

The Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, Irenaeus' Adversus Haereses 2.30.7, and the Second-Century Battle for Paul's Legacy

MICHAEL KALER, LOUIS PAINCHAUD,
AND MARIE-PIERRE BUSSIÈRES

This article discusses the Coptic gnostic *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHC V,1), an expansion of Paul's heavenly ascent as described in 2 Cor 12.2–4, arguing that its similarities to, and independence from, Irenaeus' extrapolation of a Valentinian understanding of this ascension (*Adversus Haereses* 2.30.7) suggests that both accounts were written in a context of controversy between Valentinian and proto-orthodox Christians wherein both sides tried to claim the apostle Paul's authority. It also argues that this proposed *Sitz im Leben* renders coherent certain aspects of the *Apocalypse of Paul* that have in the past been considered problematic.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we will be addressing the question of the original *Sitz im Leben* of the Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul*, a speculative expansion of Paul's account of his ascent to heaven in 2 Cor 12.2–4 of which the sole surviving manuscript is preserved in the fifth codex of the Nag Hammadi collection.¹ As the text is one of the lesser-known works of this collection, we will begin with a brief introduction to it.

1. The Coptic gnostic *Apocalypse of Paul* is not to be confused with the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, which is generally known in English as the *Apocalypse of Paul*; to avoid confusion with the Coptic *Apoc. Paul* we will refer to the *Visio Sancti Pauli* hereafter as the *Vis. Paul*. Based on 2 Cor 12.2–4, and not on the Galatians or Acts accounts of Paul's revelation, the *Vis. Paul* describes Paul's

We will then discuss Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* 2.30.7, which has been read as providing evidence that Irenaeus knew of Valentinian speculations on Paul's ascent to heaven that were quite similar to those set forth in the *Apocalypse of Paul* (hereafter *Apoc. Paul*). We will demonstrate the many similarities between the two texts. But we will also argue that, contrary to the general opinion, these similarities are due to Irenaeus' independent extrapolation of a hypothetical Valentinian argument. That is, instead of basing his account on any specific Valentinian source, Irenaeus is extrapolating what the Valentinian presentation of Paul's ascent would have had to entail based on his knowledge of Valentinianism.

This makes the similarities between the situation hypothesized in Irenaeus' text and the *Apoc. Paul* even more striking. We will argue that these similarities suggest that the two works could represent opposing sides in the same debate, that is, the second-century debate between gnostics and proto-orthodox over the nature and interpretation of Paul's writings and activities.

This contextualization of the *Apoc. Paul* enables us to understand the logic behind features of the text that have in the past been problematic. We will accordingly discuss one such feature, the varying lengths of the descriptions of the various heavens through which Paul passes in his ascent, and show how our proposed context clarifies it.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

The *Apoc. Paul* (NHC V,2) is one of the texts which make up the so-called Nag Hammadi library. Among these texts one, the *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2), has become famous (or notorious), while others such as the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3 and XII,2) and the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; and IV,1, also attested in BG 8502,2) are at least well-known in

ascent into the heavens, where he sees scenes of judgment, of bliss and of torment, and is instructed by angels. Casey ("The Apocalypse of Paul," *NTS* 34 [1933]: 31) describes the *Vis. Paul* as "a compilation, based mainly on the *Apocalypses* of *Peter*, *Zephaniah* and *Elias*, and on Slavonic *Enoch*, with other borrowings which can be recognised as such but not always assigned to definite sources." Jean Doresse (*Les livres secrets des gnostiques d'Égypte* [Paris: Plon, 1958], 238) was the first to argue that, despite the similarity in title, the *Vis. Paul* is not related to the gnostic *Apoc. Paul*, and this has been generally accepted. What similarities there are between the two texts (in the scenes of judgment especially) can be ascribed rather to the fact that they both represent self-conscious uses of the writings of the same genre, that of the ascension apocalypse.

scholarly circles. The *Apoc. Paul*, by contrast, has not been extensively studied.²

It is found in Nag Hammadi codex V, which might be called the “apocalyptic codex.” Four of the five texts in this codex are identified both in their title as well as in their form and content as apocalyptic

2. The sole book-length study of it that has been published to date is the dissertation of William Murdock, “The Apocalypse of Paul” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1968). Another study is underway, for which J.-M. Rosenstiehl has provided a new edition and French translation of the text, as well as an in-depth introduction, and M. Kaler has provided a commentary and index. See M. Kaler and J.-M. Rosenstiehl, *L’Apocalypse de Paul (NH V,2)*, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section “Textes” (Quebec/Louvain/Paris: PUL/Peeters, forthcoming 2005). The *Apoc. Paul*’s first edition was in A. Böhlig and P. Labib’s *Koptisch-gnostische Apokalypsen aus Codex V von Nag Hammadi im Koptischen Museum zu Alt-Kairo* (Halle: Sonderband der Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1963), 15–21, which includes a four-page introduction to the text as well as a German translation. Other notable translators and commentators include W.-P. Funk, “Koptisch-gnostische Apokalypse des Paulus,” in *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), 2:628–33; R. Kasser, “Bibliothèque gnostique VII: *L’Apocalypse de Paul*,” *RTP* 19 (1969): 259–63; H.-M. Schenke, “Review of Labib-Böhlig,” *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 61 (1966): col. 24; and idem with the Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften, “Die Bedeutung der Texte von Nag Hammadi für die moderne Gnosisforschung,” in *Gnosis und Neues Testament*, ed. K.-W. Tröger (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1973), 13–76. H.-J. Klauck’s “Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12:2–4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (NHC V/2),” *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 10 (1985): 151–90, in particular should be noted as the most recent extended discussion of the text in publication. Mention should also be made of the intriguing article by J. Stevenson, “Ascent Through the Heavens from Egypt to Ireland,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 5 (1983): 21–35, discussing the possible relationship between the *Apoc. Paul* and “an unusual apocryphon . . . used in the British Isles towards the end of the first millennium A.D.,” from which “a small number of [extant] texts in Latin, Old English and Irish” derive (21). Stevenson argues that “[the *Apoc. Paul*’s] lack of detail would make it particularly easy to combine with other texts or motifs,” adding that “the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse* gives the outline for a striking and impressive story without itself being one. It contains material suitable for reshaping for greater dramatic impact” (30). This is a perceptive and accurate critique. But while we accept this assessment, we would prefer to consider the *Apoc. Paul* not as a sort of apocalyptic *tabula rasa* susceptible to being filled in and expanded upon, as Stevenson does, but rather would see its lack of detail and unrealized outline as suggesting that it is the distillation of prior apocalyptic texts, as Rosenstiehl implicitly suggests in his discussion of its vocabulary (*L’Apocalypse de Paul*). In short, we see the *Apoc. Paul* as an end rather than a beginning. We thus retain Stevenson’s sensible argument that the text might belong to the same apocalyptic family as the apocryphon mentioned above, but we see it as being possibly linked to a common predecessor rather than itself being that predecessor—it would, so to speak, be an uncle rather than a father.

