

Second-Century Imaginations of Social Unity

A Survey of the *Gospel of Truth*,
the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, the
Post-Pauline Letter to the Ephesians,
and *The Thunder*

Hal Taussig

Prolegomena

This essay has a particular set of objectives to serve the Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar in its initial stages of coming to terms with the range of literature in the mostly second and occasionally third century. These objectives are:

- To counteract major trends in the scholarship of the last 50 years that marginalize, make esoteric, or treat as heretical the 52 documents discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi and to provide the Seminar membership with some orientation to some recent scholarship on this literature;
- To read this literature with other "Christian"¹ documents of the first–third centuries in social terms, in other words, to apply some of the social lenses developed in biblical studies over the past 40 years to the study of second-century non-canonical literature—both to the relatively newly discovered texts and to those that have primarily been read with

1. I use the term "Christian" with great caution for any literature of the first and second centuries, and tend to place definitive distinctions between "Jewish" and "Christian" later for three main reasons: 1) according to a number of recent studies what has been called "Judaism" and "Christianity" actually are difficult to untangle until at the earliest the third and fourth centuries; 2) the use of "Christian" terms in the second centuries seem not to designate so much a religious allegiance as a band of kinds of social identities in relationship to violence and a larger set of experiments in belonging in both the first and second centuries; and, 3) the now assumed conceptualizations of "religions" or "great religions" of Judaism and Christianity do not really correspond to the realities and behaviors of the first through third centuries.

doctrinal interest—so as to place a larger set of texts in conversation with each other, especially in the interest of thinking through the emergence of Christianity.

- To begin to introduce Nag Hammadi literature² as a major component of Christ-movement literature in the second century to the Seminar, and as such to urge disciplined and extensive study of Nag Hammadi literature³ as an integral part of the Seminar's work over the next several years.⁴

This essay assumes, but does not address directly, the growing conclusion in various scholarly quarters that the category of “gnosticism” is a failed and dogmatizing analytical category, and that in this respect a great deal of the initial analysis of Nag Hammadi literature must be rethought. In this paper I skirt this issue because of its scope and because the Christianity Seminar takes up this issue in greater detail in our Fall 2014 meeting. I mention here my rejection of “gnosticism” as a legitimate analytical category simply so that my readers can make sense of this lacuna and notice my explicit project to make sense of these documents without recourse to the theory that the second and third century featured a contestation between orthodox and “gnostic” versions of Christianity.

My primary hypothesis about this small bundle of Nag Hammadi and other second century⁵ texts is as follows: In the face of pervasive damage and fragmentation across major Mediterranean populations because of insistent imperial and other kinds of violence, a variety of second-century Christ movements began to imagine and promote alternate visions of social unity within

2. This essay is meant as a companion to Maia Kotrotsits' paper, “Social Fragmentation and Cosmic Rhetoric: Interpretations of Isaiah in the Nag Hammadi Codices,” for the Spring 2014 Westar Meeting. Her paper is included in this issue of *Forum*.

3. I do not mean to suggest any kind of unity in the Nag Hammadi corpus with my urgings. Indeed, I want to plead for the contrary notion that Nag Hammadi represents a very significant spectrum of ideas, practices, and discourses. This means to contrast our potential critical engagement with Nag Hammadi literature as having a significant breadth with the main position of the guild that Nag Hammadi can be characterized as having some kind of esoteric, gnostic, and/or heretical unity.

4. This notion does not at all originate with me. Here I am following much more developed suggestions for the rewriting of the history of early Christianity without canonical or creedal boundaries made over the past 15 years by Karen King.

5. As the reader can note in what follows, I am using the term “second century” more as a vague concept than a defended dating. By this I mean to address a period constituting the following characteristics that seem typical of the second century: 1) a consciousness of larger than local units of social formation in the Jesus/Christ traditions; 2) a move toward a self-consciousness within these larger social formations relative to both the smaller and more local units evoked throughout much of the first century and the larger power dynamics of Roman rule; 3) some predilection for and against retrojected notions of “apostolic” authority as a way of collating governance within these larger social formations; 4) increasing violence; 5) some indications within larger violent imperial strategies that Jesus/Christ traditions are explicit targets of such violence alongside indications that Jesus/Christ traditions experience of imperial violence is happening as a part of larger non-targeted imperial violence; and, 6) increasingly pointed and very diverse articulations of the ways the Jesus/Christ traditions belong to the traditions of Israel.

their movements, but more specifically for the whole (Mediterranean) world. Some of these semi-programmatic proposals of social unity were conceived as dramatic alternatives to the unity of the *pax romana*, while others fashioned dramatic compromises with Roman power for the sake of oneness.

While considering several pieces of literature, I first read each one separately in terms of its respective vision of social unity in the face of social trauma, followed by a small set of general observations about each document.

A final prefatory remark: The dating of the documents in this paper is generally in question. The disciplines needed in the study of the dates of composition of many of these documents are not yet fully developed and the existing scholarship has not paid a great deal of attention to this task. My interest in reading these documents in relationship to second-century imaginations of social unity is problematic for these reasons. In addition I read the post-Pauline letter to the "Ephesians" as a second-century document, although the majority of scholarship understands it to have been written in the latter part of the first century. Obviously then my interest is not primarily in making extended arguments for accuracy in dating this small bundle of texts but to use the second-century frame as a way of thinking about both these documents and the second century.

The Letter of Peter to Philip⁶

*The Letter of Peter to Philip*⁷ is a fairly sustained portrait of the central followers (*apostolos*: Coptic) of Jesus under siege by the "rulers," who have killed Jesus (7:3)⁸ and are threatening to kill these key ambassadors of Jesus (2:3). It begins

6. I follow here the translation of Celene Lillie in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts* (Taussig).

7. Karen King has done the most thorough update of the versions of *The Letter of Peter to Philip*. Here is her summary: "Editions of the Nag Hammadi version include: J. É. MENARD (ed.), *La Lettre de Pierre à Philippe*. BCNH section "texts" 1, Québec, Canada 1977; H.-G. BETHGE, *Der Brief des Petrus an Philippus: Ein neutestamentliches Apokryphon aus dem Fund von Nag Hammadi (NHC VIII,2)*, TU 141, Berlin 1997; M. W. MEYER, *The Letter of Peter to Philip: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, SBL Dissertation Series 53, Chico, CA 1981; F. WISSE (text and tr.), "NHC VIII,2: Letter of Peter to Philip," in *Nag Hammadi Codex VIII*, ed. J. H. Sieber, NHS XXXI, Leiden 1991, 234–51. There are currently two published editions of the Tchacos Codex: R. KASSER, G. WURST, M. MEYER, and F. GAUDARD, *The Gospel of Judas together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos: Critical Edition*, Washington, D.C. 2007; J. BRANKAER and H.-G. BETHGE, *Codex Tchacos: Texte und Analysen*, TU 161, Berlin 2007. The fullest comparison of the two versions is that of BRANKAER and BETHGE, 45–80. Citations of the NHC VIII are from the critical edition and translation by FREDERIK WISSE; citations of the Tchacos Codex (CT) are from KASSER et al., *The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition*, with some modifications." King, "Toward a Discussion of the Category *nosis*/Gnosticism': The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip," 445–65. Quotation from *ibid.*, fn 3.

