

ASPECTS OF COSMOLOGY IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

In today's professional conference we want to turn to a topic less emphasized within studies on Paul. While his view of man, sin and salvation are rightly perceived as the basic dimensions of the gospel,¹ his view of the cosmos, i.e. the world created by God including the heavenly dimensions, has received less attention. However, this turns out to be even more important the more we see that his cosmology in particular is very suitable for overcoming logical dualism since Aristotle. Therefore, today's topic is: *"Aspects of the cosmology of Paul from a biblical-Semitic perspective"*.

This results in the following outline for us:

1. Introduction: Sources of Paul's theology
2. How Paul sees the heavenly world
3. Heaven as the place of God's presence
4. The "third heaven" as "paradise" (2 Cor 12:2-4)
5. Result: Paul's overcoming of logical dualism

1. Introduction: Sources of Paul's theology
Theological research on Paul in the past decades was still largely shaped by the question of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul".² As influential New Testament scholars, N.T. Wright³, James D.G. Dunn⁴ and Seyoon Kim⁵ should be mentioned. As a critical debate on Pauline theology by N.T. Wright, the anthology *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, was published, containing 30 leading international and German New Testament scholars discussing and evaluating Wright's theological approach.⁶ However, the basic problem arose that certain *Western* hermeneutical views try to confirm or

refute other *Western* hermeneutical views.⁷ After all, M. Meiser rightly emphasizes that the "*New Perspective on Paul*" has *on the one hand* contributed as an asset to "describing ancient Judaism appropriately and without prejudice"⁸. *On the other hand*, however, it shows deficits with regard to the overall picture of ancient Judaism, including its sociological and theological categories, including its understanding of salvation history and ecclesiology of Paul.⁹ In contrast to this, today's consideration of some aspects of Paul's cosmology is intended to consciously contribute to showing a biblical-Semitic perspective on Paul. Because this hermeneutical perspective has been missing in Pauline research in the past and up to the present. So, we go back to the sources of the Old Testament, to the basic concepts of key theological terms in the Hebrew language.

Our topic today, however, does not consider the Pauline perspectives as a whole, but rather focuses on some aspects of Paul's cosmology. The topic of cosmology has not been examined in great detail within Pauline research in recent years. It is even more important that this topic is re-examined, especially from a biblical-Semitic point of view. Because in his New Testament letters, Paul repeatedly referred to his view of the invisible heavenly world. Because the heavenly world is essentially related to the visible earthly world. Therefore, the question arises: How did Paul know what it looks like in heaven and how heaven is structured with all its beings and

powers?¹⁰ Did Paul get his knowledge of the invisible world already during his childhood in Judaism, during his studies under Rabbi Gamaliel, during his time as a Pharisee, or only in the period of seclusion after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus?

For Paul, there is a strong interaction between the heavenly world and the earthly world, which is determined by the work of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹ At the same time, for Paul, the heavenly world is filled with powers, spirits, angels and demons that affect the earthly world, especially people. For Paul, however, despite all the differentiated description of the spirit world, it is foundationally clear that the Christian is protected from the spiritual powers by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. M. Dibelius aptly remarked on this in 1909 - 112 years ago, that is almost three biblical generations - in his foundational exegetical study *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*: "The certainty of already having the pledge of future glory in the Spirit of God, of being very close to God, of being his child and therefore no longer fearing any power of heaven and earth, also gives the apostle's Jewish thoughts a new, peculiar religious impetus."¹²

This strong connection and interaction between the hereafter and this world, between the invisible and the visible world, is in diametrical opposition to the worldview of logical dualism.¹³ Logical dualism makes a strict distinction and separation between metaphysics and physics, idea and reality, invisible and visible world. However, Paul would vehemently contradict a dualistic worldview, since from his biblical-Semitic point of view all areas of reality belong together and influence one another. Therefore, the question arises for us: *How can we overcome the dualistic worldview introduced by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle by studying Paul's worldview?*

With the questions: How does Paul see the heavenly world? And: How did Paul know how many heavenly levels there are?, there arises the foundational question about the sources of theology and Paul's personal knowledge. To what extent does he draw his theological statements in his letters in the NT from the OT, from the Pharisaic and rabbinical tradition, but also from his Christophany before Damascus?

U. Schnelle aptly describes Paul's gain in knowledge through his Damascus experience under the following aspects:

- “1) [...] God speaks and acts again; at the end of time, he reveals salvation in a new way. [...]
- 2) [...] The crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth belongs permanently to God's side, he is the representative of God, in heaven he takes the place of the 'second power'. [...]
- 3) [...] The exalted Christ already grants believers a share in his rulership in the present. [...]
- 4) [...] God chose and called Paul to make this unheard of new and good news known to the nations. [...]”¹⁴

Certainly, Paul's ecstatic experience, through which he saw Jesus at the right hand of God, also gave him a glimpse of heaven. At the same time, this vision becomes the basis of his calling to be a missionary to the nations. In this regard, S. Vollenweider aptly remarks: "Paul identifies the crucified Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God exalted at the right hand of God. This is linked to an election-theological perspective: Paul sees himself entrusted with the Gentile mission (Gal 1:16b; Rom 1:5)."¹⁵

However, Paul's theology was not only shaped by his Damascus experience, but also by his study of the Old Testament scriptures. As a case study for Paul's using the term "the Scriptures" (Greek *ἡ γραφή*) for the OT, Gal 3:6-9 is mentioned, where he refers to Gen 15:6 and Gen 12:3:

6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.¹⁶

As T. Vegge aptly remarks, Paul is not primarily concerned here with a voice that comes from a manuscript, but with a divine voice that is reflected by the book.¹⁷ This voice that speaks has its origin in God. Accordingly, the meaning of the words comes from a revelation that God reveals to man through his Spirit.¹⁸ This is how Paul describes it in 1 Cor 2:9-11, referring to Isaiah 64:3:

9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—

10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

11 For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.¹⁹

But the question also arises to what extent Paul knew the earthly Jesus tradition and whether he referred to it in his theology? As Kim explains, Paul's references to Jesus are rather rare and exist in the form of allusions instead of verbatim quotations.²⁰ Paul knew the Jesus tradition of the proclamation of the kingdom of God²¹, but his focus was different. He wanted to explain the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, namely salvation for the nations without the works of the law.²² Thus Kim aptly remarks: "Paul, therefore, concentrated on expounding the full significance of Jesus' death, guided by the general spirit of Jesus' teaching, in order to prove the truth of his gospel of the cross, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*."²³

It is therefore not surprising that Paul's cosmological conception, including his view of the heavenly world, does not refer to the teaching of Jesus. Likewise, his conception of the "third heaven" is a new dimension for Paul, which was not yet included and differentiated in the teaching of Jesus.

