

In Praise of Nonsense: A Piety of the Alphabet in Ancient Magic

In a collection of religious texts from late antiquity now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, there is a long poem entitled *Thunder, Perfect Mind*.¹ The poem is the self-revelation of a powerful goddess: she is “perfect mind”, and she “thunders”. Even a brief glance at this text suggests why the revelations of perfect mind might be connected with the awesome but incomprehensible rumblings of thunder, for Perfect Mind speaks in riddle and paradox, thus subverting the reader’s ability to comprehend her in any straightforward or univocal way. Like the elemental “speech” of thunder, her speech cannot be reduced to logical propositions. Indeed, from a rational analytical perspective, the structure of her language *is* nonsense; it offends the ear with its noisy incongruities.

To understand Perfect Mind, one must leave the world of discursive language behind and enter the structure of paradox, where a potentially endless play of opposites is entertained:

For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.²

How can the first be last? How can Perfect Mind be both whore and holy one? Part of the genius of her language is precisely to force the hearer to ask such questions and thereby to lead that hearer more deeply into her mystery.

Her mystery is, of course, a thunderous silence. As Plotinus once remarked, all visions of divinity “baffle telling” (VI 9 [9], 10-11), and they, frustrate the understandable human desire to tell the story plainly, to capture truth in words at last (VI 9 [9], 11).³ At the end of words, the mystery still remains, majestically silent:

I am the hearing which is attainable to everyone
and the speech which cannot be grasped.
I am a mute who does not speak,
and great is my multitude of words.⁴

Hear me, you hearers,
and learn of my words, you who know me
I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;
I am the speech that cannot be grasped.⁸

Words cannot capture truth, but they can carry its resonant echoes. Plotinus goes so far as to say that visions of primal reality “break into speech”, whose “sounds labor to express the essential nature of the universe produced by the travail of the utterer and so to represent, as far as sounds may, the origin of reality”.⁵

Like Plotinus, Perfect Mind knows that her thundering riddles are the echoes of her reality in words, and it is those words that give her mystery a place in which to dwell in human consciousness. Toward the end of her self-revelatory poem, she says:

I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.⁶

She identifies herself not only with the paradoxical *images* of language but with *language itself*. Perhaps the ultimate revelation is that this goddess is the very process of speaking that she uses to characterize herself. The structure of her language carries her nature in it: she *is* what she *speaks*, as well as teaching how to speak. In the beginning was the word.

Such is the nature of divinity. There are, of course, many ways of responding to this poetic statement of the linguistic qualities of fundamental reality. In this essay, my interest lies in exploring a particularly (and peculiarly) appropriate linguistic response to linguistic reality in certain religious texts from late antiquity. Designated by scholarly convention as “magical” texts, they embody in a most strident form the *Thunder, Perfect Mind’s* perspective on the intimate relationship between being and speaking.⁷

The Sounds of the Spirit

Perfect Mind calls herself “the sign of the letter” and exhorts her followers:

If one accepts such a conception of deity as the framework for one’s own reality, how is it possible to show that one has learned the words of the speech that cannot be grasped? The *Gospel of the Egyptians*, also called “The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit”, offers the following reply to our question:

And the throne of his (glory) was established (in it, this one) on which his unrevealable name (is inscribed), on the tablet (...) one is the word, the (Father of the light) of everything, he (who came) forth from the silence, while he rests in the silence, he whose name (is) in an (invisible) symbol. (A) hidden, (invisible) mystery came forth
iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii(iii) eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee(ec o)
oooooooooooooooooooo uu(uuu) uuuuuuuuuuuuuuu eeeeeeee-
eeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaaa (aaaa) aaaaaaaaaa oooooooooo (oo)ooooooooo
ooo. And (in this) way the three powers gave praise to the (great),
invisible, unnameable, virginal, uncallable Spirit ...⁹

Here is the “sign of the letter” with a vengeance! It would seem that the author of this prayer to the God of silent mystery knew that when language is revealed for what it truly is—a speaking of the unspeakable—it is incomprehensible, not to be resolved in a final word or in words at all. When the God who is “an invisible symbol” breaks into human speech, his sounds are the echoes of the alphabet, the vowels. Elsewhere in this gospel, in an ecstatic invocation of the God that comes near the end of the text, the same kind of “language” appears:

O glorious name, really truly, aion o on, iiii eee eeee oooo uuuu oooo
aaaa(a), really truly ei aaaa oooo, O existing one who sees the aeons!
Really truly, aee eee iiii uuuuuu oooooooo, who is eternally eternal,
really truly, iea aio, in the heart, who exists, u aei eis aei, ei o ei, ei os
ei!¹⁰

A text from the magical papyri, entitled *Monas or the Eighth Book of Moses*, makes the same point more directly:

Lord, I represent you faithfully by the seven vowels; come and listen to me; a ee eee iiii ooooo uuuuuu ooooooo.¹¹

This alphabetical language, which attempts to sound the secret name of God, also gives voice to human reality. In one of the passages from the *Gospel of the Egyptians* quoted above, God's name is "really truly" "in the heart". As the narrative continues, one learns that "this great name of thine is upon me, O self-begotten Perfect one, who art not outside me ... Now that I have known thee, I have mixed myself with the immutable".¹² To say the name is to become mixed with God.

Another document from Nag Hammadi, *The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, also links the substance of God with the substance of humans through the vowels:

O grace! After these things I give thanks by singing a hymn to thee. For I have received life from thee when thou madest me wise. I praise thee. I call thy name that is hidden within me: a o ee o ee o eee ooo iii oooo ooooo ooooo uuuuuuu oooooooooooooooooooooo. Thou art the one who exists with the spirit. I sing a hymn to thee reverently.¹³

Clearly the vowels of the alphabet designate that point at which the human and divine worlds intersect, at least from the perspective of this text. To speak this language is not only to invoke the God; it is also to sound the depths of one's own primal reality. These strings of vowels are hymnic recitations of praise to the God and to human Godlikeness.

