

ATTILIO MASTROCINQUE

From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism

*Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum*

24

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

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

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

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

A. M.

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Abbreviations

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

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

IC	Inscriptiones Creticae, ed. by M.Guarducci, 1–4, Rome 1935–1950
IGRR	Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes, Paris 1–5, 1901–1927
ILS	H. Dessau, Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae, Berlin 1892–1916
JA	Journal Asiatique
JAC	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
JAC.E	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband
JARCE	Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt
JBL	Journal of biblical Literature
JCPH.S	Jahrbücher für classische Philologie. Supplementband
JEA	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
JE	The Jewish Encyclopedia, New York 1901–1916 (= New York 1925)
JECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JEH	Journal of Ecclesiastical History
IGLS	Les inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie, Paris 1929–
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JR	Journal of Religion
JRH	Journal of Religious History
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JS	Journal des Savants
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSSt	Journal of Semitic Studies
JThS	Journal of Theological Studies
JWC1	Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes
LÄ	Lexikon der Ägyptologie, ed. by W. Helck, Wiesbaden 1975–1992
LIMC	Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae
LThK	Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, ed. by M. Buchberger, Freiburg im Breisgau 1938–1967 = 1986
MAB.L	Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique. Bruxelles. Classe Lettres et Sciences Morales et Politiques
MAIBL	Mémoires présentés par divers savants à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
MAST.M	Memorie dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino. Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche
MAMA	Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua
MB	Musée belge
MedAnt	Mediterraneo Antico
MFOB	Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph. Beyrouth
MMAIBL	Monuments et mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Fondation Eugène Piot
NAC	Numismatica e Antichità Classiche (Quaderni Ticinesi)
NC	La Nouvelle Clio. Revue mensuelle de la découverte historique. Bruxelles
NHC	Nag Hammadi codices
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

The study of Judaic and Gnostic heresies is an arduous task, because most of the texts we have were written by Christian heresiologists for polemical reasons, not in a spirit of scientific enquiry; on the other hand the books written by Gnostics, preserved in Egyptian codices, are in a difficult and at times cryptic language. We will follow the direction indicated by the figure of the snake, which seemed to be a characteristic of many religions under the Roman Empire. In general scholars have preferred to avoid this problem, because it is too vast, ill-defined and ambiguous. The Gnostic doctrinal or Gnostic-related elements in magical papyri and gems have frequently been ignored on the grounds that they come under the heading of magic, not Gnosticism. It is easy to label magic gems and papyri as uncertain documents and put them aside. On the whole, the few scholars¹ who have conducted research in this area have made good progress, especially as regards papyri, while gems have always been regarded as an unimportant field of research. This has often been a convenient position to take: the study of gems is problematical because the iconography is disconcerting and the inscriptions are hard to read. For this reason an enormous mass of documentation, bringing us face to face with individuals who expressed their religious convictions in a very concrete way, has been excluded from research into Gnosticism.

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

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

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

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

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

The Marcionite snake

§ 1. *Terminological introduction and excusatio non petita*

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

The term Gnosticism will be used to designate various Christian heresies under the Roman Empire, in the awareness that many scholars have tried to circumscribe and define the actual sphere of Gnosticism² and others have demolished their definitions³. Consequently, there is now reluctance even just to use the word, lest this be taken as support for the existence of a religious movement called Gnosticism⁴. In this work, the word *Gnosticism* will be used as a synonym for the heresies addressed by Irenaeus and related

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

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

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

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

Gnostikòi, or followers of Gnosis, have been described as the followers of Prodicus⁶; certain libertine sects⁷, the Naassene Ophites and the followers of Justin⁸, the sects led by Nicolaus and the Nicolaites⁹, the Valentinians and those who instructed the Valentinians¹⁰, those were trained by the followers of Simon Magus¹¹, the Carpocratians¹², the Basilidians¹³ and the Cainites¹⁴. The word Gnostikoi in itself was not a specific term: it meant “the wise ones”, and even the Catholic Clement of Alexandria used to describe himself as *Gnostic*. The Mithraists called themselves *the wise ones*¹⁵, which is very nearly a synonym of Gnostikoi. However, all the heretics opposed by Irenaeus disparaged the work of the creator god and tried to distinguish him from the supreme god. This is an important doctrine, which characterized the galaxy of sects opposed by Irenaeus. There are enough elements to justify treating Naassenes, Ophites, Valentinians, Basilidians and Carpocratians as one large group and calling them, as they always have been called, Gnostics¹⁶. The term *Gnostic doctrines*, therefore, will be used to mean the

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

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

⁷ Clem., str. III 18,109–110 (II, 246–7 Stählin).