writings—in addition to the *Apoc. Paul* there are two *Apocalypses of James* (NHC V,3 and 4) and an *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V,5). Though not precisely an apocalypse, the first text in the codex, *Eugnostos*, does serve as a “discours d’initiation”³ for the codex as a whole.⁴

The *Apoc. Paul* commences with an encounter between the apostle Paul and a small child while Paul is en route to Jerusalem to visit his fellow apostles, a setting inspired by Gal 1.13–17.⁵ The small child tells Paul that he must learn to distinguish the things that are hidden within from those that are apparent and briefly imparts some esoteric knowledge relating to the imprisonment of the soul within the body. Then the child, who has by now become the Spirit, takes Paul up to the third heaven.⁶ From this point the two ascend to the tenth heaven. On the way they witness scenes of the capture, judgment, and punishment of souls in the fourth and fifth heavens. They are challenged by an old man in the seventh heaven and overcome him with the use of a sign, but not before Paul declares his intent to eventually return to earth in order to “take captive the captivity that was taken captive in the captivity of Babylon” (cf. Eph 4.8).⁷ They meet the

3. F. Morard, “Les Apocalypses du Codex V de Nag Hammadi,” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification: Actes du Colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993*, ed. L. Painchaud and A. Pasquier, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Études” 3 (Quebec/Louvain: Les Presses de l’Université Laval/Éditions Peeters, 1995), 342.

4. See Morard, “Apocalypses,” 342–45; and A. Pasquier, *Eugnoste: Lettre sur le dieu transcendant*, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Textes” 26 (Quebec/ Louvain: Les Presses de l’Université Laval/Éditions Peeters, 2000), 25–32. Pasquier concludes that while *Eugnostos* shows the influence of apocalyptic thought, it itself is not an apocalypse but rather a sacred discourse presented in the form of a letter in which “il y intègre cependant d’autres formes tirées du genre de l’apocalypse” (31).

5. The author of the *Apoc. Paul* either did not have access to, or did not accept, the account of Paul’s conversion found in Acts 9. Thus in reading Gal 1.17 (“nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia”), the author has inferred that before his revelation Paul was in fact on his way up to Jerusalem. Murdock, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 160–62, argues that while the revelation itself was inspired by Gal 1.13–17, the idea of Paul going up to Jerusalem to see his fellow apostles was inspired by the revelation mentioned in Gal 2.1–2. But Gal 2.1–2 presents Paul as going up to Jerusalem as the result of a revelation (ἀνέβην δὲ κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν), while the *Apoc. Paul* has him already on the road to Jerusalem when the revelation takes place. Also, there is the problem that in the Gal 2 account Paul mentions going up to Jerusalem with Titus and Barnabas, neither of whom appear in our text.

6. A reference to Paul’s own account of his ascension in 2 Cor 12.2–4.

7. *Apoc. Paul* 23.14–17. All quotations from the *Apoc. Paul* are translated by the authors of this article and are based on the edition of Rosenstiehl, *L’Apocalypse de Paul*.

other apostles in the Ogdoad or eighth heaven. In the tenth heaven Paul greets his “fellow spirits,” and with this the tale ends.

While the setting of the *Apoc. Paul* was, as noted above, based on Gal 1.13–17, the scriptural inspiration for the ascension itself comes from Paul’s description of his visionary voyage to the third heaven in 2 Cor 12.2–4. The author of the *Apoc. Paul* makes this clear by having Paul be taken directly to the third heaven, bypassing the first two heavens as was the case also in 2 Cor 12.2–4. As well, to describe Paul’s elevation to the third heaven—and only here—the *Apoc. Paul* uses the verb τωρη, the Coptic translation of the Greek ἀρπάζειν which is found in the 2 Corinthians account.

2. PATRISTIC REFERENCES TO THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

It is well known that Paul’s revelation of the Lord in Gal 1.13–17 and the ascension which he recounts in 2 Cor 12.2–4 were used as a basis for early Christian speculation. The *Vis. Paul* (referred to in note 1 above), an apocryphal non-gnostic text, is another example of such speculation. It too tells of Paul’s ascension to heaven and recounts what he allegedly saw and was told there. There are also numerous references in early Christian writings to apocryphal or heretical speculation on Paul’s ascension to heaven and/or references to “Apocalypse[s] of Paul.”⁸ Unfortunately, most of these references are brief, frequently nothing more than the mention of the title in lists of apocryphal works, and they give little or no information about the texts to which they refer.

8. The name occurs in many church lists of apocryphal writings. The *Gelasian Decree* (E. Dobschütz, *Das Dekretum Gelasianum* [Berlin, 1912], 53) and the lists that depend on it give an apocryphal apocalypse attributed to Paul. The *List of the Sixty Books* (T. von Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons* [Leipzig: Deichert Erlangen, 1890], 2:289–93) also mentions an *Apocalypse of Paul*, as does the *Nomocanon* of Mar David (T. von Zahn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons und der altkirchlichen Literatur* [Leipzig: Deichert, 1893], 5:111–12) and all the Slavic lists of apocrypha. The Georgian catalogue of apocryphal literature (M. Trachnisvili, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur*, Studi e testi [Biblioteca apostolica vaticana] 185 [Vatican City: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1955], 331–32), as well as some of the copies of the Armenian catalogue (Zahn, *Forschungen*, 110), include an *Apocalypse of Paul*. Lastly, the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian lists an *Apocalypse of Paul* as well (J. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* [Paris: Leroux, 1890], 1:160). Naturally, we have no way of knowing whether these references are to the *Apoc. Paul* (which is unlikely), the *Vis. Paul* (much more probable), or some other text of the same name. The heresiological attestations will be discussed below.