Ecstatic though it may be, there is something ominous about this language of the spirit. In the words of a modern poet, we confront

... the murderous alphabet:
The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams
Of inaccessible Utopia.¹⁴

Paul of Tarsus agreed. Writing to his unruly congregation in Corinth, some of whom felt that their utopia was not only *not* inaccessible but fully present, Paul felt compelled to warn them about the dangers of the spiritual language that they were speaking. The kingdom was showing itself in Corinthian worship in the form of glossolalia, that speaking "in the tongues of angels" that the "swarms" of alphabetical combinations we have just seen attempt to represent in writing.¹⁵ Christian tradition sometimes attributed such language to Jesus himself, as in the following passage from the Gnostic work *Pistis Sophia*:

Then Jesus stood with his disciples beside the water of the ocean and pronounced this prayer, saying: "Hear me, my Father, thou father of all fatherhoods, thou infinite Light: aeeiou. iao. aoi. Oia ...".¹⁶

So also Paul, in another mood and writing to a different congregation, could say that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words".¹⁷ Such "sighs" or "groans" were, as one scholar has pointed out, the "characteristic form of magical utterance"; in writing, they appear as alphabetical combinations by which the devotee "calls the spirit in the spirit's own language".¹⁸ This, for Paul, is how we "ought" to pray. But, if this kind of praying is truly evidence of the spirit speaking through the prayer, why did Paul castigate the Corinthians for their angelic speech, comparing it with "noisy gong and clanging cymbal"?¹⁹

The problem, says Paul, lies with the impact of such speaking on "outsiders and unbelievers".²⁰ For them, the "tongues of angels" are not supremely inarticulate, but merely unintelligible, buzzing swarms of letters:

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ... So with yourselves; if you in a tongue utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?²¹

Paul concludes by saying that the ecstatic praying can continue only if it is interpreted; for the benefit of the understanding of the uninitiate, spirit must be yoked with mind.²² This concern that spiritual language might be heard and so dismissed as mere gibberish occurs in the magical traditions as well. The *Pistis Sophia*, for example, does what Paul was advising the Corinthians to do:

And Jesus cried out as he turned to the four corners of the world with his disciples, and ... he said: "iao. iao. iao. This is its interpretation: iota, because the All came forth; alpha, because it will return again; omega, because the completion of all completions will happen."²³

Whatever we as modern readers may think about the seeming unintelligibility of even the interpretation given here, it is clear that for the ancient writer the inspired language of the alphabet did carry meaning and could be interpreted.

Fully initiate in this language, Paul everywhere shows his respect for it, even in the midst of protests against it: "If the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?"²⁴ The verb used in this passage for madness (*mainomai*) is the one used to characterize the oracular utterances of the Delphic priestess and the Sibyls, as well as the rapturous language of the

followers of the god Dionysus, all of whom were also said to speak in a tongue.²⁵ By his use of this verb, Paul has, perhaps in spite of himself, placed glossolalia squarely in a context of sacred utterance.

What are the dimensions of that context? As A.H. Armstrong observed, the spirituality of the hellenized Mediterranean world had an archaic base; it was indebted to “the immemorial observances, always there and underlying all the changes right down to the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire, and after”.²⁶ Paul, who *talks about* what the magical papyri *do*, has in his first letter to the Corinthians described basic aspects of alphabetical language. They are aspects that carry the archaic sensibility of that language, especially as it shows itself in the magical papyri where spiritual language is best and most fully preserved. The information from Paul concerns the form and qualities of this language: it is ecstatic prayer that does not sound like normal language but rather like music (as Paul’s repeated musical metaphors suggest—gong, cymbal, flute, harp, bugle); it is not intelligible, but it is rhythmic; and it is also powerful, for it brings manifestations of the Spirit. Further, those manifestations take the verbal form not of reasonable words (“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful”) but, as we know from other sources, of strings of letters, particularly of vowels, and these somehow give expression to “mysteries in the Spirit”.²⁷

In the next sections of this essay, the piety of the alphabet will be discussed as a late antique phase of two much older ways of thinking, one of which connected language with the charm or spell, the other of which identified the letters of the alphabet with the elements of the cosmos.

The Spell of Language and the Language of the Spell

It is curious that modern scholars, if they have studied alphabetical language at all, have tended largely to take precisely the view that Paul had predicted of outsiders and unbelievers: in various ways, it is nonsense. The range of scholarly reaction to such language has run from outright disapproval to a kind of amused fascination. On the negative side, such language has been viewed as compulsive and egotistic, presuming as it does to summon divine presence into the human realm. Establishing a “lien on God” rather than a “means of approach to him”, the users of such language mock the true spiritual life with their mutterings of meaningless sounds.²⁸ On the positive side, such mutterings are transformed into “mystical gibberish”, fit to be compared with Rimbaud’s “Sonnet to the

Vowels”!²⁹ They are, in other words, symbolic, attempting to reflect in human writing and speaking the “heavenly writing” of the stars. And they are playful, carrying into adult life the alphabetical games of the child learning the letters, reciting them backward, forward, from the ends to the middle, and so on.³⁰ The child is initiated into the reality of humans, the speaking animals, by playing with the elemental parts of that speech.

A final characterization will serve to locate the perspective of the present essay, which is that alphabetical language is neither mere fancy nor selfish manipulation. It is rather, as Morton Smith has said, “jabberwocky”.³¹ Anyone who has read Lewis Carroll’s famous poem knows that it speaks the language of the Looking-Glass House. It is an enchanted language that reflects a dimension of reality that is normally hidden. The “inside”, “other side”, or even “underside” of ordinary reality is best spoken in a poetic language that scrambles ordinary words and shows their imaginal potential. When Alice encounters the whiffling and burbling Jabberwock, she remarks, “It seems very pretty, but it’s *rather* hard to understand!”.³² Alice’s comment is insightful: such linguistic play *is* difficult to understand, and that is precisely the point. The idea that words create a meaningful universe is, as a poet said, the “supreme fiction”;³³ language is phantasmal, not transparent to whatever “reality” might be. Travailing and laboring, Plotinus said, we speak, and it is jabberwocky, a creation of the world in metaphor: “We must be patient with language”, everywhere reading “so to speak”.³⁴

It is this recognition of the creative and destructive functions of language, which weaves and unweaves meaning with every word, that is so well captured by the alphabetical language under consideration here. Using language against itself by breaking it down into its elemental parts and then reconfiguring those parts in endless permutations and combinations, the magical prayers constitute an iconoclastic piety. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Monas or the Eighth Book of Moses*:

I invoke you iueuo oaeo Iao aee ai ee ae iouo eue Ieou aeo ei oei iae
iooue aue uea io ioai ioai oe ee ou io Iao, the great name; be to me (as)
lynx, eagle, snake, phoenix, life, strength, necessity, phantoms of gods,
aio iou Iao eio aa oui aaaa eiu io oe Iao ai (etc).³⁵

Such an invocation clearly breaks the normal forms of language, but the non-sense that then appears bears the “phantoms” (*eidōla*) of the gods! Ultimate meaning dwells in the breaking of form. The “nonsense” prayers are violently reverent.

