Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, 2025.

doi:10.1017/S0022046925000065

Paulician Dualism Revisited

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Preserved within the corpus of the East Roman polemicist Peter the Sicilian, several unassuming statements subtly contradict the historical consensus that the Paulicians espoused absolute dualism. According to their own testimony, rather than literally upholding two gods, as their Roman adversaries alleged, the Paulicians worshipped the heavenly Father but contended that the devil was merely a false god to whom the Romans were subject. This article therefore contributes to a broader critique of several received truths: that the Paulicians were absolute dualists, or dualists more generally, and that their thought informed that of later dualist groups.

'Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.'[1] One God, one good; one creator, one creation. The cosmogony of Genesis is a simple one, almost ironically so when read with knowledge of the theological controversies which would characterise the development of later Christian tradition. In its terse, ethically unambiguous, terms, there is no indication of the triune godhead, distinct but united in its persons, that would become the lodestone of Trinitarian orthodoxy. There is also no hint of Christ, nor the attributes and apophatic adjectives that would qualify him in an attempt to guide the Church through the series of theological Scyllae and Charybdes that characterised Christological controversy from the fifth century onward. Without the evocative legacy of New Testament texts and their concomitant complexities of interpretation, there is no rationale by which the singular creator of Genesis would find expression as a Trinity, the specifics and interrelations of whose persons would take centuries to work out. Theology is a

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for perceptive comments on an earlier version of this article.

[1] Genesis i.3–4. All biblical translations are taken from the NRSV, except those employed within existing translations.

tricky business and, while the course of developments were, at the time, couched in terms of the infallible, divinely ordained will manifesting itself in the assembled bishops, the motive forces can be more convincingly interpreted as a mix of personal grievances, deep-seated communal and regional loyalties, the contrasting and often adversarial approaches of different theological schools, as well as a generous dose of secular interference. Things could have turned out differently.

A hint of this potentiality is apparent in those forms of Christianity which fell by the wayside in late antiquity. Many such movements would nowadays be termed 'dualist' and 'Gnostic' for positing more than one first cosmological principle and considering the visible creation to be the work of a demiurge distinct from the benevolent God.[2] Though difficult to reconcile with the account in Genesis, these schools still commonly considered themselves Christian. Given the doctrinal differences, their severance from the established Church is unsurprising, yet the endurance of their ideas within orthodox polemic suggests a recurrent anxiety about explaining evil within a Christian orbit. Although Christianity had assigned responsibility for evil to the devil, the dynamics of agency were complex, as whatever means he had were granted only through the dispensation of God. As such, a misunderstanding of the devil's jurisdiction might be construed as heresy, even as Manichaeism reborn.[3]

That similar misinterpretations could arise is the subject of this article, devoted to fragments of Paulician testimony from the ninth- and tenth-century heyday of this compelling and bellicose movement. As is not uncommon in the study of heresy, an overview of the Paulicians poses as many questions as answers, since the sources which document them are hostile and controversial. The Armenian roots of the name are apparent in the brief references to Paylikeank', Polikeank' or Polikeans from the fifth to eighth centuries within Armenian texts, yet no coherent doctrinal position can confidently be assigned to them during that period.[4] Although their beliefs are often given an adoptionist bent, this is predicated on a doubtful eighteenth-century source, the *Key of Truth*, and

[2] See recently M. David Litwa, *The evil creator: origins of an early Christian idea*, New York 2021. For 'Gnosticism' see Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to 'Gnosticism'*, New York–Oxford 2013, and David Brakke, *The Gnostics: myth, ritual and diversity in early Christianity*, Cambridge, MA 2011.

[3] For thirteenth- and fourteenth-century examples from western Europe see David Zbíral, 'Définir les "cathares": le dualisme dans les registres d'inquisition', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* ccxxvii/2 (2010), 203–10.

[4] For the Armenian sources see Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, Paris–The Hague 1967, 80–111; Paul Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie Mineure d'après les sources grecques', *Travaux et mémoires* v (1973), 53–6; and Carl Dixon, *The Paulicians: heresy, persecution and warfare on the Byzantine frontier, c.750–880*, Leiden 2022, 18–28.

contemporary witnesses instead suggest an iconoclastic, or perhaps even animistic, emphasis.[5] Conversely, among East Roman sources, one stands out: Peter the Sicilian's ninth-/tenth-century *History of the Paulicians*, which describes Paulician activity within the empire from the mid-seventh century onward, albeit in a manner so stylised that it may represent a later Paulician attempt to invent a history for themselves.[6] Only at the turn of the ninth century are clear indications that Paulicians were active in East Roman territory to be found. Theophanes the Confessor mentions them regularly from the reign of Nikephoros I (802–11) onward, recounting their persecution by Michael I (811–13).[7] The letters of Theodore the Stoudite, meanwhile, indicate that this influential abbot rebuked the aforesaid emperor and his successor Leo V (813–20) for resorting to violence.[8]

These persecutions understandably left an indelible mark on Paulician communities, even though their ferocity abated with time. Perhaps in this period, but certainly by the regency of the young Michael III (843–67), when a further bout of persecution was enacted (*c.* 843–4), Paulicians could be found in open rebellion in eastern Asia Minor.[9] After this second crackdown, their presence became a strategic problem for the empire due to their coordination with the nearby Islamic emirates of Malaṭya and Tarsus, which assumed greater power in the region as the 'Abbāsid Caliphate became engulfed in palace intrigue. After outgrowing

[5] *The Key of Truth: a manual of the Paulician Church in Armenia*, ed. Frederick C. Conybeare, Oxford 1898; Anna M. Ohanjanyan, 'Jumping in and out of confessions: Armenian Catholic Yovhannēs from Mush and his book "Key of Truth"', *Bulletin of Matenadaran* xxxiv/2 (2022), 131–65. The most important contemporary source is the eighth-century *Contra Paulicianos* of Yovhannēs III Ōjnec'i. See Anne E. Redgate, 'Catholicos John III's *Against the Paulicians* and the Paulicians of Tephrike', in Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Armenian Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia*, Los Angeles, CA 2004, 88–110.

[6] Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 140–86. For tenth-century datings of the *History* which assume that it is a forgery see Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, 55–79, and Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 60–79. For ninth-century datings see Henri Grégoire, 'Les Sources de l'histoire des Pauliciens: Pierre de Sicile est authentique et "Photius" un faux', *Académie Royale de Belgique, Bulletin Classe des Lettres* 5e série xxii (1936), 101–9; Felix Scheidweiler, 'Paulikianerprobleme', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* xliii (1950), 14–19; Milan Loos, 'Deux Contributions à l'histoire des Pauliciens, I: À propos des sources grecques reflétant des Pauliciens', *Byzantinoslavica* xvii (1956), 22–56; and Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 17–21.

[7] Theophanes, *Theophanis chronographia*, ed. Carl de Boor, i, Leipzig 1883, 488, 498, 501; English translation: *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, ed. and trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, Oxford 1997, 671, 678, 684–5.

[8] Theodore the Stoudite, *Theodori Studitae epistulae, ep.* cdlv, ed. Georgios Fatouros, ii, Berlin 1992, 647, lines 82–5.