There were gnostic interpretations of Paul's ascent, and Tertullian's clear reference to one such interpretation proves that they date back at least to the second century.⁹ However, Tertullian's citation makes reference neither to the existence of more than three heavens nor to the Demiurge, and thus his source would have borne little resemblance to our *Apoc. Paul*. Similarly, the citation of Hippolytus, the reference found in the *Cologne Mani Codex*, and Epiphanius' mention of an *Ascension of Paul*—while all giving evidence of gnostic or heterodox speculation on Paul's 2 Cor 12.2–4 ascent—cannot refer to our text, since they all state that Paul rose no higher than the third heaven.¹⁰

In fact, the only patristic text that could possibly refer to the *Apoc. Paul* is *Adversus Haereses* 2.30.7, where Irenaeus discusses Paul's ascension to heaven and argues against a gnostic interpretation of that ascent. He does this by extrapolating what would have had to occur in Paul's ascent were he the gnostic apostle whom the Valentinians take him to be and then shows that these events would have been incompatible with Paul's own testimony as preserved in 2 Cor 12.2–4. Irenaeus' purpose, then, is to discredit the Valentinian conception of Paul by showing it to be irreconcilable with the Pauline writings themselves.

3. IRENAEUS AND THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

Similarities Between Adv. Haer. 2.30.7 and the Apoc. Paul

Irenaeus' extrapolation of a Valentinian understanding of Paul's ascent has a number of similarities to the ascent recounted in the *Apoc. Paul*:

(1) Irenaeus argues that from the third heaven, which is as high as Paul claims to have gone in 2 Cor 12.2–4, Paul could not even have seen the full extent of the cosmos created by the Demiurge (which the Valentinians believed to have seven heavens), let alone have gained access to the

9. Tertullian, *De praescriptione* 24.5–6: "Now, although Paul was carried away even to the third heaven, and was caught up to paradise, and heard certain revelations there, yet these cannot possibly seem to have qualified him for teaching another doctrine, seeing that their very nature was such as to render them communicable to no human being." Translation from ANF, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:254.

10. Hippolytus, *Elenchos* 5.8, in *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, ed. M. Marcovich, Patristische Texte und Studien 25 (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1986); *Cologne Mani Codex* 48.16, in *The Cologne Mani Codex (P. colon. inv. nr. 4780): Concerning the Origin of his Body*, trans. R. Cameron and A. Dewey, Texts and Translations, Early Christian Literature Series 15 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979); and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 38.2.5, in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, trans. F. Williams, Nag Hammadi Studies 35 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987–1996).

Pleromatic realm outside the cosmos which was the focus of Valentinian speculation.¹¹ How then, Irenaeus asks, could Paul be an enlightened guide to what lies beyond the cosmos when he has not even seen the whole of the cosmos itself? It is with regard to this aspect of Irenaeus' criticism that J.-M. Rosenstiehl notes, "Or, dans l'*Apocalypse de Paul*, c'est entre le troisième et le quatrième ciel que Paul contemple le monde habité."¹² One could go even further and say that the author of the *Apoc. Paul* turns Paul's downward gazing into a recurrent motif. Upon his ascension to the fourth (19.26–20.5), fifth (21.29–22.1), and sixth (21.14–16) heavens Paul gazes down.

(2) These downward gazes in the *Apoc. Paul* have something else in common with Irenaeus' text. In 2 Cor 12.2–3 Paul writes that he does not know whether he was in or out of his body when he underwent his ascension. Irenaeus argues that this proves that what Paul saw and heard were not gnostic revelations, since his body, being material, could not have received these according to gnostic beliefs. In the *Apoc. Paul* when

11. "I know a person who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven . . . And I know that such a person was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told. . . ." Patristic interpretations of this passage vary, but Irenaeus, for his part, seems to feel that paradise is located in the third heaven. In *Adv. Haer.* 5.5.1 he speaks of Paul, like Enoch and Elijah, being taken up to paradise, and there is no suggestion that he understands Paul to have stopped in the third heaven as well.

In the passage from *Adversus Haereses* under consideration in this essay Irenaeus writes that "Paul testifies to this when he says he was caught up into the third heaven, and further, carried up to paradise," which leaves the matter open. But his argument that according to the gnostic understanding Paul would still have had to traverse the fourth through seventh heavens indicates that he conceived of paradise being in the third heaven (as is attested in Slavonian *Enoch* 8 and the *Apocalypse of Moses* 37.5).

For further discussion of the location of paradise, see C. Rowland, *Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 378–86; C. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate, Part Two: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance," *HTR* 86 (1993): 265–92; and J. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986). The important thing for our purposes is to note that the distinction between paradise and the third heaven is *not problematic* for Irenaeus, indicating that he did not know of such a distinction being used by gnostics to validate their interpretation of Paul's ascent. It seems likely, however, that such a distinction was being used by some gnostics: Clement of Alexandria's understanding of the distinction between the third heaven and paradise as describing a voyage up from the third heaven into higher realms where Paul receives secret knowledge and learns the "higher mysteries" that he will later teach "to the elect souls" is an orthodox rehabilitation of an idea which must have occurred to gnostics as well. But regardless, Irenaeus did not know of such an understanding, as his text shows.

12. Rosenstiehl, *L'Apocalypse de Paul*, 59.

Paul gazes down he sees himself (i.e., his body) going about on the earth.¹³ Klauck has argued quite reasonably that these gazes have the function of resolving the ambiguity as to whether or not Paul's body ascended with him—an ambiguity that Irenaeus exploits to argue against any gnostic understanding of Paul's ascent.¹⁴

(3) In the *Apoc. Paul* an old man who is clearly some sort of a creator figure (at the end of his encounter with Paul he looks down “to his creation and to those who were his, the aut[hor]it[ies]” [23:26–28]), and who tries to impede Paul's ascent, is placed in the seventh heaven, the same place where the Valentinian gnostics would place the Demiurge according to Irenaeus' hypothesis. This old man is described in terms reminiscent of the descriptions of God in apocalyptic literature.¹⁵ It seems that he is meant to represent the Judeo-Christian god, who in a gnostic context would be considered a demiurgic power.

(4) Irenaeus argues that when Paul ascended he would have risen at least to the level of the Mother, that is, the eighth heaven. He would have had no difficulty escaping the demiurgic realm since the Demiurge would not have attempted to stop him, as according to Valentinian beliefs he (the Demiurge) would already have become subject to the Savior.¹⁶ But, Irenaeus adds, even if the Demiurge did try to hinder Paul, the effort would have been in vain. While the *Apoc. Paul* does not specify that the old man in the seventh heaven (i.e., the Demiurge) is already subject to the Savior, still he is certainly not the ignorant, blindly malevolent figure that one finds in many other gnostic texts. He greets Paul respectfully (23.1–4) and even calls him “blessed,” the same epithet which the Spirit had earlier applied to him (18.14–17).¹⁷ But nonetheless he does try to stop Paul from

13. *Apoc. Paul* 19.25–30: “The hol[y spirit rep]lied to him, saying, ‘Loo[k] and see your image up[on] the earth.’ And he lo[ok]ed down.”

