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G.R.S. Mead

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### Pistis Sophia

George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933) was for twenty-five years a prominent member of the Theosophical Society and worked closely with its founder, Helena Blavatsky. He was fascinated both by eastern religions and by western esotericism, including gnosticism, and published widely in these areas. *Pistis Sophia*, an important, probably second-century, text preserved in a Coptic manuscript, presents complex gnostic teachings in ‘gospel’ format, as having been addressed by Jesus Christ to his disciples after the resurrection. This translation, based on a Latin version published in 1851, appeared in 1896 and was the first English version of a major gnostic work. The book also includes passages from the *Books of the Saviour* found in the same manuscript. Mead’s introduction discusses the origin of the texts and highlights their difficulty. It also describes the upsurge of scholarly interest in Gnosticism in the mid-nineteenth century and the mysterious history of the manuscript itself.

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# PISTIS SOPHIA

A GNOSTIC GOSPEL (WITH EXTRACTS FROM  
THE BOOKS OF THE SAVIOUR APPENDED)  
ORIGINALLY TRANSLATED FROM GREEK INTO  
COPTIC AND NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME  
ENGLISHED FROM SCHWARTZE'S LATIN VER-  
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It is with somewhat of the feelings of one setting forth on a forlorn hope that the writer ventures to plunge into the chaos of syncretism generally classified under the vague term Gnosticism. Indeed no subject connected with the history of religion is fraught with greater difficulty, as may be seen from the comparative paucity of general works on Gnosticism from the pens of European scholars. In fact the English reader, outside of a few translations, must content himself with Burton's Bampton Lectures, Mansel's Gnostic Heresies, Norton's History of the Gnostics, King's Gnostics and their Remains, and an article by Salmon.

The documents and general literature of Gnosticism.

Not only did the persecution of the early Gnostics cause the loss of nearly all their documents, but also some of the most important writings of the Fathers, which might have thrown more light on the subject, have disappeared ; among these may be mentioned the Syntagma of Justin, and the Syntagma of Hippolytus.

Our chief authorities among the Fathers are Justin Martyr, Irenæus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, Philaster, Epiphanius, Jerome and Theodoret. But as all, with the solitary exception of Hippolytus, quote the Gnostic documents in the briefest possible manner, and devote almost all their space to the refutation of heretical opinions, it is exceedingly difficult to make out from such controversial writings what the real views of the various Gnostic schools were ; and this in spite of the immense labour and acumen which have been brought to the task

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by such men as Massuet, Beausobre and Mosheim in the last century, and in the present by Neander, Matter, Baur, Möller, Lipsius and others who will be mentioned later.

(The general literature of the subject consists of the Church Histories of Neander, Baur and Schaff; Neander: Genet. Entw. d. Gnost., Tüb., 1831; Burton: Bampton Lectures on Heresies of the Apost. Age, Oxf., 1830; Möhler: Ursprung d. Gnost., Tüb., 1831; Baur: D. christl. Gnosis, Tüb., 1835; Norton: Hist. of the Gnostics, Bost., 1845; Möller: Gesch. d. Kosmologie, Halle, 1860; Lipsius: D. Gnosticismus, Leip., 1860; Harnack: Zur Quellencritik d. Gesch. d. Gnost., Leip., 1873; Mansel: Gnostic Heresies, Lond., 1875.)

In fact, research into this obscure subject has given rise to one of the most brilliant feats of scholarship on record. This was achieved by R. A. Lipsius, the learned professor of divinity in the university of Jena, in his *Quellencritik des Epiphanius* (1865). From the accounts of Epiphanius and Philaster he reconstructs to some extent the lost *Syntagma* of Hippolytus, of which a description is given by Photius. This treatise was founded on certain discourses of Irenæus. By comparing Philaster, Epiphanius, and the Pseudo-Tertullian, he recovers Hippolytus; and by comparing his restored Hippolytus with Irenæus he infers a common authority, probably the lost *Syntagma* of Justin, or, as I ventured to suggest in my essay on Simon Magus (1892; p. 41), the work from which Justin obtained his information.

