

Gnosis, Witness, and Early Christian Identities:
The “True” Martyr in Clement of Alexandria and Gnostic Traditions

Pamela Mullins Reaves

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Approved by:

Elizabeth A. Clark

Bart D. Ehrman

David Lambert

Zlatko Pleše

Randall G. Styers

Abstract

PAMELA MULLINS REAVES: Gnosis, Witness, and Early Christian Identities:
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(Under the direction of Dr. Bart D. Ehrman)

This project examines three early Christian texts that reflect diverse approaches to suffering and martyrdom in the late second and early third centuries—Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*, Book IV; the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3); and the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3). These texts question the value of suffering and construct distinctive means of “witnessing” Christ, which do not prioritize or promote a suffering death. Seeking a basis for these perspectives, this project considers the Christological views of each author as well as evidence for emerging, diverse Christian identities in the texts. In all cases, Christ reveals the proper path for the “true” Christian, but suffering is not central to it; his own distance from suffering confirms this. Limiting the significance of his death, each author emphasizes Christ’s instruction, centered on individual progress toward *gnosis*. *Strom.* and *Testim. Truth*, specifically, promote control of the passions as a central aspect of the development of the Christian self. Such interior practices, combined with a limited interest in ecclesiastical matters, including rituals that reflect and sustain group identity, also contribute to each text’s related evaluations of martyrdom. In addition, the three texts also show how responses to potential suffering surface in the context of intra-Christian debate; views of other Christians are described and condemned as each author presents his “correct” version of the faith. Corresponding with the

heresiological efforts of Tertullian and other proto-orthodox Christians, this trend reveals that perspectives on martyrdom were critical in the evolution of group boundaries, progressively solidified via discourse of “orthodoxy” and “heresy.” At the same time, the nature of such debates illustrates the interaction of diverse Christian groups within a broad Christian community. Social identity theory serves as a useful framework for understanding how the prospect of martyrdom contributed to the emergent Christian identities and related intra-group tensions apparent in all three texts.

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| <i>1 Apoc. Jas.</i> | <i>First Apocalypse of James</i> (NHC V,3) |
| <i>1 Apol.</i> | Justin, <i>First Apology</i> |
| <i>1 Clem.</i> | <i>1 Clement</i> |
| <i>2 Apoc. Jas.</i> | <i>Second Apocalypse of James</i> (NHC V,4) |
| <i>2 Apol.</i> | Justin, <i>Second Apology</i> |
| <i>Acts Pet.</i> | <i>Acts of Peter</i> |
| <i>An.</i> | Tertullian, <i>De anima</i> |
| <i>Apoc. Adam</i> | <i>Apocalypse of Adam</i> (NHC V,5) |
| <i>Apoc. Paul</i> | <i>Apocalypse of Paul</i> (NHC V,2) |
| <i>Apoc. Pet.</i> | <i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> (NHC VII,3) |
| <i>Apol.</i> | Plato, <i>Apology</i> |
| <i>Comm. Jo.</i> | Origen, <i>Commentarii in evangelium Joannis</i> |
| <i>Disc.</i> | Epictetus, <i>Discourses</i> |
| <i>Fug.</i> | Tertullian, <i>De fuga in persecutione</i> |
| <i>Gos. Thom.</i> | <i>Gospel of Thomas</i> |
| <i>Haer.</i> | Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i> |
| <i>Hist. eccl.</i> | Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i> |
| <i>Ign. Eph.</i> | Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i> |
| <i>Ign. Smyrn.</i> | Ignatius, <i>To the Smyrnaeans</i> |
| <i>Ign. Trall.</i> | Ignatius, <i>To the Trallians</i> |
| <i>Ign. Rom</i> | Ignatius, <i>To the Romans</i> |
| <i>Mart. Ascen. Isa.</i> | <i>Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah</i> |
| <i>Mart. Pol.</i> | <i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i> |
| NHC | Nag Hammadi Codex |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| <i>Paed.</i> | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Paedagogus</i> |
| <i>Pass. Perp.</i> | <i>Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas</i> |
| <i>Phil.</i> | Polycarp, <i>To the Philippians</i> |
| <i>Protr.</i> | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Protrepticus</i> |
| <i>Quis div.</i> | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> |
| <i>Scorp.</i> | Tertullian, <i>Scorpiace</i> |
| <i>Strom.</i> | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i> |
| <i>Testim. Truth</i> | <i>Testimony of Truth</i> (NHC IX,3) |
| <i>Treat. Seth</i> | <i>Second Treatise of the Great Seth</i> (NHC VII,2) |

Chapter 1

Multiple Martyrdoms and Early Christian Identities

Likening false Christians to scorpions that sting in subtle, yet destructive ways, Tertullian claims in his invective-filled *Scorpiace* that it is precisely during times of persecution, when the faith is most tested, that the behavior of the “heretics” diverges from that of the “true Christians.” Writing in Carthage, North Africa around the turn of the third century, he reports, “the gnostics break out, then the Valentinians creep forth; then all the opponents of martyrdom bubble up.” Tertullian further points out that while he and his fellow Christians are experiencing the “intense heat” of persecution, involving fire, swords, torture, imprisonment and so forth, the “heretics go about as usual” (*Scorp.* I.5.7). It seems that some among the Christian community remain unscathed by Roman officials. Tertullian posits fear as the explanation of their behavior; such Christians are essentially weak and seek escape from persecution accordingly. He also suggests that their failure to experience, or perhaps celebrate, a martyr’s death calls their allegiance to the faith into question. For Tertullian, responses to persecution distinguish “false” from “true” Christians.

It is, of course, possible and perhaps likely that fear as well as certain beliefs compelled a fair number of Christians to avoid or easily escape encounters with Roman authorities and thus avoid martyrdom. But certain early Christian texts permit a closer look at the evidence for this distinctive behavior and, more specifically, the discourse

associated with it. Tertullian's comments reflect a broader trend in early Christian literature that associates approaches to martyrdom with proper Christian identity. By examining texts that reflect alternative voices in this significant early Christian debate, the current project seeks to better understand what prompted such less-than-enthusiastic approaches to martyrdom and how they intersect with emerging group identities and related boundaries in early Christianity.

Three early Christian texts that reflect diverse approaches to suffering and martyrdom in the late second and early third centuries—Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*, Book IV; the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII,3); and the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3)—serve as the basis for this project. I am especially interested in the ways the authors evaluate the threat of persecution, question the value of suffering, and construct distinctive means of witnessing Christ, which do not promote or prioritize a martyr's death. These constructions are examined in relation to the author's broader conception of what it means to be a "true" Christian, particularly in terms of one's social identity. In all cases, Christ reveals the proper path, but suffering is not central to it; his own distance from suffering confirms this.

The combination of these three texts has certain advantages, drawn from differences as well as commonalities among them. First, given their range, a parallel view of the three traditions illustrates the variety of early Christian responses to persecution, even among voices that reject the supreme significance of martyrdom. A consideration of Clement of Alexandria's work alongside two texts from Nag Hammadi appropriately complicates the traditional binary of "orthodoxy" and "heresy." The writings of Clement of Alexandria and the two Nag Hammadi texts offer certain ideas that diverge from

classic “orthodox” perceptions of martyrdom, prevalent in both ancient literature and modern scholarship.¹ By highlighting this distinction between prominent “orthodox” understandings of martyrdom and the traditions I examine, my project appropriately diversifies our portrait of early Christian approaches to martyrdom and, relatedly, early Christian identity.

Second, certain parallels among the texts allow me to highlight their common engagement in the process of crafting early Christian identities. In all three traditions, assertions about appropriate responses to suffering surface in the context of intra-Christian debate; views of other Christians are described and condemned as the author presents his “correct” version of the faith. This trend corresponds with the efforts of Tertullian and other proto-orthodox voices and suggests that perspectives on martyrdom were critical in the evolution of group boundaries, eventually solidified via the discourse of “orthodoxy” and “heresy.” At the same time, the presence of such debates illustrates the interaction of diverse Christian groups within a broad Christian community; in other words, boundaries were not yet clear.

Finally, all three texts highlight individual progress toward the divine. *Strom.* and *Testim. Truth*, specifically, promote control of the passions as a central aspect of the development of the Christian self. Such “interior” practices, combined with a limited interest in ecclesiastical matters, including rituals that reflect and sustain group identity, correspond with their related evaluations of martyrdom.

¹A fuller portrait of these early orthodox perspectives appears below.

The Prominence of Martyrdom in Early Christianity

My analysis of the discourse regarding appropriate martyrdom within *Strom.*, *Apoc. Pet.*, and *Testim. Truth* relies on a firm understanding of the alternative, seemingly dominant perspectives on persecution and martyrdom in early Christianity.² Through a selective survey of early Christian martyr texts and related scholarship, I highlight three prominent elements that are relevant to my project. First, early Christian texts regularly depict martyrdom as the supreme imitation of Christ. Second, early Christian martyrs often appear as motivated participants in their experience. And, third, martyrdom marks the supreme reflection of Christian identity, an act that carries communal significance. Along the way, I illuminate relevant aspects of Roman persecution of Christians. This essential overview establishes the basic context in which Clement and the authors of *Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth* wrote, as well as, to some extent, the situation to which they responded by promoting different modes of imitation and rejecting deliberate martyrdom.

Christ as the Model Martyr

In the context of his attack on heretics, Irenaeus of Lyons indicates his conception of martyrs—“those who are slain on account of the confession of the Lord, and who suffer all things predicted by the Lord, and who in this respect strive to follow the

²My brief survey of ‘proto-orthodox’ sources is primarily intended to expose basic tendencies. It is necessarily selective and general, and therefore not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation or definition of the ‘proto-orthodox’ view; the situation is too complex to neatly categorize materials, as Candida R. Moss reminds us, in *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and her more recent, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

footprints of the Lord's passion, having become martyrs of the suffering one" (*Haer.* 3.18.5).³ The experience of a suffering imitation appears central to his perception of martyrdom. Through this passage, Irenaeus highlights multiple facets of this parallel experience: confession of Christ can prompt death, this sort of suffering should be anticipated, and martyrs actively engage in this process.

At the beginning of the second century, the captive Ignatius of Antioch, traveling to Rome under Imperial guard, similarly characterizes his experience. Anticipating his own martyrdom, he writes letters to various Christians communities along the way. To the Trallians, he emphasizes his desire to "follow the example of the passion of my Lord" (*Ign. Trall.* 10.1).⁴ The *imitatio Christi* ideal is apparent in a number of Ignatius' letters, especially in the form of physical suffering and death. Concerned about their potential interference on his behalf, he urges the Christians at Rome to "allow [him] be a imitator (μιμητήν) of the suffering (πάθους) of my God" (*Ign. Rom.* 6.3). Ignatius repeatedly emphasizes how the reality of Christ's suffering justifies his own pending fate. Ignatius is one of many early Christians who promote a martyr's death as an ideal imitation of Christ; in these occasions, a belief in Christ's own suffering supports the martyr's experience. This connection is especially critical for Ignatius, who aligns his pending bodily pain with that of Christ's.

³He also repetitively points to Christ's actual suffering and resurrection. In addition, according to Irenaeus, Christ calls us to take up the cross and suffer like him. This, for Irenaeus, is not meant metaphorically, as some Gnostics assert; rather, he maintains that Christ spoke of "the suffering which he should himself undergo first, and his disciples afterwards," 3.18.5; translation is from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

⁴*Ign. Smyrn.* 4.2 expresses a comparable desire to endure and suffer with Jesus.

Ignatius's contemporary Polycarp, in his letter to the Philippians, expresses a comparable view. In reference to Christ, he writes, "Therefore we should be imitators (μιμηταὶ) of his endurance, and if we suffer (πάσχομεν) for his name, we should glorify him. For he set this example (τὸν ὑπογράμμον) for us through what he did, and we have believed it" (*Phil.* 8.2). The narrative of Polycarp's own martyrdom similarly emphasizes the imitative action of the martyr. The narrator characterizes the bishop's death as "martyrdom in conformity with the gospel" (*Mart. Pol.* 1.1). The story emphasizes this significant parallel throughout; as examples, "Polycarp waited to be betrayed, as also did the Lord, that we in turn might imitate him" (*Mart. Pol.* 1.2), and the not-so-coincidental name of the police chief, Herod (*Mart. Pol.* 6.2) highlights the common experience. The conclusion of the narrative further emphasizes the element of imitation, as Polycarp is celebrated as "a superb martyr," whose "martyrdom...everyone desires to imitate, since it occurred in conformity with the gospel of Christ" (*Mart. Pol.* 19). Here, a cycle of imitation is proposed, rooted in Polycarp's faithful following of the exemplary path of Christ.

The association of a martyr's death with Christ's is one of the more obvious and expected facets of early Christian martyr literature. In *The Other Christs*, Candida Moss offers a full portrait of this theme in early Christian literature, highlighting its diverse expressions.⁵ Robin Darling Young also discusses the imitative elements in her portrait of martyrdom as a public liturgical sacrifice.⁶

⁵Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*.

⁶Robin Darling Young, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2001 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001); Lieu also briefly discusses the "intertextual threads" that link the early Christian martyrs to Christ, yet notes that they are less extensive than one might expect, *Neither Jew nor Greek*, 221-222.

The Motivated Martyr

The concept of imitating Christ is often complemented in early Christian sources by an active zeal for a martyr's death. In her recent study of early Christian martyrdom, Moss offers a useful discussion of the notion of "voluntary martyrdom." She persuasively shows that, in spite of assumptions otherwise, this mode of martyrdom should not be understood as a distinct, peripheral practice in early Christianity.⁷ Rather, the eagerness to stay the course is a celebrated aspect of the experience.

Pagan sources frequently remark on the deliberate nature of early Christian martyrdom. In *The Passing of Peregrinus*, for instance, the second-century Greek satirist Lucian notes with regard to Christians, "most of them take death lightly and voluntarily give themselves up" (13.27).⁸ The perspective of Lucian, combined with other comparable pagan sources, leads Judith Perkins to observe that "if Christianity was known at all, it was known for its adherents' attitude toward death and suffering." Marked by an eagerness for death, this point of view represents a striking element of

⁷*Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 149ff. I generally agree with Moss' assessment, though opt not to use the designation "voluntary." To me, it implies that early Christian martyrs initiated their experiences. I am not convinced that this was generally the case. Rather, based on what we know from early Christian and Roman sources, it seems that martyrs were often given a choice in the matter. Since the Christian texts highlight the resolve of the martyrs, in spite of this choice, I prefer to characterize their approaches to martyrdom as "motivated," "deliberate," or "eager."

⁸Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* XI.3 offers further evidence of this Christian practice, which he relates as the inappropriate approach to death: "But the readiness must spring from a man's inner judgment, and not be the result of mere opposition [as is the case with the Christians]. It must be associated with deliberation and dignity and, if others too are to be convinced, with nothing like stage heroics." Translation from C. R. Haines' Loeb Classical Library edition (London: Heineman, 1930).

early Christian ideology.⁹ While the historical realities of such an approach are debatable, the perspective is certainly predominant in early Christian literature.

Early proto-orthodox sources, in fact, consistently promote an eagerness for the martyr's death. In addition to depicting himself as an imitator of Christ, Ignatius of Antioch expresses a zeal for death. He looks forward to fighting with the beasts at Rome, which will enable him to be a "true disciple," and instructs the Roman congregation to whom he writes to not obstruct this desired outcome (Ign. *Eph* 1.2).¹⁰ Rather, he consistently reiterates the deliberate nature of his pending situation. To the Romans, Ignatius writes "desiring death," and claims, "I am dying willingly for God's sake" (Ign. *Rom* 7.2; 4.1). In his letter to the Trallian community, he reiterates, "I desire (or love) to suffer" (Ign. *Trall.* 4.1.)

Similarly, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, though often cited as a cautionary tale against those who volunteer for martyrdom, nevertheless praises an eager dedication to death. The narrator reports that the "most noble" Germanicus, in spite of the attempt of the governor to dissuade him, "with a show of force dragged the beast on top of him, intending to be freed all the more quickly from this unjust and lawless life" (*Mart. Pol.* 3).¹¹ His fervent desire to escape the present life echoes Ignatius' desire for death.

⁹Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London New York: Routledge, 1995), 18–20.

¹⁰Ignatius urges the Romans, "Grant me nothing more than that I be poured out to God, while an altar is still ready..." 2.2.

¹¹In addition, the narrator claims that the martyrdoms described "took place in accordance with God's will," 2. The author does not, however, based on lapsed volunteers, approve of those who voluntarily turn themselves over, 4. Agathonike, who "threw herself joyfully upon the stake (ξύλον)," represents another example of eager imitation, in *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike* 42–44. Herbert Musurillo, tran., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

Other early Christian writers reflect the sentiments of Ignatius and the author of the *Mart. Pol.* For instance, in his *2 Apol.*, Justin Martyr, in the mid-second century, reports two instances of motivated martyrs. The first, Lucius, approaches a Roman official, promptly confesses, and is led away. Justin highlights Lucius' gratitude, "And he professed his thanks, knowing that he was delivered from such wicked rulers, and was going to the Father and King of the heavens." An additional witness, according to Justin, consequently came forward and was condemned.¹²

Considering such episodes from early Christian martyrdoms, G. W. Bowersock concludes that the texts suggest that for "many, if not most, martyrs and would-be martyrs, their enthusiasm for death comes very close to a desire to commit suicide—a suicide to be arranged by an external agent but with the clear complicity of the victim."¹³ Perkins similarly summarizes, "Clearly some Christians did understand their membership in the Christian community to entail their seeking death. Not all martyrs were voluntary. But Christian texts with their representation of death as the desired and happy ending obviously had an effect on Christian praxis."¹⁴ Thus, as Perkins understands it, this receptive approach to martyrdom is a celebrated marker of Christian identity.

¹²*2 Apol.* 2.19-20. Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. As we might expect, Tertullian also insists that martyrdom is both required and worthwhile. He directly asserts, "I stoutly maintain that martyrdom is good, as required by God," *Scorp.* 5. For additional impressions of Tertullian's conception of martyrdom, see *An.* 55, which stresses that the exclusive "key to Paradise" is one's own blood; also, *Scorp.* 1, 7.

¹³*Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 61.

¹⁴Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, 31. She also considers Apocryphal Acts, which along with the Martyr Acts and second-century apologists "scripted as ideal for Christians a life centered on death and suffering," 31f.

Excursus: Roman Persecution of Christians

A brief consideration of a few relevant aspects of Roman persecution of Christians further supports the portrait of early Christian martyrs as motivated and also reveals the central role that confession of Christian identity played in the process. Prior to the mid-third century, persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire appears to have been relatively localized and sporadic.¹⁵ The available evidence from the period suggests that Christians were essentially brought to trial on the accusation that they were Christians. The primary players in the persecution of early Christians appear to be the local populace, aroused by dislike or suspicion of Christians, in conjunction with local Roman officials, who were interested in keeping order.

Two specific aspects of the process of Roman persecution are worth highlighting here, particularly as they surface in early Christian texts and relate to the active approach to martyrdom and its association with Christian identity. First, in most cases, it seems that Roman officials were at liberty to deal with Christians as they saw fit. This coincides with early Christian evidence that suggests that imperial authorities occasionally offered Christians a way out and, at times, appeared eager to do so. As examples, *Mart. Poly.* and *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* illustrate repeated attempts by the authorities to dissuade the martyrs-to-be from their experiences.¹⁶ In his letter to the emperor Trajan in the early second century, Pliny the Younger, an imperial administrator in the province of Bithynia-Pontus, also indicates his practice of offering multiple opportunities for those accused to

¹⁵Though Nero may have harassed Christians in Rome in the mid-first century, he apparently failed to establish any imperial precedent.

¹⁶*Mart. Pol.* 4; 8.2; 9.2; *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1; 3; 10-11; 13; in the final passage, the proconsul Saturninus offers the Christians thirty days to reconsider. Their definitive reply, affirming their Christian identity leads to their execution.

deny their Christian identity (*Letter* 10.96). Trajan's reply affirms Pliny's overall procedure (*Letter* 10.97).

Related to this potentially easy exit is the second key point: allegiance to the *nomen Christianum* seems to have been the essential "crime." Based on the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan as well as early Christian literature, it appears that, rather than from a solid legal basis, Christians, during the first and second centuries, were essentially persecuted simply because they called themselves Christians—that is, maintaining a Christian identity might be considered a crime.¹⁷ It seems reasonable to view the procedure outlined by Pliny and Trajan as dominant in dealings with Christians prior to Decius. In most cases, the name Christian alone appears to have been the basis for conviction. Pliny notes that denial of the name, followed by appropriate prayers and other offerings, allowed for acquittal, suggesting that those accused were not guilty of any other crimes.¹⁸

Glimpses of Roman procedure in early Christian literature also support this conclusion. For instance, Justin Martyr, in *I Apol.* (ca. 150), argues against the

¹⁷A. N. Sherwin-White makes the argument that Christians were found guilty of *contumacia*, as their refusal to participate in pagan worship was read as civil disobedience, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?: An Amendment," *Past and Present* 27 (1964): 23–27. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix challenges this claim as a legal issue in the trials of Christians. He argues that, though Christians were certainly obstinate in their refusal to offer sacrifice to pagan gods, such obstinacy itself was not the crime. Moreover, when the option to sacrifice was not provided until after the Christians were accused (as the letter of Pliny to Trajan reports), this notion of *contumacia* does not account for why Christians were brought to trial in the first place, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?: A Rejoinder," *Past and Present* 27 (1964): 28–33. Rather, de Ste. Croix affirms his position that maintaining Christian identity in the course of interrogation or trial was generally the issue, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6–31.

¹⁸Moss cautions against overstating the "precedent" status of the Pliny correspondence, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, 10–12. Still, de Ste. Croix notes that although Trajan's reply with not officially binding, most officials, with few exceptions, appeared to follow it, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," 16. See also W. H. C. Frend, "Persecutions: Genesis and Legacy," in *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume I, Origins to Constantine*, eds. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 507–508.

accusations of Christians in name alone; rather, he encourages the emperor to search for actual evidence of crimes. The various martyr acts of the period, including the *Mart. Pol.*, also report that the confession, “I am a Christian,” determined the punishment, while denial of such an identity with a corresponding imperial oath and/or sacrifice earned one’s release.

Combined, these points—the flexibility of Roman legal proceedings and the centrality of the confession for punishment—suggest that early Christians had some choice in their fate when presented with the prospect of martyrdom. Following arrest, in the absence of a committed crime, one could deny their Christian status and apparently escape punishment.¹⁹ This element of choice contributes to the portrait of early martyrs as eager participants in the process. And the critical role played by the confession, “I am a Christian,” in martyr narratives further affirms the connection between martyrdom and Christian social identity.

Martyrdom: Supreme Reflection of Christian Identity

In the written account of her trial and martyrdom, Perpetua, a young Christian woman in Roman Carthage, rejects her father’s pleas for her to avoid suffering; rather, she resolutely affirms her Christian identity. Claiming that a vase cannot be called by any other name, Perpetua asserts, “so too I cannot be called by anything other than what I am, a Christian” (*Pass. Perp.* 3.2).²⁰ Lieu thus asserts that the confession, “I am a Christian,”

¹⁹Lieu describes this critical element as the “power of choice” (in relation to Perpetua); she also notes tendencies of imperial authorities who attempt to “deflect those apparently determined on their own death-course” (referencing *Mart. Poly.* 9), *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 214; 216.

²⁰Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

“sets the martyrs and the memorializing of their deaths at the centre of the construction of Christian identity.”²¹

Early Christian martyrdom is essentially a public performance of identity that carries a significant social function. Regardless of how many Christians actually experienced martyrdom, the production and popularity of literature associated with it was sufficient to project the identity of Christians as willing to suffer and die. In addition, certain Christians, including Tertullian, celebrated the efficacy of this public expression of identity, by noting conversions to the faith among other potential benefits.

Rooted in close readings of early martyr acts and related patristic literature, a number of recent studies emphasize the importance of martyrdom in the construction of early Christian identity. Perkins asserts that Christian texts of the late first and second centuries “almost without exception assiduously project the message that to be a Christian was to suffer and die.”²² When suffering was the Christian norm, according to Perkins, martyrdom marked the ultimate achievement. Other recent scholarly studies, including Lieu’s *Neither Jew nor Greek* and Elizabeth Castelli’s *Martyrdom and Memory*, also stress the central role of martyrdom in defining and sustaining early Christian communal identity.²³ Lieu specifically highlights the significance of the

²¹Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 212.; She elaborates, “...it is the textualizing and memorializing of the trials, the often extended suffering, and the deaths of believers which becomes determinative for not only the idea of ‘the martyr’ and martyrdom, but also of what it is to be among those who can say, ‘I am a Christian,’” 212.

²²*The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, 24.

²³Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

martyr's confession as "emphatically a public moment, and a public identity."²⁴

Martyrdom and, to some extent, suffering were thus prominent in constructions of early Christian identity.

Gnosis and Martyrdom

As Tertullian's passage at the start of the chapter reveals though, not all early Christians were eager participants in the experience of persecution and martyrdom. The rhetoric of Tertullian, as well as Irenaeus, accuses "heretical" groups, often of the "Gnostic" variety, of rejecting martyrdom.²⁵ Though there may be some basis to these reports, recent scholarship appropriately highlights the range of perspectives on martyrdom.

Beyond acknowledging varied perspectives, it is worth inquiring further how and why certain early Christians voiced concern over martyrdom and what role responses to persecution played in delineating groups, particularly those traditionally understood as Gnostic. Why did certain early Christians dismiss the enthusiastic approaches to suffering and martyrdom and, at times, argue against it?

"Gnostic" Experience of Persecution

In one early, intriguing attempt to explain the apparent lack of martyrdom among

²⁴Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 213. Robin Darling Young also emphasizes the public context of martyrdom, describing a martyr's death as a "public and deliberative self-offering in the context of Roman ceremonial," *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*, 9; 11–12.

²⁵*Haer.* 1.24.6; 3.15.5; 4.33.9; *Scorp.* 1.5; 1.8; 15.6; also, Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.77.

Gnostic Christians, W. H. C. Frend takes on the perspective of Roman authorities.²⁶ According to Frend, the public perception of the Gnostic groups—specifically their resemblance to mystery religions and their continued acceptance of certain aspects of pagan life—made them less threatening to Greco-Roman sensibilities than typical Christians. Based on the evidence offered by their proto-orthodox peers, Frend preliminarily concludes that in the first and second centuries, “the Gnostics were not generally molested, and the fact was sufficiently apparent to impress itself on contemporary Christians.”²⁷ The evidence Frend outlines, however, does not make this lack of molestation apparent. There is nothing to suggest that Romans distinguished groups of Christians and persecuted accordingly.²⁸ To an outsider, and likely even to many insiders, doctrinal divisions would hardly have been perceptible. In addition, Frend suggests that a Gnostic’s first priority, “protection of his mystery,” would have led him to avoid confrontation with the authorities at all costs.²⁹ In light of more recent examinations of the Gnostic tradition, this reasoning no longer seems valid. There is little evidence of Gnostic Christians exclusive, secretive groups. Moreover, it is not clear how an encounter with authorities would threaten access to the “mystery.” Ultimately, Frend’s reconstruction fails to fit with what we do know of circumstances at the time, both in

²⁶“The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5 (1954): 25–37.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸An exception might be an interest in rounding up Christian leaders; Klaus Koschorke notes that Frend’s argument would not apply to groups like the Valentinians, who consider themselves fully members of the Christian church, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, Nag Hammadi Studies (NHS) (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 132–36.

²⁹Frend, “The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire,” 30–31; he also suggests that gnostic writers of apocryphal works would have been fearful, 29, a point I do not entirely agree with, given that they likely were not read among non-Christians.

terms of Roman persecution and the nature of Gnostic Christians. More significantly, Frend does not sufficiently address the heresiological claims— sustained by Gnostic Christian literature—that Gnostic Christians did not simply avoid martyrdom, but also, in some cases, argued against its value.

An alternative scenario that does not depend on clear distinctions among Christians from the Roman perspective seems more likely. Even if initially targeted among their fellow Christians, certain Gnostic Christians were apparently willing and able to avoid punishment by death. There is indirect evidence for this sort of behavior, particular for the followers of the mid-second-century teacher, Basilides. Irenaeus writes that the followers of Basilides “are prepared to deny; or, rather, they are not even susceptible to suffering on behalf of the name” (*Haer.* 1.24.6). Eusebius also mentions a refutation by Agrippa Castor, who reported, “[Basilides] taught that there was no harm in eating things offered to idols, or in light-heartedly denying the faith in times of persecution” (*Hist. eccl.* 4.6.7).³⁰ Through reports like these, we get the impression that certain Gnostic Christian groups took an indifferent stance toward pagan sacrifices, the very thing that could allow an early Christian to escape the fate of martyrdom. That said, one might reasonably be suspicious that the orthodox-inclined interests of Irenaeus and Eusebius encouraged them to fabricate or exaggerate such behavior among their opponents. But a comparable perspective appears in *Testim. Truth*; the author also associates the rejection of martyrdom with the futility of sacrifice.³¹ This need not mean

³⁰Frend himself mentions this reference, *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹In addition, Paul’s indifferent assessment of idol meat in 1 Cor 8:7-8 might also have prompted the perspective attributed to Basilides and his followers; though this parallel by no means confirms the heresiological reports, it does make them more comprehensible.

that such Christians eagerly participated in pagan activities; it could simply mean that in a situation of life or death, the insignificance of the pagan cult outweighed any perceived significance of a martyr's death.

If one accepts this sort of persecution scenario, the question remains, why were certain Christians willing to find an escape (which, in some instances, the Romans appear to have offered), while others were, in many cases, enthusiastically accepting their fate and celebrated for doing so? An inherent interest in self-preservation is certainly one possible reason. But such an explanation fails to take into account the alignment of these views with particular early Christian groups' own justifications for avoiding and, at times, rejecting martyrdom.

Studies by Klaus Koschorke and Elaine Pagels, among others, appropriately highlight the range of approaches to martyrdom among groups traditionally classified as "Gnostic" and identify possible grounds for such views. Koschorke corrects the typical portrait of Gnostic Christians as universally opposed to martyrdom by highlighting three distinct approaches apparent in Nag Hammadi and patristic literature. He characterizes the first as criticism of "vulgar" conceptions of martyrdom. This perspective, represented by Heracleon and Basilides, takes issue with the promises of reward and glorification, rather than martyrdom itself.³² Other Gnostic Christians do advocate a rejection of the practice, reflecting the second approach noted by Koschorke. As Tertullian reports in *Scorp.* 1, such Christians find the notion of blood testimony to be incompatible with the will of God. Their view that Christ did not offer testimony in a physical sense further

³²He asserts that criticism of the ecclesiastical understanding need not mean refusal of martyrdom as such, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 134–35.

contributes to this rejection of martyrdom. According to Koschorke, a third perspective involves those who value martyrdom as liberation, based on their ascetic tendencies. Moreover, Koschorke acknowledges that criticism of the ecclesiastical celebration of martyrdom does not necessarily mean absolute rejection of the practice. Against this traditional interpretation, Koschorke offers a more nuanced assessment: “On the whole, it is less the greater reluctance of Gnostics against martyrdom, but rather their different understanding, which forms the boundary between Gnostics and ecclesiastical Christianity.”³³ As my project shows though, the divergent understandings often contribute to this “greater reluctance.”

Following Koschorke, Pagels seeks to find some basis for this range of responses to martyrdom. She asks, “what attitude do gnostics take toward martyrdom and on what grounds?”³⁴ She argues that different interpretations of Christ’s passion guide divergent evaluations of martyrdom in early Christianity. After describing a consistent celebration of martyrdom among orthodox writers, Pagels details the variety of approaches to persecution and martyrdom among Gnostic texts. She maintains that each view corresponds to each group’s understanding of Christ. Gnostic texts that offer a docetic Christology, in which Christ only appears to suffer, maintain a related approach to persecution—since Christ did not actually suffer, there is no benefit in a Christian suffering. As Pagels reminds us though, not all Gnostic writings maintain this ideology; some depict a suffering Savior and consequently validate bodily martyrdom. Valentinian

³³Ibid., 134–36.

³⁴“Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism, Vol. I, The School of Valentinus*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 271. See also Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), chap. IV.

traditions, the focus of much of Pagel's attention, reveal an intermediate position. Christ really suffered and died, but only in the physical (*psychic*) sense; a Christian's imitation of his death is also purely physical, rather than spiritual (*pneumatic*), and thus limited. Pagels' attention to the intersection of perspectives on martyrdom and Christology is instructive. The texts I examine further support this connection.³⁵ In addition, Pagels appropriately shows that responses to persecution are not exclusively rooted in doctrine, but involve "social and political factors" as well.³⁶

The recent appearance of Codex Tchacos, including the much-discussed *Gospel of Judas*, has revived interest in diverse early Christian approaches to martyrdom. In her most recent, thorough examination of the material, Karen L. King considers the attention to suffering in the initial three texts of the codex, specifically, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, and the *First Apocalypse of James*. She characterizes them collectively as "preparation for martyrdom,"³⁷ which involved "articulat[ing] a set of practices aimed at training potential martyrs." She identifies four typical elements associated with this preparation, including models for imitation; emphasis on mastery of the passions, particularly fear; focus on joys of eternal life; and the related goal of salvation through suffering.³⁸

³⁵The connection in Clement of Alexandria is especially striking, as I show in Chapter 2, especially in light of the typical view, reflected in Pagels, that the "orthodox" side offered a consistent approach to martyrdom.

³⁶Pagels, "Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian's Response to Persecution," 265. In her examination, this involves the particular ecclesiology associated with Valentinian versions of Christianity.

³⁷Karen L. King, "Martyrdom and Its Discontents in the Tchacos Codex," in *Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex Held at Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 13–16, 2008*, Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 24.

³⁸She acknowledges that the strategies are employed differently in each of the three texts she examines, *Ibid.*, 25–26.

Much of King's parallel analyses of the Tchacos texts is persuasive and enlightening. One issue though, from my perspective, is her broad, admittedly "capacious" definition of martyrdom. Her summary of the goals of this preparation—"people had to be trained well in the true teaching, learn to overcome fear, imitate laudable models from the past, and keep their eyes firmly fixed on the goal of salvation"—says little about the actual death and suffering of the trainees. Rather, these outcomes could fit a range of early Christian texts.³⁹ That the authors offer minimal to no attention to the actual deaths is especially striking in light of the texts' apparent interest in persecution and suffering and the existing traditions associated with the deaths of Jesus and James. King acknowledges this absence in her discussion of the *Gospel of Judas*. Noting that the Gospel ends with Judas' betrayal, she writes, "No account of his arrest, trial, death or resurrection is given—and none is needed. While it is possible to think that Christian readers of the second century didn't need the rest of the story because they already knew it well, I think it is rather the case that everything necessary for salvation had already been said." To summarize, "Jesus's death is not central to salvation for the Gospel of Judas."⁴⁰ The admission that Jesus' death is secondary actually suggests a perspective that would minimize martyrdom, rather than focus on training for it. Judas's stance against "the kind of Christianity being authorized in the name of the Twelve in the second and third centuries" also suggests that the author takes issue with the same

³⁹Ibid. This assessment stands even if one accounts for the difference in genre between the Tchacos material, understood as revelation dialogues, and the martyr acts.

⁴⁰Jesus's revelations, rather than the sacrifice of "the human who bears Jesus," brings salvation, Ibid., 35–36.

group(s) of Christians who would have promoted martyrdom.⁴¹ Contrary to King's analysis then, the *Gospel of Judas* might reflect another early Christian voice that challenged reigning perspectives on martyrdom.

Gnosis and Early Christian Group Dynamics

Dispelling the notion that all so-called “heretics” reject martyrdom is part of a larger effort in early Christian studies to revise understandings of group dynamics. Scholarly examinations of the nature of “Gnosticism,” seemingly the most prevalent “heresy,” are especially prominent in this regard. Since two of the texts I examine in this project are traditionally designated as “Gnostic”—*Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth*—and the third, *Strom.*, employs “gnosis” as an ideal, a consideration of recent approaches to Gnostic traditions and their relevance for my project is in order. As it happens, the discovery and subsequent publication of the Nag Hammadi codices has complicated, rather than clarified, our understanding of Gnostic tradition. Current discussion debates not only on the parameters of what we understand as Gnosticism, but also the usefulness of the category itself. King remarks, “Surprisingly enough, one of the most serious problems in Gnosticism studies continues to be simply defining the term ‘Gnosticism.’”⁴²

⁴¹Ibid., 37. This assumes that this brand of Christianity, “in the name of the Twelve,” aligns approximately with proto-orthodoxy. Furthermore, *Judas*’s anti-sacrificial stance limits parallels with the traditions that advance martyrdom.

⁴²“The Origins of Gnosticism and the Identity of Christianity,” in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*, ed. Antti Marjanen, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 87 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 103.

The various efforts to define “Gnosticism” are often lacking in one way or another.⁴³ One issue is the difficulty in fitting all the evidence traditionally associated with Gnosticism into a single, encompassing definition. Currently, there is some agreement that the term can be appropriately applied to a specific early Christian tradition represented by texts that roughly correspond with the tradition that scholars designate as “Sethian.”

Given the limits of various definitions of Gnosticism, the usefulness of the category itself also comes into question. Michael A. Williams has been especially vocal in this regard. In *Rethinking Gnosticism*, he objects to the application of “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” to a wide range of texts and traditions.⁴⁴ His study appropriately highlights the diversity of traditions encompassed, problematically, by “Gnostic” terminology. He also effectively dispels traditional stereotypes associated with “Gnostic” movements, including their penchant for protest-oriented exegesis, their exclusive and anti-social behavior, and their universal hatred of the body. Given the stereotypes associated with “Gnosticism,” Williams advocates dismissing the label in favor the designation “biblical-demiurgical,” which references the common belief among these traditions in an inferior creator god, rooted in interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. Though this alternative label has failed to catch on, William’s study has been successful in encouraging greater attention to use of the category and the diversity of related traditions.

⁴³For a current, concise discussion of recent approaches to defining Gnosticism, including their limitations, see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 20–26.