2. How Paul sees the heavenly world

An important study of Paul's cosmology is provided by T. Engberg-Pedersen in his 2010 book *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit*.²⁴ In doing so, based on his exegetical research of key New Testament passages in Paul, he works out two main aspects:

First, in Paul's overall view of the world there is no contradiction between the *physical nature* of the world on the one hand - and its *cognitive character* on the other.²⁵ Engberg-Pedersen explains that the word (the *logos*) of God is carried to people through the spirit (the *pneuma*) of God so that people can believe and accept it (1 Thess 1:5-6).²⁶ Thus, not only is the word a foundational element of the world, but also the spirit (the πνεύμα *pneuma*), for it too has a physical nature and effect.²⁷ This is, so to speak, the frame of existence of creation, within which also the spirit-like beings and powers move in the invisible heavenly world.

Second, the various "powers" with which Paul works have a personal character, i.e. they are superhuman beings, such as angels, demons, and Satan himself. These personal powers are therefore not just metaphors or symbols, but real beings. They populate the upper and lower regions of the world in Paul, for they are the heavenly court of God and at the same time they will accompany Jesus Christ at his return (Gal 1:8; 4:14; 2 Thess 1:7).²⁸ But even now they can intervene in life on earth and contribute to shaping life. This means that people are in a field of force where a fight is being fought, which in the end is about eternal death or eternal life.²⁹ This can be illustrated as follows: (See next page)

The World View of Paul (Phil 2:10)



Here we see *Paul's three-layered worldview*. He continues this view of the world from the Old Testament, since it is already laid out there in Dt 30:12-14: (Compare table below)

In Paul's theological worldview, the basic structure is evident that Satan reigns as ruler over the present, evil age (aeon). Two aspects follow from this, as Engberg-Pedersen explains:
First: God's rulership already takes place on earth only where the spirit of God dwells in the believers.

Second: It is only in heaven that the power of Satan is broken, for there God reigns together

with Christ. Christ will come again to finally defeat Satan and to renew this world through his spirit.³⁰

In the following, two important terms will be considered that reveal Paul's view of the cosmos in his New Testament letters.

3. Heaven as the place of God's presence

For Paul, heaven as the place of God's presence is the goal of the Christian life here on earth. As a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul knew the field of meaning of the underlying Hebrew concept סַמָּיִם samájim heaven.

Deuteronomy 30:12-14	Romans 10:6-8
12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'	6 But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)
13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'	7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).
14 But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.	8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

Ezekiel 8:3	Zechariah 5:9	1 Chronicles 21:16
He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood.	Then I looked up – and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth.	And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

As J. Soggin explains, *samájim* denotes: “[...] the space different from earth and sea [...] according to the well-known ancient oriental worldview consisting of three floors: above the sky, in the middle the earth, all around and below the water.”³¹ Any *supernatural events in the OT take place “between heaven and earth”*, such as Ezek 8:3, Zech 5:9; 1 Chr 21:16.³² (Compare table above)

Ezekiel 8:3 speaks about a divine vision in which Ezekiel was lifted by a wind between heaven and earth, that is, into the atmosphere. This was done in the form of a man, i.e. a messenger from God, an angel, for the hand of the LORD God had fallen on Ezekiel (Ezekiel 8:1-2).³³

Therefore, heaven is a uniform entity in the OT, which is positioned opposite the “earth”. On the one hand heaven exists permanently (Dt 11:21; Ps 89:30), on the other hand its end is already announced (Isa 51:6; Job 14:12). The heavens will ultimately be “rolled up” (Isa 34:4) and replaced by a new, eschatological heaven (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). In the OT God descends from heaven as the place of his dwelling (Gn 11:5; 2 Sam 22:10; Ps 18:10; 144:5); he speaks to people from heaven, also through his messengers (Gn 21:17; 22:11,15; Ex 20:22; Neh 9:13).³⁴ Very important in this context is the coming of the Son of Man who comes to earth on the “clouds of heaven” in order to establish the final reign of God on earth (Dan 7:13).³⁵

Whereas in the OT the movement basically runs from heaven to earth, it is exactly the other way around with Paul in 2 Cor 12:2. With him the movement is from earth to heaven. The term “third heaven” implies that there must be several levels within the heavenly world. In the OT the expression “third heaven” is not yet found, therefore Paul must have received this term or this knowledge through direct revelation from God. If Paul was raptured to the third heaven, what are the first and second heavens? And is there also a fourth and fifth heaven? Was it a physical or a non-physical journey? Paul was not aware of that either, because it was a personal experience of going to the limits for him.

In the NT the word *ουρανος ouranos* encompasses both physical and metaphysical aspects, as U. Schoenborn explains: “It describes everything that is in the local as well as in the figurative sense above the earth and above the human being: ‘the firmament, the heavenly vault, the comprehensive, the divine’.”³⁶

This means that God and heaven belong together, so that heaven is part of God’s sphere of power. This is evident by the fact that God not only raised Christ from the dead, but that He also seated him at his right hand in heaven (Eph 1:20). This investiture of Christ at the right hand of God should therefore also be the goal of orientation for Christians (Col

3:1).³⁷ Since God created heaven and earth through his word, heaven is included in the “totality of what is created” (Greek *τα πάντα ta panta*) (1 Cor 15:27ff; Phil 3:21; Col 1:16; Eph 1:10).³⁸ Paul describes heaven as the place where there is hope for Christians (Col 1:5) so that they will have their home in heaven (Phil 3:20; 2 Cor 5:1-2).