This brilliant attempt was owing to the revival of interest in Gnostic studies aroused by a lucky find. In 1842 Minoides Mynas, a learned Greek, sent on a literary mission by the French government, discovered what is said to be a fourteenth century MS. in one of the monasteries on Mount Athos. This purported to be a Refutation of all Heresies in ten books, the first three and a half of which were unfortunately missing. Emmanuel Miller published the first edition of this literary treasure at Oxford in 1851,

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erroneously attributing it to Origen. Further research, however, demonstrated beyond a doubt that the author was Hippolytus Romanus, Bishop of Ostia, in the first quarter of the third century. (See Bunsen, Hippolytus and His Age, 1852; Döllinger, Hippolytus und Kallistus, 1853, of which there is an English translation by Plummer; and Wordsworth, St. Hippolytus and the Church of Rome, 1880, 2nd ed.) As this treatise, entitled *Philosophumena* or the Refutation of all Heresies, is by far the most important work on Gnosticism from the pen of any Church Father, owing to its lengthy quotations from original Gnostic documents, it may be useful to state here that in 1859 Duncker, after Schneidewin's death, edited and published his colleague's excellent text and moderate Latin translation at Göttingen; in 1860 Cruice published a less reliable text and Latin translation at Paris; and that the English reader will find a passable translation by J. H. Macmahon in the Ante-Nicene Christian Library entitled *The Writings of Hippolytus*, vol. i., 1868.

Curiously enough it was in the same year in which the text of the *Philosophumena* was published, 1851, that our present document, *Pistis Sophia*, was first brought into general notice.

Of Gnostic works that have come down to us, undoubtedly the most valuable is the Coptic codex, of which we are treating in the present work. In fact, the only other important relic of the Gnosis which is so far known to have withstood the ravages of time and escaped the destruction of Christian and Mohammedan vandalism, is the Coptic papyrus, known as the Codex Brucianus and preserved in the Bodleian at Oxford, to which reference will be made later on. In the same library there is also another Coptic MS., a small quarto of 236 pages, entitled *Treatise on the Mysteries of the Greek Letters*, to which an Arabic translation is appended. The author was a priest called Atasius, who, somewhat in the fashion of the Gnostic doctor Marcus, deduces from the form of the letters of the Greek alphabet

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and the meaning of their names, the development of the dogmas of creation, providence and redemption, as Dulaurier tells us (*op. inf. cit.*, p. 538). Dulaurier in 1847 promised to publish the text and a French translation of this work, but his labours have never seen the light.

To this may be added, as connected with the magical side of the subject, some Greek Papyri mostly in fragments. Two of the Leyden Papyri of the third century have recently been edited, translated, and commentated upon by A. Dieterich (*Abrahas : Studien zur Religionsgeschichte des Spättern Altertums ; Leipzig, 1891*); the London and Parisian Papyri, of the third or fourth century, have been edited by Wessely ; in 1852 C. W. Goodwin also did some good work on the subject (*Fragment of a Græco-Egyptian Work upon Magic from a Papyrus in the British Museum, Cambridge Antiquarian Society, Octavo Series, No. 2 ; Goodwin edited, translated and annotated this fragment*). Amélineau (*P. S., Intr. iv.*) says that Rossi (F.), the Egyptologist of Turin, has published a papyrus containing an invocation similar to those in the *Pistis Sophia*, but I have not been able to find this work. It is not in *I Papyri Copti del Museo Egizio di Torino* which Rossi transcribed and translated (Turin, 1887-1892).

There is also a short Hebrew treatise, *The Sword of Moses* (*Cod., Oxford, 1531, 6 ; Cod. Heb., Gaster, 178 ; see Gaster's text and translation, Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, 1896, i. and ii.*).

The above magical works, however, are more connected with the superstitions of sorcery than with magic proper, and when attached to Gnosticism characterise its degradation in the hands of the superstitious and ignorant.

We may also mention the *Codex Nazaræus*, although it is said at earliest to be post-Mohammedan, of which there are no less than four MS. copies, dated respectively 1560, 1632, 1688 and 1730, in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* alone. This *Codex* is the scripture of the so-called Sabæans, or Christians of St. John, or Mandaïtes, and is known as



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Sidra Adam or The Book of Adam. The text, in a strange Chaldæo-Syriac idiom, was first published at Lund (1815, 1816), by Matth. Norberg, the learned Swede, together with a vocabulary and a Latin translation, in four quarto volumes. There is also a French translation by F. Tempesini in Migne's *Dictionnaire des Apocryphes* (1856). Compare also the thesis, *Stellæ Nasaræorum Æones ex Sacro Gentis Codice*, by Olof Svanander, presumably a pupil of Norberg (Lund, 1811).

