The New Testament in Byzantium

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The Reception of Paul and of Pauline Theology in the Byzantine Period

FR. MAXIMOS CONSTAS

The Paul of modern biblical studies, and to a significant extent of the modern Christian imagination, is a figure that has been largely constructed in the wake of the Reformation. Justification by faith, the mutual exclusivity of law and gospel, a radical doctrine of original sin and predestination, the repudiation of natural theology, and an opposition between faith and liturgical worship are among the predominant features of Paul as he appears in Wittenberg and Geneva. But there is another Paul, who, though relegated to the margins of modern biblical scholarship, stands at the very center of the Byzantine exegetical and theological tradition. The Byzantine portrait of Paul places in bold relief the apostle’s dramatic conversion experience, his vision of the divine light, his self-identification with Christ, his ascent to the third heaven, and his gift of divine grace and wisdom—features that are generally grouped under the now politically incorrect category of Pauline “mysticism” and that remain by far the most neglected and misunderstood aspects of Paul’s life and work. These same features, however, figure prominently in the exegesis of the Greek fathers and especially the later Byzantine writers, in a unified tradition of Pauline interpretation extending from late antiquity to the end of the Palaiologan period and beyond. The Byzantine interpretation of Paul is an important area of study, both to better understand the later Byzantine theological tradition and for the retrieval of a uniquely meaningful option in the study of a figure whose importance for Christianity is second only to that of Christ himself.


2 The classic study by Albert Schweitzer (The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle [Tübingen, 1931; Eng. trans. 1968]) was a counterblast to the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith. Pauline “mysticism” is now generally referred to as “participation in Christ,” on which, see J. D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids, MI, 2006), 390–412. Dunn noted that, unlike the “judicial metaphor of justification,” the notion of “participation in Christ” is the “more natural extension of Paul’s Christology,” adding that Paul’s language of being “in Christ” is “much more pervasive in his writings than his talk of ‘God’s righteousness’” (pp. 390–91), and that the “study of participation in Christ leads more directly into the rest of Paul’s theology than justification” (p. 395). Despite these positive assessments, Dunn devoted only twenty pages to this “pervasive” theme in a book of some eight hundred pages.
The Letters of Paul

The Byzantine Old Testament contains up to forty-nine books written by dozens of authors over the course of more than 1,000 years. In contrast, the New Testament contains twenty-seven documents traditionally attributed to nine different authors over a period of perhaps 50–60 years. Three of these authors produced nearly seventy-five percent of the total content of the New Testament, and one of the three, the apostle Paul, wrote nearly one-third of it. Of the fourteen letters traditionally ascribed to Paul, seven, i.e., Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon, are universally accepted as authentic. For literary, historical, and theological reasons, the authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus is disputed by modern scholars. The Letter to the Hebrews, which is anonymous, is not believed to be by Paul. Byzantine exegetes were not unaware of the literary and other differences between these letters, but this did not prevent them from believing in the unity not simply of the corpus Paulinum but of the Bible as a whole, a notion that itself is a fundamental hermeneutical principle directly related to the process of interpretation and reception. From this point of view, the Byzantine portrait of Paul is based just as much on the letters that bear his name as it is on the heroic figure of the great missionary, preacher, and miracle worker described in Acts of the Apostles.

3 This is the total number of Old Testament books that were recognized by various local councils and individual church fathers whose canons were collectively ratified in 692 by the Council in Trullo (canon 2).

4 Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians are often further isolated as a “canon within the canon” of Paul’s letters, and identified as the Hauptbriefe by German biblical scholars. David Trobisch (Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins [Minneapolis, 1994]) argued that Paul himself collected and edited these four letters, which he intended to be read as a unit. Such views, however, are reductive when compared to the more comprehensive approach of the Byzantines.

5 It has been suggested that these letters were written or redacted by followers of Paul after his death, and were perhaps based on recollections of his oral teaching and/or on letters that no longer survive.

6 Although it was generally accepted as such by patristic and Byzantine exegetes; cf. R. Greer, The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews (Tübingen, 1975); L. T. Johnson, Hebrews: A Commentary (Louisville and London, 2006), 3–43.

Early Receptions of Paul

The reception of Paul in the Christian tradition begins already in the New Testament. In the concluding verses of 2 Peter, the reader is exhorted to a way of life consistent with what Paul teaches in his letters:

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him (κατὰ τὴν δοθεῖσαν αὐτῷ σοφίαν), as he does in all his other letters, whenever he speaks of these matters. There are some things in these letters that are hard to understand (δυσνόητα τινα), which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Pet. 3:13–16).

These brief statements contain several points that are important for understanding Paul’s reception in the Byzantine world. The word δοθεῖσαν (“given”), in the phrase κατὰ τὴν δοθεῖσαν αὐτῷ σοφίαν, is parsed as a “divine passive,” with God as the implied agent, so that Paul’s “wisdom” is a charismatic gift from God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10). From this it follows that the letters of Paul are divinely inspired and are to be ranked with “the other scriptures,” that is, the Old Testament and presumably other apostolic literature.

7 A Byzantine catena on 2 Peter glossed this phrase with an extract from Cyril of Alexandria, Answers to Tiberius 12 (“It seems to some that the all-wise [πάνσοφος] Paul says certain things ‘hard to understand,’ but there is no doubt that these things are filled with the wisdom that is from above [σοφίας τῆς θεοῦ μετέχων], since Christ speaks in him”), ed. J. A. Cramer, Catena in epistolam Petri ii (Oxford, 1840; repr. Hildesheim, 1967), 103; the text by Cyril was edited by L. Wickham, Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters (Oxford, 1985), 168, lines 20–12.

8 For a detailed study of 2 Peter, see R. J. Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter (Waco, TX, 1983), 131–54.


10 Polycarp of Smyrna, Philippians 12 (ca. 135), cited Ephesians 4:26 together with Psalm 4:5 as “scripture.” The same letter also cited from 1 Corinthians, along with possible allusions to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and 1–2 Timothy; cf. M. W. Holmes, “Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians and
suggests that the author of 2 Peter had, or at least knew of, a collection of Paul’s letters, and, perhaps, that these were suitable for use in Christian worship.\footnote{11} Paul being the recipient of divine wisdom—he had beheld realities that “no eye had seen, nor ear heard”—that could be expressed only through “things hard to understand” (cf. 2 Cor. 12:4) is a theme deeply woven into the subsequent history of patristic and Byzantine interpretation, becoming especially prominent in the theological controversies of the late Byzantine period.

Strong interest in this theme notwithstanding, late Byzantine writers did not display much curiosity in this intriguing passage from 2 Peter, but neither did they entirely ignore it. At a late stage in the theological dispute that became known as the Hesychast controversy, Nikephoros Gregoras claimed that “just as Peter warned us about twisting the words of Paul (2 Pet. 3:16), so, too, should we distrust Palamas, who twists the words of the church fathers.”\footnote{12} As shall be seen below, Palamas and his disciples argued that, to the contrary, it was their opponents who had twisted the words of scripture, precisely because they had failed to grasp the “difficult things” in Paul’s letters.

\section*{Origen}

The history of detailed exegesis on the letters of Paul begins with Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254).\footnote{13} A brilliant biblical scholar, it is to be regretted that Origen’s voluminous sermons, scholia, and commentaries on the letters of Paul have not survived intact. Thus, his commentaries on 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Thessalonians,\footnote{14} Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews are extant only in fragments found in catenae and other sources.\footnote{15} Origen’s commentary on Romans, comprising fifteen books, survives in a fifth-century Latin translation by Rufinus, along with a number of Greek fragments.\footnote{16} This is the Alexandrian exegete’s only biblical commentary to survive in a coherent form from beginning to end, though it has been reduced to about half its original length by Rufinus’s abbreviated translation. It nonetheless remains Origen’s lengthiest extant work, second only to \textit{Contra Celsum}. The commentary touches on almost every verse of the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
  \footnotesize
  \item[11] It is not certain what “letters” 2 Peter refers to, but the letter’s argument suggests Galatians, Colossians, or Ephesians. 2 Peter, which modern scholars do not accept as authentically Petrine, was written perhaps ca. 80 or 90, by which time Paul’s letters were in wide circulation and enjoyed virtual canonical status. By the third century, the canonization of Paul’s letters was more or less complete, and subsequent statements of the faith had to be based on them no less than on the Old Testament and gospels.
  \item[14] Jerome, \textit{Ep.}, 33.4, our source for the list of Origen’s lost Pauline commentaries, does not say whether Origen commented on 1 or 2 Thessalonians.
  \item[16] Including fragments found in the Touna papyrus, the Cappadocian \textit{PhiloKalos}, and the Pauline catenae; cf. \textit{CPG} 1457; T. P. Scheck, “Introduction,” in Origen, \textit{Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans}, trans. idem (Washington, DC, 2001), 17–18. It is a pleasure for me to acknowledge my debt to the outstanding work of Thomas Scheck.
\end{thebibliography}
letter, and is the longest patristic commentary on Romans. It is, moreover, one of Origen’s last and most mature works, and its value has long been recognized both by patrologists and specialists on Romans.17

Origen’s interpretation of Romans differed markedly from the way he interpreted the writings of the Old Testament. Though generally categorized as a thoroughgoing allegorist, Origen’s commentary on Romans is a largely literal exposition of Paul’s letter from beginning to end. This is because Origen was an allegorist first and foremost when he interpreted the Old Testament but only secondarily an allegorist when he interpreted the gospels, and almost never an allegorist when interpreting the letters of Paul.18 Virtually all subsequent patristic and Byzantine allegorists follow this pattern, so that in the case of Paul’s letters, more than with any other book or passage of the Bible, we come closest to speaking legitimately of a unified Greek tradition of exegesis.19

Origen’s methods did not change when he expounded on Paul’s letters but the material is different. In Paul’s literal words Origen found that the apostle has already unfolded the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament, e.g., of Adam as a type of Christ (1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–49; Rom. 5:12–21); of the spiritual nature of Abraham’s faith and circumcision (Rom. 2:28–29; 4:1–25; 9:6–13, 24–30; Gal. 3:6–29; Col. 2:11; Heb. 11:8–12, 17–19); of Abraham’s two children (an “allegory,” according to Gal. 4:22–31); of Moses and the spiritual nature of the law (Rom. 7:4–15); of the Exodus narrative (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7–8; 10:14; 2 Cor. 3:12–14; Heb. 3:7–4:11; 12:18–29); of prophecies concerning the identity of the Messiah (Rom. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 1:1); of the inclusion of the gentiles into the Church (Rom. 9:24–30); of the Old Testament sacrificial cult (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:12–10:22; 13:10–16), and so on.20 With Paul, Origen had no need to dig beneath the surface to find the spiritual meaning of the text. Unlike the Old Testament and the gospels, Paul’s letters present—in their literal and historical argument—a spiritual exegesis and a theologically elaboration of the Christian understanding of the Old Testament. Consequently, Origen’s interpretive task was simply to clarify Paul’s terminology and elucidate the pattern of his thinking literally and historically.21

In addition to Origen’s interpretation of Paul it is necessary to speak of Paul’s impact on Origen. Origen’s thought, indeed the very pattern of his thinking, was deeply influenced by Paul’s terminology and theology, an influence that grew greater during the last twenty years of his life when he embarked upon a series of detailed commentaries on Paul’s letters. For Origen Paul was simply the “greatest of biblical exegetes.”22 Like Chrysostom, whom I shall consider in a moment, Origen had a special devotion to Paul, who provided him with the fundamental principles of his own “spiritual” exegesis.23 “If one would be a Christian, and a disciple of Paul, let him listen when he says that the law is spiritual.”24 In the school of Paul spiritual exegesis was not merely an exercise in conventional exegetical procedures; rather it called for the personal transformation of the exegete. The symbol of this change was Paul’s ascent to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2–4), which Origen understood both as a living model for the soul’s passage from visible to invisible realities and as a paradigm for

18 Cf. M. F. Wiles, The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles in the Early Church (Cambridge, 1967), 8: “The basic divergence between an allegorical and a more literal approach to scripture is far less relevant to the interpretation of Paul’s writings than it is to that of the Old Testament or of the gospels. So although the varieties of exegesis are many and interesting, we may come nearer with the Pauline epistles than with any other major portion of the scriptures to speaking legitimately of a Greek tradition of exegesis,” partly cited in Scheck, “Origen’s Interpretation of Romans,” 23 n. 49.
19 Ibid., 25, citing de Lubac, History and the Spirit, 263.
22 Origen, Homily 6.1 on Genesis (SC 7bis:182–84).
the transformative, exegetical movement from “letter to spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6; cf. Rom. 2:29; 7:6).25

The next surviving Greek commentaries on Paul’s letters were written a full century and a half after Origen. They belong to the early fifth century and are the work of the Antiochene writers John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Kyrrhos, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.26 These writers were generally hostile to Origen’s allegorical reading of scripture, which in some cases led them to espouse a narrowly literal and theologically reductive understanding of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Of these writers Chrysostom is by far the most important for the later Byzantine tradition, not least because he conveyed to the Byzantine world the positive achievements of Antiochene exegesis without any of its extremes or deficiencies. It is to him that we now turn.

