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The Apocalypse of Paul (NHC V,2): Cosmology, Anthropology, and Ethics

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Abstract

The cosmology behind the Apocalypse of Paul is interesting in many respects. To begin with it shows a peculiar ten-heaven structure instead of eight heavens as one might normally expect in a Gnostic text; it structures the cosmos into three clear, separate regions; and it omits any reference to the first two heavens. At the same time, Apocalypse of Paul's cosmology is especially fascinating, on the one hand for the close connection with the text's anthropology, which conceives of man in the light of the cosmological framework, and, on the other, for its description of Paul's ascension as an ethical progress. Most interesting for the present context, however, is that this description includes rather transgressive elements, such as the presentation of the Biblical god as the Demiurge and a polemical view of the apostles. The latter are not only said to be stationed in the archontic region together with the Demiurge, but also to be surpassed by Paul, who is the only individual entitled to enter the divine region. After providing a thorough analysis of Apocalypse of Paul's cosmology, the present paper provides an overview of the anthropological, theological, and ethical implications of its worldview.

Keywords

Apocalypse of Paul – Valentinian – apocalyptic text – ascent literature – Gnosticism – ethics

Despite the obvious disdain shown by the first scholarly approaches for the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul in the fifth codex of the Nag Hammadi corpus,

the text is very interesting in many respects.¹ To begin with, it is interesting from an intertextual perspective, since even if not explicitly the text presents itself as a continuation of Paul's reference of his rapture to the third heaven in 2 Cor 12:2–4.² Apocalypse of Paul provides an nice example of how later Christian generations combined tradition and innovation in dealing with their textual tradition.³ While Pauline lore is preserved as authoritative, this authority is used as a starting point for something new, for a creative interpretation of this tradition.

Apocalypse of Paul is also interesting due to its subject matter, since it describes the ascent of the soul not as something taking place after the death of the individual, but as an out-of-body experience.⁴ It provides the testimony of a witness, of a spectator who describes what he was allowed to see (probably) during a mystical or ecstatic experience. And the Apocalypse of Paul is intriguing from the history of religions perspective due to its inclusion of a description of the punishment of sinners. The Greek background of the scene is clear, I think, not only in the description of both sinner and his punishment in the form of reincarnation⁵ but also in the fact that it takes place in heaven, and especially in that the lot of the sinners is not presented as a counterpart of the bliss of the righteous.⁶ No less exciting is the Apocalypse of Paul's relationship to the *Visio Pauli*. Some years ago⁷ I compared the Coptic version to the Greek⁸ and Latin versions⁹ of the text. Presently I am working with the Coptologist J. Van der Vliet from the University of Leiden on a new edition of the Coptic text of the *Visio*.¹⁰

The most interesting aspect, however, is no doubt the cosmological framework behind the text, which includes many transgressive elements. And this is not simply for the peculiarity of its inclusion of ten heavens instead of eight

1 Schenke 1966, 25; See also the opinion by the Berliner Arbeitskreis in Tröger 1973, 43. In the same line, Böhlig 1963, 15 15.

2 Klauck 1985.

3 Kaler, Painchaud and Bussieres, 2004 173–93; see also Harrison 2004. On the relationship between first-century Paul and its reception during the second century, see more recently Kaler 2008, 77–119.

4 Wright 2000, 163.

5 On which see Solmsen 1982 and, more recently, Riedweg 2015.

6 On the emphasis of this contrast in Christian texts see Roig Lanzillotta 2003.

7 Roig Lanzillotta 2007.

8 Tischendorf 1866 [1966], XIV–XVIII, 34–69.

9 Silverstein and Hilhorst 1997.

10 The Coptic text was first edited by Wallis-Budge, 1915, 534–74, 1043–84.

heavens—as one might normally expect in a Gnostic text¹¹—nor the fact that the text structures the cosmos into three clear, separate regions, nor that it omits any reference to the first two heavens. The cosmology behind the text is especially fascinating, on the one hand, because of its close connection with the text's anthropology, which conceives of man in the light of the cosmological framework, and, on the other, for its description of Paul's ascension as an ethical progress. Besides, in depicting this cosmological whole, Apocalypse of Paul introduces several polemical and transgressive elements, such as the attribution of the traits of the Biblical God to the demiurge, and the view of the apostles as inhabitants of the archontic region, as "psychics" inferior to the apostle Paul. In the next pages I will focus mainly on Apocalypse of Paul's cosmology and the anthropological, theological, and ethical implications of its worldview, but will point in passing to the transgressive elements included in this text. After a first section that describes the text, its context, character, and condition, the second provides the promised analysis of the text's cosmology. I will close my paper with some remarks regarding the character affiliation of the text.

