

Baptised in *Gnôsis*: The Spiritual Alchemy of Zosimos of Panopolis

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INTRODUCTION: HERMETISTS AND GNOSTICS IN UPPER EGYPT

In his monumental study of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, A.J. Festugière concluded that the body of philosophical and initiatory writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus was a purely literary production.¹ Against the idea that the *Hermetica* originated in a living spiritual tradition with Egyptian roots, he argued that their content was drawn entirely from the intellectual *topoi* of the Greek philosophical schools. The spiritual atmosphere of the tractates—the Egyptian names and locale, the allusions to cult mystery and initiation—he dismissed as window dressing, lending an aura of sanctity to an otherwise mundane and incoherent amalgam of Platonic and Stoic ideas.² However, the discovery of Hermetic materials in Coptic, amongst the remains of the Nag Hammadi library, has since led to a rethinking of this assessment, both with respect to the Egyptian provenance of the corpus and its relationship to Gnosticism. Clearly the Egyptian gnostics responsible for the Nag Hammadi collection saw in the Hermetic revelations a kindred and edifying spiritual literature, worthy of inclusion amongst their own sacred texts.³

Garth Fowden has argued persuasively that the *Hermetica* present a practical spiritual *way*, grounded in the same dynamic and cosmopolitan Upper Egyptian milieu that produced the Nag Hammadi scriptures, the

1. A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. I, 84: "tous ces faits obligent à tenir les écrits hermetiques pour un phénomène purement littéraire"; cf. *Révélation* II, 32, 47; *idem*, *Hermétisme et Mystique Païenne*, 38.

2. On the literary character of the Egyptian *mise en scène* see *Révélation* I, 85; on the doctrinal incoherence of the tractates see, e.g., *Révélation* II, préface; *Mystique Païenne*, 39.

3. For Egyptian influences in the *Hermetica*: F. Daumas, "Le fonds égyptien de l'hermétisme"; P. Derchain, "L'authenticité de l'inspiration égyptienne dans le 'Corpus Hermeticum'"; G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*; P. Kingsley, "Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica"; J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte*. For parallels between Hermetism and Gnosticism: J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 241–48, 275–78; Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte* vol I, 1–28; and G.A.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*, 137–43.

alchemical literature, and the eclectic ritual papyri of the Thebes cache.⁴ He has demonstrated that many of the alleged *doctrinal* inconsistencies between the tractates (e.g., between dualist and monist tendencies) actually reflect different stages of initiation in a progressive spiritual *itinerarium*.⁵ Unfortunately, as Fowden concedes, there is virtually no independent evidence upon which we can reconstruct the social context of the individual practitioners or circles of initiates that adhered to this Hermetic spirituality.⁶ In light of the paucity of external *testimonia* relating to the existence of a Hermetic milieu, the writings of the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis are of singular importance. In the figure of Zosimos we meet a genuine Hermetic practitioner, who regards the revelations of Hermes as sacred texts—survivals in Greek of the ancient priestly wisdom of Egypt. Zosimos discovers in the Hermetic writings an initiatory *praxis*—a way of salvation—which serves as the spiritual foundation for his alchemy. His work also exemplifies, in a striking way, the meeting and cross-fertilisation of the Hermetic and Gnostic currents in Upper Egypt. Just as some Gnostics evidently considered the Hermetic writings worthy additions to their libraries, so Hermetic initiates, like Zosimos, found a congenial spirituality in the Gnostic scriptures.⁷

For Zosimos the close parallels between the revelations of Jewish-Gnostic visionaries, like Nikotheos and Zostrianos, and the revelations of the Egyptian Hermes attest to *more* than a shared cultural and religious milieu. These links seem, to him, to confirm the existence of a primordial alchemical tradition, transmitted from remote antiquity through secret currents of initiation: passing first through the sanctuaries of the Egyptian temples and subsequently to the Hebrew, Greek and Persian sages who sought initiation at the feet of the Egyptian priests. Part I of this paper explores the recurring theme of the unity of Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom against the background of this esoteric conception of ‘tradition.’ Part II establishes the actual sources—Hermetic and Gnostic—that seem to Zosimos to preserve and transmit the spiritual principles of this initiatory tradition and which thus serve as the twin pillars of his own spiritual interpretation of alchemical practices.

4. Fowden, 155–212.

5. *Ibid.*, 95–115.

6. *Ibid.*, 186–95.

7. The importance of Zosimos in this regard was already noted in passing by Doresse in his preliminary survey of the Nag Hammadi collection (*Secret Books*, 278); see, more recently, Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 139–43.

I. ZOSIMOS ON TRADITION IN ALCHEMY

Zosimos was a Hellenised Egyptian from Panopolis, modern-day Akhmîm in Upper Egypt, just north of Nag Hammadi. Flourishing at the turn of the fourth century CE he is the first alchemist of whom we know any biographical details. His writings are preserved along with the other remains of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy in a number of Byzantine collections⁸ and in one important Syriac manuscript.⁹ Zosimos is an eclectic and imaginative thinker, who develops an elaborate spiritual and cosmological interpretation of alchemical practices. He is also important as a transmitter of the earlier alchemical techniques of Maria and ‘Demokritos.’ Indeed he regards himself chiefly as a faithful exponent of the methods of the ‘ancients,’¹⁰ for reasons relating to his conception of a primordial and unchanging alchemical tradition.

Zosimos traces the origins of the sacred art to the Egyptian temples, designating it as *χημεία*, i.e., the art relating to *χημία*, the black-land of Egypt (Egyptian *kmt*).¹¹ Though some scholars have rejected the appeal to Egyptian provenance as a rhetorical conceit, a number of Egyptologists have argued convincingly for proto-alchemical associations in ancient Egypt.¹²

8. The oldest and most important are Marcianus gr. 299 (10th–11th cen), Parisinus gr. 2325 (13th cen) and Parisinus gr. 2327 (15th cen). The standard edition, despite its frequent difficulties, remains that of M. Berthelot & C.E. Ruelle, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* T.II (henceforth *CAG* II, cited by page and line). A more recent and superior critical edition of Zosimos, including *On the Letter Omega* and the so-called ‘Visions,’ has appeared in the Budé series: M. Mertens, *Les Alchimistes Grecs T.IV, 1^{re} partie: Zosime de Panopolis, Mémoires Authentiques* (henceforth *Mém. auth.*).

9. This 15th-century Syriac manuscript (Cambridge Mm, 6, 29) was translated in M. Berthelot & R. Duval, *La chimie au moyen âge*, T. II: *L'alchimie syriaque* (henceforth *CMA* II, cited by page). It seems to be based on a Greek original, and may preserve remnants of 12 of the 28 books of the so-called *χειρόκμητα* attributed to Zosimos in the *Suda* (Z.168). For an overview of the contents of these Syriac texts see Mertens, *Mém. auth.*, LXX–LXXVII.

10. “Do not suppose that I have written in a manner more worthy of belief than the ancients (ἀρχαίων),” *On the Letter Omega* (*Mém. auth.* I, 198–99).

