

MYSTICS AND MYSTERIES OF ALEXANDRIA

THE ADEPTS IN THE ESOTERIC
CLASSICAL TRADITION, PART TWO



MYSTICS AND MYSTERIES OF ALEXANDRIA



THIS ILLUSTRATED TEXT EXPLORES THE doctrines of Asia, North Africa, and Eastern Europe in Alexandria and how they laid the foundations for alchemy, Rosicrucians, astronomy, and the Hermetic arts which have survived in the secret societies of the modern world.

Mystics and Mysteries of Alexandria covers the esoteric schools which flourished in Egypt for over five hundred years and combined the teachings of Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, as well as Jewish scholars and early Christian mystics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Manly P. Hall (1901-1990) founded the Philosophical Research Society, Inc. as a non-profit organization in 1935, dedicated to the dissemination of useful knowledge in the fields of philosophy, comparative religion, and psychology. In his long career, spanning more than 70 years of dynamic public activity, Mr. Hall delivered over 8000 lectures in the United States and abroad, authored over 150 books and essays, and wrote countless magazine articles.



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3910 Los Feliz Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90027

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THE ADEPTS

In the Esoteric Classical Tradition

by MANLY P. HALL

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ILLUSTRATED



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PREFACE

In the *Advancement of Learning* Bacon refers to the discretion anciently observed of publishing part and reserving part to a private succession. Of this *Traditionem Lampadis*, the handing on of the traditive lamp or the Method bequeathed to the Sons of Sapience, he observes: 'The pretence thereof seemeth to be this: that by the intricate envelopings of delivery the profane vulgar may be removed from the secrets of Sciences, and they only admitted which had either acquired the interpretation of parables by Tradition from their teachers or by the sharpness and subtlety of their own wit could pierce the veil.'*

Mysticism played an important part in the religious and philosophical sects that flourished in Alexandria. Philo Judaeus certainly taught a Jewish transcendentalism. Plotinus transformed Platonism into a moral discipline for the liberation of the human soul. Valentinus, the Gnostic, was primarily a devout believer in the mystical path of redemption. Many others can be named, but there is some difficulty in tracing the adept tradition in this great Egyptian metropolis. The tree of life planted on the delta of the Nile produced many exquisite blossoms and an abundance of fruit, but it seems impossible to find the roots of the Alexandrian wisdom.

* Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, London, 1936, p. XV.

It may be that the periodic destruction of libraries, temples, and schools obliterated the old landmarks. It is certain, however, that the beliefs of the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, cabalists, and Hermetists survived the terrors and horrors wrought by fire and sword and endure even to this day. The Crusaders found secret societies in North Africa as late as the twelfth century. Astronomers followed the calculations of Ptolemy of Alexandria until the advents of Galileo and Copernicus. The Knights Templars perpetuated some of the early Gnostic beliefs, and the Rosicrucians found consolation in the survival of the Hermetic traditions relating to the transformation of metals.

Several great mystics are recognized in Europe, and there were a number in the Early Christian Church. We are still not sure about the origins of the sacred rites, records, and canons that in some mysterious way survived the obliteration of their ancient documentation. For practical purposes, the streams of Alexandrian mysticism bear witness to initiated instructors who can no longer be identified but survive in the descent of their sacred teachings.

Because of the curious complications, it has seemed best to report some of the secret rites of the original Egyptians and to recognize the Alexandria of the Ptolemies as the preserver of the ancient wisdom of mankind which came to be discreetly circulated throughout the post-classical world. In Europe especially all of the known adepts were profoundly influenced by the Alexandrian nexus and its contributions to every department of modern learning.

MANLY P. HALL
Los Angeles, 1987

THE ADEPTS

MYSTICS AND MYSTERIES OF ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria, The Glorious City

The city of Alexandria was founded in 331 or 332 B.C. by Alexander the Great. The Macedonian conqueror assembled a group of skilled architects and artisans who were resolved to create a metropolis of such grandeur that it would be truly the greatest wonder of the world. Alexander did not live to see the city he had planned, but he was buried there. For several reasons, not entirely sentimental, the embalmed remains of Alexander were placed in a coffin of gold and Ptolemy Soter contrived to have them brought to Egypt. A magnificent mausoleum known as the Soma was prepared to receive Alexander's remains. One of the later Ptolemies, in need of funds, substituted a glass coffin for the golden original. The Soma was also the place of interment for the Greek pharaohs reigning in Egypt, but no vestige of the building has survived.

The expansion and beautification of Alexandria passed to the Greek pharaohs of Egypt. The first of these, Ptolemy Soter, was largely responsible for the perfection of the original scheme, and the work was carried on by his successor Ptolemy Philadelphus. During the reign of these two kings, the Bruchium, the most famous museum, was completed; and when Ptolemy Philadelphus died the collection of manuscripts exceeded one hundred thousand items. Through the industry



Alexandria

A woodblock view of the city of Alexandria as it occurs in the 1493 edition of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. Any resemblance to the original city is purely accidental.

of Callimachus the collection was classified and labeled, and by the time of Julius Caesar the library contained over seven hundred and fifty thousand items. When Caesar besieged Alexandria the Bruchium was accidentally destroyed.

H. P. Blavatsky was well-acquainted with Coptic Christianity, and from those who held her friendship she gathered a number of details concerning the fate of the great Alexandrian collection. She tells us that several hours elapsed between the burning of the fleet in the harbor as ordered by Julius Caesar and the spreading of the fire to the city. In this precious interval librarians and servants attached to the Bruchium saved the most valuable of the rolls. The parchments had been fireproofed; and, even after the conflagration, numerous rolls were found intact, although their bindings had been destroyed. Many works were saved also by the circumstance that they had been moved to the house of the prin-

cial librarian for reconditioning. Because of a prophecy that the library would be destroyed, the most important records were gradually spirited away, and there are Arabic accounts that they were hidden in a subterranean temple some distance from Alexandria.*

Almost immediately after the destruction a restoration was enterprised, and Mark Antony presented Alexandria with the Pergamene library consisting of approximately two hundred thousand manuscripts. Among the famous scholars who availed themselves of the facilities of the Alexandrian collection were Eratosthenes, Strabo, Hipparchus, Archimedes, and Euclid.

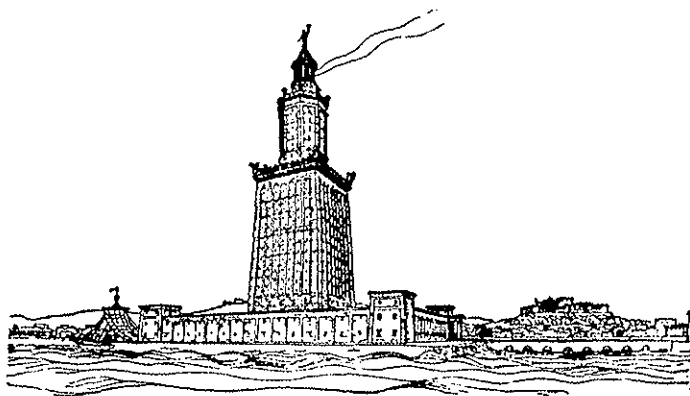
The Serapium was also built by Ptolemy Soter in honor of the Egyptian deity Serapis. It was a most extraordinary complex of buildings and contained remarkable statuary and diversified works of art. The Library of the Serapium housed about three hundred thousand manuscripts and was burned by order of the Caliph Omar in 641 A.D. Details of this event can be found in Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. There is a legend, not sustained by any strong evidence, that the manuscripts in the Serapium were used as fuel to heat the public baths of Alexandria.†

After the Moslem conquest the importance of Alexandria as a center of learning gradually diminished, and for nearly a thousand years it languished on the delta of the Nile all but forgotten. While its cultural life has waned, it is now a flourishing community with a population in excess of two million and is the second city of Egypt, exceeded only by Cairo in population and importance.

Ancient Alexandria was adjacent to the Island of Pharos

* Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, New York and London, 1882, p. 29.

† Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. V, New York, 1899, p. 229.



Restoration of the Pharos of Alexandria. From *Judaism in the Greek Period* by G. H. Box, Oxford, 1932.

where once stood the great lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was engineered for Ptolemy Philadelphus by Sostratus of Cnidus, a most celebrated architect. According to E. A. Wallis Budge, this lighthouse was about six hundred feet high; but other authors are considerably more conservative. Sostratus is remembered as well for his magnificent Temple of Diana at Ephesus, also one of the seven wonders of antiquity. He was by no means a modest man, and he carved his own name with an appropriate inscription in the stone at the top of the Pharos. It is reported that he spread plaster over this memorial to his own genius, fully aware that this fragile material inscribed with the name of the Pharaoh Ptolemy Philadelphus would later deteriorate and his own name would then be read by future generations.*

No trace of this amazing construction has descended to modern times. P. M. Fraser in his remarkable book *Ptolemaic Alexandria* casts certain doubts concerning the identity of the

* Georg Ebers, *Egypt: Descriptive, Historical, and Picturesque*, Vol. I, London, Paris, and New York, n.d., p. 6.

builder of the Pharos. Substantially, careful translation of contemporary references, especially Pliny, are inconclusive.* The Pharos was still standing as late as the twelfth century A.D. From that time on historical records are obscure, but it is known that in 1477 the Mamluk Sultan Qa'it Bay built a fort from the ruined stones of the famous lighthouse.†

Beacon fires on the top of this Alexandrian lighthouse were visible for miles out in the Mediterranean. At the time of Ptolemy Soter or his son, the Island of Pharos was connected to the mainland by a causeway, and in the course of time the city itself extended along this embankment. Budge wrote that Alexandria was of very little interest to Egyptologists. It was largely a Grecian settlement; and, while it had a considerable Egyptian population, there are few archaeological remains of major importance relating to ancient Egyptian culture.

Alexander the Great ordered that all persons living in the vicinity of Alexandria should move into the city, and these were principally Egyptians. With the passing of time, however, and through the inducements offered by the various Ptolemies, Greeks, Romans, and Jews settled in various sections of the city. As a result of its strategic location, elements of Asiatic culture found a secure footing in this ancient metropolis. The result was a diversified populace which provided a suitable atmosphere for the advancement of learning and the intermingling of several streams of religious, philosophical, and scientific beliefs. From the beginning, the Alexandrian environment drew to itself persons of extraordinary attainments who appreciated the opportunity to improve their knowledge and deepen their insight.

Yet, as is observed in G.R.S. Mead's quotation from Zeller in the Preface to *The Select Works of Plotinus*, London and

* P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1972, pp. 17-20.

† *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. I, Chicago, 1981, p. 481.

New York, 1895, in Ammonius Saccas' period it was "a time in which the nations had lost their independence, the popular religions their power, the national forms of culture their peculiar stamp, in part if not wholly; in which the supports of life on its material, as well as on its spiritual side, had been broken asunder, and the great civilizations of the world were impressed with the consciousness of their own downfall, and with the prophetic sense of the approach of a new era; a time in which the longing after a new and more satisfying form of spiritual being, a fellowship that should embrace all peoples, a form of belief that should bear men over all the misery of the present, and tranquillize the desire of the soul, was universal."

Alexandria was not only a center of religious and philosophical scholarship but also a seed ground for scientific research. George Willis Botsford, Professor of History at Columbia University, writes: "The campaigns of Alexander had greatly enlarged the bounds of geographical knowledge, and had stimulated men to explore other regions then unknown. The new information they gathered was published in geographies. Greek scientists had long believed the earth to be round; and now one of the famous geographers computed its circumference at about 28,000 English miles, which is remarkably near the truth. He believed, too, that the opposite side of the world was inhabited, and that India could be reached by sailing west across the Atlantic, were it possible to make so long a voyage. Similar advances were made in astronomy. It was found that the sun is many times as large as the earth, and that the earth revolves on its axis and around the sun. This truth was rejected, however, by most scientists of the day in favor of the view afterward known as the Ptolemaic system, which represents the earth as the centre of the universe. A certain physiologist found that the brain is the seat of the mind, and that the nerves are of two kinds, for conveying the feeling and the will respectively. He discovered, too, the circulation of the blood. Many of these truths

were rejected at the time, or soon forgotten, to be rediscovered in recent years. In the same age the practice of medicine became scientific and surgeons acquired great skill.”*

The geographer referred to in the above quotation was Eratosthenes, the astronomer was Aristarchus, and the physiologist was Hierophilus. From the same authority we also note that one of the kings of Egypt founded a zoological park in which he and his successors gathered many varieties of animals from all the known parts of the earth. Many scholars were attracted by the collection and wrote works on zoology and botany. These advancements took place during the so-called “Alexandrian Age.”

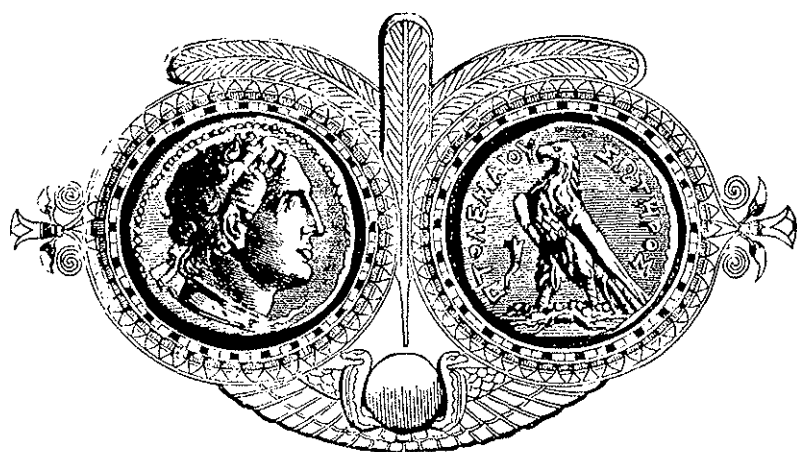
Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria was an outstanding mathematician, geographer, astronomer, and astrologer, and he had ample opportunity to benefit by the discoveries and speculations of Alexandrian scholars. He remained true, however, to the geocentric system of astronomy and is responsible, at least in part, for the modern conflict between astronomy and astrology. By tying the solar system to the mythology of the ancients, he provided an analogical pattern which may be best described as psychological astronomy.

Public celebrations often observed the conflict of beliefs. Callixenus was a witness to one of the great state festivals of Alexandria. Ebers paraphrases the report of Callixenus: “The procession with the mythological impersonations must have been interminably long. In the time of the native kings the ancestral images of the Egyptian gods and Pharaohs had been introduced; and in the same way the gods of Olympus with the Macedonian princes, Alexander the Great, Ptolemy Soter, and his son Philadelphus, were now represented. To add to the delights of the feast splendid sham fights were held,

* George Willis Botsford, *A History of the Ancient World*, New York, 1927, pp. 307f.



Portrait of Claudius Ptolemy. From *A Collection of Thirty Remarkable Nativities* revised by M. Sibly, London, 1739.



Obverse and reverse of silver coin minted by Ptolemy Soter. Note the similarity of the eagle to that appearing on the American coinage. From Georg Ebers' *Egypt: Descriptive, Historical, and Picturesque*, Vol. I, London, Paris, and New York, n.d.

where the victors, and among them the king, received golden crowns as prizes. One such feast-day under the Ptolemies cost between £300,000 and £400,000; and how enormous must the sums have been which they expended on their fleet—eight hundred splendid Nile-boats lay in the inner harbour of the Lake Mareotis alone—on the army, on the court, on the Museum and the Library!”*

The Ptolemies were not above intrigues and other misdemeanors; but the earliest ones, at least, were strong and gifted men. Ptolemy Soter maintained a modest establishment on the assumption that it was right to bestow grandeur but not to heap it upon himself. He remained on good terms with the state religion of Egypt and was probably initiated into some of its rites. He counted on the Egyptian priests to

* Georg Ebers, *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 13.

cooperate with the Greek regime, as they had for so long supported the governments of the native Pharaohs. It was not until the Greek influence had begun to wane that lawlessness troubled Alexandria. Ptolemy Soter had been a general in the armies of Alexander the Great, and from years of military life he had learned how to discipline himself and those associated with him. When the later rulers were unable to maintain law and order among the Alexandrians, they appealed to Rome for assistance, which was graciously extended; but this help ended, as might be expected, by the Romans taking control of the city. This led to the involvement of the Alexandrians in the predicaments through which the Romans themselves were passing. At that time, Rome was mistress of the civilized world with a huge colonization program. Alexandria, which had been content to unfold its internal culture, was unfit for the subtleties of power politics. It had hoped to remain a sheltered abode of learning, but the Romans were of different mettle. They were far more concerned with conquering the world than in conquering their own ambition and appetites.

The mystery deepens when we attempt to interpret psychological elements of Alexandrian thought. Dominated largely by the prevailing mysticism, a number of books and essays came into existence which defy the common rules of scholarly writing. Milton S. Terry, referring to collections of ancient Sibylline prophecies, says, "They belong to that large body of pseudepigraphal literature which originated near the beginning of the Christian era (about B.C. 150-A.D. 300), which consists of such works as the Book of Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Book of Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, the Psalms of Solomon, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Second Book of Esdras. The production of this class of literature was most notable at Alexandria in the time of the Ptolemies. The influence of Greek civilization and culture upon the large Jewish population of the Egyptian metropolis, and the marked favors shown this people in

that country, turned them far from the strict usages of their Palestinean brethren.”*

Hermes, The Thrice Greatest

Professor Terry's list could be considerably expanded. Several other apocryphal works of the Old and New Testaments can be traced to the same source. Possibly the most important is the Hermetic literature, which is believed to have appeared in the first or second century A.D.

The Egyptian deity Thoth was combined with the Greek Hermes to produce the semi-mythological deity of Universal Wisdom, Thoth-Hermes Trismegistus. It has never been finally decided whether the author of the Hermetic literature ever actually existed or whether he was used in an allegorical sense. If he was truly the embodiment of all learning, he might also be regarded as the author of all the books in the world. Scholars are now of the opinion that the Hermetic writings show strong Greek and Egyptian influences. Isaac Casaubon writing in the seventeenth century was convinced that the original Hermetic philosophy involved the blending of Platonism, the teachings of the Stoics, and Oriental concepts. As time went on, the mystical theology set forth in the *Pymander* was expanded to include alchemy, cabalism, and ceremonial magic. It was not until the Renaissance that the conviction arose that the Greco-Egyptian Hermes was actually a divinely enlightened person and efforts were made to create a pseudo-biography for him. While it is quite possible that a marvelously enlightened philosopher-mystic did actually exist, this situation will probably never be completely clarified.

S. Rappoport quotes the following prophecy attributed to Hermes Trismegistus: "Our land is the temple of the world; but, as wise men should foresee all things, you should know

* Milton S. Terry, translator, *The Sibylline Oracles*, New York, 1890, p. 12.

that a time is coming when it will seem that the Egyptians have by an unfailling piety served God in vain. For when strangers shall possess this kingdom religion will be neglected, and laws made against piety and divine worship, with punishment on those who favour it. Then this holy seat will be full of idolatry, idols' temples, and dead men's tombs. O Egypt, Egypt, there shall remain of thy religion but vague stories which posterity will refuse to believe, and words graven in stone recounting thy piety. The Scythian, the Indian, or some other barbarous neighbor shall dwell in Egypt. The Divinity shall reascend into the heaven; and Egypt shall be a desert, widowed of men and gods."*

The Hermetic dialogues are devoted largely to a reconciliation of Grecian and Egyptian esoteric teachings. There seems no doubt that they were written or compiled in Alexandria. The Supreme Power was a thinly veiled representation of the Egyptian deity Thoth, who embodied the highest aspects of wisdom. The Hermetic approach was scholarly and scientific and emphasized the highest ethical and moral aspects of learning. Hermeticism may embody parts of the teachings of the Egyptian Mysteries. As these were similar to the secret rites of the Greeks, there was little conflict and they helped to reconcile the aspirations of the Greek and Egyptian communities. Although these works may have been compiled in the early centuries A.D., they contain little or no trace of Christian influence. With the decline of the Mystery School systems, Hermetic philosophy lost its distinguishing stamp and gradually faded out of Alexandrian culture. It certainly intrigued some of the Early Christian teachers, and traces of the doctrine have survived in modern mysticism.

K. R. H. Mackenzie in his *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* discusses the Hermetic Brothers of Egypt. He states that this

* S. Rappoport, *History of Egypt From 330 B.C. to the Present Time*, Vol. II, London, 1904, pp. 131f.

fraternity is rooted in antiquity and still survives as an organized group of esotericists. While such a claim must be accepted with caution, it is quite possible that there are some footings in the past. When I was in Egypt over fifty years ago, I spent considerable time with an antique dealer who had a shop close to Shepheard's Hotel. He assured me that secret societies did exist in his country and had a profound knowledge of the secret beliefs of the people of the dynastic periods. When we realize that many mystical organizations in Europe and American trace their teachings to a remote past, there is no reason to doubt that the same is true in Egypt and countries of the Near East.

According to Albertus Magnus, the great Western Church father and later saint, Hermes was buried in the Valley of Hebron and his tomb was subsequently opened by Alexander the Great. It was here that the celebrated Emerald Tablet was discovered, the surface of which was inscribed in high relief with the law of analogy, which was later to bring comfort to the disciples of alchemy. Clement of Alexandria mentions forty-two books of Hermes. One of these related to the proper conduct of kings. Tradition has associated this work with the mysterious Black Book originally in the possession of the Knights of the Garter. Like the original Hermetic manuscripts, the Black Book disappeared under obscure circumstances. Scholars are uncertain as to when the Corpus Hermeticum was created, but it is assumed it originated in the second or third century A.D.

In notes appended to his translation of *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries* Thomas Taylor refers to the ancient pillars of Hermes. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, these pillars were concealed prior to the deluge in certain caverns not far from the Egyptian city of Thebes. Taylor implies a first Hermes who lived in antediluvian times and a second Hermes who probably lived shortly after the beginning of the Christian Era and who interpreted the ancient pillars, as Iamblichus informs us in his work on the Mysteries. These pillars are

mentioned by Laertius in his "Life of Democritus," by Dio Chrysostom in "Orat. 49," by Achilles Tatius on Aratus, and by others of the ancients. The cabalists seem to imply that the first Hermes may have been the same as Enoch. There is a tradition that Solon, the Greek legislator, saw these pillars which were believed to memorialize the destruction of the Atlantean empire.

