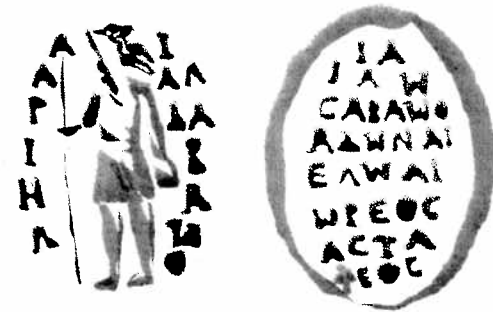


Practicing Gnosis

Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi,
Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature

Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson



Edited by

April D. DeConick

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THE ROAD FOR THE SOUL IS THROUGH THE PLANETS:
THE MYSTERIES OF THE OPHIANS MAPPED

April D. DeConick

In 178 CE, Celsus, a Greek philosopher, wrote a scathing criticism of Christianity called *Logos Alēthēs* or *The True Doctrine*. Origen, seventy years later, wrote a massive eight-volume reply called *Against Celsus*. In these volumes, Origen cites Celsus' book at length, which he then analyzes and refutes. Among the many fascinating things that Celsus claims to know about Christianity is the use of a certain diagram during Christian initiation. Origen wishes to distance Christian initiation from the diagram and so refutes Celsus' claims.

Descriptions of the diagram run throughout Origen's refutation: the description that Celsus made of the diagram in *The True Doctrine* alongside the description of a copy of the diagram that Origen possessed. From the description of the contents of the diagram, it is clear that Celsus and Origen were working from very similar copies of the same diagram, but not necessarily identical copies.¹ Origen appears to be giving us more information about the contents of the diagram than does Celsus' extant description in *Against Celsus*. The diagram consisted of a series of ten circles and other geometric illustrations, the names and images of the archons who ruled the heavens, and seven related prayers with a separate set of archontic names.

The history of analysis of the diagram has been difficult due to the fact that Origen's text is extremely complex. We have at least four levels of information that need to be handled: 1) quotations from Celsus; 2) Origen's own interpretations of these quotations; 3) descriptions of source materials Origen knows; and 4) Origen's own understandings of these source materials.² Although previous scholarship has been aware of this

¹ Chadwick 1965, 337 n. 3; Witte 1993, 23; Denzey 2005, 89; Rasimus 2009, 244; Ledegang 2011, 53–63.

² To assist with the identification of the embedded source material, Grant 1961, presents a *split translation*, dividing Celsus' material from Origen's. Chadwick 1965, presents Celsus' material in italics, while leaving Origen's in regular type.

complexity and has tried to handle it in a variety of ways including attempts to reproduce the diagram itself, success has been mixed.³ The discussion of the diagram has been made even more complex by a scholarly discourse that has overwhelmed the diagram with indiscriminate references to other ancient sources and emendations that force the material to fit the logic of the modern scholarly discourse and its assumptions. After almost two hundred years of academic analyses of Origen on the diagram, we remain trapped in the complexities of the narrative on the most basic levels.

We know that the diagram consisted of a series of circles inscribed with the names and images of the archontic rulers of the heavens, but what was it? Was this a cosmic and supracelestial map or a kabbalistic tree?⁴ We know that the diagram was connected to liturgy, but what liturgy?⁵ Was it an initiatory ascent, a meditative descent, or last rites performed as the body lay dying?⁶ The planets were involved, but what was their sequence? Was it the conventional Ptolemaic order, or not?⁷ Origen records a series of prayers

³ Reproductions of the diagram have been presented by Matter 1843; Giraud 1884; Arendzen 1909; Hopfner 1930; Leisegang 1941; Welburn 1981; Witte 1993; Mastrocinque 2005; Logan 2006. These diagrams ought to be approached with caution since they are most often derivative of earlier renderings, reproducing earlier errors and adding idiosyncratic material from other Gnostic sources not mentioned in Origen's account. Other scholars have studied the diagram without producing a pictorial: Gruber 1864; Lipsius 1864; Hilgenfeld 1884; Culianu 1983; Denzey 2005; Rasimus 2009; Ledegang 2011.

⁴ Those scholars who argue that it is a cosmic map of the planets include: Lipsius 1864, 37–57; Bousset 1901, 272; Chadwick 1965, 340 n. 1; Collins 1995, 83–84; Hopfner 1930, 87–88; Leisegang 1941, 168–173; Foerster 1972, 94; Grant 1961, 89; Welburn 1981, 263; Flamant 1982, 231; Culianu 1983, 48–49; Witte 1993, 31–39; Logan 2006, 41–42; Rasimus 2009, 244, 248. Those scholars who think that diagram included a map of the transcosmic world include: Mastrocinque 2005, 96–101; Logan 2006, 43; Rasimus 2009, 244. Mastrocinque 2005, 118, reconstructs the diagram as a kabbalistic tree of eight circles.

⁵ Arendzen 1909, 597b writes, "How far these sacred diagrams were used as symbols in their liturgy, we do not know."

⁶ Ascent is preferred by: Hopfner 1930, 265; Welburn 1981, 263; Rasimus 2009, 247–248; Ledegang 2011, 76–82. Descent is argued by: Witte 1993, 31–39, 101–102, 113, 125–128. Last rites or a mortuary context is suggested by: Denzey 2005, 115–116 (Celsus' diagram); Logan 2006, 41–42; Rasimus 2009, 249–255; Ledegang 2011, 54–55. Initiatory context is favored by: Witte 1993; Rasimus 2009, 249–255. Anz 1897, 12–13, and Culianu 1983, 48–49, suggested that the diagram referred to the words of the descending Savior.

⁷ Conventional order, but in reverse, and with some adjustments: Wendland 1972, 174–175 n. 4; Culianu 1983, 48–49; Welburn 1981, 263; Collins 1995, 83–84; Logan 2006, 42; Rasimus 2009, 112; Ledegang 2011, 76–82. Denzey 2005, 99–103, does not think the order of the names reflects the conventional order of the planets, but instead reflects the seven day week and represents a chronological ascent rather than a planetary one, again with some adjustments.

addressed to various archons and inscribed on the diagram. We know that the prayers functioned as passwords for the soul journey.⁸ But their order is odd. Not only are they presented in a descent order, but the reference to the Sun and its ruler Adonaios is missing. Did Origen render the Ophian liturgy in reverse order? Are we dealing with a mistake? Should we flip around the order of the prayers? Should we assume that a prayer to Adonaios was on the diagram too?⁹

The standard historical-critical approach has not been sufficient to answer these questions because it has not been able to account for the creativity of individual authors like Celsus or Origen, nor the cognitive innovations of architects of material items like the diagram. When textual testimony about the diagram has not fit our standardly conceived historical categories, it has been adjusted or emended to reflect our categories, so that we end up with an interpretation of a diagram that never existed except in the minds of modern scholars.¹⁰

The standard historical-critical approach has not known how to envision a cultural production like the diagram described by Origen outside a linear model of origin, causation, and consequence. We have snagged what we can from the ancient sources to construct our own system for the diagram, a system based on backgrounds, influences, and linear causal developments that likely never existed in history. To do this, the historical-critical approach has had to slice and dice the material so that we end up privileging a text's single authorial meaning as early, accurate and relevant, isolated from its consequent interpretation as late, inaccurate and irrelevant. As a result, the historical enterprise has understood the message of the text to be separate from the extended conversation that the text was part of and fueled. While this model is problematic for any text we might study, it is particularly problematic for a testimony like Origen's, which contains multiple conversations about the diagram. Which conversation do we privilege? The testimony of Celsus? Origen? The original architect of the diagram? The prime users? Our own?

⁸ Bousset 1901, 272; Hopfner 1930, 87; Leisegang 1941, 32, 168–173; Foerster 1972, 94; Welburn 1981, 263; Flamant 1982, 231; Logan 2006, 42–43; Rasimus 2009; Ledegang 2011, 76–82.

⁹ Origen transcribed them in reverse order and left out the sun: Anz 1897, 12–13; Foerster 1972, 94; Welburn 1981, 263–264; Fossum 1985, 324; Denzey 2005, 109; Rasimus 2009, 247–248; Ledegang 2011, 76.

¹⁰ On the contamination of our reconstruction of history with the prejudices and ideologies of the interpreter, see Smith 1990.

I propose to start fresh with a revisionist historical approach—what I am calling Network Historicism.¹¹ First, this approach understands the physical embodiment of human beings to be essential to the creation and interpretation of cultural productions like the diagram discussed by Origen, so that knowledge is not treated as something separate from the human bodies that produce and communicate it, as some hazy intertextual discourse or floating intangible ideal.¹²

Second, this approach abandons the construction of linear analyses, in favor of a kaleidoscopic description that explains the embeddedness of a production, like the diagram, within extended networks of knowledge and social matrices. The humans who conceived the diagram, and those who used it or consequently referenced it, were situated cognitively within a number of dynamic webs of knowledge. Furthermore, they physically inhabited certain social matrices where these webs of knowledge were in play.¹³ Their individual minds actively integrated and compressed vast amounts of knowledge into their own personal cognitive networks in order to produce the diagram, to talk about it and to use it. Consequently, information about the diagram was susceptible to the conditions of human memory, both in terms of personal memory and socio-cultural memory, not to mention the dynamics of cognition and creativity itself.¹⁴

One of the main values of the Network Historical approach is the equal weight given the composition as its own production with its own architect, and the composition as it was used consequently by others. In the case of the diagram, this is paramount. On the one hand, we have reference to a diagram that was produced by a particular architect within a particular social matrix for a particular audience of users. But this diagram has emerged within new contexts, having a life that extends beyond its architect and primer users. Subsequent users of the diagram—in this case, Celsus and Origen—may or may not be affiliated with the same domains of knowledge and social matrices that were familiar to the diagram's architect and prime users. In fact, it is arguable that they were quite divergent. Nonetheless, both Celsus and Origen have a version of the diagram, which they work to interpret by retrofitting it to their own cognitive maps and mental spaces, as well as social matrices.

¹¹ For a programmatic description of Network Historicism, see the statement published online by April D. DeConick, at the website www.aprildeconick.com.

¹² Slingerland 2008, 210–212.

¹³ Cf. Lakoff-Johnson 1980; Fauconnier 1994, 1997; Coulson 2001; Fauconnier-Turner 2002.

¹⁴ Halbwachs 1952/1992; Carruthers 1990; Zelizer 1995, 214–239; Schwartz 1996, 908–927.

