



Contextualizing the *Apocalypse of Paul*

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Article abstract

In this article, I present an introduction to my work on one of the texts from the Nag Hammadi library, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, a short gnostic work which tells of the apostle Paul's ascension to the tenth heaven. Along with a description of the text and the history of research on it, I discuss the advantages of viewing it in its literary and intellectual context as the meeting-ground of three currents of early Christian thought, namely apocalypticism, Paulinism, and Valentinian gnosticism.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

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RÉSUMÉ : Dans l'article suivant, je donne une introduction à mes travaux sur un des textes de la fameuse « bibliothèque » copte de Nag Hammadi, à savoir l'Apocalypse de Paul, un court texte gnostique qui raconte l'ascension de l'apôtre Paul jusqu'au dixième ciel. En plus d'une description du texte et aussi un résumé de l'histoire de la recherche sur ce texte, je discute comment il pourrait être vu comme le point de rencontre de trois « courants de pensée » dans le christianisme ancien, c'est-à-dire l'apocalyptique, le paulinisme, et le gnosticisme.

ABSTRACT : In this article, I present an introduction to my work on one of the texts from the Nag Hammadi library, the Apocalypse of Paul, a short gnostic work which tells of the apostle Paul's ascension to the tenth heaven. Along with a description of the text and the history of research on it, I discuss the advantages of viewing it in its literary and intellectual context as the meeting-ground of three currents of early Christian thought, namely apocalypticism, Paulinism, and Valentinian gnosticism.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will be looking at three currents of Christian thought in late antiquity, namely apocalypticism, Valentinianism, and Paulinism, and discussing how these currents converge in one gnostic text, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, by presenting a partial analysis of the way in which they were received and adapted by the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul*. I will start by defining these three currents, and then proceed to introduce the *Apocalypse of Paul* itself, as well as its goals and *Sitz im Leben*. After that I will discuss the applicability of these currents to the text, and examine the way in which they are manipulated so as to further the goals of the work.

The ideas, and the understanding of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, which I will present in this paper essentially furnish the basis, shall we say the conceptual underpinning, for my dissertation, which will explore, nuance and contextualize them, in the hopes of eventually producing a three-dimensional analysis of the *Apocalypse of Paul's* literary and religious context.

I. PROLEGOMENA

The three currents of which I spoke above are not, perhaps, household terms, and thus some discussion of them would be useful. I should stress as well that they are modern and ideal constructs. No early Christian speaks of “Paulinism”, “apocalypticism”, or “Valentinianism.”¹ To put it briefly, these terms are heuristic markers, which speak as much of our modern scholarly preoccupations as they do of the texts to which they are applied.

Furthermore, the bases upon which each of the three categories is constituted varies. A text’s “Paulinism” is determined by its reception and use of the figure or thought of Paul, while “apocalypticism” has to do with certain narrative aspects of the text in question, as well as a pool of common motifs and concerns, and “Valentinianism” serves to describe works whose theology and cosmology can be linked to what we think we know of the systems of Valentinus and his disciples — thus it is, ultimately, a label which attempts to describe a work’s socio-historical position as much as anything else. My analysis of these currents and how they interact in the *Apocalypse of Paul* will reflect their different natures, discussing how a given figure (Paul) is integrated into a narrative context with certain generic motives (apocalypticism), and how the details of this integration reflect the concerns of a member of the Valentinian movement in a given historical context.

1. Apocalypticism

Apocalypticism is a literary genre, and potentially a very loose one. It has connotations of the end of the world for us, thanks largely to the influence of the canonical Apocalypse of John, the Book of Revelation. But our word apocalypse comes from a Greek verb, *apokalupto*, meaning simply “to reveal” or “to uncover” — literally, to bring out (*apo-*) from hiding (*kalupto*). So while many apocalyptic texts did feature Hollywood-style explosions and special effects, culminating in the destruction of our sinful world and the establishment of a new, pure one, not all of them did. To speak generally, one can say that all that is strictly necessary in an apocalyptic text is that it contain the revelation of secret information by a celestial being to a human recipient.²

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1. Ancient writers did refer to “Valentinians”, but this was a label applied by heresiologists to a number of different thinkers and groups. It was intended to be derogatory, implying that while “real” Christians could trace their traditions back to Jesus, or at least to the apostles, the “Valentinians” had no such grounding, and were the followers of a mere man, Valentinus, who did not start teaching until well after the apostolic period. It is significant to note that although the Nag Hammadi collection contains numerous works which modern researchers identify as being Valentinian, the names “Valentinus” or “Valentinian” never occur in these works: the only appearance of “Valentinus” takes place in the context of a criticism of him and his followers (*Testimony of Truth* [NHC IX] 56,1 ff.).
 2. Apocalypticism as a category is — like gnosticism itself — a modern construct. It is therefore easy to give it a general, rough definition, and easy as well to propose heuristic definitions which serve primarily to limit an unworkably large corpus of material, such as I do in my discussion of ascension apocalypses. However, it is extremely difficult to provide an adequate, inclusive yet nuanced definition of the genre as a whole — probably at least partly because the genre does not exist, it is a useful scholarly fiction. (In this respect, it reminds me of the apocryphal remark said to have been made by the American judge who ruled