14. Klauck, “Himmelfahrt des Paulus,” 176.

15. *Apoc. Paul* 22.25–30: “[I saw] an old ma[n] . . . of the light . . . white . . . in the seventh heaven . . . of light [seven] times more than the sun.” It is extremely unfortunate that this section should be so lacunose. Nonetheless, the association of brightness, whiteness, and a light seven times that of the sun with the old man is clearly indebted to the portrayal of God in the apocalyptic tradition—see, for example, Dan 7.9–10; *1 Enoch* 14.20, 46.1, 71.10; *2 Enoch* 20.1, 22.1; Rev 1.13; etc.

16. The Valentinians of whom Irenaeus writes (*Adv. Haer.* 1.7.4) argued that with the coming of the Savior the Demiurge was no longer ignorant of the powers above him. In fact, he accepted the Savior's authority joyfully, received knowledge of the higher realms from him, and agreed to continue his demiurgic duties until the end of time, when matter would be destroyed and he would be raised up into the eighth heaven. Thus from the advent of the Savior the Demiurge is not understood as being simply an enemy of the gnostic, and neither is he ignorant of his true role.

17. Klauck, “Himmelfahrt des Paulus,” 174, argues that this respectfulness is only feigned. However, there is no direct evidence of this in the text.

rising farther, although the attempt fails when Paul, prompted by the Spirit, shows him a “sign” (23.23–24). Upon seeing this sign, the old man immediately turns away from Paul, allowing him to pass. Thus the *Apoc. Paul* corresponds to Irenaeus’ hypothetical situation. Whether the old man in the *Apoc. Paul* is already subject to the Savior or not is impossible to say, but certainly his respectful attitude toward Paul and his knowledge of Paul’s status lead us to believe that he has been constructed according to a Valentinian understanding. And he certainly does try to hinder Paul, and his attempt is in vain, exactly as Irenaeus’ predicted it would be.

(5) Irenaeus says that a Valentinian Paul would surely not have neglected to explore the other heavens (i.e., the fourth through seventh heavens) in the Demiurge’s realm: he would not have stayed in the third heaven. Similarly, the *Apoc. Paul* gives us brief descriptions of what Paul sees in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh heavens. In the fourth heaven there is the judgement and condemnation of a soul; in the fifth heaven we see souls rounded up by angels and herded down to the fourth heaven to be judged; in the sixth heaven there is a great light and a toll collector who tries to stop Paul from ascending farther; and in the seventh heaven there is the old man whom we mentioned above. Admittedly, the *Apoc. Paul* does not present a thorough exploration, but the features of interest to an ascending gnostic soul—that is, the various forces that attempt to impede the soul’s ascent—are noted.¹⁸

(6) Irenaeus mentions that according to the Valentinians the “interior person” would be invisible to the Demiurge. And while the old man in the *Apoc. Paul* is certainly able to see Paul, he betrays no awareness of the Spirit who accompanies Paul. Twice during the interchange between Paul and the old man the Spirit coaches Paul as to what he is to do (23.5–7 and 23.22–25). Although Paul is face to face with the old man while the Spirit

18. It is, we think, significant that the elements described here are all related to the dangers facing the ascending soul. Thus in addition to the main purpose of proving that Paul had actually passed through the fourth through seventh heavens, a purpose which could apply to gnostic or non-gnostic readers, the author of the *Apoc. Paul* is also letting gnostic readers know what dangers will await them after their death (compare, for example, with the text immediately following the *Apoc. Paul*, the *First Apocalypse of James* [NHC V,3] 32.29ff., where the risen Jesus reveals to James what will happen to him after his death and how to escape from the forces which will try to detain him). There are no dangers above the seventh heaven, and thus no description is necessary.

This secondary purpose emphasizes the directness and conciseness of our author’s account: even in the necessary task of giving some description of the heavens nothing has been added for its own sake or for the sake of idle speculation, but rather there is a secondary purpose which defines what will be included in order to fulfil the primary purpose, namely, that of proving Paul’s ascent.

speaks, the old man never refers to the Spirit. And when he asks “Where are you going?” (23.2) or “How do you think you will be able to escape me?” (23.19–20), he uses the second person singular, not plural: he is only addressing Paul. Thus the two accounts have in common the presence of a spiritual being who is invisible to the Demiurge/old man.

(7) In other accounts of the ascent of Paul the glaring fact that Paul says that he “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor 12.4) is taken into consideration.¹⁹ However, although Irenaeus cites this phrase along with the rest of the verse, he does not use or develop it: it plays no part in his polemic. It is left merely as a part of the citation. And likewise the *Apoc. Paul*, unlike the *Vis. Paul*, does not seem to feel the need to account for this phrase either. Arguments *a silentio* are of course intrinsically weak, but we nonetheless include this point simply because of the importance that the motif of Paul hearing “unutterable words” has in the other accounts. We would not find it strange if it so happened that *either* Irenaeus *or* the *Apoc. Paul* were to omit this motif, but the fact that they both do, when considered in light of the other similarities catalogued above, suggests that their respective discussions are aimed at audiences for whom the explanation of this enigmatic phrase is not an issue.

Irenaeus was Not Influenced by the Apoc. Paul

The similarities between the Valentinian viewpoint that Irenaeus is rebutting and the *Apoc. Paul* have previously been read as providing evidence that Irenaeus knew of “a gnostic tradition of interpreting Paul’s experience in 2 Cor 12.2–4.”²⁰ Earlier, Murdock wrote that, “this text demonstrated that Irenaeus knew of Gnostic speculation on II Cor 12:2–4 which

19. For example, *Vis. Paul* 21 (*Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, ed. W. Schneemelcher [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987], 2:725) includes a brief mention of Paul being told things that he must not repeat, and Epiphanius says (*Panarion* 38.2.5) that those who use the *Ascension of Paul* say that it contains the “unutterable words” that Paul heard. It is possible that the abrupt and unsatisfying ending of the *Apoc. Paul* (24.6–8: “. . . we went up to the tenth heaven, and I greeted my fellow spirits”) is meant to imply that what he learned afterward were the “things which are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor 12.2–4). Even if this is so, it does not weaken our argument; for if the author of the *Apoc. Paul* had included this incident to respond to criticisms, he or she would have signaled it in some way, such as by adding, “and they told me things which it is not permitted to repeat” or something similar.