11. *χημεία* occurs in the *Book of Sophe* (*CAG* II 213.15) and in a Zosimos fragment quoted by Georgius Syncellus (*Ecloga chronographica* 14. 4–11, ed. Mosshammer). Plutarch greecises the Egyptian *kmt* as *χημία* (*On Isis and Osiris* 364c); but as the word does not occur elsewhere in Greek, alternative etymologies have been proposed. Some regard the original word for alchemy as *χημεία*, which is also attested (cf. Olympiodoros *CAG* II 94.17), meaning the art of smelting (derived from *χῦμα*). However, D. Bain (“Μελανίτις γῆ, an unnoticed Greek name for Egypt”) has recently examined several occurrences of the expression *μελανίτις γῆ*, which are equivalent in meaning to Plutarch’s *χημία*. Moreover, the centrality in alchemy of the ‘black matter’ of transmutation lends weight to the Egyptian etymology. Cf. *infra* note 29.

12. Berthelot and Festugière consider the Egyptian contribution as *merely* technical. On their view, Egyptian craft techniques for colouring fabrics, metals and stones were reinterpreted in the ‘Demokritean’ works in the light of Greek philosophical ideas, giving rise to alchemy as a theoretical science (See Berthelot, *CAG* I, 200–01; Festugière, *Révélation* I, 218–19). This Hellenocentric view fails to account for the *ritual* and *symbolic* significance of these crafts within

Certainly the goal of transforming inert matter into spiritual matter is central to Egyptian religious belief, and this transformation was understood, moreover, as a solar regeneration in which the symbolism of gold was central.¹³ In Ptolemaic temples, like Dendara, the cultic activities in the ‘House of Gold,’ which involved the fabrication of divine statues according to secret methods and materials, seem to resonate with the spiritual and technical concerns of early alchemy. The inscriptions in Dendara’s ‘House of Gold’ explain how complex craft instructions were concealed beneath the generic names of materials: e.g., “If it says of a god that the material is electrum, this means that it is wood—juniper, gilded with fine gold.”¹⁴ Zosimos, in the Syriac survivals, repeatedly links alchemy to the ritual production of divine statues in the Egyptian cult, which sometimes involved chemical transformations. He describes secret recipes used by the priests for blackening copper and silver with sulphur, arsenic and other reagents (*CMA* II, 223). The genuine importance of such techniques is suggested by another of the Dendara inscriptions: “If it says of a god that the material is copper, this means black bronze.”¹⁵ Egyptian techniques for blackening silver and copper with sulphur are also described by Pliny, who claims that the black tincture symbolised the god Anubis (*NH* 33.131); and material evidence confirms that Egyptian artisans were experimenting with cementation methods for altering the surface colour of metals at least as early as the New Kingdom.¹⁶ Presumably, these gilding and dyeing crafts assumed a deeper ritual and symbolic meaning within the ‘laboratories’ of the Egyptian temples, where the skills of artisans were enlisted in the service of the cult mysteries.

On the other hand, we surely cannot agree that alchemy as Zosimos knew it—in its mature technical and philosophical expression—was practised in

the cultic context. For more sympathetic considerations of the Egyptian provenance of alchemy see: F. Daumas, “L’alchimie a-t-elle une origine égyptienne?”; P. Derchain, “L’Atelier des Orfèvres à Dendara et les origines de l’Alchimie”; E. Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt*, 34–42.

13. “O King, raise yourself upon your iron bones and golden members, for this body of yours belongs to a god; it will not grow mouldy, it will not be destroyed, it will not putrefy” (Pyramid Texts, Utterance 723, trans. R.O. Faulkner; cf. Utterance 467).

14. Based on the French translation of P. Derchain, “L’Atelier des Orfèvres,” 235. Concerning these formulae Derchain concludes: “Par leur allusions à des substitutions de matières... ils paraissent être les premiers survivants repérés d’une littérature pre-alchimique en langue égyptienne ...” (232).

15. From the French translation of Derchain, “L’Atelier des Orfèvres,” 235.

16. The use of such techniques dates back at least to the 18th dynasty. See A. Lucas & J.R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 249–51. The pink tinted gold ornaments discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun were probably created by dipping gold in a solution of iron salts (Lucas-Harris, 233–34). On cementation techniques in general see R. Halleux, *Les Alchimistes Grecs: Papyrus de Leyde, Papyrus de Stockholm*, 40–41. *Leid.* 35 is a recipe for blackening silver.

the Egyptian temples and veiled in the hieroglyphs of the sacred books of Thot-Hermes. By the Graeco-Roman period the rites of the Egyptian cults had *already* been reinterpreted in the light of Greek philosophy and cosmology—recast in the familiar terms of the Late Antique spiritual milieu. The Egyptian quest for solar resurrection, or rebirth with Osiris,¹⁷ is thus equivalent for Zosimos to the Hermetic quest for rebirth, the liberation of the divine spirit from the material cosmos and its ascent back to its super-celestial source.

Alongside this Egyptian-Hermetic tradition, Zosimos refers to a Hebrew tradition in alchemy, represented chiefly by Maria, who is revered as one of the ‘ancient authorities,’ especially on the subject of alchemical technique and apparatus.¹⁸ In his exposition of the spiritual dimension of this Hebrew tradition, Zosimos deploys an eclectic array of sources, from the apocryphal Book of Enoch to gnostic sources on the fringes of Late Antique Judaism. These esoteric and mystical currents seem, to him, to contain an initiated interpretation of Jewish wisdom that is entirely compatible with the sacred teachings of the Egyptian Hermes. In the *Final Quittance*,¹⁹ he even suggests that the Hebrew tradition in alchemy is derivative of the secret teachings of the Egyptian priesthood. He says that the ancients (τοὺς ἀρχαίους), being Egyptian prophets of the highest rank (τὰ πρωτεία ἐν προφητικῇ, 364.25), maintained a strict rule of secrecy. Only the Jews (μόνοις δὲ Ἰουδαίος), operating independently of such cultic prohibitions, were able to write down and transmit (γράφειν καὶ ἐκδιδόναι) this knowledge (365.1–2). The derivative status of Hebrew alchemy is suggested again by his claim that the Jewish alchemists imitated the Egyptian practice of engraving alchemical secrets in symbolic characters (συμβολικῶς χαρακτῆρσιν, 365.23) on the stelae of temples and tombs (οἱ οὖν Ἰουδαῖοι αὐτοὺς [sc. the Egyptians] μιμησάμενοι, 365.26). In the Syriac manuscript, the primacy of the Egyptian priestly tradition is also stressed. Zosimos notes with a hint of disapproval that many alchemists take credit for knowledge that really derives from the sacred Books of Hermes.²⁰ On the other hand, the Jewish appropriation and transmission of Egyptian alchemy should not be construed as a criticism. With respect

17. For the equation of lead and Osiris see Olympiodoros *CAG* II, 94.22–95.7. The alchemists clearly drew upon symbolic associations entrenched in Egyptian religion and myth, though reconfigured within the terms of the Hellenistic mysteries.

