

# *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius and the Zoolatry of the Egyptian Mysteries*

MARTIN RIST

THE METAMORPHOSES (or Golden Ass) of Apuleius, a philosopher of the second century is of interest to classicists and literary critics, but it is of equal significance to the students of the Hellenistic mystery cults with which early Christianity had so much in common; for in the last and eleventh book the author describes the rites of initiation into the mysteries of the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris who had become naturalized in the Graeco-Roman world. Superficially considered, the first ten books, which relate the adventures and misadventures, some of them erotic, of Lucius, a man who had been changed into an ass, seem to have no natural connection with the eleventh book; for they are seemingly wholly secular in character, whereas the eleventh is entirely religious. Indeed, critics have stated that the combination is quite incongruous; that Apuleius' purpose was romantic, even erotic, entertainment, and that he has appended the concluding book with its religious content to avert charges that in the composition of the whole he has been frivolous, if not, indeed, lascivious.

The seeming incongruity of the first ten books with the eleventh is admittedly puzzling. However, it is fair to assume that Apuleius was no mere literary bungler, as has been implied, who clumsily attempted to conceal a romantic, somewhat erotic book with the cloak of a religious conclusion. Instead, it may well be that the work was designed to be a literary whole—for Apuleius was an experienced writer—whose primary purpose was religious instruction and propaganda, and not ro-

manic, erotic entertainment.

This conclusion is partially supported by the observation that whereas Apuleius is mainly remembered today as a sophist, Platonist, and writer, in addition, like Plutarch of Chaeronea and Aelius Aristides, he was also a religious leader. He was early a worshiper of Asclepius. One of the hymns which he wrote in honor of this god was so well known that during the course of his celebrated trial on the charge of magic the spectators encouraged him by reciting it from memory. Later on, when he retired to Carthage, where he had studied as a youth, he was made a high priest of this same god of healing, who was the patron deity of the African metropolis. Furthermore, he piously relates that in his "eagerness for truth" and in the performance of his "duty towards the gods" he had become an initiate of a number of mystery cults. Nor was his membership in these cults merely nominal; quite on the contrary, he maintained a devout interest in their cultus. For example, he piously treasured the sacred objects which he had received during the secret rites, keeping them in his room wrapped in linen cloth. He was accustomed to exclude the uninitiated from the room in order to venerate these holy articles in silent devotion. This practice is typical of Apuleius' reverence for religion and devotion to the gods, as his writings, philosophical and otherwise, testify.

Among the cults to which Apuleius pledged allegiance was that of the Egyptian gods, Isis and Osiris, into whose mysteries he was initiated, first at Cenchreae, and later at Rome, where

he had gone to practice law. Furthermore, in addition to being an initiate he also became a chief priest of the Iseum on the Campus Martius, one of the most important in Rome and presumably in the empire as well. It is, I believe, as a priest of this important temple of Isis that Apuleius has written the *Metamorphoses*; for I submit that it is highly significant that he concludes this work with the proud boast that the gods had called him to this high position in the cult. Some, as we have observed, suggest that Apuleius has appended the eleventh book, dealing with the secret rites of the Egyptian mysteries, in order to redeem the work as a whole from the charge or appearance of absolute frivolity or pornography. This suggestion fails to take into consideration the devout reverence and religious awe with which Apuleius regarded mystic initiations. It is almost inconceivable that he, writing as an initiate and priest of Isis, would dare risk offending the mighty goddess (whose religion according to his own testimony stressed moral purity and chastity) by perverting her holy and secret mysteries into a cloak for a light and salacious tale. Then indeed he would be exposed to a far greater charge than that of frivolity; for the religious would rightly consider him utterly sacrilegious and blasphemous. This, so we conclude from the attitudes expressed throughout his writings, is an accusation which he would zealously endeavor to avoid.

The other objection to the religious motivation of the *Metamorphoses* on the ground that it is composed of ten parts of secular entertainment to one of religious instruction, overlooks two substantial additions to the Greek source (apart from the eleventh book) which likewise display the deep interest of Apuleius in the Egyptian cult. The first, occurring in the second book, is an account of a wonderful necromancy,

whereby a murdered man is temporarily restored to life that he might bring an accusation of murder against his wife, who had poisoned him. This great miracle was performed by a certain Zatchlas, an Egyptian "prophet" (or wonder worker), whose linen costume, palm leaf sandals, and shaven crown indicate that he was a priest of Isis. This conclusion is confirmed by his reference to the sistrum in his incantation. The resurrection of the murdered man was preceded by a death watch undertaken to protect the corpse from certain evil witches who possessed the power to change themselves into animals, some, if not all of which, may be recognized as having a place in the animal cultus of the Egyptian religion. This necromancy, which is given a trivial and even ludicrous setting, has some obscure but definite connection with the mysteries of Isis and its promise of rebirth and immortality.