20. G. MacRae and W. Murdock, “The Apocalypse of Paul [V,2],” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, rev. ed., ed. J. Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 257.

extended by some means Paul's ascension to the realm above the demiurge."²¹ Even more strongly, Rosenstiehl argues that elements of Irenaeus' discussion "donnent l'impression qu'Irénée connaissait, mieux qu'il ne veut le laisser croire, des spéculations sur une ascension de Paul dont plusieurs éléments pouvaient ressembler à notre *Apocalypse de Paul*."²²

When the wording of the passage from *Adversus Haereses* is examined closely, however, it becomes apparent that Irenaeus is not referring to heretical speculations on Paul's ascent. Instead, he is taking the 2 Cor 12.2–4 account at face value and using it to counter gnostic claims that Paul himself was a gnostic initiate by constructing a *hypothetical* gnostic account of Paul's ascension and showing how it would conflict with 2 Corinthians. We are *not* arguing that Irenaeus does not refer to any Valentinian sources in the excerpt that follows, for clearly he does. Rather, we are arguing that there is no evidence in the passage that these sources had specifically to do with Paul's ascension. Irenaeus is taking the information that he has gained from these sources and applying it to a new, hypothetical context.

The Latin translation of the passage (the original Greek text being lost)²³ reads as follows: "Et quid illi prodest aut in paradisum introitus

21. Murdock, "Apocalypse of Paul," 216.

22. Rosenstiehl, *L'Apocalypse de Paul*, 6.

23. The Greek text of Irenaeus' work, attested as late as the ninth century, is no longer extant. (A. Rousseau, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les Hérésies* 4.1, SC 100 [Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965], 15.) Epiphanius' *Panarion* has preserved most of Book 1, and 7–17% (A. Rousseau, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les Hérésies livre I. Tome I*, SC 263 [Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979], 61) of books 3–5 have come down to us in their original Greek thanks to citations of the *Adversus Haereses* by such authors as Eusebius and Theodoret. For book 2, however, we must rely upon the Latin translation. According to Rousseau, *Contre les Hérésies, livre I*, 110–11, the Latin translation is extremely faithful to the Greek original. This extreme fidelity has both good and bad points. On the one hand, the Latin tends to be very literal, at times almost to the point of incomprehensibility, even to a reader familiar with the Latin fathers. On the other hand, this fidelity gives us a word to word rendering that at times permits a precise idea of the wording of the original Greek text.

In their edition Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les Hérésies* 2.1–2, SC 293–94 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1982), have paid special attention to the verbs, listing a series of modifications which they made to moods and tenses for *Adv. Haer.* book 2 (2.1:26–27). However, they made no such modification in the passage presently under examination. Nor does the critical apparatus suggest the necessity of emendations or corrections, the only possible exception being the sentence: "Si enim se, hoc est ipsorum hominem, statim supergredi dicunt Demiurgum et abire ad matrem multo magis utique Apostoli homini hoc *euenisset* nec enim prohibuisset illum Demiurgus." According to the critical apparatus, manuscript S has the imperfect

aut usque in tertium caelum adsumptio, cum sint omnia illa sub potestate Demiurgi. . . .” With this allusion to Paul’s ascension account, Irenaeus sets the scene. Next he turns to discuss what Paul would have been expected to do were he the gnostic apostle that the Valentinians consider him to be. In so doing, Irenaeus uses the subjunctive to express an unreal condition (“si . . . inciperet”)—in short, to describe a hypothetical situation which, he points out, does not fit with Paul’s own testimony:

si eorum quae super Demiurgum dicuntur mysteriorum speculator et auditor inciperet fieri, quemadmodum audent quidam dicere? Si enim uti eam quae est super Demiurgum disceret dispositionem, nequaquam in his quae sunt Demiurgi remansisset, ne ipsa quidem uniuersa perspeculatus.

Immediately prior to this passage Irenaeus refers to the Valentinian belief that Paul was acquainted with the order of things above the Demiurge. This belief is something that he has learned from others, as he makes clear: it is not his own invention. However, in what follows below he is taking this belief and applying it to the situation in 2 Corinthians. This is Irenaeus’s own extrapolation, his own hypothetical application of a Valentinian belief to a given situation so as to invalidate the belief by showing that it requires conclusions which are contradicted by Paul’s account: “restabat enim ei adhuc secundum illorum sermonem quartum caelum, uti appropinquaret Demiurgo et subiectam Septenationem uideret -, sed reciperetur fortasse uel usque ad Medietatem, hoc est ad Matrem, uti ab ea disceret quae sunt intra Pleroma.”

Here he drops into the imperfect indicative (“restabat”) in order to discuss what he knows of the number and content of the heavens according to Valentinian speculations. Then follows a return to the perfect subjunctive, expressing the sense that “he would not have done this, but rather would have done that”—as was the case with “remanisset” above. The last clause is in the indicative (“sunt”) to indicate that he is referring

infinitive *euenisse*. Were this reading accepted, we would then understand this infinitive as being coordinated with *supergradi* and *abire* and translate as follows: “For if they maintain that they themselves, that is their inner person, at once ascends above the Demiurge, and departs to the Mother, much more has this occurred [so they say] to the inner person of the apostle; for the Demiurge would not have hindered him. . . .” This modification, if accepted, would lead us to understand that Irenaeus knew a Valentinian tradition of Paul’s ascension to the Mother, since the phrasing would be “they say that it has occurred.” But manuscript *S* is the result of an amateur collage, and its text was emended more according to its user’s literary taste than according to the sense of the text. The text should therefore be left as Rousseau and Doutreleau have presented it.

directly to Valentinian beliefs—he has sources that tell him of the existence of the Pleroma above the Demiurge and of its contents. Then he returns to the imperfect indicative to draw out the nuances of the Valentinian speculation: “Poterat enim qui est intus homo eius, qui et loquebatur in eo, inuisibilis existens, quemadmodum dicunt.” This latter indicative (“dicunt”) is used to establish that he is referring to what he has actually heard or read, not to his own extrapolations. Then: “non tantum usque ad tertium caelum, sed usque ad Matrem illorum peruenire. Si enim se, hoc est ipsorum hominem, statim supergredi dicunt Demiurgum et abire ad matrem multo magis utique Apostoli homini hoc euenisset.”

Having related what the Valentinians’ own writings attest, Irenaeus applies this to his hypothetical situation (Paul’s ascent) and finds that what according to Valentinian theories would have had to happen does not correspond to the New Testament account. Again, as far as we can tell from Irenaeus’ text, he is acting independently in doing this. While he earlier made clear that his sources say that the interior person could have spoken to Paul, here it is a question of his own logical application of this information to the context of Paul’s ascent. Then he continues his extrapolation: “nec enim prohibuisset illum Demiurgus, iam et ipse subiectus Saluatori, ut dicunt.”