18. See esp. the tractates *On the Tribikos and the Tube* and *Zosimos on Apparatus and Furnaces*, edited in *Mém. auth.*, pp. 14–15, 23–25.

19. Following the emended text of Festugière, *Révélation* I, appendix 1, 363–68 (citations by page and line)

20. “Beaucoup d’autres veulent donner leur nom aux recettes; personne ne les empêche. Mais ils sont blâmés par les prêtres, par ceux qui possèdent les livres . . . Tout le monde sait que ces livres sont d’Hermès et d’autres auteurs égyptiens” (*CMA* II, 226, trans. Duval).

to the secrecy of the Egyptian priests Zosimos concedes—both in the *Final Quittance* (365.1) and repeatedly in the Syriac texts²¹—that jealousy is a factor. He looks upon the dissemination of these cult secrets as a positive development, enabling all who are so inclined to seek the alchemical *gnōsis*: “If the mysteries are necessary, this is even more reason for everyone to possess a book of alchemy.”²²

For Zosimos there are two preeminent alchemical traditions, the Egyptian and the Hebrew, twin currents of a primordial tradition issuing from ‘the depths of the ages’:

The True Book of Sophe the Egyptian, and the God of the Hebrews, Lord of the Powers, Sabaoth—for there are two sciences and wisdoms, the wisdom of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews—is more certain than divine justice. For the science and wisdom of the most excellent things has come forth from the depths of the ages (ἐκ τῶν αἰώνων). Its generation is without a ruling cause and it is autonomous. It is immaterial, and unconcerned with enmattered and corruptible bodies, for it operates without suffering change (ἀπαθῶς γὰρ ἐργάζεται).²³

This primeval tradition stands above the vicissitudes of changing conventions and innovations. Its truths are divine truths, grounded in immaterial realities; its principles are revealed and not discovered. Though the Hebrew sages may express these truths in a different language and form than the Egyptian priests, the esoteric core of the tradition is timeless and unalterable (ἀπαθῶς). In a fragment preserved by Syncellos, Zosimos suggests that this primeval science was first revealed to humanity in antediluvian times by fallen angels—a teaching he claims to have read both in the ancient and divine scriptures (presumably the Book of Enoch) and in a lost book of Hermes called the *Physika*.²⁴ The original revelation was preserved in the *Book of Chêmes*, one of the gigantic offspring of the fallen angels and their human consorts. How this ‘ur-text’ of alchemical wisdom was supposed to have been transmitted is not explained. Somehow its content was taken up by the Egyptian priesthood and incorporated into the sacred Books of Hermes; thence presumably it

21. “Je pense que les anciens, par suite de leur esprit de jalousie, n’écrivirent pas ces choses; mais ils les firent connaître en secret aux prêtres seuls” (*CMA* II, 228, trans. Duval).

22. *CMA* II 239 (based on the French translation of Duval).

23. Following the emended text of Festugière, *Révélation* I, 261 (cf. Ruelle’s text: *CAG* II, 213.9–15). The attribution to Zosimos of this excerpt from the *Book of Sophe* is not certain. However, an earlier excerpt in the manuscripts (*CAG* II, 211–13) includes his name, adding after the main title: ‘Initiatory Book of Zosimos the Theban’ (ΣΩΣΙΜΟΥ [sic] ΘΗΒΑΙΟΥ ΜΥΣΤΙΚΗ ΒΙΒΛΟΣ). Moreover, the theme of the Egyptian and Hebrew traditions, which recurs elsewhere in the works of Zosimos, supports the attribution.

24. *Ecloga chronographica* 14. 4–11 (Mosshammer). For a full discussion of this Enochian thread in Zosimos, see K. Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch.”

was absorbed by the Hebrew, Persian and Greek sages who were supposed to have travelled to Egypt to receive initiation in the temples.²⁵

Zosimos shares with many of his Late Antique contemporaries the ‘universalist’ view that the philosophical and spiritual traditions of the ancient world are complementary, once grasped in their inner significance. This belief is grounded in his conception of an ‘ur-tradition’ which has been preserved, in diverse forms, in all of the sacred traditions of antiquity. On the face of it, the claim that the priestly traditions of Egypt are essentially identical to the spiritual traditions of the Hebrews sounds fantastic. However, for Zosimos, the ‘Egyptian’ tradition is really synonymous with the Hermetic tradition; while the wisdom of the ‘Hebrews’ is chiefly exemplified by Jewish apocryphal writings and Gnostic scriptures. These are the sources—Hermetic and Gnostic—that support Zosimos’s belief in the unity of the Egyptian and Hebrew traditions. No doubt Zosimos sometimes exaggerates the parallels between these sources, or mistakes general analogies for relations of identity. Given his strong commitment to the idea that alchemical truths are timeless and unalterable such conflations are inevitable. Indeed some of the correspondences that impress Zosimos seem to be commonplace ideas, originating in a shared Platonic background—for instance, the dualist anthropology of the carnal man and the luminous or pneumatic man. However, if we look more closely at the way in which this particular Platonic *topos* is deployed in his sources, a deeper complementarity becomes evident. The redemption of the pneumatic man in both traditions is associated with a distinctive baptismal initiation—a baptism in *gnōsis*—which confers total enlightenment and salvific union with the Divine. This idea of a gnostic baptism is of special interest to Zosimos because it suggests an analogy with the alchemical ‘baptism’ of the metals. Just as the base metals are immersed in the divine waters of the alchemical vessel, and transformed irrevocably into silver and gold, so the alchemist, cleansed of his material and psychic accretions, attains spiritual perfection through the transformative power of *gnōsis*. Part II of this paper is devoted to a fuller exposition of the spiritual alchemy of Zosimos, with a special focus on this theme of *baptism in gnōsis*, tracing its Hermetic and Gnostic antecedents and distilling its alchemical significance.

25. The perception of Egypt as a fount of esoteric wisdom was widespread in the Late Antique world. The alchemical literature transmitted under the name of ‘Demokritos’ is a case in point, for Demokritos was supposed to have been initiated by the Persian magos, Ostanes, in an Egyptian temple: “In Egypt Demokritos was initiated by Ostanes, the Mede, who had been appointed by the Persian kings of the day to oversee the temples of Egypt. He was initiated in the sanctuary of Memphis along with other priests and philosophers, among whom were Maria, a Hebrew sage, and Pammenes” (Georgius Syncellus, quoted in Bidez-Cumont, *Les magos hellénisés* t.II., 311, frag. A3). The Persian magos, Ostanes, the Greek philosopher, Demokritos, and the Hebrew sage, Maria, here converge in the sacred space of the Egyptian temple, the repository of esoteric wisdom.