John Chrysostom

Chrysostom’s reputation as a biblical commentator and his voluminous exegetical writings—extant in some 2,000 manuscripts—won universal acclaim from later generations of Byzantine exegetes. For the Byzantines, Chrysostom was the archetype of the biblical exegete, and his Pauline commentaries—which constitute nearly half of his extant sermons27—enjoyed unparalleled acclaim, diffusion, and influence. No other church father had written so much about Paul, and none had been so extravagantly devoted to him. One of Chrysostom’s contemporaries, Isidore of Pelusium (d. ca. 450), remarked that “had Paul chosen to write in Attic Greek to interpret his letter to the Romans, the results would not be different from what we find in Chrysostom.”28 These sentiments were enshrined in the belief that Paul appeared in a vision to Chrysostom and explained to him the meaning of his letters, a tradition that is as old as the seventh century and became a subject for iconography.29 This tradition was given lapidary expression in an eleventh-century epigram: “The mouth of Christ is Paul, and the mouth of Paul is Chrysostom.”30 Linking Paul to Chrysostom in this way makes Chrysostom himself an inspired writer, grants his Pauline commentaries authoritative status, and places his work in continuity with scripture’s divine source of inspiration.31

Just as we saw with Origen, Chrysostom’s exegesis was animated by deep devotion to the

25 For Origen’s use of Paul’s ascent as an exegetical principle, see Origen, On First Principles 2.7.4 (SC 252:33); idem, Homily 4.2 on Exodus (SC 12:110–12; cf. p. 112 n. 23); idem, Homily 21.4 on Judah (SC 71:462–63; idem, Commentary on John 15:28–36 (SC 212:46–50); idem, Commentary on Romans 10.43 (PG 14:1190–92); idem, Exhortation to Martyrdom 13 (GCS 111); idem, Contra Cæolum 1.48 (SC 132:101–8); ibid., 6.6 (SC 147:1190–92); ibid., 7.43 (SC 150:114–16).
27 According to J. Quasten, Patrology (Westminster, 1960), 3:441–51, i.e., 31 homilies on Romans; 44 on 1 Corinthians; 30 on 2 Corinthians; 14 on Ephesians; 15 on Philippians; 12 on Colossians; 11 on Thessalonians; 18 on 1–2 Timothy; 6 on Titus; 3 on Philemon; and 14 on Hebrews. Chrysostom’s commentary on Galatians survives in the summarized form of a treatise.
28 Isidore of Pelusium, ep. 1255 (V.32): Εν τῇ Εὐαγγελίῳ τῆς πρὸς Ραμαύον Εὐστολίῳ … οἷοι γὰρ … ὁ Παῦλος ὁ διστήσιος Αὐτηκνὴ εὐδοκιμήσας, ὄτι ἐκ τούτου ἐρρημόθη, σὺν ἀν δὲ ἄλλος ἠρμόθησεν ἢ ὁ προερμήματα σώζοντας αὐθάνετο (SC. 42:1:52, lines 1–6).
31 John of Damascus, On the Orthodox Faith 90.4.17: “It was through the Holy Spirit that the law, prophets, evangelists, apostles, shepherds, and teachers spoke” [ed. B. Kotter [Berlin, 1975], 2:1209, lines 9–11]. Karin Krause (Illustrierten Homilien, 196), suggests that linking Chrysostom directly to Paul provides the former with something like the status of an acheiropoietos, whose authority is not derived from human hands but directly through divine intervention.
person of Paul. Chrysostom’s extraordinary perfor-
ation on the “dust of Paul,” rising from the
ground on the day of the resurrection, is surely
the most famous and rhetorically stirring praise
of Paul in all of Christian literature.32 For Origen
it was Christ, living in the apostles, who spoke in
the apostolic letters. Not one word or jot within
them was superfluous, and every detail had to be
treated with importance.33 These beliefs were
amplified by Chrysostom, who likewise claimed
that it was Christ himself who directed the mind
and words of Paul, so that every word of the
apostle and every detail of his life were of great
value to the Christian.34 In his boundless admira-
tion for the apostle, Chrysostom unabashedly
avowed that when God created the stars and the
sun the angels sang for joy, but it was with much
greater joy that they hailed God’s gift of Paul to
the world.35

Lavish praises of Paul are to be found
throughout Chrysostom’s homilies although they
are most fully developed in his seven Encomia
on the Holy Apostle Paul. In these Encomia,
Chrysostom represented Paul as the supreme
divine apostle, a situation that caused him great
distress and motivated much of his moralizing
discourse. His aim was to inculcate in his listen-
ers a deeper acquaintance with Paul, a deeper
understanding of his message, in the hope of fun-
damentally reorienting and transforming their
lives in light of the virtues made visible in Paul.36

Chrysostom’s devotion to Paul means that
his larger hermeneutical framework is not a
set of methodological principles but the per-
son of the sainted author. Intensely familiar
with Paul and deeply conversant with his writ-
ings, Chrysostom’s first task as an exegete was
to provide his audience with a genuine exposi-
tion of Paul’s argument—thus, to establish the
literal meaning of the text, typically by work-
ing through it verse by verse, chapter by chapter,
employing all the contemporary tools of textual
analysis. As a highly trained rhetor he was espe-
cially sensitive to Paul’s own rather formidable
rhetoric. Yet this is never exegesis for its own
sake, for Chrysostom was not writing academic
commentaries in a university library but deliv-
ering sermons to his flock from the pulpit of a
church. It follows that exposition of the sacred
author is never without a strong ethical applica-
tion or, famously, a stirring moral exhortation.
Moreover, Chrysostom’s devotion to Paul did
not prevent him from being acutely aware that
his congregation was not on the same level as the
divine apostle, a situation that caused him great
distress and motivated much of his moralizing
discourse. His aim was to inculcate in his listen-
ers a deeper acquaintance with Paul, a deeper
understanding of his message, in the hope of fun-
damentally reorienting and transforming their
lives in light of the virtues made visible in Paul.37

Fully and at times painfully aware of human
weakness and societal injustice, Chrysostom’s
realistic understanding of the human condition
never lost sight of the possibility of human trans-
formation in God. The resulting sermons conse-
quentially offer a wealth of exegetical, theological,
and anthropological teachings and concepts that
have won them an enduring place in the history
of Pauline exegesis.

Chrysostom’s homilies on the letters of Paul
continued to be studied throughout the later
Byzantine period, evidenced by the compilation
of various anthologies, florilegia, and the large
number of manuscripts containing his homilies
that were copied between the thirteenth and fif-
teenth centuries.38 As shall be seen, Chrysostom’s

32 Chrysostom, Homily 32.2–4 on Romans (PG 60:678–682); cf. Mitchell, Heavenly Trumpet, 121–34.
33 See Origen, fragment from Matthew 218 (GCS 40:104); idem, Commentary on Romans 2.6; 10.25 (trans. Scheck [n. 16 above], 1:118; 2:195); Wiles, Divine Apostle, 14–25.
34 Chrysostom, Homily 1.7 on Galatians: “When I say Paul, I mean Christ, for Christ is the one who moves his soul” (PG 61:64.4); cf. idem, Homily 1.2 on Hebrews: “How great is the sagacity of the apostle! Yet this sagacity is not from Paul, but from the Spirit, for it is not from his own mind that he uttered such words, but by means of divine activity” (PG 65:15).
35 Chrysostom, Homily 4.1 on Philippians (PG 62:106).
37 On which, see J. Maxwell, Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and His Congregation in Antioch (Cambridge, 2006).
38 For manuscripts of Chrysostom’s homilies on Romans and Corinthians copied between the thirteenth and fifteenth cen-
turies, a search of Pinakes (http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr) reports
lofty view of Paul and the exemplary nature of his life would be taken to even greater heights by the late Byzantine Hesychasts.

**Dionysios the Areopagite**

The corpus of writings ascribed to St. Paul’s Athenian convert, Dionysios the Areopagite (Acts 17:34), marks a significant but still largely unrecognized milestone in the reception of Paul in the Byzantine world. Having determined that these writings are the forgeries of a sixth-century impostor who rather artlessly plagiarized passages from the philosopher Proklos, modern scholarship has spent more than a century reducing the corpus to its Neoplatonic antecedents. Among other things, this has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring Dionysios’s links to the theology of Paul. Needless to say, it is counterintuitive to think that a writer who went to so much trouble to pose as the disciple of Paul would produce a body of theological literature that exhibits no interest in Paul’s thinking. A reexamination of the corpus with an eye to the Pauline citations—of which there are around 400—strongly suggests that the celebrated *corpus Dionysiacum* is an integral interpretation and development of theological themes in Paul’s letters.41

A close reading of key passages from Dionysios’s most famous work, *De divinis nominibus* (*On the Divine Names, DN*), will help to make this clear.42 A telling point presents itself immediately in Dionysios’s signature designation of the scriptures as λόγια (DN 1.1; 107.5). This word occurs nearly 200 times in the corpus, and is typically translated as “oracles” and understood as a “pagan influence.”43 However, it is a designation for scripture in Romans 3:2 and Hebrews 5:12,44 as well as in 1 Peter 4:11, Acts 7:38, and in the Septuagint more generally.45 To be sure, Dionysios probably intended both the Christian and the pagan meaning, employing the same equivocation Paul used so effectively on the day of Dionysios’s conversion (Acts 17:22).46 To

41 One of the few scholars to have acknowledged the influence of Paul on Dionysios is Alexander Golitzin in *Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita with Special Reference to Its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessalonike, 1994), 234–42, esp. 241: “It is our contention that the main lines of the corpus Dionysiacum...are already present in embryo in the New Testament, especially in those writings traditionally ascribed to the Apostle Paul.” Golitzin enumerates seven such lines, two of which are pertinent to our discussion, i.e., that God is forever transcendent and unknowable in his own being; and that he is, or rather by his own will has become, nonetheless participable, sharing his own names and attributes with his creatures.


43 See, for example, A. Louth, *Denis the Areopagite* (London, 1989), 22: “Even his (i.e., Dionysios) attitude to the Scriptures is given a ‘pagan’ colouring. He hardly ever uses the Christian word (graphe), but prefers to refer to them as ‘oracles’ (logia), using the words the pagans used.”

44 The letter to the Hebrews is unique in the New Testament for never using the word “scripture” (graphe), but instead introduces biblical citations with verbs of speaking, such as God “said” or “says” (e.g., Heb 1:5, 6; 2:12; 8:8, etc.). This oral rather than textual delivery of scripture may have also influenced Dionysios’s preference for describing scripture not as a written text (graphe) but as the living words (logia) of God.

45 E.g., Dt. 33:9; Num. 24:4, 16; Pss. (LXX) 11:7; 17:31; 106:11; 118:11, 103, 148, 158; Wis. 16:11.


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The following: of the homilies on Romans, there are 35 manuscripts (out of 100); of the homilies on 1 Corinthians, 39 (out of 108); and of the homilies on 2 Corinthians, 16 (out of 65). For the anthologies, see J. Bompaire, “Les catalogues de livres-manuscrits d’époque byzantine (Xcix–Xxv s.),” in *Byzance et les Slaves: Études de civilisation: Mélanges Ivan Dujčev* (Berlin, 1997), 59–81, who identifies five collections of the *Margartai* or “Pearls” in late Byzantine manuscripts (nos. 13, 15, 23, 28, 39).

40 The article by K. Corrigan and M. Harrington, “Pseudo-Dionysius: The Mediation of Sacred Traditions” (in *The Invention of Sacred Traditions*, ed. J. R. Lewis and O. Hammer [New York, 2007], 241–57), is representative of this approach: the “Dionysian pseudonym raises two questions: first, why the author chose to take a pseudonym at all, and second, why he chose the Athenian convert of the Apostle Paul as the purported author of his work” (p. 244). In response, the authors argue that the writer adopted the persona of a pagan convert solely to make free use of pagan philosophy (p. 248), but never consider the writer’s obvious interest in the theology of Paul. Even the otherwise excellent and insightful work by P. T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, 2004), considers Dionysios’s identification with Paul to be “a somewhat flimsy disguise,” a “ruse” concealing his deeper identification with Proclus (p. 258). And see C. Stang, *Apotasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: ‘No Longer I’* (New York, 2012).
reduce this ambiguity to only one of its constituent terms is to eliminate the subtle, multilayered linguistic device whereby Dionysios signaled his continuity with the rhetorical practice of Paul.

A few lines further into the treatise, Dionysios proposed to explore the biblical names of God against the epistemological background of knowledge and ignorance, correlated to an understanding of the divinity as both revealed and concealed. He began by citing a passage from 1 Corinthians, in which he found a universal “rule” or “law” (διάνοιας) (DN 1:1; 107.5), namely, that truth should never be established “by plausible words of human wisdom but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4) (DN 1:1; 108.1–2).47 Paul’s distinction between “plausible words of human wisdom” and the “demonstration of divine power” expressed the apostle’s sense of a fundamental discontinuity between the “wisdom of the world” and the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:20–21), which Dionysios transformed into a systematic principle delineating the limits of human cognition. The fact that the divinity cannot be grasped by human knowledge follows logically for Dionysios from the teaching of the apostle, who—with a string of apophatic adjectives—described the divinity as “invisible,” “unsearchable,” and “inscrutable” (ἀόρατος, ἀνεξερεύνητος, ἀνεξιχνίαστος), an allusive intertwining of language from Romans 1:20; 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:11; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27; and Ephesians 3:8 (DN 1:2; 107.5–10).48

The same divinity, however, that Dionysios—following Paul—declared to be beyond all being and knowledge is nonetheless revealed in the “divine names” given to it by sacred scripture, which figures the divine under a myriad of titles, attributes, and symbolic forms. Dionysios was uncompromising in his insistence that one must “never think or say anything about the divine that has not been revealed in scripture” (DN 1:1; 108.6–8), for it is in scripture that the mind beholds the invisible God emptying himself into the forms of perceptible symbols (DN 1.4). God himself, however, is not a symbolic object of perception, being essentially dissimilar to all forms and symbols, from which it follows that, for the mind to ascend to God, all such symbols must be negated.49

In elaborating a theology of negation, Dionysios may appear to have cast off his Pauline moorings and drifted away into a sea of philosophical abstractions. Yet even this most Byzantine of theologians is securely anchored in a passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Dionysios explained that, even if the divine is called “Wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Eph. 3:10; Col. 2:3), it nevertheless transcends all wisdom, in consequence of which the unqualified use of the word “wisdom” fundamentally misrepresents the reality of God. And this, Dionysios told us:

Was something that was grasped by that truly divine man [i.e., Paul], who . . . having understood it in a manner beyond nature, said: “The foolishness of God is wiser than men” [1 Cor. 1:23], not only because all discursive thinking (διάνοια) is a sort of error when compared to the stability and permanence of the divine and most perfect conceptions (νοησις), but also because it is customary for the theologians [i.e., the biblical writers, in this case Paul] to apply negative terms to God in a manner contrary to the usual sense of pravation . . . And here the divine apostle is said to have praised the “foolishness of God,” which in itself seems absurd and strange, but which raises us up to the ineffable truth which is before all reason (DN 7.1; 193,10–194,6).50

Dionysios stated clearly that the source of his theology was Paul, a claim he substantiated by his reading of 1 Corinthians 1:25. This is to

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47 In his commentary on this passage, Paul Rorem (Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence [New York, 1995], 133–34) makes no mention of the citation from 1 Corinthians (which the critical edition places in quotation marks and cites in the apparatus) and seems unaware of its function as a Pauline structuring principle in Dionysios’s argument.