8. I am following the newly assigned chapter and verse organization of this document as published in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Documents*. The chapter and verse designations were assigned by the ANNT Director of Translation, Celene Lillie. This is also the case for *Thunder* and for *The Gospel of Truth*.

with an initiative of Peter to overcome a division among these main followers by inviting the formerly schismatic Philip. Philip enthusiastically accepts Peter's proposal for all the *apostoloi* to come together. They do so on the mountain of Olives, where they immediately pray to Jesus. One of their two prayers is:

Son of life, Son of deathlessness, who dwells in the light; the Son, Christ of deathlessness, our rescuer, give us your power for they seek to kill us. (*EpPetPhil* 2:3)

In direct response to this prayer, Jesus appears to them in "a great light," and responds to their questions, which include: "Why do the powers fight against us?"

The voice (of Jesus) "from the light" (4:1) lays out the reasons for the rulers trying to kill the *apostoloi* in terms of:

1. a set of mistakes on the part of the creators of the universe (4:2–4) but not because the *apostoloi* have themselves made any mistakes;
2. Jesus' own mission (5:1, 20); and,
3. the following encouragement in the middle of the violent threats of the rulers:

Because you all are being restrained, you are mine. When you strip off from yourselves what is corrupt, then you will become light-givers in the midst of mortal humans. This is because you are going to fight against the powers. They do not have your peace since they do not want you to be saved. (5:3)

The *apostoloi* "worship again" and plead "Lord, tell us how shall we fight against the rulers since they are over us." Jesus answers:

You will fight against them in this way: the rulers fight against the inner part of humans, but you will fight against them in this way—come together and teach salvation in the world with a promise. Strengthen yourselves with the power of my father and offer your prayers. The Father will help you as he helped you by sending me. Do not be afraid, I am with you forever—as I said to you before when I was in the body. (6:2, 3)

"What appeared to them was carried off up to the heavens," (6:4) and the *apostoloi* give thanks and return to Jerusalem. As they are on the road together, they ask: "If he, our Lord, suffered, how much then will we suffer?" (6:6a) Peter answers: "He suffered for our sake and it is necessary that we must suffer because of our smallness."⁹ (6:6b) And again a voice comes to them: "It is necessary that you be brought to synagogues and governors so that you will suffer. But those who will not suffer will not save their lives." (6:7b)¹⁰

9. Cf. King, "Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism': The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip," 459, for an insightful and broader understanding of the term "smallness" here, in contrast to the standard "gnosticizing" scholarship.

10. The text is broken here for two or three lines. See Mark 8:35 and parallels.

The *apostoloi* reach Jerusalem, go to the Temple, teach salvation “in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ” (7:1), and heal the crowd. During these on-going teachings and healings in the Temple there is no indication of tension between those in charge of the Temple and the *apostoloi*. Peter summarizes their on-going presence and its significance in the following manner:

Our light-giver, Jesus, came down and was crucified. He wore a crown of thorns and put on a purple garment. He was crucified on a cross, buried in a tomb, and rose from the dead. My brothers and sisters, Jesus was a stranger to this suffering, but we are the ones who suffer because of the transgression of the Mother. Because of this, he did everything like us. For the Lord Jesus, the child of the Father’s immeasurable glory, is the author of our lives. My brothers and sisters, therefore let us not listen to these lawless ones and walk in fear before them.” (7:3–5)

When the *apostoloi* finally leave (temporarily?) the Temple (and this document ends), they go “in the power of Jesus, in peace.” (7:9)

I think that this text, which has only recently begun to draw scholarly attention, is very important on a number of fronts. But for the purposes of this essay, I call attention to two significant aspects:

Focus on the Violence of the Rulers

The dramatic arc of this story centers on the rulers’ active threat to the lives of the *apostoloi*. This violence is clearly on the verge of ending the work of the *apostoloi*, although there is no indication that the rulers are intentionally targeting them. It seems quite possible that the fear of the *apostoloi* has to do with a more general violence. The *apostoloi* consciously identify the threat to their lives and work with the fact that Jesus also was crucified. As Karen King has recently demonstrated in an extensive survey of both recent and older scholarship, “(i)t is now generally accepted that EpPetPhil is centrally concerned with suffering and death in a context of real or potential persecution.”¹¹

In contrast to all but the most recent scholarly commentary on a set of similar threats by the “rulers” in this and other Nag Hammadi literature, it seems obvious to me that these rulers are indeed those who rule the Roman empire. The standard scholarship of the so-called “gnostic redeemer myth” in which a cosmic and grossly materializing force prevents humans from being unified with the God above it all does not work for *The Letter of Peter to Philip*. The threat here is from real rulers, who torture real people—in complete consonance with a broad range of literature from both Roman rulers themselves and various victims thereof. (That scholarship of the gnostic redeemer myth depends on leaving the Greco-Coptic word[s] *archon[tes]* untranslated to the obvious English “ruler(s)” in order to impose its meaning on these texts.)

11. King, “Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism’: The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip,” 458. Cf. especially note 37.

The desperate search by the *apostoloi* for a solution and strategy is met with a viable strategy from Jesus: "Continue your public work. Be ready to get in trouble. Teach salvation. Heal. Don't be afraid." In some tension with various other more martyrological literature of the second century, Jesus' solution in *The Letter of Peter to Philip* (at least in the Nag Hammadi manuscript) does not include either a mandate to die or even a contemplation of death (indeed as the story goes, the conscious threat seems to subside) or any blaming of the *apostoloi* for having failed to be faithful in their belief or behavior. Rather this strategy of Jesus for the *apostoloi* suggests that his own suffering and theirs is simply part of a viable and creative teaching and healing strategy that counters the rulers' violence. As King notes, "when Peter declares that 'He suffered / died for us,' presumably EpPetPhil means that Jesus was killed for the same reason that the apostles will suffer: because his teaching provoked the envy of the world rulers. Suffering and death are the price paid to teach the truth in a world ruled by deficient—arrogant, envious beings—beings."¹²

Investment in the Larger, On-going World

There are strong indications that this document is interested in the world being rescued from the rulers. There is no indication that this rescue involves removing humanity from the world. Rather, the clear indications of an investment in the on-going world include:

- the persistent and explicit agenda of healing;
- the focus on the work of the *apostoloi* on the Temple, the central representation of God's presence in the world;
- the call to teach, rather than anything like prophetic or "apocalyptic" judgment or condemnation;
- the importance of salvation. (Jesus' instructions are explicitly to "teach salvation in the world with a promise" [6:2b]. Although awaiting a fuller study than this essay can attain, the meaning of salvation here seems to be both dependent on notions of salvation as the rescue of a people from distress in the Hebrew scriptures and innovatively applied to the larger framework of a "whole world" in the consciousness of the many different peoples living in the Roman empire. This, of course, is extremely close to notions of salvation in the Pauline corpus, the Revelation to John, and Lukan birth narrative. As King asserts, "EpPetPhil envisions a universal salvation for all humanity, not just the "gnostic spiritual elite."¹³);

12. King, "Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism': The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip," 461.