⁴⁴Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Unsatisfied with William's alternative category, King, in *What Is Gnosticism?*, reveals the baggage associated with Gnosticism as a scholarly category, specifically its origins within heresiological and later Protestant discourses. Rather than jettison the term altogether though, she accepts its continued, yet cautious, usage. Like Williams, King demonstrates the inappropriateness of many aspects of the traditional typology; in doing so, she reveals the rich diversity of literature associated with "Gnosticism," which defies simple classification. Her effort also highlights the need to shift away from a misguided search for the origins of Gnosticism and the related assumption of a "pure," original Christianity.⁴⁵ She exposes how such interests have derailed the study of Gnosticism. To resolve such issues, she encourages scholars to seek different ends in their practice of historiography.⁴⁶ King writes, "An alternative approach is to reconceive religious tradition and identity in terms of continuity in difference." This notion "affirms that tradition and identity are not pure and fixed but constantly in processes of formation, deformation, and reformation."⁴⁷ Such fluidity diminishes the usefulness of a singularly defined category. Williams thus encourage an approach that considers "several discrete traditions," rather than a singular religion.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Specifically, she demands that scholars abandon "certain inherited assumptions," including the association between truth and chronology; the notion that truth is pure and syncretism reflects contamination; and the misguided premise that orthodoxy is uniform, while heresy is diverse, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 228–29.

⁴⁶Ibid., 219; King calls for "a shift in historical-critical and literary methods away from the search for origins to the analysis of practice," 228.

⁴⁷Ibid., 229–30.

⁴⁸"Was There a Gnostic Religion? Strategies for a Clearer Analysis," in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*, ed. Antti Marjanen, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 87 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 68; emphasis added.

For the purposes of my project, I see no benefit in classifying *Apoc. Pet.* or *Testim. Truth* as representative of a distinct Gnostic religion.⁴⁹ That said, I do not skirt the prominent language of *gnosis* in these texts. Its presence allows us to consider a particular ideological current in early Christianity, which, at times, stands in tension with others. When *gnosis* reflects a prominent interest for any given text or community, it seems appropriate to characterize such traditions as “Gnostic” or “Gnostic Christian.”⁵⁰ Using the term in this broad way allows me to highlight the commonalities between the two Nag Hammadi texts and Clement of Alexandria. At the same time, it also distinguishes these traditions from other early Christian literature that is silent on the matter or, in some cases, hostile to “*gnosis*.” My use of “Gnostic” does not imply a specific religious system or distinct, isolated community, nor does it imply that all traditions that emphasize *gnosis* stem from the same community. Rather, it simply characterizes a significant interest, often associated with redemption, of the author and presumably his intended audience.

With this understanding of “Gnostic” in mind, it is worth considering how these diverse Christian groups understood themselves in relation to other Christians. In addition, how did the associated terminology—*gnostic*, *gnosis*—intersect with debates about proper Christian identity? The role played by competing concepts of *gnosis* in intra-Christian debate is suggested by writers like Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus; the former designates his ideal Christian as *gnostikos*, while the latter is eager to expose false conceptions of *gnosis*.

⁴⁹In this regard, neither Nag Hammadi text reflects Sethian tradition.

⁵⁰Brakke also sees no reason to give up the adjective “Gnostic” in discussions of related early Christian literature, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, 27.

As we ponder such questions, it is also worth considering the related social situations of the early Christians. Admittedly, literary discourse offers us only indirect, often colored, glimpses of such scenarios. Still, such efforts are worthwhile and necessary, even if the results are somewhat speculative.⁵¹ Brakke, for example, encourages consideration of “some social reality.”⁵² To determine how boundaries ultimately emerge, as we know they did, Brakke asserts, “Our goal should be to see neither how a single Christianity expressed itself in diverse ways, nor how one group of Christians emerged as the winner in a struggle, but how multiple Christian identities and communities were continually created and transformed.”⁵³ I also find Brakke’s understanding of religious “subcultures” to be a productive way of envisioning closely related religious groups that lack clear boundaries.⁵⁴

With a consideration of “subcultures” apparent in *Strom.*, *Apoc. Pet.*, and *Testim. Truth*, my project thus ventures to discern, with caution, some aspects of the actual social tensions, with particular attention to the role the prospect of martyrdom played in such situations. I consider evidence for the relationships among different Christian groups as experienced by the authors of each text. I show how, rather than reflecting the existence of group boundaries, these texts are engaged in the negotiation and production of such

⁵¹Though he questions the category, Williams, for instance, still envisions a series of “new religious movements underlying the range of sources that scholars have conventionally included in the category, ‘Gnosticism,’” “Was There a Gnostic Religion? Strategies for a Clearer Analysis,” 77.

⁵²Brakke notes this particular effort is subject to neglect when one avoids reifying the category. He reasons that the eventual emergence of actual boundaries suggests that some distinctions apparent in the discourse are based in reality, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, 15.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴He writes, “we must not imagine religious communities as firmly bounded and integrated systems,” noting that “people combine myths, rituals, and social institutions to create unique religious subcultures.” This perspective on group differences limits the definition of groups based primarily on doctrine, Ibid., 27. In what follows, I use the social identity concept of “subgroups,” but understand it in a comparable way.

boundaries. Social identity theory offers useful concepts for framing this phenomenon, in which debates over the significance of martyrdom sparked intra-group conflict, which, in turn, contributed to the evolution of out-groups, or “others,” ultimately characterized as “heretics.”

Early Christian Discourse via a Social Identity Lens

As the previous discussion reveals, delineating a range of early Christian groups is a tricky process, especially when such groups appear closely intertwined. To assist in this aspect of my project, I draw on social identity theory. The theory centers on the notion of the self, or individual, as dynamic, encompassing a range of identities. The multiple identities are socially constructed as well as enacted and reflect an individual’s group affiliations. Different situations, including shifts from private to public contexts, require individuals to prioritize identities and related group allegiances accordingly. The prioritized identity then guides the individual’s social behavior. Social identity theory’s focus on the intersection of group behavior and identity helps ground my theorizing about the competing Christian groups depicted in *Strom.*, *Apoc. Pet.*, and *Testim. Truth*. This sort of informed speculation is necessary in attempts to situate early Christian identity beyond the discourse.⁵⁵ My use of social identity concepts thus serves to enhance and extend the conclusions I draw based on close readings of the texts themselves.

Understanding early Christianity as a broad, diverse community with related social identities, I examine how early voices that challenge the value of martyrdom contribute to

⁵⁵That said, I do recognize this distinction between the discourse in the literature, significant in its own way, and the necessarily less-concrete reconstruction of intra-group relations in early Christianity.

the (re)construction of the parameters and expectations of Christian identity. Social identity theory's consideration of choice among identities and related behaviors is especially applicable to understanding divergent evaluations of martyrdom. After all, a martyr's death, in the second and third centuries, is social, dependent, to a large extent, on choice, and significant for Christian identity. Moreover, the consequences are certainly dire and final, rendering one's decision before the authorities as particularly grave. This very real prospect of death heightens the relative value of martyrdom as an expression of identity. Accepting or declining martyrdom or its celebration thus makes a social statement about an individual Christian's identity within his or her social, or, in this case, religious, community.

Let us then consider social identity theory further, particularly the aspects that are relevant to my examination of early Christian responses to suffering and persecution. An appropriate starting point is the now-classic definition of social identity offered by the theory's founder, Henri Tajfel: social identity is "the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership."⁵⁶ As noted above, the premise of multiple identities, or group affiliations, is central to the theory. But, as this definition highlights, one's relative attachment to each identity in terms of its perceived value is also critical, especially in situations, like martyrdom, that demand some sort of significant sacrifice on behalf of the group.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in a Vacuum," in *The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment* (London: Academic Press, 1972).

⁵⁷Regarding the situational expression of social identity, José. M. Marques, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, and Jacques-Philippe Leyens explain, "individuals' social identities have a multitude of facets and that these facets may gain different weights in different situations," "The 'Black Sheep Effect': Extremity of

In what follows, I outline three related processes that are central to the construction and enactment of social identity and reflect on their applicability to my project: (i) individual identification with a group; (ii) construction and maintenance of group identity; and (iii) the evolution of subgroups into distinct out-groups in the course of conflict. To envision how these processes might have played out in early Christianity, I view Christianity as a broad social group that encompasses a range of subgroups, each with particular versions of social identity. Often, these social identities overlap with that of the broad group, but in certain situations, they might diverge. Given the range of early forms of Christianity as well as substantial evidence of intra-group negotiation in early Christian literature, this essential social group scenario seems appropriate.

Social Identification as Self-Categorization

For social identity theorists, the process by which individuals identify with groups is known as self-categorization. Self-categorization theory originated as a complement to social identity theory, as a means of explaining the parallels between interpersonal and intergroup behavior and corresponding personal and social identities.⁵⁸ Technically speaking, Turner characterizes this process as the “cognitive redefinition of the self – from unique attributes and individual differences to shared social category memberships

Judgments Towards Ingroup Members as a Function of Group Identification,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 12.

⁵⁸John C. Turner describes the relationship of these theories as “allied and largely complementary,” “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” in *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, ed. Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 7.

and associated stereotypes.”⁵⁹ It thus assumes that individual (or personal) and social identities are not always synonymous. In fact, “social identity is sometimes able to function to the relative exclusion of personal identity.”⁶⁰

The process of self-categorization relies on various factors, including an individual’s motives, values, expectations, and social context, all of which can impact the type and level of identity. An identity’s “level” refers to its relative position, or strength, among tiers of social identities to which an individual subscribes in any particular situation. Reflecting the dynamic process of social identification, the tiers are not static, but often in flux. Different contexts make certain social identities more salient than others. The level of a particular social identity also “determines the degree to which self-perception is personalized or depersonalized, the degree to which behaviour expresses individual differences or collective similarities.”⁶¹ In applying social identity to the early Christian community, I envision the prospect of martyrdom as a situation that demands a particularly strong social identity, one that prioritizes the social self over the personal self and, moreover, values suffering and this particular kind of death. One can recognize these processes of self-categorization and depersonalization in many narratives of early Christian martyrdom; in these situations, social identity is clearly salient.

⁵⁹John C. Turner, “Social Identification and Psychological Group Formation,” in *The Social Dimension: European Developments in Social Psychology*, ed. Henri Tajfel, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 528.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 527.

⁶¹Originally, the various “selves” were imagined along a continuum, with one end reflecting the ‘personal’ self and the other the group-oriented, or ‘social’ self. More recently, this continuum concept has been recast as “levels.” Turner, “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” 11.

Constructing Group Social Identity

Identification with a particular group generally means taking on the behavior and values of that group. At the same time, the process of depersonalization and the resultant collective behavior of members produce and maintain the concept of a shared social self, or group identity.⁶² This reflects a reciprocal and dynamic process that promotes similarity among group members. Turner highlights the effect on individual differences: “in depersonalizing the self, salient social identity also depersonalizes self-interest, transforming differing personal self-interests into a collective we-group interest and creating a cooperative orientation within the group”⁶³

The benefits of affiliation with the group, which can come at the cost of self-interests, depend on common behavior among group members. Marilynn B. Brewer highlights how assurance of trust and security “motivate adherence to ingroup norms of appearance and behavior.” This process allows an individual to be “recognized as a legitimate ingroup member.” How one projects her social identity is thus significant, especially in situations in which group affiliation matters. Brewer explains, “Symbols and behaviors that differentiate the ingroup from local outgroups become particularly important here, to reduce the risk that ingroup benefits will be inadvertently extended to outgroup members.”⁶⁴ Martyrdom, or, more broadly defiance in the face of persecution,

⁶²For an overview of this process, see Ibid., 14.-15; he stresses that group formation is not merely the result or effect of interpersonal relations; “it actively determines and qualitatively changes people’s attitudes and behaviors towards each other,” 15.

⁶³Ibid., 16.

⁶⁴Marilynn B. Brewer, “Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?,” in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict and Conflict Reduction*, ed. Richard D. Ashmore, Lee Jussim, and David Wilder, Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

could be understood as an expected behavior that defines Christians in the Roman context.⁶⁵ When certain Christians failed to value this sort of behavior, their legitimacy as group members was called into question, a process we see reflected in heresiological literature. Moreover, as I reveal in the current project, certain Christians, and presumably their associated subgroups, promote alternative behaviors as central to Christian social identity.

A shared social identity also prompts the production of “stereotypes” associated with the group. Stereotypes reflect “social categorical judgements, perceptions of people in terms of their group membership.”⁶⁶ Like social identity in general, stereotypes can be fluid and vary accordingly to context; moreover, they are generally not negative, but rather meant to be valid reflections of a social group. In the early Christian tradition, the identification of a Christian as one who suffers can be understood as a significant stereotype fostered by the Christians themselves, in part through martyrological discourse.⁶⁷

From Subgroup to Out-group: Redefining Group Boundaries

At the same time, the establishment of stereotypes that accurately reflect social identity can be a tricky process. Turner explains, “Disagreement, argument and conflict between individuals and groups over the correctness of specific stereotypes is part of the social, political, historical processes through which society moves (or tries to move)

⁶⁵Other regular rituals in early Christianity, including baptism and communal prayer, could similarly be understood as reflecting the symbols and behaviors Brewer mentions.

⁶⁶Turner, “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” 26.

⁶⁷As I note above, the suffering stereotype also makes its way into pagan understandings of Christianity; in fact, it often appears as the only remarkable aspect of the Christian faith from the pagan perspective.

towards stereotypes which are valid from the perspective of the whole community.”⁶⁸ I understand the texts that I examine in this study as engaging in this sort of debate regarding appropriate facets of Christian social identity. Specifically, the traditions I examine question the validity of the Christian as sufferer stereotype, in which martyrdom represents a supreme goal.

Differences of opinion among group members are not the only factors that foster group division. External pressures—arising outside a social group, typically leading to inter-group conflict—can also contribute to the splintering of groups, as the work of Marilynn B. Brewer reveals. Her contribution to social identity theory is rooted in her study of national and ethnic social identities, which often foster “intense emotional commitment and self-sacrifice on the part of individuals,” especially in situations of inter-group conflict. Brewer explains,

they all involve some form of separatist action—attempts to establish or preserve distinctive group identities against unwanted political or cultural merger within a larger collective entity. People die for the sake of group distinctions, and social psychologists have little to say by way of explanation for such “irrationality” at the individual level.⁶⁹

A strength of commitment comparable to the national and ethnic identities described by Brewer can be detected in the early Christian discourse on martyrdom, which presents similar high-stakes consequences. Christianity’s position vis-à-vis the Roman Empire reflects a distinctive identity, promoted, to some extent, by Christians and recognized by

⁶⁸Turner, “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” 27.

⁶⁹Marilynn B. Brewer, “The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 17 (1991): 475.

pagans, especially in circumstances that involve persecution. Studies of social identity suggest that the more distinctive a group is, the more critical group identity and boundaries are. As a social group, early Christianity's distinctive nature minimized the self-interest of group members and made self-sacrifice more likely.⁷⁰

Given the heightened significance of group behavior in situations of intra-group conflict, it comes as no surprise that divergent views and behavior within the group, which do not align with the group's social identity, are less acceptable. In his study of social groups in Second Temple Judaism, Raimo Hakola, drawing on social identity theory, explains, "Many disagreements may be tolerated in the context of intragroup discussion, while similar disagreements may become a bone of contention in the context of intergroup conflict."⁷¹ Applied to early Christianity, a situation involving pressure by the Romans (whether official or popular) could, and apparently did, expose latent conflicts within the Christian group over the contours of Christian identity.

The tendency for the social self to trump the personal or subgroup self depends on the relative level of that social identity for an individual in a particular circumstance. Reminding us that individuals have multiple identities with varying degrees of allegiance, Brewer explains the complexity of group identities:

⁷⁰Brewer also states that this "mobilization of ingroup identity and loyalty" is more typical of minority groups, "The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time." 479. This also fits the situation of Christians in the Roman world. Employing rational choice theory to early Christian martyrdom, Rodney Stark similarly highlights the significance of group distinctiveness for individual sacrifice, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chap. 8.

⁷¹"Social Identities and Group Phenomena in Second Temple Judaism," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 272.

With this profusion of social identities some individuals will be fellow ingroup members on one category distinction but outgroupers on another. Such cross-cutting ingroup-outgroup distinctions reduce the intensity of the individual's dependence on any particular ingroup for meeting psychological needs for inclusion, thereby reducing the potential for polarizing loyalties along any single cleavage or group distinction and perhaps increasing tolerance for outgroups in general.⁷²

This aspect of Brewer's theory of optimal distinctiveness can be applied to early Christian group affiliation. In the chapters that follow, I propose that the Christian identities I examine operate in this "cross-cutting" mode. I highlight their promotion of individual progress toward the divine, which minimizes the reliance on external demonstrations of social identity and the perceived benefits associated with membership in the broader Christian social group, especially those achieved through group-oriented practices. When expected sacrifices are minimal, identification with the larger Christian group works and, in some cases, offers benefits. However, when greater demands are required of group members, specifically suffering or martyrdom, individual-oriented Christians appear less inclined to enact the normative Christian social identity. In short, group interest at the expense of individual identity appears to have had its limits for certain Christians.

This sort of emergence of significant disagreement within a social group can create uncertainty regarding the validity of the group, or an individual's choice of membership. The common resolution for this sort of situation is the re-categorization of

⁷²Brewer, "Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?," 35.

others as different.⁷³ In Chapter 5, I briefly return to social identity theory to discuss group processes that reflect the shift from in-group to out-group affiliation; these offer a framework for understanding production of group boundaries in the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy.

Lessons from Social Identity Theory

From the perspective of social identity theory, the situation described by Tertullian might be viewed as reflecting a moment of competing identities, in which certain Christians prioritize one identity over another. Acknowledging that early Christians maintained multiple social identities, I focus on the prominence of one sort within the traditions I examine. In the writings of Clement of Alexandria as well as *Testim. Truth* and *Apoc. Pet.*, we encounter a social identity that demands a focused, self-reflective approach to Christianity and a corresponding lifestyle. This identity tends to limit, rather than prescribe, behavior and is primarily enacted individually. In this regard, it reflects an individual's personal identity (or self); it is not exclusively personal, though, as the production of literature with language of related group affiliation and interaction reflects a social identity (a distinctive subgroup). The presence of this particular identity alongside a broader Christian allegiance reflects the historical period in which precise group boundaries are lacking, both within the Christian group and between the group and the Roman world. In fact, the literature examined in this project, combined with the heresiological reports, participates in the discourse constructing these boundaries. Moreover, the presence and possible intensification of Roman persecution operates as a

⁷³Turner, "Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories," 16.

significant external pressure that diminishes the fluidity, or intra-group tolerance, and thus diversity, of the Christian group identification.

For my project, social identity theory functions as an explanatory framework; its concepts assist in the tentative reconstruction of social relations behind the text. In the core chapters that follow, my use of it is rather limited. I prioritize my reading of the primary textual materials and related methods of historical and literary criticism.⁷⁴ In each chapter, I explore the group interactions apparent in each text. Synthesizing this data in the conclusion, I return to lessons from social identity theory for further support of my reconstruction of the evolution of group boundaries in early Christianity and martyrdom's significant role in this process.

Each of the following chapters focuses on a particular early Christian text or set of texts, in the case of Clement of Alexandria. As I examine this material, I offer claims specific to the particular perspectives on suffering and martyrdom reflected in each chapter, while also reflecting on how they help substantiate the social identity situations I have outlined in the latter part of this introduction. Moreover, I highlight how, in each case, Christological perspectives contribute to moderate or negative assessments of suffering and martyrdom, which further shape Christian social identity. The final chapter extends my discussion of the similar Christian social identities projected in these texts by considering the nature and position of these groups within the early Christian community and its emerging orthodoxy.

⁷⁴Thus, even if a reader remains unconvinced of the relevance of this theory for my project, she can assess my central claims, which are ultimately not dependent on concepts of social identity.

Chapter 2

The Gnostic Witness:

Superior Martyrdom in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*

In the second book of his *Strom.*, Clement of Alexandria offers a glimpse of persecution in his city near the turn of the third century. Regarding his Christian community, he vividly illustrates, “But every day, we have observed before our eyes abundant sources of martyrs who are roasted, impaled, decapitated” (*Strom.* II.125.2).¹ Persecution of Christians in Alexandria comes as no surprise at the turn of the third century, particularly when one considers the heightened violence under Septimius Severus.² Against this background of imperial persecution, Clement thus crafted his views.³ Uncovering more precise details about his actual activity in Alexandria as well as

¹Annewies van den Hoek notes that it is unclear which persecution Clement is alluding to, but suggests that it may refer to events preceding 202-203, “Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom,” *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993): 326.

My translations rely primarily on the Greek edition of Clement’s writings, Clement of Alexandria, *Opera*, ed. Otto Stählin, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 12, 15, 17, 39 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905); with additional consultation of the Greek-French editions, Clement of Alexandria, *Les Stromates VII*, ed. Alain le Boulluec, *Sources Chrétiennes* 428 (Paris: Cerf, 1997); Clement of Alexandria, *Les Stromates IV*, ed. Annewies van den Hoek, trans. Claude Mondesert, *Sources Chrétiennes* 463 (Paris: Cerf, 2001); and William Wilson, trans., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II: *Fathers of the Second Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

²Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* VI.1 reports that Severus stirred up persecutions everywhere, resulting in “splendid martyrdoms,” especially at Alexandria. For additional material related to the persecution, see W. H. C. Frend, “Open Questions Concerning the Christians and the Roman Empire in the Age of the Severi,” *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 25 (1974): 333–351.

³The extent to which Clement was personally in danger is difficult to determine, given the lack of evidence. Regarding Clement’s activity in and departure from Alexandria, little information is certain; Eusebius’ *Hist. eccl.* represents our primary source V.11 describes Clement’s potential association with the early Christian teacher, Pantaenus. VI.6 notes that Clement directed instruction at Alexandria between Pantaenus

the chronology of his writings, however, is problematic. Eusebius provides evidence that suggests Clement left Alexandria during the early third century.⁴ Various scholars have attempted to relate the imperial persecutions of 202/203 both to Clement's eventual departure from Alexandria and to his evaluation of martyrdom.⁵ Limited historical evidence beyond Eusebius, however, makes any solid determination difficult.⁶ Given this general assessment, it makes sense to look beyond the precise timing of Clement's writings and travels for clues to understanding his peculiar perspective.

This chapter attempts to do so through a consideration of Clement's remarks on martyrdom in light of his emphasis on individual progression toward salvation and his

and Origen and suggests that he wrote the *Strom.* during the reign of Severus (193-211 C.E.). In VI.13-14, Eusebius describes the writings of Clement.

⁴*Hist. eccl.* VI.11.6 and VI.14.9 present the letters of Bishop Alexander of Jerusalem, which reveal that Clement spent some time with him, presumably after his departure from Alexandria.

⁵Regarding Clement's apparent flight from Alexandria during the Severan persecution, Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor suggest that his departure is significant in accounting for his "arbitrary" discussion of martyrdom, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 143-44. A. M. Ritter similarly reasons, "When in 202/203 the Roman government seemed to have changed its religious policy and the attacks were suddenly concentrated on the Christian missionary work, Clement felt compelled to flee; being a successful teacher he was, no doubt, a very well-known personality," "Clement of Alexandria and the Problem of Christian Norms," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1989): 421-22. Van den Hoek considers the restrictions placed after Septimius Severus visited Alexandria and reasons that "the resulting violence may have been the reason why Clement left the city, probably going to Jerusalem," "Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom," 327. In an earlier article though, she highlights the uncertainty related to Clement's departure and considers various possible scenarios, "How Alexandrian Was Clement of Alexandria? Reflections on Clement and His Alexandrian Background," *Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990): 184.

Whether such imperial policy relates to Clement's own position on and consequent evaluation of martyrdom depends on the dating of the *Strom.*, which is highly questionable. For a discussion of dating Clement's writings, see Elizabeth Clark, *Clement's Use of Aristotle: The Aristotelian Contribution to Clement of Alexandria's Refutation of Gnosticism*, Texts and Studies in Religion (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1977), 91-94. In any case, rather than necessarily consider Clement's views on martyrdom as a reaction to his departure, it seems just as reasonable to assume that, as Bowersock states, Clement, permitting flight, "acted on his principle," *Martyrdom and Rome*, 54.

⁶This situation leads Eric Osborn to conclude, "The life of Clement poses problems of its own, instead of illuminating the literary problems. ... we must be content to claim that in the *Stromateis* we have ideas and language of a Christian teacher of Alexandria somewhere around the year 200," in "Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982," *Second Century* 3 (1983): 221.

understanding of Christ. His views on martyrdom are related primarily in the fourth book of his *Strom.*⁷ When approaching Clement's discussion, his particular position within broader Christian debates deserves attention. Clement's assessment of martyrdom emerges in conversation with others; in the context of intra-Christian debate, he confronts both those who seek martyrdom and others who dismiss its value. As he begins Book IV with a review of the purpose of his work, Clement alerts his reader that "many refutations of the heterodox await us..." (*Strom.* IV.2.3). Other Christian writers, including Basilides and Heracleon, require Clement's attention in this matter, while overeager Christians also earn his concern. Clement responds to both groups by promoting a moderate view of physical martyrdom—one that affirms its validity under certain conditions, but fails to promote it as an ideal achievement.⁸ More significantly, Clement promotes an alternative type of Christian martyr, the *gnostic*, whose disciplined life, rather than death, bears witness to Christ. The initial part of this chapter thus establishes Clement's perspective on martyrdom, primarily as presented in *Strom.* IV. The negotiations regarding martyrdom exhibited in the *Strom.*—particularly vis-à-vis other Christians—support my

⁷Clement's comments on martyrdom have received relatively limited attention in recent scholarship. The more extensive treatments typically examine Clement's thought in comparison with contemporary views on martyrdom, whether Gnostic or orthodox, and simply note its distinctive character. Annewies van den Hoek, for instance, primarily considers how Clement's opinion on the matter was shaped to a large extent by his Gnostic opponents. She suggests that the Gnostic devaluation of a martyr's death compelled Clement to maintain a loyalty to the church and its martyrs, in spite of his lukewarm evaluation of physical martyrdom. She concludes with a brief summary of Clement's novel position, but she does not discuss fully how Clement's treatment of martyrdom corresponds with other aspects of his thought, "Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom." G. W. Bowersock indicates that Clement is one among few early Christians who admonished overly enthusiastic martyrs. Besides noting Clement's particular position, Bowersock's analysis concentrates on terminological issues associated with the concept of martyrdom. Consequently, his points on Clement, though on target, in my view, are not thorough, *Martyrdom and Rome*.

⁸Van den Hoek concurs, noting "The tone of his discussion is moderately supportive of the idea of martyrdom but not at all exhortative," "Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom," 340. Daniel Boyarin similarly considers Clement as an exception to orthodox Christian views of martyrdom, describing Clement's view as "ambivalent in the extreme to say the least," *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 62.

stance that views of the practice contributed significantly to emerging intra-Christian divisions and related identities.

At the time same, Clement's position is not exclusively a response to other so-called "heretical" Christians, with whom he occasionally agrees. More than this, his relatively lukewarm treatment of martyrdom by death, combined with his promotion of a superior form of martyrdom in life, aligns with his own concept of Christian community, one that delineates tiers of Christians, with corresponding expressions of group identity; that is multiple subgroups within a broader Christian group. Accepting of both groups, Clement prioritizes behavior associated with the advanced group, those seeking gnosis beyond faith. Specifically, his emphasis on progression in life combined with an interest in individual initiative serves as a basis for Christian identity. Clement's particular Christology also seems to inform his perspective on martyrdom. His understanding of Christ's unique nature minimizes efforts at imitation, while his view of Christ's function stresses his message over his death.

Multiple Martyrdoms

Throughout Book IV of his *Strom.* Clement promotes a moderate view of martyrdom death—one that affirms its validity under certain conditions, but does not promote it as an ideal achievement. More significantly, Clement advances an alternative type of Christian martyrdom, gnostic martyrdom, in which one's disciplined *life*, rather than *death*, bears witness to Christ.

Discouraging Overeager Christians

As noted, Clement's disapproval of various Christian groups motivates much of Book IV of *Strom*. Divergent views on martyrdom serve as one source of contention. Clement begins his treatment of martyrdom by discouraging overzealous Christians, who seek martyrdom. Interpreting Jesus' advice in Matt 10:23, which states, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next," Clement claims, "He does not advise...flight to avoid death, as if dreading it, but wishes us neither to be causes nor contributors of any evil to any one, either to ourselves or to the persecutor and murderer" (*Strom*. IV.76.1-2).⁹ Clement thus legitimizes escape from persecution when possible, arguing that Christ desires Christians to avoid actively courting such evil.¹⁰ Clement goes so far as to accuse one who deliberately presents himself to the authorities as being guilty of his own death. He writes, "If the one who kills a man of God sins against God, the one also who brings himself toward the judgment seat is liable for his own death." Even one who deliberately fails to avoid persecution is named "an accomplice in the wickedness of the persecutor" by Clement (*Strom*. IV.77.1). If one also employs provocation or provides an occasion for persecution, he is entirely guilty. Clement thus dismisses the idea of courting death at the hands of persecutors.

Similarly, against Christians who despise their flesh as created (and consequently evil) and therefore seek martyrdom, Clement offers a positive evaluation of the body.¹¹ In

⁹As an interesting contrast, Tertullian also considers Jesus' advice in Matt 10:23, yet claims that it was meant exclusively for the apostles, who otherwise would not have been able to spread the gospel, *Fug.* 5.1.

¹⁰This argument reflects Clement's interest in the care of the self; a fuller discussion of this concept in Clement's writings appears below.

¹¹Clement's understanding of the body will also be discussed further below, in relation to his soteriology and his concept of the Christian *gnostic*.

agreement with certain “heretics,”¹² Clement notes the trouble with ‘so-called’ Christians who approach death too hastily:

We, too, censure those who have rushed death; for there are some, not our own, but sharing only the name, who are hastening to give themselves up, through hatred toward the creator, the wretches are dying—these, we say, carry themselves off without witnessing (ἀμαρτύρως), even though they are punished publicly. (*Strom.* IV. 17.1-3)

Clement thus considers such individuals as false Christians and suggests that, ultimately, they suffer a “vain death” (θανάτῳ κενῷ). In addition, Clement hints that the intention behind the choice to suffer affects the attribution of the title martyr. In spite of suffering publicly, Clement denies them the designation and questions their Christian identity, asserting, “But since these falsely-named [Christians] resent the body, let them learn that the harmonious nature of the body contributes to the understanding which leads to natural goodness” (*Strom.* IV.17.4).¹³ Clement’s refutation of eagerness for martyrdom highlights two significant aspects of his thought, which I explore further below. First, Clement emphasizes the value of the body, diminishing the desire for its elimination.¹⁴ Second,

¹²Though Clement is not specific at this point, the surrounding context of the passage suggests that he has certain Gnostic Christians in mind. He notes, for instance, that this group discourages physical martyrdom, considering true martyrdom to be the knowledge of God, *Strom.* IV.16.3.

¹³He also later notes, in reference to Matt 5:25, “The adversary is not the body, as some suggest, but the devil, and those assimilated to him,” *Strom.* IV.95.2.

¹⁴In the midst of *Strom.* IV, the controversy over appropriate martyrdom allows Clement to contemplate the relationship between body and soul. Citing the Stoics with admiration, Clement maintains that the body and health are neutral attributes, indifferent to the virtue of the soul, *Strom.* IV.19.1. At the same time, following Plato, he advises that care of the body is necessary for the sake of the soul. Clement refers explicitly to the third book of Plato’s *Republic*, *Strom.* IV.18.1. In fact, he remarks, “health and an abundance of necessities keep the soul free and unhindered,” *Strom.* IV.21. Hence, moderation and maintenance of the body is therefore encouraged, as “it is by the path of life and health that we learn gnosis,” *Strom.* IV.18.1. Chapter 26 of *Strom.* IV is devoted to the perfect human treatment of body and

Clement reiterates his own understanding of Christian identity, which does not demand martyrdom, by denying the attribution, “Christian,” to those who rush martyrdom.

“When Called...”—Acceptable Martyrdom

In spite of discouraging an overabundant eagerness for martyrdom, Clement does admit the necessity of martyrdom under certain conditions, and, it seems, ideally for advanced Christians. He permits, “As is reasonable, the gnostic, when called, obeys easily, and gives up his body,” having previously “stripped [it] of the passions of the flesh...” (*Strom.* IV.13.1).¹⁵ Here, we see, first, that in contrast to the active suffering encouraged by false Christians, the gnostic Christian accepts death passively. Second, Clement advocates preparation for martyrdom, which aligns with this general encouragement of “training for death.”

Clement consistently suggests that the manner in which the Christian approaches death is significant. Gnostic preparation, which primarily involves subduing the passions, produces courage, rather than fear, and makes the acceptance of death easy. Clement

material things. As I further demonstrate below, Clement’s understanding of the body and soul, in the context of his *gnostic* program, makes his irritation with overly enthusiastic martyrs more comprehensible.

Clement’s thought often exhibits a synthesis of various philosophical views, as this essentially simultaneous reference to Plato and the Stoics reveals. Regarding Clement’s conception of the soul, Salvatore R. C. Lilla offers evidence that indicates that Clement perceived of the soul in essentially Platonic terms, consisting of a rational and an irrational part (*Paed.* III.1.2; *Strom.* III.68.5; V.80.9). At the same time though, Clement also recalls the Stoic division of the soul into ten parts (cf. *Strom.* VI.134.2; II.50.3), *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, Oxford Theological Monographs (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 81 n. 2.

¹⁵Droge and Tabor relate this involuntary type of martyrdom to the Socratic tradition, which requires a divine sign prior to acceptance of death. They suggest that Clement uses the concept of sign to moderate the fanaticism of martyrs, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, 142–43. This assessment is questionable, however, since the notion of a sign would be inconsistent with Clement’s belief that suffering was not ordained by God (a view we encounter below). Rather, it seems that Clement advises martyrdom only when no other appropriate alternative is available. “When called,” in this instance, may thus refer to the passive acceptance of martyrdom.

writes, “With good courage, then, he goes to the Lord, his friend, for whom he readily gave his body” (*Strom.* IV.14.2).¹⁶ Appropriate training, in the form of “life-long study” of the separation of the soul from the body, encourages the gnostic readiness for death (*Strom.* IV.12.5). Clement thus prioritizes individual intention and preparation over the public act of suffering.

Relatedly, Clement’s evaluation in Book IV also considers the potential objection—why does God allow Christian suffering (*Strom.* IV.78.1)? He notes that Christians are persecuted not as criminals, but merely due to their name; in other words, they have done nothing to earn their suffering. Moreover, highlighting the positive experience of death, Clement inquires,

What injustice is done to us, as far as we are concerned, in being released in death to the Lord, and accordingly undergoing a change of life, as if submitting to an alternative life? ...We should thank those who have furnished the occasion for a speedy departure,...if it is for love that we bear witness (μαρτυροῖμεν). (*Strom.* IV.80.1)

In addition to reiterating the appropriate motive of love, Clement presents death in a very casual manner. Death represents an event, not to be feared, but embraced by the Christian. With such an understanding of death, one may wonder why Clement is not a more enthusiastic proponent of martyrdom. Below, I consider this question in greater detail and reveal that, despite the easy acceptance of death, which exclusively allows the

¹⁶In this passage, “readily” appears to signify not an active desire for death, but rather a non-resistant acceptance of one’s situation.

gnostic to achieve the perfected state by releasing the soul from the body, Clement nevertheless continues to affirm the significance of life.

In doing so, Clement begins to craft an alternative conception of martyrdom. He consistently promotes love (ἀγάπη) as the appropriate motivation for and reflection of the act. In Clement's thought, love both contributes to and mirrors the progression toward gnosis.¹⁷ He claims, "We call martyrdom perfection, not because a person comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love" (*Strom.* IV.14.3).¹⁸ Therefore, as with the preparation, the motive, rather than the act itself, contributes to its worth.

Relatedly, Clement also acknowledges the benefits of martyrdom. A martyr bears witness to himself, the persecutor, and the Lord. The act not only demonstrates the sincerity of the martyr, but also promotes a steadfastness of faith among fellow Christians and encourages unbelievers towards faith.¹⁹ Still, for Clement, witnessing via death is not the exclusive or necessarily most celebrated form of Christian martyrdom.

¹⁷*Strom.* II.53.3; IV.53.1; VII.57.4. John Behr explains, "Clement maintains both the *gnosis* culminates in love and that love is perfected by *gnosis*. This ambivalence...reinforces the fact that, for Clement, love and *gnosis* can never be separated, and ultimately are one and the same," *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199. In addition, Clement associates love of God with entering into God, *Quis div.* 27.5.

¹⁸Furthermore, regarding the response to such an act, Clement asserts, "You will wonder at his love," *Strom.* IV.13.3. Clement also compares his conception of the martyr's death to Greek ideas regarding death on the battlefield; he notes that Christians die without lusts or desires, even for life, *Strom.* IV.14.4.

¹⁹Clement also asserts that Christians should accept martyrdom not because they desire personal glory, but rather out of love for God, *Strom.* IV.14. W. E. G. Floyd claims, "Clement cheerfully maintains (perhaps because he was already at a safe distance) that good is ultimately brought out of every evil, martyrdom included;" hence, martyrdom must have some positive value, *Clement of Alexandria's Treatment of the Problem of Evil*, Oxford Theological Monographs (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 96.

Ultimately, Clement makes a significant distinction between “simple” and gnostic martyrdom. In an unusual interpretation of Matt 19:29, which calls for Christians to leave behind family and possessions, Clement asserts that Jesus’s instructions refer not to simple martyrdom, by way of death, but to gnostic martyrdom. The latter is indicated by one “who has conducted himself according to the rule of the Gospel, through love to the Lord” (*Strom.* IV.15.4).²⁰ The consequence, as Matt 19:29 shows, is salvation. Therefore, the redemptive path of gnosis, indicative of a certain lifestyle for Clement, offers an alternative meaning to the term martyr that challenges any required association with a suffering death.²¹

“Heretical” Alternatives—Adaptation & Answers

Clement’s conception of martyrdom receives further definition as he encounters additional opposition in Book IV. Alongside his attempt to stifle the enthusiasm of voluntary martyrs, Clement responds to criticism of martyrdom by other Christians. Clement often agrees with those Christians he casts as “heretics,” maintaining his distance only minimally. In one instance though, Clement admonishes those who refuse martyrdom. He claims,

²⁰Matt 19:29, NRSV, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.” Clement continues with a figurative interpretation of the meanings of mother, father, etc.