Midway is a second and much larger interpolation, the celebrated allegory of Cupid and Psyche, constituting about one-sixth of the entire work. This matchless story (which incongruously enough is related by a drunken hag) is based for the most part upon folklore; its conclusion, however, is intimately connected with a mystic initiation. To summarize this famous story, Psyche, a beautiful maiden, had become the secret bride of Cupid. She did not know the identity of her divine spouse, for he visited her by night only. Nevertheless she was ecstatically happy; but one night, prompted by her jealous sisters, and overcome with curiosity, she lighted a lamp while her mate was asleep in order to learn his identity. As she did so, a drop of burning oil fell upon the god. He, of course, awoke, and angered by his bride's deception, he flew away to the home of Venus, his mother, to recover from his burns. Venus, jealous of Psyche's great beauty and enraged by her secret marriage to

her son, vowed that she would punish the maiden.

Psyche, in great distress and sorrow, searched for Cupid day and night. Entering a temple of Ceres, she besought this goddess by the "secrets" of her "baskets" to help her; but Ceres, fearful lest she offend Venus, withheld her aid. Later she sought the assistance of Juno Sospita; but she, too, refused to intervene. Then, in despair, she decided to go to Venus and humbly beg her forgiveness. Accordingly, she was taken before the goddess, who first ordered her to be scourged with whips. Next, she assigned her three difficult tasks, which Psyche, to the surprise of the divinity, performed.

As a final ordeal, she ordered Psyche to the lower world to obtain some of Proserpine's beauty. Psyche was dismayed by this seemingly impossible commission, but in time found her way to the infernal regions. On entering the presence of Proserpine she refused a royal seat and fine food, but sitting humbly at the feet of the goddess, she contented herself with coarse bread. Proserpine, on discovering her mission, secretly put some of her beauty into the little casket which Psyche had brought with her. Psyche thereupon returned to the upper world as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, on reaching the light of day, she succumbed to temptation and opened the casket; but she could see no beauty in it, only an infernal and Stygian sleep which enveloped her with a dense cloud so that she fell to the ground and lay there like a corpse. Cupid, who in the meantime had been searching for his bride, discovered her as she lay there. Removing the sleep from her face and replacing it in the casket, he revived her with a harmless prick from one of his arrows and flew away. Psyche upon awakening took the casket and its contents to Venus.

Cupid, fearing the vengeance of his

mother, went to Jupiter for help. The latter called a council of the gods, and told them all, including Venus, that the marriage of Cupid and Psyche was valid. Moreover, in order to make it as one between equals, he gave Psyche a drink of ambrosia, so that she might become immortal and live with Cupid forever. A great marriage banquet followed, with Cupid and Psyche in the seats of honor. Thus was Psyche wedded to Cupid, and in due time she bore him a son called Pleasure.

This, in bare outline, is the allegory of Cupid and Psyche. Comparison of its conclusion with Apuleius' description of the Isiac initiations in the eleventh book shows striking similarities. The ordeals which Psyche undergoes; her visit to the realm of Proserpine where she receives a dread secret which brings about her apparent death; her resuscitation (i. e., rebirth); her association with the gods; her attainment of immortality, celebrated by a banquet; all parallel the important steps of the mystic initiations described in the last book. Likewise the mystic marriage of Cupid and Psyche is matched by the mystic relationship in the eleventh book between Lucius and Isis, in which the devotee uses the fervent words of a lover to his beloved. In the story of Cupid and Psyche, Venus (as in the eleventh book) is to be equated with Isis; while Cupid is merely another name for Harpocrates, her infant son, whose cult in the Egyptian mysteries was second only to that of Isis and Osiris. This identification of Venus and Cupid with Isis and Harpocrates was not uncommon in the Hellenistic age. This is less certain, but possibly Jupiter is to be equated with Osiris, described in book eleven as "the sovereign father of all the gods."

Apuleius, then, has diverted the story of Cupid and Psyche to religious ends. Psyche, as her name indicates, is a human soul which has become de-

graded and has fallen under divine displeasure. Accordingly, she is assailed by sorrow, overcome by misfortune, and beset by fear and despair. Apparently there is no help for unhappy Psyche, not even from the gods she customarily worships, including Ceres with her mystic rites. But finally, following an appeal to Venus (Isis) she enters the mysteries of the Egyptian religion (possibly the rites of Harpocrates are indicated here) during which she obtains a mystic secret, dies, is reborn, becomes immortal, and lives in mystic union with Cupid=Harpocrates. This is the important religious message which Apuleius, Isaic mystic and priest, brings in his story of Cupid and Psyche, based in part upon a popular (Milesian) tale which he has adapted for the purposes of religious propaganda.