There is a sub-genre of apocalypticism that is made up of texts that feature the ascension of a visionary (guided by an angelic or semi-divine figure) through the various heavens, usually with descriptions of the contents of these heavens, and often ending up with an interview with God or a great Angel. These texts were very popular in late antiquity, and it is with them that my work is mainly concerned. In what follows, I will refer to texts of this genre as “ascension apocalypses.” In terms of the ancient understanding of works of this genre, pages 47 to 63 of the *Cologne Mani Codex*³ are of particular interest. In this section, which is concerned with establishing Mani’s prophetic lineage, Adam, Sethel (Seth), Enosh, Shem and Paul are all identified as the recipients of apocalyptic revelations involving heavenly ascensions, which legitimated them and gave their teachings divine sanction. The sequential and unified way in which these ascensions are presented indicates that for Baraies, the author of this section of the *Cologne Mani Codex*, the apocalyptic tales were at least to some degree harmonized, so that (for instance) Adam’s apocalypse does not invalidate Enoch’s, and also that these visionary experiences provided the basis for the visionary’s spiritual authority : thus the claim for Mani’s spiritual authority that Baries is making is bolstered by his association with the apocalyptic lineage presented here. The revelation ascribed to the pioneering second century theologian Valentinus, as recounted by Hippolytus⁴, is yet another example.

2. Valentinianism

Valentinus’ name became associated with a variety of heterodox Christian teachers and groups of the second and succeeding centuries. Many innovative thinkers, such as Ptolemy, Theodotus, and Marcus, were designated by their proto-orthodox opponents as “Valentinians.” This was clearly done with polemical intent, so as to denigrate their teachings in two ways. First of all, it implied that these teachings were derived not from Christ or the apostles, but rather from Valentinus, obviously a much

that *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* was a work of pornography, and thus should be censored. When asked how he defined pornography, the judge is said to have replied, “I can’t tell you what it is — but I know it when I see it !”.) In attempting to resolve this question in a more definite way than will be necessary in this paper, very different approaches are taken in such foundational studies as issue number 14 (1978) of *Semeia (Apocalypse : The Morphology of a Genre)* and Philip VIELHAUER’s *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1975, p. 485-493). In fact, it was the goal of the organizers of the 1979 Uppsala Colloquium on Apocalypticism to emerge from the colloquium with a generally acceptable definition of apocalypticism, much in the way that the delegates to the Messina conference on gnosticism in 1968 had produced a definition of gnosticism. But, significantly, this ambition was thwarted, as they were unable to reach a consensus. Ultimately, one’s definition will vary according to one’s perspective, as is always the case.

3. The *Cologne Mani Codex* [R. CAMERON and A. DEWEY, *The Cologne Mani Codex (P. colon. inv. nr. 4780) : Concerning the origin of his body*, Missoula, Scholars Press (coll. “Texts and Translations”, early Christian literature series, 15), 1979] is a description of episodes from the early life of Mani, the prophet and founder of Manichaeism. The section in question deals with Mani’s own revelation, putting it into context with the revelations undergone by various other legendary figures and thus legitimating it.
4. “For Valentinus says that he saw a newborn babe, and questioned it to find out who it was. And the babe answered him, saying that it was the Word. Thereupon, he [Valentinus] adds to this a certain pompous tale, intending to derive from this his attempt at a sect.” Translation Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, Doubleday, 1987) p. 231. Whether or not this revelation involved an ascension is unknown. However, the possibility cannot be ruled out.

less authoritative figure to early Christians. Secondly, in a culture where antiquity was highly regarded, it stigmatized these ideas as being of relatively recent vintage.

Given the less than ample remains of their writings which we possess, it is difficult to say how unified a movement “Valentinianism” may have been. The specific beliefs of the various Valentinian leaders varied, at least partly by design — the Valentinians were excoriated by later heresiologists precisely because their theologians improvised and worked with the material that they received from their teachers, justifying this practice by an appeal to divine inspiration in the form of *gnosis*, a mystical understanding of the true nature of the universe.⁵ But in general Valentinian groups shared certain ideas about the not entirely positive relationship between the soul and the created universe ; the inferior nature of the creator god, the Demiurge, who was to be distinguished from the transcendent higher god ; and the need for salvific gnosis, or knowledge, in order that the soul might realize its true nature and escape from its captivity in the universe.

Unlike other heterodox Christian groups such as the Marcionites, the Valentinians did not see themselves as being separate from the proto-orthodox Christian church. Rather, they saw themselves as representing a spiritual elite within the church. There are also strong indications that they felt a responsibility to guide and protect their fellow Christians.⁶ This necessarily drew down upon them the ire of the emergent proto-orthodox ecclesiastical authorities, who saw Valentinian claims to enlightenment as a threat to their own status. As I will discuss below, it is my contention that in the *Apocalypse of Paul* we see the literary remains of a battle between Valentinians and proto-orthodox over the correct interpretation of the legend and writings of the apostle Paul.