Alexandrian Christianity

Under this heading should be included Dionysius the Areopagite. There is a popular story that this learned Athenian was converted to Christianity in 50 A.D., when St. Paul preached in Athens. This Dionysius studied first in Athens and afterwards at Heliopolis in Egypt; according to Early Christian martyrology, he was tortured to death for his faith. There is no actual proof that he wrote on sacred or secular subjects, but the treatise attributed to him under the title *The Mystical Divinity* is probably the most important work on Christian mysticism ever produced and has profoundly influenced Christian doctrine for more than fifteen centuries. Critical scholars have approximated the date of this book as in the fifth or early sixth century A.D. and it follows the general pattern of Alexandrian theism. Its actual author was probably a Christian Neoplatonist often referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius.

Evelyn Underhill writes of Early Christian Mysticism: "That wisdom made its definite entrance into the Catholic fold about A.D. 500, in the writings of the profound and nameless mystic who chose to call himself 'Dionysius the Areopagite.' Three hundred and fifty years later, those writings were translated into Latin by John Scotus Erigena, a scholar at the court of Charlemagne, and so became available to the ecclesiastical world of the West."*

* Evelyn Underhill, editor, *A Book of Contemplation the Which is Called the Cloud of Unknowing, In the Which A Soul is Oned With God*, London, 1956, p. 5.



DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE. From an old engraving by Michael Burghers.

There seems no doubt that sacred writings attributed to real or symbolical sages of ancient times originated in Alexandria. It appears to have been the custom to backdate certain texts and associate them with venerated names of earlier centuries. This was certainly true of several books supposedly of scriptural origin formerly perpetuated by oral tradition. There is no doubt that these apocrypha are remarkable in themselves and are equal in style and meaning to the biblical writings. In fact, their inspirational quality is often exalted and their moral and ethical implications far in advance of the times in which they were written.

The Christian community in Alexandria gained importance with the passing of time. It is said that St. Mark preached there about 40 A.D., and this belief is firmly supported by the Coptic Christians. After the death of St. Mark (62 A.D.), his body was buried in Alexandria but was later stolen by Venetian traders, who carried the remains to Venice and enshrined them in the Cathedral Church of St. Mark. As a result of the preaching of St. Mark, a formal Christian school was established at Alexandria, and this is probably the earliest Christian institution of its kind.

Known as the Catechetical School, it was first under the leadership of Pantaenus, from whom the management of the institution passed to Clement of Alexandria. Apparently, this school had no physical meeting place, and instruction was given in the homes of the members. There was an informal curriculum, and the course required three years for completion. There was no charge for admission, and the labor was supported by sympathetic Christian converts.

Clement of Alexandria was the greatest Christian apologist of the second century. The term *apologist* was given to several early writers who attempted to reconcile Christian and pagan religious and philosophical doctrines. Clement was born about 150 A.D. in Athens. His parents were pagans,



CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA. From an old engraving by Michael Burghers.

and he followed their religion in his youth. After his conversion he became the principal spokesman for the Alexandrian Christian community. He wrote extensively and was particularly concerned with Gnosticism. His approach to this subject in the *Stromateis* (Miscellanies) was most curious. He created a more or less Christian Gnosticism and imposed his own beliefs upon the transcendentalism which had arisen in Alexandria. By advancing what he assumed to be the spirit of true Gnosticism, he must have brought considerable embarrassment upon the non-Christian community. In his *Stromateis* he separates the *good* gnosis from the *bad* gnosis, downgrading as far as possible the esoteric aspects of Egyptian religion. He acknowledged Christian Mysteries and felt that they should be respected by followers of the pagan Mysteries. Because of Roman persecution, Clement was obliged to leave Alexandria and take refuge in Palestine. He died in the early years of the third century. The leadership of Alexandrian Christianity passed to Origen, an outstanding theologian, who was subject to persecution by all concerned.

J. G. Wilkinson, F.R.S. tells us that on the evidence of Clement of Alexandria the Egyptians attached the highest importance to their Mysteries or secret religious beliefs. The secrets of divine matters were reserved for the sacerdotal class and for the heir apparent of the throne. Their esoteric rites consisted of two degrees, the lesser and the greater. Candidates had to be of unblemished character, pure and unsullied, and of the highest morality. Only priests were privileged to initiation into the greater Mysteries. Secular dignitaries were not eligible; the only exception was the king, for upon his accession to the throne he automatically became a member of the priesthood and the head of the state religion. Under the Ptolemies the lesser Mysteries were communicated to outstanding persons who were accepted for instruction. Pythagoras and Plato had access to the wisdom of secrets dealing with mathematics and astronomy. Wilkinson believed that

the astronomy of the Chaldeans was obtained from the priests of Egypt.*

Hidden in an elaborate text by John Landseer is a curious note which may explain one of the secrets of the ancient Greek Mysteries. In the preparation of his own book John Landseer came across a comment by Thomas Taylor, the distinguished modern Platonist. He quotes Taylor as follows:

"In my dissertation on the Eleusinian mysteries, (he says) I have demonstratively shewn that the most sublime part of *Inspection*, in these mysteries, consisted in beholding *the Gods themselves*, invested with a resplendent light. It appears that in the mysteries of Diana [the moon] that Goddess was rendered visible to the eyes of the initiated; and in the following passage (from Proclus,) we learn that the *Gods* were seen in all the mysteries."†

Landseer is of the opinion that when Proclus refers to "visible Gods" he is referring to planets and stars, but this in no way is a satisfactory explanation. According to Plato's *Republic*, in the rites of the Mysteries deities appear through a variety of forms and shapes, sometimes as luminosity and at other times they appear in human form and then pass into other shapes. This statement is reasonably well-known but for the average Platonist difficult to comprehend.

Nearly all of the ancient esoteric fraternities seem to have believed in the visible manifestations of divine beings. Among the various explanations by modern commentators it is assumed that the so-called "gods" were the priests themselves, sometimes wearing the masks of the appropriate divinities. It is difficult to imagine that this procedure could have proven deceptive to the more enlightened candidates. It has also been suggested that statues of appropriate deities were placed

* J. G. Wilkinson, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, Vol. I, London, 1837, pp. 266-69.

† John Landseer, *Sabaeen Researches*, London, 1823, p. 189.

in the adytum of the temple and covered with veils. At the proper moment the coverings were removed, and the statues became visible. Those more mystically inclined have suspected the neophytes were placed under spells or were given certain drugs which caused visions.

It was taught and proclaimed that those receiving initiation had the inner eye of the soul opened. This is the eye of Horus in the Egyptian Rites. If the internal vision is released from the boundary of sensory perception, the Neoplatonist may be correct in believing that the gods could become visible. The deities themselves are personifications of divine principles. Suppose for a moment that a candidate for initiation was looking at the visible sphere in the normal way. He would see mountains, valleys, birds, water, human habitations, palaces for the living, tombs for the dead. If at that moment the veil was removed from his eyes so that he no longer beheld the visible panorama, what would he see?

He might have the experience of becoming aware that behind every physical form is an invisible power or principle. All the animate or semi-animate bodies that met his gaze would be radiant units of life of varying magnitudes. The living spark in every creature and creation is a divine being. Every form that makes up the wide expanse of physical existence is actually a material body built by internal life principles. All these life principles everywhere and in everything can be considered the gods, because they are the manifestation of the one eternal source of existence. When the vision is closed, the material forms reappear. The divine universe retires behind its material manifestation.

Under such conditions the stars become beings, genera have their group consciousness, and humanity is one vast person, as the cabalists point out, composed of an infinite number of personalities. The total human being is the Adam Kadmon of Jewish metaphysics.

Pythagoras believed in the celestial harmonies perform-

ed by the Orphic hierarchy. Everything becomes alive; the stone and the star each has its own soul, but they are all brought together as cells in the composite nature of the world soul. Boehme had this type of a vision also. He did not see the universe as a diagram, but he realized that at any time and in any place the curtain could be drawn aside. He would then stand in the presence of Eternal Splendor.

Archetypal visions are not merely vagaries floating in some mysterious etheric substance. They are realities that have always existed and always will exist. For the human being, however, the material world is real and all the rest a vagary of the fancy. The initiates, however, realized that every atom of space, including themselves, is a manifestation of one of the invisible hierarchies. Man does not create these cosmic visions; but the rites of the temple open for the neophyte the eyes of the soul; and those whose sight is ordinarily clouded behold the universal mystery face to face.

Modern thinkers, emancipated from the tests and trials associated with the ancient Mysteries, have assumed that the Egyptian priesthood desired to withhold advanced knowledge for their own use. Actually, however, it was taken for granted that when higher learning became available to those lacking moral and ethical discrimination the entire future of mankind was threatened. It becomes more evident every day that the sages of antiquity were fully aware that the abuse of learning was the most vicious form of ignorance.

To quote from the decree of the Emperor Theodosius (*Vide "Codex Theodosianus"*): "We decree, therefore, that all writings whatever which Porphyry, or anyone else, has written against the Christian religion, in the possession of whomsoever they shall be found, should be committed to the fire; for we would not suffer any of these things so much as to come to men's ears, which tend to provoke God and to offend the minds of the pious." Referring to those who objected to his doctrine of the Trinity, the Emperor decreed: "Beside

the condemnation of Divine justice, they must expect to suffer the severe penalties which our authority, guided by heavenly wisdom, may think proper to inflict upon them."

In his translation of the principal works of Clement G. W. Butterworth, Fellow of the University of Leeds, makes an interesting observation concerning Clement's association with the mystical institutions of his time. Butterworth writes, "It seems clear, however, that he was not a Christian to begin with. He is so well acquainted with the mystery cults that there is a strong probability that he had been initiated into some of them. We have it on his own authority that he wandered through many lands and heard many teachers."*

It seems extremely strange that Clement could have lived in Alexandria without being influenced by the rather liberal religious atmosphere that prevailed in this North African city. Neoplatonism perpetuated the mystical theology of Plato; Clement must have been aware of the integrity of this school. Had he been open to the interpretations held and disseminated by this group, he should in all fairness have modified his own thinking about the ancient Mysteries. Clement gained immense popularity as the Church strengthened its position and has been regarded as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox and Latin communions.

Clement in *The Stromateis* states: "But the variety of disposition arises from inordinate affection to material things. And for this reason, as they appear to me, to have called night Euphrone; since then the soul, released from the perceptions of sense, turns in on itself, and has a truer hold of intelligence (*φρόνησις*). Wherefore the mysteries are for the most part celebrated by night, indicating the withdrawal of the soul from the body, which takes place by night. 'Let us not then sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that are drunken, are

* G. W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria*, London and New York, 1919, p. xi.

drunken in the night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as an helmet the hope of salvation.'”*

The expansion of Christian teachings in North Africa led gradually to the foundation in the second century of what is now called the Alexandrian School. Among its early leaders Clement and Origen were the most distinguished. Substantially, this movement was dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of the Christian Mystery. The brilliant leadership of the Alexandrian School may be regarded as the earliest formal institution which advanced general learning under Christian supervision. Greek learning and Christian faith were regarded as the first line of defense against the rising tide of heresy.

Philo Judaeus

The principal name associated with the Jewish community in Alexandria was Philo Judaeus. He was born between 20 and 16 B.C. in Alexandria, and in his religious studies he followed the Septuagint version of the Scriptures. Very little is known about the personal life of Philo, but he was married. On one occasion his wife was asked why she did not wear golden ornaments according to the style of the times. She replied: “The virtue of a husband is a sufficient ornament for a wife.” He made three journeys, the first to Jerusalem, the second and third to Rome. There are reports that Philo met St. Peter and may have been converted to Christianity. It is certain that Philo was acquainted with the Essene community and wrote extensively about their practices.

Philo's writings consist almost entirely of commentaries and interpretations of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and oral traditions of the Early Christian community.

* James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, Buffalo, New York, 1885, p. 435.

He contributed strongly to the Hellenizing of Jewish thought and properly belongs among the adherents of philosophical mysticism. He also laid the groundwork for the introduction of Greek philosophical ideals into the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers. To a measure, at least, he protected classical philosophy from ecclesiastical criticism with the result that Plato and Aristotle were never repudiated by orthodox Christianity. Philo's writings on the Essene community and related subjects have come into focus as the result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Philo was a reconciling force between the Alexandrian communities, though it was inevitable that schisms would arise and trouble follow. For more than three centuries Grecian wisdom permeated the Alexandrian atmosphere, and then the Jewish community became more influential, later mingling many of its ideas with Early Christianity. Egyptian influence was marginal, but some of the older learning colored the later speculations. The Romans came to power shortly before the beginning of the Christian era, but their contributions were minimal. The Roman officers in Alexandria were largely concerned with collecting taxes and keeping the peace. A number of Greeks became Christian converts and transferred part of their cultural heritage to the new faith. It was inevitable that the several factions should become highly competitive, and the genial atmosphere gradually faded away. Writers of the times note that the Egyptian community was never especially troublesome, but as Christianity spread the Jews found their privileges restricted and their beliefs openly attacked. All groups, however, endured with considerable antagonism what has been called Caesarism or emperor worship. As in the Jewish colony, the Alexandrians were required to worship the emperor as their principal divinity, and this caused increasing tension and strife.

The most outspoken of the groups that opposed Roman domination was the Christian, and in the course of time the Romans reacted with extraordinary severity. In the third and

early fourth centuries A.D. the emperors Decius, Valerianus, and Diocletian were responsible for a reign of terror, and the cruelties practiced against the Christians almost defy description. With the conversion of Constantine this pressure was lifted; and the Christians found themselves enjoying, at least in part, their previous privileges.

The conflict between the Romans and Christianity was grounded in expediency. It became obvious at an early date that Christianity regarded itself as the instrument of universal reformation. The Christians assumed that it was their proper destiny to make their faith the supreme power upon the earth. The Romans were never able to estimate the number of Christians that were spreading through their domains. News reached them of secret assemblies, even in the catacombs under the Imperial City. These accounts were exaggerated and embellished with distortion and misstatement. It seemed that a vast conspiracy was going on to destroy the powers of the Caesars.

Unfortunately, however, tragic divisions occurred within the Christian community. Several of the leading adherents came into direct conflict with each other; and verbal recriminations stirred up the populace in general, leading to outbreaks of physical violence. The philosophical groups such as the Neopythagoreans, Neoplatonists, and the more learned rabbis continued to teach with minor restrictions, but religious innovations were quickly and harshly repressed.

Roman Influence in Alexandria

Vespasian visited Egypt, and it was while he was in Alexandria that the imperial purple was conferred upon him in 69 A.D. While among the Alexandrians, he consulted the oracle of Serapis on matters pertaining to the state. On this occasion he was attended by Apollonius of Tyana, the foremost thaumaturgist of his day. Apollonius was a follower of the Pythagorean discipline, but he was also influenced by

other sects flourishing in Egypt. The Egyptians held him in high esteem, and he apparently practiced astrology and other forms of divination. Due to Vespasian's admiration for Apollonius, Gnostic emblems began to appear on Alexandrian coins. (For further details on this subject consult S. Rappoport's *History of Egypt*.*)

The highly influential theologian and Biblical exegete Origen is believed to have been born in Alexandria about 185 A.D. The accounts of his early life are conflicting. According to Porphyry his parents were pagans, but Eusebius states that he came from a Christian family. He was forced to leave Alexandria in 215 A.D. but later returned and was, at that time, badly treated by the Christian leaders in Egypt. He lived for a number of years in Caesarian Palestine, was tortured and imprisoned in the Decian persecution (250 A.D.), and finally died in Tyre in 253 A.D. One of the most interesting of Origen's contributions was his emphasis upon allegories. He insisted that all formal writings were subject to several interpretations depending upon the insight of the reader. Porphyry tells us that Origen attended lectures given by Ammonius Saccas, the Neoplatonist, and the instruction that he received seemed to have multiplied the difficulties through which he passed. Most of the controversy that raged around Origen would have little meaning today, and he remains to the present time the greatest of the Early Christian teachers.

The most famous version of the Old Testament was produced in Alexandria about the year 280 B.C. Apparently, Demetrius of Phaleron, who was librarian during the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus, convinced the Pharaoh that a transcription of the books of Moses should be included in the royal collection.

Very little is known concerning the New Testament until the late third or fourth centuries A.D. Three manuscripts have

* S. Rappoport, *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 69-76.



ORIGEN. From an old engraving by Michael Burghers.

derived from this period—the Codex Vaticanus (Codex B), the Codex Alexandrinus (Codex A), and the Codex Sinaiticus (Codex Aleph, or, for a small group of scholars, Codex S). These manuscripts are all in Greek and included the Old Testament according to the version of the Septuagint. May we suspect that these important manuscripts were products of Alexandrian industry? It is impossible to know at this late date how many early biblical manuscripts were destroyed when the Serapium was completely razed in 389 A.D. upon the edict of the Christian Bishop Theodosius. It is now positively affirmed that the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus were written in the first half of the fourth century A.D. Careful study of the original works has led to the speculation that the same scribes worked upon both manuscripts. The Codex Alexandrinus is very defective but together with part of the Codex Sinaiticus is now conserved in the British Museum.

In 362 A.D. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, arranged for a meeting of Christian bishops, which was known as the Synod of Alexandria. While some theological subjects were discussed, emphasis was upon the readmission to the communion of certain members of the clergy who had sided with the Arians, a schismatic body which had threatened to dominate Alexandrian Christianity. In the uneasy years that followed many religious leaders became over-involved in politics. Among the most active of these was Cyril of Alexandria, who was born about 375 A.D. and died in 444. His claim to fame was his conflict with Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople.

Almost immediately upon his appointment to the leadership of the Christian community Cyril attempted to dominate the secular government. He contributed markedly to the expulsion of Jews from Alexandria; and, when his fanatical orthodoxy led to rioting and civil strife, he made no effort to intervene or pacify the public indignation for which he was responsible until the situation was taken over by the civil

administration. He continued his attacks on Nestorius until he brought about his excommunication and banishment for heresy. As a result, Nestorian Christianity moved eastward, setting up churches in several parts of Asia and finally reaching China, where it was hospitably received.

At the time of Cyril's succession to the patriarchate in 412 A.D., the outstanding exponent of Neoplatonism and Greek learning in Alexandria was Hypatia, the daughter of Theon of Alexandria. Hypatia was born in Alexandria and after the death of Theon she became the acknowledged leader of the Neoplatonic School in Alexandria. Her extraordinary endowments attracted the attention of many outstanding intellects of her day, among them Synesius, Bishop of Ptolemais. She was a woman of great physical beauty, gentle and modest, and, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, she was the world's first great woman mathematician.* The best known book dealing with her life is *Hypatia* by Charles Kingsley. Though somewhat fictionized, it contains considerable useful information. In his preface Kingsley assures the reader that her personal life was blameless.

Resolved to destroy the influence of Greek philosophy in Alexandria, Cyril found it expedient to dispose of Hypatia and, probably with his connivance, she was brutally murdered by his followers. Dragged from her chariot by an assassin, her flesh was scraped from her bones with oyster shells.

After the death of Hypatia it became evident that the golden age of Alexandrian Neoplatonism had come to an end, and those who shared her convictions departed from the city and sought asylum in distant regions. Almost immediately Alexandria lost its leadership as a center of learning.

* *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia*, Vol. V, Chicago, 1977, p. 251.



ISIS RECORDING HER MYSTERIES. From *Histoire de la Magie*
by Paul Christian, Paris, n.d.

The Mystical Institutions of Alexandria

Esoteric schools which flourished in ancient times, especially in Egypt and Greece, were often referred to as "Mysteries." Actually, these arcane schools were not secret societies but sacred institutions. The popular belief that the Mysteries constituted a sacerdotal system devised to prevent the public dissemination of knowledge is untrue. The temples were the universities of the ancient world. They accepted candidates seeking advancement in the arts and sciences and were open to all citizens of good character, male or female.

These religious colleges withheld knowledge from corrupt persons who would pervert the sacred sciences or misuse the wisdom that was imparted to them. Graduates of the Mystery system were bound by an oath that they would never compromise the moral teachings of the sacred institutions or misuse the knowledge which had been entrusted to them. They swore that they would never commercialize the teachings they had received or in any way forget that the highly educated person is automatically a priest and must dedicate his life to the improvement of all mankind.

There is another deeper meaning for the word "Mystery." The ultimate nature of God is beyond human comprehension. Many efforts have been made to define Deity, its substance and its significance; but these explanations and definitions have arisen in the mortal mind and, while they express the deepest convictions of true believers, they are tentative and subject to countless changes and interpretations. In the early years of Christianity many of the ante-Nicean and post-Nicean Fathers mentioned the Mysteries, sometimes critically, but occasionally with profound respect.

Under special circumstances common ideas or even objects can become sanctified. In the Early Church the sacraments and, in particular, the Mass with the transubstantiation are referred to as Mysteries. They are impossible to explain but have found general acceptance as the ultimate secrets

of religion. The congregation attends the Mass and participates in certain of the sacraments on faith alone. God and the Incarnate Logos, together with symbols, relics, and holy imagery, have come to be examples of religious Mystery.

The answers to the ultimate question relating to God are not to be found in the open teachings of a religion. Prayer is an outstanding example of religious Mystery. The members of a faith beseech Deity in great emergencies, convinced that their prayers will be heard and that divine intercession is possible. This has been a belief since the beginning and will endure into the limitless future, but it cannot be rationalized, only inwardly experienced. Most faiths worship God in a Mystery. Some assume that it is a matter of faith alone; others contend that prayers are sanctified by human need. When worldliness fails, the wounded or frightened heart seeks the consolation of the Divine Presence.