[9] *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Libri I–IV*, ed. and trans. J. Michael Featherstone and Juan Signes Codoñer, Boston, MA–Berlin 2015, ch. 4.16, pp. 236–7.

their initial strongholds, the Paulicians founded the imposing and defensible Tephrikē in 856 but, although their power expanded in the short term, setbacks for themselves and the nearby emirates in 863, coupled with the recovery of Roman power that characterised the second half of the century, eventually eroded their position. Although their leader Chrysocheir raided as far as Nicaea, Nicomedia and Ephesus early in the reign of Basil I (867–86), he was ultimately left without allies.[10] His death in 872 and the fall of Tephrikē in 878 marked the end of the Paulicians as a politico-military force, although those populations which were relocated to the Balkans remained a restless presence in later centuries.[11]

If this historical sojourn appears complex and occasionally hazy, this is because it is derived from a variety of sources, Greek, Arabic and Armenian, historical, heresiological and epistolary, not all of which always align. For the Paulicians' religious views the territory is even rockier. Since the early nineteenth century, the predominant strand of scholarship has held that they were proponents of absolute dualism, a term of modern convenience corresponding to the view that there were two co-eternal first principles of creation, one responsible for good and the other for evil.[12] The sources portray this dualism as identical to Manichaeism, but many modern studies, since the pioneering works of Johann Gieseler, have interpreted it as being indebted to, or independently resembling, Marcionism.[13] Much scholarship of this ilk, exemplified by Gieseler, Henri Grégoire and Paul Lemerle, focused squarely on the Paulicians and accordingly the relationship of their doctrines to those of other movements was not always a significant emphasis.[14] By contrast, those scholars concerned with medieval Christian dualism, such as Steven Runciman, Bernard Hamilton and Yuri Stoyanov, have placed greater weight on this fact, particularly regarding the Paulicians'

[10] For the above events see Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, 125–9; Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 85–103; and Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 232–320.

[11] Ani Danchéva-Vassiléva, 'La Commune des Pauliciens à Plovdiv pendant le moyen-âge', *Revue Bulgare d'histoire* 2001/1–2 (2001), 27–51.

[12] Authors of the later nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century entrenched the idea that the Paulicians were absolute dualists. See J. J. Ignaz von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, i, Munich 1890, 16, and Steven Runciman, *The medieval Manichee: a study of the Christian dualist heresy*, Cambridge 1947, 58–9.

[13] Johann C. L. Gieseler, 'Untersuchen über die Geschichte der Paulikianer', *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* ii/1 (1829), 114–15; Adrien Edmond Febvrel, *Des Pauliciens: thèse presenté à la faculté de theologie protestante de Strasbourg*, Strasbourg 1868, 79–124.

[14] Grégoire, 'Les Sources de l'histoire des Pauliciens', 95–114, and 'Précisions géographiques et chronologiques sur les Pauliciens', *Académie Royale de Belgique, Bulletin Classe des Lettres*, 5e série xxxiii (1947), 289–324; Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 1–144.

influence (or lack thereof) on the Bogomils and Cathars.[15] Some, such as Milan Loos, tackled the problem from both angles.[16] Thanks to the aforementioned savants, the dualist position has long occupied the historiographical mainstream and this arguably remains true to this day. However, Paulician ideas about the devil challenge this by suggesting that the heresy cannot be straightforwardly classified as representative of either absolute or mitigated dualism, which holds that one principle is subordinate to the other.[17]

Since the close of the nineteenth century, when attention turned towards the Armenian sources, the dualist position has coexisted with a rival which argues that the Paulicians were inheritors of adoptionist Christianity. This view, first argued in Frederick Conybeare's edition of the *Key of Truth*, was most convincingly detailed by Nina Garsoïan.[18] She argued that this adoptionist Christianity retained its original form in Armenian territory, but assumed dualist emphases as it percolated into Roman lands by taking iconoclast ideas to their logical conclusion.[19] For instance, the iconoclast emphasis on the divine Logos over the material Christ may have led the Paulicians to a docetic Christology, whereas the former's 'spiritualisation of doctrine' could have informed the latter's ambivalence to the material world.[20] Hence, while Garsoïan's interpretation substantially overlaps with the dualist position for the period with which we are concerned, it also provides a useful comparison point for a non-dualist perspective on Paulician belief. Like Conybeare before her, however, Garsoïan's analysis did not receive broad support, partially due to its dependence on the *Key*, but her study is characterised by the broad learning and fastidious approach for which she would subsequently be famed, and, as such, aspects of her thought have periodically had their advocates.[21] Still, the dualist position has predominated since her contributions.[22]

[15] Runciman, *The medieval Manichee*; Bernard Hamilton, 'Introduction', in Bernard Hamilton, Janet Hamilton and Sarah Hamilton (eds), *Hugo Eteriano: contra Patarenos*, Leiden 2004, 1–102; Yuri Stoyanov, *The other god: dualist religions from antiquity to the Cathar heresy*, New Haven–London 2000.

[16] Loos, 'Deux Contributions à l'histoire', 19–57, and 'Le Mouvement paulicien à Byzance', *Byzantinoslavica* xxiv (1963), 258–86.

[17] For illustrative conceptions of absolute and mitigated dualism see Hamilton, 'Introduction', 1–102, and Stoyanov, *The other god*, 127–201.

[18] *The Key of Truth*, pp. xxiii–cxcvi.

[19] Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, and 'Byzantine heresy: a reinterpretation', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* xxv (1971), 85–113.

[20] Eadem, 'Byzantine heresy: a reinterpretation', 102–5.

[21] For the reception of Garsoïan's work see Redgate, 'Catholicos John III', 92–3.

[22] For recent espousals of the dualist position see Stefano Fumagalli, *L'eresia dei Pauliciani: dualismo religioso e ribellione nell'Impero bizantino*, Milan 2019; Piotr Czarnecki, 'Cathar "time-focused dualism": an argument for the eastern origins of Catharism', *Catholic Historical Review* cvii/4 (2021), 482–502; and Yianni Cartledge

More recently, another revisionist brand of scholarship has posed a challenge to the dualist interpretation, this time focused on the Paulicians' apogee in Roman territory. This strand traces its roots to a visionary, albeit rarely cited, study published by Claudia Ludwig in the late 1980s, in which she observed that the denunciations of East Roman heresiologists found no corroboration in the Paulician sources preserved, albeit in a reworked form which divests it of some of its original voice, within the Greek sources, principal among which is Peter the Sicilian's *History of the Paulicians*.[23] The form of these Paulician sources is somewhat conjectural, but two can be proposed with confidence: first, the letters of the final *didaskalos* Sergios-Tychikos, whose existence are confirmed by Peter himself; and, second, a mytho-historical account of Paulician origins that Ludwig termed the *Didaskalie*.[24] Reading these sources on their own terms, she concluded that there was no foundation for the dualist claims of Roman heresiologists, and that the Paulicians grounded their beliefs on a reverence for the Apostle Paul, as the sources which calumniate them grudgingly admit in places.[25] In recent work, I have sought to substantiate Ludwig's position by offering a systematic re-evaluation of the movement, including the particulars of the source tradition which describes it; an investigation of Paulician doctrine and religiosity based upon their testimony and hostile sources; and, finally, a history of the movement considered in light of the preceding facts.[26] This endeavour was naturally indebted to exponents of the dualist and adoptionist positions, most notably Garsoïan and Lemerle, and overlaps with recent critiques of Paulician dualism, such as that of Canan Seyfeli.[27] Taking the reassessment of the Paulician phenomenon to its logical conclusion requires three lines of investigation: first, historical reappraisal; second, a critique of the established dualist position, begun here; and third, a series of methodological interventions critiquing the methodological and conceptual apparatus which upheld that dualist consensus.

and Benton Griffon, '"Sunk in the … gulf of perdition": the "heretical" Paulician and Tondrakian movements in the periphery of the medieval Byzantine Empire', *Cerae* ix (2022), 235–71.

[23] Claudia Ludwig, 'Wer hat was in welcher Absicht wie beschreiben? Bemerkungen zur Historia des Petros Sikeliotes über die Paulikianer', *Varia II ΠΟΙΚΙΛΑ BYZANTINA* vi (1987), 149–227.

