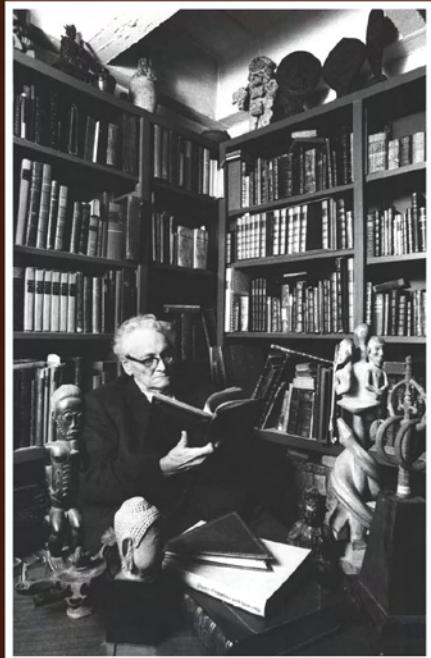


# The Wisdom of the Knowing Ones

Gnosticism, THE KEY TO  
ESOTERIC CHRISTIANITY

MANLY P. HALL



Manly P. Hall's *Wisdom of the Knowing Ones* examines the relationship of Gnostic mysticism to the inner teachings of Plato, Valentinus, Basilden, and its spiritual flowering in ancient Alexandria.

If any group which shared in the Christian mystery possessed the esoteric secrets of the early Church, it was the Gnostics, preserving to the end the highest ethical and rational standards. The early Church attacked Gnosticism vigorously and relentlessly, recognizing these mystical philosophers as being the most formidable adversaries to the temporal power of Christian theology.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR |** Manly P. Hall (1901-1990) founded the Philosophical Research Society, Inc., 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 seventy 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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Esoteric Christianity



MANLY P. HALL

**THE WISDOM OF THE KNOWING ONES: Gnosticism, the  
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### ABRAXAS, A GNOSTIC PANTHEOS

*The name ABRAXAS, coined by Basilides, the Egyptian Gnostic, is a word symbol consisting of seven letters which signify the seven creative powers or planetary angels recognized by the ancients. Sampson Arnold Mackey advances the theory that the name is compounded from two ancient words,*

*ABIR, which means a bull, and AXIS, which means the pole. To substantiate his belief, he brings forward the fact that a motion of the earth, commonly called the alternation of the poles, resulted in the vernal equinox taking place at one time in TAURUS, the Celestial Bull, over the North Pole. The four white horses drawing the chariot of Abraxas symbolize the four ethers by means of which the solar power, Abraxas, is circulated through all parts of the universe. The seven-lettered name of Abraxas is symbolically significant of his seven-rayed power. That the modern world has any knowledge whatever of ancient Gnostic symbolism is largely due to the cupidity of those individuals who set themselves the task of destroying every intelligible record of Gnostic philosophy; for, wishing to keep rather than destroy articles of commercial value, the fanatics preserved gems upon which Gnostic symbols were engraved. The above plate is the enlargement and amplification of a Gnostic jewel, the original stone being only a trifle over an inch in height. Rings and other articles of jewelry set with Gnostic gems were undoubtedly used by members of the cult as means of identification. As the order was a secret society, the designs were small and inconspicuous.*

—FROM *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* BY MANLY P. HALL.  
ARTIST, AUGUSTUS J. KNAPP.

## **Introduction**

### **WHAT DO THE KNOWERS KNOW?**

In December, 1945, an Egyptian Arab countryman made a momentous archeological discovery in Upper Egypt. No one knows precisely where the man Mohammed Ali made his discovery. It appears that he had several reasons for concealing the location of his find. Today, it is generally agreed that the discovery was made somewhere in the vicinity of the present town of Nag Hammadi, near which was located in early Christian times the first and largest of all Christian monastic communities, the compound of Chenoboskion, founded by the sainted Coptic monk, Pachomius.

Mohammed Ali's discovery consisted of a large, red earthenware jar, containing thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Legend has it that when the jar was broken by the discoverer's mattock, a cloud of golden dust rose into the air and disappeared from sight, as if a long-confined presence had at last found its way into the light of day. This incident of possible synchronistic import signaled the arrival of an era of unprecedented interest in a particular early variety of Christianity, known as Gnosticism.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, as the collection of Gnostic treatises became known, was followed less than a year later by the unearthing of the Dead Sea Scrolls

at Khirbet Qumran, in the Holy Land. As the years and decades rolled on, it became increasingly evident that these two archaeological finds were in some ways related: one concerned the teachings of the early Christian schools of Gnostics, while the other contained the writings of heterodox Jewish mystics of a slightly earlier period, who seemed to have a good deal in common with their Gnostic Christian descendants. The existence of a secret or semi-secret tradition of esoteric religiosity within the Semitic spiritual matrix thus emerged as a very real possibility.

It is well known that some esotericists in our culture have long believed in the existence of such a secret tradition. Groups and individuals such as the Cathars, Rosicrucians, Knights Templar, Esoteric Freemasons and Theosophists often considered themselves as functioning within a tradition that could be traced back to the initiates of the Gnostics and the Essenes as well as to the Neo-Platonists and the votaries of the Egyptian Hermes. The late Manly P. Hall, for instance, wrote prolifically and insightfully about this Adept tradition, in his volumes about the *Orders of the Quest*, *Orders of Universal Reformation*, *Orders of the Great Work*, and others.

While many believed in such a tradition, few could point to the precise sources and documentary evidence concerning these esoteric currents, especially when it came to the teachings and practices of the Gnostics. For over a millennium and a half the only information available concerning the Gnostics was to be found in the writings of certain Church fathers, who wrote polemical treatises against the Gnostics. To gather accurate information from such sources was highly unlikely. These writers, or “heresiologists” were the very folk who relentlessly attacked and ultimately incited the repres-

sion of the Gnostics. They assailed, ridiculed and greatly distorted the message of the Gnostic teachers, making them appear as fools and knaves of an invariably reprehensible kind. In the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries and thereafter, a small number of original documents of Gnostic provenance appeared in Europe, having been brought there by travelers from the Middle East.

By the end of the Nineteenth Century the few now available Gnostic documents impelled many scholars to abandon reliance on the biased heresiological sources which were considered normative earlier. Books, such as those by the German scholars von Harnack, Richard Reitzenstein and Walter Bauer, and their English and French colleagues, brought about a change in Gnostic studies. Neither were the members of esoteric orders and societies idle at this time. Madame Blavatsky and her brilliant pupil, G.R.S. Mead did much to stimulate enthusiastic interest in the Gnostics, while French esotericists led by Papus (Gerard Encausse) and Jules Doinel went so far as reconstituting the Gnostic Church, which in several variants continues to the present day.

However, none of the aforementioned could rival the coming of the Nag Hammadi Library and its aftermath. The new epoch of research sparked by this wealth of documents came to extend gradually far beyond the halls of academe. At the turn of the Twentieth to the Twenty-first Century we find novels, works of popular scholarship, science fiction, magazine articles and web-pages on the Internet in considerable profusion proliferating in the public arena, engendering further interest in Gnosticism.

It is high time, therefore, that we all inquire into the substance of the teachings and practices of the Gnostics.

## THE KNOWERS AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE

Until comparatively recently few people were familiar with the word, “Gnostic”; a rather larger number was acquainted with its antonym, “agnostic”. Both are derived from the Greek “*Gnosis*”, usually translated as “knowledge”. An agnostic is thus a non-knower, i.e. one who denies all knowledge of ultimate realities, while a Gnostic is one who professes knowledge of such things. One needs to keep in mind, however, that *Gnosis* is not primarily rational knowledge; it has little to do with philosophical reasoning and even less is it associated with such matters as our contemporary, computer-related obsession with access to data. Elaine Pagels, author of the splendid work, *The Gnostic Gospels*, translates the term *Gnosis*, as used by the Gnostics, as “insight”, a term denoting both psychological and metaphysical cognition arrived at intuitively.

Contemporary scholarship holds that what we call “Gnosticism” was a diverse movement, showing many complex characteristics. Yet, it is quite evident that this wealth of diversity in myth, teaching and perhaps in practice possesses an undeniable central core. While there may have been numerous Gnostic teachers and schools, this does not mitigate against the fact that there was one Gnosticism; what united the various Gnostic orientations was more important than what divided them. It is also important to keep in mind that one of the uniting factors was a common dedication to the founder of the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ.

For the sake of clarity it is useful to confine the term “Gnostic” to the kind of person we see in the Nag Hammadi writings; a Christian, albeit of a singularly creative and heterodox kind, especially when compared with Christians of so-called mainstream orthodoxy. It is true that the term

“Gnosis” and much of the basic Gnostic view of reality were shared by people who were not Christians, but these “pagan Gnostics” should properly be called Hermeticists, for they employed the figure of the Greco-Egyptian Hermes as their savior, very much like the Christian Gnostics were to do with Jesus. It is also legitimate to speak of something that Gershom Scholem has tentatively described as “Jewish Gnosticism” but the accurate name for its earlier development may be Essene and Merkabah mysticism and for its later manifestation one may properly use the term “Kabbalah”.

An important question that is in need of an answer is: How did the Gnostics come by their unique and unusual worldview? In the past it was customary to seek the origins of Gnosticism in objective external influences and transmissions. The contemporary view is rather different from this. The British scholar E.R. Dodds has suggested as long as forty years ago that the writings of the Gnostics derived from mystical experience. The great psychologist C.G. Jung has made the same suggestion, and following his lead, the Dutch scholar Gilles Quispel proposed that Gnosticism originated in the “experience of the ontological self”, a process that might appear both psychological and mystical. This experience, wrote Quispel, does not lend itself to prosaic or dogmatic description and definition. Rather, it may be projected outward in the form of mystically inspired religious mythology.

It is without doubt that the majority of the Gnostic writings bear the character of such inspired mythology. In the wake of the work of several great scholars of mythology in our day people have come to view myths in a much more positive light than had been the case earlier. Once it was

generally believed that a myth is naught but an untrue story; today many feel that myths communicate truths which cannot be adequately conveyed in any other fashion. It is also worthy of note that one of the greatest mythologists of recent decades, Karl Kerenyi, specifically pinpointed the myths of the Gnostics as originating in mystical experience, a circumstance that distinguishes them from such derivative myths as those of Homer. Today there can be little doubt about the likelihood of the great Gnostic teachers having been inspired mystics who experienced realities not accessible to mortals under ordinary circumstances. Valentinus, Basilides, Bardaisan and their followers were much more than idle “speculators” as the heresiologist Church Fathers claimed.

### **THE GNOSTIC WORLD VIEW**

While Gnosticism thus may be said to originate in mystical experience, this does not mean that all mystical experience results in Gnosticism. There are certain similarities, to be sure, between the recognitions of a St. John of the Cross or a St. Teresa of Avila and the mysticism of Valentinus; but the former share an orthodox Roman Catholic world view (albeit one with which dogmatists are often uncomfortable), while the latter is Gnostic in his outlook. It seems that Gnosticism expresses a specific religious mystical experience which then finds expression in teachings, most often embodied in mythology. All Gnostic teachings and mythologems are indicative of insights of great metaphysical and psychological subtlety; they are never to be understood in simple declarative terms and even less in dogmatic terms.

In the following summary, we will encapsulate in inadequate prose what the Gnostic myths express in their intuitive and imaginative style. Together, these recognitions add up to what may be called the Gnostic World View.

## **CONCERNING THE COSMOS**

The imperfections of the world are an issue that practically all traditions have addressed. Where the traditions differ is in what they suggest might be done about it. Orthodox Christians are agreed that we live in a fallen world which we shall leave behind at our death. Modern secularists have professed a dedication to what they were pleased to regard as the improvement of the world, and in so doing they precipitated frightful world wars, holocausts and revolutions. Gnostics, on the other hand, had their own—perhaps quite startling—view of these matters; they held that the world is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner. They also held that the only substantial and effective way to improve the world is the one that leads to the improvement of human consciousness through the insight of Gnosis.

The Gnostic world view is sometimes characterized as anti-cosmic, but in reality it is merely critical of the cosmos, because of its numerous flaws. Like Buddhists, Gnostics came to the recognition that earthly life is filled with suffering. Some of this suffering is undoubtedly of our own doing, but certainly most of it originates in the natural or cosmic order itself. Why do virtually all creatures sustain themselves by eating each other? Why are living beings destroyed by natural catastrophes? Why do humans, in addition to all other difficulties, also suffer depression, alienation and boredom? Because the causes of these and other conditions are inherent in the fabric of the world—so said the Gnostics.

## **CONCERNING GOD**

The Gnostic concept of Deity is more subtle than that of most religions. Modern minds are often puzzled by the Gnostic concept of God, but a thoughtful evaluation of this

concept discloses that it is neither unreasonable nor improbable. To properly appreciate the Gnostic view of Deity one must remember that the Gnostics originated within the Semitic monotheistic religious matrix. Unlike members of such schools of pagan Gnosis as Hermeticism, or Neoplatonism, the Gnostics were confronted with the image of the monotheistic God of the Old Testament and with the adaptations of this image in the New Testament. They faced a God who not only created the universe but micromanaged it as its lawgiver, policeman, judge and executioner, and, who, moreover, performed these tasks in a capricious, often wrathful and illogical manner. The greatest of all questions the Gnostics asked was this: Is this flawed creator truly the ultimate, true and good God? Or might he be a lesser deity, a sort of large, but not very wise angel, who has become either ignorant of a greater power beyond himself or is an impostor, impersonating the universal God?

The Gnostics answered these questions by saying that this creator is obviously not the ultimate, true God, but rather a demiurgoς (craftsman), an intermediate, secondary deity. Above and beyond this intermediate deity there is a true, ultimate, real and good Reality, which or who can be effectively addressed and experienced by the human spirit. Today, a large number of people either don't believe in any God at all, or they have managed to so whitewash the image of the monotheistic God that they feel no need to engage in the distinctions which occupied the minds of the Gnostics. Still, judged on its own merits, the issue of the dichotomy of the lesser and the greater God may be still considered as worthy of attention.

### **THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT**

The abundance of the now available Gnostic texts makes

one thing clear: The Gnostics had an unique and insightful view of the human being. Existentialist philosophy, Jungian and Transpersonal Psychology, as well as such Eastern religious traditions as Hinduism and Buddhism, all show various degrees of affinity to Gnosticism, particularly when it comes to the Gnostic teachings concerning the human being.

The Gnostics held that human nature mirrors the duality found in the world. In part it was made by the false creator and in part it consists of the light of the True God. Within the human dwells a “divine spark”, a spirit that is older than the created world and all in it. Much of the time we are ignorant of the divine spark resident within us. To awaken to the recognition of this presence involves overcoming powerful obstacles which seem to be built into our own nature and into the environment within which we exist. Gnostic wisdom has often alluded to the possibility that these obstacles may in some ways be connected with the powers that manage certain aspects of the universe, and whose dominion over us might be threatened by our Gnosis. The Apostle Paul (whom Elaine Pagels justly called “the Gnostic Paul”) may have referred to this circumstance when he wrote that we struggle not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual wickedness in high places. Death releases the divine spark from its lowly prison, but such release may be only temporary unless liberating knowledge has come to the human while still on earth.

Men and women are divided into three categories that resemble modern psychological types. A small number are spiritual (pneumatics) who are ready for Gnosis and liberation. On the opposite end of the psycho-spiritual scale we find those who are earthbound and materialistic (hyletics)

and who recognize only physical reality. Between these two poles, as it were, we find those who live largely in their mental-emotional nature (psychics). Such people expect rules of conduct to redeem them instead of aspiring to higher, salvific states of consciousness. In many cases one may note a certain development that people undergo and that moves from materialistic slavery to the senses, by way of ethical religiosity, to spiritual freedom brought by liberating Gnosis. As the noted scholar of Gnosticism, Gilles Quispel wrote: “The world-spirit in exile must go through the inferno of matter and the purgatory of morals to arrive at the spiritual Paradise”.

The Gnostics held that the essential nature of the human is divine. Mainstream orthodoxy, then as now, believes that the soul of the human is a creation, forever different in nature from the Deity. Not unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, who recognize a transcendental “Buddha Nature” or “Atman” respectively in the human, Gnosticism looks upon men and women as gods and goddesses who have forgotten who they are. Humans are caught in a predicament wherein the limitations imposed by physical existence are combined with a triple ignorance: ignorance of our origins, of our true nature, and of our ultimate destiny. It is from this predicament that the Gnostic aspires to be freed by Gnosis.

### **SALVATION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE**

An early Gnostic statement defines the nature of Gnosis in the following manner: What makes us free is the Gnosis

of who we were  
of what we have become  
of where we were  
of wherein we have been cast

of whereto we are hastening  
of what we are being freed  
of what birth really is  
of what rebirth really is.

The person who intuitively receives accurate answers to these questions is receiving liberating Gnosis. Inasmuch as it is ignorance that keeps us enslaved, it is obvious that the kind of knowledge which removes ignorance, brings about our liberation. It is as if we were enmeshed in a great, malefic cocoon, and with the coming of such knowledge the cocoon began to unravel, until at last we could stand again in the sunlight of the true God, freed from our fetters.

It might be assumed by some that this liberating Gnosis can be achieved by the individual without any outside aid. Such, however, was not the understanding of the Gnostics. To be liberated from our predicament, we require help, although we certainly must contribute our own efforts.

Orthodox Christians believe that Jesus incarnated in order to save them by his suffering and death. Gnostics always held that Jesus came into this world as their helper so that with His aid they might attain to liberating Gnosis. Neither did Gnostics hold that Jesus was the only such salvific helper to appear in the long course of human history. From earliest times Messengers of the Light have come forth from the true God in order to assist humans in their quest for salvific knowledge. Some of the messianic figures of this sort mentioned in Gnostic scriptures are: Seth (the third son of Adam), Jesus, and in the later Gnostic movement, the Iranian prophet Mani.

Gnostics never looked to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather they desired release from unconscious-

ness and incomprehension, whereby they meant primarily ignorance of spiritual realities. Salvation, (or liberation) is a potential present in every man and woman, and it is not vicarious but individual. The great Messengers of the Light come to stimulate this potential and they do so not by their death but by their lives. The ministry of these Messengers is twofold: first, they bring us teachings which lead our minds and hearts to Gnosis: and, second, they confer liberating mysteries, which with their mystic grace bring the fullness of liberating Gnosis which is thus sealed in our spirits forever.

The nature of Gnostic liberating mysteries has been a matter of conjecture for a very long time. Many scholars of the last two centuries were unfavorably disposed toward both myth and sacrament. Frequently they relegated the mythic and the sacramental aspect of Gnosticism to either some sort of early immature developments which were designed to mature into philosophy, or on the other hand, they regarded them as phenomena indicating decadence. The latest research has proven all of these contentions wrong. Myth and sacrament were not incidental byproducts of Gnostic spirituality but were its heart and essence. The Gospel of Philip of the Nag Hammadi collection presents us with an entire volume of Gnostic sacramental theology; other indications of sacramental Gnosis are ubiquitous in the currently available documents. Gnosticism is thus revealed as a tradition, possessing its own myths and its own sacramental mysteries, its own priesthood and spiritual lineage leading back to the great Gnostic teachers of old. Those who expect a totally individualistic, spontaneous spirituality unmediated by tradition and formal content in Gnosticism will be disappointed.

Today we are experiencing what might be called a modest

Gnostic renaissance. The possibility exists that the Gnostic Renaissance at the end of the Twentieth and at the beginning of the Twenty-first Centuries may in some ways represent a parallel to the Hermetic-Humanistic Renaissance of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries. As the then newly rediscovered Hermetic literature fueled the great cultural rebirth of that historical epoch, so the similar rediscovery of the Gnostic scriptures in our period may lead to similar results. The stone that the builders rejected may become the cornerstone once more; what the blindness of churchly politics rejected nearly two thousand years ago may find its way into the spirituality of the new century and new millennium. Be that as it may, books that bring us closer to the wisdom of the Gnostics ought to be welcomed. When such a book comes to us from the pen of one of the wise men of this age, Manly P. Hall, it is to be welcomed with particular joy.



The following treatise authored by the late Manly P. Hall consists of several inter-related essays concerning the Gnostics. As indicated by the subtitle of his work, our author regarded Gnosticism as the key to Esoteric Christianity. For this insight alone we ought to congratulate him most profusely. Indeed, there can be no Esoteric Christianity without Gnosticism, for in a very real sense the Wisdom of the Knowing Ones is the original Esoteric Christianity itself. Take away the contribution of the Gnostics, and all the non-mainstream spiritual structures of alternative mystical Christianity fall like a house of cards. Anyone calling himself an Esoteric Christian who disregards the Gnostics remains ignorant of the best and greatest resource of the alternative

approach to the inner core of the Christian faith.

Today we know that Gnosticism is very much alive. In Iraq and Iran there lives a substantial religious minority known as the Mandaeans, who are ancient Semitic Gnostics who have survived into our days. Also, much information has come to light in recent years concerning the great and noble religion of the Cathars, or Albigensians, who practiced their explicitly Gnostic religion openly during the Middle Ages in Europe. Though cruelly exterminated by the minions of the particularly unenlightened Catholicism of their day, some of these Gnostics also survived and have continued their religious life. In many ways and forms Gnostics walk in the light of day again.

The writer of this introduction wishes to felicitate the Philosophical Research Society and its president, Dr. Obadiah Harris, for deciding to publish this work. This introduction was certainly also intended to serve as a tribute to the late Manly P. Hall, whose memory continues to live for all of us who have known him or have studied his works.

*Stephan A. Hoeller*



## Chapter One

### Gnosticism, the Key to Esoteric Christianity

In the first century of the Christian era the intellectual world was extending its inquiries along the lines set down by the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. Plato had set up the doctrine of causes. His philosophy was devoted to those larger and general truths which may be defined collectively as universals. Through him the conception of an organized universe was introduced to Mediterranean civilization. This organization originated in archetypes, that is, grand patterns in causes. These patterns, formed by the terms and elements of a divine geometry, enclosed material life within a network of cosmic energies.