Another phase of Mystery involves the moral equation. Is the petitioner worthy of the help he seeks? It appears probable that those who have kept the rules of God are most likely to merit divine help. Beyond the sky and that cosmic manifestation of God's eternal presence is the vague outline of an inconceivable majesty—power unlimited, patience eternal, and love everlasting. These wondrous abstractions, upon which all living creatures and the realms which they inhabit depend, are the subject of all faith and the object of all believing. This is the great Mystery which all the world is seeking to understand.

The Mystery institutions of Greece and Egypt and various nations of the Near East did not bestow upon their initiates the wonders of the infinite abstraction. They could teach that their disciples should keep the rules of God because they were the proper basis for all natural relationships. They could inspire truth seekers to trust in that infinite strength wherein there is no weakness. They could demonstrate that somewhere there was an all-pervading spirit, the protector of the righteous who serve truth to the best of their abilities.

Another important point in connection with the Mysteries is that the grand pattern of these associations was compatible with the basic structures of all religions, regardless of the deity concept which was worshiped. The pious Moslem and the pious Buddhist could share equally in the Mysteries. Slowly the truth of the matter emerges. It justifies that which the world has already experienced but still cannot answer the ultimate question.

Through the disciplines imposed by the sacred colleges qualified candidates relinquished the tyranny of worldly pressures and moved firmly but gently through the various preparatory instructions. There was the purification of the body as a living temple, the cleansing of the emotions until only the highest aspects of love and faith remained. The mind was then taught the processes of mentation and gradually came to appreciate its own limitations. The mind could pass through the forty-nine gates of the cabala but not the fiftieth gate which opened the way to the Great Mystery. Having cleansed the inside of his cup and free from all delusions and worldly ambitions, the aspirant ultimately came into the presence of the Eternal Mysteries.

The temple could not answer his questions, but it fitted him to find within himself that place where all journeys end. All answers must come from within himself. Paul says: "The Christ in you, the hope of glory." Plotinus pointed out that the ultimate enlightenment is not a complex structure of questions and answers. It is the sudden experience that there are no questions and no answers. The inconceivable sufficiency of the Divine Sovereignty overwhelms doubt and uncertainties, and the truth seeker discovers that the journey to the God in space ends in his own heart. The only solution that cannot lead to contention, debate, or confusion is the silent experience of that which is beyond the mind. The ultimate conquest of space is the victory of eternity over time, life over death, and certainty over doubt. In his heart each human being shares in that eternal vision of which he himself is a timeless part.

Defense of Secret Rites

Albert Pike, the renowned Masonic scholar, makes a number of references to the Mysteries as signifying secret or esoteric rites. He notes that Clemens, Bishop of Rome, in describing the Early Church writes, "These regulations must on no account be communicated to all sorts of persons, because of the Mysteries contained in them."* Tertullian (d. A.D. 216) states firmly: "None are admitted to the religious Mysteries without an oath of secrecy."† To protect the Mysteries, he summarizes: "Far hence, ye Profane! is the prohibition from all holy Mysteries."‡ Clement, Bishop of Alexandria, who was born about the mid-second century and died in 215, notes in the *Stromateis* "that he cannot explain the Mysteries, because he should thereby, according to the old proverb, put a sword into the hands of a child."† Archelaus, Bishop of Casarea, who was involved in a controversy with the Manichaeans, said, "These Mysteries the Church now communicates to him who has passed through the introductory Degree."† Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem (315-386), explained that Jesus taught his disciples the hidden meanings of parables and allegories. Cyril then concluded, "Just so the church discovers its Mysteries to those who have advanced beyond the class of Catechumens: we employ obscure terms with others."‡

St. Basil of Caesarea (326-376) states, "We receive the dogmas transmitted to us by writing, and those which have descended to us from the Apostles, beneath the mystery of oral tradition . . ."‡ St. Gregory Nazianzen (c. 325-c. 389), Bishop of Constantinople, makes a terse remark: "Our Mysteries are not to be made known to strangers."‡ St. Ambrose (340-393), Archbishop of Milan, says in his treatise *De Mysteriorum*, "All

* Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, Richmond, Va., 1950, p. 543.

† Ibid., p. 544.

‡ Ibid., p. 545.

the Mystery should be kept concealed, guarded by faithful silence.”* St. Augustine (347-430), after the common believers had been excluded, declared: “We are now to discourse to you of sublime Mysteries, which none are qualified to hear, but those who, by the Master’s favor, are made partakers of them.”† John Chrysostom (354-417), Bishop of Constantinople, does not hesitate to say, “Where the holy Mysteries are celebrated, we drive away all uninitiated persons and then close the doors.”‡

“The Basilidians, a sect of Christians that arose soon after the time of the Apostles, practised the Mysteries, with the old Egyptian legend. They symbolized Osiris by the Sun, Isis by the Moon, and Typhon by Scorpio; and wore crystals bearing these emblems, as amulets or talismans to protect them from danger; upon which were also a brilliant star and the serpent. . . . Irenaeus tells us that the Simonians, one of the earliest sects of the Gnostics, had a Priesthood of the Mysteries.”*

According to Pike, “In the early days of Christianity, there was an initiation like those of the pagans. Persons were admitted on special conditions only. To arrive at a complete knowledge of the doctrine they had to pass three degrees of instruction. The initiates were consequently divided into three classes; the first, *Auditors* . . . were a sort of novice, who were prepared by certain ceremonies and certain instruction to receive the dogmas of Christianity. A portion of these dogmas was made known to the Catechumens; who, after particular purification, received baptism, or the initiation of the *theogenesis* (*divine generation*); but in the grand mysteries

* Ibid., p. 545.

† Ibid., p. 546.

‡ Ibid., p. 542.



SAINT IRENAEUS, BISHOP OF LUGDUNUM (LYONS). His work *Adversus Haereses* (*Against Heresies*) included a severe criticism of certain Gnostic beliefs. From an old engraving by Michael Burghers.

of that religion, the incarnation, nativity, passion and resurrection of Christ, none were initiated but *the Faithful*.”*

Religious Mysteries of the Ancient Egyptians

The Masonic scholar Brother Yarker writes, “It is however to Egypt that we must look for the most complete development of every branch of this sublime and mysterious association; its hierophants being perfect masters of Architecture, Geometry, Music, Astronomy, Medicine, Chemistry, and Theology. . . The doctrine of Hermes or Thoth, cannot be lost to those who have the keys of symbolism. The architectural ruins of Egypt are like scattered pages of a great book, whose capital letters were temples, whose phrases were cities, punctuated with obelisks and sphinxes. The geography of Egypt under Sesostris is a *pentacle*, that is to say a symbolical *resume* of all the Magian dogma of Zoroaster, recovered and formulated by Hermes. . . .

“The ‘Mysteries’ we know were practised in a secret subterranean under the Temple of Solomon, at Jerusalem, where four and twenty elders adored the Sun, with their faces toward the east. . . . But the veneration of the Jews for the sacred fire, light, first principle or holy spirit of the Persians and Egyptians, is indicated in the Abrahamic sacrifice of burnt-offering and shown in numberless passages of their scriptures.”†

The religions of the ancient Egyptians are far too complicated for the present writing, but it may be stated in general that from their unknown beginnings to their tragic ends they endured for nearly five thousand years. The nomes, or provinces of Egypt, enjoyed religious autonomy. Each had its

* Ibid., p. 541.

† John Yarker, Jr., *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, London, 1872, pp. 8ff.

own structure of beliefs with an appropriate pantheon of divinities and priestly institutions. Authorities have, therefore, noted that various cults mingled without stress for long periods of time, and this enlightened nation assumed that all the deities worshiped by the various provinces were the identical divinities under a variety of names. This was an early example of genuine religious tolerance.

Scholars are inclined to believe that the original faith of the Egyptians was accumulated from various sources and, in the course of centuries, absorbed into itself sacred lore from earlier culture groups, including India. Under the Ptolemies the Osirian sect gained in prominence until it was the dominant sacred system. The introduction of Serapis led to the inclusion of Greek and Jewish concepts and ended in a spiritual synthesis in which all believings were accepted as parts of one comprehensive theological system.

In both Egypt and Greece Serapis came to be looked upon as the male counterpart of Isis. Under the Romans the cult was extended throughout the empire and reached as far north in Britain as York. Plutarch cites a version of the Serapis legend which involves Ptolemy Soter, who was surnamed "the savior." Ptolemy had a dream which included a colossal statue which actually appeared to him demanding that it be transferred to Alexandria. No one knew of the statue until a certain traveler named Sosibius declared that he had seen such an image at Sinope. After numerous difficulties the image was transferred, and it was in Alexandria that it was first known as Serapis.

Those who have studied Egyptian art are impressed by the representations of gods and godlings with the heads of various animals and birds. The list is almost endless and may have originated in totemism. Most ancient peoples used masks in the portrayal of their deities. Of all nations the Egyptians made the most extensive use of masks, and by the rites of ritualistic magic the priests temporarily were transformed into



The Alexandrian Serapis as represented in an engraving on copper by Theodor de Bry. From *De Divinatione et Magicis Praestigiis* by J. J. Boissard, Oppenheim, 1615. This deity combines the attributes of the bull, Apis, and Osiris as the deity presiding over the realms of the dead. The Serapeum, the great library of sacred records in Alexandria, contained a colossal statue of Serapis which had a very sad and tragic expression and was referred to as "the weeping god." The central figure is accompanied by a mummy symbolizing death and what appears to be a sphinx to signify the guardianship of souls.

gods and goddesses. This same practice has existed wherever esoteric orders have flourished.

Each of the nomes had their own temples, sanctuaries, and places of initiation. Time and proximity led to a common concept of the purposes and teachings of the Mysteries. So far as can be learned, these philosophical cults were seldom, if ever, competitive. Having more sects than any other recorded nation, the Egyptians discovered the unity of all beliefs. In spite of the appearance of difference, all human beings have the same needs, the same hopes and aspirations, and will come in due time to unity with the eternal truth which is the end of searching. Most of the efforts to restore the Egyptian Mysteries are discussed and described in works dealing with Freemasonry and are explained in the liturgies and legends of the Scottish Rite.

There is no doubt that many of the earlier sacred rituals were revised with certain reservations in Alexandria. Most of the modern efforts to revive the earlier rites are supported only by inferences and fragmentary hints preserved in Egyptian literature and beliefs. Very little is available prior to the fourth century B.C., when Egypt came under the suzerainty of the Greek pharaohs. During the Theban recension of the *Book of the Dead*, the Osirian cycle dominated Egyptian worship. This was not only the basis of the temple initiations but symbolically, at least, was accepted by the entire population.

Like most of the religious Mysteries in the ancient world the Osiris cycle was a dramatic spectacle of a brother slain by his brother, a savior god betrayed by the cupidity of ignorant mortals. This good god was the only being perfect in his own time but sent to earth to reform wayward humanity. He was martyred, buried, and established as Lord of the Underworld, where he labored for the salvation of lost souls. There was a great war between the powers of good and evil. Virtue triumphed and the redemption of mankind was assured through the saving power of the solar deity.

According to Plato, "the design of the mysteries is to lead us back to the perfection from which, as a principle, we first made our descent." Maurice, speaking of the Nile island of Philae, says, "It was probably in those gloomy avenues . . . that the grand and mystic arcana of this goddess (Isis) were unfolded to the adoring aspirant, while the solemn hymn of initiation resounded through the long extent of those stony recesses."* Cicero also writes, "When these mysteries are explained, we prove not to have learned so much about the nature of the gods, as that of the things themselves, or of the truths we stand in need of." Even the Christian apologist and theologian Origen tells us that "Moses communicated secrets to the seventy elders 'from the hidden depths of the law.'"

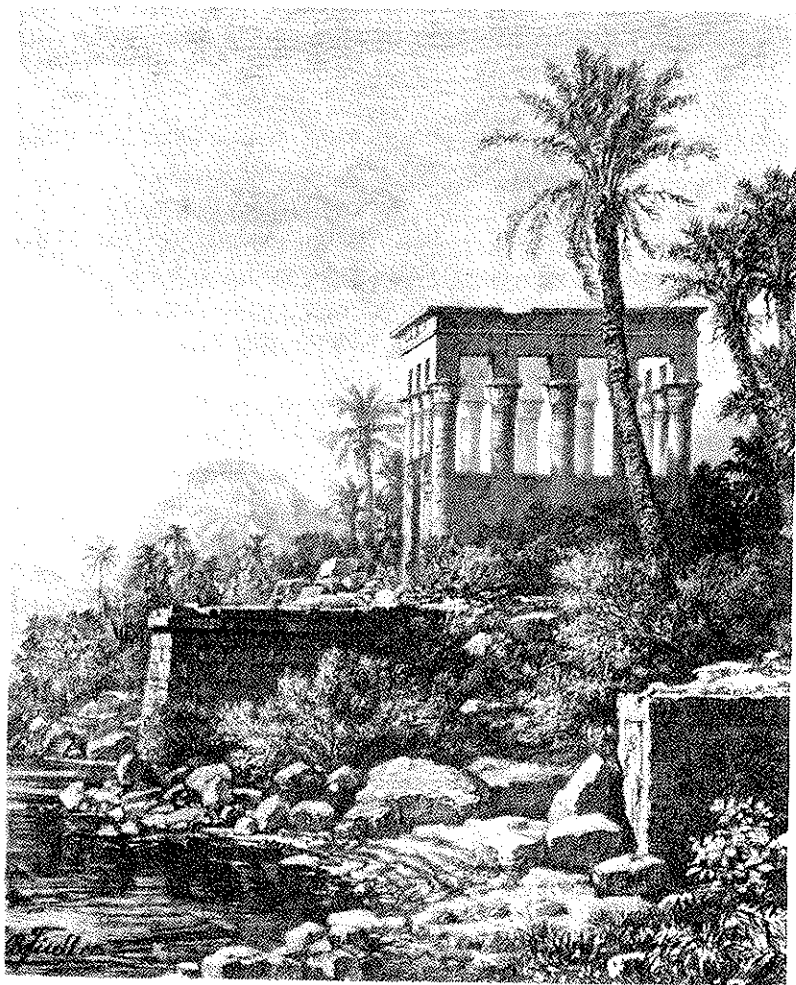
The only break in this pattern was in the twelfth century B.C. when Akhenaten, probably a Syrian pharaoh, attempted a major reformation. Under his monotheism, Akhenaten venerated the solar orb as the Aton, which gave its light to every living thing, favoring neither the rich nor the poor and bestowing its blessings upon all nations and all religions. After his death, the sacred city Akhenaten built was completely destroyed and his cartouche removed from all monuments. This young mystic died in his thirties of a broken heart, but his faith in his divine ministry never failed nor weakened. It is probable that Akhenaten was a contemporary of Moses, which may account for the foreign mystical concepts which he attempted to establish among the Egyptians.

James Bonwick writes that Egypt had an established priesthood at least as early as B.C. 4000.† Herodotus says that when in Thebes he was shown no less than three hundred and forty-five statues of successive high priests of Ammon.‡ As in other nations, the rulers of the country were also heads of the state

* Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities: or Dissertations* . . . Vol. III, London, 1801, p. 16f.

† James Bonwick, *Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought*, London, 1878, p. 351.

‡ Ibid., p. 355.



Ruins of a pavilion on the Island of Philae dating from the period of the Ptolemies. From Georg Ebers' *Egypt: Descriptive, Historical, and Picturesque*, Vol. II, London, Paris, and New York, n.d.

religion. They were properly educated for the high responsibilities of their office. Each priest had a wife but not more than one. Those married to rulers or priests were ennobled by such a union. The Egyptians always honored their wives, who were held in equal distinction with their husbands. Mothers of priests were regarded as holy women. Herodotus speaks of sanctified women dedicated to the service of the Theban Jove.* Rosellini sustains this statement by observing that "it was a custom from the earliest period of the Pharoahs to place by this rite some of the king's daughters in nearer relation to religion."* Bonwick further tells us that the wife of Cephrenes (Khafre), builder of the second pyramid, was a priestess of Thoth.*



AN EGYPTIAN PRIESTESS.
From *Error's Chains: How Forged
and Broken* by Frank S. Dobbins,
New York, 1883.

Holy women were the Egyptian equivalents of Christian nuns. They became brides of the god, Ammon, and were sworn to virginity. Such women were regarded as dead to all material concerns, held in high honor and reverence, and their religious duties were pleasant and inspiring. Here, however, the similarity of these cloistered priestesses with Christian nuns ends

* Ibid., p. 360.

abruptly. It was perfectly right and proper that the Egyptian nuns could become divorced from their celestial husbands, return to terrestrial realms, marry and raise families. There was great lamentation in the temples when one of the women chose to depart, but in due course all was forgiven.

The Book of the Dead

On the subject of Egyptian religion a curious work on the judgment of the soul by M. W. Blackden of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia should be mentioned.* Mr. Blackden was late of the Archaeological Survey, Egypt Exploration Fund. He believed like Dr. Breasted that the ancient Egyptian "*Book of the Dead*" was an initiatory ceremonial for the benefit of the living, rather than priestly practices for those who had died.

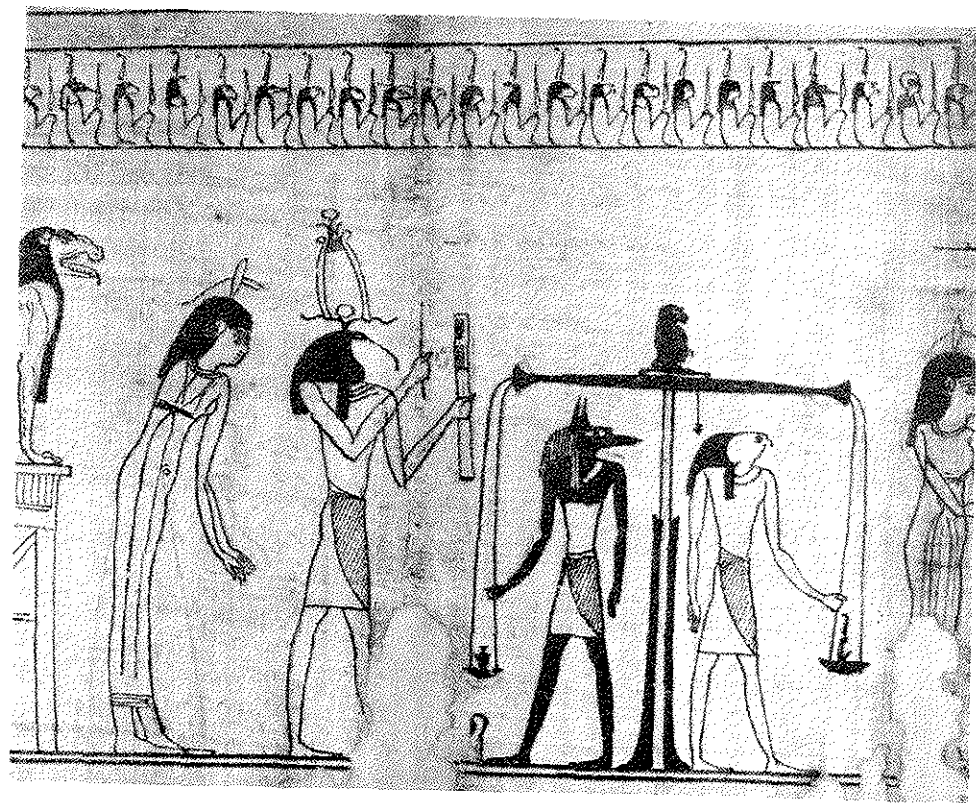
Mr. Blackden gave special attention to the negative confession of faith. The scene took place in the Hall of the Twin Truths. One of the finest representations of this scene is found in the *Papyrus of Ani*, now in the British Museum. The soul to be tested entered in the company of several deities including Maat, the embodiment of universal law. In the midst of the scene was the equipment for the weighing of the soul of the dead. On one pan of the balance was the feather of truth and on the other end the heart of the candidate, which had a small opening in one side so that it could speak. Above were the jurors who must finally conclude whether or not the soul was entitled to pass into the abode of blessed spirits. Enthroned at the far end of the Hall of Judgment sat Osiris, Lord of the Quick and the Dead, accompanied by Isis. Before him was his beloved son, Horus, his only begotten son who pleads for those being judged. The heart of the deceased must pray

* M. W. Blackden, editor, *Ritual of the Mystery of the Judgment of the Soul*, London, n.d.

for a happy afterlife by declaring that it had lived an honorable span in the mortal world and had kept the rules of the gods of the mortal realm. The jurors were also deities, and they could read the heart and mind of the supplicant. The soul being judged could conceal nothing, nor prevaricate, nor find excuses for its faults. If the sinner was too delinquent, its soul was turned over to Typhon, the crocodile in the body of a hog that lived in the Nile. Typhon was the symbol of rebirth, and the soul was condemned to come back into a body and try again. It is probable, therefore, that this ritualistic papyrus dramatizes the esoteric teachings of the Egyptian sages.

Blackden's findings were supported by Dr. James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) of the University of Chicago. I spent a pleasant afternoon with Dr. Breasted shortly after the publication of his translation of *The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus*, and on that occasion he autographed a copy of the work for inclusion in our Library. It seemed a favorable opportunity to ask this distinguished scholar if he considered it possible that the so-called *Book of the Dead* was actually an account of the ritual of the initiation rites of the Egyptian Mysteries. Dr. Breasted smiled and stated that he had examined two examples of the so-called mortuary papyrus in which the prompter's marks for the actor-priests participating in the ceremony were inscribed clearly in the margins of the hieroglyphic text.

The papyrus of the Lady Ta-Er-Pet from which we are illustrating the *psychostasia*, or the weighing episode in the judgment of the soul, is now in the PRS collection. The complete manuscript is over twenty feet in length and was described in part by Jean Capart in *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, Leipzig, 1908-09. At the extreme left is the Lady Ta-Er-Pet being led into the Hall of the Twin Truths by the ibis-headed deity Thoth-Hermes. He bears a tablet and stylus to record the decision of the jurors. Part of the jury is shown as a row of seated gods with their appropriate symbols. At the left of the central vertical bar



A section of the Papyrus of the Lady Ta-Er-Pet, produced about 600 B.C., now in the PRS Collection.

of the scales is Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the necropolis who guides souls through the underworld of the afterlife. He is holding one end of the balance, and below on one pan of the scales is a small vase containing the heart of the deceased. On the right side of the central pillar of the scales is Horus with the mask of the golden hawk of the sun, and on the other pan of the scales is a miniature of Maat, the goddess of justice, represented blindfolded as often shown in equivalent modern representations. On the top of the central pillar is the cynocephalic ape in a posture of complete neutrality.

