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ATTILIO MASTROCINQUE

# From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism

*Studien und Texte zu  
Antike und Christentum*  
24

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**Mohr Siebeck**



Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum  
Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity

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24



Attilio Mastrocinque

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to Gnosticism

Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 3-16-148555-6

ISSN 1436-3003 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum)

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

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The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Times typeface, printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

## Preface

This book has been conceived as a continuation of my study on Mithraism and magic, because I maintain that Pliny the Elder was correct in stating that the two main streams of magic arts in the Imperial Age were the Persian and the Jewish ones. I am also convinced that my previous studies on magical gems and inscriptions could be useful to an understanding of the relationship between magic and Gnosticism.

My work is based on a historical, not a theological approach and uses historiography, epigraphy, archaeology and related disciplines in order to expand and clarify the field of research.

I am especially grateful to the Humboldt-Stiftung for its continuous support for my research in German Universities. The periods of time I have spent at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau at the Seminar für alte Geschichte have been particularly important, thanks to the hospitality of Hans-Joachim Gehrke. I am grateful also to the editors of STAC and to G. Sfameni Gasparro and Mario Mazza, with whom I had the opportunity of discussing the topics of my research.

A. M.



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## Abbreviations

AAI.R	Atti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (già Accademia d'Italia)
ABAW.PH	Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. München. Philosophisch-historische Abteilung. Neue Folge
AnCl	L'Antiquité Classique
ACFr	Annuaire du Collège de France
AGDS	Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen
AIPh	Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
ALGM	Auführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie, ed. by W.H.Roscher, Leipzig 1884–1924
AmA	American Anthropologist
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Festschrift Joseph Vogt, ed. by H. Temporini and W. Haase, Berlin-New York 1972–
ANSMN	American Numismatic Society. Museum Notes
ArtAs	Artibus Asiae
ASNSP	Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa
ARW	Archiv für Religionswissenschaft
AMAP	Atti e memorie dell'Accademia Patavina di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti. Padova
ASAE	Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte
AThD	Acta Theologica Danica
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BCH	Bulletin de correspondance hellénique
BCTH	Bulletin du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques
BG	Codex Brucianus Gnosticus
BJRL	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
BMC	A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum, London 1873–
BNTW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
BoJ	Bonner Jahrbücher
BollS	Bollingen series
BRGA	Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums
BSGW	Berichte der (Koeniglichen) Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissen- schaften, Philologisch-Historische Klasse
Byz.	Byzantion
ByZ	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CA	Current Anthropology
Carin	Carinthia I. Mitteilungen des Geschichtsverein für Kärnten Klagenfurt

CCAG	Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum
CCEC	Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes Chyprïotes. Musée du Louvre-Département des Antiquités Orientales
CChr.SA	Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum, Turnhout 1983–
CÉg	Chronique d'Égypte
CHJud	The Cambridge History of Judaism, Cambridge 1984–
CIG	Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum, 1–2, Berlin 1828/6–1877
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Berlin 1862–
CIMRM	M. J. Vermaseren, Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae, 1–II, den Haag 1954, 1960
CISA	Contributi dell'Istituto di Storia Antica. Università Cattolica di Milano
CJ	Classical Journal
CIR	Classical Review
CRAI	Comptes rendus de des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, Wien, Leipzig 1866–
CSCO	Corpus scriptorum Christianorum orientalium
DACL	Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, ed. by F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, Paris 1924–1953
DAH	Deltion tes christianikes archaiologikes hetaireias
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
DThC	Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique, Paris 1903–1950
EA	Epigraphica Anatolica
EC	Enciclopedia Cattolica, Città del Vaticano 1948–1954 (Suppl. 1969)
EJ	Encyclopaedia Judaica, Jerusalem 1971–
EPRO	Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain, Leiden 1961–
ErJb	Eranos Jahrbuch
Erls	Eretz-Israel
FGH	Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker, Berlin-Leiden 1923–
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, Berlin 1897–
GMPT	The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, ed. by H. D. Betz
GöMisZ	Göttinger Miszellen. Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion
Gn.	Gnomon
GOF.Ä	Göttinger Orientforschungen – Reihe 4 Ägypten
GRBS	Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies
Hesp.	Hesperia
Hesp.S	Hesperia. Supplements
Hist.	Historia
HR	History of Religions
HThR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie

IC	Inscriptiones Creticae, ed. by M.Guarducci, 1–4, Rome 1935–1950
IGRR	Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes, Paris 1–5, 1901–1927
ILS	H. Dessau, Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae, Berlin 1892–1916
JA	Journal Asiatique
JAC	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
JAC.E	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband
JARCE	Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt
JBL	Journal of biblical Literature
JCPh.S	Jahrbücher für classische Philologie. Supplementband
JEA	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
JE	The Jewish Encyclopedia, New York 1901–1916 (= New York 1925)
JECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JEH	Journal of Ecclesiastical History
IGLS	Les inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie, Paris 1929–
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JR	Journal of Religion
JRH	Journal of Religious History
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JS	Journal des Savants
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSSt	Journal of Semitic Studies
JThS	Journal of Theological Studies
JWCI	Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes
LÄ	Lexikon der Ägyptologie, ed. by W. Helck, Wiesbaden 1975–1992
LIMC	Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae
LThK	Lexikon für Theologie und Kirke, ed. by M. Buchberger, Freiburg im Breisgau 1938–1967 = 1986
MAB.L	Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique. Bruxelles. Classe Lettres et Sciences Morales et Politiques
MAIBL	Mémoires présentés par divers savants à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
MAST.M	Memorie dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino. Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche
MAMA	Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua
MB	Musée belge
MedAnt	Mediterraneo Antico
MFOB	Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph. Beyrouth
MMAIBL	Monuments et mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Fondation Eugène Piot
NAC	Numismatica e Antichità Classiche (Quaderni Ticinesi)
NC	La Nouvelle Clío. Revue mensuelle de la découverte historique. Bruxelles
NHC	Nag Hammadi codices
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies

NIKA	Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte, deutsche Literatur und für Pädagogik
NT.S	Novum Testamentum. Supplements
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OMRM	Oudheidkundige mededelingen uit het rijksmuseum van oudheden te Leiden
OrAnt	Oriens Antiquus
OrChr	Oriens Christianus
Or.	Orientalia
PapyCol	Papyrologica Coloniensia
PG	Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca), ed. J. P.Migne, Paris 1857–1866
PGM	Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri, ed. K. Preisendanz, 2nd ed. by A.Henrichs, Stuttgart 1973
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus (series Latina), ed. J. P.Migne, Paris 1866–1911
PO	Patrologia Orientalis, Paris 1907–
PRE	Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschafted. by C. Pauly, G.Wissowa and W. Kroll, Stuttgart 1892–1980
PS	Patrologia Syriaca, Paris 1897–1926
PSBA	Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology
PSBF	Publicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien, ed. by K. Aland and W. Schneemelcher
QVetChr	Quaderni di Vetera Christianorum
RAr	Revue Archéologique
RAC	Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum, ed. J. J. Dölger, Stuttgart 1950–
RB	Revue Biblique
RBelge	Revue Belge
RdE	Revue d'égyptologie
REA	Revue des Etudes Anciennes
REG	Revue des Etudes Grecques
RFIC	Rivista di Filologia e d'Istruzione Classica
RGVV	Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
RHDF	Revue historique de droit français et étranger
RHE	Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique
RHR	Revue de l'histoire des Religions
RIB	Roman Inscriptions of Britain, I-II, Oxford 1965–1990/94
RIDA	Revue internationale des droits de l'antiquité
RivAC	Rivista di archeologia cristiana
RMP	Rheinisches Museum für Philologie
ROC	Revue de l'Orient Chrétien
RPh	Revue de Philologie
RQ	Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte

RSBN	Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici
RSR	Recherches de science religieuse
SBL.CA	Society of Biblical Literature. Christian Apocrypha
SBL.DS	Society of Biblical Literature. Dissertation Series
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SCI	Studia Classica Israelica
SEAug	Studia ephemeridis "Augustinianum", Rome 1967–
SecCen	The Second Century
SGG, I	Sylloge gemmarum Gnosticarum, ed. by A. Mastrocinque, I, Rome 2004
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions. Supplements to Numen
SIG	Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum, ed. by W. Dittenberger, Leipzig <sup>3</sup> 1915–1923
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SMSR	Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni
SNG	Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, different publishers, 1942–
SPAW. PH	Sitzungsberichte der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin. Philosophisch-historische Klasse
SSG	Sylloge gemmarum Gnosticarum, I, ed. A. Mastrocinque, Roma 2004
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
StPatr	Studia Patristica. Papers presented to the International Conference on Patristic Studies, Berlin 1957–
Syr	Syria
TPAPA	Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie, ed. by G. Krause und G. Müller, Berlin 1976–
TSECLL	Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
ThZ	Theologische Zeitschrift. Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
VB	Vestigia Bibliae. Jahrbuch des deutschen Bibel-Archivs. Hamburg
VetChr	Vetera Christianorum
VigChr	Vigiliae Christianae
WO	Die Welt des Orients
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZA	Zeitschrift für Assyriologie
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenlandischen Gesellschaft
ZKG	Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte
ZNW	Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZPE	Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik
ZRGG	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte



## Introduction

Our investigation will take us on an absolutely fantastic journey to distant lands, accompanied by the apostle Thomas and Cyriacus Martyr. We will encounter strange peoples and fabulous beasts of the kind described in the *Romance of Alexander the Great*. Our fellow-travellers will be armed with a divine Word, and will defeat a magical diabolical snake which tyrannized humankind. We, on the other hand, will use the plain weapons of philology and history to study the exploits of the heroes who have brought us to the land of magical serpents and onocentaurs. But first of all, to dispel the notion that these stories were merely the product of the imagination of a few Christians of the late Empire, we will introduce you to a 5th century AD bishop, who actually travelled through a country inhabited by worshippers of the diabolical Serpent, defeated them militarily and destroyed their idol. A role model emerged from that legendary journey, and many Christian leaders interpreted the message of the myth to mean that they had to journey into the lands of the subjects of Satan, who was worshipped in the form of a snake, defeat them by the sword, and overcome the evil idol once and for all. The story was probably repeated over and over again, especially in the 5th century. Further evidence, if necessary, is provided by an archaeological find from Tomis which brings us very close to the tangible reality: a collection of idols, featuring a sacred snake, buried during a mission to combat idolatry.

Sacred snakes: whenever the subject arises in discussions about eastern or other cults under the Roman Empire, it is usually asserted that they were legion and that almost every religious group had at least one. From this point of view, our travelling companions will be of help to us, because the snakes they fought against were mainly those revered by the Gnostics: the inheritors of the heresies of Christianized Judaism, who had reinterpreted the Bible in order to be able to worship divine entities other than the one God, including pagan divinities who had been given a new, biblical gloss. The first person to undertake a journey like Thomas and Cyriacus was Saint Paul. He came across Jews in Asia Minor who, after centuries of exile, practised idolatry and in all probability were snake worshippers. John, the author of the *Apocalypse*, specifically aimed to repress idolatry and the immoral behaviour of the

Jews in Asia Minor. As we shall see, the mythical journey of our two companions, so difficult to understand at a distance of two thousand years, was inspired by the historic journeys of the first apostles to the land of heretical and idolatrous Jews.

The study of Judaic and Gnostic heresies is an arduous task, because most of the texts we have were written by Christian heresiologists for polemical reasons, not in a spirit of scientific enquiry; on the other hand the books written by Gnostics, preserved in Egyptian codices, are in a difficult and at times cryptic language. We will follow the direction indicated by the figure of the snake, which seemed to be a characteristic of many religions under the Roman Empire. In general scholars have preferred to avoid this problem because it is too vast, ill-defined and ambiguous. The Gnostic doctrinal or Gnostic-related elements in magical papyri and gems have frequently been ignored on the grounds that they come under the heading of magic, not Gnosticism. It is easy to label magic gems and papyri as uncertain documents and put them aside. On the whole, the few scholars<sup>1</sup> who have conducted research in this area have made good progress, especially as regards papyri, while gems have always been regarded as an unimportant field of research. This has often been a convenient position to take: the study of gems is problematical because the iconography is disconcerting and the inscriptions are hard to read. For this reason an enormous mass of documentation, bringing us face to face with individuals who expressed their religious convictions in a very concrete way, has been excluded from research into Gnosticism.

Our project will take us in the footsteps of the apostles who fought the diabolical snake, in order to discover who its worshippers were, where they lived, where they came from, what they believed, and what links they had with other religions. Our guides will lead us to Asia Minor, Babylonia, Syria and Egypt, lands where the diaspora Jews had developed forms of Jewish heresy that would be the foundation of Gnosticism.

Thomas and Cyriacus will take us to some of the least respectable milieus: worlds dominated by the magic of a demonic snake and its followers. Worlds that are magical not in the modern sense of the term, but dark and deceptive, ruled by a deity known as the Soul of Darkness, the Son of Darkness. We will exercise caution in our attempt to find out who this deity was, but it must be

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Dieterich, E. Peterson, C. Bonner, H. Jackson, R. Kotansky. In the 19th century the problem had been examined in two works that are now totally discredited: J. Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme*, Paris 1828 and C. W. King, *The Gnostics and their Remains*, London 1887, which studied all magical gems (but also *defixiones* and other magical texts) as documents of Gnosticism.

said from the outset that its serpent nature will live up to its reputation, and it will try in every way to deceive us and to conceal its true self. So we will have to be content with the information gleaned either from its adulators or its detractors, since at that time it was not the subject of impartial scientific investigation. But we will see that there is far more documentation on the subject than expected, thanks mainly to Gnostic gems: those little stones viewed with condescension and sometimes irony by most Classicists and Christianists. We will strive to bring some scholarly zeal and critical thinking to the study of iconographies and Judaizing *voces* in magical gems, papyri and lamellae. Until now, the issue has frequently been evaded, and Iaô, Sabaoth and other theonyms of Judaic origin have been dismissed as simply the *voces magicae* that accompany any type of iconography or formula to increase their efficacy. The presence of such words has its own *raison d'être*, which we will try to identify; it is not true that they typify any magical document whatsoever. The instruments for classifying the available material will be found en route, with the help of our guides, who will provide us with sufficient information to identify those “magical” rites practised in the shadow of the snake as Gnostic cults. We will examine in detail the kinds of magic the snake worshippers actually performed, and we will also try to understand why they were defined as magic and not in any other way. In the worlds visited with our guides we will not have the good fortune – or misfortune – to witness wonders being worked that might enable us to evaluate the specific type of magic concerned. But we will, on the other hand, be able to make up for this lack by discovering that in the land of the magic snake people read the works of Zoroaster, who was regarded as the founder of magic and the first Magus. We will learn that Judaic astrological doctrines flourished under the influence of the snake, and that ancient Chaldean wisdom was a very rich source of inspiration. This suggests that, in the regions visited with Thomas and Cyriacus, magic and its sister, astrology, were taken very seriously.

By frequenting Gnostic and Gnostic-inspired magic circles we run the risk of becoming confused and unable to tell the bad snake from the good one. One reason is that our guides, like the apostles and the Christian apologists, confine their information to certain Gnostic circles and certain periods in history. But we know that the doctrines changed over time, as did the people and the places. The Gnostic snake is revealed to us through a play of mirrors, in which its values are reversed, or grafted on to similar or totally different snakes. But eventually the tangled knot will start to unravel, and it will be possible to classify some of the images of this deity, venerated or abhorred in various ways in the vast panorama of Judaic-inspired doctrines in the Imperial Age.

## The Marcionite snake

### § 1. *Terminological introduction and excusatio non petita*

Some of the readers following us on our journey will probably be disgusted by the misuse of the terms Gnosticism and magic, not for the same reasons that disgusted Thomas and Cyriacus, but because for the last two centuries every school of thought and just about every scholar have had their own ideas on the meaning of these words. The fact is that there are no alternative expressions, and even those who most strongly deny the existence of Gnosticism or magic use these terms.

The term Gnosticism will be used to designate various Christian heresies under the Roman Empire, in the awareness that many scholars have tried to circumscribe and define the actual sphere of Gnosticism<sup>2</sup> and others have demolished their definitions<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, there is now reluctance even just to use the word, lest this be taken as support for the existence of a religious movement called Gnosticism<sup>4</sup>. In this work, the word *Gnosticism* will be used as a synonym for the heresies addressed by Irenaeus and related

<sup>2</sup> See in particular the conference in Messina organized by U. Bianchi on *Le origini dello Gnosticismo*. *Atti del Colloquio Messina 1966*, SHR 12, Leiden 1967 (the chief characteristic of Gnosticism is the theory of the dispersal of particles of spiritual light, which unite human beings to God, and make them different from the creator, whose work is despised); a very similar view to this is taken by R. McL. Wilson, *From Gnosis to Gnosticism*, in: *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à H.-Ch. Puech*, ed. by A. Bareau, Paris 1974, 423–9; cf. also the many contributions attempting to define Gnosticism in: *Gnosis und Gnosticismus*, ed. by K. Rudolph, Darmstadt 1975.

<sup>3</sup> M. Smith, *The History of the Term Gnostikos*, in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, RGRW 130, II, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1996, 183–193; M. Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*. An argument for dismantling a dubious Category, Princeton 1996; M. Waldstein, *Hans Jonas' Construct "Gnosticism": Analysis and Critique*, *J ECS* 8, 2000, 341–372; K. L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge/Mass., London 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Term used for the first time by Henry More in 1669, in a polemic against the Catholic Church; cf. B. Layton, *Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism*, in: *The Social World of the First Christians. Essays in Honour of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. by L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough, Minneapolis 1995, 348–9. The Christian writers admitted that not every heretical sect defined itself as "gnostic": Origen., *Cels.* V 61 (CGS Origenes, II, 64 Koetschau).

heresies of a similar nature. In fact the work of Irenaeus was entitled *Exposé and overthrow of what is falsely called knowledge*<sup>5</sup>.

Gnostikòì, or followers of Gnosis, have been described as the followers of Prodicus<sup>6</sup>; certain libertine sects<sup>7</sup>, the Naassene Ophites and the followers of Justin<sup>8</sup>, the sects led by Nicolaus and the Nicolaites<sup>9</sup>, the Valentinians and those who instructed the Valentinians<sup>10</sup>, those were trained by the followers of Simon Magus<sup>11</sup>, the Carpocratians<sup>12</sup>, the Basilidians<sup>13</sup> and the Cainites<sup>14</sup>. The word Gnostikoi in itself was not a specific term: it meant “the wise ones”, and even the Catholic Clement of Alexandria used to describe himself as *Gnostic*. The Mithraists called themselves *the wise ones*<sup>15</sup>, which is very nearly a synonym of Gnostikoi. However, all the heretics opposed by Irenaeus disparaged the work of the creator god and tried to distinguish him from the supreme god. This is an important doctrine, which characterized the galaxy of sects opposed by Irenaeus. There are enough elements to justify treating Naassenes, Ophites, Valentinians, Basilidians and Carpocratians as one large group and calling them, as they always have been called, Gnostics<sup>16</sup>. The term *Gnostic doctrines*, therefore, will be used to mean the

<sup>5</sup> Eus., h. e. V 7,1 (GCS Eusebius II/1, 440 Schwartz). In haer. I 29,1 (SC 264 358 Rousseau, Doutreleau) he uses *Gnostici* as a collective term for all heretical sects issued from the heresy of Simon.

<sup>6</sup> Clem., str. III 4,30 (CGS Clemens II, 209 Stählin); cf. Tert., Scorp. I (CSEL 20, 145 Reifferscheid, Wissowa).

<sup>7</sup> Clem., str. III 18,109–110 (II, 246–7 Stählin).

<sup>8</sup> Hipp., haer. V 2 (CGS Hippolytus III, 77 Wendland); 6,4 (78 Wend.); 8,1 (89 Wend.); 29 (94 Wend.); 11,1 (104 Wend.); 23,3 (125 Wend.).

<sup>9</sup> Hipp., haer. VII 36,2 (223 Wend.).

<sup>10</sup> Iren., haer. I 5,1 and 3; 11,5 (SC 264 78–80; 178 Rouss., Dout.); on the *gnosis* or *agnitio* of the Valentinian Marcus. see: I 13,2; 16,2; 21,2 and 4 (SC 264, 192; 260; 296; 302–4 Rouss., Dout.). An excellent argument that has been made in the modern debate on Gnosticism is the definition of Valentinus as a Gnostic: in fact the parameters proposed at the Messina Colloquium do not fit with Valentinus' doctrines: Chr. Marksches, Valentinus Gnosticus?. Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins, WUNT 65, Tübingen 1992, esp. 402–407.

<sup>11</sup> Iren., haer. I 16,3; cf. II 1,1 (SC 264 260–4 and SC 294, 26 Rouss., Dout.); “the multitude of these gnostics who descended from him (Simon)”.

<sup>12</sup> Iren., haer. I 25,6 (SC 264, 342 Rouss., Dout.); Eus., h. e. IV 7,9 (II/1, 311 Sch.).

<sup>13</sup> Iren., haer. II 13,8; 31,1; 35,2 (SC 294, 122 326; 362 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>14</sup> Iren., haer. I 31,1 (SC 264, 386 Rouss., Dout.) (the Cainites said that only Judas had true gnosis).

<sup>15</sup> Ps. August., Quaest. veteris et novi Test. 94,12 (CSEL 50, 309): *se sapientes appellant*. On Clement: str. VII 1,5 (CGS Clemens III, 4 Stählin and other passages, cf. Clemens IV Register, 311–318).

<sup>16</sup> On Gnosticism as the whole group of sects described as gnostic: B. Layton, Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism, The Social World of the First Christians,

doctrines professed by these sects and sects with very similar beliefs. We will gladly leave the difficult task of defining more precisely what Gnosticism was or was not to the scholars who are good at discussing nomenclature rather than substance; the accounts of the ancients of sects defined as “gnostic” and the few things they had in common are enough for us to go by. For Marcion it would not have been important to define himself as ‘gnostic’ or ‘non-gnostic’; the essential thing for him was that the creator was an evil god and that it was necessary to embrace Christianity. Marcion’s case is clear proof of the futility of names: was he or was he not a Gnostic? What is important is not to define Marcion as one thing or another, but to understand his doctrine.

The mere mention of magic entails the risk of immediate censure, because disputes about the definition of this concept have resulted paradoxically in exactly the same embarrassment about using this word as about the word Gnosticism. It is also embarrassing to read other writers’ opinions on magic, because each author is convinced that he or she is the repository of truth on the subject and is wary of any heresy. Our conception of magic, and of Gnosticism, is a modern one, even though magic is firmly rooted in Imperial Age tradition. In this work the term magic will be used in a similar spirit to that of Thomas and Cyriacus. Although we will try to be less negative in our judgments than they were, at the same time we will not be too admiring, as the deceitful serpent would urge us to be. Christian polemicists used the concept of magic to indicate religious trends that were the antithesis of true religion; we will avoid this dialectic, which has little to commend it scientifically, and much that is controversial.

Few notions in the history of religion are as controversial as magic. *Magic* was a term that denoted the religion of the Persian Magi and was later used by the Greeks and Romans to indicate forms of religion that resembled the popular stereotyped image of the Magi’s religion. For the time being we will assume that *magic was a form of behaviour similar to the practices ascribed to the Magi and the Chaldeans in Hellenistic-Roman times.*

in: *Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, Minneapolis 1995, 340–341. For a reaction to the deconstructionist tendency of ideas on Gnosticism, see: G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Chaos e dualismo: La dialettica chaos-kosmos nell’Ermetismo e nel Manicheismo*, Cassiodorus 1, 1995, 11–28; *Chaos e dualismo: esempi della dialettica chaos-kosmos nello Gnosticism*, Cassiodorus 2, 1996, 9–40; *Ead., Eretici e magi in Ireneo: l’accusa di magia come strumento della polemica antignostica*, in: *Munera amicitiae. Studi di storia e cultura sulla Tarda Antichità offerti a Salvatore Pricoco*, ed. by R. Barcellona and T. Sardella, Soveria Mannelli 2003, 471–501, esp. 478. Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* (n. 3), has found only one case of a “Gnostic” believing in the goodness of creation: Epiphanes, the son of Carpocrates.

Modern scholars have also raised doubts and objections to other names, such as Nicolaus and the Nicolaitan sect, and what is known as the Sethian group of heresies. Occasionally modern scholars point out the inadequacy of the accounts of Christian heresiologists and their biased attitude to certain sects or groups of sects, so that one is easily led to believe that these sects never existed, despite the evidence to the contrary in ancient authors.

The main objectives of this study will be to understand the condemnation of the creator by the heretics described by Irenaeus (Gnostics, if we may refer to them as such), to evaluate the importance of the doctrines of the Chaldeans and Magi in the development of Gnosis, and to learn more about a central figure in gnostic doctrines, the snake. We will also seek new elements that will enable us to place Gnostics in their social context. Let us then, just for once, leave aside the endless and often fruitless arguments about method<sup>17</sup> and abstract philosophical concepts, and concentrate on ancient texts and monuments. This procedure carries with it a risk of error, of course. Personally I admire the errors made by great scholars such as K. Reitzenstein, W. Bousset or A. Dieterich, who have taken risks in order to open up new fields of inquiry and to advance research, far more than the sensible and impartial critiques and discussions on method of so many others.

Only at the end of our journey will we try to clarify, to some extent at least, the nature of the link between these two phenomena, Gnosticism and magic. I have addressed the relationship between Mithraism and magic in a previous book<sup>18</sup>; in this work I will examine the relationship between Gnosticism and magic, in the firm belief that most of the magical phenomenology of the Imperial Age developed within and around these two great religious movements: heretical Hebraism and heretical Zoroastrism, that is Gnosis and Mithraism.

## § 2. *The divine snake in Cyrrhestic villages*

In this section we will first examine a series of testimonies to the fact that some Gnostics revered the image of the *ouroboros*, the snake devouring its own tail; we will then study the images of the *ouroboros* which have actually been preserved and are inspired by Gnostic ideas.

The departure point of this investigation will be a passage from *Religious History*, a history of Syrian monks by Theodoretus of Cyrrhus dedicated

<sup>17</sup> There is, of course, only one method...

<sup>18</sup> A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mithraismo. Il Mithraismo e la magia*, Rome 1998.

also to James, a holy man who lived at the time of Theodoretus. This work was written in about 440 AD. In Chapter XXI<sup>19</sup> Theodoretus writes that in the Cyrrhus area Marcion had sown “the many seeds of his errors” and the followers of his heretical gnostic church were still active in the 5th century<sup>20</sup>. Theodoretus and James, having failed to convince the heretics, used force, but the largest of the villages contaminated by the Marcionite heresy resisted valiantly; then Isaiah, Theodoretus’ right-hand man, told him of a vision that had come to him:

“As soon as the singing of the psalms began, I saw over where those villages stand a serpent of fire gliding through the air from West to East. After praying three times, I saw it once again, coiled in a circle, so that its head was joined to its tail. I recited more prayers and saw that it had divided into two parts and dissolved into smoke.”<sup>21</sup>

Theodoretus goes on: “Then we saw that the prophecy had come true. In the morning the followers of the serpent, the source of all error, and its supporters, claiming to belong to the apostolic phalanx, appeared from the West with swords unsheathed. By the third hour they were in serried ranks, on the defensive, like the snake when it covered its head with its tail. At last, at the eighth hour, they dispersed and left the path into the village to us. I immediately found the bronze snake they adored as the enemy of the Creator of the universe, against Whom they had openly decided to wage war.”

<sup>19</sup> PG 82, 1439–42; for a translation: SC 257, 95–100 Canivet, Leroy-Molingen.

<sup>20</sup> Theodoretus mentions the Marcionites several times and refers to the initiatives taken against them in Ep. 81 to the consul Nomus, dated 448 (SC 98, 197 Azéma) and in the Ep. 113 to Pope Leo, dated 449 (SC 111, 62 Azéma: *supra mille animas Marcionis morbo liberavi*); he had also written a work against the Marcionites: cf. Ep. 82 to Eusebius of Ancyra, dated 448 (SC 98, 202 Azéma) and Ep. 116 to the priest Renatus, dated 449 (SC 111, 70 Azéma); *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* I 24 (PG 83, 374); cf. A. von Harnack, *Marcio: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, Leipzig 1921, Beilage V, 290–3; on the Marcionites in Syria: E. Amann, *Art. Marcion*, DThC IX, 1927, 2027–8; H. J. W. Drijvers, *Marcionism in Syria. Principles, problems, polemics*, *SecCen* 6, 1987–1988, 153–172. The era when Theodoretus worked was a time of fierce and at times violent Christian attacks on pagans and heretics: Rabbula, the tyrant-bishop of Edessa, who destroyed Syrian temples, idols and synagogues, is a notorious example; cf. J. W. Drijvers, *Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa: Spiritual Authority and Secular Power*, in: *Portraits of Spiritual Authority. Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*, ed. J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Watt, RGRW 137, Leiden 1999, 139–154.

<sup>21</sup> Damascius recounted (fr. 98 Zintzen) that one day the wife of the Emperor Leo I (457–474) prayed to the sun and saw clouds in the sky forming a lion and a man who was being eaten by the lion, and this was taken as a prophetic sign that the emperor would overcome the Goths and Aspar, who was actually killed. So it seems that this type of vision was common at the time. Purely for the sake of curiosity, it is interesting to note that *Amm. Marc.* XVI 12,39 narrates that on the purple standard of the cavalry squadron escorting Julian the Apostate there was a dragon changing its skin; obviously a symbol of the perpetual renewal of time.

In the years when Theodoretus was writing his *Religious History* a heresiological work was published in Rome, known as *Praedestinatus*<sup>22</sup>, which asserted that bishops Theocritus of Calcedonia and Evander of Nicomedia rose up in Bithynia against the snake-worshipping Ophites, and publicly refuted Ophitism, eliminated the Ophite priests and killed all their snakes<sup>23</sup>. In this instance they were Ophitic Gnostics, who, according to the well-known description by Epiphanius<sup>24</sup> and the *Praedestinatus*, worshipped the snake as a Eucharistic manifestation of Christ.

Of course Theodoretus' polemicizing could have led him to distort somewhat his description of the heretics<sup>25</sup>, but he could hardly be accused of being wrong in describing the heretics of the villages near Cyrrethos as Marcionites<sup>26</sup> and in saying that they venerated the serpent that devours its own tail. Prudentius<sup>27</sup> also accused the Marcionites of worshipping Satan – who was probably the “Creator’s enemy” in the polemics of Theodoretus. Theodoretus' description of the hostility between the *ouroboros* and the Creator cannot be accepted uncritically. Tertullian<sup>28</sup> gives the following concise definition of the God worshipped by the Marcionites: “Marcion’s god is not

<sup>22</sup> Which is attributed to the years 432–440 and to the pen of a Pelagian predestinarianist.

<sup>23</sup> *Praedestinatus* I 17 (PL 53, 592).

<sup>24</sup> XXXVII 5,1–7 (II, 57–58 Holl).

<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to his chapter on the Marcionite heresy, Epiphanius (haer. XLII 1,1: II, 93 Holl) describes Marcion as the “great serpent”; Hippolytus (haer. V 11,1; 104 Wend.) and Epiphanius (haer. XXVI 3,5; LXIV 55,1; LXIX 81,1–2; 6: I, 279; 333; II, 486; III, 228–9 Holl), speaking of the multiplicity of Gnostic sects, compare them to a many-headed snake, like a Hydra. Cf. A. Quacquarelli, *Il leone e il drago nella simbologia dell’età patristica*, *QVetChr* 11, Bari 1975, 38. The Hydra image was also used by pagans: SHA Alex. Sev. 15,2; Jul., Ep. 28; 29; 33,2.

<sup>26</sup> In 374 AD Epiphanius (haer. XLII 1,2: II, 94 Holl) meets Marcionites in Syria, as well as in Rome, in Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Cyprus and Persia. *Praedestinatus* 21 (PL 53, 594) states that they had spread throughout the East, then were confuted by Origen and condemned in every city, and after a few years moved to Africa. An inscription dating to 318–319 from Deir-Ali, in the Damascus area, attests the presence of a Marcionite community that enjoyed freedom of worship [*συναγωγῆ Μαρκιωνιστῶν κώμ(ης) Λεβάρβων τοῦ κ(ουρί)ου τοῦ σ(ωτῆ)ρος Ἰη(σοῦ) Χριστοῦ*]: Ph. Le Bas and W.H. Waddington, *Inscriptions grecques et latines recueillies en Grèce et en Asie Mineure*, III, Paris, 1870, 582–3, no. 2558; Harnack, *Marcio* (n. 20), 263–6; <sup>2</sup>1924, 341–4; Drijvers, *Marcionism in Syria* (n. 20), 153–172. In the 5th century the Marcionites were still numerous in Armenia: Eznik, *Against the sects*, IV, German transl. by J.M. Schmid, Vienna 1900; *Against the sects*, It. transl. by A. Orenco, Pisa 1996; cf. Harnack, *Marcio* (n. 20), 293–301. On the Paulicians as the followers and continuers of the Marcionites cf. G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Gnostica et Hermetica*, Rome 1982, 192–9.

<sup>27</sup> Prudent., *Hamartigenia* 129; 502.

<sup>28</sup> *contra Marc.* V 16 (632 Kroy.).

known by natural means, and has never been revealed, except in the Gospel". According to Marcion, the supreme god seen in opposition to the Creator was unknowable and outside creation; it is unlikely therefore that he could have the form of a snake, which is not mentioned in the Gospels. The snake, on the other hand, could have been a representation of Christ, derived from Gnostic speculation after Marcion. In his work on heresies Theodoretus<sup>29</sup> states that the Marcionites had the audacity to claim that the serpent of the Garden of Eden was superior to the creator, because it enabled men to attain knowledge, and that some of them worshipped this serpent. He then states that he discovered the Marcionites' bronze serpent, inside a box (*kibotion*), together with their abominable mysteries (*mousarôn mysteriôn*)<sup>30</sup>. Before attempting to analyse the testimonies presented here, it must be stated that from the preaching of Marcion to the age of Theodoretus three centuries had elapsed, during which the original doctrine may have evolved, like all other doctrines of the Imperial Age.

### § 3. *The prayer of Cyriacus*

Another two important texts discuss the snake that devours its own tail, but they do not explain which doctrinal movement this divine animal belonged to: the *Prayer of Cyriacus* and the *Hymn of the Pearl*, which is contained in the *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*. Exegetes of these texts have neglected their connection with the account given by Theodoretus, and therefore have not discussed whether there might actually have been an *ouroboros* snake cult in Syria or Mesopotamia under the Roman Empire.

We will start with the *Prayer of Cyriacus*<sup>31</sup>, which is part of the *Acts of the Passion of Cyriacus and Julitta*, since more explicit mention of the cult is

<sup>29</sup> Thdt., haer. I 24 (PG 83, 373); Harnack, Marcio (n. 20), 291–2.

<sup>30</sup> That is, secret cult objects. Theodoretus goes on to say that the Marcionites insult the creator, as loving the wicked, the patriarchs and the prophets, and that they accept only Luke's Gospel. Christ is considered as the one who revoked Old Testament Law in the name of the "unknown god" and freed man from the slavery inflicted by the creator.

<sup>31</sup> H. Gressmann, *Das Gebet des Kyriakos*, ZNW 20, 1921, 23–35 (with Greek translation). The prayer is quoted in the Syriac version of the *Passio Cyriaci et Iulittae*, on which see: P. Bedjean, *Acta sanctorum et martyrum*, III, Paris 1890, 275–322 (the Greek text has been partially expurgated, probably because it was unorthodox); on the Slavonic version, see: Al.N. Wesselofsky, *Der Drache zu Babylonia*, *Archiv für slavische Philologie* 8, 1885, 326 (on 326–30 medieval Russian and French romances inspired by the same story are mentioned); for the connection with the *Hymn of the Pearl*, see: A. Dillmann, *Über die Apokryphen Märtyrergeschichte des Cyriacus mit Iulitta und des Georgius*, SPAW.

made in this work. We will then move on from this later and more elaborate version of events to older and less complex versions.

Blessed Cyriacus – the *Acts* tell us – was sent by his mother Julitta to a foreign land and after many wanderings reached the country of darkness. He began to pray, remembering that his mother had given him a garment decorated with pearls<sup>32</sup>, and keeping with him always, “as a sign, the letter (*epistolé*) of the spirit”. Then he came to a river<sup>33</sup> which was only crossed on Saturdays and which flowed from the abyss. At last the hero came to the city of “Limnothalassa” (which means “sea-marsh”, or perhaps “marshy sea”)<sup>34</sup>, which is confused with Babylon (in the Slavonic version it is simply Babylon), and here he met the serpent god. In the city of darkness there were monstrous animals (*onokentauroi*, *hippokentauroi*), enormous magic snakes, many demons and “the king of the earthly worms whose tail is in its mouth.” The monster, which had teeth like swords, bronze sides, an iron spinal column and eagle’s claws, lay on a bed of spears, ate papyri and hay, breathed smoke from its mouth and was swallowing up the Jordan. The text of the *Prayer* goes on to say that it was the serpent that had led the angels and then Adam astray through their passions, who had inflamed Cain and driven him to evil, so that God had sent the Flood; the serpent had also extinguished the hearts of the giants<sup>35</sup>, and had instilled evil into the minds of many of the protagonists of biblical tales and instituted the cult of idols. The serpent then tried to swallow Cyriacus, but the hero closed its mouth with the letter he had with him and was saved.

PH 1887, 339–56; R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, Bonn 1921, 77; H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, I, Göttingen 1964, 332, n. 4. Julitta and her son Cyriacus (completely legendary characters) are said to have been martyred at the time of the Emperor Maximinus; the Acts of their martyrdom must have been written just before 500, and expurgated to bring them into line with more orthodox Christian thinking in about 500; cf. H. Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief in den Acta Cyriaci et Julittae*, ZKG 31, 1910, 29–40.

<sup>32</sup> A gloss explains that the mother was the Church, the pearls divine words and the robe the teaching of the Holy Spirit. In Macarius, Hom. 23 (PTS 4, 195–6 Dörries, Klostermann, Kroeger) the pearl decorates the crown of Christ and his followers.

<sup>33</sup> He is called Madiam in the Slavonic version.

<sup>34</sup> Note that in the Book of Wisdom, a pseudepigraphon of Apollonius of Tyana which is difficult to date, containing all the magical-astrological wisdom, is addressed to a disciple called Doustoumos Thalassos: cf. M. Levi Della Vida, *La dottrina e i dodici legati di Stomothalassa*, AA1.R serie VIII/3, 1951, 480; M. Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History*, Rome 1986, 103–4.

<sup>35</sup> In a Byzantine exorcism text edited by L. Delatte, *Un office byzantin d’exorcisme* (Ms. de la Lavra du Mont Athos, Q 20), MAB.L 52, Brussels 1957, 37, line 11, God is invoked as the one who opened the abysses, destroyed the wicked giants and brought down the tower of Babel.

The long series of statements explaining who the *ourobouros* snake was and what it had done corresponds perfectly to an account in the *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*<sup>36</sup>, which tells of a dragon that appeared to the apostle in India and explained its lineage with these words: “I am son to him that sitteth on a throne over all the earth that receiveth back his own from them that borrow: I am son to him that girdeth about the sphere: and I am kin to him that is outside the ocean, whose tail is set in his own mouth.” The serpent went on to say that it was he who had corrupted Eve, incited Cain to murder his brother, led the angels astray and was responsible for all the other evils listed in the *Prayer of Cyriacus*. Clearly the *Acts of Cyriacus* drew inspiration from the *Acts of Thomas*<sup>37</sup>, while the description of the city populated by demons and monsters, lying beyond the sandy river that was the boundary of the human world, the description of the king of the worms and the royal robe prepared by the mother are inspired by a letter from Alexander the Great mentioned in the *Romance of Alexander*<sup>38</sup>. The *Romance* is also the source of the monstrous animals and the gigantic serpent that swallowed huge mouthfuls (Alexander saw a similar creature in the Ganges, able to swallow an elephant). However the fact that the serpent was swallowing up the Jordan specifically links it to Behemoth, the monster paired with Leviathan in the Book of Job<sup>39</sup>.

#### § 4. *The Hymn of the Pearl and the Shepherd Hermas*

We now come to the *Hymn of the Pearl*, in chapters 108–113 of the *Acts of Thomas*<sup>40</sup>, composed probably around 225 AD, in or not far from Edessa<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> 32 (transl. by M. R. Jones, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1924); a French transl. by A.-J. Festugière, *Les actes apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas*, Geneva 1983, 60–61.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief* (n. 31), 4–5.

<sup>38</sup> *Recensio A*, II 21–38.; cf. Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief* (n. 31), 1–47. On 23–9 Stocks studies the versions given by Pseudo-Callisthenes and in two legends about Alexander, one Syrian, the other Ethiopian, which say that Alexander reached the ends of the earth, where there were monstrous barbarian peoples; he wanted to erect an impregnable gate to keep out the evil hordes (the Huns) until the end of the world. In the Ethiopian version, Alexander sealed the door with phylacteries.

<sup>39</sup> Job 40,18. In rabbinic literature it was Leviathan that was swallowing up the Jordan: I. Broydé, *Art. Leviathan and Behemoth*, *JE VIII*, New York 1925, 38.

<sup>40</sup> *Acta Apostolorum apocrypha*, ed. by R. A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet, II/2, 1903 (reprint, Darmstadt 1959), 219–224. Transl. by A. Guillaumont, H.Ch. Puech et alii, *L’Evangile selon Thomas*, Paris 1959, 41–3; Festugière, *Les actes apocryphes* (n. 36), 92–6. Cf. A. Adam, *Die Psalmen des Thomas und das Perlenlied als Zeugnisse vorchristlicher Gnosis*,

The protagonist is Thomas himself, who recites the prayer, saying that as a young man and son of an Eastern king and queen he was sent to Egypt to bring back the only pearl lying on the sea bed, encircled by the hissing serpent; if he succeeded in this task, he would be able to wear once again the robe of glory that he had cast off during the journey. Passing through Babylonia, he arrived in Egypt, where, fearing that the people might rouse the snake against him, imitated the Egyptians and ate their food, and thus forgot his mission and lived as one in a trance. His father and the other Eastern sovereigns sent him a letter<sup>42</sup> reminding him of his origins and his mission; the letter, which was sealed so that it could not be read by the wicked people in Babylonia or by the demons of Sarburg, turned into an eagle and flew to the young hero to awaken him with its words. Thus it was that he faced the great serpent, charmed it and sent it to sleep by pronouncing his Father's name, or – in another version – the name of the person who was close to him in rank<sup>43</sup>

BZNW 24, Berlin 1959; A. F. J. Klijn, *The so-called Hymn of the Pearl*, VigChr 14, 1960, 154–64 (who believes that the hymn is derived from orthodox Christian, not Gnostic, thinking); Id., *The Acts of Thomas*, Leiden 1962, 120–5 and 273–81; H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, I, Göttingen 1964, 320–8; Id., in: *Philosophical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs/N.J. 1974, 277–90; R. Merkelbach, *Der Seelenhymnus und die Weihe Julians*, in: *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*, Munich, Berlin 1962, 299 (who acknowledges its dependancy on Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*); I. P. Coulianu, *Erzählung und Mythos im "Lied von der Perle"*, Kairos 21, 1979, 60–71; G. Quispel, *Makarius, das Thomas evangelium und das Lied von der Perle*, NT.S 15, Leiden 1967; P.H. Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas: Etude de la tradition manuscrite*, in: *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, 13–17 sept. Chantilly, OCA 205, Rome 1978, 19–29; Id., *L'Hymne de la perle des Actes de Thomas*, Louvain 1981; R. Rühner, *Dualisme dans le chant médiéval de La Perle*, in: *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique*, colloque Louvain 1980, ed. by J. Ries, J. M. Sevrin, Louvain 1982, 54–6; C. Angelino, *Il canto della perla*, Genoa 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (n. 40), and Quispel, *Makarius* (n. 40), 38–53 (based on comparisons with Bardesanes and Syrian Christianity, even if the Acts show the influence of Roman orthodoxy). The Hymn must have been written in Syriac and then translated into Greek: Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (n. 40), 273–4. On the importance of the figure of Thomas in northern Syria, see the Gospel of Thomas, written in about 140, in or near Edessa, by an Encratite Christian, and then used by Tatian about 170 AD, possibly in Edessa; cf. G. Quispel, *Tatian and the Gospel of Thomas: Studies in the History of the Western Diatessaron*, Leiden 1975, 82–7.

<sup>42</sup> In the letter of Jesus to Abgar of Edessa (*Acta Apostolorum apocrypha*, I, 281 Lip., Bonn.) the Saviour sends Abgar, who is sick, a letter with his seal, consisting of 7 signs. According to Origen., in Joh. 6,48 (SC 157, 316–18 Blanc), the Nile was the kingdom of the dragon, who lived in it. On the Nile conceived as a snake: D. Wortmann, *Kosmogonie und Nilflut*, BoJ 166, 1966, 89–90.

<sup>43</sup> Possibly an allusion to Jesus: Thomas was believed to be his twin brother: E. Preuschen, *Zwei gnostische Hymnen*, Giessen 1904, 47 and 51; Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (n. 40), 161 thinks it means the Spirit, which is like a spiritual brother (cf. Tat., *orat. 13: Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments*, ed. by M. Whittaker, Oxford 1982, 26–28).

and his mother's name. He took the pearl, returned to his Father's kingdom in the East and once again donned the robe of glory and the cloak.

Gilles Quispel<sup>44</sup> has refuted the theory that the *Hymn* is testimony to a pre-Christian Gnosticism in the *Acts of Thomas*, a theory upheld chiefly by A. Adam and also, to some extent, by Hans Jonas<sup>45</sup>; furthermore Quispel has shown that the text came from the pen of a Syrian Encratite Christian. The episode based on the symbolism of the pearl, which recurs in Matthew 13.45, was frequently commented on in Syrian Christian circles; in that passage Jesus explained that on the Day of Judgement the angels would cast the wicked down to hell, and compared the search for the kingdom of heaven to a search for a pearl of great price by a merchant. The theme of the glorious robe and the human robe is also explained, without recourse to Naassene and Mandaean doctrines, through a Platonic and then a Christian comparison between the body and the garment that clothes the soul. The pearl was therefore the treasure of the Christian Word<sup>46</sup>. Poirier has continued to explain the words of the hymn in the light of Syrian Christianity, and has stressed that in this milieu the pearl symbolized Christ, the word of God, faith<sup>47</sup>. It should be added that Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrrhus<sup>48</sup>, to say that the holy Theodosius embraced the Christian faith, states that "he bought the pearl of great price spoken of in the Gospel".

<sup>44</sup> Makarius (n. 40).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. note 40. Hans Jonas also connects the hymn with Iranian traditions and, in particular, compares it with ch. 133 of Mani's *Kephalaia* (A. Böhlig and H. Polotsky, *Kephalaia*, Stuttgart 1940, 204, according to which drops (of the living soul) fall from the sky into the sea, become pearls, and are taken by fishermen to kings. According to Jonas, the pearl is more closely linked to Gnostic (cf. the Naassenes of Hipp., haer. V 8,32; 95 Wend.) or Mandaean (Ginza of left III 8; 517 Lidzbarski) or Manichaean contexts. Recently S. Parpola, *Mesopotamian Precursors of the Hymn of the Pearl*, in: *Mythology and Mythologies*, Melammu Symposia, 2, Helsinki 2001, 181–93, has looked for the source of the hymn (believed to be pre-Christian) in Mesopotamian myths concerning princes who defeat a monstrous being.

<sup>46</sup> In Iranian tradition the pearl certainly symbolized the soul: G. Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit*, Cologne 1960, 27; *Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis*, ZRGG 4, 1952, 97–121; cf. further bibliography in G. Sfamini, *I miti cosmogonici degli Yezidi*, *Numen* 21, 1974, 64–5. For this reason many scholars have interpreted the pearl as a metaphor of the soul or of the divine spark in the soul. In the *Romance of Alexander* (II 38) the king tried to take some pearls from the sea bed, but a sea monster prevented him.

<sup>47</sup> *L'Hymne de la perle* (n. 40), 418–9, especially on the basis of Aphraates, *Demonstrat.* 17,11 (PS 1, 813, 22 Parisot), and 17.2 (*ibid.* 788, 8); 22, 26 (1048, 5–7 Parisot); Ephraem, *Hymn. contra haereses* 41,2 (CSCO 169, Syr. 76, 165, transl. CSCO 170, Syr. 77, 146 Beck); cf. Ephraem, *Sermones*, II, 4,9–10 (CSCO 311, Syr. 134, 78, transl. CSCO 312, Syr. 135, 99 Beck).

<sup>48</sup> h. rel. 10,1 (SC 234, 436 Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen).

R. Reitzenstein<sup>49</sup> has noted the many precise comparisons with the hymn in an Egyptian demotic papyrus dating to the period from the second to the third century AD, so it may even be that an ancient narrative core, which spoke of an Oriental king and queen and their son, originated in Egypt, probably in the Hellenistic age, and had later influenced Judaism and Syrian Christianity.

The attribution of the work to an orthodox Christian writer does not mean that its content conformed to Roman Christian doctrine. Quispel<sup>50</sup> has stressed that Syrian Christianity, which had its main centre at Edessa, had developed its own characteristics, based on the doctrine of St Thomas, who was buried at Edessa. It was a form of Christianity that sprang directly from the first Jewish disciples in Jerusalem, and not from the preachings of St Paul, and therefore had its own *Gospels* and sacred texts, which differed from those of the Roman Church. We do not, however, agree with Quispel's underestimation<sup>51</sup> of the spread of Gnosticism in Syrian circles; the biography of Abercius, which we will shortly be examining, bears witness to an early spread of Marcionism in Syria (no later than the last decades of the 2nd century AD, but more probably towards the middle of the century); this spread signified, among other things, a distancing from Roman dogmatics and an acceptance of greater freedom of thought. The same antagonism towards Marcionism by Tatian<sup>52</sup> and his pupil Rhodon<sup>53</sup>, the bishop

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<sup>49</sup> R. Reitzenstein, *Zwei hellenistische Hymnen*, ARW 8, 1905, 167–90; Id., *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen*, Leipzig 1906, 103–7.

<sup>50</sup> *Gnosis and the new Sayings of Jesus*, ErJb 38, 1969, 201–10 = *Gnostic Studies*, I, Istanbul 1974, 180–209, esp. 181–6; cf. H. Drijvers, *Syrian Christianity and Judaism*, in: *The Jews among Pagans and Christians*, ed. by J. Lieu, J. North, T. Rajak, London, New York 1992, 124–46.

<sup>51</sup> *Gnosis and the new Sayings of Jesus* (n. 50), 198–200, which, summarizing the information we have on Christianity in Edessa, points out that Bardesanes wrote works against the Marcionites, that there were Valentinians in 363 (Jul., Ep. 115), that the heretic Audius lived in this city during the first half of the 4th century and that in the 4th century the presence is attested of the archaic Syrian Gnostic sect, the Quqites. On the Quqites: Theodorus Bar Konai, *Liber scholiorum* XI 77 (Théodore bar Koni, *Livre des scolies*, II, ed. by R. Hespel and R. Draguet, CSCO 432, Lovanii 1982, 249–250). In Callinicum, also, in Syria, there was a Valentinian meeting place: Ambros., Ep. LXXIV (40) 6, 16 (CSEL 82, 63–4 Zelzer).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Drijvers, *Syrian Christianity* (n. 50), 130.

<sup>53</sup> *Eus.*, h. e. V 13, 1 (II/1, 454 Sch.).

<sup>54</sup> *Eus.*, h. e. IV 24–25 (II/1, 378–380 Sch.).

<sup>55</sup> *Eus.*, h. e. IV 30 (II/1, 392 Sch.). On other northern Syrian authors who wrote works against Marcionism, cf. Drijvers, *Marcionism in Syria* (n. 20), 154–6.

of Antioch, Theophilus<sup>54</sup>, and above all by Bardesanes of Edessa<sup>55</sup> proves how firmly heresy had taken root on Syrian soil, and Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>56</sup> completes the picture by reminding us that at the time of Marcus Aurelius various heresies spread throughout Mesopotamia.

But some elements of the *Hymn* should immediately arouse perplexity in those who maintained that the text had nothing whatsoever to do with Gnosticism: for example, Thomas was said to have lulled the serpent to sleep with spells consisting essentially of pronouncing the name of God. But most of all a very clear distinction must be made between what is condemned in the *Acts of Thomas* and the behaviour of Thomas himself. The religion and the morals that are condemned do not seem to be just any form of pagan idolatry<sup>57</sup>, because some elements appear to be linked to the religious forms that subsequently Theodoretus physically battled against on Syrian soil. For example, the expression “I am son to him that girdeth about the sphere”, used by the snake encountered by Thomas, is not easy to construe, because it refers not to an emperor or even the “beast” of John’s *Apocalypse*, but to the god ruling the cosmos, the kosmokrator, who, in addition to assuming the form of the *ouroboros*, sits on a throne, just like the Hebrew god and the Jaldabaoth of Gnosticism<sup>58</sup>. If anything, the snake’s father corresponds to the red dragon of the *Apocalypse*, who empowered the beast and is equated with Leviathan<sup>59</sup>.

The equation of the Hebrew god with a serpentiform cosmic god was peculiar to Gnosticism, and so in the next chapters we will examine the theory that the religion condemned was a form of Gnosticism.

Some of the elements in the stories of Cyriacus and Thomas recur in a work, datable to the middle of the second century AD, known as the *Shep-*

<sup>56</sup> h. e. IV 30 (II/1, 392 Sch.); cf. Drijvers, *Syrian Christianity* (n. 50), 126.

<sup>57</sup> Circa 400 AD, it seems that the definitive version of *The Teaching of Addai*, a work on the sermons of Addai (identified with the disciple Thaddeus), was completed at the court of Abgar, ruler of Edessa. It describes the wicked idolatrous practises of the citizens of Edessa, and also those of neighbouring cities, and lists the pagan gods they worshipped: Taratha (Atargatis), Nebo, Bel, the Eagle, the Sun, the Moon: *The Teaching of Addai*, transl. by G. Howard, Chico 1981, 48–9. The paganism of this region is described in the same terms, in the 5th century, by Jacob of Sarug: *Discourse de Jacques de Saroug sur la chute des idoles*, ed. Martin, ZDMG 2, 1905, 110. When he wishes to say that a city practises pagan worship, Theodoretus is quite explicit, as in the case of Harran, at the time of Valens (Thdt., h. e. III 26; IV 18,14 CGS Theodoret Kirchengeschichte, 205 and 242 Parmentier, Scheidweiler).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Apocr. of John* (NHC II,1, III,1 and IV,1 with BG 8502,2) 10.

<sup>59</sup> The wound that the red dragon had received on one of its heads, mentioned in the *Apocalypse* 13,3, is also mentioned in Ps. 74: “thou hast broken the head of Leviathan”.

<sup>60</sup> O. von Gebhardt and A. Harnack, *Hermae Shepherd graece addita versione latina*, in: *Patrum Apostolicorum Opera*, III, Leipzig 1877; M. Whittaker, *Der Hirt Hermas*, GCS 48; French transl.: SC 53 by R. Joly; comment by D. Völter, Clemens, Hermas, Barnabas,

herd *Hermas* (or *Hermas the Shepherd*)<sup>60</sup>. Often considered canonical, it was read and copied very frequently, especially in the third century. In the fourth vision the protagonist heard a voice saying: “Hermas, do not doubt!”. Then, along the “via Campana”, an enormous animal appeared to him, like a whale, with a four-coloured head; from its mouth issued fiery locusts and ferocious breath; but he kept his faith in the words of God and the beast did not touch him. Then a woman dressed in white appeared to him; she was the Church, and she revealed to him that the Lord had sent an angel named Thegrì<sup>61</sup>, who sealed the monster’s mouth. It is possible (depending on the reading of the text) that, in the shepherd’s adventure also, the arduous crossing of a river was mentioned<sup>62</sup>.

### § 5. *The Christianity of Cyriacus and the Pearl*

After crossing the sabbatical river, Cyriacus is said to have gone to a country ruled by the wicked snake. These two elements should be compared to the affirmation in the *Acts of John*<sup>63</sup> that Jesus was taken prisoner “by lawless Jews, who were governed by a lawless snake”, and to the statement in the *Acts of Peter*<sup>64</sup> that Jesus was captured by the Jews at the snake’s instigation.

Going back in time, we find another text – which I do not think has been included in the discussion until now – which clarifies the premises of the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus: John’s Apocalypse*. In the *Apocalypse* there is frequent use of the symbolism of the white robe, associated with baptism and worn by the blessed<sup>65</sup>, and one of the central motifs in the work is the beast: a dragon standing guard over an abyss and protect-

Leiden 1904; M. Dibelius, *Die apostolischen Väter IV: Der Hirt des Hermas*, Tübingen 1923; N. Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, Göttingen 1991.

<sup>60</sup> On the problems raised by this name and possibly amending it to Segri cf. Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (n. 60), 174. The monster encapsulates the tetramorphic animal and the red dragon of the Apocalypse, the four animals in Daniel’s vision and the biblical Leviathan: B. Teyssèdre, *Naissance du Diable*, Paris 1985, 185–6.

<sup>62</sup> I 1.3 (1 Whitt.); cf. E. Peterson, *Die Begegnung mit dem Ungeheuer*, in: *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis*, Rome, Freiburg, Vienna 1959, 289–90.

<sup>63</sup> 94 (II/1, 197 Lip., Bonn.).

<sup>64</sup> 8 (I, 55 Lip., Bonn.). On the importance of these two passages, see: J.-D. Kaestli, *L’interprétation du serpent de Genèse 3 dans quelques textes gnostiques et la question de la gnose “ophite”*, in: *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique* (n. 40), 116–7.

<sup>65</sup> 3,4; 6,11; 7,9; 16,15; 22,14.

<sup>66</sup> 14,9 and 11; 15,2; 16,2; 18,2; 19,20; 20,4. In 12,3 it is an enormous, fiery-red dragon with 7 crowned heads and 10 horns; in 13,1 it is a creature from the sea with 7 heads with blasphemous names written on them and 10 horns with crowns; in 17,3 it is a scarlet beast

ing the harlot<sup>66</sup>. The harlot symbolizes the city corrupted by idolatry and fornication, the city of those who were branded with the mark of the beast and adored its statue. This city is identified with Babylon, and the dragon with the devil, who at the end will be driven out by an angel and “sealed” inside the abyss, while Babylon, the home of all fiends and unclean spirits, will be destroyed<sup>67</sup>. In the *Apocalypse* the theme of the “kings of the east” is found again: the Euphrates river will dry up to prepare their way<sup>68</sup>. In the *Apocalypse*, then, we find all the fundamental themes of the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus*: the corrupt city, the den of all kinds of demons, peopled by worshippers of the dragon – the devil – whose statue was adored; the river near the city, which could be crossed when it was dry; the final defeat of the beast, thanks to the seal; the home of the kings of the east as an image of the kingdom of heaven; the white robes worn by Christ’s followers. In the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus* two different connotations of the sinful city recur: in one story it is Egypt; in the other it is Babylonia<sup>69</sup>. In both cases they were biblical themes, evoking the Hebrews’ places of exile. The beast in the story of the Shepherd Hermas is also identified with the enormous snake mentioned in the other works under examination and with the beast of the *Apocalypse*. In John’s vision<sup>70</sup> the fifth angel opened the abyss and a swarm of locusts flew out and attacked the wicked with their scorpion stings. In the Shepherd Hermas the locusts poured out of the monster’s mouth, which was sealed by the angel, as in the *Apocalypse*.

The *Hymn of the Pearl*, the *Prayer of Cyriacus* and the *Shepherd Hermas* were probably inspired by the same theme in the *Apocalypse*. The *Apocalypse* was written between the rules of Nero and Domitian and had a very wide circulation and an extraordinary resonance. It is also probable that the apocalyptic stream as a whole originated in Jesus’ teachings on the Day of Judgement and the damning of the wicked by the angels, a doctrine alluded to in Matthew’s Gospel in the passage about the pearl.

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covered with blasphemous names, with 7 heads and 10 crowns. The dragon however coexists with the creature and hands over its throne to it.

<sup>67</sup> 20,3; 16,9; 18.

<sup>68</sup> 16,12; cf. H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Regensburg 1997, 357 (but without reference to the literature connected to the *Prayer of Cyriacus*).

<sup>69</sup> Note that in Ps. 87,4 the Egypt-Babylonia pairing is expressed cryptically in the words Raab and Babylonia (cf. H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, Göttingen 1895, 38–9), where Raab (Rahab) means an enormous sea snake, identical to (or identifiable with) Leviathan. Babylonia only started to become Christianized around the year 250, cf. J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I, Leiden 1969, 172.

<sup>70</sup> *Apc.* 9,3–11.

There are also Gnostic versions of the “sealing” of the dragon. In the Gnostic text of Nag Hammadi entitled *Nature of the Archons* or *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4, 95), the satanic beast is identified with the Hebrew god, called Jaldabaoth, whom Zoë, a divine emanation like Sophia, orders one of her angels to banish to Tartarus, at the bottom of the abyss.

### § 6. *The false prophet*

Chapter 19 of the *Apocalypse* describes Christ appearing on horseback at the head of an army to fight the beast, the kings of the earth and their armies. In Chapter 19,20 the prophetic text asserts that “the beast was caught and with it the false prophet, who had performed in its sight the signs by which he led astray those who had accepted the mark of the beast and those who had worshipped its image”. It then tells how the beast’s followers were eliminated and an angel sealed the abyss and chained the dragon up inside it. The prophecy about the dragon’s defeat goes back to Isaiah (ch. 27), which states that the Lord will slay the serpent Leviathan with his sword.

The scene from the *Apocalypse* resembles too closely the account of the battle fought by Theodoretus and James against the Cyrrethian village inhabited by Marcionites, who worshipped the snake that devours its own tail and were followers of the false prophet. The vision before the battle suggests that the episode in Cyrrethiê was the *Apocalypse* actually taking place; in John’s vision the red dragon stood at the entrance to heaven, from where Michael cast him down to earth<sup>71</sup>. For Theodoretus, the Marcionites were like the fornicating idolaters mentioned in the *Apocalypse*, and the image of the *ouroboros* snake they worshipped was identified with that of the dragon in John’s *Apocalypse*. The false prophet accompanying the beast became Marcion, or Marcion’s successor, who at the time led the heretics.

The ending of the *Apocalypse* also matches the story of the Cyrrethian villages, because in both cases the idolaters were brutally exterminated. Here there is a contradiction with the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus*, in which the idolaters were not defeated, nor was the snake with its tail in its mouth fought with weapons. In both texts, the protagonists simply shunned the corrupt peoples and refrained from imitating them, while the *ouroboros* snake was charmed with prodigious formulae. These differences can probably be interpreted as a different mythical setting for two different phases of the apocalyptic vision: first the dragon is sealed but not destroyed,

<sup>71</sup> Apc. 12,3.

then, in the final phases, it appears again on earth, accompanied by the false prophet, and only at the end is finally defeated. The *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus* mention an intermediate phase before the end of time and after the coming of Christ, who made it possible for the dragon to be “sealed”, while the Cyrrhestic war, in Theodoretus’ interpretation, took place at the end of time, when the dragon was to be vanquished for ever and no longer “sealed” with spells. This reading is confirmed by a passage from the *Acts of Thomas*<sup>72</sup> about a woman possessed by a devil, which was exorcised by the apostle; the demon complained that the time had not come for devils to leave the world, yet accepted that it had to obey in the name of Christ.

A bronze statue of the snake that was able to come to life was attributed by Christian propaganda<sup>73</sup> to the rites practised by Simon Magus, considered the founder of Gnosticism.

In the *Life of Severus of Antioch*, written in the 6th century AD by Zacharias Scholasticus<sup>74</sup>, a complex story is told of repression of idolatry in the Canopus area in Egypt. In the village of Menouthis a group of monks discovered a secret place of worship used by pagans, who concealed many idols in a cavity wall. Among these a wooden snake<sup>75</sup> was found, which roused the monks’ fury. Zaccaria’s account of the monk’s raid on the secret place says: “He held out the rebellious dragon. His idol was made of wood and I think that those who adored this snake – or rather because this was how the snake wished to be adored – were commemorating the rebellion of the first creatures, which came about through wood (the tree), at the promptings of the serpent”. A general inquiry was held. Among those questioned was the man accused of having sacrificed to the idols: “the priest confessed to the sacrifices he had dared to offer, and declared that the wooden dragon was

<sup>72</sup> 42–48 (II/2, 159–165 Lip., Bonn.).

<sup>73</sup> *Acta Petri et Pauli* (I, 193 Lip., Bonn.).

<sup>74</sup> Zacharie le Scholastique, *Vie de Sevère*, PO 2, esp. 14–36 Kugener. It is not our purpose here to establish the boundary between history and legend in this account. Cf. R. Herzog, *Der Kampf um den Kult von Menouthis*, in: *Pisciculi. Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums* Franz Joseph Dölger dargeboten, Münster 1939, 117–124; P. Athanassiadi, *Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination. The Testimony of Iamblichus*, *JRS* 83, 1993, 125–6.

<sup>75</sup> An archaeological find at Tomis, in Romania, is a perfect example of a cache of pagan statues at a time of conflict between Christianity and polytheistic paganism: L. Robert, *A travers l’Asie Mineure*, Paris 1980, 397–8. In addition to statues of anthropomorphic divinities, the cache also contained a statue of the serpent Glykon, which, as we will see, was sometimes identified with the sacred serpent of the Gnostic Ophites. The items in what was perhaps a mithraeum in Sidon (CIMRM, II, no. 74–87) come from a sealed underground area where different groups of statues of mithraic deities were placed towards the end of the fourth century AD; cf. recently M. Baratte, in: *Mithra. Colloque Maison de l’Orient Méditerranéen*, Lyon 18 Nov. 2000, in print.

the one who had deceived Eve. It had been handed down to him by the first priests. He then admitted that the pagans worshipped the dragon". Finally the idol was burned. Clearly, then, the Nile delta monks also followed the apocalyptic model and cast into the flames the dragon that had fathered idolatry when it appeared to man in the earthly paradise.

We have quoted this episode, which occurred around 500 AD, to demonstrate the Christian tendency to apply the apocalyptic format to the repression of idolatry. The most famous Christian victory over the demonic dragon was probably the one attributed to Pope Sylvester, who, at the time of Constantine, was said to have faced a ferocious dragon which lived in a cave beneath the temple of Vesta, or beneath the Capitol. Once a month, magi and sacrilegious virgins went down 365 steps to offer sacrifices and make expiation to the dragon, which now and then would come up the steps and belch out foul exhalations that were harmful to non-Christians. But the saint, instructed by St Peter during a vision, descended the steps, chained up the dragon and sealed its mouth with the sign of the cross<sup>76</sup>. This was certainly a pagan ritual, in which the snake (of Iuno Sospita, or Vesta) was present, but reconstrued as a "magic ritual", since the snake was purportedly fed by magi who went down 365 steps<sup>77</sup>: this number corresponded to the magic word *Abrasax*, which has a numerical value of 365. The legend is on the same lines as the legends of Thomas and Cyriacus, and, all things considered, is the one used in the *Apocalypse*. In this instance, too, the dragon was neutralized by the "Christian magic", that sealed his mouth. In the war on Satan and the demons, unleashed by the first Christians<sup>78</sup>, exorcisms in the name of Jesus were used to drive away the enemy of humankind.

Obviously, the existence of legends and stories like those in the *Apocalypse* could have compromised the credibility of Theodoretus' account; he was not, however, referring to pagan cults, but to Gnostic Christian cults,

<sup>76</sup> Actus Sylvestri Recensio A (late 4th-early 5th century) and Recensio B (late 5th-early 6th century), B. Mombritius, *Sanctuarium seu vitae sanctorum*, II, Paris <sup>2</sup>1910, 529–530; cf. H. J. Rose, *Iuno Sospita and St. Silvester*, *CIR* 36, 1922, 167–8; C. Cecchelli, *S. Maria del Sole e i mitrei del Campidoglio*, in: *Studi e documenti sulla Roma sacra*, I (Miscellanea della R. Deputazione romana di Storia Patria), Rome 1938, 127–76; R. J. Loenertz, *Actus Sylvestri. Genèse d'une légende*, *RHE* 70, 1975, 426–39; W. Pohlkamp, *Tradition und Topographie: Papst Silvester I (314–335) und der Drake vom Forum Romanum*, *RQ* 78, 1983, 1–100; J. Aronen, *I misteri di Ecate sul Campidoglio? La versione apocriфа della leggenda di S. Silvestro riconsiderata*, *SMSR* 51, 1985, 73–92; A. Frascchetti, *La conversione. Da Roma pagana a Roma cristiana*, Bari 1999, 114–117.

<sup>77</sup> Aronen, *I misteri di Ecate* (n. 76), 79, has underlined the importance of the account given by Jo. Mal. 307, which states that Diocletian had a temple of Hecate built in Antioch, with 365 steps.

<sup>78</sup> Paul., *Eph.* 6, 11–17; *1 Cor.* 10, 20–22.

which, unlike the Canopus area cults and the Forum and Capitol cults in Rome, were not the target of widespread accusations of idolatry.

### § 7. *The journey of Abercius*

In 1883, two fragments of a metric tomb inscription alluding to Abercius' Christian faith<sup>79</sup> were found in Hierapolis, near Synnada, in Phrygia. The text had been used to compose the beginning of another Christian funerary inscription from Kelendres, the former Hierapolis, not far from Synnada. The inscription, for one Alexander, dates to 216 AD<sup>80</sup>, and so Abercius' epitaph is datable to the 2nd century AD. Abercius can be identified as the bishop of Hierapolis<sup>81</sup>, the protagonist of the *Life of Abercius*, an account datable to the late 4th century<sup>82</sup> and subsequently expanded; Abercius is probably Avirkios Markellos, to whom, according to Eusebius<sup>83</sup>, an anti-Montanist letter had been addressed. The story of the life of Abercius is inspired by the funerary inscription, reproduced in its entirety, though it could only be understood by the faithful followers of Christ, as the *Life* admits<sup>84</sup>. Here is the translation of the epitaph:

As the citizen of a chosen city I have made this tomb in my lifetime in order to have a resting-place for my body when the time comes. My name is Abercius, and I am

<sup>79</sup> W. M. Ramsay, *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, II, Oxford 1897, 679–83, no. 657; Th. Preger, *Inscriptiones Graecae metricae*, Leipzig 1901, no. 34; F. J. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ. Der heilige Fisch in den antiken Religionen und im Christentum, II, Münster 1922, 454–507; IGRR, IV, no. 696; M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*, IV, Rome 1978, 377–386; W. Wischmeyer, Die Aberkiosinschrift als Epigramm, *JAC* 23, 1980, 22–47; F. R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianisation c. 370–529*, II, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1994, 114–8; R. Merkelbach, Grabepigramm und Vita des Bischofs Aberkios von Hierapolis, *EA* 28, 1997, 127–139; E. Wirbelauer, Aberkios, der Schüler des reinen Hirten, im Römischen Reich des 2. Jahrhunderts, *Hist.* 51, 2002, 359–82; further bibliography in H. Strathmann, Th. Klause, Art. Abercius, *RAC* I, 1950, 12–17, and in I. Ramelli, L'epitafio di Abercius: uno status quaestionis ed alcune osservazioni, *Aevum* 74, 2000, 191–205.

<sup>80</sup> W. M. Ramsay, *Trois villes phrygiennes. Brouzos, Hierapolis et Otrous*, *BCH* 6, 1882, 518–20, no. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Ed. Th. Nissen, Leipzig 1912.

<sup>82</sup> Merkelbach however believes that it was based on an older version, from not long after the age of the Antonines; Wirbelauer on the other hand demonstrates that the *Life* reflects the situation from the time of Julian the Apostate.

<sup>83</sup> h. e. V 163 (II/1, 460 Sch.)

<sup>84</sup> *Vita Abercii* 76, 53 Nissen.

<sup>85</sup> If read as βασιλ[είαν ἀθροῖσαι], or “a queen”, if read as βασιλ[είαν ἀθροῖσαι]; or “the capital”: βασιλ[ίδ' ἀναθροῖσαι]. See, recently, on the matter: Wischmeyer (n. 79), 37 and n. 186, who suggests the latter as a possible reading of the text.

the disciple of the pure shepherd, who leads his flocks to graze on the mountains and plains; he has great eyes that behold all things. It was he who taught me all the faithful writings, and sent me to Rome to see a palace<sup>85</sup> and to see a queen with a golden mantle and golden sandals. There I saw a people with a shining seal. And I saw the plain of Syria and all the cities, even Nisibis, after crossing the Euphrates. Everywhere I found brethren in faith and Paul was in my chariot. Everywhere faith led me and gave me as food the great, pure fish from the spring, conceived<sup>86</sup> by a chaste virgin. And always (faith) gave it to the friends to eat, with excellent wine to drink with bread. In truth I, Abercius, as witness, have dictated these things, in my seventy-second year, so that they may be written down. May all the religious community, understanding these words, pray for Abercius. And no one shall place another in my tomb; but if so shall pay 2000 gold pieces to the Roman treasury and 1000 gold pieces to my illustrious native city, Hierapolis.

The *Vita Abercii* tells an amazing story. Lucilla, the daughter of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina, was possessed by a devil, which only Abercius was able to drive out. As punishment Abercius ordered the devil to carry a large stone from Rome to Hierapolis. The epitaph was then inscribed on the stone. Abercius' journeys to Syria, it is said, were undertaken to deal with the Marcionite schism and enabled him to meet Bardesanes<sup>87</sup>, who was also hostile to the Marcionites.

In actual fact there are glaring inconsistencies in the epitaph, if we take everything it says literally. So, as stated in the *Vita Abercii*, clearly they were

<sup>86</sup> As interpreted by M. Guarducci, L'iscrizione di Abercius e la "Vergine Casta", in: *Scritti scelti sulla religione greca e romana e sul Cristianesimo*, EPRO 98, Leiden 1983, 348–9; otherwise ἐδράξατο should be translated as "caught".

<sup>87</sup> Bardesanes' doctrine, in my view, is the key to understanding the expression "nourished me with a large, pure fish from the spring, which a chaste virgin had conceived". In one of his hymns, in which he gave a Christian meaning to the ritual of the Goddess Syria, Atargatis (whose temples had basins with sacred fishes), Bardesanes wrote: "Something streamed down from the Father of Life and the Mother became pregnant in the shape of a fish and bore him; and he was called Son of Life" (transl. Drijvers): Ephraem, Hymn. contra haereses 55 (CSCO 169, Syr. 76, 207, transl. CSCO 170, Syr. 77, 187 Beck; cf. H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, Assen 1966, 144–9; Id., *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, EPRO 82, Leiden 1980, 79–80; Id., *The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria*, in: *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Washington D.C. 1982, 38; E. Beck, *Symbolum-Mysterium bei Aphraat und Ephräm*, *OrChr* 42, 1958, 31; 39. The Dialogue on Destiny by Bardesanes (a work attacking the Marcionites) was used by the author of the Life of Abercius (§§ 31–38), in the 4th century AD. In the Life of Abercius Euxeinianos develops the opinions of the Marcionites (Marcion came from Pontos Euxeinos, from which the name Euxeinianos is derived); cf. Th. Nissen, *Die Petrusakten und ein bardesanitische Dialog in der Aberkiosvita*, *ZNW* 9, 1908, 315–328; H. Grégoire, *Bardesane et S. Abercius*, *Byz.* 25–27, 1955–57, 363–8; Drijvers, *Marcionism in Syria* (n. 20), 155.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. further important clarification by Wischmeyer.

allegories which could only be understood by Christians. The epitaph itself refers to “those who understand” (ταῦθ’ ὁ νοῶν).

The correct interpretation of the epitaph was proposed for the first time by Dölger<sup>88</sup>: the shepherd is Christ, the seal is baptism, the writings worthy of faith are Christian sacred scriptures, the queen is the Church, the virgin is Mary, the fish is the eucharistic Jesus. The comparisons used by Dölger leave no room for pagan interpretation of the text and open the way to further comparisons with the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus*. An Eastern king and queen, in the *Hymn*, and a mother, in the *Prayer*, had sent their respective sons on long and dangerous journeys which led them to a river that was difficult to cross, identified with the Euphrates or some hostile river in the Near East. The *Acts of Thomas* explain that the mother who sent the saint to Egypt was the Church. In the *Shepherd Hermas* also, at the end of the fourth vision, a young woman dressed in white appears, symbolizing the Church. The journey or journeys of Abercius, which were the theme of hagiographies, may therefore have been taken as a model to describe imaginary journeys by other Christian heroes such as Thomas and Cyriacus. The *Acts of Thomas* were written shortly after Abercius’ epitaph, and it may be that the first allegorical speculations on Abercius’ journeys to the East influenced other biographies of saints such as Thomas and Cyriacus. Or perhaps, from the very beginning, Abercius, in alluding to the journey to the East, intended to convey an allegorical message about the dangers to be faced on the journey to salvation, a journey during which demons and heretics had to be faced. Abercius’ journey to Marcionite Syria, in this case, would not be so different from a journey to an East ruled by snake worshippers, as described in the tales of Thomas and Cyriacus. Lastly, the military campaigns conducted by Theodoretus led to real Marcionite villages inhabited by snake-worshippers. If we accept an allegorical interpretation of Abercius’s journey to Syria, the inference to be drawn is not that he never made those journeys, but that later, as he neared the end of his life, he invested them with a deeper significance, like the meaning that would be given to Thomas’s journeys to the East. In fact, the *Life* begins by saying that Abercius was considered to be “the equal of an Apostle”.

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<sup>89</sup> As translated by Dillman.

§ 8. *The river and the dragon*

In hagiography concerning Cyriacus the crossing of the Euphrates, mentioned also in Abercius' epitaph as the last important stage in the journey, symbolizes victory over a demonic entity obstructing the hero's path.

Let us return then to the episode in which Cyriacus crosses the river and goes to the residence of the king of the snakes (or worms) with its tail in its mouth. The *Acts of Cyriacus* recount that the hero reached Babylonia, on the banks of "the sandy" (or "the terrible"<sup>89</sup>) river, which human beings could only cross on Saturdays. Instead of water, it flowed with sand. The Slavonic version adds that, with the Lord's help, the river could be crossed on Thursdays. This mention of a river of sand enabled H. Stocks<sup>90</sup> to pinpoint a definite link between the *Acts* and the *Romance of Alexander*. In the *Romance*, the description in a letter to Olympia<sup>91</sup> of the Macedonian leader's travels to the ends of the earth mentions a river that for three days flows with water, and for the next three days with sand, in a continuous alternating cycle.

The river crossed by Cyriacus, however, was one of the "sabbatical" rivers, dry for six days and filled with water on the seventh, like the river in northern Syria known as the Nahr Sebti, "seventh day river", which has its origin in the spring of St George and is mentioned by Flavius Josephus<sup>92</sup>. But there was also an opposite kind of river that flowed impetuously with water for six days and could only be crossed on the seventh day, Saturday, when it was dry. This river was described, on the basis of Judaic sources, by Pliny<sup>93</sup>. A sandy river known as Sambatyon, which only ceases to flow on Saturday, is also found in Judaic sources, which state that it separates ten lost tribes

<sup>90</sup> Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief* (n. 31), 16.

<sup>91</sup> *Recensio A II* 29.