Accordingly, if we include the necromancy of Zatchlas and the allegory of Cupid and Psyche with the eleventh book we find that these three additions, which are related in one way or another to the Egyptian cult, comprise slightly more than one-fourth of the whole—one part of religious instruction to three, not ten, of secular entertainment. Furthermore, it will be noted that these three narratives, coming as they do at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the *Metamorphoses*, have the effect of unifying the entire work. However, both the relative proportion of these passages and their position with respect to the whole are quite secondary to the proposition that in the *Metamorphoses*, as in the story of Cupid and Psyche, Apuleius has adapted a popular narrative (in both instances called a Milesian tale) to serve the ends of his religious beliefs.

As is well known, the original story of Lucius the ass-man, the Milesian tale upon which Apuleius based the bulk of his book, still exists in a Greek recension (Lucius or the Ass) traditionally but perhaps falsely ascribed to the

pen of Lucian of Samosata. The original tale, if we may judge from critical reconstructions, had no special religious purpose. Apparently, it merely related the adventures of a certain Lucius who became interested in the magical arts of his host's wife while on a visit in Thessaly. One night while spying upon this enchantress he saw her change herself into a bird by rubbing her body with a magic ointment. Overcome by a desire to make the same experiment, he prevailed upon the servant girl, who had become his paramour, to procure some of this ointment for his own use. His mistress, by mistake, brought him the wrong box; for to their dismay, when he rubbed himself with the ointment he was turned into an ass instead of a bird.

He discovered, however, that despite his bestial form he retained the mind and feelings of a man. Thereupon this ass-man had many strange adventures and misadventures. Some were laughable and ludicrous; but for the most part they were erotic, lascivious, arduous, painful, shameful, and even perilous to his life. At length he found himself in an amphitheater about to become a partner with a condemned murderess in a lewdly unnatural and shameful exhibition. He had indeed reached the lowest depths of degradation; but just as the final preparations for the spectacle were being made he saw a man in the arena with a basket of flowers. Recalling that his mistress, the servant girl, had told him that he could regain his human form by eating a rose, he eagerly rummaged among the flowers in the basket and found a rose which he greedily devoured. Immediately, he was restored to his human form to the great amazement of the crowd, and was happily reunited to his friends and family.

It is this popular story of Lucius the ass-man, which Apuleius has freely used as the basis for the first ten books

of the *Metamorphoses*. His conclusion, however, is quite different from that of his source. In the first place, he changes the locale of the action from the amphitheater in Thessaly to the one in Corinth, in order to locate his hero near the temple of Isis at Cenchreae. Furthermore, in his version the transformation of Lucius from an ass into a man does not take place in the amphitheater, nor in the prosaic manner related in the source. Instead, Lucius, driven to shame and desperation by the degrading and unnatural exhibition in which he was about to be a participant, stole out of the theater unnoticed by the crowd which was being diverted by some preliminary entertainment, and impelled by great fear he ran to the seashore at Cenchreae where he fell asleep.

It was night when he awoke and the moon was shining bright. He recalled that this was the mysterious time when the goddess Isis was most powerful. Greatly moved by this thought, he uttered a beautiful prayer in praise of the goddess, and concluded with a petition for help, beseeching her to have mercy upon him in his distress, to grant him peace and rest after so many calamities and perils, and above all to remove from him the hateful form of an ass. Sleep overtook him once more, and the mighty goddess Isis, clothed in majestic splendor and brightness, appeared to him, rising out of the sea like Venus with whom she is especially identified. She comforted him by saying that she has come in response to his cries for assistance, and she assured him that the day of his deliverance is at hand. On the morrow there is to be a religious celebration. He is to join the procession of her worshipers, among whom will be a priest with a garland of roses. Lucius is to devour the roses, and when he has done so, he will lose the shape of an ass, an animal which Isis, quite significantly,

has abhorred and despised for a long time.

Lucius followed the divine instructions, and when he had eaten the roses carried by the priest of Isis the promised miracle occurred; to his great astonishment he was transformed from the hated shape of an ass into that of a man. One of the crowd covered his new-born nakedness, as it were, with an Isiac robe of white linen, whereupon the priest addressed him. In this liturgical charge the priest briefly but significantly recapitulated the first ten books, summarizing in general terms the erotic experiences, misadventures, labors, painful episodes, shameful adventures, and daily perils which had pursued the unhappy Lucius while he occupied the body of an ass. He concluded by assuring Lucius that all of these evils are now of the past. He is henceforth to assume a joyful countenance, befitting the white garment which he wears; for he has exchanged his former servitude, typified by the ass's body, which brought him so much misfortune and sorrow for service to Isis, which instead this will bring him peace, joy, liberty and immortality.