Frank S. Dobbins in his discussion of the Egyptian rituals of initiation describes a dialogue between the deceased candidate and the personification of the Divine Light. Dobbins tells us: "This dialogue presents some most remarkable resemblances to the dialogue prefixed to the books given by the Alexandrian Greeks as translations of the ancient religious writings of Egypt, between Thoth and the Light, in which the latter explains to Thoth the most sublime mysteries of nature. This portion is certainly one of the best and grandest of the Ritual, and may almost be classed with the invocations to the sun at the close of the first part."*

Between the years 1750 and 1800 there was a strong revival of interest in the esoteric religions of Egypt. The Rosetta Stone opened the way for the study of Egyptian religion and philosophy. A valiant effort was made to establish a direct descent of ancient rites and ceremonies to enrich the symbolism of craft Masonry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among the mysterious works which seemed to appear from nowhere were the *Crata Repoa*, *The Rites of Memphis*, Cagliostro's *Egyptian Freemasonry*, and the *Book of Sethos*, which contained an initiation ritual supposedly of great antiquity.

* Frank S. Dobbins, *Error's Chains: How Forged and Broken*, New York, 1883, p. 107.

The Life of Sethos

The Masonic novel entitled *The Life of Sethos* was published in French by the Abbé Jean Terrasson (Paris, 1731). Many take it for granted that Terrasson was the actual author, but this is by no means certain. The following year the work appeared in English as *The Life of Sethos. Taken from Private Memoirs of the Ancient Egyptians. Translated from a Greek Manuscript into French. And now faithfully done into English from the Paris Edition: By Mr. Lediard*. Incidentally, the book is listed in the catalog of the Bibliothèque Nationale but without author, date, or place of original issue. *The Life of Sethos* was translated into German by Matthias Claudius in 1777.

In his preface to the English translation Mr. Lediard writes that the Greek manuscript was discovered in the library of a foreign nation which was extremely jealous of this sort of treasure. Those who gave the translator access to the original work and permitted its publication were insistent that the name of the library wherein the original was deposited should nowhere be named nor any clue be given which might make it possible to trace the volume. Mr. Lediard, from a careful study of the book, was of the opinion that the author was a Greek who lived in Alexandria during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

It is assumed that *The Life of Sethos* is a fictional work concerned with the career of an Egyptian prince who lived about one hundred years before the Trojan War. The book contains a number of interesting details dealing with the history, religion, and philosophy of the province of Memphis, and in the course of the narration the translator has introduced confirmatory notes from the writings of ancient scholars. The section most often referred to is contained in Book III and describes an initiation ritual in subterranean passageways under or adjacent to the great pyramids, now in the vicinity of the town of Giza. It is obviously the source

of the libretto of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, generally referred to as his Masonic opera.

In his description of the secret rites of the Egyptians Charles William Heckethorn* follows very closely the description by Alexander Lenoir in *La Franche-Maçonnerie*, Paris, 1814. The candidate was subjected to a series of dangerous ordeals, which extended over nine days. Most of the time he was in dark subterranean chambers. If he failed, he had to remain for the rest of his life without leaving the temple; but, if success crowned his efforts, he was accepted as one reborn. In a brilliantly illumined and spacious apartment, accompanied by a priestly assemblage, he received the insignia of his newly gained estate and went forth to the fulfillment of the ministry to which he had been ordained.

Iamblichus declared that those receiving the highest mystical teachings were considered to have died away from all human concerns and had been absorbed into the eternal nature of Divine Being.

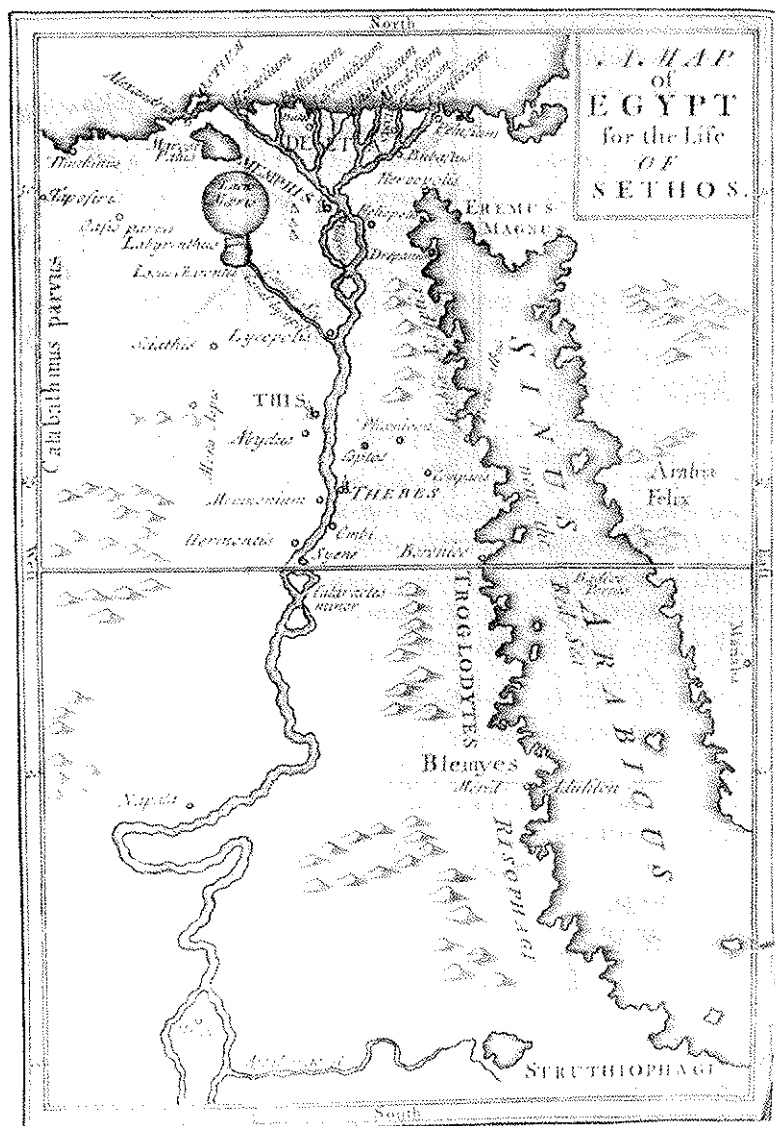
Three hypotheses have been advanced to explain the origin of *The Life of Sethos*. The first and most simple assumes that the author was indeed an Alexandrian scholar, who, following the example of Homer and Virgil, produced an elaborate fiction based either upon an earlier legend or invented for the occasion. The second, and less likely theory, is that the original manuscript was preserved in one of the great Alexandrian libraries and was copied by an unnamed scribe for some scholarly patrician. In one way or another it survived the destruction of the Alexandrian collection and by devious courses descended to the early eighteenth century. The third solution to the riddle is that *The Life of Sethos* was a modern work, probably from the pen of Abbé Terrasson at the time when a number of other curious Masonic publications made their appearances. Most researchers have given slight atten-

* Charles William Heckethorn, *The Secret Societies of All Ages and Countries*, Vol. I, London, 1897, pp. 47f.

tion to France as a source of esoteric speculation. Actually, many important works appeared there relating to Rosicrucianism, alchemy, Freemasonry, and the Order of the Illuminati. *The Life of Sethos* may be considered a significant example of a marked trend to backdate esoteric writings. This may have been partly for protection at a time when such speculations could lead to public or private disaster. It could also have provided a historical descent for ideas which seemed to need this kind of support. Some authors may have justified this practice on the grounds that their sources of inspiration originated in antiquity and that classical wisdom deserved the credit for truths long concealed or neglected.

If by chance the book of Sethos actually originated in Alexandria, it can claim the distinction of being one of the earliest examples of romantic fiction. As might be expected of an initiated hero, the character of Sethos was above reproach and at the end of the novel he sacrifices his personal feelings for the good of the State. In the course of the book he travels widely into distant places, proving his bravery in numerous adventures during both war and peace.

The first English edition of *The Life of Sethos* is in two volumes, each of which has an engraved map inserted at the beginning of the text. The first of these maps deals directly with Egypt and the second with the regions through which Prince Sethos traveled in his adventurous career. The map in Volume I. is reproduced herewith. It will be noted that the city of Alexandria is included on this map, which would indicate that it represents the area not earlier than the fourth century B.C. This is in conflict with the statement that Sethos actually lived a thousand years earlier. It will also be noticed that Memphis lies directly south of the delta of the Nile, and the name *Memphis* is accompanied by three small triangles to represent the great pyramids. It would appear that these maps conform closely with the findings of the seventeenth century Egyptologists. The description of the interior of the Great Pyramid would indicate that the story must have



MAP OF EGYPT. From the first English edition of the *Life of Sethos*, London, 1732.

originated after the Caliph al Mamun forced his way into the pyramid in 820 A.D. Prior to that time, the entrance had been completely sealed and so covered with facing stones that it was entirely invisible. The Alexandrians established a precedent for dating their writings according to convenience. This procedure has been followed in recent times, and many of the alchemical, Rosicrucian, and emblematic books were not produced in the year given on the title page. The Masonic Rite of Memphis is certainly based upon early records and ingenious reconstructions of the Sacred Mysteries of antiquity.

The Nurture of Religious Wisdom in Egypt

It is not astonishing that Egypt was selected as the cradle for a new world religion. Here the best and noblest of earlier sacred teachings were readily available. Tolerance was already practiced to strengthen a new idealism. Here in Alexander's beautiful city of marble and granite decorated with flowers gathered from all parts of the world it appeared that a new world order was in the making.

The great city of the Macedonian conqueror has vanished, but it is well-remembered in the accounts of its prominent citizens. In the present outline something of the wisdom of old religions will mingle with the urgent needs of today. In the emergencies of today we recognize with deep respect the earnest struggle of thoughtful persons for the protection of those sacred truths which survived ignorance and bigotry, which have forever in the past been slayers of the real.

The Therapeutae

The Therapeutae must be included among the mysterious sects which arose in Alexandria. Most skeptical scholars have had a tendency to deny the actual existence of this strange group of metaphysical physicians. Actually, there is nothing remarkable about a group of mystics retiring into the wilder-

ness to live according to their religious convictions. By the very nature of their austerities it is evident that such a cult or society could not long endure. Obligated to celibacy and without any practical means of maintaining themselves, they met the fate of similar organizations in different parts of the world. The group founded in Pennsylvania by Magister Johanne Kelpius came to a similar end with the passing of the original members. There is also the possibility that contact with Asia brought to Alexandria accounts of many orders of strict observance like the gymnosophists of India, which Apollonius of Tyana is said to have visited.

Although it was a common practice to consider the Therapeutae as Alexandrian Essenes, there is little real evidence to support such an association of ideas. The Therapeutae were beyond doubt an offshoot of pre-Christian Hellenistic Judaism, but in the philosophic atmosphere of North Africa the sect took on an appearance reminiscent of Neoplatonism or early Egyptian Gnosticism. Like these groups, it was too scholarly to attain lasting popularity and vanished under the impact of African Christianity.

Of the Therapeutae Albert Pike, the great Masonic scholar, writes: "The Therapeuts resided in Egypt, in the neighborhood of Alexandria, and the Essenes in Palestine in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. But there was nevertheless a striking coincidence in their ideas, readily explained by attributing it to a foreign influence. The Jews of Egypt, under the influence of the School of Alexandria, endeavored in general to make their doctrines harmonize with the traditions of Greece; and thence came, in the doctrines of the Therapeuts, as stated by Philo, the many analogies between the Pythagorean and Orphic ideas, on one side, and those of Judaism on the other"*

* Albert Pike, *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

P. M. Fraser in his study on Alexandria in the Ptolemaic period says, "The exact location of the colony is not known, but it is clear from Philo's description that it lay between the lake and the sea, i.e. on the Taenia."*

The only contemporary account that we possess of the sect of the Therapeutae, those hermit sages who dwelt beside Lake Mareotis, is to be found in the tract of Philo Judaeus, *On the Contemplative Life, or, On the Virtues of Suppliants*. It is believed that this book was written as a polemic against Chairemon, the teacher of Nero and one-time librarian of the Alexandrian Library. Chairemon prepared a description of the Egyptian priests which is preserved in Porphyry's *On Abstinence*†, and Philo, opposed to all of the mystery rites of the pagans, attempted to discomfit the old librarian, who was a follower of the Stoics.

Philo evidently regarded the Therapeutae with genuine affection and described their community at Lake Mareotis as a kind of North African Utopia. Incidentally, most of the imaginary societies described by such writers as More, Andreae, and Campanella were accepted as existing communities by downtrodden European minorities. Also, like several other Utopias, the Therapeutae appealed principally to those seeking solitude and detachment from the pressures of a materialistic social order and, having nursed their ideals for a short time, they gradually faded away. To survive, monastic institutions must be sustained by wealthy or powerful religious systems or through the benevolence of sympathetic governments.

In every cultural system there are intellectuals who by degrees separate themselves from the prevailing customs and opinions. It is inevitable that study and thoughtfulness should lead the individual to regard the conduct of those less enlightened as unreasonable and contrary to a satisfactory code of

* P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Vol. II, Oxford, 1972, p. 255.

† Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, *The Message of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria*, London, 1909, p. 85.

ethics. As it is impossible for a small minority to force its convictions upon the majority, a natural conflict results. If conditions permit, the minority group will depart to some suitable place and attempt to live according to its own convictions. In substance, this seems to have been the story of the Therapeutae.

If the fragments attributed to Chairemon can be regarded as reliable, the Egyptian religion of his time included communities of recluses of both sexes. These renounced all worldliness and devoted themselves completely to sacred studies and the service of the temples of the various gods. Having once taken the vows of holy life, these ascetics remained aloof from all gatherings except the religious festivals and gave themselves entirely to mystical contemplation of divine matters. The Therapeutae certainly were inspired, at least to some extent, by the examples of the hermit brotherhoods of the Egyptians, even though their doctrines show traces of Judaistic, Hellenic, and Buddhistic influence.

Philo is of the opinion that the name Therapeutae signifies those who heal the diseases of the soul. Ignorance is the great sickness from which all mortals suffer to some degree, and wisdom is the sovereign remedy. To cultivate true learning is to restore the health of both mind and body. In order to free themselves from all worldly ties, the Therapeutae gave their wealth and possessions to friends or relatives, renounced all personal attachments, and dwelt separately in small houses in remote places. They met only at night in connection with their religious observances.

Although Philo was inclined to agree that the Therapeutae resembled the Essenes, it was obvious to him that there were certain irreconcilable differences. So far as can be learned, the Therapeutae made little or no contribution to the needs of secular society. The Essenes, on the other hand, were dedicated to useful and constructive enterprises. As a group, they were generally respected by the Jewish community and

its Roman overlords. In many ways they also perpetuated the disciplines established by Pythagoras. While they practiced a very pure moral code, the Essenes recognized marriage as a necessary means of perpetuating their sect. They were a very serious and dedicated order, unselfish and tolerant, and ever ready to serve in the education of young people.

Although they lived as solitary sages, the Therapeutae were not excessively given to sorrowful or painful practices. They enjoyed simple luxuries, did not despise comforts, and cultivated laughter and optimism. To them, wisdom was not a burden but a privilege, and happiness was the badge of the wise man. Both men and women of pure life were admitted to the order. The sect did not venerate age but chose their leaders for the maturity of their minds, regardless of their physical years. There is no mention of classes or degrees of advancement within the order, but such distinction must have existed. Nothing is known of their initiatory rites except that they composed hymns and psalms and had responsive choruses. At their banquets each member was expected to sing either an original sacred composition or a traditional religious song.

Once every seven weeks the Therapeutae assembled for their most solemn festival. All wore white robes and gathered for a philosophical feast. They reclined on crude couches, not scorning cushions, if such were available, the men on one side of the room and the women on the other. The senior members were served by the novices, for it was against the rules of the cult to have professional servants. They were all vegetarians, and their food was of the simplest kind seasoned with herbs. They drank only water. Before the meal there was a religious lecture, which was terminated by the members indicating that they had heard enough. When all had finished eating, there was what Philo calls "a sacred singing dance." The male and female choruses, each directed by a leader, joined in imitation of the songs of Moses and Miriam at the crossing of the Red Sea. They understood the de-

liverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt as signifying the release of the human soul from the captivity of the bodily passions. It is quite possible that this symbolism was the basis of their initiation ritual.

Those doubting the actual existence of the Therapeutae insist that if such a philosophical community existed it would have been mentioned by other historians of the period. It would seem that this is a weak position when we realize the periodic destruction of the great Alexandrian libraries. Most modern Egyptologists, including E. A. Wallis Budge, have taken it for granted that Egypt under the Ptolemies offered nothing of importance to advanced formal Egyptology. The present trend by students of esotericism is to accept Philo's account as substantially true, though perhaps somewhat colored. Even in Philo's day the cult seems to have been considered ancient, and some historians think it to be the same as the school of Egyptian scientist-philosophers mentioned by Strabo and which Plato and Eudoxus are said to have consulted.

There is a vague report that the Therapeutae had sacred writings of their own, but no hint of the contents has been preserved. Philo's familiarity with the sect has raised the question as to whether he might have been initiated into the order. It is well-established that Philo was a profound student of Greek and Judaistic esoteric lore, but he seems to have had reservations about every group. He may have been an Essene or even an Orphic. There are several possibilities but no certainties.

The *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* in the article on the Therapeutae by James Moffatt finds no difficulty in accepting Philo Judaeus's references to the Therapeutae. The same article contains the following quotation:

"The origin of the Therapeutae lay in Jewish Hellenism, as that was specially affected by its Egyptian environment. Nothing more is required to explain the ascetic and mystical

habits of these recluses beside Lake Mareotis. But it would be uncritical to dismiss this problem without some reference to the question which has repeatedly been asked: Do not several traits of the Therapeutic discipline recall Buddhistic monasticism—e.g., the combination of a coenobitic life with study and devout contemplation, and the vegetarianism? The latter is one of the marks which sharply distinguish the Therapeutae from the Essenes, who were not vegetarians. But there is at least one feature of the Essenes themselves which is analogous to Indian practices, and it is open to conjecture whether some Buddhistic influence had not penetrated Egyptian Hellenism by the 1st century, B.C., as it is sometimes held to have penetrated the later Gnosticism.”*

It has also been suggested that the Therapeutae were gradually absorbed into the Early Christian monastic orders, for these seem to have originated in North Africa. Eusebius, the Early Church historian, stated emphatically that the Therapeutae were Christian monks converted by St. Mark. His statement may have been well-intended, but the consequences were unfortunate. The Early Church was opposed to any evidence indicating a pre-Christian monastic order. In the controversy which followed Buddhism and other Eastern beliefs became involved until finally it seemed that a complete denial of the existence of the Therapeutae was the solution most convenient to the Church. The matter rested in limbo until the nineteenth century, when proponents of non-Christian, Egyptian monasticism found several stalwart supporters.

If Jesus spent those years which are not recorded in the Gospels among the Egyptians, as the Jewish records might imply, it is quite possible that he could have visited this community of his own people which flourished beside Lake Ma-

* James Hastings, editor, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XII, New York, 1928, p. 318.

reotis; but other groups had similar rituals, so we cannot afford to jump to conclusions.

What little information we do have justifies the inclusion of the Therapeutae among the mystical sects of Eastern origin which originated in the esoteric tradition.

Neoplatonism

Although Athens was recognized as the center of Platonic philosophy, it remained for Alexandria to restore the glory of the original Academy. Proclus, though an Athenian, was educated in Alexandria and is remembered today as the author of *On the Theology of Plato*. In this work Proclus reveals Platonic mysticism, which clearly sets forth that the essential purpose of philosophy is to create a firm foundation under faith. The School of Athens was a center of Neoplatonism until the edict of Justinian in 529 closed forever the pagan schools of higher learning.

Among the contemplative sects that developed in Alexandria, Neopythagoreanism should also be mentioned. The principal exponent was Apollonius of Tyana. Having assumed the basic disciplines taught by Pythagoras, which included refrainment from any type of speech for five years, Apollonius came to believe himself to be a reincarnation of Pythagoras, who died about 497 B.C. Iamblichus, a pupil of Porphyry, considered himself to be a Pythagorean sage. Due to the legendry which came to be perpetuated and which included a number of miraculous circumstances, Neopythagoreanism developed magical coloring and both Iamblichus and Porphyry were credited with magical powers. At the age of sixteen Apollonius took the Pythagorean vows. It is reported that Apollonius disappeared in a flash of light in the presence of the Emperor Domitian.*

* G.R.S. Mead, *Apollonius of Tyana, The Philosopher-Reformer of the First Century A.D.*, London and Benares, 1901, p. 118.



