

Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices

Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty

Edited by

**Christian H. Bull,
Liv Ingeborg Lied
and John D. Turner**

BRILL

Mystery and Secrecy
in the Nag Hammadi Collection
and Other Ancient Literature:
Ideas and Practices

Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies

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FOREWORD

This book is offered in honor of Einar Thomassen on the occasion of his 60th birthday. The collection of essays in this *Festschrift* explores what Walter Burkert once described as “the fascination of secrecy and the promise of thrilling revelations”:¹ mystery and secrecy in the Nag Hammadi texts and other ancient texts and practices. This multivalent and fascinating topic is fitting for a celebration of Thomassen’s broad scholarly production and wide research interests in the religious currents of Antiquity.

In scholarly discourse the term “mystery” (deriving, via Latin, from the Greek word *μυστήριον*) usually refers to a secret rite, and/or to exclusive and treasured knowledge in the form of a revealed secret. The mystery often reveals cosmological or ontological truths. It may be the disclosure of God’s general plan, of hidden heavenly realities, unknown earthly truths, the real layout of past events, or a description of things to come. The mystery is commonly revealed by God or other divine agents, and is conveyed to the worthy recipients through revelatory dialogues, visions, rites or other practices. It is often of limited public exposure, and provides those who have gained access to it knowledge of things at and beyond the limits of knowability. The precise contents of ancient mystery rites often remain unknown (and hence the more intriguing). However, the functions and uses of references to mystery and mystery language in ancient texts are generally available for study. These texts show that references to mystery and use of mystery language may serve epistemological, cognitive, and social purposes: it informs pedagogical, rhetorical, and soteriological discourses: and may also be used as a way of establishing authority. In yet other ancient texts, mystery can also be used for an opposite purpose, as a means of shaming certain ungodly, dangerous, hidden and inaccessible rites and practices of “the religious other.”

The term “secrecy” refers to a strategy of distribution of control over, and access to special knowledge: the valued information generally reserved for the few. Secrecy can be understood as a social phenomenon, as discourse within a real or imagined society, as well as a rhetorical strategy. Secrecy

¹ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1.

tends to promote exclusivity, since access to the secret provides those who know it with social, epistemological and soteriological advantages.

The topic of mystery and secrecy is a broad, complex and intriguing one. As suggested above, it refers both to a set of ritual practices, as well as to a multivalent literary theme and metaphorical language in narrative texts of the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East. The topic is found across geographical, cultural and religious borders, as well as in written sources of differing genres and languages. Moreover, these sources display multiple functions, and diverse contexts of usage. In this sense, the topic of mystery and secrecy reflects Thomassen's academic profile perfectly.

Thomassen's research on Valentinianism, the Nag Hammadi texts and early Christian pluralism are well known. However, he has also taken great interest in other religious strands in antique Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies, including a variety of Greek, Roman and Near Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, and has paired this interest with an important insight into theoretical and methodological currents in Religious Studies. The theme of mystery and secrecy traces a thread through a major part of Thomassen's scholarship. His research portfolio displays a profound interest in the relationship between text, myth and ritual; the functions of revelation, knowledge, secrecy and pedagogy; notions of cosmology, dualism, protology and eschatology; not to mention identity construction and social settings of ancient religions and their texts. Thomassen has contributed specifically to the scholarly discussion of mystery and secrecy on several occasions, for instance in his seminal work *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"* (2006), as well as in the essays "Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections of the *Gospel of Truth*" (2002), and "*Gos. Philip 67:27–30*: Not 'in a mystery'" (2006).² He has stressed, among other aspects, the soteriological importance of the special knowledge of revealed books and the social value of secret wisdom in the community of the elect. Importantly, Thomassen has

² E.g., Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006); idem, "Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections on the *Gospel of Truth*," in *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions: Proceedings of the International Conference at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters in Copenhagen, September 19–24, 1995: On The Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Nag Hammadi Discovery* (ed. Søren Giversen, Tage Petersen and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen; Historisk-filosofiske Skrifter 26; Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2002), 35–45; idem, "*Gos. Philip 67:27–30*: Not 'in a mystery,'" in *Coptica-Gnostica-Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud & Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.E 7; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 925–39.

explored and proposed an alternative reading of the oft-cited reference to “mystery”—the “symbolic meaning”—of the acts of the Savior in the *Gospel of Philip* 67.

The contributions to this Festschrift discuss references to mystery and secrecy in a variety of ancient sources. We have invited Thomassen’s international colleagues as well as his former students at the University of Bergen to contribute essays in their respective fields of expertise. These range from the Eleusinian Mysteries in ancient Greece to mystery and authority building in the writings of Shenoute of Atripe. The first part of this volume focuses on Nag Hammadi and Gnostic writings. The second part addresses other Christian practices, text traditions and material culture. Finally, the third part discusses non-Christian trends of Antiquity. Hence, the volume offers an up to date presentation of research on the currents of mystery and secrecy in the ancient world. These include a close look at the Nag Hammadi texts; other early Christian and Jewish texts; Manichean, Mithraic, and Hermetic traditions; as well as mystery rites and other mystic practices and rituals.

The editors wish to thank, in particular, Johannes van Oort. This volume is published in the Nag Hammadi and Manichaeon Studies Series, of which Thomassen is one of the series editors. Ironically, this volume on mystery and secrecy has itself been a well kept secret for some years, not the least due to the efforts of van Oort, the other series editor. Thanks are also due to Jan Bremmer who suggested the topic for the anthology, to Hilde Marie Ø. Movafagh for compiling the indices, to Hugo Lundhaug for assisting the editors with his expertise on fonts, to MF Norwegian School of Theology for economic support, to Mattie Kuiper and the staff of Brill for bringing the volume to completion, to Thomassen’s colleagues in Bergen and the SBL Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Session for offering the venue for the presentation of the book.

Finally, our thanks go to Einar. Through his books and articles, and his engagement in the raising of new generations of scholars in the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network, Einar’s legacy continues to influence scholarship. For this we are particularly thankful.

The editors

ABBREVIATIONS

AAAH	Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ABRL	The Anchor Bible Reference Library
AGSJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
AJN 2	American Journal of Numismatics, Second Series
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.</i> Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers.</i> Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung.</i> Part 2, <i>Principat.</i> Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974–1998
AnzSchweiz	<i>Anzeiger für schweizerische Alterthumskunde</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AR	<i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i>
Athen. Mitt.	<i>Athenische Mitteilungen</i>
AVM	Archeologie in Vlaanderen Monografie
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i>
BCNH.É	Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section “Études”
BCNH.T	Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section “Textes”
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BJS	<i>The British Journal of Sociology</i>
BP	Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
BS	Bollingen Series
BSGRT	Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum teubneriana
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft

<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>CChr</i>	Corpus christianorum
<i>CdE</i>	<i>Chronique d'Égypte</i>
<i>CGL</i>	<i>The Coptic Gnostic Library</i>
<i>CMCL</i>	Corpus dei manoscritti copti letterari
<i>ConBNT</i>	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
<i>COr</i>	Cahiers d'orientalisme
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>CRINT</i>	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
<i>CTSRR</i>	College Theology Society Resources in Religion
<i>DDD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i>
<i>DMAHA</i>	Dutch Monographs on Ancient History and Archaeology
<i>DTC</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de théologie catholique</i>
<i>EBib</i>	Études bibliques
<i>EJMS</i>	<i>Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies</i>
<i>EPRO</i>	Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain
<i>FRLANT</i>	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>GCS</i>	Die griechischen-christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HDR</i>	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
<i>HNT</i>	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
<i>HSCP</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>HSem</i>	Horae semiticae
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HTS</i>	Harvard Theological Studies
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCTCRS</i>	Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies
<i>JdI</i>	<i>Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>J ECS</i>	<i>Journal for Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period</i>
<i>JSJSup</i>	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism

JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series
JSRC	Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	The Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament Studies
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae</i> . Edited by Hans C. Ackermann and Jean-Robert Gisler. 8 vols. Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1981–1997
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
MHSMB	Manichäische Handschriften der staatlichen Museen Berlin
<i>Mus</i>	<i>Muséon: Revue d'études orientales</i>
NCBC	The New Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>NGWG</i>	<i>Nachrichten von der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologische-historische Klasse</i>
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OCA	Orientalia christiana analecta
<i> OCD</i>	<i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i>
OCT	Scriptorium classicorum bibliotheca oxoniensis (Oxford Classical Texts)
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OLA	Orientalia lovaniensia analecta
<i>OLP</i>	<i>Orientalia lovaniensia periodica</i>
PapyCol	Papyrologica coloniensi
<i>ParOr</i>	<i>Parole de l'orient</i>
PFTUG	Publications de la Faculté de théologie de l'Université de Genève
PNIA	Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens
PS	Patristic Studies
<i>PTR</i>	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
<i>RAC</i>	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> . Edited by Theodor Kluser, Franz J. Dölger, and Ernst Dassmann. Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–

<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
<i>RSLR</i>	<i>Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa</i>
RSMS	Ritual Studies Monograph Series
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
RVV	Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SAOC	Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCHNT	Studia ad corpus hellenicum Novi Testamenti
SECA	Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha
SGRR	Studies in Greek and Roman Religion
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions. Numen Book Series
<i>SMSR</i>	<i>Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
StOR	Studies in Oriental Religions
SWE	Studies in Western Esotericism
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964–1976
<i>ThesCRA</i>	<i>Thesaurus cultuum et rituum antiquorum</i>
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TTS	Thomas Taylor Series
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
<i>VetChr</i>	<i>Vetera christianorum</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus testamentum</i>
WGRW	Writings from the Graeco-Roman World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZÄS</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

- ZNW* *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde
der älteren Kirche*
- ZPE* *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*
- ZRGG* *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*

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PART ONE

MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN THE NAG HAMMADI
AND RELATED GNOSTIC WRITINGS

FROM THE BOWELS OF HELL TO DRACO:
THE MYSTERIES OF THE PERATICS

APRIL D. DECONICK
Rice University

We alone have known that genesis is necessary, and we alone have known the roads by which humans have entered into the cosmos. We have been instructed precisely so we alone can pass through and traverse mortality.¹

Μόνοι δέ ἡμεῖς οἱ τῆς ἀνάγκης τῆς γενέσεως ἐγνωκότες, καὶ τὰς ὁδοὺς δι' ὧν εἰσελήλυθεν ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἀκριβῶς δεδιδαγμένοι, διελεθῆναι καὶ περᾶσαι τὴν φθορὰν μόνου δυνάμεθα.

So says the second-century Gnostic writer whom Hippolytus quotes and identifies as a member of the Peratics, literally the “Traversers.” Hippolytus tells us that he is resolved to publish “their forbidden mysteries (τὰ ἀπόρρητα μυστήρια).”² This description is not a casual remark on the part of Hippolytus, nor can we easily dismiss it as a heresiological misrepresentation of the Peratics or a secondary “alien” interpretation superimposed on the Gnostic tradition by outsiders.³ The Peratic author himself makes the claim that his group has received instruction in exclusive knowledge about the precise paths that the soul journeys when incarnating, and then uses to exit when traversing mortality. He also states that when the Son draws the purified soul up into the Father’s world during “the mystery of Eden (<τὸ> μυστήριον Ἐδέμ),” the initiates exit the cosmos through the river that flowed out of Eden as “the exactly copied perfect race (τὸ ἐξεικονισμένον τέλειον γένος).”⁴

¹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.1 (Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Hippolytus. Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* [PTS; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986], 182); Eng. trans. mine.

² Hipp. *Haer.* 5.12.1 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 173).

³ A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (WUNT 44; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987), 125, 139. Cf. Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott ‘Mensch’ in der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 59; Walter Burkert, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 278.

⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.9; 5.17.10 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183, 187); Eng. trans. mine. Thus I disagree with the contemporary opinion that, apart from the Naassenes who were an exception, the Greek mysteries did not impact Gnostic formation because Gnostic groups were too aware of their Judaeo-Christian roots to have acknowledged inspiration from

I find it very significant that Hippolytus' own description of the Peratics as a mystery cult appears to be sympathetic with the Peratic author he quotes. Both authors use language that belongs to mystery initiation, secret traditions and soul journeys when describing the Peratic movement. For instance, the Greek adjective ἀπόρητα is commonly used to describe the secrecy of the initiation, which was "not-to-be-spoken" or shared outside the group, while τελειώ and its cognates are descriptors for the "accomplishment" of the mysteries and the "perfecting" of the initiate.⁵ From the evidence that we have about a variety of ancient initiations or "mysteries (μυστήρια)," it is suggestive (although controversial) that one of the functions of cult initiations was as a "trial run" for the afterlife journey that began in the underworld at the moment of death. A big appeal of initiations was their promise to alleviate the horrors of hell when the person finally died, an opinion already expressed in Plato: "And it seems that also those who established the *teletai* for us are not incompetent but in fact have all along been speaking in riddles (in saying) that whoever arrives in Hades as uninitiate and non-participant in the *teletē* will lie in mud, but he who has been both purified and has participated in the *teletē*, upon arrival there, will dwell with gods."⁶

Plutarch even compares death with initiation, suggesting that the death experience itself is like initiation into the great mysteries.⁷ At the death moment, "the soul suffers an experience like those who are undergoing initiation into the great mysteries *teletai*," he says.

And so the verbs *teleutân* (die) and *teleisthai* (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity. In the beginning there are wanderings astray, tiresome running in circles, and frightening paths through darkness that

their main competitors, the mystery cults (cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 125, 139). In fact, the opposite is more likely the case. Developing their competitors' strengths would have been a much more successful strategy than ignoring them, since it would have offered a religiosity already familiar and attractive to new converts.

⁵ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 9–11.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo* 69c (E. A. Duke et al., eds., *Platonis Opera* [OCT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 107). On this passage, see Kevin Clinton, "Stages of Initiation," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; New York: Routledge, 2003), 55–56.

⁷ Cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 152–53, who points out that "death is compared to an initiation and not *vice versa*" as if this means that, while death might have been viewed as an initiation, one cannot appeal to *this* text to support the opinion that initiation was viewed as death. This is nonsense. Metaphorical language, such as used in this text, equivocates the two. Death is similar to the experience of initiation *only because* when initiation is undergone, the initiate 'dies' and journeys to the underworld.

lead nowhere. Then immediately before the end, all the terrible things, shivering and trembling and sweat and amazement. But afterwards, a wonderful light meets the wanderer, open country and meadows are there to welcome the wanderer. In that place there are voices and dances and solemn, sacred sounds and holy visions. Amidst these, the initiate, now perfect, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other sacred and pure people. He looks down on the uninitiated, unpurified mob, the mob of living people who, herded together in mud and deep mire, trample one another down and in their fear of death cling to their ills, since they believe in the blessings of the other world.⁸

As my research into a variety of Gnostic movements has progressed over the years, I have come to the conclusion that these types of initiation secrets lie at the heart of antique Gnostic movements. I offer this brief examination of the Peratics as the first in a long-term series on the subject of Gnostic initiation as I attempt to chart the precise katabatic and astrological roads into and out of the cosmos that the Gnostics claim to have discovered and traveled during their initiations. Part of the reason that these journeys have not been previously mapped by scholars is the direct result of the general modern perception that astrology is a “pseudoscience” at best. At worst it has been understood as a sign of a decline into irrationality and ignorance, a “disease” that infected the “folk” forms of religion. Scholars have been resolute that mainstream religions did not participate in astrology because they actively refuted it. Astrology has been so trivialized in the Academy that *even* the “heretics,” the “philosophically-inclined” Gnostics merely “borrowed” astrological language. As a thin secondary patina, it was hardly relevant to the development of their ideas and practices, which could be better understood by investigating philosophy.⁹

⁸ Plut. fr. 178 (Francis H. Sandbach, ed., *Plutarch's Moralia: XV, Fragments* [LCL 429; London: William Heinemann, 1969], 317–19, with some alteration) from Stob. *Ecl.* 4.52.49.

⁹ Only recently have scholars become aware of this bias. Charlesworth points out that the view that astrology in the Roman period is a ‘pseudo-Science’ is misleading and anachronistic (James H. Charlesworth, “Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Palestinian Synagogues,” *HTR* 70 [1977]: 183–200 at 199n57). Barton discusses astrology as a “science” in the ancient world (Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* [London: Routledge, 1994]). For other recent academic treatments of astrology and the integral role they play in Judaism and Christianity, see Kocku von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie: Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis* (RVV 49; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000); idem, “Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity—A New Approach,” *Numen* 47 (2000): 1–40; Tim Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (PS 6; New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Mladen Popović, *Reading the Human*

So marginalized is this astrological material that Werner Foerster, in his famous collection of patristic testimonies first published in English translation in 1972, neglects to translate an entire chapter of a Gnostic astrological book written by a Peratic. In the middle of Hippolytus' testimony on the Peratics, when Hippolytus is quoting one of their texts, Foerster writes in the blank space marking his omission: "The rest of c. 14 is not translated; it presents further astrological statements which introduce divine names and legendary characters without contributing material essentially relevant to gnosticism."¹⁰ The projection of our modern perception of astrology onto the past may explain why the Peratics as a group are so neglected that, according to the standard Nag Hammadi bibliography, the whole of scholarship on the Peratics includes three articles and a few encyclopedia entries written between 1949 and 2009—in sixty years, by my count, 55 pages total.¹¹

From the information I have been able to cull from Hippolytus and the Peratic book he excerpts, I have come to see that the Peratics' initiation journey was structured around two, perhaps even three, mysteries or stages of initiation. The first mystery or stage was the sublunar journey

Body: Physiognomics and Astrology in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hellenistic-Early Roman Period Judaism (STDJ 67; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁰ Werner Foerster, ed., *Patristic Evidence* (vol 1 of *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*; trans. Robert McL. Wilson; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 286. MacMahon provides an English translation of chapter 14 in A. Cleveland Coxe, ed., *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyrian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix* (ANF 5; 1868; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Although MacMahon interacts with Duncker and Schneidewin (*S. Hippolyti episcopi et martyris Refutationis omnium haeresium librorum decem quae supersunt* [Göttingen: Dieterichianis, 1859], and Cruice (*Philosophumena, e, Kata pason aireseon elenchus* [Paris: Typographeo imperiali, 1860]), his translation is inferior, based mainly on the *editio princeps* of the *Elenchos* IV–X printed in 1851 under the editorship of Miller as a tract from Origen. In 1921, Legge made a second English translation based on Cruice's edition. The most recent edition by Marcovich, who views the Parisinus ms. as more corrupt than previous editors, was published in 1986. My work interacts with Marcovich's edition.

¹¹ Alfonso M. di Nola, "Perati," in *Enciclopedia delle Religioni* (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1972), 4:1580–82. Pierre-Thomas Camelot, "Pérates," in *Catholicisme: Hier, Aujourd'hui, Demain* (ed. Gerard Mathon et al.; Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1985), 10:1219; Josep Montserrat-Torrents, "Les pérates," in *Pléroma: Salus cornis; homenaje a Antonio Orbe, S.J.* (ed. Eugenio Romero-Pose; Compostellanum 34; Santiago de Compostela, 1990), 229–42; Michel Tardieu, "The Perates and Their Gnostic Interpretation of Paganism," in *Mythologies* (ed. Yves Bonnefoy and Wendy Doniger; trans. Gerald Honigsblum; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2:680–82; A. Magris, "L'esegesi della setta ofitica dei Perati: Analisi di Ippolito, Haer. V.16," *Apocrypha* 14 (2003): 193–223; Winrich Alfried Löhr, "Perates," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2:934–940. Cf. David M. Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948–1969* (NHS 1; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 70; idem, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1970–1994* (NHMS 32; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 168–69; idem, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1995–2006* (NHMS 65; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 92.

through Hades. The second involved the celestial journey through the planetary spheres and the Zodiac. This second mystery or stage of initiation culminated in a transcendent journey through the divine realm above and beyond the universe. This initiation was a trial run for the soul, anticipatory of the death journey. It was meant to introduce the soul to the proper path it would take at death, and to teach the soul the proper charms and invocations to secure safe passage through the threatening realms of the dead and the demons who ruled the skies.

The Book of The Suburbs up to the Aither

The Peratic book that Hippolytus excerpts is *The Suburbs up to the Aither*. The title suggests that the book describes the regions of space between earth and the moon, *aither* delineating here the “air” that originally rose up on the winds and formed the heavenly atmosphere.¹² In cosmological terms, the suburban region depicted is the sublunar sphere, consisting of the earth and Tartarus at the center of the earth, the skies and air above it, the clouds and fire in the atmosphere, all the way up to the firmament.

Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.14.1–10¹³

5.14.1 Δοκεῖ οὖν παρατάξαι μίαν τινὰ
τῶν παρ’ αὐτοῖς δοξαζομένων βίβλων, ἐν
ᾗ λέγει·
“Ἐγὼ φωνῆ ἐξυπνισμοῦ ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῆς
νυκτός.

λοιπὸν ἄρχομαι γυμνοῦν τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ
Χάους δύναμιν.
ἡ δύναμις τοῦ ἀβυσσικοῦ θολοῦ,
ἡ τὸν πηλὸν ἀναβαστάζουσα τοῦ
ἀφθάρτου ἄχανοῦς διύγρου,
ἡ τοῦ σπάσματος ὅλη δύναμις
ὑδατόχρους ἀεικίνητος,
φέρουσα¹⁴ τὰ μένοντα,
κατέχουσα τὰ τρέμοντα,

Therefore it seems good to quote one of
the books which is praised among them,
in which it says:

“I am the voice of the one who has
awakened from sleep in the realm of
night.

Now I begin to struggle with the Power
that has sprung from chaos,
the Power of the abyss of mud,
the (Power) that supports the clay of the
boundless expanse swollen with water,
the utter Power of the earthquake,
watery-green, continually moving,
holding up what is firm,
holding down what quakes,

¹² For a discussion of *aither* as ‘air’, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 15–35.

¹³ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.1–10 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 177–80), although I do not accept all of the emendations in his edition; Eng. trans. mine.

¹⁴ Before φέρουσα Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 177: *addidi* <ή>.

ἀπολύουσα τὰ ἐρχόμενα,
 κουρφίζουσα τὰ γέμοντα,
 καθαιρούσα τὰ αὐξοντα,
 πιστή¹⁵ οικονόμος τοῦ ἵχνους τῶν ἀέρων,
 ἢ τὰ ἀνερευγόμενα ἀπὸ τῶν δώδεκα
 ὀφθαλμῶν¹⁶ <τῆς> ἐντολῆς ἀπολαύουσα,
 σφραγίδα¹⁷ δηλοῦσα πρὸς τὴν μετ' αὐτῆς
 οἰκονομοῦσαν
 τῶν ἐπιφερομένων ἀοράτων ὑδάτων
 δύναμιν, ἐκλήθη Θάλασσα.

5.14.2 ταύτην τὴν δύναμιν ἢ ἀγνωσία
 ἐκάλεσε Κρόνον, δεσμοῖς φρουρούμενον,
 ἐπεὶ ἔσφιγγε τὸ σύμπλεγμα τοῦ πυκνοῦ
 καὶ ὀμιχλώδους,
 ἀδήλου¹⁸ σκοτεινοῦ Ταρτάρου.
 ταύτης ἐγένοντο κατ' εἰκόνα Κηφεύς,
 Προμηθεύς, Ἰαπετός.

5.14.3 δύναμις πεπιστευμένη τὴν
 Θάλασσαν, ἀρσενόθηλυς·
 ἢ τὸν ἀνατρέχοντα συριγμὸν ἀπὸ τῶν
 δώδεκα στομάτων τοῖς δώδεκα αὐλίσκοις
 ἀρμόζουσα·
 δ<ι>αχύνει λεπτό<ν>ουσα καὶ καθαιρεῖ
 τὴν κατέχουσαν λάβρον¹⁹ ἀναφορὰν·

καὶ σφραγίζει ἀτραπῶν²⁰ ὁδὸς αὐτῆς,
 πρὸς τὸ μὴ πολεμῆσαι ἢ ἐναλλάξει τό²¹ μὴ
 δι²² αὐτῆς·

releasing what is to come,
 reducing what is full,
 purging what grows large,
 a fluid overseer of the trail of mists,
 losing what is spewing up from the twelve
 eyes of the law,
 putting a seal on the power with him,
 regulating
 the unseen waters hovering above, called
 Thalassa.

The ignorant call this Power “Kronos,”
 guarded with chains,
 since he bound together tightly what is
 interwoven of the dense and steamy,
 the dim dark Tartarus.
 In the image of this Power were born
 Cēpheus, Prometheus, (and) Iapetus.

The Power committed to Thalassa is
 male-female.

The whistling rising upward from the
 twelve mouths in the twelve small pipes
 is harmoniously tuned.

(The Power of Thalassa) disperses and
 purges the violent return by weakening
 and restraining [it].

And it seals its paths from a straight route,
 lest hostility form against (the straight
 route) or not divert (the route) through
 Thalassa.

¹⁵ Before πιστή Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178: *addidi* <ή>.

¹⁶ Cruice ὀφθαλμῶν = πηγῶν based on the reference to Exod 15:27 and Num 33:9 where twelve fountains פְּיָ of Elim appear. The Hebrew פְּיָ can mean both “eye” and “fountain.” There may have been a translation error from Hebrew to Greek when ὀφθαλμῶν was chosen instead of πηγῶν. See: Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178.

¹⁷ Before σφραγίδα Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178: *addidi* <ή>.

¹⁸ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178: *addidi* <καί>.

¹⁹ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178: *supplevi* <ὄμβρον>.

²⁰ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178 reads: <σ>ατραπῶν. But this correction does not fit the context which is describing the power that Thalassa has to dispense the water streaming up from the underworld.

²¹ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178 reads: τό<πους>. P: τὸ.

²² Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178 *supplevi* <ασημαινούσης>.

θυγάτηρ Τυφωνική, πιστή φύλαξ ὑδάτων
παντοίων·
ὄνομα αὐτῇ Χορζάρ.
ταύτην ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσε Ποσειδῶνα·
οὗ κατ'εἰ(κ)όνα ἐγένοντο Γλαύκος,
Μελικέρτης, Ἴη,²⁴ Νεβρών.

The Typhonic daughter is faithful guard
of all sorts of waters.
Her name is Chorzar.
The ignorant call²³ Chorzar “Poseidōn,”
in whose image were born Glaucus,
Melicertes, Iē, and Nebrō.

5.14.4 Περιεσφαιρωκῶς τὴν
δωδεκαγώνιον πυραμίδα, πύλην εἰς <τὴν>
πυραμίδα σκοτιζῶν ποικίλαις χροαῖς καὶ
ἀπαρτίζων πᾶσαν [τὴν] νυκτόχρουν.
Τοῦτον ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσε Κόρην.
οὗ λειτουργοὶ πέντε· πρῶτος Οὐ, δεῦτερος
Ἄοαι, τρίτος Οὐῶ, τέταρτος Οὐῶάβ,
πέμπτος·
ἄλλοι²⁵ πιστοὶ οἰκονόμοι αὐτοῦ τῆς
τοπαρχίας, ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς οἱ
ἀναπαύομενοι ἐν τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ αὐτῶν.
τούτους ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσε τοὺς
πλάνητας ἀστέρας,
ἐφ' ὧν ἢ φθαρτὴ γένεσις ἠώρηται.

Surrounded spherically with the twelve-
angled pyramid, darkening the gate in
the pyramid with many different colors,
fitting all in the color of night.
This one the ignorant call “Korē,”
whose officers are five. The first is OU,
the second is AOAI, the third is OUŌ,
the fourth is OUŌAB, the fifth is [?].
Other faithful ministers of his domain—
of day and night—are resting in his
authority.
The ignorant call these “the wandering
stars,”
upon which the perishable created order
is suspended.

5.14.5 Ἄερος ἀνατολῆς²⁶ οἰκονόμοι
Καρφακασημεοχειρ <καὶ> Ἐκκαββάκαρα·
τούτους ἐκάλεσεν ἢ ἀγνωσία Κουρήτας.
ἄρχων ἀνέμων τρίτος Ἀριήλ·
οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Αἴολος,
Β<ρ>ιάρη<ο>ς.
καὶ ἄρχων δωδεκαώρου νυκτερινῆς
Σοκλάν.

The ministers of the rising air are
Carpacasemeocheir and Eccabbacara.
The ignorant call these “Curetēs.”
Of the archons of the winds, the third is
Ariēl,
in whose image were born Aeolus (and)
Briarēs.
And ruling the twelve night hours is
Soklas,

5.14.6 ὃν ἐκάλεσεν ἢ ἀγνωσία Ὅσιριν.
τούτου κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Ἄδμητος,
Μήδεια, Ἑλλην, Αἴθουσα.
ἄρχων ἡμερινῆς δωδεκαώρου Εὐνῶ·

whom the ignorant call “Osiris.”
In the image of Soklas were born Adme-
tus, Medea, Helen, (and) Aethusa.
Ruling the twelve daytime hours is Eunō.

²³ Literally: “Ignorance calls”; and so throughout passage.

²⁴ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178: coniec Ἰν<ῶ>. P: ἴη. Because Inō is mentioned again in 5.14.9 as created in the image of the Fates, something odd is going on. Should we emend the text? We may be dealing with two references to the same entity, one as the deity and the other as the mortal woman. In this case, Iē would be the secret name of Inō the sea deity, while the Inō mentioned in 5.14.9 may be her mortal fate as the wife of Athamas.

²⁵ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 179 considers ἄλλοι a corruption, so adds in its place: <οἱ>.

²⁶ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 179: *supplevi* <καὶ ἄερος δύσεως>.

Οὗτος οἰκονόμος τῆς πρωτοκαμάρου
ἀνατολ<ικ>ῆς καὶ αἰθερίου·
δ<ν> ἐκάλεσεν ἢ ἀγνωσία Ἴσιν.
τούτου σημεῖον τὸ Κυνὸς ἄστρον·

5.14.7 οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο
Πτολεμαῖς ὁ Ἄρσινόης, Διδύμη,
Κλεοπάτρα, Ὀλυμπιάς.
δύναμις θεοῦ δεξιᾶ· ἢν ἐκάλεσεν ἢ
ἀγνωσία Ῥέαν·
οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Ἄττις, Μυγδών,
Οἰνώνη.
δύναμις²⁸ ἀριστερά· τροφῆς ἐξουσιάζει.

ἢν ἐκάλεσεν ἢ ἀγνωσία Δήμητραν,
ὄνομα²⁹ αὐτῆ Βένα.
τούτου κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Κελεὺς,
Τριπτόλεμος, Μίσυρ, Πραξι<θέ>α.

5.14.8 δύναμις³⁰ δεξι(ά)· ἐξουσιάζει
καρπῶν.
τούτου ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσε Μῆνα·

οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Βουμέγας,
Ὀστανῆς, Ἑρμῆς Τρισμέγιστος,
Κουρίτη(ς), Πετόσιρις, Ζωδάριον,
Βηρωσός, Ἀστράμψουχος, Ζωρόαστρις·
δύναμις πυρὸς εὐώνυμος·
τούτου ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσεν Ἡφαίστον·

οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Ἐριχθόνιος,
Ἀχιλλεύς, Καπανεύς, Φλεγύας,
Μελέαγρος, Παδ<ο>υήλ, Ἐγκέλαδος,
Ῥαφαήλ, Σουριήλ, Ὀμφάλη.

5.14.9 δυνάνις τρεῖς μέσαι,³¹ τοῦ
ἀέρος κρεμάμεναι·
αἰτίαι γενέσεως.
ταύτας ἢ ἀγνωσία ἐκάλεσε Μοίρας·

Eunō is the minister of the rising of the
primal and aitherial vault.²⁷
The ignorant call Eunō “Isis.”
The sign of Eunō is the Dog Star,

in whose image were born Ptolemy son
of Arsinoe, Didymā, Cleopatra, (and)
Olympias.
A Power of God on the right, the ignorant
call Rhea,
in whose image were born Attis, Mygdōn,
(and) Oenōne.
A Power on the left has authority over
sustenance.

The ignorant call the Power “Demeter;” a
name for her is Bena.
In the image of Bena were born Celeus,
Triptolemus, Misyr, and Praxithea.

A Power on the right has authority over
the fruits.
The ignorant call the Power on the right
“Mēna,”

in whose image were born Boumegas,
Ostanēs, Hermēs Trismegistos, Kouri-
tes, Petosiris, Zodarium, Bērosus, As-
trampsuchus, (and) Zoroaster.

A Power on the left is over fire.
The ignorant call the Power “He-
phaistos.”

in whose image were born Erichthonius,
Achilles, Capaneus, Phlegyas, Meleager,
Padouēl, Egceladus, Raphaēl, Suriēl, (and)
Omphalē.

There are three Powers in the middle,
suspended by air,
responsible for generating (people).
The ignorant call these Powers “Fates,”

²⁷ For a discussion of this use of *aither*, see Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, 15–35.

²⁸ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 180: *supplevi* <θεοῦ>.

²⁹ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 180: *addidi* <δ'>.

³⁰ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 180: *addidi* <πυρὸς>. But this Power over the fruits is not the same Power mentioned in line 45, which is the Power over fire.

³¹ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 180: *addidi* <ἐκ>.

ὦν κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο οἶκος Πριάμου,
οἶκος Λαΐου, Ἴνώ, Αὐτονόη, Ἀγαυή,
Ἀθάμας, Πρόκνη, Δαναΐδες, Πελιάδες.

in whose image were born the house of
Priam, the house of Laius, Ino, Autoñoē,
Agayē, Athamas, Procnē, Danaides, (and)
Peliades.

5.14.10 δύναμις ἀρσενόθηλυς ἀεὶ
νηπιάζουσα, ἀγήτατος·
αἰτία κάλλους, ἡδονῆς, ἀκμῆς, ὀρέξεως,
ἐπιθυμίας.

There is a male-female power always
young, never growing old,
responsible for beauty, pleasure, matura-
tion, appetite, (and) desire,
whom the ignorant call “Eros,”

ὃν ἐκάλεσεν ἡ ἀγνώστια Ἔρωτα·
οὗ κατ' εἰκόνα ἐγένοντο Πάρις, Νάρκισσος,
Γανυμήδης, Ἐνδυμίων, Τιθωνός, Ἰκάριος,
Λήδα, Ἀμυμώνη, Θέτις, Ἑσπερίδες,
Ἰασων,³² Λέανδρος, Ἡρώ.
οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ προάστειοι ἕως αἰθέρος.”
οὕτω γὰρ καὶ ἐπιγράφει τὸ βιβλίον.

in whose image were born Paris, Nar-
cissus, Ganymēdē, Endymion, Tithomus,
Icarius, Lēda, Amymonē, Thetis, (the)
Hesperides, Jasōn, Leander, (and) Hērō.
These are the suburbs up to the *aither*.³³
For thus it is that he inscribes the book.

Out of the Bowels of Hell

Hippolytus' excerpt is from the Peratic book, *The Suburbs up to the Aither*, which describes the suburbs and names its confederation of rebel rulers. The Peratics were of the opinion that there was a primordial insurrection of Aeons who became apostates. Their revolt turned good powers into evil ones, creating a confederation of rulers over the *Toparchai* or “places” (= celestial realms) and the *Proasteioi* or “suburbs” (= sublunar realms).³⁴ Here is an example of the archaic myth about God struggling with his angels and throwing the rebels into hell.³⁵ But this myth has penetrated the Gnostic cosmology in a striking way: the rulers of the cosmos in the suburban *and* the celestial realms are identified with fallen angels or demons. Why? Likely this is the result of their cosmology. Since the Supreme God resides outside the traditional cosmos, the rebellious aeons fall down into the cosmic sphere from the transc cosmic realm. But significantly, penetration of the heavens with demons may also be the

³² Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 180: emends Ἰασ<ι>ων. P: Ἰασων.

³³ For a discussion of this use of *aither*, see Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*.

³⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.13.12 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 177).

³⁵ Cf. Ezek 28:11–19; Isa 14:4–17; 1 Tim 3:6; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 12:7–9; 1 *En.* 6:6; 2 *En.* 29:4, 31:4; *L.A.E.* 12. For a discussion of the myth, see Christoph Auffarth and Loren Stuckenbruck, *The Fall of the Angels* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *The Myth of the Fallen Angels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

consequence of a connection that was made by the ancients between the myth of the fallen angels and the myth of the succession of the violent Titans.³⁶ Thus it is not surprising that the Titans are prominent among the Peratics' chief archons: Kronos, Iapetos, Rhea.

The naming process appears to have been a central feature of the book, since the excerpt provides, in most cases, the ruler's domain and both the common name for the ruler and the ruler's "real" or secret name. In the cases where the "secret" name is not recorded in this excerpt, I imagine it would have been recited and transmitted as oral hierophantic teaching so that the entire mystery was not revealed in a manner that the uninitiated (like Hippolytus!) might discover intact. Likewise, Clement of Alexandria says that the Christian mysteries are delivered through speech and, even though he is committing much of his knowledge to writing in his book, he purposely omits the "unspeakable (τὰ ἀπόρρητα)" forbidden mysteries, fearing that they might fall into the wrong hands.³⁷ It appears that some mystery cult leaders even used books written in arcane letters so that they could only be read and interpreted by the priests on behalf of the initiates. This practice also safeguarded the cult secrets from the eyes of the uninitiated.³⁸

The Peratic book also records examples of those who were created in the image of specific rulers: hero(in)es, gods and/or demons, and famous people associated with the fields of magic and astrology. This is an uncommon feature since Gnostic cosmogonies usually involve creation of lower beings according to the model of the upper luminous aeons, rather than according to the image of the fallen archontic figures.³⁹ Human beings generally are created in the image of Anthropos revealed to the archons from the other world.⁴⁰ Basilides' system, according to Irenaeus, has some similarity with the Peratic since each successive heaven is created and populated by angels according to the image of the previous heaven and its

³⁶ Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSRC 8; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 73–99.

³⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.1.14.2 (Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus. Stromata Buch I–IV* [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960], 10).

³⁸ Cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.22 (William Adlington and Stephen Gaselee, eds., *Apuleius: The Golden Ass*. [New York: Putnam's Sons, 1915], 576–79).

³⁹ Cf. *Apoc. Jn.* NHC II 12,34–13,1 (Michael Waldstein and Fredrick Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* [NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995], 76–77).

⁴⁰ Cf. *Apoc. Jn.* NHC II 14,14–15,14 (ibid., 84–87); Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.6 (Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, eds., *Irénée de Lyon : Contre les Hérésies. Livre 1* [Vol. 2; SC 264; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1979], 370–73).

inhabitants.⁴¹ Many of the Peratic examples on the image lists represent characters whose myths have definitive connections with the underworld and initiatory contexts, including those with psychopompic duties like Hermes. Many of the hero(in)es had transcended the distinctions between mortal and immortal and were considered “the powerful dead” who might be persuaded to intervene on the petitioner’s behalf.⁴² There seems to be some affinity between the named god and those created in his/her image, since those associated with Eros include the beautiful Paris and the self-obsessed Narcissus. At this time, I have not been able to further penetrate the significance of these image lists, although it appears to me that the myth of Jason and the Argonauts was significant to the Peratics since leading characters in this epic are predominant.

Many ancient people of the Mediterranean believed that the recitation of divine names was powerful “magic,” serving to persuade, appease, or overcome the named deity. The inscription on an ancient protective amulet published in 1950 by Bonner sums up the concept succinctly, stating that knowledge of the names and images of the deity gave the owner access to the deity’s power: “Holy names and symbols and terrifying characters protect from dangers the man or woman who carries your dreadful divine powers.”⁴³

Often these secret names are “barbarian” names from priestly traditions in contrast to the commonly known name or translation of the name as we see, for instance, in the Greek magical papyri, the gem collections, lamellae and magical bowls. The famous theurgist in late antiquity, Iamblichus says that the theurgical recitation of “names without meaning” does not mean that they are without signification. They might be unknowable to us, “yet to the Gods all of them are significant, but not in a manner that is effable, nor in a manner that is significant or indicative to men through their imaginations.”⁴⁴ The names were considered “sacred,” mystical words whose sound was “not concerned with ordinary, created things,

⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.24.3 (ibid., 324–27).

⁴² The phrase, “the powerful dead,” is coined by Jennifer Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults: A Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 196–207.

⁴³ Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1950), 215.

⁴⁴ Iamblichus *Myst.* 254.15–16; 254.18–255.3 (Thomas Taylor, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians and Life of Pythagoras* [TTS 17; repr., Somerset: Prometheus Trust, 1999], 133; with minor alteration in translation). For a more thorough discussion, see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 179–88.

but with a certain mysterious divine science that is related to the Creator of the universe,” states Origen.⁴⁵ Sallustius calls them “the letters of the unspeakable powers on high (οἱ χαρακτῆρες τὰς ἀρρήτους ἄνω δυνάμεις).”⁴⁶ Most simply put is the command found in the *Chaldean Oracles*: “Do not change the *nomina barbara* (ὀνόματα βάρβαρα μήποτ’ ἀλλάξης); that is, the names handed down by the gods to each race have ineffable power in the initiation rites.”⁴⁷

Thus *Asclepius* warns that the Egyptian mysteries should not be translated into Greek:

The very quality of the speech and the <sound> of Egyptians words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of... Keep the discourse uninterpreted, lest mysteries of such greatness come to the Greeks, lest the extravagant, flaccid and (as it were) dandified Greek idiom extinguish something stately and concise, the energetic idiom of <Egyptian> usage. For the Greeks have empty speeches... that are energetic only in what they demonstrate, and this is the philosophy of the Greeks, an inane foolosophy of speeches. *We, by contrast, use not speeches, but sounds that are full of action.*⁴⁸

Although this passage is clearly pro-Egyptian, it typifies the type of discourse the ancients were having about “sacred” language and the need for its preservation. It was believed by some that translation could empty the name of its “magical” power. The book of *The Suburbs up to the Aither* appears to be in sympathy with this world view, written to provide its audience with the Peratic versions of the “magical” names of the deities who rule over certain regions of the sublunar realm.

Kronos

In the hymn, the initiate learns that Kronos the Titan King bound with chains in Tartarus is the destructive power of chaos. Although restrained in chains, he remains the terrifying power that quakes the earth, the

⁴⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.24 (Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], 24).

⁴⁶ Arthur Darby Nock, *Sallustius: Concerning the Gods and the Universe* (1926; repr., Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966), 28; H. S. Vernsel, “The Poetics of the Magical Charm: An Essay in the Power of Words,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 105–58.

⁴⁷ *Chaldean Oracles* 150 (Ruth Majercik, ed., *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary* [SGRR 5; Leiden: Brill, 1989], 107).

⁴⁸ *Corp. Herm.* XVI, 2 (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], 58). Italic mine.

churning power of the waters of deep Tartarus that swell and feed the ocean above. This is the mighty power that the soul must face and overcome upon its journey through the underworld. Thus the newly awakened initiate says in the liturgy, “Now I begin to struggle with the Power that has sprung from chaos . . .”⁴⁹ The secret name of Kronos is not provided in writing, although it is stated that the famous Prometheus, Cēpheus, and Iapetus were produced in Kronos’ image.

What is being described in this portion of the hymn is the ancient geography of the underworld made famous by Plato in his *Phaedo*, where he describes a vast boundless chasm filled with water that was located at the deepest depths of the dark and misty Tartarus. All rivers flow out of and into this bottomless chasm and all vapors and mists arise from its caverns.⁵⁰ The water is turbulent and muddy, flowing off in a circle into the greatest and outermost river, Oceanus, which surrounds the earth.⁵¹ The Peratics connect this vast ocean surrounding the suburbs with the Red Sea in scripture and Kronos with the power of its violent destructive waters.⁵²

Later in Hippolytus’ description of the Peratics, we additionally discover that Kronos is the demiurge, the cause of mortal generation. Thus, he is identified by the Peratics as the god who interferes in the fate of the person as that person is brought into being.⁵³ As lord, the planets are under his dominion (ἐν τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ), faithful managers (πιστοὶ οἰκονόμοι) within his toparchy or celestial domain (αὐτοῦ τῆς τοπαρχίας).⁵⁴ We also discover that the “lord over all generation” is positioned at the center (τὸ κέντρον) of the universe.⁵⁵ This is a specific astrological reference to one of the cardinal points that mark the coordinates on the path of the rotating ecliptic. The horoscope is the center that marks the rising of the Zodiac on the eastern horizon. This is called the ascendant. The mid-heaven point is the center where the signs reach their zenith or highest elevation. The descendant or the “setting” of the Zodiac is where it crosses the western horizon. The anti-meridian is where the signs reach their lowest point underneath the earth.

⁴⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.1 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 177–78). Eng. trans. mine.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Phaedo* 111e–112b (Duke et al., *Platonis Opera*, 176–77); Plutarch, *De sera* 566a–b. For a discussion of this geography, see Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, 112–48.

⁵¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 113a–c (Duke et al., *Platonis Opera*, 178–79).

⁵² Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.2–6 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 182–83).

⁵³ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.3 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 182).

⁵⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.5 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 179).

⁵⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.15.4 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 181).

Kronos occupies one of these points, but which one? Hippolytus writes:

Since the astrologers know the ascendant and the midheaven and the descendant and the anti-meridian, and they know that these stars have different motions at different times through the perpetual revolution of the entire universe, but there are different declensions from the cardinal point and different ascensions (from the cardinal point), they allegorize the system of the astrologers presenting the cardinal point with “god” and “monad” and “lord over all generation,” and the declination is left, and the ascension is right. Therefore, when anyone reading their writings finds mention of a power which they call “right” or “left,” refer to the cardinal point and (then) the declination and the ascension, and he will clearly observe that their entire system is an astrological doctrine.⁵⁶

I understand Hippolytus to mean that the Peratic allegory identified Kronos with the midheaven cardinal point, putting the declination on his left and the ascendant on his right (Figure 1). This positioning of the “lord over all generation” makes perfect sense when it is realized that the philosophers Numenius and Cronius identified the gate for the descent and incarnation of the soul with Cancer, the summer tropic, the point on the ecliptic where the sun reaches midheaven.⁵⁷ Furthermore the tropics were believed to be so influential that, according to astrologers, they turned the wheel of fate, just as we see Kronos doing in the Peratic system.⁵⁸

Thalassa

Thalassa is identified as a male-female power who disperses and weakens the violent flow of water surging up from the underworld. “Poseidon” is Thalassa’s common name.⁵⁹ The initiate is taught the secret magical name: Chorzar. The sea deities Glaucus, Melicertes, and Ië, are produced in Poseidon’s image, along with Nebrō, a demonic archon found in other Gnostic sources.⁶⁰ In these Gnostic sources, Nebrō is known to be the

⁵⁶ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.15.4–5 (ibid.). Eng. trans. mine.

⁵⁷ Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 23 (Robert Lamberton, ed., *Porphyry: On the Cave of the Nymphs* [Barrytown: Station Hill, 1983], 33). Cf. Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.1–3 (William Harris Stahl, *Macrobius: Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1952], 133–34).

⁵⁸ Manilius, *Astron.* 3.676–79. Cf. Katharina Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

⁵⁹ For a recent treatment of Poseidon, see Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults*, 57–68.

⁶⁰ On Ië, see note 23.

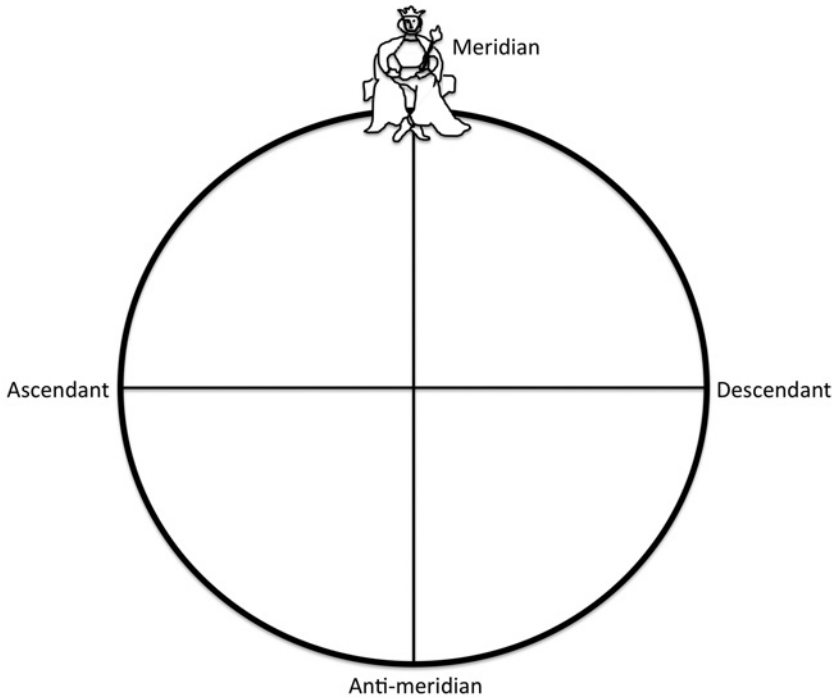


Figure 1 Graffitto from the catacomb of San Sebastiano, Rome.
Redrawn After Dölger, *Ichthys*, 4:220.2.

demiurge's assistant, as he is here.⁶¹ There also is a tradition that his other name is Ialdabaoth.⁶²

The Peratics understood the archon Nebrō to be a corrupt imitation of the biblical Nimrod, whose name in the Septuagint is Νεβρωδ.⁶³ According to Hippolytus' references to the Peratics, they were exegeting at least some scriptures transgressively.⁶⁴ For instance, they suggest that Cain was marked with a "sign (σημείον)" that represented Eve's word of wisdom so

⁶¹ *Gos. Eg.* NHC III 57,16–20; IV 69,1–4 (Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse, eds., *Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,2 The Gospel of the Egyptians* [NHS 4; Leiden: Brill, 1975], 120–23).

⁶² *Gos. Jud.* 51,13–15 (Rodolphe Kasser et al., *The Gospel of Judas Together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos: Critical Edition* [Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2007], 221).

⁶³ LXX: Gen 10:8–9; 1 Chr 1:10; Mic 5:5. On Nimrod, see Karel van der Toorn and Pieter Willem van der Horst, "Nimrod Before and After the Bible," *HTR* 83 (1990): 1–29.

⁶⁴ On Peratic exegesis, see Magris, "L'esegesi della setta oftica dei Perati."

he would not be killed by the ruler of this world, Kronos.⁶⁵ Because the lord of this world delights in blood, Abel's sacrifice was accepted by him while Cain's was not.⁶⁶ Accordingly the Peratics understood that Abel was in league with Kronos, while Cain rebelled against him and needed a magical sign to be placed on his body as protection against Kronos. It appears that this sign was conceived by the Peratics to be a diagram of Draco drawn on Cain.⁶⁷ Were the initiates similarly marked in order to be protected from Kronos as they journeyed over the Red Sea? We do know that branding was performed on initiates in other mystery cults, so this mention of marking Cain's body may allude to a Peratic initiation practice.⁶⁸

Likewise, Nimrod, a figure traditionally portrayed as an evil tyrant and associated with the building and ownership of the Tower of Babel, was interpreted transgressively as a scriptural reference to Jesus who was "like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord (ὡς Νεβρωδ ἰγίγας κυνηγὸς ἔναντι κυρίου)."⁶⁹ Based on this passage, the Peratics concluded that Jesus was like Nimrod, *opposing* the Lord of this world. The Peratics believed that there were many archons who tried to imitate Jesus, and Nebrō represented one of them. Nebrō was perceived by the Peratics to be the fake Nimrod who was *part of* Kronos' army. The Peratics were able to develop this multivalent reading of Genesis 10:9, applying it one way to Jesus and another to Nebrō, because the preposition ἔναντιόν can mean both "over against" in a hostile sense, and, more neutrally, "in the presence of" or "before." Centuries after the Peratics, this exegetical ambiguity is still in play according to Augustine who complains about it:

Some interpreters have misunderstood this phrase, being deceived by an ambiguity in the Greek and consequently translating it as "before the Lord" instead of "against the Lord." It is true that the Greek ἔναντιόν means "before" as well as "against" . . . It is in the latter sense that we must take it in the description of Nimrod; that giant was "a hunter against the Lord." For the word "hunter" can only suggest a deceiver, oppressor and destroyer

⁶⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.9 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183). Cf. Gen 4:1–16.

⁶⁶ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.8–9 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183).

⁶⁷ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.9 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183).

⁶⁸ Fritz Graf, "Mysteries," in *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (ed. Herbert Cancik et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9:433–44 at 440.

⁶⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.11 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 184). Cf. Gen 10:9; C. Uehlinger, "Nimrod," *DDD* 627–30.

of earth-born creatures. Thus he, with his subject peoples, began to erect a tower against the Lord, which symbolizes his impious pride.⁷⁰

Korē

Korē, Queen of the Underworld, is said to be seated at a gate (πύλη) in the Zodiacal “pyramid.”⁷¹ The *Book of the Suburbs* notes that Korē and her five assistants darken and guard the Zodiacal gate.⁷² They are positioned within the cosmic structure in such a way that they alone control access between the sublunar and supralunar realms, certainly the upward movement of the soul, but perhaps also the downward. Her five assistants appear to be the five rulers of the abyss mentioned in other Gnostic sources.⁷³ The first four of their magical names are preserved by Hippolytus: OU, AOAI, OUŌ, OUŌAB. The fifth magical name does not survive in the manuscript tradition. In *Pistis Sophia*, the five abyss demons are named Paraplex, Ariuth, Hekate, Parhedron, and Jachthnabas.⁷⁴ The name “Korē” itself is interesting, since it is preferred by the ancients who dreaded to vocalize the name Persephone, so terrifying was she.⁷⁵ So we are not supplied with Korē’s secret name in the Peratic excerpt. Like Kronos’ name, I imagine that it was believed to be part of the tradition that was so secret it could only be disclosed to the initiates orally.

Curetēs

In the *Book of the Suburbs*, we learn that the planets are Kronos’ servants and they provide the foundation for the suspension of the created order. The book does not list out the common magical names of the planets,

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Civ. D.* 16.4, as translated by van der Toorn and van der Horst, “Nimrod Before and After the Bible,” 19.

⁷¹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.4 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178–79); Eng. trans. mine. For a recent treatment of Korē, see Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults*, 69–85.

⁷² Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.4 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178–79); Eng. trans. mine.

⁷³ *Apoc. John* NHC II 1,9 (Waldstein and Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John*, 68–69); *Pist. Soph.* 4.139–140 (Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, eds., *Pistis Sophia* [NHS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1978], 718–33).

⁷⁴ *Pist. Soph.* 4.139–140 (ibid.).

⁷⁵ Susan G. Cole, “Landscapes of Dionysus and Elysian Fields,” in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; New York: Routledge, 2003), 193–217 at 195–96. This appears to be a soft taboo: Albert Henrichs, “Namenlosigkeit und Euphemismus: Zur Ambivalenz der chthonischen Mächte im attischen Drama,” in *Fragmenta dramatica* (ed. Heinz Hofmann and Annette Harder; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 161–201.

however, probably because *The Book of the Suburbs* was focused on information about the sublunar realm, not the celestial spheres. But it did elaborate the secret magical names of the ministers of the rising air, the winds—Carphacaseocheir, Eccabbacara and Ariel—whom the uninitiated identify with the Curetēs, the dancers who attend Rhea. Eccabbacara may derive from 1 Chr 9:15 where the name “Bakbakkar” is found.⁷⁶ In other Gnostic traditions, Ariel is the name that the initiated (τελειος) use for the Ialdabaoth archon, a name derived from his leonine shape, since “Ariel” literally means “lion of God” in Hebrew.⁷⁷ We possess the cast of an antique (in my opinion, initiatory) gem with this very information inscribed.⁷⁸

Osiris

According to the Peratics, Soklas is the secret name of the one the ignorant call “Osiris,” the god who controls the twelve hours of the night. This secret name is likely a variant of Saklas, an archon found in other Gnostic narratives. In these other sources, Saklas is known as one of the demiurge’s assistants as well as another name for the demiurge himself.⁷⁹ Here, however, Saklas (from Aramaic: “Fool”) appears to be welded with Sokaris/Seker, the god of the Memphite funeral cult who was the manifestation of Osiris resurrected.⁸⁰ Seker is the form of the night sun or the dead sun god. He represents the power of darkness, the night. In the period of the Old Kingdom, he personified the act of the separation of the soul from the body at death. By the beginning of the New Kingdom, Sokaris-Osiris then was welded with Ptah, who was not only the god of craftspeople

⁷⁶ Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 179.

⁷⁷ *Orig. World* NHC II 100,25–26 (Bentley Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7 together with XIII.2*, *BRIT. LIB. OR.* 4926(1), and *P. OXY.* 1, 654, 655 [Vol. 2; NHS 21; Leiden: Brill, 1989], 34).

⁷⁸ Campbell Bonner, “An Amulet of the Ophite Gnostics” in *Commemorative Studies in Honor of Theodore Leslie Shear* (Hesperia Supplements 8; Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1949), 43–46 and 444.

⁷⁹ NHC III 57,16 and 58,24; V 74,3. Identified with Ialdabaoth: NHC II 11,17; II 95,7; XIII 39,27; Epiph., *Pan.* 26.10.1. See also *Gospel of Judas* where Saklas is a creature separate from the demiurge, but is confused with the demiurge later in the narrative (April D. DeConick, “Apostles as Archons: The Fight for Authority and the Emergence of Gnosticism in the Tchacos Codex and Other Early Christian Literature,” in *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex held at Rice University, Houston Texas, March 13–16, 2008* [ed. April D. DeConick; NHMS 71; Leiden: Brill, 2009], 265–67).

⁸⁰ Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (repr., Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1986), 51, 274.

but also a god who fashioned afterlife bodies. The underworld area that Sokaris/Seker controlled deep within the earth is a district known as the Sixth Aat. It was depicted as a frightful place, pitch black, filled with huge snakes and the souls of those who have been consumed by the fire that came from the mouth of the goddess Ammit.⁸¹ The Peratic book records the names of those who were born in Soklas' image: Admetus, Medea, Helen and Aethusa.

Isis

As the book continues in formulaic fashion, we learn the secret name of the ruler of the hours of the day, Euno, who is Isis, Osiris' wife. The book lists the names of those heroes and heroines born in her image: Ptolemaeus son of Arsinoe, Didyma, Cleopatra, and Olympias. Her secret name appears to be a variant of Juno, the daughter of Saturn and the sister wife of Jupiter. It is one of the many names that Isis was known by in antiquity.⁸² The *Book of the Suburbs*, as Egyptian lore in general, identifies her with the Dog Star, Sirius (*Sopdet/Sothis*), whose heliacal rising after a seventy-day absence signaled the start of the annual calendar for the Egyptians.⁸³ This occurred immediately prior to the rising of the Nile floodwaters.⁸⁴

In the Peratic book, she is associated with the primal vaulting of the *aither*, when the air rose to form the heavens and separated from the earth. This association is mentioned in another ancient source where she claims to be the one who "divided the earth from the heaven."⁸⁵ Past editors of this passage did not recognize this role and so MacMahon favored translating the passage as a reference to the rising of a star named Protocamarus, a star whose existence I have not been able to verify.⁸⁶ Legge emended the Greek to read πρωτοκαμάρως, so that the translation would read (incorrectly): "He is steward of the rising of the first-blessed and aetherial (goddess) whom ignorance calls Isis."⁸⁷

⁸¹ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (2 vols.; London: Methuen, 1904), 1:216–24, 500–08, 2:138.

⁸² Cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5 (Adlington and Gaselee, *Apuleius*, 546–47).

⁸³ Cf. Cyme Isis aretalogy, as translated in Frederick C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 132.

⁸⁴ Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 1:436.

⁸⁵ Cyme Isis aretalogy, as translated in Grant, *Hellenistic Religions*, 132.

⁸⁶ MacMahon in *ANF* 5:61.

⁸⁷ Francis Legge, ed., *Philosophumena or the Refutation of All Heresies* (2 vols.; London: SPCK, 1921), 1:152.

Right, Left and Middle Powers

The book outlines several powers whose domains are “on the right” or “on the left” of Kronos, including his wife Rhea. The right hand powers are identified by their common names as Rhea and Mēna, although their secret names are not revealed. While Rhea is Kronos’ wife and mother of Zeus, Mēna is a god who has authority over “the fruits.” This may be a reference to Min, the Egyptian god of fertility. Those created in Rhea’s image include Attis, Mygdōn, and Oenōnē. In Mēna’s image were born Boumegas, Ostanēs, Hermēs Trismegistos, Kourites, Petosiris, Zodarium, Bērosus, Astrampsuchus and Zoroaster.

On Kronos’ left are Bena, the authority over “sustenance” whom the uninitiated know as “Demeter,” and Hephaistos the god of fire. Like the secret names for Rhea and Mēna, Hephaistos’ secret name remains undisclosed. However the names of those created in Bena’s image are recorded: Celeus, Triptolemus, Misyr, and Praxithea. Those fashioned after Hephaistos include Erichthonius, Achilles, Capaneus, Phlegyas, Meleager, Padouēl, Egceladus, Raphaēl, Suriēl, and Omphalē.

The *Book of the Suburbs* also includes a reference to three powers “in the middle” that are supported by air. These are known to the uninitiated as the “Fates” and the house of Priam, the house of Laius, Inō, Autoñoē, Agaue, Athamas, Procnē, Danaides, and Peliades were born in their image. Finally we learn about “Erōs” who is a male-female power of virility and maturation, responsible for beauty, pleasure, and desire, in whose image were generated Paris, Narcissus, Ganymēdē, Endymion, Tithomus, Icarus, Lēda, Anymonē, Thetis, the Hesperides, Jasōn, Leander, and Hērō.

The Peratic book was laid out in a formulaic manner, presenting information about the names and locations of the rulers of the hours of day and night, as well as the names of the lords over fertility, sustenance and fire, and the three Fates, the daughters of the primeval night deities, and the three rising winds. Why was all this information needed? Why were the Peratics concerned to write down the common and at least some of the secret magical names of the rulers in the sublunar realm? Because these were the powers encountered by the soul when it left the body at death and the initiate needed to learn this information in order to successfully journey after death through Tartarus and the airy region below the moon. The particular powers charted by the Gnostic author in the *Book of the Suburbs* are those rulers that the soul would meet in the course of its afterlife journey, when it traveled through Hades, entered the course of its purification before rebirth when it was cleansed by the buffeting

winds in the zones of clouds and fire of the sublunar realm. These were the rulers who controlled the fate of the soul, whether it would be taken for punishment into the abyss, or purified and taken to a region in the underworld to live, or released into the celestial realms where it would ascend to a more blessed afterlife until it was returned to another womb for a birth appropriate to its piety, a process of “becoming” ruled over by Kronos.

The excerpt from the Peratic book opens with a haunting hymn featuring Kronos. Like Apuleius’ Lucius who claimed, “I approached the frontier of death, I set foot on the threshold of Persephone, I journeyed through all the elements and came back, I saw at midnight the sun, sparkling in white light, I came close to the gods of the upper and the nether world and adored them from near at hand,” the Peratic initiate appears to have sung this hymn when he “awakened from sleep in the realm of night” and found himself in the bowels of hell.⁸⁸ Thus he cries, “I am the voice of the one who has awakened from sleep in the realm of night. Now I begin to struggle with the Power that has sprung from chaos . . .”⁸⁹

What might have been the practical setting for the Peratic hymn? Hippolytus does not tell us about the details of the Peratic performance of the hymn. However, he is more generous with information about a comparable group, the Naassenes whose initiatory journey into muddy Hades and over Oceanus, led by “Hermes” is described in more detail. Hippolytus reveals that part of the initiation was enacted in a theatre to the song of the leader strumming a lyre and leading the group in the performance of a hymn imbued with secret meaning.⁹⁰ The Peratic hymn may have functioned similarly. If so, it appears to have been part of what I call the “first mystery,” the initiatory journey through the underworld. As such, it would have been a practical “roadmap” meant to guide the soul through Hades, providing in lyric and formulaic format poetic instructions that could be easily memorized and recalled by Peratic initiates. Its song would have assisted the initiates in greeting the demons that they encountered as they were led along the path that passed through the perishable world and traversed over the realm of mortality.

⁸⁸ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.23.6–8 (Adlington and Gaselee, *Apuleius*, 580–81).

⁸⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.1 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 177–78); Eng. trans. mine.

⁹⁰ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.9.7 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 166).

Through the Gate of the Zodiacal Pyramid

Spherically surrounding Korē is “the twelve-angled pyramid.”⁹¹ This reference to the Zodiac as angles of a pyramid is peculiar in our sources. I think that the Peratic Zodiac as a dodecagonal shape, was a subtle development of two ideas placed in tandem, the first attributed to the Pythagorean Philolaus. It was the teaching that the angles of triangles and squares were sacred to specific gods and related to the four divisions of the Zodiac.⁹² The second is a Greek astrological teaching found, for example, in Manilius, that four triangles can be inscribed upon the circle of the Zodiac so that the vertex of each triangle touches a different Zodiac sign.⁹³ The Peratics appear to have envisioned the Zodiac as a dodecagonal shape, whose twelve angles aligned with various signs and rulers.

Further, the “pyramid” configuration may have to do with the alignment of specific sets of angles or “aspects” in astrology, since Hippolytus tells us that the Peratics were particularly concerned about the square and triangular aspects of the signs. They understood the Zodiac signs to appear in the shape of a triangle whenever three signs intervened, and in the shape of a square whenever two signs intervened.⁹⁴ So it may be that the Zodiacal pyramid has to do with the ancient application of astrology where certain alignments of the planets within the twelve signs form trine and quartile aspects. These aspects work to modify the influence of the planets in particular ways.⁹⁵

I find it fascinating that in book four of the *Pistis Sophia*, the five abysses of Hades, each ruled by its own demon, open and release their prisoners only when certain planets are aligned in specific Zodiacal signs. From the information given, Alexandra von Lieven was able to map the correspondences, revealing a trine relationship between Jupiter and Venus (in diagonal aspect, 120 degrees apart) with respect to certain houses.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.14.4 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 178–79); Eng. trans. mine.

⁹² Proclus, *In Euc.* 166.25 (Carl A. Huffman, *Philolaus of Croton: Pythagorean and Presocratic* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 381–82). For a discussion, see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (trans. Edwin J. Minar, Jr.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 349–50.

⁹³ Manilius, *Astron.* 2.270–72.

⁹⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.13.10–11 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 176–77).

⁹⁵ Cf. Roger Beck, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 20–28; Volk, *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*, 82–87.

⁹⁶ Alexandra von Lieven, “Gnosis and Astrology. ‘Book IV’ of the *Pistis Sophia*,” in *Under One Sky: Astronomy and Mathematics in the Ancient Near East* (ed. John M. Steele and Annette Imhausen; AOAT 297; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2002), 223–36 at 234.

Once released from these prisons, the souls then enter the Zodiac before becoming embodied again. Could we be dealing with a similar system in the Peratic literature, where we find an ascension gate into the Zodiacal pyramid, a gate between Hades and the heavens guarded by Korē and her five assistants? Could the reference to a pyramid of twelve angles suggest a certain trine alignment of the planets in houses that opens the gate to release souls? It is a seductive possibility, but not conclusive.

There was quite a bit of speculation in ancient literature about the exact location of the star gates that the soul journeys through when it incarnates (or descends) and when it exits (or ascends). The neo-Pythagorean philosophers Numenius and Cronius identified the ascension gate as Capricorn, while the gate to descend was through Cancer. These were the winter and summer tropics, the “gates of the sun” or the “mouths” or portals for the ascent and descent of the soul.⁹⁷ Macrobius also knows the opinion that the gates are located at the intersection of the Milky Way with the Zodiac, a teaching he suggests is supported by Pythagoras’ teaching. He tries to reconcile this teaching with Numenius’ and says that these points of intersection are at Capricorn and Cancer, when in fact they are at Gemini and Sagittarius.⁹⁸ Macrobius knows yet another teaching. He seems to be aware of a teaching that the portal of incarnation between the heavens and the sublunar realm is the Crater constellation. He states that the place where the incarnation of the soul begins in the Zodiac is where the soul moves from Cancer to Leo and passes through the Bowl or Crater of Bacchus.⁹⁹ According to the wisdom of *Pistis Sophia*, the soul journeying skyward is escorted by a spirit to the “Middle,” the ecliptic in the center of the Zodiac. Each of the twelve signs is a dungeon of punishment with gates that open out on top to the world of light above. If the soul is successful in meeting the defenses of each gate, it is escorted to the Virgin of Light who appears to be on the Sun. From there the soul is transported to the Gate of Life where the Great Sabaoth sits. Once through this gate, the spirit returns to the Treasury of Light.¹⁰⁰

Other opinions focused more on planetary gates than Zodiacal. Porphyry says that some theologians identify the “gates” of souls with the sun and the moon. Ascent takes place through the sun, while descent through

⁹⁷ Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 23 (Lamberton, *Porphyry*, 33). Cf. Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.1–3 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 133–34).

⁹⁸ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.1–5 (ibid.).

⁹⁹ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.8 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 135).

¹⁰⁰ *Pist. Soph.* 3.112 (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 286–91).

the moon.¹⁰¹ The moon appears to have been connected to genesis by the officials of the Eleusinian mysteries. They called the moon who presides over genesis “the bee” and also “the bull” since Taurus is its exaltation.¹⁰² Macrobius appears to know of a descent pattern through the seven planetary spheres as the soul passes through the successive spheres lying beneath the Zodiac: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon. At the moon, the soul is drawn into the material body, its psychical body having been formed through its planetary descent.¹⁰³ Porphyry also mentions this transfer pattern: from the heavens above Saturn (this must be the Zodiacal sphere) to Saturn to Jupiter to Mars, and so forth.¹⁰⁴ Macrobius tells us about the opinion of some philosophers who think that the moon is the demarcation of life and death and that souls falling from there towards earth are incarnated, while those rising from the moon to the heavens are returning to their former celestial life.¹⁰⁵ Macrobius describes another group of philosophers who taught that the Elysian Fields were in the Zodiacal sphere. The descent was planetary, through the four elements in triplicate: Zodiac (= earth) to Saturn (= water) to Jupiter (= air) to Mars (= fire) to the Sun (= fire) to Venus (= air) to Mercury (= water) to Moon (= earth). In this way the soul incarnates by descending from the Fields, passing through the three ranks of elements to the body by a three-fold death, suggesting that the gate to the sublunar realm is the Moon.¹⁰⁶

Firmicus Maternus, however, says that the moon is the planet of escape for the ascending soul. He writes, “Who doubts that by the same law divine Mind is transfused into earthly bodies, that descent is allotted through the Sun, ascent prepared through the Moon?”¹⁰⁷ This appears to be similar to the opinion of the Manichaeans, who identified the Moon and the Sun as stations on the path of descent and ascent for the soul. The path down was the same as the path up, and it involved the moon and the sun. They are called both “ships” and “palaces.” The way up to the Moon was to journey up the Pillar of Glory, the Milky Way, in a ship of light. From there, the soul was conveyed to the Sun which in turn conveyed them to the world of light above. But this is not the entire picture. The Zodiac also appears

¹⁰¹ Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 29 (Lamberton, *Porphyry*, 37).

¹⁰² Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 18 (Lamberton, *Porphyry*, 31–32).

¹⁰³ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.13–16 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 136–37).

¹⁰⁴ Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 16 (Lamberton, *Porphyry*, 30–31).

¹⁰⁵ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.11.6 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 131).

¹⁰⁶ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.11.8–9 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 132); 1.21.33 (180–81).

¹⁰⁷ Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* 1.5.9.

to have been involved since it is related in the *Acts of Archelaus* that Jesus came for the salvation of souls by producing “an instrument with twelve vessels; this is turned by the sphere and draws up the souls of the dying. Then the great light takes them up with its rays, purifies them and passes them on to the moon.” Once the moon has ferried the souls to the east and unloads them, ready to take on more souls that have been brought up to it “by the vessels.”¹⁰⁸

The concept of a gate that opened from the sublunar realm into the celestial spheres is at least as old as Plato. It is clear from his writings that he had begun to accommodate the old underworld myth to the skies and the concept of reincarnation. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato reflects that the pious souls after judgment are carried up into the heavens where they live among the stars. At some point, they are born again in a body worthy of their piety (as are those purged souls whose punishments have been completed in the underworld prisons).¹⁰⁹ This teaching also appears in the *Republic* when Plato describes the underworld seat of judgment as a locale between two chasms in the earth and two in the sky. The pious soul is examined by the Judges and then led “up through the sky” with its judgment in hand. The pious soul is taken to the right, through one of the sky chasms. The wicked one takes the left road and is led downwards through the earth chasm, also carrying the evidence of its judgment with it. If wicked souls or those who had not yet paid the full penalty for their sins try to thwart the system and sneak through the sky chasm, a horrific voice screams from the chasm. These souls are arrested by fierce and fiery beings standing next to the chasm. They are bound, flayed, impaled on thorns and flung into Tartarus.¹¹⁰

Plato goes on to relate that souls who have finished their punishments return to this place of judgment via the second earth chasm. The souls that have been living among the stars descend back to this place of judgment via the second sky chasm when it is time for them to be born again.¹¹¹ All these souls camp there in a meadow for seven days before journeying for four days to the place where they observe a shaft of rainbow light stretched above them straight up through the earth and then through the

¹⁰⁸ Epiph., *Pan.* 66.26.6–8 (Frank Williams, ed., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III (Sects 47–80, De Fide)* [NHMS 34; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 247–48).

¹⁰⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 249 (Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, 253–54).

¹¹⁰ Plato, *Republic* 10.614c–616a (Simon R. Slings, ed., *Platonis Rempublicam* [OCT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 398–401).

¹¹¹ Plato, *Republic* 10.614d–e (Slings, *Platonis Rempublicam*, 398–99).

heavens. They journey another day, up the pillar of light, until they reach a place that Plato calls the “middle.” At the “middle,” the souls see the light stretching all the way around the heavens, forming its circumference. Inside are the whorls or spherical paths of the seven planets that revolve around the earth. The outermost sphere, the band of light encompassing the other spheres, is identified as the eighth sphere where the Zodiac is located. The movement of each sphere emits a constant pitch and together they make up a single scale of eight perfect harmonious notes.¹¹²

What Plato is describing is a journey from the underworld up the *axis mundi*. This was the spindle or pole that ancient astronomers argued ran through the earth up into the heavens. It was the pole that allowed the heavens and the planets to rotate around the earth. The “middle” is a term used by the Greek astronomers to designate a particular path within the Zodiac. It was the center of the Zodiac band, the ecliptic, the path that the sun took as it moved through the signs of the Zodiac. So Plato is describing a journey where the souls are ferried up the pole shaft from the center of the earth and then transported to a location on the circumference of the Zodiac.

At four equal distances around the outer rim of the Zodiac are placed the thrones of the three Fates, Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos, and their “mother” Anagkē who control birth and death and the lot of life. The journeying souls come into the Zodiac at the point where Anagkē’s throne is set up. Upon arrival they journey next to Lachesis’ throne. She tells them that it is time for them to be born again as a mortal. Lots are thrown at their feet and each one picks up what it might, usually selecting a lot that reflects the habits of its former life. Lachesis then gives each soul a guardian spirit which will guide it through life so that the soul’s lot would be fulfilled. Then they go around the Zodiac, first to Clotho who ratifies their chosen lot, then to Atropos who makes the threads of destiny irreversible, and then back to Anagkē.

Here we have the descending soul’s progress through each sign of the Zodiac, and the creation of its nature and fortune through the process. The person’s horoscope is being woven—the person’s birth and death circumstances—as well as the psychical, emotional, social, and physical attributes of the person. These circumstances and attributes are determined by the placement of the planets in relationship to the signs of the Zodiac and each other as the soul moves through them. Each sign is ruled

¹¹² Plato, *Republic* 10.616b–617b (Slings, *Platonis Rempublicam*, 401–03).

by one of the planets, and each is associated with a house that influences particular aspects of the person's life.

After this ride around the Zodiacal circle, the souls descend from the skies to the plain of Lēthē through stifling heat which assists in purifying them. They camp beside the Forgetful River. Because they are thirsty, they drink, and they forget everything. At midnight while they are sleeping, the earth quakes and thunder rumbles, and "like shooting stars" the souls are swept up and away, this way and that, to their births."¹¹³

Plato expands on this teaching in the *Timaeus* where we learn that the original artificer first sowed souls among the stars and gave each his own chariot. The souls were shown the nature of the universe and the laws of destiny. Then he gave them all equitable first births so that none should suffer a disadvantage at his hands. If life went well, and the soul conquered passion, anger and fear, it would return to dwell in its native star and live a blessed existence. If wickedness abounded, the soul would be reborn in a body that reflected the soul's nature.¹¹⁴

According to Plato, Ultimate Reality exists above and beyond the cosmic whirl of the planets and the band of the Zodiac. It lives there without shape or color, intangible and only visible to reason, the pilot of the soul.¹¹⁵ Each revolution of the chariot around the sphere brings with it opportunity for the soul to peer around and take in the realities above and below it. As long as the soul stays focused on the Ultimate Reality above, it will continue to whirl around the highest spheres as the gods do. But as soon as its focus shifts to the realities below, the soul cannot stay aloft in orbit. It falls to earth and is born into a lot that reflects its piety. This primal fall of the soul begins the soul's struggle to return to its lofty place in stellar orbit. Plato states that it takes at least 10,000 years for this return to be achieved. After the first life, the soul receives its judgment and lives for 1,000 years in Hades or heaven. At this time, the soul chooses its second lot and undergoes a second birth commensurate with its piety.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Plato, *Republic* 10.617c–621b (Slings, *Platonis Rempublicam*, 403–08). Vergil (*Aeneid* 6.724–51; Gian Biagio Conte, ed., *P. Vergilius Maro: Aeneis* [BSGRT; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009], 188–90) makes a similar claim: after the cycle of time and scourges of punishment have purged the soul, it makes its way to the river Lethe where, forgetting all that has happened to it, it can "revisit the vault (of heaven) above, and begin with a desire to return to the flesh."

¹¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 41d–e.

¹¹⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 247 (Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, 250–51).

¹¹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus* 248–49 (Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, 251–54).

Plato himself did not originate these ideas, but was likely influenced by Pythagoras' legacy and the Orphics who believed that the soul lives in the *aither* after death, while the body stays on earth.¹¹⁷ Pythagoras was reported to have taught that the sun and the moon were the "Isles of the Blessed" and the sea the "tears of Kronos."¹¹⁸ He is said to have stated that souls are the "people of dreams" assembled in the Milky Way (γαλαξία). Their celestial habitation in the Milky Way is demonstrated because this belt of stars derives its name from "milk" (γάλα), the first nourishment that souls receive as newborns when they have fallen into genesis.¹¹⁹ Consequently, Pythagoras thought that the infernal regions of Hades began just below the Milky Way. Souls that fall away from the Milky Way are falling out of heaven, beginning the process of incarnation.¹²⁰

Wherever the actual gate of ascension was positioned according to the Peratics, we may never know. But we do know that it was an underworld chasm guarded by Korē and opening into the Zodiac. We also know that the Peratics identified Kronos with the power of the destructive waters surging up from the underworld and feeding into Oceanus. Thus they identified Kronos with the Red Sea from scripture. He is the power of the water that encircles the suburbs, a power that cannot be escaped by anyone who belongs to the generative world. He is the water that the soul must cross in order to reach the wilderness where dwell the gods of destruction and the God of salvation. In this scripture-based allegory, the non-Gnostics are identified with the Egyptians who drown in the waters because of their ignorance. But the Gnostics, who have the precise knowledge of the sublunar sphere and the prayers and names will be permitted to cross the Red Sea. They will be permitted to pass through the Zodiacal pyramid gate guarded by Korē and her assistants and enter the celestial spheres beyond the place of birth and death.¹²¹

From the material that Hippolytus preserves, it appears that the first part of the Peratic initiatory journey, the first mystery or stage, involved journeying through the underworld and getting past Korē, and the guards

¹¹⁷ Euripides, *Suppliants* 533–34.

¹¹⁸ For discussion and references, see Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 355.

¹¹⁹ Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs* 28 (Lamberton, *Porphyry*, 36); Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.3 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 134). Cf. Proclus (Wilhelm Kroll, ed., *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii* [2 vols.; repr., Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1965], 2:129; Heraclides Ponticus, cited in Stob. 1.906.

¹²⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.3 (Stahl, *Macrobius*, 134).

¹²¹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.2–5 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 182).

of the five abysses, and over the dangerous waters of Kronos. It appears that invocations of powerful names were used to persuade the demons that the soul should be allowed out of Hades and over the Red Sea by way of the Zodiacal pyramid gate. Success meant the beginning of the journey of the second mystery or stage, the ascent through the celestial spheres.

Over the Desert and through the Serpent's Mouth

The Peratics call the celestial spheres the “desert.” It is the frightening place that the children of Israel found themselves in once they had crossed over the Red Sea. In this desert, the Gnostics meet fiery serpents who try to bite and kill them just as they did the children of Israel.¹²² Who are the fiery serpents? Hippolytus tells us that the Peratics thought these serpents were the stars that would combat them in order to return their souls to the cycle of birth and death.¹²³ They are “the gods of generation (τῶν θεῶν τῆς γενέσεως).”¹²⁴ So here we have the confrontation between the soul and the planetary and Zodiacal rulers (who often were depicted by the Egyptians as serpentine) as it tries to make its way out of the celestial revolutions that are forcing it back into a body.

What saves the soul from this cycle according to the Peratics? Like initiations in some of the ancient mystery cults that culminated in a revelatory vision, the Peratic initiates are told to gaze further above them to the very top of the celestial sphere where they lay their eyes on Draco, the image of the perfect serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness for the redemption of the Israelites. Who is this serpent? It is none other than Christ, the Son of Man who was lifted up according to John 3:14 and who left his likeness shining perpetually in the heavens as Draco.¹²⁵

According to the Peratics, this constellation is the image of the great serpent who started the rotation of the universe and the process of descent or coming-into-being, as well as the process of ascent and return. His face turns about the pole, sometimes oriented upwards toward the

¹²² Num 21:6.

¹²³ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.6 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183).

¹²⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.8 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183).

¹²⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.6–12 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183–184). For a discussion of the Peratic serpent, see Tuomas Rasimus, “The Serpent in Gnostic and Related Texts,” in *Colloque International: L’Évangile selon Thomas et les Textes de Nag Hammadi* Québec, 29–31 mai 2003 (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.E 8; Québec: Les Presses de L’Université Laval, 2007), 417–71 at 439–42.

Father when he, as Christ, receives the descending powers. Then he turns and transfers these transcendent powers downward to matter, where they will function like the striped feed that Jacob fed his sheep in order to breed different colors.¹²⁶ This is how both the “corruptible” and the “incorruptible generations” came into being according to the Peratics.¹²⁷ Kronos, the demiurge, uses what he sees of these powers that Christ is revealing from the top of the universe and gives them material form. So we learn that the Peratics distinguish in the Gospel of John between Jesus’ “Father in heaven,” who is above Draco and who is the source of the powers that the Son transfers into the material realm, and “Your father is a murderer from the beginning” who is Kronos, the artificer of matter who reproduces the transferred powers in this world.¹²⁸ Kronos is a “murderer” because his work ends in corruption and death, the Peratic exegete concludes, although I imagine that Kronos’ reputation as a baby-devouring Titan probably influenced this identification.¹²⁹ In this way, the Peratics remain careful interpreters of the Gospel of John which they understand to refer to Jesus as the creator and resident of the highest heavens, while the God of the Jews as “the father of the devil” is Kronos, the one responsible for evil and the formation of the corruptible generation.¹³⁰

The Gnostic, a member of the incorruptible generation, is the one who knows these cosmic secrets. He knows the “mystery of Eden,” that the serpent in the sky is the river that flows out of Eden into the divine realm outside this universe and thus, it is the river that will carry him or her back to the divine realms beyond this cosmos.¹³¹ There is a suggestion in Hippolytus’ discussion that the soul, while journeying in the celestial realms, is purified and then literally drawn up into the constellation Draco. The Peratic teacher quoted by Hippolytus says that if someone knows the secret of Draco, then that person is reconceived as if from Jacob’s striped feed and becomes “white.” This language is suggestive of investiture, when the initiate may have donned a white robe as was a typical practice in

¹²⁶ Gen 30:37; cf. John 1:1–4.

¹²⁷ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.17.1–4 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 185–186).

¹²⁸ Cf. Matt 7:11; John 8:44.

¹²⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.17.7 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 186).

¹³⁰ Cf. John 8:44a. For a thorough discussion of this passage, see my forthcoming work on the Gospel of John and Gnostic thought.

¹³¹ Gen 2:10–14.

other mystery cults.¹³² If the person does not become “white,” the person was like an “abortion born of night” that perishes in the night.¹³³

Thus the “mystery of Eden,” the second of the initiation stages or journeys, appears to have included the spirit’s escape from the terrifying “desert” through Draco, the serpent Christ who is “the door” at the top of the celestial dome leading into the transcendent realm where the Father lives.¹³⁴ For just as he brought down the Father’s powers, so he brings up the awakened and purified powers, “the exactly copied perfect race (τὸ ἐξεικονισμένον τέλειον γένος),” from this world to the Father again, transferring them from unreality to reality. According to the Peratics, this happens like a magnet that draws only iron and nothing else.¹³⁵

They give proof for this Christ-centered descent-ascent system with reference to an analogy: the anatomy of the brain. The Father is the brain, while the Son is the serpentine-shaped cerebellum. The cerebellum draws up through the pineal gland the spiritual and life-giving substance that flows out from the arch of the brain. The cerebellum receives this and presents it to the Father. Likewise the Son imparts the powers to matter, like the seeds that flow down the marrow of the back so that children are born.

What we are seeing in the Peratic material is a very specific route for the ascent of the Gnostic’s spirit after death. This route begins in the sub-lunar sphere, where the demons of Hades and Tartarus must be met and overcome. Kronos, the turbulent power of the sea that encompasses the terrestrial sphere must be crossed and the soul must pass through the gate that opens into the Zodiac, the pyramid gate guarded by Korē and her five demon assistants who govern the suburbs of Hades. This is the core of the first mystery or stage. Once in the Zodiac, the stars and planets must be met and overcome. This is the heart of the second mystery or stage. The spirit must journey up the draconian river of stars from the tail to the mouth where it is then spit out into the perfect divine realms outside the universe, the dwelling place of the transcendent Father. If there was a third mystery or stage, it probably began with the journey outside the universe, back to Jesus’ “heavenly” Father who lives far above the heavens in a place all his own.

¹³² Cf. Graf, “Mysteries,” 440.

¹³³ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.17.6 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 186).

¹³⁴ John 10:7.

¹³⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* 5.16.8–9 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 183). Hipp. *Haer.* 5.17.6–10 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 186–87).

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INTERPRÉTATION D'UNE FORMULE BARBARE CHEZ LES
GNOSTIQUES VALENTINIENS D'APRÈS
LE *CONTRE LES HÉRÉSIES* D'IRÉNÉE, I, 21,3

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Le programme de recherche soutenu en France par l'Agence Nationale pour la Recherche (A.N.R.), « Corpus des énoncés barbares », ou C.E.N.O.B., a démarré, il y a quelques années, autour de la thèse de Michela Zago sur les papyri magiques grecs. Et c'est autour de la soutenance de cette thèse en 2007 à la Fondation San Carlo de Modena, et d'un séminaire de Michel Tardieu au Collège de France sur l'objet magique, puis de deux colloques au Collège de France sur « Énoncés barbares I » en 2007 et « Énoncés barbares II » en 2008, que nous avons lancé à plusieurs ce projet de recherche ; il regroupe une vingtaine de chercheurs, spécialistes de plusieurs langues de l'Orient méditerranéen, répartis en trois équipes à Paris, à l'Université de Padoue et à l'Université Libre de Bruxelles. Dans le cadre de l'appel d'offres « Corpus » de l'A.N.R., il s'agit de réaliser la constitution d'une base de données informatique qui doit donner lieu à la production d'un CdRom, en lien avec les Éditions Brepols.

Nous entendons par « énoncés barbares » ce qui dans une opération magique antique, et en particulier dans sa partie invocatoire ou exécutoire représente un ensemble de sons et de noms propres de divinités ou de démons ne relevant pas du langage commun. Il s'agit donc de ces « abracadabras » pas immédiatement compréhensibles, lors d'un passage d'une langue à une autre dans un rituel. Ces énoncés offrent des sonorités puissantes, et donc pourvues d'une certaine efficacité, mais ils se présentent comme du langage dénué de toute signification. C'est pourquoi on les désigne parfois dans la littérature ou les écrits philosophiques de l'Antiquité comme des noms dont on ne peut pas identifier le sens (des ἄσημα ὀνόματα), des noms inintelligibles (τὰ ἄσημα) ; et pourtant ce sont des énoncés dont la fonction vise souvent à contraindre les dieux ; on les désigne encore ainsi sous les expressions de « formules mystiques » (μυστικοὶ λόγοι ou *voces magicae*). Nous visons à établir un corpus de ces énoncés, mais il ne s'agit pas d'un répertoire de tous les noms d'anges ou de démons de l'Antiquité, puisque nous ne retenons comme significatifs

que les « énoncés barbarisés » : ainsi le nom de Ἰησοῦς fera partie de notre corpus, car il sert de base, par exemple, à des formules magiques chez le gnostique valentinien Marc le mage ; le nom de Barbelo, une figure féminine de la transcendance, fera aussi partie du corpus, car dans certains textes non-valentiniens, il sert à la constitution de formules rituelles baptismales, comme dans le traité gnostique *Melchisedech* (NHC IX 56,25ss.) ; mais on ne retiendra pas toutes les occurrences de Iao ou de Ialdabaoth dans les textes anciens, car elles n'apparaissent pas toutes dans un contexte barbarisé.

Ces quelques précisions données, nous avons choisi d'examiner un passage énigmatique du *Contre les hérésies* d'Irénée de Lyon, en évoquant successivement le cadre littéraire du chapitre 21 et la pratique rituelle de la rédemption chez les gnostiques valentiniens, avant d'aborder les formules liturgiques citées par Irénée. Nous proposons ici un décryptage de ces formules à partir du syriaque, dont nous tenons à souligner le contexte valentinien, en hommage à la recherche d'Einar Thomassen qui s'est toujours enquis d'œuvrer pour une meilleure connaissance de la gnose valentinienne.

Le cadre littéraire du chapitre 21

Pour bien comprendre l'intention polémique d'Irénée, il importe de se souvenir que l'ensemble du Livre I du *Contre les hérésies* porte sur l'exposé des doctrines adverses, alors que la réfutation d'Irénée, proprement dite, occupe les livres II à V. Dans le Livre I, un premier groupe de chapitres expose sous forme de paraphrase le mythe valentinien du salut, des premiers principes jusqu'à l'eschatologie, en passant par l'anthropologie et la christologie. C'est ce qu'on appelle d'habitude la « Grande Notice » (des chapitres 1 à 9) fondée sur une information rassemblée par Irénée auprès de gnostiques valentiniens issus des fidèles de Ptolémée, l'un des disciples de Valentin, peu après le milieu du second siècle. Une autre série de chapitres du Livre I (les chapitres 11 à 21) est consacrée à des informations complémentaires sur les valentiniens, dont Valentin lui-même et surtout Marc le mage. Enfin, une troisième partie de ce Livre I (les chapitres 23 à 31) offre une construction historique factice de la généalogie des hérésies. Entre ces trois groupes de chapitres, on trouve encore une description de la « règle de vérité », c'est-à-dire une confession de foi irénéenne d'inspiration biblique (respectivement aux chapitres 10 et 22) ; cette formule irénéenne de la foi chrétienne est censée proposer un critère d'évaluation

des doctrines adverses. Le chapitre 21 qui nous occupe achève donc la deuxième partie du Livre I, et comme cette partie décrit abondamment les particularités des doctrines du gnostique valentinien Marc le mage, on considère souvent, mais à tort, que le chapitre 21 concerne aussi les particularités des gnostiques marcosiens. Depuis la monographie de Niclas Förster sur Marc le mage¹, et sa démonstration sur la délimitation de la notice consacrée à Marc, du chapitre 13,1 à 16,2 seulement et non pas jusqu'au chapitre 21, il faut attribuer à l'ensemble des valentiniens les informations sur les pratiques rituelles évoquées dans le chapitre 21, et ne plus suivre certaines notices de manuels ou de dictionnaires au sujet du valentinien Marc le mage ; même l'édition des « Sources Chrétiennes » qui intitule le chapitre 21 « Diversité des rites de 'rédemption' en usage chez les Marcosiens »² risque d'induire en erreur. Il s'agit ici des rites valentiniens en général et non pas des rites propres aux marcosiens.

La pratique valentinienne de la rédemption

Si l'on entre maintenant dans ce chapitre, il est facile de le découper en paragraphes : 21,1 expose l'intention polémique d'Irénée pour montrer la diversité et l'instabilité des pratiques valentiniennes ; 21,2 discute les sources bibliques de la pratique baptismale de la rédemption valentinienne ; 21,3 énumère diverses pratiques selon une méthode connue dans les réfutations des hérésies, « les uns » font ceci, « d'autres » font cela, « d'autres encore », cela ; 21,4 prolonge cette énumération en évoquant des pratiques baptismales sans eau ; et 21,5 évoque le cas célèbre de la « rédemption » valentinienne appliquée aux mourants, une sorte de rituel d'extrême-onction, avant la lettre. Le meilleur connaisseur des sources valentiniennes, Einar Thomassen, a examiné ces divers paragraphes dans sa monographie détaillée, *The Spiritual Seed*³. Chaque paragraphe correspond pour lui à diverses sortes de pratiques liturgiques ; puis, comme Irénée découpe ses informations en fonction des marqueurs d'énonciation « les uns... d'autres... d'autres encore », E. Thomassen en vient à identifier sept

¹ Niclas Förster, *Marcus Magus. Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergemeinschaft. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (WUNT 114 ; Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

² Nous suivons l'édition d'Adelin Rousseau et de Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon : Contre les hérésies* (SC 264 ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1979), 295.

³ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60 ; Leiden : Brill, 2006), 360-414.

variantes différentes de pratiques de la rédemption : (1) la chambre nuptiale ; (2) le baptême d'eau ; (3) une forme de baptême d'eau avec des invocations d'origine sémitique ; (4) une autre forme de baptême d'eau avec des invocations différentes ; (5) une initiation sans immersion baptismale ; (6) une initiation par la connaissance sans le secours d'éléments matériels ; et (7) le rituel pour les mourants.

A la différence d'Einar Thomassen, il nous semble que le découpage en variantes différentes de pratiques rituelles provient de l'intention polémique d'Irénée, décrite précisément au début du chapitre, en 21,1. Irénée s'en prend à la « tradition » (παράδοσις) des valentiniens sur leur rituel de la rédemption. Il la prend pour « invisible et insaisissable ». C'est attester, sans le vouloir, que les valentiniens ont une doctrine cachée qu'ils transmettent avec sérieux et selon des règles propres à la transmission de la catéchèse chrétienne ancienne. L'enseignement préalable au baptême n'est pas destiné à n'importe qui, et ne peut être divulgué qu'aux futurs candidats au baptême. De la même façon, dans la *Lettre à Flora*, conservée par Épiphane, Ptolémée reconnaît qu'il y a des degrés dans l'initiation valentinienne : « Si Dieu le permet, dit-il, vous recevrez plus tard des éclaircissements... quand vous aurez été jugée digne de connaître la tradition des apôtres (ἡ ἀποστολική παράδοσις), tradition que, nous aussi, nous avons reçue par voie de succession (ἐκ διαδοχῆς) »⁴. Dans le *Contre les hérésies*, par intention polémique, Irénée fait de cette « tradition » catéchétique des valentiniens un ramassis instable qu'on ne peut décrire de manière simple et selon une seule formule, car chacun transmettrait cette « tradition » valentinienne comme il le voudrait ; un peu plus loin, en 21,2, Irénée admet que la rédemption des valentiniens est « transmise par eux sous des formes variées et discordantes ». C'est évidemment ce que veut nous faire croire l'hérésiologue. A la différence d'Einar Thomassen, il nous semble, au contraire, plus juste de lire l'ensemble de l'information transmise par Irénée sans cette construction narrative hérésiologique ; selon nous, l'ensemble du chapitre 21 concerne la pratique rituelle de la rédemption dans ses divers aspects, et même le rite particulier pour les mourants fait partie de cette préoccupation. Il ne faut donc pas lire ce chapitre comme l'écho de pratiques rituelles diverses et contradictoires.

⁴ D'après la traduction de Gilles Quispel, *Ptolémée le Gnostique : Lettre à Flora* (SC 24 bis ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 73.

L'essentiel des éléments liturgiques employés rappelle la liturgie chrétienne du baptême, mais la « rédemption » valentinienne dépasse l'horizon du rite d'initiation au christianisme. C'est une sorte de baptême ; et c'est plus qu'un baptême. En effet, Irénée décrit ce rite comme celui d'une « chambre nuptiale » (21,3), celle où l'homme intérieur du gnostique rejoint son partenaire angélique, à la manière des syzygies pléromatiques ; mais c'est aussi un rite de baptême comme le baptême traditionnel par immersion (21,3) accompagné d'invocations particulières (encore 21,3) ; cela peut être un baptême sans immersion (21,4), mais toujours accompagné d'une onction et de transmission de la « connaissance » (21,4), comme le rite d'onction sur les mourants (21,5). Irénée reproche aux valentiniens qui pratiquent la « rédemption » de devenir « insaisissables et invisibles » (21,1) ; ces deux adjectifs évoquent les caractéristiques du Dieu transcendant des valentiniens, dans la description des éons du Plérôme (I, 1,1) ; on retrouve aussi ces adjectifs au sujet du Christ qui serait rentré « insaisissable et invisible dans le Plérôme » (III, 16,1). Ailleurs encore, ces adjectifs apparaissent à propos de la pratique marcosienne de la rédemption ; les âmes qui se présentent devant le Juge eschatologique peuvent devenir « insaisissables et invisibles » si elles sont munies des paroles adéquates (I, 13,6) ; autrement dit, la rédemption dont Irénée reconnaît qu'elle n'est accordée qu'à ceux qui ont reçu la « gnose parfaite » (I, 21,2), sert à faire remonter les gnostiques jusqu'au Plérôme et à leur permettre d'échapper à la puissance des archontes s'ils connaissent les énoncés rituels à prononcer. De la même façon, le rituel pratiqué sur les mourants (I, 21,5) est décrit par Irénée comme une onction particulière accompagnée d'invocations « afin qu'ils deviennent insaisissables et invisibles aux archontes et aux puissances et que leur homme intérieur monte au-dessus des espaces invisibles, abandonnant le corps à l'univers créé et laissant l'âme au démiurge » (I, 21,5). Comment repérer des fragments de cet enseignement ésotérique, communiqué uniquement à ceux qui sont destinés à la « gnose parfaite » ? De manière inhabituelle pour un hérésiologue, Irénée rapporte quelques exemples de formulations liturgiques prononcées lors du rite de la rédemption.

Les formules liturgiques

Après la mention de la « chambre nuptiale » en 21,3, Irénée décrit le rite valentinien comme celui d'un baptême où l'on prononce une première formule d'invocation sur l'initié :

Au nom de l'inconnu Père de toutes choses,
 Dans la Vérité, Mère de toutes choses,
 Dans Celui qui descendit sur Jésus,
 Dans l'union, la rédemption et la communion des puissances.

L'édition des « Sources Chrétiennes » remarque à ce sujet : « On reconnaît, sans peine, dans la formule gnostique, une déformation de la formule trinitaire du baptême chrétien »⁵ (cf. Mt 28,19 et aussi *Extraits de Théodote* 76,3) ; et les éditeurs, Adelin Rousseau et Louis Doutreleau, interprètent la formule ainsi : le Père de toutes choses (τῶν ὄλων), c'est le Père des éons ; le Fils est évoqué par la mention de la Vérité, éon féminin en syzygie avec l'intellect ou le Fils unique (Irénée, I, 1,1) ; et l'Esprit manifeste sa présence par l'évocation de sa descente au baptême de Jésus. Einar Thomassen, lui, voit dans cette formule un ramassis de thèmes familiers autour du baptême dans le Nom ou le Fils⁶. Nous pensons, quant à nous, que la formulation peut être interprétée de manière plus spécifique en relation avec la doctrine valentinienne. Ce serait une autre preuve du caractère ésotérique de la formule, interprétable par les initiés grâce à leur connaissance du reste de la doctrine valentinienne. La formule est composée de quatre éléments dont le dernier est encore subdivisé en trois, à moins qu'il ne faille prendre la formule pour une suite de trois propositions, portant sur des figures importantes du panthéon gnostique (la triade 'père – mère – fils') auxquelles répond une triple affirmation sur le salut, vu du point de vue de l'initié : le salut compris comme une union de l'homme intérieur avec son partenaire céleste, la rédemption comme la pratique rituelle nécessaire pour obtenir le salut, et la communion des puissances comme le résultat auquel on aboutit, c'est-à-dire la communion avec les puissances du Plérôme par le biais de la rédemption.

Que le Père soit inconnu, c'est ce que mentionne la description irénéenne du panthéon valentinien (I, 1,1), et l'on peut confirmer cela par les *Extraits de Théodote* 7,1 ou les pages de la théologie apophasique du *Traité Tripartite* valentinien à propos de Dieu le Père (p. 51–54). Que le Père soit aussi le Père de tous les éons du Plérôme, « les Touts », c'est aussi une donnée que confirme Irénée à propos du panthéon valentinien. Pour la Vérité, Mère de toutes choses, il est plus difficile d'y voir une figure du Fils du Père, car la Mère de toutes choses (τῶν πάντων) renvoie plutôt au rôle de la Sophia valentinienne, responsable de l'ensemble du processus

⁵ Rousseau et Doutreleau, *Contre les hérésies* (SC 263), 270.

⁶ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 365.

de la démiurgie. Quant à Celui qui descendit sur Jésus, il faut l'interpréter en rapport avec une certaine compréhension du baptême de Jésus ; d'un point de vue valentinien, il s'agirait plus précisément de la Pensée du Père ou de son Nom (cf. *Extraits de Théodote* 22,6).

Puis viennent les énoncés barbares, les ἑβραϊκὰ ὀνόματα (ou *hebraica nomina* selon la traduction latine) dont Irénée prétend qu'ils ne servent qu'à impressionner les futurs initiés. Il faut sans doute y voir des énoncés d'origine sémitique, en araméen ou en syriaque. Mais avant d'aborder la formulation du premier des deux « énoncés barbares » rapportés par le texte d'Irénée, il faut rappeler brièvement l'histoire de la transmission de l'œuvre du *Contre les hérésies*, en donnant quelques précisions sur les langues qui l'ont transmise jusqu'à nos jours. Les « énoncés barbares » soulèvent, en effet, le problème délicat de savoir à partir de quelle langue il convient d'envisager leur interprétation. Irénée de Lyon écrivit son *Adversus Haereses* en grec vers l'an 180 de notre ère, mais l'original de cette œuvre ne nous est pas parvenu. Cependant, on peut lire cette œuvre grâce à deux canaux de transmission : l'un, en grec, consiste en une collection de différents extraits du *Contre les hérésies* d'Irénée cités par des ouvrages d'hérésiologie aux III^e et IV^e siècles, tels *l'Elenchos* attribué à Hippolyte et le *Panarion* d'Épiphane, mais aussi par l'historien ecclésiastique Eusèbe de Césarée ou des citations dans les chaînes patristiques essentiellement⁷. L'autre voie de transmission consiste en une traduction latine de l'œuvre, effectuée vraisemblablement à la fin du IV^e siècle⁸ et attestée par deux familles de manuscrits⁹. Le passage qui nous intéresse, au Livre I, 21,3, est transmis en grec essentiellement¹⁰ par Épiphane, dans le chapitre sur les valentiniens 31,2, 8–9 et 31,6,10 de son *Panarion*¹¹.

⁷ Il y a aussi des fragments en arménien et en syriaque. On trouvera une présentation détaillée de l'état de la tradition manuscrite d'Irénée dans le volume d'introduction au Livre IV, Rousseau et Doutreleau, *Contre les hérésies* (SC 100), 1–191, ainsi que dans les volumes successifs des Sources Chrétiennes 152, 210 et 263.

⁸ En tout cas antérieure à 422, selon Bertrand Hemmerding, « La tradition latine » dans le volume d'introduction au Rousseau et Doutreleau, *Contre les hérésies* (SC 100), 16.

⁹ *Ouvrage cité*, p. 16–34 à propos des manuscrits latins dont les deux groupes CV et AQS.

¹⁰ Comme le signalent Rousseau et Doutreleau, *Contre les hérésies* (SC 264), 299 dans l'apparat critique grec, Eusèbe de Césarée (*Hist. Eccl.* IV, 11, 5) cite aussi ce chapitre, mais s'arrête juste avant la mention du premier « énoncé barbare » (à τελειομένους).

¹¹ Épiphane reprend aussi les deux « énoncés barbares » dans le chapitre consacré à Marc le mage en 34, 20, 3 et 5 ; et le deuxième énoncé dans celui sur les disciples d'Héracléon, en 36, 2, 6.

Le premier énoncé

On peut reprendre le premier « énoncé barbare » selon sa formulation en grec et en latin :

βασεμὰ χαμοσσή βαϊαιανοορά μισταδία ρουαδὰ κουστὰ βαβοφορ καλαχθει

Basyma cacabasa eanaa irraumista diarbada caeota bafobor camelanthi

On remarquera que les deux formulations ne sont pas rigoureusement semblables. Toutefois, l'apparat critique de la traduction latine peut aider à mieux comprendre cette divergence. D'emblée, on constate l'abondance de variantes que présente cette formule en latin – indice, d'ailleurs, de la difficulté de compréhension que cet « énoncé barbare » a représenté pour les traducteurs. Prenons en considération les variantes de trois mots en particulier :

cacabasa (Q) : *eacha saba* (C A), *cachasaba* (V) ;

irraumista (edd. a Gra.) : *uramista* (C A Q), *uram ista* (V) ;

diarbada (A Q) : *diaruada* (C), *diuarda* (V).

Dans la transmission du texte latin, le manuscrit C (le plus ancien, car daté du IX^e siècle¹²) offre les variantes les plus significatives pour notre étude : les différences entre les leçons retenues dans l'édition critique et le manuscrit C s'expliquent, dans les deux premiers mots, par métathèse (*cacabasa* – *eacha saba* ; *irraumista* – *uramista*), et, dans le dernier, par la présence d'une lettre à la place d'une autre (*diarbada* – *diaruada*). Les éditeurs du texte, Adelin Rousseau et Louis Doutreleau, n'ont pas choisi d'éditer un seul manuscrit : *cacabasa* est attesté par le manuscrit Q, *irraumista* est une conjecture des éditeurs eux-mêmes qui fabriquent une expression à partir de plusieurs variantes, *diarbada* est une leçon gardée par l'une des familles latines (manuscripts A et Q), au lieu de C et V qui ont justement une variante plus proche de la formulation grecque. Cette méthode assez arbitraire d'éditer le texte latin nous semble guidée par un souci, une fois de plus, hérésiologique : les éditeurs ont opté au fur et à mesure, nous semble-t-il, pour le mot qui correspondait le mieux à un contexte magique, voire au dénigrement de l'adversaire (cf. *cacabasa*, leçon minoritaire par rapport à *eacha saba*).

¹² Hemmerdinger, « La tradition latine », 18.

Or, si l'on reconstruit l'énoncé latin avec les variantes attestées par le manuscrit C, on obtient le résultat suivant :

Basyrna eacha saba eanaa uramista diaruada ceotabafobor camelanthi

Si maintenant on coupe l'énoncé en suivant la formulation grecque, on découvrira que la phrase en alphabet latin s'éloigne peu de celle qui est en grec :

βασεμὰ χαμοσσή βαιαινοορά μισταδία ρουαδὰ κουστὰ βαβοφορ καλαχθει

Basyrna eachasa baeanaaura mistadia ruada ceota bafobor camelanthi

Les trois mots qui présentent le moins de correspondance sont soulignés : *eachasa* pour χαμοσσή, *ceota* pour κουστὰ, *camelanthi* pour καλαχθει. Toutefois, on s'aperçoit en les prononçant qu'ils ne sont pas non plus des mots complètement étrangers l'un à l'autre : ils pourraient, en fait, s'expliquer assez facilement par l'hypothèse de la chute ou de l'assimilation d'une lettre, par exemple.

De ce bricolage dérive l'idée que les deux traditions linguistiques ne sont pas contradictoires ; elles n'attesteraient pas deux énoncés différents, mais le même énoncé, de deux manières différentes. L'explication de cette divergence fait appel, tout simplement, aux données paléographiques : comme tout manuscrit ancien, le texte grec originel d'Irénée, ainsi que sa reprise chez Épiphane et ses traducteurs latins, était écrit en onciales et sans marqueurs signalant la fin d'un mot et le début du suivant. Cela est évident quand on regarde la tradition manuscrite latine. Les manuscrits latins présentent deux façons, ou plus, de découper les mots : par ex. *uramista* de C correspond à *uram ista* dans V, *ceotabafobor* de CA à *cacotabafobor* en VQ. Cela vient de la difficulté de comprendre le sens du texte et en conséquence, du manque de critères de découpage des mots. On pourrait aussi y voir une volonté de présenter la formule comme étant la plus magique possible, lors de la traduction et de la diffusion du texte : les manuscrits latins ont peut-être choisi de découper la phrase selon les endroits précis qui évoqueraient le mieux un énoncé magique latin ; par exemple, *uram ista* n'a pas de sens, mais les sonorités sembleraient familières à une oreille latine, en évoquant un accusatif féminin singulier suivi d'un démonstratif féminin.

Une fois résolu ce problème de transmission du texte et si l'on constate que la formulation grecque et la formulation latine sont à peu près équivalentes, la question centrale de notre étude se pose ainsi : cette phrase aurait-elle un sens dans une langue sémitique comme le syriaque ? Comme

l'avait remarqué E. Thomassen, il existe déjà un certain nombre de propositions d'interprétation de substrat sémitique pour certains termes des formules, comme les travaux d'Hugo Gressmann et Karl Müller¹³.

Voici un tableau qui explique comment on peut interpréter ce premier énoncé en syriaque : dans la colonne de gauche se trouve la formulation grecque (qui, comme on vient de le montrer, est quasiment équivalente à celle du latin) ; au centre, nous avons repris la reconstitution donnée par François Graffin il y a 30 ans, et publiée dans le volume des « Sources Chrétiennes » qui sert de commentaire au premier Livre du *Contre les hérésies*¹⁴ ; son interprétation est intéressante, mais elle s'écarte volontiers de la lettre du texte pour rejoindre des expressions présentes dans la suite du paragraphe d'Irénée. F. Graffin donne une transcription du syriaque en alphabet latin et une traduction. La colonne de droite, enfin, héberge notre propre lecture, plus fidèle à la lettre de l'énoncé et guidée par le désir de rendre compte du contenu valentinien de celui-ci¹⁵.

Texte grec	Transcription en syriaque et traduction de F. Graffin (SC 263, p. 270)		Notre lecture	
βασημά χαμοσσή βαβαιανοορά	<i>ba-š^ema</i> <i>d^e-hekm^eta</i> <i>aba w^e-nūhra</i>	Au nom de la Sagesse Père et Lumière,	<i>ba-š^ema</i> <i>kul m^ee</i> <i>b-ḥaye nūhra</i>	Par le Nom tout-puissant, par le moyen de la Vie Lumière
μισταδία ρούαδά κουστά βαβοφάρ καλαχθει	<i>meštamhya</i> <i>rūha</i> <i>d^e-qūšta</i> <i>b^e-fūrqana</i> <i>mala'kūta</i>	appelée Esprit de Sainteté pour la rédemption de la nature angélique	<i>meštadia</i> <i>rūha</i> <i>d^e-qūšta</i> <i>batar</i> <i>kul aḥūde</i>	est projeté l'Esprit de Vérité vers tous les gouverneurs

¹³ Hugo Gressmann, « Jüdisch-Aramäisches bei Epiphanius », *ZNW* 16 (1915) : 191–95 ; Karl Müller, « Beiträge zum Verständnis der valentinianischen Gnosis I–IV », *NGWG* (1920) : 188–97.

¹⁴ Rousseau et Doutreleau, *Contre les hérésies* (SC 263), 270.

¹⁵ Nous gardons la transcription donnée par F. Graffin et nous mettons nous aussi notre lecture en transcription pour rendre la comparaison plus facile.

Expliquons notre lecture¹⁶ :

βασημα : comme F. Graffin, nous lisons *ba-š^ema* (ܒܫܡܐ), à savoir « Au nom (de) » ou bien « Par le Nom (de) ».

χαμοση : ce serait l'union de deux mots syriaques, *kul* (ܟܠ) et *m^eše* (ܡܫܐ), le premier étant le pronom adjectif indéfini « tout », le deuxième le participe passif à sens actif du verbe *m^eša* qui signifie « qui peut », « pouvant », « puissant » : avec le *kul* qui précède, on aurait l'adjectif « tout-puissant ». Il faut cependant préciser que d'habitude en syriaque un tel adjectif se construit avec les deux parties de l'expression inversées : non pas, comme ici, *kul m^eše*, mais plutôt *m^eše kul*. Toutefois, un contexte poétique ou liturgique – tel que le nôtre – peut expliquer cette inversion.

βαιανοορα : sans ajouter de lettres, on peut facilement comprendre ce mot en caractères grecs comme la composition de trois mots syriaques, *b-haye nūhra*, qui indique un complément introduit par la préposition « b- » (« dans », « avec », « par », « à travers »), suivie de deux substantifs, *haye* (ܗܝܐ) « la vie » et *nūhra* (ܢܘܗܪܐ) « la lumière », d'où notre traduction « par le moyen de la Vie Lumière ». Si *οορα* peut aussi se comprendre comme le « feu », *nūra* (ܢܘܪܐ), la présence des deux *omicron* nous a fait plutôt préférer « lumière » : la lettre *hē* de *nūhra* serait ainsi expliquée par la répétition de l'*omicron*.

μσταδια : si F. Graffin supprime le *delta* et le remplace par un *mīm* et un *hē* pour obtenir le verbe « appeler », nous lisons le mot grec tel quel comme *meštadia* (ܡܫܬܐܕܝܐ), le participe passif féminin *etpe'el* du verbe *šda* (ܫܕܐ), qui signifie « jeter », « rejeter », « lancer » ; ce participe peut avoir un sens plus positif s'il est suivi de la préposition *atar*, que l'on retrouvera plus loin : dans ce cas, il signifie « aller à la suite de », « s'incliner vers », « être projeté vers », selon une idée d'émanation.

ρουδα κουστα : selon l'ordre syntaxique sémitique, le verbe précède toujours le sujet. Voici donc le sujet féminin du participe féminin que l'on vient d'analyser : *rūha d^e-qūšta* (ܪܘܗܐ ܩܘܫܬܐ), « l'esprit » (féminin en syriaque) « de Vérité » ou « de Droiture », et non pas « de Sainteté », *qaddišūta*, comme le lit F. Graffin, en pensant sûrement à l'expression française « Esprit Saint ».

βαβοφορ : ce serait la préposition *atar* (ܐܬܪ) exigée par le participe *meštadia*. Le son du *taw*, parce qu'il est précédé d'une voyelle, est emphatique, spirant (*th*), ce qui peut s'entendre à l'oreille comme un *φ* (*atar* serait alors transcrit *βοφορ*). Si l'on garde cette lecture, il faut reconnaître que nous n'expliquons pas très bien la répétition du *ba* initial, sinon comme un ajout pour faire magique, comme un bégaiement.

¹⁶ Nous sommes conscients du caractère hypothétique des reconstructions proposées alors qu'il n'y a pas de syriaque littéraire attesté au temps d'Irénée.

καλαχθεῖ : nous comprenons le mot comme l'union de *kul* (כל), « tout », et *aḥūde* (ܐܚܘܕܐ), le substantif adjectivé dérivé du verbe *eḥad* (ܐܚܘܕ), qui signifie « tenir », « soutenir », « garder », « régner », d'où le sens de « gouverneurs », c'.-à-d. de « ceux qui régissent », pour *aḥūda*, au pluriel *aḥūde*. Cette solution est plus fidèle au texte que la lecture de F. Graffin, et elle s'accorde bien avec les deux spirantes présentes dans le grec (χ et θ), qui rendent le son syriaque de *hêt* et *dalat*, l'un spirant en soi, l'autre spirantisé en vertu de la loi dite *beghadhkephath*, explicitée aussi pour *batar* (*aḥūde* se prononce donc *aḥūdhe*).

On peut récapituler l'interprétation de ce premier énoncé barbare, interprétation qui, nous tenons à le dire, est le résultat aussi d'un travail mûri grâce au séminaire de syriaque animé par Alain Desreumaux à l'École Normale Supérieure, à Paris. Cette interprétation demeure une hypothèse de lecture parmi d'autres, mais elle parut être la plus satisfaisante pour notre but, à savoir rendre compte du texte tel qu'il est et chercher des solutions qui ont un sens, lues d'un point de vue valentinien. Voici comment on peut alors comprendre la formule attestée dans la version grecque d'Irénée :

ba-šema kul m'še b-ḥaye nūhra meštadia rūḥa d'e-qūšta batar kul aḥūde

ܐܘܠܐܘܬܐ ܕܐܚܘܕܐ ܕܡܫܘܝܬܐ ܕܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܩܘܫܬܐ ܕܒܬܐܪ ܕܐܚܘܕܐ ܕܒܚܝܐ ܕܢܘܚܪܐ

« Par le Nom tout-puissant, par le moyen de la Vie Lumière l'Esprit de Vérité est projeté vers tous les gouverneurs ».

Proposition d'interprétation valentinienne du premier « énoncé barbare »

On remarquera tout d'abord que l'énoncé en langue « barbare » manifeste une grande proximité avec la formule baptismale énoncée en clair par Irénée, quelques lignes avant l' « énoncé barbare », en particulier pour ce qui concerne une perspective triadique analogue : « Par le Nom tout-puissant » pourrait correspondre à la formule « Au nom du Père inconnu de toutes choses » ; « par le moyen de la Vie Lumière » serait l'équivalent de « dans la Vérité Mère de toutes choses », et la mention de « l'Esprit de Vérité projeté » serait l'analogie de « dans Celui qui descendit sur Jésus », soit l'Esprit Saint descendu lors de la cérémonie du baptême. La métaphore de la projection pour évoquer la descente de l'Esprit sur Jésus au baptême correspond littéralement à l'usage courant du verbe grec *προβάλλειν* chez les gnostiques valentiniens, pour désigner les émissions divines. D'après la paraphrase d'Irénée (I, 2,5), les éons « Christ » et « Esprit Saint » sont émis « pour la fixation et la consolidation du Plérôme » ; leur venue dans le

monde psychique représente analogiquement la venue du Sauveur pour restaurer l'éon déchu.

La fin de la formule qui évoque l'arrivée de l'Esprit de vérité « vers tous les gouverneurs » (ⲕⲓⲁⲓⲁⲕ ⲁ) peut aussi être traduite « vers toute ma confrérie » (ⲉⲃⲁⲕ ⲁ), avec un substantif terminé par le pronom possessif de la première personne du singulier. Si l'on compare cette expression selon l'une ou l'autre des traductions, on remarquera qu'elles sont l'une et l'autre toutes proches de la finale de la formule baptismale donnée par Irénée en clair : « dans l'union, la rédemption et la communion des puissances » ; en effet, les « gouverneurs » ou les « puissances » peuvent évoquer les êtres pléromatiques, et d'un point de vue valentinien, le rite de la rédemption est qualifié dans certains textes de « chambre nuptiale » – Irénée parle ici de « mariage pneumatique » (I, 21,3) ; il s'agit principalement d'une cérémonie baptismale qui a pour but de permettre l'union de l'âme du valentinien avec son double, son « congénère » céleste dans le Plérôme. Dans ce sens, être uni par le baptême avec les puissances d'en haut, c'est rejoindre la communauté céleste, l'Église des pneumatiques valentiniens, « la confrérie » formée des membres qui ont réussi à conjointre leur âme avec leur double céleste. Un passage des *Extraits* du valentinien *Théodote*, rassemblés par Clément d'Alexandrie, explicite cela très précisément ; en 22,4, il est dit que les anges se font baptiser pour nous, pour que « possédant aussi le Nom, nous ne soyons pas arrêtés par la Limite et la Croix, et empêchés d'entrer au Plérôme » ; et dans le rituel baptismal, l'imposition des mains est suivie d'une formule « Pour la rédemption angélique » que l'*Extrait* 22,5 explique ainsi : cette rédemption angélique, c'est celle « que les Anges ont aussi, afin que celui qui a obtenu la rédemption se trouve baptisé dans le Nom même dans lequel son Ange aussi a été baptisé avant lui ». On comprend mieux alors que la mention du Nom dans le début de la formule sémitique corresponde au cœur de la cérémonie baptismale valentinienne. Le Nom n'est pas seulement un écho du Nom de la transcendance divine, c'est très précisément une invocation du Nom selon la perspective valentinienne, le Nom, c'est celui du Fils Monogène (*Extrait de Théodote* 26,1), ou Nom qui est Fils, Forme et Connaissance (*Extrait de Théodote* 31,3–4) ; selon l'*Évangile de Vérité* (p. 38–40), de la même façon, c'est le Fils qui est le Nom du Père. Dans la phrase d'Irénée « l'union, la rédemption et la communion des puissances », c'est l'horizon de la cérémonie baptismale, rejoindre la communion des puissances pléromatiques. Dans la formule « barbare », l'envoi de l'Esprit sur la confrérie des pneumatiques ou vers les gouverneurs, c'est le résumé de la cérémonie baptismale où la descente de l'Esprit permet la

réunion des âmes valentiniennes avec leurs doubles célestes. Pour résumer, il nous semble tout simplement que la formule « barbare » ne fait que redire en termes valentiniens ce que la formule baptismale d'Irénée disait en clair pour un public non initié.

En conséquence, on peut améliorer légèrement la traduction française de l'édition des « Sources Chrétiennes » qui traduit la répétition des εἰς grecs par « dans » ; la traduction latine comprend bien le sens invocatoire de la préposition grecque en utilisant la préposition *in* suivie de l'accusatif. Cela donne ainsi :

Par le Nom du Père inconnu de toutes choses,
 Par la Vérité Mère de toutes choses,
 Par Celui qui descendit sur Jésus :
 Pour l'union, la rédemption et la communion des puissances.

Et la formule « barbare » :

Par le Nom tout-puissant
 Par le moyen de la Vie Lumière,
 l'Esprit de vérité est projeté
 vers tous les gouverneurs.

On pourrait même raffiner en comparant la littéralité du texte grec à la traduction latine pour laquelle les éditeurs ont pensé utile de rajouter en latin, sur la base des manuscrits grecs, la préposition « *in* » devant le nom de Jésus, pour évoquer celui qui descend sur Jésus, soit l'Esprit Saint. Mais on pourrait tout aussi bien en rester à la formulation hymnique du texte grec, balisée par quatre emplois de la préposition εἰς suivi de la formule finale :

Par le Nom du Père inconnu de toutes choses
 Par la Vérité Mère de toutes choses,
 Par celui qui descendit [= l'Esprit ou le Sauveur lui-même]
 Par Jésus,
 Pour l'union, la rédemption et la communion des puissances.

On verrait, par là, un autre trait commun des valentiniens, par-delà la présentation hérésiologique de Marc le mage par Irénée ; les valentiniens utilisaient le nom de Jésus comme « énoncé barbare », comme nous avons déjà essayé de le montrer par ailleurs.

Le deuxième « énoncé barbare »

Avant d'aborder le contenu de la deuxième formule « barbare », il faut préciser le contexte littéraire de cette formule. Irénée propose d'abord

une interprétation du premier « énoncé barbare », formulée à la première personne du singulier ; mais cette traduction, ou cette interprétation, ne correspond pas vraiment à ce qui a été prononcé : « J'invoque ce qui est au-dessus de toute puissance du Père et est appelé Lumière, Esprit et Vie : car, dans un corps tu as régné ». Cette divergence entre la première formule et son interprétation ne nous paraît pas imputable au désordre des notes d'Irénée, selon l'hypothèse d'E. Thomassen, mais, au contraire, au caractère ésotérique de l'interprétation des formules liturgiques que l'on peut acquérir au cours de l'initiation. Quand on sait, toujours par l'*Extrait de Théodote*, 43,4, que les valentiniens utilisaient l'hymne de l'Épître aux Philippiens 2,9 sur le Nom au-dessus de tout nom, on peut comprendre que la soi-disant « traduction » de la formule « barbare » n'est autre qu'une invocation au Nom au-dessus de tout nom, à partir d'une exégèse de Philippiens 2,9, soit une invocation au Nom du Sauveur, appelé Lumière, Esprit et Vie ; on peut alors interpréter la fin de la formule « car dans un corps tu as régné » comme une exégèse de la descente du Sauveur évoquée par Philippiens 2,9 et comprise comme allant jusqu'au règne dans un corps.

Même si l'on ne peut pas dire que l'interprétation de la première formule « barbare » soit la traduction ou l'interprétation de l'« énoncé barbare », on reconnaîtra qu'il y a un lien logique, entre la formule et ce qui est présenté comme son interprétation. On peut alors proposer une interprétation banale de cette consécution de phrases liturgiques. La phrase à la première personne pourrait être une simple réponse du futur baptisé à la formule « barbare » prononcée par l'officiant. Suit alors une nouvelle intervention de l'officiant, prolongée par une deuxième formule « barbare », et dans ce cas, ce qu'Irénée présente comme la traduction de cette seconde formule ne serait rien d'autre que la nouvelle réponse de l'initié à la formule de l'officiant. En découpant un formulaire de la liturgie baptismale des valentiniens, en phrases prétendument incohérentes, accompagnées d'« énoncés barbares », Irénée agit en bon hérésiologue. Il illustre l'incohérence de ses adversaires. Mais Irénée se trahit lui-même, car à la fin de la présentation, il avoue « Ainsi parlent ceux qui font l'initiation. L'initié répond alors . . . » ; suit une phrase, aussi à la première personne, qui correspond bien à une réponse de l'initié à une intervention de l'officiant ; et Irénée achève sa présentation par une réponse de l'assemblée « Paix à tous ceux sur lesquels ce Nom repose ! », qui précède le rituel de la chrismation de l'initié, symbole de la « bonne odeur répandue sur les éons ». En résumé, il nous semble que nous avons dans ce chapitre

d'Irénée un formulaire baptismal cohérent qui a été découpé en phrases diverses pour le rendre inintelligible.

Venons-en maintenant à la formulation du deuxième « énoncé barbare ». Irénée le cite un peu plus loin :

Μεσσία οὐφαρέγνα μεμψαι μὲν χαλ δαίαν μοσομη δαέα ἀκφαρ νεψευ οὐα Ἰησοῦ
Ναζαρία

*Messia ufar magno in seenchaldia mosomeda eaacha faronepseha Iesu
Nazarene*

Les deux formulations en grec et en latin se présentent, comme dans le cas précédent, de deux façons différentes. Et comme auparavant, les variantes de la phrase en latin attestent le même problème formel : l'énoncé était probablement écrit, à l'origine, en un seul mot, sans espaces entre les lettres, et en onciales, ce qui permit aux différents traducteurs de couper les mots chacun à sa guise (par exemple : *messia ufar* CV – *messi aufar* AQ – *messiaufar* ε).

Or, si l'on fait la même opération de découpage que pour le premier énoncé, en essayant de diviser les mots différemment, on retrouve dans la formulation latine à peu près les mêmes mots que dans la formule grecque :

Μεσσία οὐφαρέγνα μεμψαι μὲν χαλ δαίαν μοσομη δαέα ἀκφαρ νεψευ οὐα Ἰησοῦ
Ναζαρία

*Messia ufarmagno inseen chal dia mosome daea achafaro nepseh a Iesu
Nazarene*

Dans cette restitution, reste sans véritable correspondance l'expression *inseen* pour μεμψαι μὲν, sauf si (μ)εμ – ψαι – (μ)ὲν a été lu : *in-se-en*.

L'ensemble de l'énoncé peut avoir un sens en syriaque, comme le montre un tableau qui récapitule la proposition de François Graffin et la met en parallèle avec notre propre interprétation¹⁷ :

¹⁷ Comme pour l'énoncé précédent, nous gardons la transcription donnée par F. Graffin et nous mettons nous aussi notre lecture en transcription pour rendre la comparaison plus facile.

Texte grec	Transcription en syriaque et traduction de F. Graffin (SC 263, p. 270)		Notre lecture	
Μεσσία	<i>m^ešiha</i>	Je suis oint	<i>m^eših</i>	Je reçois l'onction
οὐφάρεγνα	<i>wa-m^efareq ena</i>	et racheté	<i>w^e-fareq-na</i>	et je me délivre
μεμψαι	<i>men nafša</i>	de moi-même	<i>men nafši</i>	par moi-même
μέν χαλ	<i>w^e-men kul</i>	et de tout	<i>men kul</i>	de tout
δαίαν	<i>dyna</i>	jugement	<i>dayan</i>	juge
μοσομή	<i>ba-š^emeh</i>	par le nom	<i>mšammah</i>	nommé
δαέα	<i>d^e-yah</i>	de Yahvé	<i>dayūa</i>	démon.
ἀκφαρ νεψευ	<i>f^eraq nafša</i>	rachète-moi	<i>ekfūr nafšeh</i>	Que je renonce à son âme,
ουα Ἰησοῦ	<i>o iēšu</i>	ô Jésus	<i>aū yešū</i>	ô Jésus
Ναζαρία	<i>nesraya</i>	de Nazareth	<i>nesraya</i>	de Nazareth !

Analysons notre lecture :

Μεσσία : nous sommes d'accord avec F. Graffin et reconnaissons le participe passif du verbe *mšah* (ܡܫܐܗ), « oindre » : « je suis oint » ou « je reçois l'onction ».

οὐφάρεγνα : c'est un autre participe, lié au précédent par la coordination « et » (*waw*) ; c'est le participe du verbe *faq* (ܦܩܐ), « libérer », « délivrer », « racheter », mais ce n'est pas nécessaire, comme le fait F. Graffin, d'avoir un *pa'el* : la forme *pe'al* a le même sens. En conséquence, il ne faut pas rajouter un *mīm* initial (qui est la marque du participe *pa'el*), car on peut lire aisément *fareq-na* (*na* étant le pronom de la première personne du singulier sous forme enclitique). Notre traduction est donc : « je me délivre ».

μεμψαι : le mot se comprend comme l'union de *men* et *nafši* (ܡܢܢܦܫܐ), à savoir « par moi-même », le *αι* grec évoquant le possessif syriaque de la 1^{ère} personne du singulier (*i*). Il s'agit d'une expression figée en syriaque qui signifie « de mon plein gré ». C'est sans doute comme cela que le traducteur latin a rendu l'expression par *in se*. Une lecture alternative de ce mot, qui nous avait tentés, était d'y voir la racine du verbe *pšai* (ܦܫܐ), « sauver ». On aurait pu être ainsi face à un *mpasai* (ܡܦܫܐܝ), participe passif : « je suis sauvé ». Mais cette solution n'expliquerait pas le *mīm* initial.

μέν χαλ δαίαν : l'expression est tout à fait compréhensible en syriaque telle quelle : *men kul dayan* (ܡܢ ܟܠ ܕܝܢܐ), « de tout juge ». « Juge » se dit *dayana* (ܕܝܢܐ), mais à l'état absolu, requis, comme ici, par la présence du *kul* qui précède (« tout »), est *dayan*. Il ne faut pas donc y voir le jugement (*dyna*), comme le fait F. Graffin. Dans la structure de la phrase, cette expression représente le complément du « je me délivre » qui précède.

μωσωμή : la lecture de F. Graffin nous a paru un peu trop éloignée du grec, là où il lit *ba-s^cmeh*, déjà rencontré d'ailleurs dans la première formule mais transcrit en grec par βασημᾶ. On peut, au contraire, garder le *mīm* initial et comprendre le mot comme étant le participe actif ou passif du verbe « nommer », « se nommer », *šammeh* (ܫܡܡܗ), à savoir *mšammeh* ou *mšammah* (la prononciation des voyelles *a* et *e* étant en syriaque très proche). Le sens serait alors : « qui se nomme » ou « nommé ». Nous reconnaissons, cependant, qu'une formulation syriaque plus correcte aurait employé la phrase nominale « dont le nom est... » (*da-s^cmeh hū... ܕܗܘܢܫܐ ܫܡܗܐ*).

δαέα : nous préférons au « Yahvé » de F. Graffin la lecture *dayūa* (ܕܝܘܐ), démon, à cause surtout des trois voyelles grecques αέα, qui nous semblent marquer la prononciation d'un mot plus long que *yah*.

ἀκφορ νεψευ : ἀκφορ est compris par F. Graffin, à travers une inversion de syllabes, comme le verbe rencontré plus haut, *fraḡ*, « sauver ». Le mot tel quel, cependant, a un sens bien précis en syriaque : *kfar* (ܟܦܪ) signifie « renier », « apostasier », « renoncer à Satan » dans les formules baptismales. Ici, on aurait ce dernier sens, à la première personne du singulier de l'inaccompli (*ekfūr* ܝܟܦܘܪ), forme verbale qui évoque souvent le désir, l'exclamation, l'optatif ; notre traduction est alors : « que je renonce à son âme » – *našfeh*, avec le possessif masculin de la 3^{ème} personne *eh* – (à entendre, l'âme ou la personne de « tout juge nommé démon » : le démon, donc, Satan).

ουα Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρία : nous suivons F. Graffin et lisons : « ô Jésus de Nazareth ! ».

Résumons notre lecture, qui reste, on le souligne une fois de plus, une hypothèse de travail. L'énoncé grec donnerait ceci en syriaque :

mših w^c-fareq-na men nafsi men kul dayan mšammah dayūa ekfūr našfeh aū yešū nesraya

ܡܫܝܗܘܘܢܫܐ ܕܝܘܐ ܝܟܦܘܪ ܢܫܦܗ ܐܘܝܝܫܘܢܫܐ ܕܝܘܐ ܝܟܦܘܪ ܢܫܦܗ ܐܘܝܫܘܢܫܐ ܕܝܘܐ

ce qui veut dire :

« Je reçois l'onction et je me délivre par moi-même de tout juge nommé démon. Que je renonce à son âme, ô Jésus de Nazareth ! ».