Aristotle, reacting dramatically to the Platonic challenge, was endowed by nature with an organization of faculties which resented the domination of intangibles. He did not deny the Platonic scheme of things and held that Plato's vi-

sion was unassailable; not necessarily because it was true, but because the elements involved were beyond the attack of intellectual criticism. Aristotle loved to argue, but argument about intangibles could not be conclusive. He could not win his argument on Plato's grounds.

Seeking a more substantial footing, Aristotle emphasized the significance of tangibles. Here was a sphere of obvious facts. There was room for argument in matters of implication, but the facts themselves were incontrovertible. Thus he found security in the contemplation of the knowable. He set up an organization in nature by reducing the facts and their reasonable extensions into categories. He challenged Plato to come down to earth and meet him on the level of things known.

There is no indication that Plato accepted the challenge. Although the men were in close association, there never was a complete meeting of the minds, and as a consequence, subsequent generations inherited a legacy of unfinished business. Universals were defined, particulars were organized and classified, but the interval between universals and particulars became a more and more important consideration.

It was this interval between invisible causes and visible effects that burdened the intellectual world during the First Century A.D. The human mind engaged in the systematic process of building bridges to link cause to effect and effect to cause.

The two extremes were in themselves irreconcilable, at least mentally. But in nature itself they were reconciled. There must be an explanation to fit the facts. This was the broad challenge in the world of thought, and it resulted in the creation of a school of intellectuals who became the leaders of a revolutionary discovery in the sphere of mind. This

discovery produced Gnosticism, and the group supporting the new solution to the pressing dilemma was known as the Gnostics.

Gnosticism is defined as *emanationism*, or a philosophy of emanations. If two qualities cannot meet in substance, they can be brought together only by extension. Universals cannot become particulars and particulars cannot become universals, but universals exist according to degrees and particulars exist according to conditions.

For example, the ancients recognized four elements ascending from the most solid, which was earth, to the most dense, which was air. The ascending order of the elements caused the highest to be the least material. That which is least material is most like that which is spiritual; thus matter exists in an ascending scale of conditions, qualifications, modifications and rarefactions of itself.

Spirit, which is the common substance of universals, likewise exists according to states. Spirit per se, that is, in its own nature, is unknowable. But from spirit proceed things spiritual according to a descending order. Intellect is an intangible pertaining to the order of spirit, yet to a degree it has formal dimension and proportion and is subject to definition. Energy, or force as it was known in old times, is likewise an extension of spirit, but this extension is subject to greater limitations than intellect because it is definable. All definitions define natures according to their limitations. Axiomatically, definition is limitation.

A descending order of spiritual qualities, less spiritual as they depart from their own substance and cause, is therefore acceptable by the mind. Conversely, an ascending order of things material, less material as they depart from their substance and source, matter, is also appreciable to the reason.

What could be more reasonable, therefore, than to assume that the two opposites can meet on a common ground.

Of course emanationism assumes the existence of two co-eternal realities, one spiritual and the other material. This, Aristotle would allow, for he regarded matter as immortal, without beginning or end. He also accepted the eternity of spirit. The existence of two eternal principles endeared Aristotle to the Churchmen because they found in his doctrine the comfort they sought for their own belief in the eternity of good and evil and the endless warfare between God and the Devil.

A number of modern scientists are also inclined to favor Aristotle's philosophical anthropomorphism. Whether or not spirit exists belongs to the sphere of uncertainties, but, the eternity of matter is a comforting thought for those seeking something permanent in an impermanent universe.

Interesting speculation can result from such questions as, "Is spirit the highest degree of matter?" Or, "Is matter the lowest degree of spirit?" This brings complications, however. Are spirit and matter qualities of one essence differing only in degree, or are they two utterly irreconcilable opposites for which no common denominator exists? If the two extremes are equally inevitable and indestructible, which is the superior? Has either any need for the other? Is the action of spirit upon matter a kind of cosmic incident or accident, and can matter modify spirit? The Scholastics struggled with these issues for centuries, and the results, though stimulating to the intellectual faculties, were far from solutional of any practical problem.

Plato held that matter was an extension of spirit—that part of universal being most remote from the spiritual quality. He used the analogy of light and darkness. Light is a

principle, but darkness is not a principle—it is merely the absence of light. The Aristotelians, not to be outdone, suggested the possibility that darkness could be a principle and that light could equally well be regarded as the absence of darkness. Light was incidental; darkness was inevitable. Light could temporarily dispel darkness, but all light must ultimately fail, and in the failure of light the eternity of darkness was revealed.

The vital element of precedence was also involved. Did light precede darkness or did darkness precede light? That which precedes must inevitably include that which succeeds it. Did darkness contain the potential of light, or did light contain the potential of darkness? Most systems infer that darkness preceded light and is therefore more ancient, more universal, and more real. Suns are foci of light set up in darkness, but in quantity, darkness always exceeds light because light is always surrounded by an immeasurable area composed of the absence of light.

Is absence then greater than presence? Presence always exists in a field consisting of the absence of itself. One condition is not definable without the other. They are *co-eternal* and *co-dependent*, with absence always in excess of presence.

It is like the problem of food and appetite. Hunger is the absence of food. Food is the solution of hunger. Food is real and definable. Hunger has no dimension or appearance. Which then, is the reality? Food will remove hunger, but only for the time being. No matter how much food there may be, hunger remains, and it is necessary to miss only a few meals to reveal its eternal presence.

If light is food and darkness is hunger, which is the more real? Food is a temporary solution to an eternal problem. All this is very confusing.

If darkness is equivalent to space, then light may be equivalent to time. This again presents a variety of complications. Can time exist without its space equivalent, eternity? Is eternity the emptiness of time or the fullness of time? Is it all or nothing? If it is all time, then eternity or space is superior to time. If eternity is the privation of time, then time is the reality and eternity is merely an illusion of the mind. There is an illusion here somewhere, but which of these abstractions is the stronger depends upon which school you belong to.

The early Christian concept of God further complicated the already confused picture. Most pagan systems of religious philosophy conceived of the supreme spiritual power as identical with the substance and nature of space. Thus the space dimension was regarded as complete fullness. To our physical perceptions space is emptiness, properly described as *nothing*.

To the pagans this nothing was simply *no thing*. It was not emptiness but the abstraction of forms. It was universal life unconditioned, unmanifested, undifferentiated, and in its own essential state, undefinable.

The early Christian Church regarded Deity as outside of the plan of creation. God was a person, separate from the world, which he had formed. This divinity ruled the universe from some extra-universal throne. God exercised despotism over matter, molding it into a variety of forms. Each of these forms was ensouled by a separate life principle, which descended to it from the nature of Deity. Thus, to the pagans, God was a power emerging through the processes of spiritual and material generations. But to the Christians, he was a separate and alien force, controlling the creational processes by an absolute tyranny of the divine will.

The Gnostics belonged among the pagan groups inasmuch as they believed the universe to be the body of God through which the spiritual power manifested as a constant impulse toward unfoldment and growth. At the same time, the Gnostics attempted an explanation of Christian mystical philosophy according to a basically pagan tradition. In this way, the Gnostic cult succeeded in offending both the pagans and the Christians. Each felt that its viewpoint was compromised.

Gnosticism was the great heresy of the Ante-Nicene period of church history. The fathers of primitive Christianity, having elected themselves the sole custodians of salvation, exercised this prerogative to stamp out all traces of Christianity as a philosophical code. They particularly resented the Gnostics because these essentially pagan thinkers insisted upon pointing out the non-Christian sources and elements, which had contributed to the rise of the Christian sect.

The early bishops, saints and martyrs, such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, Tertullian and Theodoret, divided their activities between the somewhat diversified tasks of preaching brotherly love, and a gospel of charity and piety on the one hand, while on the other hand, formulating vicious and slanderous attacks upon the members of all dissenting creeds.

No pious ante-Nicene Father had proved his zeal, and incidentally, his bigotry, until he had prepared an elaborate treatise against heresies, and pitched a sanctified pebble at some heresiarch.

All good Churchmen sought to demonstrate that pagans in general, and Gnostics in particular, were promulgators of hateful and misleading doctrines. It was intimated and in some cases actually affirmed, that a perverse spirit (the faith-

ful old Devil) had raised up teachers of false doctrines in an effort to compromise the infallible revelations of the apostles and their legitimate descendants. Thus, the learned Fathers, who incidentally seemed better informed on heresies than orthodoxies, refuted all of the doctrines of the heretics with one grand gesture.

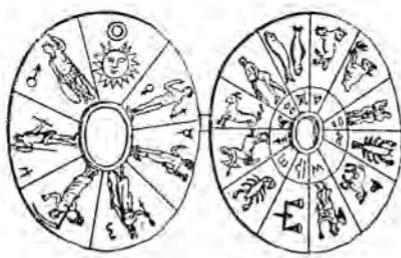
It may be seen, therefore, that the Gnostics occupied an extremely precarious position. They were reconcilers of extreme differences, and the way of the peacemaker is usually quite as hard as that of the transgressor. Gnosticism was despised by the Church because it sought to interpret Christian mysticism in terms of the metaphysical systems of the Greeks, Egyptians, and Chaldeans. At the same time, it was openly opposed by contemporary pagan philosophers, particularly certain Neoplatonists, because it appeared to accept, at least in part, the unphilosophic and illogical tenets forced upon an unsuspecting world by the Christian enthusiasts. Attacked from both sides, and gradually crushed by the sheer weight of numbers, Gnosticism finally passed into limbo after a desperate struggle for existence over a period of several centuries.

Strange to relate, Gnosticism is indebted to its enemies for the survival of certain of its teachings. Until comparatively recently, all the information available on the subject is preserved in the writings of those excited and irritable ante-Nicene Fathers who went into elaborate details concerning the substance of the heresies they condemned. Although the Gnostics have vanished from the earth, the analogies, which they established between Christian and pagan doctrines, have proved invaluable to students of comparative religion.

Among the names that stand out in the chronicles of Gnosticism, three are outstanding: Simon Magus, Basilides

and Valentinus. They have been men of exceptional brilliance, for they were singled out by the Church Fathers as the objects of particular and continued persecution. Simon Magus, the Syrian Gnostic, was subjected to an especially spiteful and unchristian tirade of abuse. His character was torn to shreds, and he was held up to public scorn, not only as a sorcerer but as a horrible example of the depth of spiritual, moral, and physical depravity into which an individual can descend.

Basilides and Valentinus were both men of such exceptional personal integrity that even the careful combings of the clergy were not able to bring to light anything that could be interpreted as deprecatory. It was evident, therefore, that



GNOSTIC ASTROLOGICAL SIGNET

these philosophers were heresiarchs of the most dangerous kind. They were the more deadly because they concealed their diabolical perversities behind an appearance of virtue and integrity. If a pagan had the ap-

pearance of virtue it was because the Devil conjured up an illusion in the hope of thus undermining the omnipotence of the Church.

If any group, which shared in the Christian mystery, possessed the esoteric secrets of the early Church, it was the Gnostics. This order preserved to the end the high ethical and rational standards which confer honor upon a teaching. The Church therefore attacked Gnosticism vigorously and

relentlessly, recognizing these mystical philosophers as being the most formidable adversaries to the temporal power of Christian theology.

In summing up 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 factor 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 astrology 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.

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 seven 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 Revelations 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 great Gnostics, may have been

influenced by Buddhistic metaphysics. This is particularly evident in that part of the teaching of the cult in which Christ is described descending through the seven worlds on his way to physical incarnation. Like the Buddha, he ensouls a body on each of the 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 the condition of not-being.

Valentinus, the Gnostic, in his vision of the order of creation, wrote: "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 depends upon aether, and fruits produced from Bythos (profundity), and the foetus born from the womb." This is 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. "He who stood, stands, and will stand." By nature and substance unknowable, he is the incorruptible form who projects from himself an image, and this image ordains all things. From his own eternal soul 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*)

Ialdabaoth (*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 the world who had nothing in common with him. The Demiurge was the personification of matter, the monad of the material sphere, the seed of the world within, which 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 correspond 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*)

Ailoaios (*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 ascending 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

finally 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 rebels, 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 extends 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 swallow her up. 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 virtue 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, determining 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 inspired 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 illumina-

tion 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, shutting 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 re-absorption of all the spiritual light into the pleroma or fullness, whence it originally descended."

Gnostic Christianity conceived of salvation without benefit of exoteric 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 mystic sacraments of the Gnostics, on the other hand, were instituted by the Christos to facilitate knowledge of the truth. 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 power of the Christian Church.

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. In the ancient system of numerology, the number equivalent to Abraxas is 365. Therefore, this divinity represents the 365 aeons or great spiritual cycles which together make up the nature of the Supreme Father. The natural physical symbol for the source of spiritual light is the visible sun, the source of physical light. Therefore Abraxas is a sun god. The deity itself is a composite creature with the head of a rooster, the body of a human being, and with legs ending in serpents. This Gnostic pantheos represents the supreme principle expressing five attributes or emanations. The head of the rooster signifies Phronesis, foresight or vigilance. The two arms bearing the whip and shield are Dynamis and Sophia, power and wisdom. The two serpents forming the legs are Nous and Logos, wisdom and understanding, by which the figure is supported. The human body is a mystical intimation that all these powers shall be revealed or perfected in man.

Although the early Church did everything possible to exterminate the Gnostics, cupidity played a part in the survival of some holy relics. The Gnostic hierophants identified themselves by their signets or jewels of recognizance. These signets were usually intaglios, plain on one side and with the figure of Abraxas or the lion face of the sun on the other. The stones were set with the plain surface on the outside to make identification of the wearer more difficult.

The gems were frequently engraved with Greek letters around the central design. These letters represented magic words, or the name of God. The more commonly used stones were carnelian, crystal, bloodstone, and emerald matrix. The Church Fathers had no mind to destroy valuable property, so the rings were saved and also some other inscribed gems containing prayers or fragments of Gnostic philosophy and magic. The *abraxoids*, stones bearing the figure of Abraxas, are exceedingly rare, but we are able to reproduce with this article a fine example from the collection of our Society. There are small collections of these gems in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and the Library of the Vatican at Rome. Gnostic intaglios date from the First, Second and Third Centuries of the Christian era. The abraxoids originated in Northern Egypt, and the strongest seat of the Egyptian Gnosis was the library city of Alexandria.

The Gnostics were only one of several groups which attempted to reconcile pagan and Christian doctrines during the first five centuries. These groups insisted that there was nothing essentially new in the Christian dispensation.

The Syrian cult was merely a reformation of long existing institutions; a new interpretation of doctrines sanctified by the veneration of countless nations and peoples of the past. In fact, even the Christians themselves, did not realize that they were the custodians of a unique revelation until the growing power of the Church forced this conclusion upon them.

Early in this article we discussed the subject of emanations by which irreconcilable opposites appear to mingle in the middle distances between extremes. The Gnostic cult itself, represented an effort to attain this condition of moderation by searching out the Christian elements in pagan phi-

losophy and the pagan elements in Christian philosophy.

The Gnostics sought to bind the two great dispensations of their time into a unified group dedicated to the perpetuation and dissemination of spiritual wisdom. Gnosticism was a temperate zone between frigid paganism and torrid *christianity*. But at that particular time, neither the pagans nor the Christians had a mind for temperance. The two great institutions realized that they were locked in a battle to the death. Christianity was certainly the aggressor, and there is very little evidence that paganism was essentially intolerant. After all, there were a hundred pagan institutions of spiritual and intellectual culture. These were not necessarily in mutual agreement, but they had dwelt together in comparative peace for thousands of years.

The Romans summed up the situation rather well: The citizen may worship at any shrine or temple that pleases his fancy. He may accept the cults of Egypt, favor the Magian religion of Persia, or pay homage to the Greek divinities. He may worship in all temples or in none, but regardless of the definitions of his faith, he must pay his taxes.

Gnostic intaglios bearing the form of Abraxas are called variously abraxoids, abraxaster gems and abraxas gems.

According to Dr. J. Bellermann, the Egyptian Gnostics of the first three centuries held the figure of Abraxas in high esteem. They used to symbolize both teacher and teaching as the subject and object of their transcendental researches and mystical speculations. The signets were tokens and pass-symbols among the initiates of the fraternity, by which they recognized each other and gained admission to their assemblies. The abraxoid was also an amulet against evil, and a talisman of power. It further served the practical purpose of a seal which could be affixed to documents.



**THE GREAT SIGNET OF THE GNOSIS**

*Enlarged three times the original size*

Most abraxoids are crudely carved. The cutting appears to consist of a variety of notches and was done with a small, coarse wheel. The materials were selected for their magical properties, and included jasper, chalcedony, fibrous hematite, and other substances of no great value. Fine abraxoids in crystal originated outside of the sect itself, and were used by astrologers and magicians. Many Gnostic gems bear figures of Greek or Egyptian divinities and magical inscriptions. The form bearing only the rooster-headed deity is the

most rare, and only a few examples are known to be in private collection

Perhaps the pagans were temperate with a slight tendency toward the chilly side. Their religions were scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic. They discussed God reasonably rather than impulsively, and they approached the problem of living as a serious business to be undertaken scientifically.

There is also the much discussed subject of pagan morals. In the long perspective of the ages there appears to be very little essential difference between ancient and modern delinquency. The old Greeks and Romans and their Egyptian and Chaldean cousins were pious in their pronouncements and somewhat inadequate in the personal application of their impersonal convictions. As one writer expressed it: "It is a little difficult to distinguish clearly between Christian and pagan vice. All men, in all times, under all conditions, and in all places, have found it difficult to be virtuous in the presence of intensive temptation."

It has been suggested that Christianity was a spontaneous emergence of personal nobility; a powerful revulsion against the indescribable and utterly detestable private and public corruption of the pagan world. It seems to me that there is a hint of bias in this perspective. While the early Church was gathering its strength for mighty works, paganism also was producing examples of high-mindedness and fineness of character equal to anything that the Christian could advance by way of comparison.

From the period 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., civilization received its priceless legacy of religious foundations, philosophical doctrines, scientific institutions, artistic and literary monuments, and its enduring codes of laws, statutes, and regulations of human conduct. From medicine to astrono-

my, from architecture to poetry, from agriculture to ethics, human talents and abilities were being wisely directed toward what Lord Bacon describes as "reasonable ends." During this period the modern concept of democracy unfolded, universal suffrage was advocated by the Roman Empire, and universal legitimacy was decreed. A Roman lady of the Second Century had more legal standing than a modern woman living in the State of New York in the 19th or early 20th Century. Politicians have always been a seedy lot, but Roman law was essentially sound and was enforced with a reasonable degree of efficiency.

Most of the progress attained in the thousand years aforementioned was accomplished by pagan men and women. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, was a pagan. So likewise was Ptolemy, the father of geography. The multiplication table was given to us by a pagan, and the first Christian hymn was pagan music with new words. In the four centuries directly preceding the Christian era, the pagan world produced nearly six hundred immortal leaders of human thought, human industry, and human achievement. Without these men, modern civilization would not exist. How many outstanding leaders of equal or approximate ability were produced in the first four centuries of a Christian dominated Mediterranean civilization? We leave the reader to ponder this issue and discover, if he can, any such array of intellect outside of a circle of theological controversialists whose contributions were completely sterile.

It is a little difficult to imagine that men of the caliber of Plato, Euclid, Hippocrates, Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, could have been the products of a religious or moral condition as corrupt as the Christian Fathers would have us believe. If like begets like, greatness must arise from great-

ness. The wisdom of the individual reveals the essential wisdom of his time and place. The contemporaries of Cato the Elder may not all have shared the largeness of his mind, but the materials necessary to create that largeness must have been available and readily accessible to such as were by nature inclined to largeness. Even in our own times, all men do not take advantage of the intellectual and spiritual opportunities which civilization offers, but it would be unkind and unfair to deny the existence of truth and wisdom.

We have no intention of belittling the essential principles of the Christian dispensation, but we are inclined to agree with Mohammed that the ante-Nicene Church Fathers went to work systematically to organize a theological system, so narrow and so ridden with intolerances, that Jesus himself could not have been a member of his own church. Had Jesus been born again in 350 A. D., he would have been pronounced a heretic and probably crucified a second time for merely repeating the words attributed to him in the Gospels.

Many enlightened pagans regarded the teachings of Jesus with the highest veneration. They saw in him one of their own kind, a noble and heroic man who had dedicated his life to the restatement of those noble principles and truths which are indispensable to the perfection of human character. Very few pagans ever attacked the teachings of Jesus, but they did oppose the organization of those teachings into a sect obviously dedicated to political anarchy. From the beginning, the Christian Church was resolved to overthrow the pagan world and establish itself as both the spiritual and temporal autocrat of civilization. This brought the two systems to an impasse. The struggle was no longer one for survival, but for complete and solitary domination.

Groups like the Gnostics attempted solution through reconciliation. There was room in the world for more than one religion, and spiritual institutions professing identical purposes should be able to cooperate without ulterior motive. The pagan and Christian institutions should acknowledge their mutual interdependence and derive inspiration from each other.

Intellectual controversies have little effect upon the natural processes of life. It is impossible to conceive of a Christian or a pagan oak tree or a Christian or a pagan sunset.

Men of all faiths are born, live their lives, useful or useless according to temperament, and having fulfilled their span, depart from the theater of this world in spite of belief or unbelief.

The garden of the pagan farmer flourishes with proper care, and the garden of the Christian farmer is also green if he uses the same industry. Both gardens fail by neglect. The rain falls upon the just and the unjust, and belief or unbelief adds nothing to the stature of the man or the contents of his barns. The Christian stomach-ache is just as painful as pagan dyspepsia, and the prayers of the infidels are answered or unanswered exactly the same as the prayers of the most orthodox bigot. Why then should we become so concerned about what we believe? The richness to ourselves lies in the fact that we believe.

Our personal acceptance is the reality of something supreme and beautiful, noble and wise. It is necessary to our personal security. The Buddhist finds peace in the shrines of his faith. The Shinto is reassured inwardly by a pilgrimage to a sacred mountain. The Dervish finds God by dance and song. Each in his own way enjoys the benefit of spiritual consolation. There is no evidence in nature as to which faith

has preferment. Religious controversies are peculiar to the human intellectual equipment. Animals have no interest in theology but obey the laws of their kind, deriving instruction from experience.