3. Paulinism

Paulinism has to do with the reception of the apostle Paul and his writings by later generations of Christians.⁷ Now, by and large, scholars who have been interested

5. It is not to be doubted that the Valentinians, like other philosophical schools of their day, were somewhat inconsistent, and allowed room for individual teachers to put their own stamp on the basic understandings of the sect. However, the heresiologists’ claim to represent a pristine tradition of unsullied orthodoxy, faithfully and completely conveyed from Jesus to the apostles, and thence to their own successors, is nowadays seen as being (at best) grossly exaggerated. If the Valentinians did in fact, therefore, justify their claims on the grounds of personal inspiration, then from the point of view of modern research we must admit that they were at least *more perceptive* than were their opponents.

6. See KOSCHORKE’s insightful analysis of the “gnostic” (his term, although his evidence and discussion make it clear that Valentinianism is his main focus) understanding of the church in the final section of his *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* [Leiden, Brill (coll. “Nag Hammadi Studies,” XII), 1978], “Das ekklesiologische Modell des inneren Kreises,” especially subsections 2 (“Die Kirchenchristen als Adressaten gnostischer Propoganda”) and 3 (“Die Kirche als notwendiger Ort der ‘Formung’”). Although his book was published in 1978, subsequent research has tended strongly to support his conclusions. See also E. PAGELS, “The Mystery of the Resurrection : A Gnostic Reading of 1 Cor 15,” *Journal for Biblical Literature*, 93 (1974), p. 276-288.

7. The concept first appeared in F.C. BAUR’s 1831 article for the *Tübinger Zeitschrift* on “The Party of Christ in the Corinthian Church,” and had to do with the alleged clash in earliest Christianity between the supporters of Peter and Paul over the definition and direction of the Church, with the Paulinists supporting

in Paulinism have looked at it in terms of the use of his theology, or more generally of his thought. Thus the concern has been to analyze the ways in which later writers accepted or disregarded his thought, and whether they developed it in ways that were faithful to his original intent. But this focus on his thought has obscured the fact that there were many thoroughly Paulinist Christians, people who wholeheartedly received Paul, but who received him as a great legendary figure of the past, not as a theologian per se, in much the same way that those of us who know nothing of, let us say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology nonetheless respect him as a modern Christian martyr. This somewhat overlooked aspect of Paulinism⁸ was stressed by the late Hans-Martin Schenke as far back as 1974, but his article⁹ was also largely overlooked. It is with this sort of Paulinism that I am concerned.

Now, I said above that this paper deals with how these three currents converge in one *gnostic* text, the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Currently, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the definition of gnosticism. In fact, Michael Williams has relatively recently argued that the phrase is no longer useful and should be replaced¹⁰, but I think that he goes too far — in my opinion, the present scholarly unwillingness to venture a definition is a necessary reaction to earlier attempts to define gnosticism which ended up with neat, oversimplified definitions which did not match up with the evidence. But to assume that this unwillingness will last forever is naive. Scholarship, like all human activities, goes in dialectical spirals, thesis leading to antithesis leading to synthesis, which then becomes a new thesis when the cycle starts again. We are now in the antithesis phase, with a synthetic period still to come.

However, this paper is not the place for an attempt to inaugurate the new synthetic phase of our never-ending scholarly spiral. Accordingly, for the purposes of this paper, we shall limit ourselves to saying a) that gnosticism was a religious movement which denigrated this cosmos and awaited a saviour figure who would rescue the gnostic believers from it, and b) that Valentinianism is considered to be one of the two main branches of gnosticism, along with Sethianism, so that insofar as the *Apocalypse of Paul* is Valentinian, it is also gnostic by default.

Paul's distinctive vision and more Hellenistic orientation. The term's application has since widened, to include any significant reception of Paul's theology.

8. Particularly in the field of gnostic studies : it is gradually becoming more accepted in the broader realm of Pauline studies, especially following the publication of *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (ed. W. Babcock). In a paper delivered at the Society for Biblical Literature meeting in Atlanta in Nov. 2003 ("The Legendary Paul") I attempted to argue for the importance of taking this element of the reception of Paul into account in our studies of gnostic Pauline texts.
9. "Das Weiterwirken des Paulus und die Pflege seines Erbes durch die Paulus-Schule", *New Testament Studies*, 21 (1974), p. 505-518.
10. This is in fact the *raison d'être* of his recent work *Rethinking Gnosticism : An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996. See also Karen KING's *What is Gnosticism ?*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE *APOCALYPSE OF PAUL* AND OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH TO DATE

The *Apocalypse of Paul*'s sole extant exemplar is the second text in codex five of the Nag Hammadi collection, a collection of 12 codices and the remains of a thirteenth which was buried in middle Egypt in the mid to late fourth century and discovered in the mid-nineteen forties. The story of the discovery, edition and publication of the collection is a long and interesting one, but somewhat off-topic here.¹¹ For the moment it will suffice to say that the collection contains some 52 texts, most of which are “gnostic”¹², using that term in a loose sense, and whose genres and contents vary enormously.