13. King, "Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism': The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip," 461.

- Jesus' multiple assurances of his on-going presence (3:1; 5:3; 6:3; 7:6b, 7:8b, 9b);
- the role of the *apostoloi* as "light-givers in the midst of mortal humans" (5:3); and,
- in discussing the violence of the rulers that threaten them, the *apostoloi* frame their resolve to follow Jesus' instructions and risk injury or death as they heal and teach this way: "He (Jesus) suffered for our sake, and it is necessary that we must also suffer" (6:6b). The Tchacos Codex version emphasizes more clearly the connection between this risk and the fate of all humanity: "We ourselves are to die for humanity."

I see these two aspects of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* coming together in an overarching vision of social unity hidden beneath the cloak of violence. The epistolary preface of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* identifies the purpose of the work of the *apostoloi* as from "the Savior of the whole world that we should come together to teach and proclaim about the salvation which was promised to us ..."(1:3). There is neither vocabulary nor narrative context indicating that such salvation is meant in an otherworldly manner. As noted above, its use seems to correspond to the way salvation is seen as the rescue of a people from destruction or domination in the Hebrew scriptures, but applied not just to a particular people, but the whole world. The visionary goal seems underlined by the persistent light metaphors in *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, culminating in the designation of the *apostoloi* as "light givers" to humanity. The companion task to proclaiming such salvation to humanity is healing, extended specifically in the international symbol of Israel's God, the Temple. The assurances of Jesus' presence "forever" (7:8b) underline the wide and long dimensions of this task to see humanity itself saved. According to Jesus, "fullness" is the purpose of his coming into the world (5:1), and has already resulted in "the generations" being "filled in his salvation" (5:2). As King notes, "salvation in EpPetPhil is not simply a matter of removing a spiritual portion from the cosmos, but is a matter of completing the world itself."¹⁴

Violence, however, now threatens the world, because the "Self-willed one" (i.e., the one who is neither unified himself nor the one who acts for the unity of humanity) has deformed humanity as created through "a misrepresentation" of that which was otherwise unified (4:4). The rulers, who are a product of the Self-willed one, now seem on the verge of killing the *apostoloi* as they have killed many others, including Jesus. Despite their own internal disputes the *apostoloi* successfully reach out to the risen Jesus, who appears to them as light and gives them instructions about how to face the violence of the rulers. They follow his

14. King, "Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism": The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip," 462. King examines ways in which this assertion may not hold throughout or in each of the versions of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* in note 47.

instructions to “fight the rulers” with teaching and healing in the Temple. This strategy is successful, and the book ends with them leaving the Temple to teach and heal in the larger world. The story does not indicate that the rulers no longer threaten the *apostoloi*, that is, the result does not seem to be the end of the violence but the inauguration of a social unity expanding throughout humanity through teaching and healing.

Notes

Both the title and the initial frame of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* indicate that it is a letter. But the content quickly shifts to the recounting of one or two appearances of Jesus Christ to the gathered apostles. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* does not have any letter conclusion. Overall then it is difficult to consider it an actual letter. It appears that the text knows an extended passion story of Jesus quite like that of Matthew or Luke, reinforcing the notion that it would be a product of the second century. The manuscript is from the Nag Hammadi collection and is in quite good shape, and is also in the more recently discovered Tchacos Codex. There is little reason to think that the story of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* is historically reliable in a direct sense. However, it contains many valuable historical impressions within its almost certainly fictive structure. Even scholars from gnosticizing perspectives have noticed the strong connections between the text and canonical writings and the many shared theological positions of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* and both canonical and what one might think of as proto-orthodox writings.¹⁵

The Thunder: Perfect Mind

Although there has been extensive public reception (especially in both mainstream and experimental artistic communities) of *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*,¹⁶ I focus here¹⁷ on its relationship to second-century imaginations of social unity, especially in relationship to the experience of violence.

15. Cf. Meyer, “NHC VIII,2: The Letter of Peter to Philip Introduction”, 227–32; King, “Toward a Discussion of the Category ‘Gnosis/Gnosticism’: The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip,” 445–65; Koschorke, “Eine gnostische Paraphrase des johanneischen Prologs: zur Interpretation von, Epistula Petri ad Philippum’ (Nag Hammadi Codices VIII, 2) 136, 16–137, 4,” 383–92; Koschorke, “Eine gnostische Pfingstpredigt. Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen gnostischem und kirchlichem Christentum am Beispiel der ‘Epistula Petri ad Philippum’ (Nag Hammadi Codices VIII, 2),” 323–43; Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library*, 75–76, 137–38.

16. The major artistic treatment of *Thunder* include Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz and Parade*; Umberto Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*; filmmakers Ridley and Jordana Scott’s film *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*; and filmmaker Julia Dash’s award-winning feature length film *The Daughters of the Dust*. For a discussion of public reception and twentieth and twenty-first century artistic treatments of *Thunder*, see, Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 93–101.

17. The largest segment of scholarship on *Thunder* has been in terms of its attention to the divine (mostly) feminine primary figure. Cf. Arthur, *The Wisdom Goddess: Feminine Motifs*

It has for some time been clear that *Thunder*¹⁸ is a kind of aretalogy, in many ways not unlike the extensive self-presentations of Isis, Wisdom, or the Johannine Jesus of the Greco-Roman era:¹⁹

I was sent from within power
 I came to those pondering me
 And I was found among those seeking me
 Look at me, all²⁰ you who contemplate me
 Audience, hear me
 Those expecting me, receive me
 Don't chase me from your sight
 Don't let your voice or your hearing hate me
 Don't ignore me in any place, any time
 Be careful. Do not ignore me
 I am the first and the last
 I am she who is honored and she who is mocked
 I am the whore and the holy woman
 I am the wife and the virgin
 I am he the mother and the daughter
 I am the limbs of my mother
 I am a sterile woman and she has many children
 I am she whose wedding is extravagant and I didn't have a husband
 I am the midwife and she who hasn't given birth. (*Thunder* 1:1–8a)

In many ways this series of self-proclaiming assertions by a divine figure is typical of the aretalogical genre. The first-person singular voice is strong, possesses a fullness of time, and is eager to list a range of attributes. Given the extent of Isis aretalogies in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman eras, the insistent (although not unanimous) feminine voice is not all that surprising. The text's interest in placing various attributes/identities in contrasting pairs and trios has its own style, but has some general similarities with other—especially Isis—parallels. What is atypical is that the divine proclaimer also identifies humiliating, defeated, and slandered characteristics such as “whore,” “slaughtered,” and “barbarian” as “her” own. Some analyses of the degrading aspects the *Thunder* voice attributes to herself have tried to account for them as part of a binary pairing of opposing attributes. And, while this is more or less the case occasionally (“I am compassionate and I am cruel”), it does not hold over the whole piece. Indeed the assertions that the attributes are organized as binary, dualistic, or even pairs have turned out to be overstated.

in *Eight Nag Hammadi Documents*; Buckley, “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” 545–46; McGuire, “Thunder Perfect Mind,” 34–54; Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

18. The two book-length studies of *Thunder* are Paul-Hubert Poirier, *Le Tonnerre: Intellect parfait*, and Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*.