²¹Bowersock persuasively argues that Clement, rather than crafting a new meaning for the term *martyr* within Christian tradition, simply utilizes the term with its traditional meaning, as a witness. He relates, “Clement’s analysis of martyrdom returned prudently to the original sense of the word...he draws [a parallel] between *martyria* and *homologia*.” Bowersock continues, “He is trying to turn the very word back into its original sense of ‘bearing witness’,” *Martyrdom and Rome*, 67; 69.

Now some of the heretics who have misunderstood the Lord, have at once an impious and cowardly love of life; claiming true martyrdom to be the knowledge of God (which we also admit), and that one who confesses by death is a self-murderer and a suicide; and treating other similar sophisms of cowardice. (*Strom.* IV.16.3)

Clement thus appears to share their essential conception of true martyrdom as gnosis, further demonstrating his perception of martyrdom as more than death at the hands of persecutors. Nevertheless, he rejects their idea that Christians who bravely confess with death are necessarily suicidal and redefines his their position as cowardly.

More typical of *Strom.* IV are carefully crafted dialogues between Clement and other Christian thinkers. An examination of Clement's interaction with such figures further illuminates his own view. One particular teacher whom Clement attempts to refute is Basilides, who, according to Clement, spawned a heresy in the early second century (*Strom.* VII.106.4). In Book IV, he focuses on Basilides' apparent misconception of martyrdom. Clement includes an excerpt from the twenty-third book of Basilides' *Exegetica*, in which the latter apparently claims that martyrdom is a punishment for sin. According to Basilides, Christian martyrs only appear to be guilty at the hands of the Romans; in fact though, they are guilty of transgressions that have little to do with Roman order and are thus consequently brought to such an end by God. To claim otherwise, according to Basilides, is inconsistent with the providence of God (*Strom.* IV.81.1-83.1). Clement attacks Basilides' proposition on two points. His initial response logically questions how martyrdom can be viewed as punishment when the decision to confess one's faith ultimately depends on the presumably guilty party. In other words,

Basilides' reasoning fails, according to Clement, if an accused Christian (the sinner) may escape martyrdom (the punishment) by simply denying his faith. Clement argues that if one denies Christianity and consequently escapes punishment, then the providence posed by Basilides must be dismissed (*Strom.* IV.83.2). Moreover, if Basilides is correct, Clement presumes "then also faith and teaching, on account of which martyrdom comes, are cooperators in punishment" (*Strom.* IV.85.2). In other words, those who exhibit faith are punished, while those who deny it (i.e. sinners) escape. With regard to divine justice, such reasoning, according to Clement, is absurd. Furthermore, recalling Jesus' apparent suffering, Clement proclaims, "how impious," as Basilides has essentially designated Christ a sinner (*Strom.* IV.85.1).

What Clement ultimately claims about Christ's suffering in his effort to protect the providence of God is also significant. In his rejection of Basilides' thought, Clement asserts, "For neither did the Lord suffer by the will of the Father, nor are those who are persecuted persecuted by the will of God" (*Strom.* IV.86.2). Clement is left with two problematic options: persecution reflects the will of God and is therefore good, or those who afflict persecution are without guilt. Both are unsatisfactory, but Clement opts for a version of the first. Since he ultimately concludes though that nothing takes place without the will of God, Clement is left to state that things may occur without his prevention. He reasons, "It is not necessary therefore to think that he actively produces afflictions...; but we must be persuaded that he does not hinder those that produce them" (*Strom.* IV.87.1). This compromise in Clement's discussion with Basilides is quite significant. God plays a passive, rather than active, role in the suffering inflicted upon Christians. According to such reasoning, one could assume that any predetermined divine plan did not include the

death of Christ. Rather, suffering and martyrdom occur simply because God does not prevent them. This deduction, according to Clement, “alone saves both the providence and the goodness of God” (*Strom.* IV.86.3). This unusual interpretation makes sense when one turns to Clement’s understanding of the crucifixion. His presumption regarding God’s failure to prevent, rather than cause, the crucifixion corresponds with his limited assessment of the expiatory significance of the event, which I consider below.

As his discussion of martyrdom continues in *Strom.* IV, Clement also offers a critical evaluation of Heracleon’s stance on the matter. He notes that Heracleon is known as “the most admirable of the Valentinian school” (*Strom.* IV.71.1). As in his discussion with Basilides, Clement reveals certain similarities with Heracleon’s thought. Specifically, both Clement and Heracleon support the primacy of witnessing Christ throughout the course of one’s life, rather than exclusively before the authorities. In fact, Clement himself remarks that, with regard to this basic idea, Heracleon “seems to agree perfectly with us” (*Strom.* IV.73.1). Clement and Heracleon differ, however, on the remaining merits of witnessing solely through a martyr’s death.

Clement relates Heracleon’s interpretation of a series of verses that exhibit Christ’s counseling on martyrdom, beginning with Luke 12:8 and Matt 10:32, and culminating with Luke 12:11-12. With regard to these verses, Clement notes Heracleon’s distinction between superior confession in Christ (ἐν ἐμοὶ, Luke 12:8) and simple acknowledgement of Christ (με, Matthew 10:32). Like Clement, Heracleon considers the disposition with which one approaches death as critical. Regarding confession, Clement agrees with Heracleon’s designation of two forms—“a confession by faith and conduct, and one by voice” (that is, before the

Roman authorities).²² Thus, one may bear witness without confessing before authorities. For Heracleon though, witness through confession alone (by voice) is judged insufficient (*Strom.* IV.71.1-2). According to Clement, one that confesses by voice (that is, before the Roman authorities), regardless of his prior behavior, still exhibits the sincerity of his faith (Heracleon denies such a confession as superficial) (*Strom.* IV.73.1). Such a confession is consequently sufficient. In fact, Clement discusses the possibility for a sudden repentance at the end of one's life by confessing Christ under torture, regardless of any prior lack of Christian behavior.²³ Of those who do no good works during life, Clement remarks, "Their witness, then, seems to be the cleansing of sins with glory" (*Strom.* IV.74.3).²⁴ Clement thus permits and honors martyrdom by death when the conditions are appropriate or unavoidable; nevertheless, he also advocates a living testimony. One is therefore led to question—which type of martyrdom, through confession via life or death, does Clement deem superior?

Superior Martyrdom—Clement's Gnostic Ideal

Clement advocates a more suitable means of bearing witness to Christ than the martyr's death, an alternative that involves a sincere lifestyle, reflects his gnostic ideal,

²²Bowersock characterizes Clement's understanding of these options as essentially "two aspects of the same thing, confession and bearing witness." He explains, "*homologia* is the element that distinguishes those who are tormented or go to their death in making their confession and bearing witness," *Ibid.*, 71.

²³Clement writes, "...if some have not by conduct and in their life 'confessed Christ before men,' they are manifested to have believed with the heart; by confessing Him with the mouth at the tribunals, and not denying Him when tortured to the death... For there is, so to speak, at the close of life a sudden repentance in action, and a true confession toward Christ, in the testimony of the voice," *Strom.* IV.73.1-3.

²⁴Cf. *Strom.* IV.104.1.

and subordinates the manner of death. He reasons,

If the confession to God is martyrdom, every soul which has lived purely with recognition of God, which has obeyed the commandments, is a martyr both by life and word, in whatever way it is released from the body—pouring forth faith as blood throughout its whole life until its departure. (*Strom.* IV.15.3)²⁵

Clement significantly broadens the concept of martyrdom to include a lifestyle focused on God. The focus on an individual's life-long practice and expression of Christian identity also limits the significance of a public death with communal implications. After advocating the efficacy of a confession exclusive to death in opposition to Heracleon, Clement nevertheless claims, "Those who witness in life by deed, and at the law court by word, whether entertaining hope or suspecting flight, are better than those who confess salvation by their mouth alone. But if one ascends also to love, he is a blessed and true martyr." (*Strom.* IV.75.3). This statement indicates the primacy of love in Clement's gnostic ideal. In addition, the comparison reflects tiers of martyrs, prioritizing those who witness in life. Continuing his response to Heracleon, Clement also highlights the selective nature of physical martyrdom, claiming that it is not universally anticipated or necessary.²⁶ This understanding of a martyr corresponds well with Clement's conception of the gnostic path, a progressive journey toward salvation.

²⁵Van den Hoek notes that Clement acknowledges that some ranks exist, "The ones who have lived in a gnostic manner and died in addition should have priority over the ones who only did the last; he admits that there has to be some differentiation," "Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom," 331.

A preference for this alternative martyrdom is revealed throughout Book IV, often expressed through biblical interpretation. For instance, Clement utilizes biblical references, particularly from Isaiah, to compare those who witness according to their voice or their heart. Rather than love only with lips, Clement claims, “those who complete the commandments of the Savior, by every action testify (μαρτυροῦσι), doing what He wishes, and accordingly naming the Lord; and testifying (μαρτυροῦντες) by deed to Him in whom they believe” (*Strom.* IV.43.4). Clement thus reiterates the opportunity for martyrdom in leading an active life, devoted to Christ. Moreover, he explains, “The same work, therefore, receives a distinction, whether it happens out of fear or accomplished by love, and is produced by faith or by knowledge” (*Strom.* IV.113.6-114.1). Clement’s priority is further reflected in Chapter 22 of *Strom.* IV, in which the true gnostic does good, not for fear of punishment or hope of reward, but for sake of good itself. In this regard, Clement’s thoughts reflect his redemptive scheme, which considers various levels of believers yet maintains the superiority of those who ultimately achieve gnosis.

Gnosis and Christian Community

Aligned with his revised concept of martyrdom, Clement’s promotion of gnosis requires further consideration.²⁷ Clement’s essential scheme of salvation relies on both faith and knowledge. Arguing that knowledge ultimately stems from an initial faith,

²⁶Bowersock appropriately notes Clement’s desire to “establish that martyrdom in the true sense does not necessarily involve death at all. It is rather an expression of one’s commitment to the Christian God, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 67.

²⁷While it permeates the entire *Strom.*, Clement’s discussion of the *gnostic* is the focus of Book VII.

Clement both confronts his Gnostic adversaries, who devalue faith, and also seeks to make gnosis acceptable to the simple believer. Faith is thus essential, and sufficient for attaining salvation. While he maintains the sufficiency of simple faith in acquiring salvation, Clement also consistently advocates a gnosis as the superior attribute.²⁸ He submits, “It is the will of God [that we should attain] the knowledge of God, which is the sharing of immortality” (*Strom.* IV.27.2). He thus refers to his ideal Christian as a gnostic. Distinguishing the levels of belief, he explains, “to know is more than to believe, as to be dignified with the highest honor after being saved is a greater thing than being saved” (VI.109.2). This tiered path of salvation underscores various facets of Clement’s work. His series of writings reflect multiple modes of Christian practice, addressed accordingly to different levels, or groups, of Christians.²⁹ The redemptive activity of Christ is similarly distinguished; he first persuades, then trains, and ultimately teaches, each a step on the path of Christian progress (*Paed.* I.1.1-3).

According to Clement, the primary means for preparing oneself for the reception of gnosis is acquiring control over the passions. Passions, for Clement, are “movements of the soul contrary to nature in disobedience to reason” and represented by “an excessive appetite exceeding the measures of reason, or appetite unbridled and disobedient to reason” (*Strom.* II.59.6). Clement argues that the soul of the gnostic must be “without the

²⁸Regarding various levels of belief, Clement distinguishes the salvation of the common believer from the more perfect *gnostic* salvation. In *Strom.* VI.109.2, he relates “now to know is more than to believe, as to be dignified with the highest honor after being saved is a greater thing than being saved.” Clement also suggests that if *gnosis* were distinguishable from eternal salvation, then the proper *gnostic* would choose the former.

²⁹The *Protr.*, for instance, is obviously directed to a non-Christian audience. The elements of the *Paed.* suggest an audience of intermediate believers, as the instruction primarily consists of practical applications for living, intended as training. The *Strom.* is intentionally written in a manner accessible primarily to the more advanced Christians. See, for instance, Eric Osborn, “Teaching and Writing in the First Chapter of the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1959): 335–343.

nonsense of the body and all the passions...and stripped of the desires of the flesh” (*Strom.* V.67.4). A corresponding lifestyle is therefore encouraged, through which the Christian strives to ultimately achieve a state of passionlessness, or *apatheia*. This stage allows for assimilation to and consequent full contemplation of God, the pinnacle of knowledge, or *gnosis*.³⁰ An integral aspect of the quest, for Clement, is its progressive nature. Relatedly, Clement considers salvation to be a cooperative enterprise and continually highlights the element of human responsibility.

The impression one gets from Clement is that such practices are essentially independent, taking shape in relative isolation from the broader Christian community; they, at the least, do not appear to reflect any formalized, ecclesiastical practice. Clement’s emphasis on the “self” minimizes the significance of communal expressions of Christian identity, particularly for the advanced Christian. This view also corresponds with Clement’s assertion that, for the gnostic Christian, care of the self comes first, while neighbors, including fellow Christians, come second (VII.16.1).³¹ In Clement’s writings, we thus find that certain occasions of Christian practice appear to unify both faithful and gnostic Christians; that is, their related behaviors overlap—subgroups unite and cooperate in common expressions of Christian identity. On other occasions though, the elevated, individual-oriented behaviors of the gnostic approach appear to trump broader expressions of Christian identity. The prospect of death at the hands of persecutors may well have marked one such occasion.

³⁰Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 60.

³¹This does not imply that Clement perceives his ideal Christian as retreating in isolation. Rather, as noted above, Clement regularly advocates the proper expression of love (ἀγάπη) as critical. Christians can model Christ, and thus cooperate in salvation, by assisting others, including teaching or praying for other Christians (VI.77.5; VII.41.6; 52.3).

Clement offers some insight into his understanding of the appropriate contexts for Christian progress as he illustrates the universal provision of the Christ's providence. Specifically, he highlights the progressive modes of instruction in three corresponding venues. Clement writes, "This is the teacher, who trains the gnostic by mysteries, the believer by expectations of good, and the hard of heart by remedial education... From him, providence proceeds in private, in public, and everywhere" (*Strom.* VII.6.1). Cautious of overstating the significance of this passage, I find his association of gnosis with the private, or individual, sphere provocative, particularly as it can inform our understanding of Christian community, and further make sense of his rather ambivalent approach to martyrdom by death—given its prominently public expression—and his preference for "gnostic martyrdom." Specifically, Clement's prioritization of the self-sufficient, progressive gnostic lifestyle appears to contribute significantly to his relative lack of enthusiasm for martyrdom by death.

To further support this view, let us briefly consider Clement's treatment of prayer, a central early Christian practice, in *Strom.* VII. His discussion contributes to a model of group relations that prioritizes individual, relatively private expressions of Christian identity over group-oriented ones. Though he initially presents prayer as communal, the majority of his discussion celebrates the individual practice of prayer, situated beyond the ecclesiastical sphere.³²

³²In general, Clement's attention to church structure, including official leaders, is scarce. Denise Kimber Buell notes his "almost total silence on ecclesial organization," *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12. Bogdan G. Bucur further shows Clement's brief references to church offices essentially undermine their significance, "The Other Clement of Alexandria: Cosmic Hierarchy and Interiorized Apocalypticism," *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006): 265.

Clement's discussion of ideal Christian prayer is guided, in part, by his desire to reveal its superiority to prior pagan and Jewish cultic practices. He thus characterizes prayer as reflective of a new cultic context, in which traditional sacrifice is no longer necessary (*Strom.* VI.31.7). In a brief reflection on the communal aspect of Christian prayer, Clement casts the congregation devoted to prayer as the appropriate sacrificial altar. He stresses the unity of this reformed offering, noting that such prayer reflects one common voice and mind (*Strom.* VII.31.8).³³

The remainder of Clement's characterization of prayer, however, stresses the individual aspects of the endeavor. Clement attributes a sacrificial quality to prayer; ideally, it stems from a pure mind, one that has cleansed "the irrational part of the soul" (*Strom.* VII.32.7). This, in Clement's view, is the offering acceptable to God. Clement continues to distinguish the gnostic approach to prayer, which he elevates as the superior practice. He stresses that honoring God via prayer is not restricted to "a specific place, or selected temple, or certain festivals, or appointed days. Rather, during his whole life, the gnostic, in every place, even if he is alone...honors God" (*Strom.* VII.35.3). Moreover, characterizations of prayer as a life-long, personal "festival" (*Strom.* VII.35.6; 49,3; cf. 35.1) interiorize the celebration of an often public, communal affair. Clement further indicates that the superior form of prayer, as practiced silently by the gnostic (*Strom.* VII.39.6; 43.3-4), takes place in a manner that is not "visible to the multitude" (*Strom.* VII.49.6).

Though it is certainly driven, in part, by his interest in showing the superiority of Christianity to prior cultic forms of worship, Clement's portrait of prayer in *Strom.* VII also reflects his prioritization of individual progress toward God, especially for the

³³He further associates this singular expression with the *logos* in VII.32.4.

advanced Christian. This stance essentially mitigates communal, public modes of prayer as necessary expressions of Christian identity. Still, in the case of prayer, one can envision Clement's ideal Christian reasonably participating in multiple modes of prayer, both communal and personal, even if more significance is ascribed to the latter. Following both paths of martyrdom—in life and by death—is, of course, a trickier and more demanding prospect.

Christ as Divine Instructor

In his *Protr.*, Clement encourages his audience toward Christianity primarily by advocating the supremacy of his faith over the traditional religions and philosophies of antiquity. At one point, Clement interjects with a description of Christ's role as Logos, "And the Word himself already speaks to you clearly, putting to shame your disbelief; yes, I say, the Word of God, having become human, in order that you might learn from a human how it is even possible for a human to become a god" (*Protr.* 1.8.4). This excerpt reveals elements essential to the present task —the didactic function of Christ in Clement's salvific vision, the potential for assimilation via imitation, and the appropriate response of the believer.

As noted in Chapter 1, Pagels, in her article on orthodox and Gnostic responses to persecution, reveals that conceptions of martyrdom often relate to understandings of Christ.³⁴ Let us then explore Clement's Christology, including references to his

³⁴For particularly persuasive proto-orthodox examples, see Pagel's discussions of Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian, whose anti-heretical defenses of a suffering Christ and martyrdom coincide,

redemptive purpose and nature, while making clear the implicit connections between his view of martyrdom and the incarnation. In contrast to the prior focus on Book IV of the *Strom.*, here, I utilize a wide range of Clement's extant writings, from which a relatively consistent Christological portrait emerges. The incarnate Christ serves a crucial role in Clement's system of salvation. In contrast to many of Clement's 'proto-orthodox' contemporaries, though, Christ functions as a savior through his teaching, rather than his suffering.³⁵ I argue that Clement's emphasis on Christ's teaching over Christ's passion in his redemptive plan essentially minimizes the importance of a suffering martyrdom. Moreover, if early Christians typically perceived martyrdom as an imitation of Christ's sacrifice, then Clement's interpretation of the passion diminishes the relevance of such a motive. Accordingly, Clement advocates witnessing Christ, not necessarily via a suffering death, but through an appropriate life intent on the progression toward salvation.

The Function of Christ & the Incarnation

Clement's *Paed.* perhaps best reveals his understanding of Christ's purpose. For Clement, Christ's gift of salvation occurs via his role as an instructor. The first book

"Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian's Response to Persecution," 266–270. 266–270.

³⁵Scholars generally agree on this aspect of Clement's characterization of Christ. Henry Chadwick confirms, "The incarnation is the central moment in the unfolding plan of God for the education and restoration of the frail, erring humanity, lost in sin that results from neglect, weakness and ignorance," in *History and Thought of the Early Church* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982), 178. Lilla considers Clement's emphasis on Platonic ideal of the contemplative life and the esoteric nature of Christ's teachings, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 173; he elaborates, "The idea of Christ as a redeemer of the whole of mankind by means of his sacrifice is replaced, in Clement's philosophical system, by the esoteric idea of *gnosis*," 159. See also John Ferguson, "The Achievement of Clement of Alexandria," *Religious Studies* 12 (1976): 71.

explains Christ's didactic function in detail. The Incarnate Logos is depicted as a healer and advisor, who uniquely offers humans the opportunity to realize their ignorance, cure their passions, and gain gnosis (*Paed.* I.2.6). The latter, as noted above, marks the ultimate goal for Clement. Describing Christ's activity, Clement explains,

His main concern is to consider the way and the means by which the [lives] of humans might be made more conformable to salvation. ... He seeks to prepare us to the condition of a wayfarer, that is, to make us well equipped and unimpeded by provisions, that we might be self-sufficient of life and practice a moderate frugality in our journey toward the good life of eternity, teaching each one of us to be his own guide. (*Paed.* I.12.98.3-4)

This depiction reveals much about Clement's understanding of Christ's redemptive role. He operates as a trainer who provides Christians the means with which they can progress toward salvation. In addition, while emphasizing that Christ's message is universally available, Clement stresses the requirement of human choice and the progressive nature of salvation, consistent with the gnostic path.

Related to Christ's role, *Paed.* itself reflects this developmental aspect of Clement's soteriology. His writings, in general, appear to relate to various stages of belief, which have implications for his understanding of the Christian community. Clement relates that persuasion comes first, followed by training, and ultimately teaching. Clement stresses the progressive development of the Christian. The stages of learning also imply different roles for Christ. In the second stage, for instance, Christ the trainer (ὁ

παιδαγωγός) operates as a sort of practical physician, who, having already persuaded one to belief, can now offer a means to begin curbing his passions (*Paed.* 1.1.1.4). Once the passions are curbed, the Christian meets Christ the teacher (ὁ διδασκαλικός), who “explains and reveals through instruction,” and thus provides knowledge (*Paed.* 1.1.2.1). Such a complex understanding of Christ’s roles also indicates that Clement perceives salvation as an incremental process. Clement summarizes, “Therefore, the all-loving Word, ready to perfect us in a way that leads progressively to salvation, makes effective use of an order corresponding to our development; from the beginning, he persuades (προτρέπον), then he trains (παιδαγωγῶν), and after all this he teaches (ἐκδιδάσκων)” (*Paed.* 1.1.3.3). In addition to his attention to Christ’s fundamentally instructive role, Clement’s emphasis on the progressive function of the Logos message significantly diminishes the impact of the concept of Christ’s death as a momentary sacrifice.

The Nature of Christ in Clement’s Thought

While he is reasonably clear regarding the didactic function of Christ’s incarnation, Clement is somewhat ambiguous when it comes to the nature of Christ. More than a few scholars note his proximity to a docetic position, primarily based on his peculiar interpretation of Christ’s nature:³⁶

³⁶Ferguson suggests that Clement is “continually flirting with docetism because he is uneasy about letting Jesus into the actualities of the human condition,” “The Achievement of Clement of Alexandria,” 77. Eric Osborn agrees, “[Clement] sounds like a dualist in his account of body and soul and a docetist in his Christology. In fact he is neither, and gives evidence that he rejects such views; but the tendencies are there,” “Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982,” 228. See also James E. Davison, “Structural Similarities and Dissimilarities in the Thought of Clement of Alexandria and the Valentinians,” *Second Century* 3 (1983): 211.

But in the case of the Savior, it would be ridiculous [to assume] that the body, as a body, demanded the necessary services in order for its continuance. For he ate, not for the sake of the body, which was maintained by a holy power, but in order that it might not enter into the minds of his followers to think differently of him, just as certainly some afterwards supposed that he only seemed to be made manifest. But he was entirely without passion (ἀπαθής), not receptive to any movement of feeling—either pleasure or pain. (*Strom.* VI.71.2)

In denying Christ typical bodily needs, Clement does minimize Christ's human experience.³⁷ Nevertheless, he also acknowledges and rejects the perception of those who assume Christ appeared as a phantom. Elsewhere, as we see below, Clement maintains Christ's existence in the flesh.³⁸ Clement's hesitation in suggesting that Christ shares in the limitations of the body is significant, particularly as one considers modes of imitation, including martyrdom.

³⁷In *Strom.* III.59.3, Clement cites a letter of Valentinus with apparent approval: "Jesus endured all things and was continent; it was his endeavor to earn a divine nature; he ate and drank in a manner peculiar to himself, and the food did not pass out of his body. Such was the power of his continence that food was not corrupted within him; for he himself was not subject to the process of corruption." Clement continues by praising a "high value on continence (ἐγκράτειαν) which arises from love to the Lord," III.59.4. Everett Proctor asserts that Clement borrows this notion, regarding the special nature of Christ's body from Valentinus, *Christian Controversy in Alexandria: Clement's Polemic Against the Basilideans and Valentinians*, American University Studies, 7. Theology and Religion 172 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 69.

³⁸Examples of this view are discussed in the following section. *Strom.* V.16.5, citing John 1:14, "...then he also generated himself, 'when the Word had become flesh,' that he might be seen"; also, "...the Son is said to be...the revealer of the Father's character to the five senses by clothing himself with flesh" (*Strom.* V.33.6).

Impassibility & Imitation

An evaluation of Christ's human characteristics, particularly his capacity to experience passions, including suffering, allows us to consider whether one might imitate him. Was Christ susceptible to these movements of the soul, according to Clement? If not, how might the experience of an early Christian reflect Christ's? At the start of *Strom.* VII, Clement describes Christ's salvific role. In doing so, he comments on the nature of Christ. He relates that the "Savior," because of "his exceeding love of human flesh, not despising its susceptibility, but clothing himself [with it], came for the common salvation of humans" (*Strom.* VII.8.1). In addition, he describes Christ as one "who for our sake assumed flesh capable of suffering..." (*Strom.* VII.6.5). Clement thus suggests that Christ's experience in the flesh included exposure to passions.

Christ's actual experience of suffering, though, remains unclear, as Clement affirms his impassible situation. For instance, Clement characterizes him as "...the Lord, who without beginning was impassible..." (*Strom.* VII.7.2). He likewise considers Christ the image of God, the impassible man (ἄνθρωπος ἀπαθής) (*Strom.* V.94.5). One is consequently left to wonder whether Clement considered the incarnation of Christ to be both genuine and complete (i.e. does he fully experience the human condition?).³⁹

Clement's discussion fails to provide a solid resolution; still, his Christological remarks

³⁹Joseph McLelland echoes this sentiment in *God the Anonymous: A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology*, Patristic Monograph Series 4 (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1976), 67. Regarding Clement's view of the incarnation, Rowan Williams also observes that the "concern with the saving effect of God's sharing human *limitation* is not to the fore. The aspect of limitedness in the earthly life of Christ is clearly ascribed to educational necessity, condescension to the limitations of the created and flesh-bound understanding," in *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1979), 34.

regularly distance Christ from the human experience, including passions.⁴⁰ Clement relates that Christ is exclusively free from human passion. He is “without passion of soul” (ἀπαθὲς τὴν ψυχὴν). In addition, Clement submits that truly Christ “himself is entirely free from human passions; that is why He alone is a judge. Yet we must attempt, to the best of our ability, to sin as little as possible” (*Paed.* I.2.4.2). Clement’s comparison of the situation of Christ and Christians suggests that the former maintains an exclusive position that the latter cannot attain. Marked by an unattainable ideal of impassibility, Clement’s Christology limits the possibility for imitation.

Interestingly, Clement does depict Christ as emotional on occasion, though it is almost always characterized as condescension to human needs inspired by love. Clement relates that “...the Lord savingly accommodated Himself to the weakness of humans” (*Strom.* II.72.4). Love is the primary motive for the incarnation, “the supreme proof he has given of His love for humans, in that he has become human on our account” (*Paed.* I.8.62.1).⁴¹ Besides love though, Christ is also apparently susceptible to anger, as Clement notes that he chastises Christians (*Paed.* I.8.64.3). Clement explains that such harsh rebuke operates in a positive medicinal manner, “relaxing the hardness of passions and purging the impurities of life, the lusts” and therefore reflects Christ’s care (*Paed.* I.8.65.1).⁴² Encouraging the appropriate response, Clement further illuminates the relationship between Christ’s emotion, message, and salvation: “Our thankfulness for the

⁴⁰For a comparable impression of the role of Christ in Clement’s thought, see J. Wytzes, “Paideia and Pronoia in the Works of Clemens Alexandrinus,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 14 (1955): 156–57. In relation to the role of the Incarnation, he notes, “For if God and the Logos educate from the beginning and their main treatment of man consists in education, then the appearance of Christ in the flesh has no more that unique meaning,” 157.

⁴¹See also *Paed.* I.8.62.2.

⁴²See also *Paed.* I.8.74.

testimony (μαρτυρία) is great, especially since the motive of his wrath—if it is proper to call his warnings wrath—is really love for humanity. It is God falling into passion (πάθη) on behalf of humanity, for whom the word of God also became human” (*Paed.* I.8.74). Clement thus considers Christ’s experience of passion, not as a moment of suffering sacrifice, but as participation in the human realm with a corresponding testimony inspired by love. While it helps explain the incarnation for Clement, the accommodation involved with Christ’s experience in the flesh, does not, however, extend to his actual physical suffering, most dramatically represented by his crucifixion. Moreover, as noted above, in relation to Basilides, Christ’s suffering was not part of the divine scheme, according to Clement, and thus not integral to the purpose of the incarnation.

A Return to Christ’s Redemptive Function

Clement’s Christ serves Christians not as a sacrifice, but rather as a conveyor of a message of salvation, ultimately gnosis.⁴³ Clement is thus left to interpret Christ’s death as a signal, awakening humans to their ignorance.⁴⁴ He, in fact, directly relates the cross to the provision of knowledge—“It was not without the cross that he came to our

⁴³Relatedly, Clement notes that God does not desire sacrifice. Against those who sacrifice to Gods, Clement argues that God does not share the needs or desires of created beings, including hunger, the apparent basis for sacrifice, *Strom.* VII.30.1. The author of *Testim. Truth* presents a similar point (32,19-21); see Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion.

⁴⁴For instance, Clement relates that the “blood and the milk of the Lord are a symbol of his sufferings and of his teachings” (*Paed.* I.6.49.4).

knowledge” (*Strom.* V.72.3).⁴⁵ In terms of his soteriology, the crucifixion, for Clement, thus marks not a moment of sacrifice, but a step in a progressive effort toward gnosis.

In fact, references to Christ’s death in Clement’s writings are minimal, surprising given the breadth of his writings. The scarce references alone suggest that the crucifixion was not a prominent feature of Clement’s Christianity. On the rare occasions when he does cite the event, the reader might infer a redemptive understanding. In each instance, though, Clement associates the crucifixion with the progressive gnostic lifestyle, afforded through Christ’s teaching. Many of the references occur in Clement’s sermon, *Quis dives salvetur* (*Quis div.*) In the midst of the sermon, Clement claims that Christ accepted death as a payment in exchange for prior sin and disbelief. At the same time though, he highlights the pedagogical role of Jesus, and maintains that immortality, or salvation, is achieved progressively. Speaking on Christ’s behalf, Clement asserts,

I am your rearer, giving myself as bread, of which he who has tasted experiences death no more, and supplying day by day the drink of immortality. I am a teacher of supercelestial lessons. On your behalf, I contended with death, and paid in full your death, which you owe for your former sins and your unbelief towards God. (*Quis div.* 23.4)

⁴⁵See also *Paed.* I.8.65-66. Lilla notes a parallel between Clement’s depiction of the wood of the cross and a passage in the *Gospel of Truth*, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 162. The *Gospel of Truth* similarly reads, “He was nailed to a tree (and) he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father,” 18.24-25, in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

The conception of Christ as a payment appears secondary to Clement's emphasis on his didactic role, which, as revealed above, progressively provides Christians with the means of attaining salvation.⁴⁶

Similarly, Clement asserts that as Jesus is "giving himself up as a ransom he leaves behind a new testament [διδάσκειν]: 'my love I give to you'" (*Quis div.* 37.4).⁴⁷ The διδάσκειν, which may be considered as a sort of deposit left behind for common wellbeing, is, in this case, love.⁴⁸ Clement thus again highlights Christ's legacy in the form of a beneficial message, rather than his death. The instruction left by Christ mediates salvation. Clement explicitly reasons, "The word is therefore called Savior, because he has left humans remedies of reason in the search for understanding and salvation" (*Paed.* I.12.100.1). Once again, the redemptive effect of the incarnation is depicted as progressive.⁴⁹

⁴⁶In the context of a hypothetical lawsuit, Clement similarly writes on behalf of Christ to a Christian, "I regenerated you, who were born badly by the world [destined] for death. Having released you, I offered a cure and redemption," *Quis div.* 23.2. Clement mentions nothing of Christ's death in this passage, but simply describes his role.

⁴⁷Clement continues by noting that the Christ expects in return the sacrifice of love of each other, *Quis div.* 37.5.

⁴⁸This translation is derived from Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed with supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): 394-395. Clement uses the term in a variety of other contexts, though it often refers to relationships between God and his people in the Hebrew Bible. It is worth noting that the term ransom (λύτρον) is never used elsewhere by Clement in relation to Christ.

⁴⁹An additional example from the *Paed.* reiterates Clement's understanding. He compares the aftermath of Christ's death with a fragrance, which he claims may "be used as a symbol of the Lord's teachings and of his sufferings," *Paed.* II.8.61.3. Clement continues the imagery, "The perfume left its odor after it, and suggests the sweet-smelling accomplishments that reach everyone. The suffering of the Lord, indeed, has filled us with its fragrance..." *Paed.* II.8.63.3. While the reference to Christ's death in this passage is clear, the choice of fragrance in Clement's comparison reiterates his attention to Christ's legacy.

Rather than directly offering redemption, the crucifixion of Jesus, according to Clement, serves to alert the Christian to his or her potential.⁵⁰ Highlighting the collaborative consequence of the incarnation, Clement explains that Christ, “taking on the flesh, came to reveal to humans what is possible through obedience to the commandments” (*Strom.* VII.8.6). Thus, even if Christ’s death served as some sort of initiative for redemption, the consequent attention of the Christian to Christ’s instruction furnishes salvation.⁵¹ The incarnate Christ thus delivers the provisions, to which a Christian must choose to respond.

An appropriate response involves assimilating oneself to Christ. Clement describes various modes of assimilation, often dependent on the level of the believer. One might mirror Christ simply through appropriate behavior. In addition, one might assist others as Christ does. One duty of Clement’s gnostic, for instance, is to cooperate in salvation by teaching or praying for other Christians.⁵² Clement explains, “so the gnostic, believing that the benefit of his neighbors is his own salvation, may suitably be called a living image (ἄγαλμα ἑμψυχον) of the Lord, not because of the specific nature of physical form, but because of the symbol of power and the similarity of preaching” (*Strom.* VII.52.3).⁵³ Appropriate imitation of Christ then is not physical, but symbolic.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Denise K. Buell remarks that Clement portrays “a Christian’s origin as birth through Christ’s passion and Christian development as the ingestion of Christ’s teachings,” *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy*, 181.

⁵¹As John Behr explains, “For Clement, man is saved by his co-operation, not with the grace or power of God, but with the *paideia* of the commandments enjoined by God, which are always within his own capacity,” *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, 168.

⁵²*Strom.* VI.77.5; VII.41.6.

⁵³Additional evidence at beginning of Book VII, ministerial role of *gnostic*, VII.3.1-6.

Clement's conception of the Church, as described in Book VII, thus involves the cooperative effort of various levels of believers and maintains the didactic duty of the gnostic, parallel to Christ's. Clement also relates the gnostic's duties to his opportunity for salvation. He writes, "For so in the case of the gnostic, who has blamelessly and honestly fulfilled all that relates to him, in the direction of instruction and training and beneficence, and what is satisfactory to God, the whole cooperates for the most perfect salvation (τὴν τελειοτάτην σωτηρίαν)" (*Strom.* VII.48.6).

Through a consideration of Clement's Christology, we encounter his emphasis on Christ's teaching, particularly in terms of its redemptive function. Consequently, Christ's death serves a secondary role in Clement's soteriological scheme, calling Christians to be attentive to his message. Interpreting Christ's death in this manner preserves the element of human responsibility in salvation, central to Clement's gnostic system. Clement advises Christians, "We should also adapt ourselves to our educator, conform our deeds to the Word, and then we will truly live" (*Paed.* I.12.100.3). Hence, appropriate decisions in living, rather than sacrifices, determine one's standing before Christ.⁵⁵ Clement's optimism regarding human potential naturally minimizes the redeeming effect of Christ's death. While the soteriological function of mercy is preserved for Clement, human

⁵⁴Judith L. Kovacs offers a useful description of this aspect of Clement's *gnostic*. She observes, "Although the Gnostic described in book 7 of the *Stromateis* is an idealized figure, who has achieved the highest state of perfection possible in this life and who already lives in close communion with God, he is by no means isolated from his fellow human beings," "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher According to Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 17.

⁵⁵In explication of the Beatitudes, Matthew 6:32-33 and Luke 12:30-31 (*Strom.* IV.34), Clement asks, "Does he not then openly exhort us to follow the gnostic life, and enjoin us to seek the truth in word and deed? Therefore Christ, who trains the soul, reckons one rich, not by his gifts, but by his choice," *Strom.* IV.35.1.

response is regarded as equally significant. Imitation of Christ signifies the appropriate response.

An ideal imitation, however, does not require suffering. If many early Christians perceived martyrdom as an imitation of Christ's sacrifice, then Clement's interpretation of the passion, as well as the nature of Christ, diminishes the relevance of such a motive. Pagels states the essential issue well:

Only if Christ suffered and died in the same way that we do ourselves can our suffering and death imitate his. But if—as the Valentinians and others suggest—Christ's experience essentially differs from ours, in that the divine Savior could not suffer, then our experience cannot be equivalent to his.⁵⁶

In my assessment, Clement belongs among the “others” indicated by Pagels. His thought suggests that the martyr's experience cannot truly reflect Christ's. More specifically, the uniqueness of Christ's impassible nature in Clement's thought minimizes the opportunity for imitation via a suffering death. Below, I further argue that the peculiarities of the human situation inhibit divine assimilation. Moreover, Clement's gnostic scheme revolves around a progressive mode of redemption, indebted not to Christ's sufferings, but to his teachings. As revealed in the first part of this chapter, the effort of the martyr, according to Clement, focuses on procuring salvation through an individual's appropriate life, rather than a suffering death. As in the quest for gnosis, this process of martyrdom is essentially individual and independent. Ultimately, our exploration of Clement's view of

⁵⁶“Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian's Response to Persecution,” 266.