The subjunctive (“prohibuisset”) expresses a hypothesis that Irenaeus develops based on his understanding that the Demiurge would attempt to stop the soul’s ascent through the heavens. The brief return to the indicative (“dicunt”) is to show that his hypothetical situation is in accord with the Valentinians’ writings. Then he continues his exposition in the perfect subjunctive (“Si . . . prohibuisset . . . profecisset”), thus expressing a past unreal condition but this time with regard not to the New Testament but rather to the gnostic theories themselves: “Si autem et prohibuisset, nihil profecisset: non enim possibile est eum Patris prouidentia fortiozem esse, et haec cum interior homo inuisibilis etiam a Demiurgo esse dicatur.”²⁴

24. “But what did that profit him [Paul], either his entrance into paradise or his assumption into the third heaven, since all these things are still under the power of the Demiurge, if, as some venture to maintain, he [Paul] had already begun to be a spectator and a hearer of these mysteries which are affirmed to be above the Demiurge? For if it is true that he was becoming acquainted with that order of things which is above the Demiurge, he would by no means have remained in the regions of the Demiurge, and that so as not even thoroughly to explore even these (for, according to their manner of speaking, there still lay before him four heavens, if he were to approach the Demiurge, and thus behold the whole seven lying beneath him); but he might have been admitted, perhaps, into the intermediate place, that is, into the presence of the Mother, that he might receive instruction from her as to the things within the Pleroma. For that inner man which was in him, and spoke in him, as they

Here again the indicative (“est”) signals that he is showing that their own writings support his hypothetical situation.

The alternate use of verbs in the imperfect indicative and verbs in the imperfect or perfect subjunctive serves to express unreal hypotheses in which the past conditions are always considered unfulfilled and the past or present consequences are thus unreal. The choice of these moods and tenses translates a Greek proposition in the conditional with *εἰ* and a principal verb in the imperfect indicative (for present unreal) or aorist indicative (for past unreal) with *ἔστω*. The succession of moods and tenses that Irenaeus uses in this section of the *Adversus Haereses* allows us to draw the following conclusions: Irenaeus knows of a Valentinian tradition asserting that Paul was initiated into the mysteries of the heavens above the Demiurge. That tradition, or another, spoke of the Demiurge’s realm as comprising seven heavens. Irenaeus does not seem to know of any tradition that recounts the ascension of Paul to the higher heavens (as “remansisset” refers to Paul’s ascension in 2 Corinthians).

Thus from Irenaeus’ point of view, the Valentinians assert that Paul knew the mysteries of the heavens above the Demiurge, but how he (Paul) gained knowledge of these is left undescribed. So Irenaeus takes it upon himself to create an account of what would have had to have happened to Paul in an ascent to these heavens. And as he shows, such a situation would have contradicted Paul’s own account at numerous points. For our argument the important thing to retain here is that Irenaeus gives the impression of having created his extrapolation independently: he shows no sign that he is indebted to a specific Valentinian source for it.

It is possible that Irenaeus gives this impression for rhetorical effect—that is, that Irenaeus does in fact know of Valentinian traditions or texts that discuss Paul’s ascension and that for his own reasons he does not wish to explicitly acknowledge the existence of such texts or traditions. This seems to be Rosenstiehl’s understanding of the situation when he writes that elements of Irenaeus’ text, “donnent l’impression qu’Irénée connaissait, mieux qu’il ne veut le laisser croire, des spéculations sur une

say, though invisible, could have attained not only to the third heaven, but even as far as the presence of the Mother. For if they maintain that they themselves, that is their inner man, at once ascends above the Demiurge, and departs to the Mother, much more must this have occurred to the inner man of the apostle; for the Demiurge would not have hindered him, being, as they assert, already subject to the Saviour. But if he had tried to hinder him, the effort would have gone for nothing. For it is not possible that he should prove stronger than the providence of the Father, and that when the inner man is said to be invisible even to the Demiurge.” Translation from ANF, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:405.

ascension de Paul. . . .”²⁵ But this is unlikely, as it does not cohere with Irenaeus’ general practice in *Adv. Haer.* When discussing other elements of Valentinian or gnostic systems, he does not present these elements as his own extrapolations—rather, he forthrightly cites them as beliefs of his opponents and then rebuts them.²⁶ One is at a loss to understand why he would act differently in this case. We prefer, therefore, to take this passage at its word, as does Rousseau: “Or, note Irénée, cette déclaration de Paul [2 Cor 12.2–4] apparaît comme dénuée de sens s’il faut admettre la thèse valentinienne . . . pour pouvoir bénéficier de révélations spirituelles, Paul aurait dû, selon la théorie valentinienne, dépasser le Démon. . . .”²⁷

Thus, far from proving that Irenaeus knew of “a gnostic tradition interpreting Paul’s experience” above the seventh heaven, *Adv. Haer.* 2.30.7 argues strongly that he did *not* know of one and that his discussion revolves around a hypothetical situation that he has created based on his own knowledge of Valentinian beliefs.²⁸

Nor was the Apoc. Paul Influenced by Irenaeus

Irenaeus’ ignorance of specific gnostic traditions makes it all the more interesting that his hypothetical reconstruction of a Valentinian understanding of Paul’s ascent has so many features in common with what we find in the *Apoc. Paul*. What are we to make of all these similarities between the two texts, similarities too striking to be coincidental? Our analysis of the wording of the passage from *Adversus Haereses* has shown that they are not to be explained by the hypothesis that Irenaeus is drawing on a specific Valentinian text, whether the *Apoc. Paul* or another.

There remains the possibility that these similarities are the result of the influence of Irenaeus on the *Apoc. Paul*. In this case the *Apoc. Paul* would be read as a Valentinian response to Irenaeus’ arguments. Such a hypothetical reconstruction of the creation of the *Apoc. Paul* would then involve a gnostic author being exposed to Irenaeus’ work and deciding to respond to it by using it as a model to construct his or her own account. The gnostic author and Irenaeus would agree on some points—such as the need for Paul to ascend beyond the demiurgic realm, the placing of the

25. Rosenstiehl, *L’Apocalypse de Paul*, 6.

26. Compare, for instance, Irenaeus’ forthright exposition of the Marcosian rites for the dying in *Adv. Haer.* 1.21 (paralleled independently in the first *Apocalypse of James* [NHC V,3] 32.28–35.25) or the beliefs of the “gnostics” at 1.29 (paralleled independently in the *Apocryphon of John*).

27. Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les Hérésies* (SC 293), 184.

28. The quoted phrase is that of Murdock, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 257.

Demiurge in the seventh heaven, and his (the Demiurge's) attempt to impede Paul's ascent.

