

Paul within Hermeticism and Kabbalah: we Lazzarelli's *Crater Hermetis* and the Mystery of Glorification

Nicolò Cantoni (PhD Student)

Department of History, Archaeology, Arts, Philosophy, and Ethics

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels

Email: nicolo.cantoni@vub.be

Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500) is an endlessly fascinating and seemingly paradoxical figure.¹ An honored poet, philosopher, and struggling alchemist, he was also a pious healer, an exorcist, and a fervent adept of a charismatic, radical doomsday preacher. He unapologetically identified as Christian and Hermetist, while remaining deeply engaged with Jewish mysticism. Standing at the threshold of diverse traditions, he reconciled their teachings in bold, unorthodox ways, inhabiting them without apparent contradiction. Remarkably, I argue that he achieved this synthesis in ways that resonate with current debates in the 'Paul within Judaism' and 'Paul within paganism' perspectives.²

To this day, Lazzarelli remains relatively overlooked by mainstream philosophy and Renaissance studies, even though he was the first Latin translator of treatises XVI, XVII, and XVIII of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and a primary source of inspiration for Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's influential *De occulta philosophia*.³ For scholars studying Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, and the late antique Mediterranean, Lazzarelli offers a

¹ The definitive study and critical edition remains Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Ruud M. Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005). For a Latin edition based on variant manuscripts, see *Opere ermetiche*, ed. Claudio Moreschini et al. (Pisa-Rome: Serra, 2009).

² On the 'Paul within Judaism' perspective, see Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); and Michael F. Bird et al., eds., *Paul within Judaism: Perspectives on Paul and Jewish Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023). On the complementary 'Paul within Paganism' approach, see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), and Alexander Chantzianthou, Paula Fredriksen, and Stephen L. Young, eds., *Paul within Paganism: Restoring the Mediterranean Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, 2023).

³ Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On Lazzarelli's influence on Agrippa, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic: Cornelius Agrippa and Lazzarellian Hermetism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 1 (2009): 1–25.

rare interpretation of Paul from within the very traditions that shaped the Apostle's own world.

1 — Ancient Wisdom, End Times, and Lazzarelli's Hermetic-Enochic Rebirth

The fifteenth century was an age of compounding upheavals. Within a few decades, the invention of the printing press, advances in philology, the recovery of Oriental languages, the revival of classical antiquity, and the discovery of the New World had produced seismic cultural dislocations. It was also a century of recurrent plagues, wars, the expanding Ottoman threat, and deep socio-political instability. Growing revulsion at the moral corruption of the Church generated a widespread demand for return to a purer, more authentic Christianity — one that had existed before the institutional accretions of centuries had obscured it. In the final decades of the *Quattrocento*, eschatological dread and prophetic hope became twin symptoms of the same fever: the conviction that the world was approaching a decisive turning point. Celestial events, above all the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 1484, were read as confirmation of an imminent renewal.⁴

Into this atmosphere came a series of portentous discoveries. Texts attributed to primordial sages — such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* of Hermes Trismegistus — were recovered, translated, and received as divinely inspired witnesses to a wisdom older than Moses, one that had prefigured the teachings of Jesus across multiple civilizations. When Marsilio Ficino translated fourteen Hermetic treatises into Latin, he did so believing he was guided by Providence — making accessible a sacred doctrine transmitted through Persia, Egypt, and Greece before finding its fulfillment in Christianity — the *prisca theologia*.⁵ Pico della Mirandola extended this framework by incorporating Kabbalah into the same genealogy of ancient wisdom.⁶ The recovery of this knowledge was understood as preparation for the

⁴ On the apocalyptic and prophetic climate of the era, see Cesare Vasoli, "A proposito delle tradizioni profetiche e millenaristiche nella storia religiosa italiana," in *Civitas mundi: Studi sulla cultura del Cinquecento*, ed. Cesare Vasoli (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), 33–65.

⁵ On Ficino, see Michael J. B. Allen et al., eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For a detailed discussion of *prisca theologia* and related concepts, such as *prisca sapientia* and *philosophia perennis*, see Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004). Regarding the distinctions between these cognate terms, see especially Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7–12.

⁶ Giulio Busi and Raphael Ebgli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Mito, magia, qabbalah* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014). For Pico's engagement with Jewish sources, see Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), and Fabrizio Lelli, ed., *Giovanni Pico e la cabbalà* (Florence: Olschki, 2014).

final act of human history, and it is within this framework that Lazzarelli's *Crater Hermetis* must be read.⁷

The life-changing event that marked Lazzarelli's existence occurred on November 12, 1481.⁸ By his own account, he was attending a papal ceremony at the Vatican when a man interrupted the celebration, holding in the air a Bible unlike any other: its cover was inscribed with apocalyptic warnings and passages from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and its pages were sealed with seven seals. The man was Giovanni da Correggio (1450–1506), and the strange encounter struck Lazzarelli with the force of a revelation. Over the following decade, Lazzarelli became his devoted disciple, celebrating him as the new 'Mercurius' — a prophetic guide destined to usher in a golden age by recovering a forgotten path to deification.⁹ Through this route, man could once again become perfect, true, and wise by regaining "the light, the life, the mind, and the word of God" and achieve "judgment and dominion over all things in the world".¹⁰

After Giovanni guided him through a powerful spiritual rebirth, Lazzarelli expressed a growing disdain for secular texts and devoted himself solely to the wisdom of Hermes, Moses, the prophets and Jesus.¹¹ He also came to believe he had obtained charismatic gifts such as healing and exorcism. Tellingly, just like his teacher had the title 'Mercurius', he began to call himself 'Enoch'.¹² Whether his fascination with the biblical patriarch reflected access to texts attributed to Enoch, or whether it drew on the Jewish mystical

⁷ The *Crater Hermetis* is edited in the original Latin and provided with an English translation and commentary in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 165–269. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent citations of the *Crater Hermetis* refer to this edition. For an in-depth analysis of the text, see also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Hermetic Christ," in the same volume, 57–96.

⁸ These events are recounted in Lazzarelli's *Epistola Enoch* (c. 1484), transcribed and translated in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 107–149. For an Italian translation, see Giuseppe Lucchesini, "L'Epistola Enoch di Lodovico Lazzarelli," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 22, no. 2 (2016): 577–594.

