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Author(s): James Arnott MacCulloch

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THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL : A COMPARATIVE
STUDY IN GNOSTICISM.

AMONG Gnostic sects the conception of the universe was that above our world, the place of detention of the heavenly sparks of light or pneumatic souls in material bodies, there were seven heavens. Above these was an eighth, the Ogdoad, and above that again stretched the Pleroma, where dwelt the Supreme God of the various systems. This idea of a number of superimposed heavens is one which is found in many cosmogonies, *e.g.*, in the Polynesian and Dayak, as well as in the Hindu and Buddhist. But more immediately to our purpose is the fact that the Babylonians believed in seven heavens, associated probably with the seven planets or planetary divinities. This was typified by the towering *zikkurat* or temple, with its seven or eight stages, one above the other, each dedicated to one of these divinities,¹ and of which the Tower of Babel is probably a mythical reminiscence. The Parsis knew also of a series of seven heavens, possibly divided among the planets, though this is not certain, while in Parsi mythology the planets personified were now good, now bad, though latterly mostly evil.² Similarly in Mithraism, a derivative from Parsism, there was a belief in seven planetary spheres.³ In the Mandaean religion, which was an eclectic mixture of late Babylonian, Persian, Jewish and Christian beliefs, and in which some recent critics see the quarry whence Gnosticism drew many important things, it was thought that above the firmament there were a number of *Matartás*,

¹ Herod. i. 181; Jastrow, *Rel. of Babylonia*, Boston, 1898, p. 618f.

² See Bousset, *Haupt-probleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen, 1907, p. 43f.

³ Cumont, *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, ii. 54.

varying in number (seven, eight, etc.), and sometimes associated with Ruha and her seven children, who bear in a corrupt form the names of the Babylonian planets.⁴

Already in the Old Testament a belief in several heavens prevailed, but it is only in later Jewish literature that the idea of seven heavens is clearly stated, and some interesting and picturesque accounts of their nature and contents are given. In the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* (xxx. 3) the planets are connected with these heavens, but generally the latter are described independently of the planets. St. Paul brought over some of this cosmogony from Judaism, and he knows of a Paradise in the third heaven—a purely Jewish belief—as well as of various “heavenly places.” The same conception of a plurality of heavens is found in many of the Fathers and in Christian Apocryphal writings, though the number varies and tends to be limited to three—a result of St. Paul’s reference to Paradise in the third heaven. But the belief was gradually relinquished, possibly because of the use which Gnostics made of it. But the Jews believed in the possibility of the existence of evil beings in the heavens—Satan appearing before God as “Accuser of the brethren,” and evil angels being confined in a kind of prison in one of the heavens, as in the *Secrets of Enoch*. More usually, however, it was the space immediately below the heavens which was peopled with demoniac beings, an idea of which the Fathers were fond as well as the writers of Apocryphal documents. St. Paul, however, could speak not only of “the prince of the power of the air,” but also of probably evil “principalities and powers in heavenly places” and of “spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places.”

Now, among the Gnostic sects there appears to have been a general belief in the apportioning of the seven heavens among the Archons or rulers of the world, of whom the Demiurge was chief, and who were opposed to the Supreme God and to all His spiritual children. The Ogdoad was

⁴ Brandt, *Die Mandäische Religion*, Leipzig, 1889, 61, 74ff.

the region of the great female power of Gnosticism, the mother or Sophia, and far beyond her blessed abode was the inexpressible Pleroma,

“To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.”

Without detailing the various systems, it will suffice to take that of the Ophite sect described by Irenaeus. They held that the Demiurge begat seven Archons who sat “in their proper order in heaven,” though, judging by a passage in Origen, one heaven was originally assigned to each. The names of the rulers of this Hebdomad were Ialdabaoth, Iao, Sabaoth, Adoneus, Eloeus, Oreus, and Astanphaeus. They sat at the gates of their respective heavens, and, according to Celsus, had animal forms. Their connexion with the planets is also seen in the fact that the Ophites maintained that “the holy Hebdomad is the seven stars which they call planets.”⁵