When ordinary language is scrambled, the “insides” of the great name of God are revealed. It is not surprising, then, that for the texts under consideration here language casts a spell, and its aura is divine. One of the ways in which this conviction appears is in the alphabetical play with a name of God composed only of vowels: *Iaō*, the Greek name of the Hebrew *YHWH*, the holiest name of God. This is the most frequently petitioned God in the magical papyri, and it seems fitting that invocations to *Iaō* should so often consist of staccato-like combinations of the letters of his name (as in *Pistis Sophia* 136, quoted above: “Thou infinite Light aeieiouo iao aoi oia ...”), since this is the God who confused human language, reducing it to babble, as well as the God who gave speech to humanity in the first place, granting the power to name.³⁶

God seems to dwell in the making and unmaking of language. This is suggested further by the frequent invocations to Hermes in our texts. The presence of Hermes, second only to *Iaō* in popularity among devotees of alphabetical language, points to one of the dimensions of archaic sensibility that lived on in the magical papyri. It is that the origin of language is divine. Among numerous theories of the origin of language in its written form, the one that captured the imagination of Greek antiquity named the god Hermes as the inventor of the alphabet.³⁷ Hermes carried into Greek tradition the linguistic genius of the Egyptian god Thoth, with whom he was identified.³⁸ The *locus classicus* for discussions of these two figures lies in the writings of Plato, whose ideas about writing are fundamental for understanding the alphabetical fantasies of late antiquity.

In Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells the story of the god Thoth presenting various arts (number, astronomy, and so on) to the king of Egypt as useful gifts for the people. Last of all, Thoth gives the king writing: “Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom”. The king, however, disagrees: “If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks”.³⁹ Writing, from the king’s perspective, is a mere semblance of wisdom.

Socrates goes on to explore the “strangeness” of writing by using an analogy to painting:

The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were

... intelligible, but if you ask them anything about what they say... they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition ... drifts all over the place ...⁴⁰

There is something uncanny about writing. It is God-given and, from the perspective of the God, offers a “recipe for wisdom”. From the human perspective, however, the written word is a most frustrating crutch: it merely imitates the truth, and when questioned concerning its meaning it “drifts all over the place”. Yet, like a painting, its silence is at the same time iconic, bursting with possibility. It is in such a context that the alphabetical words of the magical prayers belong. Attempting to write the ultimate wisdom, the name of God, they imitate that wisdom with explosions of drifting letters, icons of a divine silence. As the Gnostic text *Zostrianos*, which speaks the language of the alphabet, says, “the one who is saved” is “in the word in the way in which he exists”.⁴¹ As with the Goddess in *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, so with the human being. Expression and existence form an inseparable pair.

Plato, however, was not comfortable with the kind of writing that is only an “external mark”. The discussion in the *Phaedrus* continues as Socrates asks: “But now tell me, is there another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written speech, but of unquestioned legitimacy?”. When Phaedrus, his conversation partner, asks what kind of discourse he has in mind, Socrates replies: “The sort that goes together with knowledge and is written in the soul of the learner ...”. Phaedrus then says, “Do you mean the discourse of a man who really knows, which is living and animate? Would it be fair to call the written discourse only a kind of ghost of it?”. “Precisely”, says Socrates.⁴² Wisdom is “written” on the soul, and writing in the letters of human language is the “ghost” (*eidōlon*) of that living writing.

The idea that tangible writing is ghostly compared with the invisible writing on the soul is indeed uncanny, but we have seen these ghosts before in an invocation from *Monas or the Eighth Book of Moses*, where strings of vowels are called *eidōla tōn theōn*, ghosts of the Gods who haunt human language. The persistence of the linguistic metaphor for wisdom is striking, yet it is a metaphor from which we cannot escape. As one scholar has argued in a careful and provocative study, “While presenting writing as a false brother—traitor, infidel, simulacrum—Socrates is for the first time led to envision the brother of this brother, the legitimate one, as *another sort of writing*: not merely as a knowing, living, animate discourse, but as an *inscription* of truth in the soul”. Further, the living discourse “is described by a ‘metaphor’ borrowed from the order of the very thing one is trying to exclude from it, the order of its simulacrum”.⁴³

The “written” character of wisdom is inescapable, even when it is an invisible inscription on the soul.

This conundrum lived on in the texts under consideration here. Recall, for example, *The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, in which the devotee praises the God who has made him wise by calling the God’s name that is hidden within him. In the text, that calling takes the form of writing, and it is alphabetical nonsense. An interesting variant on the same phenomenon is offered in the “Mithras Liturgy”, a well-known text in the great Paris magical codex. At the end of this text, there are instructions concerning what the devotee is to do to consecrate himself so that the prayers and requests to which most of the text is devoted will be effective. Part of the ritual describes the devotee’s “presentation before the great god”: he must write “the eight-letter name” on a leaf and lick off the leaf while showing it to the God; then the God will listen to him. The name is “i ee oo iai”, and the text says, “Lick this up, so that you may be protected”.⁴⁴ The written form of the god’s name must be “licked up”, eaten, and ingested; to be consecrated is to internalize the written word.

But that written word is an alphabetical fantasia, and it is precisely here that magical language preserves the Platonic conundrum that living language, which cannot be captured by writing, is itself a kind of writing. By writing the name of God, the ultimate form of living discourse, in jumbles of letters that do not make sense, these texts show that it is really ordinary writing that is scrambled and confused, a mere imitation of another kind of inscription. Magical writing takes the form of ordinary writing by using its letters and so is faithful to it, but it betrays that writing by its nonsensical use of those letters and is thus faithful to the writing that is an invisible inscription on the soul. Yet it betrays the invisible inscription as well by writing it in actual letters! Magical language is thus thoroughly paradoxical, betraying and safeguarding with every vowel. It carries forward the Platonic sensibility in a radical way.

Of course Plato also spoke about language under the aegis of Hermes, who is often invoked in the magical papyri as the inventor of letters and as the God with whom the devotee asks to be united. The “inventor of articulate speech” whose name had a hundred letters and who could be approached through “the barbaric names”, Hermes was a much-sought-after figure, accompanied in the magical prayers and spells by a great many nonsensical alphabetical formulations.⁴⁵ Ancestor to the magical Hermes, the Platonic Hermes is presented in the dialogue entitled *Cratylus*, which is, fittingly, one of the most playful of Plato’s writings.