49 Dionysios discusses the question of “dissimilar images” in On the Celestial Hierarchy 2.

50 Dionysios’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:25 is further developed by Maximos the Confessor, Ambigua 71.2–3; see Maximos the Confessor, On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, ed. N. Constas, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, vol. 29 (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 312–17; see also n. 59 below.
Apophatic theology is not simply the intellectual negation of a word or concept, but calls for the radical “negation” (or “cessation”) of the sensory and intellective powers of the knower. “Negation” by itself is not union with God—the latter requires that the knower be passively drawn out of himself in an experience of ecstasy. The most famous description of this phenomenon occurred in On the Divine Names 3.2, where Dionysios described the ecstasy of his fellow Areopagite, the bishop Hierotheos (141.4–14). This mystical experience occurred while Hierotheos was “chanting a hymn,” which may have been inspired by Acts 16:25, where Paul and Silas were “chanting hymns” to God when a “great earthquake shook the prison opening the doors and unfastening their fetters” (v. 26). Even more telling, however, is the discussion that follows in the next chapter (DN 4.13), where the archetype for such experiences is not Hierotheos but Paul. Here Dionysios stated that:

The divine yearning is ecstatic, so that the lover belongs not to himself but to the beloved. . . . This is why the great Paul, when possessed by divine love (ἔρως), and participating in its ecstatic power, says with an inspired mouth: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). As a true lover, Paul was, as he says, “beside himself for God” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:13: ἐξέστημεν Θεῷ), living not his own life, but the life of the Beloved (159.4–8).

Having grounded the doctrine of ecstasy in the person of Paul, Dionysios immediately went on to make a “daring” suggestion, which is at the heart of his vision of the universe, namely, that the divine itself is subject to the ecstasy of love, being drawn “outside itself” (ἐξος ἑαυτοῦ) in its loving care for creation. Accordingly, the ecstasy of Paul serves as a microcosmic frame for the larger narrative of the ecstasy of God in creation (159.9–14).

The reality of the divine names, understood as the self-multiplication of God in creation, means that the one God is present in all things without being self-divided or confused with them. To illustrate this phenomenon, Dionysios turned to the experience of divinization, which is surely the main point of the entire discussion. He noted that the one God becomes many Gods in divinized human beings, although God himself is never replicated: the one God remains one. This is yet another doctrine derived from Paul:

When Paul, the “light of the world,” our teacher and guide to the divine gift of light, had understood this in a manner beyond nature, he said: “For although there are many Gods . . . yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:5–6). For what Paul means to say is that, in the divine realm,unities hold a higher place than their differentiations” (DN 2.11; 136.18–137.7).
Dionysios is inadequately understood without Paul, and the reception of Paul in Byzantium is inadequately understood without Dionysios, whose teachings were reinforced by their assumed apostolic authority. If Dionysios was Paul’s convert and disciple, it was logical to assume that he had received and handed down the deeper meaning of Paul’s theology. Consequently the Pauline loci that figured most prominently in the work of later commentators were largely those marked out by Dionysios, who had uniquely cultivated the dropped grains of his teacher’s more allusive theological suggestions.

Maximos the Confessor

We conclude our survey of the early Byzantine period with Maximos the Confessor (580–662), who was instrumental in the later reception of Dionysios the Areopagite, and who, in a manner parallel to Chrysostom, reclaimed the positive achievements of Alexandrian allegorical exegesis, lately besmirched by Justinian’s condemnation of Origen at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553). Maximos cited Paul in virtually all of his works, including those that are not strictly exegetical. In the philosophically oriented Ambigua to John, for example, the Pauline dichotomy of “letter” and “spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6) was used to authorize a synchronic, spiritual exegesis of scripture. Paul’s temporal construal of the distinction between “shadow” and (future) “image” (Heb. 10:1), on the other hand, was central to Maximos’s diachronic vision of history and language, the ultimate meaning of which will be disclosed consequent to the cessation of motion and time. The Pauline negation of “male or female in Christ” (Gal. 3:28) constituted the point of departure for Maximos’s complex theological anthropology. Paul’s being “crucified together with Christ” (Gal. 2:19) provided the rationale for mystical participation in Christ’s suffering and crucifixion, while the apostle’s notion of “divine foolishness” (1 Cor. 12:4–11, 30–31) was merged with Gregory Nazianzus’s poetics of “divine play” in a meditation on the limits of language and the transience of human existence. Pauline themes, then, play an important part in shaping some of the major themes of Maximos’s theology.

In his properly exegetical writings, Maximos had the opportunity to enter more deeply into problems in the Pauline corpus. His professed aim was to resolve the text’s literal and historical contradictions by discovering the spiritual level on which they concur. In Questions to Thalassium, the seeming contrast between the teaching of Paul and John on the nature of human existence after the resurrection (1 Jn. 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:10) was resolved by reading both statements in the context of the doctrine of deification. Both writers, Maximos suggested, understood the goal of human life in God, and John’s “ignorance” was simply an admission that neither he nor Paul understood the actual manner in which that goal would come about.

53 Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 5.10, spoke of an esoteric tradition, handed down through the apostles through oral teaching, which Paul everywhere hints at but did not commit to writing; supporting his arguments with citations from half a dozen of Paul’s letters, Clement subsequently argued that the letters of Plato point to the same hidden doctrines and the same reluctance to commit them to writing (SC 278:124–34).
54 On which, see Price, Acts of the Council of Constantinople, 2:270–86 (n. 26 above); P. Blowers, Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor: An Investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium (South Bend, IN, 1991).
55 Ambigua 10.32; cf. ibid., 10.34, citing 1 Cor. 10:11: “These things happened to them figuratively, and they were written down for our instruction.”
56 Ambigua 21.15–16.
57 Ambigua 41.7; see also Maximos the Confessor, Opuscula exegetica duo (On the Lord’s Prayer), ed. P. van Deen, CCSG 23 (Turnhout, 1999), 47, line 141: the remarks of L. Thunberg, Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor (Chicago, 1995), 375–81; and A. G. Cooper, The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Drifted (New York, 2005), 109–27.
58 Ambigua 47.
60 Cf. Ambigua 21.3; Quaestiones ad Thalassium 65, ed. C. Laga and C. Steel, CCSG 22 (Turnhout, 1980–90), 275–77, although some of Maximos’s Pauline exegesis is restricted to a clarification or spiritual interpretation of a single, usually obscure, text, such as Quaestiones ad Thalassium 21, which offers a virtuoso reading of Col. 2:15 (CCSG 7:127–35).
61 Quaestiones ad Thalassium 9, ed. Laga and Steel (CCSG 7:79–81); cf. ibid. 42 (CCSG 7:285–91), where Maximos
Other chapters of the *Questions to Thalassium* explore contradictions within Paul’s own teaching, including different estimations of the law, justification, and judgment.\(^6^2\)

Maximos also responded to exegetical problems in the book of Acts concerning Paul’s seemingly contradictory behavior, as well as the contradictory properties of his body, which worked miracles, was immune to snake venom, but succumbed to the edge of a sword.\(^6^3\) Another problem in Acts, which had exercised the talents of earlier exegetes, was the discrepancy between the two accounts of Paul’s vision of the divine light. In one account Paul’s companions are said to have “heard a voice” but not to have seen the light (Acts 9:7), while Paul himself remarked that they had indeed seen the light but had not heard the voice that accompanied it (Acts 22:9). Following Chrysostom, whose exegetical skill he praised, Maximos said that what Paul’s companions heard was not the voice of Christ, but simply the voice of Paul speaking to Christ (Acts 9:5), and he suggested that the shift from sound to light symbolized the mind’s ascent from “mere echoes of knowledge” to the lofty heights of visual contemplation of the divine.\(^6^4\) Paul’s vision of the divine light, which marked his dramatic conversion to Christianity, became especially prominent in late Byzantine exegesis, and I shall return to it below, after discussion of the Pauline scholarship of the preceding period.

\(^{62}\) Quaestiones ad Thalassium 18 considers the contradiction between Rom. 2:13 and Gal. 5:14 on justification by the law (CCSG 7:117), a discussion carried over into ibid. 19, which takes up the tension within Romans concerning the agent of judgment (CCSG 7:119); cf. ibid. 22, on the different senses of time in Eph. 2:7 and 1 Cor. 10:11 (CCSG 7:137–47).

\(^{63}\) I.e., *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 19 on Acts 13:4, where Paul appears to disobey the Spirit (CCSG 7:121–17); *Quaestiones et dubia* 143 (ed. J. H. Declerck [Turnhout, 1982]), where Paul, contrary to Byzantine liturgical practice, appears to kneel on the feast of Pentecost (CCSG 10:102); and *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 57, on the nature of Paul’s body, citing Acts 19:12; 28:5 (CCSG 7:147–55).


The Middle Byzantine Period

**Theophylaktos of Ohrid**

Theophylaktos of Ohrid (b. ca. 1050, d. after 1126) was a leading scholar, bishop, and biblical exegete. He produced commentaries on the Psalms, the Minor Prophets, the four gospels, and the letters of Paul. The commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles and the Catholic epistles (i.e., James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude) published under his name are now considered to be the work of Arethas of Caesarea. The bulk of modern scholarship has been devoted to his correspondence, and there are almost no studies of his prodigious exegetical writings.\(^6^5\) Theophylaktos’s work as an exegete is often dismissed by modern scholars as derivative, yet his reliance on the exegesis of earlier patristic authorities was precisely what the Byzantines appreciated and admired. In the words of the fifteenth-century writer Gennadios Scholarios: “The exegetical work of Theophylaktos, the archbishop of Bulgaria, is cherished by the Church, for he says virtually nothing of his own, since all of what he says is from other saints, and especially Chrysostom.”\(^6^6\) The Orthodoxy—and utility—of Theophylaktos’s work had already been explored the seemingly different views of sin held by Paul and John (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Jn. 1:82).


\(^{66}\) G. Scholarios, *Responses to the Questions of George, Despot of Serbia, in Oeuvres complètes de Génnoise Scholars*, ed. L. Petit et al., 8 vols. (Paris, 1928–36), 4:207, lines 17–20. The Serbian ruler had called into question the Orthodoxy of certain passages in Theophylaktos’s work, which Scholarios was quick to defend (ibid., lines 10–22): “Theophylaktos was a wise and orthodox hierarch. If something is found in the Serbian translations of his works that does not appear sound, it is due to an error on the part of the translator or copyist.”
affirmed by Gregory Palamas, who cited a passage from Theophylaktos’s *Commentary on Matthew*, in which he found a theological clarification useful in his debates with Akindynos. Even here, however, Theophylaktos’s interpretation did not differ substantially from that of Chrysostom.  

As the remarks of both Scholarios and Palamas indicate, Theophylaktos’s commentaries were popular in the late Byzantine period, during which a significant number of his commentaries on Paul’s letters were copied.  

To a degree, the work of Theophylaktos replaced that of Chrysostom and other patristic exegetes, partly because his commentaries were shorter and easier to read and partly because the multiplicity of sources and citations is effectively brought together in a single, authorial voice.  

Theophylaktos began each of his commentaries with a preface, placing the relevant letter in its broad historical context. The commentary itself takes the form of notes on each verse and ranges from questions of grammar and philology to matters of Orthodox doctrine. The prefaces are not notable for their length, but they illustrate the extent to which Pauline exegesis is framed by the narrative of Acts, which, as was mentioned earlier, is one of the defining features of the Byzantine Paul:

We can learn mysteries by continually and carefully reading the letters of the blessed Paul, for he is superior to all the other apostles in terms of his teaching, and this is only natural, for he labored more than the others, and so attracted a greater share of the grace of the Spirit. And this is clear not simply from his letters, but also from Acts, where the pagans reckoned him to be the god Hermes, owing to his power of speech (Acts 14:12).  

Corinth is a city in Greece, famed for its wealth and wisdom, and it was here that Paul suffered much. It was also here that Christ appeared to him and said: “Do not be silent but speak, for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9–10).  

Ephesus was a city sacred to Artemis, and the home of her temple, which was magnificent, lovely to behold, and venerated by all the Greeks, so that the city was called the “temple keeper” of the goddess, just as it is written in Acts (Acts 19:35).  

It is noteworthy that the commentaries of Theophylaktos were translated into Slavonic, thereby conveying the better part of Greek Pauline exegesis to the Slavic world where it informed, and continues to inform, ecclesiastical and devotional reading. Needless to say, it was the “Byzantine” Paul who was transmitted to the Slavs.  

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67 Palamas cited from Theophylaktos’s *Commentary on Matthew* (on Mt. 11:27) in his third *Antirrhetic against Akindynos* 3.2.1.100, in Ἱστορία τῶν Παλαιῶν, ed. P. Chrestou (Thessalonike, 1985), 3:540, lines 9–13, referring to him not by name but as “the one who composed the synopsis of the explanation of the Gospel” (ὁ τῆς εὐαγγελικῆς εὐκρινείας τὴν σύνοψιν ποιησάμενο) (ibid., line 9); cf. Chrysostom, *Homily 28.2 on Matthew*, PG 57:430.  

68 *Pinakes* reports that nine of the thirteen manuscripts containing Theophylaktos’s commentary on 1 Corinthians were copied from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries; for his Romans commentary, eight of the surviving twelve manuscripts are from this same period; cf. Staab, *Pauluskatatenen*, 214–31, who catalogs a much larger number of manuscripts, thirteen of which he assigns to the late Byzantine period.