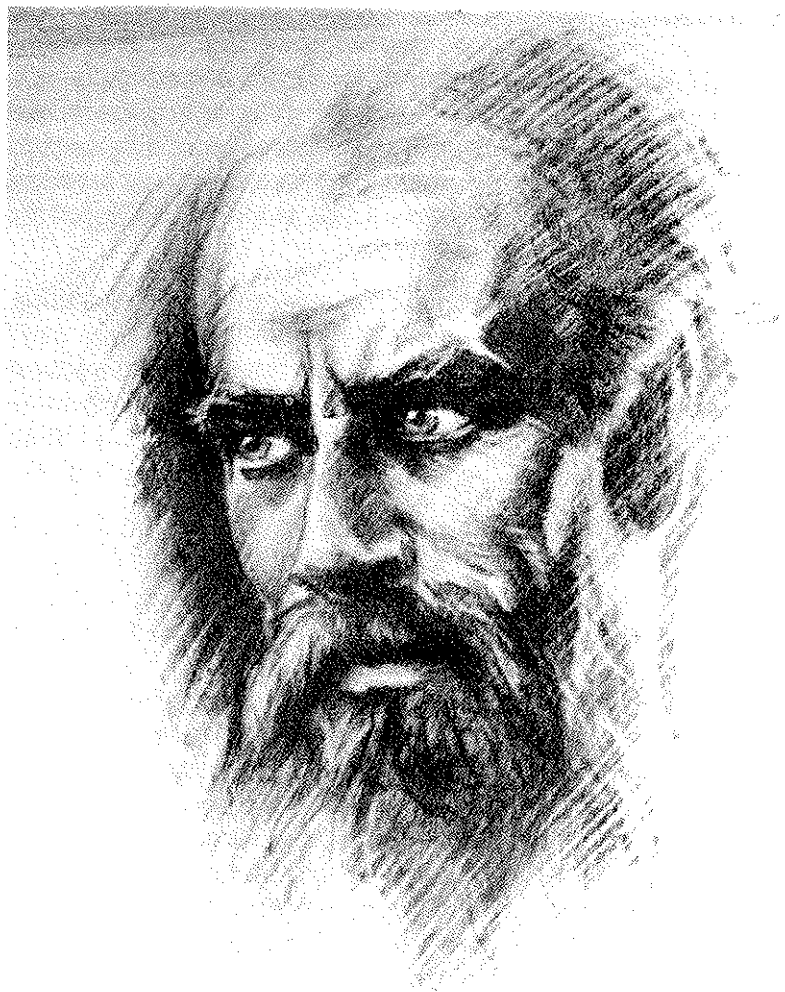
PYTHAGORAS. From *De Divinatione et Magicis Praestigiis* by J. J. Boissard, Oppenheim, 1615.

With the passing of time Neopythagoreanism was at least partly absorbed in the teachings of the Neoplatonic School. Nearly all the systems of Greek and Egyptian metaphysics recognized Pythagoras as the greatest scholar of the pre-Christian world. Even Plato paid an exorbitant sum for fragments that survived the destruction of the Pythagorean Academy at Crotona. It is also significant that Pythagoras himself was initiated into the Mysteries of Egypt and was especially favored by the priests of Memphis. After long waiting he was received into the sanctuaries of Heliopolis and remained in Egypt for approximately twenty-five years.

Referring to the Neoplatonic restoration of learning, Plotinus wrote in his *Enneads*, "This doctrine is not new; it was professed from the most ancient times, though without being developed explicitly; we wish only to be interpreters of the ancient sages, and to show by the evidence of Plato himself that they had the same opinions as ourselves."*

The exact dates of Plotinus' life are uncertain, but it is believed that he was born in 205 A.D. and lived to about his sixty-fifth year. He was born in Lycopolis in Egypt and at the age of twenty-seven went to Alexandria, where he attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas. Plotinus accompanied the Emperor Gordian in a military expedition against the Persians. During this campaign Gordian was murdered and, after many tribulations, Plotinus reached Rome, where he remained for the rest of his life. He supported himself, as Porphyry states, by tutoring pupils, both men and women. He became the personal friend of the Emperor Gallienus and his wife, Salonia, and suggested to the emperor that he should build on a deserted site in Campania a city according to the doctrines of Plato where the wise could live in peace and set a noble example to the rest of humanity. While the emperor favored the proposal, political pressures forced the abandon-

* William Ralph Inge, "Neo-Platonism," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IX, New York, 1928, p. 309.



PLOTINUS (205-270 A.D.). From a study by K. Alexander executed for *Journey in Truth* by Manly P. Hall.

ment of the plan. In spite of this unhappy venture, Plotinus continued to act as guardian and trustee to important young people and arbitrated numerous family feuds.

In *On the Descent of the Soul* Plotinus writes, "Often when by an intellectual energy I am roused from body, and converted to myself, and being separated from externals, I then perceive an admirable beauty, and am then vehemently confident that I am of a more excellent condition than that of a life merely animal and terrene."*

Plotinus died at an advanced age after a long illness acquired in a diphtheria epidemic. He was a vegetarian and permitted himself no luxuries. The physician Eustochius recorded the last words of Plotinus, "I have expected you, and now I endeavour that my divine part may return to that divine nature which flourishes throughout the universe."† *The Enneads* of Plotinus were edited by Porphyry and consisted principally of lecture notes. Plotinus was resolved to conquer the three hindrances to divine philosophy—materialism, skepticism, and dualism.

In 1895 G.R.S. Mead, an excellent scholar, prepared a special preface on Plotinus to be published by the Bohn Library for a new edition of Thomas Taylor's *Select Works of Plotinus*. In the preface Mead quotes Etienne Vacherot: "Alexandria, at the time when Ammonius Saccas began to teach, had become the sanctuary of universal wisdom. The asylum of the old tradition of the East, it was at the same time the birthplace of new doctrines. It was at Alexandria that the school of Philo represented Hellenizing Judaism; it was at Alexandria that the Gnosis synthesized all the traditions of Syria, of Chaldea, of Persia, blended with Judaism, with Christianity, and even with Greek philosophy. The

* Thomas Taylor, translator, *Five Books of Plotinus—On the Descent of the Soul*, London, 1794, p. 249.

† Thomas Taylor, translator, *Select Works of Plotinus*, London, 1817, p. xv.

School of the Alexandrian fathers raised Christian thought to a height which it was not to surpass, and which was to strike fear into the heart of the orthodoxy of the Councils. A strong life flowed in the veins of all these schools and vitalized all their discussions. Philo, Basilides, Valentinus, Saint Clement and Origen, opened up for the mind new vistas of thought, and unveiled for it mysteries which the genius of a Plato or an Aristotle had never fathomed.”*

The place of Plotinus in the esoteric tradition is established principally by the descent of the Platonic philosophy. From Olympiodorus it has been firmly established that Plato was an initiate of the Greek Mysteries. It is also noted that translators have intentionally confused the wording of the statements to obscure the original meaning. This may have been partly due to the fact that the Early Church had a definite fondness for the Platonic writings. One writer has noted that Socrates left no writings and Ammonius Saccas, who was the mentor of Plotinus, taught only by words and left no literary works. Of course, there is also the possibility that many writings by distinguished scholars were lost in the destruction of Alexandrian culture. Plato is not remembered as a mystic, although it is known that he emphasized the importance of faith in the closing years of his life.

The entire Neoplatonic school favored the descent and preservation of truth through mystical experiences and the intuitional grasp of essential wisdom. Mead has pointed out that the Neoplatonists seem to have been inspired in their contemplations through contact with devotional sects which had arisen in India. Professor F. Max Muller shares this conviction. Ammonius Saccas seems to be a more or less phantom figure. Virtually nothing is known about him, except that he was a man of very humble origin, possibly a natural mystic.

* Thomas Taylor, translator, *Select Works of Plotinus* (Preface by G.R.S. Mead), London and New York, 1895, p. x.

"In not committing his doctrines to writing, we find Ammonius Saccas treading strictly in the footsteps of Socrates, Pythagoras, and his master—Jesus."*

There was certainly an assembly of transcendentalists in Alexandria. Strange cults dominated the atmosphere for over five hundred years to fade away with the rise of the Early Church. Nearly all of the mystical organizations functioning today have been inspired by the teachings of the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, alchemists, and cabalists, who labored together more or less compatibly for the preservation and extension of metaphysical traditions which had descended from the remote past.

The Neoplatonists in particular rejected the academic scholarship of the Greek sages and depended entirely upon the release of the mind and its dependency on formal schooling. The mystics experienced a strange and wonderful peace which liberated them from opinionism, which was little better than a falling sickness of the mind, as Heraclitus put it. There was less and less dependence upon science, philosophy, and the complicated sacerdotalism of the state religious institutions. There was a dynamic awareness of a silence, and this stillness was God. Deity did not answer all the questions of the questing mind nor explain the wonders of the universe. The gentle communion with the innermost caused all questions to go to sleep in eternal acceptance of the infinite plan. The limitless potentials locked within every creature provided that heavenly food and those who ate thereof never hungered again.

In a sense, therefore, Plotinus was a defender of the eternal faith. In mysticism love is the universal medicine, the supreme secret of alchemy, because it transmutes and transforms all the material substances of the mortal realm. The

* Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis, An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis*, Vol. II, London, 1836, p. 448.

presence of God was revealed through faith and this, when perfected, was perfect love. There was no longer fear, doubt, nor uncertainty. Plotinus wrote several works in an effort to convey a concept of the infinite purpose—magnificent enough to win the admiration of scholarship and simple enough for child souls to embrace. In the mortal world human beings learn much about the realm from which they must all depart. In the peaceful heart and with perfect faith in the benevolence of infinite life the Neoplatonists sought communion with an insight that brought with it the peace of God.

It seemed to the Neoplatonists that if each creature could make the mystical journey from loneliness to that which is forever alone all religious conflict would end. Each must make the journey inward in his own way and in his own time, but for all the paths would be the same. In the mortal world they would learn to work together and discover the bountiful garden over which they were stewards, and all the conflicts as to who was right or wrong would fade away when the light of love united all differences.

Although the term Neoplatonism is generally associated with the early Alexandrian school, the teachings have endured through the centuries and have been revived and expanded many times since the passing of Plotinus. Under the general heading of mysticism it made numerous contributions to Early Christianity and is responsible, at least to some measure, for many of the monastic disciplines attributed to the ante-Nicaean and post-Nicaean fathers of the Church. Its descent can be traced from Dante to Teilhard de Chardin and from Eckhart to Boehme. The search for the soul of things has brought consolation to mystics of both East and West, and it is still a question as to what degree the Vedantic teachings of India mingled with the contemplative systems of North Africa.

Some of the outstanding principles of Neoplatonism have endured under the broad concept of idealism. Proclus, Iambli-



FLAVIUS CLAUDIUS JULIANUS (circa A.D. 331-363). From Thomas Taylor's translation of *Arguments of the Emperor Julian*, London, 1809.

chus, Plotinus, Porphyry, and the Emperor Julian had made their own private peace with God. Strengthened by conviction and illuminated by intuition, they maintained steadfastness of spirit in times of stress and disaster. The Neoplatonist Porphyry relates in his life that in his sixty-eighth year he was united by an ineffable energy with the Divinity. Porphyry states with respect to Plotinus' experience of the Divine that, ". . . four times, during the period I passed with him, he achieved . . . the ineffable Act."* Beauty, according to Plo-

* Stephen Mackenna, translator, *Plotinus: The Ethical Treatises, Being the Treatises of the First Ennead With Porphyry's Life of Plotinus*, Vol. I, Boston, Mass., n.d., p. 24.

tinus, is most usually discovered in objects of sight, but it can also be received through the ears. The question then arises as to whether the beauty of bodies is of one kind and the beauty of souls is another.

The tendency in Neoplatonism is to recognize only one aspect of beauty. This felicity of the sight is the same everywhere and in everything. In every case beauty is truth or reality and may be described as the natural and proper aspect of all external things which can be cognized by the sensory perceptions. Invisible beauty is the same as that which can be seen, for it arises from the perfection of all natures and substances. Love, truth, and wisdom are manifestations of beauty to the degree that they express the perfection of themselves. All perfect things are established in the sphere of divine reality, and their beauty diminishes as they depart from their source and descend into union with physical compounds. The love of beauty is therefore properly a religious experience, and the unity of human consciousness with its ineffable source is the consummation of life's journey.

According to Taylor, Porphyry was born at Tyre in the twelfth year of the reign of the Emperor Severus, 233 A.D. He studied first with Longinus and in the thirtieth year of his life became a disciple of Plotinus. After meeting Plotinus, Porphyry disassociated himself with all of his previous teachers. Much against his desires, Porphyry was not with Plotinus at the time of his death.

Iamblichus was one of the disciples of Porphyry and expanded his insight through the study of Pythagorean, Egyptian, and Chaldean disciplines. One of the most important writings of Porphyry was his work *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, written for such advanced persons as hoped to attain enlightenment in the present embodiment.

Iamblichus (born c. 250, died c. 330) was the founder of the Syrian branch of Neoplatonism. He was accredited with having borrowed heavily from pagan sources. His distinc-



IAMBLICHUS. From *De Divinatione et Magicis Praestigiis* by J. J. Boissard, Oppenheim, 1615. Referring to Iamblichus, Thomas Taylor writes that the sage was not surpassed in theological science and equaled by few. "Hence he was denominated by all succeeding Platonists 'the divine' in the same manner as Plato, 'to whom,' as the acute Emperor Julian remarks, 'he was posterior in time only, but not in genius.'"

tion between the highest spiritual self and a mortal self contributed considerably to the concepts of psychology as distinguished from mysticism. While Iamblichus must be included among the foremost members of the Neoplatonic association, he complicated the simple idealism of Plotinus.

Albert Pike in *Magnum Opus* notes that Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis*, VIII, 4 writes: "The Egyptians are far from ascribing all things to physical causes; i.e., Life and intellect they distinguish from physical being, both in man and in the universe . . . The wisdom recorded in the canonical rolls of Hermes quickly attained in this transcendental lore, all that human curiosity can ever discover."*

Neoplatonism sought to deliver the individual from the tyranny of his own intellect. This approach is clearly set forth in *The Mystical Divinity* of Dionysius the Areopagite and descends to us through St. John of the Cross, who wrote a poem on the super-essential radiance of the divine darkness. One verse will indicate the degree of mystical insight attained by St. John of the Cross—

"I knew not where I entered,
For, when I stood within,
Not knowing where I was,
I heard great things.
What I heard I will not tell:
I was there as one who knew not,
All science transcending."

It was inevitable that the dissensions which increased in number and violence would ultimately destroy Alexandria. It was captured by Khosrow II. in 619, later sacked again by Amr ibn al-As in 641. The library of the Serapium, which had been destroyed by Theodosius, was partly restored until it contained about three hundred thousand manuscripts; but in 641 the Caliph Omar ordered its final obliteration as

* Albert Pike, *Magnum Opus*, Philadelphia, 1857, Section 28, p. 23.

follows: "If the books contain only what is in the book of God (the Koran), it is enough for us, and these books are useless. If they contain anything contrary to the holy book, they are pernicious. In any case, burn them." Thus passed one of the noblest eras in human history destroyed from within itself by wrangling and discord and finally obliterated by the rise of Moslemism.

Discovery of the Gnostic Library at Nag Hammadi

Sometime in 1946 peasants accidentally discovered an entire library of Gnostic writings in the region of Nag Hammadi at the foot of a steep mountain on the east bank of the Nile. The Arab fellahin who made the discovery found fifty-two Coptic texts on papyrus buried in an ancient earthenware jar. In March, 1946 two French scholars in Cairo were shown two of the codices, which had been left on consignment in an antique shop near Shepherd's Hotel. Most of the collection was finally assembled in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. James M. Robinson says there were fifty-three tractates from which he subtracted six duplicates, leaving forty-seven. Six of the texts can be consulted elsewhere, so that forty-one tractates exist only in the *Nag Hammadi Codices*. The Nag Hammadi Library originally contained about twelve hundred and fifty-seven pages, of which eleven hundred and fifty-three actually survived, but ten of the surviving texts are in bad condition.*

Most scholars have thought of Gnosticism simply as a Christian heresy of the second and third centuries. The Church succeeded so well in suppressing all the Gnostic literature that the only material which survived for scholars

* James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Codices: A General Introduction to the Nature and Significance of the Coptic Gnostic Codices From Nag Hammadi*, Claremont, California, 1974, p. 5.

was an occasional quotation by some Early Christian heresy hunter.

The *Nag Hammadi Codices* modified this opinion. Many of the tractates in this Gnostic library reveal considerable Christian influence, such as *The Gospel of Thomas* which contains one hundred and fourteen sayings attributed to Jesus. Another tractate is entitled *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ* and records a dialogue between the resurrected Christ and his disciples. Still another tractate of Jewish interest is entitled *The Apocalypse of Adam* and *The Paraphrase of Shem*. There is also special emphasis upon *The Paraphrase of Shem*, which sets forth a mythological interpretation of *The Book of Genesis*. Although there is no actual biography of Jesus the Christ in the *Nag Hammadi Codices*, four of these are entitled "Gospels," and references to him are mentioned in many of the codices. *The Apocryphon of James* reports that Jesus taught in riddles so recondite that he had to come back after his resurrection to reveal the true meaning to his disciples.

Although the work entitled *Pistis Sophia* has been familiar since the publication of the three books of *Pistis Sophia* in 1851, among the Nag Hammadi scrolls there is a rather long apocalyptic work without title which seems to have served as a source for sections of the *Pistis Sophia*. Whether or not *The Apocalypse of Zoroaster* in the Nag Hammadi collection is part of the *Apocalypse of Zostrianus* is still a matter of discussion. The composition of this work antedates 240 A.D.

Completely unexpected and most surprising is the existence of five Hermetic works in the collection of the Gnostic Library. There is the *Authentic Discourse of Hermes to Thoth*, *Meditation on the Supreme Power*, a prophecy filled with Biblical allusions, and an Hermetic epistle without title. This collection of Hermetic works is not simply a result of accidental inclusion, for in this codex is a strictly Gnostic work, *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*.

The significance of the discovery is that "almost overnight our original materials, consisting of three codices containing about seven different writings, have been augmented by the existence of thirteen codices containing over forty-four different writings."* The discovery has made possible a broad reconstruction of the Gnostic system in the terms of the Gnostics themselves, rather than the prejudiced reports of the Early Christian writers.

C. R. Conder observed that, "The old Akkadian demonology, the Persian dualism, the Greek and Babylonian philosophies, the rites of Eleusis and the mysteries of Cybele, the Phoenician cosmogonies and the Egyptian worship of Isis, Harpocrates and Serapis, are all recognizable as having contributed to Gnosticism, and there is also little room for doubt that the legends of the northern Buddhists and the philosophy of the Gitas, the Upanishads, and other Brahmin writings, were known to the Gnostic doctors of Alexandria and Antioch."†

The first neo-historical character of ancient ages was known as the great master of the esoteric doctrines, Hermes, the Thrice Greatest, by whom the sacred mysteries and their occult teachings were established in Egypt. Pythagoras was the greatest of all the mystical scientists. The Therapeutae in Egypt and the Essenes in Palestine were healers. The Essenes were established in several large communities, including Carmel, Nazareth, Samaria, and Engeddi on the Jordan. The Egyptian Therapeutae were probably in communication with the Persian Magi and other Oriental mystics.

Gnosticism

The most extraordinary of the Alexandrian schools was that of Gnosticism. It arose in the second century A.D., was

* Victor Roland Gold, "The Gnostic Library of Chenoboskion," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. XV, No. 4 (December, 1952), p. 87.

† C. R. Conder, "The Gnostics," *The Asiatic Quarterly Review*, Vol. V, 1888, p. 84f.

supported by a number of brilliant devotees, but was overwhelmed by the conflicts with which it was surrounded. Rappoport considers the word *Gnosticism* to be synonymous with *Science*. He writes, "It was the proud name claimed for their opinions by those who studied Eastern philosophy of the Magi; and Egypt seems to have been as much its native soil as India."* If Gnosticism is Science, then it must be understood that the scientific realm involves all the mysteries of the seen and unseen world, not merely the extension of physical knowledge.

Dr. R. H. Swift of the Archaeological Section of the Southern California Academy of Sciences published a brief article in the *Bulletin* of the Academy. In this paper he makes a most significant observation concerning the origin and development of Gnosticism. "The whole complicated structure was due to fusing under one name, portions of at least four ancient and long established faiths made possible by the peculiar receptiveness of the mind of the period. Alexander's conquests in the East brought the Neoplatonic Greek into direct contact with the ancient mystic religions of Asia. Notable among those was Talmud Judaism, which was based upon teachings of the *Zendavesta* learned while in captivity, along with the teachings of the Kabala and Book of Enoch. These differ from the Mosaic fundamental concept of the unity of the Godhead, supplanting it with the Persian Angelic Monarchy as direct rulers of all material creation.

"From the Far East, sent by the zealous Indian king Asoka, came missionaries with a Brahminical type of Buddhism. Thus we find groups in Asia Minor and Syria blending these seemingly incompatible systems into one unit, and as the center of the philosophical world at this time was Alexandria, we find them here well organized in the second century B.C.

* S. Rappoport, *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 103.

"Nor was this all, for here in Egypt was revived and added to what already seemed to be an unwieldy concept, the esoteric symbology of the ancient Egyptian priesthood, together with the new Christian faith in the First Century, or more exactly, those portions of early Christianity which satisfied their craving for occult mysteries."*

Dr. Swift also devotes some thought to the descent of Alexandrian transcendentalism, especially its survival in Europe among the Christian Goths, Saracens, and Albigenses. He also mentions its revival in the fifteenth century in the speculations of magic, astrology, and alchemy, as well as the esoteric practices of the Druses and ascetics dwelling on the slopes of Mount Lebanon. It seems that compounds of beliefs are now surfacing again in the modern world.

Ptolemy, the Egyptian geographer and astronomer, writing in the second century A.D., described a route linking Eastern China with the Roman Empire, which had existed for some time and was probably used by Alexander the Great in his campaigns to the Far East. This highway was known to the Chinese as "the Silk Road." Sir Aurel Stein, in his important text *Innermost Asia*, Oxford, 1928, described his efforts to follow part of the old silk route and admitted that, while there were insurmountable obstacles to the restoration of this ancient highway, it did extend from Peking to the Eastern and Northeastern Mediterranean. It extended over six thousand miles and at a very early date resulted in the use of silk in the robes of wealthy Romans.