Religion is necessary to man, but competitive theologies are neither necessary nor desirable. Religious prejudice, religious intolerance, and religious fanaticism are psychoses. They are irrational fixations, which unbalance the reason, and if uncorrected, may lead to incurable mental disease.

There is a great deal of difference between a philosophical system and a theological system. Most philosophers are by nature fitted for abstract thinking. Their primary concern is to discover the universal plan as it operates through the symbolism of creation. They have no desire to stamp this plan with the signet of any creed, but through their contemplation, they discover the grandeur of the world. This grandeur itself becomes their spiritual code. They are satisfied to accept the motion of universal principle moving according to absolute and unchanging law. Their definition of virtue is derived through the observation of the operation of law, upon the substances of nature.

Philosophers may differ among themselves, but their differences do not prevent them from mingling as human beings bound together by a common realization of mental inadequacy and a redeeming sense of humor. Their attitudes can be estimated by the adaptation of their requirements of a familiar saying: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Theological systems are especially deficient in a sense of humor. In fact, with most of them, happiness itself is a mild form of heresy. Religions approach the wonders of creation emotionally rather than mentally. Instead of accepting the

world as it is, the theologian is forever trying to inform the world in the terms of what he feels the world should be. Philosophers and scientists are working toward conclusions, but most religious leaders are working from conclusions.

Possibly the difficulty is that emotions are intensely personal. Emotional reflexes arise from our own reactions to the things that have happened to us. Our personal experiences become the measuring stick by which we attempt to acclimate universals. If we have suffered, suffering is the universal plan. If we have been unfairly treated, there is no justice in the world. By investing the divine powers with personalities like our own, we create a pantheon of nervous, excitable, erratic, inconsistent, uncomfortable, frustrated, neurotic and inhibited divinities who run the world with the same lack of ability with which we administer our own affairs.

The philosopher Pythagoras defined Deity as an infinite being whose soul was formed of the substance of truth and whose body was formed of the substance of light. Such a definition arises from a deep, gentle contemplation of the beautiful and the good.

How different is this conception of Deity, which is great enough to sustain all life impersonally and impartially, from the God concept of theology. One brilliant theologian declared that the earth was divided into thirty parts. The races and nations inhabiting twenty-seven of these parts were doomed to eternal perdition because they did not belong to his church. Such a statement is so obviously unreasonable that it has little favor in our more liberal times.

The concepts of God in theology have been worked over considerably in the last century, but a number of absurd misconceptions still linger on to plague the private citizen and frustrate the United Nations' program. While the majority

of moderns are inclined to allow various races to worship as they please, this emotion arises from indifference rather than an enlightened liberalism. We have not yet reached the degree of maturity by which we may perceive as a fact that religious systems are simply human efforts to interpret a divine mystery. It is the mystery and not the interpretation that is real. If we are a normal, healthy, growing people, our interpretations must and should grow and change. We are not heretics because we change our minds. We are not untrue to God because we discard old forms of belief. The end of religion is the internal knowledge of the divine power. This knowledge brings with it a greater measure of veneration and love and a firmer desire to live according to the beauty of the divine plan. Names and sects and creeds are important only while the nature of truth itself is unattained. When we understand the principle, we become tolerant of that variety of forms which men have built in the name of the Nameless.

The Gnostics sought to find the esoteric tradition of the mystery schools in the Christian revelation. They told the story, amplified it, enriched its emblems and figures and accepted the Christian Christ as a form of the Eternal Hero of the World. To them Christ was Dionysus, Osiris, Adonis, and even Buddha. Being a philosophical sect, they were seeking the universals of the new faith.

They had no interest in an ecclesiastical system, for they realized that no man can be saved by addicting himself to a theology. The value lay in the soul experience. If Christianity could bestow a new dimension upon the internal conviction of realities, then Christianity was important. This importance deserved the respect and admiration of all thoughtful and sincere men. The new sect was valuable for those things

in it, which were eternal. As an innovation it was worthless. It must justify its existence by proving that it participated in the esoteric tradition of the ages.

All the philosophical schools made use of the symbolism of a soter or high priest of the inner mystery of salvation. It was evident that in the Christian sect Christ was this soter. It was a philosophic belief that the universe was created by the wisdom of God. This wisdom was revealed through the magnificent framework of laws, which maintain the order of the cosmos.

In the Gnostic system, wisdom was the second Logos which came forth out of the eternal will which is the first Logos. Will emanates wisdom, and wisdom in turn, engenders action of the active principle. Action is the third Logos called the Holy Ghost, represented by a dove beating the air with its wings.

The word ghost is from *geist* and in its original form the term signified a breath or motion of air. Our word gust as applied to an agitation of the atmosphere, comes from the same root. The Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, is the mover of the substance of the material creation. Thus we have a basic trinity of will, wisdom and activity.

In the Gnostic philosophy special emphasis is placed upon the principle of wisdom, which is regarded as the Universal Savior, and the mediator between cause and effect. The nature of wisdom itself is a profound mystery implying far more than our present definition of the word. The wisdom principle is a compound consisting of two qualities bound together by an internal sympathy. It is the first extension of unity toward diversity, and at the same time, it is the least degree of that diversity.

It is a mistake to regard wisdom in the terms of the Gnosis

as originating from intellect or in itself intellectual. Wisdom is not of the order of thinking; it is of the order of knowing. Knowledge is possible only through the establishment of an intense sympathy between the thing knowing and the thing known. The subject and the object must be bound into an intimate compound by an experienced consciousness. Wisdom, therefore, is a kind of artificial unity made possible by the power of the will. Like the philosophers' stone described by the alchemists as the man-made diamond, wisdom is a synthetic essential substance perfected by art.

The knowledge aspect of wisdom is philosophy; it is the power to perceive the divine nature, the divine will, and the divine purpose in all structures, substances, and processes of nature. True philosophy is an experience of consciousness toward the discovery of truth.

The love aspect of wisdom, the Sophia of the Gnosis, is natural religion or faith. Wisdom is experienced as an emotional impact. The universal realities are felt and estimated in terms of the feelings which they stimulate within the personality. The wisdom-love apperceptive power, if exercised as the instrument to attain the state of knowledge, results in the perfect experience of God and nature.

As is usual with philosophical groups, the Gnostics were individualists and opposed to any intense program of organization. The sect consisted of numerous small groups each dominated by one or more intellectuals with strong personal convictions. Gnosticism was many schools enclosed within a loose program of integration with few restrictions upon the convictions and tastes of the members. Circles of Gnostic thought sprang up in most of the countries bordering upon the Mediterranean. Each of these circles contributed original ideas to the larger pattern of Gnostic thought. These

groups of original thinkers were influenced by the religious and philosophic systems which flourished in their environment. The Gnosis was a purpose rather than a cult. It was searching for itself in all structures of ideas which appeared strange or different.

For lack of organization the Gnostics presented no united front, and lacked the machinery to rally their forces against any common enemy. At that time the rising Christian Church was the enemy of all pagan movements. It had the advantage of recognizing the importance—from a temporal standpoint at least—of building a solid, internal mechanism. The isolated communities were drawn together under unified ecclesiastic authority. As a result of this premeditated program, the Church was in a position to impose its will, by force if necessary, upon the scattered and unorganized pagan schools.

Gnosticism spread by a process of free growth. It unfolded like a plant, extending according to impulse and with no dogmatic concepts. It was, therefore, extremely liberal and by constitution, non-militant. It suffered from the uncertainties natural to extreme liberalism.

The Gnostics have been held responsible for the rapid development of the temporal authority of the Christian Church. The ante-Nicene Fathers united their resources to stamp out Gnosticism. Had they failed, the Church would itself have ceased so far as political authority was concerned. The early bishops learned the important lesson that a religion must be organized in order to survive as a temporal institution. They learned their lessons so well that organization has been a primary consideration from their time to the present day.

It may be reasonably asked if the Church had any real

justification for its program of exterminating the Gnostics. From a broad impersonal viewpoint, the action of the Fathers cannot be condoned, but according to their own convictions and beliefs, their actions are quite understandable. The Gnostics accepted the Christian concepts of Christ into their own system, and interpreted the Christian mystery by means of their elaborate system of heterodox mythology. Their Christology took on the splendor of Asiatic legendary and was involved in elaborate metaphysical imagination.

The Church Fathers felt that heathen philosophers literally had stolen their own most priceless possession, the Christ concept, from them. Worse than this, if anything could be worse, their Christ was being interpreted as to be used against the very Church that was created to advance his cause. Such a state of affairs was intolerable and called for heroic measures.

The Gnostics further embarrassed the Christian community by rejecting most of the Old Testament, questioning the inspiration of the Apostles, denying the infallibility of the clergy, and selecting only St. Paul as a trustworthy authority. These critics had the brazen effrontery to select at pleasure from the storehouse of Christian lore. That which they accepted immediately lost its orthodox Christian complexion, reducing the Church , so they felt, to a minor sect among the pagans.

The devotees of Christianity were outraged and forgot their own differences long enough to meet this challenge with every means available. Numerically overwhelmed and out-organized, the Gnostics gradually faded from view to survive only as elements in later systems of thought.

It is not easy to estimate the true proportions of a philosophy which survives principally in the writings of its op-

ponents. We may be certain that no effort was made to present Gnosticism attractively in the writings of the Church Fathers. Furthermore, the Gnostics lost the confidence of the pagan historians because they incorporated certain elements of Christian symbolism into their own system. They were bitterly attacked by the Greek and Egyptian Platonists, and were left without any informed apologists. Even the fragments, which have descended to this time, have to some degree been corrupted by unsympathetic editors and translators.

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 ship owner 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.

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, his ideas were rejected with such firmness and, as he regarded it, intolerance, that he drifted toward Syrian Gnosticism. His determination to reconvert 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 Roman Communion.

Marcion was one of the first to recognize the basic inconsistency between the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. He criticized the Fathers for imposing the Mosaic disposition upon the moral and ethical teachings of the Messianic ministry. If the two books—the Old and New Testaments—had equal or even approximate sanctity, there

could be but one answer and that was, there were two Gods. The God of the Old Testament, Marcion called the just God, and the divine person of the New Testament, he called the good God. The just God was a God of wrath and vengeance sitting in judgment over the world. This God demanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and only the blind, unquestioning, and complete obedience of his creation satisfied this universal autocrat.

The good God, who was superior to the just God and dwelt beyond the sphere of retribution, was a God of love and benevolence. He demanded from his creatures gentleness of spirit, friendship, brotherhood and the forgiveness of sin. It was this good God who was the Father of Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ was regarded as an incarnation or manifestation of the infinite love and wisdom of the good God. He had come to this world to free it from the despotism of unbending law and establish it in a sphere of grace.

In the doctrines of Marcion, the apostle Paul was regarded as the only immediate follower of Christ who had sensed the mystery of the two Gods. The evident mysticism of Paul's views fitted admirably into this Gnostic pattern.

Unfortunately, Marcion's doctrine presented difficulties; which broke down when analyzed by the instruments of philosophy. It was difficult to rationalize a universal plan administered by two Gods motivated by contrary purposes. The human soul, for example, was created by the just God and the human spirit was redeemed by the good God. This presented numerous complications. It required that man attain an end contrary to the purposes for which he was created and inconsistent with his sphere of life and experience. It also presented an extraordinary conflict in the delicate issue of redemption.

If we assume that those who accepted the doctrine of Marcion came ultimately to union with the good God, what was the fate of the objectors and dissenters and unbelievers? If a virtuous man chose to remain true to the just God, what was his ultimate state or reward? Did each of the deities preside over an Elysium and reward his believers? If so, there were two heavens. Such a contention in itself was doctrinally absurd. It is impossible to build a faith that will gain any numerical strength without assuming that the unbeliever is destined to ultimate misfortune. The Marcionite Churches held for the most part that those who followed after the just God found no favor even in the eyes of their selected Divinity, who rewarded them for their devotion only with perdition.

It is customary to blame Marcion for having promulgated a fantastic theology, but in simple truth the fault lay not with him, but with the early Church Fathers. His mistake was that he took their twofold scripture and came to the only possible conclusion; the two testaments were different and inconsistent; each taught a different concept of God. If both were inspired and infallible, then there must be two Gods.

The contradictions still exist, but theology has glossed them over and the modern believer has made no effort to examine impartially the substance of the conflict. The God who hardened Pharaoh's heart is still hard to reconcile with the God of love described in the Paulene Epistles.

Marcion himself appears to have been a good and kindly man, sincerely desirous of taking the doctrine of vengeance out of the Christian dispensation. His communities attracted many gentle, kindly souls, and as time went on they sought to heal the rift in the divine nature. In the end the Marcion-

ites reduced the just God to a secondary state, making him a servant and an instrument of the principle of good. 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 a while 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.

The principal surviving text of the Gnostics prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices, was the *Pistis Sophia*, which has been ascribed, probably without much justification, to Valentinus, who also lived in the Second Century. Like Marcion, he finally broke away from the Christian Church. Certainly the *Pistis Sophia* unfolds his system and should be attributed to Valentinian Gnosticism.

The Coptic manuscript of the *Pistis Sophia*, known as the Askew Codex, is in the British Museum and has been assigned to the Fourth Century. It is possible, however, that it is somewhat later. That the manuscript presents important commentary material on early Christian belief cannot be questioned.

There is also considerable probability that it preserves legends and reports widely circulated during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries. The text would indicate that an advanced degree of metaphysical speculation flourished in the Christian communities. A considerable part of the manuscript is concerned with esoteric instruction given to Mary Magdalene by Jesus himself.

Gnosticism is a powerful link between the elaborate philosophical system of Asia and the mysticism of Syria and Egypt. As such it 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.

## **Chapter Two**

### **PARALLELS BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY**

#### **GNOSTICISM: THE SCIENCE OF SALVATION**

Religions and philosophies come into existence, unfold their teachings, attain their maximum sphere of influence, and then either diminish and fade away, or are subject to broad renovations and reforms. It is possible to construct a graph which shows clearly the parallels between the motions of ideas and the evolution of organic forms in nature. From the study of such a graph, if carefully prepared, a quantity of useful information can be gathered.

Several inter-related factors influence the complicated course of a spiritual revelation. First of all, a major philosophical system nearly always originates in a period of moral or ethical confusion, resulting from a spreading revolt against some earlier school of thought that has lost its effectiveness. A new belief must also be placed in its proper setting involving the time factors and the environment in which some reformation is urgently required.

It follows that in almost every instance, beliefs originate in a local need, and therefore, develop in the restricted atmosphere of a clan, tribe, or community. They must also be considered as the productions of emergencies. The gods

long honored by a people have ceased to answer its prayers, or have no longer bestowed protection against the enemy. On the philosophical level, the experiences of the community may have advanced the people until the beliefs of their ancestors are no longer satisfactory or applicable to existing conditions.

A new teaching, in order to survive, must transcend the area, the time, and the conditions associated with its origin. A faith given to a people living in the desert, must be acceptable to those who dwell in cities. It must extend its influence through the levels of society, finding enthusiastic exponents among farmers, merchants, professional persons, and aristocrats. If it cannot adapt itself to the needs of the many, its influence will always be restricted to the few, and as these die out, the doctrine itself must perish.

There are also larger considerations. A teaching, to gain world prominence, must transcend barriers of language, the isolating factors of political systems and find ways of supplanting older beliefs or forming a cooperative partnership with them. Having thus assured a large area of influence, it must cope with the factor of time, which, in turn, is the measure by which social change is weighed and estimated.

As it is relatively impossible for any human being to foresee the mental, emotional, and physical conditions of his remote descendants, or estimate the problems that future ages must meet in order to survive, it is inevitable that men will outgrow the interpretations their forebears have placed upon spiritual and natural phenomena. Progress does not disturb facts, but it does require a new interpretation of the moral and ethical implications of realities universally accepted and respected.

It is interesting to compare situations that arose almost

simultaneously in the unfoldment of Eastern and Western civilization. For a long time, it was assumed that the timing was coincidental, but it is now suspected that some direct contact between the two hemispheres contributed to the similarities that have so long disturbed scholars. In Western civilization, which still centered around the Mediterranean area, the first century of the Christian era has been so significant as to result in our calculation of historical sequences as Before and After the beginning of the Christian era.

Let us summarize briefly what may be termed the intellectual emergency. Greek philosophy had fallen into decline, and the Grecian states were under the dominion of Rome. Roman philosophy was a negligible factor, offering very little to satisfy the inner life of the Latin people. Egyptian learning had been so seriously debased that it was little more than an abject formalism, catering to the whims of Rome. The Jewish religion was under enormous pressure because the God of Israel had been unable to preserve the freedom of his people, and had permitted the destruction of his temple in Jerusalem.

Christianity was emerging, but at that time, had very little general influence. It was one of those local beliefs that was tied too closely to the shores of Galilee to enjoy much respect from scholars or self-satisfied patricians. Primitive faiths on the borders of the Roman Empire exercised only a negligible influence, but the more advanced and stimulating concepts of the Persians were intriguing to the Roman Legion.

In various ways, systems of beliefs too old or too young to cope with the human tragedy that was being enacted in the centers of Western culture, attempted to renovate or strengthen their teachings, making them more attractive to

the multitude with its countless prejudices. Out of the collapse of the school of Athens, came the Neoplatonists and Neo-Pythagoreans of Greece, Rome, and North Africa. The Romans themselves began to produce a few idealistic leaders who sought to restore the sacred schools they had inherited from Greece and Egypt.

The Roman situation found inspiration in Neoplatonism, the most able exponent of this system among the emperors being Julian the Apostate. Egypt was in the process of revising its own system and laying the foundations for that elusive cult which has survived to us as Hermeticism, which in turn gave rise to medieval alchemy.

In the Judaic area, a forthright mysticism was evolving as a consolation in time of great sorrow. Here is the traditional source of the Sepher Yetzirah (*The Book of Formations*) and the Sepher ha Zohar (*The Book of the Splendors*). The Mishnah was taking precedence over the Torah, and after the Diaspora, the children of Israel carried their mystical aspirations, together with the strange spiritual sciences which they evolved, throughout Europe and the Near East under the broad name of Kabbalism.

Christianity, although comparatively young, sensed its own need almost immediately, and rebuilt its foundations upon the ministry of St. Paul, who emphasized strongly the mystical experience of Christ as the spirit of life, hope, consolation, and resurrection in the heart of every true believer.

Even this broad program, however, had one besetting weakness. Christianity had developed upon a level of simple needs, and naturally had little to offer to the philosopher, the scholar, and the sage. In order to solve this dilemma, the early Church Fathers condemned in general all branches of

higher intellectualism, insisting that by simple faith alone, salvation was possible. Several groups opposed this point of view, with the result that the early centuries of Christianity were plagued with schisms and heresies.

On the fringe of Christianity, where it mingled its influence with Neoplatonism and the old sacerdotal mysteries of Egypt, there developed another remarkable pattern of heterodoxies. The most famous of these were the Syrian and the Egyptian Gnosis. Around the Gnosis, and intertwining with it, at least to a degree, were the Manichaeans, Nestorians, Arianists, and pre-Islamic mystical associations of Arabia and Persia.

It was all very complicated, but with the concept of a graph in mind, the broad trends are immediately clear. Western man had reached a point of no return in his journey from antiquity to modern times. The institutions he cherished were collapsing about him. He had to either reject his faith or reform it.

As the human being is by nature religious, and simply declines to exist in a society devoid of abstract ideals, he followed the most reasonable course. He reserved his old heroes, honored the sanctuaries of his ancient beliefs, but convinced himself that beneath the surface of his former theological acceptances there were esoteric truths, spiritual laws, transcendental arts, and mystical forms of wisdom, and the time had come for these to be revealed. Having made his bridge, and having escaped in this way from the abstract and arbitrary boundaries of orthodoxy, he came into possession of an evolving religion, a faith that grew with him and could therefore be enthusiastically bestowed upon future ages. Thus came the days of the great evangelisms.

Now let us turn our attention for a moment to condi-

tions in Asia, using the same date line—the beginning of the Christian era. Everywhere on this vast Eastern continent, religions and philosophies were in trouble. Hinduism, far the oldest, was still staggering under the impact of Buddhism. From his early discourses, it is evident that Buddha actually regarded himself as a reformer of Hinduism, which was beginning to close in on the Buddhist schools. Furthermore, the old gods of India were more glamorous than the quiet, unworldly arhats who preached the way of salvation taught by the Light of Asia.

These arhats also were under difficulties. In the six hundred years after the death of Buddha, the Sanga or the Brotherhood had been confronted with numerous obstacles, and had slowly lost the tremendous impulse bestowed upon it by the personal life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. Councils had become necessary, and the Sanga had taken refuge under the protection of benevolent monarchs and princes.

It was generally assumed that Buddhism was destined to slowly fade away. Its moral code was too severe, and not many were to be found who would renounce wealth, family, social position, and even the scanty comforts of life, to wander as homeless beggars along the rough roads and paths of Bengal.

Buddhism had become a more or less exclusive order of monks, and like most such monastic groups, had slight hope of survival, and even less hope of exercising a profound influence upon the moral life of Asia. Hindu scholarship was riddled with skepticism, and strong traces of pre-scientific materialism were becoming evident. The various schools had little in common, and the only answer was the rise of some mystical tradition. This need was met by the gradual unfoldment of Yoga and Vedanta philosophy.

China was in a sad way, both politically and religiously. There was no such empire as we generally visualize when we think of the vast area of Chinese influence. There was constant warfare and bickering, rivalry of princes, and a continuing exploitation of the common people. Taoism, the mystical philosophy of Lao-tse, one of the most advanced systems ever devised by the human mind, had fallen into a kind of ceremonial magic, dealing in miracles, trying to perpetuate itself by offering more and more of consolation and less and less constructive instruction.