⁹ Mercurius is the Latin equivalent of the Greek Hermes. The question of whether Lazzarelli or Correggio first introduced the other to Hermeticism remains a subject of debate; see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Hermetic Christ", 25–27. What is certain is that in 1482 Lazzarelli gifted Correggio a collection of Hermetic treatises, which included three dialogues previously unknown to Ficino.

¹⁰ Lazzarelli, *First Preface*, cited in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 157.

¹¹ "Lodovico Enoch Lazzarelli Septempedanus, once a poet, but now by new regeneration a son of true wisdom...". Lazzarelli, *First Preface*, in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 153.

¹² Enoch, the patriarch who 'walked with God' (Gen 5:24), became the paradigmatic figure of human exaltation in Jewish mysticism. For a discussion of Hermetic and Enochic themes within Judaism, see Fabrizio Lelli, "Hermes Among the Jews: Hermetica as Hebraica from Antiquity to the Renaissance," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2, no. 2 (2007): 111–135. As Moshe Idel has shown, in *3 Enoch* his transformation into Metatron is associated with a restoration of Adamic dignity; see his "Enoch is Metatron," *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990): 220–240. These motifs circulated widely in the Renaissance, particularly through Pico della Mirandola. While Lazzarelli's adoption of the name 'Enoch' signals his status as a reborn man, the hypothesis that he believed himself to be channeling the patriarch cannot be ruled out.

tradition that identified Hermes with Enoch, or both, Lazzarelli's choice was not arbitrary.¹³ Enoch was for him one of the archetypal 'god-like' men — regenerated individuals destined to once again inhabit and perfect the world.

2 — Crater Hermetis: From Adam's Fall to the Quest for Happiness

Between 1486 and 1494, Lazzarelli completed the crowning achievement of his literary output: the *De summa hominis dignitate dialogus qui inscribitur via Christi et Crater Hermetis*, more commonly known as the *Crater Hermetis* (The mixing bowl of Hermes).¹⁴ From the outset, Lazzarelli proposes that the questions of human dignity and divine regeneration, as described in the Christian and Hermetic paths, are one and the same. As he would later confess, though he is a Christian, he is “not ashamed to be an Hermetist as well”,¹⁵ for the two traditions share the same divine origin.

Like the treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Crater Hermetis* is structured as a dialogue in which a master guides disciples toward the mystery of spiritual regeneration, with salvation — what Lazzarelli terms *felicitas*, signifying a salvific knowledge (*gnosis*) or deification — as the ultimate goal. The dialogue casts King Ferdinand I of Naples (1423–1494) as the primary student, accompanied by his trusted royal secretary and humanist advisor Giovanni Pontano (1429–1503). What makes Lazzarelli's approach particularly striking is his decision to cast himself in the role of a spiritual guide, effectively positioning himself above the sovereign in terms of spiritual authority.

The work opens with Lazzarelli's confession of a profound spiritual restlessness: for a long time, he had felt lost amid competing claims about the path to a happy life. This anxiety is resolved through a daring narrative twist. Pimander — the divine *Nous* who had appeared

¹³ Curiously, Lazzarelli's *Epistola Enoch* shares its title with a section of *1 Enoch* (the *Epistle of Enoch*), a work that for all we know was then unknown in the West. Lazzarelli likely accessed Enochic themes through secondary quotations and the Jewish mystical milieu. For the modern critical edition, see George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). See also Gabriele Boccaccini and John J. Collins, eds., *The Early Enoch Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁴ The title is revealing on two levels. The allusion to the theme of human dignity recalls Pico della Mirandola's famous oration, while simultaneously invoking the fourth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (*A Discourse of Hermes to Tat: The Mixing Bowl and the Monad*), particularly sections 3–4, which describe a divine vessel filled with *Nous* sent to humanity so that the wise might drink from it. Earlier drafts illuminate Lazzarelli's ambitions: in one version, he prioritized *felicitas* over *dignitas*, while the original title — *Calix Christi et Crater Hermetis* — more explicitly asserted the compatibility of Hermeticism and Christianity. See Eugenio Garin, *Ermetismo del Rinascimento* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2006), 58–59.

¹⁵ *Crater Hermetis*, 4.1.

to Hermes as a vast being in a vision and is identified here as the “eternal Consoler” (the Holy Spirit)¹⁶ — takes possession of his mind in the guise of Jesus Christ. The effect is startling and dizzying. The Holy Spirit, or the Hermetic Pimander, has come to dwell within Lazzarelli and speaks through him.

The starting point in the quest for *felicitas* lies in the ancient injunction to 'know oneself,' only reframed through the primordial wisdom of Hermes.¹⁷ By knowing itself, humanity can awaken to its immortal and divine nature and resist the passions that bind it to the material world.

To substantiate his claim, Lazzarelli draws a parallel between the Genesis myth of the two trees in Eden and Hermetic passages encouraging man to "increase and multiply" while recognizing his divine origin and treating love of the body as a form of death.¹⁸

Drawing on Philo of Alexandria, he suggests that the Tree of Life represents the contemplation of divine realities, through which the human being — endowed with a divine intellect — becomes a living temple, open to the descent of God's spirit and capable of receiving wisdom, immortality, and the fulfillment of all desire. The Tree of Knowledge, by contrast, marks a decisive turn toward matter, the senses, and the flesh. It is from this latter tree, Lazzarelli observes, that most of humanity continues to feed — a condition confirmed by both Solomon's Proverbs, which equate divine wisdom with the Tree of Life, and Paul's stark warning: "if you live according to the flesh, you shall die; but if you mortify the deeds of the body by way of the spirit, you shall live".¹⁹

On this basis, the drama of the Fall — with the choice of the Tree of Knowledge — takes on a new clarity. Eve, yielding to the material inclinations of her mind, consents to the serpent's prompting, and Adam follows without hesitation. As a result, humanity is severed from the Tree of Life and descends into a perishable condition. No longer a dwelling place for the divine spirit, mankind is exposed to darkness and bound to the fragile rhythms of earthly existence. Suffering, mortality, and the progressive shortening of life flow from this catastrophic event. Even painful childbirth is drawn into the framework: generation, no longer oriented toward God, becomes entangled in human desire.

This dialectic extends into Lazzarelli's reading of the 'sons of God' and 'daughters of men'

¹⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I.1–2.

