

How the Gospel of Truth Depicts Paul's Secret Teaching: A Study in Second-Century Reception History*

Elaine Pagels

Princeton University; epagels@princeton.edu

■ Abstract

This article shows that the Gospel of Truth (NHC I, 3), dense with allusions to sources now in the New Testament, most often explored for its resonances with Johannine literature, also offers significant evidence for second-century reception of Paul's letters, while highlighting poetic images often overlooked. Correlating the language and literary structure of such Pauline passages as 1 Cor 1–6 with the opening of the Gospel of Truth shows that the latter implicitly claims to reveal the secret and primordial “wisdom of God” that Paul declares he teaches only orally to initiates (1 Cor 2:6–7). Thus, this text exemplifies a kind of “heretical” reading that heresiologists like Irenaeus deplore, when, for example, he cites this very passage to complain that “each of (the heretics) declares that this ‘wisdom’ is whatever

* A previous version of this article was presented at the meeting of the NHGN held at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in October 2017, chaired by Luke Drake and Greg Given. I am grateful to them, and especially to the members of that seminar for invaluable help with revisions and suggestions: David Brakke, Einar Thomassen, Zlatko Pleše, Emmanuel Fiano, Geoffrey Smith, Jocelyn Burney, Emily Lafleche, Nathan Leach, Jörgen Magnusson, Hugo Mendez, Ian Mills, Pamela Reaves, Tylor Standley, and Benjamin Sheppard. I am especially grateful to David Brakke, Zlatko Pleše, and Einar Thomassen, whose contributions added clarity and scope to the presentation I gave at that meeting. Finally, I owe special thanks to Lance Jenott for his expert contributions and suggestions throughout the process of revising this research, which helped improve it in many ways, and to Jolyon Pruszinski for preparing the final version for publication.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

HTR 117:1 (2024) 99–112



he invents (*fictionem videlicet*), so that sometimes they claim that the truth is in Valentinus, or in Marcion, or in someone else . . .” (*Haer.* 3.2.1). Furthermore, this research suggests that the Gospel of Truth, narrating primordial creation, followed by a dramatic account of Christ’s incarnation and redemption, claims to offer, as the “true gospel,” a spiritual interpretation that far transcends the brief kerygmatic version set forth in 1 Cor 15:1–3. Finally, I suggest, investigating the Gospel of Truth’s interpretation of Paul’s teaching (which here includes echoes of Ephesians and Colossians) invites us to recognize elements of Paul’s letters most often overlooked. For, from patristic times to the present, exegetes who accept Irenaeus’s insistence that Paul had no secret teaching have dismissed the apostle’s emphatic claim that he did. Furthermore, those focused on dogmatic and ethical themes in Paul’s letters often miss poetic and mythological language at play in sources like the Gospel of Truth.

■ Keywords

Pauline reception, deutero-Paul, Nag Hammadi, Gospel of Truth, heterodoxy, Irenaeus

■

The Gospel of Truth found at Nag Hammadi (NHC I 3), dense with allusions to sources now included in the New Testament, and most often explored for its resonances with Johannine literature,¹ also offers significant evidence for second-century reception of Paul’s letters,² which, in turn, yields new insight into the

¹ C. K. Barrett, “The Theological Vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel and of the Gospel of Truth,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper* (ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder; New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 210–23; Jacqueline Williams, *Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi* (SBLDS 79; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Bentley Layton, “The Gospel of Truth,” in *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 251. Significant recent studies that note allusions to such texts include Elliot Wolfson, “Inscribed in the Book of the Living: Gospel of Truth and Jewish Christology,” *JSJ* 38 (2007) 234–71; Geoffrey Smith, “Constructing a Christian Universe: Mythological Exegesis of Ben Sira 24 and John’s Prologue in the *Gospel of Truth*,” in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lance Jenott and Sarit Kattan Gribetz; Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 155; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 64–81; Mark J. Edwards, “Pseudo-Priscillian and the Gospel of Truth,” *VC* 70 (2016) 355–72; Anne Kreps, “The Passion of the Book: The Gospel of Truth as Valentinian Scriptural Practice,” *J ECS* 24 (2016) 311–35, esp. 319 on “second century logos speculation,” citing the article by Wolfson noted above; Paul Linjamaa, “The Pit and the Day from Above: Sabbath-Symbolism in the Gospel of Truth and the Interpretation of Knowledge,” *SVÄ* 80 (2015) 187–206; Geoffrey Smith, “Anti-Origenist Redaction in the Fragments of the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC XII, 2): Theological Controversy and the Transmission of Early Christian Literature,” *HTR* 110 (2017) 46–74.