Christ coincides well with both his limited enthusiasm for a martyr's death and his promotion of an alternative, living martyr.

Care of the Christian Self: Clement's Gnostic Life

In considering Clement of Alexandria's stance on martyrdom, an examination of his deliberations regarding death in general seems appropriate. A brief inquiry into this matter yields interesting results, relevant to the present study. Clement positively characterizes death as the ultimate release—"the dissolution of the chains which bind the soul to the body" (*Strom.* IV.12.5.).⁵⁷ The results of this liberation of the soul, and consequent immortality, include unencumbered apprehension of God and divine assimilation—the ultimate achievements of Clement's gnostic. Regarding this shift, which death exclusively allows, Clement further explains that souls, "although obscured by passions, when set free from their bodies, are able to perceive more clearly, since they are no longer eclipsed by flesh" (*Strom.* VI.46.3). Such a seemingly negative evaluation of the body leads one to wonder why Clement is not a more adamant advocate of the practice of martyrdom.

As the discussions above reveal, however, Clement disputes both enthusiasm for martyrdom and, relatedly, a suffering death as the appropriate imitation of Christ. The current section explores this apparent paradox within Clement's thought. By evaluating aspects of his program for the Christian gnostic (particularly the related ideal of

⁵⁷Similarly, "By natural necessity in the divine plan death follows birth, and the coming together of soul and body is followed by their dissolution," *Strom.* III.64.2.

apatheia), alongside his reflections on the relationship between body and soul, I will demonstrate that, while the paradox ultimately remains, Clement offers a suitable alternative that highlights the potential for considerable progress toward salvation in the present life. Along the way, other relevant aspects of Clement's thought are explored, including his association with Stoicism, his frustration with adversaries, and his emphasis on human responsibility.⁵⁸ Returning to the matter of mortality, Clement's association of death with the gnostic ideal requires attention. By taking a closer look at attention to the "self" in Clement's gnostic program, we can further understand how his tiers of martyrdom—via death or gnosis—relate not only to whether or not one will die (significant as that may be), but also to how Christian identity is best enacted. Clement's gnostic perspective contributes significantly to both his devaluation of self-seeking martyrs and his relative lack of enthusiasm for the practice in general.

Body and Soul—Distinct, yet Harmonious

As mentioned above, Clement's assessment of death leaves one with the impression that he considers the body a hindrance. His evaluation of the body is, in fact, somewhat ambiguous. In terms of achieving salvation, the body both impedes and assists the progress of Clement's gnostic. While it is essentially inferior to the soul and

⁵⁸Clement's philosophical tendencies, including my focus in this section, Stoicism, have been the subject of much discussion. Lilla's introduction provides a review of various scholarly positions regarding Clement's philosophical influences. He notes the "overwhelming majority" of scholars view Clement as "eclectic"—"It was very easy, starting from the simultaneous presence of Platonic, Stoic, and Aristotelian elements as well as of so many quotations from classical authors throughout Clement's writings, to speak of 'eclecticism.'" Clement himself suggest this characterization: "And philosophy—I do not mean the Stoic, nor the Platonic, nor the Epicurean, nor the Aristotelian, but whatever has been said well by each of these sects, which teach righteousness with a pious understanding—this eclectic whole I call philosophy," *Strom.* I.37.6. Lilla, however, argues that Clement should be considered among his contemporary philosophical context. He thus evaluates Clement in light of Middle Platonism, Philo, and Gnosticism, all which present a cultural synthesis of earlier philosophical perspectives, including Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 2; 3–7.

contributes to the presence of passions, the body, as the supreme aspect of God's creation, nevertheless retains value (*Strom.* IV.164.3).⁵⁹ Clement considers its relationship with the soul as well, and ultimately, advocates the positive utility of the body.

In response to opponents who spurn the body and, more broadly, creation, Clement initially exhibits indifference with regard to the inherent value of the body and soul. He submits, "But neither is the soul good by nature, nor is the body bad by nature" (*Strom.* IV.164.3).⁶⁰ Rather, the choices one makes contribute to the soul's rise or demise. Continuing his criticism of the opposition, Clement illustrates the care with which God created all aspects of the human, including body and soul. Highlighting the potential of the human form, Clement explains (against those who denigrate the body) that, "the construction of the human was formed erect for the contemplation of heaven, and that the organization of the senses contributes to knowledge; and that the members and parts are arranged for good, not for pleasure" (*Strom.* IV.163.1).⁶¹ The body, therefore, is deliberately crafted in a manner conducive to the progress of Clement's gnostic.

Clement frequently elaborates on the potentially beneficial relationship between the body and the soul. Rather than opposing one another, the two human elements

⁵⁹Passions, though aspects of the soul, also relate to the body. Bodily needs may affect the rise of passions. Clement notes, "desire is not a bodily thing, though it occurs on account of the body" *Strom.* III.34.2. Clement also associates passions with the flesh in *Paed* I.6.43.1.

⁶⁰Regarding this aspect of Clement's thought, Ferguson discusses Clement's characterization of evil as a habit or activity, arising from human choice, rather than a substance, associated negatively with the material world (IV.93.3), "The Achievement of Clement of Alexandria," 73.

⁶¹This frustration compares well with Clement's reaction to deliberate martyrs in Book IV, whom he admonishes for despising the body. In that instance, he also offers that the body contributes to understanding, *Strom.* IV.4.17.

function best in a harmonious relationship (*Strom.* IV.164.5).⁶² Regarding this alliance, Clement relates, “But the business of a Christian soul is the work of reason, in accordance with a refined judgment and a yearning for truth, achieved by means of its consort and accomplice, the body” (*Paed.* I.13.102.3). The body thus enhances, rather than impedes, the soul’s progress. Integral to achieving gnosis, this concordant relationship requires that the Christian be attentive to the needs of both body and soul. Referencing Plato, he expresses, “care for the body is performed for the sake of the soul” (*Strom.* IV.22.1).⁶³ Clement’s concern for the proper maintenance of the body is further apparent in Book II of *Paed.*, which he devotes to practical advice for exercising control over the body. Though incredibly detailed, the discipline proposed by Clement is not extreme, but intentionally moderate.

Clement consistently depicts temperance as the appropriate manner of dealing with the desires of the present world.⁶⁴ Pleasures themselves are not inherently bad, but appropriate choice concerning pleasures is key (*Strom.* IV.22.2-3). Ideally, the gnostic should “encounter only the passions that exist for the preservation of the body, such as hunger, thirst, and the like” (*Strom.* VI.71.1).⁶⁵ Rather than depriving the body, Clement

⁶²Clement also maintains the potential independence of the soul from the body. In one instance, he uses dreams to illustrate this point, *Paed* II.9.

⁶³In addition, the twelfth chapter of Book VII focuses on the necessary care of both body and soul.

⁶⁴Clement’s exposition of the virtues of marriage in *Strom.* III represents well his concept of moderate and appropriate use of pleasure. David G. Hunter provides a useful analysis of Clement’s stance on the issue of marriage, “The Language of Desire: Clement of Alexandria’s Transformation of Ascetic Discourse,” *Semeia* 57 (1992): 95–111. Also, see Clark, Elizabeth, “Foucault, The Fathers, and Sex,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 619–641.

⁶⁵Such needs reflect the nature of the body, which, as explained above, is not inherently corrupt. Deprivation therefore is unreasonable; *Strom.* VII.64.2.

explicitly encourages a comfortable, though not excessive, lifestyle, as “health and abundance of necessities keep the soul free and unhindered” (*Strom.* IV.21.1). Furthermore, Clement considers the concerns of the body temporary: “[One] eats, and drinks, and marries, not as one’s main purpose, but as necessary” (*Strom.* VII.70.6).⁶⁶ Care of the body, though worthwhile, reflects a transient stage in Clement’s soteriological scheme. The body, as material, is essentially temporary. Against the Valentinian perspective, Clement relates, “But we say that things of the world are not our own, not as if they were unnatural, not as if they did not belong to God, the Lord of the all, but because we do not reside among them forever” (*Strom.* IV.94.3). The distinction between material and spiritual receives further consideration below, with particular regard to Clement’s understanding of death.

The human body, rather than an exclusively negative encumbrance, actually serves an essential, though intermediate, purpose. For Clement, care of the body allows for the development of the soul, ultimately critical for salvation. Nevertheless, as the soul of the Christian gnostic advances, the body, I will show, ultimately halts its progress.⁶⁷ Henry Chadwick summarizes the irony of Clement’s treatment of the body: “He can declare that the body is an obstacle to the soul’s clarity of vision, and that death snaps the chain binding the soul to the body; but he refuses to concede that the body is in any sense

⁶⁶For Clement, marriage, celebrated in *Strom.* III, is the appropriate outlet for sexual desires, which arise from the body.

⁶⁷Regarding this issue, Henry Chadwick relates that being created involves one in “the finitude and transitoriness of existence outside of God, and the body is an obstacle to the soul’s clarity of vision,” *History and Thought of the Early Church*, 178.

evil.”⁶⁸ This latter aspect of Clement’s thinking corresponds well with his attitude toward martyrdom.

While certainly inspired by a variety of intellectual trends, Clement’s musings on the relationship between body and soul exhibit a particular affinity to the Stoic tradition. In fact, as he explains the essential neutrality of the body and health in relation to the soul, Clement explicitly cites the Stoics, making their influence apparent (*Strom.* IV.19.1).⁶⁹ Epictetus, the Roman slave turned Stoic philosopher, provides a striking parallel to Clement’s thought regarding the human condition.⁷⁰ This correspondence deserves particular attention since, as we shall see, Epictetus’ treatment of the body lends to his evaluation of both life and death (especially deliberate death) in a manner quite comparable to Clement’s.

Like Clement, Epictetus’ reasoning on the matter of the body begins with his perception of its nature. He recalls the conception of humanity as a unique combination of body and reason. Epictetus’ treatment of the latter, which stresses the potential utility of reason in progressing “toward that which is divine and blessed,” resembles Clement’s

⁶⁸Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 48.

⁶⁹Numerous scholars acknowledge Clement’s reliance on the Stoic tradition on this issue, as well as many others. In addition to Lilla (noted above), Behr, for instance, illustrates, “The specific manner of life that Clement has in mind is living in obedience to the divine Logos, which, for Clement, is identical to living according to reason and to nature. Clement explicitly points to the similarity of his position to the Stoic doctrine of living according to nature, in which he claims that the term ‘nature’ has been impiously substituted for the term ‘God’,” *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, 138; cf. *Strom.* II.101.1.

⁷⁰My choice to compare Clement with Epictetus rests on a range of parallels between the two. Certainly, Clement’s ideas also parallel those of other Stoic philosophers, including Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations*, he similarly regards death as natural; it should not therefore be scorned or feared. Rather, one should accept it easily, simply following nature, IX.3, X.36; cf. X.2.

evaluation of the soul (*Disc.* I.3.3.).⁷¹ With regard to the body, Epictetus recognizes its inferiority, yet maintains the necessity of its care, directly asserting, “I do not neglect my body” (*Disc.* I.2.37). Epictetus, as Clement does after him, also confronts those who erroneously spend their energy despising the body (*Disc.* I.3.5-6). The body, according to Epictetus, is provided for man by God for a limited period of time and thus requires the appropriate sustenance. Advocating care of the body, Epictetus explicitly associates the maintenance of life with devotion to God: “But it is necessary for me to serve God. For that reason I remain, and am content to wash this wretched body, and to feed and protect it” (*Frag.* 23).⁷² While perhaps not as eloquent in depicting the body as God’s handiwork, Epictetus nevertheless relates an understanding of the body that is quite similar to Clement’s—ambiguous, yet essentially positive. In addition to a concern for the care of the body, Clement shares with Epictetus an affirmative evaluation of an active life.

Clement’s Road to Apatheia

As suggested above, Clement scheme of salvation demands an active, rather than passive, Christian lifestyle. Clement’s gnostic, primarily characterized in *Strom.* VII, epitomizes the ideal.⁷³ As the previous discussion reveals, the progressive development

⁷¹Just prior to this, Epictetus notes that humans share reason with the gods and the body with animals and may thus be inclined toward either relationship. A successful progression toward the divine is achieved, according to Epictetus, only by few.

⁷²Michel Foucault characterizes Epictetus’ thought as “the highest philosophical development” of notion of the care of the self. He observes, “The care of the self, for Epictetus, is a privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence,” Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, History of Sexuality, Vol. III (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 47. Clement similarly highlights the value of choices regarding the body.

⁷³*Strom.* VII.44.3-6 briefly summarizes the situation of Clement’s *gnostic*.

of the soul is critical in achieving gnosis. While the body itself is essentially neutral and can contribute to the advancement of the soul, other aspects of the human condition pose a threat to the soul's progress, particularly passions. While Clement relies on philosophical tradition to classify the passions, he also equates them with sin. He writes,

All that is contrary to right reason is a sin. The philosophers, for example, claim that the most typical passions are defined in the following way: desire (ἐπιθυμία) is a yearning that kind is disobedient to reason; fear (φόβον) is an aversion that is disobedient to reason; pleasure (ἡδονήν) is an swelling of the soul that is disobedient to reason; and grief (λύπην) is a contraction of the soul that is disobedient to reason. If the production of sin is a consequence of disobedience to reason, then how is it not necessary that obedience to reason, which we call faith, is the procurement of the proper goodness? (*Paed.* I.13.101.1)

In addition to reiterating the concept of passions as unreasonable movements of the soul, this passage also highlights the consequent appropriate management of the passions—obedience to reason. Clement offers, “Now the sacrifice which is acceptable to God is an unabashed separation from the body and its passions. This is the true service of God” (*Strom.* V.67.1-2).⁷⁴

Clement thus advances the Stoic concept of *apatheia* as the ultimate achievement, to be actively sought by all Christians. This reflects the highest ethical ideal for the

⁷⁴Clement continues by celebrating Socrates' study of death as an appropriate disciplinary practice; the reference is to Plato's *Phaedo* 67d; cf. *Strom.* IV.12.5; see also Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, 192.

Stoics; it did not signify the elimination of all emotions but only of the diseased ones, the *pathe*. Those who attain *apatheia* are guided by right reason, experience the good emotions and are therefore free from anything that is contrary to nature.⁷⁵ An integral aspect of the quest for *apatheia*, for Clement, is the freedom of choice.⁷⁶ Clement thus places emphasis on the consequent human responsibility. The centrality of human choice in Clement's scheme surfaces in his discussion regarding humanity's essential relation to God. Against other Christians who maintain the presence of a divine aspect in humans, Clement argues, "But God has no natural relation to us, as the founders of the heresies maintain...unless we dare to say that we are a part of Him, and of the same essence as God" (*Strom.* II.74.1).⁷⁷ While created in the image of God, humans do not intrinsically possess a divine likeness, according to Clement. God has endowed humans with free choice, which provides them with the capacity to achieve likeness.⁷⁸ Rather than marked by an essential affinity, Clement characterizes the relationship between disciplined Christians and God as adoptive (*Strom.* II.75.2). Highlighting Clement's soteriological interest, Denise Buell explains, "[He] rejects the notion that humans are related to God by

⁷⁵David E. Aune, "Mastery of the Passions: Philo, 4 Maccabees and Earliest Christianity," in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response Within the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Wendy E. Helleman (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 126.

⁷⁶L. G. Patterson notes that Clement considers "development and self-determination as central to human existence," "The Divine Became Human: Irenaean Themes in Clement of Alexandria," *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997): 507–08.

⁷⁷Clement continues, with reference to God's grace, "But God being by nature rich in pity, in consequence of his own goodness, cares for us, though neither portions of himself, not by nature his children," *Strom.* II.74.4.

⁷⁸Floyd notes Clement's interpretation of the human as sharing both an "image" and "likeness" with God. Image represents an intellectual affinity, or reason, while likeness is a virtue that is acquired, *Clement of Alexandria's Treatment of the Problem of Evil*, 92. Patterson also reflects on the notion of 'likeness' in Clement's writings and notes its reliance on human motivation: "It consists not in substantial identity but in freely chosen assimilation and communion with the divine," "The Divine Became Human: Irenaean Themes in Clement of Alexandria," 505–06.

essence to argue that salvation is not premised on such a relation but upon human self-discipline and divine favor.”⁷⁹ Hence, Clement explicitly rejects what he perceives as determinism of other Christians, in favor of a salvific program that advocates activity guided by appropriate choice, rather than passivity.⁸⁰

Clement’s adaptation of the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* makes his focus on active discipline apparent.⁸¹ As previously mentioned, in the Christian quest for gnosis, a significant requirement involves the control of one’s passions. Christ serves as both the model for and teacher of *apatheia*. Passions inhibit contemplation and thus require moderation, if not eradication.⁸² Clement utilizes the notion of *metriopatheia* to designate successful moderation of the passions.⁸³ Mere control, however, is not the highest ideal and Clement claims *apatheia* to be the ultimate goal. He explains:

⁷⁹Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy*, 91. Floyd also explicates Clement’s position regarding free choice and assimilation to God, *Clement of Alexandria’s Treatment of the Problem of Evil*, 94.

⁸⁰Chapter 13 of *Strom.* IV marks one particular instance of a refutation of the Valentinian concept of the elect.

⁸¹Peter Brown offers a worthwhile description of the Stoic concept of *apatheia*, which stresses the virtue of an active life. Rather than demanding repression of feelings, *apatheia* represents the “state of final serenity of purpose,” or full awareness, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 128–31. Foucault also highlights the active aspect of the Stoic lifestyle, *The Care of the Self*, History of Sexuality, Vol. III, 42.

⁸²Clement notes that the “the middle state is good in all things...,” *Paed.* II.1.16.4. In evaluating the issue of passions of Clement’s thought, Brown appropriately notes that, while the passions initially originate in the body, they ultimately endanger the progress of the mind, and thus demanded attention, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 129. Foucault also offers a brief description of the concept of *pathos*, *The Care of the Self*, History of Sexuality, Vol. III, 54.

⁸³The first stage for Clement is *metriopatheia*, *Strom.* VI.74.1; VI.105.1; VI.109.3. Interestingly, Clement relates *metriopatheia* to fear produced by the Old Testament; see Lilla, 99. More specifically, the Mosaic law functions, according to Clement, as the basis for self-restraint, *Strom.* II.18, while dietary laws assist in moderating the passions of pleasure and desire, *Strom.* II.105.1; 106.2; Aune notes that the Jewish law operates in Clement’s thought as a preparation for the gospel (comparable to the role of philosophy), “Mastery of the Passions: Philo, 4 Maccabees and Earliest Christianity,” 143–44. Lilla also offers, “The sharp distinction between two class of men, which corresponds to the distinction between *pistis* and *gnosis*,

We must therefore remove the gnostic and perfect one from all passions of the soul. For, on the one hand, knowledge creates discipline, and, on the other, discipline is habit or disposition; and such a state as this produces *apatheia*, not moderation of the passions. For the complete elimination of desire bears as its fruit *apatheia* (*Strom.* VI.74.1).⁸⁴

Discipline and consequent eradication of the passions thus mark the higher goal, *apatheia*. Achieving *apatheia* allows for contemplation and the acquisition of gnosis (*Strom.* VII.44.6).⁸⁵ Highlighting God's gift of human responsibility in the salvific enterprise, Clement encourages Christians to prepare their souls through discipline for the reception of knowledge (*Strom.* VII.71.1). He also consistently expresses the cooperative nature of this process (*Strom.* VII.48.7). Comparing God to a physician, Clement submits that he imparts "eternal salvation to those who cooperate for the attainment of knowledge and good deeds" (*Strom.* VII.48.4). As a voluntary participant, the virtuous Christian is considered especially praiseworthy (*Strom.* VII.19.3). Clement relates, "Nor shall he who is saved be saved unwillingly...but he will above all voluntarily and deliberately speed to salvation" (*Strom.* VII.42.4). While Clement's discussion emphatically supports the primacy of human activity in God's soteriological plan, the potential for progress, achieved through an active life, is ultimately restricted.

appears clearly also in the twofold ethical stage μετριοπάθεια / ἀπάθεια," *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 103.

⁸⁴See also *Strom.* VII.64.4.

⁸⁵Clement defines the culmination of such contemplation: "The greatest thing is, then, the knowledge of God (ἡ γνῶσις τοῦ θεοῦ)" *Strom.* VII.47.3.

The Limits of Human Apatheia

Just as his potential for mimicking Christ's death is limited, so also, ultimately, is the Christian's quest for *apatheia*. In spite of Clement's enthusiasm regarding the potential of free choice, the progressive achievement of the gnostic is eventually stunted by the realities of the present, bodily life. Comprehensive knowledge and full contemplation await the Christian in the afterlife. Clement relates, "When the soul, after stepping back, is by itself and in communion with the forms, like the 'chief' of the Theaetetus, at that time becomes an angel with Christ, experiencing contemplation" (*Strom.* IV.155.4).⁸⁶ Referring to the appropriate imitation of Christ, Clement expresses, "For the one who is assimilated to the Savior also saves; infallibly upholding the commandments as far as the human nature allows of the image" (*Strom.* VI.77.5). While advocating human responsibility, Clement also recognizes the inherent limitations of the human condition. Even the perfected gnostic, according to Clement, can only "converse with God" according to his limited ability (*Strom.* VII.13.2). Furthermore, as in his Christological discussions, Clement stresses the unique nature of the divine, which, in turn, restricts human assimilation. He submits that *apatheia* exclusively and naturally belongs to God (*Strom.* VII.13.3).

More significant than the divine nature, however, is the role of the body in hindering absolute contemplation. Clement congratulates the gnostic for his "mastery of worldly desires even while still in the flesh" (*Strom.* VII.74.9). Nevertheless, in spite of acquiring knowledge, this gnostic is "humbled since he is involved in the necessities of

⁸⁶In addition, "When [our soul] is pure and set free from all evil the mind is somehow capable of receiving the power of God and the divine image is set up in it," *Strom.* III.42.6.

life; not yet deemed worthy of the active participation in what he knows. So he makes use of this share of life as if it belonged to another, so far, that is, as it is necessary” (*Strom.* VII.75.1). Clement thus recognizes the restrictions associated with the transient nature of bodily existence. The progression of Clement’s gnostic ultimately continues in the afterlife, when he is released from the body through death; assimilation to and full contemplation of God marks the fullest perfection.⁸⁷ This brings one back to the question of death. Considering his recognition of the limitations, as well as his stress on the active role of the Christian, one questions why Clement is not a more enthusiastic proponent of martyrdom.

Maintenance of Life over Death

While Clement’s portrayal of martyrdom in *Strom.* IV reveals his stance regarding deliberate death, further consideration of this aspect of Clement’s thought proves worthwhile, particularly as it relates to his gnostic program for salvation. In this regard, a brief return to Epictetus illuminates the philosophical context in which Clement crafted his views. In addition to a common understanding of the relationship between body and

⁸⁷With regard to the limitations of Clement’s *gnostic*, Lilla relates, “In Clement’s conception of *gnosis* it is possible to distinguish two different stages. *Gnosis* can already be attained by man to some extent during his stay on earth; but it reaches its climax after the death of the body, when the soul of the γνῶστικός is allowed to fly back to its original place where, after becoming a god, it can enjoy, in a complete and perpetual rest, the contemplation of the highest divinity,” *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, 142. G. W. Butterworth also notes Clement’s distinctive “stress upon the earthly preparation for immortality as being itself the first stage in the process of deification.” Furthermore, with respect to gradual ascent and the afterlife, he suggests that Clement resembles the traditions of Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism, rather than the New Testament, in “The Deification of Man in Clement of Alexandria,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1916): 162–64. Olivier Prunet similarly considers Clement’s ideal of perfection, marginal to the New Testament, as a reflection of Stoic and Philonic tradition; *La morale de Clément d’Alexandrie et le Nouveau Testament*, Études d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses 61 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966). Osborn though maintains Clement’s continuity with the scriptures, though he notes some significant shifts in his ethical thinking, in “Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982,” 236.

soul, Clement's adaptation of the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, and the moral program involved, has already been noted. His correspondence with Stoic evaluations of enthusiasm for death requires examination.

Borrowing the military imagery of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, Epictetus characterizes an individual's life as a station appointed by God, not to be abandoned prematurely (*Disc.* I.9.24). Maintaining the post as a proper general would render one a "true relative of the gods" (*Disc.* I.9.25-26). Nevertheless, like Clement, Epictetus faces situations in which death might be appropriate.⁸⁸ Epictetus also confronts enthusiasts of self-inflicted death. Advocating the necessary use of reason in contemplating death, as well as the required reception of a sign from God, he advises:

Await God. When he shall give the sign and release you from this service, then you depart to him; but for the present endure to dwell in this place, in which he has stationed you. This time of your residence is brief indeed, and easily adapted by those who are well-disposed...stay, rather than depart irrationally. (*Disc.* I.9.16-17).

Emphasizing the practice of reason, Epictetus maintains that a divine signal is necessary. Unbearable circumstances that inhibit the virtuous life of the Stoic may serve as a sign of

⁸⁸Unlike Clement, Epictetus is of course not confronted with the persecution that creates martyrs. Epictetus rather deals with issue of voluntary death in the Roman period and experiences the practical problem of too much enthusiasm over self-killing. He reflects a later strain of Stoicism, with which Clement was likely familiar. Scholars agree that Epictetus is essentially consistent with earlier Stoic tradition, particularly on the issue of voluntary death (in contrast to Seneca, for instance); John M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 250f. Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, 37. Regarding death, Droge further notes that Epictetus "insists again and again on its indifferent status." In contrast to Seneca, "the exaggerated fascination with suicide as the free act *par excellence*" is missing in Epictetus, "Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide," *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1988): 272.

God's will and make self-afflicted death acceptable (*Disc.* III.24.101; IV.10-27-28).

Epictetus nevertheless prefers the maintenance of life. He reminds his audience, "If an arrangement in accordance with nature is provided, then I will seek no other place than that in which I am" (*Disc.* III.24.102).⁸⁹ Epictetus does not therefore exalt death, but considers self-inflicted death as the most drastic mode of escaping a situation in which the Stoic lifestyle cannot be properly maintained.⁹⁰ Droge submits, "According to Epictetus, an individual ought not to give up on life irrationally or for frivolous causes. The reason for this is that the deity does not desire it."⁹¹ Considered only when no other option is present, deliberate death furthermore is only truly valid when God arranges a signal; hence, the act is not exclusively self-motivated.⁹²

With the possible exception of the signal requirement, Clement's treatment of voluntary death mirrors the Stoic position well. Though the fulfillment of his potential awaits the afterlife, the gnostic must not consider taking his own life. Appropriate discipline makes such a move unnecessary. Regarding the gnostic, Clement explains, "he lives, having put to death desires, and no longer makes use of the body, but only permits it the use of necessities, so that he may not furnish a cause for its dissolution" (*Strom.* VI.75.3). Salvation essentially relates to the gnostic's spiritual, rather than physical, condition.

⁸⁹This appears to be a paraphrase of Plato's *Apol.* 28d-29a.

⁹⁰The Stoic Musonius Rufus offers a comparable view: "One who by living is of use to many has not the right to choose to die, unless by dying he may be of use to more," Frag. 29, trans. Cora E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates"*, Yale Classical Studies 10 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947).

⁹¹Droge, "Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide," 273.

⁹²Marcus Aurelius presents a comparable understanding of voluntary death. In *Meditations* III.1, he notes that suicide is possible when full comprehension is no longer possible; *Meditations* V.29 similarly considers the appropriate time to depart, or end one's life; see also *Meditations* VIII.47, IX.2.

In addition to his treatment in Book IV, Clement also considers misguided enthusiasts of death in *Strom.* VII. Like Epictetus, Clement finds fault in their lack of reason. He notes that some “without reason rush to many things, and act like brave men, so as sometimes to succeed carelessly in accomplishing the same tests...But it is not from the same cause as the gnostic, or with the same object” (*Strom.* VII.59.2-4). Moreover, Clement argues that actions of any man ultimately correspond to his knowledge, or lack thereof. Apparently brave behavior lacks value, unless backed by appropriate reasoning (*Strom.* VII.59.5). Like Epictetus, Clement emphasizes that the manner in which one approaches death is more significant than the event itself.

As he continues his discussion of those eager for death in Book VII, Clement differentiates true from false martyrs:

But he who is truly brave, with the peril arising from the bad feeling of the multitude before his eyes, courageously awaits whatever comes. In this way he is distinguished from others who are called martyrs, since some furnish occasions for themselves, and rush into the heart of dangers.

(*Strom.* VII.66.4)⁹³

Clement thus maintains his opposition to those who actively seek out their own deaths, while commending the passivity of the righteous, though undetermined, martyr. He continues, “while they in accordance with right reason, protect themselves; then, on God really calling them, readily hand themselves over” (*Strom.* VII.66.4). This passage serves as an interesting, perhaps inconsistent, parallel to Clement’s depiction of appropriate

⁹³In addition to mirroring Epictetus, Clement’s view also parallels that which Marcus Aurelius expressed in opposition to Christians, *Meditations* XI.3.

martyrdom in Book IV, in which the requirement of a call is missing. As explained above, the notion of a call in Book IV, would conflict with Clement's understanding of God's providence and weaken his argument against Basilides. Its presence in Book VII perhaps reflects Clement's dependence on Stoic thought, as represented by Epictetus.

In social identity terms, let us consider then how we might frame Clement's depiction of intra-group relations along with his emphasis on individual progress, with specific reference to the prospect of martyrdom. His tiers of Christians could be understood as multiple subgroups under one broad Christian identity; but divergent allegiances among these subgroups – stemming from various points of progress – could and likely did surface; the prospect of martyrdom appears to present one such occasion. It is not difficult to envision martyrdom by death, in Clement's scheme, as a practice most appropriate for the faithful, but not demanded of the Gnostic. This perspective could also help us explain Clement's own retreat from Alexandria; certainly, he appears to follow his own advice in avoiding martyrdom, but his departure could also suggest his view of the limited utility of witnessing by death, preferring the continuation of progressive development in life.⁹⁴

⁹⁴Clement's departure is suggested by Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.* VI.11.6; 14.4. Scholars often reasonably speculate that Clement departed due to the persecution of Septimius Severus. Still, the precise motivations for his departure are difficult to establish; see Van den Hoek, "How Alexandrian Was Clement of Alexandria? Reflections on Clement and His Alexandrian Background," 184. The timing of the departure in relation to the composition of *Strom.* is also unclear. This problematizes the perspective offered by Moss that Clement crafted his distinction of voluntary and proper martyrdoms as a consequence (i.e. justification) of his departure. Attributing the origins of this differentiation to Clement and the author of *Mart. Pol.*, Moss claims, "the condemnation of voluntary martyrdom as a distinct phenomenon serves to explain initial flight from persecution," *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, 154.

Social identity theory further leads us to anticipate that when expected sacrifices associated with group identity are minimal, gnostic identification with the broader Christian group works, and, in some cases, offers benefits. As suggested above, communal prayer might reflect such a situation. However, when greater demands are required of group members, specifically suffering or, in this case, a martyr's death, individual-oriented Christians, like Clement's gnostic (and perhaps Clement himself), appear less inclined to perform their Christian social identity for the benefit of the community.

Chapter 3

Peter as Witness in the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII, 3)

Like the writings of Clement of Alexandria, the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (*Apoc. Pet.*) offers valuable insight on early Christian debates over the value of suffering.¹ Specifically, *Apoc. Pet.* depicts a situation of persecution within the early Christian community. Notes of oppression are, of course, typical of early Jewish and Christian apocalypses. What is striking in the case of *Apoc. Pet.* is the identity of the oppressor—fellow Christians, rather than Roman authorities, are the source of concern.

The polemic associated with this apparent intra-Christian conflict as well as the text's Christological focus, which emphasizes a non-suffering Savior, make *Apoc. Pet.* an ideal choice for the current project. Furthermore, the text reflects communal layers—a range of overlapping and competing Christian identities. My analysis of *Apoc. Pet.* thus

¹This Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* discovered at Nag Hammadi is distinct from the other known early Christian apocalypse attributed to Peter, preserved in its original Greek.

For this chapter, I primarily follow the critical edition of Henriette Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften; Texte und Untersuchungen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999). Additional critical editions consulted include: the Coptic text and English translation of James Allen Brashler, "Apocalypse of Peter. Text, Translation and Notes," in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. Birger A. Pearson, Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies (NHMS) (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 218–247.; Henriette Havelaar, "Die Apokalypse des Petrus," in *Nag Hammadi Deutsch. 2. Band: NHC V,2-XIII,1, BG I und 4*, ed. Hans-Martin Schenke, Hans-Gebhard Bethge, and Ursula Ulrike Kaiser, vol. 2, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller, neue folge Band 12 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 591–600. In addition to Brashler and Havelaar's English translations, see Meyer, Marvin, ed., "The Revelation of Peter," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

tracks clues of intra-group conflict, emerging group boundaries, and expressions of social identity, particularly as these processes relate to persecution and potential suffering.

Although discourse regarding suffering permeates *Apoc. Pet.*, the issue of martyrdom—central to the present study—is not explicitly addressed.² Many scholars thus exhibit limited interest in *Apoc. Pet.*’s references to persecution, and few connect them with martyrdom. For example, in his significant treatment of *Apoc. Pet.*, Koschorke does not mention martyrdom as a possible factor in the author’s polemical criticism of other Christians.³

Others more explicitly discount the language of persecution in *Apoc. Pet.* as metaphorical, an innate feature of apocalyptic literature, but with little to no basis in reality. For instance, Clemens Scholten, in his treatment of martyrdom in Gnostic literature, rejects the idea that the language of persecution in *Apoc. Pet.* refers to an actual situation of suffering and/or martyrdom. Rather than take these references⁴ literally, Scholten claims that the use of “categories of physical suffering” derive from both the surrounding subject matter—the crucifixion narrative—and traditional eschatology.⁵

²As Moss reminds us, though, one can locate the concept of martyrdom in texts, even if they lack “martyr” language, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, 3; for instance, Moss notes the alternative *confession* language, 4.

³Koschorke does address martyrdom in Gnostic traditions in general in an excursus of his chapter on *Test. Truth*, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 134–137.

⁴Examples include: threats of stoning, 72,4-9; 73,25-74,6; ruin, 80,2; oppression, 79,11f; and Peter’s fear of enemies, 84,6-10, *Martyrium und Sophiamythos im Gnostizismus nach den Texten von Nag Hammadi*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum (Münster; Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1987), 80.

⁵*Ibid.*, 80–90. There are certainly connections between the Passion narrative and the heresiological section of *Apoc. Pet.*, as we will see below. But the presence of a crucifixion scene in a text does not always lead to the employment of suffering language throughout; in this regard, Scholten’s position is not so persuasive.

Certainly, as I highlight below, *Apoc. Pet.* draws on existing Gospel traditions. Still, it seems more reasonable that the choice of such traditions, as well as the adoption of the apocalyptic genre, reflects, rather than incidentally imports, the author's apparent concerns. Scholten also suggests that the primacy of theological disputes in the text overshadows all other concerns.⁶ Intra-Christian debates do form the core of the text, but one cannot always distinguish the theological from the social; in any case, the possibility that perspectives on actual suffering are part of that debate remains open. As my project shows, intra-Christian debates in the late second- and early third-centuries often center on relative evaluations of suffering, including martyrdom. Scholten thus too easily dismisses the references to persecution and suffering as inconsequential, especially as he admits that physical suffering is discussed "so vividly and intensely" in *Apoc. Pet.*⁷

In a similar assessment, Werner minimizes the significance of persecution references. He initially recognizes that complaints in *Apoc. Pet.* about judicial proceedings, executioners, and captivity make "one think of martyrdom."⁸ He reasons, however, that one should expect more explicit references to Roman legal proceedings, specifically the Decian or Valerian persecutions.⁹ He is certainly correct to note the relative lack of Roman blame in the text.¹⁰ However, this argument from silence does not

⁶Ibid., 87; 89.

⁷Ibid., 89.

⁸Andreas Werner, "The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. Robert McL. Wilson, vol. II: Writings Related to the Apostles, Apocalypses, and Related Subjects (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 703–704.

⁹Moreover, Werner proposes that one could offer alternative interpretations for the relevant sections of *Apoc. Pet.*

¹⁰Admittedly, the evidence for physical persecution of the author's Christian community, particularly by the Romans, is not definitive.

preclude a concern with persecution in *Apoc. Pet.* Rather, the particular apocalyptic perspective of *Apoc. Pet.* suggests an alternative explanation for the absence of Roman references. Fellow Christians, not imperial authorities, appear to reflect the more immediate source of persecution, with the prospect of martyrdom. In this case, we should not necessarily expect explicit references to Roman judicial scenarios.¹¹

Unlike Scholten and Werner, a few interpreters of *Apoc. Pet.* do recognize the threats of suffering as implicit indications of martyrdom. Pagels, for instance, reads the evidence of *Apoc. Pet.* literally. In her view, the author takes issue with early Christian coercion toward martyrdom, revealed by the references to “harsh fate” and “‘the executioner,’ under the illusion that by ‘holding fast to the name of a dead man,’ confessing the crucified one, ‘they will become pure.’”¹² The eagerness for suffering and “propaganda for martyrdom” are the issues for the author, according to Pagels.¹³ Havelaar also sees clues of persecution and possible martyrdom, given the author’s resistance to those who celebrate suffering.¹⁴ I revisit and extend these insights below, showing that martyrdom appears as one aspect of his early Christian opposition that the author of *Apoc. Pet.* finds troubling.

¹¹That is not to say that the Romans are not involved, but they appear to be perceived as the less direct threat in the case of *Apoc. Pet.*

¹²Referring to 79,11-21 “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution,” 274.

¹³As her reading of *Apoc. Pet.* continues, however, Pagels also submits that, “while the *Apocalypse of Peter* rejects the orthodox view of martyrdom, it does not reject martyrdom per se.” She roots this claim in a reading of 78,32-79,2, which I revisit below; ultimately, I find it difficult to envision the author as supportive of any sort of physical martyrdom. Ibid., 274.