The codex in which the *Apocalypse of Paul* is found contains three other apocalyptic texts (one apocalypse of Adam, and two different apocalypses of James), and seems to have been compiled specifically to be an apocalyptic codex. The texts of this codex are written in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic, but with influences from another dialect, the Bohairic, suggesting strongly that they were translated from the Bohairic dialect into Sahidic. As is usual with Nag Hammadi texts, it is assumed that the *Apocalypse of Paul* was composed in Greek and only later translated into Coptic. However, this hypothetical Greek original text is entirely unattested: there are no sure references to our *Apocalypse of Paul* in any of the ancient literature.¹³

The *Apocalypse of Paul* is a short text, around seven pages of Coptic, or three pages when translated into a modern language. It is fairly well preserved, with a few big holes in the manuscript. Where the text is preserved, it is generally clear and understandable, with the exception of two instances where a translator or copyist seems to have gotten things mixed up.¹⁴

The story features the apostle Paul, who meets a divine spirit while he (Paul) is on his way to Jerusalem. This spirit whisks him up to the third heaven, and from there they ascend through the rest of the heavens together, ending up in the tenth, where Paul is united with his “fellow spirits.” On the way, they see such stereotypically apocalyptic sights as the judgment of a soul, and they encounter the Judeo-Christian god in the seventh heaven.

In terms of its genre, the *Apocalypse of Paul* is a classic example of the sub-genre of ascension apocalypses that I mentioned above, which recount the adventures of a visionary who rises through the various heavens and ends up by meeting God. In fact, I would say that it is even a bit too classic, it conforms too knowingly to the standards

11. See J. ROBINSON, “From the Cliff to Cairo: The Story of the Discoverers and the Middlemen of the Nag Hammadi Codices”, in B. BARC, ed., *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22-25 août 1978)*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval; Louvain, Peeters (coll. “Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi”, section “Études”, 1), 1981, p. 21-58.

12. Some of the works are clearly gnostic by any reasonable definition of the term, some could be considered gnostic but need not necessarily be so, some are amenable to gnostic readings and interpretation without themselves being clearly gnostic, and a few are clearly not gnostic.

13. See note 18 below.

14. 18,10-13a; 20,5b-8a.

of its genre to be a naïve exponent of that genre. Rather, it seems that it reflects a knowledge of the genre as such, an acquaintance with its characteristic motifs, images and concerns — in the same way that, say, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* conforms too knowingly to the conventions of the 1940s action film to actually be mistaken for such a movie. We will return to this point below.

But we can specify the inspiration for the text even more precisely. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul wrote of an ascension to heaven that he had undergone. His account of it (2 Cor 12:2-4) is short : “I know a person¹⁵ in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know ; God knows. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know ; God knows — was caught up into Paradise¹⁶ and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”¹⁷

Naturally enough, this brief passage was extremely interesting to later generations of Christians, who were speculated about what had actually happened to Paul during his ascension. The *Apocalypse of Paul* is one of several later texts that resulted from such speculations.¹⁸

The *Apocalypse of Paul* is a short, laconic, lacunous, and inelegant text, so one is not surprised to find that little scholarly attention has been devoted to it. Its *editio princeps* and first German translation was in A. Böhlig’s *Koptisch-gnostische Apokalypsen aus Codex V von Nag Hammadi im Koptischen Museum zu Alt-Kairo* ; its first English translation was made by William Murdock (see immediately below) in 1968 ; its first French translation was made in 1969 by Rudolph Kasser (“Bibliothèque gnostique VII : *L’Apocalypse de Paul*” in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, 19, p. 259-263). To date there have been only one major study of it, the dissertation of William Murdock in 1968, and two presentations of the text (including translations and some commentary), in Spanish¹⁹ and German.²⁰ Mention should be made as well of an article by J. Stevenson, “Ascent Through the Heavens From Egypt to Ireland” (*Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 5 [1983], p. 21-36), which examined the possible relationship between an unattested apocalyptic apocryphon whose exis-

15. All commentators, ancient and modern, are agreed that Paul is speaking of himself here, although there is disagreement over his reason for using the third person.

16. Are the third heaven and Paradise the same place ? The material preceding each of the two place names has a formal similarity which has led many to argue that Paul is repeating, while slightly changing, his account, and thus that Paradise is to be found in the third heaven. Others, ancient and modern, have argued that they are two separate places, and thus that Paul is saying that he first went up to the third heaven, and then to Paradise. One cannot be sure which explanation was accepted by the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul*.

