Review:
THE SECRET BOOKS
OF THE
EGYPTIAN Gnostics

An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion

With an English Translation and critical evaluation of
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THOMAS

By Jean Doresse

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This Review is the third of a triad; the first being SEX, DRUGS, VIOLENCE & THE BIBLE and the second, THE JESUS MYSTERIES. All three address Biblical and Gnostic themes, but from very different points of view. Jean Doresse's work is certainly the most academic and conservative—and he was actually "on the scene" & actively participated in bringing public attention to one of the very most remarkable archaeological "finds" of the 20th Century.

Readers not in the gnostic loop—and, perhaps, even some who think are—might wonder just what "Secret Books," and where in the world is Chenoboskion (it sort of sounds like a suburb of Moscow.) Well, the "Books" are the formerly hidden Gnostic Archive now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, originally discovered (by accident) in Upper Egypt at Gebel et-Tarif. Why the Collection isn't called the Gebel et-Tarif Library is anyone's guess. At any rate, they were found, and according to author Doresse, the precious manuscripts came close to disappearing a second time—either as a result of nationalist bureaucratic bungling and petty scholastic intrigue; or by simply vanishing on the international black market.

At issue are 44 papyrus documents (written in Coptic by an Egyptian Gnostic sect) that had been sealed in an earthen jar for nigh on 2,000 years. The young men who found these priceless artifacts had so little idea of their value, that some were burnt to warm their tea! There's no way of telling how much more Gnostic history (not to mention probably over a million buck$) had been lost by that little tea break.

Author Doresse is "A student of the classics, Egyptology, and Greek Papyrology...[who] worked from 1943-1945 in..."
had adapted their creeds to the great myths of astrology, which was All the pagan religions of the Near East and Mediterranean. How mystical forces abounded in those centuries!

Doresse describes the philosophical atmosphere of the era in which Gnosticism was born:

members to the Church, and the members were then banished from the city. Talk about hitting below the belt!

attractive women—all for The Cause, of course. Then, after he had infiltrated the cult, this stalwart Christian handed in a list of Gnostic "cult." Epiphanius goes on to state that as part of his undercover operation, he bravely allowed himself to be seduced by the sects' more practice whereby the women in the sect would offer their charms in order to lure new members into what seems to be a stereotypical to a lesser extent, Pagan. A certain "St." Epiphanius apparently went "undercover" while investigating a Gnostic sect. He describes a Chapter One, The Problem of Gnosticism

However abundant...might be the information about Gnosticism that its enemies had collected, it could only be taken into consideration... in so far as we could compare it with original...documents... And it is just this which...has presented the most insoluble problem to the historian of Gnosticism. For of documents handed down directly...from the Gnostics, we possessed almost none; and such fragments as there were had to be treated with so much reserve that they could hardly answer the great questions we wanted to put to them.

On Page 6, Doresse states that the book known as the Philosophumena (circa 230 C.E.) and traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, is actually the Elenchos and written by another author he calls pseudo-Hippolytus. This was news to us, and it is important because the Philosophumena is one of the major ancient works that describe many facets and forms of authentic Pagan Practices and Ritual. Doresse disputes titles and attributions of other documents and names of authors as well—and with his impressive credentials and knowledge of the subjects involved, we tend to take his information at face value in this regard.

Historically the Gnostic Texts were found just a few years after the discovery of the famous Nassene "Dead Sea Scrolls" of Qumrân that had caused such a sensation. Many scholars now agree that the Coptic Gnostic Texts are even more valuable, in that they reveal the essence of a religion that Christianity tried to obliterate—and whose oddly traced images and message of spiritual liberation is asserting itself today in the new form of MODERN Gnosticism.

See also, The Metaphysics of Rebellion

The Author states the major reason why the discovery was so important in delineating the true nature of Early Gnosticism:

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[Incidentally, the Index of THE SECRET BOOKS is an astonishing 58 pages of very small text!]

Chapter One, The Problem of Gnosticism, begins with contemporary descriptions of Gnostics by their detractors both Christian and, to a lesser extent, Pagan. A certain "St." Epiphanius apparently went "undercover" while investigating a Gnostic sect. He describes a practice whereby the women in the sect would offer their charms in order to lure new members into what seems to be a stereotypical "cult." Epiphanius goes on to state that as part of his undercover operation, he bravely allowed himself to be seduced by the sects' more attractive women—all for The Cause, of course. Then, after he had infiltrated the cult, this stalwart Christian handed in a list of Gnostic members to the Church, and the members were then banished from the city. Talk about hitting below the belt!

