

Exploring the Pathway That Leads from Paul to Gnosticism

What Is the Genre of The Interpretation of Knowledge (NHC XI,1)?

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When Karl Löning invited me to participate in his recently completed project concerning “Erlösendes Wissen,”¹ I immediately reached back to an area of research in which I feel I still have much “old business” to attend to, namely the so-called “Coptic Gnostic Library” of texts discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945 in the “Nag Hammadi Codices.”² Having called several years earlier for a “primarily Coptological” investigation of the strange assortment of works contained in these early Coptic papyrus books,³ I proposed now to explore “Christliche und gnostische Apokalypsen im koptischen Ägypten,” in which I hoped to address at least certain aspects of the perplexing questions, who translated these works into Coptic, and who transmitted them in such a way that they became known to us from a horde of partly damaged books hidden away in a remote corner of Upper Egypt?

But as the first phase of Prof. Löning’s project unfolded, namely an interdisciplinary Oberseminar at the Universität Münster in the Wintersemester 2000/01, in which both Barbara Aland and I participated regularly,⁴ a different topic – also based in the Nag Hammadi texts – began to seem more immediately relevant to the seminar, namely the possibility of tracing a historical line of connection – a trajectory, if you will – from Paul through the “Pauline School” (by which I mean the “Paulinismus” of the deutero-Pauline epistles) to some form of what is generally known as “Gnosticism,” where “saving knowledge” (erlösendes/rettendes Wissen = Gnosis) is a central motif. And so, in consultation with Prof. Löning, Prof. Aland and I concluded the seminar with a two-part presentation in which Prof. Aland offered a general introduc-

¹ See the resulting volume, edited by Prof. LÖNING, *Wissen*.

² See ROBINSON, *Library* (a complete edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices, with English translations); ROBINSON/SMITH, *Library* (4th ed., 1996; a complete English translation); SCHENKE et al., *Nag Hammadi Deutsch* (a complete German translation).

³ EMMEL, *Tradition*, 42.

⁴ And which gave birth to the Sammelband cited in n. 1 above.

tion to second-century Gnosis, while I offered a general introduction to the Nag Hammadi Codices, followed by a sketch of how one might argue for a trajectory from some form of Pauline Christianity (as witnessed to by the author of Ephesians, for example) to Valentinian Gnosticism.

The essence of my argument was that some of Paul's language promised extraordinary things – which first-generation Christians enjoyed experientially as gifts of the Spirit – but as time passed, and Paul himself disappeared from the scene, and the world did not come to an end as expected, the Apostle's promises must have begun to seem rather hollow.⁵ Surely at least some second-generation Christians asked one another (or at least asked themselves), was Paul simply wrong about some things? Or, did our elders misunderstand him?

On the other hand, the author of Ephesians had no hesitation about perpetuating Paul's hyperbolic language and thereby confirming Paul's role as the mediator of an extraordinary saving knowledge: "To me ... this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:8–11). To whom did the Apostle communicate the "plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God"? To those whom God "chose ... before the foundation of the world ... to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Eph 1:4–5). And what was the content of this plan? It is "the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9–10).

The reader of such words has a right to expect the revelation of some tremendous mystery, something that by uniting earthly and heavenly things somehow transcends them all. And such expectations might well be severely disappointed when it is revealed that the plan entails such mundane and banal injunctions as, "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Eph 5:22) and "Children, obey your parents" (Eph 6:1). Surely Paul intended something not *less* mysterious than he sometimes made it seem, but rather something even *more* mysterious and profound, namely "a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages. ... What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the

⁵ I cited 1 Cor 15:51–52, Gal 3:27–28, Rom 7:6, and 2 Cor 3:6 and 5:17 as instances of what I had in mind.

heart of man conceived" (1 Cor 2:7–9), but which the Apostle imparted to the "mature" (1 Cor 2:6) and the "spiritual" (1 Cor 3:1). What we read toward the end of Ephesians must be the baby's milk offered to people who were "still of the flesh" (1 Cor 3:3). Surely it is not the "solid food" (1 Cor 3:2) that the Apostle promised to the perfect Christians whom God chose before the foundation of the world.

Looked at in this way, it is hardly surprising that some second- and third-generation Christians in the Pauline tradition searched the Apostle's letters – and for these Christians, the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians were as genuinely Pauline as what we today recognize as the authentic Pauline corpus – for every scrap of that "solid food" that he might have wrapped up in his written words, open to the possibility that the tremendously mysterious nature of this information might make it hard for "the heart of man" to recognize it or even to conceive it. Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine that some contemporaries of the author of Ephesians – under circumstances other than those under which was written the one work of this author that we know, perhaps even the author of Ephesians him- or herself – might well already have been more interested in the "solid food" of their founder's tradition than in the pabulum that was the necessary staple of those not yet spiritually mature.

So what "wisdom" *did* Paul teach to the spiritually perfect members of his communities? Some might answer that it was no more than what we read more or less on the surface of his authentic letters (which is not infrequently mysterious enough). If, on the other hand, what some ancient Christians believed is true, that Paul in his letters only hinted at the content of the "mystery" that was known to him and the spiritually perfect, then we will never know for certain what he really had in mind. But we do know what some of those same ancient Christians believed the content of the tremendous mystery was. Indeed, if such a Christian learned a startling cosmological, metaphysical, theological, and soteriological truth – for example, the certain knowledge that God the Father of Jesus Christ is a truly transcendent God, completely distinct from the creator of this imperfect world – and this knowledge brought him boundless joy and the certainty of being saved from this world and its oppressive constraints,⁶ then it would have been reason-

⁶ I am partly paraphrasing ALAND, *Gnosis*, 55: "das Auslöschungsmoment für das Phänomen der historischen Gnosis ist m. E. Freude und grenzenloser Jubel. Beides rührt daher, daß die Autoren die 'Gnosis' eines transzendenten Gottes empfangen haben und sich ihm als zutiefst zugehörig erfahren, mehr noch: sich in ihrem eigentlichen Selbst als mit diesem Gott identisch erkennen. Das bedeutet Erlösung von dieser Welt und ihren Zwängen. Davon reden die gnostischen Texte, daher der Jubel."

able for him to assume that Paul, the Great Apostle of Christ Jesus, knew that same truth himself.