19. Cf. Taussig in Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 15–20.

20. The “you” in *Thunder* is steadily the plural you. Cf. Taussig et al. for a study of the performative dimensions of this “you” and the performative in *Thunder*, 69–82.

Humiliation and Authority

Most of all, such analysis has missed the prominence, perhaps even dominance, of the pejorative and humiliating characteristics of this divine persona. As I have written elsewhere:

*Thunder's "I" is mocked, humiliated, ashamed, disgraced, impoverished, thrown to the ground, in the shit pile, thrown out into the condemned, in the lowest places, thrown down into those slaughtered viciously, in weakness, stripped bare, timid, among those whose mouths are shut, chased, captured, scattered, crushed, in shame, reviled with contempt, falling apart, disintegration, and down in the dirt. Of these 25 characterizations of some kind of humiliation, 13 appear paired...with antithetical characterization of being honored as well. But it is striking that 12 of these 25 characterizations are not paired with something honorable, but simply place *Thunder's "I"* in a despised place.*

This concentration of stripped-chased-crushed-thrown down locations of the "I" forces the attentive listener to think socially about the piece. It becomes clear that *Thunder* is thinking intensely about what it means to be cast down or humiliated. Especially since the typical expression of the more-or-less divine in ancient literature (the aretalogy) is filled with praise for the "I," this focus on the disgraced-slaughtered-captured-impoverished "I" in *Thunder* points to a decisive aspect of its character ...

This voice from within *Thunder* about the one cast down, however, is also quite unique in that it speaks with so much authority ...²¹

Whereas almost all scholarly investigation of *Thunder* has seen its contrasts between the honorable and the despicable as part of a gnosticizing contrast between the world of material decay and the world of bodiless glory, only Anne McGuire's work²² has puzzled over *Thunder's* focus on experiences of humiliation beyond any pairings, suggesting there is reason to ask questions about these aretalogical proclamations in terms of the Mediterranean social world. Elsewhere, I have compared this uneven aretalogical mix of honorable, authority, and humiliation with the christological complexity of the Gospel of John,²³ suggesting that *Thunder* "was probably written with consciousness of social locations in which this humiliation occurred."²⁴

Greek and Barbarian

Thunder treats the relationship between Greeks and barbarians in a similar fashion:

21. Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 56, 57.

22. Anne McGuire, "Thunder, Perfect Mind," 42, 43, 49.

23. Taussig, *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, 179–81, 187, and Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 19, 161.

24. Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 57.

Why then did you hate me, you Greeks?
 Because I am a barbarian among barbarians?
 Since I am the wisdom of the Greeks and the knowledge of the barbarians
 I am the deliberation of both the Greeks and barbarians
 I am he whose image is multiple in Egypt
 And she who is without an image among the barbarians
 I am she who was hated in every place
 And she who was loved in every place
 I am she whom they call life
 And you all called death
 I am she who they call law
 And you all called lawlessness. (3:1–8)

Here too the scholarly caricature of *Thunder* as disembodied flight from earthly realities seems obvious.²⁵ Rather this text seems quite invested in the hostilities between Greek and barbarian²⁶ and drawn to ironic disputation of the Greek put-down. The importance of this assertion is highlighted by the “I am a barbarian among barbarians,” being the only place where the “I” identifies with a single label and without description. The ironic twist of this divine “I’s” singular and proud identification with a label that no one in the ancient world wants to claim seems at the same time to challenge the going Greco-Roman assumption of their own civilizedness. It is, however, probably too hasty to characterize this bold match between the divine “I am” and the barbarian as simply a rejection of Greco-Roman domination and a casting of one’s lot with the barbarian. As I have written elsewhere:

(W)ithin the matrices of “Greek” and “barbarian” there remains the question of Egypt, the only place name mentioned in *Thunder*. In this section the “I” asserts “I am he whose image is multiple in Egypt.” This characterization of the “I” as being in Egypt actually references complex identities. In this regard, “I am he whose image is multiple in Egypt” corresponds hauntingly to the hybrid cultural milieu of Egypt in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It could be that *Thunder’s* “I” chooses to rest in this uncomfortable mixed set of identities that embraces the complex mix of Greek and barbarian that existed in Egypt at that time. This could also contribute to explaining the “I” whose image is multiple in Egypt. In this way, *Thunder’s* “I” is not just an affirmation of the slandered barbarian, but an assertion of the messy identity of Egyptians from many different walks of life under Hellenistic and then Roman occupation.²⁷

25. Cf. Lillie, “Degnostizing Thunder,” 21–28.

26. Brigitte Kahl has seen a similar irony in Paul’s letter to the Galatians and suggested that the translation of that book may better be the ironic “To the Barbarians”; see *Galatians Reimagined: Reading With the Eyes of the Vanquished*, 33–34.

27. Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 55.

Honor and Shame

Finally, this complex mix of aretalogical glory-filled authority and stark social humiliation can be seen as an address to the ancient Mediterranean codes of "honor and shame." The terms themselves actually occur in the poem itself, especially with a long riff on the term "shame." The performative and literary tension between the authority of the self-revealing divine figure and the elaboration of shaming experiences of the same persona can be seen to evoke a particular social strategy. As I have noted elsewhere:

(T)he tension between social honor and shame is taken on in *Thunder's* "I." The piece as a whole is surprising in its identification with shame, but this identification is transformed and deconstructed by *Thunder's* active combination of the shame and the honor in the same person. In this way, being ashamed, down in the dirt, chased, captured, and enslaved no longer are excluded from being honored. This piece seems to take aim at the dominant societal system of the Mediterranean. It aims to undo it by paying attention to the societal stations considered shameful in deft connection to celebrative combinations of both honor and shame in the same voice at the same time. In this way, the mutually exclusionary quality of honor and shame is undercut.²⁸

Imaginations of Social Unity in Relationship to the Second Century

There are few ways even to approximate when *Thunder* was composed. *Thunder* scholarship is at such an early stage of development that few skills have been developed to deal with the complex issues at hand in setting a time period when it was composed. There is only one manuscript and in Coptic of *Thunder* found in the Nag Hammadi jar.²⁹ If a Greek version of *Thunder* existed, it could have been composed as early as the second century BCE (since there are no explicit "Christian" terms in the document) and as late as the fourth century CE (the approximate date of the manuscript itself).

For the sake of this paper, I play with *Thunder* as a second-century document. As noted above, reasoning for this position rests primarily in the document's interest in ethnic tensions in Egypt, especially relative to Greek identities (3:3–5) and the consistent attention to violence. Hybrid identities related to a Greek presence in Egypt of course extended from the fourth century BCE through the fifth century CE, and the history of violence, even imperial violence as I propose,

28. Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, 59.