Doresse describes the philosophical atmosphere of the era in which Gnosticism was born:

How mystical forces abounded in those centuries!
All the pagan religions of the Near East and Mediterranean had adapted their creeds to the great myths of astrology, which was
accorded the status of a science, and according to which man was subject
to the planets and constellations from birth until death, shackled to the wheel of Fate.
Philosophy too was changing; like the religions, it was yielding more or less, in its conceptions
to the influence of celestial powers. Meanwhile its thinking...was sustaining also
the irresistible impact of Oriental mysticism.

It is in the second and third centuries that Gnosticism...
is to be found in full flower—centuries in which men's minds
were specially prepared to welcome such beliefs. The great Gnostic
myths harmonize well with the mystical propensities of this time...when
the altars of Mithraism were spreading...throughout the
Romanized world.

[Pgs. 10-11]

On Pages 12-13, Doresse presents a rather spectacular, if biased, outline of Early Gnosticism that more than
warrants reprinting here:

The few facts that we can glean about the birth
and the early expansion of the Gnostic sects have been
summarized by H.C. Puech with great clarity in his study,
"Where are we now with the Problem of Gnosticism?" Let us
review, then, the main outlines of his exposition. Gnosticism appeared
originally in Syria. It is in Samaria...that we trace it for the first time... "To
this Syrian Gnosis...a multitude of systems, anonymous and of a primitive tendency,
are probably related, notably the Ophites' and all those grouped under the name of
'Adepts of the Mother' on account of the part played
in their theories by this feminine entity..."

In the time of Hadrian (A.D. 110-38), Gnosticism
passes over from Syria into Egypt: it is in Alexandria
that the greatest doctors [philosophers or teachers-Ed.] of the heresy
are flourishing—Basilides, Carpocrates, Valentinus. Then it reaches Rome;
and this is the moment when the Christian doctors suddenly realize the importance
of the heresies which...had been incubating for a considerably time. How were the Gnostics
able to establish themselves in Rome at the very moment when the authorities were banishing
from that city the "Chaldean" astrologers and the devotees of Sabazios—a god who, they
claimed was identical with Iahweh Sabaôth? That is a problem. For this was just the
moment when Valentinus established himself in the city...but after being defeated
in his candidature for bishopric he broke with the Church and withdrew to Cyprus,
so that the school which he founded was split into two branches, Italian and
Oriental. About the same time a woman, Marcellina, brought to Rome,

[Doresse continues to explore in quite some depth the various sects, cults, and factions that made up the metaphysical patchwork of Early
Gnosticism.

Of special interest to theatrically minded people, is Doresse’s description of the antics employed by (the quasi-mythological) Simon
Magus:

Different legends are known to have been current about Simon’s end.
According to the apocryphal Acts of Peter Simon offered, at Rome, to give proof
of his divine power and was lifted up into the sky in view of all the people, but was then
cast down from on high by the winds.
Doresse also demonstrates that Early Gnostics, much in the manner of the 1920-30's Trotskyite Left Oppositionists—in their battle against Stalinism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere; joined open meetings of rival Literalists or Orthodox groups and engaged them in dialogue—with the secret agenda of "splitting" the groups and recruiting its members:

As for the indirect methods by which adepts...used to beguile the minds of orthodox Christians...Tertullian tells us that, in the presence of the faithful, they would begin by "expounding the regular doctrine in equivocal terms," to induce them into error..."they attract [the "faithful"—Ed.] by speaking as we speak to one another. They complained to us that we are treating them as excommunicated when, in this or that respect, the doctrines are the same, and thus, they unsettle our faith little by little by their questions. Those who do not resist they make into their disciples; they take them aside to unveil before them the unspeakable mystery of their Pleroma."

Apparently this splitting tactic was to ultimately prove as unsuccessful for the Early Gnostics as it did for the Trotskyites. Stalin ruled until he died and the Roman Catholic Church is continuing to impose its infallibility on unsuspecting victims.