The general belief of the various Gnostic systems in seven planetary heavens, ruled by seven planetary spirits, world-creating angels of a lower or evil kind, has its sources partly in Judaism, but also in later Babylonian and Persian beliefs, which also to some extent influenced Jewish and Christian thought, although this is too often exaggerated. The idea of evil in the heavens is found more or less tentatively in later Judaism. It occurs clearly in the Mandaean system; the later Parsis wavered on the subject; but it undoubtedly belongs to older Semitic sources and suggests a nature dualism, the late traces of which were welcome to the Gnostic teachers. But from the fact that the planets in Mithraism were assigned to the heavens through which the soul had to pass, and that in magic codices which have recently come to light a similar teaching is found, as well as of the hostility of the heavenly powers to the soul, it is not unlikely that there was a general eclectic belief of this kind, gathered from various sources, circulating among various groups in the pagan

⁵ Irenaeus, i. 30, 3ff.; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, vi. 31.

world. From such teachings the Gnostics may have drawn their own beliefs. Be this as it may, the evil Archons were creators of men, though not of the sparks of heavenly light within them. Yet to some extent they were masters of the fates of men, whose lives were affected by planetary influences—a belief emanating ultimately from Babylon.⁶ It was the purpose of the Gnostic systems to provide a way of escape for man, in life and in death. His spirit had come from powers superior to the world-rulers, and from these powers came the way of escape for the spirit, so that it might not be kept in durance by the rulers of the spheres as it sped on its upward way to its true home in light everlasting with the Supreme Father.

The idea that the soul on its journey to the Other-world has to encounter many trials is common in mythology and religion, savage and civilized, and it is found not only among the Gnostics, but also in popular early Christian belief. As to the latter, our sources are the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles (though these are often Gnostic in origin), Apocalypses, and Acts of Martyrs. There is first the idea that good and evil angels contended for the soul at death, and claimed it according to the excess of good or of evil contained in it. It was then led before God and allotted its temporary place till the judgement, but before being carried there it was taken to see the places of final bliss and of endless torment. These ideas are met with occasionally in some of the Fathers, and the immediate source of the former is to be found in Jewish beliefs, while these may have been influenced by a similar conception found in Parsi eschatology.⁷ As to actual dangers encountered, the simplest form of this conception is found in St. Perpetua's vision, which also points to an ascent of the soul to Heaven. She ascends a narrow ladder round which are

⁶ Cp. the belief of the Peratae that the stars are gods of destruction, affecting all existing things, Hippol. v. 11.

⁷ For examples see 4 Ezra; *Test. of Abraham*, §20; *Apocalypse of Paul*, §§25, 26; *Acta Perpetuae*, §11; *Texts and Studies*, ii. 2. 127.

swords, hooks, and lances, and at its foot lies a great dragon which she quells in the name of Christ. Similarly in the Acts of Polyeuctes (4th cent.) it is said that he trampled on the serpent's head, smote it, and ascended upwards by the mysterious and ineffable ladder. Popular Coptic eschatology carried these perils still farther. They consisted of narrow ways wherein it was fearful to go, merciless avengers with diverse faces, the worm that dieth not, the ruler of darkness, the accuser of Amenti, those by the gates who restrained the soul or put it to shame, the river of fire with its tossing waves through which all must pass, and the dragon of the abyss. Prayers against all these dangers, specifying each by name and probably partaking of the nature of charms, gave a certain protection against them.⁸ Much of this is taken directly from Jewish and Egyptian sources, and the prayers resemble the Egyptian formulæ by which the demons of the Other-world were vanquished. The dragon, though connected with Jewish and Christian ideas of Satan, has analogies in the serpent Apep, "the impious cruel one who spreadest thy wickedness." The avengers with terrible faces resemble the monstrous animal-headed beings of the Egyptian Hades, who guarded its gates. The idea of the soul being put to shame at the judgement-seat is also Egyptian.⁹ The river of fire, which is to some extent purgatorial, may reflect the Egyptian belief in a fiery lake in Amenti,¹⁰ although fire as a punishing or purifying process is also quite Biblical, and a lake or river of fire occurs frequently in Christian Apocalypses as a punishment, perhaps suggested by the fiery river in the Greek Under-world. But already in Christian theology the idea of a purgatorial fire was emerging, though opinion differed whether the soul experienced it after death or in connexion with final judgement.

⁸ See *Texts and Studies*, iv. 2, *passim*.

⁹ See Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, p. 45f., for a remarkable judgement scene.