17. New Revised Standard Version.

18. There are references to “Apocalypse[s] of Paul” and/or speculations on Paul’s ascent in many old canon lists and heresiological works, although it is extremely unlikely that any of them refer to our text. They are probably references to the *Visio sancti Pauli*, also known as the *Apocalypse of Paul*, an extremely popular and influential work which helped to inspire Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

19. R. ETCHEVERRIA, “El Apocalipsis de Pablo (NHC V2 : 17,19-24,9) : Traducion y comentario,” in R. BLASQUEZ, ed., *Quaere Paulum : Miscelanea homenaje a Monseñor Doctor Lorenzo Turrado Salamanca*, Universidad Pontificia (coll. “Biblioteca Salmanticensis”, Estudios, 39), 1981, p. 217-236.

20. H.J. KLAUCK, “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), p. 151-190.

tence can be surmised from a family of Irish, English and Latin apocalypses, and the *Apocalypse of Paul*.

The *Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi* series, section “Textes”, published by the BCNH project at Université Laval, is preparing to issue a book-length treatment of the text, co-authored by Jean-Marc Rosenstiehl and myself, and it was the subject of a paper by Louis Painchaud, Marie-Pierre Bussièrès and myself presented at the Society for Biblical Literature meeting in Toronto Nov. 2002²¹, as well as a paper presented at the AAR/EIR conference in Ottawa in April of 2002.²²

III. THE PRESENCE OF THE THREE CURRENTS IN THE *APOCALYPSE OF PAUL*

Now, over the years that I have worked on this strange little text, I think I’ve managed to develop a fairly in-depth understanding of how the text works with and uses the apocalyptic tradition. The simple fact that the *Apocalypse of Paul* is an apocalyptic work has never been seriously put in question: despite Rudolph’s odd desire to establish its genre as being that of “gnostic dialogue”²³, all the other research on the work has been unanimous in considering it to be most closely linked to the Judeo-Christian ascension apocalypses.

As regards Paulinism, Schenke’s article, referred to above, was liberatory in this regard, enabling me to see the *Apocalypse of Paul* as a completely valid exemplar of Paulinism, even though it does not deal with Paul’s theology at all, but rather treats him as a purely legendary figure, a mystical warrior rather than a thinker. This understanding is in contrast to the general scholarly consensus: there has to date been little discussion of the *Apocalypse of Paul* as a Paulinist work, and what little discussion there has been has tended to denigrate its importance²⁴.

21. “The *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Adversus Haereses* and the second century battle for Paul’s legacy,” which in revised form will be published in a forthcoming edition of the *Journal for Early Christian Studies*.

22. “De 2 Co 12,2 à Codex V de Nag Hammadi : La trajectoire de l’*Apocalypse de Paul*”.

23. K. RUDOLPH, “Der gnostische ‘Dialog’ als literarisches Genus”, in P. NAGEL, ed., *Probleme der koptischen Literatur*, Halle, Institut für Byzantinistik der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1968, p. 99.

24. KOSCHORKE argues (“Paulus in den Nag Hammadi Texten : Ein Betrage zur Geschichte der Paulusrezeption im frühen Christentum,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 78 [1979], p. 191) : “Diese Schrift hat mit Paulus nur insofern zu tun, als der Verfasser die Nachricht von die Entrückung des Apostles [...] als Einsteig für die Schilderung einer Reise durch die zehn Himmel nutzt ; ansonsten findet sich hier nichts Paulinisches”. Similarly, LINDEMANN writes (*Paulus im ältesten Christentum : Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1979, p. 99) : “[...] fehlt dem Paulus der ApcPl jede Individualität”. Lindemann does expand his point somewhat later on in his book (p. 333 — the *Apocalypse of Paul* “ist insofern durchaus ein Beleg für die Wertschätzung des Pauluszumindes in bestimmten gnostischen Kreisen”) but concludes (p. 333-334) that “diese Wertschätzung stützt sich nicht auf konkrete Kenntnis der paulinischen Theologie und besteht schon gar nicht in einer inhaltlichen Übernahme paulinischen Denkens”. And he gives (p. 98) a more explicit, but otherwise similar, dismissal of Epiphanius’ reference to an *Ascension of Paul* (*Panarion* 38,2.5) : “[...] mit inhaltlichen Aussagen derpaulinischen Theologie scheint, sofern das Referat des Epiphanius zuverlässig sein sollte, dieses Buch nichts zutun gehabt zu haben”. This is of course literally true — there is no hint from Epiphanius’ description that the *Ascension of Paul* dealt with Paul’s theology. But is it therefore to be excluded from consideration of early Christian Paulinism ? I would argue that, like

And finally, working in collaboration with Prof. Louis Painchaud and Marie-Pierre Bussi eres, a post-doctoral student and lecturer at Universit e Laval, I was also fortunate enough to be granted the opportunity to demonstrate that the text is indeed Valentinian, something that William Murdock had assumed but did not convincingly prove²⁵, as well as establishing a plausible reconstruction of the socio-historical context to which it responds, which I will discuss further below.

So, now that the basic three currents of thought which the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* received and incorporated into the text have been identified and to some degree discussed, let us move into the next phase of this paper, namely the investigation of how these currents interact, and how they are manipulated in order to achieve the goal of the work.