Confucianism was not much better off. The master himself died disillusioned and convinced that his ideals could not survive. They did live, but gradually fell into the keeping of a group of aristocratic intellectuals. By degrees, Confucianism was used to bolster up the aristocracy and protect it from the righteous indignation of the proletariat. Wherever Confucianism gained ascendancy, it attacked all liberalism. While it gave China a magnificent concept of life, it was never able to gain a sufficient support among leaders free from self-interest. The Near East had not yet felt the impact of Mohammed, and most of its schools of thought were drifting into compromise and exploitation.

Something was urgently required, and it was among the Buddhist group that this need was most clearly foreseen and adequately met. By degrees, the center of Buddhistic influence was moving out of India. One school was establishing itself on the island of Ceylon, where it managed to maintain its identity against the Hindus, Moslems, British and other foreign powers.

The other stronghold of Buddhistic philosophy was the vast desert area we now call Turkestan, partly in China, partly in Russia, and with fragments extending through

Northern India and into Afghanistan. In other words, Buddhism was setting up its abode on the periphery of the East Indian sphere of influence; and as it moved away from Hindu learning, it came into direct contact with a variety of national groups, racial strains and cultural patterns.

Most of those with whom Buddhism established friendly terms were in need of something more vital, inspiring, and encouraging than a doctrine of philosophic nihilism. Hill tribes and mountain people, and those who dwelt in the oases of Gobi, could not be expected to contemplate the abstractions of selflessness or the submergence of personal identity.

Everywhere, there was challenge, and most of the Eastern religions and philosophies had no intention of allowing themselves the luxury of liberality. They belonged to that type of thinking which condemned all change, demanded uniformity, excommunicated those who left the faith and anathematized any who sought to reform it. Into this situation Buddhism moved swiftly and effectively.

The name most honored among the Buddhist teachers of the time was Nagarjuna. Very little is actually known about him, but there is considerable legendry, part of which, almost certainly, is founded upon early historical accounts. He is said to have been born in south India of a Brahmin family, which seems quite reasonable. Although he renounced his class and his caste, he remained to the end a man of powerful attitudes and brilliant, if somewhat cynical, mind.

According to a Tibetan legend bearing upon his early life, it was predicted at the time of his birth that he would not live more than seven days. This so greatly disturbed his parents that they sought in every way possible to preserve his life by deeds of merit performed for his sake. So extraordi-

nary were their virtues, and so diligently did they earn protection for him, that Nagarjuna's life was extended to seven weeks. This in turn was lengthened out to seven months, and then to seven years.

Before he had attained to the exhaustion of his merit, Nagarjuna enrolled in the ancient priestly college of Nalanda, and began to personally venerate the great Buddha Amitayus.

The piety of so young a child, the utter sincerity of his worship, and his resolution to devote his entire life to the teaching of the Blessed Doctrine, gained for him a special dispensation. Amitayus bestowed upon the child the promise that he should live for three hundred years. Apparently, however, this burden of age was too great, and having completed his proper ministry, Nagarjuna is said to have committed suicide by decapitating himself.

There is much to suggest that we are now in the rarified atmosphere of Tibetan religious fiction. If we delete the extravagances, the facts seem to remain that Nagarjuna was likely a delicate child, whose health caused great anxiety to his parents. In answer to their prayers and other pious devotions, he survived, and like many who are naturally lacking in robust health, he chose a religious career. In the quiet atmosphere of the sanctuary, and because of his natural spiritual dedication, his health improved and he enjoyed a fairly long life.

According to the Tantric School, Nagarjuna is the third of eight patriarchs through whom the doctrine descended. When the Japanese patriarch Kobo Daishi went to China to study the esoteric teachings of Yogachaya, he was given paintings of the eight patriarchs. It appears that two of the paintings were so deteriorated by age that copies became nec-



**NAGARJUNA**

*This portrait is attributed, with substantial evidence, to Kobo Daishi*

essary. One of these was the portrait of Nagarjuna. This was actually copied by Kobo Daishi himself, and the account is one of the best authenticated of those associated with early religious paintings. The picture is now in the Todaiji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. It shows Nagarjuna seated with a distinctly non-Chinese cast of features, his complexion somewhat swarthy to suggest that he is a Hindu. He wears a robe of red and yellow stripes, and holds in one hand the thunderbolt.

The painting is over a thousand years old and shows considerable fading and repair, but it is probably the best available likeness of Nagarjuna, and may trace back to contemporary or nearly contemporary records. The tremendous power of the patriarch is well depicted, and it also reveals the extraordinary skill of Kobo Daishi as a painter of religious themes. Although the esoteric sect originally had its stronghold in China, it gradually lost most of the vitality that distinguished it in early times. In recent years, Buddhists have sought to restore their heritage and have rebuilt esoteric Buddhism upon the foundations of the Japanese records.

All this leads to a very reasonable question: What did Nagarjuna teach that was to become so important in the descent of Eastern metaphysics, and how did this teaching compare with that of Western mystical revivals? Actually, the teachings of the two are so similar that it is now believed that some inter-dependency did exist, and that the Bodhisattva Doctrine, as advanced by Nagarjuna, may have been inspired by early contact with Christianity. On the other hand, it has also been suspected that Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism are Europeanized adaptations of esoteric Buddhism brought along the caravan routes from high Asia.

Broadly speaking, both Eastern and Western mystics rec-

ognize three levels of knowledge and three ways in which it can be attained. By knowledge we mean the sacred truths of religion and philosophy. The first way of attainment is by study and research. It assumes no extraordinary capacity on the part of the truth seeker, except sincerity and a reasonably well-cultivated intellect.

By this means, strength of character can be induced through acquaintance with the noblest concepts and beliefs of mankind, and through the advancement of arts and sciences, the increase of skills, and the maturing of judgment.

The second way by which enlightenment can be advanced is called spiritual intuition. This is the stimulation of the inner resources of the individual by which he comes to sense or feel within himself the reality of his own spiritual life. It does not follow that any metaphysical faculties have to be developed; rather, enlightenment is based upon a sensing of realities and values, and a conviction that inner guidance is valid and that inner certainty is reasonable and even factual.

The third way is described as “standing face to face with reality.” It is the refinement and amplification of the inner life to the degree that spirituality is a complete experience, sustained and supported by the testimonies of all faculties of the mind and the regeneration of the sensory perceptions. This may be considered an illumination or mystical experience.

These three levels can be paralleled with the three degrees of knowledge accepted by the Kabbalists. Using the Temple of Solomon as the symbol of the House of Wisdom, they recognized it as divisible into three parts: the courtyard, the holy place, and the most holy of holiest. These in turn were likened to the three degrees of spiritual instruction: the To-

rah, or the law of Moses, was for those who studied and sought to inform themselves concerning the will of God. The Mishnah, which was called the soul of the law, was for those who possessed intuitive power and were able to sense the mystery beneath the literal exposition as set forth in the Torah. The third part was the Kabbala, the truly esoteric doctrine, containing the secret instructions by which the person could attain direct participation in the essence of God.

The same thought is suggested in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, where he writes: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known." In this the great apostle seems to describe the steps of human enlightenment, using almost the same wording for illumination—"seeing face to face"—as we find in Mahayana Buddhism.

A number of scholars have suggested the strong parallel between mystical Christianity and the Eastern system. These same authorities have also suggested that it was the rise of early Christian mysticism that ultimately sustained and justified Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. Of course, the pre-Christian Essenes, who have always been linked with Christianity and who faded out of history as the Christian ministry expanded, are known to have held mystical beliefs and to have practiced esoteric rites, although no details have survived.

In both East and West, the new interpretation was indeed the "glad tidings." It opened the way for a religion of joy, of hope, and at the same time broadened the foundation

of faith, making it acceptable for those of every class or race who were victims of anxieties, sorrows, or bereavements, or for any reason felt the need for spiritual consolation.

There can be no doubt that in both Asia and Europe the deeper interpretation of the religious mystery brought with it some kind of science of salvation. In India this was derived from the deeper scientific principles expounded by Hinduism. In the West, it was established in the Mystery Schools or secret systems of initiatory rites practiced in Egypt, Greece, and to a limited extent, in the Roman Empire. Believers were reminded that there was much more to their faith than they had come to understand generally. Therefore, they might restore their confidence in the religion they followed, and seek to inform themselves as to its esoteric instructional; all such instruction leading of course, to the personal experience of illumination.

For a time, these concepts remained vital in Europe, but the Western mind had greater interest in the advancement of material culture. We have records that Gnosticism did not die completely until well into the Dark Ages, and there were several revivals and attempted restorations. Neoplatonism also lingered on to inspire many Christian mystics. The Hermetic arts had a brilliant revival, which extended as late as the 16th and 17th centuries, and Kabbalism fell into approximately the same framework of dating. Manichaeanism also lived on to vitalize a number of heresies, and to become a prominent force in man's struggle for political liberty, social equality, and religious tolerance. A number of modern secret societies carry forward fragments of Manichaean belief. By degrees, however, mysticism outside of the Church was regarded with consistent disapproval by the clergy. With the Protestant Reformation, it almost totally vanished from

Protestant Christianity, not to be revived until the 19th century, by which time it was confronted by a strong scientific opposition.

In Asia, mysticism was more fortunate, and although the mystical sects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism passed through minor periods of persecution, they were never actually driven underground or forced to conceal themselves under such elaborate symbolism as we find in Kabbalism and alchemy.

The burden of the esoteric tradition is to assist the devout person to a new relationship with the universe in which he lives. East and West agree that man is not primarily a physical being; nor could he ever attain ultimate good by the perfection of his material institutions. In this point of view, Eastern asceticism is no more excessive than that practiced in the West. Early Christianity went through a great cycle of renunciation, and it is still held in many conservative sects that the renunciation of worldly ambition, worldly appetites, and worldly goods, is indispensable to spiritual salvation.

In this respect, Western doctrines fell upon complications similar to those that faced primitive Buddhism. It was almost impossible to make a religion of total renunciation attractive to the average believer. The monastic orders in Europe finally became more or less of a burden upon the spirit. Monks who lived only to celebrate the Mass and illumine missals and antiphonals, seemed to be of slight value to themselves or anyone else. Most of all, it did not appear that this unworldliness was actually enlarging their spiritual estates.

By degrees, this isolation was broken down and the clergy was required to take some active part in the preservation and advancement of the social system moving about them. We can observe the trend consistently, and today, most success-

ful Christian movements advise their followers to put the simple ideals of Christ to work in their daily lives and to live together in kindness, fraternity and peace, as a proof that they are truly Christians.

Gnosticism certainly dramatized the universe, bestowing upon the abstractions of space glorious and radiant appearances and filling the interval between heaven and earth with a hierarchy of evolving lives and intelligences, all of which were in some way involved in the growth of both the world and man. The Gnostics drew inspiration from the religious artistry of Egypt and the rich ritualistic poetry and cosmological lore of Greece. They also found inspiration in fragmentary sections of the Testaments, both Old and New, especially those parts which were brightened and made luminous by Apocalyptic visions.

Gnosticism simply refused to accept a cosmos with God above, man below, and nothing between except a few angelic or archangelic messengers. It assumed, with Platonism, that behind the veil which is no more nor less than the boundary of our own sensory perceptions is a luminous universe, magnificent in all its parts, surpassing in wonder any apparition that could have appeared to Ezekiel or Isaiah.

According to Gnosticism, the emanations of the eternal principles cast their shadowy forms downward into the abyss of matter. The process of the emanations uniting with their reflections by a kind of Hermetic marriage becomes the interaction of spirit and matter in the region of phenomena. Every blade of grass, every tree, is the visible extremity of a vast invisible process. The choirs of hierarchies are as inconceivable as the symbolism of Dante and Milton might suggest. These wonders are not to be named except by an adventure of the spirit beholding the substance of truth. For the

rest there can only be acceptances put into words or shapes that suggest, but faintly, the sublimity of their originals.

This splendid vision gradually faded from the hearts and minds of most Western people. Even for the devout the spectacle was unbelievable. It became convenient to merely expect a kind of spiritual morality, to strive ever to live well in the hope of earning a better destiny. Where this destiny would occur, even if earned, was uncertain. The visible became the fact, and the invisible faded away as far as man's consciousness was concerned. The unseen world ceased to be regarded as substantial, although there never was, and is not even today, any actual proof that visible forms cease where our power of vision ends.

Many will feel that the issue is not especially vital, and that there need be little time devoted to an effort to locate heaven or substantiate the findings of Aquinas as to how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. The real truth is that when we negated the invisible and ceased to sense at least the presence of superphysical machinery behind physical creation, we deprived ourselves of all evidence or proof that could sustain our moral and ethical codes. Morality could be only a personal decision to live a little better than our neighbor, and ethics a code of honesty that satisfied our own conscience.

In all probability, Northern Buddhism would have failed and perished in limbo long ago had it not maintained its dynamic concepts of the unseen. It was so successful in the development of a religious artistry that it lowered all resistance of the human mind to the acceptance of the radiant likenesses of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The vision in the Lotus Sutra has been compared many times with the Christian Apocalyptic works, both accepted and rejected,

and recently it has been examined more closely in the light of the Gnostic apocalyptic books that have been found in the present century. Buddhists themselves claim that they can understand from their own sacred texts the real meaning in the Book of Revelation.

The Gnostics attempted sincerely to build an experiential concept of the universe that could support religion, convinced that if materialists explained only natural phenomena, they would arrive at conclusions distinctly antagonistic to faith. How could the unbeliever explain creation in a manner satisfactory to the devout? We can say, of course, that if the explanation is correct it makes no difference who discovers the facts because they remain unchangeable.

To this both the Gnostic and the Buddhist would reply: this is all well and good, but how do we know who has the facts? Every discovery made by science can be explained in more than one way. What we call knowledge is explanation; it is a conclusion arrived at by the mind as the reasonable explanation of a phenomenon. No one denies that many of these conclusions are probably right; but, there is no way of knowing which ones can be wrong. If even ten percent of our conclusions are in error, we might have to completely reconstruct our concept of the universe. We cannot exist with a knowledge if we become aware of a fact that cannot be reconciled with this knowledge. Something has to change—either the fact must be disproved, or the knowledge must be reconstructed.

Gnosticism was convinced that there could finally be only one form of knowledge, and that was universal. The ideas that separate arts and sciences should perfect their own systems with no consideration for each other, while no reconciliation of differences could not be tolerated. The easiest

way to reconcile is by finding common ground in the beginning. If the universe is one firm structure of laws and procedures, then it is not necessary to separate one branch of learning from another or to isolate scholars from each other. Specialization is possible, but it should be based on knowledge of basic generalities. The more we can build a strong pattern of a magnificent, purposeful existence in time and space, the more we can depend upon education to advance the social state of man. But if we divide knowledge from ethics, facts from morality, and wisdom from skill, we dismember that vast being, that great universal totality of which the poet has written: "Its body nature is, and God the soul."

This phase of East-West thinking arose as the result of desperate need, but the situation remains unbalanced even in our century. We are completely suspicious of Oriental idealism, and the East is instinctively afraid of Occidental materialism. Must these unreconciled points of view forever serve as a barrier between intellectual and spiritual communion of the two hemispheres?

The story of Western Gnosticism is a consistently tragic account of an advanced philosophical system striving for survival in a world of disillusioned and disheartened human beings. One of the principal accounts of the Gnostics is derived from Clement of Alexandria, a Christian writer of the Ante-Nicene period who had little or no sympathy for heathen heresies. On the assumption that the Gnostics were attempting to impose an Eastern philosophic structure upon Christianity, the pious felt it a moral duty to belittle and defame both the Gnostic teachers and the system of learning they sought to disseminate. Actually, what the Gnostics were attempting to do was to bridge Eastern and Western

learning, but the time was not favorable and remained inauspicious until the present century.

Because it was subject to persecution from the beginning, very few records bearing upon the lives of prominent leaders or the deeper aspects of their teachings have survived. The recent discovery of the Gnostic Library at Chenoboskion in Central Egypt is the most important light to be cast upon the subject in fifteen centuries. Even now, however, we have only certain literary remains which are useful inasmuch as they indicate the mystical trend of the better informed Gnostic teachers. It is known that Gnosticism affirmed the Oriental belief in reincarnation, and probably found some support among followers of the old Platonic and Pythagorean systems. Unfortunately, however, Gnosticism was bitterly assailed by Neoplatonism, probably because of its emphasis upon transcendentalism and esoteric practices.

In some way, the Gnostics must have contacted some of the Tantric beliefs which were rising in Northern Asia. This is especially evident in the Gnostic teaching of shakti, or female consorts of the various divinities and divine powers. In both East and West, the shakti were not intended to represent actual goddesses, but rather, the personification of the feminine quality, or polarity, of existence. The Chinese and the Gnostics were in agreement that the divine energies operating in space moved upon various conditions or levels of substance, causing matter or the negative pole of life to be aroused and unite itself with the positive, creating principle. In Chinese metaphysics, man was the child of heaven and earth, spirit and matter, God and nature. These polarizations are represented in Tibetan art by the deities embracing their feminine counterparts. A hint of this is also to be found in what has survived of the original Gnostic theogony.



**PRAJNAPARAMITA**

*The Bodhisattva Prajnaparamita, seated between two protecting deities. The Bodhisattva carries the Prajnaparamita Sutra and is a personification of the wisdom concerning the motion of the wheel of the law*

In Northern Asia, a deity appeared which has been among the most mysterious of Eastern esoteric symbols. This deity is called Prajnaparamita and is depicted as feminine. She is a bodhisattva, the embodiment of universal wisdom, and in a sense, the personification of the great religious book *The Prajnaparamita Sutra*. She is the patroness of the book, and is the living substance which it contains. She is a strangely detached and wonderful being, and like the Greek Athena, the Latin Minerva, the Egyptian Isis, and the Gnostic Sophia, she was identified with the whole structure of the system of initiation into those sacred institutions now called the Mysteries.

Several writers on Orientalism have pointed out that Sophia, as the Virgin of the World, was so similar to the Prajnaparamita concept that it must be assumed that there was some common ground around which developed this world

idea that eternal wisdom is feminine. It became an essential part of many religions, and we will find it again in the Kab-bala as the Mother of the Alphabet with its magical letters.

Although the Tantric Buddhism of India gradually faded out of its own land and, moving eastward, established its strongholds in the deserts of Central Asia and China, it would not be correct to say that the system was ever under any desperate form of general persecution. At no time was the Yogachaya, or esoteric school of Buddhism, in actual danger of extermination. Unlike Gnosticism, which vanished away before the eighth century A.D., and was virtually extinct three or four centuries earlier, esoteric Buddhism still survives. Its ancient Gnostic rites are performed to this day, and its membership in Japan numbers nearly ten million. It also exists in China, Korea, Nepal and Tibet, but in several of these countries, its present condition is difficult to estimate. The simple fact of importance is that esoteric Buddhism can still be studied as a living religion, whereas its equivalent in the Mediterranean region can be approached only historically, and most of the historical records have been mutilated or destroyed.

Another reason for antagonism against Gnosticism—and to a degree esoteric Buddhism suffered the same complaint—was that the Tantric School emphasized various aspects of ceremonial magic. This might cause us to ask the origin of the demonology and witchcraft that arose in Europe during the Dark Ages. The Yogachaya School made use of many strange and secret rituals. The founders of this sect took the old hand postures of India and the early hand postures found on the first images of Buddha and his ar-hats; evolving from this comparatively simple beginning a complete symbolic language of mudras. So complex is this

science of the hands and the various positions in which the fingers can be placed, that practically the entire doctrine of Eastern philosophy could be transmitted by these hand positions without a spoken word.

J. S. M. Ward, in his most interesting book *The Sign Language of the Mysteries*, advances the theory that European Christian art also had a secret language of mudras, and that famous painters almost invariably made use of appropriate hand positions and arrangements of fingers when depicting the saints of Christendom, the martyrs, and their disciples. If Ward is correct, the early Christian religious painters were initiates of some secret school which communicated these hand positions.

Another interesting phase of the subject is mantrams, or sound patterns. Certain types of mantrams are known everywhere in the religious world and there is much to indicate that the Gnostics made use of what they called invocations or incantations in the drawing up of spirits, casting out of demons, purifying the minds of worshippers and invoking the Divine Presence in the performance of a Mass. Research will probably show parallels, which I have already noted to some degree, in which the transcendental magicians of Egypt and the magical Kabbalists of early Europe followed almost completely the Oriental procedures.

Another example is the magic circle. This occurs in the texts of many books of spirits used in Kabbalistic magic and by the necromancers of Central Europe. There is definitely a parallel between the magic circle associated with demonology and witchcraft, and the mandala, which in a sense is the magic circle of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to a recent writer on Buddhist Tantra, the mandala had many meanings—symbolical, mathematical, and cosmological—



#### MORTUARY TABLET OF ABBOT DE LA MARE

Engraved brass plaque at St. Albans Abbey. This picture, reproduced by Ward in *The Sign Language of the Mysteries*, shows the same hand posture as the accompanying figure of the Chinese Kuan Yin. The St. Andrew's cross formed by the hand posture, could here represent the equinox as a symbol of the hope of resurrection.



**KUAN YIN**

*Woodblock from a collection of eighty-four appearances of the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin. The hands are crossed in the position of the St. Andrew's cross and, according to Ward, this could be a secret reference to the solar mystery at the time of the Vernal Equinox.*

but it was also a magic circle by which certain spiritual beings or intelligences could be commanded or caused to arise in the consciousness of the adept.

The parallels between Eastern and Western Gnosticism could be considerably enlarged. In both groups, charms, mysterious spell letters, numerical designs and protective amulets were commonly used. Just as various deities with their names and the shrines in which they were venerated were block printed in China, Korea and Japan, and used as protections against evil, so the Gnostics had small books of magical figures and carved protective symbols and designs into semi-precious stones. These provide a rare group of research material described by King in his text on Gnostic gems.

As Gnosticism contributed greatly to the rise of metaphysical movements within the structure of Christianity, although the sect of the Gnostics was short-lived as an independent organization, so Oriental Gnosticism vitalized not only many schools of Buddhist thought, but mingled its influence with other religions with which it came in contact. We may therefore distinguish, at least dimly, a pattern of world Gnosticism, which has added to most religions a metaphysical factor that inspired the leaders to seek for hidden meaning in their sacred writings, and not to accept without question literal stories or texts.