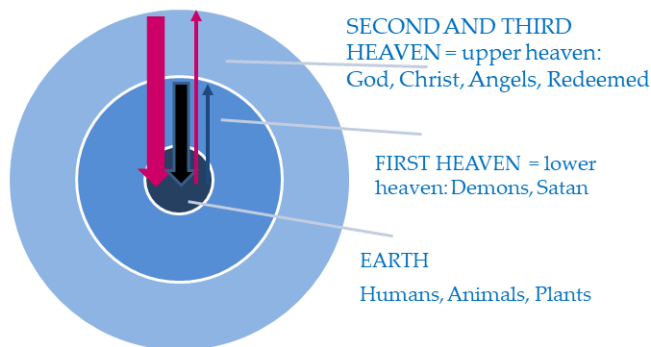
In the NT, heaven is always the local and thus empirical point of reference for humans, which has various theological implications.³⁹ Man lives on earth, which on the one hand is the place of the proclamation of the gospel to all creatures (Col 1:23), and which on the other hand also receives the revelation of God’s wrath from heaven (Rom 1:18). This wrath will fully manifest itself at the return of Jesus Christ through God’s retribution to all those who have disobeyed the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Thess 1:7-8). Paul sees heaven as a place where angels live (Gal 1:8) and where demons are also active at the same time (1 Cor 8:5-6; 15:24; Col 1:16; 2:10,15; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12), so that a battle takes place in heaven, at the end of which there is the final disempowerment of the evil forces.⁴⁰

The struggle of the demonic powers in heaven against the reign of God continues on earth as well, which is why people on earth who live and serve under the rule of Jesus Christ find themselves in distress (1 Cor 8:5-6; Col 1:16,20; Eph 1:10; 3:15; Phil 2:9ff).⁴¹ Because the present cosmos is corrupted by man’s sin, it will perish through God’s judgment (1 Thess 1:10; cf. 4:16), but the risen Christ will come down from heaven to finally establish his reign.⁴² On this, Schoenborn aptly remarks: “The victory of the risen One over death ushers in the new aeon and qualifies the present as the eschatological end times. He is expected from heaven as an incarnated contradiction to the schemata of the world.”⁴³

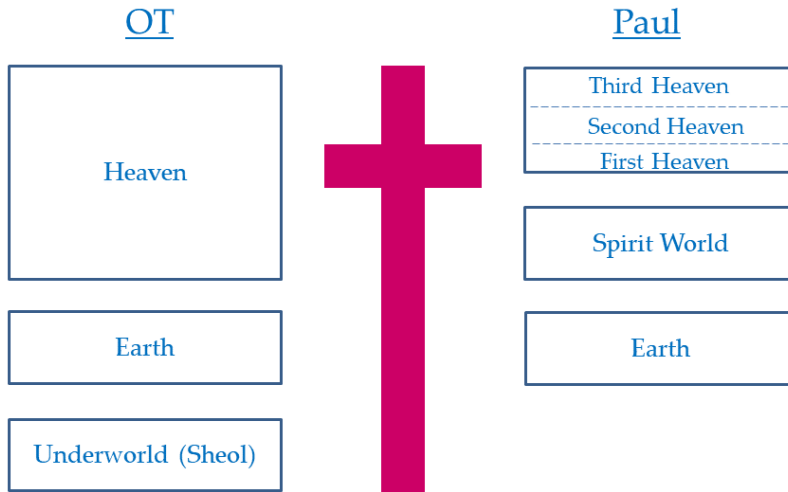
An important partial aspect of “heaven” in Paul is the concept of “Christ’s ascent into heaven” or the corresponding “descent of Christ into the depths of the earth” (Eph 4:8-9; cf. Rom 10:6-7; Dt 30:11-14). As Schoenborn explains, this is based on the idea that the world consists of the earth, which is surrounded by several spheres (celestial spaces).⁴⁴

In the lower areas of these heavenly spaces – up to the earthly atmospheric air – is the

The Heavenly World in Paul



Comparison of World Views



realm of demons and devils, the powers and forces that can act on the earth in this way (Eph 2:2; 3:10; 6:12).⁴⁵ Against this background, the incarnation of Jesus Christ means a “descent” from the realm of heaven to earth, followed by his “ascent” to dominion over all of creation (Eph 1:10,22; 4:15; Rom 9:5).⁴⁶ This “descent” of Jesus Christ proceeded according to Eph 4:9 down to the lower parts of the earth (Gr. *κατεβη εις τα κατωτερα μερη της γης*), so that in the context of the Incarnation of Christ, “the earth itself represents the *lower* areas of the universe (as opposed to heaven)”, as H. Balz explains.⁴⁷ On this, Schoenborn aptly remarks: “The Savior who has descended breaks through the isolating zones of heaven. They become passageways. [...] With the ascent, a path is completed on which the Incarnate and Exalted One claims the universe [...]. As a triumphant victor [...] he is the peace of all those who were near or far, in heaven and on earth.”⁴⁸

By participating in Christ, for Paul Christians are already positioned in heaven (Eph 2:5-6), namely in the kingdom of the beloved Son of God (Col 1:13).⁴⁹ (See above Graphic):

4. The “third heaven” as “paradise” (2 Cor 12:2-4)

The term “paradise” (Greek *παραδεισος* *paradeisos*) appears only three times in the NT, once in Paul, here in 2 Cor 12:4.⁵⁰ However, since Paul was trained in Pharisaic Judaism, he was familiar with the biblical-Semitic background of this term from the OT. The factual connections known from the OT are summarized by Paul into his individual present salvation experience, so that “the ecstatic also reaches paradise, respectively, the realm of heavens”⁵¹, as F. Stolz explains. This concerns both the description of paradise in the creation account of Genesis, as well as the ideas of paradise in the prophets and in the wisdom books of the OT.