One of the main topics of conversation between Socrates and his companions in the *Cratylus* is the meaning of the names of the gods. What can names tell us about the nature of the gods, and how can the meaning of names be investigated? Socrates proceeds by breaking down the name of each god he considers, finding in the supposed “parts” of each name allusions to two or even several other words. What he offers are highly fanciful etymologies, yet for each name the allusive meanings carried by the etymologies actually reflect the nature of the god. Name after name, Socrates takes the words apart, grouping the syllables now one way, now another, and finds in each case “a hive of wisdom”.⁴⁶

Finally his companion Hermogenes asks about the name “Hermes”. Socrates says:

I should imagine that the name Hermes has to do with speech, and signifies that he is the interpreter (*hermēneus*), or messenger, or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language. As I was telling you, the word *eirein* is expressive of the use of speech, and there is an often-recurring Homeric word *emēsato*, which means “he contrived”. Out of these two words, *eirein* and *mēsasthai* the legislator formed the name of the god who invented language and speech.⁴⁷

The name of the inventor of language and speech tells quite a story about his inventions: they interpret and give messages, but they also steal, lie, and bargain. There is something contrived about language, yet it is divine. As though this were not enough, Socrates goes on to speak about Pan, “the double-formed son of Hermes”: “You are aware that speech signifies all things (*pan*= all) and is always turning them round and round, and has two forms, true and false?”⁴⁸ The progeny of the divine inventor of language is double-formed; turning things round and round, words are double-edged and, like Pan, perpetually in motion.⁴⁹ Hence Socrates shows again and again that if one wants to understand words, one must enter the perpetual motion of their letters.

“Names rightly given”, says Socrates, are “the likenesses and images of the things which they name”. Further, “imitation of the essence is made by syllables and letters”. Thus, the analyst’s task is first to distinguish the letters and then to distinguish *among* the letters, dividing them into vowels, consonants, and so on. Entering the flow of words entails, as Socrates says, “taking them to pieces”.⁵⁰

When juxtaposed with the magical papyri, the *Cratylus* reads like the manual of instruction out of which the authors of those texts worked, patiently dividing language into letters, letters into vowels, and so on,

often invoking the authority of Hermes as they worked. Yet, for the authors of the papyri, Hermes as inventor of the alphabet was not only trickster but also spellbinder. Along with the alphabet, he invented the philter, a charm or spell.⁵¹ This close association of language and the charm through Hermes takes us back to the *Phaedrus*, where Thoth (Hermes in Egyptian disguise) called his invention, the alphabet, a “recipe for wisdom”. The word for “recipe” here is *pharmakon*, also a philter, but one that truly captures the double-edged quality of language, for it is a drug that can *both* poison *and* heal.⁵² Writing, then, is a *pharmakon*, and the wisdom it offers is a dangerous potion.

The connection between the word and the charm, stated by Plato and put into action by the magical papyri, is a very old one. When, in a prayer for protection against malevolent spirits, *Monas or the Eighth Book of Moses* says, “I invoke you, Lord, with a musical ode I chant your holy power; aeioouooo”, it has petitioned an ancient tradition that one scholar has named the “therapy of the word”.⁵³ Legends about such shamanistic figures as Pythagoras and Orpheus characterize well the therapeutic dimensions of language. Pythagoras, for example, was said to chant his disciples to sleep with soothing and melodic rhythms; his musical words healed sufferings of both soul and body. Orpheus, who accompanied his poems with the music of the lyre, was a master of the *epode*, the incantation; he not only healed the *pathos* of human beings but could also charm beasts and stones and even the hostile spirits of the underworld.⁵⁴ When the magical papyri of late antiquity speak their alphabetical words in the context of music, invocation, protection, and healing, they are carrying forward the linguistic sensibility of this shamanistic tradition, for which the musical word or the sung charm was truly enchanting.

Given the transformative powers of such metrical speech, as well as the idea that the rhythmic word can heal, it is not surprising to find in the magical papyri an emphasis on the touching of the *tongue* in spells for healing.⁵⁵ Nor is it surprising that there is an insistence on the importance of correct pronunciation of the alphabetical words of power as well as careful reminders of exactly how many letters each string of letters contains.⁵⁶ And there is the further conviction that the one who says such words must be divinized—initiated into the nature of the God—because such words of power cannot be spoken with a merely human mouth.⁵⁷ Finally, the authors of the magical papyri have also carried on the rhythmic qualities of the spellbinding word. Indeed, so musical is the magical piety of the alphabet that one scholar was led to suggest that “each aeioeioiouo ... must have been a study of scales in a mystical voice-training academy”,

and another likened it to “hymnenpoesie”!⁵⁸ We have already seen *Monas or the Eighth Book of Moses* name its magical language explicitly a “musical ode”, yet much more frequent in our texts are graphic depictions of the rhythmic character of their alphabetical chants. Typical examples are *PGM* 13.905ff., 17, and 42, which are presented at the end of this essay. As an eminent student of these papyri once noted, such configurations were not “jeux d’esprit”. “The letter and the word kept their full potency”.⁵⁹

From the archaic shamanistic tradition, the association of word and charm moved into philosophical, rhetorical, and poetic thinking. Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato and a fellow-admirer of Socrates, wrote that Socrates had characterized his own teachings as *philtr*a and *epodai*—spells and odes.⁶⁰ Plato himself described Socrates’ words as “tunes” with a “magic power” that left listeners “absolutely staggered and bewitched”, with the “whole soul turned upside down”.⁶¹ Further, in his dialogue *Charmides*, Plato connects the *epode*, incantation, with the *pharmakon* and goes on to speak about the curative effect that noble words have on the soul.⁶² So also in the poetic tradition: Pindar, for example, said that the words of a poet could persuade “as with a *philtr*on, a spell”.⁶³ And in rhetorical circles as well, Gorgias, “the theoretician of the magic spell of words”, used whole catalogues of magic-related words to describe the power of language to change reality.⁶⁴

Running through all of these traditions that connect the word with the charm is an emphasis on the power or forcefulness of words. Compulsion, from their perspective, was built into the nature of language.⁶⁵ The authors of the magical papyri seem also to have been working out of such a realization. The nonsense words, for example, are often accompanied by imperative commands to the Gods being invoked to “come!” “guard!” “save!” and the spells themselves are frequently closed with the words “now! now! quick! quick!”. This compulsive nature of the magical papyri has been repeatedly highlighted by the scholars who have studied them. But scholarly assessment of this compulsion has been negative. Magicians and their spellbinding commands have been seen as arrogant intruders on divine prerogatives.