## **Chapter Three**

### **ALEXANDRIA, THE CRADLE OF WESTERN MYSTICISM**

It is not within the scope of the present work to attempt a formal history of Alexandria. It was involved from its beginning in the conflicts raging in the areas adjacent to the Mediterranean.

Ambitious leaders battled with each other over disputed territories and, in the brief interludes between wars, conspiracies and seditions were the order of the day. Under the Ptolemies every effort was made to avoid involvement in the political upheavals of neighboring countries. Unfortunately, however, dissension arose within the city itself and these finally increased to major proportions.

Historical accounts are dismal reading, but we can concern ourselves only with the religions and philosophies of this great city which during its golden age had a population of approximately one-half million.

Most of the religious groups were divided according to the old Mystery System. There was an outer teaching for the uninitiated and an inner teaching available only to those who had bound themselves to secrecy by most solemn obligations. The Egyptian Mysteries had a limited autonomy and those who passed through them certainly received privileged instruction. The Greek schools followed a similar procedure



**STATUE OF SERAPIS, PATRON DEITY OF ALEXANDRIA**

*From an engraving in ANTIQUITY EXPLAINED by Montfaucon, London: 1721*

as did the Jewish, and most especially, the Gnostics. After the introduction of Christianity, this group also held its sacred beliefs in private; as a result the city was always permeated with esoteric doctrines of one kind or another. Every government stands in fear of secret societies. While their numbers might be small, their power was magnified simply because of the uncertainties which surrounded them. To further complicate the matter there were overlapping memberships and it was difficult to tell where basic allegiances rested. The Ptolemies were confronted with this unpleasant situation and the dilemma descended as a disturbing, heritage upon the Romans.

When it was deemed prudent to weed out troublesome sects, it was next to impossible to identify the membership with certainty. The philosophical schools with their more temperate approach to learning were tolerated, but learning itself with its high moral and ethical standards was viewed with suspicion by the less informed.

Actually, the government had little in common with Platonism or Neoplatonism for both these systems venerated God with a full spirit, whereas Ptolemy was a mortal man who could demand only temporal allegiance. This attitude was also unacceptable to the Romans who realized that a secret government of an enlightened few might some day challenge the supremacy of the Caesars. The monotheism of the Jews, the pantheism of the Greeks and Egyptians, and the trinitarianism of the Christian community mingled together, giving rise to a number of exotic sects. Thus, personified through their teachings, the sages of many lands assembled in Egypt to die a second time.

Officially, Serapis was the weeping god of Alexandria and his tears were more than justified. It was hoped that this

compound divinity would be acceptable to the populace in general. There is an interesting statement in *The Golden Age of Alexandria* by John Marlowe (London: 1971): "Of the deities of Hellenism Isis of the Myriad Names was probably the greatest. She was Lady of All, All-seeing and All-powerful, Queen of the Inhabited World, Star of the Sea, Diadem of Life, Lawgiver and Saviour. She was Grace and Beauty, Fortune and Abundance, Truth, Wisdom and Love. All civilization was in her gift and in her charge."

It was easy for members of all the Alexandrian sects to revere Isis under one of her appellations for her equivalent was to be found in every faith. Even when Christianity came into vogue, a similarity was traced between the sad-faced Serapis and the crucified Messiah, and Isis was identified with the Virgin Mary.

Public celebrations cut through 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, 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 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 their rites. He counted on the Egyptian priests to cooperate with the Greek regime, as they had for thousands of years 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 in 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.

Rome at that time 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 in conquering the world than in conquering their own ambition and appetites.

The city of Alexandria was founded in 331 or 332 B.C. by Alexander the Great. The Macedonian conqueror assembled



**OBVERSE AND REVERSE OF SILVER COIN MINTED BY PTOLEMY SOTER**

*Note the similarity of the eagle to that appearing on the American coinage*



**OBVERSE AND REVERSE OF SILVER COIN OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT**

*Alexander is presented in a manner to resemble the Greek deity Hercules*

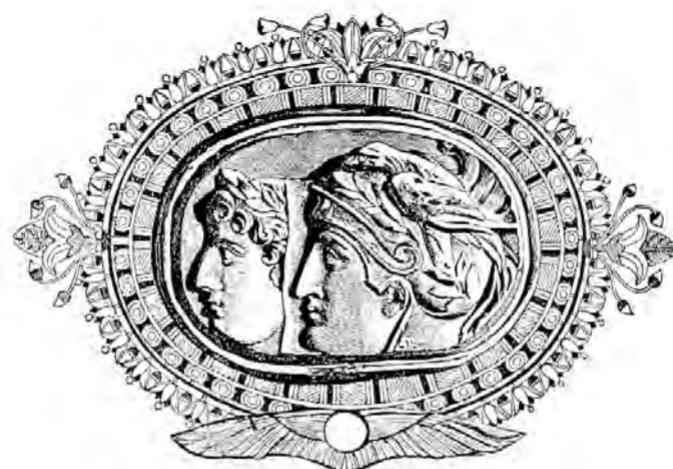
a group of skilled architects and artisans; these were resolved to create a metropolis of such grandeur that it would be truly the greatest wonder of the world. Alexander did not live to see the city he had planned, but he may have been buried there. For several reasons, not entirely sentimental, the 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 Bruchion, the most famous museum, was completed and, when Ptolemy Philadelphus died the collection of manuscripts exceeded one-hundred thousand items. Through the industry 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 Bruchion was 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 library. She tells us that several hours elapsed between the burning of the fleet, as ordered by Julius Caesar, and the spreading of the fire to the city. In this precious interval, librarians and servants attached to the Bruchion

saved the most precious 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 principal 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 enterprise and Marc Anthony 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



AN ENGRAVED GEM

*With the portraits of Ptolemy Philadelphus and his queen Arsinoe,  
daughter of Lysimachus*

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 *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.

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 Alexandria offered an appropriate atmosphere for scholarship. It was probably the first important polyglot system of culture. It drew to itself persons of extraordinary attainments who appreciated the opportunity to improve their knowledge and deepen their insight.

Etienne Vacherot, in his works published in Paris in

1856, summarizes the place of this ancient city in the spiritual life of humanity: "Alexandria at the time 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 birth place of new doctrines. It was at Alexandria that the School of Philo represented the Hellenizing Judaism: it was at Alexandria that the Gnosis synthesized all the tradition of Syria, Chaldea, and Persia, blended with Judaism, with Christianity and even with Greek philosophy."

The 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 hearts of the orthodoxy of the Councils. A strong life flowed in the veins of all these schools and vitalized all their discussions. Philo, Basilides, Valentine, St. Clement and Origen, opened up for the mind new vistas of thought and unveiled for it mysteries which a genius of a Plato or an Aristotle had never fathomed.

Alexandria was not only a center of religious and philosophical scholarship, but also a seed ground for scientific research and in *A History of the Ancient World*, George Willis Botsford, Ph. D., 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 center 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" extending from 323 to 140 B.C.

Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria was an outstanding mathematician, geographer, astronomer, and astrologer. Living in Alexandria, 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.

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, in his remarkable book *The Sybilline Oracles*, N.Y.:1890, referring to collections of ancient 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 Palestinian brethren."*

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



**CLAUDIUS PTOLEMY OF ALEXANDRIA CONTEMPLATING THE STARS  
ATTENDED BY A FEMALE FIGURE REPRESENTING ASTRONOMY**

—From the MARGARITA PHILOSOPHICA (Basel: 1508)

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, Kabbalism, 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.

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 Initiator 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



**HERMES TRISMEGISTUS**

*From a copper engraving by Johannes Theodorus de Bry, 1615*

or no trace of Christian influence.

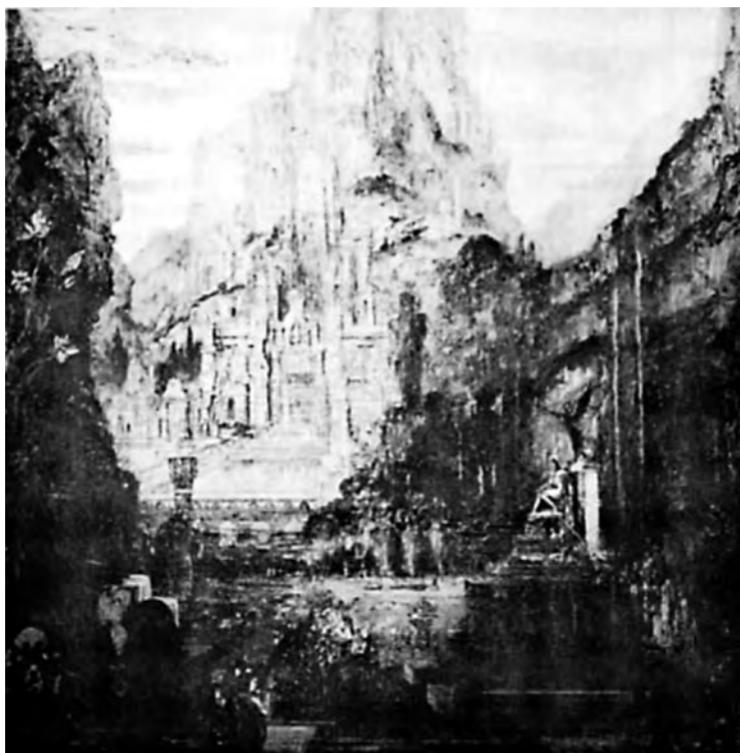
With the decline of the Mystery School systems, Hermetic philosophy lost its distinguishing stamp and gradually faded out of Alexandrian culture. It certainly intrigued some of the early Christian teachers and traces of the doctrine have survived in modern mysticism.

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's.

As a result of the preaching of St. Mark, a formal Christian school was established at Alexandria. This is probably the earliest Christian institution of its kind. During the Ante-Nicene period the various nationalities and religions had a comparatively pleasant relationship. Freedom of thought and belief has both advantages and disadvantages. In a tolerant atmosphere scholarship flourishes, but there is also danger that excessive doctrines will arise and flourish at the expense of the public good.

Jewish mysticism found its most able spokesman in Philo Judaeus, a learned exponent of Greek Judaism. He was a reconciling force between the communities though it was inevitable that schisms should arise and trouble follow. For several centuries Grecian wisdom permeated the Alexandrian atmosphere. Later, the Jewish community became more influential, mingling many of its ideas with early Christianity.

Egyptian influence was largely limited to architecture but some of the older learning colored the more recent specula-



**TRIUMPH OF ALEXANDRIA**

*By Gustave Moreau*

tions. 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 the 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. 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 regarded it as 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. Mystery can be a terrible weapon. The Roman patrician might have felt that his own servants were secret Christians plotting for his destruction. There seemed no way to combat this hidden menace and spies sent out learned little or nothing, possibly because there was little or nothing to be learned. Some of these agents considered it

expedient to bring back lurid accounts of horrible doings. Even today, we realize that established systems usually try to defend themselves against seditions of one kind or another.

In the early years, the Christians were afraid to come out and, huddled together for security, they became objects of fear. This is what finally brought Constantine the Great to convene the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.

He realized that Christianity was spreading and might ultimately come in open conflict with the Roman Empire. His conversion, if it actually took place, was not because of his devotion to religion, for what little faith he had he kept in the name of Eusebius who was secretary of the Nicene Council. Constantine wished to have Christianity brought into the open so that its followers could stand and be numbered. He was also resolved, if possible, to bind this new faith with his temporal power, so that, standing together, the State and the Church could move the world. The three-hundred bishops and other ecclesiastics who attended the Nicene Council were for the most part fiercely religious and it never occurred to them that Constantine had ulterior motives.

One happy consequence followed, however, for the persecution of Christians within the boundaries of the empire immediately ceased. 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 Neo-Pythagoreans, Neoplatonists, and the more learned Rabbis continued to teach with minor restrictions, but religious innovations were quickly and harshly repressed.



**CONSTANTINE THE GREAT**  
*From a mosaic at St. Sophia in Istanbul*



THE EMPEROR VESPASIAN

Almost 300 years earlier, 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.



APOLLONIUS OF TYANA

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*, published by the Grolier Society, London: 1904.

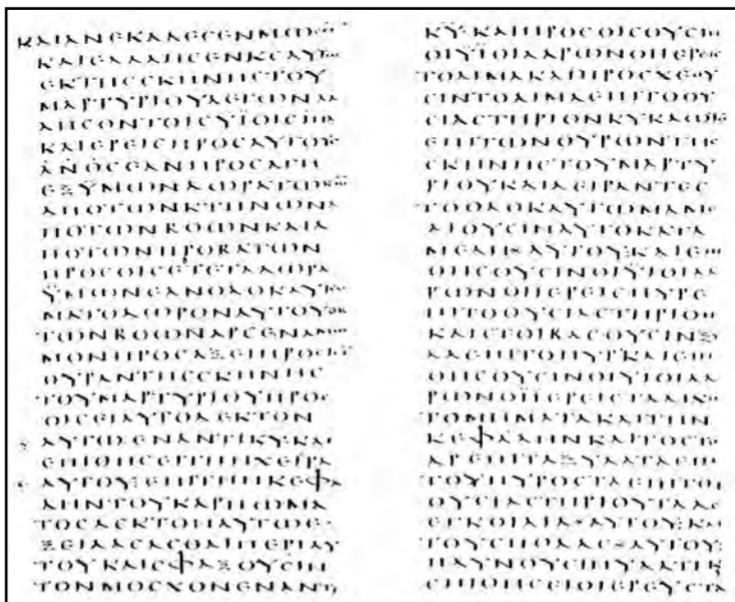
The most famous version of the Old Testament was produced in Alexandria about the year 280 B.C. Apparently, Demetrius of Phaleron, who was librarian of Ptolemy Philadelphus, convinced the Pharaoh that a transcription of the books of Moses should be included in the royal collection. He, therefore, sent two ambassadors to Jerusalem to gain the assistance of Eleazar who was then High Priest. As a proof of his sincerity the Pharaoh bought and liberated all the Jewish slaves captured by his father Ptolemy Soter.

Eleazar selected seventy-two scholars, six from each of the Twelve Tribes, and sent them to Alexandria. The earliest Greek translation was probably limited to the Pentateuch, but by the first century A.D., the Septuagint, or the version of the seventy, included the complete Old Testament. Several scholars have made a point of the need of a Greek translation for the use of Jewish intellectuals. It has been suggested that the Hellenized Jewish community had accepted Greek as the language of scholarship.

Very little is known concerning the New Testament until the late third or fourth centuries A.D. Three manuscripts have derived from this period—the *Codex Vaticanus* (*Codex B*), *Codex Alexandrinus* (*Codex A*), and the *Codex Sinaiticus* (*Codex Aleph*). 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 might be products of Alexandrian industry? It is impossible to know at this late date how many early biblical manuscripts were destroyed when the Serapium was com-

pletely 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 the *Codex Sinaiticus*, is now conserved in the British Museum. I had the privilege of seeing the *Sinaiticus* at the time it was acquired by the nation, partly by popular subscription, and I made a small donation to this good cause.



A FRAGMENT OF A FIFTH CENTURY GREEK MANUSCRIPT OF THE PENTATEUCH BASED UPON THE SEPTUAGINT VERSION

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 it is reasonably certain that 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 is also the only source of information concerning what might have been a branch of the Essenes called the Therapeuta, a sect devoted largely to medicine and mystical contemplation. Our modern words "therapy" and "therapeutic" were derived from this extremely mysterious Egyptian order. 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. 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.

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. This 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.

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 370 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, he 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.

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 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.

The leadership of Alexandrian Christianity passed to Origen, an outstanding theologian, who was subject to persecution by all concerned. Clement died in the early years of the third century.

In his well-known text *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement devotes a considerable section to a venomous attack



CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

*M. Burglere sculpsit*



Michael Burghers

sculpsit.

ORIGEN

upon the religion of the Grecian states including the Mystery Schools and their principal advocates. In his translation of the principal works of Clement, G. At. 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."

Perhaps one explanation of Clement's extreme prejudice was that he flourished during a period when classical learning was at a low ebb. What survived of the Greek philosophy was dominated by Roman influences, which were never especially idealistic. His contacts, therefore, were mostly with degenerated forms of the original teachings. It is also evident that Clement was totally unaware of the allegorical and symbolical aspects of the non-Christian religion. It never occurred to him that initiates of the caliber of Pythagoras and Plato regarded the ancient fables as veiled accounts of a sacred doctrine known only to duly qualified and dedicated persons.

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 is regarded as a saint in some Christian communions.

It is believed that Origen was 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. Eusebius, however, is known to have had considerable prejudice and a lively imagination. Porphyry tells us that Origen attended lectures given by Ammonius Saccas and the instruction that he received seemed to have multiplied the difficulties through which he passed. While it is doubtful if any of the early fathers were more orthodox than Origen, there was a wide difference of opinion as to what was orthodox. 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. Origen was imprisoned and subjected to torture during the persecution ordered by the Emperor Decius. He survived, however, and left this troubled sphere about 254 A.D.

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 Smyrna. Hypatia was born in Alexandria about 370 A.D. and was assassinated in 415 A.D. After the death of Theon, Hypatia became the acknowledged leader of the Neoplatonic School in Alexandria. 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 fictionalized, it contains considerable useful information. In his preface, Kingsley assures the reader that her personal life



**HYPATIA**

*From the book HYPATIA by Charles Kingsley*

was blameless. As a frontispiece to his book, Kingsley provides a more or less imaginary portrait of this great woman philosopher based upon early descriptions of her appearance. It conveys her spirit, if not her actual likeness. We reproduce it herewith.

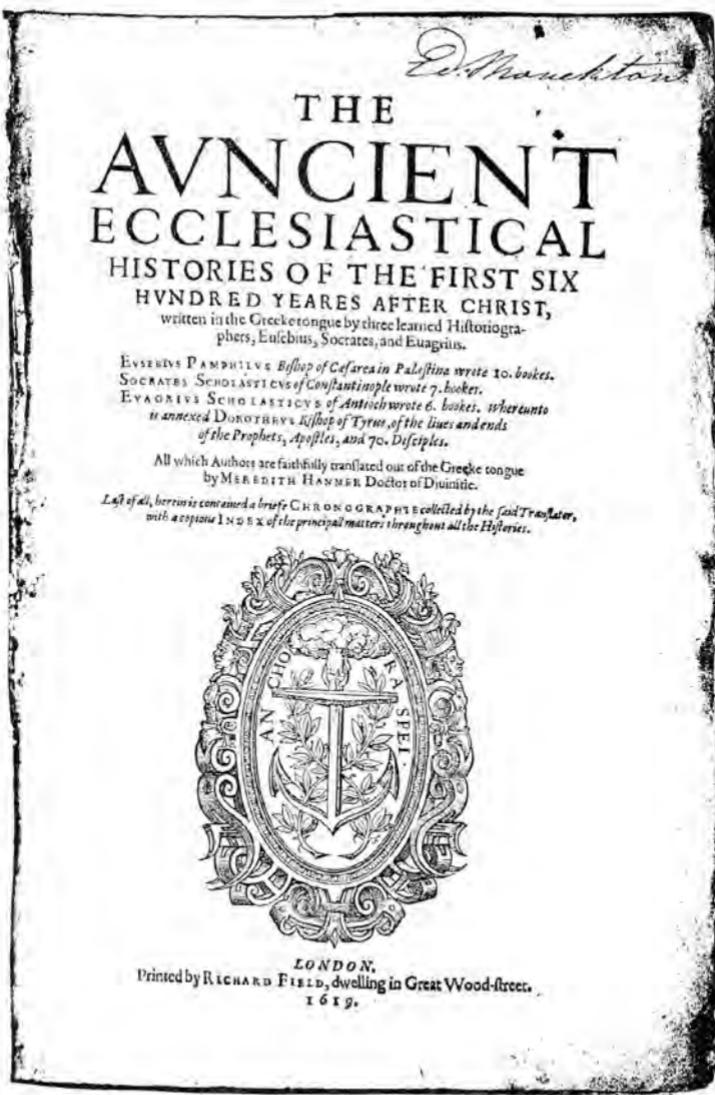
Hypatia's extraordinary endowments attracted the attention of many outstanding intellects of her day, among them Synesius, Bishop of Ptolemais. Cyril found it expedient to dispose of her and, probably with his connivance, she was brutally murdered by followers of Cyril. Dragged from her chariot by a frenzied mob, her flesh was scraped from her bones with oyster shells. After her death it became evident that the golden age of Alexandrian Neoplatonism had come to an end and those who shared her conviction departed from the city and sought asylum in distant regions. Almost immediately, the city lost its leadership as a center of learning.

Neoplatonism, if it did not originate in Alexandria, reached maturity in this North African community. In Egypt its principle leader was Plotinus who was born in Egypt about 204 A.D. The Greek branch gained distinction through Proclus, who taught in Athens. He was born shortly before the death of Hypatia. This tragic incident impelled him to remain at a safe distance. The most important of the labors of Proclus was his massive work *On The Theology of Plato*. This was translated into English by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century, but the edition was so limited that it is little known or appreciated. While the dialogues of Plato certainly include metaphysical teachings, his essentially religious beliefs have been given scant consideration. His viewpoint can be summarized in a brief statement to the effect that the purpose of wisdom is to build a solid foundation under faith.

It is usually assumed that the founder of Alexandrian Neoplatonism was Ammonius Saccas. The word “saccas” means a porter or luggage carrier and this humble vocation was his means of livelihood. Many find it difficult to believe that Plotinus should have been a disciple of Ammonius for eleven years unless this luggage carrier had attained to a high degree of mystical illumination. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, M.D., Ph.D., presents a strong argument in favor of Numanus of Apamea as the comparatively unknown source of Neoplatonic mysticism. He was a follower and interpreter of Pythagoreanism, the original Platonic tradition, and he was also acquainted with Oriental beliefs and the learning of the Jews, Magi, and Egyptians.