In the NT *paradeisos* describes “a currently still hidden, supernatural abode of the redeemed in the interim between death and the raising of the dead”⁵², as H. Balz explains. Paradise is described as a place in the realm of heaven (Luke 23:43), which in Pauline theology always marks the goal of Christian life on earth (2 Cor 5:1-10; Phil 1:23; 1 Thes 4:17; Rom 8:38-39).⁵³ As E. Waschke explains, the

Hebrew Term פַּרְדֵּס *pardes* denotes a “royal park or garden”, a “pleasure garden” (Eccl 2:5), a “royal forest” (Neh 2:8) and in the metaphorical sense the “beloved” (Songs 4:13).⁵⁴

The Septuagint (LXX) uses the Greek term παραδεισος *paradeisos* not only for the Hebrew Term פַּרְדֵּס *pardes* (only three times in the OT: Songs 4:13; Eccl 2:5; Neh 2:8)⁵⁵, but much more often for the term “garden” (Hebrew גַּן *gan*), i.e. the garden of creation into which God had placed the first human couple (Gn 2:8).⁵⁶

At this point, a hermeneutical observation should be noted that the LXX simply translates two different concepts with a single term. In doing so, however, essential aspects of meaning are transferred into the respective other term and intermingled with one another, which was not intended by the original Hebrew authors.⁵⁷ As J. Cook already noted in 2008 regarding the hermeneutical discussion of the LXX, every translation is at the same time an interpretation and thus a hermeneutical activity that needs to be consciously reflected upon.⁵⁸

However, since Paul knew and used the LXX,⁵⁹ he was quite familiar with the use of the term “paradise” for the “garden of God”. He must have taken over the term “paradise” as a translation of the “garden of God” from the LXX, because the LXX was the first source to elevate the word *pardes* from the *secular* to the *religious* sphere, as B. Jacobs-Hornig aptly remarks.⁶⁰ This garden (also called “Garden of Eden”) becomes “the image of the still undiminished life in the care and presence of God”⁶¹. This undiminished life in the presence of God corresponds to the paramount quality of Paul’s ecstatic vision in 2 Cor 12:4. H. Balz aptly comments on this: “[...] is probably thought of a state of rapture, which, however, is clearly not associated with the hoped-for state of salvation after the parousia, but which occurred on Paul as on a stranger to himself [...]”⁶²

This means that in the immediate presence of God the original state of creation is not only restored, but even surpassed. For Paul heard ineffable words that no human is allowed to say. Not even the first human couple in the garden of creation was allowed to experience this.

Since Paul describes his experience of paradise in 2 Cor 12:1 with the terms “visions” (Greek οπτασιας) and “revelations” (Greek αποκαλυψεις), research on Paul rightly raises the question of the extent to which he can be called an *apocalyptic*. This question is treated in detail in the current book published in 2020, *Voices and Views on Paul: Exploring Scholarly Trends* by B. Witherington III and J.A. Myers.⁶³ Following P. Vielhauer⁶⁴, Witherington and Myers offer a definition of “apocalyptic” based on the following seven criteria:

- (a) The present age is temporary and impermanent as opposed to the future age, which is eternal and imperishable
- (b) The age to come is of a transcendent nature that *irrupts from without, through divine intervention* and without the help of human activity
- (c) Apocalyptic includes a more global, cosmological perspective that does not only focus on Israel itself
- (d) Apocalyptic involves an interest in world history
- (e) Everything that happens has been predetermined by God
- (f) World history is divided into epochs
- (g) Apocalyptic includes the expectation that the present world and its negative aspects will end quickly⁶⁵

Insofar as Paul shares these key points of the apocalyptic conception of history in his theology, he is definitely an apocalyptic. Above all, the second point makes it clear that Paul always reckons with *God’s physical intervention on earth* (cf. 1 Thes 1:5). Schnelle aptly remarks: “Acts of power were self-evident manifestations of God’s presence in the passing cosmos for Paul (cf. 1Thes 1:5; 1Cor 2:4; 5:4; Gal 3:5; Rom 15:18f), so Paul was also a miracle worker.”⁶⁶

This approach is diametrically opposed to Aristotelian dualism, since in Aristotle’s worldview there can be no intervention from the divine and metaphysical dimensions into the physical world. This framework of knowledge in Paul represents a contrast between the “reign of death” and the “reign of life” (Rom 5:17,21).⁶⁷ Because the cosmic rule of life has already begun, Christians are enabled to fight victoriously against the powers of this world, as Vollenweider aptly remarks: “They [the Christians] participate in the future flowing into the present, but at the same time see themselves exposed to the pull of the passing world time. They are invited to open themselves to the liberating future again and again and to resist the powers of the old world.”⁶⁸

Because the death of Jesus Christ effectuates the victory over the apocalyptic powers including the triumphant disarmament of the powers (Col 2:15; cf. Eph 1:20-22).⁶⁹ Thus J.C. Beker aptly emphasizes the physical nature of Christ’s

death as an apocalyptic event: “The *death of Christ* shatters the alliance of the apocalyptic powers and signals the imminent overthrow of death, ‘the last enemy’ [...]. This is why it is an apocalyptic event and not merely an act of sacrificial love that evokes in us a moral sentiment and a good disposition. [...] it is precisely in the cross of Christ that the world itself is judged [...] (1 Cor. 1:21).”⁷⁰