One such Christian was Valentinus (perhaps). Born in Egypt roughly around the year 100, Valentinus was educated in philosophy at Alexandria, where he probably also taught for a number of years before moving to Rome in the late 130s. There, according to later detractors, he became prominent enough to be a candidate for a bishop's seat, but lost the election to someone else. After that, in any case, he himself disappears from history, reportedly having quitted Rome some twenty years after his arrival. But he left behind a large circle of influential disciples who spread his (and/or their own) ideas around the Mediterranean basin, where "Valentinianism" survived for centuries. There is evidence for the continued existence of a Christian sect associated with Valentinus's name as late as the end of the seventh century, in Constantinople.⁷

Reportedly,⁸ Valentinus was the pupil of a teacher named Theodas, who had been converted to Christianity by Paul.⁹ In other words, Valentinus was a third-generation Christian, or a second-generation Pauline Christian. He was also a Platonist philosopher and (perhaps) a Gnostic. But we have no clear idea of the order in which these various traditions entered into his personal development.¹⁰ In any event, he is mostly remembered as a Platonist Christian reviser of the Gnostic tradition.¹¹ In my presentation to Prof. Löning's seminar, I suggested that one might thus set the stage for the hypothesis that Valentinus's Christianity (which eventually developed into what we know as Valentinian Gnosticism, or Valentinianism) was somehow an organic development of Pauline Christianity, inspired by the belief that the Apostle's most important teachings constituted a *mysterium tremendum* hidden for ages, but now available to the spiritually perfect. Of course, in order to work out this hypothesis with regard to Valentinus himself, it would be necessary to be able to recover the "historical Valentinus" with some de-

⁷ See further LAYTON, *Scriptures*, 217–222 and 267–275. Layton's presentation of Valentinus has been criticized, especially by MARKSCHIES (*Valentinus*, 293–407, esp. p. 405), who offers a starkly contrasting reconstruction.

⁸ Clem. Alex. *strom.* VII 17 (106.4): "Ebenso behaupten sie auch, daß Valentinus den Theodas gehört habe; dieser war aber ein Schüler [γνώριμος] des Paulus gewesen" (trans. O. Stählin, as quoted by MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus*, 299 n. 45).

⁹ For this meaning of the word γνώριμος, cf. *strom.* VII 9 (53.5). But skepticism about the probability of Clement's report goes all the way back to Harnack: see MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus*, 298–302.

¹⁰ Cf. MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus*, 336 with n. 305.

¹¹ So LAYTON, *Scriptures*, 217–220. Against Layton's reconstruction, MARKSCHIES (*Valentinus*, 405) laments, "Wenn sie sich als Konsens der Forschung durchsetzen sollte, wäre m. E. der historische Valentin tragisch verzeichnet." However, the two authors share a recognition of the importance of mysticism in Valentinus's Christianity.

gree of confidence. Most probably this is an insurmountable difficulty, for lack of satisfactory sources of information.¹² In any case, given that Valentinus was an Egyptian, it is a priori unlikely that he himself was ever a member of a “Pauline community” in the sense that would be important here. More interesting in this respect is the intermediate figure, Theodas, who must have moved to Egypt from one of the Pauline communities on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. He could provide valuable insight into the character of first-generation Paulinism. But about Theodas we know nothing more than his name. And the crucial question for the kind of organic historical connection that I had set out to demonstrate is whether or not we can find evidence for a community in which there was a “sociologically” continuous transmission of Pauline “knowledge” from generation to generation in such a way that this “knowledge” developed, at least among some sub-group of the community’s members, into some form of what we might call Valentinian Gnosticism.

At the time that I was planning my seminar presentation, it seemed to me that evidence for such a community was available in one of the Nag Hammadi texts, namely *The Interpretation of Knowledge*, the first tractate in Nag Hammadi Codex XI, a work that Klaus Koschorke had characterized as a “gnostische Gemeindeordnung” or “Gnostic instructions on the organization of the congregation” from the middle of the second century,¹³ in which “im gnostischen Bereich eine Linie der paulinischen Tradition fortgeführt wird, die im Bereich des normativen Christentums dieser Zeit mehr oder minder abgebrochen ist.”¹⁴ Especially given that the theological orientation of this work was identified by Koschorke as specifically Valentinian (following Elaine H. Pagels’s judgment, which at that time had not yet been published),¹⁵ it seemed

¹² We do not know how Valentinus himself read Paul, but his reading of the Apostle need not have been so thoroughly allegorical as was the interpretation of his disciples’ disciples, about whom we are best informed (that is, the followers of Ptolemy against whom Irenaeus wrote his *Detection and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Knowledge* ca. 180). We have better access to early Valentinian exegesis through Heracleon’s commentary on the Gospel of John (see PAGELS, *Gospel*; MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus*, 393), and we can only mourn the loss of what KOSCHORKE (*Paulus*, 204–205; cf. MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus*, 220) has suggested might have been the earliest known commentary on Paul, written by a Valentinian named Alexander whose work was known to Tertullian (and later also to Jerome). For later Valentinian exegesis of Paul, see PAGELS, *Paul*.

¹³ KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*; idem, *Instructions*.

¹⁴ KOSCHORKE, *Paulus*, 187.