Plotinus lived a great part of his life in Rome where he established an influential school attended by distinguished politicians and scholars. He lived an exemplary life and became deeply involved in the improvement of youth. Like most of the later Platonists, he was also addicted to allegory and the interpretation of the intricate system of Grecian mythology. The last words of Plotinus as recorded by Porphyry were: “Now I seek to lead back the self within me to the All-self.”

The entire Neoplatonic system was based upon the superiority of internal experience over external education. Neoplatonism established certain disciplines for the preservation and release of the human soul from the tyranny of the intellect, the emotions, and environmental circumstances. The basic disciplines were cathartic to remove from the nature the corruptions caused by vice and intemperance. It is almost certain that the Alexandrian School of Neoplatonism was influenced by Asiatic meditational practices. Classical Greek philosophy was a system of instruction in which wis-



TITLE PAGE FROM AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE  
ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF EUSEBIUS

—LONDON: 1619

dom was communicated by initiated teachers to qualified disciples. This method was suitable for the dissemination of traditional knowledge and may be compared to the modern theory of education which is a descent by authority. The mystical experience was taught as theurgy, a kind of divine magic, free of all material corruptions by which the superior principle abiding in man became the leader of character and conduct. To a great degree, this was the conviction that dominated Alexandria during its golden age.

Pythagoras elevated the consciousness of his students by confronting them with geometrical symbols and encouraging meditational and retrospective exercises. Plato followed largely the same system, and we learn from Proclus that a profound mysticism dominated the inner experiences of the great Athenian sage. Gradually, however, intellectualism took over and human destiny came under the rulership of the mind with its rationalizing power. 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 Chosroes 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 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 Islam.

The most extraordinary of the Alexandrian schools was that of Gnosticism. It arose in the second century A.D., was supported by a number of brilliant devotees, but was overwhelmed by the conflicts with which it was surrounded.

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. A similar dilemma survives to this time. Esoteric studies in general are rejected by both science and theology. Where religious persecution is no longer fashionable, the obscure arts which were part 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 ratio-

nal, 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 length in his book *Simon Magus*. It was in Alexandria, however, that the movement 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 near Chenoboskion (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. The system of aeonology held by the Gnostics, has been called emanationism. The divine world is united to the mortal realm through the descent of divine powers and principles. As these descend, corresponding forms rise from the lower regions and finally

meet in a middle distance. The human soul is of a twofold nature. Its inner part is divine but, when it descends into bodies, its luminosity is restricted. Thus imprisoned, it becomes the victim of the mortal mind, emotions, and passions, and finally of the physical body itself. Christ was sent to rescue the soul which, becoming united with the Messiah through a mystical marriage, is restored to its heavenly estate. In the writings of Valentinus which have recently become available, we perceive a truly lofty spirit whose writings are virtually scriptural.

Soter (Savior) signified Eternal Wisdom, and Sophia this same Wisdom after it had been obscured by immersion in the sphere of generation. Wisdom obscured by worldliness manifests as worldly wisdom. Sophia, as the wisdom principle in man or the intellectual aspect of the soul, redeems itself by renouncing error. Evolution is the gradual release of spiritual powers through ever-evolving Vehicles. 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 that 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.

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. However, In Alexandria, the conflict of beliefs produced numerous constructive results. Possibly the most important of these was that it impelled the early Christian Church to codify its own teachings. It opened the way for St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Neither of these teachers would 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 allegiances. 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.

## **Chapter Four**

### **MEDITATION SYMBOLS IN CHRISTIAN AND GNOSTIC MYSTICISM**

There is reason to believe that the caravan routes between China and the Roman Empire were established before or about the time of the Christian era, which means that a tremendous territory of previously remote lands came under the direct contemplation of Western travelers, merchants, and, for that matter, escaping heretics. It was a time when heresy was abroad in the land almost everywhere, and there were tremendous migrations of people to escape social, political or religious persecution.

The Greek culture was already decadent at the beginning of the Christian era, but there were still remnants of the old Platonic, Pythagorean, and Aristotelian schools. Egyptian culture had come under the adversities of the Ptolemies and was on the brink of extinction. Syrian life and Jewish philosophy were under the yoke of the Roman Empire. The ancient traditions of Israel were disrupted and the people were in great distress.

The same type of situation was occurring in the Far East. At the beginning of the Christian era there were major philosophical and religious changes in China. At this time, a motion from India reached the Chinese and established the great vehicle of Buddhism. This great vehicle began some-

where in Central Asia, probably in the northern part of India or Nepal, and moved in both directions, East and West, to change the philosophic history of the world. Also, the last of the Zoroastrians had already departed, and the fire worship of this Parsee sect was under challenge. However, the Romans had brought back Persian philosophy with them from their travels and conquests, carrying this philosophy as far as Great Britain. There are Persian religious monuments in England put there by the Romans. The famous University of Oxford is named for one of them.

There was a great mingling, mixing, blending, and confusing of faiths, which continued until the latter part of the third or early fourth century A.D. At this time, the power of the rising church was strong enough to impress its purposes upon governments and political entities. After the allegiance which Christianity made with the East and Roman Empire under Constantine the great, the smaller groups gradually dropped back again into retirement. This was the period of the Neoplatonists, the Hermetic philosophers, the Gnostics, the Syrian mysteries, the Essenes, the Osirian rites, the Therapeutae, the Aramites and large groups of small religious sects, most of them mystical, philosophical, and idealistic. These sects have left their impression upon our thinking, although the various beliefs themselves have more or less faded from our conscious thinking.

Actually, also, a series of discoveries made about fifty years ago, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the famous Gnostic Library of Nag Hammadi, have given us some further insight on these mysterious doings, including the Essenes, the Nazarenes, and the Gnostics. The discovery of both the Old Testament records and the Gnostic Library have been rather disappointing. We have not learned as much as we hoped to

learn. Most of the questions that we hoped to answer have not been answered. And while there are certain advantages that have been gained through these discoveries, the general picture of the time has not been clarified by them.

One of the most important reactions has been in connection with the Gnostics. *The Great Book of the Savior*, part of which has been translated under the title *The Pistis Sophia*, was dated to the eighth or seventh century and believed to be a late apocryphal work. However, the Nag Hammadi discoveries in Central Egypt clearly indicate, and definitely prove, that it was in circulation as early as the third century and probably earlier. Thus, what had appeared to be for a time a sort of an apocryphal invention has been gradually established as a bona fide sacred book.

All of these points are intriguing and have a bearing on our subject. The story is quite long and complicated but we will try to clarify it as much as possible. We must realize that the Near East and North Africa were in those days important caravan posts. They marked the various stations and finally the ends of the caravans that moved from China to Rome. In the Near East, the caravan routes were the great arteries of communication. Along the caravan routes came the mingling of philosophical, scientific, political, and religious beliefs that were to bring a major change to the political history of Europe. This change included the gradual recognition of a wider world of religious insight than had previously been suspected.

Two groups of people stand out strongly in connection with this new reaction toward religion. One was the Gnostics, and the other was the Neoplatonists. Both of these became aware in the beginning of the Christian era that there was one essential story underneath or hidden within

practically all of the religious traditions of mankind. Perhaps Max Muller, the great German Orientalist, was not less than correct when he said there was never a false religion unless a child is a false man. Thus, at the beginning of the Christian era, we had for the first time the opportunity for widely separated religious and philosophical insights to meet and mingle and exchange.

While it is true that most of the merchants along the caravan routes were simply businessmen, their routes and their various protections for their cargos also provided safety for the intellectual who wished to travel the route. And many did, some coming as far as from India and China to study in the academies of Greece. Also, the Grecians sent their disciples as students to the Far East.

This interchange gradually led to a kind of mystic Kabballism—to the rise of a comparative religion—perspective. People were no longer simply this faith or that faith. They discovered a vast body of common symbols which they all held sacred. They discovered that practically every religion that met on the pathways along the silk routes had the same basic belief in astrology—the idea that the heavens, the stars, and the planets were deities.

They also had similar calendars; the Chinese were calculating eclipses and things of this kind at a very early date. It was gradually recognized, likewise, that in India there were great institutions of learning like the University at Nalanda with a student body of over twenty-five thousand, which had observatories, laboratories, and many other scientific structures teaching all the known knowledge of the world. There was no idea in the Western world that such things existed until the news of them drifted along the caravan routes.

This communication of knowledge resulted in the rise of

Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria, and, to a measure by reaction, in the rise of schools of comparative thinking in Rome and in Athens created for the purpose of uniting beliefs rather than dividing them. As might be expected, the knowledge that did come along the caravan routes was not complete, nor did it necessarily imply the deepest interpretations of symbols, allegories, and rituals. However, it did definitely indicate a trend, and it also showed the common ground of human idealism. Most of all, it attacked the literal translation of sacred writings. It became obvious that the literal jot and tittle meanings were not adequate, that all of the ancient scriptural works were symbolical, and that they had meanings that were deep and real. These meanings were perhaps best discovered by the study of comparative religions, for that which was concealed in one would be more broadly revealed in another. Intimations that could not be completed in one were continued to completion in others. Our *Book of Revelation* is a good example of one of these mystical compilations. Based upon the mingling of religions and philosophies in the area of the Isle of Patmos, John is said to have written the book which was the ground work and the center of the great Phrygian rites which at that time were very powerful in the forming of religious thinking.

There is a parallel we can draw immediately, one that is useful, helpful, and perhaps a little inspiring to this generation. Two thousand years ago a group of minority spiritual movements really discovered the identity of religious beliefs. They discovered that under various names and various symbols, the same ideas, ethics, and moralities were universally disseminated. They also made another important discovery, namely, that all of these religions had been divided into two sections, one of which was for the public and the other essentially an esoteric or mystical tradition for a few who were

willing to consecrate their lives through a process of internal enlightenment. For the many there was obedience to the forms and letters of religious law. For the few there was an insight into the deeper meanings of these things by means of which orthodoxies were transformed into great spiritual systems.

An important point to consider is that at this time, the beginning of the first century, Greek religion was decadent and its theology was falling apart. The exponents of its inner rites were gone. Its mysteries were profaned by conquerors and its political life was under the control of Rome. Rome was perfectly willing to permit the Greeks to philosophize to their heart's content, so long as they paid their taxes, but it was not a time in which the deeper issues of the Greek thinkers had any substantial following. In the Egyptian area the rites of Osiris had become the dominant philosophical teaching. These rites were also decadent and would soon collapse with the fall of Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies. Actually, almost every religion had fallen away from its deeper meaning and had become a formal, ceremonial, ritualistic structure for which the keys were no longer available.

Then about the beginning of the Christian era the flame rose again. There was a flash of light, and throughout the world this flash consisted primarily of the discovery of a mystical tradition concealed within the structure of formal philosophies and religions. There is an interesting problem here having psychological value. The question arises: where did this flame come from? Was it a world uprising, a restoration of rites and ceremonies brought together coincidentally perhaps, but by geographical contacts, historical circumstances and a few brilliant leaders? Or did this flame originally flame up with the human being himself? I am inclined

to think that the light that brought these changes came basically from within a humanity in a crisis, a crisis that was political, cultural and social, just as well as it was religious. The great structures of the world's cultures and civilizations were falling. Tyranny was abroad in the land. Religion had come on evil times, and most of the priesthood had become corrupted.

In this emergency we have a series of reactions from within in human beings themselves. A reaction of this kind was responsible for the rise of the Essene sect in the Holy Land. It was a prayer to God in which the individual offered his own life as a proof of his sincerity. All through the world about this time prayers of this kind seem to have arisen. They were coming from disillusioned persons who had become convinced of the lack of worth of the systems that they were following—philosophical, educational, political, cultural, and religious. They therefore asked, as Mohammed later asked in the Cave on Mount Hiva, if it was the will of God to permit the original religion of the patriarchs to be rediscovered by mankind; if the faith that was in the nature of Deity itself should be allowed to shine into the structure of creation. I think it was the repentance, the piety, the urgency and desperation of the people forlorn in the sense of lacking inner stability, forlorn through loss of faith in the things that had previously been important, that led to this great change in the religious life of mankind.

I think it is well described by Synesius, the Christian bishop of Alexandria, when he pointed out that these new religious ideals came with a repentance, in which thousands of persons, disillusioned, hurt, lonely, tired and abused in one way or another, cried out for a solution to their problem. Among these people were some—maybe not a majority, but

some—who came back with the same answer that we have today, namely, that basically the individual is in trouble because he is wrong. He is in trouble because he has broken the simple, eternal rules of life. There came about a rise of a religious emphasis based upon obedience to the Divine Will, and the means of achieving this obedience or this willingness to obey was through a philosophical approach to the structure of nature in the effort to discover the god of nature. Thus, a great system of searching for deity by philosophical means, religious dedication, and certain esoteric practices, gained wide attention.

What we call today Oriental meditational systems such as Yoga were available in Europe at that time. The Yogic philosophy and the Yogic disciplines were in use as early as the time of Pythagoras and were certainly part of the Neoplatonic mysticism, though not named or discussed under such terminology. The Gnostics were more open on this point. The Gnostic philosophy is all based upon a secret discipline for the release of man's internal content, by means of which he can become aware of his place in the Divine Plan of things. The Gnostics believed that salvation must be earned. They believed that the individual must make a science out of his own redemption and that the redemption of the individual is the great science, the final end of all scientific searching. They did not have the laboratories or the technical facilities that we have today, but only certain basic means of exploring the world of causes. They had first, of course, the traditions of their people and the religious revelations of antiquity. These revelations, many of which were very old by the beginning of the Christian era, seemed to contain some tremendous archetypal ideas. The mystics gradually realized that the real source of these scriptural revelations was the mystical experience—these revelations were internal experi-

ences of enlightened human beings which made possible the apperception of the divine truths of life.

Out of this arose another situation, which ultimately brought most of the religious systems into trouble, and this was that mysticism, because it is entirely an internal, individual experience, worked a serious hardship upon formal religious organizations. If man's search for truth is inward to a spiritual core within himself, then formalized religions with their vast followings become comparatively inconsequential. The religious organizations were actually only gateways. Individuals who were willing to keep the outer rules of the faith were then entitled to explore its inner mysteries, but the outer structure was a preparatory structure. The temple, the mosque, the shrine, the synagogue, and the pagoda are all gates toward a mystical experience, and the true religion has never been captured within the structure of any material organization. These organizations simply prepare the individual for the experience of religion if he is so inclined. This was the reason for the pageantry of the Greek Mysteries in which the candidate for initiation beheld a sacred pageantry, which meant to him exactly according to the meaning that he could discover for himself. He had to experience the need for meaning, and something within himself had to come forth and give him the answer. The state and the ancient religious institutions would not provide him with an answer because they held it to be the essential part of true religion that the individual release his own internal spiritual content; unless he was able to do this and unless he was willing to earn the right to do this, he was not entitled to the esoteric doctrines.

In the early development of the Christian church we also find the constant use of the Mystery Drama. The mass

is the result of ritual. The mass itself, which is perhaps the greatest single element in Christian religious mysticism, is a ritual. Very often this is put into visible form in a magnificent structure, with magnificent altar instruments and materials, fine stained glass windows, high vaulted Gothic ceilings and a magnificent mass in music, such as one of the masses of Palestrina—these accouterments evoked a tremendous solemnity, and like the high mass of St. Peter's in Rome became almost a symbol of the heavenly host in assembly. Yet this can be seen and to most people who see it, regardless of their religion, it is impressive, and deeply so. It brings with it a sense of inner depth of meaning. The individual is silenced by the spectacle of a great religious rite. Yet it does not necessarily follow that as a result of this experience he is led on to greater mystical depths. It has to be his own decision, his own ability, and also that which within himself accepts the mystery of the mass must explain it and bring it to understandable and useful form.

The organizations to which we referred earlier in this talk formed a congregation, and together they saw the body of religion as a great religious mass or spectacle. They suddenly recognized a universal temple in which Nature, God, and man unite in a glorification of the Eternal. They recognized that in some mysterious way man is bound to this infinite pattern and that there is a tremendous fulfillment, the only actual eternal fulfillment, that will come to those who are able to open the veil and behold face to face the mystery of the Infinite itself.

The Gnostics and the Neoplatonists did not get along well together (heretics seldom do), but both had the same basic conviction that there was a way that led back to the Divine. The Neoplatonists followed largely the Greek theory

of religion with strong philosophical emphasis. The Gnostics, on the other hand, followed Syrian mystic doctrines and perhaps the mysterious doctrines of Central Asia. All of these groups, including many we cannot pause to name, were indebted, however, to certain contemporary available structures and the Gnostics were indebted strongly to Egyptian religion. In fact, the Gnostics possibly give us the only clue to the inner meaning of Egyptian faith. We have seen the magnificent monuments, the great temples, the illuminated papyri and the miniature relics from the religious art of Egypt; but we have practically no understanding or insight concerning the true spiritual convictions of the Egyptian people.

It is inconceivable and impossible that any nation should have endured as Egypt did for thousands of years without a tremendous spiritual potential. Yet this potential has been lost to us with the loss of most of the keys to the hieroglyphic writings, and we are not even sure that the rosetta stone was the true key to all of the Egyptian literature. In any event, we do not actually know what moved the Egyptian as a mystical person within himself. The nearest we have to such a concept is in the case of Akhenaton, the great Egyptian mystic heretic.

From the gnosis we gain the momentum which would cause us to contemplate all religious meaning, all religious art, all religious architecture, all of nature with its natural wonders and its natural architecture in terms of a key; a secret means of understanding them. Everything visible is simply the long shadow of an invisible principle. Everything that is a letter of the law is merely the reflection of the spirit of the law, and we should never forget that the letter of the law killeth, but the spirit of the law giveth life.

Forms in a sense, kill consciousness, or kill man's native curiosity. He sees the form and touches it, his exploration ending there. If it goes further, he merely analyzes the artist who painted or carved the figure, the time it was done, the locale where it first appeared, its historical significance and what sacred figure it appears to represent. There is no actual penetration, it is all surface consideration. Therefore, there was reason probably to recognize the tremendous need for a revitalization of a religious situation that had gone from bad to worse. And, out of this effort to revitalize religion came a series of beliefs that were to survive and have a profound effect upon modern man.

One of these, of course, was astrology, derived from Chaldea and Babylonia, practiced throughout the whole world and brought back again into the Mediterranean complex of cultures largely through the Gnostics. The Gnostics were the perpetuators of the Egyptian and Babylonian magic, or star-gazers.

Another mysterious thing which occurred about this time was the rise of Hermetic philosophy. Hermetic philosophy took its name from the deity Hermes. Who this deity was or what human being he might have been a perpetuation of, remains unknown. From Hermetic philosophy, developed in the middle period of Egyptian transition, came alchemy. The alchemical and hermetic speculations and *The Divine Pymander*, or *The Ship of the Man*, which is the great hermetic text, are contemporary with the beginning of Gnosticism.

About the first century two great Jewish scholars, Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai, gave the great impetus to kabbalism. Where these systems actually originated nobody knows, but the kabbala, alchemy, astrology, and

ceremonial magic all had the purpose to break through the symbolic surface of religion and discover its spiritual content; to transform religion from a faith to a vital life force to be available to all people. The end of this force was the redemption of the individual, redemption in this case being the full unfoldment of the divine potential locked within him so that man truly would become a god like the father who created him. Thus, the search for the science of divinity, as it might apply to the individual, suddenly took over and there was this wonderful motion toward spiritualization.

In the beginning of this motion there was the early Syrian Christian sect, which was probably the extension of the Essene order about which a little has been learned from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes were probably the pre-Christian Christians for the history of the Essenes ends the day the history of Christianity begins. They probably were very closely involved—in fact, there is much to indicate that Jesus, the historical man, was either an Essene or a Nazarite. In any event, the Essene was also searching for a mystical union. Later, the Dervishes and the Sufis had the same feelings and aspirations in the Near East.

The word “union,” which we find so much in Near Eastern religious philosophy, derives from the original Sanskrit form, Yoga, which simply means “union”—to remove the interval between man and Deity. This is removed by the human being himself redeeming the lesser nature of his own being and restoring it to its luminosity. Also, we find that in the Gnostic, Kabbalistic and many other of these systems, the figure of Jesus is gradually metamorphosed. It is transformed from a historical person to a symbol of the divine power of intercession by means of which the human being can attain Deity. This is to say that the Messianic of-

fering, the Messianic martyrdom, is the bridge across which man must pass in order to attain union with the Father. Gradually, therefore, the Kabbalists and the Gnostics and the Neoplatonists began to transform the first literal image of the historical Jesus and pronounce in its place the mystical Christ.

St. Paul of Tarsus, whose city was on the caravan route to Asia, seemingly in some way picked up this concept because he had been initiated into the mysteries, probably at Ephesus, where the great mother of the Ephesians was worshipped. He had gained this insight of the transformation of the Redeemer from a historical, personal teacher, into a source of the redeeming power of God. Out of the union of a purified human being and the defense of the Soter, as it was called by the Gnostics, the heavenly Messiah used Jesus as the living bridge to bring all souls to redemption. This was the Gnostic entry point, and we find from that time on all of these religions began to verge toward an esotericism and a ritual held in private.

In the *Pistis Sophia* Jesus is reported to have instructed in esoteric matters those close to him. The discourses and the instructions are preserved in this book which is no longer to be held as a late creation, but must be believed to have been written not later than the third century, possibly earlier.

Here we have Gnosticism transforming almost all of the New Testament into a mystical testimony of the secret of human regeneration, and here we have all of the instruction necessary to open the keys of the Christian dispensation. That this concept also followed into the Papacy cannot be entirely denied because the Papal arms consist of the two crossed keys, of which the silver key is the key to the Old Testament and the gold key is the key to the New Testa-

ment. St. Peter is said to have carried the golden key, but what did he ever unlock? This is the question that remains: What has been unlocked? How has the key been turned in the lock? There seems to be no answer—it is assumed that there is a mystery, even the church admits it—but what this mystery is and how it is to be solved has not descended to us, at least publicly.