Intervention de l'officiant

On peut passer, pour terminer, à la nouvelle intervention de l'officiant incluant le deuxième « énoncé barbare » et son interprétation. La suite des citations liturgiques produites par Irénée prolonge le contenu du premier « énoncé barbare » : « Le Nom caché à toute divinité, seigneurie ou vérité qu'a revêtu Jésus de Nazareth dans les zones de la lumière du Christ qui vit par l'Esprit Saint, pour la rédemption des anges, le Nom de la res-

tauration » ; Irénée mentionne alors la deuxième formule « barbare », prolongée elle aussi d'une « traduction », et d'une autre formule à la première personne du singulier. On remarquera d'emblée que cette nouvelle intervention de l'officiant renvoie au cœur de la théologie valentinienne du baptême dans le Nom. D'après l'*Extrait de Théodote 22,4*, on découvre un élément liturgique intéressant dont nous avons déjà parlé. Dans la célébration baptismale, les valentiniens pratiquent une imposition des mains suivie de la formule « pour la rédemption angélique » ; or, cette expression « pour la rédemption angélique » est intégrée à la formule rapportée ici par Irénée, preuve sans doute qu'Irénée n'invente pas les formules qu'il rapporte. La formulation de l'officiant rappelle la descente du Sauveur dans les lieux de la lumière, comme une autre évocation de l'exégèse de l'hymne aux Philippiens.

L'« énoncé barbare », lui-même, renvoie alors, une fois encore, à la liturgie baptismale des premiers chrétiens et à l'interprétation qu'en donnent les valentiniens :

Je reçois l'onction
 et je me délivre par moi-même
 de tout juge nommé démon.
 Que je renonce à son âme,
 ô Jésus de Nazareth !

L'ensemble de cette formule semble être prononcée par l'initié, puisqu'elle évoque la réception de l'huile d'onction, rapportée par Irénée à la fin du rituel, à la fin du chapitre, une fois les phrases liturgiques prononcées. La terminologie de la renonciation évoque l'engagement du futur baptisé à renoncer à Satan, « à son âme » comme il est dit ici, c'est-à-dire à Satan et à sa personne selon une formulation bien sémitique ; c'est l'équivalent du renoncement à Satan, à ses pompes et à ses œuvres, qui précède de peu l'onction d'huile, d'après la liturgie attestée par la *Tradition apostolique* (chap. 21). Vu d'un point de vue valentinien, cette formule de renonciation fait passer le futur baptisé du domaine de la fatalité et du pouvoir des archontes au domaine de la vie, comme l'indiquent encore les *Extraits de Théodote* (76–78) ; ici, les archontes sont évoqués par les démons ou les juges auxquels il faut donner les mots de passe pour remonter de cieus en cieus jusqu'au domaine de la vie éternelle. L'invocation finale « ô Jésus de Nazareth » souligne à nouveau la spiritualité mystique des valentiniens, centrée autour de l'efficacité du nom de Jésus pour la régénération et la restauration (l'apocatastase, dans le texte grec d'Irénée).

Ce que propose Irénée comme traduction de l' « énoncé barbare » semble à nouveau très loin de l'énoncé sémitique : « Je ne divise pas l'Esprit, le cœur et la supracéleste puissance miséricordieuse du Christ ; puissé-je jouir de ton Nom, Sauveur de Vérité ! » ; seule la fin de la formule « Sauveur de Vérité » ressemble à la mention « Jésus le Nazaréen » dans l'énoncé sémitique, si l'on admet ce que E. Thomassen appelle « un parallèle intrigant »¹⁸ dans l'*Évangile selon Philippe* (62,13–15) où le nom de Jésus renvoie à son origine sémitique « celui qui sauve », et où *Nazara* est interprété comme vérité. Mais la mention « Sauveur de Vérité » ne peut pas être déduite directement de la racine *Nazara*, à notre connaissance. À nouveau, nous proposons de comprendre ces bribes de spéculations sur le nom de Jésus, au centre de la cérémonie de la rédemption, comme les traces d'un enseignement des valentiniens dont la liturgie rappelle, dans la manifestation cultuelle publique, quelques éléments compréhensibles par les seuls initiés. Et comme avec l'exemple de l' « énoncé barbare » précédent, nous soupçonnons aussi que le découpage intentionnel d'Irénée laisse entendre une interprétation fantaisiste sur un énoncé, alors que les phrases prononcées par l'officiant peuvent très bien s'enchaîner les unes aux autres ; le second « énoncé barbare », à la première personne, pourrait être encore une intervention de l'officiant offrant à l'initié la phrase qu'il est censé prononcer à sa suite ; puis l'initié récapitule son expérience, avec une terminologie bien valentinienne : « Je suis confirmé et racheté, et je rachète mon âme de ce siècle et de tout ce qui en ressortit, au nom de Iao qui a racheté son âme pour la rédemption dans le Christ vivant ». Peut-être faut-il même prendre les deux phrases à la première personne comme étant deux phrases prononcées par l'initié lui-même, après l'invocation de l'officiant se terminant par l' « énoncé barbare » d'origine sémitique.

Pour conclure, on relèvera qu'il est parfois tentant d'interpréter des « énoncés barbares ». Dans le cas d'Irénée, il nous semble important tant de déjouer les recettes hérésiologiques de l'évêque de Lyon contre les gnostiques valentiniens, que de constater la fiabilité de son témoignage, quand on le compare aux sources directes des valentiniens eux-mêmes. On ne peut pas dire la même chose pour toutes les notices des hérésiologues, surtout quand elles sont interprétées par nos contemporains comme des faits historiques servant à reconstruire l'histoire des hérésies.

¹⁸ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 367n62.

Ceci dit, le décryptage de deux formules d'origine sémitique dans les matériaux liturgiques des gnostiques valentiniens oriente le regard sur leurs sources, parfois bilingues, à un moment où la gnose valentinienne fonctionne sans la référence à un corpus biblique canonique, comme celui que nous connaissons après Irénée. Bien sûr, il est très dommage que presque tous les témoignages de l'existence de valentiniens en monde syriaque aient disparu alors que le hasard des découvertes a permis de combler, avec les sources coptes, des pans entiers de la doctrine et des pratiques rituelles des gnostiques des second et troisième siècles.

Quand on voit enfin le temps qu'il faut pour essayer de décrypter deux énoncés sémitiques d'une formule baptismale, il nous semble que nombre des énoncés que nous cataloguons avec le C.E.N.O.B. resteront encore longtemps des ἀσήματα, des énoncés sans signification. C'est dire toute la recherche qui s'ouvre encore pour les spécialistes du valentinisme.

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MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN *THE SECRET REVELATION OF JOHN*

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It is a pleasure to dedicate this essay in appreciation to my friend and colleague Professor Einar Thomassen, whose scholarship on Valentinian Christianity has shed much illumination on texts and problems that indeed had appeared to be dark mysteries before he brought their secrets to light.

*The Secret Revelation of John (SRJ)*¹ offers many opportunities to explore the topic of “mystery and secrecy.” The entire work is titled an *apocryphon*—a “secret revelation”—and one version begins by explicitly proclaiming itself to contain the revelation of mysteries and secrets hidden in silence (*SRJ* 1,1–2). All versions conclude with a declaration that John is to write down all that the Savior has told him and give “this mystery” in secret to his fellow disciples (*SRJ* 27,3–4).² Throughout the revelation itself, readers encounter numerous cases of hidden beings, references to mysteries, and veiled symbols. What might all this mystery and secrecy portend?

¹ *The Secret Revelation of John* has survived to the present in four codices: the fifth century Berlin Codex (BG 19,6–77,7) and three fourth century manuscripts from Nag Hammadi, Codex II (NHC II 1,1–32,10), Codex III (NHC III 1,1–40,11), and Codex IV (NHC IV 1,1–49,28). These manuscripts represent three independent translations from Greek into Coptic of three different versions (BG, NHC III, and NHC II/IV). Of these four manuscripts, two represent a shorter version (BG and NHC III) and two a longer version (NHC II and IV). Citations of the Coptic texts are from the synoptic edition by Michael M. Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., text and translation, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995). All English translations and numbered references follow Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 25–81. For further discussion of the manuscript tradition, see Karen L. King, “Approaching the Variants of the Apocryphon of John,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; NHMS 44; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 105–37 esp. 124–30.

² On the practice in philosophical schools of passing “secret doctrine” to disciples, see Robert Lamberton, “The ἀπόρρητος Θεωρία and the Roots of Secrecy in the History of Platonism,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 139–52, esp. the discussion of Plato, *Theatetus* 152C.

Recent scholarship has pointed to the multiple aims and effects of such claims and the practices that presumably accompany them. Some of these may be highly generalizable, such as the claim that the very notion of secrecy implies a complementary notion of revelation—as Kurt Rudolph summarizes: “ohne Geheimnis keine ‘Offenbarung.’”³ On the other hand, Einar Thomassen’s illuminating exposition of the famous statement that $\Delta\text{Π}\chi\text{Θ}\epsilon\iota\varsigma \text{ } \bar{\rho}\zeta\omega\beta \text{ } \text{ΝΙΜ} \text{ } \zeta\eta\eta\text{Ν}\text{Ο}\text{Υ}\text{Μ}\text{Υ}\text{Σ}\text{Τ}\text{Η}\text{Ρ}\text{Ι}\text{Ο}\text{Ν}$ ⁴ (*Gospel of Philip* 67,27) shows equally persuasively that the language of “mystery” can refer to a very specific content—in that case, to “the symbolic-paradigmatic quality of the incarnated Saviour’s acts, and specifically his baptism, where he himself was redeemed and thereby provided the continuously efficient model of the redemption of his followers through ritual acts.”⁵ In the *Secret Revelation of John*, both the general and the specific are on display, offering a complex set of images and themes that were potentially available for a variety of social and ideological deployments.

Secrecy and Mystery in The Secret Revelation of John

The title of the work as an “apocryphon” already indicates how the entire work is to be read—it is a “secret revelation.”⁶ This point is further confirmed by the opening declaration of the longer version: “The teaching [of the Savi]or and the re[vel]ation of the mysteries [together with the things] hidden in silence a[nd those (things) w]hich he taught to Joh[n, his disci]ple” (*SRJ* 1,1–2).⁷ The content of this “secret revelation” thus encompasses the book’s narrative in its entirety. The story begins when the disciple John is confronted by a Pharisee, who accuses “this Nazorene” of having

³ Kurt Rudolph, “Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung in Gnosis und Manichäismus,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 265–87, esp. 268.

⁴ Often mistranslated, as Thomassen demonstrates, as “The Lord did everything *in a mystery*.” Here “mystery” does not refer to “sacraments.”

⁵ See Einar Thomassen, “*Gos. Philip* 67:27–30: Not ‘in a Mystery,’” in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud et Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.E 7; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 925–39; citation from p. 939.

⁶ Rudolph suggests that this is the case for “Gnosis” more generally, e.g. that it is to be read as “Geheimwissen” and “Mysterium” (see “Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung,” 270, 275).

⁷ I have indicated lacunae in the text through brackets only where the text is attested in none of the extant manuscripts.

deceived him and lead him astray. Distressed, John retreats to a remote mountain in the desert, his mind filled with unanswered questions. At this point, the heavens open and the Savior appears. The main body of the text is taken up with the Savior's revelation to John about the ineffable God and the heavenly realm, the origin of the world and the arrogant, ignorant nature of the rulers who govern it, and the story of humanity from creation to salvation. The Savior explains the whole of human history as a struggle between the lower world rulers, who seek to entrap humanity under their illegitimate rule, and emissaries from the world above, who seek to free them from the bonds of the counterfeit spirit. At the end, the Savior admonishes John to write it all down and pass on these teachings to his fellow spirits. After he "disappears," John goes to his fellow disciples and tells them everything. The book ends with the title: "The Secret Revelation of John" (BG/III) or "The Secret Revelation according to John" (II/IV).⁸ From this narrative perspective, the "mysteries" which the Savior communicates to John include the real nature, origin, and destiny of everything. Yet throughout the book, readers learn not only the revealed truth, but also why this teaching is secret, that is, how and why the truth has been hidden from them.

While the term "mysteries" or "mystery" is used to refer to the whole book and its revelatory content, at several points this terminology is also used more specifically. At *SRJ* 20,7–8, the Savior tells John that he will teach them about "the mystery of their life"—that is, the life of the world rulers. BG describes this "life" as "their counterfeit spirit which dwells within them," while II reads it as "the plan they made with each other, the likeness of their spirit." In both versions, the comment comes immediately after the Savior's teaching about how the rulers enclosed the first human in flesh so that he became mortal and then placed him in "paradise"—a place of bitterness, poison, and death. Their "tree of life," he explains, is in truth hate, deception, darkness, and evil (*SRJ* 20,10–16). Their life is death. The Savior's revelation of this "mystery" involves reading (at least) three traditions intertextually: 1) the Biblical story of Genesis 2–3, in which the

⁸ ΠΑΠΟΚΡΥΦΟΝ ΝΙΩΡΔΑΝΗΝΗΣ (BG/III) or ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΡΔΑΝΝΑΗΝ ΝΑΠΟΚΡΥΦΟΝ (II/IV). The title is found on the flyleaf of Codex III, as well as in the subscript of all four manuscripts. In the shorter versions, it is *The Secret Revelation of John*; in the longer version, *The Revelation according to John*. For a discussion of the possible significance of this distinction as indicating that the longer version was intended to be read as a "secret gospel attributed to John," see Judith Hartenstein, *Die zweite Lehre: Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen als Rahmenerzählung frühchristlicher Dialoge* (TU 146; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 64.

creator God breathes his breath (spirit) into Adam, giving him life, and then places him in paradise; 2) ancient medical notions that the breath (*pneuma*) is the essence of life; and 3) the philosophical notion that all life ends in mortality (e.g., that life is death). The Savior thus explains the “mystery of their life” by reading mortal life as a product of the rulers’ “counterfeit spirit”; that is, by giving the true meaning of scripture and tradition, he simultaneously exposes how the world rulers cloak their maliciously deceptive version of reality with partial truths.

This is but one of multiple examples where the Savior’s revelation offers the true meaning of scripture. He explains to John numerous passages from Genesis: “moving to and fro” as the agitation of Sophia (*SRJ* 14,8–15); the trees in the garden (*SRJ* 20,1–6, 10–17; 20,18–22); Adam’s “trance” and the creation of Eve from Adam’s “rib” (*SRJ* 21,2–7; 15–16); and the escape of Noah in the “ark” (*SRJ* 24,23–26).⁹ Often these explanations are aimed at correcting the text, either by indicting Moses (“not as Moses said”) or by providing an allegorical (spiritual) interpretation. These explicit cases cue readers to expect scripture and tradition to be full of deception or hidden meaning, and invite them to see the Savior’s revelation as the key to unlock their mysteries.

Another instance of the term “mystery” occurs at *SRJ* 22,5, where the Savior discusses Yaldabaoth’s ignorance of “the mystery which came to pass from the holy design” (II) or “from the design of the holy height” (BG). The implication here is clear: the world creator (and his followers) lack a full understanding of the actions they perform and what is happening around them. In this case, Yaldabaoth doesn’t understand why Adam and Eve withdrew from him after they had eaten of the tree of knowledge. The reader has learned that this “eating of the tree” was in fact a metaphor for receiving knowledge from Epinoia-Christ. They withdraw when they realize the truth. Yaldabaoth doesn’t of course realize what had happened, but he is clearly annoyed and, in BG, he curses them, subordinates the

⁹ For further discussion of these and other well-studied uses of Jewish literature, see e.g. Birger Pearson, “Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature,” in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (SAC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 29–38; idem., “I Enoch in the Apocryphon of John,” in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts. Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman* (ed. Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 355–67; idem., “Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” in *Mikra: Text, Translations, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder; CRINT 1; Assen: Van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 635–52; King, *Secret Revelation of John*, 177–243.

female to the male, and casts them out of paradise.¹⁰ Here the “mystery” refers specifically to the fact that the full nature of “historical” events cannot be perceived without the illuminating revelation of the divine emissaries, precisely because the world rulers—who presumably supply the “normative” and “authoritative” meaning of events—are in fact ignorant. In this case, “mystery” arises from and points toward blind ignorance, as well as deception.

Another instance of the term “mystery” occurs at *SRJ* 27,5, where the Savior calls his teaching “the mystery of the immovable generation.” Here the emphasis lies on exposing the true nature of humanity as the spiritual race; its stability is an attestation of its immortal, divine character,¹¹ a truth revealed by the Savior’s teaching about the origin, current situation, and destiny of humanity.

The final instance of mystery language occurs at *SRJ* 27,12. BG says that the Savior handed over “the mystery” to John (ἀφ’ ἑτοῦτο μῆτιμύστηριον); II says that “these things” were given to John by the Savior “mysteriously” (ναῖ ἀγῆταδῶς ναφ εἰς οὐμύστηριον). Thomassen’s careful discussion of the phrase εἰς οὐμύστηριον in the *Gospel of Philip* 6,27 should caution us against reading these two variants as communicating the same thing.¹² It would seem that BG offers here a notion that the content of the “mystery” which he is to write down and pass on encompasses the whole revelation given to John. But the author of II may have something else in mind. Might “mystery” here refer to a sacrament? Possibly, but although rituals of baptism and anointing are more fully theologized in the longer version in comparison with the shorter versions of BG and III,¹³ this use of “mystery” would depart from what we have seen throughout the rest of II/IV. Rather, εἰς οὐμύστηριον may refer here to the mode in which the revelation was made known, that is, it may refer to the Savior’s triple-formed, luminous theophany at the beginning of the revelation to John (*SRJ* 3,1–17). In that passage, too, the Savior declares that his teaching to John is meant to be passed on to “his fellow spirits of the immovable race.” Thus the reference turns the reader’s attention back to the text’s beginning and forms a kind

¹⁰ The variant in II is somewhat more complicated with regard to the gender implications (see King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 254–56), but both BG and II clearly identify Yaldabaoth’s ignorance of the truth.

¹¹ See Michael A. Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (NHS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1985).

¹² See Thomassen, “*Gos. Philip* 67:27–30.”

¹³ See Jean-Marie Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal séthien: Études sur la sacramentaire gnostique* (BCNT.E 2; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1986).

of literary *inclusio* of the whole revelation, but now with emphasis on its theophanic (“mysterious”) mode of delivery.

The nature of this revelation is characterized by the statement in II 1,2 that the mysteries are [ΝΕ]ΤΡΗΠ Ζῆ ΟΥΜΝΤΚΑΡΩΦ Μ[Ν ΝΑΙ ΕΝ]Τ ΔΥΤΣΕΒΟΥΥ ΔΙΩΞΑΝΝ[ΗΣ ΠΕΦΜΔ.]ΘΗΤΗΣ (“things hidden in silence/silently and those which he taught to John, his disciple”). The first part of this phrase implies that silence is a mode of concealment, but the second part states that the hidden things are revealed in what the Savior teaches John. It would seem that the Savior’s speech to John breaks the silence, revealing what has been hidden. There is, however, no implication here that, once the mysteries have been revealed, they are no longer hidden in silence. Rather it seems that what is revealed maintains the character of “mysteries” that are “hidden in silence” even as they are revealed.¹⁴ How can this be? The text’s theology and soteriology may offer an explanation. The Savior teaches that the true God is ineffable (*SRJ* 4,18, 21), and the divine beings of the heavenly realm come into existence Ζῆ ΟΥΚΑΡΩΦ (“silently”; *SRJ* 7,17). They can be known only through the one who dwells in God (“the Invisible Spirit”) who tells these things to “us” (*SRJ* 5,6–7). How does this happen? Although the true God is “nameless” (*SRJ* 4,19), the name of Christ is spoken to those who are worthy (*SRJ* 7,32). To Christ (Autogenes) was given the knowledge of the All (*SRJ* 7,30). So, although the Divine ultimately remains in ineffable silence, to speak the name of Christ is to reveal knowledge of the All, presumably because “the name of Christ” codes both the mode and the content of knowledge about the divine. This is the revelation given to John in the Savior’s “mysterious” appearance and in his teaching of the “mystery” that is hidden in silence.¹⁵

¹⁴ As Williams suggests, “one form of mythological secrecy was the notion that truths that had now been revealed had only *formerly* been kept secret by God. Thus, there was no longer a need to conceal them. . . . That a writing contains secrets does not mean they are intended to be concealed any longer, and in fact, may indicate precisely the opposite intention” (Michael A. Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation, and Late Antique Demiurgical Myths,” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions* (ed. Elliot R. Wolfson; New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 31–58 esp. 47, 49). He does not include *SRJ* in this category, however, since it specifically commands secrecy (in the conclusion) while other texts seem to be revealing secrets that had been concealed in the past, but that are now revealed/to be revealed (op. cit. 47–50).

¹⁵ In II, readers are further told that Christ is honored “with a great voice” (II 7,27), possibly tying Christ’s nature as himself the revelation of God to his function in giving spoken revelation.

Names are powerful, but they can be distorted. Yaldabaoth, for example, is only falsely called “God” (*SRJ* 13,4–5), and he gives his subordinate authorities names “from illusion and their power” (BG 1,26). But Christ reveals that they have two names: “The names which they were given by the Chief Begetter had power in them, but the names which were given to them according to the glory of those who belong to heaven are for them destruction and powerlessness” (II 13,18–19). Here again the Savior’s revelation exposes distortion, counterfeit images, and partial truths.

The language of “mystery” is also complemented by stories where beings from the divine world purposefully are “hidden.” Three of these cases involve attempts at protecting spiritual beings from the malice of the world rulers. The Epinoia of Light hides in Adam, most certainly to escape detection by the world rulers (*SRJ* 18,28), and later she “lifted the veil” from his mind (*SRJ* 20,18). Similarly at *SRJ* 24,23–26, Pronoia/Epinoia hides Noah and others belonging to the immovable generation in a cloud in order to protect them from the flood of darkness unleashed by the world rulers. In the hymn near the conclusion of the longer version, Pronoia-Christ hides so as not to be recognized when she descends into the world (II 26,8–9). All of these concealments are meant to enable the revelation to humanity, while protecting both them and the revealers from attacks by the false gods of the lower world.

There are two other instances of concealment, however, that invoke other ends. The first occurs at *SRJ* 10,16, where Christ says that Sophia initially tried to hide her offspring, Yaldabaoth: “She surrounded him with a luminous cloud. And she placed a throne in the midst of the cloud in order that no one might see him except the holy Spirit, who is called the mother of the living” (II 15–17). He withdraws, however, and abandons that place. Concealment here seems aimed at mitigating the effects of Sophia’s ignorant and audacious activity, but it is unsuccessful. A second instance is given in the longer version, which adds a sentence describing the rulers’ creation of Fate, stating that “because of the fetter of forgetfulness, their sins were hidden” (*SRJ* 24,15). This comment seems aimed at explaining how it is that humans have not perceived the evil deeds of the rulers: Fate had “blinded the whole creation so that they might not know the God who is above them all” (*SRJ* 24,14).

This theme of secrecy as deception is directly related to concealment in *SRJ*. As we saw above, the entirety of the book is framed as a revelation to John explicitly aimed at countering the Pharisee’s initial charge that John’s teacher (Christ) had deceived him (*SRJ* 2,4–5). The Savior’s

revelations make it abundantly clear that it is not he, but the ignorant rulers of the world who engage in deception, lead humanity astray, and close their hearts.¹⁶ And yet, we see acts of deception on both sides. In order to retrieve the spiritual power which the Chief Ruler had stolen from his mother Sophia, the Father of the All¹⁷ sent down Autogenes and the four lights to persuade Yaldabaoth to breathe the spirit into the inert figure they had formed in order to give it life and movement. The shorter version makes it clear that the heavenly envoys used disguise to do this, succeeding only by appearing “in the shape of angels of the Chief Ruler” (BG 18,5).¹⁸ The rulers themselves employ this strategy later when they wish to pollute the souls of humanity with their own counterfeit spirit (II 25,7–8). They impersonate the legitimate husbands of their victims and molest them, “sating them” with their false spirit and producing children out of darkness (*SRJ* 25,9–10, 17–18).¹⁹

In summary, the themes of mystery and secrecy in *SRJ* point to multiple meanings and strategic (rhetorical) functions. “Mystery” refers not only to the content of the Savior’s revelation, but also to its mode of disclosure. It indicates a hermeneutics for deciphering the true meaning of scripture and tradition, as well as for interpreting events in a world created and ruled by ignorant powers. Secrecy points not only toward strategies of concealment and deception (used by both the emissaries of truth and by the world rulers), but it also encompasses the text’s theological epistemology of divine ineffability and the power of names. Together these themes help clarify not only the truth revealed by the Savior, but also how and why that truth had not been uncovered before now. They work strategically to aid the text’s larger aim of shaping readers who are persuaded to accept Christ’s teaching as a paradigm that will aid in distinguishing between the true and the false, the real and the counterfeit, life and death.

¹⁶ E.g., *SRJ* II 25,11–20.

¹⁷ BG 18,4; II reads: “the Mother-Father of the All.”

¹⁸ This strategy is absent from the longer version, which states only that the Lights went down “to the place of the angels” (II 18,5), possibly indicating a certain discomfort with the notion that the divine would use deception.

¹⁹ Although the Savior emphasizes the spiritual valence of this deception, the image draws on ancient medical notions of sexual intercourse and conception, such that the (deceptive) “spirit” with which they filled the women may have been identified with spermatic *pneuma*. Aristotle, for example, understands *pneuma* as the substance of the soul which is kin to the stars and causes the semen to be fertile (see Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 736b–737a).

The Social, Historical, and Rhetorical Implications of Secrecy

To acknowledge that the book explicitly asks to be read as “secret revelation” does not, however, make it entirely clear what such a reading positionality might imply socially, historically, or rhetorically. Why make such claims? And what should we make of them?

One acknowledged function of claims to “secret knowledge” is to form a group of insiders. Scholars have frequently suggested that *SRJ* works in just this way. Hartenstein, for example, sees the designation “*apocryphon*” in *SRJ*’s title as an attestation that this “secret book” is meant only for a limited “Empfängerkreis,”²⁰ and Pleše concurs that the term signifies “some intimate secret shared only by the chosen few.”²¹ Certainly, the Savior’s concluding instructions to pass on his teaching “in secret” and limit it only to John’s “fellow spirits” (*SRJ* 27,4) would seem to support this supposition that behind the text lies a socially exclusive group, a kind of elite “secret society.” From this perspective, the esoteric nature of *SRJ*’s teaching would appear to be a corollary to such posited social exclusivity—the one implies the other.

But other assumptions have come into play as well in interpreting the implications of the text’s emphasis on secrecy, particularly notions that esotericism is linked to a particular type of religiosity. *SRJ* has, for example, been described as an example of Gnostic *paradosis*, understood primarily by contrast with the exoteric teaching of the canonical gospels. Characterization of this Gnostic teaching as esoteric is buttressed by citation of Irenaeus’s polemical claim that heretics base their erroneous views on claims that the Savior gave advanced teaching to his disciples that was not intended for all people.²² To this ancient rhetoric, scholars add modern functionalist notions that such secrecy aims to garner prestige and authority for its claimants, as, for example, Pleše argues:

Similar passages from the “Gnostic” literature, both from original works and from second-hand heresiological summaries, amount to an extensive dossier—bearing witness to the distinctively ‘Gnostic’ flavor of the opening

²⁰ Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre*, 64; see also the discussion of PHEME PERKINS, “Christian Books and Sethian Revelations,” in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BNCH.E 7; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 697–730, esp. 715–16.

²¹ Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John* (NHMS 52; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 7.

²² See, for example, Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*, 7–8, referring to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.27.2.

lines of the *Apocryphon* and to their entirely conventional character. The Savior as a heavenly messenger, the secrecy of his *paradosis*, the small number of privileged recipients (apostles or other companions of Jesus), the inspiration drawn from the Gospels and, simultaneously, revisionary emulation with the scriptural tradition, are commonplaces exploited, among many others, by the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* (both in BG), by the Ophites and Basilides. The purpose of these commonplaces is always the same—to lend authority to the “Gnostic” *paradosis* and to surround it with the aura of novelty and exclusiveness.²³

The problem with seeing this thematic as distinctively “Gnostic,” as Williams and others have pointed out, is that similar forms of esotericism can be found in many strands of early Christian literature, including the New Testament gospels and letters of Paul. There, too, Jesus is depicted as a heavenly Savior, who imparts secret teaching to a chosen few. Indeed these traditions appear to be linked. Williams, for example, rightly emphasizes that later Christian claims to secrecy, such as we see in *SRJ*, depend upon this earlier tradition²⁴:

The famous saying in Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22, which most scholars would ascribe to the Q documents, has Jesus thanking God for hiding the truth from the wise and understanding and revealing it only to children, and contains the pronouncement that by the second century reportedly had become a central proof-text for some Christian demiurgical movements: “No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wishes to give revelation.”²⁵

Moreover, Williams notes that the teachings of these Christians were not very secret, given that the ancient sources indicate relatively easy access and availability—*SRJ*, for example, was known to Irenaeus and promulgated in numerous copies and in at least two languages.²⁶ At the very least, the text was not meant to be kept secret from other Christians, but indeed, as Perkins has pointed out: “By designating its initial recipients as John’s fellow disciples, the contents of the entire book are said to be common

²³ Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*, 8.

²⁴ Pleše also suggests that the “ultimate source” of this kind of “Gnostic” practice is found in the “pattern” established by Luke 24:13–54, but this acknowledgement does not seem to lessen for him the validity of Irenaeus’s contrast between the Gospels and the Gnostic heretics (see Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*, 8–9).

²⁵ Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 36. He also refers to 1 Cor 2:7 and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.20.3; 4.6.1–7.4; cf. 2.14.7. One might add the Ps.-Pauline Col 1:25–27; 2:2.

²⁶ See Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 37–41.

apostolic teaching.”²⁷ So, too, the actual teaching of the text seems to offer some incongruity with assumptions that “secrecy was an essential corollary of a typical ‘gnostic’ *soteriological determinism* or *elitism*.”²⁸ Williams challenges this view by pointing out that the Savior’s call for secrecy is in tension with the book’s teaching of universal salvation:

In fact even where we do encounter secrecy as a theme, we do not necessarily find the alleged soteriological elitism, as is demonstrated above all by the *Apocryphon of John*. Ironically, although the *Apocryphon of John* is probably our most explicit instance among these writings of a frame story containing an injunction to keep a secret book secret, it is at the same time one of the best examples of a Christian demiurgical text with a doctrine of apparently universal opportunity for salvation. . . . Thus we have the interesting situation of a revelation whose frame narrative stresses guarding the secrecy of the message, though the revelation itself portrays this message as something destined for the ears of every single human being.²⁹

The problem seems to be how to reconcile *SRJ*’s repeated use of themes of secrecy with its stated intent to reveal the truth to all humanity, as well as the associated practices of disseminating the text and its teaching.³⁰ Williams’ analysis, however, points toward the view I want to pursue here: that this formulation of the relationship between literary-rhetorical claims and social organization creates a false problem by presuming that the language of secret revelation must necessarily correlate to a socially exclusive group that is (intentionally) creating (a sensibility or a reality) of elite membership. Scholars have in fact argued the opposite in the case of the gospels and Paul. Indeed nothing in the mere use of such themes suggests that this “pattern” of secrecy, when deployed by some Christians, is distinctively “Gnostic” and indicates a secret society whose membership is limited to an elite, while the same pattern used by “canonical” Christians supposedly indicates exoteric tradition and presumably a correspondingly open (non-elite) social group. All these cases combine claims of secret revelation with practices of universal mission.

²⁷ Perkins, “Christian Books and Sethian Revelations,” 713. Moreover, Perkins sees the variants of the longer version (II) to indicate especially “A narrative frame story that draws its contents into a context of authoritative, apostolic book traditions” (724; see also 715).

²⁸ Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 33.

²⁹ Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 49, 50.

³⁰ See especially the discussion of how “revelation” is implied already in the notion of secrecy in Hans G. Kippenberg, “Erstrebenswertes Prestige oder falscher Schein? Das öffentliche Ansehen des Gerechten in jüdisch-frühchristlichen Auseinandersetzungen,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 203–24.

How can we explain why such similar patterns of secrecy language are treated so differently? Williams has suggested that the reason lies in the modern association of secrecy with heresy.³¹ Certainly one of the rhetorical deployments of secrecy in both ancient and modern discourse lies in identifying it with groups that are suspect or marginal. Scholars have frequently noted the (suspected or real) use of secrecy for malicious concealment or outright deception, but, in both ancient Christian polemics and modern scholarship, the tendency has been to tie secrecy to heresy, and quite often to immorality or dangerous intentions,³² while avoiding this negative implication when considering books that became canonical, either by ignoring the pattern of secrecy or explaining it away.³³ In any case, the rhetoric of heresy discourse is *by itself* insufficient to establish a distinctive (“Gnostic,” “elite,” “heretical,” “marginal”) social position or positionality for *SRJ*.³⁴

But the identification of esotericism with a particular notion of religiosity has more than one history in the modern West. The polemics of ancient heresy discourse can also be reinscribed within a modern “syndrome of the secret,” as Martin refers to it. He argues that when Christianity became dominant, it reimagined its own exclusivistic claims as an esoteric tradition of the past. The result was that: “Occluded by a regnant Christianity, it is precisely the Hermetic and Gnostic heritage that produced for Western culture its ‘syndrome of the secret.’”³⁵ Refracted by Enlightenment individualism and a nineteenth century *mentalité*, this syndrome came to include an identification of secrecy with religion, especially with genuine

³¹ Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 35 citing Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1. Stroumsa offers a different explanation in *Hidden Wisdom*, 157–58: “the very *ethos* of Christianity is inherently refractory to esoteric doctrines. There is one single salvation, offered to all and sundry, on the condition that one believes in Christ’s salvific sacrifice. In this context, the undeniable esoteric elements in the earliest stages of Christianity were an anomaly, condemned to disappear within a short time.” This suggestion struggles to keep the distinction between heretical Gnosticism and orthodox Christianity intact, but in my opinion the critique by Williams is convincing (see esp. 53–54).

³² See Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), xiii, xxiv.

³³ See, for example, Stroumsa, *op. cit.*, note 29.

³⁴ Williams comes to a similar conclusion regarding “Gnostics” more generally (see “Secrecy, Revelation,” 52).

³⁵ Luther H. Martin, “Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 101–22, at 117.

(albeit “primitive”) religious impulses and spirituality.³⁶ Gnostic esotericism was characterized as inward and individualistic, based on some kind of higher, ineffable experience that cannot be communicated in mere language. Thus, whether evaluated negatively as immoral heresy or positively as individualizing spirituality, Gnosticism became emblematic of esoteric religiosity.³⁷ This position is no more helpful than heresy discourse in characterizing *SRJ*’s use of secrecy and mystery language.

We can begin to formulate an alternative approach by noting Simmel’s point that secrecy is not a special condition, but a fact of social life. Given that complete knowledge of others is never possible, he argues, something always remains hidden in human relationships. As he puts it, “Every relationship between two individuals or two groups will be characterized by the ratio of secrecy that is involved in it.”³⁸ We should not see secrecy as something particular to a particular group, then, but rather should inquire about the parameters in which secrecy operates, not only its “ratio” but its rationale, rhetorics, discursive strategies, and practices.³⁹

The place to start is with Simmel’s remarkable insight that “Secrecy secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former.”⁴⁰

³⁶ For a brief discussion of how “secrecy” came (imprecisely) to be understood to be the specific purview of religion, especially through a romanticized and interiorized (e.g., individualized) conceptualization of Hermeticism and Gnosticism, see Martin, “Secrecy,” 117–21.

³⁷ One erroneous implication of this characterization is that “Gnostics” were anti-social; see the critique of Williams, “Secrecy, Revelation,” 43–44; idem., *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 96–115.

³⁸ See Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 11/4 (1906): 441–98; citation from p. 462.

³⁹ Martin, too, has suggested a move toward social analysis. Contrary to constructions of Gnostic esotericism as inward and individualistic, based on some kind of ineffable experience that can not be communicated in language, Martin argues: “As discursive formations, secrets are structured in such a way that they can be disclosed. To the rhetoric of secrecy, in other words, belong communal claims of truth to be spoken obscurely, or to be spoken not at all. In contrast to mystical or experiential views of religion which maintain that the essence of a mystery . . . cannot be communicated, but only realized, the rhetoric of secrecy has to do precisely with a collective structuring of discourse” (“Secrecy,” 113).

⁴⁰ Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy,” 462. “Secrecy in this sense—i.e., which is effective through negative or positive means of concealment—is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity. In contrast with the juvenile condition in which every mental picture is at once revealed, every undertaking is open to everyone’s view, secrecy procures enormous extension of life, because with publicity many sorts of purposes could never arrive at realization. Secrecy secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former” (ibid.).

This formulation helps to identify dimensions of secrecy that are crucial to understanding the form, content, and the possible functions or practical operations of *SRJ*. First we can see that the themes of secrecy and mystery, as well as concomitant claims to esotericism, are necessary to establish any plausibility to the audacious claim that its description of a “second world”—of the true God, the aeons above, the deeds of saviors and the actions of the lower gods—is a veritable reality. (Indeed all versions of Christianity in their nascence must have appeared as fantastic to the vast majority of late antiquity.) The literary genre of revelation dialogue is a mode of communicating not only the content of this second world but also structurally and rhetorically establishing its secret and mysterious character by presenting it as divine revelation. Securing such teaching in written artifacts (books) would give this revelation material substance as well as further its promulgation. Additionally, as Martin has suggested, *SRJ*'s reference to “mysteries and things hidden in silence” (*SRJ* 1,1–2) might refer to ritual silence as a kind of pedagogical practice that alone was sufficient for “the ‘unspeakable’ mystery of the mysteries.”⁴¹ The immediate aim of such ritual would thus not have been to conceal particular content (which in any case they claimed couldn't be communicated verbally), but again to substantiate the “mysterious” character of the teaching in collective embodiment. If so, *SRJ*'s emphatic insistence upon the mysterious character of the teaching it reveals would have been actualized through a material artifact (book) and embodied in ritual practices. Thus the imaginative fantasy of a “second” world could be performatively reiterated in bodily practices of writing, speaking, hearing, and keeping silence—practices that are not merely individual but socially performed over time.⁴²

How might such practices have affected the social formations of those who wrote and read *SRJ*? Because rhetorical themes such as positing an esoteric group (“the immovable race”) or producing secret knowledge are necessary to *SRJ*'s narrative logic, that is to its own account of its origin and nature, we should be careful about making direct correlations between the rhetoric of secrecy and the social form of a “secret society.”

⁴¹ See Martin, “Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities,” 110–12.

⁴² The emphasis on reiterated performance over time is intended to point toward the historical dimensions of such practices, including the differences in performances that accompany changes in group composition and social-historical settings (see e.g., Judith Butler, “The Question of Social Transformation,” in *Undoing Gender* [New York and London: Routledge, 2004], 204–31).

As we have seen, it is not clear to what degree actual social groups reading *SRJ* were secretive, especially given the text's teaching of universal salvation and their practices of promulgating these teachings in written artifacts. Nonetheless, as Simmel notes, claims to secrecy generally "intensify differentiation" (coded in *SRJ* as membership in the "immovable race"), and work to establish sensibilities of prestige and insider status.⁴³ It is possible that the claim to secrecy increased the authority and prestige of the group's teaching as well as the members' sense of their own value⁴⁴ and inner group cohesion. Certainly the content of the teaching itself reinforced the insider view that members of the group ("the immovable race") were not merely those "in the know" but were divine, impervious to the machinations of vicious powers and violence, and destined for eternal salvation in a utopian world of light.⁴⁵

Secret knowledge can also claim to give its possessors certain powers. The magical papyri, for example, offer examples of magicians who claim special powers based on revelation received from the gods, particularly divine names. According to Betz, such knowledge presumed initiation that involved deification.⁴⁶ In *SRJ* the topic of names receives special attention, and it is entirely plausible that the secret double names of the heavenly rulers discussed above, as well as an extensive list of the demons associated with the parts of the body in *SRJ* (II/IV) 16–17, were intended for protection, exorcism, and healing.⁴⁷ These "secrets" may have put *SRJ*'s readers (along with other Christians) into competition with other divine healers and magicians in the ancient "marketplace of magic."⁴⁸ Such prestige

⁴³ Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy," 464–67; see also Martin, "Secrecy," 113, who argues that "the rhetoric of secrecy has to do precisely with a collective structuring of discourse." Stroumsa takes the point to perhaps an extreme, arguing that not only "Gnostic Apocalypses" but others of the same genre, presented themselves as "hidden" precisely to increase their popularity: "there is no better way to publicise a text than to prohibit its publication, strongly limit its readership, or insist that it reveals deep and heavily guarded secrets" (Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Esotericism to Mysticism?" in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 289–310 at 297).

⁴⁴ So, for example, Betz's discussion of secrecy in the Greek magical papyri (Hans Dieter Betz, "Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 153–76, at 160).

⁴⁵ See King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 122–56.

⁴⁶ See the discussion of Betz, "Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri," 161–63, 172.

⁴⁷ See King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 147–53.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the account of the contest between Peter and Simon Magus in *The Acts of Peter* 23–29; Maud W. Gleason, "Truth Contests and Talking Corpses," in *Constructions*

and power, however, can be claimed only if their practitioners are to some degree “public” figures and their claims to special revelation known. The threats against those who reveal the secrets of *SRJ* in exchange for material gain (*SRJ* 27,11) may point toward just such a market value.

But secrecy offers more than mere plausibility, prestige, or even profit; it offers protection. Many scholars have associated practices of secrecy with defense, suggesting that secrecy was frequently a pragmatic strategy in the face of possible interdiction or persecution.⁴⁹ Simmel has argued, for example, that “the secret society emerges everywhere as a correlate of despotism and of police control.” Certainly *SRJ* depicts the world as dangerous and hostile to human flourishing, and it arguably engages in a thorough-going critique of power relations in the world below.⁵⁰ It may be that believers might require the defense of secrecy not merely because the rulers are bad, but because they themselves are engaged in offense. As Simmel also notes, again with lucid insight, “It (secrecy) acts as

of the Classical Body (ed. James I. Porter; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 287–313.

⁴⁹ See the discussion of Lambertson, who suggests (following Numenius fr. 23 [DesPlaces]) that “Numenius projected the need to hide the true doctrines of Platonic philosophy back to Plato himself, and explained the dialogue form itself as a response to political necessity. Socrates had expressed himself too openly and the Athenians executed him for it. Plato in turn saw a way to speak the truth *and* stay alive, but it required that he express himself obliquely” (“The ἀπόρρητος Θεωρία,” 144). See also Hubert Cancik, “*Occulte adhuc colunt*: Repression und Metamorphose der römische Religion in der Spätantike,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 191–201, concerning the use of secrecy by pagans after the ascendance of Christianity; Gerd Theißen, “Die pragmatische Bedeutung der Geheimnismotive im Markusevangelium: Ein wissensoziologischer Versuch,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 225–46 concerning the secrecy motif in the Gospel of Mark as a response to possible persecution; Dieter Giorgi, “Das Problem des Martyriums bei Basilides: Vermeiden oder Verbergen?” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 247–64, on persecution as a decisive element in promoting the notion of a secret identity as one of the illuminated. Rudolph suggests a link between “Todesgefahr” (“mortal danger”) and the interiorization of religious understanding, between martyrdom and the development of theologies of suffering (“Geheimnis,” 275–78, 286). In contrast, Williams argues that “prudential secrecy” is not necessarily “a cloak for social deviance” but might be “as much or more about social *conformity*” in the sense that “avoidance of persecution could be a way of ‘fitting in,’ conforming, toning down Christian sociopolitical deviance, and reducing tension with the surrounding society” (“Secrecy, Revelation,” 47).

⁵⁰ See King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 156–73. At the least, one might say it exposes something of the structure of power relations not available from the “public transcript” (see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 18–19).

protection alike *of defense and of offence* against the violent pressure of central powers. This is true, not alone in political relations, but in the same way within the church, the school, and the family.”⁵¹ Thus secrecy is not merely a *response* to (real or perceived) oppression, but also a *strategic tool* of resistance in an environment where open social-political critique and alternative views are neither welcome nor tolerated. In this, *SRJ* is not an exception but conforms to a widespread pattern. One can discern in ancient Christian literature a tendency for the most strident critiques of unjust power relations and violence to be cast in sharply dualistic terms and veiled imagery, and presented as direct revelation from God. Not just the *Apocryphon of John (SRJ)*, but the *Apocalypse of John* exemplifies this pattern of anti-Roman sentiment and cosmological dualism, despite other important differences between them.

Indeed the more critical and the more cloaked in secrecy, disguise, and subterfuge, the more need there is for initiated readers to learn to read “between the lines.” “Mystery” also suggests that “access to truth is a hermeneutic matter.”⁵² Leo Strauss famously suggested that persecution produces its own writing strategies, aimed at hiding meaning from all but the most perspicacious readers.⁵³ Here, however, it is not the “authors” of traditional materials, but initiates who posit hidden meanings “between the lines” of such prestigious texts as Plato and *Genesis*—and thus produce themselves as the perspicacious readers of secret revelation. *SRJ* presents Christ as an exemplary esoteric hermeneut. The Savior’s own hermeneutic disclosure of the “truth” of scripture provides a model for the group’s own endeavors and an authorization of their conclusions. The most direct social effect of *SRJ*’s pedagogy might be the training of initiates to enable them in the right kind of hermeneutics to read the “official world” (which I take to stand for some notion of hegemonic sociability) through the lenses of Christ’s revelation (a storied kind of “second world”).

The need to question the seemingly “literal” meaning of the texts of the Scripture is said to be due to the ignorance of those who produced them,

⁵¹ Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy,” 472.

⁵² In this regard, *SRJ* belongs to ancient philosophical tradition, as Lamberton argues that “throughout the history of ancient Platonism, the issue of concealment is closely bound up with hermeneutics. . . . The truth is always there in the dialogues, most of it on the surface where it is accessible to all readers, and the rest ‘in secret’ (ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ) or ‘in secrets’ (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις). Access to that truth, then, is a hermeneutic matter” (“The ἀπόρρητος Θεωρία,” 144, 145).

⁵³ Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), 22–37. Repr., from *Social Research* (1941): 488–504.

as well as to purposeful deception on the part of the pseudo-deity who inspired them. As we've seen, the Savior not only exposes the deceptions of the rulers, he also shows how tradition is deceptive and offers only partial or veiled truths. In this way, he invites readers to uncover the truth for themselves. The entire world below is represented as the deceptive and parodic imitation of the heavenly world revealed by the Savior, and the revelation is structured by charges and counter-charges of deception: The Pharisee charges that John's teacher deceived him, while the Savior shows how the world creator and his minions have formed a whole imitation cosmos that deceptively mimics and parodies the true world above. The vast compass of the *SRJ*'s revelation—a comprehensive narrative of the nature of God, the origin of the world, and human salvation—makes it possible to (re)read everything, including sacred texts, prestigious traditions, and current social-political arrangements.⁵⁴ In this sense, the revelation offers less a fixed creed than a framework for (re)orientation and (re)evaluation. The cloaking of this hermeneutics in the language of “mystery” ensures an indeterminacy that could facilitate considerable flexibility in its application.

The logic of *SRJ*'s socially critical hermeneutics is grounded in a pattern of imitation. Simmel noted that in secret societies, the socially-critical “second world” is placed in antithesis to the “official world” which exists along side of it, but this antithesis “nevertheless repeats in itself the forms of the greater structure.”⁵⁵ The second world gives characters, institutions, and events of the official world novel meanings and significance by “mirroring” them. In *SRJ*, this imitation is represented as deception.⁵⁶ This pattern of antithetical imitation is clearly discernable in *SRJ*, which itself explicitly thematizes the parallel character of the world above and the world below, but it does so precisely in order to claim that the secret “second world” is the primary reality which the apparently “obvious” world only partially and unsuccessfully reproduces.⁵⁷ This interesting

⁵⁴ For the hermeneutics of intertextual reading of prominent ancient literature in *SRJ*, see esp. King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 176–257; Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*.

⁵⁵ Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy,” 481–82.

⁵⁶ As we saw above, this is apparent not only in the creation of the lower world, but also when Autogenes-Christ and the lights take the form of the lower God's minions in order to deceive him.

⁵⁷ It has long been recognized that *SRJ* deploys Platonizing dualism to portray this world as an inferior copy of the divine realm, but this use involved a “gnostic revaluation” in which Plato's notion of the divinity of the cosmos is turned into its opposite (see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (2d ed; Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 241–65, esp. 250). In advancing a notion of Gnosticism

twist, which seems to stand “common sense” on its head, is actually a good example of the mirroring effect of all “secret societies,” and is essential to the operation of *SRJ* for various kinds of social criticism. It is this mirroring that allows the representation of the world above in utopian terms to function as the ideal model over against which the lower world could be seen to be not merely flawed but brutal.⁵⁸ We see here, too, that *SRJ* is able to redeploy the “public” rhetoric associating secrecy with criminal or anti-social behavior—an association frequently used in antiquity to implicate Christians in immorality, impiety, and criminal activities.⁵⁹ *SRJ* repeats this common discursive claim, but directs it oppositionally against the powers of the “obvious world.”

Moreover, the formulation of a second world in antithesis to the “official” world offers a particularly productive vantage point from which to view the oft-remarked distance between the exoteric views of “the world” and the esoteric teaching of secret societies. Simmel argued that the less accepted a particular group’s views were, the more a group’s need for secrecy in order to protect them from the kind of ridicule and denunciation that might lead less committed members to fall away. As a group’s views became more accepted, the less need there would be for secrecy. Similarly, as a group’s views begin to *lose* broader recognition, secrecy might begin to be invoked. Thus Simmel saw secrecy as a strategy particularly prominent both with the rise and with the demise of groups.⁶⁰ He offered the role reversals of Christianity and paganism before and after Constantine as a specific example:

So long as the Christian communities were persecuted by the state, they were often obliged to withdraw their meetings, their worship, their whole

as a rejection of life in the world through “anti-cosmic dualism,” however, we have missed the implications of *SRJ*’s claims to secrecy: to imply that reality has been purposefully concealed from humanity through active malice and deception. Plato argued that reality (“Being”) is no secret; it may be difficult to grasp, but it is potentially comprehensible to anyone exercising disciplined reason. In contrast, for *SRJ* the truth of reality is hidden. Secrecy and mystery thus aim less at rejecting the world than understanding and engaging its pervasive evils ideologically.

⁵⁸ For further discussion of this point, see King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 157–73, 239–43.

⁵⁹ For example, see Celsus (*Cels* 1.1) and Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 8–9), where charges of secrecy are coupled with immoral acts in their polemical criticisms of Christianity. As Simmel notes, secrecy often gives “the appearance of a public danger. . . (T)he secret society, purely on the ground of its secrecy, appears dangerously related to conspiracy against existing powers” (“The Sociology of Secrecy,” 499).

⁶⁰ See “The Sociology of Secrecy,” 471–72.

existence, from public view. So soon, however, as Christianity had become the state religion, nothing was left for the adherents of persecuted, dying paganism than the same hiding of its cultus which it had previously forced upon the new faith.⁶¹

I would note, however, that such relative safety would not have applied to all Christians. Those Christians deemed heretics may have retained the rhetoric (and practices?) of secrecy, not because of any essentially esoteric nature of their beliefs but because fellow Christians had now gained the means to persecute them.

Simmel's point, however, remains of critical importance in understanding the general deployments of secrecy themes and practices, both for protection and for enabling potential sites of social-political critique. Once secrecy is lost, so, too, is the second world *as* a second world and along with it, its potential for social-political critique. Secrecy and mystery can be lost in several ways: because the group's membership, views, and practices are exposed and dissipated—whether through derision/ridicule, rejection, successful rhetorical-definitional marginalization (as insane, deviant, and such), or disciplining and overt violence;—because a group accommodates to the hegemonic order and thereby loses its distinctive character; or because its perspectives and practices “win out” and become the “new” obvious world (as scholars have suggested was true of certain forms of Christianity after it became the dominant religion of the Roman world). In any case, the inference is that a multiplicity of social or ideological worlds can exist and develop only through strategies of secrecy and mystery—unless or until they (are forced to) accept the limits set in the name of the public order.

Conclusion

In the first part of this essay, specific uses of the themes of mystery and secrecy were identified: to characterize the narrative revelation given by Christ as well as its theophanic mode of disclosure; to “theorize” the Savior's revelatory hermeneutics and inculcate a reading strategy alert to the hidden meaning of scripture, tradition, and “history”; to expose the deception and ignorance of the world rulers; to differentiate the immovable race

⁶¹ See “The Sociology of Secrecy,” 472. Others have noted with regard to Christian history, that early claims to secrecy dissolved after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (see, for example, Kippenberg, “Erstebungswertes Prestige,” 203–4).

who have received the Savior's teaching from those under the power of the counterfeit spirit who are still ignorant (although in the end they will all be saved, except apostates); to characterize the ineffable nature of God and the power of names; and to describe defensive and offensive strategies of concealment and deception which various parties used sometimes to protect spiritual beings, sometimes to lead humanity astray and sometimes to save them.

The second section took up contemporary discussions of mystery and secrecy to inquire about what the diverse representation of these themes in *SRJ* might imply socially, historically, or rhetorically. Here Simmel's observation that secrecy is not a special condition, but a fact of social life was the starting point to consider a number of possibilities, involving plausibility, prestige, profit, and protection. What *generally* do claims and practices of secrecy do?

One function is to "intensify differentiation"—but what kind of differentiation? As we saw above, when contemporary scholarship classifies *SRJ*, the descriptions sometimes better fit concerns and perspectives of the 20th–21st centuries CE than the second to third. Discourses of orthodoxy and heresy, proper religiosity, and social-political or moral-legal conformity not only situate *SRJ* theologically, historically, and socially, they also evaluate it rhetorically (apologetically and ideologically) through the very application of the terms of the categorization. In operation, it is such discourses that produce differentiations between mainstream/Catholic and marginal/Gnostic Christianities, true and false religion, interior spirituality and external formalism, inclusive universalism and exclusive elitism, public transparency and dangerous subversion, moral and immoral behaviors/beliefs, and so on. These categories, however, are not the essential characteristics of particular groups or ideological formations in antiquity but the products of discursive rhetorics. The decisive problem is that they can lead to erroneous conclusions about the meaning and uses of mystery/secrecy in ancient Christianity. As we saw, *SRJ*'s language of mystery and secrecy is insufficient to differentiate heretical ("Gnostic," "esoteric," "elitist") Christians from orthodox ("mainstream," "exoteric," "universal") Christians. For all kinds of early Christianities, sharp distinctions between claims to exclusive salvation and universalizing mission, or contrasts between "individualistic" interiorization and engagement with the wider world, lead to inaccurate caricatures.

What about the question of social marginality? In the end, we might well conclude that *SRJ*'s language of secrecy implies social marginality, but by itself that does not necessarily imply that the situation of

“Gnostics” was significantly different from that of other Christians or that they were relatively unimportant in the history of Christianity, at least initially. Many early forms of Christianity which became orthodox also deployed the language of secrecy and mystery—and indeed, in the first centuries, these Christians, too, were not only numerically marginal in the Roman world, but also sought a degree of distance from public life and its potential dangers of exposure. They, too, constructed themselves as insiders who alone possessed the truth; they claimed to offer a unique relationship to God and to possess the secret of eternal life; and they promoted a universal ideology. Secrecy might, therefore, well indicate social marginality, but not such that it peculiarly marks *SRJ* in distinction from many other Christian writings.

Secrecy also appears particularly suited to situations where it would be dangerous to voice alternative ideologies or social-political criticisms directly and publically—arguably the situation of Christians under Roman rule, despite the sporadic character of the actual persecutions. If popular animosities and Roman persecution are any indication, Christians of many stripes were perceived to be anti-social critics of the political order and refused to participate in acts of civic piety (especially practices of sacrifice). But secrecy is not always the correlate of persecution; it can also protect the intellectual plausibility and integrity of a group's views and practices, and help to promote an insider sense of privilege, prestige, and even power. Given that non-Christian writers like Celsus and Porphyry openly attacked Christian views as childish and intellectually feeble, as well as intra-Christian polemics—Irenaeus' biting derision, for example, was aimed at other Christians, including readers of *SRJ*—believers might well want to conceal their views from the unsympathetic. Christian imagination of a demonic world hostile to them might not only be descriptive of their perceived situation, but it might also function to represent to themselves why they were being targeted for such vicious attacks. As Simmel suggests, such views as those of *SRJ* might require a certain level of concealment to survive, although ultimately their views would have to become broadly accepted in order to thrive. Here *SRJ* may stand out, however, given its relative status as heresy in the later period. While other Christians stepped into the light of Roman imperial patronage after the conversion of Constantine, copies of *SRJ* were hidden and buried, quite probably to preserve them from destruction at the hands of other Christians.

Here Simmel's point that secrecy is necessary both for defense (against persecution) and offense (for social critique) in the face of “the violent

pressure of central powers” shows its critical importance. While secrecy has many possible aims, strategies, and effects—these can shape insider-outsider boundaries, further the plausibility of novel claims, and offer prestige or even economic benefits—in some cases the need for secrecy’s protection is paramount for a group’s success and very survival. Whether secrecy works to protect sites for social-political criticism, for “liberating” practices, or simply for continued existence (e.g., in the face of violence or threats of violence); or whether it establishes sites to enact criminal or immoral behavior (such as illicit drugs distribution or government-sponsored torture), secrecy can have significant social impacts for good or ill. In the theme of secrecy and mystery, however, we may be dealing with one strategy that enables the generation and flourishing of social-ideological plurality, but that also simultaneously marks the limits of tolerable difference.

In the end, then, we might suppose that the general features of secrecy apply to those who read *SRJ*, as they do to other early Christian literature: to gain prestige (and perhaps profit) for themselves and their teaching; to protect themselves from persecution, ridicule, and denunciation; to promote a new imagination of the world, one whose notions of God’s justice and human piety stood in sharp contrast to those of many of their contemporaries. What is distinctive about mystery and secrecy in *SRJ*, however, are not these general social aspects, but its specific uses of these themes to establish the plausibility of the “second world” it articulated as Christ’s revelation, to give that teaching substantiality through material artifact and embodied practice, to offer a model for training in a hermeneutics of social critique, and finally for protection both against “the rulers of this world” and fellow Christians who declared its teachings “dangerous heresy.” All these work together to communicate a particular view of human existence in which Christ, the agent of the ineffable God, reveals the saving truth and offers hope to beings caught in a web of dangerous violence and deceit. The strategies employed by *SRJ* in the name of mystery and secrecy ultimately are aimed not at concealing the truth from other people, but at revealing it.

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SETHIAN BOOKS OF THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY
AS SECRET BOOKS

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It was not uncommon for Jewish and Christian religious writers of antiquity to produce books which, according to modern terminology, could be characterized as esoteric. The secrecy of the books lay, for example, in the fact that understanding them required the application of a special type of interpretation. A good example of the demand for such a guarded hermeneutic is provided by the *Gospel of Thomas*, which begins with the words: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded. He said: Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.”¹ The *Gospel of Judas* represents a further example of an early Christian text, which claims that its true message is hidden and can only be grasped with the help of Jesus’ specific guidance.² The text is characterized as a “secret revelatory discourse” (πλογο[ς] ἐτρηπ ἵταποφασίς; 33,1–2),³ the true meaning of which is explained by Jesus to Judas through a series of dialogues.

Another reason ancient writers emphasized the esoteric character of a text was to show that it was meant to be read only by a select group of people. 4 *Ezra* refers to seventy secret books, which were given to the wise among the Israelites, whereas twenty-four—presumably the texts of the Hebrew Bible—were made public to everybody (14:44–47). The *Apocryphon of James*⁴ (NHC I,2) is an example of a text, the content of which is only revealed to the two main disciples of Jesus, James and Peter.

¹ The translation derives from Marvin Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 139, with some modifications.

² Cf. also the *Book of Thomas* (NHC II,7; esp. 138,1–7).

³ The translation is taken from Marvin Meyer, “The Gospel of Judas,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 760.

⁴ The translation is taken from Madeleine Scopello and Marvin Meyer, “The Secret Book of James,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 23.

James writes it down in order to mediate it to another person⁵ who in turn is supposed to impart the text to its ultimate addressees, a special holy group, “who will be saved through the faith of this treatise” (1,27–28). The fictive author of the text, James, stresses that the content of the book should not be communicated to many people, since not even all of Jesus’ twelve disciples have had a share in it. Both in *4 Ezra* and the *Apocryphon of James* the function of the secrecy motif has to do with an attempt by the author to give a rationale for why authoritative holy books have only found a limited audience. At the same time they also emphasize the privileged character of the readers.

A particular case of esoteric religious writing can be found in those texts—usually defined as apocalyptic books—which contain secret disclosures of the history of the world from primordial times to the last days.⁶ They claim to be composed by ancient religious authorities who have been commanded to communicate secret predictions to later righteous generations. In reality, the texts were produced by writers who lived near the time when the predictions were expected to take place and where the fictive ancient religious authorities had placed the eschaton. The actual readership of the texts is thus a special elect group who through the predictions are advised to recognize their crucial place in the history of the world. Classic examples of such texts are the Book of Daniel and *1 Enoch*, apocalyptic works that contain “historical” descriptions of the past, often in the form of visions (Dan 7:1–12:13; *1 En.* 85–90; 91:11–17; 93:1–10). Although these apocalyptic predictions are not necessarily called secret,⁷ in the context of the books as a whole they clearly become secretive. They are linked together with sections which emphasize the secrecy of the books, the content and the significance of which are disclosed to a special group of the righteous at the end of the age (e.g., Dan 12:4, 9–10; *1 En.* 92:1; 107:1; 108:1–3).⁸ The fact that the fictive author is a spiritual hero from ancient times is also meant to enhance the value of the writings.

⁵ Because of a lacuna, the name of the first addressee has not been preserved in its entirety. The most common restoration of the name is “[Cerin]thos” (so e.g. Judith Hartenstein and Uwe-Karsten Plisch, “Der Brief des Jakobus [NHC I,2],” in *Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe* [ed. Hans-Martin Schenke *et al.*; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007], 10) but it cannot be taken but as a possible conjecture.

⁶ For the secrecy motif and its use in apocalyptic writings, see e.g. David S. Russel, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 107–18.

⁷ In one of his visions, Daniel is ordered to keep it secret (Dan 8:26).

⁸ To be sure, the *1 Enoch* is a composite work that consists of various originally independent parts; for this see E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (vol. 1 of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth;

The present article introduces another cluster of religious texts which also claim to be secret teachings, hidden by the fictive writers in order that their works might be revealed to a special group of the elect. These four texts are the *Apocryphon of John* (*Ap. John*), the *Apocalypse of Adam* (*Apoc. Adam*), the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (*Gos. Eg.*), and *Allogenes* (*Allogenes*).⁹ Common to all of them is that they are usually classified as Sethian¹⁰ and that they have been preserved in the Nag Hammadi corpus.¹¹ The purpose of this article is to explore what kind of functions the secrecy motif serves in each text and especially to ask whether and in what way it is employed to identify the intended readership of the writings. Finally, it will be discussed whether the use of the secrecy motif in these four texts helps us to place them better in relationship to each other.¹²

ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 6–7; George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Enoch, First Book of,” in *ABD* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:513–14. Yet, the way the apocalyptic predictions and the secrecy motif are interconnected in the *First Book of Enoch*, as it is now known in its Ethiopic version, makes it evident that the ancient readers of that book regarded it as a secret teaching to be revealed to the righteous of the end time.

⁹ The names and abbreviations of the books follow those in *The SBL Handbook of Style* (ed. Patrick H. Alexander *et al.*; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999). All the references to the books are made according to a two-digit system, in which the first number refers to the original Coptic page of the Nag Hammadi codices and the second to the line(s) of the page. In the case of the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* the reference also indicates the version of the text which has been used (see n. 11).

¹⁰ For a brief but an excellent introduction of Sethianism and Sethian writings, see Michael A. Williams, “Sethianism,” in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian ‘Heretics’* (ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 32–63. Instead of speaking of Sethian writings and mythology, Tuomas Rasimus (*Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* [NHMS 68; Leiden: Brill, 2009], 9–62) has distinguished between three related mythologies—Barbeloite, Sethite, and Ophite—which together form what he calls the Classic Gnostic mythology. According to Rasimus, the *Apocryphon of John* should be seen as a Barbeloite text whereas the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, and *Allogenes* contain both Barbeloite and Sethite features. Rasimus’ refined categories are in many ways helpful; yet, whether the main category to which these four writings are to be classified should be called Sethian or Classic Gnostic is very much a matter of taste. For the sake of convenience, I stick to the traditional designation of the writings and call them “Sethian.” With regard to the use of the secrecy motif in these texts their close relatedness at least becomes clear as the present study will show.

¹¹ Among the four texts discussed in this article, the *Apocryphon of John* is the only one with a copy to be found outside the Nag Hammadi Library. Apart from the three Nag Hammadi copies (two representing the so-called long version: II; IV; and one the short version: III), one copy of the text appears in the so-called Berlin Codex (a variant of the short version: BG). The *Gospel of the Egyptians* is moreover known in two copies but both of them were discovered in the Nag Hammadi Library (III; IV).

¹² I am very pleased that this contribution dealing with some Nag Hammadi texts can be included in a Festschrift dedicated to Einar Thomassen with whom I cooperated when

The Apocryphon of John as an Esoteric Work

The long version of the *Apocryphon of John* belongs to those Nag Hammadi texts that already at the outset claim to comprise secret teachings. The author of the long version begins the work by insisting that it provides a revelation of the “mysteries and the things hidden in silence” (II 1,1–3; IV 1,2–4). That this introduction is lacking in the short version does not mean that it is only the long version which should be characterized as an esoteric text. The end of the *Apocryphon of John*, in all its four copies, confirms that the work should be understood as “the mystery of the immovable race” (II 31,31–32; IV 49,12–13; III 39,17–18; BG 75,19–76,1).¹³ Thus, the book not only contains or refers to mysteries,¹⁴ but it is regarded as one. All the versions also contain a title at the end of the text which emphasizes the secret nature of the book. Depending on the version where the title appears, it has two forms: $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\ \dot{\iota}\omega\rho\alpha\nu\nu\eta\nu\ \eta\delta\alpha\pi\omicron\kappa\rho\upsilon\phi\omicron\nu$ (the long version: “The Apocryphon according to John”) or $\pi\alpha\pi\omicron\kappa\rho\upsilon\phi\omicron\nu\ \eta\dot{\iota}\omega\rho\alpha\nu\nu\eta\varsigma$ (the short version: “The Apocryphon of John”). The Greek adjective (“secret, concealed”), which occurs in the title in its neuter form, is used as a noun with the connotation of a “secret book.”

A similar use of the term $\alpha\pi\omicron\kappa\rho\upsilon\phi\omicron\nu$ is found in the *Apocryphon of James* (NHC I,2). At the beginning of the text James refers to two “secret books,” one of which he has written at the present moment and sent to the addressee and another which he had sent ten months earlier (1,10.30). In connection with both the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Apocryphon of James*, the term $\alpha\pi\omicron\kappa\rho\upsilon\phi\omicron\nu$ is not used in the pejorative sense, such as it is when Tertullian uses it to underline his low view of the *Shepherd of Hermas* (*De pudicitia* 10.6) or when Irenaeus refers to certain writings,

he (as a chairperson), Nils-Arne Pedersen, Jørgen Podemann Sørensen and I formed the steering committee of the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network in 2004–8. Those years gave me many fond memories when we had a privilege and pleasure to be absorbed in the secrets of Nag Hammadi writings together with many Nordic, other European and some Northern American students.

¹³ To be sure, it is difficult to decide whether the syntax of the phrase implies that the content of the book deals with “the immovable race” or that the book was written for “the immovable race.” At any rate, in either case the “mystery (Gr. $\mu\upsilon\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$)” seems to refer to the whole written book, as the word of Jesus addressed to John in the phrase before suggests: “I have said everything to you so that you might write it down . . . This is the mystery of the immovable race” (II 31,28–32; cf. BG 75,15–76,1).

¹⁴ The term “mystery” can also refer to certain details—usually dealing with biblical allusions—in the book which require a special understanding (e.g. II 21,27par; II 24,2par); for this, see Karen King’s article in this volume.

heretical in his view, produced by the Marcosians who, according to him, intend “to perplex the minds of the foolish people who are ignorant of the scriptures of truth” (*Adversus haereses* 1.20).¹⁵ Rather, the term is employed in a similar way to its use by the followers of Prodicus who are said to have owned βιβλοι ἀπόκρυφοι of Zoroaster (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.15). A similar use of the adjective ἀπόκρυφος is also attributed to Basilides who appeals to λόγους ἀποκρύφους which Matthias supposedly received from the Lord (Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.20).¹⁶

From the vantage point of the author of the *Apocryphon of John* (or the *Apocryphon of James*, for that matter) the term ἀποκρύφον in the title of the book is thus clearly a positive one.¹⁷ Whether this indicates that in both cases the title has been attached to the book in a relatively early phase after their composition, in other words, before the term began to attain a pejorative connotation, is difficult to say. The term ἀπόκρυφον/-α also continued to be applied in a non-pejorative way. This is shown by the fact that Jerome chooses the term to describe those writings which were not included in the Hebrew Bible but which became part of the collection which is now called the Septuagint (*Preface to the Books of Samuel and Malachi* [PL 28.601A-603A]). Although for him the writings he wanted to place among the apocrypha were of secondary value compared to the texts of the Hebrew Bible, he still used the term with respect and maintained that the books belonging to the category of the apocrypha were

¹⁵ In later writings, Eusebius also uses the term for the works produced by heretical groups (*Hist. eccl.* 4.22.9). As a matter of fact, he claims that it was the second-century writer Hegesippus who “in discussing the so-called Apocrypha...relates that some of them were fabricated by certain heretics in his own time.” It is not clear, however, whether Hegesippus himself used the term ἀπόκρυφα, or whether it was introduced by Eusebius. Epiphanius uses the term ἀπόκρυφα in the sense of non-canonical writings when he refers to Archontics (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40.2.1) and Severians (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 45.4.1) who are said to have produced their own apocryphal works. For him, the non-canonicity of the writings has a pejorative connotation, too. *Apostolic Constitutions* also refers both to the ἀπόκρυφα of the ancients, clearly presupposing a wider category than the modern Old Testament Apocrypha, a number of writings resembling what is now included in the collections of the so-called Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, and of Christian heretics (6.16). Both ἀπόκρυφα are regarded as harmful and wicked by the writers of *Apostolic Constitutions*. A similar notion of the ἀπόκρυφα as a broad category of non-canonical books resembling the modern Old Testament pseudepigrapha is found also in Athanasius.

¹⁶ For the references to the texts of the Church Fathers in this paragraph, I depend on G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 198.

¹⁷ In some magical texts the term ἀπόκρυφος/-ν is also employed for secret books or inscriptions which are particularly valuable; for the references, see Albrecht Oepke, “κρύπτω κτλ.,” in *TDNT* 3:965.

useful to read.¹⁸ To be sure, Jerome's use of the term deviates from the way it is employed in the *Apocryphon of John*. While for Jerome the term ἀπόκρυφος/-ν combined with a religious book implies that it is less significant than the so-called canonical books and that it is not meant to be read publicly in a worship service but rather privately, the term ἀποκρυφον in the title of the *Apocryphon of John* underlines both the special value of the text and the need to keep it away from the hands of those who are not supposed to read it or who misuse it (see below).

According to the long version of the *Apocryphon of John*, it is not only the content of the book which is ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ (II 31,31–32par) but it (i.e. that which the Savior gives to John) “is also imparted εἰς ὀμύστηριον” (II 32,1–2).¹⁹ What does it mean? Depending on how one understands the word ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ there are at least three alternatives for understanding the phrase. First, ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ in a Christian work can refer to a religious ritual. The fact that baptism is introduced just a little earlier in the text (II 31,22–24) makes this possibility realistic. This interpretation is unlikely, however. Nowhere in the *Apocryphon of John* does ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ refer to a religious ritual or sacrament. In addition, that which the Savior gives to John most naturally refers to what he has been revealing to him. Secondly, theoretically ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ in 32,2 can refer to the entire book in the same way as the word is used in *Ap. John* II 31,31. The problem with this interpretation is the indefinite article attached to the word ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ. If ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ in *Ap. John* II 32,2 refers to the same ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ mentioned in 31,31 one cannot account for the use of the indefinite article. The third alternative for interpreting the phrase remains the most plausible. As Einar Thomassen argues in the case of εἰς ὀμύστηριον in *Gos. Phil.* 67,27–28,²⁰ εἰς ὀμύστηριον should also be taken here in an adverbial sense corresponding to the Greek μυστηριωδῶς. Unlike the *Gospel of Philip*, the adverbial phrase in *Ap. John* II 32,2 should not be translated, however,

¹⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, “The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today,” in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 204.

¹⁹ The short version (BG 76,15–17; III 40,4–5) puts it differently and states: “He entrusted this mystery to him.” Karen King has observed the same difference. For this, see her article in this volume.

²⁰ Einar Thomassen, “*Gos. Philip* 67:27–30: Not ‘in a Mystery,’” in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Melanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.É. 7; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 925–39.

early Christian texts (e.g., *Apocryphon of James*, *First Apocalypse of James*, *Gospel of Judas*, *Gospel of Mary*), the *Apocryphon of John* does not seem to have any polemic relationship between the protagonist of the text and the rest of the disciples. Yet the disciples of Jesus certainly do not constitute the entire group of the immovable race. Who else belongs to the immovable race and how is the group defined according to the *Apocryphon of John*? Does the esoteric character of the text presuppose that the immovable race is to be viewed as a closed elite group? Can anyone become a member of the immovable race or is the immovability itself an indication that membership in the group is not a matter of choice but a matter of privileged identity which some have while others do not? These questions are especially pertinent because many traditional interpretations of the religiosity the *Apocryphon of John* represents (usually called Gnosticism) have tended to see this kind of determinism as an essential part of its self-understanding.²⁷

The fact that, according to the *Apocryphon of John*, the only souls that will not “be saved into the pure light” (II 25,17–18par) but be taken to the place where they cannot repent (II 27,21–31par) are those of the apostates, seems to speak against the assumption that the immovable race is a closed elite group. And if it is to be seen as a predestinated entity, its inclusiveness—even the apostates had the “knowledge but turned away” (II 27,22–23par)—makes the idea of possible pre-determination of no importance. So, if the immovable race is a predestinated group then virtually everybody is predestinated. Even the apostates, having the knowledge, have the potential to be saved but they choose not to realize their potential. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that the number of those who prove to be apostates from the perspective of the author may be relatively large, in the last analysis it does not invalidate the inclusiveness of the immovable race in principle.

What role does the secrecy motif serve in this connection? Is it not in direct contradiction to an inclusive understanding of the immovable race argued above? Why impart the book, which is even called ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ, in a secret way to its readers if it is meant that at least theoretically everybody can and ought to read it? Although the esoteric character of the text does not seem to limit the number of its readers, the secrecy motif is needed for two other reasons. First of all, the text explicitly stresses that

²⁷ The importance of the question is emphatically pointed out by Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 158.

the secret conveyance of the book to its rightful readers prevents it from coming into the hands of those who would use it for profit-making or earning their living (II 31,34–32,1par). Whether the abusers of the book, to whom the curse of *Ap. John* II 31,34–32,1 is directed, are really book-sellers, as the apparent sense of the text may suggest,²⁸ is difficult to say. Greedy booksellers were not an uncommon phenomenon in antiquity. For example, after Aristotle's death his library is said to have been used by unscrupulous book-sellers and their unskillful copyists in order that they might produce new copies of the books to be sold for profit.²⁹ Another possibility is to see the curse as a premonition, so that the book might not be given to those who, instead of searching for true knowledge from the teachings of the book, would in any case give them up in the face of worldly temptations. Thus they content themselves to satisfy their carnal needs and prove to be apostates.

Another reason for the secrecy motif may be the same as in the apocalyptic texts presented above. The secret transmission of the text can be a literary device which explains why the book, written by a close contemporary of Jesus, was "lost" for generations before it "again" turned up to a wider audience.³⁰

The Gospel of the Egyptians as an Esoteric Work

Like the major part of the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* also focuses on a mythological narrative of salvation history, beginning with the emergence of the divine realm and its entities in primordial times and following the stages of humans from the creation to the appearance of Jesus. The special target in this description is the seed of Seth and its struggle against the demonic powers of Sakla, the world creator.

Although nowhere in the extant parts of the two versions of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*³¹ is it explicitly stated that the book is secret, its esoteric

²⁸ The verb † 𐤂𐤁- in the Coptic phrase 𐪪𐪣𐪤𐪥𐪦 𐪛𐪥𐪦 𐪂𐪁 𐪀𐪥𐪤𐪀𐪖𐪖𐪀𐪖𐪖 (II 31,35–36) can mean "to exchange for" or "to sell for."

²⁹ H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2000), 66–69.

³⁰ So also Williams, *The Immovable Race*, 197.

³¹ Both versions of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* preserved in the Nag Hammadi Library are partly damaged. Put together, enough of them survives to make up approximately 90 percent of the original Coptic text; see John D. Turner, "The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit: Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 247.

character becomes obvious at the end of the work when the fictive author of the text, the great Seth,³² the heavenly prototype of the third son of Adam, is said to have composed and hidden it on a mountain. The secrecy of the text is also corroborated by a scribal note which follows the text in the third codex of the Nag Hammadi Library. The copyist calls the text “the Egyptian Gospel, a holy secret book, written by God” (NHC III 69,8).

The reason the great Seth hid the *Gospel of the Egyptians* is explicitly mentioned in the text. Although the revelation was given in primordial times it was meant to be disclosed to the generation at the end of the ages (III 68,14–22). The function of the secrecy motif is thus the same as in the Book of Daniel (12:4) or in the *Apocryphon of John* (see above). While it confirms the ancient character of the book it also explains why it has surfaced only in recent times. Unlike the Book of Daniel, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* does not, however, contain predictions of world events in terms of *vaticinia ex eventu* until the actual time of composition. Instead, it concentrates on describing a mythical salvation history whose decisive steps are the sending of the spiritual seed of Seth into the world to perfect and save imperfect humans and the appearance of the great Seth in the form of Jesus to cause the seed of Seth to be begotten by the Holy Spirit through baptism.³³ Thus, the readers of the text are not expected to recognize their place in the course of world events in order to know when the end of the ages will be at hand. Rather, they are invited to become aware of their position as members of the seed of Seth in the struggle between the realm of light and the realm of darkness.

The conclusion of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which sheds light on the fictional circumstances of composition, contains a clear criticism of earlier forms of religiosity. The fact that the text is supposed to have been hidden for millennia implies that the Israelite prophets as well as the apostles and the preachers representing a Christianity different from that promoted in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* have been left without any share in the content of the work (III 68,5–10). Neither have they received the name which the divine Self-Generated grants to the baptized according to *Gos. Eg.* III 66,22–24; 68,7–8. Therefore, the Israelite religion and other

³² As many scholars have pointed out, it is somewhat surprising that Seth appears to be the author of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and still the third person singular is used when the book speaks about Seth. Does the text want to suggest that Seth inscribed the text and hid it (therefore the writing took 130 years!) but it was another person who found it and later rewrote it?

³³ See Williams, “Sethianism,” 41–2.

versions of Christianity are based on imperfect revelations to be replaced or at least complemented. Whether this renewal is meant to take place through the reappearance of the great Seth (in the form of Jesus)³⁴ or the rediscovery of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*³⁵ depends on how one interprets the subject of the verb εἰ<ε>προελθε (“he/it came forth”) in *Gos. Eg.* III 68,19–20. The masculine pronominal infix attached to the verb can refer either to the great Seth or to the book. In light of the content of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, both interpretations are possible: the act of appearance may retrospectively refer to the institution of the baptism by the great Seth in the form of Jesus (III 63,23–64,3) or to the disclosure of the book at the end of the ages. Yet the latter is perhaps more likely because the beginning of the sentence in which εἰ<ε>προελθε occurs deals with the concealment of the book. Thus, one would expect that the text has to mention its discovery as well, whereas the appearance of the great Seth in the form of Jesus has already been mentioned. If this interpretation is correct, the concluding section of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* refers to the discovery of the book as the climax of salvation history, when the book appears to “the holy incorruptible generation of the great Savior” (III 68,20–22). This also indicates why the readership of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* is rather limited; the work is exclusively attributed to those who prove to belong to the seed of Seth.

Before we move on to deal with the two remaining texts, one question concerning the *Gospel of the Egyptians* still has to be asked. Why was the book hidden *in mountains* (III 68,1–5) or on the mountain of Charaxio,³⁶ as later specified by the text (III 68,12–14)? In the traditions of the ancient

³⁴ So Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 119; Marvin Meyer, “The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit: Translation,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 269; Uwe-Karsten Plisch, “Das heilige Buch des großen unsichtbaren Geistes (NHC III,2; IV,2),” in *Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe* (ed. Hans-Martin Schenke *et al.*; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 238.

³⁵ Meyer presents this alternative in a footnote of his translation; see Meyer, “The Holy Book,” 269.

³⁶ John D. Turner (*Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* [BCNH.É. 6; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2002], 88) has suggested that Charaxio is a combination of a Hebrew and Greek word (*har* “mountain” in Hebrew; ἀξιων “of the worthy” in Greek) referring to the mountain of those Sethians who are “worthy.” Birger A. Pearson (*Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007], 79) assumes that Charaxio derives from a Greek word χαράττω meaning “to inscribe.” Thus, says Pearson, “Charaxio is the high mountain-rock on which the writing is inscribed.” While both of the suggestions are possible, none of them can make a claim for any certainty.

near east, mountains play an important role. Often they are considered to be holy places where the nearness of gods can be experienced in a special way, in the form of divine revelations for example.³⁷ A concrete indication of the important role a mountain can have is that the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed were said to have been received on Mount Sinai (Exod 31:18). A further development of this tradition is told in 2 Maccabees which has preserved a story according to which, after the destruction of the temple, the prophet Jeremiah is said to have taken the ark, which supposedly contained the stone tablets, and to have hidden it in a cave in the same mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. Moreover, Jeremiah is said to have claimed that the ark with its stone tablets are kept there until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy (2 Macc 2:4–8).

Could this kind of tradition have served as a model for the way the *Gospel of the Egyptians* depicts its own origin and its later history? Certainly, the stories of the Ten Commandments and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* have similar features but they also have clear differences. First of all, the Ten Commandments were not meant to be a secret piece of writing when they were received on a mountain. Second, the Ten Commandments were not hidden by Jeremiah in order to be discovered later but rather in order to be protected. Third, the literary character of the two texts was also rather different. Thus, it is the mere fact that both texts are hidden which remains a common factor in their description. The reasons for the concealment of the texts are not the same, however. While the concealment of the stone tablets by Jeremiah emphasizes the need to protect the Ten Commandments, the story of the placement of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* on a mountain by Seth serves as an attempt to enhance the value of the book by creating a fiction about its ancient and worthy origin.

The Apocalypse of Adam as an Esoteric Work

The introduction of the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V,5) presents the book as a testament by Adam to his son, Seth, just before his death.³⁸ The first part of the work contains a reinterpretation of the primeval biblical

³⁷ See, e.g., Werner Foerster, “ὄρος,” in *TDNT* 5:475–487.

³⁸ Unlike the Hebrew text of Gen 5:3–5, the Septuagint version of the passage asserts that Adam was 230 years when Seth was born; after that Adam is said to have lived 700 years. The *Apocalypse of Adam* seems to presuppose the Septuagint version of the text.

stories from the creation of Adam and Eve through the Flood to the division of the land by Noah between his sons (64,6–76,7). A version of the Sodoma and Gomorrah episode may also be part of the description of the *Apocalypse of Adam* (75,9–31). In places, the story diverges quite a lot from the content and the order of the biblical narrative, and some biblical characters, most clearly the Jewish God and Noah, are turned into vicious figures, the former becoming Sakla, the evil creator-god, and the latter his faithful servant. The main point of the reinterpreted biblical narrative is to illustrate the struggle between the eternal realm and the world of the creator-god for the possession of saving knowledge. Adam as well as Seth and his offspring belong to the eternal realm, whereas Noah, Shem and his descendants are servants of Sakla. Ham's and Japheth's descendants are divided. The majority of them seems to be part of Sakla's adherents (twelve kingdoms), whereas some of them (the thirteenth kingdom?) join with the offspring of Seth (72,15–73,29).

The second part of the *Apocalypse of Adam* begins with a reference to the third coming of the illuminator of knowledge (76,8–15). He is clearly a savior figure but his precise identity remains unclear. There is no explicit reference in the extant text to his earlier visits³⁹ and the continuation of the text does not identify him either.⁴⁰ At any rate, his appearance causes confusion in the world of the creator-god. Therefore the illuminator is also persecuted by Sakla's powers but eventually conquers them. The description of the battle between the illuminator and the powers of the world is interrupted by a hymnic section which introduces thirteen attempts, twelve false and one inadequate, expressed by worldly kingdoms, i.e., Ham's and Japheth's descendants, to determine the origin of the illuminator and to explain how he came into the world (77,27–82,19). It is only the fourteenth answer, presented by the kingless generation and representing the Sethian view, which hits upon the right explanation (82,19–83,4). After the hymn, there is a brief mention that the seed of Seth is baptized and protected by a dark cloud (83,4–8). Then the story takes a surprising turn:

³⁹ It is possible that the references to the three men waking up Adam from his sleep of ignorance (65,25–66,8) and to the angels who rescue the offspring of Seth from the Flood (69,19–25) and fire (75,9–28) are to be understood as earlier visits of the illuminator(s).

⁴⁰ Some scholars have suggested that the third coming of the illuminator may refer to the incarnation of Jesus (e.g., Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 60). Especially the sentence "they (= the powers of Sakla) will punish the flesh of the man (= the illuminator) upon whom the Holy Spirit has come" (77,16–18) has been seen as a possible allusion to Jesus' baptism and crucifixion.

the peoples (νῦλλος)⁴¹ bless the seed of Seth because these have come to know the eternal God and will live forever, while they themselves will be damned (83,8–84,3). The judgment is confirmed by the guardians of baptism who also state that the peoples will be forced to serve the powers of Sakla (84,4–85,3). After the mythological account imparted by Adam to his son Seth comes to the end, there is a description of what happened to the revelation after its initial narration. Since it is mainly this part of the text which emphasizes the esoteric character of the book its careful consideration is especially important.

Contrary to expectations and unlike the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the revelation received by Adam from the eternal God and imparted to his son is not said to have been copied in a book and written down by Seth (*Apoc. Adam* 85,3–6). Still, the words of the revelation are preserved but the concluding section of the book refers to two different, even somewhat contradictory, ways to save the teaching of Adam.⁴² The first version emphasizes that angelic beings, who are unknown to all the generations of people, will take the words of Adam to a high mountain where they will be placed “upon a rock of truth.” Why to a mountain and why upon a rock? If the words were not written down in a book, why should they be concealed on a mountain as in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (see also the treatment of *Allogenes* below)? The curious reference to the “rock” (πέτρα) seems to present a sensible explanation for these questions. Josephus has recorded a tradition according to which Seth and his offspring “were the inventors of that peculiar sort of wisdom which is concerned with the heavenly bodies and their order.” In order to preserve the traditions from the fire or from the Flood, the occurrences of which Adam had predicted, they made two pillars, the one of brick, the other of stone, and inscribed their teachings on them (*Antiquitates judaicae* 1.69–71).⁴³ The stone pillar may very well be the “rock” (πέτρα) the *Apocalypse of Adam* speaks about, although the content of the *Apocalypse of Adam* is not astronomical lore as Josephus’ reference presupposes. A similar motif appears in the *Life of*

⁴¹ It is unclear whether νῦλλος refers to the majority of Ham’s and Japheth’s descendants or to those of them who earlier joined the seed of Seth but still gave an inadequate thirteenth explanation of the origin of the illuminator. For a further discussion about the identity of νῦλλος, see below.

⁴² Charles W. Hedrick (*The Apocalypse of Adam: A Literary and Source Analysis* [SBLDS 46; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980], 240, 286) considers the tension between the versions as an indication of two separate literary layers.

⁴³ To my knowledge, the first to draw attention to this text was Hedrick, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, 297.

Adam and Eve, in which Eve after the death of Adam instructs her children to inscribe the story of the life of Adam and Eve on tablets of stone and tablets of clay (50,1–2).⁴⁴

If the first version of the attempt to preserve and convey the revelation received by Adam is dependent on a tradition similar to that of Josephus and the *Life of Adam and Eve*, and if the reference to the placement of Adam's revelation upon the rock implies an inscription on a stone tablet, then the fact that the revelation was hidden on a mountain also becomes understandable. The concealment of the inscription clearly serves protective purposes. That certain angels conceal the teachings of Adam is not surprising in the context of a book which gives a lot of space to angels and usually presents them as positive figures belonging to the realm of light.

The secrecy motif in connection with the transmission of the teachings of Adam becomes even more visible in the second version of the attempt to preserve and convey Adam's revelation (*Apoc. Adam* 85,19–31). The simple chain of transmission goes from Adam through Seth to his offspring. What is conveyed is the *hidden* knowledge (†ΓΝΩΣΙΣ ἸΝΑΠΟΚΡΥΦΟΝ) of Adam as well as the holy baptism of those who have the eternal knowledge. It is worth noting that the concluding section no longer speaks of those descendants of Ham and Japheth who in an earlier passage were said to have joined the offspring of Seth. Either they have been fully incorporated into the seed of Seth or they have been removed from the group and now, together with other descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth, belong to ΝΙΛΑΟC who, on the one hand, praised the offspring of Seth but who, on the other hand, were damned because of their transgressions (*Apoc. Adam* 83,8–84,3). In any case, the secrecy motif in the *Apocalypse of Adam* functions to keep others than the seed of Seth—whether they include some descendants of Ham and Japheth or not, we do not really know—outside the eternal knowledge and the holy baptism.

Allogenes as an Esoteric Work

Unlike the three previous Sethian writings that present mythological accounts of the primeval history, *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) constitutes a series

⁴⁴ Cf. M. D. Johnson, "Life of Adam and Eve," in *Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (vol. 2 of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 292.

of revelations, by means of which Allogenes is instructed concerning the main characters of the transcendental world. Allogenes, in turn, is said to have imparted these teachings to his son Messos. The revelation discourse consists of two parts, in the first of which a heavenly female figure Youel delivers five revelations to Allogenes. In the second part Allogenes is taught by the luminaries of the Barbelo Aeon in connection with his ascent to the upper world. As the climax to his ascent Allogenes receives teaching about the Unknowable God. Among other things, the second part of the book contains a section with a negative theology (61,32–64,14), a part of which (62,27–63,25) has an almost direct parallel in *Ap. John* II 3,20–33. On the whole, *Allogenes* seems to derive its inspiration more from the Greek philosophical tradition, especially from Middle Platonism, than from Jewish and biblical motives. The purpose of the book is to provide a model for spiritual progress.⁴⁵

Allogenes is not only expected to receive and mediate his visionary experiences to his followers but he is also commanded to keep secret and guard the revelations he has seen during his ascent (*Allogenes* 52,15–25). Allogenes' revelations are not to be spoken to anyone "except those who are worthy" (52,22–23). The text does not contain a more precise definition of the target group. There are no characterizations of the readers according to a typical Sethian fashion, such as the immovable race or the seed of Seth. It is important to note, however, that the secret teaching is not to be given to "an uninstructed generation" (52,26–27). Karen King has suggested that this statement presupposes that the revelation given to Allogenes to be conveyed to Messos and other worthy hearers is meant to be imparted in a cultic setting to an audience who has received "preparatory instruction and/or cultic initiation."⁴⁶ Thus, the book is intended to be used in the instruction of a more advanced audience and has thus a clear esoteric character. At the beginning of her second revelation, Youel states: "No one is able to hear these things except the great powers alone. O Allogenes, you have been clothed with a great power, that with which the Father of the All, the eternal one, clothed you before you came to this place..." (50,24–28). The conclusion of the book that contains direct advice to Allogenes as to how to dispose of the revelation discourses confirms its secret nature. Allogenes is enjoined to write down the things he has

⁴⁵ John D. Turner, "Allogenes the Stranger," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007), 682.

⁴⁶ Karen King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God with Text, Translation, and Notes to NHC XI,3 Allogenes* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1995), 117.

heard and seen and hide the book upon a mountain. In addition, he is ordered to adjure a guardian to protect the book from the wrong kind of readers.⁴⁷

The story of the concealment of the book in *Allogenes* has parallel features in the three other Sethian writings discussed in this study. In the case of *Allogenes*, the function of the concealment is somewhat different, however. There is no attempt to enhance the value of the book by creating a fiction of its ancient and venerated origin as in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* or even in the *Apocryphon of John*. Neither is the concealment used as a protective measure as in the *Apocalypse of Adam*. The reason why *Allogenes* must be hidden has to do with its readership. It provides instruction for the more advanced on their way to a deeper spiritual understanding. The reference to the concealment of the book upon a mountain under the guardianship of the horrible one (*Allogenes* 68,20–23) is therefore most likely a metaphorical way to say that the book is not intended for general distribution.⁴⁸

Epilogue

The present study of the secrecy motif in the four Sethian texts under consideration has focused on two issues. First of all, I have examined what the use of the secrecy motif says about the intended readership of the writings. Second, we have asked whether the secrecy motif has special functions in each text. Here I shall summarize our findings under these two points. Finally, I shall ask what the discussion of these two points reveals about the relationship among the four Sethian writings discussed in the present study.

In the *Apocryphon of John* the use of the secrecy motif in connection with the discussion about the fate of various souls suggests that, despite the fact that John is said to have concealed the book from general distribution, the readership is at least theoretically very inclusive. It is a prerogative of everybody who belongs to the immovable race to have access to the *Apocryphon of John*, and almost everybody is at least potentially a

⁴⁷ A similar instruction to guard a book is found in the Hermetic treatise *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI,6 62,4–6).

⁴⁸ So also Karen King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, 182.

member of the immovable race,⁴⁹ although in practice—and perhaps in social reality—many prove to be apostates. In the *Apocryphon of John*, the secrecy motif serves two main purposes; first, although in principle it can be read by almost anybody it still prevents the text from falling into the wrong hands; second, it explains why the text turns up only more than one hundred years after its assumed composition.

The *Gospel of the Egyptians* is an esoteric book in the exclusive sense of the word. Neither Jews nor Christians other than the seed of Seth are supposed to share its message. In other words, the readership of the book is limited to Sethians. That the book has been concealed on a mountain by Seth not only corroborates its venerated and ancient character but it also explains why it has presumably been unknown for such a long time. Like the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Apocalypse of Adam* is also to be seen as an exclusive reading. The readership is confined to the seed of Seth; not only the descendants of Shem, that is, the Jews, and the majority of the offspring of Ham and Japheth are excluded, but even those descendants of Ham and Japheth who at some point join the seed of Seth seem to become apostates who in the final analysis cannot be recipients of Seth's teaching. Unlike the other Sethian writings examined in this study, it is not the written book of the *Apocalypse of Adam* which is hidden but rather its earlier version inscribed on a rock or pillar. Yet, the author of the text most likely has in mind those traditions according to which the ancient descendants of Seth inscribed their secret teachings either on a stone or clay and hid them in order to protect the texts (cf. Josephus; *Life of Adam and Eve*; even Jeremiah in 2 Macc). *Allogenes* expresses most clearly that its readership is limited to initiated, advanced Sethians who are supposed to study it for their spiritual progress. The secrecy motif is also directly related to the fact that the book is to be hidden because it is not meant for general dissemination.

Finally, in what kind of relationship do the Sethian writings that utilize a similar secrecy motif stand to each other? The fact that all of them claim that the texts were hidden or kept secret for some reason or another and that three of them introduce a mountainous area as a place of concealment speak for the assumption that, at least with regard to the secrecy motif, the authors of the texts draw from the same pool of traditions. Yet,

⁴⁹ The number of the potential members of the immovable race is increased through the transmigration of souls that is considered possible in the *Apocryphon of John* (II 26,36–27,11).

the fact that the functions of the secrecy motif may differ depending on the strategies of each book and that the secrecy motif can also variously influence the ways the readership of the texts are determined suggests that the relatedness of the writings is not very direct, at least not with regard to this one particular motif. This does not allow us to draw more general conclusions concerning the relatedness of the texts. In order to do that, other common motifs, terms or literary characters would need to be submitted to an examination similar to that of the secrecy motif in this study.

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«JOSEPH LE CHARPENTIER PLANTA UN JARDIN . . .» (EVPHIL 73,8–9)
SENS APPARENT ET SENS CACHÉ DANS L'ÉVANGILE SELON PHILIPPE

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Philippe y courut, entendit l'eunuque qui lisait le
prophète Isaïe et lui dit : « Comprends-tu
vraiment ce que tu lis ? »
Actes 8,30

Parmi les textes de Nag Hammadi, *l'Évangile selon Philippe* est sans doute, avec *l'Évangile selon Thomas*, l'un des plus beaux exemples de la mise en oeuvre d'une écriture voilée caractéristique d'un mode de communication ésotérique. Il n'est peut-être pas indifférent qu'il ait été mis sous le patronage de l'apôtre Philippe, qui a dévoilé à l'eunuque de la reine Candace le sens caché de ce qu'il lisait sans comprendre, car le seul passage de l'évangile qui se présente comme un « dit » de l'apôtre, qui concerne Joseph le charpentier et se réfère, du moins en apparence, aux circonstances de la vie terrestre de Jésus et de sa mort sur la croix, véhicule en effet un sens caché. Voici ce passage (73,8–15)¹ :

Philippe a dit : « Joseph le charpentier (ΠΡΑΜΟΥ) planta un jardin (ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙCOC) car il avait besoin de bois (ΥΞ) pour son métier ; c'est lui qui fabriqua la croix avec les arbres (ΥΗΝ) qu'il avait plantés et sa semence (ΠΕΡCΠOC) était suspendue à ce qu'il avait planté. Sa semence (ΠΕΡCΠOC), c'était Jésus ; ce qu'il avait planté, la croix.

Mais (ΑΛΛΑ) l'arbre (ΥΗΝ) de la vie était au milieu du jardin (ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙCOC) et l'olivier dont provient le chrême ; par lui la résurrection ».

Ce passage pose au lecteur un des problèmes caractéristiques de *l'Évangile selon Philippe*, celui de la délimitation de péripécopes ou d'unités de sens. Les deux premières phrases semblent raconter une histoire à la fois merveilleuse et tragique qui se situe au temps de la vie de Jésus : Jésus, le fils du charpentier (Mt 13,55), est cloué sur une croix que son père Joseph a lui-même fabriquée en utilisant le bois des arbres qu'il avait plantés. La dernière phrase paraît n'avoir aucun lien avec cette histoire puisqu'elle

¹ Les traductions de *l'Évangile selon Philippe* sont miennes.

transporte le lecteur au temps des origines, grâce à un emprunt littéral au texte de la *Genèse* « l'arbre de la vie au milieu du jardin » (καὶ τὸν ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς ἐν μέσῳ τῷ παραδείσῳ Gn 2,9 LXX). Hans-Martin Schenke en a fait deux unités distinctes qu'il a numérotées 91 et 92². Toutefois, la récurrence de deux termes, « jardin » (ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙΣΟΣ 73,10 et 16) et « arbre » (ὄμη 73,13 et 15), marque un lien entre ces deux « sentences », que Bentley Layton réunit sous le numéro 80³.

Ce lien pourra paraître à la première lecture purement superficiel mais il n'en est rien ; en effet, sous la surface, ces deux textes sont aussi reliés par des renvois allusifs au même texte scripturaire, Gn 2,8–9. En effet, « Joseph le charpentier *planta un jardin* » reprend les mots mêmes de Gn 2,8 LXX ὁ θεὸς ἐφύτευσεν παράδεισον. Le choix du terme παράδεισος ici est capital. Certes, ce mot d'origine persane désigne bien un jardin, plus précisément un jardin clos ou un parc ; il est d'abord utilisé pour la description des grands parcs des rois de Perse avant de passer dans la langue courante, mais toujours pour désigner un grand parc, d'où son emploi dans la Septante pour désigner le jardin d'Éden. Par la suite, il deviendra un lieu céleste, le paradis (par ex. 2 Co 12,4)⁴. En revanche, le terme usuel pour désigner un jardin quelconque, le jardin utilitaire d'un artisan, serait plutôt κήπος (cf. Lc 13,19; Jn 18,1.26; 19,41). Le choix du terme παράδεισος pour désigner le « jardin » planté par Joseph est donc singulier et cette singularité ne peut avoir d'autre fonction que d'attirer l'attention du lecteur et, dans le contexte juif ou chrétien des premiers siècles, de le renvoyer au texte de la *Genèse*.

Pour comprendre la portée de ce double renvoi au texte de la *Genèse* et du lien qui réunit ces deux portions de texte, je vais me concentrer maintenant sur deux éléments, la semence et l'arbre d'une part et la figure énigmatique de Joseph d'autre part.

La semence et l'arbre

Dans ce passage, l'expression « sa semence » (παιδρος <* τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ) peut être entendue de deux manières différentes. Soit l'article possessif παιρ- est cataphorique et se réfère à « ce qu'il avait planté », interprétation

² Hans-Martin Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium (Nag-Hammadi Codex II,3)* (TU 143; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 56–57.

³ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 345.

⁴ J. Jeremias, « παράδεισος », *TDNT* 5:765–73.

proposée par Layton (« its seed hung on that which he planted »⁵) et adoptée par Schenke⁶ qui cite à l'appui Gn 1,11 LXX, de sorte que la pointe de la phrase serait de signifier que Jésus est le « fruit » de l'arbre de la croix. Poursuivant dans cette veine, Schenke croit que l'arbre de la croix correspond à l'arbre de la vie associé à l'olivier, et que Jésus, le « fruit de la croix » correspond au produit de l'arbre de la vie, ou plutôt de l'olivier, le chrême dispensateur de la résurrection⁷.

Toutefois, dans le contexte de la phrase « sa semence était suspendue à ce qu'il avait planté » il paraît beaucoup plus naturel de donner de l'article possessif une interprétation anaphorique se référant à Joseph le charpentier qui est également le référent du pronom sujet « il » de « ce qu'il avait planté » (ΠΕΝΤΑΥΤΩΣΥ 73,14) et alors, « sa semence » serait une désignation métaphorique de son fils ou de sa descendance comme, par exemple, en Gn 4,25 LXX (voir aussi l'*Évangile de Judas*, CT 46,5-7). À l'exception de Layton suivi par Schenke, tous les traducteurs de langue anglaise, la seule qui puisse marquer cette distinction, ont cette compréhension du texte : c'est la semence de Joseph qui est pendue à ce qu'il avait planté. Einar Thomassen fait de ce passage la même lecture : pour lui, c'est de la semence de Joseph dont il est question ici⁸.

Outre le caractère plus « naturel » de cette lecture, il est difficile de maintenir la suggestion formulée par Schenke d'un rapport de similitude ou d'analogie quelconque entre l'arbre de la croix et l'arbre de la vie dont il est question dans la phrase suivante. En effet, la conjonction gréco-copte αλλα au début de cette phrase (73,15) doit marquer, plutôt qu'un rapport de similitude, un certain rapport d'opposition entre l'arbre de la croix planté par Joseph et l'arbre de la vie ; nous y reviendrons.

Pour comprendre le sens de ce passage, le lecteur doit interroger les autres passages qui concernent les arbres du paradis. Un premier, malheureusement très lacuneux (71,22-72,1), établit dans le paradis

⁵ Curieusement, Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 345, ne traduit pas l'article possessif dans la deuxième occurrence de l'expression ΠΕΥΡΟΡΟΣ en 73,14.

⁶ La traduction allemande ne peut évidemment rendre cette nuance « Und: Es hing sein Same an dem, was er gepflanzt hatte. Sein Same war Jesus; die Pflanzung aber war das Kreuz. » Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 57.

⁷ « Jesus hier als die samenträchtige Frucht des Kreuzenbaumes gesehen ist (und dieser seinerseits als eine Entsprechung zum Lebensbaum von Gottes Paradies . . .). » Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 437.

⁸ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 91 ; il ajoute en note que cela a été bien vu par H.-M. Schenke (*Philippus-Evangelium*, 211-12), mais s'il est vrai que Schenke, dans cette portion de son commentaire qui porte sur le texte de 55,23-27, admet que Joseph est le père terrestre de Jésus, cela ne s'applique manifestement pas à son commentaire de notre passage.

l'existence de deux arbres antinomiques, l'un qui produit des animaux, l'autre qui produit des hommes (71,22–26) :

Deux arbres poussent dans le jardin (ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙΣΟΣ) : l'un produit des animaux, l'autre produit des hommes. Adam mangea de l'arbre qui produit des animaux ; il devint animal et engendra des animaux.

À cette distinction qui oppose les deux arbres du jardin, l'arbre de la vie et l'arbre de la connaissance dont Adam a mangé le fruit, un second passage superpose une autre distinction entre deux arbres, un arbre « là » et un arbre « ici », mais cette fois ce sont deux arbres de la connaissance : un premier arbre de la connaissance, celui du paradis, a procuré la mort à Adam et est identifié à la Loi ; un autre arbre de la connaissance, celui d'ici, au contraire, vivifie l'homme (74,2–12)⁹ :

C'est là que se trouve l'arbre de la connaissance. Celui-là a tué Adam, ici au contraire, l'arbre de la connaissance a vivifié l'homme. La Loi, c'était l'arbre. Elle a la propriété de donner la connaissance du bien et du mal. Elle n'a pu ni arracher (Adam) au mal ni l'établir dans le bien, mais elle fit la mort de ceux qui en mangèrent, car lorsqu'on a dit : « Mange ceci et ne mange pas cela », ce fut le commencement de la mort.

L'Évangile selon Philippe maintient donc la distinction entre les deux arbres du paradis, l'arbre de la vie, associé à l'olivier¹⁰ qui produit le chrême source de résurrection d'une part et d'autre part, l'arbre de la connaissance, associé à l'animalité et à la mort, identifié à la Loi. Il oppose ensuite à cet arbre de la connaissance de ce temps-là, source de mort, un autre arbre de la connaissance, de ce temps-ci, source de vie. Voilà le lecteur confronté à trois arbres auxquels il faut ajouter l'arbre de la croix planté par Joseph. Où se situe donc ce dernier dans cet ensemble ? Faut-il l'identifier à l'arbre de la vie du paradis comme le pense Schenke et à l'arbre de la connaissance de ce temps-ci, dispensateur de vie ? Ou faut-il l'identifier à l'arbre de la connaissance du paradis, source de mort ? Ce Jésus crucifié, semence de Joseph, est-il fruit de l'arbre de vie ou de l'arbre de la connaissance ? Est-il du côté de la vie ou de mort, de l'animalité et de la Loi ?

Pour répondre à cette série de questions, pour résoudre cette énigme, le texte fournit au lecteur, nous l'avons vu, un maigre indice grammatical

⁹ Voir le commentaire de Schenke, *Philippus-Evangelium*, 444.

¹⁰ L'association de l'arbre de la vie à l'olivier, par proximité ou autrement, est traditionnelle ; voir par exemple, par proximité, *II Hénoch* 8,4, et aussi la *Vie grecque d'Adam et Ève* 9,3. Peu importe ici que le texte veuille identifier l'arbre de vie à l'olivier ou seulement les associer par proximité ; voir la discussion de Schenke, *Philippus-Evangelium*, 439.

par la conjonction ἀλλὰ utilisée en 73,15, qui semble marquer une opposition entre l'arbre de la croix planté par Joseph et l'arbre de la vie dont provient le chrême, source de la résurrection. Bien que la nature de ce rapport d'opposition ne soit pas précisée, il semble bien opérer une disjonction entre l'arbre de la croix auquel est suspendu Jésus, semence de Joseph, et l'arbre de la vie du temps des origines. Mais si le sens premier de la conjonction ἀλλά, qui remonte vraisemblablement au texte grec original, est clairement de marquer l'altérité, la diversité, le contraste, elle peut revêtir toutes les nuances, du plus fort au plus léger et peut porter sur différents aspects¹¹. Oppose-t-on ici l'arbre de la croix à l'arbre de la vie sous le rapport de la vie et de la mort ? Ou sous le rapport de ce temps-là et de ce temps-ci ?

L'énigme est d'autant plus obscure que si les propriétés des trois autres arbres sont très clairement exposées, et leur valeur positive ou négative par elles signifiée, le texte demeure muet sur celles de l'arbre de la croix et de la semence qui lui est suspendue, qui gardent toute leur ambiguïté. On peut figurer le système des arbres de la manière suivante :

Temps des origines	(-)	(+)
	Arbre de la connaissance « a tué Adam » (74,3) Loi (74,5) mort (74,9)	Arbre de la vie olivier (73,17) chrême (73,17) résurrection (73, 18-19)
Temps de la fin	(+)	(?)
	Arbre de la connaissance vivifie l'homme (74,4)	Arbre de la croix semence de Joseph (73,13-15)

Dans ce tableau, qu'il faut reconstituer à partir d'éléments épars dans le texte, quelle valeur faut-il donner à l'arbre de la croix planté par Joseph ? Faut-il l'associer à la vie et l'assimiler à l'arbre de la vie du paradis et à l'arbre de la connaissance du temps de la fin ? Ou à l'animalité, à la Loi et à la mort et l'assimiler à l'arbre de la connaissance du temps des origines ? Ce Jésus crucifié est-il source de vie ou de mort ? Le texte laisse au lecteur le soin de répondre à ces questions.

¹¹ J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (2^{ème} éd.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 1.

Tournons-nous maintenant du côté de Joseph le charpentier, dont c'est la seule apparition dans tout le corpus de Nag Hammadi.

L'énigmatique Joseph

Le début de la péricope, « Joseph le charpentier planta un jardin », on l'a vu, fait allusion à Gn 2,8 LXX ἐφύτευσεν . . . παράδεισον. Il ne s'agit pas d'un simple parallèle textuel, mais d'une allusion, c'est-à-dire un procédé littéraire ayant une fonction dans le texte, celle d'évoquer dans l'esprit du lecteur un autre texte éventuellement connu de lui, en l'occurrence Gn 2,8. Le procédé allusif est d'autant plus évident que non seulement toute la suite du texte jusqu'en 74,12 développe un enseignement basé sur le récit du paradis, mais elle reprend même le texte exact de Gn 2,8 : « D[ieu pl] anta u[n jar]din... » (ἀπν[ΟΥΤΕ Τ]ΩΘΕ ΝΟ[ΥΠΑΡΑ]ΔΕΙCOC 73,27–28), qui est une citation implicite de Gn 2,8 LXX ὁ θεὸς ἐφύτευσεν παράδεισον.

Cette allusion invite le lecteur à associer ou assimiler de quelque façon Joseph au dieu créateur mis en scène dans la *Genèse*¹². Du coup, ce passage devient porteur d'un message dépassant le récit tragique, allant au-delà du sens apparent. Toutefois, si l'allusion est certaine, sa portée demeure indéterminée ; elle ouvre au lecteur un horizon d'interprétation dont les limites seront fixées non par le texte lui-même, qui demeure vague, mais par le bagage cognitif dont le lecteur dispose. Comme l'eunuque de la reine Candace (Ac 8,26–35), le lecteur aura besoin d'un herméneute ou d'une tradition herméneutique pour comprendre ce qu'il lit.

Lue dans un contexte proto-orthodoxe, à la lumière de la règle de foi formulée par Irénée¹³, cette allusion suggérera un rapport d'analogie entre la figure de Joseph et le dieu créateur de la *Genèse*, qui sera identique au père céleste du Sauveur. Nonobstant la conjonction ἀλλὰ utilisée en 73,15, le lecteur pourra sans doute voir dans la sémence de Joseph pendue au bois de la croix le fruit de l'arbre de la vie, source de résurrection¹⁴.

Toutefois, l'*Évangile selon Philippe* enseigne que le Seigneur avait deux pères (55,34–36) :

¹² Il ne faut pas ici sous-estimer l'importance des allusions scripturaires dans la littérature chrétienne ancienne en général et la littérature dite gnostique en particulier ; voir à ce sujet, Louis Painchaud, « The Use of Scripture in Gnostic Literature », *J ECS* 4 (1996) : 129–47.

¹³ Voir par exemple *Contre les hérésies* I 10,1.

¹⁴ Comme le comprend Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 437–39.

Et le Seigneur n'[aurait] pas dit : « Mon Père qui es aux cieux . . . » à moins qu'il n'ait eu un autre père, mais il aurait simplement dit [« Mon père »].

Pour peu qu'on insiste non plus sur l'analogie entre ces deux pères mais sur leur différence, un lecteur adhérent à une christologie plus ou moins docète, ou dualiste, comprendra alors que celui qui est crucifié est la descendance terrestre de ce père terrestre et non le Seigneur fils du Père céleste¹⁵. Il verra dans notre passage un enseignement portant sur la nature du crucifié, lequel serait du côté des réalités terrestres et non du côté des réalités célestes¹⁶.

Lue dans un contexte valentinien enfin, l'allusion au texte de Gn 2,8 suggérera plutôt un rapport d'analogie non pas entre Joseph et le père céleste du Seigneur, mais entre Joseph et le démiurge, le créateur de son corps matériel, et indiquera par conséquent que ce qui sera pendu au bois de la croix n'est que le corps matériel de Jésus créé par le démiurge.

Le lecteur ignorant du texte de la Genèse ou incapable de déchiffrer l'allusion et d'aller au-delà de la surface du texte ne verra dans ce passage qu'une histoire à la fois merveilleuse et tragique un récit se référant à Joseph, le père terrestre de Jésus et à l'histoire terrestre de ce dernier telle que racontée dans les évangiles canoniques. Jésus, le fils du charpentier, est cloué sur une croix que son père lui-même a fabriquée. Le lecteur « gnostique », et je donne à ce mot le sens que lui donne Clément d'Alexandrie, c'est-à-dire celui qui est capable d'aller au-delà du sens apparent, qu'il soit proto-orthodoxe, docète ou valentinien, y trouvera un enseignement caché. Toutefois, ce sens caché vers lequel l'amène le jeu des allusions demeurera voilé et prendra une coloration différente selon la « règle de foi » ou la tradition herméneutique à laquelle ce lecteur adhérera.

*

Einar Thomassen a proposé de ce passage une lecture qui identifie Joseph au démiurge valentinien, en s'appuyant sur une autre base que le procédé littéraire de l'allusion mis en œuvre ici¹⁷. Cette lecture va de soi dans un

¹⁵ Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 49 and notes 4 and 5.

¹⁶ Pour Catherine Trautmann, Joseph et l'arbre qu'il a planté sont du côté de la mort ; voir « La parenté dans l'Évangile selon Philippe », dans *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi* (Québec, 22–25 août 1978) (éd. Bernard Barc ; BCNHLE 1 ; Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain : Éditions Peeters, 1981), 27.

¹⁷ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 90–91, propose de voir dans le « bois » (ⲱϮ) une représentation de la matière (ⲱϮ <* ⲩⲗⲏ) et considère sur cette base que l'Évangile selon Philippe interprète Joseph le charpentier (ⲡⲉⲗⲙⲱϮ), littéralement l'artisan-du-bois), le père terrestre

milieu valentinien et, dans la mesure où l'on admet que l'*Évangile selon Philippe* est de facture valentinienne, il y a tout lieu de croire qu'elle n'est pas seulement une lecture possible parmi d'autres, mais celle à laquelle le texte est censé conduire.

Se référant à la thèse de doctorat de Hugo Lundhaug avec laquelle elle s'accorde sur ce point, Minna Heimola préfère voir dans Joseph simplement Joseph et précise qu'il n'est pas nécessaire d'interpréter Joseph dans l'*Évangile selon Philippe* comme le démiurge valentinien¹⁸. Une telle lecture de ce passage s'en tient au sens apparent et ignore le mode d'écriture qui s'y déploie, fait d'un entrelacs d'allusions au texte de la *Genèse* et de renvois à d'autres passages de l'*Évangile selon Philippe* où sont démembrées et dispersées les parcelles voilées d'une vérité, qu'il appartient au lecteur de réunir.

Ce mode d'écriture n'est pas inconnu par ailleurs, Clément d'Alexandrie dans ses *Stromates* en use largement. Il relève d'un mode de communication ésotérique propre à masquer la vérité au simple et à la révéler au vrai gnostique. Comme les *Stromates*, l'*Évangile selon Philippe*¹⁹ :

contient la vérité, mais à l'état dispersé, répandue comme des semences pour échapper à ceux qui picorent comme des geais. Mais si elle rencontre un bon cultivateur, chaque grain germera, et l'épi se montrera chargé de froment.

À cet égard, l'*Évangile selon Philippe* ne diffère en rien de l'*Évangile selon Thomas*. J'aimerais citer ici de Stephen Patterson une phrase qui s'applique parfaitement à l'*Évangile selon Philippe*²⁰ :

de Jésus, comme le type du démiurge, créateur du monde matériel ; il y a certainement là un élément supplémentaire à ajouter au tissu d'indices que le texte donne à interpréter.

¹⁸ Minna Heimola, « Christianity and Christian Identity in the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3) » (Thèse de doctorat, Université d'Helsinki, 2010), 29 ; cf. Hugo Lundhaug, « There is Rebirth and Image of Rebirth. A Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Conceptual and Intertextual Blending in the Exegesis on the Soul (NH II,6) and the Gospel of Philip (NH II,3) » (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Bergen, 2007), 355. Toutefois, Hugo Lundhaug ne maintient pas cette position dans la version publiée de sa thèse, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul* (NHMS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2010), où la discussion de ce passage a été supprimée.

¹⁹ Clément d'Alexandrie, *Stromate I* 12,56,3 (Claude Mondésert et Marcel Caster, éd., *Clément d'Alexandrie : Les Stromates, Stromate I* [SC 1; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1951], 89-90) ; voir Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (2 éd.; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 115.

²⁰ Stephen J. Patterson, « The Gospel of Thomas and Historical Jesus Research », dans *Coptica-Gnostica-Manichaica : Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (éd. Louis Painchaud et Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.E 7 ; Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain :

Thomas, interestingly, operates on a heuristic model that might be regarded as thoroughly post-modern : the real meaning of the text resides not in the text itself, but in the reader, the seeker after wisdom and insight.

Ainsi, la rédaction voilée de *l'Évangile selon Philippe*²¹, comme celle de *l'Évangile selon Thomas*, transforme la lecture du texte en un véritable exercice spirituel menant à l'illumination, comme le décrit le logion 2 de *l'Évangile selon Thomas* (NHC II 32,14–19) :

Jésus a dit : « Que celui qui cherche continue de chercher jusqu'à ce qu'il trouve. Lorsqu'il aura trouvé, il sera troublé ; et lorsqu'il sera troublé, il sera émerveillé et il régnera sur l'univers ».

Dans *l'Évangile selon Philippe* comme chez Clément, l'importance de l'ésotérisme chrétien se révèle à l'historien par le style même ou le mode d'écriture qui prétend mimer celui qui est attribué à l'Écriture²². En effet, le texte de *l'Évangile selon Philippe*, comme les Écritures, comme aussi *l'Évangile selon Thomas*, *l'Évangile de Judas* et bien d'autres textes chrétiens des premiers siècles comporte un aspect ésotérique exigeant la mise en œuvre de stratégies interprétatives qui vont au-delà de la surface du texte, ce qui n'en fait nullement une aberration au sein du christianisme des premiers siècles, bien au contraire. « Parlant sans en avoir l'air, montrant sous le voile, signifiant sans mot dire »²³, *l'Évangile selon Philippe* propose à son lecteur un véritable exercice spirituel qui l'amènera à se découvrir comme « gnostique capable de saisir et de mettre en lumière les paroles dites par l'Esprit sous un expression voilée »²⁴. Je reprends ici les mots de Guy Stroumsa, ce texte « comporte de nombreuses chambres fermées dont il appartient au lecteur de trouver les clés »²⁵ ; c'est en faisant jouer ces clés qu'il aura le sentiment de sa propre illumination et peu importe, finalement, que ces clés aient été ou non voulues par l'auteur, car la norme de la vérité est du côté de l'herméneute, comme l'enseigne

Éditions Peeters, 2006), 680. Je remercie André Gagné de m'avoir rappelé ces lignes de Stephen Patterson.

²¹ Au sujet de l'écriture « voilée » de *l'Évangile selon Philippe*, voir Louis Painchaud, « La composition de *l'Évangile selon Philippe* (NH II,3) : une analyse rhétorique », dans *SBL Seminar Papers*, 1996 (SBLSP 35 ; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 35–66.

²² Alain Le Boulluec, éd., *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les Stromates, Stromate V* (SC 278; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1981), 19–20.

²³ Clément d'Alexandrie, *Stromate I* 1,15,1 (Mondésert et Caster, *Les Stromates*, 54).

²⁴ Clément d'Alexandrie, *Stromate VI* 115,5 (Patrick Descourtieux, éd., *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les Stromates, Stromate VI* [SC 428; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999], 292–93) ; voir Painchaud, « La composition », 60–65.

²⁵ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 108.

le livre des *Actes* en mettant en scène l'eunuque de la reine Candace et l'apôtre Philippe.

Non seulement cet ésotérisme chrétien ne naît pas de la simple nécessité imposée par la clandestinité comme l'aurait voulu Batiffol²⁶ ni n'est l'apanage de conenticules gnostiques marginaux, mais il est au cœur de l'expérience chrétienne des premiers siècles. Toujours il faut déchirer le voile du Temple pour « pénétrer le secret de la vérité » (EvPhil 85,1–13), « rompre le pain de la parole » pour en découvrir le mystère²⁷.

Ainsi donc, comme l'apôtre Philippe s'était fait l'herméneute du prophète Isaïe pour l'eunuque de la reine Candace, par le jeu des allusions il montre au lecteur de l'*Évangile selon Philippe* le chemin de la vérité, mais sans complètement soulever le voile qui la recouvre.

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²⁶ Pierre Batiffol, « Arcane », *DTC* 1:1738–58.

²⁷ Maurice Jourjon, « Rompre le pain de la parole », dans *Exégèse et patristique* (vol. 1 de *L'homme devant Dieu : Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*; éd. H. de Lubac; Paris : Aubier, 1963), 321–28, spécialement 327–28. Sur toute cette question, voir Christopher Jacob, « Arkandisziplin », *Allegorese, Mystagogie : Ein neuer Zugang zur Theologie des Ambrosius von Mailand* (Theophaneia 32 ; Francfort : Anton Hain, 1990), 1–138.

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INVOCATION ET GLORIFICATION DU NOM DIVIN DANS LE LIVRE
SACRÉ DU GRAND ESPRIT INVISIBLE OU ÉVANGILE ÉGYPTIEN
(NHC III,2; NHC IV,2)

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Pour mon collègue Einar Thomassen qui, à travers ses travaux sur l'*Évangile de la Vérité*, s'est intéressé à la question du nom divin, voici quelques réflexions sur le nom seigneurial révélé par le Verbe, Parole efficace qui fait ce qu'elle dit, en produisant la présence du Père¹. J'ai choisi, pour mettre en lumière ce thème, un autre texte de la Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, dont le contexte est liturgique, où est présenté un enseignement sur le nom de Dieu qui n'est peut-être pas si éloigné de celui de Marc le Mage. Langage et réalité étant intrinsèquement liés, un initié met en acte le rituel et incarne en lui-même le processus de transformation.

Le *Livre sacré du grand Esprit invisible* figure en second dans les codex III et IV de la Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi (NHC III 40,12–69,20 et IV 50,1–81,2). Ce titre apparaît dans le codex III, à la fin du colophon, suivi d'un « Amen », le scribe l'ayant répété immédiatement après et encadré de traits décoratifs². Cependant au début du même colophon dans le codex III, il est désigné aussi comme un « *Évangile égyptien* ». Étant donné ses liens avec l'hermétisme ainsi qu'avec certains papyrus magiques gréco-égyptiens, on peut penser que son origine est l'Égypte. Il est daté du second ou du troisième siècle par A. Bölig et F. Wisse, les éditeurs du texte dans la collection *The Coptic Gnostic Library*³.

Outre un prologue et une section conclusive, il compte trois parties dont le contexte liturgique et baptismal est évident. La *première partie*,

¹ Voir *Évangile de la Vérité* 38,6–41,3 sur le nom seigneurial ou le Fils.

² Ce titre semble bien être la reprise de l'incipit très lacuneux dans les deux versions. Comme la fin manque dans la version du codex IV (de 81,3 à la fin), on ne sait s'il s'y trouvait.

³ Alexander Bölig et Frederik Wisse, éd., *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 2 and IV, 2: The Gospel of the Egyptians (The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit)* (Leiden: Brill, 1975; repris dans vol. 2 de *The Coptic Gnostic Library*; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 38. Voir la discussion sur les titres, p. 18–23. Sur les liens avec l'hermétisme, Régine Charron, « Livre Sacré du Grand Esprit invisible (NH III, 2; IV, 2) », dans *Écrits gnostiques : La Bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi* (éd. Jean-Pierre Mahé et Paul-Hubert Poirier; BP 538; Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 516–17.

qui se conclut par un « Amen », consiste en une vision du monde supérieur en lequel se révèle la lumière ou le Logos jailli du sein du Père du silence ou du monde inengendré (NHC III 41,7–55,16; IV 50,23–67,1). À partir de ce mouvement, qui en est un d'autogénération, se produit une incarnation spirituelle : le texte décrit ensuite l'union du Verbe et de l'Homme (*anthrôpos*), pour former un Logos humain. Il ne s'agit pas ici de la chair mortelle revêtue par le Sauveur, mais de sa manifestation comme Homme céleste dont chaque baptisé porte en lui-même l'image ou la puissance lumineuse. C'est Adamas, la forme archétype de l'Homme spirituel, l'auteur interprétant ainsi le prologue johannique : « Car (c'est) (lui) Adamas, la lumière qui illumine . . . celui par qui tout est arrivé, celui pour qui toute chose existe, celui sans qui rien ne s'est produit » (NHC III 49,8–12; IV 61,8–14)⁴. Comme Philon, l'*Évangile égyptien* identifie l'Homme archétype et le Logos⁵. Cependant, dans ce dernier, l'Homme céleste, dont Seth est la manifestation, revêt Jésus le vivant au baptême afin de se manifester dans notre monde. La *seconde partie* relate l'apparition du monde, qualifié d'engendré, et la venue du salut par l'institution d'un rite baptismal de régénération (NHC III 55,16–66,8; IV 67,2–78,10).

Dans la *troisième partie* est décrit un rituel baptismal marqué par un changement de pronoms (NHC III 66,8–68,1; IV 78,10–80,15). De la troisième personne utilisée jusque là, le récit passe à la première et à la seconde : un narrateur, s'exprimant en « je », vit en tant qu'initié une expérience de régénération par le baptême et invoque directement Dieu. Bien que la révélation se déroule de haut en bas, les deux premières parties servant de préparation à l'initiation proprement dite, pour l'initié le chemin est inverse : au cours du baptême, il est formé à l'image de l'Homme archétype et contemple le monde céleste du commencement.

Au cours de cette mystagogie, le nom divin est directement invoqué par lui (NHC III 66,8–22; IV 78,10–79,3). Or ce nom est le tétragramme divin, YHWH, qui sera transcrit par « *kurios* » dans les manuscrits des Septante puis dans le Nouveau Testament. Dans le *Livre sacré*, le tétragramme n'est pas remplacé par le terme *kurios*, mais il est invoqué tel quel, en étant transcrit en lettres grecques : soit sous la forme I È O U É, la diphtongue OU comptant sans doute pour une seule lettre du tétragramme, soit à l'aide des sept voyelles, c'est-à-dire IÈEOUÔA, chaque lettre étant répétée soit *quatre*, soit *vingt-deux* fois.

⁴ Dans cet article, je reprends la traduction donnée par Charron, « Livre sacré », 523–70.

⁵ *Conf.* 146. Dans les deux cas, il s'agit d'une interprétation spirituelle de Gn 1,26–27.

Un tel usage du nom divin fait surgir à l'esprit plusieurs questions auxquelles, bien entendu, cet article n'est pas en mesure de répondre complètement. D'abord, l'*Évangile égyptien* s'appuie-t-il sur les Septante et si oui, a-t-il trouvé tel quel le tétragramme, et non son équivalent en grec : *kurios* ? Ensuite se pose la question de l'invocation du nom, que l'on évite de prononcer dans le monde judéen, du moins hors d'une enceinte sacrée. Enfin, qu'en est-il de la vocalisation de ce nom, dans la mesure où dans l'*Évangile égyptien* il semble bien être prononcé tel quel ? Avant de suggérer quelques éléments de réponse, examinons les passages où le nom divin apparaît, c'est-à-dire le début de la première partie, où ce grand nom est énoncé avec la révélation du Logos, puis la troisième, où il est donné à l'initié lors du rituel baptismal.

*La vision du monde supérieur (NHC III 41,7- ?; IV 50,23-59,27)*⁶

Le texte raconte un enfantement dans l'éternité, un autoenfantement. Hors « du silence vivant » ou du sein du Père incorruptible, jaillit la lumière « de la parole de vérité » (NHC III 40,18-19; IV 50,9-10). Autogène ou engendrée d'elle-même, cette lumière se manifeste à la fois comme Père, Mère et Fils, la mère étant identifiée à l'Esprit. C'est ainsi que se révèle le Logos ou le Verbe : « le Fils du silence du silence... fit sortir du sein (de la mère) les sept puissances de la grande [lu]mière, les sept voyelles, et le Verbe est leur plénitude » (NHC III 42,22-43,4). Le Logos, représentant la plénitude des sept voyelles, est identique au Nom divin.

L'enfantement se produit selon un double mouvement correspondant à un état féminin et à un état masculin du Logos. Le Logos est un Dieu matriciel qui s'enfante à partir de l'Esprit qui est à lui, et cet Esprit est décrit comme Vierge mâle⁷. Le thème de la virginité mâle symbolise un engendrement incorruptible, grâce à l'Esprit. Et grâce à l'Esprit reçu au baptême, l'initié se convertira de la génération mortelle à la génération incorruptible⁸.

⁶ Il manque les pages 45 à 48 dans la version du codex III.

⁷ Pour le thème du Logos issu du silence, voir Ignace d'Antioche, *Magn.* 8,2. Dans cette triade, Père, mère et fils sont décrits comme trois ogdoades, le nombre 888 correspondant aux différentes lettres du nom *Ièsous*, selon Marc le Mage (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* I, 15,2).

⁸ Sur ce thème, Marie-Joseph Pierre, « La vierge prédicante de la 33^e Ode de Salomon », dans *De la Conversion* (éd. Jean-Christophe Attias ; Patrimoine. Religions du Livre ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 278-79.

La conception d'un autoenfantement du Logos est répandue au début du christianisme : l'idée que le *pneuma* en Lc 1,35 n'est autre que le Sauveur lui-même se retrouve dans le *Protévangile de Jacques*, l'*Épître des Apôtres*, chez Origène, Tertullien, Lactance et Marius Victorinus⁹. Il s'agit d'une trinité de fonction, selon une christologie pneumatologique. Or dans l'*Évangile égyptien*, ce qui est raconté est la génération intemporelle du Fils ou du Logos, qui est le modèle de la génération temporelle. Ou plutôt, le modèle céleste du baptême de Jésus. Dans le Nouveau Testament, la triade Père, Esprit, Fils n'apparaît dans cet ordre que lors du baptême de Jésus (Mt 3,16–17; Mc 1,9–11; Lc 3,21–22). Dans le *Livre Sacré*, le Logos est aussi appelé l'enfant trois fois mâle, sans doute parce qu'il est Père, Mère ou vierge mâle, et Fils de lui-même.

Le texte révèle l'existence d'un espace céleste ou d'un éon appelé Domédon, Doxomédôn. Les noms attribués à ce lieu évoquent l'image d'une demeure (en grec *domos*), celle de seigneurie (« *adôn* », le maître ou le seigneur) et expriment la gloire, la *doxa*, qui le remplit. L'éon représente la plénitude infinie de la puissance divine du Logos ou l'ensemble du plérôme en lequel se manifeste le Nom.

Le *Livre sacré* présente alors aux yeux du lecteur mais aussi de l'initié une vision mystique du trône divin entouré d'une multitude de puissances, de gloires et d'incorruptibilités qui chantent la gloire divine. Une vision de Dieu sous une forme humaine, celle de l'enfant, identifié au Christ ou à Seth, assis sur « le trône de sa gloire » : le lieu divin est celui « dans [le] quel l'Enfant [triple-mâ]le [se] repose, et [en] lui fut établi le trône de sa [gloire], sur [lequel] son nom caché est [inscrit] » (NHC III 43,15–20 = IV 53,13–19). Il est précisé en outre que le nom est inscrit « sur la tablette » (en grec πύξος). L'utilisation de l'article défini sans autre précision montre que les destinataires anciens identifiaient parfaitement cette tablette ou cette plaque¹⁰.

⁹ Cf. Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses* (VCSup 95; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 145; Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (2 éd.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 198–99; Raniero Cantalamessa, « La primitiva esegesi cristologica di 'Romani' I, 3–4 e 'Luca' I, 35 », *RSLR* 2 (1966) : 75–76. Pour la triade Père, mère, fils dans un cadre baptismal, Daniel Vigne, *Christ au Jourdain : Le baptême de Jésus dans la tradition judéo-chrétienne* (EBib (n.s.) 16; Paris : J. Gabalda, 1992).

¹⁰ Ce qui n'est pas le cas du lecteur moderne. Le mot πύξος désigne à l'origine une tablette de buis destinée à l'écriture. Puis il en vint à désigner plus largement toute surface d'écriture. C'est ainsi qu'il est utilisé dans les LXX pour désigner les tables de la Loi (Ex 24,12 *hapax*). Est-ce une allusion au nom divin sur la première table ? Dans l'*Ogdoade et l'Ennéade* (NHC VI 62,13–14), il est demandé au disciple d'écrire le nom divin sur la table de pierre couleur saphir : selon Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Écrits gnostiques*, 969 cette table est comparable au piédestal divin dans la théophanie de Moïse en Ex 24,9. Selon Philon

Le texte introduit au mystère du trône divin (*Ma'aseh merkaba*), à une contemplation visionnaire ou une époptie, à la connaissance la plus haute qu'un humain peut atteindre. L'expression *Ma'aseh merkaba* désigne le premier chapitre d'Ézéchiel qui fit l'objet de spéculations dans le judaïsme. Son objet est une mystique du trône où Dieu est reconnu et adoré comme roi.

Outre Éz 1,26, où est évoquée sur le trône une forme à la ressemblance d'un homme, d'autres textes bibliques sont convoqués dans ce passage du *Livre sacré*. Le terme copte « *alou* » correspond au grec « *pais* » qui est un titre messianique fréquemment attribué au Christ par les auteurs chrétiens. Il renvoie au chapitre d'Ésaïe sur le « serviteur souffrant » (És 52,13–53,12), où le serviteur est appelé *o pais mou* dans la Septante (És 52,13), ainsi qu'à És 9,5 qui évoque *l'enfant* destiné à sauver *le trône* de David. Ou encore aux Psaumes, pour le thème de l'enfant appelé le Christ, car il a été oint par l'Esprit invisible (NHC III 44,22–24; IV 55,12–14). Dans le Ps 44,7–8, le messie royal est investi par une onction d'huile : « O Dieu, ton trône est éternel... aussi Dieu, ton Dieu, t'a oint d'une huile de joie » (aussi Ps 131,11)¹¹. Ces textes sont au cœur de l'exégèse messianique chrétienne. Toutefois, dans *l'Évangile égyptien*, les versets bibliques ne sont pas cités mais sont proposés à la contemplation.