<sup>92</sup> Jos., BJ VII 96–9; cf. Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief* (n. 31), 6–9. A. Neubauer, *Where are the Ten Tribes?*, JQR 1, 1889, 20, mentions on this subject the Nahr-al-Arus, between Arka and Raphanea, which flowed every third day. Dillmann, *Über die Apokryphen Märtyrergeschichte des Cyriacus* (n. 31), 352–3, has noted that the *Acts of St George*, condemned by Gelasius together with the *Acts of Cyriacus*, also had various elements in common with the story of Julitta and Cyriacus, including the search for martyrdom and a number of magic elements. It should also be noted that originally one of the salient points in the episode of St George was the baptism performed by the saint with water that he had caused to flow. On the legend of St George and the dragon, see: A.-J. Festugière, *Sainte Thècle, Saints Côme et Damien, Saints Cyr et Jean* (extraits), *Saint Georges*, Paris 1971, 320–5.

<sup>93</sup> Plin., *Nat.* XXXI 2.

<sup>94</sup> In Jer. 31,9 the prophet says that they will return across the river by a straight path. On 4Esra: CGS *Die Esra-Apokalypse* (IV. Esra) by B. Violet.

<sup>95</sup> AJ XI 5,2.

from the world. Book IV of *Esra* (written some time after 70 AD), ch. 13, speaks of the vision of the Messiah who will destroy his enemies and gather round him the peaceloving nine and a half tribes deported in the time of Salmanassar, who crossed the Euphrates because God had arrested its course; they lived in obedience to the Law until God dried up the Euphrates again and allowed them to return to the human world<sup>94</sup>. The *Apocalypse* of John also says that the Euphrates will dry up to open the way to the East.

Flavius Josephus<sup>95</sup> states that Esra sent for the tribes living in Media because Artaxerxes had given them permission to return to Judea, and some of them joined sides with Esra. In the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (written around 100 AD) the prophet writes a letter that becomes an eagle, flies across the Euphrates to the nine and a half tribes who have remained in the East and urges them to obey the Law. The river and the eagle both recur in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, in an apocalyptic context similar to the one that inspired the apocryphal book of Baruch. Rabbinical tradition also mentions<sup>96</sup> the ten tribes that remained on the other side of the river, known as the Sambatyon<sup>97</sup>, which only ceases to flow on the sabbath day, and on the other six flows with sand and stones and spits out fire. Commodianus<sup>98</sup> says that the Jews of the nine tribes and a half were cut off by a river beyond Persia. In the *Legend of Prester John* (12th century AD) the river of stones which only stops raging on Saturdays marked the boundary of the nine tribes and sprang from paradise<sup>99</sup>.

In some cases, then, the uncrossable river separates a people who rejected God's Law from our world; in other cases it cuts off paradise<sup>100</sup>.

<sup>96</sup> Midrash on Gen. 73.6 (Midrash Rabbah, ed. by H. Freedman, M. Simon, I/2, London 1939, 671); Talmud, Sanhedrin VII 7 (Der babylonische Talmud, transl. by L. Goldschmidt, VIII, Berlin 1933, 723).

<sup>97</sup> Midrash on Gen. 11 and 73 (I/1, 84; I/2, 671 Fredman, Simon); Eldad haddani (work dated to circa 850 AD, which is inspired by an older Hebrew Apocalypse and has a number of similarities to the Prayer of Cyriacus and the Hymn of the Pearl), in Neubauer, *Where are the Ten Tribes?*, (n. 92), 102. On these matters, see: Stocks, *Ein Alexanderbrief* (n. 31), 7–9; cf. W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, Berlin 1906, 273.

<sup>98</sup> *Carmen apolog.* 941–960 (CSEL 15, 176–7 Dombart).

<sup>99</sup> Neubauer, *Where are the Ten Tribes?* (n. 92), 192.

<sup>100</sup> As is the case in some Christian legends: in the *Gesta Matthaei* (Ethiopian text edited and translated by S. C. Malan, *Conflicts of the Holy Apostles*, London 1971, 44) the 10 tribes are a model of monasticism. In the *Romance of Alexander*, recensio A III 5, the river of milk encircles the country of the Gymnosophists, who drink, however, the water of the Euphrates.

<sup>101</sup> *Second Samaritan Chronicle* § E: J. Macdonald, *The Samaritan Chronicle No. II* (or: *Sepher Ha-Yamim*). From Joshua to Nebuchadnezzar, Berlin 1969, 80.

The idea that the land promised by God was on the other side of a river that was difficult to cross was rooted in the minds of the Jewish people, who crossed the dry bed of the Red Sea to reach the land destined for them. According to Samaritan tradition, Joshua caused the Jordan to cease its flow and the Hebrew people crossed its dry bed to the promised land<sup>101</sup>.

The river surrounding the lands assigned to humankind, or the promised land, or paradise, was considered a diabolical creature, and perhaps it is no coincidence that the *Prayer of Cyriacus* describes the enormous snake as swallowing up the Jordan.

Texts that speak of this river as a boundary imposed on humankind sometimes identify it implicitly with the “river Oceanus” of Greek tradition. In the *Romance of Alexander*, instead of the Oceanus Alexander sees an enormous serpent at the highest point of the sky whose coils enclose a disc, representing the earth inhabited by mankind<sup>102</sup>.

The link or identification of the river with the dragon was typical of the Syrian milieu, in which Orontes, which is swallowed up by the land between Antioch and Apameia, was called Charybdis<sup>103</sup>, or Typhon, because it was said that Typhon had sought shelter in its underground channel from the thunderbolts of Zeus<sup>104</sup>, or was known as Drakon or Ophites<sup>105</sup>. Typhon’s dwelling place was also the cave of Coricus, near the Calicadnos river, in Cilicia, where the river seemed to be swallowed up by the rock<sup>106</sup>. The idea

<sup>102</sup> Romance of Alexander, recensio A II 41.

<sup>103</sup> Strab. VI 275.

<sup>104</sup> Strab. XVI 750.

<sup>105</sup> Jo. Mal. 38, 197, 200, 234.

<sup>106</sup> Located in Cilicia: Pind., Pyth. I 28; Aesch., Prom. vinct. 351; convincing similarities to these mythical elements are found in Hittite and Mesopotamian mythology: Apollod., Bibl. I 39–44; Oppian., Hal. III 1; cf. W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens und Vorderasiens zur Ägäis bis ins 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr.*, Darmstadt 1979, 248.

<sup>107</sup> L. Moraldi, *L’aldilà dell’uomo nelle civiltà babilonese, egizia, greca, latina, ebraica, cristiana e musulmana*, Milan 1985, 13: the Sumerians believed that the other world, Kur, was reached by crossing the “man-eating river” or the Oceanus, in the boat piloted by the “boatman”. Similar ideas were widely held in Egypt and in Greece.

<sup>108</sup> haer. V 7,39 (88 Wend.). J. Montserrat-Torrents, *La notice d’Hippolyte sur les Naassènes*, in: *StPatr* 17, ed. E.A. Livingstone, Oxford 1982, 231–42, has shown that Hippolytus’ lengthy account of the Naassenes, from haer. V 6,3 to V 11 (77–104 Wend.), contains a long section (up to V 9,11) that deals with unspecified Gnostikoi, identified as Valentians by Montserrat-Torrents, who believes that there was a mistake in Hippolytus’ text.

<sup>109</sup> An allusion to Christ’s baptism in the Jordan. The Ps. August., *Serm.* 135,4 (PL 39, 2012) states that the blessing of Christ during his baptism in the Jordan filled all river beds and springs; Gregor. Nyss., *In diem lum.*, ed. by E. Gebhardt, in: Gregorii Nysseni, *Opera*, ed. W. Jaeger and H. Langerbeck, IX, Leiden 1967, 235, says that after that the

of the Other World separated from the human world by a devouring river was rooted in Mesopotamian thinking<sup>107</sup>.

In Gnostic thinking we also find the theme of waters flowing periodically. In Naassene doctrine, according to Hippolytus<sup>108</sup>, the tidal flow of the ocean caused generation. When the tide was low human beings were generated, and when it was high gods were generated. On this subject *Psalm* 81, 6 was quoted: “Θεοί ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες”. Hippolytus adds that the great Jordan prevented the children of Israel from fleeing from Egypt (from the mingling of spirit with flesh) and Jesus made it flow upwards<sup>109</sup>. In the *Psalms* it was God who had made the Jordan change its course<sup>110</sup>. A leaden exorcistic table found at Traù, in Dalmatia<sup>111</sup> claims to drive away the demon by saying that the demon too had been prevented from crossing the Jordan by a fiery current<sup>112</sup>; and therefore it could be inferred that Jesus, after the baptism in the Jordan, had transformed this river into an insurmountable barrier to thwart the demon.

According to the disciples of Marcus the Valentinian, salvation was achieved through a descent into the depths of the abyss<sup>113</sup> and the Valentin-

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river produced no more snakes; Cyr. H., catech. III 11–12 (PG 33, 441–4) states that Jesus had gone down into the river to trample on the dragon and give mankind the power to crush snakes and scorpions underfoot; Sever. Antioch., Hom. 85 De Epiph. (PO 23, 30–31), says that Christ broke the monster’s head in the Jordan; similarly Thdt., Ps. LXXIV (PG 80, 1464); cf. Quacquarelli, *Il leone e il drago* (n. 25), 54–6.

<sup>110</sup> Ps. 113,3: ὁ Ἰορδάνης ἐστράφη εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω; cf. A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, I, Liège, Paris 1927, 244.

<sup>111</sup> CIL III/2, 961; A. and J. Šašel, *Inscriptiones Latinae quae in Iugoslavia inter annos MCMIII et MCMXL repertae et editae sunt*, Ljubljana 1986, no. 2792.

<sup>112</sup> Šašel’s reading is as follows: [a]nte habes [Iorda]nis fluvio [q]uem transire n[on] potuisti; [r]equesitus qu[a]r[e] t[ra]nsire non [po]tuisti, dixisti quia ibi ign[is] [a]ra[n]ea ignefera corret et ubiconqua semper tib[i] ignis ar[a]nea [i]gnefera c[or]rat.

<sup>113</sup> Iren., haer. I 21,2 (SC 264, 296 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>114</sup> NHC XI,2.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. G. Stroumsa, Rev. of I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden 1980, *Numen* 28, 1981, 107–9. On paleo-Christian initiatic basins: P.E. Testa, *Il simbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani*, PSBF 14, Jerusalem 1962 79–84.

<sup>116</sup> K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, II, Göttingen 1960, 93; L. Koenen, *From Baptism to the Gnosis of Manichaeism*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II, Sethian Gnosticism, ed. by B. Layton, SHR 41/2, Leiden 1980, 745.

<sup>117</sup> 60–62. J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres*, Paris 1956, 216; J. Daniélou, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique*, Paris 1960, 82, cite, however, as a source of inspiration, Hom., II. XIV 201 and 246, which says the Oceanus is the father of all the gods. It may be that there were already traces of similar speculations in the doctrines of the Essenes who wrote the *Manual of Discipline*, one of the Dead Sea manuscripts (G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Sheffield<sup>3</sup> 1987, 65), which states that God created two spirits, one of Truth and the other of Falsehood; the first springs from a fountain of light, the second from a fountain of darkness.

ian tractate from Nag Hammadi *On baptism*<sup>114</sup> explains that the Jordan takes its name from the verb *yarād*, “go down”, and is connected with the doctrine that reunion with god is through a going down, which is an “exodus”<sup>115</sup>. The celestial Jordan recurs in Mandaean thinking – linked to Manichaeism – according to which the soul receives baptism after dying in that river<sup>116</sup>.

The Naassene doctrine came from Plato’s *Phaedo*. In this dialogue<sup>117</sup>, Socrates describes the form of the earth and the nature of rivers. He states that all rivers flow down to Tartarus: “the regions into which these rivers flow are filled up with them; and the cause of all these rivers flowing up and down is an underground swinging motion, due to the fact that, of the many whirlpools of the earth, there is one, the vastest of all, that pierces right through the earth”. The rivers are also compared to the snake: “There are some, then, that after having encircled the earth with one or more coils, like snakes, descend so deeply that they come out at the lowest point of Tartarus”. The most important fact is that, according to Plato, souls flowed into the four great rivers, depending on their merits or the sins they had to expiate. The destiny of the best souls is described as follows: “Those, however, who are remarkable for having led holy lives are released from this earthly prison, go to their pure home above, and dwell in the true earth. And those especially who have purified themselves through philosophy live free of all bodily attachments, for all eternity, and indeed go to places even more beautiful than these”.

A synthesis seems to have developed explicitly in Naassene thinking, and implicitly in the life of Cyriacus, between the Platonic concept of underground rivers as the home of damned souls, from which only the best escape, the geography of the Near East and the Christian allegory of the river as a physical barrier impeding the spirit’s release.

Many of the speculations of the Peratic Gnostic sect, which we know of thanks to a passage from the *Refutatio* of Hippolytus of Rome<sup>118</sup>, probably arose from the contamination of Middle Platonist ideas with Babylonian astrology. This Gnostic sect had appropriated the science of the astrologers and was striving, by arcane means, to break out of the cycle of birth and death. The negative principle in both birth and the corruption of matter was identified by the Peratae with water, whose god was Kronos<sup>119</sup> (equated by many Gnostics with Yahweh-Jaldabaoth). Thanks to their gnosis, they were able to “go beyond (περᾶσαι) corruption, and corruption is water”. Some

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<sup>118</sup> haer. V 16–19, esp. 16 (111–121 Wend.).

<sup>119</sup> According to a notion that went back to the astrologers’ speculations, on which see: A. Bouché-Lclercq, *L’astrologie grecque*, Paris 1899, 96.

episodes in the *Pentateuch* were interpreted by the Peratae in an allegorical sense: the exodus from Egypt in particular was seen as the release of the physical body, and the crossing of the Red Sea as overcoming Kronos the water god. The idea of Egypt is similar to that in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, while the crossing of the Red Sea corresponds to the idea of crossing over the dragon-river encircling the physical world, which the Peratae crossed unscathed thanks to gnosis and faith.

Lastly, some magic streams, linked perhaps to Gnosticism, identified the Hebrew god with the abyss itself, which had swallowed the great snake. A magic papyrus says: “Thou who hast swallowed the immortal serpent and every day liftest the sun’s disc and the moon’s disc, thou whose name is ithioô êi Arbathiaô ê”<sup>120</sup>. Arbathiaô means “Fourfold Yahweh” (from the four-letter name)<sup>121</sup>.

### § 9. The Cyrrhestic snake

To all schools of Gnosticism, including the Marcionites, the biblical creator was the architect of evil, while the supreme deity, incorporeal and remote from creation, was considered as pre-existing and immutable; the spiritual person was to strive to reach him, and avoid the temptations of the created world. Perhaps, then, the figure of the snake devouring its tail in the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Prayer of Cyriacus* did not only represent the devil, as it did in the *Apocalypse* and the *Shepherd Hermas*. Could it also have been the manifestation or emanation of the creator god, the Hebrew god, as perceived by the Gnostics? In the *Apocalypse* and in the *Shepherd Hermas*, moreover, there is no specific mention of the snake devouring its tail, although this was a typical figure in Gnosticism and Egyptian tradition. In Gnosticism and magic the creator and lord of the cosmos was perceived as a snake eating its tail; this snake sometimes had a lion’s head and sometimes was identified with the Egyptian Decan Chnoubis: a lion-headed snake.

But if we were to assume that the Cyrrhestic snake was the creator or an emanation of the creator, this would mean that Theodoretus had completely misunderstood the Marcionite cult, since he states that this snake was the

<sup>120</sup> PGM IV, 23–7. Sun and Moon praise God in Ps. 148,3 and Dan. 3,62; the sun obeys God by rising at his command: Ps. 104,19.

<sup>121</sup> W.Fauth, *Arbath lao*, OrChr 67, 1983, 65–103.

<sup>122</sup> Tert., contra Marc. IV 22 (CSEL 47, 491—6 Kroymann).

<sup>123</sup> Tert., contra Marc. IV 24 (502 Kroy.); cf. Lk. 10,19.

creator's enemy. Also, Marcion had noted a contradiction between the order given to Moses to make a bronze serpent and the second commandment, which forbade images of animals<sup>122</sup>, and he had also maintained that Christ had given the power to trample on serpents and scorpions<sup>123</sup>, so it is most unlikely that orthodox Marcionism envisaged adoration of a divine serpent. In order to accept Theodoretus' account, we should have to assume that those Marcionites had appropriated the ideas of other Gnostic sects, particularly the Ophites and Peratae. Indeed, these and other Gnostic sects revered Jesus in the form of a snake. Alternatively, we would have to assume that various Gnostic sects in Syria had come close to or had merged with Marcionism, which was the only movement with a solid ecclesiastical organization able to oppose the great Roman Church<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> The laws of Theodosius against the Marcionites describe them as organized into churches, bishops, presbyters, deacons; cf. Harnack, *Marcion* (n. 20), 288. On the lack of hierarchies among the Gnostics in general, see: *Apoc. Petri* (NHC VII, 3) 72. In Syria there was another Christian Gnostic sect of "Serpentarii" (in Syriac *Ḥewyāyē*), mentioned by Theod. bar Konai, *Lib. sch.* XI 31 (226 Hes., Dr.; cf. XI 78, 250–1 Hes., Dr.), who identifies them with the Ophites and gives a doctrinal profile that differentiates them from the Marcionites; cf. E. Albrile, *Il firmamento magico e l'eresia del serpente*, *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano* 7, 2003, 9–37.

## Ophite doctrine

### § 10. *The Ophite Eucharist*

Epiphanius explains the Ophite doctrine which praised the serpent in the Garden of Eden for having shown Adam and Eve the truth, and then goes on to write: “It is said that Jaldabaoth did not want men to remember the Mother on high and the Father. But the serpent persuaded them and gave them knowledge, and taught the man and the woman all the mysteries of the heavens. His father Jaldabaoth, angered that knowledge had been imparted to humankind, hurled him down from heaven. For this reason those who possess the serpent’s part, and nothing else, call the serpent “king of heaven”. Therefore they glorify him for this knowledge, they say, and offer him bread. Indeed they keep a live snake and keep it in a kind of basket. When it is time for their mysteries they take it out of its hiding place, put loaves on the table and call the snake; when the basket is opened it comes out. And thus the snake – which has grown deceitful and cunning, as is its nature, and knows how foolish they are – climbs on to the table and writhes over the loaves. They say that this is the perfect sacrifice. And so – I have been told – not only do they break the loaves touched by the snake’s writhing body and offer them to those who are to eat them, but each one of them kisses the snake. The snake has been tamed, either by a magic spell, or placated for the purposes of trickery by some other work of the devil. Yet they worship this creature and call the bread consecrated by its writhing body “the eucharist”. And they sing a hymn to the father in heaven – once again through the snake, they say – and thus they conclude their mysteries.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Epiph., haer. XXXVII 5,1–7 (II, 57–58 Holl); cf. also Praedestinatus 17 (PL 53, 592), according to which the snake licked the loaves with its tongue.

## § 11. Was the snake good?

Let us now move on to examine Irenaeus' account<sup>126</sup> of Ophitic doctrines concerning the snake. They maintained that Jaldabaoth – the Hebrew creator – seeing and desiring the dregs of matter down below – generated Nous, or Intellect, that is to say the snake that has the coiled form of the brain, from which pneumatic and psychic elements sprang, but also Oblivion, Wickedness, Jealousy and Death<sup>127</sup>. The divine Mother used the serpent to make Adam and Eve disobey Jaldabaoth's orders and acquire knowledge, thereby inciting the wrath of Jaldabaoth, who cast the serpent into the lower world, together with Adam and Eve. Then the serpent subjugated the angels who were there, and generated six children, in order to create a Hebdomad like that of his father Jaldabaoth and the planetary demons. From then on the serpent and his children incessantly opposed human beings on earth<sup>128</sup>. First of all the serpent, whose name was Michael and Samael, breathed Oblivion into the soul of Cain and drove him to murder Abel, and thus it was that Jealousy and Death appeared<sup>129</sup>.

The Barbelo-Gnostics taught a similar doctrine. They held that the divine Sophia assumed the form of a snake and taught *gnosis*<sup>130</sup>.

The fact that the Ophite snake was called Michael and Samael is significant: they are the names of an archangel and a devil, which can hardly be equated with each other, because Michael was the one who hurled Lucifer (i. e. Samael) down to Hell, and therefore was his adversary. Michael and Samael are a bipolar pair representing the positive side and the negative side of the same divine or angelic power, according to a belief that is also alluded to in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, on the subject of Ophitic or Barbeloite doctrines<sup>131</sup>. In the Ophite scheme of things, it was necessary for the good side of a divine Power to triumph over the bad side<sup>132</sup>.

<sup>126</sup> haer. I 30,5–9 (SC 264, 368–376 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>127</sup> haer. I 30,5 (SC 264, 370 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>128</sup> haer. I 30,8 (SC 264, 374 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>129</sup> haer. I 30,9 (SC 264, 376 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>130</sup> Iren., haer. I 30,15 (SC 264, 384 Rouss., Dout.). Epiph., haer. XXVI 2,6 (I, 277–8 Holl), after speaking of the Nicolaitan doctrine concerning Barbelo and Gnosis, mentions other Gnostics (whom he then describes as close to the Nicolaitans) who had a Gospel of Eve, containing the knowledge revealed by the serpent to the first woman.

<sup>131</sup> As A. J. Welburn has very clearly demonstrated: Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram, NT 23, 1981, 270–1. See: Orig., Cels. VI 30 and VI 31 (CGS Origenes II, 100–2 Koetschau).

<sup>132</sup> According to a widely held Christian concept, the twelve Apostles replaced the twelve signs of the Zodiac, and released humanity from the rule of the kosmokratores,

There is, or at least appears to be, a contradiction between the description given by Epiphanius (in the second half of the 6th century) and that given by Irenaeus (in the second half of the 2nd century): in Epiphanius the snake is king of heaven, the origin of the pneumatic part of creation<sup>133</sup> and is identified with the serpent of the Garden of Eden; it is also the image of Christ<sup>134</sup>, who consecrates the eucharistic bread during the mysteries. In Irenaeus, however, the serpent is the architect of great evils for humankind and bears no resemblance to Jesus, whose coming down to earth is described in other terms<sup>135</sup>. And if once only, in the earthly Paradise, the snake acted wisely, it was at the wish of the heavenly Mother. The same doctrine returns in the *Apocryphon of John*<sup>136</sup>, in which Jesus reveals that he persuaded Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, while the serpent taught them procreation.

It would be foolish to conclude from this apparent contradiction that the snake cult was merely a theme used in propaganda against heretics by the great Roman Church and its heresiologists<sup>137</sup>. They could be the doctrines of

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identified with the animals of the zodiac: Clem., exc. Thdot. 25, 1–2 (CGS Clemens III, 115 Stahlin); Hom. Clem. II 23 (12 (CGS Die Pseudoklementinen. I. Homilien, 44 Rehm. Strecker); Orig., comm. in Mt. 15.24 (CGS Origenes X/1, 421 Klostermann); Pistis Sophia I 50 (Pistis Sophia ed. by C. Schmidt, transl. by V. Macdermot, NHS 9, Leiden 1978, 90); J. Daniélou, Les symboles chrétiens primitifs, Paris 1961, 136–7; W. Huebner, Das Horoskop der Christen (Zeno 1.38 L), VigChr 29, 1975, 120–137. Again, as in the case of Michael-Samael, a good power has to replace its negative counterpart. This is also the principle of exorcism: the angel invoked by Solomon subjugates the devil paired with him, or the sign of God and Christ drives out the demon.

<sup>133</sup> This is the meaning of Epiphanius' words "those who possess the snake's part and nothing else call the snake 'king of heaven'".

<sup>134</sup> Epiph., haer. XXXVII 2,6 (II, 53 Holl) is very clear: λέγει γὰρ ἑαυτὸν εἶναι Χριστὸν ὃ παρ' αὐτοῖς ὄφεις; similarly Praedestinatus, 17 (PL 53, 592): *quem colubrum suum Christum appellant*. There is a problem about the statement in Orig., Cels. VI 28 (II, 98 Koet.), that the Ophites had to curse Jesus before being accepted into the sect; it is not certain that Origin invented this, and may be an Ophite attitude to Christianity in a different era.

<sup>135</sup> haer. I 30, 12–13 (SC 264, 370380–2 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>136</sup> (NHC II, 1, III, 1 and IV, 1 with BG 8502, 2) 22; the codex Brucianus version of this is clearer and more detailed than the text of Nag Hammadi. For a synopsis of codices of this Apocryphon: A. Werner, Das Apokryphon des Johannes in seinen vier Versionen synoptisch betrachtet und unter besonderer Berücksichtigung anderer Nag-Hammadi-Schriften in Auswahl erläutert, Berlin 1977; The Apocryphon of John. Synopsis of Nag Hammadi codices II, 1, III, 1 and IV, 1 with BG 8502, 2, ed. by M. Waldstein, Leiden 1995; F. Wisse, in: The Nag Hammadi Library in English, ed. by J. M. Robinson, Leiden, New York, Cologne <sup>3</sup>1996, 104–123.

<sup>137</sup> J.-D. Kaestli, L'interprétation du serpent de Genèse 3 dans quelques textes gnostiques et la question de la gnose "ophite", in: Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique (n. 40), 116–130, esp. 125, says that not even the Ophites worshipped the snake. To demonstrate this, the author is forced to make a drastic (and quite improbable, not to mention para-

two different Ophite sects, one of which was more uniformly Christianized (the one presented by Irenaeus)<sup>138</sup>. Origen, on the other hand, knew Ophites who accepted as disciples only those who had cursed Jesus<sup>139</sup>. So there were Christian Ophites and non-Christian Ophites. Epiphanius<sup>140</sup> states that according to some Gnostic groups (and he mentions Phibionites, disciples of Epiphaneus, Stratiotics, Levitics, Borborites and others) the heavenly Mother gave birth to Jaldabaoth, but according to others, to Sabaoth. The contradictions could be explained either as doctrinal developments over time or as the opinions of different groups.

Before stating that the heresiologists were making false statements, or did not understand the doctrines they were examining, we have to see whether we ourselves have understood and whether we have used all the information available to us.

Hippolytus<sup>141</sup> attributes the following doctrine to the Sethians:

“From the water, therefore, has been produced a first-begotten principle (*protogonos arché*), viz. wind, (which is) violent and boisterous, and a cause of all generation. For producing a sort of ferment in the waters (the wind) uplifts waves out of the waters; and the motion of the waves, just as when some impulsive power †... † of pregnancy (is the origin of the production) of a man or mind (*nous*), is caused when (the ocean) excited by the impulsive power of spirit, is propelled forward. When, however, this wave that has been raised out of the water by the wind and rendered pregnant in its nature has within itself obtained the power, possessed by the female, of generation, it holds together the light scattered from above along with the fragrance of the spirit – that is, mind (*nous*), moulded in the different species. And this (light) is a perfect

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doxical) separation of Ophites from Naassenes with specific regard to the divine serpent, since the Naassenes, according to Hippolytus, regarded the serpent as their supreme god (Kaestli, 128, would like to reduce the serpent to a generic divine principle; but the passage from Hipp., haer. V 9,12 (100 Wend.), has a very different scope and opens with the words: “they worship only the Naas”; besides, there has never been a generic divine principle). Cf. also, for instance, Ps. Tert., adv. omn. haer. 2 (216 Kroy.): *Ophitae...serpentem magnificent*; Filastr. 1 (2 Marx): *Ofitae... eum adnuntiant adorandum*. The diachronic development of Gnostic doctrines on the serpent of Genesis, traced by Kaestli, 125–8, is not convincing either.

<sup>138</sup> Cf., with regard to Ophite opinions on the role of the biblical Creator, who in Iren., haer. I.30 (SC 264, 284 Rouss., Dout.) is not so evil as in Orig., Cels. VI 27–29 (II, 96–99 Koet.), M. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*, Göttingen 1898 (reprint. Westmead 1972), 69–70 and n. 56.

<sup>139</sup> Cels. VI 28 (II, 98 Koet.). Saint Paul had found people in Corinth who cursed him: I Cor. 12,3.

<sup>140</sup> XXV 2,1–2 (I, 268–269 Holl).

<sup>141</sup> haer. V 19,14 (118–9 Wend.), Eng. tr. J. H. MacMahon; cf. the translation by G. Casadio, *Antropologia gnostica e antropologia orfica nella notizia di Ippolito sui Sethiani*, in: *Sangue e antropologia nella teologia*. Atti della settimana di studi Roma 23–28 nov. 1987, Rome 1989, 1314–5.

god, who from the unbegotten radiance above, and from the spirit, is borne down into human nature as into a temple, by the impulsive power of Nature, and by the motion of the wind. And it is produced from water being commingled and blended with bodies (...).

Every thought, then, and solicitude actuating the supernal light is as to how and in what manner mind (*nous*) may be liberated, by the death of the depraved and dark body, from the Father that is below, who is the wind that with noise and tumult uplifted the waves, and who generated a perfect mind (*nous*), his own son; not, however, being his own peculiar (offspring) substantially (...).

But the wind, at the same time fierce and formidable, whirling along, is in respect of its hissing sound, like a serpent. First then, from the wind – that is, from the serpent, has resulted the originating principle of generation in the manner declared, all things having simultaneously received the principle of generation. After, then, the light and the spirit had been received into the polluted and baneful (and) disordered womb, the serpent – the wind of darkness, the first-begotten of the water – enters within and produces man: and the impure womb neither loves nor recognizes any other form.

The perfect Word (*logos*) of supernal light, being therefore assimilated (in form) to the beast, that is. the serpent, entered into the defiled womb, having deceiving (the womb) through the similitude of the beast itself, in order that (the Word) may loose the chains that encircle the perfect mind (*nous*) which has been begotten in the impurity of womb by the primal offspring of water, (namely) serpent, wind (and) beast.”

From this description it emerges that the creator deity, the first being ever generated, who in other texts is called Jaldabaoth, has the form of a winged snake rising from the waters, and has the power of the wind that provokes storms. Clearly this is Leviathan, which, as we have seen, was a large sea snake that causes storms<sup>142</sup>. His son is *Nous*, intellect, which corresponds to the serpent of the Garden of Eden, the so-called “instructor”<sup>143</sup>, urged by his Mother Sophia to reveal Gnosis to Adam and Eve. Leviathan’s son was therefore the divine snake of *Nous*, who was different in nature from Leviathan. He was cursed and hurled down by the biblical god for having revealed wisdom to the first two human beings. Because of the knowledge he imparted, however, it became necessary for human beings to die. His nature then, however devious it may have been, had a positive side.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Ps. 89,9–10.

<sup>143</sup> Hypostasis of the Archons (NHC II,4) 89–90; Testimony of Truth (NHC IX,3) 47,1–4; on its belonging to the older Ophitic stream cf. B. A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, Minneapolis 1990, 43. In *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 113 the serpent’s mother is Eve-Zoë, daughter of Sophia, who spoke to Adam and Eve through the mouth of the serpent. Pearson, 45, has pointed out that behind the narrative is a paretymological speculation on the three Aramaic words, *hewya*, *hawah*, *hawa*, meaning “Eve”, but also “life” (in Greek: *Zoe*), “the beast” (obviously the serpent of the Garden of Eden), and the verb meaning “to show”, “to teach”.

The Sethians held that the serpent was the “perfect *nous*”, while in the astrological doctrine of the Peratae<sup>144</sup> there was a “perfect serpent”, the Dragon, which represented Christ on the cosmic pole, and an “imperfect serpent” restrained by the Ophiouchos. The futile attempt by the imperfect serpent to reach the Crown was probably viewed in a negative light. In the doctrine of the “heretical” astrologists examined by Hippolytus<sup>145</sup> it is clear that this serpent is evil, because the Ophiouchos is Christ himself, who holds back the animal.

So the snake had a good side and a bad side, exactly like the Michael-Samael antithesis. It would be Jesus’ task to release the good snake from the shackles of matter, by holding back and overcoming the bad snake, or the bad side always present in the same divine animal.

### § 12. *The serpent-teacher of Gnosis*

We now come to other testimonies that very probably refer to the same theme of the serpent, who was the son and then became the first enemy of the evil Creator. Since these are less explicit ideas than those discussed until now, they need to be examined separately.

Two important “Sethian” texts from Nag Hammadi, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*<sup>146</sup> and the *Origin of the World*<sup>147</sup> agree that Sabaoth was the only one of Jaldabaoth’s children to condemn his father’s action and to sing a hymn to Sophia; the spiritual god rewarded him for this by placing him in the seventh heaven, the highest of all, and establishing his royal throne above the “twelve divinities of chaos”, above the Zodiac. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* also adds that Zoë – a divine manifestation similar to Sophia – instructed Sabaoth after his repentance.

In the light of most of the works mentioned, the story of Sabaoth, the Creator’s repentant son, would seem to have a great deal in common with the story of the serpent of the Sethians, Peratae, Naassenes and Ophites<sup>148</sup>:

<sup>144</sup> Hipp., haer. V 16 (111–4 Wend.). The doctrines of the Peratae will be examined in greater detail in §§ 45 e 52.

<sup>145</sup> haer. IV 47–8 (69–73 Wend.).

<sup>146</sup> NHC II,4, 95.

<sup>147</sup> (NHC II,5) 103–104. According to the Archontics Sabaoth rules the seventh heaven and is the Hebrew god, the tyrant of all the other heavens: Epiph., haer. XL 2,6 (II, 82–83 Holl). On these doctrines: F. Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, Leiden 1978. G. Filoramo, *Aspetti del dualismo gnostico*, MAST.M 5/2.4, 1978, 239–309, esp. 306–7. supposes that the *Origin of the World* was influenced by Valentinian ideas.

<sup>148</sup> It must be remembered, however, that, in the account given by Iren., haer. I 30,5 (SC 264. 368 Rouss., Dout.), the Ophites imagined that Jaldabaoth had first of all gener-

he was the Creator's son, endowed with wisdom, thanks to Sophia's intervention, and he countered Jaldabaoth's obtuse tyranny with his *gnosis*. Also, the assumption of Sabaoth into the highest heaven makes him similar to the serpentiform deity that rules over the heavenly pole, the Dragon of the Peratae or the Proteus of the Naassenes, a multiform god who stood on the pole of the cosmos<sup>149</sup>.

The *Pistis Sophia*<sup>150</sup> calls him "good Sabaoth", but also recounts a myth<sup>151</sup> that differs from other Gnostic doctrines: Sabaoth Adamas ruled over 6 Aeons and his brother Iabraoth over another 6. Sabaoth Adamas persevered with sex and procreation, while Iabraoth repented and Jeu, grandfather of Jesus, took him to the realms of light ruled by the invisible god, then joined young Sabaoth's strength with that of the good Zeus, and made him helmsman of the planetary order, located in the "middle places", while a third Sabaoth, the older one, is in the right-hand places, on high, among the higher deities.

In Valentinian mythology Iaô was redeemed thanks to Christ<sup>152</sup>: here the story of the repentant Archon is based on a former Christian doctrine and directly concerns YHWH.

Another tradition, even more cryptical and indecipherable, is found in the *Apocalypse* of John<sup>153</sup>, in a passage we have already mentioned<sup>154</sup>, which says that a woman clothed in the sun, and with the moon under her feet, was about to give birth to a son; before her stood the great dragon, the red serpent with seven heads and ten horns, whose tail had thrust down to earth a third of the stars in the sky; it wanted to devour the woman's son, but God carried the son up to heaven, to his throne, while the woman fled to the wilderness. Here the element that connects the apocalyptic passage with Sethian and Ophitic doctrines is the enthronement of the son, who has escaped the monstrous dragon.

In the multicoloured panorama of Gnostic doctrines, therefore, the serpent often plays a positive role, as agent of the heavenly Mother and revealer of Gnosis, or as the deity of light placed by the Mother at the highest point of the cosmos, whose redemptive tasks range from the revelation of Gnosis to identification with Christ. In some sects his revelations are merged with the negative aspects typical of the serpent of Eden.

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ated six Aeons: Iaô, Sabaoth, Adonai, Elohim, Hor and Astaphaeus; and only later had generated the serpent that represented Nous.

<sup>149</sup> Hipp., haer. V 8,35 (95 Wend.).

<sup>150</sup> II 63; IV 140 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 127-8; 362).

<sup>151</sup> IV 136-7; 139 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 354-357; 359-362).

<sup>152</sup> Iren., haer. I 21,3 (SC 264, 298-300 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>153</sup> 12 13; cf. F. Boll, *Au der Offenbarung Johannis*, Leipzig 1914, 98 124.

<sup>154</sup> *Supra*, § 12.

§ 13. *The testimony of Theodoretus*

Theodoretus of Cyrhus has this to say about Marcionite doctrine:

“They dare to say that the serpent is better than the Creator. In fact the Creator forbade men to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, while the serpent exhorted them to eat it. But these sinners do not know that the serpent’s advice generated death. And so some of them worship the serpent. And I myself found that they had a bronze serpent, kept in a kind of box<sup>155</sup> together with their nefarious mysteries.”

Theodoretus adds that the Marcionites not only insulted the Creator, but also the biblical patriarchs and prophets, obviously because the latter were the Creator’s representatives, while they believed that Cain and the Sodomites had followed Jesus out of Tartarus when he descended into Hell<sup>156</sup>. This was an Ophite doctrine which, according to Irenaeus<sup>157</sup>, taught that the various prophets of the Bible belonged to the sphere of influence of one or other of the seven evil planetary Archons.

Theodoretus, therefore, attributes Ophitic doctrines and cultic practices to the Marcionites of his time. The only reason that can be given for this is that elements of Sethian, Ophitic and Peratic Gnosticism had merged with Marcionism. Otherwise it would not be possible to explain why some Marcionites detested water because it was produced by the Creator<sup>158</sup>. The notion that water was an element of the evil Demiurge, equated with Kronos, was characteristic of Sethian and Peratic-Ophitic thinking. Over the centuries Marcionite doctrine must have been modified and enriched. For example, we know that Apelles the Marcionite added to the master’s doctrine the view that Christ did not have a human body, but was made of cosmic substance<sup>159</sup>, and, according to a Syrian manuscript in the British Museum<sup>160</sup>, Marcion held that Jesus was not born of a woman, but usurped the Creator’s role and appeared between Jericho and Jerusalem.

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<sup>155</sup> Theodoretus talks of a *kibotion*, while the live snake mentioned by Epiphanius was inside a *kiste*. Also Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 31 (226 Hes., Dr.) wrote that the *Serpentarii* kept a live serpent in a box.

<sup>156</sup> In haer. XLII 4,3 (II, 99 Holl) Epiphanius adds that Kore was also saved by Christ.

<sup>157</sup> haer. I 30,11 (SC 264, 378 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>158</sup> According to Thdt., haer. I 24 (PG 83, 376); cf. Harnack, Marcio (n. 20), 292, a Marcionite used spittle instead of water to wash himself, because he refused the need for a creator and water was produced by the Creator. On the refusal to wash or drink and on the choice of “dryness” cf. P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 1978, 44–45.

<sup>159</sup> Thdt., haer. I 25 (PG 83, 376).

<sup>160</sup> Harnack, Marcio (n. 20), 283.

It would appear from Theodoretus that only some Marcionites, not all of them, celebrated the serpent mysteries. From this we could extrapolate a potential explanation of the problem. It may be that certain communities – or villages<sup>161</sup> – in Syria still believed in Ophitic Gnosticism, but were linked to Marcionite communities and their ecclesiastical authorities, who in this case would have to be imagined as being fairly tolerant and flexible. And thus we have ascertained – albeit to a very limited extent – that Ophitism was firmly established in northern Syria.

#### § 14. *Ophitic themes in the biographies of Thomas and Cyriacus*

The *Acts of Thomas* and the *Life of Cyriacus and Julitta* were written in or not far from northern Syria. It is clear from a careful reading that the serpent who corrupted Cain, described by Irenaeus, is the same as the one in the *Acts of Thomas* (“I am son to him that sitteth on a throne over all the earth ... I am son to him that girdeth about the sphere: and I am kin to him that is outside the ocean, whose tail is set in his own mouth”) and in the *Prayer of Cyriacus* (“he who led the angels and also Adam astray through their passions, the one who inflamed Cain and drove man to evil, and had extinguished the giants’ hearts”). So the snake encountered by Thomas and Cyriacus had the characteristics of the Ophite snake. And perhaps the theme of oblivion, which characterized the *Hymn of the Pearl*, coincides with the theme of Oblivion<sup>162</sup>, the serpent’s child, in Ophitic doctrine. The figure of the mother, who in the

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<sup>161</sup> More than two centuries before Theodoretus, in the age of the Severi, Tertullian stated that most heretics – that is Gnostics – did not have “even a church, or a mother, or a location, were unbelievers, vagabonds, derided wherever they went”: Tert., *de praescr.* 42.10 (SC 46, 149 Refoulé, de Labriolle). Celsus (Orig., *Cels.* V 63; II, 66 Koet.) described certain Gnostic leaders as follows: “some of them have found one master and demon, some another one, and they wander around in wretched poverty and they roll around in the deepest darkness, perpetrating more misdeeds and acts of impiety than the Egyptian thiasi of Antinous”. The case of the Gnostics of Syria must however have been different, if we bear in mind Theodoretus’ account and the fact that an inscription attests the existence at least of one Gnostic village. On the organization of Gnostic villages as thiasi with their own spiritual leaders, cf. K. Rudolph, *Die Gnosis*, Göttingen 1977, 228–31.

<sup>162</sup> It may be that the theme of Thomas’ deep sleep in Egypt and the sleep of the serpent was influenced by the episode of the lotus eaters in Book IX of the *Odyssey*, linked to Gnostic beliefs concerning deep sleep. See: F. C. Conybeare, *The Idea of Sleep in the ‘Hymn of the Soul’*, *JThS* 6, 1905, 609–10; on sleep and Gnosticism, see: G. McRae, *Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts*, in: *Le origini dello Gnosticismo*, SHR 12, Leiden 1970, 496–507; on the use of Homer by the Church Fathers and Gnostics: J. Daniélou, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique*, Paris 1960, 73–101.

*Hymn* is the Church and in the *Life of Cyriacus* is Julitta, performs a similar function to that of the heavenly Mother, or Sophia-Prunicus, of the Ophites. The *Acts of Thomas* and the *Life of Cyriacus and Julitta*, then, present concepts that are typical of Ophitic doctrines, chiefly to describe the world of Evil and the Devil. They are not, therefore, Gnostic or Gnostic-influenced works, but Christian works hostile to Gnosticism.

This will be confirmed later (§ 37). We will show that these accounts were inspired by the travels of the Apostles, particularly Paul and the author of the *Apocalypse*, to areas where Jewish heretics adored the snake and practised magic.

## A snake in the sky

### § 15. *Gnostics and magic*

Before examining the concept of Christ as a divine snake, let us attempt to study in greater detail the cosmic serpent encircling the earth and the sky, and let us consider the fact that Saint Thomas lulled the snake to sleep by reciting a formula and that Cyriacus sealed its mouth with words of divine origin<sup>163</sup>.

We know that the Christians, especially those belonging to Gnostic sects, were convinced that human salvation depended on the ability to avoid or neutralize the great snake by means of spells, formulae and “seals”.

Many ancient authors, both Christian and pagan, frequently assert that the Gnostics practised magic<sup>164</sup>. Magic was in fact the essential means to avoid the malevolent influence of the creator god and his Archons, in order to reach the sphere of the spiritual god. Menander, successor to Simon Magus, is said to have promised his followers “the knowledge to defeat the very angels who created the world”. This victory would be achieved “thanks to the magic taught by him”<sup>165</sup>. The heresiologist Irenaeus of Lyons adds that

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<sup>163</sup> Clem., paed. III 6 (CGS Clemens I, 256 Stählin) states that the serpent of wealth (obviously the god Mammon) could only be defeated by the enchantment of words.

<sup>164</sup> See for example: Iren., haer. I 25,3 (SC 264, 336 Rouss., Dout.); Tert., de praescr. 43 (149 Refoulé, de Labriolle). For an excellent and very thorough analysis of all heresiological views on magic, see F. C. R. Thee, Julius Africanus and the early Christian view of magic, HUT 19, Tübingen 1984, 346–417. On Gnosticism and magic cf. the recent studies by G. Sfameni Gasparro, Tra gnosi e magia: spazio e ruolo della prassi magica nell’universo religioso dello gnosticismo, in: Il tardoantico alle soglie del Duemila. Diritto religione società. Atti del V Conv. Naz. dell’Associazione di Studi Tardoantichi, Rome 2001, 1–35; Ead., Eretici e magi (n. 16). A. H. Logan, Magi and Visionaires in Gnosticism, in: Portraits of Spiritual Authority. Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient, ed. J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Watt, Leiden 1999, 27–44, views magic and visions in Gnosticism in the same light. K. Rudolph, Zur Soziologie, sozialen Verortung und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike, Kairos 19, 1977, 38, denies that magic occupied a central role in Gnostic thought, but states that Gnosticism, like most religious streams of the Imperial Age, was interested in magic, astrology and philosophy.

<sup>165</sup> Iren., haer. I 23,5 (SC 264, 320 Rouss., Dout.); cf. Just., I apol. 26,4 (Saint Justin, Apologies, ed. by A. Wartelle, Paris 1987, 132); Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 16 (223 Hes., Dr.).

Menander reached the zenith of magic arts (*ad summum magiae pervenit*)<sup>166</sup>. The Sethians are accused by Epiphanius<sup>167</sup> of all kinds of misdeeds, among them a “mania for idols and sorcery (*goeteia*)”. Marcus the Valentinian was considered a master of magic arts, whose secrets the heresiologists delighted in revealing<sup>168</sup>, and the insistence of Christian authors on Marcus’ magic practices suggests that he was far more versed in the subject than many other Gnostics. On the subject of the Carpocratians Irenaeus writes<sup>169</sup>: “They too have recourse to magic arts, spells, philtres and rites to obtain grace, familiar spirits, dream-sending spirits, and other abominations. They say they have the power to rule the Archons and the Creators of this world”<sup>170</sup>; he also states that they used idols and statues. The Basilidians used images, spells, invocations and other arts; they followed the ideas of the *mathematici*, that is the astrologers, and speculated on the magic name of Abrasax<sup>170</sup>. The heretics critiqued by Irenaeus also used children, to whom they made spirits appear<sup>171</sup>, invoked angels and cast spells<sup>172</sup>.

The two *Books of Jeu*<sup>173</sup>, from the *codex Brucianus*, describe a series of Gnostic baptismal rites that Christ is said to have taught the Apostles in

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Just., I apol. 26.4 (132 Wartelle); Eus., h. e. III 26–7 (II/1, 252–6 Sch.), which states that Menander taught that salvation could only be achieved through his magic and his baptism.

<sup>167</sup> haer. XXXIX 9,2 (II, 78–9 Holl).

<sup>168</sup> Mainly: Iren., haer. I 14–16 (SC 264, 206–264 Rouss., Dout.); Hipp., haer. VI 39–40 (170–172 Wend.); Eus., h. e. IV 11,3 (II/1, 322 Sch.); Epiph., haer. XXXIV (II, 5–39 Holl); Thdt., haer. I 9 (PG 83, 360); Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 29 (225–6 Hes., Dr.) adds that he used amulets; cf. N. Förster, Marcus Magus. Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergruppe, WUNT 114, Tübingen 1999. Iren., haer. I 15,6 (SC 264, 250–2 Rouss., Dout.) quotes a poem written by a presbyter of Asia Minor, in which Marcus is described as a “creator of idols, interpreter of prodigies, expert in astrology and magic”, and the son of Satan, who helps him through the angelic power of Azazel; cf. Förster, 18–26. According to Agapius, bishop of Hierapolis in Syria in about 942 AD (Mahbub ibn Qustantin, Kitab al-’Unwan, cf. Förster, 44–52), Marcus taught that there were 360 gods, clearly referring to the Chaldean system of the 360 degrees into which the Zodiac circle is divided; cf. Förster, 49.

<sup>169</sup> haer. I 25,3 (SC 264, 336 Rouss., Dout.); similarly Hipp., haer. VII 32,5 (219 Wend.); Eus., h. e. IV 7,9 (II/1, 310 Sch.); Epiph., haer. XXVII 4,7 (I, 305 Holl); Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 21 (224 Hes., Dr.); on the Carpocratians, cf. a recent work by R. M. Grant, Carpocratians and Curriculum: Irenaeus’ Reply, HThR 79, 1986, 127–36.

<sup>170</sup> Iren., haer. I 24,5, 7 (SC 264, 328–332 Rouss., Dout.); Epiph., haer. XXIV 1,8–2,2; XXIV 7,4 (I, 258 and 264 Holl). On the Elchasaites. Hipp., haer. IX 4,1; X 29,3 (240 and 284 Wend.) says that they were inspired by magic and astrology.

<sup>171</sup> Iren., haer. II 32,3 (SC 294, 338 Rouss., Dout.); similarly Hipp., haer. IV 28 (54–57 Wend.); Just., I apol. 18,3 (122 Wartelle).

<sup>172</sup> Iren., haer. II 32,4 (SC 294, 340 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>173</sup> GCS, Koptisch-gnostische Schriften, I, 257–329 Schmidt. Epiph., haer. XXVI 10,8 (I, 288 Holl), examines the doctrines of Gnostics close to the Nicolaitans, who held that the Kosmokrator in the form of a snake drank the souls of the dead who had not been

order to subjugate the Archons of the cosmos, who try to capture human souls. In this book Christ reveals a series of *charakteres*, i. e. seals – when synonymous with baptisms – by means of which Jaldabaoth, Chouchô (god of darkness) and all the other lords of the cosmos could be “sealed”, or rendered harmless.

The other books in the *codex Brucianus*, namely the *Anonimus Brucianus*, as well as the *Pistis Sophia* of the *codex Askewianus*, also give instructions on the use of magic to neutralize the Archons ruling the world.

Heresiologists such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius undoubtedly accused the Gnostics of magic in order to discredit them, and therefore their words cannot be accepted unquestioningly; yet the *charakteres* and magic words used by Gnostics and handed down in their original texts are also used in magical gems and papyri<sup>174</sup>. Also, the testimonies of pagans, especially Plotinus and Porphyrius<sup>175</sup>, confirm similar forms of Gnostic religiosity: these Christians used incantatory formulae (ἐπαιδαί), witchcraft (γοητεία), spells (θέλξεις), persuasive words (πείσεις), songs (μέλη), cries (ἤχου), blowing (προσπνεύσεις) and hissing (σιγμούς τῆς φωνῆς) to attract the attention of the higher entities and draw them to themselves<sup>176</sup>. Gnostics performed exorcisms, in the belief that illnesses were the work of demons, who could be driven out by means of incantations<sup>177</sup>.

Therapeutic exorcisms could be seen as part of a coherent system, in which the diabolical serpent ruled the world through its demons (who are sometimes identified with pagan gods). Christ had introduced baptism, by means of which the cosmic serpent and the demons afflicting humankind could be sealed. All this would continue until the end of time and the final victory over the Devil. These beliefs were widely held by all branches of Christianity.

Magic and Gnosis (or, at least, some streams of these types of heresy) were therefore closely interlinked and inseparable from each other. Gnostic texts made explicit reference to the writings of Zoroaster<sup>178</sup>, who was considered

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initiated into Gnosis and did not know how to protect themselves. On these and similar Gnostic doctrines and practices cf. M.G. Lancellotti, *Gli Gnostici e il cielo. Dottrine astrologiche e reinterpretazioni gnostiche*, SMSR 66, 2000, 83–4.

<sup>174</sup> Cf. H.M. Jackson, *The Origin in Ancient incantatory voces magicae of some names in the Sethian Gnostic System*, VigChr 43, 1989, 69–79.

<sup>175</sup> Plot., *Enn.* II, 9, esp. 14; Porph., *Vita Plot.* 16; cf. Sfameni Gasparro, *Tra gnosi e magia* (n. 164).

<sup>176</sup> Porph., *Vita Plot.* 16.

<sup>177</sup> Plot., *Enn.* II, 9.

<sup>178</sup> Zoroaster in Gnostic texts: Apocr. Joh. (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502.2) 19; Zostrianus (NHC VIII, 1) 132; G. Robinson, *Sethianism and the Doctrine of Creation in a partially restored Coptic Codex (Papyrus Berlinensis 20 915)*, Muséon 113, 2000, 239–257, esp. 247 e 253. The Gnostic Prodicus possessed books by Zoroaster: Clem.,

the founding father of the line of magi and of magic arts. We are therefore right in thinking that not enough importance is given to this fact by Morton Smith<sup>179</sup>, who suggests that Simon was described as a magus in the pejorative sense of the term by hostile Christians wishing to bring into disrepute the leader of the new sect, who claimed to be a god. Hostility and an attempt to discredit are indeed very apparent in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the writings of heresiologists, but this does not mean that Simon and his disciples did not actually celebrate rites that Greek and Roman public opinion would have described as magic<sup>180</sup>.

Howard Jackson<sup>181</sup> attributes the extensive use of magic words, formulae, symbols and rites in Gnostic texts, which are also found in magic papyri, gems or lamellae, to Gnostic imitation of the magi's texts and doctrines, since those magic words and formulae had a meaning in magic texts that later was lost in Gnostic texts and rites. Although this is true in general, it must not be forgotten that magic texts were not part of a religion that can be labelled as "magic", because there was no such thing. Those who practised magic worshipped Isis, Sarapis and Horus, or Hecate and Apollo, or the Hebrew god, or the saviour-Messiah, and frequently worshipped all these gods together. In this sense, Dieterich's theory<sup>182</sup> that the papyri retain traces of Gnosticism is still totally valid. Furthermore, in the Coptic magic repertoire there are very clear elements that can be traced back to Gnosticism<sup>183</sup>. Also there were certainly magi who were Gnostics or close to Gnosticism, to whom – as we shall see – some of the recipes in magical papyri or some of the magic figures on gems<sup>184</sup> can be traced. Gnostic magi, of course, must also have drawn on the religious (and "magic") heritage of Egypt or of the Greek world, but first of all they will have drawn on the traditions of the

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str. I 15,69 (II, 44 Stählin). Priscillianus was *Zoroastris magi studiosissimus et ex mago episcopus*: Hieron., Ep. 133,4 (CSEL 56, 248 Hilberg). The Apocryphon of John, moreover, opens by mentioning a Pharisee who was disparaging Jesus; the Pharisee was called Arimanios, the name of the Zoroastrian antagonist of Ahura Mazda.

<sup>179</sup> M. Smith, *The Account of Simon Magus in Acts 8*, in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, I, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1996, 140–51.

<sup>180</sup> The fact that there were indeed links between Gnosis and magic, aside of the polemical aspects in Irenaeus, is reiterated by Sfameni Gasparro, *Eretici e magi* (n. 16).

<sup>181</sup> Jackson, *The Origin in Ancient Incantatory voces magicae* (n. 174), 69–79. J.-M. Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal Séthien*, Québec 1986, 280–4, maintains on the other hand that it is difficult to distinguish philosophical gnosis from popular and magical gnosis.

<sup>182</sup> Abraxas, Leipzig 1891, esp. 150–2.

<sup>183</sup> M. Meyer and R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of ritual Power*, San Francisco 1994, no. 70; cf. 130; no. 92 (Jesus = Seth), cf. 195; no. 113, cf. 228; no. 119, cf. 240.

<sup>184</sup> There is a risk here of acting like the serpent swallowing its own tail, in maintaining that the Gnostics used the material of the magi, who may however have been Gnostics.

Near East, and particularly on those Magi and Chaldeans who, at least during the final phase of the Republican age, also speculated on the Hebrew god's nature and powers<sup>185</sup>.

Ophites and Peratae<sup>186</sup> identified the serpent of the Garden of Eden with the bronze serpent made by Moses and the serpent into which the rod of Moses had been transformed: it was the god who had given humankind the gift of Gnosis and, at the same time, the science of magic. Magic and Gnosis were forms of knowledge that were not dissimilar from each other, because Gnosis drew to a certain extent on the wisdom of the Magi and Chaldeans.

I believe that, starting from some point in history (perhaps from the 2nd century AD), another issue gave some Gnostics further reason to turn to magic. The most important, defining characteristic in complex Gnostic doctrines was contempt for the Creator's work and, to some extent, for the Creator, who was distinguished from the higher god remote from matter. Accordingly, many Gnostics disobeyed the Creator's precepts<sup>187</sup> and extolled biblical figures who had disobeyed him, such as the serpent of Eden or Cain. The Marcionites actually relegated the Old Testament prophets to Hell, because of their relationship with the biblical god. The biblical god had unconditionally condemned magic and divination, which were equated with worship of foreign gods. *Deuteronomy*<sup>188</sup>, for example, states: "When you have come into the Land which the Lord, your God, is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abominations of the peoples there. Let there not be found among you anyone who immolates his son or daughter in the fire, nor a fortune-teller, soothsayer, charmer, diviner or caster of spells, nor anyone who consults ghosts and spirits or seeks oracles from the dead. Anyone who does such things is an abomination to the Lord". And in *Leviticus*<sup>189</sup>: "Any

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<sup>185</sup> W. Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, TU 15/4, Leipzig 1897, was the first to suggest that the cultural origins of Gnosticism should be sought in Mesopotamia and Babylonia, but his words fell mainly on deaf ears. He stressed the importance of Babylonian-style astrology in Gnosticism and, in particular, in the Gnostic doctrine of the ascent of souls through the heavens. Recently however C. Colpe, *Sethian and Zoroastrian Ages of the World*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 16), 540–52, has rightly indicated Mesopotamian wisdom as the milieu in which Sethian Gnosis originated. Leaders of the "religionsgeschichtliche Schule" had looked for the origins of Gnosticism in Iran; cf. in particular R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, Bonn 1921; G. Widengren, *Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis*, in: *Gnosis und Gnosticismus*, ed. by K. Rudolph, Darmstadt 1975, 410–425; or also in Egypt: R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, Leipzig 1904; W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen 1907. Cf. C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, Göttingen 1961.

<sup>186</sup> But, as we shall see, the Marcionites shared a similar view to this.

<sup>187</sup> Cf., for instance, *Iren., haer. I 6.3* (SC 264, 94–96 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>188</sup> 18,9–11.

<sup>189</sup> 20,27.

man or woman among you who practises necromancy or divination must be put to death; they shall be stoned”; in *Exodus*<sup>190</sup>: “You shall not permit a witch to live”. The Judaeen kings who yielded to the temptation to worship the gods of other peoples were accused of having practised magic<sup>191</sup>. The prophets disowned and condemned magi and astrologers; Isaiah, for example<sup>192</sup>, inspired by the Lord, said, “It is I who bring to nought the omens of fortune-tellers, who make fools of diviners, I turn wise men back and make their knowledge foolish”; and Jeremiah<sup>193</sup>: “A sword is on the Chaldeans and on the people of Babylonia, and on her rulers and on her wise men! A sword is on the soothsayers, and they will become foolish!”.

In Gnostic thinking, therefore, the science of the Chaldeans was bound to be valued as a form of knowledge, precisely because it had been forbidden by the creator.

### § 16. *The Hebrew god in 1st century BC Chaldean wisdom*

Tertullian states that “the Marcionites very frequently are astrologers, and are not ashamed to live by the Creator’s stars”<sup>194</sup>. Ephraem the Syrian<sup>195</sup> attacks the practice of magic in his polemic against the heretics, particularly Marcionites, Manichaeans and the disciples of Bardesanes. Hippolytus devoted the whole of Book IV of his *Refutatio* to the Chaldeans, magi and astrologers, as the source of inspiration to Gnosticism; his conviction is supported by other authors, especially pagan authors, whose writings are therefore devoid of the polemical virulence of the heresiologists<sup>196</sup>.

First of all there are two documents that differ from each other: a fragment of Varro and a magic lamella, which appear to give a uniform indication of

<sup>190</sup> 22,17.

<sup>191</sup> 2Reg. 9,22; 2Chr. 33,6.

<sup>192</sup> Is. 44,23–25.

<sup>193</sup> 27,35.

<sup>194</sup> contra Marc. I 18,1 (313 Kroy.): *nam et mathematici plurimum Marcionitae, nec hoc erubescens, de ipsis etiam stellis vivere Creatoris*. For the interpretation of *vivere* as meaning “derive sustenance from” cf. Tertullien, Contre Marcion, I, ed. R. Braun (SC 365), Paris 1990, 303–4. This could mean that, in the age of the Severi, some Marcionites were by profession Christian astrologers. On the incredulous reaction to Tertullian’s account cf. Braun, 303. This incredulity is symptomatic of the scant importance attached to Chaldean doctrines within Gnosticism.

<sup>195</sup> Hymni contra haereses 4–10, 14–47 Beck (Louvain 1957) (CSCO 169, Syr. 76, 14–39, 50–186, transl. CSCO 170, Syr. 77, 15–41, 49–165 Beck).

<sup>196</sup> For a panorama of heresiological works against Gnostics, see G. Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, Eng. transl. Cambridge/Mass., Oxford 1990, 2–7.

the presence of Hebraic religious elements in the doctrines of the Chaldeans. Varro, in the time of Caesar, wrote that the Chaldeans studied the nature of the Hebrew god in their secret writings<sup>197</sup>. We do not know exactly what Varro meant by “Chaldeans”: they could have been the Babylonian astrologers or the astrologers and magi of the Near East in general, or the fortune-teller astrologers who travelled around the world<sup>198</sup>; but whether they could also be Jewish it is not clear. The founders of Hebraism were considered Chaldeans or at least Chaldean speakers<sup>199</sup>, but the text of Lydus with the passage from Varro distinguishes Jews from Chaldeans. A passage from Valerius Maximus<sup>200</sup> also distinguishes Jews from Chaldeans, who were lumped together in one category and repressed in 139 BC by the Roman authorities, as they were on another occasion during the age of Augustus<sup>201</sup>.

On the other hand, we know of a magic lamella, or *phylakterion*, from Emesa, dated, on a palaeographic basis, to about the early 1st century BC<sup>202</sup>. The lamella depicts an *ouroboros* snake containing a complex system of hebraizing magic words and theonyms, of the kind we are very familiar with from magic texts and monuments of the Imperial Age. The image is defined as ζωγράφημα τοῦ θεοῦ, meaning “drawing of god”, or perhaps “hieroglyph of god”.

Varro and the lamella from Emesa helped to prove that before Simon Magus and before the spread of Gnosticism<sup>203</sup> there was a Near Eastern form of magic that placed the Hebrew god at the centre of its doctrinal system; it is precisely this kind of magic that must have been drawn on by Simon<sup>204</sup> and

<sup>197</sup> Lyd., mens. IV 53 = Var., Rer. div. I, fr. 17 Cardauns: “The Roman Varro, on the god with the four-letter name, says: ‘the god of the Jews is called laō by the Chaldeans in their secret writings’”. Cf. E. Norden, *Jahve und Moses in hellenistischer Theologie*, in: *Kleine Schriften zum klassischen Altertum*, Berlin 1966, 282–5.

<sup>198</sup> On whom cf. Cato, Agr. 5.4. On the word Chaldeans, which first indicated a people, then the Babylonian clergy who studied astronomy, and then astrologers in general, cf. F. Cumont, *La théologie solaire du paganisme romain*, MAIBL 12/2, Paris 1909, 23–4.

<sup>199</sup> Abraham: Philo, Gig. 62; Somn. I 161; Moses: Philo, Mos. I 5.

<sup>200</sup> Epit. of Iulius Paris and of Ianuarius Nepotianus I 3,3 ed. by Kempf, 16–7; Liv., Periochae Ox. 54, col. VIII (who only mentions the Chaldeans). On the problems, mainly textual, raised by the mention of Jews in this context, cf. *infra*, n. 212.

<sup>201</sup> Mythogr. Vat. III 5.3 (I, 172 Bode): *Judaei vel Chaldaei ab urbe depulsi. Hinc Virgilius eleganter in VIII: “Vana superstitio...*

<sup>202</sup> R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, I, PapyCol 22, Opladen 1994, no. 48.

<sup>203</sup> This is the gestation phase of Gnostic doctrines, many of which had already become established in the 1st c. BC; cf., for instance, G.A.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed. Studies in Gnostic Mythology*, Leiden 1984; G. Quispel, *Anthropos und Sophia*, in: *Religion im Erbe Ägyptens. Beiträge zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte zu Ehren von Alexander Böhlig*, ed. by M. Görg, Wiesbaden 1988, 168–85.

<sup>204</sup> R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, London 1958, 114, n. 60, acknowledges the influence of astrology on Simon’s doctrine.

his school, the Nicolaitans of Asia Minor, who will be discussed later, and some of the early Gnostics, who continued to develop a system of relations with the divine based on magic rites, mostly private, made known by revelations, efficacious rites vis-à-vis gods and demons, rites that were outside or were placed outside the covenant between Yahweh and the Jewish people. These Near Eastern magi were both Jewish and non-Jewish, but even if they were not Jewish, they were deeply interested in Hebraic doctrines. The conversion to the Jewish faith of the king and queen of Adiabene, in northern Syria, in the time of the emperor Claudius<sup>205</sup>, is evidence of the influence of the Hebrew god on Near Eastern culture.

It has been noted that in late antique Syria charges against heretics were often accompanied by accusations of magic practices<sup>206</sup>. This is explained by the fact that for a considerable time a number of Near Eastern magic streams, particularly the Chaldean stream, had incorporated elements of Jewish thinking into their doctrinal systems.

Tibullus<sup>207</sup>, writing in the age of Augustus, believed that the seventh day of the week, sacred to Saturn, brought ill luck. He was probably more afraid of the negative astral influence commonly attributed to Saturn-Kronos than Jewish prohibitions concerning the sabbath<sup>208</sup>. There were also Romans who imitated the Jews by abstaining from work on the sabbath<sup>209</sup>, a day that was considered unlucky<sup>210</sup> by astrologers<sup>211</sup>. The spread of similar beliefs of both Chaldean and Jewish origin probably dated back at least to 139 BC, when the Chaldeans were expelled from Italy, and to the cult of Jupiter Sabazius,

<sup>205</sup> Jos., AJ XX 17–50; cf. J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I, Leiden 1969, 61–67. Again in the 3rd–4th century, at the time of Ephraem the Syrian, Judaism attracted both pagans and Christians, causing a reaction from the orthodox church, which urged Christians, in the writings of Ephraem, to avoid Jewish religious practices; cf. H. Drijvers, *Syrian Christianity and Judaism*, in: *The Jews among Pagans and Christians*, ed. by J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak, London, New York 1992, 141–2.

<sup>206</sup> H. J. W. Drijvers, *The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria*, in: *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Washington D.C. 1982, 40–1, on the basis of the Teaching of Addai, Ephraem the Syrian, Isaac of Antioch and the charge against the bishop-magus Sophronius.

<sup>207</sup> Tib. I 3.18: *Saturni sacram me tenuisse diem*.

<sup>208</sup> On “Saturn’s day” cf. also Frontin., *Strat.* II 1,17; Tert., *apol.* 16,11 (CSEL 69, 44 Hoppe); Marc. Emp. II 13, 79 Liechtenhan; Cass. Dio XXXVII 16,2; 17,3; XLIX 22,4; LXVI 7,2.

<sup>209</sup> *Juven.* XIV 96; 105–7; *Porph.*, in *Hor.*, S. I 9,69.

<sup>210</sup> *Hor.*, S. I 9,69; *Ov.*, *Ars.* I 415–6; *Rem.* 219–20; *Pers.* V 184.

<sup>211</sup> *Prop.* IV 1,84; *Hor.*, *Carm.* II 17,23; *Luc.* I 652; *Juven.* VI 569–70; cf. F. Boll, C. Bezold and W. Gundel, *Sternglaube und Sterndeutung*, Leipzig, Berlin <sup>4</sup>1931, Darmstadt 1974, 179–183; F.H. Colson, *The Week*, Cambridge 1926; P. Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, I, Pietermaritzburg 1980, 107.

which was being spread by the Jews of Asia Minor<sup>212</sup> at the time when confraternities of *Sabbatistai*<sup>213</sup> were active.

### § 17. *Adam in Chaldean writings*

In one of the chapters on Naassenes<sup>214</sup>, Hippolytus quotes a sermon which, in a part of it written perhaps around 100 AD<sup>215</sup>, lists figures of the primordial

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<sup>212</sup> Val. Max., *Epit.* by Iulius Paris I 3,3 (Kempf. 16–7); *Liv.*, *Per. Ox.* 54, col. VIII; cf. F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Sabazius et le Judaïsme*, CRAI 1906, 63–79; *Id.*, *Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris 1929, 102–3. E. Bickerman, *The Altars of Gentiles. A Note on the Jewish “Ius sacrum”*, RIDA IIIe série, 5, 1958 = *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, II, Leiden 1980, 324–346, esp. 330–5, states that the measure was applied chiefly in Asia Minor. On the problems raised by the passage from Valerius Maximus cf. E. N. Lane, *Sabazius and the Jews in Valerius Maximus*, JRS 69, 1979, 35–38; *Id.*, *Corpus cultus Iovis Sabazii*, Vols. 2–3, EPRO 100, Leiden 1985 and 1989, whose criticism is based on the fact that the main evidence of the relationship between Jews and Sabazius is the passage from Valerius Maximus, or rather a *varia lectio* of this passage, considered corrupt or the result of a gloss. In actual fact, Cumont, *A propos de Sabazius et du Judaïsme*, MB 14, 1910, 56, had already replied to the same criticism against him by A. Jamar with these words: “il est contraire à une saine méthode d’attribuer une sottise à un écrivain ou de supposer une corruption d’un manuscrit quand un reinsegnement transmis par la tradition n’est pas manifestement faux”. Cumont, 57, demonstrates that the epitome of Iulius Paris (which provides information on the Jews and Sabazius) is preferable to the later Christian version of Nepotianus. Cf. a recent work on the problem: M. Bodinger, *Deux problèmes d’histoire des religions au monde antique*. I. Le dieu Sabazius et le Judaïsme, *Archaeus* 6, 2002, 121–139.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. for instance F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées de l’Asie Mineure*, Paris 1955, no. 80; M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, II, Munich 1950, 638; Bickerman, *The Altars of Gentiles* (n. 212), 338. On a *Sambathikè synodos* see for instance W. Horbury and D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Cambridge 1992, no. 26.

<sup>214</sup> *haer.* V 7 (80 Wend.).

<sup>215</sup> Three contributions have been noted in the sermon: a hymn to Attis (cf. earlier U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Lesefrüchte*, *Hermes* 37, 1902, 328–31) with a pagan commentary, a treatise on the *Anthropos* dating back to an Alexandrian Gnostic circa 100 AD, and a final Roman Valentinian edition, circa 180 AD: J. Fricke, *Hellenistische Erlösung in Christlicher Deutung*, Leiden 1984. M. Simonetti, *Qualche osservazione su presunte interpolazioni nella Predica dei Naasseni*, *VetChr* 7, 1970, 59–68 shows that the Christian contribution to the sermon was quite old and could not be separated as an interpolation; J. Montserrat-Torrents, *La notice d’Hippolyte sur les Naassènes*, in: *StPatr* 17, ed. by E.A. Livingstone, Oxford 1982, 231–42, rejects the attribution of the passage from Hippolytus to Naassene doctrine and attributes it to Valentinian gnosis. But it is preferable to attribute only the final version of the hymn to the Valentinians. For a survey of the main theories on the genesis of the sermon, see M.G. Lancellotti, *The Naassenes. A Gnostic Identity among Judaism, Christianity, Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Traditions*, Münster 2000, 10–16. The paganism of the hymn and of the commentary could perhaps be an illusion, because the Naassenes may have created the impression of

androgyne human being found in the traditions of various peoples. At the end it states: “The Assyrians say that Oannes, eater of fish, was born among them. The Chaldeans however say that this was Adam. They (scil. the Naassenes) say that this was the man produced by the earth, solely as a body; he lay lifeless and motionless, as still as a statue, the image of that man on high, the celebrated Adamas. He was created by many powers who are the subject of much discussion among the people of this land”. On the subject of the *Apocryphon of John* and the creation of Adam by the planetary Archons, Theodor Bar Konai says that the *Apocryphon* had drawn on the Chaldeans<sup>216</sup>. In his work on the letter Omega<sup>217</sup> Zosimus of Panopolis states that Hermes-Thoth was called Adam by the Chaldeans, Parthians, Medes and Jews. In Chaldean writings, then, Gnosis theorizers found the figure of Adam, or a similar figure, which they linked to the first biblical man, believed to be the image of the Adamas, or anthropomorphic manifestation of god, mentioned for the first time in a vision of Ezechiel<sup>218</sup>. These theologians speculated on the similarity between ’*ādām* (man) and ’*adāmāh* (earth); the theogony of Philo of Byblos<sup>219</sup> was based on a similar speculation. If we accept Hippolytus’ text as the literal truth, the Chaldeans would appear to have speculated on Adam, the first man, in addition to Iaô. We will shortly try to discover who these Chaldeans were.

The Hebraic notion of the Son of Man, the manifestation of God in human form that we have just mentioned, is certainly fundamental to the Gnostic doctrine of the Anthropos, as well as to Hebraic apocalyptic literature. It is closely connected to Assyrian notions of the *išten etlu*, the perfect Divine Man, who manifested himself to humankind on rare occasions, in storms

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being pagan, given their open-minded use of gentile polytheistic religion. Only recently, indeed, they were considered pagans (initially as “interpreters of the naôs”, and later as Naassenes) by M. J. Edwards, *The Naming of the Naassenes: Hippolytus, Refutatio V 6–10 as Hieros Logos*, ZPE 112, 1996, 74–80.

<sup>216</sup> The creation of man by the Archons, as in the *Apocryphon*, is attributed by Theodor to an Apocalypse by the heretic Audi, who is supposed to have drawn his inspiration from Chaldean sources: *Liber scholiorum XI 63* (CSCO 432, II, 239 Hes., Dr.); cf. H.-Ch. Puech, *Fragments retrouvés de l’Apocalypse d’Allogène*, in: *Mélanges Franz Cumont*, AIPh 4, Brussels 1936, 939; G. Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos und die Jüdische Tradition*, ErJb 22, 1953, 195–234 = *Gnostic Studies*, I (n. 50), esp. 180, n. 17; on 181 Quispel maintains, quite rightly, that heterodox Jews interpreted the creation of man in astrological terms, and points out traces of this view in the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>217</sup> Zosim., *Comm. de litt. Omega 8* (*Les alchimistes grecs*, IV, ed. by M. Mertens, Paris 1995, 4).

<sup>218</sup> Ez. 1,26; cf. G. Quispel, *Anthropos und Sophia* (n. 203), 176–83.

<sup>219</sup> R. du Mesnil du Buisson, *Etudes sur les dieux phéniciens hérités par l’empire romain*, Leiden 1970, 34.

or dreams; on earth he was comparable to a king and was also identified with the spirit of the dead king<sup>220</sup>. Given the chronology, it is likely that the Jewish concepts came from Mesopotamian thinking, rather than vice versa. It seems that the dialogue with Mesopotamian culture continued during the Hellenistic Age and the early Empire, when the books of Daniel, the *Apocalypse of Esra* (4*Esra*) and the books of *Enoch*, in which the visions of the celestial divine Man are particularly important, were written. In Babylonian Judaism of the first centuries of the Empire speculations flourished on the visions of Ezechiel, which, in addition to being the prime source of Hebraic mystical and astrological doctrines and those reflected in the Dura Europos synagogue<sup>221</sup>, were also a starting point for the Gnostic doctrine on the Anthropos, the anthropomorphic manifestation of God.

The Gnostic theme of the mirror was probably inspired by Mesopotamian and possibly Chaldean cosmogonic concepts. According to an ancient and well established doctrine, Sophia (or the Anthropos) looked down from on high at the watery matter reflecting her own image; she was attracted by it and her erotic reaction generated Jaldabaoth<sup>222</sup>; according to another, similar, doctrine, the divine Anthropos manifested himself in the sky and the Archons recreated his image in the form of the first man<sup>223</sup>. The idea of the

<sup>220</sup> H. S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic. The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and the Son of Man*, WMANT 61, Neukirchen, Vluyn 1988, Part 2, 345–599.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I, Leiden 1969, 166–72; cf. 4, who also emphasizes the influence of Chaldean doctrines on Jewish thinking. It must also be remembered that the rabbinic literature of the Babylonian Jews reflects only a portion of the local Judaism that was closest to Jewish orthodoxy, while the vitality of heterodoxy is to be sought in the magic bowls and amulets of Mesopotamia and Syria, but probably also in the texts of the mystics and visionaries of the Merkabah and the Cabbalah. On magic bowls cf. J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic incantation texts from Nippur*, Philadelphia 1916; C. O. Isbell, *Corpus of Aramaic Incantation Bowls*, Missoula 1975; P. Ginoux, *Incantations magiques syriaques*, Louvain – Paris 1987; J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, Jerusalem – Leyden 1985; J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, Jerusalem 1993; J. B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum*, London 2001.

<sup>222</sup> Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* 67, 4–12 (GCS Hegemonius, 96–7 Beeson); Marius Victorinus, *Adversus Arium* 1086 C (SC 68, 376–8 Henry, Hadot); cf. *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4) 87; *Corpus Herm.* (Poimandres) I 12; *Plot. Enn.*, II 9,10; Syrian Ququite doctrine: *Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch.* XI 77 (249 Hes., ⚫r.); cf. H. J. W. Drijvers, *Quq and the Quqites*, *Numen* 14, 1967, 104–129; cf. Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos* (n. 216), 173–195, esp. 186; G. Filoramo, *Il risveglio della Gnosi ovvero diventare dio*, Bari 1990, 182–189.

<sup>223</sup> *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2) 14; *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4) 87; *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 114 etc.

mirror existed earlier in Assyrian cosmogony, in which Assur created, as his own emanation, Anu, the sky, to “mirror” his existence in the world<sup>224</sup>.

The idea of magically “sealing” the demon under the earth, found in orthodox and Gnostic Christianity, was part of Chaldean wisdom<sup>225</sup>.

### § 18. *The Jewish patriarchs and masters of astrology*

There was also contact between Babylonian traditions regarding the Flood, quoted by the Chaldean Berossos<sup>226</sup>, and Jewish traditions concerning Noah, which, given the very close narrative similarities, dated back to the common Mesopotamian origin of the saga<sup>227</sup>. Flavius Josephus<sup>228</sup> states that Berossos was referring to Abraham, though he did not mention his name, when he spoke of a great and righteous man, “versed in the heavens”. Around 220 a pupil of Callimachus, Hermippus<sup>229</sup>, and later Firmicus Maternus<sup>230</sup>, in the 4th century AD, consulted books on astronomy ascribed to Abraham. Between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Artapanus<sup>231</sup>, an Egyptian Jew, maintained that Hermes Trismegistos was actually Moses, who had taught the Egyptians religion, whereas Abraham taught the Egyptian priests astrology; this view was endorsed in a work attributed to Eupolemus<sup>232</sup> (first half of the 2nd century BC), who said that astrology had been discovered by Enoch (identified with Atlas) and then handed on by him to the Babylonians.

<sup>224</sup> S. Parpola, *The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy*, JNES 52, 1993, 191, who also stresses that the cabbalistic doctrines of the Keter, as the “mirror” of God, are derived from this idea.

<sup>225</sup> Amm. XXIII 6,24 states that Lucius Verus’ generals (165 AD) tore down the statue of Apollo Comaeus from Seleucia on the Tigris and took it to the temple of Apollo on the Palatine; the soldiers also found a narrow hole in the temple, sealed by the religious rites (*arcana*) of the Chaldeans, and they opened it, thereby spreading the plague that was to afflict the Roman empire.

<sup>226</sup> FGH 680, F 4, 14.

<sup>227</sup> Berossos, FGH 680, T 3; F 4c and 8d.

<sup>228</sup> AJ I 158 = Berossos, FGH 680, F 6; cf. A. Yoshiko Reed, *Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews: Josephus, Ant. 1.154–168, and the Greco-Roman Discourse about Astronomy/Astrology*, JSJ 35, 2004, 119–158.

<sup>229</sup> In Vettius Val. II 28, 96 Kroll.