[24] Peter the Sicilian, *History of the Paulicians*, ed. Denise Papachryssanthou, trans. Jean Gouillard, *Travaux et mémoires* iv (1970), ch. 43, pp. 20–3; English translation at *Christian dualist heresies in the Byzantine world: c. 650–1450*, ed. Bernard Hamilton and Janet Hamilton, Manchester 1998, 73; Ludwig, 'Wer hat was', 213–21; Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, 62–7; Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 140–4.

[25] Ludwig, 'Wer hat was', 224–5.

[26] Dixon, *The Paulicians*.

[27] Canan Seyfeli, 'Byzantine Paulicians: beliefs and practices,' *Journal of Religious Inquiries* 1 (2020), 59–60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While a thoroughgoing critique of Paulician dualism was not the primary objective of my previous work, that matter was discussed and that discussion merits summarising. The main tools of comparison used were the *Didaskalie* and *Letters of Sergios* on the Paulician side and the *Treatise* on the Roman side, since the latter, a brief exposé written perhaps *c.* 834–44, was composed earlier than the *History of the Paulicians* and therefore represented the most appropriate starting point.[28] The argument went that, contrary to the claims of Roman sources, the Paulicians accepted the Old Testament and used it to typical exegetical ends, whereas Sergios-Tychikos's predilection for allegorising the Paulician community as 'the body of Christ' argued against their docetism. Most pertinently, his allusions to instances of sin in the Old Testament, specifically the fornication of Adam and Cain's murder of Abel, in a pastoral context were a clear indication that he did not hold a classically dualist conception of the world because invoking Adam in this context would remind the reader of the corruption of humanity by Satan, thereby undermining the confessional harmony he sought to cultivate.[29] These observations seemed compelling at the time and I still stand by them. However, by not including the *History of the Paulicians* and its three associated sermons in the analysis I missed a trick.[30] Much of the *History*'s value while investigating matters of Paulician belief is that it is more detailed than the *Treatise*. By preserving what were originally Paulician sources, the *Didaskalie* and *Letters of Sergios*, in something close to their original form, it allows for a closer assessment of the reliability of Roman claims, thereby facilitating the revision of the dualist consensus.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, the *History* furnishes evidence that undermines dualist interpretations even when the source seems to be neither the *Didaskalie* nor the *Letters of Sergios*. The most pertinent cases comprise isolated utterances from Paulician voices, largely devoid of context, which orthodox authors invoke to explicate tenets of the heresy. Although there are few indications of whence these voices originated, their subtle undermining of Roman claims suggest that they contain grains of truth, not least when they involve the charge of dualism.[31] This is true of the *Treatise* and it is worth discussing the relevant passage, both

[28] On the *Treatise* see Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 89–97. [29] Ibid. 162–7.

[30] Mauro Mormino, *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani: testo e traduzione*, Rome 2024.

[31] Reference to said 'Paulician voices' raises questions such as whether these voices can be authentically reclaimed or articulated, an endeavour to which I am sympathetic but sceptical. Methodologically, I have been influenced by the below, but I do not presume to adopt their approach wholesale: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, Urbana, IL 1988, 271–313; Joanne P. Sharp, *Geographies of postcolonialism: spaces of power and representation*, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA 2023, 99–129; bell hooks,

to foreground an analysis of the *History* and to nuance our understanding of these pieces of Paulician testimony:

> Their first heresy is that of the Manichaeans, confessing two principles, as they do. They say, 'There is only one thing which separates us from the Romans, that we say that the heavenly Father is one God who has no power in this world but has power in the world to come, and that there is another God who made the world (τὸν κοσμοποιητήν)[32] and who has power over this present world. The Romans confess that the heavenly Father and the creator of all the world (τοῦ κόσμου παντὸς ποιητήν) are one and the same God.' They call themselves Christians and us Romans.[33]

Read on its own merits, this passage articulates Paulician cosmology in clear and simple terms, with a clarity that seemingly reflects a fully articulated belief system. The Paulicians distinguish two gods who respectively rule the heavenly and earthly realms, whereas the Romans recognise only one. There are contrasting indications about how reliable the Paulician voice is, however. The fact that it perceives 'only one thing' that separates themselves from the Romans minimises their differences, which we would not expect from a hostile source, particularly because the *Treatise* proceeds to articulate many such differences.[34] Similarly, the remark that the Paulicians assert their Christian identity and call their adversaries Romans has a ring of truth. However, remarks from the works of Peter the Sicilian imply that Paulician views of the divine were subtly but crucially different from those articulated here.

The most important point, though, is that this voice does not appear to derive from the main Paulician texts, as it diverges from both the *Didaskalie*'s emphasis on building communal identity and the pastoral appeals of Sergios-Tychikos. Of course, the Romans may have had access to other Paulician writings besides these, if only in a fragmentary state, perhaps preserved alongside the *Didaskalie* and *Letters of Sergios*. These emphases may therefore derive from written sources, but it is similarly plausible that they stem from first-hand interactions experienced by the author of the *Treatise*, which he incorporated within his work to articulate his conception of their beliefs, as well as the distinctive ways in which they demarcated Paulician and Roman identity. The uncertain origin of this

'Marginality as a site of resistance', in Russell Ferguson and others (eds), *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures*, Cambridge, MA 1990, 341–3.

[32] For reasons of space, I cannot examine here the intriguing term κοσμοποιητής and its reception in our texts.

[33] *Treatise*, ed. and trans. Charles Astruc, *Travaux et mémoires* iv (1970), ch. 9, p. 85; translation at *Christian dualist heresies*, 94.

[34] See, for instance, *Treatise*, chs 11–14, pp. 87–8; translation at *Christian dualist heresies*, 94–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

evidence is a point to which we shall return repeatedly in this article, although, ultimately, we lack the means to decide on an oral or written derivation.

Dualism in the works of Peter the Sicilian

Although the passage from the *Treatise* is not as simple as would first appear, it still seems to explicate the particulars of Paulician dualism in a coherent and convincing fashion. The problem is that passages analogous to this within Peter the Sicilian's *History of the Paulicians* and his first sermon, which tackles the issue of dualism specifically, suggest a different configuration of ideas. The passage above, for example, is neutral in its language and fails to articulate the spiritual affinity or antipathy that the Paulicians felt regarding the principles which ruled the heavenly and earthly realms. Peter is more explicit, however, allowing the Paulician voice he invokes a degree of credibility and freedom that is never attained in the *Treatise*.[35] Once more, there are no indications of whence this voice stems: its occurrence in the same context as the *Treatise* could suggest a common source, but their different emphases argue against this. We must remain undecided. The passage reads:

> Paulicians say that this is what divides us, that they say that the maker of the cosmos (τὸν τοῦ κόσμου ποιητήν) is one god, and that another god, whom they call the heavenly Father, has no power in this world but does in the age to come, whereas we confess that there is one same God, creator of all, Lord of all, all-powerful. They say to us, 'You believe in the maker of the cosmos (τὸν κοσμοποιητήν), we believe in him of whom the Lord speaks in the gospels, saying: "You have not heard his voice, nor seen his face"'; they are talking empty nonsense, as will be shown later.[36]

Before discussing the passage, the allusion to a refutation at its end refers to Peter's first sermon, which reprises and nuances these ideas. That extract will be discussed later. Returning to the excerpt, its initial section paraphrases that found within the *Treatise* in similar terms: the foremost thing that distinguishes the Paulicians and the Romans is that the former hold that one god rules the earthly realm and another the heavens, whereas the latter believe that the same god holds sway over both.

It is what comes next that is earth-shattering. Peter the Sicilian invokes a Paulician voice, which he quotes in direct speech, i.e. what we might

[35] This passage is also discussed by Seyfeli, who suggests that the Paulicians are accusing the orthodox of 'abiding by the devil': 'Byzantine Paulicians', 59.