IV. SITZ IM LEBEN AND GOAL OF THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

My current hypothesis²⁶ as regards this goal is the following : The *Apocalypse of Paul* was written in a situation of discussion and argument between Valentinian and non-Valentinian Christians. Both sides wished to claim the authority of Paul for their respective points of view, and thus sought to interpret his writings to show that he agreed with them, rather than with their opponents.²⁷ Now, Valentinians and non-Valentinians had very different ideas about the composition and extent of the heavenly realms and the natures of their inhabitants. As noted above, the *Apocalypse of Paul* claims to be telling the story of the ascension which Paul describes in 2 Cor 12,2-4. In presenting a Valentinian understanding of the heavens through which Paul rises, the *Apocalypse of Paul* uses this ascension to legitimate the Valentinian view of things, by attaching it to the apostle Paul. This was an important thing to do, because there was a great deal of conflict and debate within the early church between those who had different views of what true Christianity was, and what it meant. In order to

the *Apocalypse of Paul*, it is a clearly Paulinist text, witness of a reception of Paul, but a non-theological reception.

25. Cf. W. MURDOCK, "The Apocalypse of Paul," Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1968 ; G. MACRAE and W. MURDOCK, "The Apocalypse of Paul (V,2)," in J. ROBINSON, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, revised edition, New York, HarperCollins, 1988, p. 239-241. Interestingly enough, Murdock's assertion of the text's Valentinian background derived from his belief that a certain attested aspect of Valentinian theology explained a problematic motif in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In my opinion, however, this motif is not indebted to Valentinian theology. Thus while I agree with his conclusion, I disagree with the means by which he reached it. My argument for the text's Valentinian status is based instead on its similarities with *Adversus Haereses* II,30.7. I should note as well that these similarities were not originally noted by myself, Painchaud and Bussi eres : they have been mentioned by many others. However, prior to our SBL paper they had not been dealt with in depth, or convincingly explained. In his Spanish translation of and commentary on the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Etcheverria also advanced the possibility that it could be a work of Valentinian propaganda, arguing that the paucity of mythological development would indicate either that it was composed at an early stage of Valentinianism, or that the work is a piece of propaganda aimed at the catholic Church.
26. More fully discussed in KALER, PAINCHAUD, BUSSI ERES, "The Apocalypse of Paul and Irenaeus", paper presented at the Nov. 2002 SBL meeting in Toronto ; and in ROSENSTIEHL, KALER, *L'Apocalypse de Paul* (forthcoming).
27. The real, historical Paul would probably not have approved of either group. But that's a side point.

support their claims, people would refer back to the first generation of Christians, who were seen as uniquely authoritative, being the founders of Christianity and the associates of Christ. The author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* wants to strengthen the Valentinian cause by associating it with Paul, the prestigious apostle to the Gentiles and the recipient of a revelation of the Lord himself.²⁸

The *Apocalypse of Paul* is thus what one could call an “exoteric” document. In contrast to esoteric works, which are meant to be used only by an in-group and are kept secret from outsiders, exoteric documents are specifically aimed at outsiders. They are instruments of propaganda, although the desired goal of the propagandistic effort varies from text to text. Thus for example Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*²⁹ is an exoteric document written by a Valentinian teacher to a potential student, while the *Interpretation of Knowledge*³⁰, also Valentinian, appears to have been written to resolve internal tensions within a Christian community. As L. Painchaud notes regarding this latter text (unpublished): “Il est vraisemblable que cette communauté ait été divisée en deux groupes, d’un côté une faction de spirituels/charismatiques occupant une position dominante et de l’autre le reste des fidèles. Cherchant manifestement à résoudre ce conflit, l’auteur de l’homélie [the *Interpretation of Knowledge*] s’adresse aux *simpliciores* dans la communauté [...]”

I said above that the *Apocalypse of Paul* was written to convince non-Valentinians that the Valentinian understanding of the universe was endorsed by Paul, and is thus more authoritative than the non-Valentinian understandings. In order to do this, it had to possess verisimilitude — that is, it had to respond to the expectations of its audience. This need explains the stereotypical ascension apocalypse features that are found in the work, which I also mentioned earlier. By the late second or early third centuries (which is probably the period in which our text was written), the ascension apocalypses were accepted as being reliable guides as to the content of the heavens, and as showing the way that one progressed through those heavens. The author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* wants his or her text to be considered as being reliable as well, and so adopts the accepted conventions.³¹ As far as we can tell at present³², he or she does not slavishly follow any one ascension apocalypse, but rather takes stereotypical features common to many of them — although the *Testament of Abraham*, the

28. Galatians 1:13-17.

29. Preserved in Epiphanius’ *Panarion* 33,3.1-33,7.10.

30. Nag Hammadi Codex XI,1.

31. It is quite possible as well, of course, that he or she herself believed in these conventions.

32. I am currently in the process of investigating the possibility that both the *Apocalypse of Paul* and an unattested “seven heavens apocryphon” that inspired several extant Old Irish, English and Latin apocalypses were derived from the same apocalyptic ur-text. Jane Stevenson had earlier argued that this “seven heavens apocryphon” could be descended from the *Apocalypse of Paul* itself, but in my view this is not very likely. Instead, the significant similarities between the two works seem, if they are significant at all, to argue for a common dependence of the two works on a third, unattested apocalypse. However, this research is in its early stages.