On Page 23, the Author illustrates the mystical complexity and downright baffling spiritual view of JUST ONE ASPECT of JUST ONE of the various contending Early Gnostic philosophies (that of Basilides):

...according to Basilides, the god (the “Demiurge”—Ed.) of this lower world (i.e. earth—Ed.) Once engendered...lifted himself up into the firmament which, in his ignorance, he took to be the upper limit of everything in existence...Element by element he built up and organized this lower world, and he began by begetting a Son still better and wiser than himself. This Son he seated...in the Ogdoad...in the eighth heaven...of the fixed stars above all the seven heavens of the planets, but is nevertheless lower than the highest world, from which it is separated...the great creator-archon had been by Basilides, the name of Abraxas, a word which, if one adds up the numerical values of all the letters...giving the total of 365, equal to the number of the heavens over which Abraxas reigned.

And on the same page,

One of the most original portions...of Basilides dealt with the causes of the passions and the conditions for the salvation of the soul. His doctrine...was further elucidated by his son Isidore in his treatise On the Additional Soul. The passions, being lower, constituted...a second soul, which was added by the lower powers to that which man received from high. This second soul was made up of spirits external to the former—of bestial or ferocious instincts which, producing desires in their own image, weigh man and drag him into sin.

[Actually an Adept well versed in certain arcane and psychological philosophies, could make some valid analogies of the above “teachings.” However, Doresse makes a legitimate point that, in order for its message of (what we call) Salvation-for-the-Masses to be understood and accepted, the Early Church was quite correct in rejecting such convoluted Gnostic doctrines and conceptions of the universe. In other words, according to the Fundamentalist Church, if the message wasn’t watered down enough to pull in the majority of suckers, then that (Gnostic) message was definitely OUT. The Inquisition and The Burning Times made it quite clear to what lengths Fundamentalists would go to suppress people and ideas that didn’t agree with their literalist interpretation of texts that were primarily plagiarisms to begin with.]

Apparently the honorable Church “Fathers” were so unsure of their “Little Flock’s” common sense that—rather than have them deluded or seduced by Gnostic “Orientalism”—they wanted nothing more than for the Gnostics to get the flock off the planet.

Stalinists felt exactly the same way about the “sectarian” Trotskyites.

Again, owing to the rather amazing academic prowess of Doresse, we must quote extensively from the text as pertaining to the ideological standing of the famous Gnostic “doctor” Valentinus:

After Simon and Basilides, and after Marcion, the most famous of the great heresiarchs [!] is Valentinus.

His career had begun at Alexandria in the time of Hadrian. He taught At Rome from [Common Era] 136-165, after which he removed his school
The adversaries of the Gnostics accuse him above all of having stolen doctrines from Pythagoras and still more from Plato. Beyond all doubt Valentinus is the most philosophic of the Gnostics and perhaps, for that reason, his overly-scholastic [???! Is this calling the kettle black or what? –Ed.] speculations contain dilutions of the essential myths of these fluid [i.e., non-Christian] religions…

The system of Valentinus was characterized—

if we are to believe its enemies…the god of this lower world gives of the higher, primordial world…a series of emanations issuing from the…invisible Father in successive couples [i.e. variations of Shiva and Shakti which, indeed, is the case, for the exception that Gnostic Paganism substitutes AMUN for the Patriarchal “Father” and whose worship predated that of Yahweh by several thousand years. —Ed.]

The origin of all things, according to Valentinus, is a perfect aeon bearing the name of pro-Father, described also as an abyss. It is incomprehensible, intangible, eternal, unbegotten, and it dwells in profound repose. Here one can recognize a doctrine of the divine transcendence which was no invention of the Gnostics but had already been an object of Greek philosophic contemplation. Co-existent with this pro-Father is a Thought which is also Silence. From the primordial union of the pro-Father with his Thought emanate the pairs of aeons to the number of eight (the Ogdoad)…

The Word and Life emanate ten more aeons…Thus is produced…a total of thirty aeons—the Pleroma, or Plentitude.

But a drama is now enacted in this supernal and perfect world. The thirtieth and last of the aeons—Wisdom, or Sophia—tries to imitate the pro-Father by giving birth from herself, exactly as he did…without a partner…

[Pages 26-28]

And so, in a few pages, Doresse (and Valentinus & Greek Alexandrian Metaphysics), present religious speculations that continue to engage and intrigue those interested in such matters.