Text and Contents of the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul

The Coptic version of Apocalypse of Paul is the second text of codex v, a codex which, if we exclude *Eugnostos*, is of a marked apocalyptic nature.¹² It occupies seven pages between folios 17 and 24 of a manuscript of very poor papyrus quality, as a result of which the text is now and then very damaged.¹³ In addition to the first pages, the top and bottom of each page generally include lacunae.¹⁴ The Sahidic dialect of codex v presents some peculiarities, which accord-

11 The entire corpus of Gnostic testimonies, from the polemical treatises to the Nag Hammadi writings, unanimously conceive of the heavenly region as formed by seven heavens. See, for example, Corp. herm. 1.9; 9.18–20 (Nock and Festugière 1945–1954); 13; 10.19–11.5; 24–26 (Nock and Festugière 1945–1954); Ap. John NHC II,1 11.23–35 Nat. Rulers NHC II,4 95.1–5; Orig. World NHC II,5 101.9–102.16, on which Tardieu 1974, 62–65; in general, see Festugière 1932, 101–15. The only notable exception affirming the rule is Pistis Sophia AC 136, which apparently refers to only five heavens. Yarbrow Collins 1996, 52, contends that even if the seven planets might be implied here, unexpectedly Sun and Moon have been omitted.

12 Indeed, besides Apoc. Paul, the MS includes three other apocalypses, namely 1 Apoc. Jas NHC V,3, 2 Apoc. Jas NHC V,4, and Apoc. Adam NHC V,5.

13 Murdock and MacRae 1979.

14 See Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 12–14.

ing to Alexander Böhlig are due to Fayyumic influences¹⁵ and according to H.M. Schenke to the strong Subachmimic features of the pre-classical Sahidic of the text.¹⁶ As far as Apocalypse of Paul is concerned, Funk has pointed out that the Boharicisms of the text seems to indicate that it circulated in Bohairic before being translated into Sahidic.¹⁷ The original text was presumably written in Greek in the second century, while Trevijano Echeverría would date it with yet more precision to between 150 and 170.¹⁸

Despite the fact that the first scholarly approaches to Apocalypse of Paul do not consider it to be an important text,¹⁹ the last two decades have seen a renewed interest in the apocalypse, with new assessments of its numerous intriguing aspects, such as genre, structure, character and intention, and affiliation.²⁰ As far as the literary genre of the text is concerned, its pseudonymity, the report of the vision that includes the *angelus interpres* and its depiction of the other world allows us to classify it, in spite of Kurt Rudolph,²¹ as an apocalyptic text and, more precisely, in the subcategory of heavenly journey texts.²²

In terms of its structure, the text has been divided into two or three sections. William Murdock and George MacRae distinguish three main episodes, namely an epiphany scene, a scene of judgment and punishment, and a heavenly journey.²³ Martin Krause, however, prefers to distinguish only two, namely the epiphany and the ascension, which in view of the text's message and implications seems to make, in my view, more sense.²⁴ When assessing the text's character, earlier studies originally considered it the "result of popular syncretism" due to an alleged mixture of Jewish and Hellenistic elements,²⁵ an opinion that seemed to be reinforced by Rodolphe Kasser's view of the text as a result of redactional reworking of diverse sources.²⁶ Murdock and Kaler, however, have attempted to undermine its alleged syncretic character by claiming

15 Böhlig 1963, 11–14.

16 Schenke 1966.

17 Funk 1995, 107–47.

18 Trevijano Echeverría 1981.

19 See note 1 above.

20 For an overview of the literature on all these aspects, see the two most recent and excellent studies by Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005 and Kaler 2008, *passim*.

21 Rudolph 1968, 99, prefers the description "Gnostic Dialogue," since the text includes this dialogue after the description of the vision of the heavens.

22 Krause 1983, 626–28, on the basis of the criteria offered by Vielhauer 1975; See also Fallon 1979, 138; and Klauck 1985, 159–60.

23 Murdock and MacRae 1979, 48.

24 Krause 1983, 625.

25 Murdock and MacRae 1979, 48; Böhlig 1963; Klauck 1985, 178–187; MacRae 1976, 285–88.

26 Kasser 1965, 76.

that the Jewish apocalyptic current was already a syncretic phenomenon.²⁷ Despite early scholarly hesitation as to the affiliation of the text, recent studies finally describe it as (early) Valentinian.²⁸

The text relates Paul's spiritual ascent to heaven. After the lacuna-filled beginning, Paul meets a revealer in the form of a little child,²⁹ who might incarnate the polymorphic Jesus.³⁰ Later the revealer is referred to as either Spirit³¹ or the Holy Spirit.³² Paul's *angelus interpretes* takes him directly to the third heaven, in what seems to be an intentional continuation of 2 Cor 12:2–4. After a brief description of the punishment of sinners in the fourth and fifth heavens, and a short reference to the light of the sixth, the text describes Paul's encounter in the seventh heaven with an old man, the demiurge, who attempts to impede his ascent. After giving him the password, however, Paul further proceeds to the *ogdoad*, after which he reaches the ninth and the tenth heaven, where he finally becomes pure spirit.

A Tripartite View of the Cosmos

The cosmos in Apocalypse of Paul consists of three large regions. The first of them, symbolically referred to as the mountain of Jericho, is the material world where Paul and the apostles live, and where Jesus' epiphany as a small child actually takes place.³³ This is followed by the celestial region, the hebdomad symbolically associated with Jerusalem, the region inhabited by "principalities and authorities and archangels and powers and the whole race of demons"³⁴ and, of course, the demiurge; finally, there is the divine region, or *pleroma*, which consists of three levels beginning with the ogdoad and ending with the tenth heaven, to which Paul's spirit actually belongs.