The author of the *Apoc. Paul* would also be concerned to respond to the charges that Irenaeus brings against the gnostic hypothesis of Paul's ascension. Does Irenaeus say that Paul would have to have gone beyond the third heaven? Here we see Paul ascending all the way to the tenth. Does Irenaeus point out that Paul would have seen the earth and the contents of the fourth through seventh heavens (2.30.7)? Very well, these are shown too.²⁹ Does Irenaeus make no polemical use of the fact that Paul was not permitted to tell anyone about the things that he saw? All the better, now there is no need for the *Apoc. Paul* to address this issue either.

If the *Apoc. Paul* were in fact written as a response to Irenaeus' work, it would present us with a fascinating example of a continuation of the orthodox/gnostic dialogue. We see in heresiological works orthodox authors responding to and rebutting their gnostic opponents: is it not possible that gnostic authors would likewise respond to the attacks of their orthodox opponents? Must we assume that Irenaeus' magisterial work was so powerful and convincing an attack that the objects of its polemic were rendered incapable of defending themselves against it? We know that years after the publication of the *Adversus Haereses* Valentinian and orthodox Christians still engaged in public debate.³⁰ Irenaeus' arguments would have been a powerful tool for the orthodox side in such debates, and for this very reason it is logical to assume that there were gnostic rebuttals to them. If the *Apoc. Paul* is such a rebuttal, it is a clear example of the often-cited mythological approach that is characteristic of gnostic works and also of the equally well-known gnostic love of innovation. To respond to Irenaeus' rational critiques, the author of the *Apoc. Paul* would have created a new myth or reworked an already existing myth.

However, there are strong arguments against the *Apoc. Paul* being such a rebuttal. For one thing, it does not refer to the Mother (Achamoth) in the eighth heaven, although Irenaeus mentions her repeatedly. On the other hand, Irenaeus does not refer to the Ogdoad in his account, whereas the *Apoc. Paul* uses this term exclusively as the name of the eighth heaven.

29. It is significant to note that the *Apoc. Paul* describes the contents of *only* these four heavens. The eighth through tenth heavens are dealt with in a mere ten lines: "And the seventh heaven opened and we rose to the Ogdoad. I saw the twelve apostles: they greeted me. And we rose to the ninth heaven. I greeted those who were in the ninth heaven. We rose to the tenth heaven, and I greeted my fellow spirits" (23.29–24.8).

30. See, for example, Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.2.

Earlier in the *Adversus Haereses* (1.5.2) Irenaeus states that other Valentinian names for the Mother include Ogdoad and Jerusalem (which in the *Apoc. Paul* is identified with the celestial home of the apostles). Thus our text harmonizes with Irenaeus' conception of Valentinianism—suggesting that they share a common background—but does not respond specifically to Irenaeus' critique of Valentinian interpretations of Paul's ascension in *Adv. Haer.* 2.30.7.

Also significant in this regard is the *Apoc. Paul*'s description of two of the heavenly rulers as “toll collectors [τελώνης]” (at 20.15 and 22.20). This word is also used in the *First Apocalypse of James* (NHC V,3 33.8), the text immediately following the *Apoc. Paul* in the Nag Hammadi collection, in a passage that is very similar to Irenaeus' exposition (*Adv. Haer.* 1.21.5) of the rites for the dying practiced by the Marcosians. However, Irenaeus does not use the term “toll collectors” for the heavenly authorities, referring instead to the “principalities and powers.” This difference in terminology would suggest that the *Apoc. Paul*, like the *First Apocalypse of James*, is independently presenting ideas that are also attested in Irenaeus.

The Similarities Are Instead the Result of a Commonality of Purpose

Thus it is much more likely that the similarities are simply due to a commonality of purpose between Irenaeus and the author of the *Apoc. Paul*—namely, that both authors are constructing accounts of Paul's ascension that draw on Valentinian speculation, and both are using 2 Cor 12.2–4. But while the author of the *Apoc. Paul* wants to show that Paul's ascension complements Valentinian beliefs, Irenaeus wants to show that it contradicts them. Thus the points where the Pauline account seems to conflict with Valentinian beliefs would be accentuated by both of them but for opposite reasons. The two texts, then, show us opposing sides in a battle over the interpretation of Paul's career and writings. Furthermore, they show us these opposing sides as they are in the process of addressing the very same issue, that is, how one is to understand Paul's ascension to heaven.

When seen in this light, the similarities between these accounts testify to the mutual understanding of the two sides of the debate over the applicability of 2 Cor 12.2–4 to the Valentinian understanding of Paul. On the one hand, Irenaeus the heresiologist has accurately and independently extrapolated how his opponents would express this understanding—as we see from the *Apoc. Paul*. On the other hand, the author of the *Apoc. Paul* has correctly deduced which aspects of the ascension of Paul

need to be developed so as to meet the attack of heresiologists—as we see from Irenaeus’ attack in *Adv. Haer.* 2.30.7.

This ability of both sides to understand their opponents’ point of view in turn suggests that at the time these texts were written there was still interaction and debate between orthodox and gnostic authors—that is, that they were on civil enough terms to have the sort of nuanced interchanges that would allow each to know the other’s point of view down to the specifics.³¹ This would be an argument in favor of a relatively early date for the *Apoc. Paul*—let us say, tending more towards the late second or early third centuries. Irenaeus’ text is proof positive that the debate in which the *Apoc. Paul* takes part existed by, or still existed in, 180 c.e.: the *Apoc. Paul* could, of course, have been written later or earlier than this.

4. SOME RAMIFICATIONS OF OUR CONCLUSION

The *Apoc. Paul* has not enjoyed a high reputation among scholars. Böhlig, its first editor, calls it “diese kleine und nicht allzu bedeutsame Schrift.”³² Schenke was even more harsh, describing it as “ein kümmerliches Machwerk, sozusagen das Produkt eines gnostischen Hilfsschülers” but later softening his views slightly: “Im ganzen bietet die Schrift, auch für die Frage der Verarbeitung heterogener mythischer Elemente, nur wenig Interessantes.”³³

Insofar as one speaks strictly of the linguistic aspects of the text, there are good grounds for holding such opinions of it. To start with, the translation of the *Apoc. Paul* from the Bohairic dialect of Coptic into the Sahidic was inexpertly done.³⁴ Moreover, there are several points where

31. It should be noted, however, that the fact that the *Apoc. Paul* responds to orthodox criticisms of Valentinian understandings of Paul does not prove that it was an exoteric document designed to be read by non-gnostics any more than the fact that Irenaeus is responding to gnostic criticisms of the orthodox understanding of Paul proves that his text was written to be read by gnostics. However, in a situation of relatively open dialogue between gnostic and orthodox exponents, the line between “exoteric” and “esoteric” writings would be less firmly drawn in any case. The *Apoc. Paul* could have been read by gnostics to reassure them that their understanding was correct; it could also have been used as a tool to persuade the orthodox.