More to the point, what is also very interesting is, that despite Doresse’s claims to the contrary, this cosmic view does, indeed, have VERY MUCH IN COMMON with the traditional Ancient Egyptian cosmology.

Doresse concludes his summary of the major Gnostic “doctors” with reference to Justin and that philosopher’s very esoteric (and in many ways, Pagan) book called Baruch:

According to this revelation, the universe proceeded from three uncreated principles: a supreme Father called “the Good”; a second principle, masculine, father of all born beings but destitute of any foreknowledge of the future—Elohim. And thirdly, a feminine principle equally deficient in prescience—Eden, also called Israel. From the love between Elohim and Eden…were born the angels of the lower heavens…who together constituted the Paradise in which one of them, Baruch, was the tree of Life; whilst the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the angel Naas, the Serpent…

Thereupon Elohim sent the angel Baruch to give instruction to men, to the Jews, that they might turn towards God…the Good. To the uncircumcised, the pagans, he also sent Hercules, to deliver them from the evil of Eden’s creation, by slaying one after another the Nemean lion, the boar of Erymanthus, the Lernean hydra…who are those angels…

At last, in the days of King Herod, Baruch was…sent here below by Elohim; he came to Nazareth, where he found Jesus who was then twelve years old. Baruch revealed to him all the history…of Eden and Elohim; [and] foretold… the future…Naas tried to prevent the fulfillment of this prophecy by having Jesus crucified; but Jesus abandoned the carnal body that he had from Eden’s creation, left it on the Cross and ascended up into the highest heavens.

One has a yet more complete idea of the complexity of this system, if one notes how the supreme god in question is also identified with Priapus, who had been created “before anything was” and of whom, for that reason, images
were set up in all the temples. Similarly, the union of the swan [Zeus—Ed.] with Leda, and the story of Danae appear as images of the loves of Elohim and Eden, whilst Ganymede and the eagle represent Adam at grips with Naas.

[Pgs. 33-35]

And we would only underscore the obvious correlation of SHIVA / Elohim and SHAKTI / Eden.

The Eastern Orthodox Church in its iconography incorporated the metaphor of the Cross-as a ladder to heaven.

Finally, on a footnote on P.35, Doresse indicates the opinion of scholars who suggest that the Twelve Labors of Henakles-Hercules represents the Signs of the Zodiac. Doresse does not address the related suggestion that these selfsame “Labors” can also be interpreted as the “Twelve Stations of the Cross” depicted in every Roman Catholic Church.

In a footnote on Page 42, Doresse—by way of illustrating how nasty Pagans could be in refuting both Christianity and Gnosticism (and Christian propagandists more than matched them in libelous insinuation as we shall see below)—presents a theory that is in direct opposition to an interpretation of the same scenario presented in THE JESUS MYSTERIES:

The god with the head of an ass is the image of the Demiurge Ialdabaôth, the “god of the Jews”...It is upon certain monuments of Egypt that we find the most ancient proofs of the attribution of a donkey's head to a god, who was to become progressively identified with the god of the Jews. This originated from the Asiatic god Sutekh, whom the Egyptians assimilated to one of their greatest gods; Seth, the adversary of Osiris. They represented Seth also...with a human body and an ass’s head. Afterwards...Seth was definitely regarded by the Egyptians...as the father of the legendary heroes Hierosolymus and Judaeus—that is, as an ancestor of the Jews!

It was therefore not without precedent that, in the first centuries of our era, the detractors of the Christians and the Jews, and some of our Gnostics also, vulgarized...a tradition that the god of the Jews had an ass’s head: thence also the carving on the Palatine (of the third cent.) which represents a worshipper before a crucified figure with a donkey’s head, with the ironical legend “Alexamenos worships God.”

The Author’s of THE JESUS MYSTERIES reproduce a photograph of this ancient graffiti along with a recreated enhancement of the same (Overleaf, Image 7)—and they draw a dramatically different conclusion from this evidence:

A Pagan initiate of the Mysteries looks on at the crucifixion of a donkey-headed man. This represents his lower “animal” nature, which he has put to death in the process of initiation so that he may be spiritually resurrected.