¹⁰ Budge, *Papyrus of Ani*, p. 288f.

From whatever source these documents drew their beliefs, the whole conception of the perils of the soul after death shows how largely pagan ideas had affected popular Christianity, especially in Egypt. But as similar ideas are found in documents which are certainly Gnostic or tinged with Gnosticism, it is not impossible that early Christianity in Egypt was deeply influenced by it. Or there, as occasionally elsewhere, there was a certain standing-ground common to Christianity and Gnosticism, and much of that was really pagan. Thus in the Gnostic *Acts of Thomas* there is a long prayer in which the following passage occurs:—

“May the hostile spiritual powers not perceive me, and the Archons not conspire against me, and the toll-keepers at the gates not oppress me; may the higher and the lower beings not withstand me, but hide themselves before Thy victorious power that surrounds me. So grant unto me . . . that I may follow my path in peace and joy and appear before the Judge, and let not the slanderer look upon me, but let his eyes be blinded with Thy light, which Thou hast made to dwell in me.”

And in the *Acts of John*, which are very largely Gnostic, there is another prayer in which this passage occurs:—

“When I depart to Thee, let the fire retreat, darkness be conquered, the abyss overcome, the furnace lose its strength, hell be quenched. May Thy angels accompany me, the demons be afraid, the rulers be cast down, the powers of darkness sink away, the regions on the right hand stand firm, those on the left not be maintained . . . Yea, grant that I may complete the whole journey to Thee without suffering and injury.”

Distant echoes of these conceptions are found in the mediæval and modern burial services, and show how persistent is the influence both of fear and hope.

But the more peculiarly Gnostic idea of the soul's last adventures is that of its ascent through the spheres of the heavens, where it is opposed by their rulers and by many hostile powers. These would detain it if they could, or send it back to a new bodily existence in the

world, or cause it to suffer in other ways. In some of the systems a dragon or serpent—the evil world-principle corresponding on the whole to the devil—opposes the ascending soul (an idea also found in orthodox circles), or is itself one of the seven rulers. Thus in a system described by Epiphanius the soul which does not possess Gnosis is stopped at the first sphere by the Archon with dragon form who swallows such incomplete souls, turning them again into the world into swine and all living forms.¹¹ “The wicked dragon that lieth in wait” is referred to in many documents, and was feared both by Gnostics and more orthodox Christians. How then did the Gnostic hope to escape these terrors of the upward path? All Gnosis in general made the pneumatic souls free of the spheres, and this Gnosis had been mediated by the Saviour as His one great work. Or more particularly, as the Peratae taught, self-knowledge, knowledge of one’s heavenly origin or of the “paternal marks” which showed the soul that it was one with the Supreme God in the Pleroma, gave the soul power to return there.¹² The Saviour had come to free men from the power of the Archons or planetary lords, and had himself attacked them and broken their power. From Him came man’s enlightenment or Gnosis, and He also in some cases was thought to assist the ascending soul, commending it to the Father or actually guarding it and sending it forward on the path.¹³ The Gnosis mediated by the Saviour included a knowledge of the secret names of the Archons, by which knowledge, according to the universal belief in the power which comes to one through knowledge of another’s name, they were overcome. It

¹¹ Epiph., *Haer.* 40. What Irenaeus says of the transmigration doctrine of the Carpocratians (i. 25, 4f), is probably a misapprehension of a belief similar to the above. And the transmigrations of Sophia in the Simonian system, caused by the Archons, probably reflect the fate of imperfect souls (see Iren. i. 23, 27),

¹² Hippolytus, vi. 12.

¹³ Clem. Alex., *Exc. ex Theodot.*, 38, 71, 72, 74.

also included initiatory rites and sacraments or mysteries of various kinds. Yet occasionally the plea of a good life caused the opposing Archons who guarded the gates of the heavens to fall back. The belief that the Saviour had communicated the secret names or formulae is well illustrated by the beautiful hymn of the Naassenes in which He takes pity on the soul which "wanders through a labyrinth of ills," and announces His intention of descending through the spheres bearing seals, in order that He may show all forms of gods and set forth the secrets of the holy path called Gnosis.¹⁴ The names of the Archons, the formulae or charms by which they would be defeated, the symbols or seals, were taught to the neophyte and committed to memory against the time when he must set forward and brave the perils of the path. The fullest account of some of these formulae as used by the Ophites is given by Origen, and may be cited. Thus the soul spake to Horaeus, guardian of the first gate,

"Thou who didst fearlessly overleap the rampart of fire, O Horaeus who didst obtain the government of the first gate, let me pass, seeing thou beholdest the symbol of thine own power, sculptured on the figure of the tree of life . . ."