29. At least according to the state of current scholarship, the 52 documents within the jar found near Nag Hammadi were composed over a period of at least 300 years. For instance, a growing number of scholars now place the Gospel of Thomas in the first century and possibly earlier than the Gospel of Mark. On the other hand, although most scholars hesitate on this, it cannot be ruled out that some of the documents were composed in the fourth century, since the manuscripts themselves date from the fourth century.

stretches over millennia. For the sake of thinking about the second century, my particular imagination places it under long-term Roman rule, perhaps in Egypt.³⁰

Thunder's poetic strategies of coupled, tripled, and even quadrupled identities on at least one level can be seen as an imagination of social unity. Consider the following provocative associations:

- I am she who is honored and she who is mocked (1:5b)
- I am the whore and the holy woman (1:5c)
- I am the wife and the virgin (1:6a)
- I am he the mother and the daughter (1:6b)³¹
- I am a sterile woman and she has many children (1:7a)
- I am she whose wedding is extravagant and I didn't have a husband (1:7b)
- I am the midwife and she who hasn't given birth (1:8a)
- I am humiliation and pride (2:7b)
- I am without shame. I am ashamed (2:8)
- I am she who is disgraced and she who is important (2:10b)
- Do not stare at me in the shit pile, leaving me discarded; You will find me in the kingdoms (2:13)
- In my weakness do not strip me bare; Do not be afraid of my power (2:17)
- I am she who exists in all fears and in trembling boldness (2:18b)
- I am a barbarian among barbarians (3:3b)
- I am the wisdom of the Greeks and the knowledge of the barbarians (3:4a)
- I am the deliberation of the both the Greeks and barbarians (3:4b)
- I am he whose image is multiple in Egypt; and she who is without an image among the barbarians (3:5)
- I am she whom you scattered; and you have gathered me together (3:10)
- I am she who does not celebrate festivals; and I am she whose festivals are spectacular (3:12)
- I am she who is revered and adored; and she who is reviled with contempt (4:13)
- I am a foreigner and a citizen of the city (4:14b)
- I am a mute that does not speak and my words are endless (4:23b)
- I am she who shouts out and I am thrown to the ground (4:24b)

Most scholarship appropriately has called attention to the ways *Thunder* is interested in a range of women's identities. Indeed this scholarship often

30. Egypt is the only place mentioned within the *Thunder* text, but that occurs only once. That the only manuscript existing is in Coptic could undergird such an hypothesis; but most scholarship assumes that most, if not all, Nag Hammadi documents had a prior Greek version. For the case that *Thunder* demonstrates deeply rooted Coptic poetic devices, cf. Calaway, "Style and Poetic Artistry," 69–83.

31. Most previous translations have ignored the Coptic here and translated "I am she the mother and the daughter." But, as in four other places in *Thunder*, the masculine is clear. Cf. Kotrosits' essays "Gendering *Thunder*, Thundering Gender" and "Violence, Subjectivity, and Identity" in Taussig et al., *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* for a discussion of this undertow of masculine reference.

with good reason notes how *Thunder* seems to deconstruct the stereotypes of women's identity in its poetic triplets and couplets.³² But a longer look at these associational phrasings also yields interest in provocative and tensive associations across ethnic boundaries, gender, urban status, religion, honor and shame, privilege and humiliation, *métier*, immigrant and resident, power, race, exile and citizen, prestigious and ordinary, and marital status.

In this divine "I" a very broad range of human status and location is brought together. The various ways people understand themselves tumble over one another as the "I" articulates her/himself. It is, of course, the case that this poetic tension needs to be read in terms of both mythology and theology. But it would be an impoverishment of the text to leave out the clear ways *Thunder* is interested in the bringing together in dramatic tension a wide variety of social, cultural, national, ethnic, gender, *métier*, origin-based human understandings of self and others. The poem needs to be seen also as an insistent and calculat-ingly raw imagination of social unity.

Violence, Imperium, and Subjectivity

I have already cited above the wide range of violence associated with the experience of *Thunder's* "I." S/he is thrown to the ground, slaughtered, mocked, shamed, captured, enslaved, impoverished, condemned, reviled, and stripped.

For those of us on the learning curve of the wide range of state-sanctioned terror in the Roman empire, this list of *Thunder's* experience of violence is striking. Although, as noted above, that Egypt and many other parts of the Mediterranean experienced other versions of imperial violence, the possibility of *Thunder* being written in the context of Roman state violence seems strong. As is noted in the study of *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, the ways in which social unity on a Mediterranean-wide basis come into view in the Roman period is unmistakable in both its success and the irony thereof. The *pax romana* enabled vast commerce, intercultural contact, peaceful and forced immigration, new religious movements, and even the building of many cross-cultural cities. In many ways the consciousness of "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female" within the first- and second-century Christ movements is directly dependent on the *pax romana*.

But these imaginations of imperial and counter-imperial social unity come at the cost of massive violence. The *pax romana* lives directly from military conquest, military occupation, enslavement of vast populations, rape, tens of thousands of executions, and punishing tax rates. The list of violent subjection of *Thunder's* "I" is hauntingly similar to Rome's violent strategies for bringing the Mediterranean together in "peace." Rome's own imagination of social unity

32. Cf. McGuire, "Thunder Perfect Mind" for a summary of this scholarship.

provides a deep underside to the raw poetry of *Thunder* as it simultaneously inhabits evocative new social relationships and persistent violence.

Thunder's ironic and creative imagination of social unity in the face of violence resembles *The Letter of Peter to Philip* in a number of ways. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* does not portray the violent threat to humanity as either finally successful or disappearing. The commission to teach and heal for the salvation of the world does go forward ambitiously, but only in the face of imperial violence. The unity of humanity comes into imaginal view, but without the disappearance of execution, suffering, and intimidation. The heart of one world under God is imaginally reinforced by the teaching and healing of the *apostoloi* in the Jerusalem Temple, but with the realization that this same Temple has already been destroyed by Rome. *Thunder* accomplishes a similar advance in imagining a grand social unity across the differences of the newly assembled Roman, even while continuously being subjected to suffering and humiliation.

Notes

The Nag Hammadi text—which is in quite good shape as a manuscript except for some gaps in columns 20 and 21—is the only existing text of *Thunder*. It is difficult to assign a time of composition beyond the broadest of eras from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE. Similarly it is difficult to assign *Thunder* to a particular locale. Egypt is the only geographical location mentioned in the entire piece, and the text is written in Coptic, native to Egypt. In addition, the work of Jared Calaway on the poetics of *Thunder* has shown a range of Coptic poetic devices for which a decent Greek *Vorlage* is difficult to reconstruct or even feature.³³ Although Poirier assumes a Greek *Vorlage*, I think Calaway's analysis reopens the possibility of *Thunder* being composed in Egypt.