Yet, from the perspective of the therapeutic, soul-transforming word that we have just discussed, the compulsive nature of magical nonsense words is not arrogant but pious. Such language is both the medium and the message of stark reality. It recognizes precisely the divine power of words, and it uses language in accordance with language’s own qualities. Speaking to the gods in the gods’ own language, the alphabetical words of

the magical papyri expose the inner forcefulness of human language, and they expose that power in a most appropriate way, by placing those words in spells. It has been said that the magic of Socrates' words rested on their "obstinate destruction of all illusions".⁶⁶ Such can also be said of the authors of the magical texts: their alphabetical nonsense—rhythmic, incantatory, persuasive—destroys the illusions of language. It is truly a therapy of the word.

The Alphabet and the Cosmos

From the perspective of our fanciers of the alphabet, invoking God shatters human words, breaking them up into their elemental parts. Indeed, language is sometimes so shattered that only its most basic elements, the vowels, remain. Yet these phonetic components of language carry a world: if the vowels offer direct insight into language, they also offer access to the structural components of the cosmos itself. As we will see, the vowels sound a cosmic fullness through the one who speaks—and writes—them.

A striking example of the cosmic dimensions of the letters of the alphabet is given by Zosimus of Panopolis, an alchemist of the fourth century C.E. In a section of one of his treatises in which he is speculating about the proper names of generic man, he comes to the name "Adam", "a name from the speech of the angels". This is a name "with respect to the body", and it is "symbolic, composed of the four elements (*stoicheiōn*) from the whole sphere".⁶⁷ Next Zosimus reveals the symbolic meanings of Adam's name by breaking it up into its letters (*stoicheia*):

For the letter (*stoicheion*) A of his name signifies the ascendant east, and air; the letter D of his name signifies the descendant west, and earth, which sinks down because of its weight; and the letter M of his name signifies the meridian south, and the ripening fire in the midst of these bodies, the fire belonging to the middle, fourth planetary zone.⁶⁸

A, D, M; east, west, south; air, earth, fire: the letters of the name of man (his "body") signify the elements that compose the cosmos. From this perspective, the alphabet is a kind of elemental grammar within which the entire cosmos presents itself in human, earthy terms as the symbolic body of essential human being. By making these associations, Zosimus has not reduced the cosmos to the merely human but has rather divinized the human, since for him as for Greek antiquity generally the cosmos was divine, the visible body of the Gods. Again the alphabet carries a piety, as

in one of the briefest of the magical papyri in which the devotee conjure the presence of a God "with the twelve elements (*stoicheiōn*) of heaven and the twenty-four elements (*stoicheiōn*) of the cosmos".⁶⁹ The twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet are cosmic, and they form the exact "double" of the heavenly elements.

These connections between letters and elements can be made because of the multiple meanings of the Greek word *stoicheion*, a word with an interesting history. The basic meaning of the word is "something that belongs to a series". In ancient linguistics, where the enduring meaning of *stoicheion* was first developed, it was used to refer to a sound in a series with other sounds in a word, and so was distinguished from *gramma*, the proper name for the letters of the alphabet that make up a word.⁷⁰ Eventually, however, the series of sounds that weave in and out of the letters were identified with the letters themselves, so that *stoicheion* came to be used more or less synonymously with *gramma* and carried into the alphabet a vocal quality like the *Thunder, Perfect Mind*'s "name of the sound and sound of the name". Plato attributed this process to Thoth:

The unlimited variety of sound was once discerned by some god, or perhaps some godlike man; you know the story that there was some such person in Egypt called Theuth. He it was who originally discerned the existence, in that unlimited variety, of the vowels—not "vowel" in the singular but "vowels" in the plural—and then of other things which though they could not be called articulate sounds, yet were noises of a kind ... In the end he found a number of the things, and affixed to the whole collection, as to each single member of it, the name "letters" (*stoicheia*).⁷¹

As Plato goes on to say, after dividing all of these *stoicheia* into various groups according to their sounds, the God "realized that none of us could get to know one of the collection all by itself, in isolation from all the rest". Thus "he conceived the 'letter' (*stoicheion*) as a kind of bond of unity uniting as it were all these sounds into one, and so he gave utterance to the expression 'art of letters', implying that there was one art that dealt with the sounds".⁷² Plato has done some "weaving" himself here: to the original meaning of "order" or "series" carried by *stoicheion*, he has added "letter" and "sound" and has suggested that understanding this collection is an art given by a god.

To hear the sound of the letter is to be placed in a divine order, according to Plato, and it is particularly noteworthy that he emphasizes the vowels in this context. Later authors not only emphasized the vowels but saw them as first among the *stoicheia*. Thus, Philo of Alexandria, writing

in the first century, could call the vowels the best and most powerful of the *stoicheia*, and Plutarch and Zosimus could write, respectively, on why alpha is the first letter, and omega the last letter, of the alphabet.⁷³ The magical papyri, with their strings of vowels in constantly shifting order, also attest to the power of such *stoicheia*; yet, as we have seen, that power is often extended to include the entire cosmos. That extension is witness to yet another meaning that the word *stoicheion* came to hold.

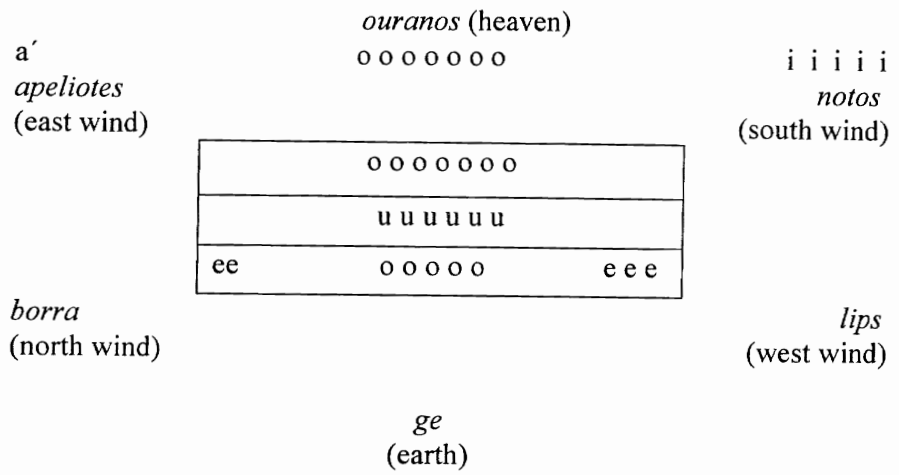
As one scholar has suggested, "from sound as the original part of a word *stoicheion* probably came to be transferred to the cosmos", and it was used to designate the fundamental principles or constituent elements of the universe.⁷⁴ Thus, Philo could write about the heavenly word that places itself between the cosmic elements, thereby preventing them from destroying each other, just as the vocal elements in human words are placed between the silent elements and so perform the same protective function.⁷⁵ What is here in Philo an analogy between cosmic elements (*stoicheia*) and alphabetic elements was in the hands of Stoic philosophers an identification. *Stoicheion* came to mean both letter and element.⁷⁶ Thus, the cosmic elements (earth, air, fire, water) and the letters of the alphabet could in some sense be said to mirror each other and, since the human being was thought to be composed of the same elements as the cosmos,⁷⁷ a further set of relationships could be added to an already complex phenomenon. It was to such an intricate net of associations that Zosimus was indebted as he took apart the name of Adam and discovered the whole cosmos there.