Le motif de l'« enfant » est particulièrement approprié dans un texte baptismal où est mise en lumière une nouvelle naissance. La descente et la remontée en gloire sont ce qui permet au Fils de répandre l'Esprit maternel, la vierge mâle, appelée cette fois Youel. Dans un texte mystique, les changements de nom sont courants et indiquent un changement de fonction. Grâce à l'Esprit, se manifeste « l'enfant de l'enfant » nommé « Éséphech », à partir du Fils¹². Cet enfant, qui est décrit comme celui « qui possède la gloire et la couronne de sa gloire » (NHC III 62,6–8; IV 73,17–19 et 59,24–26), reçoit aussi le Nom divin (NHC III 66,11–12; IV 78,14–15). Il représente sans doute l'Homme spirituel, à l'image du Logos ou du Fils. L'enfant de

d'Alexandrie (*Mos* II, 132) et la *Lettre d'Aristée* 98, sur le turban du grand prêtre se trouve la lame d'or sur laquelle le nom de Dieu est inscrit en caractères sacrés. Cette lame est parfois identifiée à une couronne. Selon *l'Évangile égyptien*, le nom est inscrit sur « lui », ce qui peut faire référence soit à l'enfant, soit au trône. En fait, il s'agit peut-être tout simplement de la tablette sur laquelle l'initié doit écrire le nom divin, comme en PGM XIII, 90–95 et 210–11.

¹¹ Cf. *La Lettre de Pierre à Philippe* du codex VIII, 133,25–26 : « dans ton saint enfant (*alou*), Jésus-Christ »; Apoc 12,4–5 pour le motif de la naissance d'un fils mâle élevé sur le trône.

¹² Le fait que le Logos soit autogène signifie que c'est parce qu'il s'enfante comme Fils, grâce à l'Esprit, qu'il peut ainsi faire venir à l'existence les baptisés, d'où la désignation « enfant de l'enfant ».

l'enfant est ainsi invoqué par l'initié au début du rite baptismal, en tant que modèle pour tout baptisé.

C'est dans le contexte d'une liturgie céleste qu'est révélé le nom divin. Notons que Youel, selon une étymologie qui est en réalité un enseignement religieux, signifie *Yah est El(ohim)*, c'est-à-dire YHWH est Dieu. Youel porte le nom qui sera donné au baptisé. Il est dit que le Verbe qui sortit du silence, « celui dont le nom (se trouve) dans un symbole [invisible] », se révèle ainsi : I È O U É A Ô. Chacune des 7 voyelles est répétée 22 fois, ce qui représente le nombre des lettres de l'alphabet hébraïque (NHC III 44,1-9; IV 53,26-54,13). Par ce nom, soit l'auteur a voulu transcrire le tétragramme par I È O U É, la diphtongue OU comptant pour une seule lettre, suivi d'alpha et ômega, soit il s'est servi des sept voyelles pour exprimer ce nom comme dans les papyrus magiques (PGM XIII, 39 et 138-39; XXI, 11-14). Quoi qu'il en soit, en dehors de ce passage, le texte emploie plusieurs fois les lettres alpha et ômega pour désigner Dieu. Alors que le nom révélé dans la première partie du texte porte A et Ω, en celui qui est donné en conclusion les lettres sont inversées, Ω et A, pour signifier un retour au commencement¹³.

Le rituel baptismal (III 66,8-68,1; IV 78,10-80,15)

Comme on l'a dit, le thème du baptême est présent tout au long de l'écrit. À trois reprises, le monde a été détruit et régénéré. Il l'a d'abord été de manière préfigurative par l'eau, lors du déluge, et par le feu, lors de l'épisode de Sodome et Gomorrhe. Puis cette régénération fut accomplie par le baptême du Sauveur au moyen d'un corps né du Logos, un corps logogène, par l'entremise de la Vierge. Jésus le vivant, qu'a revêtu le sauveur céleste, Seth ou le Christ, est celui qui a cloué les puissances inférieures pour que soient engendrés les saints au moyen de l'Esprit (NHC III 63,4-66,8; IV 74,17-78,10) : épiclese, renonciation au monde, bain dans l'eau vivante, onction, sceau, illumination, époptie et transformation, par la réception d'une forme et du nom, caractérisent le baptême.

Voici quelques extraits de ce rituel final qu'il n'est pas possible de décrire de manière exhaustive dans le cadre de cet article. Il débute par une invocation et une glorification du nom divin, aiôn o ôn, IÈEOUÔA,

¹³ Selon Marc le Mage, les lettres alpha et ômega (= 801) désignent la colombe ou l'Esprit qui descend au baptême, le mot grec *peristera* correspondant à ces valeurs numériques (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* I, 15,1).

chaque lettre étant répétée *quatre* fois (NHC III 66,12–14; IV 78,16–18). Puis l'initié le glorifie ainsi : « Ce grand nom qui est tien est sur moi, (toi), l'Autogène sans déficience, (toi) qui n'es pas en dehors de moi. Je te vois, toi l'invisible aux yeux de tous. Qui, en effet, pourrait te comprendre dans une autre langue ? » (NHC III 66,22–27; IV 79,3–12)¹⁴.

Soulignant le fait que le nom ne peut être traduit ou exprimé *dans une autre langue*, le rituel présente une série de modulations du nom de Celui qui est (Ex 3,14), ÈI, AAAA, ÔÔÔÔ, c'est-à-dire IAÔ, et celui qui est alpha et oméga. Le Sauveur est aussi invoqué sous la forme abrégée IÈ et par IEUS ÈÔ OU ÈÔ ÔUA (NHC III 66,8–9). Dans cette christologie du nom, le nom de Jésus est intégré dans le grand nom divin, celui de YHWH (IÈOUÔA).

Après l'invocation du nom, l'initié exprime ainsi sa transformation : « Je t'ai connu, je me suis mêlé à l'immuable, je me suis armé d'une armure de lumière, je suis devenu lumière. Car la Mère était dans ce lieu-là, à cause de la beauté immense de la grâce. C'est pourquoi j'ai tendu mes deux mains, j'ai pris forme dans le cercle de la richesse de la lumière : elle est dans mon sein, elle donne forme à la multitude d'engendrés, dans la lumière irréprochable. . . . » (NHC III 67,1–12; IV 79,13–22)

Le geste d'extension des mains se retrouve dans la liturgie baptismale chrétienne, par exemple dans le *De baptismo* 20 de Tertullien et dans le Traité sans titre du codex Bruce, où il est dit que l'extension des mains est la manifestation de la croix¹⁵. Le motif de la grâce, sous un mode féminin kénotique, coïncide avec la venue en ce monde de la Mère ou de l'Esprit. Dans quelques textes chrétiens anciens, la descente de la grâce en ce monde rejoint la thématique et le vocabulaire de la descente du Christ aux enfers, la remontée en gloire étant exprimée sous un mode masculin¹⁶. Le rituel suscite une déification du visionnaire qui voit en lui la lumière, en contemplant la sphère du monde céleste, et participe à la liturgie angélique lors de laquelle le nom est invoqué.

En conclusion, le parfum est associé au nom divin par l'initié : « Ô Fils . . . (toi) qui éveille l'Homme en lequel tu vas me purifier, immergé dans ta vie, selon ton nom impérissable. C'est pourquoi le parfum de la vie est en moi,

¹⁴ Pour la dernière phrase (« Qui, en effet, pourrait te saisir dans une autre langue ? »), j'ai transformé la traduction donnée par Charron, « Livre sacré », 547.

¹⁵ Cf. Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex* (CGL 13; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 227, l. 14–15.

¹⁶ Pour les *Odes de Salomon*, voir Pierre, « La vierge prédicante de la 33e Ode de Salomon », 267–68n15.

je l'ai mélangé à de l'eau... » (NHC III 67,19–24; IV 80,5–11)¹⁷. Le thème de la bonne odeur est lié au nom dans la Bible : selon le *Cantique des cantiques* 1,3, « Ton nom est comme une huile parfumée qu'on répand ». Il existe en effet un jeu de mots en hébreu entre l'expression « ton nom » (*shemèka*) et « tes huiles parfumées » (*schemanèka*), le nom de Dieu étant comparable à un encens¹⁸. Le parfum de la bonne odeur, dont est oint l'initié lors du le baptême, correspond à l'Esprit¹⁹.

Une mystique du langage : vocalisation et invocation du nom

Le contexte liturgique permet-il de comprendre la transcription du nom divin à partir de la langue originale ? Si oui, l'*Évangile égyptien* s'appuie-t-il sur les Septante et qu'en est-il de la vocalisation de ce nom ?

Selon plusieurs études, les manuscrits anciens des Septante ne présentent pas de substitution du nom, mais le laissent apparaître en hébreu, en paléo-hébreu, en araméen ou vocalisé en grec, surtout sous la forme IAÔ²⁰. Il en est de même dans les versions d'Aquila, de Symmaque et de Theodotion²¹. D'après Marguerite Harl, on « ne sait pas à quelle étape de la transcription écrite de la version grecque *Kúrios* a été substitué à la reproduction des quatre lettres hébraïques » et ce, « malgré l'apparente suite chronologique des témoins des deux types (papyrus préchrétiens avec le tétragramme, manuscrits chrétiens avec *kúrios* et *theós*) »²².

En réalité la situation n'est pas claire. Selon certains savants, dont Pietersma, la LXX originelle du Pentateuque avait utilisé *kurios* à la fois

¹⁷ La traduction est de moi.

¹⁸ Voir Gérard Gertroux, *Un historique du nom divin* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1999), 191.

¹⁹ Voir par exemple Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* I, 21,3 où le motif du parfum-Esprit est associé au nom divin.

²⁰ Pour une bibliographie sur cette question, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, « Der semitische Hintergrund des neutestamentlichen Kyriostitels », dans *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie. Neutestamentliche Festschrift für Hans Conzelmann zum 60. Geburtstag* (éd. Georg Strecker ; Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1975), 267–98; George Howard, « The Tetragram and the New Testament », *JBL* 96 (1977) : 63–83; Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (2 éd.; Oxford : F.A. Praeger, 1959), 222–25; Geoffrey Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1975); Colin H. Roberts *Manuscripts, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (Oxford: University Press, 1979), 28–31; W. G. Waddell, « The Tetragrammaton in the LXX », *JTS* 45 (1944) : 159–61.

²¹ Pour la préservation du tétragramme en certains fragments des Hexaples d'Origène ainsi que dans les manuscrits chrétiens des LXX jusqu'au début du second siècle de notre ère, voir Howard, « The Tetragram and the New Testament », 73–74.

²² Marguerite Harl, *La Genèse* (vol. 1 de *La Bible d'Alexandrie, LXX* ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 51.

pour *Adôn* (*Adônai*) et pour le tétragramme. La présence du tétragramme dans les papyrus préchrétiens résulterait de révisions hébraisantes, au moment où de nouveaux immigrants juifs venus en Égypte réagissent contre l'usage de *kurios* dans les LXX²³. En outre, il n'est pas impossible que certains manuscrits chrétiens des LXX aient laissé tel quel le tétragramme pour préserver le caractère sacré du Nom, au moins jusqu'au second siècle de notre ère. Dans cette optique, les chrétiens auraient remplacé le tétragramme par le mot *kurios* lorsque le nom divin écrit en caractères hébreux en est venu à ne plus être compris²⁴. Il est donc vraisemblable que l'*Évangile égyptien* se soit fondé sur un manuscrit des LXX, judéen ou même judéo-chrétien, pour élaborer sa doctrine du nom divin.

Quant à la vocalisation du tétragramme, les hypothèses sont nombreuses. On pense aujourd'hui que ce devait être *Yahweh*, mais ce n'est pas certain. Les transcriptions grecques pour YHWH étaient diverses, que ce soit dans les manuscrits bibliques mais surtout dans les documents ou inscriptions extra-bibliques, comme l'étaient les formes du nom dans la Bible hébraïque²⁵. Ainsi que le notait Flavius Josèphe, le nom de Dieu est constitué, non de quatre consonnes, mais de quatre voyelles²⁶. Il ne s'agit évidemment pas des voyelles massorétiques apparues plus tard, mais des *matres lexionis* que l'on transpose en grec²⁷. Il est appelé IABE selon Théodoret de Cyr ou IAÔOUÈE en certains papyrus magiques égyptiens²⁸. Clément d'Alexandrie, dans le *Stromate* V, 6,34 affirme à son tour que le

²³ Albert Pietersma et Claude Cox, éd., *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of J. W. Wevers on His 65th Birthday* (Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1984), 85–101.

²⁴ Certains savants font l'hypothèse que les premiers manuscrits du Nouveau Testament ont pu également porter le tétragramme : voir Howard, « The Tetragram and the New Testament », 76n27.

²⁵ Voir Lienhard Delekat, « Yaho-Yahwae und die alttestamentlichen Gottesnamenskorrekturen », dans *Tradition und Glaube. Festgabe für K. G. Kuhn* (éd. Gert Jeremias, Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, et Hartmut Stegemann; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 23–75.

²⁶ *Guerre des Judéens* V, 235, voir aussi *Antiquités* III, 178. Cf. Jérôme, *In Ps 8* (PL 26:838).

²⁷ Avant les massorètes, les mots hébreux étaient vocalisés grâce aux trois lettres Y, W et H. Selon la transcription grecque, Y = I, E ou È—H = A ou È—W = Ô, OU. Sur la forme YHW (IEOU) en Égypte, voir Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, 80–84. On trouve un autre mode de transcription par imitation des quatre caractères hébreux carrés yod-hé-waw-hé, écrit de droite à gauche comme en hébreu, avec les formes analogues des lettres iôta et pi, ce qui a donné l'étrange PIPI. Le nom « Jeu » que l'on trouve chez les gnostiques, soit représente une des transcriptions grecques du tétragramme, soit résulte de la synthèse entre l'abréviation du nom divin *Yah* ou *Yeh* et le pronom de la troisième personne du singulier, ce qui signifie *Yahweh* lui-même ou *Yahweh*, c'est lui. Dans un texte chrétien, cette désignation peut servir à mettre en lumière le fait que Jésus est bien le *kurios*.

²⁸ Théodoret, *Quaestiones* XV sur Exode 3,14.

nom mystique de quatre lettres est IAOUÉ, et il l'associe à la déclaration d'Ex 3,14. Il se traduit : « celui qui est et qui sera ». Selon lui, Dieu étant ineffable, il ne peut être connu que par la puissance qui vient de lui et qui est le Fils de Dieu²⁹. En d'autres documents, le tétragramme prend les formes IAIE, IAÔ, IEÔ ou IEOU, IEUÔ, IEÔA. La forme abrégée qui apparaît dans la Bible hébraïque (ou, selon certains, la forme primitive) *Yah, Yeh*, est transcrite en grec IA ou IÈ³⁰.

On a vu que le *Livre sacré* écrit le nom YHWH soit sous la forme IÈOUÉ, le OU transcrivant le W comme chez Clément, soit à l'aide des sept voyelles en le vocalisant IÈEOUÔA. À l'instar d'autres textes, il défend l'idée qu'il ne faut pas changer les noms livrés par Dieu. C'est l'énoncé même du nom qui est efficace. Le *Livre sacré* exprime ainsi une idée répandue dans les papyrus magiques gréco-égyptiens et chez Origène qui, dans le *Contre Celse* (I, 24–25 et V, 45), affirme que les noms de Dieu, tels qu'ils étaient dits par les Hébreux dans la Bible, concernaient une science divine mystérieuse : les appellations qui sont données à Dieu ne sont pas indifférentes, la puissance des invocations ne se manifestant que lorsque ces appellations sont faites dans la langue originale. Dans les rituels, le nom divin et les noms théophores ont une force ineffable. Chez Marc le mage, par exemple, l'insistance sur la prononciation et sur la structure alphabétique du nom peuvent s'expliquer rituellement (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* I, 15,1–31).

L'Évangile égyptien a vraisemblablement subi l'influence de l'hermétisme—par exemple, dans *l'Ogdoade et l'Ennéade* (NHC VI 56,17–22 et 61,10–15), le disciple invoque le nom de Dieu à l'aide d'une suite de voyelles—ainsi que celle des papyrus magiques gréco-égyptiens, comme le papyrus V de Leyde où le nom, appelé ogdoade, est formé de sept voyelles plus la monade³¹. En PGM XIII l'initié affirme : « Seigneur, je reproduis ton image par les sept voyelles, viens à moi, écoute-moi ». Dans ces papyrus magiques, les sept voyelles fonctionnent explicitement comme le nom divin. De même, alpha et ômega y apparaissent comme une abréviation

²⁹ Alain Le Boulluec, *Clément d'Alexandrie: Les Stromates, Stromate V* (trad. Pierre Voulet ; 2 vols. ; SC 278–279 ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1981), 1:81 (trad.) et 2:141 (commentaire).

³⁰ Voir Godfrey R. Driver, « The Original Form of the Name Yahweh: Evidence and Conclusion », *ZAW* 5 (1928) : 7–25 ; Natalio Marcos Fernandez, « 'Iaie, eseree, aia' y otros nombres de Dios entre los hebreos », *Sefarad* 35 (1975) : 91–106.

³¹ Marcellin Berthelot, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* (3 vols. ; Paris : Georges Steinheil, 1887) ; voir Michaël Martin, *Les papyrus grecs magiques* (Histoire ; Paris : Éd. Le Manuscrit, 2000).

des sept voyelles, et donc du nom³². De fait, la doctrine du nom dans l'*Évangile égyptien* correspond bien à l'affirmation d'Eusèbe de Césarée dans la *Préparation évangélique* XI, 6,36–37 : « la combinaison des sept voyelles ensemble renferme, disent-ils, l'expression d'un nom qu'il n'est pas permis de prononcer, nom que les enfants des Hébreux signifient à l'aide de quatre lettres et assignent à la puissance suprême de Dieu »³³.

La magie du nom se fonde sur l'idée qu'il y a un rapport intime entre le nom lui-même et celui qui le porte. Comme l'a rappelé Gershom Scholem, le nom « est même identifié à celui qu'il nomme suivant une conception qui joua un rôle important dans l'environnement oriental du judaïsme, notamment dans la religion égyptienne ». Une mystique s'est élaborée dans le monde juif, à partir de la conception du langage comme décomposition et déploiement du nom divin : « Le nom est une concentration de force divine; et suivant les diverses combinaisons de forces... de tels noms peuvent remplir des offices différents ». C'est ainsi que dans la mystique juive, les vingt-deux lettres de l'alphabet, à la base de tout le créé, semblent bien être les toutes premières créations, à l'instar du trône de gloire et des réalités du monde de la *merkaba*. Bref, l'alphabet en est venu à être conçu comme nom mystique³⁴.

Dans le monde judéen, le nom divin est désigné comme *shem ha-meforash*, ce qui a été interprété de diverses manières. De manière paradoxale, le « participe passif *meforash* peut aussi bien signifier 'révélé' que 'expliqué expressément' ou 'prononcé' de manière directe (c'est-à-dire en toutes lettres). D'autre part, il peut aussi signifier 'séparé', voire même 'occulte'; or toutes ces interprétations peuvent parfaitement être étayées à l'aide de références tirées de la terminologie des textes hébreux et araméens des premiers siècles »³⁵.

Dans le *Livre sacré*, le nom, d'abord caché, est révélé en toutes lettres dans un cadre initiatique. Le texte offre une synthèse entre les réflexions juives sur le langage et le nom divin et les spéculations grecques sur la puissance des voyelles, par exemple dans le pythagorisme, où chaque voyelle a une valeur symbolique et correspond à un nombre. En outre,

³² Voir PGM XIII, 39, 207; XXI, 11–14; aussi PGM IV, 411, 528, 992, 1182–83, 1224, 2351, etc.

³³ Trad. de Geneviève Favrelle, *Eusèbe de Césarée : Préparation évangélique, Livre XI* (SC 292; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 87.

³⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Le Nom et les symboles de Dieu dans la mystique juive* (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1983), 57–68.

³⁵ Scholem, *Le Nom et les symboles de Dieu*, 62mo.

la signification du nom YHWH est reportée sur le Christ. Comme dans *l'Épître de Barnabé* 9,8, l'abréviation IÈ est utilisée pour le désigner, afin de montrer son lien étroit avec le Père. Selon Joël 3,5: « quiconque invoquera le nom du Seigneur sera sauvé ». Or, Jésus, en grec *Iêsous*, de l'hébreu *Yéchûa*, *Yehôchûa'* signifie YHWH sauve. Le nom, par son invocation, donne le salut.

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THE TERM ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ IN COPTIC-MANICHAEAN TEXTS

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“[Le]t us worship our good father and [glori]fy [our gr]eat saviour, for he has revealed a[ll] things” . . . The father and great saviour in this quotation,¹ is Mani (216–c. 277), who called himself an apostle of Jesus Christ, bringing a revelation of cosmic and soteriological secrets to mankind. Mani was born in Southern Mesopotamia and initiated a movement or “church,” Manichaeism, which spread from the Sassanian Empire to the Roman Empire and Central Asia. It even reached China, where it existed until the beginning of the 17th century. During its long history, Manichaeism was influenced by many different religious traditions, even though Jewish-Christian traditions must have been crucial for the formation of Manichaeism, which we can infer from a Manichaean-Greek hagiographical text about the childhood and youth of Mani in the so-called Cologne Mani Codex (CMC) which was found in Egypt.

Until the end of the 19th century, Manichaeism was only known from the writings of its opponents. This state of affairs changed during the 20th century when numerous fragments of Manichaean texts in many different languages were uncovered in Central Asia; Manichaean texts have also been found in Egypt (in Syriac-Aramaic, Coptic, and Greek). However, only very few fragments have been found of Mani’s own works, which the Manichaeans considered as their holy scriptures. Among the Manichaean-Coptic manuscripts that are the topic of this contribution, there have only been found fragments of Mani’s *Epistles* and maybe also excerpts from his *Living Gospel*, otherwise the texts stem from Mani’s disciples and later generations of Manichaeans.

The Manichaean-Coptic manuscripts are from the 4th and 5th centuries, and they have been found in two places, in Medinet Madi in the

¹ Quotation from the Coptic *Sermon on the Great War*, which is preserved in the so-called *Manichaean Homilies*, pp. 7, 9–10. Edition: Hans Jakob Polotsky, ed., *Manichäische Homilien* (Manichäische Handschriften der Sammlung A. Chester Beatty 1; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1934). Reedition: Nils Arne Pedersen, ed., *Manichaean Homilies with a Number of hitherto Unpublished Fragments* (CFM: Series Coptica 2; Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

Fayium Oasis and in Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) in the Dakhleh Oasis. This study has been confined to manuscripts which have already been published in editions, leaving out documentary texts.² The following texts are included: The *Kephalaia*,³ i.e. “chapters,” containing allegedly orally transmitted teachings by Mani to his disciples about all possible questions related to Manichaean mythology; the second part of the *Psalm-Book*,⁴ which is a codex containing various collections of Manichaean hymns; the *Manichaean Homilies*,⁵ which is another codex containing both texts intended to be read for the congregation and texts of historical contents, and finally, the various Manichaean-Coptic literary texts found at Ismant el-Kharab.⁶

The widespread use of religious language in antiquity about mysteries and secrets was also very common in Manichaean literature, including the Coptic texts.⁷ Since the primary and original language of the Manichaeans was an Eastern Aramaic dialect close to Syriac, we must assume that the Greek *μυστήριον* used in the Manichaean-Coptic texts as a loan word is often a translation of the Syriac *râzâ* (originally a Persian loan word)

² Iain Gardner, Anthony Alcock and Wolf-Peter Funk, eds., *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis*, 1, *P. Kell. V (P. Kell. Copt. 10–52; O. Kell. Copt. 1–2)*, with a contribution by Colin A. Hope and Gillian E. Bowen (Dakhleh Oasis Project: Monograph 9; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999).

³ Carl Schmidt, Hans Jakob Polotsky and Alexander Böhlig, eds., *Kephalaia I, 1. Hälfte* (MHSMB I; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1940); Alexander Böhlig, ed., *Kephalaia I, Zweite Hälfte. Lieferung 1/12 (Seite 244–291)* (MHSMB I; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966); Wolf-Peter Funk, ed., *Kephalaia I, Zweite Hälfte* (2 vols.; MHSMB; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1999–2000).

⁴ Charles R. C. Allberry, ed., *A Manichaean Psalm-Book*, Part II (Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection II; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938). Cf. the partial reeditions: Gregor Wurst, ed., *Psalm Book*, Part II, Fasc. 1, *Die Bema-Psalmen* (CFM: Series Optica 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1996); Siegfried G. Richter, ed., *Psalm Book*, Part II, Fasc. 2, *Die Herakleides-Psalmen* (CFM: Series Optica 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1998).

⁵ Edition: Cf. above, note 1.

⁶ Iain Gardner, ed., *Kellis Literary Texts*, 1, with contributions by Sarah Clackson, Majella Franzmann and K. A. Worp (Dakhleh Oasis Project: Monograph 4; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1996); Iain Gardner, ed., *Kellis Literary Texts*, 2, with contributions by M. Choat, Majella Franzmann, Wolf-Peter Funk and K. A. Worp (Dakhleh Oasis Project: Monograph 15; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007).

⁷ Cf. especially among studies specifically devoted to the meaning of *μυστήριον* and related terms in Manichaean literature: Kurt Rudolph, “Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung in der antiken Gnosis und im Manichäismus,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 265–87, esp. 278–86; Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (2d ed; SHR 70; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 63–78 (Chapter IV, “Esotericism in Mani’s Thought and Background”).

which, like the Greek word, can largely be understood as both “sacrament” and “secret.”

In the Manichaean-Coptic texts, however, the word is seldom used about ritual acts or sacraments and mostly about secrets, thus corresponding to the usage in Christian texts during the first three centuries.⁸ This has also been observed in previous studies of mystery language in Manichaeism: In the context of ancient Gnosticism, Kurt Rudolph has dealt with concealment and secrecy in Manichaeism. He mainly took his examples from the Cologne Mani Codex and the Coptic *Kephalaia*. Guy G. Stroumsa dealt with the same issues in a large monograph, making an excellent analysis of the main passages where μυστήριον and related words are used in the CMC.⁹ Stroumsa pointed convincingly to the religio-historical background of Mani in Judaism and Jewish Christianity since Mani grew up in a Jewish-Christian Baptist group, the “Elchasaites.”

It does, however, make sense to supplement their examinations with a more thorough overview and study of some passages in the edited Coptic-Manichaean texts; here it has turned out that it is primarily the *Kephalaia* that contains interesting passages using the term μυστήριον.

However, it is worth observing that the term is already present in the text on a number of fragments found at Ismant el-Kharab that form one leaf (P. Kell. Copt. 54). The text is probably from one of Mani’s own scriptures, possibly an epistle.¹⁰ Here Mani is obviously referring to the secrets that he reveals to his disciples as “mysteries”; we read in Gardner’s translation:

Look, you have seen [every] thing [by] an eye-revelation. You do not lack anything from [the] mysteries of the wisdom of God.¹¹

And a few lines later on:

Furthermore, all these other mysteries and the wisdom [that I have] revealed [to] you, I am adapting and [adjusting] for you in various particular forms

⁸ Cf. Arthur D. Nock, “Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments,” in his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2:814.

⁹ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 63–78.

¹⁰ Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts*, 2, 84–93; Gardner (*Kellis Literary Texts*, 2, 85) suggests that it is a fragment of the Mani epistle titled *of Aba, Love* that is mentioned in Bayard Dodge, transl., *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 799.

¹¹ P. Kell. Copt. 54, 8–11 (Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts*, 2, 86–87).

for the sake of love; so that you will possess it and [its] fruits be truly apparent to me.¹²

So the dialectic in the Manichaean interest in secrets and mysteries is certainly, as pointed out by Rudolph and Stroumsa, that the “hidden” is being “revealed.” In this context we should observe the fundamental aspect that the highest divine hypostasis¹³ of the Light, the fundamental god who is the Father of Greatness, remains hidden until the end of times. This means that even though all secrets apparently are revealed in Manichaeism, the most fundamental is claimed to remain hidden until the end.¹⁴

As often noted, e.g. by Stroumsa, the word *mysterion* “has obviously a very broad semantic spectrum in late antiquity, and is more often than not ambivalent or used in a metaphoric or at least a rather loose sense.”¹⁵ This also applies in relation to the Coptic Manichaean texts, where *mysterion* often seems to designate individual sections of the Manichaean myth. This designation, however, is grounded in a more “loaded” sense of the word *mysterion*.

The Berlin *Kephalaia* 14,31ff. tells about the crucial revelation that Mani received from his Twin, here called the living Paraclete. In the translation of Iain Gardner we read:

He unveiled to me the hidden mystery, the one that is hidden from the worlds and the generations, the myster[y] of the dep[ths] and the heights.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the use of “depths” and “heights” is the first example of the contents of the whole revelation, which is subsequently unfolded in

¹² P. Kell. Copt. 54, 24–30 (Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts*, 2, 86–87).

¹³ This is not a concept used in the Manichaean texts, but it seems to express their idea very well, i.e. that the so-called Manichaean gods are not individual persons like the gods in, for instance, Greek mythology.

¹⁴ Cf. Nils Arne Pedersen, *Studies in The Sermon on the Great War: Investigations of a Manichaean-Coptic Text from the Fourth Century* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 392–98, and my article “The Veil and Revelation of the Father of Greatness,” in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and Other Gnosticism: Studies for Johannes van Oort at Sixty* (ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, Annemaré Kotzé, Tobias Nicklas & Madeleine Scopello, NHMS 74; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 229–34.

¹⁵ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 32, 64. Cf. also *Kephalaia* 302,28 about Jesus the Splendour who came and was revealed and crucified in the world,—πεί ὄ[ω]πε ἀπμύστηριον ἡπῶρπ ἡρῶν[ε], translated by Funk, *Kephalaia I*, as “Dies geschah (?) im Mysterium des Urmenschen” with the added note: “Oder (?): ‘Dieser/Dieses wurde zum Mysterium...’ (doch wahrscheinlich steht ‘Mysterium’ hier wie öfter meta phorisch für einen bestimmten Abschnitt des Mythos).”

¹⁶ *Kephalaia* 15,1–3; translation from Iain Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary* (NHMS 37; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 20.

detail, mostly described as mysteries, going from the most basic to the more and more specific, and from the “cosmic” aspects of the Manichaean myth to the more “historical” aspects and “ecclesiological” circumstances: The mystery of light and darkness, whose mingling forms the universe; the way that the ships (i.e. sun and moon) were constructed as means for purifying light from darkness; the mystery of the fashioning of Adam; the tree of knowledge; the apostles; the elect and their commandments; the catechumens and their helpers and commandments; the sinners with their deeds and future punishment (*Kephalaia* 15,3–19).

So it is not only light and the good that are mysteries but also darkness and the evil; hence also the fashioning of Adam, which is actually the work of the evil forces, and the existence of the sinners. But the inclusion of darkness in the “mystery” is probably due to the fact that it forms part of the whole narrative structure being revealed to Mani.¹⁷

So the mystery revealed to Mani is the totality of the myth, which also explains that every single part of it is a mystery. That Mani received the total knowledge is also stressed in the conclusion (*Kephalaia* 15,19–24). Even though the term *mysterion* is often used routinely for special sections of the Manichaean myth, this use has its justification in the broader understanding of the whole myth as a mystery.

The understanding of single aspects of the Manichaean myth as mysteries is found again in numerous passages in the *Kephalaia*, inter alia in chapter 8, pp. 36,27–37,27, describing the fourteen vehicles that Jesus has boarded. These fourteen vehicles are mythological expressions of the steps leading downwards to matter. These vehicles are finally described as mysteries, that is in a “beatitude” or promise of salvation to the one who knows “these mysteries” (*Kephalaia* 37,25–27). Such beatitudes or promises to the one who knows the mysteries are found again in *Kephalaia* 63,16; 164,1–8, and they point to the well-known fact that the Manichaean knowledge, the myth, is redeeming.

However, even if the Manichaeans were primarily interested in redemption, they assumed that not only were they themselves full of elements of light in need of redemption, but so was the whole cosmos. This cosmological redemption led them, at least in the *Kephalaia*, towards an interest

¹⁷ Evil and darkness as mysteries is also found in *Kephalaia* 93,31, which mentions that Jesus was sent because of “the mystery of wickedness,” and in *Kephalaia* 169,15 (maybe also in *Kephalaia* 21,18).

in the explanation of all natural phenomena. This resembles a scientific interest but the explanations are always mythological.¹⁸

In this connection the Manichaeans could also describe the whole world as a mystery, the real meaning of which was only revealed by Mani. His revelation is its explanation:

Then the apostle says to him: Ha[ppen] you know this, that this universe is established [of m]ystery, and is entirely full of mystery.¹⁹

Because everything is a sign with a meaning, it is therefore a *mysterion*, and the meaning is only known by being revealed. *Mysterion* is both the myth, or part of it, and the natural fact which has a secret meaning that is to be found in the myth.

As demonstrated, *mysterion* is very often used in a context dealing with Mani's revelation of the myth (besides already mentioned examples, cf. *Man. Hom.* 7,12–13; *Psalm-Book II*, 3,22).²⁰ Mani reveals this knowledge to his disciples who thus become his “associates in the mystery” (ⲠⲃⲢⲏⲬⲦⲤⲞⲢⲐⲚ):²¹

¹⁸ Cf. Gardner, *Kephalaia of the Teacher*, 258.

¹⁹ *Kephalaia* 254,7–9 (translation by Gardner) in the beginning of chapter 101 (*Kephalaia* 253,25–255,21), which deals with the meaning of reflected images in water (“mystery”: Cf. furthermore *Kephalaia* 254,12.21.23.25,29; 255,4–5,10.17). The quoted passage reminds one of the Hellenistic philosophical idea of “the world as a myth,” cf. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 11–26, especially p. 23ff.

²⁰ Cf. also the use of the native Coptic ⲛⲡⲉⲧⲏⲛⲛⲓ, “these secrets,” in *Kephalaia* 16,30–31.

²¹ The word resembles the Greek συμμύστης “one who is initiated with others” (*LSJ*, 1680a), which in a “Gnostic” context could mean “one who is initiated with others . . . into esoteric doctrines,” cf. *PGL*, 1284b, which refers to the *Acts of Thomas* 39: Ὁ δίδυμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ ἀπόστολος τοῦ ὑψίστου καὶ συμμύστης τοῦ λόγου τοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀποκρῦφου, “Twin of Christ and apostle of the Most High, and co-initiated in the secret word of Christ” (Max Bonnet, ed., *Acta Philippi et Acta Thomae accedunt Acta Barnabae* [vol. 2 of *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*; ed. Richard A. Lipsius and Max Bonnet; Leipzig: apud Hermannum Mendelssohn, 1903; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959], 156,12–14). The Syriac text, which is possibly the original text of the *Acts of Thomas*, has two parallels to συμμύστης τοῦ λόγου τοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀποκρῦφου: firstly, bar melteh k^csîtâ d^rmaḥyânâ (William Wright, ed., *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries with English Translation and Notes* [2 vols.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1871; repr., Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968], 1:208,9–10) “partaker in the secret word of the life-giver,” and, secondly, m^cqabbel râzûy kâsyê d^rbareh dalâhâ (Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 1:208, 10), “receiver of the secret mysteries of the Son of God.” Thus there is no direct equivalent to the Greek word in the Syriac text. The *Acts of Thomas* was a text well-known to the Manichaeans, and the word is also used in the Cologne Mani Codex 62,8: Paul wrote for “the co-initiated in the secrets,” τοῖς συμμύσταις τῶν ἀποκρῦφων (Ludwig Koenen and Cornelia Römer, eds., *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex: Über das Werden seines Leibes* [PapyCol 14; Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989]). Concerning the word συμμύστης, cf. also Albertus F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (2d ed.; NTSup 108; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 109.

[Af]ter th[i]s the apostle spoke again to his [dis]ciples, these who are the associates in the mystery of [his k]nowledge (*Kephalaia* 335,2).

The word is also used in other passages in the Coptic-Manichaean texts.²² Interestingly, there is also a passage where the disciples are *not* associates in the mystery:

Once again he speaks to his disciples, these who are not associates in the my[stery] of his knowledge (*Kephalaia* 104,24–25).

The idea must be to stress that they did not *yet* know it (cf. the German translation adding “[noch]”). The chapter obviously tries to describe Mani’s revelations in the true perspective of the past, for in the end it must also be the idea that the disciples became associates in the mystery.

In chapter 147 (*Kephalaia* 350,13–355,1), however, we find the idea that there is some knowledge which Mani and the other apostles do not reveal, even to their associates in the mystery, that is, the knowledge about the future. The reasons for this—which, interestingly, is bound up with a dualistic worldview—is explained at length: If the apostles told when future events would take place, the Archons in the “Zone” would be able to delay the time when the events will take place in order to scandalise the apostle. This explanation would not have given sense in a religious system assuming an almighty God. However, the chapter seems also to deal with another kind of knowledge about the future which the apostle keeps secret. Because of lacunae in *Kephalaia* 353,27–34, it is not possible to say precisely what the contents of this knowledge is, but later on it is called “his mystery about the good and the evil things” (ΠΕΡΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΔΝΕΤΑΝΙΤ Μ̄Ν ΝΕΤΖΔΥ, *Kephalaia* 354,18–19). The reason why this knowledge is kept secret is that otherwise sick and weak persons in the church would be able to use it, behaving like diviners (μάγντις) and casters of horoscopes (ΡΕΦΚΑ ΟΥΓΝΟΥ) (*Kephalaia* 354,16–17).²³ Finally, the apostle keeps the medical knowledge about plants and healing secret, in order to avoid

²² In *Kephalaia* 51,14 (in a parable); 128,11–12,15 (in a parable); 352,6. In the unpublished *Psalm-Book I*, pl. 164,9 (Søren Giversen, ed., *The Manichaean Coptic Papyri in the Chester Beatty Library: Facsimile Edition III, Psalm Book Part I* [COr XVI; Geneva: Patrick Cramer, 1988]) the word is used in one of the psalms to the Lord’s Day.

²³ Here the meaning is close to secret knowledge used in magic and divination, cf. Funk’s translation of *mysterion* as “Geheimwissen.” Cf. *Kephalaia* 143,15, where the same meaning seems probable: “Yet, now, by the power of the Light Mind, the sounds of lust and the words of magic and evil mysteries have become loathsome in his presence” (Gardner, *Kephalaia of the Teacher*, 150). Cf. perhaps also *Kephalaia* 92,29–32, referring to the *Book of the Giants*.

its misuse by persons who could make money on it and thereby loose their piety. The conclusion with Funk's restorations is:

Because of this the ap[ostle] also [hides] this other (information) and he does not reve[al about the t]hings of the world, bu[t he reveals about] the mystery of the go[d]s [for his associates in the myste]ry, [those] who receive it from him and [...]... (354,29–355,1).

This passage seems to limit the knowledge revealed by the apostle to the mythological knowledge about the Manichaeian gods, which is certainly also what fills most of the *Kephalaia*. However, we have also seen that the work contains mundane "scientific" knowledge. But there is no concrete information about fate or medicine. Such knowledge could be falsified and hence scandalise the Manichaeians.

Even though Mani seems to reveal all cosmic and historical secrets, and explain natural phenomena like clouds and mirror images, there are, as demonstrated, a few passages in the *Kephalaia* which reduce the extent of the revelation, i.e. limit it to heavenly things.

The primary meaning of *mysterion* in Manichaeian texts is secret knowledge rather than secret ritual, and this is probably also the meaning in the title of Mani's lost work, the *Book of Mysteries*. This work is often mentioned in the Coptic Manichaeian texts in the lists of Mani's own works, which scholars often refer to as the canon of the Manichaeians.²⁴ In some passages, however, the term could also refer to rituals, but hardly ever in the sense "rite of initiation."

In *Kephalaia* chapter 9 (pp. 37,28–42,23), *mysterion* is used about certain manners of greeting and salutation (peace and greeting, the right hand, kiss, salutation, laying on of hands), which were also used in the Manichaeian Church. They are explained as being earthly representations or repetitions of acts that took place on the cosmic plane in the myth. The disciples asking Mani are well aware that these manners of greeting are not only used by the Manichaeians, but are cultural features belonging to "the world" (cf., e.g., *Kephalaia* 37,32–38,4), and this may be the reason why it was necessary to link them to stages in the myth. Precisely in a passage mentioning that the forms of greeting are used by people in the world, it is stressed that they were introduced by apostles, and that they do not take their origin from the evil forces:

²⁴ *Kephalaia* 5,24; 355,11–12; *Man. Hom.* 25,3; 43,17; 92,20–21; *Psalms-Book II*, 46,28.

These five mysteries and these five signs came about first in the divine. They were proclaimed in this world by an [a]postle. Ma[nk]ind has been taught them; and they have instituted them in their midst[...but] these myster[ies] wer[e] not at the beginning amongst the powers of darkness.²⁵

Since evil and sinful habits are also mysteries, and since the forms of greeting etc. were also used by the non-Manichaeism world, their legitimacy within Manichaeism could be questioned. This chapter about their origin among the gods of light hence seeks to shed light on this question.

Another chapter to some degree relating *mysterion* to ritual matters is chapter 109 (*Kephalaia* 262,10–264,19), which explains the correspondence between mythological mysteries and the 50 κυριακαί, on which catechumens were fasting and the 50 δευτέραι (i.e. Mondays) on which the Elect were fasting.²⁶ A ritual meaning of *mysterion* seems furthermore probable in one of the Bema psalms, *Psalm-Book* II, 21,7–8, which, addressing Mani, says: “All thy Churches are fulfilling thy mystery.”²⁷

At the end of the day we can say that the Manichaeans shared the general interest in Late Antiquity in mystery language and that this interest was already present in the works of Mani himself. The first Manichaeans must have used the Syriac word *râzâ*, which generally has the same meanings as the Greek μυστήριον, i.e. as “sacrament” and as “secret.” It is the loan word μυστήριον which is found in the Manichaean-Coptic texts; there is, however, remarkably little use of *mysterion/mysteria* in the context of ritual. The Manichaeans stressed the cognitive meaning of the word and were thus in line with contemporary Christian texts. They did not intend to say that the *mysteria* would remain secrets; it was on the contrary their main point that the secrets had been revealed by Mani. This revelation, the Manichaean myth, is often said to comprise everything, and hence the individual sections of the myth could also be called *mysteria*, both “cosmic,” “historical,” and “ecclesiological” aspects and circumstances related to the myth. Only one chapter in the *Kephalaia* argues that not all knowledge has been revealed to the Manichaeans, and here it is interesting to see the interest of the congregation behind this limitation of knowledge: Revelation of the precise timing of future events could scandalise the

²⁵ *Kephalaia* 40,19–24; Gardner, *Kephalaia of the Teacher*, 45.

²⁶ Cf. Alexander Böhlig, *Mysterion und Wahrheit. Gesammelte Beiträge zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte* (AGSJU 6; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 259–61 on this chapter.

²⁷ Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book*. *Mysterion* may also refer to bread and water in the Manichaean holy meal in *Psalm-Book* II 24,32–25,2, as suggested in Rudolph “Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung,” 281.

apostles if the events did not come to pass, and revelation about fate or medicine was unfitting for the piety of the Manichaeans.

The interesting Coptic word $\Theta\beta\rho\mu\gamma\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$, “associates in the mystery,” resembles the Greek $\sigma\mu\mu\upsilon\sigma\tau\eta\varsigma$ known from the Cologne Mani Codex and the Greek *Acts of Thomas*. It was, however, not possible to establish the probable Syriac equivalent via the Syriac *Acts of Thomas* since two different phrases seemed to be used in the same context as the Greek *Acts*.

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SECRETS ET RÉVÉLATION DANS LE CODEX TCHACOS

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Pris singulièrement, les quatre traités qui composent le codex Tchacos ont une structure propre. Néanmoins si on les soumet à une lecture totale, en considérant le codex comme une unité littéraire, on ne peut ne pas être frappé par les thématiques communes qui parcourent les traités et par un choix commun d'images et de métaphores que les quatre auteurs ont employées dans leurs écrits respectifs. Ces thèmes et ces images ne sont pas pareillement développés dans chacun des quatre traités : néanmoins, même dans la différence, on remarque qu'un fil rouge les parcourt. Est-ce ce fil rouge qui a mené à réunir ensemble dans un seul codex, au IV^e siècle, ces quatre traités, rédigés entre le II^e et le III^e siècles, en les destinant ainsi à la lecture et à la méditation d'une seule personne ou, plus probablement, d'un groupe adepte de la foi gnostique ? Or cet individu, ou ces individus, nous sont inconnus. Les seuls renseignements que nous possédons sur eux proviennent de la confection du codex et du lieu (encore hypothétique) de sa découverte : il s'agit de lecteurs ayant vécu au IV^e siècle, en Égypte, dans la région d'al-Minya. Le soin apporté au codex, sa transcription, la qualité du papyrus utilisé et celle de la reliure nous permettent de dire que ce groupe était relativement aisé. Nous ignorons si la traduction du grec au copte de ces écrits a été effectuée ici pour la première fois ; les deux doublets que contient le codex Tchacos (*La lettre de Pierre à Philippe* et *Jacques*) sont en effet aussi présents à Nag Hammadi. Pour réaliser les *codices* de Nag Hammadi divers traducteurs, plus ou moins subtils, avaient été mis à contribution pour transposer les textes du grec au copte. La main de divers copistes pouvait aussi être distinguée. Des différences apparaissent dans la réalisation des reliures. Ces traducteurs et ces copistes œuvraient-ils dans des ateliers ou plutôt individuellement ?

¹ Voir à ce sujet, Nicolas Grimal, « De Louqsor à Nag Hammadi », dans *Les textes de Nag Hammadi : Histoire des religions et approches contemporaines, Actes du Colloque international réuni à Paris les 11 et 12 décembre 2008 à l'Institut de France* (éd. Jean-Pierre Mahé, Paul-Hubert Poirier et Madeleine Scopello ; Paris : Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2010), 149–53, spécialement p. 152.

Cette question n'est, pour l'instant, pas résolue. En revanche, pour ce qui est du codex Tchacos, la main d'un seul copiste a transcrit les quatre traités qui le composent. La langue copte pratiquée par le traducteur de ces textes est mâtinée de formes dialectales qui vont aider à déterminer avec plus de précision la provenance de ce codex². Mais il devait vraisemblablement exister en Égypte, et ailleurs, diverses traductions de ces écrits qui circulaient d'un groupe gnostique à l'autre. Les cas les plus éclatants sont, d'une part, les traités de *Zostrien* et d'*Allogène* du codex VIII et XI de Nag Hammadi, également connus dans l'école romaine de Plotin, d'autre part, l'*Évangile de Judas*, dont l'existence en dehors de l'Égypte est attestée par l'hérésiologie. Les manuscrits conservés ne livrent qu'un modeste aperçu de ce que devait être à cette époque l'activité de traduction, de recopiage et de façonnage³ des *codices* gnostiques en Égypte.

Quant au contenu des quatre écrits du codex Tchacos, s'il n'atteint pas le haut niveau spéculatif de plusieurs textes de Nag Hammadi, il est toutefois régi par les grandes articulations de la pensée gnostique. Leur présentation littéraire est celle des traités de révélation, et tous les personnages mis en scène relèvent d'un contexte chrétien gnosticisé ; néanmoins, des influences juives⁴ et païennes parcourent aussi ces textes, témoignant de la culture religieuse des gnostiques qui sut puiser à plusieurs sources d'inspiration.

On pourra objecter que l'unité thématique résulte de l'appartenance à un même courant de pensée : certes, mais le capital d'images et de métaphores en possession des auteurs gnostiques est si riche que l'expression

² Voir l'« Étude dialectale » de Rodolphe Kasser, dans *The Gospel of Judas, together with the Letter of Peter to Philip, James, and the Book of Allogenes from Codex Tchacos. Critical Edition* (éd. Rodolphe Kasser, Gregor Wurst, Marvin Meyer, et François Gaudard ; Washington, DC : National Geographic, 2007), 35–78.

³ Sur la codicologie de Nag Hammadi, voir l'étude de James M. Robinson dans *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (éd. James M. Robinson ; New York : Harper and Row, 1988), 10–22 ; pour le Codex Tchacos, voir Gregor Wurst, « Preliminary Codicological Analysis of Codex Tchacos », dans Kasser et al., *The Gospel of Judas*, 27–33.

⁴ C'est le cas de l'*Évangile de Judas*, dont la dette envers le judaïsme mystique me paraît fondamentale ; je me permets de citer ici, à ce propos, trois de mes travaux récents : Madeleine Scopello, « Traditions angélogiques et mystique juive dans l'*Évangile de Judas* », dans *The Gospel of Judas in Context, Proceedings of the First Conference on the Gospel of Judas held in Paris Sorbonne, 27th–28th October 2006* (éd. Madeleine Scopello ; NHMS 62 ; Leiden : Brill, 2008), 123–34 ; « Les anges dans l'*Évangile de Judas* : aperçu préliminaire », dans *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu* (éd. Mohammed-Amir Moezzi et Jean-Daniel Dubois ; Turnhout : Brepols, 2009), 589–98 ; « Les anges de l'*Évangile de Judas* », dans « *In Search of Truth* » : *Augustine, Manichaeism and Other Gnosticism : Festschrift for Johannes van Oort on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* (éd. Jacob Albert van den Berg, Annemaré Kotzé, et Madeleine Scopello ; Leiden : Brill, 2010), 593–609.

d'un même thème ne se greffe pas nécessairement sur un même lot de symboles. Prenons le cas d'un thème gnostique très courant : celui de la condition négative de l'homme dans l'univers. Son malaise existentiel est rendu, selon les auteurs, par une vaste palette d'images : la prison, l'exil, la maladie, l'aveuglement, l'ivresse, l'oubli, l'adultère, la prostituée et ses amants—pour ne citer que quelques exemples. Si l'on se penche sur le thème opposé, celui de la reconquête par l'homme de la condition divine d'origine, il sera exprimé par des symboles également opposés—les auteurs de la gnose ont tendance à privilégier l'organisation des symboles par pôles antinomiques⁵. L'on trouvera là aussi un large choix d'images : la maison, la santé, la vue, la sobriété, la mémoire et le souvenir, le mariage, l'épouse et l'époux. Sur un terrain plus abstrait, on aura en opposition esclavage et liberté, prostitution et chasteté, multiplicité et unité, anxiété et repos, mouvement et quiétude, conscience et non conscience, pour aboutir à l'opposition souveraine, celle entre ignorance et connaissance, qui structure sous son chef toutes les autres.

Même là où divers auteurs gnostiques utilisent un même lot d'images, ils le font de façon personnelle et originale. Selon le talent de chacun, une image peut être plus ou moins approfondie et explorée jusqu'à être associée à d'autres, afin d'étayer un thème principal accompagné éventuellement de développements secondaires. L'image en question peut aussi avoir un soubassement biblique que l'écrivain reprend et réinterprète ou qu'il adopte en l'ajustant à ses propres besoins, sans nécessairement bouleverser sa signification d'origine. L'image retenue peut encore faire appel à un patrimoine culturel propre à l'époque ou à des images simples (le port, le bateau, la caverne, l'oiseau . . .) transmises par les philosophes dont se sont emparés, avec des destinées différentes, à la fois les cercles intellectuels et les hommes cultivés.

Pour en revenir au Tchacos, on peut se demander si la présence de certains thèmes communs aux quatre traités n'a pas présidé à leur regroupement dans le codex. Si l'on soumet ce codex à une lecture continue, qui ne tienne pas compte de la barrière des traités, le lecteur moderne—comme déjà, probablement, le lecteur antique—repère des leitmotifs qui l'accompagnent du début à la fin. Cette insistance était sans doute voulue par celui qui constitua le codex, et visait à laisser une marque dans l'esprit des lecteurs.

⁵ Cf. à ce propos, Madeleine Scopello, *Les Gnostiques* (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1991), 94–95.

Guidé à la fois par un thème et par les images qui l'illustrent et le soutiennent, le lecteur peut parfaire son instruction religieuse dans la gnose, en s'appropriant de ses lignes directrices. Il pourra suivre les diverses facettes de la construction céleste et de ses habitants ainsi que les méandres des mondes intermédiaires ; il pourra également revivre en son for intérieur les vicissitudes de l'homme gnostique, entre ciel et terre, entre connaissance et ignorance. Des mondes défilent devant ses yeux, et les images, fortes en couleurs, le mettent au centre d'une scène toujours changeante.

Notre but dans cet article en l'honneur d'Einar Thomassen est de fournir un exemple des thèmes et des images communs aux quatre traités du Tchacos. Nous ne prétendons aucunement à une analyse exhaustive, nous limitant ici à mettre en lumière un exemple lié à l'expression de la révélation.

* * *

Clé de voûte de la gnose, la révélation, réservée à un petit nombre, s'entoure d'une aura de secret dont le champ sémantique imprègne les textes. Les secrets concernent les mondes divins mais aussi les abîmes souterrains. Secret aussi est le lien entre l'homme et son monde d'origine, un lien qui échappe aux puissances du mal. Tout comme est secret le lien qui unit Jésus au Père céleste et que les archontes ignorent.

Le secret de ses origines

L'un des moments fondamentaux de la démarche du gnostique est le questionnement sur ses origines. L'homme enfermé dans le monde a conscience, quoique de façon imprécise, du fait qu'il n'est pas conaturrel à la matière mais qu'il est lié à une dimension spirituelle dont il a été séparé. Cette démarche intime, que l'être humain décline de diverses façons, a été plusieurs fois transposée et condensée, dans les textes gnostiques, dans un énoncé en trois parties : « D'où est-ce que je viens ? ; Où suis-je ? ; Où vais-je ? »—un énoncé qui se destinait probablement aussi, par sa structure rythmique, à être récité.

Ce questionnement existentiel, qui s'adresse tout d'abord à soi-même, s'adresse pareillement à une entité capable de fournir des réponses. Mais ce questionnement est aussi une feuille de route pour celui qui cherche son commencement car il lui indique déjà, sinon le chemin à suivre, l'existence d'un chemin.

Tout questionnement exige une réponse : dans les *gnostica*, celle-ci peut être directe et brève ou passer par un long détour : ce détour consiste dans la révélation des mystères divins tout en fournissant à l'homme l'explication sur ses origines. Selon les textes, la réponse peut être immédiatement accolée à la question ou même coïncider avec le contenu global du traité.

L'interrogation sur ses origines peut être coulée, selon le choix des auteurs, dans différents cadres littéraires : dans des suppliques où l'on demande à Dieu de se connaître soi-même ; dans un dialogue entre l'initié et les archontes qui l'interrogent essayant de lui barrer le chemin de retour vers la patrie céleste. Parfois, l'entité révélatrice anticipe elle-même les questions et les réponses, dans le but de suggérer à l'initié le comportement qu'il devra tenir, le moment venu, face aux archontes.

La Lettre de Pierre à Philippe

Voyons comment ce thème est présenté dans le premier des quatre traités du Tchacos, la *Lettre de Pierre à Philippe*. Cette lettre aux allures d'un dialogue de révélation⁶, raconte à son début que les apôtres, sur l'incitation de Pierre, se rassemblèrent pour prier le Père de la lumière, auquel ils s'adressent par un titre significatif « toi qui possède ce qui n'est pas souillé » (2,8)⁷. Après quelques lignes qui tombent dans une lacune, nous lisons ce qui suit :

Alors les apôtres se prosternèrent et dirent : « Seigneur, <nous voudrions comprendre>⁸ la déficience des éons ainsi que leur plénitude. Comment sommes-nous retenus [dans ce lieu] ? [Et aussi], comment sommes-nous venus en ce lieu ? Et encore, comment le quitterons-nous ? Comment

⁶ Les remarques de Jean-Pierre Mahé, dans la notice introductive à *La lettre de Pierre à Philippe* NHC VIII, 2 (Jean-Pierre Mahé et Paul-Hubert Poirier, eds., *Écrits gnostiques* [BP 538 ; Paris : Gallimard, 2007], 1324), éclairent également le doublet du Tchacos : « Notre texte suit le déroulement typique du dialogue gnostique en cinq points : cadre narratif et décor, apparition du Révélateur, liste de questions et réponses, action, conclusion ».

⁷ Le terme ἀτχοζμ est technique, il traduit le grec *μιαίνω* et exprime l'une des hantises les plus marquées de la pensée gnostique : la souillure. Pour ce qui est du Tchacos, on le retrouve également dans *Jacques* et dans *l'Évangile de Judas*. Sur le thème de la souillure et de la *πορνεία* dans les textes gnostiques, voir Madeleine Scopello, *L'Exégèse de l'âme* (*Nag Hammadi II*, 6) : *Introduction, traduction, commentaire* (NHS 25 ; Leiden : Brill, 1985), 57-70.

⁸ Le copiste devait avoir omis une phrase du style « nous voudrions savoir » ; cf. la suggestion de Wolf-Peter Funk, note à la page 3, ligne 2-5, dans l'édition critique Kasser et al., *The Gospel of Judas*, 97. Cf. aussi NHC VIII 134,22.

pouvons-nous avoir cette assurance (παρηρησία) ? [Pourquoi] les puissances nous combattent-elles ? » (3,1-10)⁹

Les trois lignes suivantes du passage tombent également dans une lacune. À partir de 3,14-15 on relate la réponse du Christ ressuscité qui va d'abord expliquer en quoi consiste la déficience (στωχῶν) des éons (3,16-4,21), puis leur plénitude (μοῦρ) (4,22-5,9), deux mots techniques que les traducteurs coptes gardent plus habituellement en grec, et qui sont l'objet d'une attention soutenue en contexte valentinien¹⁰. La lacune allant de 5,10 à 5,26 nous empêche de connaître le contenu des réponses ultérieures. Néanmoins, en 6,1-9, nous avons des éléments de réponse à la question « [Pourquoi] les puissances nous combattent-elles ? » Le Seigneur en effet spécifie que le combat des archontes vise l'homme intérieur (6,3) et que les apôtres doivent lutter ensemble, une fois armés du pouvoir du Père (6,4-8). Les lignes suivantes abordent la réponse à la question posée auparavant « Et encore, comment le (i.e. ce lieu) quitterons-nous ? » La réponse, provenant d'une voix mystérieuse¹¹, envisage la mort physique des apôtres, après avoir été traînés « dans les synagogues et devant les gouverneurs » : il s'agit là des autorités politiques ou religieuses, pendant terrestre, pourrait-on dire, des archontes. Le passage qui suit (page 7,8 à 26) n'a pas été conservé. Après, Jésus apparaît aux apôtres et les exhorte à aller diffuser son message (9,4-5. 10-11). Si la question « comment le (i.e. ce lieu) quitterons-nous ? » n'obtient pas une réponse directe, l'on peut néanmoins penser que l'accomplissement de leur mission sur terre ouvrira aux apôtres l'accès au salut.

Jacques

Examinons maintenant le deuxième traité du Tchacos, intitulé *Jacques*¹² : il s'agit d'une version parallèle à la *Première apocalypse de Jacques* conservée à Nag Hammadi (NHC V, 3), mais pas d'une copie conforme, plusieurs différences existant entre les deux écrits. Par ailleurs, le texte du Tchacos est dans un meilleur état de conservation. Cette révélation (ἀποκάλυψις) est moulée dans un dialogue entre Jésus et Jacques, dont la première partie

⁹ Texte parallèle de la *Lettre de Pierre à Philippe* dans le codex VIII, 2 de Nag Hammadi 134,20-135,3.

¹⁰ Voir, et ce n'est qu'un exemple, l'*Évangile de vérité* NHC I 24,9-25,25.

¹¹ Reconstruction possible grâce à NHC VIII 138,21.

¹² Le titre est présent à la fin du texte, à la page 30 du codex.

a lieu avant la passion de Jésus (p. 10–16) et la deuxième partie après sa résurrection (p. 17–29).

Dans *Jacques*, ainsi qu'il en est fait mention en 19,22–23, le cœur de la révélation de Jésus consiste à expliquer aux disciples l'étape de la rédemption (σωτη)¹³ et de la remontée de l'âme qui s'ensuit. Le Christ ressuscité prédit à Jacques le périlleux voyage qu'il lui faudra entreprendre après la mort et lui suggère les réponses qu'il devra fournir aux trois collecteurs (τελώνης), le moment venu (20,2–4). Les questions que l'un des gardiens posera à Jacques sont les suivantes : « Qui es-tu et d'où viens-tu ? » (20,10) ; « Quel fils et quel Père ? » (20,14–15), « D'où es-tu venu ? » (20,19–20) ; « Pourquoi es-tu venu ? » (20,22) ; « Où iras-tu maintenant ? » (21,16).

À la première question, Jacques—sur le conseil de Jésus—devra répondre : « Je suis le fils et je viens du Père » (20,12–13) ; à la deuxième question, « Le Père préexistant et le Fils existe dans le Père » (20,15–18) ; à la troisième question, « Du Préexistant » (20,19–20) ; à la quatrième, « Je suis venu vers ce qui est mien et ce qui ne l'est pas » ; à la cinquième, « J'irai vers ce qui est mien, vers le lieu dont je suis venu » (21,17–18).

Si l'on considère en parallèle la *Première apocalypse de Jacques* de Nag Hammadi V, 3¹⁴, on a le questionnement suivant : « Qui es-tu ? D'où es-tu ? » (33,15). « Quelle sorte de fils es-tu ? À quel père appartiens-tu ? » (33,19–20). « [Pourquoi es-tu venu ?]¹⁵ » (33,25). « Où iras-tu ? » (34,16). La réponse finale s'articule ainsi : « Lorsqu'il te dira encore : 'Où iras-tu ?' Tu lui diras : 'Au lieu d'où je suis sorti, là je retournerai' » (34,15–20). Ces formules ont un fort pouvoir de protection, en effet ainsi que l'affirme Jésus à Jacques, « si tu prononces ces paroles, tu seras sauvé de tous les collecteurs » (CT 21,19–20).

L'on notera l'insistance, dans le traité *Jacques* tout comme dans son doublet de Nag Hammadi, sur un thème fondamental de la gnose : le lieu des origines et celui de la destination finale de l'homme à la recherche de

¹³ Le terme traduit le grec ἀπολύτρωσις, qui désigne pareillement un rite valentinien : voir à ce propos le compte rendu d'Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies* I, 21,5. C'est le terme grec qui est présent dans le texte parallèle de la *Première Apocalypse de Jacques*, NHC V 33,1.

¹⁴ Armand Veilleux, *La première Apocalypse de Jacques* (NH V, 3) ; *La seconde Apocalypse de Jacques* (NH V, 4) (BCNH.T 17 ; Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1986). Voir le commentaire de l'auteur, p. 85–92 et le parallèle détaillé établi avec le questionnement utilisé par les Marcosiens, selon Irénée.

¹⁵ Cette dernière reconstitution a été rendue possible par le traité *Jacques* du Tchacos et a été retenue dans Mahé et Poirier, *Écrits gnostiques*, 752.

soi ne font qu'un. C'est peut-être le *logion* 18 de l'*Évangile selon Thomas*¹⁶ qui a su rendre au mieux cette coïncidence :

Les disciples dirent à Jésus : « Dis-nous comment sera notre fin ». Jésus dit : « Avez-vous donc découvert le commencement pour que vous cherchiez la fin ? Car là où est le commencement, là sera la fin. Heureux celui qui se tiendra dans le commencement, et il connaîtra la fin et il ne goûtera pas de la mort ».

Jacques renforce ce motif par un autre, celui de la parenté que l'homme a gardée au ciel. Ce thème connaît diverses élaborations dans la littérature gnostique, allant de celle, très mythologisée, du prince du *Chant de la perle* faisant appel à ses parents d'en haut, à celles, davantage intimes, où l'âme individuelle est soutenue, dans son épuisante recherche, par l'esprit, demeuré dans les hauteurs. D'autres développements sont aussi présents, en particulier chez les valentiniens, comme le motif des anges, doubles célestes de la communauté terrestre des gnostiques.

Les réponses données dans *Jacques* au questionnement existentiel rappellent celles fournies par Paul à l'entité qui l'interroge au septième ciel, selon l'*Apocalypse de Paul*¹⁷ (NHC V 22,23–23,26). Ici aussi il s'agit d'un questionnement sur les origines et sur la fin, enchâssé dans une structure dialoguée. À la question « Où comptes-tu aller, Paul ? », celui-ci répond : « Je compte aller vers le lieu d'où je suis sorti »—ce qui met en lumière l'identification entre le lieu de ses origines et celui de sa destinée¹⁸.

L'Évangile de Judas

Ce traité est parsemé de questions et de réponses de teneur très variée (sur les pratiques religieuses, sur des attitudes de comportement, sur le temps, sur la durée de la vie...). Les questions sont posées par les disciples, par Judas et parfois par Jésus. Néanmoins il n'y a pas à proprement parler un questionnement qui porte sur les origines. Le seul passage qui

¹⁶ Traduction de Henri-Charles Puech, *L'Évangile selon Thomas : Esquisse d'une interprétation systématique* (vol. 2 de *En quête de la gnose* ; Paris : Gallimard, 1978), 14.

¹⁷ Jean-Marc Rosenstiehl et Michael Kaler, *L'Apocalypse de Paul (NH V, 2)* (BCNH.T 31 ; Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain : Éditions Peeters, 2005) ; commentaire à ce passage, 62–66.

¹⁸ En comparaison, voir les formules rituelles des Marcosiens (Irénee, *Adversus Haereses* I, 21,5). Cf. Adelin Rousseau et Louis Doutreleau, *Irénee de Lyon : Contre les hérésies, Livre I* (2 vols. ; SC 263–264 ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1979) ; Adelin Rousseau, *Irénee de Lyon : Contre les hérésies, Dénonciation et réfutation de la gnose au nom menteur* (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1984).

pourrait en contenir un écho est très condensé, et l'interrogation est tournée en affirmation ; de plus elle ne concerne pas l'initié, qui se pose des questions sur lui-même, comme cela se produit généralement dans les textes gnostiques, mais elle concerne Jésus, dont Judas affirme connaître à la fois l'identité et le lieu d'origine :

Judas lui dit : « Je sais qui tu es et d'où tu es venu. Tu es venu de l'éon immortel de Barbélo » (*Évangile de Judas* 35,15–18).

L'on remarquera également que la formule ternaire d'interrogation (« D'où ? Où ? Vers où ? ») qui se cache derrière l'affirmation de Judas paraît ici réduite à une question binaire (« qui es-tu ? d'où viens-tu ? »). Cette question implicite ressemble davantage aux demandes d'identité attestées dans les textes antiques où les personnages se présentent en énonçant à la fois leur nom et leur provenance¹⁹.

Allogène

Mais c'est dans le quatrième traité du codex Tchacos, dont le titre n'est pas conservé mais que l'on appelle *Allogène*²⁰ du nom de son protagoniste, que le questionnement existentiel joue un rôle essentiel, au point d'être repris deux fois dans le cours du texte. Traité de révélation centré sur une figure d'initié qui eut une certaine fortune dans la gnose—celle d'Allogène, l'Étranger²¹—il débute par une prière collective qu'un groupe de personnes prononce en vue d'obtenir la connaissance :

¹⁹ Voir par exemple la façon dont se présente Turbon, disciple de Mani dans les *Acta Archelai* IV : « Lorsqu'il parvenait en effet, vers le soir, comme un voyageur en pays étranger, à une auberge—c'était le très hospitalier Marcellus qui avait fait bâtir ces relais—aux guetteurs des auberges qui le questionnaient sur sa provenance et son identité et même sur celle de celui qui l'avait envoyé, il répondait : « Je suis, certes, mésopotamien mais je viens de Perse, envoyé par Manichéus, maître des chrétiens » (traduction Madeleine Scopello).

²⁰ Kasser et al., *The Gospel of Judas*, 253–79. Seulement deux lettres du titre sont visibles.

²¹ On rappellera au sujet d'Allogène, la réélaboration littéraire, sous forme d'une apocalypse gnostique, connue dans le cercle de Plotin, selon le témoignage de Porphyre (*Vita Plotini* 16) ; les mentions d'Épiphane de Salamine sur les livres dits « *Allogeneis* » en vogue chez les Séthiens, (*Panarion* XXXIX, 5,1 ; XL, 2,2 et XL, 7,4–5) et, surtout, le traité intitulé *Allogène* conservé dans le codex XI de la bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi (Wolf-Peter Funk, Paul-Hubert Poirier, Madeleine Scopello, et John D. Turner, éd., *L'Allogène (Nag Hammadi XI, 3)* [BCNH.T 30 ; Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval / Louvain : Éditions Peeters, 2004]).

[révé]lation [... pour que] nous nous connaissions nous-mêmes, à savoir d'où nous sommes venus, [vers o]ù nous allons et ce que nous devrions faire pour vivre (59, 8-13).

Au terme de cette prière, ainsi que l'indique le narrateur, les orants montent sur le Thabor²², où ils prononcent une autre prière, qui reproduit en partie la première. Cette nouvelle supplique paraît être prononcée, au nom de tous, par un personnage nouvellement apparu sur scène, Allogène :

Ils quittèrent ce lieu et montèrent sur une montagne appelée Thabor. Ils s'inclinèrent et prièrent ainsi : Ô Dieu, Seigneur, toi qui es au-dessus des grands éons, toi qui n'as ni commencement ni fin, donne-nous un Esprit de connaissance pour la révélation de tes mystères, pour que nous puissions nous connaître nous-mêmes, c'est-à-dire d'où nous sommes venus, où nous allons, et ce que nous devrions faire pour pouvoir vivre (59,13-25).

La révélation sollicitée par les orants anonymes doit leur procurer la connaissance de soi, une connaissance totale, car elle porte à la fois sur les origines et sur la fin : « d'où nous sommes venus, où nous allons ». Le groupe d'orants est donc déjà au stade de l'éveil de la conscience, car il connaît les questions à poser pour obtenir une réponse ouvrant sur l'illumination²³. Les orants ne demandent rien qui concerne leur situation actuelle (« Où sommes-nous ? ») ; en revanche, ils veulent savoir ce qu'ils doivent faire pour vivre. Or, dans les textes gnostiques, la vie est l'un des symboles du divin, tout comme le repos ou le plérôme. Le « lieu de vie » est, par exemple, une métaphore opposée à « la maison de pauvreté » qui, elle, symbolise le monde de la matière²⁴. On pourrait comparer notre écrit avec l'*Épître apocryphe de Jacques* (NHC I, 2) où vie et recherche de la connaissance sont étroitement liées en vue de gagner le Royaume. Hypostase céleste, la Vie intervient déjà dans la *praescriptio*²⁵ (« Vie de la part de la Vie sainte ! »), avant de devenir l'un des thèmes majeurs du

²² Sur ce thème, voir l'article de Madeleine Scopello, « Allogène et l'ascension au Thabor dans le traité *Allogène* du Codex Tchacos », dans *Gnosis and Revelation: Ten Studies on Codex Tchacos* (éd. Madeleine Scopello; Florence: Leo Olschki, 2009), 685-99 (= *RSLR* 46 [2008]).

²³ Cf. sur ce thème l'*Évangile de vérité* NHC I, 3 : « Qui sera parvenu à un tel état de conscience sait d'où il vient et où il va. Il est devenu lucide. Comme un homme qui a été ivre, il s'est dégrisé. ... celui qui est inconscient jusqu'à la fin est une créature de l'oubli » (22,13-15). Texte introduit et annoté par Einar Thomassen et traduit par Anne Pasquier, dans Mahé et Poirier, *Écrits gnostiques*, 45-81.

²⁴ *Dialogue du Sauveur* NHC III 132,4-16.

²⁵ *Épître apocryphe de Jacques* 1,1-8 : « [C'est Jacques] qui écrit à []thos. Paix [à toi de la part de] la Paix, [Amour de la part de] l'Amour, G[râce de la part de] la Grâce, F[oi de la]part de la Foi, Vie de la part de la Vie sainte ! ». Voir Donald Rouleau, *Épître apocryphe*

traité. À cette Vie s'oppose la vie terrestre, caractérisée par les métaphores du sommeil et de la maladie (NHC I 3,12. 25). Par ailleurs l'attention que les gnostiques ont porté à la Vie comme entité divine a probablement déteint sur les écrits mandéens, où elle a joué un rôle considérable : c'est à la Vie et à la Maison de la Vie que l'homme tombé dans la matière, mais étranger à ce monde, tend à retourner. Mais si la Vie est un but à réaliser dans l'*Allogène*, l'interrogation des orants porte sur « faire ». Le groupe est-il prêt à se soumettre à une sorte de préparation avant d'obtenir la connaissance ? Le don de la gnose ne serait, en ce cas, pas gratuit mais il exigerait un effort de la part du bénéficiaire probablement, sous la forme d'un comportement ascétique²⁶.

La deuxième prière a lieu une fois le groupe parvenu au Thabor. La montagne²⁷ marque un pas supplémentaire dans la connaissance mystique, elle est le symbole d'un avancement spirituel. La prière des orants se fait ici plus pressante. Pour demander un éclaircissement sur ses origines et sur sa fin, on s'adresse à « Celui qui n'a ni commencement ni fin ». On demande l'octroi de « l'Esprit de connaissance pour la révélation de tes mystères », en ajoutant « pour que nous puissions nous connaître nous-mêmes ». Ainsi est clairement exprimé quel est le contenu de la révélation des mystères : c'est la connaissance de soi.

On s'arrêtera brièvement sur l'expression « Esprit de la connaissance », d'abord pour remarquer qu'elle est aussi présente dans *Jacques* 26,9–10²⁸ ainsi que dans le texte parallèle de Nag Hammadi V 39,8, dans une section portant sur l'interprétation des sept femmes, disciples de Jésus. L'expression provient d'Isaïe 11,2 : « Sur lui reposera l'Esprit du Seigneur, Esprit de sagesse et d'intelligence, Esprit de conseil et de force, Esprit de connaissance et de crainte du Seigneur ». Une partie de cette formule apparaît dans le *Livre des Bénédictions*²⁹ IV, 25, retrouvé à Qumran : « Sur

de *Jacques* (NH I, 2) (BCNH.T 18 ; Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1987). Pour la présence de la Vie dans la *praescriptio*, voir le commentaire de D. Rouleau, p. 94–95.

²⁶ Thème développé dans la suite du traité (59,26–61,16), lorsque l'on décrit l'Allogène comme étant insensible aux tentations de Satan.

²⁷ Nous avons étudié le thème de la montagne dans notre article déjà cité « Allogène et l'ascension au Thabor dans le traité Allogène du Codex Tchacos », 692–95.

²⁸ *Jacques* 26,9–10 : « Ces sept femmes sont sept Esprits (πνα) qui sont introduits dans l'Écriture : un Esprit (πνα) de sagesse (σοφία) et d'intelligence (μντσαβε), un Esprit (πνα) de conseil (σοχνη) et de puissance (σομ), un Esprit (πνα) de compréhension (νοûς) et de connaissance (σογνη), un Esprit (πνα) de crainte (νηστρε) ».

²⁹ Traduction par André Dupont-Sommer, *La Bible : Écrits intertestamentaires* (éd. André Dupont-Sommer et Marc Philonenko ; BP 337 ; Paris : Gallimard, 1987), 57.

toi sera l'Esprit de conseil et de puissance éternelle, l'Esprit de connaissance et de crainte de Dieu ».

On notera, en dernier lieu, le lien établi entre celui qui pose, au nom du groupe, les questions sur les origines et la destinée, et la signification du nom Allogène : étranger au monde, ainsi que le personnage l'explique dans sa confrontation avec Satan (60,19–22)³⁰, Allogène est digne de recevoir la connaissance. Ainsi l'auteur du quatrième traité du Tchacos greffe l'un des thèmes majeurs de la gnose, celui de l'étranger, sur celui, également fondamental, du questionnement.

Variantes et similitudes

Reprenons le thème du questionnement existentiel dans l'ensemble des quatre traités du Tchacos. Dans le traité *Allogène*, la formule « d'où nous sommes venus et où nous allons » (59,10–11 et 59,23–24) évoque de manière simplifiée, mais sans ambiguïté, les célèbres interrogations de l'*Extrait de Théodote* 78,2, transmis par Clément d'Alexandrie³¹, qui condense en quelques lignes le noyau de toute gnose :

Après le baptême, les astrologues ne sont plus dans la vérité. Ce n'est d'ailleurs pas le bain seul qui est libérateur mais la gnose. Qui étions-nous ? Que sommes-nous devenus ? Où étions-nous ? Où avons-nous été jetés ? Vers quel but nous hâtons-nous ? D'où sommes-nous rachetés ? Qu'est-ce que la génération ? Et la régénération ? »

Des variantes de ce questionnement apparaissent dans d'autres textes gnostiques³² issus de la tradition directe et indirecte, où il est le plus souvent inséré dans un dialogue, articulé en questions et réponses, entre l'âme à la sortie de la vie et les douaniers des sphères. Par rapport à la formule du maître valentinien, prononcée probablement par l'initié au moment du baptême, dans l'*Allogène* du Tchacos le questionnement, réduit à deux seules questions, s'intègre dans une supplique élevée à Dieu. De plus il est posé non pas par un initié solitaire et dans une dimen-

³⁰ « J'ai été appelé Allogène, car je suis d'une autre race (γένος) ».

³¹ François Sagnard, *Clément d'Alexandrie : Extraits de Théodote* (SC 23 ; Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1970), 201–203.

³² Voir le dossier présenté par April D. DeConick, *Seek to See Him: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas* (Leiden : Brill, 1996), 48m14. Sur l'origine iranienne de ce questionnement, voir Geo Widengren, « Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis », *ZRGG* 4 (1952) : 103–104. Une origine égyptienne n'est toutefois pas exclue.

sion ultra-mondaine—que ce soit le voyage de l'âme au moment de la mort ou un voyage au ciel en état d'extase—mais dans cette vie, par un groupe voulant connaître, d'ores et déjà, le secret de ses origines. En ce qui concerne la *Lettre de Pierre à Philippe*, ce sont les apôtres qui posent les trois questions classiques à Jésus ressuscité, dans le contexte narratif de l'après-résurrection. Quant à *Jacques*, c'est le seul traité du Tchacos qui reprend le cadre traditionnel des questions que les douaniers célestes adressent à l'âme et auxquelles celle-ci doit être en mesure de répondre. Les trois questions ont été soumises ici à un effet d'amplification : la question « Qui es-tu et d'où viens-tu ? » est suivie par « Quel fils et quel Père ? », le motif du lieu de provenance se trouve ainsi étayé par le motif de la parenté. Dans l'*Évangile de Judas*, c'est la seule provenance de Jésus qui est gardée, une vague réminiscence des questionnements par rapport aux trois autres écrits du Tchacos.

* * *

Le questionnement existentiel est strictement imbriqué à la révélation ; il est formulé par celui qui demande la révélation ; l'initié se pose des questions qui en réalité sont posées à la divinité ou à l'entité qui le prend en charge sur la voie de la connaissance. C'est donc cette entité qui fournira les réponses : ce sera la révélation des mystères. Sur ce thème aussi, les quatre traités du codex Tchacos partagent un même intérêt, visant l'arcané, exprimé par une même terminologie du secret. C'est cette terminologie qui annonce, anticipe puis parachève les sections que les quatre traités consacrent à la communication des ἀπόρρητα. Cette coïncidence ne saurait être le fruit d'un hasard, et celui qui eut l'idée de réunir les quatre traités en un seul codex y fut très probablement sensible.

D'autres images et d'autres motifs fédèrent les quatre traités du Tchacos, auxquels nous consacrons actuellement une étude³³. Leur analyse peut permettre, nous semble-t-il, d'ajouter une pièce supplémentaire à nos connaissances sur la formation des codices gnostiques d'Égypte à la fin de l'Antiquité.

³³ « Nuées lumineuses et autres images du Codex Tchacos ».

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I TELL YOU A MYSTERY:
FROM HIDDEN TO REVEALED IN SETHIAN REVELATION,
RITUAL, AND PROTOLOGY

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As a tribute to Einar Thomassen, my friend and colleague of long standing, I would like to offer the following treatment of the concept of revelation in the Sethian literature from Nag Hammadi, in particular as a designation for the movement from “hidden” to “revealed” or “manifest” in two contexts. First, as the transmission of some kind of cognitive content or ritual action essential to the enlightenment and salvation of the recipient, and second as a fundamental ontogenetic concept in the protological metaphysics and mystical epistemology of Sethian and related literature in the first several centuries of the common era.

In the first part of this essay, I treat the notion of revelation as an epistemological category, as the transmission of discursive information—even though it is sometimes said to be “ineffable” and “unknowable”—with special attention to the *Trimorphic Prottennoia*, and in the second part, I explore revelation or “manifestation” mainly as an ontogenetic concept—a topic masterfully treated by Professor Thomassen himself in the case of Valentinian protologies¹—but also in the epistemological context of mystical union with the primordial source of all reality in the Sethian Platonizing treatises *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*. In the latter case, it turns out that that revelation is a form of self-knowledge which is entirely devoid of cognitive content.

¹ Chapter 23, “The Meaning and Origins of Valentinian Protology,” in Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the ‘Valentinians’* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

Sethian Revelations and Ritual as “Mysteries”

Among the eleven treatises of the Nag Hammadi Library commonly called “Sethian” or “Classical Gnostic,”² five attest the term “mystery” (μυστήριον):

the *Apocryphon of John* (5 times):

II 1,1–4 (The incipit title of the longer version: “The teaching [of the Savior] and the [revelation of the] mysteries hidden in silence, [which] he taught to John, [his] disciple.”); 21,27 (the mystery of the Archon’s tree of life); 24,2 (the Archon’s ignorance of the mystery of the holy plan); 31,31 (the myth of the *Apocryphon of John* as: “This is the mystery of the immoveable race”); 32,1–3: (“These were the things given him (John) in a mystery and he (the Savior) immediately disappeared”)

the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit / the Gospel of the Egyptians*: (7 times):

III 44,2 (the emanation of the Father’s name as a “hidden, [invisible] mystery”); IV 55,1–2 (the Triple Male Child as “he who is over the mysteries”); IV 56,17 (“invisible mysteries”); IV 57,13–16 (“This one brought [praise] to the unrevealable, hidden [mystery . . . the] Kalypptos”); IV 58,6–8 (“[the] Five Seals [and the mystery] of [mysteries]”); III 51,23–24 (at the emergence of the four Luminaries and the heavenly Seth, “the Perfect hebdomad which exists in hidden mysteries became complete”); III 63,10–13 (“a Logos-begotten body which the great Seth prepared for himself, secretly through the virgin”)

Allogenes (once):

XI 52,15–25: (“Since your wisdom has become complete and you have known the Good that is within you, hear concerning the Triple-Powered One things you shall guard in great silence and great mystery, because they are not to be spoken to anyone except those who are worthy and able to hear”)

and *Marsanes* (once):

X 39,22–24: (“(it is fitting) that we never heap scorn [on] the mysteries”).

In the previous examples, the term can designate 1) the secret character of revelation in general; 2) the secret character of an entire treatise; 3) the secret character of the divine plan; 4) the manner in which the revelation

² The *Apocryphon of John*, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Thought of Norea*, *Melchizedek*, the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* (or the *Gospel of the Egyptians*), *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes*.

is spoken or is to be received; 5) simply the hidden nature of certain divine entities; and 6) at least once (the *Gospel of the Egyptians* IV 58,6–8) seems to serve as the name of a ritual procedure, the Five Seals. However, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* uses the term “mystery” no less than thirteen times, more than twice as often as the other four treatises, to designate not only specific revelations delivered by the principal revealer, but also the precise nature of the principal ritual practiced by the Sethians, the baptismal rite of the Five Seals. By virtue of the frequency of the term and its importance to the structure of the treatise as a whole, the use of the term “mystery” in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* merits extended comment.

*Mystery as Hidden and Revealed Knowledge:
the Trimorphic Protennoia*

The basic genre of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* is a first-person self-predicatory aretalogy or recitation of the deeds and attributes of Protennoia-Barbelo, the First Thought of the Sethian supreme deity. Speaking in the first person, she recites her attributes and saving initiatives in three distinct subsections each with their own subtitles: “The Discourse of Protennoia: [One]”; “[On Fate: Two]”; and “The Discourse of the Appearance: Three.” These subsections respectively describe Protennoia’s three descents into the world: first to establish heavenly dwellings for the members of her spirit (“the Sons of Light”) who are presently trapped in human souls; second, her nullification of the power of the spiritual world-rulers and their Archigenetor that enslave her members; and third, her final saving descent as the divine Logos to restore her members into the light from which they had fallen.³

In each successive descent, Protennoia appears in modes of increasing articulateness: First, as Father, she is the audible but as yet inarticulate Voice of the essentially silent First Thought of the supreme Father/Invisible Spirit who presides over the establishing of the heavenly dwellings for her members and descends to chaos to loosen their bonds. Second, as Mother, she is the somewhat more articulate Speech of the First Thought

³ This horizontal scheme of three descents is also present in—and may have been derived from—the three-stanzaed monologue concluding the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John* (II 30,11–31,25), where Christ reveals himself as the divine Pronoia-Barbelo who narrates her three saving descents into the lower world that culminate in the baptismal rite of the Five Seals.

who descends to overthrow the old aeon ruled by the Archigenetor and his evil powers and announces the dawn of the new age. Third, as the Son, she is the fully articulate Logos who, by adopting the guise of successively lower powers, descends to and enters the “tents” of her members and leads them back to the light by means of the baptismal ascent ritual of the Five Seals, in the process putting on Jesus and rescuing him from the cross. Throughout the treatise, Protennoia’s power manifests itself not as a theophany, but as a “*theophony*,” as audible revelation. Salvation is received not only through baptismal vision but also through sound and audition, through the revelation of “mysteries.”

Of the thirteen occurrences of the term μυστήριον in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,⁴ eight concern mysteries revealed by Protennoia: 40,37 (“those who have [heard my mysteries]”); 41,3 (“I shall tell you a mystery”); 41,27–28 (“I told my mysteries to those who are mine, a hidden mystery”); 42,28 (“I shall tell you a mystery [of] this age”); 46,34 (“[I will reveal] to you [my mysteries]”); 47,6 (“I [told all of them about my mysteries]”); and 47,7 (“I taught [them the mysteries]”). In each case, the term μυστήριον means a secret, even ineffable⁵ and inexpressible message concerning the impending or accomplished salvific activity of Protennoia which she reveals or teaches to “those that are hers,” identified as the Sons of Light (41,15–16).⁶ Sometimes the mystery is an eschatological secret concerning the shift from the old to the new age (42,28: “a mystery [of] this age;” 44,32–33: “the mystery hidden from the Ages”), and sometimes it serves to characterize the source from which (41,24: “out of the immersion of the mysteries I spoke”) or the medium or persona through which Protennoia conveys the revelation, for example as the divine Voice:

XIII 36²³ For it is I²⁴ who am joined with everyone by virtue of the hidden Thought and an exalted <Voice>,²⁶ even a Voice from²⁷ the invisible Thought. And it is immeasurable²⁸ since it dwells in the Immeasurable One. It is a

⁴ 36,28; 37,17; 40,37; 41,3,24,27,28; 42,28; 44,32; 46,34; 47,6,7; 48,33.

⁵ A “secret” (41,28 εἰρη = κεκρυμμένον), indeed “ineffable” (37,17; 41,3 ἀτρωαχε ἄμοσ = ἄρητος; 47,6–7 ἀτ.οοσ = ἄρητος) or “inexpressible” (41,3–4 ἀττεγοσ = ἀνεκδήγητος) mystery.

⁶ Compare the Naasene Psalm: “For that reason send me, Father. Bearing seals I shall descend; I will pass through all the Aeons; I shall disclose all mysteries, I shall manifest the forms of gods; [and] I will hand on the secrets of the holy path, called ‘gnosis.’” (τούτου με χάριν πέμψον, πάτερ· σφραγίδας ἔχων καταβήσομαι, αἰώνας ὅλους διοδεύσω, μυστήρια πάντα δ’ ἀνοίξω, μορφάς δὲ θεῶν ἐπιδείξω· [καί] τὰ κεκρυμμένα τῆς ἁγίας ὁδοῦ, γνώσιν καλέσας, παραδώσω), *apud* Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Elenchos* 5.10.2 (Paul Wendland, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* [Vol. 2 of *Hippolytus Werke*; Leipzig, 1916], 103,20–104,3).

mystery; ²⁹ it is [an unknowable] ³⁰ deriving from [the Incomprehensible one]. It is invisible ³¹ [to all those who are] visible ³² in the All.

or as the divine Logos-Son:

XIII 37 ³ Then ⁴ the Son who is perfect in every respect . . . ¹⁴ revealed himself to those who dwell in darkness, and ¹⁵ he showed himself to those who dwell in the abyss, ¹⁶ and to those who dwell in the hidden treasures he told ¹⁷ ineffable *mysteries*, ¹⁸ and he taught unrepeatable doctrines ¹⁹ to all those who became Sons of ²⁰ the Light.

In these two extended citations, the term “mystery” is used rather generally to signify unknowability and ineffability,⁷ and seems to function merely as an explanatory gloss and not as part of an extended literary structure. But in the remainder of the treatise, the term “mystery” serves to characterize rather larger literary structures, in which the usage of the term “mystery” seems to demarcate *inclusios* that frame each of three rather lengthy revelations in 40,29–42,2; 42,27–45,2; and 46,33–48,35. Unlike the first-person singular self-predications of Protennoia which dominate throughout the treatise, these three revelations together with an earlier lengthy revelation that does not explicitly announce itself as a “mystery” (37,3–40,29), are preponderantly third-person narrative. It seems to me that alternation between first-person singular self-predication and third-person narrative is to be explained by the compositional history of the entire treatise, namely that the *Trimorphic Protennoia* has undergone three successive stages of composition.⁸

1) Its initial foundation consisted of a triad of first-person aretalogical speeches delivered by Protennoia. She narrates her three successive descents into the lower world, on each of which she appears in increasingly articulate form, first in masculine form as the divine Voice, then in feminine form as the divine Speech and finally in masculine form as the fully articulate divine Word. At the time of its initial composition, perhaps at the beginning of the second century, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*

⁷ Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (2d ed.; SHR 70; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 168 has argued that in late antique Christian authors, the term “mystery” became “something ineffable, which cannot be fully expressed by words, rather than something which must remain hidden,” thus marking “the end of ancient esotericism.”

⁸ See my “Introduction to Nag Hammadi Codex XIII, 1*^{*}: *Trimorphic Protennoia*, 35*^{*}, 1–50*^{*}, 24,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII and XIII* (ed. C. W. Hedrick; CGL; NHS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 374–405 and, more recently, Paul-Hubert Poirier, *La Pensée Première à la triple forme (NH XIII, 1)* (BCNH.T 32; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006).

seems to have had no specifically Christian features apart from occasional glosses in the third-person narratives that appear to be later additions. It was instead a product of non-Christian wisdom speculation typical of Jewish wisdom poems on the part of baptizing sectarians, expressed in a sequence of three first-person self-predicatory aretologies of the divine First Thought, similar to the wisdom poems of Proverbs 8 or Sirach 24, or the lengthy first-person antithetical self-predications that form the Nag Hammadi treatise *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (NHC VI,2), but structured according to the triple descent pattern used in the Pronoia monologue concluding the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John*.⁹ Like the prologue of the Gospel of John, the Logos theology of the tripartite Protennoia aretology drew in a similar but independent way upon a fund of oriental speculation on the divine Word and Wisdom.¹⁰ Throughout her revelatory discourses, Protennoia, the silent divine Thought, successively manifests herself first as audible sound or Voice, then as uttered Speech, and finally as the fully articulate Logos.¹¹

2) In a secondary stage, this triad of first-person speeches was supplemented by various third-person narrative materials, including a Barbeloite cosmogony (XIII 36,27b–40,29a) similar to that shared between the *Apocryphon of John* and Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 1.29),¹² an account of the harrowing of hell and the eschatological overthrow of the celestial powers, and finally a first-person liturgical fragment from the Barbeloite baptismal ascent ritual of the Five Seals.

⁹ The original aretology comprised Protennoia as First Thought (XIII 35,1–32a; 35,32b–36,27a; 40,29b–41,1a); Protennoia as Voice (XIII 35,32b–36,27a; 40,29b–41,1a); Protennoia as Speech (XIII 42,4–27a; 45,2b–12a; 45,21–46,3); and Protennoia as Logos (XIII 46,5–7a; 47,5–23; 49,15a–22a; 50,9,17–20).

¹⁰ See Carsten Colpe, “Heidnische, jüdische und christliche Überlieferung in den Schriften aus Nag Hammadi III,” *JAC* 17 (1974): 109–24, esp. 122–24.

¹¹ She is the “Logos existing in the Silence,” a “hidden Sound,” the “ineffable Logos.” One may note the similar characterization of the revealer in *Thunder: Perfect Mind*: “I am the silence that is incomprehensible and the idea whose remembrance is frequent. I am the voice whose sound is manifold and the word whose appearance is multiple. I am the utterance of my name” (VI 14,9–15); “Hear me, you hearers and learn of my words, you who know me. I am the hearing that is attainable to everything; I am the speech that cannot be grasped. I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter and the designation of the division. And I will speak [his name]” (VI 20,26–35).

¹² In particular, the material in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* XIII 37,3–20; 37,30–38,5; 38,16–40,27 narrates the same material found in the *Apocryphon of John* II 6,10–30; 7,30–8,28; 11,16–18; 13,32–14,13 and in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.29.1–4. This common theologonical material may represent the content of the earliest reconstructable version of the *Apocryphon of John*, suggesting that both it and the second compositional stage of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* were produced before the second half of the second century.

3) After circulation as a complete Barbeloite/Sethian treatise, the third and final stage of composition seems to have consisted of the deliberate incorporation of Christological polemic into the aretalogical portion of the third subtractate by Christian Sethians in an effort to demonstrate a higher, more spiritual interpretation of Christ than that espoused by most of the apostolic churches.

Clear Christian influence only begins to appear in the narrative materials added at the second compositional stage, whether by the original author or a subsequent redactor not long after the original composition. In this stage the original tripartite aretalogy has been supplemented with five didactic third-person narratives (XIII 36,27b-40,29a; 40,29b-42,2; 42,27b-45,2a; 46,7b-47,top; 47,24-50,9a) and one first-person liturgical fragment (48,top-48,35) which disturb the otherwise smooth flow of the original first-person self-predicatory aretalogies. The second, third and fifth of these doctrinal insertions are designated as “mysteries” which Protennoia is said to have communicated to the sons of the light.

Protennoia’s First Mystery: Her Descensus ad Infernos

Cast in direct discourse to a second-person plural audience, the second narrative section (XIII 40,29-42,2) contains Protennoia’s revelation of the “mystery” of her descent into the underworld to destroy the prison and the bonds by which the lower powers hold fast her fallen members. Her descent is a veritable “harrowing of hell,” employing language very similar to that found in many of the traditional *katabaseis* or descents of heroes into the underworld.¹³

XIII 40²⁹ But now I have come down³⁰ and reached down to Chaos. And³¹ I was [with] my own who³² were in that place. [I am hidden] within³³ them, empowering [them and] giving³⁴ them shape. And [from the first day] until³⁵ the day [when I will grant mighty power]³⁶ to those who [are mine, I will reveal myself to]³⁷ those who have [heard my mysteries], 41¹ that is, the [Sons] of [the] Light. I² am their Father and I shall tell you a³ *mystery*, ineffable and indulgeable⁴ by [any] mouth:

Every bond⁵ I loosed from you, and the⁶ chains of the demons of the underworld, I broke,⁷ these things which are bound on my members, restraining them. And⁸ the high walls of darkness I overthrew,⁹ the secure

¹³ See Homer, *Iliad* 8.14; Hesiod, *Theogony* 735-44; 807-12; Plato, *Republic* 10.614e-f and *Phaedo* 111C-113c; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.548-625; *Oracula Sibyllina* 2.227-228; and the Apocalypses of Elijah and Peter (Achmim fragment), *passim*; *descensus ad infernos* was a popular theme in second and third century Christian literature.

gates of ¹⁰ those pitiless ones I broke, and I smashed ¹¹ their bars. And the evil Force, ¹² the one who beats you, the one who hinders ¹³ you, the Tyrant, the Adversary, ¹⁴ the one who is King, and the present Enemy, ¹⁵ indeed all these I explained to those ¹⁶ who are mine, who are the Sons of the light, ¹⁷ in order that they might nullify them all ¹⁸ and be saved from all those bonds ¹⁹ and enter into the place where they were at ²⁰ first.

I am the first one who descended ²¹ on account of my portion which remains, that is, ²² the Spirit that (now) dwells in the soul, (but) which originated ²³ from the Water of Life. And out ²⁴ of the immersion of the *mysteriēs* I spoke, ²⁵ I together with the Archons and Authorities, ²⁶ for I had descended below their ²⁷ language. And I spoke my *mysteriēs* to ²⁸ my own—a hidden *mystery*—and ²⁹ the bonds and eternal oblivion were nullified.

Here, salvation occurs at the moment Protенnoia nullifies the power of the hostile powers merely by explaining their nature. The terms “underworld” (ἀ(ε)μῆντε i.e., ἄδης, 7 occurrences), Tartaros (35,18), and Chaos (9 occurrences), usually designations of the subterranean abode of the dead, are in the *Trimorphic Protенnoia* all equivalent designations for the physical world brought into being by the Archigenetor Yaldabaoth for the purpose of capturing the divine light in human souls and bodies.¹⁴ The imagery and terminology used here of the “harrowing of hell” has striking parallels in the *Odes of Solomon* 17:8–15:¹⁵

I opened the doors that were closed.
 And I broke in pieces the bars of iron;
 But my own iron melted and dissolved before me.
 . . . And I went over all my bondsmen to loose them
 That I might not leave any man bound or binding.
 And I imparted my knowledge without grudging . . .
 And I sowed my fruits in hearts
 And I transformed them through myself
 And they received my blessing and lived.
 And they were gathered to me and were saved,
 Because they were to me as my own members,
 And I was their head.

¹⁴ As Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.31.2 notes, a general feature of Gnostic thought. Cf. the phrases εμῆντε μῆνταος (XIII 39,23–24) and πταος μῆμεῆντε (40,24).

¹⁵ Trans. James Rendell Harris and Alphonse Mignana, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, (2 vols.; Manchester: The University Press, 1916–1920), 2:290. Cf. also *Odes of Solomon* 24:1–5 where the Voice of the dove frightens “the inhabitants” and opens the hidden abysses, which seems similar to the effect of Protенnoia’s second descent, see comments in Poirier, *La Pensée Première à la triple forme*.

as well as in Pistis Sophia's exclamation of praise to Jesus for having raised her out of Chaos into the twelfth aeon:¹⁶

... Thou hast saved me from the depth of Chaos and the aeons of the rulers of the spheres ...

I have been in the darkness and the shadow of Chaos,

bound with the strong bonds of Chaos,

and there was no light in me ...

and he also broke all my bonds,

he brought me out of the darkness and oppression of Chaos ...

Thou hast broken the high gates of darkness and the strong bars of Chaos.

The first and third paragraphs of this passage use the term "mystery" to refer to revealed secrets, indeed a "hidden mystery" (ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΕΘΗΠ, 41,28, also 44,32–33: "mystery hidden from the Ages") reminiscent of the similar deutero-Pauline expression μυστήριον ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων in Col 1:26 and Eph 3:9 (cf. Rom 6:25: μυστηρίου χρόνοις αἰώνιους σεσιγημένου). But the third paragraph also uses the term "mystery" to refer not to secret knowledge, but also to a ritual procedure, when Protennaio declares that she speaks "out of the *immersion* of the mysteries" (41,23–24). While the phrase "immersion of the mysteries" seems especially apt for participation in a ritual immersion,¹⁷ it actually must refer to the circumstances of her origin, mentioned earlier in her introductory aretalogy:

36 ⁴ I [descended to the] midst of the underworld ⁵ and I shone [down upon the] darkness. It is I who ⁶ made the [water] surge. It is I who am hidden within ⁷ [radiant] waters. I am the one who ⁸ gradually made the All radiant by my ⁹ Thought.

According to the fuller description of her origin in the *Apocryphon of John*:

Π 4 ¹⁹ And it is he alone (the Invisible Spirit) who looks ²⁰ at himself in his light which surrounds him. ²¹ This is the source of the Living Water ²² which supplies all the aeons. In every direction he [gazes] ²³ [upon] his image which he sees ²⁴ in the source of the [Spirit]. He invests his intention in his

¹⁶ *Pistis Sophia* 2.81 (Carl Schmidt and Violet MacDermot, eds., *Pistis Sophia* [NHS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1978], 179,25–180,1; 180,10–11). Cf. also the expression "walls of the darkness of Chaos" (Ἰσοβῆτ ἠπκακε ἦτε πχαος, *ibid.* 2.65 (Schmidt and MacDermot, *Pistis Sophia*, 133,16–18) and "the gates of the pitiless ones" (λιρῶθῳ ἠἠιγλη ἦτενιατιναε) in *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (BG 121,18–122,1).

¹⁷ Baptismal immersion is commonly considered a mystery by fourth century patristic authors. Thus Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica* 40.23–24: λουσάμενοι τῷ μυστικῷ τοῦτῳ λουτρῷ; Epiphanius, *De fide* 22.14: τα δ' ἄλλα μυστήρια περὶ λουτροῦ καὶ τῶν ἐνδοθεν μυστηρίων.

²⁵ luminous [water, that is], the source of the ²⁶ [pure] light-water [which] surrounds him. And ²⁷ [his Ennoia became] active and she came ²⁸ forth, namely she who had [appeared] before him ²⁹ in [the radiance] of his light. This is ³⁰ the first [power which was] before them all, ³¹ [manifested from] his thought, ³² that [is, the Pronoia of the All].

Of course, those to whom she descends to rescue have essentially the same origin, as Protennoia declares in 41,20–23: “I am the first one who descended on account of my portion which remains, that is, the Spirit that (now) dwells in the soul, (but) which originated from the Water of Life.” Thus this first “mystery” already points toward the third subtractate in which Protennoia will reveal her third main mystery, “the mystery of knowledge” (46,33–48,35).

Protennoia’s Second Mystery: The Shift of the Ages

The third narrative section (XIII 42,27b–45,2a), presently in the second subtractate, is called the “mystery of this Age” (XIII 42,28), and is addressed to a similar group in the second person plural. It offers an apocalyptic announcement of the end of the old age and the dawn of the new age with the final judgment of the authorities of chaos, the Archigenetor and his celestial powers who rule the world by Fate. This announcement contains a dialogue between the terrified powers and their Archigenetor, neither of whom recognize the source of the Voice that is shattering their control over the cosmos. The provenance of this material seems indeterminate, but it makes use of the Graeco-Egyptian astrological doctrine of the Lots of Fate and the planetary Domiciles (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 4.2.1–4; 1.18.1–8).

XIII 42 ²⁷ For I shall tell you a ²⁸ *mystery* [of] this Age (αἰών) and ²⁹ tell you about the forces that are in it. . . . 44 ²⁹ So now, ³⁰ O Sons of the Thought, listen to me, to the Speech ³¹ of your merciful Mother, for you have ³² become worthy of the *mystery* hidden from the beginning of ³³ the Ages, so that [you might receive] it. And the consummation ³⁴ of this Age [and] of the evil life ³⁵ [has approached and there dawns 45 ¹ the] beginning of the [Age to come] which ² never changes].

Protennoia’s declaration “I shall tell you a mystery [of] this Age”¹⁸ is clearly an eschatological secret of the sort disclosed by Paul in 1 Cor 15:51 (“Behold,

¹⁸ The phrase πᾶσι φημι εἶπε πᾶσι περὶ in 42,29.33 and 44,34, as also in the *Apocryphon of John* II 6,9 and 9,11 corresponds to the Greek ὁ αἰών οὐδὲτος, i.e., this present age as opposed to the coming age of salvation.

I tell you a mystery!"):19 an impending shift of the ages from the regime of the present evil age—which is about to be overthrown—to that of the new age of salvation. Her concluding statement to her earthbound members “you have become worthy of the mystery hidden from the beginning of the Ages.” (44,31–32), clearly completes an *inclusio* whose initial statement occurs in the preceding aretalogical section:

XIII 42 ¹⁷ Now I have come the second time in the likeness ¹⁸ of a female and I have spoken with them. And ¹⁹ *I shall tell them of the coming end of the Age* ²⁰ *and teach them of the beginning of the Age* ²¹ *to come, the one without change*—²² the one in which our appearance will be changed. ²³ We shall be purified within those Aeons from which I ²⁴ revealed myself in the Thought ²⁵ of the likeness of my masculinity. I settled ²⁶ among *those who are worthy* in the Thought of my ²⁷ changeless Aeon.

Another significant element of this inclusion is the designation of the recipients of Protennoia’s revelations as “those who are worthy,” which is one of the most frequent self-designations of the composers and users of the corpus of literature known as “Sethian” or “classical Gnostic,”²⁰ although the phrase is of even wider currency, for example in Matt 13:11 (“To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to those it is not given”) or the *Gospel of Thomas* 62 (“It is to those [who are worthy] of [my] mysteries that I tell my mysteries”).

Protennoia’s Third Mystery: Mystery as Ritual

The fifth narrative passage (XIII 46,33–48,35)/ (XIII 47,24–50,9a) announces yet another mystery, called “the mystery of Gnosis” (XIII 48,33b–34a). It is addressed in the first person singular to a second person plural audience, now called the “brethren.” It narrates the final descent of Protennoia as the Word who descends incognito through the various levels of the cosmic powers and strips away the corporeal and psychic thought from her

¹⁹ Cf. the similar phraseology in 41,2–4: “I am their Father and *I shall tell you a mystery*, ineffable and unspeakable by [any] mouth.”

²⁰ The term “worthy” can refer to the principal recipient of revelation (e.g., Seth in *Steles Seth* VII 118,22 or Allogenes in *Allogenes* XI 57,35–39) or to the wider community of responsive recipients in general: e.g., *Trim. Prot.* 42,25–27: “I settled among those who are worthy in the Thought of my changeless Aeon”; cf. *Ap. John* II 7,29–30; 26,1–7; *Gos. Egypt.* III 55,16; 66,1–8; *Melch.* IX 11,2; 12,11; *Steles Seth* VII 121,14; *Zost.* 4,14–17; 24,21; *Marsanes* X 40,20–22; *Allogenes* XI 68,16–20 and especially XI 52,18–22: “Hear concerning the Triple-Powered One things you shall guard in great silence and great mystery, because they are not to be spoken to anyone except those who are worthy and able to hear.”

brethren, replacing it by a shining light. This narrative also contains a striking fragment (48,15–35) from the liturgy of a Sethian ritual known as the Five Seals;²¹ it portrays five successive stages of enlightenment: investiture, baptism, enthronement, glorification, and rapture into the Light.²²

XIII 46³³ Now behold [I will reveal]³⁴ to you [my *mysteriēs*] since³⁵ you are my fellow [brethren, and you shall] know³⁶ them all [...]. 47¹ [...] ² [...] ³ [...] ⁴ [...] ⁵ I [told all of them about ⁶ my *mysteriēs*] that exist in [the ⁷ incomprehensible], inexpressible [Aeons]. I taught [them the *mysteriēs*]⁸ through the [Voice that ⁹ exists] within a perfect Intellect [and ¹⁰ I] became a foundation for the All, and [I¹¹ empowered] them.

The second time I came in the [Speech]¹² of my Voice. I gave shape to those who [took] shape¹³ until their consummation.

The third¹⁴ time I revealed myself to them [in]¹⁵ their tents as Logos and I¹⁶ revealed myself in the likeness of their shape. And¹⁷ I wore everyone's garment and¹⁸ I hid myself within them, and [they] did not¹⁹ know the one who empowers me. For I dwell within²⁰ all the Sovereignities and Powers and within²¹ the Angels and in every movement [that] exists²² in all matter. And I hid myself within²³ them until I revealed myself to my [brethren].²⁴ And none of them (the Powers) knew me, [although]²⁵ it is I who work in them. Rather [they thought]²⁶ that the All was created [by them]²⁷ since they are ignorant, not knowing [their]²⁸ root, the place in which they grew.

[I]²⁹ am the Light that illumines the All. I³⁰ am the Light that rejoices [in my]³¹ brethren, for I came down to the world [of]³² mortals on account of the Spirit that remains [in]³³ that which [descended] (and) came forth [from] the³⁴ innocent Sophia.

I [came] and I delivered³⁵ [...] and I [went] to 48¹ [...] ² [...] ³ [...] ⁴ [...] ⁵ [...] ⁶ which he had [formerly and ⁷ I gave to him] from the Water [of Life,

²¹ For other such liturgical fragments, see the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (III 66,6–68,1).

²² Cf. Lucius' initiation into the mysteries of Isis in Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.22–24. See Jean-Marie Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal séthien: Études sur la sacramentaire gnostique* (BCNH.E 2; Québec: Université Laval, 1986), Ch 2, where Sevrin considers this sequence to reflect an older baptismal ritual (now best attested in *Gos. Egypt.*) which has become spiritualized (especially by the addition of glorification and rapture, which seem to him to have no ritual basis), but thinks it improbable that investiture should precede baptism. In *Trim. Prot.* these five stages are only an interpretation of successive stages of spiritual awareness, culminating in the reception of Gnosis; they are merely a sequence of five groups of "names" to be invoked (cf. XIII 49,28–32) and by which one is "sealed" or protected from a hostile material and spiritual environment; they do not reflect a sequence of five ritual actions. The older ritual presupposed may have involved a quintuple immersion in water, which might be the ritual basis of the number five in the "Five Seals," or possibly the number five has something to do with the successive sealing of each of the five senses from worldly attachments. See also John Turner, "The Sethian Baptismal Rite," in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk à l'occasion de son soixantième anniversaire* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.E 8; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 941–92.

which ⁸ strips] him of the Chaos [that is ⁹ in the] uttermost [darkness] that exists [inside] ¹⁰ the entire [abyss], that is, the thought of [the corporeal] ¹¹ and the psychic [faculty]. All these I ¹² put on. And I stripped him of it ¹³ and I put upon him a shining Light, that ¹⁴ is, the knowledge of the Thought of the Fatherhood. ¹⁵

And I delivered him to those who give robes—¹⁶ Yammon, Elasso, Amenai—and they [covered] ¹⁷ him with a robe from the robes of the Light. ¹⁸

And I delivered him to the Baptists and they ¹⁹ baptized him—Mich-eus, Michar, ²⁰ Mn[e]sinous—and they immersed him in the spring of the [Water] ²¹ of Life.

And I delivered him to those who ²² enthrone—Bariel, Nouthan, Sabenai—and they ²³ enthroned him from the throne of glory. ²⁴

And I delivered him to those who glorify—²⁵ Ariom, Elien, Phariel—and they glorified ²⁶ him with the glory of the Fatherhood.

And ²⁷ those who rapture raptured—Gamaliel, ²⁸ [...]anen, Samblo, the servants of <the> great ²⁹ holy Luminaries—and they took him into ³⁰ the light-[place] of his Fatherhood.

And ³¹ he received the Five Seals from ³² [the Light] of the Mother, Protennoia, and ³³ it was [granted] him [to] partake of the *mystery* of knowl-edge ³⁴ and [he became a light] in ³⁵ Light.

This passage witnesses a sequence of ritual acts, originally centered on water baptism, which has become internalized into a mystery of celestial ascent, probably sometime during the late first century. The receipt of the Five Seals ultimately enables one “[to] partake (Ⲡⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ̅ = μεταλαμβάνειν ἐξ)²³ of the mystery of knowledge” and to “[become a light] in Light,” and the knowledge thus received is “the knowledge of the Thought of the Fatherhood,” that is, a direct apprehension of Protennoia herself as the supreme deity’s own first thought. Whether or not this precise sequence of investiture, baptism, enthronement, glorification and rapture into the light was in fact acted out in an actual ceremony, it is clear that the entire focus is upon enlightenment and spiritual transformation and elevation.²⁴

²³ Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 750b.

²⁴ These materials envision the descent of the savior in the form of the Logos into the world in analogy with the descent of the baptizand into the water, and the spiritual enlightenment thus conveyed in analogy with the ascent of the baptizand from the world or earthly water into the realm of light in a single movement of ecstatic vision. For similar acts, cf. 2 *En.* 22; *T. Levi* 8:2–10; 18:6–7; *Phil* 2:6–11; *Col* 2:9–15; *Odes Sol.* 11:7–16; 24:1–5. The sequence of acts portrayed in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (48,15–35; cf. 45,12–20) including investiture, baptism in Living Water, enthronement, glorification and enlightenment or rapture into the light is also nearly duplicated in the Mandaean Masbūtā as summarized by Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer* (2 vols.; FRLANT 2/57; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960–1961), 2:88–89. The motif of exaltation and enlightenment through a water rite is

The Incognito Descent of the Hidden and Revealed Savior

Not only does Protennoia reveal hidden mysteries, but even throughout the modalities of her three appearances she remains hidden, not only from the antagonistic forces and powers that necessitate her revelatory mission, but also even to her fallen members, the Sons of the Light. As the silent divine thought, she is the Voice hidden within the radiant waters of the primordial light from which all reality takes its rise (35,30–36,11). Upon her initial descent she hides within her own members who are bound in Chaos (40,29–34). Upon her second descent, while the Powers and their Archigenetor hear but cannot recognize Protennoia’s Voice and Speech, she hides within yet reveals herself to her fallen members who long for her (45,21–24). On her third descent, she appears as the Logos, which is not only the hidden silence, intellect, and primordial light and source of all reality (46,11–25), but also reveals herself in her members’ “tents,” in the “likeness of their shape,” indeed wearing their “garments” (47,13–16), although—like the hostile powers in her second descent—even they do not initially recognize her identity. By adopting the appearance of the powers inhabiting each successive level through which she descends, she is completely incognito to everyone until she chooses to reveal herself:

XIII 47¹³ The third¹⁴ time I revealed myself to them [in]¹⁵ their tents as Word and I¹⁶ revealed myself in the likeness of their shape. And¹⁷ I wore everyone’s garment and¹⁸ I hid myself within them, and [they] did not¹⁹ know the one who empowers me. For I dwell within²⁰ all the Sovereignties and Powers and within²¹ the Angels and in every movement [that] exists²² in all matter. And I hid myself within²³ them until I revealed myself to my [brethren].²⁴ And none of them knew me, [although]²⁵ it is I who work in them. Rather [they thought]²⁶ that the All was created [by them]²⁷ since they are ignorant, not knowing [their]²⁸ root, the place in which they grew. . . . 49⁶ I was] dwelling in them [in the form⁷ of each one. [The Archons] thought⁸ [that I] was their Christ. Indeed I [dwell⁹ in] everyone. Indeed within those in whom [I revealed¹⁰ myself] as Light [I eluded]¹¹ the Archons. I am their beloved, [for]¹² in that place I clothed myself [as]¹³ the Son of the Archigenetor, and I was like¹⁴ him until the end of his decree, which is¹⁵ the ignorance of Chaos. And among the¹⁶ Angels I revealed myself in their likeness,¹⁷ and among the Powers as if I were one¹⁸ of them, but among the Sons of Man as if¹⁹ I were a Son of Man, even though I am²⁰

ancient and continuous: cf. “I will praise the Lord of Wisdom,” *ANET* tablets 3 & 4 (James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [3d ed.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993], 434–36); Pss 18, 30, 69, 80, 89, & 146; 1 Kgs 1:38–47.

Father of everyone. I hid myself within them ²¹ all until I revealed myself among my members, ²² which are mine.

Hidden and Revealed as Ontogenetic Categories

Although mysteries are by nature hidden, they are also by nature intended to be revealed to those who are regarded as worthy to know them. But the movement from hidden to revealed is not restricted merely to speech acts and epistemology or matters of knowing, for it also has its application in the generation of ontic reality, as is evident in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* itself.

The Trimorphic Protennoia and the Stoic Logos Endiathetos and Prophorikos

Throughout her revelatory discourses, Protennoia, the silent divine Thought, successively manifests herself first as audible sound or Voice, then as uttered Speech, and finally as the fully articulate Logos. The creative act of the original author of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* was an interpretation of the sequence of Protennoia's successive revelatory descents according to a theory of the increasing articulateness of verbal communication in which a completely hidden, interior thought becomes outwardly expressed,²⁵ surely deriving from the Stoic distinction between internal reason (λόγος ἐνδιάθετος) and uttered or expressed reason (λόγος προφορικός), which in turn has various degrees of articulation.²⁶ Although the distinction

²⁵ The silent divine Thought reveals itself first as a 1) soft, hidden, ineffable and incomprehensible Voice or sound that is imperceptible by perceptible means (XIII 36,13–22) and thus only germinally recognizable by her own members who consubstantially already know her (36,13–16; as Voice, Protennoia spoke with the Archons and Authorities by “going down below their language” 42,24–27), then 2) subsequently becoming perceptible in a more articulate form (37,20–24) as “the Speech of the Voice (lifted up) to the ears of those who have known me” (42,14–16), and finally 3) as the fully explicit Word.

²⁶ Cf. the sequence φωνή, λέξις, λόγος in Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 7.57: διαφέρει δὲ φωνὴ καὶ λέξις, ὅτι φωνὴ μὲν καὶ ὁ ἦχος ἐστὶ, λέξις δὲ τὸ ἔναρθρον μόνον. λέξις δὲ λόγου διαφέρει, ὅτι λόγος αἰεὶ σημαντικός ἐστι, λέξις δὲ καὶ ἀσημαντος, ὡς ἡ βλίττυρι, λόγος δὲ οὐδαμῶς. In 3.107 Diogenes distinguishes between literate speech and mere sound: Ἡ φωνὴ διαίρεται εἰς δύο· ἓν μὲν αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἔμψυχον, ἓν δὲ ἄψυχον. ἔμψυχον μὲν ἡ τῶν ζώων φωνή, ἄψυχον δὲ φθόγγοι καὶ ἦχοι. τῆς τοῦ ἐμψύχου φωνῆς ἡ μὲν ἐστὶν ἐγγράμματος, ἡ δὲ ἀγράμματος. A different though similar distinction is surely intended by the Coptic words used by the *Trimorphic Protennoia* to distinguish between the progression from mere sound or voice (ἔρροϋγ, masculine ← φθόγγος or perhaps ἦχος) to humanlike speech (σμη feminine ← φωνή or perhaps λέξις) to fully articulate Logos in the sense of an intelligible proposition or statement. Perhaps a similar sequence underlies the *Apocryphon of John's* portrayal of Barbelo as initially the

between internal speech or reason and uttered or expressed speech was first used to distinguish between rational and irrational beings, it may be that the Stoics saw a similar distinction in Plato's treatment of the reasoning process, which they represented under two aspects, the internal thought process and its external expression in spoken words.²⁷

From Revelation of Knowledge to Ontogenetic Production

In the later Platonic tradition, this distinction became applied also to the thought, not just of humans, but also of the divine mind as well as to the distinction between the intelligible and perceptible realms. Thus in *De vita Mosis*, Philo of Alexandria holds that the divine Logos is two-fold; the relation between God's *logoi* can be mimetic, since the visible creation of one Logos is an icon of the invisible creation of the other, or, in analogy with human speech, they can be related by procession, as suggested by applying the term *προφορικός* to speech and *ἐνδιάθετος* to thought, wherein the *logos endiathetos* represents the archetypal ideas as the thoughts of the divine mind and the *logos prophorikos* as the power that instantiates those archetypes in the physical world.²⁸ Thus just as in

Ennoia internal to the Invisible Spirit, which activates itself as his Pronoia, and is finally instantiated as his Protennoia.

²⁷ For the Stoic distinction between λόγος ἐνδιάθετος and λόγος προφορικός see *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 2:43.18 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 2.275.5–8: "They say that it is not by the uttered logos that man differs from the irrational beasts (for crows and parrots and jays also emit connected sounds), but by the indwelling one" (φασιν, ὅτι ἄνθρωπος οὐχὶ τῷ προφορικῷ λόγῳ διαφέρει τῶν ἀλόγων ζῴων . . . ἀλλὰ τῷ ἐνδιαθέτῳ). Such a distinction between interior and expressed reasoning may have been suggested in Plato's notion of an unspoken internal dialogue within the soul: "Well, then, thought and speech are the same. What we have called thought is this internal dialogue of the soul with itself, which is produced without the intermediary of voice." (Οὐκοῦν διάνοια μὲν καὶ λόγος ταῦτόν· πλὴν ὁ μὲν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὐτὴν διάλογος ἄνευ φωνῆς γιγνόμενος τοῦτ' αὐτὸ ἡμῖν ἐπωνομάσθη, διάνοια, *Sophist* 263e) or of an inward debate within the soul: "the discourse which the soul has with itself about any subjects which it considers" (Λόγον δὲ αὐτῆ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἢ ψυχῆ διεξέρχεται περὶ ὧν ἂν σκοπῆ, *Theaetetus* 189e). Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 76b24–27: "every syllogism, and therefore a *fortiori* demonstration, is addressed not to the spoken word, but to the discourse within the soul, and though we can always raise objections to the spoken word, to the inward discourse we cannot always object" (οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τὸν ἔξω λόγον ἢ ἀπόδειξις, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ συλλογισμός. αἰεὶ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐνστήναι πρὸς τὸν ἔξω λόγον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν ἔσω λόγον οὐκ αἰεὶ).

²⁸ *De vita Mosis* 2.127: "For reason is double, both in the universe and also in the nature of mankind, in the universe there is that reason which is conversant about incorporeal and paradigmatic Ideas (παραδειγματικῶν ἰδεῶν) from which the intelligible world (νοητὸς κόσμος) was made, and also that which is concerned with the visible objects of sight, which are copies and imitations of those Ideas (μιμήματα καὶ ἀπεικονίσματα τῶν ἰδεῶν ἐκείνων), of

the case of the revelatory progression from hidden and ineffable to manifest and expressible, there is also the ontogenetic progression from potentiality and latency to actual and manifest.

While the *Trimorphic Protennoia* clearly applies the progression from interior to outwardly expressed thought to the notion of progressively articulate revelation from Silence to Sound to Speech to Statement (Logos), it may also have intended to suggest a progressively articulate ontogenesis of the divine First Thought from an initial silence resident within the supreme deity to its actual emergence as the divine Son of God.

XIII 36 ⁴ I [descended to the] midst of the underworld ⁵ and I shone [down upon the] darkness. It is I who ⁶ made the [water] surge. It is I who am hidden within ⁷ [radiant] waters. I am the one who ⁸ gradually made the All radiant by my ⁹ Thought.

In the second century, the Stoic distinction between the immanent and the expressed Logos provided a way to explain how Christ had preexisted as the immanent Logos in the Father's mind and then became incarnate in time, as in Theophilus of Antioch.²⁹ In the third century, Plotinus could

which this perceptible world was made. Again, in man there is internal (ἐνδιάθετος) reason and another that is uttered (προφορικός): and the one is, as it were a spring, and the other flows from it; and the place of the one is the governing part (the mind), while the place of uttered part is the tongue, the mouth, and all the rest of the organs of the voice." Cf. also *De vita Mosis* 2.129; *De Abrahamo* 83.2; *Quod deterius* 92.

²⁹ Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.10.7–9: "God, then, having his own logos dwelling in his own inward parts generated it, having emitted it with his own wisdom before the All" ("Ἐχων οὖν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ λόγον ἐνδιάθετον ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις σπλάγχνοις ἐγέννησεν αὐτὸν μετὰ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ σοφίας ἐξερευζάμενος πρὸ τῶν ὄλων). Ibid., 2.22.9–17: "But what else is this voice (of God speaking with Adam in the garden) but the Logos of God, who is also his Son? Not as the poets and writers of myths talk of the sons of gods begotten from intercourse, but as truth relates, the Logos that always exists was residing within the heart of God (τὸν λόγον τὸν ὄντα διὰ παντὸς ἐνδιάθετον ἐν καρδίᾳ θεοῦ). For before anything came into being he had him as a counsellor, being his own mind and thought. But when God wished to make whatever he resolved, he brought this Logos forth as an utterance, the firstborn of all creation, not himself being emptied of the Logos, but having generated Logos, and always conversing with his Logos (τοῦτον τὸν λόγον ἐγέννησεν προφορικόν, πρωτότοκον πάσης κτίσεως, οὐ κενωθείς αὐτὸς τοῦ λόγου, ἀλλὰ λόγον γενήσας καὶ τῷ λόγῳ αὐτοῦ διὰ παντὸς ὁμιλῶν)." Cf. also Clement of Alexandria's distinction between the innate knowledge of faith as opposed to the expressed knowledge of wisdom in *Stromateis* 7.55.4: "Faith is an internal (ἐνδιάθετόν) good, and without searching for God, confesses His existence, and glorifies Him as existent. Whence by starting from this faith, and being developed by it, through the grace of God, the knowledge respecting Him is to be acquired as far as possible. Now we assert that knowledge (γνώσις) differs from the wisdom (σοφία) that is the result of teaching. For as far as anything is knowledge, so far is it certainly wisdom; but in as far as anything is wisdom, it is not certainly knowledge. For the term wisdom appears only in the knowledge of the uttered word (προφορικὸς λόγος)."

employ a similar notion to the genesis of the cosmos from the cosmic soul. For Plotinus, the Cosmos is not a created order planned by a deity whom one can blame for producing evil whether intentionally or inadvertently; it is rather the self-expression of the cosmic Soul, which corresponds roughly to Philo's λόγος προφορικός, whose λόγος ἐνδιάθετος would be the divine Intelligence (νοῦς):

Ennead V.1 [10].3.5–9: Take then the soul's upper neighbor (Intellect), more divine than this divine thing after which and from which the soul derives. For although it is a thing of the kind which our discourse has shown it to be, it is an image of Intellect (εἰκὼν τίς ἐστι νοῦ); just as a thought in its utterance is an image of the thought in soul, so soul is itself the expressed thought of Intellect and its whole activity and the life, which it sends out to establish another reality (οἶον λόγος ὁ ἐν προφορᾷ λόγου τοῦ ἐν ψυχῇ, οὕτω τοι καὶ αὐτὴ λόγος νοῦ καὶ ἡ πάντα ἐνέργεια καὶ ἦν προῖεται ζωὴν εἰς ἄλλου ὑπόστασιν).

As is well known, Plotinus expressed this emanative self-expression as an undiminished circumradiation of luminescence from the One (a notion found also in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* 36,6–9: "It is I who am hidden within [radiant] waters; it is I who gradually made the All radiant by my Thought"). Thus *Ennead V.1 [10].6.15–30:*

How the Divine Mind comes into being must be explained: everything moving has necessarily an object towards which it advances; but since the Supreme can have no such object, we may not ascribe motion to it: anything that comes into being after it can be produced only as a consequence of its reversion upon itself (ἐπιστραφέντος ἀεὶ ἐκείνου πρὸς αὐτὸ); of course, we dare not talk of generation in time, dealing as we are with eternal Beings: where we speak of origin in such reference, it is in the sense, merely, of cause and subordination: origin from the Supreme must not be taken to imply any movement in it: that would make the Being resulting from the movement not a second principle but a third: the Movement would be the second hypostasis. Given this immobility in the Supreme, it can neither have yielded assent nor uttered decree nor stirred in any way towards the existence of a secondary. What happened then? What are we to conceive as rising in the neighborhood of that immobility? It must be a circumradiation—produced from the Supreme but from the Supreme without alteration (περίλαμψιν ἐξ αὐτοῦ μὲν, ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ μένοντος)—and may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance. (trans. MacKenna)

The motif of ontogenetic radiation adumbrated in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and explicit in Plotinus also finds direct application in the *Apocryphon of John*, whose introductory theogony expresses the emergence of the second principle from the first in somewhat similar terms, whereby the supreme Monad or Invisible Spirit instantiates his First

Thought, Triple-Powered Barbelo, by contemplating himself in the luminous “living water” circumradiating from him:

ApJohn BG [26]¹⁴ It is he (the Invisible Spirit) . . .¹⁵ who contemplates himself alone¹⁶ in his own light that¹⁷ surrounds him, which he himself is, the source¹⁸ of living water, the light that¹⁹ is full of purity, the fountain of the²⁰ Spirit. It flowed from the²¹ living water of the light and²² provided all aeons and [27]¹ worlds. In every direction² he contemplated his own image, beholding³ it in the⁴ pure luminous water that surrounds him. And⁵ his Thought (ἔννοια) became active and⁶ appeared and stood at rest before⁷ him in the brilliance⁸ of the light.

Here, a first moment of procession or circumradiation is complemented by a second moment of self-contemplation in which the act of thought becomes exteriorized as an entity distinct from its luminous source. Although the notion of self-contemplation may go back to Aristotle’s self-thinking intellect,³⁰ by the second century it becomes a mechanism of theogonical ontogenesis through productive self-contemplation, and is widely attested in both Sethian and non-Sethian theogonies.³¹

Such self-contemplation can easily complement the epistemological movement from hidden thought to manifest discourse or from obscurity to clarity to yield an ontogenetic movement from potentiality to actuality conceived as the progressive yet self-reflexive revelation of a hierarchy of increasingly determinate and articulate levels of reality that can in turn become the subject of revelatory discourse.

Later Platonic Theories of Ontogenesis through Emanation

One of the novel developments in the transition from the rather static ontologies typical of Middleplatonism to the dynamic emanationism of Neoplatonism is the doctrine of the unfolding of the world of true being

³⁰ E.g., *Metaphysics* 12.1072b20–30; cf. also 1074b33–1075a4.

³¹ Cf. *Eugnostos the Blessed* III 75,3–7 (= the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* III 99,1–7): “the beginningless Forefather sees himself within himself, like a mirror, having appeared in his likeness (εφ’αυτῶ ερωτῶ ἑμῆν ἑμῶν ἡρραῖ ἡρητῶ· ἡεε ἡογείαλ· εαλογῶνηρ εβολ εῖμ πεφεινε) as Self-Father, that is, Self-Begetter”; *Tripartite Tractate* I 56,1–57,3: “For it is truly his ineffable self that he engenders. It is self-generation, where he conceives of himself and knows himself as he is. . . . by knowing himself in himself the Father bore him (the Monogenes Son) without generation, so that he exists by the Father having him as a thought—that is, his thought about himself, his sensation of himself and [...] of his eternal being.”; Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 7.1: “Being unknown, the Father wished to be known to the aeons, and through his reflection, as if knowing himself. . . . he emitted the Monogenes.”

and intellect from its source in an ultimate unitary principle beyond being itself. As in Neoplatonism, the Nag Hammadi Sethian Platonizing treatises *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and *Marsanes* envisage emanation as a three-stage process: First, an initial identity of the product with its source, a sort of potential or prefigurative existence; second, an indefinite procession or spontaneous emission of the product from its source, and third, a contemplative visionary reversion of the product upon its own prefiguration still latent in its source, whereby the product receives its own distinct reality. The later Neoplatonists named these three stages Permanence or Remaining, Procession, and Reversion, and often characterized the three successive modes of the product's existence during this process by the terms of the noetic triad of Being, Life, and Intellect.

The Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes Triad

A similar emanational scheme is implemented in the Sethian Platonizing treatises, whose metaphysical hierarchy is headed by a supreme and pre-existent Unknowable One, often named the Invisible Spirit, who, as in Plotinus, is clearly beyond being and conceivable only through negative predication and a cognition devoid of discursive content. Below the supreme One, at the level of determinate being, is the Barbelo Aeon, conceived along the lines of a Middle Platonic tripartite divine Intellect.³² It contains a triad of ontological levels, conceived as sub-intellecets or subaeons of the Barbelo Aeon: a contemplated intellect (νοῦς νοητος) that contains the archetypal ideas (τὰ ὄντως ὄντα), called Kalyptos or "hidden"; a contemplating intellect (νοῦς θεωρητικός or νόερος) that contains intellects united with their objects of thought, called Protophanes or "first appearing"; and a discursive and demiurgic intellect (νοῦς διανοούμενος) that contains discrete forms of individuals, called Autogenes or "self-generated."

³² Cf. Gerald Bechtle, "A Problem Concerning the Question of Being in 2./3. Century Platonism," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 393–414, esp. 401n74: "Barbelo really is equivalent to mind. It is the first thought of the Invisible Spirit and it has, principally speaking, three levels: Kalyptos, the hidden One, Protophanes, the first appearing One, Autogenes, the self-begotten One. . . . Thus Barbelo corresponds to Numenius' second mind. Insofar as the second mind is participated in and used by the first, i.e. insofar as the second mind is prefigured in the first and thus is the first in a certain way, we have Kalyptos. Insofar as the Numenian second mind is identical with the third and acts through the third it can be compared to Autogenes. *Stricto sensu* the second mind as second mind is comparable to the Protophanes level of the Sethians."

Originally, the names of these three subaeons seem to have been derived from epithets that earlier Sethian literature applied to the members of their supreme trinity: the Invisible Spirit as Father, the Mother Barbelo as his First-appearing Thought, and their self-generated Child Autogenes. Thus the triad of terms Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes would have designated the dynamic process by which the Barbelo Aeon itself gradually unfolds from the Invisible Spirit:³³ at first “hidden” (καλυπτός)³⁴ or latent within the Spirit as its prefigurative intellect, then “first appearing” (πρωτοφανής)³⁵ as the Spirit’s separately-existing thought or intellect, and finally “self-generated” (αὐτογενής) as a distinct demiurgical mind that operates on the physical world below in accordance with its vision of the archetypal ideas emerging in the divine intellect, Protophanes.³⁶ Indeed,

³³ Thus in the *Apocryphon of John*, the Invisible—and thus “hidden”—Spirit emits an overflow of luminous water in which he sees a reflection of himself; this self-vision then “first manifests” itself as the second principle Barbelo, the divine First Thought. In turn, Barbelo contemplates the same luminous water from which she had originated in order to generate the third principle, the divine Autogenes as the “First Appearance” of the Invisible Spirit’s first power.