Apocalypse of Zephaniah and the *Ascension of Isaiah* may have been particularly inspirational.³³

The hero of an ascension apocalypse is usually a respected figure from long ago — thus we see ascension accounts attributed to people like Enoch, Isaiah, Moses, and so on.³⁴ In this case the figure is Paul, to whom a great deal of importance is attached. At the climax of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Paul declares that his mission on earth is “to take captive captivity” — he is a cosmic liberator. In fact, it is not going too far to argue that the *Apocalypse of Paul* seems to identify Paul with Jesus, showing him (Paul) as being the means by which Christ’s salvific mission is carried out.³⁵ But be that as it may, one can certainly say in general that Paul, like other heroes of ascension apocalypses, is given a great task to carry out upon his return to earth.

This presentation of Paul ties into a side of Paulinism that I discussed above, a truly popular Paulinism that was less concerned with abstruse theological analysis of his writings, and more concerned with the heroic figure of Paul. I am speaking here simply of the tendency to work with Paul’s figure, not with any particular version of that figure. There existed a great variety of understandings of the figure of Paul, or — as one might say — a great variety of possible stories in which Paul could play the lead role. The important thing is that this sort of Paulinism does fit Paul into a story, it turns him into a model for others to emulate.

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33. For the *Apocalypse of Paul*’s apparent debt to the *Testament of Abraham*, see G. MACRAE, “The Judgment Scene in the Coptic Apocalypse of Paul”, in G. NICKELSBURG, ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham*, Missoula, Scholars Press (coll. “Society for Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies”, 6), 1976, p. 285-288. There are aspects of the *Apocalypse of Paul*’s scene in the sixth heaven that are structurally parallel to the equivalent scene in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. It seems unlikely that either text directly influenced the other but it is possible that both draw on similar sources. Likewise, in the description of the inhabitants of the fifth heaven the *Apocalypse of Paul* seems similar to the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. In this case, where it is a question of content-related issues, direct influence of *Zephaniah* on *Paul* does indeed seem possible, especially given that the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* seems to have been a popular text, leaving an influence on the *Visio sancti Pauli* as well (see R. CASEY, “The Apocalypse of Paul”, *New Testament Studies*, 34 [1933], p. 1-33).
34. They are almost always pseudonymous, with the narrator claiming the identity of a figure from the past. In fact, Paul’s own account of his ascension (2 Cor 12,2-4) is itself a very rare exception to this general rule — and even there he uses the third person, although it is clear that he is talking about himself.
35. With regard to the text’s Christology, there are two curious features. The first is the complete absence of Christ — Paul is enlightened and guided by a Spirit, and even in the higher heavens he is only said to have met “those that were there” or his “fellow spirits.” The second curiosity has to do with the text’s apparent substitution of Paul for Christ. At one point in his ascent Paul declares his intention to return to Earth and “take captive the captivity which was taken captive in the captivity of Babylon,” an allusion to Ephesians 4:8. However, in the Ephesians passage it is Christ who is going to be taking captives, not Paul. Now, as I mentioned earlier, Galatians 1:13-17 was one of the scriptural bases for the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In that passage, Paul says that “God [...] was pleased to reveal his Son to me.” However, this passage could also be read as follows: “God [...] was pleased to reveal his Son *in me* (ἐν ἐμοί).” If read in this way (and the Valentinians were well-known for their careful exploitation of nuances and possible alternate meanings of the vocabulary and syntax of the texts they interpreted), the passage links Paul and Christ, implicitly making Christ responsible for Paul’s mission, but also explaining His absence: He is not separate from Paul, a figure which Paul could see or meet, but rather is in some sense within Paul, identified with him, and also identified with Paul’s future activities. This coheres with Heracleon’s belief (which outraged Origen) that pneumatics are essentially of the same nature as God (*Comm. In Joh.* 13.25).

For some, such as the author(s) of the Pastorals, he was the model of saintly endurance and obedience, patiently carrying out his mission despite all his humiliations and sufferings. For others, such as Marcion, he was more like a new prophet, a revolutionary leader proclaiming the tenets of the new religion of Christ and showing his churches the way to salvation. In the *Acts of Paul* he becomes an idealized martyr, being led by his proclamation of Christ from one torment to another. For the *Apocalypse of Paul*, he is recast in the image of a stereotypical apocalyptic hero, who ascends through the heavens and ends up with an interview with God Himself, wherein he receives a great mission that he will carry out on his return to earth.

Thus the text's Paulinism is assimilated to apocalyptic norms: the specifically Pauline aspects are subordinated to the apocalyptic, so that they add superficial colorations without altering the basically apocalyptic basis of the work. In the case of the apocalyptic and Paulinist currents, then, we see a definite tendency, structurally at least, to privilege the apocalyptic current.