<sup>230</sup> VIII 3,5; cf. IV, proem. 5; IV 17,2; 18,1. On Abraham as an astrologer in pagan authors: Jeffrey S. Siker, *Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism*, JSJ 18, 1987, 188–208.

<sup>231</sup> In Eus., PE IX 18,1; 27 (CGS Eusebius VIII/1, 504 and 519–24 Mras) = FGH 726, F 3.

<sup>232</sup> FGH 724, F1, 8; on Eupolemus: B. Z. Wachholder, *Eupolemus. A Study of Judaeo-Greek Literature*, Cincinnati 1974. Cf. also Theod. bar Konai, *Lib. sch. XI 3* (213 Hes., Dr.).

Eupolemus certainly based his view on *Genesis*, which states that Abraham came from the land of the Chaldeans. After Eupolemus, other authors continued to look upon Abraham as an astrologer<sup>233</sup>. Medieval tradition held that Abraham had taught Zoroaster astrology<sup>234</sup>, or that, vice versa, he had been taught by Zoroaster<sup>235</sup>, and Abraham himself was considered a Chaldean<sup>236</sup>. This was, therefore, a well-established tradition, whose origins may have been pagan, but are more likely to have been Jewish. Clearly, Eupolemus feels some pride in attributing the invention of astrology to the Jews<sup>237</sup>, and not the Egyptians.

On the subject of Gnosticism, it is extremely interesting that a Byzantine astrological treatise<sup>238</sup> attributes the invention of astrology to Seth, Adam's son; Seth was considered by many Gnostics as their founder, able to make revelations to them, like those in the Nag Hammadi treatise *The three steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5). Flavius Josephus<sup>239</sup>, writing in the Flavian age, stated that Seth left a progeny of just, peace-loving men, who understood the secrets of the stars and, since Adam had predicted the Flood and other disasters, inscribed their doctrine on two steles.

The astrological books of Abraham have been lost, but those attributed to Enoch have come down to us<sup>240</sup>; they are also books on astronomy, revealed

<sup>233</sup> Jos., AJ I 156–8; Eus., PE IX 16 (VIII/1, 501–2 Mras); Cyr., Juln. I 10 (SC 322, 126 Burguière, Evieux); cf. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'astrologie grecque* (n. 119), 578 and n. 1.

<sup>234</sup> Petrus Comestor (XII sec.), *Historia scholastica*, Liber Genesis 47 (PL 198, 1095) and a Jewish Haggada: Bin Gorian, *Die Sagen der Juden*, Berlin 1935, 219; J. Bidez, F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspes d'après la tradition grecque*, Paris 1938, I, 41; II, 48, B 41.

<sup>235</sup> Theodorus of Melitene, In astronomiam 11 (PG 149, 997); cf. CCAG V, 140. Zoroaster was also thought to be a Jewish priest: Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 13 (220 Hes., Dr.).

<sup>236</sup> CCAG V, 3, 141 (Σήθ is however a correction of Σωθήθ).

<sup>237</sup> On the other hand, it is significant that the information in 2Reg. 21,3–7, that Manasses introduced the cult of the stars into Palestine, was not reiterated and emphasized; Manasses in fact was an idolater.

<sup>238</sup> CCAG VIII/1, 160, 5; but cf. all the other sources mentioned by W. Speyer, *Art. Gigant*, RAC X, 1978, 1263–4.

<sup>239</sup> AJ I 68–71; cf. A. A. Orlov, *Overshadowed by Enoch's Greatness: "Two Tablets" Traditions from the Book of Giants to Palaea Historica*, JSJ 32/2, 2001, 137–58.

<sup>240</sup> This is a corpus of writings handed down by the Ethiopian Bible, inspired by a Greek text, which was the translation of an Aramaic or Hebrew text; passages from Enoch have also come down through Egyptian papyri and Dead Sea scrolls. Cf. *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch*, ed. by M. Black, Leiden 1985, with (pages 386–419) the astrological chapters from the Ethiopian Enoch and a commentary by O. Neugebauer (who underlines the many similarities with Babylonian doctrines); R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, Oxford 1912 (again, referring to the Ethiopian version); *Le livre des secrets d'Hénoch*, Texte slave et trad. franç. par A. Vaillant, Paris 1952; for the chapters on the giants from

directly by angelic powers during visions and ascensions to heaven, books written at the time of the Maccabees and the late Hellenistic period of the Hasmoneans<sup>241</sup>. Some parts of the revelations of Enoch, and especially the *Book of Watchers* (1 Enoch 1–36), are considered even more ancient<sup>242</sup>.

For many years now scholars of Gnosticism have found in Enochic literature the oldest streams of the doctrines that the Gnostics would later appropriate, in particular the doctrine of the angels who came down to earth to take women as their wives and reveal to them the secrets of astronomy, magic and the natural elements<sup>243</sup>. The same myth recurs in the untitled text of Nag Hammadi, known as the *Origin of the World*<sup>244</sup>. Enoch is arguably the most important evidence of the Hebrew and pre-Christian roots of Gnostic doctrines. But it has also been noted that the outline for the narrative in *Enoch* was inspired by the Babylonian myth of Enmeduranki, seventh king of Sippar before the Flood, to whom the gods Shamash and Adad revealed all divine secrets and dictated the tables of the kings; Enmeduranki subsequently handed down these mysteries to his children<sup>245</sup>.

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Qumran: L. T. Stuckenbruck, *The Book of Giants from Qumran*, TSAJ 63, Tübingen 1997. Cf. a recent work by J. VanderKam, *Enoch: a Man for all Generations*, Columbia 1995.

<sup>241</sup> Cf. O. Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das alte Testament*, Tübingen 1956, 765–6 and the clear presentation by M. Delcor, *Jewish Literature in Hebrew and Aramaic in the Greek Era*, CHJud, II, 1989, 422–432. The book of Ben Sirach (or Ecclesiastes, 44,16b), written circa 190 BC, and the Book of Jubilees (4,17), probably from the Maccabean age, acknowledge the Enochic tradition.

<sup>242</sup> For a dating to the middle of the 3rd century BC, see: J. T. Milik, *Problèmes de la littérature hénochique à la lumière des fragments araméens de Qumrân*, HThR 64, 1971, 347; Id., *Hénoch au pays des aromates* (ch. XXVII à XXXII). *Fragments araméens de la grotte 4 de Qumrân*, RB 65, 1958, 70–77; cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (175 B.C. – A.D. 135), revised by G. Vermes and F. Millar, III/1, Edinburgh 1986, 256; L. J. Ness, *Astrology and Judaism in Later Antiquity*, Diss. Oxford/Ohio 1990 ([www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/humftp/Religion/pandal.uottawa.ca/astrology-and-judaism-dissertation.txt](http://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/humftp/Religion/pandal.uottawa.ca/astrology-and-judaism-dissertation.txt)), 138, believes that it is the first Jewish astrological work.

<sup>243</sup> 1 Enoch 7–8, 28–9 Black. On the relationship with Gnosticism cf. I. P. Couliano, *Experiences de l'extase*, Paris 1984, chapters 2–3; Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203).

<sup>244</sup> (NHC II,5) 123.

<sup>245</sup> P. Grelot, *La légende d'Hénoch dans les Apocryphes et dans la Bible: origine et signification*, RSR 46, 1958, 5–26; 181–210, esp. 195 et seqq.; Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic* (n. 220) (on Enmeduranki: 184–190); K. von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie. Jüdische und christliche Beiträge zum antiken Zeitverständnis*, RGTV 49, Berlin, New York 2000, 322–4. S. Parpola, *The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy*, JNES 52, 1993, 205, emphasizes several similarities with the story of Enoch and those of Adapa, who was borne up into heaven, according to an Assyrian-Babylonian myth. The theme of the antediluvian inscriptions (cf. § 40) was already found in Assyrian tradition; cf. P. Villard, *L'éducation d'Assurbanipal*, in:

The influence of Chaldean astrology was probably also felt by the Palestinian Jewish world, especially during the Hasmonean age, when Daniel's prophecies to the Babylonian king were celebrated. During the time of Herod, a Judean king would no doubt have been proud to welcome into his court the Magi astrologers who followed the comet from the East. The second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, with its description of the Magi, proves that the Jews had a high regard for the science of the stars.

From the age of the Hasmoneans Zodiacal figures were depicted in Palestinian synagogues<sup>246</sup>. In Hellenized Jewish milieus the Judaic god and the sun (or their images, at least) were equated, as attested by the *Sepher ha-Razim*<sup>247</sup> and the mosaic in the Beth Alpha synagogue depicting Helios in a chariot in the middle of the Zodiac, and by other documents<sup>248</sup>. These processes of identification were echoed in the Hebraic theonyms attributed in magical papyri to Apollo<sup>249</sup>. Philo of Alexandria<sup>250</sup> knew of one tradition according to which the 12 stones on the breastplate of the high priest represented the Zodiac and the twelve patriarchs, in groups of four indicating the seasons. The Essene sect believed in the power of the stars<sup>251</sup>, and eight of the Qumran manuscripts contained apocrypha of Enoch. One of these discusses the interpretation of thunder using the Babylonian Zodiac<sup>252</sup>. In the early Imperial Age, no doubt, Jewish astrological pamphlets containing revealed wisdom proliferated; examples are found in magic manuals such

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Enfance et éducation dans le Proche-Orient ancien. Table-ronde de l'UPR 193 du CNRS (directeur Francis Joannès), organisée par B. Lion, C. Michel, P. Villard, Paris-Nanterre, 6 déc. 1997, *Ktéma* 22, 1997, 137.

<sup>246</sup> E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period*, I, New York, Toronto 1953, 203; 217; 219; 248–51; 255; VIII, 167–71; J. Daniélou, *Les symboles chrétiens primitifs*, Paris 1961, 139.

<sup>247</sup> 30; 56; 71 Morgan.

<sup>248</sup> E. Sukenik, *The ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha, Jerusalem 1932*; cf. Smith, *Helios in Palestine*, in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, I (n. 179), 238–62; R. Lesses, *Speaking with Angels: Jewish and Greco-Egyptian Revelatory Adjurations*, *HThR* 89, 1996, 50–1. On the Zodiac in synagogues: R. Hachlili, *The Zodiac in ancient Jewish Art*, *BASOR* 228, 1977, 61–77; P. Prigent, *Le Judaïsme et l'image*, Tübingen 1990, 159–173; cf. also J. H. Charlesworth, *Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea scrolls, and early Palestinian Synagogues*, *HThR* 70, 1977, 183–200; Id., *Jewish Interest in Astrology during the Hellenistic and Roman Period*, in: *ANRW* II/20.2, 1987, 926–950.

<sup>249</sup> PGM I, 300–5; cf. IV, 595; XII, 201–69 etc.

<sup>250</sup> *Quaest. ex. II* 114; Daniélou, *Les symboles chrétiens* (n. 246), 140.

<sup>251</sup> *Jos.*, *AJ* XIII 172; *XVIII* 13; *BJ* II 128–9.

<sup>252</sup> J. C. Greenfield and M. Sokoloff, *Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, *JNES* 48, 1989, 202, no. 2; Ness, *Astrology and Judaism* (n. 242), 141.

as *The sword of Moses* (2nd to 3rd c. AD)<sup>253</sup>, the *Eighth Book of Moses*<sup>254</sup>, the *The wisdom of the Chaldeans*<sup>255</sup>; the *Hekhalot*<sup>256</sup>, with its descriptions of ascensions to heaven, are also part of this literature. A slightly later work, the *Sepher ha-Razim*, or *Book of Mysteries*<sup>257</sup>, containing the revelation of Raziel to Noah, was probably written in the early 4th century AD.

A very rich stream, especially as regards the demonic and natural magic<sup>258</sup> based on the properties of substances and living beings, is found in the many apocryphal works of Solomon, particularly the *Testament of Solomon*<sup>259</sup>, a manual on the subjugation of demons written during the early Imperial era, and in the *Hygromanteia Salomonis* or *Letter from Solomon to Roboam*, a treatise on magic and astrology probably written between the first and early second centuries AD.<sup>260</sup> The writings of Solomon were used by the Gnostics, who refer to them in the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX, 3), in the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5) and the *Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5 and XIII, 2)<sup>261</sup>. The *Treatise of Shem*, an astrological work attributed to Sem, Noah's son, probably written in the 1st century AD, must also have been relatively old<sup>262</sup>.

<sup>253</sup> *The Sword of Moses*, ed. by M. Gaster, London 1898.

<sup>254</sup> In PGM XIII.

<sup>255</sup> M. Gaster, *The Wisdom of the Chaldeans*, PSBA 20, 1900, 329–51.

<sup>256</sup> *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by P. Schäfer, Tübingen 1981; *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. by P. Schäfer, Tübingen 1984.

<sup>257</sup> M.A. Morgan, *Sepher-Ha-Razim. The Book of Mysteries*, Chico/Calif. 1983.

<sup>258</sup> According to the medieval classification, based on Plato; cf. P. Zambelli, *Il problema della magia naturale nel Rinascimento*, *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* 3, 1973, 271–96; Id., *Platone, Ficino e la magia*, in: *Studia Humanitatis*, ed. by E. Hora and E. Kessler, Munich 1973, 121–42.

<sup>259</sup> C.C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon*, Leipzig 1922 (cf. PG 122, 1315–58). Cf., in the vast bibliography on the subject, P. Perdrizet, ΣΦΡΑΓΙΣ ΣΟΛΟΜΟΝΟΣ, REG 16, 1903, 42–61; Id., *Negotium perambulans in tenebris. Études de démonologie gréco-orientale*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg 6, Paris 1922; D.R. Jordan and R.D. Kotansky, *Magisches*; 338. *A Solomonic Exorcism*, in: *Kölner Papyri*, VIII, PapyCol VII/8, Opladen 1999, 53–69; S. Perea Yébenes, *El sello de Dios (Σφραγίς Θεοῦ)*, Madrid 2000.

<sup>260</sup> CCAG VIII/2, 143–65; other versions of the text in CCAG IV and in A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, Liège-Paris 1927, 397–445; 470–7; on dating see: Ness, *Astrology and Judaism* (n. 242), 146. For Solomonic literature see: K. Preisendanz, PRE, Suppl. 8, 660–704.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. A. Cosentino, *La tradizione del re Salomone come mago ed esorcista*, in: *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica. Atti dell'incontro di studio Verona 22–23 ott. 1999*, ed. by A. Mastrocinque, Bologna 2002, 47.

<sup>262</sup> A. Mingana, *Some Early Judaeo-Christian Documents in the John Rylands Library*, BJRL 4, 1917, 79–80; J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, Garden City 1983, 601–4; Id., *Rylands Syriac MS 44 and a New Addition to the Pseudepigrapha: the Treatise of Shem*, discussed and translated, BJRL 60, 1978, 376–403; dating: Ness, *Astrology and Judaism* (n. 242), 144.

We could continue to discuss the astrological and magical revelations attributed to angels, and to Adam, David, Daniel and Esra, for some time<sup>263</sup>, but, even if we stop here, I think it is sufficiently clear that Mesopotamian Chaldean knowledge was widely shared by Hellenistic Jews, who assiduously pursued astrological speculations.

Both *Book I of Enoch* and the books of *Daniel* and the book of *Jubilees* (perhaps 2nd century BC) either condemn Babylonian astrology as a diabolical science, or stress its inferiority to wisdom directly revealed by God. This is certainly the dominant trait in Jewish astrology that distinguishes it from the “scientific” astrology of Babylonian Chaldeans. Gnostic astrology continues to follow the same path traced by Judaic revealed astrology. In Gnostic works it is Seth, Jesus or Mary who reveal to the faithful the truth about the planetary spheres and the deities who rule them. On closer inspection, we see that the early Empire was a time of great flowering of Judaic astrological literature, and many Gnostic treatises are the Christian continuation of this.

In § 36–37 we will return to the relationship between Chaldeans and Jews, and we will study the question of the Jews of Babylonia and their descendants who moved to Asia Minor.

### § 19. *Hebraic elements in magic and pagan theurgy*

Anyone who still has any doubts on the role of the speculations of magi and astrologers on the Hebrew god has only to read the magic papyri and lamellae and study magic gems: documents that bear witness to numerous Hebraic elements in astrological speculation. It would be impossible to attribute all these Hebraizing formulae to Jewish magi, and so it is certain that there were also non-Jewish magi and astrologers who speculated on the *Bible*.

This point has been made by many scholars, particularly M. Smith<sup>264</sup>, who insists that the forms of magic in Judaism, in Christianity – both Gnostic and

<sup>263</sup> There is an excellent exposé in W. and H. G. Gundel, *Astrologoumena*, Wiesbaden 1966, 51–59, where there is a bibliography; cf. the recent vast work by K. von Stuckrad, *Das Ringen um die Astrologie* (n. 245), esp. chapters 3–7.

<sup>264</sup> M. Smith, *Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati*, in: *Biblical and other Studies*, ed. by A. Altman, Cambridge/MA 1963, 142–60. R. Lesses, *Speaking with Angels: Jewish and Greco-Egyptian Revelatory Adjurations*, *HThR* 89, 1996, 41–60, part. 59, at the end of a useful analysis of magic procedures common to *Hekhalot*, *Sepher ha-Razim* and Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, asserts that Greek-speaking Jews had contributed to the development of Graeco-Egyptian magic. Jackson, *The Origin in Ancient Incantatory voces magicae* (n. 174), 69–79, thinks that Gnosticism drew on magical texts. G. Bohak, *Hebrew, Hebrew everywhere? Notes on the Interpretation of voces magicae*, in: *Prayers*,

non-Gnostic – and in pagan polytheism derived from a common Hellenistic matrix. Other scholars have noted similarities between the Zoroastrian tradition of the ages of the world and the “Sethian” Gnostic tradition<sup>265</sup>.

In practice, then, Jewish astrologists could have passed themselves off as “Chaldeans”, even though their science, like the books of Hermes Trismegistos, owed more to revelations by God and the angels than to an empirical study of the sky.

Judaic, Semitic and Persian belief in angels was shared by the Chaldeans and very soon spread through the Greek and Roman worlds<sup>266</sup>. The Hebraic or Hebraicizing beliefs and practices of magi, philosophers and theurgists of the Imperial Age probably sprang from Chaldean tradition. Origen remarks that “many of those who recite formulae to drive away demons use expressions such as: “the God of Abraham”... Even if these names are recognized by everyone as Jewish, they are often included by the Egyptians in magic formulae (ἀτινα ὁμολογουμένως ἐβραῖα ὄντα ὀνόματα πολλοχοῦ τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις ἐπαγγελλομένοις ἐνέργειάν τινα ἐνέσπασται μωθήμωσι)<sup>267</sup>; he then stresses that “the formula “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob”, is used not only by the members of the Jewish nation in their prayers to God and in exorcisms of demons, but also by nearly all those who practice spells and magic.”<sup>268</sup> The author testifies to the great interest shown by the Platonist Numenius of Apameia in Judaic literature<sup>269</sup>. According to the *Life of Isidore* by the neo-Platonist Damascius<sup>270</sup>, the wise Theosebius drove a demon out of a woman’s body by forcing it to make an oath (*horkise*) in the name of “the sun’s rays and the God of the Jews”. Exorcisms were in fact also carried out by non-Jewish magi<sup>271</sup>. In one magic papyrus<sup>272</sup> there is a spell described as “Jewish” but used, in all probability, by non-Jews, since it had to be “labelled” by indicating its Jewish origin. For curses, too,

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Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World. ed. by S. Noegel, J. Walker, B. Wheeler, Pennsylvania, University Park 2003, 69–82, seek to minimize the Hebrew *voces magicae*.

<sup>265</sup> C. Colpe, Sethian and Zoroastrian Ages of the World, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 540–52.

<sup>266</sup> F. Cumont, *Les anges du paganisme*, RHR 71, 1915, 159–182.

<sup>267</sup> Orig. Cels. I, 22 (CGS Origenes I, 72–3 Koetschau).

<sup>268</sup> Orig. Cels. I 22 (I, 72 Koet.).

<sup>269</sup> Orig., Cels. IV 51 (I, 324 Koet.). On the matter in general, cf. A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, in four volumes, Paris 1950–53, esp. Vols. 3–4.

<sup>270</sup> Fr. 56, 82 Zintzen.

<sup>271</sup> Philostr., VA IV 25; Just., II apol. 6,6 (204 Wartelle); Kyranides I 13,74 Kaimakis et passim... Similarly in the *defixio* A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae*, Paris 1904, no. 41, A 11, the operation is completed with “Hecate formulae and Jewish exorcisms”.

<sup>272</sup> PGM IV, 3084–5.

people turned to Hebraic tradition<sup>273</sup>. In magic, non-Jewish divinities were sometimes attributed the characteristics of the Hebrew god<sup>274</sup>. Jews living under the Empire were well aware that Theurgists and other magic specialists used the name of the Hebrew god<sup>275</sup>, and we know, as already stated, that the Theurgists were considered the inheritors of Chaldean wisdom. The *Chaldean Oracles* have been considered a form of pagan Gnosis<sup>276</sup>.

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<sup>273</sup> Two inscriptions dating to the middle of the 3rd century AD from Acmonia (MAMA VI, 335; J. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, New York, Oxford 1992, no. 91) use the “Deuteronomy curses”; the first of these probably was not invented by a Jew, the second is uncertain. It must be remembered that many Jews had been living in Phrygia since the late 3rd century BC.

<sup>274</sup> For instance: PGM XIII, 1061: ὁ ὦν Βαλσάμης, in which the Hebrew God is identified with the Syrian Baalshamin; cf. *infra*, note 734.

<sup>275</sup> In works that describe visions of the divine world such as *Hekhalot Zutreti* (2nd–3rd c. AD) and *Re’uyot Yehezkel* (“Visions of Ezechiel”, 4th to 5th c. AD) Jewish authors claim to know the correct form of God’s name, unlike the theurgists and magi who used it wrongly; cf. G. Scholem, *Über eine Formel in den koptisch-gnostischen Schriften und ihren jüdischen Ursprung*, ZNW 30, 1931, 170–176; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden, Cologne 1980, 145.

<sup>276</sup> W. Kroll, *De oraculis Chaldaicis*, Hildesheim <sup>2</sup>1962, 82; cf. E. Livrea, *Sull’iscrizione teosofica di Enoanda*, ZPE 122, 1998, 95; L. Turner, *The Figure of Hecate and Dynamic Emanationism in the Chaldean Oracles. Sethian Gnosticism and Neoplatonism*, *SecCent* 7, 1989–1990, 221–32.

## Chnoubis the serpent God

### § 20. *Chnoubis and Chnum*

So far we have only partly resolved the contradiction between the Ophitic doctrine presented by Irenaeus, which distinguishes the snake from Christ, and the Ophitic mystery ritual described by Epiphanius, which equates the sacred snake with Christ. And we have still more arguments to submit which prove that worshippers of Jaldabaoth's son, the tempter serpent, really did exist, as asserted by heresiologists and hagiographers. These may be insoluble problems, but even so we need to collect and examine all the evidence, which consists not only of literature but also engraved stones and other monuments, and cannot simply be regarded as a cultural dialogue between Palestine and Alexandria. We will then examine an important Gnostic doctrine concerning the serpent of Nous, in which elements of Anatolian and Egyptian religions converge.

Chnoubis/Chnoumis was one of the 36 Egyptian Decans, each of which occupied 10 degrees of the Zodiac. His image consists of two elements: a snake's body and a lion's head emanating rays. A similar god was raised to the status of supreme deity by doctrinal circles close to Gnosticism. The idea that the supreme god had the form of a lion and a snake was, as we have seen, held by gnosticizing non-Christian magi, who invoked him with the words: χαῖτε δράκων, ἀκαμίαιε λέων ("hail, serpent, indomitable lion")<sup>277</sup>.

In their passionate quest for the true image of the Hebrew god, *Bible* scholars must have noticed that the word YHWH resembled the Aramaic HYWAH, "animal"<sup>278</sup>. There are traces of this thinking in Gnostic treatises<sup>279</sup>, in which

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<sup>277</sup> PGM IV, 939–40; cf. below, § 46. On the Egyptian conception of a serpentiform creator god: B. van de Walle and J. Vergote, *Traduction des Hieroglyphica d'Horapollon*, CÉg 35, 1943, 87.

<sup>278</sup> Cf. A. Böhlig, P. Labib, *Die koptisch-gnostische Schrift ohne Titel aus Codex II von Nag Hammadi*, Berlin 1962, commentary to 114; Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203), 52. The Hebrew form was חַיָּה (*Chayah*).

<sup>279</sup> Cf., for instance, *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 114; 119; Origen, *Cels.* VI 30 (II, 100 Koet.).

the Hebrew god, Jaldabaoth, together with the other Archons of the planetary spheres, had the form of an animal, especially that of a lion<sup>280</sup>. It was widely believed by Gnostics that the Kosmokrator, the Lord of the World, had the form of a snake<sup>281</sup>. In the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2, 10) we read that Jaldabaoth “had the form of a dragon, the face of a lion with fiery eyes darting lightning and flames... and (Sophia) wrapped him in a shining cloud...”. This corresponds exactly to a description of Chnoubis, as does that of the indomitable lion-serpent, to whom however prayers were offered.

We will now examine the Egyptian interpretation of the Gnostic serpent, in the form of the leontocephalous snake Chnoubis/Chnoumis. On gems his name often appears as Chnoumis, undoubtedly because this god was identified with the Egyptian creator god Chnum. In Egypt Chnum was worshipped mainly in Syene as the god of the Nile flood<sup>282</sup>, which began under his influence in the sign of Leo<sup>283</sup>. Furthermore the *vox magica* Harponchnoubis is well-attested; it is a variation of Harponchnouphi, a title given to Horus

<sup>280</sup> Cf. particularly Origen, *Cels.* VI 30–1 (II, 100–1 Koet.); many Gnostic texts speak of the leonine nature of this god: cf. for instance: *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II,4) 94; *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 100; *Apocr. John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2) 10; *Pistis Sophia*, I 31–32; 39; 50 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 46–47; 63; 91); cf. H. M. Jackson, *The Lion becomes Man. The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition*, Atlanta 1985 (according to which the leontocephalous form of the Gnostic demiurge had its origin in certain biblical verses, but was above all Egyptian-inspired, and the leonine iconography of Chnoubis came from the identification of the creator god Chnum with Yahweh, and of Yahweh with Egyptian leontocephalous gods such as Bastet and Mios). E. Aydeet Fischer-Mueller, *Yaldabaoth: the Gnostic Female Principle in its Fallenness*, NT 32/1, 1990, 79–95, points out that the leonine form comes from the Psalms (7; 17; 22; 57...) and from Plato who, in *Rep.* IX 588 B–89 B, says that the soul also has a passionate nature: its higher part is a lion, and its lower part is a many-headed beast. J. E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of Lord*, Tübingen 1985, 321–9, notes that the leontocephalous god could also be Michael, the angelic name of Jaldabaoth (cf. Origen, *Cels.* VI 30; II, 100 Koet.), and two Gnostic gems that accompany the lion with the archangel’s name; cf. *SGG*, I, 71 and 197).

<sup>281</sup> Cf. Epiph., *haer.* XXVI 10,8 (I, 288 Holl); A. Thom. A 32 (149 Lip., Bonn.); the idea was shared by the Samaritan Saduqa’i, cf. J. Fossum, *Sects and Movements*, in: *The Samaritans*, ed. by A. D. Crown, Tübingen 1989, 336. In Num. 21,6–7 the Seraphim have the form of serpents.

<sup>282</sup> D. Bonneau, *La crue du Nil*, Paris 1964, 232–3.

<sup>283</sup> D. Wortmann, *Kosmogonie und Nilflut*, *BoJ* 166, 1966, 85–87; R. Merkelbach, *Astrologie, Mechanik, Alchimie und Magie im griechisch-römischen Ägypten*, in: *Begegnung von Heidentum und Christentum im spätantiken Ägypten*, *Riggisberger Berichte* 1, 1993, 59. In actual fact we do not know how and when the process of identification of the Decan with the creator god occurred.

(Har-), in which, clearly, the name of Chnoubis (-chnouphi<sup>284</sup> > -chnoubis) was recognized. Harponchnouphi was also identified with the Agathodaimon, the Egyptian snake with a human head, the Lord of Destiny<sup>285</sup>. It may well be that a number of magi and amulet wearers perceived Chnoubis as a great Egyptian astral god, but in all probability in other religious spheres his figure was the subject of further speculation, mainly biblical in nature.

The image of Chnoubis, the serpent with a lion's head emanating rays, was reproduced over and over again on emerald-green stones. Chnoubis was certainly one of the figures most often seen on magical gems. The rays encircling his head have always been considered proof that Chnoubis was a sun-god. This has a positive connotation, evoking the luminous nature of the Gnostic and astrological god of the pole, who had the form of a snake or a lion<sup>286</sup>.

Many green gemstones with the image of Chnoubis were amulets against stomach diseases. The symbol that frequently accompanies his image, a crossed triple S, was recommended for the same purpose<sup>287</sup>. One of these gems is inscribed with the words φύλαξον ὑγειῆ στομάχου Προκλου (“protect the health of Proclus's stomach”)<sup>288</sup>, another bears the inscription: στομάχου ἢ Χνουῖνης (*sic*)<sup>289</sup> (“of the stomach (*scil.* amulet) or Chnoubis”),

<sup>284</sup> *Nouphi* (= *nepher*) meant “good”, “perfect”.

<sup>285</sup> Cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), 69, n. 224.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. below, § 48.

<sup>287</sup> Gal. XII, 207 Kühn (which quotes book XIV of Nechepso, on which cf. E. Riess, *Nechepsonis et Petosiridis fragmenta magica*, Bonn 1890); Socrates et Dionysius, *De lapidibus* 35 (170 Halleux, Schamp): “white onyx, completely translucent, like air...inscribe on it the coils of a serpent whose front part is the head of a lion emanating rays. When worn, this stone completely stops stomach pains, and whatever you eat you will digest well”; Hephaestion IV 1 (II, 143 Pingree: (φυλακτήριον τοῦ στομάχου...ὡς κύριον ὄντα τοῦ στήθους τοῦ κόσμου: “protection of the stomach...because he is ruler of the cosmic chest”); Marc. Emp. XX 98 (354 Liechtenhan): *ad stomachi dolorem remedium physicum hic: in lapide iaspide exculpe draconem radiatum, ut habeat septem radios, et claude auro et utere in collo*; XXIV 7 (412 Liechtenhan): *pleuriticis et laterum doloribus remedia in lapide iaspide Frygia aerizusa si nota infra scripta insculpta fuerit, id est .SSS., et collo dolentis latus fuerit suspensus, inire proderit*; cf. XX 98 (354 Liechtenhan); Aetius Amid. II 18 (on Nechepso's instructions on green jasper and treatment for the stomach). In PGM IV, 1264 reference is made to a sign of this kind with a single S, useful for driving away demons. Cf. C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor, London 1950, 54–60; 162.

<sup>288</sup> A. Delatte, Ph. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes*, Paris 1964, no. 80 = SGG, I, 168.

<sup>289</sup> R. Mouterde, *Le glaive de Dardanos: Objets et inscriptions magiques de Syrie*, MFOB 15, 1930, 74, who says that the gem engraver must have clumsily followed the instructions in a text that prescribed the following inscription on a similar amulet: στομάχου ἢ Χνουῖνης, i.e. either one word or the other. Cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 59.

on one agate the god's image is accompanied by the inscription "great god of the stomach"<sup>290</sup>; and on two other gems the command πέσσε (digest!)<sup>291</sup> is repeated. Sometimes the image of Chnoubis was reproduced on gems depicting the womb, an organ controlled and placated by the god<sup>292</sup>, together with Isis, Osiris and other Egyptian deities. The Chnoubis amulets also assisted breastfeeding<sup>293</sup>. The power of all these magical gems resided in the notion that, as the god who regulated the Nile flood, Chnoubis/Chnum could also regulate menstruation, stimulate the flow of breast milk, and stop haemorrhaging, bleeding ulcers and abnormal digestive juices in the stomach.

Just who were these pro-magic doctors who prescribed this type of amulet? On the "uterine" gems Chnoubis is accompanied by groups of Egyptian gods. It is quite possible, therefore, that the specialists prescribing the use of this specific image were predominantly pagan and influenced by Egyptian religious beliefs. There is no doubt that many Chnoubis amulets were designed and used by pagans who were fascinated by Egyptian mythology and astrology. Also, the depiction of the snake, raised on two coils in the form of an 8 lying on its side, with its head emitting rays and surrounded by a nimbus<sup>294</sup>, is typical of gems of Egyptian provenance<sup>295</sup>, and certainly of pagan origin. Galen's account<sup>296</sup> indicates that even Hippocratic medicine was not averse to prescribing Chnoubis amulets, perhaps because the serpent was, after all, the symbol of Asclepius.

### § 21. *He who broke the giants*

Another problem is posed by recurring inscriptions describing Chnoubis as the conqueror of giants: Γιγαντορήκτα, Γιγαντοπνικτορήκτα,

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<sup>290</sup> O. Neverov, *Les amulettes magiques de l'Ermitage. Essai d'une classification*, in: *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica* (n. 261), 199; cf. Id, *Le thème égyptien dans les amulettes magiques de l'époque d'Empire Romain*, in: *L'Egitto in Italia dall'antichità al Medioevo. Atti del III congresso Internazionale Roma 1995*, Rome 1998, 468.

<sup>291</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 59.

<sup>292</sup> Cf. especially A.A. Barb, *Diva matrix*, *JWCI* 16, 1953, 193–238; and also A. Delatte, *Etudes sur la magie grecque III-IV. La clef de la matrice*, *MB* 18, 1914, 75–88; J.-J. Aubert, *Threatened Wombs: Aspects of ancient Uterine Magic*, *GRBS* 30, 1989, 421–449.

<sup>293</sup> *Socrates et Dionysius*, de lap. 36 (171 Halleux, Schamp).

<sup>294</sup> Cf. *SGG*, I, 158.

<sup>295</sup> W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Amulets*, London 1914, plate XXI, n; t; E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums*, III, Munich, no. 2222.

<sup>296</sup> Cf. above, note 287.

Γιγαντοφόντα<sup>297</sup> (*vel similia*<sup>298</sup>): “he who breaks giants”, “he who stifles and breaks giants”, “he who kills giants”<sup>299</sup>.

In a complex “Hebrew” exorcism performed in the name of the Hebrew God, attributed to the Egyptian magus Pibechis, the Hebrew god Sabaoth is invoked and hailed as “he who destroyed the giants with lightning”<sup>300</sup>. Several parts of this text are inspired by Rabbinic tradition<sup>301</sup>, confirming how deeply rooted the theme of giants and of Chnoubis *gigantorekta* was in Judaic doctrine. In another magical prescription, of essentially Greek tradition, the supreme sun god is flanked by 16 giants<sup>302</sup>.

The identification of Chnoubis with the Hebrew god explains the title “he who broke (or stifled) the giants”: the divinity of Elephantine, Chnum, was the god who brought the Nile flood, who ruled over water and all liquid elements<sup>303</sup>, and therefore had also sent the Flood. The *Bible* frequently

<sup>297</sup> Γιγαντοφόντα: C. Bonner, *Amulets chiefly in the British Museum*, Hes. 20, 1951, 326, no.

21; Γιγαντοπνικτορήκτα: *Cat. of the coll. of ant.gems formed by James, Ninth Earl of Southesk K.T.*, ed by H. Carnegie, I, London 1908, no. 4.

<sup>298</sup> Cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 168–9.

<sup>299</sup> Note that the image of Chnoubis is hardly ever accompanied by that of the snake-footed rooster (extensively used on magic gems), that is to say the giant and the giant slayer are never seen facing each other, even though the snake-footed rooster is depicted alongside many divinities, both Egyptian and Greek. One such stone (SGG, I, 252) depicts a snake-footed lion and, on the reverse, bears the inscription ΓΙΓΑΝΤΟΦΗΚΤΑ; in the work by Delatte-Derchain on the gem, no. 12, the snake-footed rooster is accompanied, on the reverse side, by the same inscription. The gem depicting Chnoubis and a snake-footed rooster from Bombay (cf. J. H. Middleton, *The Lewis Collection of Gems and Rings*, London 1892, 79), examined by Delatte, Derchain, *Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 87, is probably false: M. Smith, *Rev. of Delatte, Derchain, AJA* 71, 1967, 418; cf. also note to SGG, I, 234. On the subject of *Gigantorekta* (“he who destroys giants”) the expression *rumpere serpentes*, used by Ps. Quintil., *Decl. X* 15, describes one of the operations that magi were able to perform. The verb is also used in another well-known expression: *rumpere invidiam*.

<sup>300</sup> PGM IV, 3007–86, esp. 3059; Jesus is also invoked together with the Hebrew god. This reference to the killing of giants recurs in two medieval exorcisms: Ps. Bas., *exorc. 2* (PG 31, 1679); L. Delatte, *Un office byzantin d'exorcisme* (Ms. de la Lavra du Mont Athos, Q 20), *MAIBL* 52, Brussels 1957, 37, line 11; cf. A.A. Barb., *Rev. of Delatte, Derchain, Gn.* 41, 1969, 296 and n. 5. Cf. the tradition of the Kyranides on the giants who had built the tower of Babel: see note 307.

<sup>301</sup> Cf. D. Sperber, *Some Rabbinic Themes in Magical Papyri*, *JSJ* 16, 1985, 93–103, esp. 96–99.

<sup>302</sup> PGM II, 102.

<sup>303</sup> In Origen, in *Joh. 6.48* (SC 157, 316–18 Blanc) it is said that the Nile was the kingdom of the dragon. *Diod. I* 26,6 mentions a victory by Osiris over the giants. Note that Osiris was the god believed to cause the Nile flood.

mentions Yahweh's dominion over the waters, particularly the Red Sea and the Nile<sup>304</sup>.

One of the oldest beliefs – found in Enochic literature – on which Gnostic doctrine is based has its origin in an interpretation of a passage in *Genesis* 6.4, which tells the story of the angels, who were the sons of God and had lain with women and generated children; these children destroyed men and spread evil, so that God repented of his creation and sent the Flood. The angels' children (the *Nephilim*) are referred to by the term גבור or גבור: GiBoR, GiBWR, which indicates a hero or a great man, but is translated in the Septuagint as γίγας, “giant”<sup>305</sup>, when it occurs in the phrase ἐκεῖνοι ἦσαν οἱ γίγαντες οἱ ἀπ' αἰῶνος, which could also be taken to mean “giants born of, or descendants of the Aïōn”. The Septuagint also translates *Nephilim* as γίγαντες. The myth of the birth of the giants and their destruction by God flourished to an extraordinary degree in late-Hellenic Judaic literature (especially in the *books of Enoch*), in Gnosticism and later in Manichaeism<sup>306</sup>. A biblical Gigantomachy in the East was imagined, coinciding with the destruction of the tower of Babel<sup>307</sup>.

The biblical episode was of fundamental importance in the development of Gnosticism, because it showed the Lord repenting of his creation<sup>308</sup> and willing to save only the few spiritual men, the chosen ones. Since the theme of giants in Hebrew and Gnostic literature has been extensively dealt with by other scholars<sup>309</sup>, we will only focus on the variation which states that the destroyer of giants was the god with the form of a snake. As we have read in the passage from Irenaeus describing Ophitic doctrine, in which the heresiologist asserts that the serpent, son of Jaldabaoth, but also an instrument of the

<sup>304</sup> In addition to episodes from the story of Moses, cf. for instance Is. 19,5.10, prophesying that the Hebrew god would dry up the sea and the Nile; cf. again, on God's power over the waters: Is. 8,6–8; 35,6; 43,2–3; 44,3...

<sup>305</sup> A. Barb, Abraxas-Studien, in: *Hommages à W. Deonna*, Coll. Latomus 28, Brussels 1957, 76–9. Philo, Gig. 58–61, seems to be refuting the theory that the giants mentioned in *Genesis* are the same as the giants spoken of by Greek mythographers and poets.

<sup>306</sup> Cf. the seminal work by Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203); cf. the concise and very full presentation of sources in Speyer, *Art. Gigant* (n. 238), 1264–68.

<sup>307</sup> Speyer, *Art. Gigant* (n. 238), 1267–8.

<sup>308</sup> On this repentance cf. A. F. J. Klijn, *An Analysis of the Use of the Story of the Flood in the Apocalypse of Adam*, in: *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic religions presented to Gilles Quispel on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, ed. by R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, EPRO 91, Leiden 1981, 218–26 (on the subject of the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Apocryphon of John* and other texts, from which it emerges that the creator tried in vain to destroy the people of Gnosis). On Jewish and Christian literature concerning the Flood: J. P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, Leiden 1968.

<sup>309</sup> Cf. above, notes 240 and 243.

divine Mother, introduced Adam and Eve to gnosis in the Garden of Eden, so that Jaldabaoth was angered and drove out the first men and also the serpent: “*Sed et Serpentem adversus Patrem operantem deiectum ab eo in deorsum mundum. In potestatem autem suam redigentem Angelos qui hic sunt...*”<sup>310</sup>. Having been hurled by Jaldabaoth down to earth, the serpent therefore subjugated the angels who were there. In the Ophite myth the Serpent surrounded himself with demons, his children, and caused harm to humankind. He was, therefore, the Devil, according to Irenaeus. In the speculations of Hebraizing magi sympathetic to Ophite ideas and worshippers of Chnoubis, the repentant creator of the *Bible* became the serpent that “broke and stifled” the giants, who were the angels’ children. In Gnostic texts the serpent is the creator’s disobedient son, while in Judeo-Egyptian doctrine Chnoubis is the creator himself, who sent the Flood to destroy the whole of creation, except for the few righteous men, by water.

The relationship between these concepts is borne out by the figure of the lion-headed serpent, but there are also very clear differences. The most conspicuous one is the claim by certain Ophites that the serpent who imparted gnosis was in fact the enemy of humankind. The passage from Irenaeus seems to prefigure the condemnation of the serpent cult, echoed by Theodoretus and biographers of Thomas and Cyriacus. As we have already seen (§§ 11–12), there are also well-documented Gnostic traditions in which the instructor serpent is seen in a totally favourable light, and is frequently placed in the seventh heaven or above, on the cosmic pole. The spread of gems depicting Chnoubis with the inscription *Gigantorekta* would suggest that the solar serpent and enemy of the giants was by no means the enemy of humankind, but if anything was akin to the sovereign of the seventh heaven. It may be, then, that we are looking at two opposing schools of thought: the doctrine of the worshippers of Chnoubis and that of his enemies. As we shall see later, this reversal was a result of Christianization, which clashed with Jewish thinking and the ideas of peoples influenced by Judaism who revered the lion-serpent as a manifestation of the Hebrew god. Christian Gnosticism identified Chnoubis with the devil, the Beast of the Apocalypse, whereas doctrines similar to Gnosticism which remained faithful to Egyptian Judaism continued to revere that divinity. But this will be discussed more fully in §§ 24 and 43.

In the *Prayer of Cyriacus* the serpent is said to have “extinguished the giants’ hearts”: this serpent is the *ouroboros* devouring its tail, identified with the

<sup>310</sup> haer. I 30,8 (SC 264, 374 Rouss., Dout.).

serpent of the earthly Paradise, the instigator of Cain, the author of human wickedness and the one who led the angels astray through their passions: all typically Gnostic conceits. This would seem to confirm the suggestion that the corrupt city visited by Cyriacus is described by an author who had a Gnostic, Ophite and /or Marcionite community in mind.

Perhaps the iconography of Chnoubis, interpreted in a biblical sense, was used on amulets to combat physical illness because this was perceived as an evil to be overcome, like the giants<sup>311</sup> whom Chnoubis had once defeated and could defeat again.

Images of Chnoubis sometimes show a round base, which could be an altar, but could also, at least in some cases, be a *cista mystica*, of the kind used to contain the snake and depicted on coins dating to the Hellenistic era and the Roman Empire.

## § 22. Anoch Chnoubis

The image of Chnoubis is often accompanied by a *charakter* in the form of a crossed triple S and the word ANOX. In one magical papyrus<sup>312</sup>, it is defined as a Hebrew word, but it may have been Coptic. In both cases it means “I”, “I am”<sup>313</sup>. Anoch was also a theonym, designating one of the three aspects of the sun. Another magical papyrus names the “three Helioi: Anoch, Mane and Barchuch”<sup>314</sup>. Barb<sup>315</sup> has quite rightly pointed out that Anoch, as a theonym, corresponded to the definition of the Hebrew god as “I am the one who is”<sup>316</sup>. The Greek rendering of these words: Ὁ ὢν, is a translation of the biblical definition of God<sup>317</sup>. יהוה, YHWH, was an inflection (qal future) of the verb to be, יהיה, and means “is”, “the one who is”. The same notion was expressed by the *vox Ἀνόχ*: “I am”; it could also be accepted by the followers of Plato, who<sup>318</sup> defines the celestial divinity as τὸ ὄν ὄντως, “that which truly is”; and

<sup>311</sup> Evil was often depicted as a Medusa’s head writhing with snakes, vanquished by Perseus (above, note 292) or exorcized by the formula of Christian uterine gems (SGG, I, 315–316). Note that Chrys., in eos qui Pascha jejunant 3 (PG 48, 870) says that Christ stifled the devil.

<sup>312</sup> PGM XIII, 83; 148–9; 458.

<sup>313</sup> Cf. A. Jacoby, Ein berliner Chnubisamulet, ARW 28, 1930, 272, n. 3; Barb, Abraxas-Studien (n. 305), 67–86; 73–76.

<sup>314</sup> PGM XII, 217–8.

<sup>315</sup> Abraxas-Studien (n. 305), 73–76.

<sup>316</sup> In the Septuagint, Ex. 3, 14: ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν; Vulgate: *sum qui sum*; Naassene Sermon (Hipp., haer. V 7, 25, 84 Wend.): εἰμὶ ὁ εἰμὶ.

<sup>317</sup> Ex. 3, 14.

<sup>318</sup> Phaedr. 247 D.

by the followers of Hermetism (closely related to the Gnostics), according to whom: “the one who is has no name”<sup>319</sup>.

Those who used the *vox* Anoch probably knew Hebrew and speculated on the nature of the biblical god.

SSS is known as the “sign of Chnoubis”, because it is nearly always seen on gems depicting the god. It was prescribed for stomach illnesses<sup>320</sup> and to drive away demons<sup>321</sup> and its popularity survived into the modern age<sup>322</sup>. It represented a divinity of light and was snake-like in form<sup>323</sup>.

The sequence Z Z Z is similar to the previous one, and is used on many gems, inside the circle of the *ouroboros*, to indicate the name of God, the Hebrew god. For example, on some magic gems sequences such as Y Z Z Z<sup>324</sup>; S S S \* ⊕<sup>325</sup>; Z \* Z<sup>326</sup>; ✱ S S<sup>327</sup> recur; in the first three cases the *characteres* are preceded by vowels (the names of the planets). The three crossed Z or S signs come from an ancient Hebrew version of the name of Yahweh (ׁׁׁ)<sup>328</sup>; three archaizing Yods: FFF, representing the name of God<sup>329</sup>. What is more, the Hebrew origin of the crossed Z sign is corroborated by the inscription on a gem<sup>330</sup> defining it as the seal of Solomon. So Chnoubis was used

<sup>319</sup> Corp. Herm. XXIX 3A,7.

<sup>320</sup> Cf. above, note 287.

<sup>321</sup> PGM IV, 1264.

<sup>322</sup> Delatte, *Etudes* (n. 292), 62, which points out that this sign, called *Fermesse*, was still being used as late as the 16th century.

<sup>323</sup> It is definitely not the Latin S. W. Drexler, *Art. Knuphis*, ALGM II/1, 1890–94, 1264, notes that in several Egyptian astronomical texts at Edfu and Dendera the Decan KNM was symbolized by three serpents intersected by a fourth, horizontal, serpent. D. Wortman, *Kosmogonie und Nilflut*, BJ 166, 1966, 90–1, recognizes the sign on some sacred amphorae used to contain Nile water (but it is not absolutely clear that it is the “sign of Chnoubis”). The Physician Alexander of Tralles (VIII 2; IV, 81 Brunet) prescribed an amulet for cholera with the symbol N (which could be a Z, if turned on its side).

<sup>324</sup> SGG, I, 418.

<sup>325</sup> SGG, I, 412.

<sup>326</sup> SGG, I, 413.

<sup>327</sup> King, *The Gnostics* (n. 1), plate M, 2.

<sup>328</sup> R. Kotansky, J. Spier, *The “Horned Hunter” on a Lost Gnostic Gem*, HThR 88, 1995, 325.

<sup>329</sup> The sign, repeated three times, introduces a Christian inscription on the floor of a 5th century AD church at Evron, and indicates the Hebrew god: V. Tzaferis, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Early Christian Church at Evron*, *Eretz Israel* 19, 1987, 47, no. 11 and 50. ● On the crossed double S as the abbreviated name of Yahweh, see: Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 53; M. Philonenko, *L’anguipède alectorocéphale et le dieu Iaō*, CRAI 1979, 297–303.

<sup>330</sup> SGG, I, 418.

by Hebraizing magi and magi close to Gnostic groups, who saw in him the image of the god who had vanquished the giants; he carried with him the sign of the creator and was identified with the Egyptian creator. Perhaps some Gnostic thinkers saw Chnoubis as the entity who had righted the wrongs of creation through gnosis.

### § 23. *The leontocephalous god*

There are gems on which the god Chnoubis has the features of a warrior with a breast plate and human arms, but he has a lion's head, his right hand is holding a sword, and he has a long snake's tail instead of legs<sup>331</sup>. There are other variations on the theme: a snake-footed warrior with a donkey's head, an allusion perhaps to the belief that a donkey-idol was worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem<sup>332</sup>; or else the same divinity has a monkey's head (Thoth)<sup>333</sup>; there are also images of mummies of Osiris with snake's feet coming out from below<sup>334</sup>. There are gems showing a warrior with two serpentiform legs and a lion's head<sup>335</sup>. They were used, at least in some cases, to aid digestion<sup>336</sup>. Usually, the leonine and serpentiform warriors carry a sword instead of a whip, sometimes accompanied by a palm branch, to emphasize their warrior-like nature<sup>337</sup>.

We will now look at a very well-attested class of gems, showing the anthropomorphic leontocephalous god. This is basically an Egyptian divinity, as is demonstrated by the fact that the same gem workshop produced two virtually identical gems, with the same angelic names, except that one shows the lion-headed god, the other Anubis (SGG, I, 71).

Hebraic interpretations of this god are important. We have seen that the Hebrew god was also perceived as a lion-headed god, and he is depicted as

<sup>331</sup> The inscriptions sometimes accompanying the image mention Chnoubis: M. Dunand, *Fouilles de Byblos*, I, Paris 1939, 44 and pl. CXXXVII, no. 1250; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 269, D 99–101.

<sup>332</sup> Cf. Tac., *Hist.* V 2,4; Jos., *contra Ap.* 2,80; Tert., *apol.* I 16,12 (44 Hoppe); Min. Fel., *Oct.* 9.3 (CSEL 2, 13 Halm).

<sup>333</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), D 181; on the images of the monkey symbolizing the sun, replacing Horus, see 155.

<sup>334</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), D 186; SGG, I, 245.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. SGG, I, 252,

<sup>336</sup> Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums* (n. 295), III, no. 2230: inscription πέπτε.

<sup>337</sup> According to Rabbinic tradition (Midrash on Gen. 11, Bereshit Rabba 38, I/1, 305 Freedman, Simon), those who built the tower of Babel placed a deity armed with a sword, fighting against God, on top of the tower.



Fig. 1

such on a number of magic gems, including a very famous one<sup>338</sup> showing an anthropomorphic lion-headed demon (fig. 1) accompanied by the inscription Ἰαλδαβαῶθ / Ἀαριήλ; and on the reverse: Ἰά Ἰάω Σαβαῶθ Ἀδωναι Ἐλωαῖ Ὠρέος Ἀσταφέος. These are the names of the planetary Archons typical of Ophite Gnostics, referred to by Origen and Irenaeus<sup>339</sup>. The angelic name Ariel, which accompanies Jaldabaoth (the Hebrew god's Gnostic name) on the obverse of the gem, very probably meant "Lion of God"<sup>340</sup>. Moreover we know that it was a firmly rooted Gnostic belief that the Creator had a lion's face<sup>341</sup>.

<sup>338</sup> C. Bonner, *An Amulet of the Ophite Gnostics*, in: *Studies in Hon. of Th. Leslie Shear*, Hesp.S 8, 1949, 43–46; Id., *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 135–7 and pl. IX.188. J. M. A. Chabouillé, *Catalogue général et raisonné des camées et pierres gravées de la Bibliothèque Impériale, suivi de la description des autres monuments exposés dans le Cabinet des médailles et antiques*, Paris, 1858, 288–9, no. 2179 describes a haematite with the image of a uterus, accompanied by Chnoubis and, on the other side, by a donkey-headed mummy; the inscriptions have the names of angels, including Jaldabaoth; cf. J. Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme*, Paris 1828, pl. VI, 6.

<sup>339</sup> Jaldabaoth, Iaô, Sabaoth, Adonai, Eloeus/Aiolaios, Horaios/Oreus, Astaphaios: Origen., *Cels.* VI 31 and 32 (II, 101–2 Koet); Iren., *haer.* I 30,5 (SC 264, 368 Rouss., Dout.); see also Origen: *Contra Cels.*, ed. by H. Chadwick, Cambridge 1965, 349, n. 2. In a gem in the Archaeological Museum of Florence (Inv. no. 15096, which will be published in SGG, II) the leontocephalous god is surrounded by a series of magical names of the planets (Semaia, Kanteu...).

<sup>340</sup> As regards Kronos, *Mythogr. Vat.* III 1,8 (I, 155–6 Bode) expounds the doctrine that the head of Saturn had the attributes of a serpent, a lion or a boar, according to the season.

<sup>341</sup> *Hy. Arch.* (NHC II,4) 94; 99; and especially *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 100, where it is stated that the Archon Jaldabaoth was called "Ariel" by the perfect ones (the

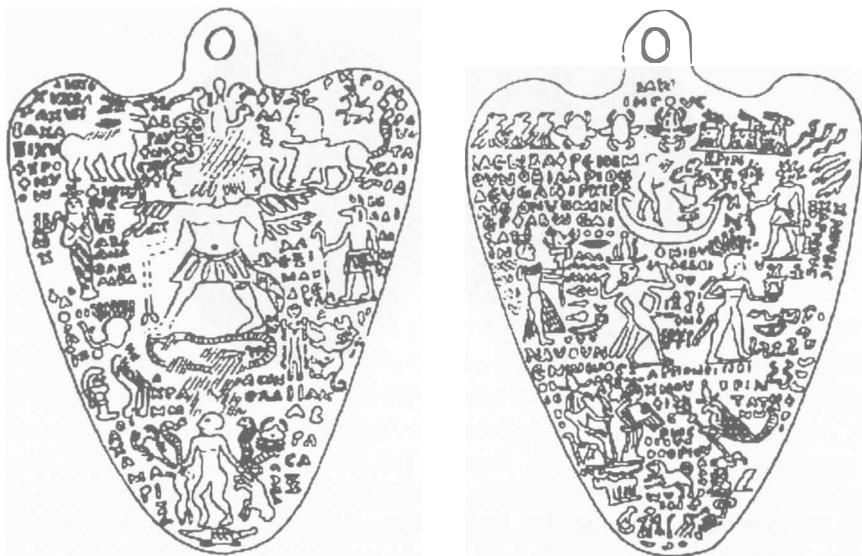


Fig. 2

Gems showing a similar lion-headed god, who on some of them is holding in his hand the serpent Chnoubis in the form of a spinal column, probably derive from the same prototype that inspired the gem showing the leonine Jaldabaoth. There is also a chalcedony showing the lion-headed god accompanied by the inscription  $\chi\nu\omicron\upsilon\beta\iota\varsigma$ <sup>342</sup>. The same inscription accompanies the lion-headed god with the serpent Chnoubis in his hand on an Egyptian bronze amulet (fig. 2) depicting an Egyptian magic pantheon<sup>343</sup>; while another gem<sup>344</sup> bears the inscription  $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\alpha\tau\omicron\nu\tau\omicron\mu\acute{\alpha}\chi\epsilon$ , the Greek translation of

Gnostics) because he looked like a lion. Cf. also Meyer, *Smith, Ancient Christian Magic* (n. 183), no. 70, line 89: Jesus, issued from the father, whose front side is a lion: no. 118: Petbe, who is in the abyss, has a lion's face. In the Apocalypse (10, 1–2) there is a description of an angel with enormous legs of fire and a lion's voice.

<sup>342</sup> E. Zierlein-Diehl, *Glaspasten im Martin-von-Wagner-Museum der Universität Würzburg*, I, Munich 1986, 278, no. 854; the god is holding ears of corn in his hand; probably this is the same engraving or a very similar one to that described by C. Cavedoni, *Dichiarazione di due gemme incise provenienti dalle parti di Reggio, l'una ortodossa, l'altra gnostica*, Modena 1852, 7–11 (found in 1849 in the villa at Cogento, in the Reggio countryside, 11 miles from Reggio and 16 from Modena); cf. *Cat. of the Coll. of Ant. Gems formed by James 9th Earl of Southesk K. T.*, ed. by H. Carnegie, I, London 1908, no. 52.

<sup>343</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Amulets*, London 1914, 30.

<sup>344</sup> King, *Gnostics* (n. 1), plate L, 2.



Fig. 3

the position held by an officer of the Jewish-Hellenic army<sup>345</sup>; and another<sup>346</sup> has the inscription Σαβᾶὼ Φοῖν Ἰάω. Within this iconographic category is a series with a prayer to Seth and, it would seem, Mithras, requesting protection for oneself and one's family<sup>347</sup>; in such invocations the abbreviation *χε*, i. e. Κύριε ("O Lord"), probably indicates Judaic or Christian influence<sup>348</sup>. Another series shows the lion-headed god with six rays or flames emanating from his sides, lifting up a tablet (interpreted as the Mosaic law given to Moses on Sinai) with the legend Ἰάω accompanied by inscriptions on the reverse side urging the stomach to digest<sup>349</sup>; and there is also a series of numerous gems (fig. 3) showing the lion-headed god in an Egyptian kilt,

<sup>345</sup> Jos., AJ XII, 339; cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 169; A. Mastrocinque, *Studies in Gnostic Gems: The Gem of Judah*, JSJ 33/2, 2002, 164–170.

<sup>346</sup> G. Minervini, *Poche osservazioni intorno ad una pietra Basilidiana*, *Bullettino Archeologico Napoletano* 5, 1857, 90.

<sup>347</sup> Cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), 37–38.

<sup>348</sup> Cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 292.

<sup>349</sup> Bonner, *Amulets chiefly in the British Museum* (n. 297), 332, no. 44: στόμαχε πέπτε. Cf. SGG, I, 193. The elongated shape of these gems suggests they were produced in Syria and neighbouring areas, where medical and protective gems of the same shape were produced, showing a reaper or Solomon on horseback. M. Smith, *Old Testament Motifs in the Iconography of the British Museum's Magical Gems*, in: *Coins, Culture, and History in the Ancient World. Numismatic and other Studies in honor of Bluma L. Trell*, Detroit 1981, 192–3, believes that the figure lifting up the tablet is in fact Moses himself, who on a gem in the British Museum is shown with two small figures who are feasting and dancing; however, on this gem this figure has a rooster's head, exactly like the snake-footed rooster, which suggests that it is an angelic manifestation; the process of transfiguration whereby the flesh becomes "flaming torches" is known to Hebrew mysticism of the Imperial Age: G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1941, 67.

wielding Egyptian-style symbols, as well as a rod with a serpent – sometimes with a lion’s head<sup>350</sup> – entwined round it.

Other gems showing the lion-headed warrior god identify him with Judah, founder of the Jewish tribe of the same name, famed for being an indomitable warrior<sup>351</sup>.

On a gem found at Sakkara and conserved in New York<sup>352</sup>, the leontocephalous divinity is accompanied by an inscription identifying him with the god of Leontopolis, lord of thunder, lightning and wind, whose names are Miôs, Miôsi, Armîôs, Ousirmiôs, Phrê, Simiephe, Phnouto, Phôs, Pyr and Phlox. This is the lion-headed or leontomorphic god Mios of Leontopolis, identified with Rê (in the form Phrê), Horus (in the form Harmiôs), Osiris (in the form Ousirmiôs), and described as Great God (in the form Phnouto), light and fire (Phôs, Pyr and Phlox<sup>353</sup>). This gem is also linked to those requesting protection for oneself and one’s family, because the inscription ends with an invocation by one Ammonius for the god’s grace, using the same verb ἐλεεῖν, “have mercy”, “be benevolent”. Given that from the 2nd century BC until the 1st century AD, not only the cult of the leonine sun-god Mios and the leonine goddess Bastet but also that of the Hebrew god flourished at Leontopolis, the figure of the lion-headed sun-god probably represented a number of deities at the same time: the leontocephalous Mios, Horus, Osiris, who were solar deities, and Yahweh, who was lord of thunder, lightning and wind<sup>354</sup>.

<sup>350</sup> On the various iconographies of the leontocephalous god cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 152. The gem in fig. 3 is published by S. Michel, *Bunte Steine – Dunkle Bilder: “Magische Gemmen”*, Freiburg 2001, 58, plate 9, 54. In PGM IV, 2006–2125 there is an instruction to draw a similar god; the prescription is in a letter from the Thessalian magus Pitys to King Ostanes; in lines 2124–5 the magus orders that Osiris be depicted “as he is shown by the Egyptians”, which proves that the writings of Pitys did not date back to an Egyptian magus (cf. E. N. O’Neil, in: GMPT, 75).

<sup>351</sup> A. Mastrocinque, *Studies in Gnostic Gems: The Gem of Judah*, JSJ 33/2, 2002, 164–170.

<sup>352</sup> P. Perdrizet, *Antiquités de Léontopolis*, MMAIBL 25, 1921–22, 359 and 357, fig. 2; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 183–5.

<sup>353</sup> In the cosmogony of Philo of Byblos (FGH 790, F 2, 9), these were the names of the three mortals born of Aîôn and Protogonos, for whom the mountains Casios, Libanos, Antilibanos, and Brathû (Tabor) were named (cf. O. Eissfeld, *Der Gott des Tabor und seine Verbreitung*, ARW 31, 1934, 14–41). In Gen. 15,17 God appeared to Abraham as a tongue of fire: φλόξ and πῦρ.

<sup>354</sup> Cf. Gen. 7–9 (the Flood); Ex. 9,22–25 (the plague of hail); Ps. 77, 17–19; Jer. 10,13. It has occasionally been noted that another lion-headed god, Apedemak, was worshipped at Meroe during the Hellenistic-Roman era (see: L. Žabkar, *Apedemak, Lion God of Meroe*, Warminster 1975), who could also be identified with the deity on Gnostic gems; cf. O. Neverov, *Le thème égyptien dans les amulettes magiques de l’époque d’Empire Romain*, in: *L’Egitto in Italia dall’antichità al Medioevo. Atti del III congr.*

Moreover, the temple of Yahweh at Leontopolis stood on the site of the ruins of the ancient temple of “the fierce Bubastis”<sup>355</sup>, i. e. the goddess Bastet (=Sekhmet), who was identified with Artemis<sup>356</sup>.

One certain piece of evidence is the gem showing the leontocephalous god named as Ἰαλδαβαῶθ Ἰαριήλ. It is equally certain that in Gnostic tradition Jaldabaoth is a leonine god. In literature he is evil, but in amulets he can only be a good god, since he helps those who invoke him. G. Scholem argued that in the repertoire of magic handed down in papyri, gems and lamellae Jaldabaoth’s name appears only on two occasions. He concludes from this that the name was basically unconnected to the world of magic<sup>357</sup>, and that Origen<sup>358</sup> was incorrect in asserting that the name Jaldabaoth was derived from magical tradition. In actual fact, this is not true at all. A fragment of the great magical papyrus in Paris, strongly influenced by Hebraic elements<sup>359</sup>, contains an invocation to Ἰαλδαζαω, which states that Sophia, referring to the supreme god, “said that” Ialdazao “is as strong as he is”, i. e. Ialdazao is equal to the supreme god. In *PGMI*, 195–9; 203 and IV, 1095 Ἰαλδαζαω is the name given to the creator surrounded by angels. In *PGM XIII*, 971 the theonym Ἀλδαζαω is taken from one of the books of Moses.

The form Jaldabaoth recurs on a magic gem in the sequence Μαχειου Σαβαῶθ οπιμηωροβαλζηησ...Ἰαλδαβαῶθ...Μιχαήλ...Αβρασαξ Σουρειήλ Ἰαχω διαφύλ[αξον]... Κορνοφίκι[ον *sive* αν]. One gem (fig. 4), of similar design, produced by the same gem engraver, invokes Σαβαῶθ Βῆλ Βᾶλ Ὀρωμάζης Σαβαῶθ Μιχαήλ Γαβριήλ Νεοριήλ Αβραξ Αμνη (perhaps: ἀμὴν) διαφύλαξον Ἀλέξανδρον<sup>360</sup>. So those who invoked Jaldabaoth in magical incantations also prayed to Oromazes, who was the Persian god Ahura Mazda. A gold leaf amulet from the late 2nd century AD has recently been published. It was found in a man’s tomb at S. Giorgio, near

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Intern. Roma 1995, Rome 1998, 470. I do not rule out the possibility that the lion-headed serpents mentioned in note 331 represent Apedemak.

<sup>355</sup> Jos., *AJ XIII* 62–73. Cf. M. Delcor, *Le temple d’Onias en Egypte*, *RB* 75, 1968, 188–203.

<sup>356</sup> Her. II 137. Identification with Isis-Aphrodite: Cat. Southesk (n. 297), 155 no. 27.

<sup>357</sup> G. Scholem, Jaldabaoth reconsidered, in: *Mélanges d’histoire des religions offerts à H.-Ch. Puech*, Paris 1974, 405–21, esp. 406; the two recurrences are in *PGM IV*, 1195 and on the gem published by Bonner, *An Amulet of the Ophite Gnostics* (n. 338), 43–46.

<sup>358</sup> Cels. VI 32 (II, 102 Koet.).

<sup>359</sup> *PGM IV*, 1167–1226.

<sup>360</sup> On the two gems: G. Bevilacqua, *Antiche iscrizioni augurali e magiche dai codici di Girolamo Amati*, Rome 1991, 26–7.



Fig. 4

Arco (in the Trentino region, just north of Lake Garda<sup>361</sup>). It opens with the following series of theonyms invoking protection: ἄγιε Πρωτογενέτωρ Εἰαλδαλξαοῦ Λαθαμιαχωρι Ξαηκῶ Ἰάω... Eialdalxaob (pronounced Ialdalxaob<sup>362</sup>) is obviously Jaldabaoth, here referred to as Protogenetor – the first parent<sup>363</sup>, and distinct from Iao. The author of the formula invoked Iao and the whole series of magical theonyms for help against epilepsy, demonic apparitions and other evils. Jaldabaoth here is described as *hagios* (holy). This type of amulet proves beyond any doubt that there were magi who had some contact with Gnosticism and prayed to Jaldabaoth.

On some magic gems (*SGG*, I, 128) Ἰαλδαθαίων, at the start of a magic *logos*, accompanies the image of the solar scarab<sup>364</sup>. The name Jaldabaim (a royal plural), composed by analogy with Elohim, has the numerical value 99, like Ἀμήν<sup>365</sup>. On two gems the theonym Ἄλδαβαῖμι accompanies the image

<sup>361</sup> E. Cavada, G. Paci, Un amuleto contro l'epilessia, *Archeo Alp. Archeologia delle Alpi* 6, 2002, 189–215, esp. 202.

<sup>362</sup> The final -b could also be an erroneous transcription of -th. It is interesting to note that the deceased who wore the amulet had a ring on his finger with an onyx showing Hermes, indicating that he believed in pagan gods, even if he used Gnostic, or Gnostic-inspired, magic formulae.

<sup>363</sup> *Protogenetor*, *zōpoioun* and other names for the god of generation and life were given both to the Zeus of Stoic theology and to the Hebrew god; cf. E. Norden, *Jahve und Moses in hellenistischer Theologie*, in: *Kleine Schriften zum klassischen Altertum*, Berlin 1966, 283.

<sup>364</sup> Cf. for instance IGLS IV, 1292 = R. Mouterde, *Objets magiques. Recueil S. Ayzav*, MFOB 25, 1942–43, 109, no. 10; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 268, no. 93 and pl. IV; H. Philipp, *Mira et Magica: Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der staatlichen Museen*, Mainz, 1986, no. 118; S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum*, ed. by P. und H. Zazoff, London 2001, no. 101.

<sup>365</sup> C. Bonner, *The Numerical Value of a Magical Formula*, *JEA* 16, 1930, 9.

of Sarapis<sup>366</sup>. The forms Ἄλδαβαεῖμ Ἄλδαβιαεῖμ recur in *PGM XIII*, 462; 596, where they indicate the creator. Ἄλδαβαῶθ is the form that recurs in the *Apocryphon of John*. In *PGM XIII*, 84 and 152–3, it is stated that the Egyptian name for the sun is Ἄλδαβιαῖμ, corresponding to Αβρασαξ.

Modern scholars trying to establish the etymology of Jaldabaoth have always assumed that he was a malevolent god, and therefore have confined their searches to the “vocabulary of evil”<sup>367</sup>.

Attested variations prove that the final part of the name could have different Hebrew theonymic endings: -oth, as in Sabaoth, or -im, as in Elohim. There is stronger evidence for the beginning of the name, Iald-, in which Gnostics recognized the Semitic term *yeled*, *yalda*, “young”, “child”, “son”<sup>368</sup>. This must have been the reason why in Egyptian circles he was identified with Harpocrates, the child sun-god, whose name means “Horus the child”, “Horus the son”<sup>369</sup>. Jaldabaoth was “the Son”, the “young god”, the first manifestation of the unknowable, nameless, formless god, and was the first parent, the creator. An iconography of a lion-headed Harpocrates was also created (fig. 5), further underlining that the two were the same<sup>370</sup>.

The iconography we have identified shows Jaldabaoth as a young warrior. In fact Jewish heresiologists under the Roman Empire opposed the *minim*, the heretics of Judaism, some of whom believed in “two heavenly powers”<sup>371</sup>. Some of the arguments extrapolated by the heretics from the Bible had tended to distinguish a “young” god from an “old” one: one a “warrior”, the other “merciful”. Jaldabaoth was the young god; the warrior god could be

<sup>366</sup> Delatte, *Etudes* (n. 292), 53; Philipp, *Mira et Magica* (n. 364), no. 78; cf. King, *Gnostics* (n. 1), 249.

<sup>367</sup> Collected etymology in Scholem, *Ialdabaoth reconsidered* (n. 357), 405–21, esp. 406.

<sup>368</sup> Scholem, *Ialdabaoth reconsidered* (n. 357), 412–413, based on the Untitled Text (or Origin of the world: NHC II,5). Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203), 79, suggests that Derdekeas, the Saviour in the Paraphrasis of Sem (NHC VII, 1), be interpreted as Aramaic *DRDG*, “son”, “child”.

<sup>369</sup> Egyptian: *hr- p3- hrd: Har-pe chrot*. V. Tran Tam Tinh, B. Jaeger, S. Poulin, *Art. Harpocrates*, LIMC, IV/1, 1988, 415; cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 198–9, which also mentions the form Χράτης of *PGM XII*, 229, possibly a variation of the same word, meaning “son”.

<sup>370</sup> SGG, I, 25.

<sup>371</sup> A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven. Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, SJLA 25, Leiden 1977. On the different social and doctrinal issues that came under the category of *minim* cf. recently L. Vana, *La birkat ha-minim è una preghiera contro i giudeocristiani?*, in: *Verus Israel. Nuove prospettive sul giudeocristianesimo*. *Atti del Coll. Torino 1999*, ed. by G. Filoramo and C. Gianotto, Brescia 2001, 147–189.



Fig. 5

none other than Sabaoth, the god of hosts. The probable switching of names is corroborated by the fact that on gems the lion-headed god could be called either Jaldabaoth or Sabaoth<sup>372</sup>. The speculations of the Jewish heretics had resulted in the creation of two figures, Jaldabaoth and Sabaoth, destined to play a central role in Gnosticism. One was the “young god” or “Son God”, and the other was the “god of hosts”; the various schools of thought exchanged the roles of these two figures, so that the sovereign of the cosmos could be either Jaldabaoth or Sabaoth. The two powers in heaven were the supreme spiritual god and Jaldabaoth, his equal<sup>373</sup> and lord of the cosmos: one eternal, the other young and bellicose; one remote from matter, the other destined to shape matter as the omnipotent sovereign, Pantokrator, and as the lord of generation, Protogenitor.

The lion-headed god<sup>374</sup>, as we have seen, was the god of Leontopolis, a solar deity identified with Egyptian divinities. This leads to the almost inevitable conclusion that Jaldabaoth was the creation of the Jewish priests of the temple of Yahweh at Leontopolis. In this way the clergy were able to explain

<sup>372</sup> For instance, in the gem published by G. Sena Chiesa, *Gemme del Museo Nazionale di Aquileia*, Aquileia 1966, no. 1554, the leontocephalous god is accompanied by the name Sabaoth; in the gems in the Archaeological Museum of Florence, Inv. Nr. 15097, and here, fig. 3 (note 350) the god is accompanied by the name Chnoubis.

<sup>373</sup> As in the *stèle* of the magical papyrus IV, 1167–1226, which we have examined.

<sup>374</sup> The iconography could have been justified, for instance, on the basis of Is. 31,4: “Like the lion and the young lion roaring at his prey.... the Lord of hosts shall come down to fight on mount Zion and on its hill”.

the existence of a second Temple as the result of the Egyptian Hebrews' special devotion to the first manifestation of God in a lion-headed human form; and thus it was that the Hebrew religion practised in the Heliopolitan demos merged with indigenous culture, resulting in identification of the leontocephalous lord of the cosmos with Harpocrates or Sarapis.

### § 24. *The Christianization of Jaldabaoth*

We have seen that several gems show the lion-headed god holding Chnoubis in his hand, and therefore the two figures were often merged into a single doctrinal system. On the one hand, then, we have the lion-headed god Jaldabaoth invoked as sovereign of the cosmos and identified with Harpocrates and other Egyptian supreme deities, and on the other we have the lion-headed Jaldabaoth condemned as ignorant and arrogant in Gnostic texts. Again, on the one hand we have an enormous number of gems showing the lion-headed serpent Chnoubis, who protected his faithful, and on the other Jaldabaoth, the arrogant tyrant of the cosmos, described in the *Apocryphon of John* as a lion-headed serpent surrounded by a cloud of light. To understand these contradictions we have to start a little further back before getting to grips with the problem.

The major innovation made by the Gnostics to the doctrines developed by the Chaldeans and the Jews, who were experts in astrology and Greek philosophy, must have been the emphasis on the Saviour, who at first was probably just the serpent who inspired Gnosis, but later became increasingly identified with the Christ<sup>375</sup>. Perhaps even before resemantization of the serpent, the precursors of the Gnostics had reappraised several Biblical figures such as Enoch, Melchisedech and Seth, crediting them with doctrines at least as important as those ascribed to Abraham and Moses<sup>376</sup>. The claim that the origin of evil lay in the errors of the creator god of the *Bible* could be supported by the long-established tradition that Kronos was the god of

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<sup>375</sup> The existence of pre-Christian Gnosticism, a theory upheld by a number of scholars (cf. note 385), has sometimes been denied; cf. E. M. Yamauchi, *The Apocalypse of Adam, Mithraism and pre-Christian Gnosticism*, in: *Etudes mithriaques. Actes du 2e Congr. int. Téhéran 1975*, Acta Iranica 17, Leiden, Tehran 1978, 553–4; cf. Id., *Pre-Christian Gnosticism. A survey of the proposed evidences*, Grand Rapids 1973. On the secondary introduction of the figure of the Saviour in Gnosticism: Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos* (n. 216), 173–195, esp. 179; on the documentation concerning the saviour in Gnosticism, see: W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King*, Leiden 1967, 6–17.

<sup>376</sup> Cf. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (n. 138).

the sabbath and a maleficent deity<sup>377</sup>. His identification with the Jewish god had been asserted by the pagans, probably even before the destruction of the Temple by Titus, but certainly after that event the negative concept of the Hebrew God was to be affirmed with renewed vigor. This negative connotation was reinforced even more after the brutal repression of the Jews in Egypt and Palestine by Trajan<sup>378</sup> and Hadrian<sup>379</sup>. One of the oldest Gnostic texts, for instance, the *Apocryphon of John*, in which the Hebrew god is an arrogant demon, is believed to have been written in Alexandria around 120 AD<sup>380</sup>. If this is correct, it must not be forgotten that in 115 AD a wide-scale Jewish revolt broke out in Cyrene and then in Egypt and Cyprus, which was so brutally suppressed by Rome that the Jewish population in Egypt was nearly wiped out. More or less contemporaneous to the *Apocryphon of John* is the first fragment of papyrus containing the *Gospel of John* found in Egypt<sup>381</sup>. If

<sup>377</sup> G. Quispel, *The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge*, in: Kyriakon. Festschrift J. Quasten, ed. by P. Granfield and J. A. Jungmann, Münster 1970, 271–6 = *Gnostic Studies*, I (n. 50), 213–20, esp. 214–5, held that the attribution of creation to an angel dated back to the beliefs of the Magharians, a small Hebrew sect known to have existed before 70 AD (of which mention is made by only one author, a 10th century Arab writer), who were intent on explaining why the biblical god was anthropomorphic, and attributed the anthropomorphic form to an angel. Fossum, *The Name of God* (n. 280), notes that in the doctrines of the Samaritans such an angel was present, and was the anthropomorphic representation of God and therefore of the creator, whose name he also bore. This would appear to be the bad angel described by the Gnostics.

<sup>378</sup> Eus., h. e. III 32.7 (II/1, 270 Sch.) traces the origin of Gnostic heresies to the time of this emperor.

<sup>379</sup> Cf. R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and early Christianity*, New York, London 1959, esp. 57; cf. also B. A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, Minneapolis 1990, 147 (which states that after Trajan's repression Judaism was no longer an important religion in Egypt, which is why other religious groups filled in the gap). Among the arguments against Grant's view, it has been objected that Messianic and Apocalyptic Judaism continued even after the destruction of the temple: Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (n. 375), 157–8. How little this historical context is taken into consideration is demonstrated, for example, by J. Helderman, *Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?*, in: *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, Papers read at the eighth Int. Conf. on Patristic Studies, Oxford 1975, ed. by M. Krause, Leiden 1981, 44, who, in an otherwise excellent article, argues that aversion to the Creator was conceived by the Jews in the Hellenistic age, when Alexander's successors had amalgamated the Eastern peoples and turned them into a colourless mass of subjects. But even a superficial acquaintance with the story of the Maccabees and the Hasmonean dynasty shows that the opposite was true: during the Hellenistic period Palestinian Judaism was stronger and more distinctive than ever, and proud of its covenant with the Creator. It was as if the good old days of Esra and Nehemia had returned. This is certainly not a context in which the origin of aversion to the Hebrew god should be sought.

<sup>380</sup> Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos* (n. 216), 173–195, esp. 174.