² Jacques-É. Ménard, *L’Évangile de Vérité. Rétroversion grecque et commentaire* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1962); idem, *L’Évangile de Vérité. Traduction française, introduction et commentaire* (NHS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1972); Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in I Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism* (SBLDS

structure and content of this remarkable text. As we shall see, comparing Paul's theme of God's hidden mystery in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians with the Gospel of Truth reveals some remarkable correlations. Furthermore, it suggests that this "gospel"—most likely an ancient sermon—answers a question that Paul leaves provocatively dangling: What is the true gospel, the "wisdom of God hidden in mystery" (θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην), which Paul says he knows, but did not tell the immature believers in Corinth (1 Cor 2:1–8)?

As is well known, Paul opens 1 Corinthians by complaining that when he arrived in Corinth, he was deeply distressed to find Jesus's followers split into factions, quarreling over elementary questions. Scolding his hearers for their spiritual immaturity, he says that since "you were babies in Christ, I could not give you meat, only milk"—baby food. So, he says, "among you, I decided to acknowledge" only "Christ crucified"—barely more than a slogan (1 Cor 2:2; so also 1 Cor 15:3).

Immediately, though, Paul hastens to add that he is not preaching what he calls "the foolishness of the κήρυγμα" (1 Cor 1:21) because it is all he knows. On the contrary, he declares that the wisdom he *does* teach is not the wisdom of this age, that is, not worldly wisdom, but rather "the mystery of God" (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ [2:1]), "the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery, which God preordained before the aeons" (σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην, ἣν προώρισεν ὁ Θεὸς πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων [2:7]), known only to spiritual people like himself, to whom, he says, God's spirit reveals it directly:

We have received the spirit of God . . . so that we may understand what we received through God's grace, which we also speak . . . in language taught by the spirit, interpreting spiritual matters to those who are spiritual.

ἡμεῖς δὲ . . . ἐλάβομεν . . . τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν· ἃ καὶ λαλοῦμεν . . . ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες. (1 Cor 2:12–13)

But having found his followers in Corinth mere "babies in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1), Paul explains that he offered them only milk, recognizing that, through God's grace, even "the foolishness" of the κήρυγμα suffices to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:18–21).

Let us briefly recall what we know of Pauline reception history during the second century. Sources available for nearly two millennia have shown that while countless groups of Jesus's followers throughout the Roman Empire shared reverence for Paul, many of them simultaneously disputed his legacy. Consider, for example, how radically differently various believers interpreted Paul's teaching: believers ranging from Ignatius, who self-consciously modeled his teaching and his ministry as bishop of Antioch after Paul; to followers of Marcion in Rome and throughout the empire, who insisted that Paul separated law from gospel; to Christians such

12; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973); Walter Schmithals, "The *Corpus Paulinum* and Gnosis," in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of Robert McL. Wilson* (ed. Alastair H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983) 107–24; Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 146–65, esp. 149 n. 11.

as Justin in Rome, and, later, Tertullian in North Africa, who fiercely contested Marcionite exegesis; to Irenaeus in Gaul, who revered Paul as a foundational pillar of the Roman Church and cited his letters, including the Pastoral Epistles, in his refutation of heretics. And while the Acts of Paul depicts the apostle as a radical ascetic, the “Paul” of the Pastorals promotes marriage and criticizes those who teach asceticism (1 Tim 4:1–3). Clement of Alexandria even pictures Paul himself as a married man.³ Other second-century interpreters of Paul range from the author of 2 Peter, distressed over the way “ignorant and unstable” believers read Paul’s letters (2 Pet 3:16), to those “disciples of Valentinus” who so intensely claimed the authority of “the great apostle” that Tertullian sarcastically dubbed him “the apostle to the heretics.”⁴

Disputes among such disparate exegetes involved at least three different issues, all of which are relevant for the Gospel of Truth’s perspective on Paul’s message. The first and most obvious question was: What did Paul actually write? As is well known, this basic question was so contested that it impelled Paul’s various admirers to write secondarily Pauline literature that ranges from 3 Corinthians to 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Ephesians, and Colossians, not to mention such works as the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Paul found at Nag Hammadi (NHC V 2).

Second, even second-century Christians who read the same writings—who shared, for example, Paul’s widely read first letter to the Corinthians—often argued ferociously over another question: How are we to interpret those letters that we agree Paul wrote? Scholars of the history of hermeneutics are familiar with the kind of running argument that engaged such writers as Irenaeus and Tertullian when debating with disciples of Valentinus, who wrote such works as the Treatise on the Resurrection (NHC I 4) and the Prayer of the Apostle Paul (NHC I 1).

A third question—one even more difficult than either of the others—is: What is the “mystery of God” that Paul says he revealed only orally to the spiritually mature (τέλειοι) and did not write down?