There is no reason to doubt, therefore, that both land and sea routes connected Asia with Europe. Chinese cargo safely reached Rome, where the merchandise sold for its weight in pure gold. The caravans also brought Eastern wisdom to Alexandria and Ephesus, and the merchants returning to their own lands introduced many Western ideas and cultural trends

* R. H. Swift, "Gnostic Intagli," *Bulletin of the Southern California Academy of Sciences*, Los Angeles, Vol. 30, Part 3, September-December, 1931, p. 94.

to the most remote parts of the East. This generally overlooked dissemination of knowledge proves beyond reasonable doubt that there was a strong religious and cultural exchange about the beginning of the Christian era. Godfrey Higgins observes: "The more I reflect upon Gnosticism, the more I am convinced that in it we have, in fact, the real science of antiquity—for a long time almost lost—but, I trust, by means of our oriental discoveries, yet to be recovered."*

Esoteric Gnosticism and mystical Christianity formed an uneasy partnership, each claiming to be a custodian of spiritual truth. According to General Forlong in his *Rivers of Life* (Vol. I., London, 1883, p. 512), various sects of Gnostics reached France in the second century and met strenuous opposition from Irenaeus, but the Christian Bishop Priscillian of Avila in Spain greatly extended the influence of Gnostic teachings in the fourth century A.D. Justinian persecuted the sects; but fragments of Gnosticism survive to this day among the Druses of Lebanon, and this conflict still persists to the present time. Esoteric studies in general are rejected by both science and theology. While religious persecution is no longer fashionable, the obscure arts, which were parts of the original Gnostic tradition, are consistently downgraded.

The Christian community was at a serious disadvantage because it had no adequate doctrine regarding theogenesis and cosmogenesis. The Greeks had philosophical concepts of the universe to support their rational, ethical, and moral convictions. The Jewish people had the opening chapters of Genesis and numerous commentaries thereon by learned teachers. By uniting the Old and New Testaments, the Early Church strengthened its position but still left the universe unexplained.

Gnosticism may have originated in the Syrian teachings of Simon Magus. G.R.S. Mead discusses this point at some

* Godfrey Higgins, *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 131.

length in his book *Simon Magus*. It was in Alexandria, however, that the sect attained its fruition. The first leader was Basilides, who may have been in contact with East Indian scholars. He was sympathetic to the Christian community and wrote commentaries and interpretations on the early Jewish and Christian sacred writings. He was succeeded by the most famous of all Gnostic teachers, Valentinus, who claimed that he had received a vision of the Supreme Power while still an infant.

Until recent years it was difficult to evaluate the deeper aspects of Gnostic learning. The principal available authority was Clement of Alexandria, who devotes considerable space to the Gnostics in his work against heresies. Some have suspected, because of his extensive knowledge of the subject, that Clement may have studied Gnosticism before his conversion to Christianity. The recent discovery of the collection of Gnostic documents at Nag Hammadi in Egypt has markedly altered learned opinion on Gnosticism in general. Most of these manuscripts have now been translated and are available in print. The process of evaluation of the manuscripts will continue for some time.

Scholars are convinced that both a pagan and a Christian Gnosticism existed and that many of the Patristic Fathers assumed that the two schools were compatible. In some cases incidents and personalities referred to in the canonical writings appear also in the Gnostic codices with considerable elaboration. When Christian doctrines were promulgated in Asia, the Manicheans used Gnosticism to support and explain the Messianic mystery. In the Gnostic discourses Mary of Magdala plays a prominent part and is presented as particularly learned in the cosmic mysteries. She is included among those permitted to attend the instructions given by Jesus to his apostles after his resurrection. Here we again note the similarity between the Gnostic literature and that strange group of neo-scriptural documents which we mentioned earlier and which appeared during the Alexandrian age. It sometimes seems as though

they were revelations resulting from profound internal experiences, and they have immediate value to modern truth seekers.

By the third century A.D. the Gnostics were fading from the Alexandrian scene. Some of the followers of this school became Christian converts, however usually retaining some of their earlier Gnostic convictions. The early Gnostic sacred writings were ruthlessly destroyed whenever they could be found. Those who refused to recant their heresies departed to other regions to continue their contemplations.

About the only relics that have survived are the Gnostic gems usually decorated by intaglio designs of curious symbols and even more curious Greek inscriptions. Incidentally, during the Italian Renaissance many of the Gnostic jewels were copied as part of the program for restoring classical learning. Such Gnostic inscriptions as do exist are of a cabalistic nature and difficult to translate.

From all the groups we have discussed, we gain the distinct impression that in Alexandria mysticism first appeared as a separate aspect of learning. A strong revulsion against materialism was spreading throughout the Mediterranean area. Enlightened thinkers rebelled against the restrictions imposed by institutions either pagan or Christian. The human mind was seeking greater insight into the essential meaning of life and living. When members outgrew the tenets of the sects to which they belonged, discontent often led to open rebellion.

In Alexandria the conflict of beliefs produced numerous constructive results however. Possibly the most important of these was that it impelled the Early Christian Church to codify its own teachings. It opened the way for Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. Neither of these teachers could have made as valuable contributions had they not been aware of the Alexandrian schools. The thinkers of that age realized that humanity could not be united on the levels of their divided allegiance. Division belongs to the outside world. The only

hope for release from the clash of creeds lies within the individual himself. Only when the soul, purified by devotion and discipline, is permitted its full expression can those who are divided by physical estates be restored to unity by that redeeming power which resides in the world soul and manifests in the core of every creature.

The Gnostics claimed a direct descent from the apostles and their disciples. This sect proclaimed itself to be the sole custodian of the inner mysteries of Christianity and to possess those spiritual keys which Jesus communicated only to his most immediate associates. Gnostic Christianity emphasized the philosophic content of the Gospels and interpreted the sayings of Jesus, the parables, miracles, visions, and prophecies of the New Testament according to the doctrines of the Esoteric Schools. Thus pagan beliefs were carried over and incorporated into the fabric of Christian mysticism, reconciling the new system with the older institutions.

The Gnostic sect was short-lived and perished with other nonconformist groups as the rising power of the Church bestowed the temporal authority to enforce orthodoxy upon both the congregation and the community. Although the Gnostics were certainly persecuted, even the details of their trials and troubles are unknown. By the end of the fifth century the Gnostics had ceased to exist as a religious order. Those who survived the pressures which disintegrated the group continued the private practice of their worship and selected disciples to perpetuate the secrets of the cult. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Gnosticism survived to the time of the Crusades and that certain of its teachings continue to exercise a degree of influence.

Gnosticism must be included among the emanationist schools. The Gnostics believed that two principles—spirit and matter—existed in the same place at the same time. In order that creation as a series of creative processes could take place, it was necessary to reconcile the extremes of existence. Ac-

cording to their diagrams, Absolute Spirit emanated from its own nature a series of modified qualities. Qualitatively speaking, universal life, through processes of extension and restriction, manifested on various planes of existence, by which it was said to descend or to proceed from a greater to a lesser state.

Matter, which was the lower extremity of the vibratory gamut, produced a growth from within, which caused it to ascend and expand in the direction of life. The two extremes met and mingled in a middle state, which was impregnated with the power of life and, at the same time, partook of the qualities of matter. As always in pagan systems, the middle distance or plane of moderation was outwardly the abode of man and inwardly the substance from which his soul was differentiated. Thus, man himself, a creature of extremes while unenlightened, was transformed through wisdom into a creature of moderation. There are elements of cabalism, Sabianism, and Egyptian transcendentalism in the structure of the cult. These were skillfully blended to present a conception of the universe which was wonderfully beautiful.

Simon Magus

In the eighth chapter of *The Acts of the Apostles*, verses 9-24, there is reference to a certain man called Simon, who had bewitched the people of Samaria. It states that he was baptized, perhaps by Philip, and that later his sincerity was challenged by Peter. The repentance of Simon is intimated, and after this episode he disappears from the Scriptural writings but not from the legendry and lore of the Early Church. Around this Simon, called *The Magician*, there gradually developed a symbolical system in which he came to represent the very embodiment of those heathen practices which threatened the ministry of the apostles and their followers. Of the historical Simon very little is actually known, for his enemies were his biographers, and they were not impelled to treat his name or memory with much charity.

It is now generally acknowledged that the Simon of the Fathers and, for that matter, the Simon of the later legends, is an almost complete fabrication suspended from the simple reference in *The Acts of the Apostles*. Popular dislike for Simon has gradually subsided as a result of critical scholarship, and it is acknowledged that in all probability he is to be included among the wandering teachers and professors of theurgic arts who were not uncommon at the time and under the prevailing trend of beliefs. Such statements of Simon's philosophy as have been preserved include the following definition of God: "I say there are many gods, but one God of all these gods, incomprehensible and unknown to all . . . a Power of immeasurable and ineffable Light, whose greatness is held to be incomprehensible, a Power which the maker of the world does not know."* This would scarcely suggest that Simon was an evil or corrupt person. From the universal principle there emerges, as from invisible inapprehensible silence, a mysterious triad of that which stood, stands, and will stand. This triad Simon described as the principles of incorruptible form, universal mind, and the great thought. From this thought emerge aeons or powers—seven creating deities or spirits. These ultimately bring forth the lower regions or worlds, which are generated by the great thought and upon which it moves, bringing forth mortal creation. Thus, the aeonology of Simon corresponds to that of the Orphites and is indebted strongly to the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato.

According to Hippolytus, "Simon, on the other hand, alleges that the nature of fire is twofold; and one portion of this twofold (nature) he calls a something secret, and another (a something) manifest. And he asserts that the secret is concealed in the manifest *parts* of the fire, and that the manifest *parts* of the fire have been produced from the secret. And he says that all other parts of the fire, visible and invisible, have been supposed to be in possession of a capacity of

* G.R.S. Mead, *Simon Magus, An Essay*, London, 1892, p. 49f.

perception. The world, therefore, he says, that is begotten, has been produced from the unbegotten fire. And it commenced, he says, to exist thus: The Unbegotten One took six primal roots of the principle of generation from the principle of that fire. For he *maintains* that these roots have been generated in pairs from the fire; and these he denominates Mind and Intelligence, Voice and Name, Ratiocination and Reflection. And he asserts that in the six roots, at the same time, resides the indefinite power, *which* he affirms to be Him that stood, stands and will stand. And when this *one* has been formed into a figure, He will, *according to this heretic*, exist in the six powers substantially and potentially. *And he will be* in magnitude and perfection one and the same with that unbegotten and indefinite power, possessing no attribute in any respect more deficient than that unbegotten, and unalterable and indefinite power. If however, *He who stood, stands and will stand*, continues to exist only potentially in the six powers, and has not assumed any definite figure, He becomes, says Simon, utterly evanescent, and perishes.”*

Marcion

No outline of Gnosticism would be complete without a consideration of Marcion and the Marcionite Churches. Marcion, who lived in the second century A.D., is believed to have been a wealthy shipowner of Sinope who was converted from paganism and became an influential leader in the Early Christian Church. He traveled considerably and reached Rome about 140 A.D., where he met Cerdo, a Gnostic Christian. Marcion was expelled from the Christian Church in 144 A.D. He was an original thinker and attempted to institute what he regarded as essential reforms in Christian theology. Although he contributed generously to the funds of the Church, because his ideas were rejected with much firmness

* Reverend Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, Buffalo, New York, 1886, p. 143.

and intolerance he drifted towards Syrian Gnosticism. His determination to restore the Christian Church to what he held to be the pure gospel never wavered, and he went so far as to create a church of his own which for a time threatened the survival of the Orthodox and Catholic Communion.

According to Marcion, "The Soul of the True Christian, adopted as a child by the Supreme Being, to whom it has long been a stranger, receives from Him the Spirit and Divine life. It is led and confirmed, by this gift, in a pure and holy life, like that of God; and if it so completes its earthly career, in charity, chastity, and sanctity, it will one day be disengaged from its material envelope, as the ripe grain is detached from the straw, and as the young bird escapes from its shell. Like the angels, it will share in the bliss of the Good and Perfect Father, re-clothed in an aerial body or organ, and made like unto the Angels in Heaven."*

It is important to note that the earliest inscription found upon a Christian place of worship (320 A.D.) was over the doorway of a Marcionite meeting place. The Gnostics continued for awhile to influence Christian thought largely through the followers of Marcion. Traces of the sect are to be found as late as the tenth century A.D., and the questions which Marcion pondered were revived in the years of the Protestant Reformation. Even today the principles of justice and mercy are usually in conflict in practice, if not in theory.

Gnosticism as a powerful link between the elaborate philosophical system of Asia and the mysticism of Syria and Egypt offers a vast amount of material to students of comparative religion and esoteric philosophy. It also supplies many missing elements of the Christian story and implies the existence of a well-formulated esoteric tradition under the surface of Early Christian theology.

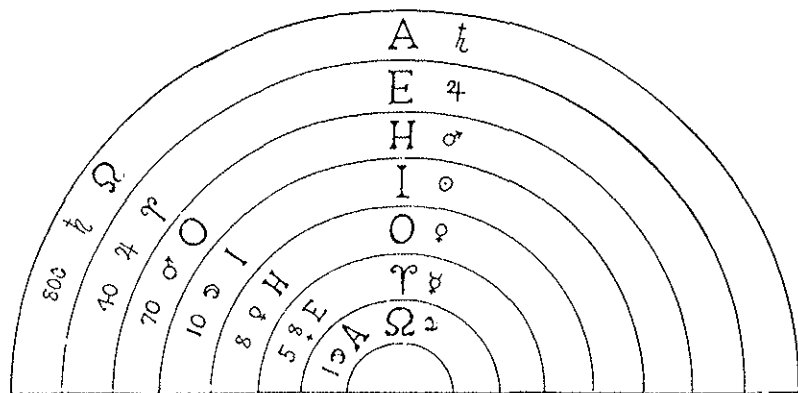
* Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, Richmond, Va., 1950, p. 287.

A Summary of Gnostic Doctrines

In summarizing the doctrine of Gnosticism it is not possible to consider the numerous divisions which took place within the sect nor the more intricate elements of its systems. From a simple cult Gnosticism evolved into an elaborate and complex philosophy uniting within its own structure the essential elements of several great religions. The central idea of Gnosticism was the ascent of the soul through successive stages of being. This doctrine probably originated in the astrolatry of Babylon with its doctrine of a series of heavens each under the rulership of a planetary god. The soul must ascend through these heavens and their gates by means of magical passwords delivered to the guardians of the doors. This viewpoint is reminiscent of the Egyptian ritual of the dead. It should be remembered that the Egyptians represented the solar system by the cross section of an onion with its concentric rings.

The ladder of the worlds upon which souls ascend and descend is described in the Babylonian myth of Tammuz and Ishtar. It appears also in the *Poimandres* of Hermes Trismegistus where seven planetary governors sit upon the concentric circles of the world through which souls ascend and descend. Here likewise is the symbolism of Jacob's ladder, the nine royal arches of Enoch, and the seven heavens of the *Revelation* of St. John. The commentaries upon *Mohammed's Night Journey to Heaven* describe how the Prophet of Islam, after climbing a ladder of golden cords hanging above the Temple of Jerusalem, passed through seven gates at each of which stood one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament.

There is much in Gnosticism to intrigue the orientalist. Bardesanes, the last of the enlightened Gnostics, admitted to having been influenced by Buddhistic metaphysics. This is particularly evident in that part of the teaching of the cult in which Christ is described as descending through the seven worlds on his way to physical incarnation. Like the Buddha,



A Gnostic concept of the solar system adapted from the astronomical cosmogony of Claudius Ptolemy.

he ensouls a body on each of these seven planes, thus literally becoming all things unto all men. The ultimate condition of consciousness to which Gnosticism aspires is also reminiscent of Buddhist doctrine. The soul is finally absorbed into an abstract state perfectly analogous to nirvana, so that the end of existence is reunion with the infinite or unconditional being.

Valentinus, the Gnostic, in his vision of the order of creation, employs Gnostic emanationism, the birth of all natures from their own superiors, and creation itself emerging from its own cause, the absolute or the profundity.

In the simplest arrangement of the Gnostic concept of the godhead we find first the universal Logos, "that which stood, stands, and will stand." By nature and substance unknowable, the Logos is the incorruptible form which projects from Itself an image, and this image ordains all things. From Its own eternal and imperishable nature, "That Which Abides" emits three hypostases, which Simon Magus called *Incorruptible Form*, *The Great Thought*, and *The Universal Mind*.

It is interesting here to note that as in many esoteric

systems thought precedes mind, or as the ancients said, "The thought conceives the thinker."

Among the later Gnostics the godhead is represented by three potencies in this manner:

Anthropos (the man)

Anthropos, son of Anthropos (the man, son of the man)

Ialdebaoth (the son of chaos)

Ialdabaoth, who corresponds to Zeus in Orphic and Platonic metaphysics, is called the Demiurge or the Lord of the World. The Gnostics believed that it was this Demiurge to whom Jesus referred when he spoke of the prince of this world who had nothing in common with him. The Demiurge was the personification of matter, the monad of the material sphere, the seeds of the world within which were locked the patterns of all generated things. Ialdabaoth gave birth out of himself to six sons, who together with their father became the seven planetary spirits. These were called the seven archons (governors) and corresponded with the guardians of the world described by Hermes. Their names in order according to Origen are as follows:

Ialdabaoth (Saturn)

Iao (Jupiter)

Sabaoth (Mars)

Adonaios (the sun)

Astaphaios (Venus)

Aילוaios (Mercury)

Oraios (the moon)

Here Ialdabaoth becomes the outer boundary of the solar system, the orbit of Saturn within which the other planets exist as embryos in a descending order of powers. Thus we understand the Greek fable of Saturn devouring his own children, for the ancients believed that planetary substance was finally drawn into the rings of Saturn, from which it was ultimately scattered into space.

In the Hermetic allegory the seven guardians of the world—the builders, or Elohim of the Jews—were simply manifesters of divine purpose, in themselves neither good nor bad. According to the Gnostics, however, Ialdabaoth and his six sons were proud and opposing spirits, who, like Lucifer and his rebel angels, sought to establish a kingdom in the abyss which should prevail against the kingdom of God. Hence we find Ialdabaoth crying out triumphantly, “There are no other gods before me!” when, in reality, he is the least part of the triune godhead and beyond him extend the spheres of the Father and the Son.

In his rare and valuable text *The Gnostics and Their Remains* C. W. King sums up the Gnostic genesis.* His remarks are in substance as follows:

Sophia Achamoth, the generative wisdom of the world, was lured into the abyss by beholding her reflection in the deep. Through union with the darkness she gave birth to a son—Ialdabaoth, the child of chaos and the egg. Sophia Achamoth, being herself of a spiritual nature, suffered horribly from her contact with matter, and after an extraordinary struggle she escaped out of the muddy chaos which had threatened to engulf her. Although unacquainted with the mystery of the pleroma—that all-including space which was the abode of her mother, the heavenly Sophia or divine wisdom—Sophia Achamoth reached the middle distance between the above and below. There she succeeded in shaking off the material elements which had clung like mud to her spiritual nature. After cleansing her being, she built a strong barrier between the world of intelligences or spirits, which are above, and the world of ignorance and matter, which stretched out below.

Left to his own contrivances, Ialdabaoth, the son of chaos, became the creator of the physical part of the world; that part in which sin temporarily prevailed because the light of vir-

* C. W. King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, London, 1887, pp. 95ff.

tue was swallowed up in darkness. In the process of creation Ialdabaoth followed the example of the Great Deity, who engendered the spiritual spheres. He produced out of his own being six planetary spirits, which he called his sons. The spirits were all fashioned in his own image and were reflections of each other, becoming progressively darker as they receded from their father.

Here we have the Platonic theory of proximities in which it is described that those beings which are closest to the source of life partake most of the source; but, to the degree that they retire from the source, they partake of the absence of the source until at last the outer extremity of the reflections is mingled in the substance of the abyss.

Ialdabaoth and his six sons inhabit seven regions disposed like a ladder. This ladder had its beginning under the middle space (the region of their mother Sophia Achamoth) and its end rests upon our earth, which is the seventh region. When the earth is referred to as the seventh sphere, it does not mean the physical globe but signifies rather the region of the earth composed of ether.

Ialdabaoth, as may be inferred from his origin, was not a pure spirit, for, while he inherited from his mother (generating wisdom) instinct and cunning as well as an intuitive realization of the universal immensity, he also received from his father (matter) the qualities of ambition and pride, and these dominated his composition. With a sphere of plastic substances at his command Ialdabaoth severed himself from his mother and her sphere of intelligence, determined to create a world according to his own desires in which he should dwell as lord and master.

With the aid of his own sons, the six spirits of the planets, the son of chaos created man, intending that the new creature should reflect the fullness of the Demiurgic powers. This man should acknowledge matter to be his lord and should never seek beyond the material sphere for truth or light. But

Ialdabaoth failed utterly in his work. His man was a monster, a vast soulless creature which crawled about through the ooze of the lower elements bearing witness to the chaos that conceived it. The six sons captured this monster and brought the awful creature into the presence of their father, declaring that he must animate it and give it a soul if it were to live.

Ialdabaoth was not a sufficiently exalted spirit, and he could not create life; all he could do was to make forms. In his extremity the Demiurge bestowed upon the new creature the ray of divine light, which he himself had inherited from his mother Sophia Achamoth. It is thus that man gained the power of generative wisdom. This new man, sharing the light with his own creator, now beheld himself as a god and refused to recognize Ialdabaoth as his master. Thus, Ialdabaoth was punished for his pride and self-sufficiency by being forced to sacrifice his own kingship in favor of a man he had fashioned.

Sophia Achamoth now bestowed her favor on mankind, even at the expense of her own son. Humanity, which now contained her light, followed the impulse of that light and began to collect of itself and into itself and divide light from the darkness of matter. By virtue of this spiritual industry, mankind gradually transformed its own appearance until it no longer resembled its creator, Ialdabaoth, but took on the visage and manner of the Supreme Being—Anthropos the primal man—whose nature was of the substance of light and whose disposition was of the substance of truth.

When Ialdabaoth beheld his creation greater than himself, his anger blazed forth with jealous rage. His looks, inspired by his passions, were reflected downward into the great abyss as upon the polished surface of a mirror. This reflection apparently became informed with life, for all bodies are but ensouled shadows, and from the abyss arose Satan in the form of a serpent, the embodiment of envy and cunning.