[Lacking definitive empirical evidence, we tend to lean more toward Doresse’s claim that the image in question is more likely to be a cartoon in very poor taste, than a compelling religious statement. But who knows for sure? After all, this IS daemonic reality we’re talking about here—and much has to do more with preconceived notions than evidentiary reality. Patrick Harpur’s break-through book, DAIMONIC REALITY makes a statement to the effect that, NO CHRISTIAN EVER HAD A VISION OF THE BUDDHA, JUST AS NO BUDDHIST EVER HAD A VISION OF JESUS CHRIST.
Whatever the truth of these claims may be, The Gnostic Pagan School’s FOUNDING DOCUMENT states a belief that the god Seth (or Set) is the “pure and Pagan form of Jehovah.” Certainly there are many similarities in the Myths and Theology of the two—with some outstanding differences within the Early Christian Ultra-Revisionist branch of Orthodox Judaism. Jehovah sends his son as a sort of lame duck Messiah to be vilified and eventually crucified by the very people he was sent to “Save.” In the earlier Egyptian Legend, the Son/Sun Horus actually engages in battle with his uncle Set/Darkness—and vanquishes him. In other words, Horus is an Active Principle and Spiritual Warrior, whereas Jesus was a Passive Spiritual Victim.

We can accept—if not embrace—certain aspects of the notion or validity of Voluntary Sacrifice offered for the sins of an entire tribe or nation (after all, that’s what War has always been about)—and “Orthodox” (i.e. Fundamentalist) Jews were notorious in the ancient world for their carefully crafted sense of Collective Guilt, thanks to the egocentric nature of their Patriarchal Sky God, Jehovah (who seemed to have little else to do than find new ways to punish his Chosen People.) The Early Jewish Sect of The Nazarene (the Jesus Cult, or Christianity) adopted this Doctrine of Collective Guilt (“Original Sin”) and Humanity has been paying for it ever since.

In most “civilized” Pagan cultures it would have been considered a disgraceful breach of social etiquette to demean the relevance of, for example, a visitor’s deity. In general, it was only during times of war that “foreign” gods or goddesses were usually considered fair game for ridicule. The Ancient Pagans were closer to the DAEMONIC REALITY OF LIFE than were the theologically passive-aggressive stance of Early Christians and Jews.

[It is interesting to note in this context the problem of contemporary “Arab” or “Muslim Extremists.” While the Catholic Church monopolized the political reins of State power, it carried on a merciless campaign of terror aimed at all its theological enemies, real or psychotically imagined. Doesn’t this sound familiar? The only difference between State Sponsored Christian and Israeli (Orthodox Judaic) Terrorism is simply this: THE CHRISTIANS HAD A THOUSAND PLUS YEARS OF SADISTIC STATE TERROR EXPERIENCE OVER THE MUSLIMS; just as the State of Israel HAS BEEN SUBSIDIZED & ARMED TO THE HILT BY THE NEW ROME (WASHINGTON)

See also,

REVIEW: ISLAM...

Among other things, they (the Nicene Church Dictators) circulated horror stories about Gnostic orgies, self-induced abortion, and the sacrifice and cannibalism of infants [P. 43]. Much of this is suspiciously like the lies the latter Church disseminated about Jews and, latter still, even Protestants. Again, who is one to believe? This is one instance where we cannot take Doresse at face value. What we are willing to accept is the fact that there were Gnostic sects who practiced some form of birth control, so strongly did they perceive the world as an essentially dark and evil place, that bringing a child into it would be an act of cruelty. There are people today who never heard of Gnosticism and who feel exactly the same way. Additionally, we accept the fact that many, if not most, Gnostic sects were in varying degrees elitist and threatened doom on the “uninitiated” or unbaptized (just like their “Orthodox” Christian counterparts—a point blithely ignored by Doresse) [P. 43]. And we are also fairly certain, if not totally so, that some Gnostic sects practiced sex rituals involving semen, blood and sperm. Whether these groups represented a majority or minority of believers is virtually impossible to determine, but it is an aspect of Early Gnosticism that obviously has to be investigated—and the implications either accepted or rejected—by anyone calling himself or herself a “Gnostic” today.

CHAPTER II, “Original Texts and Monuments,” is yet another tribute to the depth of Doresse’s philosophical literary and archival critique. The primary text explored in this section is the Pistis-Sophia.