The text does not show any special interest in the lower realm. The little child simply associates the physical world with the mountain of Jericho,³⁵ an allegory that Paul should be able to understand if his intellect is awakened,

27 Murdock 1968, 237, cited in Kaler 2008, 38–39.

28 Trevijano Etcheverría 1981; Kaler 2008, 40.

29 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 18.6, 8, 13.

30 Roig Lanzillotta 2013.

31 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.4; 22.1.

32 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.21; 19.26; 21.22.

33 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 18.6; 18.13–14. See Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 70–77.

34 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.2–5.

35 References in Rosenstiehl and Kaler, 2005, 26–34.

as the child puts it, “so that you may know the hidden things in those that are visible.”³⁶ Rosenstiehl and Kaler are right in pointing out that the importance of the mountain is as a place of revelation.³⁷ In the present context of Paul’s ascension, however, I think it is more interesting to interpret the mountain in line with the Heracleon fragment 20 as the material world: Paul’s point of departure is the lower realm, the sphere of influence of the Devil (below).³⁸

The tangible world is consequently referred to as “the earth,”³⁹ as “the creation,”⁴⁰ as the “world of the dead,”⁴¹ or else simply as “the world.”⁴² It is the place in which both Paul’s and the apostle’s likenesses remain while *angelus interpretes* and Paul are traveling through the heavens, something that the text emphasizes by expressions such as “and he looked down”⁴³ or “he gazed down and saw.”⁴⁴ From an anthropological perspective, this region is associated with the body, which is mentioned three times and is always equated with sin.⁴⁵ From an ethical perspective, it is the scenario in which lawless deeds, murder, and concupiscence take place. From an epistemological one, finally, we may say that it is the realm of darkness,⁴⁶ where torpor of the mind obstructs

36 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.13–14.

37 Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 26–29. The “elaborate and ingenious” explanation is, according to Kaler (2008, 9 n. 17), due to Rosenstiehl. Kaler comments it in extenso at 2008, 198–201.

38 According to Orbe 1983, 91, we find here an allegorical reading of Luke 10:30 that inverts the terms of the story. Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 27 n. 159, consider Orbe was probably thinking of Heracleon’s exegesis of John 2:12. This is even more likely taking into consideration Heracleon’s interpretation in Frag. 20 (of John 4:21), of the mountain as the material world: “The mountain represents the Devil, or his world, since the Devil was one part of the whole of matter, but the world is the total mountain of evil, a deserted dwelling place of beasts, to which all who lived before the law and all Gentiles render worship. But Jerusalem represents the creation or the Creator whom the Jews worship. . . . The mountain is the creation which the Gentiles worship, but Jerusalem is the creator whom the Jews serve. You then who are spiritual should worship neither the creation nor the Craftsman, but the Father of Truth. And he (Jesus) accepts her (the Samaritan woman) as one of the already faithful, and to be counted with those who worship in truth”. See Wucherpfennig 2002, 130–131.

39 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.29.

40 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.4, *ktisis*; 23.27.

41 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.19–20; 23.13–14.

42 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 21.5, *kosmos*.

43 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.29–30.

44 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.1–2.

45 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.22–23; 20.29; 21.20.

46 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 21.13.

knowledge and from which consequently one must awake.⁴⁷ In short, it is the realm of the captivity (αἰχμαλωσία), which Paul mentions by means of a polyp-ton in his answer to the Demiurge in the seventh heaven:

I am going down to the world (κόσμος) of
the dead in order to lead captive (αἰχμαλωτίζειν)
the captivity (αἰχμαλωσία)
that was led captive (αἰχμαλωτίζειν)
in the captivity (αἰχμαλωσία) of Babylon.⁴⁸

This is all we can derive from the text about the earthly realm. There is no further cosmographical interest, no reference, for example, to the higher, bordering region between the sublunary world and the celestial region, sometimes described in other texts as the “firmament” or “the air,” as in the Ascension of Isaiah,⁴⁹ or “the region in the middle of the air,” as in the Coptic Asclepius.⁵⁰ In my view, this lack of interest shows that despite the clear separation between both spheres there is a given continuity between them: it seems as if Apocalypse of Paul conceives the lower and the celestial realms as parts of an organic whole.

From the mountain of Jericho, Paul is taken directly to the third heaven. Maybe due to its being a continuation of Second Corinthians, or to the fact that the focus of the text is neither the netherworld nor the celestial region but the pleroma, the first two heavens are simply omitted.⁵¹ The second region of this tripartite cosmic whole is the celestial realm, which is symbolically referred to as Jerusalem.⁵² Heracleon’s fragment 13 allegorizes the way up to Jerusalem as the ascension from the material to the psychic.⁵³ The already mentioned fragment 20 further associates the city with both the creator god and the psychic

47 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 18.22; 19.10.

48 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 23.13–17. On the use of the term αἰχμαλωσία ‘captivity’ and derivatives in the context of Nag Hammadi, see Klauck 1985, 177–178.

49 See Ascen. Isa. 7.9–11; 10.30, on which Roig Lanzillotta 2016, 1.3.1 and n. 22.

50 Perf. Disc. NHC VI,8 76.22–37.

51 Against the view of Kasser 1969, 260, who surmises a complicated textual history for the text in order to explain the silence regarding the first two heavens, Kaler 2008, 60–61, already surmised that 2 Cor 12:2–4 as point of departure may sufficiently explain this omission.