This article suggests that the Gospel of Truth seeks to interpret that “hidden wisdom”—something that Irenaeus complains that “heretics” often do. Citing this same passage in 1 Cor 2:6–7, he says that “each one of them” invokes it to validate their practice of offering “wisdom” through oral teaching:

They say that it is not possible for those ignorant of tradition to derive truth from the scriptures, since it is not transmitted in writing (*per literas*) but orally (*per vivam vocem*), which, they say, is why Paul said, “We speak wisdom among the perfect; but not the wisdom of this age” (1 Cor 2:6). Each one of them declares that this wisdom is whatever he invents (*fictionem videlicet*); so sometimes they claim that the truth is in Valentinus, or in Marcion, or in (someone else) . . .⁵

³ Clement, *Strom.* 3.53.

⁴ Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.5.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2.1, trans. mine, following the edition of W. W. Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei. Libros quinque adversus haereses* (Cambridge: Typis Academicis, 1857).

Challenging such claims, Irenaeus insists that none of the apostles ever knew or taught “hidden mysteries . . . which they used to teach to ‘the perfect’ apart from the others.”⁶ On the contrary, he declares, had they known such things, “they would have transmitted them to the same people to whom they were entrusting the churches themselves”—namely, to the bishops of Rome, whose claims to succession he traces from Peter and Paul to Linus and Clement.⁷ Drawing his narrative primarily from the book of Acts, Irenaeus first relates Peter’s activities, then Paul’s, noting especially the claim that when Paul himself foresaw the coming of “wolves” among the flock, he endorsed “bishops” (ἐπίσκοποι) as the apostles’ future successors, the proper guardians of true teaching (Acts 20:28–30). Furthermore, as I noted, from the very first line of his treatise *Against Heresies*, as throughout the entire five volumes, Irenaeus invokes “Paul’s” letters to Timothy in order to characterize “the apostle” as one who, like himself, vehemently denounced “falsely so-called gnosis” (1 Tim 6:20), especially in the form of secret oral teaching.

Although we do not know whether the Gospel of Truth found at Nag Hammadi is the same as the one known to Irenaeus, the text that we have does precisely what arouses his concern.⁸ For this sermon, like the Christians opposed by Irenaeus, similarly reflects on the Pauline notions of God’s mystery known only among the spiritually mature (ἐν τοῖς τελείοις [1 Cor 2:6–7]), proclaiming its own exegesis to be “this gospel . . . revealed to those who are mature, through the mercies of the Father, the hidden mystery, Jesus Christ” (πρὸς πεγαγγελιον . . . ἡταρογανηῖ ἡνετχνηκ αβαλ ριτῆ ἡμηῖτωδανητηῖ ἡτε πωτ πηγστηριον εἰηπ η(σογ)ς πεχρ(ιστο)ς [18.11–16]). The Gospel of Truth, however, promises to reveal much more than Paul did to the immature Corinthians: the “true gospel,” it says, literally “the gospel about the truth” (πεγαγγελιον ἡτηῖη), “is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him” (16.31–33).⁹ Here, the true gospel is wisdom teaching, which includes a capacious drama of primordial error and cosmic redemption that the sermon proceeds to set forth.

Yet, first, a caveat before we engage this sermon directly. When seeking to recognize how various exegetes argued over Paul’s letters, we need to leave aside, so far as possible, interpretations that textual scholars today often take for granted on the basis of orthodox tradition—even, or especially, if we imagine that such tradition has not influenced our own interpretations. We may need to apply the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to our own reflexive assumptions, because some of the ancient exegetes whose works we find at Nag Hammadi, for example, read Pauline passages in ways so wildly unfamiliar to our own that we often fail to recognize

⁶ Ibid., 3.3.1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 3.11.9. For a summary of the much-debated question of the Gospel of Truth’s authorship, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 146–48.

⁹ All citations from the Gospel of Truth follow the text and translation by Harold W. Attridge, *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices* (NHS 22; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 55–122. The translation has been slightly modified at times for clarity.

allusions to his letters that are central to the message of these texts.¹⁰ Reading such strange exegesis is rather like discovering that the musical notes on which, as a child, you learned to play scales and simplified Bach melodies, could, in the hands of other composers, create jazz, rock and roll, or the music of Stravinsky or Philip Glass—music played in distinctly different keys.

When it comes to understanding 1 Corinthians, for example, one interpretation prevalent today is that Paul's "mystery of God" is effectively identical with what he calls his κήρυγμα, the preaching of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor 2:4).¹¹ To make this point, however, exegetes have to ignore, consciously or not, what Paul states clearly: that he reveals the mystery of God's wisdom only orally, to the spiritually mature (Σοφίαν δὲ λαλοῦμεν ἐν τοῖς τελείοις [1 Cor 2:6]), but did not reveal it to the immature Corinthians, whom he shames by calling them "babies in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1). Ancient Christians who believed that Paul revealed God's mystery only to the mature were criticized by Irenaeus for claiming "that Paul alone knew the truth, and that the mystery was revealed to him by revelation."¹² He insists that the opposite is true: neither Jesus nor Paul taught any "mystery" in secret to certain disciples. He strenuously belabors the point, presumably because his claim contradicts what Paul himself declares in 1 Cor 2, as well as Mark's report of Jesus's own secret teaching (Mark 4:10–12, 34).

