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Gnostic Elements in the Pauline Epistle

By Hermann Detering, version May 9, 2017

This article draws the conclusion from two observations:

1. Gnosis is a phenomenon of the 2nd century AD (modern research).
2. Paul's letters are influenced by Gnostics (religious history school).

The necessary conclusion is that the Gnostic elements were either added later or, since this is not possible, that the Pauline texts come from the 2nd century.

As the second thesis is questioned by today's theologians (for good reasons, i.e. to avoid that very conclusion), the influence of the mythological Gnosis of the second century will be demonstrated in a debate with modern research positions using three central examples:

Phil 2:6-11 ("Christ hymn"), 1 Cor 2:6-81 ("ruler of this world") and Cor 15:8 (Paul as a "miscarriage").

This shows:

- 1) In the "Christ Hymn", Jesus is the anti-type of the Gnostic God Jaldabaoth;
- 2) the "rulers of this world" in 1 Cor 2:6-8 refer to the archons of the Gnostic myth;
- 3) 1 Cor 15:8 is a reference to a topos common in Gnosis

1. Introduction

In 1976, during the first meeting of the European Society for Scientific Theology in Vienna, a debate took place between two theologians: Walter Schmithals (Berlin) and Martin Hengel (Tübingen). The topic of discussion was the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosis, which Schmithals asserted and Hengel contested. The debate was exceedingly successful for Schmithals. Those who, like him, claimed the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosis in the 1970s could be assured of widespread support. In the year of Bultmann's death, there was hardly a theological faculty that was not, in one way or another, committed to the legacy of the master who had once introduced this idea into the discussion. Alongside Schmithals, a select group of Bultmann's students and followers, including Schlier, Käsemann, Jonas, Bornkamm, Koester, Wilckens, and Rudolph, ensured that the old thesis originating from the History of Religions School (Bousset, Reitzenstein) gained recognition. Theologians like Hengel, on the other hand, who resisted this historical-religious trend, were suspected of Christian-church apologetics—whether rightly or wrongly, remains to be seen.

While Schmithals published¹ the expanded manuscript of his lecture shortly thereafter under the title "Zur Herkunft der gnostischen Elemente in der Sprache des Paulus" [= *On the Origin of the Gnostic Elements in the Language of Paul*], his opponent Hengel remained silent for a long time. Thus, it was difficult to avoid the impression that pre-Christian Gnosis had emerged victorious—at that time in Vienna.

¹ Aland 2009

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However, times were destined to change. Hengel's response came late, but it came. When he published his revised lecture text in 2005 under the title "Paulus und die Frage einer vorchristlichen Gnosis" [= Paul and the Question of a Pre-Christian Gnosis], which he had let rest for 25 years, the triumph was entirely on his side: "Some problems," as he now notes with visible satisfaction, "simply resolve themselves over time." Given that "the research situation regarding the topic of Gnosis and the New Testament, and especially in the old contentious question of whether there was a chronologically 'pre-Christian Gnosis,' has significantly changed over the past 25 years—not least due to the unexpectedly unproductive texts from Nag Hammadi for proving a 'pre-Christian Gnosis,'" the text from back then now has "only historical significance in the context of research history."

Indeed, Hengel could now laugh heartily. His argument that "there are no original Gnostic sources from the 1st century" and that we "do not have any reasonably reliable references to Gnostic teachers and teachings before the beginning of the 2nd century"²—something that the discovery and subsequent analysis of the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi had not changed—had left a lasting impression and made the assumption of a pre-Christian Gnosis increasingly problematic in the eyes of many researchers. Although its proponents had always acknowledged and tried to explain the lack of pre-Christian Gnostic sources³, this weakness in their argumentation was hard to overlook in the long run and eventually led to the decline of the

once highly esteemed, proud theoretical edifice. Now, they had to hear from their opponents that "despite all new text discoveries, a chronologically and substantively pre-Christian Gnosis could not be proven; rather, it is almost entirely a Christian phenomenon with Judeo-Christian roots."⁴

In his aforementioned essay, Hengel seems to visibly enjoy his supposed "historical victory." Unfortunately, in the exuberance of his triumph, he repeatedly resorts to formulations that are not appropriate to the matter at hand. What he says about the work of the representatives of the History of Religions School, whom he apparently did not particularly sympathize with, and their successors, at times reads like the description of an epidemic or contagious mental illness. Richard Reitzenstein, a representative of the History of Religions School, is said to have been "gripped by the Iranian fever";⁵ following him, the "Gnostic fever" is said to have spread from Bultmann's Marburg.⁶ That the "aberrant views in German New Testament scholarship at the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s received so much attention and in some cases even recognition," according to Hengel, "does not necessarily speak for the historical-critical quality of this discipline at that time."

2 Hengel 2005, p. 477.

3 The thesis that Gnosis is a prerequisite for the explanation of Christianity is, according to Schmithals 1969/70, p. 379, "contradicted by the fact that we have no reliably datable original Gnostic sources from pre-Christian times." However, according to Schmithals, this possibility is supported by, among others, "the evidence of a Jewish Gnosis, which allows Christian Gnosis to be explained in the same way as ecclesiastical Christianity from its obvious Jewish roots; the more recent research into the early western origin of a Mandaean Gnosis; the reports of the Church Fathers about Simon and other non-Christians as heretic fathers" and the impossibility of all other attempts to explain the Gnostic elements in the NT (ibid.).

4 Hengel 1994, p. 320f.

5 Hengel 2005, p. 486 A. 36.

6 Hengel 2005, p. 496 A. 65.

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One might interpret this as the grumbling of an old man who had long fought for his view of early Christian history and, in the end, believed he had won the laurels. However, he probably did not even believe himself that he had done justice to the issue with this caricature. As a careful exegete, Hengel had to know that the debate about a pre-Christian Gnosis was by no means without any basis in the ancient texts. There was at least one source that even Hengel could not ignore: the New Testament.

Besides the Gospel of John, it was primarily the letters of Paul that had once prompted researchers like Reitzenstein or Bultmann to successfully use Gnostic texts to explain them. A closer examination of Pauline language and its comparison with corresponding Gnostic texts had revealed striking similarities. It was not a "Gnostic fever," but rather exegetical findings that had once initiated the discussion about a "pre-Christian Gnosis."

Thus, it was certainly no coincidence that Schmithals opened his discussion with a lecture that he later published under the title "On the Origin of the Gnostic Elements in the Language of Paul." The Gnostic elements in Paul's theology and language were indeed his strongest argument, which made him, despite the absence of other testimonies from the 1st century, hold on to the assumption of a pre-Christian Gnosis until the end. He repeatedly emphasized that "the decision about the relationship between Gnosis and the New Testament... must be made in exegesis itself in view of this situation"; the only criterion being "the question under which relationship the texts can best be explained." "It therefore first emerges in the hermeneutical circle whether a Gnosis must be assumed for the explanation of certain parts of the New Testament or not. In this circle, it is possible and methodologically appropriate that we only come to know the Gnosis, which we must assume for the interpretation of individual New Testament writings, through exegesis itself."⁷ Rudolph also could not ignore the Gnostic influence on Paul. It occurred both in connection and opposition. Therefore, two things must be distinguished: "the more unconscious influence in terminology, style, and motive" and "the conscious adoption of Gnostic ideas for the purpose of polemics, as was variously customary with Paul and his disciples... Early Christianity is, on the one hand, in conflict with the Gnostic sects, but on the other hand, also dependent on Gnostic ideas."⁸

7 Schmithals 1969/70, p. 379.

8 Rudolph 1975, p. 545.

4

With Schmithals, Rudolph recognizes a series of Gnostic ideas in Paul:

- the contrast between psychics and pneumatics (Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13)
- or the Gnostic dualism of flesh and spirit, which are regarded as irreconcilable opposites here as in Gnosticism (Romans 8:5-10; 13:11-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-6);
- for Paul, too, the world is governed as a fallen creation by the "lords of this world" (1 Corinthians 2:6-8);
- hence, a world-averse, sexually- and marriage-hostile attitude dominates (1 Corinthians 7:32-34);
- Gnostic thoughts are seen by Rudolph in Paul's conception of the fall of Adam, through which humanity was subjected to sin and death (Romans 5:12ff),
- as well as in the idea that Christ created a new humanity in the spirit through his work of redemption (1 Corinthians 15:21, 44, 49).
- Gnostic is Paul's pre-existence notion and the idea of the unrecognized descent of the redeemer and his ascent to the Father (2 Corinthians 8:9; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Philippians 2:6-11);
- Gnostic is the evaluation of Christ's saving act as liberation from demonic powers and the world-enslavement of humans that has prevailed since Adam (2 Corinthians 5:16);
- Gnostic is the thought associated with the mysticism of Christ of the body of Christ of the redeemed and the resulting idea of a universalistic community of salvation of the church (Romans 5:12-14; 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 48-49; 12:12-27);

- Gnostic finally is the emphasis on "knowledge" alongside "faith" (Philippians 3:8-10)
- and the emphasis on "freedom" and "power" of the pneumatic (1 Corinthians 9:1-23).⁹

9 Rudolph 1983, pp. 322–323

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Rudolph concludes his summary with the words: “Thus, in Paul, a touch of Gnostic terminology and worldview can be found, stemming from the heritage of Hellenistic Christianity and his own experience, which also makes him interesting for the history of Gnosis.”¹⁰ – To speak of a “touch of Gnostic terminology” is indeed a significant understatement when one considers that most of the parallels Rudolph mentions are not just arbitrary additions or supplements but essential components of Pauline theology.

The Gnostic material used by Paul for the purpose of anti-Gnostic polemics is extensively treated by Schmithals, whom Rudolph frequently references. Schmithals also recognizes many borrowings from Gnostic terminology in Paul's theology, particularly concerning anthropological dualism, pre-existence Christology (redeemer myth), and the mysticism of Christ. However, his primary interest lies with Paul's opponents, whom he identifies as Gnostics. Although Paul himself speaks Gnostic language, he is not a true Gnostic; on the contrary, he is engaged in a confrontation with a unified Gnostic opposition.

In his study of Corinthian Gnosis, Schmithals provides a closer identification of these opponents:¹¹ They are proponents of a dualistic Christology and curse the earthly Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:1-3). In this sense, they proclaim another Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:4). They empty the significance of the cross of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:17; cf. Philippians 3:18). Instead of the cross, they proclaim wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:17-3:4, 18f) or gnosis (1 Corinthians 8:1). Paul's opponents consider themselves pneumatics (1 Corinthians 7:40b; 12-14; 2 Corinthians 10:1, 10; 11:4; 13:9a), and as such, they have already experienced the resurrection, understood by them in a spiritualized sense, and deny a future resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12); they boast of their perfection, which they deny to Paul (1 Corinthians 4:8), and refer to themselves as Christos (1 Corinthians 1:12); they demonstrate their “freedom,” i.e., superiority over cosmic powers, by eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:14-22; 10:23-11:2) and advocate a libertine approach to the body (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). In the congregational assemblies, they appear as prophets (1 Corinthians 14:3f) and demonstrate Gnostic spiritual possession, e.g., through speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 12-14). They also baptize for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29).

10 Rudolph 1983, p. 323

11 Schmithals 1969.

6

Since Paul combats Gnostics in his letters, he could not himself be a Gnostic. The numerous Gnostic elements in Paul's theology are considered by Schmithals, following Bultmann, as the

adoption and borrowing of Gnostic terminology: "The use of Gnostic motifs," according to Schmithals, "is not a syncretistic phenomenon, much less a transition to Gnosis itself, but a linguistic-hermeneutical occurrence."¹² Given the many actual (and also some supposed) Gnostic traces and elements identified by Schmithals and Rudolph in the Pauline letters, one can understand, and Hengel should have also understood, why an entire generation of exegetes was seized by "Gnostic fever" and postulated the idea of a pre-Christian Gnosis as a necessary consequence of the exegetical findings. The Bultmann student Koester also observed: "Without assuming a pre-Christian Gnosis, many early Christian and extra-Christian phenomena cannot be explained at all."¹³

And yet, the gap that now emerged between the supposed time of origin of the Pauline letters in the mid-1st century and the verifiable appearance of Gnosis only in the 2nd century presented significant problems. How was it possible that Paul's language contained Gnostic terminology, while on the other hand, no sources were known outside the NT in the 1st century from which this terminology could be derived?

For a time, Schmithals sought his answer in a "system of pre-Christian Christ-Gnosis." This was supposed to be a Judeo-Christian Gnosis traced back to Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:9ff). The outlines of this Gnostic system were developed by him from the Simonian writing *Apophysis Megale*, cited by Hippolytus in the *Refutatio* (VI 9,3-18,7). However, it is by no means certain that this writing actually came from the hand of Simon. If Simon were the author, which is doubted by most scholars for good reasons, the question arises as to how and by what means this system of pre-Christian Christ-Gnosis, traced back to Simon, could spread and influence the Christian communities in such a short time. Schmithals assumes that Hellenistic Christianity or its supposed exponent Stephen became the mediator of this type of Christianity to Paul and that Paul converted to the Christianity he persecuted¹⁵. But even then, as Hengel has shown, too many questions remain unanswered: the silence of Jewish and Hellenistic sources, the impossibility of a Gnostic-Jewish mission, and so on.¹⁶ Whether the character profile of Simon, swaying confusedly by "the favor and hate of the parties," is sufficient to dive into the "depths of Gnosis" at the beginning of the 1st century with his help, must therefore remain highly questionable. In any case, the "system of a pre-Christian Gnosis"¹⁷ described by Schmithals has rightly found no resonance within the scholarly community.

12 Schmithals 1984, p. 19.

13 Koester 1964, p. 62 A. 5.

14 Schmithals 1969, p. 32.

15 Schmithals 1984, p. 156.

16 Hengel 1991, p. 477ff.

17 Schmithals 1969, p. 32.

The discovery of a Gnostic library in Nag Hammadi did not provide new support for the assumption of a pre-Christian Gnosis. The writings discovered there could only support the thesis of those who had assumed a Jewish origin of Gnosis, independent of Christianity, but not its early dating.¹⁸ It remained the case that: "... no known Gnostic document can be dated in its present form to the period before the New Testament ... We also cannot find any developed system before the second Christian century."¹⁹

Furthermore, the evidence for the Gnostic "Urmensch myth" once discovered by Richard Reitzenstein, for which references were also thought to have been found in the New Testament, apparently originated from a later period.²⁰

In view of this complicated situation, more and more researchers distanced themselves from the position of Bultmann and his followers. Wilson and many others drew the "convincing conclusion" from the mentioned problems "that the movement of Gnosis grew and developed during the New Testament period, side by side with Christianity and to some extent in exchange with it. We cannot determine its origin and sources or the exact stages of its development, but we can identify certain 'development lines' (cf. Köster/Robinson), which culminate in the developed systems of the 2nd century."²¹ Generally, scholars shifted from speaking of "pre-Christian Gnosis" to terms like "Gnosis in statu nascendi," "early Gnosis," "Prae-Gnosis," "Proto-Gnosis," or simply "gnosticizing tendencies,"²² unless they completely abandoned the term and spoke of influences of "dualistic wisdom," "Jewish wisdom literature," or similar.²³

18 According to K. W. Tröger, non-Christian Gnostic texts include, for example, "Eugnostos", "The Apocalypse of Adam", "Bronte – Perfect Understanding", "The Three Steles of Seth", "Zostrianus", "The Ode on Norea", "Marsanes" and "Allogenes"; Tröger 1980, p. 21; cf. Lahe 2006, p. 226.

19 Wilson, p. 536; cf. Brandenburger 1968, Sellin 1982, p. 71; Baird 1979, p. 41

20 Colpe 1961; Schenke 1962.

21 Wilson, p. 536; cf. Lahe 2006: "...Gnosis is an independent spiritual movement (or even religion) that arose at about the same time as, but independently of, Christianity."

22 Gäckle 2005, p. 186f.; Köster 1980, p. 555: "It is not wrong to describe the opponents in Corinth (the 'strong' among the community members) as Gnostics or proto-Gnostics..."

23 Markschies 2010, p. 74; Hengel 2005, p. 496ff.

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However, the terms were unfortunately chosen due to their lack of clarity, leading to a Babylonian confusion of languages, with various scholars apparently designating completely different concepts with them. On one hand, there were and are those who include the possibility of a non-Christian, e.g., Jewish origin of Gnosis in the 1st century,²⁴ and on the other hand, those who entirely exclude this and prefer a purely Christian origin of Gnosis. The list of individual interpretations that terms like Proto-Gnosis, Prae-Gnosis, or Gnosis in statu nascendi have received is long.

Theologians who did not want to know anything about Gnosis, Proto-Gnosis, or Præ-Gnosis in the 1st century adhered to Hengel and the church history origin model he had always favored.²⁵ According to this model, Gnosis should be considered an intra-Christian phenomenon. Ultimately, this was an explanatory model that went back to Harnack and, strictly speaking, already to the Church Fathers. Just as the Church Fathers regarded Gnosis as a Christianity "contaminated" by ancient philosophy, and just as Harnack believed he could recognize in Gnosis an "acute secularization or Hellenization of Christianity,"²⁶ Hengel also saw in Gnosis only the distorted copy of the Christian original. Extra-Christian influences to explain the phenomenon, unless they were of Jewish or Old Testament origin, were excluded for him.

The fact that this explanatory model, going back to Harnack and the Church Fathers, believed long dead, has recently experienced a resurgence is surprising but surely has to do with the influence of Hengel and his followers. Weiß notes: "Historically, the question of early Christian Gnosis is no longer at the center of the New Testament scholar's interest. Rather, there is a 'retrograde' tendency in this regard, namely a return to a primarily 'church-historical' or 'heresy-historical' view of the so-called Gnosis – as 'early Christian' Gnosis, thus no longer primarily a phenomenon of late antique religious history, but of early church or 'heresy history.'"²⁷

24 Schmithals 1984, p. 12f.; Conzelmann 1981, p. 114, A. 28; Weiß 2008, p. 63f. notes: "The step initiated by W. Bousset and the School of the History of Religions from an internal church-historical to a religious-historical view of Gnosis can no longer be reversed, even - and especially! - given the current state of Gnosis research."

25 Lahe 2006, p. 222ff.

26 von Harnack 1909, p. 250.

27 Weiß 2008, p. 3.

9

Hengel's student Marksches' book on Gnosis follows the same line of thought.²⁸ Its author also views Gnosis as a purely Christian phenomenon. For its emergence in the 2nd century, Greek philosophy was of crucial importance.²⁹ According to Marksches, the Gnostics attempted "following the Platonic model, to tell a myth that complemented the biblical stories with the parts that many educated people thought were missing,"³⁰ in short, Gnosis was an attempt by "somewhat educated" people to explain their Christianity on the level of the time.³¹ Marksches considers it "quite unlikely that Paul himself or these letters were already arguing against developed mythological systems."³²

Surveying the course of the debate over "pre-Christian Gnosis," it becomes clear that the underlying historical question is hotly contested, not least because it is intertwined for many exegetes with a theological value judgment. It concerns the alternative of "biblical-Jewish" versus "Hellenistic-Gnostic." Among the proponents of a historical-religious, i.e., "Gnostic" solution, there was often a certain scientific pathos at play—they saw themselves in the role of those who led Gnosis research "from the narrow confines of church history into the open air of religious history."³³ In contrast, theologians like Hengel evidently feared a "syncretistic

paganization of early Christianity,"³⁴ a "delivery to the pagan myth."³⁵ Here, only "the Jewish" was and is regarded as a kind of "reserve of legitimate biblical thinking," whereas everything "Hellenistic" was from the outset suspected of being illegitimate or "biblically inappropriate," i.e., "pagan."³⁶ "The Old Testament heritage is considered by this research a priori as a legitimate heritage, while the Hellenistic heritage is likewise a priori devalued as a 'foreign influence' and reduced to a minimum."³⁷

28 Markschies 2010; cf. Markschies 1992.

29 Markschies 2010, p. 68f.

30 Markschies 2010, p. 116.

31 Markschies 2010, p. 84.

32 Markschies 2010, p. 74.

33 Rudolph 1983, p. 37; critical of this, Markschies 2010, p. 32.; Berger, p. 521, draws parallels between the representatives of early Gnosis and today's theologians (whereby he evidently means primarily the Protestants) under the heading "systematically conditioned research interests" and believes that despite all the differences, a secret affinity and soul mate can be identified. In his opinion, this includes above all the preference for present eschatology and soteriological individualism; the Gnostic certainty of salvation is often understood as a counter-image to one's own Protestant existence, the Gnostic primal man as a modern ideal human (Nietzsche's "superman") and much more. All of this is, of course, far-fetched. Gnostic ideas - in contrast to Jewish ones - were hardly received in Protestant circles.