¹⁷ Lazzarelli maintains that the Hebrews derived their wisdom from Hermes, a claim he justifies by recalling Moses's training in the Egyptian arts; see Acts 7:22.

¹⁸ Gen 9,1; *Corpus Hermeticum*, I.18.

¹⁹ Romans 8:13. For the Salomonic passage, see Proverbs 3:18: "She [Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed."

in Genesis.²⁰ Here, the daughters represent the material world's proliferating temptations, while the sons are interpreted as malevolent angels — an identification Lazzarelli reinforces through the *Asclepius*, where Hermes laments a future age in which 'wicked angels' mingle with a humanity turned away from the divine, driven toward violence and excess.²¹ The Fall thus appears as a cosmic contamination and a downward spiral of decay.

Against this backdrop of decline, a pressing question emerges: can humanity be restored to the state of *felicitas* that preceded the Fall? Lazzarelli's answer is unequivocal. Inspired by Kabbalah, he argues that Adam's disobedience introduced a fracture into creation that will endure until the coming of the Messiah, when humanity will finally be restored to its original condition. Though he attributes this idea to the *Zohar*, the precise source has not been identified.²² For the time being, however, humanity must endure its fallen state. Thus, Lazzarelli joined in Hermes's lament over a world that has forgotten its divine origin.

And yet, this is not the end of the story. The *Crater Hermetis* claims to hold the keys to a revolutionary discovery: a path that does not merely await the Messiah but actively works toward the *felicitas* that humanity has forfeited but not irrevocably lost.

3 — The Theurgic Restoration

Through an emphatic rhetoric of ancient mysteries and long-concealed secrets being revealed, the *Crater Hermetis* gradually shows that a path toward true *felicitas* is hidden within the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden, and it concerns the fruit of the Tree of Life: immortality itself. The departure point for this journey is self-knowledge.

Since the human being was fashioned in the image and likeness of God, any genuine inquiry into the self is ultimately inseparable from knowledge of the Creator. Lazzarelli grounds this claim in a double authority — reason and experience — but specifies that

²⁰ Gen 6:2–4.

²¹ *Ascl.* 25. The *Asclepius* may have been influenced by *1 Enoch*; see Moshe Idel, "Hermeticism and Judaism," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Associated University Presses, 1988), 60.

²² Hanegraaff, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 80. Since the *Zohar* was not printed until 1558 in Mantua, Lazzarelli likely consulted it via commentaries such as Menahem Recanati's *Commentary on the Torah*, which relied heavily on Zoharic exegesis, or through miscellaneous manuscripts and pseudo-Zoharic excerpts circulating for polemical and apologetic purposes among Christians and *conversos*. On the Christian polemical use of the *Zohar*, see Saverio Campanini, "Nottole ad Atene: La qabbalah cristiana e la conversione degli ebrei," *Materia Giudaica* 19, no. 1–2 (2014): 81–99; Yehuda Liebes, "Christian Influences in the Zohar," *Immanuel* 17 (1983–1984): 43–67.

"experience" cannot be the ordinary testimony of the senses.²³

The radical possibility he has in mind was inaugurated by the Incarnation: in assuming human form, God elevated humanity by transforming the human condition from within, making the body the very starting point for transcendence. Precisely as *imago Dei*, mankind is called to participate actively in the perfection of the world.²⁴

Evoking Poimandres' revelation to Hermes, he posits that Life emerges from the union of God's *Logos* and the divine spark within mankind, the *Nous*.²⁵ Knowledge of God thus leads humanity to rediscover and reclaim the latent divinity obscured by sin and oblivion. This initiates an ascent through increasingly subtle planes of reality, leading the individual to shine among the angelic powers and culminating in a genuine participation in the divine light.²⁶ At that level, the human being becomes capable of the ultimate goal toward which the entire mystagogical arc is oriented: generating a divine progeny for God.

As King Ferdinand and Pontano confess to feeling transformed by Lazzarelli's words — altered, expanded, no longer quite the men they were when the conversation began — he reassures them: what they are beginning to experience is the initial stage of spiritual regeneration, the transformation, in the fullest sense, into 'true men'. This status, he explains, confers a power comparable, if not superior, to that of the gods.²⁷

Drawing on the Talmudic *Abodah Zara*, Lazzarelli presents Abraham — who at the age of fifty-two attained the condition of a "true man" and became a teacher of the authentic worship of God in Harran — as an archetypal figure. Crucial to this passage, and key to the *Crater Hermetis*, is a peculiar interpretation of Genesis 12:5, which describes the souls Abraham and Sarah "had gotten in Harran". While traditional exegesis read this as a

²³ On the role of (salvific) knowledge in Hermeticism as a transformative and trans-rational state, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of *Gnōsis* in the *Hermetica*," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2, no. 2 (2008): 128–163.

²⁴ This vision resonates with the Jewish concept of *tikkun ha-olam* (the repair of the world through human agency). While rabbinic literature often frames this as social reform, in the *Zohar* it assumes cosmic and theurgical dimensions. For a historical overview, see Gilbert S. Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept," *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 214–240.

²⁵ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I.6.

²⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum* I.26. Lazzarelli may have perceived a profound parallel between the Hermetic ascent and the Pauline promise of cosmic sovereignty. For Paul, those united in Christ become co-heirs with the divine Son (Rom 8:17). On how this process allows believers to rule over cosmic forces, see M. David Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul's Soteriology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 182–184.

²⁷ *Corpus Hermeticum*, X.24: "For the human is a godlike living thing... the one who is really human is above these gods as well." See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 36. Note the lexical parallel between the Lazzarellian *homo verus* and the Hermetic "really human."

reference to the conversion of idolaters, Jewish mystical tradition opened the door to a magico-esoteric reading: the human potential to literally *create* souls.²⁸ It seems that Lazzarelli was aware of this interpretation, and built upon it.

A *homo verus*, or *novus*, as he further explains, is someone who does not break the divine order and reaches the goal of his creation: an implicit critique of Adam's sin, and a gesture toward Christ's fulfillment of God's plan.²⁹ In fact, Lazzarelli promptly identifies Jesus as the supreme instance of the true man, invisible to human reason alone, and the one who most completely revealed the secret through parables and actions.