For example, on Page 67, Doresse explains the Gnostic concept that the awakened Psyche (or KA) demonstrates the superiority of Free Will in overcoming Fate (the Planetary Power of the Archons):

…the soul that is making its way towards the right
is mounting upward and escaping the destiny prefigured for it
in the celestial sphere of Fatality…

And yet the Early Gnostics were famous (or, depending on your point of view, notorious) Astrologers.

Clearly there is a contradiction here between Gnostic religious theory and practice.

Be that as it may, the Initiate Gnostics of The Gnostic Pagan School study Astrology (as well as Tarot, I-Ching, Runes, etc.) because these Systems form part of our Collective Spiritual /Daemonic Past (and their Gnosis leads into other Spheres of Knowledge so relevant today—such as Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, etc.,) but we do not believe that any “Metaphysical System’s” configurations MUST OF AND BY THEMSELVES ULTIMATELY apply to spiritually awakened individuals (Celebrants or Initiates). These occult systems are, or should be, considered as liberating indicators rather than stultifying tombstones.

As Human Beings and Children of Creation, the true Source of Destiny is always in our own hands to shape into further Creation of Light (GNOSIS) or Destruction.
On Pages 73-75, Daresse examines an untitled portion of the Coptic text that is interesting both for its imagery and its implications:

It is soon after the Resurrection. Jesus—"who is Aberamenthô"—is standing near the shore of the Ocean, upright upon an altar around which are ranged his disciples. He pronounces a mysterious prayer, in which there are some Kabbalistic names that we find also engraved on gems which are...described as “Gnostic”...

[Carl Jung possessed such an object in the form of a ring—Ed.]

...under the impact of these words the heavens are suddenly opened: Jesus and his followers are transported into intermediate space and in front of them... they behold the ships of the sun and the moon, manned by fantastic beings.

[In a footnote to the above, Daresse concedes that this imagery of a sacred ship sailing a cosmic sea might well derive from earlier visions of such vessels described in Ancient Egypt.]

In one of these ships they...even distinguish the dragons whose function is to wrest from the Archons the light that they have stolen. Jesus then tells us how the powers of Sabaôth the Adamas, who...first persisted in procreating angels, decans, and other powers, had been bound by Jêou, “Father of my Father;” ...to the wheel of time.

One of these powers, Iabraôth, became converted and was instated higher up, whilst Sabaôth the Adamas remained obstinately attached to his lower works and was bound to the sphere. To the five planets—already entrusted with three hundred and sixty-five powers—certain forces drawn from the Triple-powers were subjected; for instance, the little Sabaôth, the Good, was linked in this way with Zeus, for the government of the sphere. Then Jêou regulated the movements of the heavens.

This little historical tidbit of Early Gnostic cosmology (strongly influenced by Paganism) reads like a sci-fi and surreal version of Genesis—and, in our view, certainly describes a much more interesting vision of Creationism.

As is often the case in the editing of this web site, space & time considerations indicate that we must reluctantly jump to CHAPTER IV, “Thirteen Codices of Papyrus.”

This short Chapter contains relevant information regarding the Pagan and Christian concept of the Ankh and the Cross:

...the ends of the text are decorated with...the symbol of life [Ankh], which the Copts inherited from their ancestors and use to this day as an equivalent of the Christian cross. But this sign does not appear to have been taken over from Egyptian paganism until the year 391. That, indeed, was the date when the Serapeum of Alexandria was destroyed by the mobs that the patriarch Theophilus had stirred up; when the famous statue of the god, sculptured by Bryaxis, was broken to pieces. Ecclesiastical tradition complaisantly records that, during these troubles, the Christians were astonished to discover, on the interior walls of the temple, this ancient sign so similar to the Cross, and were told that it was a symbol of “the life to come”...

[Pgs. 138-139]

Serapis was a sort of “hybrid god” (EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY, Paul Hamlyn, Tudor Publishing Company, © 1965), a late stage variant of the Osirian Apis bull called Usar-Hapi and revered by both the Alexandrian Gnostics and by the (primarily Roman) Cultists of Mithra. The profaning of the god at the urging of a Christian “patriarch” is akin to the recent devastation of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan perpetrated by the Taliban thugs. It is no coincidence that the earlier sacrilege occurred in Alexandria, the “Mother City of Gnosticism.” The destruction of religious artifacts and art objects is culturally repulsive—whether the desecrator is Pagan, Christian, Muslim, Jew—or Atheist.