I will start to map the diagram by first tracing what can be known about Celsus' knowledge and interpretation of the diagram, as it has been censored by Origen. What does Origen reveal about Celsus' knowledge of the diagram and his interpretation of it? Second, I will turn to Origen's knowledge of the diagram. What did he think it represented and how does he see himself as correcting Celsus' impressions of it?

Once this extended network has been charted, the diagram itself can be considered, as the production and property of people other than Celsus and Origen. The diagram itself reflects the mental map of the person who initially produced it for a particular set of users or clients. The traces of this person's mental map reflected in descriptions of the diagram represent the selective projection, integration and compression of information for a particular application within a particular social matrix. What can we know about it?

In this final stage of analysis, it will be necessary for me to examine comparable productions, cultural data, and resources that may have been unavailable to the architect of the diagram, or those like Celsus and Origen who subsequently interpreted it. When I overlay this global network of knowledge onto the local networks of Celsus and Origen, a kaleidoscopic vista will emerge, allowing us to view the deep architecture of the diagram, its uses, and its explanations.

What Does Celsus Think about the Diagram?

Among the many criticisms of the Christians that Celsus voices in *The True Doctrine* is the point that the Christians offer nothing to intellectuals. Celsus says that Plato and the other philosophers had already expressed the ideas found in the Christian scriptures, without needing to assert, as the Christians do, that they were revealed by a god or a son of a god. He says that the scriptures used by the Christians are a far cry from the aesthetically pleasing and intellectually sophisticated writings of the philosophers. The scriptures are crude at best. At worst, they were invented to dupe uneducated yokels in the language of the folk.¹⁵ Celsus thinks that Christians operate as “sorcerers” whose audience is not people of culture. Rather Christians prey on those who are easily deceived, seeking to “trap illiterate folk” in their churches.¹⁶

¹⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.1–2; Borret 1969a, 178–183.

¹⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.12, 14; Borret 1969a, 206–209.

To prove his point, Celsus calls into play a number of examples where he finds the Christian discourse plagiarizing the Platonic. By examining these, we are able to highlight a number of traces of Celsus' own mental map of the Christian landscape. One of the traces concerns the concept of the soul. Celsus discusses Plato's view of the soul as an entity whose ultimate aim is to leave behind the "troubles and strivings" of embodiment, to mount and ascend to the "topmost heaven" where it flies around "the circumference of the heaven" engaged in the "contemplation" of the invisible things.¹⁷ He identifies the route of embodiment and the route of escape with a Platonic journey through the celestial spheres of the seven planets, saying that "the way for the souls to and from the earth passes through the planets."¹⁸

Celsus goes on to relate his understanding that the Platonic route through the planetary spheres was known to the Mithraic initiates. They use a ladder to symbolize the two orbits of heaven—the orbit of the fixed stars in the Zodiac and the orbit of the planets—and the soul's ascent through these. The rungs of the ladder represent seven gates, and at the top is an eighth. The gates are associated with the planets, the gods, and certain metals.¹⁹ This arrangement of the planets does not follow the traditional arrangement, which was based on the perceived distance of each planet from the earth: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. Celsus tracks this unconventional arrangement of the planets by the day of the week to Mithraism's reliance on a musical theory, a theory which may have reflected ancient speculations about the harmony of the spheres.²⁰

Table 1. Mithraic arrangement of planets and their associations

Gate	Planet	God	Metal	Characteristic
1	Saturn	Kronos	Lead	slowness of the star
2	Venus	Aphrodite	Tin	brightness and softness of tin
3	Jupiter	Zeus	Bronze	firm base
4	Mercury	Hermes	Iron	reliable for work/money
5	Mars	Aries	Alloy	uneven mixture and quality
6	Moon		Silver	resembles moon's color
7	Sun		Gold	resembles sun's color

¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.20; cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 247B–C.

¹⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.21; cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 248 C–E; *Timaeus* 41D–42E.

¹⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.21: Borret 1969a, 230, 232.

²⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22: Borret 1969a, 232–237.

Having established that Mithraic initiation is derivative of Plato, Celsus moves on to criticize Christian initiation (τελετή), which he argues plagiarizes both Plato and Mithraism for its own take on the planetary journey of the soul.²¹ To prove his point and lay bare what is uniquely Christian and ultimately silly about Christian initiation, Celsus goes on to compare what he considers analogous systems: Christian initiation through the spheres and Mithraic initiation. He does so by referring to a diagram that he identifies as "Christian."²²

Celsus is making these connections because, in his mind, what he has learned about Christian initiation and the use of a particular diagram during that initiation, fits what he already knows about Platonic views of the planetary journey of the soul and Mithraism. This is not a point that should be dismissed because we think Celsus might have been mistaken or was acting out of polemics. Traces of Celsus' own mental map are reflected in his composition, and these traces suggest that he recognized a fit between his local web of knowledge—what he knew about Plato's view on the planetary ascent of the soul and Mithraism—and what he had learned about Christian initiation and the use of a particular diagram. In addition, Celsus, as a writer, understood that his audience would be capable of recognizing this fit too. In other words, the coordination of these nodes of information was local and reasonable given the shared web of knowledge available to the ancient people in his society.

What did Celsus' diagram look like? He describes a drawing of ten circles, separate from each other, but held together by a single circle, which was the soul of the universe, labeled Leviathan.²³ He continues that the diagram was "marked with" a black line (μελαίνῃ γραμμῇ παχείᾳ διειλημμένον εἶναι τὸ διάγραμμα).²⁴ The people from whom he got the diagram told him that this marked off area was Gehenna or Tartarus.²⁵

At this point in his discussion of the diagram, Celsus mentions a ceremony called "The Seal" and gives an account of it, describing a formulaic exchange between the one who confers the seal and whose title is Father (πατήρ) and the one who receives the seal and whose title is Youth (νέος)

²¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.24: Borret 1969a, 238, 240.

²² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.24: Borret 1969a, 238, 240.

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.25: Borret 1969a, 242.

²⁴ This is commonly translated "divided" even though the passive form means "to mark off or distinguish" (MLS:190a). This has caused previous commentators to think that the diagram itself was divided in half with Gehenna located below the circles and the dark line.

²⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.25: Borret 1969a, 242.

and Son (υἱός).²⁶ The Youth answers the Father, "I have been anointed with a white oil from the tree of life."²⁷ Celsus says that the people who were responsible for anointing the body told him that during the ceremony "there are seven angels standing on each side of the body as the soul leaves it" (ἑπτὰ, ἑκατέρωθεν τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦ ἀπαλλαττομένου σώματος ἐφισταμένων).²⁸ I read the Greek in its most simple terms to indicate that seven angels were collected on the right side of the body, while another seven were collected on the left. Celsus says that he was told by those who perform the ceremony that one group of these angels is comprised of angels of light, while the other group of angels is called, "the archontic angels." The chief of the archontic angels, they called "a god who has been cursed."²⁹ This cursed god, Celsus said, they identify with the God of the Jews, the storm god who is described by Moses in his writings as the god who created this world.³⁰ They further told Celsus that this god deserves to be cursed because it was he who cursed the serpent that gave the first humans knowledge of good and evil.³¹ Celsus again identifies these religious practitioners as "Christians."³²

Celsus remarks that their views of the Jewish god amounts to something along the order of schizophrenia. First he wants to know why the Jewish god would have made a mistake. Perhaps the Jewish god did not make a mistake when he promised the Jews everything from progeny to immortality as resurrected beings. Perhaps the Jewish god really did inspire the Jewish prophets. Celsus criticizes the Christians for holding stock in the Jewish scriptures and laws, while abusing the god who gave them in the first place. If you believe that Jesus laid down laws that contradict the laws of the Jewish god, Celsus reasons, why give the Jewish laws any credence at all? Celsus wants to know why the Christians who curse the god responsible for creation and the law, accept the cosmogony laid out by Moses, and hold enough stock in the Jewish law to even bother reinterpreting it allegorically. Celsus thinks that this kind of reasoning makes the Christians crazy or stupid. On the one hand, they say that they respect the same god as the Jews, while on the other hand, they posit the existence of another god who is the genuine Father God.³³

²⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 244, 246.

²⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 246.

²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 246.

²⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 246.

³⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 246.

³¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.28: Borret 1969a, 248.

³² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.28: Borret 1969a, 248.

³³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.29: Borret 1969a, 250.

After this aside, Celsus returns to describe the seven archontic demons named by the Christians with whom he had conversed about the diagram. He lists them in order from first to seventh: the first is lion-shaped; the second is a bull; the third is some kind of amphibian hissing horribly; the fourth has the form of an eagle; the fifth has the face of a bear; the sixth has the face of a dog; the seventh has the face of an ass and is called "Thaphabaoth" or "Onoel."³⁴ Then Celsus says that when the practitioners "go up into" (ἐπανέρχομαι) the archontic realms, some of them become lions, some bulls, and others serpents or eagles or bears or dogs.³⁵

Celsus mentions a rectangle on the diagram, which the practitioners associated with the gates of paradise.³⁶ He tells us that there were circles drawn above the heavens and labeled. He says that there were two among them, a larger and smaller circle, which were labeled "Father" and "Son."³⁷

He lists out a number of themes and images that he appears to have learned from the practitioners with whom he had been conversing. He says that

they add one thing on top of another—words of prophets, and circles on circles, and an outpouring of the Church upon the earth and (an outpouring) of the Circumcised, and a power flowing from a certain virgin harlot, and a living soul, and heaven sacrificed that it may have life, and, with a knife, earth sacrificed and many people sacrificed that they may have life, and death in the world ceasing when the sin of the world dies, and a narrow descent again, and gates that open spontaneously.³⁸

Celsus comments that they made constant references to "the tree of life" and ἀνάστασιν σαρκός, "by means of the tree." He imagines that these references were being used because their teacher had been nailed to a cross and was a carpenter.³⁹

Celsus even reports how the Christians he spoke to were using their diagram. He says that they professed to use magical enchantment, invoking the foreign names of the demons. In a later chapter of *Against Celsus*, Origen quotes another passage in which Celsus explains that "the enchantments addressed to the lion, the amphibian, the ass-shaped, and the other super-human gatekeepers were names" of the Archons that had to be "memorized"

³⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.30: Borret 1969a, 252, 254.

³⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.33: Borret 1969a, 260.

³⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.33: Borret 1969a, 260.

³⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38: Borret 1969a, 270.

³⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.34: Borret 1969a, 260, 262.

³⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.34: Borret 1969a, 262.

by the initiate.⁴⁰ In this way, Celsus felt they bamboozled converts who did not know that these pronunciations were ordinary demon names in an unfamiliar language like Scythian.⁴¹ He mentions that they practiced rites of purification (καθαρμοὺς), songs of redemption (λυτηρίους ᾠδὰς), sounds to get rid of illness (ἀποπομπίμους φωνάς), echoes (κτύπους), appropriation of demon forms (δαιμονίους σχηματισμούς) and various remedies of vestments (ἐσθήτων παντοῖα ἀλεξιφάρμακα) and numbers (ἀριθμῶν) and stones (λίθων) and plants (φυτῶν) and roots (ρίζων) and all kinds of other things (ὅλως παντοδαπῶν χρημάτων).⁴² He affirms that he has seen with his own eyes the books of the Christian Elders in which the foreign names of the demons and the knowledge of portents (τερατεία) were written.⁴³ Celsus considers their pronouncements to be harmful rather than beneficial as they claimed.⁴⁴

What Does Origen Think about the Diagram?

In order to refute Celsus, Origen says that he searched around and found a copy of the diagram Celsus had. He explains that he was unable to find anyone who used the diagram, including gullible women and stupid yokels.⁴⁵ Although he appears to have discussed the diagram he found with a number of other "learned" Christians, by his own admission, he was not in contact with the diagram's prime users.

To defuse Celsus' argument, his main strategy is to distance Christians and Christianity from the diagram as far as he possibly can, repeating serially that Celsus has misidentified the users. Origen wants to make clear that Christians do not use this diagram. Instead Christians understand the passage of the soul into the divine realm with reference to Ezekiel, "where different gates are described, intimating in veiled form certain notions about the various ways in which the more divine souls enter into the higher (realm)".⁴⁶ According to Origen, these twelve gates are referenced too in Revelation when John of Patmos discusses the gates and foundations of

heavenly Jerusalem.⁴⁷ Origen references also the book of Numbers where he suggests that Christians who ask are initiated (μυσταγωγέω) into what has been written about the encampments of the children of Israel. This is done so that they can "learn through symbols the road which has been revealed to those who will journey to the divine realm".⁴⁸

So although Origen wishes to distance Christianity from the diagram that he and Celsus have in hand, he does not argue that Christians are uninvolved in soul journeys. Rather he maintains that Christians have a form of initiation associated with the journey of the soul to the divine realm, but insists that it is different from the one represented by the diagram.

Origen goes on to make an even more extreme claim than this. Not only don't Christians use the diagram, he says, but the diagram belongs to a religious sect that is both non-Christian and anti-Christian. He identifies the prime users as heretics called Ophians, or snake worshipers, who "blasphemed Jesus' Name" and who maintained that the Jewish god is cursed.⁴⁹ In order to prove this point, he contrasts Christian doctrines with Ophian. He insists that Christians believe that the Creator of this world is good rather than cursed.⁵⁰ He says that Christians and Jews worship "one and the same God."⁵¹ He also insists that Christians do not understand the serpent in Eden to have done right by conspiring with the first humans.⁵² In typical Origenist fashion, he tries to distance Christians from the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, saying that Christians do not maintain that the natural body will be raised. He quotes Paul to support this position.⁵³ Paradoxically, as we will see later in this essay, the Christians who drew the diagram would have agreed with Origen on this latter point.

As for the diagram itself, Origen provides us with more details about the copy he has in hand, while also exposing the perceived errors in the Ophian teachings. He recounts that the diagram says that Leviathan is the

⁴⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.23: Borret 1969a, 236. Cf. Rev 21:12–21.

⁴⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.23: Borret 1969a, 236, 238. English translation: mine.

⁴⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.13; 6.24, 27–28; Catena fragm. 47 in 1 Cor 12:3 (ed. Jenkins, *JTS* 10 [1908]: 30): "There is a certain sect which does not admit a convert unless he pronounces anathemas on Jesus; and that sect is worthy of the name which it has chosen; for it is the sect of the so-called Ophians, who utter blasphemous words in praise of the serpent." Cf. Iren., *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.1–15; Ps.-Tert., *Adv. Omn. Haer.* 2; Epiph., *Pan.* 37.3.1; Filastrius, *Haer.* 1; Theodore, *Haer. fab.* 1.14.

⁵⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.27: Borret 1969a, 246.

⁵¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.29: Borret 1969a, 250.

⁵² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.28: Borret 1969a, 248, 250.

⁵³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.28: Borret 1969a, 250, 252. Cf. 1 Cor 15:42–44.

⁴⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.40: Borret 1969b, 104–109.

⁴¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38–39: Borret 1969a, 270, 272.

⁴² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.39: Borret 1969a, 274.

⁴³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.40: Borret 1969a, 274.

⁴⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.40: Borret 1969a, 274.

⁴⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.24: Borret 1969a, 238, 240.

⁴⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.23: Borret 1969a, 236. English translation: mine. Cf. Ezek 48:30–35.

soul permeating the universe. Origen connects the Leviathan reference to the Psalms (while quoting a version of Joshua 18:16). He understands the scriptural reference to Leviathan to have negative connotations that undo the Ophian association of Leviathan with the universal soul—that Leviathan was created by God to be a playmate, not the soul of the universe.

He also mentions that the lowest circle in the diagram is labeled. “Behemoth” is written in the middle of the lowest circle (μετὰ τὸν κατωτάτω κύκλον). Thus Leviathan, Origen says, is both upon the circumference of the circle and at its center.⁵⁴ It is unclear to me from Origen’s testimony if Leviathan is identified on the diagram as the ouroboros and a figure in the middle of the lowest circle, or if in Origen’s mind Leviathan and Behemoth are identical entities so that the reference to Behemoth in the center of the lowest circle is understood by Origen to be a second reference to Leviathan.

He agrees that there is a thick black line on the diagram, but disagrees that this line actually indicates the location of Gehenna or Tartarus. Through a scriptural study of the word Gehenna, Origen locates this place of torment “in heavenly Jerusalem” with the Chasm of Ennom owned by the tribe of Benjamin.⁵⁵ Origen’s argument suggests that the thick black line around Gehenna on the diagram, located Tartarus somewhere outside of the heavenly realms where he himself seems to place Gehenna. In his discussion of Gehenna, Origen refers to a doctrine of the purification of the soul: since the soul has taken into its very essence the works caused by evil, the soul is in need of refinement. He refuses to say any more on the subject because he thinks that the masses do not require any more instruction than “sinners will be punished.”⁵⁶

Origen provides more information about the seven archons mentioned by Celsus. Origen says that his copy of the diagram included the scriptural or angel names of the archons, along with their animal forms: Michael is the lion-like archon; Suriel is bull-shaped; Raphael is the hissing amphibian; Gabriel is shaped like an eagle; Thauthabaoth is bear-like; Erathaoth is dog-faced; Onoel or Thartharoath has the head of an ass.

Origen’s copy of the diagram also contained a number of prayers. Origen understands them to be certain initiatory secrets (ἀπόρητά τινα) invented by sorcerers. The initiates were taught to say these prayers “as they went through the middle of what they call ‘the fortification of evil’, the gates

of the Archons which had been bound shut forever” (μετὰ τὸ διελθεῖν ὃν ὀνομάζουσι “φραγμὸν κακίας”, πύλας ἀρχόντων αἰῶνι δεδεμένους). We are very fortunate that Origen quotes the prayers inscribed on the diagram, preserving for us the liturgical words of some of the prime users of the diagram.⁵⁷

Origen says that the first prayer is addressed to the Archon from whom the Powers of the Ogdoad originate.

Βασιλέα μονότροπον, δεσμὸν ἀβλεψίας, λήθην ἀπερίσκεπτον ἀσπάζομαι, πρῶτην δύναμιν, πνεύματι προνοίας καὶ σοφία τηρουμένην· ἔνθεν εἰλικρινῆς πέμπομαι, φωτὸς ἥδη μέρος υἱοῦ καὶ πατρὸς· ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, ναὶ πάτερ, συνέστω.⁵⁸

I greet the Solitary King, the bond of blindness, the reckless forgetting, the First Power, guarded by the Spirit of Pronoia and by Sophia. Thence I am sent forth pure, already a part of the light of the Son and the Father. May Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me.⁵⁹

Next they approach the gate of Ialdabaoth. Origen remarks that the initiates think Ialdabaoth, the lion-like Archon, is in sympathy with the planet Saturn. As they pass through the gate of Ialdabaoth, the initiates are taught to say:

Σὺ δὲ μετὰ πεποιθήσεως πρῶτε καὶ ἑβδόμῃ γεγονώς κρατεῖν Ἰαλδαβᾶωθ, ἄρχων λόγος ὑπάρχων νοὸς εἰλικρινοῦς, ἔργον τέλειον υἱῷ καὶ πατρί, χαρακτήρι τύπου ζωῆς σύμβολον ἐπιφέρων, ἦν ἔκλεισας αἰῶνι σὺ πύλιν κόσμῳ ἀνοίξας, παροδεύω τὴν σὴν ἐλεύθερος πάλιν ἐξουσίαν· ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, ναὶ πάτερ, συνέστω.⁶⁰

(I greet) you, First and Seventh, born to rule with audacity, Ialdabaoth! As a ruling Logos of pure Nous, as a perfect work for the Son and the Father, by the imprint of the seal bearing the symbol of life, opening your cosmic gate that was shut forever, as a free man I go past your authority again. May Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me.⁶¹

After passing through Ialdabaoth’s gate, the initiates reach Iao. They are taught to say to Iao:

Σὺ δὲ κρυπτομένων μυστηρίων υἱοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἄρχων νυκτοφαῖς δεύτερε Ἰαὼ καὶ πρῶτε δέσποτα θανάτου, μέρος ἀθώου, φέρων ἥδη τὸν ἴδιον ὑπὸν σύμβολον, παροδεύειν σὴν ἔτοιμος ἀρχὴν· κατίσχυσας τὸν ἀπὸ σοῦ γενόμενον λόγῳ ζῶντι· ἡ χάρις συνέστω, πάτερ, συνέστω.⁶²

⁵⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 254, 256, 258.

⁵⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 254.

⁵⁹ English translation is mine.

⁶⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 254, 256.

⁶¹ English translation is mine.

⁶² Vatican MS. has φέρων ἥδη τὸν ἴδιον ὑπὸν σύμβολον, which I follow and translate here. Borret accepts emendation by K: ὑπή(χοον) νοῦν: Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 256.

⁵⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.25: Borret 1969a, 240, 242.

⁵⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.25: Borret 1969a, 240, 242.

⁵⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.26: Borret 1969a, 242, 244.