69 Theophylaktos, *Commentary on Romans*, preface (PG 124:316A).  

70 Theophylaktos, *Commentary on Corinthians*, preface (PG 124:561B).  


73 The nineteenth-century Russian monastic leader and bishop Ignatius Brianchianinov (Приношение современного монашеству) [St. Petersburg, 1867]; Eng. tr., *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism* [Madras, 1970], 21 recommends: “While reading the Gospels, the novice should also read the explanation of the Gospel by blessed Theophylact, the Archbishop of Bulgaria, which is indispensable. It is an aid to the right understanding of the Gospel.” He also notes that “in a well-ordered cenobitic monastery, the explanation of the Gospel for the day is read daily at Matins” (p. 21 n. 1). A three-volume annotated translation of Theophylaktos’s commentaries on Paul was published by Nikodemos Hagiorites (Venice, 1819), and is currently being translated into English by Chrysostom Press.  

74 Long before Theophylaktos, the Slavs had claimed St. Paul as a founder of their church; see D. Obolensky, “The Cyrillo-Methodian Heritage in Russia,” *DOP* 19 (1965): 53–54; “Moravia
work of Theophylaktos was also an important channel through which the Greek exegesis of Paul reached the Latin West throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Theophylaktos’s commentaries were valued by writers such as Thomas Aquinas, who commissioned their translation into Latin, and Erasmus, who used them, not simply in his Annotaciones in Novum Testamentum (Annotations on the New Testament, 1516–1535) but in his Moriae encomium (Praise of Folly, 1509), the title and theme of which is said to have adopted from Theophylaktos’s commentary on the “divine folly” of 1 Corinthians 1:18. Like Paul, Erasmus’s personification of Folly overturned traditional notions of wisdom, calling wisdom folly and foolishness wise.75

**Euthymios Zigabenos**

Euthymios Zigabenos (fl. ca. 1100) was court theologian to Alexios Komnenos (r. 1081–1118) and the greatest polemical writer of the twelfth century. He was also the last Byzantine scholar to write full-scale commentaries on books of the Bible, producing commentaries on the Psalms, the four gospels, and the letters of Paul.76 Because Zigabenos’s gospel commentaries were commissioned by Alexios to counter the teachings of the Bogomils, it has been suggested that his commentaries on the letters of Paul were also directed against that same group.77

The format of the learned commentary gave Zigabenos the opportunity to interpret the text of Paul’s letters often word for word, or to focus on short phrases and/or other small intelligible units of material. At the conclusion of each commentary, he added a note indicating where the letter was written, the name of the addressee, and other information concerning the letter’s historical context. For some letters he also included verse numbers, but these do not accord with the modern numbering. Unsurprisingly, some modern scholars have dismissed him as a mere compiler, but this is unfair.78 Zigabenos was a fine philologist and a keen theologian in his own right.79 To be sure, he made use of earlier writers, especially Chrysostom, but he worked creatively with his sources, employing theological language and themes that arose after the era of the great patristic exegesis.80 Zigabenos’s commentaries on the gospels are generally ethical or moralizing in orientation. In commenting on the letters of Paul, however, he was more engaged with theological concepts and questions of doctrine. Zigabenos’s Pauline commentaries, which remained in use throughout the late Byzantine period, are extant in seven manuscripts, one of which was copied in

75 Aquinas ordered a Latin translation of Theophylaktos’s commentaries on the gospels, which he cites more than 1,000 times; see M. Plesed, Orthodox Readings of Aquinas (Oxford, 2001), 18. On Erasmus’s use of Theophylaktos, see Obolensky, Six Byzantine Portraits, 34–55.

76 For a detailed study, with a survey of the manuscripts, see A. Papavasiliou, Ἐὐθύμιος Ζυγαδηνός: Βίος-Συγγραφέας (Nicosia, 1979). Zigabenos’s commentaries on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians have been published by N. Kalogeris, Ἐμφιάλωσις εἰς τὰς ἸΔ´ Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παύλου καὶ εἰς τὰς Ζ´ Καθημέρινες, 2 vols. (Athens, 1887). Also in the circle of the emperor was Niketas Seides (b. 1040/50, d. ca. 1116), a layman who

77 On this question, see Kalogeris, Ἐμφιάλωσις, 1, p. 62 (= xiiv); Papavasiliou, Ζυγαδηνός, 221–222. J. Hamilton and B. Hamilton, Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650–c. 1450 (Manchester, 1998), 180–207. Also in the circle of the emperor was Niketas Seides (b. 1040/50, d. ca. 1116), a layman who

78 Though such an observation (albeit with an altogether different judgment of value) finds support among the Byzantines themselves. Two fifteenth-century manuscripts of Zigabenos’s Pauline commentaries describe the work as an: “Interpretation of the epistles of the great apostle Paul, laboriously compiled by the monk Euthymios Zigadenos [sic], primarily from the exegesis of St. John Chrysostom, but also from the writings of various other fathers brought together by the compiler” (Metorea 65, fol. 1; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 259, fol. 1; cited in Papavasiliou, Ζυγαδηνός, 252).

79 For a detailed discussion of these points, see Papavasiliou, Ζυγαδηνός, 219–68.

80 Ibid., 268–77, provides a list of the patristic authors cited by Zigabenos in his Pauline commentaries, which includes leading theological writers such as Basil and the two Gregories, Cyril of Alexandria, Dionysios the Areopagite, and Maximos the Confessor. Note that Zigabenos also wrote a lengthy encyclopaedia, On St. Hierotheos of Athens (see n. 52 above), which draws extensively on the corpus Dionysiacum and places Paul in a distinctly Dionysian framework. The text is printed in Kalogeris, 1, pp. 99–184 (lxxvii–xci); for discussion, see Papavasiliou, Ζυγαδηνός, 501–9.
the thirteenth century, another in the fourteenth century, and three in the fifteenth.81
In some of these manuscripts, Zigabenos’s commentary is prefaced by a lengthy, anonymous poem on St. Paul.82 The poem begins (lines 1–8) with elaborate punning on Paul’s name:

Ὁ Παῦλος ὄς ἄυλος ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων Ἡ γραμμάτων πέφηνε τῇ διαστάσει. Τὸ Π γὰρ αἴρον τόστο γνώ ῥαδίως, Μάλιστα προσχόν οίς βιοίς ἡν καὶ γράφων. Ἡ τοῦ Παῦλον αὐλὸν τοῦ Παρακλήτου λέγε. Ἀρνο τὸ πρῶτον γράμμα καὶ τόσον τέλει Ἐνθείς, διαγνόσις Πνεύματος τοῦτον λύραν Ως δραγάν ὑ τῆς θείας μουσουργίας.

It would appear that Paul was not of matter made at all,
Or so he seems to be when one sets the letters free,
And this you too can easily see by the mere removal of the “P”,83
Yet even better by attending to his holy life and letters.
Or say that Paul is the pipe of the Paraclete:
Remove again the “P” from Paul and on the end let the accent fall,
And you will see him as a harp that to the Spirit belongs;
An instrument of divine melodious song.84

These verses are followed by a poetic description of each of Paul’s fourteen letters (lines 20–62), after which the poet recounted the apostle’s trials before various officials and local governors, followed by his martyrdom in Rome (63–97). The poem concludes by contrasting the spiritual states of Nero and Paul: “The tyrannical soul of Nero lies dead, ill-famed, and defeated, eternally bound in inescapable bonds. But Paul lives and speaks every day, openly beholding the face of God” (lines 111–15). Byzantine poems on Paul, which often appear in conjunction with his icons and relics, are a subject worthy of study in their own right, but space does not permit me to pursue this material any further here.85

The Catena of Paul
In 1926 Karl Staab published a major study of the Byzantine catena of Paul, which he grouped into several types.86 The most outstanding example is what he called the “Vatican type,” after the

81 Papavasiliou, Ζυγαδηνός, 231–33.
82 Text in Kalogeris, Ἐμφάνισις, vol. 1, p. 65 (lxxiv). The poem is also printed in PG 118:31–34, although in slightly truncated form, with some of the closing verses presented under a different heading as a separate poem.
83 That is, the removal of the Π from Παῦλος leaves αὐλὸς, which, with a diaeresis mark over the υ, is the Greek word for “immortal.”
84 As above, αὐλὸς, with an accent on the final syllable, is the Greek word for “pipe” or “flute”; cf. the thirteenth-century Legenda aurea: “The name of ‘Paul’ is interpreted to mean ‘mouth of a trumpet,’ or ‘their mouth,’ or ‘wonderfully chosen,’ or ‘miracle of election.’ Our ‘Paulus’ comes from pausa, which in Hebrew means quiet or repose, and in Latin means a moderate pause; Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, trans. W. G. Ryan (Princeton, 1993), 350.
85 The Byzantine poet Manuel Philes wrote a number of epigrams on Paul, including a series of short poems on nine of the letters, ed. E. Miller, Manuelis Philae Carmina, 2 vols. (Paris, 1855–1857), 1:23–25. One of Philes’s two epigrams on a relic of Paul’s foot requests a cure for a foot problem by punning on the name of Paul’s birthplace: “The city of Tarsus (Ταρσός) gave Paul to the world; but may I now be given a cure for the bottom (ταρσών) of my foot”; cf. Homer, Iliad 11.377, 388; see Miller, Manuelis Philae Carmina, 1:85. The longest of Philes’s Pauline epigrams is a poem of nearly 100 lines on the relic of Paul’s footprints impressed in stone and housed at the Panachrantos monastery (Miller, Manuelis Philae Carmina, 1:98–202). In the early fifteenth century these footprints were seen by the Russian pilgrim, Zosimas; see G. Majeska, Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, DOS 19 (Washington, DC, 1984), 182. Interest in Paul’s lower extremities can be said to have begun with Chrysostom’s praises of the apostle’s feet, which circumambulated the world, were placed in stocks, etc.; see Mitchell, Heavenly Trumpet, 119 (“Paul’s feet”).
The Reception of Paul and of Pauline Theology in the Byzantine Period

This manuscript, which was copied in the tenth or eleventh century, contains a complete set of scholia on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians. The catena on Romans consists of more than 1,000 scholia, of which 269 are taken from Chrysostom; 158 from Theodoret; 151 from Gennadius of Constantinople; 126 from Theodore of Mopsuestia (although there is some confusion with those by Theodoret); 109 from Photios; 79 from Diodore; 66 from Cyril of Alexandria; 59 from Origen; 28 from Oikoumenios; 3 from Basil; 2 from Severos of Antioch; 1 from Gregory of Nyssa; and 1 from Didymos. The catena on 1–2 Corinthians follows the same pattern: of the 702 scholia, 154 are from Chrysostom; 148 from Theodoret; and so on. For 2 Corinthians there are 316 scholia, of which 114 are from Chrysostom, with the next largest number, 60, from Didymos.

Since the last writer represented in these catenae is Photios, who died in 891, Staab argued that the Vatican catena was originally compiled in the tenth century. He further contended that, since the textual recension of the Pauline letters is Antiochene, the catena originated in Constantinople. The majority of the extant manuscripts date to the eleventh or twelfth centuries, but they continued to be used in the late Byzantine period, evidenced by various corrections and marginalia added by later hands.

Also dated to this period are copies of the catena on Hebrews (originally compiled in the late eleventh or early twelfth century) by Niketas of Herakleia (with nearly 900 scholia) and the massive Pseudo-Oikoumenios type, the oldest form of which was compiled in the tenth century, containing a total of more than 5,000 scholia covering the entire corpus Paulinum.

Even more than the middle Byzantine commentaries described above, the catenae are taken as a sign of intellectual decline. To modern sensibilities the mere activity of extraction and adaptation constitutes a radical loss of context and meaning, not unlike transcribing orchestral music for the piano or adapting a novel for television. Such views, however, presuppose that intellectual life is somehow limited to the composition of new works, and fail to account for the living tradition in which the catenae were compiled, copied, and studied. As for being reductionist or one-dimensional, these collections are often the only place where the writings of many condemned or questionable authors were preserved, including Origen, Didymos, Apollinaris, Severos, and others whose interpretations of Paul’s letters might otherwise not have survived.

Despite the preponderance of Antiochene writers, especially Chrysostom and Theodoret, the Pauline catenae do not present us with anything like a univocal viewpoint, but something much more heterogeneous and dialogical. Moreover, to value these compilations solely as mines for fragments can prevent us from attending to the mind and logic of the compiler, from seeing the compilation’s unique dynamics of selection and organization. To reduce a work of compilation to its sources is to look at it backward, not forward to its history of reception, to those who compiled and made use of it, and how and why they did. We need to place the middle Byzantine commentaries and catenae in their proper context, recognize them as works in their own right,
and rediscover the culture of reading and study within and for which they were produced.\textsuperscript{94}

The Pauline commentaries and catenae compiled during the middle Byzantine period were the last of their kind. Subsequent generations of biblical exegetes continued to comment on the gospels, mostly in the form of lectionary homilies, but in the lengthening shadows of the Byzantine twilight, one looks in vain for scholarly commentaries on the letters of Paul.\textsuperscript{95} It is therefore advisable to look elsewhere. As shall be seen, the late Byzantine period displays acute interest in Paul—rivaling the devotion to the apostle’s person and letters in the late antique period—for which we must turn to the literature of theological controversy, with which this period is exceedingly rich.

The Late Byzantine Period

To my knowledge there are no studies dealing with the reception of Paul and Pauline theology in the late Byzantine period. The last fifty years have witnessed an explosion of Palamite studies, along with a slower but growing interest in other theological writers of the period, yet almost no attention has been paid to the Palamite (or Hesychast) use of Paul or of scripture more generally. If we take the standard works of reference as our starting point, we will be told that the Hesychast controversy was a debate about the nature of mystical experience, a clash between ascetic spirituality and scholastic methodology, a chapter in the ongoing quarrel between faith and reason (or between theology and philosophy, or Christianity and Hellenism), or simply an ideological screen for the ambitions of warring feudal magnates set against the background of reviving urban life. As true as these interpretations might be, they do not even remotely suggest that the Hesychast controversy can and probably should be seen as a debate about who was the true follower of Paul.