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

⁹ Hipp., haer. VII 36,2 (223 Wend.).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The main objectives of this study will be to understand the condemnation of the creator by the heretics described by Irenaeus (Gnostics, if we may refer to them as such), to evaluate the importance of the doctrines of the Chaldeans and Magi in the development of Gnosis, and to learn more about a central figure in gnostic doctrines, the snake. We will also seek new elements that will enable us to place Gnostics in their social context. Let us then, just for once, leave aside the endless and often fruitless arguments about method¹⁷ and abstract philosophical concepts, and concentrate on ancient texts and monuments. This procedure carries with it a risk of error, of course. Personally I admire the errors made by great scholars such as K. Reitzenstein, W. Bousset or A. Dieterich, who have taken risks in order to open up new fields of inquiry and to advance research, far more than the sensible and impartial critiques and discussions on method of so many others.

Only at the end of our journey will we try to clarify, to some extent at least, the nature of the link between these two phenomena, Gnosticism and magic. I have addressed the relationship between Mithraism and magic in a previous book¹⁸; in this work I will examine the relationship between Gnosticism and magic, in the firm belief that most of the magical phenomenology of the Imperial Age developed within and around these two great religious movements: heretical Hebraism and heretical Zoroastrism, that is Gnosis and Mithraism.

§ 2. The divine snake in Cyrrhestic villages

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

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

¹⁷ There is, of course, only one method...

¹⁸ A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul Mitraismo. Il Mitraismo e la magia*, Rome 1998.

also to James, a holy man who lived at the time of Theodoretus. This work was written in about 440 AD. In Chapter XXI¹⁹ Theodoretus writes that in the Cyrrhus area Marcion had sown “the many seeds of his errors” and the followers of his heretical gnostic church were still active in the 5th century²⁰. Theodoretus and James, having failed to convince the heretics, used force, but the largest of the villages contaminated by the Marcionite heresy resisted valiantly; then Isaiah, Theodoretus’ right-hand man, told him of a vision that had come to him:

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

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

¹⁹ PG 82, 1439–42; for a translation: SC 257, 95–100 Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen.

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

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

In the years when Theodoretus was writing his *Religious History* a heresiological work was published in Rome, known as *Praedestinatus*²², which asserted that bishops Theocritus of Calcedonia and Evander of Nicomedia rose up in Bithynia against the snake-worshipping Ophites, and publicly refuted Ophitism, eliminated the Ophite priests and killed all their snakes²³. In this instance they were Ophitic Gnostics, who, according to the well-known description by Epiphanius²⁴ and the *Praedestinatus*, worshipped the snake as a Eucharistic manifestation of Christ.

Of course Theodoretus' polemicizing could have led him to distort somewhat his description of the heretics²⁵, but he could hardly be accused of being wrong in describing the heretics of the villages near Cyrrhus as Marcionites²⁶ and in saying that they venerated the serpent that devours its own tail. Prudentius²⁷ also accused the Marcionites of worshipping Satan – who was probably the “Creator’s enemy” in the polemics of Theodoretus. Theodoretus’ description of the hostility between the *ouroboros* and the Creator cannot be accepted uncritically. Tertullian²⁸ gives the following concise definition of the God worshipped by the Marcionites: “Marcion’s god is not

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

²³ *Praedestinatus* I 17 (PL 53, 592).

²⁴ XXXVII 5,1–7 (II, 57–58 Holl).

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

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

²⁷ Prudent., *Hamartigenia* 129; 502.

²⁸ contra Marc. V 16 (632 Kroy.).

known by natural means, and has never been revealed, except in the Gospel". According to Marcion, the supreme god seen in opposition to the Creator was unknowable and outside creation; it is unlikely therefore that he could have the form of a snake, which is not mentioned in the Gospels. The snake, on the other hand, could have been a representation of Christ, derived from Gnostic speculation after Marcion. In his work on heresies Theodoretus²⁹ states that the Marcionites had the audacity to claim that the serpent of the Garden of Eden was superior to the creator, because it enabled men to attain knowledge, and that some of them worshipped this serpent. He then states that he discovered the Marcionites' bronze serpent, inside a box (*kibotion*), together with their abominable mysteries (*mousarôn mysteriôn*)³⁰. Before attempting to analyse the testimonies presented here, it must be stated that from the preaching of Marcion to the age of Theodoretus three centuries had elapsed, during which the original doctrine may have evolved, like all other doctrines of the Imperial Age.

§ 3. *The prayer of Cyriacus*

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

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

²⁹ Thdt., haer. I 24 (PG 83, 373); Harnack, Marcion (n. 20), 291–2.

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

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

Passages

- Abercius, see *Vita Abercii*
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