<sup>381</sup> P. Rylands; cf. H. Idris Bell, *Evidences of Christianity in Egypt during the Roman Period*, HThR 37, 1944, 185–208. Traces of Christianity in private correspondence can be

Judaism seems to have been eradicated from Egypt under the rule of Hadrian, from then on Christianity began to take firmer root<sup>382</sup>. The evil nature of the Hebrew god could be used to explain the defeat of the Jews and to provide a new interpretation of history, both human and divine<sup>383</sup>. Furthermore, being a Christian or, even better, a member of the Gnostic-type Christian sects, made it possible to dissociate oneself from the responsibilities of the Jewish rebels. Heterodox forms of Judaism could be tolerated or even respected by the Romans, in so far as they renounced the exclusive covenant with the Jewish god and embraced the cult of an ecumenical god. But this meant placing the god of the Bible on a different footing vis-à-vis humankind. The case of the magus who performed his miracles before Vespasian<sup>384</sup> is probably a good example: in order to win the favour of the pagan emperor, he trampled on Hebrew Law, and therefore on the covenant with the Hebrew god, which forbade any recourse to magic.

Major contributions by Quispel, Stroumsa, Segal, Fossum and other scholars have proved that many elements central to Gnosticism date back to the Hellenistic era and to heterodox Judaic movements<sup>385</sup> and that, therefore,

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found only from the early 3rd century AD: M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II-IV*, Florence 1968.

<sup>382</sup> After the repression of the Bar Kokhba revolt and the banishment of all Jews from Jerusalem, there were no more circumcized bishops in the holy city; bishops were chosen from among the Gentiles: Eus., h. e. IV 6,4 (II/1, 308 Sch.).

<sup>383</sup> Gnosticism was by no means born of the shattered hopes of Messianic Judaism (on this question, see: Yamauchi, *Jewish Gnosticism?*, in: *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religion* presented to G. Quispel, EPRO 91, Leiden 1981, 491), because at the time schools of thought close to Gnosis were already in existence. C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, London 1979, has rightly said that the repression of Judaism in Egypt constitutes a hiatus in every possible historical reconstruction of Gnosticism; cf. also A. H. B. Logan, *Gnosticism*, in: *The Early Christian World*, ed. by Ph.F. Esler, II, London, New York 2000, 922-3. R. McL. Wilson, *Jewish Gnosis and Gnostic Origins. A Survey*, HUCA 45, 1974, 177-190, maintains that before the 2nd century the Gnostics were not yet organized; and this is true: the first great Gnostic ecclesiastical organizations were those of Marcion and Valentinus, who came from the Catholic Church and were a cause of serious concern to the Church Fathers.

<sup>384</sup> Jos., AJ VIII 46-48. On the hostility of Basilides towards the Jews: Iren., haer. I 24.3-6 (SC 264, 324-330 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>385</sup> Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (n. 138), and E. Peterson, in his article *Gnosi for the EC VI*, 1951, 876-882, esp. 880-1, were the first to point out the Jewish roots of Gnosticism. Against the theory of the anti-Semitic - i.e. anti-Jewish - nature of Gnosticism, held by H. Jonas, Response to G. Quispel's "Gnosticism and the New Testament", in: *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. by J.Ph. Hyatt, Nashville, New York 1965, 279-93, cf. G. Quispel, *The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge* (n. 377), 271-6 = *Gnostic Studies*, I (n. 50), esp. 213. W. Ullmann, *Apokalyptik und Magie im gnostischen Mythos*, in: *Altes Testament - Frühjudentum und Gnosis, Neue Studien zu "Gnosis und Bibel"*, ed. by K.W. Tröger, Gütersloh 1980, 170, notes that the Christian

Gnosticism (the term is used reservedly) is to be considered as originally being a Jewish, not a Christian, heresy. One absolutely fundamental aspect of Gnosticism, the evil nature of the biblical Creator, is more conspicuous after the destruction of the Temple and, perhaps even more so, after repression by Trajan and Hadrian. Tertullian<sup>386</sup> states, perhaps not very accurately, that Marcion (who left the broader Catholic church in 144 AD) was the first to assert that the good god is different from the creator; Eusebius<sup>387</sup> emphasizes more generally that there was a burgeoning of heresies at the time of Hadrian, when magi and charlatans rubbed shoulders with Christians. Modern scholars<sup>388</sup> have correctly pointed out that, before Marcion and the preachings of the founders of Gnostic schools during the first half of the 2nd century AD (Saturninus, Basilides, Valentinus ...), among heterodox Jews, particularly Samaritans, there was a widely held belief that creation was the work of one or more angels. Even Cerinthus was apparently convinced that the Hebrew god was an angel<sup>389</sup>. But this in itself did not imply that the biblical creator was an evil god; it simply meant that he was an inferior deity. The wickedness of the creator angel could be corroborated by identifying him with the planetary god Saturn. Tacitus, writing at the time of Trajan, seems to take this as a certain fact<sup>390</sup>. Saturn, as well as being the god of the maleficent planet, was also, in the Greek myth, the father of the chief deity; and Jaldabaoth, who was perceived in the same way, was identified with Saturn, both in the *Apocryphon of John* and in the account given by Celsus, who, probably at the time of Marcus Aurelius, described the beliefs of certain Gnostic Christian sects.

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heresiologists treated Gnosticism as a Christian heresy because they were concerned with refuting specific and important Christian Gnostic doctrines (Justin and Tertullian versus Marcion; Irenaeus, Clement Alexandrine and Origen versus Valentinus); however they did occasionally imply that Gnosticism was of non-Christian origin (Iren., haer. I 23–30, SC 264, 312–390 Rouss., Dout.; Hipp., haer. V 1–6; 77 Wend.; Orig., Cels. V 62; VI 28 and 30; II 65 and 98–100 Koet.).

<sup>386</sup> Tert., de praescr. 34 (SC 46, 135 Refoulé, de Labriolle).

<sup>387</sup> h. e. IV 7, 1–2 (II/1, 308 Sch.).

<sup>388</sup> For instance Quispel, *The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge* (n. 377); Fossum, *The Name of God* (n. 280).

<sup>389</sup> Iren., haer. I 26, 1 (SC 264, 344 Rouss., Dout.); Theod. bar Konai, *Lib. sch.* XI 23 (225 Hes., Dr.); cf. Quispel, *The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge*, in: *Gnostic Studies*, I (n. 50), 217.

<sup>390</sup> Just., II apol. 12 (214 Wartelle) asserts that the Romans accused the Christians of human sacrifice during the “mysteries of Saturn”, clearly because the Romans identified Yahweh with Saturn, to whom, in Africa in particular, human beings had been sacrificed. On the importance of the identification of Saturn with Yahweh, see: A. Barb, *St. Zacharias the Prophet and Martyr*, *JWCI* 11, 1948, 64–5.

At some point the identification of the creator with Saturn, typical of paganism, and his identification with an angel, typical of heretical Judaism, must have reinforced the negative view of the creator as a maleficent divinity. But these were probably not the most important reasons for the redefinition of two divine figures such as the serpent and the creator. And this brings us back to the lion-headed Jaldabaoth and the serpent Chnoubis. Condemnation of the biblical creator spread as Gnosticism became Christianized. The author of the *Apocryphon of John*, Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion were inspired by Christianity, albeit in different ways. Quispel and Stroumsa reject the idea that the origins of Gnosticism lay in strong anti-Jewish feeling, because its roots were in the thinking of the Jews themselves. But when the early 2nd century charismatic Gnostic texts appeared, condemning the creator, they were in the form of *Gospels* or of the revelations of Christ, as in the case of the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel* according to Basilides and the philological purges conducted by Marcion, who expurgated all allusions to the Hebrew creator from evangelical texts. Condemnation of the creator was part of the Christianization of Gnostic thinking. The results varied according to the religious and doctrinal terrain where the evangelical message took root. The author of the *Apocryphon of John*, Basilides and other 2nd century founders of Gnostic schools came from the substratum of Gnosticism, with all its characteristic figures such as Sophia, Anthropos, Abrasax...; Valentinus and Marcion came from a Catholic Christian substratum but adhered, in different ways, to the Gnostic doctrinal repertoire. As we shall see, identification of the biblical creator with the Egyptian creator Chnoumis/Chnoubis is an example of this: after the repression of Egyptian Judaism, around 120 AD, the *Apocryphon of John* condemned the biblical creator, identifying him with the Egyptian divinity Chnoumis/Chnoubis, whose cult, however, continued for a long time, but only outside Christianity. In the late 1st century AD the Christian Apostles found Jews in Egypt who had long been followers of the Leontopolitan heresy, with its central figure Jaldabaoth, the Son, the manifestation of the young god. As it is told in the story of Thomas, they also came across Jews who believed that the lion-headed serpent, the god of the Nile flood, was the manifestation of the creator. Acceptance of the Gospel message coincided with the rejection and demonization of Jaldabaoth and Chnoubis. The roles of Jaldabaoth the Son and heavenly Anthropos and Chnoubis the creator who ruled the waters were reversed, and they became Jaldabaoth the arrogant creator and Chnoubis his son, the serpent-instructor. In the *Apocryphon of John* Jaldabaoth looks like Chnoubis, and the various Gnostic sects took these few elements inherited from Egyptian Hebraism and reinterpreted by Christianity and used them in a different way. Who-

ever embraced Christianity, in fact, could no longer accept that god's Son was Jaldabaoth, whose temple had been closed by Vespasian, and could not accept worship of a snake, an animal that the Christians inevitably associated with the devil.

Christians were convinced of the tyranny and wickedness of the demons who ruled the world, the firmament and destiny<sup>391</sup>. These demons were identified with pagan gods. The idea of the great cosmic serpent that devoured the damned and kept them inside its body was common to both Gnostics<sup>392</sup> and orthodox Christians<sup>393</sup>. Although the two branches of doctrine differed in their perception of the creator, both orthodox and Gnostic Christians shared a pessimistic view of a material world ruled by demons, and this belief separated them from the pagans. It is primarily in the Christianization of Hellenistic Judaic Gnosis, therefore, that the origin of the condemnation of the creator is to be sought. And this process took place principally in Egypt. The difference in reaction to Christianization is explained by the fact that pagans who converted to Christianity had no reason to condemn the creator, whereas the heretical Egyptian Jews and their followers had already distanced themselves from Palestinian Judaism. Christianity entailed repudiation of their supreme god, Jaldabaoth, the lion-headed Son of God, and of his minister, the lion-headed serpent, and at the same emphasized the importance of the unknowable god, who in Egypt tended, if anything, to be identified with Osiris and Sarapis. Egyptian Gnostic Christianity continued to apply the theory of the successive emanations of God and to indulge in mythological speculation. Consequently the role formerly played by Jaldabaoth was now assigned to Sabaoth, the repentant Archon, or to Christ, identified with the Dragon, and each sect proposed its own solution. But the persistence of the cult of the

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<sup>391</sup> Especially Tat., orat. 9 (16–18 Whittaker); but also Paul., Eph. 2,2: “in time past you walked in the manner of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, that spirit that now works in rebellious men”; 6,12: “for we wrestle not against creatures made of flesh and blood, but against Principalities and Powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”. According to the theory that had taken firm hold, going back to the Book of Enoch, the wicked angels who had come down to earth, lured by women, and the children born of their union, had continued to spread idolatry, astrology and magic; cf. esp. Just., 1 apol. 14,2; 18,2–5; 26,2 and 4; 56,1; 11 apol. 5,2–4 (114; 122; 130–1; 176; 202–4 Wartelle); Athenag., leg. 24–25 (Ante-Nicene Fathers, II, ed. by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, Peabody/Mass. 1885 = 1995, 141–2); Tert., De idolatria IX 1–2 (CSEL 20, 38 Reifferscheid, Wissowa).

<sup>392</sup> Pistis Sophia III 126 (317–9 Schmidt, Macdermot): the external darkness was a great dragon with its tail in its mouth, surrounding the world; inside it were various rooms where the damned were punished.

<sup>393</sup> Acta martyr. Lugdun. 2,6 (Atti e passioni dei martiri, ed. by A.A.R. Bastiaensen et alii, Milan 1987, 94).

lion-headed Jaldabaoth and the serpent Chnoubis shows that Christianization did not lead to the elimination or general condemnation of these two figures: on the contrary, for a long time they were cult objects, venerated by Jewish heretics and their followers, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

§ 25. Gnostic protest or Christian protest?

The conclusion we have reached confirms once again the validity of Kurt Rudolph’s outline of the historical development and doctrinal organization of Gnosis<sup>394</sup>, reproduced in fig. 6.

Demonization of the leontocephalous serpent, identified with the biblical creator, concerns only certain branches of Gnostic doctrine and should be seen in relation to the Christianization process, since Christian preachers were battling against gods with the form of a snake, particularly those worshipped by Jews. In § 5 we have seen, moreover, that the *Acts of John*<sup>395</sup> and the *Acts of Peter*<sup>396</sup> described Palestinian Jews as governed by the diabolical snake.

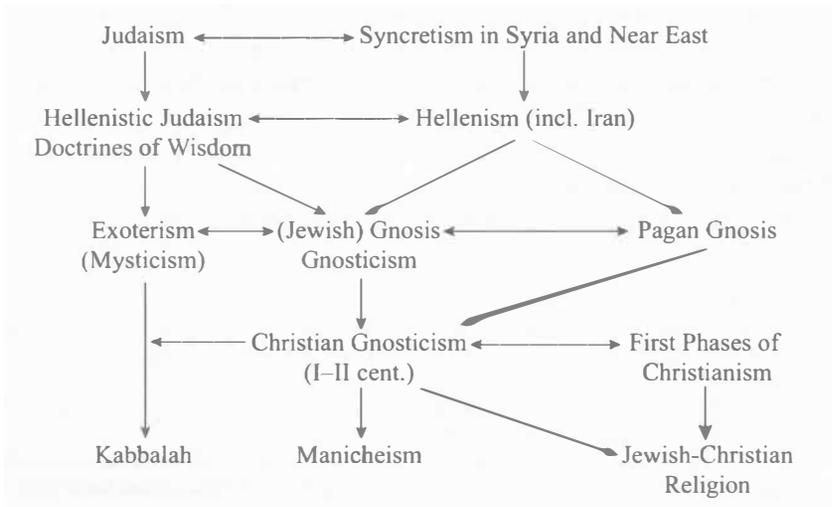


Fig. 6

<sup>394</sup> Randerscheinungen, Kairos 9, 1967, 105–122, esp. 122.

<sup>395</sup> 94 (II/1, 197 Lip., Bonn.).

<sup>396</sup> 8 (I, 55 Lip., Bonn.). On the importance of these two excerpts, see: J.-D. Kaestli, L’interprétation du serpent de Genèse 3 dans quelques textes gnostiques et la question de la gnose “ophite”, in: Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique (n. 40), 116–7.

Note that magical texts, on both gems and papyri, invoke the protection of Jaldabaoth in a Hebraizing doctrinal context devoid of any trace of Christianity<sup>397</sup>. It was therefore among Gnostic Christians that the condemnation of Jaldabaoth and the serpent Chnoubis, the two guises assumed by the biblical creator, took place and then developed. Jaldabaoth and the serpent Chnoubis were benevolent towards their faithful before Christianization and remained so later towards those who continued to adhere to forms of what we could arbitrarily refer to as non-Christian Gnosticism.

We cannot, therefore, agree with the widely held theory that Gnosticism, as such, was a form of cultural, religious and political protest, or an actual repudiation of nature and a total rejection of the world<sup>398</sup>. It is not clear against whom the protest is supposed to have been directed (against the Jews? the Romans? the Greeks?), or why Gnostic sects were not present during historically documented protests (under Vespasian, Trajan and Hadrian), or why there is never any mention in Gnostic books of any kind of target<sup>399</sup> (apart from the creator and his children) of this hypothetical protest. Those who wished to renounce the world<sup>400</sup> and what was called the *saeculum* or *aiōn* were, if anything, Christian monks, particularly Egyptian monks, or followers of Montanus and Marcion (who wished to be considered more as a Christian than as a Gnostic thinker). It is among Christians, rather, that protest should be sought: against idolatry, mythology, heresy, Gnosis, Judaism, magic, male-oriented culture, sex, certain emperors, the cult of emperor and enlistment in the Roman legions. It was Christianity that taught that the kingdom of Christ was not of this world, and that the city of God would replace the city built by man. Because of that the persecutions targeted Catholic Christians<sup>401</sup>. There are no traces of martyrdom ideology in Gnos-

<sup>397</sup> Cf. above, § 23.

<sup>398</sup> On these theories, held mainly by Hans Jonas (the anticosmic view) and Kurt Rudolph (the "Protest Exegesis"), cf. Allen Williams, Rethinking "Gnosticism" (n. 3), chapters III and V.

<sup>399</sup> On this lack of mention, see: K. Rudolph, Zur Soziologie, sozialen Verortung und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike, Kairos 19, 1977, 39.

<sup>400</sup> Julian the Apostate, contra Heracleium 224 A–C speaks of those who renounce the world calling them *apotaktites*, i. e. *renuntiantes*, i. e. certain Christians (and the Cynics). There is no mention of Gnostics.

<sup>401</sup> To these should be added the Montanists and some Marcionites; cf. W. H. Frend, The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire, JEH 5, 1954, 25–37; Id., Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabee to Donatus, Grand Rapids 1981, 11; 245–6; 353–6. It is interesting to note that, in his exhortations against the heresies of Asia Minor, Bishop Ignatius insisted on the ideology of martyrdom. Cf. Tertullian's opposition, especially in the Scorpiace, between Valentinians or other heretics and Catholic Christian martyrs.

ticism. It was St Paul<sup>402</sup> who condemned the Archons of this world (*aiôn*), who enslaved humankind, and also called them *stoicheia tou kosmou* (the elementary powers of the universe). The anti-cosmic attitude discussed by H. Jonas applies to Christianity<sup>403</sup>, and concerns Gnosticism only in so far as it was part of Christianity. However, anyone wishing to reconcile Judaism and paganism inevitably came into contact with some form of idolatrous religious practice that venerated Harpocrates, Apollo, Attis or other deities as manifestations of God, or as pagan precursors and prefigurations of Gnostic truths. And this applies most of all to the oldest forms of Gnosticism, Sethian or Ophitic, and less to the Valentinian branch, which comes from Christianity, and not from heretical Judaism. This is above all true of non-Christian Egyptian Gnosis, which resisted the allure of Christianity and continued to assimilate Egyptian culture. To a certain extent, Hermetism is also part of this phenomenon. Take, for example, the *Poimandres*<sup>404</sup>.

Unlike a Christian, a Gnostic – even a Christian Gnostic – could very well have adopted the cult of the sun, which was placed at the centre of the Roman pantheon by Aurelian, or even the doctrines in the *Discourse on Helios* by Julian the Apostate<sup>405</sup>, as is proved by the gnosticizing (but never Christian) Hermetic treatises inspired by similar concepts. No polemical *vis* emerges from Gnostic writings, which are comparable to the works of Zoroaster or of astrologists. Their aim was to avoid the evil influences of the Demiurge and his Archons, namely the planets and the signs of the Zodiac, thanks to the beneficent influence of solar and instructor divinities.

To the extent that it was Christian, Gnosticism was characterized by a pessimistic view of a world dominated by demons, a yearning for the reign of the spirit, and protest. From this perspective it is easier to clarify the position of Marcion. It is futile to argue over whether or not he was a Gnostic. The only link between his doctrine and Gnosticism is the condemnation of the Biblical creator.

<sup>402</sup> 1Cor. 2,6–8; Gal. 4,3,8–10; Col. 2,8–15,20.

<sup>403</sup> M. Waldstein, Hans Jonas' Construct "Gnosticism": Analysis and Critique, JECS 8, 2000, 341–372, esp. 361, maintains that the gnostic anti-cosmic view described by Jonas was influenced by Heidegger.

<sup>404</sup> On this approach to the problem cf. M. Simonetti, Alcune riflessioni sul rapporto tra gnosticismo e cristianesimo, VetChr 28, 1991, 340–1.

<sup>405</sup> In addition to the notion of one supreme, incorporeal God, of which Helios (like the Anthropos) is the manifestation, a Gnostic would have found (in ch. 17) a familiar doctrine: the generative principle coming from the emanation of light. In his speech to the Mother of the Gods Julian also expounds a theory on the fall of Attis, which led to excessive procreation. This has clear similarities to Gnostic doctrines. On the Gnostic theme of the serpent-instructor in Julian's *Contra Galilaeos*, see: N. Brox, Gnostische Argumente bei Julianus Apostata, JAC 10, 1967, 181–6.

Focusing on this aspect also enables us to understand why the heresiologists did not address non-Christian heresies akin to Gnosis, which we know of, albeit in a fragmentary way, from magical papyri, gems and lamellae. If the number of these documents is anything to go by, it was a major phenomenon. But heresiologists were interested in Christian heresies; they were not interested in Jewish heresies, not even of the kind that reconciled paganism and Judaism. This is why we must avoid the temptation to see the heresies refuted by Irenaeus within an isolated Christian context, because they were very closely allied to older Jewish heresies of the same kind. Whether we are referring to a Gnostic phenomenon, to pre-Christian Gnosticism, or to Jewish heresies that separate a supreme god from the creator, it is only the names that are different; the essentials are the same.

### § 26. *The divine brain*

It is not easy to understand the thought processes that led to the belief that the Gnostic creator god had the form of the Decan of Leo. However, there is a passage in the treatise known as *Origin of the world* in the Nag Hammadi library that sheds some light on Gnostic reasoning in this area. On p. 119 there is a description of the creation of man by seven Archons, each of whom was responsible for creating individual parts. Of Jaldabaoth, their chief, who corresponds to the biblical god, it states: “their chief formed the brain and the medulla”. We then move on to a passage from Hippolytus on the doctrine of the Peratae Gnostics<sup>406</sup>, explaining the theory that Jesus Christ, the Logos, was a serpent, who could be seen in the Dragon polar constellation and had manifested himself on several occasions on earth. The Peratae recognized the existence of three entities: the Father, the Son and Matter. In the human microcosm, the Father, or spirit, was represented by the brain, the Son by the spinal column with the cerebellum, and Matter by semen, which, drawing inspiration from the brain, generated offspring through the movement of the spinal column<sup>407</sup>. Hippolytus<sup>408</sup>, referring to the doctrines of Simon and Valentinus, says that much had been written about the nature of the human brain. It was believed to have a snake’s head, in which the spirit resided.

<sup>406</sup> Hipp., haer. V 17–19 (114–121 Wend.).

<sup>407</sup> Cf. F. Michelini Tocci, *La cosmogonia dei Perati e il gregge di Giacobbe* (e Dante), in: *Omaggio a Piero Treves*, ed. by A. Mastrocinque, Padua 1983, 249–60.

<sup>408</sup> haer. IV 51, 14 (76 Wend.); these are doctrines that Irenaeus does not examine and were probably attributed to Simon because he increasingly came to symbolize the origin of all forms of Gnosticism.

The spirit was immobile inside the cranium, and spread to the spinal cord through the pineal body. By the same path, semen reached the genital organs. It is highly unlikely that similar doctrines were correctly ascribed to Simon Magus<sup>409</sup>, because Hippolytus knew that Simon's *Megale Apophasis* was a work that had been attributed to him at a later date<sup>410</sup>. The fact that Simon and Valentinus are mentioned does, however, suggest that works by their school had addressed this issue.

The starting point for astrological and physiological speculation of this kind was Plato's *Timaeus*<sup>411</sup>, which describes the shape and function of the brain, the medulla and sperm, as intended by the creator, who placed the divine soul in the encephalon and the mortal soul in the medulla<sup>412</sup>.

A conflation of *Genesis* and *Timaeus* resulted in a definition of the divinity as a being in the form of a serpent with a large head, like a lion's. We also find traces of this type of speculation in Ophitic gnosis, which held that Jaldabaoth had generated Nous in the form of a serpent, similar to the coils of the brain<sup>413</sup>. As already stated, the Sethians also maintained that the great sea serpent was the father of Nous<sup>414</sup>. But before the Gnostics it was the pagan astrologists who combined the doctrine of *Timaeus* with astrology. In the Platonic-style dialogue composed by a Christian and entitled *Hermippus sive de astrologia*<sup>415</sup> each planet is given affinities with and power over certain parts of the human body. Kronos governs the brain, which is the seat of thought (*nous*) and also of generation, since it is from the brain that semen (identified with *pneuma*) descends through the spinal medulla<sup>416</sup>.

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<sup>409</sup> K. Beyschlag, *Simon Magus und die christliche Gnosis*, WUNT 16, Tübingen 1974, 18–19.

<sup>410</sup> haer. VI 9–18 (136–145 Wend.); cf. Beyschlag, *Simon Magus* (n. 409), 37–49.

<sup>411</sup> Tim. 73 B–74 A. There are echoes of Platonic ideas in Pythagorean thinking: Diog. Laert. VIII 1,28, and Egyptian thinking: Horap., Hierogl. II 9.

<sup>412</sup> The Gnostic thinker Marcus, as a consequence, held that the brain contains a particle of divine power, which was created by God in his own image and likeness: Iren., haer. I 18,1 (SC 264, 274 Rouss., Dout.). It may very well be that the Egyptian doctrine concerning the spinal medulla, seat of life, was also taken into consideration; cf. J.-C. Goyon, in: *Damascius. Commentaire du Parménide de Platon*, ed. by L. G. Westerink and J. Combès, II, Paris 1997, 156, n. 2.

<sup>413</sup> Iren., haer. I 30,5 (SC 264, 370 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>414</sup> Hipp., haer. V 19, 15–17 (119–120 Wend.).

<sup>415</sup> *Anonymi Christiani, Hermippus I* 13,80 and II 3,24–26 (ed. by G. Kroll and P. Viereck, Lipsiae 1895, 18 and 37–8).

<sup>416</sup> Cf. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'astrologie grecque* (n. 119), 323. On Saturn and the *pneuma*: Maneth. V 262. On the *melothesia* of the astrologers: Bouché-Leclercq, 318–325. Theodor Konai, *Lib. sch. XI* 63 (239 Hes., Dr.) maintained Audi (a 4th cent. heretic or schismatic) borrowed the *melothesia* from the Chaldaean.



Fig. 7

The process recognized the form of God in the form of man, who was created in his (or more properly “in their”) own image and likeness.

The fact that Chnoubis was often considered as the creator is confirmed, as we have already said, by the form “Chnoumis” that sometimes accompanies him on gems. Many gems show Chnoubis with the shape of an S<sup>417</sup>, like a human spine (fig. 7), and it can be assumed therefore that the serpentiform Egyptian creator Chnoubis/Chnoumis was believed to have created the spinal column and the brain (or cerebellum) in his own image and likeness.

### § 27. *The divine intestine*

Looking carefully, we can see that Chnoubis is depicted with two basic shapes: one is a letter S, or spinal column, and the other consists of one or more coils, rather like an intestine. It is difficult to say whether the second type, which was certainly more suitable for digestive amulets, was linked to Gnostic theories on the form of the intestine. According to Irenaeus<sup>418</sup>, the Barbelo-Gnostics thought that “Sophia changed into a snake, became the adversary of Adam’s Creator, and imparted Gnosis; the position and shape of our intestines through which food passes are a sign that the snake’s generative substance is within us”. A passage in a fragment of the *Untitled Text* (ch. 21) in the codex Brucianus states that the Father moulded the various parts of his Son and made the large intestine in the likeness of Setheus, the lord of the pleroma, and the small intestine in the likeness of the Ennead.

<sup>417</sup> For instance: AGDS, III, Kassel, no. 166; R. Casal Garcia, *Collección de gliptica del museo arqueológico Nacional. Serie de entalles romanos*, (no city and date, but 1990), no. 501.

<sup>418</sup> Iren., haer. I 30,15 (SC 264, 384 Rouss., Dout.).

Marcus the Valentinian said that the image of the divine Ogdoad was reproduced and concealed in the bowels<sup>419</sup>.

Magi inspired by Egyptian or Egyptianizing polytheism certainly prescribed amulets depicting Chnoubis, whose wearers must have been predominantly polytheist. However, we do not know whether Gnostic speculations led to the production of a particular kind of Chnoubis gem. The spread of the well-known Chnoubis symbol (the barred triple S) to aniconic gems inspired by the seal of Solomon could be an indication that the leonine serpent featured prominently in the religious doctrines and practices of Judaizing and Gnosticizing sects.

### § 28. *The divine worm?*

On several gems, such as one specimen from Cyrenaica<sup>420</sup>, Chnoubis is depicted with a very squat body divided into rings.

The idea that the creator had made the first man in his own image and likeness led to the Gnostic concept that the first creature was a worm-like being who could not stand upright or breathe. The Gnostic Saturninus held that the seven Archons made man in the form of a worm resembling a divine figure (the Anthropos of light), who had appeared from above, and that God the Father, “the Power”, placed a spark inside the “worm” to give life to the creature, who became man<sup>421</sup>. The deity resembling Chnoubis was therefore identical to the being that he himself (or his children, the Archons) had created in his own likeness.

Ophitic Gnostics believed that Jaldabaoth heard the Mother’s voice and created man; the other Archons created an enormous man like a creeping worm, and his father Jaldabaoth breathed on to his face to give him a soul<sup>422</sup>. In Judaic tradition also, Adam was initially a worm that could not walk<sup>423</sup>.

<sup>419</sup> Iren., haer. I 18,1 (SC 264, 276 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>420</sup> F. Della Cella, *Viaggio da Tripoli alle frontiere occidentali dell’Egitto, Città di Castello 1912* (3rd reprint of the 1819 ed.), 127 and plate I, with an inscription containing the same text as a similar specimen in the British Museum (Bonner, *Amulets chiefly in the British Museum* (n. 297), 325, no. 20 = Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 327): Χνουῦβις Ναβις βιεννουϋ ὕδαρ δίψηη ἄρτος πείνη πῦρ ῥείγοι (= ῥίγει).

<sup>421</sup> Iren., haer. I 24,1 and 7 (SC 264, 322 and 332 Rouss., Dout.); Hipp., haer. VII 28,3 (208 Wend.).

<sup>422</sup> Iren., haer. I 30,6 (SC 264, 370–2 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>423</sup> E. Preuschen, *Die apokryphen gnostischen Adamschriften*, in: *Festgruß Bernhard Stade, Gießen 1900*, 227; it was also said that at the beginning man had a tail, which God

In his examination of Ophitic Gnosis, Hippolytus<sup>424</sup> says that the Gnostics identified the “king of glory” who had passed through the gate of the heavens with the worm, not with man: “σκόληξ καὶ οὐκ ἄνθρωπος”. Apparently, then, this Gnostic doctrine rejected God’s manifestation in human form<sup>425</sup>, as the Anthropos, or Adam of light, but preferred to believe that God had manifested himself in the form of a worm.

Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite (an author of Late Antiquity who cannot be conclusively dated) stated that the representatives of the tradition imagined God as a worm<sup>426</sup>. The origin of this is in *Psalm* 21.7 (22.7): “I am a worm and no man” “ἐγὼ δὲ εἶμι σκόληξ καὶ οὐκ ἄνθρωπος”, which, in actual fact, does not refer to God, but to the righteous man, and “worm” in this context means “a worthless creature”<sup>427</sup>. However, the image of the worm was taken to be an allusion to God or Christ<sup>428</sup>.

At this point we can refer back to the passage in the biography of Cyriacus which states that the *ouroboros* revered in the corrupt city was “the king of the worms”. Clearly, therefore, that being, which was certainly equated with Leviathan, was a sort of giant worm. The author of the biography of Cyriacus made a slight departure from Septuagint tradition, which identified Leviathan with a giant serpent (*drakon*); a similar departure, however, had been made by the author of the *Shepherd Hermas* in describing it as a whale.

There is enough evidence to suggest that one fairly widespread variation on Chnoubis iconography depicted this creator deity with the body of a worm, rather than that of a serpent. It is unlikely that this could have been done without the stimulus of Gnostic doctrines concerning the creator god and his worm-shaped first creature.

Given that Chnoubis was considered the exterminator or the suffocator of giants, it is interesting to remember that, in Rabbinic literature<sup>429</sup>, Leviathan was afraid of a worm known as a *kilbit* which attached itself to the gills of large fish and killed them.

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later removed to give him dignity: Midrash on Gen. 14,10 (Judah ben Rabbi: Midrash Rabbah, I/1, 117–8 Freedman, Simon).

<sup>424</sup> haer. V 8,18 (92 Wend.).

<sup>425</sup> Cf. Ez. 1,26.

<sup>426</sup> Dion.Ar., c. h. II 5,145 A (SC 58, 84 Roques, Heil, Gandillac). According to Plin., Nat. X 4 and the Physiologus 7, in the burnt Phoenix’s ashes a worm was found, which then became a new Phoenix.

<sup>427</sup> Cf. J. van der Ploeg, De Boeken van het Oude Testament. Psalmen, I, Roemond 1973, 154.

<sup>428</sup> Pachymeres, Paraphr. 26 (PG 3, 161 A).

<sup>429</sup> Talmud, Shabbat VIII 1 (I (1929), 663 Goldschmidt); cf. I. Broydé, Art. Leviathan and Behemoth, JE VIII, New York 1925, 38.

The leech is also a parasitic worm, and according to a somewhat obscure passage in the *Pistis Sophia*<sup>430</sup>, Jesus-Aberamentho placed the mysteries of the Archons, the angels, the powers of the invisible god Agrammachamarei, and Barbelo and the leech, on the right, leaving the solar disc, consisting of an *ouroboros* snake, the moon and the other Aeons on the left, in the West. Clearly the leech was the form assumed by a great, benevolent deity, who in all probability was equated with the divine worm and may even have been Chnoubis.

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<sup>430</sup> IV 136 (354 Schmidt, Macdermot).

## The Ophite Diagram

### § 29. *The cosmic snake in Judaism*

We will now examine in detail Ophitic notions of the cosmic snake as a malevolent and powerful being encircling creation. First of all we will discuss its mythological antecedents in Jewish, Near Eastern and Egyptian thinking. According to the first book of *Enoch*<sup>431</sup>, Leviathan inhabited the abyss, above the source of the waters<sup>432</sup>, and Behemoth lived in the desert.

The *Bible* speaks of two sea serpents, Leviathan<sup>433</sup> and Rahab; sometimes the Rahabim are many<sup>434</sup>; *Joshua* 26.12 mentions two Leviathanim and a sea dragon<sup>435</sup>, which God defeated in the beginning, when he created the earth<sup>436</sup>; or it was said that Leviathan was under the control of God's agents<sup>437</sup>, that its fury manifested itself in storms<sup>438</sup> and when it rose up, it caused a low tide<sup>439</sup>; final victory over the serpents will be at some time in the future<sup>440</sup>. In Rabbinic tradition also Leviathan encircles the earth<sup>441</sup>, but may even be the snake carrying the Zodiac<sup>442</sup>.

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<sup>431</sup> I 60,7–9 (56 Black).

<sup>432</sup> Typical notion in Mesopotamian mythology.

<sup>433</sup> Which in Ps. 74,14 is described as a many-headed monster.

<sup>434</sup> Ps. 74,13; Job 9,13; on these two sea monsters: H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, Göttingen 1895, 30–111; M.L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford 1971, 42; cf. also Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic* (n. 220), 503–6; A. Castanini, *Il mostro delle acque: riutilizzazioni bibliche della funzione di un mito*, *MedAnt* 4, 2001, 71–89. The *Bible* speaks in the same terms of *tannin*, the dragon (either a crocodile or a whale), *nahash*, the serpent, *yam*, the sea, and *neharim*, the flood: P.Ma. and J.F., *Art. Leviathan*, *EJ* XI, Jerusalem 1971, 89–90.

<sup>435</sup> And therefore three monsters: Gunkel, *Schöpfung* (n. 434), 47.

<sup>436</sup> Ps. 44,19; 74,12–17; 89,10–12; cf. Is. 51,10; Job 3,8; 7,12. This is the Jewish version of the victory of the sky god over the sea serpent, a myth that recurs in Hittite, Cananean (which calls the serpent Lotan) and Mesopotamian traditions.

<sup>437</sup> Job 3,8.

<sup>438</sup> Ps. 89,9–10.

<sup>439</sup> Hieron., in Ps. CIII, 26 (CCh 78, 187 Morin).

<sup>440</sup> Is. 27,1; Ez. 29,3–7.

<sup>441</sup> Cf. M. Grünbaum, *Beiträge zur vergleichenden Mythologie aus der Hagada*,

In eastern pagan symbology the snake also represented the ecliptical path described by the sun<sup>443</sup>. One possible reason why the Jews needed to place the great serpent in the sky and not the sea may have been found in the Septuagint version of *Job* 9.13, in which Rahab's assistants are called κήτη τὰ ὑπ' οὐρανόν, "whales beneath the sky"<sup>444</sup>.

It has been noted that Jewish ideas on the great sea serpent were very similar to those of neighbouring peoples, particularly the Phoenicians<sup>445</sup>.

### § 30. The ouroboros snake in Egypt and the Near East

In the *Romance of Alexander*, as we have said, the earth is surrounded by the great serpent<sup>446</sup>.

The *ouroboros* snake had featured in Egyptian iconography since the 21st Dynasty and indicated encirclement, protection or the cosmic circle described by the sun, and therefore the boundary between the area ruled by the sun and chaos; later it became the symbol of cyclic time<sup>447</sup> which is continually regenerated; it protected the gates "of confusion" from what was outside, that is, it protected existence from non-existence<sup>448</sup>.

It frequently encircles a solar divinity, such as Harpocrates or the scarab<sup>449</sup>, and in magic papyri<sup>450</sup> and in Macrobius<sup>451</sup> the great serpent is once again a form of the sun. In the Assyro-Babylonian and Phoenician world, too, the *ouroboros* snake seemed destined to act as the external boundary of various

ZDMG 31, 1877, 275; Gunkel, *Schöpfung* (n. 434), 47; West, *Early Greek Philosophy* (n. 434), 42, n. 9.

<sup>442</sup> Cf. S. Krappé, *Étude sur les origines et la nature du Zohar*, Paris 1901, 157, n. 1.

<sup>443</sup> R. Beck, *Planetary Gods and planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, EPRO 109, Leiden 1988, 53–56.

<sup>444</sup> Gunkel, *Schöpfung* (n. 434), 38, thinks it refers to the Zodiac.

<sup>445</sup> O. Kaiser, *Die mythische Bedeutung des Meeres in Ägypten, Ugarit und Israel*, BZAW 78, Berlin 1959, 140–52; Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic* (n. 220), 504.

<sup>446</sup> *Romance of Alexander*, recensio A, II 41.

<sup>447</sup> On the snake as a symbol of time in Egypt, see: P.A. Bochi, *Images of Time in Ancient Egyptian Art*, JARCE 31, 1994, especially 55–58.

<sup>448</sup> E. Ciampini, *Tradizioni faraoniche e iconografie magiche*, in: *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica* (n. 261), 27–40.

<sup>449</sup> A vignette of the Her-Uben A papyrus in the Museum of Cairo (21st Dynasty) depicts Harpocrates inside the serpent that devours its tail, between two lions symbolizing the mountains between which the sun rises: A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *Mythological Papyri*, New York 1957, 22, fig. 3.

<sup>450</sup> PGM IV, 1436–38.

<sup>451</sup> I 20.3.

dimensions of reality<sup>452</sup>. Authors of the Imperial Age held that the *ouroboros* was an Egyptian symbol of the universe in motion, which regenerated itself every year<sup>453</sup>, or else was both the Almighty and the spirit that enters the world<sup>454</sup>, or the year, represented by the abyss containing the *ouroboros* and symbolized by a circle containing an X<sup>455</sup>. According to an “Egyptian” idea quoted by Philo of Byblos<sup>456</sup>, the cosmos was shaped like the Greek letter Theta: Θ, and was crossed by a serpentine falcon-headed god. Phoenician doctrines known to Macrobius taught that the cosmos destroying and then regenerating itself was represented by the *ouroboros*<sup>457</sup>. The *ouroboros* may also have represented time<sup>458</sup>. According to Martianus Capella a serpent vomiting fire and devouring its tail was held by Saturn in his hand<sup>459</sup>.

In magical doctrines concerning Hecate, the moon goddess, identified with the Mesopotamian Ereschigal, with Persephone, Isis and Selene, the goddess was also described as ἀκρουροβόρε, that is “she who eats the tip of her tail”<sup>460</sup>, so it is likely that one of the forms attributed to the goddess was that of the *ouroboros*.

### § 31. Reconstructing the Ophite diagram

According to the main concept, the great circular snake is imagined as being in the sky, either like a circle enclosing the stars’ orbits and dominating the whole of creation, or like an external boundary of the earth, and therefore a

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<sup>452</sup> Cf. K. Preisendanz, *Aus der Geschichte des Uroboros*, in: *Brauch und Sinnbild: Eugen Fehrle zum 60. Geburtstag gewidmet von seinen Schülern und Freunden*, ed. by F. Herrmann, W. Treutlein, Karlsruhe 1940, 195–209, 197–198; W. Deonna, *Ouroboros*, *ArtAs* 15, 1952, 163–170, 166; A. Niwinski, *Noch einmal über zwei Ewigkeitbegriffe. Ein Vorschlag der graphischen Lösung in Anlehnung an die Ikonographie der 21. Dynastie*, *GöMisz* 48, 1981, 41–53; L. Kákosy, *Art. Uroboros*, *LÄ VI*, 1986, 886–893; Ciampini, *Tradizioni faraoniche* (n. 448); M.G. Lancellotti, *Il serpente ouroboros nelle gemme magiche*, *ibid.* 71–85 (which emphasizes the importance of Near Eastern documentary material).

<sup>453</sup> Horap., *Hierogl.* I 2.

<sup>454</sup> Horap., *Hierogl.* I 64.

<sup>455</sup> *Lyd.*, *mens.* III 4; on the *ouroboros* as a symbol of the year cf. also *Serv.*, *Aen.* V 85.

<sup>456</sup> *In Eus.*, *PE I* 10,52 (VIII/1, 53–4 *Mras*) = *FGH* 790, F 4.

<sup>457</sup> *Macr.* I 9,12.

<sup>458</sup> *Cyr.*, *Juln.* IX 300a (PG 76, 961).

<sup>459</sup> *De nupt.* I 70; *Mythogr. Vat.* III 1,1 (I, 153 *Bode*). In this case also perhaps it was an allegory of time, based on the paronymology of *Kronos* (= *Saturn*) from *chronos*, “time”.

<sup>460</sup> In the *logos* Υεσσειμιγαδων; cf. for instance *PGM* II, 34; VII, 684.

kind of horizon. In Gnosticism this concept could be of Egyptian inspiration, but, given its antiquity, its widespread acceptance in the Near East and its link to the Greek idea of the Oceanus surrounding the earth, its origin cannot be established with any certainty. It is also possible that the connection or equation of Leviathan<sup>461</sup> in the book of Job with the *ouroboros* sprang from Judaic beliefs predating the birth of Gnosticism. This theory is supported by the fact that the Septuagint called the Hebrew Leviathan *drakon*, serpent. So this very important concept, widely held both in and outside Gnosticism, is yet another case of a doctrine that can be linked to Chaldean tradition. Moreover, the name Leviathan may be related to the Assyrian word *lawû*, “that surrounds”, and its myth probably owes much to the Babylonian saga of Marduk and Tiāmat<sup>462</sup>.

We will now examine the Ophite diagram, which, according to Origen, “had a design of ten circles, separated from one another, but joined together by another circle, which they said was the soul of the world and was called Leviathan... I have also found the name Behemoth, a being located beneath the lowest circle. And the author of this abominable diagram has drawn this Leviathan on the circle and in its centre, and has written its name on it twice.... The diagram is divided by a thick black line... which was Gehenna or Tartarus”. In another passage<sup>463</sup>, Origen mentions the two circles (one yellow and one blue) which are near the circle of the Father, which encloses the circle of the Son. Then, he says, there are circles outside the Father,

<sup>461</sup> See, on this subject, Is. 27,1; Job 3,8; 41,1; Ex. 32,2.

<sup>462</sup> West, *Early Greek Philosophy* (n. 434), 42–3.

<sup>463</sup> VI 38; cf. the two reconstructions, fairly similar to each other, by H. Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, Leipzig 1924, 168–72 and fig. on 160, and by Th. Hopfner, *Das Diagramm der Ophiten*, in: *Charisteria Alois Rzach*, Reichenberg 1930, 86–98. According to the reconstruction by Welburn, *Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram* (n. 131), 261–87, which is substantially different and, in my opinion, better than the other ones, Tartarus should not be placed as a diameter inside the planetary circles, but outside them, as the diameter of the “yellow circle”, which separates the planetary circles from a circle of the same size which probably contained Prunicus; Tartarus, then, is the cosmic diaphragm separating the material world from the spiritual one. The idea of the diagram dates back to the first four decades of the second century; cf. B. Witte, *Das Ophitendiagramm nach Origenes’ Contra Celsum VI 22–38*, Altenberge 1993; the graphic reconstruction proposed by this author (140–148, esp. 142–3) is a retrograde step compared to that of Welburn. Its main faults are the following: the circles of the Father, the Son and Sophia are inside Leviathan, whereas Leviathan should only encircle the material world, ruled by the planets. Also, since the circles of the Father, the Son and Sophia are located on the margins of the planetary circles, they are inevitably small, which makes it impossible to draw all their internal sections with their respective names. For these, a second drawing is required, although Origen mentions only one diagram. Lastly, Leviathan’s tail cuts the diagram in half, whereas it should remain in his mouth.

with the words: Love (*Agape*), Life (*Zoe*), Foresight<sup>464</sup> of Sophia (*Sophias Pronoia*), Nature of Sophia (*Sophias Physis*), Knowledge (*Gnosis*), Intellect (*Synesis*)<sup>465</sup>.

In the reconstruction attempted by Welburn, Tartarus is quite rightly placed not at the centre of the circle of the Leviathan, but as the diameter of a larger circle, which also encloses Leviathan and separates the material world from

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<sup>464</sup> Or Providence; but cf. Iren., haer. I 29,1 (SC 264, 358 Rouss., Dout.) (from the Apocryphon of John): Prognosis (one of the 10 Aeons of an Ophite system).

<sup>465</sup> Orig., Cels. VI 38 107 Koet.). The most important passages of *Contra Celsum* are as follows:

VI 25 (II, 95—96 Koet.): in this diagram were described ten circles, distinct from each other, but united by one circle, which was said to be the soul of all things, and was called Leviathan...

We observed, also, in the diagram, the being named Behemoth, placed under the lowest circle. The inventor of this accursed diagram had inscribed this Leviathan at its circumference and centre, thus placing its name in two separate places. Moreover, Celsus says that the diagram was “divided by a thick black line and that this line was called Gehenna, which is Tartarus”.

VI 33 (II, 103 Koet.): We also found in the diagram in our possession, which Celsus called “the square pattern”, the statements made by these wretches concerning the gates of Paradise. The flaming sword was depicted as the diameter of a circle of fire, and as if guarding the tree of knowledge and of life.

VI 34 (II, 103 Koet.): In all their writings mention is made of the tree of life and a resurrection of the flesh by means of the tree.

VI 35 (II, 104 Koet.): But when Celsus speaks of “circles upon circles”, he perhaps borrowed the expression from the above-mentioned heresy, which includes in a circle (which they call soul of all things, and Leviathan) the seven circles of archontic demons.

VI 38 (II, 107 Koet.): Between the upper circles – those that are above the heavens – certain inscriptions of which they give the interpretation, and among others two words especially: “a greater and a lesser”, referring to the Father and Son. Now, in the diagram referred to we found the greater and the lesser, upon the diameter of which was inscribed “Father and Son”; and between the larger circle (in which the lesser was contained) and another composed of two circles – the outer one of which was yellow and the inner one blue – a barrier in the shape of a hatchet. And above it, a small circle, close to the greater of the two forms, having the inscription “Love”; and lower down, one touching the same circle, with the word “Life”. On the second circle, which was intertwined with and included two other circles, another figure like a rhomboid, entitled “the foresight of Sophia”. And within their point of common section was a circle, on which was inscribed: “the nature of Sophia”. Above the common intersection point was a circle, on which was inscribed: “Knowledge”; and lower down, another, on which was inscribed: “Understanding”...

Moreover, those who pride themselves on such matters profess also a kind of magic and sorcery (*magiké goeteia*), which, in their opinion, is the summit of wisdom.

VI 39 (II, 107–8 Koet.): Speaking of those who employ the arts of magic and sorcery, and who invoke the barbarous names of names, Celsus remarks that such persons act like those who, in reference to the same things, perform marvels before those who are ignorant that the names of demons among the Greeks are different from what they are among the Scythians ....

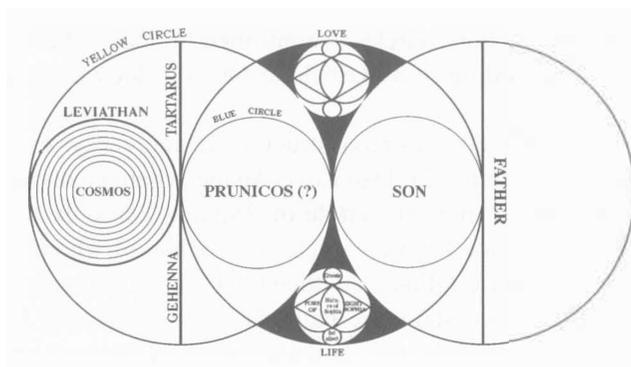


Fig. 8

the spiritual one. The thick black line was where Sophia (or Prunicus) gazed on her reflection, arousing a sexual impulse in her and a generative act by which matter was fertilized and luminous spiritual particles of Sophia were captured and retained by it.

The reconstruction proposed by Welburn is more or less the one reproduced in fig. 8.

There are aspects of Origen's text that are unclear and in some cases contradictory. This is due not only to the conciseness of his account of Celsus' text, but also to the fact that the Church Fathers and the pagan polemicist used two diagrams which may have differed slightly. However I do not think that there is an insoluble contradiction between the ten circles spoken of by Origen in VI.25 and the seven circles he mentions in VI.35, if we assume that there were ten circles altogether, one of which was the Leviathan's, containing the seven planetary spheres. There may also have been two slightly different diagrams, one of which placed the 7 planetary spheres inside Leviathan, while the other placed all ten circles inside Leviathan<sup>466</sup>. The fact

<sup>466</sup> This solution however creates an obvious problem, because it also envisages the Father's circle inside Leviathan. There is another potential solution: the yellow circle could have been Leviathan, intended to resemble the circle of the Father and, like it, containing a smaller circle of the son (the second Leviathan?), which encircles the 7 planetary zones. This theory however would have to assume a simplified diagram in the circle of Sophia, in order to have, inside the outer yellow circle (=Leviathan), 10 circles: the internal Leviathan (=Zodiac)+7 planets+2 circles of Sophia above the diaphragm of Tartarus. But two circles of Sophia cannot be explained: if anything she should have been triple, as stated in the Three steles of Seth (NHC VII.5). Tat., orat. 8 (14–16 Whittaker) states that the angels who came down to earth and lay with women taught the diagram of the constellations, like a dicing table. It should be borne in mind that many of the *tabulae lusoriae* we know have series of circles inscribed on them; cf. A. Ferrua, *Tavole lusorie epigrafiche*, Vatican City 2001.

that there were 10 and not 7 circles is confirmed by the 10 Aeons, grouped into 5 syzygies, according to a Barbeloite Ophitic doctrine described by Irenaeus<sup>467</sup>.

The deficiencies of Welburn's reconstruction, in many ways excellent, can be seen in the small external circle of Love-Agape, where no divine concepts can be inserted. Furthermore the circle of Prunicus can only be assumed, and strangely is separated from the circles of Sophia, of whom Prunicus is just one particular manifestation. And then the horizontal arrangement does not, as we would expect, show the Father's circle above and Leviathan's below. As will shortly be demonstrated, the system of circles formed a "tree of knowledge and life" which certainly was not supposed to be arranged horizontally, but vertically, with the Father at the top, and with matter and its two monsters Leviathan and Behemoth below.

It was probably the following statement by Origen that led to the erroneous arrangement of the circles: "And above it, a small circle, close to the larger of the two former, bearing the inscription 'Love'; and lower down, one touching the same circle, with the word 'Life'. And on the second circle, which is intertwined with and includes two other circles, together with a rhomboid figure, is entitled 'Foreknowledge of Sophia'". Where Origen talks of the "second circle" we must interpret this to mean a second large circle next to the Father's, not the small circle of Life; therefore it would appear that "above" and "below" were the positions of the circles of Love and Life when the diagram was arranged horizontally, though normally it it was supposed to be viewed vertically. For this reason we are proposing the reconstruction in figure 9.

The total number of circles is ten, if we exclude the yellow circle. Its only function is as an analogy to the Father's circle and to enclose the circles of Sophia and Leviathan<sup>468</sup>. The colour yellow may have been used to highlight it less than the others, which were certainly darker. The blue circle is used to enclose all the circles of Sophia, containing a symbol of the female womb, which in Greek may indeed have been described as  $\varphi\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . The colour system is certainly based on the description of the cosmic spheres in the vision of Er, in Plato's *Republic*<sup>469</sup>.

If we look at the diagram we can easily grasp certain Gnostic doctrines, particularly 1) the manifestation of God the Father in two forms, one male

<sup>467</sup> haer. I 29,1 (SC 264, 358 Rouss., Dout.), from the Apocryphon of John.

<sup>468</sup> Another solution would, in actual fact, be possible, which excludes Leviathan from the number of circles, in accordance with Origen's assertion in the passage describing the great serpent as being surrounded by ten circles.

<sup>469</sup> Plat., Rep. X 616 B-617 D.

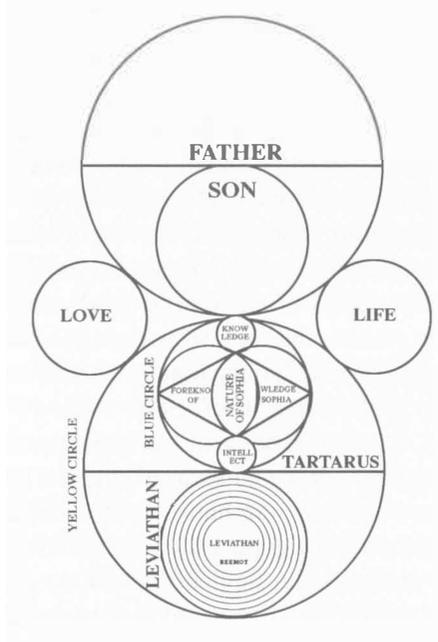


Fig. 9

and one female, namely the Son and Sophia; 2) Sophia's departure from the "male" partner to join with matter, that is, the line of Tartarus, which resulted in the birth of Leviathan, who was responsible for creation; 3) Sabaoth's position after his repentance and assumption to the seventh heaven, which is at the top of the planetary heavens but inside the circle of Sophia, who instructed him in all the mysteries of the cosmos and divinity. Sabaoth's position is in the circle of the Intellect (*Synesis*). We have seen that in some Gnostic myths Sabaoth has the same role that, in other myths of the same kind, is played by the serpent of the Garden of Eden: Nous, according to the doctrines of Sethian Gnosis. Nous is an almost identical notion to Synesis, which denotes the act of "understanding", while Nous is the mind itself performing the operation.

§ 32. The tree of life

The idea of circles in which God's virtues are manifested must have been widespread and, as we shall see, also occurs in a passage from the 4th magical papyrus that we will be examining. The idea that the circles constituted a "tree" must also have been widespread.

A passage from Origen<sup>470</sup> states that on the diameter of one of the circles a sword of fire (ξομφαία) was depicted, doubtless the one that had driven Adam and Eve from the earthly paradise. This sword guarded the tree of knowledge (*gnosis*) and of life (*zoe*). If the sword was above the black line of Tartarus, then the tree of knowledge and of life has to be the series of circles starting from Gnosis and Sophia and leading through the circle of Life to the Father. The diagram therefore represented the tree of knowledge and of life. In a passage from *Contra Celsum*<sup>471</sup>, Origen reports Celsus' comments on the Christians (in actual fact Sethian Gnostics), who called their baptismal rite "seal": the person who placed the seal was called "father"; the one who received it was called "son" and "young man" and answered: "I am anointed with the white chrism of the tree of life". Irenaeus<sup>472</sup> says that, according to the Barbelo-Gnostics, the Autogenes emitted two Aeons: Man and Gnosis, from which a tree (*lignum*) sprang and was also given the name Gnosis. In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*<sup>473</sup> the Archons say that they were born from a "tree". The Stratiotikoi sect in Egypt, which was linked to the Phibionites, the Nicolaitans and probably the Sethian branch, knew of a tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, which they compared to the twelve annual menstrual cycles of women<sup>474</sup>. In the Naassene doctrines mentioned by Hippolytus<sup>475</sup>, the almond tree in the myth of Attis represented the Father of the universe himself, who from the depths bore within himself the perfect fruit that was the Son. In the work of the Gnostic Justin the earthly paradise is envisioned as a series of trees, each of them an angel; some, however, are the angels of the Mother Edem, and are destined to become evil; others are the angels of the Father Elohim. The tree of life is the angel Baruch, the tree of knowledge

<sup>470</sup> Cels. VI 33 (II, 103 Koet.).

<sup>471</sup> VI 27 (II, 97 Koet.). It may be that Juvenal's allusion (VI 543–5) to a young priestess "of the tree" (*interpres legum Solymarum et magna sacerdos arboris ac summi fida internuntia caeli*) was a reference to the tree of life. The priestess is described by the satirist as a seller of dreams, so she may have been a sorceress, and therefore a Jewess who had no respect for Judaic law. D. S. Wiesen, *The Great Priestess of the Tree*. Juvenal vi,544–545, CJ 76, 1980, 14–20, interprets the tree as a menorah; for the other interpretations proposed so far (all rather implausible), see: E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal*, London 1980, 332–3.

<sup>472</sup> haer. I 29.3 (SC 264, 360–2 Rouss., Dout.) (from the Apocryphon of John).

<sup>473</sup> (NHC XIII, 1) 44. S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, State Archives of Assyria 15, Helsinki 1997, 85, no. 44, to this evidence adds the passage from the Gospel of Luke (13,18) in which Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a tree that has grown from a mustard seed.

<sup>474</sup> Epiph, haer. XXVI 5,1 (I, 281 Holl).

<sup>475</sup> haer. V 9,1 (97–98 Wend.).

is Naas, the Mother's angel<sup>476</sup>. In the doctrines of Marcus the description of the tree in the earthly paradise in *Genesis* conceals ten concepts corresponding to ten Aeons<sup>477</sup>.

The tree of life, or sacred tree, was recently the subject of a penetrating study by Simo Parpola<sup>478</sup>, who set out to explain the meaning of the sacred trees surmounted by the image of the supreme god and accompanied by minor gods in the act of adoration, recurring frequently in Mesopotamian, and particularly Assyrian, iconography from at least the middle of the second millennium BC. These divine trees consist of a trunk with regular intervals of "knots" and branches ending in fruits or flowers. Parpola verified his working hypothesis that the system of ten circles symbolizing the manifestations of God, typical of Cabbalistic speculations starting from the late Imperial Age, was the specific result of secret speculations typical of Assyro-Babylonian wisdom. The typical scheme of the Cabbalistic Sefirot, that is, the ten (or rather eleven) manifestations of God, had five central circles with three circles on each side; each of the circles had a number and belonged to a divine manifestation, but one of them was the number 0. The basic scheme is shown in fig. 10.

Intellect, Wisdom and Knowledge are divine concepts that are also repeated in the Ophite diagram; we can say that the set of concepts underlying this "tree" of God's manifestations is the same as the one used by the Cabbalists and in Gnostic circles, and that both Cabbalists and Gnostics called it a "tree".

<sup>476</sup> Hipp., haer. V 26,6 (127 Wend.). Hipp., haer. VI 12,2 (138 Wend.) describes as *rizai*, "roots", the six principles of Simon Magus, Mind, Intelligence, Voice, Name, Reason and Thought. According to Hy. Arch. 89, the Archons wanted to pour the seed into Eve, but she became a tree; cf. B. A. Pearson, *She became a Tree – A Note to CG II*, 4:25–26, HThR 69, 1976, 413–5.

<sup>477</sup> Epiph., haer. XXXIV 15,5 (II, 29 Holl). C. H. Kraeling, in consultation with C. Hopkins (The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Reports of V Season, New Haven 1934, 95–97) believed he recognized in a graffito of Dura-Europos a diagram, similar to that of the Ophites, but more likely to be connected to Mithraism and to the ladder with seven rungs, and also recognized the magic word ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ. However, there is no sign of this in the graffito, which should be seen as an exercise in writing the alphabet, given the sequence of letters ΑΒΓΔΕ...

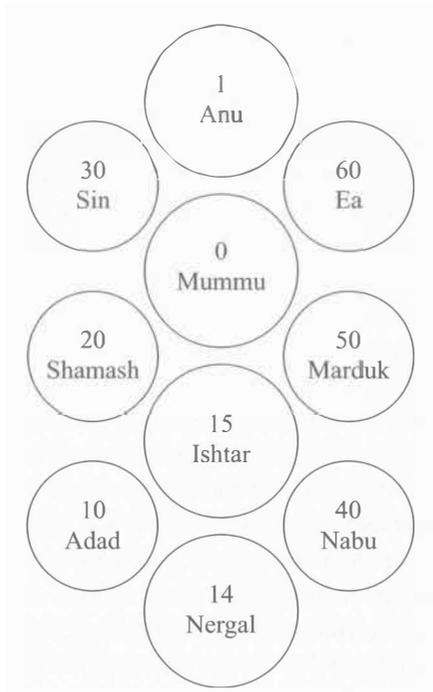
<sup>478</sup> The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy, JNES 52, 1993, 161–207; Id., Assyrian Prophecies (n. 473), XIII-XLVIII (containing further discussion on Assyrian religion as a precursor of Christianity). The comparison between the Gnostic Sophia and Ishtar, who descends to Hell, had already been proposed by W. Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, TU 15/4, Leipzig 1897, 90–93.



Fig. 10

Returning to Parpola's thesis, if we replace the Cabbalistic Sefirot concepts with the corresponding Assirian gods and give them the numbers that Mesopotamian wisdom normally assigned to them, we obtain the diagram in fig. 11, which essentially is the one proposed by Parpola.

The "trunk", corresponding to the Cabbalists' "pillar of equilibrium", gives a numerical sum of 30, while the numerical sum of the branches, if the ones on the left are calculated as negative numbers, is always 30. Furthermore the cabbalistic numerical succession of circles corresponds to the genealogies of the Assirian gods, if we transfer them to their specific circles, as proposed. This, in Parpola's opinion, and in all likelihood, certainly cannot be the result of chance, but is based on a Pythagorean-type religious doctrine (*ante litteram*) conceived in Mesopotamia in the second millennium BC and perfected by the 13th century BC.



*Fig. 11*

Part of Parpola's thesis has been contested by other scholars<sup>479</sup>, who have questioned his explanation of the Assyrian tree as an image of the pantheon divided into a series of emanations of the supreme god. Nobody, however, has denied the central importance and religious nature of the sacred tree in Mesopotamian doctrine. The relationships between certain numerical values and the corresponding characteristics of the gods have also been contested. However, in the aftermath of Parpola's revolutionary propositions and the reaction of other Assyriologists, it is now clear that Mesopotamian wisdom widely influenced the religious thinking of Eastern peoples by spreading scientific and mathematical study of the divine world, which eventually became enshrined in the Cabbalah and Gnosticism.

<sup>479</sup> E. Frahm, *Wie "christlich" war die assyrische Religion?*, WO 31, 2000–2001, 31–45; M. Weippert, "König, fürchte dich nicht!" Assyrische Prophetie im 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr., Or. 71, 2002, 1–54.

§ 33. *The cosmic Leviathan of the Ophites*

Let us return to the Ophite *diagram*. In the words of Origen, “the author of this abominable diagram has drawn this Leviathan on the circle and at its centre, and has inscribed its name there twice”. Celsus goes on to say: “The diagram is divided by a thick black line” and says that “he had been told that it was Gehenna or Tartarus”.

The fact that Leviathan marks the limit of the material cosmos is less surprising than the fact that his name is also at the centre<sup>480</sup>. This can perhaps be explained if we think that the circles represent the paths followed by the planets and the stars, and that outside them is the astral Dragon embracing all things, whereas the central circle coincides with Tartarus, since it represents the circumference of the earth viewed in profile, surrounded by the Dragon which is also Tartarus. If we look at the diagram as a tridimensional object we see two circles intersecting at right angles: one is the equator, the other is the area of the Zodiac. Moreover, in pagan astrology and particularly in Mithraism, the Zodiac, or its path, was pictured as a snake<sup>481</sup>. At this point let us think back to the doctrine of Plato’s *Timaeus*<sup>482</sup>, in which the Demiurge had originally created a letter X, which was bent into a circle enclosing the cosmos in the areas of the Zodiac and the equator<sup>483</sup>.

Also, in their prayers Ophites said: “And thou, archon of the sacred mysteries of the Son and the Father, who shineth at night, thou, Iaô, second and first, lord of the night”<sup>484</sup>. Since Iaô shines in the night, it is clear that he is an astral deity. In Ophitic thought the serpent of Eden was the son and evil counsellor of Jaldabaoth, and also misled Cain; his name was thought to be Michael or Samael<sup>485</sup>.

In the Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia*<sup>486</sup> the place where sinners were punished was the *ouroboros*, identified with the darkness surrounding the world. This immense monster is divided into various segments to which the various

<sup>480</sup> The *ouroboros* in the centre of the large circle in a gem in the Archaeological Museum of Florence (Inv. no. 15146, which will be published in SGG, II) may perhaps have reflected similar doctrines.

<sup>481</sup> Cf. R. Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, EPRO 109, Leiden 1988, 53–4.

<sup>482</sup> Plat., *Tim.* 36 B-C.

<sup>483</sup> *Tim.* 36 B-C; cf. also *Rep.* X 616 C.

<sup>484</sup> Orig., *Cels.* VI 31 (II, 101 Koet.); according to E. Peterson, *Εἰς Θεός*, Göttingen 1926, 307, there was a daytime Iaô and a night-time Iaô.

<sup>485</sup> *Iren.*, *haer.* I 30,5 and 9 (SC 264, 368; 376 Rouss., *Dout.*); *Thdt.*, *haer.* I 14 (PG 83, 366) who gives him the name Samannà.

<sup>486</sup> III 126 (317–9 Schmidt, Macdermot).

categories of damned are assigned. In this case it seems that the *ouroboros* is imagined to be in the sky and identified with Gehenna or Tartarus. In the testimony of Celsus<sup>487</sup>, who was writing at the time of Marcus Aurelius, the Gnostics believed that the seven Archons, commanded by the Jewish god, waited for the souls who were leaving their bodies in order to overcome them; but Epiphanius, speaking of Sethian Gnostics, said<sup>488</sup> that those who had taken part in Gnostic rites could be saved and go up to heaven after having passed the Archons and having ‘trampled on the head of Sabaoth’ (identified with the Archon of the outermost celestial sphere), and thus be united with the spiritual divinity, perceived as the Ogdoad<sup>489</sup>. Clearly, on the basis of this doctrine, Sabaoth performed the functions of the cosmic dragon; in fact Christ had given the power to crush snakes and scorpions<sup>490</sup>. The Archontic Gnostics<sup>491</sup> held that Sabaoth was the tyrant of the seventh heaven and father of the Devil, and added that the planetary Archons fed on souls in order to stay alive. In Catholic Christianity also it was believed that a proud fiery serpent surrounded the cosmos and that the souls of the blessed who had left the earth crushed its head before ascending to the kingdom of God<sup>492</sup>.

It is fairly obvious that, although the Leviathan surrounding the cosmos was always considered evil, opinions on his serpent son (sometimes identified with Sabaoth) varied from one sect to another, and possibly from one age to another.

<sup>487</sup> Orig., Cels. VI 27 (II, 97 Koet.).

<sup>488</sup> haer. XXVI 10,9–10 (I, 288 Holl); on the passing of the seven spheres of the planetary gods to reach the Ogdoads cf. also Clem., exc. Thdot. 63 (128 Stah.); Poimandres 26; Discourse on Eight and Nine: Nag Hammadi VI 6 (J.-P. Mahé, Hermès en Haute-Egypte, I, Quebec 1978).

<sup>489</sup> On the doctrines and rites of these Gnostics cf. a recent work by G. Casadio, *Vie gnostiche all’immortalità*, Brescia 1997, chap. II, esp. 104. In a 2nd or 3rd century silver leaf amulet found in a tomb near Aleppo the gods Yah, ‘Ezri, ‘Ehyeh, together with the number 1, and ‘Ahmah, ‘Ehyeh, ‘Ahmah, Yah, Shadday, together with number 8, are invoked in order to protect the soul through its heavenly journey: M. Schwab, *Une amulette Judéo-araméenne*, JA 7, 1906, 5–17, Testa, *Il simbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani* (n. 115), 52–59.

<sup>490</sup> Lk. 10,19. On the enormous spread of this image in literature and Christian figurative arts, cf. Quacquarelli, *Il leone e il drago* (n. 25).

<sup>491</sup> Thdt., haer. I II (PG 83, 362).

<sup>492</sup> Prudentius Clemens, *Peristephanon*, Hymnus XIV: *Passio Agnetis* 112–118 (*Atti e passioni dei martiri*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen et alii, Milan 1987, 365–6), a work composed near the end of the fifth century concerning the passion of St Agnes, which occurred in an unspecified era, before 354.

§ 34. *Gnostics and Mathematici*

Let us now move on to the numerical speculation underlying the Ophitic system.

Welburn<sup>493</sup> had already noted that the ten circles of the Ophite diagram must have been related to the oldest Cabbalistic illustrations. Parpola has also noted that the Gnostic doctrine of Monoimos the Arab (second century AD) placed the whole Monad at the centre of everything<sup>494</sup>. The Monad operated through the Decade, expressed by the numerical sign ι, the letter Iota, which signifies both unity and multiplicity. In some ways the doctrine of Monoimos was similar to that of the Peratae and in other ways to that of Marcus the Valentinian, who speculated on the value and numerical meaning of the letters of the Greek alphabet. According to Marcus<sup>495</sup> the 9 consonants corresponded to the Father and Truth, the 8 semivowels to Logos and Life, and the 7 vowels to the material world of the planets; the balance was restored by the removal of Christ, the Digamma (a semivowel), from the sphere of the Father to the material world. I do not think that it is arbitrary to suggest that Marcus perceived the order of things as a tree of life on which the circles are arranged: a tree of equilibrium, with three central circles or three systems of circles from top to bottom, each containing 8 letters of the alphabet, obviously with their numerical values.

Marcus had certainly followed in the footsteps of Valentinus. In fact Irenaeus, in his refutation of Gnostic – and especially Valentinian Gnostic – doctrines, states that they translated their theological and theogonic system into numbers, recognizing in The One (*to hen*) the principle of all things, from which came Two, Three, Four, Five...<sup>496</sup> Hippolytus<sup>497</sup> asserts that both Ptolemy and Colarbasus were seeking mathematical knowledge of the divine world.

In the *Three steles of Seth*<sup>498</sup>, the second stele, dedicated to the Mother Barbelo, says that its deity can be calculated numerically by division and

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<sup>493</sup> The Identity of the Archons in the Apocryphon Johannis, *VigChr* 32, 1978, 241–54, esp. 245.

<sup>494</sup> Parpola, *The Assyrian Tree of Life* (n. 478), 189, n. 104. On Monoimos: Hipp., haer. VIII 12–15 (232–6 Wend.); X 17 (278–9 Wend.).

<sup>495</sup> Iren., haer. I 13–21 (SC 264, 188–308 Rouss., Dout.); cf. Hipp., haer. VI 42–54 (173–189 Wend.); Epiph., haer. XXXIV (II, 5–37 Holl); Clem., str. VI 16, 140–1 (II, 503–4 Stählin); *De mysteriis litterarum Graecarum*, ed. Hebbelyncx, passim.

<sup>496</sup> Iren., haer. II 14,6 (SC 264, 224–6 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>497</sup> haer. IV 12–13 (44–45 Wend.).

<sup>498</sup> (NHC VII,5) 121–123.

is a triple deity. The triple nature of God's Sophia is the subject of the Nag Hammadi treatise *The Trimorphic Protennoia*.

There is no doubt at all that many Gnostic sects had appropriated the theological speculations of the Chaldeans and neo-Pythagoreans on numbers and on the possibility of "mathematically" knowing the world of the gods<sup>499</sup>. Philosophical religious concepts describe the higher gods as intelligible or able to be apprehended purely by the mind of man, because they have no material body. The possibility of thinking of them was also represented by numbers and geometrical shapes. Let us consider, therefore, some important theories on the numbers assigned to the gods.

According to A. Sorlin Dorigny<sup>500</sup>, the sign of Chnoubis could represent the Greek digamma, written as ζ and repeated three times; he also suggested that the "number of the beast" in the *Apocalypse*, 666<sup>501</sup>, could be recognized in it; in fact the digamma corresponds to 6. In the Greek numerical system, of course, a series of three digammas did not make sense; however we know that in the magi's speculations numbers such as 3663 or 9999 had a special significance: the first was the numerical value of Βαιν(χ)ωωωχ, the "living soul of darkness", and the second corresponded to χαβραχ φνεσχηρ φιχρρ φνυρρ φωχω βωχ, and represented the Pythic serpent, Apollo, Harpocrates or Sarapis<sup>502</sup>. Numbers of this kind have a symbolic value only if considered as 3, 6, and 9 with their highest application (9 units, 9 tens, 9 hundreds, 9 thousands), just as, in the speculations of Marcus the Valentinian, Jesus was expressed as 888 (8 hundreds, 8 tens and 8 units)<sup>503</sup>. So it is likely that the numbers 666, 3663, 999(9) were represented by triple (or quadruple) letters of the alphabet, and these letters could have been selected from the Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets.

If this is true, it means that the triple Yod (which in Hebrew has the numerical value of 10) could also be interpreted according to the Greek numerical system, as if it were a triple digamma. We have confirmatory evidence of this: several gems showing Chnoubis have the *characteres* 555 𐤆𐤆𐤆 ✱

<sup>499</sup> For instance, Plut., de Is. et Os. 10 = 354 F.

<sup>500</sup> Phylactère alexandrin contre les épistaxis, REG 4, 1891, 291.

<sup>501</sup> 13,18: ἑξακόσιοι ἑξήκοντα ἕξ. On numerical symbolism cf. A. Y. Collins, Numerical Symbolism in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature, ANRW II/21.2, 1984, 1221–87.

<sup>502</sup> Bonner. The Numerical Value (n. 365), 6–9; R. Merkelbach, Die Zahl 9999 in der Magie und der Computus digitorum, ZPE 63, 1986, 308. Cf. IGLS 1403, on the number βυμγ = 2443 = isopsephic value of Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστος, to be broken down into β(οήθη), ὕ(τῆ) (ἔκ) Μ(αριάς) γ(εννηθεῖς).

<sup>503</sup> Orac. Sibyll. I 323–31 (CGS Die Oracula Sibyllina, 21–22 Geffcken); Hipp., haer. VI 50,2–3 (182–3 Wend.); cf. F. Dornseiff, Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie, Leipzig,

repeated three times<sup>504</sup>. The second *charakter* is a Greek Ξ with small circles like eyes or “spectacles” (*Brillenbuchstabe*), which has the numerical value of 60; while the asterisk contains a cross and Greek X, which has a value of 600. So the three *charakteres* are the “number of the beast”, FΞX, repeated three times, with the same stress on 6 and 3 that recurs in Βαινχωωωχ. In the *Pistis Sophia*<sup>505</sup> three gods “endowed with triple strength” are mentioned, together with the triple signs that expressed their nature. Sometimes the sign of Chnoubis is identified with the “seal of Solomon”<sup>506</sup>, a seal that the *Acts of Saint Marina*<sup>507</sup> attribute to Satan.

It is true, then, that the sign of Chnoubis is 6, but if we look carefully, the sign is hardly ever rendered as ζζζ, because there is always a bar. Moreover,

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Berlin 1925, 131; Collins, Numerical Symbolism (n. 501), 1271. On the role of 10 and of multiples of 10: Collins, Numerical Symbolism, 1242–4; on the most respected interpretations of 666: Collins, Numerical Symbolism, 1271–2. With brilliant intuition, *Il simbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani* (n. 115), 47 and 228) recognises in the 6 the concept of incompleteness (7 was a perfect number). In § 52 we will deal with an “imperfect serpent” and with a “perfect” one. According to Iren., haer. I 30,15 (SC 264, 384 Rouss., Dout.) the Valentinian school derived from the Ophite one. Multiplication by 10 and by 100 represented the intensification of a number, as in Jesus’ reply to Peter, who asked him if it was necessary to forgive seven times: “I say to you not seven, but seventy times seven” (Mt. 5,22). Regarding number 9, cf. Hipp., haer. VI 52,5 (185 Wend.) on the word ἄμην, whose value is 99; Jaldabaim has the same value: Bonner, *The Numerical Value* (n. 365), 9. There is a large number of magic gems, showing Heracles strangling the lion, combined with the character KKK (K has the value 20). According to F. Dölger, *Sol Salutis*, Münster 1925, 81, it signifies K(ύριε ἐλέησον): “Lord have mercy”. According to U.F. Kopp, *Paleografia critica*, IV, Mannheim 1829, §§ 728–32; R.L.M. Heim, *Incantamenta magica graeca latina*, JCPH.S 19, 1892, 481; and A.A. Barb, *Diva matrix*, JWC1 16, 1953, 227, n. 149; Id., *Review of Delatte, Derchain*, Gn. 1969, 301–2, it means *q(uadoš)*, “Holy”. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 63–4, on the other hand, suggests that the triple K be interpreted on the basis of PGM XXXIII, 19, which invokes Kok Kouk Koul’s protection against fever; Mouterde, *Objects magiques* (n. 364), 112, thought that it was the k of κωλική, since this type of gem was used to protect digestion. Sometimes the series ΜΜΜ appears with the triple K (see, for example: Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 63; Delatte, *Derchain, Les intailles* (n. 288), nos. 79; 276; 339–340), which probably shows the Aramaic Kaph (corresponding to the letter K): Mouterde, *Objects magiques* (n. 364), 112, n. 18; it is the old Semitic Nûn, according to Barb, *Review of Delatte, Derchain*, Gn. 1969, 302.

<sup>504</sup> SGG, I, 152; 159; 161–2; 171; 179–180.

<sup>505</sup> I 14,4; 30,4–5 (23 and 44 Schmidt, Macdermot, on the Jewish god); IV 137,1 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 356), on “Chainchoooch” (= Bainchoooch); cf. also the Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2) 5: Barbelo was “triple strength”, “triple name”. On triplicity as an absolute superlative (for instance: Plut., *De Is. et Os.* 36, 365 C) see: W. Deonna, *Trois, superlatif absolu*, AnCl 23, 1954, 403–28, esp. 409 et seqq. In a 6th or 7th century papyrus (P. Grenf. II 91,8) the formula ἡ ἅγια τριάς is repeated three times.

<sup>506</sup> Delatte, *Derchain, Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 270.

<sup>507</sup> H. Usener, *Acta S. Marinae et S. Christophori*, Bonn 1896, 36 (f. 138 r).

the X is nearly always modified with a cross, and the Ξ, in addition to the “spectacles”, has an oblique bar, but in this instance it is certainly not an unusual way of writing the letter.

It is therefore likely that John had come across the sign ⚡ formerly associated with the serpent in Anatolian circles, where it symbolized the snake worshipped by idolatrous Jews.

In § 32 we saw that the Ophite diagram may have represented a form of the tree of life and that it had similarities to the cabbalistic tree; in this case, the circles shown must also have had numerical values, as they did in the doctrines of the Monoimos the Arab<sup>508</sup> (close to the Peratae creed). Monoimos maintained that God held within himself unity and Ten (symbolized by the Iota). The doctrines of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and the hermetic *Discourse on Eight and Nine* in the Nag Hammadi library<sup>509</sup> presuppose numerical values for manifestations of God, as does the system developed by Valentinus, which envisioned the theoretical attainment of 10 divine Aeons<sup>510</sup>. He develops a system consisting of about thirty entities<sup>511</sup>, which would suggest that he had taken the simpler Ophite system and expanded it until it was almost uncontrollable. Marcus’ doctrines concerning the alphabet also start from numeral speculations<sup>512</sup> and give a clearer order to the Valentinian system.