52 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 18.5; 18[18].

53 See Heracleon’s Frag. 13 (on John 2:13–16): “The ascent to Jerusalem signifies the ascent of the Lord from material realm things to the animate (psychic) place, which is an image of Jerusalem”. On the issue Wucherpfennig 2002, 51–53 and 64–67.

region.⁵⁴ I think consequently that the Jerusalem of Apocalypse of Paul cannot be put in connection with the Valentinian ogdoad, as described by Irenaeus.⁵⁵ As is also the case in *(First) Revelation of James*, Jerusalem “gives the cup of bitterness to the sons of the light. She is the dwelling place of a great number of archons.”⁵⁶

In comparison to elementary level of the mountain of Jericho, Jerusalem represents a higher stage of development, which in the present context is the realm that the apostles, as “elect spirits,”⁵⁷ are said to attain (but not to trespass).⁵⁸ The little child in fact refers to Jerusalem as the apostles’ domain.⁵⁹ When Paul starts his way up, their psychic component is already there since, when Paul looks up, he sees them greeting him,⁶⁰ and they are also said to accompany Paul during his travel through the hebdomad.⁶¹ In spite of the question raised by earlier scholars as to whether or not the apostles ascend with Paul,⁶² I think they do but only up to the upper border of the celestial region, namely to the confines of the hebdomad. In a last analysis the heavenly Jerusalem is the apostle’s proper region. Consequently they not only greet Paul from there when he is still on earth; they also accompany him during his ascent, and when

54 See above note 34.

55 See Kaler in Rosenstiehl and Kaler (2005, 271–272), in reference to Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.5.3.

56 1 Apoc. Jas. NHC V,3 25.16–19. trans. Schoedel 1979. On Jerusalem as the habitat of the archons, see also DeConick 2009, 276–8.

57 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.17.

58 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 24.1–4.

59 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 18.18–19.

60 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.18–20.

61 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 21.29–30; 22.14–16. In contrast to Paul’s mobility, which takes him from the lower to the highest realm, the figure of the Apostles is rather static. In the beginning they are already in the celestial region, in Jerusalem, since they greet Paul from there when he is preparing himself to ascend (19.18–20). At the end, they also greet Paul from the seventh heaven, once he proceeds to the ogdoad.

62 See Tröger 1973, 43, who refers to Schenke’s opinion according to which 20.4 with its reference to the “creation” seems to imply a negative answer. Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.18–20, however, clearly shows that the apostles are already in the celestial region, since it says that Paul raises his eyes and sees them greeting him. I think the text intentionally distinguishes between Paul’s and the apostles’s “likeness,” which remains in the lower realm, and the soul, which ascends to the archontic region. As for the third, divine region only Paul’s spirit is allowed to enter. Thus also Klauck, 1985, 169. See also Kaler, 2008, 11 n. 37, who provides two additional reasons for denying that the apostles accompany Paul beyond the ogdoad: 1) to begin with, the frame story from Galatians places the apostles in Jerusalem; 2) secondly, the apostles are always explicitly mentioned whenever they are referred to.

Paul finally abandons the hebdomad, while entering the ogdoad he looks (back) at them and sees them greeting him, as it were to wish him fare-well.⁶³

I think this interpretation fits well in the view developed by April DeConick of the apostles as archons in the Gospel of Judas. As she has clearly shown, there is amply testimony in a wide array of early Christian writings as to both the (negative or positive) view of the apostles' relationship to the zodiac and their equation to the archontic powers populating the astral region.⁶⁴ At any rate we seem to be dealing here with a highly polemical statement about the status and character of the apostles, who are not only hierarchically inferior to *the* apostle Paul but are also associated with the passions that characterize the psychic realm. Most transgressive, however, are the implications of such a statement: while Paul's authority is based on the *pleroma*, that of the apostles is derived from their service to the rule of the demiurge.

Another important polemical aspect is perhaps the portrayal of the demiurge⁶⁵ with its reminiscences of Daniel 7. Even if he remains a negative figure, apparent in his hostility to Paul and his obstructing his way up, it is interesting that the text does not include other typically negative aspects belonging to the demiurge's description, such his beast-like countenance or his presumptuous arrogance. Apocalypse of Paul rather describes him as an "old man"⁶⁶ and refers both to the bright white clothes he wears and his throne, seven times brighter than the sun, which contributes to the overall neutral presentation. In my view, this description intends to emphasize even more clearly that we are dealing here with the "divinity who was considered by Jews and non-gnostic Christians to be the supreme deity," but was seen as an inferior or subaltern god by gnostics.⁶⁷ Once again then we encounter a transgressive element: despite his magnificent countenance, "the old man" in the seventh heaven is the creator god, and is the lord of the authorities and principalities ruling the lower heavens and the sublunary world.

63 Given that the apostles, according to Apoc. Paul 22.14–16, accompany Paul during his ascent, it is incorrect to say that the Spirit's promise to take Paul to the Apostles (in 19.17–18) is only fulfilled when they reach the ogdoad (Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 271). Rather, when reaching the ogdoad Paul looks (back) at the apostles and they greet him in order to bid him farewell.