¹⁴Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, in reference to *Apoc. Pet.* 78,32-34, 98. In his translation, Meyer similarly understands this passage as a reference to martyrdom, indicated by his section heading to 78,31-79,31, which references “martyrs,” “The Revelation of Peter,” 495.

In what follows, I first demonstrate how *Apoc. Pet.*'s apocalyptic perspective lends to the identification of its audience as persecuted Christians; physical suffering, however, is not celebrated as part of their plight. Second, in critiquing certain Christians, the author highlights a range of misguided behaviors, which, I assert, includes physical martyrdom; those who encourage it are particular targets. Third, such behaviors appear rooted, in part, in an improper understanding of the nature of Christ; an extensive vision of the crucifixion narrative emphasizes that the Savior did not experience a suffering death, which mitigates the value of a martyr's death. To conclude the chapter, I show how Peter, as a critical witness to this vision, is characterized as a different sort of martyr. With no reference to his "future" death as a martyr, the text revolves around Peter's role as the recipient of the Savior's significant message. Additional elements of *Apoc. Pet.* appear to critique physical martyrdom and, more precisely, those who encourage and celebrate it.¹⁵ Thus, although the author crafts a persecuted identity, physical suffering is not a valued aspect of this identity.

Informed by social identity theory, I consider these elements of *Apoc. Pet.*—persecuted identity, Peter's distinctive role as a model martyr, as well as the negative view of suffering—alongside clues regarding inter- and intra-group processes and related social identification. I am particularly attentive to increasing definition of boundaries (and related emerging identities) as well as the role of authority. Like the other traditions examined in this study, *Apoc. Pet.* fosters an identity that centers on individual progress and limits, rather than prescribed, group-related activity. More precisely, the author's

¹⁵ At the very least, physical suffering is not lauded, as the depiction of the crucifixion makes clear; below, I make the argument that martyrdom is quite likely among the misguided behaviors criticized by the author.

expressed suspicion about those who control the behavior of others reflects limited attachment to the collective social identity, Christian. Divergent ideas about group control and the value of physical suffering, rather than exclusively theological differences, prompt a shift in social identity and the related emergence of inter-group boundaries.

Manuscript, Date & Provenance

Prior to a consideration of these elements of *Apoc. Pet.*, a few introductory remarks on the text, with specific reference to its possible date and provenance, are in order. In addition, a brief outline of the content of the apocalypse sets the stage for the remainder of the chapter.

Apoc. Pet. is preserved exclusively within Nag Hammadi Codex VII.¹⁶ Among the manuscripts from Nag Hammadi, *Apoc. Pet.* is one of the best preserved. The text appears to be a Coptic translation of an earlier Greek version.¹⁷ In spite of the stellar

¹⁶For additional details on Codex VII, see Hans-Martin Schenke, "Zur Faksimile-Ausgabe der Nag-Hammadi-Schriften. Die Schriften des Codex VII," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 102 (1975): 123–138.

¹⁷As with the other Nag Hammadi texts, the presence of a Greek original is easily detectable in the Coptic translation. For instance, the title is preserved in Greek at the beginning (70,13) and end (84,14). In addition, certain Greek words are only partially translated into Coptic, while other Greek particles and conjunctions persist in the Coptic translation, A. Werner, "Die Apokalypse des Petrus, die dritte Schrift von Nag Hammadi Codex VII. Eingeleitet und Übersetzt vom Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 99 (1974): 703.

preservation, the unusual state of the Coptic in certain sections of the text can lead to difficulties in translation and interpretation.¹⁸

Determining a precise date for the composition of *Apoc. Pet.* is not possible. The broad parameters for dating are typically marked by an internal allusion to a certain “Hermas,” for the early end, and the physical data of the Nag Hammadi codex, as reflective of the latest possible date. If one takes the Hermas mentioned in *Apoc. Pet.* 78,18 as a reference to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, then a *terminus post quem* of ca. 150 CE seems appropriate.¹⁹ Receipts in the binding of Codex VII mark the *terminus ante quem* as 348 CE.²⁰ Within this span of approximately 200 years, internal evidence makes a late second- or early third-century date most probable. Specifically, the text’s references to established church offices and suggestions of heightened hostility between Christians appear to reflect the state of the Church near the turn of the third century.²¹

Solid clues regarding a place of origin for *Apoc. Pet.* are more elusive. Havelaar assigns provenance to Syria, given the text’s focus on Peter and relatively heavy reliance on Matthew’s gospel. She cautiously admits, though, such an assignment is not

¹⁸Havelaar offers a quite thorough and current discussion of the manuscript, orthography, and the Sahidic form of the Coptic in Chapter 1 of her critical edition, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 19–29.

¹⁹On the question of whether one can assume this Hermas is that associated with *Shepherd of Hermas*, see footnote 67.

²⁰Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 15.

²¹Of course, neither of these elements can be definitively tied to the late second or early third centuries. Still, this general scholarly consensus regarding the dating seems most reasonable. Michael Desjardins, for instance, locates *Apoc. Pet.* within the context of early third century orthodoxy and heresy debates and the emerging consolidation of the church, “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. Birger A. Pearson, Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 214. Werner also advocates a late second- to early third-century date, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 702. And Havelaar recognizes that “though the intra-Christian hostility is not unique to this period, its character resembles heresiology of the broad second- to third-century period,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 16.

definitive.²² Further, the use of Matthew does not make a strong criterion for locating a text given the gospel's wide popularity in early Christianity.²³ Pearson suggests an Egyptian provenance, rooted in his argument regarding *Apoc. Pet.*'s use of 2 Peter. Specifically, Pearson understands the shift from “waterless springs” (πηγαὶ ἀνύδροι, 2 Pet 2:17) to “waterless canals” (ΝΙΟΟΡ ΝΑΤΜΟΟΥ, *Apoc. Pet.* 79,31) as indicative of an Egyptian environment.²⁴ Though provocative, this particular evidence is not entirely telling, since the adaptation could have occurred at any point in the transmission process; our lack of other textual witnesses makes editorial changes difficult to detect. Though a precise provenance is difficult to pinpoint, we do know that the text, given its translation from Greek to Coptic and its inclusion in the Nag Hammadi material, circulated, and was thus valued, in Egypt in the third to fourth centuries.

Elements of Apocalypse of Peter

A brief consideration of the essential content and structure of *Apoc. Pet.* will offer some context for the analysis that follows. *Apoc. Pet.* exhibits a fairly clear structure, best

²²Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 15. Werner similarly notes that Peter's role as well as Jewish-Christian connections could support a Syrian or Palestinian origin; though he also recognizes that the text offers “no clear information” regarding provenance, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 702.

²³In his discussion of *Apoc. Pet.*, Scholten makes a similar point, *Martyrium und Sophiamythos im Gnostizismus nach den Texten von Nag Hammadi*.

²⁴Birger A. Pearson, “The Apocalypse of Peter and Canonical 2 Peter,” in *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: Essays in Honor of James M. Robinson*, ed. James E. Goehring and et al, Forum Fascicles 2 (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990), 67–75. Pearson's case for provenance has been criticized by Havelaar, among others.

outlined in five parts.²⁵ Following the title (70,13), (i) an introductory section (70,14-72,4) sets the scene by introducing the Savior as the instructor and Peter as the recipient of the revelation. The initial lines depict the Savior sitting in the Temple (70,14-15), evoking his pedagogical role. He conveys some initial lessons to Peter, calling those who belong to the Father (70,21-22) to listen to his message (70,28). Peter's own distinctive position as the Savior's chosen one, who will serve as the beginning (ἈΡΧΗ) for others called to knowledge (ΓΝΩΣΙΣ) (71,15-21).

(ii) Following the introduction, the first of two visionary sequences begins (72,4-73,10), initiated by Peter's vision of priests, among others, rushing toward him and the Savior with stones (72,5-9). A correction by the Savior follows (72,9-21) as well as an additional vision of "new light" (72,23). As with the vision, his initial understanding of his experience is flawed, prompting the Savior to offer further instruction.

This leads into the third (iii), most substantial portion of *Apoc. Pet.* (73,10-81,3). Unlike its surrounding sections, this central revelation lacks the visions and related dialogue. It is best characterized as a description of the emergence of error (πλάνη; 73,26) within Christianity. Apocalyptic elements still appear throughout this central

²⁵Numerous scholars have offered structural outlines of the text, based on a variety of interests. Here, I follow Havelaar (126-127), Desjardins, and Brashler in understanding in the text in five parts (their specific line divisions vary slightly). Koschorke offers a threefold outline, though his central section, is essentially subdivided into three parts, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 11–17.; his approach is echoed by Martin Krause, "Die literarischen Gattungen der Apokalypsen von Nag Hammadi," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium of Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979*, ed. David Hellholm (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 628. Terence V. Smith isolates four visions, reflected in four instances of the introductory formula, "I saw," (72,5; 72,23; 81,4; 82,4-5). In part, Smith's position is compatible with the others, which essentially consider the initial two as part of the first visionary sequence and the latter two as part of the second, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, Wissenschaftliche untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 127. Also, David Hellholm offers a detailed outline of the text's structure, "The 'Revelation-Schema' and Its Adaptation in the Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter," *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 63 (1998): 233–248.

section, including prophecy *ex eventu* and eschatological predictions (as examples, “the hour has not yet come,” 75,29, and “until my return (παρουσία)” 78,6). Moreover, the themes of oppression and persecution are most prominent in this central section, though they are also apparent in the surrounding sections (ii) and (iv) as well.

At the conclusion of the central, polemical section, *Apoc. Pet.* returns to (iv) visions of Peter and explications by the Savior; in this second visionary sequence (81,3-83,15), *Apoc. Pet.* builds on traditional material to offer a distinctive portrait of the Passion.²⁶ Peter witnesses the arrest of the Savior, as well as the crucifixion. In his vision of the latter, he encounters a laughing figure, “the living Jesus,” (81,17-18) standing above the cross (81,10-11; 15-16). The Savior explains to Peter that the one suffering crucifixion is merely a substitute (81,20-21). Further explication of the nature of the Savior follows. In short, this section serves to correct those who advocate a suffering Savior. *Apoc. Pet.* makes it clear that the real Savior is only a bystander to the suffering, while those who persecute are “blind” (83,3) and imperceptive (83,2), like the erroneous Christians countered in the central section.

Apoc. Pet. concludes (v) (83,15-84,14) with encouragement for Peter. The Savior instructs him to present his visions to “those of another race (ἄλλογενής) who are not of this age (αἰών)” (83,17-18). This concluding section also highlights the capacity for “honor” (ΤΑΕΙΟ) in the immortal ones, and lack of it in those who are mortal (83,19-26). The Savior’s final lines remind Peter to “be courageous and not fear anything” (84,7-8). *Apoc. Pet.* ends with Peter coming “to his senses,” reflecting its revelatory character.

²⁶By “traditional” here, I refer to Gospel material that appears relatively established in second-century Christianity, ultimately becoming canonical.

Apocalypse of Peter as *Apocalypse*

Unlike many of the other Nag Hammadi texts that include the ascription, ‘apocalypse,’ *Apoc. Pet.* does appear to fit its title.²⁷ In many ways, it more closely resembles the classic early Jewish and Christian apocalypses than other Nag Hammadi writings that share the designation. Most prominently, its inclusion of significant visions distinguishes it from other Nag Hammadi apocalypses, which primarily involve revelatory dialogues, including *1 Apoc. Jas.* (NHC V,3), *2 Apoc. Jas.* (NHC V,4), and *Apoc. Adam* (NHC V,5).²⁸

²⁷For a discussion of *Apoc. Pet.* as apocalypse, see Chapter II of James Allen Brashler, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation* (Claremont, CA: University Microforms International, 1977), 70–120.; Desjardins, “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” 208–209.; and Chapter 4 of Havelaar’s Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 111–130. In the landmark *Semeia* volume focused on apocalypticism, Francis T. Fallon, in his examination of “Gnostic” apocalypses aligns *Apoc. Pet.* with Collins’ seminal definition, “The Gnostic Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 123–158. Desjardins follows, describing how *Apoc. Pet.* fits ten of the thirteen characteristics outlined in Collins’ paradigm and noting that it lacks (i) theogony, cosmogony, and anthropology; (ii) eschatological crisis; and (iii) an extended paranaetical section, 208–209. I agree that the latter is lacking, but references to the other two elements are apparent in *Apoc. Pet.*, even if not fully developed. Havelaar also details the parallels with Collins’ “master paradigm,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 124–125. In addition, an earlier work by Krause views *Apoc. Pet.*, with some hesitation, as apocalypse, given features outlined by Vielhauer, “Die literarischen Gattungen der Apokalypsen von Nag Hammadi,” 627–628.

²⁸This point is recognized by Fallon, “The Gnostic Apocalypses,” as well as Klaus Koch, who sees *Apoc. Pet.* as exceptional among Nag Hammadi apocalypses, *Apokalyptik, Wege der Forschung* 365 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982), 8. Havelaar builds on the work on Fallon by highlighting the “inclusion of elaborate vision accounts (72,4–28 and 81,3–83,15)” as the feature that most resembles other apocalypses, in *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 121. For another comparative approach to the apocalyptic nature of *Apoc. Pet.*, particularly in relation to other “Gnostic” apocalypses, see G. M. Shellrude, “Nag Hammadi Apocalypses: A Study of the Relationship of Selected Texts to the Traditional Apocalypses,” 1986; from a study of sixteen apocalypses, Shellrude concludes that only *Apoc. Pet.* and *Apoc. Paul* include traditional apocalyptic elements.

The distinctive nature of Nag Hammadi apocalypses leads Pheme Perkins to consider them as a distinct genre, “revelation dialogue,” *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism*, Theological Inquiries (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). She includes *Apoc. Pet.*, given the periodic interruptions of discourse, but also recognizes its “unusual combination of visions and exegesis,” 62. As Havelaar notes, Perkins seems to downplay the visionary aspects of *Apoc. Pet.*, while overemphasizing the prominence of the dialogue. She also observes that elements central to Perkins’ “revelation dialogue” are

Moreover, the references to a troubled community in *Apoc. Pet.* make the apocalyptic perspective a logical mode of expression, a point recognized by many.²⁹ Desjardins, for example, reflects, “The author, perhaps frustrated by events which left him and his group powerless, chose the apocalyptic genre to present his message.”³⁰ Hellholm also suggests that the authority associated with an apocalypse would have “strengthened and comforted” the author’s community, suggesting the need for such reinforcement.³¹ And Havelaar recognizes “persecution” as the “eschatological crisis” of *Apoc. Pet.*³² Discussions of genre thus generally acknowledge that *Apoc. Pet.* reflects a community in crisis, as most apocalypses do.

To build upon this broad, established recognition of the text’s apocalyptic elements, let us focus on their position and function within the text’s central polemical section.³³ Specifically, I illuminate what a “community in crisis” means within the context of *Apoc. Pet.* I argue that the presence of apocalyptic language and ideology contributes to the identification of the author’s community as persecuted. Moreover, the unusual representation of other Christians as the source of the persecution offers insight into the group dynamics and emergence of boundaries within the author’s community. At

lacking in *Apoc. Pet.*, including descriptions of God and the myth of creation, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 118-119; 121.

²⁹Werner also acknowledges connection between genre and the text’s purpose, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 703.

³⁰Desjardins, “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” 210.

³¹David Hellholm, “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians,” in *Mighty Minorities? Minorities in Early Christianity - Positions and Strategies*, ed. David Hellholm, Halvor Moxnes, and Turid Karlsen Seim (Oslo; Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 66.

³²Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 125. She locates this in *Apoc. Pet.* 73,14-79,31, the bulk of the central section.

³³In this, I am less concerned with the specific *genre* designation.

the same time, aspects of the author's presentation of the apocalyptic scenario also reveal that the Christians in conflict do not reflect fully distinct groups.

To start, an apocalyptic perspective frames the central polemical section. This framework is initiated with a distinction of two ages, the current one marked by ignorance, while the one to come will be distinguished by gnosis. In the present age, the Savior warns Peter that he will experience hatred by "the children of this aeon" (73,18), who should not be privy to the mysterious things revealed to Peter. The Savior explains, "You (sg.) will be taunted in these ages, since they do not know you. But you will be glorified in the age of knowledge" (73,18-23). The position of this statement at the start of the central, polemical section sets the intra-Christian conflict in an apocalyptic context, in which persecution is par for the course. The expectation of reward in the subsequent age encourages Peter and his cohort of "little ones" to persevere in their current situation. At the same time, there is no indication that death is the anticipated or celebrated outcome of the persecution. The focus on future judgment also reflects the apocalyptic interpretive framework of the communal dispute.

References to judgment that will distinguish the "immortal" from "mortal" Christians further frame the section and reflect the mingling of Christians in the interim period, presumably experienced by the audience. The author conveys, in a move typical of heresiological work, that the community was initially united in belief: "For many will accept our teaching in the beginning. But they will turn away again according to the will of the father of their error, because they have done what he wanted. And in his judgment he will disclose those who are the servants of the word" (73,23-32). This notice of

defection suggests that, even if diversity was present early on in the community, there was nevertheless a certain sense of unity.

Moreover, a subsequent reference to an approaching “hour” (75,28-29), in which the immortal souls shall be distinguished from mortal ones, marks another obvious indication of the central section’s eschatological focus. After instructing Peter on the distinction between the souls, the Savior nevertheless recognizes their similar appearance: “The immortal souls do not resemble those, Peter, but as long as the hour has not yet come it will look like the mortal one. But it will not reveal its nature, that it alone is immortal, contemplating immortality, having faith and desiring to renounce these mortal ones” (75,26-76,4). This passage again presents a lack of distinction among Christians; one can conclude that the groups interact, a situation further illuminated in the subsequent section.³⁴ From these passages, and what follows, we can also observe that the author envisions apocalyptic divisions occurring temporally, rather than spatially; one’s position will only be definitely clarified in the future. Certain behaviors might reveal the quality of one’s soul, but, in general, the author suggests a current resemblance, or outward expression of identity, among all Christians.

The anticipated judgment also involves the future return of the Savior, further evidence of the text’s apocalyptic perspective. In the midst of his critique of the “mortal” ones, the Savior informs Peter that at his return (ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑ) (78,6) the “immortal souls” (78,4) will finally be freed of the “harsh fate” (78,2) that accompanies their association

³⁴Havelaar similarly remarks, “This could point to a situation in which Gnostic and orthodox Christians were part of one community,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 92.

with the “mortal souls.”³⁵ The Savior details, “They are doing business with my word – and they shall establish a harsh fate, from which the race of the immortal souls will flee in vain, until my parousia (ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑ), for they shall live among them...” (77,33-78,7). Here again, the author, via the authority of the Savior, acknowledges that the current association between the “mortal” and “immortal” souls, a shared community (“live among them”), creates unfortunate circumstances for the latter.³⁶ In addition, the situation is set on the apocalyptic timeline; it will cease with the future coming of the Savior. This further highlights the temporal perspective, with implications for future communal division.

The continuation of the passage also confirms blurred boundaries in the community. The Savior offers “forgiveness of their transgressions (ΠΑΡΑΠΤΩΜΑ) into which they fell through the adversaries (ΑΝΤΙΚΙΜΕΝΟΙ)” (78,8-11). The implication here is that some of the “immortal souls” were misled and thus behaved in ways that require the Savior’s forgiveness. It also suggests that parameters distinguishing the groups are not yet established; the possibility exists that those ultimately on the author’s side will be misled.

Near the conclusion of the central section, the author of *Apoc. Pet.* offers further details regarding the two ages (80,23-30). The period of oppression is limited and will be followed by a shift in power. The Savior explains,

³⁵The close association is again reflected in 78,6-7: “they shall live among them”.

³⁶What these circumstances entail will be discussed more fully below.

For a determined period of time in proportion to their error, they will rule over the little ones. But after the completion of the error, the ageless one of immortal intellect will be renewed, and the little ones will rule over those who are their rulers. He will pull out the root of their error, and he will put it to shame, so that it will be exposed for all the liberties that it has claimed. And such persons will remain unchanged, Peter. (80,8-23)

In this passage, the Savior extends his earlier message regarding the coming judgment. The error of those Christians who currently rule will be exposed. And those subject to their rule will ultimately reign as part of the “race of the never-aging intellect.” The issue with contested authority is also previewed. In the mean time, the designation, “little ones,” further establishes the persecuted status of the author’s specific community.³⁷

As these examples illustrate, apocalyptic sentiment is prominent in the central section of *Apoc. Pet.* These apocalyptic references help depict the author’s community as one forced to suffer the reign of less-enlightened, fellow Christians. Moreover, in these examples, the attention to a future time in which the distinction between “true” and “false” Christians will be made apparent is indicative of a situation in which various stripes of Christians interact with one another (hence, their similar appearance). The apocalyptic perspective thus informs our understanding of intra-Christian group relations reflected in *Apoc. Pet.*

Further evidence of this multi-faceted Christian collective is apparent throughout *Apoc. Pet.* Though the writing reflects a situation of increased tension within the

³⁷See Hellholm, “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians.”

community, evidence of interaction is nevertheless apparent. In what follows, let us take a closer look at the division—or, more specifically, the rise and proliferation of “error”—outlined in the central section, in order to gauge processes of group identity, including evidence of interaction as well as rifts. An examination of this material allows us to better understand the debated role of suffering and martyrdom in the author’s community.

Group Identities in Apocalypse of Peter

Among the fellow Christians that the author of *Apoc. Pet.* criticizes are those who “hold fast to the name of a dead man, while thinking that they will become pure (ΤΕΒΒΟ)” (74,13-14). The author goes on to claim that they will in fact become “defiled” (ΤΩΛΜ) (74,16) and “will be ruled (ῚΑΡΧΕΙ) heretically (ΟΥΜΝΤΖΕΡΕCΙC)” (74,21-22).

Divergent views on Christ are at least one element that fosters division among Christians. In this case, the dead one almost certainly refers to the crucified figure, whom the author of *Apoc. Pet.* emphasizes is not the Savior. This particular passage also implicates leaders in the division of the community. As part of the heretical rule, these misguided Christians will “lapse into a name of the error and into an evil intriguer with a multifarious doctrine” (74,16-20). The key elements reflected in this passage—erroneous understandings of Christ, succumbing to error, and faulty leadership—recur throughout the central section of *Apoc. Pet.* and likely reflect emerging shifts in group identities and boundaries.

Given the vitriolic criticism of other Christians as well as the apocalyptic genre of the text, scholars typically acknowledge communal conflict behind *Apoc. Pet.* Many offer

relatively general diagnoses of the situation that imply that the author's community has already separated itself from other Christians. For instance, Werner characterizes the community behind *Apoc. Pet.* as a "closed gnostic group of a conventicle type, which considers indispensable a sharp delimitation over against various other movements of Christian life and faith."³⁸ This characterization implies established, firm group boundaries. As my discussion of the apocalyptic material in light of group dynamics reveals though, evidence of intra-group interaction is apparent.

Scholars who tread beyond a general assessment of the communal conflict tend to consider how many adversarial groups are described and/or seek a precise identification for the opponents. The question of whether the author of *Apoc. Pet.* polemicizes against one or more opponents has been addressed in a variety of ways. On the surface, the language of the central section (i.e., the use of "some," 74,22; "many others," 77,22; "others" 78,31; 79,22) suggests that the author describes multiple opposing groups, counted as seven. This leads Werner and Brashler, among others, to assume that several groups create problems for the *Apoc. Pet.* community. Werner claims, "The formulation and the argument of *Apoc. Pet.* favour the view that we should assume several points of conflict and several opponents."³⁹ On the other hand, for others, including Desjardins and Koschorke, the enumeration of opponents functions rhetorically to reflect different issues

³⁸Werner, "The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter," 704.

³⁹Ibid., 703. Brashler assumes that the outline of multiple opponents reflects the historical presence of six groups of opponents, in *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 223–235. Also see James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard, "Apocalypse of Peter," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, Revised (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 372. Furthermore, F. Wisse, "Peter, Apocalypse of" *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, 269.

associated with a singular opposition.⁴⁰ Havelaar offers an appropriate solution to this tension by proposing that the seven groups indeed reflect diverse interests, yet they fall into “one organisational unity,” a proto-orthodox Christian community.⁴¹

Alongside attempts to quantify the antagonistic groups in *Apoc. Pet.*, scholars have also engaged in efforts to precisely identify them.⁴² Challenges to this endeavour include a general lack of clear, specific identifying features as well as the presence of stock ways of castigating opponents in *Apoc. Pet.*⁴³ Exceptions include references to “bishops” and “deacons,” who claim that they receive authority from God (79,25-27). These references encourage Koschorke to argue that early orthodox leadership, specifically the clergy, are the exclusive targets of the polemic.⁴⁴ Desjardins, who hints about more precise identities, similarly settles on orthodox leadership as the primary target.⁴⁵ A number of features of *Apoc. Pet.*, however, make it difficult to assume leaders

⁴⁰ *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 80–85. Desjardins, “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” 212. U. Schoenborn, advocating another perspective, finds no real opposition in *Apoc. Pet.*, given the use of polemical clichés and vague group descriptions, *Diverbium Salutis. Literarische Struktur und theologische Intention des gnostischen Dialogs am Beispiel der koptischen “Apokalypse des Petrus”*, Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 416. From this perspective though, it is difficult to imagine the purpose of the central portion of the text.

⁴¹ Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 91; 199; 201-203.

⁴² For example, Michel Tardieu identifies Pauline Christians as the opponents, “Hérésiographie de l’Apocalypse de Pierre,” in *Histoire et conscience historique dans les civilisations du Proche-Orient ancien*, ed. Albert de Pury, Les cahiers du Centre d’étude du Proche-Orient ancien (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 33–39. It is unclear though what that would mean in the late second or early third centuries. Moreover, such identifications are quite tentative, given the lack of specific evidence in *Apoc. Pet.*

⁴³ See Desjardins, “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” 212.

⁴⁴ Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 82.

⁴⁵ “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction.”

as the exclusive opponents. First, the characterization of the persecuted as “little ones,” misled by “many,” does not align well with Koschorke’s view. It is difficult to imagine the clergy as representing the majority, numerically, of the Christian community. Second, an exclusive focus on leaders in the community requires creative interpretation of apparent references to other groups. For example, Koschorke reads an apparent reference to Simon Magus and Helena (74,27-34) as an implicit criticism of Paul and thus an indirect reflection of ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁴⁶ Such a roundabout reading is unnecessary. Rather than subscribe to Koschorke’s view, it thus seems best to acknowledge leaders as part of the problem, but also allow for a broader spectrum of opposition, including perhaps other Gnostic Christian subgroups alongside element of the proto-orthodox community.⁴⁷ Attempts to identify the opposition precisely often assume strict differentiation among groups; the overlap among groups revealed elsewhere in *Apoc. Pet.* suggests that this approach might be misguided.

In spite of the efforts to classify the opponents, there have been few attempts to offer substantial explanations of the nature of this intra-Christian dispute. In one of the more thorough, recent discussions of group dynamics in *Apoc. Pet.*, Havelaar attributes the break in the community to “explicitly deviating beliefs,” specifically divergent understandings of the Passion.⁴⁸ She explains, “In the course of time a conflict

⁴⁶Moreover, Smith notes that the range of uses of Paul by the end of the second century make any precise target of anti-Pauline attitude difficult, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 136.

⁴⁷For Werner, the opposition includes other Gnostic Christian groups, based on the apparent references to Simon Magus and Helena in 74,27-34; in n. 6, Werner also notes that this point favors a late second- to early third-century date, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 703. Hans-Martin Schenke also discusses anti-Simonian sentiment, “Bemerkungen zur Apokalypse des Petrus,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts. In Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause, Nag Hammadi Studies (NHS) (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 281–83.

⁴⁸Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 201; 203.

concerning doctrine must have arisen, as a result of which the Petrine Christians were forced to leave the parent group.”⁴⁹ I agree that distinct interpretations of the crucifixion seem to relate, and possibly contribute, to the schism. But there appear to be other factors involved as well, which I consider below, including the prospect of persecution.

Divergent views about what it means to be a Christian, particularly in terms of practical matters—how one should behave and who holds authority—seem to have contributed significantly to the intra-Christian rift. Moreover, the doctrinal differences might have been extended as a product of the split, rather than its cause.⁵⁰ Havelaar also concludes that *Apoc. Pet.* “seems to reflect the search for a new group identity,” but she does little to define that identity beyond doctrine.⁵¹

In what follows, I thus refine and extend these prior considerations of group schism and identity. Specifically, I ask, are there clues to the extent of the split? Also, what contributed to it, and how might social identity theory help make sense of this evidence? And, finally, what does the new social identity crafted in the text involve? What I discover are clues of a community recently divided and in the process of establishing intra-group boundaries, suggested by hints of determinism. The persistence of communal proximity is suggested the appearance of a shared tradition and current overlapping boundaries, as we have seen. In addition to divergent Christologies, a

⁴⁹Ibid., 204.

⁵⁰One might deduce this based on *Apoc. Pet.*’s reliance on ‘canonical’ Passion narratives; though they appear in *Apoc. Pet.* as substantially altered, these ‘proto-orthodox’ traditions also seem to have been valued by author and his community at some point. I am not suggesting that differences in belief were not apparent early on; rather, such distinctions within the group likely became more heightened and more significant over time.

⁵¹Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 204.

situation of Roman persecution, which involved the prospect of martyrdom and relative values attached to suffering, helped prompt the division. Divergent ideas about authority in the community also likely contributed. And, finally, the Christian social identity crafted by the author reflects the experience of persecution in the context of a communal rift, but without the expectation of suffering or death. A related discussion of *Apoc. Pet.*'s depiction of Christ and Peter further illuminates the author's construction of a Christian identity that anticipates persecution, but rejects the significance of suffering.

Locating Communal Discord

For many scholars, like Werner, dualistic language and hints of determinism suggest defined boundaries between the community of *Apoc. Pet.* and other Christians.⁵² These elements can be better understood as part of an effort to delineate boundaries; still, in *Apoc. Pet.* the apocalyptic outlook, as we have seen, suggests that clear definition of groups will only be apparent at the final judgment. This perspective is supported by a series of references to current communal mingling and fluid boundaries that seem to reflect the current social situation. The combination of determinism and fluidity can be understood as indicative of the tension between an ideal and reality. The former—

⁵²James A. Brashler also reflects this perspective, asserting that the author understands his community as “consubstantial” with the redeemer. This guides an ecclesiology “that has a very definite and highly developed understanding of how a spiritual community is to be organized,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 197. He goes on to assert that the writer “conceived of himself and his group as immortal souls who were opposed by those whose false teachings and oppressive behavior established their identity as mortal souls condemned to destruction. This anthropological dualism underlies his uncompromising division of the Christian church of his day into a faithful Gnostic remnant, on the one hand, and a variety of apostate groups on the other,” 206. In my view, Brashler overstates the clarity and rigidity of group boundaries. Moreover, it is difficult to locate a distinct, developed ecclesiology in *Apoc. Pet.*

fostered by a dualistic perspective—helps the author and presumably his community cope with the current situation. Indications in *Apoc. Pet.* of an initial unified Christian community, primarily the presence of shared traditions, also support this perspective. The language associated with distinct groups thus represents a future ideal, rather than a present social reality. In the mean time, not all Christians are definitively aligned with one group or another in practice; this is one issue the author faces. *Apoc. Pet.* thus reveals emerging division within a Christian community.

Apoc. Pet. suggests some similarities among Christians, both those favored and those criticized by the author. The common ground between these Christian subgroups is most apparent in the shared use of scriptural traditions. *Apoc. Pet.* draws on a range of early Christian texts that would ultimately become canonical.⁵³ The Gospel of Matthew is especially prominent; the author draws on its Passion narrative and its depiction of Peter, among other elements.⁵⁴ The author of *Apoc. Pet.* presents these traditions in a positive

⁵³Dubois offers a relatively thorough overview of potential New Testament references in *Apoc. Pet.*, “L’Apocalypse de Pierre (NHC VII,3) et le Nouveau Testament,” in *Écritures et traditions dans la littérature copte*, ed. Jaques-E. Ménard, Cahiers de la Bibliothèque Copte (Louvain: Peeters, 1983), 117–125. He recognizes that it is difficult to speak precisely of “citations,” even in the cases of 2 Pet, with which it shares a number of similarities (particularly involving polemic against opponents), 119. Dubois also discusses five apparent *logia* of the Savior, 121–124, and concludes that they are not likely “genuine quotations,” but reflect use of a text in a new context, in this case, a polemical one, 124–25. He ultimately concludes, “The use of the New Testament by the *Apoc. Pet.* serves the entire project of the text: to present a clear vision of the fundamental distinction between crucified Jesus, the substitute, and the true Savior, incapable of undergoing the suffering of the cross,” 125; For additional details, see Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, chap. 5; she details 33 apparent references to the New Testament, drawing on the work of previous scholars.

⁵⁴In his introduction to the text, Desjardins highlights four features of *Apoc. Pet.* that appear to draw on Matthew’s Gospel: (i) 71,15–21 likely reflects the designation of Peter as the church’s leader and rock (Matt 16:17–19); (ii) the language used to depict the opponents in *Apoc. Pet.* parallels that used of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew; (iii) the designation “little ones” (*Apoc. Pet.* 78,22; 79,19; 80,11) can also be found in Matt 10:42 and 18:6;10;14; and (iv) a few passages could be direct quotations from Matthew (*Apoc. Pet.* 83,27–29 from Matt 25:29; *Apoc. Pet.* 75,7–9 from Matt 7:18), “Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction,” 210–211. Terence V. Smith also highlights the heavy reliance on Matthew, including the author’s use of Matthean imagery and vocabulary to describe the group conflict, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 131–135. Others have also recognized the reliance on Matthew, including, Scholten, *Martyrium und Sophiamythos im Gnostizismus nach den Texten von Nag Hammadi*, 88.

light. Rather than denigrate Matthew's Passion narrative as flawed, for instance, he maintains the authority of the tradition, but lends his own interpretation to counter existing (in his view) erroneous interpretations. This stance suggests that his intended audience would not only have been familiar with a version of Matthew's Gospel, but would also have valued it.⁵⁵

The commonalities between 2 Pet and *Apoc. Pet.* might also illuminate intra-Christian relations. Most prominently, the reference to "waterless canals" (79,30-31) parallels "waterless springs" (2 Pet 2:17); both phrases reference the authors' opponents. Brashler, Smith, and Pearson also associate references to "false proclamation," (74,10-12) "messengers of error," (77,24-25) and those who "lead astray many others" (80,2-4) with 2 Pet 2:1-2, which describes "false teachers" among the author's audience, "who will secretly bring in their destructive heresies" and mislead many.⁵⁶ The shared characterization of other erroneous Christians as "blind ones" also provides a possible link between *Apoc. Pet.* (72,10-13; 73,11-14; 76,21-22; 81,28-32) and 2 Pet 1:9.⁵⁷ Drawing on this series of similar passages, Pearson argues that the author of *Apoc. Pet.* used 2 Pet as a source. With the possible exception of the parallel with 2 Pet 2:17 though,

⁵⁵Havelaar makes a similar point; she also suggests that the allusions to the Passion narrative are implicit, further suggesting an intended audience that is quite familiar with the tradition, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 168–169; 163.

⁵⁶Brashler, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 55. Smith, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 138–40. Birger A. Pearson, "The Apocalypse of Peter and Canonical 2 Peter," in *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: Essays in Honor of James M. Robinson*, ed. James E. Goehring and et al (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990), 67–75. Havelaar observes a similar connection with Matt 24:11, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 146–147.

⁵⁷Smith, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 138. Pearson, "The Apocalypse of Peter and Canonical 2 Peter," 1990, 70. Havelaar though notes the intermediate text of Matthew, which includes frequent references to Pharisees as "blind" (Matt 9:36, 15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 26), *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 142–143.

the evidence does not firmly support this position. As Havelaar notes, accusations regarding false teaching and blind ones abound in New Testament texts, including Matthew. Smith's assessment of the links between 2 Pet and *Apoc. Pet.* is perhaps more useful. Rather than posit literary dependency, Smith envisions both texts as products of controversy regarding Peter's authority in the second century.⁵⁸

In addition to shared textual traditions, *Apoc. Pet.* also reveals clues of group interaction and mingling—all suggestive of emerging, rather than established boundaries between social groups. I discuss some indications of this above, in my analysis of apocalyptic elements in the central polemical section. Here, I examine two additional, related passages (73,23-28 and 80,2-4) from the central section that challenge the view that *Apoc. Pet.* evokes firm group boundaries rooted in a strict determinism.

First, 73,23-28 posits that certain erroneous Christians had strayed from the author's community, which originally held the majority position: "For many will take our word in the beginning but they will turn themselves away again, according to the will of the father of their error because they have done what he wants to." Certainly, this sort of suggestion of original unity and eventual defection is not surprising in intra-group polemic. Still, regardless of its potential inaccuracy, it acknowledges that group parameters were subject to change. In addition, there were some originally "in the know," who opted for a different path.

Second, a subsequent passage, near the conclusion of the central polemical section, further illuminates this shifting majority, alluded to at the start of the section:

⁵⁸*Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 138–41. He concludes with the possibility "that the community behind *Apoc. Pet.* is the *type* of Gnostic opposition encountered by the author of 2 Peter," 141.

“there are multitudes that will mislead other multitudes of living ones” (80,2-4). We thus get the sense of at least three early Christian groups in close proximity, experiencing shifting allegiances. The author’s own group reflects the ideal “living ones,” while other “multitudes” are depicted as luring some of the “living ones” away, thus reflecting a lapsed, intermediate group.⁵⁹ The language also suggests the relative size of the groups. The author depicts his group as the minority, subject to pressures from the larger Christian community.⁶⁰ It seems then that rather than understand the distinctions between “immortal” and “mortal” souls as indicative of a static reality, an alternative view of the community is needed. The apocalyptic outlook of *Apoc. Pet.* suggests that such definitive distinctions within the community will occur in the future, as part of the eschatological judgment. In the current state of the community, these differences are less apparent, since they are, in part, not yet determined. A recognition of this fluidity serves as a useful preface for an evaluation of the nature of the rifts reflected in *Apoc. Pet.*

Reasons for the Rift

As noted above, theological differences, including Christology, seem to have

⁵⁹Hellholm draws a similar conclusion, highlighting “two divergences.” In his estimation, “the multitude of living ones are *actively* being misled by the multitude of orthodox Christians,” “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians,” 64.

