

## Ptolemy's Commentary On The Gospel Of John Prologue

*Translation by Bentley Layton*

*Introduction by Craig Schenk*

### Introduction

Irenaeus, in his work "The Detection and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Gnosis" (written c. 180, also called "Against Heresies"), recorded a commentary written by the Valentinian teacher Ptolemy (2nd Century) on the prologue to the Gospel of John (Irenaeus, *Adversus Heraeses* 1.8.5). In this commentary, Ptolemy interpreted the prologue of John's gospel (Jn 1:1-14) as it related to the first octet of aions. This primal octet can be shown graphically as follows: Parent - Loveliness

/\
   
 Only-Begotten - Truth
   
 /\
   
 Word - Life
   
 /\
   
 Human Being - Church

"Parent" is usually called "Father" or "the Deep." "Loveliness" is usually called "Silence." In the Valentinian version of the Gnostic Myth, these are the first eight aions (at least in Ptolemy's variant of the Valentinian myth). There was a split among Valentinians as to the relationship of the Father and Silence. Some claimed that the Father was a monad, and Silence was the state in which he exists. Some said that Silence was the Father's feminine consort, and the two together were called the Source. Ptolemy falls in the second group. The full Gnostic Myth and its many variants is too complex a topic for this introduction, and I would refer you to Hans Jonas' book, "The Gnostic Religion," or to the book from which this translation was taken, Bentley Layton's "The Gnostic Scriptures."

### Ptolemy's Commentary On John

John, the disciple of the Lord, intentionally spoke of the origination of the entirety, by which the Father emitted all things. And he assumes that the First Being engendered by God is a kind of beginning; he has called it "Son" and "Only-Begotten God." In this (the Only-Begotten) the Father emitted all things in a process involving posterity. By this (Son), he says, was emitted the Word, in which was the entire essence of the aions that the Word later personally formed. Now since he is speaking of the first origination, he does well to begin the teaching at the beginning, i.e. with the Son and the Word. He speaks as follows: "The Word was in the beginning, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It was in the beginning, with God." [Jn 1:1] First, he distinguishes three things: God; beginning; Word. Then he unites them: this is to show forth both the emanation of the latter two, i.e. the Son and the Word, and their union with one another, and simultaneously with the Father. For the beginning was in the Father and from the Father; and the Word was in the beginning and from the beginning. Well did he say, "The Word was in the beginning," for it was in the Son. "And the Word was with God." So was the beginning. "And the word was God;" reasonably so, for what is engendered from God is God. This shows the order of emanation. "The entirety was made through it, and

without it was not anything made." [Jn 1:3] For the Word became the cause of the forming and origination of all the aions that came after it. But furthermore (he says), "That which came into being in it was Life." [Jn 1:4] Here he discloses a pair. For he says that the entirety came into being through it, but Life is in it. Now, that which came into being in it more intimately belongs to it than what came into being through it: it is joined with it and through it it bears fruit. Indeed, inasmuch as he adds, "and Life was the light of human beings," [Jn 1:4] in speaking of human beings he has now disclosed also the Church by means of a synonym, so that with a single word he might disclose the partnership of the pair. For from the Word and Life, the Human Being and the Church came into being. And he called Life the light of human beings because they are enlightened by her, i.e. formed and made visible. Paul, too, says this: "For anything that becomes visible is light." [Eph 5:13] So since Life made the Human Being and the Church visible and engendered them, she is said to be their light. Now among other things, John plainly made clear the second quartet, i.e. the Word; Life; the Human Being; the Church. But what is more, he also disclosed the first quartet. Describing the Savior, now, and saying that all things outside the Fullness were formed by him, he says that he is the fruit of the entire fullness. For he calls him a light that "shines in the darkness" [Jn 1:5] and was not overcome by it, inasmuch as after he had fitted together all things that had derived from the passion they did not become acquainted with him. And he calls him Son, Truth, Life, and Word become flesh. We have beheld the latter's glory, he says. And its glory was like that of the Only-Begotten, which was bestowed on him by the Father, "full of grace and truth." [Jn 1:14] And he speaks as follows: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; we have beheld its glory, glory as of the Only-Begotten from the Father." [Jn 1:14] So he precisely discloses also the first quartet when he speaks of the Father; Grace; the Only-Begotten; Truth. Thus did John speak of the first octet, the mother of the entirety of aions. For he referred to the Father; Grace; the Only-Begotten; Truth; the Word; Life; the Human Being; the Church.