By the time of late antiquity, *stoicheion* had come to designate not only the constituent components of language and the cosmos but also, with the help of astrologers, the seven planets and even the stars. Astrologers, indeed, found more and more correspondences between human writing and heavenly phenomena; when they contemplated the skies, they saw what one modern scholar has called "Himmelschrift",⁷⁸ a celestial text whose lights formed the moving script of divine order.⁷⁹ The "Mithras Liturgy" offers one example of how that divine script is mirrored in human writing. During one of this text's ceremonies of invocation, the initiate must invoke "the living, immortal names" that cannot be spoken with mortal sound or speech: eeo oeeo ioo oe eeo eeo oe eo ioo (and so on, for several lines). The initiate is instructed to "say all these things with fire and spirit, until completing the first utterance; then, similarly, begin the second, until you complete the seven immortal gods of the world". When this is accomplished, the "cosmos of the gods" opens.⁸⁰ The immortal sounds of the seven vowels of the human alphabet, when they are spoken with

"elemental" force ("with fire and spirit") reveal the seven planetary God and their realms. It is striking, of course, that such a divine script can be not only spoken but also written in human "language", yet it is here that the overflow of meaning carried by *stoicheion* can best be seen.

The idea that the seven vowels, most potent of the alphabetic *stoicheia* and the seven planets, divine *stoicheia*, are related is an implicit assumption of the "Mithras Liturgy". This connection was made explicit by Nicomachus of Gerasa, a Neopythagorean thinker of the second century C.E. who carried into late antiquity the old Pythagorean doctrine of the music of the spheres. Pythagoras, who in the sixth century B.C.E. discovered the orderly arrangement of the musical scale, had elevated that order to the heavens. Like the seven notes of the octave, the seven planets moved in a harmonic progression and so made a "music" which, as tradition had it, Pythagoras claimed to have heard on several occasions. For Nicomachus, the vowels sound this mystical music. They are "sounding elements" (*phonēenta stoicheia*) and each vowel rings out the tone appropriate to each planetary sphere.⁸¹ The heavens sing, and the sound is that of the vowels.

In the magical papyri, it is often the case that this Pythagorean music of the spheres is made audible as a human song. One of the most striking of the texts that utter the celestial harmony in earthy tones is the following:



(PGM 13.840)

This diagram, which coordinates seven cosmic elements (heaven, earth, and air plus the east, west, south, and north winds) with the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet, is accompanied by instructions. It is a "picture" of what the initiate is to recite. Samples of the recitations are: "looking to the north wind, with one fist stretched out to the right, say 'e'"; "looking to the heavens, with both hands lying on the head, say 'ō'" and so on through all the elements and vowels in the diagram. Ultimately the initiate says to each of the cosmic elements the whole string of the vowels, and ends by invoking the God "as the cosmos: o uu ooo aaa eeeee eeeeee i:iiii".⁸² The initiate here is called upon to enact with his body and with his voice the entire cosmic scheme, all of which is effected by chanting alphabetical nonsense. It is a song both human and divine and displays fully the multidimensional power that the *stoicheia* had garnered by late antiquity. Archaic speculation lived on in the "elemental" piety of the magical texts.

The Allure of Language

The alphabetical nonsense that I have been discussing in this essay is informed, I would suggest, by a radical philosophy of language best expressed by the Neoplatonist Plotinus, who advised that we must be "in collusion with" language, reading all words as metaphors.⁸³ That he followed his own advice will be clear from the following passage, in which he is speaking about Being itself, the ultimate reality that underlies everything:

We cannot think of it as a chance existence; it is not what it chanced to be but what it must be—and yet without a "must" ... Neither thus nor in any mode did it happen to be; There is no happening; There is only a "Thus and no otherwise than Thus". And even "Thus" is false.⁸⁴

We must read metaphorically, letting language do its work of evocation. Strictly speaking, "we should put neither a This nor a That" to reality: "we hover, as it were, about it, seeking the statement of an experience of our own, sometimes nearing this Reality, sometimes baffled by the enigma in which it dwells".⁸⁵ Nonetheless, the word for Plotinus is an "outshining" of soul, and discussion, while it cannot capture Being, does call to vision.⁸⁶

Yet the vision baffles telling, perhaps because of the spellbinding character of reality itself. Plotinus had quite a lot to say about magic, most of it negative. "Everything that looks to another is under spell to that ... We move to that only which has wrought a fascination upon us".⁸⁷ In this latter

statement, Plotinus has used the verb *thelgein* (to "enchant", "bewitch", "charm"), one of the words used by Gorgias long before him to describe the magical charm of words. Yet Plotinus has used it negatively. He is speaking here about the man who is captured by the charm of the external world and so neglects the inner, deeper world of the soul. There is, however, a positive magic: if nature is an allurer, administering as he says a "deceptive philter", Being itself is also beguiling, but beneficently so. In Plotinus' words, "So great is it in power and beauty that it remains the *allurer*, all things of the universe depending from it and rejoicing to hold their trace of it and through that to seek their good".⁸⁸ Again the verb *thelgein* appears, but this time it refers to the bewitching allure of reality!