⁶⁰The use of “little ones,” discussed below, as a designation for the group(s) associated with the author also affirms this relative status. This portrait aligns with modern understandings of Gnostic Christian contingents as typically smaller in scale than their proto-orthodox counterparts. See Hellholm, “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians.” Of course, there could be exceptions to this pattern; for instance, Walter Bauer argues that so-called heretical versions of Christianity, specifically Gnostic varieties, appear more prominent in Egypt during much of the second century. Though provocative, his argument primarily rests on the absence of alternative evidence, rather than clear support for the strength in numbers, *Orthodoxy & Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, Second German Edition (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1996), 59–60. Also, these minority groups might exist within the broader Christian community, as it appears in *Apoc. Pet.*, rather than as an external group. The early Valentinian community, as I discuss in Chapter 5, also reflects this sort of scenario.

contributed to the progressive intra-group division. However, it is possible that such ideological distinctions were tolerated for a time within the group. Two additional, related issues appear to have fostered increased tension and the related emergence of group division in *Apoc. Pet.* First, the author of *Apoc. Pet.* expresses frustration over the efforts of other Christians, not only for their claims of exclusivity (79,14-16), but also their capacity to “mislead” fellow Christians, with potentially dire consequences. Second, one hazard of their misguidance appears to be the unnecessary suffering of Christians, including exposure to persecution and physical martyrdom. This situation aligns with premises of social identity theory that posit that external pressures foster or heighten intra-group disputes, especially when differences that were previously acceptable become problematic. A series of passages suggest that martyrdom and its celebration are problematic for the author of *Apoc. Pet.* The implicit nature of the references makes it difficult to identify martyrdom definitively as the key issue; still, the accumulation of evidence, read in the context of the apocalypse (and intra-Christian critique), in my view, persuasively points toward physical suffering—as a valued expression of Christian identity—as problematic. At the same time, *Apoc. Pet.* sustains a positive expectation of persecution.

74,4-14

Through further examination of intra-group division, we begin to discover the emergence of a persecuted identity in *Apoc. Pet.* Following the initial reference to defection, the Savior informs Peter of the fate of those who stray. Referring back to “children of this aeon” (73,18), he explains that “those who mingled with these will

become their prisoners, since they are without perception” (73,32-74,3).⁶¹ Here, we are reminded that the author of *Apoc. Pet.* takes issue with at least two intersecting Christian groups. The initial “those” appears to reflect a group of misguided Christians, perhaps initially aligned with the author’s community, but now swayed by the “children of this aeon” (73,18) (i.e. the “these” involved with the misguidance). Though “prisoners” is likely not meant literally, the implication is that certain Christians are oppressed by others.⁶² A lack of awareness allows this situation, which Peter is ultimately tasked to resolve. This statement suggests that, in the mean time, those lacking perception might be unfavorably guided by other Christians, presumably those in a relative position of leadership.⁶³

As the apocalypse continues, we gain further understanding of what happens in the course of this “imprisonment”:

They deliver the pure and good one to the executioner. And during their reign, Christ is glorified in a restoration (ΑΠΟΚΑΤΑΚΤΑCΙC), but they glorify the men of the false proclamation, who will come after you. (74,4-12)

This passage suggests, first, that those with power include Christians who advocate a resurrected Christ. Second, they are responsible for prompting a “pure one” toward death

⁶¹Havelaar writes, “The whole phrase (73,32-74,3) could be read as a reference to the transition of Petrine Gnostics to the hostile (orthodox Christian) side, formulated in terms that suggest struggle and oppression. It is difficult to determine if events are described here that have taken place in reality,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 88.

⁶²Rather than suffer actual imprisonment and persecution from fellow Christians, it seems more reasonable to understand such experiences as occurring at the hands of Romans; the issue though is that certain Christians seems to prompt others toward this fate.

⁶³To further complicate Koschorke’s designation of ecclesiastical leaders as the exclusive focus of *Apoc. Pet.*’s polemic, it is also worth considering the possible presence of leaders in the community who are not part of the official hierarchy.

of some sort (literally, “the one who works for death”). Some interpreters understand the “pure one” as a Christological reference, a possibility explored by Havelaar.⁶⁴

An alternative is to understand the “pure one” as a general reference to Christians who are misled under the sway of other Christians. Brashler takes this perspective, considering this as a reference to hostile Christian interactions, potentially with actual executions.⁶⁵ The immediate context of the passage supports the view that this passage refers to intra-Christian conflict, with encouragement for martyrdom as a point of contention. Just preceding this passage, as we have seen, is the description of the defection of certain Christians to the proto-orthodox camp.

What follows this reference to executioners also supports an interpretation centered on martyrdom. First, if one considers a connection between the potential execution and the subsequent mention of glorified, this passage could reflect a situation of suffering martyrdom and early Christian celebration of martyrs. The reference to “glorified” ones could well indicate martyrs, since among early Christians, they reflect the group most likely to be celebrated and praised. Second, the passage continues with the notice, “And they will adhere to the name of a dead man, while thinking that they will become pure (τῆβο)” (74,13-14).⁶⁶ Certainly, this statement reflects criticism of a Christological focus on the crucified one. But, it also suggests a rejection of confession of this “dead man” and the related hope of purity.

⁶⁴Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 88.

⁶⁵Brashler, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 218.

⁶⁶Havelaar recognizes the reference to the “dead man” as a clear indication of the orthodox Christian belief in a crucified Jesus, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 89.

77,33-78,6 / 78,7-15

As the polemic continues, *Apoc. Pet.* criticizes “messengers of error” (77,24-25) for, among other things, their belief that good and evil have a common origin (77,30-33). These “messengers” also represent a significant threat for the author and his community. The Savior communicates, “They do business in my word. And they will establish a harsh fate (εἰμαρμένη) in which the generation of the immortal souls will run in vain until my return” (77,33-78,6). The accusation of misusing the Savior’s “word” suggests a situation of competing Christian identities.⁶⁷ The allegiance to Christ is further associated with apparent persecution, which the “immortal souls” will try to avoid. The “harsh fate” involves a significant threat to the “immortal souls.” It could simply refer to their general negative experience of suppression. The tenor of the passage combined with a subsequent reference to “transgressions,” however, suggests that some more substantial action is meant.

The continuation of the passage also highlights the proximity of diverse early Christian groups as well as the potential for error among those favored by *Apoc. Pet.* The Savior informs Peter, “For they will remain among them. And I have forgiveness of their transgressions into which they fell because of the adversaries. I accepted their ransom from the slavery in which they existed and I gave them freedom” (78,7-15). Given the context, the initial “they” likely refers to the immortal souls mentioned in the preceding lines. Here, *Apoc. Pet.* reiterates that even those favored by the Savior are not immune to

⁶⁷The beginning of this passage recalls 2 Cor 2:17, in which Paul likewise distinguishes his proper mission from those who are “peddlers of God’s word,” writing “we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence,” NRSV.

error or, in this case, misguidance. The nature of the “transgressions” and the “ransom” is less apparent, making this a tricky passage to comprehend. A subsequent reference to “Hermas, the first-born of unrighteousness” (78,18-19) leads Havelaar to understand the transgressions as related to the concept of second penance. According to this understanding of the passage, the author of *Apoc. Pet.* takes issue with certain early Christian leaders’ presumed ability to forgive sins repeatedly. Though this reading initially seems reasonable, it fails to take into account the harsh fate that is to be avoided as well as the Savior’s forgiveness and acceptance of ransom.⁶⁸ In my view, the reference to their “ransom from the slavery in which they existed” (CΩTE; ΔΙΧΙ ΜΠΙCΩTE) is provocative. It could simply refer to escape from the body, but combined with the harsh fate encouraged by others, it could well indicate a martyr’s death, one of the transgressions prompted by error and misguidance.

78,31-79,2 / 79,8-21

As the author of *Apoc. Pet.* continues to detail his adversaries, he explains the error of Christians who celebrate the value of suffering. The Savior explains to Peter their folly: “But other ones from them again, because they have the suffering (ΜΠΙ ΜΚΔ2), think that they will fulfill the wisdom of the brotherhood that truly exists” (78,31-79,2). Among

⁶⁸This reading also relies on the assumption that mention of Hermas is, in fact, a reference to the *Shepherd of Hermas*. As Brashler notes, this is not self-evident, and there is reason to reject this reading; he writes, “exactly who he is remains unclear. He should not be identified with Hermas of Rome, however. The author of *Apoc. Pet.* believes that there will be forgiveness of sins committed by members of the Gnostic group who are forced to do wrong by their enemies, and therefore he would not polemicise against the same view advocated by the writer of the *Shepherd of Hermas*,” *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 232. If one cannot assume the author has the *Shepherd of Hermas* in view here, then the importation of second penance as the issue here is less persuasive.

the passages I examine here, this one most clearly evokes the prospect of martyrdom. Havelaar and Pagels both associate the “suffering” with physical martyrdom.⁶⁹

In the same section, presumably with the same opponents in mind, *Apoc. Pet.* continues, “The kindred race of the sisterhood will appear as an imitation. These are the ones who oppress their brothers, saying to them, ‘Through this our God has mercy, since salvation comes to us through this.’ They do not know the punishment of those who are delighted by what has been done to the little ones whom they sought out and imprisoned” (79,8-21). This passage reports that some within the community encourage others to take on a particular deed that reflects a mode of suppression and reportedly earns one salvation. Havelaar suggests that “the verb used to denote this suppression, λωξῶ, may even point to a situation of persecution,” but she does not explicitly connect the statement regarding salvation (79,14-16) to martyrdom. Rather, she views it as a more general statement of orthodox salvation.⁷⁰ I see no convincing reason to be reticent in equating 79,11-21 with the early promotion of martyrdom, given the prior reference to suffering and the emphasis on a deed. In his brief notes on the text, Brashler states that this passage reflects “the author’s rejection of the oppressors’ motivation that they are promoting the salvation of the Gnostics by forcing orthodox doctrine upon them.”⁷¹ Rather than doctrine though, the passage makes an issue of some practice. When one considers what sort of “deed” would fit here—that causes others to rejoice, reputed to earn mercy and salvation, and is associated with imprisonment—martyrdom stands as a reasonable option.

⁶⁹Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 98; “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution,” 274.

⁷⁰Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 98.

⁷¹Brashler, “Apocalypse of Peter. Text, Translation and Notes,” 237.

79,32-80,7

At the conclusion of the Savior's overview of the rise of division, Peter expresses his concern over the situation, symptomatic of his persistent lack of understanding. He confesses to the Savior, "I am afraid because of the things you have told me—that indeed little ones are, in our view, in accordance with the image. Indeed, there are multitudes that will mislead other multitudes of living ones, and they will be destroyed among them. And when they speak your name, they will be believed" (79,32-80,7). Peter's statement confirms that "living" Christians are being led astray by other Christians, with a destructive outcome. In addition, the final line in this passage suggests martyrdom as one possible threat. To "speak" the Savior's "name" as a means of encouraging belief (80,6-7) suggests a situation in which confession is central and public.

Collectively, this series of references to persecution—often in association with group identity and conflict—suggests that promotion of a martyr's death was a key source of concern for the author of *Apoc. Pet.*

Christian Identity in Apoc. Pet.

In outlining divisions in the early Christian community, the author of *Apoc. Pet.* reveals particular self-designations for his own group: "little ones" and "immortal ones." The former implies the marginalized, minority status of the group in their current situation, while the latter reflects the dualistic perspective, which I suggest contributes to

(rather than necessarily reflects) group boundaries. The notion of “brotherhood” is similarly evoked as a group definition in *Apoc. Pet.* In this section, I consider what sort of social identity, including related behavioral expectations, is captured by these group designations in *Apoc. Pet.*

The distinctive appellation, the “little ones,” appears three times in *Apoc. Pet.*, exclusively within the central, polemical section; it thus depicts the group’s status vis-à-vis other Christians. All three instances cast the group as a threatened minority. The initial instance occurs in the author’s criticism of an “imitation” group associated with Hermas that exists “in order that the real light shall not be believed by the little ones (ἡ ΝΙΚΟΥΕΙ)” (78,22). In this instance, a rival belief apparently threatened to overshadow the “real light,” or truth, intended for the little ones. The presence of such a threat also assumes the proximity among subgroups of Christians. The second reference to the “little ones” is discussed just above, among potential references to martyrdom: “They do not know the punishment with those who rejoice with those who have done this deed to the little ones (ἡ ΝΙΚΟΥΕΙ)” (79,19). The third instance of the designation, “little ones,” reminds the audience that their oppression, “rule over the little ones (ΝΙΚΟΥΕΙ),” will come to an end following a fixed time (80,11). This apocalyptic sense of “little ones” recalls the use of the phrase in the Gospel of Matthew, widely understood as a key source for *Apoc. Pet.*⁷²

⁷²Hellholm finds that the terms “majority” and “minority” as designations for Christians do not appear elsewhere in the New Testament; they are, however, common in second and third-century Gnostic writings, where “they are used precisely as self-designations of Gnostic Christians on the one hand and as their designation of antagonistic Christians on the other,” “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians,” 41; for instance, *Gos. Thom.*, sayings 46 and 50, while “many” (212) characterizes those who are understood as their opponents in sayings 74 and 75, Hellholm, “The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians,” 42-43.

As the passages examined thus far reveal, “immortal souls” and “little ones” designate the author’s community. Less apparent, however, are the parameters of the group. Who makes up the “little ones?” Brashler and Werner consider “little ones” as a Gnostic self-designation.⁷³ As Hellholm shows though, there were likely layers within this collective group. He views “little ones” as representative of two types of immortal souls: first, those who were initially aware, but have been deceived (77,10; 76,27-77,22), and, second, those who are aware, but are still in danger of being deceived by other Christians (“the majority in the Great Church,” in Hellholm’s view).⁷⁴ We can thus discern at least three interacting groups associated with *Apoc. Pet.*, with apparent fluidity among them.

Peter’s Christological Visions

As *Apoc. Pet.* progresses, we further discover how divergent Christologies foster division in the community. Central to the Christology of *Apoc. Pet.* is an extended crucifixion scene, which offers a corrective to traditional Gospel portraits. In the apocalypse, Peter experiences a series of three visions, each explained by the Savior. The progressive illumination highlights Peter’s distinctive role in the narrative. Through these elements, the reader discovers a tripartite spiritual Savior who temporarily inhabits a fleshly body. Departing this latter figure, just prior to the crucifixion, the Savior stands by

Werner interprets this in accordance with the Matthean “little ones” (10:42; 18:6,10,14) who are regarded as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 704.

⁷³Brashler, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 154; Werner, “The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 704.

⁷⁴“The Mighty Minority of Gnostic Christians,” 65.

“laughing,” as the authorities foolishly execute the irrelevant bodily remnant. *Apoc. Pet.*’s unique interpretation of the Passion thus illuminates the author’s perspective on suffering.⁷⁵ Through the example of the Savior, the author rejects the glorification of physical suffering; presumably, this stance applies to martyrdom as well, especially if martyrdom is understood as *imitatio Christi*. In addition, Peter’s role as an exclusive, proper crucifixion witness lends to his characterization as a different sort of martyr. As the Savior did not suffer, neither will Peter. Moreover, he participates in conveying salvation to others by sharing his vision; in this manner, he serves as a witness.⁷⁶ This special role of Peter also has implications for group identities.

Following the Savior’s description of erroneous Christians, Peter abruptly experiences a vision of the Savior’s arrest and subsequent crucifixion (81,3-83,15): “When he had said those things, I saw him apparently being seized by them” (81,3-6). Peter then initiates a dialogue with the Savior to comprehend what he sees. He inquires, “What am I seeing, O Lord?” Is it you yourself whom they take? And are you grasping me? Who is this one above the cross, who is glad and laughing? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are hammering?” (81,7-14). Peter’s initial observation of the crucifixion thus reflects the presence of (at least) two distinct figures, the hovering figure who laughs and the bodily figure hung on the cross. At its core, *Apoc. Pet.*’s Christology appears dualistic, distinguishing the material from the spiritual. The latter, though, finds expression in multiple ways.

⁷⁵There is a relative consensus regarding the essential Christology of *Apoc. Pet.*; in this discussion, my interest focuses more on what this information suggests about suffering and how it positions Peter.

⁷⁶In this case, Peter’s role as a martyr aligns with the traditional, more general sense of the term, “witness.”

The Savior explains, “The one you see above the cross, glad and laughing, is the living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshly part (CΑΡΚΙΚΟΝ) which is the substitute. They put to shame that which is in his likeness. But look at him and me” (81,15-24). This prompts a misunderstanding by Peter, who looks (81,25), notes that no one is watching the Savior, and thus suggests escaping the situation: “Lord, no one is looking at you. Let us flee this place.” (81,26-28). The Savior’s response suggests that Peter’s proposed flight is absurd, since the persecutors do not reflect a real threat. He chastises Peter, “I have told you, ‘Leave the blind (ones) alone!’ And see how they do not know what they are saying. For the son of their glory, instead of my servant, they have put to shame.” (81,29-82,3). The persecutors are mocked for the pointless execution of one of their own. This passage also further highlights Peter’s particular role; he is instructed to be attentive to their lack of knowledge, rather than any threat of physical persecution. The Savior thus refocuses Peter, and the primary lesson is to not worry about physical persecution.

The second part of Peter’s vision further illuminates the nature of the Savior. Peter reports,

And I saw someone about to approach us who looked like him, and like the one who was laughing above the cross. And he was filled with a holy spirit, and he is the Savior. And there was a great ineffable light surrounding them and the multitude of ineffable and invisible angels blessing them. And it was I who saw him when this one who glorifies was revealed. (82,4-16)

This passage details additional manifestations of the Savior. The approaching figure appears distinct from the laughing figure, but resembles the Savior already known to Peter. A third figure seems to be reflected by the presence of the “great ineffable light,” as “one who glorifies.” Moreover, this passage also reiterates Peter’s distinctive role; he stresses that he is the key witness to the revelation.

Peter’s position is further highlighted in the following lines, which also convey additional details about the nature of the crucified one. The Savior instructs Peter, “Be strong! Because you are the one to whom these mysteries are given, to know through revelation that the one whom they crucified is the first-born, and the house of demons, and the stone vessel in which they dwell, belonging to Elohim, and belonging to the cross that is under the law” (82,18-26). Here, *Apoc. Pet.* highlights Peter’s role as recipient of the key mysteries surrounding the crucifixion, specifically, the actual identity of the one on the cross. The list of attributes makes it clear that this secondary figure reflects the material realm, the world associated with the law and the inferior, creator god. Moreover, it is clear that other Christians have made this critical Christological error; this further reflects division within the Christian community. The themes of division and persecution, initially introduced in the central, polemical section, surface again in *Apoc. Pet.*’s portrait of the Passion (and are arguably central to it). The encouragement for Peter to remain strong suggests the tenuousness of his position; with uncertain parameters, Peter reflects the possibility for even “true” Christians to misunderstand and lapse.

The Savior continues with an explication of the figure standing by at the crucifixion scene: “But he who stands near him is the living Savior, the one who before was in the one whom they seized. And he has been released. He stands joyfully looking at

those who persecuted him. They are divided among themselves. Therefore he laughs at their inability to see, and he knows that they are born blind” (82,26-83,3). A number of points in this passage are noteworthy.⁷⁷ First, the bystander is designated as “the living Savior,” who inhabited the one who will be crucified. Prior to the punishment though, the spiritual form departs the distinct body.⁷⁸

Second, and more significant for my project, this passage reveals perspectives on persecution and suffering that correspond with the intra-group concerns of the central section. The persecutors are mocked for their blindness, which presumably limits their ability to recognize the “true” identity of their prisoner; they err in their understanding of the situation. The laughing Savior highlights the futility of the persecution of one of their own. The persecutors are also characterized as internally divided. In *Apoc. Pet.*, the traditional persecutors associated with the Passion—Jews and Romans—serve as symbols of the author’s contemporary Christian opponents. Both of these characteristics, lack of understanding and division, echo the author’s critique of erroneous Christians in the preceding section of the apocalypse (for instance, they rule schismatically).⁷⁹

The Savior goes on to detail the distinctions among the figures present in Peter’s vision of the Passion scene: “Indeed, therefore, the suffering one must remain since the body is the substitute. But the one that was released was my incorporeal body (πᾶσσωμα

⁷⁷A laughing Christ is also present at the crucifixion in the *Treat. Seth* (VII, 2) 56.19, in which Simon of Cyrene appears as the physical substitute on the cross. A similar perspective is attributed to Basilides by Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.4.

⁷⁸Gerard P. Luttikhuisen ascribes this figure an intermediate role between Christ’s intellectual spirit and the material body, comparable to an “ethereal soul-body” in a trichotomous concept of reality, “The Suffering Jesus and the Invulnerable Christ in the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” in *The Apocalypse of Peter*, Studies in Early Christian Apocrypha 7 (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 194–195.

⁷⁹The recurrence of the lack of awareness and divisiveness reflects how these seemingly distinct sections of the apocalypse are actually intertwined.

ⲡⲉ ⲛⲁⲧⲥⲱⲙⲁ). But I am the intellectual spirit (ⲡⲓⲛⲟⲉⲣⲟⲛ ⲙⲡⲛⲁ) filled with radiant light. He whom you saw coming to me was our intellectual pleroma, which unites the perfect light with my pure spirit” (83,4-15). This passage distinguishes the physical body, which will suffer, from (i) the Savior’s “incorporeal body,” (ii) the “intellectual spirit filled with radiant light” (the Savior’s self-designation), and (iii) the one Peter witnessed, “the intellectual pleroma.” The latter three appear to be related manifestations of the spiritual realm. The body that suffers is, on the other hand, purely physical; characterized as a “substitute,” its role in the scheme seems to carry little to no value. In addition, it derives from a distinct, inferior cosmic realm. Combined with the negative associations noted above, the crucified one who suffers is not a figure to be glorified, as the author’s critique of other Christians reveals.

No less important than the Christological reflections here is the recipient of the message. The Savior’s interpretation of events on Peter’s behalf is immediately followed by a commission for the disciple to share what he has discovered. The Savior instructs Peter, “These things, therefore, which you saw, you shall present to those of another race, who are not of this age. For there will be no honor (ⲧⲁⲉⲓⲟ) in any one who is not immortal, but only for those who were chosen from an immortal substance who has shown that he is able to comprehend the one who gives his abundance” (83,15-26).⁸⁰ Peter’s delivery of the message is a significant task. In addition, though the passage suggests an elect group bound for honor based on their substantial nature, the emphasis is

⁸⁰This passage recalls a preceding passage in *Apoc. Pet.* that describes the intended recipients of Peter’s revelation. The Savior encourages Peter, “Now then, listen to the things that are being told to you in a mystery, and guard them. Do not tell them to the children of this age” (73,14-18).

on exhibiting one's awareness.⁸¹ Peter receives final encouragement: "You, therefore, be courageous and do not fear anything. For I will be with you so that none of your enemies will prevail over you. Peace be to you! Be strong!" (84,6-11).

The depiction of the Passion in *Apoc. Pet.* reveals that physical suffering, including the actual crucifixion, is not to be celebrated. It is thus unlikely that the promotion of early Christian martyrdom as, in part, an imitation of Christ, would carry any weight for the author of *Apoc. Pet.* As Desjardins concludes in his discussion of crucifixion scene, "The author's main point ... is that Jesus' external, physical form is not the one worth honoring."⁸²

Nevertheless, the Passion scene itself makes up a significant part of in the apocalypse. Rather than highlight suffering, though, it reveals the nature of the Savior and signals Peter's key role as the witness of this knowledge. This is apparent in the details the author chooses to highlight; the cross itself is secondary to the action of the scene from Peter's perspective. It also serves as a corrective to those who misunderstand the crucifixion and subscribe to a suffering Savior; Peter's vision of the crucifixion as well as the Savior's subsequent explanation of the scene and his nature demonstrate the futility of physical suffering and mock those who subscribe to it. The concluding instructions for Peter to share his received knowledge also relates to the Savior's function, more specifically, his provision of salvation.

⁸¹See M. A. Williams' discussion of the emphasis on behavior as an expression of identity, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, chap. 9.

⁸²Desjardins, "Apocalypse of Peter. Introduction," 206.

Peter as “Martyr”

As the pseudonymous author, Peter’s role in *Apoc. Pet.* extends beyond that of the typical apocalyptic revealer.⁸³ In the context of intra-Christian conflict, the choice of Peter as apocalyptic messenger is significant, given his prominent role in proto-orthodox tradition, the author’s apparent opposition. Specifically, Peter’s authoritative voice challenges the centrality of suffering for Christian identity and redefines his role as a proto-martyr or witness. Peter’s progressive enlightenment, via the Savior, over the course of the apocalypse serves as a model for other Christians to imitate. His periodic misunderstandings reveal that his acquisition of awareness is not automatic. Through proper instruction and reflection they can participate in the immortal realm and become invulnerable to suffering. The encouragement to “be strong” (84,11) relates not to Peter’s physical side, but to his newfound understanding in the face of “persecution” by fellow Christians, as he awaits the end of the present age.⁸⁴

Depicting Peter as the original leader of a unified community, *Apoc. Pet.* offers hope that Peter will reclaim his authoritative role with the Savior’s return. In the meantime, Peter is meant to await the Parousia (78,4-6), while bravely accepting his role in the midst of intra-Christian conflict (80,31-81,3). Relying on Peter’s authority, the author of *Apoc. Pet.* resituates Peter’s Gospel experiences in his present situation of intra-Christian

⁸³Typical facets of Peter’s role include his authoritative status as a figure close to the Savior and his ability to view “the future,” given his experience in the historical past.

⁸⁴This contrasts Pagels’ view of this final statement as encouragement for Peter to go on to confidently face his own suffering, “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution,” 275. Given the negative assessment of suffering in the text and the lack of reference to Peter’s pending persecution, this reading does not seem entirely persuasive.

conflict. One example of this strategy is an apparent allusion to Peter's threefold denial of Jesus.⁸⁵ *Apoc. Pet.*'s version predicts that the Savior will correct Peter three times in the course of their night (71,34-72,4).⁸⁶ Peter's immediate response further evokes the Gospel narratives. He expresses his fear of death, noting his vision of priests and others coming toward them with stones (72,5-9). Though the setting of pending persecution is maintained, the adaptation of the threefold denial shifts the focus to progressive instruction and its challenges in *Apoc. Pet.*

The Savior's instruction of Peter that follows emphasizes spiritual—or, in this case, sensory—awareness over bodily experience.⁸⁷ The Savior directs Peter to cover his eyes in order to comprehend the “blindness” of his opposition (72,13-17). By shielding his physical view, Peter ultimately gains clarification. He reports, “Fear in joy came to me for I saw a new light brighter than the light of day” (72,22-25). A comparable experience follows, in which the Savior instructs Peter to listen in an elevated way (73,6-8). The Savior's instruction thus conveys how Peter can “inwardly transcend visible reality.” Luttikhuisen appropriately casts this experience as preparation for Peter's

⁸⁵“Jesus said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times,’” Mark 14:30 (NRSV); Matt 26:34, Luke 22:34, and John 13:38 as parallels.

⁸⁶Havelaar doubts the connection with Peter's traditional Gospel betrayals, primarily based on the lack of consistent language, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 83. In addition to the common setting, the presence of “three times” alongside the reference to “this night,” though, seem sufficient to evoke the Gospel scene. We should not expect the scene to have the traditional meaning for the author of *Apoc. Pet.*, since he often revises the Petrine tradition for his own purposes. Theofried Baumeister remarks that the unusual allusion to Matt 16:18 likely reflects “a positive evaluation of the denial, in which Peter distanced himself following a proper Gnostic understanding of the form of the suffering Savior,” “Die Rolle des Petrus in gnostischen Texten,” in *Acts of the Second International Congress of Coptic Studies*, ed. Tito Orlandi and Frederick Wisse (Rome, 1985), 7.

⁸⁷Luttikhuisen highlights the way Peter learns through the spiritual, rather than physical, side of his senses, “The Suffering Jesus and the Invulnerable Christ in the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 191.

subsequent vision of the crucifixion.⁸⁸ But, it also serves as a broader lesson, instructing the reader how to approach life as a Christian, which involves attention to one's spiritual development.⁸⁹ Peter's initial fear and anticipation of death symbolize his ignorance. The Savior responds with a reminder of the persecutor's error, rather than with any comment regarding Peter's own death.

Peter's portrait can thus be understood as a challenge to his traditional characterization as a dying witness, especially in light of the intra-Christian conflict in *Apoc. Pet.* By the time of its composition, the tradition of Peter as a key early martyr appears to have been well-entrenched.⁹⁰ Given Peter's martyr legacy and his expressions of fear in this text, it is all the more noteworthy that his own death is not forecast in *Apoc. Pet.* As with the crucifixion narrative, we also find an adaptation of shared tradition in *Apoc. Pet.*'s portrait of the disciple. Peter admits fear, yet there are no references to a death at the hands of the Romans. Rather, his quest centers on perfection, a challenge posed by the Savior at the start of the apocalypse. He encourages, "Peter, become perfect (ϰϱϱⲡⲉ ⲉⲕⲉⲛⲧⲉⲗⲓⲟⲥ), in keeping with your name, along with me, the one who has chosen you" (71,15-18).⁹¹ In addition to highlighting Peter's special role, this opening

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹On this point, also see Schoenborn, *Diverbium Salutis. Literarische Struktur und theologische Intention des gnostischen Dialogs am Beispiel der koptischen "Apokalypse des Petrus."*

⁹⁰In perhaps the earliest reference to the tradition of Peter's death as a martyr, see *1 Clem.* 5; also, the 'Quo Vadis' legacy of *Acts Pet.* 35f; Origen *Comm. Jo.* 20.12; and Eusebius' later reports, *Hist. eccl.* 3.1.2f; 2.25.5-8.

⁹¹It is somewhat unclear what is meant by "in keeping with your name" here; Havelaar suggests a possible link between the Greek *telios* (71,16) and *petros*, noting that a rock might symbolize strength and perfection, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 81. The emphasis on the Savior's choice of Peter also recalls the tradition of Matthew 16:18, in which Jesus casts Peter as the rock on which the church will be built.

also sets the Savior as an example for Peter to follow. The perfection involves attaining proper knowledge, particularly regarding the nature of the crucifixion (71,25-33).⁹² The combination of a crucifixion without suffering and the call for Peter imitate Jesus leads Brashler to consider this statement as a “subtle criticism of the orthodox view that martyrdom was the τελειότης of spiritual perfection.”⁹³ One could also understand the moments of encouragement for Peter to “be strong” (71,22; 82,18; 84,11) and have courage (80,32-33; 84,7) as adaptations of typical support in the early martyr acts.⁹⁴ Peter progresses through the course of the apocalypse and, in the end, appears fully aware. The indication that Peter “came to his senses” (84,12-13) reflects the awareness he achieves in the course of the apocalypse. If read as an allusion to Acts 12:11, in which Peter “came to himself” after a miraculous escape from prison, this final statement further implies Peter’s ultimate distance from persecution.⁹⁵

Though less extensive in its description of what the proper Christian is to do than the other traditions examined in this project, *Apoc. Pet.* nevertheless presents Peter as a model for appropriate Christian action. By following a similar path, Christians are privy to the true meaning of the crucifixion and conduct themselves accordingly; in this sense, they are witnesses, or martyrs. Based on the assessment of the physical form in the

⁹²The author might have in mind the description of Peter as a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” in 1 Pet 5:1, Smith, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 131.

⁹³*The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: A Genre Analysis and Interpretation*, 209–210.

⁹⁴For example, in *Mart. Pol.* 9, a heavenly voice encourages the martyr, “Be strong, Polycarp, and be courageous.”

⁹⁵Smith mentions this parallel, though he does not discuss its potential significance in relation to *Apoc. Pet.*’s perspective on persecution and possible martyrdom, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*, 126.

crucifixion, it seems reasonable to envision the author's group as one that prioritizes spiritual over bodily matters.

Chapter 4
**Martyrdom without Sacrifice:
The Silent Witness in the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3)**

In the second chapter of *Martyrdom and Memory*, Elizabeth A. Castelli argues that early Christian “rhetoric, interpretation, and theorizing” framed martyrdom in terms of the Roman system of sacrifice. Regarding the function of Roman sacrifice, Castelli explains that “at the level of ritual, it helped to maintain networks of relationship and patterns of order that were simultaneously social, political, and religious. It satisfied the *status quo*, sustained through regular ritual reinscription.”¹ The ritual of sacrifice thus reflected and solidified a group’s social identity in the Roman world, including values and expectations.

Early Christians’ general refusal to participate in this expression of Roman identity marked them as deviants, susceptible to persecution.² Nevertheless, as Castelli shows, many Christians tapped into this already existent system of Roman sacrifice, including the public arena and inverted the expected social framework.³ Specifically, Castelli details how, through remembrance of traditions, the ritual of martyrdom became

¹*Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, 50.

²A point long recognized by historians, which Castelli reiterates, *Ibid.*, 51.

³Castelli’s argument brings together the dimensions of sacrifice, gender, and the Roman arena, *Ibid.*, 54–55.

meaningful for Christians.⁴ As her work reveals, the events and subsequent celebrations of martyrdom, primarily via circulating literature, reflect a process of ritualization that became central to early Christian identity. As part of this, Christians regularly depicted the deaths of their martyrs as parallel to that of Jesus, “appropriat[ing] the language of sacrifice to describe their experience of persecution at the hands of the Romans.”⁵

Castelli thus reminds us of the intersection of a suffering Christ and early Christian conceptions of martyrdom, while also highlighting the ritual processes that accompany early Christian remembrances of martyrdom and related social identity.

In this chapter, I consider *Testim. Truth* as one early Christian response to this ritualization of martyrdom. This text depicts “so-called Christians” who undergo martyrdom at the hands of persecutors as misguided fools, who mistakenly believe that “death for the sake of the name” (34,5-6) will offer them salvation (32).⁶ Exposing the misguided motives and “emptiness” of a martyr’s death as well as water baptism, the author challenges the relative value ascribed to such external, often public, group-oriented expressions of Christian identity. Undoubtedly, the author’s negative assessment

⁴Here, I emphasize, like Castelli, that whether Christians designated martyrdoms as a ritual or sacrifice is less significant than how it functioned for them. She writes, “It seems possible that one might well call an event or a performance sacrificial even when its participants might not call their actions by this name. The question seems to be what work that naming does and how it either sheds light or obscures the view,” Ibid., 59.

⁵Ibid., 51. For a complementary study of early Christian martyrdom as sacrificial, see Young, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*.

⁶The author simply notes that “such matters are not settled in such a way” (34,6-7). In this chapter, I rely primarily on the Coptic text transcribed by Søren Giverson and Birger A. Pearson, Birger A. Pearson, ed., “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X*, Nag Hammadi Studies XV (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 101–203, with occasional consultation of the accompanying English translation. I also utilize the Coptic-French critical edition, including commentary of Annie Mahé and Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi 23 (Louvain; Paris: Peeters, 1996). A current English translation, also by Birger A. Pearson, appears as “The Testimony of Truth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 613–628.

of all things fleshly contributes to this perspective. The social implications of this view, though, also deserve considerable attention. Through an examination of competing expressions of Christian identity apparent in *Testim. Truth*, I show how this text prioritizes the solitary side of group affiliation, primarily by advocating renunciation and self-inquiry. These practices mark the “true martyrdom” and “true baptism” promoted by the author.

Manuscript, Provenance, and Date

Before a fuller examination of *Testim. Truth*’s outlook on martyrdom, some introductory remarks on the text are necessary. *Testim. Truth* survives in a single manuscript, as part of the collection of writings discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945.⁷ The third treatise in Codex IX, the manuscript is quite fragmentary, with approximately 45% of the text lost or damaged.⁸ *Testim. Truth* does not fit neatly into a particular genre, though scholars tend to categorize it as, at least in part, a homily.⁹

⁷For a discussion of the text’s title, perhaps better rendered *The True Testimony*, see Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*; the authors also note the parallel phrase in Clement of Alexandria, 2.

⁸The latter half of the text is especially damaged and includes the loss of complete pages; Pearson, “The Testimony of Truth.”

⁹Pearson understands it as a homiletic tract, comprised of two essential parts, “Anti-Heretical Warnings in Codex IX from Nag Hammadi,” in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 151; 189. Mahé and Mahé also consider it as a homily, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, 5–6. After a full discussion of the polemical flair of the author (8-9), they still conclude that one cannot prove that *Testim. Truth* was actually delivered as a homily, “one can nevertheless affirm that the text has all the stylistic features of a live speech,” 10. One could also understand the text, or at least parts of it, as reflective of *paraenesis*; the author’s interest in correcting behavior suggests this characterization.

The author draws on both Christian and Jewish materials, including biblical and apocryphal traditions, often offering distinctive interpretations.¹⁰ The Gospel of John seems to be the primary gospel used by the author, though allusions to Matthew and Luke are also present.¹¹ The Pauline letters appear to have further influenced *Testim. Truth*.¹² In addition, the author employs a range of material from the Jewish Scriptures and later Jewish traditions, most prominently an extensive reading of the Paradise narrative of Genesis 2-3.¹³

The diverse content as well as shifts in style prompt some to question the text's original unity. Pearson and Koschorke understand it, in part, as a pastiche of material, though they nevertheless recognize a single author. Pearson proposes that the original version concluded at 45,6, based on the repetitive nature of the following text (45,6-74,30) as well as the diversity of material. He suggests that the latter half is directed toward a more inclusive audience, though it still complements the initial homily.¹⁴ Such a division is unnecessary, however. Mahé and Mahé as well as Gerard P. Luttikhuisen persuasively show how *Testim. Truth* can be understood as a single, coherent

¹⁰As examples, *Testim. Truth* includes references to David and Solomon (70,1-30) as well as the apocryphal *Mart. Ascen. Isa.* (40,21-41,1).

¹¹Christopher M. Tuckett's article references a series of Synoptic allusions in order. He concludes that there is no clear reference to Mark; the majority reflect material common to Matthew and Luke (i.e. Q), "Synoptic Tradition in the Gospel of Truth and the Testimony of Truth," *Journal of Theological Studies* 35, no. 1 (1984): 144–145. On the primary use of John, see Birger A. Pearson, "Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3)," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 312.