In the first century, a desperate effort was made by a number of minority groups of devout persons to unlock the mystery of salvation and to reinterpret these older theologies in the terms of a new concept. The attempt was made to bring religions along the caravan routes into a uniformity of beliefs by explaining to each how the others interpreted the same mysteries, to prove that all were right, and therefore, to establish the need for an art or science of comparative interpretations. What was implied was that regardless of names and dates and places and allegories, all were worshipping the same principle because there never had been but one principle and never could be. Of course, this created instead of a united religious world, a great cycle of religious dissension. Each individual was reluctant to accept the fact that other faiths were as true as his own. He was also reluctant to see his own faith interpreted in terms of other beliefs that he had been taught to believe were false.

There arose a kind of religious dedication or religious loyalty by which those of various faiths held tenaciously to their own belief in the name of God, rejecting all other systems as heathen and the works of the devil. In order to protect oneself from the works of the devil it was necessary to cling tighter and tighter to orthodoxy. This is the reason why the great first century motion had practically no enduring physical consequences. The Gnostics were persecuted out of exis-

tence by the end of the third century. Most of their art was destroyed; all that we have left are a few engraved stones—gems, on which their symbols were carved. Some of these were preserved simply from a value standpoint, and fortunately, some of these have survived for our time.

The same fate, to a large degree, followed another heresy that arose about the same time and that was the Manichae-an heresy which was broadly the entire Eastern motion of Christianity. We have very abundant records of Christianity and its effect on Europe, its Westward motion to the United States, and finally through colonization and conversion, its practical journey around the world. What seems to be ob-scure is the early Eastern motion of Christianity. Christianity not only moved from Syria to Rome and Athens and then forward and into the West, but it moved also Eastward along the caravan routes.

Eastern Christianity reached India, Persia, China, and there is evidence that early Christian missionaries of the Eastern church finally reached as far as Japan. The reason why these have been ignored for the most part is because they were heretics. The Christians who made this great Eastern pilgrimage were followers of an excommunicated patriarch, Nestorius. At the time of the council, in which he was declared heretical, he was not allowed to even speak in his own defense. The Roman emperor who presided over the council declared it invalid because it was completely unfair and unreasonable, but that had no effect upon the state of Nestorius himself. To escape persecution he and his follow-ers moved Eastward, constituting a tremendous line of Eastern mystical Christianity which mingled with Brahmanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and all of the other faiths of the Far East, ultimately modifying them all. We have a

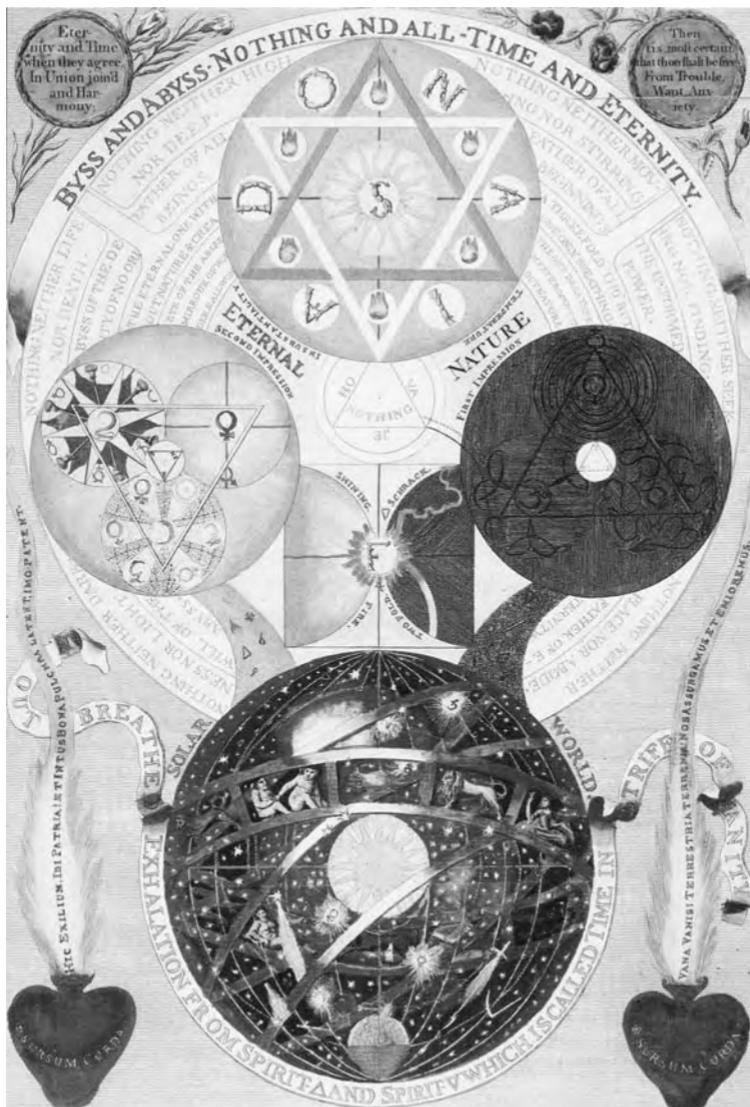
tremendous motion starting here, which brings us perhaps to the core of our problem. What were the principal symbols which were used in the meditative disciplines of these sects of which the Gnostics and the early Christian mysteries are so typical?

We all know the common symbolism of Christianity in which the cross, though not the earliest (the earliest probably being the fish), is the most prominent symbol. We also know that the Gnostics had gems inscribed with their principal deities, most of which were borrowed from Egypt. They had Greek inscriptions, replete with mystical words, some of which appear later in the Kabbala and Ceremonial Magic of the Middle Ages.

The grimoires and the so-called "Keys of Solomon," probably originate from the Gnostic system. The Gnostics also had some diagrams, some of which have survived, in which the universe itself becomes a great mandala symbol. Nearly all of the Gnostic mandalas took the form of two interpenetrating cycles of orbits as though the old idea of our solar system with its planetary orbits was superimposed by another with the outer ring of one at the center of the other, creating a series of overlapping circles. This was the principal emblem of the Gnosis.

The Gnostics were emanationists and their philosophy of life was built upon the Mithraic ladder of the Persians and Greeks, Homer's cave of the nymphs, and the mysterious symbolic ladder that is nearly always shown leaning against the cross at the time of the bringing of the body of Christ down from the cross. The ladder was a Gnostic symbol and also the Christian symbol of aspiration. The ladder in Egypt was tipped so that the top of it pointed toward the constellation of the seven stars. The Great Bear was the symbol of

## *The Wisdom of the Knowing Ones*



### THE TREE OF THE COSMOS

—FROM *The Works of Jacob Behmen [Boehme]*

initiation into the mysteries and of the heavenly ascent of the human soul. This was the ladder described in the vision of Jacob in which the angels descended and ascended.

Gnostic symbols of emanationism depicted the manner in which existence came to be—the polarization of two forces, spirit and matter. Spirit and matter were originally one, and in essence, substance and eternal truth remain forever one. Spirit is the highest state of matter; matter is the lowest state of spirit. This was a basic Gnostic concept, later to be found in the early writings of the Rosicrucians. The ladder symbolized a pattern of levels of emanations from the Divine Power coming down in waves, one after another like the tides along the shore, bringing Divine Light down into the abyss of matter as Jakob Boehme called it.

Along with this concept at the same time from below, another tide was rising which was matter being refined, regenerated, purified, and ascending so that finally all forms reached the point where they could mingle with the descending powers of God. Emanationism was this process of the Divine descending in waves of emanation, and the material ascending in waves of emanation until they met; the meeting point being the spiritual constitution of man. Man was placed in the middle place and in him there was a mingling of the natural and the Divine. The human being was, therefore, the living bridge between nature and God, placed there not necessarily only that he might cross this bridge, but that through him all forms lesser than himself could cross. All of nature finding its way to God is destined to pass through the consciousness of man himself or that level of consciousness which man possesses.

The ladder of emanationism also became the physical geographic symbol of the universal structure, clearly indi-

cating the morality of Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that man's growth was a sequential unfoldment of his own inner life on ascending levels. From below upward he had through regeneration to reach the central point of himself, which was the luminosity of his own soul. It was in his own soul that his ascending body met his descending spirit, and this union produced the divine being within him. As Paul says, "The Christ in you, the hope of glory." It was the regeneration of the body making possible the descent of the spirit that finally resulted in what the alchemists called the rose diamond, the philosopher's stone, the mystery of the universal medicine and the transmutation of all base substances into their purest spiritual essences. These were different terms with essentially the same meaning.

In Christianity we must recognize that the most valid archetypal meditation form that we have is the architectural form. The architectural form produced the great churches of early Europe and the great symbolic monuments, which were to remain as the wonders of the world. Nothing has been done equal to them in any other part of the world. These churches were mathematically developed according to the patterns of Pythagoras. They were symbolically, vibrationally correct, and were also intended to represent the emanation concept of the Gnostics; it was built into them, being the place where the Divine and the human met. The Divine was represented in these churches by the great mandala window—the rose window in which the interior of the church was lit by one light, the sun, broken-up upon the varicolored patterns of the same glass segments. Thus, it would appear that one light became a thing of exquisite beauty in the shining through of the handicraft of man.

The final archetype of the church, or the ecclesia, was the

heavenly palace. It was the universe itself regarded as a great structure, a structure in which all things lived and existed to honor their creator. In the Gnostic symbolism, the Egyptian deities were used for very much the same purpose. One of the transmissions that we have in practically all parts of the world is the transmission of Isis, the great mother of mysteries. Isis is, and always has been, the emblem of the esoteric tradition itself. Isis is the ever-fruitful mother of wisdom, the Virgin Sophia of the cabalists and the troubadours. She is Maha Maya, the mother of Buddha, for both Maya and Mary have the same meaning, water. She is the water of life. Most of all she is the symbol of the mystical discipline which must give birth to the hero of the world, to the Redeemer. Isis was the mother of Horus, who avenged the murder of his father. In all of these religions, the adept, the mystic, the enlightened and the initiated one was born from the mystery of the great mother, the womb of the universal spiritual mystery.

Another symbol that we find carried from one religion to another is the cross. The cross is one of the most universal emblems of all time. It was symbolic not only of the death of Christ, this being actually a comparatively late usage, but most of all it was the Pythagorean symbol of equilibrium. It was the symbol of balance and the symbol of matter. It was the symbol of the material world on which all of the saviors of time have been crucified. It represents the human body within which the soul is crucified; also the directions of space and, therefore, the measurements of the mundane world. The cross was the basis of the shape of the church.

In Egypt, the cross was a symbol of water because water was life—the water of baptism and the water of righteousness. Water was measured in the Nile by the nilometer, which

became the Egyptian cross. Wherever the water came at the proper season, the crops were assured; otherwise, there was desolation in the land. Because it was water, it was life, and because it was life, it was forgiveness. Because it was forgiveness, it was shown coming from the mouth of the Pharaoh when he forgave his enemies. It is interesting that the Pharaoh should be represented as doing good to those who had spitefully used him, forgiving criminals or forgiving those who had injured his country. Where this was done, the sign of the cross is shown coming out of his mouth and these representations go back to two and three thousand B.C.

Another very famous symbol was the ship of salvation, which is found in all faiths. The so-called fisherman's ring, the ring of the Papacy, shows Peter in a little boat. The nave of the church is simply the ship of salvation. The word "nave," being also the basis of navel, or navy, is the symbol of the boat and all the ancient churches had the nave in that form. This is the ship of salvation of Asia upon which souls are carried across the sea of life and death to come finally to the blessed land of protection at the end of the journey. In the Asiatic symbolism the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas are the crews that sail the ship; in the West the priests, deacons, and acolytes were regarded as the crew of the ship. The ship is a very common symbol because it also crosses the most mysterious of all elements—water. Always the land of the blessed is beyond water and the souls in the old hymn are coming to the end of mortal life as one more river to cross. The Jordan, the River Styx, and the Milky-Way are all symbols having the same essential meaning.

By contemplating certain symbols the individual, with the aid of basic insight or knowledge, is able to discover their universal meaning. It is good to take both the Neoplaton-

ic and the Gnostic point of view on this and to recognize the tremendous importance of research inward by various means to the discovery of the secret of the inner self. We should also try to understand the meaning of the old writer who said of the whole problem, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" What are we? Why are we? Who are we? Where are we? These are vital questions that have passed for ages unanswered, mostly on the ground that they cannot be answered, and that there is no way to solve these questions. The Gnostic answer was what they called "The Aeonology." The Aeons were levels of the rungs of the ladder leading from death to eternal life. They had a way of ascending the ladder through internal meditation and insight. The individual learned to experience level by level and the inner nature of himself.

The Gnostic gems are symbols of man. The Abraxas symbol with the human body and the rooster's head was the symbol of the human heart, and therefore, also the symbol of the sun. These people used Pythagorean numerology. They used almost every form of ancient learning in an effort to portray to the mind of the believer the structure of the mystery of himself. It was not a problem that could be easily accomplished, but it was a problem of internal accomplishment. Also, as they pointed out, this inner road is not competitive. The individual searching for truth within himself is actually not in conflict with any religion, nor is he in conflict with the faith he may nominally belong to. No one but himself can ever know about this searching. If the searching is done properly, it is devoutly religious and can be done in the name of any religion in the world, for all have the same quest as it was called in the age of chivalry when the orders of the quest came into existence. In the quest for the over-self, the searching for the reality and the determination to penetrate

every symbol to find the essence behind it, the individual can discover how he himself can be his own physician and redeem his own nature. He is a priest before the altar of his own soul, and he too, has the right to direct inward communication with the Father who abideth within him. The purpose of the mystery rituals was to awaken this.

In dreams we have symbolic pictures in which some attitudes of our own have become embodied in archetypal forms and we see them again. Many of these dreams are capable of interpretation. The great dream is the dream of life itself, and this also is capable of being interpreted. Life has meaning according to the dreamer. Dreams have different meanings according to those who dream them, but always there is meaning and this meaning has always to do with the level of development the person has reached, the problems that beset him, the insecurities that he experiences or the fears that dominate his mind and emotions. These things can all be discovered and the dream can be made meaningful.

The dream of heaven, the great spiritual dream of man, can also be interpreted. This dream, which was held in common by hundreds of millions of people, is a dream founded upon an archetypal reality within man himself. The kingdom of heaven is within you, and this kingdom is discovered by the journey inward. This journey inward is the experience of the journey through the aeons or through the orbits of the world as described in Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Finally, the whole thing centers on an internal approach to the meaning of symbols.

For the average Christian, probably the best symbol to start with is the *cross*. No longer conceived as a symbol of death or as a symbol of martyrdom, the cross is considered

in terms of cosmogony, in terms of the world and in terms of the psychic life of man. The cross is made up of the vertical line of descending life and the horizontal line of deceptive matter. Here, positive and negative meet. Here, the great corners of the directions of space meet. Here, the great fixed signs of the zodiac meet.

In the cross, we also have the sign of addition, the plus factor forever present. Gradually, transform the cross into a psychological study of your own inner resources. Find out what you can dig out of yourself from it and what you can experience from it. By combining the experience with the Christian mystery of the experience of the crucifixion, the crucifixion will gradually unfold into the cosmic mystery that it is supposed to represent. It will begin to give insight into the universal significance of a faith, transcending infinitely all denominations and levels of interpretation until eventually the entire mystery of the cosmos can be beheld. To do this is to have ascended the Gnostic ladder and the levels of the Neoplatonic mysticism.

The *crux ansatta* or the ankh cross of Egypt, is different from the Christian cross in that it has a loop instead of the upper bar. Also, the cross of the Eastern church is somewhat different from the Western church. There are reasons for all these variations. There are reasons for the regalia, rituals and the various sacraments. These reasons all go back to a great universal purpose. Man, in losing the sense of this universal meaning, has left himself with superficial meanings that do not satisfy him.

Today, one of the problems that is breaking up so many churches is the problem of interpretation. The priest or the clergyman does not feel that he can continue to teach the rather trite orthodoxies without questioning and seeking for

deeper meaning. Thus, he feels his only recourse is to get out and begin the quest on his own. If he knew the substance of these symbols and the whole story behind them, he would not have to leave. He would find so much more than he could ever hope to find on the outside. But, while the outside is free for exploration and the inside is tied with artificial knots and stoppages, he will in many instances have to leave his faith. The right answer is that if he went deep enough into his faith, he would find everything he is seeking for, but he has not realized this and has not been taught to know it.

It is the descent of mystical orders, more or less secretly perpetuated as an oral tradition held only by a few, that has made possible this great resurgence of modern mysticism. Until religion solves the problem of spiritual ignorance it cannot lead us economically, industrially, politically or socially towards a state that is conformable with the Divine Purpose of things. In the last analysis, all truth seeking is motivated by the impulse that if truth is found and applied naturally to all the works of man, the result will be universal peace, happiness and security.

To find these mysteries, the old philosophers said that in days of darkness when the world was not particularly open to spiritual things, the only solution for security was to remain discreet. The old alchemists in their cellars and garrets working with the spiritual mystery of life realized that only a small percentage of mankind could understand the findings. However, if one person did discover the truth, that one person would become a monument of strength in society and gradually leaven the loaf.

The Gnostic symbols include the lion-headed serpent taken directly from the Egyptian legends. One of the most

important symbols on their gems was the god Harpocrates represented as a small child with a finger to his lips seated on a lotus. This was the god of discretion. Things, which are sacred, must not be profaned. That, which is intended for the wise and the virtuous, must not be cast before swine. Harpocrates represented discretion not only as necessary to protect the individual against persecution, but to prevent the rise of confusion around him and within him. The moment the individual tells more than he should, his own position is complicated. He should gain sufficient insight to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

Harpocrates represented discretion and also the right of the individual to the mystery of his own inner life. This deity was placed in the proper temples and it was finally said that it represented "Keep quiet while you are on the inside. Do not talk in church." However, the real meaning was, "You are entering a sacred place. Be discreet about what you learn here." If this is followed out, the meditational discipline, which is the symbol of the temple, is properly carried on. To enter the temple is always to enter a state of communion with Deity. To sit upon the prayer rug, as the Moslems do, is to enter into the sanctuary. The prayer rug is the magic carpet. It is the symbol of magic for it carries the individual from this world to the other through the meditational process.

Always seeking inward, always working to penetrate the veils between the obvious and the real, always seeing in nature a fragment of the Eternal and recognizing that every form that exists in the world is in some way a symbol of something deeper, leads to enlightenment. The universe is the great mandala. Within the universe places of worship have been built—the great churches, cathedrals, and

temples. These are the symbols of the universe and in the midst of these symbols stands man himself. He is the symbol of both the cathedral and the universe, and has been able because of the consciousness within himself, to create the church as the symbol of the universe. He has intentionally put together a pattern on which he has based his understanding and insight of the universal pattern in which he exists. Therefore, man's mind is capable of capturing the archetype and making new applications of it. He is capable of presenting the material world in the form of a church, just as he is also capable of experiencing the Divine Will as the great cathedral.

Because man has this power within himself to interpret, to open gates, to solve the riddle of the sphinx and to come gradually into the possession of all knowledge, he is represented as the magician, the sage, the saint and the scholar. He is the Gurnemanz to Parsifal. He is the one who is forever the old teacher, the archetypal symbol, and he is also the personification of the mysteries. He is the Gnostic, the Neoplatonist, the Platonist and the Pythagorean. He is the Christian saint and the pagan savior. Essentially, he is the archetypal wisdom within which can be reached by internal meditation and contemplation that which when reached, becomes the instructor, instructing not in the form of words, but in the form of inner experiences which are irrefutable—the mystical illumination.

## Chapter Five

### THE SYMBOLISM OF GNOSTIC GEMS

The recent discovery of a library of Gnostic manuscripts in Egypt has focused the attention of scholars upon this obscure mysterious movement and its influence upon early Christianity. It therefore seems timely to point out a phase of this 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 dating from the 1st to 4th 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 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 a slight taste for meaningless adornment. They chose, rather, to combine ornamentation



**ABRAXAS RIDING IN THE SUN CHARIOT**

*Intaglio in green jasper, showing the deity as the embodiment of solar power*

—FROM KING'S *The Gnostics & Their Remains*

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 a strong military and economic policy. The central government was not inclined to interfere with the religious beliefs or the philosophical systems of the regions which it conquered. It was only when the priests and scholars of various sects and cults became involved in political conspiracy 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 appointed priesthood, 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 skilful in the art of cutting intagli, few of the genuine Gnostic stones show evidence of high degree of craftsmanship. Materials vary, including dark green jasper from Egypt often mottled with yellow or red; plasma, a variety of quartz-green, faintly

translucent; 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. Most of the stones are decorated only on one surface, but occasionally the sides are inscribed and there are figures or combinations of letters on the reverse.

An example of *abraxoid* in my personal collection is roughly square and appears to be cut in basalt. It is considerably larger and thicker and assumes the proportions of a small tablet. 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 it 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, the famous center of late Egyptian culture. At this time, the glyptic art of Egypt was declining and it practically ceased after the fall of the Western Empire. Inscriptions on the gems are often undecipherable. The spelling and grammar are described by one authority as simply “barbaric.”

Although the engraving on the abraxoids may seem rather skillful, careful examination under a magnifying glass indicates that it 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 shall 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 Kabbala, 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, regardless of their actual race or nation. These Chaldeans favored Gnostic rings cut in crystal, a material not 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 higher 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. Therefore, in estimating abraxoids crudeness may be accepted as a good sign of both authenticity and antiquity.

The Gnostics were a comparatively small religion 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, as well as 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 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. There is also distinguishable borrowing from Syria and the Syrian Gnosis. Kabbalistic elements are introduced, as was a blending of Mithraic and the earlier Egyptian symbols. There is probably no other

group of religious jewels which can offer as wide a variety of unusual and meaningful emblems and figures.

Montfaucon, in his *Antiquity Explained*, (London, 1721) devotes a section to the Abraxas symbols. He divides the symbols into seven classes, distinguished by the nature of the symbols and their inscriptions. As these classes are illustrated in Montfaucon's work by several large engravings showing collections of these signets, we reproduce the more important plates which are little known and difficult to secure. All students of religious symbolism will do well to examine the figures carefully. In addition to his notes and translations, Montfaucon devotes considerable space to a none-too-flattering account of the Gnostic cult, based upon the opinion of the Ante-Nicean fathers. In substance, he takes the general attitude that the Gnostics were a heretical sect and a cause of confusion and discord among the fathers of the early Church. The Roman opinion of the situation, in general, can be gathered from a letter written by the Emperor Hadrian: "The worshippers 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."