64 DeConick 2009.

65 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 22.25–23.28.

66 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 22.25.

67 See Kaler's commentary in Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 252. *Contra* Rosenstiehl's introduction in Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 55–62.

Other important inhabitants of this region are the various angels in charge of the judgment and punishment of sinners in the fourth and fifth heavens,⁶⁸ of course the souls of the sinners,⁶⁹ the “toll collectors”⁷⁰ who control the gates of the heavens, and the demiurge’s “principalities and authorities.”⁷¹

The password Paul gives the demiurge in any case clearly shows that we have reached a climactic point before proceeding to the divine region. From a cosmological perspective, this momentous turning point in the seventh heaven emphasizes that the hard divide between the celestial and divine realms is here and not in the ogdoad, as numerous scholars seem to believe.⁷² The ogdoad in the Apocalypse of Paul is clearly seen as antechamber of the pleroma and thus as belonging to the divine region.

As far as the cosmographical description is concerned, not all the heavens receive such a detailed description. The third heaven is mentioned in passing, and the actual description of the hebdomad begins in the fourth heaven with the judgment of a soul. If we exclude the mention of the gates⁷³ and the bright light of the sixth heaven, there are no further descriptions of the region. From an anthropological perspective, however, the description is richer. The archontic region is, of course, the psychic region. If the description of the first earthly realm abounds in references to the body and materiality, the psychic region now includes numerous references to both the soul and passions. In the same way that the earth is the setting for factual sins and crimes, such as iniquity, promiscuity, and murder, the psychic realm includes the passions that gave rise to them: anger, rage, envy, and desire.⁷⁴ Although there is no reference to the origin of passions—, which might be due to either the lack of references to the planets or to the archons responsible for them, or both—, it is interesting that the three witnesses that accuse the soul of her sins are in fact personifications of the urges behind these passions. This is the reason why, in

68 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.5–12; 22.2–10. Three angels, who under the leadership of the great angel goad the souls, might according to Murdock, 1965, 76, be inspired by the Erinyes (see Virgil, *Aen.* VI, 570–572) of Greek mythology. As support, he adds the alleged etymological relationship between the Greek verb ἐρίζειν “compete, to be rival” and the name of the Ἐρινύες. However, in spite of Klauck 1985, 183, and Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 48–50, there is no such etymological relationship: Both words have completely different roots. See Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique*, s.v. ἔρις and Ἐρινύες.

69 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.8–21.22; 22.9–10.

70 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.16; 22.20.

71 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 23.20–22; 23.28.

72 Thus for example Kaler’s commentary in Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 272–273 n. 381.

73 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 20.10; 21.27; 22.12, πύλη.

74 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 21.1–9. See DeConick, 2013.

my view, there is no relationship whatsoever between Apocalypse of Paul and the Testament of Abraham 10.⁷⁵ From an ethical perspective, it is interesting to note that the soul appears to be responsible for yielding to their impulses and for the wrong course of action based on them.

The last divine region consists of three heavens, namely the ogdoad, the ninth heaven, and the tenth heaven. Apocalypse of Paul's description of this realm is reduced to a minimum. There is neither a special denomination for it nor a description of its inhabitants. We simply hear who is allowed to enter and who is not. While Paul and the Spirit-child proceed to the new region, as indicated by Paul's restrictive use of "we" (to refer to himself and the Spirit), the apostles remain behind (see below), greeting Paul from the seventh heaven.⁷⁶ This is also emphasized by the fact that it is only Paul who gives the old man the password necessary to be allowed to continue the ascension. No further mention is made of the inhabitants of the eighth heaven. In the ninth, Apocalypse of Paul simply makes a reference to "those who are in the ninth heaven." As for the inhabitants of the tenth heaven, Paul describes them as my "fellow spirits."⁷⁷

No further cosmographical details are added. The special place the divine region occupies in the overall cosmological structure is more derived from its highest hierarchical position than from its intrinsic description. From an anthropological perspective, the divine is the realm of the intellect (*nous*). It is

75 In spite of the scholarly opinions that, on the basis of Murdock and MacRae 1979, claim a relationship between the judgment scenes in Apoc. Paul and T. Ab. 10 (long recension and Coptic version, see See G.W. MacRae 1976, 334–335), in my view the similarities should not be overstated. In fact the only common motif between both scenes is the appearance of *three witnesses* who testify against the soul. Despite MacRae 1976, closer analysis reveals important structural differences among the scenes: (1) First of all, there is an important difference between the character and function of the witnesses. In Apoc. Paul in fact they seem to be personifications of the urges behind the passions (see also Klauck 1985, 171); in T. Ab. they are real witnesses who accuse the soul of the sins actually committed. (2) The place of judgment is different: the fourth heaven (Apoc. Paul) and Paradise (T. Ab.). (3) The order of the elements in the narration is also different: in Apoc. Paul, Paul sees first the judgment of one soul and then the angels conducting numerous souls to judgment; in T. Ab. it is the other way around: first thousands of souls are brought and one of them is chosen for judgment. (4) The intention is different as well: While Apoc. Paul simply shows the punishment of sins, T. Ab. contrasts right and wrong. (5) Accusations are worded differently: Not only what they say, but also the sins of which they accuse the soul are of a rather different nature. (6) The motif of the books does not imply textual relationship, since it is a rather common object in the context of judgments.