To Sabaoth he said,

"O governor of the fifth realm, powerful Sabaoth, defender of the law of thy creatures who are liberated by grace by a more powerful Pentad, admit me, seeing the faultless symbol of their art, preserved by the stamp of their image, a body liberated by a Pentad."

Similar formulae were addressed to the other Archons.¹⁵ They show that the knowledge of their names and nature, as well as an appeal to the power of the sacraments ("purified with the spirit of a Virgin"), and perhaps the exhibition of symbols or amulets, which would be buried with the dead, caused the gates to open and gave free passage through the spheres.

¹⁴ Hippol. v. 11.

¹⁵ Origen, c. *Cels.*, vi. 31.

These formulae were communicated at baptism, and the mystic words and invocations used in this sacrament gave the Gnostic union with the highest powers as well as knowledge of their hidden names into which he was baptized.¹⁶ And, as the Basilideans taught, he who had learned the mystic formulae and known all the angels and their causes, is rendered invisible and incomprehensible to the angels and all the powers as he ascends through the spheres. "Thou shalt know all, but none will know thee."¹⁷ In the same way the power of the Sacraments themselves—baptism, anointing, reception of the Eucharist, aided the soul against the dangers, giving it, as it were, a magic armour against them. Thus Gnosis, or spiritual knowledge, joined hands with magic in combating the evil powers which assault and hurt the soul. Gnosticism had a common standing ground with those religions or eclectic faiths which made their chief appeal to superstition and the belief in magic, rather than to Divine grace or the virtue of a pure life.

It is not impossible, as Professor Bousset has suggested,¹⁸ that the initiate underwent some induced ecstatic state, in which it seemed to them that they had made the ascent and triumphed over the hostile powers, and learned the joy of the final state. There are many indications that this may have been the case. Thus in the account given by Hippolytus of the Gnostic sect of Justinus, we learn that after taking the oath at initiation the candidate "goes on to the Good One" and beholds "whatsoever things eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man."¹⁹ This is suggestive of an induced ecstasy, not unknown in other initiation rituals. In the *Clementine Recognitions* Simon Magus speaks of reaching forward to distant regions and seeing them plainly, so that he was

¹⁶ *Iren.* i. 14. 2f.

¹⁷ *Iren.* i. 24. 6.

¹⁸ *Haupt-probleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen, 1907, p. 314.

¹⁹ *Hippol.* v. 27.

unconscious of his surroundings, because of the delight-someness of the things on which he gazed.²⁰ It is the state of which Tennyson writes:—

For more than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself
The word that is the symbol of myself,
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts into Heaven.

Ecstasy and vision were practised by the Neoplatonists, and doubtless the Gnostics were not behind them in this. But both the savage and the more civilized man in every age have thought that in dream, in trance, or in ecstasy, the soul passed into the Other-world and learned its secrets and beheld its landscapes, and experienced its bliss or its horror.²¹ In Jewish and early Christian literature journeys of a seer in spirit or in body through the spheres of the heavens are of common occurrence, and they also suggest that the Gnostic believed it possible to have a preliminary experience of the upward path and the joys to which, through many perils, it led.

But the ascent of the soul was prefigured for the Gnostic by the ascent of the Aeon Christ at or after His crucifixion, which, as well as His descent to earth through the spheres, opened up the way to the Pleroma. In the teaching of Carpocrates the Heavenly Christ escaped the Archons, passed through all the spheres, and so remained free. And human souls can in like manner despise them all.²² In the system of Basilides Christ descended and ascended invisible to all and could not be laid hold of. But this power probably came from the mystic name Calacau which He bore. Those who had mastered this system and knew the names and nature of the Archons

²⁰ *Clem. Recog.* ii. 61.

²¹ See my article *Descent into Hades (Ethnic)* in Hastings's *Encyclop. of Religion and Ethics*, iv. 649.