32. Böhlig and Labib, *Koptisch-gnostische Apokalypsen*, 15.

33. Schenke, “Review of Labib-Böhlig,” col. 24; “Die Bedeutung der Texte von Nag Hammadi,” 43.

34. It is probable that the *Apoc. Paul*, like the other Nag Hammadi texts, was originally composed in Greek and only later translated into Coptic. Moreover, apparently the *Apoc. Paul* and the other texts in codex V were first translated into a northern dialect of Coptic and only later, as Coptic copies traveled southwards, were translated (or should one say transposed?) into the southern, Sahidic dialect. A

the text is, as Funk puts it, “nicht ganz in Ordnung,” where errors or incoherencies in the manuscript render it difficult to make sense of certain passages.³⁵

On the narrative level, however, several aspects of the *Apoc. Paul* that earlier scholars have criticized become more understandable, and hence acceptable, when the text is examined with regard to its context as sketched out above—that is, as representing one side of the debate between orthodox and Valentinian Christians over which group has the right to claim Paul as their own apostle. In the hopes of contributing to a reassessment of the *Apoc. Paul*'s literary merit, or at least of showing that there is more logic to the text than previously perceived, we propose here to examine one such aspect, namely, its descriptions of the heavens through which Paul ascends.

Although the *Apoc. Paul* presents a ten-heaven cosmology, it does not describe the contents of all ten heavens equally. The first two heavens are entirely ignored, the third heaven is only mentioned, the fourth through seventh heavens are more or less thoroughly described (in terms which are clearly indebted to the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition), and then the eighth through tenth heavens are not described at all. All that is recorded of these latter three heavens is that Paul greets or is greeted by the inhabitants of each.

Trying to account for this disparity of description, Kasser argues that the *Apoc. Paul* used a source document with more or less equal descriptions of all ten heavens.³⁶ The author of the *Apoc. Paul* would then have

reconstruction of the southward voyage of our text can be found in W.-P. Funk, “The Linguistic Aspect of Classifying the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification: Actes du Colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993*, ed. L. Painchaud and A. Pasquier, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Études” 3 (Québec/Louvain: Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Éditions Peeters, 1995), 107–47. Only superficially Sahidicized, the *Apoc. Paul* contains Bohairicisms both in its syntax (a cleft sentence at 19.15–16a which would only be possible in the Bohairic dialect) and its vocabulary. For there are two Coptic verbs both spelled ⲙⲟⲗⲏⲓ, one meaning “reveal” and the other, “create.” The latter verb only occurs in the Bohairic dialect (Crum 812b). At *Apoc. Paul* 19.6b ⲙⲟⲗⲏⲓ appears, and the context shows that it is the Bohairic verb “create” that is intended and not the verb meaning “reveal.” These remnants of an earlier stage in the text's life enable us to fill in some of the history of the text and also testify to the inexpert translation (or transposition) which produced our sole manuscript.

35. Funk, “Koptische-gnostische Apokalypse,” 631.

36. Kasser, “Bibliothèque gnostique VII,” 259. The *Apoc. Paul* “pourrait être la forme abrégée d'un ouvrage plus long, dans lequel l'apôtre aurait décrit successivement, et d'une manière assez uniforme, chacun des dix cieux rencontrés lors de son ascension.” He argues further that “pour le gnostique, les deux (ou trois) premiers

expanded some of these descriptions (of the fourth and seventh heavens), shortened others (most notably the eighth through tenth), and entirely eliminated the first two heavens. This is possible, but this hypothetical source document is entirely unattested; and even if its existence could be proven, we would only have moved our problems back a step: we would still have to explain why the author of the *Apoc. Paul* edited this document as he or she did.

If we look instead at the context in which, as we have suggested, the *Apoc. Paul* was written—namely, a dialogue between orthodox and heterodox Christians over the meaning and nature of Paul's ascension in 2 Cor 12.2–4—things become much clearer. It then becomes obvious that the first two heavens are omitted simply because they are also omitted in 2 Cor 12.2–4. As for the mere mention of the third heaven, both sides of the dialogue agreed that Paul ascended this far, as Paul's own account asserts. Since the third heaven was not a point of contention, no description of it is necessary and accordingly none is given.

It is only after this that the two sides start to disagree. The orthodox side would argue, as Irenaeus did, that Paul stayed in the third heaven. This would have to be opposed by the gnostic side. For their understanding of Paul to be convincing, the gnostics would have to show that he had ascended higher than the Demiurge in the seventh heaven. The text of 2 Cor 12.2–4 is on the side of the orthodox in that it does not seem to mention any higher ascent. The gnostics would have to assert vigorously and independently that Paul did in fact rise above the Demiurge. And what better way to support this assertion than by describing what Paul saw in the various heavens? Thus the descriptions of the fourth through seventh heavens. That the *Apoc. Paul* draws its descriptions from common apocalyptic speculations should not be surprising: if its purpose is to convince its audience that Paul actually did ascend through these heavens, it would naturally present features that would be accepted. Thus the stereotypical nature of the contents of the various heavens. Thus also the brevity and the absence of names: there is no need to say more, once a few easily recognizable motifs have been presented.

But what of the lack of description of the eighth through tenth heavens? By showing that Paul ascended beyond the seventh heaven our author has completed the job. There is no need to go into greater detail as

cieux n'offraient sans doute pas grand intérêt" (260). Although Kasser recognized that the *Apoc. Paul* was "inspirée sans doute de l'extase décrite par l'apôtre en II Cor. 12:2–4," he does not see that same source as an explanation for why the first two heavens were skipped.

to the contents of the higher heavens. A Valentinian reading the text would be able to fill in the gaps with his or her own understanding of the nature of these heavens, while an orthodox Christian, a non-initiate who might nonetheless lend a sympathetic ear, would be spared the explicit description of activities in the higher heavens with which he or she would not be familiar already and which might drive him or her away.

Our interpretation of the *Apoc. Paul* does not claim to resolve all the questions regarding its treatment of the heavens. We have merely attempted to show that when the context of this text is examined, the vast disparity in its description of the various heavens ceases being a flaw, or at best being the evidence of a literary seam resulting from an inexperienced redactional job, and becomes instead the deliberate product of a focused and logical author.

Michael Kaler is a doctoral student in the Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses at Université Laval, Quebec City

Louis Painchaud is professor of early Christian studies in the Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses at Université Laval, Quebec City

Marie-Pierre Bussières is a researcher with the Institut d'Études anciennes at Université Laval, Quebec City