(I greet) you, the Archon from whom the mysteries of the Son and the Father are concealed, Iao, the Second Lord Shining-in-the-Night and the First Lord of Death! As part of the Innocent One, wearing already my own beard as a symbol, (I am) prepared to go past your sovereignty, since by the Living Word I have overpowered that which was born from you. May Grace be with me. Father, may it be with me.⁶³

Once they have successfully navigated through Iao's gate, they come to Sabaoth. They are supposed to address him:

Πέμπτης ἐξουσίας ἀρχων, δυνάστα Σαβαώθ, προήγορε νόμου τῆς σῆς κτίσεως χάριτι λυομένης, πεντάδι δυνάτωτέρᾳ, πάρες με, σύμβολον ὁρῶν σῆς τέχνης ἀνεπιληπτον, εἰκόνι τύπου τετηρημένον, πεντάδι λυθέν σῶμα · ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, πάτερ, συνέστω.⁶⁴

Archon of the Fifth Power, Commander Sabaoth, Defender of the Law of your creation which is being destroyed by Grace! By a mightier Pentad, let me go past, since you see the symbol not open to attack by your craft. (I am) protected by the image of the imprint, since (your) body is destroyed by the Pentad. May Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me.⁶⁵

Astaphaeus is the next Archon encountered. The initiates are taught the following formula:

Τρίτης ἀρχων πύλης Ἀσταφαίε, ἐπίσκοπε πρώτης ὕδατος ἀρχῆς, ἕνα βλέπων μυστήν πάρες με παρθένου πνεύματι κεκαθαρμένον, ὁρῶν οὐσίαν κόσμου · ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, πάτερ, συνέστω.⁶⁶

Archon of the Third Gate, Astaphaeus, Overseer of the First-Water-Source! Since you are looking at one who is an initiate, let me pass. By the Virgin Spirit, (I) have been purified, perceiving the essence of the cosmos. May Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be (with me).⁶⁷

After the initiate passes successfully by Astaphaeus, the next Archon is engaged with these words:

Δευτέρας ἀρχων πύλης Αἰλωαίε, πάρες με τῆς σῆς μητρὸς φέροντά σοι σύμβολον, χάριν κρυπτομένην δυνάμεσιν ἐξουσιῶν · ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, πάτερ, συνέστω.⁶⁸

Archon of the Second Gate, Ailoeus! Let me pass since I bring to you your Mother's symbol, Grace that is hidden by the powers of the Authorities. Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me.⁶⁹

⁶³ English translation is mine.

⁶⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 256.

⁶⁵ English translation is mine.

⁶⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 256.

⁶⁷ English translation is mine.

⁶⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 256, 258.

⁶⁹ English translation is mine.

The last to be addressed is the Archon Horaeus. When the initiates approach his gate, they are taught to say:

Υπερβάς φραγμὸν πυρὸς ἀφόβως, πρώτης λαχὼν ἀρχὴν πύλης Ὠραιε, πάρες με, σῆς ὁρῶν δυνάμεως σύμβολον καταλυθέν τύπῳ ζωῆς ξύλου, εἰκόνι καθ' ὁμοίωσιν ληφθέν ἀθώου · ἡ χάρις συνέστω μοι, πάτερ, συνέστω.⁷⁰

You who mount the wall of fire without fear, the Archon who protects the First Gate, Horaeus! Let me pass, since you see the symbol that destroys your power with the imprint of the tree of life. (Your power has been) seized by the image according to the likeness of Innocence. May Grace be with me. Yes, Father, may it be with me.⁷¹

Origen understands the names in these prayers to be passwords that coordinate with the Archons on the diagram. The mixture of names is explained by Origen to be derivative of multi-sources. The diagram drew names from the scriptures, as well as from the craft of ancient magic. He says that they took from magic the names Ialdabaoth, Astaphaeus, and Horaeus, while from the Bible they took various titles of God and applied them to different Archons: Iao, Sabaoth, Adonaeus, and Eloaeus.⁷²

Origen describes other drawings on the diagram. He mentions a rectangular figure that was associated with the gates of paradise. Drawn with this figure was a circle of fire, and a flaming sword was pictured on the diameter of the circle, guarding the trees of knowledge and life.⁷³ Origen also describes further the dual circles mentioned by Celsus, the circles that were labeled "Father" and "Son" on their diameters. The smaller circle was inside the bigger circle. The bigger circle was yellow. The inner was blue. These circles were mirrored with a second set, and between the mirror-image sets was a barrier drawn in the form of a double-sided axe. Above the axe is a smaller circle that touches the larger first two circles. It is labeled "Love" and below the circle "Life" is inscribed.⁷⁴ The second smaller and larger circles are described by Origen. Within the larger circle is another circle labeled "Pronoia of Sophia." Within this circle are two smaller circles that intersect. One circle is inscribed with the word "Gnosis" and the other with the word "Synesis." The intersection of the circles is described as a rhomboid shape labeled "Nature of Sophia."⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31: Borret 1969a, 258.

⁷¹ English translation is mine.

⁷² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.32: Borret 1969a, 258, 260.

⁷³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.33: Borret 1969a, 260.

⁷⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38: Borret 1969a, 270.

⁷⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38: Borret 1969a, 270.

What Can We Know about the Diagram?

As a modern scholar, I have knowledge of comparable materials that Celsus and Origen did not. I operate within my own network of information, one that is more global in scope than were the personal networks of Celsus and Origen. By methodically superimposing this global knowledge onto the information gleaned from our analysis above a kaleidoscopic vista emerges allowing us to begin to gain insight into the deeper architecture of the diagram. We can begin to answer the questions, Who created it? Who used it? What was it?

Matters of Identity

Our analysis of the extended network provided us with contradictory information about the identity of the prime users. Celsus identifies them as Christians. Origen identifies them as non-Christian heretics called Ophians. Since Celsus had direct contact with some of the prime users, it is reasonable to think that he is transmitting information about their own self-identity. If this is the case, then the prime users understood themselves to be Christians and their initiation practices to be Christian. They marketed themselves and their rites to Celsus as Christian through-and-through. Celsus' descriptions of their ideologies are marked with Christian concepts, including Jesus' trade as a carpenter, his proclamation—as their teacher!—of a God of love, his crucifixion on the cross, the resurrection, and the Church on earth. So Celsus transmits in his work what was marketed to him as “Christian” by this group.

Origen's insistence that they are not Christian, but heretical, provides us with his own judgment of them. Origen understands his own brand of Christianity to be the genuine expression of Christianity. Any expression of Christianity that is deviant from Origen's is considered by him to be non-Christian. However, that the prime users were anti-Christian, blaspheming Jesus' Name, does not square up with the information that Celsus provided. This identification is generated solely from Origen's own imagination and consequent assumption that a heretical group must be also a blasphemous group.⁷⁶

What about Origen's association of the diagram with Ophianism? Irenaeus describes a group he identifies as heretical in chapter 30 of his first

⁷⁶ For alternative explanations, see Rasimus 2009, 225–242.

book *Against Heresies*. The mythology of this group shares a substantial conceptual array with Celsus' and Origen's accounts of the diagram, including the positive evaluation of the Edenic serpent, certain characters in salvation history, and the names of the Archons.⁷⁷ In this case, the two sources are sharing not only common individual ideas, but an arrangement of conceptual arrays that are each emergent distinctive blends: a subversive interpretation of Genesis, a peculiar story of salvation history, and an idiosyncratic list of Archons. These shared conceptual arrays establish a strong domain fit between the diagram and the mythology of the particular group described by Irenaeus. Irenaeus, however, calls this group “Gnostic,” not Ophian. It isn't until *Pseudo-Tertullian* that we find the Ophian label connected to a mythology comparable to Irenaeus' description.

This evidence shows that the prime users of the diagram, while understanding themselves to be Christians, were perceived by other Christians as heretics, Gnostics, and Ophians. These were all used as polemical labels meant to erase the group's own Christian heritage and identity. That said, the main tenets of the prime users form a strong conceptual fit with the mythological domain described in the heresiological literature and attributed to the Gnostics and Ophians, rather than the Christian mythological domain that either Origen or Irenaeus were advocating for themselves. While the architect and the prime users of the diagram understood themselves to be Christians, they were operating within a very specific Gnostic Christian matrix of myth, ritual, and social identity. This social matrix was competitive with other Christian matrices, while simultaneously it was perceived by other Christians as transgressive. To highlight their distinctiveness (and for the sake of a better term), we shall call their matrix, *Ophian-Christian*.

A Cosmic Map

What was drawn on the diagram? It is clear from the information gleaned from our analysis above that the diagram included an illustration of the heavens and Tartarus. Given that the diagram consists of ten separate

⁷⁷ Contrary to Ledegang 2011, 74, who argues that the users of the diagram are not necessarily the same as the Gnostics/Ophians mentioned by Irenaeus, since the serpent is negatively valued in Irenaeus' account. In my opinion, this is not accurate. The serpent is clearly used by Sophia to enlighten Adam and Eve in Irenaeus' rendition of the myth, even though the serpent is identified as Nous, Ialdabaoth's son. The serpent in fact acts against his father. He is punished for his transgression by being cast down in the lower world of demons and humans (Iren., *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.5–8).

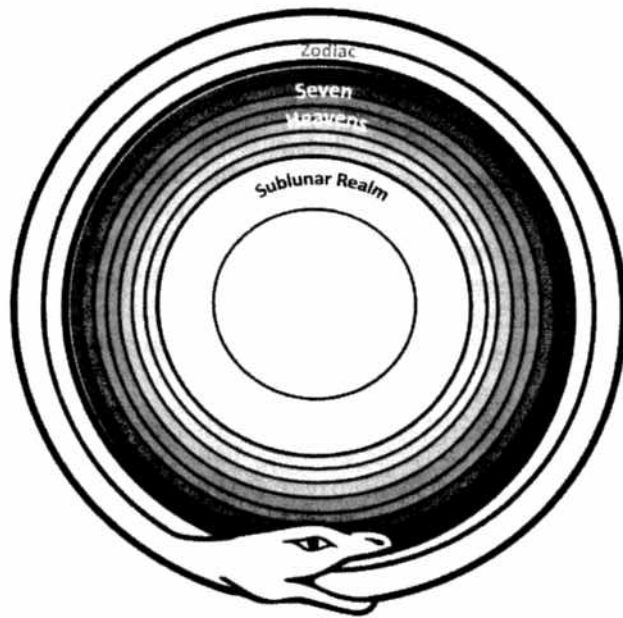


Figure 1. Map of Ptolemaic cosmos with ourboros. Illustration by April D. DeConick

circles, with Leviathan encompassing them, what we have is a conventional ancient map of the cosmos (1. Earth, 2. Sublunar realm, 3.–9. Seven heavens, 10. Zodiac), with the body of Leviathan as the life-producing ourboros surrounding the Zodiac.