³⁴ In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, Barbelo is the invisible “hidden one,” (38,9–10; cf. 36,6–9: “It is I who am hidden within [radiant] waters. I am the one who gradually put forth the All by my Thought”), the Intellect hidden in silence (46,11–23). According to the *Apocryphon of John*, not only Barbelo (II 4,27–30; 5,11) and her self-generated child Autogenes (6,20–21; cf. also the *Gospel of the Egyptians* IV 54,21–22; 55,25; *Eugnostos the Blessed* III 74,14–15), but even the divine Adamas (II 8,32) are said to be the “first to appear” (πεταρωρη ογωνη εβολ) ~ πρωτοφανής). Cf. Codex Bruce, *Untitled* 234,12–13 [Schmidt-MacDermot]: “The ninth father has a hidden (καλυπτος) aspect and a first-appearing (πρωτοφανης) aspect and a self-generated (αυτογενης) aspect.”

³⁵ Cf. Phanes: *Orphicorum Hymni* 52.5–6; *Papyri Magicae* IV,943–4; cf. *Orphic Argonautica*, line 16 Dottin: Φάνητα . . . καλέουσι Βροτοί · πρώτος γὰρ ἐφάνθη. Note the use of φαίνειν in the following Gnostic testimonia: Simon Magus *apud* Hippolytus, *Refutations of All Heresies* 6.18: “For Thought (ἔννοια) that subsists in unity processing forth became two, being rendered manifest to itself from itself (φανεῖς αὐτῷ ἀπὸ ἑαυτοῦ), the Father passed into a state of duality.”; Marcus *apud* Hippolytus, *ibid.*, 6.42: “The self-existent Father opened His mouth, and sent forth a Logos similar to himself and it stood by him and showed him who he was, that he himself had been manifested as a form of the Invisible One” (ὃς παραστάς ἐπέδειξεν αὐτῷ ὃ ἦν, αὐτὸς τοῦ ἀοράτου μορφῆ φανεῖς).” Cf. Codex Bruce, *Untitled* 252,24–253,2 [Schmidt-MacDermot]: “Moreover the power that was given to the forefather is called first-manifest (πρωτοφανής) because it is he who first appeared (πενταρωρη ογωνη εβολ πωρη). And he was called unbegotten (ἀγέννητος) because no one had created him. And he was (called) the ineffable and the nameless one. And he was also called self-begotten (αὐτογενής) and self-willed (αυτοθελητος) because he appeared (ογωνη εβολ) by his own will.”

³⁶ In *Ad Candidum* 14.11–14, Victorinus hints at a similar progression: “For what is above ὄν is hidden (cf. Kalyptos) ὄν; indeed the manifestation (cf. Protophanes) of the hidden is generation (cf. Autogenes), since ὄν in potentiality generates ὄν in act.”

in the *Apocryphon of John*, Autogenes, the third member of the Father-Mother-Child trinity, also “first appears” from Barbelo:

Ap. John BG [29] ¹⁸ Barbelo ¹⁹ gazed intently into ²⁰ the pure Light, [30] ¹ and she turned herself to it and gave rise to ² a spark of blessed light, ³ though it was not equal to her in ⁴ magnitude. This is the ⁵ only-begotten (μονογενής) one, who appeared from ⁶ the Father (~ *patrofanēs*), the divine Self-generated One (αὐτογενής), ⁷ the first-born (~ *prōtogenos*) Child of the ⁸ entirety of the Spirit of pure light. ⁹ Now the ¹⁰ Invisible Spirit rejoiced over ¹¹ the light that had come into being, ¹² who first appeared (ΝΤΑΦΩΡΠ̄ ΝΟΥΩΝ̄ ΕΒΟΛ ~ *prōtofanēs*) from the ¹³ first power, his Forethought (πρόνοια), ¹⁴ Barbelo.

In the Platonizing Sethian treatises, these attributes of “hidden,” “first-appearing,” and “self-generated,” which seem to have originally applied to the emergence of Barbelo as the Invisible Spirit’s *feminine* First Thought (ἔννοια), have become designations for the tripartite structure of the *masculine* Aeon (ἄλων) of Barbelo, reconceived as a distinct divine Intellect.³⁷

As Thomassen has pointed out,³⁸ Marius Victorinus also exhibits a similar tripartite scheme using the terms *absconditum* / *occultum*—*manifestatio* / *apparentia*—*generatio* / *natalis* to defend “the homoousian doctrine by explaining the relationship of Father and Son in terms of a distinction between the hidden and the manifest: the Son is the manifest form of the hidden reality of the Father; in manifesting the Father, the Son, as Logos, and the Holy Spirit represent the Life and Thought of the Father; thus, the pure being of the Father manifests itself in an outward movement as Logos/Life and in a movement of return as Holy Spirit/Thought.” He cites a portion of the following passage from Victorinus’ letter to Candidus:

[God the Father] is known neither as τὸ ὄν nor as μὴ ὄν, but as knowable in ignorance since He is simultaneously ὄν and not ὄν who by His own power has produced and led τὸ ὄν into manifestation. . . . For that which is above ὄν is the hidden ὄν. Indeed the manifestation of the hidden is begetting, if indeed the ὄν in potentiality begets the ὄν in actuality. For nothing is begotten without cause. And if God is cause of all, He is cause also of the begetting of the ὄντα, since He is certainly above τὸ ὄν although He is in contact with τῷ ὄντι

³⁷ *Marsanes* X 9,1–3: “For this reason the Virgin (Barbelo) became male (as νοῦς, i.e., the Aeon [m.] of Barbelo), because she had separated from the male (i.e., the Invisible Spirit).”

³⁸ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 298 and 301. For the study of Victorinus, the basic works are Paul Henry and Pierre Hadot, *Marius Victorinus: Traité théologique sur la Trinité* (2 vols.; SC 68–69; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1960) and Pierre Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* (2 vols.; Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968).

as both its father and begetter. Indeed, the one who is pregnant has hidden within what will be begotten. *For the embryo is not nonexistent before birth but it is in hiding and by birth there comes into manifestation the ὄν in action which was ὄν in potentiality*; and so that, to tell the truth, τοῦ ὄντος comes to manifestation by the action of ὄν. Indeed the action begets outside. But what begets it? That which was within. What therefore was within, in God? Nothing other than τὸ ὄν, the truly ὄν or rather the προόν (preexistence) which is above the universally existent genus, which is above the ὄντως ὄντα, the ὄν in potentiality now in actuality. (*Ad Candidum* 14,5–25, trans. Clark)

Thomassen goes on to note that this motif of a movement from hiddenness to manifestation that underlies the Sethian triad Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes also underlies Valentinian protologies of “type A,” for example the *Gospel of Truth* (esp. 27,26–33 and 28,4–10) and the *Tripartite Tractate*, that portray the generation of a multiplicity of aeons from the single monadic Father as a manifestation from an initial hiddenness latent in the Father’s Thought.³⁹ In the case of the *Tripartite Tractate*, he observes:

The generative process of *Tri. Trac.* can be analyzed as involving three terms, namely the Father, the Son, and the “church” of aeons, whose mutual relationships pass through three successive stages: an initial existence as hiddenness and latency is followed by an exteriorizing manifestation and completed as individuated generation and independent instantiation. At a first stage the ineffable and unknowable Father (51:8–54:35) is united with the Son in his own self-thinking activity (54:35–57:23), and contains within him the church as the multiplicity of this Thought (57:23–59:38). At a second stage the Son “spreads himself out and extends himself” (65:4–6), the Father is made potentially accessible, and the aeons are searching for him; here the three members all co-exist in the modus of continuous exteriorization, represented by the self-extension of the Son (60:1–67:34). Finally, the third stage is characterized by the coming into being of the Pleroma as a multitude of individual, cognizant beings.

The Noetic Triad of Being, Mind and Life

Despite the simplicity and attractiveness of the Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes nomenclature as a denotation for the primordial generation of all subsequent reality from a supreme unitary principle, the Sethian Platonizing treatises have consistently demoted this triad to a subordinate level, where the phases of Hidden, First-manifesting, and Self-generated

³⁹ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 302.

have become conceived as an “*intellectual*” triad of distinct sub-intelligences that comprise the second principle, the Barbelo Aeon, playing the role of the divine intelligence. As a result, when it came to working out the actual dynamics of this emanative process, these treatises ended up employing a quite different terminology to account for the emergence of the Barbelo Aeon from the supreme Invisible Spirit. In addition to the lower *intellectual* triad of Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes, they introduce a higher, *intelligible* triad, namely, the noetic triad of Being, Life, and Mind. Indeed, although Plotinus too occasionally employed the terms of this noetic triad to designate distinctly *non-hypostatic* phases in the emanation of Intellect from the One,⁴⁰ nevertheless, just as the Sethians ended up confining the Kalyptos-Protophanes-Autogenes triad to their second hypostasis Barbelo, Plotinus too mostly confined the function of the noetic triad to his second hypostasis, Intellect, as a way of portraying it, not as a realm of merely static being, but instead as living and creative thought.⁴¹

By contrast with Plotinus’ implementation, the Platonizing Sethian treatises conceive this intelligible triad as a somewhat quasi-hypostatic entity, the Invisible Spirit’s Triple Power, which serves as the means by which the supreme Invisible Spirit gives rise to the Aeon of Barbelo.⁴² It is composed of the three powers of Existence (ὑπαρξις rather than ὄν, Being), Vitality (ζωότης rather than ζωή, Life), and Mentality (νοότης [or Blessedness in *Zostrianos*] rather than νοῦς, Intellect), essentially a de-substantified version of the Being-Life-Mind triad. Each of its powers designates a distinct phase in the emanation of the Barbelo Aeon: 1) In its initial phase as a purely infinitival Existence (ὑπαρχις or ὀντότης), the Triple Power is latent within and identical with the supreme One;

⁴⁰ E.g., *Ennead* VI.7.[38].17.

⁴¹ Justified by Plato, *Sophist* 248e–49b: “Are we really to be so easily persuaded that change, life, soul and intelligence have no place in the perfectly real (παντελῶς ὄν), that it has neither life (ζωή) nor intelligence (νοῦς), but stands aloof devoid of intelligence (φρόνησις)?” and *Timaeus* 39e: “the Nous beholds (καθορᾷ) the ideas resident in the veritable living being (ὃ ἐστὶ ζῶον); such and so many as exist therein he purposed (διενοήθη) that the universe should contain.” Intellect is not a lifeless being, but an act (*Enn.* V.3[49].5-33–44; cf. II.9[33].6.14–19; VI.9[9].9.17; II.5[25].3.36; V.5[32].2.9–13).

⁴² While *Zostrianos* tends to portray this entity as the Invisible Spirit’s inherent three-fold power, *Allogenes* (and *Marsanes*) tends to hypostatize the Triple Power as a quasi-hypostatic “Triple Powered One” or “Triple-Powered Invisible Spirit” interposed between the supreme Unknowable One and the Aeon of Barbelo by identifying it in terms of its median processional phase (e.g., Vitality, Life, Activity; XI 66.30–38: “From the One who constantly stands, there appeared an eternal Life, the Invisible and Triple Powered Spirit, the One that is in all existing things and surrounds them all while transcending them all.”), although in its initial and final phases it actually *is* these two.

2) in its emanative phase it is an indeterminate Vitality (ζωότης) that proceeds forth from One; and 3) in its final phase it is a Mentality (νοήτης) or Blessedness that contemplates its prefigurative source in the supreme One, thereby conceptually defining itself as a distinct divine Intellect, the Aeon of Barbelo.⁴³

XI 48 ¹⁴ It is ¹⁵ with [the] hiddenness of Existence that he (the Triple Powered One) provides ¹⁶ Being, [providing] ¹⁷ for [it in] every way, since it is this ¹⁸ that [shall] come into being when he ¹⁹ intelligizes himself.

XI 53 ²³ On account of the ²⁴ third silence of ²⁵ Mentality and the undivided secondary ²⁶ activity (i.e. Vitality) that appeared (ετασογῶν̄ε̄ εβολ) ²⁷ in the First Thought—²⁸ that is, the Barbelo-Aeon—²⁹ and the undivided ³⁰ semblance of division, even the Triple-Powered ³¹ One and the non-substantial Existence, ³² it (fem., the activity, ἐνέργεια) appeared (ασογῶν̄ε̄ εβολ) ³³ by means of an activity ³⁴ that is stable ³⁵ and silent.

XI 49 ⁷ When he (the Triple Powered One, TPO) ⁸ is intelligized as the traverser (πεφχιοορ < διαπεράω or perhaps “delimiter” < διαπεραίνω) ⁹ of the (indeterminate) Boundlessness (B) of the ¹⁰ Invisible Spirit (IS) [that subsists] in him (TPO), ¹¹ it (B) causes [him (TPO)] to revert to [it (IS)] ¹² in order that it (B) might know what it is ¹³ that is within it (IS) and ¹⁴ how it (IS) exists, and ¹⁵ that he (TPO) might guarantee the endurance of ¹⁶ everything by being a ¹⁷ cause of truly existing (i.e., determinate) things. ¹⁸ For through him (TPO) ¹⁹ knowledge of it (IS) became available, ²⁰ since he (TPO) is the one who knows what ²¹ it (IS) is.

A similar process is described in *Zostrianos*, where the three powers of Existence, Life and Blessedness (rather than Mentality) do not explicitly form a distinct quasi-hypostatic entity like the Triple Powered One of *Allogenes*, but rather reside in the Invisible Spirit itself as its own three powers:

VIII, 16 ² Not only [did they dwell] ³ in thought, but he [made room for] ⁴ them, since he is [Being] in the following ⁵ way: he set a [limit] upon ⁶ Being, lest it become ⁷ endless and formless; ⁸ yet it was truly delimited while it was a ⁹ new entity in order that [it] might become ¹⁰ something having ¹¹ its own [dwelling], ¹² Existence together with [Being], ¹³ standing with it, existing with it, ¹⁴ surrounding it, [and being like it] ¹⁵ on every side.

VIII 20 ¹⁷ The ¹⁸ Invisible Spirit is [source of them all] ¹⁹ and [an insubstantial Existence] ²⁰ [prior to essence] ²¹ and existence [and being]. ²² [Existences are prior to] ²³ life, [for it is] the [cause of] ²⁴ Blessed[ness].

⁴³ E.g., *Zostrianos* VIII 81,6–20: “She (Barbelo) [was] existing [individually] [as cause] of [the declination]. Lest she come forth anymore or get further away from perfection, she knew herself and him (the Invisible Spirit), and she stood at rest and spread forth on his [behalf] . . . to know herself and the one that pre-exists.”

In fact these notions are also present in the negative and positive theological source shared in common between *Zostrianos* (VIII 64,13–66,11 + 66,14b–68,13 + 74,17–75,21) and Book I of Victorinus' *Adversus Arium* (1.49.9–50.21). The existence of this common source, shared virtually word-for-word between *Zostrianos* and book I-b of Marius Victorinus' treatise *Against Arius*, was detected in 1996 by Pierre Hadot and Michel Tardieu.⁴⁴ Here both *Zostrianos* (VIII 64,13–66,11) and Victorinus (*Adversus Arium* 1.49.9–40) characterize the supreme deity by means of a negative (the *via negativa*)⁴⁵ and superlative theology (the *via eminentiae*), supplemented by a long series of positive affirmations about the One's identity as a threefold Spirit (VIII 66,14–68,13 + 74,17–75,21 and *Adversus Arium* 1.50.1–21). The most unique feature of the common source is found in its second section, namely the concept of a supreme principle that contains three powers or a single threefold power of Existence, Life and Blessedness:

⁴⁴ See Pierre Hadot, "Porphyre et Victorinus. Questions et hypothèses" and Michel Tardieu, "Recherches sur la formation de l'Apocalypse de Zostrien et les sources de Marius Victorinus" respectively pages 115–25 and 7–114 in *Res Orientales IX* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1996). Tardieu attributes the common source to Numenius as one of the few school Platonists that might have been daring enough to identify the Platonic-Pythagorean One beyond all being with the universal, all-pervading Logos-Spirit of Stoic thought; Hadot would avoid attributing such a radical move to Numenius by proposing that the purely Platonic common source was mediated to *Zostrianos* and Victorinus by a subsequent Christianized or Gnostic version of it that itself originated the identification of the One as the Spirit. For many illustrative parallels and some details of the reconstruction of the Coptic text of *Zostrianos* on the basis of Victorinus' Latin in my introduction and commentary to the French critical edition of *Zostrianos* edition by Catherine Barry, Wolf-Peter Funk, Paul-Hubert Poirier, and John D. Turner, *Zostrien (NH VIII, 1)* (BCNH.T 24; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2000). See now the review of various source theories in Volker Drecoll, "The Greek Text behind the Parallel Sections in Zostrianos and Marius Victorinus," in *Plato's Parmenides* (ed. John D. Turner and Kevin Corrigan; WGRW 2; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 195–212.

⁴⁵ In the negative theology common to *Zostrianos* and Victorinus, the negative attributes of the Spirit—such as immeasurable, invisible, indiscernible, and partless—mostly derive from the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* (137c–142a), while others are transferred from the *Phaedrus* or derive from the description of matter in the *Timaeus*. These include "immeasurable" (*Parmenides* 140c3, 140d4), "invisible" (*Parmenides* 136d7–138a1), "indiscernible" (*Parmenides* 139b–e), "partless" (*Parmenides* 137c4–d3, cf. *Sophist* 245a), "shapeless" (*Parmenides* 137d9); "colorless" and "shapeless" (*Phaedrus* 247c6–7); "formless" (*Timaeus* 50d7, 51a8); "specieless" (*Timaeus* 50e4); "qualityless" [and of Matter, "shapeless," "specieless"] (Alcinoos, *Didaskalikos* 10.165.10–13 Whittaker-Louis = 8.162.36 Hermann). See Luc Brisson, "The Platonic Background in the *Apocalypse of Zostrianos*: Numenius and *Letter II* attributed to Plato," in *The Tradition of Platonism: Essays in Honour of John Dillon* (ed. J. J. O'Cleary; Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999), 173–88, here 178.

VIII 66 ¹⁴ For they are [triple] ¹⁵ powers of his [unity], ¹⁶ [complete] Existence, ¹⁷ Life and ¹⁸ Blessedness. In ¹⁹ Existence he exists [as] ²⁰ a simple unity, ²¹ his own [rational expression] and idea. ²² Whomever he will find ²³ he brings into ²⁴ being. [And in] ²⁵ Vitality, he is alive [and] **[67]** ¹ [becomes; in Blessedness] ² [he comes to] ³ [have Mentality].

VIII 67 ²⁴ [There] is that which **68** ¹ [comes to be in] ² [Mentality] and [Life], ³ even [its] inhabitant. ⁴ And the Life ⁵ is [an] activity of the ⁶ insubstantial [Existence]. ⁷ That which exists in [them] ⁸ [exists] in it; ⁹ and because of [it they exist as] ¹⁰ Blessed[ness] and ¹¹ perfect[ion]. And [it (the Life) is the power] ¹² that exists in [all those] ¹³ that truly exist.

Just after the end of this common source, both Victorinus and *Zostrianos* immediately move beyond their expositions of the supreme One to expound the process by which an indeterminate activity pre-existing within the supreme One gives rise to a subsequent hypostasis: for Victorinus the Son of God (*Adversus Arium* 1.50.22–51.43), and for *Zostrianos* the Aeon of Barbelo (VIII 76, top-84, 21). The common theme shared by both Victorinus' and *Zostrianos*' account of the emergence of a second principle is a gender transformation from female to male. For Victorinus, the indeterminate feminine power of Life emerging from the Father is rendered as the masculine Son of God by reversion upon its potential prefigurative existence in the Father. For *Zostrianos*, the indeterminate feminine power of knowledge emerging from the Invisible Spirit is rendered as the masculine Aeon of Barbelo by a contemplative reversion upon its prefigurative existence in the Invisible Spirit.

The account of Barbelo's emanation on pages 76–82 of *Zostrianos* reflects the same sequence of procession, reversion and acquisition of separateness and stability. Having emanated from the Invisible Spirit, Barbelo's further descent and potential dispersion is halted by a contemplative reversion upon her source. By foreknowing her impending aeonic status potentially prefigured within the Invisible Spirit, she comes to stand outside him, examining him and her prefigurative self, spreading forth and becoming separate and stable as an all-perfect (*παντέλειος*) being, the unengendered Kalyptos. Note that in *Zostrianos*, Barbelo emanates directly from the Invisible Spirit who is himself triple powered; here the Triple Powered One lacks the quasi-hypostatic status it seems to have in *Allogenes*.

VIII 76 ²⁰ And ²¹ his knowledge dwells ²² outside of him with ²³ that which contemplates him ²⁴ inwardly. . . . **77** ¹² She became distinct ¹³ because she is [an] all-perfect instance ¹⁴ [of] perfection ¹⁵ existing as contemplation. ¹⁶ With respect to that one, ¹⁷ [she] is an offspring that supplements ¹⁸ him, even that which derives from ¹⁹ his ineffable power. ²⁰ She has ²¹ a pre-potency,

even ²² the primal unengenderedness ²³ succeeding that one, ²⁴ because with respect to all the ²⁵ rest [she is] a first aeon. . . . **78** ⁶ It is she (Barbelo) who knows] ⁷ and [who foreknows] ⁸ herself, [truly existing] ⁹ as a [single] aeon ¹⁰ in act [and] ¹¹ potency and [Existence]. ¹² It is not [in] ¹³ time that she originated, but [she] ¹⁴ [appeared] eternally, ¹⁵ having eternally stood ¹⁶ in his presence. ¹⁷ She was overshadowed by the ¹⁸ majesty of his [majesty]. ¹⁹ She stood ²⁰ looking at him and rejoicing. ²¹ Being filled with ²² kindness [she did not become separate]. . . . **79** ¹⁰ [And from] the undivided one toward ¹¹ existence in act ¹² move the [intellectual] perfection ¹³ and intellectual life ¹⁴ that were ¹⁵ blessedness and ¹⁶ divinity. The [entire] Spirit, ¹⁷ perfect, simple ¹⁸ and invisible, ¹⁹ [has] become a unity ²⁰ in existence and ²¹ activity, even a ²² simple Triple [Powered] One, ²³ an Invisible Spirit, an ²⁴ image of the one that ²⁵ truly exists . . . **81** ⁸ Lest she come forth anymore ⁹ or get further away ¹⁰ from perfection, she ¹¹ knew herself and him (the Spirit), ¹² and she stood at rest ¹³ and spread forth ¹⁴ on his [behalf]— ¹⁵ since she derived ¹⁶ [from] true existence, ¹⁷ she derived from that which ¹⁸ truly exists in common with all ¹⁹ things—to know herself ²⁰ and the one that pre-exists. . . . **82** ⁵ And they appeared ⁶ [through the one (Barbelo)] who ⁷ foreknows him, being ⁸ an eternal receptacle (*χώρα*), ⁹ having become ¹⁰ a secondary form of his knowledge, ¹¹ even the duplication of ¹² his knowledge, the unengendered ¹³ Kalyptos.

Victorinus' account of the emergence of the Son as the second principle is as follows:

I 50 ²² Therefore with this One existing, the (second) One leaped forth, the One who "is one." . . . ⁵¹ ¹ But this One, which we say to be a One-One, is a ² Life that is in infinite motion, creator of all other existents, whether of ³ the authentic existents or the existents, being the Logos of the "to be" of ⁴ all existents, moving itself by itself in an eternal ⁵ movement, having its movement in itself, or rather being itself ⁶ movement . . . ¹⁰ For proceeding ¹¹ as a potency out of a state of immobile pre-existence—unmoved ¹² so long as it was in potency—this never-resting motion ¹³ arising out of itself and hastening to engender all sorts of movement ¹⁴ since it was infinite life—this motion as it were appeared outside in vivifying ¹⁵ activity. It necessarily follows that life has been engendered . . . ¹⁹ Life is thus this ²⁰ Existence of all existents, and insofar as life is ²¹ movement, it has received a sort of feminine power, since it ²² desired to vivify. But since, as was to be shown, this movement, ²³ being one, is both Life and Wisdom, Life is converted ²⁴ to Wisdom, or rather to the paternal existence, ²⁵ or better yet, ²⁶ by a retrograde movement to the paternal power. Thus fortified, Life, hastening back to the Father, has been made male. ²⁷ For Life is descent and Wisdom is ascent. It is also Spirit; ²⁸ the two are thus Spirit, two in one. And likewise Life: at first nothing other than ²⁹ primal Existence, it was necessarily first invested with a virginal ³⁰ potential to be subsequently engendered as the male ³¹ Son of God by masculine birth from the Virgin—since in the first motion, when it first ³² appears, Life initially was—as if it defected from the

Father's power and by its innate³³ desire to vivify while it was still interior—³⁴ externalized by its own movement. When it again³⁵ reverted upon itself, it returned to its paternal³⁶ existence and became male. Completed by its all-powerful³⁷ vigor, life has become perfect Spirit by³⁸ reversion toward the higher, i.e., toward the interior away from its downward tendency.

Although these expositions of the generation of a second principle lack the degree of nearly word-for-word agreement as is found in the common source, their conceptual similarity is sufficiently close as to suspect that here too Victorinus and *Zostrianos* may have drawn on the same sources. As their common archetype, Einar Thomassen has suggested that “one is lead to postulate the existence of a theory where the Father/Monad is conceived as a Mind/Thought containing potentially within him the Totality, in the manner of a womb.⁴⁶ In the description of this pre existence, moreover, its ‘hiddenness’ was underscored, and the generation of the Totality was presented as a ‘manifestation.’ . . . This terminology has an Orphic ring to it, particularly in the myth of Phanes emerging from the cosmic egg.”⁴⁷

While in *Zostrianos*, ontogenesis seems to be initiated by the supreme Invisible Spirit itself, in *Allogenes* ontogenesis apparently begins, not with the First One—the Invisible Spirit, who is pure self-contained activity—but on a secondary level with the self-contraction of the Triple Powered One.⁴⁸ This initial self-contraction is immediately followed by its

⁴⁶ Note that in *Zostrianos* 82,8 (cited above) Barbelo is termed a receptacle (χώρημα), and in the *Apocryphon of John* II 5,5, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* XIII 38,15, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (III 42,3; 43,1; IV 59,2) she is called the Womb (of all).

⁴⁷ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 306–7. So too Proclus (e.g., *Platonic Theology* 3.32.1, etc.) uses the term κρύφιος to describe the initial hiddenness of the Totality within the One, which, as Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, 1:306n4 notes, is symbolized by the Orphic egg. See also note 35 above on the Orphic figure of Phanes vis-à-vis Protophanes and comments in John Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (BCNH.E 6; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2001), 540n37.

⁴⁸ Here it seems that Vitality, the median power of the Triple Powered One, is equivalent to the indefinite dyad of Neopythagorean metaphysics prior to its final instantiation as the fully determinate Aeon of Barbelo. If so, one can compare this process of contraction with Moderatus' (*apud* Simplicius, *In Phys.* 231.7–10) “unitary Logos” that inaugurates ontogenesis on a secondary level by depriving itself of the unitary aspects of its multiple Forms, thus yielding not only the transcendent unity of the First One, but also making room for pure Quantity—perhaps the mere plurality of the Forms—deprived of all unity and proportion as a sort of relative non-being that could be identified with the receptacle of the *Timaeus*. Cf. the similar process in frgs. 3–5 of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, where the Father snatches away his own fire or hypostatical identity that occupies the highest level (. . . ὁ πατήρ ἤρπασσεν ἑαυτὸν, οὐδ' ἐν ἐῆ δυνάμει νοερᾷ κλείσας ἴδιον πύρ) to yield pure indeterminate power or potential to be informed by his intellectual power on a lower level.

expansion into the Aeon of Barbelo, which thereupon achieves initial determination. It then becomes the fully determinate Aeon of Barbelo by an act of knowing itself and its source.

XI 45²¹ [O] Triple-Powered One who²² [truly exists]! For after it [contracted]²³ [it expanded], and²⁴ [it spread out] and became complete,²⁵ [and] it was empowered [with]²⁶ all of them by knowing [itself]²⁷ [and the perfect Invisible Spirit],²⁸ and it [became]²⁹ [an] aeon. By knowing [herself]³⁰ she (Barbelo) knew that one,³¹ [and] she became Kalyptos.³² [Because] she acts in those whom she³³ knows,³⁴ she is Protophanes, a perfect,³⁵ invisible Intellect.

Such a notion of systolic contraction and diastolic expansion draws once again on Stoic thought, namely the Stoic doctrine of a tensile motion (τονική κίνησις) directed alternately outward to produce multiple magnitudes and qualities and inward to produce unity and cohesive substance, a precursor to the Neoplatonic doctrines of procession and reversion.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ As applied to the Stoic universal Logos/Pneuma, Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.55.7–8: ἡ τοῦ πνεύματος φύσις καὶ ἡ τονική κίνησις; as applied to bodies, Nemesius, *De nat. hom.* 2.44–49 = Numenius, fig. 4b des Places = *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 2:45: “If they should say, as the Stoics do, that there exists in bodies a kind of tensile movement which moves simultaneously inwards and outwards, the outward movement produces magnitudes and qualities and the inward one unity and substance, we must ask them—since every movement issues from some power—what this power is and what substance it contains.” (εἰ δὲ λέγοιεν καθάπερ οἱ Στωϊκοὶ τονικήν τινα εἶναι κίνησιν περὶ τὰ σώματα εἰς τὸ εἶσω ἅμα καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔξω κινουμένην, καὶ τὴν μὲν εἰς τὸ ἔξω μεγεθῶν καὶ ποιότητων ἀποτελεστικὴν εἶναι, τὴν δὲ εἰς τὸ εἶσω ἐνώσεως καὶ οὐσίας, ἐρωτητέον αὐτούς ἐπειδὴ πάσα κίνησις ἀπὸ τινός ἐστι δυνάμεως τίς ἢ δύναμις αὐτῆ καὶ ἐν τίνι οὐσίῳται). Cf. Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, 1:68–77. A partial antecedent to such motion might be the Pythagorean notion that one thing became distinguished from another through the inbreathing of the Unlimited by the Limit (much as according to ancient medical speculations, the seed in the womb “breathes in” the air and is divided by it); see Aristotle, *Met.* 14.1091a13–19 “There is no reason to doubt whether the Pythagoreans do or do not introduce it (generation); for they clearly state that when the One had been constituted—whether out of planes or superficies or seed or out of something that they cannot explain—immediately the nearest part of the Infinite began to be drawn in and limited by the Limit.” (οἱ μὲν οὖν Πυθαγόρειοι πότερον οὐ ποιοῦσιν ἢ ποιοῦσι γένεσιν οὐδὲν δεῖ διαστάζειν φανερώς γὰρ λέγουσιν ὡς τοῦ ἐνός συσταθέντος, εἴτ’ ἐξ ἐπιπέδων εἴτ’ ἐκ χροιάς εἴτ’ ἐκ σπέρματος εἴτ’ ἐξ ἄν ἀποροῦσιν εἰπεῖν, εὐθύς τὸ ἔγγιστα τοῦ ἀπείρου ὅτι εἰληκετο καὶ ἐπεραίνετο ὑπὸ τοῦ πέρατος); *Physics* 213b22–27: “The Pythagoreans, too, held that void exists, and that it enters the heaven from the unlimited breath—it, so to speak, breathes in void. The void distinguishes the natures of things, since it is the thing that separates and distinguishes the successive terms in a series. This happens in the first case of numbers; for the void distinguishes their nature.” (εἶναι δ’ ἔφρασαν καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι κενόν, καὶ ἐπεισιέναι αὐτὸ τῷ οὐρανῷ ἐκ τοῦ ἀπείρου πνεύματος ὡς ἀναπνέοντι καὶ τὸ κενόν, ὃ διορίζει τὰς φύσεις, ὡς ὄντος τοῦ κενοῦ χωρισμοῦ τινός τῶν ἐφεξῆς καὶ [τῆς] διορίσεως· καὶ τοῦτ’ εἶναι πρῶτων ἐν τοῖς ἀριθμοῖς· τὸ γὰρ κενόν διορίζειν τὴν φύσιν αὐτῶν).

Although neither the Existence-Vitality-Mentality nor the Being-Life-Mind nomenclature for the noetic triad explicitly appears in the *Apocryphon of John*, its introductory theogony describes the emergence of the Triple-Powered Barbelo in essentially the same terminology and concepts, suggesting that it too was composed in a similar conceptual environment. In the two passages previously cited from the shorter version (*Ap. John* BG 26,14–27,8 on page 179 and 29,18–30,14 on page 182), the supreme Monad who “always exists” (εἰς πάντας αἰῶνες, BG 24,2) and who is “the life that gives life” and “the blessedness that gives blessedness” (25,15–16) implies the existence of a Being-Life-Mind/Blessedness triad within the first principle.⁵⁰

Protological Ontogenesis and Mystical Union as Revelation

Another enigmatic feature of the Platonizing Sethian treatises is found in *Allogenes* (NHC XI 59,4–68,top). While the first half of *Allogenes* is occupied with a sequence of five revelations from a revealer named Youel that largely inform the visionary Allogenes about the structure of the metaphysical hierarchy I have just described, the second half of the treatise narrates his contemplative ascent into union with the supreme unknowable One. At this point, a new set of revealers, the powers of the Luminaries of the Barbelo Aeon, reveal to Allogenes the path of contemplative ascent through the powers of the Invisible Spirit’s Triple Power leading to a mystical union with the supreme One (NHC XI 59,4–68,top). The ascent beyond the Aeon of Barbelo to the Unknowable One is first revealed to Allogenes by the powers of the Luminaries (XI 59,4–60,12) and then actually implemented and narrated (XI 60,12–61,22) by Allogenes in a way quite similar to the revelation, yielding what amounts to two accounts of the ascent. The technique consists of an ascending series of

⁵⁰ Moreover, the second principle Barbelo, who originates from the first principle’s self contemplation (νοῖ, 26,15) of himself in the luminous “living” water (μοοὺ ἕωον, 26,18) that emanates from him, is herself called Triple-Powered (BG 27,21–28,1: τῶο[μ]ντε ἕωον; III 8,2–3: [τῶο]μντ ἕωον[αμν]). Finally, the third principle, the Invisible Spirit’s and Barbelo’s self-generated Child is, like the Father, also identified as blessed (μακαριον; BG 30,2–3) and receives Mind (νοῦς, BG 31,5–9). Cf. the parallel in the longer version, NHC II 4,19–28. The living waters of the Sethian baptismal rite have become a transcendent emanation of luminous, living, and self-reflective thinking. In turn, Barbelo’s contemplation of this same luminous water manifests itself as the self-generated Autogenes, the “first appearance” of the Invisible Spirit’s invisible first thought. Compare Codex Bruce, *Untitled* 242,24–253,2 [Schmidt-MacDermot] cited in note 35.

contemplative “withdrawals” (ἀναχωρεῖν) into a kind of mystical union with the supreme Unknowable One itself.⁵¹ The ultimate moment of apprehension of the unknowable deity is described as a ογα(ο)ρπῑ νογω̄νε̄ εβολ̄ or ογῑντ̄ωορπῑ νογω̄νε̄ εβολ̄, which at first sight appears to mean something like “a first revelation” or “a primary revelation.”

In a seminal essay,⁵² Zeke Mazur has made a study of these phrases, noting that Coptic verb phrases ογᾱνε̄ εβολ̄ (or σω̄λῑ εβολ̄) may generally be rendered generally as “to reveal” (or the noun “revelation”) as translations of transitive Greek verbs like ἀναγγέλλειν, αποκαλύπτειν, or φανεροῦν that connote transmission of some kind of cognitive information, but also as translations of verbs such as ἐμφανίζειν, ἐπιφαίνειν, or φαίνεσθαι and nouns such as ἐπιφάνεια or ἐμφάνεια that denote the intransitive act of manifestation or appearance,⁵³ or even certain Greek verbs such as προβάλλειν or προέρχεσθαι that connote forward motion, emanation, or projection.⁵⁴ Moreover, when certain revelations or manifestations are qualified by the

⁵¹ So also according to Plotinus, the contemplative union of both the mystic aspirant and the universal Intellect with the supreme One involves a similar withdrawal from any proactive or aggressive intellection. As the product of an indeterminate, primary life that processes forth from the One, the contemplative intellect must withdraw back into the initial manifestation of its own primordial life, which coincides with the supreme One's initial act of emanation: “By what sort of simple intuition could one grasp this which transcends the nature of intellect? . . . What is it, then, which we shall receive when we set our intellect to it? Rather, the Intellect must first return [“withdraw”], so to speak, backwards, and give itself up, in a way, to what lies behind it (δεῖ τὸν νοῦν οἷον εἰς τοῦπίσω ἀναχωρεῖν καὶ οἷον ἑαυτὸν ἀφέντα τοῖς εἰς ὀπισθεν αὐτοῦ ἀμφίστομον ὄντα)—for it faces in both directions; and there, if it wishes to see that First Principle, it must not be altogether intellect. For it is the first life, since it is an activity manifest in the way of outgoing of all things (Ἔστι μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸς ζωὴ πρώτη, ἐνέργεια οὖσα ἐν διεξόδῳ τῶν πάντων; cf. *Allogenes* XI 48,34 cited below, p. 195); outgoing not in the sense that it is now in process of going out but that it has gone out. If, then, it is life and outgoing and holds all things distinctly and not in a vague general way—for [in the latter case] it would hold them imperfectly and inarticulately—it must itself derive from something else, which is no more in the way of outgoing, but is the origin of outgoing, and the origin of life and the origin of intellect and all things (ἀρχὴ διεξόδου καὶ ἀρχὴ ζωῆς καὶ ἀρχὴ νοῦ καὶ τῶν πάντων).” (*Ennead* III, 8 [30] 9.18–40, trans. Armstrong).

⁵² Zeke Mazur, “Self-Manifestation and ‘Primary Revelation’ in the Platonizing Sethian Ascent Treatises and Plotinian Mysticism” (paper presented at the November 2008 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature), here pp. 3–4.

⁵³ Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, 486b–787a; 812ab.

⁵⁴ Mazur cites the Graeco-Coptic vocabulary of the *Apocryphon of John* and the parallel fragments of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* preserved by Theodoret: e.g. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.10.1, line 13: προελθούσης; cf. NHC III 8,9: ογᾱνε̄ εβολ̄; BG 28,8–9: ογω̄νε̄ εβολ̄; NHC II 4,28; 5,15.22.34: ᾱσ̄ω̄λῑ εβολ̄; IV 7,[3–4]; 8,[2–3].[25]: ᾱσ̄ω̄λῑ εβολ̄. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.29.1, line 7: προελήλυθεν; cf. NHC III 8,16: ογᾱνε̄ εβολ̄; BG 28,17: ᾱσ̄ω̄λῑ εβολ̄; NHC II 22: [ᾱσ̄ω̄λῑ]π̄ εβολ̄. In the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC IV 53,4; 54,21–22, 56,12.21–22; 63,5.28), ρ̄ω̄ορπῑ νογω̄νε̄ εβολ̄ denotes emanations on many ontological levels, and is also

prefix $\omega(\omicron)\overline{\rho\pi}\ \bar{\nu}$ - or $\overline{\mu\eta\tau}\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \bar{\nu}$ - (generally renditions of Greek prefixes like $\pi\rho\omicron$ - and $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron$ - or similar adverbials), it may signify that the revelation or manifestation is considered as primary or preeminent, but it may also signify temporal or sequential priority, in the sense of initial, prior, or originary such that the phrase $\overline{\mu\eta\tau}\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \overline{\nu\omicron\gamma\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$ or $\omega(\omicron)\overline{\rho\pi}\ \overline{\nu\omicron\gamma\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$ may be rendered as “initial emergence” or “originary manifestation” or even “protophany” as translations of Greek phrases such as $\pi\rho\omega\tau\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\phi\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\sigma\iota\varsigma$, $\pi\rho\omega\tau\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\phi\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\epsilon\iota\alpha$, $\pi\rho\omicron\phi\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\epsilon\iota\alpha$, or even adjectives (sometimes substantivized) like $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron\phi\alpha\bar{\nu}\eta\varsigma$.

In particular, these phrases occur at the culmination of Allogenes’ final contemplative ascent through the three powers of the Triple Powered One—Blessedness (i.e., Mentality), Vitality, and Existence—that mediate between the supreme Unknowable One and the Barbelo Aeon. The passages are as follows:

XI 59 ²⁶ And should you experience ²⁷ a revelation of that One by ²⁸ means of a *primary revelation* ²⁹ ($\omicron\gamma\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \overline{\nu\omicron\gamma\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$) of the Unknowable One, ³⁰ should you ³¹ know him, you must be incognizant!

XI 60 ¹³ While I was listening to these things as ¹⁴ those there (the luminaries of the Barbelo Aeon) spoke them, there ¹⁵ was within me a stillness ¹⁶ of silence, and I heard the ¹⁷ Blessedness ¹⁸ whereby I knew <my> proper self. ¹⁹ And I withdrew ($\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\chi\omega\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$) to the ²⁰ Vitality as I sought it. And ²¹ I mutually entered it ²² and stood, ²³ not firmly but ²⁴ quietly. And I saw ²⁵ an eternal, intellectual, undivided motion ²⁶ peculiar to all formless powers, ²⁷ not determined ²⁸ by any determination. And when ²⁹ I wanted to stand firmly, ³⁰ I withdrew ($\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\chi\omega\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$) to ³¹ the Existence, which I found ³² standing and at rest, ³³ according to and image and ³⁴ likeness of what was enveloping ³⁵ me. By means of a *manifestation* ($\omicron\gamma\overline{\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$) ³⁶ of the Indivisible and the ³⁷ Stable I was filled ³⁸ with *revelation* ($\xi\bar{\nu}\ \omicron\gamma\overline{\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$); by means ³⁹ of the Unknowable One’s **61** ¹ *primary revelation* ($\omicron\gamma\overline{\mu\eta\tau}\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \overline{\nu\omicron\gamma\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$), [as though] ² incognizant of him, I [knew] ³ him and was empowered by ⁴ him. Having been permanently strengthened, ⁵ I knew that [which] ⁶ exists in me, even the Triple-Powered One ⁷ and the revelation of ⁸ his uncontainableness. [And] ⁹ by means of a *primary revelation* ($\omicron\gamma\overline{\mu\eta\tau}\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \bar{\nu}[\omicron\gamma]\overline{\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$) ¹⁰ of the universally unknowable First One—¹¹ the God ¹² beyond perfection—I saw ¹³ him and the Triple-Powered One that exists ¹⁴ in them all.

XI 61 ²⁵ Cease dissipating the inactivity ²⁶ that exists in you ²⁷ by (further) inquiry after ²⁸ incomprehensible matters; rather hear ²⁹ about him insofar as it is ³⁰ possible by means of a *primary* ³¹ *revelation* and a *revelation* ($\omicron\gamma\overline{\mu\eta\tau}\overline{\omega\rho\pi}\ \overline{\nu\omicron\gamma\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda\ \overline{\mu\eta}\ \omicron\gamma\overline{\omega\bar{\nu}\xi}\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda$).

used of the manifestation of the aeons begotten by Christ in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* XIII 39,8.

XI 63 ⁹ Nor is he something ¹⁰ that exists that ¹¹ one can know; rather ¹² he is something else that is superior that ¹³ one cannot know, ¹⁴ since he is *primary revelation* (εγωορπι νογωωνε εβολ πε) ¹⁵ and self-knowledge, ¹⁶ since it is he alone who knows himself.

In the passage *Allogenes* 60,13–61,14, Allogenes ascends through the three powers of Blessedness, Vitality, and Existence one by one. Having become inactive, still and silent, indeed incognizant even of himself, he has become one with the object of his vision, having passed into the realm of non-knowing knowledge where there is no longer any distinction or contrast between actively knowing subject and passively known object that characterizes ordinary acts of knowledge.

The repeated emphasis on seeking and knowing oneself and what is within oneself suggests that the term “withdrawal” (ἀναχωρεῖν) indicates an inner-directed self-contraction, a kind of mental and spiritual implosion, as if Allogenes’ ascent were actually a journey into his interior primordial self where knower and known have become completely assimilated to one another.⁵⁵ He has withdrawn into the prefiguration of his own self prior to or coincident with the moment of its very origination.⁵⁶

In the same essay, Mazur goes on to suggest that the “primary revelation” or, perhaps better, the “originary manifestation” or “pre-manifestation” or “protophany” of the Unknowable One by which Allogenes is permanently strengthened amounts to an epistemological participation in the Unknowable One’s own as-yet-indeterminate primordial self-manifestation and subsequent self-reversion leading to the emergence of a fully determinate second principle from the first through an act of self-cognition.⁵⁷ As *Allogenes* puts it:

⁵⁵ Cf. *Zostrianos* VIII 44,17–22: “Whenever one [wishes], then he again parts from them all and withdraws (ἀναχωρεῖν) into himself [alone], for he can become divine by having withdrawn to God.” Porphyry, *Sententiae* 40,51–56: “To those who are intellectually (νοερώς) able to withdraw (χωρεῖν) into their own being (οὐσία) and to know it, and who, by both the knowledge itself and the consciousness (εἰδησις) of that knowledge, apprehend themselves according to a unity of knower and known, to those thus present to themselves, true being (τὸ ὄν) is also present.”

⁵⁶ A similar act of self-directed mentation is attributed to the original emergence of the Barbelo Aeon from the supreme One’s Triple Power in *Allogenes* 45,21–35; compare *Allogenes* 56,15–20: If you [seek with perfect] seeking, [then] you shall know the [Good that is] in you; then [you shall know yourself] as well, (as) one who [derives from] the God who truly [pre-exists].” For similar understandings of self-knowledge, see the *Book of Thomas the Contender* II 138,16–18; *Acts of Thomas* 15,14–15; *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78b; and *Hermetic Definitions* 9.4.

⁵⁷ Mazur, “Self-Manifestation and ‘Primary Revelation,’” 8: “It would appear that the Platonizing Sethian authors conceived the mystical ascent as a process of reversion

XI 53⁹ And] ¹⁰ that one (the Triple Power) moved motionlessly ¹¹ in his ¹² navigation, lest he sink ¹³ into indeterminateness by means ¹⁴ of another act of ¹⁵ Mentality. And he entered ¹⁶ into himself and appeared ¹⁷ completely determinate (αφορωνε εβολ εφε νττοου νημ).

In an earlier passage, *Allogenes* speaks of a similar approach to knowledge of the One experienced by the intelligible beings residing “all together” in the Protophanes level of the Barbelo Aeon; they apprehend their indeterminate source in the One by participating in the indeterminate “pre-vitality” or “first life”⁵⁸ of their own being processing from the One as an indivisible activity:

XI 48⁸ If they come together—⁹ since it is impossible that ¹⁰ the Individuals (actively) comprehend the All ¹¹ [situated in the] place that is higher than perfect—¹² they thereby (passively) apprehend through ¹³ a preconception (αφορη νηνηοια = προέννοια). ¹⁴ It is not Being *per se*, but it is [rather] along with ¹⁵ [the] hiddenness ¹⁶ of Existence that he provides Being, [providing] ¹⁷ for [it in] every way, since this ¹⁸ is what [shall] come into being when he ¹⁹ intelligizes himself. . . . ³² But when ³³ they (passively) apprehend (i.e., through a preconception), they participate ³⁴ in the pre-vitality (ταφορη νηνηοια = ζωή πρώτη; cf. *Ennead* III.8 [30].9.33 cited above, note 51), even ³⁵ an indivisible activity (ένέργεια), ³⁶ a reality (ύπόστασις) of the first One, ³⁷ of the One that ³⁸ truly exists.

Apparently the mystical ascent involves a self-reversion towards some residual aspect of the transcendental One’s initial self-manifestation or pre-vitality that somehow lies at the origin of one’s own self. In other words, the means by which the contemplating Intellect attains mystical union with the Supreme is the exact reverse of that by which it was originally generated.

It is also evident that the ascending sequence of epistemological states—ending in utter cognitive vacancy—experienced by *Allogenes* is the exact reverse of the sequence of the ontogenetic phases or modalities

towards some residual aspect of the transcendental divinity’s initial self-manifestation that is immanent within the self. Yet it also seems that the human aspirant’s mystical self-reversion is itself non-coincidentally parallel to the primordial self-reversion undertaken by the first, transcendent principle, when this principle reverts to and apprehends itself to produce the first incipient duality whence emerges the rest of reality. Indeed, it appears that these sectaries envisioned the mystical and the ontogenetic experiences of self-perception—in each case a ‘primary manifestation’—to be identical, according to a kind of commutative principle, even if the end result in each case was thought to be quite different. One may therefore suppose the Sethian authors imagined that it was possible to reiterate the transcendent principle’s own primordial self-apprehension.”

⁵⁸ Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* III, 8 [30] 9.33 cited above, n. 51.

by which the Invisible Spirit's Triple Powered unfolds into the Aeon of Barbelo: Existence, Vitality, and Mentality. Since the contemplation of entities on ever higher ontological levels is characterized as a form of the contemplator's self-knowledge, it appears that the consciousness of the knowing subject is actually assimilated to the ontological character of the level that one intelligizes at any given point. Since the Spirit is beyond determinate being, so also he is beyond any kind of discursive cognition, and therefore he is "known" by not knowing him, a kind of "learned ignorance" (60,13–61,22).

Learned Ignorance

Indeed, it seems that the primary manifestation conveying the ultimate vision of the supreme reality is identical with its object: the Invisible Spirit *is* the very primary revelation or manifestation by which he is known, whether by himself or by another:

XI 63⁹ Nor is he something¹⁰ that exists, that¹¹ one can know. Rather¹² he is something else that is superior, which¹³ one cannot know.¹⁴ He is originary manifestation¹⁵ and self-knowledge,¹⁶ since it is he alone who knows himself.¹⁷ Since he is not one of those things¹⁸ that exist, but is another thing,¹⁹ he is superior to all superlatives,²⁰ even in comparison to his character and²¹ what is not his character.

As the anonymous Turin *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* puts it:

There is a knowledge which is knowledge of a knower, passing from ignorance to knowledge of the known, and there is also another knowledge, an absolute one which is neither knowledge proper to a knower nor knowledge of a known, but knowledge which *is* this One before every known or unknown and every subject coming to knowledge. (*Anon. in Parmenidem* 6.4–12 [Hadot 2:82])

The Invisible Spirit is so unknowable that he is in some sense his own unknowable knowledge, and forms a unity with the nescience that sees him. In fact he seems to be equated with the state of mental vacancy itself:

XI 63²⁸ But he is self-comprehending,²⁹ like something³⁰ so unknowable,³¹ that he exceeds those who excel³² in unknowability . . . 64⁶ And thus he⁷ is unknowable to all of them⁸ in every respect, and⁹ through them all he is¹⁰ in them all,¹¹ not only as the unknowable knowledge¹² that is proper to him;¹³ he is also joined through the¹⁴ nescience that sees him.

The self-knowledge and existence of the Unknown One is not something distinct from him, but identical with him. To equate him with either knowledge or non-knowledge is to miss the goal of one's quest:

XI 64¹⁴ <Whether one sees>¹⁵ in what way he is unknowable,¹⁶ or sees¹⁷ him as he is¹⁸ in every respect or¹⁹ would say that²⁰ he is something like²¹ knowledge, he has acted impiously against him,²² being liable to judgment because he did not²³ know God. He will not²⁴ be judged by²⁵ that One, who²⁶ is neither concerned for anything nor²⁷ has any desire,²⁸ but it results²⁹ merely from the fact that he has not found the origin³⁰ that truly exists. He was blind³¹ apart from the quiescent source³² of revelation,³³ the actualization³⁴ from the triple-powered³⁵ preconception (ὄρπι νέννοια = προέννοια; cf. 48,13 cited above, p. 195 and *Anon. in Parm. 2.20*, cited below)³⁶ of the Invisible Spirit.

The unknowable deity is united with the nescience that sees him, which is identical with his own self-knowledge. By implication, he is also united with the non-knowing visionary as well. The “unknowable knowledge that is proper to him” includes not only human knowledge of the Invisible Spirit, but also the Spirit’s own knowledge of himself and things other than himself. The Spirit abides in the nescience that sees him, a nescience whose image dwells also in us, as the anonymous *Parmenides Commentary* makes clear:

We also lack the faculty proper to the direct apprehension (ἐπιβολή) of God, even if those who represent him in some way reveal to us something of the subject by discourse as far as it is possible for us to understand, for he himself abides beyond any discourse and every notion, in the ignorance of him that is found in us (ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ περι ἡμᾶς ἀγνωσίᾳ καταμένοντος). (*Anon. in Parmenidem* 9.20–26 [Hadot 2.94–96])

Such a cognitively vacant apprehension of the Supreme is advocated both by the fragment 1 of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and by the anonymous commentator on Plato’s *Parmenides*:

It is necessary therefore to subtract everything and add nothing: to subtract everything, not by falling into absolute non-being, but by thought attending to everything that comes to and through him, considering that he is the cause of both the multitude and the being of all things, while himself being neither one nor multiple, but beyond being in regard to all the things that exist on his account. Thus he transcends not only multiplicity, but even the concept of the One, for it is on his account that both the One and Monad exist. And thus one will be able neither to fall into the void, nor dare to attribute anything to him, but to remain in a non-comprehending comprehension and in an intellection that intuits nothing. Through such means, it will occur to you at some point, having stood apart from the intellection of the things constituted by him, to stand upon the ineffable preconception of him which represents him through silence (ἀποστάντι τῶν δι’ αὐτὸν ὑπο-σταν>των τῆς νοήσεως στήναι ἐπὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ ἄρρητον προ-σ}έννοιαν τὴν ἐνεικονιζομένην αὐτὸν διὰ σιγῆς), (a preconception) that is unaware of being silent and not conscious that it represents him and is cognizant of nothing at all, but which

is only an image of the ineffable and is ineffably identical with the ineffable, but not as if knowing him, if you can follow me, even though imaginatively, as I venture to speak (*Anon. in Parmenidem* 2.4–27 [Hadot 2.68–70]; trans. Bechtle)

Interestingly, in the *Chaldean Oracles* and the anonymous *Commentary*, this supra-rational nescience or “non-knowing knowledge” is indeed described, but it is not self-reflexive and not narratively reenacted as it is in *Allogenes*. It is also interesting that both this citation from the anonymous *Commentary* and the previously cited passages from *Allogenes* 48,13 on p. 195 and 64,14–36 on p. 197 apparently use the term “preconception” (ὀρπὶ νῆννοια = προέννοια) to refer to the nescient apprehension of the One, not only on the part of the visionary, but also on the part of the One itself. Like the concept of protophany or originary manifestation, so also the concept of preconception—defined (in *Allogenes* 48,8–38, cited above, p. 195) as an apprehension of the supreme One through a participation in the indivisible activity of the First One’s “pre-vitality”—seems to play a role in both originary ontogenesis from and mystical reversion to the One.

Conclusion

The term “revelation” as a designation for the movement from “hidden” to “revealed” or “manifest” is clearly a central one in religious literature, where it can designate not only the transmission of some kind of cognitive content or ritual action essential to the enlightenment and salvation of the recipient, but even serve as a generic designation or even the title for entire compositions. In the case of the Sethian literature from Nag Hammadi, revelation is a dominantly epistemological phenomenon, a way of knowing ultimate—generally invisible and intangible—reality that is thought to qualify and add depth to the ordinary reality of everyday experience. In this sense, such revelations promise to transmit a knowledge that can be understood, even though in many instances these revelations are said to be “ineffable” or “incomprehensible,” or to be a “mystery” that is secret and indivulgeable, especially to those outside of the group for which its content is intended.

The case of Sethian literature is particularly interesting, owing to its indebtedness to Greek—mainly Platonic and Stoic—metaphysics that reaches its height in the so-called Platonizing Sethian treatises *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, the *Three Steles of Seth* and *Marsanes*. In these treatises, especially *Allogenes*, the concept of revelation—without losing its original

epistemological significance—has slid over into the domain of rather technical metaphysics, especially theories of protological ontogenesis. Here, the process by which reality itself is generated is depicted as a manifestation, appearance, exteriorization, deployment, or actualization of a potentiality hidden or prefigured in an originating source that transcends or is clearly “other” than what is thereby generated. This movement from hidden to manifest results in a hierarchy of increasingly determinate and articulate levels of reality that can be grasped and categorized through revelatory discourse.

Given the monistic character of this metaphysics that traces the origin of an articulated ontological hierarchy back to an absolutely simple and unitary single source in which this hierarchy is originally hidden, the initial generation or manifestation of this hierarchy also constitutes a revelation of the original source. But while the product of this manifestation is knowable by discursive thought and intellection, its originary manifestation is not. Thus, especially in *Allogenes*, initial moment of ontogenetic manifestation is ultimately a revelation which, like its ultimate source, is not only merely “ineffable” or “incomprehensible,” but one that cannot be known at all, or is knowable only by knowing what it is not, or indeed by not knowing it at all. As *Allogenes* puts it, the source of all reality is so unknowable that it is in some sense its own unknowable knowledge, and forms a unity with the nescience that sees it. Here, it turns out that that revelation is a form of self-knowledge which is entirely devoid of cognitive content, not only on the part of the would-be knower, but also of that itself which one seeks to know. Surely the most significant feature of *Allogenes* is the irony that such a lengthy sequence of erudite metaphysical “revelations,” whose comprehension demands rather difficult mental gymnastics, has as its goal an ultimate nescience and cessation of any mentation whatsoever. *Allogenes* is to my knowledge the earliest attempt in the history of Western mysticism actually to narrate the successive stages of a mystical union with the Unknowable God who can only be known by not knowing him. Indeed, *Allogenes* is not so much a revelation of the mystical ascent or of its ultimate destination as it is a performance: the very act of reading *Allogenes* is itself to undergo the ascent.

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PART TWO

MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN OTHER CHRISTIAN PRACTICES,
TEXT TRADITIONS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN THE EGYPTIAN DESERT:
ESOTERICISM AND EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

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It seems that Evagrius of Pontus often said less than he knew. Evagrius may have written more about the ascetic life than any monk of the Egyptian desert before 400 C.E., but he frequently drew attention to how much he was not telling his readers. Consider, for example, his so-called *Letter to Melania* (“so-called” because it may not in fact have been addressed to Melania). Evagrius opens by pointing out that when separated friends “want to know—or to make known to one another—those intentions and hidden secrets that are not for everyone and are not to be revealed to anyone except those who have a kindred mind, they do so through letters.”¹ From this statement the letter’s recipient might have expected that he or she would receive everything that Evagrius might have to say, that to this “kindred mind” Evagrius would not hold back, that between these two separated friends all “intentions and hidden secrets” would be revealed. But it was not so. Later in the letter, discussing the relationships among the human being’s mind, soul, and body and among the Father, Son, and Spirit, Evagrius pauses and explains, “I can truly say that many pathways full of various distinctions meet me here—but I am unwilling to write them down for you because I am unable to entrust them to ink and paper and because of those who might in the future happen to come upon this letter.”² The danger of revealing certain ideas to those unworthy or incapable of them forces a reticence on Evagrius, even when he is corresponding with someone who is experienced with advanced theological discourse and whom he considers a friend.

Scholars have often attributed Evagrius’s reluctance to say all that he knows to the esoteric, easily misunderstood, or potentially heretical

¹ Evagrius, *Letter to Melania* 1 (Augustine M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* [The Early Church Fathers; London and New York: Routledge, 2006], 64). In part due to the uncertainty about the addressee, Casiday calls this work *The Great Letter*. I use the traditional title simply because it will be familiar to readers. Throughout this essay I cite the translations that I have used. If no translation is cited, then it is my own.

² *Letter to Melania* 17 (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 67).

nature of his higher teachings, in short, to his “Origenism.” And so while I understand the opening of the *Letter to Melania* to promise intimacy between friends (“I will share with you, a kindred mind, all my secrets”)—a promise, to be sure, that the author breaks—M. Parmentier, the pioneering translator of and commentator on the letter, saw concealment and anxiety: “Evagrius ‘has something to hide.’ His teaching is, he realizes, easily misunderstood and rejected. This is why he refrains from showing the back of his (Origenistic) tongue in his ascetic-practical works, which are addressed to a wider and less intellectual public.”³ There are several problems with this line of interpretation. For one thing, the *Letter to Melania* is neither an “ascetic-practical work” nor “addressed to a wider and less intellectual public,” and in fact it does contain explicit teachings that are undeniably “Origenistic,” including one of Evagrius’s most detailed descriptions of a highly unitary *apokatastasis* (minds “will return” to the Father “like torrents to the sea”).⁴ If Evagrius hoped to restrain “his (Origenistic) tongue,” he did not succeed. Moreover, scholars increasingly question to what extent Evagrius held the doctrines that the Council of Constantinople would later condemn as dangerously Origenist. But even apart from that skepticism (which I do not fully share), there is little reason to think that Evagrius would have understood that he was teaching suspect ideas, for he never considered himself anything other than a loyal and orthodox member of the Church. He had, of course, helped Gregory of Nazianzus defend Nicene theology against its “Arian” critics in Constantinople.

Far better to understand Evagrius’s withholding of information as pedagogically motivated, as indeed most scholars now do: Evagrius was a teacher, and teachers adapt their instruction to their students’ capabilities and do not share some concepts before they are ready. Evagrius’s “esotericism,” his frequently stated reluctance to say all that he knows, stems primarily from his pedagogy, as we shall see. But related factors are also in play, including modesty about embarrassing (particularly sexual) matters and fear of uttering blasphemous words. Moreover, we can and should push the pedagogical interpretation of Evagrius’s secrecy further: “mysteries,” increasingly higher secrets of God that the monk can discover, stimulate the monk’s spiritual life, which is a journey back to God and to the

³ Martin Parmentier, “‘Evagrius of Pontus’ ‘Letter to Melania,’” *Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 46 (1985): 2–38, at 21.

⁴ *Letter to Melania* 27 (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 69).

contemplation that he enjoyed before the “first movement” that resulted in diversity and embodiment. Esotericism is built into the cosmos, as Evagrius sees it, and thus into God’s plan for his rational creatures.

First, however, we should acknowledge more prosaic reasons for some of Evagrius’s demurrals about saying all that he has known or experienced. One is embarrassment: to reveal one’s thoughts, temptations, and anxieties fully is risky because it makes one vulnerable to the disappointment, mockery, or even contempt of others. Thus, Evagrius opens *Antirrhētikos* or *Talking Back*, his collection of nearly 500 instances in which the monk ought to recite a scriptural passage, by remarking on the pain and difficulty of his undertaking: “I have struggled ‘to open my mouth’ (Ps 118:131) and to speak to God, to his holy angels, and to my own afflicted soul. I have made public the entire contest of the monastic life . . .”⁵ And indeed, Evagrius reports that the demon of sadness “threatens me with curses and said, ‘I will make you an object of laughter and reproach among all the monks because you have investigated and made known all the kinds of all the unclean thoughts.’”⁶ Sexuality is an obvious area of potential shame. A thought of fornication can be so humiliating that a little vainglory can counteract it, and vice versa: while vainglory “promises honors,” fornication “leads to indignities.”⁷ In one instance Evagrius provides only a sketchy description of sexual temptation, explaining that “those who have been tempted by this demon will understand what I am saying”; in another he refuses to describe at all certain “unspeakable evils” that would discourage experienced monks, terrify new monks, and scandalize lay readers.⁸ It is beneficial to let struggling ascetics know that the demons suggest vile sexual acts even to advanced monks, and it is helpful to suggest ways to resist such demonic attacks, but it would be of no use and even counterproductive to describe particular sexual behaviors.

Similar logic applies to the horrifyingly blasphemous thoughts against God that the demon of pride often suggests to particularly accomplished monks. Evagrius notes that such thoughts can be accompanied by “forbidden fantasies that I have not dared even to transmit in writing.”⁹ If he were

⁵ Evagrius, *Antirrhētikos* Pref.6 (David Brakke, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* [Cistercian Studies Series 229; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009], 52).

⁶ *Antirrhētikos* 4.25 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 105).

⁷ *Praktikos* 58 (SC 171:636).

⁸ *Antirrhētikos* 2.55, 65 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 81, 83).

⁹ *Praktikos* 46 (SC 171:602–04).

to put them in writing, he would “shake heaven and earth”—and yet, as in the case of sexuality, “those who have been tempted by it know what I am saying.”¹⁰ Despite these refusals to speak, scholars suspect that Evagrius has revealed what these thoughts are elsewhere.¹¹ If so, they include wondering whether God is present within one’s self, denial of human free will and thus the justice of God’s condemnations of us, identification of the demons as gods, denigration of the body as evil, believing that the Trinity was created, and doubting God’s providence and judgment and our ability to attain virtue.¹² Evagrius calls all these thoughts blasphemous, but I suspect that the thoughts and fantasies that he will not repeat in writing are even worse than these, the reporting of which presumably provides benefit to the reader.

The risks of embarrassment, shock, and blasphemy suffice to account for such moments of reticence on Evagrius’s part, but we should not discount also that when Evagrius says that he knows astonishing things that he dare not repeat, he also augments (wittingly or not) his mystique as a monastic expert. Such is especially evident in *Talking Back*, which reports demonic attacks that some readers may find improbable. As evidence for the sometimes fantastic things that he narrates, Evagrius can appeal to his firsthand visual confirmation of the demons’ physical attacks and, as we have seen, to the knowledge of monks who have undergone such experiences: “those who have been tempted by this demon will understand what I am saying.”¹³ His explicit refusals to describe certain experiences in writing because of their disturbing quality alert the reader that Evagrius knows even more than the work itself contains and thus more than even the most attentive reader who has not had experiences like his. At one point Evagrius rebukes critics who “ridicule” accounts of demonic attack as persons who lack experience,¹⁴ and his condemnations of certain seemingly positive visions (of God or Christ) as the products of the demons of vainglory or pride serve to label the visionary experiences of other monks

¹⁰ *Antirrhētikos* 8.21 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 164).

¹¹ Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (OECT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255; Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, *Traité pratique, ou le moine* (2 vols.; SC 170–71; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 2:604–5, from which most of the following examples are taken.

¹² *Antirrhētikos* 8.12, 16, 47; *Kephalaia Gnōstika* 4.60; *Ad monachos* 134; *Scholia on Proverbs* 190.

¹³ Visual confirmation: *Antirrhētikos* 2.65; 4.36 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 83–84, 108). Experienced monks: *Antirrhētikos* 2.55; cf. 8.21 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 81, 164).

¹⁴ *Antirrhētikos* 4.72 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 116).

as illegitimate.¹⁵ He may not say so explicitly, but Evagrius indicates that he is a veteran spiritual warrior, with longer and better experiences of demonic combat than others. His declarations of reticence support that self-presentation. Likewise, his appeals to readers who *do* know what he is saying flatter those readers who think they know (whether or not they in fact do).

Certainly, however, pedagogy provides the most important context for understanding Evagrius's esotericism.¹⁶ It is well known that Evagrius divided the monastic life into two broad stages or aspects, ascetic practice (*praktikē*) and contemplation or study (*gnōstikē*), within which even more distinctions in the monk's progress are possible. There are teachings that are appropriate to give to monks at each stage in their ascetic journey, and to give prematurely more advanced teachings to monks at earlier points could prove damaging. And so the teacher must sometimes conceal information, give it only sketchily, or even obfuscate at times. This was standard practice among teachers of philosophy in antiquity, picked up by Philo of Alexandria, then by Christians, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Evagrius's Cappadocian teachers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁷ Evagrius indicates his adherence to this practice when he introduces his trilogy of *Praktikos*, *Gnōstikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnōstika* in terms of his stages in the monastic life: the first discusses the life of the ascetic practitioner; the second and third, that of the gnostic. Evagrius will not simply reveal the facts of the matter, "not what we have seen and heard," but only those teachings that experienced monks have considered proper to transmit to learners, "what we have learned from them to say to others." Moreover, Evagrius says, "We have concealed some things and obscured others, lest we 'give what is holy to the dogs and cast pearls before swine' (Matt 7:6), but such things will be clear to those who have embarked with them on the same path."¹⁸ Characteristically, Evagrius gestures to monks who are advanced enough to understand even the things that he has hidden or obscured, inviting readers to imagine that they may be such.

¹⁵ *Antirrhētikos* 7.31; 8.17, 21 (Brakke, *Talking Back*, 154, 163–64).

¹⁶ For an overall view see Columba Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy," in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West; Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia* (ed. John Behr, Andrew Louth, and Dimitri Conomos; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 241–71.

¹⁷ See Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, *Gnōstikos: Le Gnostique, ou à celui qui est devenu digne de la science* (SC 356; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1989), 35–40.

¹⁸ *Praktikos* Prol. 9 (SC 171:492–93).

Evagrius provides specific directions on withholding and obscuring teachings in the *Gnōstikos*, which addresses the gnostic, that is, the monk who has advanced to the point of guiding others.¹⁹ On the one hand, he urges the gnostic not to be “hard to approach” because he should desire “that all people be saved and come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).²⁰ So too elsewhere Evagrius urges the gnostic to obey Proverbs 24:11 and “rescue those who are being led to death,” whom he identifies as “those who are deemed worthy of *gnōsis* and yet neglect the study.”²¹ On the other hand, the *gnōsis* that the gnostic possesses and shares must be “closely guarded” if it is to be “strictly maintained and become greater.”²² The teacher must say “what is useful for each person,” and thus he must investigate the diversity of human laws and lifestyles so that he can properly address the differing circumstances of students.²³ Reticence and riddling are important strategies for the gnostic who wishes to adapt his teachings to the conditions of the individuals whom he guides:

Sometimes it is necessary for us to pretend that we do not know something because those who are asking us questions are not worthy to hear. And you are being truthful if you say you are embodied and do not have an accurate knowledge of things.

Watch yourself, lest—whether on account of advantage or comfort or for the sake of fleeting reputation—you say something forbidden and so be cast out of the sacred precincts, even as he did to those selling young doves in the temple (Matt 21:12–13) . . .

Do not theologize thoughtlessly, and never define the divine. For definitions belong to things that <have come into being and> are composite.²⁴

These statements demonstrate concern for the condition of the hearer or student (whether he is worthy to hear) and the motivation of the speaker or teacher (whether he is acting out of self-interest rather than the benefit of others). But they indicate also sensitivity to the limits of human knowledge (at least during embodied existence) and caution about defining the godhead in inappropriate ways. Taken together, these elements make it

¹⁹ In addition to the discussion of the Guillaumonts, cited earlier, see Young, “Evagrius the Iconographer: Monastic Pedagogy in the *Gnōstikos*,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 53–71, esp. 58–61.

²⁰ *Gnōstikos* 22 (SC 356:122).

²¹ *Scholia on Proverbs* 269 (SC 340:362).

²² *Gnōstikos* 9 (SC 356:100).

²³ *Gnōstikos* 15 (SC 356:112).

²⁴ *Gnōstikos* 23 (Wilhelm Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* [Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Neue Folge 13/2; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912], 548); 24, 27 (SC 356:126, 132).

possible for the gnostic to feign ignorance sincerely. “Someone said, ‘Only the doctor is allowed to get angry or to lie,’ but so too the teacher, and this for the sake of a certain adaptation to circumstances (οἰκονομία)—but no one else.”²⁵

Evagrius’s students likewise remembered that the gnostic is obligated to teach and assist those seeking salvation, but that there are times when he must hold back and not reveal all that he knows. So the *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius*:

Concerning virtues, doctrines, and faith, one should answer, <but sometimes one should not> either because one is internally preoccupied with representations or some situation, or because the question is not suitable to the condition of the person who asked, or because there are others present who are not competent to hear—or because of ignorance, for we do not know everything. But if one does not answer for some other reason, I do not think one is acting reasonably.²⁶

This chapter emphasizes the gnostic’s duty to teach about the essentials of “virtues, doctrines, and faith,” but one may keep silent because of the inappropriate condition either of the teacher, who may be preoccupied with other matters and unable to concentrate, or of the student, whose question may be too advanced for his level of progress, or of others present, who may misunderstand what the teacher says because they lack the suitable competence. These pedagogical concerns are readily understood, but the list ends with an abrupt statement of human limits: “We do not know everything.” Some things even the gnostic does not know.

This interest in the limits of human knowledge takes us beyond good pedagogy as the background to Evagrius’s esotericism and invites us to consider how his esotericism reflects views about how and what human beings can know about God and higher realities—and which human beings can do so. Richard Lim has argued that during the late fourth century educated elites became alarmed by “the popularization of theological discussion,” which they considered a threat to social order. “Interested parties,” he argues, “mobilized various ideological pressures and strategies in attempts to curb rampant disputing” about theological topics like the trinitarian nature of God. Lim includes among these strategies “the mystification of the divine essence (οὐσία).”²⁷ One of these “interested

²⁵ *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius* 155 (SC 514:230).

²⁶ *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius* 87 (SC 514:178–80).

²⁷ Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (The

parties” was Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius’s beloved mentor. In 380 Gregory delivered his famous *Theological Orations* as the Nicene bishop of Constantinople, while Evagrius served as his deacon. In these sermons Gregory complained about excessive theological debate and questioning, which he attributed to heretics and other troublesome people, and he reserved even the limited knowledge of God that a human could obtain to those few who had purified themselves sufficiently and received extensive training—that is, to educated and ascetic elite persons like himself. Turning to Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai, Gregory compared himself to Moses, able to “enter the cloud and company with God”; lesser people corresponded to Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the elder, who “stand further off, his place matching his purity”; “the crowd,” however, “unfit” for divine contemplation, must not come near the mountain’s summit at all.²⁸ Evagrius sounds precisely like the Gregory of the *Orations* when he warns, “The time for explanation and that for debate are not the same. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to hold back with those who make objections at the wrong time. For this is the habit of heretics and contentious people.”²⁹ Only the gnostic can ascend to theological knowledge and engage in discussion and questioning.

Evagrius explicitly cites Gregory as his authority for understanding how the virtue of justice applies to contemplation (and not just to ascetic practice). Justice, according to Gregory, requires that the gnostic “distribute the rational principles (λόγοι) to each person according to merit, proclaiming some things obscurely, signifying other things through enigmas, and making other things clear for the benefit of the simple.”³⁰ The reader of Evagrius’s works will certainly observe this principle in action, as Evagrius’s normally laconic style and his frequent use of parables and unexplained analogies can leave the reader mystified. The composition of most of his works in short “chapters” or “sentences” (κεφάλαια) has several motivations, including imitation of the style of biblical wisdom books such as Proverbs, but one is its utility for distributing rational principles to individuals according to their merit. They obscure teachings from the unworthy, are accessible to the more advanced, and can be the basis for oral explication for those making progress.

Transformation of the Classical Heritage 23; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 150–51.

²⁸ Lim, *Public Disputation*, 158–71. Moses analogy: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 28.2.

²⁹ *Gnōstikos* 26 (Frankenberg, *Euagrios*, 548).

³⁰ *Gnōstikos* 44 (SC 356:174).

The *kephalaia* privilege oral communication over written texts as the preferred method of instruction. Rooted in the interaction between teacher and student, they are to be memorized and pondered, as the student recalls more extensive discussions by his teacher. The ancients had long considered first-person oral teaching to be superior to learning through written texts. Among Christians the preference for oral transmission dovetailed with appeals to personal connections through lines of tradition back to the apostles and Jesus himself, the basic element of the notion of apostolic succession. Among Christians like Clement and Origen this oral tradition might also be secret, reserved for an elite and their students.³¹ The notion of a secret oral tradition of teaching continued into the fourth century, as is evident in a famous passage in Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit*.³² Basil, another one of the young Evagrius's patrons and mentors, writes, "Among the doctrines and proclamations preserved in the Church, some we have through written instruction, but others we have received from the tradition of the apostles, passed down to us in a mystery (ἐν μυστηρίῳ). Both have the same validity for piety."³³ Basil expands upon the purpose of these dual traditions, which do not map precisely onto the distinction between oral and written:

The apostles and fathers who ordained matters concerning the Church from the beginning preserved dignity for the mysteries by secrecy and silence. For what is made available for common and random hearing is not mystery at all. This is the reason for the unwritten tradition: so that the knowledge (γνώσις) of the doctrines might not be neglected or easily despised by the multitude on account of familiarity. Doctrine is one thing, and proclamation is something else, for the former is a matter of silence, while proclamations are made public. One form of silence is the obscurity that Scripture employs when it renders the meaning of doctrines hard to understand for the advantage of the readers. For this reason we all look to the east when we pray, but few of us know that we seek our ancient homeland, paradise, which God planted in Eden to the east (Gen 2:8).³⁴

Basil goes on to give more examples. We recognize here the elitism that we saw in Gregory: certain teachings must be kept away from ordinary people and reserved for elites. As Evagrius would put it, "Not everyone is capable

³¹ Richard P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1954), 53–90.

³² On this passage and other references to esoteric traditions in early Christianity, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (2d ed.; SHR 70; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 27–45.

³³ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66.

³⁴ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66.

of Scripture's mystical sense."³⁵ But we should notice another theme as well: obscurity, especially as Scripture employs it, benefits readers, not only by protecting them from things that they are not ready to know, but also by drawing them to further investigation. We all pray to the east, but only a few of us have learned why through study of the Scriptures—but certainly more people should, and the obscurity of Scripture entices them to do so.

So the esotericism of a secret oral tradition could be extended to written traditions, Scripture above all, as well: Scripture too employs parables, puzzles, and other obscurities to conceal higher truths, of which not everyone is capable. It does so not only to distinguish an elite and to keep secrets from the masses, but also to enable those with the necessary fortitude and learning to join the elite. So Origen:

The prophets, according to the will of God, said without any obscurity whatever could be at once understood as beneficial to their hearers and helpful toward attaining moral reformation. But all the more mysterious and esoteric truths, which contained ideas beyond the understanding of everyone, they expressed by riddles and allegories and what are called dark sayings, and by what are called parables and proverbs. Their purpose was that those who are not afraid of hard work but will accept any toil to attain virtue and truth might find their meaning by study, and after finding it might use it as reason demands.³⁶

In other words, obscure teachings have both the negative function of preventing unworthy persons from learning information that is beyond their rank and the positive function of luring people to higher levels of understanding. At the end of his great *Kephalaia Gnōstika*, Evagrius signals a similar function for his frequently terse and mysterious *kephalaia*: "Whoever is made worthy of spiritual knowledge will assist the holy angels and will bring back the rational beings from vice to virtue and from ignorance to knowledge. Examine our words, our brothers, and explain with diligence the symbols of the centuries in the number of the six days of creation."³⁷ The gnostic should not simply conceal doctrines, but should lead others to advance in virtue and knowledge as he has done. Examining Evagrius's

³⁵ *Scholia on Proverbs* 250 (SC 340:346).

³⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.10 (trans. Henry Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 403). See David Brakke, "Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the *Apocryphon of James*," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 187–218.

³⁷ *Kephalaia Gnōstika* 6.90 (PO 28.1:255–57). I am grateful to Rowan Greer for sharing with me his private translation of the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*, which I have used and sometimes adapted.

words and explaining the symbolic meanings of his written works constitute essential means of making that advance. Within individual works and sets of works, Evagrius's *kephalaia* become progressively shorter, denser, and more obscure, drawing the reader upward into knowledge, as if on a ladder.³⁸

"The ladder to heaven (Gen 28:12) is the revelation of God's mysteries, by which the intellect ascends by degrees and is elevated toward God."³⁹ So Evagrius's students recalled him teaching about Jacob's ladder. Here mysteries or secrets (*μυστήρια*) are the means by which one advances in contemplation, and esotericism becomes the condition for our knowing God. What has not been concealed cannot be revealed. Evagrius elaborates on the meaning of Jacob's ladder in the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*: "If the Christ who appeared to Jacob on the ladder signifies natural contemplation, the ladder's form indicates the way of ascetic practice. But if it makes known the knowledge of the Unity, the ladder is a symbol of all the worlds."⁴⁰ The ladder symbolizes three analogous progressions: the monk's advance toward *apatheia* through the discipline of ascetic practice, his advance toward *gnōsis* through natural contemplation, and the rational creatures' advance toward unity through successive worlds. It is the second of these progressions that concerns us most here, for it is through natural contemplation that the intellect begins to discern the *logoi*, "the dynamic immaterial principles and *raisons d'être* of all created beings and objects."⁴¹ These *logoi* reveal God's wisdom to the "pure intellect" (*νοῦς καθαρός*), which discerns them from the created beings in which they are "concealed" (*ἀποκειμένοι*). The created order is, then, "God's book," a text like Scripture, one whose deeper or higher meanings (*logoi*) are hidden and require increasingly assiduous study, discernment, and contemplation.⁴² Konstantinovsky explains the analogy: "As one diligently applies oneself to the study of Scripture, so must one persevere in scrutinizing the book of creation. In fact absorbing the spiritual sense of Scripture and penetrating the sacred essence of creation are both termed 'contemplation' (*θεωρία*)."⁴³ God designed both Scripture and creation as something

³⁸ Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy," 260–61.

³⁹ *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius* 192 (SC 514:252).

⁴⁰ *Kephalaia Gnōstika* 4.43 (PO 28.1:155).

⁴¹ Julia Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies; Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2009), 41.

⁴² *Scholia on Psalms* 138:16 (PG 12:1662).

⁴³ Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 56–57.

like Russian nesting dolls, with layers of increasingly advanced mysteries, through which the human intellect reaches God himself. Or, as Evagrius seems to have preferred, Scripture and creation represent ladders of mysteries.

The advanced monk or gnostic plays a crucial role in guiding others up the ladder behind him. We have seen that Evagrius's *kephalaia* style of writing imitates the function of Scripture and creation by presenting increasingly enigmatic and mystical teachings. The gnostic teacher becomes "a steward of God's mysteries. In proportion to the condition of each brother, he distributes spiritual knowledge—the Corinthian milk to drink (1 Cor 3:2) and the more solid Ephesian food to eat (Eph 3:1–19; Heb 5:12)." His teaching points to the hidden *logoi* of creation: "He discusses high, long, broad, and deep matters (Eph 3:18), indicating through these dimensions the distinction of the rational natures, which includes the rational principles (λόγοι) concerning the judgment and providence of God, which are very profound and beyond the human condition."⁴⁴ In so doing the gnostic imitates Christ, who likewise adapts himself to the capabilities of those whom he teaches:

The same Christ can be both father and mother, depending on one's perspective. He is father to those who have the spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15) and mother to those who require milk and not solid food. For it is the Christ who speaks in Paul who became father to the Ephesians by revealing to them the mysteries of wisdom (Eph 3:1–19) and mother to the Corinthians by giving them milk to drink (1 Cor 3:2).⁴⁵

In this role, Christ is the divine, cosmic gnostic, who guides not just his few monastic disciples, but all souls to knowledge of God through his mysteries:

The *Ecclesia* of pure souls is the true knowledge of ages and worlds and of the judgment and providence that are in them. The *Ecclesiast* is the begetter of this knowledge, Christ, or the *Ecclesiast* is the one who purifies souls through ethical contemplations and leads them to the natural contemplation.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Scholia on Proverbs* 153 (SC 340:248).

⁴⁵ *Scholia on Proverbs* 210 (SC 340:306).

⁴⁶ *Scholia on Ecclesiastes* 1 (SC 397:58). Compare *Scholia on Proverbs* 2 (SC 340:90): "The kingdom of Israel is the spiritual knowledge that comprehends the principles (λόγοι) concerning God, incorporeal things, corporeal things, judgment, and providence, or which reveals the contemplation of ethics, physics, and theology."

Einar Thomassen has described how the Valentinians believed that the incarnate Christ performed his actions $\mu\sigma\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\omega\delta\omega\varsigma$; that is, his actions contained symbolic meanings that the Christian could discern as he or she advanced in knowledge.⁴⁷ For Evagrius (as for others in the “Origenist” tradition), Christ’s role as concealer and revealer of mysteries is cosmic, not limited to his earthly sojourn. The human gnostic’s practice of concealing and revealing mysteries mimics this cosmic activity, for he acts as merely the “steward of the mysteries,” not their author.

We see an instance of the gnostic both concealing and revealing in one of the chapters of Evagrius’s *Thoughts*:

The demons do not know our hearts as some people think. For the Lord alone is a knower of hearts (cf. Acts 1:24; 15:8), “the one who knows the intellect of people” (Job 7:20) and “who alone fashioned their hearts” (Ps 32:15). But the demons recognize many of the representations that are in the heart from the word that one utters and from the telltale movements of the body. Now I would have liked to explain this clearly, but our holy priest [Macarius the Alexandrian] stopped me, saying that it is not right for such things to be published and so to be cast into the ears of the profane (βέβηλοι), because, he says, the man who has sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman becomes culpable under the Law (cf. Lev. 15:19–24). I will say only that from such signs the demons recognize the things that are hidden in the heart and take from them starting-points for their war against us.⁴⁸

The language in this passage is not merely pedagogical, but ritualist: those who cannot hear advanced teachings about demonic knowledge of human beings are not simply “unworthy” or not yet ready, but “profane.” If, as we have seen, knowledge is the true Church and only the “pure souls” can enter it, then it seems right to imagine those who are less advanced as impure, ineligible to enter the “sacred precincts,” in which the gnostic dwells.⁴⁹ With the term βέβηλος Evagrius gestures not only to those deemed unclean by the ordinances of Leviticus, but to those uninitiated into the classic mysteries. To reveal something “intelligent, that is, profound and mystical,” to such persons is “to cast pearls before swine (Matt 7:6).”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Einar Thomassen, “Gos. Philip 67:27–30: Not ‘In a Mystery,’” in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNHE 7; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2007), 925–39.

⁴⁸ *Thoughts* 37 (SC 438:280).

⁴⁹ *Gnōstikos* 24 (SC 356:126).

⁵⁰ *Scholia on Proverbs* 253 (SC 240:348).

Of course, the ultimate knowledge that the Evagrian monk seeks is mystical, not expressible in words, images, or thoughts.⁵¹ Guy Stroumsa has argued that in late antiquity—in such diverse patristic authors as John Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory the Great—“‘mystery,’ in its Christian garb” became “something ineffable, which cannot be fully expressed by words, rather than something which must remain hidden.” At such a point we come to “the end of ancient esotericism.” Instead, we come to the beginning of Christian mysticism.⁵² Stroumsa, however, admits that his analysis fails to take into account monastic traditions,⁵³ and indeed Evagrius defies any attempt to distinguish between esotericism and mysticism, much less to mark the end to one and the beginning of the other. In his view, esotericism, the deliberate concealment of knowledge from those who are unworthy, unprepared, or unclean, is not simply a pedagogical strategy of the wise teacher, nor is it merely a way to safeguard a tradition from the unlearned who would distort it and the contentious who would malign it. It certainly is these. But even more, esotericism is built into the universe itself: God, the author of the book of creation, has concealed his *logoi* in all the world’s splendidly diverse physical and rational beings, precisely to lure human beings up the ladder of knowledge to himself. The gnostic monk’s strategic esotericism provides the best way to guide others through this universe of secrets.

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⁵¹ See, among others, Columba Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 173–204.

⁵² Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 168.

⁵³ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, xi–xii.

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SECRECY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN¹

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If the Gospel of John bears witness to an early Christian school of thought, as seems likely,² it would seem almost self-evident to find in it traces of secretiveness, or “information control.”³ In Greco-Roman antiquity, veils of secrecy not only covered mystery cults, in which initiates were—often with little success—⁴prohibited from divulging to outsiders the secret rituals in which they took part. It was also a quite common practice among the learned of different sorts and persuasions that certain things were only disclosed to, and speculated among, those who had reached advanced levels of learning and understanding. Such strategies are attested for Greek philosophers, Jewish rabbis and authors of apocalyptic texts, Christian teachers, and Hermetic authors. Advanced teaching was usually delivered orally rather than by means of texts. Some teachers of philosophy required pledges of silence from their students, and mistrust in the written word was widespread.⁵ Unlike teachers in a classroom setting, authors could not exercise control over the “correct” interpretation of their texts. The learned in antiquity already knew the problem that texts are open to

¹ I wish to thank all those who read the penultimate draft of this article and contributed to it with their encouraging and critical comments: Risto Auvinen, Raimo Hakola, Judith Kovacs, Outi Lehtipuu, Alin Suci, Heikki Räisänen, Ulla Tervahauta, Päivi Vähäkangas, and Margot Stout Whiting.

² I still find instructive the analysis by R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (SBLDS 26; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975).

³ I adopt this term from the incisive analysis of secrecy in John from social-scientific perspective by Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009), 252–81.

⁴ Cf. Walter Burkert, “Der geheime Reiz des Verborgenen: Antike Mysterienkulte,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 79–100, p. 85 (on Eleusinian mysteries).

⁵ For a brief summary of some relevant texts, see Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 192–4; in addition to the literature discussed there, see also Guy G. Stroumsa, “From Esotericism to Mysticism in Early Christianity,” in Kippenberg and Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment*, 289–309, p. 291.

all kinds of interpretations, including those that the author might deem as wrong, stupid, or ill-advised. Moreover, the copies in circulation were not necessarily faithful to the original. The author's chances of correcting "wrong" interpretations and taking the corrupted versions of their works away from circulation were very limited.

In addition to oral teaching in ancient schools of thought, a great deal of information control was also involved in the division between novices and the more advanced ones in certain groups. Hermetic tractates, for example, envisage the "way of Hermes," consisting of "steps" or "degrees" (*βαθμοί*), which can require considerable intellectual flexibility since some new revelations are introduced as being in contradiction to what the student learned at an earlier stage.⁶ Garth Fowden argues, compellingly in my view, that "variations of manner and doctrine between the (Hermetic) texts" should not be taken as evidence of "the incoherence of Hermetism" but as an indication "that aspiring Hermetic initiates were expected to proceed systematically from elementary to more sophisticated texts."⁷

Irenaeus and Tertullian famously claimed that Valentinian Christians were secretive about their teaching and revealed what they really thought only to the true insiders; Celsus made the same accusation against all Christians.⁸ Although such accusations are mostly polemical quips at the Other, they were not completely unfounded. Paul already made claim to esoteric knowledge in affirming that "we speak of wisdom among the perfect" (1 Cor 2:6). This "hidden wisdom of God in secrecy" (2:7) can only be taught to "the spiritual ones," who "discern all things" but are "subject to no one else's scrutiny" (1 Cor 2:15). Paul, however, complains that his addressees in Corinth had not yet attained this level of insight; they are still in need of the beginners' instruction ("milk") instead of more advanced teaching ("solid food," 3:1).

⁶ Cf. CH XIV, 1.

⁷ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 99. Tage Petersen shares Fowden's pedagogical approach to the Hermetic tractates, but offers a different interpretation of the steps involved. Fowden maintains that the Hermetic tractates with monistic tendencies belong to the elementary stage of initiation and those with dualistic ones to the advanced level (e.g., *ibid.* 103–4), but Petersen points out that the Hermetic tractates usually classified as "dualistic" also contain monistic features; cf. Tage Petersen, "Alt kommer jo på øjet an, der ser: En analyse af kosmologien i de såkaldt dualistiske tekster i *Corpus Hermeticum*" (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2003), 16–21.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1, preface; Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians*, 1.1–4, 16–18; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.9, 12.

Although the metaphors of “milk” and “solid food,” which were frequently used to denote different levels of instruction,⁹ do not appear in the Gospel of John, the idea of distinct levels is present in it. The adjacent question not usually discussed at all is where the gospel itself belongs in the Johannine “syllabus”: was it at the level of “milk” or “solid-food”?

It is often, more or less implicitly, assumed that the Gospel of John, if read through the correct lenses, lends itself to a deeper, spiritual interpretation. In other words, it is presupposed that the gospel itself contains the answers to the questions it poses, and that these “right” answers can be gleaned from the gospel itself by means of careful reading and the correct interpretive strategies. One application of this view is that the gospel invites repeated acts of reading, which lead the reader to a gradually deepening encounter with the divine Word described in the gospel.

What I am proposing here is a more disconcerting scenario that the gospel does not give away all its secrets even to a sympathetic and persistent reader, one who accepts the gospel’s symbolic world and seriously wants to understand the true aims of the gospel. There are, of course, a number of points in the gospel where the characters fail to understand Jesus but the reader is informed what the correct interpretation is. There are also, however, a number of enigmatic sayings and teachings of Jesus in John that are *not* clarified for the reader, and a number of topics about which subsequent teaching is promised but not delivered within the confines of the gospel. My suggestion is that, at these points, the reader does *not* find the right answers in the gospel as it stands. The reader is, instead, expected to find a Johannine “doctor” who, through oral instruction, could help the student to attain an advanced level of understanding.

A Less Secretive Gospel

Taken as it stands, the Gospel of John does not present itself as an overtly secretive text. It is true that the gospel introduces as its key witness and author the enigmatic figure of the Beloved Disciple (John 21:24), whose identity is nowhere disclosed in John. As Harold Attridge has recently pointed out, leaving this crucial figure anonymous defies the natural

⁹ For an informative survey of the use of these metaphors as denoting different levels of instruction in Paul, Philo, Hebrews (5:12–14), and Clement of Alexandria, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 125–30, 136–46.

expectation that the eyewitnesses on whose testimonies legal documents and historical accounts are based should be named. Attridge sees here an indication of “the Fourth Gospel’s critique of a reliance on historiographical technique,” and persuasively suggests that leaving the Beloved Disciple anonymous is a critical response to the quest of some other early Christians for new eyewitness testimonies about Jesus.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the Beloved Disciple differs from similar authenticating figures described in other early Christian texts in that no clear secrecy motif is linked with him. He provides the reader neither with “the secret sayings of the living Jesus” (like Thomas in the *Gospel of Thomas*) nor with Jesus’ secret teachings imparted through a vision (like Mary in the *Gospel of Mary*, John in the *Secret Book of John*, and a number of other disciples in early Christian revelation dialogues), nor is the reader given the privilege of learning what Jesus said to his chosen disciples in private discussions (thus the *Book of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas*).¹¹ Rather, what the Beloved Disciple bears witness to in John is marketed as common knowledge: the author uses an associative “us” to confirm the reliability of the testimony offered in the gospel (John 21:24).¹²

¹⁰ Harold W. Attridge, “John, Testimony, and Historiography” (a paper read at the John, Jesus, and History Group, the SBL 2009 Annual Meeting, November 20–24, New Orleans, LA); cf. idem, “The Restless Quest for the Beloved Disciple,” in *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions, and Symbols* (ed. David H. Warren, Ann Graham Brock & David W. Pao; FS François Bovon; BIS 66; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 71–80, pp. 78–79. Attridge’s conclusion of the former paper is worth quoting: “. . . the Fourth Gospel does not just bend an element of the historiographical/biographical genre, he [sic] challenges its fundamental premise. The quest for the certitude of reliable historical facts depends on our access to those facts in the person of witnesses to them. Our evangelist purports to provide the reader a narrative based on such a witness, whose identity simply cannot be established.” While Attridge mentions Papias as an example of the Christians seeking previously unknown, and yet eyewitness-based, information about Jesus, the same tendency, albeit from a different perspective, is also attested by all early Christian gospels and revelation dialogues attributed to the disciples of Jesus.

¹¹ For this difference between the Beloved Disciple in John and similar figures in other early Christian texts, see Ismo Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict? Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 165–87. Some scholars have seen a piece of secret discussion in the encounter between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple in John 13:21–30; for my critical rejoinder, see *ibid.* 144–47.

¹² This confirmation is often regarded as a testimony of the Johannine group whose founder and leader the Beloved Disciple was according to most modern scholars. Suspicion against this view can be brought from two perspectives. First, the mention of “us” in John 21:24, forms an *inclusio* to the prologue of this gospel, where a group of “us” laid claim to being eyewitnesses to Jesus: “The word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw (ἑθεασάμεθα) his glory . . .” The past tenses used here show that this statement is not intended as a reference to the entire Johannine community, e.g., their experience of the continuing presence of Jesus among them. It stands to reason that the same group of

The idea of messianic secrecy is also far less prominent in John than in Mark and other synoptic gospels.¹³ Most people described in John are mainly unaware of who Jesus truly is, but nowhere in this gospel does Jesus command people or evil spirits not to disclose his true identity, as he does in the Gospel of Mark (cf. Mark 1:25, 34, 43–44; 3:12; 5:43; 8:26, 30). The characters in the Johannine story often misunderstand Jesus but their misunderstandings are regularly corrected in the text, in most cases by Jesus (e.g., John 3:3–21; 4:7–10; 11:23–26), but also occasionally by the omniscient narrator (e.g., John 2:21; 11:13).¹⁴ The misunderstandings are thus not left for the reader to decipher.

What is more, the public dimension of Jesus' teaching is emphasized in John. In defending himself in front of the high priests, Jesus claims that he has spoken to the world "in public" (παρρησίᾳ), teaching "always in the synagogue and the temple," and having "said nothing in secrecy" (John 18:20). The latter claim is not entirely true since the gospel relates a great number of occasions when Jesus is teaching someone in private.¹⁵ Since the high priests, in this connection, are described as questioning Jesus "about his disciples and his teaching," Jesus' response may be understood as an attempt to protect his disciples by diverting attention from them (18:19). Yet, it remains unclear whether this was the author's intention. What is clear is that the author here wants the reader to look back to Jesus' public

alleged eyewitnesses, now confirming the reliability of the Beloved Disciple, could be in view in John 21:24. Another explanation, which I find quite plausible, was suggested by Howard M. Jackson, "Ancient Self-Referential Conventions and Their Implications for the Authorship and Integrity of the Gospel of John," *JTS* 50 (1999): 1–34, pp. 29–30: the author first speaks of himself in the third person singular ("this one") and then in the first person plural ("we"), meaning "you and I." In that case, the first person plural in John 21:24 should be understood inclusively, that is, referring to both the author and the implied audience at the same time. In that case, the point behind the author's somewhat baroque formulation would simply be "I wrote this and we all know that I'm speaking the truth."

¹³ Cf. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 322, 334.

¹⁴ For a fuller account of the "statement-misunderstanding-(maybe) clarification" scheme in John, see Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*, 262, listing the following passages as evidence: John 3:3–6; 6:41–48; 8:21–30; 11:11–15; 12:28–30; 14:4–6; cf. also R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 152.

¹⁵ The most prominent cases are: Nicodemus in John 3; the Samaritan woman in John 4; the man born blind in John 9; Martha and Mary in John 11, and the disciples in John 13–17. Kasper Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (BIS 93; Brill: Leiden, 2008), 62, maintains that no real contradiction is posed by John 18:20: "The import is rather that Jesus claims not to have tried to hold back his true identity." This view may make some sense in the broader context of the Johannine story, but it is at odds with what is said in John 18:20.

appearances in the temple (John 2:19–22; 7:14, 28; 8:20; 10:23) and in the synagogue (6:59). The author does little to help the reader understand the contradiction between how Jesus describes his teaching activity here and what he has really done in the previous parts of the story.

Finally, it should be mentioned that even the most common technical terms related to ancient mysteries and religious secrets are missing in the Gospel of John. It neither purports to disclose nor even mentions “the ineffable things” (ἄρρητα/ἀπόρρητα);¹⁶ the word “mystery” (μυστήριον), which both Paul (e.g., Rom. 11:25) and synoptists (Mark 4:11parr) use to denote a deeper understanding of the Christian message, is not used in John; and there are no spells of secrecy similar to those in magical papyri in this gospel.¹⁷ An ancient reader of John, thus, would not have had the impression of being faced with an esoteric, mysterious text.

Everything Is Not Revealed

Although it is emphasized in John 18:20 that Jesus taught everything in public and nothing in secrecy, the idea of information control runs through the gospel and is expressed in a variety of ways.¹⁸ Most importantly, information control is indicated in the brief statement of purpose concluding the main body of the gospel (John 20:30–31).¹⁹ The reader is informed here that the gospel only offers a selection of the signs Jesus did. The author claims knowledge about “many other signs” of Jesus that are not recorded “in this book.” The second ending of the gospel likewise affirms that there were “many other things that Jesus did” (John 21:25)

¹⁶ For the popularity of this term in ancient mysteries, see Luther H. Martin, “Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities,” in Kippenberg and Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment*, 101–21, p. 112; Robert Lamberton, “The ΑΠΟΡΡΗΤΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΙΑ and the Roles of Secrecy in the History of Platonism,” in Kippenberg and Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment*, 138–52, pp. 146–7.

¹⁷ For spells of secrecy in magical papyri, see Hans Dieter Betz, “Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in Kippenberg and Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment*, 153–75, esp. 154–60.

¹⁸ Cf. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*, 260–3, who finds in John the following forms of information control: lying; deception; ambiguity; evasion; riddles and parables; words with double meaning; statement-misunderstanding-clarification scheme; hiding; irony, and false knowledge.

¹⁹ I leave aside the once popular theory that John 20:30–31 was originally the closure of a “signs source,” which the author used in composing his gospel. This theory does not really explain why the author of the present gospel chose to express the purpose of his work with these words.

which were not included in this gospel. These affirmations can be taken as indications of an awareness that there existed other versions of the story of Jesus, but they also imply that there is more information about Jesus which the reader can obtain either from the author or the community in which the gospel was produced.

In addition, it is stated in John 20:30–31 that the purpose of the selection of Jesus' signs offered in the gospel is to create (or sustain) faith in him. This is, in fact, an odd closure to a gospel in which faith based upon the miracles of Jesus is seriously questioned. The hermeneutical dilemma becomes especially vexing if one compares the conclusion in John 20:30–31 with what has been said in John 2:23–24. It was maintained in the latter passage that many in Jerusalem "*believed in his name* because they saw the signs he made." The same expressions are used in John 20:30–31: these things (the signs told in this book) have been written "... so that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, Son of God, and that as believers you may have life *in his name*."²⁰ The point where the two passages differ is that, in John 20:30–31, faith based on miracles is encouraged, whereas it was already in John 2:23–24 affirmed that Jesus found such faith inadequate (cf. also John 4:48).

The gospel, thus, paradoxically invites the reader to have a faith that it deems insufficient. I take this as an indication of the underlying conviction that the gospel, as a written text, can take the reader only so far, to a relatively modest level of understanding, that is, to a faith based on miracles. This may be a good start²¹ but those seeking spiritual progress are in need of additional instruction, which goes beyond what is said in the gospel. Moreover, as the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) shows, faith based on miracles is no guarantee of the student's progress (see below).

The distinction between two levels of insight, which is implied in the concluding paragraph John 20:30–31, is more clearly stated in a number of other passages of John.²² The gospel brings the reader to the same level of insight as where Nathanael is placed in John 1: he believes in Jesus because of a miracle, but Jesus promises him that "you will see greater things than these" (John 1:50). It is not immediately clear whether this

²⁰ Cf. also John 1:12: the license to become the children of God is granted to "those believing in his name."

²¹ Cf. Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72, p. 54.

²² Cf. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*, 267: "Eventual disclosure."

promise refers to the subsequent stories of “greater” miracles in John (like the raising of Lazarus in John 11) or to something that is not told in John. The second promise, that the disciples will see heaven open and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1:51), is even more enigmatic since nothing of the sort is said later in the gospel: it does not contain any elucidation as to the angels mentioned here. This is one of the points where a riddle is posed not only to a character in the narrative but also to the reader in John, and the gospel offers no clear solution to it. For this reason, I am inclined to see in John 1:51 a glimpse of the topics that were to be discussed and clarified orally in an advanced stage of Johannine instruction.

In John 2, it is affirmed that, after the resurrection, the disciples “remembered” and understood what Jesus truly meant with his words (2:22). The reader, however, is at pains to find any evidence of the disciples’ improved insight after the resurrection. However the Beloved Disciple’s faith at Jesus’ empty tomb (20:8) should be understood, it remains curiously ineffective: after having inspected the tomb, he goes home with Peter (20:10). In a further scene, the disciples are portrayed as closet believers: they are hiding behind closed doors because they are afraid of the Jews (20:19). In other words, they are no different from the secret believers, described elsewhere in the gospel (see below). Although Jesus then endows the disciples both with the Spirit and the authority to forgive sins (20:21–23), they still continue to meet each other behind closed doors (20:26), and after the doubtful Thomas finally confesses what seems to be full-blown faith in Jesus (20:28), the disciples go fishing (21:1–14). At no point in the Johannine story does it seem that the disciples really “got it,” as the reader would expect after John 2:22. The only positive indication in this direction is the reference to the death of Peter, which is explained in terms of glorifying God (21:19).

Above all, the veil of secrecy surrounds the Johannine farewell discourse (John 13–17). Jesus states here that what Peter does not yet know he will hereafter (13:7). It becomes clear that Jesus exercises information control not only among his enemies but also among the disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” (John 16:12) What Jesus offers to the disciples in the farewell discourse is teaching “in riddles (*ἐν παροιμίαις*),” as opposed to one delivered in the form of “plain speaking (*ἐν παρρησίᾳ*).” That the plain teaching is reserved for a later time (John 16:25) clearly indicates a separation between two distinct levels of instruction. If one believes what the disciples say in response to Jesus, the promised time of greater maturity takes place immediately: they

realize that “now you are speaking plainly and are not talking any kind of riddles” (16:29). Yet Jesus’ biting remark (“Is it now that you believe?”), followed by his prediction that the disciples will soon leave him alone (John 16:31–32), warns against taking at face value the disciples’ self-styled claim to finally understanding Jesus.²³

As for the teaching taking place in the future, Jesus makes a promise that this will be taken care of by the Spirit of truth, who “will guide you into the whole truth” and will reveal “to you the things that are to come.” (16:13) As far as the literary setting goes, however, the Spirit teaches nothing in the Gospel of John since the Spirit enters the scene only where the story told in the gospel ends. The reader is left with the impression that the disciples, who were endowed with the Spirit, are in possession of knowledge about “the things that are to come,” but the gospel does not purport to disclose the contents of this knowledge.²⁴ Disparity of knowledge, thus, is not only maintained in relation to the characters in the Johannine story, but it is also extended to the reader. Although the reader, guided by the author, is more knowledgeable about certain things than figures in the story, there are also a number of issues where the gospel exercises information control over the reader, thus creating demand for more advanced teaching.

Rebirth Misunderstood

One of the private discussions in John is the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. The secret nature of their conversation is emphasized by the fact that the discussion takes place “by night” (3:2), which may lend an aura of dubious religious activity to the scene.²⁵ In John’s

²³ For a more positive understanding of the dialogue between the disciples and Jesus in John 16:29–31, see David Brakke, “Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the *Apocryphon of James*,” *J ECS* 7 (1999): 187–218, p. 200, who does not take the words of Jesus as a question (“Is it now that you believe?”) but as a statement (“Now you believe”). That would be at odds with other similar dialogues, where Jesus does not make much of the signs of budding insight among his followers (e.g., John 6:66–70; 11:39–40). As Brakke (*ibid.*) points out, the scene in John 16:29–31 “is hardly the definitive moment in which the disciples at last evidence full faith in Jesus . . .”

²⁴ It is, of course, possible that the author conceived of some teachings in the gospel as going back to the instruction the disciples (or later Christians) received from the Holy Spirit after the resurrection. This claim, however, is made nowhere in John.

²⁵ Philo’s criticism of those initiated into the mysteries was that they “despise the truth and pursue things which have taken night and darkness for their province, discarding what is fit to bear the light of day.” Philo also wonders why the initiated, instead of

narrative world, one motivation for the secret meeting is the threat, described later in the gospel, that “the Jews” expel from the synagogue all those who confess that Jesus is Christ (9:22). Nicodemus is introduced as a Pharisee and a Jewish “ruler” (ἄρχων), who believed that Jesus is “from God” (3:1–2). The reader will be later informed that there were many such Jewish leaders who “believed” in Jesus but did not “confess” him because they wanted to avoid expulsion from the synagogue (12:42). The distinction drawn in this latter passage between private “believing” and public “confessing” explains why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night: he represents the secret believers who were reluctant to profess their faith in public.²⁶ In accordance with this picture, Nicodemus reappears in the Johannine story of the burial of Jesus together with Joseph of Arimathea who is described as Jesus’ “hidden disciple because of his fear of the Jews” (19:38).

In John 3, Nicodemus is portrayed as a spokesperson for a larger group: he contends that “*we know* that you are a teacher who has come from God.” (3:2) The “us” could refer to the secret believers among the Jewish leaders, but it also can refer to “the Pharisees.” The reader learns only later that the Pharisees were split in their opinions about Jesus (7:47–52; 9:16). Nicodemus, thus, does not represent the entire group but only one faction. In fact, he is singled out as one who publicly spoke in favor of Jesus to other Pharisees (7:50). In keeping with his role as a secret believer, however, Nicodemus offers a lame defense, which only pertains to the legal procedure, whereas he carefully keeps silent about his faith in Jesus.

Neither the author of the Gospel of John nor the Jesus described in it show any great sympathy for such people. The author supplies the story of Nicodemus with a brief introduction in which it is mentioned that there were many people who believed “in the name of Jesus” because of the miracles he performed, but to whom Jesus “did not entrust himself” (οὐκ ἐπίστευεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς, 2:23–24). Nicodemus is portrayed as an illustration of such people who Jesus did not trust. Jesus, rather, chides Nicodemus

promoting their views “in the midst of the marketplace” remain “in darkness and reserve their benefits for three and four alone.” The dubious nature of mysteries is demonstrated by Philo’s instruction that no Jew be a participant in the mysteries (*Spec. Laws* 1.319–20); cf. Hans G. Kippenberg, “Erstrebenswertes Prestige oder falscher Schein? Das öffentliche Ansehen des Gerechten in jüdisch-frühchristlichen Auseinandersetzungen,” in Kippenberg and Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment*, 203–24, pp. 209–10. Philo, however, was not really consistent in his criticism of mysteries conducted in nighttime (cf. *Somm.* 1.68–119; I owe this point to Risto Auvinen).

²⁶ Cf. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven,” 55.

for his lack of understanding ("Are you a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?" 3:10), and treats him as an unbeliever (3:11–12).

Another reason for the private meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus may be that the topic of their discussion demands secrecy. It has long been noted that the closest parallel to the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus on the necessity of being born "again" or "from above" (the word ἀνωθεν used in John 3:3 has both meanings) comes from the Hermetic tractate *On Being Born Again* (CH XIII).²⁷ In this tractate, rebirth is singled out as an issue that can be taught and properly understood only at an advanced level of instruction. This means information control in two ways. First, what rebirth really means can be taught only to a chosen few. What the student ("Tat") has learned at earlier stages of instruction is only that one cannot be saved without being born again (cf. John 3:3). To receive further clarification from the teacher (Hermes Trismegistos), the student must be prepared and "become alienated from the world." The proper understanding of rebirth, thus, belongs to the final steps on "the way of Hermes." Second, the divine revelation about rebirth is secret teaching. The "hymn of rebirth" Hermes teaches to Tat is "a secret kept in silence" (CH XIII, 16). Accordingly, at the closure of the dialogue, Hermes urges Tat "to be silent about this miracle . . . and reveal the tradition of rebirth to no one" (CH XIII, 22; cf. also CH XIII, 8, 13). If such traditions were in circulation when the Gospel of John was written, it would not have struck one as particularly odd that rebirth is a topic reserved for a private discussion conducted by night.

Affinities between CH XIII and John 3 invite further comparison. In fact, the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus looks like a small piece of Hermetic revelation dialogue. In both texts, it is taken for granted that salvation requires rebirth: ". . . no one can be saved before being born again" (CH XIII, 1) / ". . . unless one is born again, one cannot see the

²⁷ For thorough analyses, see C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 44–52, and William C. Grese, "'Unless One Is Born Again': The Use of a Heavenly Journey in John 3," *JBL* 107 (1988): 677–693, pp. 681–84; cf. also idem, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (SCHNT 5; Leiden: Brill, 1979), e.g., 56–7, 78. For affinities between John and Hermetica, see also, e.g., Harold W. Attridge, "Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 121 (2002): 3–21, p. 9, and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 206–7 (on John 3). In my quotations of the tractates in the Corpus Hermeticum, I follow the English translation by 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).

kingdom of God" (John 3:3).²⁸ What is more, the student experiences, in both cases, great difficulties in trying to understand the divine revealer's teaching about rebirth. It may not be a great surprise after what is said in John 2:23–25 that Nicodemus fails miserably, but it is striking that Tat, after being so carefully prepared, does not fare much better. He is constantly frustrated at his lack of understanding,²⁹ complains that Hermes speaks in riddles (CH XIII, 2), and insists that he deserves straight and clear answers as to how one can be born again (CH XIII, 3).

Nevertheless, the dialogue between Hermes and Tat gradually leads to a positive outcome: Tat gets to know how rebirth can take place (CH XIII, 10), he is taught how to praise "the one who created everything" (CH XIII, 17–18), and he is even able to compose a little prayer to God, which, despite its brevity shows that he's now got it (CH XIII, 21). In comparison to the way things are wrapped up in CH XIII, the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus seems rather like a *failed* attempt at instruction: Nicodemus even fails to understand the basic point that rebirth is necessary (3:4)—a point from which Tat's inquiry begins! While Tat progresses from ignorance to insight, Nicodemus only remains perplexed,³⁰ concluding his part of the dialogue with the question: "How can these things be?" (3:9).

²⁸ It is commonly acknowledged that the words of Jesus in John 3:3, 5 are based upon the more traditional saying of Jesus attested in Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17 ("Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child cannot enter it"), and, in a different form, in Matthew 18:3 ("Unless you convert and become like children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven"). John 3:5 is closer to the traditional saying insofar as it speaks of *entering* the kingdom of God. The version in Justin, *First Apology* 61.4 ("Unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven") is probably a conflation of the different forms of the saying in John and Matthew; thus Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 325–8.

That John 3:3 speaks about *seeing* the kingdom of God (instead of entering it) probably goes back to Wisdom 10:10, where it is said that Wisdom "showed" to the righteous person "the kingdom of God, and gave him knowledge of holy things." Because this passage refers to the story of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:10–22), it has been argued that *seeing* the kingdom of God in John 3:3 refers to Jewish traditions of heavenly journeys. Since such journeys are, according to John, possible only for Jesus (e.g., 3:13), Meeks ("The Man from Heaven," 52–53) concludes that "that 'the one born from above/from the spirit' can only be the Son of Man, Jesus." But why should Jesus be *born* from above? This idea does not seem to be attested elsewhere in John. (It is *not* identical with the claim that Jesus "*comes* from above," as stated in John 3:31.) In addition, Meeks's theory fits ill with John 3:8, where Jesus speaks of "*everyone* who is born from spirit."

²⁹ "I am entirely at a loss", "You have driven me quite mad, father," "I have gone mad," CH XIII, 2, 4, 6.

³⁰ Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77. Scholars are divided over the issue whether other passages in John mentioning Nicodemus imply his progress in faith or not; for a recent discussion of different positions, see Raimo Hakola, "The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social

Rebirth itself is imagined differently in John 3 and CH XIII. What takes place during rebirth, according to the latter, is the complete change of one's mindset which results in a new way of looking at the world. Prior to rebirth, Tat's inner self is subject to twelve "torments," which are mental states and dispositions (e.g., ignorance, pain, envy, desire, greed and anger). Rebirth takes place when God provides the student with ten powers (e.g., knowledge, joy, perseverance) that drive away the mind's twelve torments for good. After this, the student's mind becomes filled with truth, goodness, life and light (CH XIII, 9–10), and he no longer sees with his physical eyes but with his "mind's eye" (14). Rebirth, thus, is envisioned in intellectual terms; the only "ritual" involved is the hymn of praise to be presented in honor of the creator-God (17–18).

Jesus in John 3 is far less specific as to what happens in rebirth. One learns that, as a spiritual birth, rebirth is contrasted to physical birth (3:6), and that the origin and goal of the reborn person remain unknown (at least to Nicodemus, 3:8). Moreover, ritual plays a role in rebirth: it is a birth "from water and the Spirit" (3:5). This implies that baptism plays a role in rebirth,³¹ although it is not explained how. This point separates John from CH XIII where a baptismal ritual is not connected with rebirth. However, the combination of water, spirit, and intellectual rebirth occurs in the so-called *Mithras Liturgy* (PGM IV. 475–820), which "seems to reflect an early or nascent Hermeticism of the first and the second century C.E."³² One crucial difference between the *Mithras Liturgy* and the treatises in *Corpus Hermeticum* is precisely that the former invests "in the actual practice of ritual," while the latter "drop the ritual and fully internalize and spiritualize

Identity of the Johannine Christians," *NTS* 55 (2009): 438–55, pp. 439–45. As Hakola points out, the negative view that leaves Nicodemus completely in the dark is regularly connected with the "two-level" reading of the Gospel of John as indirectly describing the persecution of the Johannine Christians by the Jews. This scenario is historically untenable; for a sweeping critique of it, see Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 41–86. Nevertheless, it still seems to me that there are enough textual indicators demonstrating that, in the Johannine story world, Nicodemus is one of the secret believers.

³¹ The baptismal allusion in John 3:5 was questioned by Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted in Its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1968 [orig. Uppsala, 1929]), 67. Odeberg contended that the expression "from water" "contains no allusion to baptism," and was rather inclined to see in John 3:5 an allusion to "celestial waters" and the like, but there is little evidence for them elsewhere in John.

³² Hans-Dieter Betz, Introduction to *The "Mithras Liturgy": Text, Translation, and Commentary* (STAC 18; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 37. This is also the edition I have relied on in my references to this text.

the religion.”³³ In the *Mithras Liturgy*, rebirth is the mind’s transformation, just as in CH XIII (“that I may be born again mentally,” νοήματι μεταγεν[ν]-ηθῶ, ll. 508–9), but it is also conceived of as taking place “by means of immortal water” (τῷ ἀθανάτῳ ὕδατι, l. 506).³⁴

Moreover, just like in John 3, rebirth is in the *Mithras Liturgy* intrinsically linked with the spirit. The request “that I may be born again in thought” is followed by the words “and the holy spirit may breathe in me” (καὶ πνεύσῃ ἐν ἐμοὶ τὸ ἱερὸν πνεῦμα, l. 510). (Being filled with the spirit is especially important in the *Mithras Liturgy* because at different points of ascension one needs to “draw in breath” in order to be lifted up, ll. 540–41, 629.) In other words, the ritualistic understanding of rebirth in John 3 stands closer to an older form of Hermeticism, which was probably prevalent when the Gospel of John was written, than to the full-blown spiritualized understanding of rebirth in CH XIII.

While the Hermetic parallels from CH XIII and the *Mithras Liturgy* illustrate the intellectual background of the discussion on rebirth in John 3, it is far from clear what the reader should gather from the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. The author frames the story of Nicodemus with the remark that Jesus “did not entrust himself” to the likes of Nicodemus (2:24). I take this expression to mean that these people, unlike the disciples (John 15:13–15), are not true friends of Jesus in whom he could confide.³⁵ In the Johannine story world, the crucial difference between the untrustworthy secret believers, whom Nicodemus probably represents in John 3, and the trustworthy disciples is that the former want to avoid expulsion from the synagogue, whereas the latter are not only going to be expelled from the synagogue but will also face the danger of being killed (16:2).³⁶ The remark in John 2:24 lends an aura of mistrust to the entire dialogue in John 3. This, in turn, raises the question of how seriously Jesus is engaged in the conversation with Nicodemus in the first place. Does

³³ Ibid. 36.

³⁴ As Dodd points out, the language of baptism is also used in CH IV, 4, where the student is instructed to immerse himself in a “mixing bowl” that God has sent below. In this passage, however, the student is at once taught that “baptism” should be understood purely spiritually: it is immersion “in mind,” and it is reserved only for those who have acquired “knowledge” and have become “perfect ones.” However, baptism as a rite of purification plays a role in Hermetic traditions outside the *Corpus Hermeticum*; cf. Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, 134–5.

³⁵ For “entrusting oneself” as a sign of friendship, see, e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 3.

³⁶ Cf. also the portrayal of Lazarus in John 11–12, whom Jesus calls “our friend” (11:11; cf. 11:3, 5, 35), and whom the Jewish priests, according to John 12:10, sought to kill.

Jesus *really* mean what he says about rebirth, or does he only make the remark to taunt Nicodemus?

If one takes into account the aforementioned Hermetic parallels, the dialogue in John 3 not only looks like an instance of *failed* Hermetic instruction but it also looks like a *parody* of Hermetic revelation dialogue:³⁷ while the student is led to improved understanding in Hermetic treatises, Nicodemus is led nowhere in John 3. A reader familiar with Hermetic tradition might also recognize the irony that Jesus *starts* his instruction with rebirth since in the Hermetic tradition, rebirth can be adequately taught only to those who are already at the *final* stage of instruction and who, like Tat in CH XIII, have taken the specific measures of preparation. From this perspective, Nicodemus, who seems totally unprepared for learning about rebirth, is not at all an ideal student for Jesus' teaching. It is, thus, no wonder that he is so perplexed about it.

The way the dialogue proper is closed in John 3 only adds to the problem: "If I told you (pl.) about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (John 3:12)³⁸ This saying bears witness to a distinction between two levels of instruction, but it is not immediately clear how the distinction relates to the previous discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. Has the entire discussion been about "earthly things," or does this designation refer to some parts of it (e.g., what Jesus says about "flesh," 3:6, or the way Jesus describes the

³⁷ Cf. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven," 57 (yet without reference to CH XIII, which is conspicuously absent in his otherwise well-documented discussion of John 3): "Thus the dialogue with Nicodemus and its postscript connected with John the Baptist constitute a virtual parody of a revelation discourse."

³⁸ The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 ends with Jesus' enigmatic saying in John 3:12 (cf. Grese, "Unless One is Born Again," 677). After that, Nicodemus simply disappears from the scene: Jesus no longer addresses him, and the author does not mention him again before John 7. However, Jesus "disappears" as well: he no longer refers to himself in the first person after this point, and what is said in John 3:13–21 does not clearly build upon the dialogue in John 3:1–12. Therefore, in contrast to the usual interpretation (e.g., Grese, *ibid.*), the following passage (John 3:13–21) does not even look like a monologue of Jesus that develops the themes addressed in the dialogue. Instead, what is offered in this passage is a more general reflection on Johannine themes. This passage is, in my view, similar to John 3:31–36, which is usually considered an independent passage that is not intended as part of John the Baptist's response to his disciples (3:27–30). The composition looks similar in both cases: the dialogue proper ends with a teacher's saying (3:12 / 3:30), and is followed by a passage that rehearses basic themes of Johannine theology without any clear connection to the preceding dialogue. Moreover, the closure of the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus with an enigmatic saying recalls the way the dialogue between Jesus and Nathanael is ended in John 1:47–51. This discussion also ends with two obscure sayings whose meaning the author does not explain to the reader (1:50–51).

blowing of the wind to illustrate how the things are with those born of the Spirit, 3:8)?

One solution that can be supported with some other passages in John is that the “earthly things” refer to the “water” linked with rebirth. It is striking that Jesus first mentions both “water” and “spirit” in connection with rebirth (3:5), but then drops “water” and speaks of those “born of the Spirit” (3:8). If water denotes baptism here, it seems that this “material” aspect of rebirth is less important than the spiritual aspect.

Such emphasis on “the Spirit” at the expense of “water” fits well with John 4, where the Johannine Jesus promotes a completely spiritualized view of worship:³⁹ he declares the *place* of worship as completely unimportant since “God is spirit and the worshippers must worship him in spirit and truth” (4:19–24). Moreover, in John 6, the reader is left with a mixed message concerning another ritual, the eucharist. Here Jesus first insists that only those who “gnaw the flesh of the Son of Man” and drink his “blood” abide with him, will be resurrected, and will live forever (6:51–58). Instead of trying to downplay cannibalistic images linked with the eucharist, Jesus chooses expressions that amplify them.⁴⁰ He also promises present and future salvation only to those who participate in the eucharist. Only a few lines later, however, Jesus professes to the same, full-blown spiritualized understanding as in John 4: he teaches that “it is the Spirit that brings about life,” and adds that “the flesh is of no use” (6:63).

Any careful reader would probably find the statement in John 6:63 perplexing since it undermines everything that has just been said about the flesh of the Son of Man in John 6:51–58. While this dilemma has often been resolved with source-critical operations (in which John 6:51–58 is usually ascribed to a later editor), it may also be explained in terms of two different levels of instruction. It is described how some disciples of Jesus became offended at his teaching about eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man. It would seem almost unavoidable that some in the audience are offended at Jesus’ cannibalistic language in John 6:51–58, but the claim that the offended ones were his disciples sounds more surprising. Jesus responds to these disciples with an *a posteriori* argument similar to the one he used in John 1:50–51: “Does this offend you? (How much more offended would you be) if you see the Son of Man

³⁹ Cf. Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger*, 135.

⁴⁰ This is most recently demonstrated by J. Albert Harrill, “Cannibalistic Language in the Fourth Gospel and Greco-Roman Polemics of Factionalism,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 133–58.

ascending to where he was before?" (John 6:62) Jesus' response implies that his teaching about consuming the eucharist is only an initial step, yet the reaction of the offended disciples is similar to that of Nicodemus in John 3: they are unable to grasp even the elementary teaching about the eucharist, so they are utterly incapable of taking the subsequent step where they can recognize that the flesh is not at all important.

Wisdom Misunderstood

It has now become customary to argue that the Johannine misunderstandings, based upon ambiguity of terms, should be understood in connection with a Johannine in-group language. Jesus poses "riddles," which the in-group members are able to decode, whereas outsiders are left in the dark. Thus, the argument goes, the riddles in John establish a social boundary between insiders (those "in the know") and outsiders (those "not in the know").⁴¹ Moreover, it is usually assumed that the implied reader of the Gospel of John is one of the insiders. For example, Neyrey suggests that, in John, "footnotes and asides are provided for select knowers, namely, insiders."⁴² Meeks proposes a similar understanding of John's implied audience:

It is a book for insiders, for if one already belonged to the Johannine community, then we may presume that the manifold bits of tradition that have taken distinctive form in the Johannine circle would be familiar, the "cross-references" in the book—so frequently anachronistic within the fictional sequence of events—would be immediately recognizable, the double entendre which produces mystified and stupid questions from the fictional dialogue partners (and from many modern commentators) would be acknowledged by a knowing and superior smile.⁴³

⁴¹ The study by Herbert Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (BBB 30; Bonn, 1968), is groundbreaking in this approach to Johannine misunderstandings and riddles. For more recent studies adopting the same perspective, see, in addition to the examples mentioned in the main text, Brakke, "Parables and Plain Speech," 194; Tom Thatcher, *The Riddles of Jesus in John: A Study in Tradition and Folklore* (SBLMS 53; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), e.g., 180: "If the riddlee is not a member of this group or subgroup, and therefore does not have access to this prerequisite knowledge, she will not be able to answer the riddle. . . . 'Insiders' will be equipped to understand the desired answer."

⁴² Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*, 266.

⁴³ Meeks, "The Man from Heaven," 70. Meeks (*ibid.* 53) constructs a similar "insider" response for the gospel's portrayal of Nicodemus "whose maladroit questions provide the

Meeks concludes from this that “one of the primary functions” of the Gospel of John “must have been to provide a reinforcement for the community’s social identity.”⁴⁴

The view that the reader of the Gospel of John is an insider capable of understanding the gospel’s double entendre and irony must, however, be qualified in light of the fact that the author occasionally resorts to explicit commentary. If the author could rely on the reader’s understanding of ambiguous expressions, there would be no need for Jesus to explain to Nicodemus how rebirth really takes place, or for the narrator to explain that in speaking of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple, Jesus meant his own body, and that, in saying that Lazarus had fallen asleep, Jesus meant that Lazarus was dead. In my view, the picture of a reader emerging from the narrative asides of this kind is of one who is *not* supposed to understand the Johannine double entendres—at least, not yet.⁴⁵

Herbert Leroy has correctly pointed out that there are two sets of themes to which misunderstandings are most often related in John. The first set pertains to rituals and cult (baptism, John 3:3–5; the place of worship, John 4:19–24; eucharist, John 6:51–65; washing the disciples’ feet, John 13:1–20); it was argued above that the Gospel of John can be adduced as evidence for a spiritualization of these themes. The second set is related to Jesus’ departure, accompanied with his sayings about “lifting up” the Son of Man (John 3:14) and those about seeking and not finding him. For example, the narrator informs the reader that the “lifting up” means the crucifixion (John 12:33), but Jesus’ interlocutors apparently fail to understand this connection (12:34). That “being lifted up” means crucifixion is not really a distinctly Johannine double entendre: “the pun was evidently a common one, in Greek as well as in Semitic languages.”⁴⁶ This implies that a Jewish audience *should* have easily understood what Jesus meant.

occasion (a) for the reader to feel superior and (b) for the sage who is questioned to deliver a discourse.”

⁴⁴ Meeks, “The Man from Heaven,” 70.

⁴⁵ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 164, also suggests that the “most obvious function” of the misunderstandings in John “is to enforce a marked distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ between those who understand Jesus and those who do not.” However, his slight modification to that view brings his interpretation closer to the reading I am proposing here: “Explanations of the misunderstandings draw the reader farther into the circle of ‘insiders.’” (*ibid.*) This formulation brings to fore the dynamic aspect of the Johannine implied reader: the implied reader is not simply “an insider” or “an outsider” but can be conceived of as one expected to progress from one stage to another.

⁴⁶ Meeks, “The Man from Heaven,” 62.

In a similar manner, one would expect of the Jewish interlocutors a better grasp of Jesus' words about seeking and not finding. It should appear quite obvious to them that the saying in John 7:34 ("You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am you cannot come") identifies Jesus with God's Wisdom, described in Proverbs 1:28 ("The evil ones will search for me but will not find me"). This association, however, escapes the Jewish interlocutors. They are portrayed as having no clue whatsoever as to what Jesus meant by these words (7:35–38). The same pattern of failure to identify the source is repeated in John 8:21–22: Jesus describes himself in terms stemming from Jewish portrayals of Wisdom ("You will search for me, but you will die in your sin"; cf. Prov 24:9: "the fool dies in sins"), and yet the Jews fail to make the connection, being only puzzled as to whether Jesus is going to kill himself.⁴⁷

In such passages, the Jews are portrayed, not as incapable of understanding the special jargon of Johannine Christians, but as having a poor grasp of their own tradition.⁴⁸ Hence, the command of an ingroup language or the lack thereof may not be a decisive issue in Johannine misunderstandings after all. As the comments of Peter and Thomas show, the "insiders" in the narrative are no less baffled than the Jews at Jesus' words about his departure (13:14–14:7). There is no dramatic difference either between the way the Samaritan woman confuses "the living water" with normal water (John 4:10–15), the way the Jews confuse the "living bread" with normal bread (John 6:26, 34), and the way Nicodemus assumes that Jesus is speaking of physical birth in John 3. The different outcomes of these dialogues—the Samaritan woman is led to insight while Nicodemus and the Jews are not—do not depend on the characters' capacity to understand double entendre.

Conclusion

Based upon the final point in the previous analysis, my suggestion is that it is not "esoteric" in-group language that creates the boundary between insiders and outsiders in John; the insiders also fail to understand Jesus,

⁴⁷ For the affinities between the Johannine sayings of seeking and finding and Jewish Wisdom traditions, see especially Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständnis*, 53–61.

⁴⁸ The same tendency is visible in John 7:19–24, where Jesus justifies his healing activity on Sabbath with reference to two ordinances of Jewish law, one of which (circumcision on the eighth day) supersedes the other (keeping the Sabbath).

and the outsiders are presented in this gospel as those who should have understood but did not. In the Johannine story world, it is no coincidence that the Jews fail to perceive links posed between Jesus and Wisdom; their ignorance in this regard only illustrates the point made in the prologue that the divine Wisdom (called “Word” not only in John 1:1–18 but also by Philo) was rejected by his “own ones” (οἱ ἴδιοι, 1:10).

What does then create the boundary between insiders and outsiders in John, if their responses to Jesus are quite similar? The answers offered in John are heavily on the deterministic side: the choice is based upon Jesus’ knowledge of who belongs to which side (John 2:23–25; 10:26–27); upon his will to cause to live those he chooses (5:21), and upon one’s being “drawn” by the Father (6:44).

It should be noted, however, that while most characters in the Johannine story demonstrate lack of understanding, the *possibility* of spiritual progress is engraved in the narrative through characters moving from ignorance to insight regarding the true identity of Jesus. These figures include John the Baptist (1:31; 3:27–30),⁴⁹ Nathanael (John 1:43–51), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42), the man born blind (John 9:1–38), and doubting Thomas (20:24–28).⁵⁰ While it is not clear how far each of these characters advances on the Johannine ladder of understanding, the idea that progress is possible is especially important, if the Gospel of John is understood as an exoteric writing, functioning as an invitation to (rather than expression of) fuller insight.

In John, Jesus alone is portrayed as the one who knows everything but who does not let himself be known by all people (2:23–25). This portrayal recalls Paul’s description of the spiritual Christian, who “discerns all things, but is not subject to anyone’s scrutiny” (1 Cor 2:15). The crucial difference between John and Paul is, however, that a quality Paul attributes to a group of Christians is in John confined to Jesus.⁵¹ John, thus, seems far less “democratic” than Paul at this point.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger*, 99–100.

⁵⁰ Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*, 274–5, also mentions Martha as an example of progressing characters but this view is problematic. Although she professes full-blown faith in John 11:27, Martha demonstrates lack of confidence in Jesus at Lazarus’ tomb, which Jesus points out to her (John 11:39–40).

⁵¹ In a similar manner, John also offers a restricted understanding of the divine light: while it was Hellenistic Jewish commonplace to argue that the light of God resides in all descendants of Adam, it is claimed in John that this light resides only in Jesus; cf. Elaine Pagels, “Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 477–96.

However, this is not the entire picture of the Johannine pedagogy. As was pointed out above, the person born of the Spirit is in John described in a manner that makes him or her similar to Jesus: just as the Jews do not know where Jesus comes from or goes, it is maintained in John 3:6 that it cannot be known where one born of spirit comes from and goes (3:6). The boundary between Jesus and those born of the Spirit is thus blurred in John. The same tendency is more explicit in the Johannine epistles. There is a clear tendency in 1 John that “ideas that are said of Jesus in the gospel are presented as characteristics of all those who believe.”⁵² Among other things, the language used in 1 John suggests that Johannine Christians approved, at least in theory, of the Pauline idea that Christians can achieve a level of insight where they no longer need to be taught by anyone: “You have the anointing from the Holy One, and you all are in the know . . . as for you, the anointing you received from him abides in you and you are not in need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, is truthful and not deception, and as it taught you, abide in him.” (1 John 2:20, 27.)⁵³

Although these sentences are certainly part of the author’s attempt to persuade the audience to his side by gentle flattery, the claims he makes presuppose a context where such claims were known and accepted as being true; otherwise, the author would have had little point to resort to the whole idea of divine instruction. Hence, I gather from this passage that it hints at subsequent “steps” a Johannine initiate could take towards spiritual perfection—after having first entered the “novice” level, where the gospel seeks to bring its readers. Entering the more advanced levels may have brought elucidation to the classical *aporiae* posed by the gospel, including the statements that eating the flesh of the Son of Man is absolutely essential for salvation and yet the flesh is of no use at all (John 6:51–58, 63), and that the time of raising the dead will arrive, is already here, and yet will take place in the future (John 5:24–29). At least in cases like these, the *aporiae* should not necessarily be understood as traces left

⁵² Raimo Hakola, “The Reception and Development of the Johannine Tradition in 1, 2, and 3 John,” in *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (ed. Tuomas Rasimus; NovTSup 132; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 17–47, pp. 25–26.