It is quite obvious that Apuleius has substituted for the original ending of the tale of the ass-man a religious episode which is symbolic of the Isiac initiations. Specifically, he is here symbolizing his own initiations into the Egyptian mysteries which he proceeds to describe in detail. In this more or less autobiographical account he assumes the name of Lucius, and for the sake of continuity he makes several allusions to events which are related in the first ten books. This is generally admitted, but it is usually overlooked that the symbolism of the divine deliverance of Lucius from the ass's skin which Apuleius uses to represent the Isiac initiations depends upon the symbolism of the animal cultus which accompanied the Egyptian mysteries into

the Graeco-Roman world. Furthermore, the otherwise inexplicable diversion by Apuleius of the popular fable of Lucius the ass-man to introduce the sacred mysteries is only to be explained by the significance of the ass in the cultus.

According to the zoolatry of the Egyptian mysteries, the ass (among other animals) was a counterpart of the god Set-Typhon, equated with Typhon by the Greeks and Romans), the wicked brother and murderer of Osiris, and the eternal and fiendish enemy not alone of Isis and the other gods, but also of mankind. In the mythology of the Egyptians, he was the god of darkness and of evil. According to the Greek interpretation, he was the principle of evil, opposed to Osiris, the principle of good; as well as cruel, blind fate or necessity.

This identity of the ass, which Apuleius pointedly declares was a beast abhorred and despised by Isis, with Set-Typhon, has abundant attestation. According to the authority, the Egyptian ideograph for Set was a conventionalized ass. While this has been questioned, there can be no doubting the funerary inscriptions and papyri which present a close association between the ass and the god of darkness and evil. This same identity was accepted in the Graeco-Roman period, so that members of the Egyptian mysteries were popularly accused of worshipping an ass (for Set-Typhon, although feared, was also worshiped as a means of propitiation). Plutarch, himself an initiate in the Egyptian mysteries, as is implicit in his treatise "On Isis and Osiris," is an important witness to the popular identification of the despised ass with the god of evil prior to the time of Apuleius. To be sure, Set-Typhon was also equated with other animals, including the crocodile and the hippopotamus, which only serves to show that there was no uniformity or consistency in the animal cultus of the Egyptian religion. With

reference to the *Metamorphoses* and its interpretation it is only necessary to note that at times the ass was considered to be the animal representation of the evil Set-Typhon.

With this Egyptian zoolatry in mind Apuleius has boldly adapted the current tale of Lucius the ass-man into a vehicle for a religious message, just as he had also used the tale of Cupid and Psyche for the same purpose. In this adaptation Lucius and his metamorphoses typify mankind and the experiences that are his lot, with doubtless a reference to the author's own religious life. In some mysterious way, due to the machinations of blind Fortune, Lucius came under the power of Set-Typhon, as is represented by his transformation into the body of an ass, the animal identified with the god of evil. As a result of this his first metamorphosis, he endured many misadventures, labors, and trials, erotic and shameful experiences, daily perils and the imminent threat of death itself. But through the providence of the goddess Isis, who is more powerful than Set-Typhon or Fortune itself, he had been chosen to become initiated into her mysteries. As the recipient of her favor by shedding the ass body he literally shed the control which Set-Typhon had previously exercised over him. In this, his second metamorphosis he has been reborn so that under the control and guidance of Isis he is to be blessed during the rest of his life and will have the assurance of a blessed immortality.

This is the message of salvation, (which is elaborated in the concluding sections of the book by descriptions of additional initiations into the Egyptian mysteries) which Apuleius has presented by his religious adaptation of the popular story of Lucius the ass-man. To those who are unaware of or ignore the implications of the zoolatry which had accompanied the Egyptian

gods in their naturalization in the Hellenistic world the *Metamorphoses* is seemingly an incongruous book with an ending that has no direct connection with that which preceded. But when this identification of the gods with animals, and particularly of Set-Typhon with an ass, is considered in its true significance the incongruity disappears and the book as a whole (like Apuleius' recasting of the tale of Cupid and Psyche) is seen as containing a religious message of salvation to those who will become devotees of Isis and her consort through initiation into their rites.\*

A final word may be in order. It is, perhaps, not out of place to call attention briefly to a similar concept of man and his salvation in Paul's writings. Man, due to Adam's fall, is born in sin, is under the control of Satan, as is seen by his flesh and blood body which encases his soul and enslaves it. However,

when he is called by God's providence to be saved through justification by faith and baptism in Christ he sheds the body of flesh, the old man, like a garment, is, in fact, "metamorphosed" or reborn, and in consequence is no longer under the control of Satan and of sin. Instead, he is now under the control of Christ; for he is in Christ and Christ is in him. As a result, he is assured through this transformation of freedom from sin and death and of a blessed immortality. There are differences, and important ones, between the message of Paul and that of Apuleius, but at the same time the similarities should not be ignored.

---

\*It has previously been suggested by some critics that the tale of the ass man had already been adapted to the purposes of the Egyptian religion before the time of Apuleius, but this is not certain. But if so, we would merely have to credit some unknown instead of Apuleius for the adaptation.