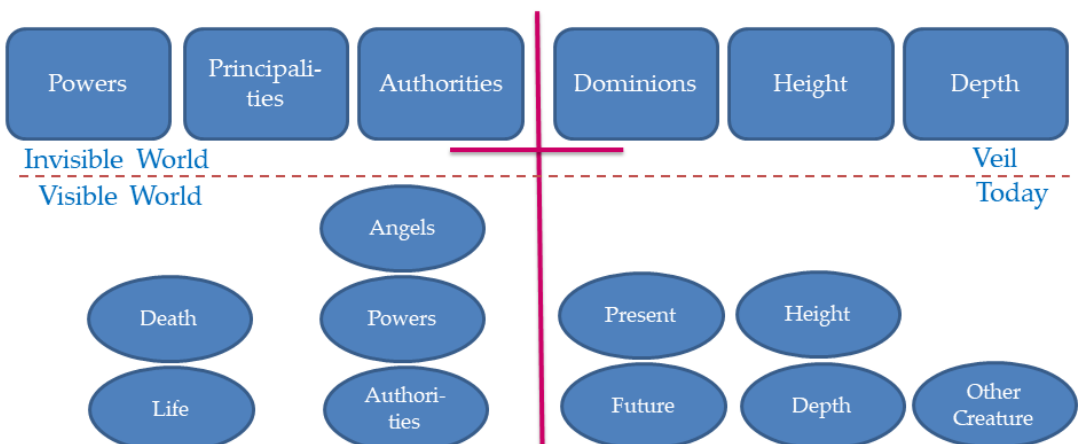
This victory over the powers of the invisible world can be illustrated as follows (see Graphic below):

Regarding the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ for the work of God, M. Meiser aptly remarks that man must acknowledge Christ’s death on the cross through faith if he wants to live in a relationship of righteousness with God in this world.⁷¹

However, in 2 Cor 12:1-4 Paul does not describe his apocalyptic in the sense of world

The Cosmology of Paul

Jesus Christ reigns over all through his authority (εξουσία) which he received from God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit



Christians live by faith in this world and participate in the authority (εξουσία) of Jesus Christ in WORD and DEED (דבר)

history, but in the sense of his personal experience, which represents a partial aspect of his overall view. What was the point of this vision? Did God want to encourage and prepare him in a special way for his life and ministry? T. Schmeller examines this “ascension report” of Paul in detail, in that he dates the time reference “14 years ago” in 2 Cor 12:2 to the years 42 or 43 AD, provided that 2 Cor was written in 55 or 56 AD.⁷² Similarly, M. Seifrid also dates the time reference “14 years ago”, assuming that 2 Corinthians was written in 54 or 55 AD, concluding that the rapture of Paul would have taken place around 40 AD.⁷³ This event cannot therefore be identical with Paul’s vision of calling on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:1-9. Schmeller concludes aptly: “The journey to heaven took place in the time between the first visit to Jerusalem and the mission with Barnabas, that is, during the time about which we hardly know anything as far as Paul is concerned.”⁷⁴

Through God’s activity, Paul was raptured into the heavenly sphere so that he shared a special and rare experience with Enoch and Elijah - an experience that implies Paul’s theological reference back to the OT.⁷⁵ The third heaven is the highest heaven and at the same time the paradise into which Paul is raptured.⁷⁶ Thus Paul was allowed to enter the presence of God, but he was not allowed to report either about this experience or about his journey through the different heavenly spheres.⁷⁷ Here we have a two-part description of the same journey to heaven, first naming the fact and then describing it.⁷⁸ Since the words come from the heavenly sphere, they are so sacred that if translated into human language they would be profaned.⁷⁹ As a result, Paul’s special privilege emerges clearly, as Schmeller explains: “Paul was distinguished like few in that he came into contact with exceedingly holy secrets of the heavenly world, which cannot be imparted to the earthly world.”⁸⁰

This unique privilege of knowing sublime divine mysteries sets the quality of God’s revelations to Paul far apart from all the revelation claims of his opponents.⁸¹

5. Results: Paul’s overcoming of logical dualism

*(1) As we saw at the beginning, Paul has been researched and interpreted in the past decades primarily within the framework of a Western dualistic knowledge grid. However, this means a - conscious or unconscious - submission to the logical dualism of Aristotle. As a result, the person and theology of Paul were strongly hellenized, in that the Greco-Western way of thinking at the turn of the ages was assigned to him. His roots in biblical-semitic thought, including the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, have largely been pushed into the background.*⁸²

(2) Today’s investigation of the terms “heaven” and “paradise” has shown, however, that Paul was deeply rooted in the Torah of the Old Testament as well as in Jewish apocalypticism of his time. Therefore, his perception of the physical activity of God in space and time is rooted in a holistic, non-dualistic worldview. His journey into the heavenly world clearly shows that it could not be permanently on the other side, but that he should return to the here and now, earthly existence. By returning, he refuted every form of dualism in his life, for he was commissioned to carry on with his ministry as the apostle to the nations to the very end.

(3) Although Paul moved in the Hellenistic culture of the Greek-speaking language area of the 1st century AD, he was and remained a Semite in his person and in his theology. This aspect must be emphasized much stronger in future Pauline research in order to do better justice to his person and his work, so that the Christian faith in this country and worldwide can also be strengthened and promoted through a more appropriate understanding of Paul.

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ENDNOTES

1 E.g. Seifrid, Mark A. *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

2 S. Vollenweider aptly explains the “new perspective”: “The sociologically interpreted doctrine of justification and the law is specifically related to overcoming the demarcation between Jews and Gentiles (Dunn). This is linked to a more positive assessment of ancient Judaism (covenantal nomism, Sanders).” – Vollenweider, Samuel. “Paulus. I. Person und Werk”, RGG⁴, Bd. 6 (2003): 1043; on the theological development of the “new perspective on Paul”, cf. Chester, Tim. “Justification, Ecclesiology and the New Perspective”, *Themelios* 30/2 (2005): 5-20.

3 Wright, N.T. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. London: SPCK, 2013; Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. London: SPCK, 2013.

4 Dunn, James D.G. *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*. Tübingen: Mohr, 2007; Dunn, James D.G. *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2010.