76 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 24.1–3.

77 Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 24.8.

the part Paul needs to awaken in order to know the “hidden thing in those that are visible”⁷⁸ and is the only human component that is allowed in the highest region, which is then, however, described as “spirit” (*pneuma*).⁷⁹ The lack of any other description plausibly points to both simplicity as main characteristic of the divine and to the necessary silence regarding the revelations the neophyte has received.

Continuity and Discontinuity among the Realms

The three realms which make up the cosmos—earthly, celestial, divine—are arranged according to an implicit ascending hierarchy. The lower realm is inferior to the celestial one, which in turn is inferior to the divine abode. However, can we say something more about how the spheres are articulated? In my view, the study of how the borders between the regions are described may help us to refine the analysis. To begin with, the lack of interest in the border between the earthly realm and the hebdomad, and the absence of references either to firmament or air of this area, shows that both realms are conceived of as a continuum. This fluidity seems to be confirmed by the fact that there is visibility between the realms. When Paul looks up or down he is able to see what is happening either in the heavens or on the earth.⁸⁰ The continuity between both realms is also stressed by the fact that Paul is taken directly from the earth to the third heaven, without intermediary stations. Furthermore, the conception of the earthly mountain of Jericho and celestial Jerusalem as point of departure and goal of the journey, respectively, clearly shows that the text conceives both realms as belonging together, as a continuum. This seems to be confirmed by the ambiguity of the term for “creation” (*ktisis*, 20.4) that in Apocalypse of Paul at the same time refers to the lower and celestial realms as parts of the same creation of the lower deity.

This continuum is interrupted, however, when Paul reaches the seventh heaven. As already pointed out, the momentous speech with the old man, his magnificent description, Paul’s password, and the apostles’ greeting from that region underline the hard divide between celestial and divine regions. When Paul proceeds to the ogdoad he enters a new realm, a new space, the difference of which is marked off by its special name (no longer just adding

⁷⁸ For, *nous*, see Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.10.

⁷⁹ Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 24.8.

⁸⁰ Thus in Apoc. Paul NHC V,2 19.18–20 Paul looks up and sees the apostles greeting him from the hebdomad; in 19.27–32; 20.1–4, he looks down and sees their likenesses on earth.

a numeral to a heaven but by a special name, namely the ogdoad), by its simplicity, and by the text's silence regarding both its characteristics and inhabitants. In contrast to the detailed description of the two lower realms, the divine region belongs to the revelatory part of the journey; it needs to be protected by esoteric transmission.

Why Ten Heavens?

In marked difference from the more widespread cosmological patterns including three or seven heavens, Apocalypse of Paul apparently includes ten heavens, and all commentaries point out the anomaly.⁸¹ It is important to note, however, that in so doing Apocalypse of Paul is not as anomalous as commentators seem to assume. Apocalypse of Paul includes a seven-plus-three pattern, which means that it in fact combines the regular seven heavens of the hebdomad with three layers of the divine realm. This is, by the way, not that strange among Nag Hammadi writings: witness, for example, the systems of the Secret Book of John, which also includes ten heavens,⁸² or On the Origin of the World and Nature of the Rulers, which, besides describing the creation of the demiurge, also provide an overview of the higher divine region, albeit without clearly distinguishing layers within it.⁸³

Due to Apocalypse of Paul's silence concerning the upper three layers, which is not that strange either—see, for example, the similar case of the Orig. World⁸⁴—we cannot know the specific characteristics peculiar to them. In any case, the author attempted to organize and give structure to the Gnostic aeons, expressing by means of hierarchically disposed heavens that which other texts express by means of highly poetic descriptions. In this sense, it is plausible to think that Apocalypse of Paul was trying to adapt his view of the cosmos to standard ancient cosmology and that, in so doing he created a hybrid product that conflates cosmology with theology, similarly to the Aristotelian system of the *Metaphysics Lambda*. In fact, Aristotle adds to the seven planetary orbits and the outer circle of the fixed stars, inherited from Plato's *Timaeus*, a divine

81 Murdock and MacRae 1979, 47; Rosenstiehl and Kaler 2005, 28; Kaler 2008, 60–62.

82 Ap. John NHC II,1 14.1–14.

83 Orig. World NHC II,5 102.1–2; 104.30–35; Nat. Rulers NHC II,4 94.8–95.21.

84 Also referred to by Bethge 2015: “The complete absence of any description of the upper world or any account of its development is striking.”

region allotted to the Unmoved Mover.⁸⁵ The only difference from Apocalypse of Paul's system is that the fixed stars are included in the divine region and that it, moreover, divides the transcendent layer into two.