As we saw earlier in this essay, Plotinus thought that attempts to speak and write about this alluring reality were agonistic. Hence, he commends the "wise men of Egypt", who "left aside the writing forms that take in the detail of words and sentences and drew pictures instead". The language most appropriate to reality is hieroglyphic; that is "the mode in which the Supreme goes forth".⁸⁹

Plotinus was not, of course, recommending that we abandon words and draw pictures instead; he wanted to see the "hieroglyphic" quality of all language. So also the authors of the alphabetical nonsense words. They did not abandon language either but formed their hieroglyphs with the letters of the alphabet. That this was not, for them, mere play or a deceptive philter is nowhere more poignantly voiced than in the alphabetical philosophy of Marcus, a Christian teacher of the second century. It is with his thoughts that I will close.

Marcus had taken the first verse of the Gospel of John seriously: "In the beginning was the word". God's creation was linguistic, and the letters of the first potent word that he uttered contained all of the forms of creation, each form presided over by the name of a letter of the alphabet, which in turn composed of letters, each of which has a name, and so on to infinity. Thus, alpha, the name of the letter *a*, is composed of the letters *a*, *l*, and so on, and these letters have names in their turn, so that, for example, *l*'s name, lambda, contains yet more letters, and more names. Creation, in other words, is eternal and ongoing: "the multitude of letters swells out into infinitude", and "letters are continually generating other letters".⁹⁰ The alphabet speaks a divine language, and it does so in a radically generative, metaphoric way, each letter calling up, but never pinning down, the enigmatic nature of reality, the word of God.

Marcus, and his fellow magicians as well, was under spell to the bewitchment of language itself, which had the power to evoke the very

heart of being—but it had that power only when broken apart. Shattered in this way, the alphabet was “the body of truth”, “the figure of the element, the character of the letter”, and it was emblazoned on the body of the human being as well as in the cosmic spheres.⁹¹ Indeed, Marcus describes the human being, who *is* the element that the alphabet figures, as “the mouth” of the silent God, and the song the human sings echoes the elemental sounding of the heavens, each one of which pronounces its own vowel.⁹² Marcus’s illustration of the sound of this song, which brings letter, element, God, and human being together in one long wail, is the sorrowing cry of a newborn baby. Composed only of vowels, the baby’s cry is a hymn of praise, sounding the elemental glory of the heavens and their linguistic creator.⁹³

A figure for all attempts to express in language what is ultimately meaningful, Marcus’s baby speaks, sorrowing and rejoicing at once. Here is “the murderous alphabet” indeed, and it shows what Plotinus described as the “agony” of speaking in a most wrenching way. As we suggested at the beginning of this essay, the piety of the alphabet is a violent one; its praise is nonsense.

Appendix

Two of the important categories used in this essay are “gnosticism” and “magic”. They are typically used by scholars as normative categories that designate philosophical and theological positions. Such usage has recently been questioned, however, and I offer the following remarks both to alert the reader to these issues and to clarify my own use of the two terms.

Most of the texts in the collection called *The Nag Hammadi Library* have been considered by modern scholars to be expressions of gnosticism, which is generally defined as a dualistic, anti-historical religious system with philosophical and mythological elements taken from Platonism and Judaism. The use of the term “gnostic” to describe these texts is, however, highly problematic. The term “gnostic” was used by the second-century Christian heresiologist Irenaeus to describe certain thinkers in the Christianity of his day as heretics whose theology was unsound. Hence the term “gnostic” carried, and tends still to carry, polemical overtones of a decidedly negative sort.

Further, as Morton Smith has pointed out in a ground-breaking essay, most of the thinkers whom Irenaeus branded with the name “gnostic” did not consider themselves to be part of such a “movement” and did not even

use the word. In the present essay, use of this term is avoided where possible. Its usefulness is limited to convenient designation of texts and does not extend to descriptions of the contents of such texts. For a pointed discussion of these issues, see Morton Smith, “The History of the Term Gnostikos”.

Like the term “gnostic”, the term “magical” is problematic because of a negative theological bias that the word still carries from antiquity. What was called “magical” was considered by an earlier generation of scholars to be a debased form of religion in which conjuration replaced contemplation and arrogance toward the Gods replaced humble submission to them, but texts designated as “magical” have more recently been shown to be much more sophisticated and complex. Indeed, the term “magic” itself had in antiquity a very wide range of applicability from true piety to quackery; hence, the reductive use of the term in modern scholarship is not an accurate reflection of the ancient usage or phenomenon. In this essay, “magic” has been used only as a convenient designation of a collection of texts edited by Karl Preisendanz (see bibliography) and as a designation of those portions of texts from the Nag Hammadi Library that share the “alphabetical piety” so common in the magical papyri. For recent discussions of magic in late antiquity, see the excellent studies by Alan F. Segal and Morton Smith listed in the bibliography.

Notes

- 1 The collection of texts to which *Thunder, Perfect Mind* (hereafter *NHC VI, 2*) belongs was discovered in 1945 in the Naj’ Hammadi region of Egypt and has now been translated into English from the Coptic and published as *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1977).
- 2 *NHC VI, 2*, p. 271.
- 3 *Enn.* 6.9.10-11(MacKenna). See also 5.5.6, where Plotinus describes the attempt to speak about profound reality as an “agony”.
- 4 *NHC VI, 2*, p. 276.
- 5 *Enn.* 5.5.5.
- 6 *NHC VI, 2*, p. 277.
- 7 Most of the magical texts discussed here are located in Preisendanz (ed), *Papyri Graecae Magicae*. Texts from this collection will be cited *PGM*, with papyrus and line numbers following. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 8 *NHC VI, 2*, p. 277.
- 9 *NHC III, 2*, p. 197.
- 10 *NHC III, 2*, pp. 204.
- 11 *PGM* 13.206-9.
- 12 *NHC III, 2*, pp. 204-5.
- 13 *NHC VI, 6*, p. 296.