¹⁵ KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*, 31: “wahrscheinlich dem valentinianischen Zweig der christlichen Gnosis zuzurechnen.” The statement quoted from Pagels on p. 32, n. 6, later appeared in print in a slightly altered form (PAGELS, *Introduction*, 30), but without any change in substance. Although Pagels had not said anything about the Valen-

to me that one might be able to use *Interp. Know.* to complete the line of argument that a historical trajectory is traceable from “Paul” to “Valentinus” in terms of a “community” that transmitted – and transformed – the Pauline “knowledge” across generations. Especially significant in this trajectory would be the preservation of a charismatic authority structure within the community, the community’s self-understanding as being the body of Christ (with Christ as the body’s head), and the emergence of an elite group at the community’s center, namely the *pneumatikoi*, the spiritually perfect.

As interesting as such a hypothesis might be (and however stimulating my seminar presentation might have been at the time), I found when I came to try to write it up for publication that I could not finally convince myself that *Interp. Know.* can bear the interpretive weight that I was trying to place on it. Not only has this text’s Valentinian character been challenged,¹⁶ but it is also clear that the work as such cannot be adequately described as a “Gemeindeordnung” and therefore does not necessarily give us direct insight into the organization of a community behind the text. Even though Koschorke had been careful to qualify his use of this term to describe *Interp. Know.* as being “nicht im Sinn der Gemeindeordnungen des katholischen Bereichs, sondern im Sinn der ‘paulinischen Konzeption einer Gemeindeordnung vom Charisma aus’¹⁷ ... ganz bewußt in der paulinischen Tradition, die hier fortentwickelt und weiterinterpretiert erscheint,”¹⁸ still it is very difficult to see how one can move from the fact that “der Verfasser Mahnungen und konkrete Ratschläge zur Wiederherstellung der gestörten Gemeinschaftsbeziehungen ausspricht” to a description of these warnings and

tinian character of *Interp. Know.* in her first published discussion of the text in 1977 (in ROBINSON/MEYER, *Library*, 427, where Pagels described the text’s author only as “a Gnostic teacher”), the revised version of that discussion (in ROBINSON/SMITH, *Library* [3d ed., 1988], 472–473) stated that the author uses “Valentinian theology to interpret [scriptural texts and terms familiar to us from early Christian orthodoxy] to his audience.” In the meantime (PAGELS, *Gospels*, 32, 95, 116), she had designated both the text and its author straightforwardly as Valentinian. See also KOSCHORKE, *Paulus*, 185.

¹⁶ PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 4: “Es scheint mir deshalb [after a brief critique of Pagels’s arguments in favor of the Valentinian character of the text] angeraten, die religionsgeschichtliche Einordnung der ‘Auslegung der Erkenntnis’ [i. e. *Interp. Know.*] nicht durch voreilige Weichenstellungen in schwer zu korrigierende Bahnen zu lenken, sondern sich (zunächst) mit der Feststellung zu begnügen, daß in NHC XI,1 ein christlicher Gnostiker in bewußter Paulustradition ein aufregendes (weil) eigenständiges Stück Theologie vorgelegt hat.”

¹⁷ Quoted from Ernst KÄSEMANN, as cited in Koschorke’s n. 9. For a thorough and sociologically sensitive analysis of the “structure” of the Pauline communities, see MEEKS, *Christians*, chap. 4, “Governance” (Ger. tr. MEEKS, *Urchristentum*, chap. 4, “Die Leitung der Kirche”).

¹⁸ KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*, 32.

pieces of advice as amounting to a “Gemeindeordnung” in *any* meaningful sense of the term. At the same time, it is even less clear to me to what extent, if at all, the author “sich dabei grundsätzlich über das Wesen dieser Gemeinschaft sowie das Verhältnis der verschiedenen Gemeinschaftsfunktionen zueinander äußert.”

Koschorke’s generic description of *Interp. Know.* as a “Gemeindeordnung” has not been adopted by other commentators on the Coptic text, who have preferred to describe the work as a homily,¹⁹ albeit one that offers “Einblicke in die Strukturen einer gnostischen Gemeinde.”²⁰ Pagels’s argument that the text is homiletic was based on “features of style and structure,” in particular the observation that “the author speaks in the first- and second-person plural throughout most of the discourse[,] including himself or herself as a member of the church addressed.” The first part of this observation is perfectly accurate: the authorial voice expresses itself in the first-person plural already on the first page and then consistently so throughout the text.²¹

But the second part of Pagels’s observation is simply false. In support of her claim, she referred to two “speeches that address the congregation directly in the second-person plural,” but where “the author shifts into the first-person singular to adopt the Savior’s direct address,” namely *Interp. Know.* 9:28–38 and 10:18–38. In fact, only in the first of these two passages does the author use the second-person plural, and only in the second does he use the first-person singular.²² But in the first passage, the only occurrences of the second-person plural are in a series of quotations from the Gospels, whence “you” plural is

¹⁹ PAGELS, *Introduction*, 22; PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 3.

²⁰ WURST, *Review*, 234; cf. PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 3, and PAGELS, *Introduction*, 22–23 and *passim*.

²¹ The extant occurrences of first-person plural statements by the author are: *Interp. Know.* 1:24; [none on p. 2]; 3:31(?) .33; 4:26(?) .28(?); 5:38(?); 6:18(?) .28.29; [none on pp. 7–8]; 9:24.26.35.36; 10:9(?); [none on p. 11]; 12:17(?) .22.23.26.28.36.37; [none on pp. 13–14]; 15:10(?) .11(?) .24.27.29; [none on p. 16]; 17:16.22(?); [none on p. 18]; 19:16(?) .36.37; 20:1(?) .3(?); 21:19(?) .20.28.29.30.32.33, the latter being the penultimate line of the text. (The queried passages are uncertain because too little cotext survives to exclude other possible interpretations of the meaning of the surviving words; entirely omitted from consideration in the foregoing list are occurrences that have been restored in lacunas by Turner and/or Plisch, even when these restorations are very likely.) The only apparent exception to this pattern of usage is at 15:12, where the first-person singular occurs (“I say”), but here not enough of the cotext, nor sufficient context, survives to permit secure judgment even about the construction of the sentence.