Since Origen says nothing about numerical values in his treatise on the diagram, these values can only be attributed hypothetically, as an experiment or a working hypothesis, based on the most well-known numerical characterizations of certain Gnostic and magic deities. The data available no longer belong to an organic system, but can be gleaned from heterogeneous sources, which however are widely and very well attested. In the light of this statement, let us summarize the available data. There were 10 circles, as explained in § 31. In § 12 we pointed out that some Gnostic (probably Sethian) texts speak of Sabaoth’s repentance and promotion to the seventh

<sup>508</sup> Hipp., haer. VIII 14,1–9 (233–5 Wend.); 15,1–4 (235–6 Wend.); X 17 (278–9 Wend.).

<sup>509</sup> NHC VI,6; on which see: J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte*, I, Québec 1978; A. Camplani, *Scritti ermetici in copto*, Brescia 2000. In *Pistis Sophia IV* 138 (358 Schmidt, Macdermot) Jesus promises to reveal the numerical values and seals of the Archons.

<sup>510</sup> Cf. similarly Marcus: Epiph., haer. XXXIV 15,5 (II, 29 Holl). On Valentinian doctrine cf. Chr. Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins*, WUNT 65, Tübingen 1992.

<sup>511</sup> Cf. for example, Iren., haer. II 15,1; 22,1 (SC 294, 146 and 212–4, 296 Rouss., Dout.); Hipp., haer. VI 29,3–5 (155–6 Wend.).

<sup>512</sup> For example, Hipp., haer. VI 49,1 (181 Wend.).

heaven, where he came into contact with Sophia, who had him instructed in Gnosis by Zoë. Both Sophia and Sabaoth have their own certain number: Sophia is triple<sup>513</sup>, while Sabaoth is septuple. Indeed in the speculations of the Chaldeans and other magi the theonym Sabaoth was paretymologically connected with the Hebrew שַׁבַּת, ŠB' "seven", and therefore it was stressed that Sabaoth was the god of the seventh heaven, Saturn's heaven<sup>514</sup>, or that he was above the seventh heaven<sup>515</sup>, but also that he was the god of the seventh day, the Sabbath<sup>516</sup>. This theonym was influential in the identification of the Jewish god with Kronos-Saturn.

In the reconstruction of the circle of Sophia we have seen that the space attributed to Sabaoth is lower than that of Nous (whom the Sethians identified with the divine serpent). Inside the circle of Sophia, then, there are three circles for the triple goddess and one for Sabaoth.

The sum of Sabaoth and Sophia is 10, the number attributed by Monoimos to God, certainly God the Father, who was, however, also the Monad, because all other numbers come from Unity, as they do in the Assyrian, Pythagorean<sup>517</sup>, Egyptian<sup>518</sup> and cabbalistic systems. To obtain 10, the number 9 is required, which should probably be attributed to the Son, or Anthropos. In § 42 we will examine the god Pantheos depicted on a magic stele in Geneva, as well as on many magic gems. An Egyptian bronze amulet<sup>519</sup> depicts him with three human faces surmounted by six animal faces, which make him a

<sup>513</sup> Cf. Apocr. Joh. 5. His pagan Chaldean counterpart (in the Chaldean Oracles) is Hecate. Cf. H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, Paris<sup>2</sup> 1978; S. I. Johnston, *Hecate Soteira*, Atlanta 1990. In the system of the late neo-Platonist Damascius (In Plat., Parm., II, 37 Westerink-Combès) the first are the One and the Two, identifiable with Zeus (or Adad: Macr. I 23,17), and the Three, identifiable with Hecate.

<sup>514</sup> Tac., Hist. V 2,4. It is clear of course that Sabaoth was a name of the Jewish god, but it is equally clear that it later became an independent theonym; cf. for instance M. Smith, *A Note on Some Jewish Assimilationists: the Angels* (P. Berlin 5025b, P. Louvre 2391), in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, II (n. 3), 239.

<sup>515</sup> Lyd., mens. V 53; Meyer, Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic* (n. 183), no. 66. Cf. A. Jacoby, *Der angebliche Eselkult der Juden und Christen*, ARW 25, 1928, 268; and also P. Perdrizet, *Amulette grecque trouvé en Syrie*, REG 41, 1928, 79, who states that Sabaoth was understood as seba oth = ἑπτὰ γράμματα.

<sup>516</sup> Hieron., in Jer. 5,24, ch. II 3 (CCh 74, 60 Reiter); cf. the translations of Aquila and Theodotion of the same passage from Jeremiah; Lact., div. inst. VII 14 (CSEL 19, 629 Brandt, Laubmann). Opinions differed as to the nature of the Hebdomad: usually it was the group of the 7 planets, but also the seven days of the week: Iren., haer. I 30,10 (SC 264, 376–8 Rouss., Dout.). In the Nag Hammadi treatise *Discourse on the Eight and the Nine* (NHC VI, 6) 28, the Hebdomad is the righteous man's first arrival point.

<sup>517</sup> Cf. Diog. Laert. VIII 1,25; Hipp., haer. VI 23,2–3 (149–150 Wend.).

<sup>518</sup> In Heliopolitan theology emanations of the divine have a numerical progression: 1 = Atum, 2 = Tefnout, 3 = Chou, 4 = Nout, 5 = Geb; cf. *infra*, note 539.

<sup>519</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Amulets*, London 1914, 30.

god with nine aspects (ἐννεάμορφος)<sup>520</sup>. At the Byblos archaeological site a quadrangular pendant was found showing this god, whom the inscription describes as: φρευβηλ μαρμαραωθ αβραμανταδουχε (on the reverse:) ὁ γῆς κὲ θαλάσσης δεσπότης ὁ σίων τὴν οἰκομένην Ορτινευ ἐννεάμορφε κελενεφές, ἔθερα τέμνων, that is: “Rê, Bahal, Lord of Lords... Lord of the earth and the sea that makes the world tremble, Ortineus of the nine forms, wrapped in clouds, who splits the ether”<sup>521</sup>. Nine, which is three times three, indicated absolute totality, since three, in Egypt, indicated plurality or totality<sup>522</sup>. The allusion to the ether crossed by the god comes from the words ὁς αἰθέρα ἔχθορε πρῶτος, concerning a phallic generator who had produced the ether, in accordance with the cosmogony of the Orphic papyrus of Derveni<sup>523</sup>. The Orphic texts mention the god Protogonos (frequently equated with Phanes), who had two pairs of eyes, two sexes, the wings and heads of different animals, among them the lion, the ram, the bull and the serpent<sup>524</sup>. Since the Egyptian Pantheos of magic is an ithyphallic deity, he was probably the creator god, and the many forms that his figure took were those of his future creatures. This god was also called Aion, as explained by Damascius the neo-Platonist: “Theologists call the polymorphic gods Aiones, because of the nature of the first Aion”<sup>525</sup>. The alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis quotes a sentence uttered by the Nous: “The Son of God, who can do anything and become whatever he wants, shows himself to each person in whatever form he wishes”<sup>526</sup>. The Naassene doctrines<sup>527</sup> examined “the essence of seed, the cause of all the beings who are born, which is not any of these, but generates and creates all the things that are born; and are expressed thus: ‘I become what I want and I am what I am’”<sup>528</sup>. According to the Naassenes, this mys-

<sup>520</sup> Cf. R. Merkelbach, *Astrologie, Mechanik* (n. 283), 49–62, esp. 57.

<sup>521</sup> M. Dunand, *Fouilles de Byblos, I*, Paris 1939, 44, pl. CXXXVII, no. 1248; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 182–3; in the inscription it is followed by the request to banish illnesses and treachery.

<sup>522</sup> W. Barta, *Untersuchungen zum Götterkreis der Neunheit*, Berlin 1973; Merkelbach, *Astrologie, Mechanik* (n. 283).

<sup>523</sup> R. Janko, *The Derveni Papyrus: an interim Text*, ZPE 141, 2002, 26–27; cf. L. Brisson, *Les Théogonie orphiques et le papyrus de Derveni*, in: *Orphée et l’Orphisme dans l’Antiquité greco-romaine*, Aldershot 1995, 415–20; there is a different interpretation in W. Burkert, *Da Omero ai Magi*, Venice 1999, 82: “was the first to ejaculate the radiance of the sky”.

<sup>524</sup> *Orphicorum fragmenta*, 76; 78–81 Kern.

<sup>525</sup> Damasc., in *Parmen. I 50* Westerink, Combès; cf. G. Casadio, *Dall’Aion ellenistico agli eoni-angeli gnostici*, *Avallon* 42/2, 1997, 45–62, esp. 54.

<sup>526</sup> Zosim., *Comm. de litt. Omega* 12 (6 Mertens).

<sup>527</sup> Cf. also *infra*, § 42.

<sup>528</sup> Hipp., *haer. V* 7,25 (84 Wend.).

tery of the “All” had been discovered by the Egyptians. The Pythagoreans also held that 9 contained all qualitative and quantitative possibilities<sup>529</sup>. The form of the Son (more properly: the Protogonos), which we know of through the god Pantheos of Egyptian iconography and Gnostic gems, is certainly part of non-Christian Gnostic doctrines, and was used widely for a long time during the Imperial Age.

9, with its highest application, 9999, was also the number of the sun god Apollo, the Delphic snake and Harpocrates. The 13th magic papyrus, containing passages from the Seventh *Book of Moses*, mentions the Enneamorphos, depicted on a falcon-headed crocodile and on an *ouroboros*<sup>530</sup>, in accordance with the well-known iconographic system; it was also said that he was instrumental in creation and that the gods themselves cannot see his shape, which changes continually<sup>531</sup>.

The Anthropos, in line with the doctrines of nearly all the Gnostic schools, had been taken as a model of creation, which the Archons had seen, directly or reflected, in the sky. He was the manifestation of God who contained all forms, especially those of the seals used to shape inert matter<sup>532</sup>. But the Anthropos had a human shape, while the Pantheos incorporated all forms.

If 10 seems to be the standard that must be reached in order to achieve a balance in the Ophite diagram of the 10 circles, then the cosmic world, ruled by the cosmic serpent and the Archons, had to reach the equilibrium of the Decad.

The assignment of numbers to the lower circle is not so easy as it seems. The number of the Beast, or Leviathan, is 6, and that of YHWH is 4. The quadruple nature of the Hebrew god was expressed by the words Ἰαϋεὶαθιῶω: “Yahweh four” (ebr. יְהוָה אַרְבַּעַת), that is, with the four-letter name<sup>533</sup>, which was frequently used in magic texts, and corresponds to the division into four of the material world, which we will examine in § 56, as well as in several

<sup>529</sup> Hipp., haer. VI 24,2 (150–1 Wend.). The Discourse on Eight and Nine does not give a very clear description of the nature of 8 and 9. In § 41 it was said that in the Ogdoad there are souls and angels singing silent hymns. In § 29 the interlocutor of Hermes asks to see “the form of the image that lacks nothing”, which could be 9, which contains all forms.

<sup>530</sup> PGM XIII, 42, 52 (cf. 159, 392, 422, 469).

<sup>531</sup> XIII, 69–71.

<sup>532</sup> In Pistis Sophia III 132 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 343–4) “seal” means “create”.

<sup>533</sup> W. Fauth, *Arbath Iao*, *OrChr* 67, 1983, 65–103. In mystical Jewish texts of the Merkabah a form derived from Greek was used: *Tatrosjah*; cf. W. Fauth, *Tatrosjah-totrosjah und Metatron in der jüdischen Merkabah-Mystik*, *JSJ* 22, 1991, 40–87. The god’s throne was supported by four animals and the god was attended by four archangels; cf. M. Smith, *A Note on some Jewish Assimilationists: the Angels* (P.Berlin 5025b, P.Louvre 2391), in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, II (n. 3), 238.

well-known magic *charakteres* that symbolize the quadruple god<sup>534</sup>. According to Pythagorean doctrines, which Valentinus also drew on, the intelligible world is subordinate to the Monad, and the world perceived by the senses is subordinate to the Tetrad (or Tetraktys)<sup>535</sup>.

The choice of YHWH, or Iaô, is arbitrary, because it does not depend on the description of the diagram. Furthermore the attribution of 6 for Leviathan to the Ophite system is problematic, because that number is attributed to him by John, the enemy of the Ophite system and the serpent. The serpent was obviously used with different values by Ophites and Christians of the great Roman Church. In § 53 we will see how the Digamma = 6 became the number of Christ in certain systems, linked to the doctrines of Marcus the Valentinian; to this should be added the fact that certain Christian commentators<sup>536</sup> recognized a monogram of Christ in the three letters of the alphabet that make up the numeral 666.

Another problem is posed by the number 8, or Ogdoad, which is extolled by the *Discourse on Eight and Nine* and other Gnostic texts as a superior deity to the planetary Hebdomad. If we consider the result we have obtained so far, we see there is an obvious increasing ratio from the 1 of the Father to the 4 of YHWH, and a decreasing ratio from the 9 of the Son to the 6 of Leviathan. Into this system must be inserted the 2 and the 8, to which the Ophites must have assigned the two circles of Love and Life, whose autonomous position outside the “central trunk” of the tree is explained solely by the need to position 2 and 8 without creating a larger circle separating the circles of the Father and Son from the circle of Sophia. In the eighth *Book of Moses*<sup>537</sup> the Ogdoad, who commands angels and demons, is invoked. This deity seems to correspond to Zeus, who instills life<sup>538</sup>, and whose eyes shine in human pupils, whose head is the sky, whose body is the ether, whose feet are the earth, who is surrounded by water in the form of Agathodaimon, the life-giving Oceanus escorted by 8 guards<sup>539</sup>. The Ogdoad’s role as life-giver

<sup>534</sup> Cf. A. Mastrocinque, *Una donna di Comum che credeva nella magia*, NAC 30, 2001, 235–244.

<sup>535</sup> Hipp., haer. VI 23,1 (149 Wend.); Marcus held that the Tetraktys was expressed at the beginning of Genesis, where the names “God, beginning, heaven, earth” are named: Epiph., haer. XXXIV 15,2–3 (II, 29 Holl).

<sup>536</sup> Cf. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (n. 503), 130, n. 2.

<sup>537</sup> PGM XIII, esp. 731–834.

<sup>538</sup> PGM XIII, 261–3; 784. The apocryphon of Moses also mentioned the Monad; cf. PGM XIII, 230.

<sup>539</sup> Here typical Egyptian religious themes are present, in Hellenistic guise. Inscriptions on sarcophagi of the Middle Kingdom (circa 19th c. BC) mention the creator, who produces Tefnout and Chou on his own (by masturbation): They are given the names “She who is life” and “He who is life”, and are in fact called “Life”: P. Barguet, *Les textes des*

would argue in favour of attributing 8 to the circle of Life, rather than the circle of Love<sup>540</sup>, which will accordingly be assigned the number 2.

While the Ogdoad, the divinity that manifests itself as 8, is discussed in the Gnostic texts we know, the Diad, the number 2, does not receive the attention that would be expected, given that it featured prominently in Babylonian theology, which developed into the Syrian form that we are familiar with<sup>541</sup>. Number 5 seems to be absent from Gnostic theological speculations: it would lead to the identification of two divine identities, which, in the descending order of the emanations of God, should be in direct contact with matter.

In this reconstruction the tree of life with its circles follows a descending path from 1 to 4, which represents the story of creation, from the Father to Sophia, through the entity of 2, to the Jewish god, while the ascending path, from 6 to 9, goes from Leviathan to the “good Sabaoth”, identifiable with the serpent of Nous, and passes through the Ogdoad to the Ennead of the Son. The latter is the path that the Gnostic initiate should follow after death, having been prepared in life<sup>542</sup>. The Gnostic divinities, too, had played a totally positive role in creation. The sphere of the Son could be also be read in a Platonic sense as the world of ideas, from which everything had taken shape, while Life had animated them. These numerical combinations must have been the source of inspiration for the Valentinian magus Marcus, who divided the body of Aletheia into 12 parts, represented by pairs of letters

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sarcophages égyptiens du moyen empire, Paris 1986, 471–2 (chap. 80). From the unity of Atum we proceed to the duality of Tefnout and Chou, and therefore from 1 to 2. Heliopolitan theology attributed a series of numbers to the divine ennead: 1 = Atum, 2 = Tefnout, 3 = Chou, 4 = Nout, 5 = Geb; cf. S. Sauneron, *Remarques de philologie et d'étymologie*, RdE 15, 1963, 61; J.-C. Goyon, in: *Damascius. Commentaire du Parménide de Platon*, ed. by L. G. Westerink and J. Combès, II, Paris 1997, 156, n. 3.

<sup>540</sup> In the Valentinian system Love (Agape) was the reason that drove the Father to generate the first six pairs of divine entities: Hipp., haer. VI 29.3–4 (155–6 Wend.).

<sup>541</sup> According to Proclus, in *Plat.*, *Parm.* (Plato Latinus, ed. by R. Klibansky and C. Labowsky, III, London 1953, 59–61), theologians (those linked to the Chaldean Oracles) called the first principle Ad, which in Syriac means One, and the creator Intellect Adad, by simply duplicating One; *Macr.* I 23,17 states that the Assyrians worshipped Adad, whose name means “One One”; *Damascius* (in *Plat.*, *Parm.*, II, 37 Westerink, Combès), drawing on Babylonian theogonies, asserts that the demiurgic divinity was “Twice beyond” (*Dis epekeina*) and is identified with Zeus. See, on this theme: Ph. Talon, *Enūma Eliš and the Transmission of Babylonian Cosmology to the West*, in: *Mythology and Mythologies*, *Melammu Symposia*, II, ed. by R. M. Whiting, Helsinki 2001, 272–5. A doctrine concerning the Monad and the Diad was also attributed to Zoroaster; one was considered the Father and the other the Mother: Hipp., haer. VI 23,2 (149–150 Wend.).

<sup>542</sup> Witte, *Das Ophitendiagramm* (n. 463), 37; 101–2, thinks that the diagram represented the meditative path of the Gnostikòs, understood as a descent into divine mysteries. For an evaluation of its role *post mortem* cf. Lancellotti, *Gli Gnostici e il cielo* (n. 173), 79.

of the alphabet: head = ΑΩ, neck = ΒΨ; shoulders and hands = ΓΧ, chest = ΔΦ and so on<sup>543</sup>. In this way the first letter of the alphabet is combined with the last, the second with the penultimate, the third with the third from the last and so on. If we compare the number system we have attributed to the Ophites with the alphabetical system of Marcus, we see the same logic applied:

1	9	Α	Ω
2	8	Β	Ψ
3	7	Γ	Χ
4	6	Δ	Φ
		Ε	Υ
		Ζ	Τ
		Η	Σ
		Θ	Ρ
		Ι	Π
		Κ	Ο
		Λ	Ξ
		Μ	Ν

The attempt to reconstruct the Ophite diagram in its numerical dimension is therefore reproduced here in fig. 12.

Concrete examples are seen in some exorcism gems of how the combination of 6, the serpent biting its tail, and 4, the Jewish god with the quadruple name, was used.

This group of magic gems<sup>544</sup> shows a lion-headed *ouroboros* snake encircling the whole. One of these gems<sup>545</sup> bears the inscription: ὁ Ἰοαηουαυη, ὁ Βακαξιχυχ, ὁ Κερατάγρας, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πρωτοπάτωρ, ὁ τοῦ σώματος μόνος ὢν, διὰ πάντων πορευόμενος. Σολομῶντος ἡ σφραγίς Ψ Ζ Ζ Ζ ὁ δράκων ἔστω λεοντοκέφαλος (“Ἰοαεουαυε, Bakaxichych, Keratagras, he

<sup>543</sup> Iren., haer. I 14.3 (SC 264, 214–6 Rouss., Dout.); Hipp., haer. VI 44 (176–7 Wend.); Epiph., haer. XXXIV 5 (II, 13 Holl); Ps. Tert., adv. omn. haer. 5 (222 Kroy.).

<sup>544</sup> Cf. Kotansky, Spier, Horned Hunter (n. 328), 315–337; S. Michel, Der NYXEYA BOABAX-Logos. Zu einer neuen magischen Formel und ihrer Bedeutung, in: Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica (n. 261), 126–136.

<sup>545</sup> Kotansky, Spier, Horned Hunter (n. 328) = SGG, I, 418; hier fig. 13. The reading differs from Kotansky and Spier only in line 8 (ἡ σφραγίς). In the expression ὁ τοῦ σώματος μόνος ὢν I think there is a word missing, for instance ὁ τοῦ σώματος (δεσπότης) μόνος ὢν. On this kind of names, see Peterson, Εἷς Θεός (n. 484), 261–3. But it may be that ὁ τοῦ σώματος is a genitive depending on πρωτοπάτωρ, that is, “first Father of the body”. The final expression is a transcription of the text from which the engraver copied.

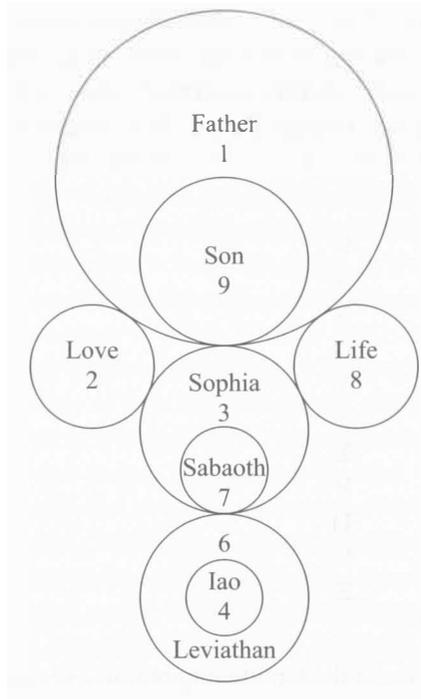


Fig. 12

is the first Father, he who is the only (lord?) of the body, who passes through all things. The seal of Solomon:  $\Upsilon \text{ Z Z Z}$ ; let the snake have a lion's head"). Kotansky and Spier quite rightly trace this text back to Gnostic circles, and compare the expression "he who passes through all things" with similar definitions in the *Tripartite Treatise* (Valentinian) of the Nag Hammadi library. But the origin of the expression is the famous passage from the book of *Job*<sup>546</sup> in which the devil, in the form of a dragon, tells God that he came by crossing all the regions under the heavens. The leontocephalous serpent is identified with the creator, known as Protopator, to which the body is subordinate, and is also called Ioaeouaue – possibly a variation of Yahweh –, "soul (*Ba*) of darkness (*kach*), son/daughter (*Si*) of darkness (*chych*)"<sup>547</sup> and "horned"<sup>548</sup>. Clearly the purpose of the seal of Solomon, which contained the

<sup>546</sup> Job 2.2: Διαπορευθεὶς τὴν ὑπ' οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐμπεριπατήσας τὴν σύμπασαν πᾶρθεμι.

<sup>547</sup> Cf. Mouterde, *Le glaive de Dardanos* (n. 289), 127; F.L. Griffith, H. Thompson, *The Leyden Papyrus: An Egyptian Magical Book*, New York 1974, 162–3.

<sup>548</sup> Some of the gems in the series have Keratagras, others Keratagas; cf. Michel, *Der NYXEYA BOABAX-Logos* (n. 544), and so the interpretation of the term by Kotansky

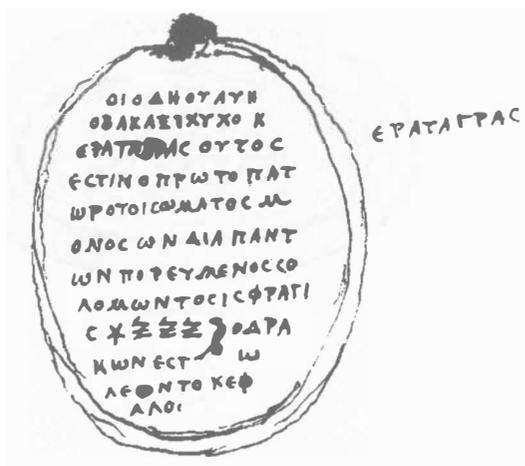


Fig. 13

sacred name of God and was able to subjugate demons<sup>549</sup>, was to keep the disquieting cosmic snake under control. The faith inspiring the person who designed this type of amulet was inspired by a passage in *Psalms* 91:

You will tread upon the lion and the asp  
 You will trample on the young lion and the serpent.  
 “Because he loves me I will protect him,  
 I will exalt him, because he knows my name”.

The seal of Solomon contains the three archaizing Yods, reversed as though in a mirror, plus a fourth sign. In this category of gems, then, the secret name of the supreme god and saviour is used against a god who is similar to Chnoubis, but, like Leviathan, is despised. Since the serpent is called “(lord) of the body”, it is likely that the god of the seal was the god “(lord) of the spirit”. In this way the deity of 4 “seals” the deity of 6.

Other gems<sup>550</sup> show, inside the snake biting its tail, an anagram of the word Βαυχωωωχ, which means “living (*inkh*) soul (*ba*) of darkness (*choch*)”;

and Spier as “horned hunter” is based on less than 50% of the specimens. Note that there is a horned dragon in the Apocalypse.

<sup>549</sup> On the seal of Solomon cf. Perdrizet, ΣΦΡΑΓΙΣ ΣΟΛΟΜΟΝΟΣ (n. 259), 42–61; Id., *Negotium perambulans in tenebris* (n. 259), 32–35; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 208–211; B. Bagatti, *Altre medaglie di Salomone cavaliere e la loro origine*, RivAC 47, 1971, 331–442; Id., *I Giudeo-Cristiani e l’anello di Salomone*, RSR 60, 1972, 151–60; Jordan, Kotansky, *A Solomonic Exorcism* (n. 259), 64–9.

<sup>550</sup> AGDS, III, Kassel, no. 208 (SGG, I, 398; on the obverse is the name Phrê); J. Macarius, *Abraxas seu Apistopistus cui accedit Jo. Chifletii. Abraxas Proteus*, Antverpiae 1657, plate XVI, 66 (= SGG, I, 399); for similar anagrams: Mouterde, *Objets magiques*



Fig. 14

one gem<sup>551</sup> has four *charakteres*<sup>552</sup> in the centre of the *ouroboros* – based on a design very widely used on aniconic magic gems – and on the outside the word Σεσενγενβαρφαρανγης, whose second part could mean “son (*bar*) of Tartarus (*pharanges* = *pharangos*)”<sup>553</sup>. Other gems (fig. 14) have the sign of Chnoubis inside the *ouroboros*<sup>554</sup>, or on the other side of the stone.

(n. 364), 110–1, no. 13 (from Aleppo); PGM, IV, 2427: Φρη ανωφωρχω (with the numerical value 3661, while Βανχωωωχ has a value of 3663); PGM, III, 55. On numerical value, see: Bonner, *The Numerical Value* (n. 365), 6–9; Merkelbach, *Die Zahl 9999* (n. 502), 308. In the Coptic exorcism edited by A. M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, II, Brussels 1930, no. XLIII = Meyer, Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic* (n. 183), 131, no. 70, Bainchooch is described as “invisible”. In *Pistis Sophia IV 137* (356 Schmidt, Macdermot) χανχωωωχ is one of the gods endowed with triple strength.

<sup>551</sup> A. F. Gori, *Inscriptionum antiquarum Graecarum et Romanarum quae in Etruriae urbibus exstant*, I, Florence 1727, LXXIV and plate XII (= SGG, I, 405).

<sup>552</sup> In § 42 we will see various sequences of *charakteres* symbolizing God’s name.

<sup>553</sup> Φάραγιξ (the ending in -es instead of -os is explained by the fact that a theonym must have a nominative type of ending) is the ravine and can indicate Gehenna (the valley of the son of Hinnom): Orig., *Cels.* VI 25 (II, 95 Koet.), according to which the Ophite diagram indicated “υιου Ἐννομι”, that is “of the son of Gehenna or of Tartarus” – cf. 4Reg.: ἐν φάραγγι υιου Ἐννομι –, and the term recurs in medieval spells attributed to St Zacharias: A. Barb., *St. Zacharias the Prophet and Martyr*, JWCI 11, 1948, 40; in Coptic spells the same place corresponds to the West: A. M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, II, Brussels 1930, 105. A survey of previous theories on the etymology of the vox is in D. G. Martinez, P. Michigan XVI. A Greek Love Charm from Egypt (P.Mich. 757), Atlanta 1991, 78–9. The name Sesengenbarpharanges recurs in the Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III.2; IV.2) 64, among the powers that preside over the baptism of life and the purifiers; Barpharanges recurs in the codex Brucianus in the Untitled Text (GCS, *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften*, I, 362 Schmidt) 20.

<sup>554</sup> A.-C.-Ph. de Caylus, *Recueil d’antiquités égyptiennes, etrusques et romaines*, I–VII, Paris 1761–67, VI, 63–6, plate XIX, 4; J. M. A. Chabouillé, *Catalogue général et raisonné des camées et pierres gravées de la Bibliothèque Impériale*, suivi de la descrip-

The magic power of all these gems consisted of “sealing” the demonic serpent, or its “mouth”<sup>555</sup>, with God’s name. These were therefore exorcisms, like those performed by Thomas and Cyriacus .

### § 35. *Man and the Snake*

Origen<sup>556</sup> compared the Gnostic Christian doctrine refuted by the pagan Celsus – towards the middle of the second century AD – with the doctrine that inspired the Ophite diagram. In the circle enclosed by Leviathan the circles of the planets were drawn with the names of their Archons, whose forms were also specified by Origen:

Michael – lion	Thauthabaoth – bear
Souriel – bull	Erathaoth – dog
Raphael – serpent	Taphabaoth/Onoel – ass
Gabriel – eagle	

The sequence was composed using the traditional figures of four biblical archangels, to whom three new personages were added. The animal forms are derived from the biblical story of the famous vision of Ezechiel<sup>557</sup>, as is the iconography of the four evangelists. Ezechiel had seen four monstrous beings in the shape of winged men with four faces: of a man, a lion, a bull and an eagle, on each of the four sides. Welburn’s recent study on the Ophite diagram<sup>558</sup> correctly pointed out that the replacement of the figure of the snake with that of a man was not surprising in the system used by the Ophites, who gave the snake a central place in their doctrines. In my opinion, that specific replacement was very significant precisely because it was a human figure. In the next chapters we will see how widely the concept of the Saviour and Christ in the form of a snake had spread.

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tion des autres monuments exposés dans le Cabinet des médailles et antiques, Paris, 1858, no. 2194 (SGG, I, 403).

<sup>555</sup> In the sermon of John Chrysostom, *De sancto hieromartyre Babyla* (PG 50, 527–34), it is stated several times that the presence of the relics of St Babyla closed the mouth of Daphnic Apollo, preventing him from prophesying.

<sup>556</sup> Cels. VI 30 (II, 100 Koet.). On the series of Archons and their names and forms in Gnostic doctrines cf. Lancellotti, *Gli Gnostici e il cielo* (173), 75–77.

<sup>557</sup> Ez. 1,10.

<sup>558</sup> Welburn, *Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram* (n. 131), 266.

## Asia Minor and Egypt: the roots of Gnosis

### § 36. *The sign of the serpent in Asia Minor*

We will now examine the statement in John's *Apocalypse* that the number of the beast was 666, corresponding to 𐤆𐤆𐤆 and 𐤆𐤆𐤆 𐤀 𐤁, the signs of Chnoubis.

The *Apocalypse* speaks of the churches of Ephesus (and mentions the Nicolaitans), Smyrna (and mentions those who "say they are Jews and are not"); Pergamum (where the "throne of Satan" was located, and where some taught the science of Balaam<sup>559</sup> and some were Nicolaitans), Thyatira (where the prophetess Jezebel, who seduced people into eating the food sacrificed to idols and into prostitution<sup>560</sup>, was tolerated, and where there were people who knew the "deep things of Satan"); Sardis, Philadelphia (where there was a "synagogue of Satan" and "Jews who are not Jews"); and lastly mentions Laodicea. These cities had been part of the kingdom of Pergamum and it is very likely that the descendants of the Babylonian Jews sent by Antiochus III had settled there. Among them were eastern Magi or Chaldeans (the new Balaams) and prophetesses. The Jews worshipped the Gentile idols, among them "the throne of Satan" at Pergamum. Bearing in mind the fact John called Satan the "old serpent"<sup>561</sup>, the throne should be in the Asclepieium, where the snake was the symbol of the god of healing<sup>562</sup>. Since there were

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<sup>559</sup> Eastern magus and prophet hired by the enemies of Israel.

<sup>560</sup> The verbs *porneuein* and *moicheuein* are used. Epiph., haer. LI 33,6 (II, 308 Holl) repeats that she encouraged *porneia*. Jezebel could be an allegorical name, like Balaam, to indicate an idolatrous woman who taught the Jews idolatry, because Jezebel was Jeroboam's wife, a Sidonian who continued to practise the cult of Bahal and induced her husband to do so, arousing the wrath of the prophet Elijah: 2Reg. 16,31–32; cf. W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, Göttingen 51906, 216.

<sup>561</sup> Apc. 12,9; cf. C.K. Barrett, *Gnosis and the Apocalypse of John*, in: *The New Testament and Gnosis*, in honour of R. McL. Wilson, ed. by A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn, Edinburgh 1983, 129, who links the snake cult, implicit in the expression "throne of Satan", to Ophite Gnosis; his position is rejected (though without justification) by H. Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans: Apoc. 2; Acta 6*, in: ANRW II/26.2, 1995, 1621, n. 12.

<sup>562</sup> Cf. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (n. 560), 210–1; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London 1966, 37. H. Giesen, *Die Offen-*

also “synagogues of Satan” at Thyatira and Philadelphia, it may be that Jews worshipped the snake in these cities too.

At Thyatira, Sibylline prophecy had been in vogue during the first century AD, and possibly also in the first century BC<sup>563</sup>. A funerary inscription from Thyatira<sup>564</sup>, dating to circa 120 AD, says: “Fabius Zosimus, having built the tomb, placed it in a pure place just outside the city, in the Sambatheion, in the area sacred to the Chaldean”. So at Thyatira there was a synagogue (where the sabbath was kept)<sup>565</sup>, in a sacred precinct built by a Chaldean, or containing the tomb of a Chaldean hero. Even though the connection between the cult of prophetesses denounced by John and the Jewish Sibyl Sambathe/Sambethe<sup>566</sup> is dubious, she was certainly considered by some to be the daughter of Berossus and Erymanthe, while others thought she was Babylonian or Egyptian<sup>567</sup>. This confusion of the Chaldeans with Jews is easily explained by the fact that there were indeed Chaldean Jews and that heretical Jewish doctrines sprang from Chaldean doctrines.

Inscriptions from Bithynia, Phrygia and surrounding areas provide clear evidence of the existence of a large number of Jews and later of Christianized Jews who prayed to the god Hypsistos, or to the Theòs par excellence, the biblical god<sup>568</sup>. They were integrated into their local communities and

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barung des Johannes, Regensburg 1997, 113–4 (bibliography), prefers the other theory, namely that the throne is the altar of Zeus. Some Christian writers were hostile to pagan medicine and Asclepius: Tat., orat. 16–18; 20 (32–36 Whittaker; nearly all medicine is ruled by magic and is of demonic origin); Athenag., leg. 24 and 25 (141–2 Roberts, Donaldson: the treatment of illness is also derived from the teachings of demons, probably a reference to the temples of Asclepius, cf. Thee, Julius Africanus (n. 164), 342).

<sup>563</sup> Apul., apol. 42, says that the inhabitants of the neighbouring city of Tralles had asked a child who had the gift of prophecy (or was forced to prophesy by a magus) to foretell how the Mithridatic war would end.

<sup>564</sup> CIG 3509.

<sup>565</sup> Cf. Jos., AJ XVI 164; and a recent work by P. R. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge 1991, 198, n. 65.

<sup>566</sup> The Jewish Sibyl is called Sambethe in the prologue to the Sibylline Oracles and Sabbe in Paus. X 12.9; on Berossus, father of the Jewish Sibyl, see: Plin., Nat. VII 123. The Nag Hammadi treatise *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 101 says that the arrogant creator generated his divine court of 7 deities, who had both male and female names (since they were androgynous), and the (collective) female name was Pronoia Sambathas, meaning “hebdomad” (or “week”). Sambethe (Sambas in the hypochothic form) was a female name used in Ptolemaic Egypt: *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, III, Cambridge/Mass. 1964, section XIII. In the Sibylline Oracles III 826 (90 Gef.) Sambethe was the wife of one of Noah’s sons.

<sup>567</sup> Cf. W. Bousset, *Die Beziehungen der ältesten jüdischen Sibylle zur Chaldäischen*, ZNW 3, 1902, 23–50.

<sup>568</sup> Cf. L. Robert, *Hellenica*, X, Paris 1955, 247–56; XI–XII, 1960, 381–413 (which provides, on 399, an essential bibliography on Christian inscriptions). On the relations

later became Romanized. In Asia Minor Jews had been settled since the time of Antiochus III of Syria (late third century BC.). Antiochus had brought 200 Jewish families from Babylonia and Mesopotamia because he was relying on them to keep Phrygia and Lydia under control, and had given them permission to use their own laws<sup>569</sup>. These Jews left a considerable amount of evidence behind: for example, some coins from Apameia Kibotòs in Phrygia have the image of Noah's ark, believed to have run aground in that area<sup>570</sup>.

Hellenistic Jews in Western Asia Minor must have been perfectly integrated into the local culture. Antiochus III had placed them there as an outpost of the monarchy, in an area recently regained. It is reasonable to think that they took part in all the ceremonies of the Seleucid dynastic cult and in the 2nd century were loyal subjects of the kingdom of Pergamum<sup>571</sup>. At the time of the Jewish insurrections under Vespasian, Trajan and Hadrian, these Jews were to some extent Christianized and did not create any problems for the Romans<sup>572</sup>. The integration of the Jews of Asia Minor into the pagan environment surrounding them is comparable to the attitude of certain Gnostics described by Irenaeus<sup>573</sup>, who took part in pagan feasts, ate sacrificial meat,

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between Jews and Christians cf. M. Simon, *Verus Israel. Étude sur les relations entre Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'empire romain (135–425)*, Paris 1948.

<sup>569</sup> Jos., AJ I 147–153. Cf. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565). Seleucus I, circa 300 BC, had sent Jews, certainly Babylonian, to Antioch and to the other great colonies he had founded: Jos., AJ XII 119.

<sup>570</sup> B. V. Head, D. C. L. Litt, *BMC Phrygia*, London 1906, 101, no. 181; *SNG Deutschland. Sammlung von Aulock*, Berlin 1965 and 1968, nos. 3506; 3510; 3512; 8347–8; cf. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 87 and n. 6, which gives a bibliography. They are bronze coins, emitted under Septimius Severus, Macrinus, Alexander Severus, Gordian III, Trebonian Gallus, and Philip the Arab, showing on the reverse the open ark, bearing the name NΩH and containing a man and a woman; in front of the ark: another couple with their right hands raised; above and on the lid of the ark: a dove with an olive branch in its beak. A bronze coin of Apameia from the time of Septimius Severus shows Athena playing the double flute, turning backwards and looking at herself in the waters of lake Aulokrene in the presence of Marsyas, the chaste satyr: *BMC Phrygia*, 97, no. 163; *SNG von Aulock*, nos. 3497; 8344 (Marsyas the flautist on his own: nos. 3472–4; 3490; 3492; Athena on her own: 3482). The theme of the goddess of wisdom whose image is reflected in the waters is Gnostic; the flautist theme is Naassene (Hipp., haer. V 9.3, 98 Wend.: it seems to be the image of the created Anthropos = Attis = *pneuma enarmonion*). Although it is not certain that the coin's unusual iconography reflects Gnostic speculations, it is however possible.

<sup>571</sup> In Jerusalem a decree from Pergamum was kept that spoke of the friendship between the Pergamene ancestors and the children of Abraham: Jos., AJ XIV 247–55. This presupposes good relations between the Pergamum court and the Jews of Asia Minor. The ancestors of the Pergamene people must have been Herakles, his son Telephos and their descendants.

<sup>572</sup> Cf. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 32–33.

<sup>573</sup> haer. I 6.3 (SC 264, 94–6 Rouss., Dout.).

and went to the circus games; the heresiologist adds that they indoctrinated women in particular and fornicated with them. This description is exactly the same as the one given in the Johannine *Apocalypse* and another passage from Irenaeus<sup>574</sup> which mentions the Nicolaitans, a heretical sect that probably became established very early on in Asia Minor, since the author of the *Apocalypse* was already criticizing them harshly during the time of Domitian. There must have been contact between the Jews of Asia Minor and their kinspeople in Babylonia<sup>575</sup>, from where they originated. A Babylonian wise man called Zacharias, who dedicated a book on the properties of stones<sup>576</sup> to Mithridates of Pontos, very probably was a Jew named Zacharias<sup>577</sup>.

According to Irenaeus, the Nicolaitans were convinced of their spiritual incorruptibility, even if they mingled with polytheistic pagans<sup>578</sup>. Clement of Alexandria<sup>579</sup> says that Nicolaus, one of the first disciples of the Apostles<sup>580</sup>,

<sup>574</sup> Joh., Apc. 2,14–15 and Iren., haer. I 26.3 (SC 264, 348 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>575</sup> On Judaism in Babylonia: J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I–V, Leiden 1965–1970.

<sup>576</sup> Plin., Nat. XXXVII 169.

<sup>577</sup> A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom. The Limits of Hellenisation*, Cambridge 1975, 115.

<sup>578</sup> haer. I 26.3 (SC 264, 348 Rouss., Dout.). The notion of incorruptibility brings to mind the comparison made by some Valentinian doctrines with gold, which is not corrupted even if mixed with mud, just like the “pneumatic” men who come into contact with the material world: Epiph., haer. XXXI 20,9 (I, 417 Holl).

<sup>579</sup> str. II 118,3–4; III 25,5–6; 26,1–2 (177; 207–8 Stählin); Clement tries to make the behaviour of Nicolaus (who had been chosen by the Apostles!) more edifying by interpreting his assumption as contempt for the flesh, and preference for the spirit. There is also an edifying account of Nicolaus in Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch. XI 20 (224 Hes., Dr.). Clem., str. III 25,5 (207 Stählin) adds that Carpocrates also behaved in a similar fashion. The historicity of Carpocrates is doubtful, since his name is almost identical to Harpocrates, revered by the sect; cf. H. Kraft, *Gab es einen Gnostiker Karpokrates?*, ThZ 8, 1952, 434–443; P.-Th. Camelot, *Art. Karpokratianer*, LThK, V, 1960, 1379.

<sup>580</sup> Act. 2,5, in which he is said to be from Antioch; cf. Iren., haer. I 26,3 (SC 264, 348 Rouss., Dout.); Clem., str. II 20,118; III 4,25–26 (II, 177 and 207–8 Stählin); Eus., h. e. III 29,1–4 (II/1, 260–2 Sch.). On the link between Nicolaus and his sect cf. the accurate observations of N. Brox, *Nikolaos und Nikolaiten*, VigChr 19, 1965, 23–30. The widely held theory (cf. Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans* (n. 561), 1625–26) that the Nicolaitans had not been taught by the deacon Nicolaus, but simply made reference to him, is an unjustified concession to the good reputation of the Apostles’ disciple; any such concession, if at all, ought to have been made by the Church fathers, but was not. The *porneuein* of the heretics of Asia Minor, according to many scholars, was merely idolatry; cf. P. Prigent, *L’hérésie asiatic et l’église confessante de l’Apocalypse à Ignace*, VigChr 31, 1977, 1–22, esp. 12; Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans* (n. 561), 1602–44 (bibliography), esp. 1613–19; P.F. Beatrice, *Apollo of Alexandria and the Origins of the Jewish-Christian Baptist Encratism*, in: ANRW II/26.2, 1995, 1261–63. Doubts on whether there was an actual Nicolaitan sect have also been expressed by Casadio, *Vie gnostiche all’immortalità* (n. 489), 98, who also shows that a purely metaphorical interpretation of the Nicolaitan *porneia*, particularly in

recommended the “abuse of flesh”, and therefore advocated unbridled sexuality. St Jerome echoes this statement, and considers Nicolaus to be the true father of the Ophite heresy<sup>581</sup>. Barkabbas, a prophet close to the Nicolaitans, also urged abnormal sexual practices<sup>582</sup>. It is possible that Nicolaus was the first to Christianize Jewish heretical groups in Asia Minor and that he went along with his guests’ free-thinking approach, while of course adapting it to his own Christian beliefs<sup>583</sup>. Earlier than the author of the *Apocalypse*, St Paul had to deal with Jews who practised sexual licentiousness<sup>584</sup> and his teaching on sexuality and marriage must have been aimed at reforming such customs. Nicolaus corresponds to the description of the false prophet and

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the testimonies of Clement and Irenaeus, is untenable. I do not see why the *porneuein* and the *moicheuein* attributed by the *Apocalypse* to the heretics of Asia Minor could not indicate both idolatry and sexual transgression. One could speculate that originally their *porneuein* was confined to the consumption of meat sacrificed to the idols, and over the century (from the writing of the *Apocalypse* to Irenaeus’ *Adversus haereses*) they decided to abandon themselves to sexual *porneia*; however, this would be an arbitrary and futile hypothesis. It goes without saying that I do not accept the theory that the Nicolaitans were disciples of St Paul: E. Renan, *Saint Paul*, Paris 1869, 304–5; 367–70; M. Goguel, *Les Nicolaïtes*. RHR 115, 1937, 11; M. Simon, *De l’observance rituelle à l’ascèse: recherches sur le décret apostolique*, RHR 193, 1978, 67–75. Cf. E. Fiorenza, *Apocalyptic and Gnosis in the Book of Revelation*, JBL 92, 1973, 565–81, according to whom John countered Nicolaitan Gnostic ideas with his Apocalyptic theology.

<sup>581</sup> Ep. 14,9 (CSEL 54/1,57–58 Hilberg); 133,4 (CSEL 56, 248 Hilb.); CXLVII 4 (CSEL 56, 319 Hilb.).

<sup>582</sup> Epiph., haer. XXVI 2,2–4 (I, 277; cf. 279 Holl).

<sup>583</sup> Cerinthus was another Gnostic Christianizer of the province of Asia: Epiph., haer. XXVIII 1,4 (I, 313–4 Holl): ὁ Κήρινθος ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ διατρέψων κἀκείσε τοῦ κηροῦργματος τὴν ἀρχὴν πεποιτημένος; but in LI 2,3 (II, 250 Holl) the term Asia is used in a broad sense. Iren., haer. III 3,4 (SC 211, 40–42 Rouss., Dout.) quotes the story told by Bishop Policarpus that Cerinthus had been seen by the apostle John (the author of the *Apocalypse*) at the thermal baths at Ephesus; this defines the geographical area of Asia visited by the heretic. He had served his apprenticeship not only in Palestine but also in Egypt: Hipp., haer. VII pinax 7 (190 Wend.); 33,1 (220 Wend.); X 21,1 (281 Wend.). But it must not be forgotten that, according to Dionysios, bishop of Alexandria in the middle of the third century, Cerinthus was the author of the Johannine *Apocalypse*: Eus., h. e. III 28,3–4 (II/1, 258 Sch.); VII 25,1–2 (II/2, 690 Sch.). Cerinthus held that Jesus was a man like any other, but that the divine Christ came down upon him so that he could reveal the unknown God (Iren., haer. I 26,1, SC 264,344–6 Rouss., Dout.). Cerinthus can be considered the first Christian Gnostic, cf. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, London 1958, 100. Scholars usually date him to the first decades of the second century AD; cf. for instance. Casadio, *Vie gnostiche all’immortalità* (489), 91.

<sup>584</sup> Rom. 3,8; 6,1, 15; 1Cor. 5–6; 10; 2Cor. 6,11–7,1; Gal. 5,13–21; Phil. 3,18–19; 2Tim. 3,1–9; 2Petr. 2–3; Hebr. 3–19. Other Apostolic Fathers also met “false teachers” in Asia Minor; cf. Ign., Philad. 6,2 (SC 10, 146 Camelot), and persons who practised the “evil arts”: Ign., Polyc. 5,1 (174 Camelot); cf. P.J. Donahue, *Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, VigChr 32, 1978, 81–93.

the Antichrist of the *Apocalypse*: he had started the process of Christianizing heretical Jews, who probably were already Gnostics, by reconciling their doctrines with the figure of Christ. It is clear from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (who died in 117) and the works of the Apostolic Fathers in general (that is, from second century Christian literature) that there was concern about magi and “false prophets”, especially in Anatolia. One only has to read the letters from Ignatius to the inhabitants of Tralles and Philadelphia<sup>585</sup> on the subject.

The snake cult, which was still practised during the late antiquity by Bithynian Ophites<sup>586</sup>, goes back to Anatolian religion, as does the Gnostic (and Christian) reinterpretation of the Phrygian mysteries of Cybele and Attis by the snake-worshipping Naassene sect<sup>587</sup>. It would have been difficult for the

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<sup>585</sup> In general it is believed that the Asia Minor heresy addressed by Ignatius was basically uniform and followed the same Judaizing line (now also Docetist) as the heretics of the *Apocalypse*; cf. Prigent, *L'hérésie asiatic* (n. 580), 1–7; discussion and bibliography on the doctrines opposed by Ignatius in E. Norelli, *Ignazio di Antiochia combatte veramente dei cristiani giudaizzanti?*, in: *Verus Israel* (n. 371), 220–264. Personally I think that the main unifying element was the recent process of Christianization. Th. Lechner, *Ignatius adversus Valentinianos?*. *Chronologische und theologieggeschichtliche Studien zu den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien*, TSECLL 47, Leiden, Boston. Cologne 1999, has argued that the date of the alleged Ignatian letters should be moved to ca. 165–175 and that they, and esp. the one to Ephesians, are documents of the opposition to Valentinians and Marcosians in Asia Minor. On the authenticity of the letters cf. R. Weijenborg, *Les lettres d'Ignace d'Antioche. Etude critique littéraire et de théologie*, Leiden 1969, 15–21.

<sup>586</sup> *Prædestinatus* I 17 (PL 53, 592).

<sup>587</sup> Hipp., haer. V 3–4; 8–9 (77–78; 89–102 Wend.). From the long section in Hippolytus on the Naassenes, based on a hymn to Attis, it emerges that they were very familiar with the ancient mysteries, from those of Samothracia to the Eleusis and the Egyptian Osiris mysteries, but their knowledge of Cybele seems to go back to rare, ancient theonyms used in certain Anatolian sanctuaries; cf. D.M. Cosi, Adamma. Un problema e qualche proposta, *AMAP* 88/3, 1975–76, 149–56; G. Sfameni Gasparro, Interpretazioni gnostiche e misteriosofiche del mito di Attis, in: *Studies Quispel* (n. 308), 376–411. The Naassenes were also well versed in the doctrine of the priests of Pessinus concerning the almond tree that sprang from the genitals of Agdistis, who was also said to have generated Attis: Hipp., haer. V 9,1–2 (97–98 Wend.); cf. Paus.VII 17,9–12. The myth as told by Pausanias is as follows: “some Lydians and Attis were killed by the boar and as a result of these events the Galatians living in Pessinus abstain from pork. They do not, however, follow the current tradition of the Attis story, but they have another local tradition concerning him. Zeus, while sleeping, shed his seed on the earth, which in time produced a demon with dual sexual organs, male and female, who was named Agdistis; the gods, fearing Agdistis, cut off his male member. When the fruit of the almond tree born of this organ was ripe, it is said that the daughter of the Sangarius river plucked it; when she placed it in her bosom the fruit disappeared immediately and she became pregnant; after she had given birth, a he-goat took care of the child who had been exposed. As he grew,

Jews of Asia Minor to avoid worshipping the major local divinity, Cybele, beloved of the Romans<sup>588</sup>. But to venerate her they needed a Gnostic type of interpretation, based on divine revelations. And this, like every Gnostic interpretation, required a philosophical reading of the Greek, Antolian or Egyptian myth, because the gods of the Gentiles could only be respected by the Jews if they were a manifestation of their own god. The same applies to the serpent of Asclepius in the capital of the Pergamene kingdom and provincial capital of Asia. Moreover, the snake cult could also have been justified

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Attis became more beautiful than any human, and Agdistis fell in love with him. When Attis became an adult, his family sent him to Pessinus to marry the king's daughter. The wedding song was already being sung, when Agdistis appeared: Attis, out of his mind, cut off his own genitals, and the king who was giving away his daughter also unmanned himself. Agdistis, however, repented of what she had done to Attis and persuaded Zeus not to allow the body of Attis to putrefy or to be consumed". Here we could find many premises for a potential Jewish Gnostic interpretation of the myth of Attis. This interpretation was given, according to Hippolytus, by the Naassenes. There is a parallel to the ejaculation of Zeus in Origin of the World (NHC II,5) 114: the Archons shed sperm on to the navel of the earth, and thus the earthly Adam was born. We could venture a hypothetical comparison:

Zeus sheds his sperm,	From the Father
the hermaphrodite, who was castrated,	Sophia, a predominantly female herm-
is born,	aphrodite, is born
the almond tree is born	who emits a creative substance, from which
Attis is born from the almond and	Jaldabaoth, who generates Sabaoth, is born
from a woman	Sabaoth cooperates with Jaldabaoth,
Agdistis loves him	Sabaoth repents,
Attis marries a mortal	Sabaoth is assumed into
Attis castrates himself	the divine sphere of Sophia
Agdistis forgives him and her request	
for his	
bodily incorruptibility for him is granted	

But this is a purely hypothetical comparison.

<sup>588</sup> R. P. Casey, Naassenes and Ophites, JThS 27, 1926, 374–87, esp. 387, proposed Hierapolis in Syria as the origin of the Naassene sect (because of the similarity between Naassene doctrine and that of Monoimos the Arab); J. Montserrat Torrents, El universo masculino de los Naasenos, Faventia 1, 1980, 7–13, thinks it originated in Rome (and refers to the crypt of the Aurelii near via Manzoni); J. Frickel, Hellenistische Erlösung in Christlicher Deutung, Leiden 1984, 8, thought it originated in Rome or Alexandria; M. Tardieu, Histoire des syncrétismes de la fin de l'Antiquité, ACFr 1992–93, 549, proposes Asia, and especially Asia Minor and links the Naassenes to the Montanists (on the basis of certain terms, not specifically Naassene, such as *pneumatikōi* and *Christianōi*, that recur in epitaphs that could be Montanist); M. G. Lancellotti, The Naassenes. A Gnostic Identity among Judaism, Christianity, Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Traditions, Münster 2000, 74, suggests Syria (because of the choice of the Hebrew noun *Naas* and the role of Mariamme = Maria Magdalen in Naassene doctrine).

by the fact that the brazen serpent of Moses (like the snake of Asclepius, a healer) was worshipped for some time in the Temple of Jerusalem<sup>589</sup>.

As already mentioned, the *Apocalypse* states that in Thyatira there were people who claimed to “know the deep things of Satan” (ἐγνώσαν τὰ βαθέα τοῦ Σατανᾶ)<sup>590</sup> and Hippolytus, approximately three generations later, said that the Naassenes called themselves *Gnostikòι*, because they alone knew the deep things (φάσκοντες μόνοι τὰ βάθη γινώσκειν)<sup>591</sup>. This conceptual and verbal coincidence is an indication that the Naassenes were located in Asia Minor and related to the Jewish sects in Thyatira and the surrounding areas.

Strange as it may seem, scholars of Gnosticism have had to acknowledge the fact that the figure of Seth, son of Adam, has nothing to do with the Egyptian god of the same name<sup>592</sup>. And yet there have been attempts to retrace the social basis of Gnosticism to Egypt<sup>593</sup>. In the case of Sethianism, however, is necessary to study the history of internal Anatolia in order to understand why there was no contamination between the two Seths. On the other hand, it would have been odd if there had been no Noah theme in the thinking of the Gnostics of Asia Minor, who believed that the ark had run aground near Akmonia in Phrygia. The Sethians did in fact speak of the ark, in which they believed 7 out of 8 people were of the pneumatic race, bearers of divine particles, whereas only Cham was sent by the wicked angels<sup>594</sup>.

<sup>589</sup> Ex. 17,11; 2Reg. 18,4: but Ezechias had it removed.

<sup>590</sup> 2,24 (John is addressing those who have still not followed their teachings); on interpretations of this Johannine expression, see: Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans* (n. 561), 1619–22; on the passage from Hippolytus: G. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, London 1974, 92; W. Schmithals, *Neues Testament und Gnosis*, Darmstadt 1984, 138; Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans* (n. 561), 1621. In Paul., 1Cor. 2,10 the depth (τὰ βάθη) of God is mentioned; on the possible similarities between Nicolaitans and certain members of the first Christian community in Corinth, see: Räisänen, *The Nicolaitans* (n. 561), 1617; Beatrice, *Apollo of Alexandria* (n. 580), 1232–75.

<sup>591</sup> Hipp., haer. V 6,4 (78 Wend.). The followers of Marcus the Valentinian also believed that salvation was through descent into the depths: Iren., haer. I 21,2 (SC 264, 296 Rouss., Dout.). Gnostic learning is described in Iren., haer. II 22,1 (SC 294, 214 Rouss., Dout.) as *profunda Bythi*; 22,3: *profunda Dei*; cf. Tert., adv. Valent. I (CSEL 47, 178 Kroymann): *altum est*.

<sup>592</sup> J. Fossum and B. Glater, *Seth in the Magical Texts*, ZPE 100, 1994, 86–92, with an earlier bibliography.

<sup>593</sup> H. A. Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism*, SBL.DS 77, Atlanta 1985.

<sup>594</sup> Ps. Tert., adv. omn. haer. 2 (218 Kroy.); Epiph., haer. XXXIX 3,2 (II, 74 Holl); according to the haer. XL 7,1–6 (II, 87–88 Holl) the Archontics held that the seven children of Seth were called *Allogeneis*, that is, born of other stock. In the Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG 8502,2) 29–30, after the Flood the creator’s angels came and mingled with the people of Gnosis, leading to another mixing of evil with good. On

So there are several clues that suggest that the roots, or at least one of the roots of the Sethian movement, are to be sought in the Hellenistic Judaism of Asia Minor. By following this line of inquiry, a historical and social explanation could be found for certain doctrinal illogicalities.

### § 37. *The war against the snake*

But let us return now to the Anatolian descendants of the Babylonian Jews. The snake, probably the same divinity worshipped in the shrine of Asclepius in Pergamum, was also revered by heretical Jews from the province of Asia when Paul, John and other followers of Christ arrived. Nicolaus had adapted to the situation, and probably had proposed the identification of the sacred serpent with Christ that characterized Ophitic doctrine, while Paul exhorted the diaspora brothers to revere monotheistic tradition, to reject idolatry and magic and to respect marriage. A similar reconstruction, apparently arbitrary, concedes less than would appear to hypotheses, because it is confirmed in the stories of Thomas and Cyriacus, which are inspired by the journey of Paul and probably that of his emulator Abercius. They had gone to a land where the Jews had ceased to respect the Law (the Egypt of the Hymn of the Pearl), because they were cut off from the world by a river that rested only on Saturdays (Cyriacus); the country where the divine Mother had sent the two heroes was ruled by the diabolical snake, which was both adored and feared; they had taken with them the message sent by the King of Heaven; an eagle, sent by the Father to remind them of the message, stirred their consciences; thus it was that Thomas found the pearl and lulled the serpent to sleep; while Cyriacus closed the snake's mouth with the letter he was carrying. The mission of Paul, the prototype of these heroes, had generated one of the great Christian myths<sup>595</sup>.

Both Paul and Nicolaus had success with their preaching. Judaism in Asia Minor, which had already started to accept Gnosis, must have taken diverse forms, because John outlines the characteristics of each of the churches mentioned and admonishes them. But there were also many other cities where the Jews had settled, and Gnosis must have taken root and branched out among them, owing to the lack of socio-political and ideological cohesion among

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the Flood as a central argument of gnostic thought against the creator: A. F. J. Klijn, *An Analysis of the Use of the Story of the Flood in the Apocalypse of Adam*, in: *Studies in Gnosticism* (n. 308), 218–226.

<sup>595</sup> The myth was still influential at the time of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec kingdom, where the Christians were faced with the cult of the plumed serpent.

these Jews. They were nearly all descended from the Seleucid settlers who formerly resided in Babylonia, and were now citizens of the various *poleis*, and belonged mainly to the province of Asia.

We must never underestimate the learning of the Chaldeans and consequently that of their Jewish disciples in Asia Minor, but the snake cult did not have an important role in Babylonia, as far as we know, while it was extremely important in Anatolia. We can infer from this that it had not been appropriated by the Jews until their arrival in Asia Minor, whereas it is likely that in Babylonia theories had already been developed on the divine Anthropos, the Sophia of God, the angels who came down to earth, and probably also on Seth and the other more ancient beliefs underlying Gnosticism. The doctrinal system developed by these Jews no doubt included an Anthropos Son of God and (in Asia Minor) an emanation of God in the form of a snake<sup>596</sup>. The system must have had numerous similarities with those of the Jews of Leontopolis. It is not clear at what stage the snake came to be perceived as be the rebellious son of Leviathan, resulting in the following perfect equation with the divine world:

God the Father	Leviathan
Anthropos the Son	Instructor Serpent

As a result of the Christianization of the Jews of Asia Minor, the instructor serpent was identified with the Son made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Meeting these Jewish idolaters and heretics was traumatic for the Christian preachers, who were totally unfamiliar with many of the doctrinal theories of Babylonian, Anatolian and also Egyptian Judaism. It was then that the Christians started a new kind of warfare against the devil, who was equated with the pagan snake gods also revered by diaspora Jews. The Christians gradually extended their campaign against the devil from the sphere of Jewish heresies to Greek and Roman serpentiform divinities<sup>597</sup>. We have already

<sup>596</sup> According to one modern theory (going back to R. A. Lipsius, *Der Gnosticismus, sein Wesen, Ursprung und Entwicklungsgang*, in: *Allgemeine Encyclopädie*, ed. by J. S. Ersch and J. G. Gruber, I. Sektion, 71. Band, Leipzig 1860, 140–3; cf. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203), 5), Ophitism was the oldest form of Gnosticism, and gave rise to Sethian Gnosis. C. Colpe, *Sethian and Zoroastrian Ages of the World*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 540–52, has suggested that the origin of Sethianism should be sought within certain schools of Mesopotamian wisdom.

<sup>597</sup> Quacquarelli, *Il leone e il drago* (n. 25). Christ and the Apostles had used exorcism to fight the devil, but at some moment (especially under the Christian emperors) in Christian history this war targeted pagan gods, who had been equated with demons at least since the time of Tatian and Tertullian; cf. J. Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, Wien 21880, repr. Munich 1982, 143–193; A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Wiesbaden 1924, 151–170; *L'intolleranza*

mentioned Theodoretus and Severus of Antioch, who found the snakes worshipped by Gnostics or pagans, the dragon defeated by St Silvester (§ 6), and the cache of pagan statues at Tomis containing the snake Glykon.

The *Apocalypse of John* explains the origin of the evil that afflicted Judaism in Asia Minor: the corrupt, idolatrous city was Babylonia, the native country of the Jews admonished at the beginning of the work. The first cause and author of idolatry was the red dragon – Satan-Leviathan – which lived in the starry sky; it had been cast down to earth by Michael and the angelic hosts, but the beast from the sea had received authority from the dragon and made men worship it<sup>598</sup>. If we link the dragon cult to the snake cult, widespread in the province of Asia and also practised by Jews, we can also link John's vision to the condemnation of the synagogues of Asia Minor.

In conclusion, there are secondary elements to be stressed alongside the relationship between Chaldeans and Jews. There must have been a large number of Jews living in Babylonia since the time of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar. When Greek became established as the *lingua franca*, from the fourth century BC onwards, the Greeks also began to study Chaldean science and some of them attended Chaldean schools<sup>599</sup>. If there were Greek Chaldeans, then there is all the more reason to suppose that there were Jewish Chaldeans, who had been there even longer. And if the Greek Chaldeans did not renounce their Homeric or Platonic cultural background, the Jewish Chaldeans certainly will not have renounced the fundamental aspects of their biblical tradition. Here, then, is the origin of the first and oldest forms of astrological and cosmological Gnosis.

At this point we can provide a new interpretation<sup>600</sup> of the visit of the Magi astrologers to Jesus recounted in Matthew's *Gospel*. Assuming that there are

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cristiana nei confronti dei pagani, ed. by P. F. Beatrice, Bologna 1990; F. J. Wiebe, *Kaiser Valens und die heidnische Opposition*, Bonn 1995, 230–235. However, it is not clear how, when and by whom this leap forward in the war on the devil was made.

<sup>598</sup> In the Sibylline Oracles III 62–92 (50 Gef.) there is a prophecy against those who had been seduced by Beliar, that is, the Devil; this collection of oracular statements is of Jewish origin and was probably composed in Egypt. For an exegesis of the oracle and parallels, see J. Geffcken, *Die Oracula Sibyllina*, CGS VIII, Leipzig 1902, 50–52; cf. a recent work by M. Mazza, *Il vero e l'immaginato. Profezia, narrativa e storiografia nel mondo romano*, Rome 1999, 58–61. This oracle however predicts that only the Jews will be saved: herein lies the difference between Hebraism and Gnostic or Christian thinking.

<sup>599</sup> J. Bidez, *Les écoles chaldéennes sous Alexandre et les Séleucides*, in: *Mélanges Carpat*, APh 3, Brussels 1935, 41–89. The Persian Magi are a similar case; on the Arabs and the name Magos, see: Aesch., fr. 36b.II Radt; cf. J. N. Bremmer, *The Birth of the Term 'Magic'*, ZPE 126, 1999, 3–4; Magi of Syria: Aristot., fr. 32 Rose; Magi of Capadocia: Strab. XV 733.

<sup>600</sup> For a status quaestionis and full biography, cf. W. Wiefel, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, *Theol. Handkomm. zum N. T.*, Leipzig 1998, 37; the best recent contribu-

no conclusive reasons for dismissing the episode as total invention, with no core of historical truth, if Magi really did come from the East, following a new star, then they were probably not astrologers from a purely Babylonian tradition, but Chaldean Jews. This is the only explanation for their interest in the kingship of Israel. If we tried to picture these Magi, they would be like Monoimos the Arab, or better still the authors of the first century BC magic lamella from Emesa, mentioned in § 16, with the great *ouroboros* snake and Jewish theonyms. If, on the other hand, we do not accept the historicity of the Magi's visit, the fact still remains that in Matthew's account certain Eastern astrologers could be interested in Jewish kingship.

If we agree that there were Chaldean Jews in Babylonia and neighbouring areas, and in Anatolia, it is easier to understand why the Chaldeans mentioned by Hippolytus and Zosimus<sup>601</sup> speculated on the figure of Adam, and why the Chaldeans known to Varro mentioned Iaô in their secret writings.

### § 38. *Chnoubis and Glykon*

Chnoubis was identified with the sacred serpent Glykon, whose cult was instituted by Alexander of Abonouteichos in the middle of the second century AD<sup>602</sup>. The obverse of a magic gem in green agate in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris<sup>603</sup> (fig. 15) shows the serpent Chnoubis, with a lion's head surrounded by a nimbus and 7 rays, and bears the following inscription: XNOYBIΣ (above), ΓΛΥ/ΚΩ/Ν/Α (on the left), ΙΑΩ (below) and the symbol SSS, typical of Chnoubis.

Another gem<sup>604</sup> depicts Chnoubis with long human hair, like Glykon (fig. 16).

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tion on the subject is by M. Hengel and H. Merkel, *Die Magier aus dem Osten und die Flucht nach Ägypten im Rahmen der antiken Religionsgeschichte*, in: *Orientierung an Jesus*, Festschr. J. Schmid, Freiburg 1973, 139–69, who however construe the role of the Magi differently, as replicas of Balaam/Bileam, an Eastern Magus hired to curse Israel, who was compelled by his science to predict the triumph of Israel thanks to the Messiah (Num. 24,17).

<sup>601</sup> Cf. §.17.

<sup>602</sup> Cf. Lucianus, *Alexander or the false prophet*.

<sup>603</sup> Delatte, *Derchain, Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 82; cf. A. Mastrocinque, *Alessandro di Abonouteichos e la magia*, in: *Imago antiquitatis. Mélanges Turcan*, ed. by N. Blanc, Paris 1999, 341–52. It is probably a moss agate.

<sup>604</sup> R. van den Broeck, *The Myth of Phoenix according to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, Leiden 1972, plate 10.1; R. Vollkommer, *Art. Phoinix III*, LIMC VIII.1 (Suppl., 1997), 988. no. 17.



Fig. 15

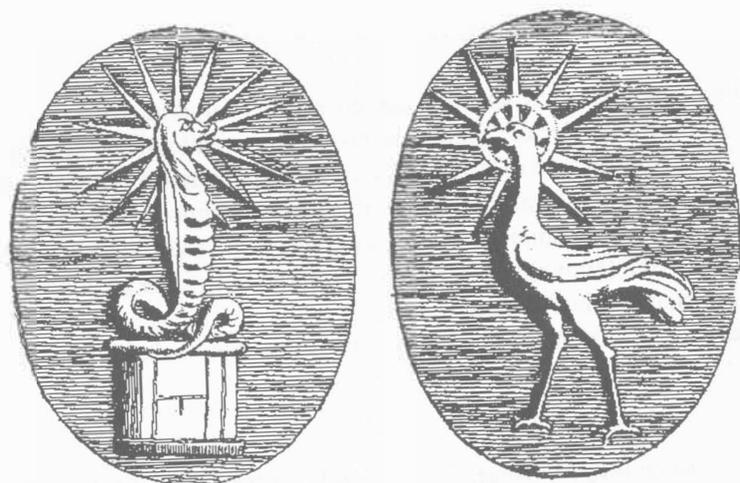


Fig. 16

The gem in the Cabinet des Médailles proves that the Decan of Leo could have represented the incarnation of Asclepius, like the serpent god Glykon worshipped at Abonouteichos<sup>605</sup>, which had luminous solar attributes. More-

<sup>605</sup> The inscription on the gem in the Cabinet des Médailles recurs on another Chnoups gem found at Caesarea Maritima (cf. Mastrocinque, Alessandro di Abonouteichos (I, 202), 204-7). The fact that the leontocephalous serpent was sometimes depicted as lying on an altar or a pedestal suggests that it was a cultic statue reproduced on gems.

over, Jamblichus<sup>606</sup> asserts that Asclepius is located in the Sun and everything that concerns creation and becoming proceeds from him. Lucianus' pamphlet on the *False Prophet*<sup>607</sup> used the term *phaos* to denote Glykon, and one of the oracles created by Alexander of Abonouteichos proclaimed: "I am Glykon, third blood of Zeus, light of mortals". The expression "light of men" recurs in John's *Gospel*<sup>608</sup> and in *Poimandres*<sup>609</sup>, the Hermetic treatise closest to the language of the gospel. So Gnostics could find fertile ground here for future syncretism. But it is more likely that Alexander had been inspired by Gnostic thinking.

The testimony of the *Prædestinatus*, examined in § 2, tells us that at the beginning of the fifth century Christian priests had repressed the Ophite heresy in Bithynia and had killed the sacred snakes. The geographical area of Bithynia is very near to the homeland of the Glykon serpent cult, which originated in Paflagonia, and the coinage of Nicomedia in Bithynia celebrates the Glykon cult under Caracalla and Maximus Caesar<sup>610</sup>; for this reason some modern scholars have decided to group together the phenomonology of the Anatolian Ophitic cult and that of the Glykon cult<sup>611</sup>, also Anatolian. In my opinion, it is possible that Ophites and Glykon worshippers had coexisted for some time in Anatolia<sup>612</sup> and that during the fourth century, as a result of

<sup>606</sup> Fr. 19 ▀ Dillon (in *Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta*. In Tim.). Jamblichus contradicted those who held that Asclepius was equated with the moon and Apollo with the sun.

<sup>607</sup> Alex. 18.

<sup>608</sup> 8,12. Cf. G. Sfameni Gasparro, Alessandro di Abonutico, lo "pseudo-profeta" ovvero come costruirsi un'identità religiosa, I. Il profeta, "eroe" e "uomo divino", SMSR 62, 1996, 565–6, who cites other appropriate comparisons, particularly with Aristoph., *Plut.* 640, in which Asclepius is described as "βροτοῖσι φέγγος".

<sup>609</sup> I 6; cf. O. Weinreich, Alexander der Lügenprophet und seine Stellung in der Religiosität des zweiten Jahrhunderts, in: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, I, Amsterdam 1969, 543 (= NIKA 47, 1921, 129–151).

<sup>610</sup> Robert, *A travers l'Asie Mineure* (n. 75), 395.

<sup>611</sup> R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order, Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire*, Cambridge Mass. 1966, 118. It is not certain whether the Celsus of the *Alethès logos*, critiqued by Origen, can be identified with the Celsus addressed by Lucianus in the pamphlet dedicated to Alexander of Abonouteichos; cf. Ph. Merlan, *Art. Celsus*, RAC II, 1954, 954. The author of the *Alethès logos* was very familiar with the Ophites, whom he treats as ordinary Christians. If indeed he was a friend of Lucianus, then the Ophites were probably from Asia Minor, which means that we would have one pamphlet by Lucianus against the serpent Glykon and one by Celsus against the Ophite Christian snake worshippers.

<sup>612</sup> Lucian., *Alex.* 25 says that Alexander, the founder of the Glykon cult, hated the Epicureans and the Christians, whom he considered atheists. They may even have been Ophites, whom his contemporary Celsus treated as Christians, but they are more likely to have been Pauline Christians, linked to the Roman Church, like his contemporary Abercius of Phrygia.

the Christianization of the empire, Glykon worshippers had Christianized their doctrines and rites through forms of religious syncretism. The form of Christianity closest to their religion was probably the Ophitic heresy, whereas orthodox Christianity was certainly hostile to the Glykon serpent<sup>613</sup>. At the same time, and for the same reasons, a doctrinal and also, perhaps, a social rapprochement between Marcionites and Ophites must have taken place in Syria. This does not however mean that the syncretism between Iaō and Glykon only dates back to the fourth century AD. The chronology is still open to question, because there are coins emitted under Philip the Arab in Moesia, an area where the Glykon cult was widespread, which have a divine serpent with its head encircled by a nimbus<sup>614</sup>. The figure is not, however, Glykon, who had a human head and hair, but could be linked to Gnostic doctrines. However, this is pure conjecture, since coins in Asia Minor under the Empire depicted various snakes sacred to Greco-Roman deities<sup>615</sup>.

### § 39. *The children of the snake*

The Nicolaitans, as we have seen, indulged in “immoral” practices. They committed not only ‘adultery’ and ‘fornication’ in the biblical sense of these words, which were metaphors for idolatry, but also actual sexual transgressions. The passage from Irenaeus mentioned earlier describes heretics in the same terms used in the *Apocalypse*, and adds that they indoctrinated women and had sexual intercourse with them. In Alexandria and in Egypt the Phibionite Gnostic sect, related to the Nicolaitans and the Gnostics of Barbelo, expected their followers to copulate freely, as and how they wished, to gather sperm and menstrual blood in their hands and lift them up as an offering, or to perform ritual copulation 365 times. Epiphanius himself was tempted by Phibionite women<sup>616</sup>, and adds that the Stratiotic sect, similar to the Phibi-

<sup>613</sup> Lucian., *Alex.* 25, states that Alexander’s aversion was reciprocated by the Christians, who certainly saw Glykon as the incarnation of Satan.

<sup>614</sup> From Marcianopolis: B. Pick, *Die antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands*, I, Dacien und Moesien, Berlin 1898–9, no. 1206; Nicopolis: W. Drexler, *Der Kultus der ägyptischen Gottheiten in den Donauländern*, Leipzig 1890, 66–67; Lukian von Samosata, *Alexandros der Lügenprophet*, ed. by U. Victor, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1997, 1 and figs 4–5. On the spread of the Glykon cult in Dacia and the surrounding areas (the father-in-law of Alexander of Abonouteichos was governor of Upper Moesia) cf. Robert, *A travers l’Asie Mineure* (n. 75), 397.

<sup>615</sup> For instance: SNG Deutschland. *Sammlung von Aulock, Pontus*, Berlin 1957, no. 19: Amasia; no. 582: Nikaia; no. 940: Tios; nos. 1366–1373; 1400; 1403; 1407: Pergamum.

<sup>616</sup> Epiph., *haer.* XXVI 4.3–5; 9, 1–9; 11, 8–10 (I, 280–1; 285–6; 289–90 Holl). Cf. A. Harnack, *The Sect of the Nicolaitans and Nicolaus, Deacon in Jerusalem*, JR 3, 1923,

onites, consumed both kinds of liquid as a eucharistic offering, and prayed naked<sup>617</sup> (as illustrated on the cup examined in § 60). One of their books stated that menstrual blood was the same colour as Raab, that is, Leviathan or one of the children of Leviathan<sup>618</sup>. Epiphanius states that copulation did not lead to insemination, but merely enabled the divine semen to be collected. He adds that, if a woman accidentally became pregnant, they extracted the fetus, cooked it and ate it<sup>619</sup>. The heresiologists, in their polemical fervor, probably invented these tales of cannibalistic heretics, but the underlying purpose of the practices must have been to imitate the creator in order to escape from his control. The heretics imitated Kronos, who devours his own children<sup>620</sup>, and the *ouroboros* snake that eats its tail<sup>621</sup>. On the subject of alleged Gnostic libertinism, writers of antiquity spoke in particular of ceremonies that took place after supper, when the lamp was extinguished and men and women had intercourse without restraint, even if they were brothers and sisters<sup>622</sup>. Other Gnostic (non-Sethian) sects had also devised libertine practices and rites, though we do not know what significance they had within their doctrinal systems<sup>623</sup>. The documentation as a whole is a compound of polemical argu-

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413–22; S. Benko, *The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites according to Epiphanius*, *VigChr* 21, 1967, 103–19; J. E. Goehring, *Libertine or liberated: Women in the So-called Libertine Gnostic Communities*, in: *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. by K. L. King. Philadelphia 1988, 329–44. In *haer.* XXVI 3,6–7 (I, 279 Holl) Epiphanius states that the Borborites, the Coddians, the Zacchaeans and the Barbeloites were linked to the Nicolaitans, and to the Stratotics and the Phibionites in Egypt. On the development of Christianity in Egypt and its relations with Gnosticism, see: *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. by B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring, Philadelphia 1986.

<sup>617</sup> *haer.* XXVI 5,7 (I, 282 Holl). Cf. Casadio, *Vie gnostiche all'immortalità* (n. 489), 103. The Adamites also prayed naked: *Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch.* XI 45 (229 Hes., Dr.).

<sup>618</sup> *haer.* XXVI 9,2 (I, 285 Holl).

<sup>619</sup> *haer.* XXVI 5,2–6 (I, 281–2 Holl).

<sup>620</sup> *Epiph.*, *haer.* XXVI 16,8 (I, 296 Holl) connects the practices of these Gnostics with the myth of Zeus swallowing his daughter Metis.

<sup>621</sup> On the tail as a generative organ, like the penis, cf. H. Wagenvoort, *On the Magical Significance of the Tail*, in: *Pietas. Selected Studies in Roman Religion*, Leiden 1980, 147–165.

