

PART I
ANCIENT AND
MEDIEVAL SOURCES



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CHAPTER ONE

ANCIENT ESOTERIC TRADITIONS

Mystery, Revelation, Gnosis



Dylan M. Burns

Gar das antike Leben! Was versteht man von dem,
wenn man die Lust an der Maske,
das gute Gewissen alles Maskenhaften nicht versteht!
Hier ist das Bad und die Erholung des antiken Geistes.
(F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §77)

INTRODUCTION

Ancient esoteric tradition is a modern scholarly term useful for designating currents in Hellenistic and Late Antique Mediterranean culture that are concerned with the mediation of some kind of absolute knowledge via a dialectic of secrecy, concealment, and revelation (cf. ‘esotericism’—von Stuckrad 2010: xi; for a different approach, see Hanegraaff 2012). These currents often occupy the fault-lines between ancient ‘magic’, ‘philosophy’, and ‘religion’. However, it is efficacious to use the second-order, etic word ‘esoteric’ to describe a myriad other literary and ritual elements of ancient religious life, such as Graeco-Oriental mystery-cults, Neoplatonic theurgy, Christian mysticism and Gnosticism, Jewish apocalyptic and Merkavah literature, and more. While the contours of esoteric discourse in the Renaissance, Modern, and contemporary eras are to a large extent defined by their marginalization in mainstream religious and academic institutions, many (although certainly not all) esoteric traditions occupied central, respected and publicly acknowledged places in ancient life.

ANCIENT MYSTERY-CULTS, PYTHAGOREANISM, AND ORPHISM

Esoteric discourse has always played a role in religious life in the West (taken here to extend to the Mediterranean basin, including Egypt, Israel/Palestine, and Syria, regions deeply Hellenized following the conquests of Alexander the Great and afterwards usually ruled or contested by Greeks or Romans through the end of antiquity). Priests in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian religion were highly trained

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specialists who formed their own elite scribal culture; the disparity between their education and that of the rest of society lent them and their craft an aura of mystery, enhancing the sense of their power. The iconographic nature of their alphabets was highly regarded as mysterious, powerful and even dangerous. Egyptian mythology also offered its own analogue to the later, transcendent God of the Platonists with its descriptions of a god ‘whose name is hidden’ and paradoxically unbegotten, although his shroud of secrecy was not bound to his role as source of divinity and unity until the later second millennium BCE (Assmann 1998: 12–25). Greco-Roman philosophers would later enshrine ‘barbarian’ speech, script and emphasis on the transcendence of the deity as ‘oriental’ wisdoms contributing to Greek wisdom, often phrased as secret, ‘esoteric’ doctrine.

Greco-Roman religious life, meanwhile, was full of traditions inundated with and governed by secrecy (Martin 1995). Primary amongst these were, of course, the ‘mystery cults’, which were widespread and diverse. Nonetheless, one can distinguish general features usually found amongst them (Burkert 1987; Johnston 2004). These cults enforced secrecy of one’s experience(s) in their rites, which (ostensibly) had positive effects upon one’s existence—both during and following life—through eliciting a special encounter with a deity. They did not challenge everyday civic religion as much as supplement it, and, since they were usually open to individuals of any class, ethnicity, age or gender, they occupied a significant and public role in ancient life.

Moreover, despite the injunctions to keep the rites secret, the content of the rites themselves appears to have been something of a public secret; divulging them was not itself illegal as much as was the ‘impiety’ of profaning them in public (Heraclid. Pont. Frag. 170; Thuc. 6.28, 6.61; Martin 1995: 109). Certainly the myths connected to them were usually well-known: the Eleusinian mysteries, for instance, appear to recreate for initiates the experience of Demeter’s reactions to Hades’ kidnapping of Persephone—descent into the underworld, grief, fasting, and eventual recovery, culminating in the presentation of a symbol of life to the initiates (Hipp. *Haer.* 5.8.39ff Marcovich), who obtained a ‘password’ to a happy afterlife. These transformative rites resemble more than anything what anthropologists term ‘rites of passage’, practices whose performance change a child into an adult. Such rites are strangely absent from Greco-Roman life, so perhaps mystery-cults filled this gap (Johnston 2004: 106).

In themselves the Eleusinian mysteries (like those of Mithras, Isis, the ‘Great Mother’, etc.) are of little importance for the history of ‘Western Esotericism’, because their institutions and myths perished along with other Greco-Roman cults during the rise of Christianity. The same is true of their religious competitors, Orphism and Pythagoreanism. Plato’s Socrates refers to cryptic ‘books’, associated with the primaeva musician Orpheus, invoked by wandering soothsayers to support their exhortations to a life governed by ritual purity and vegetarianism (*Resp.* II 364a ff). Much later, the ‘Neoplatonists’—a movement of systematizing readers of Plato, starting with Plotinus (mid-third century CE)—would quote cosmogonic poetry referred to as ‘Orphic’, the oldest body of which could go back to the sixth century BCE (West 1983). Modern reconstructions of this poetry portray an ‘Orphic’ mystery-religion whose initiates came to learn of a secret myth concerning the dismemberment of Dionysus and the birth of humankind from the blood of the evil Titans. However,

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the same evidence may rather indicate a family of disparate but related myths that were marketed by itinerant ritual specialists (Brisson 1995; Radcliffe 1999).