A similar combination of cosmology and theology can be found in three interesting Hermetic tracts, two of them in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and one in the Nag Hammadi library. I am referring to *Poimandres*, the thirteenth Hermetic treatise,⁸⁶ and the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*.⁸⁷ Interestingly enough, they all also include the same seven-plus-three pattern.⁸⁸ After enumerating the seven heavens and the seven vices (implicitly) associated with the planets,⁸⁹ *Poimandres* also describes the divine region as consisting of three layers, the ogdoad, the ninth, and the tenth heaven:⁹⁰

Then, stripped of the activities of the cosmos, he enters the substance of the eighth plain with his own power, and he sings praises to the Father with those who are present; those who are near rejoice at his coming. Being made like to those who are there together, he also hears certain powers which are above the eighth sphere, singing praises to God with sweet voice. Then in due order, they ascend to the Father and they surrender themselves to the powers, and becoming the powers they are merged in God.⁹¹

Whether *Poimandres* provides here an eschatological description, as Nock and Festugière surmised,⁹² or whether it offers a commentary on the previous visions described in *Poimandres* chapters 4 through 7, as Wouter Hanegraaff perhaps more likely interprets⁹³ is irrelevant for our present purpose. What interests us here is that even if the ascension described in *Poimandres* takes

85 The system Aristotle adapts is of course that of Eudoxus with the corrections included by Callipus. See Mendell 2000. However, Plato's *Tim.* (38C–40C), albeit in a mythical exposition, already implies the same cosmological structure. See Leinkauf and Steel 2005.

86 *Corp. herm.* 13.10.

87 *Disc.* 8–9 NHC VI,6.

88 Dirkse, Brashler and Parrott 1979, 342.

89 See Nock and Festugière 1945–1954, 28.

90 *Corp. herm.* 1.26 (Nock and Festugière, 1945–1954).

91 Trans. Salaman et al. 1999.

92 Nock and Festugière, 1945, *Corp. herm.* 1.2–6; and notes to chapters 23–26.

93 Hanegraaff 2008, 141–142.

place after death,⁹⁴ the ethical dimension is obvious, since the individual leaves behind the passions and vices that bothered the soul during its life.⁹⁵ At the end of that process, we find the fusion with the divine, the final *homoiosis theos*.

A similar process is involved in the Disc. 8–9, but in this case we see an out-of-body experience. The ecstatic experience allows the disciples to reach the eighth and ninth levels. That the ascension is at the same time conceived of as an ethical progress can be seen in the fact that, in order to reach the divine region, the individual surpasses first the *heimarmene* governed by the *Ousiarches* and then the vices associated with them.⁹⁶ Interestingly the *Discourse* describes the divine region in a similar way to Poimandres. Not only is the tenth heaven not explicitly mentioned, but we also see that the increasing degree of perfection of the three highest heavens is expressed by means of the praises that each heaven sings to the next one.⁹⁷ As for the silence regarding God's abode in the tenth heaven, it is its omission that makes it all the more present.

By contrast, the thirteenth Hermetic treatise does mention the tenth level of ascent explicitly,⁹⁸ even if its exposition is more schematic. This is probably due to the mainly ethical description of the ascension here set forth, which consequently shuns every reference to planets or to heavens. The ascension of the soul includes ten levels, the first nine of which are associated with vices that, when counteracted by the opposite virtues,⁹⁹ allow access to the following level. Once the soul passes through all nine levels, the ethical progress culminates in the assimilation to the divine, the rebirth, or *palingenesia*, in the

94 Nock and Festugière, 1945, Corp. herm. 1.6; Tröger, 1971, 140. Van den Broek 2006, 66; Hanegraaff 2008, 149.

95 The ethical character of the ascent's description was also noticed by Dirkse, Brashler and Parrott 1979, 342.

96 Disc. 8–9 NHC VI,6 63.19. On the topic see Scott 1936, vol. 3, 115, who, relating it with Stoicism, interprets the term *heimarmene* as a divinity who “presides over (some kind of) material substance.” In my view, Festugière 1967, 127, rightly points out that these are the seven archons governing the seven planetary regions. See more recently, Mahé 1978 133–134.

97 Disc. 8–9 NHC VI,6 59.28–60.1, trans. Salaman et al.: “And I see the eighth (ὀγδοάς) and the souls (ψυχῇ) that are in it and the angels singing a hymn (ὑμνεῖν) to the ninth (ἐννεάς) and its powers (δύναμις). And I see him who has the power (δύναμις) of them all, creating those <that are> in the spirit (πνεῦμα).” According to Mahé, 1978, 120, we have here a parallel to the explicit mention of the tenth level in Corp. herm. 13.

98 See Mahé 1978, 120.

99 See Mussies 1981.

tenth, the divine realm.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, as Bousset, Ferguson, and Nock and Festugière have rightly noticed we also seem to have behind the thirteenth Hermetic tractate a seven-plus-three pattern, since to an original list of seven vices and their opposed virtues the text adds the good, life and light to reach the number ten, the δέκας that will counteract the power of the Twelve.¹⁰¹

Intention of Apocalypse of Paul

In my view, Apocalypse of Paul shares with the Hermetic tracts something more than the number of heavens. In the same way as in the Hermetic treatises, the ascension in Apocalypse of Paul is presented as an ethical progress, which begins upon his leaving Jericho, the realm of the body and physical existence, and culminates in Jerusalem, the higher psychic level. With Poimandres, Apocalypse of Paul shares both the negative view of the hebdomad, the ogdoad as the beginning of the divine region, and the description of the ascending degrees of glory of the following two layers. With *Disc. 8–9*, Apocalypse of Paul shares a view of the ascension as an ecstatic experience that at the same time is conceived of in terms of ethical progress. This is also the case in the thirteenth Hermetic treatise which, however, leaves the heavens aside, retaining only their significance and presenting a more abstract sequence of ten levels of purification.