²² *Iren.* i. 28. 1.

would likewise be invisible to them.²³ In the system of the Naassenes the voice of the descending Son is heard, but His shape is not seen. It resides in an earthly mould but no one recognizes it. But in His Ascent the powers are commanded to open their gates in the words of Psalm xxiv. 7-9. In these various systems there is adumbrated that doctrine of the deception of the world-rulers or of the devil which played such a large part both in Gnostic and Christian theology, and appears so often in Gnostic accounts of the descent of the Saviour to this world. This forms the Gnostic parallel of the Descent to Hades, since to the Gnostic the world was the region of the Cosmocrator or the devil, just as Hades was in the orthodox view. From both it was Christ's purpose to free the souls of men.

In some cases the descending Saviour took the form of the Archons as He passed through the heavens, and thus escaped their notice.²⁴ Or again, He takes their form in order to rob them of their powers and of the spiritual seed of which they have made themselves possessors. This was taught by an Ophite sect,²⁵ and it is probably referred to in the *Acts of Thomas* (§48) where Christ is said to be *παλύμορφος* and to have overthrown the Evil One *εν τῇ ἰδίᾳ φύσει*, and to have gathered together "his nature" into one place. Still another method of escaping the power of the Archons is found in the hymn of the Naassenes where Christ descends bearing "seals" (*σφραγίδας*), probably intended for some kind of amulet, bearing mystic words, which served as a pass, like the symbols carried by the ascending souls in the Ophite system described by Origen. Such amulets are well known to Christian archaeology.

Thus it was through the power of the Saviour and through mysteries communicated by Him that the Gnostic hoped to be able to traverse the upward path through the

²³ Iren. i. 24. 4.

²⁴ Simoniaas, Iren. i. 23. 3; Epiph., *Haer.* 21.

²⁵ Iren. i. 30. 12.

spheres, along which He had already passed. In that curious Gnostic document, the *Pistis Sophia*, Christ describes the terror and horror of the dwellers in the Aeons (here twelve in number, corresponding to the twelve divisions of the Egyptian Duaf) as they saw not only His brightness but their own names and the mystery of them written on His vesture. And in communicating these names to the disciples after His ascent He points out the importance of a complete knowledge of them to the Gnostic. They are words of power by which their terrible owners may be brought to nothing by the soul which knows them.

This idea of a conquest of evil powers by a Heavenly Being is rooted in old nature-myths of a dualistic kind. In Babylonian mythology Marduk's fight with and conquest of Tiamat, or Chaos, and her evil brood, is well-known and is an excellent example of this class of myths.²⁶ But these took a more ethical colour as time went on. Another example, which bears a very close resemblance to the Gnostic account of the Saviour's triumph over the Archons, is found in the Mandaeen system, and it is possible that myths of such a kind are the source of the peculiar Gnostic conceptions found in this doctrine. According to the Mandaeen myth, Mândâ d'Hajê appeared among the seven evil offspring of Ruha in their own form. They at once desired to make him their ruler. He agreed, on condition that they would reveal to him their well-guarded mysteries. But when they had done this, he showed himself in his true form and overpowered them, just as Christ overpowers the Archons in the systems of Saturninus and Basilides.²⁷ Still more markedly is this idea seen in the myth of Hibil Ziwa's descent to the dark regions of evil powers. He passes through these worlds of darkness and remains unnoticed there for many ages because he

²⁶ Jastrow, *op. cit.* 409ff.

²⁷ Brandt, *Mand. Religion*, 34, 38, 182; Norberg, *Codex Nasaræus*, 1815-6, i. 223.

is armed with the power of a mysterious name. Thus he learns the secrets of their rulers. By overpowering the giant of the seventh region he gains his pass or seal on which are written the secret names of the evil powers, and by it he ascends from region to region unscathed, and learns more of their mysteries or gains new amulets of power and strength.²⁸ Here many of the episodes of the Descent or Ascent of the Gnostic Saviour are recalled—His invisibility, the power of the name or of amulets, or the capacity of shape-shifting. The latter is also seen in the Gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl,” preserved in the *Acts of Thomas*, in which a King’s son (the Saviour) is sent to Egypt (the world) to obtain a Pearl guarded by a dragon (the evil world-principle). In order to escape notice he puts on “clothes of Egypt,” in other words, he takes the form of the rulers of this world, and he also conquers the dragon by virtue of the names of those who had sent him—an excellent example of the power of the ineffable name.