Nonetheless, even in antiquity the adjective ‘Orphic’ connoted secret teachings about salvific knowledge regarding the cosmos and human life. Archaeologists have unearthed funerary texts that interpret Orphic poetry in the context of the afterlife, or even provide instructions for successful descent into the underworld—the *Derveni Papyrus* and ‘Orphic’ *Golden Tablets* (Betegh 2004; Radcliffe 2011). Yet most cosmological poetry associated with Orpheus would not have survived but for the importance placed upon them by the Neoplatonists, who adopted him as one of their Hellenic culture-heroes. The same is true of thinkers who devoted themselves to the teachings of the mathematician Pythagoras, adopting vegetarianism, communal life, and a vow of silence (Cic. *Nat. d.* 1.74; Burkert 1972: 178ff). While few of their writings survive, their teachings about geometry and lifestyle exerted enormous influence over the Neoplatonists, who even composed hagiographies of Pythagoras. The incorporation of Orpheus and Pythagoras into the ranks of the Platonic authorities, not any particular ‘esoteric’ teaching, made them attractive to admirers of the Greeks in later eras. Similarly, the content and rites of the ‘mysteries’ themselves may have been lost, but the accounts of their salvific importance and esoteric trappings provided ample fodder for later, ‘esoteric’ thinkers who sought to ‘revive’ what they thought ancient, Pagan wisdom to be.

MAGIA, SUPERSTITIO, THEURGIA

The concept of ‘magic’, too, obtained part of its ‘esoteric’ valence in the modern world by virtue of its association with ‘Paganism’, yet some forms of ancient private ritual life can be aptly described as ‘esoteric’ in the same sense as the secret rites of salvation we find in the mystery-cults. Private ritual practices aimed at alleviating disease, cursing enemies, or obtaining one’s desires by supernatural means were commonplace in the ancient world. However, thanks to the rise of new ways of organizing knowledge (like ‘philosophy’ and ‘medicine’) in the sixth century BCE, Greeks began to use the set of terminology that we would commonly translate today as ‘magic’ (*magia*, *goeteia*, etc.) to denote and distance these competing ritual specialists (Graf 1995). Meanwhile, Greek ‘religion’ was largely a public, civic affair. Rituals were usually carried out as part of greater festivals that reinforced the bonds between a local municipality, its greater political sphere, and the gods. Even at home, worship remained decidedly exoteric—a public custom shared with the community. This religious exotericism was based in part upon the depth of belief in supernatural powers: prayers and rites that were uttered or conducted in secret were assumed to be motivated by selfish, or even anti-social concerns.

The subversive nature of ‘magic’ was twofold, insofar as it appeared to come from the east and to reside in the private, and therefore potentially criminal, sphere—indeed, ‘*magia*’ is a Persian word, and ‘*goetia*’ initially referred to Persian funerary laments, which were imagined by the Greeks to possess necromantic efficacy (Aesch. *Pers.* 684–88). Thanks to Greek influence, the Romans, too, stigmatized private ritual practice. While the mystery-cults were generally not seen as magical sects, they could be targeted when it was politically convenient, as with the crackdown (186 BCE) on a cult of Bacchus in Rome, on charges of secret orgies, cannibalism, magic,

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and conspiracy against the state (Liv. *Hist.* 39.8–19). In the following century, Romans began using the term *superstitio* to denote foreign or private religions in Rome, in juxtaposition to the civic cult (Martin 2004: 130ff), replicating the double stigma of magic in Greek culture as alien and secret. One of these was Christianity, a barbarous ‘superstition’ shrouded in the mystery of its closed meetings in house churches (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96). Christians would be accused of secret, conspiratorial activity in charges recalling those leveled against the Bacchants of Cicero’s day (ibid.; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 8; Orig. *Cels.* 1.1, 1.3). Apologists replied that the Christian churches were innocent political clubs (*collegia*)—private, but safe (Ter. *Apol.* 39).

Nonetheless, mystery-cults grew in popularity under the Roman Empire, as worship of ‘oriental’ deities—most famously, Isis, the ‘Great Mother’, and Mithras—spread far and wide. Our knowledge of these mysteries is slight, but the paradigm of a ritual drama plunging the initiate into darkness before a restoration to new, greater life, as we saw at Eleusis, held enough currency to be used by Apuleius of Madaura in our only first-person (albeit fictional) description of (Isiaic) initiation (*Metam.* 11). Nor did private ritual specialists cease operations; some went corporate, as when an Egyptian priest accompanied Emperor Marcus Aurelius on a German campaign (Cass. Dio 72.8.4).

The sands of Egypt have preserved spells used during the Hellenistic and Roman periods which offer a window into the ancient marketplace of private ritual life (Betz 1992; Meyer/Smith 1994). Many charms possessed an esoteric force through their use of the medium of the written word. While estimates of the degree of ancient literacy in everyday society vary widely (anywhere from .5 per cent through 10 per cent, before allowing for the ‘semi-literate’—Humphrey 1991), the culture of writing, largely limited to the aristocratic and priestly strata of society possessed an iconographic beauty and mystery to the unlearned. The allure of letters was particularly intense in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where scribal culture was doubly sacred and whose alphabets were seen as unintelligible but potent symbols even to educated Greeks and Romans (e.g. Plot. *Enn.* 5.8.6). The efficacy of many spells is therefore premised upon the power of decorative arrangements of letters in shapes, strings of vowels to be chanted (Dornseiff 1925), and especially so-called *nomina barbara* (PGM III.1–164, IV.3007–86)—foreign or nonsensical words simulating the powerful holy tongues of Egypt, Syria and Israel (*Corp. herm.* 16.1–2). Other spells could be regarded as ‘esoteric’ insofar as they do not grant practical benefits, as much as abstract knowledge of or a mystical confrontation with the transcendent God (PGM IV.1115–66, VII.756–94; Betz 1995), which can even bestow immortality (as in the so-called ‘Mithras Liturgy’—PGM IV.475–829).

