

PAUL IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY: RECEPTION AND PERCEPTION

GHEORGHE RAZMERITA

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

Abstract

Modern and contemporary studies of Paul, such as the Tübingen School and the New Perspective, have advanced different interpretations of Paul and his theology vis-à-vis Jesus, the Jews, the Gentiles, the church, and salvation. All these schools, and especially the New Perspective, have dismissed the Paul that, allegedly, was “poorly” or “wrongly” understood by the early Christian tradition as represented by various early Christian theologians, who, in turn, influenced the Protestant Reformers. But how did the early Christian church understand Paul? How important was Paul for early Christianity? What Pauline theological themes did the Early Christians highlight or use in constructing their theology? To find answers to these questions, this article studies the perception and reception of Paul in early Christian theology, both in heretical and mainstream Christian theologies, with the purpose of reconstructing the image of Paul in this period of the Church. A more integrated understanding of Paul in Early Christian theology does not only enrich historical theology as a discipline, but especially contributes to the current discussions on Paul.

... and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which there are some things that are hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

(2 Pet 3:15–16, NASB)

Keywords: Paul, reception, perception, early Christians, Gnostics, and Marcionites

1. Introduction

Modern critical studies of Paul, such as the Tübingen School, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Jesus Seminar have advanced different interpretations of Paul and his theology on Jesus, the Jews, the Gentiles, the Church, and salvation. Influential theologians from these theological movements have argued that the traditional Christian portrait of Paul must be dismissed on accounts of “poor” or “wrong” understanding of Paul by the early Christian tradition. Recently, the New Perspective movement rejected the Reformation’s understanding that the essence of Pauline theology resides in the Christian concept of justification by faith as opposed to the intertestamental Jewish justification by works.¹ Although the theologians of the New Perspective do not agree on the exact details of Paul’s new theological portrait, they would generally agree that Paul’s revolution did not spring out of his call to justification by faith. Rather, his radicalness resides in something else. N. T. Wright, for instance, thinks that the essence of Paul’s theology was not his individual soteriology, but rather his proclamation of the New Covenant with the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth and an invitation to all, Jews and non-Jews, to sit at the covenant table, in the new community of humanity, the church. Thus, as the New Perspective alleges, the Paul of the justification by faith was an interpretation of early Christianity that developed and culminated in Augustine’s individual soteriology.

This situation raises again several basic questions. How did the early Christians receive and understand Paul? How important was Paul for the

¹ Although these ideas were already present in the 19th century. For instance, Matthew Arnold thought that Paul can be understood only “with the sort of critical tact which the study of the human mind and its history ... without preconceived theories to which we want to make his thoughts fit themselves. It is evident that the English translation of the Epistle to the Romans has been made by men with their heads full of the current doctrines of election and justification we have been noticing; and it has thereby received such a bias, of which a strong example is the use of the word atonement in the eleventh verse of the fifth chapter, — that perhaps it is almost impossible for any one who reads the English translation only, to take into his mind Paul’s thought without a colouring from the current doctrines” (Matthew Arnold, *St. Paul & Protestantism: With an Essay on Puritanism & the Church of England; And, Last Essays on Church & Religion* [New York: Macmillan, 1883], 240).

early Christianity? What impact did the Pauline theology have upon the formation of early Christian theology? What implications does that understanding have for the studies of the origins of Christianity? To find answers to these questions, this article studies the perception and reception of Paul in early Christian theology, such as the apostolic fathers, in heretical movements of the second century, and among major theologians of the second and third century such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. A more integrated understanding of Paul in early Christian theology does not only enrich historical theology as a discipline, but especially contributes to the current discussions on Paul.

Ever since the angle of Pauline research initiated by Baur, a wealth of literature has been published on a large variety of subjects. Given the limited scope of this research, only several works are mentioned, directly related to the current study. In his chapter, "Understanding Paul and His Letters during the Past Twenty Centuries, with Particular Attention to His Letter to the Christians at Rome,"² Richard N. Longenecker explores the understanding various theologians during early church history had of Pauline writings, but especially of Paul's letter to the Romans.³ Paul has been studied extensively and profoundly in old and recent theology. However, the study of Paul in the early church is less complete.⁴

2. Paul in Apostolic Writings

Historical theologians define "apostolic fathers" as the church theologians

² Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 267–380. Richard Longenecker is professor emeritus of New Testament at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto.

³ Longenecker, *Paul*, 268–300.

⁴ Perhaps several additional works relevant to the current study could be mentioned here such as Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); William Mitchell Ramsay, *Pauline and Other Studies in Early Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Paul the Apostle* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Peter Richardson and David M. Granskou, eds., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity: Paul and the Gospels*, vol. 1 of *Studies in Christianity and Judaism* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986); Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture: The Apostle and His Critics through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Kevin L. Hughes, *Constructing Antichrist: Paul, Biblical Commentary, and the Development of Doctrine in the Early Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); David R. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

who lived and wrote between the end of the first and the middle of the second centuries. As these writers have either encountered the apostles themselves or lived within the next one or two generations after the apostles,⁵ their works are essential for the understanding of the early historical, ecclesiastical, and theological developments in Christianity. Among the apostolic fathers, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna dominate the horizon of the period. Other pieces of literature of the time such as *Didache*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Barnabas* are considered part of the group, although these works do not have known authors and do not have relevant information on Paul.⁶ This section studies the reception and perception of Paul in Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

Writing a few decades after the death of Paul, these apostolic fathers addressed approximately the same churches Paul founded and/or wrote to. For this reason, given the similarity in the socio-geographic (same regions/churches), temporal contexts (close timeframe), and occasion (persecution, faithfulness, local problems), it is rather expected that the apostolic fathers assumed that their audiences knew Paul, his writings, his style, and theology. Therefore, the apostolic fathers did not spend time on introducing Paul; rather, they used his style and reputation to promote their own ideas and theology.

2.1 Clement of Rome

Dated by most scholars at approximately 96 AD, the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (or *1 Clement* (*1 Clem*))⁷ is the only uncontroversial book attributed

⁵ For more discussion on the origin and development of the term “apostolic fathers,” see Joseph B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1890), 1:3. See also, David Lincicum, “The Paratextual Invention of the Term ‘Apostolic Fathers,’” *JTS* 66 (April 2015): 139–48.

⁶ See, e.g., Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite, eds., *Apostolic Fathers and Paul* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). In this book, Clayton N. Jefford, in his article “Missing Pauline Tradition in the Apostolic Fathers? *Didache*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Papias*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the *Epistle of Diognetus*” (pp. 41–60) concludes that Paul is not overwhelmingly evident in the writings mentioned in the title of his chapter. In another chapter of the same book, Paul Foster, “The Absence of Paul in *2 Clement*” (pp. 61–78), struggles with the uncertainty whether Paul is known to the author of the *2 Clement*.

⁷ The references to the apostolic fathers and Irenaeus in this article are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1 of *The Apostolic Fathers*,

to Clement of Rome (35–99 AD). Clare K. Rothschild concludes that *1 Clement* “relies on 1 Corinthians as both substructure and warrant,” although “Clement never descends to slavish copying; the two letters certainly possess important differences.”⁸ Then, Rothschild explains the two-fold way 1 Corinthians determines *1 Clement*. On the one hand, *1 Clement* “relies on structural elements of 1 Corinthians, including its epistolary form and rhetorical species, its prescript and postscript, and its occasion, the outbreak of a faction.”⁹ On the other hand, Clement’s epistle “echoes seminal content of Paul’s first letter to Corinth, citing or alluding to it, including one allusion to the letter *qua* letter.”¹⁰

However, Clement seems to go beyond Paul’s 1 Corinthians. For instance, in his epistle, Clement highlights the perennial problem of the Corinthians, divisions, addressed by Paul himself in his epistle to them (*1 Clem* 47). But in tackling the Corinthian factionalism of his days, Clement uses other Pauline texts as well, such as Ephesians and Romans: “Why are there strifes, and tumults, and divisions, and schisms, and wars among you? Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ? [Ephesians 4:4–6] Why do we divide and tear in pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own body, and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that we are members one of another? [Romans 12:5]” (*1 Clem* 46).

Several points related to Paul emerge from *1 Clement*. First, Clements exhibits a special appreciation for Paul’s personal reputation. Himself bishop of the church in Rome, Clement paints a heroic Paul who suffered persecution. Paul, in Clement’s perception “obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned” and eventually suffered martyrdom and left for “the holy place” (*1*

Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature, 1885). Henceforth, this section will use parenthetical references to the corresponding citations.

⁸ Clare K. Rothschild, “The Reception of Paul in 1 Clement,” in *Apostolic Fathers and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 102.

⁹ Rothschild, “Reception of Paul,” 102.

¹⁰ Rothschild, “Reception of Paul,” 102. Following a serious exegetical work on *1 Clement* and on Polycarp’s epistle to the Philippians, Paul Hartog, “The Implications of Paul as Epistolary Author and Church Planter in 1 Clement and Polycarp’s Philippians,” in *Apostolic Fathers and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 20–40, concludes that Paul is definitively well remembered in the works of both Clement and Polycarp.

Clem 5). Later in his epistle, Clement acknowledges Paul with the reverential address “the blessed Apostle Paul” (*1 Clem* 47).

Second, Clement’s Paul is the divinely-inspired preacher who preaches “both in the east and west” of the Roman Empire, teaching “righteousness to the whole world” (*1 Clem* 5). To the Corinthians, according to Clement, Paul wrote “under the inspiration of the Spirit” “at the time when the gospel first began to be preached” (*1 Clem* 47). Third, Clement does not perceive any division in the early Church, between Peter and Paul, referring to both Peter and Paul as “the greatest and most righteous pillars” and “illustrious apostles,” who “have been persecuted and put to death” (*1 Clem* 5).

Fourth, echoing Paul’s centrality of justification by faith, Clement calls the church to experience God’s salvation or justification. To receive God’s blessing, Clement explains to the Corinthians, “let us think over the things which have taken place from the beginning. For what reason was our father Abraham blessed? Was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith?” (*1 Clem* 31). In the same way as the offspring of Abraham “were highly honoured, and made great, not for their own sake, or for their own works, or for the righteousness which they wrought, but through the operation of His will,” Clement explains, so “we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (*1 Clem* 32).