5 Kim, Seyoon. Paul and the New Perspective:

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6 Heilig, Christoph; Hewitt, J. Thomas; Bird, Michael F. (eds.). *God and the Faithfulness of Paul. A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N.T. Wright*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017.

7 E.g. Bieringer, Reimund; Pollefeyt, Didier, “Prologue: Wrestling With the Jewish Paul”, in: Bieringer, Reimund; Pollefeyt, Didier (ed.). *Paul and Judaism: Crosscurrents in Pauline Exegesis and the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012: 1-14.

8 Meiser, Martin, “Phil 3,7-11 im Horizont der *New Perspective on Paul* und der patristischen Exegese”, in: Hoffmann, Matthias R.; John, Felix; Popkes, Enno Edzard (Hg). *Paulusperspektiven*. Biblisch-Theologische Studien 145. Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 2014, p. 146.

9 Meiser, “Phil 3,7-11”, S. 147-148 (Lit.!)

10 This also applies to other questions in Paul’s theology, for example in 1 Corinthians: “Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor 6:3); Christ’s victory over all powers, including death as “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:24-26); Christ will in the end submit himself to the Father so that God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28); these insights could only partially be derived from the OT, therefore Paul must have received essential new contents of his theology by direct revelation from God after his Damascus experience.

11 Already the proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Our Father prayer emphasizes the unity of heaven and earth as spheres of God’s will: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

12 In German: „Die Gewißheit, im Gottesgeist schon das Unterpand der künftigen Herrlichkeit zu haben, Gott bereits ganz nahe, sein Kind zu sein und darum keine Macht des Himmels und der Erde mehr zu fürchten, gibt auch den jüdischen Gedanken des Apostels eine neue, eigenartige religiöse Triebkraft.“ - Dibelius, Martin. *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909, pp. 182-183.

13 For a comparison between the dualistic and the biblical-Semitic worldview, see Piennisch, Markus, “The Biblical-Semitic Aspect of Hermeneutics: An Introduction to the Field of Study”, *STT*, vol. 5 (2010), pp. 153-154: “Initially, the holistic reality was divided into the spheres of idea and reality by the worldview of Plato. Here originates the dualistic thinking regarding the perception of reality. His student Aristotle, again went one step further by only considering the empirically

feasible reality as a valid sphere of reality. Through this process, reality was reduced to the realm of the empirically feasible, to the space which is controllable by experiment and measurement. In contrast to this, according to the Biblical-semitic understanding, reality presents itself as a holistic entity which comprises both the invisible realm of ideas and the visible realm of reality. Because of this world view the New Testament gospels proclaim the way of Jesus Christ. This way is a dynamic and comprehensive process of participation and implementation of the kingdom rule of God in space and time.”

14 In German: „1) [...] Gott redet und handelt wieder; er offenbart am Ende der Zeit auf neue Art und Weise das Heil. [...] 2) [...] Der gekreuzigte und auferstandene Jesus von Nazareth gehört bleibend auf die Seite Gottes, er ist der Repräsentant Gottes, im Himmel nimmt er den Platz der ‚second power‘ ein. [...] 3) [...] Der erhöhte Christus gewährt den Glaubenden bereits in der Gegenwart Anteil an seiner Herrschaft. [...] 4) [...] Gott hat Paulus auserwählt und berufen, den Völkern diese unerhörte neue und gute Botschaft bekannt zu machen. [...]“ - Schnelle, Udo. *Paulus: Leben und Denken*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003, p. 89.

15 In German: „P[aulus; Vf.] identifiziert den gekreuzigten Jesus als Messias und Gottessohn, der zur Rechten Gottes erhöht ist. Damit verbindet sich eine erwählungstheol. Perspektive: P[aulus; Vf.] sieht sich mit der Heidenmission beauftragt (Gal 1,16b; Röm 1,5).“ - Vollenweider, „Paulus“, p. 1038.

16 English Standard Version.

17 See Vegge, Tor, “Sacred Scripture in the Letters of Paul”, in: Hoffmann, Matthias R.; John, Felix; Popkes, Enno Edzard (Hg). *Paulusperspektiven*. Biblisch-Theologische Studien 145. Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 2014, p. 31.

18 Vegge, „Sacred Scripture“, p. 31.

19 English Standard Version.

20 Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, p. 259.

21 Thus, Kim (pp. 289-290) aptly remarks: “Paul, like the other New Testament writers, probably treated Jesus tradition as an independent entity and transmitted it separately to his churches at their foundation [...] . However, for Paul, as for the post-Easter church as a whole, Jesus was significant primarily not as a teacher but as the Christ who had died and risen. Hence Paul concentrated on the Christ event.”

22 Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, p. 290.

23 Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective*, p. 290.

24 Engberg-Pedersen, Troels. *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

25 Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, p. 80.

26 Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, p. 80, aptly remarks: “It is the rational, cognitive content of Paul’s missionary ‘word’ or speech that the Thesalonians understood and grasped when they first heard him. And what accounts for that grasp was [...] the pneuma.”

27 Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, p. 81.

28 On this, Dibelius, *Geisterwelt*, aptly remarks: “The idea of the *heavenly court of God* [italics Dibelius], the idea of angels [...] is little touched upon by Paul. It is self-evident for him: God is naturally to be thought of as being surrounded by angels in heaven (p. 183). [...] For if otherwise the perfection of the world consists in the fact that the heavenly is revealed to the earthly, then of course angels must also form the entourage of the Messiah on his arrival (p. 185).”

29 Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, p. 81.

30 Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, p. 95; he remarks aptly on this (p. 96): “Satan is the god of death and decay. And that idea is given a thoroughly cosmological meaning by Paul. When he speaks of creation’s slavery to ‘corruption’ (*phthora*, Rom. 8:21), he means just that: physical decay, which is the fate of the sublunary world of water and earth. Conversely, God is the god of life and eternity. And that idea, too, is given a cosmological meaning focusing on the pneuma and the upward-moving, pneumatic transformation of the world.”