The Neoplatonists drew from this wellspring of Graeco-Egyptian magic and the fetish of ‘oriental’ wisdom in formulating a ritual culture premised on the practice of ‘divine works (theurgy)’. Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 300 CE) theorized these practices aimed at facilitating the ascent of the soul by adopting the pose of an Egyptian priest in an exchange of letters with his elder contemporary, Porphyry of Tyre (Shaw 1995; Clarke et al. 2003). Porphyry, following his teacher Plotinus, believed that the soul communed with the divine intellect, and therefore needed to avoid engagement with the world in order to practice contemplation; Iamblichus responded that the soul had fully descended into matter, and must navigate and master the cosmos by means of proper symbolic manipulation of objects (Iamb. *An.* 6–7; Damasc. *Comm. Phaedo*

105). His admixture of Neoplatonic metaphysics, valorization of Hellenic culture (particularly Pythagoreanism and Orphism), and ‘orientalizing’ ritual trappings (drawn from the Middle Platonic hexameter poetry of the *Chaldean Oracles*) proved to be popular and effective at a time when Hellenic philosophers sought to define themselves against Christianity. Julian the Apostate (361–63 CE) attempted to institutionalize theurgic cult during his brief reign (O’Meara 2003: 120–24), and the Neoplatonic school persisted in rituals like the animation of statues up through its closing by the Emperor Justinian in 529 CE (Proc. *Comm. Tim.* 3.155.18–22). Yet all Neoplatonists, Plotinian and theurgic, Hellenic and Christian, agreed on the importance of meditative contemplation of God (The One) as negotiated by the esoteric wordplay of ‘negative theology’ (Mortley 1986).

Iamblichus distinguished ‘theurgy’ from ‘magic,’ although it was clearly a product of contemporary private ritual culture. Porphyry charged that the use of *nomina barbara* to subdue demons was superstitious and barbaric; no true philosopher would claim, like a ‘sorcerer’ (*goēs*), to have power over the gods (*Aneb.* 2.10). Iamblichus replied that theurgic power belonged not to the theurgist, but the providential divine activity which raises humanity to heaven (*Myst.* 1.12). The *Chaldean Oracles* excoriate popular divination (frag. 107). While Iamblichus’ adoption of theurgy was motivated by philosophical concerns and remained relevant thanks to anti-Christian polemics, it also marked a turn to esotericism in the Platonic tradition. ‘Theurgy’ as equated with ‘magic’ (Iamblichus’ protestations notwithstanding), would later take on the status of a forbidden system of absolute, oriental knowledge passed on by ancient heathens. Yet the theurgic tradition also exemplified a particular blend of Platonic metaphysics, heathen mythologoumena, and esoteric pedagogy that flourished in the second–fifth centuries CE (Lewy 2011).

THE PLATONIC UNDERWORLD, ORIENTALISM, AND HERMETISM

A textbook on ancient philosophy includes an appendix concerning an ‘Underworld of Platonism’: literature that discusses elaborate Platonic metaphysics, but describes the universe through ‘mythologizing’ soteriological schemata that feature the ascent of soul (a divine ‘spark’) out of evil, material existence (Dillon 1977: 384; Majercik 1989: 4–5). These texts include the aforementioned *Chaldean Oracles*, the Hermetica, and Gnostic literature. This grouping oversimplifies much (e.g., the ‘spark’ is hardly the most common metaphor for the fallen soul during this period), but also presents a fundamental insight into one ‘Pagan intellectual milieu’ (Fowden 1986: 114), a Platonic worldview emphasizing divine transcendence and a cognate epistemology struggling to know the unknowable and embracing a diversity of Greco-Roman and ‘oriental’ mythologoumena. Our conceptualization of the range (Greek, Persian, Egyptian) and function (philosophical, theurgic, polemical) of myth and symbolism in these circles, and how important they were for articulating the social reality behind the texts, remains controversial.

The Platonic corpus itself contains no ‘secret’ doctrine; references to oral tradition address the deficiency of textual production and exalt personal dialectic, rather than esotericism per se (*Phaedrus* 276a), although a spurious letter (*Ep.* 2 314b–c) does describe a secret theology orally transmitted at the Academy. This epistle is commonly

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regarded to be a forgery stemming from the revival (first century CE) of the thought of Pythagoras; indeed, another ‘Neopythagorean’, Numenius of Apamea (second century CE), would have agreed with modern critic Leo Strauss that Plato, recalling the execution of Socrates, had employed an esoteric ‘art of writing’ to conceal his more controversial thoughts while providing clues for careful readers (Num. frag. 23 des Places; Strauss 1952). Part of Plato’s brilliance is that many of his narratives *can* be read as esoteric puzzles which, properly unlocked, yield radically unexpected readings; the Neoplatonists followed Numenius in holding that these readings concerned ideas about cosmogony and theology drawn synthesized from the dialogues, Pythagorean teaching, and allegorical readings of ‘Orphic’ poetry, but which agreed with their conception of the *prisci theologi* (Lat., ‘ancient theologians’), the great teachers of the Orient. Numenius appeals to the authority of ‘the justifiably famous nations...the Brahmins, Jews, Magi, and Egyptians’, thanks to their elder stature, rich ritual tradition, and, most importantly, their concordance with Plato’s theology (frag. 1a). Although such notions of the superiority of the ancient wisdom of the east goes back to Plato himself and beyond (Baltes 2005), this ‘Platonic Orientalism’ became, with Numenius, standard in Platonic circles through the medieval period and beyond (Burns 2006).