34 Hengel 1977, p. 34.

35 Hengel 1977, p. 113.

36 Gräßer 1964, p. 167, 170f. with regard to the Epistle to the Hebrews; cf. Weiß 2008, p. 96

37 Gräßer 1964, p. 167.

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Regarding the actual historical question, it is difficult to reach a decision. Light and shadow, right and wrong are distributed quite differently among the various solutions. All the mentioned scholars see some truths, yet they all simultaneously adhere to an error.

Some are correct in denying the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosis due to the lack of Gnostic original texts from the 1st century AD and seeing Gnosis as a phenomenon of the 2nd century. They are also consistent in rejecting the hypothesis that there were oral precursors.³⁸ However, they go too far in one aspect: the Gnostic elements in Pauline language and theology cannot be denied with unbiased exegesis. Vague references to Jewish wisdom literature and "contemporary Judaism," from which these supposedly derive "easily,"³⁹ can at best show isolated parallels but are insufficient to explain their uniqueness and internal structure. Similarly, it is not acceptable to interpret the wisdom "parallel" texts as Gnostic to make them "fit" Paul.

This approach does justice neither to the texts nor to "Paul" (as we will see in the example of Sellin's exegesis of 1 Cor 2:8).⁴⁰

38 Hengel 2005, p. 487f.

39 Markschies 2010, p. 74 with reference to the letter to the Colossians.

40 Weiß 2008, p. 68 also sees and recognizes, with other exegetes, numerous parallels and similarities with Gnostic ideas, especially with regard to 1 Corinthians 2:6 ff. (or also 1 Cor 8:1 ff. etc.), and speaks of Paul's language being "close to Gnosis" or "ready for Gnosis", cf. Schrage 1995, p. 263; Widmann 1979, pp. 46–48. However, this is based on an "original context" common to early Gnosis, the (Hellenistic-Jewish) dualistic wisdom. This context of origin is supposed to presuppose a roughly simultaneous development for Paul as well as for (later Christian) Gnosis in the course of the 1st century AD, "in which that common heritage of a 'dualistic wisdom' was shaped or processed in its own way or under a different hermeneutical sign. In the specific case of the community in Corinth, there is no need to question that Paul's Gnosis-like language is itself not least, perhaps even primarily, conditioned by the conflict with his opponents in the community, and specifically aims at negating the position of his opponents: Gnosis-like language as an instrument of rebuke and polemic." Such good-sounding theories must regularly fail in the face of concrete individual exegesis.

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In contrast, for example, Schmithals cannot be accused of neglecting or sugar-coating the exegetical findings in Paul. Here, the problem is different: incorrect conclusions are drawn from the existence of Gnostic terminology in Paul's texts. Schmithals speaks of a hermeneutic circle and suggests that the assumption of a Gnosis in the first century and a proper interpretation of the New Testament are mutually dependent. Rudolph expresses the same point succinctly: he believes that "the New Testament itself is the best witness" that a Gnosis already existed in the first century.⁴¹ However, this results in a methodological narrowing. The principle formulated by Rudolph applies only if we must assume that the dating of the Pauline writings is a constant and the time of the letters' origin is undisputed. But this is not the case. For the sake of methodological openness, it is necessary to recognize that this is also only a variable. The insight that clear Gnostic influence is already recognizable in the various writings of the New Testament does not necessarily lead to the assumption of the existence of a "pre-Christian Gnosis." Rather, it is also possible that the beginnings of Gnosis lie in the 1st century, or that the Pauline writings originated in the 2nd century.⁴²

In other words, Hengel and Schmithals were both right and wrong. One arrived at an incorrect dating of Gnosis due to a correct assessment of the exegetical findings, while the other arrived at an incorrect assessment of the exegetical findings due to his correct dating of Gnosis.

The solution to this paradox is quite simple: If (a) it is correct that Gnosis can only be evidenced in the 2nd century, and if (b) it is also correct that the Pauline letters show clear Gnostic traces, then they must also come from the 2nd century!

This conclusion would probably have been drawn long ago. However, historians and theologians, in the case of Paul, relied more on external evidence (Acts of the Apostles and Church Fathers) and the self-testimony of the letters than on internal criteria. As a result, they

could not see what is evident: that the Pauline letters, regarding internal criteria, i.e., their language and theology, belong to the 2nd century AD. It is precisely the so-called Gnostic elements in Paul's language and theology that provide excellent material for this thesis. Essentially, we can only be grateful to Hengel and his cohorts. Their campaign against "pre-Christian Gnosis" has lifted the curtain – and the emperor stands naked, meaning we see "Paul" as he is: a "contemporary" of Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion, and other Gnostic figures.

41 Schmithals 1984, p. 15.

42 A thesis for which I can rely on the approval of my teacher Walter Schmithals.

12

The purpose of the following sections is to strengthen this thesis with specific examples. It is not primarily about providing another comprehensive overview of the various Gnostic elements in Paul's language and theology, as this task has already been extensively covered by research from Reitzenstein to Bultmann and Schmithals over the past century. Given the changed research situation, another task takes precedence:

1. To defend the Gnostic interpretation (*Interpretatio Gnostica*) they represented against their contemporary opponents using three selected examples, and at the same time,
2. To correct it against their earlier proponents.

This means it is necessary, on the one hand, to both sharpen the Gnostic profile of Pauline language and theology against all attempts to completely deny it or dilute it by placing it in the nebulous context of a vague "dualistic wisdom," and to show that the Pauline texts not only contain Gnostic echoes here and there or speak in a "Gnosis-related" language but – the crucial point – already presuppose the developed mythological systems of 2nd-century Gnosis!

On the other hand, it is necessary to free the older Gnostic interpretation from some misjudgments and errors. This includes, above all, the assumption presented above that the author of the Pauline letters, either partially or generally, opposes Gnostic opponents. This thesis, represented in its radical form by Schmithals, is based, as I will show in detail in a later essay on the opponents of "Paul" (but see already my contribution "Elchasai und die Häresie des Kolosserbriefes" [= Elchasai and the Heresy of the Colossians], which sets the direction), on an optical illusion. Incidentally, this assumption made it easy for its proponents to integrate the Apostle into the church – perhaps also a secret of its success. For by making the opponents Gnostics and the Apostle the opponent of the Gnostics, they could largely absolve him of Gnostic tendencies, as the Gnostic elements in his theology were not considered substantive but merely a "linguistic-hermeneutic" phenomenon.

2. Phil 2:6-11 or: Jesus versus Jaldabaoth

The most impressive example of a clear reference to a motif of the "mythological Gnosis" of the 2nd century is undoubtedly the so-called Christ Hymn in the Letter to the Philippians, 2:6-11:

This think among you, which also (the community) in Christ Jesus (corresponds)

6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being made in human likeness; and being found in appearance as a man,

8 he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The issues of this passage are manifold and have produced extensive exegetical literature. The question, repeatedly discussed since Lohmeyer's commentary, of whether the verses come from an older tradition or were "introduced"⁴³ by the author of the letter, has, after being long decided in favor of the former, recently become open again.⁴⁴ However, it is clear that the form and vocabulary of the hymn differ in many respects from the rest of the letters considered genuinely Pauline. It is likely, as Dibelius once suspected, that the author "used some expressions already somewhat liturgically associated with Christ in a hymn of his own composition."⁴⁵ However, answering this question is not crucial for us. Here, the focus is on the religious-historical background to which the hymn refers, which can be determined independently of issues of tradition criticism. For the assumption of a "post-Pauline composition," i.e., the assumption of a later interpolation considered by a few exegetes, as will be shown, there are no convincing reasons.

43 Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 124.

44 Vollenweider 1999, p. 413; cf. Heen 2004, p. 137.

45 Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 73.

Regarding the interpretation of the crucial verse 6, exegesis has generally moved within two alternatives. Either the phrase "harpagmon hēgēsato" is interpreted as an idiom, or the phrase is taken literally, suggesting that Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be "seized" (*res rapienda*) or held onto (*res rapta*) as "plunder."

The first translation is already found in the Greek Church Fathers. According to them, "harpagmon hēgeisthai" should be translated⁴⁶ as "consider as plunder" or "regard as a windfall, a fortunate opportunity." In the past century, the classical philologist Werner Jäger revisited and supported this interpretation, following Wettstein. A passage from the works of Plutarch holds heuristic significance for Jäger. Plutarch says of Alexander the Great in the context of his Asian campaign that he did not "overrun Asia like a robber, nor intended to hold and plunder it as a piece of loot or the gift of an unexpected stroke of luck, . . . but because he wanted to show that all earthly things were subject to a Logos and that all people were one nation of a state, he took on such a form (i.e., that of an Asian). If the god who sent Alexander's soul here had not called him back so quickly, one law would have enlightened all people ..."⁴⁷ Jäger then paraphrases the passage in Philippians as follows: "Not 'for free (literally: as a dowry) and from fortune' did Christ accept the divine nature and his glory inherent to him – but he renounced the inherited, and in sleepless nights and bloody days of suffering acquired this form of existence" – and then enthusiastically states: "Plutarch's words could be written about Christ."⁴⁸ Fortunately, Jäger does not claim that the formulations were copied by the author of the Christ Hymn from Plutarch. However, he is convinced that "harpagmon hēgeisthai" does not point to a heavenly spirit drama, but represents the necessary *tertium comparationis* between Christ and the community. He accuses theologians of a "gross linguistic error."⁴⁹

46 See Lightfoot 1869, p. 131ff.; Loofs 1999, p. 1ff.

47 Alex. fort. virt. 1, 8 (330 D): translation in Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 138

48 Jaeger 1915, p. 552.

49 Jaeger 1915, pp. 552–553.

Jäger's comments, as the last sentences show, are not entirely free from a hidden sense of Schadenfreude towards colleagues from the other faculty, whom he, as a classical philologist, wants to bring down from the heights of dogmatics to the ground of "reality," i.e., a simple colloquial expression. Despite the somewhat polemical tone⁵⁰, Jäger's interpretation was widely accepted and is quite common today. In the "Bibel in Gerechter Sprache" (Bible in Just Language), it is stated that Christ did not consider equality with God to be a "stroke of luck";⁵¹ according to the "Einheitsübersetzung" (Unified Translation), he did "not cling to being like God"; and Gnllka suggests that he "did not greedily cling to it."⁵² Even esteemed theological writers are not shy about translating that Christ did not consider being equal to God as "a windfall."⁵³

However, this interpretation reveals the whole problem with Jäger's recommended translation. The trivial expression, often used in a suggestive sexual sense, does not fit well with the elevated style of a hymn, especially a religious one. Additionally, it is worth questioning what the mythological framework would be like within which the attainment or possession of "equality with God" can be described as a "fortunate opportunity" or "stroke of luck"; this applies both to the human level assumed by Jäger and to the preexistent, i.e., beginningless, existence of Christ. Jäger's impression that Plutarch's words about Alexander sound as if they were written with reference to Christ is not convincing. The passage contributes little to explaining Phil 2:6, as Alexander's refusal to regard Asia "as a piece of plunder" can hardly serve as evidence for Jäger's favored idiomatic meaning of "harpagmon hēgeisthai." Alexander's refusal to see Asia as "plunder or the gift of unexpected luck" seems rather to be taken literally and fits the ruler who did not come with plundering intentions. Finally, it should be noted that "harpagmos" (plunder) and "harpagma" (loot) should not be readily equated.

50 See the reply from Jülicher 1916.

51 Bail 2006.

52 Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 111.

53 Jüngel 2002, p. 307; cf. Jaeger 1915, p. 550.

16

2.1 Adam versus Christ – Cullmann's Typological Interpretation

Among those exegetes who understand "harpagmos" not idiomatically but literally, the background against which Christ's actions stand out is determined differently. The comparison between Adam and Christ enjoys relatively great popularity. Cullmann,⁵⁴ Dunn,⁵⁵ and other exegetes see Christ in his relation to Adam. "It is simply reminiscent of Gen. 3:5, the serpent's promise: 'As soon as you eat from it, you will be like God.' Adam, tempted by the devil, wanted to be like God: that was his sin, and thus he lost the highest thing he possessed, the image of God. The heavenly man did not commit this 'robbery' and thus remained faithful to his divine destiny, to be the image of God; this is shown precisely in that he emptied himself, that is, he decided to become a human, to enter humanity, which had lost the image of God."⁵⁶

As Jäger noted, some interpreters have completely abandoned the assumption that verse 6 refers to the preexistent Christ. According to Rissi, Christ did not follow Adam's deed because he was the true man "in the image of God." Verse 6 does not speak of a preexistent, heavenly being, and verse 7 does not refer to his incarnation; rather, both verses point to the life of Christ on earth. Here on earth, he decided not to follow his own will, but as the true man, he gave himself according to the will of God.⁵⁷

This interpretation has rightly been criticized, as it is very unlikely to assume that the statement in Gen 1:26, which refers to an earthly, created human (= the image of God), is rendered in Phil 2:6a with the words "en morphē theou hyparchōn" (= equality with God). The contrast between

"morphē theou" (divine form) and "morphē doulou" (form of a servant) especially excludes a connection between Phil 2:6a and Gen 1:26f. "So, in Phil 2:6a, there is certainly no mention of the image of God in the man Jesus!"⁵⁸

The interpretation of Phil 2:6a, 7a, b as referring to the human Jesus, as proposed by Rissi and others, is not possible because the subsequent verses can no longer be interpreted meaningfully. "It is absolutely absurd to say of a person who has never been anything other than a human that they 'became like humans' and 'were found in appearance as a human.'"⁵⁹

54 Cullmann 1958, p. 182ff.

55 Dunn 2003, p. 115ff.

56 Cullmann 1958, p. 182.

57 Rissi, p. 3318.

58 Hofius 1991, p. 117; there the more detailed discussion of the Adam-Christ thesis. For criticism of the thesis see also Habermann 1990, p. 115ff.; Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 139f.

59 Hofius 1991, p. 116; Habermann 1990, p. 116.

17

A more serious and widely accepted interpretation is the political understanding of the motif of robbery. Although it is hinted at in many commentaries, its detailed argumentative elaboration in the German-speaking area has only been developed in Samuel Vollenweider's essay on the Christ Hymn.

2.2 Caesar versus Christ - Vollenweider's "Political" Interpretation

Vollenweider first opposes the widespread view that we are dealing with an idiom at this point. He rightly points out that "the hypothesis of a postulated idiom faces two serious problems." First, a phrase comparable to Phil 2:6 (harpagma + verb + double accusative) is not attested until three hundred years later, in a romance novel by Heliodorus of Emesa from the late fourth century. Moreover, the narrator there uses the phrase with a preference for uniformly "favorable, seizable opportunities for sex and crime," leaving the question of how the vulgar idiom could have entered the elevated language of a hymn completely unanswered.

But Vollenweider also rejects the Adam hypothesis, whose proponents find the 'being like God' in Gen 3:5. He points to the two well-known "sharp cliffs": on the one hand, it is incompatible with the entering into the "likeness of men" described only in v. 7. On the other hand, ancient Jewish exegesis would not have interpreted Adam's sin as grasping for equality with God but as a transgression of a commandment.

Instead of the Adam type, Vollenweider identifies another biblical reference that promises exegetical gain: the type of powerful rulers "who, in their fullness of power, transcend the

ultimate human boundaries and usurp a divine position." These rulers are comparable to Jesus as individual figures, and their position of power is as constitutive as the motif of equality with God hinted at in Phil 2:6. By examining this reference field in detail, Vollenweider ultimately arrives at a "political interpretation of Phil 2:6," in which the self-humbling Christ becomes the counterimage of the self-exalting ruler who usurps divine equality.

60 Vollenweider 1999.

61 Müller 1988, p. 23, A. 38.

62 Vollenweider 1999, p. 419

63 Vollenweider 1999, p. 419ff.

18

Vollenweider has found many supporters and adherents for his thesis. Among the first to jump on his bandwagon was the Heidelberg New Testament scholar Theißen. He also sees in the "Philippian Hymn" a "counterimage to the emperor – to those people who grasped for a godlike status. Christ takes the opposite path. He renounced his equality with God. The salvation message of the hymn, therefore, does not lie in Christ going to the cross for sinners, but," as Theißen adds in modern pulpit jargon, "that through the way to the cross, he became in solidarity with all humiliated victims."⁶⁴ Similar sentiments can also be found in the works of Schnelle, Becker, and others.⁶⁵

Such statements sound good in their abstract generality. They meet the need of many contemporary Christians for "political theology." However, a closer look and a demand for exegetical scrutiny reveal that something about this interpretation does not quite add up. If the author had the Roman emperors in mind as the counterimage, as Vollenweider assumes, a substantial problem arises. Translated using Vollenweider's own words: "He (the preexistent Christ) did not consider equality with God as plunder, not as something to be violently seized or grasped,"⁶⁶ and considering that this statement is directed against the Roman emperors, the immediate question arises as to how the godlike status of the Roman Caesars relates to that of the preexistent Christ. Is it really of the same kind, that is, a true, genuine equality with God, so that they can be mentioned in the same breath? It is hardly conceivable that the author intended this thought, as it would imply a recognition of the true divinity of the emperor, which would contradict the intention assumed by Vollenweider.

64 Theißen 2006, p. 450.

65 Schnelle 2003, p. 417: "He thus embodies the antithesis of the self-aggrandizing ruler." Finally, mention should be made of the rather imaginative assumption by Heen, who wants to see in the hymn the document of a "hidden resistance" against the Roman rulers, a "nasty political song" that is said to have been sung at Christian gatherings. Heen 2004, p. 137: "That is to say, in their assemblies, the followers of Christ may have sung that it was Jesus rather than the emperor who was deserving of the honorific *isa theō*." - "When set against the background of the use of *isa theō* in the contemporary civic and imperial cult in the Greek cities where Paul conducted his mission, however, it may be more appropriately understood as an expression of a hidden transcript that sets Christ over against the Roman emperor."

Or, alternatively, is Christ's equality with God similar to that of the Roman rulers, thus only a figurative "equality with God"? The indirect degradation of Christ implied in this assumption also makes it unlikely.

Vollenweider and others overlook that the "equality with God" is the common reference point of both the image and the assumed counterimage and that the implied (negative) comparison only works if the equality with God of the preexistent Christ and that of the earthly Caesars are on the same level—which is not the case with this interpretation.⁶⁷

Moreover, Vollenweider goes to great lengths to demonstrate that emperors a) were considered godlike and b) were seen as rapacious ("positions of power and kingdoms are subject to the rapacious grasp"). Both points are indisputable, well-documented, and fundamentally not new.