Clement does not discard the importance of good works. “We see, then, how all righteous men have been adorned with good works, and how the Lord Himself, adorning Himself with His works, rejoiced. Having therefore such an example, let us without delay accede to His will, and let us work the work of righteousness with our whole strength” (*1 Clem* 33). However, Clement sets the good works in the framework of grace: “Let us attend to what is good, pleasing, and acceptable in the sight of Him who formed us. Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world” (*1 Clem* 7).

2.2 Ignatius of Antioch

Sometime between 110 and 117 AD, Ignatius of Antioch (35–107 AD), the second bishop of Antioch after Peter, was joyously making his way to martyrdom in Rome. During the journey, he addressed epistles to the

churches/leaders in seven cities of the empire¹¹ where Paul had ministered earlier on. As expected, Paul's marked influence on Ignatius is evident.¹²

Not only is Ignatius's language, and even theological concepts, steeped in Pauline epistolary style and theological themes, but Ignatius makes two direct references to Paul in his letters to two churches Paul himself had written to, Ephesus and Rome. In a passage echoing Paul's contrasting style (1 Cor 4:10), Ignatius uses reverent terms to remind the Ephesians of their knowledge of the Gospel received from Paul himself: "You are initiated into the mysteries of the Gospel with Paul, the holy, the martyred, the deservedly most happy, at whose feet may I be found, when I shall attain to God; who in all his Epistles makes mention of you in Christ Jesus" (*Eph* 12).

To the Romans, Ignatius wrote to beg them not to prevent his martyrdom so as to allow him to become "a disciple of Christ" and "a sacrifice" (*Rom* 4). Then, Ignatius explains to the Romans that he does not "as Peter and Paul, issue commandments" to them, because they "were apostles" while he was "but a condemned man" (*Rom* 4; *Trall* 2-3). These statements reveal Ignatius's high regard for Paul, but also his understanding of the equal status and collaboration of Paul and Peter.

Ignatius's difference from Pauline theology comes in his ecclesiology. While displaying respect for apostolic authority, Ignatius sets this concept in the framework of his three-tier church structure: bishop-presbyter-deacon. In his letters to the Magnesians and the Trallians, he described the bishop presiding "in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles" (*Mag* 6; *Trall* 2-3). The apostles, in turn, are the source of ecclesiastical authority together with Jesus Christ: "Study, therefore, to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles" (*Mag* 13). Elsewhere, Ignatius explains: "It becomes every one of you, and especially the presbyters, to refresh the bishop, to the honour of the Father, of Jesus Christ, and of the apostles" (*Trall* 12).

Ignatius also discusses the subject of law and the gospel, of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Jews and the

¹¹ Eusebius, *Church History* 3.36 (NPNF 2:2-4).

¹² For examples of comparative studies in Paul and Ignatius, see Harry O. Maier, "Paul, Ignatius and the Thirdspace: A Socio-Geographic Exploration," in *Apostolic Fathers and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 162-80; Todd D. Still, "Ignatius and Paul on Suffering and Death: A Short Comparative Study," in *Apostolic Fathers and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 136-42; David J. Downs, "The Pauline Concept of Union with Christ in Ignatius of Antioch," in *Apostolic Fathers and Paul*, ed. Todd D. Still and David E. Wilhite (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 143-61.

Gentiles. In his letter to the Philadelphians, he explains that the “priests indeed are good, but the High Priest is better; to whom the holy of holies has been committed, and who alone has been trusted with the secrets of God. He is the door of the Father, by which enter Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the prophets, and the apostles, and the Church. All these have for their object the attaining to the unity of God. But the Gospel possesses something transcendent [above the former dispensation], viz., the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and resurrection. For the beloved prophets announced Him, but the Gospel is the perfection of immortality. All these things are good together, if you believe in love” (*Philad* 9).

2.3 Polycarp of Smyrna

Known as the bishop of the Church in Smyrna who had met Apostle John in person,¹³ Polycarp (c. 69–155 AD) was considered the embodiment of morality and faithfulness during the first half of the second century. Polycarp’s only existing letter, *Epistle to the Philippians* (Pol. *Phil*), is taken as authentic by most scholars. It was written and/or published sometime between 130–155 AD,¹⁴ and exhibits ample knowledge of Paul. As Paul Hartog states: “Questions about a *Corpus Paulinum* may remain ‘superfluous’, but clearly Paul and his letters carry religious authority in the Pol. *Phil*.”¹⁵ The “strong roots” of the faith of the church in Philippi, of which Polycarp writes in the opening of his letter, stretch back “in days long gone by” (Pol. *Phil* 2). Evidently, those were the days of the “blessed and glorified Paul” (Pol. *Phil* 3).¹⁶ Though now Polycarp is writing at the request of the Philippians, he acknowledges that “neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of” (Pol. *Phil* 3)¹⁷ that glorified Paul, one of the apostles (Pol. *Phil* 9).¹⁸

¹³ See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.3.4; Tertullian, *Praescr.*, 32. Henceforth, Tertullian’s references are taken from ANF 3.

¹⁴ For more discussion on Polycarp’s letter, see Paul Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–50. For aspects related to the unity of the letter, see Percy N. Harrison, *Polycarp’s Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 15–17.

¹⁵ Hartog, Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians, 67.

¹⁶ See also Polycarp, *Philippians*, 11.

¹⁷ See also Pol. *Phil* 11.

¹⁸ In the same passage, Polycarp exhorts the Philippians “to exercise all patience” seen “in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles.”

According to Polycarp, Paul is known to the Philippians, both in person and in writing, because “[h]e when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter” (Pol. *Phil* 3). Evoking Paul’s concepts and terms, Polycarp notes that Paul’s letter contains “the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbour, is the mother of us all” (Pol. *Phil* 3).

However, in identifying faith as the very core of Christian theology, Polycarp builds it upon a united Petrine-Pauline Christological-soteriological foundation, showing that the two apostles were not perceived to be in conflict. Already in his first chapter, Polycarp uses a series of Petrine discourse elements and texts, such as Acts 2:24; 4:10 and 1 Pet 1:3, 8, 21; 3:18 to collage the portrait of the “Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the bands of the grave. In whom, though now you see Him not, you believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (Pol. *Phil* 2). Polycarp concludes the same sentence with a Pauline text, taken from Eph 2:8–9: “which joy many desire to enter, knowing that by grace you are saved, not of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ” (Pol. *Phil* 2).

After laying his theological core—salvation by faith, not by works—upon the substitutionary death and the resurrection of Christ, Polycarp uses 1 Pet 3:9 to connect Christ’s resurrection with sanctification: “But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but being mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching” (Pol. *Phil* 2).

In an allusion to Rom 13:8–10, Polycarp relates the law and grace with faith, hope and love: “For if any one be inwardly possessed of these graces [faith, hope, love], he has fulfilled the command of righteousness, since he that has love is far from all sin” (Pol. *Phil* 3). Likewise, Polycarp sees a harmonious relationship between the NT and the OT. “Let us then serve Him in fear, and with all reverence,” Polycarp concludes, “even as He Himself has commanded us, and as the apostles who preached the Gospel unto us, and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord” (Pol. *Phil* 3). Ultimately, the bishop of Smyrna could conclude with Paul’s Eph 2:20 that the church is built upon “the foundation of the apostles and the

prophets” and thus to understand Jesus and Paul requires the knowledge of the prophets.

3. The Heretics’ Claim on Paul

The second century opened with a conflict between the apostolic fathers and those they deemed as “heretics.” Ignatius warned against judaizers (Ignatius, *Mag* 10; *Philad* 6), schismatics (Ignatius, *Philad* 3), and both him and Polycarp warned against Docetists (Ignatius, *Trall* 10, *Smyrn* 2–7; Pol. *Phil* 7). Throughout the century, heresies developed and diversified into two polarized groups, the Ebionites and the Gnostics. The Ebionites were generally Judaism-leaning Christian heretics who taught that the OT God created the world, Jesus is His Messiah, although on adoptionist terms, and that the truth is found in the Gospel of Matthew, rejecting the writings of Paul (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.26.2).

At the other end of the heretical spectrum, considered by defendants of Christian orthodoxy such as Irenaeus and Tertullian as the most dangerous, was Gnosticism and Marcionism.¹⁹ It is with the representatives of these groups that the most fierce conflict over Paul ensued: while the Orthodox Christians were confident that Paul was the apostle of Christianity, the Gnostics/Marcionites claimed him to be their apostle too.²⁰ The following sections probe into the reasons and ways the Gnostics and the Marcionites claimed Paul and his theology as their foundation.

3.1 Gnosticism

Till the middle of the 20th century, Gnosticism was known mostly from the writings of their Orthodox Christian opponents, the leading bishops and theologians of the time, such as Tertullian of Carthage and Irenaeus of Lion.

¹⁹ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses*, traces Gnosticism from Simon the Magician of Samaria (1.23.1–4) and Menander of Samaria (1.23.5.), to Saturnius of Antioch/Daphne (1.24.1–2.) and Basilides of Alexandria (1.24.3–7.) to Carpocrates (1.25.1–6.), to Valentinus (1.1.1–3.), Cerdon (1.27.1.) and Marcion (1.23.2–4.).

²⁰ See, e.g. James D. G. Dunn, “The Apostle of the Heretics: Paul, Valentinus, and Marcion,” in *Paul and Gnosis*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Yoon (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 108. The Valentinians claimed a direct line of apostolic succession, as Valentinus was the disciple of Theuda, allegedly a disciple of Paul. Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters I* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), 5–7, examines the Gnostics’ claim to Paul through the prism of the Gnostic idea that Paul’s epistles could be interpreted both in the Orthodox or Gnostic ways.

The Nag Hammadi library, discovered in 1945, reveals that these critics of the Gnostics, generally, understood and described the Gnostics accurately.²¹ A syncretistic mixture, the so-called Christian Gnostics, developed an alternative and competitive worldview and soteriology to the classic Christianity by re-interpreting some Judeo-Christian concepts in terms closer to Platonic/Neo-Platonic philosophy and Zoroastrism.