Certain second-century Jewish teachers, wary of questions about what God was doing before he created the world, similarly tried to prohibit such speculation, forbidding Jewish exegetes to speak about "what happened before, or beyond, or above" the world's creation, insisting that people were never meant to know such mysteries, much less probe into them.¹³ Although Irenaeus, contending against "evil exegetes," strongly agreed, and articulated his own objections in language that echoes that of Mishnah Hagiga,¹⁴ prohibitions have never stopped people from speculating. When Paul wanted to claim that Jesus existed even before the world was created, he, like his followers, drew upon poetic and mythological Jewish traditions about divine wisdom, ignoring the gender difference implicit in Hebrew and Greek, to suggest that Jesus Christ was himself that "hidden mystery"—

¹⁰ For an example of how some mythic texts from Nag Hammadi implicitly interpret Paul's ideas of creation and resurrection, see Elaine Pagels, "Exegesis and Exposition of the Genesis Creation Accounts in Selected Texts from Nag Hammadi," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles Hedrick and Robert Hodgson; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986) 257–86.

¹¹ E.g., Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) 54 and passim.

¹² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.13–14.

¹³ M. Hag. 2.1. Philip S. Alexander, "Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation," *JJS* 43 (1992) 230–45; Douglas Farrow, "St. Irenaeus of Lyons: The Church and the World," *ProEcl* 4 (1995) 333–55; Yair Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic Ban on *Ma'aseh Bereshit*: Sources, Contexts, and Concerns," in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony* (ed. Jenott and Kattan Gribetz), 39–63.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.3.

Wisdom—who worked with God to create the world (1 Cor 2:6–7; Prov 8:22–30; cf. Col 1:26–27, 2:2).

So when the Gospel of Truth sets out to reveal Paul’s hidden mystery, it begins by asking, “What happened before the world’s creation?” To answer this question, it begins in primordial time, since, as Paul told the Corinthians, this is a mystery that “God foreordained before the aeons” (πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων [1 Cor 2:7]). What happened when “all things” (πτερῶ, τὰ πάντα) began to search “for the one from whom they came forth”? “When all things went searching for the one from whom they had come forth, and all things were in him, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thought, ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror” (ἐπιδη πτερῶ ἀγκατοῦ ν̄σα πενταγει ἀβαλ ἄρητῶ ἀγω νερε πτερῶ εἰ κανροῖν ν̄μαρ . . . ἡμ̄ντατσοῶν πωτ ἀσῶ οἰνογοῶπ̄ μ̄ν οἰρῶτε [Gos. Truth 17.4–11]).

This passage is probably based, in part, on Paul’s view that all things (τὰ πάντα), including ourselves, are from God and Jesus Christ, even though many people do not recognize this; for, as Paul says, “the *gnosis* is not in everyone” (1 Cor 8:7):

1 Cor 8:6–7 But for us there is one Father, God, from whom are all things, and in whom we exist; and one lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist. . . . But the *gnosis* is not in everyone.

ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν εἰς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν, καὶ εἰς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι’ αὐτοῦ. Ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν πᾶσιν ἡ γνῶσις.

Col 1:16–17 All things were created in him, and through him; he is before all things, and in him are all things.

τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν ἐκτισται· καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.

Drawing on such passages, the Gospel of Truth explains that even though τὰ πάντα were, and are, in the Father, τὰ πάντα did not know the Father; they neither knew that they were in him, nor could they find him. Thus “ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror” (ἡμ̄ντατσοῶν πωτ ἀσῶ οἰνογοῶπ̄ μ̄ν οἰρῶτε [Gos. Truth 17.9–11]). Unable to comprehend the Father from whom they had come forth, since ignorance had obliterated their vision, they wandered in the dark, feeling abandoned and terrified, like children looking in vain for their lost parents.

Strikingly, as this story tells it, what separates God’s children from their Father is not *sin*. Instead, what frustrates their longing for him is his transcendence, since he is “the incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thought” (Gos. Truth 17.6–9), and thus incomprehensible to beings with limited capacity for understanding. The story goes on to say that when τὰ πάντα realized that they could not find their way home, did not know where they came from, nor how they came into being, they opened themselves to error (πλᾶμη, πλάνη), and became entangled in oblivion, susceptible to the deceit that error creates in worldly existence (Gos. Truth 17.11–29).

At this point, the Gospel of Truth turns from the drama of creation toward the drama of redemption. For when the Father sees his children terrified and suffering, ensnared by negative energies, he sends his Son, “the hidden mystery, Jesus the Christ” (ΠΝΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΘΘΠ Η(ΣΟΥ)Σ ΠΕΧΡ(ΙΣΤΟ)Σ), to show them a way, to reveal the truth about their origin, and to restore them into communion with the Father (18.2–21). The sermon’s identification of God’s hidden mystery with Christ himself appears to follow Colossians, which, probably alluding to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians itself, explains that “the mystery hidden before the ages . . . is Christ in you, the hope of glory (τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων . . . ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης [Col 1:26–27]), and speaks of “the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ” (ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ [Col 2:2]).