²² Here adopting the Savior’s first-person singular direct address to a second-person singular feminine, apparently the soul (*pace* PAGELS/TURNER [*Notes*, 80 *ad* 10:20–38], who thought rather of the church as the addressee here; compare the suggestion of PLISCH [*Auslegung*, 108–112, esp. p. 111] that here “der Erlöser vom Kreuz aus zur ψυχή = ἐκκλησία spricht,” perhaps already in line 12 [see PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 108]).

speaks strongly against identifying the work as a homily. Rather, I would like to suggest that the work should be approached as something more akin to a philosophical epistle. Given the manuscript's extremely poor state of preservation, it may never be possible to define the genre of *Interp. Know.* with much precision, but I want to propose that within the surviving corpus of Gnostic literature, *Interp. Know.* might best be grouped with *The Treatise on Resurrection* (NHC I,4)²⁸ and Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*.²⁹ In contrast to these two works, *Interp. Know.* shows no signs of having been framed even superficially as a letter (note, however, that the opening of the work is entirely wanting), but in other respects I think the comparison might well be useful, and perhaps even apt. But in any case, the main thrust of my proposal is rather *away* from designating the work as a "Gemeindeordnung" or homily than *toward* designating it specifically as an epistle or letter of any particular sort.

Before exploring preliminarily this hypothesis about the genre of the text, it is necessary to point out that the two existing critical editions of *Interp. Know.*,³⁰ as useful as they are, pose something of a problem for students of this work. As Gregor Wurst has remarked in his review of the more recent of the two editions, Uwe-Karsten Plisch "hat sich, wie auch schon [John D.] Turner vor ihm, mit seiner Edition durchaus auf ein Wagnis eingelassen."³¹ Which is to say that both editors undertook to provide a *restored* Coptic text.³² Given that out of 585

were addressed to more than one person, as at *Interp. Know.* 6:25, where "seht" could just as well be (and in my view probably should be) "siehe."

²⁸ On the genre of this work, see especially LAYTON, *Treatise*, 119–123, and *Scriptures*, 317–318, referring to "a complex mixture of genres in which certain traditional materials are subordinated to others. I. Philosophical epistle; A. Introductory treatise (*eisagogē*); I. Philosophical sermon (diatribe)."

²⁹ On the genre of this work, see especially MARKSCHIES, *Research*, 228–232, describing the *Letter* as "α διαίετική εισαγωγή in the form of an epistle."

³⁰ TURNER, *Transcription*, with PAGELS/TURNER, *Notes*; PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 8–49, with commentary on pp. 75–162. Note also that the text on which Wolf-Peter Funk's concordance is based, which he describes as "un stade préliminaire dans la préparation de l'édition pour la collection BCNH (par W.-P. Funk, L. Painchaud et E. Thomasen)," which edition is still in preparation, is printed as "texte suivi" in FUNK, *Concordance*, 312–319 (see pp. xx–xxvii for Funk's characterization of the concordated text, and for a list of differences between his text and that of Plisch). Funk judged it necessary to reject a large number of Turner's conjectural restorations, as well as many of those offered by Plisch ("un peu plus prudente en ce qui concerne les lacunes"), for which reason I myself prefer Funk's text. But since the latter is only preliminary and has not yet been presented as a critical edition, I refrain from giving it pride of place in my citations of the text in the present article.

³¹ WURST, *Review*, 234.

³² The "Wagnis" consists in attempting to restore a text of which it had been said: "Die einundzwanzig Seiten nebst dazugestellten Fragmenten sind so zerrissen und frag-

lines of text from which at least one letter trace survives (out of an estimated original total of about 800 lines for the entire text), only some 60 or so are more or less completely intact (none of them in the first eight pages, and most of them on pp. 15–21), such an undertaking requires a great deal of conjecture and hypothesis. I cannot help but wonder if scholarship would not be well served at this point by an edition that sought only to present the surviving evidence as accurately as possible (reporting all possible readings of ambiguous letter traces), restoring lacunas only where effectively certain or highly likely restorations are determinable on the basis of surviving cotext and context.

The problem with the existing editions is that they do not make it easy to distinguish between the facts (the unambiguous surviving evidence of the manuscript and ambiguous readings and restorations that are nonetheless relatively secure) and hypothesis and conjecture on the part of the editors. In the Coptic Gnostic Library edition, the editor of the volume in which Turner's edition appeared cautioned readers to "be aware of extensive restorations of lacunae" and sought to draw attention to the hypothetical character of the text by printing the translations of restored words not just within square brackets as usual, but also in italic type.³³ Wisely cautious as that procedure was, it could only have been fully successful if much more of the translation had been so marked. Plisch, for his part, was generally more cautious in the extent of his restorations (although he adopted many of Turner's conjectures nevertheless), and he undertook always to place the square brackets in his translation around entire words. Still, here too the unwary reader can be misled into thinking that some parts of the text are more secure than they really are, not only because the square brackets do not always enclose as much as they probably should, but also because in such a fragmentary text the translation even of words that survive completely often depends on the conjectural restoration of the nearby lacunas.