According to Irenaeus, Gnosticism posited an antagonism between the Father, the spiritual god living out his life in the Pleroma and the Demiurge, the inferior god who created the material universe (*Adv. haer.* 1.23.1–4). The Demiurge himself was created by Achamoth’s fear, perplexity and misjudgment (*Adv. haer.* 1.5.1–2).²² As the OT has a distinct description of God the Creator, the Gnostics identified Him with the Demiurge and rejected the OT, re-interpreted it (*Adv. haer.* 1.19.1; 1.20.1), or used some of its names and concepts to populate its sophisticated cosmos, material, or spirituality. Consequently, the Gnostics developed a docetic Christology, teaching that Christ has come not from the Demiurge, but from the Father and from the spiritual Pleroma, and, therefore, was above matter. Salvation or “redemption” in Gnosticism is by attaining to “perfect knowledge” that leads to regeneration “into that power which is above all” and re-admission into the

²¹ In view of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, some scholars launched the hypothesis that early Christianity represented a diversity of competing Christian views and communities, with the Gnostic-like views widely spread in Christianity. See, e.g., Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); Marvin W. Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009); Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to Gnosticism: Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009). Accordingly, some of these scholars, sought to construct a neutral—if not an altogether positive—view on the Gnostics. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, 2nd ed. (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1996) proposed that what contemporary Christianity regards as heresy, was, in fact, simply another or even a more original form of Christianity, later suppressed with the help of Rome. For an evaluation of the “Bauer Hypothesis,” see, e.g., Paul A. Hartog, ed., *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015). In this book, a group of scholars refuted the Bauer hypothesis by noting, for instance, that Irenaeus’s description of Gnosticism is accurate and that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 did not challenge that description.

²² Following this passage, Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.5.2–6, continues to explain that the Demiurge fashioned the universe ignorantly, in an emanationist fashion, in the image of the Pleroma, while remaining ignorant of both the existence of the universe and the existence of his mother and of the Pleroma.

Pleroma and “into the depths of Bythus” (*Adv. haer.* 1.21.2). For the Gnostics, the NT writers who could be associated with these ideas were apostle Paul, and for some, apostle John. While Marcion went as far as forming his own Pauline NT canon, generally, the Gnostics accepted most of Paul’s epistles, but rejected 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Philemon, which include rejections of Gnostic teachings.²³

The claim on Paul as their apostle was vital for the so-called Christian Gnosticism and Marcionism. As Longenecker puts it, the Gnostics “thought of themselves as followers of Paul, who was widely acclaimed among early Christians (both ‘mainstream’ and ‘sectarian’) as ‘The Divine Apostle’ – with the Gnostic believers in Jesus also speaking of him as ‘The Gnostic Initiate and Teacher Par Excellence.’”²⁴

The Nag Hammadi library contains at least two documents attributed by Gnostics to Paul. In the first document, *The Prayer of the Apostle Paul*,²⁵ dated between the second half of the second century and the end of the third century, the supposed “Paul” starts his prayer by asking God to grant him mercy, redemption, generation (birth), and the ineffable perfection. The basis for these requests is the author’s awareness of belonging to God, having “come forth from” God.²⁶

Then, the praying person asks for the “gifts” in the name of Jesus Christ, “exalted above every name, [the Lord] of Lords, the King of the Ages,” using Pauline language from Phil 2:9, 1 Tim 1:17 and 6:15. The author of the prayer also invokes the “Evangelist” in asking for “authority,” claiming apostolic authority, “healing of the body,” redemption of the “eternal light soul,” and the revelation of “the First-born of the Pleroma of grace” to be revealed to his mind. These invocations border on the magic, while concepts such as the “First-born of Pleroma” are clearly Valentinian.²⁷

The third part of the prayer contains the most direct allusions to Paul: “Grant what no angel eye has [seen] and no archon ear (has) heard and what

²³ Longenecker, Paul: Apostle of Liberty, 270–71.

²⁴ Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 270.

²⁵ See James Robinson, “The Prayer of the Apostle Paul,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume*, trans. Dieter Mueller (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 27–29.

²⁶ Robinson, “Prayer of the Apostle Paul,” 27.

²⁷ Dieter Mueller, “Introduction,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume*, trans. Dieter Mueller (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 27–28. See also Madeleine Scopello, “Introduction,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 15–17. For more background on Valentinian Gnosticism, see below.

has not entered into the human heart which came to be angelic and (modelled) after the image of the psychic God when it was formed in the beginning, since I have faith and hope. And place upon me your beloved, elect, and blessed greatness, the Firstborn, the First-begotten, and the [wonderful] mystery of your house."²⁸

The reference to Paul's 1 Cor 2:8–9 is evident; however, while in this passage Paul refers to the fulfillment of the promise of Isa 64:4 in the gospel preached in the world by the apostles, the Gnostic prayer applies this Pauline text to the Gnostic transcendent cosmology.²⁹ Where Isaiah and Paul simply say "no eye" and "no ear," the Gnostics re-interpret the text to say that the angels' eyes and ears have not seen or heard or that the human heart became angelic.³⁰ Therefore, the prayer requests of the Gnostic Paul have nothing to do with the biblical Paul and the worldview he describes in his canonical letters. Rather, those requests are a heavy distortion of some of his canonical expressions and concepts. Paul's Gnostic prayer surges out of a Valentinian spirit,³¹ attempting to harness Paul's fame, erudition, and authority.

The other Gnostic work attributed to Paul is *The Apocalypse of Paul*,³² a second-century Gnostic apocalyptic writing added to an entire series of apocalyptic documents. George W. MacRae and William R. Murdock briefly summarize Paul's *Apocalypse*:

Paul begins with a narrative of Paul's encounter with a small child on the "mountain of Jericho" en route to Jerusalem. The child, who is Paul's guiding spirit or interpreting angel, sometimes called the Holy spirit in

²⁸ Mueller, "Introduction," 15–17.

²⁹ See also, Scopello, "Introduction," 16–17.

³⁰ Scopello, "Introduction," 16–17.

³¹ Mueller, "Introduction," 27.

³² George W. MacRae and William R. Murdock, eds., "The Apocalypse of Paul," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, trans. Dieter Mueller (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) 257–59. See also, Madeleine Scopello and Marvin W. Mayer, eds., "The Revelation of Apostle Paul," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin W. Mayer (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 317–20. Other versions of Paul's journey to the heavens circulated under a similar writing, *The Vision of Paul*, although the details are different, the idea behind that work was to exploit Paul's lack of a direct description of what he had seen in the Paradise, according to 2 Cor 12:2–4. This Gnostic *Apocalypse of Paul* should be distinguished from the later (arguably fourth century) *Apocalypse of Paul*. For the latter *Apocalypse*, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 288–96.

the text, takes him to the heavens to meet his fellow apostles, who accompany him during his further ascent. In the fourth heaven Paul witnesses the judgment of souls; in the fifth, angels driving souls to judgment. The sixth heaven is illuminated by a light from above, and in the seventh Paul meets an old man on a shining throne who threatens to block his further ascent. He continues, however, into the Ogdoad and the ninth and tenth heavens, and when he reaches the last he has been transformed so that he greets, no longer his fellow-apostles, but his fellow-spirits.³³

The Apocalypse of Paul alludes to the experience and teachings of Paul, especially in (1) Gal 1:11–17, wherein he presents himself as being called from his mother's womb to reveal Christ; (2) Gal 2:1–2, wherein Paul talks about his ascension to Jerusalem to meet the apostles; (3) Eph 1:18–22, wherein Paul prays for his listeners' eyes to open to see Christ's power over the dominions and authorities; and (4) 2 Cor 12:2–4, wherein Paul describes himself as being taken to the third heaven. However, the Gnostic *Apocalypse* gives the experience of Paul a Gnostic twist. Thus, whereas in Gal 2 Paul talks about the ascent to Jerusalem to meet the apostles, in the *Apocalypse* the apostle ascends to the eighth heaven to meet them and to the tenth heaven to meet the spirits. While in 2 Cor 12 Paul writes about being taken to the third heaven or Paradise, in the *Apocalypse* his journey only starts in the third heaven and goes on to reach the tenth heaven. In addition, while in Eph 1, the Apostle distinguishes Christ as God above any earthly and celestial powers, the Gnostic text attributes the dominions and powers to the spheres that comprise the Pleroma. Besides the grim depictions of the punishment of the souls of the wicked and the blissful fate reserved for the soul of the righteous, the Gnostic writing heavily emphasizes the concept of the transmigration of the soul and the Gnostic way of salvation by special knowledge and symbols.³⁴

As the two books studied above seem Valentinian, it would be appropriate to have a look at the Valentinian view of Paul. In Longenecker's view, the Valentinians, "probably the most significant" of the Gnostic groups and the "'closest' to the 'catholic' Christianity ... claimed succession to the apostle Paul through Theudas, who was believed to have been both a disciple of Paul and the instructor of their teacher Valentinus."³⁵

³³ MacRae and Murdock, "Apocalypse of Paul," 256.

³⁴ See also Scopello and Mayer, "The Revelation of Apostle Paul," 313–16.

³⁵ Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 270. On the same page he writes: "During the second and third centuries of Christian history there also appeared a number of

Valentinus (c. 100–c. 160 AD), who had studied Middle Platonism in Alexandria, became so eloquent and popular in the church of Rome that, around 140 AD, he expected to be elected bishop of the capital of the Roman Empire. However, according to Tertullian, when someone else was elected, Valentinus focused on developing his own, “Platonic,” school.³⁶ As only a few fragments of Valentinus’ writings have been preserved, various other sources help reconstruct this school of “Christian” thought.³⁷ According to Longenecker, “the primary feature in a Valentinian understanding of Paul’s teaching was the insistence that the apostle divided all of humanity into two groups of people: (1) the psychics, who are bound to the demiurgic god of the Old Testament, to the Mosaic law, and thus to spiritual death; and (2) the pneumatics, who have been reborn by the true God through the work of Christ to a new law and a true knowledge.”³⁸

3.2 Marcion of Sinope

The son of a bishop, Marcion of Sinope/Pontus (c. 85–c. 160 AD), joined the Church in Rome in the 130s, only to return to Asia Minor in 144 AD after the Church in the eternal city excommunicated him for heretical ideas. Apparently, his own father had rejected his ideas too and Marcion asserted that he was the heir of the Apostle Paul’s teaching and mission to proclaim to the world the essence of Christianity. Marcion’s Christianity was found in a canon that comprised the *Evangelikon*, the Gospel of Luke, and the *Apostolikon*, as well as 10 epistles of Paul: “Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans (Ephesians?), Colossians, Philippians,

groups of people professing to be ‘Christ followers’ who produced a variety of teachings and writings that were viewed by more mainstream Christians as ‘Gnostic’ or ‘heretical’ in their interpretations of Paul. Some of the better known of these groups were the ‘Sethians,’ the ‘Ophites’ or ‘Nassenes,’ the ‘Simonians,’ the ‘Basilidians,’ the ‘Marcosians,’ the ‘Narcellians,’ the ‘Carpocratians,’ and the ‘Cerinthians.’”