⁵³ My translation of 1 John 2:20 follows the reading οἶδατε πάντες, preferred in NA, 27th ed. (The NRSV translation “all of you have knowledge” seems misleading to me.) The alternative reading οἶδατε πάντα (“you know all things”) is also well attested (esp. A and C) and would fit well with the idea of a higher status attributed to some Christians. Hence, it seems extremely difficult to decide with certainty which of the two readings is closer to the original.

behind by a clumsy redactor but as pedagogical devices creating demand for additional instruction offered by Johannine teachers.

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LIVING IN TOMBS:
THE SECRET OF AN EARLY CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

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Tombs are meant to receive dead bodies, but not all bodies residing in them are necessarily dead. Human beings are occasionally buried alive for punishment, as was the Roman custom with transgressing vestal virgins, or even by mistake, as was popularised by the Greek novels *Chaereas and Calliroe* and *An Ephesian Tale*. Fugitives, runaways, desperate homeless or outcasts might also seek refuge in graveyards. Such cases, also popularised by the novel *A Babylonian Story*, must have been widespread in the Mediterranean world, as the Psalmist seems to imply (Ps 67:7 LXX). According to the Gospels, a tomb was likely to become the only available shelter for a destitute demented person (Mark 5:3). It was, however, mainly Christian ascetics, men and women, who, starting from the late third century, chose to live inside burial places abandoning families and regular homes on their own accord and without any apparent necessity. Most of them were inhabitants of Egypt, both natives and Greeks, but imitators are known from other provinces of the Roman Empire as well.¹ By the late sixth century, many Christians in Egypt had settled permanently in ancient necropoleis, transforming them into monasteries.²

Christian ascetics who chose to live in tombs wished to cut off themselves from the civilised world and to be forgotten by relatives and friends.³ But they did not lead a life of total isolation. They had to make arrangements for regular provisions, while their habitation was occasionally widely known and frequented by visitors. Their behaviour was admired by many of their contemporaries and praised by biographers. Nevertheless,

¹ For Syria see Theodoret, *Religious History* 12.2. For other examples, see below.

² Elisabeth R. O'Connell, "Transforming Monumental Landscapes in Late Antique Egypt: Monastic Dwellings in Legal Documents from Western Thebes," *J ECS* 2 (2007): 239–73.

³ Although the literary evidence tends to report mostly extreme forms of exercise, the great majority of monks in fourth and fifth century Egypt tended to live in monasteries within the inhabitant zones, often transforming deserted villages into ascetic places of habitation. See James E. Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt," *HTR* 89/3 (1996): 267–85.

they all had to spend long hours, day after day and month after month, sometimes for many years, meditating and praying unceasingly without any human comfort or contact.⁴

Such practices have normally been considered as extreme examples of Christian self-discipline. Since the mortification of the body in the hope of obtaining angelic substance while still upon earth was the declared aim of all monks, the idea of self-burial appears almost as self-evident and, consequently, has not attracted special attention. Asked why he treated his body so harshly, an early Christian ascetic replied: "I am killing it because it is killing me."⁵

Living in graves must have served other purposes as well, reminding recluses of their mortal nature. "Shut yourself in a tomb," one of the desert fathers is reported to have advised his fellow-monks, "as though you were already dead, so that at all times you will think death is near."⁶ It is furthermore conceivable that hermits who inhabited cemeteries had in mind Jesus' promise regarding the resurrection. As they had all read in the Gospel, the hour was approaching when the dead would hear the voice of the Son of God. Residents of graves were expected to hear it first and lead the way (John 5:25–8; cf. 1 Thess 4:15–7). It was thus easy to draw the conclusion that tombs were really privileged locations, making their inhabitants more perceptive than others. It was after all by Jesus' sepulchre that the pious women were encouraged by an angel to abandon all fear (Matt 28:1–5).⁷

Further connotations were also available. No early Christian could forget that an empty tomb had served as proof of the resurrection. Significantly, a story circulating about Simon, the so-called Magus, clearly associated temporal burial with claims to immortality. To prove his divine nature, Simon was said to have asked his disciples to bury him alive. Unfortunately his expectation to rise upon the third day failed, as the story goes, for he was not the Christ.⁸ Some courageous Christians were evidently hoping to

⁴ Cf. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 3.

⁵ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 2.2. On developing ideas of the body in antiquity see Anthony Synnott, "Tomb, Temple, Machine and Self: The Social Construction of the Body," *BJS* 43/1 (1992): 83–89.

⁶ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (trans. Benedicta Ward; London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1984), John the Dwarf 34.

⁷ Cf. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 37.

⁸ Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 6.15. Cf. Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, "The Holy Man and the Sorcerer or How to Distinguish between Good and Evil in Early Christianity," in *Esorcizzare il Male. Credenze e superstizioni a Bisanzio* (Atene: Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, 2006), 38–39.

prove themselves superior to Simon. By living in tombs they were expecting to rise up, transformed and regenerated.

Mortification of the body, as most early Christian ascetics understood it, was clearly an idea far removed from committing suicide and entombment a practice far removed from totally despising life upon earth. On the contrary, despite the harsh conditions of living, most of the holy recluses are said to have achieved longevity—some reaching the advanced age of a hundred years or more. Interestingly, as the stories told suggest, tombs were only rarely chosen as permanent and final places for habitation. After shorter or longer periods of voluntary self-burial, the recluses would normally continue their exercises outside the graveyards, in the desert, up on the mountains, or wherever they thought best. Dying inside a tomb has been reported as an extreme rarity. Such was the case of Alexandra, who had lived confined for ten years, being apparently motivated by a very severe sense of guilt. But even she received visitors constantly and, besides praying and meditating, kept working inside her tomb.⁹ Similar was also the case of a sinful young man who lived in a tomb for the rest of his life, repenting for all his previous sins. He also excited admiration and worked miracles, leading a great number of people to virtuous lives.¹⁰ Mourning for the loss of his beloved fellow traveller, with whom he had planned to visit Sinai, seems to have prompted a pious pilgrim to spend the rest of his life inside a self-made grave-like pit.¹¹ However, most practitioners of this extreme way of living appear to have had different aspirations.

Inhabiting tombs must have been seen, in many cases, as a form of initiation rather than premature interment—a symbolic death leading to a better earthly life. Much like the pagan mystery initiations that were meant to conquer the fear of death,¹² the ascetic exercise was in all likelihood mainly meant to establish, besides, direct contact with God. It appears to have been a second baptism appropriate for a special kind of believers.¹³

Of the illustrious Anthony, who is reported to have inaugurated the practice, it was said that having lived isolated in a deserted fortress for

⁹ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 5.

¹⁰ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (trans. Norman Russell; London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1980), John of Lycopolis 1.37–43.

¹¹ Theodoret, *Religious History* 6.7 ff.

¹² See Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 89–114, especially p. 97 on initiations to Isis.

¹³ The idea that the Christian baptism was an initiation to death was clearly expressed by Paul in Rom 6:4.

nearly twenty years, he “came forth as though from a shrine, initiated in the mysteries (*memustagōgemenos*) and filled with the Spirit of God.”¹⁴ In similar fashion, having spent years of meditation inside a tomb, he came very close to exclaiming, just like a pagan initiate: “I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpine’s threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the under-world and the gods of the upper-world, stood near and worshipped them.”¹⁵ Indeed, Anthony’s life inside a grave may serve as a case study to illuminate the nature of this most strenuous experience.

* * *

Early in his career, Anthony, as we are told by his learned biographer Athanasius, departed to the tombs, which happened to be at some distance from his village.¹⁶ Having bid one of his acquaintances to provide him with bread at intervals of many days, he entered one of the tombs and remained within it alone. Readers of his *Life* are informed neither about his motives nor about his prospects. They are provided, however, with an interesting hint. According to a suggestion of his biographer, Anthony was adopting the life ways of his prototype and hero Elijah, who had lived in the desert as well as in caves.¹⁷ If Anthony and other early Christian ascetics had indeed such a Biblical prophet in mind, then, as should be inferred, they were hoping not merely to punish their bodies, but to make their senses more alert than was normal. Their aim would have been to hear the Lord’s voice and to converse with him in a most direct manner. (A purified soul, Anthony is reported to have argued, is able to become clear-sighted, and to see farther in distance and in time even than demons.¹⁸) In this way, they could hope to become the Lord’s agents and friends, according to the terminology of the period.¹⁹

¹⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 14. My translations are adaptations from *Life of Antony, Select Writings of Athanasius* (trans. Henry Ellershaw; NPNF II/4; Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1924; repr., 1957), and *Athanasius, The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (trans. Robert C. Gregg; CWS; London: SPCK, 1980).

¹⁵ Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 11.23.6–8 (trans. Robert Graves; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1950).

¹⁶ Doubts about the authorship of the *Life* do not significantly affect the present arguments.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 7.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 34.

¹⁹ On Anthony’s ascetic career see Philip Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek *Life*,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau;

Whatever his expectation, Anthony's first encounter inside the tomb was not with the Lord but with evil spirits. Enraged with such daring behaviour, the demons of the area were provoked, as readers are told, and paid him a visit one night. They whipped him so harshly that he was at last left on the ground speechless. As he explained later, he felt certain that no human being could have caused such pain and agony. The next day his associate arrived bringing bread. Finding him as though dead, he lifted him up, carried him to the church in the village, and laid him upon the ground. Many of Anthony's kinsfolk as well as regular villagers sat around him, as was customary before the burials of the deceased. But about midnight Anthony came to his senses and arose. Seeing everybody asleep and his comrade alone awake, he motioned with his head for him to approach and asked to be carried again to the tombs without waking anybody.²⁰

The symbolic implication of this narration is pretty obvious. Instead of dying, being mourned and buried, Anthony was first buried alive, then transported from the tomb to the church to be mourned, and finally seen to awake as if from a deep, death-like sleep. Actually, it was his mourners, people who should have remained wakeful, that had lost their vitality. By inverting the natural order of events, the biographer seems to suggest that tombs could lead one from an undiscerning life to a most conscious and perceptive life, since they enabled ascetics to sense what was normally beyond apprehension.

Despite his traumatic experience, Anthony did not feel that his brief confinement had fulfilled its purpose, so he returned to his graveyard. It is to this second phase of isolation that careful attention should be paid, because of the details provided. Buried alive for a second time, the monk had further and more profound encounters with spirits.

* * *

Athanasius has given such a vivid account of Anthony's encounters inside the tomb that he inspired not only pious Christians in East and West, but also poets, novelists, and painters throughout the ages. In spite of his imaginative claims about what may be seen as near death experiences expressed in a somewhat mythical fashion, it is clear that he had captured authentic feelings and genuine experiences. He certainly implies that he

Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 92–95. Cf. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971): 80–101.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 8.

had heard some of the stories from Anthony himself, whom he had known personally. More plausibly he depended upon reports circulating among many of the monk's admirers. But writing more than seventy years after the events, he obviously had to fill in the details from his own imagination. While in hiding during his last exile, he had probably lived inside his own ancestral tomb for about four months. It would therefore be nice to think that his writing about such matters was based upon his own personal experiences as well, it is, however, generally accepted that the *Life* was composed a few years earlier.²¹

Athanasius' imagination was obviously enriched by similar experiences of other ascetics with whom he was in contact. In the following decades several such accounts were actually written down. In a different context, for example, we are told about a young man who had chosen the cemeteries for habitation because of the great sense of guilt he felt. While still alive he incarcerated himself among the tombs, renouncing his previous sinful life and groaning from the depth of his heart. After a week had passed by he encountered demons summoning him to his former debaucheries. But since the demons failed to tempt him with memories of lustful acts, they seized hold of him and tortured his whole body savagely. Having lacerated him and tormented him cruelly, they left him half dead. The same and even worse attacks were repeated for a few more days, until the poor man was left senseless. Exhausted at last, the demons departed crying out loudly that they had been defeated.²²

Whatever his sources, Athanasius reports that Anthony was not satisfied with his achievement during the first, rather brief isolation. As he saw it, he had been attacked by evil spirits who wished to drive him away from the tomb, fearing that the desert would otherwise be filled with imitators. Having gone through an extreme physical and psychical pain he managed to survive, but had failed to deal directly with the cause of his suffering. His ambition could not have been simple survival, but victory over his enemies, exploitation of their weaknesses and elimination of their power.²³ He therefore re-entered the tomb to confront the demons in an even more direct manner.

Anthony and the early hermits could not have been surprised to find out that tombs and graveyards were inhabited by spirits. Similar beliefs were

²¹ Socrates, *Church History* 4.13; Sozomen, *Church History* 6.12.

²² *Lives of the Desert Fathers*: John of Lycopolis 1.37–43.

²³ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 42.

common among pagans and Jews. In order to appease such spirits, pagans would normally offer them libations and even venerate them.²⁴ Some Jews who might have done the same were condemned by Yahweh (Isa 65:4). Few people appear to have been really sceptical. As it is reported, the very exceptional philosopher Democritus attempted experimentally to disprove the existence of disembodied souls. To achieve his objective he once shut himself up in a tomb outside the city gates, spending his nights and days in literary labours, as if the place was perfectly secure. Some youths, wishing to frighten him, got themselves dressed up in black palls and skull-masks, formed a ring round him and treated him to a brisk dance. "Enough of that nonsense" was the philosopher's reply.²⁵ According to another report Democritus "used to practise himself in testing perceptions in various manners; sometimes retiring into solitary places, and spending his time even among tombs." The Greek expression for testing perceptions is *dokimazein tas phantasias*, which could be translated "testing the mental images or visions," but has more precisely the meaning of testing the power of the mind to form objects before itself.²⁶ It therefore appears that Democritus was of the opinion that under the harsh circumstances and strain associated with living inside a tomb, people tend to see images of things that do not actually exist. Anthony and the hermits, just like most of their contemporaries, thought the opposite: Bodiless spirits could become visible and tangible because they were objective realities. It was the obligation of Christians to make them powerless and, if possible, to destroy them.

In order to confront demons, the early Christian ascetics seem to have been inspired by Jesus' example. According to a story that was well known to Anthony, Jesus had once challenged an unclean spirit that had taken possession of a man living at the territory of the Gerasenies (Mark 5:1–20).²⁷ The unfortunate man had found shelter in tombs, fleeing from all those who were trying to control him. He could easily snap the chains and break the fetters with which he was often tied. Spending his nights and

²⁴ See Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 44–69.

²⁵ Lucian, *Liar* 32. My translation is from *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (trans. Henry Watson Fowler and Francis George Fowler; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905).

²⁶ Diogenes Laertius 9.38. My translation is from *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (trans. Charles Duke Yonge; London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).

²⁷ Cf. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 29. For the Gospel account, see Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 210–11. For Biblical quotations I depend on The New Jerusalem Bible.

days among tombs and in the mountains, he would howl and gash himself with stones—in a way that Anthony could understand only too well after the blows he had himself received. As soon as he caught sight of him from a distance, Jesus challenged the spirit to come out of the man. In order to overcome it he tricked it to reveal its name (Legion, representing a multitude of demons) by holding a conversation with it. He then made the spirit plead for its survival and granted it permission to enter the bodies of pigs. Caught inside the body of animals, it was quickly led to its destruction, falling off the cliff and drowning in a lake.

Anthony proceeded with his own experiment in a similar manner. Shut in his tomb for a second time he confronted the evil spirits with the only effective weapon that was available to him: his speech, which he probably recovered the night he spent in the church. After praying, he entered into a dialogue with his enemy shouting: “Here am I, Anthony; I do not flee from your stripes, for even if you inflict more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ.” He then started to sing. The hostile spirits, marvelling at Anthony’s courage to return after such severe blows, called together their hounds and exclaimed: “You see,” they said to them, “that neither by the spirit of lust nor by blows did we stop the man, but that he resists us; so let us attack him in another fashion.”

While it was still dark, the demons, who could evidently take many different forms, made such a din that the whole place seemed to be shaken by an earthquake. As if breaking through the dwelling’s walls, they appeared to enter, visible in the likeness of beasts and reptiles. The building was all of a sudden filled with the apparitions of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves, each moving according to its nature.²⁸ The lion was roaring, wishing to attack, the bull seeming to toss with its horns, the serpent writhing but unable to approach, and the wolf whose onward rush was restrained; altogether the noises of the apparitions, with their angry raging, were dreadful.

Stricken and goaded by such aggressive spirits, Anthony felt bodily pains more severely than before. He lay watching, however, with unshaken soul, groaning from bodily anguish, but with his mind clear, and mockingly said: “If there had been any power in you, it would have sufficed had one of you come. But since the Lord has made you weak you attempt to terrify me by your numbers: and a proof of your weakness is that you take the shapes of brute beasts.” And he added with boldness: “If you are able,

²⁸ Cf. Lucian, *Liar* 31.

and have received power against me, do not delay your attack; but if you are unable, why trouble me in vain? For faith in our Lord is a seal and a wall of safety to us." After many attempts the demons gnashed their teeth upon him, having themselves been mocked rather than intimidating him. Revealing themselves in bodily form and confronted by Anthony's abusive language the demons were actually enfeebled.²⁹

Anthony next saw the roof opening, and a ray of light descending to him. The demons suddenly vanished, the pain of his body straightway ceased, and the building was again whole. Sensing the source of help and getting his breath back again, freed from pain, he besought the vision which had appeared to him, saying: "Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to make my pains to cease?" And a voice replied: "Anthony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight; wherefore since you have endured, and have not been defeated, I will be your helper forever, and will make your name known everywhere." Having heard this, the hermit arose and prayed, receiving more power in his body than formerly. The next day he left the tomb, even more enthusiastic in his devotion to God. He was then about thirty-five years old.³⁰

* * *

Speaking to bodiless spirits was not a Christian invention. But the early hermits who spent years of meditation inside tombs and were surrounded by buried bodies, as well as those who lived in very small cells or caves that greatly resembled tombs, made oral communications with the demons a matter of course. According to Anthony's advice, when confronting evil spirits hermits should not collapse in terror but enter with them into fearless exchange of words instead. Whenever a demon made its appearance, one should enquire about its name and place of origin: "Who are you? And from whence have you come?" The demon would immediately become feeble, realising the firm purpose of the hermit's mind.³¹

Anthony felt that he had received help from the Lord, but most of his wisdom he had acquired by conversing with demons. Through his constant discussions with them he came to realise that at a deeper level he had to protect himself from his own vulnerability—his flesh constantly

²⁹ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 9.

³⁰ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 10. Democritus was also made famous after returning from the tombs.

³¹ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 43.

requesting food and sex.³² As other hermits were to find out as well, controlling their desires was far more difficult than confronting evil spirits.³³ Demons had power because Christians were weak. By choosing tombs as places for habitation, the daring ascetics were thus waging battle against both external and internal forces. Anthony's ambition to fill the desert with holy men was accomplished, but so also was the desert filled with human weaknesses.

There was certainly a paranoid element in such behaviour, but the early hermits were certainly not psychotic. Their arguments with evil spirits were neither repetitive and obsessive nor delirious. They made perfect sense and, in due course, evolved and progressed. Through their discussions, the hermits received information that made them adjust their behaviour and transform their ideas about human nature and life. They never admitted that what they called demons were neither dead gods, nor fallen angels. But they gradually apprehended that the language spoken by evil spirits was actually their own inner voice of desire. This profound discovery was credited by Athanasius to Anthony himself.

According to the biographer, Anthony felt that he had been once visited by Satan, the leader of all demons, in person. Having presented himself, Satan expressed his surprise with the behaviour of the monks. "What are you doing here?" he asked the astonished hermit. "Why do the monks and all other Christians blame me without cause? Why do they curse me every hour?" Anthony replied that they were censuring him because of the torments with which he inflicted the monks. But Satan complained that this was not quite so: "I am not the one tormenting them," he replied, "but they disturb themselves, for I have become weak . . . I no longer have a place, a weapon, a city. The Christians are spread everywhere, and even the desert is filled with monks. Let them watch after themselves and stop cursing me for no reason." Anthony marvelled and conceded: "Even though you are always a liar and never tell the truth, nevertheless this time, against your will, you have spoken truly. For the coming of Christ has made you weak, and after throwing you down he left you defenceless." Upon hearing the name of the Saviour, and not being able to bear its burning intensity, Satan vanished.³⁴

³² Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 41.

³³ See Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (trans. Felicia Pheasant; Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), chapters 9 and 10.

³⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 41.

Living in a tomb must have been a very strenuous experience. The fact that it was by choice and not by obligation could not have made it much more tolerable. The only comfort to those who made such bold decisions was the expectation of achieving a great goal. But even this expectation could not be accomplished in a foreseeable length of time. Some entered tombs for months, others for years. The length of self-burial depended upon many factors and not least upon the internal resistances and conflicts within each individual. Most recluses appear to have terminated their exercise only when they felt that they had got the upper hand in dealing with their desires and temptations.

This new Christian form of initiation could have been neither widespread nor formalised, as was customary with pagan mystery rituals. Furthermore it was not surrounded by secrecy, which could often make a simple experience seem awesome and overwhelming. Since its significance and efficacy depended upon long-term physical and emotional endurance, apprenticeship was by necessity required, whereas for the assistance of novices details were publicised and advertised. The *Life of Anthony* clearly served as an introduction and a guide.

And yet, this Christian mystery concealed a great secret. While seeking God inside tombs, the desert fathers became acquainted with demons, and through them they entered into a dialogue with their human nature in ways that none of their contemporaries had achieved. Instead of accepting that they were actually projecting their repressed impulses, hermits were convinced that the demons were external realities. They appeared to speak from within their own bodies only because they were taking possession of their mental systems. Thus, without realising it, Christian ascetics gave demons new and vigorous lives for many centuries. Overall, however, living in tombs can be seen as the counterpart of ancient mysteries. As Aristotle would have it, the idea was not to learn something, but rather to undergo an experience that could put the initiate into a state of mind.³⁵

* * *

A successful initiation gave to those who accomplished it a new attitude towards life as well as prospects for special powers. As it was often declared, they became famous and were admired by their contemporaries.³⁶ Such was the case of the ascetic Sisinnius, a former slave, who

³⁵ Aristotle quoted by Synesius, *Dio* 8.

³⁶ Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 10.

had come all the way from Cappadocia to Egypt. After dwelling with an elder hermit for six or seven years, he at last shut himself up in a tomb and continued living inside it for three more years, constantly praying, and never sitting down, lying, or walking out neither by night nor day. At long last he gained power over demons.

When Sisinnius returned to his native country he was a different person. He soon became a priest and collected around him a company of men and women. By his daring manner of life he was able to drive out whatever masculine lusts there were in himself, and by self-discipline he curbed feminine desires in women.³⁷ Liberated in a social as well as a mental manner, the former slave became the acknowledged leader of a community. The demanding mystery inaugurated by Anthony had proved its value. It granted rebirth to some of the heroes of a society that was entering a new religious horizon.

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³⁷ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 49. My translation is from *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (trans. William K. L. Clarke; SPCK; London: The Macmillan Company, 1918).

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MYSTERY AND AUTHORITY IN THE WRITINGS OF SHENOUTE¹

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If you have faith, then you have the fullness of the mystery.² If you do not have faith, then you do not have hope in the mystery and the Lord of the Mystery. (Shenoute, *And It Happened One Day*, AV 234–35)³

Introduction

In the fifth century there is one figure who towers above all else in the history of Upper Egyptian monasticism. This figure is Shenoute of Atripe, who at his death around 465 had led his monastic community for an impressive period of 80 years.⁴ His long tenure at the helm of the White

¹ It is an honour to have the opportunity to present this study of the writings of the greatest of Coptic authors, Shenoute, in appreciation of the work of Einar Thomassen, in particular his important efforts in establishing a network of younger scholars of Coptic literature in the Nordic countries and beyond, for which many of us are deeply grateful.

² Cf. Col 1:26–27.

³ Coptic text in Louis-Théophile Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” *ZÄS* 80 (1955): 43. I refer to Shenoute’s writings using titles based on their incipits (as listed in Stephen Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus* [2 vols.; CSCO 599–600, Subsidia 111–112; Leuven: Peeters, 2004], xviii–xxii), followed by a reference to the manuscript and page number of the White Monastery codex from which the Coptic text is taken (using the sigla established by Tito Orlandi but omitting the abbreviation MONB, for “Monasterio Bianco” [see the list in Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus*, xxiii–xxiv, and the description of the codices in *ibid.*, 111–379]). In addition, I indicate in the footnotes which edition(s) of the Coptic text I have used, or, when the manuscript in question is unpublished, its collection and call number (in accordance with the principles outlined in Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus*, 39–45). A special case is constituted by the text *I Am Amazed*, where I also refer to the numeration scheme of Tito Orlandi’s edition whenever this is possible, since this has become the standard for this particular text. Due to the often unreliable nature of the published editions of Shenoute’s writings, I have as far as possible also consulted photographs of the manuscripts. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁴ On the life of Shenoute, see, e.g., Emmel, *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus*, 6–14; Stephen Emmel, “Shenoute the Monk: The Early Monastic Career of Shenoute the Archimandrite,” in *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture: Atti del simposio “Testi e temi nella tradizione del monachesimo cristiano” per il 50° anniversario dell’Istituto Monastico di Sant’ Anselmo, Roma, 28 maggio–9 giugno 2002* (ed. Maciej Bielawski and Daniël Hombergen; SA 140, Analecta Monastica 8; Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo/Herder, 2004), 151–74; Stephen Emmel, “Shenoute’s Place in the History of Monasticism,” in *Akhmim and Sohag* (vol. 1

Monastery,⁵ coupled with the fact that he was a highly prolific writer, makes his corpus of writings a unique window into the life, organization, and theology of Upper Egyptian monasticism and its contexts in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁶

In a monastic community like that of the White monastery, which by its very nature was a closed, hierarchical community with strict rules and regulations governing extensive parts of the practical and intellectual lives of its members,⁷ questions concerning the sources of authority and of who was to administer and wield the powers of that authority were crucial. With ultimate authority resting on the manifestation and partial revelation of what Shenoute referred to as “the mystery and the Lord of the mystery,”⁸ questions concerning the correct content and acceptable

of *Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt*; ed. Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 31–46. On the date of Shenoute's death, see esp. Stephen Emmel, “From the Other Side of the Nile: Shenute and Panopolis,” in *Perspectives on Panopolis: An Egyptian Town from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest: Acts from an International Symposium Held in Leiden on 16, 17 and 18 December 1998* (ed. A. Egberts, B. P. Muhs, and Jacques van der Vliet; Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava 31; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 96–98.

⁵ In addition to what is now known as the White Monastery, Shenoute's monastic community also included the so-called Red Monastery in the lower desert close to the village of Atripe, as well as a monastery of female monastics in the village itself. For the monastery of the female monastics and their relationship with Shenoute, see esp. Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute & the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Thanks to the impressive cataloguing efforts of Stephen Emmel (Stephen Emmel, “Shenoute's Literary Corpus” [PhD diss., Yale University, 1993], later published in a revised and updated version as *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*), it is now possible to systematically study Shenoute's literary corpus from the scattered remains of the close to 100 White Monastery codices containing Shenoute's writings. The situation prior to Emmel's work is aptly described by Janet A. Timbie, “The State of Research on the Career of Shenoute of Atripe,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* [ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring; SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], 258–70).

⁷ On the rules and organization of Shenoute's monastic community, see esp. Bentley Layton, “Rules, Patterns, and the Exercise of Power in Shenoute's Monastery: The Problem of World Replacement and Identity Maintenance,” *J ECS* 15/1 (2007): 45–73; Bentley Layton, “The Ancient Rules of Shenoute's Monastic Federation,” in *Akhmim and Sohag* (vol. 1 of *Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt*; ed. Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 73–81; Bentley Layton, “The Monastic Rules of Shenoute,” in *Monastic Estates in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt: Ostraca, Papyri, and Essays in Memory of Sarah Clackson* (P. Clackson) (ed. Anne Boud'hors, et al.; American Studies in Papyrology 46; Cincinnati, Ohio: The American Society of Papyrologists, 2009), 170–77; Bentley Layton, “Social Structure and Food Consumption in an Early Christian Monastery: The Evidence of Shenoute's *Canons* and the White Monastery Federation A.D. 385–465,” *Mus* 115 (2002): 25–55.

⁸ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 235 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43).

sources of knowledge of the mysteries of faith were hardly trivial. The present article will outline some of the ways in which Shenoute tackled these questions, including what he considered to constitute the proper mysteries of faith, the identity of the true authorities through which one might gain access to them, and the limits of human inquiry.

Illicit Mysteries: Apocryphal Books and False Knowledge

There is one issue that stands out, which brings Shenoute's attitude towards the true sources and contents of the ultimate mysteries and their revelation especially into relief, namely his opposition to those who composed, read, and taught on the basis of apocryphal books. Although the term ἀπόκρυφον originally connotes "secret" or "hidden," in Shenoute's day it was often used simply in the sense of "false" or "spurious,"⁹ and while Shenoute certainly employs the term in the latter sense, it is not entirely clear whether he sometimes also intends to refer to such texts as esoteric.

In any case, such books and people are attacked in several treatises of Shenoute. In one of them, however, his largest preserved anti-heretical treatise, *I Am Amazed*,¹⁰ written sometime between 431 and 451,¹¹ they

⁹ See Richard A. Norris Jr., "Apocryphal Writings and Acts of the Martyrs," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28.

¹⁰ *I Am Amazed* has been published by Tito Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas: Testo con Introduzione e Traduzione* (Unione Accademica Nazionale: CMCL; Roma: C.I.M., 1985). This edition is incomplete, however, and should be used with caution. It includes some parts that are not actually parts of *I Am Amazed*, while omitting not only the substantial final part of the text constituted by a quotation of Theophilus of Alexandria's festal letter of 401 and Shenoute's own final remarks, but also much manuscript evidence only later identified as such. For the purposes of the present article I have consulted photographs of the relevant manuscript evidence.

¹¹ Since the council of Ephesus in 431 is mentioned in it, while there are no traces of the conflicts of the council of Chalcedon in 451, or its aftermath, *I Am Amazed* must have been written sometime between 431 and 451. Most scholars prefer to date it to the 440's on the basis of a certain compatibility of its heresiological themes with the situation described in a letter from Dioscorus to Shenoute on the problem of heresy in Upper Egypt (see, e.g., Aloys Grillmeier, *From the Council of Chalcedon [451] to Gregory the Great [590–604]: The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia After 451* [vol. 2, Part 4 of *Christ in Christian Tradition*; in collaboration with Theresia Hainthaler, trans. O. C. Dean Jr.; London: Mowbray, 1996], 175–76; Emmel, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*, 648. For a discussion of Dioscorus' letter to Shenoute in the context of Shenoute's heresiological writings, including *I Am Amazed*, see Hugo Lundhaug, "Shenoute's Heresiological Polemics and Its Context(s)," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity* [Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity; ed. David Brakke

are in fact among the main targets, and it is this treatise which provides us with a major part of our insight into Shenoute's opposition to extra-canonical books and the objectionable teachings Shenoute presents as being based on them.¹² Shenoute sets the stage early on in the preserved parts of *I Am Amazed*, stating what is clearly one of the main purposes of the treatise,¹³ when he admonishes his hearers to "listen, so that you may understand that those who write apocrypha are blind, and blind are those who receive them and who put their faith in them."¹⁴ Apparently the users of apocryphal texts claimed to have access to additional, higher knowledge through these texts. Shenoute, however, contrasts the apocrypha with the canonical Scriptures, stating that "the knowledge of the Scriptures and their teaching by those who know them" is the "greater good," while "a greater evil is the knowledge of those who say that there is another knowledge that is hidden from the Scriptures, or which the Scriptures have not revealed."¹⁵ Shenoute counters such claims to additional knowledge in various ways. First of all, he is adamant that there are no more than four gospels, "Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, these which enlighten the entire world,"¹⁶ as he puts it. For "who will say that there exists another gospel outside of the four gospels, and the church will not reject him as heretical?"¹⁷ Still, Shenoute reports, some people claim that "there are twelve gospels," but states emphatically that "even if there are additional ones, they are rejected."¹⁸

So, Shenoute predictably presents the knowledge of the Scriptures as being better than that of the apocrypha, but what are his main problems with the latter? First of all, the apocryphal books are by their very definition

et al.; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011], forthcoming). However, since archbishop Dioscorus is not mentioned in the extant parts of *I Am Amazed*, and since there are no aspects of the text that may securely date it to the time of his episcopate, it may have been written at practically any time during the twenty-year period between 431 and 451.

¹² Shenoute himself refers in *I Am Amazed* to the fact that he has written similar things elsewhere (see 303=HB 17; 370=HB 36 [cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 20, 34]).

¹³ That the opposition to apocryphal writings is central to *I Am Amazed* was highlighted in Tito Orlandi's early article on it, "A Catechesis Against Apocryphal Texts by Shenute and the Gnostic Texts of Nag Hammadi," *HTR* 75/1 (1982): 85–95.

¹⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 101=DQ 14 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 14. Orlandi, however, erroneously reads $\text{N}\epsilon\text{T}\chi\omega$ ["those who speak"] rather than $\text{N}\epsilon\text{T}\chi\iota$ ["those who receive"]).

¹⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 363=HB 34 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32).

¹⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 425=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

¹⁷ *I Am Amazed*, 307=HB 18 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 20).

¹⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 425=DS 116–17 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

non-canonical. Secondly, Shenoute is clear about the fact that, as he sees it, everything that is worth knowing has already been revealed by the Holy Spirit through the prophets, apostles, and evangelists in the canonical Scriptures. The apocryphal books, on the other hand, contain nothing but the teachings of the Devil and his demons: “What did the apostles lack, and the prophets and all the saints? What is not in the Scriptures, through the Holy Spirit who speaks in them, that we shall look for apocrypha? Do you not see that they are demonic teachings (ἑνεσβω ἡδαιμωνιον)?”¹⁹ In contrast to the true Scriptures, it is “erring spirits” (ἑνεπῆδ ἡνωρῆ) that are in “every book outside of the Scriptures, whether those of the pagans, or those of all the godless peoples, or those of the heretics, and including also the apocrypha.”²⁰ These are thus dangerous books, for “even if they proclaim the name of God (in them), or speak correct words, all the evil things that are written in them destroy the other that is good.”²¹

Shenoute accordingly warns against what he calls “false knowledge” (ἡσοῦν ἡνοῦχ)²² and its purveyors, and states that those who attribute their heretical doctrines to the saints “lead astray,” for, as he quite bluntly puts it, the saints “spoke to us,”²³ i.e., not to his opponents or to the authors of their books. According to Shenoute, the mysteries were not revealed to the heretics (i.e. to the opponents of Shenoute and Alexandrian orthodoxy), or through secret, non-canonical books, but through the canonical Scriptures and the orthodox fathers of the Church.

The apocryphal books constituted a threat, however, for, as Shenoute presents it, the Devil is especially prone to deceiving unsuspecting Christians with teachers of false knowledge based on apocryphal books. “Through whom does he (i.e. the Devil) entrap? Or what sort of a trap does he use for a multitude?” asks Shenoute, and answers that “it is through those who say to them, ‘we are teachers,’ that he entraps, making a trap for those who set their hearts on an ensnaring writing until many are

¹⁹ *I Am Amazed*, 311–12=HB 19–20 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 22, but note that Orlandi erroneously reads εἰηαιπωρτ, rather than εἰηαισωωτ [as correctly noted by Janet A. Timbie, “Reading and Rereading Shenoute’s *I Am Amazed*: More Information on Nestorius and Others,” in *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context* [ed. James E. Goehring and Janet A. Timbie; CUA Studies in Early Christianity; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 64), and that he erroneously reads ἑνερῶβ [“things”], rather than ἑνεσβω [“teachings”]).

²⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 384=HB 39 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 36).

²¹ *I Am Amazed*, 384=HB 39 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 36).

²² See *I Am Amazed*, 364, 415, 604.

²³ *I Am Amazed*, 306=HB 18=XE 143–44 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 20).

entangled.”²⁴ Such teachers do not, as they seem to be claiming, reveal “the secrets and the unrevealed things of the Wisdom of God,” nor do they teach “piety,” warns Shenoute, but rather “impiety,” and what is revealed is actually “the secrets of the Devil and the unrevealed things of the son of lawlessness.”²⁵ Shenoute also stresses that knowledge of apocryphal texts does not make one wise, and in characteristically blunt fashion he asserts that “if there is one who speaks those emptinesses thinking of himself that he is a wise one (ΟΥΣΟΦΟΣ), he is even more ignorant (ΟΥΔΘΗΤ).”²⁶ For, as Shenoute puts it, “he who says ‘I know’ (ΕΙΝΟΕΙ), because he reads apocrypha, he is a most unlearned (ΔΤΣΒΩ) one, and he who thinks that he is a teacher (ΡΕΦΤΣΒΩ) when he memorizes (or: recites from memory)²⁷ apocrypha, he is even more unlearned (ΔΤΣΒΩ).”²⁸ Rather than knowledge, which is gained from reading “the true Scriptures” (ΝΕΓΡΑΦΗ ΪΜΕ), the reading of apocrypha brings madness.²⁹

In addition to the basic problem of additional revelation based on dubious sources, as such, there was thus the even greater problem of people claiming additional knowledge on the basis of such sources, and especially those who seem to have operated as teachers on the basis of them. There was thus a problem of conflicting authority, for there were evidently certain people operating as teachers or preachers close enough to Shenoute’s monastic community to pose a challenge to the basis of his, and the Alexandrian archepiscopate’s, authority.³⁰ In order to counter the influence of conflicting authority figures who were using, or referring to, apocryphal books, Shenoute did his best to undermine their authority by attacking what he saw as—or at least what he wanted to present as—the basis and foundation of their preaching, namely apocryphal books and extra-canonical revelation. A basic rhetorical move of his in this regard, as we have seen, was to associate his opponents with the Devil and his demons, while arguing that those who taught on the basis of the true

²⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 321=HB 22–23 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24. Orlandi, however, erroneously reads νεφδαφ instead of the correct η κωδαφ. The latter reading has correctly been noted by Timbie, “Reading and Rereading,” 64.

²⁵ See *I Am Amazed*, 414=DS 112–13 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44).

²⁶ See *I Am Amazed*, 414=DS 112 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44).

²⁷ For this translation of ΔΙ as the equivalent of ἀποστηθίζειν, see Crum, 748b.

²⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 317=HB 21 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24. Orlandi, however, mistakenly reads ουατςβω ηρογο ηε, rather than ουατςβω ητοφ ηρογο ηε).

²⁹ See *I Am Amazed*, 318=HB 22 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24).

³⁰ For a discussion of the identity of these opponents of Shenoute, see Lundhaug, “Shenoute’s Heresiological Polemics”.

Scriptures likewise had the Holy Spirit on their side: "Those who are fervent in the Holy Spirit," states Shenoute, "it is the Scriptures that they are speaking,³¹ not needing other words from books that are foreign to it (i.e. foreign to the Holy Spirit)."³² For just as "Satan, the unclean spirit" fills man with "false knowledge and perverted teaching and crooked faith and everything that is wicked," argues Shenoute, the Holy Spirit will on the contrary "reveal to him all the profitable things, the faith and the sound teaching and the perfect knowledge and every good thing."³³

One of the heretical ideas opposed by Shenoute was the belief in the pre-existence and fall of souls. Against those who claimed that the material body is the chastisement of the soul for sins prior to its incarnation, Shenoute states that "I have said many times in many ways that the soul of the men who say these things is worse than a prostitute."³⁴ Shenoute then further builds on this metaphor of the soul as a prostitute³⁵ by stating that "I have also said that the men who will enter this one (i.e. this prostitute), it is the demons who will enter the soul(s) of those people. And if they had not conceived from them they would not have given birth to those impieties and those emptinesses."³⁶ Shenoute calls his hearers to "know those in whom Christ speaks and who are speaking in Christ, and those who speak from the Devil and through whom the Devil speaks."³⁷ According to Shenoute it should be possible to know this from his own account, and he asks "who are not revealed in the presence of the wise? Because 'their speech is an ulcer, like gangrene.'" ³⁸

³¹ Cf. Acts 18:25.

³² *I Am Amazed*, 381=HB 38 (Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 36).

³³ *I Am Amazed*, 415=DS 113 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44). For a discussion of Shenoute's demonology, see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 416=DS 113 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44).

³⁵ The metaphor of the Soul as a prostitute is employed by Shenoute also elsewhere (see *So Listen*, XO 48–50). It is especially interesting to note, however, that this is also the main metaphor used in the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II,6), a text that incidentally also operates with the notion that the soul has fallen into a material body as a result of sin, the very notion Shenoute is confronting in this part of *I Am Amazed*. For a discussion of these similarities, see Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul* (NHS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 147–49.

³⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 416=DS 113–14 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44).

³⁷ *I Am Amazed*, 418=DS 114 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44).

³⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 418=DS 114 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 44); cf. 2 Tim 2:17.

Shenoute, however, warned that the Devil could ensnare many of those who “are inclined towards the good,” i.e., the Christians, with “false knowledge” (COOYH NNOCYX).³⁹ According to Shenoute, it is easy for Satan to deceive such people and “to make them heretics and anti-Christ and prophets of the lie and false apostles (NAΠOCTOΛOC NNOCYX).”⁴⁰ How does the Devil accomplish this? As Shenoute puts it, “he makes them servants of the mystery of lawlessness (ΠHΓCTHPION NTANOMIA) with wonders for those who believe in them.”⁴¹ These wonders, however, “are abominable before those whom the Lord authorizes to watch against those workers of evil,”⁴² namely Shenoute himself and those whom he holds forth as upright and trustworthy authorities, namely Scripture and certain contemporary and historical fathers of the Church, most notably the Alexandrian archbishops.

Shenoute was not content to associate his opponents with the Devil, however, but also associated them with notorious heresiarchs. There are here three main heretical figures that are explicitly opposed in the preserved parts of *I Am Amazed*, namely Arius, Nestorius, and Origen. Of these three, it is the last who is especially of interest in the present context, since Shenoute connects his followers to the use of apocryphal books. Shenoute reports that some people claim that Origen was not anathemized “because he was a heretic,” but “because of envy,” since “he revealed the things hidden from the Scriptures, or those things that were not written in the Scriptures and which are superior to those things which the Saints said.”⁴³ Shenoute replies, in characteristic style, that

I myself will say that it was not the things hidden from the Scriptures that he (i.e. Origen) revealed, for there are no other things or other words that man can hear or understand, or which may produce fruit among them, that the prophets and the apostles and the fathers of faith and the true writers of the church (HCΔZ HAME NTCKKΛHCIA) did not reveal completely. (*I Am Amazed*, 360=HB33)⁴⁴

So, what did Origen reveal? According to Shenoute he revealed “those things that are hidden from the evil of that one (i.e. Origen), and the

³⁹ *I Am Amazed*, 604=DQ 77 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

⁴⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 604=DQ 77–78 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

⁴¹ *I Am Amazed*, 604=DQ 78 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

⁴² *I Am Amazed*, 604=DQ 78 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

⁴³ *I Am Amazed*, 359=HB 33 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32).

⁴⁴ Cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32.

mysteries of his father the Devil,” and “he has revealed them as they are hidden within him.”⁴⁵

In his polemics against those who make use of apocryphal books, Shenoute often quotes Scripture, which he also describes, as did Athanasius before him, as “the waters of life,” which are “sufficient for those who are thirsty to drink.”⁴⁶ In his tractate *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, for example, Shenoute invokes Psalm 1, charging his opponents with inventing and spreading myths, and threatening them with divine wrath: “Your invented and mythical words which you speak, by which you undertake to purify the Truth, he (i.e. God) shall scatter them ‘like the dust which the wind drives away upon the face of the earth.’”⁴⁷ Similarly, in *I Am Amazed* Shenoute quotes Paul’s letter to the Galatians, asking, rhetorically, “does he (i.e. Paul) not say: ‘there exists no other (gospel), except that there are some who trouble you, wishing to change the gospel of Christ?’”⁴⁸ Shenoute here continues by quoting the next verse of Galatians while also invoking the authority of Athanasius in the process, stating that

if he (i.e. Paul) says, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you outside of that which we have preached to you, let him become anathema,”⁴⁹ and we ourselves accept apocryphal books, not knowing by whom they are, why have all the holy fathers, most of all our father Apa Athanasius the archbishop, he of the true knowledge, not accepted them, but rather rejected them? (*I Am Amazed*, 308=HB 18–19)⁵⁰

In addition to referring to Athanasius by name, Shenoute also quotes from the influential 39th Festal Letter, of 367, where Athanasius lists the acceptable Scriptural books, while attacking apocryphal and non-canonical Scripture.⁵¹ Shenoute uses the authority of this Athanasian text in order

⁴⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 361=HB 33 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32).

⁴⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 426=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46). Cf. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39 (cf. Samuel Moawad, “The Relationship of St. Shenoute of Atripe with His Contemporary Patriarchs of Alexandria,” in *Akhmim and Sohag* [vol. 1 of *Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt*; ed. Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008], 111). Cf. also *I Am Amazed*, 379=HB 38 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 36).

⁴⁷ *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, ZM 43 (FR-BN 131^a f. 158), quoting Ps 1:4.

⁴⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 307=HB 18 (Cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 20, 22). Shenoute quotes Gal 1:7.

⁴⁹ Gal 1:8.

⁵⁰ Cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 22.

⁵¹ For an English translation of the surviving parts of Athanasius’ 39th festal letter, see David Brakke, “A New Fragment of Athanasius’ Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon,” *HTR* 103 (2010): 47–66. For the Coptic text of this letter, see Louis-Théophile Lefort, ed., *S. Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales en copte* (CSCO 150,

to support his own attacks against such books and their users,⁵² when he states that “truly the great teacher of faith, Apa Athanasius, said in his writings: ‘I have written these things concerning the heresies, but especially the miserable Melitians, who pride themselves on those (writings) that are called “apocryphon” (ΝΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΡΟΥ ΧΕΛΠΟΚΡΥΦΟΝ).’”⁵³ Elsewhere in the same letter, Athanasius characterizes such apocryphal writings as “an invention of heretics, who write these books whenever they want and then generously add time to them, so that, by publishing them as if they were ancient, they might have a pretext for deceiving the simple folk.”⁵⁴ Shenoute refers to the letters of Athanasius also elsewhere. In *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, for example, he informs us that he has learned about the error of many heresies through the letters of Athanasius,⁵⁵ “the holy messenger of the Lord (ΠΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ ΕΤΟΥΓΑΔΒ ΜΠΧΘΕΙΣ).”⁵⁶

Shenoute’s use of the writings of Athanasius is indicative of his relationship with Alexandrian orthodoxy.⁵⁷ At the end of *I Am Amazed*, Shenoute

Scriptores Coptici 19; Leuven: L. Durbecq, 1955), 16–22, 58–62; René-George Coquin, ed. and trans., “Les Lettres festales d’Athanasie (CPG 2102), Un nouveau complément: Le manuscrit IFAO copte 25,” *OLP* 15 (1984): 138–44; Brakke, “A New Fragment,” 62–64. For studies of this letter, see e.g. David Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*,” *HTR* 87/4 (1994): 395–419; Alberto Camplani, *Atanasio di Alessandria: Lettere Festali. Anonimo: Indice delle Lettere Festali* (Milan: Paoline, 2003); Gabriella Aragione, “La lettre festale 39 d’Athanasie: Présentation et traduction de la version copte et de l’extrait grec,” in *Le canon du Nouveau Testament: Regards nouveaux sur l’histoire de sa formation* (ed. Gabriella Aragione, Eric Junod, and Enrico Norelli; Le monde de la Bible 54; Genève: Labor et Fides, 2005), 197–219; Nils Arne Pedersen, “The New Testament Canon and Athanasius of Alexandria’s 39th *Festal Letter*,” in *The Discursive Fight Over Religious Texts in Antiquity* (ed. Anders-Christian Jacobsen; Religion and Normativity 1; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009), 168–77.

⁵² It is important to note, however, that Shenoute’s notion of what constitutes true Scripture is not limited to Athanasius’ list of canonical books, but also include the texts’ listed by Athanasius’ as texts to be read (see Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.20; trans. Brakke, “A New Fragment,” 61). As Janet Timbie has shown, Shenoute at least cites *Wisdom*, *Sirach*, and the *Didache* in the same way as he does canonical Scripture (see Janet A. Timbie, “Non-Canonical Scriptural Citation in Shenoute,” in *Actes du huitième congrès international d’études coptes: Paris, 28 juin–3 juillet 2004* [2 vols.; ed. Nathalie Bosson and Anne Boud’hors; OLA 163; Leuven: Peeters, 2007], 625–34).

⁵³ *I Am Amazed*, 319=HB 22 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24). We could also have translated the passage as “those (writings) that they call.” Since this part of the 39th *Festal Letter* is only preserved in Coptic translation it is impossible to know whether the original Greek here had an active or passive sense.

⁵⁴ *Festal Letter* 39.21 (trans. Brakke, “A New Fragment,” 61).

⁵⁵ *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, ZM 44=FR-BN 131^a f. 158.

⁵⁶ *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, ZM 44=FR-BN 131^a f. 158.

⁵⁷ Cf. Moawad, “The Relationship”; Mark Moussa, “*I Am Amazed*: Shenoute of Atripe’s Endorsement of Alexandrian Theology in the White Monastery,” *Bulletin of Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society* 5 (1998/99): 19–40; Lundhaug, “Shenoute’s Heresiological Polemics”. When he was head of the White Monastery, Shenoute had contact with the

refers back to the preceding long quotation from archbishop Theophilus' 16th festal letter, which constitutes a substantial portion of *I Am Amazed*, as words that should help his hearers "discern (ΔΟΚΙΜΑΣΕ) the spirits of truth and the spirits of error," and exclaims: "[see], now, [brothers], how wise it is fitting for us to become."⁵⁸ Shenoute then nicely sums up what he has been trying to achieve with *I Am Amazed* as a whole, as he accuses those who have spoken what he regards as blasphemies against God and Christ, "in accordance with all that we have said in the exegesis⁵⁹ and in the writings of the blessed archbishop Apa Theophilus," of not knowing what they are saying.⁶⁰ As Shenoute explains it, using a simile, "Neither do they know what they are saying, nor do those who receive their teaching know what they are hearing. For like animals who feed on very many weeds of every sort because they have not found those that are better, thus it is even more with those who teach those words and those who are taught them."⁶¹ Shenoute goes on to explain that the Devil fills the minds of those who teach in this way, while they, in turn, fill the minds of those who listen to them. What both the teachers and their pupils lack, however, which they "have fallen away from," according to Shenoute, are "the true Scriptures" (ΝΕΓΡΑΦΗ ΜΗΕ).⁶² Importantly, both groups are to blame, both the teachers and those who listen to them.

Making sure there is no doubt in his hearers' minds who are the champions of true knowledge and true faith, Shenoute asks: "who are those who break those entrapping things and who cut off their fetters?"⁶³ The answer, of course, is "the teachers of the Scriptures" (ΝΣΑΖ ΝΝΕΓΡΑΦΗ), and not only the contemporary ecclesiastical authorities, but all the way "from the prophets and the apostles and the upright fathers."⁶⁴ These authorities

Alexandrian patriarchs Timothy I, Theophilus, Cyril, Dioscorus, and Timothy II (see Emmel, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*, 8).

⁵⁸ *I Am Amazed*, DS 221 (Stephen Emmel, "Theophilus's Festal Letter of 401 as Quoted by Shenoute," in *Divinitae Aegypti: Koptologische und verwandte Studien zu Ehren von Martin Krause* [ed. Cäcilia Fluck, et al.; Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1995], 95).

⁵⁹ This probably refers to the section of *I Am Amazed* that precedes the Theophilus-quote (cf. Emmel, "Theophilus's Festal Letter," 96 n. 17), probably the entire *I Am Amazed* except the Theophilus part.

⁶⁰ *I Am Amazed*, DS 221–22 (Emmel, "Theophilus's Festal Letter," 95).

⁶¹ *I Am Amazed*, DS 222 (Emmel, "Theophilus's Festal Letter," 95).

⁶² *I Am Amazed*, DS 222 (Emmel, "Theophilus's Festal Letter," 95). Cf. also, e.g., *I Am Amazed*, 605=DQ 78 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

⁶³ *I Am Amazed*, 323=HB 23 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24).

⁶⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 323=HB 23 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24). See also *I Am Amazed*, 364=HB33 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32, 34), where Shenoute quotes 2 Cor 10:4–5.

have, says Shenoute, “dragged many away from the false knowledge.”⁶⁵ As for the heretical teachers, “when stupid people come to their place from time to time they are ensnared and implicated in their dark knowledge and their defiled faith,” says Shenoute.⁶⁶

In addition to arguing that everything there is to know has already been revealed through the Scriptures, Shenoute also takes care to state that there are limits to acceptable inquiry. As he puts it in *Canon 1*, for example, “There is a time for everything.⁶⁷ There is a time to speak about things hidden since the creation of the world until the completion of the end,” and, correspondingly, there is “a time to hide the secret things from the creation of the world until the completion of the end of the world.”⁶⁸ Similarly, at the end of a trinitarian discussion in *I Am Amazed*, he emphatically asks his hearers not to enquire further into the mysteries of faith: “So, let us now not seek beyond this. For ‘who will search his ways?’⁶⁹ as it is written. Therefore, do not now pay heed to the words of those false teachers, for these are those of whom it was written: ‘For there are many unruly and vain speakers and deceivers.’”⁷⁰ As Shenoute presents it here, inter alia quoting Titus 1:10, those who seek additional revelation and knowledge of mysteries are false teachers and deceivers. And they are many. Shenoute mentions, for instance, that there are some who claim “that there are forty aeons,”⁷¹ but wonders how they could possibly know this, and asks those whom he characterizes as “dreamers of false dreams—in the sleep of the mind, not that of the body” for an explanation:⁷² “Is there another one who knows how many aeons there are,” asks Shenoute, other than “he who made them, or the one through whom they were made, God and the Lord Jesus Christ?”⁷³ Moreover, “if there are ten thousand aeons, not forty,” asks Shenoute, “how do they know?”⁷⁴

⁶⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 364=HB 33 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 32, 34).

⁶⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 322=HB 23 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 24).

⁶⁷ Cf. Eccl 3:1.

⁶⁸ *Canon 1*, XC frg. 1c (Émile Amélineau, *Œuvres de Schenoudi: Texte copte et traduction française* [2 vols.; Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1907–14], 1:459–60, as collated by Stephen Emmel. I am grateful to Emmel for sharing this with me).

⁶⁹ Job 36:23.

⁷⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 820=DS 165–66 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 62). Shenoute quotes Titus 1:10.

⁷¹ *I Am Amazed*, 426=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

⁷² *I Am Amazed*, 426=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

⁷³ *I Am Amazed*, 427=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

⁷⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 426=DS 117 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 46).

In a similar way, he argues against others, at least one of whose apocryphal texts he seems to be quoting from, who claim that there are many more worlds than this one, and that many of these are unknown even to the angels,⁷⁵ which leads Shenoute to ask the rhetorical question, “if there exists other worlds that no angel knows because he (i.e. God) did not teach them (i.e. the angels) about them (i.e. the worlds), how is it that *they* (i.e. the heretics) know them (i.e. the worlds), or how will he teach *them* about them?”⁷⁶ Shenoute then appeals to Scripture:

For it is written: “The Lord will not do anything which he did not reveal to his servants the prophets.”⁷⁷ How much more (does this apply to) his angels? From where is it that they (i.e. the heretics) have known these things, when it is in this way that it is written: “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth”⁷⁸ He did not say “the earths,” as there are many testimonies reporting this. (*I Am Amazed*, 104=DQ 15)⁷⁹

The objectionable belief that there are additional worlds, which Shenoute battles at length in *I Am Amazed*, is connected by him not only to apocryphal books per se, but also to what he sees as erroneous interpretation of canonical Scripture:

You see that one should not at all pay heed to a word from an apocryphal book. And, as we have written in another place, fighting against the error of those who say that there is another world underneath this one, when they heard “those that are under the earth,”⁸⁰ they did not understand that it is of those who are dead, who shall come out from their tombs that he (i.e., Paul) is speaking, and (of) those who are buried everywhere in the entire earth. (*I Am Amazed*, 303–04=HB 17)⁸¹

The Mystery of Christ and the Limits of Human Understanding

In addition to arguing that there is nothing to be known outside of the canonical Scriptures and their correct interpretation, however, Shenoute also argues that there are limits to what it is possible to know. Of course,

⁷⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 102=DQ 14–15 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 14). The text here quoted by Shenoute has so far not been identified.

⁷⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 103=DQ 15 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 14).

⁷⁷ Amos 3:7 (For the identification of this quotation, see Timbie, “Non-Canonical Scriptural Citation,” 629); Cf. Eph 3:5.

⁷⁸ Gen 1:1.

⁷⁹ Cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 14.

⁸⁰ Phil 2:10.

⁸¹ Cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 20.

the notion that human beings did not have the capacity of fully understanding the divine mystery was a common one. It was used already by Paul,⁸² and it was often employed in the doctrinal debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, for instance by Athanasius.⁸³ Included among the issues that Shenoute deemed largely beyond the capacity of human understanding were the nature of God and the preexistence, incarnation, and divinity of Christ, questions that are discussed in many of Shenoute's writings. One of them, the short anti-heretical tractate *And It Happened One Day*, is introduced as an answer to questions concerning the divinity of Christ and his incarnation:

And it happened one day, when we spoke about the divinity of our Saviour and that he became a man and dwelt with men while being God and the Son of God, (that) some replied in the crowd gently and without vice, being amazed by what they heard. They said: "Does he then exist before he comes into being from Mary the Holy Virgin?" (*And It Happened One Day*, AV 228)⁸⁴

Much of *And It Happened One Day* is spent answering this question,⁸⁵ which is also a question Shenoute confronts in *I Am Amazed*, where he answers that Christ existed "not only before he made Mary in the womb, his mother according to a dispensation (*oikonomia*) and his servant according to his divinity, but before he made a single angel or spirit and seraphim and cherubim and power, the heaven and the earth, and the sun and the moon and the stars and the heavens and all that is in them, all the way down to the flea to which there is nothing lesser."⁸⁶

Against those who claim to know how Christ came into being (Shenoute does not say how, only that they claim to know), while denying his preexistence, Shenoute asserts that "if they were able to understand how he came into being within her, or from where he came into her, they

⁸² See Rom 11:33–36.

⁸³ Cf. James E. Goehring, *The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism* (PTS 27; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 226.

⁸⁴ Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 41.

⁸⁵ Elsewhere in this text he states that "many are the words we have spoken and written concerning the birth of the Saviour and his divinity, but it is for the sake of those who have asked whether he existed before he came into being from Mary, that we have said those other things" (*And It Happened One Day*, AV 231 [Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 42]).

⁸⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 461–63=DD 146 (IT-NB IB7 f. 50v, as collated by Frederik Wisse & Stephen Emmel, 2009. I am grateful to Stephen Emmel for sharing this with me). Orlandi's edition is lacking at this point since it is based on the damaged DQ 59 (GB-CU 1699D f. 2r).

would also understand that he exists before the entire creation, and that it was through him that the aeons were made.”⁸⁷ Against those who deny the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary on the grounds that the creator cannot be born from one of his creations, Shenoute asks whether it was “impossible for he who took earth from the earth, and made it a man after his image and after his likeness, to build himself a temple of the holy body as he wished, in the womb which he has honoured more than all the women?”⁸⁸

Making use of a striking metaphor, Shenoute also argues that “[like it] is not a shame [for the] builder to dwell in the house that he has built, thus also it is not a shame for the de[mi]urge to [dwell in] the womb that he [made]” ([ΝΘΕ]⁸⁹ ΟΥΣΩΩ ΔΝ Π[Ε ΜΠ]ΕΚΩΤ⁹⁰ ΕΟΥΩΞ ΖΗΠΗ ΝΤΑΚΟΤΥ ΝΤΕΙΞΕ ΟΝ ΟΥΣΩΩ ΔΝ ΠΕ ΜΠΔΥ[Μ]ΟΥΡΓΟΣ ΕΟΥ[ΩΞ ΖΗ]ΘΗ ΝΤΑΥ[ΤΑΜΙΟ] c⁹¹).⁹² Shenoute argues in similar fashion also elsewhere, asking: “How was it shameful for the builder that he went in and came out from the house that he built?”⁹³ and adds that “he came out from the one whom he made in the womb, and he also greatly honored the Holy Virgin Mary that he might say to her, ‘my mother,’ when she was (really) his servant,”⁹⁴ and speaks of how “he made the little womb of Mary accept him,”⁹⁵ which he then compares to the indwelling of Christ in each individual Christian,

⁸⁷ *I Am Amazed*, DD 145 (IT-NB IB7 f. 50r, as collated by Frederik Wisse & Stephen Emmel, 2009. I am grateful to Stephen Emmel for sharing this with me). This corresponds to parts of Orlandi’s sections 452 and 455, but Orlandi’s edition is here lacking since it is based on the seriously damaged DS 124 (FR-BN 132’ f.81r).

⁸⁸ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 230 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 42).

⁸⁹ This reconstruction is my own, based on the context.

⁹⁰ This restoration was suggested to me by Stephen Emmel. Amélineau has π . . . εκωτ (Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 1:333).

⁹¹ This reading has been suggested by Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 1:333 n. 3. (Cf. David W. Johnson, “Coptic Reactions to Gnosticism and Manichaeism,” *Mus* 100 (1987): 206.

⁹² *I Am Amazed*, HB 68 (cf. Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 1:333). See the parallel in *The Rest of the Words*, GO 403 (Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 2:176–77).

⁹³ *The Rest of the Words*, GO 403 (Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 2:177).

⁹⁴ *The Rest of the Words*, GO 403 (Amélineau, *Œuvres de Shenoudi*, 2:177). Shenoute also refers to Christ making Mary in the womb in *I Am Amazed*, 461=DQ 59 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 50); DD 146 (IT-NB IB7 f. 50v), and in *And It Happened One Day*, AV 232–33 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 42). He also states in *And It Happened One Day* that “According to a dispensation she was his mother, but according to the exalted divinity she was his servant” (AV 231 [Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 42]), on which cf. also *I Am Amazed*, 461–63=DD146 (IT-NB IB7 f. 50v).

⁹⁵ *The Rest of the Words*, YR 332 (FR-BN 131⁴ f. 141).

i.e., how “he makes the little man accept him and abides in the one who will be worthy.”⁹⁶

The exact fashion in which the incarnation takes place, however, is a mystery beyond human comprehension and should not be enquired into. As Shenoute puts it, “who are you, O disturber, to say, ‘how did he become (a) man in the womb of the Holy Virgin?’ Tell me first: How did *you* come into being in the womb of *your* mother?”⁹⁷ Since human procreation was a mystery in itself, how could anyone presume to know the specifics of Christ’s incarnation? In *I Am Amazed*, Shenoute answers those who ask “how did the Father beget the Son?” by retorting that the fact of “his birth according to flesh” (ΠΕΦΥΧΠΟ ΚΑΤΑΣΑΡΞ) constitutes no problem “for the wise,”⁹⁸ and proceeds to bring out the big guns, asserting that not only does “the entire Church of Christ” (ΤΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΜΠΕΧ̄) know it, but “it has already been proclaimed by the angels and it has been preached through the Gospels and the apostles, and, moreover, it has been indicated by the great Patriarchs.”⁹⁹ However, Shenoute emphasises that there are limits to what we are supposed to know, and the primordial begetting of the Son by the Father is one such thing, argues Shenoute, stating that “his begetting from the father which no angels knew, it will be proclaimed neither by prophet, nor apostle, nor anyone anywhere in the entire creation, except by him alone, and his father.”¹⁰⁰

Shenoute does not content himself with asserting that the begetting of the Son is unknowable, however, but points out that “It is impious for man to inquire about it, especially the heretics.”¹⁰¹ For “those who are truly wise and faithful,” argues Shenoute, referring to his opponents’ claims to knowledge of the higher realities, it is enough “to know that the Son is with the Father and the Holy Spirit before the entire creation.”¹⁰² Interestingly, Shenoute then connects this with what seems to be a claim of deification that he evidently regarded as excessive: “So, he who inquires now, or he who thinks in his arrogance that ‘I shall examine the begetting of the Son from the Father,’ it is that single thunderbolt which shall come

⁹⁶ *The Rest of the Words*, YR 331–32 (FR-BN 131⁴ f. 140–41).

⁹⁷ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 230 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 42).

⁹⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 809=DS 162 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

⁹⁹ *I Am Amazed*, 809=DS 162 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 810=DS 162 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰¹ *I Am Amazed*, 810=DS 162 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰² *I Am Amazed*, 811=DS 163 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

upon him and he who dared to say: 'I will become like the exalted one.'¹⁰³ How can the heretics know, wonders Shenoute, the things that were not known to the angels or the prophets and apostles: "that which no angel has proclaimed, nor prophet nor apostle,¹⁰⁴ what is your relation with it?"¹⁰⁵ He then switches his argument, mockingly stating that "if it is possible for you to know how the Father begat the son, then it is also possible for you to know what existed before the heaven and the earth were created, or where God was, and how he dwelt, and of what sort God is."¹⁰⁶ Shenoute then explicitly quotes three statements from "the true man of God, Apa Athanasius the archbishop of Alexandria."¹⁰⁷ First he quotes him asking "why do you presume to perceive those things which even the angels do not know? For the creatures will not be able to recount the begetting of the creator."¹⁰⁸ Then he relates Athanasius admonishing his hearers to "be satisfied with knowing that the Father begat the Son before the aeons, but to say how, no one knows."¹⁰⁹ Finally Shenoute quotes Athanasius' warning: "If you give yourself to those words and those satanic inquiries, you will turn away from God, like now all the heresies and everyone whom the Church anathematizes."¹¹⁰ In addition to employing the words of Athanasius, Shenoute backs up his argument with a few choice quotations from Scripture: "For it is written: 'Who will be able to proclaim his generation?'¹¹¹ 'No one knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father who begat him.'¹¹²

According to Shenoute, then, there was no additional knowledge to be gained from apocryphal books, or from teachers who did not base

¹⁰³ *I Am Amazed*, 812=DS 163 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60. Orlandi, however, erroneously reads εινε instead of εινε. Cf. also Stephen J. Davis, who, citing personal communication with Janet Timbie, correctly reads εινε [Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* [Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 285 n.40]).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. 1 Cor 2:7ff (especially as it is reported by the heresiologists that the Valentinians read it).

¹⁰⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 813=DS 163 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 814=DS 164 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰⁷ *I Am Amazed*, 815=DS 164 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60).

¹⁰⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 815=DS 164 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 60, 62).

¹⁰⁹ *I Am Amazed*, 815=DS 164 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 62).

¹¹⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 817=DS 165 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 62, but note that Orlandi erroneously reads ΝΙΘΙΝΕ ΝΣΑΤΑΝΑΣ ["those satanic nets"], rather than the correct ΝΙΘΙΝΕ ΝΣΑΤΑΝΑΣ ["those satanic inquiries"]).

¹¹¹ Acts 8:33 (Isa 53:8).

¹¹² *I Am Amazed*, 816=DS 164 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 62). Shenoute quotes a significantly altered version of Matt 11:27.

themselves purely on the Scriptures and on interpretations of them that were in line with orthodoxy as he saw it. Additional knowledge was thus not to be sought. On the contrary, Shenoute emphasised that “all the works of God exist by faith.”¹¹³ If you have faith, then you have the fullness of the mystery.¹¹⁴ If you do not have faith, then you do not have hope in the mystery and the Lord of the Mystery.¹¹⁵

The Eucharistic Mystery

The main area where Shenoute employs mystery terminology, however, is in relation to the pinnacle of Christian ritual life, the Eucharist. As was indeed common already in his day, Shenoute refers to the Eucharist as a “mystery” (ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ),¹¹⁶ and by his own admission he had “written many words concerning the mystery.”¹¹⁷ Shenoute’s discourse is here, as usual, highly polemical. He addresses several objectionable eucharistic practices in his writings, warning against the Eucharistic practices of his heretical opponents, for their “impiety” (ΜΗΤΑΣΕΒΗΣ), as he puts it, is hidden in their worship “like a knife to destroy those who are deceived.”¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly he characterizes such people in less than favourable terms. In *There is Another Evil that has Come Forth* he refers to “false brethren” (ΖΕΝΟΝΗΥ ἸΝΟΥΧ),¹¹⁹ which he also labels as “new Jews” (ΖΕΝΕΙΟΥΔΑΙ ἸΒΡΡΕ) and “unbelieving heretics” (ΖΕΝΖΑΙΡΕΤΙΚΟΣ ἸΑΠΙΣΤΟΣ), who claim that it is not necessary to celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays.¹²⁰ According to Shenoute, “those who speak that pestilent teaching have corrupted the minds of many brothers, but especially many sisters and many ignorant

¹¹³ Cf. Heb 11.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Col 1:26–27.

¹¹⁵ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 234–35 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43).

¹¹⁶ Cf. Johannes Quasten, “Mysterium tremendum: Eucharistische Frömmigkeitsauffassungen des vierten Jahrhunderts,” in *Vom Christlichen Mysterium: Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von Odo Casel OSB* (ed. Anton Mayer, Johannes Quasten, and Burkhard Neunheuser; Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1951), 66–75.

¹¹⁷ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 235 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43).

¹¹⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 604=DQ 78 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 56).

¹¹⁹ This term is also found in 2 Cor 11:26; Gal 2:4.

¹²⁰ *There is Another Evil That Has Come Forth*, GP 108–109 (Henri Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti [introduction, texte, traduction]: Thèse soutenue à l’École du Louvre,” *Revue égyptologique* 11 [1904]:18).

wretches."¹²¹ In *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, Shenoute polemicises specifically against the Eucharistic practices of “the defiled Melitians” (ΜΗΕΛΙΤΙΑΝΟΣ ΕΤΧΑΔΕ̅Μ) and “everyone who resemble them everywhere.”¹²² Above all, Shenoute accuses these people, whom he claims “obey men rather than God,”¹²³ of a lack of respect for the Eucharist, and opens this particular sermon by stating that “we will speak in the fear of God concerning the fearlessness of those who perform the mystery without fear and trembling.”¹²⁴ Apparently these people had a habit of celebrating the Eucharist in cemeteries, celebrating it several times a day, and consuming the eucharistic elements also apart from the eucharistic celebration proper. Shenoute consequently accuses them of lacking the proper respect for the mystery, considering the eucharistic elements merely as “bodily food and bodily drink, rather than as spiritual food and spiritual drink.”¹²⁵ Shenoute does not stop there, however, but also slanderously states that these heretics not only drink eucharistic wine “until they are drunk” (ϠΑΝΤΟΥΤΕΙΡΕ), but even “until they throw up” (ϠΑΝΤΟΥΚΑΒΟΛ),¹²⁶ generally faulting them for a lack of restraint, and for performing the Eucharist simply because of their love of food and drink.¹²⁷

Also in *I Am Amazed* Shenoute attacks those for whom the Eucharist is of no concern, “as if they are (merely) eating bread and drinking wine,”¹²⁸ and he attacks those who partake of the Eucharist while not acknowledging the divinity of Christ, whom he calls “hypocritical men and true cheaters, false Christians,”¹²⁹ asking them: “Why do you partake of the Holy Mystery? Have you not found bread to eat and wine to drink?”¹³⁰ Shenoute

¹²¹ *There is Another Evil That Has Come Forth*, GP 109 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 18).

¹²² *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 107 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 17).

¹²³ *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 107 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 17).

¹²⁴ *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 106 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 17). For the notion of the fearful aspect of the Eucharist, see, e.g., Quasten, “Mysterium Tremendum”; Theodore, *Letter 1,6* (trans. Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia: The Lives, Rules, and Other Writings of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* [3 vols.; Cistercian Studies Series 45–47; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1980–1982], 3:124); Horsiesios, *Regulations*, 14 (trans. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, 2:201).

¹²⁵ *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 106 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 17).

¹²⁶ *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 107 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 18).

¹²⁷ *We Will Speak in the Fear of God*, GP 107–108 (Guérin, “Sermons inédits de Senouti,” 18).

¹²⁸ *I Am Amazed*, 351=HB 31 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30).

¹²⁹ *I Am Amazed*, 370=HB 36 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 34).

¹³⁰ *I Am Amazed*, 370=HB 36 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 34).

emphasises the special character of the eucharistic elements in relation to common food also elsewhere, stating that “the bread and the water is the life of the bodies of men, but the body and the blood of the Lord is the life of the spiritual man (ΠΩΝῆ ΜῆΝῆΛΤΙΚΟΝ ΝΡΩΜῆ),”¹³¹ and admonishes his hearers not to doubt that the body of Christ in the Eucharist is “the true bread that came from heaven” and, quoting the Gospel of John, that “his body is true food and his blood is true drink.”¹³² Those who deny this, however, “especially those from among us, and not only the pagans, they are more wicked than the dogs and the pigs,”¹³³ exclaims Shenoute, and also connects the rejection of the real presence with the heresy that Christ was not conceived by Mary, branding it as a “new” heresy that has an inner-Christian origin: “Is this not another *new* impiety (ΜῆΝΤΑῤΕΒΗῤ),¹³⁴ having not been revealed among the pagans, for the work of those (people) *always* slanders the Scriptures, but a *new* lawlessness having been uncovered *among us*, namely that Mary did not conceive the Savior, and furthermore, that what we are partaking of is not his body and his blood?”¹³⁵

The real presence of the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist is doubtlessly a question of great concern to Shenoute, and as is the case with the questions of the nature of God and the begetting of the Son, the real presence is not a matter for rational understanding or discussion, as Shenoute rhetorically asks, “do we say that it is bread which we partake of? Is it not a mystery, according to the Scriptures?”¹³⁶ Those who doubt this, asking “how can the body and the blood of the Lord be bread and wine?”¹³⁷ Shenoute associates with Origen, stating that “there are some from among us who say this, as their heart is wounded by the words of

¹³¹ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 235 (cf. Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43. ΝΡΩΜῆ is my own reconstruction. Lefort has Ν...).

¹³² *And It Happened One Day*, AV 235 (cf. Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43). Shenoute quotes John 6:55.

¹³³ *I Am Amazed*, 352=HB 31 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30. Orlandi, however, erroneously reads ΕΝΕΟΥΧΟΟΡ rather than ΕΝΕΥΧΟΟΡ).

¹³⁴ Orlandi, on the basis of HB 35, erroneously reads ΕΥῤΕΒΗῤ, rather than ἈῤΕΒΗῤ. Stephen Davis, citing personal communication with Janet Timbie, correctly reads ἈῤΕΒΗῤ (see Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice*, 280 n.8). Although the Ἀ in HB 35 is faint, which explains Orlandi’s error, my own inspection of a photograph of this leaf confirms the latter reading.

¹³⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 367=HB 35=DT 87 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 34).

¹³⁶ *I Am Amazed*, 352 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30).

¹³⁷ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 233 (Lefort, “Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute,” 43).

Origen.¹³⁸ Shenoute's main reply is the simple Scriptural argument that if God could make man from dust, he would surely also be able to make the eucharistic elements into body and blood.¹³⁹ What is interesting, however, is how Shenoute compares the creation of man, as recounted in Genesis 2, with the ritual transformation of the eucharistic bread and wine through the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit, for he explains that just as God breathed "a breath of life" into the face of man, who subsequently "became a living soul,"¹⁴⁰ this is also how it is with the eucharistic elements:

Being placed upon the holy table of the Lord and resting upon it, bread and wine is their name, but when they are pronounced upon in that fearful Eucharist, and when the Lord God sends down upon them his Holy Spirit from heaven, it is not bread and it is not wine from this moment, but it is the body and the blood of the Lord. (Shenoute, *And It Happened One Day*, AV 234)¹⁴¹

Moreover, some of the heretics confronted by Shenoute in *I Am Amazed* are said to hold the heretical notion that the eucharistic elements are not really "the body of Christ and his blood, but only a type (τύπος)."¹⁴² Those who reject the real presence, in any way at all, however, are in Shenoute's eyes not only "more wicked than the beasts," but even "more wicked than the impure demons."¹⁴³ Especially objectionable is it if such a person "is a presbyter or a cleric according to his rank in the priesthood, and he does

¹³⁸ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 233 (Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43).

¹³⁹ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 233 (Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43). Moreover, Shenoute also argues that if Jesus says "This is my body" (Mark 14:22), "this is my blood" (Mark 14:24), as Scripture says he does, who is to say that this is not so? (*And It Happened One Day*, AV 233–34 [Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43]).

¹⁴⁰ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 234 (Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43). Cf. Gen 2:7.

¹⁴¹ Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43. See also *I Am Amazed*, 350=HB 30 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30).

¹⁴² *I Am Amazed*, 348=DQ 29–30=HB 30 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30). Elizabeth Clark argues that Shenoute is here confronting Evagrian Origenism (see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 156–57). For a critique of Clark's conclusion that the Origenism confronted by Shenoute was specifically Evagrian, see Mark Sheridan, "The Modern Historiography of Early Egyptian Monasticism," in *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture. Atti del simposio "Testi e temi nella tradizione del monachesimo cristiano" per il 50° anniversario dell'Istituto Monastico di Sant' Anselmo, Roma, 28 maggio–r° giugno 2002* (ed. Maciej Bielawski and Daniël Hombergen; SA 140, *Analecta Monastica* 8; Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo/Herder, 2004), 209–12.

¹⁴³ *I Am Amazed*, 353=HB 31 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30).

not believe that God can do everything.”¹⁴⁴ In the final analysis, those who reject this do not have the Holy Spirit, for “it is an impossibility for a man speaking in the Holy Spirit ever to say that the Holy Mystery is not the body and the blood of Christ. And it is impossible for a man to say that the Holy Mystery is the body and the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God, if not in a Holy Spirit.”¹⁴⁵ The mystery of the real presence of Christ’s flesh and blood in the Eucharist should simply be accepted, with all due respect and reverence. For all the objectionable eucharistic practices mentioned by Shenoute have one thing in common—in his eyes they all show a lack of respect for the mystery, and the Lord of the mystery.

Since the Eucharistic ritual is for Shenoute the main locus of the mystery of faith, it is of profound importance that it is treated with respect, officiated in the right way, and, not least, by the right people, for the people who are to officiate and partake of the Eucharist must have the correct, orthodox, notions of its nature and significance in order for it to have its salvific effect. Shenoute is therefore adamant that the Eucharist should not be taken lightly, and not by those who doubt its real significance or who are Christians in name only, while he curses those who insincerely “receive from the Holy Mystery while being of two minds.”¹⁴⁶

Conclusion: True Knowledge Only From True Texts and Teachers

In light of a monastic theological discourse as heavily dependent upon references to a collectively sanctioned corpus of writings and spiritual authority as Shenoute’s, as reflected in the frequent use of quotations, allusions, and references both to Scripture and various champions of orthodoxy, it is small wonder that claims of additional knowledge or sources of knowledge in the form of additional authoritative books could potentially constitute serious challenges to the existing authority. For the use, especially among his own monastics, of extracanonical literature as authoritative Scripture would seriously undermine Shenoute’s authoritative rhetoric based on quotations and allusions to canonical Scripture as the ultimate authority. It is thus easily understandable when he, for example, expresses the

¹⁴⁴ *I Am Amazed*, 354=HB 31 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 30).

¹⁴⁵ *I Am Amazed*, 383=HB 39 (cf. Orlandi, *Shenute Contra Origenistas*, 36).

¹⁴⁶ *As I Sat on a Mountain*, HB 263 (Johannes Leipoldt, ed., *Sinuthii Archimandritae: Vita et Opera Omnia* [3 vols.; assisted by Walter E. Crum; CSCO 41, 42, 73, *Scriptores Coptici* 1, 2, 5; Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1906–1913], 3:45).

differences between those who teach on the basis of the true Scriptures and those who do not, by comparing them to people who build their houses on rock or sand respectively, and asks “which one of them shall we rely upon?”¹⁴⁷ While from Shenoute’s perspective Scripture constituted a firm basis of authority, apocryphal books and their purveyors could threaten to erode the very foundations of his own teaching and power.

Through the lense offered us by Shenoute’s writings, we really do not get anywhere close to his opponents and their actual views on the issues he raises, but what we do get is important insight into Shenoute’s own attitudes with regard to diverging opinions and additional or different sources of authority. Being, as he was, a rather authoritarian community leader, leading what seems to have been a very strict monastic organization, it is both clear and understandable that he did not take lightly to any kind of threat to his authority. The vehemence of Shenoute’s opposition to apocryphal books is moreover reflected in the tone of his anti-heretical discourse, where he does not shirk from outright abuse, as for example when he, in *As I Sat on a Mountain*, compares his pagan and heretical opponents to flies and rhetorically asks: “Will men ask animals about mysteries and secrets of God?”¹⁴⁸ According to Shenoute one might indeed just as well ask a fly as a pagan or a heretic, for, as he puts it, “if there is someone who wants to ask a pagan (ΟΥΡΕΛΛΗΝ) or a heretic (ΟΥΡΑΙΡΕΤΙΚΟΣ) about a thing, let him ask that small animal that is (of) his nature.”¹⁴⁹

For Shenoute, as we have seen, the true mysteries and secrets of God are not accessible through heretical teachers or books, but exclusively through correct interpretation of the (true) Scriptures, as made by the approved, orthodox, saints and leaders of the Church. Interestingly, Shenoute did not completely limit his proof-texts to writings in the strict sense, however, for we have evidence that he could also use embroidered textiles in this way, as he does in *And It Happened One Day*, when he asks his hearers to listen to the words of “the braiders and the weavers

¹⁴⁷ *Who Speaks Through the Prophet*, ZM 64 (Henri Munier, *Manuscripts coptes* [Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire 9201–9304; Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1916], 137).

¹⁴⁸ *As I Sat on a Mountain*, XN 231 (Leipoldt, *Sinuthii Archimandritae*, 3:49).

¹⁴⁹ *As I Sat on a Mountain*, XN 230 (Leipoldt, *Sinuthii Archimandritae*, 3:49).

or the embroiderers,"¹⁵⁰ whom he cites in support of his claim that Mary bore God.¹⁵¹

For Shenoute there are, as we have seen, acceptable, true mysteries, and there are unacceptable, false mysteries. He presents himself, of course, as a representative of the former, standing on the shoulders of the giants constituted by the prophets, apostles, saints, and the Alexandrian archbishops, while warning his hearers against the false mysteries. We have also seen that he especially warns against claims to higher, or additional, knowledge, and that he consequently not only seeks to circumscribe the sources of knowledge available to his flock, but also to outline certain limits to what questions they should enquire into. His own use of mystery discourse he reserves to two main themes, namely the mystery of Christ and the ritual mystery of the Eucharist. With regard to both of these he struggles against, on the one hand, what we could term "rationalists," i.e. those who are not willing to accept the reality of the mystery of Christ's incarnation and the real presence of his body and blood in the Eucharist, and, on the other hand, against those who are too "esoterically" inclined, i.e., those who would multiply the mysteries of creation and who refer to, teach, memorize, and accept apocryphal writings, from which they also take their inspiration.

In conclusion it is also clear that Shenoute downplays the salvific importance of knowledge. His discourse is one of power. One should fear the power of God, and consequently one should show great respect for the eucharistic mystery and the mystery of faith in general. In the final analysis, faith not only in God, but also in Shenoute and his understanding of the mystery on the basis of what he regarded as the true Scriptures, rather than additional inquiries and trust in other authorities, was what was required. As Shenoute puts it, "if you have faith, then you have the fullness of the mystery."¹⁵² If you do not have faith, then you do not have hope in the mystery and the Lord of the Mystery."¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ For this translation of the terms $\mu\alpha\chi\alpha\kappa\iota\kappa\iota$, $\pi\lambda\omicron\eta\mu\alpha\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$, and $\pi\omicron\iota\kappa\iota\lambda\tau\eta\varsigma$, cf. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice*, 288. Cf. also Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 44 n. 17.

¹⁵¹ *And It Happened One Day*, AV 232–33 (Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 42). For a discussion of this passage, see Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice*, 74, 170. See also Davis' treatment of the theological significance of coptic textiles in *ibid.*, 154–80; Stephen J. Davis, "Fashioning a Divine Body: Coptic Christology and Ritualized Dress," *HTR* 98/3 (2005): 335–62.

¹⁵² Cf. Col 1:26–27.

¹⁵³ Shenoute, *And It Happened One Day*, AV 234–35 (Lefort, "Catéchèse christologique de Chenoute," 43).

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MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN PAUL

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When I first began working on the topic assigned to me by the editors of this volume, I immediately thought of looking for a way to use some of our esteemed jubilarian's work as a "segue," specifically to see if Einar Thomassen's studies of Valentinian Gnosticism could in any way shed light on the notion of "mystery" in the Pauline writings. I looked first at his article in the Festschrift for Wolf-Peter Funk, "*Gos. Philip* 67:27–30: Not 'in a mystery.'"¹ The passage studied reads, "The Lord [did] everything in a mystery. . . ."² The phrase "in a mystery" (ἐν μυστηρίῳ) occurs in 1 Cor 2:7. But Thomassen rightly translates the Coptic ρῆνοϥμϥστῆριον adverbially, equivalent to Greek μυστηριωδῶς; so the possible parallel in 1 Corinthians disappears. And, in fact, there is no obvious use of Paul anywhere in the *Gospel of Philip*.

On the other hand, the influence of Paul is very prominent in other Valentinian texts. In his important book, *The Spiritual Seed*,³ Thomassen cites an example in the *Gospel of Truth*. The relevant passage occurs in *Gos. Truth* 18,11–21, which Thomassen translates as follows:

This gospel about the one who was searched for was revealed to those who were perfect through the mercy of the Father: the hidden mystery, Jesus, the Christ. Through him he enlightened those who were in darkness because of oblivion. He enlightened them and showed them a way, and that way was the truth that he taught them.

Thomassen remarks that this passage "makes use of the early Christian 'Revelation-Schema,' . . . Christ is God's mystery, hidden to previous generations, but revealed at the present moment in history." In a footnote

¹ Einar Thomassen, "*Gos. Philip* 67:27–30: Not 'in a mystery,'" in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNHE 7; Québec: Université Laval/ Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 925–39.

² *Ibid.*, 925. Thomassen cites here the translation by Wesley Isenberg in Bentley Layton, ed., *Gospel according to Thomas, Gospel according to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes* (vol. 1 of *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7; NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 177.

³ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

he cites Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7–10; Eph 3:9; Col 1:26, and studies by Rudolf Bultmann, Nils Dahl, and David Hellholm.⁴

Paul's relationship to Gnosticism has been assessed in various ways by scholars. Bultmann argued that Gnostic motifs had entered Hellenistic Christianity even before Paul, and he argued that Paul was certainly influenced by Gnostic motifs.⁵ For example, he argued that Paul interpreted the death of Christ "in the categories of the Gnostic myth, regarding his death as unified with his incarnation and resurrection or exaltation."⁶ Of course Bultmann also argued that Paul's theology included non-Gnostic or even anti-Gnostic elements.

The anti-Gnostic interpretation of Paul was taken up by two of Bultmann's students, Walter Schmithals and Ulrich Wilckens.⁷ They argued that Paul's opponents in Corinth were Gnostics, and Paul argued vigorously against their theology. I took up their arguments in my 1968 dissertation, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*,⁸ and argued that Gnosticism was not to be found at all in Paul's Corinthian correspondence. Instead, the opponents of Paul in Corinth advocated a wisdom mysticism akin to that of Philo of Alexandria. Involved in the discussion between Paul and his opponents is the use of the term "mystery."

It used to be argued that Paul's use of the term "mystery" was influenced by the Graeco-Roman mystery cults, a position that is still upheld in some quarters. But that idea was definitively laid to rest with the publication of Raymond Brown's slim but very important work, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery"*.⁹ He finds that the New Testament usage should be interpreted against the background of the concept of "mysteries" in post-exilic biblical writings, especially Daniel; the Pseudepigrapha, especially the Enoch literature; and the Qumran literature. I have adopted

⁴ Ibid., 149. On the Valentinian Gnostic use of Paul see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (vol. 1; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 164–83.

⁶ Ibid., 298.

⁷ Walter Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth: Eine Untersuchung zu den Korintherbriefen* (FRLANT 66; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956, 1965, 1969); Ulrich Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur 1 Kor und 2 BHT 26*; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1959).

⁸ Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism* (SBLDS 12; Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973).

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Facet Books, Biblical Series 12; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

his approach in my work on Paul. In my view, Paul's religious worldview reflects an apocalyptic orientation common in Second Temple Judaism in Palestine.

Paul uses the term "mystery" in only two of his letters. It occurs six times in 1 Corinthians and twice in Romans. In what follows I want to take up (1) the use of the term "mystery" in 1 Cor 1:10–4:21 and Rom 16; (2) in 1 Cor 13 and 14; (3) and in 1 Cor 15 and Rom 11. I shall also discuss (4) Paul's references to "secrets." In my concluding remarks I shall discuss the issue of esotericism in Paul's congregations.

"Mystery" in 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21

The first occurrence of the term "mystery" in 1 Cor 1:10–4:21 is at 2:1, where there is a variant reading attested in a number of important ancient manuscripts: μαρτύριον. The RSV translation adopts this reading ("testimony"), but the NRSV adopts the reading of Nestle-Aland,²⁷ μυστήριον, "mystery," which in my view is more probable. The second occurrence is at 2:7 and the third at 4:1. Scholars often tend to treat these occurrences separately. That is the case, for example, in the recent works by Markus Bockmuehl¹⁰ and Benjamin Gladd.¹¹ The passage in 2:6ff. is a crucial one, where Paul says that he imparts wisdom among the mature, the "hidden wisdom of God in a mystery" (Θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην). Unless one understands this passage and the two others in the context of Paul's defense of his apostleship in 1:10–4:21, the meaning of Paul's language in 1 Cor 2:6ff. will likely be misconstrued. That is a point that I made some years ago in an article on Paul's wisdom language in 1 Corinthians.¹²

Paul begins his apostolic *apologia*¹³ with the news that he had heard from "Chloe's people" that there is quarreling and dissension in the

¹⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (WUNT 36; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990; see pp. 157–66).

¹¹ Benjamin Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion: The Use of Mystery in Daniel and Second Temple Judaism with Its Bearing on First Corinthians* (BZNW 160; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); see chapters 4 and 5, pp. 108–90.

¹² Birger A. Pearson, "Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Paul," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Robert L. Wilken; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 43–66. That article has been drawn on in the following discussion.

¹³ On 1 Cor 1:10–4:21 as an apostolic *apologia* see Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 281–305.

congregation, involving factions attached to various teachers: “What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1:12).¹⁴ It is clear from what follows that there are essentially two factions: Paul people and Apollos people. While there might have been some immigrants to Corinth who had encountered Peter (Cephas) somewhere and were impressed by his teaching, there can hardly have been a “Christ party” in Corinth. Paul’s quarrel in this passage is with the Apollos party, as is made clear in chapter 3.

The focus of the dispute between the two factions is “wisdom,” and Paul sets up a contrast between human wisdom, which he attributes to his opponents, and divine wisdom based on divine revelation. The first occurrence of the term “wisdom” is at 1:17, where Paul says that when Christ sent him to preach the gospel he did so “not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” The word of the cross is folly for the worldly-wise who are destined to perish, but to the elect it is the power of God that leads to salvation (1:18–31). When Paul came to Corinth he did not proclaim the “mystery of God”¹⁵ in lofty words of wisdom, but “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” that their faith “might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (2:1–5). The “mystery” that Paul preached was nothing other than “Christ crucified” (1:23).

But then Paul suddenly appears to “shift gears” in the following section, beginning with 2:6:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and (ἐν μυστηρίῳ) hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (2:6–8)

Irenaeus reports that the Valentinian Gnostics used 1 Cor 2:6 as a proof text for their assertion that their secret wisdom tradition derived from the apostle Paul. Clement of Alexandria reports the same claim, adding that Paul is said to have communicated his pneumatic teaching to an otherwise unknown Theudas, who communicated it to Valentinus, and

¹⁴ Quotations from the NT are usually taken from the RSV.

¹⁵ As noted above I think that μυστήριον is the correct reading, rather than the v.l. μαρτύριον. The context certainly supports μυστήριον. So also Gladd, *Revealing the Mystery*, 123–25.

Valentinus to his initiated disciples.¹⁶ Of course, no historian would take the Valentinian claims seriously. Nevertheless, the statements made by the church fathers provide interesting testimony to how some second-century Christians interpreted Paul.

Some scholars, e.g. Bockmuehl, interpret 1 Cor 2:6 to mean that Paul expands his message with “deeper instruction in the full hidden dimensions” of divine wisdom for mature Christians in Corinth who are ready for “solid food” (3:2). Gladd rightly rejects this view with the claim that the wisdom enunciated in chapter 1 is the same as the wisdom of 2:6–16. “The ‘hidden wisdom’ (2:7) is none other than the cross.”¹⁷

Paul uses Jewish apocalyptic traditions in interpreting the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as part of God’s redemptive plan, the mystery of salvation, hidden from all human and demonic authorities but now revealed to Paul through the Spirit (2:10; cf. also Rom 16:25).¹⁸ Use of the book of Daniel is especially prominent in the development of Paul’s argument in 2:6–16.¹⁹ Paul states that “unspiritual” (ψυχικοί) people looking for human wisdom are unable to grasp this divine wisdom; it is discerned only by “spiritual” (πνευματικοί) people endowed with God’s Spirit (2:13–14).²⁰

It is clear from the larger context that Paul’s use of the terms “mature” (*teleios*) and “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) derive from Paul’s opponents. Paul uses their terminology, derived from Hellenistic Jewish traditions, and reinterprets it, turning it back against them. Paul says that he could not address the Corinthians as “spiritual” people, but only as “immature” (νήπιοι) and “fleshly” (σαρκικοί) people, as indicated by their quarrelsome behavior in the community (3:1–4). It is clear from Paul’s argument in chapter 3 that his opponents’ (mis)use of such terms as “mature” and “spiritual” derives from teachings introduced by Apollos, who had arrived at Corinth from Ephesus (Acts 18:27–28). Apollos is described by the author of Acts as a Jew from Alexandria, “an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures” (Acts 18:24), and Apollos’ learning and eloquence apparently

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.2.1 and Clement, *Stromateis* 7.17, cited by Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*, 4–5, 11–12.

¹⁷ Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 117–19.

¹⁸ Rom 16:25 is probably part of a secondary ending to the epistle, added by a later editor. But it reflects “a Christian use of *mysterion* consonant with Paul’s theology” (Brown, *The Semitic Background*, 51).

¹⁹ Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 129–36.

²⁰ On this terminology see Pearson, *Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, ch. 4, pp. 27–43.

impressed a large segment of the Corinthian community. I have treated extensively elsewhere Apollos' role in the introduction of Alexandrian Jewish wisdom to the Corinthians, and need not elaborate my arguments here.²¹ It is clear from Paul's statements that he does not think highly of the "wisdom" embraced by partisans of Apollos in Corinth.

In Paul's apocalyptically oriented understanding of God's mystery of salvation, Paul uses the typical contrast found in apocalyptic Judaism between "this age" and the "age to come." But for Paul, while the resurrection of the Messiah signals the beginning of the "age to come," "this age" will only come to an end with the parousia of Christ. Those "in Christ" are thus living in both ages, an interim period equivalent to the Jewish concept of the "days of the Messiah." It would appear that the Corinthians claim to have experienced an exalted spiritual status as a result of their wisdom, something that is indicated by what Paul says in 4:8ff.

Paul sets up an elaborate contrast between the roles played by Apollos and himself in Corinth. Paul "planted" the church in Corinth; Apollos "watered" (3:5-6). Like a master builder Paul "laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it" (3:10). Whatever is built upon the foundation, whether "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw" each builder's work will become manifest on the final "Day," when it will be tested by fire (3:12-15). Paul tells the Corinthians that they are "God's temple," and "if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him" (3:16-18). He admonishes them that if anyone thinks he is "wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise," for "the wisdom of this world is folly with God" (3:19; cf. 1:20-25).

Paul then sums up his role as a "steward of the mysteries of God" (4:1). I would argue that Paul's use of the plural in this passage (οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ) is an example of his common practice of using an "apostolic plural" to refer to himself. Paul's understanding of his role as an interpreter of the divine mysteries revealed to him by God is comparable to the role of the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran.²² For Paul, the divine mystery par excellence is God's plan of redemption involving the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (2:6-16). But other divine mysteries have been revealed to him as well, such as the "mystery" involving the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:51f.).

²¹ Pearson, "Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation"; idem, "Philo, Gnosis, and the New Testament," ch. 11 in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 165-82.

²² Brown, *The Semitic Background*, 45; Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 182.

Paul then goes on to admonish his people with a rebuke filled with irony: "Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you" (4:8). This is undoubtedly a reference to the spiritual status claimed by the Corinthians. Operative in the background of Paul's discussion is the Hellenistic-Jewish conception of the sage as one who is treading the "royal way" of wisdom that Philo of Alexandria speaks of in his writings.²³ Paul sarcastically contrasts the Corinthian's spiritual status with his own lowly status as a "fool for Christ's sake," subject to all manner of physical suffering in the course of his apostolic ministry (4:9–13).

Paul continues his apostolic *apologia* with a reminder that his people are his "beloved children." While they may have countless guides, they only have one father. Paul appeals to them to become "imitators" of him (4:14–16). He concludes his discourse with a promise to come and visit them soon (4:19–21).

To sum up: Paul's notion of "mystery" is closely bound up with divine revelation, and has to do with eschatological events prophesied in the scriptures, centered upon the eschatological significance of the death and resurrection of Christ. An important part of Paul's role as a "steward of the mysteries" is his interpretation of the scriptures as given to him in revelatory experiences by the Spirit of God. His use of the term "mystery" in 1 Cor 1–4 involves conflicting interpretations of "wisdom" among his Corinthian people. Paul finds himself obliged to defend his apostolic ministry against detractors inspired by rival teachers, notably Apollos.

"Mystery" in 1 Corinthians 13–14

The larger context of the occurrence of "mystery" in 1 Cor 13 and 14 is Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts, which begins in chapter 12. There Paul emphasizes that the community's common confession that "Jesus is Lord" is inspired by the Holy Spirit (12:3). But the same Spirit gives to individual members of the community various gifts, and though different people have different gifts all are members of one "body of Christ" (12:27–31). All of the various members should "desire the higher gifts" (12:31).

²³ E.g. *Migration of Abraham* 28. See my discussion in "Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation," 46–47.

But then Paul interrupts his discussion of spiritual gifts with his famous “ode to love,” which begins as follows:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love (ἀγάπη), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries (τὰ μυστήρια πάντα) and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (13:1–2)

The use of the term “mystery” in this passage is unspecific. What Paul means is that knowledge of all possible divine mysteries would be meaningless if he lacked the supreme gift, love. The phrase “all mysteries” is reminiscent of Enoch’s confession to God, “All your mysteries are deep and numberless” (1 *En.* 63:3).²⁴

Paul concludes his encomium on love with this remark on the three highest spiritual gifts, “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Paul then continues his discussion of spiritual gifts with an extended discussion of glossolalia, one of the spiritual gifts he had already enumerated (12:10, 30; cf. 13:1):

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit (πνεύματι δὲ λαλεῖ μυστήρια). On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. (14:1–2)

He then goes on to allow for tongue-speaking in the church, but only if what is uttered is accompanied by an interpretation. If there is no one to interpret, the prospective tongue-speaker should be quiet: “let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God” (14:28). The main consideration is that “all things be done for edification” (14:12). Paul concludes his discussion with his command that all things be done in church “decently and in order” (14:40).

What does Paul mean when he says that the tongue speaker “utters mysteries in the Spirit?” Does it mean, simply, “he speaks mysteriously?” Or are the “mysteries” referred to here “hidden truths” inspired by the Spirit?²⁵

²⁴ Quoted in Brown, *The Semitic Background*, 46.

²⁵ These are the options discussed by Brown, *ibid.*, 47.

The “mysteries” here are unspecified, but the reference to “tongues of angels” in 13:1 may indicate that Paul’s statement should be understood against the background of Jewish apocalyptic and early Jewish mysticism.²⁶

We can compare Paul’s own mystical experience briefly recounted in 2 Cor 12. Certain opponents in the Corinthian church have disparaged Paul for his weaknesses. Paul reluctantly makes reference to “visions and revelations of the Lord” that he has experienced. He recounts a mystical experience that he had had “fourteen years ago,” when he was “caught up to the third heaven,” “caught up to Paradise,” either “in the body or out of the body.” There he heard “things that cannot be told (ἄρρητα ῥήματα), which man may not utter” (2 Cor 12:1–4).²⁷

Paul does not use the term “mystery” in this passage. What he saw in Paradise is not stated, and what he heard is unutterable, part of a personal experience. For Paul himself, a “mystery” is a divine revelation to be communicated openly by the apostle to his congregation. It is conceivable that what Paul heard in Paradise has to do with the language of the angels resident there. The “mysteries in the Spirit” uttered by the Corinthian tongue-speakers may also have to do with angelic tongues that they claimed as part of their own mystical experiences. Paul insists that their tongues be interpreted to the community if they are allowed in church. Otherwise, they should keep silent.

“Mystery” in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 11

As noted above, the supreme “mystery” of salvation centered in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ has to do with the eschatological inauguration of the “age to come.” The “mysteries” revealed by Paul in 1 Cor 15 and Rom 11 have to do with the end of “this age” involving eschatological events associated with the parousia of Christ: the resurrection of the dead and the final redemption of Israel.

²⁶ This is the view of Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 170.

²⁷ Paul locates “Paradise” in the “third heaven,” probably the third of seven. Paradise is located in the third heaven in 2 *En.* 8:1–3, the third of ten; cf. also *Apoc. Mos.* 40:2. Cf. the Gnostic *Apoc. Paul* (NHC V,2). The author of that work takes Paul from the third heaven all the way up to the tenth.

Paul unfolds the mystery of the resurrection in the following way:

Lo, I tell you a mystery (ἰδοὺ μυστήριον ὑμῖν λέγω). We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. (15:51–54)

Chapter 15 as a whole is devoted to the theme of the general resurrection of the dead. Paul's discussion is mainly focused on answering the claim of some in the Corinthian church that "there is no resurrection of the dead" (15:12). He begins by recounting the essentials of the gospel that he has preached in Corinth, that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures," that he was buried, and "raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3–4). He recounts the appearances of the risen Christ to various people, including finally Paul himself (15:5–8), an event that changed him from being a persecutor of the church to an apostle of Christ (15:9–11).

Paul then answers the claim of some in Corinth that "there is no resurrection of the dead," grounding his argument on the resurrection of Christ. Christ is the "first fruits" of the general resurrection that will happen with the parousia (15:23). After further arguments and admonitions he addresses an important issue in answer to his opponents: what sort of body will believers have when they are raised from the dead? (15:35–50).

What did his Corinthian opponents believe when they insisted that "there is no resurrection of the dead"? It is highly unlikely that they had no belief in an afterlife of any sort. The most probable assumption is that they affirmed a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and regarded a resurrection of the physical body as superfluous, if not repugnant. A key biblical text involved in such a belief is Gen 2:7, which Paul quotes in 15:45. Alexandrian Jews, notably Philo, interpreted Gen 2:7 to mean that man is a composite being of a mortal body fashioned from the earth and an immortal spirit or mind breathed into the human body by God. The physical body dies but the inbreathed spirit is immortal, and lives on after physical death. Such a doctrine is likely to have been introduced into the Corinthian church by the Alexandrian Apollos.²⁸

²⁸ See my discussion of 1 Cor 15 in chapter 3 of *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, 15–26. Cf. also my discussion of 1 Cor 1–4, above.

As to the kind of body that is raised in the resurrection, it is a “celestial” body (15:40). At death the mortal body is a perishable body, “sown” in the earth (15:42). “It is sown a physical (ψυχικόν), it is raised a spiritual (πνευματικόν) body” (15:44). Paul then quotes (rather paraphrases) Gen 2:7: “Thus it is written: *‘The first man Adam became a living being’* (ἐγένετο ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος Ἄδαμ εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν); the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (15:45).²⁹ Paul presents here a kind of eschatological “targum” on Gen 2:7, commenting further that the physical Adam was first, a man from earth, of dust (χοϊκός); the second Adam (Christ) is “from heaven.” “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (15:47–49). Paul then virtually concedes to his opponents that the mortal body will not be raised: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (15:50). Nevertheless, he insists that what is raised is raised as a body, but imperishable. This is what has been revealed to him in the “mystery” (quoted above) that he now communicates to his Corinthian people.

The resurrection will occur “at the last trumpet,” i.e. at the Parousia of Christ. The dead will be raised imperishable, and those who are still alive will be transformed. “For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (15:53).

The mystery that Paul conveys here is reminiscent of texts from Jewish apocalyptic literature that describe the eschatological transformation of the righteous in terms of donning “garments of glory.” A good example is found in *1 En.* 62:25–26:

And the righteous and the chosen will have arisen from the earth, and have ceased to cast down their faces, and have put on the garment of glory. And this will be your garment, the garment of life from the Lord of Spirits; and your garments will not wear out, and your glory will not fade in the presence of the Lord of Spirits.³⁰

Paul’s revelation of the mystery of the resurrection has a number of parallels with a passage from an earlier epistle of his, *1 Thessalonians*, where he is consoling members of the church in Thessalonica who are mourning those who have died:

²⁹ The actual text of Gen 2:7c is given here in italics.

³⁰ This text and several others are cited by Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 254–60. The translation given here is from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 81.

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord (ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου), that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. (4:15–17)

We note that Paul does not use the term “mystery” here. Instead, he refers to a “word of the Lord.” Since there is no such word attributed to Christ in our written sources, it can easily be supposed that the “word of the Lord” here is something that he has received as a personal revelation from the Lord. In that case, what Paul says here in 1 Thessalonians can easily be seen as equivalent to a “mystery,” such as the one in 1 Cor 15. As already noted, a “mystery” to Paul, as “steward of the mysteries,” is something revealed to him and communicated to his congregation.

Both passages deal with a signal event of the end time, associated with the end of “this age.” In 1 Thessalonians he tells his people that, when the trumpet sounds and Christ comes to take his people with him to heaven, the dead will be raised and then those who are living will join the resurrected ones in their journey with Christ to heaven. In 1 Corinthians he tells his people that, when the trumpet sounds and Christ comes, the dead will be raised “incorruptible,” and those remaining alive will be “changed.” The new information in 1 Corinthians has to do with the nature of the resurrection body.

Paul presents another end-time “mystery” in Romans, his last letter, this mystery having to do with the final redemption of Israel:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren (οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμας ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο): a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”: “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” (11:25–27)

Bockmuehl refers to 1 Cor 15:51ff. and Rom 11:25ff. in a section of his book that he calls “New Doctrine as μυστήριον.” He points out the structural similarities between the two passages. Paul’s disclosure of the mystery follows (1) a lengthy preceding argument, about resurrection and Israel’s salvation respectively. Then the mystery is announced (2.1) and its content briefly stated (2.2). Paul then situates the disclosure within the context of eschatological tradition (3) and Scripture (4).³¹

³¹ Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 171–72. He presents a synoptic table with three columns, the third one with 1 Thess 4:13–17.

In Romans the disclosure of the mystery follows upon a lengthy discussion of the situation of Israel in God's plan, beginning with his lament over Israel's unbelief, contrasting the Gentiles' faith with Israel's unbelief (Rom 9–10). He raises the question, has God rejected his people, and answers firmly in the negative. Israel's unbelief has opened the way to salvation for the Gentiles. He sets up a metaphor likening Israel to an olive tree with broken branches, with wild shoots (the Gentiles) grafted in their place. He then allows for the possibility that the natural branches can be grafted back into their own olive tree (11:1–24).

Paul concedes that “at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (11:5), a remnant that includes Paul himself; but the majority of Israel is “hardened” (11:7). The “mystery” that Paul then discloses explains the “hardening” of the larger part of Israel as opening the way for the salvation of Gentiles, construed as an eschatological event. But “when the full number of the Gentiles come in . . . all Israel will be saved.” The ultimate salvation of “all Israel” is God's own action, associated with the parousia of Christ prophesied in Scripture: “as it is written, ‘the Deliverer will come from Zion . . .’” (Isa 59:20).

That “all Israel has a share in the world to come” is a well-known rabbinic dictum (*m. Sanh.* 10.1), certainly familiar to Paul the Pharisee. But for Paul, the redemption of “all Israel” is an eschatological event associated with the parousia of Christ. Paul concludes that even if most of the Jews are “enemies of God” as regards the gospel, they are nevertheless “beloved for the sake of their forefathers” as regards election, because “the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” (11:28–29). Paul then praises the depth of the riches and wisdom of God and his inscrutable judgments, and concludes this section of his letter with a doxology: “To him be glory for ever. Amen” (11:33–36).

“Secrets” in Paul

Paul treats “secrecy” and “secrets” rather infrequently in his letters. The Greek root *krupt-* occurs three times in 1 Corinthians, once in 2 Corinthians, and twice in Romans. We have already encountered one occurrence in 1 Cor 2:7, where Paul speaks of the wisdom of God that is “hidden” (*ἀποκεκρυμμένην*) from the rulers of the world. At 1 Cor 4:5 Paul says that when the Lord comes he will “bring to light the things now hidden in darkness (*φωτίζει τὰ κρυπτά τοῦ σκότους*).” And at 1 Cor 14:25, he says that, when an unbeliever comes to church, “the secrets of his heart are disclosed” (*τὰ κρυπτά τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ φανερά γίνεται*) by what is said by the congregation's prophets.

At 2 Cor 4:2 Paul says that he has “renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways” (ἀπειπάμεθα τὰ κρυπτὰ τῆς αἰσχύνης),” choosing instead to present the truth openly. The context here is a defense of his apostleship against accusations of certain detractors who have come to Corinth to undermine his ministry. They are the ones who are using underhanded ways to deceive the Corinthians.

At Rom 2:16 Paul makes reference to the day when “God judges the secrets of men (τὰ κρυπτὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων) by Christ Jesus.” In a discussion of circumcision in Rom 2 Paul argues that “true circumcision” is not something external or physical. With a probable allusion to the prophet Jeremiah (4:4; 9:25) Paul says that “he is a Jew who is one inwardly (ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαίος), and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (2:29).

It is to be noted that in all of these instances except one the “secrets” that Paul refers to are secrets kept by other people. The one exception is the wisdom of the cross that God had kept secret until the appointed time. As for Paul himself, he has no secrets at all. The “mysteries” that he conveys to his congregations are conveyed openly to all. In Paul’s congregations, including the Corinthian one, there is no special group of “mature” people capable of receiving higher wisdom.³²

Concluding observation: esotericism in Paul

In his essay in a volume of essays on secrecy and concealment in Mediterranean and Near Eastern religions, Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa makes the following statement: “Christianity was born and first grew in a world in which esotericism, religious as well as philosophical, was rife.” He points to the various practices of religious groups in keeping certain beliefs and/or cultic practices secret, and asserts that this was the case all around the Mediterranean, as well as throughout the cultures of the Near East.³³ Stroumsa stresses that, in the case of early Judaism and Christianity, the esoteric dimensions were a matter of teachings, not cult. In the case of earliest Christianity Stroumsa cites 1 Cor 2:7 as a reference to esoteric

³² See discussion of 1 Cor 2:6ff, above.

³³ Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, “From Esotericism to Mysticism in Early Christianity,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 289–309, here 291.

doctrines meant to be shared within an exclusive group, but hidden from the majority.³⁴

In our survey of Paul's use of the term "mystery" we have seen that 1 Cor 2:7 should be taken in the larger context of Paul's discussion with his opponents. For Paul, the "mystery" hidden by God until now has to do with the redemptive crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, which is the heart of the gospel that Paul preaches.

In our survey of Paul's references to secrecy in his letters, we noted that Paul had no secrets at all. The "mysteries" revealed to him by God were communicated openly to all in his congregations. Rudolf Meyer concludes his discussion of the root *krupt-* in the *Theological Wordbook* with the following comment: "The concept of the hidden does not lead in the NT to esotericism. It leads to world mission."³⁵

That is certainly the case with Paul.

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³⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

³⁵ *TDNT* 3:977.

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MYSTÈRE ET MYSTÈRES DANS LES ACTES DE THOMAS

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Seuls des cinq grands Actes apostoliques anciens à nous être parvenus en entier, les *Actes de Thomas* (ci-après Ac Thom) sont connus par une version grecque et une version syriaque¹, ainsi que par divers remaniements dans d'autres langues orientales et en latin². Bien que l'accord soit loin d'être fait sur ce point, on considère généralement que le syriaque est la langue originale dans laquelle les Ac Thom furent composés, même si les manuscrits syriaques qui nous sont parvenus sont loin de conserver la forme première de l'œuvre³. Les Ac Thom font partie d'un « cycle

¹ Éditions : William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries with English Translations and Notes* (2 vols. ; London : Williams and Norgate, 1871), 1 : 172–333 (syriaque) ; Maximilien Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (II, 2 ; Leipzig : Hermann Mendelssohn, 1903), 99–291 (grec) ; traduction française : Paul-Hubert Poirier et Yves Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », dans *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (éd. François Bovon et Pierre Geoltrain ; 2 vols. ; BP 442 ; Paris : Gallimard, 1997), 1 : 1321–470 (syriaque) ; André-Jean Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas : Traduction française et notes critiques* (COR 6 ; Genève : Patrick Cramer, 1983), 41–117 (grec) ; traduction anglaise : Han J. W. Drijvers, « The Acts of Thomas », dans *Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects* (vol. 2 de *New Testament Apocrypha* ; éd. Wilhelm Schneemelcher ; rev. ed. ; trans. Robert McL. Wilson ; Cambridge/Louisville : James Clarke/Westminster-John Knox, 1992), 322–411. Les Ac Thom seront cités selon la division en chapitres mise en place par M. Bonnet et la division des chapitres en paragraphes instaurée par P.-H. Poirier et Y. Tissot dans leur traduction. Les traductions utilisées seront, sous réserve de modifications, pour le syriaque, celle de Poirier-Tissot, pour le grec, celle de Festugière.

² Voir Yves Tissot, « Les Actes apocryphes de Thomas : exemple de recueil composite », dans *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres : Christianisme et monde païen* (éd. François Bovon et al. ; PFTUG ; Genève : Labor et Fides, 1981), 223–32 ainsi que Maurits Geerard, *Clavis apocryphorum Novi Testamenti* (CChr ; Turnhout : Brepols, 1992), 147–52 pour la liste de ces remaniements et le signalement des éditions.

³ Sept manuscrits syriaques des Ac Thom sont actuellement connus (cf. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1328, que l'on complétera par Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux, et Jacob Thekeparampil, « Découverte d'un manuscrit très important contenant des textes apocryphes dans la bibliothèque de la Métropole de l'Église de l'Est à Trichur, Kérala, Inde », dans *Symposium Syriacum VII. Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages, 11–14 August 1996* (éd. René Lavenant ; OCA 256 ; Rome : Pontificio Istituto orientale, 1998), 592–96. Le manuscrit le plus complet est celui de Londres, British Library 14645, daté de 936 de notre ère, et qui sert habituellement de

thomasien » qui comprend, outre ceux-ci, l'*Évangile selon Thomas* (NH II,2) et le *Livre de Thomas* (NH II,7). On admet généralement que les Ac Thom figurent à la troisième place dans ce cycle⁴, mais si l'on tient compte du fait que le *Livre* suppose déjà connu et admis ce qui fonde l'autorité traditionnelle de Thomas et qui constitue précisément la trame des Ac Thom, à savoir sa gémellité avec le Sauveur, on postulera plutôt la séquence suivante : (1) *Évangile selon Thomas*, (2) Ac Thom, (3) *Livre de Thomas*⁵. En revanche, ce cycle thomasien ne saurait comprendre des textes tardifs comme l'*Évangile selon l'enfance de Thomas* (plus justement l'*Histoire de l'enfance de Jésus*) ou l'*Apocalypse de Thomas*⁶, dont les liens avec la tradition thomasienne se limitent à la mention de l'apôtre dans leur titre.

Dans cette brève contribution destinée à honorer notre collègue et ami Einar Thomassen⁷, je voudrais procéder à un inventaire et à une analyse du vocabulaire « mystérique » des Ac Thom, essentiellement dans leurs

base aux traductions, et le plus ancien, le palimpseste du Sinai, 30, des V^e-VI^e siècles (éditions Francis Crawford Burkitt, « Fragments of the Acts of Judas Thomas from the Sinaitic Palimpsest », dans *Select Narratives of Holy Women from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest* [éd. ; Agnes Smith Lewis ; Studia Sinaitica 9 ; Londres : C.J. Clay and Sons/Cambridge : University Press, 1900], 23-45 ; et Agnes Smith Lewis, *Acta mythologica apostolorum* [HSem 3 ; Londres : C.J. Clay and Sons, 1904], 191-228). Pour le grec, on compte au-delà de 70 manuscrits, d'ampleur et de teneur diverses ; seuls deux manuscrits sont complets, cf. Geerard, *Clavis apocryphorum Novi Testamenti*, 148 ; Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1327. Le plus récent examen de la question de la langue originale des Ac Thom est celui de Harold W. Attridge, « The Original Language of the Acts of Thomas », dans *Of Scribes and Scrolls : Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism and Christian Origins Presented to John Strugnell on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* (éd. Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins et Tomas H. Tobin ; CTSRR 5 ; Lanham : University Press of America, 1990), 241-50, qui conclut en faveur du syriaque.

⁴ Depuis John D. Turner, « A New Link in the Syrian Judas Thomas Tradition », dans *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhlig* (éd. Martin Krause ; NHS 3 ; Leiden : Brill, 1972), 109-19.

⁵ Voir Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », et Philip H. Sellew, « Thomas Christianity : Scholars in Quest of a Community », dans *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (éd. Jan N. Bremner ; SECA 6 ; Leuven : Peeters, 2001), 11-35.

⁶ Comme le voudrait Glenn W. Most, *Doubting Thomas* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2005) ; voir à ce sujet Paul-Hubert Poirier, compte rendu de Glenn W. Most, *Doubting Thomas, Apocrypha* 18 (2007) : 290-91.

⁷ On me permettra de rappeler que j'ai fait la connaissance d'Einar à Paris, à l'automne 1974, où il venait d'arriver, avec Øyunn, pour passer l'année. Nous avons suivi ensemble les conférences qu'Antoine Guillaumont (syriaque et copte), Pierre Hadot (Plotin), Pierre Nautin (patristique) et Francis Schmidt (judaïsme hellénistique) dispensaient alors à la section des sciences religieuses de l'École pratique des hautes études.

versions syriaque et grecque. Aux fins de notre enquête, nous prendrons comme points de départ les termes suivants : le syriaque *rāzā*⁸ et le grec *μυστήριον*.⁹ On relève dans les Ac Thom vingt occurrences du premier terme¹⁰ et treize du second¹¹. Ces occurrences et les passages dans lesquels elles se trouvent peuvent être classés sous certaines catégories, qui serviront à les présenter et à les analyser brièvement. Nous reproduisons chacun des textes en traduction synoptique.

Mystères cachés et manifestés

La plupart des occurrences de *rāzā* et de *μυστήριον* figurent dans des passages où il est question de « mystères cachés » qui sont manifestés ou révélés. Le premier texte que nous citerons est une prière que l'apôtre Thomas prononce sur la fille du roi de Sandaruk que celui-ci vient de donner en mariage. Cette prière s'adresse à Jésus, « Fils parfait de l'amour parfait », à qui l'apôtre demande d'accomplir pour les nouveaux époux ce qu'il sait leur être utile (10,4) et qui s'avérera être l'engagement à la continence.

⁸ Cf. Robert Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus* (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1879–1901), col. 3871–73.

⁹ Sur ce terme, voir Bornkamm, « *μυστήριον, μύω* », *TDNT* 4 :802–28 ; Walter Bauer, Kurt Aland, et Barbara Aland, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3 éd. ; rév. et éd. Frederick William Danker ; Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 661–62 ; Raymond E. Brown, « The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of "Mystery" », *CBQ* 20 (1958) : 417–43.

¹⁰ Occurrences de *rāzā* : 10,1, Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 179 [pagination syriaque], 10 ; 25,2, p. 192,10 ; 27,2, p. 193,12 ; 38,1, p. 207,2 ; 39,2, p. 208,10 ; 40,3, p. 210,6 ; 45,1, p. 214,5 ; 47,2, p. 216,7 ; 47,2, p. 216,8 ; 50,1, p. 218,17 ; 50,1, p. 219,2 ; 59,2, p. 229,8 ; 88,3, p. 257,15 ; 113B,5, p. 280,5 ; 113B,11, p. 281,6 ; 113B18, p. 282,15, 113B,21, p. 283,6 ; 121,1, p. 291,10 ; 136,3, p. 305,3 ; 165, p. 329,17.

¹¹ Occurrences de *μυστήριον*, repérées grâce à Matthias Lipinski, *Konkordanz zu den Thomasakten* (BBB 67 ; Frankfurt am Main : Athenäum, 1988), 10,1 ; Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 114,12 ; 25,2, p. 141,7 ; 27,2, p. 142,16–17 ; 40,3, p. 158,12 ; 47,2, p. 163,21 ; 47,2, p. 164,1 ; 50,1, p. 166,8 ; 80,3, p. 204,1 ; 121,1, p. 230,23 ; 133,1, p. 240,11 ; 136,3, p. 243,15 ; 165, p. 279,2 [ms. V] et 12 [ms. P].

*Texte § 1*Syriaque¹²

10 'Il commença à prier
et à parler ainsi :
« Seigneur,
compagnon de tes serviteurs,

guide et conducteur
de ceux qui croient en toi,
refuge et repos des opprimés,
espoir des pauvres
et sauveur des faibles,
guérisseur des âmes
malades,

vivificateur des mondes
et sauveur des créatures !
C'est toi qui connais ce qui doit arriver
et tu l'accomplis par nous.
C'est toi qui manifestes
les *mystères cachés*
et qui révèle les paroles secrètes !

C'est toi le planteur du bon arbre
et par tes mains sont
toutes les œuvres !
C'est toi
qui est caché
dans toutes tes œuvres,

et tu es connu par
leurs actions !
10 ²Jésus, Fils parfait de l'amour parfait,
tu devins Christ

Grec¹³

10 'Debout l'apôtre commença à prier
en ces termes :
« Mon Seigneur et mon Dieu,
toi le compagnon de route de tes
serviteurs,
toi qui guides et diriges
ceux qui croient en toi,
toi le refuge et le repos des affligés,
toi l'espoir des pauvres
et le rédempteur des prisonniers,
toi le médecin des âmes
gisant dans la maladie
et le sauveur de toute la création,
toi qui vivifies le monde
et qui donnes force aux âmes,
tu connais les événements à venir,
toi qui par nous réalises ces événements
toi, Seigneur, qui dévoiles
les *mystères cachés*
et qui révèle les paroles qui sont
secrètes.
tu es, Seigneur, le planteur du bon arbre
et par tes mains sont engendrées
toutes les bonnes actions.
Tu es, Seigneur,

celui qui est en toutes choses
et qui passe par toutes choses,
et qui est inhérent à toutes ses œuvres
et qui est révélé
par l'activité de toutes choses.
10 ²Jésus Christ, toi le fils de la
miséricorde
et le Sauveur parfait,
Christ

¹² Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 179,4–18 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1339.

¹³ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 114,4–115,1 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 50.

Texte § 1 (suite)

Syriaque

Grec

et tu as revêtu le premier homme.
C'est toi la puissance,
la sagesse, l'intelligence, la volonté et
le repos de ton Père, en la gloire de qui
tu es caché et par qui tu es révélé dans
ton agir.
Vous êtes un sous deux noms ! »

Fils du Dieu vivant ... »

Cette prière, qui s'ouvre par l'énoncé d'une série de titres appliqués à Jésus, combine plusieurs des thèmes christologiques propres aux Ac Thom¹⁴, qui sont en même temps traditionnels dans la littérature syriaque¹⁵. Jésus y est présenté comme celui qui manifeste les « mystères cachés » (*rāzē kasāyē*; *μυστήρια ἀπόκρυφα*) et révèle les « paroles secrètes » (*melē sātūrātā*; *λόγους ἀπορρήτους ὄντας*). Ces mystères et ces paroles concernent ce qui relève de la prescience divine (« ce qui doit arriver »), mais aussi la nature même de Jésus, cachée dans toutes ses œuvres et connue par leurs actions (*bāsu'rānayhun*; *διὰ τῆς πάντων ἐνεργείας*).

Ce thème de Jésus, « mystère caché » (*rāzā kasāyā*; *τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀπόκρυφον*), revient dans une invocation que Thomas lui adresse au moment de guérir une femme possédée du démon.

*Texte § 2*Syriaque¹⁶Grec¹⁷

47 ²Et l'apôtre se mit à dire :
« Jésus, *mystère caché*
qui me fut révélé,
c'est toi qui m'as fais connaître
tes mystères

47 ²Puis il commença de dire :
« Jésus, *mystère caché*
qui nous a été révélé,
tu es celui qui nous a révélé
une infinité de mystères,
celui qui m'a mis à part

¹⁴ Voir Paul-Hubert Poirier, Yves Tissot, « La christologie d'un apocryphe : une christologie apocryphe ? Le cas des *Actes de Thomas* », dans *From Logos to Christos: Essays in Christology in Honour of Joanne McWilliam* (éd. Ellen M. Leonard et Kate Merriman; Waterloo : Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 39–66.

¹⁵ Cf. Robert R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (rév. éd.; Piscataway, NJ : Gorgias Press, 2004), 160–61.

¹⁶ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 216,6–12; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1372.

¹⁷ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 163,20–164,6; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 68–69.

Texte § 2 (suite)

Syriaque

plus qu'à tous mes compagnons
 et tu m'as dit ces <trois> paroles
 par lesquelles me voici brûlant,
 et je ne peux les dire.
 Jésus, homme
 né,
 tué,
 mort !
 Jésus, Dieu, fils de Dieu,
 vivificateur, faisant revivre les morts ! »

Grec

de tous mes compagnons
 et m'a dit trois paroles
 par lesquelles je suis embrasé,
 et je ne puis les dire à d'autres,
 Jésus, homme
 assassiné,
 cadavre enseveli,
 Jésus, Dieu de Dieu,
 Sauveur qui ressuscite les morts
 et guérit les malades ! »

Tout ce passage est très proche de la dernière partie du logion 13 de l'*Évangile selon Thomas* :

Et (Jésus) prit (Thomas), se retira, lui dit trois paroles (*afčō ʿnaf nšomt ʿnšāčē*). Lorsque Thomas revint vers ses compagnons, ils lui demandèrent : « Que t'a dit Jésus ? » Thomas leur dit : « Si je vous dis une des paroles qu'il m'a dites, vous ramasserez des pierres et vous me les jetez, et un feu sortira des pierres et vous brûlera »¹⁸.

Dans l'*Évangile*, ce logion légitime l'autorité de Thomas comme transmetteur privilégié des paroles secrètes de Jésus. Il en va de même dans les Ac Thom. Dans le manuscrit de Londres, il n'est question que de « paroles » (*melē*), alors que le grec précise, comme le copte, qu'il s'agit de « trois paroles » (*τρεις λόγους*). Cependant, le syriaque n'ignore pas cette précision puisque la tradition représentée par les manuscrits de Berlin et de Cambridge portent bien que les paroles sont au nombre de trois¹⁹. Ces paroles sont ici identifiées aux « mystères » que Jésus, « mystère caché », a fait connaître à l'apôtre de préférence à ses compagnons.

¹⁸ NHC II 30,7–14, éd. Bentley Layton, *Gospel According to Thomas, Gospel According to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes* (vol. 1 de *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2**, *Brit. Lib. Or. 4926 (1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*; NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 58; trad. Jean-Marie Sevrin, « Évangile selon Thomas (NH II, 2) », dans *Écrits gnostiques : La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi* (éd. Jean-Pierre Mahé et Paul-Hubert Poirier; BP 538; Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 312.

¹⁹ Cf. Paul Bedjan, éd., *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (7 vols.; Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1890–1897), 3:51,5.

Dans un hymne de louange au « Dieu de vérité et Seigneur de toutes les natures » qu'il prononce au moment où il s'apprête à se rendre chez le général Siphûr qu'il vient de convertir, un passage qui manque en grec, Thomas évoque, dans un vocabulaire proche de celui du mystère, ce qui, de Dieu, demeure caché (*kasyutā*) et qu'il a mené jusqu'à la manifestation (*gelyā, galyutā*), d'abord par le ministère des prophètes, puis par l'intermédiaire de celui qui est sa volonté et la puissance de sa pensée, entité quasi personnifiée, et à qui il a imposé le nom de Fils.

Texte § 3²⁰

70 ²Judas Thomas, l'apôtre du Seigneur, éleva la voix dans un chant de louange et dit :

« Glorifié sois-tu, Dieu de vérité et Seigneur de toutes les natures que, dans ta volonté, tu as désirées !

Tu as fait toutes tes œuvres, tu as achevé toutes tes créatures et tu les as produites selon l'ordre de leur nature, et tu as établi ta crainte sur toutes afin qu'elles soient soumises à ton commandement.

Ta volonté a frayé un chemin depuis *ce qui, de toi, est caché* jusqu'à la manifestation et elle s'est occupée de toute âme que tu as faite.

Elle fut dite par la bouche de tous les prophètes, par toutes sortes de visions, de voix et de sons, et Israël n'a pas obéi à cause de son inclination mauvaise.

70 ³Et toi, parce que tu es le Seigneur de tout, tu prends soin des créatures pour étendre sur nous ta miséricorde en celui qui est venu par ta volonté et a revêtu le corps, ta créature, corps que tu as voulu et formé selon ta sagesse glorieuse ; lui que tu as disposé dans *ce qui, de toi, est caché* et que tu as fait surgir dans ta manifestation.

Tu lui as imposé le nom de Fils, lui qui est ta volonté, puissance de ta pensée, car vous êtes sous des noms distincts, Père, Fils, et Esprit, à cause de l'administration de tes créatures, en vue de la croissance de toutes les natures.

Vous êtes un en gloire, en puissance et en volonté, et vous êtes séparés sans être divisés, et un, tout en étant distincts.

Tout subsiste en toi et t'est soumis, parce que tout t'appartient.

Une strophe du grand hymne de louange qui suit l'*Hymne de la Perle* dans le manuscrit syriaque de Londres et qui est absent de la version grecque des Ac Thom, peut être rapprochée du passage précédent, puisqu'elle attribue la révélation des mystères à la réconciliation opérée par le Fils.

²⁰ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 239,19–240,19 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1391–92.

Texte 4²¹

113B ¹⁸« Glorifié sois-tu, Père sublime, qui fus caché à tous les mondes et qui te révélas à tous tes adorateurs, selon ta volonté !

Loué sois-tu, Fils de la vie, qui accomplis la volonté du Père : tu as réconcilié tes créatures pour qu'elles adorent en toi ton mandataire et deviennent participantes de *tes mystères* ! »

Le ministère des prophètes, à qui fut d'abord destinée la révélation du mystère du Fils, est évoqué dans cet hymne de louange :

Texte 5²²

113B ⁵« Glorifié sois-tu, Père bon, qui révélas *le mystère de ton premier-né* à tes prophètes, par l'Esprit de sainteté !

Loué sois-tu, Fils éprouvé, qui révélas, dans tous les peuples, la gloire du Père à tes envoyés ! »

Le même texte affirme d'ailleurs que la révélation des mystères du Fils a également été impartie aux « saints » :

Texte 6²³

113B ¹¹« Glorifié sois-tu, Père, vivificateur universel, qui, par l'Esprit, as révélé à tes saints *les mystères de ton Fils*, dans la paix et le repos !

Loué sois-tu, Fils, fruit du Père, qui caches tes élus sous tes ailes ; tu as accompli la volonté de ton Père et tu as sauvé tes bien-aimés ! »

Et c'est l'ensemble de la révélation biblique qu'évoque cette autre strophe :

Texte 7²⁴

113B ²¹« Glorifié sois-tu, doux Père, parce que tu nous as réconciliés par notre vivificateur et tu nous as révélé *tes mystères glorieux et saints* par l'audition de ton enseignement !

Loué sois-tu, Fils unique du Père, parce que ton amour fut sur nous et que tu nous as marqués de ta croix vivante et vivifiante ! »

²¹ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 282,11-18 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1429.

²² Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 280,4-7 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1426.

²³ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 281,4-8 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1427.

²⁴ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 283,4-8 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1430.

Le texte suivant est une épiclese accompagnant l'onction baptismale, mais, plutôt que d'être adressée à l'huile, elle l'est directement au nom du Christ. L'identification de l'huile au nom du Christ, ou l'allusion à celui-ci dans les prières sur l'huile (cf. 121,1, *infra*, texte § 9 ; 132,2 ; 157,2), repose évidemment sur le rapprochement, sous leur forme syriaque, du nom de l'huile, *mešhā*, et de celui du Christ, *mšihā*. Le fait qu'un pareil rapprochement soit également attesté dans la version grecque, où un tel jeu étymologique est impossible, plaide en faveur d'une dépendance de celle-ci par rapport à la version syriaque.

Texte § 8

Syriaque²⁵

Grec²⁶

27 ²« Viens, saint nom du Christ !

27 ² « Viens, saint nom du Christ
qui es au-dessus de tout nom !

Viens, puissance de la miséricorde
d'en haut !

Viens, puissance
du Très-Haut

Viens, amour parfait !

et miséricorde parfaite !

Viens, don sublime !

Viens, charisme très haut !

Viens, mère miséricordieuse !

Viens participation de la bénédiction !

Viens, communion du mâle !

Viens, révélatrice des *mystères cachés* !

Viens, toi qui révèles les *mystères sacrés* !

Viens, mère des sept demeures,
et dont le repos se trouve
dans la huitième demeure !

Viens, mère des sept demeures,
afin que tu trouves ton repos
dans la huitième demeure !

Viens, messenger de réconciliation,

Viens messenger
des cinq membres,
l'intellect, l'intellection, la pensée,
la réflexion, le raisonnement,
communie

et associe-toi
à l'intelligence

avec ces jeunes gens !

de ces jeunes gens !

Viens, Esprit de sainteté,

Viens, saint Esprit,

et purifie leurs reins et leurs cœurs ! »

et purifie leurs reins et leur cœur . . . ! »

Dans la version syriaque de cette épiclese, seuls les deux premiers impératifs sont du masculin (*tā*) ; les autres sont du féminin (*tāy*), étant donné que le référent est l'Esprit, *ruḥā*, un substantif féminin en syriaque. C'est

²⁵ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 193,9–16 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1352.