What was unconventional about the map were its labels and the ourboros. The map was charted with the Ophian-Christian names of the Archons of each planet and pictorial representations of the animal forms of each ruler. If we accept Origen's comment that Ialdabaoth was associated with Saturn and the planets were presented in conventional order, this would mean that Celsus and Origen were describing the archons on the map from the seventh heaven downwards to the first. The order presented in the following table is the standard ancient planetary arrangement based on the perceived distance of the planet from the earth, beginning with the farthest (Saturn) descending to the nearest (Moon). The seven heavenly spheres and the Zodiac were labeled with this arrangement on the Ophian-Christian diagram, an arrangement which will be confirmed later in this essay.

Table 2. Planetary arrangement

Star or Planet	Ritual or Magic Name	Scriptural or Angel Name	Animal Shape
Zodiac	(?)	Leviathan	Serpent
Saturn	Ialdabaoth	Michael	Lion-shaped
Jupiter	Iao	Suriel	Bull-shaped
Mars	Sabaoth	Raphael	Hissing Amphibian
Sun	Adonaeus	Gabriel	Eagle-shaped
Venus	Astaphaeus	Thauthabaoth	Bear-faced
Mercury	Ailoeus	Erathaoth	Dog-faced
Moon	Horaes	Thaphabaoth-Onoe-Thartharaoth	Ass-faced

It is more difficult to identify the location of the dark line that marked the site of Gehenna or Tartarus. Origen discusses this point immediately after he has identified "Behemoth" in the middle of the "lowest circle." This makes me think that the dark line was in close proximity to the lowest circle. By "lowest," I understand Origen to mean the circle that indicates the earth. So I imagine that the dark line was drawn somewhere within the sphere of the earth or immediately outside of it in the sublunar realm.

A Neopythagorean Ascent Pattern

Origen does not dispute Celsus' point that the diagram is connected to the path that the soul journeys through the planets.⁷⁸ Additionally, Origen states in book 7.40 that the path that the Ophians map on the diagram is the path "upwards" through the gates of each of the Archons.

Previous scholars, however, have found it impossible to reconcile the upward journey with the accompanying prayers, which move through the archons in a sequence that does not match a sequential order of ascent through the planets: Hoaeus (Moon), Ailoeus (Mercury), Astaphaeus (Venus), Adonaeus (Sun), Sabaoth (Mars), Iao (Jupiter), Ialdabaoth (Saturn). Instead the prayers present us with what appears to be a descent sequence through the planets from an unnamed Archon, to Ialdabaoth, to Iao, to Sabaoth, to Astaphaeus, to Ailoeus, to Horaes. Adonaeus ruler of the Sun is missing from the prayer sequence when read in descending order.

⁷⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.21: Borret 1969a, 230, 232.

Table 3. Ophian-Christian prayer chart

Prayer Sequence	Gate No.	Archon Invoked	Archon Epithets	Planet	Protection Used
1			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Solitary King · Bond of Blindness · Reckless Forgetting First Power 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Spirit of Pronoia · Sophia
2		Ialdabaoth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · First Seventh 	Saturn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Symbol of Life · Father and the Son
3		Iao	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Second Lord Shining-in-the-Night First Lord of Death 	Jupiter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Symbol of the beard
4		Sabaoth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Archon of the Fifth Power · Commander Defender of the Law 	Mars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Symbol of the Pentad
5	3rd	Astaphaeus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Archon of the Third Gate · Overseer of the First-Water-Source 	Venus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Purification by the Virgin Spirit
6	2nd	Ailoeus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Archon of the Second Gate 	Mercury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Symbol of the Mother
7	1st	Horaeus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The-One-Who-Mounts-the-Wall-of-Fire-Without-Fear · Archon who protects the First Gate 	Moon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Symbol of Tree of Life · Symbol of Innocence

The problem that has frustrated past scholarship on this matter revolves around a failure to identify the domain of knowledge and the social matrix in which this ascent pattern was located. Previous scholars have not properly understood how diverse ancient speculation was when it came to identifying the exact path souls take to enter and exit the cosmos at birth and death. This speculation was embedded within the local webs of knowledge about astrology and philosophy, and it produced a plethora of theories. The ancients speculated about the soul's descent and ascent through various planetary routes, as well as through specific star gates within the Zodiacal belt or along star columns like the Milky Way.⁷⁹ In fact, one of the attractions of initiatory guilds like the Ophian-Christian was their claim to the secret knowledge of the precise path the soul uses to enter and exit the world. This

⁷⁹ DeConick 2012, 25–31.

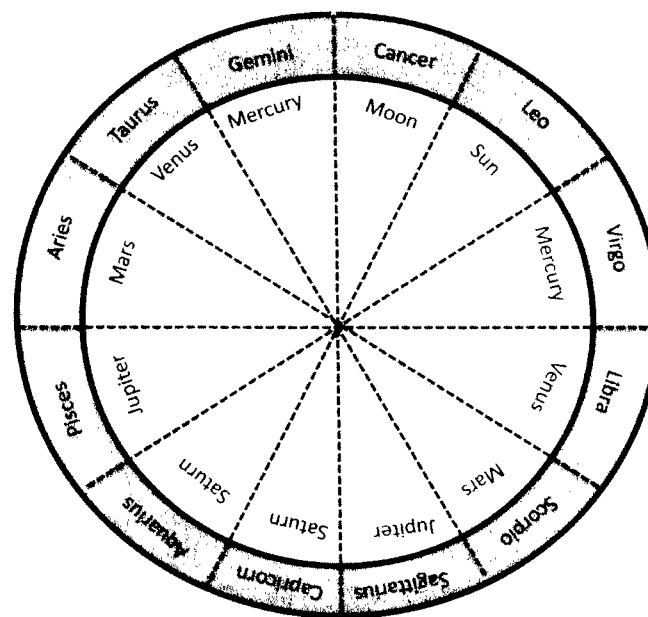


Figure 2. Ancient Zodiac with planetary rulers. Illustration by April D. DeConick

knowledge was the trade secret of each guild. The path of descent and ascent through the planets was not necessarily the same thing as ascending and descending through the structural arrangement of the planetary spheres. If this were the case, the guild would have no initiation secret to offer.

As it turns out, the architect and prime users of the diagram were not befuddled folk who did not understand astrology, nor was Origen mixed up and sloppy in his presentation of the prayers. As we will see shortly, the pattern that Origen transmits maps directly onto the ascent pattern articulated by Numenius according to Porphyry, a pattern that had the soul move successively through the Zodiacal signs and their planetary rulers. The correspondence between the ascent schema reflected in the diagram and Porphyry's record of Numenius' teaching is not just at the level of the order of the nocturnal houses, but also includes an exact correlation between the gates of entry and exit which were identified with Capricorn and Cancer.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs* 22–23. Contrary to Denzey 2005, 102, who writes that Porphyry's testimony is not helpful.

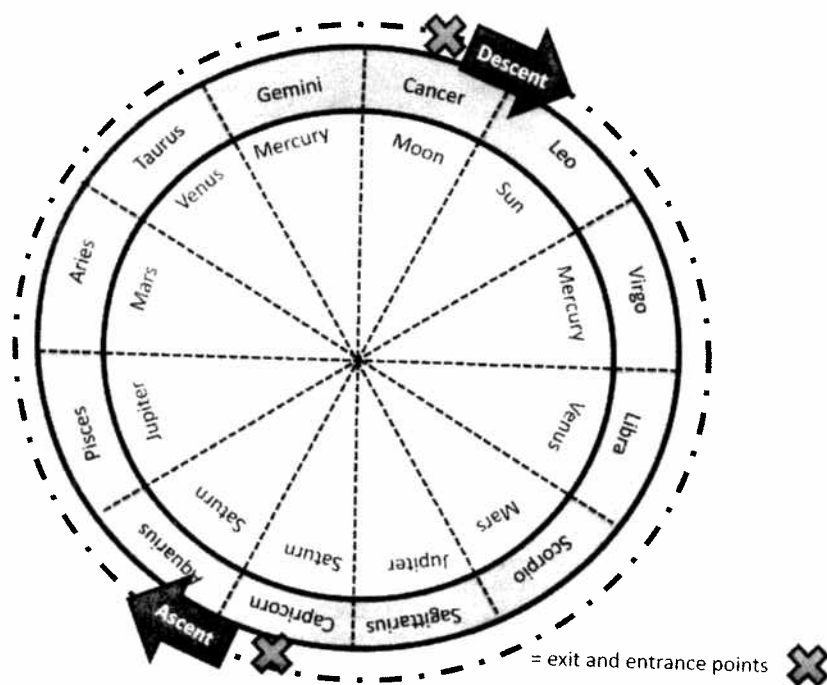


Figure 3. Numenius' descent-ascent pattern. Illustration by April D. DeConick

In Numenius' expert opinion, the descent of the soul started through the Gate in Cancer, which is ruled by the Moon, and then followed around the Zodiac until it hit the Gate in Capricorn when it was flung into a material body. The ascent of the soul was a different matter. It began at the Gate of Capricorn, which is ruled by Saturn and made its way around the Zodiac until it exited through the Gate of Cancer.

Table 4. Shared sequence of planets

Sequence of Planetary Rulers in Numenius' Ascent Pattern	Sequence of Archons and Planetary Associations in Ophian-Christian Prayers	
Saturn	?	?
Saturn	Saturn	Ialdabaoth
Jupiter	Jupiter	Iao
Mars	Mars	Sabaoth
Venus	Venus	Astaphaeus
Mercury	Mercury	Ailoeus
Moon	Moon	Horaes

How does Numenius' ascent pattern align with the sequence of prayers transmitted by Origen? An exact configuration is shared between them, except in the case of the first prayer, which is not explicitly connected to an Archon or a planet in Origen's account.

What can we make of the first prayer? Who might it have been associated with? The Archon is addressed as the "Solitary King" and the "First Power." The second prayer addresses an Archon who is both the "First" and the "Seventh" Power named Ialdabaoth. Why is he *First* and *Seventh*? Because in the descent pattern, Ialdabaoth is the seventh Archon encountered. He is the Archon responsible for genesis, putting the soul into a physical body when it passes through the seventh gate in the descent journey, Capricorn. The reference to the *First* must correspond to the ascent pattern, where Ialdabaoth guards the Gate of Capricorn, the first gate in the journey upwards through the Zodiac. Thus he is the *First* and *Seventh*.