The content of these ‘theological matters’ naturally varies, but the basic schema is the same (Dillon 1977): in the first century CE, Platonists became interested in fusing the concept of the transcendence and unknowability of the first principle—‘The One’ (or ‘monad’) as discussed in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*—with the concept, drawn from the *Timaeus*, of the cosmos as created by a divine craftsman (‘demiurge’), occasionally identified with the divine creative intellect. The ambiguity in the latter text regarding the material with which this craftsman worked begat speculations on a separate, passive, occasionally evil principle of matter, often termed ‘The Dyad.’ The objective of the human mind and soul is to go beyond the material principle and reunite, whether in mystical contemplation in this life or in post-mortem release, with their source, God.

Platonists thus (mostly) agreed upon the basic schema of the cosmos and the role of humanity in it, upon the identity of human and divine with respect to soul and intellect, and upon the ultimate unknowability of The One, God. While accepting the importance of contemplation, they disagreed about the character of other means to access this divinity—clearly one kind of ‘absolute knowledge’—and the relative value of the authorities that claimed to possess it. Although he championed the goal of union with The One, Plotinus, for instance, staunchly defended the tradition of exoteric Greek education as the best road there, particularly against the Gnostics (*Enn.* 2.9.6, 9–10).

Hermetic dialogues like *Poimandres*, perhaps the ancient esoteric text *par excellence*, also offered Platonized accounts of cosmogony and salvation, but as transmitted by Hermes Trismegistus, a semi-divine culture-hero of Hellenistic Egypt vested with the authority of Thoth (the Egyptian god of writing) but employing a particularly Greek idiom (Festugière 1950–54; Fowden 1986; Copenhaver 1995). While some ‘Hermetica’ are fairly dry philosophical discourses, others deal with practical ‘occult’ techniques (such as magic or astrology); still others portray Hermes leading an interlocutor to acquire an indescribable vision of the divine, even in an out-of-body experience (*Corp. Herm.* 13.11–13). The Hermetica sometimes describe

the experience as the acquisition of ‘knowledge (*gnōsis*)’ or ‘mystery’ (ibid., 10.5–6), although the terminology varies widely (e.g., NHC VI,6.3–25: ‘contemplative vision...wisdom (*theōria...sophia*)’; cf. Hanegraaff 2008). Like the *Chaldean Oracles*—whose content and even mythologoumena is largely Greek (its God is ‘Mind’; its prime intermediary, ‘Hecate’), title notwithstanding—the *Hermetica* ‘auto-orientalize’, authorizing their Platonism by clothing themselves in the garb of the hoary ancient east.

The theurgic Neoplatonists, like Numenius and other ‘Orientalizing’ Hellenes (Diog. Laer. 1.1–3), ultimately saw the Greeks and Plato as first amongst equals; they respected Trismegistus and considered the *Oracles* fully valid revelations (Fowden 1986: 201–5; Mar. Vit. Proc. 916–19), yet their authoritative texts claimed usually Greek heritage: Pythagorean, Orphic, Platonic. Their teaching revolved around an esoteric hermeneutics of the Platonic dialogues that would disclose total understanding of material and metaphysical reality, beginning with ethics, proceeding to (meta) physics, and culminating in allegorical interpretations of Orphic myths as describing the matters of high theology (Proc. Theo. Plat. 1.5ff). As with the *Oracles* and *Hermetica*, the presence of myth alone does not denote esotericism; rather, it is the assignment of authoritative, urgent content to the myths, and their mediation through secrecy and disclosure (revelation or, in this case, allegory). Moreover, the theurgists were themselves ambivalent auto-orientalizers, brandishing the wisdom of Hellas above all others. ‘Chaldean’ and ‘Egyptian’ Platonism appeared safe, because Greeks traditionally regarded these nations as authoritative. In later times, the association of Persia and Egypt with ‘magic’ would tar these ‘Orientalizing’ Neoplatonists with the brush of sorcery. In their own day, meanwhile, they were consumed by the threat of Christianity.