As I once pointed out with regard to the text that follows *Interp. Know.* in NHC XI, which survives in a similarly fragmentary condition and was also edited by Turner, "His edition puts forward many detailed hypotheses about the ancient author's intended meaning and the Coptic translator's rendering of it. These hypotheses must now be tested in other philological laboratories with a view to determining which parts of *Val. Exp.* [NHC XI,2] can be established with sufficient certainty to warrant using them as reliable evidence for Valentinian-

mentarisch, daß keine Herstellung von Zusammenhängen oder gar Nachzeichnung eines Gedankenganges möglich ist. Man kann nur von Seite zu Seite die Themen ausmachen, die abgehandelt werden" (COLPE, *Überlieferung*, 110–111).

³³ HEDRICK, *Codices*, xi.

ism, and for the sparsely attested Coptic dialect in which *Val. Exp.* survives (dialect L6).³⁴ Effectively the same can be said of Turner's edition of *Interp. Know.*, and now also of Plisch's edition of it. In the case of *Interp. Know.*, an essential part of the procedure must be trying to ascertain the genre and structure of the work, and this can be done only on the basis of those portions of the text where its purport is more or less clear without recourse to too much conjectural restoration. A useful exercise is to try to read only the extant words (and parts of words) in an effort to get a "feel" for what the text is about. One must be prepared to accept the fact, sad as it is, that much of this text will remain forever unrecoverable unless we are fortunate enough one day to discover another witness to it.

One obvious question touching on the genre of *Interp. Know.* is, how did the Coptic translator know to render his Greek Vorlage's "you" singular, unmarked for gender in Greek, as masculine in Coptic?³⁵ Possibly he made this choice by default, but I regard it as more likely that the name of an individual male addressee is simply lost with the opening 11 lines of the work.³⁶ Difficult as it is to determine the argument of the early pages of the work, it seems to begin with a discussion of faith (or belief) and persuasion (or conviction).³⁷ The line of argument near the end of page 1 (lines 30–35) is relatively clear: a person can be persuaded only on the basis of what he believes, for which reason faith is of fundamental human importance.³⁸ Neither the content of faith, nor the object of persuasion are specified in this passage. Rather we seem to have a general statement of principle, laying the groundwork for going on to discuss the content of faith, on which basis conviction (regarding matters also yet to be discussed specifically) will be achieved. Certain general characteristics of faith³⁹ have

³⁴ EMMEL, *Restoration*, 5. By the way, I should state that while I myself am not fully convinced that *Interp. Know.* is a product of Valentinian Gnosticism, I am also not yet fully convinced that it is not. (The Valentinian character of *Val. Exp.* is not disputed.)

³⁵ Let me state once for all that although I refer to both the author of this work and its Coptic translator as "he," I am open to the possibility that either or both of these individuals was a woman. I also follow the author's (ancient standard) usage of the masculine gender as the default gender, except where it is possible to use modern inclusive language without risking a misrepresentation of the ancient text.

³⁶ See the opening sentences of *Treat. Res.* and Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*.

³⁷ To judge from the certain, or nearly certain, occurrences of the words πειθε (πειθειν), πιστεγε (πιστεύειν), πιστις (πίστις), and ἡπίσταθηστε ("lack of faith") in 1:30.31.35.37 and 2:16.

³⁸ Possibly the author goes on, in lines 35–38, to equate lack of faith with the world, κόσμος (κόσμος), and hence with death. Even if so, this line of thought serves only to underscore the fundamental importance of faith, by contrasting it with the consequences of lack of faith.

³⁹ I regard the restoration of πιστις at the end of 1:24 as very likely, as also the restora-

already been named in lines 24–27: “our faith” should be holy, pure, and “planted in [us].”⁴⁰ It seems likely, therefore, that the sentence (lines 28–30) between these two passages should also be restored, if possible, as a general statement of principle. Despite the relatively small lacunas here, this is a very difficult passage to analyze.⁴¹ I myself think the core statement (line 29) is that “endurance (ΖΥΠΟΜΟΝΗ / ὑπομονή) depends on faith.”⁴² As for what was said in the first half of the page, both editors have seen references to belief based on “signs and wonders” (lines 14–15), to “reproaches and humiliations” (lines 17–18), to the crucifixion (line 21), and to Christ (lines 23–24),⁴³ and both have suggested that faith based on “signs and wonders” is denig-

tion of ΗΑΩΠΕ at the beginning of line 25, and hence also ΧΕΚΑΘΕ in the middle of line 24.

⁴⁰ I prefer Plisch’s restoration ΠΖΗΤΩ to Turner’s ΠΖΗΤΩ. Without going into too much detail, I also think that the contrast here is between faith that is “planted” (that is, firmly rooted) and faith that is characterized somehow by “activity” (but it needs to be investigated just what ΕΠΕΡΕΙ [ἐνεργεῖν] might mean in such a contrast), since faith is apparently the subject (“she”) of both verbs. Furthermore, I think it likely that two different verbs are to be restored at the beginnings of lines 26 and 27 (especially if ΠΗΑΣ, rather than ΔΡΑΣ, is correctly read/restored in line 27, as really does seem to be the case), in keeping with the contrast being drawn (compare the statement by PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 78, with which Turner’s restorations show him to be in agreement).

⁴¹ See WURST, *Review*, 236, although I think he was too quick to endorse Plisch’s text, even in adjusted form.