³⁶ Tertullian, *Adv. Val.* 4. See also Tertullian, *Praescr.* 7, 30.

³⁷ Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 270, mentions 3 major sources for the study of Valentinus: “(1) from certain extant fragments of their writings, (2) from various refutations of their views by Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses*, by Hippolytus in his *Refutationes Omnium Haeresium*, by Tertullian in his *Adversus Valentinianos* (*Adv. Val.*), by Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata* 7 and his *Excepta et Theodoto*, and by Origen in the many anti-Valentinian comments throughout his commentaries and homilies on Paul’s letters, and (3) from certain Nag Hammadi texts that are generally considered today to be Valentinian in their contents, particularly the so-called *Gospel of Truth*.”

³⁸ Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 271.

and Philemon.³⁹ Tertullian believed that Marcion declined 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus because they “treat ... ecclesiastical discipline,” which Marcion rejects because his supreme god does execute judgment (*Adv. Marc.* 5.21).

However, according to Irenaeus and Tertullian, even the *Evangelikon* and the *Apostolikon* were seriously revised and redacted by Marcion to suit his theology (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.1, 2, 6, 7; 5.16, 5:21).⁴⁰ Irenaeus notes that Marcion “dismembered the Epistles of Paul, removing all that is said by the apostle respecting that God who made the world, to the effect that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also those passages from the prophetic writings which the apostle quotes, in order to teach us that they announced beforehand the coming of the Lord” (*Adv. haer.* 1.27.2).

Although Marcion’s theology can be reconstructed only from his Orthodox critics, the discussion on Gnosticism above generates confidence that these critics described Marcion accurately. Several elemental concepts constitute his theology. First, a contrasting reading of the OT and NT made him conclude that the God of the OT was not the same as the God of the NT, the Father of Jesus Christ. According to Tertullian, one of the reasons Marcion created his ditheism was reading Isa 45:7 (“I [God] create evil”) as pointing to God as the originator of evil (*Adv. Marc.* 1.3). Marcion viewed the God of the OT as “judicial, harsh, mighty in war” and the God of the NT as the Creator, “mild, placid, and simply good and excellent” (*Adv. Marc.* 1.6; 5.4).

According to Tertullian, “Marcion’s special and principal work is the separation of the law and the gospel.... Marcion’s *Antitheses* ... which aim at committing the gospel to a variance with the law, in order [to] contend for a diversity of gods also” (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19). A direct consequence of the law-gospel dichotomy, Marcion’s spiritual “god could not have been known” (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19). Marcion insists that it was not him who invented the law-gospel dichotomy; rather, he claims to have recovered this separation from the apostolic times, when Paul rebuked Peter and other apostles for faltering in the gospel (Gal 2) (*Adv. Marc.* 1.20). For this reason, Marcion “holds in derision” the OT (*Adv. Marc.* 5.5) and, referring to Romans 10:2–4, affirms “that the Jews were ignorant of the superior God, since, in opposition to him, they set up their own righteousness—that is, the righteousness of their law—not receiving Christ, the end (or finisher) of the law” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.14).

³⁹ Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty*, 273. See also Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.14.

⁴⁰ In Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.13, Tertullian notes: “But what serious gaps Marcion has made in this epistle especially, by withdrawing whole passages at his will, will be clear from the unmutated text of our own copy.”

Marcion taught a Docetic Christology, preaching that Christ had a “phantom body” (*Adv. Marc.* 3.40),⁴¹ rejected the resurrection of the body (*Adv. Marc.* 5.10), and “wholly prohibits all carnal intercourse to the faithful” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.7). Salvation in Marcionism is for the soul only, not for the body (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1.3; Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.27.2).

4. Paul in the Polemists

The polemists are the early Christian theologians who have confronted various heresies, such as Marcionism and Gnosticism. In their refutation of heretic’s use or interpretation of Paul, the polemists revealed their own understanding of the apostle. This section will summarize the view on Paul of two major polemists, Irenaeus and Tertullian.

4.1 Irenaeus of Lyon

Irenaeus (130–202 AD) wrote his *Adversus haereses* sometime around 180 AD mainly to refute Gnosticism. Already in the preface to his extensive work, Irenaeus states that the heresies are being “brought in” and therefore are not part of a church with a diversity of competing opinions. For this reason, the heretics “falsify the oracles of God,” not only failing to correctly interpret Scripture, but proving “themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation” (*Adv. haer.* 1.1.1).

One of Irenaeus’s main concerns about the Gnostics is that the Gnostics mis-interpret Paul’s texts as well. For instance, the Pauline doxology in Eph 3:21 (“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever,” NIV) is interpreted by the Gnostics as referring to “these Æons” and even in their specific order (*Adv. haer.* 1.3.1). After describing the Gnostic understanding of the Savior as “derived from all the Æons” and being “everything” for the “suffering Æon, when it had been expelled from the Pleroma,” Irenaeus continues:

And they [the Gnostics] state that it was clearly on this account that Paul said, And He Himself is all things [Col 3:11]; and again, All things are to Him, and of Him are all things [Rom 11:36]; and further, In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead [Col 2:9]; and yet again, All things are gathered together by God in Christ [Eph 1:10]. Thus do they interpret these and any like passages to be found in Scripture (*Adv. haer.* 1.3.4).

⁴¹ See also Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.40, 42, 43; 5.5.

Noting that Gnosticism was never included in the OT prophecies, in the teachings of Jesus or in the writings of the apostles (*Adv. haer.* 1.8.1), Irenaeus declares that Christian theology is not based on human speculation or wisdom. Rather, Christian “faith” springs out of three sources: revelation, tradition, and catholicity (*Adv. haer.* 1.10.1–2). Revelation of the true, omnipotent One God (*Adv. haer.* 2.1.1–5) comes from “the apostles themselves, and from the discourses of the Lord ... [and the] utterances of the prophets” (*Adv. haer.* 2.2.5).⁴²

For this reason, proper hermeneutics is imperative, for a theological “system does not spring out of numbers, but numbers from a system” (*Adv. haer.* 2.25.1). The foundation of the correct interpretation is found in Paul himself. This foundation is love, because “knowledge puffs up” (1 Cor 8:1) (*Adv. haer.* 2.26.1). As our epistemology is human, it is limited. Therefore, attaining perfect knowledge is impossible. Some things we do not understand now (*Adv. haer.* 2.28.1–2), some knowledge is simply reserved for God alone. For this reason, we must follow Paul’s advice in 1 Cor 13:13 and seek primarily after faith, hope, and love, thus excluding knowledge from the essential things necessary for salvation, for now we know in part and prophecy in part (1 Cor 13:9) (*Adv. haer.* 2.28.3–7).

Otherwise, if knowledge, nature, and substance are the essential factors for the salvation of the souls, the Savior’s incarnation, righteousness, and faith in Him are superfluous. Irenaeus does not discuss here how we obtain righteousness. However, the context associates it with Christ’s incarnation and faith, although he also insists that the bodies are essential as well, as they are the medium of exercising righteousness (*Adv. haer.* 2.29.2–3). Again, what is important for Irenaeus in approaching God, is love. In discussing Paul’s vision of the third heaven, Irenaeus concludes that it is not important whether Paul was taken into the third heaven in his body or without it. What is important is that he is “permitted even without the body to behold spiritual mysteries which are the operations of God, who made the heavens and the earth, and formed man, and placed him in paradise, so that those should be spectators of them who, like the apostle, have reached a high degree of perfection in the love of God” (*Adv. haer.* 2.29.7).

Perfect knowledge came to the apostles from the power of the Holy Spirit. Under this power, they orally preached the gospel to the entire world, but also committed their knowledge of salvation to written text in the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which present one and the same God,

⁴² The apostle he immediately quotes is Paul and his text from Eph 4:6.

the Creator and Savior (*Adv. haer.* 3.1.1). Irenaeus has trust in the message of the apostles because they did not proclaim a message that the public wanted to hear (*Adv. haer.* 3.5.1–2). The heretics, however, would not accept them as God’s revelation and sources of truth, claiming that God reveals His truth to them directly; but the truths that Basilides, Marcion, Valentinus and others claim to have thus received, are so different and unreliable (*Adv. haer.* 3.2.1–2).

Against the heretics, Irenaeus uses the argument of apostolic succession: “For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to the perfect apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men” (*Adv. haer.* 3.3.1).⁴³

The true knowledge of salvation the gospels proclaimed is knowledge of Jesus the Christ, who was prophesied by the prophets of the old, who were sent by the same God the Creator. With the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel, the world “entered upon a new phase, the Word arranging after a new manner the advent in the flesh, that He might win back to God that human nature which had departed from God; and therefore men were taught to worship God after a new fashion, but not another god, because in truth there is but ‘one God, who justifies the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision by faith’” (Rom 3:30) (*Adv. haer.* 3.10.2).

The teaching of the gospel and of Paul was preached by all the apostles. Peter was always preaching the same God of the OT who now sent Jesus the Christ for our salvation. Therefore, Peter frequently appeals to the OT in his proclamation or decisions (Acts 1:16; 2:37–38; 3:12; 4:2, 8; 24) (*Adv. haer.* 3.12.1–4). Irenaeus notes that

Peter, together with John, preached to them this plain message of glad tidings, that the promise which God made to the fathers had been fulfilled by Jesus; not certainly proclaiming another god, but the Son of God, who also was made man, and suffered; thus leading Israel into knowledge, and through Jesus preaching the resurrection of the dead [Acts 4:2], and showing, that whatever the prophets had proclaimed as to the suffering of Christ, these had God fulfilled (*Adv. haer.* 3.12.3).

⁴³ For more of his argument in favor of apostolic succession and the church as the depository of apostolic truth, see Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.3.1–3; 3.4.1–3; 4.26.1–5; 5.20.

When preaching to Cornelius, a God-fearer, Peter could have preached freely to the Gentiles, that the God of the Jews was indeed one, but the God of the Christians another.... But it is evident from Peter's words that he did indeed still retain the God who was already known to them; but he also bore witness to them that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the Judge of quick and dead, into whom he did also command them to be baptized for the remission of sins; and not this alone, but he witnessed that Jesus was Himself the Son of God, who also, having been anointed with the Holy Spirit, is called Jesus Christ (*Adv. haer.* 3.12.7).