Finally we may mention the Æthiopic Enochian literature. In 1773 Bruce brought back from Abyssinia three copies of the Æthiopic version of The Book of Enoch. Archbishop Laurence issued a translation in 1821 (2nd ed., 1833; 3rd, 1838), under the title *The Book of Enoch*. Hoffman published a German translation, *Das Buch Henoch* (Jena, 1838), Gfrörer a Latin version of no value (Stuttgart, 1840); Dillmann a critical text and also a German version (Leipzig, 1851; 2nd ed., 1853); Migne's *Dictionnaire des Apocryphes* (1856) contains an anonymous French translation; there is also an anonymous reprint of Laurence's translation, with a controversial introduction (London, 1883); and finally Charles recently (1893) published an English translation from Dillmann's text. This year Charles has also published *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch* (Oxford), a translation from Slavonic, which presents us with a new tradition entirely, namely, the Slavonic Enoch, from a Greek original which he places from B.C. 30 to A.D. 70, the Greek having in its turn a Hebrew background of a still earlier date. In an Appendix is a translation from the Slavonic of a fragment of Melchisedecian literature. For more than 1200 years this version of Enoch has been unknown save in Russia, and in Western Europe was not known to exist even in Russia till 1892.

Outside of apocryphal scriptures and the world-bibles, these are all the documents connected directly or indirectly with the Gnosis, which, to my knowledge, we possess; and, in spite of the good work that has been done since 1850,

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the chaos of Gnosticism still remains to a large extent intractable, refusing to submit to the ordering of even the most praiseworthy and painstaking industry.

Nor is the reason of this ill-success mostly due to the paucity of material, but rather to the intrinsic difficulty of the subject itself, which is not only replete with the most involved mysticism, but also bound up with magic and mystery and occasionally sorcery of every kind. It is, therefore, not a matter of great surprise, when we remember the absolute disbelief of scholarship in magic of any kind, and the distaste of the present age for everything connected with mysticism, to find that no single writer on the subject, except perhaps King in a very feeble fashion, has really grappled with the problem. The point of view of the most liberal-minded scholars with regard to this tabooed subject may be seen from the remarks of Dr. Gaster, who would have magic treated after the fashion of folklore. The translator of *The Sword of Moses* in the second paragraph of his introduction (*loc. sup. cit.*) writes: "It is remarkable that we do not possess a good work, or exhaustive study, on the history and development of magic. It is true that we find allusions to it, and sometimes special chapters devoted to the charms and incantations and other superstitious customs prevailing among various nations in books dealing with such nations. But a comprehensive study of magic is still a pious (or impious) wish." And, even were such a task attempted by some venturesome scholar, the result, we may venture to suggest, would at best be merely a guess-work compilation, and of no real value, unless the compiler in addition to his scholarship had not only a belief in but also a knowledge of the art.

To treat of Gnosticism, then, in a really comprehensible manner, requires not only a writer who at least believes in the possibilities of magic, but also a mystic or at least one who is in sympathy with mysticism—a person difficult to find nowadays, when the very names of magic and mysticism evoke nothing but a smile of contempt and

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a frown of disapproval from the world of science and letters.

The present Introduction, however, is only concerned with the purely historical and critical side of the subject, and even this is restricted to the consideration of one document.

Though it would be highly presumptuous to endeavour to define Gnosticism without a previous analysis and classification of the various schools, sects and offshoots which have been grouped under this vague heading, we may nevertheless venture to suggest the probable point of view which led the best of the Gnostic doctors, pre-eminently Valentinus, to compile their various treatises. Let us then consider the movement about the year 150 A.D. By that time the original Logia or the Urevangelium of Christianity had disappeared, and the Synoptic Gospels were all set in the framework of the traditional life of the great Master of the Faith. The popular tidal-wave of the new religion had come exclusively from the ocean of Jewish tradition, and was engulfing a more universal view of Christianity in the same flood of intolerance and exclusiveness which had characterised the Hebrew nation throughout the whole of its previous history.

This startling phenomenon was now attracting the attention of minds which were not only skilled in the philosophy of the schools, but also imbued with the eclectic spirit of a universal theosophy and a knowledge of the inner doctrines of the ancient religions. Such men thought that they saw in the Christian Gospel a similarity of doctrine and a universalism which was consanguineous with these inner teachings of the ancient faiths, and set to work to endeavour to check the exclusive and narrowing tendencies which they saw so rapidly developing among the less instructed, who made faith superior to knowledge, even to such an extent as to openly condemn every other form of religion and scoff at all philosophy and education.

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It is true that about this time such men arose as Clement of Alexandria and Origen who voiced much more liberal views and laid the foundations of Christian theology, but they were exceptions to the rule.