II. BAPTISM IN THE KRATER: THE SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY OF ZOSIMOS

Ia. Alchemy as ritual technology

The tradition of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy comes gradually to assume the priority of a spiritual alchemy, veiled in the external procedures of metallic transmutation. This spiritual interpretation is grounded in the philosophical and initiatory currents—Platonist, Hermetist and Gnostic—alive in the cultural and religious milieu of Graeco-Roman Egypt. In the writings of Zosimos, the ritual and cosmological dimensions of alchemical practice are made explicit:

For those who save and purify the divine soul, which is ensnared in the elements (ἐν τοῖς στοιχείοις συνδεθεῖσαν θεῖαν ψυχὴν), or rather the divine spirit, which is mixed into the dough of the flesh (πνεῦμα φυραθὲν τῇ σαρκί), the symbol of χημεῖα is taken from the creation of the cosmos (*The Book of Sophe*, CAG II, 213.15–18).

Alchemy, as interpreted by Zosimos, is not a human innovation aimed at finite, material ends (the production of gold and silver for their own sake); it is a sacred technology, which aims at cosmic regeneration, the purification of the divine spirit which has fallen into the sphere of Fatality and embodiment. The methodical and repetitive operations enacted in the vessel have a ritual function, based upon, and in turn reinforcing, hidden correspondences between the divine spirit in nature and the inner spirit of the alchemist. Zosimos's dual formulation above underlines this symmetry: the alchemist seeks simultaneously to liberate the spirit mixed into the flesh and the soul which is ensnared in the elements.

In order to appreciate the basis for this spiritual allegory a brief overview of the physical processes and materials employed in alchemy may be helpful.²⁶ In a typical operation the impure metal—lead, copper or some alloy of the two—is placed in the upper part of the circulatory vessel, or κηροτακίς,²⁷ while the medicines or reagents are located in the base, heated below by a furnace. The lead-copper is exposed to ascending vapours of sulphur, which slowly dissolve the metals and—as *we* would say—transform them into their sulphides. The lead-copper sulphide condenses in the upper regions of the vessel and drains back into the base. This so-called ‘divine water’²⁸ is once

26. For a very clear overview of alchemical techniques and apparatus see Mertens, *Mém. auth.*, CXIII–CLXIX; cf. F.S. Taylor, “A Survey of Greek Alchemy,” 123ff.

27. For the κηροτακίς in particular see Mertens, *Mém. auth.*, CXXX–CLII and Taylor, “Survey,” 131–37.

28. In the strict sense ‘divine water,’ ὕδωρ θεῖον, signifies ‘sulphur water,’ playing on the morphological identity of the substantive τὸ θεῖον (sulphur) and the adjective θεῖον (divine). More generally, the expression denotes any of the corrosive reagents or sublimes produced by the heating of sulphur, mercury or arsenic. For ‘divine water’ as mercury (ὕδραργυρος) see Zosimos *On the Divine Water* (*Mém. auth.*V); cf. CAG II, 176.18–19.

again heated, so that a continuous cycle of vaporisation and condensation is set in motion within the hermetically sealed vessel. The initial product is a blackened mass or liquid, which the alchemists understand as the prime matter of the metals—symbolically linked to the black earth of Egypt, from which *χημεία* derives its name.²⁹ This black earth is next subjected to a series of further purifications, employing vapours of mercury, sulphur and arsenic, thought capable of generating silver and gold. These transmutations were signalled by a sequence of colour changes, as the blackened lead-copper first turned silvery white and then golden.

The tincturing vapours were conceived, in a Stoic manner, as manifestations of the divine spirit (*πνεῦμα*) trapped within the minerals of sulphur, mercury and arsenic; this spirit was liberated through the agency of fire, and then redirected towards the spiritualisation of the metallic world. In this way the alchemist participated in creation, awakening the divine spirit and releasing its creative potency; as Zosimos puts it, “the symbol of *χημεία* is taken from the creation of the cosmos” (*CAG* II, 213.15–16). As in the Platonic theurgy developed by his contemporary, Iamblichus, the ritual sacrifice of matter to its spiritual source was understood as purifying also the body and soul of the alchemist. The release of the indwelling spirit in the metals coincided, through ‘cosmic sympathy,’ with the liberation of the divine spirit in the human.

This resonance between the inner and outer dimensions of alchemy could be expressed in terms of the symbolism of baptism. The vapours or spirits which colour the prime matter are typically called *βαφή*, ‘tinctures,’ or *καταβαφή*, ‘deep tinctures,’ i.e., tinctures that penetrate the mass of the material substrate through and through resulting in a total transformation.³⁰ Now, the terms *βαφή* and *καταβαφή* are related to the verb *βάπτω*, to dip or dye, which is the root of the intensive *βαπτίζω*, to baptise. Already in the alchemical literature preceding Zosimos the etymological and symbolic links between alchemical tincturing and baptism formed the basis for a spiritual interpretation of the ‘Great Work.’ An early tractate entitled *Dialogue of the philosophers and Cleopatra*³¹ describes the alchemical vessel in allegorical

29. “It has been revealed by Maria that the All is the body of Magnesia, and this is the black lead-copper, for it has not yet been tinctured” (*CAG* II, 192.15–16). The centrality of the blackened lead-copper (*μολυβδόχαλκος μέλας*) as substrate of transmutation supports the case for an Egyptian etymology of *χημεία*, as meaning ‘art of the black-land.’

30. The term *καταβαφή* is discussed by Mertens (*Mém. auth.*, 62, n. 9). It is mainly a Zosiman term, though it occurs frequently in the Leiden papyrus.

31. This is its title in the table of contents of Marcianus. In Parisinus 2327 it appears as part of a larger work, *Comarios the Philosopher and High Priest Instructs Cleopatra in the Divine and Sacred Art of the Philosopher’s Stone*. I am following the text established by Ruelle (*CAG* II, 292.13–299).

terms, as the tomb and womb of rebirth. Recall that for the early Christians and Gnostics, following Paul, the baptismal font was imagined as the tomb and womb of the resurrected Christ.³² Analogously, the κηροτακίς could be imagined as the tomb in which the base metals are initially decomposed and the womb from which they are subsequently reborn as luminous, spiritualised metals. The divine water is the *pharmakon*,³³ which first poisons and decomposes the metals in Hades—the lowest part of the vessel—and then resurrects them, nourishing them like embryos in the womb. “The waves and surges wound them one after another in Hades, in the tomb in which they lie. When the tomb is opened they shall rise up from Hades like the babe from the womb” (293. 23–25). Elsewhere Cleopatra likens the metals to spring flowers which ‘clothe’ (ἐδύονται, 293.11) themselves in brilliant colours. The sequential colour changes which mark the stages of transmutation are imagined in terms of baptismal investiture: stripping away the soiled garment of flesh and putting on the glorious light of divinity (ἐνεδύσατο γὰρ θεότητος φῶς, 297.4; cf. 297.14, 17–18). These images of baptism and investiture clearly suggest that alchemical transmutation involved an internal, spiritual purification and redemption.