<sup>622</sup> *Min.Fel.*, Oct. 9.7 (14 Halm); *Orig.*, *Cels.* VI 27 (II, 97 Koet.); *Just.*, I apol. 26,7; II apol. 12 (132; 214 Wartelle); *dial.* 10 (*Iustini philosophi et martyris opera*, ed. by I. C. Otto, Jena 1877, 38); *Theoph.*, *Ad Autol.* 3,4 (SC 20, 134 Sender, Bardy); *Tert.*, apol. 7,1 (18 Hoppe). Orthodox Christians were also – unjustly – accused of participating in ceremonies of this kind: *Eus.*, h. e. V 1,14 (II/1, 406 Sch.); *Athenag.*, leg. 31 (145 Roberts, Donaldson). On the other hand, certain branches of Gnosticism also condemned “spermatic” practices: II Book of *Jeu* 43 (GCS, *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften*, I, 304 Schmidt); *Pistis Sophia* IV 147 (381 Schmidt, Macdermot).

<sup>623</sup> The Carpocratians celebrated the “love-feast for union”: *Clem.*, str. III 2,10 (II, 200 Stählin), and used a Gospel which emphasized libertine elements: Clement’s fragment

ments, not a historical picture, although the specific descriptions of sexual abuses supported by theological doctrines could not be entirely without a historical basis. We can also assume that sexual abuse was important for a number of Gnostic sects. Epiphanius says that the Nicolaitans were the first to perform such rites and to develop doctrines on them.

The prophet of the Nicolaitans introduced the Sethians of Asia Minor to Christianity, a doctrine that promised the kingdom of heaven to those who were eunuchs in their hearts<sup>624</sup>, and those sterile sexual practices may even have been connected to a specific construal of the words of Jesus. Nicolaus must have come as a “false prophet” to a milieu where the covenant with Yahweh had already been superseded by the notion of alleged descent from the chosen race of Seth, hence the cult of semen, the bearer of the spiritual god’s light. Nicolaus taught that it was possible to trick the creator by refusing to procreate. Unfortunately, we do not know how much this doctrine owed to his personal contribution, or how much to existing doctrines that he had reformed.

Saint Paul preached to Jews who were willing to enter into a new covenant with God that also included the Greeks<sup>625</sup>, whom he addressed as people who already had some knowledge of Judaism.

The Ophite, Naassene and Peratic branches of Sethianism did not practise the sterile libertinism of the Nicolaitans. The Naassenes, however, attached great importance not only to Attis the eunuch, but also to the male member, which, according to them, stood in front of all temples. Peratic doctrine – associated with Ophitic doctrine – speculated on the snake-like nature of the spinal column, which carried semen from the brain to the genital organs and performed the same role as the Son, linking matter to the Father.

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ed. by M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a secret Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge/Mass. 1973. On the libertinism attributed to the Basilidians, see: *Iren. haer.* I 24,5 (SC 264, 328–330 Rouss., Dout.), apparently contradicted by the doctrines critiqued by *Clem. str.* III 1,1–3 (II, 195–7 Stählin). *Iren. haer.* I 6,3; 13,3 and 7 (SC 264, 96; 194–6 and 204 Rouss., Dout.), mentions the children born to Marcus the Valentinian and his followers, but since his doctrinal system was Valentinian, and therefore emphasized the value of marriage, Marcus was simply abusing his female disciples for purposes that differed from those of the Nicolaitans or Sethians. In other cases we cannot know whether the libertinism was dictated by religious doctrines, or by the behaviour of members of the sects, or whether it was only a malevolent argument used by Christian writers; cf. for instance: *Theod. bar Konai, Lib. sch.* XI 40 (228 Hes., Dr.) on the Tascodrougites.

<sup>624</sup> Mt. 19,10–2.

<sup>625</sup> The case of the disciple Timothy is a good example (*Act.* 16,1–3): he was the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek and had not been circumcized; cf. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 23.

One testimony deserves special attention in this study: that of Minucius Felix, who quotes the accusation made by Caecilius Natalis that Christians worshipped the priest's genitals, *quasi parentis sui adorare naturam*<sup>626</sup>. Caecilius must have been referring to the Gnostic priests who were convinced that they had to procreate children with their female disciples. This practice was based on the Sethian descendants' doctrine that sperm contains particles of divine light<sup>627</sup>.

Alexander, the founder of the Glykon cult, should also be seen in the context of Anatolian religions. As we have seen, he sometimes used Christian language and concepts and his solar snake had acquired the same status as Chnoubis. Alexander's sexual behaviour was very similar to that of the leaders of certain Sethian Gnostic sects in Asia Minor; in fact Lucianus attests that many women were happy to be impregnated by him and were convinced that they were generating the serpent Glykon's children<sup>628</sup>, and there were people who publicly boasted that Glykon was their father<sup>629</sup>. On the reverse of the gem identifying Chnoubis, Glykon and Iaô there is a magical inscription that is difficult to construe. In it, however, the word ΑΣΑΛΕΩΝ<sup>630</sup>, which looks like a genitive plural coming from ἀσαλής, "still", "stable", can be picked out. In Gnostic thinking the descendants of Seth were described as "stable", ἀσάλευτος γενεά<sup>631</sup>. The divine serpent, who was a conflation of

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<sup>626</sup> Min.Fel., Oct. 9 (13 Halm). A contrary position to the scepticism of Bardenhewer (who thought it was a misunderstanding of the supplicatory act of embracing the knees) is taken by: W. Speyer, *Zu den Vorwürfen der Heiden gegen die Christen*, JAC 6, 1963, 131, who uses the testimony of Epiph., haer. XXVI 4,3–8 (I, 280–5 Holl), on Gnostic orgies. Epiphanius however says that there were ceremonies at which men and women, after a copious meal, celebrated the Christian agape by holding sperm in their hands.

<sup>627</sup> For example, Hipp., haer. V 21,2; X 11,4, 10 (123 and 271–2 Wend.); Epiph., haer. XXXIX 2,1 (II, 72). On the figure of Seth: A.F.J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature*, N.T.S 46, Leiden 1977.

<sup>628</sup> Alex. 42. M. Caster, *Alexandre ou le faux prophète*, Strasbourg 1938, 86–7, thought that these were calumnies.

<sup>629</sup> Robert, *A travers l'Asie Mineure* (n. 75), 407–8. This was in the tradition of the cult of Asclepius; cf. IG IV/1, 122 (Epidaurus, second half of the fourth century): "Nicasibula of Messene wished to have children and performed the incubatio; she saw in a dream the god with a snake crawling beside him. The snake slept with her and after one year she gave birth to two sons".

<sup>630</sup> Two similar gems, with Chnoubis and similar inscriptions – but without the name of Glykon – are in A. Hamburger, *Gems from Caesarea Maritima*, *'Atiqot* 8, 1968, no. 110 (from Caesarea Maritima); and in Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 321; on this gem the word ΑΣΑΛΩΝ recurs.

<sup>631</sup> Apocr. Joh. 2.24–25; 25,23; 29,10; 31,31; Zostr. 6,27; *The Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5) 1; cf. M. Williams, *Stability as a Soteriological Theme in Gnosticism*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 819–829 (who notes that Philo, Post. 22–23,

Glykon, Chnoubis and Iaô (Sabaoth Adonai), was probably considered as the father of a chosen line who transmitted the supreme god's light to humanity through sperm.

According to Epiphanius<sup>632</sup>, the Sethians held that Christ descended from Seth and had been sent into the world by the heavenly Mother. It is extremely likely that the heretical sects confronted by Paul and the first Christianizers of Asia Minor were indeed Sethians, because the incorruptibility they boasted of was related to the concept of "stability" central to Sethian doctrines<sup>633</sup>. The doctrine of descent, specifically from the "seed" (*sperm*) of Seth, was already known to Philo of Alexandria<sup>634</sup> and therefore preceded the Christian era. From this fact and the inconsistencies deriving from the superimposition of Jesus on the instructor serpent<sup>635</sup> as the mediator between man and God, it is fairly obvious that the figure of Christ was grafted on to an existing structure<sup>636</sup>.

In the light of the Nicolaitan belief in the incorruptibility of the spirit, let us take another look at a doctrine that clearly identifies the Sethian Gnostics: they maintained that they were part of an elect race descended from Seth, Adam's spiritual son<sup>637</sup>. I think that one is bound to feel slightly ill at ease

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was thinking of the notion of stability and instability); Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203), 75 and 100.

<sup>632</sup> haer. XXXIX 3,5 (II, 74 Holl): ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ Σήθ κατὰ σπέρμι καὶ κατὰ διὰδοχὴν γένους ὁ Χριστὸς ἦλθεν; cf. XXXIX 1,3 (II, 72 Holl); Ps. Tert., adv. omn. haer. 2 (CSEL 47, 218 Kroymann); Filastrius 3 (CSEL 38, 2–3 Marx).

<sup>633</sup> The two notions of the incorruptibility and stability of the Sethian line are interrelated in the Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III,2; IV,2) 59; 61–62.

<sup>634</sup> R. Kraft, Philo on Seth, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 457–8 (on Philo, Post. 10; 172).

<sup>635</sup> Consider the Apocryphon of John, in which Jesus invites Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, while the serpent invites them to have sexual intercourse.

<sup>636</sup> On the kind of doctrines, typical of diaspora Jews, based on "alternative" charismatic figures, such as Melchisedech, Cain, Seth or the Ophite snake, cf. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (n. 138), ch. I, esp. 29–30; on 40–42 he also stresses the role of of the Judaizing communities of the *sebomenoi ton theôn*, those who feared the Jewish god, and the Hypsistarians. Bibliography in L. Boffo, *Iscrizioni greche e latine per lo studio della Bibbia*, Brescia 1994, 353–4; S. Mitchell, *The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews and Christians*, in: *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. by P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, Oxford 1999, 81–148.

<sup>637</sup> The main characteristics of what is known as the Sethian branch of Gnosticism have been defined by H. M. Schenke, *The Phenomenon and the Significance of Gnostic Sethianism*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 588–616, but its real existence is challenged by some modern scholars, notably F. Wisse, *Stalking those Elusive Sethians*, in: *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II (n. 116), 563–76; more recently G. Casadio, *Antropologia gnostica e antropologia orfica nella notizia di Ippolito sui Sethiani*,

with a religious doctrine that makes salvation conditional upon ancestry, and not upon a creed and behaviour acceptable to the divinity. A peculiarity of this kind would be understandable if it were attributed to the Jews of Asia Minor, who wanted to justify their acceptance of the pagan rites and cults of their cities and their monarchs by insisting on their incorruptibility and stability as descendants of Seth. Nicolaus was acting within the framework of Sethian heresies, but he reversed the value of generation and refused to procreate. It is difficult to say what his main aim was. Perhaps the Christian doctrine of the eunuch could have been his starting point.

### § 40. Sethian and Nicolaitan literature

The Jews of Asia Minor had come from Babylonia and Mesopotamia, so it is not at all strange if the *Apocalypse* asserts that there were new Balaams, that is Chaldeans, among them; and in 139 in Rome there were Chaldeans and Jews working together. Not surprisingly, then, Gnosis had been profoundly influenced by Chaldean wisdom.

On many occasions during his travels St Paul met Jews who practised magic: in Cyprus the sorcerer and false prophet Bar Jesus, alias Elymas, on whom he inflicted a terrible punishment<sup>638</sup>; he then prevailed upon Jewish exorcists in Asia Minor to use the name of Jesus in their rites<sup>639</sup>; at Ephesus Paul convinced many of those who believed in magic to take away their books and burn them<sup>640</sup>. In 95 BC Silla also had been met by a Chaldean in Asia Minor<sup>641</sup>. Many of these magi and astrologers from Asia Minor must have been Jews, and it is not clear what their magic books could have been, other than Solomonic recipe books, or astrological texts and doctrinal revelations. According to Epiphanius<sup>642</sup>, the Sethians had produced a vast amount of literature: seven books of Seth, books entitled *Allogeneis*, the *Apocalypse*

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in: *Sangue e antropologia nella teologia. Atti della settimana di studi Roma 23–28 nov. 1987, Rome 1989, 1295–1350* (= *Id., Vie gnostiche all'immortalità* (n. 489), ch. I), has convincingly argued in favour of the existence of Sethian doctrines and Gnostic circles who professed them.

<sup>638</sup> Act. 13,6–8.

<sup>639</sup> Act. 19,13.

<sup>640</sup> Act. 19,19; they counted the value of them and found it came to 50,000 pieces of silver.

<sup>641</sup> Plut., Sulla 5; cf. Vell. Pat. II 24,3.

<sup>642</sup> haer. XXXIX 3,5 (II, 75 Holl). The importance of Sethian literature has given rise to the theory that the Sethians, rather than a group of religious communities, were authors of books: A. B. Scott, Churches or Books? Sethian Social Organisation, *JECS* 3, 1995, 109–22.

of Abraham, books of Moses, and others. He ascribes to the Nicolaitans and kindred sects the writings of Mary, in which the Son's mysteries are explained to her, a book on the birth of Mary, works by Seth against Jaldabaoth, *Apocalypses of Adam*, the *Gospels of Philip* (which explained the formulae to be recited by the soul in order to pass through the spheres of the Archons<sup>643</sup>) and by other disciples of Christ<sup>644</sup>. In the collection that we refer to in this work as magical papyri there are passages from a work entitled *The eighth book of Moses*, which bears traces of a Christianization occurring later than the original version<sup>645</sup>, so it may be that many writings of Sethian origin had been subsequently rewritten and given a fresh, Christian, interpretation. It is possible that some magi renounced their books, as urged by Paul and other Christian preachers, while some persisted in their beliefs, and others eventually tried to reconcile Jewish magic and Christianity. For instance, it is very likely that among the alleged descendants of Seth in Asia Minor, a copy was preserved of the text that, according to Flavius Josephus, Seth's descendants had inscribed on two steles, and contained all knowledge, including the prophecy of the Flood<sup>646</sup>. As already stated, the Flood was a central theme in the speculations of Asia Minor Jews<sup>647</sup>. Book

<sup>643</sup> As in the Book of Jeu in the codex Brucianus. This Gospel of Philip is probably different from the one in the Nag Hammadi codex II; cf. G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Gnostica et Hermetica*, Rome 1982, 24.

<sup>644</sup> haer. XXVI 8,1–2; 12,1; 13,2 (I, 284; 290; 292 Holl); cf. M. Tardieu, *Les livres mis sous le nom de Seth et les Séthiens de l'hérésiologie*, in *Gnosis und Gnosticism. Papers read at the seventh Int. Conf. on Patristic Studies*. Oxford 1975, ed. by M. Krause, Leiden 1977, 204–210.

<sup>645</sup> Cf. M. Smith, *The Eighth Book of Moses and How it Grew* (P.Leid. J 395), in: *Atti del XVIII Congr. intern. di papirologia*, Naples 1984, 683–93 = *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, II (n. 3), 217–226.

<sup>646</sup> AJ IV 33; in the Apocalypse of Adam in the Nag Hammadi library Adam prophesies the future Flood to Seth. Cf. A. A. Orlov, *Overshadowed by Enoch's Greatness: "Two Tablets" Traditions from the Book of Giants to Palaea Historica*, JSJ 32/2, 2001, 137–58. The prologue to the Kyranides tells of a stele that was located in a Syrian lake, or on a tower erected by giants near Babylon: the mention of giants presupposes the universal flood and the survival of the steles; but the detailed account, according to the author of the work, was contained in the "ancient book".

<sup>647</sup> In Phrygia local legends concerning the Flood were older than the Jewish settlement under Antiochus III. There was mention of an ancient king of Phrygia, Nannakos, who was told by the oracle that after his death the entire people would perish, but then Prometheus and Athena fashioned images (*eikones*, from which the city of Ikonium took its name) from mud and created men: Herodas III 1,10; Suid., s. v. *Νάννακος*; Zenobius, *Prov.* VI 10; Steph. Byz., s. v. *Ἰκόνιον*; *Apostol.* XV 100. Cf. also the legend of Philemon and Baucis: *Ov.*, *Met.* VIII 618–724; that of Priasos: *Nonn.* XIII 522–45; XXXVII 649; of Midas and his son Anchouros at Kelainai (the future Apameia): *Ps. Plut., Parall. min.* 5 = 306 E–F; cf. Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 88–90.

I of the *Sibylline Oracles*<sup>648</sup> states that after the Flood the first thing to rise out of the waters was a Phrygian mountain called Ararat, from which the Marsyas river springs.

The first Gnostics in Asia Minor were similarly fascinated by Flood legends, so much so that, among other things, a book of Norea, thought to be Noah's wife<sup>649</sup>, was attributed to the heretics associated with Nicolaus. This book told how the Archon and creator of the world also wanted to destroy Noah and his family, and how the ark had been burnt on three occasions, but Norea<sup>650</sup> revealed to him the existence of authorities higher than the Archon: Barbelo and the other powers, and showed that it was necessary to collect the power (*dynamis*) originating in the heavenly Mother, which is in the liquid that comes from the male and female bodies. Epiphanius does not clarify when exactly these speculations occurred, but by ascribing them to the libertine circle of Nicolaus he places them around the first century AD, in Western Asia Minor. Eusebius of Cesarea<sup>651</sup> asserts that the Nicolaitan heresy did not last long. To say that Epiphanius was wrong and that the book of Norea should be ascribed to other circles and another era would be improper, in the absence of sound evidence.

We have said that, according to Irenaeus, the Nicolaitans indoctrinated women<sup>652</sup> and had sexual relations with them. But what else could they have

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<sup>648</sup> I 261–7 (18–19 Gef.); on the possibility that this part of the *Sibylline Oracles* was composed in Phrygia, and indeed probably in Apameia: J. Geffken, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der 'Oracula Sibyllina'*, Leipzig 1902, 50; A. Rzach, *Art. Sibyllinische Orakel*, PRE IIA, 1923, 2152; J. J. Collins, *Sibylline Oracles*, in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by J. H. Charlesworth, London 1983, 332; Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 95. For dating to the period from 30 BC to 70 AD, see: J. J. Collins, *The Development of the Sibylline Tradition*, in: ANRW II/20.1, 1987, 442; Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 96, which gives a bibliography on other theories concerning dating. A scholium to Plato's *Phaedrus* 244 B (*Scholias Platonica*, ed. by F. Allen, I. Burnet, C. P. Parker, G. Ch. Greene, Haverford/Penns. 1938, 79) says that the Hebrew Sibil was married to a son of Noah.

<sup>649</sup> Epiph., *haer.* XXVI 1,3–9 (I, 275–6 Holl); according to the Sethian doctrine referred to in XXXIX 5,3 (II, 75 Holl), Horaia was Seth's wife; in the account of the Ophites in *Iren.*, *haer.* I 30,9 (SC 264, 376 Rouss., Dout.), Norea was Seth's wife.

<sup>650</sup> Her name comes from *noura*, which meant "fire" (and for this reason she was compared with Pyrra, the wife of Deucalion, whose name was linked to the Greek *pyr*). However, says Epiphanius, this word was not Hebraic, as the Nicolaitans claimed, but Syriac. So the Nicolaitans used an Aramaic dialect, as was to be expected of settlers who had migrated from Mesopotamia (Syriac was actually the Aramaic dialect of Edessa, which by the time of Epiphanius already had its own very substantial literature).

<sup>651</sup> *h. e.* III 29 (II/1, 260 Sch.).

<sup>652</sup> It is well known that Christianization – even in Gnostic circles – focused more intensely on women, and pagans frequently opposed it and criticized it for this very reason (for example Clem., *paed.* III 4,28–29 (CGS Clemens I, 252–3 Stählin); Orig., *Cels.*

taught them other than the secrets of the magical-astrological doctrines we have just mentioned?

Let us now focus on the famous passage in *Genesis* (6.4) which states that the Flood was sent by God to punish the crimes committed through the fault of the children of the angels – the Nephilim, that is, giants – who had lain with women. Enochic and then Gnostic literature subsequently added that the angels who had come down to earth taught the women the secrets of astronomy, magic and the natural elements<sup>653</sup>. Orthodox Judaism condemned relations between the women (referred to as “Cainites”) and the angels<sup>654</sup> and Gnostic books<sup>655</sup> added that the angels also taught the women idolatry. We must not, however, be misled into believing that everything taught by the angels was condemned; in fact the Jews and, even more so, the Gnostics had great respect for astrology and all knowledge revealed by the angels. Enochic literature and later its imitators, like the *Sepher ha Razim* and a vast number of other books of Judaic inspiration, all glorify the science of the stars and the cosmos revealed by the angels.

We could posit two possible solutions to this problem: a) Jezebel of Thyatira, a Jewish prophetess<sup>656</sup> who encouraged immorality, idolatry and possibly knowledge of the “deep things of Satan”, was an expert in the knowledge revealed by the angels to women<sup>657</sup>; b) the Nicolaitans who indoctrinated women and then had intercourse with them modelled themselves on the angels who had come down to earth. The two hypotheses are not mutually

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III 44–55; I, 239–251 Koet.). On the role of women in Christianization cf. a recent work by G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Aspetti e problemi della condizione femminile nel Cristianesimo dei primi secoli* (profezia, enkratea e Gnosi), in: *Donne e matrimonio alla origini della Chiesa*, ed. by E. Dal Covolo, Rome 1998, 111–160; on Gnosticism cf. *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. K. L. King, Philadelphia 1988.

<sup>653</sup> 1 Enoch 7–8 (28–9 Black); *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 123; Clem., str. V 1,10 (II, 332 Stählin); Hom. Clem. VIII 8–12 (CGS Die Pseudoklementinen, I. Homilien, 125–7 Rehm, Strecker); cf. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (n. 203), part. 21–37; A. Yoshiko Reed, *The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine: Aetiology, Demonology, and Polemics in the Writings of Justin Martyr*, *JECS* 12, 2004, 141–171. The arcane knowledge widespread in the time of the “giants” was that of Zoroaster: *Epiph.*, haer. II 2–3 (I, 177 Holl).

<sup>654</sup> *Pirqe of Rabbi Eliezer* 22 (on Gen. 6,1–4), translated by G. Friedlander, New York 1971, 158–62, esp. 159.

<sup>655</sup> *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 123.

<sup>656</sup> Or married to a Jew.

<sup>657</sup> Cf. the Jewish high priestess spoken of by *Juven.* VI 543–5. It would be interesting to know whether the role played by women among heretical Jews in Asia Minor had influenced Paul’s decision (2Tim. 2,12) to exclude women from teaching. On heretical women who performed priestly functions: Tert., *de praescr.* 41 (SC 46, 147 Refoulé, de Labriolle).

exclusive, but unfortunately there is insufficient documentation to allow confirmation and further investigation. But it is a fact that women played an important role in Jewish communities in Asia Minor: some indeed were leaders of the synagogue<sup>658</sup>.

### § 41. Abraham's descendants and Seth's descendants

I do not think that scholars have asked what the Sethians felt about morality, their relations with the Gentiles, religious propaganda or any other aspect of their lives that brought the descendants of Seth into contact with others. If a Gentile or Jew had wanted to become a Sethian, how could he have done so when being a Sethian depended on race, not faith and morality or even initiatory rites? In actual fact, people of Sethian ancestry included both Jews and other Semites, Greeks and certainly also Romans, as descendants of Japhet. In Noah's ark only one man who was not a descendant of Seth was said to have survived, after being infiltrated by the wicked Archons: Cham, from whom the Canaanites, the Egyptians and other African peoples were allegedly descended<sup>659</sup>.

The Jews in Asia Minor in theory were conditioned by the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants<sup>660</sup>, but those Jews had decided to coexist peacefully with the Gentiles and to be loyal subjects of the Seleucids, the Attalids and then the Romans, and were not involved in the Maccabean uprisings and Jewish rebellions of the second and third centuries AD. Veneration of Seth, the chosen son of Adam, was therefore a means of establishing kinship (*syngeneia*) with the Gentiles, in order to overcome the barriers erected by orthodox Judaism. Babylonian Jews, loyal to the Seleucids<sup>661</sup>, could no longer be bound to God's promise that he would give Abraham's descendants "the land from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates"<sup>662</sup>. The new biblical literature began to place greater importance

<sup>658</sup> Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 104–126, who believes that the phenomenon is confined to certain locales and does not include them all; on the position of archisynagogos: T. Rajak, D. Noy, *Archisynagogoi: Office, Title and Social Status in the Greco-Jewish Synagogue*, *JRS* 83, 1993, 75–93; W. Horbury, *Women in the Synagogue*, *CHJud*, III, 1999, 358–401, esp. 391–5.

<sup>659</sup> Gen. 9,22; 10,6–22, cf., for instance, Hipp., *haer.* X 31,3 (287 Wend.).

<sup>660</sup> Cf. Gen. 15; 17; 22.

<sup>661</sup> On the great friendship between the Babylonian élite and Seleucus I: App., *Syr.* 54; on the Jews deported by Seleucus I to the colonies he had founded in Syria, including Antioch: Jos., *AJ* XII 119.

<sup>662</sup> Gen. 15,18.

on patriarchal figures who had preceded Abraham. Kinship with the Greeks, which, for the Jews of Asia Minor, was through the brotherhood of the Sethians Sem and Japhet, was one of the strong points of Hellenistic Judaism. Around 300 the high priest Onias I and the Spartan king Areus reportedly kept up a correspondence in which they asserted that Jews and Spartans were “kinspeople”<sup>663</sup>, and in Jerusalem there was a decree of Pergamum referring to the friendship between the Pergamene ancestors and the children of Abraham<sup>664</sup>. Maccabean Jerusalem could only sanction friendship, but kinship, which had been upheld in Jerusalem by Jason in the time of Antiochus IV, must also have been sanctioned by Judaism in Asia Minor. It was their devotion to the Seleucid kingdom that led the high priests Jason and Menelaus to violate the covenant with Yahweh and introduce Hellenic customs into Judea<sup>665</sup>. Christianity, on the other hand, extended the notion of *syngeneia*

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<sup>663</sup> The correspondence was later resumed by the Hasmonean sovereign Jonathan towards the middle of the second century and then, in 142 or 139, by Simon, but it was an apocryphal correspondence: 1Macch. 12,6–23; 14,20–23; 2Macch. 5,9; Jos., AJ XII 226–7; XIII 166–7; cf. A. Momigliano, *Prime linee di storia della tradizione maccabaica*, Turin 1931, 141–170. Cf. also Alex. Pol., FGH 273 F 102: the children of Abraham are the allies of Heracles; Jos., contra Ap. 2,225–31: similarity between Jews and Spartans in their obedience to the law; Steph.Byz.. s.v. Ἰουδαία: Oudaïos was the name of one of the Spartoi of Thebes; the Samaritans, seeking the benevolence of Antiochus IV, introduced themselves as descendants of the Sidonians: Jos., AJ XII 260. See S. Schüller, Some problems connected with the supposed common ancestry of Jews and Spartans and their relations during the last three centuries B. C., JSt 1, 1956, 257–68; B. Cardauns, *Juden und Spartaner: zur hellenistisch-jüdischen Literatur*, Hermes 95, 1967, 317–24; L.H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, Princeton 1996, 11–2. On the notion of *syngeneia* in the Hellenistic world cf. D. Musti, *Sull’idea di syngeneia in iscrizioni greche*, ASNSP 32, 1963, 225–39; L. Robert, *Documents d’Asie Mineure*, IV. Deux inscriptions de Tarsos et d’Argos, BCH 101, 1977, 88–132; J. Bousquet, *La stèle des Kyténiens au Létôon de Xanthos*, REG 101, 1988, 12–53; S. Elwyn, *Interstate Kinship and Roman Foreign Policy*, TPAPA 123, 1993, 261–86; O. Curty, *Les parentés légendaires entre cités grecques*, Geneva 1995. It goes without saying that I do not agree with the theory put forward by H. S. Kippenberg, *Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus*, Numen 17, 1970, 211–39, who suggests that Gnostic hostility to the creator god was the result of the hostility to Roman domination felt in certain circles, mainly Hellenistic, but steeped in Judaism. K. Rudolph, *Zur Soziologie, sozialen Verortung und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike*, Kairos 19, 1977, 41, also believes that the Eastern opposition to Roman imperialism had been a decisive factor in the genesis of Gnosticism. These attempts to identify the social genesis of Gnosticism strangely ignore the “proto-Gnostic” Nicolaitans, attacked in John’s Apocalypse, and the testimonies concerning the geographical location of the Ophites, analyzed in this study. And, as usual, they do not take magic testimonies into consideration; the studies of Peterson and Jackson in this field are exceptions.

<sup>664</sup> Jos., AJ XIV 247–55.

<sup>665</sup> Jason went to spend his last days with his Spartan “kinsfolk”: 2Macc. 5,9.

to all humankind, as God's children<sup>666</sup>. To debase the covenant, they went so far as to denigrate the creator, equated by the Chaldeans with the evil planet Saturn. In addition to or instead of the creator and only god, they began to venerate above all others a spiritual, intelligent god of light (who manifested himself as Sabaoth, a serpent, a deity of the cosmic pole, etc.), usually identified with the sun. During the Hellenistic era, in fact, the doctrines of the Chaldeans had placed the sun at the centre of the cosmos<sup>667</sup>, a discovery that was to be universally accepted in the Hellenistic-Roman age.

Any Jew who was a loyal subject of the Seleucids would have to revere the kingdom's tutelary deities, such as Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, Athena<sup>668</sup>, and only the system of the manifestations of the supreme God permitted him to accept such a cult. For example, in the *Pistis Sophia* Zeus is linked to Sabaoth and placed in charge of the entire cosmos<sup>669</sup> in order to sanction worship of Zeus or Iuppiter Optimus Maximus. A Jewish citizen of any city in Asia Minor could not avoid participation in the main public celebrations in honour, for example, of Artemis, Cybele, or Athena; but Gnosticism gave ample latitude to the Sophia of God, who, by a typical Hellenistic process, could be identified with the great goddesses of the cities<sup>670</sup>. Only in this form could a Jewish person live in harmony with his fellow citizens. If we address the problem from a different perspective, we have to ask ourselves which cult the Gnostics attributed to Sophia and to the other female manifestations of the supreme god. A goddess cannot be a goddess without a cult. The heresiologists are not at all clear on this point, but they do tell us that many Gnostics were idolaters. So in this case also, the clues always point in the same direction. And then, how could the Jews of the Imperial Age venerate

<sup>666</sup> Cf. E. Des Places, *Syngeneia. La parenté de l'homme avec Dieu d'Homère à la Patristique*, Paris 1964.

<sup>667</sup> Cumont, *La théologie solaire* (n. 198).

<sup>668</sup> Cf. A. Mastrocinque, *Zeus Kretagenès. Da Seleucia a Praeneste (e in Giudea)*, *Klio* 84.2, 2002, 355–372. Some scholars put forward two opposing hypotheses on the origins of Gnosis: a Jewish origin (pre-Christian Gnosticism) versus a Greek-Christian (Christian Gnosticism influenced by Greek philosophy) origin. Cf. for instance: W. Beltz, *Gnosis und Altes Testament. Überlegung zur Frage nach dem Ursprung der Gnosis*, *ZRGG* 28, 1976, 352–7. This antithesis is misleading.

<sup>669</sup> Cf. *supra*, § 12.

<sup>670</sup> Perhaps by following this line of inquiry an explanation could be found for the many coincidences with Gnosticism in Chaldean and neo-Platonic doctrines on Hecate; cf. J. L. Turner, *The Figure of Hecate and Dynamic Emanationism in The Chaldean Oracles, Sethian Gnosticism and Neoplatonism*, *SecCen* 7, 1989–1990, 221–32. I do not think that it is possible to infer from the Act. 19,23 and 41 and from the episode concerning St Paul in the theatre at Ephesus that not all the local Jews revered Artemis; cf. on this Trebilco, *Studies on Jewish Communities* (n. 565), 25.

the emperor? They did in fact revere him, especially if we are to believe the acts of the Christian martyrs (for instance those of Pionius), which place the Jews, particularly in Asia Minor, on the same anti-Christian front as the pagans. Only a Gnostic-style conceptual system could have justified the divinity of the emperor, perceived as a cosmic power.

For this reason I do not agree with the widely-held theory that Gnosticism was inspired by protest ideology. This has already been discussed in § 25.

#### § 42. *The temple of the ouroboros snake*

Tracing the geographical and chronological development of Gnostic ideas is an almost impossible undertaking, but the clues that can be identified need to be clarified. There was certainly a dialectic, even though it is not clear what form this took, between the Gnostic sects in Asia Minor, Egypt and other areas.

Let us now return to Egypt and search for other sources of inspiration for Gnostic sects in its religious traditions.

The doctrine of the *ouroboros* snake ruling the cosmos from the astral pole was, as we have seen, of Chaldean origin, but we will now examine a series of Egyptian-inspired Gnostic variations on this theme.

The *ouroboros* was not only, or was not always, a frame for the cosmos or a philosophical image. Sometimes it was an actual god, rooted in the concepts of religious communities or sects. In this chapter we will examine a small monument that bears witness to a syncretism of Egyptian and Jewish religious elements, and could also attest a syncretism that took place not far from the Gnostic milieu.

The monument is a small Horus stele (fig. 17). There is a supposed Renaissance bronze copy of it (14.5 cm high) in the Museum of Geneva<sup>671</sup>,

<sup>671</sup> From the Foucault collection; B. de Montfaucon, *L'antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, II, Paris 1719 24, pl. CLXVII, 370; W. Deonna, *Talismans du Musée de Genève*, RAr 18, 1923, 118–131; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 157; pl. XXIV; H. Sternberg-El Hotabi, *Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Horusstelen*, I, Wiesbaden 1999, ch. 7.6, II, 29–30. An Alexandrian stele, in the museum of Giza, has an absolutely identical obverse: G. Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique*, I, Paris 1895, 215. M. Dewachter, *La première liste connue des Antiquités égyptiennes de la Bibliothèque du Roy* (1684), RdE 37, 1986, 164, n. 4 and Sternberg-El Hotabi think that the stele is a modern imitation, because it is unlike the typology of the Horus stele of the Imperial Age; but there are arguments that seem to contradict this theory. In all probability the stele was used as a model for an imitation designed by Pirro Ligorio (Naples 1513–14 – Ferrara 1583) and then reproduced by Alfonso Ciacone and Claudio Menestrier, between the late 16th and early 17th centuries:

depicting a scene with two ithyphallic baboons worshipping the *ouroboros*, exactly as if the snake were the sun god – usually Harpocrates – on Ra’s solar barque, where he is often accompanied by adoring baboons. The *ouroboros*, therefore, was considered a sun god. But let us first attempt to describe the find in more detail.

It may be that this magic stele was produced not in Egypt, like nearly all the other Horus steles<sup>672</sup>, but in Italy or, at any rate, in an area where Latin was one of the languages spoken, because the edge is inscribed with a succession of Latin letters repeating variations on the name of Isis. We know, on the other hand, of a Hellenistic Horus stele used in a villa on the Esquiline hill in the time of Constantine<sup>673</sup>, which bears witness to the interest shown in these cultic objects in late imperial Italy.

The obverse of the stele shows the young god Horus standing on crocodiles, following the traditional pattern. On the reverse, however, there is a very unusual pantheon: at the bottom is a small Harpocrates on a lotus flower; in the central section there are three gods side by side: the snake-footed rooster, a typical god found on magic gems<sup>674</sup>, the magical god Pantheos, an ithyphallic creator deity with the attributes of a number of animals<sup>675</sup>, and the

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A. Ferrua, *Antichi amuleti orientali in Roma*, MFOB 37, 1961, 274–5. Ligorio’s strange prism is clearly a fake, because it inserts, instead of the god Pantheos, a kind of masturbating Pan over the *ouroboros*. Ligorio therefore already knew the stele, and before Ligorio there was no forger anywhere in the world who was so erudite and so perfectly acquainted with the iconography of the god Pantheos, the stele with the seal of Solomon, the adoring baboon, Osiris, Harpocrates and the snake-footed rooster, as well as the Latin and Greek lettering that we find on the stele. Despite his great learning Ligorio succeeded only in creating what was clearly a forgery, and in order to do so he had used an older monument, the Geneva stele, which no other Cinquecento erudite was able to invent.

<sup>672</sup> On these steles, widespread particularly during the Ptolemaic era and used to cure the stings of poisonous animals by drinking the water that flowed over them cf. P. Lacau, *Les statues “guérisseuses” dans l’ancienne Égypte*, MMAIBL 25, 1921–22, 189–209; W. D. van Wijngaarden and B. H. Stricker, *Magische Stèles*, OMRM 22, 1941, 6–38; B. van De Walle, *Le cippe d’Horus découvert par J. Bruce à Axoum*, CÉg 56, 1953, 238–47; *Iside. Il mito, il mistero, la magia*. Catalogo della mostra, Milan 1997, 219, no. IV.198–9; 587, no. VI/50. Examples of this kind of stele have also been found in Syria: H. Ingholt, *Rapport préliminaire sur sept campagnes de fouilles en Syrie*, Copenhagen 1940, 122.

<sup>673</sup> F. De Salvia, *Horos sui cocodrilli nella tradizione costantiniana*, in: *The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt*. Studies pres. to Lazlo Kákosi, ed. by U. Luft, Budapest 1992, 509–17.

<sup>674</sup> On this god: A.A. Barb, *Abraxas-Studien* (n. 305), 1957, 67–86; F. Marco Simòn, *Abraxas. Magia y religión en la Hispania tardoantigua*, in: *Héroes, semidioses y daimones*, Primer encuentro-coloquio de ARYS. Jarandilla de la Vera 1989, Madrid 1992, 485–510.

<sup>675</sup> The main comments on this god, of Egyptian tradition, have been made by Merkelbach, *Astrologie, Mechanik* (n. 283), 57. It should be added that sometimes the pantheistic god has the head of Bes; this Egyptian deity was sometimes an expression of

mummy of Osiris; in the upper section there are the two baboons (animals associated with Thoth) with their front paws raised in adoration of a cultic aedicule or schematic temple containing the *ouroboros*, which encircles 4 *charakteres*; above it is the legend ΒΡΟΙΝΧΩ, and below: ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ and 6 incomprehensible signs; in the tympanum is the word: ΙΑΩ<sup>676</sup>.

The depiction of the *ouroboros* encircling a group of *charakteres* or letters is typical of magic gems, but also recurs on lamellae and papyri. A recently published study of a lamella with an exorcistic inscription<sup>677</sup> mentions the seal of Solomon, which consists of an *ouroboros* serpent containing four letters or *charakteres*: ΖΞΠ. The editors have quite rightly deduced that the numerous images of the *ouroboros* containing similar sequences represented the seal of Solomon, which traditionally<sup>678</sup> contained God's name. A gem from Aleppo<sup>679</sup> has an *ouroboros* containing three groups of elements that depict the Jewish god in different ways: 'Ιάω Ζ Ζ ✱ ΠΙΠ; and therefore the three *charakteres* that also recur on other gems represent the name of God. Ιαô was the usual Greek way of designating the Jewish god with the first three letters of the tetragrammaton YHWH<sup>680</sup>, ΠΙΠ were the last letters of the tetragrammaton rendered by the graphic form of the Greek alphabet (יהוה = ΠΙΠΠ<sup>681</sup>). The crossed Zs are an ancient Hebrew form of Y, the initial

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totality, but had seven heads, and the number 7 could also indicate totality: J. Assmann, *Primat und Transzendenz, Struktur und Genese der ägyptischen Vorstellung eines "höchsten Wesens"*, in: *Aspekte der ägyptischen Religion*, GOF.Ä 9, ed. by W. Westendorf, Wiesbaden 1979, 12.

<sup>676</sup> Cf. the heliotrope gem in the Berlin state museums: Philipp, *Mira et Magica* (n. 364), no. 112, which depicts the mummy of Osiris before a narrow tabernacle containing three cruciform signs (Philipp, like Wortman, interprets it as a nilometer), both above an *ouroboros* encircling the name of Ιαô. A gem in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna shows the god Pantheos in front of the tabernacle containing symbols: Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums* (n. 295), III, no. 2215. A heliotrope gem found in Hungary depicts the snake-footed rooster facing Osiris: *Religions and Cults in Pannonia*. Exhibition at Székesfehérvár. Csók István Gallery 15 May – 30 September 1996, Székesfehérvár 1998, 115, no. 240.

<sup>677</sup> Jordan, Kotansky, *A Solomonic Exorcism* (n. 259), 54; this article contains many references to portrayals of the *ouroboros* containing symbols or letters.

<sup>678</sup> A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, I, Liège, Paris 1927, 245–6; cf. Lact. Plac., schol. in Stat., Theb. IV 516: the magi have *sphragides quas putant dei nomina continere*.

<sup>679</sup> Mouterde, *Le glaive de Dardanos* (n. 289), 104; cf. M. Philonenko, *L'anguipède alectorocéphale et le dieu Ιαô*, CRAI 1979, 297–303; Jordan, Kotansky, *A Solomonic Exorcism* (n. 259), 65.

<sup>680</sup> In the 5th century the Jews of the Elephantine garrison used the form YHW (Ιαô): *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, ed. by B. Porten, Leiden, New York, Cologne, 1996, no. B 37–8.

<sup>681</sup> A. Sorlin Dorigny, *Phylactère alexandrin contre l'épistaxis*, REG 4, 1891, 291; Philonenko, *L'anguipède alectorocéphale* (n. 679)

letter of YHWH; in fact the name of God was also rendered by the sequence YYY (""")<sup>682</sup>. One magical papyrus<sup>683</sup> has a prescription called “stele of Jeu, the painter of hieroglyphs”, probably inspired by Gnosticism, in which the Jewish god is called on to drive away a demon, and is described as a headless god, who sees through his feet; then the exclamation by the god himself is uttered: “I am the grace (*charis*) of the Aïôn, my name is a heart encircled by a snake”. In the Imperial Age the idea of the sun god as the “heart” of the universe (*καρδία τοῦ παντός*)<sup>684</sup> was widespread.

To conclude, the god adored by the baboons on the reverse of the Horus stele is similar to the Jewish god, depicted inside a temple as an *ouroboros* snake containing letters and symbols which probably represent the divine tetragrammaton. Here we have tangible evidence of a cultic *ouroboros*. We can also say that the religious background of the stele in the Museum of Geneva, and others like it, is unlikely to be Jewish or catholic Christian; they cannot simply be ascribed to Egyptian cultic practices, because of the snake-footed rooster and the temple with the *ouroboros*; and also there are Latin letters. There is no doubt that we are dealing with magic, but this does not define the religious milieu, which could be Gnosticism or a religion influenced by Gnosticism, given that some pagan magi and theurgists included the Jewish god in their pantheon.

A passage from Hippolytus concerning the Naassene Gnostics<sup>685</sup> is worth quoting on the subject: “They revere only the Naas, which is why they are called Naassenes. Naas is the serpent, and from the word Naas all the temples under the heavens are denominated *naôî*. And to this Naas alone, all temples, rites and mysteries are consecrated, and no mystery under the heavens may be performed without a temple (*naòs*) and the Naas inside it; this is why it is called *naòs*”. The scene showing baboons adoring the temple of the *ouroboros* would fit in very well with Naassene concepts, though it must be remembered that Hippolytus, in his derogatory description, may to some extent have distorted the meaning of the rites of the Naassene Gnostics, because they identified the Naas (the Hebrew word for “snake”) with the serpent that corrupted humanity.

<sup>682</sup> Cf. *supra*, notes 328–329.

<sup>683</sup> PGM V, 96–172.

<sup>684</sup> Theon Smyrn. III 15 (collection Teubner: 187 Hiller); Macr., Somn. I 20,6; Procl., in Remp. II 220 (14 Kroll) from the Chaldean Oracles; Procl., Hymn. I 5; cf. Cumont, *La théologie solaire* (n. 198), 12. In *Pirqe of Rabbi Eliezer* 6, translated by G.Friedlander, New York 1971, 40, the sun is said to have three letters written on its heart (probably the name *laô*).

<sup>685</sup> haer. V 9,12 (100 Wend.).

*Fig. 17*

Again from Hippolytus<sup>686</sup> we learn that the Naassenes had their own particular reading of the “Egyptian mysteries” and identified Osiris with water and Isis with Nature wearing seven cloaks; the Naassenes also spoke of the “essence of the seed”, emitted by the supreme god, which generates all things; this mystery had been revealed by the Egyptians, who had erected a phallus in front of every temple<sup>687</sup>. The latter element recalls the two ithy-

<sup>686</sup> haer.V 7,19–23; 27–28 (80–85 Wend.).

<sup>687</sup> Plut., *De Is.et Os.* 51. 371 F says that the Egyptians erected ithyphallic staves of Osiris everywhere; Ps. August., *Quaest.veteris et novi Test.* 94,11 (CSEL 50, 308) says that the Cynocephalus was searching everywhere for the phallus of Osiris.

phallic baboons next to the temple with the *ouroboros* on the Horus stele<sup>688</sup>, while the mystery of the essence of the seed was incarnated by the ithyphallic deity with the many animal attributes, whom we have called Pantheos: he incorporated the forms of all living creatures, which came into the world from his seed.

It has already been said that the baboons were adoring a sun god, and indeed the snake biting its own tail was sometimes considered an image of the sun, not only in ancient Egypt but also in the late syncretistic speculations of Macrobius<sup>689</sup>, in the Gnostic treatise named the *Pistis Sophia*<sup>690</sup> or in magical papyri<sup>691</sup>. On the other hand, we know that in magic doctrines the Jewish god was frequently identified with the sun, or was considered a sun god<sup>692</sup>; consequently in magical papyri we find Hebraic theonyms attributed to Apollo<sup>693</sup>. In Hellenized Judaic circles, too, conflation of the Jewish god with the sun god occurred, as stated in § 18.

### § 43. *The development of Gnosticism in Egypt*

The inference immediately drawn on encountering religious phenomena that combine Hebraic and Egyptian elements is that they are the result of syncretisms in Alexandria, where there was a large Jewish community. This has been said about Gnostic gems, magical papyri, Gnosticism, Hermetism and so on. But it is important to remember that there was bad blood between Alexandrian Jews and Greco-Egyptians, and fierce insurrections often broke out among their ethnic and religious components. In the Imperial Age, when Gnosticism flourished and magical gems spread, the situation was no different: Alexandrian Jews took part in the rebellion that started in Cyrene under Trajan and forced the Romans to crack down ruthlessly, almost totally eliminating the Jews from Egypt. The temple of the Jewish god at Leontopolis, in the Heliopolitan Nomos, had already been destroyed by Vespasian.

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<sup>688</sup> A green jasper in the British Museum (Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 51) shows the baboon adoring a stele with an inscription similar to that on the Geneva stele.

<sup>689</sup> I 20.3.

<sup>690</sup> *Pistis Sophia* 136 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 354).

<sup>691</sup> PGM XII, 202; 274; cf. H. Leisegang, *The Mystery of the Serpent*, in: *The Mysteries. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, Bollis 30.2, New York 1955, 220–2.

<sup>692</sup> PGM XII, 239.

<sup>693</sup> PGM I, 300–5 ; cf. IV, 595; XII, 201–69.

To assume that Egyptian priests and scribes were willing to introduce Hebraic elements<sup>694</sup> into their religious traditions would be to embark on the most dubious and unrealistic line of inquiry. Not even Hellenistic art or Greek mythology, which had already conquered the entire *oikoumene*, had managed to penetrate Egyptian temples. So it was the heretical Jews, who were to inspire the Gnostics, who selected certain Egyptian divinities and reinterpreted them in a completely new way, exactly as their fellow Jews must have reinterpreted the serpent Glykon.

We will first of all focus on a number of the doctrinal differences that have emerged so far and other potential differences. 9 was the number of the Orphic Protogonos, but represented, first of all, the pantheistic Egyptian god who incorporated all forms. The Naassenes were aware that they had drawn on Egyptian doctrines. But in the main texts of Gnosticism, especially Sethian Gnosticism, creation was inspired by an apparition of the Anthropos, who, as the word itself denotes, had a human shape, was the perfect man, the ideal man, and therefore was not the pantheistic god. An Egyptian variation must also be posited for Sethian doctrines concerning the sons of Noah. In Egypt the myth of Cham, the ancestor of the Egyptians, could not be proposed because he bore the blood and the accursed seed of Cain<sup>695</sup>, as maintained by the Sethians on the basis of the negative connotation of Cham in *Genesis*. This position was obviously necessary if the Jews were to have good relations with the Egyptians, which came about in the late Hellenistic era. The creator Chnoumis/Chnoubis, who choked the giants under the waters, must also have saved and blessed the ancestors of the Egyptians, as well as those of the Jews. The Jews of Elephantine, like all the other Jews

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<sup>694</sup> An insight into the way magic gem engravers worked is given in an essay by Ph. Derchain, *L'atelier des Orfèvres à Dendara et les origines de l'alchimie*, CÉg 65, 1990, 219–42. The workshops were sacred places, presided over by priests and governed by precise rituals. Here the engravers of hard stones worked, in accordance with traditional Egyptian rituals that made no allowances for even the slightest intrusion of foreign religious forms. So it is hardly likely that Egyptian priests would have welcomed the religion of the Jews, with whom they were constantly at war... The valuable contribution by R. Ritner to the understanding of magical papyri (cf. *Egyptian Magical Practice under the Roman Empire: the Demotic Spells and their Religious Context*, in: ANRW II/18.5, 1995, 3333–79) has highlighted the considerable impact of Egyptian religion on magical practices, but tends to focus too narrowly on the Egyptian contribution, and not enough on Greek and Jewish influences. Cf. Chr. Faraone, *Handbooks and Anthologies: the Collection of Greek and Egyptian Incantations in Late Hellenistic Egypt*, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2, 2000, 196 with n. 5.

<sup>695</sup> The Cainite sect certainly aimed to oppose the malevolent influence of the creator, rather than reassess the Egyptians, and therefore has no direct bearing on this case. Epiph., *haer.* XXXIX 1,3 (II, 72 Holl) says that there were some Sethians in Egypt.

who did not wish to clash with the Egyptians, had to elaborate a new myth about Noah and his sons, and Chnoubis the suffocator of giants was one of the new myths of the Egyptian Jews. A work, probably Sethian, like the *Apocryphon of John*<sup>696</sup>, does not ascribe the persistence of evil in humanity after the Flood to the figure of Cham, but strangely attributes it to a new intervention by the creator's angels. As already stated, this text is believed to have been written in Alexandria around 120 AD<sup>697</sup>. This explains why there was no mention of the condemnation of Cham, the ancestor of the Egyptians. However, disagreement about the lion-headed serpent must have led to incompatibility and antagonism between the doctrines in the *Apocryphon of John* and those of the Chnoubis cult. Consequently, Jewish or Hebraizing adepts of Chnoubis were not Sethians, or rather did not correspond to our idea of Sethians: judging from magical gems, they seem to have had no leanings towards Christianity, unlike the Sethians described by heresiologists.

The Judaizing Chnoubis and the Judaic origin of the sign of Chnoubis should not be studied in an Anatolian context, but, obviously, as an Egyptian phenomenon. Some light needs to be shed on the Egyptian branches of Gnosticism, which, in this case also, will need to be sought in the religious practices of the heretical Jews of the diaspora.

Chnum, the Egyptian creator, had been a very familiar figure to the Jews of the Elephantine garrison, where he had a temple near that of the Jewish creator, locally known as YHW (Iaô) by the Jews serving the Persians during the period from 495 to 399<sup>698</sup>. From this site there is also a blessing in the name

<sup>696</sup> (NHC II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1; BG 8502, 2) 29–30.

<sup>697</sup> Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos* (n. 216), 173–195, esp. 174. On the role of Cham in other Sethian traditions, cf. *supra*, note 594.

<sup>698</sup> Cf. a recent work, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, ed. by B. Porten, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1996, no. B 37–8. Cf. again A. Vincent, *La religion des Judéo-Araméens d'Éléphantine*, Paris 1937, who, on 357–91, dates the temple of Iao in Elephantine to the period from circa 630 to 405–4 BC. On the role of the Jews of Elephantine in the Judaizing concept of Chnoubis/Chnoumis cf. Barb, *Abraxas-Studien* (n. 305), 75, and above all H. M. Jackson, *The Lion becomes Man. The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition*, Atlanta 1985. M. Smith, *The Jewish Elements in the Magical Papyri*, in: *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, II (n. 3), 242–56, has examined the Judaic or Judaizing elements in magical papyri, and has concluded that they date back to the time when the Jews of Elephantine and then those of Leontopolis did not scruple to venerate certain Egyptian gods alongside Yahweh, and when the Egyptians were not yet so hostile to the Jews. The lion-headed appearance of the Jewish god has been connected with the beliefs of the Jews of Leontopolis by S. Davies, *The Lion-Headed Yaldabaoth*, JRH 11, 1980–81, 495–500. On the temple of Chnum at Elephantine: W. Niederberger, *Elephantine XX. Der Chnumtempel Nektanebos' II.*, Mainz 1999.

of YHW and Chnub<sup>699</sup>. The original name of the Egyptian Decan of Leo was Knm, and so the initial aspirate of Chnoubis is the result of combining the two deities, Knm and Chnum, while the snake-like appearance is witness to the influence of the creator snake of Theban cosmogony, Kmeph/Knef. In a magical papyrus<sup>700</sup> the god of the Southern boundary of Egypt (the Cataract), that is Chnoumis, looked on as a sun god and as the creator, is given the form of a gigantic snake, called Kmeph<sup>701</sup>.

Under Ptolemy I a large number of Jewish prisoners were released and settled in Egypt, where they became loyal subjects of the monarchy, as we learn from the *Letter of Aristeas*. But in order to be good subjects they could not neglect the great new god introduced by Ptolemy: Sarapis, the dynasty's tutelary deity, whom both the indigenous population and the Macedonians or Greeks were expected to worship. For the Jews to take Sarapis into consideration, they had to introduce him into their cultural system. And that is what happened: the Jews of Egypt conflated Sarapis with Joseph and considered him as the bringer of fertility to the fields<sup>702</sup>. Ptolemy II placed the Greek translation of the *Bible* in the temple of Sarapis<sup>703</sup>, who thus took on a new meaning for the Jews. Sarapis was equated with Zeus or Hades, and from the *Letter of Aristeas*<sup>704</sup> it emerges that at the court of Ptolemy II the Jewish god was identified with Zeus, and in the time of Antiochus IV it was possible, especially among the Samaritans, to identify him with Zeus Hellenios, or Xenios<sup>705</sup>; under the Romans identification of the Jewish god with Zeus-Iupiter<sup>706</sup> was also widespread.

<sup>699</sup> S. A. Dupont-Sommer, "Yahô" et "Yahô-Şeba'ôt" sur des ostraca araméens inédits d'Éléphantine, CRAI 1947, 175–191, esp. 178: "I bless you in the name of Yahô and Hnu[b]."

<sup>700</sup> PGM IV, 1635–42 and 1704. In PGM VII, col. 17 Kmeph is depicted as an *ouroboros*; according to Philo of Biblos, in Eus., PE I 10,46 (VIII/1, 52 Mras), Kneph is an immortal serpent.

<sup>701</sup> Cf. Delatte, Derchain, Les intailles (n. 288), 56–7. On the subject of Kmeph cf. a recent work by H. J. Thissen, KMHΦ. Ein verkannter Gott, ZPE 112, 1996, 153–60, who maintains that Kemateph originally was not the same as Kmeph, but a solar deity who only in the Ptolemaic era was seen as a snake and identified with Agathòs Daimon. The number 4, as a name, could also be assigned to the god of the Cataract: S. Sauneron, Remarques de philologie et d'étymologie, RdE 15, 1963, 61.

<sup>702</sup> G. Mussies, The Interpretatio Judaica of Sarapis, in: Studies in Hellenistic Religions, ed. by M. J. Vermaseren, EPRO 78, Leiden 1979, 189–214.

<sup>703</sup> Chrys., Jud. I 6 (PG 48, 851); probably it was the library annexed to the temple.

<sup>704</sup> Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates 16.

<sup>705</sup> 2Macch. 6,2; Jos., AJ XII 261.

<sup>706</sup> Cf. M. Simon, Jupiter-Yahvé, Numen 23, 1976, 52–56.

According to the *Historia Augusta*<sup>707</sup>, Sarapis was venerated by the Christians in Egypt at the time of Hadrian. There are no valid reasons to claim that the *Historia Augusta* is wrong in this respect, since the word “Christians”, in the time of Hadrian, was also used to designate Gnostic Christians. Besides, there are magical gems that accompany the figure of Sarapis with the theonym Ἰαλδαβαῖμ<sup>708</sup>, which was probably the equivalent of Ἰαλδαβαῖμ<sup>709</sup>, and others that accompanied it with the names Ἰάω, or Ἰαία<sup>710</sup>. Furthermore it is unlikely that the well-known formula εἷς Ζεὺς Σάραπις<sup>711</sup>, which recurs on gems and other monuments, including those in the Palestinian area, was unconnected with the Jewish concept of one god<sup>712</sup>, even if the number 1 was more properly used to denote the original Monad, in exactly the same way that Arbathiaō indicated that Iaō was expressed by the number 4. It should be added that the Babylonian *Talmud* urged Jews not to wear rings with images, including the one with the “dragon” and the one with Isis breastfeeding Horus and another with Sarapis<sup>713</sup>.

<sup>707</sup> Vita Saturnini 8. It is usually thought that a late legend underlined the interpretation of the graffito of an ankh, similar to a cross, found on a wall of the Serapeum, as proof of the common religious basis of Christianity and the Sarapis religion: Socr., h. e. V 17 (GCS Sokrates, 290–I Hansen); Soz., h. e. VII 15,10 (GCS Sozomenus 321 Bidez, Hansen); cf. F. Thelamon, Païens et chrétiens au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle: l’apport de l’“Histoire ecclésiastique” de Rufin d’Aquilée, Paris 1981, 267–73. On the authenticity of the Hadrian’s letter in the Vita Saturnini cf. esp. F. Dornseiff, Der Hadrianbrief in der frühbyzantinischen Historia Augusta, in: Aus der Byzantinischen Arbeit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, ed. by J. Irmscher, I, Berlin 1957, 39–45.

<sup>708</sup> Delatte, Etudes (n. 292), 53; Philipp, Mira et Magica (n. 364), no. 78; cf. King, Gnostics (n. 1), 249. Perhaps the name also alludes to the god Aldemios or Aldos, corresponding to Marnas, the “Zeus” venerated in Gaza: Etym.M. 58,20. According to PGM XIII, 152–3 Aldabiaeim was an Egyptian name for the sun; in PGM XIII, 971 the theonym Αλδαζωω is taken from a book of Moses. In the Apocryphon of John (NHC II, I; III, I; IV, I; BG 8502,2) 19–30; 35 the form Altabaoth recurs, while in other parts of the work the form Jaldabaoth is used; cf. S. Giversen, Apocryphon Johannis, AthD 5, Copenhagen 1963, 199–201.

<sup>709</sup> Perhaps also of Ἰαλδαβαῶθ.

<sup>710</sup> Michel, Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum (n. 364), nos. 30–31.

<sup>711</sup> Cf. Bonner, Studies in Magical Amulets (n. 287), 174–6.

<sup>712</sup> Cf. Peterson, Εἷς Θεός (n. 474), 265 and passim). L. Di Segni, “Εἷς Θεός” in Palestinian Inscriptions, SCI 13, 1994, 94–115, has pointed out that in Palestine the acclamation was sometimes used for Sarapis and Kore; it did not belong exclusively to “orthodox” Christianity, but also to Gnosticism and Hebraism. Archaeological excavations probably show that the Serapeum of Alexandria was destroyed during the war with the Jews in 116 AD; cf. Sh. Applebaum, Jews and Greeks in ancient Cyrene, SJLA 28, Leiden 1979, 295. It could be inferred, therefore, that Sarapis was a divinity at the heart of the controversy.

<sup>713</sup> Talmud, Avodah Zarah, III 3 (IX (1934), 566–8 Goldschmidt); cf. M. Hadas-Label, Le paganisme à travers les sources rabbiniques des II<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles, in: ANRW II/19.2,

The prevalence of Gnostic ideas and language in Hermetism should be attributed – as proposed by Reitzenstein and as confirmed by the Nag Ham-madi library – to the Gnostics who were extremely well versed in Egyptian tradition. It is more than likely that Biblical construals of Harpocrates, Sarapis and Chnoubis began in Egypt, and it is equally likely that they spread outside Egypt, especially after the repression of the Jews in the first decades of the second century.

Chnoubis, the god of the Nile flood, had sent the deluge to kill the giants. Therefore the sign of Chnoubis had a positive meaning and consisted of the initial letter of the name of YHWH repeated three times.

The cycles of Nile flood celebrations were the high point of the religious life of the peoples of Egypt. The flood brought benefits for everyone, including the Jews, and so they too must have devised cults that allowed them to take part in the common thanksgiving to the god who had blessed the earth. This is why Chnoubis/Chnoumis came to be equated with the Jewish god and, later, Sarapis with Joseph. Towards the end of repression of Judaism in Egypt the *Apocryphon of John* was composed, in which the lion-headed serpent was seen as the evil creator. This phenomenon marks a clear separation from Egyptian Hebraism and an acceptance of certain forms of Christianity. Forms of veneration of the snake as the manifestation of the Jewish god must also have occurred in Anatolia, perhaps in imitation of the Egyptian example, though other influences are not to be ruled out; for example, worshippers of the god of Leontopolis, who were exiled after the closure of the temple by Vespasian, could have played a part.

The sign of Chnoubis, indicating the sacred snake (probably the snake of Asclepius, certainly not Leviathan<sup>714</sup>) must have spread, like the doctrine of the number 9, from Egypt to Asia Minor. The Chnoubis sign was venerated by the Jews of Asia Minor, who read it as a triple Digamma, therefore as 666. This seems to have been the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and the sects close to the Nicolaitans of Western Anatolia, who, it seems, also had branches in Egypt, with the Phibionites or the Stratiotics. The Ophites, however, assigned the number 6 to Leviathan, creator and tyrant of the cosmos, from which came the number 3663, corresponding to the numerical value of Bainchooch, to be exorcized in the name of the Jewish god, corresponding to 4. It was the Christians who demonized not only Chnoubis, assigned the number 6, but also all divine snakes resembling him. The *Apocryphon*

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1979, 405; N. Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina. The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)*, Tübingen 2001, 162–4 and passim. The passage of Avodah Zarah also condemned the cult of a little worm.

<sup>714</sup> Cf. Epiph., haer. XXVI 10,8 (I, 288 Holl).

*of John* gives the form of Chnoubis to Jaldabaoth, the malevolent creator, and there were also learned men who attributed to Leviathan the form of a Chnoubis with his tail in his mouth, who was exorcized by the “seal of Solomon”, as explained in § 34.

Amulets identifying Chnoubis with the Biblical god can therefore be attributed to the doctrines of Jewish or Hebraizing magi; not to the Christianized Gnostics who condemned the creator, but to those who revered him and placed him in the Zodiac and perhaps even above it, at the cosmic pole. These magi, continuing the tradition of the Egyptians and Egyptian diaspora Jews, revered this deity.

Two different definitions of the serpentiform deity can be attributed with certainty to two different cultural environments, Anatolia and Egypt. In Egypt the god was seen in a very positive light, except in those Gnostic doctrines that informed the *Apocryphon of John*; in Anatolia there seem to have been different points of view. The Chnoubis reinterpreted by the Jews was an older deity, probably less complex than the snake revered by Anatolian sects, who were linked to Chaldean tradition and indulged in complex, sophisticated speculation. Chnoubis does not seem to have been the instructor serpent, partly because in all probability his identity was defined before the development of doctrines concerning the instructor serpent of the garden of Eden.

## The Snake at the highest point of the Universe

### § 44. *The Dragon constellation according to the heretical astrologers*

We will now examine another concept of the snake with its tail in its mouth in Gnostic thinking and contemporary doctrines close to Gnosticism: the notion of the *ouroboros* as god of the cosmic pole, placed in a dominant position in the extreme North and responsible for moving all the astral spheres that determined time and the destiny of all things. In this case, we will note that Christianity did not result in a general condemnation of the serpentine creator, but in multiple offshoots, including some that emphasised a serpentine manifestation of the supreme god and made it the image of the Saviour.

One of the recurrent ideas in Gnosticism was, as we have seen, that the evil serpent, in the guise of a river, obstructed man's way to God. There was also an astrological variation on this theme, in which the snake, who plays the same role as the Euphrates, the Jordan or the Oceanus, bars the way to souls attempting to ascend beyond the last of the planetary and astral spheres. Hippolytus, in Book IV, dedicated to magi and astrologers, states<sup>715</sup> that the heresiarchs drew inspiration from the astrological writings of Aratus of Soloi when they recognized the protagonists of their sacred stories in the starry sky. The heresiologist maintains that, according to Aratus, "there towards the Bears, it turns on itself, like the current of a river, an enormous and prodigious monster, the Serpent; and this is what the devil says to God in the Book of Job (1,7): 'I have crossed the earth under the sky and have travelled around it'". This serpent was identified with the Dragon constellation, which is immobile above the celestial pole, and controls everything<sup>716</sup> in

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<sup>715</sup> Hipp., haer. IV 47–8 (69–73 Wend.). J. Frickel, *Unerkannte gnostische Schriften in Hippolyts Refutatio*, in: *Gnosis und Gnosticism. Papers read at the seventh Int. Conf. on Patristic Studies*. Oxford 1975, ed. by M. Krause, Leiden 1977, 119–137, esp. 124 stresses that it must have been an anonymous work.

<sup>716</sup> An Alexandrian tomb inscription (II AD) invokes (in addition to other divinities) "the Most High God who sees all things" (*Theòs Hypsistos kai pantôn epoptes*): F. Prei-

creation, as well as the rising and setting of the other stars. Near the Dragon's head was the Engonasis constellation, which looked like a kneeling man. The "heretics", according to Hippolytus, said that "the Engonasis is Adam, who, according to the commandment of God – as Moses had declared –, is looking at the Dragon's head and the Dragon is looking at his heel. The same statement is made by Aratus:

'Having the right footprint of the deceitful Dragon''.

Near the Engonasis are the Lyre and the Crown; nearby is the Ophiouchos, who restrains the serpent son of the Dragon, and prevents him from reaching the Crown. The "heretics" referred to by Hippolytus held that the Engonasis represented Adam in the first creation, kneeling because he was labouring and weary; the Ophiouchos, who represented Christ in the second creation, through whom we are regenerated, is holding the beast away from the Crown, which had been prepared for man.

In this text perhaps we find the explanation for the Adam spoken of by the Chaldeans, mentioned in the Naassene sermon. If this is so, it means that certain Gnostic thinkers (the "heretics" spoken of by Hippolytus) had already come across the identification of Adam with the Engonasis in Chaldean doctrines. But it may even be possible that the "heretics" of Hippolytus were the Chaldeans themselves<sup>717</sup>, who earnestly speculated on biblical themes; this proposition would be borne out by the fact that the Peratic Gnostics had a very similar astrological theory; except that in this case it was the Dragon who was identified with Christ.

### § 45. *The Dragon constellation according to the Peratae*

An astrological doctrine similar to the one we have expounded is repeated by Hippolytus in Book V, ch. 16, where it is attributed to the Peratae. But in this case the Dragon is not the prince of the stars who controls and rules creation and has generated the diabolical serpent who aspires to the Crown, but the

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sigke, *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*, I, Strassburg 1915, no. 1323. Macr. I 20.3 attests the existence of a paretymological speculation that interpreted the word *δορυκων* on the basis of the verb *δέρχειν*, "to watch", therefore the Dragon is the one who sees everything, and this was a characteristic of the sun. Porph., *de abst.* IV 16 attests that the forms of the sun were the lizard, lion, serpent and falcon. On the serpenti-form sun cf. Leisegang, *The Mystery of the Serpent* (n. 691), 220–5.

<sup>717</sup> G. Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos*, in: *Gnostic Studies*, I (n. 20), 180–1, has examined the question of the Chaldean Adam, and has reached a similar conclusion, i. e. that these Chaldeans were Jews.

image of Christ, who had already manifested himself in the serpent of the earthly Paradise<sup>718</sup> (in the form of the river of paradise), in the mark of Cain and in Cain himself (whose sacrifices were not acceptable to the lord of the world, who was pleased by blood offerings<sup>719</sup>), in the serpent-rod of Moses and in the brazen serpent erected by Moses. The Peratae took the Chaldean reading of the sky and inverted its values. Hippolytus<sup>720</sup> also states that the Peratae interpreted the serpents encountered by Moses in the Pharaoh's palace and in the desert as demonic, evil stars. This biblical exegesis was a potentially good basis for an astrological apocryphon of Moses.

The specifics of the Peratic doctrine concerning the Dragon will be examined in more detail later; for the moment we will confine ourselves to tracing the origin of Gnostic speculations on the tail-biting Dragon-serpent back to Chaldean doctrines.

A Greek astrological codex<sup>721</sup> states that the Chaldean Dragon, that is, the astral pole constellation, was an *ouroboros*. Another codex<sup>722</sup> states that the *ouroboros* Dragon causes eclipses. In another manuscript<sup>723</sup> the Dragon is placed in the ninth and outermost sphere. Two astrological codices<sup>724</sup> agree that this doctrine is Chaldean and call the Dragon Ἀθαλίαν, which corresponds to the Assyrian *antalu*, *attalu*<sup>725</sup>, a name that recurs in a Cretan magical lamella of the fourth century BC<sup>726</sup>. From a work by the Syrian

<sup>718</sup> J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres*, Paris 1956, 111–2, has recognized the Naassene serpent that speaks to Adam and Eve in a fresco, dating to the time of the Severi, in the Roman cemetery of the Aurelii, near viale Manzoni. But it is not certain that those frescoes were inspired by the Naassene heresy. Moreover, one would have expected a Naassene confraternity to place far more emphasis on the serpent than is seen in that funerary crypt.

<sup>719</sup> Here there is a very noticeable link with Marcionite doctrine.

<sup>720</sup> V 16,6–8 (116 Wend.).

<sup>721</sup> CCAG VII, A, cod. 7 (Paris codex 13th c.), 125; cf. F. Cumont, *De dragone caelesti*, in: CCAG VIII, 1, 1929, 194–5. In a codex at Erlangen containing a Christian spell (CCAG VII, 244–5, 244) a star is called on (using a play on the words *astera*, “star”, and *hystera*, “womb”) to stop the bleeding, and at the end there is a drawing of an *ouroboros* snake.

<sup>722</sup> CCAG VIII (Paris codex. 12th c.), 199.

<sup>723</sup> CCAG X, 10 and 40. Cf. Leisegang, *The Mystery of the Serpent* (n. 691), 217.

<sup>724</sup> The Rome cod. V, 2, 131 et seqq. and the Paris cod. VIII, 1 (according to which Athalia is a two-headed pneuma drakontoeidēs with a double tail; one head is in the Yoke, the other in Scorpio).

<sup>725</sup> Th. Nöldeke, *Aus einem Briefe des Herrn Prof. Th. Nöldeke an C. Bezold*, ZA 25, 1911, 355–7; C. Bezold, *Aus der Antwort auf diesen Brief*, *ibid.*, 357–8; Cumont, *De dragone caelesti*, (n. 721), 194.

<sup>726</sup> In the form Ἀθαλία, which is a malevolent demon: C. C. McCown, *The Ephesia Grammata in Popular Belief*, TPAPA 54, 1923, 128–40; 133–4; IC II (19) 7, from Phalasarua.

cleric Severus Sebocht (second half of the seventh century) we learn that eclipses of the moon were attributed to an enormous dragon called Atalu, which extended over the sky from East to West<sup>727</sup>. So now we also have a reference point for defining at least one use of the term Chaldeans, not in a very general sense to mean Oriental astrologers or astrologers of Oriental tradition, but in a very specific sense to indicate Babylonian astrologers<sup>728</sup> or their followers.

Origen<sup>729</sup> states that the Ophites took the names of Jaldabaoth, Astaphaios and Horaios from “magic” and the names Iaô, Sabaoth, Adonai and Eloaios from the *Bible*. Hippolytus clearly asserts that the Peratae were inspired by Chaldean doctrines<sup>730</sup>. The fathers of the Peratic heresy were Euphrates and Kelbes (or Akembes or Ademes) the Carystian<sup>731</sup>, who may not even have been Jews. A doctrine very similar to and certainly linked to Peratic thinking was elaborated by Monoimos the Arab<sup>732</sup>, who said that everything originated in the son of man, who was the Iota, the sovereign “number”, with a value of 10<sup>733</sup>, and was represented by Moses’ rod. The Hebraizing magical lamella of the first century BC, with an *ouroboros*, found in Emesa, probably was associated with doctrines akin to those of Monoimos. During the Imperial Age the Palmyran god of heaven, Baal Shamin, was invoked with descriptive phrases usually applied to the Jewish god, such as “blessed be his name” or “the one and only merciful god”<sup>734</sup>. All these are testimonies that

<sup>727</sup> F. Nau, *La cosmographie au VIIe siècle chez les Syriens*, ROC 15, 1910, 253–4 (the dragon Aitalia goes forward in the sky, below the orbits of the sun and the moon, occupying 180 degrees).

<sup>728</sup> In a Hellenistic context, Babylonian culture should be extended to what the Greeks called “Babylonia”, an area roughly corresponding to present day Iraq.

<sup>729</sup> Orig., *Cels.* VI 32 (II, 102 Koet.).

<sup>730</sup> *haer.* IV 2,1; V 13,12 (33 and 108 Wend.).

<sup>731</sup> Hipp., *haer.* IV 2,1 (33 Wend.); 13,9 (107 Wend.); X 10,1 (268 Wend.); Thdt., *haer.* I 17 (PG 83, 368); Orig., *Cels.* VI 28 (II, 98 Koet.) says that Euphrates was the father of the Ophite sect. Cf. R. P. Casey, *Naassenes and Ophites*, JThS 27, 1926, 374–87.

<sup>732</sup> Hipp., *haer.* VIII 12–15 (232–6 Wend.); X 17 (278–9 Wend.). According to Thdt., *haer.* I 18 (PG 83, 370), he founded his doctrine on arithmetic, the science of numbers. On the dating of Monoimos to just before the middle of the 2nd century AD, cf. Casey, *Naassenes* (n. 731), 387.

<sup>733</sup> On this doctrine, see: Iren., *haer.* I 3,2; cf. 15,2 (SC 264, 52 and 238 Rouss., *Dout.*), on the subject of the theory of Marcus; Iota was the initial letter of Ἰεσοῦς. The middle, and fourth, planetary sphere was attributed to him. Its harmony had the letter I as the tone, and the Sun as planet; cf. Hipp., *haer.* VI 48,2 (180 Wend.); cf. the apparatus of Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, ed. by M. Marcovich, PTS 25, Berlin, New York 1986, 267, and Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (n. 503), 131; Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* (n. 79) I, 357.

<sup>734</sup> H. Seyrig, *Antiquité syriennes* 14. Nouveaux monuments palmyréniens des cultes de Bêl et de Baalshamin. *Syr.* 14, 1933, 270; *Antiquité syriennes* 41. Nouveaux monu-

lead in the same direction and suggest that the source of doctrinal inspiration for these Gnostic principles should be sought in Babylonia.

### § 46. *Kronos, Iaô and Proteus*

As already stated, the Peratae thought that the Dragon constellation was Christ, who had manifested himself as the serpent and the river of the earthly Paradise, the mark of Cain and Cain himself, the serpent-rod of Moses and the brazen serpent that Moses had erected<sup>735</sup>.

We will now search for some of these concepts in a formula in the great magical papyrus in Paris, which was used to summon the supreme god of light. The formula<sup>736</sup>, which follows a Solomonic spell to induce a trance, starts with a prayer that combines Homeric with biblical exegesis and adds to it syncretisms with Egyptian religious tradition. The hymn begins with the words: "Hail, O serpent and indomitable lion, natural sources of fire; and hail, clear water and tall leafy tree!"<sup>737</sup>. These are the forms in which Proteus had manifested himself, in the Homeric episode of Menelaus in Egypt<sup>738</sup>. In actual fact, in the *Odyssey* Proteus became a lion, a snake, a panther and a monstrous boar, and then flowing water and a tall leafy tree. An obsidian gem in the civic museum of Bologna<sup>739</sup> depicts, on the obverse, an emasculated Kronos and, on the reverse, a lion-headed snake and a wild boar. They are the three animal forms that the god could assume. A jasper in the Paul Getty Museum, at Malibu<sup>740</sup>, has the same god on the obverse, but on the reverse, instead of the three animal forms, it bears the inscription Ἰαώ Σαβαώθ Ἄδωναι, οἱ τρεῖς οἱ μεγάλοι. The god was therefore a planetary god,

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ments palmyréniens de Baalshamin., Syr. 26, 1949, 29–35; Bickerman, *The Altars of Gentiles* (n. 212), 339–40.

<sup>735</sup> Hipp., haer. V 16 (111–4 Wend.).

<sup>736</sup> PGM IV, 835–49.

<sup>737</sup> PGM IV, 939–941; note: δένδρεον ὑπεπέτηλον: PGM IV, 941 = Hom., Od. IV 458.

<sup>738</sup> Hom., Od. IV 418 e 456–8. On religious interpretations of the Homeric text by middle and neo-Platonists cf. R. Lamberton, *Homer Theologian*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1986; on 37 and 226–7 on Jambl., *Theol. arith.* 7,20–3 and *Procl.*, in *Remp.* I 112,28–9, according to whom Proteus incorporated the shapes of all things.

<sup>739</sup> A. R. Mandrioli, *La collezione di gemme del Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna*, Bologna 1987, 134, no. 268; cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), 82–83 and plate 19; Id., *Metamorfosi di Kronos su una gemma di Bologna*, in: *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica* (n. 261), 103–118, with a detailed study of these Kronos gems.

<sup>740</sup> R. Kotansky, *Kronos and a New Magical Inscription Formula on a Gem in the J. P. Getty Museum*, *Ancient World* 3/1, 1980, 29–32.

Kronos-Saturn, identified with the Jewish god and his three names Iaō (the abbreviation of Yahweh), Sabaoth and Adonai. An obsidian gem showing a similar Kronos who has recently removed his genitals is described in the magic-naturalistic treatise of Syrian tradition entitled *Kyranis*<sup>741</sup>. The work adds that this inscribed stone was like others forming part of Aphrodite's *κεστός ἱμάς*, a leather belt with decorative open work which, according to Homer<sup>742</sup>, contained every love spell. The obsidian with the image of the castrated man was supposed to make those who used it "effeminate".

This kind of speculation was perhaps linked to the doctrine of the Gnostics close to Nicolaitans, who believed that Sabaoth had woman's hair<sup>743</sup>. If so, then Sabaoth's repentance, mentioned in § 12, may have had sexual implications, in the sense of renouncing sexuality, or (since these are doctrines close to Nicolaism) procreation.

### § 47. Harpocrates, the Dragon and Gnosticism

We have spoken of these magic gems not only because they show a Kronos identified with the Jewish god and having sexual characteristics – the lack of a distinct gender – similar to those of the protagonists of Gnostic mythology, but also because these gems refer to a treatise, the *Kyranis*, which was definitely not composed by Jews or Christians but by pagans<sup>744</sup> inspired by Near Eastern Hellenistic wisdom.

At this point the passage following the hymn in the magical papyrus in Paris can be read:

"Thou who art seated at the summit of the cosmos and beholdest all things<sup>745</sup>, surrounded by the circle of Truth and Faith<sup>746</sup> ΙΥΑΗ ΙΩΑΙ, enter, appear to me, O

<sup>741</sup> I 10, 62–65 Kaimakis; cf. also Latin tradition: *Textes latins et vieux français relatifs aux Cyranides*, ed. by L. Delatte, Liège-Paris 1942, 55–61. On the amulets described in the first book of the *Kyranides* cf. M. Waegeman, *Amulet and Alphabet – Magical Amulets in the first Book of Cyranides*, Amsterdam 1986. On this gem: Mastrocinque, *Metamorfosi di Kronos* (n. 739).