The foregoing, which may be accepted as the unbiased opinion of a disinterested observer, gives some idea of the religious confusion that prevailed in Alexandria. It is not even certain whether the Patriarch referred to was Christian or Jewish. 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.

The French Father, Montfaucon, states that a number of Gnostic gems were excavated in the vicinity of his abbey, which had a collection of more than sixty of these stones. They were widely dispersed and one came to light recently in the Arabian area.

It had been set into a brass mounting with the inscribed part turned in and used as a kind of button to hold an Arab cloak. Many had been found worked into religious jewelry to adorn good Moslems, Western Christians and members of the Coptic Church. A measure of shrewdness has played its part in the preservation of the Gnostic gems. Books were destroyed, images broken and holy relics permanently removed. On the other hand, gems were valuable 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 were not employed in the making of Gnostic signets. At that time natural materials were available and cheap. It was more suitable to receive the complicated engraving.

The seven classifications into which Montfaucon arranged Gnostic gems are certainly arbitrary, but there is a broad

pattern behind his plan. His arrangement is as follows:

1. Those with the true Abraxas symbol;
2. Those featuring the lion;
3. Those with figures or inscriptions of Serapis;
4. Those with symbols taken directly from the older Egyptian religion;
5. Those with human figures;
6. Those with inscriptions only;
7. Miscellaneous examples with extraordinary designs.

Obviously, those of the first class are bound most closely with the Gnostic religion, and contemporary manufacture may well have belonged to the initiated members.

The peculiar concept of the human body with the head of a rooster and legs ending in serpents, would not be so readily acceptable to non-members or those of contrary beliefs.

The symbolism was too definite for mere decorative or even talismanic uses. The second class, featuring the lion, often with the body of a serpent was also originally Gnostic in reference to one of their principal concepts—that of the “lion-faced light aeon.” The other group drifts gradually away from the central focus and the symbols and deities represented are derived from a variety of sources. They are called Gnostic by association, or perhaps because we are not certain as to the boundaries of formal Gnosticism. It should be pointed out, however, that even the Abraxas figure may be found in combination with these more indefinite designs. There are also simple inscriptions which are intimately Gnostic so it is impossible to say that any of the groups are actually disassociated. It would be interesting to know how the Gnostics organized this confusion while preserving the

# The Symbolism of Gnostic Gems



FIRST GNOSTIC PLATE

—FROM Antiquity Explained

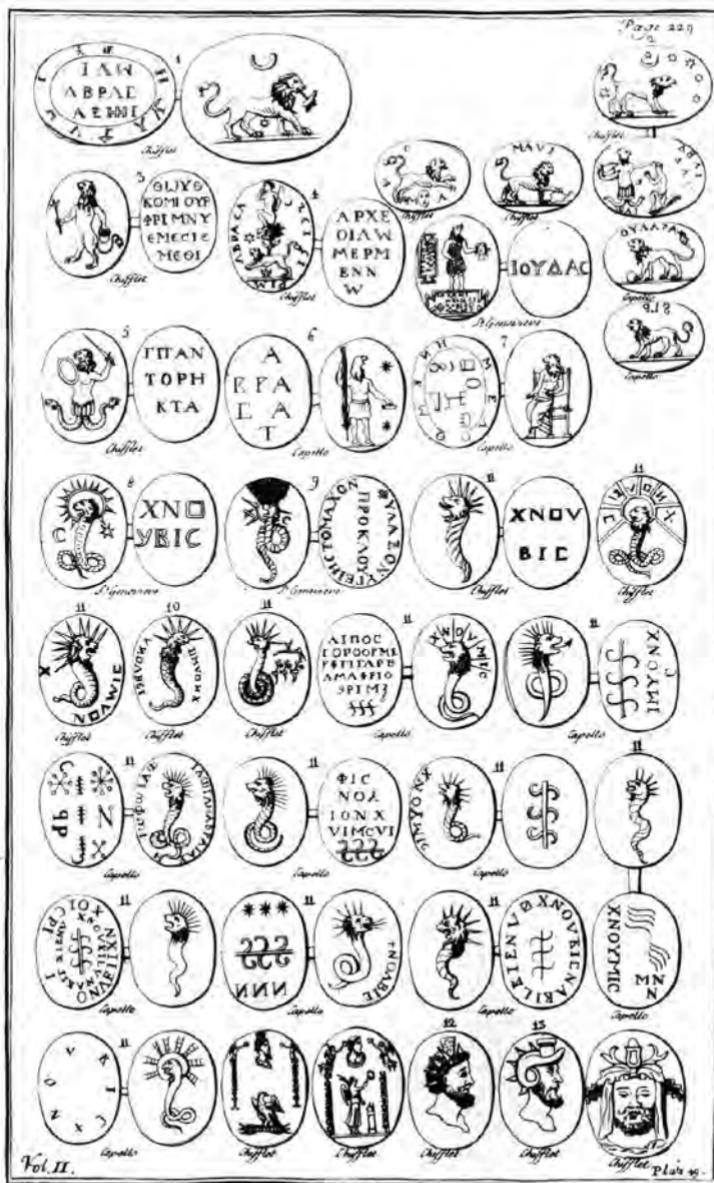
structure of their own beliefs.

It will be necessary here to summarize the Abraxas concept. 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 Gnostics, 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, which according to the ancients was similar to that of man. 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.

Numerological speculations also played a part and mingled with the theories of the Alexandrian Gnostics. The numerical equivalent of the name Abraxas is 365, equivalent to the days of the year. There is also a spelling of the name Mithras, which can be made to give the same number. The circle of the year was an ancient emblem to represent the world, time, the mutations of seasons, and the orderly procedure everywhere in mundane affairs. This ties Abraxas

## *The Symbolism of Gnostic Gems*



## SECOND Gnostic PLATE

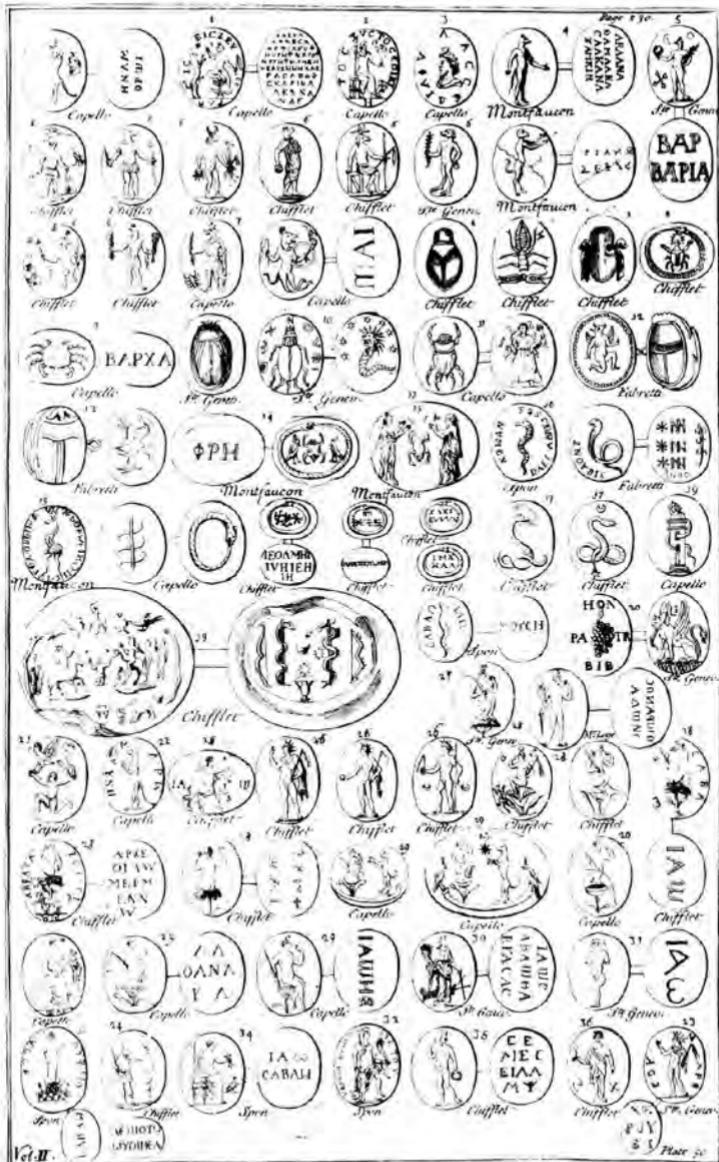
—FROM *Antiquity Explained*

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 on the gems with the word Abraxas, but more often only 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 to Abraxas as none have survived. In the 19th 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.

The first Plate in the Montfaucon collection presents a typical group of gems. When lines connect two seals, the obverse and reverse are indicated. The italic words below the various gems indicate the sources of the illustrations. The general similarity of the Abraxas figure will be obvious, but it will be noticed that the deity faces either right or left and may or may not carry all of his attributes. In one seal in the upper row the sign of Cancer or the crab is with the central figure. Another abraxoid has the sun-god and horses on the reverse. In several cases, the shield of the deity is inscribed.

At the lower right, Abraxas is represented as a quadruped with a rooster's head, standing over a prone human figure

## *The Symbolism of Gnostic Gems*



### THIRD GNOSTIC PLATE

—FROM *Antiquity Explained*

and apparently receiving the veneration of a devotee. As previously mentioned, the instructions are often so corrupt as to be unreadable, but on the reverse of the gem marked number 12, the names Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael and Ananael may be distinguished. The reverse of number 14 is more informative. It may be translated "Give me grace and victory because I have pronounced thy secret and ineffable name." Apparently, this name is the *IA O* which occurs on the shield of the figure to the left of the inscription and on several others. Number 15 has the name Mithras on the reverse, thus tying the Persian cult to the Gnosis. In this case, the spelling has been changed so as to agree with the number 365. On number 16 the Abraxas appears to be seated above two figures. On the reverse are the sacred names *IA O*, Abraxas and Sabaoth, the last hinting of the Kabbala. Numbers 19 and 20 are obviously associated with astrology.

The second Plate emphasizes the lion form, but includes several composite symbols. The association of the lion with the bee in its mouth may be an allusion to the story of Samson who is also a solar hero. Figure 8 is typical of the Gnostic use of the lion. The letters in the rays emanating from the lion's head are not decipherable. Number 11 shows magical and astrological talismanic figures. These descended almost unchanged into the necromancy of medieval Europe, possibly through the gypsies. It is possible that the lion-headed serpent should be regarded as a time symbol inasmuch as the god Phronis was sometimes called The Lion-Headed.

The simplest explanation is that the body of the serpent represents the pathway of the sun through the Zodiac and the head of the lion represents the exaltation of the sun in Leo. The Gnostics considered this figure as a Christ symbol

by associating it with the lion of the tribe of Judah. At the bottom of this Plate are heads of Serapis with Gnostic allusions. It will be noticed that these were not inscribed.

The third Plate contains various allusions to Serapis in combination with other symbols and figures. It will be noted that Harpocrates seated on a lotus, the Anubis figure with the head of a dog or jackal, representations of the scarab beetle and various divinities, sphinxes, and tail-devouring serpents are here in abundance. The vertical rod with three curved lines cutting through it may be a simplification of the serpent-wound stag occurring on the reverse of number 18. Harpocrates was not only the god of science, but was placed at the gates of the temple in a posture admonishing the initiates to keep their secrets faithfully and well.

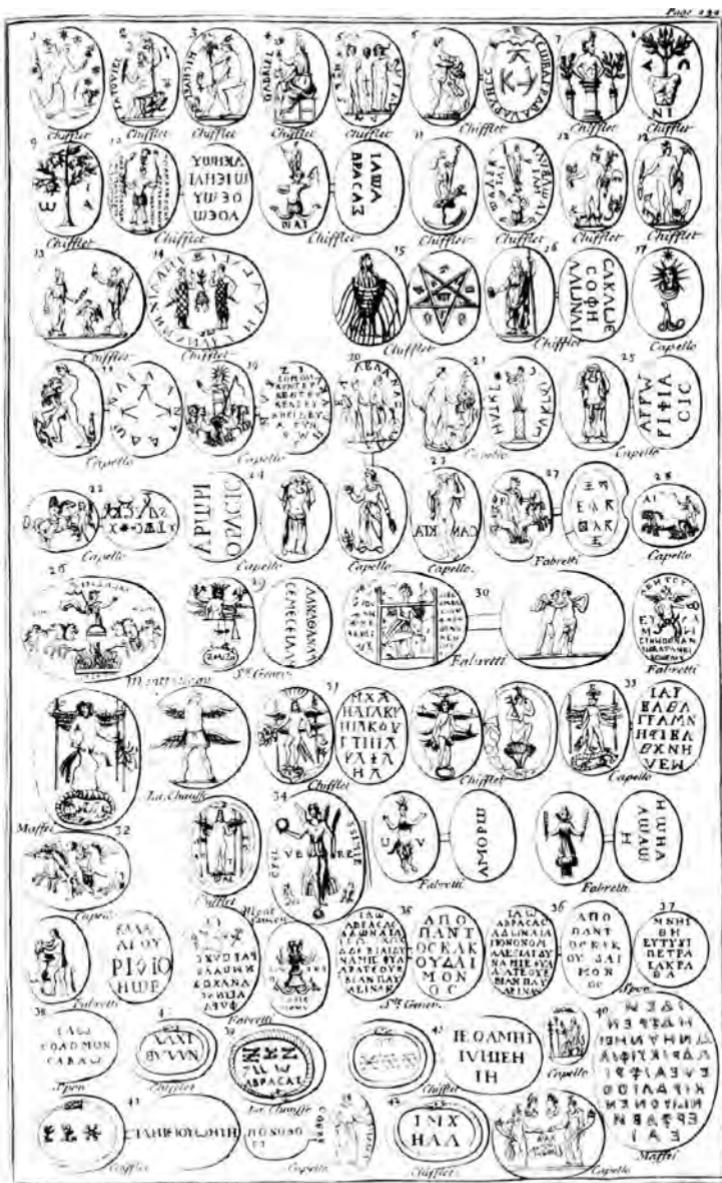
According to Porphyry, the later Egyptians considered the scarab as a solar symbol associated with the resurrection. In number 7, Anubis is accompanied by a scorpion and seems to have his foot on the tail of the insect. In this class the inscriptions are less complicated and when readable, are usually the names of deities, or brief words of praise and prayer. The serpent with the tail in his mouth, as represented in the central part of the engraving, is an ancient symbol of eternity. In number 29 Harpocrates is seated in a boat and the design, except in the method of its presentation, is almost completely Egyptian. Several of these signets apparently derive their inspiration from the Ophites, who held the serpent in great veneration and considered it as a proper symbol of the Christian Mysteries. They reasoned that when Moses raised up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, he was referring to the coming Christ, who would also be raised or lifted up for the salvation of man. On number 19, directly to the right of the large central gem, the name Moses actually

appears.

The fourth and fifth classes of Gnostic gems are included in the next Plate and the lower sections of the preceding Plate. Thus, we see various animals, insects, composite creatures, as well as designs essentially human in construction, including Greek and Roman gods and beings with multiple wings and arms. Number 2 of this group represents Jupiter accompanied by the astrological signs of his planet and Sagittarius. Number 3 and 4 present Mercury with the inscription Michael and Diana accompanied by the word Gabriel. On number 15 is Canopus in the form of a jar from which water is flowing. This figure is associated with the zodiacal sign Aquarius. On the reverse is a typical magic star. On number 30, Cupid and Psyche are seen embracing. Most of the other designs represent deities or aeons. Number 34 is of unusually fine workmanship and its direct relation to the Gnosis is uncertain. In many gems of this type, there are crude inscriptions on the reverse, which seem to have been added for magical purposes. The inscription on number 36 includes the following: "Holy Name, Propitious Powers, preserve Vibia Paulina from every evil Demon." Vibia Paulina is evidently the person for whom the charm was made.

A considerable part of the next Plate is devoted to the sixth class consisting of inscriptions without figures. The first number identifies a large seal on the reverse of which is a prayer and a combination of vowels which may be a cipher. Number 4 is similar, with a number of magical symbols. Number 13 suggests the deity Horus standing on a crocodile and is strongly Egyptian. Number 129 at the lower right is about five inches high, combining numerous elements and perhaps intimating a ritual or unfolding part of the esoteric doctrine of the cult. The Plates that follow are largely astro-

*The Symbolism of Gnostic Gems*



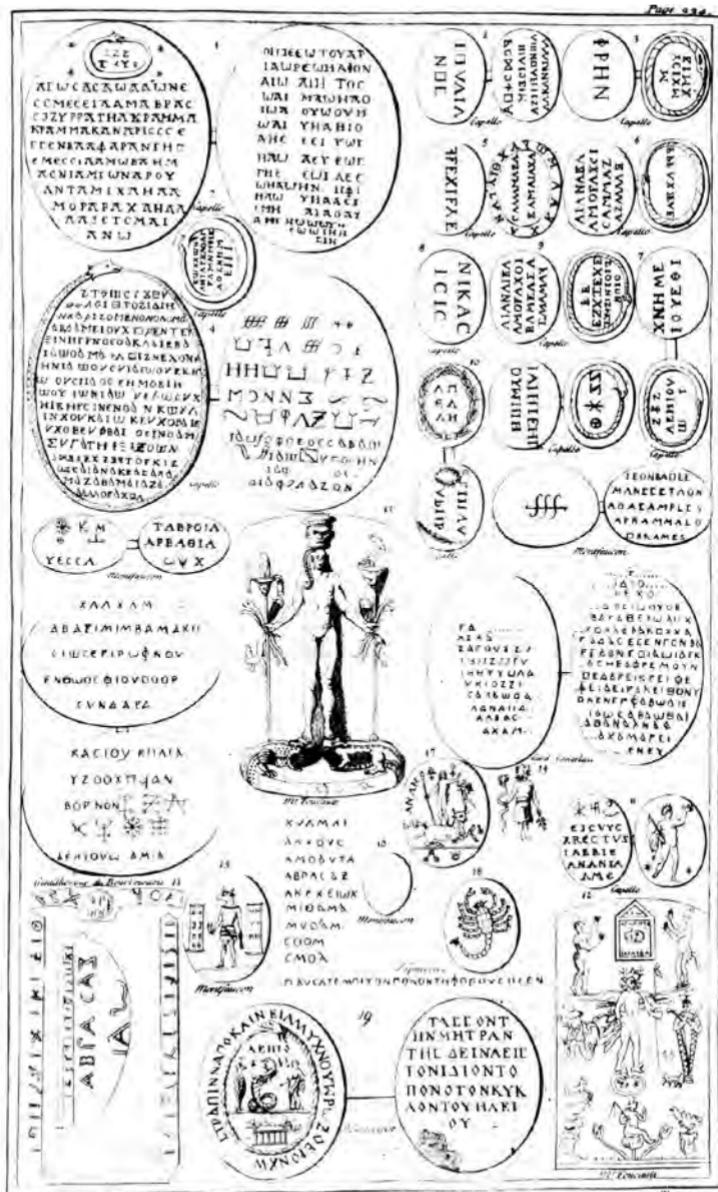
**FOURTH GNOSTIC PLATE**

—FROM *Antiquity Explained*

logical combined with references to Egyptian and Roman deities. They are not reproduced as they have little Gnostic interest.

Another important and almost unknown relic of the 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 Kircagr, and the other was in the collection of Montfaucon. We reproduce two leaves from the latter. These leaves 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 Kircagr 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 examples of the Leaden Book were contemporary with the original Gnostic sect, but it is evident that they are of considerable antiquity. The elaborate Egyptian manuscript of the ritual of the dead may have inspired them. 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 assume that Basilides derived his religious philosophy from the teachings of Aristotle. This position, however, cannot be adequately maintained. Basilides and his son, Isidorus, assert definitely that Glaucias, a direct disciple of St. Peter, the Apostle, instructed them in the Mysteries of Christianity. The Gnostics in general assumed that Christ had communicated his true



## FIFTH GNOSTIC PLATE

—FROM *Antiquity Explained*

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 Basiliadian 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, tended to downplay the usual Gnostic teaching concerning the activities of the 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.



**GNOSTIC BOOK ON SMALL TABLETS OF LEAD**

—FROM *Antiquity Explained*

In the system of Basilides creation unfolded from spiritual seeds or roots which 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 him. Man cannot ascend directly to the abode of principles because he lacks the internal faculties necessary to experience the infinite. He must, therefore, for the time being 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 Christian 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.



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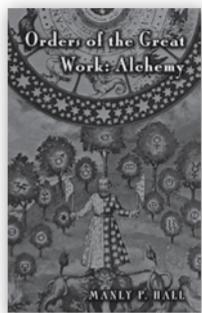
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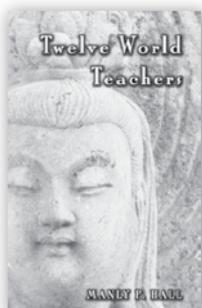
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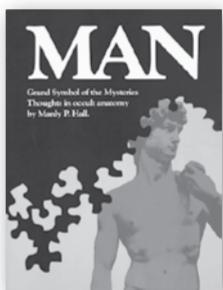


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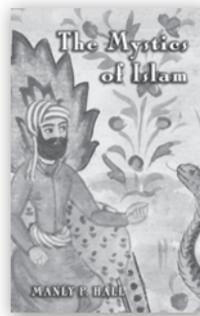
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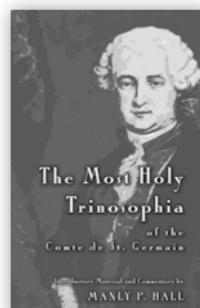
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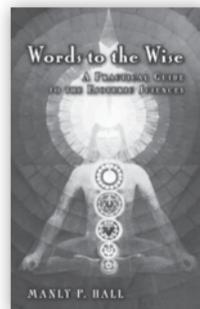
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