What Vollenweider cannot demonstrate is a precise linguistic correspondence to the thought he assumes in Phil 2:6, that the godlike status of secular rulers is the subject of a "harpagmos" (robbery). The section promisingly titled "Usurpation of Divinity in the Hebrew Bible and Judaism" contains no evidence for this, at most a collection of testimonies of royal hubris and arrogance. According to Vollenweider himself, only "interactions between the semantic fields of 'robbery' and 'rulership' can be demonstrated," which is insufficient to make the thesis watertight. Only two pieces of evidence, which Vollenweider claims "have not yet been 'discovered'," can be considered prime witnesses: a passage from the Alexander history of Curtius Rufus⁶⁸ and another from a romance novel by Achilles Tatius (2nd century AD). Without being too pedantic, it must be noted that in both cases, the talk is of the robbery of "divine honors," which is not the same as the robbery of "equality with God." In the latter case, the accusation is not directed at a secular ruler but at a priest.

67 Vollenweider's statements become even more opaque when he "with fear and trembling" takes the side of those who see in the "equality with God" 6b an "increase of being in the form of God" and a "res rapienda" (p. 429). This results in three levels of equality with God: 1. equality with God as the highest "increase of being in the form of God", 2. the being of the pre-existent Christ, which is different from this, and 3. the being of the Roman Caesars, which is to be distinguished again from this. Unfortunately, Vollenweider does not give us Ariadne's thread to help us find our way out of this maze. The height of confusion is reached when Vollenweider uses the term *res rapienda*, although he had just explained in a previous footnote (p. 428, A. 89) that he wanted to avoid the opposition between *res rapta* and *res rapienda*, "since it is fraught with numerous vaguenesses and confusions." If only he had remained true to this intention.

68 "Iamque omnibus praeparatis ratus, quod olim prava mente conceperat, tunc esse maturum, quoniam modo caelestes honores usurparet coepit agitare. Iovis filium non dici tantum se, sed etiam credi volebat, tamquam perinde animis imperare posset ac linguis."

Finally, it is worth asking whether the political interpretation truly does justice to the context of the letter. Vollenweider seems very confident in his position and refers to some recent works on the topic.⁶⁹ However, his own arguments are extremely weak. The warnings in the exhortation to the Philippians (2:1-5) against "selfishness" and "vainglory," "wanting to surpass others," and "looking to one's own interests" may indeed correspond to the tendency toward self-exaltation. However, seeing this as a political issue is only possible if one assumes that the letter can only be interpreted "politically." In and of themselves, these are general human traits, unfortunately not limited to the political sphere, as is the mentioned "rivalry and upward mobility." Similarly, the fact that Paul writes his letter from prison does not make the matter inherently "political." And even the exhortation to "live your life worthy of the gospel" does not necessarily have a specific political dimension, despite the "politically" sounding term "politeuesthai." It most likely forms the Christian counterpart to the corresponding Jewish conduct of the law (2 Macc 6:1).

All in all, Vollenweider's study of Phil 2:6 has its merits, insofar as it leaves behind the old idiom theory and again questions the origin of the counterimage underlying this passage without resorting to the old "favorite" Adam and the Paradise story. However, the interpretation proposed by Vollenweider, seeing the divine Caesar as the counterimage to the divine Christ, is unconvincing, as both forms of "equality with God," as noted above, are on entirely different levels, and it is highly unlikely that the author intended to compare apples and oranges, that is, the equality with God of the preexistent Christ with that of the "godlike" Caesar.

Thus, the problem remains or even intensifies. For if Vollenweider is right, and for linguistic and content reasons, it is clear that the author of Phil 2:6 is not using a phrase but has a negative counterimage in mind, whose main character is neither Adam nor the Roman emperor, as Vollenweider believes, then who is it?

A true counterimage would have to be a real divine being with genuine equality with God, but unlike the preexistent Christ, this equality would be due to a robbery, a real robbery. Finally, this being must be somewhat familiar to the Christians to whom the letter is addressed – for allusions that no one understands because no one knows what is being alluded to make no sense.

⁶⁹ Bormann 1995; Pilhofer 1995; Fairy 1992.

21

In the next section, we will see that such a counterimage does indeed exist. The only problem: It is attested only later, nearly a century after the supposed composition of the supposed Letter to the Philippians.

2.3 Sophia versus Christ - F.C. Baur

The history of the interpretation of the Christ Hymn teaches us that a brilliant exegetical insight retains its value even if time seems to have passed it by. About 150 years ago, none other than Ferdinand Christian Baur took the first step in the right direction with a keen eye for theological

and intellectual-historical connections in the exegesis of Phil 2:6.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, his hypothesis quickly fell into oblivion. In most modern commentaries on the Christ Hymn, it is sought in vain.

According to Baur, the difficult passage in 1 Cor 2:6 must be explained by assuming that "the author of the letter had certain Gnostic contemporary ideas in mind because: 'What peculiar notion is it to say of Christ that, although he was in the form of God, he did not consider it robbery, or, to take the words more grammatically precisely, did not think it necessary to make it the object of an *actus rapiendi*, to be equal with God. If he was already God, why would he want to become what he already was? But if he was not yet equal to God, what eccentric, unnatural, self-contradictory thought would it have been to become equal to God? Should not precisely this unthinkable nature of such a thought be indicated by the expression *ouch harpagmon ēgēsato* ("did not consider it robbery")? How, then, does the author come to say something so unthinkable about Christ, even in a negative form?"

Baur's answer: "The possibility of how the author of the letter could come to such a thought is seen in the teachings of the Gnostics. It is a well-known Gnostic notion that in one of the Aeons, namely in the last in their series, the Gnostic Sophia, there arose a passionate, eccentric, unnatural desire to penetrate the being of the primal father with all power, to unite directly with him, the Absolute, and to become one with him."

70 Baur 1866, p. 50ff.

22

Baur refers to the well-known Gnostic myth of the fall of Sophia and attempts to show that the author of the Letter to the Philippians must have had this myth or one of its variants in mind at this point. Irenaeus recounted the Sophia myth:

"The farthest leap was made by the last and youngest offspring of the Twelve, the Aeon produced by Man and the Church, Sophia, who fell into passionate excitement without the embrace of her consort Theletos. The excitement began with Nous and Aletheia but then extended sideways to Sophia under the pretext of love, in reality out of folly, as she did not have the same communion with the perfect Father as Nous did, and she was nothing other than seeking the Father, attempting to grasp his greatness. But then she could not, because she aimed at the impossible, and she fell into great distress because of the depth of the abyss and the unfathomability of the Father, and her tenderness toward him. As she strove ever further forward, she would have ultimately been consumed by his sweetness and dissolved into the general substance if she had not encountered a power that establishes the universe and guards it outside the unspeakable greatness. They call this power Horos."⁷¹

According to Baur, the difference between the author of the Christ Hymn and the Gnostics lies only in the fact that "he turns what has a purely speculative meaning for the Gnostics into a moral one. Thus, while for the Gnostics, that *harpagmos* really occurs but, as an unnatural endeavor, negates itself and only has negative consequences, here it must not come to such a

harpagmos through a moral self-determination, and the negative ... is now the voluntary renunciation and self-emptying through an act of will."⁷²

There is much to be said for Baur's assumption that the Sophia of the Gnostics is the counterimage to Christ: Unlike the other "favored candidates" Adam or Caesar, this is a real divine being comparable to the preexistent Christ, endowed with true equality with God. It could also be said, in a certain sense, that this Sophia made a real attempt to seize the equality with God of the Father and to become like him, making it quite understandable if Baur wants to decide the old dogmatic dispute—whether harpagmos refers to something already possessed by the preexistent (*res rapta*) or something yet to be obtained as booty (*res rapienda*)—in favor of the latter.

71 Haer 1 2:2.

72 Baur 1866.

23

Of course, all this applies only "to a certain extent." The problem is that the sources used by Baur, especially Irenaeus, nowhere explicitly speak of a robbery, a harpagmos. Instead, the sources speak of Sophia's desire to have communion with the Father (*kekoinōnēsthai*) or of a "yearning," etc. Baur himself must admit this critical flaw in his theory: "I cannot indeed prove the expression harpagmos as a Gnostic term."⁷³ However, he is so convinced of the correctness of his view that he still holds to his assumption, believing that "the expression itself does not matter so much if only the concept it is supposed to denote is found among the Gnostics."⁷⁴

Since Baur could not provide the crucial philological proof for his claim, it is understandable that his theory could not endure and subsequent generations of exegetes soon overlooked his discovery. This was evidently all the more convenient since Baur's findings were met with little enthusiasm among the majority of theologians; he had drawn conclusions from his observations that seemed highly problematic to them. Baur disputed the authenticity of the Letter to the Philippians. Consequently, he dated it to the same time as those Gnostic ideas he saw reflected in it, i.e., to the 2nd century. In doing so, he touched on a taboo that one cannot violate in the theological world, both then and now, without repercussions, even if Baur had to be credited for sparing the four "main letters of the Apostle" (Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Galatians) and not going as far as Bruno Bauer, who no longer recognized a single letter written under the name of the Apostle as genuine.

As for Bruno Bauer, he closely aligned himself with Baur on the interpretation of the Christ Hymn. According to Bauer, too, the Letter to the Philippians presupposes the "complete systematic development of Gnosis; Gnostic formulas are incorporated into it with explicit correction. The author of the letter has his Christ voluntarily do what the Gnostic Sophia experiences as a result of her criminal self-exaltation," with a polemical glance at Valentinus's system.⁷⁵ This is Baur's original tone, from which Bauer only distinguishes himself by more decisively placing the letter in the "depths of the second century," i.e., the mid-2nd century, something Baur had expressed less clearly.⁷⁶

73 ThJb(T) XI, p. 142.

74 Baur 1866, p. 54.

75 Bauer 1879, p. 374.

76 Bauer 1879, p. 374.

24

The fact that Baur's thesis was adopted and further radicalized by Bruno Bauer may have contributed to its complete discrediting, especially in the eyes of conservative theologians. To my knowledge, only one other scholar had the courage to revisit it, namely the Berlin Gnosis researcher and New Testament scholar Hans-Martin Schenke:

"The enigmatic 'ouch harpagmon hēgēsato to einai isa theō'... can only be truly and concretely understood, in my opinion, against the background of the widespread Gnostic topos of the world's creation through the fall of a divine being, usually Sophia: She presumptuously and rapaciously seeks to be equal to the divine primal father by attempting to bring forth something from herself alone; accordingly, her product, initially the demiurge, who in turn wants to be equal to God, and then the world, is only an abortion. Our phrase could be paraphrased against this background: The Son of God does not make the mistake of his sister, but descends into the world, leaving behind the wealth of his divine fullness in heaven for the sake of those to be saved (ekenōsen; cf. 2 Cor 8:9), to rectify the mistake."⁷⁷

Unlike Baur, Schenke does not question the authenticity of the Letter to the Philippians. In his view, the hymn cited by Paul originates from a circle of pre-Christian Gnosis, from which the Apostle more or less adopted it unaltered. However, the thesis taken up by Schenke from Baur could not prevail, certainly also because the idea of pre-Christian Gnosis favored by Schenke has now been largely abandoned. It may also have failed to convince because there is no indication in the texts for the idea of Sophia's "rapacious presumption."

Nevertheless, Baur's, Bauer's, and Schenke's thesis, despite its obvious shortcomings, could have at least pointed in the approximate right direction. Further research into the context of the Gnostic Sophia myth shows that there is indeed another figure that precisely fulfills all the requirements for a counterimage capable of satisfactorily explaining the religious-historical background of the Christ Hymn.

⁷⁷ Schenke 1973, p. 219.

25

2.4 Jaldabaoth versus Christ

The figure being discussed here is none other than the Gnostic Demiurge, known by various names and designations in Gnostic mythology. In the accounts of the Church Fathers and the

original Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, we encounter him directly in the context of Sophia, his mother; the wayward son is most often referred to as Jaldabaoth (or Yaltabaoth). His meaning is not definitively clarified. Rudolph suspected an Aramaic or Semitic origin and thought of "Creator of Sabaoth" (i.e., Abaoth), the (heavenly) powers, as an esoteric euphemism for the Jewish God. The meaning "Son of the Abyss" (from Greek abyssos) is also discussed.⁷⁸

Jaldabaoth's true "homeland" is the Gnostic Sophia myth, which exists in various versions.⁷⁹ While his mother, Sophia, navigates a delicate balance between the material and spiritual, finite and infinite spheres, ultimately returning to the Pleroma, her son as the Demiurge is more aligned with the material world, which is despised by the Gnostics. As the Demiurge, he initiates the work of creation. However, because his creation is based on the theft of divine light/divine powers, it becomes a prison for the divine light forces trapped in the material world. This leads to the process of redemption through Sophia's brother and, so to speak, the "uncle" of the Demiurge: Christ.

If we understand the verse of the Christ Hymn dealing with the robbery of equality with God in light of the counterimage of the Gnostic Demiurge, its meaning becomes perfectly clear, and every single word finds its explanation:

(1) Even in the introductory phrase "hos en morphē theou hyparchōn" ("who, being in the form of God"), we find the contrast to the Gnostic Demiurge hinted at, who, unlike the preexistent Christ, did not always possess his godlike form. This is explicitly emphasized in the Apocryphon of John: because he was created without a consort, his form was imperfect and different from the form of Sophia ("without form from her form"). It further states: "It did not resemble the appearance of the mother since it had a different form (μορφῆ = morphē, 7)."⁸⁰ This form is described as having the face of a lion and a serpent, "and his eyes were like flashing bright fire."⁸¹

78 Nagel 2007, p. 253, A. 116; see van Unnik 1961, p. 79; Quispel 1953, p. 199; the etiology UW (NHC II /5) p.100, 10ff. is hardly correct.

79 AJ (NHC II/1) p. 9:25-11; 14.15ff.; 19.23ff.; 23.36-24.8; AJ (NHC III) p. 15, 22ff.; 18, 9ff.; 21.19ff. 31, 7ff.; AJ (NHC IV,1)p. 17.17ff. 18.25ff., 22.22ff. 37.5.22ff; AJ (BG) p. 38, 14ff.; 62.5ff., 5HA (NHC II/4) p. 94.15ff; 96; UW (NHC II/5) p.99; 100.14ff.; 101; 102.12ff.; 103.1ff; 106-107; 112; SJC (BG 3)p. 119.16ff.; 2LogSeth (NHC VII/2) p.53,13ff; 62.27ff.; 68.29ff.; Protennoia (NHC XIII/1) p. 39; JudEv (CT 3) 51; Iren Haer 1 30:5ff, 10ff, 14; Orig Cels 6:31f; Epiph Haer 2 25:2f; 26:8, 10; Epiph Haer 3 37:3ff; 45:1.

80 UW (NHC II/5) p. 101,1ff.; AJ (BG 2)p. 37, 18, Schenke et al. 2007, p. . 90.

81 According to Grant 1959, 1959, p. 49, lion and snake faces are the attributes of Mithras-Zervan. From this, van Unnik 1961, p. 79, concludes that the myth could be "a polemic against Persian-Babylonian Astral theology".

The fact that the Demiurge is initially described as formless in some sources reflects Gnostic thinking, which attributes morphē only to what is of divine nature or origin. While the hallmark of the divine sphere is form, the hallmark of material creation is initially formlessness, the

amorphous,⁸² which is sometimes also expressed through the image of a "miscarriage."⁸³ This may perhaps be a reminiscence of the chaos (tohu wabohu) of the first day of creation (Gen 1:2). The Priestly source describes the earth as "formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep (abyssos); and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." This passage would not have escaped the notice of Gnostics interested in cosmogony.⁸⁴

(2) As we saw, Baur's interpretation of the Christ Hymn primarily failed because he and his few followers could not verify terminologically his thesis that Sophia's striving to unite with the Father should be interpreted as "harpagmos." In fact, no corresponding or similar term can be found in this context.

It is quite different with the son of Sophia, the Demiurge Jaldabaoth, who in some Gnostic myths is closely associated with the motif of robbery and whose godlikeness is evidently due to the fact that he violently took divine powers from his mother. The motif of the "theft of light" or "theft of power" by the Demiurge is found in Irenaeus, but especially in two original Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, the Apocryphon of John and the (possibly based on it) Trimorphic Protennoia.

82 Iren Haer 2.3.1; Protennoia (NHC XIII/1) p. 45,23f. "...who had given the universe an image when it had no form." – As everywhere, there are exceptions, TractTrip (NHC I/5) p. 54,29ff. (of the divine original source) the opposite seems to apply.

83 HA (NHC II/4) p. 94,15; UW (NHC II/5)p. 99,9; 115:5; Iren Haer 2.30.4; Hipp Ref 5.17; 6.31.36; 7.26: "After this had happened, the formlessness in us should also be illuminated and the mystery should be revealed to the sonship left behind in formlessness like a miscarriage,...": see also Gilhus 1984 on abortion as a metaphor in Gnosis.

84 See also Hipp Ref 5:19: "From above he came, a ray of that perfect light, overwhelmed in the dark, terrible, bitter, foul water; this is the luminous spirit that hovers over the waters (Gen. 1, 2)." Fredriksen 1979 also refers to ancient theories about the origin of the embryo. According to them, the man contributes the "form" to the origin of an embryo, while the woman contributes the material. See Arist. Gn. An., 729a 9f., 730a 24f; cf. Gilhus 1984, p. 112. See also Wyrwa 2009, p. 109ff.

27

In his account of the Barbeliotes' Sophia myth, the Church Father Irenaeus again discusses the creation of the Demiurge, here called Proarchon, who, like in the Valentinian tradition, was conceived without the participation of a suitable consort and born as a deficient being.

According to Irenaeus in "Against Heresies" 1.29.4, this Proarchon, as the Barbeliotes claim, took a great power from his mother (virtutem autem magnam abstulisse eum a Matre narrant) and then went outside the Pleroma, where he created the "powers and angels, the firmaments and all earthly things" beneath him. Similarly, Epiphanius reports in his account of the Ophites that Jaldabaoth took his power from his mother in the heights, Prunikos.⁸⁵

It is possible that the Apocryphon of John (or a precursor thereof), presumably dating from the 2nd century, was already available to the Church Father for his summary.⁸⁶ In any case, there are a number of correspondences in the first main part that indicate this. The Apocryphon of John exists in four different manuscripts, with the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae being known since the late 19th century. The other three manuscripts were discovered along with other Gnostic texts in

Nag Hammadi. Their origin is suspected, with good or better reasons, to lie either in Sethian or Barbelo Gnosis.⁸⁷

The motif of stolen power frequently appears in the texts. Again, it is the son of Sophia, Jaldabaoth, who extracts the dynamis from his mother. He is the "first ruler who took a great power ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ from his mother."⁸⁸ Shortly thereafter, Sophia's repentance over her mistake is mentioned; Apocryphon of John (NHC II/1; IV/1) p. 13,21ff.: "...when she (Sophia) saw the wickedness that had occurred and the theft (ἵρξι) her son had committed, she turned back, and forgetfulness came over her in the darkness of ignorance, and she began to be ashamed."⁸⁹ Jaldabaoth uses his mother's power to create his creatures, as stated in Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1) p. 19,26 ff. Elsewhere, it is said of Jaldabaoth, Apocryphon of John (BG 2) p. 42-43: "From the pure light, however, that he had drawn from his mother, and the power he gave them nothing... Because of the (p.43) [glory that is in] him from the power of the light of his mother, therefore [he had] himself called God over them, thereby he was disobedient to his origin, from which he had come."⁹⁰ This clearly hints at a connection between the theft of light and Jaldabaoth/Sakla's assumed godlikeness. Jaldabaoth's arrogance is expressed in many different places in Gnostic literature: "The ruler who is weak has three names. The first name is Jaldabaoth, the second is Saklas, and the third is Samael. He is blasphemous in his arrogance that is in him, for he said, 'I am God, and there is no other God besides me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he came."⁹¹

85 Epiph Haer 3.37.4.2.

86 Markschiefs 2010, p. 96.

87 Cf. Becker 2006, p. 140ff.

88 AJ (NHC II,1) p. 10,20f.; (translation Schenke)

89 Schenke et al. 2007, p. 95.

90 AJ (BG 2) p. 42-43 (translation Schenke).

91 Schenke et al. 2007; cf. AJ (NHC II/1) p. 11,20ff.; AJ (NHC IV,1) p. 18,5ff; HA (NHC II/ 4) p. 86,30f.; 94,22f.; 95,5; UW (NHC II/5) p. 103.12; 107.30; 112.29f.; 2LogSeth (NHC VII/2) p. 53.20; 64.19; Protennoia (NHC XIII/1) 43.36f.; TestVer (NHC IX,3) p. 48.5f.