To be sure, the primary theological question between Gregory Palamas (b. ca. 1296, d. 14 November 1357) and Barlaam of Calabria (b. ca. 1290, d. June 1348) was about the validity of Christian religious experience as a true contact with God and not with some created reality. Despite the sea changes of imperial politics, this question remained the undercurrent throughout the successive waves of controversy, which extended from 1335 to 1351.\textsuperscript{96} For both sides, the question was in fact a series of questions touching on the nature of human knowledge. Could human reason, on its own initiative, attain accurate knowledge of God? Was nature the objective ground or medium of that knowledge, or did it have some other, supernatural source? What were the proper means and methods, the concrete practices, necessary for the acquisition of that knowledge? And, finally, what was the best way to build, on the basis of that knowledge, a way of life consistent with it?

It should be emphasized that this was not a debate about human knowledge in general. Instead, the controversy began when Barlaam publicly denounced the monks of Mt. Athos, arguing that spiritual perfection in the monastic life—including states of dispassion and assimilation to God—could not be attained without the study of pagan Greek philosophy.\textsuperscript{97} It comes as no surprise that Palamas, an Athonite monk, vigorously refuted Barlaam’s arguments; yet he did not reject secular studies altogether, but merely

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\textsuperscript{95} Among the more prolific Palaiologan preachers are Gregory Palamas, with nearly twenty extant sermons on the Sunday gospel readings, along with many others on Dominical feasts (Ἡχογραφία τοῦ Παλαμά: Ὑμηλίαι, ed. P. Chrestou, 3 vols. [Thessalonike, 1985–86]), and Isidore Glavas, with more than twice that number (Ἰεραδόρος Γλαβᾶς, Ἄρχιερετικοῦ Θεολόγου Ὑμηλίαι, ed. V. Christoforides, 2 vols. [Thessalonike, 1992–96]).

\textsuperscript{96} For an overview of the controversy, see R. E. Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” in Théologie byzantine et sa tradition, ed. Conticello and Conticello, 132–57.

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sought to highlight the uselessness of profane Hellenism for the acquisition of divine grace, along with its inability to bring about mystical union with God.\(^9\)

In his struggle against Greek philosophy, which was mounted in defense of the life of prayer, Palamas found a powerful ally in Paul, who himself was no stranger to these questions. Paul had traveled throughout much of the Hellenistic world, spoke Greek fluently, was reasonably well versed in Greek literature,\(^9\) and came into conflict with what he called the “wisdom of the Greeks” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22), that is, with the same philosophical tradition promoted by Barlaam.\(^10\) Consequently, when confronted with the tradition of Greek philosophy, Paul and his late Byzantine readers were situated in more or less the same linguistic and intellectual framework. It was thus that a number of Pauline loci quickly moved to the center of the debate, and that the debate itself became in many ways an elaborate theological exegesis of Paul.\(^10\)

### The Triads

Palamas’s use of Paul’s letters is exemplified in the Triads, a collection of nine treatises grouped in three trilogies. Written over a three-year period (1338–1340), these seminal writings established the basic Hesychast position and became the principal point of reference for the ensuing debates. The first two Triads have overlapping themes and virtually identical structures, each beginning with an extensive critique of pagan Greek philosophy, followed by a defense of Hesychast prayer, and concluding with a discussion on the knowledge of God. The third Triad departs from this pattern, focusing instead on the doctrine of divinization, the uncreated light, and the distinction between God’s essence and energies. Of the three Triads, the first two make constant reference to Paul, together containing more than one hundred and fifty citations from Paul’s letters, whereas the third Triad contains only twenty-five citations.\(^10\) In the following analysis, the focus is on the first Triad, which presents a fairly complete picture of Palamas’s use of Paul. Relevant passages from the other works in the trilogy, and from contemporary writers, are also included. I engage in a close reading of this work, since this is the only way to appreciate the richness and complexity of Palamas’s handling of Paul’s letters.

### HEBREWS 13:9

In response to a question about the place of pagan Greek philosophy in the monastic life, Palamas began the first Triad with a quotation

\(^9\) Palamas, Triad 1.1.12: “We do not prevent those who have not chosen the monastic life from occupying themselves with secular studies, but neither do we advise them to do this for their whole life. For we completely reject the idea that through such studies a person can hope to know with precision anything about the divine, since it is not possible to learn from such studies anything certain about God, for ‘God has made’ such studies ‘foolish’ (1 Cor. 1:20)” (ed. Meyendorff, 1:37, lines 6–12); cf. Triad 1.1.35: “The Lord did not categorically forbid secular studies, just as He did not forbid marriage, or eating meat . . . but according to you, since the Lord did not forbid these things, we are required to indulge in them to full measure” (ibid., 1:295, lines 17–24).

from Hebrews: “Brother, to speak in the manner of the apostle, ‘it is well that the heart acquire certainty by grace’ (Heb. 13:9), but how could someone demonstrate by means of reason the Good that transcends reason?” It can hardly be insignificant that Palamas opened with a reference to Paul. Though Hebrews 13:9 does not figure in the subsequent argument, it serves here to make three important points. It enlists the authority of Paul on the side of the Hesychasts; it foregrounds the notion of divine grace; and it emphasizes the need for the heart to acquire “certainty” by means of this grace. In this way Palamas aligned himself with the apostle and adroitly shifted the terms of the debate from “mind” to “heart,” and from “knowledge” to “grace,” which, as the rest of the treatise will make clear, essentially sums up the whole of his response to Barlaam.

When we look more closely at the text of Hebrews, however, it appears that Palamas took the verse out of context. The argument at this point in the letter is about not being concerned with what the law says about unclean foods, which is the reading of Chrysostom and other patristic commentators. Such disregard for context, as well as for the patristic exegetical tradition, is unusual for Palamas, and raises a question. The answer may be that Palamas was following an interpretation of Hebrews 13:9 such as that found in a homily ascribed to St. Makarios the Great. This interpretation brackets the reference to food and associates the phrase with the preceding exhortation to doctrinal purity, noting that Orthodox belief is a corollary of the “spiritual works of the inner man.” The Makarian homilies were popular reading in Byzantine monastic circles, and Palamas cited them frequently. We may therefore have a case in which Palamas was following a spiritual exegesis of this passage and not that of the standard commentators. But Palamas must have known that this particular interpretation is slightly forced, which may be why he never cited this verse again.

**ROMANS 11:34**

The second passage, Romans 11:34, occurs in the middle of the next paragraph, where Palamas cited it in order to counter Barlaam’s claim to know the mind of God through secular studies. Palamas found this “outrageous,” insofar as “the apostle says: ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?’ (Rom. 11:34 = Isa. 40:13).” This would seem to be a rather devastating proof text, yet this is the only time it occurs, perhaps because it takes the form of an unanswered question, or because Palamas will shortly come to rely almost exclusively on passages in which Paul explicitly rejects the “wisdom of the Greeks.” The verse has a long history of citation and among Palamas’s disciples it was used by Theophanes of Nicaea (d. ca. 1380/81), who included it in a dense gathering of Pauline loci, summing up in large measure the Hesychast interpretation of Paul. The same verse, however, could cut both ways—it is cited twice by Akindynos, who deployed it to

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103 Triad 1.1.1 (ed. Meyendorff, 1:9, lines 8–10).
104 Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews 11.2 (PG 61:126); cf. Theodore, Commentary on Hebrews, PG 82:781BC.
106 Around fifty times in the Triads alone.
107 After Palamas, Scholarios seems to be the only writer who even so much as alluded to this verse, which he did in his epitome of the Summa, to highlight the notion that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are established by divine grace (ed. Petit et al., Oeuvres complètes [n. 66 above], 6:72, line 9).
108 Triad 1.1.2, ed. Meyendorf, 1:11, lines 14–15. I follow Meyendorff in identifying this verse as Romans 11:34, even though Paul used the same phrase in 1 Corinthians 2:16. Given Palamas’s heavy reliance on 1 Corinthians (see n. 101 above, and below), the Romans citation should probably be emended to include 1 Corinthians 2:16.
109 Theophanes of Nicaea, On the Light of Tabor 2.17 (idem, Ο Βίος καὶ τὸ συγγραφικὸ του ἔργο, ed. G. Zacharopoulos [Thessalonike, 2003], 191–94): “Wishing to show once and for all that the supernatural mysteries of piety (cf. 1 Ti. 3:16) are above all human wisdom and knowledge (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15–16), and that one must not seek for them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22) without divine illumination (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6), the divine apostle says: We interpret spiritual things to those who are spiritual, because the unsupplanting man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are discerned spiritually; but the spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one, for who has known the mind of the Lord, as to instruct him? (Is. 40:13).” But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:13–16).” According to the divine fathers, the “mind of Christ” is the Holy Spirit, through which mind we know the mind of the Lord, that is, the divine purpose, which is the future divinization of the saints.”
undermine Palamas’s claim to possess definitive knowledge about the divine energies.

1–2 CORINTHIANS

The remainder of Triad 1.1.12 through the end of 1.1.9 is marked by a large number of citations from 1–2 Corinthians, which are organized into three groups or textual units. These units present us with impressive examples of Palamas’s rhetorical and theological skill in handling material from Paul’s letters, and are worth looking at closely.

The first unit begins immediately after the citation of Romans 11:34, noted above. Alluding to 1 Timothy 6:20 (ψευδόγνωσία), Palamas called the knowledge promoted by Barlaam a “pseudo-knowledge” (ψευδόγνωσία), in support of which he cites three passages from the Corinthian letters and one from Colossians:

The soul that possesses the knowledge of secular wisdom is in no way born hence to the Truth itself, or even to the truth, which is why those who boast about it do so in vain. Let them listen to Paul, who calls secular wisdom “fleshly wisdom” [2 Cor. 1:12], just as he calls “the knowledge that makes one arrogant” [1 Cor. 8:1] the “mind of the flesh” [Col. 2:18]. How, then, can the “wisdom of the flesh” [2 Cor. 1:12] endow the soul with likeness to God? “For consider,” he says, “your call; not many of you were wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” [1 Cor. 1:26].

As a bridge to the second unit, Palamas argued that the mind is marred by sin and requires purification in order to live with “the only wise God” (Rom. 16:27) (Triad 1.1.3). He subsequently countered Barlaam’s contention that Christian perfection is achieved through the study of philosophy by citing a passage from Dionysios the Areopagite, in which union with God follows upon “love and the keeping of the commandments” (Triad 1.1.4). This is confirmed by the Lord himself (Triad 1.1.5), who did not say, “If you would be perfect, occupy yourself with secular education,” but “deny yourself, give to the poor, and take up your cross” (cf. Mt. 19:21; 16:24). If what Barlaam says is correct, “why did Christ not teach geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and the natural sciences, if such things indeed had the power to banish the darkness of ignorance from the soul?” Palamas’s answer to this question—which calls forth a series of further rhetorical questions—brings us to the second unit, containing five citations from the first chapter of 1 Corinthians:

Why did Christ call as His disciples men who were illiterates, fishermen, and rustics, but not the wise? Was it not so that He might “confound the wise,” just as Paul says? [1 Cor. 1:27]. Why did God “make their wisdom foolish”? [1 Cor. 1:20]. Why was God pleased to “save believers by the folly of Paul’s preaching”? [cf. 1 Cor. 1:21]. Was it not because “the world did not know God through wisdom”? [1 Cor. 1:21]. And what did those, who you say are wise, do when the Word of God, “who became our Wisdom” [1 Cor. 1:30], and who is “the light of the World” [Jn. 1:9], was manifested bodily to the world? They replaced the Light with a tiny lamp, and now encourage others to abandon the way of inner purification and take up secular studies instead.”

110 Gregory Akindynos, Antirhetic 1.14, cited Romans 11:34 to counter Palamas’s claim to know that there exists a multiplicity of divine energies, which Palamas had somewhat recklessly described as an “infinity of lower divinities,” and which he believed, according to Akindynos, were “visible to the eyes of the body” (CCSG 11:16, lines 10–11); cf. Gregory Akindynos, 1:30 (60, line 6).

111 This is the first explicit mention in the Triads of the name “Paul,” who is previously referred to simply as “the apostle.” Palamas’s use of Paul’s name here may be intended to highlight the argument, although for the Byzantines the title “apostle” was used interchangeably with Paul’s proper name.

112 Triad 1.1.3 (ed. Meyendorff, 1:11, lines 17–27). In this, and in subsequent translations, I frequently condense the effect of the rhetoric and syntax.

113 Dionysios, On The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 2.1 (ed. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, in Suchla, Corpus Dionysiacum, vol. 2 [Berlin, 1991], 68, lines 17–20): “As the Scriptures (logia) teach, assimilation to God and union with him come about only through love and the keeping of the commandments,” citing John 14:21: “If any man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.”

114 Triad 1.1.5, ed. Meyendorff, 1:18–19.

115 Triad 1.1.5, ed. Meyendorff, 1:19, lines 5–13; cf. Palamas, First Treatise on the Fabified Account of Gregoras 16, who, having ridiculed Gregoras for his life-long study of secular subjects,
After a discussion on the nature of knowledge (Triad 1.1.6–8), Palamas concluded that knowledge by itself is utterly useless for the soul’s salvation, a view he will corroborate (in Triad 1.1.9) with arguments from Paul. With this we arrive at the third and final unit, which also draws extensively from 1 Corinthians but now with a slightly higher concentration of passages from the second chapter: “What does Paul write to the Corinthians—he who did not wish to ‘speak with lofty words’ [1 Cor. 2:1] ‘lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power’ [1 Cor. 1:17]; who did not ‘address them in persuasive words of human wisdom’ [1 Cor. 2:4]; who ‘knew nothing else among them but Christ crucified’ [1 Cor. 2:2]—what, I ask, did he write to them? ‘Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ [1 Cor. 8:1].” Describing such knowledge as “earthly” and suited to “the old man” (Eph. 4:12: Col. 3:9), Palamas granted that, whereas it can be “fortified by secular education,” it can never become “spiritual knowledge,” unless it is “reborn by means of grace and love,” becoming “new and deiform, so that it can be called a heavenly wisdom, indeed the ‘wisdom of God’ [1 Cor. 1:21, 24: 2:7; Eph. 3:10].” Knowledge becomes “spiritual” insofar as it is “subject to the wisdom of the Spirit, knowing and receiving the gifts of the Spirit,” which is why the ‘unspiritual man cannot know the things of the Spirit’ [1 Cor. 2:14], but deems them ‘folly’ [1 Cor. 2:14; cf. 1:18], and seeks only to refute and destroy them.”