If Apocalypse of Paul was composed vis-à-vis Jewish apocalyptic texts, it seems obvious that its writer was attempting to redefine, if not the genre, at least the character and the goal of the revelation presented in it. To begin with the latter, the goal of the revelation is not the vision of God or his throne, but something much more radical, namely the fusion with God. Significantly, the Biblical God appears in the text but not as a goal, rather as an obstacle Paul easily transcends. The character of the apocalypse is also redefined: the ascent shows a typically ethical nature, since it symbolizes the steps that the gnostic has to fulfil to transcend both his body and soul and become pure spirit.

This is the reason why Apocalypse of Paul includes a seven-plus-three heaven pattern. The ascent through the hebdomad is necessary to provide the

100 Corp. herm. 13.10, “You know now, o son, the manner of rebirth. And with the arrival of these ten, spiritual birth is complete and it drives out the twelve, and by this birth we have become divine. Whoever, then, by God’s mercy attains a divine birth is freed from the bodily senses and is made whole by these powers. He knows himself and rejoices.”

101 Bousset 1973 [1907], 364 in reference to Reitzenstein; Ferguson cited in Scott 1936, 388; Nock and Festugière 1945–1954, 213. See, however, more recently DeConick 2013; and 2009.

ethical purification by means of which the individual frees himself from soul altogether. The last three levels focus on the progressive process of transformation before attaining the final assimilation. As all three Hermetic texts also do, Apocalypse of Paul conceives of the tenth level as the highest point and ultimate goal of the ascent. It is at that point—once Paul has liberated himself from all the accretions of both body and soul—that he can fuse with the divine, attaining the desired *homoiosis theo* that Apocalypse of Paul laconically describes as Paul greeting his “fellow spirits.”

Summary

As far as Apocalypse of Paul's cosmology is concerned, first, one of the most important aspects of the text is its tripartite conception of the universe. Not only do the three cosmological regions show that we are dealing with a text heavily influenced by a typically Greek worldview, but it is especially the continuity between earthly and celestial realms, and the discontinuity between the latter and the divine realm, which do as well. To begin with, the three realms seem to echo Aristotle's distinguishing, as found in the *Metaphysics*, of three sorts of substance: perishable, movable-eternal, and immovable.¹⁰² The hard divide between the celestial and divine realms seems to betray the influence of the Aristotelian system, since it combines the Eudoxian model of the cosmos with the view of the external cause of the Unmoved Mover of *Metaphysics Lambda*. All these aspects seem to point to a Greco-Roman background rather than to a specifically Jewish one, as has been assumed in recent scholarship.

Second, it is important to note that Apocalypse of Paul's interest in the heavens is rather more anthropological than cosmological, which means that the heavens are significant for the influence they might exert on human beings. Consequently, Greek cosmology is adapted to suit the anthropological and ethical views of the text. In spite of Apocalypse of Paul's silence regarding the planets, the reference to the toll collectors and the demiurge clearly show that the hebdomad is seen as the realm of the *heimarmene*, the psychic realm that oppresses humans by means of passions and vices. The personifications of the urges behind the affections, which appear as witnesses to testimony against a sinner's soul in the fourth heaven, further complete this framework. Most interestingly and transgressively, Apocalypse of Paul conceives of this region as station of the apostles, who in this way are presented as lackeys of

102 See Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1069AB.

the demiurge and his creation. Differently, Paul, the gnostic, transcends all this and speeds to the divine region, from which his authority emanates.

This is the reason why Apocalypse of Paul describes the ascension as an ethical progress in which the individual leaves behind the passions belonging to the psychic level. Incidentally, this mainly ethical view of the ascent may allow one to explain the alleged anomalous pattern of ten heavens. From an ethical perspective, the seven-plus-three pattern is perfectly understandable, since it focuses on both the preparatory ethical progress towards the goal—the purificatory ascension through the seven heavens culminates with the *homoiosis theo* in the divine region. This ethical focus of the text is clear in that it culminates not in the vision of God or the throne of God as in Jewish apocalyptic currents, but in the fusion with the divine, with divinization of the individual. Most transgressive is the use of a description of the Biblical god evoking Daniel 7 to present the demiurge, whom Paul leaves behind staring at his creation.

Finally, in my view the previous conclusions leave little room for hesitation. It seems clear that the goal of Paul's ascension is more ethical than apocalyptic. What I mean is that the goal of the revelation transmitted by the text is not so much the description of an otherworldly journey and its stations as it is the ethical progress experienced by the initiate and the fact that its culmination is equated to the fusion with the divine. Interesting in this context is the fact that the vision of the sinners is not intended to contrast with the fate of the righteous. The interest is not so much in the punishment of the faults as it is in the very passions that generated them.

The countercultural message is, I think, obvious: While conventional Christians follow the apostles and remain trapped in the purgatory of the archontic region, dealing with passions and the oppression of the *heimarmene*, gnostics go far beyond all this, knowing as they do the way to dispose of the accretions of both body and soul and how to supersede the cosmic realms related to them.

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