28

Robbery and even the overpowering of Sophia are mentioned in the Trimorphic Protennoia (where Sophia speaks):

"Immediately the great demon appeared, who rules over the depths of the underworld and chaos, who has neither form nor is perfect, but rather possesses the form of the 'glory' of those who were born in the darkness. This one is called: 'Sakla(s)' and is also named: 'Samaēl' (or) 'Yaltabōth,' who possesses a power he robbed from the innocent one, after he (30) overpowered her—namely the Epinoia of light, who had descended and from whom he (himself) originally sprang.⁹² ... Then I myself revealed myself mysteriously through my call and (10) said: 'Stop,

stop, O you who dwell in Hylē. For behold, I will descend into the world of mortals because of my part that is there, since (15) the innocent Sophia, who had descended, was overpowered, so that I might nullify their (the Archons') purpose, which was established by him who (first) appeared through her (Sophia).' Then all those who (do not) dwell in the house of the unknowable light trembled, and the abyss shook."

It is interesting to note that Jaldabaoth is identified through a type of name etiology as "the one who possesses a power he robbed from the innocent one after he overpowered her." The name has thus already become the epitome of the Gnostic "god of robbery." Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that at the beginning, the formlessness and imperfection of the Demiurge are emphasized. This is clearly a leitmotif closely associated with the figure of the Demiurge in Gnostic thinking.

92 Translation Schenke 1984, p. 78. [Referring, of course, to the German translation of which this is an English translation.]

29

According to Brankaer, the motif of robbery can also be found in a passage from the recently discovered and published Codex Tchacos (CT); in EpPt it says:

CT 3,24-27: "But there remained [a] limb of her (i.e., Sophia/Epinoia). The arrogant one (i.e., Jaldabaoth) seized it. And (thus) a deficiency arose."

CT 4,1-4 speaks of a "body part" (of Sophia) that was seized and sown by the "arrogant one" (Jaldabaoth/Saklas) to establish his "powers and forces." Brankaer states: "It is a well-known motif in 'Gnostic' texts that the Demiurge tries to seize or actually seizes something from the upper world. The fact that it is only a part already explains the deficiency. Additionally, the separation from the Pleroma inevitably leads to deficiency." Brankaer also notes that here "the mother is rather passive in the process of the creation of the deficiency, while the Demiurge is active."⁹³ In other Gnostic texts, Sophia also plays an active role. For example, in the writing "Nature of the Archons," the light is not stolen by the Demiurge but brought into the material by Sophia herself.⁹⁴ Overall, however, one can say that the idea of robbery, whether of (divine) light or divine powers, is closely associated in Gnostic literature with the figure of the Demiurge Jaldabaoth or Saklas, to the extent that he could become the epitome of the "robber" (see the text quoted above from the Trimorphic Protennoia).

According to Dibelius⁹⁵, Philippians 2:6b should be connected with the idea of the robbery of spirits in the region of the firmament; see Ascension of Isaiah 10:31: "And he (Christ) gave no password, for one robbed and violated the other." Dibelius' view comes very close to the thesis represented here. However, the passage he quotes does not specifically mention the robbery of "equality with God" but rather the robbery and violation of the archons in general. It is very likely that the corresponding section in the Ascension of Isaiah was inspired by corresponding Gnostic myths (see the next section).

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts has once again made it clear how widespread the motif of archons as robbers was in Gnostic literature: The fleshly body, the "cave," with which Adam is clothed is considered the work of the "robbers" (lēstēs), i.e., the archons (Apocryphon of John (NHC II/1) p. 21:11); the Gospel of Philip knows that the soul left behind by Christ is robbed by the "robbers" (lēstēs), i.e., the archons (Gospel of Philip (NHC II/3) p. 53,12f); in the Exegesis on the Soul, the soul that has fallen into the body, just like in the Ascension of Isaiah, "falls into the hands of many robbers. When she fell into (a) body (and) came into this life, she fell into the hands of many robbers. And the criminals passed her around [and held her]. Some abused her [with violence], while others deceived her with a treacherous gift. In short, she was defiled and [destroyed her] virginity" (Exegesis on the Soul (NHC II/6) p. 127,25ff.); finally, in the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the savior who came down from heaven "breaks the work of the robbers," they are "condemned" by him (Sophia of Jesus Christ (NHC III/4 BG 3) p. 107:15f.; 114:1).⁹⁶ Presumably, we are dealing with a classic motif shift here, in the course of which the motif of the Demiurge's theft of light in particular was transferred to the archons (who are involved in the creation of the world) in general.⁹⁷ As Karl Martin Fischer has shown, there could be a close thematic connection to the Shepherd's Discourse in the Gospel of John (John 10:1).⁹⁸

93 Brankaer, Bethge 2007, p. 58.

94 HA (NHC II/ 4) p. 94,30f.

95 In the first edition of his commentary, Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 79 and in Dibelius 1909, pp. 103–109; cf. Strecker 1964, p. 74.

96 Schenke 1965, p. 388 on the system of the Sophia of Jesus Christ: "Yaldabaoth and his angels are arrogant, haughty, blind and ignorant. They consider themselves to be gods, although they are not, and are far inferior in quality to the beings of the upper world. They behave in a hostile manner towards the upper world in that they try to keep the soul and spirit of man in their sphere of power through ignorance, which is why they are also called 'robbers'."

97 See also Ephraem Pr. Ref I, 123, 1-14 on Bardesan: "She (Sophia), he says, showed the archons and rulers an image of her beauty and thereby deceived them, so that when they (the archons) urged each other to create [something] like what they had seen, each one of them would give up something of his treasure that he possesses. And in this way what they had grabbed would be snatched from their treasures." See Aland 2009, p. 372

98 Fischer 1973, p. 260f.

30

The question of "whether the Philippians could have understood the expression"⁹⁹ is to be answered affirmatively given the widespread presence of the motif in Gnostic literature as shown here. It is well-known and does not need further elaboration that the motif of the theft of light transitioned from the Gnostic systems of the 2nd century into Manichaeism, where it played a significant role as an "original fact"¹⁰⁰ establishing the process of redemption.¹⁰¹ Here, it should only be demonstrated that the beginnings of this motif can be traced back quite far, though likely no further back than the 2nd century. As far as I know, there is no evidence for the existence of this motif in sources from the 1st century. In light of our starting point, one must logically

conclude that the Christ Hymn cannot be older than the myth it apparently polemically refers to. In other words, it also originates from the 2nd century.

99 Dibelius et al. 1937.

100 Niedner 1866, p. 254.

101 Rudolph 1980, p. 363.

31

(3) This assumption can be further supported by additional observations we can make about the Christ Hymn, which clarify its Gnostic origins. The first pertains to the word "ekenōsen": "he emptied himself," a difficult phrase with a multitude of interpretations that cannot all be discussed here and do not need to be.

Vollenweider believes that the meaning of "emptying himself" can be illuminated by texts like Ruth 1:21, Jeremiah 15:9, and Luke 1:52f., as they reflect the "loss of a contextually clearly defined magnitude"—whatever the latter may mean.¹⁰² However, in the texts cited by Vollenweider, the references are to people and rulers or countries (Judah) who "wither" or "pine away," "go empty" and "come back empty," etc. Vollenweider does not provide an example of a divine power "emptying itself," as the Son of God in the Christ Hymn does. Such an example would be difficult to find in early Judaism and the Old Testament.

Once again, the Gnosis of the 2nd century, where the word almost took on the role of a technical term, offers rich evidence. In those Gnostic systems where the Sophia myth and the theft of her divine power by the Demiurge are played out in various versions, we also learn about the "self-emptying" of divine powers. Kenosis, as the "emptying" of divine power, is usually set within the typically Gnostic-dualistic tension between the Pleroma (as the epitome of divine fullness) on the one hand and emptiness/lack/shadow (lat. *vacuitas*, as the epitome of the transient material world) on the other hand. Adam and Eve are emptied of their divine light-dew by Sophia (*mater evacuans*, Irenaeus, Haer 1.30.8); the Sophia, emptied of her spiritual essence by the birth of Christ, brings forth the Demiurge in the shadow (we have both the Latin translation, *matrem evacuatam*, and the Greek, which offers the same expression derived from *kenoō*, *kekenōmenēn*, Irenaeus, Haer 1.11.1); Irenaeus, Haer 1.30.6 has Mother Sophia creating humans from her aeons so that she may empty herself of her primal power in the act of creation; Jaldabaoth seeks to empty man (Adam) through a woman (Eve) (Irenaeus, Haer 1.30.7), and so on.

102 Vollenweider 2002, p. 302; Hofius 1991, p. 59ff.

32

A compact definition of kenosis, also from the Gnostic milieu, is provided by the Gnostic Theodotus. This is actually an interpretation of Phil 2:7. Theodotus says that Jesus' kenosis "of the light" consisted in him crossing the boundary of Horos and leaving the Pleroma. Kenosis, or

emptying, here means nothing other than: leaving the fullness, the Pleroma.¹⁰³ It is hard to deny that the Gnostic interpretation indeed captures the intention of the Christ Hymn well. Certainly, the interpretation of the Christ Hymn at this point would be entirely undisputed if its author had done us the favor of adding the crucial word "Pleroma."¹⁰⁴

Sometimes 2 Cor 8:9 is cited as an analogy to Phil 2:7: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." This is indeed a parallel, though not in the sense some interpreters think. 2 Cor 8:9 is most meaningfully understood against the background of the Gnostically influenced Pauline pre-existence Christology, with its contrast between Pleroma/richness on one side and kenosis/lack/poverty on the other,¹⁰⁵ as seen in SJC (NHC III/4) p. 107, 1ff.: "a drop from the light, through this, was sent into the world of the Almighty, so that it might be guarded by him. And the chain of his forgetfulness bound him according to the will of Sophia, so that the matter might be revealed through him in the whole world of poverty."

Overall, it is evident that the author of the Christ Hymn must have had Gnostic terminology in mind when using the term. Another question is how radically he envisioned the process of depotentiation in his Christ, assuming he reflected on it at all. He likely did not think of a complete relinquishment of divinity. Kenosis was probably understood, as with Theodotus, as simply crossing the Horos and leaving the Pleroma. The fact that the author of the Hymn did not consider a total loss of the divine is also supported by the docetic phrasing he clearly uses in the following lines:

(4) The assumption of the form of a servant or slave (2:7) gains its true meaning on the basis of the Gnostic Pleroma-kenosis contrast outlined above, as evidenced by the fact that *doulos* is explained by *anthropos*. In other words, being human is seen as a state of enslavement. This, again, corresponds entirely with the Gnostic understanding of existence. The idea of bondage in the world as a result of the rule of the Demiurge and his Aeons, as well as ignorance, has a firm place there.¹⁰⁶

103 Exc ex Theod 2:35.

104 Cf. also Exc ex Theod 2:35.

105 Bultmann, Merk 1984, p. 179.

106 See Gnilka 1976, 1968, p. 120; EV (NHC I/3) p. 24.21ff.; EvPhil 123 (NHC II/3); ApcAd (NHC V/5) p. 65.20f; 72.20; AuthLog (NHC VI/3) p. 30.20; 2LogSeth (NHC VII/2) p. 64.1f. (food commandments); ApcPt (NHC VII/3) p. 78.10ff.; ExVal (NHC XI/2) p. 29.19; 42.20.

The themes of humiliation and obedience (2:8) also belong here. According to Gnilka, this involves "obediently accepting the nature of earthly, contingent existence."¹⁰⁷ Gnilka believes he is justified in his interpretation based on some Philonic passages that speak of the "obedient acknowledgment of the nature of fundamentally insignificant human existence."¹⁰⁸ However, the obedient acceptance of the inevitable nature of insignificant human existence and the obedient

decision to take on this very existence by the preexistent Son of God are on entirely different levels. Strecker considers the "real existing slavery of the contemporary society" as the "associative background";¹⁰⁹ he does not see the "Hellenistic idea of human subjugation under cosmic powers ... indicated by the text." However, Strecker's remarks on ancient slavery—following in the footsteps of Max Maurenbrecher—are likely entirely off the mark. The sociological category of slavery has no basis in the earthly existence of the Son of God. Strecker seems to be confusing Christ with Spartacus.¹¹⁰ The religious-historical interpretation he dismisses without reason still hits the crucial point. Schenke has correctly understood this once again. For him, being a servant, humiliation, and obedience belong together. "But then one must ask, not only whose servant he (Christ) becomes, but also before whom he actually becomes humble and obedient and whether these three expressions do not have the same reference point. Can we not, indeed must we not understand, or at least originally intend: He became the servant of the anti-divine powers, he humbled himself before them, he became obedient to them—that corresponds to the Gnostic motif that the redeemer remains initially unrecognizable to the archons out of cunning—, until his death, that is, until the moment when he lets them kill him, in order to destroy them in the process (cf. 1 Cor 2:8)?"¹¹¹ Schenke refers in this context to a passage from Baruch Gnosis as referred to by Hippolytus in *Refutatio* 5.26.22: "This is Naas; it means that one should obey the eleven other angels of Eden."

107 Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 123.

108 Her 29; 1:1 Congr 107; Post 136.

109 Strecker 1999, p. 154; cf. Moule 1970, p. 268.

110 See Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 74: Of course, *doulos* has no sociological meaning, as if Jesus were a slave; his slavery is his humanity."

111 Schenke 1973, p. 219f.

34

It is also possible that the motifs of "humiliation" (*tapeinoun*) and "obedience" (*hypēkoos*) are introduced by the author of the hymn as a counterimage to the Gnostic Demiurge Jaldabaoth. A hint of this can be found in the previously quoted Berolensis; there, the pride of Jaldabaoth is mentioned, who "let himself be called God over them," "thereby being disobedient to his origin, from which he had come" (*Apocryphon of John* (BG 2) p. 42-43). Perhaps the author of the hymn had the disobedience of Jaldabaoth in mind when depicting the obedience of Christ.

(5) In Phil 2:7, it is said that the Son of God, after his descent (from the Pleroma), took on the form of a servant and became like or similar to humans (*en omoiōmati anthrōpōn genomenos*). The interpretation of this passage depends on the meaning of the word *omoiōma*, which can be translated as "likeness" or "similarity." If one assumes the first, it is thought that Christ must have been fully human for the author; if one assumes the second, then Christ only seemingly had the form of a human. In this case, the author of the hymn could rightly be suspected of docetism, i.e., the denial of the genuine corporeality of Jesus. Theoretically, both translations are possible. In practice, i.e., in academic and ecclesiastical contexts, only the first is

considered "correct." Proponents of this view point out that the corporeality of Christ is beyond question for Paul, as he otherwise could not have spoken of Christ's descent from the line of David (Rom 1:3) or his birth from a woman (Gal 4:4). Moreover, Rom 8:4 must also be considered, where, in their opinion, *omoiōma* is undoubtedly used in the sense of "likeness." Overall, it is said: "Docetic notions are entirely foreign to Paul" (Schneider).¹¹² "The poet is concerned with full incarnation" (Gnilka).¹¹³ "Where the *omoiōma* formula appears, it is about the true and unrestricted humanity of Jesus" (Michel).¹¹⁴ "Against a docetic misunderstanding, the facticity of Jesus' humanity is emphasized ... The facticity of humanity is not denied, but, on the contrary, is sharply highlighted" (Käsemann).¹¹⁵

112 Schneider, p. 197.

113 Gnilka 1976, 1968, p. 121.

114 Michel 1954, p. 91; cf. Rissi, p. 3320.

115 Käsemann 1950, p. 339 "But the one who actually became human behaved differently than other people, *omoioma* seems to give scope for such a statement, thus preparing for the miracle of this human being."

35

It is interesting that Käsemann's judgment is sometimes adopted by some contemporary exegetes, which must be quite surprising. Since there supposedly was no pre-Christian Gnosis, one wonders about Paul's apparent zeal in combating a heresy that did not yet exist in his time...

Despite the strict judgment of some exegetes, an unsatisfactory impression remains. Perhaps this is because it seems too forceful, too loud, and reminiscent of children whistling in the forest out of fear of the big bad wolf, which in this case is docetism. If one were to discover it in a Pauline text, it would very thoroughly change our understanding of the Apostle and his proclamation of Christ.

Despite all the clever explanations, it is not quite clear why the author struggles so much here and avoids a simple formulation, such as stating that Christ became a human, which can hardly be explained by poetic style. Even those exegetes who believe the issue is essentially resolved show hesitation. According to Ulrich Müller, while the author of the hymn made every effort to vividly portray the real incarnation of Christ (e.g., through hymnic pleonasm) and to depict Christ as a historical human, he then suddenly concedes, "one cannot say that the formulations are completely clear. Taken by themselves, they could appear docetic. This applies especially to v. 7d: 'being found in human likeness.' Yet this comparative phrase should not lead to the assumption that the hymn did not take the reality of Christ's humanity seriously. On the contrary! V. 7a ultimately aims at the intended understanding. The ever-recurring manner of speaking, which nevertheless remains somewhat in suspense, reveals the difficulty."

In the end, Müller concludes that the hymn "has obvious difficulty" in "expressing the full incarnation." – A remarkable statement, as it seems Müller himself does not entirely believe what he previously stated about the author's efforts to express the real incarnation.

In any case, all the usual explanations are hardly able to truly eliminate the issue that arises with the enigmatic *omoiōma*.

It seems even less plausible that the verse speaks of the full humanity of Christ, considering there is an interpretation of the text, which as early as the 2nd century, took the opposite direction.

36

No less a figure than the arch-heretic Marcion used the verse from the Christ Hymn as confirmation of his theory that Christ had a phantom body. Chrysostom vividly recounts the discussion between Marcionites and Catholics in one of his sermons:

"See,' he says, 'he was not found as a man but in the likeness of a man.'" Chrysostom, hom. 7 in Phil: "What do the heretics say now? See, they say, he did not (truly) become a man—the followers of Marcion, I mean—but what? He only 'became similar' to humans, they say. But how is it possible—to become similar to humans? By assuming a phantom body? ... And being found in appearance as a man.'—Do you see, it is said, 'in appearance' and 'as a man.' But this expression 'being as a man' and 'being in appearance as a man' does not designate a real man; for 'being in appearance' as a man is not the same as 'being by nature' a man."¹¹⁶

The further course of the discussion shows how much the Marcionites troubled the orthodox Christians with their interpretation. The latter had little to counter their argumentation.