The Post-Pauline Letter to the Ephesians

This essay's analysis of the fictive portrait of Peter and the *apostoloi* in the *Letter of Peter to Philip* hopes to be helpful in thinking about Ephesians in the same way. The many scholarly analyses of Ephesians that demonstrate theological and lexical differences between Ephesians and the authentic letters of Paul might in the vein of *The Letter of Peter to Philip* also point to Ephesians as a fictive portrait of Paul in prison. Somewhat similarly the way *Thunder's* "I" carries the life situations of a range of populations in its own voice might help in reading Paul's "I" as a fictive unifying voice of significantly post-Pauline populations. The well-known manuscript lacunae that raise doubts about the designation

33. Calaway, "Style and Poetic Artistry," 69–83.

of “Ephesians” as the target of this “letter” also help in re-framing Ephesians outside the rhetoric of the historical Paul.

Although as previously noted I do not aim to make a thorough case for Ephesians belonging to the second century, I provide below a few strands of ways to imagine it in the second century. These aspects of Ephesians can (but need not) connect to the earlier and now more recent proposals for placing the letters of Ignatius of Antioch further into the second century. This scholarly debate³⁴ is germane in that one of the main bases for having kept Ephesians in the latter first century is the relatively solid evidence of Ignatius quoting or at least paraphrasing Eph 4:4–6. If Ignatius’ life and work themselves are pushed back, so then could/would the Ephesians of the NT. My major interest in reading post-Pauline “Ephesians” alongside these other works lies mainly in the ways they share and/or overlap in their interest in imagining social unity within a context of violence.

Envisioning Social Unity in a Larger World

Post-Pauline Ephesians’ imagination of social unity forms on relatively different terms than *The Letter of Peter to Philip* or *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*. Instead of attending primarily to the unity of humanity or the salvation of the world as *The Letter of Peter to Philip* does or to imaginative groupings of strikingly different human identities as in *Thunder*, Ephesians concentrates on what it sees as the spectacular new inclusion through Christ of gentiles in the tradition of Israel. This new social unity is celebrated lushly in the Ephesians text:

For God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, so that we might be holy and blameless in his sight. From the first God destined us in his goodwill toward us to be adopted as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. (1:4, 5)

It also accords with the goodwill which God purposed to exhibit in the Anointed One, in view of that divine order which as to mark the completion of the ages, when he should make everything, both in heaven and on earth, center in him. (1:9b–10)

For by our union with him (Christ) we became God’s heritage. (1:11)

The Spirit is a pledge of our future heritage, foreshadowing the full redemption of God’s own people—to enhance his glory. (1:14)

34. Brent says “we can ... if we like, place Ignatius’ work towards the end of Hadrian’s reign (AD 135).” Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic*, 318. Foster, *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, 89, places Ignatius’ writings “sometime during the second quarter of the second century, i.e. 125–150 CE, roughly corresponding to Hadrian’s reign or the earlier part of Antoninus Pius’ period in office.” Timothy Barnes in 2008 concluded that the letters were written “probably in the 140s.” Barnes, “The Dating of Ignatius of Antioch,” 128. Richard Pervo says “A date of c. 130–140 is the preferable date for Ignatius.” Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 135.

That you may realize the hope given by God's call, the wealth of the glory of his heritage among his people. (1:18b)

He raised the Anointed One from the dead and caused him to sit at his right hand on high, exalting him above every ruling force, authority, or sovereignty. (1:20b)

God placed all things under Christ's feet, and made him, as he is above everything, the head of the church, which is his body, the fullness of him, who is filled all in all. (1:22)

And through our union with Christ Jesus, God raised us with him, and caused us to sit in heavenly places in order that by his grace to us in Christ Jesus, he might display in the generations to come the boundless wealth of his grace. (2:6, 7)

Remember, therefore, that you were once gentiles yourselves, as your bodies showed; you were called the uncircumcised by those who were called the circumcised by reason of physical operation. Remember that you were at that time far from Christ; you were shut out from the citizenship of Israel; you were strangers to the covenants founded on the promise; you were in the world without hope and without God. But now through your union with Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have, by the shedding of the blood of the Anointed One, been brought near. He it is who is our peace. He made the two divisions of humanity one, broke down the barrier that separated them, and in his own flesh put an end to the cause of enmity between them—the law with its injunctions and ordinances—in order to create, through union with himself, one new humanity and so make peace. And when, on the cross, he had destroyed the hostility, he by means of his cross, reconciled them both in God, united in one body. He came with the good news of peace for you who were far off, and of peace for those who were near; for it is through him that we both, united in the one Spirit, are now able to approach the Father. It follows then that you are no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of God's household. (2:11–19)

In the former generations it was not made known to humanity, as fully as it has now been revealed by the spirit to the ambassadors and prophets—that in Christ Jesus and through the good news, the gentiles are co-heirs with us and members of one body, and that they share with us in God's promise. (3:5, 6)

For this reason, then, I kneel before the Father, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth derives its name. (3:14–15)

All God's holy people have the power to comprehend in all its width and length and height and depth and to understand—though it surpasses all understanding—the love of the Christ and so be filled to the full with God himself. (3:17c–19)

This text overflows with joy, grace, and fullness in relationship to the new social unity of all humanity and the traditions of Israel.

The chosenness of God's people does not occur at the moment of Abrahamic delegation, Jacob's birth or rise to power, Mosaic rebellion, or even exodus from Egypt, but rather at or before the creation of the world (1:4). God's people are those of the creation of the world. The imagined social unity of Israel and the nations in the first and second centuries began at creation. This means that the nations/gentiles are at the writing of Ephesians now adopted in Christ as God's created people (1:5). The divine completion of the ages results in everything in heaven and earth centering on him (1:9, 10). It is in this belonging to Christ (a figuration of Israel) that the gentiles become God's heritage (1:11). The Spirit itself guarantees this gentile heritage in God's people (1:14). It is crucial that the gentiles realize the glory and wealth of this heritage they have received (1:18). The gentiles then join Israel and Christ (the Anointed One) in the skies (1:20; 2:6, 7). Christ's fullness exhibits itself in the unification of Israel and the gentiles, the all in all (1:22). The nations are co-heirs with Israel and share with Israel God's heritage (3:5, 6). Fatherhood in every place expresses itself in its belonging to the one Father (3:14, 15). All God's people are envisioned as being at creation and are full of God (3:17–19).

In 2:11–19 these images are drawn together quite straightforwardly in language of belonging to a common citizenship. The covenants promised this unity, and now Ephesians claims it, giving hope to all who live in the world. Humanity is now fully imagined (and experienced?) as one.

The text's voice often abandons the pretense of a Pauline voice and speaks fully as "we" gentiles who are now "fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of God's household," and then switches to a voice that addresses these same gentiles who are now included in this "heritage" of spiritual Israel. Although occasionally its ecstatic language does claim that a "new humanity" has been formed, it mostly stays tethered to the now re-united, but still messy, contestation between those belonging to Israel and the gentiles.

Roman Violence, Social Unity, and Ephesians

This text's triumphant and joyful proclamation of the good news of a new unity in Christ between the people of Israel and the heterogeneous Mediterranean populations does not fail to face the same gratuitous and proliferating imperial violence that *The Letter of Peter to Philip* and *Thunder* do. It does so in the portrait of fictive Paul in prison for his challenges to the empire. Ephesians allows those generations after the historical Paul to identify with him in prison. The authorial voice makes his imprisonment clear twice (3:1; 4:1) at the beginnings of his appeal for them to follow his strategy vis-à-vis this violence. He similarly connects his "sufferings" to those of his readership (3:13).