However, Irenaeus also observes that Peter, James, or Paul abrogated circumcision under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Adv. haer.* 3.12.15).

To the Marcionites "who allege that Paul alone knew the truth, and that to him the mystery was manifested by revelation" Irenaeus responded:

One and the same God wrought in Peter for the apostolate of the circumcision, and in himself for the Gentiles [Gal 2:8]. Peter, therefore, was an apostle of that very God whose was also Paul; and Him whom Peter preached as God among those of the circumcision, and likewise the Son of God, did Paul [declare] also among the Gentiles. For our Lord never came to save Paul alone, nor is God so limited in means, that He should have but one apostle who knew the dispensation of His Son (*Adv. haer.* 3.13.1).

After all, in quoting Isa 52:7 in Rom 10:15, Paul "shows clearly that it was not merely one, but there were many who used to preach the truth" (*Adv. haer.* 3.13.1).

According to Irenaeus, Luke was the faithful and helpful co-laborer with Paul and the other apostles, writing down the details of their journeys all the way to Paul's imprisonment in Rome (*Adv. haer.* 3.14.1–2). However, Irenaeus is aware that Luke's Acts of Apostles is being challenged and his Gospel is being redacted by the Marcionists and others. To this, Irenaeus responded with the principle that Luke-Acts is a unit: if someone rejects Acts, should reject the Gospel too. Luke's Gospel records unique and significant details of the life and sacrifice of Jesus (John the Baptist's genealogy, the shepherds in the fields, various unique sayings of Jesus, Zacchaeus, etc.) (*Adv. haer.* 3.14.3). The Marcionists use some of these stories but reject others. But by so doing, Irenaeus notes, they

must either receive the rest of his narrative, or else reject these parts also. For no persons of common sense can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being true, and to set others aside, as if he had not known the truth. And if indeed Marcion's followers reject these, they will then possess no Gospel; for, curtailing that according to Luke, as I have said already, they boast in having the Gospel [in what remains]. But the followers of Valentinus must give up their utterly vain talk; for they have taken from that [Gospel] many occasions for their own speculations, to put an evil interpretation upon what he has well said. If, on the other hand, they feel compelled to receive the remaining portions also, then, by studying the perfect Gospel, and the doctrine of the apostles, they will find it necessary to repent, that they may be saved from the danger (*Adv. haer.* 3.14.4).

The problem of the Gnostics, concludes Irenaeus, is that they, "having been set against the Mosaic legislation, judging it to be dissimilar and contrary to the doctrine of the Gospel, have not applied themselves to investigate the causes of the difference of each covenant.... Ignorance of the Scriptures and of the dispensation of God has brought all these things upon them" (*Adv. haer.* 3.12.12). Since Paul proclaimed Jesus as the Christ based on the OT Scriptures or prophecies,⁴⁴ he cannot be understood as proclaiming a different God or apart from the OT Scriptures (*Adv. haer.* 3.16.3–5).

For Irenaeus, the interpretation of the NT should be done in the light of and in harmony with the OT. It was the patriarchs and the prophets of the OT that prepared the faithful and the entire world for the first advent of Christ. The faithful of the NT accepted Christ in the light of the OT and even Christ presented himself as the fulfilment of the OT promises (*Adv. haer.* 4.23.1–2).⁴⁵ The center, the treasure of all Scripture is Christ (*Adv. haer.* 4.26.1–2). Paul's entire theology is based on the OT. Commenting on Rom 1:17, Irenaeus points out that Paul's pivotal theological aspect is in fact taken from the OT, Hab 2:4 (*Adv. haer.* 4.34.2). These prophets were certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit because they all gave various details that have all been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of one person, Jesus of Nazareth. No other single person in the antiquity could claim to have all these details in his life (*Adv. haer.* 4.34.3–4). A balanced and correct interpretation of both the OT and NT will reveal that God is the same God of mercy in both

⁴⁴ Irenaeus refers to passages such as Rom 1:1–4; 9:5; Gal 4:4–5; Col 1:14–15 (cf. Mark 1:1; Luke 1:32; 2:29; 24:25).

⁴⁵ See also, Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.32.1–2; 4.33.1–2.

testaments, but also the God of judgment in both testaments (*Adv. haer.* 4.28.1–2).

The Irenaean soteriology builds upon the same law-gospel, promise-fulfillment pattern. Against Marcion, he argues that the OT Abraham was saved by faith, as testified by both Paul (Rom 4:3, Abraham believed God, and this was imputed to him as righteousness) and Jesus (Luke 13:28, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are going to be in the kingdom of heaven). Those who reject God's salvation by faith are excluded from God's kingdom; God "introduces, through Jesus Christ, Abraham to the kingdom of heaven, and his seed, that is, the Church, upon which also is conferred the adoption and the inheritance promised to Abraham" (*Adv. haer.* 4.8.1).⁴⁶ When Christ healed the bleeding woman, "a daughter of Abraham," Christ "loosed and vivified those who believe in Him as Abraham did." By doing so on a Sabbath, "He [Christ] did not make void, but fulfilled the law, by performing the offices of the high priest, propitiating God for men, and cleansing the lepers, healing the sick, and Himself suffering death, that exiled man might go forth from condemnation, and might return without fear to his own inheritance" (*Adv. haer.* 4.8.2). It is true that Jer 31:31 announces the new covenant, however, "one and the same householder produced both covenants, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who spoke with both Abraham and Moses, and who has restored us anew to liberty, and has multiplied that grace which is from Himself" (*Adv. haer.* 4.9.1).

Irenaeus also explains his understanding of grace and works. Christ will, "in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love" (*Adv. haer.* 1.10.1). When Christ was revealed, the people, who "make progress through believing in Him, and by means of the ... covenants, should gradually attain to perfect salvation. For there is one salvation and one God; but the precepts which form the man are numerous, and the steps which lead man to God are not a few." In this circumstance, Irenaeus reasons that if it "is allowable for an earthly and temporal king ... to grant to

⁴⁶ Elsewhere, Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.5.4., compares Christians to the Abraham following God's word: "Righteously also the apostles, being of the race of Abraham, left the ship and their father, and followed the Word. Righteously also do we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood, Genesis 22:6 follow Him. For in Abraham man had learned beforehand, and had been accustomed to follow the Word of God. For Abraham, according to his faith, followed the command of the Word of God, and with a ready mind delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only-begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his seed His own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption."

his subjects greater advantages at times: shall not this then be lawful for God ... to confer a greater ... grace upon the human race, and to honour continually with many gifts those who please Him?" (*Adv. haer.* 4.9.3). In the same way, Christ's "advent has brought in a fuller grace and greater gifts to those who have received Him, it is plain that the Father also is Himself the same who was proclaimed by the prophets" (*Adv. haer.* 4.11.4).

Appealing to his extensive reading of Paul, Irenaeus excludes the possibility of salvation by works: "For as it was not possible that the man who had once for all been conquered, and who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself, and obtain the prize of victory; and as it was also impossible that he could attain to salvation who had fallen under the power of sin—the Son effected both these things, being the Word of God, descending from the Father, becoming incarnate, stooping low, even to death, and consummating the arranged plan of our salvation" (Rom 10:6–7, 9; 14:9; 1 Cor 1:23; 10:16) (*Adv. haer.* 3.18.2).

The problem of the Jews, in Irenaeus's view, was that they abandoned God's law for the human tradition that was against the law of Moses: "desiring to uphold these traditions, they were unwilling to be subject to the law of God, which prepares them for the coming of Christ" (*Adv. haer.* 4.12.1). But Christ, as the One who descended from the same Father, the Creator described in the OT, taught that "when He says that the entire law and the prophets hang upon these two commandments" [love God and the neighbor] and "renewed this very same one to His disciples, when He enjoined them to love God with all their heart, and others as themselves." This teaching, then, was confirmed by Paul in his statement: "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10) and that "the greatest of all is love" (1 Cor 13:13) (*Adv. haer.* 4.12.2).

Irenaeus seems to agree that God "promulgated particular laws adapted to each" testament. However, "the more prominent and the greatest [commandments], without which salvation cannot [be attained], He has exhorted [us to observe] the same in both," for "as in the law, therefore, and in the Gospel [likewise], the first and greatest commandment is, to love the Lord God with the whole heart, and then there follows a commandment like to it, to love one's neighbour as one's self; the author of the law and the Gospel is shown to be one and the same" (*Adv. haer.* 4.12.2).

Christ, continues Irenaeus, "did not throw blame upon that law which was given by Moses, when He exhorted it to be observed, Jerusalem being as yet in safety; but He did throw blame upon those persons, because they repeated indeed the words of the law, yet were without love. And for this reason were they held as being unrighteous as respects God, and as respects

their neighbours” (referring also to Isa 29:13). Quoting Rom 10:3–4, Irenaeus explains by way of a question: “And how is Christ the end of the law, if He be not also the final cause of it? For He who has brought in the end has Himself also wrought the beginning” (*Adv. haer.* 4.12.4). As “the law did beforehand teach mankind the necessity of following Christ,” Christ taught Christians “that they should obey the commandments which God enjoined from the beginning, and do away with their former covetousness by good works, and follow after Christ” (*Adv. haer.* 4.12.5). In His discourse on the Mount, “the Lord did not abrogate the natural [precepts] of the law, by which man is justified, which also those who were justified by faith, and who pleased God, did observe previous to the giving of the law, but that He extended and fulfilled them” (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.1).

The difference between the law and the gospel is that the precepts of the law were given to “instruct the soul by means of those corporeal objects which were of an external nature, drawing it, as by a bond, to obey its commandments, that man might learn to serve God” while the gospel teaches that the “body should be willingly purified” through the Word and “should follow God without fetters,” not as slaves, but as children, having “greater confidence” (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.2). Irenaeus continues:

Now all these [precepts], as I have already observed, were not [the injunctions] of one doing away with the law, but of one fulfilling, extending, and widening it among us; just as if one should say, that the more extensive operation of liberty implies that a more complete subjection and affection towards our Liberator had been implanted within us. For He did not set us free for this purpose, that we should depart from Him (no one, indeed, while placed out of reach of the Lord’s benefits, has power to procure for himself the means of salvation), but that the more we receive His grace, the more we should love Him. Now the more we have loved Him, the more glory shall we receive from Him, when we are continually in the presence of the Father (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.3).