Expounding on Jesus Christ as the hidden mystery, the Gospel of Truth tells how, when Christ came into the world to restore τὰ πάντα to the Father, “error” (πλᾶνη) became angry at him, pursued him, and he was nailed to a tree (ΔΣΒΩΛῚ ΑΡΑΦ ΠΘΙ ΨΠΛΑΝΗ ΔΣΠΩΤ ΠΣΩΦ . . . ΔΓΑΓΤῚ ΔΓΩΦ [18.22–24]). But what does the Gospel of Truth mean by πλᾶνη? An earlier generation of scholars often interpreted it as a demiurge who creates the world, since many of those who first investigated the text assumed that this sermon was a “gnostic” text and that a demiurge was a defining feature of gnostic literature.¹⁵ Such assumptions have encouraged scholars to import the concept of a demiurge from texts such as the Apocryphon of John and the Hypostasis of the Archons, and read them into such texts as the Gospel of Truth, where they do not appear. Today, however, many scholars are much more attentive to the nuances and individual perspectives found among these various texts, and are careful to read each one on their own terms, even while classifying them according to different “schools” or patterns of thought (e.g., Valentinian and Sethian).¹⁶ Consequently, most now recognize that the Gospel of Truth assumes a monistic theology, and that its cosmology is no more demiurgical than that of Paul’s own thought.¹⁷

We might compare the ambiguity regarding what the Gospel of Truth means by “error” with what Paul means when speaking of the “rulers of this age” (τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) in 1 Cor 2:8. Does error, like Paul’s rulers, refer to human rulers who arrested and crucified Jesus, or hostile supernatural powers who

¹⁵ For the classic discussion and challenge to such assumptions, which were based on patristic polemics, see Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ For the classification of the Gospel of Truth as a Valentinian text, see Einar Thomassen, “Notes pour la délimitation d’un corpus valentinien à Nag Hammadi,” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification. Actes du colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 Septembre 1993* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Anne Pasquier; Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi section “Études” 3; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1995) 243–59; Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 146–65.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Thomassen’s learned and detailed discussion in *The Spiritual Seed*, ch. 23, “The Meaning and Origins of Valentinian Protology,” 269–314.

impelled them to this evil act? Perhaps error alludes to both, as do the Gospels of John and Luke, which envision both human and supernatural agents collaborating to kill Jesus.¹⁸ Whatever the Gospel of Truth means by “error”—perhaps a personification of Jesus’s enemies, both cosmic and human—it agrees with Paul’s narrative that when Jesus became manifest in the world, his enemies angrily resisted his advance, hounding him until they tortured and crucified him (18.22–24).

Despite error’s murderous intent, however, the Gospel of Truth teaches that the Father overturned its conspiracy, transforming even this hideous crime into a means of grace.¹⁹ To demonstrate this, the Gospel of Truth reframes the vision of the cross from an instrument of torture into a locus of revelation, setting forth two movingly transformed images. The first image envisions Jesus’s battered body “nailed to a tree” (perhaps alluding to Gal 3:13 and Acts 10:39), becoming fruit on a new tree of knowledge, “fruit of knowledge of the Father” (οἴταρ ἡπικαγνε ἤτε πῶτ), that brings not death but life and joy (Gos. Truth 18.24–28). With the image of the crucified Christ as the “fruit of knowledge,” it proclaims that, for those who ate it, “He (Christ) discovered them in himself, and they discovered him in themselves” (ἤταρ ἡχε νεει ἡταρθεῖτογ ἡρητῆ αγω ἡταρ αγωητῆ ἡρητογ [18.29–31]), perhaps alluding to Jesus’s prayer in the Gospel of John, “As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, may they also be in us . . . I in them, and you in me (καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ κἀγὼ ἐν σοί, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ᾔσιν . . . ἐγὼ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ ἐν ἐμοί [John 17:21–23]; cf. John 6:49–58, 14:20).

The image of Christ becoming the fruit of the tree of knowledge shows how the Gospel of Truth’s interpretation of the gospel goes beyond Paul’s κήρυγμα. For rather than seeing Jesus’s crucifixion as Paul publicly preached it, that is, as the necessary sacrifice to atone for human sin, this sermon suggests instead that his passion, seen through the eyes of wisdom, opens the potential for revelation, as an opportunity for coming to know the Father, and to be known by him. What Jesus’s suffering can reveal, then, is the intimate relationship between the Father, his Son, and all beings who have discovered Christ in themselves, discovering what Colossians calls “the riches of the glory of this mystery . . . which is Christ in you” (τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου . . . ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν [Col 1:27]).