<sup>742</sup> II.XIV 214–217; this is a Homeric passage full of references to Mesopotamian traditions: C.A. Faraone, *Aphrodite's KESTOS and Apples for Atalanta: Aphrodisiacs*, *Phoenix* 44, 1990, 219–243; Id., *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, Cambridge/Mass. 1999, 97–110.

<sup>743</sup> *Epiph.*, haer. XXVI 10,11 (I, 288 Holl).

<sup>744</sup> K. Alpers, *Untersuchungen zum griechischen Physiologos und den Kyraniden*, VB 6, 1984, 13–88.

<sup>745</sup> ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου κεφαλῆς καθήμενος καὶ κρίνων τὰ πάντα.

<sup>746</sup> περιβεβλημένος τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ πίστεως κύκλῳ.

Lord, who art outside and inside fire and snow, for I am Bainchooch<sup>747</sup>, born of the sky, and my name is Balsames<sup>748</sup>; enter, appear to me, O Lord of the great name which each of us has in his heart<sup>749</sup>; thy name is Barphanneth ralfai ninther chouchai, thou who breakest rocks in half and takest away the names of the gods; enter, appear to me, O Lord, thou who hast the power and the strength of fire, Sesenghen barpharanges, thou who art seated between the seven poles AEHIOYΩ, with a golden crown on thy head and in thy hand the Memnonian sceptre, through which thou sendest the gods...<sup>750</sup>.

At the end of the rite this god is supposed to appear above the lamp in the form of Harpocrates. But the remarkable thing is that he is sitting at the summit of the cosmos, from where he sees and judges all things<sup>751</sup>. The seven poles may not be the Septem Triones, that is, Ursa Minor, which is next to the Dragon in Imperial Age planispheres, but the seven spheres of the Planets, which are named by means of the seven vowels.

In the doctrines of the heretical astrologers known to Hippolytus, the Kosmokrator was also at the top of the cosmos, in the form of the Dragon, and from there he saw and controlled everything. The Peratae agree with the text of the magical papyri mentioned here, and viewed the Dragon as a benevolent god. Also, the two entities beside the god, Aletheia and Pistis, recur in Gnostic thinking, especially Valentinian doctrine, as personifications and emanations of the supreme god's actions<sup>752</sup>. It is also noteworthy

<sup>747</sup> From the Egyptian *ba*: "soul", *inkh* "living" and *kho(oo)kh*: "darkness"; in the Pistis Sophia IV 137 (Schmidt, Macdermot, 356) χαυχωωωχ (with Ch instead of B, to evoke the name of Cain) is one of the gods endowed with triple strength.

<sup>748</sup> Hieron., Ep. 75, 3,1 (CSEL 55, 32 Hilberg) criticized the search for exotic and mysterious theonyms in these words: "To excite the minds of the ignorant and of foolish women, they claim to derive from Hebrew sources the names Armazel, Barbelo, Abraxas, Balsamus and the ludicrous Leusiboras and other monsters". Since Barbelo certainly brings to mind Gnosticism, it may be that Balsames was a theonym used by Gnostics.

<sup>749</sup> According to the neo-Platonists, the symbol of the Greek X is inscribed on the human soul: Procl., in Remp., II, 143–4 Kroll. It was the sign drawn by the Demiurge to enclose the cosmos within the astral equator and the zodiac: Plat., Tim. 36 B–C.

<sup>750</sup> PGM IV, 1010–1030.

<sup>751</sup> On Helios who sees and judges all things cf. L. Robert, Un oracle gravé à Oinoanda, CRAI 1971, 615–6.

<sup>752</sup> On Valentinian Gnosis: cf. for instance, on Aletheia: Iren., haer. I 1,1; 8,5 (SC 264, 30 and 134 Rouss., Dout.); Hipp., haer. IV 51,9 (76 Wend.); VI 20,4 (148 Wend.); 30,1–5; 44,1 (157 and 176 Wend.); specifically in Ptolemy the Valentinian: Iren., haer. I 12,1 (SC 264, 182 Rouss., Dout.); in Marcus the Valentinian: 45,2; Iren., haer. I 14,3; 15,1 (SC 264, 214 and 234 Rouss., Dout.); in Barbelo-Gnostic thinking: haer. I 29,2 (from the Apocryphon of John); on Pistis in Valentinian thinking: Hipp., haer. VI 30,5 (157 Wend.); in Ptolemy the Valentinian: Iren., haer. I 1,2 (SC 264, 32 Rouss., Dout.); M. Guarducci, Ancora sui Valentiniani a Roma, in: Scritti scelti sulla religione greca e romana e sul Cristianesimo, EPRO 98, Leiden 1983, 380–2 (on the Valentinian linking of Sigé and

that Aletheia and Pistis surround God with a circle, which must have been a manifestation of God himself.

Another magical papyrus, the XXIIb, contains a “prayer of Jacob” to be offered, while facing the Bear, to Sabaoth, who is constantly moving and moves all the stars. This formula is also followed by the description of a lamp rite.

Another formula of Judaic inspiration in the first magical papyrus<sup>753</sup> contains a prayer to Adam and God, beginning: “I invoke thee, Lord, hear me. O holy God, who resteth among the saints, with the Glories always (διηνεκῶς) at thy side. I invoke thee, first father, and I need thee, O eternal one, he who, immovable, commands<sup>754</sup>, he who eternally moves the Pole, placed over the seven zones”<sup>755</sup>. In the first magical papyrus the “holy god” is invoked as “αἰωνοπολοκράτωρ, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἑπταμερ[ί]ου σταθείς”<sup>756</sup>, “sovereign of time and of the pole, placed over the seven zones”. These descriptions of God are inspired by the biblical words of Isaiah<sup>757</sup>. Again in the magical papyri there is another invocation<sup>758</sup> spoken in the name of Adam to the god who illuminates the world, who copulates in the ocean, called Κμηφ, Helios, as the infant god – that is, Harpocrates –, creator of justice and dispenser of truth.

From some passages in magical papyrus XIII<sup>759</sup> we learn that the secret name of the Delphic serpent, the Python, was φωχω φωβωχ. These magical *voces* are part of the well-known magical *logos* χαβραχ φνεσχηρ φιχρο φνυρω φωχω βωχ, usually associated with solar deities, especially Apollo<sup>760</sup>.

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Aletheia). Pistis was another name for Sophia, the divine being omnipresent in Gnosticism. On Pistis, Aletheia and Gnosis accompanying the figure of Enoch ascending to heaven, according to a Jewish prayer, attested in Book VII of the Apostolic Constitutions: E. Peterson, Henoch im jüdischen Gebet und in jüdischer Kunst, in: Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis, Rome, Freiburg, Vienna 1959, 36–42.

<sup>753</sup> PGM I, 196–222; a related text is in PGM IV, 1167–1226; cf. E. Peterson, Die Befreiung Adams aus der Ananke, in: Frühkirche (n. 752), 107–128.

<sup>754</sup> There is no need for the correction αἰωνοπολοκράτωρ.

<sup>755</sup> ἐπικαλο[ῦ]μαί σε, κύριε, κλήθι μου. ὁ ἅγιος θεός, [ὁ] ἐν ἁγίοις ἀναπαινόμενος, ὦ αἰ Δόξα παρεστήκασι διηνεκῶς· σὲ ἐπικαλούμαι, [προπ[ά]τωρ, καὶ δέομαί σου, αἰωναῖε, αἰωνοπολοκράτωρ, αἰωνοπολοκράτωρ, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἑπταμερ[ί]ου σταθείς.

<sup>756</sup> PGM I, 200.

<sup>757</sup> Is. 57,15; κύριος ὁ ὑψιστος ὁ ἐν ὑψηλοῖς κατοικῶν τὸν αἰῶνα, ἅγιος ἐν ἁγίοις ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. κύριος ὑψιστος ἐν ἁγίοις ἀναπαινόμενος; cf. Peterson, Die Befreiung Adams (n. 753), 114.

<sup>758</sup> PGM III, 140–57.

<sup>759</sup> PGM XIII, 198; 368; 535; 668; similarly III, 110–3.

<sup>760</sup> PGM II, 138–140; III, 78; cf. Bonner, Studies in Magical Amulets (n. 287), 141–142. In PGM I, 143–8 the *logos* is addressed to the solar deity, who must be engraved on a gem in the form of lion-headed god encircled by an *auroboros* snake. In Meyer, Smith, Ancient Christian Magic (n. 183), no. 59 the *logos* corresponds to the god who illuminates the afterworld.

The numerical equivalent of the formula is 9999<sup>761</sup>. A large group of magical gems has this formula next to the figure of Harpocrates<sup>762</sup>. Sometimes Harpocrates is inside an *ouroboros*, often he is being adored by a baboon or surrounded by animals of every kind, in groups of three. The sun god, represented as the child Horus, is frequently accompanied by divine names or Hebraic angels. A jasper from Athens<sup>763</sup> shows him with four archangels' names and the triad Iaô Sabaoth Abrasax: seven in all, like the planets, over which Harpocrates evidently ruled from the top of the pole.

In the Hebraizing magical-astrological text entitled *Sepher ha Razim*<sup>764</sup> the god Helios is similarly invoked as lord of the cosmic axis and of the pole (*polokrator*). In the time of Julian the Apostate this was, furthermore, the doctrine upheld by the emperor himself<sup>765</sup>.

It is clear that we are dealing with a very widespread and clearly defined concept that influenced from within a system of Hebraic myths (the prayers of Jacob or Adam, the Jewish theonyms), resulting in the syncretism of Harpocrates, Apollo and a manifestation of the Jewish god, who assume the form of a cosmic snake that rules the astral pole and moves all the astral and planetary spheres. Gnostic texts tell of how Sabaoth rebelled against the tyrant Jaldabaoth and was carried up by Sophia above the seventh heaven.

The passages from the magical papyri do not, however, equate the god of the celestial pole with Jesus; only Peratic doctrine proposes this conflation. Naassene doctrine identifies the pole of heaven with the Anthropos, a luminous manifestation of God in an anthropic form and potentially also a *figura Christi*<sup>766</sup>. The Homeric figure of Proteus was taken from Naassene speculations, according to which Proteus was the god on the cosmic pole, moving the spheres, and identical to the Phrygian god Polykarpos<sup>767</sup>, both pagan conceptions that had drawn on truth. The god was clearly shape-changing and serpentiform. In the Ophitic system the multiform god was the Son and was placed higher than the cosmic pole, just below the Nous, whereas the Naassenes seem to identify the god of the pole with the multiform god.

<sup>761</sup> Bonner, *The Numerical Value* (n. 365), 6–9; cf. *supra*, note 502.

<sup>762</sup> P. Zazoff, AGDS, III, Kassel, no. 148; cf. also Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 127.

<sup>763</sup> Cat. Southesk (n. 297), no. 54.

<sup>764</sup> 60, 71 Morgan.

<sup>765</sup> Jul., *Or. IV* in *Solem regem* 27 = 147 D.

<sup>766</sup> He was thought to be the Logos, the father of Christ, and the only difference between them was that the Logos was not *kecharakterismenos*, that is to say had received no form, while the Christ was: Hipp., haer. V 7,33 (87 Wend.).

<sup>767</sup> Hipp., haer. V 8,35 (95 Wend.).

The Phibionites, an Egyptian Gnostic sect, placed the Mother Barbelo and Christ in the eighth heaven<sup>768</sup>. It is obvious that the nuances of these complex doctrines escape us, even if the essential features of the figure of the cosmic sovereign who rules the pole are well described.

All of this confirms what could be assumed on the basis of what has been said about the two magical gems: that they were not, apparently, used by Christians, but by pagans steeped in Judaism who shared the ideas of the Gnostics, which is tantamount to saying that they were another type of Gnostics. The Carpocratians must have been one such type, who, according to the testimony of Celsus<sup>769</sup>, were called Harpokratianoï, and therefore it is possible that they venerated Harpocrates<sup>770</sup>. One of their adepts, a woman called Marcellina, came from Rome and had many followers. They used sacred images, painted or in other material, and displayed them together with those of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle<sup>771</sup>.

Valentinian Gnosticism, which was certainly a Christian branch of Gnosticism, and maybe even Valentinus himself had also reinterpreted the myth of Isis and Harpocrates, a myth already construed philosophically by Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*<sup>772</sup>. The *Gospel of Truth*, a Valentinian treatise conserved in the codex Jung, describes the wanderings of Plane, a personification of the futile search for Truth. The roving goddess was said to have fashioned a creature that had nothing to do with the heavenly Father, and her flawed creation was inspired by the Plutarchian myth of the roamings of Isis in search of the dead Osiris. Specifically, the source of inspiration was a passage in Plutarch's treatise<sup>773</sup> which states that Apollo (i. e. Horus) was procreated by Isis and Osiris in Rhea's womb, before the world was perfected by Logos, and thus the first creation was imperfect: in the physical darkness of the

<sup>768</sup> Epiph., haer. XXVI 10,4 (I, 287 Holl). The globe held by the Roman emperor in his hand symbolized the cosmic sphere, also known as the *polus*: Amm. XXV 102.

<sup>769</sup> Orig., Cels. V 62 (II, 66 Koet.).

<sup>770</sup> Iren., haer. I 25 (SC 264, 333–344 Rouss., Dout.) and Hipp., haer. VII 32 (218–220 Wend.), say that this sect believed that the world had been created by angels, that Jesus was Joseph's son, but his soul had been given the power to perform miracles by the supernatural Father and had returned to the Father; they believed that the cycle of the soul's reincarnations was interrupted by committing any kind of misdeed.

<sup>771</sup> Iren., haer. I 25,6 (SC 264, 344 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>772</sup> J. Helderman, Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?, in: Gnosis and Gnosticism. Papers read at the eighth Int. Conf. on Patristic Studies, Oxford 1975, ed. by M. Krause. Leiden 1981, 26–46, whose starting point is an idea in A. Torhoutd, Een onbekend gnostisch systeem in Plutarchus' *De Iside et Osiride*, Leuven 1942. Note that in an exorcistic text transcribed in the 8th century (A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, I, Liège, Paris 1927, 234), Plane is the name of a demon.

<sup>773</sup> De Is. et Os. 54.

womb was born Horus the Old Man (the Egyptian Haroeris), who was only an image and a vision of the cosmos that would come later. This philosophical reading proposed by Plutarch presupposes the subsequent birth of Horus the Young Man, Harpocrates.

Here we have an example of the way in which a Gnostic reworking (*Umdeutung*) of an Egyptian myth occurred: it had been the subject of philosophical reinterpretations by a pagan with a Platonic background, and only later was rediscovered and reinterpreted by a Gnostic thinker.

The figure of Harpocrates very frequently appears in magic of the Imperial Age, especially on gems, because this god had a special significance in the doctrinal systems of Gnosticism, and also for learned men who were not Christians, but pagans. Why is it that on Gnostic gems (and also in magical papyri) Athena and Cybele appear so rarely and Dionysos, Hephaistos, Hera, etc. never appear? Why are Harpocrates and Chnoubis seen so frequently, and Osiris, Horus, Thoth and Seth less frequently? The fact is that it was the great masters of Gnosis who identified the figures of the Gentile religions, reinterpreted them, gave them their recondite meanings and attributed to them powers that could only be activated if one knew their secret nature, names, symbols and voice.

Harpocrates' position in the cosmos was therefore the same as that of Sabaoth and the biblical Serpent spoken of in Gnostic literature. It was later to become the position of Christ himself or Leviathan. We can see this position in the Ophite diagram: above the planetary circles, enclosed by the zodiacal serpent, within the great circle of Sophia, in the circle of the Intellect, which is placed immediately above the Leviathan *ouroboros* of the 12 Signs of the Zodiac. Since both Harpocrates and Christ are solar in their nature (the day of the Sun is Christ's day in the week devised by Constantine), this would indicate that the sphere abandoned by Sabaoth when he was assumed into the seventh heaven was that of the sun. The sun was therefore the visible "form" of the great god, who resided, however, on the Pole, from where he governed the entire cosmos. In § 61 we will see that in the philosophical thinking of the Hellenic and Imperial ages the belief that the sun's light was "intelligent" had become deeply rooted. This explains the position of this type of supreme divinity in the circle of the Intellect, within the greater circle of Sophia.

#### § 48. *Pagan gods of the cosmic pole*

The god who moved the cosmic axis, the god of time, the first emanation of the unknowable supreme spiritual god, sitting above the cosmos, was a very

widespread and important theme in the religions of the Roman empire. It had been developed by the schools of Eastern astrologers<sup>774</sup>. We find it for the first time in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*<sup>775</sup>, probably based on concepts disseminated by Posidonius, which recur later in Apuleius and Statius<sup>776</sup>. Roman paganism called this supreme god Iuppiter summus exsuperantissimus, a god of Eastern origin, probably Baal Shamin, "the sky god", who was given a public cult in the empire by Commodus.

It was a kind of deity found in various doctrinal circles: Jews could identify him with the Jewish god<sup>777</sup>, Mithraists identified him with Mithras or with Ariman and depicted him as a lion-headed god encircled by a snake's coils<sup>778</sup>, the Egyptians or worshippers of Egyptian divinities saw him as Osiris with the snake wound round him<sup>779</sup>, some pagans of the late empire identified him with Saturn<sup>780</sup>. Many pagan monuments of the Imperial Age depicted the god of eternity, the Aion, as an old man, or as a young man at the centre of the Zodiac circle<sup>781</sup>. The vertical position of the god in the middle of the zodia-

<sup>774</sup> F. Cumont, Jupiter summus exsuperantissimus, ARW 9, 1906, 323–336.

<sup>775</sup> De Rep. VI 17; cf. Cumont, Jupiter summus (n. 774), 332.

<sup>776</sup> Apul., Mun. 27 (126 Goldbacher): *Summus exsuperantissimusque divum...si ipse in alto residat altissimo eas autem potestates per omnes partes mundi dispensat; De Platone I 11–12 (73 Goldbacher): Deorum trinas nuncupat species quarum est prima unus et solus summus ille ultramundanus et incorporeus quem patrem et architectum huius divini orbis superius ostendimus...Providentiam esse summi exsuperantissimique deorum omnium qui non solum deos caelicolas ordinavit...; Stat., Theb. IV 515.*

<sup>777</sup> CIL III, 3327; cf. S. Sanie, Deus Aeternus et Theos Hypsistos en Dacie romaine, in: *Hommages à M.J. Vermaseren*, ed. by T.A. Edridge, EPRO 68, III, Leiden 1978, 1092–1115; V. Velkov, Le culte de Deus Aeternus en Mésie Inférieure, in: *L'Afrique, La Gaule, la religion à l'époque romaine. Mélanges à la mémoire de M. Le Glay*, ed. by Y. Le Bohec, Brussels 1984, 792–4; A. Buonopane, Deus Aeternus: alcune considerazioni in margine a una iscrizione inedita, in: *Studi in onore di A. Garzetti*, Brescia 1996, 149–64; A. Mastrocinque, Pregare Ialdabaoth, in: *Modi di comunicazione tra il divino e l'umano Tradizioni profetiche, divinazione, astrologia e magia nel mondo mediterraneo antico*, Conv. Messina, 21–22 March 2003, ed. by G. Sfameni Gasparro, in print.

<sup>778</sup> CIMRM 833 = RIB 641 (from York); three dedications to Arimanius: CIMRM 222 (from Ostia); 369 (from Rome); 1773 and 1775 (from Carnuntum). J. Duchesne-Guillemin, Ahriman et le dieu suprême dans les mystères de Mithra, *Numen* 2/3, 1955, 191–5; Id., Aion et le Léontocéphale, *Mithras et Ahriman*, NC 10, 1958–60, 91–8.

<sup>779</sup> Cf. L. Kákosy, Osiris-Aion, *OrAnt* 3, 1964, 15–25; on the god of Upper Egypt, Mandulis, described as Aion: A.D. Nock, *A Vision of Mandulis Aion* (1934), in: *Essays on Religion and the ancient World*, I, Oxford 1972, 357–400; on the so-called Alexandrian Aion: G. Zuntz, *ΑΙΩΝ in der Literatur der Kaiserzeit*, Wien 1992.

<sup>780</sup> J.G. Préaux, Saturne à l'ourobos, in: *Hommages à W. Deonna*, Brussels 1957, 394–410.

<sup>781</sup> Cf., among the vast bibliography: D. Levi, Aion, *Hesp.* 13, 1944, 269–314; L. Foucher, Annus et Aïôn, in: *Aïôn. Le temps chez les Romains*, Caesarodunum 10 bis, 1976, 15–25; M. Le Glay, Art. Aïôn, *LIMC*, I, 1981, 399–411; H.M. Jackson, *Love*

cal belt identifies him with the god of the cosmic axis, who is the unmoved mover of the cosmic spheres. The immobile god who plays this role, according to Imperial Age doctrines, could have been Mithras<sup>782</sup> or Helios<sup>783</sup>, or the god with the fatal name of Abrasax, who has a numerical value of 365, and represents the annual cycle of time. Abrasax “commands the earthly axis, the astral dance and the cold light of the Bears”<sup>784</sup>. Prayers were offered to the Bear, as if she were a divinity<sup>785</sup>. She is said to be “queen of mortals and of the gods and mistress of the sky”<sup>786</sup>. The mistress of the axis could also have been Aphrodite<sup>787</sup>; or Isis<sup>788</sup>, or Brimò (a name given to Demeter), invoked with the attributes of Hecate<sup>789</sup> and also called ἀκρουροβόρε, meaning “she who devours the tip of her tail”.

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makes the world go round. The classical Greek Ancestry of the Youth with the Zodiacal Circle in Late Roman Art, in *Studies in Mithraism*, ed. by J.R. Hinnells, Rome 1994, 131–164.

<sup>782</sup> Cf. the so-called Mithrasliturgie in PGM IV, 679–829; cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), ch. XII; and also the Mithraic relief in Modena depicting Mithra-Eros-Phanes, standing on the line of the equinoxes: *CIMRM*, II, nos. 695–6. It is also likely that the long stick held in their hands by the Mithraic Aiones represented the cosmic axis.

<sup>783</sup> PGM IV, 1275–95. On the Roman emperor and the cosmic axis cf. a recent work by M.-H. Quet, *La mosaïque dite d’Aïôn de Shahba-Philippopolis*, Philippe l’Arabe, et la conception hellène de l’ordre du monde, en Arabie, à l’aube du Christianisme, *Cahier du Centre Gustave-Glotz* 10, 1999, 269–330.

<sup>784</sup> PGM XXIII, 35–7.

<sup>785</sup> PGM IV, 1331–89. On the Bear in magical papyri cf. H.G. Gundel, *Weltbild und Astrologie in den gr. Zauberpapyri*, Munich 1968, 59–64; W. Fauth, *Arktos in den griechischen Zauberpapyri*, *ZPE* 57, 1984, 93–9; R. Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, IV, *PapyCol* 17/4, Opladen 1996, 93–4; 137–44.

<sup>786</sup> PGM LXXII, 1–36; sometimes incomprehensible “barbaric” theonyms are given to her: PGM IV, 1301; and in some case theonyms of Hebraic origin: PGM IV, 1331–89.

<sup>787</sup> “who with her hands moves Rhouzô, the central point of the cosmos among the stars”: PGM IV, 2923–4.

<sup>788</sup> PGM LVII, 16–8.

<sup>789</sup> PGM VII, 683.

## The Decan of the astronomical pole

### § 49. *Tepiach exorcisms*

Let us now continue our analysis of other magical-astrological Gnostic documents: amulets invoking the help of one of the Decans, who was probably another *figura Christi* recognized in the Zodiacal belt.

A sardonyx in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna<sup>790</sup> shows a small Harpocrates on a lotus, standing on the solar barque; above is an inscription inside the *ouroboros* serpent, to be read as follows<sup>791</sup>:

ΙΑΩ ΑΝ  
ΟΧ ΤΕΠΙΑΧ  
✱ Ζ Ζ  
Ο ΜΕΓΑΣ ΜΗ  
ΝΕΥΣ 4

The stone is densely inscribed on both sides with almost incomprehensible words and vowel clusters, but at the end the legend διαφύλαξον τὸν φοροῦντά σου τὴν ἅγιαν σφραγίδα (“protect the wearer of your holy seal”) can be read clearly.

Here we must underline the following elements: the *ouroboros* containing the divine name, Harpocrates, the Egyptian context and the exorcism procedure consisting of “placing the seal”.

On the three Gnostic gems studied by Bonner<sup>792</sup> the same magical formula

<sup>790</sup> A. Barb, Zur Deutung des Kahnfahrers vom Magdalensberg, Carin 1957, 102–4; Zwierlein-Diehl, Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums (n. 295), III, no. 2194; A. Mastrocinque, Studi sulle gemme gnostiche, ZPE 122, 1998, 109–117. Recent research on Gnosis and iconography is quite poor; see, however: P. Corby Finney, Gnosticism and the Origins of Early Christian Art, in: Atti IX Congresso internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana, Rome 21–27 Oct. 1975, 391–405; Id., The invisible God, New York, Oxford 1994.

<sup>791</sup> Zwierlein-Diehl has recognized only ὁ μέγας Μηνεύς, whereas Barb had also read Ἰάω ανοχ.

<sup>792</sup> Studies in Magical Amulets (n. 287), 301, D 288, 289, 290.

recurs, with a few variations. The first gem is in a yellowish, circular stone<sup>793</sup> and bears the following inscription:

IA ANOX	
TEPIAX	
MHNEYΣ	
EE EΞOPKIZΩ ΣE	4
MEΓAN ΘEON XH	
YE TON ZΩN	
TA	
Ω	8

Anoch is a Coptic word meaning, “I”, “I am”; Tepiach is, as we shall see, the name of one of the Decans of Libra, Μηνεύς is one of the names of Helios, perhaps the masculine form of Μήνη, the Moon goddess, or a name of the god of darkness<sup>794</sup>; the rest of the formula is clear: “I conjure you, great God Chêye, the living ô”. The final ô could be the Egyptian adjective meaning “great”, but perhaps represents the vocalic tone of the planetary god mentioned. Omega is the tone of Saturn, identified also with Jaldabaoth (= Yahweh) by Sethian and Ophite Gnostics<sup>795</sup>. Chêye and ô could also be two numerical values.

In Bonner’s opinion, the description of the god as τὸν ζῶντα indicates Jewish-Christian influence<sup>796</sup>.

The second gem is a heliotrope in the British Museum<sup>797</sup> with the following inscription:

IAIA	
.AXTZEEHO.	
ANOX TEPIAX	
MHNEYO	4
O ΩN	
* ΠΤΥΥZE	
ABAPIMMA	

<sup>793</sup> In the University of Michigan, inv. no. 26035.

<sup>794</sup> On the Moon cf. for instance PGM IV, 2815; VII, 753 etc.; see on this subject Barb, *Zur Deutung des Kahnfahrers* (n. 790), 103, n. 54, who suggests, however, that it may also be derived from the name of the Egyptian god Min. On Mêne as a great god of darkness (Bachachsichych): R. Wünsch, *Die sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom*, Leipzig 1898, no. 21, line 17.

<sup>795</sup> On the subject cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitrismo* (n. 18), 8–10; 84–5.

<sup>796</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 292–3.

<sup>797</sup> Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 498.

This inscription opens by invoking Yahweh, in the form IAIA<sup>798</sup>. MHNEYO is a misspelling of MHNEYΣ, and ὁ ὢν (“The One who is”) is a description of the Jewish god<sup>799</sup>.

The third stone is a reddish-yellow cornelian in the University of Michigan<sup>800</sup>, with the following inscription, inside a snake biting its tail:

I ANO  
X TEPIAX M  
HNEYΣ EΦOPKIZΩ ΣO  
ΩN M 4

On the obverse the inscription probably means: ι ανοχ Τεπιαχ Μηνεύς, ἐφορκίζω σ(ε), ὁ ὢν μ: “Iota; I am Tepiach Meneus, I exorcize you in the name of the One who is<sup>801</sup> Mi”. The i and m are two symbolic numbers.

The text on these gems should be compared with a *defixio* from Hadrumetum<sup>802</sup>, in Latin, but with Greek lettering, in which a spell is cast in the name of a μαγνουμ δεουμ (*per magnum deum* = κατὰ τοῦ θεοῦ μεγάλου) and concludes with the statement: εγω ενιμ σουμ μαγνους δεχανους δει μαγνι δει αχραμμαχαλαλα ε (*ego enim sum magnus Decanus dei, magni dei Achrammachalala e*).

To these four gems should probably be added a fourth one, in onyx, kept in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris<sup>803</sup>, with a closely worded inscription on both sides, a total of 21 lines in which only a few words are recognizable, notably: Αριήλ, an angelic name meaning “lion of God”; βλαναθαναλαβ, which is part of the well-known magical palindrome Αβλαναθαναλαβα; on the reverse, inscribed inside an *ouroboros* serpent, the word Ἰάω (I.2) can be recognized, μέγα ὄνομα: “great name”; but we can also add, on the basis of a comparison with the other three gems, that in line 1 of the reverse the name Tepiach is perhaps recognizable in the sequence AMOTIPIAXNOI.

<sup>798</sup> Cf. Mouterde, *Le glaive de Dardanos* (n. 289), 98.

<sup>799</sup> Cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 292–3.

<sup>800</sup> Inv. 26002.

<sup>801</sup> Or “I conjure you, the One who is”.

<sup>802</sup> A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae*, Paris 1904, no. 270 = IGRR III, 949.

<sup>803</sup> Inv. no. 2230 A; Delatte, *Derchain*, Les intailles (n. 288), no. 519. I do not rule out that this same scheme may also recur in a Coptic spell to favour fishing, which retains traces of Gnostic doctrines (the angel-Archons who shape man), in which the words: “I exorcize you in the name of Jak Piak Sachorak Ph...I, Sablan Athanabla Achramach[amarioth], who brought you the mud when you shaped Adam” can be read: A. M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte* (n. 550), II, no. XXX, lines 37–9. In this case, it would be necessary to assume that Tepiach had become Piak (but the loss of the aspirate is unlikely) and had been identified with a planetary Archon.

Recently a coral gem has been published<sup>804</sup>, showing a bird (a falcon?) accompanied by the palindromic inscription ΒΗΛΤΕΠΙΑΧΧΑΙΠΕΤΛΗΒ, in which the names Βῆλ and Τεπιαχ can be recognized.

### § 50. *The Decans and exorcisms*

It is clear, then, that in accordance with the dictates of a school of magic, amulets were made in which the name Tepiach was used to perform exorcisms in the name of the Jewish god (“The One who is”). Before examining who Tepiach was, it is stressed that an exorcism is not a prayer, but a command. Ἐξορκίζω σε. ἔφορκίζω σ(ε), tend to be performative verbs, whose action is accomplished merely by using them, as in “I bless you”, “I consecrate you”. So ἔφορκίζω σ' ὁ ὢν means “I exorcise you, the One who is”<sup>805</sup>, or, and this is more likely, “I exorcize you in the name of the One who is”. In this case, as in the case of the numerous magic lamellae and gems, demons are driven out in the name of the god, which is repeated frequently, in the accusative case for the sake of brevity<sup>806</sup>, usually in the form of one of the many Jewish theonyms that were efficacious against demons<sup>807</sup>.

Just as the papyrus prescribes use of the formula “I am Balsames, come, appear to me, O Lord...”, so these amulets say: “I am Tepiach, I exorcize you (O demon), in the name of the One who is”.

The Vienna gem mentioning Tepiach and Iaô shows clear Judaeo-Egyptian syncretism, because it portrays Harpocrates, exactly as prescribed in the papyrus. On the other hand, in an Egyptian-Jewish exorcism quoted in magical papyrus IV (lines. 3019–20) the invocation is as follows: “ὄρκίζω σε κατὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν Ἐβραίων Ἰησοῦ ιαβα ιαιη Ἀβραῶθ αια Θώθ...”; here the identification proposed is of Thoth with Jesus, whose ability to drive out demons is celebrated in the Gospels. Similarly, an exorcism written on

<sup>804</sup> Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 23.

<sup>805</sup> A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sulle gemme gnostiche*, ZPE 122, 1998, 109–117.

<sup>806</sup> Ὁ ὢν is indeclinable.

<sup>807</sup> R. Kotansky, *Remnants of a Liturgical Exorcism on a Gem*, *Muséon* 108, 1995, 143–56; Id., *Greek exorcistic Amulets*, in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. by M. Meyer, P. Mirecki, RGRW 129, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1995, 241–77; on Jewish and Christian exorcisms and conjurations cf. Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, IV (n. 785) However, in the formulae of constriction, of various religious origins, but always with the objective of subduing the spirit of a dead person, the expression ἔξορκίζω σε means “I conjure you”, and is usually followed by names of the infernal gods who ensure control of the *nekrydaimon*.

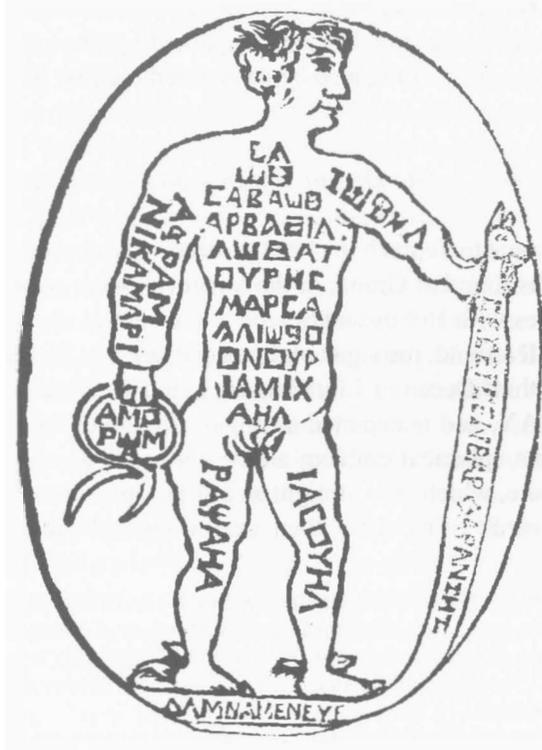


Fig. 18

a well-known gem in the Cabinet des Médailles<sup>808</sup> ends with the words: ἔξορκίζω θεὸν Ἐναθιάω Φαβαθαλλον Βαβλαιαίω Θαλαχ Ερου Ρωσαρ Βως Θωύθ (I exorcize in the name of the god Enathiao Phabathallon Bablaiaiao Thalach Erou Rosar Bos Thouth). In the word Βως the name of the first Decan of Scorpio, Βους / Βως, can be recognized<sup>809</sup>; and it may even be that in Θαλαχερου the name of another Decan, Ερου<sup>810</sup>, can be discerned. In

<sup>808</sup> Delatte, Derchain, *Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 460; cf. L. Robert, *Amulettes grecques*, JS 1981, 6–27.

<sup>809</sup> Cf. E. Peterson, *Engel- und Dämonennamen. Nomina barbara*, RMP 75, 1926, 400; P. Sijpensteijn, *Objects with Script in the Collection Moen*, ZPE 42, 1981, 112; M. Brashear, *Lesefrüchte*, ZPE 50, 1983, 101–2 (which cites a number of amulets to cure diseases by invoking this Decan); P. Sijpensteijn, *Another ΒΟΥΣ Amulet*, ZPE 55, 1984, 114. It may even be that ΡΟΣΑΡ is a variation on the name ΧΟΣΑΡ, a Decan of Pisces in the tables of Grand, on which cf. *infra* note 812.

<sup>810</sup> Cf. Orig., *Cels.* VIII 58 (II, 274 Koet.); according to Ephestion (I 1, 7 Pingree), the second and third Decans of Taurus are called Ἐρω and Ῥομβρόμαρε; the sum of these two gives the name of the seventh heavenly Tyche in the so-called Mithrasliturgie (PGM IV, 674): Ἐρου Ῥομβριες.

this case the exorcism was probably performed in the name of a god identified with one of the Decans, Bos, accompanied by the name of Thoth, the Egyptian Hermes, who could also be considered the first of the Decans<sup>811</sup>.

### § 51. *The Decan Tepiach and his snake*

And now we come to Tepiach. In 1993, following restoration, the two astrological diptychs found at Grand, in the Vosges<sup>812</sup>, were published. They are two astral tables with Helios and Selene at the centre, the four winds at the corners, and, all around, the signs of the zodiac and the 36 Decans with their names<sup>813</sup>. The third Decan of Libra has the name ΤΕΠΙΑΧ, or, in the other table, ΤΕΠΙΤΑΥ, and is depicted as a man (in one of the two diptychs he seems to have a spherical emblem above his head) who is holding by his side a long snake, which is as straight as a stick, apart from the head, which is leaning forward<sup>814</sup>. This deity, then, according to the magi who designed

<sup>811</sup> Cf. F. Heintz, A Greek Silver Phylactery in the MacDaniel Collection, ZPE 112, 1996, 295–230. A gem in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna, with the leontocephalous serpent, has the inscription ΧΡΑΝΟΥΜΙΣ ΑΝΟΧ, which means “I am Chra(ch)noumis”, the name of the first Decan of Leo; cf. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 54–5.

<sup>812</sup> Les tablettes astrologiques de Grand (Vosges) et l’astrologie en Gaule romaine, Table ronde 1992, Lyons 1993.

<sup>813</sup> These names do not correspond exactly to the images, because in each group of three Decans the first has the name of the third and the third has the name of the first (except for the Decans of Pisces); cf. H.-J. Abry, *Les diptiques de Grand, noms et images des Décans*, in: *Les tablettes astrologiques de Grand* (n. 812), 81–2.

<sup>814</sup> J.-C. Goyon, *L’origine égyptienne des tablettes décanales de Grand (Vosges)*, I, in: *Les tablettes astrologiques de Grand* (n. 812), 69 (according to whom the form in -αχ is closer to the Decan’s original Egyptian name than the form in -ου); Abry, *Les diptiques de Grand* (n. 813), 99. The name Tepiach is Egyptian; cf. the Decans ΤΡΥ-ἡνττ, ΤΡΥ-ἡνττ, ΤΡΥ-ἡνττ: O. Neugebauer, R. A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts*, I. The early Decans, London 1960, 26, 28–9. Tepiach was also subject to a Hebraic construal, as Ezio Albrile has suggested to me; in fact *ṭepaḥ* means “palm of the hand spread out”, “measure”, in reference to the hand of God in Is. 48,13: “my right hand (scil. Yahweh’s) spread out (lit.: measured, *ṭipḥah*) the heavens”; and in Ps. 39, 6: “behold, thou hast made my days as a hand-breadth”. One of the Decans of Scorpio, in Grand’s plates, also has the name ΤΕΠΙΑΧ, but this is an erroneous repetition of the name of the Decan of Libra; cf. Goyon, as quoted. In Ephaestion’s list of Decans (*Apotelesmatica*, I 1, I, 18 Pingree) the third of Libra is Χοντροπέ; Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* IV 22, I, 269 ed. Kroll-Skutsch, series Teubner) quotes the form Senta (two codices quote: *Senta idest Atepiten*). The snake is also attributed to the third Decan of Libra in the lists of “Hermetic” Decans in the *Hierà biblos*, ed. by Ch.-E. Ruelle, *Hermès Trismégiste. Le livre sacré sur les décans*, RPH 32, 1908, 267 (a deity called Phou, with a human body and a horned snake’s head) and in the *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti*, ed. by W. Gundel, *Neue astrologische Texte des*

the gems we are examining, was thought to be able to influence the will of “the One who is”, in other words the Jewish god, and make him drive out demons. Tepiach’s importance is to be stressed in the light of a series of magical gems that depict him as a man with his body covered with inscriptions referring to Yahweh, the Archangels or *vores magicae*. Some of them are in transparent stones (rock crystal or amethyst), and have been studied by Bonner<sup>815</sup> and Barb<sup>816</sup> in particular. The latter recognized in them Hermes-Phosphoros-Michael, who is holding in his right hand a serpent like a vertical stick (sometimes depicted simply as a stick), with his head inclined at a right angle. The gems in question are the following: 1) an amethyst “from the Levant”, in the Cabinet des Médailles, in which the god is holding a crown in his right hand; on the reverse is a series of seven vowels (the magical names of the planets)<sup>817</sup>; 2) a heliotrope in the same museum with a simplified figure of the god wearing a hat; on the reverse is a lion<sup>818</sup>; 3) a similar gem studied by Baronius and other authors<sup>819</sup>; 4) a similar specimen was in the Southesk collection<sup>820</sup>; 5) a similar yellow agate, also with a lion on the reverse, was in the De Clercq collection<sup>821</sup>, on this gem the deity is holding an *ankh* in his hand; and among the inscriptions is the name of Thoth; 6) an amethyst

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Hermes Trismegistos, ABAW.PH 12, 1936, 21: *nomen ei est Psamiatois...Totus est in speciem serpentis*. In the Tabula Bianchini (F. Boll, Sphaera, Leipzig 1903, 299–305; in a fine photograph in F. Gury, L’iconographie zodiacale des tablettes de Grand, in: Les tablettes astrologiques de Grand (n. 812), pl. VI) the third Decan of Libra has a bull’s head and is holding a stick in the form of a >).

<sup>815</sup> C. Bonner, *Magical Amulets*, HThR 39, 1946, 48–9; Id., *A Miscellany of Engraved Stones*, Hesp. 23, 1954, 151–2, no. 40; Id., *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 292–3 D 234–237; 20, no. 53 and 152, no. 27; the author has published his study on a gem showing Mithras with his body covered with inscriptions, and compares it, because of the use of rock crystal, with five gems showing a leontocephalous god, four of which have invocations to the god Seth on the reverse. To this has been added a similar gem in the Cabinet des Médailles: Delatte, Derchain, *Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 302; cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), 31–2; 37–8. The leontocephalous god, moreover, may have been conflated with the Jaldabaoth of the Gnostics: Bonner, *An Amulet of the Ophite Gnostics* (n. 338), 43–46; Id., *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 135–7 e pl. IX.188; cf. H. M. Jackson, *The Lion becomes Man. The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition*, Atlanta 1985, 21–23.

<sup>816</sup> *Three elusive Amulets*, JWCI 27, 1964, 5 and notes 19–20.

<sup>817</sup> J. Spon, *G. Wheler, Voyage d’Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grèce, et du Levant*, Lyon 1678, III, 154–61 (here fig. 18); Delatte, Derchain, *Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 416; SGG, I, 359.

<sup>818</sup> Delatte, Derchain, *Les intailles* (n. 288), no. 415.

<sup>819</sup> C. Baronius, *Annales ecclesiastici*, II, Rome 1588, repr. Lucca 1738, 92; cf. A. Gorlaeus, *Dactyliotheca*, II, Amsterdam 1707, no. 359; SGG, I, 358.

<sup>820</sup> *Cat. Southesk* (n. 297), no. 59 = King, *Gnostics* (n. 1), plate H. 6.

<sup>821</sup> A. De Ridder, *Collection de Clercq. Catalogue. VII: Les bijoux et les pierres gravées*, Paris 1911, no. 3469.

described by Minervini, in which the god is holding a situla in his right hand<sup>822</sup>; 7) an amethyst formerly in the G. B. Passeri museum, in Pesaro, in which the god has two wings on his head, like Hermes, a flame and a sphere, while in his right hand he is holding a branch<sup>823</sup>; 8) a sardonyx, formerly in the Planci collection, depicting the god with a kind of lotus blossom on his head, and a star and a *charakter* on the right<sup>824</sup>; 9) a pinkish-white jasper in the National Museum of Athens, portraying the god with two uraei on his head and an *ankh* in the left hand<sup>825</sup>; 10) a yellowish-brown jasper (probably from Egypt) in the Egyptological museum in Berlin, showing the god with an emblem (a lotus?) on his head and a crown in his left hand; between the inscriptions is a name that could be Thoth<sup>826</sup>.

### § 52. *Tepiach and the Son*

Since this is the iconography of a Decan, whose body is covered with Hebraic theonyms, the inevitable conclusion would seem to be that these gems were designed by Gnostic sects with a special interest in astrology. Peratic gnosis<sup>827</sup> is the one closest to the doctrines of the designer of the Tepiach gems. The Peratae, who have already been discussed briefly, attached a great deal of importance to the figure of Moses, who saved his people from snakes by showing them the ὄφις τέλειος, the “perfect snake”<sup>828</sup>. The perfect snake

<sup>822</sup> G. Minervini, Poche osservazioni intorno ad una pietra Basilidiana, *Bullettino Archeologico Napoletano* 5, 1857, 89–91, plate VII 3.

<sup>823</sup> I. B. Passeri and A. F. Gori, *Thesaurus gemmarum antiquarum astriferarum*, Florence 1750, plate CXC VII; SGG, I, 361; I. M. Tacconius, *De tribus Basilidianis gemmis*, Naples 1824, 84–89, has published a study of an identical gem (without the globe on the head), in his collection.

<sup>824</sup> Passeri, Gori, *Thesaurus gemmarum* (n. 823), plate CXC VI; SGG, I, 360; a glass paste copy of the gem is in Vienna: Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums* (n. 295), III, no. 2192.

<sup>825</sup> Delatte, *Etudes* (n. 292), 59–60.

<sup>826</sup> Philipp, *Mira et magica* (n. 364), no. 187. In the Dendera zodiac the third Decan of Libra is a baboon (Thoth’s animal) on a boat: cf. W. Gundel, *Dekane und Dekansterbilder*, Hamburg 1936, 134.

<sup>827</sup> haer.V 17–19 (114–121 Wend.); on astrology and Peratic doctrine cf. Lancellotti, *Gli Gnostici e il cielo* (n. 173), 91–101.

<sup>828</sup> In Just., dial. 91 (332 Otto) Moses’ brazen serpent was a prefiguration of the crucified Christ, who saved humanity, just as the snake saved the Hebrews. Cf. August., *Serm.* 37,2 (CC 41, 448 Lambot). On the iconography of a cross combined with a snake: Testa, *Il simbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani* (n. 115), 278–282. The portrayal of Christ as a snake is confirmed in the eucharistic ceremony of the Ophites, who placed a snake on the table; the snake consecrated the bread when it came into contact with it: Epiph., haer.

was identified with the rod of Moses (and Aaron), transformed into a snake in front of the Egyptian magi. This snake was also identified with the one that appeared to Eve, and called καθολικὸς ὄφις ε σοφὸς λόγος. Lastly the snake was identified with Jesus<sup>829</sup>. The Peratae acknowledged the existence of three entities: the Father, the Son and Matter. In the human microcosm the Father, that is, spirit, was represented by the brain, the Son by the spinal column, and Matter by semen, which generated life through the movement of the spinal column, after drawing inspiration from the brain<sup>830</sup>. In the heavenly macrocosm the Son, in the form of a snake, the mover of the firmament, was recognized, as we have said, in the Dragon constellation, and described as ὄφις τέλειος, between the Lyre and the Crown, near the ἀτελής ὄφις, “the imperfect snake”, the one restrained by the Ophiouchos, to prevent it from reaching the Crown.

The portrayal of the god Tepiach holding the serpent-rod is similar to that of the Mithraic Aion, who holds the cosmic axis in one hand and makes it rotate<sup>831</sup>; also, the fact that the snake and mover of the cosmos is Jesus explains the dance of Jesus surrounded by a circle of Apostles, described in the *Acts of John*, a Gnostic apocryphon<sup>832</sup>. Jesus is near the cosmic pole and therefore dominates the axis round which everything turns; he does not move, but through him movement is propagated and messages are sent through the cosmos from the supreme, unknowable god.

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XXXVII 5,6–7 (II, 57 Holl). The definition “perfect snake” probably came from Plato, who in *Timaeus* 29 A, speaks of the “perfect living creature” (ζῷον τέλειον, which could be translated as “perfect animal”), which the Demiurge looks at during creation. Hippolytus identifies the Peratae with the Ophites, and Origen (*Cels.* VI 28; 98 Koet.) says that Euphrates was the father of the Ophite sect, while according to Hippolytus he was one of the fathers of the Peratae.

<sup>829</sup> Their speculations may have been based on Is. 11,1, whose prophecy of the Messiah speaks of the birth of a “shoot”, a concept rendered by the Septuagint with the word ἄβδος, which literally means “small stick”.

<sup>830</sup> Cf. F. Michelini Tocci, *La cosmogonia dei Perati e il gregge di Giacobbe* (e Dante), in: *Omaggio a Piero Treves*, ed. by A. Mastrocinque, Padua 1983, 249–60.

<sup>831</sup> Especially CIMRM, nos. 695–6; cf. the god of the Mithrasliturgie (PGM IV, 700) who turns the cosmic axis; Claudian., *De laud. Stilich.* I 62–3: *volventem sidera Mithram*. The Mithrasliturgie describes how, after passing a series of tests in the world of the heavenly gods, the initiate came before the god who turns the cosmic axis, in this case Mithras.

<sup>832</sup> *Acta Joh.* 94 (CChr.SA 1, Turnhout 1983, 199 Junod, Kaestli); cf. B. E. Bowe, *Dancing into the Divine: The Hymn of the Dance in the Acts of John*, *JECS* 7, 1999, 83–104. Ignatius, one of the Apostolic Fathers, described the birth of Jesus as a dance of all the constellations, together with the sun and the moon, around the Redeemer’s star: *Ign., Eph.* 19,2 (88 Camelot).

Hippolytus does not expatiate on all the Peratic astrological speculations, but it would be strange if this sect had not taken into consideration the Decans, and in particular the Decan accompanied by a rod-shaped snake, Tepiach. It has been noted that the gems depicting Tepiach sometimes gave the god a winged head or feet, thereby identifying him with Hermes, as pointed out by Barb. Hermes was frequently identified with Moses<sup>833</sup> in Hellenized Judaic circles; and, as seen in the previous chapter, Hermes was also identified with Jesus<sup>834</sup>. The Egyptian Hermes, Thoth, is the only non-Jewish god invoked in the spell inscribed in the cornelian in the Cabinet des Médailles. Also, the presence of Hermetic treatises in the Nag Hammadi Gnostic library proves, if proof were needed, Gnostic interest in Hermetism, while the Johannine Gospel style and language of the *Poimandres* proves its interest in Christianity. Both Jesus and Hermes in fact were the divine Logos.

Peratic gnosis was inspired by the heretical astrologers mentioned by Hippolytus<sup>835</sup>, and gave considerable attention to the figure of Moses, whose order, it was said, was obeyed by the astral Adam, the Engonasis, who faced the Dragon's head, while the Dragon faced Adam's heel. In Tepiach iconography, however, the snake is turning its head in the opposite direction to the deity holding it.

To conclude, it could be said that the expression "I am Tepiach, I exorcise you (O demon), in the name of the One who is" is similar to the exorcisms performed by Jesus or in the name of Jesus<sup>836</sup>. The secret astrological name of the divine Logos, of the luminous sovereign of all the astral gods, transformed the formula into the perfect exorcism. But it was precisely the absence of Jesus' name that suggests that those who prescribed Tepiach exorcistic amulets were not Christians, or were only marginally so, and did not comply with Paul's injunction to use the name of Jesus to exorcize demons<sup>837</sup>. The influence of Christianity on their doctrines is similar, perhaps, to its influence on the authors of the *Poimandres* and other Hermetic works.

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<sup>833</sup> Cf. G. Mussies, *The Interpretatio Judaica of Thot-Hermes*, in: *Studies in Egyptian Religion Dedicated to Professor Jan Zandee*, ed. by M. Heerma van Voss, SHR 43, Leiden 1982, 89–120, who points out, among many other elements, the fact that Thoth was imagined as an ibis, which destroys poisonous snakes, in the same way that Moses had rid the desert of snakes.

<sup>834</sup> Cornelius Agrippa said (though we do not know on what grounds) that the third Decan of Libra was like a man holding a loaf and a cup of wine (*De occulta philos.* II 37, 356 Perrone Compagni). His source may have been the tradition that identified the Decan and Christ with eucharistic symbols.

<sup>835</sup> Hipp., haer. IV 47 (69–70 Wend.).

<sup>836</sup> On the magic use of the name of Jesus cf. D. E. Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity*, in: ANRW II/23.2, 1980, 1545–6.

<sup>837</sup> Act. 19,13.

§ 53. *The mystery of the letter Waw*

F or Ƴ is the Greek digamma. Its real name was stigma or episemon, corresponding to the number 6. It recurs most frequently on gems with a series of *charakteres* that could also have a numerical value. In the doctrine of the Valentian Gnostic magus Marcus<sup>838</sup> the letters of the alphabet originally were not properly organized, because there were 9 consonants, corresponding to the Father and Truth, 8 semivowels for the Logos and Life, and 7 vowels for the hebdomadic material world (of the planets); the coming to earth of Ἰησοῦς, the god with the six-letter name, restored harmony to the three worlds by moving the F from the Ennead to the Hebdomad. The *Sibylline Oracles*<sup>839</sup> call the cross σφραγίς ἐπίσημος, “illustrious seal”, but ἐπίσημος is also the Greek name for the letter F, which could therefore indicate Jesus<sup>840</sup>. Stigma was the equivalent of the Semitic letter Waw, and this letter was at the centre of the speculations of the Peratic Sethian sect, who attributed to Kronos five ministers whose names were five Greek renderings of the name Waw<sup>841</sup>. Similarly, the snake, which had manifested itself as Moses’ rod, Moses’ brazen serpent and Jesus Christ himself, was at the centre of Peratic doctrine. Since the letter Waw was written in the form of a small vertical serpent, the letter and the divine animal matched perfectly<sup>842</sup>. The letter Waw, 𐤅, had the same form as an astral snake in the series of Gnostic gems depicting Tepiach.

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<sup>838</sup> Iren., haer. I 13–21 (SC 264, 188–308 Rouss., Dout.); cf. Hipp., haer. VI 40–55 (171–189 Wend.); Epiph., haer. XXXIV (II, 5–37 Holl); Clem., str. VI 16,140–1 (II, 503–4 Stählin); De mysteriis litterarum Graecarum, ed. by Hebbelynck, passim. Cf. A. Dupont-Sommer, *La doctrine gnostique de la lettre waw*, Paris 1946, who has published a study on a lamella inscribed in Aramaic, in which Christ is given the name Waw. On this leaf and other drawings or inscriptions with Waw as a symbol of the cross: Testa, *Il simbolismo dei Giudeo-Cristiani* (n. 115), 59–64; 242–247; 316–321. M. Philonenko’s interpretation (*Une intaille magique au nom de Iao*, *Semitica* 30, 1980, 57–60), which treats Hellenistic coin monograms in the same way as magical *charakteres*, is misleading.

<sup>839</sup> VIII 244–5 (157 Geff.).

<sup>840</sup> Cf. J. Danielou, *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme*, I, Paris, Tournai, New York, Rome 1957, 302, n. 1.

<sup>841</sup> Hipp., haer. V 14.4 (109 Wend.); cf. Dupont-Sommer, *La doctrine gnostique* (n. 838), 70–71.

<sup>842</sup> Dupont-Sommer, *La doctrine gnostique* (n. 838), 72.

## Aberamentho

### § 54. *The snake-headed god*

Our study will now focus on the doctrinal speculations of Gnostic sects, or sects at any rate close to Gnosticism, who were steeped in Egyptian religious lore and believed that the astral pole god – identified by some sects with Christ – had the form of an Egyptian god with a human body and a snake’s head. In Egyptian religion snake-headed gods were few in number and were not senior deities, but in Gnostic speculations of the Imperial Age certain minor gods were rediscovered, reappraised and interpreted in a new light.

One category of magical gems, on which very little research has been done<sup>843</sup>, depicts a snake-like god with human legs. It is linked through the accompanying inscriptions to Aberamentho, a name that some Gnostic groups – as we shall see – gave to Jesus Christ. We know of two iconographic variations on this serpentiform god. In one (on four gems<sup>844</sup>) the god has a man’s legs and a snake’s upper body, while in the other variation, in an Egyptianizing style (on 8 or 9 gems<sup>845</sup>), the same god has a man’s form

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<sup>843</sup> Cf. A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sulle gemme gnostiche*, VII. *Metamorfosi del dio siriano Hop* (‘uccello’), in *ZPE* 130, 2000, 131–6.

<sup>844</sup> 1) SGG, I, 124: shows a composite figure with human legs; the rest of the body is serpentiform, with a kind of three-pointed crest and a cleft tongue. The legend ΥΛΣΥ-ΕΡΘΕΝΕΙΝΩΠΙΣΙΡΑΟΥΘΙΒΡΥΜΦΟ is inscribed around it. 2) King, *Gnostics* (n. 1), plate F I= Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 477: greenish-brown stone with the inscription: ABPA / YB / OI M / EIMΩ / PIN Φ / ΠΕΙΕΙΕΙ / ΟΥΟΙ; and probably 3) I. B. Passeri, *Sycophantia magica*, in: I. B. Passeri and A. F. Gori, *Thesaurus gemmarum antiquarum astriferarum*, II, Florence 1750, 256, no. 39: gem in the Planci collection, described as follows: *serpens humanis pedibus incedens: supra caput: ΑΥΣ sub pedibus: ΠΙΜΦΕ e latere dext.: ΛΕΡΘΜΙΝ e sinistro: ΒΣΙΔΑΟΕ VΘΙ*; 4) Archaeological Museum, Rome, inv. 78771; E. D’Amicone, *Les intailles magiques du musée nationale à Rome*, in: *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique* (n. 40), 81 (with an inexact description): reddish brown and green jasper, showing a demon with a bearded snake’s head, standing on a globe, with a five-leaved branch in the right hand, and an arrow in the left hand; on the border: ΙΑΩ ΕΑΩ; R/ ΑΓΑΘΩΔΕΜΟΝΙ (cioè ἀγαθωδαίμονι).

<sup>845</sup> 1) SGG, I, 125 (here fig. 20): magnetite showing a deity facing right, wearing a *sndwt* kilt; the deity has a snake’s head with hair, surmounted by a crescent moon and

and is wielding an *ankh* and a *was* sceptre, or is sitting on a throne and has a snake's neck and head, in two cases with long hair. On one gem with the first type of iconography, he is standing on a cosmic globe and identified with Iaô and the Agathodaimon, the Alexandrian snake-lord of destiny. This god is also depicted in some ancient Egyptian bronzes and a papyrus<sup>846</sup> in the

scarab beetle, and is holding a long *was* scepter in the left hand and an *ankh* in the right hand. On three concentric circles there are inscriptions on the edges of which only the outermost (or bevel?) can be read: Δόται χάριν τοῖς φοροῦσι πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους; reverse: Harpocrates sitting on a lotus flower on the solar barque, facing right, his head radiate, raising his left hand to his mouth and holding a whip in his right hand. At either end of the boat are two birds of prey with crowned heads. Facing the god is the deity with the snake's head with hair surmounted by a crescent moon and scarab, as on the obverse in the act of protection (in the same attitude as Isis and Nephthys on either side of Osiris); behind the god is a baboon whose head is surmounted by a lunar disk, in the same attitude of protection. Around the upper part of the edge, from left to right, are a scarab, a quadruped, the radiate bust of Helios near the centre, a scarab over a globe above the nimbus of Harpocrates, the bust of Selene near the centre, surmounted by a crescent moon with the symbol ☿, a scorpio. Under the barque, along the lower edge, are the letters: ΑΝΑΛΒΑΑΒΡΑΜΑΣ; 2) Zwierlein-Diehl, Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums (n. 295), III, no. 2184: lapislazuli showing the same figures on the solar barque, together with a long series of vowels; 3) L. Barry, Notice sur quelques pierres gnostiques, ASAE 7, 1906, 248, no. 10: haematite in Cairo, inscribed on the obverse: ΑΟΥΣ ΠΙΣΙΔΑΟΥΘΕΙ ΒΡΙΜ ΛΕΡΘΕΜΙΝΩ; and inscribed on the reverse: ΑΟΥΣ ΠΙΣΙΔΑΟΥΘΕΙ ΒΡΙΜ ΛΕΡΘΕΜΙΝΩ; iscrizione al R/: ΑΒΕΡΑΜΕΝ / ΘΩΟΥΛΕΡΘΕ / ΞΑΝΑΞΕΘΕΡΕΛΥ / ΘΩΘΝΕΜΑΡΕΒ / ΑΡΕΜΜΑΛΩΑ / ΜΜΙΜΕΑΩ; 4) Bonner, Studies in Magical Amulets (n. 287), 296, D 262: ferrous stone, maybe limonite; on the reverse Bonner has pointed out the word: 'Michael', which is probably a Greek inscription); 5) Zwierlein-Diehl, Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums (n. 295), III, no. 2241: haematite from Al Fayum showing the enthroned god, with an adoring baboon in his hand; the inscription on the reverse is ΑΒΡΑΣΑΞ; 6) F.M. Schwartz, J.H. Schwartz, Engraved Gems in the Collection of the American Numismatic Society I. Ancient Magical Amulets, ANSMN 24, 1979, 178: quadrangular haematite with a snake-headed god facing Harpocrates and another cuirassed deity; 7) Michel, Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum (n. 364), no. 474: dark red stone with the ophiokephalos with *ankh* and long *was* sceptre; the letters ΛΕΡΘΕΜΙΝΑΠΙΣΙΔΑΟΥΘΙΒΡΙΦ... are inscribed round it; 8) Michel, no. 475: red jasper showing the same god; 9) probably R. Casal Garcia, Colección de gliptica del museo arqueológico Nacional. Serie de entalles romanos (no city, no date, probably 1990), no. 503: haematite inscribed on the reverse: ΜΑΩ and two characteres. Bonner, Studies in Magical Amulets (n. 287), 315, D 367, has published a study of an engraving in the form of a spindle depicting Hecate and other figures, among them a snake's head; the author (297, D 264) also describes a haematite showing a similar god, but with two heads, an ibis's head and a snake's head; the inscription refers to Chnoubis and Thoth.

<sup>846</sup> On the bronzes, see: G. Roeder, Ägyptische Bronzefiguren, Berlin 1956, 70–1, plate 13; G. Daressy, Statues de divinités, Cairo 1906, 176–7, plate XXXVI; Reflets du divin, Cat. de l'exposition Geneva 2001, 42, no. 27; on one of the bronzes is a dedication to Heneb, the god of Herakleopolis Magna, in Middle Egypt; on the papyri, see: A. Piankoff, N. Rambova, Mythological Papyri, New York 1957, 79 (the same iconography).

act of adoring the sun god. The gems with the second type of iconography were produced in Egypt and incorporate Egyptian mythology (fig. 19), since the god appears beside Harpocrates on the solar barque or in an attitude of adoration with the baboon. In both iconographies we find the words Ριμϕ<sup>847</sup>, and Λερθεμινω<sup>848</sup>. The latter is an attribute of Seth and is accompanied by the logos Αβεραμενθω<sup>849</sup>, which appears on the reverse of a gem with the second type of iconography. This is a palindromic logos, and is pronounced Αβεραμενθουλερθεξαναξεθρελσωθνεμαρεβα<sup>850</sup>; it starts with Αβεραμενθω, a word formed from Αβερ(ρ)<sup>851</sup>, and Αμενθ(ω), in which *Amenth-* indicates the West and the kingdom of the dead in Egyptian thinking<sup>852</sup>. Magical papyri<sup>853</sup> state that Λερθεξαναξ was the name of the sun god (Horus-Harpocrates-Apollo), who in the southern part of the cosmos had the form of a falcon. The form ουλερθεξαναξ in the palindrome is a play on the Greek verb ὄλλυμι<sup>854</sup>, ‘I destroy’, which would fit Horus, but could be more aptly applied to Seth, since λερθεξαναξ was he who sent the fiery

<sup>847</sup> In which a form of Βριμ, from the Greek βριμώδης; ‘terrible’ may be identifiable.

<sup>848</sup> According to M. Schwab, *Vocabulaire de l’angelologie*, Paris 1897, 297, this has been construed in a Hebraic light as ‘rain god or dew god’, in fact he identifies the Hebrew *lartmn* by reading the inscription from right to left (*nimeθrel*).

<sup>849</sup> PGM IV, 3258 and 3269; R.W.Daniel, F.Maltomini, *Supplementum magicum*, I, Opladen 1990, no. 95. On the gem Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 12, the vox Λερθεμινω accompanies a god with a horse’s head (Seth) or a dog’s head (Anubis).

<sup>850</sup> M. Tardieu, *Aberamenthō*, in: *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religion* presented to G. Quispel, EPRO 91, Leiden 1981, 412–8, has interpreted this as ‘powerful Thoth of the waters, god of rain, O sovereign: rain of God, Thoth, of the mighty waters’; cf. J. Fossum, B. Glazer, *Seth in the Magical Texts*, ZPE 100, 1994, 92. The link with Thoth is not clear in the palindrome, but does seem clear in PGM II, 125: Αβεραμενθωουθ; cf. PGM XXXVIII, 20: αβερανεμανε Θωύθ; in PGM V, 172–9 Hermes and Iaō are called on, while mentioning the name Aberamentho, to discover a thief, and this explains the presence of Hermes.

<sup>851</sup> The vox *Aberraberra* exists. It could even be the Hebrew (*abir*), ‘strong’, ‘to have strength’ ‘chief’ = the Egyptian *ijbr*: ‘stallion’: L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, English transl., I, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1994, 6; A. Erman, H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, I, Berlin 1955, 63. In PGM XXXVI, 1–31 the form Ιαβεραμενθω, which perhaps presupposes Ἰαβέ, i. e. Yahweh, recurs.

<sup>852</sup> Cf. Jackson, *The Origin in Ancient Incantatory voces magicae* (n. 174), 70: αμενθ = eg. *imntt* / copt. *amente*. Cf. PGM VII, 445: Ουσερσετεμενθ, attribute of Osiris. *hntj ijmn.t.t o hntj ijmn.tjw* (‘the first of the Westerners’) was an attribute of Osiris and the god of the dead; cf. J. Spiegel, *Die Götter von Abydos*, Wiesbaden 1973, 31–7; J. G. Griffiths, *The Origin of Osiris and his Cult*, SHR 40, Leiden 1980, 134–6.

<sup>853</sup> PGM II, 108–9.

<sup>854</sup> Οὔλιος is an attribute of Apollo.

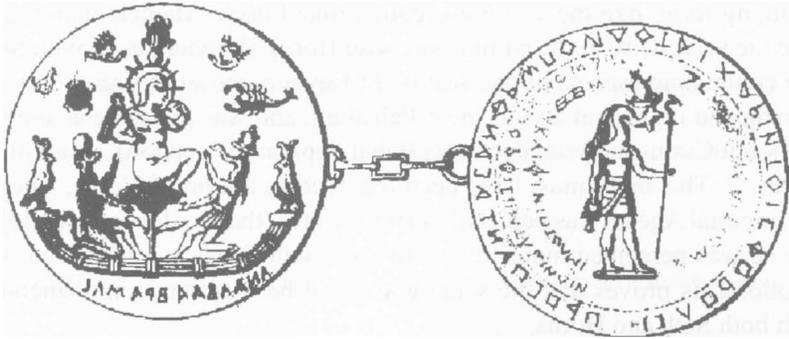


Fig. 19

wind from the South. Besides, some passages from the magic papyrus very clearly attribute the *logos* Ἀβεραμενθῶ to Seth<sup>855</sup>, and an Egyptian-style bronze statue of Seth has the *vox* Ἀβεραμενθῶ<sup>856</sup> inscribed on the base. The theonym must have been Λερθεξ, which recurs in Λερθεμινῶ<sup>857</sup>, while ἄναξ is a Greek word meaning ‘king’. Another two passages from magical papyri state that at the third hour of the day the creator god assumes the form of a snake and the name of Ἀβερανεμανε Θωύθ<sup>858</sup> or Ἀμεκρανεβεχεο Θωύθ<sup>859</sup>. Ἀμεκρανεβεχεο contains the name Mechran, the name of the third snake-faced Tyche, mentioned in the *Mithrasliturgie*<sup>860</sup>, a Hermetic Egyptianizing initiatory text<sup>861</sup>.

### § 55. The four aspects of Aberamentho

The palindrome may have indicated the alternation of the sun god’s different manifestations in the four quadrants of the sky and during the course of the day, encapsulating the unity of a god who was constantly in motion and

<sup>855</sup> PGM XXXVI, 1–34; 69–101 and LVIII; see also the *defixio* published by G. W. Elderkin, Two Curse Inscriptions, *Hesp.* 6, 1937, 385.

<sup>856</sup> G. Roeder, *Ägyptische Bronzefiguren*, Berlin 1956, plate 72 g; cf. J. Fossum, B. Glazer, Seth in the Magical Texts, *ZPE* 100, 1994, 91.

<sup>857</sup> The final -ὸ may be the Egyptian adjective meaning ‘great’ and tends to be associated with the theonym, as in Thouthō, ‘great Thoth’.

<sup>858</sup> PGM XXXVIII, 20.

<sup>859</sup> PGM IV, 1656–7.

<sup>860</sup> PGM IV, 671; cf. Tardieu, *Aberamenthō* (n. 850), 413. On the Tychai of the *Mithrasliturgie*: A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Berlin-Leipzig 1923, 71.

<sup>861</sup> Cf. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mithraismo* (n. 18), ch. XII. In a recent work H. D. Betz, *The ‘Mithrasliturgie’*, STAC 18, Tübingen 2003, has stressed the Mithraic nature of the text.

changing form, like the *ouroboros* coiled round itself. Magical papyri conflate the solar deity in the palindrome with Horus-Harpocrates or with Seth: two contrasting aspects of one reality. In Egypt a god of Syrian origin was worshipped on Mount Casius, near Pelusium, and was the same as the god of Mount Casius in Syria, known as Bahal Saphon (or Zephon), 'Lord of the North'<sup>862</sup>. This deity must have been regarded as a kind of Horus, since in the Imperial Age he was depicted as Harpocrates (that is, Horus the child)<sup>863</sup>. But he was perceived more frequently as a Seth figure and identified with Apollo. This proves that the same god could be identified simultaneously with both Seth and Horus.

The cardinal points, according to the Egyptians, were personified as deities; the East could belong to Seth and the West to Horus; but in the pharaohs' purification rites Horus had the South, Seth the North, Thoth the West, and a falcon god (Dunanui?) the East<sup>864</sup>.

One formula in the magical papyrus in Berlin<sup>865</sup> invokes the god of light, identified with Apollo-Harpocrates: "You who have 16 giants as your body guards, and sit on the lotus flower, illuminating the entire inhabited earth..., who appear as the sacred bird (the Phoenix) in the eastern parts of the Red Sea, and in the northern regions as a child who does not speak, sitting on a lotus flower<sup>866</sup>, O you who rise!, you of the many names, Sesengen Barpharanges; in the southern regions you have the form of a sacred falcon, through which you send into the air the flame that becomes Lerthex Anax; in the western regions you have the form of a crocodile with a snake's tail, from which you send rain and snow; in the eastern regions you have the form of a winged snake<sup>867</sup> with a crown made of air, with which you rule disputes

<sup>862</sup> P. Chuvin, J. Yoyotte, Documents relatifs au culte pélusien de Zeus Kasios, RAR 1986, 41–63; cf. O. Eissfeldt, Baal Zaphon, Zeus Kasios und der Durchzug der Israeliten durchs Meer, BRGA 1, Halle a. d. Saale 1932; C. Bonner, Harpocrates (Zeus Kasios) of Pelusium, Hesp. 15, 1946, 51–9; C. Bonnet, Typhon et Baal Saphon, in: Studia Phoenicia, V. Phoenicia and the East Mediterranean in the First Millennium B. C., Leuven 1987, 101–43.

<sup>863</sup> The influence of the young Cretan Zeus – also worshipped in neighbouring Gaza – resulted in conflation with Zeus: A. B. Cook, Zeus, II, New York 1925, 986; Mastrocinque, Zeus Kretagenès (n. 668).

<sup>864</sup> D. Keßler, Art. Himmelsrichtungen, LÄ, II, 1977, 1214. In the ancient world it was widely believed that the sun travelled from the east to the south, then to the west, and lastly to the north: R. Eisler, Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt, Munich 1910. On the four forms of the sun in Syrian doctrines: R. du Mesnil du Buisson, Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre, Paris 1962, 115–128.

<sup>865</sup> PGM II, 64–183, esp. 103–40.

<sup>866</sup> Harpocrates.

<sup>867</sup> On a magic gem from Tripolitania, showing the winged snake, on the reverse of

under the heavens and on earth”. Invocations with magic names follow, including the palindrome *Aberamentho*.

The four parts of the palindrome, therefore, correspond exactly to the sun god’s four aspects in the four sectors of the cosmos<sup>868</sup>. In the two halves of the palindrome the sun-god is revealed, one could say, through a play of two mirrors.

palindrome Αβεραμενθω	<i>PGM</i> II, 105–118
Αβεραμενθω = West (Horus or Thoth)	West = crocodile with a snake’s tail
ουλερθεξαναξ = South (Horus)	South = falcon
αναξεθρελυο = North (Seth)	North = Harpocrates on the lotus
ωθνεμαρεβα = East (Seth)	East = winged dragon

The location of the solar god in the North, during the sun’s nocturnal journey to the East, was typical of Egyptian mythology, but was also mentioned in the Hebraizing astrological treatise *Sepher ha Razim*<sup>869</sup>. In the context of the numerous doctrines described here, the god depicted on the gems should be seen in the light of papyrus prescriptions that speak of the sun god assuming various forms in different parts of the world<sup>870</sup>, since he is part of the entourage of Harpocrates and is paired (but not identified) with Thoth as a baboon.

It is interesting to note that here again Harpocrates is placed in the North, as he is in the prescription in the great magical papyrus of Paris<sup>871</sup> which we have studied, and is seen also as the Dragon identified by the Peratae with Christ.

### § 56. *The falcon-headed god*

The same magical inscription on the gems mentioned above recurs on seven more engraved gems (one of them from Egypt, one from Syria, and one from the Lebanon). These gems exemplify two distinct iconographies: one with a

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an Egyptian scarab: Bonner, *A Miscellany of Engraved Stones* (n. 815), 153–4 (SGG, I, 187).

<sup>868</sup> The animals mentioned in the papyrus could correspond to other divinities, as follows: crocodile (Seth), falcon (Horus), Harpocrates (Horus), winged dragon (Seth); consequently they would not match the divinities to which we propose the parts of the palindrome *Aberamentho* be linked.

<sup>869</sup> 43, 70 Morgan.

<sup>870</sup> Cf. Barb, *Abraxas-Studien* (n. 305), 81–6, where a gem showing the four forms of the god is examined; cf. also L. Kákósy, *Une tunique solaire de Saqqara*, in: *Studia Aegyptiaca*, II, ed. by L. Kákósy and E. Gaal, Budapest 1976, 192–196.

<sup>871</sup> *PGM* IV.835–49.

naked god with the head of a bird of prey, sometimes also with wings instead of arms; and one with a bird-headed figure wearing a kind of cloak, from under which emerge the feet and a limb that is part wing, part arm. On one specimen the god is wielding an *ankh*; on another a lance, and on a third he is paired (on the reverse side) with a winged goddess, who may perhaps be Sigé, the goddess of silence<sup>872</sup>, but is more likely to be Nemesis. This god is known as Hop, who was originally a Syrian pastoral god, but whose name must have been interpreted, on the basis of the Hebrew, as ‘bird’, leading to theological speculations that linked him to the Egyptian-type magic god who changed his form in the four sectors of the cosmos. Clearly Hop became that solar deity’s manifestation in the form of a falcon.

### § 57. *Jesus Aberamentho*

In the Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia*<sup>873</sup> Ἀβεραμενθῶ is identified with Jesus. It is unlikely that the author of the *Pistis Sophia* intended to link Jesus through that magic name to the world of the dead, Amente, in referring to his descent into Hell<sup>874</sup>. By using the name Aberamentho the author attributed to Jesus all the theological concepts encapsulated in the palindrome: he was the sun god who manifests himself in various forms in the four sectors of the cosmos, according to a doctrine also held by the Peratae. Besides, in the *Pis-*

<sup>872</sup> Cf. R. Mouterde, Le dieu syrien Op. in: *Mélanges syriens offerts à René Dus-saud*, I, Paris 1939, 391–7; Id., *Gemmes inscrites. Le dieu Op, Hippocrate et le Grand Roi*, MFOB 26, 1944–46, 72–4; A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sulle gemme gnostiche*, VII. *Metamorfosi del dio siriano Hop* (‘uccello’), ZPE 130, 2000, 131–6. Three more gems of the first type have now been published: Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (n. 364), no. 139: yellow jasper with the cuirassed god, with the head of a bird of prey, holding an *ankh* and a sceptre surmounted by a falcon; surrounding inscription: ΑΒΡΑΣΑ[Ξ Σ]ΑΒΑΩΘ; inscription on the reverse: ΘΩΖΑ / ΞΑΖΩΘ; no. 140: chalcedony with a similar god, but with a situla instead of the *ankh* and a basket-shaped crown on his head with vertical lines; no. 142: black glass with the same deity, *ankh* and sceptre, and two stars; ΙΑΩ; inscription on the reverse: ΣΑΜ / ΜΑΙΧ / ΟΣ; and two gems of the second type: Michel, no. 476: greenish-grey soft stone on which the deity is beside an anchor; on the reverse is a god with an animal’s head and tail, accompanied by the inscriptions: ΑΥΣΡΙΜΦ; ΛΕΡΘΕΜΕΙΝΩΠΙΣΙΔΑΟΥΟΙΒ; Michel, no. 478: brownish-green jasper, on which the deity is standing on a *tabula ansata* inside which is the legend ΡΙΜΦ; surrounding inscription: ΔΕΡΘΕΜΙΝΩ ΑΥΣ ΡΙΣΙΔΑΟΥΘΒ

<sup>873</sup> *Pistis Sophia* IV 136; 139; 141 (354; 360; 367 Schmidt, Macdermot).

<sup>874</sup> *Amenti*, however, is also used to indicate Hell in Christian texts, which also describe Christ’s descent into Hell, cf. Coptic Gospel of the Four Apostles (PO II, 131–2 and IX, 135–9).

*tis Sophia*<sup>875</sup>, among the ‘barbaric’ words uttered by Jesus to the Father, we find “Zakourax Akouris”, which are the well-known magical *voces* Ζαγουρη Παγουρη, meaning “pure light” and “flow of light”<sup>876</sup> in Aramaic. One gem shows a seven-rayed Harpocrates followed by the inscription Ζαγουρη<sup>877</sup>, while one papyrus links the *vox* with Sabaoth and (Arbath)Iaô<sup>878</sup> and regards them as the first three angels to appear in creation. The link between these *voces* and Hebraizing and Gnostic speculations is clear from passages in magical papyri such as the following ones:

Ἰάω Σαβαώθ Αρβαθιάω Ζαγουρη Παγουρη: PGM XXXVI, 308–9  
 Αρβαθιαω Ιαώθ Σαβαώθ Πατουρη Ζαγουρη Βαρουχ Ἰαδωναϊ: PGM V, 479  
 Ἰάω Σαβαώθ Ἰαδωναϊ Παγουρη Ζαγουρη Αβρασαξ Αβραθιάω Τερηφαηλ:  
 PGM XXXVI, 348–53.

Moreover, in the *Pistis Sophia*<sup>879</sup> Christ also pronounces the *vox magica* Θωβαρραβαυ, which recurs in various magical documents and in Hebrew means “the deposit is good”<sup>880</sup>. Probably the author intended to make him invoke the Holy Spirit, which St Paul described as the “earnest” given by God to humankind<sup>881</sup>.

To conclude, Jesus was merged with the magical Egyptianizing god known as Aberamentho because he was a serpentiform god residing in the celestial pole in the extreme North, and was also a solar deity.

It is not ruled out that this doctrine may have been related to the doctrine, attested in rabbinic tradition, that Adam had a quadruple nature, exactly like YHWH, and represented the four elements or the four cardinal points<sup>882</sup>.

<sup>875</sup> IV 136,2 (353 Schmidt, Macdermot).