To cross the threshold of the god-making mystery (*deificum arcanum*), the adept must undergo a period of contemplation, prayer, praise, and wonder. At the core of the initiation is the recognition that God must be understood as supremely fertile. And since the human being is the image of God, it must share, by analogy, the same potential to generate a divine progeny.

Pressed by King Ferdinand and Pontano, Lazzarelli clarifies that he is speaking of the *generatio mentis* described by Hermes in his dialogue with Asclepius.³⁰ The vision that follows is one of consummate *felicitas*: divine nourishment offered, immortality unearthed, and the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem finally opened. At this luminous apex, Lazzarelli proclaims the central mystery: humanity has discovered the nature of God, and knowing it, has become capable of reproducing it. Just as God generates angels and celestial beings, so too the *homo verus* produces divine souls — beings once called “terrestrial gods”, who dwell among human beings, assist them, and participate in their very destiny.³¹

By shifting their focus from idols to humanity, this teaching is a daring reinterpretation of the Hermetic *Asclepius* — particularly the god-making passages concerning the animation of statues, long regarded as theologically scandalous.³² Where earlier readers saw only pagan idolatry, Lazzarelli discerns the veiled expression of a profound sacramental truth that illuminates Christianity: just as ancient priests animated statues by drawing spirits into

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 171.

²⁹ *Homo novus* inevitably evokes the Pauline “new man” of Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10.

³⁰ And yet, within the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the possibility of ‘creating’ or ‘generating’ the human mind was not discussed in the terms envisioned by Lazzarelli, except in the more general sense of spiritual regeneration. See especially CH XIII, dedicated to the regeneration of Tat.

³¹ Cf. *Ascl.* 38.

³² *Ascl.* 23–24, 37–38. Augustine’s condemnation of Hermetic idolatry is found in *De Civitate Dei* VIII.23–26. For a study on Augustine’s complex engagement with Hermetic spirituality, see Johannes van Oort, “Augustine and Hermes Trismegistus: An Inquiry into the Spirituality of Augustine’s ‘Hidden Years,’” *Journal of Early Christian History* 6, no. 3 (2016): 1–18. Regarding the ancient practice of statue animation, see Sarah Iles Johnston, “Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual,” *Arethusa* 41, no. 3 (2008): 445–477.

them, the human being may become a *homo verus*, a divinized being, by attracting the divine Spirit within. The decisive distinction lies in the source of power: not planetary or demonic forces, but the Holy Spirit itself.

This distinction is precisely what separates the *generatio mentis* from inferior forms of magical operation. In his *Vademecum*, Lazzarelli distinguished *magia celestis* — illicit astral magic involving the attraction of planetary spirits into material receptacles — from *magia sacerdotalis et divina*: the harmonious conjunction of the human spirit with the Spirit of God, encoded in Scripture.³³ This is theurgy in its purest sense: a sacred technology that underlies Mercurio's teaching and finds its fullest expression in the *Crater Hermetis*.³⁴

Lazzarelli further anchors this teaching in Jewish mystical tradition through two significant moves. The first concerns a passage whose origin remains elusive, though its imagery evokes the symbolic universe of the *Zohar*: "Likewise, the wise men of the Hebrews say that Enoch in a book he wrote makes mention of the higher and lower king; and the one who unites them both will daily harvest gladness from above. And in my opinion that is exactly the heart of this mystery".³⁵ Following Copenhaver's interpretation, the two kings can be read as allusions to the *sefirot*.³⁶ According to the *Zohar*, Adam's transgression fractured the divine structure itself: the lowest *sefirah*, *Malkuth* — sometimes figured as the 'apple' — became severed from the rest of the sefirotic tree, and with it came the descent into idolatry, corruption, and death.³⁷ The restoration of the divine order is thus inseparable

³³ Lazzarelli's *Vademecum* is an introductory text within his *Tractatus de alchimia* (post-1495), where he appeals to the testimony of Paul to argue that the conjunction of God and man is a natural and innate transformation. He also identifies Hermes as the "father of theologians, magi, and alchemists" who revealed the secrets of these disciplines to his spiritual sons. The text is transcribed and translated in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 274–277.

³⁴ The *magia sacerdotalis et divina* echoes Proclus's 'hieratic art', which connects ancient sacerdotal wisdom to theurgy (i.e., the priestly art). See the recently published Eleni Pachoumi, ed., *Proclus' On the Hieratic Art according to the Greeks* (Leiden: Brill, 2024). See also Anne Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," *The Classical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1982): 212–224.

³⁵ *Crater Hermetis*, 29.1. The Latin term *laetitia*, rendered by Hanegraaff as 'gladness', could also be translated as 'fertility' or 'fecundity'. In my view, these terms are more pertinent to the generative mystery discussed here.

³⁶ Brian P. Copenhaver, "A Grand End for a Grand Narrative: Lodovico Lazzarelli, Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio and Renaissance Hermetica," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 2 (2009): 222. Copenhaver links the lower king to *Malkuth* ('Kingdom') and the upper one to *Keter* ('Crown'), as suggested by the distinctly royal names of these two *Sefirot*. However, in a Zoharic context, these could correspond to *Malkuth* and *Binah* (or *Tiferet*). On *Sefirot* as kings, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 84.

³⁷ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 52. Through Recanati, this idea also reached Pico: see Giacomo Corazzol, "From Sinai to Athens," *Intellectual History Review* 29, no. 1 (2019): 80.

from the repair of the primordial wound. For Lazzarelli, the mystic's fundamental task is to reunite what has been divided, restoring the original harmony and recovering the privileges humanity forfeited at the Fall.

The second move draws on a tradition associated with the *Sefer Yeşirah* and attributed to Abraham, preserved in a commentary by Eleazar of Worms (1176-1238), where Lazzarelli encounters a procedure for the formation of new human beings through the permutation and vocalization of sacred letters — in other words, a technique for creating a golem.³⁸ Lazzarelli reinterprets this procedure as a theurgic allegory: through the “mystical disposition of the letters” — that is, through the generative and transformative power of sacred language properly articulated — a *novus homo* is formed. Divine generation, at its highest, is a work of the *logos*.