Following Paul’s claim that he reveals wisdom only to the τέλειοι (1 Cor 2), and his own contempt for worldly wisdom (“Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . For God’s foolishness is wiser than people” [1 Cor 1:18–25]), the Gospel of Truth itself goes on to express contempt for worldly wisdom, blended

¹⁸ Luke relates that after Satan entered into Judas Iscariot (22:3), Jesus confronted the chief priests, police, and elders who came to arrest him as agents of “the power of darkness” (22:53). In John, Jesus signals Judas’s approach as the approach of “the ruler of this world,” the evil one, in person (14:30).

¹⁹ Note here the thematic similarity to the story told in Hypostasis of the Archons, which explains how the higher powers transform the cosmic archons’ malevolent attack on Adam into an act of divine beneficence. See Pagels, “Exegesis and Exposition,” 268–77.

with a further allusion to Matt 11:25, in which Jesus praises the Father for hiding his mysteries from “the wise and the learned” and revealing them instead to the little ones (“I praise you, Father . . . because you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and have revealed them to babes” [ὄτι ἔκρυψας ταῦτα ἀπὸ σοφῶν καὶ συνετῶν καὶ ἀπεκάλυψας αὐτὰ νηπίοις]). According to the Gospel of Truth,

There came men wise in their own minds, testing him. But he confounded them, because they were foolish. They hated him because they were not truly wise. After all these there came the little children also, those to whom the knowledge of the Father belong.

ἀγεί ψαράει ἡῖσι ἡσοφοσ ἡεῖρηί εἰ ποῦρητ οὔαετογ εὔπιραζε ἡἡαϗ ἡἡαϗ
 δε νεϗϗπιο ἡἡαϗ δε νεῖἡἡετῶρογετ νε δῡμεστοϗ δε νεῖἡἡἡεῖρητ εν νε
 ἡἡἡἡε ἡἡἡἡα νεει τἡροϗ ἀγεί ψαράι ἡῖσι ἡκεκοῖ ῶἡἡ νεει ετε πῶοϗ πε
 πῶαῖνε ἡἡῶτ. (Gos. Truth 19.21–29)

Having stated that worldly wisdom cannot convey knowledge of God, the Gospel of Truth takes up a theme that Paul articulates in 1 Cor 8–13 and in his letter to the Romans to show what true γνῶσις is. Paul explains that knowing the Father is a matter of loving him, and of reciprocal relationship: “If one loves God, he is known by him” (εἰ δέ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἔγνωσται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ [1 Cor 8:3]); “then I shall know, even as I am known” (τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην [1 Cor 13:12]). Furthermore, as Paul hinted in both 1 Corinthians and Romans, that relationship, begun in primordial time, is completed only in eternity: “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, (was) decreed before the ages, for our glory” (1 Cor 2:7); “Those whom he foreknew (οὓς δὲ προώρπισεν) . . . he called . . . (and those whom he called) he also glorified” (τούτους καὶ ἐδόξασεν [Rom 8:30]). Accordingly, the Gospel of Truth declares of those who come to know the Father that “they knew, they were known; they were glorified, they glorified” (19.32–33), and that “those whose name he foreknew were called at the end” (νεει ἡἡαϗῖψ ψαῖῖ ἡῖσαῖνε ἡἡοῖρεν δῶἡἡ ἀῖμοῖτε ἀραῖ [21.27]).

After explaining how the Father foreknew those who love him, the Gospel of Truth introduces a second striking image—or series of images—of the cross as a place where the Father’s will was published as written text. As is well known, Jesus’s followers often envisioned the cross as a post for publishing official announcements. Besides the Gospel accounts, which say that Pilate’s death sentence was published on the cross, Col 2:14 suggests that what was written on the cross was not Pilate’s sentence against Jesus, but rather God’s “sentence of condemnation against us” (τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον)—the death sentence we deserve for our sins.

The Gospel of Truth, however, rejects what both images imply: the vision of God as divine judge, whose “sentence of condemnation against us” impelled Jesus to come into the world to die for our sins. Instead, it declares that those who belong to the Father do not think of him as harsh or wrathful (42.5–6), but as a loving Father, who sent Jesus to find his lost children and show them the way back home (18.19–21). Consequently, rather than seeing the writing on the cross as a death

sentence—whether Pilate’s or God’s—this sermon transforms the image of what was published on the cross into a positive message that the Father sends through Jesus to reveal to his own who they really are:

There was manifested in their hearts the living book (ζωωμῆ) of the living . . . that (book) which no one was able to take, since it remains for the one who will take it to be slain. . . . For this reason the merciful one, the faithful one, Jesus, was patient in accepting these sufferings until he took that book, since he knows that his death is life for many. Just as there lies hidden in a will (διαθήκη), before it is opened, the fortune of the deceased master of the house, so (it is) with the totality, which lay hidden while the Father of the totality was invisible. . . . For this reason Jesus appeared; he put on that book; he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict (δικταγμα) of the Father on the cross. (Gos. Truth 19.34–20.27)

According to the Gospel of Truth, then, what was published on the cross was the Father’s “book” (ζωωμῆ, βιβλίον [19.35]), the “living book of the living,” which reveals the names of all who belong to the Father, those whom he foreknew;²⁰ it was also, in effect, a “will” (διαθήκη [20.15]) that names family members of the deceased as beneficiaries; and finally, it was the Father’s “edict” (δικταγμα [20.26]). All three images, then—book, will, edict—envision writings inscribed on the cross, now revealed in their hearts, so that the Father’s children may “learn about themselves” and “return to him” (Gos. Truth 21.5–6).