Realizing that man's power lay in the protection of his

mother, Ialdabaoth determined to detach man from his spiritual guardian, and for this reason created about him a labyrinth of snares and delusions. In each sphere of the world grew a tree of knowledge, but Ialdabaoth forbade man to eat of its fruit lest all the mysteries of the superior worlds be revealed to him and the rulership of the son of chaos come to an untimely end. Sophia Achamoth, determined to protect the man who contained her own soul, sent her genius Ophis in the form of a serpent to induce man to transgress the selfish and unjust commands of Ialdabaoth. Man, having eaten of the fruit of the tree, suddenly became capable of comprehending the mysteries of creation.

Ialdabaoth revenged himself by punishing this first pair (Adam and Eve) for eating the heavenly fruit. He imprisoned man and woman in a dungeon of matter, building around their spirits the physical bodies of chaotic elements wherein the human being is still enthralled. But Sophia Achamoth still protected mankind. She established between her celestial region and relapsed mankind a current of divine light and kept supplying him constantly with a spiritual illumination through his own heart. Thus an internal light continually protected him, even though his outer nature wandered in the darkness.

The battle continued, Sophia Achamoth ever striving to protect and Ialdabaoth ever determined to destroy. At last, sorely afflicted by the evils which had befallen her human grandchildren, Sophia Achamoth was afraid that darkness would prevail against her. Ascending to the feet of her celestial mother (the heavenly Sophia which is the wisdom of God), she besought the all-knowing to prevail upon the Unknown Depth (which is the Everlasting Father) to send down into the underworld the Christos (who was the son of the union of the Father of Fathers and Heavenly Wisdom).

Ialdabaoth and his six sons of matter were weaving a curious web by which they were gradually but inevitably shut-

ting out the divine wisdom of the gods to the end that mankind should perish in darkness. The most difficult part in the salvation of man lay in discovering the method by which the Christos could enter into the physical world. This method must be within the law of creation, for the gods cannot depart from their own ways. To build bodies was not within the province of the higher gods. Therefore, Ialdabaoth himself had to be coaxed into creating, without knowing the end, a body to receive the Soter.

Sophia Achamoth appealed to the pride of the Demiurge and finally prevailed upon Ialdabaoth to prove his powers by creating a good and just man by the name of Jesus. When this had been accomplished, the Soter Christos enveloped himself in a cloak of invisibility and descended through the spheres of the seven archons. In each of the arches he assumed a body appropriate to the substances of the sphere, in this way concealing his true nature from the genii or guardians of the gates. In each world he called upon the sparks of light to come out of the darkness and join him. Having united all the light of the worlds in his own nature, the Christos descended into the man Jesus at the baptism. This was the moment of the Age of the Great Miracle.

Ialdabaoth, having discovered that the Soter had descended incognito to thwart his purposes, stirred up the people against Jesus; and, using all the forces of materiality at his command, he succeeded in destroying the body by which the Christos was functioning in the material sphere. But before the Soter departed from the earth he implanted in the souls of just men an understanding of the great mysteries and opened forever the gate between the lower and higher universes.

Theodoret thus completes the story: "Thence, ascending into the middle space he (Christ) sits on the right hand of Ialdabaoth, but unperceived by him, and there collects all the souls which shall have been purified by the knowledge of Christ. When he has collected all the spiritual light that

exists in matter, out of Ialdabaoth's empire, the redemption will be accomplished and the world will be destroyed. Such is the meaning of the reabsorption of all the spiritual light into the pleroma or fullness, whence it originally descended."

Gnostic Christianity conceived of salvation without benefit of clergy. Christ, the Soter, was the high priest who by his descent destroyed forever the old order of the world. Religion became a matter of internal adjustment. Forms and rituals by which primitive peoples had propitiated Ialdabaoth were regarded as valueless under the dispensation of the Christos. The rule of fear and darkness was gone. The rule of love and light had come. It appears, however, that the Church regarded this new arrangement as economically unsound. The Gnostics were destroyed lest their philosophy render useless the temporal powers of the Christian Church.

Valentinus

The letter of Valentinus to Rheginos found among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts is a gentle and kindly epistle with strong Christian emphasis. Jesus Christ is referred to as "Our Savior." In the same letter Valentinus assures his disciples that the mysteries of creation and redemption were "through the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ." The Alexandrian mystics functioned in a religious atmosphere and sought to reconcile Greek, Jewish, Chaldean, Egyptian, and Oriental beliefs. The tendency developed to interpret the various doctrines in terms of each other. For a time a measure of compatibility was maintained, but gradually the Alexandrian Christian community broke the truce and anathematized all other faiths and their members. This policy continues to modern times. Christian sects even have difficulties in arbitrating their differences. It appears that the Alexandrians made a valiant effort to find interpretations of scriptural writings which would be acceptable to the needs of different races and their more or less confused people.

Valentinus in his vision of the order of creation wrote as follows: "I behold all things suspended in air by spirit, and I perceive all things wafted by spirit; the flesh (I see) suspended from soul, but the soul shining out from air, and air depending from aether, and fruits produced from Bythus [profundity], and the fetus borne from the womb."* This mystical vision is reminiscent of Plato and sounds the very depths of reality.

The Church fathers considered the period of Gnosticism to have been the most crucial in the history of Christianity, for at that time it had to be decided whether it should be a religion or a philosophy. If the Gnostics had been victorious, Christianity would have been regarded as the legitimate heir to the philosophical wisdom of preceding ages and would have contributed strongly to the establishment of a universal religion. When the Church succeeded in dominating the situation, it decreed that the new faith should retain its isolated infallibility, so that its hand was against every unbeliever.

According to Epiphanius, Valentinus was born on the coast of Egypt and was trained in Hellenistic science in Alexandria. He resided in Rome for some fifteen years. He was baptized a Christian but was excommunicated for attempting to introduce Greek and Oriental teachings into the orthodox communion. It is obvious that Valentinus was indebted to Plato for his cosmological and theurgical beliefs. After his break with the Roman clergy Valentinus retired to the island of Crete, where he continued to expound his beliefs and died about 160 A.D.

Valentinus taught, "In the beginning naught was that was generated. The Father alone *was*, ungenerated, without space (or region), time, counsellor, or any other essence (or attribute) capable of being conceived by any means. It was alone,

* Reverend Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, Buffalo, New York, 1886, p. 91.

solitary, and at rest, *itself in itself*, alone. But since it had the power of creating (emanating rather), it seemed good to it at length to generate and produce that which was most beautiful and most perfect *in itself*, for it loved not solitude. For Love, said (Valentinus), was all, but Love is not Love if there is nothing to be loved.”*

The Pistis Sophia

The *Pistis Sophia* belongs to a class of literature which includes the mysterious *Book of Enoch*, the *Sepher Yetzirah*, the *Mystical Divinity* of Dionysius, and the *Divine Pymander* of Hermes. There is no adequate explanation for any of these writings or the mystical impulses which produced them. Perhaps they were the progeny of the first union of Christian and non-Christian sects and the general revolt against materialism which distinguished the times.

The several writings above-mentioned all have the same basic concept. The fall of man is the descent of a spiritual being into a material state by which the divine powers and attributes are locked within the human corporeal constitution. The human spirit comes to physical birth so invested with the garments of mortality that it is no longer aware of its spiritual origin and destiny. The universe is symbolized as stratified and consists of a series of concentric orbits or planes descending in quality from the state of perfect Light above to a condition of absolute darkness below. Thus, spirit and matter are the ultimate opposites, and, though essentially conditions of one eternal principle or substance, exist in a state of conflict. Matter is a privation or impoverishment, which produces the phenomenal qualities of limitation, obscuration, and inhibition. The Gnostic *Hymn of the Robe of Glory* is a version of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The

* G.R.S. Mead, translator and annotator, *Pistis-Sophia*, *Lucifer*, Vol. VI, No. 33 (May 15th, 1890), p. 230f.

hero in each instance is exiled from his father's house and wanders in darkness until necessity, which is the instrument of destiny, reawakens the dim remembrance of the spiritual heritage.

Gnosticism introduces a new concept of the Christ mystery. The Gospel account was interpreted and enlarged until it was reconciled with the Platonic and cabalistic traditions. In the Valentinian Gnosis the Saviour is called the Soter. The system is dualistic, and the Soter is given a feminine aspect, which is called Sophia. In the mystical psychology of Gnosticism the Soter represents the essential divinity of the human spirit, which is derived from the universal spirit and is, therefore, immortal. Like the Pythagorean definition of Deity, the world spirit and its microcosmic counterpart, the human spirit, are being-substances inwardly composed of truth and outwardly invested with light. The presence of the Soter in every minute particle of existence is the covenant of redemption. Thus, the Soter is "the Christ in you, the hope of glory." There is an elaborate cosmological explanation for the origin of the Soter and the wonderful workings within the natures of celestials by which the eternal creating principle manifests its eternal redemptive attribute.

Sophia is the personification or, perhaps more correctly, the individualization of the longing for Light. This longing is locked in darkness, but because such yearning after the Great Treasure is not natural to the darkness, which is the privation of quality, Sophia is not actually a material creature nor a generation of the dark world. She had originally been a glorious Aeon, whose adoration for the Light had caused her to have a wonderful ecstatic experience in which she approached the very substance of truth. Because she had sought to elevate herself above her native place in the great order of Aeons, the others had turned upon her and conspired against her. They caused a false light to appear in the lower regions, and, pursuing this light which she believed to be the Light of truth, she fell into the mystery of illusion. Like Nar-

cissus, she mistook a reflection for a reality; and, seeking to embrace the likeness, she fell into the pool of dreams.

Because Sophia was the consort of the Soter and they were bound together as twins of one birth, her fall created the pattern of the vast redemptive program. Sophia, the world soul, with its microcosmic analogy, the human soul, is the Bride of the Lamb. In the Gnostic system the soul is the immortal-mortal, which through redemption becomes the mortal-immortal. The resurrection of the soul is accomplished by a series of confessions or repentances, which are nothing more than the gradual rejection or overcoming of the limitations imposed by the Guardians of the Aeons. The Soter, descending, states its glory in each sphere or world by a positive affirmation of supremacy. Sophia, ascending to ultimate and eternal union with the Soter, follows the Egyptian concept of negative confession. The Soter descends by the voluntary acceptance of the laws peculiar to each of the levels of creation. Sophia ascends by stating renunciation of the attributes imposed by the Aeons. Sophia must free herself by acknowledging the false values with which she was invested in the circles of the illusion. Thus the rites of the soul, Sophia, are those of baptism by water or the washing away of sin; and the rites of the spirit, the Soter, are those of baptism by fire, which, blazing forth, overcomes the divided powers of the regent Aeons.

The disciplinary doctrines of the Gnosis approached regeneration by identifying the aspiring human soul with the repentant Sophia. In human psychochemistry the soul, released from bondage to the carnal instincts and sensory pressures, can attain the mystical marriage with the spirit or Soter. For this reason, the Valentinianist visualized his own spiritual composition as twofold. There was an invisible spiritual person whom some of them called the Anthropos. This was the Overself, the Soter-self. From this was suspended, like a beautiful flower from a heavenly root, the human nature consisting of the intellectual, emotional, appetitive,

and physical parts. These together were Anthropos the Son of Anthropos or the being which is the offspring of the Being. This offspring is Sophia, whose substance is dimly apparent as the power behind and within the human personality.

Gathered about the mysterious nucleus of soul power, the elements and dimensions of the personality extend like the circles of the Aeons. Each of the human propensities is governed by one of the heavenly Aeons, which invest the soul with a particular attribute or limitation. Each limitation is a veiled opportunity to redeem not only its characteristics in human nature but also its celestial counterpart. The Gnostic, therefore, placed his personality in a feminine relationship to his spiritual self. His mortal nature was the Bride, and his eternal spiritual Overself was the Bridegroom. This instantly clarifies the legends and songs of the Troubadours and other mystical sects who employed the symbolism of the lover and the beloved to conceal their esoteric doctrines.

We also understand from this philosophical concept why Mary Magdalene and Salome are so important in the *Pistis Sophia*. Like the mysterious Helen of the Syrian Gnostic Simon Magus (which is again a restatement of the Helen fable in the story of the Trojan War), the female character is Sophia. It might seem inconsistent that the word *sophia*, which really implies wisdom, should be considered feminine. Here is another Gnostic subtlety. The Soter-Sophia principle is substantially undivided.

In the mortal sphere wisdom is positive when polarized with its opposite, ignorance. Thus, when considered from below or by the outward faculties, wisdom is a positive or male quality. But in relation to the Eternal Truth, the Soter, wisdom is subordinate and is called the handmaiden. The seeker is always less than that which he seeks and is thus thrown into a receptive relationship. The human personality is the receptacle of wisdom, but wisdom itself is the receptacle of the Great Light.

The Greek fable of Orpheus descending into Hades to rescue Eurydice may be the original of the Gnostic symbolism. Here Orpheus is the Soter, and the rituals of the Orphic Mysteries dramatized his descent, which is paralleled in the return of Jesus to preach to his disciples after his ascension into the circles of light. In the Babylonian account Ishtar, who is Sophia, repeats the mystery in the lower Aeon. She descends to rescue Tammuz, who has been locked by death in the dark abode presided over by Sin, the lunar angel. In descending Ishtar passes through seven gates, at each of which she is required to divest herself of one of the symbols of her spiritual sovereignty. She reaches Tammuz, therefore, deprived of her raiment; and, as a mortal woman, she rescues her lover.

Thus, human love is presented as the unadorned power of the soul. This performs or fulfills its destiny in the sublunary region. Having finally been united with Tammuz, the physical body, Ishtar then begins the "perilous journey" back through the gates with Tammuz. The same ascent and descent explain the symbolism of Jacob's ladder, Mohammed's night journey to heaven, and the Hermetic vision of the *Poimandres*. Here also is the clue to Isis seeking the dismembered body of Osiris and numerous other descriptions of the "perilous journey."

The Gnostics were reincarnationists, and to them the Soter was the permanent ego which remains from life to life and causes its extensions to be invested with the sequence of bodies which compose the chain of incarnations. The duality of the Soter and Sophia continues through this process of rebirth until the mystical illumination, symbolized as the Hermetic marriage. Those who do not accomplish the initiation return until the union is attained by conscious effort.

The substance of sin is explained by Jesus in the *Pistis Sophia* in answer to a question asked by the Magdalene. The soul of man is a fourfold compound, consisting of a particle

of Eternal Light enclosed within a threefold envelope fashioned from the effluvia or emanations of the rebellious Aeon. The Aeon-envelope clings to the soul like a shroud covering and binding it in every part. The Aeons themselves use this shroud to bind the soul, so that even after death it cannot escape from the regions of the middle space, which are the abodes of pain. Souls are judged by the Virgin of Light accompanied by seven handmaidens, and the general concept is similar to the Last Judgment of the Egyptian Mysteries.

The Gnostics had a curious provision for those who, having lived virtuous lives, died without initiation or knowledge of the Gnostic disciplines. These good ones were not deprived of glory. They were taken rapidly through the invisible world and received a kind of substitute enlightenment. Thus, when these virtuous souls were reborn in the physical world, they were internally strengthened and given the precious enlargement of Light by which they could hasten toward the redemption of their own natures.

The last part of the *Pistis Sophia* goes into great detail about the operations of the Aeons, as these are revealed in the astrological speculations of the times. The constellations and planets become the channels for the intensity of the pressures of the rebellious Aeon-angels. The human being is, therefore, bombarded with sidereal influences which impel him to accept the burden of material providence and fortune. These Aeon influences impel but do not compel. They become rulers over those who have not become rulers over themselves.

It is possible, however, for the indwelling Sophia, by cultivating her remembrance of the Eternal Light, to substantiate her own nature and to know that she is in the material world but not of it. She discovers herself to be the wanderer, and she achieves liberation by the wonderful works of Light in faith, love, and humility. She becomes the repentant Magdalene; and, having thus confirmed herself in the Light, she

may then address herself to the Soter. By this simple action alone, she becomes the handmaiden of the Lord, beholding the face of her beloved.

In spite of the extreme complexity of its symbolism, which might at first appear little better than an intellectual confusion, Gnosticism is actually an advanced system of mysticism. The intellectual part is merely intended to stimulate a recognition of values. It creates a pattern or design by which the machinery of the cosmic process can be recognized. The devotional part of the system is a series of conscious adjustments made possible by the release of essential soul light.

The Gnostic did not visualize the great order of Aeons as spheres to be conquered by will or effort. They were a vast illusion, which was dissipated by the simple experience of the power of soul over circumstances. In a way, Gnosticism was the conquest of philosophy by a faith justified by both philosophy and science. The mind cannot overcome the mind; but soul power, the child of a higher Aeon, can clarify or reveal the mystery of Light.

These elements were responsible for the several opinions which affected the descent and survival of Gnosticism. The pagan schools regarded the Gnostics with suspicion, because it seemed to them that the sect was conquering the Platonic universe with Christian mysticism. The Christians, on the other hand, were equally suspicious, because it seemed to them that the Gnostics were using the machinery of the Mystery Schools to justify the Messianic dispensation and, therefore, were making Christianity a part of paganism.

Perhaps there was truth on both sides, for the Early Church was seeking a cosmological and psychological background for its own moral and ethical teachings. The Gnostic offering, however, was not acceptable, because it impaired the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. The Church Fathers had no desire to regard their faith as a mere unfoldment or restatement or even a fulfillment of other systems. Thus, the

Gnostics had few friends and many powerful enemies. The sect was soon submerged to survive only in the mystical speculations of such medievals as Dante, Bruno, and St. Francis of Assisi.

The Neoplatonists were, to a degree, involved in the Gnostic scheme through the philosophical interpretation of such works as the *Pistis Sophia*. On the plane of philosophy the Soter signifies eternal wisdom and Sophia, this same wisdom after it has been obscured by immersion in the sphere of generation. Wisdom obscured by worldliness manifests as worldly wisdom. The knower, functioning through imperfect vehicles, is caused to appear as infirm, crippled, or disfigured. The Egyptians had a lame deity to represent this quality. Worldly wisdom turns back upon the human consciousness as a false light, an *ignis fatuus* which lures the reasoning powers away from truth and toward the confusion of false doctrines.

Sophia, as the wisdom principle in man, which is the intellectual aspect of the soul, redeems itself by renouncing error. The intellect, through experience, discovers the insufficiency of mentation on the phenomenal plane. Knowledge without internal light leads to confusion. The involutionary process results ultimately in the complete obscuration of the knowledge of causes. Evolution is the gradual release of spiritual powers through ever-evolving vehicles. The body becomes a lantern through which truth shines to lighten the darkness of the material environment. The Soter appears as what Boehme calls the flash of divine lightning. It impregnates the soul and impels the work of redemption.

The Neoplatonists objected to Gnosticism, and Plotinus wrote against the sect because he felt that it was reactionary. To him, the Gnostics were attempting to bind philosophy to the old sacerdotal system of the Mysteries. Plotinus visualized mystical philosophy as a means of enlightening the human mind without involvement in elaborate systems of cabalistic

or Magian transcendentalism. To him, the Gnostics involved their system in many superstitions and practices which he regarded as confusing and unphilosophical. To a degree, the two schools were competitive; but, as both were beyond the comprehension of the masses, their respective spheres of influence were comparatively small and they were submerged together by the rising tide of orthodox Christianity.

The most practical lesson that can be learned from the study of the *Pistis Sophia* is concerned with the rescuing of man's divine nature from the illusion of opinionism. Thoughts can be no more refined and enlightened than the vehicles through which they must pass in order to reach the surface of the intellect. Regeneration is a redemptive process accomplished by the strengthening of internal values, rather than the accumulation of external facts. Things are to be known by their true name or substances only when the light of the soul shines upon them. Mahatma Gandhi spoke as a Gnostic when he declared the ultimate victory of soul power over brute power.

The release of the human soul by conscious effort is reflected into the macrocosm, or universal sphere, through the gradual revelation of the world soul. This world soul is the superior part of Nature by which is ultimately accomplished the transmutation of all material elements. As the English mystic A. E. Waite wrote in one of his poems, the word made flesh must become the word made soul. The ultimate victory is substantiated through the intercession of the Soter, who is the Quickener, the agent of the second birth. Impregnated by the Soter, Nature gives birth to the World Hero. This hero is both the human being and the collective humanity. He is the regenerated Adam—the man made God by the mystery of the spirit.

The Christian dispensation symbolized this by a trinity of heaven, earth, and the Church. In this arrangement the Church becomes the symbol of the assembly of the elect. It

is the ecclesia through which and in which Sophia is revealed. The ultimate union of the Church with Christ and in Christ is the marriage of the Soter and Sophia. When the Gnostics pointed this out to the early Fathers, their opinions were more or less unprintable. Instead of recognizing the sublimity of the thought, the patristics, although acknowledging the essential integrity of the concept, insisted that the analogies were cunning contrivances of the devil. In spite of this opposition, however, St. Augustine in his book *The City of God* speaks as one conversant with the Gnostic doctrine, which he endorses by frequent use of their dogmas.

The *Pistis Sophia* cannot be appreciated without some foundation in the esoteric traditions of the times. Like most of the productions of the Alexandrian Magi, the book is an exposition of certain disciplines previously taught only in the sanctuaries; and in the manner of most mystical writings it remains dark and obscure until the light of the soul releases its inner meaning. The very wording challenges this light and invites the mystical apperceptive powers of consciousness to emerge from their hidden recesses. Thus, the very symbolism is the custodian of the revelation. The revelation, in turn, leads to the recollection of the redemptive plan. Once this plan is accepted by the mind and made superior to the passing concerns of the day the individual unfolds as a self-conscious unit within the body of the world soul and dedicates himself to the works of his Father.