MYSTERY, ESOTERICISM, AND REVELATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Early Christian literature and rituals are replete with esoteric discourse, sometimes dominant, sometimes coexisting with an exoteric *kerygma* (Christian message). The latter current is commonly associated with ‘proto-orthodox’ groups, although they also traded in esoteric leanings in Scripture, popular use of the language of ‘mysteries’, and mysticism. The Gospel of Mark is undergirded by the so-called ‘Messianic Secret’ (Jesus’ concealment of his identity—Wrede 1901) and emphasizes the esotericism of the parables (Mk 4:3–34). The Gospel of John, too, makes wide use of parables and riddling language (Dunderberg 2011). Yet both texts, like the other canonical gospels, are centered upon the exoteric theophany of the Son of God, his death, and resurrection. The bizarre symbolism of The Revelation to John appears decidedly esoteric but actually trades in popular cryptography (such as *gematria*—coding words with numbers, e.g., ‘666’ = ‘(Emperor) Nero’, widely feared amongst Christians) to express reaction to crisis. The apostle Paul deals particularly often with esoteric language. He combats his opponents’ claims to esoteric authority in favor of the exoteric gospel of love (esp. 1 Cor 13), while noting his own heavenly journey (2 Cor 12:1–10) and making wide use of the term *mystērion* to describe the allure of Christian experience and initiation (Bultmann 1933: 709; Morray-Jones 1995; Pearson 2011). This ‘mystery-language’ was widespread in the Apostolic Era, and

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while it could have roots in both Jewish and Hellenic culture (cf. Stroumsa 1996: 156), early modern Protestant polemics opted for the latter, hoping to marginalize a supposed ‘Paganized’ esoteric Hellenism of the early Church (Smith 1990: 54ff).

One thesis holds that ‘esoteric’ language of divine mysteries and ‘secrets’ (*arrēta*) in early Christianity disappeared in the fourth century with the downfall of Gnosticism. The terms became more common, but referred no longer to ‘secret doctrine’, as much as the ineffable knowledge negotiated by mystics (Stroumsa 1996: 147–68). In the fourth century and beyond, there is indeed a very public (e.g., exoteric) and ‘orthodox’ emphasis on divine ineffability, as in Constantine’s remarks on the mystery of the Trinity (Eus. *Vit. Const.* 2.69), the Neoplatonic mysticism of the Cappadocian Fathers (Greg. Naz. *Or.* 28.5), or the Miaphysite contention that the single, divine nature of the Incarnation is *arrēton* (Cyr. Alex. *Ep.* 4 [PG 77.44–50]). Yet ‘esoteric’ Christianity was hardly limited to or even chiefly associated with Gnosticism. Anti-Gnostic teachers like Clement and Origen focused on divine ineffability, but also developed Greek allegory for enlightened exegetes of Scripture (Pépin 1958), an esoteric hermeneutics that would become commonplace in the Church. In other literature, like the pedagogical letters of the Platonist monk Evagrius of Pontus (Brakke 2011) one can hardly distinguish between ‘esotericism’ and ‘mysticism’, and the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite draws on not just the contemplative language but the esoteric pedagogy of the theurgists (Burns 2004). Early Christian esotericism is therefore not to be strictly identified with Gnosticism, whose communities and practices were often no less exoteric than their proto-orthodox contemporaries (De Jong 2006: 1052).

Perhaps most importantly, the identification of ‘esotericism’ and ‘Gnosticism’ misleadingly implies that any non-orthodox revelation is ‘Gnostic’ by virtue of its esotericism. This is particularly acute in the case of clashes about authority and canonicity between the proto-orthodox and groups who were authorized by a different ‘revelation’ (Gk. *apokalupsis*, ‘uncovering’: the acquisition of knowledge that completely alters one’s understanding). The Hellenistic and Roman eras saw a proliferation of revelatory texts in Judaism and eventually Christianity that used the genre ‘apocalypse’—pseudepigraphic accounts of revelations transmitted by a supernatural mediator to a seer (Collins 1979; Charlesworth 1985). Such texts and their readers directly challenged the proto-orthodox claim to authority transmitted instead via apostolic succession. The proto-orthodox thus opposed groups who held different views based upon different revelatory authority, such as the Syrian baptists known as the Elchasaites. They sharply distinguished the canon from the worthless ‘secret books’ (*apocrypha*—Athan. *Ep. Fest.* 39) like the apocalypses, and opposed new prophecies, such as the ecstatic millenarianism of Montanism. Elchasaism, the apocrypha, and Montanism each have relationship (or lack thereof) to Gnosticism, yet each also possesses an esoteric flair, by virtue of association with ‘heretical’, revelatory, knowledge of secret things (Hipp. *Haer.* 9.13.2ff; 1 *En.* 37:2–5; Ter. *An.* 9). Yet while every revelation was once a secret—and conversely, esotericism is nothing more than the promise of revelation—not every revelation is ‘Gnostic’, for ‘Gnosticism’ is not just about *gnōsis*, but creation.

GNOSTICISM, MANICHAISM, AND THOMASINE MYSTICISM

‘Gnosticism’ is a modern term used by scholars to denote groups known in antiquity as ‘Gnostics’ (*gnostikoi*, ‘knowers’) and related individuals sharing a distinctive mythography that distinguishes God from an imperfect creator-deity, identifies the human essence with the Godhead, and holds salvation to be ‘knowledge’ (*gnōsis*) of God and one’s divine origins (Brakke 2010). ‘Gnostic’ literature and thought is of particular importance for the understanding of ‘esotericism’. Since Gnosticism became regarded as heresy, information about it survived into the modern era, until recently, only through the writing of its orthodox opponents. Its focus on salvation via knowledge and its wide use of Platonic thought (in the form common to the ‘Platonic Underworld’) led to its association with ‘Pagan’ Neoplatonism, ‘Hermetism,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘theurgy,’ leading both exponents and detractors to identify these disparate ancient religious discourses under a variety of terms, such as an ‘underworld,’ *l’ésoterisme*, or, as often in German scholarship, *die Gnosis*. Yet the 1945 discovery of a cache of ancient literature—much of it Gnostic—preserved in the Coptic language at Nag Hammadi (Egypt) offers us a rare glimpse, unclouded by the heresiographers, into this supposedly ‘esoteric’ Christianity (Layton 1987; Meyer 2007).