Who is the new and true man of the *Crater Hermetis*? He identifies a restricted canon of paradigmatic figures as witnesses to a primordial truth that has circulated since antiquity under different symbolic guises: Hermes, Enoch, Abraham, and Jesus. The regenerated human being emerging from this process is endowed with superhuman abilities: prophecy, exorcism, incorruptibility, and above all the generative power over souls.³⁹ As Pimander declares, the ultimate end of those who attain knowledge, or rather *gnosis*, is “to be deified”.⁴⁰

As the dialogue draws to a close, Lazzarelli proclaims a final hymn addressed to Christ under the name of Poimandres, before uttering a prophetic invocation: a vision of humanity transfigured by divine light, where the darkness accumulated since the Fall finally dissolves to make way for the luminous repose of the seventh day. In this state, deified man walks the earth once more, ushering in the long-deferred Kingdom of God.⁴¹

The *Crater Hermetis* is the proclamation of the “novelty of novelties”. But what does it mean to generate divine souls, to become a *homo verus*, to accomplish here, in historical time what the tradition had often deferred to a more distant horizon? This is the question

³⁸ For the identification of the text of Eleazar of Worms, see Moshe Idel, “Hermeticism and Judaism,” 68. On the Golem technique, see Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 56, and for the connection to theurgic statue animation, see 3–7, 29–32.

³⁹ See Lazzarelli, *Epistola Enoch*, in Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 56, where he recounts how Giovanni da Correggio was able to cast out demons, and cites his prophetic gifts.

⁴⁰ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I.26.

⁴¹ This apocalyptic vision mirrors the prophecy in *Ascl.* 24–26, where God restores creation after an age of impiety.

that connects Lazzarelli's Hermetic-Christian initiation to the mystical, apocalyptic Paul of the Second Temple world, and it is to this nexus that I now turn.

4 — The Re-Judaization and Re-Hellenization of Paul: A Theurgical Synthesis

While modern scholars working within the 'Paul within Judaism' and 'Paul within Paganism' perspectives have re-contextualized the Apostle within the Greco-Roman milieu, Lazzarelli reaches a similar result through his own quest for the primordial roots of Christianity. He primarily adopts what might be ironically termed a 'Paul within Hermeticism' approach that helps him uncover a more mystical Paul. Although the Apostle had no direct ties to the *Hermetica*, the ideas that informed that worldview were embedded in the cultural and religious landscape of the first-century Mediterranean.⁴² The *homo novus et verus* of the *Crater Hermetis* is the conceptual bridge where Renaissance Christian Hermeticism and the Jewish apocalyptic Paul of the Second Temple meet in a shared language of deification.

4.1 - A Shared Lexicon: Paul and Lazzarelli in Dialogue

The *Crater Hermetis* engages in a vivid and provocative dialogue with the Pauline epistles. While it repeatedly echoes the Apostle's language and central themes, it also reinterprets his message through the lenses of Hermeticism and Jewish mysticism.

At the center of this dialogue is the dialectic of mystery and revelation. Paul uses *mysterion* when referring to the hidden divine wisdom preordained for our glory — wisdom unknowable yet disclosed, reserved for the mature and revealed at the appointed time.⁴³ Similarly, Lazzarelli speaks of a "mystery of theology", an "ineffable mystery", and "the greatest of secrets", all "long unknown" and only now being revealed.⁴⁴ Where Paul speaks of a "revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past", Lazzarelli's "secret of secrets" shares the same apocalyptic rhetoric: a truth always present, always concealed,

⁴² It is noteworthy that in the New Testament Paul was mistaken for Hermes himself. See Acts 14:12, where Paul and Barnabas perform a miraculous healing in Lystra, and the crowd identifies Barnabas with Zeus and Paul with Hermes ("because he was the chief speaker"). This misunderstanding seems to suggest that at the time the figure who heals and transforms through the power of speech is instinctively associated with Hermes.

⁴³ 1 Cor 2:7–9.

⁴⁴ *Crater Hermetis*, 5.3, 26.4, 11.5, 27.1,

now disclosed to those prepared to receive it — the believers, or those ready for initiation — in what each author understood as an era approaching the End.⁴⁵

Intriguing parallels are also found in the vocabulary of sonship and renewed humanity. Paul distinguishes between the “children of the flesh” and the “children of the promise”, anchoring this new and glorified lineage in the figure of Isaac as the sole heir of the free woman, Abraham’s wife Sarah.⁴⁶ Lazzarelli closely parallels this structure but reinterprets it through a *Zoharic* exegesis of Abraham’s inheritance: he uses the *Zohar* to oppose the “sons of the concubines” (the recipients of corrupted magical arts) to Isaac, the legitimate heir of the “divine secrets” of Kabbalah.⁴⁷ In Lazzarelli’s hands, the Pauline “promise” becomes synonymous with the specific procreative privilege granted to Abraham and Sarah: the power to create souls. To be “children of the promise” (of Sarah and Abraham) is to move beyond the “persecution of the flesh” to embrace a “fertility of mind”.⁴⁸ In other words, by tethering the Pauline lineage to the Genesis passage of the souls created in Harran, Lazzarelli suggests that the *Crater Hermetis* is describing the rightful inheritance of the new, glorified humanity.

This procreative dimension leads directly to the lexicon of deification. The “ineffable mystery” is, for Lazzarelli, what he calls the *mentis generatio*. Through this operation, the initiate is described as one “regenerated by the divine light and transformed into a true man”: a being who “creates divine souls, which the ancient host used to call gods of the earth”, by means of the “knowledge of divine fertility” (or “fertility of mind”).⁴⁹ These “divine offspring” — elsewhere called “God’s offspring” — are divinized human beings who have experienced a palingenesis of sorts through a real initiatory ritual.⁵⁰

The Pauline “New Creature” thus finds its Lazzarellian counterpart in the *novus homo*, the reborn human being who has reawakened the original divine and immortal spark.⁵¹ Paul explains that while the first Adam was a being of dust, the last Adam became a “life-giving spirit”.⁵² Lazzarelli’s new man, regenerated by divine light and now able to initiate other

⁴⁵ Rom 16:25 and *Crater Hermetis*, 28.1.

⁴⁶ Rom 9:8 and Gal 4:28–31.

⁴⁷ *Crater Hermetis*, 30.3. Intriguingly, the *Sitra Achra* (‘the Other Side’, the realm of darkness) is often characterized as sterile and incapable of true generation. Whether, and to what extent, such *Zoharic* motifs informed Lazzarelli’s thought remains a subject for further investigation.