Ephesians' authorship's devotion to social unity across broad reaches of the Mediterranean world is so strong that it demands a complex, consistent, and ironic strategy, especially relative to the on-going violence. Not at all unlike Justin Martyr's *Apologies*, Ephesians' strategy for the success of the newly imag-

ined social unity in Christ involves that those in Christ live according to the highest standards of behavior, including organizing their households according to the proper Roman standards. All, according to Ephesians, know better their common unity if they observe women's subservience and thoroughgoing adherence to slavery as it functions in the empire and is formulated in its household codes. Like Justin, Ephesians never actively advocates for Roman authority, but also appeals to the readers to appear harmless, meek, and obedient to the ways of society, so that the violence does not destroy the newly imagined social unity in Christ.

Ephesians and Justin Martyr—among others—develop a belonging both intensely unified in a spiritual Israel and its Anointed One (Christ) and collectively inhibited by the Romanized good behavior. Perhaps only ironically or posthumously, they are also socially united in the complex failure (the executions of Paul and Justin) and success (their survival of the same violence that killed Paul and Justin).

The Gospel of Truth³⁵

"The good news of truth is joy" is the way the *Gospel of Truth*³⁶ begins. In poetry, homily, and allegory this almost certainly second-century document³⁷ continues an almost ecstatic celebration of the oneness of the Father's light and love as "published" by Jesus. *Truth* shares a good deal of vocabulary with Ephesians (fullness; the Father; Jesus' death as unifying all people; knowledge; grace; Spirit; the union of the Father, Son, and humanity; the good news; all-embracing Wisdom), but *Truth* seems uninterested in the tension between Israel and the nations. Indeed, *Truth* assumes unity at all times, and considers division as simply a matter of fogginess (2:8) or forgetfulness (3:1–4), since the unity of the Father with all things and people is never in question.

Imaginations of Complete Unity Include Social Unity

For *Truth* all people and things belong in the Father. Much of its lush and joyful descriptions of this unity focus on unified consciousness of not simply human beings, but all that is:

The name "good news" is the revelation of hope, for this is the discovery of those who seek him (the Father). All things have searched for the one from whom they come. All things were with him—the uncontainable, incomprehensible one who surpasses all thought. (1:3–2:2)

35. For an overview of *Truth* bibliography, textual apparatus, and introduction, cf. Attridge and MacRae, "The Gospel of Truth," 56–81.

36. I follow here the translation of Celene Lillie in *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts* (Taussig).

37. Irenaeus mentions a *Gospel of Truth* and disapproves of it in the late second century.

The sensuousness of this experience of God's presence in all is nearly unique in early Christ literature:

The Father is sweet and within his desire is goodness ... The Father's children are his fragrance for they are from the beauty of his face. Because of this, the Father loves his fragrance and discloses it everywhere, and when it mixes with matter it give his fragrance to the light. (19:1, 4-5)

Many people forgot the Father, but Jesus' teachings and death on the cross changed this:

This is the good news of the one whom they seek, revealed to those filled through the mercies of the Father. Through the hidden mystery, Jesus Christ shone to the ones in the darkness of forgetfulness. He enlightened them and showed them a way ... He was nailed to a tree and became the fruit of the Father's knowledge. It did not cause destruction when it was eaten, but it caused those who ate it to come into being and find contentment within its discovery. And he discovered them in himself, and they discovered him in themselves All things are in him and all things have need of him ... He became a guide, at rest and at leisure. He came into their midst and spoke a teacher's word in places of learning. Those thinking themselves wise tested him, but he reproached them because they were empty and hated him for they were not truly wise. After all these, the little children came—those to whom the knowledge of the Father belongs. When they had been strengthened, they learned about the Father's face. They knew and were known, they were glorified and they glorified. (4:1-3, 5-7a, 8; 5:8-12)

Jesus' teachings and death bring all people together, from those with whom he fought to the children themselves:

Truth came into their midst and all its bounty knew it. They welcomed the Father in truth and perfect power that joins them with the Father ... This is the manifestation of the Father and the revelation of his generations. (13:1-3)

In the truth of the Father brought through Jesus, all have the power of the Father. As in Ephesians, the presence of power in integrated humanity is linked to Jesus' work, both in his teaching and death, and reflects fully God's own rule over all. It is this unity with one another and with the Father that brings humanity to the glory of oneness:

This is the way of those who hold something of the immeasurable greatness from above. They stretch toward the full one alone, who is a Mother for them ... They are not troubled or twisted around the truth, but they are truth. And the Father is within them and they are in the Father. They are full and undivided from the one who is truly good. They need nothing at all, but they are at rest in spirit, and will listen to their root. (27:1, 2, 5-8)

Here the fullness of humanity participates in the Mother and Father completely and mirrors Jesus' own process of becoming full in his teachings (5:8-12).

Hints of Violence in the Midst of Ecstatic Unity

Strangely, this overwhelming fullness of beauty, power, and grace seems nevertheless slightly nervous about something. This anxiety only appears briefly, but in ways that intimate pain and trauma. In describing how “the light had spoken” (16:7) through Jesus’ mouth, seams of pain slip to the surface of the text:

He did away with torture and torment for they caused those needing compassion ... to stray from his face. He dissolved them with power ... He became a way for those who strayed and ... discovery for those searching and strength for those who were shaken, purity for those who were defiled. (16:8–10)

Similarly Jesus’ own encounter with fear reveals consciousness of it in humans as well:

When he entered empty ways of fear, he passed through those stripped by forgetfulness. (7:1)

Indeed, *Truth’s* lush affirmations and joy themselves slip regularly between the present and the future tense. Although there is no sense of eschatological myth in the text, sometimes that which has just been described as fully present and powerful becomes something to hope for in the future. For instance, just after human need has been banished and “dissolved in union with oneness” (10:13), the text slips into the future tense:

Now their works lie scattered, but in time oneness will make the places full. In oneness all will return to themselves, within knowledge purifying themselves from multiplicity into oneness ... If indeed these things have happened to each one of us, it is necessary for us to think about all things so that this house might be holy and tranquil in oneness. (11:1–3)

Close reading of *Truth’s* “fullness” then seem nevertheless to exhibit pain and fear as well. There is—in contrast to *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, *Thunder*, and *Ephesians*—no hint of the Roman empire as the source of this subliminal torture, need, and fear. I would wonder, however, whether the fullness of ecstasy itself is not a sign of the haunted presence of violence in many places. That is, could *Truth’s* overwhelming energy for light, fullness, and power in the present be an expression of and compensation for the on-going violence its people face? Can the sensuous presence of the Father and Mother with humanity be intimately related to on-going pain and violence, only hinted at textually?