Having revealed the “true gospel” that transcends the κήρυγμα, the sermon breaks into praise, expressing wonder that Jesus descended into the darkness of this world to “publish the Father’s edict” on the cross (20.25–27), while also alluding to Paul’s idea of the perishable clothed in the imperishable (δεῖ γὰρ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσασθαι ἀφθαρσίαν [1 Cor 15:53–54]) to describe Christ’s glorification in eternal life:

O such great teaching! He draws himself down to death, although eternal life clothes him. Having stripped himself of the perishable rags, he put on imperishability, which no one can possibly take away from him.

ⲟⲩ ⲙⲏⲧⲏⲁⲥ ⲛⲥⲄⲱ ⲛⲧⲉⲣⲉⲓⲥⲁⲓⲧ ⲉⲓⲥⲱⲕ ⲙⲏⲙⲁⲓ ⲁⲛⲓⲧⲏ ⲁⲛⲓⲟⲩⲩ ⲉⲣⲉⲓⲱⲛⲉⲛⲉ ⲛⲁⲛⲏⲣⲉ ⲧⲟ
ⲉⲓⲱⲟⲩ ⲉⲁⲓⲓⲱⲟⲩ ⲙⲏⲙⲁⲓ ⲛⲏⲓⲛⲓⲉⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲧⲉⲕⲁⲓⲧ ⲁⲓⲧⲓ ⲉⲓⲱⲟⲩ ⲛⲧⲏⲧⲏⲧⲁⲧⲧⲉⲕⲟ ⲛⲉⲓ ⲉⲧⲉ
ⲙⲏ ⲟⲩⲁⲙ ⲛⲉⲗⲁⲓⲉ ⲁⲓⲟ ⲓⲧⲓⲩⲩ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲓⲩ (Gos. Truth 20.27–34)

It is important to note that the language used in these passages excludes docetism, as recent scholarship has pointed out.²¹ The Gospel of Truth teaches that divine love

²⁰ Einar Thomassen, “Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections on the Gospel of Truth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions* (ed. Søren Giverson, Tage Petersen, and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen; Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2002) 35–45; Wolfson, “Inscribed in the Book of the Living.”

²¹ Tuomas Rasimus, “Johannine Opponents, the Gospel of John and Gnosticism,” in *Nag Hammadi at 70 ans. Qu’avons nous appris?* (ed. Éric Crégheur, Louis Painchaud, and Tuomas Rasimus; Leuven: Peeters, 2019) 211–28; Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) 208–17; Elaine Pagels, “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion:

(ἀγάπη) “made a body” in which the Father’s Word came into the world (ἀγαπήν ἵκοιτο εἰς τὸν κόσμον . . . πηρητὸς ἐρεπίσχεσε ἵκοιτο πῶς ἐμαλλερε ἀβαλ ἕν πτηρῶ [23.30–35]), in which he was persecuted and nailed to a tree (18.22–24), and that he “was patient in accepting these sufferings” (20.11). Here again, suffering and death are no longer seen as punishment atoning for sin but are envisioned simply as the necessary cost of Christ willingly entering into human life, motivated by love. And since Jesus came into the world to “put on that book” (20.24), the Gospel of Truth pictures the Father calling each of his children by name, sending his spirit to run after them, extending a hand to lift each one from the ground, so that they not only could see and hear Jesus, but also could “taste, smell, and touch the beloved Son” (30.16–31). In this way the Father brings back those who were lost to himself, “into the Father, into the Mother, Jesus of the infinite sweetness” (24.6–8).

The Gospel of Truth, then, is about relationship: how, when we come to know ourselves, we simultaneously come to know God. Such relationship, however, involves not intellectual knowledge, but knowledge of the heart. And as the Gospel of Truth suggests, such knowledge embodies the following paradox: first, we must come to know that we cannot comprehend or understand, or “know” God with our intellect, since, as the source of all things, God far transcends our understanding. Yet at the same time, what we *can* know is that we are intimately connected with him, that we are “in him,” or, in words attributed to Paul in Acts 18:28, and cited by followers of Valentinus, that “in him we live and move and have our being.”