Chief amongst the Gnostic teachers was Valentinus (ca. 150 CE), whose theology appears to revise earlier, ‘Classic Gnostic’ myths in light of Platonic-Pythagorean thought (Layton 1987). Students such as Ptolemy or Theodotus developed his thought into a potent rival to ‘proto-orthodox’ churches. Irenaeus of Lyons (late-second century CE) claims that Valentinian communities employed an esoteric soteriology which divided up humanity into nonbelievers, learners (other Christians), and elite individuals (Valentinians) who were already saved (Ir. *Haer.* 1.6). The criterion for membership in the elect was ‘initiation’ into the Gnostic ‘mystery’ of the production of the cosmos and humanity through the fall of divine Wisdom (Gk. *Sophia*) from heaven, underlying the Christian message found in various New Testament writings, often expressed through the esoteric hermeneutics of allegory. Indeed, some Valentinian exoteric literature—such as the *Epistle of Ptolemy to Flora* or the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3)—only make oblique, vague references to the story of the Fall of Sophia, so perhaps Irenaeus was correct to identify the Gnostic myth as ‘secret knowledge’ only granted to the ‘initiates’ in Valentinian communities. A version of the myth by another teacher, ‘Justin the Gnostic’, begins with an injunction to keep its contents secret (Hipp. *Haer.* 5.27).

Nag Hammadi revealed two other major Gnostic literary traditions, Ophitism and Sethianism, together commonly referred to as ‘Classic Gnosticism’; the paradigmatic ‘Gnostic’ text, the *Apocryphon of John*, blends both traditions. Ophite thought focuses on the serpent (Gk. *ophis*) in the Garden of Eden, regards Adam and Eve’s eating of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge as positive, and employs a distinctive set of mythologoumena, chiefly comprised of beastly demons (Rasimus 2009). Sethianism, meanwhile, is uninterested in the Garden-narrative and deals with the incarnations of Seth (third child of Adam and Eve), drawing widely on the Jewish apocalypses (particularly Enochic traditions) in forming its own mythologoumena of the divine world and the revelators and saviors that descend from it. Some Sethian texts weld apocalyptic genre and literary motifs to the contemplative praxis of

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Neoplatonism, producing *sui generis* apocalypses whose revealers discuss technical metaphysics (Turner 2001; Burns 2014). Christian ‘heretics’ circulated these texts in the school of Plotinus in Rome, producing controversy over revelatory authority (Plato vs. Seth et al.) and estranging themselves from the philosophers (Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 16). The Sethian literature thus presents a particularly strong conjunction of ancient esoteric traditions (Gnostic apocalypse vs. Neoplatonism) and furnishes a case-study of the breakup (into Christian and Hellenic parties) of an ‘interconfessional’ circle (Wasserstrom 2000) once united by shared interest in these esoteric traditions.

Sethian thought appears to have grown out of a Syrian baptismal circle like the Elchasaites, deeply influenced by Jewish pseudepigrapha but regarding Jesus of Nazareth as one of many salvific figures (Burns 2012). Elchasaism also birthed the prophet Mani (mid-third century CE), who synthesized a religion which, like Gnosticism, regarded the material world as a negative creation, but differed in viewing its creator as a good being appointed by heaven (Gardner/Lieu 2004). Manichaean use of mystery-language is entirely consonant with contemporary Christian language, and its pedagogy, lifestyle, and missionary activity (extending to East Asia) were decisively exoteric (Pedersen 2011; De Jong 2006: 1052). At the same time, Manichaeism popularized esoteric traditions from Gnostic and apocalyptic literature. For instance, Manichaean salvation-history is traced by a line of *prisci theologi* who transmit revelation (e.g., Adam, Enoch, Jesus, the Buddha et al.), a development independent of the ‘Oriental wisdom’ esteemed by the Platonists but derived rather from (Elchasaite) Christian speculation about multiple descents of the savior (Burns 2012: 388ff).

Mani was also influenced by Thomasine literature. The *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2; early second century CE), like the famous *Hymn of the Pearl* (embedded in the *Acts of Thomas*, chs. 105–8) strongly affirms that one can be saved by the secret knowledge that one is in fact divine (*Gos. Thom.* log. 3) and thus escape the trappings of the body. Thomasine traditions say nothing about the creator of the world or the fall of Sophia, but they emphasize salvation by knowledge, a secret revealed by a certain favored apostle: Jesus’ divine twin, Judas Didymus Thomas (Aram., *tā’mā*; Gk. *didymos*, cf. John 11:16). We do not know if there was a ‘school’ of St. Thomas; like Sethianism and Ophitism, Thomasine Christianity is a literary tradition that, unlike Valentinianism and Manichaeism, cannot be traced to any ancient community known to scholarship. Nonetheless, despite its lack of Gnostic myth, the *Gospel of Thomas* has been marketed and received as the most popular ‘Gnostic’ text recovered from Nag Hammadi, generating controversy and commentary amongst churchgoers, scholars, and even New Age exegetes alike, who ‘find’ in it what they ‘seek’ (Burns 2007).