The Gnostic doctors could not believe that the Jews were the only nation in the past to whom God had revealed himself, and that the scriptures of the nations were to be cast on the dustheap of falsehood and error. And yet they saw that the old order of things had received a rude shock, and that the fierce faith which had been aroused among the people in the personality of Jesus, and the social revolution which was rushing along with leaps and bounds under their very eyes, could never be dammed back again. All they could hope to do was to turn the energy generated into a more universal channel. Accordingly they used the traditional story of Jesus which had roused such mighty enthusiasm, as the framework into which they wove the "wisdom" of the great religions. Believing, as they did, that truth was one, and at no time a respecter of persons or nations; that all the nations had received of that truth in proportion to their needs and capacities, they wove these ideas into the Christian tradition, and compiled gospels and apocalypses of that veiled and mysterious wisdom which had been guarded so carefully in the temples throughout the ages, and into which they believed Jesus had been initiated and was in his turn an initiator. Nor did they so much invent these things out of their own heads as it would appear, but rather compiled them from existing scriptures, many of which have since disappeared. They drew from the wisdom of Egypt, Chaldæa, Babylonia, Assyria, Phœnicia, Æthiopia, the books of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, of the Magi and Zoroaster; and even perhaps in some indirect way from those of the Brâhmans. Their source of information was for the most part the Orient.

Believing as they did, that the orthodox life of Jesus was legendary and allegorical, and finding many other legends current which were not included in the Synoptic account;

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devoted to the mystic life, and making light of the historical side of religion, with faith alone in the watchword "now and within," it is evident that their views met with little favour among the orthodox who clung above all things to what they held to be the greatest fact of all history. The ancient wisdom, however, proved far too difficult for popular comprehension, and being also misunderstood even by the followers of the great doctors themselves in many cases, often degenerated into superstition and the wildest of speculations.

But, as we are not attempting to trace the evolution of the movement, but simply presenting one of the better sides of the endeavour, we will proceed to a consideration of the document we are especially interested in, at the same time reminding the reader that in this Introduction only a brief outline of the MS. will be attempted, and all further considerations will be postponed for a further Commentary which the writer has the intention of undertaking.

The only MS. of the Pistis Sophia known to exist was bought by the British Museum from the heirs of Dr. Askew at the end of the last century, and is now catalogued as MS. Add. 5114. The title on the back of the binding is *Piste Sophia Coptice*, and below is printed *Mus. Brit. Jure Emptionis*. On the top of the first page of the MS. is the signature A. Askew, M.D. On the first page of the binding is the following note, probably in Woide's hand: "Codex dialecti Superioris Ægypti, quam Sahidicam seu Thebaidicam vocant, cujus titulus exstat pagina 115: Pmeh snaou ñtomos ñtpiste Sophia—Tomos secundus fidelis Sapientiæ—Deest pagina 337-344."

The title *Piste Sophia* is incorrect; nowhere is this form found in the book, and the suggested emendation of Dulaurier and Renan from *Pistis Sophia* to *Piste Sophia* "*La fidèle Sagesse*," has received no support from other scholars.

Where Askew found it or bought it, I cannot discover. It is not mentioned in his biography, and the reference

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given by Köstlin (v. i.) is unverifiable. When the Museum bought it is not stated. It was evidently before the great sale of the Askew library which lasted twenty days in 1785, for the Pistis Sophia is not mentioned in the catalogue (*Bibliotheca Askeviana Manuscripta*, etc., 1785; v. Askew, A., Cat. B.M.). The MS. is written on vellum in Greek uncial letters, and is in the Upper Egyptian dialect, called Thebaidic or Sahidic. It consists of 346 quarto pages written in double column, and for the most part is in an excellent state of preservation; several pages, however, are badly defaced, and a number faint. Perhaps the most competent expert who has yet given a decided opinion as to its date is Woide, whose knowledge of such matters was very extensive, and cannot be easily surpassed. It was by Woide that the New Testament, according to the text of the famous Codex Alexandrinus, was edited, in uncial types cast to imitate those of the MS., in 1786. In an Appendix to this great undertaking, in 1799, he added certain fragments of the New Testament in the Thebaico-Coptic dialect, together with a dissertation on the Coptic version of the New Testament. The date of the Codex Alexandrinus is pretty generally assigned to the fifth century, and with the exception of the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus, which are sometimes assigned to the fourth century, is the oldest extant MS. of the New Testament. This being the case, it is of interest to read Woide's description and opinion of the MS. of Pistis Sophia, which was lent to this ripe scholar by Dr. Askew and his heirs long enough for him to copy it out from the first word to the last. Woide was, therefore, eminently fitted in every way to form an opinion; in fact, no one of equal fitness seems to have appeared in the field since his time. In Cramer's *Beyträge* (op. inf. cit., pp. 82 sq.), Woide wrote as follows in 1778: "It [P. S.] is a very old MS. in 4to on parchment in Greek uncial characters, which are *not so round* as those in the Alexandrine MS. in London, and in the Claromontain MS. in Paris [Codex Regius Parisiensis, also an Alexandrine text]."