The Gnostic doctrine of the ascent of the soul was one which was capable of being allegorized, or one which, with higher minds, probably meant no more than an allegory of the doubts and fears and illusions of the soul as it seeks to rise to higher truth and to God who made it. But these trials may be vanquished by aspiration, insight, faith, hope, and love. These profound things are the soul’s true magic, its sacramental mysteries by which it rises on wings upwards to the heaven it seeks. Each new spiritual experience raises the soul out of its earth-bound condition. Like the Saviour of Basilides who ascended to the Hebdomad and there left His psychical part, and so to the Ogdoad leaving there the parts of His being appropriate to it, thus finally reaching the highest region of light—a process repeated in the case of all true Gnostics—so it is with the soul. Ascending upward through insight, and thus gradually

²⁸ Brandt, *Mand. Schriften*, Göttingen, 1893, 138ff.

expanding its spiritual life, it may leave behind it its old husks. It has outgrown them, as the nautilus outgrows the inner chambers of its shell.

Nevertheless for the rank and file of the Gnostic circles the ascent of the soul through mortal perils which might be overcome by knowledge, by magic, by mystery, was a literal truth and possessed a grim reality. What, then, were its sources and affinities? To all men, at all stages of culture, the soul's flight from the body at death is conceived of as a difficult and toilsome journey to the Other-world. This might be illustrated from many sources, whether from the lower or the higher culture. The dangers to the savage mind are intensified forms of those which beset his earthly journeys, with the addition of more spiritual or demoniac terrors. Nor is this very far different from what is found in higher faiths. But these difficulties might be overcome or faced bravely by those who bore certain signs or marks (among savages tattooing, nose-boring, circumcision, and the like), or who had been initiated into mysteries, or who knew the magic names, words of power, or formulae, or who had been furnished with what might be called a map of the route, for generally the way itself and all that is to be met on it are well known.

A few examples of this are worth citing. Among savage races a typical instance is found among the Fiji Islanders, who knew perfectly and exactly what they would meet with on the Long Road to Bulotu or Hades. A river was crossed with the aid of a ghostly ferryman. Later the soul encountered a god who pounded it on the neck with a stone, and goddesses who gnashed at it with their awful teeth, or who tried to catch it in a net, and other gods who impaled it on a reed or subjected it to different ordeals. Now certain actions were performed at this or the other tree or rock, or certain words must be spoken. Cowards found the perils impossible to surmount; brave warriors, though in much terror, escaped them. But there was also a blessed spring, called the

Water of Solace, which when tasted caused the grief both of the shade and of its mourning friends on earth to be assuaged.²⁹ Thus at the ends of the world we meet parallels to the Greek Charon and the Waters of Lethe, an instance of the similarity of mental processes and conceptions everywhere. The whole journey along the Long Road was described minutely in poems of which the nearest analogy is to be found in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the verses taught to the Pythagorean-Orphic sectaries.

Both of these afford excellent instances from the religions of civilized men of the conception of the perils of the soul's journey across the Long Road. The *Book of the Dead* was a guide to the kingdom of the blessed, and it contained all the necessary charms, spells, and words of power, which when uttered in the "true voice" resulted in victory over all foes. It was buried with the dead, inscribed on the walls of tombs, or on the coffer, or on amulets, and it is probable that much of it had already been committed to memory. By its means the soul passed in safety through the desert and the lands of terror, where were serpents, crocodiles, torrents of boiling water, hunger and thirst, gates guarded by devouring demons. By asking properly he was carried by Hathor across the mountains, and ferried over the lake to the isles of the blessed. Knowledge of the names of the gate-keepers, of the pylons and their gods, gave him admission to the house of Osiris. Moreover something corresponding to the power of sacramental rites is also found. At the pylons the soul had to enumerate its purifications and the oils with which it had been anointed before the words "Pass on, thou art pure," could be uttered. And as the Gnostic was aided by the supreme powers and by the Saviour, so the Egyptian, by use of the right formulae, was aided by Osiris, who lent him his form that thus he might escape the powers of

²⁹ B. Thomson, *The Fijians*, 1908, p. 117ff; Williams, *Fiji*, 1858, i. 243.

darkness. In the same way other ritual books, the *Litany of the Sun* or the *Book of Am Duat* prescribed the course and the magic formulae for that conception of the future life which pictured it as a voyage in the bark of the Sun-god Ra through the twelve regions of Duat. By their means the soul escaped the devouring monsters and forced the gate-keepers of each region to fling open the gates to let the bark pass through.