JEWISH ‘GNOSTICISM’ AND ‘THEURGY’ FROM QUMRAN TO THE HEKHALOT

The literary frame of Jesus secretly passing on esoteric knowledge to one of his disciples was a common tool of self-authorization in early Christian pseudepigrapha, viciously opposed by the proto-orthodox (Ir. *Haer.* 1.25.5). Scholars once referred to such texts as comprising their own genre—the ‘(Gnostic) revelation dialogue’—although they are really apocalypses, ‘revelations’ granted on this world (by Jesus) rather than during a heavenly journey (Collins 1979). Literary traditions of the Jewish apocalypses deeply influenced early Christian literature, particularly in

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Gnosticism, which drew on apocalyptic topics (ranging from wild cosmological speculation to the ‘historical eschatology’ of the end of days) as well as popular motifs (a seer’s ascent to heaven via cloud or assimilation to angelhood). The apocalypses’ strong claims to revelatory authority made them controversial in proto-orthodox circles but popular amongst Gnostics.

The ascent traditions of the apocalypses survived into the so-called ‘Hekhalot’ or ‘Merkavah’ literature, sometimes argued to be the earliest instance of Jewish esotericism. These texts, whose manuscripts go back to the early medieval period, provide information about visionary ascent to the celestial palaces (*hekhalot*), culminating in worship before God’s chariot-throne (*merkavah* – Davila 2013). The ascent is said to be difficult and potentially fatal (Schäfer 1981: ch. 259); the texts paradoxically call it a ‘descent’, and its practitioners ‘descenders to the chariot’. The merkavah-vision follows upon long and prolix descriptions of the heavenly gates, their angelic guards, and rivers of fire, all of which must be carefully navigated using the correct passwords and keys. A famous passage describes how visionaries made their ‘journeys’ through what appears to have been an ecstatic, out-of-body experience, ‘like going up and down a ladder in a house’ (Schäfer 1981: ch. 199; cf. 225ff, 560). Useful comparison to some methods and goals of ascent in Gnostic and magical literature once led scholarship to dub the Hekhalot-texts ‘Jewish Gnosticism’ (Scholem 1960), misleadingly implying a historical relationship between these disparate textual traditions. Similarly misleading is the unfortunate designation (common in Judaic studies) of such practices as ‘theurgy’; as noted earlier, *theourgia* in ancient sources denotes not just any visionary or self-deifying practice, but a specific body of spiritual techniques used in the later Neoplatonic school and derived from the culture of ‘Orientalizing’ Hellenism.

Gnostic, apocalyptic, and Merkavah literature each probably drew separately upon a common well of scribal and/or priestly traditions developed in Israel during the Second Temple Period (Alexander 2006: 135). Ezekiel’s vision of the *merkavah* (Ezek 1) was the cornerstone of these speculations, which developed into various accounts of the heavenly palaces, ranging from participation in the celestial liturgy (as in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls—García Martínez/Tigheelaar 2000) to the culmination of Enoch’s flight to heaven in pursuit of cosmological secrets (1 En. 14). In many apocalypses, sages are transformed into angels, or even the celestial vice-regent, Metatron (3 En. 4ff). The Rabbis frowned on such dangerous practices, without forbidding them outright (m. Hag. 2.1). Merkavah-speculations appear to have been a kind of open secret, since the texts themselves never describe their contents as esoteric. Kabbalah sprang from these variegated traditions, which, together, thus form crucial opening chapters in the history of Jewish mysticism (Schäfer 2009).

GNOSIS, REVELATION, ESOTERICISM

These ancient esoteric traditions emerged from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds: Greco-Roman and Egyptian mystery-religion, private magical practice, Pythagorean and Orphic revival, Hellenic (but ‘orientalizing’) Platonists, early Christian initiation, theology, and apocrypha, Gnostic literature, and the development of Jewish mysticism. These traditions employed secrecy, concealment, and revelation about

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absolute knowledge for very different and even conflicting ends. Most importantly, the content of their ‘absolute knowledge’ was in no way identical. Why, then, group these highly disparate ancient traditions under a single moniker, ‘esoteric’? Certainly scholars have long recognized that an emphasis on revelatory or secret knowledge is a marked feature of religious life in the Hellenistic and Late Antique periods (e.g., Hengel 1996: 1.210–18); they have simply disagreed on how best to term it.

For instance, a recent reference work discusses ‘esotericism’ in ancient religions, but is unable to define the term, or the rubric under which various Egyptian, Neoplatonic, Jewish, and Gnostic trends fall into the same chapter (Johnston, ed., 2004: 640–56). Older scholarship, meanwhile, has often opted for the language of *gnōsis*. Most often, ‘gnosis’ designates any tradition that considers knowledge of God the key to salvation (Festugière 1954: 4.ix; Majercik 1989: 4; Marksches 2000: 1045; Hanegraaff 2012: 12). However, scholars disagree about the *object* of this knowledge: ‘gnosis’ can thus refer to knowledge whose knowledge is of itself (Filoramo 2000:1043), elite secret knowledge (Scholem 1960: 1), knowledge opposed to mere faith (Rudolph 1987: 55–56), experiential knowledge of the divine (Jonas 2001 [1958]: 286; Hanegraaff 2004: 492, 510; Hanegraaff 2008; DeConick 2006: 7), or knowledge of divine origins (van den Broek 2006: 404–5).