31 In German: „[...] den von Erde und Meer verschiedenen Raum [...] entsprechend dem bekannten, aus drei Stockwerken bestehenden altorientalischen Weltbild: oben der Himmel, in der Mitte die Erde, ringsherum und unten das Wasser.“ - Soggin, J.A. “שָׁמַיִם *samájim* Himmel”, THAT, Bd. 2 (1984): 966.

32 Cf. Soggin, J.A. “שָׁמַיִם *samájim* Himmel”, THAT, vol. 2 (1984): 967.

33 On this, G. Bartelmus further explains: “The atmosphere, the region between heaven and earth (in the narrower sense), is referred to in constructions where the prep. *ben*, “between”, appears in conjunction with heaven and earth. [...] Angels, however, have ready access to this domain, where they can move freely or even stand without incurring harm (Zec. 5:9; 1 Ch. 21:16). When seized by such an angel or by the *ruah*, a mortal like the prophet Ezekiel can also experience the sensation of flight without danger (Ezek. 8:3) [...]”. – Bar-

telmus, G. “שָׁמַיִם šamayim”, TDOT, vol. 15, p. 227. 34 Cf. Soggin, J.A. “שָׁמַיִם samájim Himmel”, THAT, Bd. 2 (1984): 968-969.

35 See on this the investigation of the “Son of Man” in the OT and NT by P. Wassermann, “Son of God and Son of Man”, *STT*, Vol. 10 (2015): 113-130, as well as the investigation of the meaning of the “Son of Man” for the Messianic secret in the Gospel of Mark by M. Piennisch, “The Messianic Secret in Mark’s Gospel as Fulfillment of the Revelations of God”, *STT*, Vol. 10 (2015): 227-252.

36 In German: „Bezeichnet wird alles, was im lokalen wie im übertr[agenen] Sinne oberhalb der Erde und über dem Menschen sich befindet: „das Firmament, das Himmelsgewölbe, das Umfassende, das Göttliche“ - Schoenborn, Ulrich. “οὐρανός, οὐ, ο *ouranos* Himmel”, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider. 3. ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011: 1329.

37 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1330.

38 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, pp. 1330-1331.

39 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1332.

40 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1332; regarding the eschatological-apocalyptic texts in the NT, Schoenborn aptly remarks (p. 1332): “Where apocalyptic thinking dominates, this war is described as the eschatological end and the collapse of the heavenly vault. Dramatic events and signs in heaven precede as an announcement (cf. Mk 13:25 par.; Lk 21:11,26,33; Apc 6:13f; 8:10; 9:1; 12:4).”

41 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, pp. 1332-1333.

42 Cf. Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1334.

43 In German: „Der Sieg des Auferstandenen über den Tod leitet den neuen Äon ein und qualifiziert die Gegenwart als eschatologische Endzeit. Vom Himmel wird er erwartet als inkarnierter Widerspruch gegen die Schemata der Welt.“ - Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1334.

44 Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1336.

45 Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1336.

46 Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1336.

47 Balz, Heinrich. “κατώτερος, 3 *katoteros* tiefer, weiter unten”, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, hg. Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider. 3. Aufl. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011: 679; Balz explains the grammar: “The Gen. της γης can be used as genitivus appositivus (‘in the lower parts, namely the earth’) or objectivus (‘in the lowlands of the earth’) or partitivus (‘in the lowest parts of the earth’).“ - cf. Blaß / Debrunner § 167 Note 2 (Balz, p. 679).

48 In German: „Der herabgestiegene Erlöser

durchbricht die isolierenden Himmelszonen. Sie werden zu Durchgangsräumen. [...] Mit dem Aufstieg vollendet sich ein Weg, auf dem der Inkarnierte und Erhöhte das All beansprucht [...]. Als triumphaler Sieger [...] ist er der Friede aller derer, die nahe oder ferne waren, im Himmel und auf Erden.“ - Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1336. 49 Schoenborn, “*ouranos*”, p. 1337; this affirmation of the Christian’s position in heaven and at the same time on earth stands in contrast to the letter to the Hebrews, which emphasizes the physical reality of the Christian’s life on earth (p. 1338): “The letter to the Hebrews knows no ontological dualism. The historical path of believers is consistently described as the path of hope (3:7ff). For the promised inheritance awaits ‘in heaven’ (9:15), the righteous are written down (12:23) and the ‘permanent city’ is ready (13:14).”

50 So, there is a *hapax legomenon* with Paul, so that it is difficult to develop a spectrum of meanings that is characteristic of Paul. The other occurrences of *paradeisos* are Luke 23:43 (heavenly place for those people who die blessedly) and Rev 2:7 (heavenly place where the righteous will eat from the “tree of life”) - cf. Waschke, Ernst-Joachim. “Paradies. II. Biblisch”, *RGG⁴*, Bd. 6 (2003): 913.

51 Stolz, Fritz. “Paradies. II. Biblisch”, *TRE*, Bd. 25, p. 710.

52 Balz, Heinrich. “παράδεισος, οὐ, ο *paradeisos* Paradies”, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, hg. Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider. 3. Aufl. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011: 40-41.

53 Cf. Balz, “*paradeisos*”, p. 41.

54 Waschke, Ernst-Joachim. “Paradies. II. Biblisch”, *RGG⁴*, Bd. 6 (2003): 911.

55 Cf. Jacobs-Hornig, B. “גַּן gan”, TDOT, vol. 3, p. 36: “*pardes*” is an Iranian loan word from the old Persian *paridaida*, which means “orchard, park”.

56 Waschke, Ernst-Joachim. “Paradies. II. Biblisch”, *RGG⁴*, Bd. 6 (2003): 911. He aptly remarks (p. 912): “In the oldest tradition, the function of this beautiful, fertile tree garden (2:9) is solely to be the abode of the human created by Yahweh who cares for his creatures with this garden. The aspect of blissful leisure is not given, however, since the human is commissioned to work and preserve the garden (2:15).”