[36] Peter the Sicilian, *History*, ch. 38, pp. 20–1, lines 9–16; translation at *Christian dualist heresies*, 72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

surmise is close to the hypothetical Paulician's own words, rather than the reported speech of the *Treatise*. Said voice accuses the Romans of believing in the creator of the world while avowing that the Paulicians believe in the God of the Gospel. Quite simply, this is astonishing. It is as categorical an affirmation of Paulician monotheism as one could reasonably expect to find in a hostile source. In their own terms: 'We believe in him of whom the Lord speaks in the gospels, saying "You have not heard his voice nor seen his face".' The other power invoked, the creator of the world, is not said to be an entity they venerate, nor one whose existence they necessarily accept; it is merely a being they allege is revered by their Roman adversaries. The crucial point of ambiguity is whether this is properly-speaking a deity – for it remains possible that we are witnessing a dualist theology given a monotheist bent in a hostile altercation – or something akin to a false god. To be sure, there are questions to be answered before adopting the latter interpretation, which will be addressed below, but it is indisputable that the passage needs to be placed front and centre while examining Paulician understandings of the divine. Postponing this investigation for now, it seems that the distinction between Christian (read: Paulician) and Roman identities remarked in the *Treatise* has taken a newfound prominence that demarcates the communities even with respect to the gods they venerated; in the Paulician imagination, they had their god and the Romans had another. It is intriguing that the sources identify this latter figure more precisely: it is none other than the Devil himself.

Before addressing the implications of the passage, there is merit to examining the discursive interplay which preconditions it because interplay of this sort is crucial to the second passage, to be examined below. Much like aspects of Paulician community formation that I have previously studied, the motive forces impelling configurations of belief are not intellectual or doctrinal debts to dualist or demiurgical movements but discursive interaction between orthodox and heterodox, including the labelling processes employed by the two. The exonym 'Paulician' does not reflect the objective truth of an association between the Paulicians and a particular Paul; it is a site of conflict reflecting the opposing claims of parties who sought to denigrate or extol Paulician religious identity through association with a variety of figures of that name.[37] The above passage suggests the same. The Paulician voice states that their god is not the god of the Romans; the Romans take this to mean that the Paulicians believe in two gods. In my view, four facts suggest that this Paulician utterance reflects a counterargument to Roman accusations of cosmological dualism rather than a long-held commitment to the same. First, Peter the Sicilian distorts the Paulician voice, which never expresses a belief in the god of the

[37] Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 187–8, 221–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Romans in a fashion he suggests. Second, he specifies that Paulicians make this claim against the Romans, thereby suggesting it carried weight in this specific discursive context. Third, as we shall see, Paulician ideas about agency and authority in the present world differ from the portrayal Peter offers, emphasising the influence of the 'heavenly Father' and downplaying that of the power whom Peter calls 'the maker of the cosmos', suggesting that the latter has only limited influence in the present, contrary to Roman claims. Fourth and finally, the writings of Sergios-Tychikos provide a corroborating witness that Roman conceptions of Paulician 'dualism' were misunderstood.

Leaving these points aside, if the above passage is taken seriously, in their own terms the Paulicians were monotheists. Despite previous attempts to undermine the foundations of Paulician dualism, we have not thus far been able to argue this point so forcibly. The significance of Peter's twisting of Paulician ideas is something we also must not underestimate; never before have we identified Roman commentary that distorts Paulician testimony *vis-à-vis* dualism quite so manifestly.[38] However, the matter is not straightforward. In their own self-understanding, the Paulicians were monotheists but that does not necessarily mean that they were not dualists by the standards of their contemporaries or modern scholarship. Two possibilities spring to mind: first, that the Paulicians were fundamentally monotheist and that they believed that the god of the Romans was akin to a false god. Second, they may have given the god of the Romans an integral role in their understanding of the world, in which case they might be called dualists, albeit dualists of a different kind from both that which their Romans adversaries alleged and that which modern historians have proposed.

There are obstacles which impede deciding between these options. First, Peter's accusations indicate that such claims arose specifically in dialogue between Paulicians and Romans, which complicates determining whether it represented a core Paulician teaching because there is no testimony of their beliefs outside that preserved by Roman sources. In other words, Paulician ideas expressed in and of themselves, without the distorting properties of an orthodox kaleidoscope, remain elusive. Second, the sources never give an account of creation as the Paulicians understood it (or are alleged to have understood it), thereby complicating our ability to characterise the cosmic forces which informed their conception of the universe.[39] More pertinently, deciding between these options may be besides the point. They are not mutually exclusive; it is eminently plausible

[38] Note the equally tendentious arguments of Girolamo Pizzicanella in the eighteenth century: 'Notizie della chiesa in Nicopoli in Bulgaria', in Liubomir Miletich (ed.), 'Nashite Pavlikiani', Сборник за народни умотворения, наука и книжнина [Folklore and Ethnography Collection] xix (1903), 347; Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 50 n. 177.

[39] *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani*, 47.

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that a more systematised dualism would develop organically from allegations of venerating a false god, or that different groups of Paulicians held contrasting views. Ultimately, the balance of the evidence leads to the belief that most Paulicians were not what we could call dualists but, given the limitations of our evidence, it seems precipitous to rule out the opposite possibility.

Further light is shed on this, as well as many of the other points deferred, through an examination of the fuller discussion within Peter the Sicilian's first sermon. These sermons have been lamentably neglected in earlier scholarship – a circumstance that will surely change following Mauro Mormino's invaluable new edition and study[40] – thereby explaining why the paradigm of absolute dualism has remained predominant despite the challenge the following passage poses:

> For theirs is that one, all too obvious thing: the profession of two principles: a bad god and a good one. The first is the maker and ruler of this world and the second, whom they call the heavenly Father, is that of the world to come, attaching their own deceptions incongruously to the heresies of the ill-named Mani. Inveighing against us, they say that 'You – they say – you believe in the creator of the cosmos, the god of this world, but we believe in that one concerning whom the holy gospel says that "you have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you".' On this matter we will say something a little later, but in the meantime we should listen to such scriptural defences as there are. What is it that these senseless people are saying? 'From the gospel and apostle,[41] we have determined to think and say that there is one god, the maker and ruler of this world and another one of the world to come, according to the phrase spoken by the apostle: "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ." And he says in another place: "following the ruler of the power of the air" and in accordance with that said by the Lord in the holy gospels: "The ruler of this world is coming, and he will find nothing in me." And many times the ruler of this world is called the apostate devil.'[42]

[40] Ibid.

[41] That is, Acts and the Pauline letters.

[42] Ἔστι γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἓν μὲν ἐκεῖνο καὶ λίαν πρόδηλον τὸ δύο ἀρχὰς ὁμολογεῖν, πονηρόν τε θεὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν· τὸν μὲν τοῦδε τοῦ κοσμοῦ ποιητήν τε καὶ ἐξουσιαστήν, τὸν δὲ τοῦ μέλλοντος, ὃν καὶ πατέρα ἐπουράνιον ὀνομάζουσιν, ταῖς τοῦ δυσωνύμου Μάνεντος αἱρέσεσι τὰς ἰδίας ἀπάτας ἀκαταλλήλως ἐπισυνάψαντες. Καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς μὲν ἀποτεινόμενοι λέγουσιν ὅτι <<Ὑμεῖς>>, φησίν, <<πιστεύετε εἰς τὸν κοσμοποιητὴν τὸν θεὸν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου", ἡμεῖς δὲ εἰς ἐκεῖνον περὶ οὗ τὸ ἅγιον Εὐαγγέλιον λέγει ὅτι "οὔτε φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκηκόατε οὔτε εἶδος αὐτοῦ ἑωράκατε, καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔχετε μένοντα ἐν ὑμῖν">>. Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν τούτου μικρὸν ὕστερον ἐροῦμεν· τέως δὲ τὰ γραφικὰ αὐτῶν προβλήματα οἷά εἰσιν ἀκούσωμεν. Τί γάρ φασιν οἱ ἀνόητοι; <<Ἡμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου καὶ τοῦ Ἀποστόλου παρελάβομεν νοεῖν τε καὶ λέγειν ἄλλον εἶναι θεὸν τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου ποιητήν τε καὶ ἐξουσιαστήν, καὶ ἕτερον τοῦ μέλλοντος, κατὰ τὸ ῥητὸν τὸ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου εἰρημένον, "Ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου ἐτύφλωσε τὰ νοήματα τῶν ἀπίστων, εἰς τὸ μὴ αὐγάσαι αὐτοῖς τὸ φωτισμὸν τῆς δοξῆς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ Χριστοῦ".