⁴⁸ Gal 4:21–31. *Crater Hermetis*, 25.2.

⁴⁹ *Crater Hermetis*, 22.1, 27.1, 24.5.

⁵⁰ *Crater Hermetis*, 21.4, 25.3, 5.3.

⁵¹ 2 Cor 5:17.

⁵² 1 Cor 15.

believers into the god-making mystery, can plausibly be read alongside this transition. And just as Paul describes the transformation as the mystery of being changed from an animal body to a spiritual one, Lazzarelli explains that the *generatio mentis* is not to be understood as a metaphor, but as a literal ontological transformation.⁵³ In this convergence, Lazzarelli's Hermetic-Pauline syncretism reaches its apex: the "one who is really human" from the *Corpus Hermeticum* fuses with the Pauline New Creature to produce a *homo verus* and *novus*.

4.II - The Mystery of Glorification: Justification as Theurgical Deification

For centuries, particularly in the post-Lutheran tradition, Paul had been read as the apostle of faith against works. According to this framework, justification was almost akin to a forensic divine decree: a person was declared righteous solely through faith in Christ, while the human being passively received this new status. E. P. Sanders and the New Perspective dismantled this paradigm.⁵⁴ While Sanders refocused the debate on Jewish identity markers, his most significant contribution for our purposes is the argument that justification in Paul is fundamentally participatory. One is righteous because one is mystically united "in Christ", and not because of a divine decree.⁵⁵

While he fully shares Sanders' premise of Pauline justification as participatory union, he then radicalizes it toward theurgical deification.⁵⁶ In Lazzarelli's framework, the union of human and God is an operative process that transforms the believer. He declares that "to know God is the only salvation, the only justification, the only road to the regions above".⁵⁷ Lazzarelli is clearly referring to a salvific knowledge, or *gnosis*, as the experience through which God ultimately reunites humanity to Himself and transforms it into gods. The *works of the Law* are thus superseded by the *divine works* of a humanity restored to its original dignity: the active, ritual cooperation with God through which the sinner is remade into a son.

⁵³ *Crater Hermetis*, 25.2: "I am not speaking about the fertility of the body [...], but about the fertility of the mind, which also affects the body."

⁵⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). On the broader development of the 'New Perspective' regarding Pauline justification, see James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁵⁵ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 447–510.

⁵⁶ As he writes in his *Vademecum* the *magia sacerdotalis et divina* consists precisely in the "conjunction and harmony of the Spirit of God with the spirit of man" (Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 277).

⁵⁷ *Crater Hermetis*, 5.3.

To understand what this restoration entails, one must consider the condition of humanity after the Fall. Forced into the mundane sphere, man has lost consciousness of his original divine noetic essence, now obscured by the body's envelope and earthly enticements.⁵⁸ The Fall turned the human being, originally a “radiant temple” of God, into a “dwelling of darkness”.⁵⁹ Most of humanity lies in oblivion, subjugated by demonic forces and the impulses of the flesh. This diagnosis resonates with Boccaccini's reading of Enochic Judaism, where human nature is contaminated by fallen powers, almost like a cosmic disease.⁶⁰ If that is the diagnosis, the cure can only be a genuine *healing*, that is, a salvation, a justification, or rather, a restoration of the human essence. And it is here that the concept of deification comes into play.

Deification — also referred to as *theosis*, *apotheosis*, divinization, glorification, exaltation — was a cornerstone of the ancient and late-antique Mediterranean world.⁶¹ While it remained marginal in Latin Christendom compared to the Eastern tradition, it found a powerful advocate in Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th century), who established theurgy as the essential way to achieve *theosis*.⁶² Drawing partly on his apostolic weight — he was long regarded as Paul's direct disciple — Lazzarelli was able to legitimize Hermetic theurgy and to frame the Pauline mystery of glorification as a concrete, operational reality. For Lazzarelli, the convergence of this theurgic path across Hermetic, Dionysian, and Jewish mystical sources must have confirmed the authenticity and primordial nature of this doctrine.⁶³ He may have understood his own initiatory mission as a continuation of the

⁵⁸ See 2 Corinthians 5:1–4, where Paul describes the body as a tent (a temporary dwelling) and expresses the longing to be “clothed” with a heavenly body, a permanent and incorruptible house “not made by human hands.”

⁵⁹ *Crater Hermetis*, 15.2.

⁶⁰ Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Boccaccini interprets the problem of evil in Enochic Judaism as the result of a cosmic contamination unleashed by the rebellion of the Watchers. From this perspective, Lazzarelli's theurgy may be read as a redemptive remedy to that primordial corruption.

⁶¹ For an overview on Christian deification across the centuries, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024). On deification within Judaism, see Silviu Nicolae Bunta, *The Lord God of Gods: Divinity and Deification in Early Judaism* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2021). The extent to which the Renaissance interest in deification relies on Patristic *theosis*, rather than pagan sources, is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate; on this see Cornelis J. Schilt and Steven Matthews, “Ficino and the Fathers: Patristic Readings of *De Christiana Religione* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*,” forthcoming.

⁶² Dionysius used the term ‘theurgy’ in relation to Christian sacramental rites. See Gregory Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 4 (1999): 573–99.

⁶³ In fact, in the third preface to the Hermetic collection gifted to Correggio, Lazzarelli refers to the Areopagite as “our Hermetic Dionysius” (*Hermeticus noster ille Dionisius Areopagita*). See Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 162–163.

Pauline one.

After all, Lazzarelli believed he had already undergone the very process described in the *Crater Hermetis*. His palingenesis under Giovanni Mercurio marked a watershed in his life, and the dialogue was the lived testimony of someone who understood himself to be already, in some sense, on the other side of transformation. This autobiographical and experiential dimension gives Lazzarelli's reading of Paul a unique character absent from more conventional engagements with Pauline theology.

In the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the master facilitates the pupil's rebirth through liberation from demonic torments and the vibrating power of the *Logos*.⁶⁴ This emphasis on the creative power of language must have resonated deeply with Lazzarelli's poetic sensibility, and it also tied the abstract doctrine of the *logos* to the decisive event of his own life. In the *Hermetica*, the *Logos* is generative: it inscribes itself within the adept and, in a way, reconstitutes the self from within. For Lazzarelli, this was reality. Correggio's words proved to him that language was a catalyst for transformation. The *Logos*, embodied in the voice of the master, had transformed him.