The spiritual background of this tractate is difficult to determine with precision. Régine Charron has recently illuminated a number of striking analogies between Cleopatra’s allegory and the ‘Pronoia hymn’ of the *Apocryphon of John*.³⁴ However, she concludes that the specifically gnostic elements of that hymn are absent in Cleopatra’s account. The final goal of Cleopatra’s alchemy is not the liberation of spirit from matter, in the Gnostic vein, but the reunification of spirit, soul and body in a higher synthesis.³⁵ The doctrine of the spiritual body of resurrection seems to be in the background, and the allegory employs Pauline baptismal motifs and terminology throughout.³⁶

There can be no doubt, however, that the baptism of the metals results in their total transformation from a state of imperfection to a state of permanence and incorruptibility. In gold, matter and spirit are fused in a higher and indissoluble synthesis: “they have all been united in love (ἠνωθήσαν πάντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ)—the body, the soul and the spirit—and have become one being (γεγόνασιν ἓν) in which the mystery is concealed” (297. 5–6; cf. 297.21–22, 294.18–19). Cleopatra’s allegory suggests that the baptised alchemist undergoes a comparable transformation from a state of base mortality

32. Romans 6.3–4; Cf. John Chrysostom, Homily 25 on John 3.5.

33. Playing on the dual sense of *pharmakon*, as at once ‘poison’ and ‘medicine.’

34. R. Charron, “The Apocryphon of John (*NHC* II, 1) and the Graeco-Egyptian Alchemical Literature.”

35. Charron, 450–52.

36. *Ibid.*, 452–53 & note 58.

to a state of immortality, attaining union with the divine. “For that activity is divine which, through its union with divinity, brings substances to divine completion” (θείας ἀποτελεῖ τὰς οὐσίας, 296.5–6). This baptism, in other words, is a complete initiation resulting in enlightenment and apotheosis. Cleopatra’s allegory borders—at least in this regard—on a Gnostic reading of the Pauline doctrine of resurrection, which would directly identify baptism with *gnōsis* and salvation. This Gnostic interpretation of baptism becomes explicit in the works of Zosimos.

Iib. Zosimos’s Hermetic and Sethian sources

In the *Final Quittance*, Zosimos warns Theosebeia of the dangers of working with astrological and daemonic powers in alchemy, advising her to maintain a steadfast spiritual discipline so that she can master the daemons, after the example of Solomon, instead of being mastered by them. His advice to Theosebeia directly addresses the esoteric understanding of the alchemical ‘baptism’ of the metals and gives us invaluable insight into the Hermetic sources that support that understanding:

When you recognize that you have been perfected (τελειωθῆισαν), then, realizing the natural tinctures (τῶν φυσικῶν [sc. βαφικῶν]), spit on matter, take refuge in Poimenandra [sic], and once baptised in the *krater* (βαπτισθεῖσα τῷ κρατῆρι) ascend quickly to your own race.³⁷

In this key passage Zosimos alludes to two of the Hermetic tractates extant in our Byzantine collection of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The *Poimandres* (*CH I*) presents the famous account of the fall of the Anthropos, the Luminous Son of the supreme God. Zosimos here advises Theosebeia that the goal of alchemy is to redress this fallen condition. He urges her to resist the downward attraction of the body and its appetites, which led to the original fall, and to return to her spiritual origin, as a child of Poimandres. The participle τελειωθῆισαν, completed or perfected, has an initiatory sense, implying the attainment of *gnōsis* and salvific union with the Divine. This alchemical initiation is presented, moreover, in the terms of a baptism: the realisation of the tinctures or βαφαί, which transform the base metals in the alchemical vessel, coincides with the alchemist’s spiritual baptism and ascent to Poimandres.

This notion of baptism in the κρατήρ derives from a tractate (*CH IV*) entitled *The Krater or Monad*. Here Hermes employs an allegory to explain to his son Tat the difference between the initiated and the profane. The Demi-

37. *The Final Quittance*, *CAG II*, 245.4–7, as emended by Festugière, *Révélation I* 368. P. Kingsley (“Poimandres,” 2–3) suggests that the misspelling ‘Poimenandra’ may be a pun (i.e., ‘shepherd of man’), a Greek re-etymology of the name Poimandres, which originally derives from the Egyptian *P-eime nte-ré*, i.e., ‘The knowledge of Ré.’

urge, Hermes says, filled a κρατήρ with νοῦς and sent it to the lower world, along with a herald, who called forth all who were willing to receive *gnōsis* through a baptism in mind: “All those who heeded the proclamation and were baptised in mind (ἐβαπτίσαντο τοῦ νοός), these received the γνῶσις and became complete (τέλειοι) men” (CH IV, 4).³⁸ The parallel with Zosimos’s text is reinforced by the shared initiatory language: Hermes’s reference to the baptised as complete men, τέλειοι, is answered by Zosimos’s τελειωθεῖσαν. The Hermetic κρατήρ is symbolic of the mind itself; to be baptised in its intelligible ‘waters’ is to withdraw into the interiority of νοῦς, so as to realise one’s essential freedom from embodiment. This baptism involves a tortuous ascent (ἔστι σκολιόν τὸ ... ἀνακάμπτειν, CH IV, 9) through the astral pathways (δρόμους ἀστέρων, IV, 8) towards union with the one and only (τὸν ἕνα καὶ μόνον). In the course of this ascent, the outer layers of body and soul are sacrificed to their planetary and stellar principles, laying bare the inner pneumatic self: “Then, once he has stripped away (γυμνωθεῖς) the influences of the cosmic order, he enters the sphere of the ogdoad, possessing only his inherent power” (CHI, 26).³⁹ In the alchemical context, this stripping away or cleansing (κάθαραι σεαυτὸν XIII, 7) of the garments of embodiment is paralleled by the stripping away of the imperfections of the metals and their reduction to prime matter. The deep tinctures which are then applied as divine waters, transforming the prime matter through and through into silver and gold, are mirrored inwardly by the transformative power of *gnōsis*.

The *nous*-filled κρατήρ of Hermes obviously reminds us of the κρατήρ in which Plato’s Demiurge mixes the stuff of the World-Soul in the *Timaeus* (41d). However, the idea of *baptism* in the κρατήρ is a strange twist. In the context of the ‘pagan’ mysteries the κρατήρ is a cup in which wine is mixed for sacramental consumption. As Festugière argues we see in this tractate the merging of two distinct ritual practices, one eucharistic, the other baptismal. In a brilliant analysis,⁴⁰ he traced the origins of this conflation to a Gnostic account: the story of Jesus’s miraculous conversion of a pitcher of eucharistic wine into baptismal water, recounted both in the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Book of Jeu*. However, in keeping with his typical depreciation of the spiritual content of the *Hermetica*, Festugière concluded that the Hermetic mysteries

38. For the Greek text of the *Hermetica* see A.D. Nock & A.J. Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste, Corpus Hermeticum* 4 vols (henceforth CH).