57 On the question of the proper allocation of the Hebrew text of the OT and the Greek text of the LXX, cf. Piennisch, Markus. “The Relevance of Biblical-Semitic Revelation Structures for a Hermeneutic of the Septuagint”, *STT*, vol. 10 (2015),

p. 280: "It is crucial for the proper correlation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the LXX to recognize the structural difference between these two text forms. Because the Hebrew text has priority of interpretation over against the Greek text. This is due to the Semitic language, thought and cultural forms that are encoded in the Hebrew and Aramaic language. [...] Therefore, the *qualitative perceptual priority* of the Hebrew text in comparison with the Greek text, must be emphasized again and again."

58 Cook, Johann, "Interpreting the Septuagint – Exegesis, Theology and/or Religionsgeschichte?", in: Kraus, Wolfgang; Karrer, Martin (Hg.). *Die Septuaginta – Texte, Theologien, Einflüsse*. 2. Internationale Fachtagung veranstaltet von Septuaginta Deutsch (LXX.D), Wuppertal 23.-27.7.2008. WUNT 252. Tübingen: Mohr, 2010, p. 590.

59 Vollenweider aptly remarks on this: "For Paul, the *Scripture*, i.e. the Septuagint, partly in the form of recensions that are aligned with the Hebrew text, is of unique authority. [...] He receives particularly intensely Isaiah and Psalms, where in an intertextual perspective there is no clear distinction between quotation, paraphrase and allusion." - Vollenweider, "Paulus", p. 1045.

60 Jacobs-Hornig, B. "גַּן", TDOT, vol. 3, p. 36.

61 Waschke, Ernst-Joachim. "Paradies. II. Biblisch", RGG⁴, Bd. 6 (2003): 912.

62 In German: „[...] gedacht ist wohl an einen Zustand der Verzückung, der aber deutlich nicht mit dem erhofften Heilszustand nach der Parusie in Verbindung gebracht wird, sondern sich an Pls (sic!) wie an einem ihm selbst Fremden vollzog [...]“: - Balz, "paradeisos", p. 41.

63 Witherington III, Ben; Myers, Jason A. *Voices and Views on Paul: Exploring Scholarly Trends*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2020, pp. 139-182.

64 Vielhauer, Philipp. "Apocalypses and Related Subjects", in: *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003: 542-568.

65 Witherington, *Voices and Views on Paul*, p. 140.

66 In German: „Machtatzen waren für Paulus selbstverständliche Manifestationen der Gegenwart Gottes im vergehenden Kosmos (vgl. 1Thess 1,5; 1Kor 2,4; 5,4; Gal 3,5; Röm 15,18f), so war Paulus auch ein Wundertäter.“ - Schnelle, *Paulus*, p. 285.

67 Cf. Beker, J. Christiaan. *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990, p. 81.

68 In German: „Sie [die Christen; Vf.] partizip-

ieren an der in die Gegenwart einströmenden Zukunft, sehen sich aber zugleich auch dem Sog der im Vergehen begriffenen Weltzeit ausgesetzt. So sind sie dazu eingeladen, sich immer neu der befreienden Zukunft zu öffnen und den Mächten der alten Welt zu widerstehen.“ - Vollenweider, "Paulus", p. 1049.

69 Cf. Beker, *Triumph*, p. 81.

70 Beker, *Triumph*, p. 81-82.

71 Meiser, "Phil 3,7-11", p. 172, explains: "Wherever the term δικαιοσύνη in Paul denotes the action of the Christian, the activity of the human being is emphasized as a correspondence to the action of God as well as a responsibility." - On the concept of "Righteousness of God" in Paul, cf. Haacker, Klaus, "Bible Translation and Biblical Studies", *STT*, vol. 10 (2015), pp. 41-43 (Lit.); on the relationship between God's righteousness, Torah and human justification in Paul, cf. Vollenweider, "Paulus", pp. 1049-1051.

72 Schmeller, Thomas. *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*. Teilband 2: 2Kor 7,5-13,13. EKK VIII/2. Neukirchen/Düsseldorf: Neukirchener/Patmos, 2015, pp. 276, 284.

73 Seifrid, Mark A. *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014, p. 438.

74 In German: „Die Himmelsreise fand in der Zeit zwischen dem ersten Besuch in Jerusalem und der Mission mit Barnabas statt, also in der Zeit, über die wir, was Paulus betrifft, kaum etwas wissen.“ - Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 284.

75 Cf. Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 287.

76 For a discussion of the ideas in early Judaism of (mostly) three to ten heavens, especially three or seven heavens, cf. Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 287.

77 Cf. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, p. 440.

78 Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 289.

79 Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 291.

80 In German: „Paulus wurde ausgezeichnet wie wenige, indem er mit besonders heiligen Geheimnissen der himmlischen Welt in Berührung kam, die der irdischen nicht vermittelbar sind.“ - Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 291.

81 Cf. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, p. 443; as Seifrid explains, Paul received

multiple visions of Christ, even after his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road: Acts 16:9; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11; 27:24 (p. 434).

82 On the significance of the Aramaic-Semitic culture and language for theological research, P. Wassermann aptly remarks: "It has to be emphasized that Aramaic is a Semitic language which a non-Semitic people, as the Persians were, employed. This means that the Semitic structures of the Aramaic language inevitably had a shaping effect on the various cultures of the Middle East and beyond. This becomes evident in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as well as in the text of the New Testament." – Wassermann, Peter, "Introduction", *STT*, vol. 8 (2013), p. 12. For this purpose, P. Stein examined the archaeological findings from the excavations in Tayma / Saudi Arabia from a palaeographical and linguistic point of view and proved that a living Aramaic – therefore Semitic - culture was present there as early as the 5th century BC, which even despite the Hellenization of the time of Alexander was not extinguished. – Stein, Peter, "Aramaic in Tayma: On the Linguistic Situation of the Oasis in the 2nd Half of the 1st Millennium B.C.", *STT*, vol. 8 (2013): 31-45.