⁴² Hence I agree with Plisch (*Auslegung*, 78–79) about the meaning of ΔΩΙ ὄ- (which preposition is probably not restricted in its governance of zero-determined nouns), but with Turner that the end of line 29 is to be restored ΠΑΤΙΣ (and hence ΕΡΕ is perhaps a likely restoration at the beginning of line 30). Plisch’s “Auf Grund einer [Lästerung] hängt die Geduld am [Kreuz]” (with “die Geduld” understood “als Synonym für Jesus” [PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 79]) seems to me too specific in its content to fit into the surrounding context. I expect that the prepositional phrase that must be restored across lines 28–29 might have a more generally adverbial meaning, something like “certainly” or “of necessity” (although it was I who first observed, in a report addressed to John Turner from Cairo in 1976, that under ultraviolet light the last letter trace in line 28 cannot be read as Ε but must be read as Ο, I now wonder if Σ is not equally possible; in any case, I am not prepared to offer a specific restoration of the end of this line). Furthermore, I see no motivation for restoring the phrase that introduces this sentence at the beginning of line 28 as a negative statement (Turner/Plisch: ΠΡΩΧΟΟΧ ΧΕ-; Funk wisely left the lacuna unrestored). It could just as well be a rhetorical question, for example: [ΠΗ ΗΑΥ]ΧΟΟΧ, or perhaps an affirmative Aorist [ΠΩ ΦΑΥ]ΧΟΟΧ, in any case the point being to introduce a philosophical claim (“endurance depends on faith”) that is then “proved” by the statement that “a person can be persuaded only on the basis of what he believes.” The unspoken assumption is thus that “endurance” = “conviction.”

⁴³ While I agree with Turner and Plisch that the letters ΕΧ in line 23 are to be read as certain (against Funk’s text), I am inclined to agree with Funk that restoring “Christ” here is overly conjectural. See further n. 45 below.

rated here in favor of faith that has some other basis.⁴⁴ While the occurrence of ἀλλὰ (ἀλλά) in line 17 does indicate that some kind of a contrast is being drawn in this passage, the terms of the contrast are not clear at all. I myself am not convinced that we should try to see any more here than a brief rehearsal of (a part of) the Gospel kerygma (the Savior performed miracles, but was rejected and crucified), introduced as a common basis for the following discussion of faith.

Viewed thus, the author of *Interp. Know.* begins his discussion with a concise statement of basic Christian belief about the biography of Jesus, and then emphasizes that this basis must be firm since, as a general philosophical principle, conviction is grounded in faith (basic beliefs), whence also comes endurance. That “endurance / steadfastness / patience” (ὑπομονή) is finally the focus of the author’s exposition is suggested not only by the apparent content and structure of this opening section, but also by the end of the work, where the author draws on commonplace athletic imagery to underscore “our” special status as “athletes [of] the Logos” (21:27–29),⁴⁵ the point being, then, that if *we* sin, we do worse than the pagans (21:29–30).⁴⁶ The commonplace basis for this a fortiori argument is a comparison between an athlete (Coptic $\omega\alpha\epsilon\iota\chi$ = Greek ἄθλητής) and an ordinary person (ἰδιώτης [ιδιώτης]), both of whom are endowed with the same basic (human) capacity (21:25–27). Of course there is an unstated assumption, which the reader is expected to share, that athletes distinguish themselves from ordin-

⁴⁴ PAGELS/TURNER, *Notes*, 77, suggesting that what is affirmed is faith that “is received through a vision” (line 19, on which see PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 77, whose dissenting interpretation has been seconded by WURST, *Review*, 235); PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 75–76, suggesting that what is affirmed is faith “auf Grund von Spott und Verachtung” (lines 17–18).

⁴⁵ Plisch’s text of 21:25–34 is to be preferred where it differs from Turner’s (except at the end of line 29, on which see note 46 below), and his commentary on the passage (*Auslegung*, 158–161) is a good introduction to its problems. The Logos (see also 3:28, 4:36, 10:24, 17:35) is the “eldest child” (or “Son”) of God the Father (see especially 14:22–23, 27–30, as well as 11:32–38 [with Plisch’s restoration of line 38]) and can be described as (among other things) $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ($\chi\rho\eta\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$) “good / kind” (17:36). The word $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ($\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$) does not occur in the extant text, and it is questionable whether any occurrence of $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ with the definite article in this work should be translated as “the Christ” rather than as “the Good One,” as an epithet of the Logos (the only relatively certain occurrence is at 15:16–17, but see also the restorations of 1:20–21 [Turner] and 1:23–24 [Turner/Plisch]). Possibly the Logos is also called “the Aeon” and “the Greatness” (12:33–36; cf. 11:32–38). The name Jesus occurs once, at 5:38. Compare the list of *dramatis personae* offered by PAGELS, *Introduction*, 24–25, where, however, I fail to see the basis for the assertion that the Son’s “manifestation involves the participation of both the Father and the Mother”; the reference to 11:17–38 does not seem to me to offer any support for this claim.

⁴⁶ Literally: “If *we* sin, we sin more than the pagans.” The end of line 29 is surely to be restored $\delta\iota\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ (not $\delta\iota\mu\alpha\varsigma$) as Turner, Plisch, and Funk all have it).

ary people by doing something extraordinary with their basic capacity.⁴⁷ For “athletes of the Logos,” then, the stakes of the contest are extraordinary: not only does failure to win mean a greater loss (21:29–30), but also the victor’s crown is a greater prize than the ordinary athlete’s crown, since it is comparable to the Father’s glorification of the Savior (21:30–34).⁴⁸ And of course – although this too is not stated explicitly by the author – a salient quality of victorious athletes is their endurance (not only during the contest, but in daily life as well⁴⁹), which is what enables them to achieve something extraordinary with their basic human capacity.⁵⁰

Before turning to the most difficult question raised by the author’s statements at the end of *Interp. Know.*, I should point out, first, that the contest in which the “athletes of the Logos” compete is the struggle to avoid sin. The word “sin” occurs already in line 21 of this page, in a context that is too fragmentary to permit judgment about its exact import,⁵¹ but its occurrence there clarifies how it is that the author can take “sin” – meaning sinful behavior – for granted as the topic to which his athletic comparison refers: given that we are talking about sinful behavior, if we compare ourselves to athletes, then we can see that sinful behavior on our part is a greater lapse than for an ordinary person (comparable to a successful athlete losing a contest that he should

⁴⁷ I agree with PLISCH (*Auslegung*, 160) that in the author’s mind, the difference between an athlete and an ordinary person “nicht primär in einer von vornherein unterschiedlichen Anlage, sondern in der Ausbildung einer grundsätzlich gleichen Anlage besteht.” But I am not convinced that here “athlete” means “im Unterschied zum Soldaten den Schaukämpfer der Arena.” I suspect that this passage would profit from a search for parallel images in roughly contemporary literature (and not only Christian literature).