Lazzarelli understood this as a primordial spiritual technique for reaching, already in this life, the apocalyptic condition Paul describes as the New Creature. By inscribing the divine Word within the adept, the initiate is restored to his true essence, finally able to embrace "the liberty of the glory of the children of God".⁶⁵

The physiology of this process emerges in Lazzarelli's synthesis of the Pauline Last Adam with the god-making passages of the *Asclepius*, and rests on the bold premise that humanity shares in the inexhaustible fertility of its divine Creator. Hermetic theurgy becomes the ritual path by which the indwelling divine splendor — the Spirit, the earnest of future glory⁶⁶ — is reawakened within the human being. In this reinterpretation of Paul, the Spirit fecundates the *nous*, the divine spark within, clothing the initiate with a new spiritual body. A profound theurgical parallel follows: where the ancient priests animated statues through the art of drawing down spiritual entities, Lazzarelli applies the same logic to the human vessel. The initiate becomes the statue, the body a temple, the indwelling Spirit its life-force.

⁶⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum* XIII, 7–12. For further discussion of this phase of Hermetic regeneration — which is essential for understanding the *Crater Hermetis* — see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 235–63.

⁶⁵ Rom 8:21.

⁶⁶ 2 Cor 5:5.

Through this theurgical imitation of the divine act of generation, Lazzarelli's *homo verus* is reborn: a justified human being who, having recovered the buried spark of divinity, may now magnify God, perfect the world, and conceive a "divine offspring". Paul's image of the cosmos in labor pains, waiting with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God, takes on a strikingly literal force here. For Lazzarelli, the world is genuinely pregnant with a divinity that only the *homo verus* can deliver. The theurgical generation of divine souls fulfills this cosmic labor, giving birth to a 'new genus' — a 'change of species' involving a transformation from a body of dust to a spiritual body of celestial light.⁶⁷ In this sense, Lazzarelli offers a kind of initiatory and mystical path to that transformation: a bridge between Hellenistic-Jewish apocalypticism, Pauline Christianity, and Hermetic rebirth.

What distinguishes this from a merely eschatological reading of Paul is that, for Lazzarelli, glorification is not a distant post-mortem hope but a process attainable within historical time. In his hands, the Pauline mystery of glorification is transmuted into a Judeo-Christian Hermetic wisdom of deification. Through regeneration, the new man acquires prophecy, exorcistic power, and an incorruptible body rendered invisible to common perception: the spiritual (or astral) body envisioned by Paul, present within the world yet no longer subject to corruption. Such *perfecti* are figures Lazzarelli could plausibly associate with Paul's 'sons of God': deified men, children of the promise, ordained into a cosmic priesthood through the 'priestly art' of theurgy to participate in the final liberation of creation.⁶⁸

This vision also illuminates his reading of the 'Son of Man'. Where conventional theology reserves this title for the Messiah, Lazzarelli extends it toward the universal human condition. Citing Psalm 8,⁶⁹ he argues that God "magnified man so much that He descended from eternity into time and, taking on a covering of flesh, has become man". In a striking inversion of Athanasius of Alexandria's (c. 297-373) maxim, the Incarnation becomes divine recognition of humanity's supreme dignity and vocation to cooperate in the

⁶⁷ On the idea of a new species in Paul, and for a discussion about God's offspring, see James D. Tabor, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 112–122. See also James D. Tabor, "Paul's Notion of Many Sons of God in its Hellenistic Contexts," *Helios* 13 (1986): 87–97. On the transformation of mortal bodies into spiritual bodies in the context of 1 Cor 15, see also Matthew Thiessen, "Paul among the Sons of God", in *Paul within Paganism*, 93–105.

⁶⁸ See Rom 8:14 and especially Rom 8:19-21.

⁶⁹ "Lord, what is man that thou shouldst notice him, and what is the son of man that thou shouldst be mindful of him?" (Cf. Ps 8:4; Ps 144:3).

perfection of the world.⁷⁰ So, when asked whether man can ever return to his original state of happiness, Lazzarelli responds by citing Jesus' words: "Does that offend you, if the Son of Man will return to where he was before?".⁷¹ Rather than reading this as a statement about the pre-existence of the Messiah, Lazzarelli interprets it as an anthropological promise for humanity to recover its original, prelapsarian state. This 'over-evaluation' of the human — grounded in the Incarnation as proof of divine dignity — means that the Pauline transformation is the re-awakening of something the human being has always, in some sense, been.

5 — Conclusion: The Looming Apocalypse and the Novelty of Novelties

There is something fascinating and almost paradoxical about Lazzarelli's achievement. The thinker whose interpretation resonates with several recent scholarly reassessments of Paul is a fifteenth-century Italian Catholic who read the Apostle through the lenses of Hermetic theurgy and Jewish mysticism. It was his intent to recover what he took to be the purest apostolic core of Christianity that led him back toward Mediterranean sources later obscured by confessional tradition. His portrait is that of a Paul concerned with the primordial corruption of the human species, and for whom the solution was a radical transformation — a theurgy of the self through the indwelling of the divine *Nous*.

This shared language of transformation is rooted in recurring trends within the different Jewish mystical sources they both engaged. Segal and Tabor have argued that Paul's famous ascent to the "third heaven" reflects his immersion in the *Merkavah* mystical techniques of the first century.⁷² Lazzarelli, fifteen centuries later, turned to a different but

⁷⁰ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54.3: "God became man so that we might become god." Lazzarelli's vision of the *homo verus* as a divine agent of renewal offers an unexplored parallel to the Jewish figure of the *Tzaddik* — the righteous and holy person acting as a bridge between heaven and earth, whose sanctity benefits the wider community through healing, counsel, protection, and proximity to the divine. Intriguingly, the Hebrew root *tzadek* (justice/righteousness) underlies Paul's notion of justification. Comparisons between deification and incarnational thinking in early Christianity and Judaism have been drawn, and the parallel between Jesus and the charismatic figure of a *tzaddik* has been noted by scholars interested in pre-Hasidic Jewish thought: see Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). However, the specific link between Pauline glorified humanity and the *Tzaddik* as a divine vessel remains a possible avenue for research.

