CHAPTER 21

The Apostle of the Heretics?

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“The apostle of the heretics” is how Tertullian refers to Paul in his extensive polemic against Marcion. For the impression was already widespread that Marcion had built his system principally on the letters of Paul. But not only Marcion, also different Gnostic systems, particularly Valentinianism, drew heavily on Paul, so much so that a century ago, in the heyday of the History-of-Religions approach to the NT and the beginning of the quest for pre-Christian Gnosticism, Richard Reitzenstein could refer to Paul as perhaps “the greatest of all the gnostics.” Whereas most of the Jewish believers-in-Jesus probably regarded Paul with suspicion, and his Gentile mission as the stage where things began to go wrong, there were other religious ideologies or systems that found much in Paul amenable to them. Indeed, the issue cannot be sidestepped: that the two responses to Paul, the different ways in which he was received and in which his impact worked out in the second century, may in fact be related. Was “the gnostic Paul” a confirmation that Paul had led emerging Christianity in a direction too far away from its roots in second Temple Judaism, so that his fellow Jewish believers were right to turn their backs on him? Alternatively posed, was the great church’s increasing rejection of the Jewish Christian “sects” a de facto affirmation that if Christianity was going to establish itself as a truly international religion, within the prevailing culture of the Greco-Roman world, it had to become a different kind of religion from Judaism?

In addressing these somewhat disturbing questions, it is appropriate to look first at the ways in which those generally regarded as Gnostics received and used Paul, second at Marcion, and finally at the response of Irenaeus.

1 Since I have enjoyed my earlier interaction with Stan, particularly on his The Paul of Acts, I regret that I have been unable to pursue it further here; but this comes nonetheless with gratitude for his many contributions to NT study and with heartiest congratulations on this auspicious occasion. This essay is drawn from my Christianity in the Making, vol. 3, Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) §§46.5–47.6.

2 Tertullian, Marc. 3.5 (haereticorum apostolus); see also Pseudo-Tertullian, Adv. haer. 23–24.

3 Reitzenstein, Hellenistic Mystery-Religions, 84.
1 The Gnostic Paul

It is an interesting, not to say a somewhat uncomfortable fact, that much in Paul proved so attractive to so many Gnostics. At not a few points, indeed, Paul affirmed views that commended him more to the “heretical” Gnostics than to the “orthodox” Fathers. Indeed, according to Clement of Alexandria, Valentinus's disciples claimed that he had been taught by Theudas, a pupil of Paul (Strom. 7.17), and Paul was even spoken of as “in the form of the Paraclete” (Exc. ex Theod. 23.2). The Nag Hammadi texts confirm that for many of those responsible for the tracts, Paul was simply “the Apostle,” or “the great apostle,” and The Teachings of Silvanus alludes to a statement of Paul (1 Cor. 11:1) “who has become like Christ” (108.30–32). The Nag Hammadi texts include a brief Prayer of the Apostle Paul, “heavily indebted to . . . the Pauline letters,” and a Coptic Apocalypse of Paul.

Not least of significance was the fact that Paul denied that he was dependent on the earlier apostles and Jerusalem leaders for his gospel. His insistence that his gospel came to him by direct revelation from God, “not of human origin nor from a human source” (Gal 1:11–12), would have been more appealing to those who claimed secret revelation from the risen Christ in distinction from the ecclesiastical tradition of the heresiologists. What was so offensive

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4 King writes, “The real attraction of Gnosticism to Christianity was not, then, the figure of Jesus; it was the theology of Paul, which contained ‘the basic outlook of its own piety’” (What Is Gnosticism, 99, quoting Bousset)—an observation much diminished by the Nag Hammadi texts, particularly the Gospel of Thomas.

5 The point is made forcibly by Pagels, Gnostic Paul, 1–12: “Valentinus himself often alludes to Paul . . .; his disciples Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus—no less than Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement—revere Paul and quote him simply as “the apostle” (2). She concludes her opening chapter with the challenge: “If the apostle were so unequivocally anti-gnostic, how could the Gnostics claim him as their great pneumatic teacher?” (10).

6 Lindemann, Paulus, 98.

7 Treat. Res. 45.25–28, echoes Rom 8:17 and Eph 2:6; and 46.25–27 echoes Rom 8:27. Hypost. Archons 86.20, quotes Eph 6:12 and Col 1:13. Exeg. Soul 131.2–13 quotes “Paul, writing to the Corinthians,” cites 1 Cor 5:9–10 and Eph 6:12, and in 134.1–2 echoes 2 Cor 3:6 (NHL, 194, 196). Note also that the Gospel of Philip quotes 1 Cor 15:50 (56.31–34), alludes to 1 Cor 8:1 (77.25–26) and echoes Rom 7:14–19 (83.25–29); and The Dialogue of the Savior also echoes the much-echoed 1 Cor 2:9 (140.1–4) (NHL 144, 155, 158, 252).


9 Not to be confused with the Apocalypse of Paul.

10 Pagels, Gnostic Paul, 102. The typical claim that Jesus gave secret instruction to disciples during his appearances following his resurrection—the Apocryphon of James indicat-