¹²Pearson, "Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3)," 312.

¹³Pearson discusses the author's use of the Jewish scriptures, through short quotations, allusions, and extended interpretations (which Pearson labels *midrashim*). *Ibid.*, 313–317.

¹⁴Tuckett, tracing synoptic allusions in *Testim. Truth*, notes that concentration of allusions in the initial part of the text (29,6-45,6) could support Pearson's theory, though he also acknowledges that the fragmentary nature of the latter half of the text prevent a firm conclusion, "Synoptic Tradition in the Gospel of Truth and the Testimony of Truth," 144.

composition.¹⁵ Below, I offer some further resolution to the issue of distinct audiences, showing that this element likely reflects multiple Christian groups associated with the author, rather than textual disunity.

Regarding *Testim. Truth*'s provenance and date, there is general consensus. An Alexandrian origin seems likely. Pearson bases this assessment on *Testim. Truth*'s inclusion of Hellenistic-Jewish speculative wisdom as well as Philonic and Platonic influences.¹⁶ In addition, the author's reference to a series of Valentinian teachers, including Basilides and Isidore, suggests an Alexandrian provenance (the latter appears to have been exclusively active in Alexandria).¹⁷ A late second- to early third-century date seems appropriate. This positions *Testim. Truth* later than the second-century Christian teachers it references. Its focus on martyrdom also indicates composition during a period of persecution, making a date prior to the early fourth century more likely. Within this time frame, a date near the start of the third century seems the most reasonable given the nature of the intra-Christian debate as well as parallels with the writings of Clement of

¹⁵Mahé and Mahé view 67,8-9 as evidence for the unity of the treatise; it returns to the theme of testimony, central to the initial part of the treatise; *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 11–17. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, "A Resistant Interpretation of the Paradise Story in the Gnostic Testimony of Truth (Nag Hamm. Cod. IX.3) 45-50," in *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 140–152.

¹⁶Pearson, "NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth," 117; he further reflects that allegorical interpretations could further support an Alexandrian provenance, "Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3)," 317.

¹⁷Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 109. Of course, references to these Christian teachers do not necessarily indicate location.

Alexandria.¹⁸ My project, which further highlights the commonalities between Clement's writings and *Testim. Truth*, also adds weight to this date of composition.

Though its original locale and date seem relatively sound, the identity of *Testim. Truth*'s author is less apparent. Pearson suggests Julius Cassianus, as described by Clement of Alexandria in *Strom.* III.91, 93. Clement notes that Julius left the school of Valentinus and advocated strict abstinence. Pearson asserts, "Clement's description of Cassianus and his teachings fit exceedingly well, down to explicit details, the views of the author of *Testim. Truth*."¹⁹ Koschorke asserts that the parallels in Clement are not strong enough to demonstrate this connection, especially since Clement offers no mention of Julius Cassianus' view of sacraments or martyrdom; presumably, if he held the views of *Testim. Truth*, one would expect Clement to reference them.²⁰ Mahé and Mahé also do not find the parallels noted by Pearson as "sufficient to establish that the author of *Testimony of Truth* is Julius himself or one of his close disciples." They also offer convincing arguments against Pearson's case, specifically by highlighting Julius' negative assessment of the serpent, which conflicts with *Testim. Truth*'s positive reading.²¹ Frederick Wisse offers another possible identification for the author—Hierakas of Leontopolis, a contemporary of Pachomius, or one of his close followers. Wisse draws on Epiphanius' description of Hierakas as a radical ascetic (*Haer.* 67), who denied bodily

¹⁸Pearson, "NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth," 118; Mahé and Mahé note parallels with Clement of Alexandria's discussion of martyrdom and thus conclude that it is best to situate *Testim. Truth* between 180-215.

¹⁹Pearson, "NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth," 118-120.

²⁰Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 108.

²¹Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, 49.

resurrection, as support.²² Wisse's suggestion shifts the date of *Testim. Truth* to the late fourth century; though this is possible, the weight of evidence in support of an earlier date combined with the limited connection to Epiphanius' report make this identification difficult to sustain. Given the lack of any specific elements that identify the author or attributions in other literature, it seems appropriate not to ascribe *Testim. Truth* to any known early Christian.

Let us now return to the key focus of this chapter, an examination of the intra-Christian dynamic expressed in *Testim. Truth*. This task is especially worthwhile, given the divergent scholarly understandings of group relations apparent in this text. Among the few extensive treatments of *Testim. Truth*, the works of Koschorke and Mahé and Mahé reflect two very different reconstructions of *Testim. Truth*'s position vis-à-vis other Christian groups, including those criticized by the author; these include not only proto-orthodox Christians, who celebrate martyrdom and baptism, but also other representatives of so-called Gnostic forms of Christianity, including followers of Basilides and the Simonians.²³

In his significant study of anti-ecclesiastical polemic in *Testim. Truth* and *Apoc. Pet.*, Koschorke situates the author of *Testim. Truth* and his adherents well within what

²²Wisse specifically highlights their common interest in Christ's role in abolishing marriage, "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 439–440. "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism," 439–440.

²³These names appear among others in a rather fragmentary section that outlines the misguided error of others (55,1–60,4).

he considers the ecclesiastical Christian community.²⁴ According to Koschorke, *Testim. Truth*'s version of Christianity stands not against (*gegen*) but above (*über*) ecclesiastical Christianity.²⁵ Koschorke asserts that the faith associated with the broader ecclesiastical community was accepted by *Testim. Truth* as provisional, though it would ideally be surpassed by superior gnostic awareness. According to Koschorke, the intra-Christian conflict reflected in the polemic of *Testim. Truth* responds only to circumstances in which ecclesiastical Christians promote their faith and practices as exclusively valid.²⁶ Koschorke also suggests that the orthodox, rather than the Gnostic Christians, ultimately establish the boundaries.²⁷ At the same time, Koschorke reads the polemic as an “indicator of the changing relationship of gnostic and orthodox Christianity.”²⁸ I agree with Koschorke on this latter point, among others, but find it difficult to accept his implication that *Testim. Truth* supports proto-orthodox celebrations of martyrdom and baptism, provided the acknowledgement of their secondary significance. As I show below, there appears little room for such accommodation in the author's treatment of these practices.

²⁴Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*.

²⁵Ibid., 204. Koschorke offers the same assessment for *Apoc. Pet.*

²⁶Ibid., 9.; I translate Koschorke's language of “kirchlichen Christentum” as “ecclesiastical Christianity,” though I also equate it, as he generally does, with proto-orthodox perspectives.

²⁷Koschorke positions this process of separation as relatively late; he writes that both groups “actually stood in relatively unhindered association” up through the fourth century, based, in part, on Epiphanius' education alongside Valentinian Christians, Ibid., 10.

²⁸Ibid.

More recently, Mahé and Mahé offer a significantly different portrait of the author's association with proto-orthodox Christianity.²⁹ Specifically, they depict the community of *Testim. Truth* as decidedly distinct from the church at large. In response to Koschorke's reconstruction of communal relations, they find it inconceivable, given the strength of the polemic, that the author of *Testim. Truth* would allow for any association with the broader Christian community. Rather, they suggest that the harshness of the attacks requires that the author belongs to a distinct community.³⁰ Mahé and Mahé thus appropriately limit *Testim. Truth*'s acceptance of typical proto-orthodox practices. Their insistence on a separate community, however, makes it difficult to explain why *Testim. Truth*'s is addressed, at least in part, to misguided Christians. Moreover, the strong associations with Valentinian traditions that Mahé and Mahé detect in *Testim. Truth* could actually suggest more overlap among divergent Christian communities than their conclusion allows.³¹

My effort in this chapter thus focuses on a revised portrait of the complex intra-group dynamics depicted in *Testim. Truth*, with particular emphasis on divergent assessments of martyrdom.³² Specifically, I assert that *Testim. Truth* reflects debate

²⁹Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 69–72.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 69.

³¹The bulk of their substantial introduction to *Testim. Truth* examines connections with Valentinian tradition, *Ibid.*, 26–69. An earlier article by Jean-Pierre Mahé draws similar conclusions, “Le Témoignage Véritable et quelques écrits Valentiniens de Nag Hammadi,” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. Louis Painchaud and A. Pasquier, 1995, 233–242.

³²In this regard, I specifically challenge Koschorke's suggestion that the author of *Testim. Truth* was primarily—and perhaps exclusively—concerned with “vulgar conceptions” of martyrdom, rather than martyrdom itself, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 131. There is little evidence to suggest that a martyr's death, even when combined with proper awareness, would have been valued in any way by the author of *Testim. Truth*. Moreover, Koschorke himself references examples from a range of orthodox sources on martyrdom to illustrate the

among multiple Christian groups that are closely aligned with one another, likely overlapping.³³ Martyrdom, as a key expression of Christian identity, stands at the center of this debate. At first glance, this understanding of intra-group relations does run against the grain of the rather harsh polemic prominent in *Testim. Truth*, as Mahé and Mahé note. Similarly, Pearson understands the “animus directed against catholic Christians” as indicative of a “bitter struggle” among communities close to the author.³⁴ In spite of this, the heightened contrast between proper and improper Christian behavior reflects intra-group negotiations about what it means to be a Christian. This interpretation is confirmed by elements of *Testim. Truth* that reveal an interest in the progress of the author’s perceived opponents. In this regard, I assert that *Testim. Truth*—particularly the polemical elements—functions less as a denunciation of error and more as a call for correction regarding proper martyrdom.

My argument in this chapter takes shape in essentially three ways. To begin, I detail *Testim. Truth*’s distinction between misguided and proper “true” martyrdom. A consideration of *Testim. Truth*’s particular Christology follows. I show how statements regarding the Savior’s purpose, though limited, support renunciation as the appropriate form of testimony, or imitation. In addition, *Testim. Truth* asserts that a key function of Jesus’ arrival was the termination of baptism, another prominent moment of outward

key concerns of *Testim. Truth*; in the context of the early Christianity, these sources, including *Mart. Pol.*, the letters of Ignatius, and the writings of Tertullian, appear to reflect relatively widespread, rather than radical, perspectives on martyrdom.

³³My view of the intra-Christian scenario thus appropriately allows for more intra-group conflict than Koschorke’s position, though also maintains the close associations of differing groups of Christians, lacking in Mahé and Mahé’s portrait.

³⁴Pearson, “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” 118.

confession rejected by the author. Moreover, an apparent lack of interest in his suffering or death mitigates the value of martyrdom as imitation.

The remainder of the chapter, informed by social identity theory, focuses on evidence of intra-Christian debate and social interaction, with attention to three interrelated features of *Testim. Truth*: the distinction of two generations of Christians; the promotion of silence as an ideal behavior; and an interest in mending, rather than extending, intra-communal rifts. In this section, I highlight the rhetorical use of language of dual, opposing generations: the Generation of Adam and the Generation of the Son of Man. I also show how *Testim. Truth* positions behavior, rather than nature, as central to Christian identity. Furthermore, my attention to silence as a key reflection of renunciation in *Testim. Truth* reveals how the author constructs an alternative ritual for the individual Christian. This interior ritual challenges the efficacy of what the author casts as meaningless deeds and words, including confession in baptismal and martyr contexts. I understand this contrast as a reflection of intra-group negotiations about what it means to be a Christian. *Testim. Truth*'s recommendations for altering the behavior of other Christians reveal that this matter is not yet settled.

Misguided Martyrdom

Testim. Truth is clearly not sympathetic to Christians who confess before the Roman authorities and consequently suffer martyrdom. The author describes the ignorance and error of martyrs-by-death as follows:

They are thinking in their heart, namely the ones without knowledge, that if they confess (ΕΥΘΑΝΖΟΜΟΛΟΓΕΙ), “We are Christians,” with the word only, not knowing (to where) they are going nor who Christ is, that they will live. Since they are deceived, they hurry toward the rulers and the authorities and they fall to these because of the ignorance that exists in them. For, if merely words saved, the entire world would endure this thing and be saved. (31,22-32,12)

According to *Testim. Truth* then, ignorance fosters a misguided desire for martyrdom—“they do not know they will destroy themselves” (32,18-19). The conclusion of this passage also offers a reversal of the typical proto-orthodox claim that Gnostic Christians take the easy route by declining martyrdom; *Testim. Truth* casts the idea that a simple confession, “mere words,” saves as so easy that it is ridiculous. Moreover, the characterization of words as empty previews the author’s broader criticism of statements, particularly confession, as insignificant. He reflects that those who claim to witness via death are like the disciples, as “blind guides,” confused at the shore of Sea of Galilee (33,21-24).³⁵ On the futility of their efforts, he remarks, “These are empty martyrs (ΝΑΙ ΝΕ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΟΣ ΕΤΘΟΥΕΙΤ) who bear witness only to themselves” (33,24-27).

The description of their erroneous logic continues: “When they are ‘perfected’ with passion (ΠΑΘΟΣ), this is the thought they have within them, ‘If we deliver ourselves over to death for the sake of the name, we will be saved’” (34,1-6). This passage reveals significant aspects of the author’s perspective on martyrdom. First, he associates the presence of passion with the misguided behavior. This reflection on the danger of

³⁵This particular assessment of the disciples follows some reflections on the Son of Man, including his walking on the water (33,8-9).

succumbing to one's passions aligns with the call elsewhere in *Testim. Truth* to gain control of them, primarily via renunciation. The prior statement sets the stage for this reading, as it characterizes these empty martyrs as "sick," unable to "raise themselves" (33,28-34,1).³⁶ The use of passion language also can also be understood as a criticism of proto-orthodox tendencies to understand a martyr's death in light of Jesus' suffering death. Second, the author's account of the martyr-to-be's rationale highlights the prominence of "the name," by which he presumably means Christian. The author is aware that this particular behavior—martyrdom by death—is, for some, intimately linked to Christian social identity; this event is thus questioned as a valid performance of this identity. Third, at the end of the present passage and in what follows, the author dismisses the anticipated salvation, specifically, the hope for a physical resurrection. He challenges such a motivation by simply noting, "These matters are not settled in this way." (34,6-7).³⁷

Having rejected testimony by death, *Testim. Truth* redefines appropriate martyrdom as an individual enterprise centered on knowledge, relating, "This, therefore, is the true testimony (ΤΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΔ ΜΜΕ): When one knows himself (ΩΔΝΠΡΩΜΕ ΟΥΩΝΓ ΟΥΔΔ) and God who is over the truth, he will be saved, and he will be crowned with the crown unfading" (44,30-45,6). In what follows, I explore additional aspects of this "true

³⁶Koschorke reasonably understands this sickness as indicative of "diseases of the soul," often equated with passions, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 94.

³⁷The passage that follows (34,26-35,9) illuminates the author's stance against a belief in physical resurrection; the primary errors include the belief that the resurrection is to take place in the future, rather than a present possibility (34,26-35,9); and that the flesh will be saved, rather than destroyed (36,29-37,5). According to the author, these misconceptions emerge from a misreading of the scriptures (37,7-9).

testimony,” most prominently, progressive preparation for knowledge via renunciation. In addition, I illustrate how *Testim. Truth*’s contrast of misguided martyrdom by death with “true testimony” coincides with the author’s general characterization of mere deeds and words as misguided and vain. This distinction reveals a judgment about the relative utility of certain behaviors. The most public, outward expressions of proto-orthodox faith—martyrdom and baptism—are also the least effective, in the author’s view. Before turning to a fuller examination of what “true testimony” entails though, I consider how *Testim. Truth*’s depiction of Christ also aligns with its evaluation of martyrdom.

The Son of Man vs. the Jordan

Testim. Truth, at least what remains of it, presents a relatively unique portrait of Christ, with little attention to either his teachings or his death.³⁸ Most prominent, as well as perplexing, are multiple, seemingly inconsistent, accounts of the Son of Man’s arrival on earth.³⁹ Certainly, this emphasis could result from the fragmentary nature of the text. Nevertheless, as I show in this section, the narratives about Christ’s earthly appearance illustrate a number of key Christological points that closely align with the text’s

³⁸One reference to his death remains (33,14); unfortunately, the corruption of the surrounding text prevents any further understanding on this point. “Salvation” appears in the preceding line, 33,13, but there is little to help in reconstructing a connection. Certain other references draw on Gospel traditions, though often offer distinctive interpretations: as examples, the descent to hell (32,24-27), his role as a healer (33,3-8), walking on the sea (33,8-9). He is also depicted a model of sinlessness, which prompts the comic rulers to envy him (32,28-33,2).

³⁹“Son of Man” appears to be the favored name for the savior figure in *Testim. Truth*. The author also occasionally employs “Jesus,” (30,25), “Christ” (45,14), “Savior” (45,17), “Logos,” (39,22) and “Holy Spirit” (39,26), all in a relatively interchangeable way. For additional details, see Pearson, “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” 110; and Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 98.

prominent message about proper Christian testimony. Specifically, by allegorically interpreting key elements of traditional Gospel narratives—John the Baptist, the Jordan River, and Mary—the author highlights their “true” import: each plays a role in rise of renunciation.

A brief introduction to the divergent accounts of Christ’s arrival in *Testim. Truth* will help situate my discussion. Though numerous traditions intersect, including Synoptic material and later Valentinian interpretation, essentially two routes for Christ’s entry into the world are apparent. In the first, the Son of Man comes from “imperishability” to the world (ΚΟСМОС) via the Jordan River (30,18-25); John the Baptist “witnessed” (Λϣ̅ϣ̅ Μ̅Ν̅ ΤΡΕ) this “descent of Jesus” (30,24-25), in the form of “power” (ΔΥΝΑΜΙC) on the Jordan.

A separate passage recalls this episode. Following a lacunae of a few lines, we find a reference to the “word (ΛΟΓΟC) upon [the Jordan River]” (39,21-23), followed by remarks that the Son of Man, in the form of the Holy Spirit, came to John the Baptist as a dove (39,23-28). Complicating matters, these statements immediately precede the first indication of the second mode of the Son of Man’s arrival. *Testim. Truth* describes “Christ...born of a virgin,” who took on flesh (39,29-31).⁴⁰

The virginal birth receives further attention elsewhere in the text. Recalling the Gospel of Luke, the author compares the birth of John the Baptist with the birth of

⁴⁰45,14-15 repeats the assertion that Christ “passed through a virgin’s womb”; 43,28-29 also refers to the “virgin who brought forth the light.” In addition to drawing on the tradition of a virginal birth shared by Matthew and Luke, this view also corresponds with Valentinian thought; see Pearson, “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” 110. Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, 31.

Christ.⁴¹ The former was “begotten by the word” via Elizabeth; Christ was also “begotten by the word,” but, in this case, the remarkable situation of Mary’s virginity distinguishes his birth (45,6-11).⁴² This leads the author to inquire, “What is the meaning of this mystery?” (45,11). He highlights the distinction between an old womb and a virginal one (45,13-15), but leaves the reader to decipher the mystery.⁴³

As the examples above illustrate, *Testim. Truth* appears to collapse these divergent traditions regarding Christ’s arrival without issue, especially on page 39 of the codex, where they appear side-by-side. Most scholars have similarly smoothed over these apparent discrepancies, by highlighting how the essential message of each narrative is the same. Many further assume that various sources contribute to the composite presentation.⁴⁴ Such explanations seem generally reasonable to me. What I find more interesting and relevant for my project though is how these traditions further connect, both with each other, through the prominent role of John the Baptist, and with certain key concerns of the text, specifically, the rejection of water baptism and sexual desire. Let us

⁴¹Boudewijn Dehandschutter also treats *Testim. Truth*’s use of the birth narrative from the Gospel of Luke, in “Readers of Luke in the Second Century: The Valentinian Gnostics,” in *Luke and His Readers: Festschrift for Adelbert Denaux*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Gilbert van Belle, and Jozef Verheyden, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Leuven University Press Peeters, 2005), 57–59.

⁴²The passage reads, “Christ was begotten by the word through a virgin, Mary” (45,6-11).

⁴³Koschorke reads the two wombs as representative of tiers in the Christian community, an interpretation that makes sense. The “old womb” reflects those who follow prior traditions, while others, represented by the virginal one, are more advanced.

⁴⁴Both Koschorke and Pearson acknowledge that the conflicting reports likely stem from the use of distinct traditions. For Pearson, the key point in both traditions is that “the heavenly origin is implicit (if not always explicit),” “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” 110–111. Koschorke reasons that they are essentially compatible, given *Testim. Truth*’s primarily interest in the “spiritual” meaning of such traditions; in this case, they both reveal that Jesus avoided “the sphere of fleshly generation” (30,30), *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 93.

take a closer look at these connections and consider their relevance for *Testim. Truth*'s assessment of martyrdom.

Christ's relationship to John the Baptist, whether expressed directly or indirectly through references to the Jordan River or his mother, Elizabeth, appears to be a significant aspect of *Testim. Truth*'s presentation of Christ. The attention to this connection is likely rooted, in part, in traditional understandings of John the Baptist as the final valid representation of the Jewish Law.⁴⁵ As we see below, the author of *Testim. Truth* faults fellow Christians for continual reliance on the Law; given this concern, we can understand the attention to John the Baptist.

Closely related to John the Baptist, the Jordan River also plays a critical role in *Testim. Truth*'s presentation of Christ's function. Near the start of *Testim. Truth*, the author reflects on the Son of Man's role in the termination of water baptism: "The Son of Man came from imperishability, a stranger to defilement. He came to the world by the Jordan River, and immediately the Jordan turned back" (30,18-23).⁴⁶ John witnessed this and "realized that the dominion of carnal procreation had come to an end" (30,24-30). The river serves as a symbol for the end of baptism by water, itself a holdover of the law and the desire it facilitates. The author explicitly states that the Jordan represents "the power of the body (COMΔ), that is the senses of pleasures (2ΗΔΟΝΗ)" (30,30-31,1). He continues, "The water of the Jordan is the desire (ΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΑ) for sexual intercourse"

⁴⁵A reading shared by Mahé and Mahé; in this case, the distinction reflects the old and new revelations, and specifically prepares the reader for *Testim. Truth*'s interpretation of Gen 3, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 13.

⁴⁶As Pearson notes, this appears to be an allusion to Ps 114:3, "Jordan turned back." Pearson recognizes other similar uses of this Psalms verse, including one associated with the Naassene Gnostics, which suggests that *Testim. Truth* could be using an intermediary apocryphal text, "Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3)," 314.

(31,1-3). This passage further characterizes John the Baptist as “the ruler (ἄρχων) of the womb” (31,3-5). The prominence of the Jordan River and its interpretation by the author in *Testim. Truth* highlights a key aspect of Christ’s role—to encourage others to curb desire and cease procreation.

The promotion of an ascetic life, initiated by the Jordan, also relates to *Testim. Truth*’s references to Mary’s virginity. In the context of *Testim. Truth*, the indication of Mary’s virginity relates less to Christ’s nature and more to an ideal to which Christians can subscribe.⁴⁷ Following the initial reference to Mary’s virginity, the author ponders, “Were we ourselves born from a virginal state or conceived by the word? Rather, we have been born again by the word. So let us strengthen ourselves as virgins” (40,2-7). In this reflection, the author distinguishes human experience from Christ’s; he was born of a virgin, but humans are born again. Moreover, he advocates virginity as the appropriate expression of this status. In the absence of clear modes of imitating Christ in *Testim. Truth*, this association of Mary’s virginity with a call for Christian renunciation presents one option.

The relative lack of references to Christ’s death, especially when compared with the substantial attention to Christ’s birth, also favors renunciation as an ideal mode of imitation. A mention of “the cross” is the only apparent indication of the crucifixion tradition. Its treatment is also rather peculiar, surfacing in a typological interpretation of the martyrdom of Isaiah (40,21-41,4).⁴⁸ Reflecting on this story, the author perceives

⁴⁷For a similar assessment, see Dehandschutter’s discussion of *Testim. Truth*’s use of the Lucan birth narrative, “Readers of Luke in the Second Century: The Valentinian Gnostics,” 58–59.

⁴⁸The narrative of Isaiah’s martyrdom is part of fuller apocryphal *Mart. Ascen. Isa.*, recognized as a Christian composite text; the martyrdom account likely originated in Judaism, rather than Christianity.

Isaiah as the “type of the body,” (40,30-41,1) and the saw, the instrument of Isaiah’s martyrdom, as “the word of the Son of Man that separates us from the error of the angels (41,1-4). In his interpretation, the author further and explicitly connects the “word” with the “cross,” asserting, “the Son of Man divides us by the word of the cross, dividing the day from the night, the light from the darkness, and the corruptible from incorruptibility” (40,23-28).⁴⁹ The parallel between the cross and the martyrdom of Isaiah could, on the surface, imply that the author ascribes some meaning to the related deaths. What it actually highlights though suggests otherwise. The person of Isaiah receives little attention. Rather, the saw is significant, in the author’s view, for its capacity to divide, or separate. Similarly, the relevance of the cross relates to the Son of Man’s message, not his death. What was previously muddled, in the view of the author, is now clearly distinct with the “word of the Son of Man.” More precisely, Christians should realize the “error of the angels” and align with “incorruptibility.” The reference to the “error of the angels,” recalling the procreation by “sons of God” in Genesis 6:1-4, further reminds the reader of the focus on renunciation.⁵⁰

Returning to the aspect of Christology most relevant to the present study, we might then ask, how might a Christian imitate the Son of Man, according to *Testim. Truth*? The absence of explicit references to the Son of Man’s death, combined with the adamant rejection of martyrdom, implies that a suffering death is not among the ideal

⁴⁹Mahé and Mahé note that this reading of the cross recalls “typical Valentinian exegesis that equates the Cross to the aeon boundary,” primarily drawing on Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.3.5; 1.2.2). In this interpretive tradition, the cross has a dual function of consolidation and separation, Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 52–53. “True” martyrdom and baptism thus parallel this separating function, 55. Pearson also notes that the attribution of a “cutting” power to the logos is common in Hellenistic-Jewish speculative theology, showing that this is not an exclusively Valentinian reading, “Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3),” n. 39.

⁵⁰Here, as Pearson notes, the author is likely relying on the more fully developed tradition that appears in *I Enoch*, “Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX, 3),” 319.

modes of imitation. Rather, the prominent features of *Testim. Truth*'s Christology, at least as it has been preserved, encourage an imitation via renunciation that corresponds with the author's promotion of "true testimony." Moreover, the prominent roles of John the Baptist and the Jordan in *Testim. Truth*'s musings on the Son of Man also signal the end of water baptism, indicative of the author's stance against such external, material rituals as central to Christian social identity. This association helps make sense of *Testim. Truth*'s treatment of martyrdom, a practice similarly rooted in a failure to recognize the lessons from the arrival of the Son of Man.

Christian Practice and Intra-Group Debate in the Testimony of Truth

Let us further examine how this prominent call for renunciation, initiated by the Savior's arrival, serves as the proper mark of Christian identity as well as the appropriate alternative to water baptism and a martyr's death by considering evidence of intra-Christian debate in *Testim. Truth*. In the remainder of the chapter, I examine three facets of the text that are critical to the Christian social identity it promotes. First, the prominent distinction between the Generation of the Son of Man and Generation of Adam deserves attention. My analysis highlights how the behavior associated with each generation is central in *Testim. Truth*. For those associated with the Generation of Adam, for instance, their social identity is exhibited via behavior that is dominated by passion and driven by misreading of scriptures. Second, I consider the related contrast between ideal silence and futile words (and related actions), including ritualized confession. The advocacy of silence is another manifestation of the author's rejection of physical martyrdom,

particularly as a valued, external expression of Christian identity. And, third, I show how the author's approach to correcting misguided Christians reflects fluid group boundaries and an interest in minimizing emerging intra-Christian conflict. A brief consideration of the treatment of Valentinian traditions in *Testim. Truth* reveals the complexity of delineating early Christian groups. I also reveal how the author positions variant Christian behaviors and related social identity as adjustable, rather than determined, which allows for the possibility of universal, individual progress. A closer look at these elements in *Testim. Truth* informs our understanding of the significance of martyrdom—as a prominent source of division—in intra-Christian debate.

Rival Generations

Let us begin our examination of intra-Christian group dynamics in *Testim. Truth* with the relatively obvious references to group identities. Most prominently, the author contrasts two groups, the “Generation of Adam” and the “Generation of the Son of Man.” Reflecting divergent expressions of early Christian identity, the latter includes those who, along with the author, recognize the truth; the former, in contrast, persist in their erroneous attachment to the Law (50,7-9). Though one could read this explicit contrast as a reflection of distinct early Christian communities, perhaps bound for different fates, it is more appropriate to understand how these designations function rhetorically. Specifically, they help the author distinguish proper from improper Christian behavior. Christian practice, rather than doctrine, is the central issue. In addition, the multiple generations reveal an effort to highlight and curb emerging distinctions within a common, yet diverse, Christian community.

The Generation of Adam

According to *Testim. Truth*, the Generation of Adam suffers from a misguided attachment to the Law, a remnant of Adam. Misinterpretation of scripture contributes to their flawed behavior.⁵¹ Such activity prevents certain Christians from attaining the truth. *Testim. Truth* conveys, “Many have sought the truth, but have not been able to find it, because of the old leaven of the Pharisees and scribes of the Law” (29,9-15). Interpreting this statement, the author reflects that the “leaven” here represents “desire for the error of the angels, demons, and stars” (29,15-18).⁵² Simply put, law leads to defilement, while “undefilement belongs to the light” (29,26-30,2). The erroneous passion is represented primarily by procreation, misunderstood as mandated by the law (30,2-11).

Thus, *Testim. Truth* depicts misinterpretation of scripture, “owing to doublemindedness” (37,7-9), as the root of such behavior. On many occasions, the author corrects faulty interpretation. An extensive, and somewhat unusual, treatment of Genesis 2-3 features prominently in *Testim. Truth*. The author details what is written in “the law” (43,23), essentially sharing the familiar story (43,24-47,14) with periodic commentary. Following the expulsion of Adam from paradise (47,10-11), due to his awareness of good and evil (47,9-10) and potential for immortality (47,13-14), the author of *Testim. Truth* bluntly reflects, “What sort of god is this?” (47,14-15). God’s envy of Adam combined

⁵¹Hence, *Testim. Truth* offers regular reminders to seek and understand mysteries properly, 40,21-41,4; 45,19-22; 70,24-30. This often involves allegorical interpretation; for a range of examples, see *Ibid.*, 317–319. Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 93. Koschorke also highlights the tendency among patristic writers to cite scriptural exegesis as the origin of the Gnostic “error,” 213-214.

⁵²In this case, the scribes and Pharisees are understood as under the power of the archons, 29,18-21.

with his lack of foreknowledge and awareness—needing to ask Adam about his whereabouts—reveals his inferior status (47,15-23). What most irks the author of *Testim. Truth*, it seems, is the failure of others to realize this: “Great is the blindness of those who read such things, and they don’t know him” (48,2-4). The treatment of Genesis 2-3 thus marks a prime example of what the author views as the root of error.⁵³

Additional examples from the Hebrew Scriptures follow the interpretation of the Eden narrative, further revealing deficiencies of the god of the law.⁵⁴ The series includes a few references to Moses’ activities with a snake (48,16-49,7). As in the explication of the serpent in the Garden, the author also understands the snake as representative of Christ (49,7). He continues, “those who have believed in him have received life. Those who did not believe will die” (49,8-10).

The consequences resulting from such delusion, according to the *Testim. Truth*, include attachment to passions and, relatedly, procreation (67,29-30). Those who are “ignorant” are ruled by “defiled pleasures.” Their behavior is driven by the claim, “God created members for our use,” including self-enjoyment (38,27-39,6). The author of *Testim. Truth* is appalled by this reasoning since it positions God as an accomplice in their error (39,7-9).

⁵³Gerard P. Luttikhuisen effectively associates the author of *Testim. Truth*’s treatment of the Adam and Eve episode with its polemical interests. He considers why Gnostic Christians made use of the Old Testament at all and proposes that the critical interpretation of the Paradise story marks “an organic, integrated part of the polemic with other Christians—in particular catholic Christians—that permeates through the whole of the surviving text,” 150. His position explicitly challenges Pearson’s understanding of the Paradise criticism as an instance of Gnostic *midrash*, reflective of Jewish frustration, “A Resistant Interpretation of the Paradise Story in the Gnostic Testimony of Truth (Nag Hamm. Cod. IX.3) 45-50,” in *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 140–152.

⁵⁴The examples include references to the “jealous God,” (Exod 20:5) who carries sins across generations (48,4-7); the thickening of hearts that contributes to misunderstanding (Isa 6:10; 48,8-13). Again, the author comments on the ridiculousness of such statements, “But these are things he says to those who believe in him and worship him!” (48,13-15).

The practices associated with the Generation of Adam are guided by desires (ἐπιθυμία) (67,9-12); these most clearly challenge the complete renunciation advocated by the author. Moreover, such behaviors are rooted in a lack of knowledge. For instance, the author contrasts those able to receive the “word of truth” with one who is “ignorant”; it is difficult for the latter to “diminish his works of [darkness],” while “those who have known Imperishability...have been able to struggle against passions” (31,5-15). Behavior then, rather than doctrinal disputes, distinguishes those of the Generation of Adam from proper Christians.⁵⁵ *Testim. Truth* makes this point explicit, “But those who are descendants of Adam are revealed by their deeds (πράξις) and by their work (εργον)” (67,9-11). Such actions are rooted in “wicked desire” (67,12-13). This behavior, presented as indicative of the group’s social identity, fits into *Testim. Truth*’s consistent assessment of “mere words and deeds” as essentially meaningless remnants of the Law.

The Generation of the Son of Man

The general denigration of those associated with the Generation of Adam in *Testim. Truth* stands in sharp contrast to the idealized portrait of those of the Generation of the Son of Man (60,5-6). Epitomizing true testimony, the ideal Christian, according to *Testim. Truth*, has “great wisdom and prudence and understanding and intelligence and knowledge and power and truth” (61,2-5). He or she “... cannot be controlled by any “pleasure” or “desire” (67,1-3). Given the emphasis on the error of procreation among those affiliated with the Generation of Adam, it is not surprising that an ascetic life,

⁵⁵With specific attention to the treatment of Valentinus and his disciples in *Testim. Truth*, Mahé and Mahé similarly note that the author criticizes “their moral conduct and ritual practices,” *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, 25. This contributes to their understanding of Valentinianism as a “starting point” for *Testim. Truth*.

marked by control of such bodily pleasures is the hallmark of the Generation of the Son of Man. Following the description of the evil procreation associated with those in the Generation of Adam, the author makes the contrast explicit, “The person who is able to renounce these things shows that he belongs to the generation of the Son of Man and has power to accuse them” (68,8-12). Again, behavior reflects the proper Christian identity.

The process begins with inquiry, which leads to knowledge of bondage and the possibility of release (35,22-24). Regarding this generation, *Testim. Truth* asserts, “They came to know themselves, who they are now, and where the place is in which they will find rest from their ignorance, attaining knowledge (ΓΝΟCΙC)” (35,25-36,3). It is these who “Christ will transfer to heaven, since they have renounced ignorance and advanced to knowledge” (36,3-7). The acquisition of gnosis thus offers salvation. Moreover, coming to know the Son of Man is coming to know oneself (36,23-26); “This is the perfect life, that one know oneself by means of the all” (36,26-28).

The link between a practice of renunciation and gnosis is explicit. The author claims, “No one knows the God of truth except the person who forsakes all the things of the world, having renounced the whole place... He has established himself with power and subdued desire everywhere within himself” (41,4-9; 11-13).⁵⁶ Moreover, *Testim. Truth* establishes renunciation as the proper mode of testimony. The author writes, “It is fitting that they should become undefiled, so that they might show to everyone that they are from the generation of the Son of Man, since it is regarding them that the Savior bore witness.” (67,3-9). Here, the ascetic lifestyle openly exhibits their social identity, as part

⁵⁶This practice also involves “self-examination” (41,15).

of the Generation of the Son of Man.⁵⁷ Their quest to become undefiled is also presented as a progressive, individual enterprise.⁵⁸ In addition, this statement illustrates the Savior's role as a witness, whose lead the Christians might follow. Thus, if any imitation is encouraged, death does not seem to be a part of it.

As these examples reveal, the author presents the qualities of this generation via an idealized type; this suggests that he envisions Christians progressing toward the ideal, rather than automatically or naturally manifesting it.⁵⁹ I establish this perspective further below, when I discuss *Testim. Truth*'s support of fluid, rather than established group boundaries, in spite of the seemingly static language of "generations."

Revising Ritual

The individual effort of renunciation—indicative of the Generation of the Son of Man—allows one access to the divine realm. Describing this endeavor, *Testim. Truth* states that the ideal Christian has battled passions (42,28) and condemned error to become "filled with wisdom, counsel, understanding, and insight, and an eternal power" (43,14-17). Through this effort, he or she has broken "bonds" (43,18). Moreover, the practice allows the gnostic Christian to begin "to know oneself and speak with one's

⁵⁷On conduct expressing identity (67,6), see also Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 45.

⁵⁸Mahé and Mahé seek to identify a process of renunciation in *Testim. Truth* that aligns with Valentinianism; it involves a two-stage purification of the psychic element, that involves first, awareness of the passions, and second, healing, *Ibid.*, 49f. I agree that the progressive nature of this process is significant for *Testim. Truth*, especially for understanding the fluidity of the categories of "generation"; I am not convinced, however, that Valentinian categories are necessarily at the heart of it.

⁵⁹This could also help explain their minority, rather than necessarily exclusive, status.

mind, which is the father of truth” (42,23-26). In addition to conveying a significant connection between *nous* and the supreme God, this statement also promotes contemplative, independent behavior as ideal. The phrase, “speak with [one’s] mind,” implies a silent activity that aligns with *Testim. Truth*’s regular promotion of silence as an aspect of the “true martyrdom.” John D. Turner, drawing on other Nag Hammadi as well as heresiological texts, characterizes this sort of contemplative repose as one form of Gnostic ritual.⁶⁰ Considering the broad range of ritual practices apparent among early Gnostic Christians, Turner distinguishes individual, self-initiated rituals from broader communal-oriented ones. With Turner’s framework in mind, I find in *Testim. Truth* a community debating the relative value of these distinct approaches to ritual. For the author, individualized, reflective ritualized practices effectively replace group-oriented baptism and martyrdom. By considering the promotion of silence in *Testim. Truth* as an alternative to open confession, especially via baptism and martyrdom, we can better understand this preference for interior reflection.