⁷¹ John 6:62. *Crater Hermetis*, 16.1.

⁷² On Paul's ascent (2 Cor 12:1–4) as a reflection of *Merkavah* techniques, see James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986). See also Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 34–71. One may also wonder whether, in Lazzarelli's framework, Paul's Damascus experience — with his radical transformation from persecutor to apostle — would qualify him as a *homo novus*. What is certain is that in the third preface to the Hermetic collection gifted to Correggio, Lazzarelli expresses a desire to "follow, worship and venerate" his master,

related body of material: the *Sefer Yeşirah*, the *Zohar*, and the traditions of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.⁷³ Despite the vast temporal gap, the underlying vision is strikingly similar: salvation through a communion with God that culminates in deification. That both thinkers, working in such different contexts, arrived at such similar conclusions reflects the enduring nature of these mystical themes.

From a modern philological standpoint, of course, the *Crater Hermetis* rests on a foundational error: the belief that the Hermetic texts he revered predated biblical revelation itself. We now know that these writings were products of the Judeo-Hellenistic milieu of the first centuries of the common era — roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament. And yet it is precisely by reading Paul through the distorting lens of Hermetic theurgy and Jewish mysticism that he inadvertently synchronized with the cultural world of the first century. The Hermetic dialogues and the Pauline letters were, after all, shaped by the spiritual zeitgeist of the Hellenistic-Jewish Mediterranean in which gnosis, deification and apocalyptic urgency stood at the very heart of the religious imagination. In treating them as a unified body of ancient wisdom, Lazzarelli was, fortuitously, reading them within their shared historical milieu.

A comparable apocalyptic fever animated fifteenth-century Italy, when people were scanning the skies and ancient texts for signs of an imminent renewal. In this atmosphere, Lazzarelli's revealed mystery responded to a widespread longing for a rebirth that would invest both human society and the entire cosmos. The spiritual and material decay of the age found a profound resonance in the Pauline "groaning of creation," waiting with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God. Lazzarelli's work may be read as a daring attempt to hasten this revelation through the regeneration of the *homo verus*. The Pauline promise became, in his hands, an urgent historical task, actionable *hic et nunc*, through initiation and a powerful rebirth experience transmitted by a master.

The first and most radical embodiment of this apocalyptic urgency was Lazzarelli's own master, Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio. On Palm Sunday 1484, Correggio appeared in the streets of Rome wearing a crown of thorns and blood-stained linen, bearing an

much as "our Hermetic Dionysius" once did toward his "most holy teachers Paul and Hierotheus". See Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 163.

⁷³ Although not always explicitly cited, the *Crater Hermetis* shares a series of striking affinities with the *Zohar* which deserve closer attention in future studies. These include the exile of the Godhead following Adam's sin, a shared focus on procreation, the importance of a life devoted to the worship of God, and the central role of a holy mediator in perfecting creation. For an overview of these themes, see Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*.

uncanny resemblance to Jesus.⁷⁴ Yet, this was no simple *imitatio Christi*. Correggio acted as though Pimander was speaking through him on behalf of the Holy Spirit, wielding a cane as a scepter and bearing the Greek letter Tau (τ) engraved in gold upon his chest — a magical-thaumaturgical symbol signifying the Son of God and the Son of Man, granting health, life and eternal peace.⁷⁵

This "Hermetic Christ", as Hanegraaff aptly called him, paraded through Rome on a donkey while proclaiming apocalyptic warnings and the necessity of faith in view of the impending Judgment. The crowd grew; branches of olive were raised. And the event reached its climax when the Vatican guards, reportedly moved by the spectacle, escorted the preacher into Saint Peter's Basilica — an entrance that echoed Jesus' arrival at the Temple of Jerusalem. Inside, Correggio proclaimed the Kingdom of Christ and the Eternal Gospel, laid down his mystical vestments, and departed on horseback.⁷⁶

Reality and fiction, Christianity and Hermeticism, Jesus and Hermes, the sacred and the profane, mingle in his retelling of the event. Yet, here was a "new and true man" in flesh and blood, or so Lazzarelli believed. The *Crater Hermetis* was more than fiction to him. It was a bold interpretation of the Pauline "New Creature" and an initiatory pathway toward its realization. This vision also carried profound political implications. By initiating King Ferdinand, Lazzarelli was promoting the utopian ideal of a glorified monarchy.

In conclusion, what scholarship has established through rigorous historical-critical method, Lazzarelli arrived at through personal experience and his conviction that Hermes, Enoch, and Paul were all conduits of the same primordial truth. Five centuries later, Lazzarelli deserves greater attention as a daring reader of Paul. For scholars working at the intersection of Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, and the history of mysticism, the *Crater Hermetis* invites us to ask again how Paul may be interpreted, and to take seriously the possibility that a Renaissance poet-mystic, armed with wrong historical facts but with

⁷⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of Correggio's Roman appearance, see Hanegraaff, "The Hermetic Christ", 27–33.

⁷⁵ The Franciscan devotion to the Tau (based on Ezekiel 9:4) is well established. That the Tau was a meaningful symbol for Correggio is evidenced by its prominence on the cover of his *Oratio*; see Hanegraaff, "The Hermetic Christ", 28, n. 91. Hanegraaff hypothesizes that Correggio may have intended to literally mark his disciples with the Tau during his proselytizing mission.

⁷⁶ The Roman episode is so extraordinary that the first modern scholar to study Correggio initially questioned his historical existence; see Hanegraaff, "The Hermetic Christ", 22. Lazzarelli's account is at least partially corroborated by independent contemporary witnesses who did not share his hagiographic intent. The Jewish scholar Abraham Farissol (c. 1452–1528) records that Correggio's prophetic-apocalyptic proselytism led to his imprisonment and subsequent escape. See David B. Ruderman, "Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio's Appearance in Italy as Seen through the Eyes of an Italian Jew," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1975): 309–322.

the right intuitions, discerned dimensions of Pauline thought often muted in dominant Western interpretations. In this sense, Lazzarelli offers a valuable reminder that creative misreadings of the past can sometimes illuminate truths later orthodoxy leaves in shadow. In seeking to turn men into gods through the life-giving Spirit, he foregrounded the transformative side of Paul's message — and did so with the urgency of one who believed that the New Creation was an imminent reality that humanity was called to hasten.