Palamas then drew these arguments to their conclusion, articulating his celebrated doctrine of “double knowledge,” which I will consider in a moment. At this point a word about his handling of Paul’s Corinthian letters is in order. In the texts presented above we have three interrelated units, unfolding over nine pages (in Meyendorff’s edition) and containing a series of more than twenty Pauline citations, taken mostly from 1–2 Corinthians. The first unit, which introduces the basic lines of the argument, uses Paul’s language of “fleshly wisdom” (2 Cor. 1:12) to establish a series of polarities that lend all three units their tremendous rhetorical energy. In the second and third units, the passages from 1 Corinthians are generally cited consecutively (i.e., from 1 Cor. 1:20–8:1), indicating that Palamas was closely following the argument of Paul’s letter. The cited passages are not generated by means of free association, neither is their use simply literary or ornamental. And whereas they do function, in one sense, as “proof texts,” the larger theological argument in which Palamas introduced them is itself profoundly Pauline; a virtuosic rhetorical mimēsis of the apostle’s own arguments against the proponents of secular wisdom in the church of Corinth. Even though Palamas did not compose these three textual units in the form of a learned commentary or exegetical homily, they are nonetheless a work of biblical interpretation, Palamas’s procedures do not, of course, follow those of a modern biblical critic, but they are common to the late antique and Byzantine use of scripture in theological controversy. To a reader unversed in the argument of the Corinthian correspondence, Palamas’s citations may appear chaotic, or lacking in structure or criteria, but he followed Paul very closely and not a single citation is quoted out of context or given isolated or extraneous meanings.

The letters to the Corinthians figure so prominently in Palamas’s argument because it was Paul himself who was confronted by similar problems in the church of Corinth. In response the apostle found it necessary to impress upon his readers that the message of the gospel is divisive, signaling the apocalyptic division of humanity into two epistemological camps. The cross, as the paradoxical manifestation of God in history, creates a series of polarities between those “being saved” and those “perishing” (1 Cor. 1:18; cf. 2 Cor. 2:15; 2 Thess. 2:10); between “divine weakness” and “human power” (1 Cor. 1:25, 27);

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117 Indeed, the doctrinal and polemical use of scripture generally induces greater fidelity to literary context than is sometimes the case in other genres, such as liturgy, hymnology, hagiography, and works of edification or spiritual instruction, although this is not say that patristic and Byzantine exegetes thought or wrote within narrowly construed generic categories.
between the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) and the “mind of the flesh” (Rom. 8:5–6); between “divine wisdom” and “human foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:21; 3:18–19); and between the “wisdom of the world” and the “Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:20–21; 3:18–19; 2 Cor. 1:11). From any merely human perspective, the message of the gospel must always appear as folly. Yet human wisdom itself is folly in the eyes of God, for it is the “foolishness” of those “who consider themselves wise, but in truth are perishing” (Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:18). For Paul, God has not simply made wisdom appear foolish, but has turned it into its very opposite, namely, foolishness. Palamas’s distinction between divine and human wisdom is thoroughly Pauline, and the conclusions he drew from this distinction mark one of his most significant appropriations of the apostle’s theology.\(^\text{119}\)

Organically rooted in the theology of Paul, Palamas’s doctrine of “double knowledge” brings to the fore a fundamental incommensurability between Christian faith and pagan philosophy:

This is why Paul, wishing to show us that the form of wisdom is double (διττὸν τὸ τῆς σοφίας εἰδός), said, “in God’s wisdom, it was not through wisdom that the world knew God” [1 Cor. 1:21]. Do you see how he distinguishes the two, and how he calls them by different names? And when the divinely wise Paul says that he “speaks with the wisdom of God” [1 Cor. 2:7], does he agree with them, or they with him? Quite the contrary. This is why he adds: “To the perfect, we do speak wisdom, but not the wisdom of this world, or of the rulers of this world, who are being abolished,” and “who knew nothing of this wisdom” [1 Cor. 2:6, 8], a wisdom that is found within us by the grace of Christ, “who became our wisdom” [1 Cor. 1:28].\(^\text{120}\)

The radical transcendence of the divine imposed general limitations on all natural knowledge, creating a strong epistemological skepticism and allowing no place for a perfect likeness between knowledge of contingent creation and knowledge of the creator.\(^\text{121}\) The Byzantines had tremendous esteem for the life of the mind, but they also recognized its limits. No amount of philosophical learning was sufficient for a correct understanding of God, which emerged not from knowledge but from faith, unfolding in response to the gracious gift of God’s voluntary self-disclosure. Following Paul, Palamas affirmed that the “two wisdoms” were profoundly discontinuous, the one being a matter of natural reasoning and the other the result of supernatural grace. A wisdom that was limited, temporal, and at best analogical could not be identified absolutely with the wisdom that was eternal, perfect, and divine.

### Natural Theology

In his rejection of fallen Greek wisdom, Palamas was clearly the disciple of Paul, and on this

\(^{118}\) Note that one of Paul’s key verses, “I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise” (1 Cor. 1:19), is in fact a citation from Isaiah 29:14, which represents not the speech of the prophet but of God himself, threatening to annihilate the wisdom of the wise, which is God’s judgment against Judah, whose political and religious leaders had abandoned God for their own devices.

\(^{119}\) On which, see P. Chrestou, “Double Knowledge According to Gregory Palamas,” Epistole greche 7.2, ed. G. Schiro [Palermo, 1954], 312, lines 39–40, cites 1 Corinthians 1:13 (not 1 Cor. 1:30, pace Schiro) to argue for a similar doctrine of “two wisdoms,” based on the fact that “all beings are double,” by which he meant objects and their images (εἰδόλα). Yet Barlaam’s doctrine is not an ontological distinction between a thing and its appearance—it distinguished between realities and mental illusions that deceptively present themselves to the mind in place of those realities. This is not, therefore, a double “knowledge,” but simply a distinction between reality and illusion, and has little to do with Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 2:13; see Triad 1.1.17 (ed. Meyendorff, 1:49, lines 9–12).

\(^{120}\) Triad 1.1.17 (ed. Meyendorff, 1:49–51). Note that these Pauline citations are framed by a parallel passage from Dionysius, Letter 7.2, ed. Heil and Ritter, 166–67.

\(^{121}\) J. A. Demetracopoulos (“Nicholas Cabasilas’ Quaestio de rationis valore: An Anti-Palamite Defense of Secular Wisdom,” Byzantina 19 [1998]: 55–93) argued that Kavasilas offered a positive assessment of “secular wisdom” in direct opposition to the position of Palamas in the Triads. Kavasilas’s Quaestio, however, is not a defense of pagan Greek philosophy, which he explicitly rejected, but of reason (λόγος) itself, and even Demetracopoulos acknowledged that Palamas was not anti-rational. Marcus Plested (Orthodox Readings of Aquinas [n. 75 above], 166) provided a more balanced assessment when he stated that Kavasilas was “by no means inconsistent with Palamas’ ultimately positive, if tremendously cautious, approach to philosophy and secular learning. One might even detect in it a critique of the theological skepticism of critics of Palamas such as Barlaam and Gregoras. Rather than a straightforward attack on Palamas, this text is perhaps better read as a reaction to obscurantist and anti-logical tendencies in Palamite and anti-Palamite circles alike.”
question he had the upper hand in the debate. Barlaam, however, was not slow to point out that Paul had elsewhere stated that the pagans had a natural knowledge of God: “For what can be known about God is plain to them [i.e., the pagans], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible realities, namely, his eternal power and divinity, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made [Rom. 1:19–20].” This passage seemed to support what later came to be called a doctrine of “natural theology,” and the opponents of Palamas threw all their weight behind it. Palamas, however, argued that the larger context of Romans 1 told a different story, in no way nullifying Paul’s position in Corinthians, and that, when properly understood, the two letters constituted a definitive refutation of Barlaam’s vaunted claims for pagan philosophy.

The interpretation of this passage had already been contested in 1336 in an exchange of letters between Palamas and Barlaam.122 Two years later, Palamas was writing the first Triad, seeing no contradiction between Romans and Corinthians, for “Paul, the disciple of Peace [i.e., Christ] is not at war with himself.”123 In his letter to the Romans Paul was not imputing “wisdom” to the philosophers, rather to the natural capacity divinely implanted in creatures; it has the potential to grasp the notion of a creator, which “is why Dionysios says that ‘the true philosophers, by means of the knowledge of beings, ought to have been elevated to the cause of beings.’”124

The plain sense of Romans 1 was that the pagans indeed had an “idea” of God, but it was merely an idea, and an imperfect one at that; being “foolish” from the beginning, their so-called knowledge led them to the worship of idols, “for claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles [Rom. 1:22–23].”

Discussion of Romans 1:19, and the question of “natural theology,” continued into the 1340s, in Palamas’s debates with Akindynos, and into the 1350s, with Gregoras, although by then the responses on both sides had become formulaic.125 In his ongoing engagement with this passage, Palamas came to see that not only did Romans 1:19 refute Barlaam’s doctrine of natural theology, it also supported a real distinction between essence and energies in God.126 Once again Palamas had the weight of tradition on his side, and his reading of Romans 1:19 is more

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122 In his First Letter to Palamas, Barlaam cited Romans 1:19 to argue that, according to Paul, Socrates and Plato were the recipients of divine revelation (ed. Schirò, 290–91, lines 279–80, 316–39). In First Letter to Barlaam (ed. Chrestou, EPE 1:47), Palamas responded that pagan knowledge of God was “not itself faith, nor even the knowledge of faith,” interpreting Romans 1:19 in light of 1 Corinthians 1:21: “If the world did not know God through wisdom [1 Cor. 1:21], how could the Socrates and Platons of this world attain the summit of divine knowledge; and how, ‘being wise, were they made foolish’ [Rom. 1:21], if in fact they were illuminated?” Palamas chided Barlaam for “not hearing Paul when he speaks to the Greeks and says that, what could be known about God should have been clear to them, but ‘they did not honor God or give thanks to Him’ [Rom. 1:19–21], nor did they attain faith or the contemplation of faith.”


124 Triad 1.1.16, ed. Meyendorff, 1:47–49, citing Dionysios, Letter 7.2 (ed. Heil and Ritter, 166–67): “By means of the knowledge of beings… which (knowledge) the divine Paul called the wisdom of God, true philosophers ought to have been elevated to the cause of beings and to the knowledge of them.”

125 Triad 1.1.6, ed. Meyendorff, 1:43–45.

126 Palamas cited Romans 1:19 in his Antirrhetic against Akindynos 3.1.2, and again in Antirrhetic 5.17.70, to show that Barlaam and Akindynos were guilty of the same errors as the pagan Greeks. In First Letter to Akindynos, Palamas cited Romans 1:19 in distinguishing between God as known and unknown, and between logical demonstration and faith. In the same letter he cited Romans 1:21, contending that the Greeks had pithanologia (i.e., Paul’s word in Col. 2:4) but not theología, whereas Christians are “taught by God” (1 Thes. 4:9; cf. 1 Cor. 2:13). For citations, see, respectively, EPE, ed. Chrestou, 5:357; 6:224; 1:212–13.

127 See Palamas, On Union and Distinction 8 (scr. 1341) (ed. Chrestou, EPE 2:74, lines 22–24, 31): “What is it that we know from creatures? That their creator is God. And if he is their creator, he is good and wise and powerful. And from these creations we know God, but not according to his essence, just as Paul has taught us, namely, that: ‘Ever since the creation of the world his invisible realities, namely, his eternal power and divinity, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made [Rom. 1:20]. Is, then, the essence of God made visible in creatures? Absolutely not, for this is the madness of Barlaam and Akindynos and of Eunomios before them’; and idem, To Simeon the Nomophylax (scr. 1341) (ed. Chrestou, EPE 2:491, lines 18–20): ‘The “wise of this world” fail to understand the “ecstasy” of the divine as it is drawn out of itself and comes into creation [citing Dionysios, DN 4:15]; they are ungrateful creatures, refusing to acknowledge their benefactor; they fail to understand Dionysios’s notion of “great and small” [the former indicating essence, the latter energy]; neither have they been taught by the divine Paul, who, according to the great Dionysios, praised the “folly of God” [1 Cor. 1:23], and that which in it appears to be paradoxical, absurd, and ineffable.”
closely aligned with earlier patristic exegesis than that of his opponents. There is no question that the Greek patristic exegesis of Romans does not provide much ground for a robust doctrine of “natural theology.”\textsuperscript{128} But it did point to the essence-energies distinction in a tradition stretching as far back as Origen.\textsuperscript{129} The distinction was further developed by Theophylaktos and Zigabenos, and was available in an eleventh-century \textit{Catena on Romans} in the form of an Apollinarian fragment: “What is ‘known’ of God is not his active essence . . . but the essence’s naturally existing invisible energies, which never become visible but are shown forth through creation.”\textsuperscript{130}

To claim that philosophy was a parallel \textit{nomos} for the pagans may have been a helpful apologetical strategy, but such an idea does not find support in the theology of Paul, who recognized a “natural law” among the Gentiles only to underline their failure to keep it. The cosmos could perhaps provide proofs for the existence of God as the cause of creation, but any argument from design had to account for divine transcendence, had to be sharply qualified by apophatic negation. The logical status of human “natural proofs” for God was ambiguous indeed. God is not an object of knowledge, but is known by those to whom he freely discloses himself. Unlike other forms of knowledge, knowledge of God begins with God’s own initiative, with the gift of his grace, not with human reason. Following the early church fathers, Palamas recognized that philosophy is hobbled by theological agnosticism, proven by the fact that the philosophers did not change their manner of life or manner of worship. Though they claimed to know the one God, they continued worshipping many. What they knew of God was limited to the activity of their own minds, through deduction and inference, which is never able to arrive at genuine knowledge of the divine. Human reason is not the “cause” of one’s “knowing” God, for true knowledge of God, which is not simply an intellectual apprehension of God’s existence, is an understanding of his mode of existence, of what he is actively doing in the world, which can only come about through revelation and the grace of the Spirit. Consistent with Paul’s arguments to the Corinthians, a God who is discovered by human wisdom will be a projection of human fallwness and a source of human pride, which is the worship of the creature, not the creator (cf. Rom. 1:25).