Finally, if, as some scholars speculate, the Gospel of Truth derives from a long, poetic homily that is often repetitive, like a musical composition, we may imagine a context for its delivery. Around the time it was written, and perhaps long afterward, someone may have told this story to men and women fasting and staying awake all night in darkness, as they waited to be baptized into Christ’s family on Easter morning, telling them, in effect, that “this is your story, and mine.” For while Irenaeus ridicules heretics for telling stories in myth, this clearly is myth as Plato understood it: a poetic story told to reveal the deeper truth of human experience.²² Thus, after narrating the drama of primordial creation and cosmic redemption, the speaker would go on to say that “each one of us” may experience these events, each of us being a microcosm of the whole, yet connected to each other in unity: “If, then, these things have happened to each one of us, then we must see to it above all that the house will be holy and silent for the unity” (Gos. Truth 25.19–24).

The homilist who delivered the Gospel of Truth’s story would conclude, then, that whether or not we recognize such experiences as our own, this mythical narrative has real consequences. Those who fail to recognize the truth this myth embodies,

Paradigms for the Christian Response to Persecution,” in *The School of Valentinus* (vol. 1 of *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*; ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1980) 262–83.

²² Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker* (trans. G. Naddaf; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

and who lack that sense of intimate connection with the Father and with one another, live in the scenario evoked in the sermon's Nightmare Parable:

... as if they were sunk in sleep and found themselves in disturbing dreams. Either (there is) a place to which they are fleeing, or without strength they come (from) chasing after others, or they are striking blows, or receiving blows themselves, or they have fallen from high places, or they take off in the air though they do not even have wings. Again, sometimes (it is as if) people were murdering them, though no one is even pursuing them, or they themselves are killing their neighbors, for they have been stained with their blood. (Gos. Truth 29.14–25)

Here, the sermon alludes to what it assumes we all recognize: that people who live in ignorance of spiritual connection, whose lives are dominated by a sense of terror and isolation, can, and often do, turn those nightmares into horrific reality. But those who recognize their connection with the Father, with the Mother, and with Jesus, and so with all beings, are impelled by that recognition to act in ways that manifest such connection:

Speak the truth with those who seek it, and knowledge to those who have sinned in their error. Make firm the foot of those who have stumbled; stretch out your hands to those who are ill; feed those who are hungry; give rest to the weary; raise up those who wish to rise; and awaken those who sleep. (Gos. Truth 32.35–33.8)

Could this sermon actually be Paul's secret teaching? Probably not. Some scholars have suggested that the Egyptian teacher Valentinus (ca. 140 CE) may have written the Gospel of Truth, citing similarity with the one poem of his that survives, and with fragments of his homilies, and recalling Irenaeus's comment that it had been "recently composed" by his time (ca. 160 CE).²³ Might the author have received Paul's secret teaching orally, handed down in succession from a disciple named Theudas, who, some claimed, had received it from Paul?²⁴ While theoretically possible, this hypothesis is, of course, not verifiable. A less speculative hypothesis seems more likely: that like nearly all Christians in the second century, whoever wrote the Gospel of Truth was inspired by Paul's epistles and wove ideas found in them, such as God's mystery hidden before the aeons, into his or her exposition of the "gospel about the truth." Whoever wrote it, however, was not trying to impress the hearer with claims to apostolic authority or to a succession of teachers; for while the sermon alludes to many passages from Scripture, weaving them together, it neither mentions Paul nor any other author. Instead, the story is allowed to speak for itself, or not, depending on who reads, preaches, or hears it.

²³ Henri-Charles Puech and Gilles Quispel, "Les écrits gnostiques du Codex Jung," *VC* 8 (1954) 1–55; *Evangelium Veritatis. Codex Jung* (ed. Michel Malinine, Henri-Charles Puech, and Gilles Quispel; Studien aus dem C. G. Jung-Institut 6; Zurich: Rascher, 1956) xiv–xv; W. C. van Unnik, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings* (trans. H. H. Hoskins; SBT 30; London: SCM, 1960) 90–101.

²⁴ Clement, *Strom.* 7.17.

I conclude, then, that the intertextual allusions to Paul's letters, especially 1 Corinthians, found in the Gospel of Truth, suggest that its author sought to explain "the mystery of God" that Paul says that he told to the spiritually mature but not to immature believers in Corinth (1 Cor 2:6–7). I suggest, too, that investigating the reception history of the Pauline letters in treatises such as the Gospel of Truth can yield unexpected benefits for how we read Paul himself. Seeing how previously unknown exegetes interpreted Paul's letters enables us to step back from some of our conventional assumptions about what Paul is saying and to recognize aspects of his writing too often overlooked. For, from patristic times to the present, exegetes who adhere to Irenaeus's insistence that Paul had no secret teaching have dismissed the apostle's emphatic claim that he did; and those focused primarily on dogmatic and ethical themes in his letters often miss the poetic and mythological language at play in sources like the Gospel of Truth.