Quoting 1 Cor 10:11, Irenaeus concludes that “for by means of types they learned to fear God, and to continue devoted to His service” (*Adv. haer.* 4.14.3). Thus, for the Jews the law was “a course of discipline, and a prophecy of future things” (*Adv. haer.* 4.15.1). Thus,

all natural precepts are common to us [Christians] and to them (the Jews), they had in them indeed the beginning and origin; but in us they have received growth and completion. For to yield assent to God, and to follow His Word, and to love Him above all, and one’s neighbour as one’s self (now man is neighbour to man), and to abstain from every evil

deed, and all other things of a like nature which are common to both [covenants], do reveal one and the same God (*Adv. haer.* 4.13.4).

In Irenaeus' understanding, in the beginning, God gave Israel only the natural precepts or the Decalogue (referring to Deut 5:22). However, when Israel proved to be a hardened people, God had to "enact" additional laws for them to keep them in school of slavery that will educate them the need to and how to follow God. It is for the same reason that in the NT Paul gave Christians additional, guiding laws (1 Cor 7:6, 12, 25) not from the Lord, but out of considerations of human frailty (*Adv. haer.* 4.15.1-2). Thus, God gave circumcision "not as the completer of righteousness, but as a sign, that the race of Abraham might continue recognisable." However, circumcision did not have only a literal meaning applicable only to Abraham; rather, "the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit" (referring to Col 2:11) (*Adv. haer.* 4.16.1). In the same way, the Sabbath was given to us so that we will be "ministering continually to our faith, and persevering in it, and abstaining from all avarice, and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth" (*Adv. haer.* 4.16.1).

For this reason, people are "not justified by these things"; rather, circumcision and the Sabbaths were given as signs of salvation, because "all the rest of the multitude of those righteous men who lived before Abraham, and of those patriarchs who preceded Moses, were justified independently of the things above mentioned, and without the law of Moses" (*Adv. haer.* 4.16.2). The "righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbour. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by prohibitory mandates (*correptoriis literis*), because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves. But when this righteousness and love to God had passed into oblivion, and became extinct in Egypt, God did necessarily, because of His great goodwill to men, reveal Himself by a voice, and led the people with power out of Egypt, in order that man might again become the disciple and follower of God" (*Adv. haer.* 4.16.3).⁴⁷ Irenaeus, thus, thought in terms of promise-fulfillment, not law abrogation. To him, the natural law is the moral law in the sense that it belongs to human nature, because humans were created free as the image of God (*Adv. haer.* 4.14.1).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See also, Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.17.1-6.

⁴⁸ In *Adv. haer.* 4.4.3, Irenaeus elaborates: "But man, being endowed with reason, and in this respect like to God, having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself the cause to himself, that sometimes he becomes wheat, and sometimes

But what is the role of obedience? Irenaeus answers that God created humans

not as if He stood in need of man, but that He might have [some one] upon whom to confer His benefits.... Nor did He stand in need of our service when He ordered us to follow Him; but He thus bestowed salvation upon ourselves. For to follow the Saviour is to be a partaker of salvation, and to follow light is to receive light. But those who are in light do not themselves illumine the light, but are illumined and revealed by it: they do certainly contribute nothing to it, but, receiving the benefit, they are illumined by the light. Thus, also, service [rendered] to God does indeed profit God nothing, nor has God need of human obedience (*Adv. haer.* 4.14.1).

Both the Jews and the Gentiles are called to the same Gospel, according to Irenaeus. Quoting Gal 3:5–9, he concludes that Abraham was the “father of those who from among the Gentiles believe in Jesus Christ, because his faith and ours are one and the same: for he believed in things future, as if they were already accomplished, because of the promise of God; and in like manner do we also, because of the promise of God, behold through faith that inheritance [laid up for us] in the [future] kingdom” (*Adv. haer.* 4.21.1). Due to their knowledge of the OT, it was easier for the Jews to accept the message of the coming of the Messiah. Quoting 1 Cor 15:10 (“I labored more than they all”), Irenaeus concluded that Paul, as the apostle of the Gentile had to work much more to convert the Gentiles (*Adv. haer.* 4.24.1; see also 4.24.3), preaching that

that the gods of the nations not only were no gods at all, but even the idols of demons; and that there is one God, who is above all principality, and dominion, and power, and every name which is named [Eph 1:21], and that His Word, invisible by nature, was made palpable and visible among men, and did descend to death, even the death of the cross [Phil 2:8] also, that they who believe in Him shall be incorruptible and not subject to suffering, and shall receive the kingdom of heaven (*Adv. haer.* 4.24.2).

If the Gnostics or the Marcionites are correct, then

chaff. Wherefore also he shall be justly condemned, because, having been created a rational being, he lost the true rationality, and living irrationally, opposed the righteousness of God, giving himself over to every earthly spirit, and serving all lusts.” See also Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.37.1–7; 4.39.1–4.

the advent ... of Him whom these men represent as coming to the things of others, was not righteous; nor did He truly redeem us by His own blood, if He did not really become man, restoring to His own handiwork what was said [of it] in the beginning, that man was made after the image and likeness of God; not snatching away by stratagem the property of another, but taking possession of His own in a righteous and gracious manner (*Adv. haer.* 5.2.1).

Maybe Irenaeus did not understand some details from Daniel's prophecy (*Adv. haer.* 5.26.1-2) or the Antichrist and the Apocalypse (*Adv. haer.* 5.28.1-3; 5.30.1-3), but he clearly understands that Paul must be understood in the light of the OT and entire Scripture, and also in the framework of preaching the only one gospel of salvation by grace and by faith, not by works.

4.2 Tertullian of Carthage

According to Tertullian (155-240 AD), Marcionism was such a considerable danger to Christianity that he decided to respond with a five-volume work, *Adversus Marcionem*, to refute the great heretic. As one of the major problems of Marcionism is its Luke-Paul NT canon, in this work, Tertullian concentrates his response on and uses material from these NT books. He dedicates an entire volume, the fourth, to the study of the Gospel of Luke, in which he highlights that the criteria for identifying the true gospel is antiquity and apostolic succession (*Adv. Marc.* 3.4-5). In doing so, Tertullian insists that Marcion's teaching was a novelty (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19; 3.5), not another, original, competitive version of Christianity. Then, Tertullian focusses on details from the Gospel of Luke, demonstrating that Christ came from the Creator God: the demons acknowledged the Creator God ("The Holy One of God," Luke 4:33-34) (*Adv. Marc.* 3.7), that the miracles were true (*Adv. Marc.* 3.20, 26), that Christ prohibited divorce (vs. the Law of Moses) (*Adv. Marc.* 3.34, 39), that Luke presents Christ in His Coming in judgment (*Adv. Marc.* 3.35), and various details in the Gospel corroborated, more or less successfully, with OT passages (*Adv. Marc.* 3.8-12).

In the fifth volume, Tertullian undertakes a thorough investigation of Paul, Marcion's "favourite apostle" (*Adv. Marc.* 1.15), and developed his theological perspective vis-à-vis the issues raised by Marcion. Tertullian begins by questioning Marcion's criteria for selecting Paul over all the other apostles. Marcion's criteria are weak, Tertullian notes, because Marcion ac-

cepts Paul as an apostle, as an authoritative source of revelation and theology based on his own claim. Tertullian, on the contrary, accepts Paul based on both his own claim, but also based on a verifying principle, the extra-Pauline sources confirming Paul as an apostle. One of these sources is the OT, such as Gen 49:27, which prophesied the advent of Paul as a wolf devouring in the morning and distributing food in the evening: “In the early period of his life he would devastate the Lord’s sheep, as a persecutor of the churches; but in the evening he would give them nourishment, which means that in his declining years he would educate the fold of Christ, as the teacher of the Gentiles” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.1).⁴⁹ In Tertullian’s understanding, had Christianity professed a different God than Judaism, Paul would have taught a new and different God. However, Tertullian observes, Paul did not reveal any new God, he never rejected the Creator God of the OT. Therefore, Paul proclaims the same God of Christ and of the OT (*Adv. Marc.* 5.1).⁵⁰

Tertullian, then, enumerates and studies the most significant Pauline epistles. He starts with the most “anti-Jewish” epistle, Galatians. The Epistle to the Galatians, Tertullian reasons, understood “that faith in Christ ... was obligatory, but without annulling the law, because it still appeared to them a thing incredible that the law should be set aside by its own author” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.2). However, Tertullian notes, had Paul announced to them that a new and different God should be worshiped, they would have hardly gotten into the problem Paul is dealing with in Galatians, that is, keeping both the faith in Christ and the old law. This is the essence of Tertullian’s biblical and Pauline interpretation.

One of Tertullian’s hermeneutical principles is “let us only attend to the clear sense and to the reason of the thing, and the perversion of the Scripture will be apparent” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.3). But Tertullian’s main hermeneutical principles are Scripture interprets Scripture and *Tota Scriptura*. According to him, all Scripture is interconnected, the NT being the fulfillment of the OT prophecies. For instance, in Eph 1:13 Paul states that Christians have been sealed with “His Holy Spirit of Promise.” Tertullian is quick to ask and then answer: “Of what promise? That which was made through Joel: In the last days will I pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh, [Joel 2:28] that is, on all

⁴⁹ In *Adv. Marc.* 5.6., Tertullian interprets Isa 28:16 to predict the advent of Paul, the wise master-builder (1 Cor 3:10) to lay the foundation of the Christian church.

⁵⁰ In *Adv. Marc.* 1.14., referring to 2 Corinthians 12, Tertullian notes that Christ, the superior God of Marcion, has come down from the “third heaven” to die for this very creation and use its elements such as water and oil to establish the sacraments, thus proving its worthiness.

nations. Therefore, the Spirit and the Gospel will be found in the Christ, who was foretrusted, because foretold" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.17). Thus, the connecting principle between the two dispensations, the OT and the NT, is that both dispensations have the same God and that the prophets in the old dispensation announced the coming of the other dispensation (Isa 2:3, 4; 11:1; 43:18-19; 55:3) (*Adv. Marc.* 4.1)!