Paul the Hesychast

Thus far Palamas did not have much to say about the specific origins of Paul’s wisdom, although this question was important to him and touches on a key element in the Byzantine understanding of Paul. How did Paul gain access to “the secret and hidden wisdom of God”? How had he come to know “what no eye had seen, nor ear heard, nor ever entered the heart of man”? How, indeed, had he come to know “the very depths of God”? (1 Cor. 2:6–10). Palamas turned to these questions toward the end of the first \textit{Triad}, and found their answers in Paul’s extraordinary visionary experiences. He believed that the apostle’s wisdom was imparted to him through his vision of a “light from heaven” on the day of his conversion (Acts 9:3–7, cf. 22:6–11; 26:12), and especially
through the “visions and revelations” he received in the course of his subsequent “ascent to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:1–4). In discussing these events, Palamas underlined the power of the divinizing grace that transformed a “Saul” into a “Paul,” and it seems clear that this is the point toward which his entire argument was moving. Palamas saw in Paul’s spiritual experiences nothing less than the definitive embodiment of the Hesychast spirituality attacked by Barlaam. He did not bring these experiences forward simply to use as proof texts in support of his theological arguments; he believed that Paul himself was the founder and model of a form of spiritual life that continued to be practiced by the Hesychasts.

Paul’s Rapture

With this we arrive at the question of Paul’s visionary experiences and in particular his ascent or “rapture” (ἀναστάσις) into the third heaven, which many modern scholars find disconcerting, if not a little alarming, inasmuch as the familiar Paul here changes into a believer in celestial wanderings. Accounts of “visions and revelations” (2 Cor. 12:1) and of journeys to “heaven” and “paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2, 4) make Paul seem more like a medieval Byzantine saint than a modern Protestant pastor, and argue for an image of the apostle as a man of “mystical” experiences in a way that scholars have found difficult to conceptualize. Yet none of this should be surprising, since Paul’s letters, as well as his depiction in the book of Acts, provide ample evidence of visionary experiences, revelations, and ecstasies; of miracles; of the indwelling of Christ and/or the Holy Spirit; of experiences of grace and spiritual transformation; and of personal union with Christ.

Paul’s account is the only firsthand description of an ascent to heaven to have survived from the first century. It is tantalizingly brief—around fifty words—little more than an elliptical digression about “visions and revelations” embedded in a larger argument and therefore “difficult to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16). In the tradition of ironic boasting, Paul wrote of “a certain man” who was “caught up” into the “third heaven,” although he afterward stated that this man was “caught up” into “paradise,” where he heard “certain ineffable words that cannot be spoken.” To complicate matters still further, the apostle repeatedly noted that he did not know whether this experience took place “in the body or out of the body.” We are consequently left to wonder about the precise relation of the “third heaven” to “paradise,” which may perhaps be one and the same destination, unless Paul was speaking of a two-stage ascent, or perhaps of two separate ascents. Further ambiguity arises over whether or not this was a spiritual or a bodily experience;

131 Triad 1.1.22: “Our theosophia is a gift that transforms ‘Sauls’ into ‘Pauls,’ catching them up from earth into the ‘third heaven,’ where they ‘hear ineffable things’ [2 Cor. 12:1],” ed. Meyendorff, 1:61, lines 22–28.

132 In Triad 2.3.24, Paul is described as the “most divine initiator (θειότατος ἰεροτελεστής) . . . inasmuch as he ascended beyond nature, and saw ‘invisible things’ and ‘heard what cannot be heard’” [cf. 2 Cor. 12:4], ed. Meyendorff, 1:455, lines 11–17. Palamas recognized other models for the divinized life, such as Melchizedek, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and St. Stephen, but the principal archetype was Paul (Triad 3.3.8; 1:3.35; 1:3.30–31). Before Palamas, Gregory of Sinai (d. ca. 1357) in On the Signs of Grace and Delusion (in Φιλοκαλία [Athens, 1961], 4:67) had already grounded the entire Hesychast project, understood as the manifestation of the “indwelling grace of baptism,” on the teaching of Paul in 2 Cor. 11:3: “Do you not know that Jesus Christ dwells within you?”

133 See n. 2 above.
and we are told nothing about the content, meaning, or purpose of the revelation, or why the words that were heard cannot be communicated to others.\footnote{Of course, writers of apocryphal works eagerly provided answers to these questions; see Goeder, \textit{Only the Third Heaven?}, 104–27; J. E. Wright, \textit{The Early History of Heaven} (New York, 2000), 148–63.}

Despite these ambiguities—or perhaps because of them—this passage attracted considerable interest throughout the patristic and later Byzantine periods. On the whole, the church fathers accepted the account as entirely fitting and natural, recognizing in Paul’s rapture a paradigm for their own spiritual experiences, a connection authorized by the influential \textit{Life of Antony}.\footnote{Athanasius, \textit{Life of Antony} 65.8–9, SC 400:306; cf. the saying of Abba Silouanos (PG 65:408), who for hours stood in a state of ecstasy, his hands stretched out to heaven; when pressed to reveal what he saw, he replied: “I was caught up into heaven and saw the glory of God.”} The connection itself, however, is much older, and appears in highly developed form already in Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs, which conflated the connubial “inner chamber” with the apostle’s “third heaven.” The commentary survives only in a Latin translation (\textit{Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum}), although the passage linking Paul’s ecstasy with Christian mystical experience is extant in Greek in the \textit{catena} on the Song of Songs compiled by Prokopios of Gaza (ca. 460–526).\footnote{Origen, \textit{Commentary on the Song of Songs} 1, GCS VIII/ 31:108–9; cf. Prokopios, \textit{Catena on the Song of Songs}, PG 17:253; PG 87:1552. See also Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Apologia on the Hexaemeron} (PG 44:111B), who also describes Paul’s ascent into the third heaven as an “entrance into the innermost sanctuary of intelligible nature.”}

From at least the third century, spiritual writers interpreted Paul’s ascent as an expression of the highest level of mystical experience. Undoubtedly, the most elaborate example of such an interpretation is found in Maximos the Confessor, \textit{Ambigua} 20. Maximos interpreted the event in the framework of his theology of divinization. He pointed out that divinization is not a natural potential of human nature, but the activity of divine grace, the reception of which requires a person to “go outside of himself,” that is, to enter a state of ecstasy, after the manner of Paul. Maximos subsequently embarked on a highly Dionysian interpretation of the apostle’s ascent to the third heaven, which, he argued, unfolded according to the three stages of purification, illumination, and mystical union.\footnote{Maximos was in fact commenting on Gregory of Nazianzos, \textit{Or.} 2.8.20, which describes Paul’s rapture as a threefold “progress, ascent, or assumption to the third heaven,” SC 250:140, lines 2–3. For \textit{Ambigua} 20, ed. Constas, \textit{Ambigua}, see n. 55 above. See also Maximos’s \textit{scholion} on the ecstasy of Paul, ed. B. R. Suchla, \textit{Ioannis Scythopolitani, prologus et scholia in Dionysi Areqagogiae librum De divinis nominibus} (Berlin, 2013), 488, lines 9–35 (in the apparatus).}

The first stage encompasses (1) the “practical philosophy” of asceticism, (2) a renunciation of nature through virtue, or (3) a state of dispassion. The second stage is marked by (1) the transcendence of cognitions generated by the activity of sensation, (2) the transcendence of time and space (i.e., the conditions in which objects of perception have their existence), or (3) “natural contemplation,” which is the comprehension of the intelligible foundations of phenomenal reality. The third and final stage is either (1) “dwell ing” in God, (2) a restoration by grace to one’s divine source, or (3) initiation into “theological wisdom.” Because the latter triad is an ecstatic state marked by the cessation of both sensation and intellection, it is “not something that the apostle accomplished, but something that befell him,” and the only “activity” in actual operation belonged wholly to God. As for the meaning of the “third heaven,” Maximos offered two interpretations, either (1) the “boundary” or “limit” of each of the three stages that Paul attained or (2) the “three orders of angels immediately above us.”\footnote{Cf. Zigabenos, \textit{Commentary on 2 Corinthians} (ed. Kalogeris, \textit{Epistole}, 2:479): “Even though Paul appeared to live on earth, he was engaged in friendly competition with the angels, and so ascended to the third heaven”; Chrysostom, \textit{Encomium on St. Paul} 1.8 (SC 100:116): “Let us consider the honors Paul received. He was caught up into paradise, into the third heaven, and made to share in secret words that man may not repeat [1 Cor. 15:2–4]. He deserved the honor for he walked the earth as if he were in the company of angels. Under the trapings of a mortal body he was angelic in his purity, and, despite his human frailty, strove to be as angelic as the powers above.” Placing Paul among angels was not inconsistent with the evidence of the apostle’s letters, which depict a cosmos populated with multiple levels of angelic beings. In Romans 8:38–39, Paul mentioned “angels, principalities, powers, heights, and depths,” which are the names of various celestial powers. He was confident that the victory of Christ would be over “every principle, authority, and power” (1 Cor. 15:24), which may likewise...} Through these orders Paul ascended by a...
process of negation and affirmation. By negating
the knowledge of one order, the apostle was initiated into the rank immediately above it, “for the positive affirmation of the knowledge of what is ranked above is a negation of the knowledge of what is below, just as the negation of the knowledge of what is below implies the affirmation of what is above.” This process comes to a halt with the final negation of the “knowledge of God,” beyond which there can be no further affirmations, “since there is no longer any boundary or limit that could define or frame the negation.”

According to Maximos, it was the natural result of the apostle’s temporary loss of corporeal sensation and intellection that he did not know whether he was “in the body” or “outside the body.” Insofar as Paul had gone outside himself in ecstasy, his power of sense perception was inactive, and thus he was not “in the body.” But neither was he “outside the body,” insofar as “his intellection power was inactive during the time of his rapture.” Maximos averred that this is also why the words Paul heard cannot be repeated, for having, as it were, sounded in a realm beyond mind, they cannot be grasped by ordinary thought, or uttered through ordinary speech, or received by ordinary human hearing. Maximos concluded this complex interpretation by construing Paul’s threefold ascent as an expression of the spiritual progress that results from a life lived according to the Pauline virtues of “faith, hope, and love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

In Maximos’s reading of 2 Corinthians 12:1–4, Paul’s rapture is fully identified with ascetic contemplation and the experience of divinization. The “three heavens” signify—indeed simply are—the three stages of the spiritual life and their respective modes of cognition. The movement of “ascent” is thus a progression from lower to higher modes of cognition as the soul is increasingly abstracted from its bodily senses, passing into a realm beyond intellect. The condition of being “caught up,” of being “outside oneself,” is, as we have seen, a signature Dionysian doctrine grounded on the ecstatic transport of Paul to the third heaven.142 Consistent with this tradition, Maximos allowed for an immediate experience of God in ecstasy, so that Paul’s rapture, far from being a unique or extraordinary event, coincided with the end for which Christian life is a preparation, namely, divinization. Among later Byzantine writers, this is the standard interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12:1–4, so that every saint becomes “another Paul (ήτερος Παύλος), caught up to the third heaven of theology.”143

Palamas’s understanding of Paul’s rapture falls squarely within this tradition of interpretation, being primarily indebted to Dionysios and Maximos. Throughout the Triads, Palamas cited Paul’s account extensively, for which Gregoras criticized him, although Palamas said little that was new.144 Novelty, of course, was not his aim, although Palamas supplied a missing piece of the puzzle about whether Paul was “in the body or outside of it.” Palamas’s reading was based on the aforementioned idea that the ecstasy of divinization involves a cessation of sensory and intellectional activities:

“Now we see by means of sense perception, beings, and “divisible symbols,”145 but then, finding ourselves beyond such things, we...”