On page 241 Doresse includes a section titled HERMES TRISMEGITUS AS AN ALLY OF Gnosticism. He expresses surprise at the fact that texts with a decided Hermetic content were included in this strange and exotic Early Gnostic library.

[For those unfamiliar with the allusion to Hermes Trismegistus, this is the title of an esoteric figure, Hermes-the-Thrice-Great. According to some traditions this was an actual man, a Great Teacher in Egypt at the dawn of civilization, so advanced were his ideas that the
Ancient Egyptians transformed him into a legend and a god—namely, Thoth (the ibis-headed god of writing, mathematics, communication and magic.) Of course there are Pagan revivalist traditions that claim he was a god.

As for the properly Hermetic writings of this category, they are—significantly—grouped together, five of them, in Codex VI—which was one of the most in use, as we can see from the portions of feathers slipped in between the leaves to mark certain places in the book.

The feathers used as bookmarks conveys a charming historical detail—and reminds us that Doresse was studying from the original artifact and not a copy.

By way of leading the reader to an understanding of the text he quotes, Doresse explains the Ogdoad and the Ennead, and their close theosophical relationship to the Ancient Egyptian cosmology that states from the One Divinity (Amun) emerged eight others, and how the Egyptian model bears a close affinity with the idea of multiple heavens, aethyrs, or spheres of material creation. It is also vital to understand that the Egyptian Cosmology claimed that the land of Egypt itself was a Microcosm of the Heavens as represented by the Universal Night Sky. Some modern speculation asserts that the Egyptians constructed pyramids and temples in mathematical alignments to replicate the positions of various stars and planets. Certainly the Ancient Egyptians believed that as long as their country experienced the normal ebb and flow of the Seasons and the Nile—and the Divine Customs & Rites observed—then the World would remain on an even keel. They also expressed this idea in a highly stylized art that barely changed in form for thousands of years. The Egyptians did not like change and they found it very disruptive. This is why the Middle Kingdom reign of Ahkenaten, the so-called “Heretic King” and his personal and autocratic form of monotheism was almost universally despised, and ultimately failed.

[Recent archaeological evidence has led to serious speculation that (1) Ahkenaton was born with severe genetic anomalies that caused the Royal Family to prevent his participation at public events, including polytheistic festivals of such popular gods as Amon in the capital city of Memphis. According to this theory the young prince grew to hate the gods and the avaricious priests associated with their worship that was conducted in darkened temples, and from which the common person was denied access. (2) Although it is true that during the unpopular reign of Ahkenaten the worship of the Aten Sun Disk was conducted in out in the open, it is now believed that people in court and commoners alike were more or less forced into the worship of Aten. In addition, Ahkenaten may have displaced the popular gods and greedy priests, but he substituted himself in their place. It is now believed that far from a liberating influence, the monotheistic religion of Ahkenaten created a climate of fear and persecution. His was to be the only name removed from the Royal List of Egypt’s Pharaohs. This was considered a form of excommunication, damning the failed King’s soul to oblivion. Excavations in the new capitol he created saved, at least his name, from that fate.]

[See also, NUMBERS, MAGICK & MOTION]

This is another section where Doresse appears to contradict his own statement made at the beginning of the book, to the effect that Early Gnosticism owed little, if anything, to Egyptian Mythology. It seems quite natural that Egyptian Coptic Gnostics would be at least a little interested in the millennia old religion of their native land. Apparently Doresse found this intermingling of Pagan and Early Christian beliefs disconcerting. Perhaps, like the Ancient Egyptians, he did not like change?

We again quote extensively from the text as this section is of special interest as it pertains to the Coptic Gnostic use of the apocalyptic style applied within a traditionally Hermetic/Pagan context.

[Supposedly the information was originally given by Hermes-Thoth at the dawn of civilization, but was, in fact, composed by the Gnostics (based on ancient texts) several centuries into the Common Era.]

As a sort of Prologue, Doresse quotes an invocation (to Amun?) the Great Teacher bestows to his “son.”

Thee I invoke, thou who dost govern the sovereign power; thou whose word is creative of light and whose sayings are immortal, eternal and immutable.

[P. 244]

Pious men are few in number, continues our book. Created after the gods, composed of (both) divine and mortal nature, man tends towards the supreme powers. Like them, he too has created in his own image, by fashioning the statues that he worships.