If this is the case, then the unnamed Archon addressed in the first prayer, the "Solitary King" and "First Power," must be Ialdabaoth. But isn't the second prayer addressed to Ialdabaoth too? Why would we have two prayers addressed to the same Archon? Because, in the ascent journey, Ialdabaoth also guards the gate in Aquarius, the Zodiacal sign that the initiate progresses through immediately following Capricorn. It stands to reason that we would expect the first two prayers to be addressed to Ialdabaoth, since he guards the first two gates in the ascent path through the Zodiac. This is exactly what Origen preserves for us: two prayers to the *First Power*. It also explains why, in the second prayer, the initiate tells Ialdabaoth that he is going past "your authority again" (παροδεύω τὴν σὴν πάλιν ἐξουσίαν).⁸¹ This means that there is an exact domain fit between Numenius' ascent pattern and the Ophian-Christian prayers.

What is highly significant is the fact that there is a correspondence between Numenius and the Ophian-Christian maps of the movement of the soul through the nocturnal houses, as well as a correlation of the gates of entry and exit. This innovative conceptual blend is not a simple sharing of a single data point, but the affinity of a bigger conceptual array that Porphyry believed Numenius created. This is strong evidence that there was contact between the Ophian-Christians and Neo-Pythagorean teachings,

⁸¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31; Borret 1969a, 256.

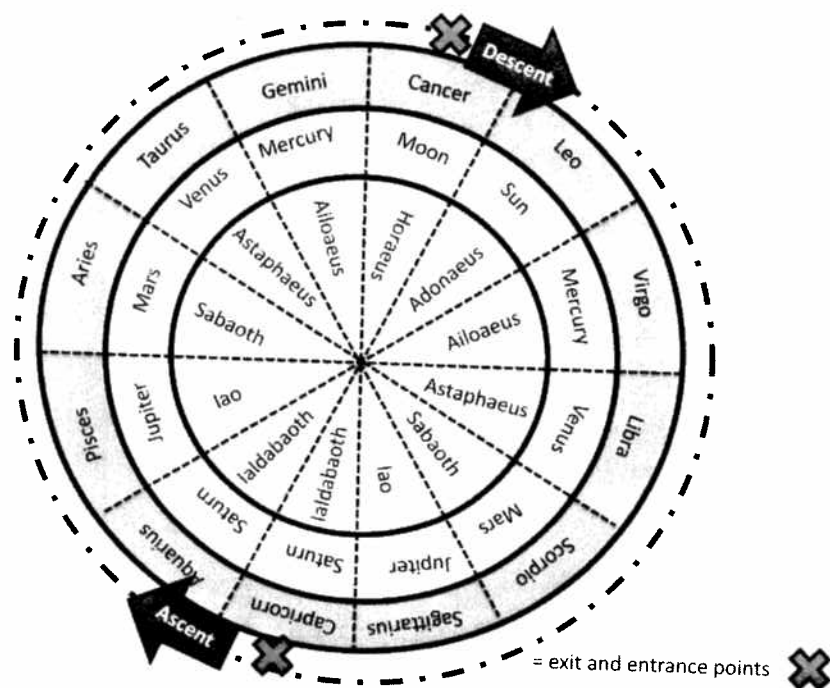


Figure 4. Ophian-Christian descent-ascent pattern. Illustration by April D. DeConick

even though they did not share the same social matrix as the Neo-Pythagoreans. In terms of the social and liturgical contexts, what the Ophian-Christians were doing with the shared ascent pattern was quite distinctive from Neo-Pythagoreans like Numenius. So the Ophian-Christians and their diagram cannot be regarded as Neo-Pythagorean. What the Ophian-Christian diagram reflects is an innovative blend of knowledge, where a Neo-Pythagorean astrological map of the soul journey has interfaced with Gnostic spirituality in a Christian matrix, and become something totally new and totally distinctive on both the conceptual and social levels.

It is difficult to isolate, however, the direct point of contact between the Ophian-Christians and the Neo-Pythagoreans. We do not know whether the Ophian-Christian prayers are younger or older than Numenius who was active in the mid- to late second century. Celsus' record of the diagram may give us the latest possible date for the composition of the prayers—178 CE—although it is Origen, not Celsus, who records the prayers, which were included with Origen's copy of the diagram. If the prayers were not

original to the diagram but are secondary, then their latest possible date of composition shifts from the late second to the early third century, just prior to Origen's testimony. In either case, it means that the composition of the prayers was roughly contemporary with Numenius.

That said, we do not know if there was direct contact between Numenius and the Ophian-Christians, although we do know that Numenius' philosophical writings were popular among Christians beginning in the late second and early third centuries. Even though Porphyry attributes the pattern to Numenius' and Cronius' interpretation of the *Myth of Er*, where Plato mentions two "mouths" as portals for the descent and ascent of the soul, we cannot be certain that Numenius invented this descent-ascent pattern with the Cancer and Capricorn gates. It may have been that Numenius was the one who popularized what already was a conceptual array within the Neo-Pythagorean domain of knowledge. In this latter scenario, the Ophian-Christians simply would have known the ascent scenario as a philosophical teaching among the Pythagoreans, while having had no direct contact with Numenius or his body of work.⁸²

This matter is all the more interesting when we take into account the archaeological evidence for Mithraic worship, where the Mithraic caves are constructed to represent the image of the cosmos.⁸³ The benches that line the walls are meant to represent the ecliptic, the path of the sun through the Zodiac. The arrangement of the diurnal and nocturnal houses of the Zodiac is clearly demarcated on the benches. Furthermore, the gates of entry and exit marked on the benches are associated with Cancer and Capricorn. In the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres, the gates are specifically located at the Gemini-Cancer and the Sagittarius-Cancer boundaries and identified with the summer and winter solstices.

The identification of the gates with Cancer and Capricorn is also depicted on the Housesteads rockbirth, only in this case with the Cancer-Leo and the Capricorn-Aquarius boundaries.

The Housesteads monument, like the benches in the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres, depicts an arrangement of the Zodiac that follows the sequence of the planetary houses.⁸⁴ On the Housesteads monument, Mithras emerges in the center of the Zodiacal wheel from a broken egg. The arrangement of the two broken halves of the shells at the top and bottom

⁸² Porphyry, *Cave of Nymphs* 23. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 10.615d.

⁸³ Beck 2006; Beck Forthcoming.

⁸⁴ Beck 1988, 35.

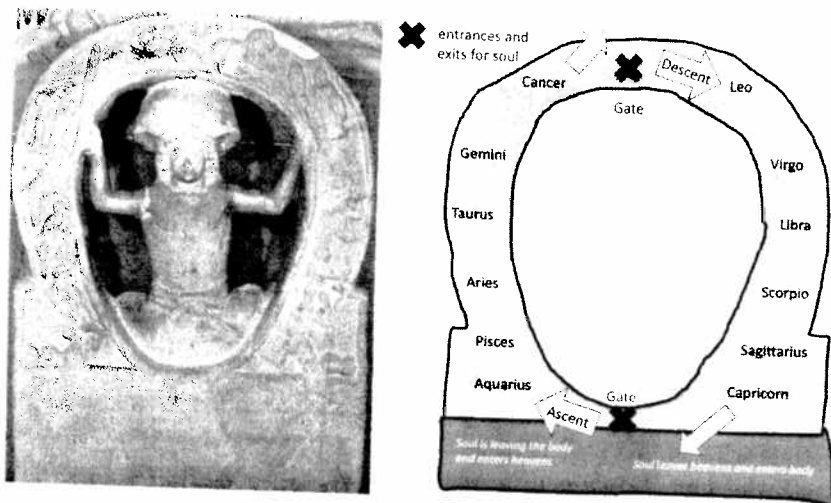


Figure 5. The birth of Mithras from the Mithraeum at Housesteads, MOA 43731, ca. third century; Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; The Bridgeman Art Library. Reprinted with permission. Corresponding illustration by April D. DeConick

of the wheel reflect the entry and exit points of souls going into and out of the human body. The gate of entry is at the top between the two gates of Cancer and Leo ruled by the two luminaries the Moon and the Sun.⁸⁵ If we are meant to follow the pattern from top to bottom, then the artist is depicting the movement of the soul through Leo (Sun) and then through Virgo (Mercury), Libra (Venus), Scorpio (Mars), Sagittarius (Jupiter), and Capricorn (Saturn), at which point it embodies. This reflects a descent through the diurnal house of the Sun on the right side of the monument from top to bottom.

The gate of exit is found at the bottom between Capricorn (Saturn) and Aquarius (Saturn). The artist is depicting the soul leaving the body through this gate, and passing through Aquarius (Saturn), Pisces (Jupiter), Aries (Mars), Taurus (Venus), Gemini (Mercury), and Cancer (Moon). This route is depicted on the left side of the monument, moving from bottom to top, following the order of the nocturnal house on the lunar side of the artifact.

⁸⁵ Cf. Varro, *ap. Servius ad. Georg.* 134. Varro read that Empediotimus of Syracuse claims to have seen three routes and three gates of the soul: one in the sign of Scorpius, where Hermes was said to pass to the gods; another at the boundary between Leo and Cancer; a third between Aquarius and Pisces. See Beck 1988, 42.

The evidence from Mithraism shows that these cult worshipers had identified the gates of entry and exit of the soul with the solstices associated with Cancer and Capricorn just as Numenius had done. The evidence from Origen tells us that the Ophian-Christians had identified Capricorn as the gate of exit as well. Additionally, the Mithraic cultists depict a nocturnal pattern of ascent through the houses that has striking similarities to the ideas of Numenius and the practices of the Ophians. Like the Ophians, the Mithraic worshipers not only connected the ascent of the soul with passage through the nocturnal houses, but also through the spheres of the seven planets. If Celsus is to be believed (and why not?), the Mithraic worshipers arranged the planetary spheres through which the soul passes sequentially in the week-day order due to some known music theory, likely related to ancient speculation about the harmony of the spheres.

No matter the similarities, the Ophian-Christian system was distinctive too, marketing a precise brand of knowledge to initiates. This brand of knowledge had complexities that would have been shared and rehearsed with the congregants. The fact that the archons are associated with the order of the planetary houses as well as the conventional order of the planets suggests that in the Ophian-Christian system, each archon was identified with a variety of numbers that initiates would have memorized: his planetary house number in the diurnal descent pattern, his planetary house in the nocturnal ascent pattern, and his conventional planet number in terms of distance from the earth.