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The initial sections of this passage are akin to that above but once we pass the familiar material interesting details emerge, particularly regarding the scriptural authorities the Paulicians quote in defence of their position. In the first passage the god whom the Paulicians venerate was defined in respect of Scripture, specifically John v.37–8, and this tendency is further developed here. Besides this, it is claimed that the god who created the world is the devil.[43] This bears emphasising since the neglect of these sermons has caused the Paulician accusation that the Romans were followers of the devil to go unremarked, even though it is stated unequivocally here. A point of paramount importance must now be signposted, a point of which prior scholarship has mystifyingly lost sight: the passage counters the long-held assumption that the Paulicians were absolute dualists, since the devil, a fallen creation of God, does not qualify as a first principle coeval with him.[44]

Leaving this aside, once taken in its entirety, the passage above nuances the first. Peter again employs the distinctive Paulician utterance that the Paulicians and Romans hold to different gods, phrased in similar fashion, with minor changes in syntax and a fuller quotation of John v.37–8. The passage then recounts another remark which can perhaps be attributed to a Paulician voice but may equally have been reworked by Peter. This comes far closer to substantiating the allegation of dualism: 'From the gospel and apostle, we have determined to think and say that there is one god, the maker and ruler of this world and another one of the world to come, according to the phrase spoken by the apostle.' This claim is bolstered by a handful of scriptural quotations which identify the entity regarded as the ruler of this world: 2 Corinthians iv.4, Ephesians ii.2 and John xiv.30. These passages derive from Scripture the Paulicians frequently used and, since they are employed to denigrate the religious affiliation of their Roman adversaries, there is no reason to doubt that they reflect their ideas.

Still, there is a discrepancy. The first statement suggests that the Paulicians espouse monotheism and attribute the worship of a false god

Καὶ ἐν ἑτέρῳ φησίν· "Κατὰ τὸν ἄρχοντα τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος τούτου"· καὶ κατὰ τὸ ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς εὐαγγελίοις λεγόμενον· "Ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἔρχεται, καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ εὑρήσει οὐδέν". Καὶ πολλάκις ἄρχοντα τοῦ κόσμου τὸν ἀποστάτην διάβολον ἀποκαλοῦντα': *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani: sermo I*, ch. 2.1–3, pp. 110–12; translations from the Greek text of the sermon are my own.

[43] This precludes a straightforward affinity with Marcionism, which posited that the god of the Old Testament was the demiurge. For Marcion's demiurge see Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the making of a heretic: God and Scripture in the second century*, Cambridge 2015, 324–31, 337–43.

[44] The Paulicians would therefore be considered 'mitigated dualists'. In my view, even this is a simplification, and the terms absolute and mitigated dualism are anachronistic when applied to this period.

to their adversaries, while the second has them articulate a dualist worldview. The contradiction is plain to see. There are two obvious ways to account for this: either the second statement constitutes an inaccurate representation of Paulician ideas due to the application of an orthodox filter, perhaps to parse the Paulician voice for a Roman audience, or, alternatively, Paulician ideas did tend toward a thoroughgoing dualism. The former is most likely true. Prior to the second statement, Peter the Sicilian poses a question: 'What is it that these senseless people are saying?' The second statement then returns to the themes of the first, suggesting that Peter is explicating the first statement, at least as he understands it, for his readers. This is further suggested by the oddly periphrastic phrase 'we have determined to think and say', which seems appropriate for a statement made at one remove from the community in question. The evidence is hardly conclusive, though. For instance, the extract implies that the Paulicians had collated allusions to nefarious powers in the New Testament in order to substantiate their position, suggesting a more systematised conception of 'the ruler of this world' which might indeed imply dualism. Since the scriptural fragments employed to this end are appropriate for the purpose and coherent with the Paulicians' scriptural proclivities, the possibility must be taken seriously. While examining this, it would be remiss to neglect the confessional boundary-making lurking under the surface of the passage, since this is crucial to understanding the claims that the Paulicians directed against the Romans.

The Devil and the Paulicians

Thus far, we have seen that Roman allegations that the Paulicians held a form of dualism reveal counter-accusations on the Paulicians' part: that the Romans venerated a worldly god associated with the devil whereas the Paulicians worshipped the god invoked at John v.37–8. The task now is to identify whether this reflects a thoroughgoing dualism, or whether it is a misconception occasioned by Roman distortions and/or misunderstandings of Paulician ideas. This is not an easy question to answer, but some light is shed by examining the scriptural extracts quoted in Peter's first sermon. Therein a Paulician assertion of unknown derivation claims that they venerate a god who is, in some sense, unseen, while alleging that the Romans venerate the devil, supporting this through reference to three excerpts from the New Testament. Crucially, when these scriptural passages are read in context, it becomes clear that the Paulicians deployed a sophisticated brand of identity politics which disavowed the possibility that the devil held significant power over their Christian community.

The first scriptural witness in the sermon is John v.37–8, which seems to be the predominant passage by which the Paulicians characterise the God

they venerate, since it serves the same purpose in the *History*. The biblical context sees Jesus performing miracles in Bethseda and, after observing these, the Jews grow angry and begin plotting against him because he is working on the Sabbath. In the midst of his reply to them is the following: 'You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding within you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.'[45] In both the *History* and the first sermon, Peter the Sicilian juxtaposes this 'unseen' deity with the creator of the world, thereby characterising the god of John v.37–8 as the heavenly Father. This passage merits repeating:

> Paulicians say that this is what divides us, that they say that the maker of the cosmos is one god, and that another god, whom they call the heavenly Father, has no power in this world but does in the age to come, whereas we confess that there is one same God, creator of all, Lord of all, all-powerful. They say to us, 'You believe in the maker of the cosmos, we believe in him of whom the Lord speaks in the gospels, saying: "You have not heard his voice, nor seen his face."'[46]

Here, Peter prefaces the Paulician statement with his interpretation of the same, which can be misleading because it leads the reader to project a set of assumptions onto the words he attributes to his opponents. By supplying the information that the heavenly Father has no power in this world, Peter implies that the god invoked at John v.37–8 is an unheard and unseen god beyond the present cosmos.[47] However, this is not what the scriptural context suggests, since John v.37–8 does not relate to the comprehensibility of God in the abstract, but his comprehensibility to the subject of the passage, the collective you, the Jews. The emphasis is not that the god in question is fundamentally unhearable and unseeable, but that he has not been heard or seen by the Jews because they do not believe in the one that the Father has sent. Now, consider again the 'us and them' rhetoric of the final part of the extract from the *History*: 'They say to us, "You believe in the maker of the cosmos (*τὸν κοσμοποιητήν*), we believe in him of whom the Lord speaks in the gospels, saying: 'You have not heard his voice, nor seen his face.'"[48]

Once the preconditioning lens of the Roman interpretation is discarded, it is evident that the communal you who have not heard the voice nor seen

[45] John v.37–8.