<sup>876</sup> M. Tardieu, *Nethmomaôth*, in: *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor*, ed. by A. Caquot, Kevelaer 1985, 403–7, esp. 406; Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo* (n. 18), 76. Cf. also W. Fauth, *Helios Megistos*, Leiden 1995, 102; R. Merkelbach, M. Totti, *Abrasax*, I, *PapyCol* 17/1, 1990, 198 and 217; in *Abrasax*, II, 1991, 152, these authors quite rightly suggest that the ending -rh may have been linked to the theonym Rê. Hipp., *haer.* V 20,8, on Sethian doctrine, mentions the ὄνομα τοῦ Φάουως ἑυέτου.

<sup>877</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 159, 198 and 297, no. 265.

<sup>878</sup> PGM XIII, 78 9; 146; 177.

<sup>879</sup> IV 136,2 (353 Schmidt, Macdermot).

<sup>880</sup> R. Kotansky, *Θωβαρραβαυ* = ‘The Deposit is Good’, *HThR* 87, 1994, 367–9. Cf. the Greek ἀρραβών, “deposit”, “pledge”, and the Latin *arra*.

<sup>881</sup> 2Cor. 5.5.

<sup>882</sup> Quispel, *Der gnostische Anthropos* (n. 216), 173–195, esp. 189–90.

§ 58. *The spread of Christological snake doctrine*

It should be noted that Gnostic texts describing Jesus as the god of the cosmic pole and a serpentiform solar deity are rare and seem to be confined to Peratic doctrine; yet there are intimations in the *Pistis Sophia* text that these doctrines were more widely held in Gnosticism than would seem. On the other hand, papyri and magical gems show that the doctrine of the Dragon as supreme god was also widespread in circles close to Gnosticism and in Hebraizing pagan magic. I think it should be assumed that there was a broad range of religious circles half-way between Gnosticism and pagan polytheism, which had flourished thanks to the appeal of the alleged scientific objectivity of Chaldean astrology merged with elements of Egyptian religion. Gnosticism was such a clearly compartmentalized and many-coloured religious movement that it might well appear to some as an artificial category used by Christian heresiologists and even more so by modern scholars in order to group together all kinds of heretical doctrines<sup>883</sup>. If Hippolytus treated heretical astrologists in the same way as the Peratae or Monoimos, and placed them all under the heading of Gnostic heresies, I see no reason why we cannot include in their company the authors of the formulae in magical papyri uttered in the name of Jacob or Adam and addressed to the cosmic pole god, who was perceived as Harpocrates and a winged snake, or the authors of the magical gems linking the figure of Harpocrates to the names of Sabaoth, Iaō and Abrasax. These authors used magical words and *charakteres* to the same extent as the writers of the *Pistis Sophia* or *The Book of Jeu*, except that the use of the magical formula to conjure up the god or make him speak entailed a more open-minded recourse to a large repertoire of *voces magicae* and amalgamations with Egyptian and Greek gods. If there are few references in papyri or gems to Sophia, the Logos, their complex rites and the protagonists of Gnostic Theogonies, this is because magic formulae and amulets are not theological treatises. Gnostic sacred books were not expected to give details of how to cure a headache or seek an answer from the god of the cosmic pole.

Christianity is a more accurate means of classification with regard to Gnosticism. On this subject it should be candidly stated that there are very few references to Jesus in gems and magical papyri, not only in the passages and individual gems that we have examined here, but in general. We know of only one gem<sup>884</sup> that links – on the reverse – the image of Harpocrates and

<sup>883</sup> Cf. the recent book by Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* (n. 3).

<sup>884</sup> R. Garrucci, *Storia dell'arte cristiana*, VI, Prato 1880, plate 492, no. 14; H. Leclercq,

the inscription ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, while the obverse depicts the Good Shepherd and bears the inscription ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, “Jesus”. It is an important gem, but a comparison with the large number of other gems that combine Harpocrates with non-Christian Hebraic theonyms suggests that most of the magi who identified Harpocrates with the Dragon and with Iaô Sabaoth Abrasax were not very Christianized. Some of them may even have been hostile to Christianity<sup>885</sup>. However, Gnostic texts and the heresiologists’ testimonies allow two observations to be made. On the one hand it is clear that the cosmic pole snake was identified with Jesus, while on the other is it equally clear that Jesus was superimposed on or accompanied by another serpentiform saviour: the serpent of Eden, sometimes identified with Sabaoth. As we have seen, the Ophites identified the snake with Jesus in their Eucharist, but in their mythology the figure of Jesus was unnecessary, since the whole process of salvation was accomplished through the repentance of Sabaoth, his assumption to the seventh heaven and his role as instructor serpent. The Jesus of Ophite mythology came down on earth later and in a different manner from the snake. For the Sethians and the Barbelo-Gnostics (who must have been linked to the Sethians) the instructor serpent was the agent of the divine Sophia and the father of Gnosis.

This issue probably ought to be explained in historical terms: the triumph of Christianity compelled many Gnostic groups either to superimpose Jesus on the instructor serpent, or to introduce him into their mythological system in the final act of the process of salvation. For this reason the authors of Gnosticizing magical gems and papyri should be seen as part of a religious movement that preserved and developed Gnostic themes mainly outside Christianity. Some of the leading figures of second-century Gnosticism emerged after the brutal repression of Judaism by Trajan and Hadrian. These

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Art. Gemmes DACL VI.1, 1924, 840, fig. 5058. On Christian gems with astrological elements or magic words cf. Leclercq, 855–8.

<sup>885</sup> F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis. A Study of Christian Thought and Speculation in the Second Century*, Cambridge 1932, 36, discussing the relations between Gnosticism and magic, makes a number of questionable statements: firstly, that there is no proof that the so-called Gnostic gems were possessed by Valentinians or Basilidians (this is an *argumentum ex silentio* which has no value, because there are thousands of Gnostic gems, but only a few score of them have been found in an archaeological context, and this context at the most can provide chronological information based on funerary items; in any case no amulet was ever labelled with the wearer’s religion); he also maintains that some Gnostic gems pre-date the Christian era (there are only a few magic gems with Egyptian figures from the late republican era: P. Zazoff, *Die antiken Gemmen*, Munich 1984, 355), and that the texts in magical papyri related to Gnostic gems do not come from Christian Gnostic schools (in fact they come mainly from non-Christian Gnostic schools). Lastly, 36–37, he attributes the creation of a divinity called Sabaoth to Christian thinkers.

leaders did not come from Judaism, like their predecessors, but from Christianity. Right from the start, thinkers such as Valentinus, Marcus and Marcion placed Christ at the centre of their speculations. In older forms of Gnosticism, such as Sethian or Ophite Gnosticism, the figure of Christ was grafted on to an existing structure, making it even more complex.

Christ in snake form appears in the doctrines of one of the most ancient and widespread Gnostic systems, Sethianism. According to Hippolytus<sup>886</sup>, Sethian doctrine asserted that “the perfect Word of supernal light being therefore assimilated (in form) to the beast, (that is,) the serpent, entered into the defiled womb, having deceived the womb through the similitude of the beast itself”. It is possible, though highly unlikely, that these words contain an allusion to Christ. However, a clearly Christian version of this doctrine is found in some Nag Hammadi treatises: in *The Logos of the Great Seth* (NHC VII, 2<sup>887</sup>) Christ changed his form and assumed that of the archons when he appeared to them; in the *Paraphrasis of Sem* (NHC VII, 19<sup>888</sup>) Christ took on the animal’s form in order to enter the womb; in the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX, 3<sup>889</sup>) Christ assumed a snake’s form and one of his images was Moses’ serpent; according to the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII, 1<sup>890</sup>) Christ evaded the archons by wearing the clothing of the First Parent’s son – the form of the snake –, then assumed the form of the angels and the Powers, and lastly of the sons of men. This, then, was the notion developed by the Sethians concerning the descent of Christ from the divine world through the heavens into the material world. In the Sethian system also, Christ assumed the form of a snake. The *Trimorphic Protennoia* version makes it clear that the figure of Christ could perfectly well replace the instructor serpent, who was the son of the First Parent, though only physically, as a snake; spiritually he was the son of Sophia. As we have seen, some Ophitic communities used a real snake as Christ’s image in their Eucharistic ceremony. The Saviour’s snake-like form was also corroborated in the *Gospel of John*<sup>891</sup>, and in the *Letter of Barnabas*<sup>892</sup>, in which the crucified Christ is likened to the brazen serpent that Moses placed on his rod in the desert.

<sup>886</sup> Hipp., haer. V 19,20 (120 Wend.). The issue we are examining is not mentioned in the volume by P. Koslowski, *Gnosis und Theodizee*, Vienna 1993.

<sup>887</sup> 52. On whether or not this treatise belonged to Sethian Gnosticism, see: P. Painchaud, *Le deuxième traité du Grand Seth*, Quebec 1982, 21.

<sup>888</sup> 25–35.

<sup>889</sup> 48–9.

<sup>890</sup> 47, 15 et seqq.

<sup>891</sup> 3,14.

<sup>892</sup> 12,5 (SC 172, 168 Prigent, Kraft); cf. also Just., I apol. 60 (180 Wartelle); Tert., contra Marc. III 18 (407 Kroy.); Melitonis clavis, in J. B. Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense*,

Peratic doctrine, therefore, conformed with the widespread tendency, shared by Gnostics and Gnosticizing pagans, to see the luminous Saviour as a snake. For pagans he was the sun god, in the Egyptian form of Harpocrates, with the name Iao Sabaoth Abrasax; for Christians he was the solar Christ. All this confirms the close relationship between Sethian, Ophite-Naassene and Peratic gnosis<sup>893</sup>, already confirmed by other scholars, using different arguments<sup>894</sup>.

In Christian thinking of the Imperial Age, the Sun as a symbol and manifestation of Christ gained firmer hold<sup>895</sup>, and the *dies Solis*, Sonntag, became *dies dominica*, or κυριακή, celebrating the Christ who had risen from the darkness and was the bringer of light<sup>896</sup>. One of the signs of the solar Christ's victory was also the fact that Cyriacus – of whom we spoke much earlier, in § 2 – crossed the evil river on a day other than Saturday with the help of the Lord, whose name he bore (Kyriakòs comes from Kyrios, just as Dominicus comes from Dominus).

### § 59. *The snake on the cosmic navel on a magic gem*

In the twentieth century the De Ridder collection housed a quadrangular gem<sup>897</sup> (fig. 20) with squared corners, engraved on both the obverse and reverse and on the bevel. On the obverse Adam and Eve are on either side of

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III, Paris 1855, 88: “*serpens, Christus, propter sapientiam...et sicut Moyses exaltavit serpentem in deserto...estote prudentes sicut serpentes*”; Greg. Naz., Or. IV.65 (SC 309, 172–4 Bernardi); Ps. Chrys., Jud. Serp. (PG 61, 796–7).

<sup>893</sup> To which Barbeloite and Archontic gnosis should be added.

<sup>894</sup> G. Casadio, *Antropologia gnostica e antropologia orfica nella notizia di Hippolytus sui Sethiani*, in *Sangue e antropologia nella teologia. Atti della settimana di studi Roma 23–28 nov. 1987*, Rome 1989, 1295–1350, esp. 1330–9.

<sup>895</sup> Cf. F. Dölger, *Sol Salutis*, Münster 1925; M. Wallraff, *Christus verus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, JAC.E 32, Münster 2001. On this subject mention should at least be made of a magical gem showing a solar god identified with Christ: Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), 181–2.

<sup>896</sup> Clem., str. VII 12, § 76.4 (III, 154 Stählin); Aug., In Ps. 47, enarr. 1 (PL 36, 532); In Ps. 126, enarr. 4 (PL 37, 1670); cf. Dölger, *Sol Salutis* (n. 895), 405; J. Barbel, *Christos Angelos*, Bonn 1941, 223, n. 199. On the consecration of Sunday by Constantine: CIL III, 4121 = ILS 704. Before solar religions took hold during the Imperial Age, the figure of Jupiter must have played a central role in the series of planetary gods, cf. Delatte, *Etudes* (n. 292), 61.

<sup>897</sup> A. De Ridder, *Collection de Clercq. Catalogue. VII: Les bijoux et les pierres gravées*, Paris 1911, no. 3514. Cf. E. Goodenough, *A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet of the Roman Period*, GRBS I, 1958, 71–80; Ch.H. Kahn; D.E. Gershenson; M. Smith, *Further Note on 'A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet of the Roman Period*, *ibid.* 2, 1959, 73–81.



Fig. 20

a tree encircled by the snake; the two figures are flanked by two Hebrew letters. On the reverse is a band divided into twelve sectors, containing twelve circular symbols, enclosing a convex area surmounted by a coiled snake. It represents the zodiac band, with the Dragon constellation above it, in the centre<sup>898</sup>. On the left are a crescent moon and a globe (the sun or a heavenly body<sup>899</sup>). On the right are a crown and a cluster of seven small globes; probably the constellation of the Crown and the Septem Triones<sup>900</sup>. Above are two Hebrew letters. At the four corners are a roughly semicircular object, thought to be a Dionysian basket or a ship<sup>901</sup>, a vegetable element, four faces, a funeral pyre or lighthouse (?), a table with four legs, and a female face<sup>902</sup>, all accompanied by Hebrew letters. On the longer side of the bevel is a Hebrew inscription in which M. Smith<sup>903</sup> has read 'awakener of the dawn'. In 1958 E. Goodenough<sup>904</sup> proposed a Naassene-Ophite Gnostic reading

<sup>898</sup> Kahn, *Further Notes* (n. 897), 75–6.

<sup>899</sup> Smith, *Further Notes* (n. 897), 79 thinks it is a star: the heavenly Naassene Anthropos seen as a polar star.

<sup>900</sup> Goodenough, *A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet* (n. 897), 75, however, thinks that they are planets.

<sup>901</sup> By Goodenough and Smith respectively.

<sup>902</sup> As stated by Goodenough, *A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet* (n. 897), 79, but the profile seems to be that of a murex.

<sup>903</sup> Smith, *Further Notes* (n. 897), 80–1. The two letters, heth and dalet, near Adam and Eve have been interpreted as the initials of two Hebrew words denoting life and knowledge: B. A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, Minneapolis 1990, 47, n. 39.

<sup>904</sup> *A Jewish-Gnostic Amulet* (n. 897).

of the monument. In the light of what we have studied up to now it seems that this reading should be confirmed, since all the figures that appear in the engraving recur in Peratic and Naassene Gnosis: Adam, Eve and the snake, the zodiac, the Dragon, the Crown and the Septem Triones. Here the use of Hebrew becomes interesting because it means that in the Middle Empire period (when the gem was produced) the magi we referred to as ‘Jewish Chaldeans’, similar to the ones St Paul met in Cyprus at the Roman governor’s court<sup>905</sup> or to the magus who performed ‘Solomonic’ magic before Vespasian<sup>906</sup>, were still active. By that time these ‘Jewish Chaldeans’ were masters of various forms of Gnosticism.

### § 60. *The Orphic-Gnostic cup*

One of the most important archaeological testimonies to Orphism imbued with Gnosticism (or vice versa) is the famous late antique alabaster cup (fig. 21), in a private Swiss collection<sup>907</sup>. On the outside are depicted the four winds next to a colonnade, below which there is an Orphic inscription. Inside, the navel of the cup is in the form of a winged, coiled snake, emitting small rays; around it, like the spokes of a wheel, are 16 naked men and women. On the outside the following Orphic lines are inscribed:

Hear (you who perennially turn) the radiant sphere  
of distant movement (which runs around the heavenly vortexes)!  
Heaven and earth were one form;  
(first he – Phanes – was born, and named Dionysos),  
because he turns the infinite, the lofty Olympus in a round circle;  
shining Zeus, generator of the cosmos.

In brackets are added the parts that are not inscribed on the cup but recur in some fragments of an Orphic poem quoted by late authors, particularly Macrobius<sup>908</sup>. The theology and cosmogony reflected in this text are also in harmony with Julian’s *Hymn to Helios*.

<sup>905</sup> Act. 13,6–10; cf. Nock, Paul and the Magus, in: Essays (n. 779), I, 308–318.

<sup>906</sup> Jos., AJ VIII 46–48.

<sup>907</sup> Leisegang, The Mystery of the Serpent (n. 691), 194–260; cf. G. Casadio, Adversaria orphica et orientalia, SMSR 52, 1986, 315–6. On early Jewish interest in Orphism, especially in Egypt, cf. C. R. Holladay, Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors. IV: Orphica, SBL 40, Atlanta 1996; cf. also G. Casadio, Aspetti della tradizione orfica all’alba del Cristianesimo, in: La tradizione: forme e modi. XVIII Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana. Roma 7–9 maggio 1989, SEAug 31, Rome 1990, 185–204.

<sup>908</sup> I 18,12–15; 23,22; but the line ‘Heaven and earth were one form’ comes from Euripides, fr. 484 Nauck. On the text cf. Leisegang, The Mystery of the Serpent (n. 691), 194–215.

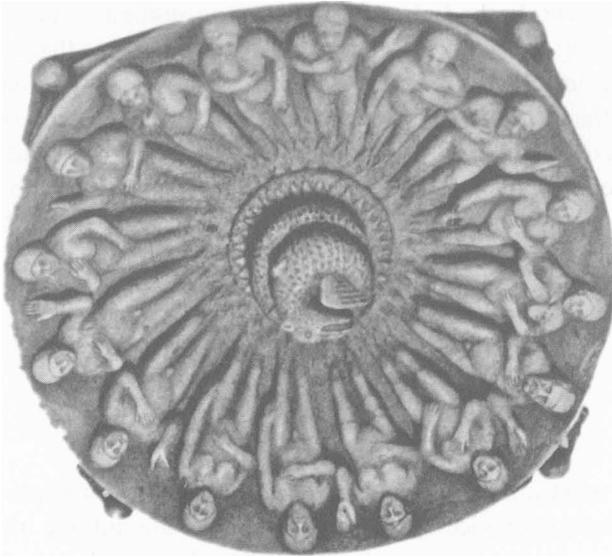


Fig. 21

After fully examining the theme of the luminous god who, from his throne on the cosmic pole, turns the astral spheres, we now have a better understanding of these Orphic verses than the small number of scholars who have studied them have had until now.

The faithful depicted inside the cup are the worshippers of the astral snake, and their naked promiscuity links them to the tradition of the libertine Gnostic sects<sup>909</sup> mentioned in § 39. Since this is highly likely to be the case, it is clear that Hippolytus' statement<sup>910</sup> that the Sethians had drawn inspiration from Orphism in their doctrines on the womb and the navel acquires greater weight.

A Gnostic gem (fig. 22) has been published recently<sup>911</sup>: it is a heliotrope showing, on one side, Hecate, and on the other a lotus flower holding a winged snake with a bird's head. It is clear that this is the iconography used for Harpocrates, who is replaced here by the winged snake, fairly similar to the one on the cup. So the gem provides the missing link between the god sitting on the cosmic pole, perceived as Harpocrates, and his manifestation as a snake or Dragon.

<sup>909</sup> Cf. Casadio, *Adversaria orfica* (n. 907). On Gnostics who prayed naked cf. *supra*, note 617.

<sup>910</sup> *haer.* V pinax 4,1; 20,5 (77 and 121 Wend.).

<sup>911</sup> E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Siegel und Abdruck. Antike Gemmen in Bonn*, Bonn 2003, no. 115; but previously J. Engemann, *Art. Glyptik*, RAC XI, 1979, 288 and fig. 6.



the philosophical and theological development of a religion centred around the sun god<sup>914</sup>. A similar theological revolution, based on a science considered 'exact' and objective, led to the merging of many eastern and later also western gods with the sun. The Syrian Baals became solar or luminous deities, and Persian and Anatolian gods underwent a similar transformation. Inevitably, the same fate befell the Hebrew god in both Judaic and Christian speculations, in which however the role of solar deity was given to Christ. Until the time of Constantine and the clashes between pagans and Christians in the fourth century the figure of the sun god was common to the major religious movements throughout the empire. It was the conflict between pagans and Christians that resulted in the distinction between Christ and Helios, as attested in Julian the Apostate's *Hymn to Helios*, in which Apollo, Dionysos, Oceanus, Osiris and Sarapis are considered to be manifestations of the sun god. In the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius, too, the sun god tends to incorporate the essential characteristics of all the major Greco-Roman deities (including the Hebrew Iaô).

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<sup>914</sup> Cumont, *La théologie solaire* (n. 912), 15–33; on Posidonius, see 27–9.

## Magic and Christianity

### § 62. *Observations on Gnosticism and magic*

Let us leave aside for the moment modern definitions of Gnosticism, which help to give a clearer understanding of the vast panorama of multiform Gnosis from antiquity to the present day. Let us look instead at the many testimonies to Gnosticism and related doctrines that we have found in magical papyri, gems and a few magical lamellae. This direct evidence creates a slightly different picture from the one that emerges from the writings of the heresiologists and most of the texts written by the Gnostics themselves. The reason for this is not so much the absence of many of the Aeons that populate Gnostic mythology, which is partly explained by the uses for which magical recipes and amulets were intended, as the fact that, in magic linked to a greater or lesser extent to Gnosticism, *Iaô*, Sabaoth, the One Who Is and the other names of the Hebrew god are not used disparagingly. The initial letter of the name of YHWH is used everywhere to combat illness and demons, though other letters or numbers also have a certain role. Jesus could be concealed behind figures such as Tepiach, Harpocrates or the solar snake, but his name is absent, while the names of *Iaô*, Sabaoth, Adonai, Ὁ ὢν, Abrasax are always very conspicuous.

Sabaoth, as we have seen, had his own special mythology and could represent the god redeemed by the Sophia of God; *Iaô* was Yahweh, whom Gnostic mythology looked upon as the evil creator, or as one of the creator angels of Jaldabaoth (the Hebrew god's *alter ego* and father of *Iaô* in many Gnostic systems).

We must not draw hasty conclusions on the subject, because there is a series of invocations, exorcisms and *defixiones* that call on Ἰαβεζεβὺθ<sup>915</sup>,

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<sup>915</sup> R. Wünsch, IG III.3, A, Berlin 1897, XV: ἐξορκίζω ὑμᾶς τὸ ἅγιον ὄνομα... Ἰάω Ἰαβεζεβὺθ; PGM III, 449; IV, 1795; 1995 (in what appears to be a pagan invocation); VII, 419 (recipe for a *defixio*); R. W. Daniel, F. Maltomini, *Supplementum magicum*, II, Opladen 1992, no. 57, lines 16–17: διὰ τὸ ἅγιον ὄνομα Ἰωβεζεβὺθ; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (n. 287), D 251, 294–5: haematite gem with Pataecus on crocodile on obverse, and, on the reverse, scarab at the centre of an *ouroboros* snake and Ἰαβεζεβὺθ

a composite name obviously derived from Iabé, that is, Yahweh<sup>916</sup>, or from the form Iah<sup>917</sup> of the Tetragrammaton, and probably Beelzebub. According to the *Gospels*<sup>918</sup> the Pharisees accused Jesus of driving out demons in the name of Beelzebub, and clearly some exorcists attempted to do precisely this. Other magic experts used the destructive force of Iabezebyth to perform *defixiones*. So it is not true that the Hebrew god's negative aspects are not mentioned in magical texts. According to a tradition rooted in paganism, even a potentially wicked and dangerous god could or indeed had to be invoked in prayers and placated. As we have seen in § 34, one series of gems shows the *ouroboros* snake Leviathan with a lion's head, who is described as the Hebrew creator of the corporeal element, and referred to by disquieting attributes ("soul of darkness, son of darkness"), but is neutralized by the seal of Solomon, i. e. the name of God.

The distinction between the Christian Gnosticism opposed by the heresiologists and the Gnosis of papyri and magical gems can, at this point, be restated: the authors of many Christian Gnostic texts, like those of Nag Hammadi or the *Codex Brucianus*, differed from the authors of magic texts not only in their aims but also in their mindset. It is possible that a number of magi who wrote the recipes in papyri or designed Hebraizing amulets shared many ideas with Gnostic thinkers (astrology, arithmology, the use of *charakteres*, Zoroaster's books, the serpentiform saviours of the seventh heaven...), but they are devoid of the pessimism of many Gnostic authors and, if anything, are closer to the traditional pagan view that the gods were part of Nature and could be influenced through nature; not only the 'good' gods, but also, most importantly, those who were dangerous and feared. The unknowable God of the Gnostics is virtually absent from the world of the magi. Understandably so, because an unknowable, immutable god outside Nature was not much use: he could have been looked upon as a *deus otiosus*, while Iaô and Sabaoth were anything but *otiosi*. The supreme god's name is definitely not unknown: any magus worth his salt, it seems, was familiar with Solomon's seal, on which the theonym was inscribed. Hebraizing magi and Gnostic thinkers shared – to varying degrees – the same doctrines but they had a different way of thinking. Even though many Hebraizing magi shared

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βοφοβιβωθ νουφι ουαθ θωζαξαζωθ χεινοφινυθ βακαξιχυχ βατητορωθ βαινωωωωχ σεμεσιλαμ. Perhaps the ending -th of Iabezebuth was created by analogy with theonyms such as Sabaoth or Thoth, or with Bythos.

<sup>916</sup> 'Iabé was a typical Samaritan form: Thdt., qu. 25 in Ex. (PG 80, 244); cf. A. Jacoby, Ein berliner Chnubisamulet. ARW 28, 1930, 274, n. 3.

<sup>917</sup> For instance, in Alleluiah and in Hebraic anthroponyms ending in -iah.

<sup>918</sup> Mk. 3,22–26; Mt. 12,24–28; Lk. 11,15–20.

Gnostic ideas on the role of the Saviour, they had far less in common with Christianity than the majority of Gnostic authors. It is important, therefore, to distinguish between the various streams of Gnosticism.

Which Gnostics had the greatest influence on magic? We have already identified the Ophites, the Naassenes and the Peratae in this respect, because of their connections with Chaldean doctrines, the role assigned to the instructor snake and the many instances where their doctrines are reflected in magical recipes or gems. The Sethians, whom we have linked to the Jews of Asia Minor, originally from Babylonia, are the most likely group. The Carpocratians are also potential candidates, since they were probably linked to the cult of Harpocrates. The divine redeemer snake on magical gems was usually the Egyptian Chnoubis, not the Anatolian snake of Asclepius; this means that the incentive to use these amulets originated in Egypt, and spread from there to other areas where the same ideas were shared. But the very fact that the Chnoubis gems were approved by many doctors probably means that these gems were associated with Asclepius.

Within a large Gnostic group such as the Valentinian branch, which had been Christian since its inception, were there driving forces that inspired magic? Marcus was certainly a practitioner of magic arts, and may have initiated doctrines such as the letter Waw representing Christ. Could it be that authors such as Valentinus, Heracleon or Ptolemy also inspired recipes or amulets? This seems unlikely, in view of Christ's almost total absence from magic documents, with the exception of exorcism formulae (St Paul advised exorcists to use the name of Jesus!). Basilides was familiar with Abrasax and his numerical value, but this does not mean that he inspired the magic use of this figure. The opposite may have been the case: perhaps, as the heresiologists suggest, he drew on the wisdom of the Hebraizing magi and the Jewish Chaldeans.

Recourse to magical gems in many cases meant the use of divine images<sup>919</sup>, that is, idolatry. The heresiologists, as we saw in § 15, often specified whether a Gnostic sect was idolatrous, as in the case of the Sethians, the Nicolaitans and the Carpocratians; but they did not accuse other sects of idolatry. However, there are categories of magical gems that seem to eschew the use of images, which are restricted to an *ouroboros* encircling the divine name or a series of *charakteres*; in many instances these are aniconic gems with Hebraizing inscriptions.

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<sup>919</sup> G. Quispel, *Gnosis*, in: *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich*, ed. by M. J. Vermaseren, EPRO 83, Leiden 1981, 416, has stated that Gnosis flourished in the Jewish environment, which was promoting an "Aufstand der Bilder", a "revolt of the images".

Within Gnosticism, the fundamental distinction that must be drawn is between Christian Gnosticism and non-Christian Gnosticism. The former is frequently referred to as 'dualistic'. Non-Christian Gnosticism survives not only in some Nag Hammadi<sup>920</sup> treatises, but chiefly in Hebraizing magic. Obviously, if there is a more suitable term than 'Gnosticism', it will be gladly adopted; but for the time being its conventional name will continue to be used.

### § 63. *Gnosticism: religion or magic?*

So far our study has focused on one aim: to demonstrate that the Gnostics practised magic, and indeed that their theories and practices were based on the traditions of the Chaldeans, masters of all manner of magic. At this point an apparently contradictory theory could be upheld. What we have referred to as Gnostic magic was in fact the Gnostic religion. The prayers inspired by Gnosticism in magical papyri were part of this religion, even if their purpose was to conjure up Harpocrates, or to elicit an oracular statement from him. Were all those who consulted the oracle of Delphic Apollo (identified with Harpocrates) magi or magic practitioners?

Does the magic aspect lie in the conflation of Sabaoth, Apollo and Harpocrates? And does this mean, then, that all Roman religion, which adopted Greek mythology and iconography, is to be regarded as magic? Is it magic because it is based on astrological concepts? If so, are Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn magical deities simply because they are planetary gods?

This applies not only to certain passages in magical papyri, but also to many Gnostic texts in the Nag Hammadi library or in the *codex Brucianus* concerning stars and angelic powers, initiations, magical words, *charakteres*, which quote the books of Zoroaster, the astrological treatises of Abraham, Seth, Enoch, and so on. The Gnostics have excellent credentials for being considered magi.

Given that a large portion of the texts in magical papyri and on magical gems combine Hebraic theonyms and Greco-Egyptian divine figures, we have to conclude that many of these documents were inspired by forms of

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<sup>920</sup> For instance the Testimony of Truth; on which see: B.A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, Minneapolis 1990, chap. 3: Jewish Haggadic Traditions in The Testimony of Truth from Nag Hammadi (CG IX,3), 39–51. In my opinion, it is erroneous to assume that the absence of Christian elements in certain Nag Hammadi treatises ought to be proof of their antiquity.

Gnosis, be it Hebraizing, Egyptianizing, Platonizing etc. The magi who frequently call on Sabaoth, the god who rules the seventh heaven, concur with the doctrines in many Gnostic books, but, as far as we know, mention Sophia only once<sup>921</sup>. Is this a valid reason for denying them the status of Gnostics, linked to the heretics attacked by Irenaeus?

Various Gnostic sects worshipped a snake, either live or depicted on statues and reliefs. The snake was sometimes winged and coiled round itself, with its tail in its mouth. A snake of this kind has to be defined as magic, since it features on magical gems and in magical papyri. But that snake was at the centre of their religion, and represented the redeemed Nous that inspired Gnosis, or even Christ himself. The *ouroboros* therefore should be perceived as the great god of many Gnostic sects and as a concept influenced by philosophical notions: Hermetism (a branch of Gnosis), Orphism and Christianity itself.

At this point, we can concede that the religion of very important branches of Gnosticism was pure magic. We could ascribe this to the decisive influence of the Chaldeans on Gnosticism. However, if we really cannot endorse the view of the Christian propagandists, then, as a radical solution, we could deny the very existence of magic<sup>922</sup>.

For some time now scholars of the ‘magic’ issue have maintained that magic and religion should not be seen in opposition, and that magic is indeed part of religion, but is a special manifestation of it<sup>923</sup>. However, any attempt to define this ‘special manifestation’ inevitably comes into conflict with substantial portions of documentation. It is easier to contradict any definition of ‘magic’ than to find one even only partially valid definition.

When anyone in the ancient world described himself as a magus, he clearly knew what he was doing; when the Roman public authorities decided to burn magical books, they must have had a good idea of which books to select. The best solution to the problem, according to F. Graf<sup>924</sup>, is to use the term in the same way that it was used in Greco-Roman culture. Although this seems to be a very valid solution, it was immediately objected, quite

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<sup>921</sup> PGM IV, 1167–1226, in which the goddess is called on to testify that Jaldazao (i. e. Jaldabaoth) is as strong as the supreme god.

<sup>922</sup> On this cf. A. Segal, *Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition*, in: *Studies Quispel* (n. 308), 349–375; an attempt to introduce the expression “ritual power” instead of “magic” is made in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (n. 807); for a reaction to positions of this kind, see H. S. Versnel, *Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion*, *Numen* 38, 1991, 177–197.

<sup>923</sup> This, for example, is Graf’s approach, in his recent book on Greco-Roman magic.

<sup>924</sup> *Magic in the Ancient World*, English transl. Cambridge Mass. 1997.

reasonably, that in the Greco-Roman world opinions on magic varied and often conflicted<sup>925</sup>.

Within the context of the Greco-Roman world also, then, the notion of magic needs to be elucidated in historical and cultural terms.

Graf recently identified and summarized the three moments in history that led to the birth and development of the concept of magic in Western culture. The first was the adoption of the term 'magic' by the highly cultured classes in Greece between the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Also from 'religion of the Persian Magi' the term came to mean certain Greek practices and traditional beliefs. By that time, as a result of rationalism, science, medicine and philosophy, magic tended to be despised as ignorant superstition, quackery and sorcery<sup>926</sup>. The second moment was the Augustan age, when the Romans and their laws appropriated the Greek notion of magic and applied it to religious practices that it was necessary to condemn. The third moment was the age of Constantine, when Christian emperors applied the term to pagan religious activities that had to be prohibited. A study on magic in the modern age would certainly have added a fourth moment in history, the Protestant Reform<sup>927</sup>, which rejected the ritual of the Roman Christian Church by arguing that it was a form of magic.

#### § 64. *The Roman Christian attitude to magic*

The thinking of the Roman Christian Church provides the basis for a clear and unequivocal definition of the word 'magic'. It is an important viewpoint, which even today conditions our criteria for evaluation. For the Christian Church magic was the work of demons. A magus is someone who venerates, summons and interrogates demons; but some may also have regarded those who drove out demons as magicians. If we bear in mind that late imperial legislation and historiography spoke more of the *malae artes* than of *magic*, then exorcism certainly did not fall into the category of the *malae artes*, unlike other kinds of contact with demons. Magic and idolatry were virtually the same thing, because there was only one God and the other spirits who

<sup>925</sup> J.G. Gager. in: Panel Discussion: Magic in the Ancient World by Fritz Graf, *Numen* 46, 1999, 298.

<sup>926</sup> On this cf. also G. E. R. Lloyd, *Reason and Experience. Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science*, Cambridge 1979; M. Smith, *How Magic was changed by the Triumph of Christianity*, in *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh* (n. 3), 208–216.

<sup>927</sup> Cf. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (n. 926), chap. II, and J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, Chicago 1990.

were adored by the gentiles (and by Gnostics, especially those who were not Christians) of necessity were demons<sup>928</sup>: either the spirits of the dead venerated as gods (hence the marked Christian propensity for Evemerism<sup>929</sup>), or demons numbered with the fallen angels who had taken women as their wives. Jesus Christ – it was said<sup>930</sup> – had come down on earth to defeat the demons and overcome all kinds of magic. Clearly this notion of magic was the darkest and most negative that humankind has ever conceived of, quite different from that of Greco-Roman paganism, which judged it in both a negative and a positive light and considered it to be harmful not in itself, but only in so far as it damaged the individual and the community. This point of view was shared by the Christians, and yet they spread the notion that magic was always harmful because it was the work of the devil.

Whenever Western modern scholars, from the 19th century up to the present day, have tried to define magic, as a rule they have unwittingly reiterated the Christian Church's point of view. No scholars have ever simply stated what is obvious to all monotheists, and that is that the term magic is used to mean any miraculous event that is not the work of the one god<sup>931</sup>. The school of Frazer, in the 19th century, distinguished between magic and religion<sup>932</sup> and regarded magic as an initial, more primitive stage, of religion. This was (and still is) basically the position of the Catholic Church<sup>933</sup>, while in Greco-Roman civilization (and of course the Persian and Near Eastern world) there was no such antithesis<sup>934</sup>. Remus is probably right in dating to the 2nd century AD, and to Celsus and Justin in particular<sup>935</sup>, the

<sup>928</sup> M.Th. Fögen, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager. Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissenschaftermonopol in der Spätantike*, Frankfurt 1993, 218.

<sup>929</sup> One only has to read, for example, the work of Malalas.

<sup>930</sup> Ign., Eph. 19,3 (90 Camelot); Just., dial. 78,9 (282 Otto); II apol. 6,5 (204 Wartelle).

<sup>931</sup> This was also what the ancients thought; cf. for example, an interesting passage in the *Kyranides* I 24 (107 Kaimakis), which states that whoever follows the recipe to obtain a ring that is able to break chains and perform other miracles will be considered a magician. Lact., *div. inst.* V 3,19 (409–410 Br., Laub.) states that a person who performs *mirabilia* will be considered a magician, but if he is inspired by god, he is a prophet.

<sup>932</sup> On the conflict between religion and magic cf. bibliography and discussion in Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity* (n. 836), 1510–13.

<sup>933</sup> As emphasized by Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (n. 926), 14; cf. C.A. Hoffmann, *Fiat magia*, in: *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (n. 807), 183–4.

<sup>934</sup> Indeed, a clearly defined religious sphere was not envisaged in Western thought until after the Reform, and the need to use the term 'magic' was not really felt until the late Middle Ages: J. N. Bremmer, *The Birth of the Term 'Magic'*, *ZPE* 126, 1999, 10.

<sup>935</sup> H. Remus, 'Magic or Miracle'? Some Second-Century Instances, *SecCen* 2, 1982, 127–156; *Id.*, *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century*, Cambridge

pagan-Christian polemic that centred around the conflict between magic and religion. Earlier Roman thinking had singled out within religion whatever caused harm: the *veneficium*, the *maleficium* and the *religiones illicitae*, which did not necessarily correspond to magic<sup>936</sup>. The notion of magic as something harmful, however, was one of the main arguments used in Christian propaganda in the Imperial Age.

In several instances it has been suggested that magic is to be considered as a coercive (or manipulative) and arrogant attitude towards the divine, unlike religion, which is meek and submissive<sup>937</sup>. This distinction is in keeping with the ideas of a number of Church Fathers<sup>938</sup> and especially the ideas that inspired the legislation passed by Valentinian, Gratianus and Theodosius<sup>939</sup>, forbidding consultations in temples and warning that god must be prayed to *castis precibus, non diris carminibus profanandum*. The central importance of prayer in the Christian rite, in contrast to pagan ritual, hardly needs to be restated<sup>940</sup>.

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Mass. 1983; cf. F. Heintz, Simon 'Le Magicien': actes 8,5–25 et l'accusation de magie contre les prophètes thaumaturges dans l'antiquité, Paris 1997.

<sup>936</sup> Cf. the instances of Dionysism repressed by the *Senatusconsultum de Bacchanalibus* or the Isiac cults repressed in the mid-first century BC, at the same time as the popular *collegia*.

<sup>937</sup> For instance: J. de Vries, *Magic and Religion*, HR 1, 1962, 214–21, esp. 221; L. Petzold, *Magie und Religion. Beiträge zu einer Theorie der Magie*, Darmstadt 1978; *contra*: Remus, "Magic or Miracle" (n. 935), 127–156. The main reasons why magic should be distinguished from religion have been listed by W.J. Goode, *Magic and Religion: a Continuum*, *Ethnos* 14, 1949, 172–182.

<sup>938</sup> Cf. Eus., *Hier.* 6 (SC 333, 110–7 Forrat, *Des Places*); Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticus III 1* (PL 10, 1383–5; *Macarii Magnetis quae supersunt*, ed. Blondel, Paris 1876, repr. with Germ. transl. by A. Maeger, Hamburg 2001, 79); Synes., *insomn.* XII 145 B. *Jambl.*, *De myst.* III 17,139; 18,143 denied that the deity could be coerced by magi. In more recent times 16th and 17th century English Protestant theologians examined the conflict concerning religion=prayer versus magic=manipulation: K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, New York 1971.

<sup>939</sup> *Cod.Th.* 16,10.7 (381 BC).

<sup>940</sup> Cf. F. Heiler, *Das Gebet. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung*, Munich 1921; *La preghiera dei Cristiani*, ed. by S. Pricoco, M. Simonetti, Milan 2000. A case in point is the rain miracle which favoured the victory of Marcus Aurelius over the Quadi, a miracle allegedly caused by the magic rites of Julian the Theurgist or the Egyptian Harnuphis, or by the prayers of a unit of Christian soldiers (cf. for instance. Z. Rubin, *Weather Miracles under Marcus Aurelius*, *Athenaeum* 57, 1979, 357–80; G. Fowden, *Pagan Versions of the Rain Miracle of A.D. 172*, *Hist.* 36, 1987, 83–95; A. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, London 1987, 227 and 251–9). But there are plenty of instances where the magi and their magic rites are compared with the apostles and their prayers in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles or in the works of the Clementine corpus. Not all forms of magic use coercion: for example, many defixiones are presented as 'letters' to the gods of the afterlife, others as prayers, and others even beg the deity's forgiveness for being compelled to call on it (cf. Elderkin, *Two Curse Inscript-*

It has very often been asserted that magic is private, whereas official religion is public<sup>941</sup>. And this, generally speaking, seems to be the only well-founded criterion in modern definitions of the concept of magic. But in actual fact the private nature of magic was the result of the Christianization of the empire and the repression of pagan cults, which were eliminated from public life. This had already occurred officially under Emperor Gratianus<sup>942</sup>. In 391 Theodosius banned all kinds of sacrifice, both public and private, and access to pagan temples<sup>943</sup>; later another law also banned the rites celebrated in Egypt to bring about the Nile flood<sup>944</sup>. The official position of the Christianized Roman empire resulted in pagan cults being practised only in private, in secret, and at ever greater risk. This was even before the decree of Theodosius<sup>945</sup>. Pagan cults were no longer part of state religion. The Christians considered them as 'magic'; and therefore it is clear that the labelling of magic as 'private' and 'illicit' was typical of Christian thinking.

In ancient paganism it would have been unthinkable to define magic as a private form of religious expression. On the other hand the cities occasionally held public ceremonies that were like those that we describe as magic rites (the *defixiones*), and the emperors publicly consulted magi and astrologers<sup>946</sup>. Magi and Chaldeans, moreover, were public authorities in the East,

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tions (n. 855), 382–395). On the other hand, we know of examples of ancient cities that physically bound certain statues of divinities, in order to force them not to abandon their supplicants by going over to the enemy's side (cf. A. Mastrocinque, *Gli dei protettori della città*, in: *Religione e politica nel mondo antico*, CISA 7, Milan 1981, 3–21; C.A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual*, Oxford 1992). Christianity itself uses the most coercive form of ritual, when it performs exorcisms.

<sup>941</sup> For examples of this universally accepted position, see: E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Eng. transl. New York 1965, 57 et seqq.; M. Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, Eng. transl., London 1972, 24–32; J.Z. Smith, *Good News is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel*, in: *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults. Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. by J. Neusner, I, SJLA 12, Leiden 1975, 23 (which characterizes magic as an illicit, as well as private, religion); H.G. Kippenberg, *Magic in Roman Civil Discourse*, in: *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. by C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink, New York, Oxford 1991, 137–63, esp. 154–7.

<sup>942</sup> Cf. A. Chastagnol, *La restauration du temple d'Isis au Portus Romae sous le règne de Gratien*, in: *Hommages à Marcel Renard*, II, Brussels 1969, 135–144; V. Messina, *La politica religiosa di Graziano*, *Seia* n. s. 3, Rome 1999.

<sup>943</sup> Cod.Th. 16,10.10; 7.4–5.

<sup>944</sup> Cod.Th. 16,10.11.

<sup>945</sup> Cf. for example Amm.XIX 12,10 (under Constantius); a law under Valentinian (Cod.Th. 9,37.2, in 369 AD; cf. Amm.XXVIII 1,11 and 24) also sanctioned the torture of aristocrats, if they were guilty of practising magic.

<sup>946</sup> Here are some examples: the *lex cathartica* in Cyrene envisages the use of human figurines in wood or clay, which were to be treated as replicas of living persons, in

and those regarded as 'Egyptian magi' in Egypt under the Empire were for the most part scribes and temple priests<sup>947</sup>.

The definition of magic as the manifestation of a private cult is completely misleading and is the product of our Christian mentality. Let us try and imagine that in our cities there are people who, in their own homes, seriously celebrate Isiac rites, or seek private oracles from Apollo: our initial reaction, surely, would be to think they were magicians? We judge those who perform strange and secret rites in this way. And I see no reason why we should not use the concept of magic in this regard. We cannot, however, claim that we are using an universal category of evaluation, because this universal category does not exist, any more than the concept of absolute religious 'purity' or absolute 'chastity' exists. Our parameters for evaluation differ from those used in Greek and Roman society, where there were numerous little private groups of worshippers of strange or foreign deities<sup>948</sup>. Nobody would have dreamt of saying that these cults were magic rites simply because they were not performed in public.

The tendency when defining magic is to connect it with ritual<sup>949</sup>. This is clearly the result of the same ideological and political process that in the past relegated paganism to the private sphere. Imperial legislation tried to eliminate first and foremost pagan ritual, namely sacrifices (Theodosius I), and the consultation of oracles and all other forms of divination (Constantius II)<sup>950</sup>.

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accordance with well known magic rituals (G. De Sanctis, *Epigraphica*, IX., *Le decretali di Cirene*, RFIC 55, 1927, 185–212, esp. 202, 204; F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques* (Supplement), Paris 1962, no. 115, lines 29–39); some curses at Teos follow the typical pattern of private *defixiones*, even though they are public (SIG 38; P. Herrmann, *Teos und Abdera im 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr.*, *Chiron* 11, 1981, 1–30); the emperor Tiberius listened to the opinions of the astrologer Thrasyllus as if they were oracles (Tac., *Ann.* VI 20–21; Suet., *Tib.* 14; Cass. Dio LV 11,2; LVII 15,7). Cf. D. S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors. Humane and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge/Mass., London 1994.

<sup>947</sup> D. Frankfurter, *Ritual Expertise in Roman Egypt and the Problem of the Category 'Magician'*, in: *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. by P. Schäfer, H. Kippenberg, SHR 75, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1997, 115–135; cf. Id., *Religion in Roman Egypt. Assimilation and Resistance*, Princeton 1998. M. Himmelfarb, *Panel Discussion: Magic in the Ancient World* by Fritz Graf, *Numen* 46, 1999, 300, has pointed out that the difference between magic and civic cults is not applicable to Egypt.

<sup>948</sup> For example, the Sabazius and Bendis cults in Athens, and the first Isiac or Judaic confraternities in Rome.

<sup>949</sup> Cf. a recent work by E. 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. by D. R. Jordan, H. Montgomery, E. Thomassen, Bergen 1999, 55–66.

<sup>950</sup> Cf. F. Martroye, *La répression de la magie et les cultes des gentils au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, RHDF IV ser. 18, 1930, 669–701; E. Massoneau, *Le crime de Magie dans le droit*

With the exception of a few academic specialists, scholars who have a Christian European background tend to include the shamans, medicine men and healers of our own time in the category of magic, as well as all the ritual specialists of the ancient world (from Medea to Proclus). Whenever a strange or foreign (or pagan) ritual has to be classified, it can easily be placed under the heading of magic, whereas a doctrinal system cannot be classified so quickly. It is nonetheless clear that all magic rituals were connected with religious doctrines and that magic in the Imperial Age drew its strength from elaborate and complicated speculation on the gods and the world. Therefore magic could equally correctly be defined as a religious doctrinal system, handed down in forms that were secret or initiatory to varying degrees. Indeed, a careful appraisal reveals that the Chaldeans, masters of every form of magic, were the most profound and sophisticated scholars of the divine and natural worlds that antiquity had ever known<sup>951</sup>.

### § 65. *Christian magic*

Orthodox Christianity was opposed to magic. This is an undeniable fact, but it is not entirely true. It is true, in an absolute sense, that Christianity wanted to conquer demons, and therefore Christian hostility to magic was effective only in the war on the Devil, against whom identical practices to magic arts were unflinchingly used. However, certain forms of magic that were not associated with the devil, but involved only natural substances, could be tolerated. Besides, if magic had been totally prohibited and repressed, there

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romain, Paris 1933; A. A. Barb, *The Survival of Magic Arts*, in: *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. by A. Momigliano, London 1963, 100–125; MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (n. 611); K.-L. Noethlichs, *Die gesetzgeberischen Maßnahmen der christlichen Kaiser des vierten Jahrhunderts gegen Häretiker, Heiden und Juden*, Diss. Cologne 1971; L. Desanti, *Sileat omnibus perpetuo divinandi curiositas: indovini e sanzioni nel diritto romano*, Milan 1990; M.Th. Fögen, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager. Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissenschaftsmonopol in der Spätantike*, Frankfurt 1993; D. Briquel, *Chrétiens et haruspices. La religion étrusque, dernier rempart du paganisme romain*, Paris 1997. Protestant polemics against Roman Catholic ritual must also have contributed to the entrenchment of the idea that magic is essentially a ritualistic practice.

<sup>951</sup> The weak point in all purely social theories on magic, from the schools of Durkheim and Mauss to Peter Brown (cf. *Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity: from Late Antiquity into the Middle Age*, in: *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, London 1972, 119–46) is that they underestimate its doctrinal aspect.

would be no explanation for the tradition of Christian magic, which is well attested, especially in Egypt<sup>952</sup>.

Magic in the ancient world was not a homogeneous phenomenon. And here we are not referring to the many distinctions, which are less important now than they were then, between *incantamentum*, *pharmakeia*, *magus*, *mathematicus*, *hariolus* and other terms that today (as in the 4th century AD) can conveniently be explained and summarized with the words ‘magic’ and ‘magus’<sup>953</sup>. We are referring to a distinction, within magic, between natural magic and demonic magic. One uses natural substances and their properties, the other uses the work of demons. It is very similar to the distinction between white magic and black magic. This categorization, based on Plato’s *Laws*, took root thanks to the teaching of Albertus Magnus and William of Auvergne and was used effectively in the Renaissance<sup>954</sup>, whereas it is not accorded much importance in the impassioned contemporary debate on the nature of magic.

A similar distinction, however, was already fundamental to Christian writers in the first centuries of the Empire and has been brilliantly examined in a recent book by F. Thee<sup>955</sup>. Some authors, such as Justin and Tatian, condemned magic wholesale as the work of the devil, while others, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, more perceptively distinguished fraud, conjuring tricks and interference with natural substances from the works of the devil. A Christian author, Julius Africanus, was able to publish a work on magic with impunity, because it contained recipes based on natural substances, which made no mention of ‘magic’, divination, *voces magicae*, magic figures or anything that might have smacked of recourse to demons<sup>956</sup>.

The distinction between natural and demonic magic must have had some importance in the definition of lawful and unlawful magic in the legislation of Christian emperors. Constantine (especially between 317 and 321 AD) banned all forms of harmful magic, but permitted medical magic and

<sup>952</sup> Meyer, Smith. *Ancient Christian Magic* (n. 183).

<sup>953</sup> Ancient pagan terminology was much more precise and clearly differentiated than Christian terminology: *maleficium*, *veneficium*, *carmen*, *incantamentum*, *hieratikè episteme* or *techne*, *telestikè*, *goeteia*, *manganeia*; *hariolus*, *vates*, *philosophus*, *chaldaeus*, *theurgus*, *mathematicus*, *astrologus*, *telestes*, *mantis*, *nekromantis*, *saga*, *goes*, *agyrtes*, *prophetes*. Cf. for example MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (n. 611), 110; Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (n. 926), 20–60. To give one example, Ammianus Marcellinus devotes whole chapters (cf. XXVI 3 and XXVIII 1) to the repression of magi and magic by the Roman prefects Apronius and Maximus, but he never uses the words magic and magi, preferring *malae artes* and *venefici* or similar expressions.

<sup>954</sup> Cf. *supra*, note 258.

<sup>955</sup> Thee, *Julius Africanus* (n. 164), esp. 316 et seqq.

<sup>956</sup> Cf. Thee, *Julius Africanus* (n. 164), 449–57.

weather magic<sup>957</sup>. Valentinian and Valens also permitted medical amulets<sup>958</sup>. This helps to explain why treatises by Apollonius of Tyana<sup>959</sup> could circulate in the Byzantine world and why in various cities certain statues were kept that he had once allegedly made to protect the cities from animals, winds and other harmful natural factors<sup>960</sup>. These are also the reasons why in late antiquity magic to prevent hail continued to be performed<sup>961</sup>. Astrology was also taken seriously by Christians<sup>962</sup>.

Emperor Constantius II forbade necromancy and other forms of divination and magic arts that disturbed the ‘elements’ and threatened the lives of innocents<sup>963</sup>. It was believed that demonic magic had the power to upset the natural world, as shown very clearly in the legend of the magus Heliodoros

<sup>957</sup> Cod. Theod. 9,16.13 (= Cod. Iust. 9,18.4): *eorum est scientia punienda et severissimis merito legibus vindicanda, qui magicis adincti artibus aut contra hominum moliti salutem aut pudicos ad libidinem deflexisse animos deteguntur. Nullis vero criminationibus implicanda sunt remedia humanis quaesita corporibus aut in agrestis locis, ne maturis vindemiis metuerentur imbres aut ruentis grandinis lapidatione quaterentur; innocenter adhibita auffragia, quibus non cuiusque salus aut existimatio laederetur, sed quorum proficerent actus, ne divina munera et labores hominum sternerentur.*

<sup>958</sup> Cod. Theod. 9,16.7.

<sup>959</sup> Cf. M. Dzielska, Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History, Rome 1986, 103–4. The only Christian to accuse Apollonius of having performed magic with the help of demons was Eusebius, *Contra Hieroclem*.

<sup>960</sup> Cf. Th. Hopfner, Apollonios von Tyana und Philostratos, Seminar Kondakov 4, 1931, 135–64; W. L. Dulière, Protection permanente contre des animaux nuisibles assurée par Apollonius de Tyane dans Byzance et Antioche. Evolution de son mythe, *ByZ* 63, 1970, 247–277.

<sup>961</sup> Cf. the interesting Latin magic lamella from Traù with an invocation to Jesus against the devil and hail: *supra*, note 111; on protection against hail: W. Speyer, *Art. Hagel*, *RAC* XIII, 1984, 314–328; G. Bevilacqua, S. Giannobile, ‘Magia’ rurale siciliana: iscrizioni di Noto e Modica, *ZPE* 133, 2000, 135–146 (with a further bibliography on 144, n. 34); D. Jordan, Cloud-Drivers and Damage from Hail, *ibid.*, 147–8; A. Mastrocinque, *Magia agraria nell’impero romano*, *MedAnt*, in print.

<sup>962</sup> Cf. M. J. Vermaseren, C. C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Roma*, Leiden 1965, 120–121.

<sup>963</sup> Cod. Theod. 9,16.4 (357 AD): *nemo haruspicum consulat aut mathematicum, nemo hariolum. Augurum et vatum prava confessio conticescat. Chaldaei ac magi et ceteri, quos maleficos ob facinorum magnitudinem vulgus appellat, nec ad hac partem aliquid moliantur. Sileat omnibus perpetuo divinandae curiositas*; Cod. Theod. 9,16.5 (357 AD): *multi magicis artibus ausi elementa turbare vitas insontium labefactare non dubitant et manibus accitis audent ventilare, ut quisque suos conficiat malis artibus inimicos...*; Cod. Theod. 9,16.6 (358 AD): *...omnes magi. in quacumque sint parte terrarum, humani generis inimici credendi sunt, tamen quoniam qui in comitatu nostro sunt ipsam pulsant propemodum maiestatem, si quis magus vel magicis contaminibus aduetus, qui maleficus vulgi consuetudine nuncupatur, aut haruspex aut hariolus aut certe augur vel etiam mathematicus aut narrandis somniis occultans artem aliquam divinandi aut certe aliquid horum simile exercens in comitatu meo vel Caesaris fuerit deprehensus, praesidio dignitatis cruciatus et tormenta non fugiat.*; cf. Cod. Theod. 9,16.7 (364 AD); Cod. Iust. 9,18.9 (389 AD).

in Sicily<sup>964</sup>, who, with the help of his demons, changed stones into gold, though for a brief period only, disrupting the market. Roman legislation, even that passed by Christian emperors, more often targeted the *veneficium* or the *malae artes* than magic in general. The poetic formulae recited by old women against malarial fever were not punishable by law<sup>965</sup>. Magic was targeted only in so far as it caused harm; on this subject it is noteworthy that under the pagan emperors the sphere of evil was very limited, while under Christian emperors it became vast. The brutal repression of magic by Constantius II, Valentinian and Valens was dictated mainly by dread of attacks by evil demonic powers on the emperor and imperial institutions, and so trials for performing magic included charges of *lèse-majesté*<sup>966</sup>. These emperors had been baptized in order to drive away all potentially evil spirits, whose assaults they continued to fear<sup>967</sup>.

Christianity persevered with Jewish exorcistic magic, which had been given fresh impetus by the successful exorcisms performed by Jesus. Thus St Paul was able to persuade the Jewish exorcists of Asia Minor to use the name of Jesus in their rites<sup>968</sup>.

On careful scrutiny, what little evidence we find of Christianity in the body of known magical texts (papyri, lamellae and gems) centres on exorcistic formulae. Not only real exorcisms, but also amulets (gems or lamellae) used to drive away demons<sup>969</sup>, or to comfort the newly baptized, who could still be attacked by demons<sup>970</sup>. The many exorcistic gems that have been preserved

<sup>964</sup> A. Acconcia Longo, *La vita di S. Leone vescovo di Catania e gli incantesimi del mago Eliodoro*, RSBN N. S. 26, 1989, 3–98.

<sup>965</sup> *Amm.* XXIX 2, 26 (age of Valentinian and Valens).

<sup>966</sup> An example of this is: *Amm.* XXX 5, 11–12.

<sup>967</sup> Cf. *Amm.* XXX 8, 11 on Valentinian's fears.

<sup>968</sup> *Act.* 19, 13. On the central role and also the lawfulness of exorcism in the Christian religion, see: Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity* (n. 836), 1523–33 (bibliography); Thee, *Julius Africanus* (n. 164), 335. On the role of exorcism in baptismal rites, see: F. J. Dölger, *Der Exorzismus im althristlichen Taufritual*, Paderborn 1909; H. A. Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism*, Ithaca-London 1985; E. A. Leeper, *From Alexandria to Rome: the Valentinian Connection to the incorporation of Exorcism as a Prebaptismal Rite*, *VigChr* 44, 1990, 6–24; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* (n. 202), 178–9. In certain cases exorcism corresponded perfectly to the definition of Christian magic as a war against demons, as it does, for example, in the story of Abercius, who exorcized Lucilla and forced the devil to carry a large stone from Rome to Phrygia. Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity* (n. 836), 1538–9, asks whether Jesus can be considered a magician, in the light of his exorcisms. The answer to this depends on the religious and cultural opinions of the person questioned; but therapeutic exorcism was certainly considered lawful by pagans and Jewish Christians.

<sup>969</sup> Cf. Robert, *Amulettes grecques* (n. 808), 20–25; R. D. Kotansky, *Remnants of a Liturgical Exorcism on a Gem*, *Le Muséon* 108, 1995, 143–156.

<sup>970</sup> Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* (n. 202), 178–9.

could, in the absence of clear evidence, be ascribed to Christians, Gnostics, Jews or indeed pagan exorcists. The same could be said of the protective magical lamellae of late antiquity, which invoked angels, divine symbols or biblical names for God.

Virtually all Byzantine amulets can be read in the light of the titanic war which the Christians had declared against the Devil and subsequently involved the Roman state. In their most widespread iconographies, these amulets consisted of gems or bronze plaques depicting a rider saint (Solomon, St Sisinnius or other saints), subjugating a female demon with his lance<sup>971</sup>, or a Gorgon encircled by a Christian prayer that defeats it<sup>972</sup>, or the evil eye, in the form of an eye attacked by various animals<sup>973</sup>, or an owl, driven away by an invocation to Jesus, the lion of Judah<sup>974</sup>. The demonic nature of the Gorgon is obvious (it was a sea devil that brought illness, especially diseases of the womb), like the female devil conquered by the rider saints, while the Evil Eye was identified with the Devil himself in the *Acts of Thomas*<sup>975</sup>.

<sup>971</sup> G. Schlumberger, Amulettes byzantins anciens destinées à combattre les maléfices et maladies, REG 4, 1896, 90–2; Perdrizet, ΣΦΡΑΓΙΣ ΣΟΛΟΜΟΝΟΣ (n. 259), 42–61; Id., Negotium perambulans in tenebris (n. 259); F. Macler, Formules magiques de l'Orient chrétien, RHR 58, 1908, 9–33; H. A. Winkler, Salomo und die Karina, Stuttgart 1931; S. Giversen, Salomon und die Dämonen, in: Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhlig, NHS 3, Leiden 1972, 16–21; B. Bagatti, I Giudeo Cristiani e l'anello di Salomone, RSR 60, 1972, 151–68; Id., Altre medaglie di Salomone cavaliere e loro origini, RivAC 47, 1971, 331–442O. Meinardus, The Equestrian Deliverer in Eastern Iconography, OC 57, 1973, 142–155; G. Vikan, Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium, DOP 38, 1984, 65–86; Ch. Walter, The Intaglio of Solomon in the Benaki Museum and the Origins of the Iconography of Warrior Saints, DCAH 15, 1989–90, 39–40; E. Jastrzebowska, Une amulette de Chersonèse Taurique avec Salomon terrassant la démonsse femelle: inscription énigmatique, Kwartalnik Historii Materialnej 46, 1998, 69–74; A. Cosentino, La tradizione del re Salomone come mago ed esorcista, in: Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica (n. 261), 43–61.

<sup>972</sup> G. Schlumberger, Amulettes byzantins anciens destinées à combattre les maléfices et maladies, REG 4, 1896, 90–2; V. Laurent, Amulettes byzantines et formulaires magiques, Byz 36, 1936, 300–15; A. Barb, Antaura the Mermaid and the Devil's Grandmother, JWC 29, 1966, 1–5.

<sup>973</sup> O. Jahn, Über den Aberglauben des bosen Blicks beiden Alten, BSGW 1855, 1–110; S. Seligman, Der böse Blick und Verwandtes, II, Berlin 1910; Robert, Amulettes grecques (n. 808), 29–33; K. M. D. Dunbabin-, M. W. Dickie, Invidia rumpantur pectora, The Iconography of Phthonos-Invidia in Graeco-Roman Art, JAC 26, 1983, 7–37; A. J. Decaudin, Le mauvais oeil, une superstition perdurable, in CCEC I, 2, 1984, 25–32; T. Matantseva, Les amulettes byzantines contre le mauvais oeil du Cabinet des médailles, JAC 37, 1994, 110–121; M. W. Dickie, The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye, in: Byzantine Magic, Colloquium at Dumbarton Oaks, February 27–28 1993, ed. by H. Maguire, Washington 1995, 9–34.

<sup>974</sup> A. Merlin, Amulettes contre l'Invidia, REA 42, 1940, 486–93; Perdrizet, Negotium perambulans in tenebris (n. 259), 30–1; H. Leclercq, Art. Kef, DACL VIII/1, 1927, 701.

<sup>975</sup> A. Thom. 44 (161 Lip. Bonn.).

At this point we can ask how the magic permitted by the great Christian Church differed from Gnostic magic. The magic performed by non-Christian Gnosticizing magi is clearly different, because it does not scruple to use divine images, divination, divine apparitions and all kinds of astrological deities, with a predilection for Egyptian deities. It is heir to syncretisms which were promoted, particularly during the Hellenistic age, by the Jews under the authority of Leontopolis. The different forms of Gnostic Christian magic are harder to recognize, and, as we said, should be sought mainly within the Sethian-Ophite system, among the sects who used sacred images, particularly that of the snake. But basically it would be difficult to pinpoint a fundamental difference between Gnostic Christian magic and orthodox Christian magic, unless we examine the different doctrines on the creator and the saviour that inspired them; some Gnostic sects imagined both of them as snakes, while orthodox Christianity only gave the form of a snake to the Devil (or to the Demon Leviathan and the Demon son, the tempter).

#### § 66. *Antithesis between magic and Christianity*

There must have been a difference between Gnostic magic and orthodox Christian magic, but since it was not obvious, the issue was discussed at length during the Imperial Age. The answer that was eventually found, however, concerned matters of faith, not the nature of magic. Even so, the debate and its conclusions served to provide a precise description of what is 'magic' and what is not 'magic'. And this led to a clearer demarcation between Roman orthodoxy and Gnosis-related heresy, between miracles and magic, and between the work of god and the work of the devil.

Under Diocletian, Sossianus Hierocles had written a work comparing the miracles of Jesus with those of Apollonius of Tyana, and describing the works of Jesus as sorcery and fraud. Eusebius contradicted these accusations in his *Contra Hieroclem*, maintaining that any miracles that may have been worked by Apollonius had been with the help of demons; Apollonius, in contrast to Jesus, was arrogant and impudent towards the emperor. Justin had already addressed the issue<sup>976</sup> and resolved it by saying that the works of Christ had been predicted by the prophets, whereas those of the magi had not; Tertullian also<sup>977</sup> stressed that in Jesus all the prophecies were fulfilled, and this is what differentiated him from Apollonius, Apuleius and all the

<sup>976</sup> I apol. 30 (136 Wartelle); cf. dial. 3–8 (10–34 Otto).

<sup>977</sup> Div.inst. V 3,18–21 (CSEL 19, 409–410 Brandt, Laub.).

other magi. A pseudo-Clementine work<sup>978</sup> imagines Nicetas asking Peter how to tell the difference between magic and a miracle worked by God, how the Egyptian magi differ from Moses, and how Jesus differs from Simon. Using Socratic arguments, Peter demonstrates that the purpose of miracles is to do good, while the purpose of magic is to cause harm to humankind.

These distinctions arose from the need to reject the accusations that Christ and his followers were practitioners of the magic arts<sup>979</sup> and were used to refute the miracles attributed to the Gnostics. Accordingly the origins of Gnosticism were traced back to Simon Magus<sup>980</sup>, whose magic works were dismissed as short-lived and illusory, unlike the miracles of St Peter recounted in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*. Quadratus<sup>981</sup> held that the cures brought about by Jesus were superior to those effected by pagan gods because they were more lasting. Irenaeus<sup>982</sup> and Lactantius<sup>983</sup> also underline the ephemeral and illusory nature of magic; Justin<sup>984</sup> stresses that Hebrew and pagan exorcisms failed to achieve their objectives.

The discrimination between miracles and magic, between saints and magicians, between Jesus and Apollonius or St Peter and Simon, and between Christians and Gnostics was therefore the result of the crystallization of Christian doctrinal arguments in response to the conflict with paganism<sup>985</sup> and the need for Christians to differentiate themselves from Gnostics. The late imperial Christian value system provided a descriptive, not a scientific, definition of magic. It is clear that distinctions between true religion and magic depended on faith, and indeed were open to question. Emperor Constantius II, for instance, of Arian faith, tried to have bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who was loyal to Pope Liberius, removed from his diocese. Among the arguments used by the emperor were the accusations of practising magic that had been levelled against the bishop<sup>986</sup>.

<sup>978</sup> Clem. recogn. III 57–60 (CGS Die Pseudoklementinen, II, Rekognitionen, 133–136 Rehm, Strecker).

<sup>979</sup> Especially Just., dial. 69,7 (248 Otto); Orig., Cels. I 68; cf. the works of H. Remus quoted in note 935; G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Magie et magiciens. Le débat entre Chrétiens et païens aux premiers siècles de notre ère*, in: *Charmes et sortilèges. Magie et magiciens*, Res Orientales 14, Bures-sur-Yvette 2003, 239–266.

<sup>980</sup> Cf. for instance Beyschlag, *Simon Magus* (n. 409).

<sup>981</sup> In Eus., h. e. IV 3,2 (II/1, 302–4 Sch.).

<sup>982</sup> haer. II 32,3–4; cf. 31,3 (SC 294, 338–342 Rouss., Dout.).

<sup>983</sup> Div. inst. IV 15,4; 6; 19 (CSEL 19, 330 and 334 Brandt, Laub.).

<sup>984</sup> II apol. 6,5–6 (204 Wartelle); dial. 85,1 and 3 (306 Otto).

<sup>985</sup> E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge 1965; T. Fremer, *Wunder und Magie: Zur Funktion der Heiligen im frühmittelalterlichen Christianisierungsprozess*, *Hagiographica* 3, 1996, 15–88.

<sup>986</sup> Amm. XV 7,8; Zos. IV 10,6 7; Socr. I 27 (78 Hans.); Sozom. IV 9 (148–9 Bid., Hans.). In our own era, too, these terms have been rever ed by Morton Smith, who para-

The process of defining Gnostics as a group of heretical Christian sects who were devotees of magic enabled Christians belonging to the great Roman Church to identify themselves by antithesis<sup>987</sup>. During the first two centuries of our era orthodox Christianity and Gnostic Christianity had far more in common than would appear after the works of Irenaeus and Hippolytus had been written. Both orthodox and Gnostic Christians hated the gods of this world. It was the condemnation of the creator and the snake cult that sharply divided orthodox from Gnostic Christians. In particular the cult of the snake, identified by many Gnostics with the serpent of Eden, was proof for orthodox Christians that their interpretation of idolatry as devil worship was correct. Christians accordingly devised methods of identifying the devil's works and distinguishing them from God's works, and in this way they distanced themselves from Christian Gnostics.

We can now summarize the antithesis between the Christian religion and magic as follows:

<i>magic</i>	<i>Christian religion</i>
unlawful magic (aided by demons)	lawful magic (against demons)
worship and consultation of demons	meteorological and medical, against the evil eye, exorcistic
arrogant attitude	humble attitude
rejection of God, idolatry	submission to God
ritual	prayer
magic	miracles
magician	saint
perversion of natural laws	acceptance of natural laws
private religious expression	public religious expression

These, then, are the identification criteria established by Christianity in the imperial era. It is clear that modern scholars who, perhaps unintentionally, use them to define magic in general or Greco-Roman magic eventually find themselves in an embarrassing position or contradicting themselves.

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doxically – maintains that Christ was a magician and Simon a divine being: M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge Mass. 1973; Id., *Jesus the Magician*, S. Francisco 1978; Id., *The Account of Simon* (n. 179), 140–51. On the subject of Jesus, Smith's arguments apply only to exorcisms, while in the case of other rites, arbitrary comparisons with magical papyri are made. Smith has noted, probably correctly, a gradual tendency in Christian authors to eliminate all forms of ritual that might appear to be magic (both in stories about Jesus and in the approach of Christians to others).

<sup>987</sup> Cf. K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge/Mass., London 2003. Quispel, *Gnosis and the new Sayings of Jesus*, in: *Gnostic Studies*, II (n. 50), 208–9, maintained that Jesus was a gnostic. Perhaps many ancient thinkers expressed a similar view, and consequently the Christians wanted to be distinguished from heretical Jews influenced by magic and astrology.

Where can Gnosticism be placed, in the light of this glaring dichotomy? The answer to this question is extremely important and needs to take as many different factors into account as possible. According to the heresiologists many heretics called themselves Gnostikòì, meaning “those who possess Gnosis”, in other words “those who know the truth”. Plotinus, who was not a heresiologist, also knew about the Gnostics, but Roman legislation, Imperial Age historiography and pagan propaganda were not familiar with Gnostikòì. Legislation from Theodosius onwards began to persecute heretics, that is, the Christians who did not accept official dogmas. Among these, as we have seen, the Marcionites were specifically taken into consideration, as attested also by the inscription recording the freedom of worship granted by the empire to one of their villages and the attention they received in Theodosian laws against heresy. It is probable that many other Gnostic sects did not have a Marcionite-style organization and were placed in the category of Christians, pagans or Jews<sup>988</sup>. Polemicists such as Celsus or Lucianus are only familiar with Christians, even though they may be discussing Gnostics. The distinction that was made, therefore, was between whether a person was a Christian or a pagan. A Gnostic had to be and still has to be defined primarily as a polytheist, a Jew or a Christian monotheist, with all the legal implications this entailed<sup>989</sup>. By its very nature, worship of the one Jewish god was restricted to the Jewish people and their descendants, with whom God had made a covenant. Only a form of heretical Judaism could allow ‘the nations’ to worship that god. This is why orthodox Jews were not much given to proselytizing<sup>990</sup>. Also, it was difficult to instil into gentiles that unshakeable faith in a god who was capable of tormenting the just (Job) or favouring sinners (David); in order to believe in this god all notions of absolute justice and of his knowability had to be abandoned. The problem must have emerged in all its magnitude during the Hellenistic Age. Before that time a large number of diaspora Jews had been in contact with the Persian kingdom, where monotheism flourished. The Maccabean era created a deep divide, separating orthodox militant Judaism from Babylonian, Syrian, Anatolian and Egyptian Judaism, which had found a doctrinal middle ground<sup>991</sup>.

<sup>988</sup> On the three categories cf. M. Sordi, *A proposito di un’iscrizione di Salona*, RFIC 39, 1961, 301–8. Jews of the Imperial Age often spoke of heretics (most probably non-Christian Gnostics) who believed in “two powers in heaven”: Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (n. 371).

<sup>989</sup> The charge of *nomen Christianum* made members of the sect liable to penal sanctions (until 313 AD); sometimes Judaism was granted privileges, and sometimes it was repressed by the public authorities.

<sup>990</sup> E. Will, C. Orrieux, ‘Prosélytisme juif?’ *Histoire d’une erreur*, Paris 1992.

<sup>991</sup> The Jews of Babylonia (and obviously those of Asia Minor, which was governed

And lastly Christianity was a a rigorous kind of reformed Judaism, but was open to gentiles. Christians could not serve two masters and had to renounce idols, gods and demons, whereas Gnostics had at their disposal the various manifestations of God, which were to be placed in the Chaldean tree of life and could be merged with pagan gods.

Christianity and Gnosticism spread energetically, one trusting in the Son of God, the other in the Father and his manifestations, particularly as the Anthropos and Sophia. In this way the Jewish god could become acceptable to the gentiles<sup>992</sup>. And in this way the Jews could be integrated into the Roman empire.

But acceptance of the Jewish god, the Son and Sophia occurred in widely varying degrees: from the magi and theurgists who exorcized and cast spells in the name of Yahweh, to the emperor Alexander Severus, who had the image of Christ in his *lararium*; from the Carpocratians, who placed Christ alongside Pythagoras, to the Gnostic Justin, who reinterpreted the labours of Heracles in a biblical light.

If we wanted to classify Gnosticism in terms of its relationship with magic, we would have to give each sect and each thinker a rating based on its degree of affiliation to the great Christian Church, which by definition is the negation of magic. On the one hand we would have Christianity (the *verus Israel*, the spiritual watershed in the history of the empire), and on the other polytheistic paganism, and we would place Gnostic sects and thinkers within these two categories. It makes very little difference, for practical purposes, whether we call them Gnostics, as some of them described themselves, or heretics, as the Christians and the Jews labelled them. All of them, without exception, shared one or more Gnostic ideas, but some of them took the *Bible* and the *Gospels* as their starting point and appropriated the gentiles' religious ideas, while others started from Homer or Plato or the *Enūma Eliš* and assimilated Hebraic religiosity. Here is an example:

Christians

Pagans

Marcion Valentinus Basilides Justin Ophites Nicolaitans Hermetism Chnoubis  
pagan exorcists

Without question, the intermingling of Judaic cults and paganism inevitably gave rise to magic. This, of course, is the scale of values applied by Christi-

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by Pergamum) did not take part in the Maccabean uprising; cf. E. Bickermann, *Der Gott der Macchabäer*, Berlin 1937, 121; J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I, Leiden 1969, 13.

<sup>992</sup> Cf. with regard to Gnosticism: G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion*, Zurich 1951.

anity (heir, in this respect, to Judaism), in its efforts to define and condemn magic, that is, idolatry. Magic was the religion of the heretical and idolatrous Gnostic Jews encountered by St Paul, by the author of the *Apocalypse*, by St Thomas and by Cyriacus.

In the opinion of a pagan writer such as Pliny the Elder<sup>993</sup>, magic had come from the Orient of the Magi and there were also Judaic and Cypriot forms of magic. Up to now we have discussed the Jewish form of magic examined by Pliny, who classified it as magic because it was a branch of the Oriental Magi's science, and not for the reasons given by the Christian polemicists. In the eyes of the Christian heresiologists the term "magi" applied equally to Jewish followers of magic and astrology and to their Christianized emulators, who were classified as Christian Gnostics. Subsequently Christian thinking extended the sphere of magic more and more explicitly to all non orthodox Christian religiosity, and also to paganism.

§ 67. *The concept of 'magic' in antiquity and in the modern era*

Understandably, our ideas on magic reflect those of the Christianized Roman Empire<sup>994</sup>. We perceive as magic whatever was perceived to be so by Christians under the late Empire. There are however very noticeable, though not substantial, differences, between late antiquity and our own era: today we place just a few marginal elements in Greco-Roman paganism under the heading of magic and classify everything else as religion, whereas in late antiquity Christians classified all paganism as magic. The event that took place in the meantime, following the destruction of paganism, was the rediscovery of the classics and above all classicism, which idealized the ancient world, and saw magic as foreign to it. This explains why magical gems, which were so enthusiastically studied in the 17th and 18th centuries, were neglected to such an extent in later centuries that the British Museum removed them to the medieval section and the Berlin museums consigned them to the Egyptology section. More than 70 years went by after the discovery of magical papyri before they became known to a large number of scholars: Wilamowitz and the majority of Hellenists preferred to ignore them as a degenerate by-product of the Greek spirit.

<sup>993</sup> Nat. XXX 8,1–11,1.

<sup>994</sup> On the influence of late antique Christian thinking and the Catholic-Protestant controversy on our concept of magic cf. M. & R. Wax, *The Notion of Magic*, CA 4, 1963, 495–518; D. Hammond, *Magic: A Problem in Semantics*, AmA 72, 1970, 1349–56.

Classicism allowed numerous elements classified as magic by both pagans and Christians to remain hidden under the tip of the iceberg. We ourselves have neglected them, at least until the last two generations of scholars, who have opened up new avenues of research.

In Greek and Roman religion there was a vast repertoire of practices and beliefs that were classifiable as magic, in addition to magic in literature. But the 'classics' that we read are those that have been passed through the filter of medieval Christian tradition, which would never have permitted the dissemination of 'demonic' magical texts. Much of our documentation on ancient magic comes from magical papyri, gems and lamellae, from the crypt, so to speak, to which the Roman authorities and Christianity in particular relegated a vast amount of texts and objects, which were definitively prohibited and condemned under the late empire. However, it was Arab translations and recastings<sup>995</sup> that brought magic texts back into circulation in the Western world. It must of course be assumed that a very high percentage of this literature was consigned to the flames. Only a slightly better fate was reserved for 'natural' magic texts: astrological texts, herbaries, bestiaries and lapidaries.

The triumph of Christianity has swept aside belief in gods who are immanent in nature, and there is no more religious dread of offending animals, plants, stones, rivers or lakes. There is not even a deity forbidding us to support unacceptable political regimes. Demons, too, inspire little fear, after centuries of exorcisms and rites to 'seal' anything that was frightening. The scientific rationalism that has prevailed since the 17th century has also swept away belief in natural magic. It is difficult, therefore, for us to enter into the ancients' way of thinking, and to comprehend the stormy conflicts between pagans and Christians. Here, essentially, lies the difference between our notion of magic and the notion of magic in the late empire.

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<sup>995</sup> Especially the Picatrix.

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3 0000 100 638 166

Attilio Mastrocinque examines the intriguing link between magic and Gnosticism. There were two main reasons why Christian thinkers identified Gnosticism with magic: the fact that the roots of Gnosticism lay in the Hellenistic Judaism influenced by the Chaldeans and the Magi, and the need felt by orthodox Christians to distinguish themselves from Christian Gnostics by proving that the latter were magicians.

ISBN 3-16-148555-6

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**Mohr Siebeck**