Table 5. Enumeration of the archons

Archon	Number of his Planetary House in Nocturnal Ascent Pattern	Number of his Planetary House in Diurnal Descent Pattern	Number of his Planet in Conventional Order Farthest to Nearest from Earth	Number of his Planet in Conventional Order Nearest to Farthest from Earth
Ialdabaoth	First-Capricorn Second-Aquarius	Seventh-Capricorn	First-Saturn	Seventh-Saturn
Iao	Third-Pisces	Sixth-Sagittarius	Second-Jupiter	Sixth-Jupiter
Sabaoth	Fourth-Aries	Fifth-Scorpio	Third-Mars	Fifth-Mars
Adonaeus		Second-Leo	Fourth-Sun	Fourth-Sun
Astapheaus	Fifth-Taurus	Fourth-Libra	Fifth-Venus	Third-Venus
Ailoeus	Sixth-Gemini	Third-Virgo	Sixth-Mercury	Second-Mercury
Horaeus	Seventh-Cancer	First-Cancer	Seventh-Moon	First-Moon

The Ophian-Christian association of the archons with their planetary houses and with the conventional planetary order helps to explain other difficult features in the prayers. Why, for instance, is Saboath called the "Archon of the Fifth Power" when Saboath rules Mars, the third planet, not the fifth Venus? As Table 5 shows, Sabaoth is the "Archon of the Fifth Power" in the descent pattern, just as Ialdabaoth is the "Seventh." Iao is called the "Second Lord Shining-in-the-Night" because Jupiter is the second planet furthest away from the earth. The references to Astaphaeus, Ailoeus, and Horaeus as the Archons of the Third, Second and First Gates refer to their proximity to the earth, from Venus (Third) to Mercury (Second) to the Moon (First). Horaeus is called the Archon who "Mounts-the-Wall-of-Fire-Without-Fear" because the Moon, his planet, sits just above the flaming firmament at the top of the sublunar realm.

The question that remains to be answered is the how their movement through the zodiac corresponded to their movement through the planetary spheres, and how this might have been ritually performed by the Ophian-Christians. In Mithraism, the movement through the planets appears to have taken place through a sequence that mimicked the week-day order of the gods. Not so in the Ophian pattern.⁸⁶ The order of prayers suggest that the soul met each archon when that ruler was in his house, beginning with Ialdabaoth in Capricorn and ending with Horaeus in Cancer. Whether these meetings between initiate and archon took place in real time (that is, when Saturn was actually in Capricorn or the Moon in Cancer) or in ritually designated time (that is, on a particularly chosen date, like the winter solstice when the sun was in Capricorn) cannot be readily discerned from the extant evidence.

The literature beyond the Ophian evidence suggests that groups in antiquity practiced both. On the one hand, the Hermetics who wrote the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* held initiations into the highest spheres when Mercury was in the house of Virgo and the sun was in the first half of the day and fifteen degrees had passed by Mercury.⁸⁷

On the other hand, the ascent practices of the disciples of the book of *Pistis Sophia* appear to have occurred on a specific designated day to imitate Jesus' ascension and conquest of the archons. They remembered that this event occurred on or around January 24th, that is the fifteenth day of the month of Tōbe when the moon was full and the sun was at its zenith. Their

⁸⁶ Contrary to Denzey 2005.

⁸⁷ *Discourse on Eighth and Ninth* 62.16–20.

ceremonies ended the next day at the ninth hour, when they believed Jesus' ascension to the Kingdom of Light had been completed.⁸⁸ Their mystery rites were phased, some lesser and others superior mysteries. Initiation begins, however, with a robing ceremony when the initiate dons a luminous garment and makes an initial ascent to the gate in the firmament above the earth.⁸⁹ Once having passed through this gate, the initiate enters the zodiacal houses of the spheres and encounters archons that become fearful and agitated at the sight of the initiate's luminous garment.⁹⁰ Once the rulers of the houses are overcome and bound in their places with the seals of Jeu, the initiate was believed to have passed the first mystery. With the twelve seals, the initiate had bound the planetary rulers in their houses and now had safe passage through the Zodiac.⁹¹ Superior phases of initiation would have been performed on this same day as well, although they would have been reserved for initiates working on passing higher levels.

Whether in real or imagined time, the initiatory practices of the Ophians were similar. Given that Celsus tells us that when the initiates ascended into the archontic realms, "some became lions, some bulls, and others serpents or eagles or bears or dogs," it appears that the Ophian astrological ceremonies were phased.⁹² The ascension to overcome Ialdabaoth in Aquarius, for instance, likely occurred on a separate occasion from the ascension to conquer Ailoeus in Gemini. In the former case, the initiate would return a lion, while in the latter, a dog. The Ophian-Christians were successively traveling through each house when the ruler was believed to be present, to conquer the ruler and make passage through the heavens safe. They did this so that when their souls returned to the planetary spheres after their deaths, the initiated would ascend without resistance. When they came to the eighth sphere of the Zodiac, they would move with no trouble through the nocturnal houses where they would be released from reincarnation at the Cancer gate.

An Ophian-Christian Liturgical Handbook

When seeking the user environment for the diagram, all vectors converge in the web on a single site: a liturgical handbook. Both Celsus and Origen

⁸⁸ *Pistis Sophia* 1.2–3; Schmidt-MacDermot 1978, 4–6.

⁸⁹ *Pistis Sophia* 1.11; Schmidt-MacDermot 1978, 20–21.

⁹⁰ *Pistis Sophia* 1.12–15; Schmidt-MacDermot 1978, 21–25.

⁹¹ *Pistis Sophia* 2.98; Schmidt-MacDermot 1978, 239–241.

⁹² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.33; Borret 1969a, 260.

are in agreement on this, and the record of Celsus' exchange with the prime users confirms this environment. The diagram was a page in a handbook filled with all forms of Ophian-Christian rituals and liturgies. We have copies of similar handbooks, such as the two *Books of Jeu* in the Bruce Codex. The pages were covered with illustrations, diagrams, incantations, prayers, creedal statements and ritual instructions.

The Ophian-Christian diagram was used during an initiation ritual called The Seal, when a white unguent was smeared on the body of the initiate by the priest or "Father" of the community. The unguent was understood to originate from the "tree of life" and effect the ἀνάστασιν σαρκός when the soul was released from the body and journeyed through the celestial spheres. It is apparent from their ritual, that the Ophian-Christians were reading the genitive in the phrase *resurrection of the flesh* as an ablative, *resurrection from the flesh*. This appears to have been a major point of contention between the Ophian-Christians and other Christians. In fact, Irenaeus reports the Ophian-Christian complaint that even Jesus' disciples misunderstood what Paul understood, that flesh and blood will not attain to the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not rise in a mundane body. Rather he rose *from* the dead, the Ophian-Christians argued according to Irenaeus' testimony.⁹³

The goal of The Seal ceremony was to simulate the death journey—to learn the secret passage of the soul through the archontic realms so that, at death, the soul would be able to avoid the "narrow descent" of reincarnation, and the freed spirit could escape upwards from the cosmos. By superimposing my more global knowledge of the ancient world, I was able to establish that the social matrix of the diagram was not Neo-Pythagorean, but Gnostic Christian. I was able to corroborate, however, a Neo-Pythagorean cognitive domain fit for the diagram, which conceptualized the ascent of the soul as a journey through particular gates along a route in the nocturnal Zodiac houses ruled by certain planetary rulers, a route also known and perhaps invented by Numenius.

The prayers in the handbook coordinate with this particular ascent scheme. Their recitation, along with the display of certain images or seals and the invocation of the secret name of each Archon, opened the locked archontic gates to the passage of the soul. In addition to revealing the secret name of power for each Archon, some of the prayers mention certain items and seals that the initiate displays at each of the archontic gates. The

display of these ritual objects was understood to have a powerful effect, overcoming the Archon and opening the gates so that the soul could pass through them.

In the first prayer, as the initiate approaches the gate, the initiate acknowledges that "the Spirit of Pronoia and Sophia" are Ialdabaoth's guardians or wardens, restraining Ialdabaoth from harming the pure initiate. The second prayer mentions bearing a seal imprinted with the "symbol of life." According to the third prayer, sporting a beard is a symbol that overpowers the Archon. The fourth prayer references showing an image of the "Pentad," a symbol so mighty that it destroys the Archon. In the fifth prayer, it is the vision of the purified initiate him/herself that overwhelms the Archon. The initiate reveals the "symbol of the Mother" to the Archon, according to the sixth prayer. The seventh prayer describes a "symbol of the tree of life" that destroys the power of Horaeus, the Archon who sits atop the flaming wall.

Can we know any more about these ritual objects? Previous scholars have understood the illustrations on the diagram above the heavens to refer to supracelestial realms. But this is an unconvincing reconstruction, especially when one realizes that the concepts inscribed on these illustrations correspond directly with the concepts mentioned in the prayers.

So what was drawn above the cosmic map? Two of the seals to be used in the ceremony. One of the seals described by Origen was shown to Ialdabaoth twice, once at the gate of Capricorn and once at the gate of Aquarius. As the prayers, this sign contained references to the Father, the Son, Pronoia, Sophia and the sign of Life. The following sketch is my attempt to reproduce Origen's description of this seal and its circles.

The "Gates of Paradise" seal with the trees of life and knowledge and the flaming perimeter matches the final prayer with its description of Horaeus mounted atop the wall of fire. It was the seal the initiate was supposed to display at Horaeus' Moon gate, which was located immediately above the flaming firmament barrier at the top of the sublunar realm. From Origen's description, I offer the following sketch as a mock-up.

A description of the seal of the Pentad was not recorded by Celsus or Origen, perhaps because it appeared on a separate page of the handbook. The reference to the bearded initiate is curious. Since growing a beard is associated with the transition into adulthood, it may be that we have a reference to the achievement of spiritual adulthood, and with it, a strength and maturity that could overcome the Archon. The same idea seems to be behind the fifth prayer where the presentation of the purified initiate him/herself as a vision is what strikes down the Archon.

⁹³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.13.