Depicting an appropriate life behavior, *Testim. Truth* encourages the ideal gnostic to “keep silent (ΕΤΡΕΦΚΑΡΩ) within himself until the day when he should become worthy to be received above. He rejects for himself wordiness and disputations, and endures the whole place; and he bears up under them, and he endures all of the evil things” (44,3-13). Toward the conclusion of the text, the author reiterates the value of

⁶⁰John D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 33 (1994): 136–181. For additional, relevant discussions of Gnostic rituals, see Koschorke’s “Exkurs VI: Die Sakramentspolemik der Gnostiker,” which emphasizes the variety of Gnostic approaches to sacramental practices, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 142–148; and David E. Aune, “The Phenomenon of Early Christian ‘Anti-Sacramentalism,’” in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, ed. David E. Aune, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 194–214.

finding rest in silence, explaining, “And having withdrawn...he became silent (ⲁⲓⲕⲁⲣⲱⲓ), resisting verbosity and disputations. The (one) who has found the life-giving word and who has come to know the Father of Truth has come to rest; he has ceased seeking, having found. And when he found he became silent (ⲁⲓⲕⲁⲣⲱⲓ)” (68,27-69,4).

A consideration of the use of silence in another Nag Hammadi text, *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3), can help illuminate *Testim. Truth*’s promotion of the practice. This treatise features the title character’s experience of progressive revelation, a process Turner characterizes as an “ascent ritual.”⁶¹ This enterprise is enacted individually, rather than communally. *Allogenes* portrays silence as an “activity” that paradoxically strives for “inactivity.” It assists in self-knowledge, as blessedness “silently abides...by which you know your proper self” (59,10-13). Furthermore, silence characterizes the supreme One, whom *Allogenes* presents as worthy of imitation.⁶² *Allogenes* cultivates the “likeness of the One, who is truly at rest and embraces all these silently and inactively” (59,22-26). The culmination of the treatise depicts *Allogenes* as receiving the revelation “in great silence.” (68,32). *Allogenes* thus portrays silence not only as an ideal behavior, but also as a mode of imitation that assist in the reception of knowledge. This concept of silence seems to inform its comparable promotion in *Testim. Truth*.

Moreover, the ritualization of silence as an individual, interior endeavor also helps us better understand *Testim. Truth*’s presentation of the concept as an alternative to other Christian rituals, specifically when we consider the centrality of open confession in baptism and martyrdom. In my view, this silence relates not only to the contemplation

⁶¹The revelation takes shape in the second part of *Allogenes*, 57,24-69,19. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

⁶²Silence reflects an attribute of the unknown God, 60,13f; 61,21 also references “stillness” alongside “silence.”

encouraged for the gnostic Christian, but also to his or her behavior if faced with the prospect of physical martyrdom. By not confessing publicly and undergoing a perceived meaningless death, the gnostic Christian maintains the desired silence. A closer examination of *Testim. Truth*'s treatment of confession, particularly in the ritualized contexts of baptism and martyrdom, supports this perspective. Moreover, silence is an individual, relatively isolated behavior that coincides with, and perhaps promotes, the option to not undergo or celebrate physical martyrdom. This understanding fits particularly well with what we know of Roman persecution of Christians—it typically relied on open, verbal confession of Christian identity.

Water Baptism vs. True Baptism

A closer look at the rejection of baptism in *Testim. Truth* further illustrates the diminished view of ritual, particularly confession. The author makes it apparent that, in his view, the hypocrisy of meaningless statements is not limited to (false) martyrdom. It also applies to water baptism.

The fullest discussion of baptism in *Testim. Truth* immediately follows one of the celebrations of silence. The author writes:

Some enter the faith [by receiving a] baptism, on the ground that they have it as a hope of salvation, which they call 'the seal.' They do not know that the fathers of the world are manifest in that place, but he himself [knows that] he is sealed. For the Son of Man did not baptize any of his disciples. But [... if those who] are baptized were headed for life, the world would become empty. And the fathers of baptism were defiled. (69,7-21)

By stating that only some become Christians in this way, the author distinguishes those who practice water baptism from his own community. The Son of Man's activity, drawing on John 4:2, makes the futility of baptism clear; as noted above, his arrival signaled the end of the practice (cf. 30,18-30). Moreover, given his earlier association between the water of the Jordan and desire for sexual intercourse (31,1-3), the author's assessment of this ritual is not surprising here.

Testim. Truth continues, "But the baptism of truth is something else; it is by renunciation of the world that it is found. [But those who] say only with the tongue [that they] are renouncing it [are lying,] and they are coming to [the place] of fear" (69,22-28). Here, the author positions "baptism of truth" as not simply a statement of renunciation – as in water baptism – but a lifestyle of renunciation.⁶³ Moreover, it seems that the author does not find water baptism acceptable even if accompanied with an ascetic lifestyle.⁶⁴ Rather, the practice, like martyrdom, is indicative of a false sense of hope, driven by fear.⁶⁵

⁶³Pearson shows how the author borrows liturgical baptismal terminology and applies it to his process of "true baptism," including renunciation and sealing, "NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth," 109. See also Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 138.

⁶⁴This view challenges Koschorke's; he writes that the question remains open whether *Testim. Truth* "really rejects water baptism as such," noting that it would reflect a "claim of unprecedented sharpness," *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII,3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX,3)*, 141. Without textual evidence to suggest this sort of accommodation, it seems difficult to imagine that the author of *Testim. Truth* would find the practice generally acceptable. At the same time, this position need not imply that the author's community would have isolated themselves from the broader church community, as Mahé and Mahé suggest, *Le Témoignage Véritable (NH IX, 3) Gnose et Martyre*, 69; rather, they might well have included and interacted with previously baptized Christians, who might then recognize the limited value of the practice, as well as catechumens, who, in the long process of preparation for the ritual, might question its value.

⁶⁵The author writes, "Just as those to whom it was given to have been condemned, they shall get something. They are wicked in their behavior (*praxis*).” (69,29-32); some worship idols, 70,1, while others have demons, 70,3.

The proto-orthodox are not alone in making this error. Valentinian Christians, it seems, are also admonished for their particular practice of water baptism.⁶⁶ According to the author of *Testim. Truth*, these Christians do “not know what salvation is, but enter into [misfortune] and...death, in the [waters].” He writes, “This [is] the baptism [of death which they observe]” (55,4-9). I see the association of death – suggesting at best futility – with this practice as indicative of not only the author’s diminishment of its value, but also his rejection of it.

A Martyr’s Death is Not a Sacrifice

According to *Testim. Truth*, ascribing value to rituals like baptism and martyrdom reflects a significant misunderstanding of God.⁶⁷ This perspective is explicitly conveyed in the criticism of martyrs: “If the Father were to desire a human sacrifice, he would be vainglorious” (32,19-21).⁶⁸ Another passage similarly suggests that those martyrs who perceive their deaths as sacrifice are mistaken. The author writes, “If they come to...sacrifice, they die a human death, and they give themselves up” (38,6-8). As these passages reveal, perceptions of God inform *Testim. Truth*’s dismissal of martyrdom as a viable sacrifice. The criticism also suggests that certain other early Christians did attach a ritual significance to a martyr’s death.⁶⁹

⁶⁶The immediately preceding reference to the Ogdoad (55,1) as well as a subsequent reference to a follower of Valentinus (56,1-2) suggests that the author has a Valentinian tradition in view here. The related group mentioned in 56,1-9 is accused of worshipping idols (56,8-9).

⁶⁷According to *Testim. Truth*, idol worship and possession by demons are similar manifestation of error (69,32f).

⁶⁸Similar sentiments appear in Tertullian, *Scorp.* I.15.6-7.

⁶⁹As the discussion of Castelli’s work at the beginning of this chapter similarly suggests.

Questions regarding the value of verbal confession also link ritual processes associated with martyrdom and social identity. Correcting Christians who value open confession of Christian identity, the author admonishes, “you (pl.) do not understand Christ spiritually when you say, ‘we believe in Christ’” (50,1-3); this sort of simple confession is associated with the Generation of Adam (50,3-7f). It is reasonable to assume that the author has physical martyrdom in mind here, given its echo of the passage detailed above, in which he offers a similar sentiment about the uselessness of a simple confession. One of the noted deficiencies of the faulty Christians is that “they confess, ‘We are Christians,’ with the word only.” (31,24-26). The public proclamation of Christian identity—which early Christian depictions of martyrdom so often highlight—carries no value, according to this author.

Returning to the alternative to confession, silence, it is worth noting that this behavior also appears along alongside references to persecution and martyrdom in a few other Gnostic Christian traditions. The *Second Treatise on the Great Seth* (NHC VII,2), a revelation dialogue, depicts Christ discussing persecution of himself and his followers; the author references those who believe that “they are advancing the name of Christ” but are “unknowingly empty” (59,21-29); they should consequently “shut their mouth” (60,1). Also, via the church historian Eusebius, we learn that Basilides, an early Alexandrian teacher, promoted a Pythagorean type of silence: “He taught that there was no harm in eating things offered to idols, or in light-heartedly denying the faith in times of persecution. Like Pythagoras he enjoined those who came to him to keep silence for five years” (*Hist. eccl.* IV.7.3-8).⁷⁰ The close proximity of calls for silence and responses

to persecution in both the *Testim. Truth* and other Gnostic Christian traditions supports the understanding of silence as a significant expression of Christian identity in *Testim. Truth* meant, in part, to challenge open, communal-oriented confessions. Naturally, this divergent view has implications for intra-group conflict. Rather than an open behavior that is seen as beneficial to the community, such as a martyr's confession reflecting solidarity, silence reflects a solitary, independent behavior that appears to prioritize the individual over the group.

If we consider the significant association between rituals (in this case, involving confession) and group identity, we can then better understand why the author of *Testim. Truth* takes issue with such practices. There is a general objection to deeds, but more prominent is a specific distaste for ritualized actions that garner misplaced significance. As performances of group identity, such deeds, foster group solidarity, on the one hand, but also contribute to rifts, on the other, when disagreement about the value of such behavior emerges. This is especially the case when the cost of related behaviors—particularly martyrdom—is significant.

Intra-Group Fluidity

Just as silence affords a contemplative state, listening “not with the ears of the body (CΩMΛ), but with the ears of the mind (2HT)” (29,6-7) allows one to comprehend

⁷⁰Irenaeus, in his discussion of the Valentinians, also notes “a long protracted silence” in preparation for biblical interpretation (*Hist. eccl.* IV.35.4). In addition, the particular critique of the *Testim. Truth* parallels a similar assessment ascribed to Heracleon in *Strom.* IV.71.1-4, which I address in Chapter 2. In relation to martyrdom, Heracleon essentially distinguishes between two forms of confession – one by “voice” and one in “faith and conduct.” Heracleon casts confession by voice as incomplete and thus inferior.

the message of *Testim. Truth*. This initial call, to start the treatise, alongside portraits of dual generations and rejection of certain prominent early Christian practices, might suggest that the author envisions an exclusive audience, already in tune with his perspective and distinct from the broader Christian community.⁷¹

As I noted above though, competing generations do not necessarily indicate distinct social groups; rather, they often serve to represent ideals in the construction of communal identity.⁷² In my view, the author's effort to distinguish his "true" views from those of others likely reflects overlapping group boundaries, a situation in which various trajectories of Christianity co-exist. As he advocates strict renunciation, a key social identity marker of his subgroup, the author also appears interested in retaining some contact with the broader Christian community, including those with whom he disagrees. I explore this communal fluidity in this section, positioning martyrdom as one critical practice that disturbs relative intra-group harmony. Specifically, I argue for fluid boundaries based on, first, the author's attention to multiple audiences; second, the combination of influence by and rejection of Valentinian traditions; and, third, *Testim. Truth*'s ultimate message that salvation is possible for all.

Multiple Audiences

The author's interest in others is especially evident in *Testim. Truth*'s apparent

⁷¹As noted above, Mahé and Mahé set *Testim. Truth* in a context marked by a tight structure of orthodoxy as well as orthopraxy, which would not permit the author to compromise his views, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 69–72.

⁷²Similarly, Koschorke views the dualistic perspective—specifically series of contrasts expressed in *Testim. Truth*—as indicative of “a certain scope of reality” that can be discerned through proper interpretation; they do not reflect a static dualism, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 98.

shift in audience—from those Christians who are aware, like the author, to others who are misguided. The author utilizes the second person plural in both the first and second halves of the treatise, but the identity of the proposed audience changes dramatically. In the first half, the author notes, “It is fitting for you (pl.) to receive the word of truth” (31,7-8), suggesting an audience already in tune with his particular perspective.⁷³ In the second half of the treatise, the author admonishes a seemingly different audience, “Why, then, do you (pl.) err and not seek after these mysteries...” (45,19-21). Here, the audience appears to be the group (“they”) who so frustrated the author in the initial half. Though it could reflect the composite nature of the text, this shift also implies a lack of strict group boundaries and suggests that the author affiliates himself, to some extent, with both audiences, though he is clearly more sympathetic to one than the other.⁷⁴

This interest in others also surfaces in *Testim. Truth*’s description of the ideal Christian. The gnostic should balance his solitary and social interests: “he is patient with everyone; he makes himself equal to everyone, and he also separates himself from them...” (44,13-16). Like the author, he is able to assist in the advancement of other Christians. *Testim. Truth* further reflects, “And if someone wants something, he brings it

⁷³In his commentary on the text, Pearson characterizes this as an “an expression of communal solidarity” and notes seven other instances of the second person plural in the first half of the treatise, Pearson, “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth”; for additional discussion of the use of first- and second-person, see Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 92.

⁷⁴This discussion of shifting audiences also relates to the question of the text’s genre. As noted above, it has been understood as a combination of a homily, intended for those aligned with the author, and a polemical work, geared toward those who need correction. But this understanding implies that the audiences are relatively discreet, at which point the combination of two genres in a single text seems misguided. If we understand this text as addressing a broad, yet single community, with mixed allegiances, we might make better sense of the seemingly disparate genre forms. Viewing *Testim. Truth* as a work of *paraenesis*—encouraging, but also corrective—could prove productive.

to him, so that he might become perfect and holy” (44,16-19). These passages suggest that, although it primarily emphasizes individual progress, *Testim. Truth* also exhibits an interest in communal relations.

Valentinian Connections

The complex and fluid intra-group dynamics behind the seemingly static portrait of the Generation of Adam are perhaps best illustrated by *Testim. Truth*’s apparent association with Valentinian versions of Christianity. As we have seen, proto-orthodox Christians are not the exclusive target of the author’s ire; Valentinian Christians, among others, are denounced for faulty practices. What is especially remarkable about the inclusion of Valentinian Christians in *Testim. Truth*’s polemic is the author’s positive incorporation of Valentinian traditions elsewhere.⁷⁵ The intra-group relations are thus complex.

Mahé and Mahé detect strong Valentinian influences in *Testim. Truth*, which form the basis for their view of it as a thoroughly Valentinian text, reflecting a third generation of the movement. Specifically, they understand the Valentinian myth, including its conception of three categories of humans, as central to the author’s perspective.⁷⁶ Clear references to Valentinian mythology are lacking, though. In addition, Mahé and Mahé’s equation of *Testim. Truth*’s anthropology with Valentinian ideas lacks precision and requires some creative interpretation. For example, to characterize *Testim. Truth* as

⁷⁵For the most thorough discussions of Valentinian concept in *Testim. Truth*, see Mahé, “Le Témoignage Véritable et quelques écrits Valentiniens de Nag Hammadi,” and Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*.

⁷⁶Mahé, “Le Témoignage Véritable et quelques écrits Valentiniens de Nag Hammadi.” Mahé and Mahé, *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*.

Valentinian, Mahé must collapse the three Valentinian classes of humans (*pneumatic*, *psychic*, and *hylic*) into two – the Generation of the Son of Man and the Generation of Adam. He reasons that the traditional Valentinian *psychic* and *pneumatic* classes can be considered as one, if one recognizes the progress permitted between the two. Still, there is no indication that *Testim. Truth* limits the possibilities for any humans; thus, there is not a clear hylic contingent. Rather, through adjustments in behavior, all humans can theoretically achieve awareness. Even Mahé and Mahé acknowledge that “praxis is the true criterion of the recognition of Christ” (cf. 37,29), and thus admit that “from this point of view, the attitude of our author is very different from that which Irenaeus presents of spiritual Valentinians.”⁷⁷ In short, the case for understanding *Testim. Truth* as a thoroughly Valentinian text is not convincing.

It seems more reasonable to acknowledge Valentinian tradition as one among many influences.⁷⁸ Koschorke discerns Valentinian concepts in *Testim. Truth*, but similarly highlights additional influences from Marcionite, Naasene, and Ophite traditions.⁷⁹ Because of this, he resists associating *Testim. Truth* with any particular Gnostic “sect,” noting, “on the contrary, the *Testim. Truth* shows the questionability of

⁷⁷Referencing *Haer* 1.6.4; *Le Témoignage Véritable* (NH IX, 3) *Gnose et Martyre*, 41.

⁷⁸For instance, Pearson notes that Valentinian influence is strong, particularly in the application of certain terminology (like *oikonomia*, 42,7, which he claims likely reflects Valentinian technical usage), the contrast between carnal and spiritual resurrection, and the distinctive Valentinian teaching on the birth of Christ (45,15-16). At the same time, Pearson recognizes the criticisms of Valentinian views and resists labeling the text as “Valentinian,” “NHC, IX,3: The Testimony of Truth,” 116–117.

⁷⁹Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate “Apokalypse des Petrus” (NHC VII,3) und “Testimonium Veritatis” (NHC IX,3)*, 107–108.

the heresiological classification.”⁸⁰ Koschorke’s conclusion thus foreshadows more recent assessments of Gnosticism.

In particular, studies of Valentinian Christianity reveal a movement closely associated with ecclesiastical Christianity.⁸¹ This encourages a revised understanding of *Testim. Truth*’s association with Valentinianism. Rather than viewing the author as Valentinian or even one with prior ties to a Valentinian community, as Pearson does, it would be more appropriate to understand *Testim. Truth*’s unsettled treatment of Valentinian ideas as indicative of the fluidity of its early Christian community.⁸² From this perspective, understanding *Testim. Truth*’s polemic as indicative of an existing, decisive break would be misguided. Understanding group boundaries as more fluid and less restricted by “sect” designations also allows us to make better sense of *Testim. Truth*’s message regarding universal salvation.

Salvation for All

The presentation of two distinct generations in *Testim. Truth* reflects two essential paths that Christians could take; obviously, the author advocates one over the other. At the same time though, *Testim. Truth* reveals that affiliation with either generation is not

⁸⁰Ibid., 108.

⁸¹For example, Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion.

⁸²Pearson understands *Testim. Truth* as reflective of an ideology that originated within a Valentinian context, but subsequently split; *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X*, Nag Hammadi Studies (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

settled, but dependent on behavior as well as choice.⁸³ The message that salvation is theoretically achievable for any Christian is apparent in *Testim. Truth*. The shift in audiences, as discussed above, suggests this view. Additional evidence related to the natures of the generations further reflects this possibility. For instance, *Testim. Truth* presents humans as born, with the potential to be reborn (40,1). There is no indication of distinctions in nature among the generations. Rather, reference to the significance of faith counters a deterministic perspective (49,7-10). *Testim. Truth* also emphasizes the significance of progress. Regarding the salvific message, the author writes,

This is what the Son of Man reveals to us: it is proper for you to receive the word of truth, if one receives it perfectly. But, for one who is in ignorance, it is difficult for him to diminish the works of darkness that he has done. On the other hand, those who have come to know imperishability have become capable of combatting passions. (31,5-15)

This passage suggests the possibility of a transition from ignorance to gnosis. Moreover, the final statement implies that one gains the capacity to combat passions; the latter is not an inherent quality. Furthermore, based on the descriptions of the two generations above, we discovered that, according to *Testim. Truth*, error is rooted in misguided behavior, typically rooted in faulty interpretation and spurred by passions. The author's effort to correct the basis of these errors reveals an interest in rehabilitating the audience. This interest, intensified by strong polemic, also suggests that the author does not find the

⁸³The concept of "generations" in *Testim. Truth* does not refer to exclusive groups, designated by nature, but fluid ones. This mode of reading *genos* aligns the recent work of scholars including Williams and Buell, who have shown that the language of *genos* need not imply a static group Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*; Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

misguided behavior of other Christians as acceptable, even if inferior. Rather, as this passage suggests, an intermediate, lower-tier Christian identity is not ultimately acceptable. One is given the choice to accept the logos of truth to perfection or reject it. Thus, the prospect of progress for all, driven by choice, rather than nature, is apparent in *Testim. Truth*.

Through this chapter, I offer a portrait of Christian social identities in *Testim. Truth*, one that represents an alternative to Mahé and Mahé's Valentinian-driven reading as well as Koschorke's view that *Testim. Truth* accepts tiers of Christians, with different, acceptable modes of salvation, including martyrdom by death. Correction of martyrdom can be understood as reflective of processes of social identity construction in early Christianity—here, we find the construction of an alternative ritual of *askesis*, individual and interior; understood as superior to and perhaps in conflict with (on occasion) community, group-identifying rituals. The increasingly significant celebration of martyrdom among early Christians could be understood as a key catalyst in the progressive split that emerges. In spite of language that implies strict differentiation among various stripes of Christians, *Testim. Truth* shows that divergent evaluations of martyrdom, perhaps more so than baptism (given that the stakes are higher), prompt significant debate.

Chapter 5

Self and Social Identities: Group Relations in Early Christianity

In Chapter 3 of *Martyrdom and Memory*, Elizabeth A. Castelli extends Michel Foucault's study of "self-writing" by examining early Christian "texts that seek to leave a trace of the askesis (that is, self-discipline and training) of the martyr's self-formation."¹ Against Foucault's emphasis on interiority in the self-writing of the period, Castelli shows that these texts "draw attention to the production of the martyr's self within the context of a much more public, collective narrative."² In doing so, she appropriately complicates Foucault's model of self-writing by highlighting its communal relevance.³

As my project shows, however, other currents in the early Christian conversation regarding martyrdom support Foucault's assertion of a turn toward interiority and interest in the development of the self apart from the collective.⁴ In this concluding chapter, I further reflect on how this aspect of the literature contributes to its assessment of

¹Specifically, she examines Ignatius's Letter to the Romans, Perpetua's prison diary, and Pionius's public speeches, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, 69.

²Ibid., 70. Castelli notes Foucault's emphasis on established asceticism in the fourth and fifth centuries, which leads to a neglect of second and third century material, particularly the texts related to martyrdom, which she asserts are "foundational to Christian askesis," 71.

³In line with her study, she highlights the function of such exterior modes of self-writing; the texts "produce a public self—on shaped by askesis, preserved in language, and displayed for commemoration and remembrance," Ibid., 78.

⁴Though the texts I examine do not reflect "self-writing" *per se*, they still mirror many of the associated ethical concerns.

martyrdom by considering, first, contemporary group structures with comparable ethical interests, and, second, the related impact on early Christian social identities.

Alongside the diminishment of martyrdom in *Strom.*, *Apoc. Pet.*, and *Testim. Truth*, we also encounter a related revision of what it means to “witness” in the Christian tradition. This process—that both constructs and reflects one’s social identity—relies on individual progress toward gnosis, which generally involves the practice of self-control. All three texts offer a related Christology that highlights Christ’s critical didactic role. Clement’s *Strom.* and *Testim. Truth* also advocate *apatheia* as the ideal goal for the Christian. The associated practices reflect an interiorized practice of spirituality; the common interest in spiritual progress, propelled by self-control, brings to mind contemporary philosophical traditions, particularly Stoicism. This connection, developed in Chapter 2 with a comparison of Clement of Alexandria and Epictetus, proves instructive for understanding not only the ethical concerns of these early Christian groups, but also their social structure.⁵

As the texts I examine in this project reveal, an interest in the self does not necessarily preclude one’s ties to a social group.⁶ Clement and the authors of *Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth* reveal an interest in the broader Christian community. Pierre Hadot

⁵Related to this, Frend, in considering the Gnostic Christians’ distance from persecution, notes that their adaptation of pagan philosophy would have made them more acceptable to Roman authorities. Though I do not imagine this affected Roman perceptions, I do find the connection significant for exploring approaches to death from the Christian side, “The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire,” 29.

⁶According to social identity theory, the self, or individual, is primarily defined in social terms; this perspective contrasts cognitive perspectives on the self as stable. Individuality can still be expressed, but, like group identity, is also “dynamic, variable, and context-dependent,” Turner, “Some Current Issues in Research on Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories,” 29–31. See also, Rina S. Onorato and John C. Turner, “Fluidity in the Self-Concept: The Shift from Personal to Social Identity,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34 (2004): 257–278.

discusses a similar communal orientation among pagan philosophers of the Roman period. He notes that the contemplative life involved care for others. In addition, certain common practices, including group readings and discussions of texts, merged the social and individual aspects of ancient philosophical life.⁷ The focus of philosophical schools in the early Christian period included interpretation of established core texts and related guidelines for living, interests that align well with those of Clement and the authors of *Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth*. Hadot highlights the connection between these two essentials in the imperial age: “To learn philosophy, even by reading and commenting upon texts, meant both to learn a way of life and to practice it.”⁸

Scholars of early Christianity have already successfully drawn on the model of the ancient philosophical school to characterize Valentinian communities within the early Church. Regarding Valentinians in Rome, Brakke writes, “Adopting the character of philosophical schools, they formed study circles that existed alongside and open to other Christian groups and traced their lineage through Valentinus to Paul.”⁹ Given the comparable interest in gnosis in the Valentinian tradition, it seems reasonable to understand the communities associated with Clement of Alexandria, *Apoc. Pet.*, and

⁷*What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, ed. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 156; 159–60.

⁸*Ibid.*, 153.; see also, 148–153, regarding philosophical groups of the imperial period. In addition, Hadot emphasizes the connection between philosophical discourse and “concrete practices,” including *askesis*, 170.

⁹Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, 256. Bentley Layton claims that *gnostikos* “primarily denoted a member of a distinct social group of professional school of thought,” which involved some kind of social history. “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 334. Risto Uro characterizes Valentinians, beginning in the late second century, as a religious “splinter group” or “a loose network of such groups that had partially separated themselves from the proto-orthodox churches,” “Gnostic Rituals from a Cognitive Perspective,” in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 118.

Testim. Truth as operating in similar ways, developing their own philosophically-oriented groups within the broader Christian community. In fact, Clement's situation in Alexandria reveals common intra-group circumstances. The complicated investigation of his possible affiliation with a questionably "official" catechetical school, for instance, reveals the fluid boundaries of Alexandrian Christianity at the time. Gustave Bardy, for instance, rejects the notion of an official school prior to Origen; he characterizes Clement and his teacher Pantaenus as philosophers who taught in small, relatively private circles; he further notes limited attention to the institutional side of the Christian community in Clement's writings.¹⁰ As he reviews subsequent scholarly considerations of an official school in Alexandria, Andrew C. Itter further highlights the tenuous distinctions between institutional and peripheral expressions of Christianity in Alexandria and Clement's seemingly fluid interaction with both.¹¹ A consideration of Clement alongside Nag Hammadi material thus reveals both ideological and social commonalities. Regarding the use of *gnostikos* in Sethian traditions, among others, Williams observes that this concept would not have been "so different in type from the way in which Clement of Alexandria speaks of *gnostikos* as an ideal."¹² My project suggests that the same could be said of *Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth*.

¹⁰"Aux Origènes de l'école d'Alexandrie," *Recherches De Science Religieuse* 27 (1937): 65–90. Disputing the idea of an organized school during Clement's time, R. van den Broek concludes, "the whole idea of a Christian school with a διαδοχή of teachers handing down a fixed tradition of learning from their pupil successors is completely false, at least until the second decade of the third century," in *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East*, eds. Jan W. Drijvers and Alasdair A. MacDonald, Brill Studies in Intellectual History 61 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 41.

¹¹Andrew C. Itter, *Esoteric Teaching in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 97 (Leiden: Brill, 2009). See also David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹²Williams, "Was There a Gnostic Religion? Strategies for a Clearer Analysis," 76.

Refining Gnostic Social Groups

As King observes, tackling the question of the nature of Gnosticism involves asking, “Who were the gnostics?” The nature of the relevant literature, often driven by myth with occasional reference to ritual, leaves us with a “paucity of sociological information.”¹³ Still, King encourages that for those historically inclined, it should be possible to determine, to some extent, “discrete social groups.”¹⁴ In fact, *Apoc. Pet.* and *Testim. Truth* are especially valuable in this regard given the nature of their content. Unlike the myth-driven literature that, as King laments, leaves us few impressions of the communities behind the texts, these two texts, through polemical and interpretive discourse, offer some indirect insight into the social milieus and related concerns of the authors. My analysis of intra-group relations in my selected texts thus helps refine our understanding of Gnostic traditions within early Christian communities.

With the exception of recent reconstructions of Valentinian communities (as noted above), many attempts at sociological reconstructions of early Gnostic Christian communities provide limited results and often sustain some of classic characterizations of the groups that scholars have since challenged.¹⁵ Encouraging further sociological study,

¹³“The Origins of Gnosticism and the Identity of Christianity,” 107–108.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵For example, Hans G. Kippenberg situates the Gnostics among repressed intellectuals in the eastern Empire; he argues that their worldview, centered on alienation, reflects their socio-political experiences. Hans. G. Kippenberg, “Versuch einer soziologische Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus,” *Numen* 17 (1970): 211–231. Lampe discusses issues with Kippenberg’s case, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 293. In addition to those discussed here, see P. Pokorny, “Der soziale Hintergrund der Gnosis,” in *Gnosis und Neues Testament*, ed. Karl-Wolfgang Tröger (Berlin: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1973), 77ff.

Henry A. Green identifies two central themes in Gnostic traditions that offer insight into social realities. The second theme, stratification, considers the elevated social status of Gnostic Christians; he posits that anthropological distinctions, like those conveyed via Irenaeus, would be reflected in the social order.¹⁶ Green also highlights the relative lack of institutionalization among Gnostics when compared with proto-orthodox Christianity. Asserting, “the experience of gnosis is by definition anti-institutional,” he references the individualism inherent in Gnostic ideology as the root of this trend. Relatedly, individual interests signal that “sacraments were of little to no importance.”¹⁷

Green’s observations are, as intended, provocative starting points for further study; in fact, my project supports them, in general terms. Still, they require greater nuance, especially given the diversity within so-called Gnostic traditions. Specifically, his emphasis on individualism and its resultant anti-institutional stance seems to assume that interest in self-progress is entirely incompatible with group orientation. In the texts I examine, we find that this is not the case. Though there is an emphasis on individual progress, association with a group is nevertheless significant. Moreover, the dynamic nature of social identity means that group-oriented behavior is situational. In addition, Green’s assertion that “sacraments were of little to no importance” neglects evidence for diverse approaches to ritual across Gnostic Christian traditions.¹⁸ It would be more appropriate to allow for variant evaluations of sacraments, within a tradition and across

¹⁶“Suggested Sociological Themes in the Study of Gnosticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 31 (1977): 176–178.

¹⁷According to Green, Gnostics specifically lacked uniform structure and doctrine. Extending Bauer, he does note that these elements were not present among the orthodox from the start either, *Ibid.*, 170–171.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 175. For revised approaches to Gnostic ritual that reflects diversity, see Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism”; Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. M. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 214–52.

contexts. Once tempered in this way, we can understand how different perspectives on individuality vis-à-vis the group and related evaluations of rituals shaped distinctively Gnostic social identities.

This perspective coincides with more recent assessments of the sociology of Gnostic groups that emphasize overlap with the broader ecclesiastical community. For instance, in his recent assessment of Gnostic traditions, Christoph Marksches notes that many Gnostic Christians likely took part in typical house church worship.¹⁹ Consequently, Gnostic circles would have experienced a ritual life comparable to other Christians.²⁰ Along with Williams, he also characterizes Gnostic circles as primarily, or at least originally intellectual. Marksches envisions adherents of gnosis “gathered as a small circle of ‘knowers’ around the charismatic free teachers, as a small but active conventicle led by intellectuals.”²¹ Such a scenario fits the tiered approach to Christian life that we find in Clement of Alexandria’s writings. Along these lines, Marksches suggests that Gnostic movements within early Christianity reflect cultural negotiation with the broader Greco-Roman world, partly motivated by a desire to avoid social conflict. This perspective might further illuminate why such groups often felt a limited inclination toward martyrdom.²² At the same time, Lampe reminds us that even if the

¹⁹*Gnosis: An Introduction* (London New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 114.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 115.

²¹*Ibid.*, 111.

²²Marksches suggests this by noting that Gnostic systems encouraged “privatization” of Christianity, by which he means an intellectual “interest in avoiding conflicts,” *Ibid.*, 117.

educated elite formed the core of Gnostic circles, the followers appear to have reflected a more diverse cross-section of the early Christian community.²³

Regarding the situation at Rome, Lampe also observes relative tolerance within the Christian community prior to the end of the second century. Based on his assessment of the relevant evidence, he reports, “hardly any Roman Christian group excluded another group in the city from the communion of the faithful—apart from a few significant exceptions.”²⁴ Dawson detects a similar situation for the Alexandrian Christian community.²⁵ Given the nature of the close association among Christians of various stripes in the texts I examine, it seems reasonable to posit a comparable, relatively tolerant situation, at least in the not too distant past. The apparent rumblings of discontent surfaced alongside a heightened interest in martyrdom. Regarding the sociology of Gnostic groups, E. Mendelson asserts that doctrine is not always the primary reason for group fragmentation; he observes, “Certain situations will push groups into fragmenting themselves for social, economic, or political reasons and not for ideological reasons.”²⁶

²³Based on literary output and interests, as well as heresiological evidence, Lampe concludes that the generalization of educated circles is “valid for the ‘inventors’ of this Gnosticism, for the outstanding teachers whose crowd of followers was nevertheless not uniformly ‘intellectual’ but rather stratified,” *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 293–98. Marksches also acknowledges that Gnostic communities progressively included more “ordinary people,” *Gnosis: An Introduction*, 117.

²⁴Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 385–93.

²⁵*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*.

²⁶“Some Notes on a Sociological Approach to Gnosticism,” in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13-18 Aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi, *Studies in the History of Religions (Supplements to Numen)* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 670.

Intra-Group Conflict & The Rise of Orthodoxy

In her study of early Christian identity, Judith Lieu concludes that martyrdom “comes to function as a means for asserting and defining orthodoxy, and so for exercising control.”²⁷ Lieu primarily considers Christian identity in relation to Jews and Romans. My examination of divergent approaches within early Christianity further support her assessment of martyrdom as a critical player in the emergence of orthodoxy. Regarding martyrdom, Lieu continues, “Central is the act of public affirmation: we might suppose this implicitly conveys allegiance – to Christ; association – with others who claim the same allegiance; adherence – to articles of belief and behaviour.”²⁸ The intersection of various facets of Christian identity in open confession suggests that the stakes are high for those who fail to perform. Perceived as a threat to Christian identity, the diminished value of martyrdom contributed significantly to definitions of orthodoxy, in discourse and ultimately in practice.

Havelaar examines one relevant facet of emerging orthodoxy in her examination of the Christology of *Apoc. Pet.* Specifically, she highlights the increasing emphasis on Christ’s corporeal nature among proto-orthodox writers of the second century, including Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. Havelaar reasons,

This increasing accent on the physical suffering of Jesus and the emphasis on its meaning for salvation can partly be understood as a natural attitude of Christians

²⁷*Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 226.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 228.

who, in a hostile environment, held martyrdom very much in veneration. For another part it can be interpreted as a reaction against the opposite tendency in Gnostic circles, a tendency to trivialize the bodily suffering of Jesus, which in fact was a natural consequence of the Gnostic worldview.²⁹

I agree with Havelaar, for the most part. Rather than understand these two factors as distinct though, I find it more appropriate to consider them in tandem. The worldview's frequent emphasis on a non-suffering Christ appears to have prompted limited fervor for martyrdom. Not only different views of Christ, but also questions regarding the value of martyrdom, likely contributed to a more refined orthodox perspective on Christ.

A brief return to social identity theory can help us understand how the mixed early Christian communities become progressively distinct, triggered by debates over martyrdom. Specifically, the “black sheep effect” allows us to read the intra-group hostility, apparent in texts like *Testim. Truth* and Tertullian's *Scorp.*, as preceding, rather than following, any decisive communal split. The black sheep effect finds that group members react more strongly to in-group members whose behavior deviates from the groups than to those outside the group.³⁰ In her study of gender constructions in early Christian martyrdom, L. Stephanie Cobb, also shows how this facet of social identity

²⁹*The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (Nag Hammadi-Codex VII,3)*, 187.

³⁰José M. Marques, Dominic Abrams, and Rui G. Serôdio, “Being Better by Being Right: Subjective Group Dynamics and Derogation of In-Group Deviants When Generic Norms Are Undermined,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001): 436–447; Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, “The ‘Black Sheep Effect’: Extremity of Judgments Towards Ingroup Members as a Function of Group Identification.”

theory is particularly applicable to martyrdom.³¹ In social contexts where the public performance of social identity is especially critical, deviant behavior among in-group members is much more threatening than that associated with out-groups, who might—as in the case of the Romans, reflect a much more direct threat. One result is heightened derogation against in-group members, which contributes to shifting group parameters.³²

My project suggests that approaches to martyrdom—whether via discourse or in practice—were critical in the emergence of group boundaries in early Christianity. The shift from in-group to out-group, ecclesiastically speaking, for such groups certainly would have been progressive. Given the overlap apparent in the texts I examine, it seems reasonable to imagine the rifts becoming more concrete during the third century. This timing also coincides with the rise of martyrdom, alongside increased persecutions, as significant for proto-orthodox Christian identity.³³

³¹L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 22.

³²Jolanda Jetten et al., “When Differences Matter: Intergroup Distinctiveness and the Evaluation of Impostors,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35 (2005): 609–620; Brewer, “Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?”

³³Luttikhuisen notes, “In the third century, the exclusive claims of the great Church were increasingly pressed upon minority groups that did not accept orthodox teaching and practice,” “The Suffering Jesus and the Invulnerable Christ in the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,” 88.

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