²⁶ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 142,13–143,3 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 57–58.

donc l'Esprit qui est ici révélateur—ou révélatrice—des « mystères cachés », *gālyāt rāzē kasiyē*, en grec ἡ τὰ μυστήρια ἀποκαλύπτουσα τὰ ἀπόκρυφα, une formulation qui paraît le décalque du syriaque. En revanche, pour l'invocation qui précède, le grec a manifestement conservé une expression plus archaïque, ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἄρρενος, qui peut fort bien refléter le syriaque originel, dans la mesure où le terme « bénédiction » (*burkatā*) pourrait être une corruption—ou une altération délibérée—de *bukrā*, « premier-né », terme qui traduit ἄρσεν dans la version sinaïtique de Luc 2,23²⁷.

Lors du baptême de Magdonia, vers la fin des Ac Thom, l'apôtre prononce une louange sur l'huile, qui se termine par une épiclèse :

Texte § 9

Syriaque²⁸

121 1« Huile sainte, qui nous a été donnée

pour l'onction,
et *mystère caché de la croix*
qui es apparu en elle !
C'est toi le redresseur
des membres courbés,
c'est toi,

notre Seigneur Jésus, qui es la vie, la santé
et la rémission des péchés.

Que vienne ta puissance,
qu'elle repose
sur cette huile,
et que ta sainteté y habite ! »

Grec²⁹

121 1« Huile sainte qui nous a été
donnée

pour notre sanctification,
mystère caché dans lequel la croix
nous a été montrée,
tu es le redresseur
des membres incurvés,
tu es
celui qui rabaisse
les exploits orgueilleux,
tu es celui qui montre
les trésors cachés,
tu es le rejeton de la gentillesse,

que vienne ta puissance,
que cette puissance soit établie
en ta servante Magdonia

et guéris-la par ta liberté ! »

²⁷ George A. Kiraz, éd., *Luke* (vol. 3 de *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels* ; NTTS 21, 3 ; Leiden : Brill, 1996), 33.

²⁸ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 290,9–13 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1436.

²⁹ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 230,23–231,5 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 99.

L'huile baptismale est invoquée comme « mystère caché de la croix » (*rāzā kasyā daṣalibā*), ce qui fait sans doute référence à la forme de l'onction³⁰, comme c'est le cas au chap. 157,2 : « Oui, mon Seigneur, viens demeurer sur cette huile comme tu as demeuré sur le bois ! ».

Thomas, récipiendaire et interprète des mystères

Dans plusieurs passages des Ac Thom, le héros apostolique apparaît en récipiendaire des « mystères cachés », celui qui peut les interpréter dans la mesure où il en a été rendu participant. Dans un premier texte, où c'est un ânon qui prend la parole, Thomas est présenté comme celui qui a reçu les « oracles secrets » (τὰ ἀπόκρυφα λόγια) en sa qualité de jumeau (δίδυμος) du Christ, apôtre du Très-Haut et co-initié (συμμύστης) à la doctrine—ou au verbe—caché du Christ. Au lieu de « jumeau » (*tāmā*), le syriaque porte « abîme », leçon sans doute secondaire mais qui s'explique par le même jeu d'allitération sur le nom de l'apôtre (*tahumā* → *tōmā*)³¹, et qui figurait déjà en 31,2 (où le grec a encore δίδυμος).

Texte §10

Syriaque³²

39 ²L'ânon ouvrit la bouche
et, par la puissance de notre
Seigneur, il parla comme un homme.

Il dit à Judas : « Abîme du Christ
et apôtre du Très-Haut,
participant
de la parole cachée du vivificateur,
toi qui a reçu les *mystères cachés*

Grec³³

39 ²Ayant ouvert la bouche,

(l'ânon) lui dit : « Ô jumeau du Christ,
apôtre du Très-Haut
et compagnon d'initiation
dans la doctrine cachée du Christ,
toi qui a reçu les *oracles secrets*
du Christ,
compagnon de travail

³⁰ Cf., dans ce sens, le sacramentaire de Sérapion cité par Albertus F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (2 éd. ; NTSup 108 ; Leiden : Brill, 2003), 207 : τὸ ἐκτύπωμα τοῦ σημείου τοῦ σωτηριώδους σταυροῦ τοῦ μονογενοῦς.

³¹ Voir Paul-Hubert Poirier, « Une étymologie ancienne du nom de Thomas l'Apôtre et sa source », *ParOr* 10 (1981–82) : 285–90 ; cf. Francis Crawford Burkitt, « The Original Language of the Acts of Judas Thomas », *JTS* 1 (1900) : 288.

³² Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 208,7–18 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1365–66.

³³ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 156,12–23 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 65.

Texte § 10 (suite)

Syriaque	Grec
du Fils de Dieu, homme libre qui es devenu esclave	du Fils de Dieu, toi qui, étant libre, es devenu esclave et, une fois vendu,
pour en amener beaucoup à la liberté par ton obéissance, fils d'une famille opulente, qui vécus dans la privation, afin de priver l'ennemi	as amené des multitudes à la liberté, toi le parent de la grande race
d'une multitude, par la puissance de ton Seigneur, et de devenir cause de vie pour le pays des Indiens, toi qui es venu contre ton gré vers les hommes qui erraient loin de Dieu, voici qu'en te voyant et par tes paroles divines, ils se tournent vers la vie !	qui a condamné l'Ennemi et a racheté les siens, toi qui es devenu cause de la vie pour beaucoup dans le pays des Indiens – car tu es venu chez des hommes égarés, et, par ton épiphanie et tes secours divins, maintenant ils se tournent vers le Dieu de vérité qui t'a envoyé—,
Grimpe, monte sur moi et repose-toi jusqu'à ce que tu entres dans la ville. »	monte et assois-toi sur moi et repose-toi, jusqu'à ce que tu sois entré dans la ville. »

Le deuxième passage, plus développé en syriaque qu'en grec, fait de Thomas l'interprète (*məḥāwyānā*) des mystères dont le Christ est le révélateur (cf. 10,1, texte § 1).

Texte § 11

Syriaque ³⁴	Grec ³⁵
38 ¹ « Apôtre du Dieu vivant, guide de la route de la vie et interprète des <i>mystères de vérité</i> ! Nombreuses	38 ¹ « Homme de Dieu,

³⁴ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 207,1–6 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1364–65.

³⁵ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 165,21–24 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 64.

Texte § 11 (suite)

Syriaque

Grec

sont les choses qui ont été accomplies
pour nous,
des gens qui étions étrangers
au Dieu glorieux que tu prêches.
Et jusqu'à présent,
nous n'osons dire
que nous sommes siens,
parce que nos œuvres
lui sont étrangères
et que nous sommes
haïssables devant lui. »

ce Dieu que tu prêches,

nous n'osons pas dire
que nous sommes à lui,
parce que les actions
que nous avons accomplies
sont étrangères à lui

et ne lui plaisent pas. »

Il en va de même dans l'exhortation de l'onagre à Thomas, même si le vocabulaire du mystère cède la place à celui de l'occultation, *kasyuta*, et de l'indicible ou de ce dont il est interdit de parler, τὰ ἀπόρητα.

*Texte § 12*Syriaque³⁶Grec³⁷

78 ²« Pourquoi restes-tu à ne rien faire,
apôtre du Très-Haut ?
Car voici que le défenseur
se lève pour toi
et attend que tu lui présentes une
demande
pour te l'accorder.

Pourquoi tardes-tu,
bon disciple ?
Car voici que ton maître veut faire voir
de grandes choses par tes mains.
Pourquoi restes-tu là,
héraut de ce qui est caché ?

78 ²« Pourquoi te tiens-tu sans rien faire,
apôtre du Christ Très-Haut,

qui attend que tu lui demandes

les plus beaux enseignements ?
Pourquoi donc tardes-tu ?

Ton maître veut manifester
ses exploits par tes mains.
Pourquoi te tiens-tu immobile,
héraut de ce qui est caché ?

³⁶ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 247,11–20 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1397.

³⁷ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 193,1–10 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 82.

Texte § 12 (suite)

Syriaque

Car voici que ton maître veut
exposer par toi *ce qui de lui est caché*

à ceux qui sont dignes
d'entendre ces choses.

Pourquoi t'arrêtes-tu
de faire de grandes choses
au nom de ton Seigneur ?

Car voici que ton Seigneur se tient là
et t'encourage.

78 ³Ne crains pas,
car il ne t'abandonnera pas
et sa divinité ne laissera pas
ton humanité souffrir. »

Grec

Ton (maître) veut
par toi révéler *les choses secrètes*

qu'il réserve à ceux
qui sont dignes de lui,
pour qu'ils les entendent.

Pourquoi te tiens-tu en repos,
toi qui accomplis tes exploits
au nom du Seigneur ?

Ton maître
t'encourage, mettant en toi de l'audace

78 ³Ne crains donc rien,
car il n'abandonnera pas

l'âme qui t'appartient par la naissance. »

L'expression *bar rāzē*, au chap. 45, littéralement « fils des mystères », c'est-à-dire « participant aux mystères », apparaît chez Aphraate, *Démonstrations* XIV,39,³⁸ où elle désigne les chrétiens qui ont accueilli la parole du Christ, mais elle a aussi des racines juives, notamment à Qumrân³⁹. Le terme *σύμβουλος*, qui figure en grec, en est proche par le sens, dans la mesure où le conseiller connaît les secrets de son maître ; il peut même être considéré comme une traduction assez exacte du syriaque *bar rāzē*.

*Texte § 13*Syriaque⁴⁰

45 ¹« Que nous veux-tu,
apôtre du Très-Haut ?
Que nous veux-tu,
serviteur de Jésus le Christ ?

Grec⁴¹

45 ¹« Qu'as-tu à faire avec nous,
apôtre du Très-Haut ?
Qu'as-tu à faire avec nous,
serviteur de Jésus Christ ?

³⁸ Éd. Jean Parisot, *Aphraatis sapientis Persae Demonstrationes* (PS I, 1 ; Paris : Firmin-Didot, 1894), col. 684,12.

³⁹ Cf. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 166n3 ; Brown « The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of "Mystery" ».

⁴⁰ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 214,3-7 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1370-71.

⁴¹ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 162,4-7 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 68.

Texte § 13 (suite)

Syriaque

Que nous veux-tu,
participant des *saints mystères* de Dieu ?
Pourquoi veux-tu notre destruction,
alors que pour lors notre temps n'est
pas arrivé ? »

Grec

Qu'as-tu à faire avec nous,
conseiller du saint Fils de Dieu ?
Pourquoi veux-tu nous perdre,
notre temps n'étant pas encore
arrivé ? »

Mystère et préfiguration

Quelques passages des Ac Thom attestent d'un emploi traditionnel du terme « mystère », *rāzā* ou *μυστήριον*, au sens de type ou préfiguration symbolique ou prophétique du Christ. Ainsi dans une épiclese adressée à l'Esprit, proche de celle du chap. 27 (texte 8) et qui offre plusieurs formules parallèles. Ici aussi, sauf pour la deuxième invocation (*taw*), la forme de l'impératif est toujours féminine (*tay*), en accord avec le genre féminin de *ruhā*. Quant au grec, il présente, comme en 27, des tournures plus archaïques.

*Texte § 14*Syriaque⁴²

50 'Et il commença à dire :
« Viens, don du Sublime !
Viens, amour parfait,
Viens, Esprit saint !
Viens, révélateur des *mystères de l'élu*
parmi les prophètes !
Viens annonciateur,
par tes apôtres,
des combats de notre athlète
victorieux !
Viens, trésor de la grandeur !
Viens, bien-aimée de l'amour du Très-
Haut !
Viens, silencieux révélateur
des *mystères* du Sublime !

Grec⁴³

50 'Et il commença de dire :
« Viens, miséricorde parfaite !
Viens, communion du mâle !
viens, toi qui connais les *mystères de l'élu*,
Viens, toi qui participes
à tous les combats du valeureux athlète !
Viens, silence qui révèle
les hauts faits de la totale grandeur !

⁴² Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 218,15–219,8 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1375.

⁴³ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 166,7–17 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 69–70.

Le passage suivant, plus développé en syriaque, emprunte la perspective et le vocabulaire propres à l'exégèse typologique : figures (*tupsē*), mystères (*rāzē*), images (*yuqanē*). L'opposition entre le peuple (*'ammā*), c'est-à-dire les Juifs, et les peuples (*'ammē*), les païens, absente du texte grec, est tout à fait représentative de la théologie syriaque⁴⁴.

Texte § 15

Syriaque⁴⁵

59 ²Il ne cessait jamais de prêcher, de leur dire et de leur montrer que Jésus est le Christ dont les Écritures ont parlé : la Loi et les prophètes en ont montré les figures, les *mystères* et les images ; il a été donné comme alliance pour le peuple afin que ce dernier soit, grâce à lui, gardé du culte des idoles, et comme lumière pour les peuples, afin que, par lui, se lève sur eux la grâce de Dieu ; et tous ceux qui garderont ses commandements trouveront le repos dans son royaume et seront comblés de gloire ; il est venu, il a été crucifié et il est ressuscité le troisième jour. L'apôtre leur racontait et leur expliquait cela depuis Moïse jusqu'au dernier des prophètes, parce que tous ont prêché sur Jésus, et Jésus vint et accomplit en œuvre (ce qu'ils avaient prêché).

Grec⁴⁶

59 ²Lui-même ne cessait de prêcher, de dire aux fidèles et de leur montrer que c'était ce Jésus Christ que les Écritures avaient proclamé,

qui est venu, a été crucifié et après trois jours est ressuscité des morts.

Il leur éclairait ensuite, commençant par les prophètes,

les choses qui concernent le Christ, qu'il fallait qu'il vînt et qu'à son sujet fussent accomplies les prophéties qui le concernaient.

On rapprochera de ce passage une double invocation du grand hymne de louange propre au manuscrit syriaque de Londres :

⁴⁴ Cf. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 41–68.

⁴⁵ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 229,5–16 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1383.

⁴⁶ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 176,5–11 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 74.

Texte § 16⁴⁷

113B ⁵« Glorifié sois-tu, Père bon, qui révélas *le mystère de ton premier-né* à tes prophètes, par l'Esprit de sainteté !

Loué sois-tu, Fils éprouvé, qui révélas, dans tous les peuples, la gloire du Père à tes envoyés ! »

Mystères sacramentels

Les Ac Thom connaissent bien l'usage des termes *rāzā* et *μυστήριον* en un sens largement attesté dans la tradition ancienne, à savoir celui de sacrement⁴⁸. Au chap. 25, juste avant que le roi et son frère Gad reçoivent le « signe » (*rušmā*, *σφραγίς*), l'apôtre fait la prière suivante à leur intention :

Texte § 17

Syriaque⁴⁹

25 ²« Car voici qu'ils te prient
et te supplient,
et ils veulent être pour toi des
serviteurs,

être persécutés par ton ennemi
et être haïs à cause de toi.

Qu'ils aient donc en toi
de l'assurance,

Grec⁵⁰

25 ²« Ils te prient en effet,
ils te supplient,
ils veulent devenir tes serviteurs
et tes ministres,
et à cause de cela ils acceptent
et d'être persécutés par tes ennemis
et à cause de toi d'être haïs par eux
et d'être violentés et de mourir, de même
que toi tu as souffert toutes ces choses
pour nous, pour que tu nous acquières,
étant le Seigneur et vraiment le bon
Pasteur.

Donne-leur d'avoir en toi seul
liberté de parole
et secours venu de toi
et l'espérance de leur salut,

⁴⁷ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 280,4–7 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1426.

⁴⁸ Cf. Lampe, « *μυστήριον*, F., » *PGL* 892a–893b et Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, s. v. *rāzā*, 3, col. 3872–73.

⁴⁹ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle*, 192,7–11 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1350.

⁵⁰ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 140,14–141,9 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 57.

Texte § 17 (suite)

Syriaque

qu'ils soient confirmés
dans *tes glorieux mystères*
et qu'ils reçoivent
la faveur
de tes dons ! »

Grec

qu'ils attendent de toi seul,
donne-leur d'être fermement établis
dans *tes mystères*
et de recevoir
les biens parfaits de tes grâces
et de tes dons,
et d'être florissants dans ton service
et d'être perfectionnés dans ton Père. »

C'est également du sacrement de l'initiation chrétienne dont il est question dans les paroles d'encouragement adressées par Thomas à Magdonia, l'épouse du roi Mazdaï :

*Texte § 18*Syriaque⁵¹

88 ³« Va en paix !
Notre Seigneur te rendra digne
de ses *divins mystères* ».

Grec⁵²

88 ²« Va en paix !
Le Seigneur te rendra digne
de ses *mystères* ».

et à Tertia, celle du général Siphur :

*Texte § 19*Syriaque⁵³

136 ³« Toi aussi, si donc tu as cru
vraiment en lui,
il te rendra digne de *ses saints mystères*,
il t'exaltera et t'enrichira,
il renouvellera ton esprit
et te fera héritière dans son royaume ».

Grec⁵⁴

136 ³« Toi donc, si tu crois fermement
en lui,
tu seras jugée digne de *ses mystères*.
Lui-même, il t'exaltera et t'enrichira
et fera de toi l'héritière de son royaume ».

⁵¹ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 257,15–16 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1405.

⁵² Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 204,1–2 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 86.

⁵³ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 305,2–4 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1446.

⁵⁴ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 243,13–16 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 105.

Dans tous ces cas, on peut penser que le pluriel « mystères » désigne non seulement le baptême mais aussi l'eucharistie, qui l'accompagne dans les Ac Thom.

Trois des attestations de *rāzā/μυστήριον* n'entrent pas dans les catégories selon lesquelles nous les avons classées. Dans la première—il s'agit de l'épisode où Thomas est invité à monter sur un ânon auquel la parole a été miraculeusement accordée—, le terme « mystère » semble désigner le prodige dont est témoin l'apôtre, celui de l'ânon non seulement doué de la parole mais descendant de celui que montait Balaam et de celui sur lequel Jésus est entré à Jérusalem.

Texte § 20

Syriaque⁵⁵

40 ³Thomas lui dit :
« Il est fidèle,
le Dieu qui t'a donné
maintenant
ce don
pour qu'à la fin aussi,
celui-ci soit accompli avec toi
et avec ceux de ta famille.
Car moi je suis trop petit et trop faible
pour *ce mystère*. »

Grec⁵⁶

40 ³L'apôtre lui dit :
« Celui qui t'a accordé

ce don
est capable de faire
qu'il soit réalisé en toi
et en ceux qui t'appartiennent par la race,
car, quant à *ce mystère*, je suis faible et
sans force. »

La deuxième occurrence est empruntée à l'ultime discours de Thomas avant son martyre, dans lequel il donne une interprétation symbolique, plus développée en grec qu'en syriaque, de la manière dont va se réaliser sa sortie du monde.

Texte § 21

Syriaque⁵⁷

165 Les gens
courageaient à la suite de Judas
pour le délivrer.

Grec⁵⁸

165 Ceux qui étaient présents
coururent vers Judas,
désireux de le libérer.

⁵⁵ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 210,3–6 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1367.

⁵⁶ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 158,9–12 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 65.

⁵⁷ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 329,13–330,2 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1467.

⁵⁸ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 278,19–280,10 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 115–16.

Texte § 20 (suite)

Syriaque

Mais les soldats allaient à sa droite
et à sa gauche,
et ils portaient des lances ;
et celui qui était du nombre des grands
le tenait par la main et le supportait.

Judas dit : « *Ô mystères cachés*
qui s'accomplissent en moi
jusqu'au moment de (ma) sortie !
Ô richesses de la grâce de celui
qui ne nous laisse pas ressentir
les souffrances du corps !
Comme ils m'entourent en armes et
combattent contre moi jusqu'à la mort !

Je suis livré à l'Unique,
car voici qu'un seul grand me tire
et ne tient par la main,
pour me livrer à l'Unique
que j'attends de recevoir ;

il en est allé de même pour mon
Seigneur :
parce qu'il provenait de l'Unique,
il fut frappé par un seul ».

La dernière attestation figure dans la bénédiction sur le pain que prononce l'apôtre lors de l'eucharistie qui suit le baptême de Siphur, de sa femme et de sa fille.

Grec

Deux (soldats) allaient à la droite de
l'apôtre
et deux à sa gauche,
portant des lances,
tandis que l'officier tenait sa main
et le supportait.

Tandis qu'il marchait,
Judas disait : « *Ô tes mystères cachés,*
<qui> jusqu'à la fin de notre vie
s'accomplissent en nous.
Ô richesse de ta grâce
qui ne nous permet pas de sentir
la souffrance corporelle.
Voici que quatre soldats m'ont saisi,
parce que j'ai été composé
de quatre éléments ;

et un seul me conduit

puisque j'appartiens à un seul,
vers lequel je m'en vais,
et qui toujours est avec moi
invisiblement.

Maintenant je comprends

que mon Seigneur,
puisque'il était issu d'un seul,
a été percé par un seul ;
mais moi, puisque je suis issu de quatre,
je suis percé par quatre ».

Texte § 22

Syriaque⁵⁹

133 '« Pain vivant
qui préserve de la mort
ceux qui te mange,
pain qui combles
de ta béatitude les âmes affamées,
toi qui es digne de recevoir le don
et de devenir
rémission des péchés
afin que ceux qui te mangeront
ne meurent pas !
Nous faisons mémoire sur toi
du nom du Père,
nous faisons mémoire sur toi
du nom du Fils,
nous faisons mémoire sur toi
du nom de l'Esprit,
nom sublime
qui est caché à tous ! »

Grec⁶⁰

133 '« Pain de vie,
tel que ceux qui le mangent
doivent demeurer incorruptibles,
pain qui remplis
les âmes affamées de ta bénédiction,
tu es celui qui a daigné recevoir le don,
pour que tu deviennes pour nous
rémission des péchés
et que ceux qui te mangent
deviennent immortels.
Nous nommons sur toi

le nom de la Mère,

du *mystère ineffable* des Puissances et des
Autorités cachées ! »

La version syriaque, qui porte la formule trinitaire et ne comporte pas la mention du mystère, a sûrement éliminé une formulation plus archaïque, conservée en grec et dont le palimpseste du Sinaï, qui n'a pas la formule trinitaire, semble avoir conservé une trace⁶¹. Dans le grec, seul le nom de la Mère est invoqué, comme aux chap. 27 (texte § 8), 39,3⁶² et 50,2⁶³. Dans tous les cas, l'expression désigne l'Esprit.

⁵⁹ Éd. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 302,1-7 ; trad. Poirier et Tissot, « Actes de Thomas », 1443.

⁶⁰ Éd. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 240,6-12 ; trad. Festugière, *Les Actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, 103.

⁶¹ Smith Lewis, *Acta mythologica apostolorum*, 209.

⁶² Ὑμνοῦμεν σὲ καὶ τὸν ἀόρατὸν σου πατέρα καὶ τὸ ἄγιόν σου πνεῦμα καὶ τὴν μητέρα πασῶν κτίσεων (Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 157,16-17) ; le syriaque, qui ne mentionne pas la Mère, a néanmoins une formule, inspirée de Gn 1,2, qui évoque une activité maternelle : « l'Esprit saint, qui couvre (ou : couve, *məḥapat*) toutes les créatures » (Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 209,12-13).

⁶³ Ἡ ἀπόκρυφος μήτηρ (Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 166,13).

Il ressort de cet inventaire que le vocabulaire mystérique est relativement important dans les Ac Thom. Pour en rendre compte dans toute sa richesse, il faudrait accompagner chacun des passages que nous avons présentés d'un commentaire exhaustif⁶⁴, qui permettrait de situer nos actes au sein de l'ensemble du corpus thomasien et des autres actes apocryphes. Mais on voit déjà que les emplois de *rāzā* /μυστήριον attestés dans les Ac Thom reflètent la polysémie de ces termes dans la première littérature chrétienne.

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⁶⁴ Un tel commentaire accompagnera l'édition des *Actes de Thomas* syriaques et grecs qu'Yves Tissot et moi-même préparons pour la « Series Apocryphorum » du *Corpus Christianorum* (Turnhout : Brepols).

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REVISITING THE *ICHTHYS*:
A SUGGESTION CONCERNING THE ORIGINS OF
CHRISTOLOGICAL FISH SYMBOLISM

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The symbol of Christ as a fish first appears in the extant Christian literature and material culture in the second half of the second century. Apart from the famous acronym/acrostic¹ from the initial letters of Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Ὁ σωτὴρ (“Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior”),² yielding the Greek word for fish, ΙΧΘΥC, the symbol appears especially in Eucharistic and baptismal contexts. In addition, one finds numerous pictorial representations of fish in the material culture, although it is often difficult to decide whether one is then dealing with an actual Christological symbol or not—fish can also stand for Christians or for food, or function as a mere decorative element. However, the *Christological* fish symbol itself is well attested by the end of the second century, and becomes extremely popular in the course of the third and fourth centuries, involving a complex network of meanings.³

Much has been written concerning the origins of this fascinating symbolism. Direct pagan and Jewish influence have been suggested, and theories

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¹ As Laurence Kant observes, “[I]t is helpful to note the distinction between the terms acronym and acrostic—terms which many scholars have used synonymously. An *acronym*, however, generally refers to a word that is formed from the initial letters of the successive parts of a compound phrase. On the other hand, an *acrostic* generally refers to a composition, where the initial letters of successive lines or verses form a word or a series of words.” (emphasis added). Laurence Harold Kant, “The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism” (3 vols.; Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993), 493.

² With a few exceptions, I use the open/lunate *sigma* (C) in this essay because it is more common than the “four-bar” *sigma* (Σ) on early Christian artifacts that spell out the word, ΙΧΘΥC—early Christian manuscripts also commonly use the open/lunate *sigma*. See, e.g., Franz Joseph Dölger, *Ichthys* (5 vols.; 2d ed.; Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlh., 1928–1957; repr., Oberhausen: Metzler, 1999); and Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

³ Thus Kant, “Religious Symbols.”

of Christian origin range from proposing the original catalyst to have been either the acronym itself, or the idea of the Eucharistic or baptismal fish, or several factors in various combinations. No clear consensus has been reached on the question, and recent scholarship has rightly stressed the multivalent nature of the symbolism, as opposed to simplistic solutions of previous studies that usually claimed one meaning and one origin for the symbol.⁴ Such solutions, once popular, include the fish as a secret symbol for persecuted Christians or as a symbol for Christ mystically sacrificed in the Eucharist. Thus, this book in honor of Professor Einar Thomassen, exploring aspects of secrecy and mysticism, offers an excellent context for discussing the origins and meaning of the early Christian fish symbolism. In fact, I would here like to suggest a new solution to this *crux* in early Christian studies. In what follows, after having discussed the main sources and previous solutions proposed, I will attempt to show how one specific invention may have acted as an important catalyst in the early development of the symbolism. This then led to a veritable explosion in the use of the image in early Christianity, allowing for the huge potential, present in pagan, Jewish and New Testament stories and traditions about fish, to be exploited.

The main passages from early Christian literature that deal with the Christological fish, have already been collected by Achelis⁵ and Morey⁶ (even earlier, Pitra⁷ had collected all early Christian passages dealing with a symbolic fish—recently, Kant has updated these collections⁸), and I will summarize and analyze the evidence below. The material evidence has been collected and thoroughly discussed by Dölger,⁹ and only a few items can be added to his corpus.¹⁰ The relevant Jewish fish imagery, for its part, has been dealt with especially by Schetflowitz and Goodenough,¹¹ and

⁴ Kant, "Religious Symbols."

⁵ Hans Achelis, *Das Symbol des Fisches und die Fischdenkmäler der römischen Katakomben* (Marburg: Elwert, 1888), 6–54 (also includes inscriptions).

⁶ Charles Rufus Morey, "The Origin of the Fish Symbol," in 5 parts in *PTR* 8 (1910): 93–106 [1], 231–46 [2], 401–32 [3]; 9 (1911): 268–89 [4]; 10 (1912): 278–97 [5], here 2:231–46, 3:401–32.

⁷ Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense: Complectens Sanctorum Patrum scriptorumque ecclesiasticorum anecdota hactenus opera selectae Graecis Orientalibusque et Latinis codicibus* (4 vols.; Paris: Didot, 1852–1858), 3:499–543, 627–29.

⁸ Kant "Religious Symbols," 652–751.

⁹ Dölger, *Ichthys*.

¹⁰ E.g., the possibly Christian fish graffito from the Vatican necropolis (see below). See also Josef Engemann, "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang," *RAC* 7: 959–1097.

¹¹ I. Schetflowitz, "Das Fisch-Symbol in Judentum und Christentum," *AR* 14 (1911): 1–53, 321–92; Edwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols.; BS 37; New York: Pantheon, 1953–1968), 5:31–61.

Kant offers a valuable and thorough discussion on Greco-Roman ideas and practices related to fish (on these, see below).¹²

Some 23 passages from early Christian literature seem relevant to the discussion. These are, in roughly chronological order: (1) *Sibylline Oracles* 8.217–250; (2) Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.11; (3) Tertullian, *De baptismo* 1; (4) Origen, *In Matthaeum* 13.10; (5) Optatus Milevitanus, *De schismate Donatistarum* 3.2; (6) Jerome, *Epistle* 7; (7) Zeno of Verona, *Tractate* 2.13.2; (8) Pseudo-Athanasius of Alexandria, *Quaestiones in Novum Testamentum* 10; (9) Paulinus of Nola, *Epistle* 13.11; (10) Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII* 1.61.4; (11) Augustine, *Confessions* 13.21, 23; (12) Augustine, *The City of God* 18.23; (13) Augustine, *In evangelium Johannis* 123; (14) Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermon* 205.1; (15) Eucherius, *Formulae spiritualis intelligentiae* 3–4; (16) Orientius, *De epithetis Salvatoris nostri* and *Explanatio nominum Domini*; (17) Chrysologus, *Sermon* 55.6; (18) Quodvultdeus, *De promissionibus et praedictionibus Dei* 2.39; (19) *Sermo sancti Severiani episcopi*; (20) Maximinus, *Contra paganos* 4; (21) Pseudo-Eusebius Emesenus, *Homilia, feria III*; (22) Pseudo-Eusebius Emesenus, *Homilia, feria IV*; (23) Philip of Side, *Narratio rerum quae in Perside acciderunt*.¹³

Three main motifs can be identified in this evidence:¹⁴ (i) the use of the acronym/acrostic IXΘYC (§§ 1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 18, 20, perhaps §§ 8, 23), (ii) a baptismal fish (§§ 3, 5, 9, 16, perhaps §§ 2, 4, 6, 11, 12, 23), and (iii) a Eucharistic fish (§§ 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, perhaps §§ 6, 10, 19).¹⁵ Occasional other motifs include the fish of Tobit (Tob 6–11; §§ 5, 14, 18) and the fish with the coin in its mouth (Matt 17:27; §§ 7, 8). A few texts also quote the *Sibylline* acrostic (§§ 12, 18, 20). Let me briefly cite and summarize some of the key passages.

The *Sibylline Oracles* (§ 1) contain a section (8.217–250) describing the judgment day, written in such manner that the initial letters of each line form the sentence: IHCOYC XPEICTOC ΘEOY YIOC CΩTHP CTAYPOC, i.e. “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior, Cross.” The concluding seven lines, the so-called *Laus Crucis*, yielding the acrostic CTAYPOC, are sometimes suggested to be a later addition to the rest of the poem. However, there are reasons to believe that they may have been part of the original

¹² Kant, “Religious Symbols,” esp. 122–307.

¹³ I follow Kant (“Religious Symbols”) concerning the authorship of §§ 18, 20, 23.

¹⁴ Morey, “The Origin,” 1:106.

¹⁵ Kant (“Religious Symbols,” 602–5) suggests that one should replace “baptism” with the larger category of “new life,” in light of the importance of Greco-Roman ideas about fish and afterlife/rebirth/new era, which must have been present in the Christian “network of meanings” as well.

(see below), which was probably composed in second-century Alexandria.¹⁶ It should be noted that the *Sibylline Oracles* contain a whole acrostic sentence upon which the acronym IXΘYC(C) itself is based on.

Clement of Alexandria (§ 2), around the year 200 C.E., instructs Christians to only use certain, mainly maritime, images on their seal rings. These images include the fish and the fishermen, the latter evoking baptismal imagery, although Clement may not have been aware of the Christological fish *per se*:

Let our seals be the dove, or the fish, or a ship sailing before a fair wind, or the lyre for music, which seal Polycrates used, or a ship's anchor, which Seleucus carved on his device, and if there be a fisherman, he will recall an apostle and children drawn from the water. (*Paedagogus* 3.11)¹⁷

Tertullian (§ 3) in early third-century North Africa, does know of the Christological fish, and not only places it in a baptismal context, but also knows of the acronym: "But we little fishes, according to our Fish (IXΘYN) Jesus Christ, are born in the water, nor are we saved in any other manner than by remaining in the water." (*De baptismo* 1) Significantly, Tertullian, while writing in Latin, uses the Greek word for fish in the accusative without any explanation—he clearly assumes his readers' knowledge of the acronym.¹⁸

While the acronym and the baptismal association of the Christological fish are thus attested by ca. 200 C.E., the Eucharistic association of the fish appears in literature only in the beginning of the fifth century. The earliest witnesses are Paulinus of Nola (§ 9) and Augustine of Hippo (§§ 11, 13):

I see the congregated people so arranged in order on the couches and all so filled with abundant food, that before my eyes arise the richness of the evangelical benediction and the image of the people whom Christ fed with loaves and two fishes, Himself the true bread and fish of the living water. (Paulinus of Nola, *Epistle* 13.11)

[The living soul] feeds upon the fish which was taken out of the deep, upon that table which Thou has prepared in the presence of those that believe.

¹⁶ For discussion, see Morey, "The Origin," 2:231–46. For the *Sibylline Oracles* generally, see John J. Collins, "Sibylline Oracles," in *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; vol. 1 of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 317–472.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of ancient literary sources are from Morey, "The Origin," and the translations of inscriptions from Kant, "Religious Symbols."

¹⁸ Morey, "The Origin," 5:282, 290. For an alternate opinion, see Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 5:32m2.

For therefore He was raised from the deep, that He might feed the dry land.
(Augustine, *Confessions* 13.21)

The roasted fish is the crucified Christ. He is also the bread that cometh down from heaven. In Him is the Church incorporated to the participation of eternal blessedness. (Augustine, *In evangelium Johannis* 123)

The feeding miracles (Matt 14:13–21 parr.; cf. Matt 15:32–39//Mark 8:1–9), as well as the meals of the resurrected Jesus (esp. John 21; cf. Luke 24), are here given a Eucharistic interpretation, and Jesus himself is identified not only with the bread, but also with the fish. Quite likely, the passage from Augustine's *Confessions* also builds upon a Jewish legend of the huge sea monster Leviathan raised from the deep to serve as food at the messianic banquet.¹⁹ While the Eucharistic fish seems to be a latecomer in literature, we do find early attestations of the idea in material culture: it is central to the Abercius inscription from Phrygia, which has been dated to the late second or early third century.²⁰ A translation of the relevant section (lines 12–16) of this reconstructed²¹ inscription goes as follows:

Faith led me everywhere and furnished everywhere as nourishment a fish from a water spring, (a fish) which was enormous and pure, and which a holy virgin grasped. And she (Faith) bestowed it among friends so that they could always eat it, as they had excellent wine and as they gave it in its mixed form with bread.

The likewise famous Pectorius inscription from Autun in Gaul—which has been variously dated between the second and sixth centuries²²—contains both the Eucharistic and baptismal fish. In addition, the first

¹⁹ See, e.g., 2 Bar. 29:4; 4 Ezra 6:52; b. B. Bat. 74b–75a. See Scheftelowitz, “Das Fisch-Symbol,” especially 6–16; Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 5:35–41.

²⁰ See Morey, “The Origin,” 4:268–82, 5:282; Kant, “Religious Symbols,” 757–58. The dating is due to (i) the probable identification of the Abercius of the epitaph with Avircius Marcellus (during the reign of Marcus Aurelius) known from Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.16.1–5; (ii) the probable dependence of the so-called Alexander epitaph (216 C.E.) on the Abercius epitaph; and (iii) the style of the lettering of the original fragments (see below) which fits with Phrygian Greek inscriptions from the turn of the third century. The inscription is today generally considered to be Christian. For discussion, see Kant, “Religious Symbols,” 771ff.

²¹ Two fragments of the original survive, and the Alexander epitaph appears to copy the opening and concluding lines of the Abercius epitaph. The author of the *Life of Abercius* (fifth to sixth century) also says he knew the original tombstone and copied its contents into his text. Missing parts of the original have been restored on the basis of the Alexander epitaph and the *Life of Abercius*. See Morey, “The Origin,” 4:268–82; Kant, “Religious Symbols,” 752ff.

²² See Morey, “The Origin,” 4:282–89.

letters of the first five lines form the acrostic IXΘYC. The translation of the inscription reads:

Divine race of the celestial fish, make use of a pious heart, as you, one among mortals, receive the immortal spring of oracular waters. Refresh your soul, friend, with the ever-flowing waters of wealth-giving wisdom. Receive the honey-sweet food of the savior of the saints. As you hunger, eat a fish that you hold in the palms of your hands. Bring satisfaction with a fish, for which I yearn, Lord savior. I pray to you, light of the dead, that my mother rests well. My father Aschandius, dear to my heart, along with my sweet mother and brothers, remember your Pectorius in the peace of the fish.

In addition, meal scenes—usually with fish and bread, probably sometimes evoking Jesus' feeding miracles and their Eucharistic interpretation (already in John 6, but without the fish)—abound among the early, third-century frescoes and sarcophagi from the Roman catacombs (fish-and-bread meals are also commonly depicted in pagan funerary contexts).²³ Moreover, the other two main motifs from literary sources are found early (late second to first half of the third century) in the material culture. The word IXΘYC is found in a graffito from the catacomb of San Sebastiano (*ICUR* 12889), and has been dated between 150–260 C.E. (Fig. 1).²⁴ The Licinia Amias epitaph (*ICUR* 4246), containing the phrase, IXΘYC ΖΩΝΤΩΝ, is probably from around 200 C.E.²⁵ (The word IXΘYC is extremely well attested in third-to-fifth-century evidence, e.g., in inscriptions and graffiti, and on oil lamps and amulets.²⁶) Frescoes from the Roman catacombs depicting Jesus' baptism can include fish in the water as well as fishermen on the shore.²⁷ In addition, depictions of individual fish are found in the earliest areas of the catacombs (late second and early third centuries), sometimes accompanied by other symbols, such as an anchor

²³ See Elisabeth Jastrzebowska, "Les scenes de banquet dans les peintures et sculptures chrétiennes des III^e et IV^e siècles," *RecAug* 14 (1979): 3–90; Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 52–59; and Kant, "Religious Symbols," 526–85, 782–810.

²⁴ Carlo Carletti ("IXΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ," *VetChr* 36 [1999]:15–30) has dated it to 230–258 C.E., while Peter Lampe (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* [trans. Michael Steinhauser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000], 28–31) prefers ca. 200 C.E. In the graffito, a Tau cross has been inserted between iota and chi. See also Henri Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ," *DACL* 7/2:1990–2086, here 2046; and Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:2*–8*.

²⁵ Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:161. See also Morey, "The Origin," 5:285.

²⁶ See Dölger, *Ichthys*. See also a summary of the main evidence in Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ."
²⁷ E.g., a fresco in the left wall of the Cubiculum of the Sacraments A3 in the catacomb of St. Callixtus, from the first half of the third century. See Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ," 2049–50; Antonio Baruffa, *The Catacombs of St. Callixtus: History—Archaeology—Faith* (trans. William Purdy; 3d ed.; Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), 79–81.



Figure 1 Graffito from the catacomb of San Sebastiano, Rome. Redrawn After Dölger, *Ichthys*, 4:220.2.

(cf. Clement of Alexandria, § 2), a Christogram ✠ (which might sometimes function as a Christian ideogram indicating that the fish is Christ), or another fish in mirror image,²⁸ which may have been introduced under the influence of the zodiac sign *Pisces*, or simply by the law of symmetry.²⁹ A possibly Christian fish graffito from the Vatican necropolis may even predate 160 C.E.³⁰ In other words, the three main motifs (acronym, baptism, Eucharist) from the literature can also be found in the extant material evidence by ca. 200 C.E.

Scholars have proposed a host of solutions for the origin of the Christological fish symbol. Although the first attempt by Cyprianus and Ludovici in 1699 suggested that the symbol arises from the Sibylline acrostic,³¹ it became fashionable in the 19th century to look for oriental roots. Piscine gods, heroes and saviors were suggested as having directly influenced the Christian concept of Christ as a fish—such figures included the Indian god Vishnu (transforming into a savior-fish in some myths), the Babylonian fish-man Oannes, and the Syrian, divine fish-woman Atargatis.³² A variant of such a theme can be seen in the proposal that derives the concept from the figure of Joshua ben Nun. Many early Christians saw

²⁸ See, e.g., *ICUR* 4246; 7162; and Dölger, *Ichthys*, 4:170.

²⁹ See, e.g., Morey, "The Origin," 5:278–97; Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ," 2013–86; Kant, "Religious Symbols," 586–613; Dölger, *Ichthys*, 5:613–736; and Danilo Mazzoleni, "Inscriptions in Roman Catacombs," in *The Christian Catacombs of Rome: History, Decoration, Inscriptions* (ed. Vincenzo Flocchi Nicolai, Fabrizio Bisconti and Danilo Mazzoleni; trans. Cristina Carlo Stella and Lori-Ann Touchette; Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2002), 146–85, here 149–55.

³⁰ Lampe, *From Paul*, 106–7. Illustration of the graffito in Engelbert Kirschbaum, *Die Graeber der Apostelfürsten: St. Peter und St. Paul in Rom* (3d ed.; Frankfurt am Main: Societäts-Verlag, 1974), 143.

³¹ See Morey, "The Origin," 1:94–95; Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ," 1994.

³² For an overview and refutation of such older scholarship, see Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:3–42. See also Kant, "Religious Symbols," 191–201.

him as a prototype of Jesus, especially because his proper name was translated as Ἰησοῦς in the Septuagint. Since his patronym *Nun* meant “fish” in contemporary Palestinian Aramaic, this was thought to have already provoked the idea of Jesus of Nazareth as a fish among the early, Aramaic-speaking Christians.³³

Better in accordance with the actual Christian source material is the theory by Goodenough (essentially following Scheftelowitz),³⁴ who favors a Jewish origin for the symbolism. He has pointed out Jewish parallels for the baptismal and Eucharistic imagery and practice. The idea of Jews as fishes swimming in the waters of Torah (e.g., *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 3b; *Gen. Rab.* 97:3; *'Abot R. Nat.* 40) would have given rise to the idea of the baptismal fish, found in Tertullian (§ 3). In addition, the concept of the huge sea monster Leviathan eaten by the faithful at a messianic banquet (e.g., 2 *Baruch* [Syriac] 29:4; 4 *Ezra* 6:52; *b. B. Bat.* 74b–75a)—in connection with the probable importance of fish in the *cena pura*, the Sabbath evening meal somehow anticipating the messianic banquet—would have been translated into the idea of Christ as the Eucharistic fish. According to Goodenough, the Christological fish symbolism derives completely from Jewish prototypes, taken over and reinterpreted by early Christians.

However, most commonly, scholars favor a Christian origin and nature of the symbolism. These proposals also vary, and are of three basic types, in accordance with the three main themes in the Christian source material. The father of catacomb archaeology, J.-B. de Rossi, was of the opinion that the fish was a hieroglyphic sign of the “living Christ,” and already symbolized the mystic dogma of the Eucharist in the apostolic age; it may also have inspired the Sibylline acrostic, although de Rossi leaves the question of their mutual relationship open.³⁵ Achelis,³⁶ and especially

³³ This has been recently argued by Guy G. Stroumsa, “The Early Christian Fish Symbol Reconsidered,” in *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity: Presented to David Flusser on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (ed. Ithamar Gruenwald, Shaul Shaked and Guy G. Stroumsa; TSAJ 32; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 199–205; following Robert Eisler, *Orpheus the Fisher: Comparative Studies in Orphic and Early Christian Cult Symbolism* (London: Watkins, 1921). Friedrich Münter (*Sinnbilder und Kunstvorstellungen der alten Christen* [Altona: Hammerich, 1825], 49) and Alfred Jeremias (*Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients: Handbuch zur biblisch-orientalischen Altertumskunde* [2d ed.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906], 69n1) had already pointed out the Jewish traditions of the Messiah’s connection with the sign of the Pisces, and its possible influence on Christian symbolism. See also criticism in Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:33–39.

³⁴ Schetflowitz, “Das Fisch-Symbol”; Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 5:31–61.

³⁵ Giovanni Battista de Rossi, *La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana* (3 vols.; Rome: Cromo litografia pontificia, 1864–1877), 1:350–1. See also Morey, “The Origin,” 1:96–97, 5:292–93.

³⁶ Achelis, *Das Symbol*.

Dölger,³⁷ have favored the derivation from baptism: Dölger argued that the concept of the apostles as “fishers of men” gave rise to the idea of converts, i.e., baptized Christians, as fishes, which by analogy suggested the concept of the baptized Christ, himself the Logos present in the baptismal water, as *the Fish*.

The third solution goes all the way back to the first study in 1699, and derives the symbol from the acronym, although not necessarily from the acrostic of the *Sibylline Oracles* themselves. In fact, to explain the choice for the words of the acronym/acrostic (the *Sibylline Oracles* simply use them), three proposals have been put forward. First, Egli suggested that the opening words (in some MSS)³⁸ of the Gospel of Mark (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]) would yield IXYΘ (note the reversed order of *upsilon* and *theta*), which would suggest the actual word, IXΘΥC (‘Savior’ presumably would have been inserted to explain the concluding *sigma*).³⁹

Mowat, secondly, offered a very different explanation. He thought that Domitian’s claim to be the “Son of God,” which is echoed on his (Greek) coins from Alexandria, might have caused some Christians to protest against emperor worship in general, and his claim in particular, and to have modeled a formally comparable statement for Jesus. Allegedly, Domitian’s persecutions in 95 would also have necessitated the use of such a secret code,⁴⁰ although recent scholarship has cast doubts on the severity and even existence of Domitianic persecutions of Christians.⁴¹ In any case, according to Mowat, Domitian’s coins follow a tripartite formula: (i) ΑΥΤ(οκράτωρ) ΚΑΙC(αρ); (ii) ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙΟC ΔΟΜΙΤ(ιανός); (iii) CEB(αστός) ΓΕΡ(μηνικός). Mowat argues that this is modeled upon legends on Augustus’ coins, such as (i) IMPERATOR CAESAR, (ii) DIVI FILIVS,

³⁷ Dölger, *Ichthys*.

³⁸ The words υἱοῦ θεοῦ are probably a secondary addition since they are missing from several early MSS, including the still unpublished Oxyrhynchus fragment of Mark 1:1–2, which may be the earliest extant witness to Mark’s Gospel (Geoffrey Smith, “Gospel Magic: A New Amulet of Mark 1:1–2 from Oxyrhynchus,” A Paper Presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 21–24, 2009).

³⁹ Emil Egli, “Ueber eine Genfer Thon-Lampe mit dem Symbol des Fisches,” *AnzSchweiz* 24 (1891): 576–79.

⁴⁰ Robert Mowat, “IXΘΥΣ,” in *Atti del II° congresso internazionale di archeologica cristiana tenuto in Roma nell’ aprile 1900* (Rome: Spithöver, 1902), 1–8.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95–115; J. Christian Wilson, “The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” *NTS* 39 (1993): 587–605; Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143–51.

(iii) AVGVSTVS; and (i) CAESAR AVGVSTVS, (ii) DIVI FILIVS, (iii) PATER PATRIAE. The division, according to Mowat, basically follows the tripartite naming system of the Romans (*praenomen, nomen, cognomen*) with the paternal affiliation inserted between the second and third parts. Based on such imperial legends on coins, the formula Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Ὡτήρ would have been invented, which then would have led to the acronym itself. The specific word order Θεοῦ Υἱός, instead of the more common Christian Υἱὸς Θεοῦ, would be based on imitation of the imperial claims, which regularly use the word order Θεοῦ Υἱός (< DIVI FILIVS).

Third, Dölger has proposed that the acronym (although not the fish symbolism itself) derives from the Christian practice of abbreviating Jesus' name and titles on monuments. Before 200 C.E., the name, "Jesus," was abbreviated with the simple *iota*, or with H , i.e., the monogram *iota-eta* (*iota* inserted inside *eta*). "Christ" was often abbreviated with the Christogram X , *chi-rho*. "God," Θεός, for its part, was sometimes abbreviated with the simple *theta*, and Jesus was already simply called "God" in the New Testament (John 1:1–18) and in the works of the apostolic fathers (see, e.g., Ignatius, *To the Romans*, salutation). "Jesus Christ" was in turn sometimes abbreviated with X , i.e., the monogram *iota-chi*. The existence of the actual Greek word, ἰχθύς, together with the use of such abbreviations, would then have influenced the invention of the acronym from the shorter forms such as IXΘ or IXΘY, perhaps with the imperial claims inspiring the word order Θεοῦ Υἱός, and the derivation of the *sigma* from Ὡτήρ (emperors were often hailed as saviors).⁴²

One should finally mention Morey's proposal, according to which the origins of the Christological fish symbol lie *both* in the Eucharistic interpretation of the feeding miracles (perhaps also in John 21), *and* the acronym. Although the Eucharistic interpretation of the fish seems to have been the earlier of the two, the invention of the acronym was ultimately responsible for the actual Christological fish symbol, in Morey's judgment.⁴³ This, then, is essentially also Kant's solution to the origins of the Christological fish symbol *per se*,⁴⁴ although he stresses the importance of Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent, Jewish) ideas about fish: the common connections of fish with death, bucolic setting, sexuality and prophecy; astrological

⁴² Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:351–422. See also Leclercq, "IXΘYΣ," 2008–9.

⁴³ Morey, "The Origin," 5:282, 297.

⁴⁴ Kant, "Religious Symbols," 495, 498.

ideas about *Pisces* marking the end of an era and the beginning of a new one; dolphins (conceived of as fish) as saviors; gods metamorphosing into fish; the aristocratic habit of keeping fish as pets; fish as one of the most common foodstuffs; eating of large fish as a status symbol; fishing as a socially marginal occupation, and so on.⁴⁵ According to Kant, all of these ideas must have been present in the early Christian fish symbolism as well (early Christians, after all, lived in the Greco-Roman world), although I would myself stress the *potential* of such contemporary parallels—most early Christians could not have been aware of all the numerous traditions and practices Kant marches out in his otherwise substantial and important study.

In sum, there is no generally accepted solution to the question of the origins of the Christological fish symbolism. Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas probably influenced the development of the Christian symbol, and the three main motifs in the source material (acronym, as well as the baptismal and Eucharistic fish) can all be explained as having arisen independently of each other, and only afterwards come into mutual, cross-fertilizing contact. This may well have been the case, but in my view, there must have been something that catalyzed this cross-fertilizing development and helped crystallize the symbolism and realize its potential.

Indeed, a piece of evidence that has been relatively neglected in this regard might shed additional light on the symbol's early development. The evidence in question is a fragment of an alabaster disc from *Roma vecchia* on the *Via Appia* (ICUR 15413; Fig. 2). Its dating is uncertain, but it might be from any time between the second and sixth centuries, although it is usually dated to the fourth (see below). It was found in the 18th century in the ruins of the magnificent late antique *Villa Quintiliorum*.⁴⁶ The fragment shows the word IXΘYC below what appears to be an image of an eight-spoked wheel (Fig. 3). The disc was evidently in better condition when it was found since illustrations of its earlier, more complete, condition survive (Fig. 4);⁴⁷ we can see that the wheel contained in itself the Christogram $\chi\rho$, and had a name inscribed above it. Only five and a

⁴⁵ Kant, "Religious Symbols," esp. 122–307.

⁴⁶ See Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ," 2034–35; Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:231–35; Rita Paris, "Historical Background," in *Via Appia: The Villa of the Quintili* (ed. Rita Paris; Milan: Electa, 2000), 5–27, here 14; Lucrezia Spera, "The Christianization of Space along the Via Appia: Changing Landscape in the Suburbs of Rome," *AJA* 107 (2003): 23–43, here 36–37.

⁴⁷ For another illustration, see Paris, "Historical," 15; and Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:231–35 for discussion.

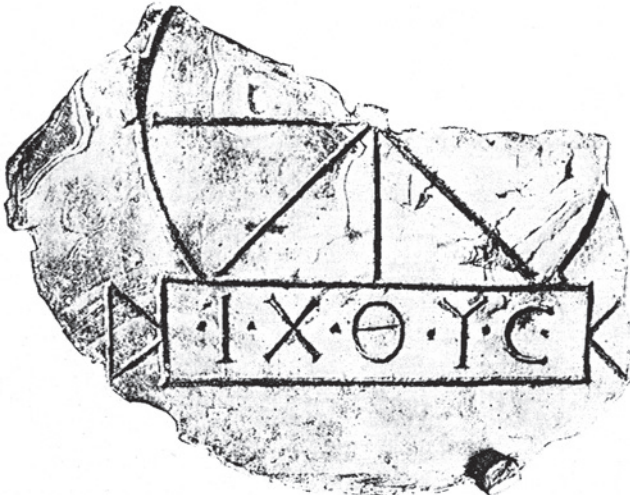


Figure 2 Alabaster Fragment from Villa Quintiliorum, Rome. From Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:232, fig. 25. Reproduced with the permission of Metzler Verlag, Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Germany (www.metzler-verlag.de).

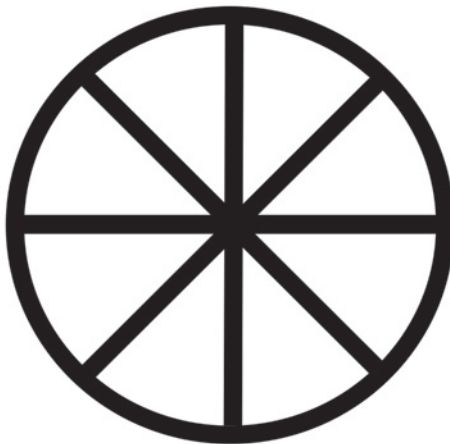


Figure 3 Eight-spoked wheel. Illustration by the author.

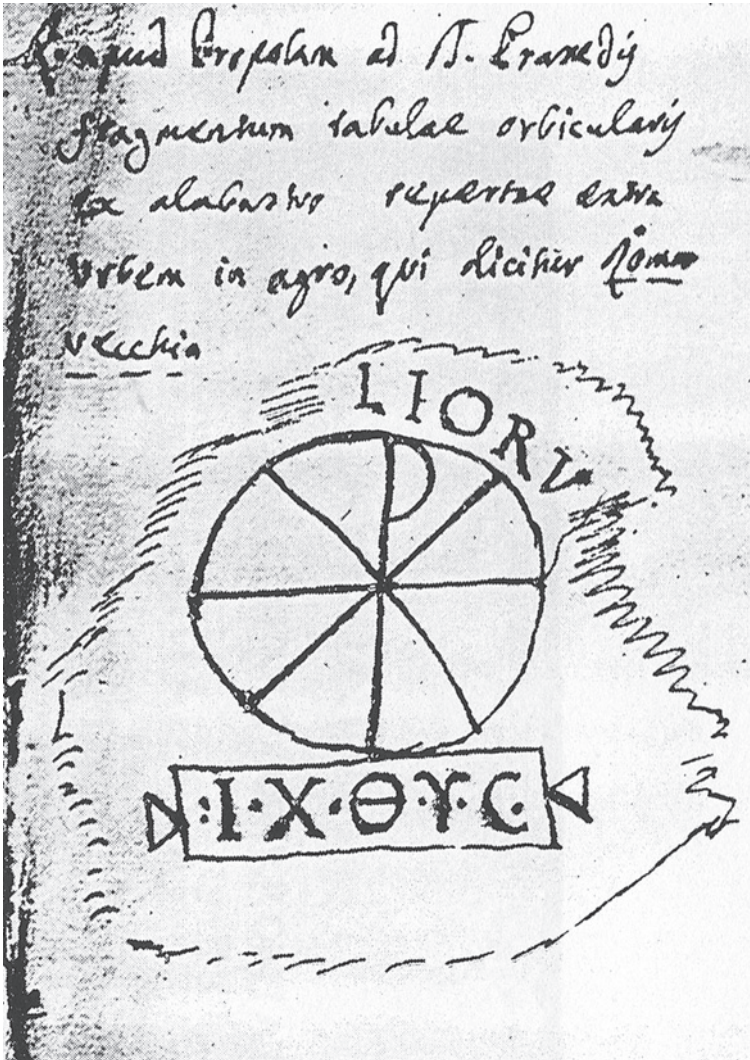


Figure 4 Reconstruction of the Alabaster Fragment in its earlier condition. From Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:233, fig. 25a. Reproduced with the permission of Metzler Verlag, Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Germany (www.metzler-verlag.de).

half letters of the name survive, but they appear to consist of the plural genitive ending, *LIORV(M)*. This would fit well with the place of discovery, the *Villa Quintiliorum*. The emperor Commodus (180–192 C.E.) confiscated the villa for himself, having killed the owners, the two Quintilii brothers, who had served as consuls in 151 C.E.⁴⁸ Ancient sources provide no information on their Christianity, although scholars of earlier generations—due to the finding of the alabaster fragment—erroneously suspected that Commodus executed the brothers for being Christians.⁴⁹ However, the *Villa Quintiliorum* seems to have retained its name even after Commodus exterminated the two Quintilii,⁵⁰ and hence the name on the alabaster fragment does not mean necessarily that the brothers themselves had been Christians. Given the nature of the alabaster fragment, the villa appears to have become at some later point the property of Christians, probably in connection with the third-to-seventh century Christianization of the *Via Appia*, including the emergence of several Christian catacombs in the vicinity.⁵¹ Excavations have revealed signs of use and restorations in the villa between the late second and early sixth centuries,⁵² making it probable that the fragment indeed post-dates the Quintilii brothers. Thus, the usual dating of the fragment to the fourth century is a reasonable one.⁵³

As for the content of the fragment, I would suggest that the round image above the word IXΘYC is not to be seen so much as a stylized Christogram (consisting perhaps of the superimposed staurogram † and the letter *chi*, X, inside a circle)⁵⁴ than as a wheel; the Christogram (or simply the loop of the *rho*) was merely added to it as an ideogram, to mark

⁴⁸ See Dio Cassius 73.5–7; *Historia Augusta, Commodus* 4.9. See Leclercq, “IXΘΥΣ,” 2034–35; Rudolf Hanslik, “Quintilius [22, 27],” *PW* 47:984–87; Paris, “Historical,” 22–23; and A. R. Birley, “Quintilii brothers,” *OCD* 1291.

⁴⁹ See Barbara Pettinau and Giuliana Galli, “The Antiquarium,” in *Via Appia: The Villa of the Quintili* (ed. Rita Paris; Milan: Electa, 2000), 57–75, here 71.

⁵⁰ *Historia Augusta, Tacitus* 16.1–2, in the late third century, speaks of a house/villa *Quintiliorum*. This may well be the same villa. See Leclercq, “IXΘΥΣ,” 2035; and Paris, “Historical,” 23.

⁵¹ See Spera, “Christianization.”

⁵² See Paris, “Historical,” 22–23; and Spera, “Christianization,” 36–37n62. See also Leclercq, “IXΘΥΣ,” 2035.

⁵³ See Leclercq, “IXΘΥΣ,” 2035; Carletti, “IXΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ,” 16; Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:235; Spera, “Christianization,” 36.

⁵⁴ On early Christian sarcophagi, the staurogram (see Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Giuseppe Bovini and Hugo Brandenburg, eds., *Rom und Ostia* [vol. 1 of *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1967], 138.859) or the christogram (ibid., e.g., 16.49; 19.59,61; 43.175; 48.208; 51.224; 149.933) are occasionally placed inside a garland. However, the circle on our alabaster fragment is not a garland.

the wheel specifically as a Christological symbol. Comparable Christian ideograms are found in graffiti, where a Tau cross (cf. Fig. 1) or a Latin cross has been inserted inside a name or a word, without any apparent phonetic value.⁵⁵ The round image itself, the wheel, was, in fact, a very common ancient symbol that had countless applications. It could represent a flower or a rosette, a wheel, a star, the sun, or bread.⁵⁶ Carved on a surface, it could function as a board for a game.⁵⁷ (In fact, the image is so common that it is also a Jungian archetype.)⁵⁸ But one can also see it as a ligature or a monogram, consisting of the superimposed Greek letters I, X and Θ (cf. Fig. 5). As Dölger earlier, and Hurtado more recently, have pointed out, Christians commonly abbreviated Jesus' name and titles with monograms in second-century monuments and manuscripts.⁵⁹ What is important, is that the X (*iota-chi*), as well as the X (*chi-rho*) monograms were originally non- and pre-Christian devices (symbols, abbreviations, or signs for tachygraphy), *which Christians adopted and to which they gave new meanings*. Instead of using the X as an abbreviation for χρόνος, χιλιάρχης or χρηματίζειν,⁶⁰ for example, some Christians saw in it the two initial letters of the word Χριστός, "Christ." As for the X , which was an ancient form of the Greek letter *psi*, but could also stand for the Roman numeral XVI, or a six-pointed star, and function as an abbreviation for the town name Χίος, or be a simple, decorative sign,⁶¹ some early Christians saw in it the *initial letters of two separate words*, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, i.e., "Jesus Christ."

The case with our wheel seems to be similar. It, too, is a non- and pre-Christian symbol,⁶² which some Christians seem to have taken over and reinterpreted as a monogram consisting of the initial letters of the *three words* Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεός, i.e., IXΘ. This alone then may have

⁵⁵ See Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:2*-8*.

⁵⁶ See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 5:62-95; 7:175-201.

⁵⁷ Cf. Dölger, *Ichthys*, 4:133; 5:119-35, esp. 27.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (trans. R. F. C. Hull; vol. 9/1 of *The Collective Works of C. G. Jung*; BS 20; 2d ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 36ff. Jung also wrote on Christian fish symbolism (*Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* [trans. R. F. C. Hull; vol. 9/2 of *The Collective Works of C. G. Jung*; BS 20; 2d ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1968], 72-94, 103-72), and was especially interested in the astrological connection with *Pisces*.

⁵⁹ Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:351-422; Hurtado, *Earliest*, 135-54.

⁶⁰ Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:366-72; Hurtado, *Earliest*, 137-39.

⁶¹ Max Sulzberger, "Le Symbole de la Croix et les Monogrammes de Jésus chez les premiers Chrétiens," *Byzantion* 2 (1925): 337-448, here 394.

⁶² See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 7:175-201.

suggested the actual word ΙΧΘΥC, or perhaps Θεός first evoked the more common Υἱὸς Θεοῦ or Θεοῦ Υἱός, which then resulted either in ΙΧΥΘ or ΙΧΟΥ, both of which certainly suggest the actual word ΙΧΘΥC. In fact, one can also identify the letters Y and C in the wheel symbol itself (Fig. 5). Ligatures and monograms, whose invention and deciphering required some imagination, are found *en masse* in the ancient world.⁶³ The explanations for the *upsilon* and *sigma* were then coined, with the *upsilon* finding an obvious reference in the word υἱός. As for the *sigma*, there was more than one option, as one can see from the *Sibylline Oracles* (σωτήρ, σταυρός). The prominence of the cross in early Christianity—i.e., the Gospel stories about Jesus' passion and the consequent preaching of it, Tau and Latin crosses as ideograms, and the staurogram—may have suggested the word σταυρός. Jesus Christ as the “Savior” (σωτήρ), for its part, is an idea already found in the New Testament,⁶⁴ and, in my opinion, one does not need emperor worship (or Gnosticism) to explain its introduction into the acronym ΙΧΘΥC.⁶⁵ That the wheel at one point was identified as a monogram for ΙΧΘΥC, is indeed suggested by our Roman alabaster fragment, as well as by a small carnelian gem from Asia Minor (Fig. 6), which shows the wheel with a fish replacing the horizontal stroke of the *theta*, as Dölger has argued.⁶⁶ However, the fish seems to function in the gem *also* as an ideogram, a key to deciphering the meaning of the image: it is a monogram for ΙΧΘΥC.⁶⁷

I would like to suggest that a Christian appropriation of the wheel as a monogram for ΙΧΘ (Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεός) gave rise to the acronym ΙΧΘΥC, which then influenced other, possibly already existing *Christological* fish symbolism, arising out of New Testament stories where Jesus and fish already had a close connection. The coinage of the monogram ΙΧΘ(ΥC)

⁶³ Mazzoleni, “Inscriptions,” 160. See, for example, *ICUR* 25791; 25794.

⁶⁴ Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Phil 3:20; 2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6; 2 Pet 1:11; 2:20; 3:18; 1 John 4:14.

⁶⁵ Thus Mowat, “ΙΧΘΥC”; and Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:409–15.

⁶⁶ Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:333.

⁶⁷ That the image can function as a monogram for ΙΧΘΥC was already pointed out by Dölger (*Ichthys*, 1:333) a hundred years ago (first edition 1910; second edition of 1928–1957 reprinted 1999). Goodenough (*Jewish Symbols*, 5:56n127) disagrees, and sees in the image only an identification of the fish with the wheel, not a monogram. The relative scarcity of evidence for an identification of the wheel as a monogram for ΙΧΘΥC could be explained with the simple, spelled-out acronym having quickly replaced the wheel as a less ambivalent and a specifically Christian symbol. The Ephesian graffito (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ephesus_Ichthys.jpg, retrieved April 9, 2010), consisting of the wheel and the word ΙΧΟΥC (spelled with the “four-bar” *sigma*), is a modern one (Prof. Hans Taeuber, personal communication).



Figure 5 Identification of the letters of the word *IXΘYC* in the wheel. Illustration by the author.

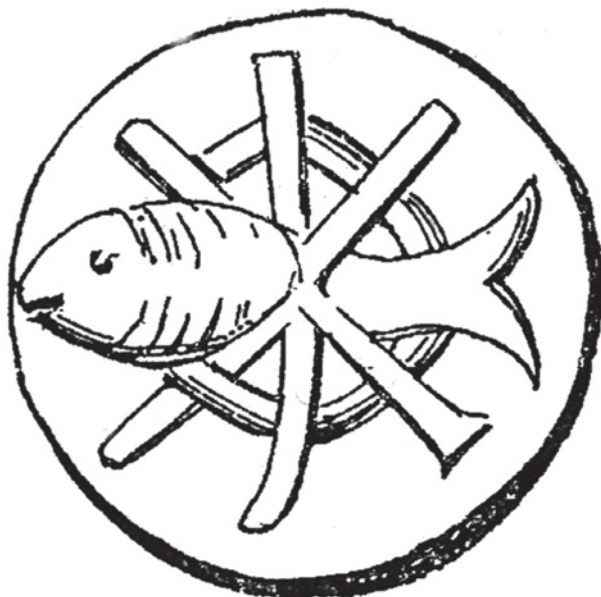


Figure 6 Carnelian Gem from Asia Minor. From Dölger, *Ichthys*, 1:333, fig. 49. Reproduced with the permission of Metzler Verlag, Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Germany (www.metzler-verlag.de).

out of the wheel would be analogous to the Christian appropriation of the χ (*iota-chi*) as a monogram for IX, i.e., “Jesus Christ.” Moreover, this theory has the following, additional virtues. First, it can offer an explanation for the curious expansion of the IX Θ YC-acrostic into the actual IX Θ YCC, with two *sigmas*, in the *Sibylline Oracles*. If the acrostic/acronym is indeed based on the wheel image, then the simple law of symmetry alone might suggest that the circle of the *theta* should contain two, rather than just one, *sigma* (Fig. 7), and this might account for the curious *Sibylline* form IX Θ YCC.

Second, and more importantly, the image in itself was used as a representation for bread in art (Figs. 8–9),⁶⁸ and actual breads surviving from Pompeii have the exact same, eight-pointed bread stamp (Fig. 10). If this common symbol in early Christianity thus functioned simultaneously as a reference for bread (iconographically) and for fish (as a monogram), it could well explain the idea of a Christological Eucharistic fish. The connection was, of course, enhanced by the New Testament stories of the feeding miracles⁶⁹ and the fish-and-bread meals of the resurrected Jesus (John 21; cf. Luke 24), and especially by their Eucharistic interpretations (already in John 6). As for the baptismal fish, one should entertain the possibility that it may have arisen independently of the acronym (and the Eucharistic fish), although the acronym could certainly have enhanced the interpretation of Christ as the baptismal fish, if such an idea already existed.

The solution proposed here offers a new explanation for the origin of the acronym, and hence contributes to the discussion on the early development of the Christological fish symbolism. While the secrecy and mysticism theories by Mowat and de Rossi must be abandoned as such, the frequent occurrence of the Christological fish symbol in the catacombs and on amulets may point to the symbol’s fairly common apotropaic and magical application, especially in the third and fourth centuries. However, it seems that already earlier, probably sometime in the second century, the appropriation of the wheel for more practical reasons (abbreviation of Jesus’ name and titles) gave rise to the acronym, which perhaps simultaneously gave rise to, or at least enhanced, the concept of the Eucharistic fish—an idea that is present *implicitly* in John 6. It also seems likely, that

⁶⁸ See especially the third basket from the left in Fig. 8, and the left-hand loaf in Fig. 9.

⁶⁹ Matt 14:13–21 parr.; cf. Matt 15:32–39//Mark 8:1–9.

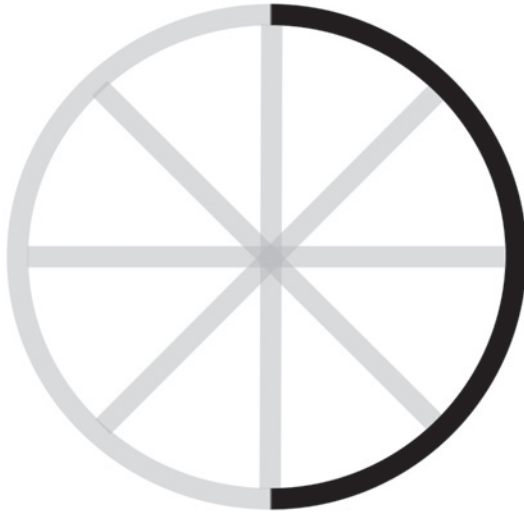


Figure 7 Identification of the second *sigma* in the wheel.
Illustration by the author.



Figure 8 A detail from a fourth-century Christian sarcophagus (“Continuous frieze”) from Rome. Photo: author, courtesy of the Vatican Museums.



Figure 9 Illustration of a fourth-century Christian sarcophagus lid, Rome. From Dölger, *Ichthys*, 3: LXI.1. Reproduced with the permission of Metzler Verlag, Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Germany (www.metzler-verlag.de).



Figure 10 Bread from Pompeii. From http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompei_pane.jpg. Photo: 'Beatrice,' used under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Italy license.

the acronym functioned as an important catalyst behind the concept of the baptismal Christ-fish, too, which was naturally enhanced, and perhaps originally provoked, by the idea of the apostles as “fishers of men.” Afterwards, together with the existence of the large amount of Jewish and pagan fish imagery, the possibilities for employing the IXΘYC were endless.

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PART THREE

MYSTERY AND SECRECY IN NON-CHRISTIAN PRACTICES,
TEXT TRADITIONS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

SECRECY AND INITIATION IN THE MITHRAIC COMMUNITIES OF FOURTH CENTURY ROME

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Secrecy—at least the kind of secrecy associated with the initiatory rites—was one of the defining factors of both Mithraic and Christian communities in late antique Rome. This secrecy was an attractive, communal secrecy which, by its very nature, in many ways also must have served as a means to attract and recruit new members. Indeed, the promise that the new members would learn the fundamental secrets of the cults, that they would be allowed to participate in secret rituals, like the Mithraic cult meal and the Christian Eucharist, and that they would become part of an exclusive elite community possessing esoteric knowledge and a special soteriology, must have been as great incentives to join a religious group in late antiquity, as they are in the religious landscape of the modern Western world. In the following, I will be exploring the relationship between secrecy and initiation in the cult of Mithras and mechanisms that were instrumental in maintaining other contemporary hierarchical social structures, exemplified by the patronage system and the concept of the Roman *familia*. When studying the role and importance of secrecy and initiation in Rome's Mithraic communities in this period, we have to raise three fundamental questions: who filled the mithraea of Rome in the fourth century, who was attracted to these nominally secret initiatory communities, and what was it that made them so attractive? It is my contention that a selective kind of secrecy and the initiatory hierarchy practiced by these communities provides at least some preliminary answers.

Secrecy and the Public-Private Divide

Passing by either a Christian basilica or large-scale, semi-public mithraea like those of the *Crypta Balbi*, *Terme di Caracalla*, or the *Santa Prisca*, must have been a rather similar experience: a passerby would perhaps see light coming from inside the cult room, he would smell the heavy incense, and perhaps hear singing and recitation of mystical hymns. Dale Kinney evocatively describes the impression the Lateran basilica might have made on

an early fourth century passer-by, and stresses the importance of lighting. Not only do the large windows of the fourth century assembly-halls serve to admit daylight, but, just as importantly—they would have let light out.¹

The light shining out of these windows would be especially noticeable at night, drawing attention to the ritual gatherings of the Christian community. Essentially, the community was advertising their presence and exclusivity. Furthermore, these basilicas “positively advertised the fact that Christians had nighttime liturgies, in a brilliantly lighted space whose glowing windows established darkness as the realm of the non-initiates outside.”² Early morning gatherings, which seem to have been a feature of at least some mithraea in Rome and central Italy, must also have made an impact on the everyday life of the urban environment, particularly in cases where these mithraea were located in public baths or other buildings of a more public nature.³

All of this took place in relatively densely populated areas of the city, and the density of the churches and mithraea was such that, just as in present day Rome, there was a religious building on nearly every corner.⁴ Clearly this secrecy and the restricted access to mysteries enacted just barely out of plain sight must have been very attractive to many. Supporting the argument of a close connection between “public secrecy” and recruitment is the increased public visibility of both Christianity and Mithraism in Rome in the mid-to-late fourth century. It seems that throughout the fourth century, more information concerning these cults became

¹ Dale Kinney, “The Church Basilica,” in *Imperial Art as Christian Art—Christian Art as Imperial Art: Expression and Meaning in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Justinian* (ed. Rasmus J. Brandt and Olaf Steen; AAAH 15; Rome: Bardi Editore, 2001), 128–29.

² Kinney, “The Church Basilica,” 129.

³ Examples of mithraea located in public baths are the mithraeum of the baths of Caracalla in Rome and the Terme di Mitra at Ostia in which the natural lighting of the mithraeum in particular suggests the importance of early morning rituals. Mithraea located in the middle of centrally located *insulae*, like the mithraeum of the Crypta Balbi in Rome, must also have attracted quite a bit of attention if early morning rituals indeed were practiced there.

⁴ For an extended discussion of Mithraic topography and demographic models in fourth century Rome, see Jonas Bjørnebye, “Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus’: The cult of Mithras in Fourth Century Rome” (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2007), 59–82. For the topography of mithraea in Ostia, see Jan Theo Bakker, *Living and Working with the Gods: Studies of Evidence for Private Religion and its Material Environment in the City of Ostia (100–500 AD)* (DMAHA 12; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1994), 111–17.

generally known, but this information was still restricted to external appearances, the mechanisms of the recruiting drive, rather than any of the actual secrets of the cults in question.

The secrecy of the fundamental doctrinal “truths” of the community was especially important in this regard as a passage from the *Carmen ad senatorem ex Christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem conversum* indicates: “If you do not wish to know the truth,” writes the anonymous poet, “the offence will be light. It will not be light if you abandon the truth already known.”⁵ Initiatory knowledge was not to be revealed, but while the mysteries of the Christians are to stay hidden from those not initiated into the Christian mysteries, the pagans are criticized for hiding their mysteries from plain view. In another anonymous poem, the *Carmen ad Antonium*, the Mithraists are blamed for hidden sun-worship, and the poet phrases the rhetorical question: “What of the fact that they hide the Unconquered One in a rocky cave and dare to call the one they keep in darkness the Sun? Who adores light in secret or hides the star of the sky in the shadows beneath the earth except for some evil purpose?”⁶

Now for many Christian rites, and despite the distinctive “Christocentric” terminology of many contemporary sources, there is little or no evidence for direct Mithraic ritual analogues. However, there is good reason to suppose that Mithraic initiatory rituals were in many ways quite similar to the Christian initiations and that there were similarities both in practice and ideology between the Christian agape and Eucharist and the Mithraic cultic meal. Roger Beck has recently, and quite plausibly to my mind, suggested that a shared “ritual mentality” is fundamental to any comparison between Mithraism and Christianity. He argues that rather than comparisons of *types* of ritual activity, a more constructive approach is to focus on “fresh analogies which display something more fundamental, the *relationship* of ritual to cult myth (or other esoteric ‘fact’)... What

⁵ “Ut leve crimen erit, si nolis noscere vera; Non leve crimen erit, si cognita vera relinquis.”—*Carmen ad senatorem ex Christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem conversum* (Poem to a senator converted from Christianity to the service of idols), 72–73.

⁶ “Quid quod et Invictum spelaea sub atra recondunt / quemque tegunt tenebris audent hunc dicere Solem? / Quis colat occulte lucem sidusque supernum / celet in infernis nisi rerum causa malarum?”—Pseudo-Paulinus, *Carmen XXXII: Carmen ad Antonium*, 13–16. Translation by Brian Croke and Jill Harries (*Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome: a Documentary Study* [Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1982], 88). Ambrosiaster too criticizes pagans for celebrating their rites in secrecy, *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 114.6.

the analogies suggest, then,” Beck continues, “is a *shared sacramental mentality*, a propensity for expressing myth in ritual.”⁷

Similarities between ritual practices in contemporary Mithraism and Christianity—*typological similarities* as well as the shared *mentality* posited by Beck—were, judging by literary references, recognized by the Mithraic and Christian communities themselves as well.⁸ As such it is quite likely, given the outwards appearance of both religions in Rome in the fourth century, that a wide range of similarities between the two may have been assumed by the uninitiated contemporaries of the cults too. In fact, it seems that the existence of the initiatory grade hierarchy in Mithraism was comparatively well known to outsiders, while details concerning the actual rituals and teachings, as well as the significance of the initiatory grades themselves, remained a well kept secret.⁹ We must assume that on the level of detail—the nuts and bolts of Mithraic ritual practices, so to speak—the detailed and often lurid reports of contemporary Christian sources were mostly based on speculation. Indeed, in a close parallel to this discussion, Neil McLynn argues that the Spanish Christian poet Prudentius’ account of the *taurobolium* in the cult of Magna Mater in fourth century Rome does not derive from any knowledge of the mechanics of secret ritual practices. His description is rather informed by dark rumors of secret subterranean practices, and not surprisingly, according to McLynn: “It thus corresponds almost exactly with the Thyestean banquets and promiscuous orgies that pagans conjured from reports of what went on behind the closed doors of the Christian Eucharist.”¹⁰

Consequently, what was generally known of the Christian initiations and the celebration of the Eucharist at the time and what was common knowledge of Metroac and Mithraic rites could have been much the same for the uninitiated passer-by. Moreover, it seems clear that this apparent dichotomy between a secret revelatory truth and a relatively public hierarchical initiatory structure is one of the factors that lie at the heart of both Mithraism and Christianity in late antique Rome.

⁷ Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” *JRS* 90 (2000): 145–80 at 175.

⁸ See for example Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 70, and Tertullian, *De corona* 15.3.

⁹ A secret so well kept in fact that much of modern Mithraic scholarship has been concerned with the painstaking work of piecing together the details of Mithraic teachings and ritual practices on the basis of archaeological remains, dedicatory inscriptions and a handful of textual references.

¹⁰ McLynn, “The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*,” *Phoenix* 50 (1996): 312–30 at 319.

The initiatory truths themselves remained hidden and accessible only to the initiated, a situation which served to maintain most of the cults at this time, and perhaps in this sense at least, it is meaningful to speak of some sort of competition between the cults. However, there is no doubt that the cult of Mithras, even though the membership base seems to have been much more extensive in the fourth century than is usually assumed, remained quite small in comparison to the Christian population of the city in the late fourth century.¹¹ It is in this competitive light we must see Prudentius' description of the taurobolium. His description of the ritual in the *Peristephanon* conjures forth a mental picture of the bloodbath which must not be understood as an attempt at accurately describing the actual rite, such as it was practiced in the Metroac cult in Rome, but rather as a case of sending a *frisson* down the collective spine of his Christian audience back in Spain. Prudentius was in no sense privy to the actual performance of the taurobolium, but he could easily have witnessed the public acclamation of a *tauroboliatus* with a bloodstained tunic, outside of one of the Metroac temples in the city of Rome, inciting his poetic imagination. In this sense, he surely reflects the perspective of most Christians. "Excluded from the mystery of the *taurobolium*, Christians could only shudder at what they could see of its results," argues Neil McLynn, and "Prudentius, moreover, suggests a likely source for their information: for he shows the ceremony culminating in that most characteristic fourth-century publicity device, an acclamation."¹² This dichotomy between a secret "private" rite and a rather gaudy "public" finale is indicative of the mechanisms which engenders and perpetuates such an attractive secrecy.

The poet's description of the rite of the taurobolium, which is found in a rather long-winded passage from the end of the *Peristephanon*,¹³ reveals the difficulty Prudentius had in trying to reconcile the presence of a crowd of spectators with the supposed secrecy of the rite of the taurobolium, and, as McLynn rightly remarks, "we might more plausibly envisage the blood-stained tauroboliate emerging from a sanctuary to display himself to an awed crowd; the hero of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, after his secret initiation to Isis, had likewise stood on a wooden platform to be 'unveiled' for public inspection."¹⁴ And this is the crux of the matter when it comes

¹¹ See Bjørnebye, "Hic locus," 64–68 and 180–83.

¹² McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 318.

¹³ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 10.1006–1050.

¹⁴ McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 318. McLynn cites Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.24.

to the “secret rites” and their place *between* public and private in late antique Roman society. McLynn argues succinctly that “the key development of the fourth century might therefore be identified as the merger of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ types of *taurobolium*, which (as far as we can tell) had involved essentially the same ritual but had differed in their intended beneficiaries and the degree of publicity; but now the pomp and spectacle of the public rites were at the disposal of private individuals.”¹⁵

Much the same can be said of Mithraism in the fourth century, and moreover, this blurring of the public-private lines goes both ways. There was clearly an increase in the “privatization” of rites, in the sense of rites performed in a *familia*-setting, as evidenced by the increased popularity of, and evidence for, *domus* mithraea in fourth century Rome, especially among the senatorial aristocracy.¹⁶ At the same time, however, it is important to note that this period also saw the use of several very large and semi-public mithraea, which seem to have remained in use throughout the entire fourth century and perhaps even into the early fifth century.¹⁷ Wolf Liebeschuetz, however, makes a point of the distinction between *secret rites* and *secret societies*, and argues that “Mithraic groups were private societies, which met in private, and by lamp-light. But they were not secret societies. Mithraea were often situated in frequented locations, and often even in public buildings.”¹⁸ The evidence from Rome, particularly in light of the excavation of the mithraeum of the Crypta Balbi,¹⁹ indicates that this tendency became even more pronounced in the course of the fourth century.

It is in this context that the increase in “outsider” literary references concerning Mithraic grades, initiations, hierarchies, and other small details in the fourth century should be understood. Unsurprisingly, there are more literary references to Mithraism in the material from the fourth and fifth centuries than there are from the second and third.²⁰ While most of these

¹⁵ McLynn, “The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*,” 323.

¹⁶ See Bjørnebye, “Hic locus,” 67–71.

¹⁷ For a discussion of mithraea in use throughout the fourth century, see Bjørnebye, “Hic locus,” 25–52.

¹⁸ Wolf Liebeschuetz, “The Expansion of Mithraism among the Religious Cults of the Second Century,” in *Studies in Mithraism* (ed. J. Hinnells; Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 1994), 195–216 at 196.

¹⁹ See Marco Ricci, “Il mitreo della Crypta Balbi a Roma (note preliminari),” in *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds* (ed. Marleen Martens and Guy De Boe; AVM 4; Brussels: I.A.P., 2004), 157–65, and Lucia Sagù, “Il mitreo delle Crypta Balbi e i suoi reperti,” *ibid.*, 167–78.

²⁰ There are more texts that mention Mithras, directly or indirectly, in the literary corpus of the fourth century, than at any other point in history. If we were to include, as

sources mention Mithraism only in passing, they seem almost exclusively to be concerned with superficial details pertaining to the hierarchical structure of the cult—indicating that this was general knowledge about Mithraism at the time. They report on the existence of a grade hierarchy and the use of initiatory rituals often involving fasting, sensory deprivation, and other tests—in short, the typical elements of an initiatory cult, and not far removed from the contemporary practices of some Christian communities.²¹

The central importance of the act of initiation, as well as the more private and exclusive nature of the ritual practices, is central for understanding the relationship between secrecy and initiation in the practices of initiatory cults in late antique Rome—in the Mithraic communities as well as in the Christian communities, full membership required initiation. Even so, both groups figured in the public eye, and we can reasonably conclude that some of the aspects of the Mithraic cult were commonly known in fourth century Rome, and that many of the mithraea of the city were known as such in the local environment. A reasonable inference is that men seen entering and leaving the premises would have been known as members of the Mithraic community outside of the group itself. Consequently, while the mithraea themselves and the identity of the community members were most likely not secret, what these men actually *did* inside the mithraea during the Mithraic ceremonies remained hidden, at least to a large extent.

fourth century texts, Arnobius's *Adversus nationes*, possibly written around 298, as well as Claudianus' panegyric on the consulship of Stilicho from the year 400 (*De laudibus Stilichonis* 1.63) at the other end of our timeline, there are at least seventeen different texts from the fourth century with one or more, sometimes oblique, references to Mithras. These include, but are not limited to: Ambrosiaster (*Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti* 113.11), Arnobius (*Adversus nationes* 6.10), Claudian (*De laudibus Stilichonis* 1.63), Pseudo-Clement (*Homiliae* 6.10), Commodian (*Instructiones* 1.13), Firmicus Maternus (*De errore profanarum religionum* 5.2; 19.1; 20.1), Gregory Nazianzen (*Oratio* 4.70, *Oratio* 39.5.), Jerome (*Ep.* 107.2, *Commentariorum in Amos* 1.3,9–10), Prudentius (*Contra Symmachum* 1.562–4), Socrates Scholasticus (*Hist. eccles.* 3.2–3), Julian (*Caesares* 336), the anonymous *Mithras Liturgy*, Pseudo-Paulinus (*Carmen* 32: *Carmen ad Antonium* 114–115), and the anonymous *Carmen contra paganos* 47. Compared to the seven, or so, extant texts that mention Mithras from the first through third centuries (except of course the non-extant works on Mithras by Eubulus and Pallas), and the ten or so references to Mithras in texts from the fifth century and onwards, the textual evidence from the fourth century seems almost over-represented. This should at least be taken as an indication that the cult of Mithras was not generally unknown at the time.

²¹ Baptism as initiation, and the importance of fasting and other ascetic practices, is well documented in contemporary Christian sources, not least in the correspondence of Jerome.

The anonymous fourth century poem *Carmen contra paganos* describes an unnamed Roman prefect who initiates a priest, teaching him to “seek the Sun beneath the earth.” The Latin reads: *Sacratus vester urbi quid praestitit, oro, qui hierium docuit sub terra quaerere solem*,²² and the actual wording here is especially interesting in relation to Mithraic initiatory rituals in two respects. Since the prefect in question is most likely Vettius Agorius Praetextatus,²³ *pater patrum* in the cult of Mithras, while the “priest” in the poem is referred to as *hierius*, similar to the appellation of *hieroceryx* used to signify a Mithraic priesthood.²⁴ It is quite possible that the passage above refers to the initiation or confirmation of a new Mithraic *pater* by the *pater patrum* of the community, or communities, in question. The consequent allusion a few lines below to another ritual performed which involved being “sent beneath the earth, stained with the blood of the bull,”²⁵ is usually taken as a reference to the *taurobolium* as practiced in the cult of Magna Mater. In this context, however, it seems rather to be a metaphorical reference to a Mithraic initiation, and the phrase is neatly echoed in a line in a mural at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, reading: *et nos servasti . . . sanguine fuso*—“and you saved us, having shed the . . . blood,”²⁶ presumably that of the bull. If the passage from the *Carmen contra paganos* is indeed a reference to a Mithraic ritual, we have one more instance of the main tenets, if not the actual detail and

²² *Carmen contra paganos* 46–47.

²³ There is no consensus at present as to the identity of the prefect, though the two most likely candidates are Vettius Agorius Praetextatus and Nichomachus Flavianus. Following McLynn, “The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*,” I believe that Praetextatus is the most likely candidate. For prosopographic details on Praetextatus, see Arnold H. M. Jones, John R. Martindale and John Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (3 vols.; London: Cambridge University Press, 1971–1992), 722–24.

²⁴ Examples from Rome of the use of the appellation Hieroceryx are: V513, V514 and V515 in Vermaseren’s catalogue (Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* [2 vols.; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956–1960]), hereafter referred to by the prefix V followed by the catalogue number.

²⁵ “. . . sub terram missus, pollutus sanguine tauri,” *Carmen contra paganos* 60.

²⁶ This famous line from the lower layer of paintings at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum was originally reconstructed by Vermaseren (Maarten J. Vermaseren and Carel C. Van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* [Leiden: Brill, 1965], 217–18) as: *et nos servasti aeternali sanguine fuso*, which he translated as “And you saved us after having shed the eternal blood.” However, as Silvio Panciera pointed out (“Il Materiale Epigrafico Dallo Scavo di S. Stefano Rotondo,” in *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su ‘La Specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento Alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia’* [ed. Ugo Bianchi; EPRO 80; Leiden: Brill, 1979], 87–127 at 103–05), the word *aeternali* is highly uncertain, and is best avoided. I have followed Panciera in my translation above.

“meaning,” of Mithraic ritual practice being known to the general public in Rome at the time.

As for public visibility, it is clear that the Christian communities became much more visible to the uninitiated masses of Rome in the fourth century, and there seems to be reason to suspect that this was true also of the other religious communities of the city, including Mithraic communities. The evidence for this, however, is more problematic owing to the general lack of sources. In Rome, the richest religious communities are the most visible in both the archaeological and in the literary material, and consequently, there are many more sources for the religious practices of the senatorial elite than for communities with a lower socio-economic status. The archaeological sources pertaining to fourth century mithraea, as well as the associated statistical demographic models, suggest that Mithraism was still popular, perhaps even in growth, among the non-elite population of Rome,²⁷ but it is amongst the senators that the cult becomes most visible in the fourth century. Elite patronage was important not only for the religious community in question, but just as much for the status concerns and social networks of the aristocrats, and in this respect, Mithraism and Christianity were clearly much alike in the urban context of fourth century Rome. Indeed, just like the senatorial patronage of Christian communities found expression in financial and political support for churches and charities, one should consider the possibility that involvement in pagan cult, in this case Mithraism, was also an expression of aristocratic political considerations and fashion, as much as of sincere piety and religious self-expression. Alison Griffith argues that religious initiation had an important function in the social fabric of the elite networks of the Roman aristocracy, and that this had a pronounced effect on the increased visibility of Mithraism. According to Griffith, *domus* mithraea could well have been built for display within aristocratic circles. Coupled with the presence of Mithraic grade-inscriptions from the Vatican Phrygianum, the temple to the officially recognized cult of Magna Mater, this would suggest that revealing, even advertising, Mithraic initiations to one's peers was important.²⁸ But would well-known “mysteries” cease to be mysterious, or would this kind of semi-public secrecy rather serve to heighten their attraction?

²⁷ See Bjørnebye, “Hic locus,” 59–66 and 180–90.

²⁸ Alison B. Griffith, “The Archaeological Evidence for Mithraism in Imperial Rome” (PhD. diss., University of Michigan, 1993), 259.

Though much of the evidence indicates that the public face of the cult of Mithras was comparatively well known in the fourth century, and certainly seems to have left more of an impression in the contemporary sources than in the preceding two centuries, there is not enough solid evidence to suggest that the “mysteries” in the sense of the initiatory “truths” of the cult of Mithras were known to many, nor that they ceased to be mysteries. Indeed, it seems probable that public visibility of some aspects of Mithraism rather serves to strengthen the absolute secrecy surrounding teachings, doctrines, and the actual ritual practice of the community—in short, its internal workings.

Familia Structures and Patronage

The internal workings of the cult of Mithras are, for a large part, still inaccessible to the modern scholar, but the structure of the cult at least becomes much more visible in the last century of its history. In Rome in this period, there seems to be a close connection between the initiatory hierarchy of the cult of Mithras, and the twin structures of the concept of *familia* and *domus* on the one hand, and the all important social network of patronage on the other. Much of this connection becomes visible through the use of the key terms of *pater* and *frater*, father and brother, and the highly symbolic gesture of the clasping of right hands by the initiated brothers.

There were many similarities between Mithraic and Christian communities on the structural level as well, as is clear from the shared focus on initiatory hierarchy and from the adaptation of the social structural templates of the *familia* and the *domus* adopted by these communities. Both of these groups made extensive use of metaphorical kinship language to reinforce the hierarchical structures of the community, and in the case of both Mithraism and Christianity, this “family language” is primarily represented by the appellations of Father and Brother—*pater and frater*—and by the focus on the parallel vertical and horizontal structuring principles represented by these types of relationships. The latter seems to have been especially important in the Mithraic communities, and Marquita Volken points out the inherent growth potential of such a structure:

A cult that uses small groups of men organized into cells could use a vertical structure of grades for the cells and a horizontal structure for an all encompassing hierarchy, thus eliminating a central figure of authority and central administration and so creating a flexible and adaptable network.

This would mean that the relations between members and their position in the grade system were the most important parts of the overall organization. The cult authority would reside in the enforcement of the grade system and the strength of the interpersonal relations and commitment between members.²⁹

This type of social structure, organized on both a vertical and on a horizontal axis, reinforces both natural authority and group cohesion at the same time. Although the Mithraic cult had more levels of initiation than Christianity,³⁰ a structural comparison, based on the use of hierarchies structured along kinship lines, is still illuminating. In the case of the Christian use of kinship language, according to Denise Kimber Buell, “the model of parent-child relations lends an air of naturalness to hierarchical relations among Christians even while it insists upon the essential similarity in substance among all Christians.”³¹ This finds a close parallel in Mithraism, where each community of *fratres* was headed by a *pater*, and sometimes it seems one or more of the local communities were presided over by a *pater patrum*, the Father of the Fathers.³² The grade of *pater patrum* may, although we don’t know this for certain, have functioned much like the Christian episcopate, with the Father of Fathers being in overall charge of several Mithraic communities.

Just like in the Christian communities of the fourth century, there tended to be a close correspondence between the social and the religious status of the community leader, and the evidence, although often circumstantial, indicates that members of the senatorial aristocracy dominated the top positions both in the Christian and the Mithraic communities in Rome and Italy in the course of the fourth century. In the case of the set of inscriptions from the Mithraic site of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, it seems that the *pater patrum* and the *pater* were also biologically father and son.³³

²⁹ Marquita Volken, “The Development of the Cult of Mithras in the Western Roman Empire: A Socio-archaeological Perspective,” *EJMS* 4 (2004): 1–20 at 7.

³⁰ Evidence for the seven-tiered grade hierarchy in Roman Mithraism (*corax, miles, nymphus, leo, perses, heliodromos, pater*) comes mainly from Rome and Ostia, particularly from the S. Prisca mithraeum in Rome and the Felicissimus mithraeum in Ostia.

³¹ Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clemens of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 117.

³² The grade of *pater patrum* is particularly associated with Mithraic communities in Rome and central Italy.

³³ V403: “D(ominis) n(ostri) Valente V et Valentiniano / iunior primus aug(ustis) VI idus april(es) / tradidit hierocoracica Aur(elius) Victor / Augentinus v(ir) c(larissimus) p(ater) p(atrum) filio suo Emiliano / Corfini(o) Olympio c(larissimo) p(uer)o anno tricenisimo / acceptionis suae felic(iter).”

This state of affairs corresponds well with the overall power relations within the Roman *familia*. “Characteristic of the family structure of Antiquity was its asymmetry,” argued Reidar Aasgaard recently. “It was a patriarchy: its organization was strongly hierarchical, with the oldest male in the central position.”³⁴ And this is exactly how the organization of the Mithraic communities in general and the community of the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* in particular appears to us from the evidence of the inscriptions.³⁵

Brotherhood and Hierarchy

In contrast to the vertically structured organization represented by the *pater* in the position of highest authority, followed in turn by the representatives of the initiatory grades in decreasing order of importance, is the perceived equality of the brothers. According to Roger Beck, the result of this contrast was that, “as often in such enterprises, the Mithraic cell existed in a tension of hierarchy and egalitarianism. All Mithraists were ‘brothers’ (*fratres*), ‘handshakers’ (*syndexioi*), and ‘initiates’ (*mystai*). Yet there were of course leaders.”³⁶ In the Mithraic communities, these were the *patres* holding the highest rank in the initiatory grade system. As we have seen, the initiates described themselves as brothers, *fratres*, and used the appellation of *syndexi*—a transliteration from the Greek meaning “those who join right hands”³⁷ but which in Mithraism takes on the added meaning of “those united by the clasping of right hands,” as the brothers were said to be “united by the handshake of the illustrious Father.”³⁸ The Latin form of the word is known from an inscription most likely connected to the *San Lorenzo* mithraeum.³⁹ The inscription, in hexameter, concerns the celebrations of the dedication of the mithraeum and declares that the *pater* Proficientus constructed the Mithraic cave “so

³⁴ Reidar Aasgaard, *My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!: Christian Siblingship in Paul* (JSNTSup 265; London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 49.

³⁵ V400–406.

³⁶ Roger Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson; London: Routledge, 1996), 180.

³⁷ See L. Michael White, *Texts and Monuments for the Christian Domus Ecclesiae in its Environment* (vol. 2 of *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*; HTS 42; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press, 1997), 406, note 183.

³⁸ Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 5.2.

³⁹ The inscription is V423.

that the *syndexi* might in joy be able to perform their prayers together for ever.”⁴⁰ Reinhold Merkelbach notes that: “Hier ist *syndexi(i)* geradezu ein Name für alle Mithrasmythen; denn der Handschlag war die charakteristische Zeremonie dieses Kultes. Durch den Handschlag entstand eine feste persönliche Beziehung; der Eingeweihte wurde zu einer Art Lehensmann des Paters.”⁴¹ Thus this ritual action in effect established both axes of the hierarchical structure at the same time.

An example of the use of brother-language similar to the usages in Mithraism and Christianity is found in two third century inscriptions to Jupiter Dolichenus from the *Dolichenum* on the Aventine Hill, where the listed initiates of the community are referred to as brothers, while the father of the candidates, mentioned in the first paragraph of the inscription, and seemingly occupying an intermediate position in the cult hierarchy, was responsible for their initiation.⁴² Structurally, it seems that the hierarchy of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus had more than a little in common with the Mithraic grades, and though the evidence is scant, it is not unreasonable to assume that amongst the brothers of the cult, the role of “candidate,” somewhere in between the priesthood and the ordinary worshippers, was somewhat akin to that of the *leo* in the Mithraic mysteries. Interestingly, there seems to have been a Mithraic presence in the *Dolichenum* on the Aventine in Rome, attested by a small tauroctony icon,⁴³ a fact which serves to highlight both the structural similarities and the possibility of a close cultic relationship between the two varieties of religious community.

According to Philip Harland, the use of metaphorical kinship language was not in any way exclusive to the Christian communities.⁴⁴ Refuting the claim that this type of metaphorical brother-language was rare in non-Christian associations or other religious communities and relatively common in Christian groups, Harland shows that this misunderstanding primarily has to do rather with differences in the genre of sources for early

⁴⁰ In Latin the relevant passage reads: “Ut possint syndexi hilares celebrare vota per aevom”.

⁴¹ Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Königstein: Hain Verlag, 1984), 107.

⁴² *AE* (1940) and *ILS* 4316 respectively. Both inscriptions are briefly discussed in Monika Hörig, “Iupiter Dolichenus,” *ANRW* 17.4: 2155–57 and 2163–65, and in Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2:295–96. The latter also provides an English translation.

⁴³ V469.

⁴⁴ Philip A. Harland, “Familial Dimensions of Group Identity: ‘Brothers’ (ΑΔΕΛΦΟΙ) in Associations of the Greek East,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 491–513 at 509.

Christian groups as opposed to other contemporary religious groups and associations. “We have personal letters pertaining to early Christian groups (reflecting personal interaction), but rarely have any literary or epistolary evidence for the internal life of associations,” writes Harland. “Instead we have (public) monuments, including honorary inscriptions and epitaphs.”⁴⁵ This is reflected in the nature of the evidence for Mithraism in late antique Rome, and it is worth noting that many of the direct references we have to the titles of *pater*, *frater*, and *syndexi*, are of a very private sort, found inside mithraea and only meant to be seen by the initiates themselves.

Familia and domus

The crucial link between the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy and the function of the brother-language is the central importance of the key terms and concepts of *familia*, *domus*,⁴⁶ and patronage. “These Greco-Roman family ideals of solidarity, goodwill, affection, friendship, protection, glory, and honor,” argues Philip Harland, “would be the sorts of values that would come to the minds of those who drew on the analogy of family relationships within group settings.”⁴⁷ Thus, when the term “brother” was used within the group, for instance in a guild setting, it invoked these ideals and indicated that the association itself represented a type of *familia* or *domus*. Furthermore, *domus*, which was a concept which almost, but not quite, overlapped the meaning of the use of the word *familia* in this context, could mean anything from the small nuclear family of a man, his wife, and their children—much like the modern concept of family—to a rather large community. This *familia*-community included peripheral members of the extended family, slaves, freedmen beholden to the *pater familias*, and clients and hangers-on, which in the case of the largest and most influential noble families of Rome could number in the hundreds.

This extensive range in size—as well as the degree in which the *familia* fitted with the hierarchical pyramid structure—has much in common with the traces we find of the Mithraic communities of Rome. For example, we must imagine that the community which used the small and very private

⁴⁵ Harland, “Familial Dimensions,” 495.

⁴⁶ For a clear and concise treatment of the relationship between the two concepts of *familia* and *domus* in the social structure of Roman society, see Aasgaard, *Christian Siblingship*, 40–41.

⁴⁷ Harland, “Familial Dimensions,” 513.

mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza* 128⁴⁸ was a small and close-knit family unit, while the communities that frequented the very large and quite public mithraea of the *Terme di Caracalla*⁴⁹ and the *Crypta Balbi*⁵⁰ were not only larger but also, naturally, more heterogeneous groups. These groups closely resembled the familiar social structures of the plethora of different Roman voluntary associations which were generally within a similar size range to the Mithraic communities.⁵¹ In defining the central elements of voluntary associations, Joseph Hellerman stresses that: "Association activities typically included participation in communal meals and the election of members to magistracies or other positions of honor in the group."⁵² Both of these activities were also of fundamental importance to what we know of Mithraic ritual practice; indeed one might argue, on the basis of the extant evidence, that the "participation in communal meals" and the "positions of honor in the group" were two of the most basic mechanisms of social interaction and structuring in the Mithraic communities in Rome. The first of these activities, the communal meal, was indeed so important that it became the defining factor in the layout of the mithraeum along the lines of the traditional Roman triclinium, while the position in the group is fundamental to the initiatory hierarchy and one of the main themes of Mithraic inscriptions from Rome.

In addition to the importance of patronage for the vertical chain of command of the community, the horizontal spread of the grade hierarchy

⁴⁸ See Bjørnebye, "Hic locus," 50–52; Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 67–71; Griffith, "Mithraism in the Private and Public Lives of 4th-c. senators in Rome," *EJMS* 1 (2000): 3–5; and Daniella Gallo, "Il mitreo di Via Giovanni Lanza," in *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su 'La Specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento Alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia'* (ed. Ugo Bianchi; EPRO 80; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 249–58.

⁴⁹ See Bjørnebye, "Hic locus," 47–49; Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 144–48, and Dario M. Cosi, "Il mitreo nelle Terme di Caracalla," in *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su 'La Specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento Alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia'* (ed. Ugo Bianchi; EPRO 80; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 933–51.

⁵⁰ See Bjørnebye, "Hic locus," 32–34; Ricci, "Il mitreo della Crypta Balbi," 157–67; and Sagui, "Il mitreo delle Crypta Balbi," 167–78.

⁵¹ Joseph Hellerman defines Roman voluntary associations thus: "Thirty to forty members constituted an average-sized group—and local in nature. The associations came together for a variety of purposes. Some groups consisted of persons who worked the same trades. Other groups gathered together to worship a specific god or goddess. Also to be included under the broad rubric of voluntary associations are the empire's synagogues and philosophical schools."—Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 4.

⁵² Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, 4.

would of course also have been dependent on the size and social makeup of the community. Recruitment and growth relied on the relationship between the sponsor and his candidates for initiation, a system clearly reminiscent of the function of *familia* and patronage in contemporary Roman society.⁵³ One may imagine that some communities could be more egalitarian than others, and this would more likely be the case in the more public larger communities which presumably had a more heterogeneous membership than in the small *domus* communities dominated directly by the *pater familias*. On the other hand, duties and initiations might have been less rigorous in more private settings, but in any case, all the initiates were clearly, as emphasized by Richard Gordon, subordinate to the authority of the *pater* of the community. "This is one of the implications of the term 'brothers' occasionally employed to describe a group of Mithraists," argues Gordon. "The Father decided whom to admit to the cult, supervised many of the rituals including the dedication of votive-offerings, was responsible with some assistance for all initiations and grade promotions. In fact he was the outstanding figure in each cell."⁵⁴ In this sense, the role of the *pater* in the initiatory structure of the Mithraic communities finds a clear parallel in that of the *pater familias* in the Roman extended family network. These two aspects of "parental authority" intersect in a group of fourth century Mithraic inscriptions from Rome.

Fathers and Sons

The outstanding figures in the fourth century Mithraic community in Rome which is best recorded in the epigraphic evidence, the community of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, are also the *patres*. Nonius Victor Olympius, the oldest male of the *familia* and bearing the title of *pater patrum*, and his son Aurelius Victor Augentius, holding the rank of *pater* of the community. According to Roger Beck, the most interesting thing about these inscriptions is actually what they do *not* say.⁵⁵ The inscriptions do not mention Mithras, nor do they mention the names of initiates with the exception of the family itself. In fact, the only mention of a name in

⁵³ See Volken, "The Development of the Cult of Mithras," 12.

⁵⁴ Richard L. Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire," *Religion* 2 (1972): 92–121 at 101.

⁵⁵ Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.

relation to an induction into one of the initiatory grades is when Aurelius Victor Augustus initiates his own son, Aemilianus Corfinius Olympius, into the grade *corax* in 376.⁵⁶ “Clearly,” writes Beck, “what the mysteries were largely ‘about’ for this noble family was the noble family itself.”⁵⁷

This indirectly raises the central question of whether the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* was the private mithraeum of the family of Nonius Victor Olympius, or whether Victor senior was in charge of several mithraea in the city, as his title of *pater patrum* would suggest, while his son, Aurelius Victor Augustus was the presiding *pater* of this specific mithraeum. Further, we must ask who composed the rest of this community; was it the *familia* of the two men including younger siblings, clients, and slaves, or were the other initiates of roughly the same social group as the *patres*? A clue might be that the inscriptions which celebrate the initiations performed by the *patres* mention no other names apart from those of the Fathers themselves, except for the one instance mentioned above where a newly initiated *corax*, Nonius Victor Olympius’ grandson Corfinius, is mentioned by name.⁵⁸

The span of a generation was in general much shorter in late antique Rome than it is today, and early initiation might have been a necessity if the candidate was to succeed his father in holding the highest rank of the community. The overlapping seen in the early initiation of Corfinius, still a few years away from assuming the *toga virilis*, might thus reflect the fact that many children lost their father very early, death rates entailing that half of them would be fatherless before the age of twenty. Furthermore, according to Reidar Aasgaard, “Only about 20 per cent were born with a (paternal) grandfather still alive. Consequently, very many boys, already in their teens, would be the oldest living male in the family.”⁵⁹ Thus the supremacy, and indeed survival, of the *gens Augustii* as leaders of this particular Mithraic community might be one motivation for the unprecedented early initiation of Corfinius into the rank of *corax*.

The inscription also furnishes another important clue concerning Mithraic initiatory practices in Rome at this time. It would seem from the initiation of Corfinius that there was indeed a rigid *cursus* of grades which had to be followed, or else Corfinius could easily have been inducted at

⁵⁶ V403.

⁵⁷ Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*, 98.

⁵⁸ V403.

⁵⁹ Aasgaard, *Christian Siblingship*, 37.

for example the pivotal rank of *leo* rather than starting at the bottom of the ladder, so to speak, by being initiated into the servitor grade of *corax*. Corfinius seems to have been initiated shortly after the death of his grandfather, which made his father *pater patrum*. We do not know if there was another *pater* presiding over the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* at this point, perhaps an uncle of the newly initiated Corfinius, or whether Aurelius Victor Augentius functioned in this capacity as well as that of *pater patrum*. Even if there had been another *pater* at the mithraeum who was not a member of the immediate family, the inscriptions need not have mentioned this. There is the possibility that initiations were the unique responsibility of the *pater patrum* in Rome at this time, or it may simply be that the inscriptions in question were put up by, and celebrated, the *familia* of the Augentii.

This focus on the members of the inner core of the *familia* indicates that the chief aim of these inscriptions was that they were set up to proclaim the ascendancy of this family dynasty rather than to record the initiations of members of the community. "Mithraic associations were small, intimate groups, made even closer by a solemn initiation ceremony," wrote Wolf Liebeschutz. He argued that: "it is unlikely that slaves were allowed to join without the permission, and indeed the encouragement of their master, and this would naturally have been forthcoming if the group had been set up by the master himself, with a view to, among other things, strengthening the solidarity of his household."⁶⁰ As we do not know with certainty anything about the community these fathers belonged to, we cannot tell who made up the membership of the congregation, though Alison Griffith recently made a convincing case for the community being made up of subordinate members of the extended *familia*.⁶¹

Leadership, Patronage, and the Senatorial Elite

Closely connected to the role of the *pater* as *pater familias* is, as briefly mentioned above, the function of the patron in the patronage system of reciprocal obligations. Consequently, the question of authority structures in Mithraism, and any structural similarities with the Roman *familia*, is tightly linked with the function of the system of patronage. This link is highly relevant when evaluating the importance of social standing within

⁶⁰ Liebeschutz, "The Expansion of Mithraism," 203.

⁶¹ Griffith, "Mithraism," 8.

and outside of the cult hierarchy, especially in relation to the senatorial segment of the Mithraic population of Rome.⁶² The similarities between patronage and Mithraic hierarchy are also highly relevant in relation to the connection between different Mithraic groups, as well as providing clues to the function of the office or title of the *pater patrum*. When evaluating the extent of the structural similarities between the Mithraic communities and the patronage system with its exchanges of favours and obligations, the close connection between how the Mithraic grade hierarchy, the Roman extended *familia*, and the ubiquitous friendship networks of the leading families of Rome are structured quickly becomes apparent. This structural similarity is worth studying not only from the perspective of the social elite, the holders of authority, but also from the point of view of their dependents.

It is hard to imagine that the senators holding the rank of *pater patrum* were, in essence, simply glorified *patres* exerting influence only over their own immediate household, perhaps allowing sons and younger brothers the opportunity to be ordinary *patres* and thus setting them apart from the rest of the initiatory community. Rather, the semi-public locations and large dimensions of several of the late Roman mithraea suggest that while still a secret initiatory cult, Mithraism was also at this point in time visible in the religious landscape of the city, and the leadership as well as the sponsorship of these more visible communities would certainly be desirable for senators wanting to demonstrate to their peers their *pietas* as well as their social influence. Thus the group of inscriptions celebrating pagan senators holding a multitude of religious offices, including Mithraic priesthoods, from the *Phrygianum*⁶³ should be seen more as fitting with an already established social hierarchy than as an aberration signaling a new type of Mithraism. Mithraic communities had always been patronized by the wealthy, at least this was the case in the city of Rome from the very earliest times, and the elevation of a considerable number of wealthy individuals to the ranks of the senatorial aristocracy in the mid-fourth century would simply make the desire for religious sponsorship even more attractive. Consequently such religious patronage became more noticeable in our sources in the course of the fourth century.

According to Michele Salzman, the Roman aristocrats were above all concerned with belonging to the right status group, and this extended

⁶² See Griffith, "Mithraism," 22–26.

⁶³ See Griffith, "Mithraism," 9–12 and also 22–23.

to participation in, and patronage of, a variety of religious communities: "Senatorial aristocrats traditionally sought pagan priesthoods," Salzman argues, "because they offered another arena in which to demonstrate and augment honor; pagan ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and holidays had for centuries allowed the aristocrat to assert preeminence in public. . . . In private cultic settings the aristocrat gained honor before his peers."⁶⁴ The private cultic settings were not only confined to traditional Roman cult and to Mithraism and the other "oriental religions," like for instance the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, but certainly also allowed Christianity to attract many new recruits from the ranks of the aristocrats in this period. In these less public settings the access to exclusive secret teachings and initiatory practices were to a large extent, directly or indirectly, controlled by aristocrats. In the case of the Roman Mithraic communities at least, this tendency is clearly corroborated by both the archaeological sources and the epigraphy.

Returning briefly to the inscriptions commissioned by Nonius Victor Olympius and his sons, it is important to note that they do not commemorate the donation of moneys, furniture, or icons to the mithraeum or to the community. Nor do they give thanks for a fulfilled promise or a successful venture. Instead, they celebrate the act of initiation of junior members into the lower grades by the *patres* of this Mithraic community. This focus on recording the act of the initiatory ritual reveals that the old grade hierarchy with its ritual initiations was still very much in operation in late antique Rome, and furthermore, it is an indication that initiation was still of pivotal importance to the practice of Mithraism in fourth century Rome.

The motivation of the elite for joining or, more likely, for continuing their participation in the cults is closely connected to the required demonstrations of *pietas* inherited from their grandfathers. Indeed, in pragmatic terms, most of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome in the mid-to-late fourth century owed their advancement to the house of Constantine, and, whether pagan or Christian, the Roman elite still had a distinct and important place in the social, political, and religious fabric of the city. The standing of these men in their social peer group depended on the degree to which these men embodied the traditional Roman virtues, and

⁶⁴ Michele Renee Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 20.

any system that would allow them to show such virtues, in this case primarily *pietas*, would be well received by their peers. Additionally, the structure of the initiatory religious communities perpetuated the complex network of the parallel systems of patronage and friendship, which was of fundamental importance in late antique Rome, both for the senators and for the rest of the population of the city. This network was closely mirrored by the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy with its vertical and horizontal community structures precipitated by the language of Fatherhood and Brotherhood, and continually reinforced by the traditional friendship gesture of the clasping of right hands. It is clear that patronage was in no way defunct amongst the senatorial aristocracy and their dependents in Rome in the fourth century. On the contrary, it may have become even more important as the wealthy elite of the city became more introverted and concerned with city rather than empire—indeed, the fourth century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus reports that the aristocrats would not venture outside without a huge throng of clients and other followers which displayed their importance.⁶⁵ Clearly, religious leadership offered a very attractive mechanism for extending and maintaining such a network, both for the patron himself and for the increasingly under-employed citizens of Rome who were his clients.

The cultores mithrae in Fourth Century Rome

As for the questions posed in the introduction—who filled the mithraea of Rome in the fourth century, and who were attracted to these communities who met in closed rooms and were united by secret initiations and handshakes?—the Mithraic communities of late antique Rome were, as far as we can tell, made up of a representative selection of the population of the city. Perhaps even more so than had been the case in the preceding two centuries, they recruited members from all layers of Roman society—from the poorest unemployed day-workers in the Tiber-side slums to the exalted ranks of the *clarissimi* themselves. As to whether the *pater* of a Mithraic community, the chief position of religious authority in the group, also may have held the highest social status in it, there is no clear answer. One might suppose, however, that any man who sponsored a Mithraic community would also want to maintain some authority over it. On the

⁶⁵ Ammianus, *Res gestae* 14.6.

other hand, the history of religion is filled with examples of religious sponsors who are subordinate to the priests of their community in religious matters. In the end, it remains likely that in the corpus of epigraphic evidence from Rome, individuals holding the grade of *pater patrum* presided over several mithraea by virtue of either seniority or as an honorary title, while each mithraeum was controlled on a day-to-day basis by its own *pater*. This structure could be an attempt to control the interaction between many closely situated communities in a relatively limited space, however, and the system need not necessarily have been true of other Mithraic communities outside Rome. Finally, while the senatorial elite in Rome seem to have preferred the more private and secret setting of *domus* mithraea for their personal initiatory practices, it is probable that members of the aristocracy may have been financial sponsors of the larger “public” mithraea. Perhaps that was what earned them the title of *pater patrum* in our sources. Such a scenario would also seem to fit well with the model of patronage, and with the traditional Roman values of *fides*, *amicitia* and *pietas*.

In the context of the city of Rome in the fourth century, the main themes of Mithraic cult practices seems to be the dynamic between the dichotomy of public exposure and secret teachings on the one hand, and the structure—simultaneously vertical and horizontal—of the initiatory grade hierarchy on the other. Indeed, the semi-secret initiatory hierarchy was so fundamental to the practices of fourth century Roman Mithraism, being stressed again and again in both literary sources and epigraphy, that these two defining factors—secrecy and initiation—were still the fundamental mechanisms of maintaining and perpetuating the cult of Mithras in fourth century Rome.

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INITIATION INTO THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES:
A “THIN” DESCRIPTION

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The philosopher Democritus once said: “A life without festivals is like a road without inns” (B 230), but there can be little doubt that among all the Greek festivals it is the Eleusinian Mysteries that most intrigues the modern public. It is the aim of this contribution to take a fresh look at this festival during the height of the Athenian empire, the later fifth century B.C. Unlike older studies, the most recent detailed analyses, those by Walter Burkert and Robert Parker, have given up on a linear reconstruction of the ritual.¹ Yet there is something unsatisfactory in such an approach, as it prevents us from having a proper view of the course of the ritual and appreciating its logic.² Ideally, we should reconstruct a linear “thick description” (to use the famous term of the late Clifford Geertz [1926–2006]) of the experience of the average initiate, *mystês*,³ but we are prevented from doing so by the fact that our main and rather scanty literary information is from Christian authors, who often wanted to defame the ritual, and, in some cases, lived 600–700 hundred years after Athens’ heyday. For these

¹ Walter Burkert, *Homo necans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 248–97 and Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 334–68. For the older, linear approach see August Mommsen, *Heortologie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864), 243–69 and *Feste der Stadt Athen im Altertum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898), 204–45 (very little about the actual performance of the Mysteries); Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin: H. Keller, 1932), 71–91; George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 237–85. For a different and, in my opinion, unpersuasive, brief reconstruction see Kevin Clinton, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis,” in *Greek Sanctuaries* (ed. Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hägg; London: Routledge, 1993), 110–24 at 118–9.

² We can see the effect of this approach very clearly in the study of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* by Ismene Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus: Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes’ Frogs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81–84, who completely confuses the two stages of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

³ For this term note Antoine Hermay, “Dioskouroi,” in *LIMC* 3.1 (1986), 567–53 at 576 no. 111 (black-figure Attic pelike of about 510 B.C.); Sophocles Fr. 804 Radt; Euripides, *Suppl.* 173, 470; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 159, 887; Thucydides 6.28.1 and 53.2; the title *Mystai* of one of Phrynichus’ comedies and the title *Mystis* of comedies by Philemon, Antiphanes and Philipides.

reasons, our account will be “thin” rather than “thick” and, moreover, tentative rather than assured. In fact, almost all analyses of ancient festivals are no more than probable, ahistorical scripts or templates, as we cannot get to the original performances, and thus have to confine ourselves to static outlines of festivals, however unsatisfactory that may be. This is certainly true for the Eleusinian Mysteries, as it is highly improbable that this festival would have stayed completely unchanged during a whole millennium. Yet it is characteristic for our dearth of sources that we cannot point to any changes in the ritual over the course of this period.

The Eleusinian Mysteries profoundly influenced all other Greek mysteries and are therefore an appropriate subject for a book on mysteries and secrecy. It is with pleasure that I dedicate this analysis to Einar Thomassen. I first met Einar during a symposium on “Myth and Symbol” organised by Synnøve des Bouvrie at the University of Tromsø in the midnight sun of 1998. We have since met in all kinds of places—ranging from Oslo, Groningen, Chicago, Malibu and Bergen to London and Volos—and those meetings have always been most stimulating and pleasurable experiences.

Let us start with the question regarding the identity of the average initiates. Unique for Greek festivals, the Mysteries were open to men and women,⁴ free and slaves,⁵ young and old, Greeks and non-Greeks. Yet not everybody could afford the Mysteries. Prospective initiates first had to complete a whole series of ritual acts, as we know from the Church Father Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 200), who relates the following “password” of the initiates: “I fasted, I drank the *kykeon* (like Demeter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*), I took from the hamper, after working I deposited in the basket and from the basket in the hamper.”⁶ Clearly, the meaning of these allusive acts is intentionally left obscure, but they could not have been part of the actual Mysteries, given that there was no time in the programme for a couple of thousand initiates to perform these acts

⁴ For the well known Ninnion Pinax, see most recently Michalis Tiverios, “Women of Athens in the Worship of Demeter: Iconographic Evidence from Archaic and Classical Times,” in *Worshipping Women: Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens* (ed. Nikolaos Kaltas and Alan Shapiro; New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2008), 125–35 at 130–31. Kalliope Papangeli, *ibid.*, 150–51 wrongly suggests that the name Ninnion suggests a courtesan, cf. Olivier Masson, *Onomastica Graeca Selecta* 3 (Geneva: Droz, 2000), 238.

⁵ Initiation of a slave was clearly a favor of a benevolent master: Theophilus F 1 Kassel-Austin (= KA).

⁶ Clement of Alexandria (= Clem. Alex.), *Protr.* 2.21.2; Arnobius 5.26, cf. Pierre Rousset, “L’initiation préalable et le symbole éleusinien,” *BCH* 54 (1930): 52–74; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 269–74; Parker, *Polytheism*, 354.

or to fast in a meaningful way. Consequently, they will have been performed either at the Lesser Mysteries in the spring,⁷ seven months earlier,⁸ or, perhaps more likely, at some other time, as the receipts of the Lesser Mysteries in 487/6 were much lower than those of the Greater ones.⁹ Prospective initiates will have been introduced into the secret teachings of the Mysteries by so-called mystagogues, already initiated friends and acquaintances:¹⁰ Andocides mentions that he initiated guest friends, the orator Lysias promised to initiate Metaneira, the courtesan he was in love with, and Plutarch stresses the fact that the murderer of Plato's friend Dio had also been his mystagogue,¹¹ which clearly made the murder even more heinous.

Initiation into the Mysteries, then, was not a simple act, but potential initiates must have been able to spend time and money, as they also had to pay a fee to the officiants.¹² All these conditions will have limited participation mainly to the less poor strata of the population. In addition, we should never forget that not every Athenian was initiated. The story that Aeschylus escaped condemnation for revealing the mysteries by arguing that he had not been initiated is probably a misunderstanding of Clement of Alexandria, our source,¹³ but Socrates was not initiated, and Andocides mentions that the uninitiated had to withdraw from his trial.¹⁴ These cases are somewhat exceptional, but we must remain conscious of the fact that we simply do not know how many Athenians participated in the Mysteries.

⁷ This seems suggested by Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 5.11.

⁸ *IG* I³ 6 B 36–47 = *I. Eleusis* 19 B 36–47; Plutarch, *Demetr.* 26.2, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 344f.

⁹ Robert Simms, "Myesis, Telete, and Mysteria," *GRBS* 31 (1990): 183–95 at 183; Parker, *Polytheism*, 345f.

¹⁰ Note the close connection between mystagogues and teaching: Posidonius, fr. 368 Theiler; Plutarch, *Mor.* 795e; Dio Chr. 12.27; Ineke Sluiter, "Commentaries and the Didactic Tradition," in *Commentaries—Kommentare* (ed. Glen W. Most; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 173–205 at 191–5. For assistance by mystagogues see Menander, fr. 500 KA; *LSCGS* 15; Plutarch, *Mor.* 765a; for the instruction, Christoph Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie bei Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandrien* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 5–14. Mystagogues are still underresearched, but see Arthur D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2:793 note 8; Simms, "Myesis," 191–5 notes the relatively late appearance of the term.

¹¹ Andocides, *Myst.* 29; [Demosthenes] *In Neaeram* 21; Plato, *Epistle* 7, 333e; Plutarch, *Dio* 54, 56.

¹² Parker, *Polytheism*, 342 note 65.

¹³ Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2.14.60.2, cf. Radt on Aeschylus T 93d.

¹⁴ Lucian, *Dem.* 11 (Socrates); Andocides, *Myst.* 12.

So, on the fifteenth of the month Boedromion (September) well over 3000 prospective initiates and mystagogues assembled in the agora of Athens to hear the proclamation of the festival, a gathering which excluded those who could not speak proper Greek or had blood on their hands;¹⁵ in later antiquity, in line with the growing interiorisation of purity,¹⁶ this became extended to those “impure in soul.”¹⁷ Participation *en masse* meant that the initiates had to bring their own sacrificial victims, just as they did for other big festivals, such as the Diasia for Zeus Meilichios and the Thesmophoria.¹⁸ Thus the initiates of the more remote regions must have brought their own piglets, to sacrifice later, and their squealing could hardly have enhanced the solemnity of the occasion (we may compare the inevitable ringing of cell phones at inappropriate moments today). The next day the formula “initiates to the sea” sent them off to the coast in order to purify themselves and their animals.¹⁹ However, some participants must have confused purification with having a nice swim, as in 339 B.C. a prospective initiate was eaten by a shark.²⁰ A sacrifice of the “mystic piglets” probably concluded the day.²¹

On the morning of Boedromion 19, after three days rest (a free period of time that had made it possible to intercalate the Epidauria festival for

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 369 with scholion *ad loc.*; Isocrates 4.157; Suetonius, *Nero* 34.4; Theon Smyrnaeus, *De utilitate mathematicae* 14.23–4 Hiller; Celsus *apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59; Pollux 8.90; Libanius, *Decl.* 13.19, 52; *SHA Alex. Sev.* 18.2, *Marc. Aur.* 27.1.

¹⁶ Jan N. Bremmer, “How Old is the Ideal of Holiness (of Mind) in the Epidaurian Temple Inscription and the Hippocratic Oath?” *ZPE* 142 (2002): 105–7.

¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59; Eusebius, *Contra Hieroclem* 30.3 (anecdote about Apollonius of Tyana); Libanius, *Decl.* 13.19, 52; Julian, *Or.* 7.25; Matthew W. Dickie, “Priestly Proclamations and Sacred Laws,” *CQ* 54 (2004): 579–91.

¹⁸ Michael Jameson, “Notes on the Sacrificial Calendar from Erchia,” *BCH* 89 (1965): 154–72 at 159–66 (Diasia); Robert Parker, “Festivals of the Attic Demes,” in *Gifts to the Gods* (ed. Tullia Linders and Gullög Nordquist; Boreas 15; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 137–47 at 145 (Thesmophoria).

¹⁹ Ephoros *FGrH* 70 F 80, cf. Polyaeus 3.11.2; Hesychius α 2727 Latte; *IG I³* 84.35–6; *IG II²* 847.20 = *I. Eleusis* 208 with Clinton *ad loc.* (bibliography).

²⁰ Aeschines 3.130 and scholion *ad loc.*; Plutarch, *Phocion* 28.3, cf. Fritz Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 43; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47 note 85; Parker, *Polytheism*, 108–9, 347; Kevin Clinton, “Pigs in Greek Rituals,” in *Greek Sacrificial Ritual: Olympian and Chthonian* (ed. Robin Hägg and Britta Alroth; Stockholm: Svenska institutet i Athen, 2005), 167–79; note also, for the values connected with pigs, Rolf Schneider, “Der Satyrknabe im Schweinsfell,” in *Die zweite Haut. Panther-, Wolfs- und Ferkelfell im Bild des Satyrn* (ed. Andrea Mogwitz; Munich: Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke München, 2005), 37–46.

²¹ Philostratus, *VA.* 4.18, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 347 note 87.

Asclepius),²² the prospective initiates assembled again in the agora and formed the procession to the sanctuary of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in Eleusis.²³ At the front went the Eleusinian dignitaries,²⁴ dressed in their full glory,²⁵ the priestesses carrying sacred objects on their heads in special baskets closed by red ribbons,²⁶ and, in later times, the ephebes, the Athenian male youth. They were followed by a huge cavalcade of Greeks, holding a kind of pilgrim's staff consisting of a single branch of myrtle or several held together by rings,²⁷ who were accompanied by their donkeys with the provisions and torches for the coming days.²⁸ The procession now left the city, and it would be quite a few hours before they would have completed the roughly 15 mile journey, which was repeatedly interrupted by sacred dances, sacrifices, libations, ritual washings,²⁹ and the singing of hymns, accompanied by pipes.³⁰ It was hot and dusty, but the crowds did not care and rhythmically chanted "Iacch', o Iacche," invoking the god Iacchos at the head of the procession, who was closely related to and sometimes identified with Dionysos.³¹ Later reports told how during the battle of Salamis (480 B.C.) "a great light flamed out

²² Kevin Clinton, "The Epidauria and the Arrival of Asclepius in Athens," in *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Epigraphical Evidence* (ed. Robin Hägg; Stockholm: Svenska institutet i Athen, 1994), 17–34; Parker, *Polytheism*, 462.

²³ For the debate whether there were two processions, on 19 and 20 Boedromion, see Parker, *Polytheism*, 348, whom I follow here.

²⁴ For the Eleusinian priests see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "The Priesthoods of the Eleusinian Cult of Demeter and Kore," in *ThesCRA* 5 (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), 60–65.

²⁵ For their costumes see Lysias 6.5; Plutarch, *Alc.* 22, *Arist.* 5; Arrian, *Epict.* 3.21.16; Athenaeus 21e; Janine Balty, "Hiérophantes attiques d'époque impériale," in *Rayonnement Grec. Hommages à Ch. Delvoye* (ed. Lydie Hadermann-Misguich and Georges Raepsaet; Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1982), 263–72; Wolfgang Geominy, "Eleusinische Priester," in *Festschrift für Nikolaus Himmelmann* (ed. Hans-Ulrich Cain et al.; Mainz: Von Zabern, 1989), 253–64.

²⁶ Plutarch, *Phoc.* 28; Apuleius, *Met.* 6.2; Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 245.

²⁷ Servius, *Aen.* 6.136; schol. Aristophanes, *Knights* 408; Claude Bérard, "La lumière et le faisceau: images du rituel éleusinien," *Recherches et documents du centre Thomas More* 48 (1985): 17–33; Mary B. Moore, *Attic Red-Figured and White-Ground Pottery* (Agora 30; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 136–7; Hermann Schaubert, "'Bakchos'. Der eleusinische Kultstab," in *ThesCRA* 5, 385–90; Parker, *Polytheism*, 349.

²⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 159 with scholia *ad loc.*, cf. Diogenianus 6.98.

²⁹ Hesychius, s.v. Πειτοί.

³⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 313 (pipes, cf. Graf, *Eleusis*, 57; Claude Bérard, *Anodoi* [Rome: Institut suisse de Rome, 1974], 92–3); Plutarch, *Alc.* 34.4; *IG* II² 1078.29–30 = *I. Eleusis* 638.29–30.

³¹ Herodotus 8.65.1; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 316–7; Graf, *Eleusis*, 40–50; Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1992), 64–71; Erika Simon, "Iakchos," in *LIMC* 5.1 (1990), 612–4.

from Eleusis, and an echoing cry filled the Thriasian plain down to the sea, as of multitudes of men together conducting the mystic Iacchos in procession."³² At times, the scene must have resembled that of fervent Catholic or Shi'ite processions.

The participants were now in that transitory stage of betwixt and between, which, as the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) has taught us, is often characterised by reversals and confusions of the social order.³³ And indeed, during the journey the young mocked the old,³⁴ at the bridge over the Athenian river Kephisos a prostitute hurled mockery at the passers by,³⁵ and the wealthier women who rode in buggies reviled one another.³⁶ Although some couples must have been initiated together,³⁷ in general the two sexes were now able to take a close look at one another in a way that would have been unthinkable in normal circumstances. Aristophanes even lets one of his male characters peep at a slave girl who had performed a Janet Jackson act with her top.³⁸ That will have been wishful thinking, but Phaedra, a kind of Athenian desperate housewife, saw Hippolytus first when he had come to Athens for, to quote Euripides, "the viewing of and initiation into the most solemn mysteries" (*Hippolytos* 25).

At the end of the day, the procession finally reached the sanctuary "together with Iacchus."³⁹ The night fell early, and the flickering of the thousands of torches must have produced a near psychedelic effect among the weary travellers.⁴⁰ Recent neurological research has stressed

³² Plutarch, *Themistocles* 15.1, tr. Perrin.

³³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

³⁴ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 374–5, 389–93; *Wasps* 1362–5, cf. Jeffrey S. Rusten, "Wasps 1360–1369. Philokleon's τωθαασμός," *HSCP* 81 (1977): 157–61.

³⁵ Hans Fluck, "Skurrile Riten in griechischen Kulte" (PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 1931), 52–59; Rusten, "Wasps 1360–1369"; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 278 note 19; Susan Cole, "Achieving Political Maturity: *Stephanosis*, *Philotimia* and *Phallephoria*," in *Gab es das griechische Wunder?* (ed. Dietrich Papenfuss and Volker M. Strocka; Mainz: Von Zabern, 2001), 203–14.

³⁶ Buggies: Aristophanes, *Wealth*, 1014; Demosthenes 21.158; Plutarch, *Lives of the Ten Orators*, 842a. Reviling: scholion on Aristophanes, *Plut.* 1014; Suda τ 19.

³⁷ Homer Thompson and Richard Wycherley, *The Agora of Athens: The History, Shape and Uses of an Ancient City Center* (Agora 14; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 153f.

³⁸ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 409–15, see also *Wealth* 1013f.

³⁹ Sophocles, *Ant.* 1146–52 with scholion *ad loc.*; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 342–3; *LSS* 15.42; *IG II²* 847.21 = *I. Eleusis* 208.21.

⁴⁰ The torches are already mentioned in Sophocles, *OC* 1049–51.

that a good walk can produce euphoric effects.⁴¹ I take it therefore that the “pilgrims” were already in a state of excitement when they reached their goal, which can only have increased that mood. At the entry to the sanctuary was the Kallichoron well, literally “Beautiful dancing,” the location for dancing during the Mysteries cited by Euripides in his *Ion* (1074): apparently, the “pilgrims” danced their way into the sanctuary.⁴² As Demeter is portrayed several times as seated on the well,⁴³ the place clearly had a marked symbolic significance.