Chrysostom is not the only one from whom we learn how the Marcionites interpreted the Christ Hymn. Esnik of Kolb also knows that Marcion and his followers tried to capitalize on Phil 2:7 for their phantom body thesis: "Jesus became a man only in appearance."¹¹⁷

These quotes are astonishing; they show that the full humanity of Christ in Phil 2:7 cannot be as clear as some contemporary theologians believe, if Marcion and his followers saw the exact opposite in it and found solid evidence for the correctness of their docetic views.

Among the few who noticed the Marcionite character of the passage Phil 2:6-7 is the Bruno Bauer scholar Ernst Barnikol. In his study "Der marcionitische Ursprung des Mythos-Satzes Phil. 2, 6-7" [= "The Marcionite Origin of the Mythical Phrase Phil. 2, 6-7"], he notes that the interpretation of the Christ Hymn diverged in the early Church, with one tradition seeing the preexistent Christ/Logos as the subject of Phil 2:6ff (B, Greek Fathers), and another viewing the "real" human Jesus as the subject (A, Latin Fathers). Barnikol also believes he can show that the two verses 6-7 were still unknown to some Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus. Finally, he points to the already mentioned interpretation of the Marcionites, which in his view better captures the meaning of the text than any other. "But if this is Marcion's Christological heartfelt opinion and interpretation of this ... 'Pauline passage,' about which there can be no doubt, then

one must say that this text fits excellently with this (Marcion's) anthropo-docetic Christology. Like a glove. As if it were specially created or shaped out of this Christological belief."¹¹⁸ Barnikol therefore assumes that verses 6-7 are a Marcionite interpolation from the 2nd century. If a Church Father like Tertullian, who believes that the verses speak of the true incarnation of the Son of God, were correct, "why does it not simply say, instead of the triad of form of a servant, likeness of man, and appearance, simply: homo factus est? Why are the shimmering circumlocutions, precisely in Marcion's sense, not missing?"¹¹⁹ Barnikol's answer: "Because Marcion is the author who created this text, which is solely adequate to his Christology!" According to Barnikol, the core of his teaching is contained in it: the preexistence concept is fundamentally un-Pauline and was only secondarily inserted into the hymn through the two verses 6-7.

116 Chrysostom, hom. 7 in Phil, translation by Barnikol 1932, p. 86.

117 Esnik von Kolb, De Deo 4:7f. For more on this see Barnikol 1932, p. 87ff.

118 Barnikol 1932, p. 75.

119 Barnikol 1932, p. 76.

37

Finally, Barnikol also points to some discrepancies between the Marcionite text form and the Textus Receptus, which he believes are best explained by assuming a Catholic revision of the original Marcionite hymn. (1) While the Old Catholic Church read the plural "anthrōpōn" ("of men," plural) in 2:7c, Marcion read the genitive singular "anthrōpou" ("of a man"). (2) The word "genomenos" ("becoming") following "anthrōpōn" in the Catholic version is missing in the Marcionite version, as is (3) the "hōs" ("as") before "anthrōpos" ("man"). According to Barnikol, the first variant can be explained by the Catholic editor's intention to give "homoīōma" the meaning of "likeness" in order to emphasize Christ's humanity. Because: "One does not say 'likeness of men,' but 'likeness of a man' for human likeness, but one says 'equality of men' for human equality." The addition of "genomenos" can be seen as the editor's attempt to rephrase the sentence to leave time for birth and messianic work between preexistence and passion (2:8). Since the author had already used "genomenos" in 8b, this resulted in an awkward repetition. The addition of "hōs" was also intended, paradoxical as it may sound, to combat Marcionite docetism, because: "Marcion meant: in human likeness and only in appearance a man. That meant: otherwise not a man! The Old Catholic meant: in human equality and in appearance like a man. That means: exactly like a man! And yet not merely a man!"¹²⁰

120 Barnikol 1932, p. 99.

38

Barnikol's study contains a number of remarkable and accurate observations. However, his conclusion that verses 6-7 must have been interpolated into the text of the Letter to the Philippians by Marcionite circles in the 2nd century is not very convincing. The silence of

Irenaeus and other Church Fathers, which Barnikol cites as evidence, could also be explained by their embarrassment in the face of the Marcionite appropriation of verse 2:7, in which they saw a basis for their docetism. Moreover, it is not permissible to exclude the report of the Gallic communities about the martyrs of Lugdunum (Hist Eccl 5:2) from the list of witnesses.¹²¹

A good decade after Barnikol and apparently independently of him, R. M. Hawkins arrived at a similar conclusion. However, he considers not only verses 6-7 but 5-11 as a whole to be a later interpolation, supposedly inserted by someone who did not want to accept the "reality of the true incarnation" of Christ.¹²² Unlike Barnikol, Hawkins cannot identify who is responsible for the interpolation, although his reference to someone who "denied the true incarnation" seems to point in a similar direction.¹²³ Hawkins believes that the "genuine" Paul can only be brought to light after the removal of various later insertions in his writings.

Barnikol and Hawkins rightly recognized that it is impossible to resolve the many contradictions and problems in Pauline literature without assuming interpolations. However, it is crucial to determine the relationship between the various literary layers. Both scholars assumed that there was an "orthodox," i.e., anti-docetic, anti-dualistic fundamental layer of the letters, which was repeatedly overlaid by docetic and dualistic insertions. As we will see, the opposite is the case. It is not the fundamental layer but the interpolations that are anti-Gnostic or anti-Marcionite and thus correspond to the theology of the anti-Gnostic and anti-Marcionite Catholic orthodoxy emerging in the 2nd century.

121 Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 73.

122 Hawkins 1943, p. 252.

123 Martin 1997, p. 62, A. 1.

39

Even John Knox, known as the author of a monograph on Marcion¹²⁴, did not want to conform to the majority trend among theologians. Unlike Barnikol and Hawkins, he supports the thesis of a pre-Pauline origin of the Christ Hymn. For him, it is less the "omoiōma" and more the "schēma" that is the stumbling block, as this places too much emphasis on the aspect of mere outward appearance, which he believes is incompatible with the reality of Christ's full humanity. His explanation is similar to Hawkins's: "This whole passage (Phil. 2:5-11), it is widely recognized, probably had its original provenance in some Christian group with Gnostic and Docetic leanings. It comes into Paul's mind at this point in his letter because of the stress it lays upon the humility of Christ (which he wants the Philippians to express in their relations with one another). He no doubt made some changes in it, but he could not, or at any rate did not, eliminate all the signs of its Gnostic origin."¹²⁵ The fact that "schēma" sounds even more docetic than "omoiōma" is indeed correct. For example, in Lucian, it denotes the "pseudo-philosopher," i.e., someone who wants to be judged as a philosopher only by his external appearance (beard, gait, and clothing) but is not truly one.¹²⁶ Similarly, in Phil 2:7, it apparently means the "semblance of a human."

Finally, Hans-Martin Schenke also advocated a docetic interpretation of Phil 2:7: "The description of his human mode of existence 'en omoiōmati anthrōpōn genomenos kai schēmati heretheis hōs anthrōpos' certainly sounds like Docetism, as this emerges with some necessity when the Gnostic redeemer concept is applied to Jesus."¹²⁷ Unfortunately, he fails to provide the "exegetical foundation" for his claim.¹²⁸ Like Knox, Schenke also assumes that the hymn in its (gnosticizing) fundamental elements was already available to the author of the Letter to the Philippians.

Although Barnikol, Hawkins, Knox, and Schenke sought to reconcile their exegetical insights with the traditional image of Paul by attributing the suspect sections in the Christ Hymn of the Philippians to interpolations by a less orthodox editor or by assuming a Gnostic hymn adopted by Paul, their theses, unsurprisingly, have not been accepted by the majority of theologians. What must not be, cannot be. According to Martin, there is not "a shred of evidence to support this, textually or otherwise."¹²⁹ This raises doubts as to whether Martin ever even saw Barnikol's book, which comprehensively justifies his theses.

124 Knox 1942.

125 Knox 1967, p. 32; cf. Yamauchi 1982, p. 16, A. 33.

126 Pisc 31.7. Cf. Dialogi mortuorum 10.8, where the false philosopher has to remove his schēma (raised eyebrows, beard) before he is allowed to board Charon's boat. The schēma pomenikon Herm vis 5 1:1 is the shepherd's garb; for the whole, cf. Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 78.

127 Schenke 1973, p. 219.

128 Schenke 1973, p. 218, A. 30.

129 Martin 1997, p. 62.

40

Anyone approaching the problem without theological bias will hardly be able to dispute the validity of a docetic interpretation of the crucial verse Phil 2:7. This is even more so, as it fits excellently into the previous interpretation of the Christ Hymn, which has already revealed the outlines of a Gnostic hymn that, in content and language, shows the closest kinship with similar notions from the realm of 2nd-century mythological Gnosis.

The docetic character of the passage is further illuminated by a parallel in the Trimorphic Protennoia, which has so far received too little attention in the interpretation of Phil 2:7. In the last part (46,4-50,20), the descent of the Logos is described in the form of a self-revelation in the first-person style.¹³⁰ It speaks of three revelations, reminiscent of the prologue of the Gospel of John. After the Logos first revealed himself to the heavenly powers and then to those who "took on [an] image to their completion" through the "call," he finally revealed himself to the humans dwelling in their "tents" (bodies),¹³¹ namely

"in the likeness of their form (or 'image'¹³²). And I wore everyone's garment, and I hid myself within them; and [they] did not recognize the one who gives me strength. For I dwell in all the powers and authorities and in the angels and in every movement that exists in all matter. And I hid myself among them until I revealed myself to my [brethren]. And none of them recognized me, [although] I am the one who works within them, but [they thought] that the All was created through them, for they are ignorant; they do not know [their] root, the place where they grew up... I, I put on Jesus. I carried him away from the cursed wood and set him in the dwelling places of his Father."¹³³

The parallel to Phil 2:7 is evident—there is no sign of dependence, and as far as I know, no one claims such. Just as the author of the Christ Hymn can say about the "incarnation" of the redeemer that he appeared "in the likeness of the human form or image," the author of this Christianized Gnostic text can say the same. The expression *εἶνε* for him does not in any way include notions of a full incarnation in the orthodox sense, as is clearly shown by the "as if" in Protennoia (NHC XIII/1) 49.15ff.: "... I revealed myself among the angels in their form; and to the powers, as if I were one of them; among the sons of men, as if I were a son of man—though I exist as the Father of each one." "Incarnation thus in the sense of 'as if'¹³⁴—in other words, docetism—which not only gets along perfectly with the formulation reminiscent of Phil 2:7 but is probably even its adequate expression—as with the author of the Christ Hymn.

130 Lüdemann 1997, p. 600f.

131 John 1:14: "he camped (*eskēnōsen*) among us."

132 So Schenke 1984, p. 47.

133 Protennoia (NHC XIII 1) p. 47,10ff.; translation Lüdemann 1997.

134 Weiß 2008, p. 383.

41

(6) Phil 2:9f is considered the turning point of the Christ Hymn. Following the descent and death of the Son of God comes his exaltation. From God, he receives the name (to onoma), "which is above every name," "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."¹³⁵

What is the name that the exalted one receives from God? Today, it is widely accepted that the name "which is above every name" refers to the title "Kyrios" (Lord). "This now bestowed name," says Gniska, "can of course only be the Kyrios name."¹³⁶ Similarly, Hofius states: "God has given the exalted one 'the name above every name,' i.e., his own name. For the expression 'the name above every name' is to be understood as a paraphrase of the most holy divine name, i.e., as an equivalent rendering of the Tetragrammaton with 'Kyrios.'" Hofius also cites the Gospel of Philip and the Acts of Thomas to support his interpretation.

However, if the name given by God is supposed to be the title "Kyrios," it is necessary to understand the phrase "en tō onomati Iēsou" in the sense of a genitivus possessoris, that is, not "in the name Jesus" (epexegetical genitive), but "in the name of Jesus."¹³⁷ The "name of Jesus" is then supposed to be "Kyrios" – theoretically, it could also be another name.

135 Müller 1988, p. 39; Hofius 1991, p. 27.

136 Gnllka 1976, 1968, p. 125.

137 Cf. Lightfoot 1869, p. 112.

42

The problems with such an interpretation are obvious. Against the backdrop of the usual New Testament usage of this phrase, the genitivus possessoris at this point would be singular. No one would ever claim that, for example, in Mark 9:41, Acts 2:38, 3:6, 4:10, 4:18, 5:40, 9:27, 10:48, 16:18, 1 Peter 4:14, the intended "name" is actually "Kyrios." This interpretation also completely overlooks the fact that "Kyrios" is not a name but a title. It is true that in the Old Testament, the "name of the Lord" is frequently mentioned. However, this is only because "Kyrios" functions as a substitute for the sacred Tetragrammaton, which was not to be pronounced, so that the "name of the Lord" always implicitly means Yahweh. The phrase should not lead to the assumption that "Kyrios" itself was considered a name.

All in all, interpreting the genitive as a genitivus possessoris seems entirely impossible: if "Kyrios" is a title, and this can hardly be disputed, then one can say that "Kyrios" has the name Jesus, but not that Jesus has the name "Kyrios."

A much more plausible interpretation would be to understand the genitive as an epexegetical one, seeing "Jesus" as the name conferred by God upon the exaltation. The reason most interpreters shy away from this is simple: according to the Gospels, Jesus received his name not at his exaltation, but already at the beginning of his earthly life. Lightfoot says, "the personal name Jesus cannot there be meant; for the bestowal of the name is represented as following upon the humiliation and death of the Son of Man."¹³⁸ If the name Jesus were intended, Lightfoot argues, it would have to say: "'He bestowed on Him the name, etc.' but 'He exalted the name borne by Him.'"

It is primarily in this context that most exegetes prefer to accept the problems arising from interpreting the name as "Kyrios" rather than favoring the linguistically more likely but contextually problematic interpretation of the name as "Jesus."

And yet, it would be premature to give up and return to the supposedly intended "name" "Kyrios," because otherwise, we would miss the decisive point of the Christ Hymn. Who says that the author of this ancient hymn meant the Jesus of the Gospels or even knew him at all? This again highlights that most exegetes, due to their entrenched perspectives, are unable to adequately grasp a situation that escapes this perspective. Instead of settling for tortured

explanations, it would be better to truly engage with the texts, which of course would require a fundamental change in perspective or a paradigm shift that one is reluctant to make.

138 Lightfoot 1869, p. 112.

43

In this case, what Phil 2:9-11 has to say is indeed astonishing. If the "name that is above every name" truly refers to the name Jesus—and the text says nothing else—if the name Jesus was given to the divine being only upon his exaltation, then this means nothing less than that the author of this ancient hymn had a completely different understanding of the person of Jesus Christ than we do, based on our knowledge of the Gospel history that we project into the hymn. It would mean that the author of the hymn did not presuppose the full humanity of Christ—he appears only "in likeness" as a human—nor would he have had any knowledge that the one who received the name Jesus from God upon his exaltation was called Jesus from the beginning. Instead, he would have been telling a pure myth, fundamentally no different from the myths we have already encountered in the Gnostic systems of the Valentinians, Sethians, and others.

Thus, we would have to conclude, with a view to the history of the "Historical Jesus," that there was no subsequent mythical "exaltation" or "embellishment" of the earthly life of a historical figure; rather, the earthly life of Jesus was the later historicization of an essentially entirely mythological affair.

Therefore, there is no fundamental discrepancy between the Jesus myth narrated in Phil 2:6-11 and the Sophia myth of the Valentinians, Sethians, and other Gnostics. The only differences concern nuances. While the Soter in the mythological cosmos of the Gnostics is just one figure among others, the myth narrated in Phil 2:6-11 is centrally focused on him. The Jesus myth appears here as a part of the larger Sophia myth, from which it has been "broken out." Additionally, as often noted, the Christ myth in the Letter to the Philippians has a strong ethical orientation, which is generally absent in the Gnostic myths.

The interpretation of the "name that is above every name" as Jesus is sometimes also found among theologians on the fringes of the mainstream, such as C.F.D. Moule.¹³⁹

139 Moule 1970, p. 220f.: "God, in the incarnation, bestowed upon the one who is on an equality with him an earthly name which, because it accompanied that most God-like self-emptying, has come to be, in fact, the highest of names, because service and self-giving are themselves the highest of divine attributes. Because of the incarnation, the human name, 'Jesus', is acclaimed as the highest name." Older proponents of this interpretation in Martin 1997, p. 235, who of course speaks of a "curiosity of New Testament interpretation" because: "Jesus had borne this name from His circumcision (Luke ii. 21) and what is envisaged in this hymn is the bestowal of a new name."

44

The interpretation, however, is not very convincing here, as it is connected to the conventional view, ultimately the church's doctrine of incarnation, and leads to rather artificial explanations; the mythical character of the Christ Hymn is not recognized.

The first to draw radical consequences from this interpretation was Paul-Louis Couchoud: "The God-Man does not receive the name Jesus till after his crucifixion. That alone, in my judgement, is fatal to the historicity of Jesus."¹⁴⁰ Robert M. Price followed him: "this name was a subsequent honor. Here is a fossil of an early belief according to which a heavenly entity (perhaps already called Christ, like the Valentinian Christ-Aion) subsequently received the cult name Jesus. In all this there is no historical Jesus the Nazarene. Nor, as Couchoud pointed out, could there be, since all the gospel tales of the wandering Jesus are at once revealed as later fabrications, taking for granted the naming of the savior as Jesus and reading it back anachronistically into his period of earthly servitude."¹⁴¹

The fact that the author of Phil 2:9-10 indeed has the name Jesus in mind is supported not only by the New Testament passages already cited but also by some non-canonical texts that also speak of the saving power of this name.¹⁴²

(7) The passage "those in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil 2:10) presupposes a tripartite division of the cosmos, which has rightly been associated with corresponding Gnostic ideas.¹⁴³ As Dibelius and Peterson have impressively shown, the idea of a spirit world divided into three spheres is undoubtedly of Gnostic origin.¹⁴⁴ Traub: "This is not a general location specification ('in heaven, on earth, and in hell' - Lohmeyer), but all three parts are meant to refer to ruling spirit powers."¹⁴⁵ This is justified by reference to sources where, similar to Phil 2:10-11, there is talk of victory and triumph over a triad of demonic powers—a motif that also echoes in Eph 1:21 and 1 Pet 3:22.

140 Couchoud 1939, p. 438; Price 2003, p. 357, A. 7.

141 Price 2000, p. 85; Price 2003, pp. 353–356; Wells 2002, p. 11f.

142 ActPt (NHC VI,1) p. 6,2-4 He said to me: "Why do you groan when you know this name 'Jesus' and believe in him? He is a great power to give strength. For I also believe in the Father who sent him." – EpPt (NHC VIII/2) p.140,5ff. "Then Jesus appeared and said to them: 'Peace be with you [all] and with everyone who believes in my name.'" Protennoia (NHC XIII/1) p. 37:5ff.: "is the Logos, who came into being through the call, who had gone forward from on high, (who) had the name in himself, who is a light -- he (i.e. the Son) revealed the infinite; and all the unknowable were known" (Lüdemann translation).

143 Baur 1866, p. 58, already spoke of a "genuinely Gnostic" concept. Alleged parallels that are provided for this triad from other sources cannot be verified. For example, Bergmeier 1994/Bergmeier 2000, p. 179, points to Ex 20:4 and Revelation 5:13 in addition to Ignatius. But the differences are obvious: Ex 20:4 mentions the underworld and water, which is not the case in Phil 2:10. Rev 5:13 actually contains a five-part division (in heaven - on earth - under the earth - on the sea - what is in it) and also does not belong in this context.