142 See above, p. 155.
143 Niketas Stethatos, Gnostic Chapters 44, in Φιλολογία 3:356–357; cf. ibid., 58, 5:354–354; idem, Practical and Theological Chapters 104, in Φιλολογία 5:254–254; Makarios, On the Freedom of the Intellect 3, in Φιλολογία 1:3;9; PG 143:957B; Kallistos the Patriarch, On Prayer 45, 49, in Φιλολογία 4:329, 331; see also Neilos of Ancyra, Discourse on Voluntary Poverty 27 (PG 79:1004B, cited by Palamas at Triad 1,3,18): “Perfect prayer is the rapture of the mind and the total cessation of sensory perception, and this is why Paul, when he was ‘caught up into the third heaven, did not know if he was in the body or not’ [2 Cor. 12:2]. The same thing happened to him when he was ‘praying in the temple and entered a state of ecstasy’ [Acts 22:17–18] and heard the divine voice by means of the inner sense of his heart, for the sense of hearing, together with all the other bodily senses, ceases during the experience of ecstasy.” See also Anastasios of Sinai, Question 3, CCSG 39:7–9.
144 Cf. Triad 1.1.22; 1.3.5, 16, 18, 24; 2.1.4; 2.1.11; 2.1; 2.1.2; 26–27, 37, 56; 3.1.18; and the remarks of Gregoras, Antirrhetic 1.1.2 (ed. Beyer [n. 12 above], 245, 251).
145 A citation from Dionysios, DN 1.4 (μεσιτιών συμβολήν) (114,6), which I take to be a Dionysian gloss on Paul’s notion that our knowledge, which is “divisible” (i.e., partial, ἐκ μέρους), will be “abolished” in the unmediated vision of God (1 Cor. 13:9–11). This passage from the Triads is replete with Dionysian allusions, although full annotation is not possible here.
shall see the timeless light directly, with no intervening veil, just as the most divine initiator into these things revealed, saying: “Now (νῦν) we see through a glass darkly, but then, face to face” [1 Cor. 13:12]. By the word “now” he meant the mode of contemplation that is accessible and appropriate to our nature, for he himself, having ascended beyond nature and finding himself beyond sense perception and intellect, saw “invisible things” and “heard things that are beyond hearing” [cf. 2 Cor. 12:4], receiving within himself the “pledge” [2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14] of that “rebirth” [cf. Titus 3:5] and the vision that accompanies it, which is why he said, “I knew,” and “I heard,” and “I saw.” These indeed seem to be the activity of perception. But he also said: “I do not know if it was the intellect or the body that perceived those things”—because this “perception” is beyond both sensation and intellect, for when one of the two is active, and because it is active, it apprehends and knows. This is why he added: “God knows” [2 Cor. 12:3], for it was God who at that moment was active. Paul himself, however, inasmuch as he had gone beyond what is proper to man by virtue of his union with God, saw invisible realities by means of the invisible, even though those realities, which became visible to him, never departed (ἐκστάντα) from their realm beyond perception.148

146 Here Paul said ἀποκριθεὶς and not νῦν, which is a rhetorical refinement introduced by Palamas.

147 In 2 Corinthians 12:4, Paul spoke only of “hearing,” and made no mention of “seeing,” although he did refer to “visions” (ἐπτάσεις) at the beginning of the account [2 Cor. 12:1]. Psellos (On the Words, “I Know a Man in Christ,” ed. Gautier, 111–12) argued that Paul was caught up first into the third heaven, where, outside of himself, he was overwhelmed by light (as on the day of his conversion) and by the singing of the angels, the sound of whose voices can be received by God alone. It is only in the apostle’s subsequent rapture to the earthly paradise that he was able to “hear certain sounds” and “see certain things,” given the relatively sense-perceptible character of paradise.

148 Triad 2.3.14, ed. Meyendorff, 2:435–57; cf. Gennadios Scholarios, Responses to the Questions of George, Deport of Serbia 14 (ed. Petit et al., Œuvres complètes, 4:209–10): “Paul is in doubt about whether this happened ‘with or without the body,’ not because he suspects that his body was taken up along with his soul into heaven, for he knew that this was not possible at that time, for the body was still corruptible; but when it becomes incorruptible and light and bright, as was the body of Christ after the resurrection, then it will ascend to the heavenly paradise, which is the place of the blessed. But he wonders: ‘Was the soul separated from the body for a time, leaving the body dead until the soul, by some miracle, should return to it, or did the soul remain within the body?’ But he was ‘caught up to heaven,’ and he was both naturally in the body and in heaven according to activity (κατ’ ἐνέργειαν), so that the mysteries of heaven might be revealed for the benefit of the world.”

149 Triad 3.1.18, ed. Meyendorff, 2:855, lines 2–3.

150 Triad 3.1.38; 3.1.40; 3.2.1, ed. Meyendorff, 2:653, 657, 642. Note that at Triad 3.1.38 and 3.2.1, Palamas cited Makarios, On the Freedom of the Intellect (PG 54:957AB), which conflated Paul’s vision of the divine light with his ascent to the third heaven, making the divine light the cause of the apostle’s transport to heaven. He did the same in his Antirrhetic against Gregory 5.6.23 (ed. Chrestou, EPE 6:146).


The Reception of Paul and of Pauline Theology in the Byzantine Period

The Divine Light

In addition to Paul’s ascent to the third heaven, his vision of the divine light on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9; 22:6–11; 26:12–18) also figured prominently in the controversy. As described by Luke in the book of Acts, Paul, while traveling to Damascus, was overwhelmed by a “light from heaven that flashed all around him.” Temporarily blinded and falling to the ground, Paul heard the voice of Jesus, who called him to serve as the apostle to the gentiles (Acts 26:18). Palamas directly cited Luke’s account of Paul’s vision only in the last volume of his trilogy, written around 1340.149 By that time, the debate had shifted away from the epistemological questions described above, and came to focus increasingly on the nature of the divine light, which, according to Palamas’s opponents, was a mere “symbol” or “created phenomenon.”151 Having already

148 Triad 2.3.14, ed. Meyendorff, 2:435–57; cf. Gennadios Scholarios, Responses to the Questions of George, Deport of Serbia 14 (ed. Petit et al., Œuvres complètes, 4:209–10): “Paul is in doubt about whether this happened ‘with or without the body,’ not because he suspects that his body was taken up along with his soul into heaven, for he knew that this was not possible at that time, for the body was still corruptible; but when it becomes incorruptible and light and bright, as was the body of Christ after the resurrection, then it will ascend to the heavenly paradise, which is the place of the blessed. But he wonders: ‘Was the soul separated from the body for a time, leaving the body dead until the soul, by some miracle, should return to it, or did the soul remain within the body?’ But he was ‘caught up to heaven,’ and he was both naturally in the body and in heaven according to activity (κατ’ ἐνέργειαν), so that the mysteries of heaven might be revealed for the benefit of the world.”

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150 Triad 3.1.38; 3.1.40; 3.2.1, ed. Meyendorff, 2:653, 657, 642. Note that at Triad 3.1.38 and 3.2.1, Palamas cited Makarios, On the Freedom of the Intellect (PG 54:957AB), which conflated Paul’s vision of the divine light with his ascent to the third heaven, making the divine light the cause of the apostle’s transport to heaven. He did the same in his Antirrhetic against Gregory 5.6.23 (ed. Chrestou, EPE 6:146).

argued for the continuity of experience between Paul and the Hesychasts, Palamas affirmed that what the apostle beheld on the road to Damascus was nothing less than the eternal, uncreated energy of God—in other words, the very same divine light seen by the Hesychasts.

By identifying the light of Paul’s conversion with the uncreated light of God, Palamas was able to solidify two key points. In the first place, Paul’s gift of divine wisdom—already emphasized in 2 Peter—is now revealed to have been communicated to him through the medium of the divine light.\(^{152}\) It was not the “light of the mind” that illuminated Paul, but the “power of the Holy Spirit, dwelling in his soul, and which revealed to him the true knowledge of God.”\(^{153}\) Receiving the Spirit of God, which “knows the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:11), Paul was granted to see what “no eye had seen, nor ear heard, nor ever entered the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9). It was through this same light, moreover, that Paul received both the “eyes of Christ” and “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), by means of which he was able to see and know the invisible God, for God is not “invisible to himself,” but “only to those who see and think with created eyes and minds.” But to those whom “God has united himself, becoming, as it were, their mind, how would he not give them his own vision and grace?”\(^{154}\)

The second point follows from the first. If what Paul saw was the light of God, and if the light of God was the uncreated energy of God, then one had to conclude, Palamas pointed out, that what Paul did not see was the divine essence.\(^{155}\) Palamas’s opponents, of course, did not believe that Paul had seen God’s essence, but because they refused to acknowledge the existence of the divine energies they had no choice but to argue that Paul had seen nothing at all. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the essence-energies distinction, about which much has been written, and this question need not detain us any further. I conclude this section by touching on one more Hesychast reading of Paul, which makes the apostle the founder of the practice of ceaseless prayer to Jesus.

**Paul and the Jesus Prayer**

Barlaam’s attack on the ceaseless repetition of the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”—also known as the Jesus Prayer—was understood by Palamas as an attack on Paul, for it was he who had exhorted all Christians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17; cf. Eph. 6:18). The ceaseless repetition of the Jesus Prayer, an advanced spiritual state attained by certain monks,\(^{156}\) was seen as the fulfillment of Paul’s teaching. Barlaam, however, took this verse to mean simply that Christians should acquire a general habit of prayer, not that they should always be engaging in the actual activity. Palamas countered this interpretation with a series of biblical passages (Eph. 6:18; Lk. 11:13; 18:7) and a citation from Dionysios on the nature of prayer.\(^{157}\) Associating 1 Thessalonians 5:17 with the ceaseless invocation of the name of Jesus was an ancient tradition and is found in the earliest teachers of the Jesus Prayer.\(^{158}\) Palamas further argued that when Paul speaks of the “five words uttered by means of the intellect” (1 Cor. 14:19), he is in fact referring to the five words of the Jesus Prayer (i.e., in Greek), which was an interpretation that had also been put forward by earlier writers.\(^{159}\)

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152. See *Triad* 3.1.10–11, ed. Meyendorff, 1:129–33.
156. But not only monks—Palamas, citing Thessalonians 5:17, maintained that the Jesus Prayer “should be taught to men, women, children, to the educated and the illiterate, and indeed to all.” Palamas’s views met with resistance from an elderly monk on Athos who believed the prayer should be restricted to monks, for which he was rebuked by an angel who confirmed the teaching of Palamas; cf. Philotheos Kokkinos, *Encomium on St. Gregory Palamas* 29, ed. D. Tsamis, *Φιλοθέου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως τοῦ Κοκκίνου: Αγιολογικά έργα* (Thessalonike, 1983), 457–58.
After the definitive triumph of Hesychasm in 1351 these interpretations became standard among Orthodox writers, whose understanding of Pauline themes, rhetoric, and theology. In response to the challenge of fallen Greek wisdom, and in defense of the transforming activity of divine grace, Palamas found his argumentative footing in the letters of Paul. Immersed in the patristic exegetical tradition, Palamas was a careful student of Paul’s letters, and it is hard to fault him for reading his own ideas into the texts. The cut and thrust of theological controversy called for a powerful command of rhetoric, and prompted Palamas to assume, not simply the arguments, but the very voice of Paul, amplifying and reinforcing the content of Paul’s message. In the course of the debates, it was ultimately the voice of Paul that the Byzantines recognized in the voice of Palamas, in whom they saw “another Paul.” In the liturgical office for Palamas written shortly after his death, the hymnographer astutely captured these resonances, artfully aligning the sainted bishop with the apostle: “Through your life of prayer, poverty, and virginity, and in the font of your tears, you purified your heart, O Gregory, and being wholly raised aloft, you were united to Christ, becoming ‘one spirit with him’ [1 Cor. 6:17], and thus like Paul you ‘heard ineffable words’ [2 Cor. 12:4], and became a ‘chosen vessel, bearing the Name of the Lord’ [Acts 9:15].”}

**Conclusion**

The reception of Paul and Pauline theology in the Byzantine world was part of a larger process that began in the first century and continued through the Palaiologan period and beyond. Once Paul’s letters were taken up into the canon of scripture, they received wide attention in sermons, commentaries, theological debates, ascetical literature, and, not least, in liturgy, the sacraments, and the lectionary cycle, which features Paul’s letters for ten months of the year.

Byzantine exegetes were theologians, and they labored to provide Paul’s letters with a secure theological framework. After the early church fathers, the theological interpretation of Paul reached a major milestone with the corpus Dionysiacum, which had a profound influence on the reception of the corpus Paulinum in the later Byzantine world. Commentaries on Paul’s letters continued to be produced throughout the middle Byzantine period, when the exegetical work of earlier writers was enriched with the theological concepts of later centuries. The compilation of commentaries and catenae, incorporating thousands of scholia.

162  Philotheos Kokkinos, Φιλοκαλία τῶν ἱερῶν ἱερευνητῶν (Venice, 1782), 7. The anonymous pilgrim’s quest to learn the meaning of ceaseless prayer is inspired after he hears 1 Thessalonians 5:17 read aloud at the Sunday liturgy; see The Pilgrim’s Tale, ed. A. Pentkovsky, trans. T. A. Smith (New York, 1999), 49.
drawn from dozens of authors, reveals the tremendous interest and industry devoted to the letters of Paul at this time.

The late Byzantine period, spiritually invigorated by the Hesychast controversy, was marked by an extraordinary appropriation of Pauline theology that has hitherto escaped scholarly notice. This study has argued that the Hesychast controversy unfolded around rival interpretations of Paul’s theology, with both of the opposing parties claiming to be the true follower of the divine apostle. The close reading of Gregory Palamas’s _Triads_ offered here indicates that the teachings of Paul were not altered to suit a theological novelty known as “Palamism,” but rather that the edifice of Palamite theology was built upon principles derived directly from Paul’s letters and information provided by the book of Acts. Hewing closely to the Pauline exegesis of the early church fathers, and heavily indebted to Dionysios the Areopagite and Maximos the Confessor, Palamas’s reading of Paul demonstrates the impressive continuity of the patristic and Byzantine exegetical tradition.

In Paul’s rhetorically vehement separation of the two wisdoms, Palamas found a fixed point from which to launch his response to the vaunted claims of pagan philosophy. As the apostle had made clear, philosophy does not offer true knowledge of God, which is a gift of grace understood as true contact and union with God. Divine, uncreated grace does not originate from a place within creation but from God himself. For the creature to receive the creator, the receiver had to enter a state of prayer, and ultimately be caught up in a state of ecstasy, so that the intellect is increasingly detached, not simply from the “mind of the flesh” (Rom. 8:6–8) but from all created realities. Consistent with the traditional patristic emphasis on the person of Paul, Palamas highlighted the apostle’s own spiritual experiences, especially his ecstatic rapture into heaven, which Palamas explicated in light of traditional monastic anthropology. In a defining moment for Byzantine theology, Palamas connected the Dionysian notion of ecstasy to the idea of the self as open to the divinizing vision of the divine light understood as the uncreated energy of God. In the life and letters of Paul, Palamas saw what he and other faithful Byzantines had seen in all their saints: a human life overwhelmed by God, transformed by divine grace, and caught up from the present aeon into another beyond it.