After their tiring but inspiring journey, the prospective initiates will hardly have performed other ritual obligations, and the evening and night must have been fairly quiet. The next day will have begun with sacrifices, as was normal. We hear of sacrifices by the *epimelêtai*, the *archôn basileus* and the epebes.⁴⁴ In order to demonstrate their physical prowess, the latter, “in the way of the Greeks” (Eur. *Helen* 1562), lifted up the sacrificial bull to have its throat cut. This custom is attested in many inscriptions but was doubted by Paul Stengel, the greatest expert on Greek sacrifice at the turn of the twentieth century. He had put the question to the Berlin abattoir, where the possibility was laughed away. Yet the sixth-century athlete Milo of Croton had gained great fame for lifting a four-year old bull on his shoulders and carrying it round the stadium at Olympia. Moreover, a more recently published sixth-century amphora shows us a group of adult males with a bull on the shoulders, clearly on their way to the sacrifice.⁴⁵ Modern spectators of bulls or oxen will probably share Stengel’s doubts, but ancient Greek bovids were considerably smaller than those we see nowadays.⁴⁶ Still, despite the difference—and bovids on the mainland

⁴¹ See the interesting study of Eveline J. Albers-van Erkelens, *Heilige kracht wordt door beweging los gemaakt. Over pelgrimage, lopen en genezing* (Groningen: Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap, 2007).

⁴² See also Pausanias 1.38.6 and the allusion to the well in Aristophanes, *Frogs* 450f.

⁴³ Iphigeneia Leventi, “The Mondragone Relief Revisited: Eleusinian Cult Iconography in Campania,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007): 107–41 at 121–4.

⁴⁴ *IG II²* 847.13–16 = *I. Eleusis* 208.13–16, 1028.10–11, cf. Paul Foucart, *Les mystères d’Éleusis* (Paris: Picard, 1914), 371–5; Parker, *Polytheism*, 351 note 102.

⁴⁵ Epebes: Fritz Graf, “Apollon Delphinios,” *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979): 2–22 at 14–5 (fullest collection); Paul Stengel, *Opferbräuche der Griechen* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1910), 115. Milo: Athenaeus 10.412ef. Amphora: Claude Bérard *et al.*, *A City of Images: Iconography and Society in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 58f.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Boessneck and Angela von den Driesch, *Knochenabfall von Opfermahlen und Weihgaben aus dem Heraion von Samos* (Munich: Institut für Palaeoanatomie, 1988), 22 (sacrificed cows only between 95 cm and 1,15 m, one bull 1,26 m, an ox 1,35); Manfred Stanzel, “Die Tierreste aus dem Artemis-/Apollon-Heiligtum bei Kalapodi in Böotien/Griechenland” (PhD diss., University of Munich, 1991), 48 (bulls about 135 cm).

may have been somewhat bigger—the “lifting up of the bulls” remains a feat that undoubtedly was admired by the prospective initiates. Burkert locates these sacrifices after the completion of the whole ritual of the Mysteries,⁴⁷ but this seems less likely, as people would hardly have been very interested in such ritual activities once the highlights of the actual initiation were over.

Some time after the setting of the sun, the prospective initiates would go to the *telestêrion*, where the actual initiation would take place over two consecutive nights.⁴⁸ It was a square or rectangular building of about 27 by 25 metres, seating about 3000 people,⁴⁹ and in its middle was a small chapel, the *anaktoron/anaktora*,⁵⁰ about 3 by 12 metres, where the sacred objects, that were displayed at some point in the ritual, were kept. Given that there were 5 rows of 5 pillars each inside the *telestêrion*, it is understandable that, as Plutarch noted, there was shouting and uncomfortable jostling at the entrance of the building, presumably in order to get to the best places.⁵¹ Finally, the initiates, who would have washed themselves to be pure for the occasion,⁵² sat down on the 8 rows of stepped seats around the walls “in awe and silence,”⁵³ the room smelling of extinguished torches,⁵⁴ darkness reigning supreme. The initiation could begin.

But what was the programme? In the second century A.D. a religious entrepreneur, Alexander of Abonouteichos (a kind of Greek Joseph Smith), founded mysteries, which were closely modelled on those of Eleusis. Its

⁴⁷ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 292.

⁴⁸ For night being the usual time of Greek mysteries see Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47 note 81. *Telestêrion*: Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 78–88, 111–3, 117–24, fig. 26.

⁴⁹ For the various building phases and reconstructions see especially Ferdinand Noack, *Eleusis: Die baugeschichtliche Entwicklung des Heiligtumes* (2 vols.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1927); Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Reconstructing Change: Ideology and the Eleusinian Mysteries,” in *Inventing Ancient Culture* (ed. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey; London: Routledge, 1997), 132–64; Andrea Jördens, “IG II² 1682 und die Baugeschichte des eleusinischen Telesterion im 4. Jh. V. Chr.,” *Klio* 81 (1999): 359–91, to be read with the comments by Kevin Clinton, *Eleusis, the Inscriptions on Stone: Documents of the Sanctuary of the Two Goddesses and Public Documents of the Deme* (2 vols.; Athens: Archaeological Society at Athens, 2005–2008), 2:429–30.

⁵⁰ For the term, see Catherine Trümper, “Die Thesmophoria, Brimo, Deo und das Anaktorion: Beobachtungen zur Vorgeschichte des Demeterkults,” *Kernos* 17 (2004): 13–42 at 34–7.

⁵¹ Plutarch, *De prof. virt.* 10, 81e. The jostling is somewhat exaggerated in Plato, *Phaedrus* 248b1 and Plutarch, fr. 178 Sandbach; note also Plutarch, *Mor.* 943c, cf. Graf, *Eleusis*, 133f.

⁵² For the attention to washing at Eleusis see Robert Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 284 notes 12f.

⁵³ Plutarch, *De prof. virt.* 10, 81e. Silence: Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 14.10f; Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.8.39–40.

⁵⁴ Aristophanes, *Frogs* 314 mentions “the most mystic whiff of torches.”

highlights were divided over two nights, with a kind of sacred wedding and the birth of a child on the second night.⁵⁵ Exactly the same division over two nights would have taken place in Eleusis, as there were two grades of initiation,⁵⁶ and two nights available within the programme of the Mysteries.⁵⁷ It thus seems a reasonable guess that both nights were different,⁵⁸ that the freshly initiated could hardly have left the scene after the climax of their initiation in order to clear the field for those aspiring to the highest grade,⁵⁹ and that we therefore should divide the information that has come down to us over the two nights. In fact, this is not impossible, as both Plato in his *Phaedrus* and Christian authors assign certain events explicitly to the highest grade of the initiation, the *epopteia*, literally “the viewing.” That leaves the events connected with the kidnapping of Persephone to the first night.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the foundation myth of the Mysteries,⁶⁰ relates how Hades kidnapped Persephone, and how her mother Demeter wandered the earth in search of her. When her daughter had been returned to her, Demeter promised fields yellow with corn and a better afterlife. It was this myth that was in some way acted out by the Eleusinian clergy and the prospective initiates on the first night. Only the three highest Eleusinian officials seem to have participated in this “mystic drama,”⁶¹ and their limited number enabled Alcibiades and his friends to parody the

⁵⁵ Lucian, *Alex.* 38–9, cf. Angelos Chaniotis, “Old Wine in a New Skin: Tradition and Innovation in the Cult Foundation of Alexander of Abonouteichos,” in *Tradition and Innovation in the Ancient World* (ed. Edward Dabrowa; Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2002), 67–85 at 77–9.

⁵⁶ Ken Dowden, “Grades in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” *RHR* 197 (1980): 409–27; Kevin Clinton, “Stages of Initiation in the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries,” in *Greek Mysteries* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; London: Routledge, 2003), 50–78.

⁵⁷ Clinton, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore,” 118–9 reduces the events to one night, as he postulates two processions on two days to Eleusis, but this is improbable, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 348 note 90.

⁵⁸ This was already argued by Mommsen, *Heortologie*, 261.

⁵⁹ Noack, *Eleusis*, 1:230. In this division over two nights, my analysis returns to the older studies of Mommsen, *Feste der Stadt Athen*, 244–5; Lewis Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 173 and Foucart, *Mystères*, 357. The great value of Noack’s reconstruction is that he continuously takes the practical possibilities of the *telestêrion* into account.

⁶⁰ Robert Parker, “The Hymn to Demeter and the Homeric Hymns,” *Greece and Rome* 38 (1991): 1–17.

⁶¹ Graf, *Eleusis*, 129f. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 3.12 still mentions only four officials, even though their meaning had clearly been adapted to the allegorizing spirit of his times.

Mysteries in private houses.⁶² It was a kind of Passion Play, that contained dances,⁶³ but no discursive accounts. Apparently, the initiates were sent outdoors to look for Persephone with their torches,⁶⁴ like Demeter herself in her *Homeric Hymn* (47),⁶⁵ but eventually the hierophant, the Eleusinian high-priest, sounded a gong to call up Persephone.⁶⁶ This was the sign for the initiates to assemble in order to witness her successful recovery, which guaranteed the fertility of the land. It must have been an extremely joyful moment, and Lactantius, surely correctly, reports that after Persephone was found the ritual came to an end with “rejoicing and brandishing of torches.”⁶⁷ The search for a divinity was a well-known ritual in ancient Greece,⁶⁸ and, originally, the Mysteries would perhaps have ended with the return of Demeter’s daughter.

This leaves the initiation into the highest degree of the Mysteries, the *epopteia*, for the second night—once again, surely, after washing. Although we do not know the exact order of the programme, several things must have been going on, and it seems reasonable to surmise that the programme gradually worked towards a climax. We will therefore start with the preliminary events. Tertullian mentions that a phallus was shown to the *epoptai*. The validity of this information has been denied, but another Christian author also mentions “acts about which silence is observed, and

⁶² As is well observed by Parker, *Polytheism*, 353. For the process against Alcibiades see most recently Fritz Graf, “Der Mysterienprozess,” in *Grosse Prozesse im antiken Athen* (ed. Leonard Burckhardt and Jürgen Ungern-Sternberg; Munich: Beck, 2000), 114–27, 270–73; Alexander Rubel, *Stadt in Angst. Religion und Politik in Athen während des peloponnesischen Krieges* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 220–29; Stephen Todd, “Revisiting the Herms and the Mysteries,” in *Law, Rhetoric, and Comedy in Classical Athens* (ed. Douglas Cairns and Ronald Knox; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2004), 87–102 at 89–92.

⁶³ Cleanthes, *SVF* 1. no. 538; Epictetus 3.21.16; Aristides 22.13; Lucian, *Pisc.* 33, *Sal.* 14; Tatian, *Or.* 27; Clem. Alex., *Protr.* 12.1; Sopatros, *Rhet. Gr.* VII.115.11, 30; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288.

⁶⁴ It may well be that some women also used the cross torches that were typical of the cults of Demeter, Kore and Artemis, cf. Anja Klöckner, “Women’s Affairs? On a Group of Attic Votive Reliefs with Unusual Decoration,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (ed. Jitse Dijkstra *et al.*; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 179–91.

⁶⁵ See also Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6.2, cf. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47.

⁶⁶ Apollodorus, *FGrH* 244 F 110b; Bérard, *Anodoi*, 84f.

⁶⁷ Lactantius, *Epit.* 18 (23), 7: *et ea (Proserpina) inventa ritus omnis gratulatione ac tædarum iactatione finitur.*

⁶⁸ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Hylas, the Nymphs, Dionysos and Others: Myth, Ritual, Ethnicity* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 2005).

which truly deserve silence.”⁶⁹ In fact, a phallus was part of several festivals and does not seem to be out of place in a ritual for Demeter.

A more intriguing feature is mentioned by the late antique Christian bishop Asterius of Amaseia in Pontus. He rhetorically asks:

Are not the Mysteries at Eleusis the core of your worship [...]? Are the dark crypt (*καταβάσιον*) not there and the solemn meeting of the hierophant with the priestess, the two alone together? Are not the torches extinguished while the whole huge crowd believes its salvation (*σωτηρίαν*: note the Christian interpretation) to lie in the things done by the two in the dark?⁷⁰

The mention of a subterranean crypt should not be taken as a reference to “a gate to the underworld,” as suggested by Burkert, since the word never has this meaning,⁷¹ and archaeology has demonstrated the absence of a subterranean crypt. However, that does not really solve the problem, as was thought by Mylonas, who felt he had to defend the dignity of the Mysteries.⁷² Now a “Hymn to Isis” by the mid-second century A.D. Cretan poet Mesomedes indicates the stages of the mysteries of Isis according to rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁷³ His enumeration mentions the “birth of a child” (13), the “unspeakable fire” (14), the “harvest of Kronos” (16) and, finally, the *anaktora* (18), which betrays its Eleusinian origin. And indeed, his enumeration starts with a *chthonios hymenaios* (10), which is exactly and irrefutably a “subterranean wedding.” Now, the mysteries of Isis had been developed by the Eleusinian hierophant Timotheus, who had been summoned to Alexandria by Ptolemy Soter to propagate the cult of Serapis (Plut. *Iside* 28). This puts the information about the Eleusinian mysteries back to about 300 B.C., which is pretty early.

Burkert interprets the words as a reference to Persephone, but her wedding was in no way a highlight of the Mysteries. Given that all the other references are to clearly identifiable stages of the epoptic ritual, it seems more likely that we have a reference here to the same act as mentioned by Asterius. In fact, Gregory of Nazianze notes: “nor does Demeter wander

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Adv. Valent.* 1; Gregory Nazianzenus, *Or.* 39.4, tr. Parker; Theodoretus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* 7.11, cf. Parker, *Polytheism*, 355 notes 123–4.

⁷⁰ Asterius, *Homilies* 10.9.1 Datema, tr. Parker, *Polytheism*, 356, with an illuminating commentary.

⁷¹ *Contra* Burkert, *Homo necans*, 284 note 47.

⁷² Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 314.

⁷³ Mesomedes, *Hymn.* 5 Heitsch, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 291 note 79 and *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 160 note 116.

and bring in Celeuses and Triptolemus and snakes, and perform some acts and undergo others,” and love between the Eleusinian king Celeus and Demeter is attested elsewhere.⁷⁴ In other words, various sources suggest that sex played a role at least on the mythical level, which could, but need not, have been reflected on the level of ritual. But how do we explain a “subterranean wedding” when there is no such space archeologically attested? Two answers seem possible. The *anaktoron* was sometimes called *megaron* or *magaron*, the term for subterranean cultic buildings of Demeter and Persephone, but also of the pits in which sacrifice was deposited during the Thesmophoria.⁷⁵ In other words, both Asterius and Mesomedes, directly or indirectly, could have misinterpreted their source’s report of the sacred wedding in the *anaktoron* because they were not, or no longer, familiar with the Mysteries. A second possibility could be that the hierophant himself, who was the only one who had access to the *anaktoron*,⁷⁶ made a suggestion of a subterranean descent. We simply do not know.

There also will have been dancing,⁷⁷ and probably other acts that escape us but which almost certainly included speaking or singing, as *euphônia* was required of the hierophant, whose voice could even be depicted as that of his eponymous ancestor Eumolpos.⁷⁸ In fact, there is a close connection between *Mousai* and *mysteria* in a number of texts.⁷⁹ As the singing of hymns is securely attested in the mysteries of the Lykomids,⁸⁰ we may well expect them to have been performed in Eleusis as well. And indeed, a first-century B.C. inscription mentions *hymnagôgoi* in Eleusis.⁸¹ Unfortunately, we cannot tell whether they instructed choirs or whether we can think of a kind of community singing in the *telestêrion*.

⁷⁴ Gregory Naz. *Or.* 39.4; scholion on Aelius Aristides pp. 53.15–16 Dindorf.

⁷⁵ Hesychius α 4390 Latte. For the spelling *magaron* see Menander, fr. 553 KA; Aelius Dion. μ 2 Erbse; Photius μ 5 Theod.; Albert Henrichs, “Megaron im Orakel des Apollon Karaios,” *ZPE* 4 (1969): 31–37 at 35–6; Louis Robert, *Opera minora selecta* (7 vols.; Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969–1990), 2:1005–7 and 5:289–90; Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 126–32.

⁷⁶ Aelian, fr. 10h, i¹ Domingo-Forasté.

⁷⁷ Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 57–8, who compares Plato, *Phaedrus* 247a7; 250b6; 252c3; Alex Hardie, “Muses and Mysteries,” in *Music and the Muses: The Culture of “mousikê” in the Classical Athenian City* (ed. Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–37 at 19.

⁷⁸ Plutarch, *Phoc.* 28.2; Arrian, *Epict.* 3.21.16; Philostratus, *Vit. sophist.* 2.20; *IG* II²:3639.4 = *I. Eleusis* 515.4.

⁷⁹ Hardie, “Muses and Mysteries.”

⁸⁰ Jan N. Bremmer, “*Manteis*, Magic, Mysteries and Mythography: Messy Margins of Polis Religion?” *Kernos* 23 (2010): 13–35 at 27.

⁸¹ *SEG* 30.93.18.

However, before the high point of the ritual occurred, the initiated were first subjected to a terrifying experience. As Plutarch notes: “subsequently, *before the climax* (my italics: *pro tou telous*) [come] all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement.”⁸² It is the same rhythm that we can see in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (251a), where those who have seen “a godlike face” first experience shuddering, sweating and abnormal heat. We may safely assume that the Eleusinian clergy knew how to build up tension in the performance, and several sources state that prospective initiates were frightened during initiations into all kinds of mysteries.⁸³ It seems a fair assumption that Greek initiations learned from one another, and that such a practice thus will have occurred at Eleusis as well.

The high point of the initiation has been described by a Gnostic author, who rhetorically asked: “what is the great, marvellous, most perfect epoptic mystery there, an ear of wheat harvested in silence,” the showing of which was probably accompanied by a display of a statue of Demeter.⁸⁴ But that was not all. The Gnostic author proceeds with the words “just as the hierophant [...] at Eleusis, when performing the great, unspeakable mysteries amid great fire, calls out at the top of his voice: ‘the reverend goddess has given birth to a sacred boy, Brimo to Brimos, that is the strong one has born a strong child.’”⁸⁵ And as we just mentioned (above), Mesomedes had also mentioned the birth of a child, the fire and the “harvest of Kronos.” In other words, these acts surely constituted the climax of the epoptic ritual.⁸⁶

This conclusion is confirmed by other indications. Around A.D. 200 an epigram for a hierophant stresses the moment that the initiates saw him “stepping forward from the *anaktoron* in the shining nights” of the

⁸² Plutarch, fr. 178 Sandbach, tr. Burkert; similarly, Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 3.18; see also Aeschylus F 387 Radt; Plutarch, *Ages.* 24.7; Aelius Arist. 22.2; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 64–7; Richard Seaford, “Sophokles and the Mysteries,” *Hermes* 122 (1994): 275–88 at 284f.

⁸³ Idomeneus, *FGrH* 338 F 2 (Sabazios); Origen, *Cels.* 4.10 (Bacchic mysteries); schol. Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1361 (Eleusis); Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysos*, 90–2.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Phaedr.* 254b, cf. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 52, 61–2; Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 89f. For such φάσματα in mysteries see Graf, *Eleusis*, 134 note 34; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288.

⁸⁵ Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.8.39–41 Marcovich, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 288–90; Parker, *Polytheism*, 357f. For the last part of this passage, which is a comment of Hippolytus, compare Hesychius β 1166: Βριμῶν ἰσχυρὰ, where Latte *ad loc.* wrongly compares “Clem. Al. protr. 2,15,1) A (S)n.”

⁸⁶ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 276 note 8: “the high point of the celebration.”

Mysteries.⁸⁷ The fire returns in many allusions to the Mysteries,⁸⁸ and clearly was a well-staged moment in the ritual that made a big impression on the participants. Plutarch even uses this crucial moment in a discussion of the *Werdegang* of a philosopher: “but he who succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a big light, because the *anaktora* was opened . . .”⁸⁹ The announcement of the birth also seems to be traditional, as the beginning closely resembles a line from Euripides’ *Suppliants*: “You too, reverend goddess, once gave birth to a boy” (54). The main difference with the Gnostic report is the introduction of the names Brimo and Brimos. The *Suppliants* probably date from about 420 B.C., and it fits with this date that the name Brimo is most likely an import from Orphic poetry, probably at the end of the fifth century B.C.⁹⁰ The most likely interpretation of these somewhat enigmatic words is that the boy is Ploutos, the personified Wealth, who is a recurrent figure in Eleusinian iconography and who is already mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as “the god who bestows affluence on men” (489).⁹¹ Apparently, the ritual celebrated both the arrival of wheat and its personification. We may think of the showing of an ear of wheat as a somewhat poor climax, but we must not forget that the fifth century was the heyday of Athens’ claims to the invention of agriculture and Triptolemos as the missionary of the new invention,⁹² as well as of Prodicus’ re-interpretation of Demeter as the deified wheat.⁹³

Finally, why did the hierophant call out “at the top of his voice”? We touch here upon a difficult and debated topic of the Mysteries. Naturally, one of the answers is: because this was the climax of the ritual. And indeed, Lysias already mentions the loud voice at the conclusion of his enumeration of the profanation of the Mysteries, just as Alexander of

⁸⁷ IG II/III² 3811.1–2 = *I. Eleusis* 637.1–2, cf. Clinton, *Sacred Officials*, 40–1; note also IG II/III² 3709.10 = *I. Eleusis* 659.10; Philostratus, *Vit. sophist.* 587.

⁸⁸ See the extensive discussion by Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 47–52; Richard Seaford, “Mystic Light in Aeschylus’ Bassarai,” *CQ* 55 (2005): 602–06.

⁸⁹ Plutarch, *Mor.* 81e, cf. Burkert, *Homo necans*, 276 note 8; similarly, Maximus Tyrius, *Diss.* 39.3; Himerios, *Or.* 67.9.

⁹⁰ For Brimo as an originally Orphic figure and the date of her introduction into Eleusis see Jan N. Bremmer, “Divinities in the Orphic Gold Leaves: Euklès, Eubouleus, Brimo, Kore, Kybele and Persephone,” in *The Gold Leaves* (ed. Fritz Graf; Leiden: Brill, 2011), forthcoming. For Orphic influence on Eleusis at the end of the fifth century see Graf, *Eleusis*, 182–6.

⁹¹ Clinton, *Myth and Cult*, 91–5, followed by Parker, *Polytheism*, 358.

⁹² Graf, *Eleusis*, 22–39; Parker, *Athenian Religion*, 99.

⁹³ Albert Henrichs, “Two Doxographical Notes: Democritus and Prodicus on Religion,” *HSCP* 79 (1975): 93–123 and “The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretologies,” *HSCP* 88 (1984): 139–58.

Abonouteichos used a loud voice at the climax of his ritual.⁹⁴ Yet there will have been another, more practical reason. Given the architecture of the *telestêrion* with its many pillars, it must have been impossible for everybody to see exactly what was on show during the climax of the ritual. This fact is indeed admitted by our best recent students, but they refuse to accept it because, as they argue,⁹⁵ the importance of “seeing” and “showing” is continuously stressed by our sources as a fundamental part to the highest degree.⁹⁶ Yet in the same passage of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (248ab), one that is so replete with the terminology of the Mysteries,⁹⁷ we also read that many horses could not behold the realities or could only just do so. The ancient Greeks were not yet like modern consumers who certainly would have strongly demanded their money back if they had not seen everything. We may better compare church services in medieval cathedrals. Here, too, not everybody could see the performance of the Eucharist and, in fact, a bell had to be rung so that the faithful knew when to kneel during the climax of the mass. In many churches the clergy had even made squints, “an aperture, usually oblique, affording a view of an altar,” in walls or screens to enable the viewing of the climax of the service at the high altar.⁹⁸

However this may have been, we may assume that whatever awe there was eventually would have turned into relief and joy. With their personal well-being assured the initiates will have left the *telestêrion* tired but content.

The last day of the Mysteries was a day of festivities and sacrifices, and the happy initiates now could wear a myrtle wreath, like the officiating

⁹⁴ Ps. Lysias 6.51: καὶ εἶπε τῇ φωνῇ τὰ ἀπόρρητα; Lucian, *Alex.* 39.

⁹⁵ Graf, *Eleusis*, 128–9 (“völlig ausgeschlossen”); Parker, *Polytheism*, 351–2 (“we know that the initiates did see the sacred objects, even if we do not understand how”).

⁹⁶ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 480; Pindar, fr. 137.1 Maehler; Sophocles, fr. 753.2 Radt; Euripides, *Her.* 613, *Hipp.* 25; Andocides, *Myst.* 31; Aelius Arist. *Or.* 22.2, 12; Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 22–6, 37–8; Parker, *Polytheism*, 353 (importance of “showing”).

⁹⁷ Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie*, 65f.

⁹⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (2d ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 97 (bell, squint); Justin Kroesen, “Squints in Nederland: Definitie, typering en inventarisatie,” *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 22 (2006): 195–216; Simon Roffey, “Constructing a Vision of Salvation: Chantries and the Social Dimension of Religious Experience in the Medieval Parish Church,” *Archaeological Journal* 163 (2006): 122–46. For some interesting observations on the problem of blocked vision during ritual action see also Allie Terry, “The Iconostasis, the Choir Screen, and San Marco: The Veiling of Ritual Action and the Participation of the Viewer in Byzantine and Renaissance Imagery,” *Chicago Art Journal* 11 (2001): 15–32.

priests.⁹⁹ The day was called Plemochoai, after a type of vessel that was used for the concluding libation, one vessel upturned to the west, the other to the east,¹⁰⁰ to the accompaniment of a “mystic utterance,” perhaps the attested cry “Rain,” while looking up to heaven, and “Conceive” while looking down to the earth.¹⁰¹ During this day, and probably also before, the initiates visited the fair, which was a standard feature of ancient festivals, as it still is often today.¹⁰² In the middle of the fourth century B.C. the Athenian state even issued a number of coins with symbols referring to the Mysteries, such as Triptolemos, the mystic piglet and the staff. These will have helped to pay the vendors of food and drink but also the sellers of presents, souvenirs and, probably, ladies of pleasure.¹⁰³ We must never forget that longer rituals regularly had, so-to-speak, empty moments, which were not rule-bound, formal or differentiated from everyday activities.¹⁰⁴

When leaving, the initiates probably uttered the words “*paks*” or “*konks*,” as we are told that this was the exclamation of those who had

⁹⁹ Initiates: Aristophanes, *Frogs* 330 and scholion *ad loc.*; *Agora* 16.239 (late 3rd century B.C.; see also Angelos Chaniotis and John Mylonopoulos, “Epigraphic Bulletin for Greek Religion, 2002,” *Kernos* 18 [2005]: 425–74 at 473); Plutarch, fr. 178; Theo Smyrnaeus, *De utilitate mathematicae* 15.1–4 Hiller; schol. Sophocles, *OC* 681; Peter G. Maxwell-Stuart, “Myrtle and the Eleusinian Mysteries,” *Wiener Studien* 85 (1972): 145–61; Hans R. Goette, “Römische Kinderbildnisse mit Jugendlocken,” *Athen. Mitt.* 104 (1989): 203–18 at 207–9; Lee Ann Ricciardi, “The Bust-Crown, the Panhellenion, and Eleusis,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007): 365–90 at 386f. Priests: Istros *FGrH* 334 F 29.

¹⁰⁰ For the vessels see Margaret M. Miles, *The City Eleusinion* (Agora 31; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 95–103; Ingrid Krauskopf, “Plemochoe,” in *ThesCRA* 5:252–55; Kevin Clinton, “Donors of Kernoi at the Eleusinian Sanctuary of the Two Goddesses,” in *Le donateur, l’offrande et la déesse* (ed. Clarisse Prêtre; Liège: Centre International d’Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique, 2009), 239–46; Christina Mitsopoulou, “De Nouveaux Kernoi pour Kernos. . . Réévaluation et mise à jour de la recherche sur les vases de culte éleusiniens,” *Kernos* 23 (2010): 145–78, with a unique representation of the ritual at 168–72.

¹⁰¹ Critias *TrGF* 43 F 2; Athenaeus 11.496ab; Proclus, *In Tim.* 3.176.28, reflected at Aelius Arist. 22.7. I follow here Burkert, *Homo necans*, 293; see also Parker, *Polytheism*, 350.

¹⁰² Plutarch, *Mor.* 635A, cf. Luuk de Ligt and Pieter W. de Neeve, “Ancient Periodic Markets: Festivals and Fairs,” *Athenaeum* 66 (1988): 391–416; Michael Wörrle, *Stadt und Fest im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (Munich: Beck, 1988), 209–15; Christophe Chandezon, “Faires et panégories dans le monde grec classique et hellénistique,” *REG* 113 (2000): 70–100; Rena Basser, “Is the Pagan Fair Fairly Dangerous? Jewish-Pagan Relations in Antiquity,” in *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (ed. Leif Vaage; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 73–84.

¹⁰³ For the coins see John H. Kroll, *The Greek Coins* (Agora 26; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 27–36, who, at 29, also notes an increase of visitors in the fourth century B.C., cf. Kevin Clinton, “A Law in the City Eleusinion Concerning the Mysteries,” *Hesperia* 49 (1980): 258–88 at 273–5, 281; Selene Psoma, “*Panegyris* Coinages,” *AJN* 2/20 (2008): 227–55 at 229.

¹⁰⁴ Parker, *Polytheism*, 370.

been initiated.¹⁰⁵ Somehow the end of the Mysteries had to be ritualised, although we have no idea what these words mean. Having returned home, the initiates used the clothes they had worn during their initiation as lucky blankets for their children or consecrated them in a local sanctuary. That is why many an initiate even wore old clothes.¹⁰⁶ After all, religion and economic interest are not mutually exclusive, as the USA shows us all too clearly.

When we now look back, we first note that the term “Mysteries” is misleading to a certain extent. The rite was secret, but there was nothing mysterious about it. Even if we were to find a full description dating from antiquity, nothing leads us to expect anything unheard of. Why, then, were the mysteries secret in historical times? The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* explains the secrecy from the fact that the rites, like the deities to whom they belong, are *semna*, “awesome”, and “a great reverence of the gods restrains utterance” (478–9).¹⁰⁷ In Augustan times, Strabo gave the following explanation: “the secrecy with which the sacred rites are concealed induces reverence for the divine, since it imitates the nature of the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses” (10.3.9, tr. H.L. Jones, Loeb). These “emic,” or insider, explanations are fully satisfactory: it is the very holiness of the rites that forbids them to be performed or related outside their proper ritual context.¹⁰⁸ It is also important to note that these “emic” explanations do not suggest a valuable propositional element in the Mysteries. Contrary to what many moderns seem to think, there was no esoteric wisdom to be found in the ancient Mysteries, no Da Vinci Code to be deciphered.

Second, what was the goal of the Mysteries? Was it eschatological, as one of the best students of Greek religion states in his most recent discussion?¹⁰⁹ Such a statement perhaps overstates one, though important, aspect of the Mysteries and does not seem to take another claim into sufficient account. As we have seen, the first day ended in the return of Persephone, the guarantee for fertility, and the second in the showing

¹⁰⁵ Hesychius k 3134 Latte, wrongly quoted by Mylonas, *Eleusis*, 279.

¹⁰⁶ Graf, *Eleusis*, 45; Parker, *Polytheism*, 361.

¹⁰⁷ See also Albert Henrichs, “Namenlosigkeit und Euphemismus: Zur Ambivalenz der chthonischen Mächte im attischen Drama,” in *Fragmenta Dramatica* (ed. Heinz Hofmann and Annette Harder; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 161–201 at 169–79.

¹⁰⁸ See also Jan N. Bremmer, “Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 61–78.

¹⁰⁹ Parker, *Polytheism*, 354, 373; differently, Burkert, *Homo necans*, 294.

of an ear of wheat and the birth of (Agricultural) Wealth. Moreover, Varro, the most learned Roman of the first century B.C., noted: “there are many traditions in her (Persephone’s) mysteries, all related to the discovery of grain.”¹¹⁰ And indeed, as Burkert has noted, “no matter how surprising it may seem to one Platonically influenced, there is no mention of immortality at Eleusis, nor of a soul and the transmigration of souls, nor yet of deification.”¹¹¹ In other words, the actual performance of the Mysteries points only to agricultural fertility.

This interpretation of the Mysteries as a kind of fertility ritual seems to fit the iconographical representations. None of those with Eleusinian themes refers to blessings in the afterlife, but the message of fertility is very clearly expressed in the prominence of the gods Ploutos and Plouton, whose names reflect the aspiration for (agricultural) wealth.¹¹² The connection of Eleusis with agriculture is also manifest in the equally prominent position in Eleusis of Triptolemos, the inventor of agriculture but a judge in the underworld only in the fourth century, and by the presence on a fourth-century Apulian vase of personified Eleusis sitting next to Eniautos, “(The products of the) Year,” holding a horn of plenty with ears of wheat sprouting out.¹¹³

On the other hand, literary texts regularly speak of the eschatological hopes that await the initiates.¹¹⁴ As the afterlife does not seem to have been mentioned during the actual performance, which consisted primarily in “showing” not “teaching,” prospective initiates will have heard about it during their preliminary initiation. Such a “catechism” kept the interpretation of the Mysteries up-to-date and could incorporate contemporary intellectual fashions, just as Christian theology and rabbinic scholarship have kept the texts of the Bible alive for the faithful by their interpretations.

¹¹⁰ Varro *apud* Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 7.20. For other, similar texts see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Festival and Mysteries: Aspects of the Eleusinian Cult,” in *Greek Mysteries* (ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos; London: Routledge, 2003), 25–49 at 35.

¹¹¹ Burkert, *Homo necans*, 294.

¹¹² Parker, *Polytheism*, 336f.

¹¹³ Triptolemos: see most recently Gerda Schwarz, “Triptolemos,” in *LIMC* 8.1 (1997), 56–68; Jan N. Bremmer, “Triptolemos,” in *Der Neue Pauly* 12/2 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2002), 528–29. Apulian vase: Malibu 86.AE.680, not yet known to David Parrish, “Annus,” in *LIMC* 1.1 (1981), 799f.

¹¹⁴ *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 480–3; Pindar, fr. 137 Maehler; Sophocles, fr. 837 Radt; Isocrates 4.28; Plato, *Gorgias* 493B; Cicero, *De legibus* 2.36; Crinagoras, *Anth. Pal.* 11.42.

Recent years have seen many discussions of the relation between myth and ritual, which have resulted in the realisation that myth often selects the more striking parts of the ritual as well as dramatizes and simplifies its issues at stake.¹¹⁵ Moreover, we also have recently learned that there is no one-to-one relationship between rituals and their representations.¹¹⁶ Consequently, we must accept that in their representation of the Mysteries vase painters selected fertility for their emphasis, rather than the eschatological promise. There probably was a good reason for that choice, as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (480–3) mentions only this about the afterlife: “Blessed is he of men on earth who has seen them, whereas he that is uninitiated in the rites [...] has another lot wasting away in the musty dark.” That is all, and the other older texts with this promise (above) are equally vague. As belief in the afterlife was not widely held and always seems to have been limited to a minority,¹¹⁷ vase painters had little to work with and hardly ever represented the afterlife.¹¹⁸ People, then, will have made their own choices about what to bring home from the festival. As nobody seems to have put the fact of their Eleusinian initiation on his or her tombstone before the second century B.C.,¹¹⁹ most Greeks may well have looked forward more to the promise of wealth in this life than to a good afterlife. The times of medieval Christianity were still far away.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ For the most recent surveys see Jan N. Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece: Observations on a Difficult Relationship,” in *Griechische Mythologie und Frühchristentum* (ed. Raban von Haehling; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 21–43 and “Walter Burkert on Ancient Myth and Ritual: Some Personal Observations,” in *Gewalt und Opfer. Im Dialog mit Walter Burkert* (ed. Anton Bierl and Wolfgang Braungart; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 71–86.

¹¹⁶ Anja Klöckner, “Votive als Gegenstände des Rituals—Votive als Bilder von Ritualen: Das Beispiel der griechischen Weihreliefs,” in *Archäologie und Ritual. Auf der Suche nach der rituellen Handlung in den antiken Kulturen Ägyptens und Griechenlands* (ed. John Mylonopoulos and Hubert Roeder; Vienna: Phoibos, 2006), 139–52.

¹¹⁷ Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7–8; Parker, *Polytheism*, 363–8.

¹¹⁸ Andreas Scholl, “Hades und Elysion—Bilder des Jenseits in der Grabkunst des klassischen Athens,” *JdI* 122 (2007): 51–79.

¹¹⁹ See now *SEG* 55.723: a grave epigram that mentions both the initiation into the Samothracian and Eleusinian Mysteries.

¹²⁰ For information and comments I am most grateful to audiences in Malibu (Getty Villa: 2006), Winnipeg, Malibu (Pepperdine University), Durham, St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Leeds (2007), Montreal (McGill), Giessen (2008) and Cologne (Internationales Kolleg Morphomata: 2010). Sarah Hitch kindly and skillfully corrected my English.

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THE NOTION OF MYSTERIES IN THE FORMATION OF HERMETIC TRADITION

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The Hermetic treatises have in the history of research traditionally been put in the context of two larger currents of Hellenistic thought, namely that of Gnosticism and that of the mysteries. Accordingly, Hermetism has often been designated as a “pagan gnosis,” or as an example of “reading mysteries.” In the last few decades, however, the descriptive power of both these labels has been put into question: That of “Gnosticism” by Morton Smith, Michael Williams and Karen King,¹ and that of “mystery cults” by Walter Burkert, Giulia Sfameni Gasparro and Jonathan Z. Smith,² just to name some of the main figures. This renewed critical attention to the question of definition has not fully penetrated into Hermetic studies though, where the earlier, somewhat essentialistic, preconceptions of the terms are often used to inform and direct the interpretative efforts.

Rather than getting involved in the extensive definitional controversy, the present contribution will have the more modest aim of determining the use of the term “mystery” in the Hermetic treatises themselves, and what role it plays in the formation of a Hermetic tradition. The question

* I would like to express my gratitude to my teacher, Einar Thomassen, who has commented on an earlier draft of this article, unaware that it would end up in his own Festschrift. I have also benefited from the comments of the Ancient Studies-group at the University of Bergen, the participants of the “Highways and Byways” seminar at the Norwegian institute at Athens, 2010, and the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network (NNGN). The following abbreviations are used throughout this article: CH = *Corpus Hermeticum*; SH = *Stobaei Hermetica*; FH = *Fragmenta Hermetica*; DH = *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*.

¹ Morton Smith, “The History of the Term Gnostikos,” in *Sethian Gnosticism* (vol. 2 of *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 796–807; Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

² Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis* (Leiden: Brill, 1985); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

of Gnosticism and gnosis in the texts will have to be left aside for the present, however it should be indicated at the outset that the current general consensus, established mainly by Jean-Pierre Mahé and Garth Fowden, is that the Hermetic tradition, called “The Way of Hermes,”³ progresses from a monistic-positive to a dualistic-pessimistic view of the world. The earlier position, of two incompatible brands of Hermetism, championed by Wilhelm Bousset and André-Jean Festugière, are here combined into one coherent way of initiation. The notion of a “way” with “steps” indicating degrees of esoteric knowledge is supported by the texts, but the scholarly construction of two such contrasting world-views and their sequence on the way is based on conjecture. Moreover, Tage Petersen has shown that the supposed dualism of the texts so branded is questionable,⁴ and that the texts themselves seem to indicate an increasing sense of the unity of the All on the higher stages.

The question of the relationship between the Hermetic treatises and the mysteries has been much debated, and the following is only an outline of the main developments. An early view, propounded by Richard Reitzenstein and repeated occasionally in the century to follow, was that the reading of the texts constituted “Lesemysterien,” that is, the reader would ostensibly experience the effect of initiation through the reading of the texts.⁵ Festugière did not agree with this view, and claimed the mystery imagery was solely metaphorical, as in Plato,⁶ reflecting more a school situation than a *traditio mystica*.⁷ Gerard van Moorsel took up the question

³ Referred to in NHC VI 63,11 as “the way of immortality.” Cf. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 110–11; Jean-Pierre Mahé, “La voie d’immortalité à la lumière des ‘Hermetica’ de Nag Hammadi et de découvertes plus récentes,” *VC* 45 (1991): 347–75.

⁴ Following Ugo Bianchi, Petersen convincingly argues that dualism has been used as a “dogma-finding device.” Cf. Tage Petersen, “‘Alt kommer jo på øjet an, der ser.’ En analyse af kosmologien i de såkaldt dualistiske tekster i Corpus Hermeticum” (PhD diss., Copenhagen, 2003); idem, “Hermetic Dualism? CH VI against the Background of Nag Hammadi Dualistic Gnosticism,” in *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions* (ed. Søren Giversen et al.; Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2002), 95–104.

⁵ Richard Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (3d ed.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), 51–64. Reading mysteries, of some form, were subsequently accepted by Karl-Wolfgang Tröger, *Mysterienglaube und Gnosis in Corpus Hermeticum XIII* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1971), and J. Peter Södergard, *The Hermetic Piety of the Mind: A Semiotic and Cognitive Study of the Discourse of Hermes Trismegistos* (ConBNT 41; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003).

⁶ Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum* (4 vols.; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1942–1953), 2:375n154.

⁷ Cf. André-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste* (4 vols.; Paris: Lecoffre, 1944–1954), 2:35.

again, and divided between the “spiritual” mysteries of the *Hermetica*, and the “empirical” mysteries, where the former lead to a vision of and unity with god without the ritual trappings of the latter.⁸ Likewise, Giulia Sfameni Gasparro treats CH XIII, *On the Rebirth*, as a fully “spiritualized” mystery-initiation, claiming that Tat’s affirmation to his father Hermes, that he has estranged himself to the world, means that he has died in order to be ritually born again, thus conforming to the alleged pattern of the dying and resurrected god of the mysteries.⁹ Karl-Wolfgang Tröger aimed to delineate the relationship of “mystery-faith” (*Mysterienglaube*) and Gnosis, again especially in CH XIII, and like van Moorsel concludes that the Hermetic rebirth is a spiritualized reading-mystery, dispensing with external *dromena*.¹⁰ Garth Fowden, while acknowledging that “not just the mysteries, but all forms of cult may play a part in the lower stage of spiritual progress,” claims that they have fundamentally different backgrounds: “The mysteries had their roots in traditional cultic practice, and their main appeal was to those who simply wanted something more profound than what was available to all in the public temples. The *Hermetica*, by contrast, emanate from the world of philosophical reflection.”¹¹

When evaluating all this, one must be mindful of the warning of Jonathan Z. Smith not to construct a picture of the mysteries as an *ex opere operato* dramatization of death and rebirth, a scholarly construction he claims is derived mainly from protestant bias against catholic ritualism.¹² Most of the scholars previously cited have a tacit understanding of what the mysteries constitute, and some specifically contrast the spirituality of Hermetism to the ritualism of the mysteries. This is why all the three works dealing specifically with the *Hermetica* and the mysteries

⁸ Gerard van Moorsel, *The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus: A Phenomenologic Study in the Process of Spiritualisation in the Corpus Hermeticum and Latin Asclepius* (Utrecht: Drukkerij Kemink en Zoon, 1955), 80ff. Van Moorsel illustrates Smith’s point of protestant bias, writing à propos Calvin: “The sacraments are no more ‘signs’ and ‘seals’, but means of grace that, by virtue of Christ their *substance*, have the power to *offere, exhibere, praestare, efficere (!)* and *présenter*—not *causative* and mechanically of course (like Roman Catholicism holds), but by means of the Holy Spirit, Who is the author of the identity spiritual=real” (p. 48). The emphases are all van Moorsel’s.

⁹ Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, “La gnosi ermetica come iniziazione e mistero,” *SMSR* 36 (1965): 43–62. However, Gasparro later admits, in *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects*, xvii, that “the classificatory scheme of the ‘dying and rising god’ . . . has turned out to be inadequate for the definition of the varied and multiple historical reality of the facts examined.” This extends also to the question of salvation.

¹⁰ Tröger, *Mysterienglaube*, 21 and 51.

¹¹ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 149–50.

¹² Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 34, 65, and 67.

focus predominantly on CH XIII, because it has to do with rebirth, supposedly a core element of mystery religion. However, this text is meager in mystery language, containing little of its vocabulary. In the following, we shall keep the presumptions of what constitutes “true” mysteries at bay, and rather focus on how the texts employ the word.

According to Walter Burkert, there is an inflation of the terms *mystéria* and *mystikos* in Gnostic and Hermetic texts, causing a corresponding devaluation of meaning.¹³ A lexicographical survey of words cognate to *mystêrion* and *myeô* in the Hermetica yields a total of 26 instances: Nine in the Stobaeic fragment *Korê kosmou* (SH XXIII), another three in SH XXV, two in FH 23 and one each in CH I, V, XIV and XVI. Another six instances of *mysterium* appear in the Latin *Asclepius*, along with two in the Coptic fragment unattested in the Latin.¹⁴ Other mystery terms are sparse. *Teletê* does not appear at all, and *teleô* and its derivatives appear uniformly in the sense of completion, not initiation.¹⁵ Despite Burkert, this is not such an impressive profusion of terms, and it should be possible to evaluate if there is indeed a devaluation of meaning.

Straightaway, the fact that there are no instances of the word in the more initiatory texts should give us pause, namely *On the rebirth* (CH XIII) and *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI, 6), along with only one instance in that central text, the *Poimandres* (CH I).¹⁶ Our main focus will thus naturally be the two texts where the terms *mystéria* and *mysterium* abound, namely the *Korê kosmou*¹⁷ (hereafter KK) and the *Asclepius*.

Korê kosmou: Isis' treatise to Horus (SH XXIII)

Consistent with its multiple invocations of *mystéria*, the KK expounds at some length about the pedigree of the Hermetic *traditio mystica*. At one

¹³ Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 86.

¹⁴ Louis Delatte, Suzanne Govaerts, and Joseph Denooz, *Index du Corpus Hermeticum* (Roma: Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1977), 121 and 310.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 180. *epoptês* appears only in SH XXIII, and then not in its mystery-sense, see below.

¹⁶ The Byzantine manuscript tradition of the *Corpus Hermeticum* may have undergone Christian censorship. Cf. Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte* (2 vols.; BCNH.T 3 & 7; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978–1982), 1:24.

¹⁷ I opt here to keep the title untranslated, due to the fact that both “maiden” and “pupil” (of the eye) have been suggested as translations for *Korê*. Furthermore, it might be a reference to the protagonist, Isis. Cf. Howard M. Jackson, “Κόρη κόσμου: Isis, Pupil of the Eye of the World,” *CdE* 61 (1986): 116–35. In the following, the translations of SH and FH are my own, while those of CH and *Ascl.* belong to Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

point in the lengthy discourse of Isis in the KK, she is about to tell her son Horus about the incarnation of souls, and admonishes him:

πρόσεχε, τέκνον ὦρε, κρυπτής γάρ
ἐπακούεις θεωρίας, ἥς ὁ μὲν προπάτωρ
Καμήφης ἔτυχεν ἐπακούσας παρὰ Ἑρμοῦ
τοῦ πάντων ἔργων ὑπομνηματογράφου,
<ἐγὼ δὲ> παρὰ τοῦ πάντων προγε-
νεστέρου Καμήφεως, ὅπῳτ' ἐμὲ καὶ τῷ
τελείῳ μέλανι ἐτίμησε· νῦν δὲ αὐτὸς σὺ
παρ' ἐμοῦ.

Pay attention, my son Horus, for you are
about to listen to a secret contemplation
that my forebear Kamephis got by listen-
ing to Hermes, the scribe of all things,
and I from Kamephis, the ancestor of all,
when he also rewarded me with the Per-
fect Black. And now you yourself from
me. (§ 32)

Unlike the more human Hermes of many Hermetic treatises, we are here clearly dealing with the god and cosmic agent Hermes-Thoth. Scribe of all things, or scribe of the gods as he is called elsewhere (§ 44), is clearly an apt epithet for the Egyptian conception of Thoth, who is thus placed here in a divine chain of tradition whence Isis derived her esoteric knowledge.¹⁸ The *traditio* is elaborated:

ἀλλ' ἦν αὐτῷ διάδοχος ὁ Τάτ, υἱὸς ὁμοῦ καὶ
παραλήπτωρ τῶν μαθημάτων τούτων, οὐκ
εἰς μακρὰν δὲ καὶ Ἀσκληπιὸς ὁ Ἴμούθης,
Πτανὸς καὶ Ἡφαίστου βουλαῖς, ἄλλοι τε
ὅσοι τῆς οὐρανοῦ θεωρίας πιστὴν ἀκριβείαν
ἔμελλον βουλομένης τῆς πάντων βασιλίδος
ἱστορήσαι προνοίας.

Tat was his successor, both his son
and recipient of these teachings, and
shortly after, Asclepius the Imouthes,
according to the wishes of Ptah and
Hephaistos, and then also others who,
when the queen of all things Pronoia
wished it so, were about to discover
the reliable truth of the heavenly
contemplation. (§ 6)

The links of the tradition thus consist of several personages known from other Hermetic treatises (Tat, Asclepius, Isis, Horus), whereas others are more seldom associated with Hermetism (Ptah-Hephaistos, Kamephis). What is passed on is not only sacred writings (ιεραὶ βίβλοι, § 8) or teachings (μαθήματα, § 6), but an experience; a contemplation (θεωρία).

The translation of *theōria* as contemplation must here be taken in a wider sense, comprising not only the sense of “doctrine,” as Festugière often has it, but also as a sort of “meditative seeing,” as in § 3 when it is put in a context of watching the heavenly representation of God,¹⁹ and again in

¹⁸ Isis as daughter or pupil of Hermes is known also from Isiac aretalogies, e.g. Kyme 3b. Cf. also Plut., *Is. Os.* 352a and 355f.

¹⁹ § 3: ἦν γὰρ ἄξιον θεωρίας ὁμοῦ καὶ ἀγωνίας ὄραν οὐρανοῦ κάλλος θεῶ καταφανταζόμενον. Karl Kerényi, *Religion of the Greeks and Romans* (trans. Christopher Holme; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962), 151–55, draws attention to *theōria* as witnessing divine spectacles in Greek

CH XIII, 21 where the verb is used to designate a mental contemplation.²⁰ The contemplation is also directly connected to the concept of *mystêrion*, demonstrated in a sequel of KK, namely SH XXV: "I also want to become a *mystês* of this *theôria*."²¹ *Theôria* is thus the preferred term over the more common *epopteia* of the mysteries, which in all of the Hermetica only occurs in the KK (*epoptês*, § 40 & 62; *epopteira*, § 42). Moreover, the term here refers to divine overseers of the cosmos, not of any beholding by the *mystês*. Eleusinian mystery vocabulary might however be alluded to in KK § 2, where the primacy of heaven over earth is compared to that of the Greater Mysteries over the Lesser ones.²² But these mysteries are not locative, tied to any one locale, like the Eleusinian ones; they are cosmic and they were given to mankind in primordial times. The heavenly quality of the mysteries is reiterated throughout, and it is apparently related to the ordered movement of the celestial bodies.²³ After having created the upper heavens, God separates the creation and "fills it with mysteries," putting the divine daughter of Physis, Heuresis or "Invention," as their governing principle.²⁴ The identity of Heuresis is obscure, perhaps willfully so, but it is tempting to see in the mother-daughter relationship of Physis and Heuresis a reflection of the Eleusinian Demeter and Korê. The former is of course regularly identified with Isis, and both are often called Heuretis.²⁵ Now, Heuretis means an inventor, whereas Heuresis is the invention, so Heuresis may thus allude to the Eleusinian Korê, also often identified with Isis,²⁶ or to the finding of Osiris, annually commemorated in the festival called Heuresis.²⁷ The only other mention of Heuresis is in § 29, where

religion (Plato, *Rep.* 327 b), contemplation of numbers (Philolaos, fr. 11 Diels), its connection with *nous* (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 10,7), and of heavenly lights (Menander, fr. 481 Boll).

²⁰ CH XIII, 21: Ἐν τῷ νῶ, ὦ πάτερ, ἃ θεωρῶ.

²¹ SH XXV, 1: βούλομαι οὖν καὶ τῆς θεωρίας ταύτης μύστης γενόμενος. In the same treatise, Isis is a *mystês* of immortal nature, § 4: μύστις δὲ ὡσπερ τῆς ἀθανάτου φύσεως αὐτῆς τυγχάνουσα καὶ ὠδευκῆα διὰ τοῦ πεδίου τῆς Ἀληθείας διεξελεύσομαι σοι τῶν ὄντων τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον. See below, p. 416n76, on § 11.

²² § 2: ἀνάγκη τοίνυν τοῖς κρείττοσι μυστηρίοις εἶκιν τὰ ἐλάσσονα.

²³ § 3 κινουμένων ἐν οὐρανῷ μυστηρίων; § 51: ἐφάνη μὲν οὐρανὸς ἄνω, συγκεκοσμημένος τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μυστηρίοις πάσι... ἔχαιρε δὲ ὁ θεὸς ὁρῶν ἤδη ἑαυτοῦ τὰ ἔργα κινούμενα.

²⁴ § 13: τῆ [Εὐρέσει] δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἐχαρίσατο εἶναι καὶ χαρισάμενος διέκρινε τὰ ἤδη γεγονότα καὶ ἐπλήρωσεν αὐτὰ μυστηρίων καὶ τῆ Εὐρέσει τούτων τὸ κατὰ τούτων ἐχαρίσατο ἡγεμονικόν.

²⁵ Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4:27n46; André-Jean Festugière, "À propos des aréalogies d'Isis," *HTR* 42 (1949): 209–34 at 228 f. Diodorus Siculus says the Egyptians called Isis φαρμάκων τε πολλῶν πρὸς ὑγίαιαν εὐρέτιν (*Hist.* 1.25; cf. also 1.27: ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ πρώτη καρπὸν ἀνθρώποις εὐρούσα, and *Kyme* 7: εὐρον). He also calls Demeter Heuretis in 5.76.

²⁶ Jackson, "Κόρη κόσμου," 121f.

²⁷ The *inventio Osiridis*. Cf. John Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch: De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), 452.

Hermes says that he never ceases to “be with her” (συνών), perhaps implying that the mental gifts he gives mankind are their children.²⁸ These gifts are tied to an astrological doctrine where he promises to help the ones in his zodiacal signs, whose natural energies are in harmony with the heavenly movement.²⁹ Thus, in § 5 we are told that no mortal seed may succeed in seeing god revealed, only souls being in sympathy with the heavenly mysteries.³⁰ And for this to be possible for future generations, the all-knowing Hermes must make provisions:

ὅς καὶ εἶδε τὰ σύμπαντα καὶ ἰδὼν κατενόησε καὶ κατανοήσας ἴσχυσε δηλώσαι τε καὶ δεῖξαι. καὶ γὰρ ἃ ἐνόησεν ἐχάραξε καὶ χαράξας ἔκρυψε, τὰ πλείστα σιγήσας ἀσφαλῶς ἢ λαλήσας, ἵνα ζητῆ ταῦτα πᾶς αἰὼν ὁ μεταγενέστερος κόσμου.

He saw the universe, and having seen he understood, and having understood he managed to reveal and show it. Thus, what he apprehended he engraved, and having engraved he hid it, and he kept a steadfast silence about most of it rather than speaking, so that every following epoch of the world might search for it. (§ 5)

As in the *Poimandres*, Hermes is here the first beholder of the secrets of the universe, and he both shows (*deixai*, probably referring to *ta deiknymena*) and then hides his insights, thus initiating the *traditio mystica*. The topos of the engraved stele is well known in Hermetic literature, and it is often connected with astrological lore; the ending of the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI 62,1–19)³¹ contains astrological instructions for the erection of a hieroglyphic stele, to be put in the sanctuary of Hermes

²⁸ This means that if Heuresis is to be identified with Isis, she is probably another Isis than the interlocutor of the treatise, who is a pupil of Hermes. The topos of several “versions” of gods is known in Hermetism; cf. *Ascl.* 37. Two further texts are informative on the relationship of Hermes and Heuresis: Diod. Sic. 1.16 attributes the *heuresis* of letters to him; and Plutarch (*Is. Os.* 352 a–b) says that Hermes is the *heurêtês* of letters and *mousikê*, and that Isis was the foremost of his Muses in Hermopolis, adding that she was also called Justice, and that she was wise and revealed the divine things to the true worshippers.

²⁹ § 29: τῶν ὑπὸ ζῳδίων τῶν ἐμῶν γινομένων ἀνθρώπων εἰσαεὶ τὸν θνητὸν βίον ὠφελήσω (ζῳδία γὰρ ἃ ἐμοὶ ἀνέθηκεν ὁ πατήρ καὶ δημιουργὸς ἔμφορὰ γέ καὶ νοερά) καὶ τότε πλεόν, ὅταν καὶ <ἡ> ἐπικειμένη αὐτοῖς τῶν ἀστέρων κίνησις σύμφωνον ἔχη τὴν ἐνὸς ἐκάστου φυσικὴν ἐνέργειαν. Cf. also the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI 62,15–19), where Hermes mentions the exaltation of his own planet; Mahé, *Hermès*, 1:129.

³⁰ § 5: οὐκ ἂν ἐπὶ θνητῆς σποράς ἐγεγόνει, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἦν οὐδέπω, ψυχῆς δὲ τὴν συμπάθειαν ἐχούσης τοῖς οὐρανοῦ μυστηρίαις. Cf. CH IV, 3: “For what reason, then, did god not share mind with all of them, my father?—He wanted it put between souls, my child, as a prize for them to contest.”

³¹ Mahé, *Hermès*, 1:85. Cf. idem, “Le sens et la composition du traité hermétique, ‘L’Ogdoadé et l’Enneade’, conservé dans le codex VI de Nag Hammadi,” *RSR* 48 (1974): 54–65 at 64, who sees the passage as “une affabulation familière à l’hermétisme.”

in Diospolis. External testimonia also attest to this Hermetic tradition, as in the fragments of (Ps.-)Manetho,³² Bolos of Mendes,³³ and in the Syriac letter of Pebechios to Oson, with its astrological steles of Hermes hidden in the Egyptian temples.³⁴ Although this is certainly a literary trope, this does not mean that it is without a parallel in historical reality; the so-called “Naos of the Decades,” where Thoth is the god presenting the decans, is a good example of astrological lore carved in stone and placed in an *adytum*.³⁵ Thus also in KK, when mankind wants to see “the beautiful mysteries of nature,”³⁶ they search in the inner sancta of the temples to observe the ordered movement of the heavens, and thus become initiated in the good.³⁷

Finally, the role of Isis and Osiris, the Egyptian mystery-deities *par excellence* of the period, is elucidated. This is done in a long passage (§§ 64–68) in answer to the question of Horus of how the earth has come to receive the heavenly effluences (ἀπόρροια), and the style is an aretalogy of Osiris and Isis reminiscent of the Isiac aretalogies, although the plural “it is they who . . .” (οὗτοι) has replaced the “I am . . .” (ἐγώ εἰμι) of the traditional form.³⁸

³² William G. Waddell, *Manetho* (LCL 350; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 209.

³³ Or Ps.-Democritus, who is told by Ostanès to search for his books (*bibloi*) in a temple in Memphis. The books turn out to be a single sentence hidden inside a stele, destined for an illustrious career in alchemical manuals: Ἡ φύσις τῆ φύσει τέρπεται, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν κρατεῖ. Cf. Marcellin Berthelot, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* (3 vols.; Paris: Georges Steinheil, 1887–1888), 1:43. The concept of *physis* as “occult properties” inherent in nature plays a significant role in both KK and *Ascl.* 37–38. See below.

³⁴ Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés: Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque* (2 vols.; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1938), 2:338: “Il leur a persuadé de lui révéler les mystères du sortilège du roi . . . et ils expliquèrent ce qui était écrit dans les steles sacerdotales d'Hermès . . . il les plaça dans l'endroit secret.” Cf. Festugière, *Révélation*, 1:319ff.

³⁵ Anne Sophie von Bomhard, *The Naos of the Decades* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, 2008), 46–47, 54f., 212f.

³⁶ § 44: τὸν ὄραν μέλλοντα τολμηρῶς τῆς φύσεως τὰ καλὰ μυστήρια.

³⁷ § 45–46: ἐπιζήτήσουσιν καὶ τίς ἐνδοτέρω τῶν ἱερῶν ἀδύτων φύσις ὑπάρχει. τὰ μέχρις ἄνω διώξουσι, παρατηρήσαι βουλόμενοι τίς οὐρανοῦ καθέστηκε κίνησις. . . τῷ τῆς ἀλυπίας ἀγαθῷ μνηθῶσι. Gasparro thinks *myeō* here is purely metaphorical (“La gnosi ermetica,” 45n3). In § 56, god is asked to initiate mankind from its savage state into peace (τοῦ βίου τὸ ἄγριον μύησον εἰρήνη), and to give them laws and oracles. Cf. André-Jean Festugière, “Le style de la ‘Korè Kosmou,’” *Vivre et Penser* 2 (1942): 15–57 at 49 for references.

³⁸ Cf. Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 3:cxlvii–cxlix.

οὔτοι τὸ περιέχον ὅτι δαιμόνων ἐπληρώθη παρὰ Ἑρμοῦ μαθόντες κρυπταῖς στήλαις ἐχάραξαν.

It is they who, having learned from Hermes that the atmosphere is full of demons, engraved it upon secret steles.

οὔτοι μόνοι τὰς κρυπτὰς νομοθεσίας τοῦ θεοῦ παρὰ Ἑρμοῦ μαθόντες τεχνῶν καὶ ἐπιστημῶν καὶ ἐπιτηδευμάτων ἀπάντων εἰσηγηταὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐγένοντο καὶ νομοθέται.

It is only they who, having learned the secret laws of god by Hermes, became lawgivers and authors of all crafts, sciences, and ways of life for mankind.

οὔτοι παρ' Ἑρμοῦ μαθόντες ὡς τὰ κάτω συμπαθεῖν τοῖς ἄνω ὑπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ διετάγη, τὰς προσκαθέτους τοῖς ἐν οὐρανῶ μυστηρίοις ἱεροποιίας ἀνέστησαν ἐν γῆ.

It is they who, having learned from Hermes how what is below was arranged in sympathy with what is above by the creator, established sacred rituals on earth connected to the *heavenly mysteries*.

οὔτοι τὸ φθόριμον τῶν σωμάτων ἐπιγνόντες τὸ ἐν ἅπασι τέλειον τῶν προφητῶν ἐτεχνάσαντο, ὡς μήποτε ὁ μέλλων θεοῖς προσάγειν χεῖρας προφήτης ἀγνοῇ τι τῶν ὄντων, ἵνα φιλοσοφία μὲν καὶ μαγεία ψυχὴν τρέφῃ, σῶζῃ δ' ὅταν τι πάσχη ἰατρικὴ σώμα.

It is they who, recognizing that the bodies are perishable, devised the perfection of the prophets in all regards, so that the prophet destined to lay his hands upon gods never should be ignorant of any of the beings, so that philosophy and magic³⁹ should nourish the soul, and medicine heal the body when anything ails it.

Isis and Osiris are thus not presented as the object of the mystical contemplation, rather they are a second order of gods who passed on the *traditio mystica* of Hermes; they instituted certain rites on earth as a way to bring heavenly effluences, that is, astrological influences, down to earth, thus ensuring the harmony between microcosm below and macrocosm above. These rites must make use of the sacred objects, “the sacred *symbola* of the cosmic signs,” that Hermes “deposited near the secrets of Osiris” (§ 7).⁴⁰ “Prophet” is the common Greek designation of the Egyptian High Priest of a temple, the Servant-of-God (*hm-ntr*), who is thus to be identified with

³⁹ For the confluence of magic and mystery terminology in the PGM, see Hans Dieter Betz, “Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Magika Hiera* (ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 244–59 at 249.

⁴⁰ § 7: πλῆσιον τῶν Ὀσίριδος κρυφίων ἀποθέσθαι τὰ ἱερά τῶν κοσμικῶν στοιχείων σύμβολα; Cf. Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 3:clv–clvi. I have translated *στοιχεῖα* here as “signs”; they may be alphabetical letters, zodiacal signs or elements of nature (LSJ s.v. *στοιχείον*). Cf. Diod. Sic. 1.20. Walter Scott, *Hermetica* (4 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924–1936), 3:489–93, believes it to refer to hieroglyphic letters, and that the *symbola* are thus in fact books of Hermes.

the “souls in sympathy with the heavenly mysteries” of § 5.⁴¹ Far from devaluing the *dromena* of empirical cult, as especially van Moorsel and Tröger would have it,⁴² our text clearly states that the rites (*hieropoia*) of Isis and Osiris on earth are in sympathy with the mysteries of heaven.

The heavenly mysteries then, although they are cosmic and therefore in a sense universal, were revealed and graven in stone by Hermes (§ 5), probably hidden with the *symbola* in the care of the Egyptian temples of Osiris (§ 7), who with Isis has instituted sacred rites connected to them (§ 68). The word *mystêria* itself does not refer to rituals; rather it designates the hidden underlying connections between earth and the movements of the heavenly bodies, which can only be experienced and grasped through contemplation (*theôria*) by souls in sympathy with this order.

To be initiated would then mean to gain the noetic faculty to perceive the unity of the All, as in the fragment from *Hermes' third book to Asclepius*, preserved in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria: “For it is not possible to present such mysteries to the uninitiated. But listen with your *nous*.”⁴³ The fragment goes on to emphasize the uniqueness and ubiquity of the noetic light. Further confirmation is found in CH V, aptly titled *That god is invisible and entirely visible*, that is, visible to the one with the ability to see. This discourse is delivered to Tat “lest you go uninitiated in the mysteries of the god who is greater than any name. You must understand how something that seems invisible to the multitude will become entirely visible to you.”⁴⁴ The manner in which this invisible god is perceived is, as in KK, connected with *theôria* and *nous*: “This god who is evident to the eyes may be contemplated in the mind.”⁴⁵ And of course, the visible cosmic phenomena which should be perceived noetically are especially the heavenly bodies, in particular the sun and the constellation of Ursa, probably Maior

⁴¹ Franz Cumont, *L'Égypte des astrologues* (Bruxelles: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Elisabeth, 1937), 121–23 and 164f., gives extensive sources to Egyptian prophets as astrologers, magicians, and philosophers, the latter word taken in the meaning of “docteur ès-sciences occultes” (p. 122). Note that also a fragment of Chaeremon has the prophets as practitioners of “true philosophy” (fr. 10: ἀλήθειαν φιλοσοφούν); Pieter W. van der Horst, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (EPRO 101; Leiden: Brill, 1984).

⁴² Neither pays much attention to the *Stobaei Hermetica*, and both read Hermes' rejection of sacrifice in *Ascl.* 41 out of context.

⁴³ FH 23 = Cyr. Alex., *c. Iul.* 1.556A: Οὐ γὰρ ἐφικτόν ἐστιν εἰς ἀμύητους τοιαῦτα μυστήρια παρέχεσθαι· ἀλλὰ τῷ νοῖ ἀκούσατε.

⁴⁴ CH V, 1: ὅπως μὴ ἀμύητος ἦς τοῦ κρείττονος θεοῦ ὀνόματος, σὺ δὲ νόει πῶς τὸ δοκοῦν τοῖς πολλοῖς ἀφανὲς φανερώτατόν σοι γενήσεται.

⁴⁵ § 10: ὁ τῷ νοῖ θεωρητός, οὗτος ὁ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ὄρατός· I modify Copenhaver's “be seen” for *theôrêtos* to “be contemplated.”

(§ 3–4). The moment in which the entirety of the cosmos is perceived, so that the invisible creator becomes visible through his creation, is a *visio beatifica*: “Oh, this is a most happy sight to see, my child, to have a vision of all these in a single instant, to see the motionless set in motion and the invisible made visible through the things that it makes!”⁴⁶

The Perfect Discourse, or, The Asclepius

Of the seven instances of *mysteria/mystêria* in the *Perfect Discourse*,⁴⁷ three are used in a similar way as in the KK: In § 19 the word is used in an admonition to silence before a cosmographical survey: “Longing for heaven’s favor, I begin by unfolding great things for you, and revealing divine mysteries.”⁴⁸ What follows is a hierarchy of intelligible and sensible gods, where we learn that the visible planetary gods have an intelligible “essence-principle” (οὐσιάρχης). As in KK the mysteries are also here related to heavenly phenomena; there is a hierarchical emanation of divinity from the intelligible, through the sensible heavenly realm, and down to the material realm, which is filled with demons ordered in troops under different gods. In § 32 the mystery again has to do with celestial visions:

Sed tibi, deus summe, gratias ago,
qui me uidentiae diuinitatis luminasti
lumine. Et uos, o Tat et Asclepi et
Hammon, intra secreta pectoris diuina
mysteria silentio tegite et taciturnitate
celate.

To you, supreme god, I give thanks
for enlightening me with the light by
which divinity can be seen. And you,
Tat and Asclepius and Hammon, hide
these divine mysteries among the
secrets of your heart and shield them
with silence.

It is unclear if the mysteries refer to the preceding or the following part, but the whole argument revolves around four intellects: that of god, that of eternity, that of the world, and that of man. Therefore, man only sees dimly what is in heaven as through a haze (*per caliginem*), as it is covered by the intellect of the world, but once he has seen, “the happiness of his

⁴⁶ § 5: ὦ θεᾶς ἐκείνης, τέκνον, εὐτυχιστάτης, ὑπὸ μίαν ῥοπήν πάντα ταῦτα θεάσασθαι, τὸν ἀκίνητον διακινούμενον, καὶ τὸν ἀφανῆ φαινόμενον δι’ ὧν ποιεῖ. Cf. Franz Cumont, “Le culte égyptien et le mysticisme de Plotin,” *Mon Piot* 25 (1921–1922): 77–92 at 79 and 91.

⁴⁷ Hereafter PD. I will use this title since two of the instances in the Coptic fragment have no parallels in the Latin translation.

⁴⁸ Magna tibi pando et diuina nudo mysteria, cuius rei initium facio exoptato fauore caelesti. I modify slightly Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 77 (“unfold and reveal” for pando et nudo, instead of “disclose and expose”).

awareness is vast.”⁴⁹ Once again, the word is used in relation to heavenly contemplation and the notion of sympathy between the upper and lower realms. In both of the above stated uses of the word *mysterium*, there is the notion of a *traditio mystica* from Hermes to his pupils. The command of silence recalls the mystery oaths of silence, while together with the mention of “secrets of the heart” it brings to mind the Hermetic contemplation with the eyes of the heart (e.g., CH VII, 1–2) and the silence which precedes vision (e.g., CH XIII, 8; NHC VI 56,12).

In § 37, the mysteries are grounded in a cultic context. The passage deals with earthly gods, who are gods made by men in their image, that is, statues:

Quoniam ergo proavi nostri multum errabant circa deorum rationem increduli et non animaduertentes ad cultum religionemque diuinam, inuenerunt artem qua efficerent deos. Cui inuentae adiunxerunt *uirtutem de mundi natura conuenientem* eamque miscentes, quoniam animas facere non poterant, euocantes animas daemonum uel angelorum eas indiderunt imaginibus *sanctis diuinisque mysteriis*, per quas idola et bene faciendi et male uires habere potuissent.

Our ancestors once erred gravely on the theory of divinity; they were unbelieving and inattentive to worship and reverence. But then they discovered the art of making gods. To their discovery they added a *conformable power arising from the nature of matter*. Because they could not make souls, they mixed this power in and called up the souls of demons and angels and implanted them in likenesses through *holy and divine mysteries*, whence the idols could have the power to do good and evil.

At first glance, this would seem to have little to do with the celestial realm, but the mention of a “conformable power arising from the nature of matter” brings us to *terra firma*, so to speak. The power conforms to heaven; the quality abiding in these statues, as we are told in § 38, derives from the fact that they are made from ingredients—herbs, stones, and spices—that contain a “natural power of divinity,” and the demons or angels are enticed to indwell in the statues through “constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven’s harmony,” thus ensuring the heavenly ingredient “constant communication with heaven.”⁵⁰ The

⁴⁹ Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4:342 (§ 32): *latissima uero, cum uiderit, felicitate conscientiae.*

⁵⁰ § 38: *diuinitatis naturalem uim . . . sacrificiis frequentibus . . . hymnis et laudibus et dulcissimis sonis in modum caelestis harmoniae concinentibus ut illud, quod caeleste est, caelesti usu et frequentatione inlectum in idola possit laetum.* Cf. Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:244, who points out the use of this in magical practice, and how Iamblichus (*Myst.* 5.23) uses

statues of the temples of Egypt thus assure that there is a divine presence in the lower world, and the famous prediction of § 24–27, where the gods leave Egypt and the world is destroyed and rejuvenated, is a result of the decline of proper worship. As in the KK, Isis and Osiris are mentioned as important earthly gods, together with the apotheosized ancestors of Hermes and Asclepius. However, whereas KK mentions rites in sympathy with the heavenly mysteries, “mysteries” seem here to be the very appellation of the rites with which to implant the conjured angels and demons in statues.

Another instance of a *mystêrion* in the PD is only preserved in the Coptic fragment. It concerns the manifold punishments of the impious by horrible demons in mid-heaven. Hermes tells his disciples: “But do not compare what happens here with what happens in the other place. Now I would like to speak to you mysteriously; no part of it will be believed.”⁵¹ Mahé translates here “as a mystery,” and adds that the essence of the mystery is that the torture of the impious ones is beyond human belief.⁵² This corresponds poorly to the heavenly mysteries we have seen thus far. Indeed, the point in this passage is that what is above is not like what is below; the punishment of the impious *there* is unlike the punishment of criminals *here*. But this is not a mystery; instead the passage should be read adverbially in the Coptic, as “mysteriously,”⁵³ which rather modifies Hermes’ mode of talking. That is, what he says won’t be believed by the ignorant ones, those who are not initiated.⁵⁴ The topic that the Hermetic

sympathetic correspondences of material objects in his theurgical practice. Festugière (Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 2:396n326) translates *diuinitatis naturalem uim* by “une vertu occulte d’efficacité divine,” and believes the Greek correlate to be θεϊότητος φυσικὴν δύναμιν/ἐνέργειαν. In this context, φυσικός means an occult property, cf. Festugière, *Révélation*, 1:197n1. Cf. also SH XXIII, 45: “Humans will dig up the roots of plants and examine the qualities of their juices. They will observe the nature of rocks.” (ρίζας φυτῶν ἀνασκάψουσιν ἀνθρώποι καὶ ποιότητας ἐξετάσουσι χυλῶν. λίθων φύσεις ἐπισκοπήσουσι) The Hermetic *Cyranides* is a manual for practical uses of the hidden forces in nature; cf. Maryse Waegeman, *Amulet and Alphabet* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1987), 7.

⁵¹ NHC VI 78,20–24: να πῆιμα δε μῆ να πκεμα μῆρτῆτῶνου ενεγερ[η]ογ: τῶγωω δε εχω νακ μῆπειωαδε ἔν ογμγστηριον παντωσ σενατῆρῶγτῆ αν.

⁵² Mahé, *Hermès*, 2:206 and 269: “comme un mystère”.

⁵³ The construction ἔν ογ- is adverbial; cf. Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), § 221.

⁵⁴ The Greek should probably be rendered μυστηριωδῶς; Cf. Einar Thomassen, “Gos. Philip 67:27–30: Not ‘in a mystery,’” in *Coptica–Gnostica–Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; BCNH.É 7; Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval/Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2006), 925–39 at 929, who offers a parallel in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.3.1, where the Saviour is said to indicate his parables μυστηριωδῶς, which only those capable of *gnosis* can understand.

truths can only be understood by those capable of gnosis is recurrent in our treatises, and also in other mystery-related passages. Thus in *Ascl.* 21, to be considered shortly, the mystery of intercourse is not understood by the multitude, and in CH XIV Hermes promises to give the advanced student Asclepius a “more mystical interpretation”⁵⁵ of a summary given to Tat. Indeed, the exclusivist attitude toward those who are uninitiated and thus ignorant pervades the whole treatise right from the start. When the disciples are convening in the sanctuary, Hermes tells Asclepius:

Nulla invidia Hammona prohibet a nobis; etenim ad eius nomen multa meminimus a nobis esse conscripta, sicuti etiam ad Tat amantissimum et carissimum filium multa physica exoticaque quam plurima. Tractatum hunc autem tuo scribam nomine. Praeter Hammona nullum uocassis alium, ne tantae rei religiosissimus sermo multorum interuentu praesentiaque uiolentur. Tractatum enim tota numinis maiestate plenissimum inreligiosae mentis est multorum conscientia publicare.

No jealousy keeps Hammon from us; indeed, we recall having written many things in his name, as we have also written so much on physical and popular topics for Tat, our dearest and most loving son. But this treatise I shall write in your name. Call no one but Hammon lest the presence and interference of the many profane this most reverent discourse on so great a subject, for the mind is irreverent that would make public, by the awareness of the many, a treatise so very full of the majesty of divinity.

Clearly we have in this literary framework a reminiscence of the oath of silence in the mysteries, thus creating the impression of a holy book that has somehow come to be published.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the text reflects the different stages of initiation of the pupils of Hermes; Hammon is the last to be called in, and is to be considered a neophyte. In CH XVI he is in turn instructed by Asclepius, who is the most advanced student of Hermes (CH XIV, 1). Tat is the son of Hermes, but younger and less advanced than Asclepius, and has *multa physica exoticaque* written in his name. This is an intertextual reference to the *traditio* of lectures, supposed to be given at varying stages of spiritual progress. The usual denominations for them

⁵⁵ CH XIV, 1: μυστικώτερον αὐτὰ ἐρμηνεύσας.

⁵⁶ In CH XIII, 22 also, Hermes is worried that the *paradosis* of the rebirth should be revealed to anyone, which would make him and Tat divulgers, *diaboloï*, of cult secrets. On secrecy being essential for sacred books, cf. Albert Henrichs, “‘Hieroi Logoi’ and ‘Hierai Bibloi’: The (Un)Written Margins of the Sacred in Ancient Greece,” *HSCP* 101 (2003): 207–66. The concern for legitimacy in the handing down of such books can be seen by the decree of Ptolemy, probably IV Philopator, demanding that all who perform initiatory rites of Dionysos in Egypt travel to Alexandria to give an account of their *Hieros Logos* and a genealogy of initiations three generations back (p. 228).

are *genikoi* and *diexodikoi*, that is, general and detailed lectures, and the *exotica* should perhaps be identified with the latter.⁵⁷ Perhaps the *physica* refers to alchemical or iatromathematical writings, like Bolos of Mendes' *Physika kai mystika*, thus including the study of technical Hermetica in the Way of Hermes.

The Hermetic Mystery of Intercourse

The remaining three uses of *mysteria* in the PD all occur in § 21, where also the Coptic fragment begins, and they deal with the androgyny of god and a “mystery of intercourse,” which warrants to be treated at some length. The first passage regards the procreation given by god to the world, and reads:

Hoc ergo omni uero uerius manifestius-
que mente percipito, quod ex domino
illo totius naturae deo hoc sit cunctis
in aeternum procreandi inuentum
tributumque mysterium, cui summa
caritas, laetitia, hilaritas, cupiditas
amorque diuinus innatus est.

Grasp this in your mind as truer and
plainer than anything else: that god, this
master of the whole of nature, devised
and granted to all things this mystery
of procreation unto eternity, in which
arose the greatest affection, pleasure,
gaiety, desire and love divine.

The “mystery of procreation unto eternity” must refer to the immediately preceding statement, that both sexes in all things are full of fecundity and that their union is incomprehensible, but could be called either Cupid or Venus.⁵⁸ This is further developed in the following passage, where our Coptic fragment starts off. We will follow the Coptic, since it is closer to the lost Greek original:⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 2:357n9 suggests *exôt(er)ikoi*; Festugière, *Révélation*, 2:39f. for more references.

⁵⁸ Procreatione enim uterque plenus est sexus et eius utriusque conexio aut, quod est uerius, unitas incomprehensibilis est, quem siue Cupidinem siue Venerem siue utrumque recte poteris nuncupare. Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:145, points out a parallel in Clement Alexandrinus, *Strom.* 3.27: “Those who call Licentious Aphrodite a mystical communion insult the latter name. . . . The wretches make a religion (ἱεροφάντοῦσι) out of physical union and sexual intercourse, and think that this will lead them into the kingdom of God.” Cf. also Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 234, who refers to PGM XXXVI. 305–6 which has “mystery rite of Aphrodite” as a euphemism for sex in a love spell. He also points out Epiphanius' reference to Phibionite ritual sex (*Pan.* 26.9.6–7), as well as Eph 5:32–33 on the “great mystery” of the unification of the flesh of male and female, which refers to Christ and the Church. In addition, see Heliod., *Aith.* 17 where a young paramour has “only recently begun his initiation into the mysteries of Aphrodite.”

⁵⁹ Mahé, *Hermès*, 2:51–52.

εωδε κουωω δε εναγ εφωβ
 ηπειμυστηριον· αγω οικων ηωπηρε
 ηγναγ ερος ητετςγνογσια εωααωωπε
 εβολ ηιτη φοογτ ην τςριμε· ροταν
 σε εωωανει ετακμε ωααωωωε εβολ
 ησι πεσπερμα· ητεγνογ ετμμαγ
 ωαρετςριμε χι ητσωμ ηφοογτ·
 φοογτ ρωωω ωααχι ητσωμ ητςριμε
 ερω· ρωω ερεπισπερμα ρεπεργει ηπαι·
 ετβε παι ημυστηριον ητςγνογσια
 εγειρε ημοω ην ογρωπ χεκααα
 ενετσωειω ηφγςις ρααχμημονι ηναρην
 ραρ εγχοητ αν ηφωβ ετμμαγ· πογα
 γαρ πογα ημοω ητ ηπεαχπο· νετε
 γαρ ηνατσωογν ηηρωω εωδε ωωοω
 ηναρραγ⁶⁰ ησωβε αγω ηνατναρτε·
 ηρωο δε ρενημυστηριον εγωααβ νε
 ητε ηλογος ην ηρβηγε· ογ μονον δε
 εγτησωτη αλλα ησεναγ·

And if you wish to see the enactment of this mystery, then consider the marvelous image of the intercourse that takes place between the male and the female. For when the semen reaches the climax, it leaps forth. In that moment the female receives the strength of the male; the male for his part receives the strength of the female,⁶¹ for this is what the semen effectuates. Therefore the mystery of intercourse is performed in secret, in order that the two sexes might not disgrace themselves in front of the many who do not experience this reality. For each one of them (the sexes) yields its offspring. For if it happens in the presence of those who do not understand the reality, (it is) laughable and unbelievable. And, moreover, they are holy mysteries of both words and deeds, because not only are they not heard but also they are not seen.⁶²

According to Arthur Darby Nock, the word *mysterium* here merely denotes “a secret act, with a nuance of solemnity,” and has no sacramental value as Walter Scott suggested.⁶³ However, Nock did not have access to our Coptic fragment, which goes further than the Latin did, and describes the *synousia* as “holy mysteries of words and deeds,” neither seen nor heard by the ignorant. Thus, Mahé claims that the term “mystery” denotes more than Nock would admit: Firstly, the *synousia* is called a mystery because it needs to be kept secret from the multitude, secondly, because it has a symbolic meaning pointing to something divine.⁶⁴ He likens this sense of the term “mystery” to the mystery of marriage in the *Gospel of Philip*

⁶⁰ Mahé inserts <αε> here.

⁶¹ Interestingly, the Latin version has *uirtutem feminae marum adipiscuntur et mares femineo torpore lassescunt*. See below.

⁶² NHC VI 65,15–38; trans. Peter A. Dirkse and Douglas M. Parrot, “Asclepius 21–29,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI, with Papyrus Berlinensis 8502, 1 and 4* (ed. Douglas M. Parrot; NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 401–03, with small adjustments.

⁶³ Arthur Darby Nock, “A New Edition of the Hermetic Writings,” *JEA* 11 (1925): 126–37 at 135; Scott, *Hermetica*, 3:145.

⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Le sens des symboles sexuels dans quelques textes Hermétiques et gnostiques” in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (ed. Jacques-É. Ménard; NHS 7; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 123–45 at 130.

(NHC II,3), but concludes that there are important differences because in our text there are no direct allusions to ritual practices of the mysteries, and because our text is anti-gnostic and monistic.⁶⁵ He further identifies two separate views on sexuality within Hermetism, a positive one, representing a “philosophical” current of Hermetism, and a negative one, representing a “Gnostic” current, hostile to the world and the body.⁶⁶ Of these two, the former is in his view the closest to the traditional Egyptian religion, and may be anterior to the latter.⁶⁷ Mahé later modifies his view, and sees the two currents as being stages of one coherent “Way of Hermes,” in which the monistic doctrine is for beginners, whereas more advanced students reject the body and follow the dualistic doctrines: “I am inclined to assume that, once perfection has been reached by means of Hermetic initiation, sexuality is somehow overcome or superseded. Instead of being exterior, it becomes purely interior.”⁶⁸

Later, Richard Valantasis saw the mystery of intercourse as a metaphor, “the sexual encoding of religious formation,”⁶⁹ codifying an all-male initiation in sexual terms since he claims that the reciprocal exchange of power between male and female is impossible according to ancient medical theory.⁷⁰ Roelof van den Broek follows Mahé’s early division of two views on sexuality in Hermetism, a negative one found primarily in the *Poimandres* (CH I) and a positive one in the PD, where he emphasizes that the mystery of intercourse has “a religious and even esoteric meaning,” “with sacred and secret words of love and a sacred and secret act.”⁷¹

Of the three instances of *mystêrion* in the relevant passage, the first deals with intercourse as an image which can be seen, given the correct

⁶⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁶ This corresponds to the division posited by amongst others Walter Bousset and André-Jean Festugière between a dualistic and a monistic current.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁸ Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Gnostic and Hermetic ethics,” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff; New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 21–36 at 26.

⁶⁹ Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism* (HDR 27; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 63–104.

⁷⁰ Valantasis doesn’t take the two-semen theory into consideration, however. Cf. the Armenian DH 10.1: “What is a female? A receptive fluidity. What is a male? A seminal fluidity.”

⁷¹ Roelof van den Broek, “Sexuality and Sexual Symbolism in Hermetic and Gnostic Thought and Practice (Second-Fourth Centuries),” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal; SWE 7; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 19 and 10.

inner state,⁷² as the enactment or reality⁷³ of a mystery. This would correspond to the most common sense of *mystêrion* in our other Hermetica, namely as a hidden reality that can be contemplated. Mahé sees the image as referring to the creative power of the androgynous god discussed in § 20⁷⁴ and van den Broek adds that it could also be an image of the primal androgyny of humankind,⁷⁵ supported by CH I, 16 which also describes the primal act of lovemaking as a mystery:

Τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ κεκρυμμένον μυστήριον μέχρι τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας. ἡ γὰρ φύσις ἐπιμιγείσα τῷ Ἀνθρώπῳ ἦνεγκέ τι θαύμα θαυμασιώτατον· ἔχοντος γὰρ αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀρμονίας τῶν ἑπτὰ τὴν φύσιν, οὗς ἔφην σοι ἐκ πυρός καὶ πνεύματος, οὐκ ἀνέμενεν ἡ φύσις, ἀλλ' εὐθὺς ἀπεκύησεν ἑπτὰ ἀνθρώπους, πρὸς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἑπτὰ διοικητόρων, ἀρρενοθήλεας καὶ μεταρσίους.

This is the mystery that has been kept hidden until this very day. When nature made love with the man, she bore a wonder most wondrous. In him he had the nature of the cosmic framework of the seven, who are made of fire and spirit, as I told you, and without delay nature at once gave birth to seven men, androgyne and exalted, whose natures were like those of the seven governors

Heavenly man, who is an image both of the first God and the demiurgic *nous* thus brings fire and spirit to the mix, whereas female nature supplies earth and water (CH I, 17). The image evoked by intercourse is therefore not only that of the first God, but also of the second God, Cosmos, which consists of a heavenly male demiurge and an earthly female nature. Their union is accomplished by spirit, which thus plays the role of a cosmic *sperma*. This cosmic framework is again described as a mystery in SH XXV, 11: "Pay attention, child, for you are listening to ineffable mysteries of earth, of heaven, and of all of the sacred intermediary spirit."⁷⁶

The last two instances of the word deal with the secret performance of the mystery, and the hidden quality of its words and deeds. First of all, we should consider the question if the mystery of intercourse in the PD refers to a sacramental ritual, or is simply a metaphor. Despite the polemics of heresiologues against libertine sects such as the Perates, there can be no talk here of a ritualised sex act in a communal setting like a mystery

⁷² The slightly different Latin version adds: *ex sui contemplatione unicuique ex intimo sensu*. "Sensus" is the preferred term in *Ascl.* for *nous*.

⁷³ Translating ρωβ. The Latin has "uis atque necessitas."

⁷⁴ Mahé, "Le sens des symboles sexuels," 131–33; Mahé, *Hermès*, 2:212.

⁷⁵ Van den Broek, "Sexuality and Sexual Symbolism," 10.

⁷⁶ SH XXV, 11: πρόσσεχε, παῖ, ἀροήτων γὰρ ἐπακούεις μυστηρίων γῆς τε καὶ οὐρανοῦ καὶ παντὸς τοῦ μέσου ἱεροῦ πνεύματος·

cult. The text clearly states that the intercourse takes place hidden from anyone who does not experience the reality of the act, that is, anyone but the male and female involved. An argument against a purely metaphorical reading is, as we have seen, that the Coptic version adds that “they are holy mysteries of words and actions, for not only can they not be heard, but neither can they be seen.” (NHC VI 65,34–38) This sentence emphasises the hidden character of the mystery, but it might also be an allusion to the *legomena* (words) and *dromena* (actions) of mystery vocabulary.⁷⁷ That intercourse should consist of actions is not surprising, but what would be the words uttered? Given the prominence of Hermes in the magical papyri, so full of erotic spells,⁷⁸ one can of course not entirely discount that these *logoi* are magical invocations, meant to bring about union with or visions of the divine. However, a more likely explanation is that it relates to those ignorant of the mystery of intercourse. These people can not understand the divine reality of intercourse, neither by seeing the action (ϺΩΒ . . . ΝΑΥ), nor by hearing the explanation (ΛΟΓΟΣ . . . ΣΩΤῼ), for their minds are obscured by the passions of matter. They are further derided as “blasphemers, atheistic and impious,” since they see intercourse as “laughable and unbelievable.”⁷⁹ Therefore it must be performed in secrecy, since the presence of the ignorant multitude would disgrace the sacred union, a theme that reoccurs elsewhere in the treatise.⁸⁰ Only those possessing *gnōsis* and *epistēmē*, the topic discussed in the subsequent passage (NHC VI 66,5–68,20), are able to understand the divine image represented by intercourse. Thus, a “holy mystery of words and actions” means that neither *logos* nor the act itself can sufficiently explain the higher reality, only point the way.⁸¹ This limitation of the *logos* is elaborated in CH IX, 10: “*Logos* does not get to the truth, but *nous* is powerful, and, when it has been guided by *logos* up to a point, it has the means to get <as far as>

⁷⁷ Dirkse and Parrot, “Asclepius 21–29,” 402.

⁷⁸ E.g. PGM IV. 94–153; VIII. 1–63; cf. Festugière, *Révélation*, 1:290.

⁷⁹ NHC VI 65,33–34 (ΣΩΒΕ, ΑΤΝΑΖΤΕ), and 66,1–2 (ΡΕΧΧΕ, ΑΤΝΟΥΤΕ, ΔΣΕΒΗΣ).

⁸⁰ E.g. NHC VI 68,16–20 = *Ascl.* 23, and *Ascl.* 1. Also, NHC VI 78,22–24 on an explanation stated mysteriously (ϺΝ ΟΥΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ), since it is incredible (ΣΕΝΑΤῼϺΟΥΤῼ), see above.

⁸¹ Mahé, “Le sens des symboles sexuels,” 129–30: “les réalités physiques de la procréation constituent vraiment un mystère sacré, non seulement parce que les époux ne s'exposent pas en public, mais parce que leur acte même a une signification symbolique qui tend à dévoiler quelque chose de divin.” Similarly, Thomassen, “Not ‘in a mystery,’” 927, à propos *Gos. Phil.*, gives a description which is also apt for our text: “The ‘mysteriousness’ of these acts consists in their symbolic significance—they are types and images of a higher reality.”

the truth.”⁸² Consequently, the mystery of intercourse seems not to be accompanied by ritual gestures or exclamations, but is rather a union of two partners who possess the prerequisite mental faculties to grasp the “marvellous image.” The Hermetists would probably claim that their intercourse was different from that of most people in that it was free of carnal passions, and thus more similar to the creative work of god, who takes no pleasure in his begetting.⁸³ Also, according to ancient obstetric lore a child would bear the features of whomever the women thought of during conception, so presumably focusing on the “marvellous image” of the androgynous god or primal man would produce superior children.⁸⁴ If this is a correct interpretation, it would mean that also women must have had access to the Way of Hermes, which is most often thought of as an exclusively male phenomenon. There are indeed some indications that there were women Hermetists; as we have seen, Isis is often presented as the pupil of Hermes and teacher of Horus; Zosimus writes to one Theosebeia, and encourages her to “hasten towards Poimenandres (sic);”⁸⁵ and Hypatia’s father, Theon, was said to be a commentator of Hermes.⁸⁶

Our Coptic fragment thus makes male and female equal partners in the mystery of intercourse, whereas the dominant medical theories of the time would subordinate the female: The male was commonly seen to be the active sower, whereas the female was thought of as a passive vessel, ready to receive the offspring. Indeed, the Latin translation of the exchange of power seems to correct this discrepancy of the PD with the normative view: “Finally at that moment from the common coupling females gain the potency of males and *males are exhausted with the lethargy of females*.”⁸⁷ The sexual act is here no longer reciprocal, but instead the male yields his *virtus* to the passive female partner, who in turn infects

⁸² CH IX, 10: ὁ γὰρ λόγος οὐ φθάνει μέχρι τῆς ἀληθείας, ὁ δὲ νοῦς μέγας ἐστὶ καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου μέχρι τινὸς ὀδηγηθεὶς φθάνειν ἔχει <ἔως> τῆς ἀληθείας.

⁸³ CH XI, 14: ἐκεῖνος ἄρ’ οὐχ ἤδεται

⁸⁴ Ingvild S. Gilhus, “Sacred Marriage and Spiritual Knowledge: Relations between Carnality and Salvation in the Apocryphon of John,” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 487–510 at 499; April D. DeConick, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the *Gospel of Philip*,” *VC* 55 (2001): 225–61 at 251, believes that the Hermetic mystery of intercourse is “the supreme meditative moment when the divine Mind within each sexual partner unites with the other.”

⁸⁵ Zosimus of Panopolis, *fr. Gr.* 245, quoted from Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 33.

⁸⁶ Jay Bregman, “Synesius, the Hermetica and Gnosis,” in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (ed. Richard T. Wallis; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 95 n. 3.

⁸⁷ *Ascl.* 21: denique eo tempore ex commixtione communi et uirtutem feminae marum adipiscuntur et mares femineo torpore lassescunt. My emphasis.

him with her feminine *torpor*. Since it has been established that the Coptic version is closer to the Greek original than the Latin one, and since the Latin text still contains traces of the original reciprocal relationship,⁸⁸ it seems that the Latin translator has corrected what seemed to him to be an impropriety.

Mystery, Secrecy, and the Way of Hermes

The final instance of *mystêrion* in the Hermetic corpus, also here connected with the motif of egyptosophy,⁸⁹ is to be found in the oft-cited preamble to the *Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon* (CH XVI, 2):

τὸν λόγον διατήρησον ἀνερμύνηυτον, ἵνα μῆτε εἰς Ἑλληνας ἔλθῃ τοιαῦτα μυστήρια, μῆτε ἢ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὑπερήφανος φράσις καὶ ἐκλελυμένη καὶ ὡσπερ κεκαλλωπισμένη ἐξίτηλον ποιήσῃ τὸ σεμνὸν καὶ στιβαρὸν, καὶ τὴν ἐνεργητικὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων φράσιν.

Keep the discourse uninterpreted, lest mysteries of such greatness come to the Greeks, lest the extravagant, flaccid and (as it were) dandified Greek idiom extinguish something stately and concise, the energetic idiom of <Egyptian> usage.

The statement is surprising, and raises the question of how a sympathetic reader in antiquity would react to such a *caveat lector*, perhaps concluding that the following account is necessarily hopelessly garbled from its (non-existent) Egyptian original. The main body of the treatise thus designated as mysteries deals with astral emanations, similar to the mysteries of KK, and strongly emphasizes the demiurgical role of the sun. Presumably, the interpretative strategy must also rest in the notion of mystery: The Egyptian language has an inherent occult property which unites signifier and signified; the *logoi* keep their *nous* hidden (κεκρυμμένον, CH XVI, 1), and this makes them efficacious in themselves. This indwelling power reminds us of the similarly inherent astral sympathies of sacred items in both KK and PD. As in the preamble of the *Asclepius* (above), there is a concern that the publication of these sacred words will deprive them of their power and venerability, creating the impression that the following treatise is reserved for the initiated few.

⁸⁸ *Ascl.* 21: *utraque in utramque fundat natura progeniem.*

⁸⁹ This is a concept introduced by Erik Hornung, to designate the motif of Egypt as the repository of hidden wisdom; Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

As Erik Iversen has aptly put it, “the mysterious symbolic qualities with which Greek ignorance of their true character endowed the hieroglyphs, became, therefore, their main charm and attraction.”⁹⁰ A symbolic understanding of hieroglyphs among the Greeks was quite widespread, exemplified by how Plotinus uses the motif to illustrate the insufficiency of discursive reasoning to understand the intellectual realm, and Iamblichus’ notion of Egyptian *mystâgogia* in symbols.⁹¹ A ritual initiatory use of hieroglyphs is attested by Apuleius, who has his hero Lucius tell of an old priest of Isis, after having conducted the morning services at the Iseum in Corinth:

De opertis adyti profert quosdam libros litteris ignorabilibus praenotatos, partim figuris cuiusce modi animalium concepti sermonis compendiosa verba suggerentes, partim nodosis et in modum rotae tortuosis capreolatimque condensis apicibus a curiositate profanorum lectione munita. Indidem mihi praedicat, quae forent ad usum teletae necessario praeparanda.

He brought out from the hidden quarters of the shrine certain books in which the writing was in undecipherable letters. Some of them conveyed, through forms of all kinds of animals, abridged expressions of traditional sayings; others barred the possibility of being read from the curiosity of the profane, in that their extremities were knotted and curved like wheels or closely intertwined like vine-tendrils. From these writings he indicated to me the preparations necessary for the rite of initiation.⁹²

Again, the allegorical conciseness of Egyptian writing and the shape of the letters make them hard to understand and thus suitable to keep away the gaze of the profane. Since our source here is a novel, its historical veracity should not be overstated. The general scenario, however, is believable, since the phenomenon of Egyptian priests wielding sacred books is widely attested.⁹³ Moreover, the scenario of books containing abridged sayings reminds one of the thesis of Mahé, that the humble beginnings of the philosophical Hermetica is to be found in collections of *gnomai* akin to the Armenian *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*.⁹⁴ These are to be elaborated by the teacher, like the above-mentioned priest does (*praedicat*), and like Hermes in CH XIV, 1, who gives “the most important

⁹⁰ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1961), 45.

⁹¹ Plot., *Enn.* 5.8.6; Iamb., *Myst.* 7.1.

⁹² *Metam.* 11.22; transl. John Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (EPRO 39; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 97.

⁹³ Cf. Henrichs, “Hieroi Logoi,” 225ff.

⁹⁴ Mahé, *Hermès*, 2:407–36.

summaries... more mysterious interpretations.”⁹⁵ The loss of meaning which occurs when translating the sacred books of the Egyptians into Greek, as seen in CH XVI, 1–2, is thus a way to keep the appearance of possessing an inviolate secret while divulging it only piecemeal. Full understanding demands initiation and potential *mystai* must thus seek out a master: “Seek a guide to take you by the hand and lead you to the portals of knowledge” (CH VII, 2). The hopeful initiate thus embarks on a route: “Only one road travels from here to the beautiful—reverence combined with knowledge” (CH VI, 5). That is, the Way of Hermes.

In closing, we should like to sum up the general sense of *mystêrion* in our treatises, and its place in the Way of Hermes. First, one should note the importance of becoming a *mystês*.⁹⁶ It is unclear what this initiation consists of, but it obviously confers on the candidate the ability to contemplate the mysteries, that is, the hidden reality or forces underlying the cosmic, phenomenal world. All people can perceive the outer appearance of the phenomena, but only those who have the requisite mental faculties can contemplate their inner essence; the uninitiated simply do not understand.⁹⁷ The heavens are the prime example: Everyone can of course perceive the stars on a clear night, but only those who are initiated can properly contemplate their regular course, see their true essence, and thus catch a glimpse of their creator.⁹⁸ This is not only a contemplative practice; the practical use of the knowledge of essences is that one can draw angels and demons into statues,⁹⁹ one can know which astral energies inhabit stones and plants,¹⁰⁰ to be used in astrological medicine and magic, and one can utilize the magic power indwelling in the Egyptian words,¹⁰¹ as in the Egyptian magical papyri. The most important essence, however, is that of man himself. Thus, those who know themselves know that they are an image of the cosmos, which is an image of god, and they can experience their own likeness to the androgynous god during a sexual intercourse which is undisturbed by material passions and vulgar onlookers.¹⁰² Such a passionless intercourse leads to an exchange of power between the partners.

⁹⁵ CH XIV, 1: τὰ κυριώτατα κεφάλαια... μυστικώτερον αὐτὰ ἐρμηνεύσας.

⁹⁶ CH V, 1; SH XXV, 1 and 4; FH 23 (SH XXIII, 46 and 56 seem to be metaphorical).

⁹⁷ CH XIV, 1; NHC VI 78,20.

⁹⁸ SH XXIII, 2, 3, 5, 13, 51 and 68; SH XXV, 11; *Ascl.* 19 and 32.

⁹⁹ *Ascl.* 37.

¹⁰⁰ SH XXIII, 44; *Ascl.* 38.

¹⁰¹ CH XVI, 1.

¹⁰² CH I, 16; *Ascl.* 21= NHC VI 65,15–38.

Most of the passages mentioning mysteries are thus more concerned with the hidden forces residing within the cosmos than with hypercosmic realities.¹⁰³ This could be the reason that neither the initiatory *On the Rebirth* (CH XIII) nor the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NHC VI,6) mentions any mystery. If the mysteries are concerned with hidden cosmic forces, these initiatory treatises make the candidate exclaim: “I see the universe and I see myself in mind” (CH XIII, 13).¹⁰⁴ “I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning” (NHC VI 58,10–13).¹⁰⁵ At this stage the divine does not need to present itself as a mystery, but is directly accessible.

However, the Hermetist is not expected to remain in these lofty noetic realms forever, but after the transfiguring ascent needs to return to the “happier place of middle status”¹⁰⁶ of humankind. Therefore, the view that practices of the lower stages of the way should eventually be superseded, as Fowden claims for traditional cult and Mahé for sexual practice, can not be maintained. Sufficient proof of this should be that in the *Discourse of the Eighth and the Ninth*, just after Tat has achieved divinity, Hermes asks him to go to his temple in Diospolis and write down the discourse on a hieroglyphic stele. This should be set up at a specific astrological conjunction, and has a protective curse put on it, conjuring amongst others the seven *ousiarchs* of heaven who also appear in *Ascl.* 19 in connection with the heavenly mysteries.¹⁰⁷ The books should thereafter only be accessible to those who “going step by step arrive onto the way of immortality.”¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰³ The exception is FH 23, dealing with the intellectual light (φῶς νοερὸν), which however “always embraces all things with its intellect and light and spirit.” (ἀεὶ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ νοῖ καὶ φωτὶ καὶ πνεύματι πάντα περιέχει.)

¹⁰⁴ CH XIII, 13: τὸ πᾶν ὁρῶ καὶ ἑμαυτὸν ἐν τῷ νοῖ.

¹⁰⁵ NHC VI 58,10–13: ἀνοκ δεισῶν τάρχη ντ.Δ.γ.ν.δ.μ.ι.ς ἐτ.ῤ.ι.χ.ν̄ ν.Δ.γ.ν.δ.μ.ι.ς τηροῦ τέτε μ̄ν̄τ.ε.ς δ.ρ.χ.η.

¹⁰⁶ *Ascl.* 6: feliciore loco medietatis est positus.

¹⁰⁷ NHC VI 61,15–63,32.

¹⁰⁸ NHC VI 63,9–11: κατὰ β.δ.θ.μ.ο.ς ἐφ.μ.ο.ο.ϰ.ε ἐφ.ν̄ν.η.η.γ ἐξ.ο.γ.ν. ε.θ.η.ν̄ ν̄.τ.η.ν̄.τ.α.τ.μ.ο.γ.

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THOSE WHO KNOW AND THOSE WHO DON'T: MYSTERY,
INSTRUCTION, AND KNOWLEDGE IN 2 *BARUCH*

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—For my favourite teacher—

The apocalyptic writing 2 *Baruch* begins, “The Revelations of Baruch son of Neriah.”¹ This introductory line of the Syriac manuscript provides a precise description of the content of the book that follows: 2 *Baruch* consists of a series of ordered episodes containing Baruch’s apocalyptic visions or revelatory dialogs with God, their respective interpretation, followed by Baruch’s instruction of his audiences based on his new insights.² Together, these episodes constitute the revelation of *the mystery*,³ i.e., God’s redemptive, eschatological, plan revealed to Baruch in a time of crisis.⁴

2 *Baruch* was in all probability produced by a Jewish milieu in Palestine in the decades after the fall of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. Most scholars today understand the work as a response to that destruction and as a deliberation over the situation of Jewish societies following

¹ 2 *Baruch* survives in a single complete Syriac witness, the so-called *Codex Ambrosianus*, which is a sixth or seventh century Bible manuscript. This remains the only known complete witness to the work to date. A fourth or fifth century Greek fragment containing 2 *Bar.* 12:1–13:2 and 13:11–14:3 was discovered in the rich finds of the Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus in the early twentieth century. A Latin fragment (of 2 *Bar.* 48:33–34 and 36) survives in a citation found in Cyprian’s *Test.* 3:29. Three Syriac lectionary manuscripts, two dating from the thirteenth century and one from the fifteenth also include passages we recognize as excerpts of 2 *Baruch*. These manuscripts contain 2 *Bar.* 44:9–15 and 72:1–73:2. Cf. Liv Ingeborg Lied, “Recent Scholarship on 2 *Baruch*,” *CBR* 9/2 (2011): 238–76.

² Since the early days of scholarship, it has been suggested that 2 *Baruch* can be divided into seven episodes. Since the 1960s, scholars have commonly approached 2 *Baruch* as one coherent, though complex, literary composition, consisting of these ordered episodes.

³ 2 *Baruch* applies the word “mystery” three times, in 48:3; 60:1 and 81:4. In two of these contexts (48:3 and 81:4) the term refers to God’s hidden plan and order of redemption. In 60:1 the term is used to refer to the secret and ungodly rituals of the Amorites.

⁴ This is a commonly found, though not the only, understanding of the concept of mystery in apocalyptic texts. Cf. Benjamin L. Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion: The Use of Mystery in Daniel and Second Temple Judaism with Its Bearing on First Corinthians* (BZNTW 160; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 1, 22, 31, 106–107; Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (WUNT 2/36; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), 2, 32, 36–37.

the loss of the temple. *2 Baruch* takes the destruction of the *first* Jerusalem temple as its narrative point of departure, however, and situates the plot of the frame narrative at the end of the life of Baruch, the famous scribe of Jeremiah. From this narrative point of departure, *2 Baruch* describes how God calls Baruch to gather and protect the remnant that is left of the righteous in Israel and reveals to him the hitherto concealed knowledge that will be crucial for the survival of the community in the imminent end time and subsequent redemption of the righteous (1:1–10:3). God discloses his overall plan for humankind, periods of time (temporal) and the worlds (spatial). God provides Baruch with particular insight into the order of the last events of the present corruptible world; the judgment, resurrection and the transformation of the righteous and the wicked, as well as the hidden reality and the constitution of the other, heavenly and incorruptible world that awaits the righteous.

Like other apocalyptic writings of Late Antiquity, the crucial content of *2 Baruch* is the revelation of hitherto hidden, apocalyptic knowledge.⁵ According to 59:4–12, God showed aspects of this apocalyptic knowledge to Moses at Sinai, and the main contents were probably also revealed to Adam and Abraham (4:1–7). The knowledge, however, was not made known to others before Baruch disclosed it to his audiences. Still, *2 Baruch* is generally not assumed to be an esoteric writing. For instance, *2 Baruch* does not present itself as a “secret writing” intended only for the few. Even though the content of the visions that God bestows on Baruch have so far been restricted to some few distinguished individuals in the past, Baruch—the ideal sage, apocalyptic visionary and teacher—instructs his growing audience in public speeches about the contents of God’s plan.⁶ He even writes letters to the tribes in captivity in order to spread the word as much as he can.⁷ Hence, *2 Baruch* does not keep secrets or reserve them for the elect few. It is rather described as an explicit goal in the text that Baruch’s deliberations and pedagogical adjustments of God’s plan should

⁵ Cf. John J. Collins and James H. Charlesworth, eds., *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (JSPSup 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 11–12; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 24–36.

⁶ *2 Bar.* 31–33; 44–46; 52:6–7; 77:1–17. Fredrick J. Murphy has suggested that Baruch’s audience becomes wider and wider (Fredrick J. Murphy, *The Structure and Meaning of Second Baruch* (SBLDS 78; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 13. Cf., Mark F. Whitters, *The Epistle of Second Baruch: A Study of Form and Message* (LSTS 42; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 49.

⁷ One of them, the letter to the nine and a half tribes (also known as the Epistle of *2 Baruch*), is attached to the apocalypse proper (*2 Bar.* 78–87). The other letter is solely mentioned in 77:12 and 19.

be disclosed to as many as possible (77:12). Baruch is concerned about the survival of "all Israel" in the end time.

In a similar vein of transparency, *2 Baruch* never mentions the existence of secret books.⁸ Rather, *2 Baruch*'s protagonist, Baruch, constantly highlights the status of the Torah as the sole written authority. Unlike its "sister apocalypse," *4 Ezra*, which establishes a divide between the 24 books⁹ available to the worthy and unworthy alike, and the 70 books that are kept for the wise among the people only (*4 Ezra* 14:44–48),¹⁰ no division can be found in *2 Baruch*.¹¹ Baruch teaches his audiences observance of the Torah by means of the authority he gains from apocalyptic knowledge. Through the guidance of Baruch and other wise men (e.g. *2 Bar.* 46:4), the words of the Torah are to be accessible to all Israel, until the end of days.

Thus, in *2 Baruch*, God's ancient plan for mankind and the world is concealed no longer. This apocalyptic knowledge has been revealed to Baruch, Baruch disseminates his teachings as widely as he can, and the Torah is ideally accessible for everyone.¹² Finally, the essence of Baruch's teachings is eventually presented as a written artefact in the form of the letter to the nine and a half tribes attached to the apocalypse proper (*2 Bar.* 78–87).

And yet, the role of apocalyptic knowledge in *2 Baruch* can not properly be taken into consideration unless we address a classic challenge met by all teachers, that a pupil's level of learning does not necessarily reflect the quality of the instruction they have received. In other words, although a pupil receives instruction, he or she does not necessarily listen and become knowledgeable. This well-known pedagogical challenge is reflected in *2 Baruch* as well, for instance in *2 Bar.* 32:1; 46:4–6; 77:11–17; 85:4–9 and particularly in 47–52. Hence, *2 Baruch* does not take for granted that all recipients of instruction will listen carefully, and receive the gift

⁸ Matthias Henze, "Torah and Eschatology in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch," in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. George J. Brooke, Hindy Najman and Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 201–215 at 211; Hindy Najman, "How to Make Sense of Pseudonymous Attribution: The Cases of *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*," in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

⁹ I.e., the books of the Hebrew canon.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the suggestion in *4 Ezra* that the books are kept only for the wise, does not necessarily imply that they are esoteric. The suggestion may mean that the unworthy could not read the books themselves, but needed the instruction and interpretation of the wise in order to approach them.

¹¹ Najman, "Pseudonymous Attribution." Cf. also *Asc. Isa.* 4:20.

¹² I.e., all Israel.

of understanding. This aspect of instruction and knowledge has attracted little attention in previous research. Most scholars have studied the role of Torah-obedience or the development of Baruch's own knowledge without discussing the function of the knowledge and the understanding assumed to be acquired by his audiences in *2 Baruch*.¹³

Here, I discuss the functions of apocalyptic knowledge in *2 Baruch*, focusing on one of the episodes of the text, *2 Bar.* 47–52. Specifically, I address the following questions: how does knowledge of God's plan matter in this episode, why is the knowledge of Baruch's audience stressed, and, lastly, what are the pedagogical and rhetorical functions of apocalyptic knowledge?

2 Bar. 47–52: The Functions of Apocalyptic Knowledge

Several scholars have isolated *2 Bar.* 47–52, alternatively 47–51, as one of *2 Baruch*'s constituent episodes.¹⁴ At God's command Baruch goes to Hebron. He sits alone under an oak at Hebron, fasting for a week (47:1–2). Baruch then prays to God, asking him to reveal the course of the remaining periods, the generations and the worlds (48:2–24). The section that follows (48:31–51:16) describes God's revelation to Baruch of things to come.

Three periods can be isolated in God's revelation of history. The first period, described in 48:31–36, presents the first phase, the end time in which the followers of Baruch are imagined to live. This period is presented as the perverted and abnormal period of the reign of the wicked in the corruptible world. It is a period of affliction to the righteous, but a time of glory and peace to the wicked (48:31–36).

The second period (48:37–51:6) is presented as a time of transition. This part of God's revelation focuses on the relationship between the wicked and the righteous as the times are about to turn in favour of the righteous. In 50:1–4, resurrection and an event of recognition are described as the prelude to God's judgment. God's judgment is the important turning point

¹³ Cf., e.g., Gwendolyn B. Sayler, *Have the Promises Failed? A Literary Analysis of 2 Baruch* (SBLDS 72; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984); Martin Leuenberger, "Ort und Funktion der Wolkenvision und ihrer Deutung in der Syrischen *Baruchapokalypse*," *JSJ* 36 (2005): 206–46; Henze, "Torah and Eschatology," 205–06; Najman, "Pseudonymous Attribution."

¹⁴ Cf. the convenient overview of suggestions in earlier research in Daniel M. Gurtner, *Second Baruch: A Critical Edition of the Syriac Text: With Greek and Latin Fragments, English Translation, Introduction and Concordances* (JCTCRS 5; New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 20–24.

in the layout of eschatological history (50:4). Following that judgment, the glorious destiny of the righteous in comparison with that of the wicked is ordained by God, the righteous are transformed into glorious manifestations, whereas the wicked continue to transform into ever more evil shapes until their destruction becomes final in 51:6.

2 *Bar.* 51:7–16 contains the third and last part of God's revelation. This passage describes the continuing transformation and elevation of the righteous after the final defeat of the wicked, a transformation that continues until the generations of the righteous enter into the other heavenly world and gather in proximity of the throne of God (51:13).¹⁵

The concluding paragraph, 2 *Bar.* 52:1–7, contains Baruch's answer to God and his message to the righteous: why worry about the hardships of the imminent end time, when the present times are about to change for the better? You should rather take pleasure in the suffering you experience now, Baruch utters. The present order will be destroyed, and the reward is near (52:6–7).¹⁶

Seeing the Corruptible World as It Really Is

How does apocalyptic knowledge, the revealed knowledge of God's redemptive plan, matter in this episode of 2 *Baruch*? To answer this, I take a closer look at some select passages. The first paragraph to be put under scrutiny is 48:32–36, which describes the situation during the first period singled out in God's revelation, the end time:

And it will happen in those days that all the inhabitants of the earth will be at rest with each other, because they do not know that my judgment has come near. For at that time there will not be found many wise [persons] and the understanding will be few, but also those who know (سليم ورحيم) will be silent more and more. And there will be much hearsay and not few rumours, and works of fantasy will be shown, and not a few promises will be repeated, some of them without cause, and some of them will be confirmed. And glory will be turned into dishonour, and strength will be humiliated into contempt, integrity will be destroyed, and beauty will be meanness. And the many will say to the many at that time: "How has the multitude of

¹⁵ Cf. Liv Ingeborg Lied, "What Happened to Heaven When the Righteous Finally Arrived? Transformation, Space, and Redemption in 2 *Baruch*," in *Construction of Space III: Biblical Spatiality and the Sacred* (ed. J. Cornelis de Vos, Jorunn Økland and Karen Wenell; LHBOTS; London: T&T Clark, forthcoming).

¹⁶ For other interpretations of this passage, cf. e.g. Daewoong Kim, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic in 2 *Baruch*," *Henoch*, forthcoming.

understanding been hidden from sight and how has the multitude of wisdom been displaced?"

This paragraph illustrates the first function of apocalyptic knowledge that deserves notice. Those who do not know the plan of God, i.e., those who do not know that God's judgment is drawing near, will live in peace with each other in the end time. They will continue to live their lives, ignorant of the destruction that awaits them (Cf. 15:5).¹⁷ Those who know, however, become more and more silent (48:33). There are only a few left, who are wise, and know God's plan. They become hidden, at least from the sight of the ignorant. Hence, the world of the end time is deceptive to the ignorant. The world is not what it seems to be, and it does not reveal to them what is imminent. This present world is full of lies, rumours, and a reversed evaluation of human virtues. In a sense, the world of the end time mirrors the delusions of the ignorant majority.

Thus, this passage shows that knowledge of God's plan matters in the sense that it provides an opportunity to recognize what happens *when it happens*. Those who have knowledge will perceive that God's judgment is closing in on them. Those who lack this knowledge will remain blind to the catastrophe that has been prepared for them and thus cannot change their ways (Cf., 85:12).

Knowledge possibly serves a similar function in 50:1–4, the second passage to be studied here. This passage describes the resurrection of the dead before God's judgment:

And he answered and said to me: "Hear, Baruch, this word and write in the record of your heart all that you will learn. For the earth will then surely give back the dead, which it receives now to keep, although transforming nothing in their appearance, but as it received [them], so it gives them back. And as I delivered them to it, so also it will raise them. For then it is needed to show those who live that the dead have come to life and that those who went [away] have come [back]. And it will happen after they have recognized¹⁸ one another, those who know now, then judgment will become strong, and these [things] will come, which were spoken of."

¹⁷ In 55:2–3 the opposite idea is presented: the wicked know that they will be punished, but they act wickedly anyway.

¹⁸ The Syriac word ܠܝܕܥܝܢ is commonly translated "to know, recognize, understand, to see, perceive" in the Eshtaph'al form, found in 2 Bar. 50:4. Cf. J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (ed. J. Payne Smith; Eugene, Or.; Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 188; Cf. R. Payne Smith, ed., *Thesaurus Syriacus I* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1879–1901; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2006), 1558.

According to 50:2–3, the dead will be returned unchanged by the earth. The earth has kept the dead without transforming them. At this point in time, it will be necessary to *show* the living that the dead have come back to life. 40:2–3 may indicate that the living need this kind of overwhelming sight to realize that a major change is imminent. The return of the dead is possibly mentioned to prove that the god of the righteous is omnipotent, unlike the gods of the wicked. The god of the righteous can in fact raise the dead, not merely produce “works of fantasy” (48:34). He is the only one who can transform people—it is not within the power of the earth to change them. At this point the almighty God intervenes in history and reveals his powers: God’s judgment is approaching. Before the judgment sets in, however, “those who know now”¹⁹ will recognize each other (50:4). This sentence is open to several interpretations, and I have discussed this passage in detail elsewhere.²⁰ One possibility is that those who knew that God’s judgment was closing in “now,” i.e., in the end time (48:32), will recognize each other. Those in the know possibly see and perceive more than those not in the know. Whereas everyone will be able to see that the dead have returned, only those who have knowledge will be able to perceive the identity of their kind. Perhaps those who know God’s plan are also the only ones who will identify the reappearance of the dead as the sign that the event which was predicted has now arrived (50:4).²¹

¹⁹ I translate **ܟܠܗ ܗܘܢܝܢ ܕܥܝܢܗܘܢ** in 50:4 as “those who know now,” rather than “those whom they now know” (Robert H. Charles, *The Apocalypse of Baruch, Translated from the Syriac, Chapters I–LXXVII from the Sixth Cent. MS in the Ambrosian Library of Milan, and Chapters LXXVIII–LXXXVII—the Epistle of Baruch—from a New and Critical Text Based on Ten MSS and Published Herewith. Edited, with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* [London: Black, 1896], 82–83), alternatively “those who know each other now” (Albertus F. J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch,” in *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* [vol. 1 of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*; ed. James H. Charlesworth; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983], 615–52 at 638). Although all these translations of the phrase in 50:4 are possible, my translation is closer to the Syriac manuscript (Cf. Liv Ingeborg Lied, “Recognizing the Righteous Remnant? Resurrection, Recognition and Eschatological Reversals in 2 *Baruch* 47–52,” in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* [ed. Turid K. Seim and Jorunn Økland; Ekstasis 1; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009], 31–35). Cf. also Bruno Violet, who included the option, but chose to translate **ܕܥܝܢܗܘܢ** “kennen”: “Und sobald die sich gegenseitig erkannt haben, die (sich) jetzt kennen, dann wird das Gericht in Kraft treten, und die vorhergesagten (Dinge) werden kommen” (Bruno Violet, *Die Apokalypsen des Ezra und des Baruch in deutscher Gestalt* [GCS 32; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1924], 275).

²⁰ Lied, “Recognizing the Righteous Remnant.”

²¹ Alternatively: “promised,” cf., 57:2.

Knowledge and Group Identification?

The two passages cited above, 48:32–36 and 50:1–4, suggest a second feasible function of apocalyptic knowledge in 2 Bar. 47–52. It is possible that reference to knowledge is not only used to denote different levels of knowledge, but also that knowledge of God's plan is used emblematically to designate a division between two groups or categories of people: the few who know, and the many who don't.

Accordingly, 48:32–36 can be interpreted as establishing a divide between groups or categories based on differing levels of knowledge—there is an epistemological gap between those who know God's plan and those who don't. They act differently, in accordance with their knowledge, and the reference to their respective qualities may be understood as a supplementary description of the members of the two groups. Whereas the ignorant are an integral part of the corruptible world and share its ignorance and its corruptibility,²² those who are in the know have integrity and are in fact glorious, strong, beautiful, and hence feel suppressed and foreign to the corruptible world in which they live. The wicked or ignorant are, of course, blind to this fact in a world that has turned the evaluation of human virtues upside down. The last comment of the passage, cited in 48:36, can be understood as a sarcastic remark from the many: where has the other group, those who are wise and understanding, gone?²³ To the ignorant, the knowledgeable few appear to be outnumbered and suppressed, and hence completely out of sight.

This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the expression “those who know” (48:33) appears again in 50:4: “those who know now.” Those who had knowledge, who knew that God's judgment was near in this end time, may be members of the same group, or people who belong to the same category who at the onset of judgment were able to perceive the resurrection as the sign of God's interference in history. Further, those who know “now,” i.e. “those who know” in the end time (48:33), will recognize each other. This separates them from the others. If the above interpretation of 50:1–4 is correct, we have yet another example of a situation where

²² Alternatively: worldly wisdom.

²³ The sentence may alternatively also be understood as a reference to the more general qualities “understanding” and “wisdom.”

the two groups, or categories, of people are singled out and identified by their knowledge and ignorance, respectively.²⁴

Torah-obedience, Wisdom, and Understanding

We turn to the passage that reveals the culmination of God's redemptive plan for those who are found to be righteous. *2 Bar.* 51:1–13:

And it will happen when that appointed day has passed on, then after that the [elevated] pride of those found guilty will soon be transformed, and also the glory of those found righteous. For the shape of those who now act wickedly will be made more evil than it is, like those who endure torment. Also, (as for) the glory of those who now have been declared justified in my law, those in whose lives there has been understanding, those who planted the root of wisdom in their heart, then their splendor will be glorified in transformations, and the shape of their faces will be changed in the light of their beauty, to enable them to acquire and receive the world that does not die, which then is promised to them. For because of this especially they will groan, those who come then, that they rejected my law, and stopped their ears so that they did not hear wisdom and did not receive understanding when they then see those over whom they now are exalted, who will then be more exalted and glorified than they, and these and those will be transformed, these into the splendor of angels, and those will waste away especially in amazement over the visions and the sight of the shapes. For first they will see, and afterwards they will be punished.²⁵ For those who have been delivered by their deeds, and for whom the law is now a hope, and understanding an expectation, and wisdom a firmness wonders will appear to them in their time. For they will see that world which is invisible to them now, and they will see the time which is now hidden from them. And again time will not make them old. For they will dwell in the heights of that world, and they will be like angels, and they will equal stars. And they will be transformed into every form they desire, from fairness to beauty, and from light into the splendor of glory. For the extents of Paradise will spread out before them, and to them will be shown the fairness of the greatness of the living beings under the throne, and the hosts of the angels, who are now held by my word, so that they do not show themselves, and who are held fast by the command so that they will stand in their places until their advent has arrived. And then the excellence in the righteous will become greater than in the angels. For the first will receive the last, the ones they were expecting, and the last those of whom they used to hear that they had passed away.²⁶

²⁴ Cf., e.g., *4 Ezra* 14:26, CD III, 12–16; 1QH XV, 2–3. Cf. Bockmuehl, "Revelation and Mystery," 56.

²⁵ Translation: Lied, "Recognizing the Righteous Remnant," 314.

²⁶ Translation: Liv Ingeborg Lied, *The Other Lands of Israel: Imaginations of the Land in 2 Baruch* (JSJSup 129; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 287.

This passage describes the effects of God's judgment. God's judgment, which promises to be a turning point in the eschatological history of *2 Baruch* (Cf., 57:2), sets off a series of events. First, the shapes of "those found righteous" (51:1) and "those who now act wickedly" (51:2) are transformed in accordance with their dispositions.²⁷ Whereas the wicked transform into more and more evil shapes, the righteous become more glorious in order to enable them to inherit the undying world (51:3). Before they are punished, the wicked will witness the transformation of the righteous. The righteous, on the other hand, will be shown great wonders; the world which was hidden will now be revealed to them. They continue to transform until they finally gather under the throne.

The passage addressing the process of the final redemption of the righteous and the revelation of the hitherto hidden heavenly world describes events in the eschatological future. However, it additionally provides a good deal of information concerning the life choices and characteristics of the righteous versus the wicked in the corruptible world before the event of God's judgment. The righteous are described in *2 Bar.* 51:3 and 7. According to 51:3, those who are found righteous are those who have been "declared justified in my law, those in whose lives there has been understanding, those who planted the root of wisdom in their heart." The righteous are also described as being "delivered by their deeds" and as those "for whom the law is now a hope, and understanding an expectation, and wisdom a firmness" (51:7). The wicked are described as the opposite of the righteous in 51:4: the wicked rejected God's law, "stopped their ears so that they did not hear wisdom and did not receive understanding."

In other words, three factors constitute the main differences between the lives of the righteous and the wicked in the period before judgment: the Torah, i.e., Torah-obedience and the good works that result from it; wisdom, i.e. receptiveness and internalization of wisdom; and understanding. These three factors, Torah-obedience, wisdom; and understanding, seem to be perceived as closely related phenomena in *2 Baruch*.²⁸ Inquiries into the law, the root of wisdom, the richness of understanding, and the fountain of knowledge are for instance all mentioned among the phenomena God showed Moses at Sinai (59:7–12).²⁹ In particular, Torah and wis-

²⁷ Note that the shape of the wicked is *already* evil and the shape of the righteous *already* beautiful (Cf. 49:2). These features are now intensified.

²⁸ Cf., also, Dan 12:2–4; Sir 9:14–16; *1 En.* 82:3. Cf., another possible translation in Henze, "Torah and Eschatology," 205.

²⁹ Cf. also 38:1–2.

dom are often seen as interrelated (Cf. e.g. 38:2–4) and the relationship between the two has been studied by several scholars.³⁰ Of course, this is a commonly found idea rather than an idea that originates with 2 *Baruch*.³¹ Wisdom is often regarded as stemming from the Torah, to be revealed together with the Torah at Sinai, and sometimes Torah and wisdom may appear to be more or less overlapping concepts.³²

On the other hand, the function of “understanding” has received less attention in the context of 51:1–13.³³ Initially, it is not obvious precisely what “understanding” may refer to in 51:3, 4 and 7. Understanding is described as one of the three factors that characterize the life of the righteous (51:3); it is said to be an expectation (51:7); and one of the failures of the wicked was that they did not receive understanding because they closed their ears (51:4). The Syriac word ܠܘܫܢܐ may mean “understanding,” “intelligence,” “intellect,” “a thought,” or “consideration.”³⁴ The word ܠܘܫܢܐܘܬܐ (51:7), deriving from the same root (ܠܘܫܢܐ), means “understanding,” “intelligent,” “prudent,” “capable.”³⁵ Hence, both words seem to refer to cognitive capacity. “Understanding” (ܠܘܫܢܐ and ܠܘܫܢܐܘܬܐ) is used in some passages of 2 *Baruch*, for instance in 56:4 and 75:3, to describe God’s immense understanding/intelligence, but other passages apply the term to describe peoples’ ability or disability to perceive. In 38:1 understanding characterizes the ones God will enlighten, “those who conducted themselves with understanding.” 15:5–6 refers to the understanding of those who have received the Torah and have been instructed “with

³⁰ Wolfgang Harnisch, *Verhängnis und Verheissung der Geschichte: Untersuchungen zum Zeit- und Geschichtsverständnis im 4. Buch Esra und in der syr. Baruchapokalypse* (FRLANT 97; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969); Anitra C. B. Kolenkow, “An Introduction to II Baruch 53, 56–74: Structure and Substance,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1971); Alden L. Thompson, *Responsibility for Evil in the Theology of 4th Ezra: A Study Illustrating the Significance of Form and Structure for the Meaning of the Book* (SBLDS 29; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977); Michel Desjardins, “Law in 2 *Baruch* and 4 *Ezra*,” *SR* 14 (1985): 25–37. In recent research: Sharon Burkes, “‘Life’ Redefined: Wisdom and Law in Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch,” *CBQ* 63 (2001): 55–71; Matthias Henze, “Qoheleth and the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch,” *VT* 58 (2008): 28–43; Leuenberger, “Ort und Funktion”; Henze, “Torah and Eschatology”; Najman, “Pseudonymous Attribution.”

³¹ Cf. *Ezra* 7:25; *Sir* 17:11–14; 24:23; *Bar* 3:36–41; *Ps* 111:10, mentioned by Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 63–64. Cf. further, *ibid.*, 13–14.

³² Cf., e.g., Burkes, “‘Life’ Redefined,” 70–71; Najman, “Pseudonymous Attribution.”

³³ Cf. however, Najman, “Pseudonymous Attribution.”

³⁴ Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 365.

³⁵ Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, 377.

understanding.” Those who have understanding, but still trespasses the commandments, will be punished.³⁶

The immediate linguistic context in 2 *Bar.* 51 may give us a better idea of the use of “understanding” in this particular context. The passage mentions wisdom in the *heart, ears* that will not hear, and revelations that are *seen*.³⁷ It is interesting to note that 51:1–13 in general describes the events and transformations in the post-judgment era in terms of visible categories and favors a language of seeing.³⁸ The wicked will, for instance, *see* the righteous and waste away in amazement over *the visions* and *the sight* of them (51:5). To the righteous, wonders will *appear* and they will *see* the invisible world (51:7–8). Moreover, according to 51:3, the righteous have planted the root of wisdom in their heart. Likewise, Baruch is admonished by God to write in the record of his heart everything he will learn by God’s revelation (50:1). In 2 *Bar.* 51:1–13, we see what Benjamin L. Gladd has referred to as organ- or sensory-language.³⁹ In his study *Revealing the Mysterion: The Use of Mystery in Daniel and Second Temple Judaism with Its Bearing on First Corinthians* Gladd argues that this type of language is commonly found in passages that reveal a mystery: “Mystery and senses are wedded,” says Gladd, who proposes that the senses are crucial to grasping the mystery.⁴⁰ Mysteries are thus revealed, experienced, or otherwise seen or heard. Further, Gladd discusses the relationship between cognition, the understanding of mystery, and the interconnection between the eye, the ear, and the heart. The heart, in particular, is presented as the organ, or field, of intention, thought, and disposition, but Gladd maintains that: “All three organs are very much interconnected. The heart can be defined as one’s inclination or disposition . . . , will or intention . . . , conscience . . . , and the center of cognition and understanding.”⁴¹

Thus, the concept of understanding in 2 *Bar.* 51 should probably be understood in the context of Torah-obedience and wisdom on the one hand, and sensory language on the other. “Understanding” would then seem to refer to one’s cognitive and sensory ability, intention, and the

³⁶ Cf. 44:14; 61:4; 66:2.

³⁷ Cf., also 50:1.

³⁸ Cf. Paul Volz, *Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter. Nach den Quellen der rabbinischen, apokalyptischen und apokryphen Literatur* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1934; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), 46.

³⁹ Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 275–76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁴¹ Cf., e.g., 2 *Bar.* 50:1; Ps 24:4. Gladd lists a series of texts that links the heart and cognition: Gen 31:20; Exod 9:14; Deut 29:3; 1 Sam 4:20; etc. (*Revealing the Mysterion*, 275n8).

gift of God (or the disposition) to perceive wisdom and instruction in the Torah, and hence one's ability to grasp the revealed mystery.⁴²

As suggested in the discussion of 48:32–36 and 50:1–4 above, 51:1–13 once again presents a cognitive gap between those who know and those who do not in the period before the judgment. The righteous were not only wise and obedient: they also understood. The wicked, however, not only broke the law: they also stopped their ears and blocked out wisdom and understanding.

The pedagogical connotations evoked by the description of the wrongdoings of the wicked are important: they did not *hear* wisdom, hence they did not *receive* understanding. This terminology seems to refer to a context of instruction, where knowledge is passed on orally and needs to be perceived by those who listen. As several scholars have pointed out, the importance of instruction is stressed several times in 2 *Baruch*.⁴³ According to 45:1–2 and 76:5, instruction provides those who receive it with an opportunity to survive the end time. Instruction is referred to in 2 *Baruch* as the difference between the life and death of the community. It is therefore a top priority of Baruch, who spends his last 40 days on earth teaching and writing letters to the tribes in captivity to strengthen them (77:12) and to give them knowledge (84:1).⁴⁴

Yet, the reference to the mistake of the wicked in 51:4 indicates that not everyone listens. Those who are proven to be wicked after judgment are those who were not willing or able to receive instruction. This insistence of 2 *Baruch* has parallels in several contemporaneous texts, for instance in Matt 13:14–16:

With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: “You will listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes: so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and

⁴² Note the focus on understanding in Daniel and 1 *Enoch*: Daniel understands the vision (10:12, 14). Enoch hears and understands in 1 *En*. 1:2.