144 Dibelius 1909; Dibelius et al. 1937, p. 79; Peterson 1926; Käsemann 1950; Heitmüller 1903, p. 67, 322; Traub, pp. 538-542; Martin 1997, p. 258ff.; Gnika 1976, 1968, p. 128.

145 Traub, p. 541.

As with many correct insights from the History of Religions School, this one is also being questioned again recently, whether it is that the powers are interpreted positively as serving God,¹⁴⁶ or that the passage is viewed independently of its historical-religious background.¹⁴⁷ Better arguments are lacking; instead, there is a lot of theological resentment against an exegetical approach oriented towards the history of religions.

The closest parallel to Phil 2:10 is found in IgnTrall 9:1: "Jesus Christ ... who was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth." This also shows the Gnostic origin of the idea—perhaps it would be better to say the Marcionite origin here, since, as we have shown elsewhere, the Ignatian letters are of Marcionite origin. The cosmos of the Marcionites was also divided into three parts. We will return to this in our last point.

(8) The mention of the katachthonioi, i.e., those "under the earth," could be a reference to the Descensus ad inferos.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the Descensus motif is found in many other Gnostic or non-Gnostic texts, where the descent of the redeemer to the underworld is given ample space, so much so that one could almost speak of a fixed form-critical topos.¹⁴⁹ The following sentences from the so-called Humility Hymn of the Teachings of Silvanus also offer a fascinating parallel in that they contain clear echoes of the Christ Hymn of the Letter to the Philippians (2:7) at the beginning:

146 Strecker 1964, p. 77.

147 Bergmeier 2000, p. 179.

148 Here too, Baur 1866, p. 58, was one of the first to recognize that "the katachthonioi is particularly reminiscent of the Gnostic idea of the descent into hell." The Descensus ad Inferos motif in "Paul" is also Rom 10:6; Eph 4:9.

149 Of particular importance is Asc Isa 11:19-21 "And after this the adversary was jealous of him and incited the children of Israel against him, not knowing who he was. And they delivered him up to the king and crucified him, and he went down to the angel of the underworld"; EvBarthol 1:1; ActThom 1:156; OdNor (NHC XI/2) p.41,1f.; Seneca Herculeus Furens 423ff. etc. See Kroll 1932; Schlier 1929; Knox 1939, p. 222; Peterson 1926, p. 259, A. 2; 262.

"13 Recognize who Christ is, and make him your friend! For he is the faithful friend. He is also God and the Master. Although he is God, he became human for your sake. He is the one who broke the iron bars of hell and the bronze bolts; he is the one who violently overthrew all arrogant tyrants; who cast off the chains (of death) with which he was bound; and brought the poor from the abyss and the afflicted from hell; who humbled the proud powers and shamed the arrogant through humility; who overthrew the strong and the misanthropic through weakness; who, in his disdain, despised what is considered to be glory, so that humility before God would become especially great; who put on man and (yet) is God, the divine Logos; who always bears man and wanted to bring forth humility in the proud."¹⁵⁰

It is also worth noting the Marcionite redeemer myth, which has been handed down to us by the aforementioned Armenian church father Eznik of Kolb (5th century):

“The good other God, they say (i.e., the Marcionites), who sits in the third heaven, saw that so many generations were being lost and given over to torment as a bone of contention [Armenian: in the midst] between two rivals, namely the Lord of creation and matter. And he was pained by those cast into the fire and given to torment. He sent his Son to go out and free them, to take on the form of a servant and appear in human form among the children of the God of the law. ‘You shall,’ he said to him, ‘heal their lepers, raise their dead to life, open their blind eyes, and perform great healings among them for free, until the Lord of creation sees you, envies you, and lifts you up on the cross. Then, when you have died, you will descend into hell and lead them out from there. For hell is not accustomed to receiving life within itself. That is why you will come to the cross so that you will resemble the dead, and hell will open its mouth to swallow you. You will then go right into it and empty it. And when they had lifted him up on the cross, as they say, he descended into hell and emptied it. He led the spirits out of it and brought them into the third heaven to his Father. The Lord of creation became enraged and tore his mantle in anger and the veil of his temple, then darkened his sun and clothed his world in darkness and sat in sorrow full of grief. Then Jesus, in the form of his divinity, descended a second time to the Lord of creation and held judgment with him over his death.”

150 Silv (NHC VII/4) p.104,1ff. Translation: Schenke 2001. [Referring, of course, to the German translation of which this is an English translation.]

47

Following is a description of a negotiation with the "Lord of Creation" to redeem humanity from his hand, paid for by the innocent blood of Christ. The section concludes with the statement that faith in the "price," i.e., the blood of the redeemer, is the center of Marcionite belief.

Here, too, the similarity with Phil 2:7 ("but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form") is striking. Since the two quoted texts are younger than the Christ Hymn, it is plausible to explain the similarity with a dependence of the two sources on the Christ Hymn in the Letter to the Philippians. Yet, this would probably be too simple. It is hard to imagine that their authors were inspired solely by the mere mention of the katachthonioi for their depiction of the descent into the underworld. It is more likely that they were drawing on a myth circulating in various versions, which is only briefly referenced in the Philippians Hymn.

There are significant differences between the Marcionite myth and the various versions of the Sophia myth. Notably, the absence of Gnostic aeon concepts is striking. The cast of characters is limited to a small ensemble of protagonists, and there is no place for Sophia herself.¹⁵¹

Unfortunately, there has been little research on the relationship between the Marcionite and Gnostic redeemer myths.¹⁵² One would like to know more about this. It seems evident that they are two offshoots of a common trunk, an "Ur-Myth."¹⁵³ However, it is also clear that this could not

have been the Christ Hymn of the Philippians, as the sparse reference to the katachthonioi could hardly have prompted such growth and swelling of the Descensus ad inferos motif. As mentioned before, the assumption that the author of the Christ Hymn was drawing on a widespread redeemer hymn, which he then varied in his own way, is most likely. In what form he had this in mind is not entirely clear. That the Demiurge appeared in it, as well as the (light) robbery motif, is obvious.¹⁵⁴

151 Schenke 1965: "Marcion is a Christian Gnostic of a completely different type. He is not interested in clever religious-philosophical speculation; he rather wants to be a Bible theologian quite consciously. While for Basilides and Valentinus Christianity serves to develop Gnosis, for Marcion Gnosis serves to create a new understanding of Christianity. Marcion takes over numerous motifs from the already established Gnostic world of ideas, but essentially his teaching represents a new, different objectification of the Gnostic attitude to existence and worldview, growing from within the church, so to speak."

152 Some references can be found in Aland 1973, p. 430f. Aland draws particular attention to the oath formula "I am God, and besides me there is no one." "...this oath corresponds entirely to the statement of the Gnostic world creator Jaldabaoth, with which he reveals his ignorance, blindness and narrow-mindedness in countless Gnostic writings. The adoption of this formula by Marcion - for that is what it is - to characterize his creator god has a signal character for our time, but even more so for Marcion's contemporaries who were familiar with Gnostic literature. It became clear to them that related concepts were present here. And that does not only apply to the statement about the world creator. As different as the Gnostic systems of the 2nd century may be in detail, they nevertheless have certain basic features in common. This includes, above all, the contrast between the blind creator god and lord of the world and the highest and true god of Gnosis, the primal father, the god of perfect goodness and mercy."

153 Marcion also uses the motif of the arrogance of the world ruler(s) who knows no god above him, which is well known from the Sophia myth: Eznik of Kolb 1:19: "And when, says he [Marcion], the god of the law, who was the lord of the world, saw that Adam was noble and worthy of service, he considered how he could rob him of matter and draw him over to his side as his sole ally. He took him aside and said: 'Adam, I am God and there is no other. And besides me you shall have no other god. If you had another god besides me, know that you will surely die.'"

154 In the archetype reconstructed by Schenke 1965, p. 413, the theft motif is unfortunately ignored. However, in most Gnostic myths the soul is not sent from the kingdom of light into the material world, but stolen by the powers of darkness.

48

All in all, it has been shown that a consistently Gnostic approach, in contrast to most other interpretative models, results in a coherent interpretation of the Christ Hymn. Harpagmos, morphē, kenōsis, doulos/hypēkoos, omoiōma; cosmological triad, Descensus ad inferos: everything interlocks; the Gnostic character of all this can be effortlessly made evident. The hymn varies a specific type of redeemer or Sophia myth, which first becomes tangible in the systems of 2nd-century mythological Gnosis and belongs, like them, to that very era. The contrast between Christ and Jaldabaoth, which the author of the hymn evidently emphasizes, can be illustrated once more through the following table:

Christ	Jaldabaoth
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"in the form of God"	"without the form of her form," i.e., not in the divine form of Sophia
"did not consider it robbery to be equal to God"	"... the theft that her son had committed"
"emptied himself and took the form of a servant"	"he called himself God over them" - "I am God, and there is no other God besides me"
"he humbled himself"	"he is wicked in his arrogance"
"and became obedient"	"by which he was disobedient to his origin from which he had come forth" / "thereby disobeying his origin from which he was born"

49

In summary, the verses of the Christ Hymn can be paraphrased according to their original meaning within a Gnostic hymn as follows:

(1) Unlike the Gnostic demiurge, who initially did not possess a divine form and only attained his equality with God through the theft of the divine powers from his mother, Sophia, Christ was in the divine morphē from the beginning; (2) therefore, he did not regard being equal to God as "something to be grasped" or "something to be violently seized," but (3) "emptied" himself, that is, he divested himself of his divine powers (the "evacuare" of divine potentials in Gnostic terms) or left the Pleroma and (4) submitted himself to the dominion of the cosmic powers, to whom he was obedient (5); in his outward appearance, he was seemingly found as a man (Gnostic docetism). Following the (apparent) death of Christ on the cross, came his exaltation by God, that is, his appointment as the ruler of the cosmos and the (6) associated bestowal of the sovereign name Jesus, which is above all names and before which every knee of (7) the three powers belonging to the Gnostic cosmos, the heavenly (= Archons), earthly, and (8) the underworld (freed during his descent to Hades), shall bow.

3. 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 – Who are the "rulers of this age"?

Another indication that the author of the Pauline letters almost certainly had knowledge of the Gnostic systems of the 2nd century is found in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, the author proclaims a "wisdom among the mature":

not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are being destroyed; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; which none of the rulers of this age understood; for if they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

The question of who is meant by the "rulers of this age" has been controversial from the beginning. Even in the interpretation of the early church, opinions differed on whether these were earthly rulers (interpretation 2) or demonic powers (interpretation 1). One of the first interpreters of this passage was Marcion. While he saw the "rulers of this age" as spiritual powers in the service of the Demiurge (i.e., the Archons or planetary powers of Gnosis), his opponent Tertullian saw them as earthly rulers, specifically Herod and Pilate.¹⁵⁵

The heretic's interpretation found little favor among the Church Fathers. Their interpretation dominated for a long time and was only challenged by the representatives of the History of Religions School at the end of the 19th century. This shift is often linked to the publication of Martin Dibelius' influential book "Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus" (The Spirit World in Paul's Belief) in 1909. However, two decades earlier, Otto Everling had already published a work on the "Pauline Angelology and Demonology," in which he, like Dibelius later, rejected the prevailing view and convincingly argued that 1 Corinthians 2:8 must refer to demonic powers, not earthly rulers. Since only Pilate and Caiaphas could be considered as earthly rulers, it is difficult to understand why the accusation of crucifying the Lord would be extended to "all the mighty ones of the earth." Additionally, the term *katargoumenōn* ("who are being destroyed," present tense) does not fit them, as they were likely not alive when "Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians, so they could not be included among those who were sure to face destruction." Moreover, it would be strange to include Pilate among the representatives of the "wisdom of this age."¹⁵⁶ For these reasons, Everling argued that the *archontes* ("rulers") should be understood as concrete subjects of the *archai* frequently mentioned by Paul (Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16, 2:10, 15) and seen as angels who possess wisdom, but not divine, full wisdom. That these spirit beings are also subject to mortality is evidenced by 1 Corinthians 15:24, which also speaks of their ultimate destruction.

¹⁵⁵ Tertullian Marc 5.6.8.

¹⁵⁶ Everling 1888, p. 12.

Dibelius largely followed the arguments of his predecessor.¹⁵⁷ Both he and Everling opposed Baur, who had claimed that the *archontes tou aiōnos toutou* ("rulers of this age") were still meant in an indefinite sense by the Apostle; it was only in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians that they became "a supernatural power, and the combat and conquest of these powers and authorities is an act relating to the visible and invisible world."¹⁵⁸

Baur's ambiguous position must be understood against the background of his overall conception, which presupposed the recognition of the authenticity of four main Pauline letters. Since Baur interpreted the *archontes* (understood as supernatural powers) in other places, such as in the letter to the Colossians, as evidence of Gnostic influence, and this in turn as an indication of a later date, he would have had to question the authenticity of 1 Corinthians as well if he recognized Gnostic influence and consistently applied his rule. This would have undermined the very foundation of his historical conception (and completely blurred the distinctions between Baur and Bauer).

Bousset also considered it established that "the rulers of this world (this age) are not to be understood as pagan authorities. What sense would it make for Paul to emphasize that divine wisdom was hidden from these worldly authorities, and why would it be particularly noted that these authorities are doomed to destruction? Rather," as Bousset notes with reference to Galatians 4:1-3, 8-11; Colossians 2:8-23, "they are powerful, semi-divine angelic beings, in whose hands (according to the pessimistic belief of late Judaism) at least part of the control over the present world lies."¹⁵⁹

157 Dibelius 1909, p.89.

158 Baur 1864, p. 262.

159 Bousset 1917, p. 85.

52

Bultmann also saw supernatural rulers at work in the "rulers of this age" and found the "idea that the 'rulers of this age' crucified Jesus because they did not recognize him, the Son of God sent from heaven, in his disguise as a human (1 Cor. 2:6-8)" to be "entirely Gnostic."¹⁶⁰ Bultmann's influence on the following generation of exegetes was, as is well known, immense. His interpretation and that of the History of Religions school continued to live on in commentaries for a long time – even in the rather conservative NTD, intended for pastors, teachers, and community workers, though without using the word "Gnostic." Wendland only mentions "spiritual powers" that govern the cosmos in its various regions and did not know God's plan of salvation. "Had they known it, they would have avoided crucifying Christ and instead done everything to prevent it, as Christ's crucifixion was God's way to their own destruction and the redemption of the world from their dominion."¹⁶¹

The discovery of Gnostic original texts at Nag Hammadi and a better understanding of the Gnostic redeemer myth removed the last doubts about the Gnostic nature of the *topos* used in 1 Corinthians 2:8. For Schenke, "the statement in 1 Cor. 2:8 ... can only be understood as a *topos*

of a very specific formulation of an already Christian-Gnostic redeemer idea, detached from its original Christological context." Schenke points to a striking parallel of the topos in the Gnostic text "The Thought of the Great Power" from NHC VI (p. 41, 13-42, 21): "The crux of our topos is that the death of the truly Living One necessarily becomes the death of death and its archons themselves. The truly Living One swallowed by death is the poison that kills him."¹⁶²

The exegetical-religio-historical study of 1 Corinthians on "Wisdom and Folly" by U. Wilckens already formed a kind of summary of the results of the History of Religions work on this topic at its time.¹⁶³

For various reasons, including the increasing discomfort of many, especially conservative theologians, with the History of Religions research, the scholarship began to move in the opposite direction around the 1980s. The demonological interpretation was abandoned, and the interpretation of the "rulers" as earthly rulers was rediscovered. Apparently, the results of the History of Religions research had been troubling some theologians for too long. For others, growing sympathy with the then-current "political theology" may have played a role, for which earthly rulers were more useful than heavenly spiritual beings. Additionally, the thesis of a "pre-Christian Gnosis" propagated by Bultmann and the History of Religions school had come under criticism, as we have seen. This made it increasingly difficult for later exegetes to acknowledge the influence of Gnostic ideas on Paul. For if Gnosis was only a phenomenon of the 2nd century, the appearance of Gnostic ideas in the supposedly 1st-century letters of the Apostle required a plausible explanation. Without such an explanation, it seemed advisable – according to the motto that what cannot be, must not be – to deny Gnostic influence on Paul altogether and revert to the earlier interpretation of the archons as earthly rulers. Elliott notes in his 1994 book: "Earlier scholarship, heavily influenced by the 'religio-historical school,' tended to find 1 Corinthians saturated with Gnostic motifs; the 'rulers of this age' were set within a Gnostic scheme of supernatural powers through which a 'redeemer' would descend to bring salvation. More recent scholarship has decisively criticized this interpretation, however, *pointing out that the construct of a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth is a retrojection into the time of Paul of a pattern that first appears in Gnostic literature a century or more later* (emphasis mine), a pattern often dependent on Paul's letters."¹⁶⁴

160 Bultmann, Lattke 1984, p. vol. 4, 87. 161 Wendland 1963, p. 24.

162 Schenke 1973, p. 220.

163 Wilckens 1959, 1959 – Wilckens inexplicably revised his theses later, see Wilckens 1979, p. 508ff.. Now, for him, the synonymy of "wisdom of this aeon" (2:6) and "wisdom of men" (2:5) means that the rulers of this aeon must be men (as representatives of the wisdom of this aeon); cf. Sellin 1982, p. 84, note 52. Since these would then have to be the same people who crucified the "Lord of glory", Paul 2:5 would have protested against him preaching the wisdom of a Pontius Pilate or Caiaphas or Herod...

164 Elliott 1994, p. 111. Among the scientists who support a demonological interpretation, Thiselton counts: Everling (1888) Dibelius (1909), Weiss (1910). Lietzmann (1933), Delling (1933), Moffatt (1938), Knox (1939), Hering (1948), Craig (1953), Bultmann (1952), Wendland (1956), Wilckens (1959), Barren (1968), Conzelmann (1969), Senft (1979), Merk (1980) and Schrage (1991). – According to Thiselton, the following argue for the archons as secular rulers: J. Schniewind, G. Miller, Carr; Heinrici (1880), Findlay (1900), Robertson and Plummer (1911), Parry (1916), Bachmann (1936), Grosheide (1954), Morris (1958), Munck

(1959), Feuillet (1963), Thrall (1965), Bruce (1971), Miller (1972), Davis (1984), Fee (1987), Strobel (1989), Kistemaker (1993) Lang (1994), Witherington (1995), Wolf (1996). Hays (1997) and Horsley (1998). Sellin 1982, p. 83, note 47, described Wilckens' thesis that the motif was a Gnostic myth as "absurd".

53

A more detailed explanation of the shift in direction is provided by A. Wesley Carr, who seems to have made it his mission with his publications on this topic¹⁶⁵ to revise the findings of religious studies work by German scholars like Clemen, Dibelius, Bousset, and Bultmann. He aims to demonstrate, using various New Testament passages as examples, that belief in spirits and demons generally had no place in early Christianity.

165 Carr 1976; Carr 1981; see Thiselton 2000, p. 236.

54

Carr argues against the demonological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:8 by emphasizing linguistic evidence. According to Carr, the term "archontes" (in the plural) typically refers to "political rulers" in the New Testament, especially in the context of the crucifixion (Luke 23:14, 35; 24:20; Acts 3:17; 4:8, 25; 13:27). Thus, he claims, the plural form inherently lacks a demonological meaning.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, Carr finds no evidence that "archontes" was used to mean "demons" before the 2nd century.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Carr argues that Paul would not have identified the archontes in any way with those mentioned in Colossians 1:16 and Ephesians 6:12.¹⁶⁸ Finally, Carr adds that the phrase "archontes tou aiōnos toutou" "cannot yet be regarded as a technical term of gnosticism, since Paul is describing his own message, not that of his opponents."¹⁶⁹ However, Carr fails to address Everling's earlier question about how the author of 1 Corinthians could blame all "powers of the age" for Jesus' death. Nor does he offer a plausible explanation for why the author of 1 Corinthians would speak of the "wisdom" of Pilate, Herod, or Caiaphas, or suggest that this would hold any value for the Christian community he addresses (2:6).