Social Unity in Action

Even if there are seams of imperial or other violence in the lives of the hearers of *Truth*, there is also strong evidence—perhaps one of the strongest in the first two centuries of Christ literature—of courageous action by humans to insure and expand the fullness of power and beauty:

Say then from the heart that you are the perfect day and within you dwells the light that never ends. Speak of the truth with those who seek it and of knowledge with those who have sinned through their transgressions. Strengthen the feet of those who stumble and stretch your hand to those who are weak. Feed those who are hungry and give rest to the weary. Raise those who wish to arise and awaken those who sleep—for you are understanding drawn forth. If strength does these things, strength becomes stronger. (17:11–16)

In this text there is integration of the lush presence of God in humanity with the haunted presence of those who are weak, hungry, and weary. This rare time when the fullness and unity of humanity (“you [all] are the perfect day and within you [all] dwells the light that never ends”) is woven in *Truth* into the awareness of hunger, weakness, and sin; it is the active encounter that is integrative. Humanity catches itself in the act of making itself fuller. The shadow of pain (and torture?) is acknowledged in behavior for the sake of fullness. Not unlike the healing program in *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, the work of Jesus becomes the work of those whom he taught, and the social unity of humanity is caught in the act of expanding. This, of course, is not any reduction of the fullness of humanity and the Father, to that which humanity does. But it is a place where the losses of humanity are recognized in their encounter with the imagination of fullness.

Some Caveats and Intuitions for Further Study of Second-Century Social Unity

In the process of initiating conversation of the Christianity Seminar about Nag Hammadi literature, I have played with the imagining of social unity in Christ literature of the second century. The larger task of exploring such social imaginations of this time is hardly begun in this paper in that the second century has an abundance of Christ literature. So this essay is only a playful probe in that direction.

This small set of texts—whether one takes the pretentiousness of their dating into account or not—does exhibit such fascination with and commitment to imagination of social unity, both within the composing groups and the larger world. But the diversity with which such imagining goes on within each of them is probably as important to study as this common theme in them. This diversity should not, I think, even be seen just as differences of expression of a common theme. Rather their differences in the way they imagine social unity contain profoundly different meanings of such unity and striking variations in strategies. So, for instance, even though there is some linkage between *The Letter of Peter to Philip's* program of healing with *The Gospel of Truth's* clarion instructions to help the hungry and weary, the on-going danger and fear in *The Letter of Peter to Philip* differs hugely from the intense and sensual perfect day of

Truth. And, even though both Ephesians and *Thunder* have common interest in the place of barbarians/gentiles in such imagined and experienced social unity, *Thunder's* connections of various populations with one another is much more raw and less resolved than that of Ephesians.

I have also suggested in each text's test case that the reality and overwhelming presence of violence—mostly, but not exclusively, imperial—has much to do with prompting imaginations of social unity. So, although I do think that the Seminar needs to examine carefully the demographic growth of Christ movements in the second century, here I am suggesting an alternate (or accompanying) line of thinking about second-century social unity than is being prompted by the movement's growth in numbers. Rather, I am interested in exploring how violence may in the second century have prompted complex coping expressions through the visions of social unity. It is also the case, I think, that our Seminar desperately needs to begin an exploration of (mostly imperial) violence in the emergence of Christianity. Many shortcuts and quick solutions to characterize this violence lie before us in this necessary component of our work.

I hasten to add that I do not at all see imaginations of social unity (in the second or any other century) as an unmitigated good. To the contrary, I am suspicious of it in its many iterations, its romantic twenty-first century forms, and in any reduction of the meanings of Christianity to such imaginations. It seems to me that both in the imperial second century and in the twenty-first century, imagined or enforced social unity can reduce the truths and possibilities of difference. So although it is, I think, important to look at emergent, enforced, and imagined social unity in the eventual realities of Christianity, I do so at least as much to assess the undersides and damages of social unity as to appreciate and credit its (obvious) goodness.

Nor do I mean to propose that such Christ literature, its imaginations of social confluence, and its underlying experience of (increasing?) imperial violence is somehow becoming a defining characteristic of Christianity in the second century. The many sides of this possibility need much more exploration. And, as noted earlier in footnotes, I am very cautious that there is any such thing as Christianity in the second century. Here I am simply wondering about how the particular fascination of social unity in the second century did or did not actually bring some Christ movements into relationship with one another and the larger world.

Works Cited

- Arthur, Rose. *The Wisdom Goddess: Feminine Motifs in Eight Nag Hammadi Documents*. Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1984.
- Attridge, Harold W., and George MacRae, ed. and trans. "The Gospel of Truth." Pp. 56–81 in *The Coptic Gnostic Library*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 1985.
- Barnes, Timothy D. "The Dating of Ignatius of Antioch." *The Expository Times* 120 (2008) 119–30.

- Brent, Allen. *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic: A Study of an Early Christian Transformation of Pagan Culture*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.
- Buckley, Jorun. "Thunder Perfect Mind." Pp. 545–46 in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Calaway, Jared. "Style and Poetic Artistry." Pp. 69–82 in *The Thunder Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. Ed. Hal Taussig et al. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.
- Eco, Umberto. *Foucault's Pendulum*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007.
- Foster, Paul. *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*. New York: T & T Clark, 2007.
- Kahl, Brigitte. *Galatians Reimagined: Reading With the Eyes of the Vanquished*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- King, Karen. "Toward a Discussion of the Category Gnosis/Gnosticism': The Case of the Epistle of Peter to Philip." Pp. 445–65 in *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienueberlieferungen: Beitrage zu ausserkanonishcen Jesusueberlieferungen aus verschiedenen Sprach-und-Kulturtraditionen*. Ed. Joerg Frey and Hens Schroeter. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.
- Koschorke, Klaus. "Eine gnostische Paraphrase des johanneischen Prologs: zur Interpretation von Epistula Petri ad Philippum' (Nag Hammadi Codices VIII, 2) 136, 16–137, 4." *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979) 383–92.
- _____. "Eine gnostische Pfingstpredigt. Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen gnostischem und kirchlichem Christentum am Beispiel der 'Epistula Petri ad Philippum' (Nag Hammadi Codices VIII, 2)." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 74 (1977) 323–43.
- Kotrotsits, Maia. "Gendering Thunder, thundering gender." Pp. 41–52 in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. Ed. Hal Taussig et al. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- _____. "Violence, Subjectivity, and Identity." Pp. 61–68 in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. Ed. Hal Taussig et al. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Lillie, Celene. "Degnostizing Thunder." Pp. 21–28 in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. Ed. Hal Taussig et al. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- McGuire, Anne. "Thunder Perfect Mind." Pp. 100–115 in *Searching Scriptures II: A Feminist Commentary*. Ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Meyer, Marvin. "NHC VIII, 2: The Letter of Peter to Philip Introduction." Pp. 227–32 in *The Coptic Gnostic Library*. Vol. 4. Ed. James M. Robinson. Leiden: Brill, 2002.
- Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Pervo, Richard I. *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.

- Poirier, Paul-Hubert. *Le Tonnerre: Intellect parfait*. Quebec: Press de l'Université de Laval, 1995.
- Taussig, Hal, ed. *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013.
- Taussig, Hal, Jared Calaway, Maia Kotrosits, Celene Lillie, and Justin Lasser, eds. *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.
- Tuckett, C. M. *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986.