39. Although the *Poimandres* (CHI, 24) seems to represent the initiate’s ascent as a singular post-mortem event, involving the literal dissolution of the body, CH IV and XVIII clearly describe a *technique* or *rite* of ascent, which culminates in the rebirth and enlightenment of the incarnate initiate.

40. *Mystique Païenne*, 100–12.

of baptism and rebirth are *literary mysteries*, which merely mimic the lived realities of Gnostic initiation and ritual praxis.⁴¹

The Sethian-Gnostic texts unearthed at Nag Hammadi strengthen Festugière's conjecture that the Hermetic baptism of *CH IV* reflects a Gnostic influence. These Sethian scriptures reveal a highly spiritualised baptismal mystery, closely associated with an ascent into the divine world and culminating in the attainment of *gnōsis*—a conception strikingly reminiscent of our Hermetic baptism.⁴² The Sethian Gnostics identify themselves as the immovable race or pneumatic seed of Seth, the bearers of the original light spark who await redemption from their cosmic prison. Following a distinctive exegetical approach to Genesis, the Sethian texts identify the creator as a corrupt divinity and his creation as a degradation from the Pleroma or spiritual world. They describe the descent of various redeemers, sometimes Seth himself in his preexistent form, sometimes manifestations of the divine Mother Forethought or 'Barbelo.' Jesus typically figures as the incarnation of these heavenly redeemers, the garment which they don to infiltrate the fallen world of the Demiurge and which they sacrifice upon their ascension. These redeemers reveal a way a salvation, a spiritual baptism and sealing which strips away the garment of ignorance in exchange for a luminous garment of *gnōsis*. Through this mystic baptism the race of Seth hope to attain salvific union with their Divine source in the Pleroma.⁴³

In the earliest Sethian texts, like the *Apocryphon of John*, the emphasis is on the origins and enslavement of the seed of Seth, and the descent of the redeemer who confers the baptismal mysteries. Later sources, like *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, focus instead on the way back, describing a visionary ascent of the initiate, which culminates in *gnōsis* and union with the Ineffable First Principle. In *Zostrianos* the stages of this ascent are characterised as baptisms and sealings in the luminous waters of the intelligible world. The ineffable Father is imagined as a wellspring, which overflows in the disclosure of its own thinking, producing Forethought, the Barbelo Aeon. Barbelo then functions as the Womb of the Pleromic World, giving birth to the Self-Originate Aeon (the 'Son') and its subordinate powers.⁴⁴ Zostrianos in his ascent is baptised

41. "Ce qui était, dans la secte gnostique, mystère cultuel au sens propre, sacrement d'initiation réservé à une élite, devient ici un symbole, un mystère spirituel, *logique*, ou, comme j'ai dit ailleurs, littéraire" (*Mystique Païenne*, 112).

42. See J.-M. Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal séthien*; J.D. Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism," 87–97.

43. For a recent typology of the Sethian sources and a provisional reconstruction of their chronology see J.D. Turner, "Typologies of the Sethian Gnostic Treatises."

44. This imagery of the pleromic waters issuing from the wellspring of the ineffable Father is already developed in *The Apocryphon of John* (*NHC II*, 4–6), which Turner (*op.cit.*) dates to the second century. For translations of the Nag Hammadi tractates I have consulted J. Robinson *et al.*, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, and B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

in the heavenly waters of each of these subordinate Aeons in turn until finally attaining the perfection of *gnōsis*, a vision of the unity of all the Aeons in the First Principle: “And there I saw all these (spiritual beings) as they exist, in one. And I became unified with all of them.”⁴⁵

Whereas ordinary Christian water baptism merely reinforces human enslavement to the archons, the heavenly baptism of the Sethians was believed to strip away the demon-ridden garment of matter, liberating the inner spirit from the lower strata of body and soul, and sealing it in the luminous armour of *gnōsis*.⁴⁶ As in the Hermetic κρατήρ baptism, the Sethian baptism is associated with a rite of celestial ascent, which cleanses the pneumatic self of its material and psychic accretions and confers *gnōsis*.⁴⁷ One sees vestiges in the Sethian materials of a liturgical framework, suggesting that this mystical baptism may have evolved from an older water rite.⁴⁸ However, the characteristic ritual components of water baptism—immersion, disrobing and enrobing—seem to have been experienced inwardly, “as acts of mental transformation, conceptual refinement and abstraction from the world of psychic and sensible experience.”⁴⁹ Like the ‘gnostic baptism’ to which Hermes calls his disciples in *CH IV*, the Sethian baptism was a spiritual transformation and rebirth effected through immersion in the intelligible waters of the divine world.

These analogies suggest some kind of interface of Hermetism with Sethian circles over the course of the second and third centuries CE. By the time of Zosimos, writing at the beginning of the fourth century, this cross-fertilisation of the ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Hebrew’ gnostic currents seems to have been well established in the cultural milieu of Upper Egypt, as evidenced by the Hermetic survivals in the Nag Hammadi collection. In his work *On the Letter Omega* (*Mém. auth.* I) Zosimos states that the fall of the luminous man, which alchemy seeks to remedy, is a common teaching of the Hebrews and the sacred books of Hermes (μόνοι οἱ Ἑβραῖοι καὶ αἱ ἱεραὶ Ἑρμοῦ βίβλοι, *Mém. auth.* I, 147–48). Both traditions hold to a distinction between the inner pneumatic man, the man of light (ὁ φωτεινὸς ἄνθρωπος) and the external bodily man, whom the Hebrews call Adam and the Egyptians Thoth (I, 87–88). On the Hermetic side I have already noted Zosimos’s familiarity

45. Zostrianos *NHC VIII*, 129 (trans. B. Layton).

46. For polemics against ordinary water baptism see *Apocalypse of Adam NHC V*, 5: 84; Zostrianos, *NHC VIII*, 131; *Paraphrase of Shem NHC VII*, 30, 37, 38. On Sethian baptism as ‘heavenly,’ and the incorruptible armour of *gnōsis* which seals the initiate, see *The Egyptian Gospel IV*, 75.

47. For a direct identification of baptism and *gnōsis* see *Apocalypse of Adam NHC V*, 85.

48. These liturgical dimensions are reconstructed by J.-M. Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal séthien*.

49. Turner, “Ritual,” 89.

with the Poimandres account of the fall of the Anthropos. As regards his Hebrew sources, the evidence suggests a Sethian influence. Zosimos attributes the fall of the Light-Man to the deception of the archons, who clothe him in a garment created from Fate and the four elements (I, 104–09). Likewise, in the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1: 20–21), the archons model the body of the carnal Adam out of earth, water, fire and the spirit of matter and ignorance—the so-called ‘counterfeit spirit’ (ἀντίμιμον πνεῦμα).⁵⁰ Zosimos speaks similarly of a ‘counterfeit daimon’ (ὁ ἀντίμιμος δαίμων), a deceiver who claims in blasphemy that he is the son of God and who attempts to maintain Adam’s enslavement to the forces of Fatality (I, 14–15). The *true* son of God, he says, is Jesus Christ, who appeared in the form of a suffering man, but in reality suffered nothing:

[Jesus Christ] appeared even to powerless men, becoming a man himself, battered and suffering (παθητός); and he secretly carried away his own Lights, suffering nothing (μηδὲν παθών), and revealing that death is trampled and cast aside (*Mém. auth.* I, 122–26).