This brings Tertullian to the law-gospel relation. By building his theology upon the law-gospel antithesis, Tertullian notes, Marcion became the "the author of the breach of peace between the gospel and the law.... a peace, which had remained unhurt and unshaken from Christ's appearance to the time of Marcion's audacious doctrine" (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19). To the Marcionite argument that Paul's rebuke to Peter was the sign of the radical separation between the law and gospel, Tertullian responds by explaining that Paul rebuked Peter for a momentary compromise in their conduct siding with the Jews in a particular situation. However, Tertullian notes that, later, Paul would embrace this type of compromise "himself to become in his practice all things to all men, that he might gain all—to the Jews, as a Jew, and to them that were under the law, as under the law" (1 Cor 9:20) (*Adv. Marc.* 1.20).⁵¹ However, Tertullian insists, when "touching their public doctrine ... they had ... joined hands in perfect concord, and had agreed also in the division of their labour in their fellowship of the gospel, as they had indeed in all other respects: Whether it were I or they, so we preach" (1 Cor 15:11) (*Adv. Marc.* 1.20).⁵² In his *De Præscriptione Haereticorum*, Tertullian notes that the relationship between Paul and Peter should not be indicative of a "weaker" Peter "lacking" original Christianity that was later supplied by a "fuller knowledge" of Paul, as this idea would justify further new revelations by the heretics (*Praescr.* 23). Paul himself was teaching the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:10) not to have divisions among themselves (*Praescr.* 26).

Paul was in fact a peacekeeper between the law and the gospel. According to Tertullian's Paul, Christians are called to "perpetuate the teaching of

⁵¹ See also *Adv. Marc.* 4.3; *Praescr.* 24.

⁵² Elsewhere, in *Praescr.* 23, Tertullian explains that Peter and Paul "arranged among themselves a distribution of office, not a diversity of gospel, so that they should severally preach not a different gospel, but (the same), to different persons, Peter to the circumcision, Paul to the Gentiles." Tertullian perceives complete harmony between Peter and Paul, not only from the Book of Acts (which some heretics reject), but also from Paul's Epistle to Galatians (which most of the heretics accept): Paul met Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 1:18) because "of a common belief and preaching," the apostles "'glorified the Lord'" (Gal 1:24) and gave Paul "'the right hand of fellowship'" (Gal 2:9) "as a sign of their agreement with him."

the law." The problem was not with the law, but with the Jews who maintained "circumcision, and observing times, and days, and months, and years, according to those Jewish ceremonies which they ought to have known were now abrogated, according to the new dispensation purposed by the Creator Himself," in such OT passages as Isa 43:19, Jer 4:4 and Hos 2:11 (*Adv. Marc.* 1.20).

On the other hand, Tertullian did acknowledge a sense in which the law was "abrogated." But Tertullian argues that this change occurred not because Paul decided to do so, but because the Creator God had announced it in the OT (Isa 42:6, 9; 52:7) that it would be changed and the Creator's Christ determined that John the Baptist would be the border between the two dispensations (Luke 16:16). Christ came at the fulness of time (Gal 4:4), brought by God of the OT, the God of Prophecy, God the Creator "to whom belonged the end of time no less than the beginning" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.4). By contrast, the Marcionite god of the OT does not have relevance to prophecy and therefore to time, nor to the fulness of time.

However, Tertullian explains that by 'abrogation' he does not mean the abrogation of the entire law. Rather, a part of the law was "retained" and another one was "erased," such as the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals and the circumcision (referring to Gal 4:9–10; Isa 1:13–14; Amos 5:21; Hos 2:11) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.4). But the most important part of the law that was "erased" was circumcision: "All those ... who had been delivered from the yoke of slavery he [God] would earnestly have to obliterate the very mark of slavery—even circumcision" (referring to Gal 5:1, 6; Deut 10:16; Ps 2:2–3; Jer 4:4) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.4). The most important aspect of this discussion is that the law was commanded by the God of the OT and abrogated by the same God.

Now, the part of the law that was "retained" is in actuality "all the law" (Gal 5:14), "the gist of it all being concentrated in this one precept," the law of grace and love to God and to humans, law given by the Creator and confirmed to remain valid by the Liberator (Lev 19:18; Deut 6:5; Gal 5:14) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.4). This "old-new" law is the law of the Creator and the Law of Christ. Referring to Rom 7:7, Tertullian declares that "the apostle [Paul] recoils from all impeachment of the law.... [for there is] no acquaintance with sin except through the law" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.13). Citing Rom 7:13–14, Tertullian concludes that the law "is prophetic, and that it is figurative.... Christ was predicted by the law but figuratively, so that indeed He could not be recognised by all the Jews" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.13).

Christ "has made the law obsolete by His own precepts, even by Himself fulfilling the law ... it is impossible to make an adversary of the law out of

one who so completely promotes it" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.17). Thus, Tertullian thought the abrogation of the law or the difference in the law-gospel dispensations was rather helping his argument that there was the same God, the Creator, and Jesus, His Christ (*Adv. Marc.* 5.2). Commenting on Col 2:16–17 (ceremonial days and Sabbaths), Tertullian notes:

the apostle here teaches clearly how it has been abolished, even by passing from shadow to substance—that is, from figurative types to the reality, which is Christ. The shadow, therefore, is His to whom belongs the body also; in other words, the law is His, and so is Christ. If you separate the law and Christ, assigning one to one god and the other to another, it is the same as if you were to attempt to separate the shadow from the body of which it is the shadow. Manifestly Christ has relation to the law, if the body has to its shadow (*Adv. Marc.* 5.19).

Salvation, for Tertullian, springs out of the cross of Christ. According to Tertullian, Christ came into the world “to redeem them that were under the law” [Gal 4:5], to “make the crooked ways straight, and the rough places smooth, as Isaiah says” [Isa 40:4], and so “that we might receive the adoption of sons [Gal 4:5] that is, the Gentiles, who once were not sons” “that we may have ... the assurance that we are the children of God” (Gal 4:6) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.4).

Marcion’s Docetism, he argues, dismisses the power of God in the cross of Christ (1 Cor 1:18). If the cross of Christ represented the love of a new God, the Creator God of the OT could not have known about the cross! But the God of the OT “predicted the incidents of the cross,” including the fact that the very cross will be a stumbling block for His people (referring to Isa 8:14; 28:16) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.5).⁵³ This stumbling block is perpetuated by Marcion’s Docetism, for “what is that weakness of God which is stronger than men [1 Cor 1:25], but the nativity and incarnation of God? If, however, Christ was not born of the Virgin, was not constituted of human flesh, and thereby really suffered neither death nor the cross, there was nothing in Him either of foolishness or weakness” (*Adv. Marc.* 5.5).

Moreover, using 1 Cor 2:7, Tertullian contrasts Marcion’s OT god who does not know the future to Paul’s Creator God who pre-ordained salvation “in the counsels of God before the ages.” These pre-ordained ordinances of the Creator “were publicly instituted in Israel; but they lay overshadowed

⁵³ In *Adv. Marc.* 5.7, Tertullian refutes Docetism based on Paul’s presentation of Christ as our Passover (1 Cor 5:5, 7, 13). See also, 5.10–11; 5.14. See also 5.15., on resurrection, and 5.20., on Philipians 2.

with latent meanings, in which the wisdom of God was concealed, to be brought to light by and by among 'the perfect', when the time should come" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.5). However, "that which He both fore-ordained and revealed He also in the intermediate space of time announced by the pre-ministration of figures, and symbols, and allegories" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.5).

The Scripture's emphasis on salvation does not reject God's status as a Judge. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Tertullian notices that God is presented as a Judge and Avenger. Paul "ascribes both the gospel and salvation to Him who ... I [Tertullian] called the *just* God, not the *good* one" ("righteousness of God," Rom 1:16–17). "It is He who removes (men) from confidence in the law to faith in the gospel—that is to say, His own law and His own gospel" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.13, italics in original). This God, the Creator, reveals His wrath from heaven against the unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18) to revenge the truth. God, according to Tertullian's understanding of Paul, will judge the sinners "'by Jesus Christ'" (Rom 2:16) (*Adv. Marc.* 5.13).

Tertullian's study of Eph 2:11–12 takes him to the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church, made possible by Christ. He notes that Marcion modified Paul's text (Eph 2:15) again, by writing "in flesh" instead of "in His flesh," in support of his Docetism, to avoid saying that Jesus had flesh: "But Marcion erased the pronoun His, that he might make the enmity refer to flesh, as if (the apostle spoke) of a carnal enmity, instead of the enmity which was a rival to Christ" (*Adv. Marc.* 5.17).

Tertullian develops yet another contra-Marcion argument by quoting Eph 2:17–20: the Church is "'built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets,'" although Marcion erased the phrase "and the prophets," "forgetting that the Lord had set in His Church not only apostles, but prophets also.... the apostle himself never fails to build us up everywhere with (the words of) the prophets. For whence did he learn to call Christ the chief corner-stone [Eph 2:20] but from the figure given him in the Psalm?" [118:22] (*Adv. Marc.* 5.17).

This brings Tertullian to the renowned argument of apostolic succession: "No other teaching will have the right of being received as apostolic than that which is at the present day proclaimed in the churches of apostolic foundation" (*Adv. Marc.* 1.21). Commenting on 1 Tim 1:14, 18; 6:13, 20, Tertullian insists that "there is no mysterious hint darkly suggested in this expression about (some) far-fetched doctrine, but that a warning is rather given against receiving any other (doctrine) than that which Timothy had heard from himself [Paul], as I take it publicly: Before many witnesses is his phrase" (*Praescr.* 25). These many witnesses are the church members, not

the heretics (*Praescr.* 25). Both Jesus and the apostles have always taught the gospel and its teachings publicly (*Praescr.* 26). Paul handed his entire knowledge to the church and, for the very reason, expected the church to be mature, not foolish (Gal 3:1), not to stumble (Gal 5:7), not carnal, not babies (1 Cor 8:2) (*Praescr.* 27).

The true church “reposes its Christian faith in the Creator” (*Adv. Marc.* 1.21). But even “if the churches shall prove to have been corrupt from the beginning,” continues Tertullian, “where shall the pure ones be found? Will it be among the adversaries of the Creator? Show us, then, one of your churches, tracing its descent from an apostle, and you will have gained the day” (*Adv. Marc.* 1.21). Yes, the heretics, “are bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the apostles, because they existed in the time of the apostles,” but they have to “produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning” (*Praescr.* 32).