In the various Greek mystery-cults, public and private, there was no teaching of an ascent through the heavens, but the use of lustrations, initiations, the disclosure of mysteries, and the reception of Sacraments, ensured for the soul union with deity and a blissful life beyond the grave. But in the Orphic-Pythagorean circles there was something closely corresponding to the Fijian saga of the Long Road and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. This was probably the poem known to us under the title *κατάβασις εἰς ἄδου*, which must have described the way, the dangers, the scenery, the punishments and the bliss of the Other-world. Some verses inscribed on gold tablets have been found in graves of the fourth century B.C. and of the second century A.D., and they must have been buried with members of the Orphic community, and were probably verses from such a poem. They describe what the soul of the initiate will see in Hades, what he must avoid, what he must say, and what bliss awaits him, viz., to become a god. Like the *Book of the Dead* they were intended for the magical help and guidance of the soul. One fragment runs thus:—

“ On the left you will find a stream and near by a white poplar. Approach it not. Another you will find, cool water flowing from the Lake of Memory. Before it are guards. Say, ‘ Child am I of earth and starry sky, a heavenly origin is mine, as ye yourselves know well. I am parched and dying of thirst. Give me quickly cool water flowing from the Lake of Memory.’ And then they will give you to drink of the holy stream, and thereafter among the other heroes thou shalt have lordship.”³⁰

³⁰ Dieterich, *Nekyia*, Leipzig, 1893, p. 86ff.; Miss Harrison, *Prolegomena to Greek Religion*, Cambridge, 1908, p. 573ff.

Thus the Orphic soul, like the Fijian, knew of a Water of Solace and passed through all perils to the gods, just as the Fijian reached the place where the gods danced before him and sang, and where he danced before them in turn. Both conceptions are of a beautiful kind, and, like our own Celtic tales of Elysium, of Tir na nOg, the "Land of Youth," show the desire of the universal human soul for peace and rest.³¹

In the Mandaean religion, to which reference has already been made, the soul of the blessed ascended through the seven *Matartás* to the region of light far beyond. The wicked were there detained and punished, but the good passed safely through, being provided with the names of the lords of the *Matartás* and the tokens which they had received in the baptismal rites, and went rejoicing on their upward way.³² The old Parsi religion had already spoken of the blessed soul's journey to the region of the stars, then to that of the moon, then to that of the sun, and finally to the highest heaven where Ormazd dwelt. Mithraism, an offshoot of Parsism, taught a doctrine of the soul's ascent through the planetary heavens, which apparently closely resembled that of the Gnostics. It was revealed in the mysteries and may possibly have been dramatized. But, again, the mystico-magical cults which had affinity with Mithraism, and whose *praxis* is seen in the magical codices recently discovered, offer a further illustration of the ascent. In one a mystic ascent, probably in a state of ecstasy, is described. The initiate, after inhaling three deep breaths (the deep breathing of the modern would-be mystic), finds himself rising through space. Before him appear the gods of the stars, ascending and descending. They observe him and rush at him, but, laying his right finger on his mouth, he utters a charm which makes them friendly. A thunder-clap is heard, and he utters a new

³¹ See my *Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 1912, ch. 24.

³² Brandt, *Mand. Rel.*, pp. 76, 98.

charm. Then the sun's disc appears and he sees a circle of fire and fiery closed doors. Seven times he calls the names of the seven immortal gods of the world. The doors thereupon open, and there is disclosed before his eyes the world of the gods. One by one they pass before him, and finally, after thunder and lightning, appears Mithras in his splendour. In a state of convulsion the initiate receives the divine oracles.³³ The idea of ascent in ecstasy has already been suggested as a Gnostic practice, and it is significant that it is also found as a custom of the savage medicine-man—a bodily or spiritual flight to the sky-land.