So far then, of the three currents I mentioned above, we see that the Pauline current is definitely subordinated to, or rather incorporated into, the apocalyptic — and there are two ways, which are not mutually exclusive, to explain this. The first has to do with what I discussed above about the use of Paul's name and status to legitimate the text's authority. One could write an *Apocalypse of Joe Smith*, but it would lack the punch that Paul's name gives. The second way of explaining this has to do with the legendary aspect of the text's (and thus presumably the author's) Paulinism. As we saw in the examples cited above, legendary Paulinism appreciated Paul as a heroic figure from the past, cast in some more or less stereotypical mold. Here the mold, or the stereotype, is that of the apocalyptic hero.

When we factor in the third current that the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* received and factored into her work, the situation gets a bit more complex. This current is Valentinianism, and it takes precedence over the apocalyptic material — in fact, one could say that it's the defining current. But whereas the apocalyptic current provided the structure of the text, into which the Pauline material was fitted, the Valentinian material doesn't actually have as much of an impact of the structure of the text as it does on the interpretation of that structure. For while Paul's progression through the heavens and the things that he sees there pretty much all follow apocalyptic norms, these events and sights are given Valentinian interpretations. To clarify this point, I will give just one example.

In a common apocalyptic stereotype, the visionary meets God in the seventh heaven, a figure of overwhelming glory and majesty. God graciously reveals secrets about the universe to the visionary, as well as the sacred task that he is to carry out on Earth. Then amidst great jubilation the visionary descends to Earth again. But according to Valentinian thought, the Judeo-Christian God was only an inferior, ignorant deity, who the gnostic would probably have to oppose and overcome. Accordingly, in the *Apocalypse of Paul* the scene is structured just the way it would be in a conventional apocalypse, even to the extent of describing God with the trappings of celestial glory that one would expect, but as the scene unfolds the God figure is re-

vealed to be rather weak and petty, in need of enlightenment from Paul, and unable — though he tries — to stop Paul from ascending beyond his heaven, up into realms of which this God knows nothing.

There are other characteristically Valentinian touches which are incorporated in this way into the text : the overall impression that they give is that the apocalyptic tales are factually correct, but that their authors have not understood the true significance of the events that they describe, and that Valentinian thought provides the hermeneutical key which enables one to decipher the real meaning of what goes on in the heavens.

V. CONCLUSION

Now, by way of conclusion, I would like to outline the means by which the relationship between these three currents, and the way that they have been organized, relates to the text's goals.³⁶ As I said above, the *Apocalypse of Paul* was written to convince its audience that Paul's ascension to the heavens conformed to what Valentinian thought would lead one to expect from such ascension, and thus that Valentinianism was a more accurate description of religious matters than its competitors, and also that it had Paul's authority behind it. Accordingly, we can see that the Paulinist element would have been incorporated to add authority to the text, attaching it to a name that the audience would respect. This was a common tactic in the ancient world — speaking with regard only to Paul, there is a huge body of writing attributed to him or allegedly recounting the events of his life, much of which having little or nothing to do with the historical Paul.³⁷ In choosing this approach, then, the author of our text would have been following a well-established custom.

The apocalyptic current, the deliberate use of the clichés of apocalyptic writings, would have made the text convincing to its audience, and quite possibly to its author as well, by responding to their expectations of what the heavens would contain.

Thus, if all went well, the Paulinist and apocalyptic elements of the text would have won over the audience, convincing it that the text was both authoritative and true. This would have prepared the way for the third element, the Valentinian, which

36. In the discussion that follows, I will be writing as if the author knew and planned out what he or she was doing. I would like, therefore, to make it clear that my goal is merely to describe what is going on, and how it interacts with a certain number of limited criteria. Such analyses are necessary, but we must always be careful not to replace our former unreflective trust in the pious ethics of the religious author with an equally naïve, not to say facile, cynicism. I do not wish what follows to give the impression that the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was deliberately thinking, "Aha ! Here's how I will hoodwink these gullible fools !" Not at all. The problem is to find a way to discuss these things without either imputing such motives to the author, or making the ridiculous and illogical assumption that it is "the text" which does this, all by itself, without an author. As yet I have not resolved this situation — hence the inclusion of this caveat.

37. Including the Pastorals, probably Ephesians and Colossians, perhaps 2 Thessalonians and the second half of Acts — to speak only of works canonized in the New Testament ! To give an example closer in date and purpose to our text : Towards the end of the second century (around the time of composition of the *Apocalypse of Paul*) an unnamed presbyter wrote the work known 3 *Corinthians* in order to combat gnosticizing heresies of his day.

one might say piggybacks on the authenticity of the other two currents. Acting parasitically, it uses their status to ensure the acceptance its own message, and it can do this because Valentinianism, like many gnostic systems, relies on a way of looking at things, an exegetical stance. “It ain’t what’s there, it’s how you look at it”, so to speak — and thus the apocalyptic structure can be simultaneously accepted and reinterpreted by the application of a Valentinian hermeneutic, a hermeneutic which relies on the authority of this very apocalyptic structure for its acceptance.