Basilides

“Basilides, the Christian Gnostic, taught that there were seven emanations from the Supreme Being: The First-born, Thought, the Word, Reflection, Wisdom, Power, and Righteousness . . . In the system of Basilides, Light, Life, Soul, and Good were opposed to Darkness, Death, Matter, and Evil, throughout the whole course of the Universe . . . In the Alexandrian Gnosis, the Platonic notion of the . . . [Hulē]

predominates. (A constantly changing factor associated with life) . . . In one respect *all* the Gnostics agreed: they *all* held, that there was a world purely emanating out of the vital development of God, a creation evolved directly out of the Divine Essence . . . They agreed in holding that the framer of *this lower world* was not the Father of *that higher world* of emanation; but the Demiurge.”*

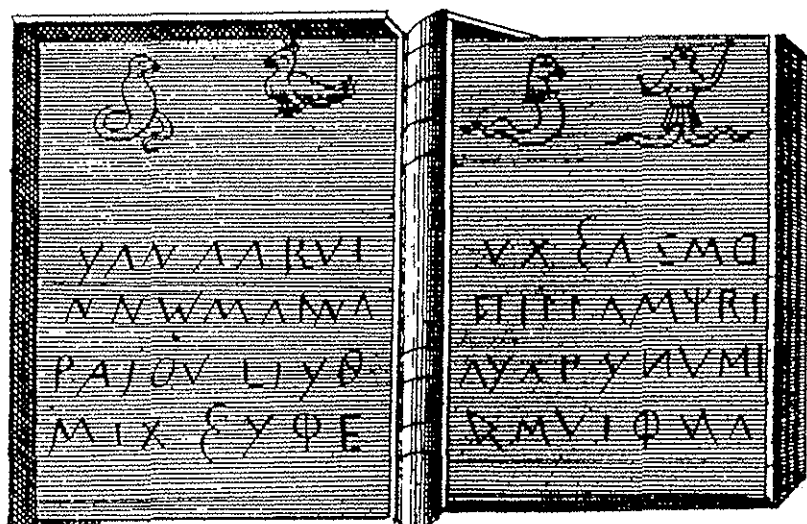
It was Basilides who claimed to have been a disciple of one of the twelve apostles who formulated the strange concept of Deity which carried the name Abraxas. It is commonly held that Abraxas was a solar deity and that Gnostic Christians attempted to associate Christ with the sun or the solar principle. The head of the rooster was used, at least according to the critics of the sect, because this bird hailed the rising sun with its crowing. The Gnostics may have regarded themselves as heralds of the dawn of enlightenment. The deity carried a shield and a whip, the symbols of Sophia and Dynamis, the shield of wisdom and the whip of power. These were certainly the passive and active extensions of the soul. In the Egyptian ritual the head of the cock stood for foresight and vigilance; and, as the Gnostic *Phronesis*, it combined with the powers of wisdom and strength to form a kind of triad of primary divine attributes. The human body of Abraxas suggested the natural form of God, and from this body extended the serpent legs or supporters, Nous and Logos, the mind and the word, which sustain creation. Thus interpreted, the symbol is no longer entirely unreasonable or fantastic. To the initiated, it represented the qualities of the divine nature more graphically than would have been possible with a less curious type of figure.

Cabalistic speculations also played a part and mingled with the theories of the Alexandrian Neopythagoreans. The numeral equivalent of the name Abraxas is 365, suggesting the days of the year. The circle of the year was an ancient emblem

* Albert Pike, *Op. cit.*, pp. 553, 555, and 557.

to represent the world, time, the mutations of seasons, and the orderly procedure everywhere in mundane affairs. This ties Abraxas with the cosmic speculations of the astrologers, magicians, and geographers. Thus, this Gnostic pantheos, as the term signifies, was inclusive of many deities and doctrines, and, as such, was an appropriate symbol of the Basilidian Gnosis. The figure itself is sometimes accompanied by the letters I A O, which may be scattered around the central motif. These constitute the sacred name of deity. The Abraxas is sometimes shown in a chariot drawn by four horses representing the Ages, in India the Yugas or great procession of aeons. These are the gold, silver, bronze, and iron ages of the Greeks and return in Christian symbolism as the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. The sun and moon occasionally accompany the Abraxas image. It is not known whether the Gnostics made statues of Abraxas, as none have survived. In the nineteenth century the French transcendentalists, following the school of Eliphas Levi, carved Abraxas figures of wood, painted them in brilliant colors, and regarded them with considerable veneration. I have seen several of these figures, which are highly decorative.

Another important and almost unknown relic of the Basilidian Gnosis is the small book engraved on leaves of lead mentioned by King. At least two examples of the Leaden Book are recorded. One apparently belonged to the famous Jesuit scholar Father Kircher, and the other was in the collection of Montfaucon. We reproduce two leaves from the latter, somewhat reduced. These leaves actually measure three by four inches and are engraved on both sides. As there are six leaves, there are twelve groups of symbols and inscriptions. The example belonging to Kircher had seven leaves. King believes that the book of seven leaves contained prayers and magical formulas to be used by the souls of the dead when addressing the deities of the planets. Montfaucon writes that the twelve pages (six leaves) were devoted to the symbols of the twelve hours of the day. He doubts that the known ex-



Gnostic book on small tablets of lead.

amples of the Leaden Book were contemporary with the original Gnostic sect, but it is evident that they are of considerable antiquity. They may have been inspired by the elaborate Egyptian manuscript of the ritual of the dead. In the later period of the Egyptian religion it was usual to condense these manuscripts, using only short sections of prayers and preserving the most significant parts of the funerary rites.

The early Fathers of the Church liked to believe that Basilides derived his religious philosophy from the teachings of Aristotle. This position, however, cannot be adequately maintained. Basilides and his son, Isidorus, who was also his disciple, assert definitely that they had been instructed in the secret Mysteries of Christianity by St. Matthias the Apostle. The Gnostics in general assumed that Christ had communicated his true teachings only to his nearest and most advanced disciples. These true teachings were the foundation of the Gnosis, according to the testimony of the initiated. Hippolytus seems to have regarded the Basilidian theory as

a new interpretation, or adaptation, of the ancient teachings of the Egyptian priesthood.

There were several schools of the Gnosis, and the teachings of Basilides differ in one important particular from the other sects. This Egyptian initiate, in the unfoldment of his system, completely ignored the existence of an evil principle in the universe. In this, he certainly followed the Egyptians, who would have been deeply offended by any theology which affirmed that deity would have created or entered into conflict with an evil power. The Egyptians did not have an enemy opposing the Supreme Being, but in the generated world universal laws were violated and good and evil were revealed through the conduct of creatures.

In the system of Basilides creation unfolded from spiritual seeds or roots that resided in the vast substance of unconditioned existence or dimensionless being. From these seeds came forth three creative agencies corresponding to the Trinity. These, in turn, fashioned the world, which was divided into three parts. The highest of these parts was the eternal abode of divine principles; the lowest unfolded into the material universe; and between these extremes was placed a mysterious power, which, through the release of its own potency, ultimately engendered mankind.

Man, therefore, lives in what is called "a middle distance," surrounded by the aeons of the superior and inferior creations and containing their powers within himself. Man cannot ascend directly to the abode of principles because he lacks the internal faculties necessary to experience the infinite. He must, therefore, be content to grow and unfold in the world that has been provided for him. In due time, however, the divine power will provide him with a redeemer, who will conduct him through the Mysteries and reveal to him the secrets of his own origin. The followers of Basilides believed that this redeemer was Christ, whom they accepted mystically and philosophically but not in the literal sense of orthodox Chris-

tian theology. With strange symbols they traced their ideas, and, to those who have the proper keys, the curious inventions preserved in their writings and upon their gems become intelligible. Gnosticism will continue to be of interest as a profoundly psychological approach to the riddle of man's place in the divine plan.

Abraxas and the Gnostic Gems

It seems timely to point out a phase of Gnostic research and extend the labors of C. W. King, who made a diligent survey of Gnostic gems in his rare and scholarly work *The Gnostics and Their Remains*. King was deeply impressed by the remarkable talismanic jewels inscribed with symbols of the Gnosis and dating from the first to fourth centuries of the Christian era. Many examples of these stones are in the private cabinets and public museums of Europe, but, as yet, the majority of them have not been properly studied. It has been pointed out that Gnostic symbolism was so widely diffused and so generally assimilated that its devices and emblems occur, sometimes considerably modified, on most of the engraved gems of the period. Roman military campaigns, extending into various and remote parts of the world, resulted in a scattering of Gnostic jewels throughout the European continent and England. The legionnaires evidently wore these talismans as protective charms.

As King has pointed out in his *Antique Gems and Rings*, the citizens of Rome had slight taste for meaningless adornment. They chose, rather, to combine ornamentation with utility and favored jewelry that had mystical or magical properties. Their taste was consistent with the spirit of the time. The Roman empire was a polyglot of nations held together by strong military and economic policies. The central government was not inclined to interfere with the religious beliefs or philosophical systems of the regions which it occupied. It was only when the priests and scholars of various sects



ABRAXAS. Intaglio in red jasper of the deity protecting its believers from evil forces. From *The Gnostics and Their Remains* by C. W. King, London, 1887.

and cults became involved in political conspiracies that freedom of worship was restricted or the free practice of belief was prohibited. If the gods of strangers paid their taxes promptly through their annointed priesthoods, Rome was content.

The genuine Abraxas gems now in public and private collections present certain features which suggest a brief summary of the materials used and the method of incising. Although the lapidaries of the period were skillful in the art of cutting intagli, few of the genuine Gnostic stones evidence a high degree of craftsmanship. Materials vary, including dark green jasper from Egypt, often mottled with yellow or red, plasma, a variety of quartz—green and faintly translucent, passing into common chalcedony, and the more or less magnetic hematite, which is an important ore in iron. Finished products of this last material appear to be cut in polished steel. Examples vary in size and shape, but the majority are oval—from three quarters of an inch to an inch and a half in their longest dimension. The thickness is from one sixteenth of an inch to approximately one quarter of an inch. Many of the stones are decorated on only one surface with the reverse

side blank. There are a considerable group with inscriptions, figures or images, together with letters, on the underside.

An example of an Abraxoid in my personal collection is considerably larger and thicker and assumes the proportions of a small tablet. It measures one and one-fourth inches by one and eleven-sixteenth inches and is one-half inch thick. The Abraxas figure is deeply cut into the obverse surface, and the Egyptian deity Harpocrates, with his finger to his lips, is similarly cut into the reverse. This stone would not have been suitable to be set into a ring. It might have been part of a pectoral or, perhaps, was used as a seal. Gnostic inscriptions occur in scaraboid form, and there are cases where earlier jewels have been re-engraved or Gnostic symbols added. It is evident from the workmanship and symbolism that most of the Abraxas gems originated in the area around and including Alexandria. At this time, the glyptic art of Egypt was declining, and it practically ceased after the fall of the Western Empire. The decadence of scholarship is evident from the inscriptions on the gems, many of which are undecipherable. The spelling and grammar are described by one authority as simply "barbaric."



Gnostic tablet on basalt engraved with Abraxas on obverse and Harpocrates on reverse. From the PRS Collection.

Although the engraving on the Abraxoids may seem rather skillful, careful examination under a magnifying glass indicates that the work was done by means of a coarse wheel, a method commonly used in Persia at an earlier date. This method is identified with what is called the Sassanian stamp. We also learn that Abraxoids and other Gnostic gems were copied and reproduced at a later period. They became so closely associated with astrology, magic, and the cabala that it was customary to find them among the paraphernalia of magicians and sorcerers for several hundred years. Delvers into the portents of the stars were generally referred to as Chaldeans or Chaldaei regardless of their actual race or nation. These Chaldeans favored Gnostic rings cut in crystal, a material not often used by the votaries of the original sect. There are many fine and beautiful gems of Gnostic style in existence, but careful research shows that they originated in the Cinquecento school, which flourished during the period of the Italian Renaissance between 1500 and 1600 A.D. and is especially remembered for its revival of classical arts. In some areas the Renaissance was accompanied by a strong revival of interest in mysticism and high philosophical speculation. Talismanic gems came into vogue and were worn by persons in all stations of life. Needless to say, the original meaning of the symbols did not descend with the figures themselves, which were more or less faithfully copied according to the taste of the designer or the requirements of the purchaser. In estimating Abraxoids, therefore, crudeness may be accepted as a good sign of both authenticity and antiquity.

The Gnostics were a comparatively small sect, and by force of necessity were inclined to secrecy. It is unreasonable, therefore, to assume that all of the stones bearing their symbols originated within the school itself. They held to the belief of divine intervention in the affairs of men. They practiced magical healing and may have supplied charms to non-members as part of their religious or magical services. There

is some indication of fraternization with other Christian or semi-Christian sects and with the surviving Egyptian priesthood. In describing the Abraxas figure Bellermann writes: "They used it as a *Teacher* in doctrine, in obedience to whom they directed their transcendental researches and mystic instruction; as a *Token* and a *Password* amongst the initiated, to show that they belonged to the same fraternity; as an *Amulet* and a *Talisman*, and lastly as a *Seal* to their documents."*

In some instances it appears that the stones were originally set in a swivel type of mounting, so that either face could be exposed at will. There are examples which could have been mounted with the inscribed surface inward for purposes of secrecy. There is also a class, usually of irregular shape, with a hole in the center of the principal surface and evidently intended to be worn around the neck at the end of a cord. Like the Egyptian scarab, they could be carried in the most convenient form and according to taste and circumstances. The mingling of Gnostic, pre-Gnostic, and post-Gnostic symbols is so confused that it is difficult to determine the boundaries of usage. When there are large inscriptions, they often include prayers or invocations for the protection of the wearer. In such cases, we must suspect that they had purposes beyond identification of membership, and there is nothing to show that the original owner was even a member of the group. Several streams of culture are distinguished in the designs upon these gems. King is convinced of the Hindu origin of some of these elements.

Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, sometime keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities in the British Museum, scholar of Christ's College, Cambridge, and Tyrwhitt Hebrew scholar, in *Amulets and Superstitions* writes: "The tenets of some of the Gnostic sects were derived primarily from India, and they travelled westwards through Persia to Syria, Palestine, Egypt

* C. W. King, *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

and Greece with the Buddhist envoys to the Seleucidae and the Ptolemies who were sent thither by the kings of India in the IIIrd and IInd centuries B.C. Modern research has shown that the pictographic writings of the Indians and Sumerians were almost identical in character, and it may be that there is Sumerian influence in Gnosticism. The astrological element in Gnosticism, of which so many examples are found on Gnostic amulets, certainly came from Babylonia, the home of astrology. . . . And it is tolerably certain that many of the curious linear signs which represent the sun, moon, planets and other stars, are garbled copies of early Sumerian pictographs.”*

There is also distinguishable borrowing from the Syrian Gnosis and cabalistical elements are introduced. There is probably no other group of religious jewels which can offer as wide a variety of unusual and meaningful emblems and figures.

Bernard de Montfaucon in his *Antiquity Explained*, London, 1721, devotes a section to the Abraxas symbols. These he divided into seven classes, distinguished by the nature of the symbols and inscriptions. The fifth plate in Montfaucon's series is especially interesting. It proves that talismanic magic was a major element in the teachings of Basilides. Two of the miniature tablets were inscribed on both sides and the obverse inscriptions are encircled by the serpent of eternity, which later played a prominent part in the alchemistical tradition. The central figure in this illustration appears to be Horus, the child, standing on the heads of two crocodiles. The scorpion is prominently displayed on a small intaglio, and it has been suggested that the tablet at the lower right is a kind of trestle board presenting symbolically elements of the Gnostic initiation ceremonies. Examples of magical

* E. A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, London, 1930, pp. 200f.

alphabets are noticeable and reappear some fifteen hundred years later in European pacts with spirits.

The Roman viewpoint on Gnosticism in general can be gathered from a letter written by the Emperor Hadrian: "The worshipers of Serapis are Christians, and some of the votaries of that deity call themselves Bishops of Jesus Christ. There is, however, neither prince of the Jewish synagogue, nor Samaritan; no Christian presbyter, no mathematician, no soothsayer, nor *Aliptes*. When the Patriarch goes into Egypt, some will be ready to force him to worship Serapis, and some Jesus Christ."

Hadrian's remarks may be accepted as the unbiased opinion of a disinterested observer and give some idea of the religious confusion that prevailed in Alexandria. It is not even certain whether the Patriarch referred to was Christian or Jewish, and it is quite possible that pagan sects had their own bishops and priestly leaders whose affiliations were far from clear. The condition of Christianity in North Africa is difficult to restore from the meager records of the period. Thus, the diversity of symbolism found on the Alexandrian gems was a faithful representation of the state of the public mind. The old Mystery Schools were gradually passing out of objective existence in the Mediterranean area. The Gnostic gems are, therefore, part of the symbolism of a dying concept of culture. All students of religious symbolism will do well to examine the figures carefully.

Montfaucon states that a number of Gnostic gems were excavated in the vicinity of his Abbey St.-Germain-des-Prés, which had a collection of more than sixty of these stones. Many Gnostic stones have been found worked into religious jewelry to adorn good Moslems, Western Christians, and members of the Coptic Church.

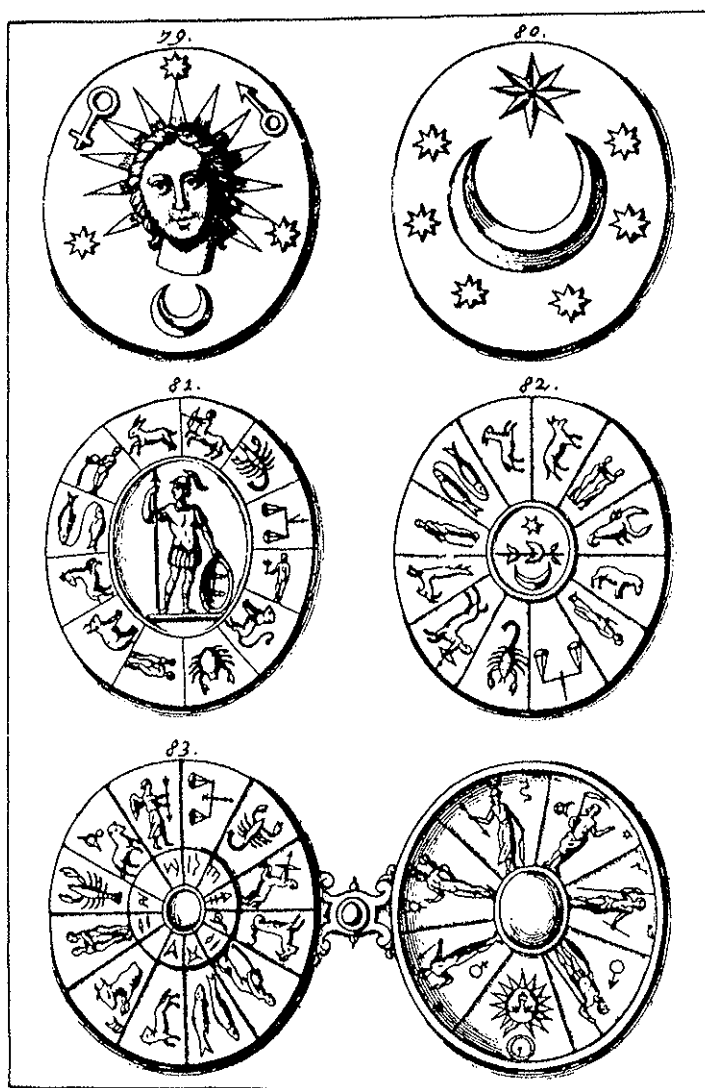
References appearing in recent Gnostic studies based upon Coptic manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion indicate that the great creator-archon was given the name of Abraxas by

Basilides. (*Vide The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* by Jean Doresse). *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, fifteenth edition, states that Basilides was perhaps the first to use the Abraxas form to signify the supreme deity.

One of the rarest and most curious works dealing with the Abraxas signets, *Abraxas sive Apistopistus*, etc., was written by Joannes Macarius and published in Antwerp in 1657. It includes commentary material by Jean Chiflet, Canon of Tournai, who contributed to the illustrations. From the engravings in this book we have selected one of the most interesting plates. Thorndike in his *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* notes that Chiflet issued Macarius' volume posthumously with some original contributions.

Harpocrates (Horus the child) is found among the engravings of Abraxas on early gems. Horus, the younger, is represented as a child making the gesture of silence. He sits upon an open lotus flower and may carry symbolic attributes. Figures of this deity were placed at the entrances to temples, especially the sanctuaries of the esoteric Mysteries. It is assumed that he was a protector of the secrets of the mystery religions and commanded prudence, reticence, and caution regarding the dissemination of the secret doctrine. Harpocrates is sometimes represented standing with the child lock of hair curling down on one side of his head.

In Egyptian mythology Horus was the son of the deities Osiris and Isis. He was also a widow's son, for he was born after the murder of his father. In due time he led the armies of light against the powers of darkness in the last great war. In the rituals of the *Book of the Dead* he becomes the defender of souls. When sinners were judged, Horus acted as an intercessor, taking upon himself the punishment of wrongdoers and permitting them to attain salvation. Osiris, Lord of the Underworld, over which he ruled after his physical death, could never deny the pleas of his only begotten son. These mystic rituals existed from an early date but gained impor-



GNOSTIC GEMS. A solar head with the accompanying astrological signs for Venus, Mars, and the moon and fixed stars. 80. A symbol of the moon, the solar symbol above, and six planets. 81. The zodiac with Mars in the center. 82. A zodiac, the sun, moon. 83. A zodiac with illegible inscription on reverse: The seven planets. From *Abraxas* by Joannes Macarius, Antwerp, 1657.

tance when the cult of Horus increased in favor with the recension of the Osirian cult.

A measure of shrewdness also played its part in the preservation of the Gnostic gems. Books were destroyed, images broken, and holy relics permanently lost. On the other hand, gems were considered valuable by the avaricious and, although precious stones were not included in this class, many beautiful and colorful bits of jewelry were fashioned. No one seems to have thought of casting these aside. After their religious significance was forgotten, they were intriguing curiosities with considerable material value as talismans and works of ancient art. It might be mentioned here that although synthetic gems and Roman paste were known, they do not seem to have been employed in the making of Gnostic signets. At that time, natural materials were available and more suitable to receive the complicated engraving.

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