Our survey of various faiths has shown us how natural it is for men to believe that the way to the Other-world is beset with perils, from which, however, a way of escape is possible. The Gnostics might easily have hit upon this idea for themselves, but it is much more likely that they, whose faith was so eclectic, borrowed it from the cults and religions all around them. As has been seen it was in the religions of Egypt, Persia, Babylon, Greece, that such ideas abounded, and they were certainly based on very primitive conceptions, such as that illustrated from Fiji. But the special form of the belief as found in Gnosticism has more immediate affinities with the mingling of Persian and Babylonian religions, which was consequent upon the Persian conquest of Babylon.³⁴ The Babylonians, it is true, had no native doctrine of an ascent to heaven. Souls passed to an underworld through seven gates, at each of which the warders stripped them of their garments and ornaments. But it knew of gates of the heavens and of the seven planetary gods, as the myth of Etana's attempted ascent while yet in life shows. Meanwhile the Persians knew of the soul's upward ascent, and thus Babylonian and Persian "combined their information," and the result was the

³³ Wessely, "Griech. Zauberpapyri," *Denkschr. d. kais. Akad. d. Wissen. zu Wien, phil. hist. Klasse*, xxxvi. [1888], 56ff.

³⁴ Anz, *Texte und Untersuchungen*, xv. 4. 85f.

doctrine of the ascent of the soul through the heavens. We must suppose that various charms and names had to be used by the soul in its ascent, since these are so prominent in the cults derived from the two faiths, viz., Mithraism, Mandaeism, and Gnosticism. Babylonian magic afforded a wide use of divine names as a means of invocation and of exorcism, while it is not unlikely that Egyptian and Hebrew magical formulae also played their part. And as the mere belonging to a close religious sect was of itself a claim on future bliss, an idea not unknown to modern sectarianism, the rites which gave entrance to it, the marks which betokened membership, also served as an all-compelling means to facilitate the soul's passage through the spheres.

All this we find in Gnosticism, but it is significant of the wide prevalence of these conceptions that they were not altogether without influence on more orthodox Christian thought. Apocalyptic books describing the Other-world were sometimes buried with the Christian dead, probably for the same reason as the *Book of the Dead* and golden tablets were buried with Egyptian or Orphic. The Fathers believed in a series of super-imposed heavens, and many of them could also speak of an ascent of the soul, though they generally allegorized it and they had none of the superstitious notions regarding it which we find among the Gnostics. Tatian³⁵ could speak of demons hindering men from rising to the path which leads to heaven, Hippolytus³⁶ of the ladder leading up to the sail-yards as an emblem of the Passion which brings the faithful to the ascent of heaven. Origen wrote of the spheres of the heavens or of the planets through which the souls of the righteous pass until they are united with Christ far beyond them all.³⁷ The Christian philosopher could without fear make use of the ideas of Gnosticism which lent themselves to his purpose. Thus

³⁵ *Orat.* 20.

³⁶ Hippol., *De Christo et Antichr.*, §59.

³⁷ *De Princip.*, ii. 3.

St. Clement speaks of the time when sin's burden is laid down and those angels who guard the road to the highest heaven have taken their toll. Then the spirit, grown in knowledge, could rise through the seven heavens of Valentinus, and reach the Ogdoad and behold the Father.³⁸ But more beautiful still is a passage of St. Clement's which unites the ideas of Gnosis, of ecstasy, and of ascent, and with which as a suggestive lesson we may leave this fascinating subject:—

"I affirm that Gnostic souls, that surpass in splendour of contemplation the manner of life of each of the holy ranks, among whom the blessed abodes of the gods are allotted by distribution, reckoned holy among the holy, transferred entire from among the entire, reaching places better than the better places, embracing the divine vision not in a mirror or by means of mirrors, but in the transcendently clear and absolutely pure insatiable vision which is the privilege of intensely loving souls, holding festival through endless ages, remain honoured with the identity of all excellence. Such is the vision attainable by the pure in heart."³⁹

It is the thought of our own Tennyson:—

Lay thine uphill shoulder to the wheel,
 And climb the Mount of Blessing, whence, if thou
 Look higher, then—perchance—thou mayest—beyond
 A hundred ever-rising mountain lines,
 And past the range of Night and Shadow—see
 The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day
 Strike on the Mount of Vision.

J. A. MACCULLOCH.

³⁸ *Strom.*, iv. 18.

³⁹ *Strom.*, vii. 3. The translation is Dr. Bigg's.