⁴⁸ In the final sentence of the text, I understand the emphasis (the “new information”) to lie in the “like”-clause: crucial is not *that* the winner will receive the crown (of course the winner receives the crown), but rather *what kind* of crowning it will be (*like the Father glorifying the Savior*). The Coptic construction would be clearer if the Coptic translator had used a focalizing conversion in the apodosis, although the meaning of the text is plain enough from the information structure of the sentence.

⁴⁹ REISCH, *Athletai*, 2053–2054.

⁵⁰ This analysis of the beginning and end of *Interp. Know.* leads me to propose a restoration of the lacuna in the middle of 3:33 that is in keeping with my working hypothesis: [ἴῃϥ], thus giving this sentence fragment the meaning, “that we become surpassing in endurance” (as opposed to Turner’s [ἴῃϥ], “causes us to transcend patience,” and Plisch’s [ἴῃϥ], “uns die Geduld übertreffen läßt”). I may also note that WURST (*Review*, 237), independently, has proposed two restorations that support my hypothesis, suggesting that the verb ὑπομονή(ε)ις (ὑπομένειν) occurs in 5:36 and 12:17. In both cases, “endurance” thus becomes an explicit characteristic of the Savior’s victory on the cross.

⁵¹ Plisch’s suggestion that the passage 21:20–25 should be understood in connection with Rom 5:12–18 is intriguing (especially in its implication that the antecedent of “he” in line 24 is Adam), but it is very speculative.

have won), just as victory for us depends on avoiding sinful behavior of any sort. The Savior's victory brought us forgiveness of sins (*Interp. Know.* 12:24–26, 14:34–38), the greatest of all our sins having been (so it seems⁵²) ignorance of the one true Father in heaven (9:35–10:1, with 9:28–30; see also 15:32–33).

Second, I must point out that in paraphrasing the last lines of the text, I have glossed over a very interesting feature of the author's language, one that is particularly relevant to the context in which I have introduced *Interp. Know.* in this essay, namely that the author refers here not to "the Savior," as I expressed it above,⁵³ but to "our head" (21:33). This designation for the Savior is but the last instance of the author's striking use of the (deutero-)Pauline image of Christ as the head of a body, whose limbs are the members of the church. His use of this image extends from a fine metaphor according to which the Savior's head, bent in death on the cross, drew the church up out of "the pit" (also called Tartaros) just as inevitably as a person who looks down to the reflecting surface of water at the bottom of a well sees his own face looking back up at him (13:25–36),⁵⁴ to a rather concrete conceptualization according to which the Logos and the church constitute a single organism, analogous to the human body, in which the head organizes and controls the functions of the various parts of its body as a harmonious whole, and these parts would not survive if they were separated from the rest of the organism, of which the head is the crucial member (16:28–19:37).

The different parts of the body have different functions, and some are more important than others. Of specific members besides the head, the author mentions eye, hand, foot, and finger, and he makes it clear that the last of these is significantly less important than the others (18:28–32). The purpose of the analogy is to make several points: that diversity of members is an essential characteristic of an organism (17:18–20); that it is better to be even the lowliest member of the organism than not to be a part of it at all (18:33–38), since a severed member is dead apart from the body (17:21–22); and that the health of the organism as a whole depends on each of its parts being healthy and in harmony with the rest (18:15–28). In terms of diverse functions within the church, the author's analogy equates the directing function

⁵² That is, if "this" in 9:38 is anaphoric and not cataphoric (which latter possibility cannot be tested because of the long lacuna at the top of p. 10), and accepting Plisch's (and Funk's) reading of this line rather than Turner's.

⁵³ The designation "Savior" does occur earlier on this final page (21:23), as well as earlier in the work (3:26, 5:30). As noted above (n. 45), this figure is most often referred to in the extant text as Logos and Son.

⁵⁴ Here again I prefer Plisch's text where it differs from Turner's.

of the head with the outflow of different “gifts” that are distributed from a single source among the members of the community (16:28–31). Of specific gifts, the author mentions a “prophetic gift” (15:35–36), “progress in speaking (ἡμεῖς / λόγος [λόγος])” (16:31–35), and (if the author means it to be a “gift”) “understanding the speech” (16:37).⁵⁵ Because the Logos is rich, generous (without φθόνος), and good (χρηστός), distributing its gifts impartially (17:35–38), there is the possibility that a lesser member will receive a greater gift than he has enjoyed heretofore, granted him in return for humility, prayer, and joyful acceptance (17:31–34; cf. 15:26–29.33–35, 16:22–24).

The motivation for this long section on the church as the body of Christ⁵⁶ is to exhort the particular individual to whom the work is addressed to change his attitude toward other members of the community. In contrast to the ideal relationship between member and organism that the author presents, the recipient of this “Lehrbrief” (if I may so call it, provocatively) is jealous of other members of the community who are better endowed with gifts. In particular, if we can judge accurately from the extant remains of the text, he is envious of those who prophesy and preach (if this is what it means to “make progress in speaking”), and he does not understand why he has not been granted such a gift (15:35–38, 16:31–35). Not only does this attitude on the part of one (lesser) member disrupt the harmony of the entire organism and show a gross misunderstanding of the inherent nature and meaning of that organism, but it is also leading the offending member toward alienating himself from the community, a circumstance that the author describes as “loving (?) the dead members instead of the living” (17:23–25) and even as hatred for his fellow members (17:27, 18:38–19:1, 16:27), who are his “brethren” (17:26; cf. 15:38, 16:31). Instead, he should be content with the portion he has received (15:26–29, 18:28–38) and enjoy his status as a member of a body which is, as a whole, suffused with grace (15:33–35, 16:22–31.35–38, 17:28–31), in the hope that in time he might enjoy a greater portion himself (17:31–34).⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*, 35–39 (but I am skeptical about his paragraphs d, e, and f); idem, *Instructions*, 760–761.