[46] Peter the Sicilian, *History*, ch. 38, pp. 20–1, lines, 9–15; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 72.

[47] Since the Greek sources give few specifics on Paulician dualism, such as a developed account of the relationship between the two principles, this idea is often briefly expressed, with emphasis on absolute dualism. See *Christian dualist heresies*; Stoyanov, *The other god*, 127; and Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 127.

[48] Peter the Sicilian, *History*, ch. 38, pp. 20–1, lines 13–15; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 72.

the face of the god of the Gospel are the same group that believe in the 'maker of the cosmos'. Thus, the god venerated by the Paulicians is not an unheard, unseen being alienated from the present world; he is merely a god whom the Romans have not heard or seen because, in the Paulician view, they believe in the 'maker of the cosmos' and do not qualify as Christians.[49] As such, the heavenly Father of the Paulicians was not a quasi-Marcionite stranger god who had no agency in the present creation, as scholarship has frequently concluded.[50] This allows an incisive question: if the heavenly Father is not alienated from the present world, what need is there for a separate demiurge in Paulician thought?

Strikingly, all three scriptural passages subsequently invoked by the Paulicians follow a similar train of thought, albeit in reverse, by disclaiming that the devil had any power over a faithful Christian community. This undermines the Roman allegation that the Paulician 'god of this world', the devil, was a demiurge or creative force, further eroding the case that our heretics were dualists as conventionally understood. This can be seen in 2 Corinthians iv.4, a passage whose reference to a deity that blinds has long troubled Christian theologians, including Peter the Sicilian.[51] Here, further context is provided by including 2 Corinthians iv.2–4:

> We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth, we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the glory of Christ*, who is the image of God.[52]

The significance of this passage to the Paulicians can well be imagined. The truly faithful renounce shameful things and embrace truth, whereas the unbelievers are blinded by 'the god of this world' and withheld from the

[49] Hence the fact that the Paulicians call inhabitants of the empire Romans, not Christians.

[50] For proposed Marcionite influences see Gieseler, 'Untersuchen über die Geschichte', 103–11; Karapet Ter Mkrttschian, *Die Paulikianer im byzantinischen Kaiserreiche und verwandte ketzerische Erscheinungen in Armenien*, Leipzig 1893, 104–12; Felix Scheidweiler 'Paulikianerprobleme', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* xliii (1950), 366–71; and Loos, 'Deux Contributions à l'histoire', 22–38. The idea that the heavenly Father was alienated from material creation is not solely found in interpretations with a Marcionite emphasis. See Fumagalli, *L'eresia dei Pauliciani*, 67–73, 112.

[51] *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani: sermo I*, ch. 4.1–3, pp. 116–18. See also Litwa, *The evil creator*, 90–108; Irenaeus, *Adversus haeresis*, in *Contres les hérésies*, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, iii/2, Paris 1974, ch. 3.7, pp. 80–9 and Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, ii, Oxford 1972, ch. 5.11.9–10, pp. 580–3.

[52] 2 Corinthians iv.2–4. The words quoted by the Paulician voice of Peter's sermon are italicised for added clarity.

glory of Christ. Distinguishing faith communities is a central concern, like the contending claims of Paulicians and Romans. The implication must be that the Gospel is not veiled to the Paulicians themselves, only those who are blinded, the unbelievers, not least because these unbelievers are explicitly invoked by the Paulician voice. Read thus, the god of this world does not hold sway over the Paulicians, but only over their Roman enemies.

A similar emphasis is apparent in the next excerpt given by Peter, Ephesians ii.2. Much like John v.37–8, this passage addresses a communal you, but instead of recounting Jesus' words to the Jews, it articulates Paul's message to his followers. Ephesians ii.1–5 provides clarity:

> You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, *following the ruler of the power of the air*, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.[53]

Whereas the communal you in John pertained to enemies of the faith, this passage is more complex. The faithful are included within this grouping but, once God has made them alive in Christ, they become dissociated from the disobedient who still follow the 'course of this world' and remain under the control of the periphrastically named 'ruler of the power of the air'. Unlike 2 Corinthians iv.4, those who oppose the faith are not mentioned in the portion of Scripture quoted by Peter in the sermon but, paired with it, the emphasis must be the same. In fact, this extract is more concerned with differentiating true believers from adversaries of the faith than any encountered thus far. Read according to the Pauline emphasis, the Paulicians were once among these sinners but were subsequently redeemed, at which point God supplanted the 'ruler of the power of the air'. They, therefore, are now alive in Christ, whereas the disobedient are not.

Predictably, the final passage coheres with what we have already seen. John xiv.30 relates Christ's words to his disciples during the Last Supper. John xiv.30–1 reads: 'I will no longer talk much with you, for *the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me*;[54] but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.'[55] The relevance of this message is apparent once more:

[53] Ephesians ii.1–5. The words quoted by the Paulician voice of Peter's sermon are italicised for added clarity.

[54] The text preserved by Peter the Sicilian uses a variant reading: 'He will find nothing in me (καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ εὑρήσει οὐδέν)', a translation I have retained elsewhere.

[55] John xiv.30–1.

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although the ruler of this world will appear imminently, he has no power over Christ and, by extension from the passages cited above, over the Paulicians either. The emphasis is preserved clearly and explicitly in the Paulician voice quoted in Peter's sermon: '[the devil] will find nothing in me'. Taken together, the three quotations the Paulicians invoked to characterise the devil are consistent, offering a different picture from that our heresiologist would like to paint: the Paulician devil, 'the god of this world', was an entity who had little power over their Christian community, even if the emphases of Pauline theology suggest he once had. He was simply a power that predominates over sinners, including their Roman foes. Yet, the point of ambiguity remains: was this figure a deity and did he create the world?

Given the uncertain origins of the Paulician testimony quoted so far, it seems injudicious to commit on this point, not least because a divergence of views is possible or even probable. The inclination, however, is to conclude in the negative; the evidence suggests that, in the majority Paulician view, the devil did not create the world or qualify as a deity. First because, as the *Treatise* interprets the Paulician worldview, the maker of the cosmos 'has authority in the present world'.[56] In the *History*, Peter the Sicilian agrees, calling this entity the 'creator and ruler of this world' and, given what we have seen above, while his role as creator can be debated, his rulership is highly dubious: Paulician testimony consistently disclaims his power over Christ and the faithful in this creation. Furthermore, the Paulicians identified this entity with the devil and consistently associated him with the Romans; both facts which the Roman sources suppress, willingly or otherwise. The Paulicians believed the devil had agency in this world, albeit in the specific context of death, but, overall, his jurisdiction seems to have been limited, particularly over themselves.

Second, and in a contrary sense, both the *Treatise* and the *History* claim that the Paulicians thought that the heavenly Father had no authority in the present world, thereby explaining the Marcionite emphasis of a transcendental stranger god that has long influenced the historiographical tradition. However, we have seen that the Father was not alienated from the Paulicians, only that he was incomprehensible to their foes. The scriptural authorities they presented, such as Ephesians ii.2 and John xiv.30, show that the Father had agency in the world when read in broader context. Thus, 'God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ'[57] and, as Jesus says: 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.'[58] Both passages suggest that the heavenly Father has agency in

[56] *Treatise*, ch. 9, p. 85; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 94.
[57] Eph. ii.4–5.
[58] John xiv.31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the world, albeit one that is qualified by typical theological considerations such as free will, the divine plan for redemption and the differing roles of the persons of the Trinity. Third, there is a fundamental difference in the oppositions presented by the sources: the Romans see two gods operating in different worlds, the present and that to come, whereas Paulician testimony envisages two gods – if two gods they are – differentiated rather by their faith community, the heavenly Father tending to them and the devil ruling the Romans. There is no indication that creation can be assigned to the latter and his agency is consistently downplayed by the Scripture cited in support of the Paulician position. Once normative expectations, largely transplanted from a late antique context, about what 'dualism' constitutes, are discarded it is clear that Paulician ideas comprise something very different.

