

APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

A part of [Codex V](#) of the NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY. This is the account of a heavenly journey made by the apostle, from the third sphere to the pleromatic circles of the Ogdoad, the Ennead, and the Decad. Paul begins his journey on the mountain of [Jericho](#) with the aim of reaching Jerusalem, that is, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the twelve apostles are gathered. On his way, Paul is accompanied by a small child, the Holy Spirit, who shows him the direction and suggests how he should conduct himself when confronted by the obstacles of the spheres. The aim of the journey is the acquisition of knowledge: “Let your mind awaken, Paul, and see that this mountain upon which you are standing is the mountain of Jericho so that you may know the hidden things in those that are visible.”

In the course of this journey to heaven, which at times takes on the appearance of a descent to hell, Paul glimpses the [organization](#) of the heavenly hosts, angelic and demonic, the interlocking of the spheres with their doors and their keepers, and the punishment of a wicked soul. Arriving at the seventh heaven, Paul faces a demiurgic power who questions him before allowing him to pass on to the Ogdoad. When Paul reaches the eighth heaven, he joins the twelve apostles, his spiritual companions, and with them goes to the tenth and last heaven.

The framework of the heavenly journey, as it is briefly sketched by the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, is of a literary genre common to many Jewish writings (patriarchs' and prophets' journeys to heaven, including the *Ascension of Isaiah*; *2, 3 Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Baruch*, *4 Esdras*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Testament of Abraham*; cf. Widengren, 1955; Schwartz, 1977). The Gnostics frequently took up this schema to illustrate a theme that was dear to them: the mounting of the soul to God by a dangerous ascent through the heavenly spheres (cf. the [Apocryphon of James](#), the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *First Apocalypse of James*, the [Paraphrase of Shem](#), *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, *Allogenes*, the [Gospel of](#)

Mary, all in the Nag Hammadi Library).

The elements supporting Paul's ascent in this *apocalypse* are common to all heavenly journeys: the passage from sphere to sphere, questionings by the appointed toll-collectors at the gates, passwords and signa that the soul must give in order to advance, and finally the presence of an escorting angel who helps the soul in her wanderings (for a discussion of this imagery, cf. Scholem, 1960).

The *Apocalypse of Paul* does not seem to be closely related to the apocryphal [literature](#) about Paul that flourished in the first centuries of the Christian era: the *Acts of Paul* (Hennecke and Schneemelcher, 1975) and *Visio Pauli*. There is only one fairly close parallel between the Nag Hammadi text and the *Visio Pauli*: the scene of the punishment of the hypocritical soul. This scene is worth a comment. The men acting as witnesses in the *Visio Pauli* become the demons who have urged the soul to sin in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. This psychologized interpretation by the author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* reflects the influence of the Jewish apocryphal speculations on the evil tendency dwelling in man's soul (cf. *Testament of Reuben* 11;2-3: the seven spirits are the cause of human sins).

Here one can as well think of the case of demonic possession of the soul; the sentence "I saw you and desired you" is very expressive in this connection (cf. the case of the possession of Sarah by the demon Asmodeus in the *Book of Tobit*). We should note, too, that the punishment adjudged to the soul in the *Apocalypse of Paul* consists of casting her into a body prepared for her. Here we have the idea of metempsychosis, expressed also in the phrase: "the whole race of demons, the one that reveals bodies to a soul—seed." It is the demons, then, who are responsible for the new incarnation of the wicked soul. Furthermore, Tartarus, the infernal place of punishment, is situated not under the earth nor in the sublunar part of the heavens but on earth—an earth which the author does not hesitate to define as "land of the dead" or "world of the

dead.”

Another scene takes place in the seventh heaven, with Paul as protagonist, and is also worth noting. He meets an old man there, a demiurge, who asks Paul three questions before allowing him to proceed: “Where are you going, Paul? . . . Where are you from? . . . How will you be able to get away from me?” To these questions Paul gives the answers: “I am going to the place from which I came”; “I am going down to the world of the dead in order to lead captive the captivity that was led captive in the captivity of Babylon.” Paul is presented here as the savior going down into the world of the dead to deliver them from the captivity of sin (Kroll, 1963; for *aichmalosia* (captivity), cf. Testament of Daniel 5, 8, 11, 13, where a Levitic Messiah will come and deliver from the captivity of Beliar the souls of the saints and will take them to rest in Eden and New Jerusalem; see also *Midrash of Melchizedek*, ed. Woude, 1965; [Apocryphon of Jeremiah](#), ed. Kuhn, 1970).

Paul does not answer the third question but he gives the old man a sign such that the keeper of the seventh [heaven](#) opens up to him the way to the Ogdoad. This question-and-answer section resembles closely the *First Apocalypse of James* from the Nag Hammadi Library. Through his answers, James, like Paul, escapes the vengeance of the toll-gatherers. So, to the toll-gatherer’s question, “Where are you going?” one and the same answer is given by Paul and James, “I am going to the place from which I came.” The kernel of all *gnosis* is condensed in this brief formula, which is not without echoes of that classic example in [Extract 78 from Theodotos](#) (and also Irenaeus 21.5).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cumont, F. *Lux Perpetua*, pp. 196ff. Paris, 1949.
- Festugière, A. J. *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, Vol. 1, p. 257, n. 2. Paris, 1944.
- Hennecke, Edgar. *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 2, ed. W.

- Schneemelcher. London, 1963. English trans. R. McL. Wilson, pp. 322-89. Great Britain, 1975.
- Kroll, J. *Gott und Hölle, Der Mythos von Descensuskämpfe*, repr. Darmstadt, 1963.
 - Kuhn, K. H. "A Coptic Jeremiah Apocryphon." *Le Muséon* 83 (1970):291-350.
 - Murdock, W. R., and G. MacRae. "The Apocalypse of Paul," pp. 47- In *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 and VI*, ed. D. M. Parrott. Nag Hammadi Studies 1. Leiden, 1979.
 - Scholem, G. *Les Grands courants de la mystique juive*, chap. 2. Paris, 1968.
 - Schwartz, J. "Le Voyage au ciel dans la littérature apocalyptique." In *L'Apocalyptique, Etudes d'histoire des religions*, ed. M. Philonenko-M. Simon. Paris, 1977.
 - Widengren, G. *Muhammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension*. Uppsala, 1955.
 - Woude, A. S. van der. "Melchisedek als himmlische Erlösergestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midraschim aus Q- Höhle 11." *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 14 (1965):354-73.

MADLINE SCOPELLO

Tags: [Books](#)