Each of these definitions is unsatisfying. First, none of the primary sources testify to a ‘gnosis’ which has no specific content outside of itself; a classic example (*Corp. Herm.* 1.27–29) does state that ‘gnosis’ is salvific without defining its content, but the rest of the tractate makes clear that it is ‘knowledge’ of divine origins. Second, the charge of ‘elitism’ fails to capture the goal of many esoteric claims, which is namely to become revealed (exoteric); Hermetic or apocalyptic literature, for example, is replete with the themes not just of secret knowledge but paraenesis and even mission (*Corp. Herm.* 1.29; 2 *En.* 39). Third, the juxtaposition of ‘gnosis’ and ‘faith’ encodes a juxtaposition between proto-orthodox Christians (identified with ‘faith’—Matt 10:32; Acts 2:44, 4:32) and their ‘Gnostic’ opponents, clumsily grouping ‘gnosis’ with any and all Christian heresy. Yet ancient religious literature, Christian or not, often equates ‘knowing’ (*gnōsis*) with ‘believing’ (*pistis*—e.g., Just. Mart. *Dial.* 69.1; Athan. *Vit. Anth.* 77; *Corp. Herm.* 4.4; Porph. *Marc.* 21–24). Fourth, ‘experience’ is a category whose hermeneutic utility is questionable (for a critical discussion, see Sharf 1998), particularly in antiquity, and in any case, the use of the term ‘gnosis’ for it misleadingly implies that ‘Gnosticism’ was the mystical tradition of Late Antiquity *par excellence*.

Salvation through ‘gnosis’ of ‘divine origins’ is a stronger definition with wide textual evidence in Gnosticism and Hermetism (Clem. Alex. *Exc. Theod.* 78.2; Hipp. *Haer.* 5.10.2). It has nothing to do with secrecy and thus is not necessarily esoteric (van den Broek 2006: 406), but is predicated upon the axiom of the identity between the human and the divine; knowledge of this identity elicits—indeed itself is—access to the divine (Filoramo 2000: 1044; Marksches 2000: 1045; Hanegraaff 2012: 372). The objection to this approach is twofold: ‘gnosis’ is a misleading term for such knowledge, and the lack of emphasis on ‘secrecy’ hides the importance of the concept of ‘revelation’, which is in turn tied to concealment.

Ancient literature used various terms to designate what modern scholars would like ‘gnosis’ to describe. For instance, the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus calls the ‘theurgic virtue’ associated with mystical experience produced by negative theology ‘faith’ (Gk. *pistis*), not *gnōsis* (*Theo. Plat.* 1.25). A seminal Sethian Gnostic text uses the

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term *gn̄sis* for salvific knowledge in general, but ‘primary revelation’ for esoteric, intimate knowledge of the Great Invisible Spirit (*Allogenes* NHC XI,3.53.8, 60.37–61.1). Conversely, early Christians commonly used the word ‘gnosis’ without a ‘Gnostic’ sense (Brakke 2010: 30–31 re: 1 *Clem.* 36:2; *Ep. Bar.* 19:1; etc.). Moreover, modern coining of the term ‘gnosis’ implies an association with Gnosticism, which is both historically misleading (e.g., the Hermetic literature commonly considered representative of ‘gnosis’ was produced by circles distinct from the *gnostikoi* known to Irenaeus and Plotinus) and plays into the hands of the heresiologists, who preferred to group a variety of heretics under the umbrella of ‘gnosis falsely-so-called’ (Ir. *Haer.* 1.29).

The exclusive focus on the language of gnosis to the ancient traditions addressed here thus masks the variety of terms in the sources themselves and shuts us off from other, useful comparisons (e.g., between Gnosticism and the apocalypses) which could be governed by another term. The language of ‘esotericism’ is useful precisely because it addresses the importance of revelation (and in turn concealment) that is central to these traditions. Indeed, the same currents have often been described as a spike of interest in ‘revelation’ in antiquity, and studies of ‘gnosis’ often remark on its ‘revelatory’ character (Bultmann 1933: 693, 702; Rudolph 1987: 55; Marksches 2000: 1051; van den Broek 2006: 403). Regardless, any revelation, whether it became mainstream or not, must have seemed strange and esoteric when first proclaimed, and thus employed secrecy in the interests of both security and allure (King 2011: 82ff). Thus ‘esoteric’ tendencies are integral to revealed religion.

Yet the term ‘esoteric’ is useful in the ancient context for the particular traditions surveyed above because of the role they played in the flowering of ‘Esotericism’—Renaissance Platonism, Hermeticism, alchemy, occultism, theosophy, etc. These esoteric discourses developed out of the reception-history, beginning in the Renaissance, of precisely the materials addressed in this essay—Hermetic texts, Neoplatonism and its association with the mysteries of Orpheus and Pythagoras, theurgy and ancient magic, Kabbalah and its ancestry in the apocalypses and Merkavah-speculation, and, sometimes thanks to their heretical reputation, the thought of the Gnostics themselves. Because the term ‘esotericism’ (like ‘occultism’) does not appear until the eighteenth century (ca. 1772) and is used today to denote these relatively recent historical developments, it would perhaps be anachronistic to speak of ‘ancient esotericism’ per se. At the same time, recalling the debt of ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’ to the secret revelations of the Hellenistic and Late Antique worlds, one might speak of ‘ancient esoteric traditions’.

NOTE

This article was written under the auspices of a postdoctoral research fellowship from Copenhagen University (the Faculty of Theology), to which I express my gratitude.

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