This is a clear statement of the docetic Christology shared by Sethian and Valentinian Gnostics.⁵¹ Jesus is the material garment of the heavenly redeemer, which is stripped away at the crucifixion revealing the illusion of suffering and death. Following the example of Christ, the initiate must crucify his material garment—his proper Adam (τὸν ἑαυτῶν Ἀδάμ ἀποκτείνουσι, I, 131–32). This stripping away of the external dross of the body reveals the hidden pneumatic self, just as the alchemical dissolution of the base metals is the necessary preliminary to the production of silver and gold.

Zosimos refers twice to a mysterious figure called Nikotheos. He says that Nikotheos ‘the undiscoverable’ (ὁ ἀνεύρετος) knows the true name of the pneumatic man, whom the unenlightened can name only by way of metaphor, as Luminous-Man (Φῶς) (*Mém. auth.* I, 97–103). In a similar vein he says that Nikotheos alone knows the immaterial meaning of the letter omega:

The round letter omega is bipartite and according to material speech (κατὰ τὴν ἔνσωμον φράσιν) corresponds to the seventh zone of Kronos. In the terms of immaterial speech (τὴν ἀσώματον), it is something else entirely—which only Nikotheos the hidden (κεκρυμμένος) knows (*Mém. auth.* I, 1–4).

In the terms of mundane speech, omega corresponds to the outermost circle of Kronos which comprehends the entire cosmos. But according to immate-

50. The original Greek expression is retained in one Coptic manuscript (see Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 37, n.8).

51. I see no reason to conclude with Reitzenstein and Festugière that this is a ‘Christian’ interpolation (see *Révélation* I, 270, note 10). The docetic Christology is consistent with Zosimos’s Sethian sources. See Mertens, *Mém. auth.*, 101, n. 80.

rial speech—the *logoi* of the divine world—omega presumably signifies the more substantial totality of the Pleroma. The epithets of Nikotheos—‘hidden’ and ‘undiscoverable’ (κεκρυμμένος, ἀνεύρετος)—seem to imply that he has been translated into the divine world, in the manner of Enoch, attaining a privileged insight into the noetic structure of the Pleroma.⁵²

Porphyrus, at *Vita Plotini* 16, mentions a number of Gnostic ἀποκαλύψεις attributed to Zoroaster, Zostrianos, Allogenes and Nikotheos, which were critiqued in Plotinus’s school as examples of bad Platonism.⁵³ He says that these revelations prompted Plotinus’s well known polemic against the Gnostics. I have already discussed the revelations of Zostrianos and Allogenes as typical late Sethian works, which detail a mystical ascent and baptism in the luminous waters of the Pleroma. Porphyry’s grouping of an *apocalypse of Nikotheos* with those of Zostrianos and Allogenes suggests that it too belongs to this Platonising Sethian tradition. Evidently Nikotheos is a Sethian visionary, like Zostrianos, who ascends into the Pleroma and returns with a *gnōsis* that can only be expressed to the uninitiated in the veiled forms of material speech.

Nikotheos is mentioned in another late Sethian work, contained in the *Codex Bruceianus*, as one who has seen the ineffable Father face to face:

Indeed to speak of him with a tongue of flesh, of the manner in which he exists, is an impossibility ... Nikotheos spoke concerning him ... He said: “The Father exists, surpassing every perfection. He has revealed the invisible, triple-powered, perfect one.”⁵⁴

This distinction between the tongue of the flesh and the immaterial discourse of the Pleroma is exactly paralleled by Zosimos’s claims that Nikotheos alone knows the immaterial (ἀσώματου) meaning of the letter omega and the hidden name of the pneumatic man. It seems probable that Zosimos and the ‘untitled text’ of the Bruce Codex are dependent on a common source relating to Nikotheos, which may well be the very apocalypse referenced by Porphyry.

Zosimos evidently regards Nikotheos as a preeminent authority concerning the essence of the pneumatic man and the architecture of the Pleroma. The revelations of Nikotheos, esoterically interpreted, are complementary to the revelations of Hermes himself. The parallels established earlier between Hermetism and Sethian productions, like Zostrianos, are key to understanding his point of view. In both traditions one hears the call of the illuminated

52. See H.M. Jackson, “The Seer Nikotheos and his Lost Apocalypse in the Light of Sethian Apocalypses,” esp. 269–75.

53. The Middle and Neoplatonic background of these late Sethian productions has been studied intensively by J.D. Turner, most recently and exhaustively in his *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*.

54. *The Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, 7 (Schmidt/MacDermot).

prophet (Hermes, Zostrianos or Nikotheos) to abandon the body and its impurities and ascend into the luminous ‘waters’ of the intelligible world, exchanging ignorance for *gnōsis* and death for a rebirth in Mind. It is on the basis of this initiatory model that Zosimos builds his distinctive interpretation of the alchemical ‘baptism’ and spiritual rebirth of the metals.

IIc. Baptism and Sacrifice in the ‘Visions’ of Zosimos

A full treatment of the baptismal motif in Zosimos requires an examination, however brief, of his so-called ‘Visions,’ a dream sequence full of bizarre and violent images.⁵⁵ Zosimos dreams of a sacrificial altar in the form of an alembic (βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς, X, 18), positioned at the top of a staircase. The priest presiding over the sacrifice declares that he has descended fifteen steps of darkness (δεκαπέντε σκοτοφεγγεῖς κλίμακας, X, 22) and ascended fifteen luminous steps (φωτολαμπεῖς κλίμακας, X, 23), sacrificing the coarseness of the body (τὴν τοῦ σώματος πηχύτητα, X, 24) in order to be initiated as a spirit (πνεῦμα τελοῦμαι, X, 25).⁵⁶ This Work of alchemical initiation involves a descent into the darkness of Hades, which represents at once the spiritual darkness of the alchemist and the physical blackening of the metals in the ‘nether-regions’ of the κηροτακίς. The unity of these inner and outer dimensions is symbolised above all by the men of copper (χαλκάνθρωπος) and lead (μολυβδάνθρωπος), who throughout the ‘Visions’ are flayed, dismembered and boiled alive in the divine waters of the vessel, awaiting their spiritual transformation into men of silver and gold. As in the allegory of Cleopatra, the alchemical vessel is at once the tomb and womb of rebirth—sacrificial altar *and* baptismal font—since the cleansing of the metals requires first their reduction to a blackened prime matter. Likewise, on the esoteric level, the killing of the outer Adam is the necessary condition for the rebirth of the pneumatic man.