Among the arguments presented by Carr, not all hold the same value; some are "duds," and other claims are simply incorrect. We don't need to delve further into these.¹⁷⁰ However, the aforementioned points are not entirely dismissible. While it is true that the plural "archontes" in the New Testament generally refers to earthly rulers, it is methodologically flawed to conclude that it cannot "per se" refer to spiritual powers. The term "ruler of this world" (archōn tou kosmou) in the Gospel of John (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) undeniably refers to a demonological entity, and there is no reason why this could not also apply in the plural form (although a separate, significant question is whether the Gospel of John was written in the 1st century).

166 Carr 1976, p. 23.

167 Carr 1976, pp. 23-24, 28-30.

168 Grindheim 2002, p. 694, A. 20.

169 Carr 1976; Wink 1989, p. 42.

170 For example, Carr claims that Ignatius "shows very little interest in angelic or demonic beings." – But this Bahauptung cannot be explained in light of IgnEph 10:3; 13:1 (hai dynameis tou Satanā); 17:1; 18:2; IgnMag 1:2; IgnTrall 4:2; 5:1; 8:1; IgnRom 5:3; 7:1; IgnPhld 6:2; IgnSm 6:1 (Satan as archōn of this world); 9:1 can only be described as ignorant; Wink 1989, p. 42, A. 8.

55

However, apart from this, the objections raised by Carr against the demonological interpretation are completely resolved if one does not assume, like Carr and most other exegetes, the authenticity of the 1 Corinthians and date the letter to the 1st century. The term "archontes tou aiōnos toutou" is indeed a term from the 2nd century and originates from mythological Gnosticism—this must be agreed with Carr. For this very reason, it is also, what Carr and other exegetes do not want to acknowledge, the clearest indication that the author of 1 Corinthians belongs to this time, i.e., the 2nd century and not the 1st century! Carr's assumption that the phrase could not be meant as a Gnostic trope because it appears in the writings of the author of the letter, i.e., "Paul," is based on the erroneous assumption that the author of 1 Corinthians was an opponent of Gnosticism, which is yet to be proven.

Another attempt to escape the Gnostic interpretation and understand "Paul" from the context of wisdom literature or Philo has been made by Sellin.¹⁷¹ According to him, the entire theory of the Gnostic myth should be dismissed because the relative pronoun "hēn" (which none of the rulers of this age has understood) does not refer to personified wisdom but to God's plan. For Sellin, the "rulers of this world" are not Gnostic archons but the "religious leaders" responsible for the crucifixion. Unfortunately, Sellin fails to specify who these individuals are and where we can learn about their "wisdom."

For the interpretation of the "rulers of this age" as supernatural powers, i.e., as archons, there are numerous striking parallels in the various systems of mythological Gnosticism of the 2nd century.

The following are some passages related to the three key motifs of 1 Corinthians 2:6-8:

- 1) *The ignorance of the archons, 2:8 or the hidden appearance of the Redeemer, 2:8.*
- 2) *Their crucifixion of the Redeemer or his death, 2:8.*
- 3) *Their destruction enabled by the innocent sacrifice, 2:6.*

¹⁷¹ Sellin 1982, p. 84ff.

56

A very enlightening passage here again is from the *Ascensio Jesajae*:

Asc Jes 10:11-12: "And none of the angels of this world shall know that you, together with me, are the Lord of the seven heavens and their angels [nec sciunt omnes principes istius mundi, (= archontes tou aiōnos toutou) esse Dominum mecum Septem coelorum et

angelorum eorum (sc. coelorum), nec sciunt te esse mecum]. And they will not know that you belong to me (1) until I call their angels and their lights with the voice of the heavens and let the mighty voice resound to the sixth heaven, that you may judge and destroy the prince and his angels and the gods of this world, and the world which is ruled by them (3)... 11:19 And then the adversary was jealous of him and stirred up the children of Israel against him, not knowing who he was, and handed him over to the king and crucified him, and he descended to the angel of the underworld (2)."

The Marcionite myth narrated by Eznik surely has its roots already in the 2nd century:

"And it grieved him (the 'Good') for those who were cast into the fire and condemned to torment. He sent his son to go out and free them, to take on the form of a servant, and to appear in human form among the children of the god of the law. You shall, he said to him, heal their lepers, raise their dead to life, open the eyes of their blind, and perform great healings among them freely, until the Lord of creatures sees you, becomes jealous, and raises you up on the cross. Then, when you have died, you descend into hell and lead them out from there. For hell is not accustomed to receiving life within itself. Therefore, you also come to the cross so that you may resemble the dead and hell will open its mouth to swallow you (2). You go right into it and will empty it. And when they raised him on the cross, as they say, he descended into hell and emptied it. He led the spirits out of it and brought them to the third heaven to his father. The Lord of creatures became angry and tore his mantle in wrath and the veil of his temple, then darkened his sun and clothed his world in darkness, and sat sad and full of grief. Then Jesus descended in the form of his divinity for the second time to the Lord of creatures and held judgment with him about his death. When the Lord of the world saw the divinity of Jesus, he recognized that there was another God besides him. And Jesus said to him: 'Now judgment is upon you through me, and no one else shall be judge between you and me but your own laws that you have written. When the laws were presented, Jesus said: 'Have you not written in your laws, whoever kills shall die; and whoever sheds the blood of a righteous person, his blood shall be shed?' [Gen. 9:6.] He said: 'Yes, I have written that.' And Jesus said to him: 'So surrender yourself into my hands so that I may kill you and shed your blood, as you killed me and shed my blood. For I am more righteous than you. And I have done great favors for your creatures.' [Then] he began to enumerate the favors he had done for his creatures. When the Lord of creatures saw that he was prevailing over him, and when he did not know what to say, because he was convicted of guilt by his own laws, and found nothing to answer, because he was guilty of death for the death of him, he pleaded and begged him: 'For the fact that I have sinned and killed you unknowingly, not knowing that you were God, but took you for a man (1), I will make this atonement for you, all who want to believe in you shall be led wherever you want. Then Jesus left him and took Paul in a rapture and revealed to him the price... And they say that the Lord of the world destroys himself and his world for eternity (3)."

57

The myth in the Epistle to the Ephesians by Ignatius has often been pointed out (IgnEph 19):

"And it remained hidden from the prince of this world (1) the virginity of Mary and her giving birth, as well as the death of the Lord (2); three loudly proclaiming mysteries accomplished in the silence of God. How were they made known to the times? A star shone in the sky ... As a result, all magic dissolved, and every bond of wickedness was destroyed; ignorance was taken away, the old kingdom was destroyed (3), as God appeared in human form to renew eternal life; what was prepared by God thus began. Therefore, everything was set in motion because the destruction of death was underway."

Wink may rightly assume that Ignatius is dependent on the *Ascensio Jesajae*. This is also supported by what Wink does not mention, the motif of the "loudly proclaiming mysteries." It clearly refers to *Asc Jes 10:12*: "And they will not recognize that you belong to me until I call their angels and their lights with the voice of the heavens and let the mighty voice resound to the sixth heaven, that you may judge and destroy the prince and his angels and the gods of this world, and the world which is ruled by them..."

However, Wink draws a false conclusion from his correct observation:

*"The very fact that Ignatius is dependent on the tradition preserved in the Ascension of Isaiah indicates that 1 Cor. 2:6-8 was already being interpreted by Christians prior to the end of the first century as referring to demonic powers."¹⁷² But the brief mention in 1 Cor. 2:6-8 could hardly have sparked the myth developed in the *Ascensio Jesajae*. Hannah also views the passage in the *Ascensio* as "a midrashic explanation of this Pauline pronouncement."¹⁷³ To trace the *Ascensio Jesajae* and the entire related tradition of the "hidden Redeemer" back to a midrash of the three verses 1 Cor. 2:6-8 is an absurd assumption.*

172 Wink 1989, p. 44.

173 Hannah 1999, p. 192.

From the text Noëma (NHC VI/4) 42.1ff mentioned by Schenke:

"And he exposed the ruler of the underworld to shame. He raised the dead, and he dissolved his dominion. Then a great disturbance arose. The rulers raised their wrath against him. They wanted to hand him over to the ruler of the underworld. Then one of his followers was recognized. Fire seized his soul. He delivered him up, because no one knew him. They did it, they seized him. They judged themselves. And he was handed over to the ruler of the underworld, and he was handed over to Sasabek and Beroth (2). He had prepared himself to descend and expose them. Then the ruler of the underworld received him, (p.42) and he could not find out the nature of his flesh, so that he could hold him to show him to the rulers (1). Rather, he said, 'Who is this? What kind of being is it?' His word dissolved the law of the aeon. He originated from the word of the power of life. And he was stronger than the command of the rulers. And they were unable to control their work. The rulers sought the one who had originated. They did not recognize that this was the sign of their dissolution and (that) he is the change of the aeon. (2) The sun set in the daytime; the

day became dark. The demons trembled. And afterward, he will visibly ascend. And the sign of the coming aeon will become visible. And the aeons will melt away. (3)"

Further parallels: Irenaeus, *Haer* 1 23:3; 30:12; Irenaeus, *Epid* 1:84; Tertullian, *Carn* 1:6; Epiphanius, *Haer* 2 21:2; *EvPhil* (NHC II/3) 26; *UW* (NHC II/5) p. 125:1; *2LogSeth* (NHC VII/2) p. 56:20ff.; *Protennoia* (NHC XIII/1) p. 49:1ff.; *Pistis Sophia* 1,7,12.

A closer examination of the two interpretations A and B shows:

1. The statement that the rulers of this aeon will be destroyed (katargoumenōn, present tense) makes no sense in the context that those responsible for Jesus' death presumably no longer lived at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians. – However, it fits perfectly with the assumption that we are dealing with those supernatural powers mentioned by the author of this passage in the last chapter of the Corinthians letter. 1 Cor 15:24 states the end will come, "when he (the Son) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion (archē) and every authority (exousia) and power (dynamis)."

In the Marcionite reading testified by Eznik of Kolb, the subject of the sentence is not Jesus, but the world creator. Eznik: "Moreover, they also devalue another word, which the Apostle rightly spoke: That when he will have thrown down all dominions and powers, he must reign until all his enemies are put under his feet. And they say that the Lord of the world destroys himself and his world for eternity."¹⁷⁴ This idea is based on the notion that the Lord of the world will ultimately destroy his own work. It is a variation of the Gnostic thought that the material creation dissolves and eventually collapses in on itself after the withdrawal of the pneuma sparks, which are freed by the Redeemer and led into the realm of light.

174 Eznik v. Kolb De Deo 4:10.

59

From such triumph over the Demiurge and the archons, the Letter to the Colossians also knows. Col 2:15 speaks again of the "powers and authorities" which he "disarmed and publicly exposed, making a triumph of them in Christ" (cf. Col 1:19f); according to Eph 1:20-23, Christ received dominion from God "over all realms, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world but also in the one to come." (Eph 1:20-23; cf. 1 Cor 15:24).

2. The possibility that "Paul" might have been thinking of the "wisdom of the rulers of this world" (2:6) as referring to the powers responsible for the death of Jesus, i.e., Pilate, Herod, or Caiaphas, is so absurd, even if theoretically intended, that it cannot be seriously considered here. 2:6 is the decisive obstacle at which Interpretation 2 inevitably fails. – On the other hand, it is not inappropriate to speak of the wisdom of the archons, especially as they are the powers responsible for creation.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, their powers are limited, which they do not recognize in their arrogance (on a cosmic level, they behave like the psychic to the pneumatic).

3. The statement that none of the rulers of this age have recognized the "wisdom of God" would be as puzzling, provided one understands the rulers as the earthly powers responsible for

Jesus' death, as the related statement that they would not have crucified the Lord if they had known him. These are statements whose point is ultimately possible only against the background of the myth as we have come to know it in the Gnostic systems of the 2nd century, and which consists in the fact that the Demiurge and his archons made themselves guilty through the innocent death of Christ, thereby causing their own destruction.

It is evident that Interpretation 1 allows for a coherent understanding of the connection between the three core motifs contained in 1 Cor 2:6-8 – something that cannot be said of the explanations of Carr and other proponents of Interpretation 2.

175 UW (NHC II/5) p. 125:23ff "Now when the perfect ones appeared in the forms of the archons and when they revealed the incomparable truth, they put all the wisdom of the gods to shame." Polemically Eznik of Kolb 4:2 "And if he (the supreme god) did not have such wisdom in himself, then he should at least have looked to the Creator of the world and yet learned the art from him."

60

Now Thiselton, in his commentary, mentions, in addition to the two mentioned interpretative possibilities of 2:6-8, a third and a fourth: (3) rulers as "angelic custodians of nations. Both supernatural and political." Additionally, "(4) rulers of this world order as sociopolitical powers in a structural collectivity that transcends given human individuals (possibly with a hint of demonic overtones)." Both interpretative possibilities are "both-and" positions, differing only in that (3) is more focused on religious history, while (4) is more socio-psychologically/politically emphasized. As a representative of (3), Thiselton mentions Oskar Cullmann, for whom "Paul manifestly means both the invisible 'princes of this world'... and their actual human instruments, Herod and Pilate. Invisible powers "stand behind what occurs in the world." Cullmann refers to Martin Dibelius and his thesis that, according to the belief of late Judaism, each nation is represented by a particular angelic being.

Wink, who Thiselton names as a representative of interpretation 4, also believes that interpretations 1 and 2 can be combined: "Both the argument that the archontes in 1 Cor 2:6-8 are human and the argument that they are divine are plausible... both views are correct."¹⁷⁶ Similarly, Dehn argued for a connection between earthly and heavenly rulers: "If he now here, as there can be no doubt, understands angelic powers under the 'rulers of this world,' he could only have imagined the process in such a way that Pilate, the high priests, etc., who brought Jesus to death, were in the hands of these powers, so that authority and angels were closely connected."¹⁷⁷

Elliott argues more politically, citing dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos, Benigno Aquino, Oscar Romero in El Salvador, and Jean-Bertrand Aristide to show that "evil powers" always involve over-individual forces of a system of oppression. According to Elliott, Paul understood Jesus' death as the beginning of God's "liberation war" against the oppressive world powers.¹⁷⁸ Such "actualization attempts," which were still possible a few decades ago, have little to do with historical-critical research.

176 Wink 1989, p. 43f.; similar Strecker, Horn 1996, p. 47 "The powers hostile to divine wisdom are evidently identical with demonic forces associated with cosmic being, which exercise their power through earthly forces."

177 Dehn 1936, p. 104. For Weiss 2008, p. 421 too, the "question of whether the 'rulers of this world' mentioned several times in 1 Cor. 2:6 ff., who, as it says in 1 Cor. 2:8, 'crucified the Lord of glory', are worldly or non-worldly demonic powers ... cannot be answered in the sense of an alternative." But his position remains unclear because he only offers arguments for the latter.

178 Elliott 1994, p. 123.

61

The fact that supernatural and worldly powers were interconnected in the worldview of some ancient authors is demonstrated by Wink using Ascensio Isaiae 11:19-20: "And afterward, the adversary became jealous of him and incited the children of Israel against him, not knowing who he was, and they delivered him to the king and crucified him, and he descended to the angel of the underworld. For in Jerusalem, I saw how they crucified him on the wood..."

In the case of 1 Corinthians, however, proponents of interpretations 3 and 4 would first need to prove that "Paul" knew of any worldly authorities as historical figures responsible for Jesus' death. In his letters, there is no mention of them, nor are the specific circumstances of Christ's crucifixion discussed at all.

There is also the possibility that the author of 1 Corinthians operated within a mythological framework that entirely excludes human "executors" responsible for killing the Son of God. Some texts from the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi might attest to the existence of such a myth. These texts outline a mythological drama that unfolds purely on a supernatural level. In these accounts, the killing of the Son of God is not carried out by humans but solely by demonic powers.

This seems to be the case in the previously quoted section from "The Thought of Norea" (NHC VI/4, p. 41,20ff.). The passage begins by describing how the archons become confused by the actions of the redeemer and decide to hand him over to the ruler of the underworld. Following the "betrayal" by one of the "followers," whose name is not mentioned and who does not necessarily have to be Judas, as Lüdemann suggests, the redeemer is seized by these demonic powers.

As previously noted, this is a classic variant of the well-known Gnostic redeemer myth. The redeemer remains unrecognized on earth, and his actions, especially raising the dead, cause unrest among the cosmic powers, the archons. This version differs from others mainly due to the appearance of a "betrayal." Since the archons do not know the redeemer, they have him identified by a follower. He is then handed over by them (not by the "betrayal") to Sasabek and Beroth. However, the ruler of the underworld fails to capture him, as the entirely different "nature of his flesh"—here, the Gnostic docetism is evident—escapes the limited understanding of the underworld ruler.

Overall, notable differences from the Gospel accounts become evident. Instead of thirty pieces of silver, nine bronze coins are handed over for the betrayal of the redeemer, and these are given not to the "betrayed," but to the archons. Moreover, the dramatic personae known from the Passion narrative are missing: Pontius Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, and the people. Instead of the worldly Roman and Jewish rulers, cosmic powers—the archons, and the ruler of the underworld—appear.

It is hard to imagine that the myth presented here was spun from 1 Corinthians 2:8 or from the New Testament Passion story, which would be the case if we followed the common view. We are evidently dealing with a completely independent tradition that shows no connection to the New Testament betrayal or Passion narrative and cannot be considered a "midrash" of 2:6-8.

At this point, one is almost tempted to see in the text evidence for the old radical-critical thesis that the Gospel Passion story is, in essential parts, nothing more than a historically dressed-up Gnostic redeemer myth. The lines from the mythical to the historicized version are easy to draw—the reverse is much more difficult: It is quite possible that the still nameless, nebulously mythical figure of the "betrayed" became the figure of Judas the traitor. From the mythical archons, historical persons, the "rulers" of the Passion story, could have developed: the Roman governor and the representatives of the Jewish establishment. This could also explain the notable frequency of the term "archons" within the Passion story observed by Carr. The fact that the priests did not recognize Jesus without Judas's help could be seen as a reflection of the myth of the hidden redeemer. This aspect of the story, which makes no sense within a historical framework, would have simply been carried over from the myth. The nine bronze coins would have been replaced by Matthew with the thirty pieces of silver, which in turn clearly allude to the prophet Zechariah (11:12-13); the Old Testament reference served, as so often, to link the New Testament salvation history to the Old Testament and to secure it against Gnostic "misinterpretations."

However, given the fragmentary nature of the redeemer myth presented in "The Thought of Our Great Power" and the unresolved questions regarding the age and origin of this text and the traditions contained within it, such considerations must remain speculative. Proving that the Passion narrative is a historicized version of the Gnostic redeemer myth would require a broader framework.

It remains clear: the "rulers of this age" in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 are supernatural beings or the archons of the Gnostic myth, which was transmitted in various forms in the Gnostic systems of the 2nd century. If this myth or essential components of this myth were known to the author of the Corinthian letter, as the comparative material suggests and considering the untenability of Interpretation B, then this letter must also be dated to the 2nd century. Unless there was a "pre-Christian Gnosis" or a proto-Gnosis or Gnosis in statu nascendi, for which, as we now know, there is no evidence. In other words, no evidence other than Paul himself, i.e., the

Gnostic elements in his language and theology. But this evidence, as anyone would recognize, despite the "hermeneutical circle" invoked by proponents of "pre-Christian Gnosis," is extremely weak. Therefore, it would be better to do what would surely be done if it were not about Paul: to accept that we are dealing with pseudepigraphical texts in the Pauline letters that belong to the 2nd century AD.