⁴³ Cf., e.g., Kolenkow, “Interpretation,” 107–09; Saylor, *Have the Promises Failed*, 74, 79–86; Whittiers, *Epistle of Second Baruch*, 115–19, 142–43; Lied, *Other Lands of Israel*, 134–38; as well as J. Edward Wright, *Baruch ben Neriah: From Biblical Scribe to Apocalyptic Seer* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 87–97.

⁴⁴ Some passages of 2 *Baruch* says that Baruch dies (78:5; 84:1). Other passages claim that he leaves the earth but does not die (e.g., 13:3; 48:30; 76:2).

I would heal them.” But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.⁴⁵

In summary, 2 Bar. 51 underscores the importance of the Torah and Torah-obedience, of wisdom, and of the willingness and ability to listen to and understand instruction. In other words, Torah and Torah-obedience are not enough *per se*.⁴⁶ The passage adds, firstly, that instruction is important in its own right because it is the source of wisdom and understanding (Cf., 15:5–6). Secondly, instruction has no effect if the members of the audience do not want to listen or lack the ability to understand what they in fact hear. Markus N. A. Bockmuehl addresses this nicely in his discussion of Wisdom: “Divine mysteries can be known only by revelation. But in Wisdom there is no reason not to disclose them to others: the mysteries are hidden merely insofar as their present transcendence makes them hard to fathom, especially for the unrighteous.”⁴⁷ In other words, the mystery can be revealed to everyone, yet not understood by all. The mystery remains hidden to those who are incapable of understanding it.

Yet another function of knowledge should be noted in this context: apocalyptic knowledge must be acquired while the corruptible world still stands; before God’s judgment.⁴⁸ Knowledge that is acquired after that event serves another purpose—it enhances the eschatological triumph of the opponent. The wicked who are described in 51:4 are probably identical to, or belong to the same category as those in 48:36 who could not see “the multitude of wisdom and understanding.” However, in 51:1–6 that multitude appears to them again in what must be an eye-opening experience to the wicked. After judgment, the righteous transform into glorious shapes. At the moment when the multitude reappears in the sight of the wicked in all its splendor and glory, the wicked groan at the sight. The wicked, who used to be exalted, now look grim, lowly and evil, and they see their opponents tower above them. The wicked are amazed at the visions and the sight of the shapes.

This realization on the part of the wicked suggests that they finally understand that they have been wrong and now see the delusions of the corruptible world. They see who the once lowly and hidden crowd really is. But after judgment it is too late. This new-found knowledge does not

⁴⁵ Matt 13:14–16 quotes Isa 6:9–10. Cf. Mark 4:11–12; John 12:40; Acts 28:23–28.

⁴⁶ Likewise, understanding is not enough, if you are not obedient to the Torah (15:5–6).

⁴⁷ Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 66.

⁴⁸ Cf., 2 Bar. 41:3–4; 85:12.

lead them to redemption, but rather dooms them to double punishment. This vision and the realization that accompanies it seems to be part of the punishment of the wicked: "For first they will see, and afterwards they will be punished." To the righteous, however, the fact that the epistemological gap between the groups is finally bridged enhances their air of triumph. Not only do the righteous finally excel, their triumph is even witnessed by their former oppressors.

Enjoy Your Suffering: Apocalyptic Knowledge Changes Life Here and Now

Finally, in 52:1–7 we step outside the revelation proper. Baruch displays his newly found knowledge, partly as an answer to God, and partly in the form of an admonition of the righteous (52:6–7): "Take pleasure in the suffering which you suffer now. For why do you look for the decline of your enemies? Prepare your souls for that which is kept for you, and prepare your souls for the reward which is preserved for you."

This passage (52:1–7) is the culmination of the long description of God's revelation to Baruch in a vision. The double time reference of that description is relevant in this context. On the one hand, 50:1–51:13 describes the parallel reality of the other world which is already there, but which Baruch alone can see at first and which initially remains out of sight to all others. Simultaneously, this passage is part of Baruch's instruction to his followers: this is what he *tells* his followers that they will *come to see*.

Thus, when Baruch admonishes the followers and *tells* them to enjoy the suffering in 52:1–7, he talks to them when the end time is about to set in, and he gives them exact knowledge about what to *look* for and what to expect. In other words, he gives them the key to interpreting the events of the end time, in order to see these events for what they really are. Baruch's instruction is exactly the knowledge they need to understand that God's judgment is approaching (48:32) and to interpret the resurrection as a sign (50:2–3). Importantly, Baruch also informs them how things will turn out. It is not a vague assumption of the outcome he provides them with, but rather a presentation of a reality that already exists as a fact that Baruch has contemplated in the revelation granted him by God.

Thus, this portion of Baruch's instruction to his followers provides apocalyptic knowledge that gives those listening a grasp on the present realities of the end time: enjoy the suffering. First of all, Baruch affirms that the suffering the righteous experience "now" is nothing compared to the suffering awaiting the wicked after judgment (52:3). Second, the fact that the righteous suffer now proves that they are among those who will

be rewarded in the other, incorruptible world. If they were happy now, that happiness would have been delusive (48:32, cf., 11:2; 82:1–9). Finally, the very revelation of the redemption of the righteous should provide the audience with a new certainty. They know exactly what will happen and the outcome of the upheaval is already given: the righteous will eventually triumph.

Why Does Knowledge Matter? Torah-obedience and Apocalyptic Teaching

In the above discussion, I have studied some critical passages in detail and suggested how apocalyptic knowledge functions in the episode of *2 Bar.* 47–52. I show how knowledge of God's plan enables the knowledgeable to recognize the events of that plan while it is played out in eschatological history. Additionally, the knowledge Baruch imparts to his audience *here and now* can give that audience a completely new comprehension of the suffering they experience in the present corruptible world—but only if they are willing and capable of appropriating that knowledge. I also suggest that apocalyptic knowledge plays a part in distinguishing two groups, or categories, of people in the eschatological order that is revealed to Baruch. The difference between these two categories is played out rhetorically in the text as an ongoing fight between the few (in the know) and the (ignorant) many. Those few who are in the know—and who are also wise and righteous—perceive and experience the present, corruptible world differently from those who are ignorant. The knowledgeable and the ignorant are separated and transformed into two visibly distinct categories by God's judgment and those who are in the know eventually end up triumphing in a distinct place and in a completely different manifestation than their adversaries. Finally, I propose that the understanding and wisdom that are acquired through instruction play a part in the redemption process in that both qualities characterize the righteous—those who are finally allowed to see the other incorruptible world unfold in front of them.

In summary, two main tendencies stand out. First, apocalyptic knowledge matters: knowledge and understanding of God's plan are imperative for those who survive the end time and experience redemption. And second, knowledge and understanding are not equally distributed among people.

This preliminary conclusion is seemingly at odds with my presentation of *2 Baruch* in the introduction to this essay. There I suggested that

2 Baruch is commonly regarded as an exoteric writing, a writing that intends to disseminate the revealed mystery to as many as possible. The general accessibility of knowledge is further stressed by the fact that Baruch promotes the authority of the Torah. Through instruction by wise men, the Torah—presented as the only authoritative text—is available to all Israel. Likewise, Baruch himself works hard to disseminate the knowledge he has received among all the twelve tribes. Consequently, the different levels of knowledge stem neither from differential access to authoritative texts nor from lack of instruction.

The apparent tension in the text is rather to be identified as that between Baruch's intention to instruct his audiences and the results of his efforts.⁴⁹ It is true that *2 Baruch* stresses Baruch's concern for all the tribes of Israel.⁵⁰ However, *2 Baruch* never says that those who heard his instructions acquired the knowledge he meant to impart to them. Baruch's instruction is certainly crucial, but as suggested in 51:4, it is not obvious that the recipients of his instruction understand and grasp the great teacher's words of wisdom—they may close their ears to what he has to say. This is reflected by the fact that “those who know” in the end time are “few” (48:33).

Certainly, it is not unlikely that this description of the redeemed is meant to refer to “all the tribes of Israel.”⁵¹ Other passages of *2 Baruch* imply that all Israel will in fact be redeemed, while the nations are punished (Cf. 78:2–7). But this is hardly the point. The association with the tribes of Israel is not the relevant identification tag of the passage I have studied in this essay. If we simply presume a one-to-one relationship between “all Israel” and the category described in *2 Bar.* 51, we miss a large part of the rhetorical nuances of the passage.

So, what are the rhetorical and pedagogical functions of presenting this divide in *2 Bar.* 51, between those who are redeemed and those who are punished as a difference in Torah-obedience, wisdom, and understanding, if the text in fact implies that “all Israel” will be redeemed? What is the outcome of applying this terminology?

Christoph Münchow has suggested that the apocalyptic visions of *2 Baruch* serve the purpose of encouraging people to live life here and

⁴⁹ This tension is not necessarily fully resolved in *2 Baruch*. Cf., e.g., 48:22–24; 78:2–7; 82:1–85:15.

⁵⁰ Cf., Henze, “Torah and Eschatology,” 209.

⁵¹ Henze, “Torah and Eschatology,” 209–11.

now in accordance with the Torah.⁵² As 51:7 points out, the ability to see and be part of the miracles described in 51:7–13 depends on the choice to live according to the will of God in the corruptible world. Matthias Henze makes a similar claim:

Our author has a developed interest in the eschaton, not for the sake of predicting the future, but rather in order to spell out how such knowledge about the End Time has an immediate effect on the Mean Time, i.e., the time of the author and his original audience. After all, the apocalyptic promise is just that, a promise that seeks to motivate and to encourage the faithful.⁵³

The suggestions of Münchow and Henze provide a key to an important part of our puzzle.⁵⁴ It is quite likely that the identification of the redeemed as those who are obedient, wise, and understanding serves as a didactic device to make Israel listen to instruction. If Baruch taught his audience that all Israel would be saved due to the covenant God made with the patriarchs and the good works of their forefathers only,⁵⁵ there would be no reason for his followers either to obey the Torah or to listen to his instruction. There would simply be no risk involved, as redemption would already have been secured.

When Baruch reports from his visions that he has identified the redeemed as those who acquired wisdom and understanding, and who lived their life in accordance with the Torah, while the wicked are identified as those who rejected the Torah and refused to listen to instruction, he keeps his audience on their guard. I agree with Münchow and Henze that Baruch's vision and teaching clearly promote the importance of living life lawfully. In addition, however, I believe that Baruch also adds a solid dose of authority to his own teaching.⁵⁶ Those who close their ears and do not listen to his instruction—based on the revelation of God's mystery—will certainly be punished. Those who do not listen will not know that God's judgment is closing in on them, nor will they be able to read the signs when they manifest. In other words, they do not have the necessary tools to survive the end time. And, importantly, they will not have had

⁵² Christoph Münchow, *Ethik und Eschatologie. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der frühjüdischen Apokalypik mit einem Ausblick auf das Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 228–29.

⁵³ Henze, "Torah and Eschatology," 202–03.

⁵⁴ Cf. also Leuenberger, "Ort und Funktion," 244–46.

⁵⁵ In other passages of 2 *Baruch*, the covenants and the promises are given prominence (Cf., e.g., 78:2–7).

⁵⁶ Cf. Whittiers, *Epistle of Second Baruch*, 159; idem, "Some New Observations about Jewish Festal Letters," *JSJ* 32 (2001): 272–88; Wright, *Baruch ben Neriah*, 87–97.

the opportunity to *hear and acquire* the wisdom and understanding that stems from the Torah—a wisdom and understanding that separate the redeemed from those who are punished.

In this sense, the references to the epistemological gap between those who know and those who do not know, promote the importance of both Torah-obedience and the apocalyptic knowledge passed on through Baruch's instruction. No one will survive unless they live according to the Torah, but neither will they survive the destructive consequences of the fall of the Jerusalem temple unless they also learn to see the post-destruction world through the lenses of Baruch's teaching. The present corruptible world has entered into the end time and God's intervention in history is imminent. God's judgment will eventually separate those who know from those who do not—unless, of course, the incentives of Baruch's teachings are effective enough to bring all Israel to knowledge.

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THE “MITHRAS LITURGY” AS MYSTERY AND MAGIC

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The theme of the present essay, in keeping with the focus of this volume, is an elucidation of mystery and magic in the text ordinarily referred to as the “Mithras Liturgy,” but little is very lucid about the “Mithras Liturgy.” The “Mithras Liturgy” received its name and a good deal of its fame from Albrecht Dieterich, whose book *Eine Mithrasliturgie* suggested a title for the text and opened the debate on the nature of the text.¹ Since then, many scholars have complained that the text is neither Mithraic nor liturgical, but what it is remains an open question. Recently Hans Dieter Betz has explored the Mithraic and liturgical aspects of the text in his volume,

¹ On the “Mithras Liturgy,” cf. Jaime Alvar, *Los misterios: Religiones “orientales” en el Imperio Romano* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2001); rev. ed.: *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras* (RGRW 165; Leiden: Brill, 2008); Jaime Alvar, “Mithraism and Magic,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference Held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept.–1 Oct. 2005* (ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco M. Simón; RGRW 168; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010), 519–49; Roger Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (EPRO [RGRW] 109; Leiden: Brill, 1988); Hans Dieter Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (STAC 18; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2003); Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903; 2d ed.; ed. Richard Wünsch, 1910; 3d ed.; ed. Otto Weinreich, 1923; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966); Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti, eds., *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts* (4 vols.; Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sonderreihe Papyrologica Coloniensia 17.1–4; Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990–1996, particularly Band 3, *Zwei griechisch-ägyptische Weihezeremonien (Die Leidener Weltschöpfung; Die Pschai-Aion-Liturgie)*); Bruce M. Metzger, “A Classified Bibliography of the Graeco-Roman Mystery Religions 1924–1973, with a Supplement, 1974–77,” *ANRW* 17.3:1259–423; Marvin Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Marvin Meyer, *The “Mithras Liturgy”* (SBLTT 10; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976); Marvin Meyer, “The Mithras Liturgy,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr., and John Dominic Crossan; Princeton Readings in Religions; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 179–92; Marvin Meyer, “PGM IV. 475–829,” in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (ed. Hans Dieter Betz; 2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 48–54; David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). The translations of passages in the “Mithras Liturgy” included in this essay are my own.

with text, translation, and commentary, entitled *The "Mithras Liturgy"*.² The text finds its place within a fourth-century magical codex found in Egypt (probably in Thebes) and ordinarily described by scholars as the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, Supplément grec 574). Dieterich thought the original text of the "Mithras Liturgy" was a liturgy from the mysteries of Mithras that had secondarily been worked into a codex of magic or ritual power; others have contended that the text is fundamentally at home within a codex of ritual power and the world of ritual power, as a text soliciting an oracular response from the divine. For his part, Betz concludes that the "Mithras Liturgy" occupies a place—"a precarious place," he admits,³ among several religious and philosophical traditions within Greco-Roman Egypt—a place that involves magic and knowledge of Mithraism interpreted in a Stoic manner with Hermetic overtones.

Here I assume that the text under discussion merits being called the "Mithras Liturgy." The rich history of scholarship on the text gives the title a nearly hallowed status in the scholarly discussion. Further, I propose, the text is indeed both Mithraic and liturgical, with authentic elements of Mithraic piety within a liturgical ritual for the ascent of the soul. According to Porphyry, writing *De antro nympharum* ("On the Cave of the Nymphs"), a fundamental goal of Mithraism was to guide the soul of the initiate in the descent into this mortal world and its ascent to the immortal world beyond: "the Persians, as mystagogues, initiate the *mystēs* by teaching him the downward way of the souls and their way back, and calling the place a grotto."⁴ The prominent Mithraic scholar Roger Beck agrees with Porphyry's understanding of Mithraism and the place of the

² The review of Betz' book by John Gee in *Review of Biblical Literature* (2005; <http://www.bookreviews.org>) illustrates one side of the debate about the Mithraic character of the "Mithras Liturgy." Gee originally wrote of the Betz volume, "The volume is elegant; the typesetting is all that one has come to expect from the publisher. The photographs are reasonably clear, although those in my edition are already yellowing; the index is magnificent. The commentary is erudite, learned, and deeply steeped in Hellenic philosophy. One could shower the book with bouquets were it not for one major problem: the text is simply not Mithraic." At the request of the editors of the *Review of Biblical Literature*, Gee modified his review to read as follows: "There is a simple reason why some of the greatest scholars of ancient Greek, Roman, and Mithraic religion, such as Cumont, Richard Reitzenstein, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Martin P. Nilsson, and Walter Burkert all rejected the idea that the text was a Mithras liturgy (pp. 1–5): the text is not Mithraic." I attempt to demonstrate in this essay that Gee is mistaken in his concluding comment.

³ Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, 37.

⁴ Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6, as cited in Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 211.

cave or Mithraeum within Mithraism,⁵ and the "Mithras Liturgy" offers a ritual for such an ascent. The text itself is untitled in the manuscript, and the leading terms that might be dubbed titular words—ἀπαθανατισμός, "immortalization," also given in verbal form, ἀπαθανατίζεσθαι, and πράξις, "ritual"—are descriptive terms that simply underscore the aforementioned liturgical goal of the Mithraic mysteries and the "Mithras Liturgy."

Here I assume, with a degree of hesitation, that the "Mithras Liturgy" occupies lines 475–834 of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris. Hans Dieter Betz has disputed this designation of the precise textual place within the manuscript, for some understandable reasons,⁶ and more recently Jaime Alvar has joined in with Betz.⁷ Betz notes that the body of the text is flanked in the manuscript by Homeric spells before and after. Just prior to what is judged to be the opening of the "Mithras Liturgy," the papyrus codex incorporates the following lines on account of their supposed value for the generation of ritual power:

Spell for restraining anger: "Will you dare to lift up your mighty spear against Zeus?" For friends: "Let . . . seize . . . , lest we become a source of joy for our enemies." "So speaking, he drove through the trench the single-hoofed horses." "And men gasping among grievous slaughters." "And they washed off their profuse sweat in the sea." "So Ares suffered, when Otos and mighty Ephialtes . . . him" (467–74).

At or near the conclusion of the text there are similar lines, with some mythological narrative:

"So speaking, he drove through the trench the single-hoofed horses." "And men gasping among grievous slaughters." "And they washed off their profuse sweat in the sea." "Will you dare to lift up your mighty spear against Zeus?" Zeus went up to the mountain with a golden bullock and a silver dagger. Upon all he bestowed a share, only to Amara did he not give, but he said, "Let go of what you have, and then you will receive, PSINŌTHER NŌPSITHER THERNŌPSI," and so on, as you like. "So Ares suffered, when Otos and mighty Ephialtes . . . him." Spell for restraining anger: "Will you dare to lift up your mighty spear against Zeus?" For friends: "Let . . . seize . . . , lest we become a source of joy for our enemies" (821–34).

⁵ Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85–87.

⁶ Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, 26–27.

⁷ Alvar, "Mithraism and Magic," 525. Both Betz and Alvar mention, among other things, the apparent paragraph marks in the papyrus text.

These lines are preceded by a Greek sentence that reads as follows: καὶ τὸ ὑπόμνημα ἔχει (820). Betz translates this sentence in such a way as to make it the very end of the “Mithras Liturgy,” and thus he avoids the issue of the Homeric lines fore and aft: “[With this] the memorandum has [finally] reached its completion.”⁸ I translate this sentence so as to introduce the Homeric lines constituting what might be written on the amulets: “And it has this text” (followed by the Homeric lines). One of the key points in the translation is the interpretation of the Greek term ὑπόμνημα. I retain the pattern of repetitive lines from Homer, but I believe my translation may communicate a better comprehension of the Greek—and it leaves us with a text comfortably, or uncomfortably, nestled between lines from Homer’s *Iliad*. I could imagine that the contours of the text may even have taken final form within the overall context of the codex itself, and that editorial work on the text may have integrated Homeric spells into the opening and closing of the “Mithras Liturgy.”

Hence, the extent of the present text of the “Mithras Liturgy,” as I cautiously propose, is through line 834 of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris. Theoretically, if one would be so disposed, the Homeric lines preceding the “Mithras Liturgy” itself could also be included in the liturgical text, to leave the textual contours embracing lines 467–834.

In this essay I argue that the “Mithras Liturgy” can be seen to illustrate both Mithraic and magical features. To the issues of mystery and magic in the “Mithras Liturgy” we now turn.

Mithras and Mystery in the “Mithras Liturgy”

The “Mithras Liturgy” contains an impressive number of features that seem to reflect a concern for Mithras and the mysteries of Mithras. Here we explore the text in order to highlight these features.

The “Mithras Liturgy” opens (if we may ignore the preceding Homeric lines) with an invocation prefacing the liturgy per se. The lines invoke Πρόνοια (“Providence”) and Ψυχή (Psyche, “Soul”), along with none other than “the great god Helios Mithras.” Betz sees this focus upon deified abstracts like Providence and Soul as a reflection of the Stoic concerns of the text.⁹ The opening reads:

⁸ Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 59, 225–26.

⁹ Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 88–90.

Be gracious to me, O Providence and Psyche, as I write these mysteries handed down, but <not> for profit. I request immortality for an only child, for an initiate of this our power. Moreover, O daughter, you must take the juices of herbs and spices, which will <be made known> to you at the end of my holy treatise. The great god Helios Mithras ordered this to be revealed to me by his archangel, so that I alone may ascend to heaven as an eagle and behold the universe (475–85).

In this passage mention is made of terms familiar from the mystery religions, including Mithraism: “mysteries” (μυστήρια) and “initiate” (μύστης). The term μυστήριον is actually used, in singular or plural form, four times in the “Mithras Liturgy” (lines 476, 723, 746, 794), and μύστης is used twice (lines 477, 744). In the present passage particular attention is directed to “the great god Helios Mithras” (ὁ μέγας θ(εὸς) Ἥλιος Μίθρας, 482). Mithras and Helios (or Sol) may be invoked in a variety of traditions during late antiquity, including Mithraic traditions, and in a similar way the two names and the two figures may be brought together in syncretistic fashion, as *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras* or some other entity (compare “Zeus Helios Mithra Sarapis,” *Papyri Graecae Magicae* V, 4). Mithras and Helios are the two leading personages in the mythology and iconography of Mithraism, where they are commonly distinguished—or are not. As Roger Beck notes, this sort of observation is a part of “the larger paradox under which Mithras both is and is not the Sun.”¹⁰ Such is also the case, paradoxically, in the “Mithras Liturgy,” where mention is made of Helios Mithras, yet Helios and Mithras are invoked in separate prayers and as separate beings in the ritual.

Within the opening of the “Mithras Liturgy,” the practitioner reciting the text asks to be lifted up for a vision and revelation. The initiate asks this, it is said, in the first person, “so that I alone may ascend to heaven as an eagle and behold the universe.” The Greek word here translated “eagle” is copied as αἰητης in the papyrus manuscript, and this spelling has sometimes been emended to read αἰ<τ>ητής, “inquirer,” after the editor Karl Preisendanz.¹¹ However, αἰητός is the Doric form of ἀετός or αἰετός, “eagle,” and according to Betz, David Martinez favors reading ε rather than η in the papyrus.¹² The eagle is a symbol of Zeus and Helios, and it is attested in

¹⁰ Beck, *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays* (Contemporary Thinkers on Religion: Collected Works; Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 75.

¹¹ Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (3 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1941).

¹² Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 100.

Mithraic sources. The relief work on a Mithraic stele from Hedderheim shows the torchbearer Cautes and, below him, an eagle, with wings outstretched, perched on a cosmic sphere with seven stars and grasping a thunderbolt in its claws.¹³ In his work *De abstinencia* (“On Abstinence”) 4.16, Porphyry refers to Mithraic initiates who were called eagles and falcons (and women, he says, who could be called hyenas).¹⁴ The image of the eagle is especially well suited for a text, like the “Mithras Liturgy,” that presents an initiate experiencing an ecstatic ascent and envisioning the profound things of the cosmos.

The ritual section of the “Mithras Liturgy,” I suggest, is structured around seven stages for the ascent of the soul. Betz offers a similar analysis, but with what he calls seven scenarios. I propose in this essay, as I have elsewhere, that the soul of the initiate encounters the following in the “Mithras Liturgy”: 1) the four elements; 2) the lower powers of the air; 3) Aion and the Aionic powers; 4) Helios; 5) the seven Fates; 6) the seven pole lords; and 7) Mithras himself. The use of numbered prayers in the text accentuates the likelihood of stages—even seven stages—in the “Mithras Liturgy.” If such seems to be the structure of the ritual, the sevenfold ascent of the soul recalls the use of the number seven within Mithraism in general, in particular in connection with progressive stages of initiation into the mysteries of Mithras. Seven initiatory stages are frequently indicated: *Corax*, *Nymphus* (or *Cryphius*), *Miles*, *Leo*, *Perses*, *Heliodromus*, and *Pater*. At Ostia and elsewhere, Mithraea can display archeological evidence of seven stages of liturgical use, such as the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, the floor of which has seven stations decorated with a variety of symbols. Another Mithraeum at Ostia has areas with seven arcs, a third has a floor mosaic with seven gates. According to Celsus, a Mithraic initiate climbed a ladder, or ascended, through seven heavenly gates associated with seven planets and seven metals and, it seems, seven days of the week, culminating with the day of the Sun (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22).

The place in the “Mithras Liturgy” for the elements and the winds is also paralleled in other Mithraic texts and monuments.¹⁵ According to the “Mithras Liturgy,” the initiate is to pass through the four elements (spirit,

¹³ For an excellent reproduction of this stele, see Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Königstein/Ts.: Hain, 1984), 346.

¹⁴ On the eagle within Mithraism, cf. also Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (EPRO [RGRW] 11; Leiden: Brill, 1968).

¹⁵ Betz (*The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 101–30) observes that in its treatment of the elements the “Mithras Liturgy” shows Stoic and Hermetic influences.

fire, water, and earthy substance—the first stage) in the process of being transformed and “born again” (μεταγεν<ν>ηθῶ):

First origin of my origin, AEĒIOYŌ,
 first beginning of my beginning, PPP SSS PHR[.],
 spirit of spirit, first of the spirit in me, MMM,
 fire given by god to my mixture of the mixtures in me,
 first of the fire in me, ĒU ĒIA EĒ,
 water of water, first of the water in me, ŌŌŌ AAA EEE,
 earthy substance, first of the earthy substance in me, YĒ YŌĒ,
 the complete body of me, NN child of mother NN,
 formed by a noble arm and an incorruptible right hand
 in a world without light and radiant,
 soulless and soulful, YĒI, AUI EUŌIE.

If it be your will, METERTA PHŌTH –
 METHARTHA PHĒRIĒ, elsewhere –
 IEREZATH,
 give me over to immortal birth
 and then to my underlying nature,
 so that, after the present need which is pressing me sorely,
 I may gaze upon the immortal beginning with the immortal spirit,
 ANCHREPHRENESOUPIRIGCH,
 with the immortal water,
 ERONOU I PARAKOUNĒTH,
 with the most steadfast air,
 EIOAĒ PSENABŌTH,
 that I may be born again in thought,
 KRAOCHRAX R OIM ENARCHOMAI,
 and the sacred spirit may breathe in me . . . (487–510).

Later in the ritual, in the description of the lower powers of the air (the second stage), the initiate meets powers on high—just a little higher than the world here below—including the winds. The text remains difficult to translate, but I suggest the following translation:

The course of the visible gods will appear through the disk of god, my father, and in similar fashion the so-called pipe, the origin of the ministering wind. For you will see it hanging from the sun's disk like a pipe. You will see the outflow of this object toward the regions westward, boundless as an east wind, if it is assigned to the regions of the east, and the other (the west wind), similarly, toward its own regions (547–55).

In other Mithraic texts and traditions, Celsus can indicate the importance of metallic elements within Mithraism. The Mithraic inscriptions of Santa Prisca mention one that “is piously reborn (*renatum*) and created (*creatum*) by sweet things.” Porphyry discusses “cosmic elements and regions”

within Mithraism (*De antro nympharum* 6–7).¹⁶ The four winds are also frequently depicted in the artwork of Mithraism. Further, the god is here called, with words reminiscent of the highest initiatory grade of Mithraism, “my father” (πατήρ μου).

Fire-breathing Aion is invoked in the third stage of ascent in the “Mithras Liturgy.” Aion is addressed by many different names and epithets in the “Mithras Liturgy,” and many of the names that are listed in the prayer are creative expressions and even *hapax legomena*. The reference to “the fourfold root” (reading δ-(τετρα-)ριζώματος for δ-λιζώματος [589–90]), if correct, may indicate the four elements.¹⁷ The list reads like this, in part:

Give ear to me,
 hearken to me, NN child of mother NN,
 O lord, you who have bound together with your breath
 the fiery bars of the fourfold root,
 O fire-walker, PENTITEROUNI,
 light-maker –
 others: encloser –
 SEMESILAM,
 fire-breather, PSYRINPHEU,
 fire-feeler, IAŌ,
 light-breather, ŌAI,
 fire-pleaser, ELOURE,
 beautiful light, AZAI,
 Aion, ACHBA,
 light-master, PEPPER PREPEMPIPI,
 fire-body, PHNOUĒNIOCH,
 light-giver,
 fire-sower, AREI EIKITA,
 fire-driver, GALLABALBA,
 light-forcer, AIŌ,
 fire-whirler, PYRICHIBOOSĒIA,
 light-mover, SANCHERŌB,
 thunder-shaker, IĒ ŌĒ IŌĒIŌ ... (587–600).

Following the invocation of names and epithets of Aion, along with magical words, the liturgy continues with glossolalia based on the seven Greek

¹⁶ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 406–11. Cf. also Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, on the elements.

¹⁷ Or conceivably the reference could indicate the four pillars supporting heaven, according to Egyptian lore (traditionally the arms and legs of the sky goddess Nut). Cf. the description of the seven Fates of heaven later in the “Mithras Liturgy”: “most holy guardians of the four pillars” (668–69); further discussion in Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 156–58.

vowels. These are to be uttered by the initiate, the text directs, "with fire and spirit" (617–18). Aion is a god of time, and within Mithraic traditions Aion seems to play a role in what David Ulansey calls "a fluid Mithraic-Orphic-Aionic syncretism."¹⁸ Reflecting upon the leontocephalic figure in Mithraic art, who holds keys and breathes fire in a manner similar to that of Aion in the "Mithras Liturgy," Ulansey emphasizes the connections among Aion, Mithras, and cosmic time, and he states, "Mithras is precisely the ruler of time, by virtue of his ability to shift the world ages from one aeon to the next by changing the cosmic spheres, and it is therefore completely predictable that we would find gravitating toward Mithras the various symbols for cosmic time available in the Hellenistic world."¹⁹

The fourth stage of ascent within the "Mithras Liturgy" involves breathing in from the divine and gazing into the rays of the sun, so as to meet and greet Helios and thereafter gain an audience with the highest god. Helios is depicted as "a youthful god, beautiful in appearance, with fiery hair, in a white tunic and a scarlet cloak, and wearing a fiery crown" (635–37). The client making use of the ritual is enjoined to utter "the fire greeting":

Greetings, O lord,
 great power, great might, king, greatest of gods,
 Helios, lord of heaven and earth, god of gods.
 Mighty is your breath,
 mighty is your strength, O lord (639–42).

Within Mithraism, as noted, Helios is prominent, and in Mithraic artwork Mithras and Helios—or Sol—are typically related to each other in a variety of ways. In Mithraic art Helios is often shown as crowned, with the sun's rays emanating from him, and Mithras and Helios banquet together, ride in a chariot together—and in artwork from Ponza and elsewhere they are pictured in an investiture scene (reminiscent of the "Mithras Liturgy") in which Mithras holds in his hand what may be interpreted as the shoulder of a bull.²⁰

¹⁸ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 122.

¹⁹ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 122–24. Here we may also recall that Reinhold Merkelbach refers to the "Mithras Liturgy" as the "Pschai-Aion-Liturgie" (Merkelbach and Totti, *Abrasax*). Franz Cumont, whose scholarly work on Mithraism dominated the field for many years, assumed that the lion-headed god of Mithraism was a representation of Zurvan, the god of infinite time in Iranian thought.

²⁰ For reproductions of the Mithraic investiture scene, see Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 104.

Mithras as the Highest God in the "Mithras Liturgy"

In the culmination of the ritual in the "Mithras Liturgy," experienced as the seventh stage of ecstatic ascent, the initiate has a vision of divine Mithras himself—though the deity is not named Mithras here. The appearance of Mithras is described in a way familiar from portrayals of Mithras within Mithraic iconography, and not only is he said to be wearing "trousers" (ἀναξυρίδες), but he is also holding something significant in his hand:

look in the air and you will see lightning bolts going down, lights flashing, the earth shaking, and a god descending, a god immensely great, with a bright appearance, youthful, golden-haired, wearing a white tunic, a golden crown, and trousers, and holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young bull. This is the Bear that moves heaven and turns it around, moving upward and downward in accordance with the hour. Then you will see lightning bolts leaping from his eyes and stars from his body (693–704).

The initiate is instructed to bellow, perhaps like a bull, long and hard, kiss the amulets, and say,

Greetings, O lord, master of the water.
 Greetings, O founder of the earth.
 Greetings, O ruler of the wind.
 O bright lightener,
 PROPROPHEGGĒ EMETHIRI ARTENTEPI THĒTH
 MIMEŌ YENARŌ PHYRCHECHŌ PSĒRI DARIŌ
 PHRĒ PHRĒLBA.

Give revelation, lord, concerning the matter of NN.
 O lord, though born again, I am passing away,
 though growing and having grown, I am dying,
 though born from a life-generating birth, I am passing on,
 released to death,
 as you have founded,
 as you have decreed
 and have established the mystery.
 I am PHEROURA MIOURI (708–24).

Through the revelation promised in the "Mithras Liturgy," death and rebirth are anticipated, and the initiate announces that he or she, in dying, is born again.

The identification of the bull's shoulder in the "Mithras Liturgy" is especially important for our evaluation of the text. The bull's shoulder held by Mithras is said to represent the Bear, most probably the constellation *Ursus maior*, the Great Bear, which was called the bull's shoulder in

Egypt.²¹ The connection of Mithras with a bull's shoulder and a bullish constellation calls to mind the investiture scene in Mithraic iconography, and it also places Mithras in the company of the bull of heaven. Throughout Mithraic art the scene of Mithras killing the bull (Mithras *tauroktonos*) dominates many a Mithraeum, and although the "Mithras Liturgy" does not allude directly to a tauroctony, the image of Mithras holding the shoulder of the bull maintains a connection with the most dramatic monument in Mithraic mythology and iconography.

Such an astronomical understanding of Mithras and the bull's shoulder in the "Mithras Liturgy" coheres with the current dominant astronomical paradigm of Mithraism proposed by Roger Beck, David Ulansey, and other scholars.²² The depiction of lightning bolts coming from the eyes and stars from the body of Mithras also does so, and this description of Mithras may bring to mind the way in which the gaze of Mithras and his star-studded cape are shown in a fresco like the one from the Mithraeum at Marino, Italy.²³ In the "Mithras Liturgy," Mithras, as the highest god and the ruler of the universe, in the company of the seven Fates (at the fifth stage) and the seven pole lords (at the sixth stage),²⁴ grabs onto the constellation called the bull's shoulder and cranks the vault of the sky around—so overwhelming is his cosmic power. The heavenly pole is the cosmic pivot, and the sky revolves around it, thanks to Mithras. In the peculiar words of the "Mithras Liturgy," the Bear "moves heaven and turns it around (*ἀντιστρέφουσα*), moving upward and downward in accordance with the hour" (700–02). The Greek verb *ἀντιστρέφειν* means

²¹ Cf. the discussion in Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, 183–85. It is also possible, though less likely, that the bull's shoulder held by Mithras may represent the constellation *Ursus minor*, the Little Bear.

²² Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*; Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*. On the earlier paradigm of Mithraism based upon Iranian and Zoroastrian sources, cf. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Dover, 1956); idem, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (2 vols.; Brussels: H. Lamertin, 1896–1899).

²³ For a reproduction of the scene of Mithras with gaze and cape, see Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, the dust jacket or cover.

²⁴ The seven Fates and the seven pole lords in the "Mithras Liturgy" are portrayed in typical Egyptian fashion: the seven Fates, with the faces of asps, are dressed in linen and carry golden wands, and the seven pole lords, with the faces of bulls, are dressed in linen loincloths and carry golden diadems. Some of the names resemble the names of decans. The seven Fates, which may be compared with the seven Hathors of Egyptian lore, may be related to the Pleiades or the Great Bear (*Ursus maior*), and the seven pole lords may be related to the Little Bear (*Ursus minor*). Cf. the discussion in Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, 174–80.

“to turn to the other side” or “to turn back”; Betz does not know what to do with this expression, and Martinez, in Betz’ book, translates the clause “this is the Bear which moves and turns the heavenly vault around in the opposite direction, with its upward and downward seasonal revolutions.”²⁵ I would suggest a possible alternative translation, which indicates that the Bear “moves heaven and turns it around” or “turns it back.” It seems to me that the most plausible explanation for these words may build upon the theory of Ulansey, who proposes that the initiates of Mithraism were convinced that Mithras as the savior of the universe is responsible for the astronomical precession of the equinoxes, the progressive change of the earth’s orientation in space caused by a wobble in the earth’s rotation, discovered by Hipparchus. Ulansey explains the origins of Mithraism in summary fashion as follows:

The fact that a highly appropriate symbol for the precession would be the death of a bull (because the last constellation the spring equinox had been in, according to Hipparchus’ discovery, was Taurus the Bull) was then combined with the fact that the constellation Perseus lay directly above Taurus, producing the image of the bull being killed by the hero directly above him. This image signified the god’s tremendous power, which enabled him to end the Age of the Bull by moving the entire universe...²⁶

To be sure, the details of Ulansey’s theory may be debated, but the essential point is worth serious consideration. It is through his might in moving the universe that Mithras, with connections to Perseus, comes to be the *kosmokrator*.²⁷

Magic and Ritual Power in the “Mithras Liturgy”

The “Mithras Liturgy” is to be read, we have seen, within a handbook of magic and ritual power, a grimoire of 36 leaves and 3274 lines that is aptly named the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris. The Greek text of the “Mithras Liturgy” is permeated with expressions of magical power that are worked into the very fabric of the piece, in the liturgical section as well as a section of “instruction for the ritual” (750) that is appended to the ritual. Doubtless the approach of Dieterich, which suggests a distinction between the

²⁵ Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*, 184.

²⁶ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 93.

²⁷ We should acknowledge that the star map indicated in the “Mithras Liturgy” shows similarities to but also differences from star maps within Mithraea.

primary Mithraic liturgy and the secondary magical adaptation, must be modified. In the "Mithras Liturgy" motifs from magic and ritual power are constituent elements in the text.

Among the specific magical features in the "Mithras Liturgy" are descriptions of breathing techniques, recipes, rituals, amulets, and words of ritual power (*vores magicae*). In the ascent to and through the lower powers of the air, the text instructs the practitioner as follows:

Draw in breath from the rays, drawing up three times as much as you can, and you will see yourself being lifted up and ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in midair. You will hear nothing either of humanity or of any other living thing, nor in that hour will you see anything of mortal affairs on earth, but rather you will see all immortal things (537–44).

In the instructions for the use of the mystery there are recipes for feeding, embalming, and mummifying a scarab beetle, and preparing immortalization ointment (lines 750–71), as well as making ritual salve for the eyes (lines 772–78) and licking up a formula written with the juice of the ken-tritis plant in order to converse with the sun god (lines 778–92). There are also descriptions of the relevant herbs and plants, and where they might be found (lines 798–813). Rituals involving other people, and alternative rituals, are also mentioned. The "Mithras Liturgy" closes (wherever that might be, as discussed above) with directions for the construction of amulets (lines 813 and following).

The words of power in the "Mithras Liturgy" illustrate a variety of expressions typical of the spells in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris and the magical papyri in general. Some *vores magicae* may be onomatopoeic (PPP, uttering a popping sound, possibly like thunder, and SSS, uttering a hissing sound), symbolic or linguistic (AEËIOYÏ, chanting the Greek vowels), or glossolalic (with the sounds of vowels or other series of letters, in ecstasy). Some names and words of power in the "Mithras Liturgy" seem to come from identifiable languages, while the origin of others cannot be identified. Among words from known languages are PROPROPHEGGË, perhaps "primal brightener," and PSYCHÏ[N] DEMOU PROCHÏ PRÏA, from Greek; ARARMACHËS, "Horus of the horizon," and PHRË, "Re," the sun god,²⁸ from Egyptian; and SEMESILAM, "eternal sun," and IAÏ, a version of the tetragrammaton, from Hebrew or another Semitic language. At times letters may be manipulated for the sake of power, for example,

²⁸ In the light of the use of PHRË, perhaps we may restore PHR[Ë] in line 488 (see above).

PSINŌTHER NŌPSITHER THERNŌPSI, permutations of the expression “the son of god” in Egyptian, and IAŌ ŌAI AIŌ, permutations of the ineffable name of the Jewish God. The last four letters of the name PEPPER PREPEMPIPI may visually reproduce the four Hebrew letters of the Jewish tetragrammaton.²⁹

In these ways the “Mithras Liturgy” functions as a text in a fourth-century magical codex, used by an Egyptian magos and presented on behalf of clients who looked to channel the power of the supernatural and the divine. In the case of the “Mithras Liturgy,” the ritual power of the text displays a devotion to Mithras and his mysteries that incorporates the way of ritual power. In his analysis of Mithraism and the “Mithras Liturgy,” Jaime Alvar also recognizes the Mithraic motifs in the “Mithras Liturgy,” and he argues that magical practitioners “saw such motifs as a means of offering their clients the advantages of initiation, but at lower economic, social and psychological expense.”³⁰ In the words of Alvar, the sort of Mithraism found in the “Mithras Liturgy” may be described as “a magical short-cut” to knowledge and enlightenment.³¹

With some such understanding of the “Mithras Liturgy,” the Mithraic mysteries begin to bring to manifestation more diversity in the traditions of Mithras than might have been imagined before.

Secrecy and Silence in the “Mithras Liturgy”

Along with mystery and magic, the “Mithras Liturgy” presents the related concepts of secrecy and silence, but it does so in its own special way. To the extent that the “Mithras Liturgy” reflects themes and concerns of the mysteries of Mithras, it may share the interests of the mysteries in keeping secret the deep things of life and the experience of initiation. Furthermore, the “Mithras Liturgy” is part of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris, and so it is included in a collection that often dictates secrecy and silence about the spells of ritual power. The texts in the magical codex contain a substantial number of references enjoining the person using the spell to keep it secret. In an exorcistic spell found later on in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (lines 1227–64) and entitled “Excellent spell for driving out demons,” the user is commanded, immediately after the description of

²⁹ Cf. Meyer, “The Mithras Liturgy,” 182.

³⁰ Alvar, “Mithraism and Magic,” 543.

³¹ Alvar, “Mithraism and Magic,” 544.

the magical procedure to be employed, "Keep it secret; it is proven."³² This requirement of secrecy, repeated elsewhere in magical texts, may make more emphatic the esoteric and mysterious character of the spells, which already is clear from the frequently obscure and provocative contents of the spells, with their *voces magicae*, *charaktères*, ring letters, signs, and similar features. Still, some of the designations of silence in the magical papyri, I suspect, may well be more artificial and symbolic than actual in their realization. It may be that the conceit of the spells is that they are kept secret, but in reality a knowledge of the spells and a belief in their efficacy are crucial to bring about a desired result.³³

In the "Mithras Liturgy" there is a passage that is particularly interesting from the perspective of keeping the liturgy secret. At the opening of the instructions for the use of the mystery, several lines describe how a solitary initiate will respond to the divine disclosure and how a fellow initiate may share the bliss. The passage begins by addressing the solitary initiate:

After you have said these things, he (the highest god) will immediately respond with a revelation. You will grow weak in soul and will not be in yourself when he answers you. He speaks the oracle to you in verse, and after speaking he will depart. You remain silent, since you will be able to comprehend all these matters by yourself, for at a later time you will remember infallibly the things spoken by the great god, even if the oracle contained myriads of verses (724–32).

This section depicts the recipient of revelation in ecstasy while the oracle is delivered, as oracles were once delivered at Delphi, in verse,³⁴ and the devotee remains silent and comes to understand and remember the oracular utterance. Here silence is mentioned apparently not as secretive silence but rather as instructive silence. One is to be still and know what the god is uttering.

The passage continues with instructions for the inclusion of another person:

If you also wish to use a fellow initiate, so that he alone may hear with you the things spoken, let him remain pure together with you for <seven> days and abstain from meat and the bath. Even if you are alone, and you

³² This text is presented and discussed in Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Mythos; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 43–44.

³³ In general, cf. Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 1–6.

³⁴ Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* ("Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse").

undertake the things communicated by the god, you speak as though prophesying in ecstasy. And if you also wish to show him, judge whether he is completely worthy as a person. Treat him as if in his place you were being judged in the matter of immortalization, and whisper to him the first prayer, the beginning of which is "First origin of my origin, AEE̅IOYŌ." Say the successive things as an initiate, over his head, in a soft voice, so that he may not hear, as you are anointing his face with the mystery (732–46).

In this section the portion relevant for the present discussion is the description of how the additional person is to be addressed and what might be his response. The initiate is to speak in a whisper, *sotto voce*, and is to do so over the head of the fellow initiate. This murmuring, as Betz describes it, is also known from other sources.³⁵ Is the practitioner to stand behind the second individual, as in the exorcistic spell discussed above,³⁶ and utter the words softly over the person's head—thus causing the words, barely discernable, to flow over the head and face? The fellow initiate may not be able to hear with any clarity, but his face is anointed, and thus he may be able to see clearly, to behold the mystery. In the very next line (747) this ritual is called ἀπαθανατισμός, "immortalization."

Of special significance in the "Mithras Liturgy" is the invocation of σιγή, "silence," several times within the ritual pertaining to the lower powers of the air (lines 558–60, 573, 578, 582). It should be noted that this is indeed an invocation, with the nominal and not the verbal form of "silence." Silence is invoked, addressed, and referred to as "symbol of the living, incorruptible god." As symbol, silence is a personified expression of the divine silence, well known from Gnostic and other sources.³⁷ Here silence is asked to provide protection, with words of power: "Guard me, silence, NECHTHEIR THANMELOU." Silence may also be understood to be an abstract concept, and it may reflect the tendency in Stoic contexts to personify what is abstract, as is also seen with Πρόνοια ("Providence"), Ψυχή ("Soul"), and Τύχαι ("Fates," in the plural) elsewhere in the "Mithras Liturgy." But there is nothing abstract about the way in which the prayer and invocation σιγή are to be offered. The text prefaces the first words addressed to σιγή with a statement about how the practitioner is to pray: "So at once put your right finger on your mouth and say (the prayer)."

³⁵ Cf., for example, with Betz, Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* ("The Error of the Pagan Religions") 22.1; Apuleius of Madauros, *Metamorphoses* 1.3.

³⁶ "Place olive branches before him (the patient) and stand behind him and say (the spell)"; Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 43.

³⁷ Discussion in Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, 147–48.

This bodily position, with the right finger on mouth, recalls the figure of Harpocrates, Horus the child, in Egyptian art, and his childish pose, appearing to be sucking on his fingers, was taken in later texts and traditions such as the "Mithras Liturgy" as a visual recommendation of silence.³⁸ Hence, the "Mithras Liturgy" both commands silence and also invokes silence.

The roles of mystery, magic, and silence in the "Mithras Liturgy" are complex, but these features of the text coalesce in a liturgical document celebrating mystery and magic within the syncretistic context of Egypt in antiquity and late antiquity. Employing words of power and enlightenment, and the silence of mystery and magic, the "Mithras Liturgy" leads the initiate to ecstasy and divinity. And with its mystery and its magic, the "Mithras Liturgy" shows what an experience of the mysteries of Mithras could look like in the Greco-Egyptian world of *mageia*, *magia*, *hik*—the world of magic and ritual power.

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³⁸ Cf. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* ("Isis and Osiris") 68.

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THE SECRET HYMN IN HERMETIC TEXTS

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Not all hymns cleave the skies with shouts of praise; some are secret, “hidden in silence,” considered essentially spiritual acts, and yet borrow their name from the louder part of ritual performances. This is the case with the hymns in the XIIIth Hermetic Tractate and in the Hermetic Nag Hammadi text *On the Eighth and the Ninth* (NHC VI, 52–63), and probably also with the hymns and hymn-like passages in other parts of Hermetic literature. A brief survey of the occurrences of hymns in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and related texts¹ may be the best way to present the scope of this paper:

Towards the end of the *Poimandres* (CH I, 31–32), when the “I” of the text has obtained *gnosis* through the teachings of Poimandres and has even become a preacher of the new insight himself, he is said to “give praise (*eulogia*) to God the father out of his soul and all his strength.” Then follows a ninefold hymnic veneration of God as *hagios*, three times in the third, and then six times in the second person. This litany is consecrated as “a pure sacrifice in words,” and followed by a prayer in which the adept petitions never to fall away from *gnosis*, pledges to work for the illumination of those in *agnoia*, and affirms his own journey into life and light. The repeated *hagios* may reflect the praise of the *seraphim* in Isa 6:3 and other Jewish texts; indeed, much of the form and the vocabulary of the text suggests substantial influence from Hellenistic Judaism.²

¹ *Corpus Hermeticum* I–IV (ed. Arthur D. Nock & A.-J. Festugiere; Paris: Société d'édition “Les Belles lettres”, 1945–54). There is an excellent English translation: 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) with a learned and bibliographically meticulous commentary. For the Coptic text *On the Eighth and the Ninth*, cf. Martin Krause & Pahor Labib, *Gnostische und hermetische Schriften aus Codex II und Codex VI* (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo. Koptische Reihe 2; Glückstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1971), 170–84 with German translation. Cf. also the edition (with English translation) by Peter A. Dirkse, James Brashler & Douglas M. Parrott in *The Coptic Gnostic Library* (ed. James M. Robinson; Vol. 3; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 341–73.

² C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, (1935) 1964), 194–200.

The Fifth tractate of *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH V, 10–11) deals with God and nature, and not least the role of contemplation; in continuation of these teachings it concludes with a subtle mixture of considerations on the impossibility of praise together with the offering of an actual hymn. The intellectual character of the hymn provides a clue, to which we shall return, pointing to the role of hymns in these texts in general.

In the XIIIth tractate—R. Reitzenstein’s famous “*Lesemysterium*”—the long hymn likewise occurs towards the end, in CH XIII, 17–20, as a secret text that Tat learns from his father Hermes Trismegistus. It is the final lesson in a progressive religious education, and it puts Tat in a position to extend his own praise to God from his own heart. It is quite obvious from the context that the performance of the hymn coincides with the spiritual breakthrough of the adept, in this case Tat, but potentially any devoted reader of the text. In addition, Reitzenstein observed a certain ritual character, perhaps a progressive initiatory structure, in the text. Both observations contributed to his idea of the *Lesemysterium*, a text that performs a mystery initiation on its reader and at the same time causes an illumination of his mind. He emphasized that the text was also a *Lehrschrift* and thus combined teaching with performance.³

Reitzenstein’s idea continues to be of interest in the study of Hermetic and Gnostic texts,⁴ and justly so, but it was probably never a very precise idea. If a *Lesemysterium* is a text that combines spiritual teaching (which may be instrumental towards the spiritual breakthrough of its reader) with ritual performance, then what exactly identifies it as a ritual performance? While Reitzenstein seems to have thought in terms of structures of initiation, a more obvious answer, at least in CH XIII, is the hymn itself. The hymn is a well-known element in the liturgy of all the traditions relevant to the formation of Hermetism, and when the hymn addresses gods and other entities, it establishes the dramatic interpersonal element pointed out by Jan Assmann as characteristic of hymns.⁵ To address somebody, gods or humans, is also by implication to establish a here and now

³ Richard Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), 52 and 64.

⁴ Cf. Einar Thomassen, “Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections on the Gospel of Truth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions* (ed. Søren Giversen, Tage Petersen & Jørgen Podemann Sørensen; Historisk-Filosofiske Skrifter (Det kongelige danske videnskabernes selskab) 26; Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2002), 35–45, especially p. 42. J. Peter Södergård, *The Hermetic Piety of the Mind*, (ConBNT 41; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 112–20.

⁵ Jan Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* (Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1999), 62–63.

in which to speak—and when gods or God are addressed, the speech becomes by definition a ritual performance.

The Coptic Nag Hammadi text *On the Eighth and the Ninth* provides a very similar context for a hymn (NHC VI, 58–61). In describing spiritual progress whose culmination is denoted by the hymn, this text is even more explicit than CH XIII. The hymn is a mental act, and during the illumination, of which it is the verbal counterpart, the adept sees the angels of the eighth singing a hymn to the ninth and the powers in it. Whether the eighth and the ninth are heavens, firmaments or more abstract stages or levels of being is nowhere explicit, but what is important is that the hymn of an adept may here be understood as an imitation of the liturgy performed by celestial beings.

At the end of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Tractate XVIII deals extensively with the nature of eulogy and hymns. At least one aim of the text is to demonstrate the analogous nature of musical, cosmic and divine harmony, and as the argument goes on, the text turns more and more into eulogy of God and the divine (CH XVIII, 10–11) without, however, addressing or invoking God explicitly. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the text is incomplete. A hymn with straightforward invocations might have made up a proper culmination of all the arguments for praising God.

The *Kore Kosmou*, “The Eye of the World” is likewise an incomplete tractate. In the last paragraph (§ 70), Horus utters his wish to learn the hymn that Isis and Osiris had to learn in order to ascend to the Lord of the All. The original full text would probably have ended with this hymn.

The *Asclepius*, the longest of all the Hermetic tractates, called *Logos teleios* or “The Perfect Discourse” in Greek fragments, also ends in a hymn: In the last paragraph, after the final teachings, Asclepius suggests an offering of incense to accompany the prayer of thanksgiving. Hermes, however, rejects the idea as sacrilege and states that praise and eulogy are the only legitimate forms of worship. Then follows the hymn of gratitude and *gnosis*. In the Coptic version (NHC VI, 8), this hymn stands just before the main text of *Asclepius*. It will thus have been considered a text in its own right.

It should be mentioned that two short tractates, CH III and XVI come rather close to hymns in structure and wording. CH III begins with the words *doxa pantôn ho theos...*, “the glory of everything is God...,” and already Nock considered the form of the text as that of a hymn in prose.⁶

⁶ Nock & Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum* I, 43; cf. Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, “The Egyptian Background of the *Hieros logos* (CH III),” in *Apocryphon Severini: Presented to Søren Giversen* (ed. Per Bilde et al.; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 215–25 at 216.

CH XVI begins, after a preface in §§ 1–2, *ton theon epikalesamenos*, “by invoking God.” There follows a number of divine epithets none of which, however, is in the vocative; nor is there, grammatically speaking, an actual invocation. Nevertheless, being an exposé of the nature and properties of the divine, the text preserves very much of the structure of a hymn,⁷ albeit a very philosophical one. The mixture of teachings and hymn found here and in CH V, 10–11 is of great interest as an example of the development of novel genres of religious literature in the centuries around the beginning of the common era.

Even where teachings and hymn are clearly distinct, their occurrence within the same text is of great interest. Not only does this correspond to what Wilhelm Bousset⁸ called the outstanding achievement of the Jewish synagogue: the creation of a service consisting basically of teachings followed by prayer and priestly blessings; above all the hymn lends to the text the character of a performance, while the teachings invest the performance with core elements of human subjectivity. To our Cartesian eyes, ritual performances may seem very different from religious teachings and devotional reading; but again, in the centuries around the beginning of the C.E., traditional forms of religion were in a process of change, and the novel *religio mentis* had to find expression through modified traditional forms of religious literature. On the following pages, we shall attempt to describe more thoroughly the structural and functional relation between hymns and religious teachings in the Hermetic texts.

The Hymn and Gnosis

A closer inquiry into the religious aim of the hymn in the context of the Hermetic texts reveals that the hymn is closely linked with *gnosis*, understood as a spiritual breakthrough and probably also as a more permanent state of spiritual bliss following that breakthrough. In Poimandres, the hymn is preceded by passages about the sober awakening (*nêpsis*) of the soul from the sleep of the body, and about closed eyes transformed into true vision. The hymn is eventually recited at full strength “from the soul,”

⁷ Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, “Ancient Egyptian Religious Thought and the XVIth Hermetic Tractate,” *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions* (ed. Gertie Englund; Boreas 20; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989), 48–53.

⁸ Cf. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (HNT 21; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1966), 172–76.

as it is filled with a divine spirit of truth (*theopnous genomenos tês alêtheias êlthon*). The last very compact sentence unifies the spiritual breakthrough and the ritual performance: *êlthon*, "I have come." In Classical Egyptian ritual texts *jj.n.j*, "I have come," is the traditional expression of an immediate ritual context: "I have come" or "The king has come" is the phrase that denotes the ritual situation, which is then further interpreted, as in this passage from a hymn to Isis in her temple at Philae:

The son of Re, Ptolemy, *has come* before you, Lady of Life,
On this day on which you have gloriously appeared,
to tie onto you the Uraeus- Diadem
to fasten onto you the Mighty One...⁹

The phrases "I have come" or "N has come" are also very common in mortuary literature,¹⁰ where they denote the ritual presence of the deceased person.

In *Corpus Hermeticum V*, the hymnic passages are more continuous with the preceding teachings; these, however, urge the adept to realize that the invisible transcendent god is in fact most visible: "O this vision, child, is the most blissful one, to see all this in one decisive moment: the immovable one in movement, the invisible one visible in what he makes: the very order of the world and this world of order."¹¹ The text goes on to recommend consideration of all the marvels of nature as the means to arrive at this realization or spiritual breakthrough. In pointing out all the creations and designs that bear witness to the greatness of the creator, the text gradually takes on the character of eulogy. As the eulogy becomes more and more intense, the image of God becomes more transcendent and abstract, but at the same time explicitly pantheistic: "There is nothing that he is not."

At this point (CH V, 10), at the very climax of this eulogistic expression of, transcendence and pantheism, there is a shift of grammatical person, and in a series of invocations, God becomes the direct addressee of the rest of the text. We may thus safely say that the hymn in CH V is the culmination of all the measures taken to reach that most blissful vision or spiritual breakthrough, which is the religious goal of the text.

⁹ Louis V. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 11.

¹⁰ E.g. Coff. T. I, 116; IV, 254; IV, 345.

¹¹ CH V, 5; my translation.

Corpus Hermeticum XIII, the Nag Hammadi *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, the *Kore Kosmou* and the *Asclepius* are dialogues in which the hymn is taught by a teacher to a less experienced adept. In all these four examples, the hymn is the explicit instrument in achieving the spiritual breakthrough or *gnosis*.¹² In CH XIII, it is called the hymn of *palingenesia* (§ 16), and the context leaves no doubt as to what it means to be born again. In CH XIII, 21, after the hymn has been silently recited or processed through the mind, the adept (*Tat*) declares that his mind (*nous*) is fully illuminated. Hermes has learnt the hymn in the 8th heaven (§ 15), presumably from angels singing the praise of the 9th heaven. To *Tat*, or to the adept, it is introduced as *harmozousê eulogia*, which may be cautiously translated as a “fitting” or “appropriate” hymn.¹³ A teacher like Hermes Trismegistus would, however, hardly need to recommend his teachings as somehow relevant or to the point. It is much more likely that *harmozousê* refers to the capacity of the hymn to establish a connection or a correspondence between the adept and God, very much like the harmonies and correspondences in music. The incomplete tractate XVIII seems to have made quite a point of the analogy between musical harmonies and hymns and eulogies “in tune with” the divine and the universe.

In the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, the book with the hymn is given the title “The Eighth reveals the Ninth.” This must imply that the hymn is or causes a revelation and takes the adept from the 8th to the 9th heaven, very much like the hymn in CH XIII was said to have been revealed by Poimandres for use in the 8th heaven (sc. as a means to reach the ninth). In both tractates the hymn must be understood somehow to reflect the song of the angels in the 8th heaven.

The *Kore Kosmou* and the *Asclepius* are without any reference to this Jewish or Babylonian hierarchy of the heavenly regions and their population of angels. In the *Kore Kosmou* the hymn is said to have given Isis and Osiris access to Heaven, not only because hymns please God, but also because the invocation of the sole Lord fills the space, just as the holy voice of God filled the universe when he imposed his order on it (§ 62). To invoke God is thus somehow to re-establish contiguity with the source of

¹² Cf. Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Mental Faculties and Cosmic Levels in *The Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI, 6) and Related Hermetic Writings,” in *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions* (ed. Søren Giversen, Tage Petersen & Jørgen Podemann Sørensen; Historisk-Filosofiske Skrifter (Det kongelige danske videnskabernes selskab) 26; Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters 2002), 73–83.

¹³ Nock & Festugiere: “bien adapté,” *Corpus hermeticum* II, 207.

being. There is probably also a mental dimension of this hymnic return to primeval conditions; when Horus asks to learn the hymn, Isis urges him to be aware or pay close attention (*prosechein*). That is where the text ends abruptly, and we are never given the text of the hymn, nor anything concerning the result of Horus knowing it. The awareness urged upon Horus, however, might suggest that, as in the other cases, the mental processing of the hymn was also here of some significance.

The *Asclepius* leaves no doubt about the connection or even the coincidence of hymn and gnosis, but compared to the other contexts it is less explicit as to the religious aim of the hymn. It agrees, however, not only with CH XIII and the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, but also with the *Poimandres* (CH I, 31), in regarding the hymn as a spiritual sacrifice and an offering in words. Against the background of the radically spiritualized character of Hermetism that tends to silence hymns and considers even the faintest scent of incense as sacrilege, the insistence on sacrifice is remarkable. It must mean that, as the only legitimate kind of worship, the hymn carries out the tasks of sacrifice or somehow works in a manner analogous with sacrifice.

The Jewish and the Ancient Egyptian Roots

Thus far, we have identified two important aspects of the Hermetic hymn: its cosmological and its ritual setting. The actual hymn in any Hermetic text is, of course, designed to be performed or processed in the mind, "hidden in silence," by the reader or user of the text. The human and earthly *Lesemysterium*, however, corresponds to and enacts a heavenly liturgy; it makes the reader participate in the praise of the angels of the 8th or even the 9th heaven. The ritual identification of human worship with the heavenly praise by the cherubim or seraphin as in Septuagintal and later Jewish understanding of Ezekiel 1 and 3:12 or Isaiah 6:2–4 is still current in modern Jewish understandings of the *Qedushah*,¹⁴ the third of the eighteen benedictions of the *Shemoneh esreh*, and it seems to go back at least to the time of the Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*.¹⁵ In late antique and subsequent Jewish mysticism, the heavenly service

¹⁴ I am grateful to Caroline Henriques, Sara Theils and Hanne Kjærgaard Walker for valuable hints and guidance concerning Jewish parallels of the Hermetic hymns.

¹⁵ 11Q17 vii 709; 4Q405 ii 21–22:7–9, cf. Richard Bauckham, "Creation's Praise of God in the Book of Revelation," *BTB* 38 (2008): 55–63.

has a cosmological setting reflecting the hierarchical construction of the heavens and their angelic inhabitants as we find it in *1 En.* 39:12–13 and in later Hekhalot literature. The hymns of the Hekhalot literature are said to have been heard by Rabbi Akiva as the prototype of the merkavah-mystic.¹⁶ This does not prove that they date back to the first or second century, but we may be pretty sure that, in the first centuries C.E., the ritual identification of hymnic praise with celestial, angelic liturgy was understood in the light of heavenly levels or hekhalot. As we have already seen, the Hermetic texts themselves show that progression or ascent through heavenly levels were expressions of mental progress or spiritual ascent, very much as in later Jewish mysticism. For the hekhalot-literature, Peter Schäfer has coined the term *unio liturgica* to account for the kind of mystical union to be achieved by the merkavah-adept: to participate, on behalf of his earthly congregation, in the heavenly liturgy.¹⁷ In the Hermetic texts, however, the traditional Jewish seven celestial levels were no longer compulsory. CH XIII and *The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* add two more levels, and the *Kore kosmou* has no such hierarchy. Nevertheless, the hymn is used by Isis and Osiris in order to re-ascent to the heavenly abodes of the gods.

Hymns were, however, also in ancient Egypt a means of entering into connection with the divine, and Jan Assmann¹⁸ has in fact borrowed the idea of *unio liturgica* from Peter Schäfer in order to account for the role of hymns in New Kingdom mortuary literature. Hymns, especially those addressed to the Sun-god and Osiris, were always important in ancient Egyptian mortuary literature; in the Old Kingdom, there were no mortuary texts in non-royal tombs, but on the east wall of the burial chamber of the pyramid of king Pepi I (who died in 2255 B.C.E.) we find the following short hymn to the Sun-god, probably one of the oldest hymns in the world:¹⁹

¹⁶ Peter Schäfer, *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991), 72–73 & 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160–62.

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, “Unio liturgica. Die kultische Einstimmung in Götterweltlichen Lobpreis als Grundmotiv “esoterischer” Überlieferung im alten Ägypten,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 65; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 37–60; *idem*, *Tod und Jenseits im alten Ägypten* (München: C.H. Beck, 2003), 501–18.

¹⁹ Jean Leclant, *Les textes de la pyramide de Pepy Ier 1–2* (Vol. 2; Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale 2001), Pl. III, 8–10. My translation follows this complete edition of the oldest version of Utterance 456. The two younger versions are third person texts that

Hail to you, Great One, son of a Great One!
 The roof of the sanctuary shall be lifted for you!
 The temple walls shall give place to you!
 The locks of heaven shall open to you!
 The movements of the sunlight shall be released for you!
 Hail to you, Single One, enduring every day!
 Horus shall come, the wide-striding one shall come!
 He who has power over the horizon shall come, he who has power over the
 gods!
 Hail to you, *ba* who is in your blood!
 Single one, said his father; Knowledge, said the gods,
 He who assumes his place at the zenith of the sky, where his heart is at
 rest.
 You shall traverse the sky in your course!
 You shall travel north and south during your journey!
 He who knows them, these utterances of Re,
 He who recites them, these ritual formulae of Harakhti,
 He shall be one known by Re,
 He shall be a friend of Harakhti.
 I do know them, these utterances of Re,
 I do recite them, these ritual formulae of Harakhti,
 I shall be one known by Re,
 I shall be a friend of Harakhti,
 I shall be taken by the arm to heaven as a follower of Re. (Pyr. 852–56)

At the time of Pepi I, mortuary literature was a relatively new invention in Egypt. In this particular text, Utterance 456, we are fortunate to have a glimpse of how this new literature—that grew into the most comprehensive literary achievement preserved from ancient Egypt—might be composed. The text consists in a hymn used in the worship of the Sun-god—or at least selected passages from such a hymn—to which has been added a very explicit text insisting on the blessings to be accrued from the knowledge and use of this hymn: the user will become a person close to Re and Harakhte and will gain access to heavenly regions.

In an attempt to throw light not only on the mortuary literature, but especially on the much later Hermetic texts, one wonders how hymns from the worship of the temples could achieve individual soteriological significance. The best known context for hymns in ancient Egyptian temple worship is the daily temple liturgy, which was probably carried out every morning in temples all over Egypt in basically the same form from

mention the king's name in place of "I." English translation based mostly on the younger versions in Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 151–52.

the early New Kingdom²⁰ through the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods. The best textual sources for the study of the liturgy are the Karnak ritual for Amun and a closely corresponding one for his divine consort Mut from the 22. dynasty.²¹ Earlier texts are preserved, together with stylized pictures of most of the rites in the liturgy, in the temple of Seti I (1306–1290) at Abydos.²² The Karnak liturgy for Amun has 6 hymns (chapters 37–42) as its central part.

Every morning, the high priest or his representative entered the primeval darkness of the sanctuary, lit the fire, made ready for the fumigation of the god, burned incense and gradually approached the *naos* in which the cult statue of the god was locked in behind doors. For every single act, a chapter of the liturgy was recited. Thus, to unlock the *naos* involved three acts: cutting the ribbon, breaking the seal and withdrawing the bolt, accompanied by the recitation of chapters 7–9. The most critical moment was the opening of the doors of the *naos* (chapter 10); it was an opening of the gates of heaven and earth, and in the immediately following chapters, the priest prostrates himself in front of the god, prays for his own security in the dangerous encounter about to occur, and asserts his respect and his legitimate and constructive intentions (chapters 11–17). These chapters serve to establish a liminal period in the ritual in which everything has come down to a kind of “absolute zero” where anything might happen, either to the priest by falling victim to some mythological battle (chapter 13), or even to the god by a destructive manipulation of his statue (chapters 14–15).

It is in this situation that hymns have a crucial role to play. From this mythological zero point, the god may begin to come to life. There have already been hints that the incense is the smell and the sweat of the god (chapters 35–36), i.e. that the god is becoming present in the statue, and now follows what was probably to the ancient Egyptians the most important part of the ritual: the hymns (chapter 37–42). The hymns wake up the

²⁰ Cf. Dieter Arnold, *Wandrelief und Raumfunktion in ägyptischen Tempeln des Neuen Reiches* (Münchener ägyptologische Studien 2; Berlin: Verlag Bruno Hessling, 1962).

²¹ Adolf Erman, *Hieratische Papyrus aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Erster Band; Leipzig: Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen, 1901). Transcription and French translation in Alexandre Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Egypte* (Annales du Musée Guimet. Bibliothèque d'étude 14; Paris, 1902, repr. Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 2007). German translation of the hymns in Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, 268–81.

²² Alan H. Gardiner, ed., *The Temple of King Sethos I at Abydos, Copied by Amice M. Calverley I–II* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1933–1935; German transl. in Günther Roeder, *Kulte, Orakel und Naturverehrung im alten Ägypten* [Die ägyptische Religion in Texten und Bildern III; Zürich: Artemis, 1960], 85–141).

god and invoke him by all his names and with all his epithets, as if building him up again. “Wake up in peace,” is an often recurring phrase in these hymns, for according to chapter 24, the god is “in his rage” (*m nšnjf*), i.e. still in his liminal, not yet stable condition. Another recurring phrase is “pharaoh has come to you” or, in chapter 42, “I have come to you.” The situation is the crucial encounter between a god not yet completely stable in his creative and upholding capacity and a priest impersonating the king, pharaoh, the representative of all humanity.

But what kind of work does the hymn carry out in this important situation? We get at least a glimpse of it in some passages of chapter 37:

Rise! Maat is your daughter;
 she puts her arms round you; your *ka* is in her.
 Your daughter has formed you, and you have formed your daughter.
 You have become the *ka* of every god.
 You have fostered it, you have given it life.
 You are the one who has created their *kas*.²³

Maat, the goddess personifying cosmic order—or rather the world with its immanent principle of order—is here said to embrace the god; she is his daughter, and his life (*ka*) is in her as it is in every god. The Egyptian creator god does not create beings and things different from himself. He rather reproduces himself into nature, cosmos, and the divine pantheon. His *ka* or vital principle is also the vital principle of all the gods, the formative principle in all their doings, and, by implication, the formative, ordering principle of the whole world. That principle is also called *maat*, and although basically issued from the god—in the personal aspect as his daughter, in the cosmological aspect as the order he has created—Maat is also said to have formed the god. This makes a certain amount of sense when we consider that the god is ritually in the making; he is being recreated and made ready as creator and upholder of the world. There is, however, also an important reciprocity enacted in this hymn: Maat forms the god and he forms her. While this makes no sense as a cosmogony or theogony, it does make sense as a ritual act of exchange. It is in the ritual interaction, mediated by the hymn, that this exchange becomes possible.

A closer understanding of this mutual conditionality may be obtained from chapter 42, which is not only a hymn, but also the text that

²³ P. Berlin 3055, 14, 11–15, 2.

accompanies the presentation of Maat.²⁴ The ritual scene of the king presenting the goddess Maat to the god is well known from Egyptian temples from the New Kingdom to the Roman Period, and the Karnak Ritual for Amun preserves the full and very elaborate text that accompanied it in the daily liturgy. We shall probably never know with absolute certainty what was actually done during the recitation of the hymn that comprises chapter 42. Was a small statuette of the goddess presented to the god, or was the figure of Maat a symbolic expression of alimentary offerings? Jan Assmann²⁵ has made a suggestion that stands either by itself or together with one or both of the two other suggestions: The presentation of Maat denotes a sacrifice in words, i.e. a hymn. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the chapter *is* a hymn, and that, very much like chapter 37, it construes the ritual act as giving Maat to the god—or providing the god with maat. In chapter 42, there are passages that explicitly understand maat as praise:

Maat has come in order to be together with you—
Maat is now everywhere, where you are,
that you may rely stably on her.
It is the creatures in the circle of heaven,
their arms praising you every day.²⁶

As in the Jewish hymns we have considered, a heavenly choir joins in with praise when the ritual is enacted, but in the Egyptian daily temple liturgy, the ritual is also understood to provide the god with a foundation, namely maat, from which the god comes into existence and from which he lives.

Later passages return to the reciprocity or the mutual conditionality of Maat and the god and connect it with the idea that Maat is praise:

Your *ka* shall belong to you, when Maat praises you,
your limbs being united with Maat,
at whose sight you are pleased and rejuvenated.
The heart of Amon-Re shall live!
Maat has now appeared in front of him.
Your daughter Maat is at the bow of the *Sekti*-boat—
she is the one who belongs in your *naos*.

²⁴ On this important rite, cf. Paul John Frandsen, "Trade and Cult" in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions* (ed. Gertie Englund; Boreas 20; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 95–108; Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (SAOC 57; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997); Jan Assmann, *Maat: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten* (München: C.H. Beck, 1990), 174–200.

²⁵ Jan Assmann, *Liturgische Lieder an den Sonnengott* (Münchener ägyptologische Studien 19; Berlin: Bruno Hessling, 1969), 154–57.

²⁶ P. Berlin 3055, 20, 9–21, 1.

When you exist, Maat exists—and *vice versa*.
 When Maat is united to your head,
 she comes into existence in front of you eternally...²⁷

We saw in chapter 37 that the *ka* or life of the god was in Maat, and that their mutual conditionality enabled his possession of a *ka*. Since his *ka* was said to be in every god, it was implied that his relation with Maat is at the very foundation of the god's creative and upholding activity. In the first of the lines just quoted, that relation is the encounter with praise, and the present rite of praise is sacramentally construed as the union of the god with Maat—as a daughter, a member of the crew in the solar boat, a *paredros* in the temple, and at last as the *Uraeus* on his forehead, the symbol of militant royal power that makes cosmic and social order come into existence in front of Amon-Re, the king of the gods, eternally.

The priestly authors of this important text have taken the full logical consequences of their understanding of the rite: it is about the very existence of the god and the ordered world. When the god exists, maat exists, but the god is also dependent for his very existence on maat. One could not want a more clear-cut and explicit expression of the mutual conditionality at the root of all existence. And the exchange that makes the world go round takes place in rites of praise during the daily temple liturgy in all Egyptian temples.

The role of the hymn in the daily temple liturgy is thus to make the god and, by implication, the world come into existence. The paradox in calling well-established gods into existence was perfectly clear to the ancient authors. Chapter 38, a short but beautiful hymn to the creator god puts it in a very salient manner:

May you come into existence, you lord of everything,
 Atum, who came into existence on the first occasion (i.e. in primeval time)!²⁸

The ritual act carried out by the hymn is an act of renewal and re-creation, but, as we have seen, also an encounter that unites creator and creation, worship and object of worship. The subsequent rites of the daily temple liturgy—rites of purification, unction, clothing—serve to establish the god thus recreated in the world. The hymns remain the central and most decisive part of the liturgy.

This paramount ritual significance may almost suffice to explain how hymns to gods were taken into mortuary literature and there assumed

²⁷ P. Berlin 3055, 23, 3–6.

²⁸ P. Berlin 3055, 16, 9.

soteriological significance. From the Pyramid texts to the Book of the Dead and even the later mortuary compositions, the acquisition of ritual competence for the deceased was a major objective. Pyramid texts identify the deceased with Osiris and other gods, Coffin texts claim ritual (and mythological) knowledge for the deceased, and illustrated Books of the Dead actually show the deceased in a posture of worship or otherwise engaged in ritual activities. The ritual competence thus acquired would enable the deceased to remain a source of life for his descendants.

According to our Pyramid Text, which is also the oldest piece of evidence concerning the use of hymns in mortuary texts, he who knows and recites the solar hymn will be close to the Sun-god. Now that we have considered the hymns in the much later daily temple liturgy, we are perhaps beginning to understand. It is not just a matter of having pleased the god; as a ritual text, the hymn enacts an encounter that unites worship and object of worship, present and primeval, human and divine. This understanding of the hymn must have made for its soteriological significance already in 2255, when Pepi I was buried in his pyramid, and it is still in a salient way behind the hymns in the Book of the Dead.

The classical New Kingdom Book of the Dead begins with a hymn to the rising sun, later counted as chapter 15. Illustrated papyri show the deceased worshipping and—in a subsequent picture once counted as chapter 16—the sun rising, adored by the heavenly baboons. The heavenly baboons and sometimes the divinities (*b3.w*) of Pe and Nekhen serve as angelic choirs worshipping the Sun-god. They carry on the worship of the hymn to its addressee, the Sun-god. In close connection with the scenery of the rising sun, there is also depicted the image of Osiris brought to life by the songs of his two sisters Isis and Nephthys. Both sunrise and the waking of Osiris are expressions of the Egyptian idea of regeneration, and in the New Kingdom, Osiris and the Sun-god are often seen as two aspects of the same divinity. The deceased owner of the papyrus, who is shown worshipping the rising Sun, will conventionally have called himself Osiris. By ritually contributing to the sunrise he also participates in the regeneration of Osiris, the mythical exemplar of every deceased person. The hymn is thus a ritual enactment of mutual conditionality, an encounter uniting the ritual person, in particular the deceased owner of the papyrus, with the mythical exemplar of his regeneration.²⁹

²⁹ More detailed analysis in Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, "Ritual Art: A Key to the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead" in *Dance, Music, Art and Religion* (ed. Tore Ahlback;

The role of heavenly beings—or for that matter Isis and Nephthys—as reforwarding or mediating the hymnic worship is interesting as a parallel to the angelic choirs known from Jewish and Christian hymns. A late mortuary text, a so-called mythological papyrus from the 21st dynasty, offers the most striking illustration of what Assmann has called, with Schäfer's term, *unio liturgica*: The deceased is first shown worshipping Osiris, then with a hymn to the rising sun, wishing for the divinities of Pe and Nekhen to greet his rising with jubilation. The next picture shows Re-Harakhti in his boat, greeted by the divinities of Pe and Nekhen. Below that picture, the rays of Re-Harakhti reach the mummy of Osiris, who is flanked by Isis and Nephthys. In a later scene, the deceased is again shown worshipping the Sun-god, but as if to promote his further integration into the realm of the transcendent, he is now actually siding with the heavenly baboons.³⁰

Unio hymnica in Hermetic Texts

For the historical understanding of the role of hymns in Hermetic texts, there are thus both a Jewish and an ancient Egyptian background,³¹ both of them undoubtedly relevant. Hermetism shares with Judaism a monotheism only superficially disturbed by a kind of Euhemerist polytheism. With ancient Egyptian religion it shares a fundamental pantheism, in which creation is an extension of the creator³² and hymns re-unite creator and creation. In this perspective we shall now discuss more closely the texts of the Hermetic hymns.

The hymn in *Poimandres* 31–32 consists in the ninefold *qedushah* already mentioned, an invitation to receive “pure sacrifices in words from a soul and a heart striving towards you . . .,” and a prayer. The holiness of

Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis XVI; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1996), 257–67.

³⁰ Alexandre Piankoff, *Mythological Papyri I–II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), No. 11: The Papyrus of Khonsu-Renep, Scene Four; cf. Podemann Sørensen, “Ancient Egyptian Religious Thought,” 48–53.

³¹ For the ancient Egyptian background in general, cf. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and many precious observations in Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte I–II* (BCNH.T 3, 7; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978–1982).

³² This important aspect of the ancient Egyptian conception of god is nowhere better elaborated than in Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad, *Image of the World and Symbol of the Creator* (StOR 10; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985), notably 79–157.

God in the first part is associated with *gnosis*, creation by the word and the pantheist idea that all nature reproduces the image of God. The hymn then presents itself as *thysia*, a word that in classical Greek denotes animal sacrifice. This must imply that the hymn, like a sacrifice, is a point of union between the worshipper and the object of worship. The prayer ends with the assertion that the man who belongs to God wants to share in his holiness (*synhagiazein soi*).³³ Nock and Festugière took this in the very active (perhaps almost missionary) sense of working for sanctification. In this way the semantic and referential cohesion of the text gets lost. In the light of what we have established concerning Egyptian hymns, there is an obvious line to draw from the ninefold *hagios* through the idea of sacrifice to the shared holiness in the *unio liturgica*.

The hymn in *Corpus Hermeticum V* is not liturgical in style; it is the culmination of a theology and a *tour de force* in the rhetoric of transcendence. Starting as a kind of natural theology, it moves through pantheist predications almost to a kind of negative theology in which the impossibility of praise is discussed. The universality and transcendence of God does not allow for the details of any eulogy—not even for the interpersonal element of the hymn: “. . . as if I were of myself. . . as if I were another! You are whatever I am, you are whatever I do, you are whatever I say. For you are everything, and nothing else exists!”³⁴ With the shift of grammatical person in a context where praise and eulogy are repeatedly mentioned, the negation of an interpersonal element increases to the performance of union. As the culmination of a still more intense rhetoric of transcendence, the *unio hymnica* seems designed to bring the reader to a spiritual breakthrough or *unio mystica*.

The long hymn in CH XIII, 17–20 is more unequivocally a liturgical text. Like the opening of the *naos* in the Egyptian daily temple liturgy (chapter 10), it starts by opening earth and heavens. The hymn proper begins as a hymn to the creator of all nature, who is also the eye of the *nous*. The union of nature and spirit, and perhaps also creation and *gnosis*, seems to be almost built into the divinity. In the middle part of the hymn, the choir called upon to join in praise is made up neither by angels nor by baboons. It consists of 10 powers, which are in the worshipper: *gnosis*, *chara*, *enkrateia*, *karteria*, *dikaioynê*, *koinônia*, *alêtheia*, *to agaton*,

³³ Henry G. Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1691 cites only this example and translates: “share in holiness.”

³⁴ CH V, 11.

zôê, phôs. In CH XIII, 7–10, they are the powers that defeat 12 evils that keep one imprisoned in the non-spiritual world of the senses. In CH XIII, 11–12 these obstacles to *gnosis* and salvation seem to make up a canopy of astral and planetary spheres. A breakthrough is possible when the 10 powers defeat the 12 evils.

In the hymn, the 10 powers are invoked almost as a choir of angels or heavenly baboons to forward or mediate the praise to the ultimate object of worship. The powers, which probably also denote the human potential of the adept, do, however, themselves constitute this ultimate object, so that e.g. *alêtheia* is urged to praise *alêtheia*. The hymn thus enacts a union of the adept's inner potential with the universal, cosmic conditions to which he must respond. Towards the end of CH XIII, 18 it is intimated that God is in charge of both the cosmic powers and the powers in man. It is also his word that praises him through the adept, who prays that God will accept the universe as a verbal, spiritual sacrifice. The act carried out by the hymn takes place both within the divinity and within the adept. It is a sacrifice in which human, cosmic, and divine are united, and in almost upanishadic terms, the following section (§ 19) speaks of *to pan to en hêmin*, "the All in us," and prays for its salvation and illumination. The way in which the hymn is seen through the metaphor of a universalized sacrifice is once again remarkable:

Thus do the powers in me shout,
They praise the All, they fulfil your will,
Your design, which issues from you and returns to you, is the All.³⁵
Accept from all a sacrifice in words, the All in us—
Save it, Life! Illuminate it, Light, Spirit, God!

The hymn sung by the powers within the adept has as the object of worship the All, and by praising it the powers fulfil the will of the Father/God, for his design (*boulê*) is one that issues from him and returns to him, and it is also the All. This line of thought may be difficult to follow, but if we recall the ritual logic of the ancient Egyptian sacrifice of Maat, it becomes obvious that this is an act of exchange. Maat has the double sense of a creative potential in the god and an immanent order in the world, very much as the *natura naturans* and the *natura naturata* in scholastic philosophy. The sacrifice of Maat is, as we have seen, an act of exchange in which the god is renewed in his creative and sustaining potential by means of the

³⁵ I take this as a nominal sentence with *to pan* as the predicative: "Your design, from you and to you, (is) the All." For other possibilities, cf. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 194.

maat at the disposal of humans. It is in sacrifice and ritual that this union of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* makes sense. Their regular union is what makes the world go round; the god forms Maat and she forms him; his *ka* or “life” is in her, and he receives it from her and reproduces it in every god. In the Egyptian text from the daily temple liturgy, Maat tends to be everything on all levels: she is the entire activity of the god, she is with him in the temple, she is everywhere in the world, and she is right here in the ritual act as the hymn and perhaps as a small figure presented to the god. To “have come,” to stand there, with hands on Maat, is to be at the very root of things. It is the *unio liturgica*.

In our Hermetic text, “the All” (*to pan*) has very much the role of Maat. The important addition is that this time, it is also “the All in us” that the hymn brings as a sacrifice in words. And in the very moment when the *unio liturgica* is enacted, the hymn turns into a prayer for salvation and illumination. The *unio liturgica* is quite obviously a design for the *unio mystica*.

The *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* is, as we have already pointed out, very explicit on the role of the hymn in the spiritual ascent of the adept.³⁶ A remaining difficulty, however, is the identification of proper hymnic texts. From page 55 to 61 in the MS, the text speaks about hymns, praise and prayer, often in terms close to the phraseology of hymns. The mixture of *Lehrschrift* (in dialogue form) and hymnic performance is a very salient feature that this tractate shares with CH V and XVIII, as we have seen. Nevertheless, at least two hymns may be safely identified: one praying for the gift of the eighth: 55,23–57,25; and, after a vision of the *unio liturgica*, a hymn of culmination: 60,17–61,17. In both hymns, there is an enactment of exchange, very much as in CH XIII.

The first hymn ends up in a prayer for truth in exchange for a sacrifice in words:

Lord, give us the truth (*alêtheia*) in the image (*eikôn*),
 Give us through the spirit (*pneuma*) that we see
 the form (*morphê*) of the image (*eikôn*) that has no deficiency.
 Accept the *tupos* of the *plêrôma* from us through our praise,
 and recognize the spirit (*pneuma*) that is in us. (57,3–11)

Once again, there is an act of exchange. This time *maat* or *alêtheia* is first said to come from God to men, and, as the *Gospel of Philip* has it, truth

³⁶ Cf. note 11 above.

does not come naked into the world, but in *tupoi* and images (*eikôn*).³⁷ To the *Nag Hammadi* readership, truth is accessible only as a hermeneutic challenge, and naked truth is something that takes place in the spirit, as a result of the mind's work with images and images of images; it is the perfect form behind the image that cannot be seen with the eyes, but only through the spirit.

In exchange for this spiritual breakthrough, the text offers itself, the hymn, which is, by ancient Egyptian standards, also *maat*. The hymn transmits the *tupos* of the *plêrôma*—and in this way, God will recognize the *pneuma* in those who praise him. Knowing and being known by God as a possessor of *pneuma* is almost by definition *gnôsis*, but how is it brought about by the hymn? The two difficult terms *tupos* and *pleroma* may possibly give us the clue. They are both used somewhat vaguely and with slightly diverse denotations. *Plêrôma* is the paradigmatic structure of aeons, beings etc. emanated from the unknown and ineffable God; it is still divine, but possesses some degree of explicitness. *Tupoi*, in contradistinction, are not divine, but like images they are hermeneutical clues, imprints left on the created world, accessible in books, in nature etc., but clues to what is truly divine behind the created world. What may be puzzling in our text is that, in the form of praise, these clues ascend to God, whom we would not believe was in need of hermeneutical clues.

This is, however, the ritual logic we already know from the Egyptian daily temple liturgy, notably from the sacrifice of Maat. To let Maat ascend to the god (*šꜣꜣr Mꜣꜣt*)³⁸ is to use the immanent order in the created world to renew and re-establish the god as a producer of *maat*. And this, as we have already seen, is what hymns do. The term *tupos* assumes a distinct ritual meaning in this context, as a kind of prototype or master type of what the ritual is designed to produce. In this sense all ritual texts are full of *tupoi*: pre-figurations of what is to be produced, and our hymn contains the *tupoi* of the *plêrôma*. Just as *gnôsis* is knowing and being known, our text insists on the *unio hymnica* as an act of exchange.

In the hymn of culmination, which is a prayer reaching out for the end of the All and the very first beginning (*archê*), the adept sings his praise to God, who has given him life, having made him wise (*sophos*). It is obvious that spiritual life is meant, and that the adept has come very close to God; he even recites his hidden name, one of those series of vowels sometimes

³⁷ *Gos. Phil.*, logion 67a: NHC II 67, 9–12.

³⁸ Cf. Assmann, *Maat*, 192.

called "*nomina barbara*." The decisive expression of the hymnic union with god, however, is found in a few very poetical lines:

I am the instrument (*organon*) of your spirit (*pneuma*);
 the mind (*nous*) is your plectrum (*plektron*),
 while your design plays (*psallein*) on me.
 I see myself . . . (60,29–61,1)

In this hymn at the end of the teachings, mystical union is accomplished in the exemplary adept. Whoever manages to get hold of the book, which according to the instructions on the following pages was to be deposited and guarded in the temple of Diospolis, may enact the *unio hymnica* and, if sufficiently predisposed and motivated, experience a spiritual breakthrough, *gnôsis* or *unio mystica*.

The hymn in the *Asclepius*, finally, is a prayer of thanksgiving to the most high, fatherly God, who has equipped the adepts with spirit, reason and knowledge (§ 41). Latin *sensus*, *ratio* and *intelligentia* here translate Greek *nous*, *logos* and *gnôsis*.³⁹ The Latin translation is a free and intelligent one, but not very concerned about terminology, for in the next line, *gnosis* is translated as *cognitio*. The purpose of this *cognitio*, the text goes on, is that the adepts may rejoice in knowing God:

And saved through your divine power, we rejoice that you have shown yourself entirely to us;
 we rejoice that you have deigned to consecrate us to eternity while we are in bodies.
 For this is the only human way of showing gratitude: the *cognitio* of your majesty.
 We have come to know you and the greatest light, which the spirit alone can sense;
 we have become aware of you, O true life of life, O fertile fecundation of all nature;
 we have come to know you, eternally enduring process of nature all filled with your procreation . . .

This hymn to God and to *cognitio* ends up in one single prayer: to go on loving the *cognitio* of God and never stray from this way of life. The god of the *cognitio* is a process in nature very much like the god of CH III.⁴⁰ He is the very essence of life and the immense fertilizing potential that makes life go on and renew itself eternally. Traditional Egyptian ideas about

³⁹ Greek text of this part of *Asclepius* in Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 285–87, and in Mahé, *Hermes en Haute-Égypte* I, 161–67.

⁴⁰ Cf. Podemann Sørensen, "The Egyptian Background," 215–25.

the rhythm of nature may very well be the background of this dynamic and processual conception of the divine. They do, however, represent an agrarian pantheism that all ancient cultures would at least understand.

The *Asclepius* hymn renders thanks for the *cognitio* and thus marks the culmination of the long series of teachings. But like the hymn in CH XIII, it also enacts an exchange. In the text, there is an interpersonal element and thus a here and now; there is a divine grace to thank for, a gratitude to show, and a prayer for continued blessings. And *cognitio* is the name of all three elements in this exchange; just as Maat in the daily temple liturgy is the creative and upholding power of the god, the sacrifice (and the hymn) given to renew the god, and the cosmic and social order that comes into being through the god, thus *cognitio* is here the cause, the means, and the outcome. To perform the hymn is thus to be at that very important point where cause, means, and outcome coincide, very much as a sacrifice, but this time consecrated to eternity. This is *cognitio* or *gnosis*, and *unio mystica*. The prayer that ends the performance is a prayer for the *vita unitiva*, the life in God.

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COGNITIVE AND EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES TO ANCIENT
RITUALS: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT THEORIES AND THEIR
RELEVANCE FOR THE HISTORIAN OF RELIGION

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Are ritual theories helpful in explaining the emergence of early Christian religion and the history of religions in late antiquity? I have been asking this question for some time and trying to read up on the rich and complex world of ritual theorizing. During the last two decades or so, a number of new theories have been advanced, some of which are complementary and some competitive with regard to classical theories. Although there is no reason to de-emphasize the competition between different theoretical options, it may be justified to say that the field is increasingly open to interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-fertilization between different theoretical stances. This entails an approach that draws upon several theories and levels of study. The editors of the recent massive two-volume work on *Ritual Theorizing* encourage exactly this kind of approach when they state that “in modern scholarly practice of the study of ritual, one will . . . always need to refer to more than one theory.”¹

This contribution is an attempt to organize a number of recent theories into a larger framework that could take into account both the fragmentary nature of our sources, which sets limits on an analysis of ancient rituals and ritual systems, and the call for the use of more than one theory by the editors of *Ritual Theorizing*. Although my contribution is mainly theoretical, I hope to be able to demonstrate the relevance of such an analysis to the study of ancient religions and ancient mysteries by means of a few selected examples.² I am happy to offer my (tentative) reflections to a Festschrift written in honor of Einar Thomassen, whose broad expertise

¹ Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, “Ritual Studies, Ritual Theory, Theorizing Rituals—An Introductory Essay,” in *Theorizing Rituals* (ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg; SHR 114; 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1:xv–xxvii, esp. xxiii.

² The need for a more theoretically informed study of ancient mysteries has been emphasized, e.g., by Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

on the history of religions and comparative religion also includes the field of ritual theories.

Although it is useful to have more than one tool in a “toolbox of theories,” one has to make some choices. A pluralistic approach to early Christian rituals or ancient rituals in general cannot reasonably embrace theories that build on totally different epistemological presuppositions. According to Catherine Bell, one dividing line in recent theoretical approaches goes between theories that “remain heavily rooted in cultural explanation” and those seeking to advance empirically testable theories and models with clearly defined predictions.³ Bell, of course, counts her own approach among the first theories. I am more interested in the latter type of theorizing, not because I think theories relying on cultural studies, practice theory, and power relations, etc., are useless, but because I am interested in modeling and it is difficult to advance models or theories of ritual behavior without some sort of *a priori* assumption about ritual universalism or regularities in ritual behavior across time and space. In this regard, I side with Ronald Grimes, who takes issue with Bell’s criticism of the “hegemony of theory” and her rejection of universalism.⁴ Grimes concludes that “we scholars of ritual have little choice but to define and theorize about it. If we do not do it explicitly, it will happen tacitly.”⁵

The interest in modeling has led me to cognitive and evolutionary theories of ritual, which clearly belong to the type of theorizing characterized by empirically testable theories and defined predictions. Ritual has been an integral part of cognitive theorizing since Lawson and McCauley’s seminal *Rethinking Religion* (1990) and during the past two decades, a number of theories of ritual have emerged in the field of the cognitive

³ Catherine Bell, “Ritual (Further Considerations),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition* (ed. Lindsay Jones; 15 vols.; Detroit, Mich.: Macmillan, 2005), 11:7848–56, esp. 7849.

⁴ Following a typical postmodern mode of thinking, Bell argues that existing theories of ritual have not avoided a circularity in which ritual is taken as an object of analysis “in such a way as to mandate a particular method, expertise, and way of knowing” (Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], viii–ix). I am arguing that it is possible to use theories amenable to empirical testing without being committed to only one theory or level of explanation (cf. “explanatory pluralism” advocated below). For Bell’s rejection of universalism, see “Ritual,” 7853.

⁵ Ronald L. Grimes, “Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual,” in *Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches* (vol. 2 of *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*; ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warni; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 109–38, esp. 136.

science of religion (CSR).⁶ Attempts to integrate various cognitive theories have also been made.⁷ Evolutionary science has played a role in cognitive accounts of religious beliefs and behavior as well,⁸ although some cognitivists regard the application of evolutionary psychology and anthropology as a secondary project rather than as an integrative part of the CSR.⁹ It should be noted, however, that evolutionary perspectives have been used in different ways. Cognitive anthropologists like Boyer and Atran utilize “evolutionary psychology,” a program developed in the early 1990s by a research group in Santa Barbara (University of California) under such leading figures as John Tooby and Leda Cosmides.¹⁰ One of its main methods is “reverse engineering,” which in evolutionary contexts means that human psychological faculties are explained by asking what kinds of adaptive problems our Pleistocene ancestors might have faced and figuring out how the human psychological systems adapted to ancient conditions. However, evolutionary perspective can also refer to a quite different research strategy, namely to the use of biological evolution as a model or analogy for cultural transmission.¹¹ Many cognitive theorists in fact rely on selectionist arguments. The most influential theory of cultural transmission with evolutionary tenets in the CSR is Dan Sperber’s “epidemiology of beliefs,” which argues that some cultural items are more suitable for selection because the human mind is better prepared for processing some ideas than others.¹²

⁶ Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷ Robert N. McCauley and Thomas E. Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Kimmo Ketola, “A Cognitive Approach to Ritual Systems in First-Century Judaism,” in *Explaining Early Judaism and Christianity: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science* (ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro; BibInt 89; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 95–114; Pierre Liénard and E. Thomas Lawson, “Evoked Culture, Ritualization and Religious Rituals,” *Religion* 38 (2008): 157–71.

⁸ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2002); Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁹ E.g., Justin L. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion Compass* 1 (2007): 1–19.

¹⁰ For a programmatic and influential publication, see Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹¹ E.g., Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹² Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). For Sperber’s influence on the CSR, see Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, “Introduction: Social and Cognitive Perspectives in the Study of Christian Origins and Early Judaism,” in *Explaining Early Judaism and Christianity: Contributions from Cognitive*

From the viewpoint of early Christian and ancient rituals, an interesting theory developed by evolutionary anthropologists is the so-called “costly-signaling theory,” which argues that the adaptive value of ritual (and by extension religion) is that it promotes cooperation. There is a debate between the cognitive theorists who claim that religion is a by-product of adaptive cognitive systems and those who hold adaptationist views,¹³ but it is possible to assess the usefulness of cognitive and evolutionary theories of ritual without taking a firm stance on either side. I will below seek to demonstrate how costly-signaling theory relates to classical and more recent cognitive theories of ritual.¹⁴

What Do Rituals “Do”?

Although functionalism as a grand theory was outdated in the social sciences a long time ago, functionalist questions may still serve as a fruitful point of departure for a scientific search.¹⁵ What do rituals “do” to the performers or participants? What is the benefit of performing actions that often seem to be quite pointless, sometimes even harmful, from the point of view of practical life management? Why, for example, waste some of the precious food resources on sacrificial offerings to gods or ancestors? Or why perform actions that are—again from the perspective of the ordinary life management—inappropriate or redundant in their present context? Why wash instruments or body parts that are already clean?¹⁶

Ritual theorists have offered a multitude of answers to these questions. Traditionally, two types of explanation have been offered by ritual scholars, although in practice theorists often combine these alternatives. One type approaches rituals from the point of view of their effects or functions,

and Social Science (ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro; BibInt 89; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–33.

¹³ For a status of the question, see, e.g., Joseph Bulbulia, “Evolution of Religion,” in *Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (ed. Louise Barrett and Robin Dunbar; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 621–36 and Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Marc Hauser, “Religion as Evolved Adaptation or By-Product?” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 14/3 (2010): 104–09.

¹⁴ As far as I know, there has not been much cross-fertilization between cognitive and costly-signaling theories. See, however, Joseph Bulbulia, “Why ‘Costly-Signalling’ Models of Religion Require Cognitive Psychology?” in *Origins of Religion, Cognition, and Culture* (ed. A. Geertz and J. Jensen; London: Equinox, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 29–30.

¹⁶ Pascal Boyer and Pierre Lienard, “Why Ritualized Behavior? Precaution Systems and Action Parsing in Developmental, Pathological and Cultural Rituals,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29/6 (2006): 595–650.

the other focuses on their meanings. The first line of answers emphasizes that, in spite of their seeming pointlessness or, perhaps better, their “lack of direct functionality”¹⁷ rituals are believed—by ritualists or ritual theorists (sometimes by both)—to have beneficial effects after all: offerings may keep gods favorable to those who offer sacrifices, rituals of healing are purported to heal the patients, coming of age rituals really make adolescents adults, collective rituals may increase the cohesion among the members of a group, some rituals may reduce the stress of the performers, etc. These are just a few examples from a host of different types and “functions” of rituals discussed by scholars. Theories of performance that began to gain currency in the study of ritual since the 1970s have attempted to provide answers to the question of what ritual actually *does* with some elaboration and precision.¹⁸

Cognitive explanations bring a completely new dimension to the discussion on the functions of ritual behavior, namely the question of how rituals are processed in the human mind, but they also accord with the traditional accounts in various ways.¹⁹ Boyer and Liénard, for example, have advanced a theory of “ritualization,” in which the human proneness to ritual behavior is explained by a specific cognitive mechanism, the Hazard-Precaution system, dedicated to responding to recurrent potential threats.²⁰ This cognitive system seems to also be involved in producing children’s ritualistic behaviors, parents’ practices around childbirth or

¹⁷ Liénard and Lawson, “Evoked Culture,” 158.

¹⁸ Grimes is one of the leading proponents of performance theory. See, e.g., Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (rev. ed.; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Grimes, “Performance Theory.” Performance theory is not one single and coherent theory, but rather of a set of approaches and emphases. Bell succinctly summarizes the following four points as central to most performance approaches: 1) Ritual does not only simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts, but actually effects changes in people’s perceptions and interpretations; 2) performance theorists appreciate the physical and sensual aspects of ritual activity; 3) they are interested in “frames” (a term originally coined by Gregory Bateson) that ritual performance invokes and allows people to separate ritual from everyday activities, such as special codes, archaic speech, distinctive use of metaphors, stylized rhythms and distinctive harmonies; and 4) they are concerned with the peculiar efficacy of ritual, which distinguishes ritual from literal communication, on the one hand, and pure entertainment on the other. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72–76.

¹⁹ For a comparison between traditional and cognitive approaches, see also Risto Uro, “Ritual and Christian Origins,” in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris; London: Routledge, 2010), 220–32.

²⁰ Boyer and Liénard, “Why Ritualized Behavior?” Pierre Liénard and Pascal Boyer, “Whence Collective Rituals? A Cultural Selection Model of Ritualized Behavior,” *American Anthropologist* 108/4 (2006): 814–27.

even pathological symptoms, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder.²¹ The latter assumption goes back as far as Freud's suggestion about a connection between neurotic behavior and ritual.²² However, in their exploration, Boyer and Liénard do not so much answer the question what rituals do as to provide the *motivational grounding* for ritualized behavior, which is an essential component of many cultural rituals. Neither does their theory give particular consideration to *religious* rituals.²³ The ritual competence theory advanced by Lawson and McCauley,²⁴ in contrast, focuses specifically on rituals in which "culturally postulated superhuman agents" (CPS-agents) are involved. They state that "all religious rituals [in the technical sense defined by them] are inevitably connected sooner or later in actions in which CPS-agents play a role and which bring about some *change* in the religious world."²⁵ McCauley and Lawson argue that rituals are actions comparable to any other actions (vs. something just happening) and therefore their formal characteristics can be parsed with "the action representation system," consisting of agent, action/instrument and patient: someone does something to someone (by means of something). The only difference with religious rituals is that in them, one of these constituent parts is connected more or less directly with a CPS-agent or agents. Approaches which emphasize rituals as *actions* lend themselves to an analysis of ritual efficacy since actions often have effects.²⁶ Therefore, McCauley and Lawson argue that rituals in which a CPS-agent is associated with an agent of a ritual ("special agent rituals," as they call them) have especially powerful effects: they bring about a "superpermanent change" in a ritual patient. This kind of approach takes very little note of the communicative aspect of ritual behavior.

²¹ See, e.g., Siri Dulaney and Alan Page Fiske, "Cultural Rituals and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Is There a Common Psychological Mechanism?" *Ethos* 22 (1994): 243–83; Alan Page Fiske and Nick Haslam, "Is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder a Pathology of the Human Disposition to Perform Socially Meaningful Rituals? Evidence of Similar Content," *The Journal of Mental Disease* 185/4 (1997): 211–22.

²² Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," in *Character and Culture* (ed. Philip Rieff; New York: Collier, 1963), 17–26.

²³ Liénard and Lawson, "Evoked Culture," 162.

²⁴ Lawson and McCauley, *Rethinking Religion*; McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*.

²⁵ McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*, 13 (my emphasis).

²⁶ For the "action paradigm" in the study of ritual, see James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey, "Action," in *Theorizing Rituals* (ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg; SHR 114/1; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1:265–84.

However, it has been fairly common in anthropology and in related fields to understand ritual as a form of communication.²⁷ Symbolist approaches to ritual have placed a lot of emphasis on this dimension of ritual activities, although some symbolists connect ritual symbolism more to the functionalist-type of questions presented above, while others, more semantically-oriented theorists, are interested in how ritual symbolism is related to the whole system of cultural meanings.²⁸ For the purpose of this chapter, I want to put forward two considerations on ritual symbolism. First, with James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey, I am inclined to think that the attribution of meanings is a *response* to ritual, rather than a constitutive element of ritual.²⁹ The symbolist mechanism may be triggered by some elements of ritual actions,³⁰ but it would be misleading to take symbolism as a general key to all kinds of ritual activities. Second, since theological and symbolic interpretations of rituals in any case abound in religious texts, it would be difficult for a historian of religion to dispense with the symbolic response to ritual altogether. To state that rituals are completely devoid of meaning (or function, for that matter) is to close one's eyes to much of religious thinking and reflection.³¹

Among the cognitive approaches, Harvey Whitehouse's "modes of religiosity" theory is the one that deals with explicit concepts (including ritual symbolism) along with implicit motives (i.e., cognitive processes).³² Whitehouse argues that all religious traditions tend to develop either toward large-scale organizations characterized by orthodoxy and dry ritual routine (doctrinal mode) or small-scale communities placing emphasis on emotionally arousing rituals (imagistic mode). What makes the theory cognitive is the claim that these two modes rely on quite different

²⁷ See, e.g., Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (2d ed.; London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 41; Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 45. For a critical discussion of this line of approach, see Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

²⁸ Lawson and McCauley, *Rethinking Religion*, 37–41; Bell, *Ritual*, 61; Uro, "Ritual and Christian Origins," 224–26.

²⁹ Cf. Laidlaw and Humphrey, "Action," 274.

³⁰ Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). See also Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* (Cognition and Culture 1; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 41–42.

³¹ This position has famously been taken by Frits Staal. See his *Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989).

³² Harvey Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2004).

types of cognitive processing or memory systems: “episodic memory” for rarely repeated dramatic rituals, “semantic memory” for frequent routinized rituals. One aspect of Whitehouse’s theory, important to the present discussion, is that meanings may be attributed to rituals either through “spontaneous exegesis” by individual patients in infrequent emotionally arousing rituals (imagistic mode) or through systematic teaching by religious specialists (doctrinal mode). This is probably not the whole story of how the symbolist mechanism and ritual are related, but it may be safe to state that symbolic meanings are frequently attributed to rituals, and religious leaders often utilize this capacity of rituals.

Mapping Approaches to Ritual Actions

At the risk of oversimplification, we have thus far outlined two approaches to ritual activities. One that focuses on what ritual *does* with an emphasis on ritual efficacy and one that focuses on what it is supposed to *mean* centering on ritual’s capacity to maintain and invoke religious ideas. Can we define more precisely the relationship between the symbolic capacity of religious rituals and their nature as actions involving references to super-human agents and bringing about “some change in the religious world” (Lawson & McCauley)? With regard to this question, a helpful distinction has been made by a Danish scholar of religion, Jesper Sørensen.³³ Sørensen distinguishes between two approaches or responses to ritual which he calls “magical interpretation” and “symbolic interpretation.” Similarly to Lawson and McCauley, Sørensen argues that being actions, rituals are generally performed in order to change some aspect of the world, and as such, rituals involve what Sørensen calls “magical agency.”³⁴ This property of ritual allows the magical interpretation of rituals. The symbolic interpretation of rituals, in contrast, directs attention to the issue of how ritual actions are connected to “overarching symbolic and doctrinal systems, that is, to the *meaning* of the ritual actions.”³⁵ Sørensen furthermore hypothesizes that

³³ Jesper Sørensen, “Charisma, Tradition, and Ritual: A Cognitive Approach to Magical Agency,” in *Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity* (ed. Harvey Whitehouse and Robert N. McCauley; Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2005), 167–85. See also idem “Malinowski and Magical Ritual,” in *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science* (ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw; RSMSS; Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 81–104.

³⁴ Sørensen, “Charisma, Tradition, and Ritual,” 173.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

“extended symbolic interpretations of ritual action . . . seem to correlate inversely with representations of ritual efficacy. The more elaborate the symbolic interpretation of ritual becomes, the less efficacy is accorded to it.”³⁶ In Sørensen’s view, ritual efficacy/magical interpretation, on the one hand, and ritual symbolism, on the other, can thus be understood as the opposite ends of one continuum. Although both of these approaches are available to ritual participants, religious traditions or ritual contexts usually endorse one or the other.

Since the identification of “magical interpretation” and “ritual efficacy” runs against the grain of the usual understanding of these concepts, a few comments on “magic” are in order here. Although having a long history in the study of religion, in which it has often been contrasted with religion, at some point magic was deemed a pejorative and ethnocentric term, being detrimental rather than helpful in the academic study of religion. However, it has not been easy to get rid of magic and, more recently, a number of scholars have sought to develop it into an analytical concept for understanding ancient as well as more modern practices directed at producing desirable effects.³⁷ Scholars are still trying to make a distinction between religion and magic. For example, Thomassen argues that magic is the “dark side” of ritual, the appropriation of ritual power for personal ends, which has always existed side by side with religious rites.³⁸ Ilkka Pyysiäinen suggests that the distinction between religion and magic reflects a panhuman tendency to think that some natural events are caused by superhuman instigators whereas some natural deeds and behaviors are relevant with regard to the superhuman reality. Thus, he defines that “in magic, supernatural agents and forces bring about specified effects in the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁷ E.g., Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (trans. Franklin Phillip; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jens Braarvig, “Magic: Reconsidering the Grand Dichotomy,” in *The World of Ancient Magic: Papers from the First International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4–8 May 1997* (ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen; PNIA 4; Bergen: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), 21–54; Einar Thomassen, “Is Magic a Subclass of Ritual?” in *The World of Ancient Magic: Papers from the First International Samson Eitrem Seminar at The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4–8 May 1997* (ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen; PNIA 4; Bergen: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), 55–66; Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles, and Religion: A Scientist’s Perspective* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2004), 90–112; Jesper Sørensen, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2007); István Czachesz, “Explaining Magic: Earliest Christianity as a Test Case,” forthcoming in *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography* (ed. Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen; London: Equinox).

³⁸ Thomassen, “Is Magic a Subclass of Ritual?” 65.

known reality, while in religion natural actions have effects in a supernatural reality.”³⁹ This, however, begs the question of how to specify when a given ritual is meant to have effects in the “known” world and when in the supernatural world.⁴⁰ The ancients, at least, did not think in terms of such dichotomies. In my view, the most neutral way of approaching the issue is to understand the magical dimension of ritual simply as the effective side of ritual actions, whether they are designed to change the state of affairs in the visible or invisible reality or both.⁴¹ This kind of use of the term magic, although not widely held, comes close to how Ronald Grimes defines it:

Magic as used here does not refer only to other people’s rites but to ours as well. It is not a pejorative term but a way of referring to rites that aim to effect. The word refers to any element of ritual understood as means to an end. If a rite not only has a meaning but also works, it is magical. Insofar as it is a deed having transcendent reference and accomplishing some desired empirical result, a rite is magical.⁴²

Grimes’ reference to “empirical results” accomplished by means of ritual actions may, however, lead to similar problems as the distinction between the effects in the “known” and “supernatural” reality criticized above. Irrespective of whether the ritual is purported to heal the patient or cleanse of ritual impurity, it can still be classified among effective/magical rituals.

Ritual efficacy is usually discussed either at the level of individual participants or at the level of social dynamics.⁴³ Magic, on the other hand, is traditionally limited to the sphere of the individual’s interest. According to Durkheim’s famous dictum, the magician has a clientele, not a church.⁴⁴ Ritual scholars have drawn much attention to the social effects of ritual behavior. Collective rituals are usually understood as the social glue keeping the group together and generating cohesion among the members of

³⁹ Pyysiäinen, *Magic, Miracles, and Religion*, 96–97.

⁴⁰ Czachesz, “Explaining Magic.”

⁴¹ According to Czachesz (“Explaining Magic”), magic equals “illusory manipulation.” It “assumedly changes the state of affairs in visible or invisible reality, whereas in actuality it does not.” For my purposes, however, the emphasis on the “illusory” nature of the magical ritual is too narrow. The effect of a ritual may be real, although science may come up with a different explanation for what happened in the ritual than the agent or the patient of the ritual.

⁴² Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 48–49.

⁴³ Jørgen Podemann Sørensen, “Efficacy,” in *Theorizing Rituals* (ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg; SHR 114; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1:523–32.

⁴⁴ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (trans. Carol Cosman; Oxford World’s Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43.

the group. However, rituals emphasizing the concrete efficacy of the ritual for an individual participant do not necessarily focus on creating strong social ties and group solidarity, although many sociologists and anthropologists have seen these as the primary functions of ritual. It is therefore natural that the social scientists, following the lead of Durkheim, have left all kinds of private rituals and “magical” practices outside religion proper. However, I think it is important that we do not lose sight of the individual perspective of ritual efficacy. The Durkheimian functionalism has to be complemented with the Malinowskian type of functionalism, as it were.⁴⁵ We can express this concern by adding one more variable, individual/social, to Sørensen’s continuum of magical and symbolic interpretation of ritual. Graphically this typology can be described by means of a diagram consisting of vertical and horizontal lines which represent the two variables, individual/social and magical/symbolic, respectively (see Fig. 1).

This diagram can be used for organizing various interpretations of ritual identified in ancient texts as well as for choosing theoretical approaches in analyzing the texts in biblical/early Christian studies. We can see that some interpretations or descriptions of early Christian rituals fit more readily

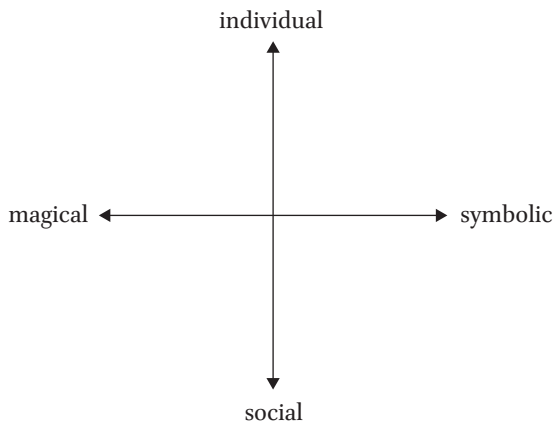


Figure 1 A chart of approaches to ritual actions including two variables (individual/social and magical/symbolic).

⁴⁵ As is well known, Malinowski’s functionalism differed radically from the structural functionalism building on Durkheim’s heritage. Malinowski was much more interested in biological needs of humans and psychological aspects of culture. For connections of Malinowski’s anthropological theories with the CSR, see Sørensen, “Malinowski and Magical Ritual.”

into one quadrant of the chart than into another (Fig. 2). John's baptism or Jesus' healing activity can be located in the magical/individual quadrant since these rituals seem to have focused on efficacy⁴⁶ and, although there is no doubt that John and Jesus were leaders of social movements, their ritual activities are not described as creating tightly-knit local communities. In contrast, the ecstatic rituals in Paul's communities, especially speaking in tongues, can be put in the magical/social quadrant. This is an attractive hypothesis since glossolalia arguably played an important role in the rise and growth of early Christian groups.⁴⁷ We may also observe that Paul, by urging his people to strive after ecstatic speech that can be understood by others, that is prophecy (1 Cor 14:12–25),⁴⁸ aims at guiding the behavior of his people in the direction which can be located in the symbolic/social part of the diagram. Many of the New Testament references to rituals emphasize the symbolic nature of ritual actions or connect rituals with Christian teaching (see, e.g., Eph 4:4–6; John 6; Matt 28:19–20). Moreover, it is possible to imagine ritual systems which focus on the symbolism of the practices without fostering group solidarity and mutual trust among the ritual participants. The Valentinian ritual exegesis could be considered as reflecting such a system to some degree. I have elsewhere argued that the teaching related to the Valentinian initiation, as documented in the *Gospel of Philip*, could be iconistic (cf. Whitehouse's imagistic mode), in other words, based on multivalent images and metaphors, such as the "bridal chamber," and lacking in authoritative canonical interpretation.⁴⁹ The *Gospel of Philip* offers a tantalizing and

⁴⁶ Lawson and McCauley's theory, emphasizing rituals as actions with effects, is particularly fitting for an analysis of John's and Jesus' ritual activities. See Risto Uro, "Towards a Cognitive History of Early Christian Rituals," in *Changing Minds: Religion and Cognition through the Ages* (ed. István Czachesz and Tamas Bíró; Groningen Studies in Cultural Changes; Leiden: Peeters, 2011), 103–121.

⁴⁷ Esler has suggested that glossolalia played an important role in the admission of the gentiles to the early Christian communities. Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37–51. The role of glossolalia and ecstatic rituals in the emergence of the early Christianity movement should be further investigated in light of more recent studies on religious experience.

⁴⁸ For a recent, pioneering analysis of Paul's ecstatic religiosity drawing on both neurological and anthropological studies, see Colleen Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Risto Uro, "A Cognitive Approach to Gnostic Rituals," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science* (ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro; BibInt 89; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 115–37; Risto Uro, "The Bridal Chamber and Other Mysteries: Ritual System and Ritual Transmission in the Valentinian Movement," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer*

allusive exegesis of early Christian rituals which could hardly be organized into a coherent set of shared beliefs. Although it would be absurd to argue that the Valentinians had no group solidarity—since they were recognized as a group, they must have had some shared identity—their social organization as a *school* differed from more cohesive and centralized churches led by bishops.⁵⁰

It is crucial to notice that the diagram is not ultimately a classification of rituals but of *approaches* to rituals. Different approaches can be taken to a ritual in the same community or religious tradition. For example, sometimes participants may be more interested in the magical effect, whereas religious leaders may emphasize more the symbolic meanings of the ritual. As Sørensen points out, in principle, all rituals can provoke both “magical” and “symbolist” responses, and “there is a dynamic

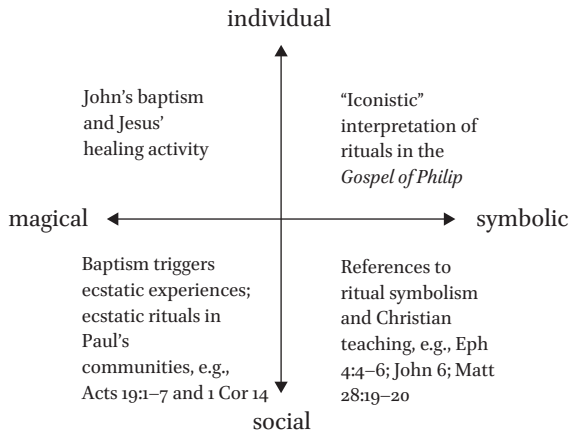


Figure 2 Examples of approaches to ritual in the New Testament and early Christianity.

to *Early Christianity* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 457–86.

⁵⁰ I am relying here on Dimitris Kyrtatas' analysis on the relationship between “school” and “episcopacy” in second-century Alexandria, Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of the Early Christian Communities* (London: Verso, 1987), and especially on Ismo Dunderberg's work on Valentinianism as a school, Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Einar Thomassen, in his magisterial study on Valentinian theological systems and traditions, is much more skeptical about reconstructing the social history of the Valentinian movement. Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006), esp. 491.

tension between the two approaches in most religious traditions.”⁵¹ It is also important to realize that, because of anthropologists’ interest in the social aspects of ritual behavior, many ritual actions, such as the Jain *puja* consisting of an individual sitting in meditation, have been regarded as atypical⁵² or, in case of “effective rituals” outside organized cults, classified as magic in contrast to religious rituals proper (see above).⁵³

The chart can be used in the classification of traditional theoretical approaches to ritual as well. Some theories of ritual are more suitable to modeling one type of approach than other. Symbolist approaches, focusing on the web of meanings,⁵⁴ and structural functionalist approaches both capture one of the dimensions of ritual described in the diagram. It is also important to see that the same rituals can be studied from different perspectives. For example, although I have located speaking in tongues in the magical/social quadrant, it is quite reasonable to study the effects of a possession trance from the point of view of the individual participant,⁵⁵ even though the trance would be happening in a group context. Psychological and sociological explanations certainly work at different analytical levels, but it is possible and even fruitful to allow psychological and sociological approaches to fertilize each other and to study ritual on multiple levels of explanation. This is the basic idea of the “explanatory pluralism” advocated by McCauley and others.⁵⁶

For a classification and comparison of cognitive theories, the “individual” component of the chart should be broken into several levels or domains, such as cognitive and neurological or various areas of psychological research. As the discussion above demonstrates, however, some aspects of these theories are relevant to the four-sided model outlined

⁵¹ Sørensen, “Malinowski and Magical Ritual,” 93.

⁵² Humprey and Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*.

⁵³ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (trans. Robert Brain; London: Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1972).

⁵⁴ Remember, however, that symbolist approaches (e.g., of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas) cannot always be strictly separated from the structural-functionalist accounts. See above note 27.

⁵⁵ Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy*, 162, referring to William Wedenoja, “Ritual Trance and Catharsis: A Psychological and Evolutionary Perspective,” in *Personality and Cultural Construction of Society: Papers in Honor of Melford E. Spiro* (ed. David K. Jordan and Marc J. Swartz; Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 275–307.

⁵⁶ Robert N. McCauley, “Explanatory Pluralism and the Co-evolution of Theories in Science,” in *The Churchlands and Their Critics* (ed. Robert N. McCauley; Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 17–47; Robert N. McCauley and William Bechtel, “Explanatory Pluralism and Heuristic Identity Theory,” *Theory & Psychology* 11/6 (2001): 737–60; Aku Visala, “Religion Explained? A Philosophical Appraisal of the Cognitive Science of Religion” (PhD Diss., University of Helsinki, 2009).

here. In what follows, I attempt to integrate one new theory, that is, costly-signaling, into the chart of approaches.

Ritual and Costly Signaling

As stated earlier, costly-signaling theory is related to the recent discussion on the adaptive value of religious behavior and has been developed by theorists of religion taking an evolutionary approach. During the first decade of the third millennium, the theory has inspired numerous theoretical and empirical works.⁵⁷ The major propositions of the theory can be summarized as follows:

- The primary adaptive benefit of religion is its ability to facilitate cooperation.
- Religious rituals are a form of communication (cf. animal behavior).
- Religious rituals signal commitment to other members of the group.
- A reliable signal for cooperation is one that is too costly to fake.
- Religious rituals promote group cohesion by requiring members to engage in behavior that is too costly to fake.
- Costly rituals are an efficient mechanism to overcome the problem of free riders.

The theory belongs to the long tradition that explains collective rituals as a means of maintaining communal stability and group cohesion. On the chart, it can be clearly located on the social side of the diagram. Religious behavior and rituals are analyzed from a group perspective, which sets it apart from another theoretical stance, namely rational choice theory, to which costly signaling can be compared. Rational choice theory regards

⁵⁷ See, e.g., William Irons, "Religion as Hard-to-fake Sign of Commitment," in *Evolution and the Capacity for Commitment* (ed. R. M. Nesse; New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 292–309; Richard Sosis, "Why Aren't We All Hutteries: Costly Signaling Theory and Religious Behavior," *Human Nature* 14/2 (2003): 91–127; Richard Sosis and Candace Alcorta, "Signaling, Solidarity, and the Sacred: The Evolution of Religious Behavior," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 12 (2003): 264–74; Richard Sosis and Bradley J. Ruffle, "Religious Ritual and Cooperation: Testing for a Relationship on Israeli Religious and Secular Kibbutzim," *Current Anthropology* 44/5 (2003): 713–22; Bradley J. Ruffle and Richard Sosis, "Does It Pay To Pray? Costly Ritual and Cooperation," *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy* 7 (2007): article 18; Richard Sosis, "The Adaptive Value of Religious Ritual," *American Scientist* 92 (2004): 166–72; Candace S. Alcorta and Richard Sosis, "Ritual, Emotion, and Sacred Symbols," *Human Nature* 16/4 (2005): 323–59; Bulbulia, "Evolution of Religion"; Bulbulia, "Why 'Costly-Signalling' Models of Religion Require Cognitive Psychology?"

people as rational decision makers who balance costs against benefits before taking an action. Religion is envisioned as an economic exchange between people and supernatural agents.⁵⁸ Both theories propose that costly demands are an efficient way of reducing the risk of free riding which plagues all human groups and enterprises. Rational choice theory assumes that people are ready to engage in costly rituals because they value the benefits (health care, economic support, eternal life, etc.) more than the costs, while costly-signaling theory takes religion and religious rituals as a means of overcoming problems of collective action that humans have faced throughout their evolutionary history.⁵⁹ As noted above, it is not necessary for our purposes to take a firm stance on the question whether ritual behavior or religion in general evolved as an adaptation.⁶⁰ Rational choice theory may capture one part of human psychology, but as David Sloan Wilson has noted, the cost-benefit reasoning is not the only part of it.⁶¹ Recent achievements about the cognitive underpinnings of religious beliefs and practices provide support for Wilson's comment.

Although costly-signaling theory takes religious rituals as a form of communication, it should be noted that the communication is not understood as *encoded information* representing social structures or psychological states as is the case in symbolist anthropology. Instead, the information is rather straightforward: rituals signal commitment and the acceptance of the moral values of the group. Nor does costly-signaling theory *as such* explain how religious rituals function as an instrument of spreading and consolidating religious beliefs and doctrines.⁶² Rituals in which the level of costly signaling is high can thus be located in the magical(effective)/social quadrant of the diagram. Of course, costliness is something that can operate also in rituals and cults which focus on the individual as an individual rather than as a member of a religious community. Some of the ancient mystery cults provide examples of that kind

⁵⁸ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Rational Choice: Framework for the Scientific Study of Religion," in *Rational Choice Theory and Religion* (ed. Lawrence A. Young; London: Routledge, 1997), 24–44; Rodney Stark, "Bringing Theory Back in," in *Rational Choice Theory and Religion* (ed. Lawrence A. Young; London: Routledge, 1997), 3–23; idem, "Micro Foundations of Religion: A Revised Theory," *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999): 264–89.

⁵⁹ Irons, "Religion as Hard-to-fake Sign."

⁶⁰ For a recent survey of the issue, see Pyysiäinen and Hauser, "Religion as Evolved Adaptation or By-Product?"

⁶¹ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 85.

⁶² Note, however, the additional hypotheses suggested by Sosis, "Why Aren't We All Hutteries?"

of ritual dynamic. Participation in mysteries, such as in the initiation to Isis and Osiris, involved abstaining from certain foods, sexual abstinence, submitting to repeated cleansings and lustrations, prayers and sacrifices offered to deities, in other words, behaviors that may function as costly signals,⁶³ but it is not always clear how the initiation served as creating particularly strong social bonds and group solidarity. Walter Burkert, for example, notes that “we find forms of mysteries that do not result in any kind of organized and stable community.”⁶⁴ The degree in which the ritual investments of the participants contributed to creating group solidarity and cohesive religious communities of course depended on the general organizational structure of the given cult (for example, whether it was organized around the activity of an itinerant charismatic, as a local sanctuary or as an association),⁶⁵ but it is reasonable to argue that the relatively free religious market of the Greco-Roman world gave some room for an individualistic approach to mystery initiations.⁶⁶ Costly signaling may thus not always work in the way predicted by the costly-signaling theorists. It is possible that the evolutionary theorists are correct in arguing that ritual behavior evolved among humans as a response to the problems of collective action, but this ultimate explanation cannot be applied to all kinds of ritual systems developed in various cultures and historical situations. The explanation for costly behavior provided by rational choice theorists may be valid as well, especially if we move toward the level of individual in the

⁶³ The most famous description of an initiation into a mystery in Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*) 11, speaks about several costly signals that Lucius, the protagonist of the novel, gives before his initiation into the cult of Isis: chastity, a patient wait for the celestial token, abstinence from all profane and forbidden foods, a fast of ten days and sums of money spent on the ceremonial. After his return to Rome, Lucius is initiated into two more mysteries of Isis and Osiris.

⁶⁴ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30–53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48; Sarah Iles Johnston, “Mysteries,” in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* (ed. Sarah Iles Johnston; Harvard University Press Reference Library; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 107. See also Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 133 (comparing the Mithras Cult with the Eleusinian Mysteries). Of course, it is not difficult to find evidence of strong group identities, especially among mystery associations, since “the shared knowledge among group members is a powerful means of defining group identity against those who lack this knowledge.” Fritz Graf, “Lesser Mysteries—Not Less Mysterious,” in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (ed. M. B. Cosmopoulos; London: Routledge, 2003), 241–62, esp. 256. For sentiments of familial identity among Greco-Roman associations, see especially Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

chart. On the other hand, a good deal of empirical support can be offered for the claim that costly signaling *does* enhance commitment in religious communities⁶⁷ and rituals are an efficient way of demonstrating commitment.⁶⁸ Costliness is one method of increasing ritual efficacy, although efficacy may be achieved in many other ways; for example, by relying on the special status of a ritual agent (shaman, priest, charismatic preacher, etc.) or by emotional stimulation (which may of course be costly, but not necessarily so).

Cognitive theorists have concentrated relatively much attention to the fact that rituals are capable of inciting elevated emotions or “sensory pageantry” in participants and sought to find cognitive variables which best explain the variance of the emotional level in different rituals.⁶⁹ Costly-signaling theorists, in turn, have referred to religious emotions as hard-to-fake signals for religious commitment.⁷⁰ They argue that since emotions are processed in the limbic system, outside of the executive control systems of the cerebral cortex, these can function as reliable signals. As Joseph Bulbulia puts it, “we can lie with words but making tears is harder.”⁷¹ On the other hand, as Bulbulia also admits, emotions can be relatively “cheap.” People often catch and feel emotions that are similar to others’ without great effort. Social psychologists have coined this tendency as “emotional contagion.”⁷² For example, anthropologists have reported about the contagious nature of such phenomena as speaking in tongues.⁷³

A full treatment of the role of emotions in ritual behavior is beyond the limit of this paper. For the present purpose, it is reasonable to retain ritual efficacy instead of sensory pageantry or ritual costliness as a variable of the chart since ritual efficacy seems to be the most comprehensive

⁶⁷ Ruffle and Sosis, “Does It Pay To Pray?”; Richard Sosis and E. R. Bressler, “Cooperation and Commune Longevity: A Test of Costly Signaling Theory of Religion,” *Cross-cultural Research* 37 (2003): 211–39; Sosis and Ruffle, “Religious Ritual and Cooperation.”

⁶⁸ Herbert Gintis, Eric Alden Smith, and Samuel Bowles, “Costly Signaling and Cooperation,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 213/1 (2001): 103–19.

⁶⁹ Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); idem, *Arguments and Icons*; idem, *Modes of Religiosity*; McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*.

⁷⁰ Bulbulia, “Evolution of Religion”; idem., “Why ‘Costly-Signalling’ Models of Religion require Cognitive Psychology”; Sosis, “Why Aren’t We All Hutteries?”

⁷¹ Bulbulia, “Why ‘Costly-Signalling’ Models of Religion Require Cognitive Psychology.”

⁷² E.g., Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, “Emotional Contagion,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2 (1993): 96–99.

⁷³ Felicitas Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 70–72. See also Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds*, 37–51; Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy*, 180.

of these three candidates. Some rituals may be costly and emotional, some costly and not emotional, some emotional and not costly; nonetheless, all can be classified as efficacious rituals. I call such rituals magical. Although it extends the meaning of the word magic beyond its most common uses, it is not completely new in social science (cf. “social magic” coined by Bourdieu).⁷⁴

Conclusions

The four-sided chart advanced in this chapter is analytical rather than an explanatory model. It provides a tool for classifying various approaches to rituals, but being a chart it does not actually *explain* ritual behavior or the role of ritual in religious systems. For explanations, the ritual analyst has to use more specific theories with a more limited scope and analytical focus. The chart introduced here is a tool for organizing and integrating ritual theories, creating bridges between theories of different backgrounds, and recognizing the limitations of each approach. For a historian of religion, the chart provides a set of questions which can direct the analysis of the rituals represented in the textual (or archaeological) evidence. Does the evidence support a magical or symbolic approach to a given ritual practice? Is the ritual described from the perspective of an individual or community? Is it possible to reconstruct the level of costly signaling in the ritual system or ritual activities under scrutiny? Different questions evoke different theoretical frameworks and the field of ritual studies can help us to recognize and familiarize ourselves with these frameworks. Cognitive theorizing, in turn, may help us to realize that ancient rituals (or contemporary rituals, for that matter) are not things out there that we can simply collect from our sources for an analysis or typology. What we can find in our sources are rather *representations* of ritual constructed by ancient minds with some marks left on the preserved artifacts. These representations are then reconstructed by a modern scholar using empirically verifiable/falsifiable propositions and theories.⁷⁵

As to the ancient mysteries, it would be interesting to use both rational choice theory and costly-signaling theory in the analysis of the sources and to ask which perspective better fits the data to be analyzed. Moreover,

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (trans. G. Raymond and M. Adamson; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 111.

⁷⁵ For a similar point, see Beck, *The Religion of Mithras*, 9.

it could be potentially fruitful to compare the behaviors demanded by various ancient cults in terms of costly signaling. For example, would the intolerance towards the participation in other cults, the demand expressed by most early Christian teachers, function as an effective costly signal which increased social coherence and solidarity among the members?

I started with the call for the use of more than one theory in the study of ritual. For the historian of religions, the pluralistic approach to rituals has much to commend itself since the scarce and fragmentary data for ancient rituals are best analyzed from a multitude of perspectives and angles. However, some systematization and charting is needed to create an order in the multifarious and sometimes perplexing theoretical discussions. I hope this chapter meets such a need.

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