⁵⁶ This phrase itself does not occur in *Interp. Know.*, but I use it in recognition of the fact that the author’s conception here stands in the tradition of Christian ecclesiology that is generally so designated. See PLISCH, *Auslegung*, 146–149 (excursus on “Die Entfaltung der Leib-Christi-Vorstellung in Inter als Rezeption paulinischer und deuteropaulinischer Texte”); KOSCHORKE, *Paulus*, 185–188; idem, *Gemeindeordnung*, 40–42; idem, *Instructions*, 761–762.

⁵⁷ In order to underscore the organic unity of the community, the author avails himself of another metaphor, this one agricultural (19:27 to somewhere at the top of p. 20). LAYTON (*Scriptures*, 285 n. 1.2.6b) has observed that “the Valentinian school charac-

In conclusion, I want to broach what I referred to above as the most difficult question raised by the author's statements at the end of *Interp. Know.*, and in the process return briefly to the general problem with which this essay began. The specific problem at the end of *Interp. Know.* is to determine what was the relationship among the three (or four) "groups" represented (whether factually or fictitiously is unimportant at the present stage of research) in the work: the author, the addressee, and the other members of the community (or at least some of them, perhaps divisible into two groups: those whom the author regards warmly ["brethren"], and those whom he characterizes as "dead" [17:24]). Koschorke's analysis of *Interp. Know.*, although in retrospect probably to be judged as over-hasty in certain important respects (and in any case to be reexamined in light of recent progress in the establishment of the Coptic text), demonstrated the likelihood that "the conflict" that seems to have provided the occasion for the author's writing is "between Gnostic pneumatics and ordinary, 'simple' members of the congregation."⁵⁸ But to which group does the addressee belong? Does the author think of all Christians (as long as they are not "dead members") as "athletes of the Logos"? Or are the athletes only the pneumatics? And what does the author want for the likes of his addressee? Can we be certain that the author belongs to the circle of pneumatics, or might he be a simple Christian teacher who admires the pneumatics and acknowledges their greater gifts? I believe it will be possible to answer these questions eventually, but only after scholars have wrestled much more extensively, and intensively, with the problems posed by the text, in the unfortunate condition in which it has come down to us. I hope that the eagerly anticipated publication of the BCNH edition by Wolf-Peter Funk et al.⁵⁹ might provide an occasion to pursue such questions further.

Koschorke's provocative analysis about *Interp. Know.* can no longer be accepted wholesale, if for no other reason than that he assumed (like Pagels and others) that the work is addressed to the community as a whole, and not just to a single individual. From the latter point of view, which I have tried to establish in this essay, it is no longer possible to accept sweeping statements about *Interp. Know.* such as that "the author directly addresses the situation of a community that he sees

teristically spoke of emanations and the process of emanation with agricultural metaphors," and such imagery is also to be found in Paul. Another (commonplace?) image in *Interp. Know.* that deserves further exploration (at least partly in the hope of achieving a more satisfactory restoration of the text) is that involving the musical terms ἄρμονία, συμφωνεῖν, and συμφωνία (18:22–28).

⁵⁸ KOSCHORKE, *Instructions*, 760; somewhat more extensively: idem, *Gemeindeordnung*, 43–45.

⁵⁹ See n. 30 above.

torn by jealousy and hate over the issue of spiritual gifts.”⁶⁰ The author’s use of Pauline and deuter-Pauline concepts and terminology to do with charismatic gifts and the church as the body of Christ is very likely purely rhetorical, based on reading the letters of Paul and not (or in any case not necessarily) a reflection of his community’s self-understanding in a concrete sociological sense. As interesting as the author’s use of the Pauline tradition is – and it is very interesting indeed, and I might wish that I had reached a different conclusion in my recent work with it – I doubt very much that *Interp. Know.* can be used as “das Dokument einer pneumatisch-charismatischen Gemeindeorganisation”⁶¹ in which a Christian community self-consciously governed itself according to “der paulinischen Konzeption einer Gemeindeordnung vom Charisma aus,”⁶² thus structuring itself primarily according to a metaphysical self-identity as the body of Christ, their head. But before such a conclusion can be definitively accepted or rejected, a more nuanced – or perhaps better, a differently nuanced – interpretation is called for. If this is a step backwards from what I had set out to do in my presentation to Prof. Löning’s seminar, I hope it is also a step forward in the analysis and understanding of *Interp. Know.*, which is in any case a very interesting – if also highly problematic – document of early Christianity.

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⁶⁰ PAGELS, *Introduction*, 22. Cf. KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*, 34: “Inter richtet sich an eine Gemeinschaft, deren Zusammenhalt bedroht ist. Er ist gefährdet durch den wechselseitigen ‘Haß’ und ‘Streit’ zwischen den Gliedern, durch ihren Dünkel, Verachtung, ‘Verleumdung’ sowie die Selbstgenügsamkeit, in der sie sich voneinander abkapseln” and so on.; similarly: idem, *Instructions*, 759.

⁶¹ KOSCHORKE, *Gemeindeordnung*, 45; cf. idem, *Instructions*, 763.

⁶² See n. 17 above.

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