But now, from the mouth of the Trismegistus, we are given a description of the future of the world: “Knowest thou not, Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of heaven… the dwelling [place] of heaven and of all the powers that are in heaven? …Our earth [i.e. the land of Egypt] is the temple of the world.”

Nevertheless “a day is coming when it will appear that the Egyptians have served the divinity in vain, and all their pious worship
will become sterile. Indeed all divinity will leave Egypt and take refuge in heaven…
for the foreigners will invade Egypt and will dominate her.” Then the Egyptians will be
prevented from worshipping the divinity…The country will no longer be filled with temples
but with tombs. “And thou, O river; a day will come when thou wilt overflow with blood instead
of water; and when the bodies of the dead will be piled higher than thy banks.”

And yet, when that day comes, they will weep less for one who dies
than for anyone who is still living, having no longer anything of Egypt except the language.
On that day “all that I have taught you…will be accounted as vanity.”

Even the physical universe will subside in disorder: this will be the old age
of the world, marked with these three seals—“Atheism, dishonour and unreason.”
Then the divinity will complete the ruin of this universe by some calamity, before giving
it back its first beauty and restoring all things for a new cycle, so that, in the end,
the gods “will be established in a town that will be upon the borders of Egypt.”

[Pgs. 245-246]

The suggestion that salvation will originate from “a town that will be upon the borders of Egypt” seems an obvious reference to
Bethlehem, birthplace of The Jesus Legend. But if so, why do the Gnostics imply that this event will reestablish Paganism (“the gods”)? It
is certainly curious and posits various levels of interpretation. As for Doresse, he is dismissive of the entire section. In the first place he
does not believe that the “event” in question refers to the birth of Jesus (Joshua ben Joesph), but rather implies the future birth of a foreign
monarch who will supposedly rejuvenate Pagan spirituality in Egypt, causing a cultural renaissance. [Another curious fact, by the time this
was written by the Egyptian Gnostics, Egypt barely maintained colonial status—and would remain as such into the 20th Century.]

Further, Doresse negates the apocalyptic style.

Naturally, writings of this kind were composed
after the enthronement of the fictitiously predicted “saviour.”

[P. 247]

Well, as to that, Literalist Christian Doresse should know best since both the Old and New Testament are ridden with such post-factual
apocalyptic warnings and propagandistic prophecies.

Doresse concludes this interesting section by noting:

The intentional juxtaposition of Hermetic writings and Gnostic treatises
shows that some interchange was then going on between the two schools of doctrine.
Here, living once again before our eyes, is that syncretic movement which associated
the Gnostic prophets not only to the Hermes of Cyllene, but also to the more learned Hermes
of the Greek mystical treatises. This is precisely the blend of ideas whose occurrence at that
epoch had been suggested, but not satisfactorily proved, by the little treatise of Zosimos the
alchemist Upon the Letter Omega; in which myths derived from the writings of
Zoroaster; some of those of Nicotheus “the hidden” and of the Jewish Gnosis,
are treated upon the same footing as writings On the Natures and
On Immateriality, which are imputed to the authority of the
Trismegistus.

[P.248]

We assumed these theological interrelationships were obvious, but apparently it requires an Academic to make them “official” and
acceptable.

As much as we would like to explore other details in Doresse’s wonderful and unusual SECRETS, space limitations on this site prohibit
it.

However, we will close with a quotation on Page 305 that strangely enough more or less ties together the theme of these three Reviews:
SEX, DRUGS, VIOLENCE and the BIBLE; THE JESUS MYSTERIES; and SECRET BOOKS OF THE EGYPTIAN
GNOSTICS.

From a…general point of view
one could already discern in [the Coptic] writings,
the chief points upon which they will provide opportunity for comparison
of Gnosticism with orthodox Christianity. Firstly, a flood of light is thrown upon
the strange figure that the Gnostics made of Jesus. By glossing upon the phrase
“the Son of Man,” our sectaries placed him in the higher world and made him the
Son of the primordial Anthropos. For them, his incarnation was fictitious, and so was
his crucifixion. Their teachings about the baptisms and the anointings which
prepared them for the ascent towards the Light and for mystical union
with the higher entities went far beyond any Christian conception and rejoined, perhaps, those of the pagan mysteries.

Questions? Comments?
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