The case against Paulician dualism is, however, best reinforced by observations elsewhere in the polemical tradition. It has long been observed that tendencies usually associated with belief in a malign demiurge, such as asceticism or a mistrust of procreation, are absent among the Paulicians, but the most convincing argument again stems from their own testimony.[59] This is Sergios-Tychikos's (*c.* 800/01–834/35) commentary on the sins of Adam and Cain: a serious impediment to the view that the devil created the earth:

> Elsewhere you [Sergios] said, 'The first prostitution which we have inherited from Adam is a good work, but the second prostitution is more serious, about which it is said: "The immoral man sins against his own body."'[60] You go on to say, 'We are the body of Christ; if anyone separates himself from the traditions of the body of Christ, that is, our traditions, he sins, because he takes the part of those who teach otherwise, and does not believe sound doctrine.'[61]

This is an involved discussion, the meaning of which is entangled with several scriptural passages, particularly 1 Corinthians vi.15–18. My reading, which coheres with that of Lemerle and Ludwig, is that, by framing the Paulician community as the body of Christ, Sergios considers sinning against that communal body a fornication – and a fornication more serious than original sin at that. Thus, the passage articulates an appeal to communal unity also evident in other extracts of Sergios's letters.[62] Given this pastoral emphasis, it seems unthinkable that Sergios is attributing the creation of the world to the devil since, if he were, allusions to the creations of the demiurge would only serve to undermine his

[59] On the lack of asceticism see Dimitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: a study in Balkan neo-Manichaeism*, Cambridge 1948, 44, 47, 129, and Garsoïan, *The Paulician heresy*, 173; Hamilton, 'Introduction', 33–7.

[60] 1 Corinthians vi.18.

[61] 1 Timothy vi.3; Peter the Sicilian, *History of the Paulicians*, ch. 167, pp. 62–3; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 89.

[62] Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 121–2; Ludwig, 'Wer hat was', 219–20; Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 163–5.

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community-building aims. If Adam were created by the originator of evil and dissension, by reminding his followers of that fact, Sergios would effectively tell them that rebellion is inherent in humanity from the outset, which would not be a convincing emphasis in a passage where he pleads for unity. The only reasonable conclusion must be that Sergios did not believe that the devil created the earth or the human race.[63] If the Paulicians' most famed *didaskalos*, the heresiarch *par excellence* according to Peter the Sicilian, was not a dualist, what reason is there to doubt others of his confession?[64]

One point remains. If the Romans falsely believed that the Paulicians considered the devil to be the creator and ruler of the earth, can we account for these misunderstandings given our conclusions? Perhaps. If our argument is correct, the Paulicians claimed that the Romans had never heard, nor seen the heavenly Father and were instead beholden to the devil, a lesser being and not a true deity. From the Roman perspective, they faced allegations that they venerated an evil being, a being whom, in their understanding, they repudiated in their rites and scriptures. These allegations were, it bears remembering, projected on to them by their adversaries in emotionally charged contexts, even if the Romans held the upper hand in many such scenarios. It is understandable why they would misinterpret a figure whom they never sought to venerate and it is equally understandable that they would identify him as a demiurge, given their historical awareness of movements such as Manichaeism. In fact, that conclusion may have been inevitable given that their adversaries alleged that this malign power was the Pauline 'god of this world' and the Johannine 'ruler of this world' who, as we shall now see, held or once held the power of death.

The Devil and the power of death

Having seen that the devil had only limited power over the present creation in the Paulician understanding, this investigation is nearing its end. However, there is still the need to address the only other passage of Peter the Sicilian's first sermon which quotes a Paulician voice. Although the extract is obscure, it holds significance, since in referring to the devil having power over death, it further develops our understanding of the

[63] Note that Romans also claimed that Paulicians rejected the writings of the Old Testament, which is contradicted by Sergios's exegesis. See Peter the Sicilian, *History of the Paulicians*, ch. 42, pp. 20–1; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 73.

[64] For Peter's invective against Sergios see Peter the Sicilian, *History of the Paulicians*, chs 132–4, pp. 50–3; trans. at *Christian dualist heresies*, 83.

malign power that was closely associated with the Romans in the Paulicians' reckoning:

> Here, just as I did at the beginning of the sermon, I shall endeavour to scrutinise another of their arguments, one which they consider strong: 'Death exercised dominion' he [Paul] says 'from Adam until Moses'[65] and 'so that through death he [Jesus] might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.'[66] 'Look' they say 'how he says that the devil holds the power of death?'.[67]

While the implications of this passage are complex, its essential meaning is straightforward: the Paulicians argue that Romans v.14 and Hebrews ii.14 demonstrate that the devil holds, or once held, the power of death. This is uncontroversial from an orthodox perspective since theologians have conventionally espoused that the devil held the power of death until Christ relieved him of it.[68] As such, the Paulician claim is broadly orthodox, which perhaps explains why Peter's reply never addresses the points made and instead references the role of emperors in punishing miscreants, rewarding their allies and reconciling the misguided with the faith.

There are, however, two ambiguities which require attention in the words attributed to the Paulicians. First, according to them, Paul 'says that the devil holds the power of death' when the orthodox view would be that he held the power of death, since this abated with the coming of Christ. Admittedly, while Hebrews ii.14 is central to the latter interpretation, it too uses a present tense, so this point cannot be overemphasised. Nevertheless, a paradox seems implicit in the juxtaposition: Romans v.14 suggests that the devil's dominion over death ended with Moses, while Hebrews ii.14 implies that only with Jesus did it wane. The two passages can be reconciled, but some interpretive work is necessary to do so.

The second enigma is more intriguing. According to the Paulician voice, Romans v.14 demonstrates that the devil held the power of death, but it does nothing of the sort, or at least not straightforwardly so. To illustrate, there is no mention of the devil in the broader context of Romans v, whose interpretation revolves around the themes of sin and law. Certainly, the devil may be associated with or personified as sin, but such an emphasis is not necessarily intuitive. Given this fact, the two passages may not be linked merely to demonstrate that the devil holds the power of death, as Peter says, but are part of a more nuanced theological exegesis on the themes of sin and death current among the Paulicians. This interpretation is rendered more likely by the fact that the two extracts contradict

[65] Romans v.14.
[66] Hebrews ii.14.
[67] *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani*: *Sermo I*, ch. 17.1, p. 164.
[68] John Chrysostom, *Homily 4 on Hebrews*, in *A select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, xiv, trans. Frederic Gardiner, New York 1890, ch. 6, p. 385.

each other at first glance, thereby suggesting a need to decode a deeper meaning through exegetical work.

That being so, let us examine these passages in greater detail. Romans v is principally concerned with Christ redeeming the sin of Adam, albeit with nuances informed by Paul's understanding of sin and law. For Paul, death came into the world through the sin of Adam and, since all then sinned, death spread to all. Sin, however, cannot be reckoned as such without law and law was inaugurated by Moses. Without law, it was not sin which ruled before Moses, then, but death, as Paul says: 'Sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.'[69] Paul then articulates Christ's role in redeeming humanity from sin and death, themes which are woven closer together at the end of Romans v and in vi–vii. As such, Romans v.14 does not provide literal evidence that the devil has power over death. He is only mentioned once in Romans, toward the end of the letter when Paul states: 'The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet.'[70] For the Paulician testimony to make sense, the devil's association with sin must be read into the passage. This is theologically comprehensible, but, even in that case, the passage is still more concerned with Adam and Christ. The passage seems ill-equipped to do the conceptual work that Peter claims.

