MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN PAUL

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When I first began working on the topic assigned to me by the editors of this volume, I immediately thought of looking for a way to use some of our esteemed jubilarian’s work as a “segue,” specifically to see if Einar Thomassen’s studies of Valentinian Gnosticism could in any way shed light on the notion of “mystery” in the Pauline writings. I looked first at his article in the Festschrift for Wolf-Peter Funk, “Gos. Philip 67:27–30: Not ‘in a mystery.’” The passage studied reads, “The Lord [did] everything in a mystery…” The phrase “in a mystery” (ἐν μυστηρίῳ) occurs in 1 Cor 2:7. But Thomassen rightly translates the Coptic ϩⲛ̄ⲛⲟⲩⲙⲥⲧⲏⲣⲓⲟⲛ adverbially, equivalent to Greek μυστηριωδῶς; so the possible parallel in 1 Corinthians disappears. And, in fact, there is no obvious use of Paul anywhere in the Gospel of Philip.

On the other hand, the influence of Paul is very prominent in other Valentinian texts. In his important book, The Spiritual Seed, Thomassen cites an example in the Gospel of Truth. The relevant passage occurs in Gos. Truth 18,11–21, which Thomassen translates as follows:

This gospel about the one who was searched for was revealed to those who were perfect through the mercy of the Father: the hidden mystery, Jesus, the Christ. Through him he enlightened those who were in darkness because of oblivion. He enlightened them and showed them a way, and that way was the truth that he taught them.

Thomassen remarks that this passage “makes use of the early Christian ‘Revelation-Schema,’…Christ is God’s mystery, hidden to previous generations, but revealed at the present moment in history.” In a footnote


2 Ibid., 925. Thomassen cites here the translation by Wesley Isenberg in Bentley Layton, ed., Gospel according to Thomas, Gospel according to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes (vol. 1 of Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7; NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 177.

he cites Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7–10; Eph 3:39; Col 1:26, and studies by Rudolf Bultmann, Nils Dahl, and David Hellholm.

Paul’s relationship to Gnosticism has been assessed in various ways by scholars. Bultmann argued that Gnostic motifs had entered Hellenistic Christianity even before Paul, and he argued that Paul was certainly influenced by Gnostic motifs. For example, he argued that Paul interpreted the death of Christ “in the categories of the Gnostic myth, regarding his death as unified with his incarnation and resurrection or exaltation.” Of course Bultmann also argued that Paul’s theology included non-Gnostic or even anti-Gnostic elements.

The anti-Gnostic interpretation of Paul was taken up by two of Bultmann’s students, Walter Schmithals and Ulrich Wilckens. They argued that Paul’s opponents in Corinth were Gnostics, and Paul argued vigorously against their theology. I took up their arguments in my 1968 dissertation, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology,* and argued that Gnosticism was not to be found at all in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence. Instead, the opponents of Paul in Corinth advocated a wisdom mysticism akin to that of Philo of Alexandria. Involved in the discussion between Paul and his opponents is the use of the term “mystery.”

It used to be argued that Paul’s use of the term “mystery” was influenced by the Graeco-Roman mystery cults, a position that is still upheld in some quarters. But that idea was definitively laid to rest with the publication of Raymond Brown’s slim but very important work, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery.”* He finds that the New Testament usage should be interpreted against the background of the concept of “mysteries” in post-exilic biblical writings, especially Daniel; the Pseudepigrapha, especially the Enoch literature; and the Qumran literature. I have adopted

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6 Ibid., 298.