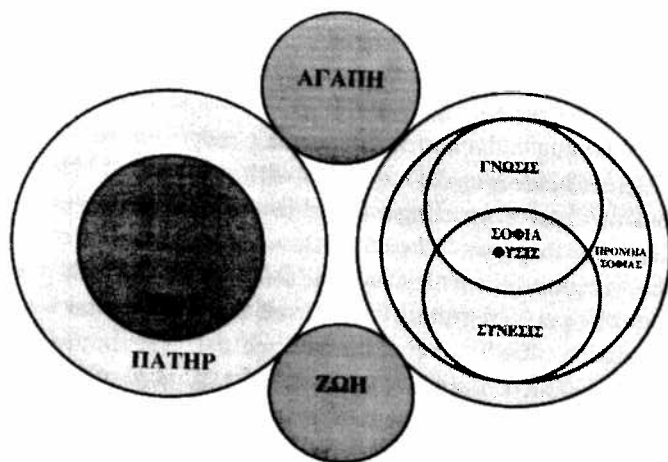


Figure 6. The seal for Ialdabaoth. Illustration by April D. DeConick



Figure 7. Gates of Paradise seal. Illustration by April D. DeConick

What Did the Prime Users Think about the Diagram?

Even though both Celsus and Origen have copies of the diagram and have opinions about the diagram, it is only Celsus who had direct contact with some of the prime users of the diagram. So I understand Celsus' testimony to be invaluable in my attempt to understand the people who were among the prime users of the diagram. First, the prime users of the diagram appear to have understood themselves to be Christians. Second, Celsus identifies the people he talked with as the Elders of a Christian congregation. He says that he was shown certain Christian books used by the Elders. The books contained the names of demons and other formulas used in their rituals of purification, redemption, healing, and demon appropriation. By reading the books and talking to the Elders, he was able to discern that these Christians in the performance of their rituals used vestments, numerology, stones, plants, roots and "all kinds of things."

The diagram appears to have been among the "all kinds of things" they used in their rituals. As a ritual object, it was a material anchor for the community, representing a compression of their conceptual worldview in the physical form of an illustration.⁹⁴ Within the performance of the ritual when the illustration was referenced, the diagram's condensed meaning and its connection with knowledge that is beyond human scale was roused. In this way, the map moored the entirety of the community's knowledge of their myth and this entirety was conjured when the diagram was in ritual use. The diagram was created as an external memory resource that prompted specific constructions of meaning and served as a reference point for a very specific worldview.

Since Celsus was told that a certain area on the diagram represented Gehenna or Tartarus, and he mentions that an illustration of the Gates of Paradise was drawn above the heavens, it is reasonable to conclude that the diagram was some type of cosmic map labeled with the names of the archons who were believed to have ruled each of the spheres. Celsus was told by the ritual performer himself, whom the community called the "Father," that the diagram was used in an unction ceremony called The Seal, which effected the separation of the soul from the material body. Some scholars have wanted to read this as a reference to death, although death is not mentioned in the passage, only the separation of the soul from the body.

⁹⁴ Fauconnier-Turner 2002; Hutchins 2005, 1555–1577.

Such a separation would have been an ecstatic experience in the initiatory context described by both Celsus and Origen.

Further, the Christian Elders explained their theology to him, a theology where the Jewish God is cursed even though the Jewish scriptures are being used and reinterpreted, Jesus' Father is a separate God of Love, and the serpent in Eden is applauded for giving knowledge to the first human beings. The Christians Celsus talked to revealed to him the names of the seven archons on the diagram and identified them with their animal forms. They also told him that when they themselves go up into the realms of these archons, they assume their animal forms.

Celsus also provides us with a list of phrases that these Christians repeated. Celsus views them as the repetition of one nonsensical thing after another. In the sequence of Celsus' book, however, these phrases come after Celsus' mention of the ceremony of The Seal and his commentary on it. Were these also part of the anointing ritual associated with the diagram? From his list of phrases, we can see that the priests repeated certain sayings of the prophets while referring to the circles on the diagram. So it is likely that the phrases Celsus has preserved were some of the liturgical words that the community used during the ceremony of the Seal.

During this ceremony with the diagram in hand, the priests recounted the story of the unfolding of the Church and the Jewish community on earth, the outflowing of a Power from Prunikos, the creation of the living soul, and the institution of a sacrificial system that sustained life under the Jewish god of creation. Their liturgy hinged on their declaration that death will only cease when the sin of the world perishes, an apparent reference to the need for the cessation of the sacrificial worship of the Jewish God. The words Celsus recalls end with a reminder of what faces the soul at death. The sinful soul faces the narrow road of descent and rebirth and death again. The purified soul faces ascent through the gates that open. Celsus connects these liturgical words to the community's writings about the tree of life and the resurrection from the flesh by means of the tree. It appears that these Christians understood that they would be resurrected from the flesh when the white unguent that came from the tree of life was smeared on them during The Seal ceremony.

How did Celsus get all this information? He reports that he talked directly with the Elders and the priests of the community who were using the diagram. They showed him their books long enough for him to read portions of them. They explained their books and rituals to him, including walking him through the diagram and explaining it to him in the context of the ritual of The Seal, which Celsus appears to have witnessed. Celsus understands the

information he learns to represent Christian initiation, a mystery that effects the resurrection from the flesh when the soul journeys through the planets.

That Celsus was directly informed by the Elders and priests of the Ophian-Christian community about esoteric knowledge reserved for initiates is curious. Might it suggest that Celsus posed as a Christian initiate at one time, whether his intent was sincere or not? Or was the claim to esoteric knowledge and rites perhaps just that, a claim that held very little truth. Were the Ophian-Christians inviting outsiders to witness their ceremonies and learn about their ways in order to entice them to be initiated into their company?

Compression of Meaning

The Ophian-Christian diagram has long been misunderstood, not only because information about it is embedded in a complex narrative that requires systematic scrutiny, but also because the diagram itself is a compression of meaning. The architect of the diagram blended and compressed elements from the large web of knowledge known to him, so that this vast web of information that exists beyond the human scale was made humanly manageable and relevant to the prime users. This compression resulted in emergent ideas quite distinctive to the Ophian-Christians, ideas not so easy to organize in a linear model of origin, causation and consequence.

These distinctive features have been a challenge—one might even say, an impediment—to explain, and so previous scholarship has resorted to adjusting the information provided to us by Origen, assuming that Origen was wrong or copied the material in reverse order. Scholars have felt warranted to add the name Adonaios back into the prayer list, to rearrange the order of the archons and prayers, and to add information from other Gnostic sources that have nothing whatsoever to do with the diagram. And so previous scholarship, by altering Origen's testimony, has forced the information into modern historical paradigms, rather than decompressing the information and emergent blends back into their source domains.

When we decompress the information back into their source domains, we are faced with a group of mid-second century self-identified Christians who have a priesthood in place, a complex initiatory ritual called The Seal which effected *the resurrection from the flesh*, and a liturgical book that, among other things, includes a cosmic map, illustrations of seals, and prayer formulas used in their mystery initiations.

They are Christians who still give credence to parts of the Jewish scripture, although they understand the Jewish God to be a separate god from

Jesus' loving Father. The Jewish God is portrayed by these Christians as "cursed" because he cursed the serpent that gave Adam and Eve knowledge of good and evil. This god and his minions are associated with the planets. In order for the soul to journey out of this cosmos and be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, which the planets control, the archons must be ritually conquered at their zodiacal gates.

These Christians offer their initiates precise information about the path of ascent through these gates, following a Neo-Pythagorean conceptual pattern made popular by Numenius. The path began at the gate of Capricorn, and then proceeded through Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, with Cancer's gate as the exit. These gates are ruled by specific planets, which these Christians associated with a distinctive pattern of names: Saturn-Ialdabaoth (rules Zodiacal gates of Capricorn and Aquarius); Jupiter-Iao (rules Pisces' gate); Mars-Sabaoth (rules Aries' gate); Venus-Astaphaeus (rules Taurus' gate); Mercury-Ailoeus (rules Gemini's gate); Moon-Horaeus (rules Cancer's gate). Adoniaos is the archon of the Sun and he rules Leo's gate. But this archon is only encountered in the diurnal descent pattern, when the soul falls down through the Zodiacal gates and is embodied again. Thus there is no ascent prayer registered for him in the liturgy of The Seal.

In the end, we discover that Celsus and Origen were both correct. Celsus knew that the diagram was part of an initiatory ritual, a Christian mystery whose performance effected the release and ascent of the soul through a celestial route. In this way, he understood rightly that these Christian initiation practices were distinctive although comparable to those performed in the cult of Mithras. As for Origen, he was no sloppy copyist, nor did he invert the order of the prayers. In fact, his insistence that this ritual was an ascent ritual is confirmed. Indeed, the Ophian-Christian diagram mapped a very precise road for the soul to ascend to Jesus' Father through the nocturnal houses of the Zodiac which were ruled by the planets.

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ECSTATIC RELIGION IN THE ROMAN CULT OF MITHRAS

Roger Beck

Gnosticism and Mithraism—to use the vexed modern terms merely to *indicate* the two ancient systems without in any way *defining* them—share certain features. One of these was a penchant for prescribing, claiming, and undergoing exotic, other-worldly religious adventures. A paper on ecstatic religion in the Mithras cult seemed the most suitable tribute I could offer as a Mithraic scholar to Birger Pearson, one of the pre-eminent Gnostic scholars of our times.¹

In 2009 my Toronto colleague Colleen Shantz published a groundbreaking book entitled *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought*. Shantz, as far as I know, is the first to apply the approach and methods of neurobiology systematically to a historical subject. Her particular concern is to give an account of the altered states of consciousness experienced by Paul and documented, primarily, in his own letters. Shantz's project, I emphasize, is descriptive (“an account of”) rather than explanatory (“accounting for”), certainly not explanatory in a reductionist sense.

By the technical term “altered state of consciousness” (“ASC” for short) Shantz intends the state of mind and body undergone by Paul in, for example, the experience which he reports in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4. Although Paul employs third-person language to describe this experience, it is generally understood as Paul's own. In other words, the narrative is autobiographical. Paul writes:

I know a Christian man who fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of it, I do not know—God knows) was caught up as far as the third heaven.

¹ I first presented this paper as a public lecture at Rice University on November 4, 2011 as a part of the Andrew W. Mellon Graduate Research Seminar “Mapping Death”. The exchange of ideas and the hospitality at Rice were among the most memorable and pleasant I have experienced over a by now very long career! If the paper still seems more like an orally delivered paper rather than a “learned article”, notably in a shortage of footnotes and references, well, in context that is no bad thing! A few references by way of example seemed preferable to detailed citations of “the scholarship”. In matters pertaining to the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), as also in matters pertaining to Paul of Tarsus, Shantz 2009 should be the first port of call; for the application of CSR to the Mysteries of Mithras: Beck 2006, Martin 2012, Martin forthcoming; on the mystery cults in general: Burkert 1987, Bowden 2010.