4. 1 Corinthians 15:8 – The Apostle as a "Miscarriage"

Among the passages that cannot be understood without the background of the Gnostic myth is 1 Corinthians 15:8. After listing the resurrection witnesses, "Paul" says of himself: "Last of all, as to one untimely born (*ektroma*), he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

The interpretation of the word *ektroma*, which appears only in this place in the New Testament, is disputed. Among Greek writers, it generally means a "miscarriage," leaving open whether it refers to a premature or stillborn birth. "In any case, it refers to the undeveloped, immature fruit of the womb, brought into the world either alive or dead. What is decisive is the abnormal timing of the birth and the incomplete form of the born being."¹⁷⁹

In the Septuagint, *ektroma* appears only three times. While in Ecclesiastes 6:3 and Job 3:16 the word means untimely birth or premature birth, in Numbers 12:12 it clearly refers to a stillbirth, one that was lifeless in the womb.

Since Paul speaks of Christ appearing to him "last of all (apostles)," it suggests that *ektroma* here is meant in the sense of "late birth" or "posthumous birth." However, given the clear lexical evidence, this interpretation must be ruled out.¹⁸⁰ Thus, the meaning of *ektroma* can only be "premature birth" or "miscarriage," which poses significant interpretative difficulties, as both translations are difficult to reconcile with Paul's explicit self-designation as the last resurrection witness. Harnack: "Ekrōma as premature birth cannot be considered, as *eschaton* fits like a square peg in a round hole."¹⁸¹

The same applies to the translation "stillbirth," which cannot be considered as the "interpretation of the introductory temporal determination."¹⁸² Another difficulty is that *ektroma* is determined by the definite article, giving it particular weight (Bengel: *Articulus vim habet*).¹⁸³ How can it be explained that "Paul" speaks of the miscarriage? To which "miscarriage" in particular is he referring?

179 Schneider 1933-1979, p. 463.

180 Schneider 1933-1979, p. 464.

181 Harnack 1980, p. 72, A. 3.

182 von der Osten-Sacken 1973, p. 250.

183 Bengel 1759, p. 754.

Given the numerous difficulties, the explanations of the exegetes are predictably as imaginative as they are mannered or artificial. According to Björck, Paul is said to have described himself as a "monster" or "freak."¹⁸⁴ This explanation was picked up by Boman, who interpreted it as a reference to the apostle's frail physique (2 Cor 10:10) or as a derogatory nickname meaning "dwarf." In any case, the term is an "expression of the highest human misery."¹⁸⁵ Since the definite article is generally explained by citing Paul as using an insult, as per Weiss, Boman suggests that the term did not originate from Paul himself but from his opponents in Corinth.¹⁸⁶

Similarly, for Güttemann, it is an insult that Paul adopts, intending to depict him as an "outsider." The Gnostic opponents in Corinth had denied Paul's apostleship with the argument that he represented an outsider position in the resurrection doctrine with the proclamation of Christological distance. The true apostle, they claimed, proclaimed the identity between Christ and Christians and thus knew no Christological-temporal distance.¹⁸⁷ Paul wanted to show that he stood in line with the others with his teaching and added in v. 8: "I also came last and only later joined the line of proclaimers."¹⁸⁸ Thus, Paul would have essentially retorted to the Corinthians: "I am only a premature birth in the sense of a late birth" (since I joined later). This is, apart from the linguistically questionable equation "miscarriage" = "outsider," not very convincing.¹⁸⁹

According to Fridrichsen, Paul's opponents called him an *ektrōma* of *anagennēsis*, i.e., a "miscarriage of rebirth."¹⁹⁰ Understandably, this interpretation could not prevail either.¹⁹¹ For why wouldn't the apostle then have referred to himself as *ektrōma tēs anagennēseōs*?

Strecker "deciphers" the enigmatic phrase from an "anthropological-ritological perspective": Paul had "died" to his previous life as a persecutor of Christianity through the Damascus experience, and his birth as an apostle had completely ended the old person. *Ektrōma* must thus be understood as a symbol for the "initiation death." "The miscarriage is an excellent symbol for 'permanent liminality.'"¹⁹² As a living stillbirth, the "stigmatized" Paul becomes "the liminal figure par excellence." However, it is questionable whether the Corinthians would have been able to extract these complex theological-ritological connections from the little nutshell *ektrōma* without the hermeneutic assistance of Strecker.

184 Björck 1939, p. 3ff.

185 Boman 1964, p. 48ff.; cf. Fuchs 1965, p. 63.

186 Weiss 1977, p. 315f.; also Schneider 1933-1979, p. 464; Lindemann 2000, p. 334, sees no evidence that an insult directed against Paul could be in the background.

187 Güttemanns 1966, p. 89.

188 Güttemanns 1966, p. 91.

189 von der Osten-Sacken 1973, p. 250, note 23.

190 Lindemann 2000, p. 334.

191 Fridrichsen 1994, p. 216; cf. Lindemann 2000, p. 334.

Nickelburg's explanation also demands quite a bit from the Corinthians. He interprets the term "miscarriage" in light of Galatians 1:15. Since Paul considered his life before conversion as contrary to his actual calling, he found himself in an embryonic state. "He was *ektrōma* with respect to the purpose for which he was appointed from the womb. In spite of this, God revealed the risen Christ to him and made him what he was intended to be from the womb."¹⁹³ Strecker rightly notes that the Corinthians could only have understood this if they were aware of Paul's conviction that he had been chosen from the womb (Galatians 1:15). Nickelburg's assumption that this was part of Paul's preaching and teaching in Corinth is speculative.¹⁹⁴

Unlike Nickelsburg, who leaves the question of the meaning of the article before *ektrōma* unanswered, Schäfer rightly recognizes that the apostle must be alluding to "something familiar to the readers."¹⁹⁵ However, not an insult, as Weiss thought, but an Old Testament scripture. Schäfer sees in the expression used by "Paul" a reference to Hosea 13:13. There, the disobedient Ephraim is compared to a child that does not want to leave the womb despite the onset of labor and thus risks being stillborn. According to Schäfer, Paul should be understood as the "second Ephraim" because he did not follow his original calling, the call of God.

If this interpretation were correct, the apostle would have severely tested the biblical knowledge and exegetical skills of the Corinthians. Moreover, Schäfer has to abandon the widely accepted meaning of *ektrōma* as "miscarriage," "premature birth," or "stillbirth." Instead, he suggests it refers to an embryo or child to connect to Hosea 13:13, where the word *ektrōma* does not appear. This is not very convincing. Additionally, nothing is known about a calling of Paul before the Damascus vision, leaving Schäfer's thesis without any basis in the sources.¹⁹⁶

193 Nickelsburg 1986, p. 204.

194 Strecker 1999, p. 154, A. 357.

195 Schaefer 1994, p. 214.

196 See Hollander, van der Hout 1996, p. 226.

For Harm W. Hollander and Gisbert E. van der Hout, the term is a self-deprecating expression used by Paul, following Jewish prophetic tradition (Exodus 3:11; 4:10,13; Judges 6:15; 1 Samuel 9:21; Jeremiah 1:6; Assumption of Moses 12:6), to express his unworthiness in light of the divine calling.¹⁹⁷ However, this interpretation also fails to address the main problem: how Paul came to describe himself as a "miscarriage" and the significance of the definite article.

One must be thankful to Sellin for bringing the discussion of this verse back from the realm of fanciful speculation to the reality of historical context. Sellin investigates the use of the word *ektrōma* and its synonym *amblōsis* in Philo's works. Passages like *SpecLeg* 3:108, 117, *All* 1:76 show that "stillbirth" often refers to a type of person who is limited to the physical, the trivial, and the empty, living only biologically but "spiritually, in truth, essentially dead" (cf. *Wisdom* 3:16; 5:13), "like the first human Adam as a clay puppet, as a golem. 'Stillbirth' is the best term for a person who is born but still dead, which means, of course: a merely biologically living person is (as a natural human) spiritually dead." For Sellin, the metaphor is thus an image of the radical life change of the apostle: "Without God's grace, Paul's pre-Christian life was dead." Stillbirth is defined by the lack of *pneuma*.¹⁹⁸

Sellin's interpretation significantly advances our understanding of the term. However, the problem remains that his interpretation seems more influenced by Gnostic texts, while Philo and the wisdom literature provide limited support. This leads to a methodological and chronological issue: if the entire Gnostic conceptual framework originates from the 2nd century, it could not have been known to Paul. Sellin cannot convincingly demonstrate that this framework existed in Philo and the wisdom literature, especially since these texts typically speak of *amblōsis*, not *ektrōma*.

197 Hollander, vanderHout1996, p.234ff.

198 Sellin 1986, p. 250.

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Sellin addresses the problematic article by referring to a grammatical rule: "The article before *ektrōma* is syntactically necessary. *ektrōma* relates to the determined *kaimoi* and is therefore also determined."¹⁹⁹ Similarly, G. Björck claimed that "the article is not only required by a syntactic rule but also indispensable for the meaning." According to Björck, followed by Sellin and Munck, the definite article was meant to prevent the misunderstanding that Christ revealed himself to Paul in the manner he would to a miscarriage, in other words, to avoid the misconception that there was a specific way Christ revealed himself to miscarriages (!).²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the article (unstressed) follows the rule that appositions to personal pronouns take the article (as in *hēmeis hoi Hellēnes*). Therefore, it should be translated as: "He appeared to me as an *ektrōma*."²⁰¹

Certainly, many previous exegetes (including excellent philologists) who spent much effort and ink solving this difficult problem would have been grateful for this clarification. However, it is highly doubtful whether Björck's claimed thesis, adopted by Munck and Sellin, is even correct. As early as 1973, Peter von der Osten-Sacken demonstrated that Björck's thesis was simply wrong, as shown by the passages 1 Corinthians 7:25 ("I give my opinion as one who is shown mercy" and not "as if I were one") and Hebrews 12:5 ("as if we were sons" and not "as sons"). Since the appositions introduced by *hōs* in these examples are also without the article, the second justification is not valid. In short, it remains: "The article in the determination ... remains

striking and is not merely 'very weakly stressed,' as Björck suggests."²⁰² After Osten-Sacken's correction was later adopted by Blass-Debrunner (BI-Debr translates 453.6: "to me as the miscarriage"),²⁰³ Sellin's thesis should have already been settled.

There is no doubt that the author of 1 Corinthians intended to emphasize the term *ektrōma* with the article, yet the question remains how this article is to be explained. Unlike Weiß and other exegetes, Osten-Sacken believes that interpreting the term as a slur is not the only possibility. Rather, Paul might have been referring to the previously mentioned apostles, thus paraphrasing: "to me as the miscarriage (among the apostles)." The term *ektrōma* must be explained similarly to the term *skybala* = *dung* in Philippians 3:8. Both judgments come from a Christian perspective, making it understandable if the one who calls his former anti-Christian stance 'dung' can also refer to himself as a persecutor with the term 'miscarriage,' even if he uses a different image."²⁰⁴ The crucial question of why the author of 1 Corinthians introduces the mysterious term 'miscarriage' remains unanswered by Osten-Sacken.

199 Sellin 1986, p. 251.

200 Munck 1959, p. 181.

201 Björck 1939, p. 3ff.; in agreement Munck 1959, p. 181ff.; cf. Conzelmann 1981, p. 306, note 95

202 Cf. von der Osten-Sacken 1973; cf. Lüdemann 1983, p. 116, note 42.

203 Blass et al. 1976.

204 von der Osten-Sacken 1973, p. 245.

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As the mostly rather artificial interpretations of previous exegesis have shown, the question of the origin of the term *ektrōma* cannot be approached in this way. The approach taken by Sellin, which involves religious history, seemed more promising. Particularly interesting is Sellin's reference to the gnostic mythology of the 2nd century, which has been entirely neglected by other exegetes. According to Sellin, the metaphor has a "fixed position" in this context. Indeed, a comparison of the sources cited by Sellin with 1 Corinthians 15:8 is fascinating. The large number of references not only shows that the term *ektrōma* played a significant role in the gnostic (Sophia) myth, but also that the gnostic understanding of this term could be particularly helpful in elucidating the difficult passage of 1 Corinthians 15:8.

While the *ektrōma* motif often appears as part of the Sophia myth and its variations in the church fathers' reports on the mythology of the Valentinians, Basilidians, Peratae, etc.,²⁰⁵ it is also found in the Nag Hammadi scriptures, a total of four times, as well as once in the Apocryphon of John (BG). Characteristic of the *ektrōma* is that it is not defined by the Pneuma, but receives its type from the shadow and remains completely formless due to its spiritual indeterminacy. In the text *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II/4) p. 94,15, this results in the already familiar gnostic Demiurge Yaldabaoth:

1. *"Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create a work alone without her consort... And a shadow arose beneath the veil. And that shadow became matter. And that shadow was cast into a separate region; what she had created became a work of matter, comparable to a miscarriage. It received its type from the shadow. It became a self-satisfied beast of lion shape."*

205 Iren. Haer 1.4.1; 8.2; Iren Haer 2.30.4; Iren Haer 4.35.3; Hipp Ref 5.7.6 (Peratien); 6.31.2.4ff, 36.3 (Valentinians); 7.26.7 (Basilidians).

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The Apocryphon of John (BG 46) also identifies Sophia's miscarriage with Yaldabaoth:

2) *"But when the mother realized that the miscarriage of darkness was not perfect, as her partner had not agreed with her, she turned back and wept greatly."*

In the untitled text On the Origin of the World (NHC II/5), p. 99, 9.26, the Demiurge arises first from envy and the miscarriage:

3) *"Since that day, the principle of envy appeared in all the aeons and their worlds. That envy was found as a miscarriage without spirit in it."*

4) *"When these things happened, Pistis appeared in the matter of chaos, which was thrown away like a miscarriage. There was no spirit in it."*

In On the Origin of the World (NHC II/5), p. 115,5, it is the creature of the archons, i.e., Adam, who is described as a miscarriage:

5) *"And when they had finished Adam, they placed him in a vessel, for he had received a form like a miscarriage, since there was no spirit in him."*

The identification of the miscarriage with the Demiurge Yaldabaoth is not always carried out, as seen in the Excerpts of Theodotus, where it is said of the (gnostic) Christians:

"As long as we were children of the feminine, as if from a shameful union, incomplete and childish and weak and without form, like miscarriages, we were children of the woman; but when we received form from the Savior, we became children of the man and of the bridal chamber."²⁰⁶ "As long as the seed is still formless, it is a child of the woman, but when it is formed, it is transformed into a man and becomes the son of the bridegroom. It is no longer weak (asthenēs) and subject to the cosmic powers, whether visible or invisible, but having become a man, it is a male fruit."²⁰⁷

These passages can illuminate the meaning of the miscarriage metaphor. It is interpreted as a purely material or psychic existence, wholly oriented toward redemption by the Pneuma, and in this sense, it is also a metaphor for pre-Christian existence.²⁰⁸

206 Exc ex Theod 4:68.

207 Exc ex Theod 4:79: The "formless" seed thus corresponds to the "miscarriage"; according to Gnostic (ancient) ideas, it refers to the female-material basis of the fetus, imagined as an amorphous mass, while the "form" is provided by the male side. Luke 1:35, the overshadowing of the Virgin Mary, is also interpreted as the formation (enetuposen) of the female "seed" by the divine spirit, cf. Exc ex Theod 3:60.

208 Redemption is here "represented in the mythical image as the formation of the shapeless and disordered, Wyrwa 2009, p. 110. A correspondence to the "miscarriage" from Hellenistic mysticism can be found in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* 373C. The fact that Apollo was born of Isis and Osiris while the parents were still in the womb of Hera is a coded expression of the fact that "Isis herself - nature revealed it - brought her first birth into the world unfinished; therefore they say that this god was born crippled in the dark, and call him the 'elder Horas'; for he was not a cosmos, but a kind of illusion, a premonition of the future cosmos."

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Thus, the bridge to the enigmatic statement in 1 Corinthians 15:8 is established, as this also pertains to the pre-Christian existence of "Paul." The meaning of the statement becomes clear when interpreted through the quote from the Excerpts of Theodotus: "Paul" used the image of the "miscarriage" to express that his pre-Christian existence was still incomplete and reliant on redemption and formation by the divine Pneuma.

The puzzling article before **ektrōma** also finds its explanation in this context. It indicates that "Paul" is not referring to just any miscarriage but to "the miscarriage" of the gnostic myth, whose knowledge he assumes in his readers, as we have seen from the previous sections where it repeatedly appears.

The close connection between "miscarriage" and initiation or calling within this conceptual framework is made clear by a quote from Hippolytus. In his report on the teachings of Basilides, which provides the earliest evidence for the gnostic use of the term "miscarriage," it states: "After this had occurred, the formlessness among us should also be enlightened and the third sonship, left behind in the formlessness like a miscarriage, should be revealed the mystery that was not known to previous generations, as it is written: 'The mystery was made known to me by revelation' (Ephesians 3:3), and: 'I heard secret words that a man is not permitted to speak' (2 Corinthians 12:4)."²⁰⁹

The third sonship, left behind like a formless miscarriage, is enlightened and gains form and shape through the revelation of the hidden mystery, i.e., the gospel.

With the help of the Basilides report handed down by Hippolytus, the crucial question for interpreting 1 Corinthians 15:10 about the enigmatic and seemingly paradoxical connection between "miscarriage" or "premature birth" and the self-designation of the author as the "last" or "least" can also be answered. The Basilidian system, as we know from Hippolytus, recognizes a threefold sonship. While the first sonship – similar to the imperceptible spiritual Logos in Philo's "That God is Unchangeable" (31) – returns to the Father immediately after its creation and the second sonship follows with the help of the Holy Spirit, the redemption-needing third sonship remains in formlessness as a "miscarriage" or "premature birth." Only after the light of the

gospel comes into the world through the mediation of the archons and their sons with Jesus can the third sonship be transformed and purified, and rise to the (nonexistent) Father by its own power.

209 HippRef7:26.

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It is clear that the author of 1 Corinthians 15:10 alludes to this. The paradox can only be explained against the background of the Basilidian system with its three different sonships: here, the sonship left in formlessness as a premature or aborted birth was indeed the last. The many quotations by the Church Fathers, and the frequent occurrence of the term in the above-cited Nag Hammadi texts, show that this was evidently a widely spread topos in Christian circles.

Since the work of Basilides emerged only in the first half of the 2nd century, this is another indication of the late origin of this "Pauline letter" and gives us an approximate terminus a quo for its dating.

It should also be noted that we are aware of a Gnostic reception of 1 Corinthians 15:8 through Irenaeus. According to the Valentinian Gnostics, as Irenaeus reports (Haer 1.8.2), Paul, with the words in 15:8, intended to imply that the Savior appeared to Achamoth "when she lingered outside the Pleroma in the form of an abortion (in abortiois parte)." The individual calling experience of Paul is interpreted as a terrestrial reflection of the mythical event occurring between the Savior and Achamoth.

To what extent the way Paul's calling experience is portrayed in 15:8 has implications for the evaluation of the relationship between Paul and the other apostles cannot be determined. Pagels suggests that the Gnostics concluded "that Paul alone received the pneumatic gospel, while the preaching of the rest remained only psychic."²¹⁰ Under such circumstances, the term *ektrōma* should not be seen merely as an expression of self-deprecation but as a reference to Paul's special calling as a Pneumatic.

210 Pagels 1992, p. 81.

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