However, it becomes more amenable when read in conjunction with Hebrews ii.14. After beginning with an exhortation to pay heed to the message of the angels, the author of Hebrews notes that we are unable to discern angelic influence, but were for a time able to see Christ when he descended and tasted death for all.[71] The death and sufferings of Jesus were apt since he was akin to humanity in having the same Father. He was thus driven to call humans brothers and sisters and acknowledge the things they shared:

> Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has power over death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.[72]

After noting that Jesus was compelled to become like humanity to achieve these things, the author continues by observing that he was faithful to his Father like Moses was, albeit differently, since whereas Christ was a son

[69] Rom. v.13–4.
[70] Rom. xvi.20.
[71] I follow the modern consensus that the epistle's author was not Paul, unlike the Romans or the Paulicians of this period.
[72] Heb. ii.14–6.

Moses was a servant.[73] Once this excerpt is fully understood, it becomes clearer why the Paulician voice has tied these passages together. Both explore Christ condescending to die as a means of triumphing over death, and both relate this to an Old Testament context involving Moses. That being so, it seems possible that there is a deeper theological reading behind the association of these passages in Paulician thought but, unfortunately, the specifics are unfathomable, not least because Peter the Sicilian missed the point entirely.

Even if this is so and the meaning of the Paulician statement is irrecoverable, it may not be beyond our means to postulate why it appears in this sermon, for the scriptural quotations address a theme with which we have become all too familiar. Both Romans v.14 and Hebrews ii.14 have the triumph of Christ as a central emphasis and, in the latter case, this is once again achieved over the eternal adversary, the devil, while, according to Peter, the Paulicians interpreted the former passage similarly. Likewise, the Paulician voice at the beginning of the sermon, whether alluding to 2 Corinthians iv.4, Ephesians ii.2 or John xiv.30, was at pains to stress that, once overcome by Christ, the devil's authority extended only to sinners, not the truly faithful. It is no coincidence that this point is hammered home a final time in this last snippet of Paulician testimony. Taken as a whole, the Paulician assertions heard or read by Peter were remarkably consistent in their meaning: the devil held little or no power over their Christian community. Irrespective of how he came across this testimony, certain Paulicians had gone to great lengths to refute the Roman allegations against them.

The Paulicians whose testimony is preserved, vividly but devoid of context, in the works of Peter the Sicilian considered themselves to be followers of the heavenly Father, while avowing that their Roman adversaries were under the yoke of the devil. Contrary to Roman allegations, the Paulicians believed that the agency of the heavenly Father was not confined to the world to come, for his influence also operated in the present creation. Moreover, they consistently downplayed the authority of 'the god of this world', that is, the devil; a fact which argues against him being a creator or demiurge. Particular concern was paid to disavowing his power over their communities, for Peter encountered numerous scriptural witnesses to this end. Taken together, these observations flesh out a distinctly Paulician understanding of divinity, one idiosyncratic enough to dissociate them from any historical relationship with the Manichaeans and their realms of darkness and light; the Marcionites and their jealous, but just, demiurge and transcendental Father; or the

[73] Heb. iii.1–6.

Bogomils and Cathars with their soteriological drama of heavenly war and fallen angels.[74]

It is frustrating that this Paulician testimony cannot be dated precisely, but some chronological specifics can still be given. The most fruitful witnesses lie within the *History of the Paulicians* and its associated first sermon. Like Garsoïan, I favour the view that the former should be considered a mid-tenth century forgery and, while it would be premature to assign a similar date to the sermon, it is unlikely that it differs considerably.[75] If the Paulician testimony were to be dated to this period, it would follow that there was little trace of dualism in their thought in the century after their heyday. If, however, the *History* were considered to be genuine and dateable to *c.* 869–71, this would only strengthen our argument, since that would suggest that they did not espouse dualism at the apex of their power.[76] This line of reasoning does not, of course, demonstrate that all Paulicians were not dualists, but the fact that Sergios-Tychikos's letters (written prior to his death in 834/835) also argue against such a worldview suggests continuity of thought across the ninth and tenth centuries, as does the fact that the *Treatise*, compiled during the 830s/840s, raises some of the ideas which are given greater clarity by Peter. Crucially, other observations corroborate the impression that these beliefs arose about this time. As witnessed throughout, Paulician ideas about the devil were tied to and positioned against their understandings of Roman power and identity, which does not suggest an ancestral tradition imported from Armenia, but a development from the period when they came to be reviled and persecuted by East Roman authorities. In other words, the points raised herein testify to the same politics of boundary-making and exclusion that underlaid much of Roman-Paulician interaction during the ninth century, borne out against the backdrop of polemics, punishment and warfare.[77]

Finally, taking a broader viewpoint, it has become clear that a critical eye should be directed upon medieval Christian dualism to identify whose ends it serves. There is a significant gap in understanding between Peter the Sicilian's expectations of 'Manichaean' heretical tenets and the range of

[74] See variously Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China*, Manchester 1985, 1–24; J. Lieu, *Marcion and the making of a heretic*, 323–66; Obolensky, *The Bogomils*, 117–45; Hamilton, 'Introduction', 49–98; and Malcolm Barber, *The Cathars: dualist heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages*, 2nd edn, Abingdon 2013, 94–105.

[75] For the date of the *History* see n. 6 above. Mormino has recently suggested that the sermons may have had an earlier recension, perhaps incomplete, which predated the *History*. See *Pietro Siculo: tre omelie contro i pauliciani*, 40–1. This position is informed by Lemerle, who considers the texts roughly contemporaneous: 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 25–6.

[76] The dates favoured by Lemerle, 'L'Histoire des Pauliciens', 17–31.

[77] Dixon, *The Paulicians*, 240–77.

Paulician ideas by which he was confronted, as noted by Garsoïan, Ludwig and others. The Christian dualist paradigm has only bridged this gap, insofar as it has, by shifting the goalposts slightly, by considering the heresy to be Marcionite rather than Manichaean in its genealogy or resemblance. In practice, though, eliding these movements into the supercategory of dualism has had the by-product of precluding an examination of Paulician ideas from Paulician sources – even though it has been possible to do so since the seventeenth century.[78] The sheer enormity of this must be underlined: the interpretative paraphernalia of early modern and modern scholarship has silenced the Paulicians to a degree that even their medieval persecutors did not aspire. That being so, it is surely methodologically imperative to undertake a critical historiography of what purposes this 'medieval Christian dualism' serves, addressing whether these might be orientalist, colonialist, confessional or otherwise in emphasis, and how this might be redressed in writing the history of heresy in the future.[79] Gnosticism, another term of modern convenience used both to specify particular groups of movements and to characterise an expected set of ideas associated with it, has suffered penetrating criticisms on account of its lack of typological rectitude and its propensity to entrench normative religious agendas.[80] Perhaps because it is not as closely associated with a specific era or set of movements, and therefore grates less against historical sensibilities, dualism has thus far avoided this fate. Nevertheless, given the habitual reluctance of scholarship to articulate the typological logic and methodological foundations of the concept, as well as the ends to which it aspires, it can reasonably be argued, in the case of its medieval lineage at least, that the term exists as a vehicle of circular logic: originally formulated to explain perceived similarities in a set of historical movements, it now has little conceptual utility save to perpetuate the increasingly tenuous links between said movements. If so, then its historiographical reckoning cannot long be postponed.

[78] *Petri Siculi historia Manichaeorum*, ed. Matthaeus Rader, Ingolstadt 1604.

[79] The plea for a historiographical intervention is inspired by Benjamin Anderson and Mirela Ivanova (eds), *Is Byzantine studies a colonialist discipline? Toward a critical historiography*, University Park, PA 2023.

[80] Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': an argument for dismantling a dubious category*, Princeton 1996; Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, MA–London 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046925000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press