- 14 Stevens, "The Man With the Blue Guitar", in *Collected Poems*, p. 179.
- 15 For the connection between speaking in tongues and alphabetical writing, see Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 232-33; and Behm, "glossa", in *TDNT*, vol. 1, pp. 722-23.
- 16 *Pistis Sophia* 136 (MacDonald, p. 707).
- 17 Rom. 8:26 (RSV).
- 18 Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 232.
- 19 1 Cor. 13:1 (RSV).
- 20 1 Cor. 14:16, 23 (RSV).
- 21 1 Cor. 14:7, 9 (RSV).
- 22 1 Cor. 14:13-15 (RSV).
- 23 *Pistis Sophia* 136 (MacDonald, p. 707).
- 24 1 Cor. 14:23 (RSV).
- 25 For sources pertaining to mantic speaking in tongues, see Behm, "glossa", *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 722; and Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 64-101.
- 26 "Introduction", *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, xv.
- 27 1 Cor. 14:2 (RSV).
- 28 The quotations are from Nock, "Greek Magical Papyri"; see also Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, pp. 283-309; and Behm, "glossa", *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 722.
- 29 Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet*, p. 52 ("mystische Kauderwelsch") and p. 25 (Rimbaud).
- 30 See Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet*, pp. 18-19; and Dieterich, "ABC-Denkmaeler".
- 31 Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 232.
- 32 Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p. 197.
- 33 Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", in *Collected Poems*, pp. 380-407.
- 34 Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8.13 (MacKenna).
- 35 *PGM* 13.876-87.
- 36 For uses of *lao*, see Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 233, n. 10. For the Hebrew *YHWH* who both makes and unmakes language, see Gen. 2:19; 11:1-9.
- 37 Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet*, pp. 3-8.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 7, n. 4; Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, pp. 287-93.
- 39 Plato, *Phaedrus* 274D-275B (Hackforth).
- 40 *Ibid.*, 275D-E (Hackforth).
- 41 *NHC* VIII, 1, p. 380.
- 42 Plato, *Phaedrus* 276A-B (Hackforth).
- 43 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 149 (italics in original).
- 44 *PGM* 4.785-90 (trans. Meyer, p. 25).
- 45 See, e.g., *PGM* 8.1-22, 50-53; *PGM* 5.400-423; French translations of many Hermetic magical texts can be found in Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, pp. 287-96.
- 46 Plato, *Cratylus* 401E (Jowett).
- 47 *Ibid.*, 408A-B.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 408C.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 408D.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 439A; 424B-425A.
- 51 Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, pp. 287-88.
- 52 See Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 95-117; Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, p. 95; and de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, pp. 34-35.
- 53 *PGM* 13.630-31; Lain Entralgo, *Therapy of the Word*, passim.
- 54 Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 30; Iamblichus, *De vita Pythagorica* 15.64-65; for discussion of these figures, see Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 44-52, 75-86; de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, pp. 14-15; and Burkert, "Goes: Zum Griechischen 'Schamanismus'".
- 55 Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 223.
- 56 Betz, "The Formation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri", p. 167; Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 292-93.
- 57 Betz, "The Formation of Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri", p. 167; see Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 218 for a translation of *PGM* 13.783ff., in which a magician identifies himself with a spirit.
- 58 Dieterich, *Abraxas*, p. 43; Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vol. 2, p. 668.
- 59 Nock, "The Vocabulary of the New Testament", p. 346.
- 60 Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.2.16; translated and discussed in Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word*, p. 122, n. 21.
- 61 Plato, *Symposium* 215C-E (Joyce). See also *Meno* 80A-B.
- 62 Plato, *Charmides* 157A (Jowett); for discussion, see de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, pp. 34-37; Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 121-26.
- 63 See de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, pp. 4, 7-9 for sources and discussion.
- 64 See *ibid.*, 3-22, and Lain Entralgo, *Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, p. 88, for sources and discussion.
- 65 For discussions of *bia* (force) and *anankē* (necessity), see Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 89-91.
- 66 De Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, p. 36.
- 67 Zosimus of Panopolis, *On the Letter Omega* 9 (Jackson, p. 29).
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 *PGM* 39.17-18.
- 70 Delling, "stoicheion", in *TDNT*, vol. 7, pp. 670-71.
- 71 Plato, *Philebus* 18B-C (Hackforth).
- 72 *Ibid.*, 18C-D.
- 73 Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.14; Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 9.2.2, cited in Delling, "stoicheion", p. 671.
- 74 Delling, "stoicheion", p. 672.
- 75 Philo, *On Noah's Work as a Planter* 10, cited in *ibid.*, p. 671.
- 76 Delling, "stoicheion", pp. 672-75; Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, pp. 14-17.
- 77 See, e.g., the theories of the Greek physician Galen, discussed in Delling, "stoicheion", p. 673.
- 78 Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, p. 89.
- 79 *Ibid.*, pp. 81-90; see also Delling, "stoicheion", pp. 679-83 for astrology and the elements.
- 80 *PGM* 4.605-25 (Meyer, p. 13).
- 81 See Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, pp. 32-35; Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, pp. 82-91.
- 82 *PGM* 13.824-40.
- 83 *Enn.* 6.8.13 (MacKenna). The verb *sūnchōreō* has a range of meanings, including to "defer", "concede", "be in collusion with", "connive at".

- 84 *Enn.* 6.8.9 (MacKenna).
 85 *Ibid.*, 6.9.3.
 86 *Ibid.*, 3.2.16; 6.9.4.
 87 *Ibid.*, 4.4.43.
 88 *Ibid.*, 6.6.18.
 89 *Ibid.*, 5.8.6.
 90 The teachings of Marcus are most fully reported by the Christian heresiologist Irenaeus in *Haer.*, Book 1. On the reliability of Irenaeus's accounts, see Greer, "The Dog and the Mushrooms". The passages cited here are from Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.14.1-2 (*ANF*, vol. 1, pp. 336-37).
 91 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.14.3 (*ANF*, vol. 1, p. 337): Truth, who is also human, is described as follows: "Behold, then, her head on high, *Alpha* and *Omega*; her neck, *Beta* and *Psi*, her shoulders with her hands, *Gamma* and *Chi*", and so on through the whole body.
 92 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.14.3, 7 (*ANF*, vol. 1, p. 337).
 93 *Ibid.*, 1.14.8 (*ANF*, vol. 1, p. 338).

Figures

a a			
ba ak			
lba akr			
alba akra	a a a a a a		
nalba akram	e e e e e		
analba akramm	e e e e e e		
hanalba akramma	i i i i i i o o o o		
thanalba akrammac	u u u u u		
athanalba akrammach	o o o o o		
nathanalba akrammacha		(PGM 42)	
anathanalba akrammacham			
lanathanalba akrammachama			
blanathanalba akrammachamar			
ablanathanalba akrammachamari			
blanathanalba akrammachamar	aeiyouo	aeiyouoo	aeiyououoo
lanathanalba akrammachama	eeiouoa	eeiouooa	eeiououoa
anathanalba akrammacham	eiouoae	eiouooae	eiououoae
nathanalba akrammacha	iouoae	iouooae	iououoae
athanalba akrammach	ouoae	ouooae	ououoae
thanalba akrammac	uoae	uooae	uouoae
hanalba akramma	oae	ooae	ouoae
analba akramm			
nalba akram			
alba akra			
lba akr			
ba ak			
a a			

(PGM 17)

(PGM 13.905ff)