Zosimos tries to ascend seven steps (ἑπτὰ κλίμακας, XI, 2), no doubt representing the seven planetary spheres through which the initiate must pass in order to return to the pleroma.⁵⁷ Twice he loses his way and, discouraged

55. Following Mertens, *Mem. auth.*, tractates X–XII. The actual title of the work varies in the manuscripts. Marcianus renders it, *Of the Divine Zosimos, On Virtue*, and this is how it is identified by later alchemists (see Mertens XCI; 213).

56. Mertens (216, note 7) plausibly suggests that the 15 steps may represent the duration of the moon’s waxing phase, which is tied to the generation of silver (the ‘moon stone’).

57. This conception of an initiatory ascent in seven phases is not exclusive to Hermetic and Gnostic currents. The Mithraic initiate, according to Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI, 22), ascended through seven planetary gates, each of the appropriate metal. The idea of sympathetic correspondences between metals and planets resonates with alchemical concerns about astrological influences in alchemy—the so-called ‘opportune tinctures,’ discussed by Zosimos in *On the Letter Omega and The Final Quittance*. See my “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch” for a discussion of astrological conceptions in alchemy.

by his lack of progress, falls asleep (XI, 5ff, 27ff). This illustrates the psychological dimension of the alchemical blackening, the ‘leaden’ inertia of the soul weighed down by material entanglements. In the famous temple allegory (X, 100–18), the recalcitrant nature of matter is symbolised by a serpent that guards the narrow entryway into the alchemical temple. The serpent must be sacrificed and flayed (πρώτον θύσον καὶ ἀποδερματώσας αὐτόν ..., 109), its parts reconfigured into a step (βάσις, 112) on which the alchemist can climb into the sanctuary. Within the pure waters (ὔδατος καθαρωτάτου, 103) of the temple, the man of copper is transformed into a man of gold (χρυσάνθρωπος, 118). On the most immediate level, the temple symbolises the alchemical vessel and its divine waters; and the serpent, which guards the narrow entry, represents the base earthiness of the metals which must be neutralised before the work of transformation can begin. But clearly the temple also signifies the spiritual goal of the alchemist, the Pleromic homeland from which he is exiled. In Valentinian Gnosticism, the Pleroma was imagined as a celestial temple, veiled from the fallen material cosmos, which could only be regained through the mysteries of baptism and the bridal chamber: “The holy building is baptism, the holy of holy is the ransom, the holy of holies is the bridal chamber. Baptism possesses resurrection and ransom; ransom is in the bridal chamber.”⁵⁸ It seems likely that Zosimos is drawing on this Valentinian imagery relating to the celestial temple. If so it is tempting to suppose that the pure waters of the temple represent not only the divine waters of the vessel, but on a more esoteric level, the aeonic waters of the Pleroma in which the Gnostic initiate is baptised in the course of his ascent.

A CONCLUDING DILEMMA:

WHAT IS PURIFIED IN ALCHEMY, SPIRIT OR MATTER?

The Sethian sources sometimes speak of baptism as a killing or crucifixion of the world and its corrupt cosmic rulers, where this seems really to be a metaphor for the withdrawal of the initiate from external entanglements.⁵⁹ In the alchemical interpretation this idea of crucifying the world is taken rather more literally. The self-sacrifice and purification of the alchemist finds its ritual expression in that flaying and dissolution of the metals which is so graphically allegorized in the ‘Visions.’ The alchemical interpretation of

58. *The Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 69) following the translation of B. Layton. On the symbolism of the celestial temple in Valentinianism see A.D. DeConick, “Heavenly Temple Traditions and Valentinian Worship.” It is not clear what sort of ritual, if any, was entailed in the mystery of ‘bridal chamber.’ There are indications in *Philip* of a sacramental system (NHC II, 67), but its details are obscure. See Turner, “Ritual,” 99–101; and A.D. DeConick, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip,” with a summary of relevant scholarship (225, note 2).

59. See, e.g., *The Egyptian Gospel* (NHC IV, 74–75).

baptism thus moves beyond the goal of human redemption to a much wider goal of *cosmic redemption*. There is an implication in alchemy that the cosmos can be redeemed and made sacred. But it is precisely on this point that we encounter a deep and perhaps insurmountable tension in the position of Zosimos, which seems to originate in his Sethian sources.

In the *Final Quittance*, Zosimos presents the goal of alchemy as a total liberation from the material world, advising Theosebeia to spit on matter once she has realised the tinctures.⁶⁰ In light of the external procedures of alchemy this acosmic stance is surprising. Certainly in the initial phases of the operation there occurs a separating out of prime matter and the divine spirits or vapours, but this separation is not an end in itself. It is only once the blackened substrate has been isolated that the real work of transmutation begins, as the alchemist now proceeds to realise in that substratum the distinctive properties of silver and gold. Alchemy, like Iamblichan theurgy, aims ultimately at the sacralisation of the cosmos, the reconciliation of matter and spirit in a higher and more stable synthesis.⁶¹ Gold, in its immunity to fire and its incorruptibility, symbolises this spiritualisation of matter. What Zosimos represents as the ultimate goal of alchemy—the liberation of the spirit trapped in matter—seems instead to describe its preliminary phase. This tendency towards a dualism of spirit and matter is, arguably, a reflection of Zosimos's Sethian sources, which teach that the created universe is a degradation from the heavenly Pleroma.

For the Hermetic tradition the realisation of *gnōsis* does not imply the rejection of the material universe; *gnōsis* is described instead as a noetic transformation, from an embodied and finite perspective to a transcendent perspective in which the outer cosmos is perceived within mind. As Tat exclaims in a visionary moment: "I am in heaven, in earth, water and air; I am in animals and plants; in the womb, before the womb, and after the womb—everywhere" (CHXIII 11). The Sethian notion of a rupture between the created world and the spiritual universe is nowhere to be found in the *Hermetica*. This distinction gives us a clearer insight into what it means to speak of alchemy as a properly Hermetic science: the phases of alchemy seem to reflect the phases of Hermetic initiation, from an initial blackening, an experience of spiritual disorientation and imprisonment, to a higher realisation of the unity of spirit and matter, a *gnōsis* or enlightenment symbolised for the alchemists by Gold.⁶²

60. See page 43 of this paper.

61. The goal of theurgy was not to escape from a demonised material cosmos, but to bring order and stability to the "initial chaos of embodiment" (G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 14–15).

62. CHXIII illustrates this initiatory transformation from a state of confusion and derangement (μανία, 4) to a rebirth in mind (παλιγγενεσία, 10, 13).

ABBREVIATIONS

CAG II = Berthelot-Ruelle. *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs II: Texte Grec* (cited by page and line).

CMA II = Berthelot-Duval. *La chimie au moyen âge II: L'alchimie syriaque* (cited by page)

CH = Nock-Festugière. *Hermès Trismégiste, Corpus Hermeticum* 4 vols.

Mém. auth. = Mertens. *Les Alchimistes Grecs IV, 1^{re} partie: Zosime de Panopolis, Mémoires Authentiques* (cited by tractate and line)

NHC = Nag Hammadi Codex (cited by codex and page)

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