On the other hand, it could be demonstrated that the heretics were present in the apostolic times. But rather than being present as the true, Orthodox church, they were present in the apostolic times as a heresy. Paul predicted the rise of heresy and the “necessity” of heresies (1 Cor 11:19).⁵⁴ But he signaled their seminal presence already in his time: “In his first epistle to the Corinthians, [he] sets his mark on certain who denied and doubted the resurrection” (1 Cor 15:12), a teaching that “is maintained by Marcion and Apelles and Valentinus” (*Praescr.* 33). In “Galatians, he inveighs against such men as observed and defend circumcision and the (Mosaic) law” (Gal 5:2), which “runs Hebion’s heresy” (*Praescr.* 33). In 1 Tim 4:3, Tertullian sees Paul rebuking Marcion’s and Apelles’s prohibition of marriage and in 1 Tim 1:4, he sees Paul rejecting Valentinus’s “endless genealogies” or “Æons” (*Praescr.* 33–34).

Having defeated the heretics with Paul’s help, Tertullian concludes: “Our system is not behind any in date; on the contrary, it is earlier than all; and this fact will be the evidence of that truth which everywhere occupies the first place. The apostles, again, nowhere condemn it; they rather defend it” (*Praescr.* 35). And Tertullian summarizes that “system”:

⁵⁴ Tertullian, *Adv. Val.* 5. In Tertullian, *Praescr.* 4, Tertullian explains that by saying the words in 1 Cor 11:19, Paul “does not mean that those persons should be deemed approved who exchange their creed for heresy; although they contrariously interpret his words to their own side.”

One Lord God ... the Creator of the universe, and Christ Jesus (born) of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God the Creator; and the Resurrection of the flesh; the law and the prophets she unites in one volume with the writings of evangelists and apostles, from which she drinks in her faith... [which the church] "seals with the water (of baptism), arrays with the Holy Ghost, feeds with the Eucharist, cheers with martyrdom, and against such a discipline thus (maintained) she admits no gainsayer (*Praescr.* 37).

5. Conclusions and Implications

Several conclusions arise from this study. First, while it is true that later ecclesiastical developments have used many of the polemist's newly proposed concepts, such as apostolic succession and catholicity, the original concepts must be understood in the context of the debate with the Gnostics/Marcionites. During the second and third centuries, these concepts were used as efficient theological and ecclesiastical arguments against the Gnostics. As an application for contemporary situations, we should be careful in generating new theological and ecclesiastical concepts and practices, which, when applied in new contexts, would become unbiblical traditions or dogmas. Conversely, when seeking theological and ecclesiastical solutions, church leaders need to look for the biblical foundations for that solution, and not merely build a tradition or doctrine on a historic precedent.

Second, Paul is not a new battle fought by the theologians of the 19th through the 21st centuries. While the first century Church in Corinth saw a factionalist conflict over Paul as an apostle and as a leader, the second and third centuries witnessed a fierce battle over the control of Paul's theology. This controversy, which has raged for centuries till the 21st century, was not only over securing the honor of having Paul as the founder or champion of their movement, but especially to control Paul's interpretation and teachings. This study of Paul in early Christianity does not only reveal the considerable extent of the knowledge Christians had about the apostle and his teachings or about his role as the teacher of Christianity, but the essentiality of the interpretation of his teachings. For both the apostolic fathers and for the polemist, Paul was a historical person, a first century Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, honored apostle, the inspired writer of the epistles to the Christian Church, the apostle called to work at laying the foundation of the Orthodox, Catholic church. This foundation was the Gospel, the teaching that we are saved through the faith in the grace of God historically manifested in the crucified Christ, who was the fulfilment of God's promise in the OT

given to Adam and Abraham. For the heretics, Gnostics and Marcionites, Paul was the divine apostle of the God of the NT, the teacher of gnosis who has access to the pleroma and to the seven heavens or æons, who taught the gospel of the new era of the spirit that came to defeat the works of the Demiurge in a Gnostic worldview.

Third, not all Pauline writings are being mentioned by the early Christians and Gnostics/Marcionites. However, the reasons for some absences are radically different. The apostolic fathers and the polemicists used as many writings from Paul as they knew or needed for their purpose. The Gnostics and the Marcionites consciously, explicitly, and intentionally used a limited Pauline corpus, determined by their theological framework. This triggered the process of the establishment of the NT canon.

Fourth, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library and the study of Gnosticism has significantly raised the level of trust and respect for the early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus. These theologians were not propagandists with a nefarious agenda of falsifying the truth, of taking down an opponent by misinformation or disinformation. Rather, they valued the truth in the best form they could understand it based on the entire Scripture. They themselves were shocked and disturbed by the heavy cuts and redactions their opponents applied to the biblical text in general and to Pauline texts in particular. For this reason, these theologians, starting with Polycarp and ending with Irenaeus and Tertullian, cannot be perceived as redactors or ghostwriters of the Pauline letters or the gospels. On the contrary, they not only quoted Paul as a theological authority, but perceived him as an inspired author and themselves as under his authority.

Fifth, some theologians may have a point in noting that the early Christian theologians won the battle and told the story. However, looking at Irenaeus—and the others—the important questions are why and how did they win the battle over Paul against the Gnostics? Here are several factors.

1. The context of the persecutions. The early Christians did not and church history in general does not perceive the early Christian theologians as conspiracy theorists working with political or violent means to destroy their opponents and to impose an artificial unified theological interpretation. As Christian leaders, the early fathers were ready to give their lives for the sake of the teachings of the Scriptures. They, therefore, did not have the luxury nor the interest in erring about or misconstruing the identity and teaching of Paul. The Chris-

tians who were reading the writings of the early Christian theologians trusted them because of their personal and moral integrity and faithfulness to God and the teachings of the Scriptures.

2. The apostolic fathers and the polemistors strove to have both a complete and objective perspective on Paul. They did not look at Paul in isolation but studied him in the larger context of Scripture and of the history of salvation revealed in the Holy Book. The writings of the early fathers inspired a sense of objectivity and seriousness, producing a convincing impression. They had their own copies of Scripture; they knew history, both the history of the Bible and the history of the Roman Empire; they knew philosophy and logic; they knew their theological opponents and their theological positions and arguments and were ready to point out their theological and philosophical problems. The early fathers were not trying to hide the theological debates and dissident positions. On the contrary, they described in detail the teachings and the practices of the heretical movements in their published books for everyone to read and then engaged in a theological and rational debate and refutation.
3. When confronted with the Marcionite canon, the polemistors reacted in a two-fold way. On the one hand, Irenaeus and Tertullian did not limit their responses to that truncated canon but worked with the entire Scripture to counter Marcionism, emphasizing that Luke and Paul are in complete harmony with the rest of all Scripture. On the other hand, the polemistors did sometimes accept the challenge of their opponents and worked from within the limitation of the Marcionite canon to prove their points anyways.
4. The most considerable strength but also contribution of the early fathers was their hermeneutics applied to the Pauline epistles. Sometime called the “Irenaeian reading” of Paul, this hermeneutical approach included the concepts of *Tota scriptura* and Scripture interprets Scripture. The heretics were able to depict Paul as a proto-Gnostic only when they used some of his passages in isolation and placing them in a Gnostic context. But the early church fathers proposed to read Paul’s epistles not only in the entirety of a given epistle, but in the context of the whole Pauline corpus, in the context of the entire NT, and especially in the context of the OT, apart from which Paul cannot be understood correctly. Certainly, these early theologians erred in some facts, forced applications of some OT texts, and developed some erroneous theological concepts. For instance, Tertullian

saw Paul literally fulfilling some OT texts or Irenaeus saying that Jesus was more than 40 years old when He died. They also differed in various theological aspects, such as minute details of the relation between the Torah and the new covenant. But they understood very clearly that the only way Paul could be correctly understood is in the context of the entire Scripture.

Sixth, this study, reveals what the early fathers perceived as Paul's foundational theological principles and core teachings of the apostle.

1. While the dissident movements (Ebionites, Gnostics, Marcionites) as well as contemporary studies build their interpretation of Christianity on a division between Peter and Paul or even between the Old and New Testaments, the early fathers did not perceive or accept such a theological division among the apostles or founders of Christianity. Although Peter and Paul did have practical disagreements, they were perceived as having the same message and the same gospel of salvation through the substitutionary death of Christ and the same ministry and mission. The early fathers understood this Pauline and Petrine message in the complex but focused framework of grace-faith, justification-sanctification, law-gospel, old-new covenants, Jews-Gentiles. But the early fathers emphasized that this complex understanding of Paul's teaching is to be accomplished only in the context of the entire Scripture.
2. Thus, in the theological perception of the early fathers, Paul is described significantly through the prism of his teaching of salvation and righteousness by grace and not by works, although they understood clearly that grace and faith did not preclude sanctification and the personal involvement of the individual. This theme occupied a considerable amount of their discussion of Paul.
3. Also, in the early fathers' perception, Paul placed his main theme of salvation by grace and faith in the context of the old-new covenants or law-gospel. Indeed, they treated Paul in the context of their response to the Gnostic division between the OT and NT, but the early fathers used this opportunity to summarize and develop their understanding of Paul. The logic of the law-gospel or old-new covenants relationship was promise-fulfilment. God fulfilled in Christ what He had determined in His plans and what He had revealed and promised in the Israelite economy.
4. In the early fathers' theological perception of Paul, the themes of the law-gospel and of the old-new covenants are further related to the

themes of the Jews and Gentiles as partaking to the same table of the new covenant, which was the fulfilment of the promise of the old one. However, these themes are inseparably connected to the theme of salvation or righteousness by faith and grace. This message was urgently needed by both the Jews and the Gentiles, as, during the time of Paul, both groups were stuck in the atmosphere of the religion of salvation by works.

Seventh, while the early fathers may have erred in some details or applications of the teaching of Paul, to conclude that the early fathers misunderstood Paul's central message or had a simplistic understanding of the apostle is simply incorrect. This study reveals that the early fathers had a complex, but balanced and focused perception and understanding of Paul, his mission, and core teaching, perception and understanding based on a complex study of the entire Scripture. Rather than pitching Paul's teaching about the righteousness by faith against Paul's teaching about the inclusion of the Gentiles at the table of the new covenant, the early fathers understood Paul to be preaching the unbreakable gospel of righteousness by grace and faith brought about by the new covenant (the cross of Christ) and preached to both the Jews and Gentiles. Rather than fragmenting or reducing the apostle's teaching, following the early fathers' complex and rich approach to Paul will prove fruitful to modern and contemporary theology.