

Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia

from the Librarian-General's desk

Recommended Reading List No.4:

Gnosticism, NeoPlatonism and The Mysteries

As with the earlier Reading recommendations, the purpose of this list is to provide a basic guide for fratres wishing to study the subjects - whether from an historical or Philosophical point of view. Many of the books mentioned are to be found in the High Council Library [see Ordinance VI para5 for rules re borrowing of these books]. It should be noted that the choice of books on this list, and all comments upon them, reflect the personal opinions of the Librarian-General and do not necessarily reflect those of other members of High Council.

Classical Paganism (General)

(a) Texts

LUCK, George Arcana Mundi. Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds (Wellingborough, 1987)

A well annotated collection of ancient texts in translation.

(b) Studies

FERGUSON, B. Religions of the Roman Empire (1982)

GRAVES, Robert Greek Myths (1958)

A carefully annotated presentation of Greek mythology which includes all the tales of gods and heroes. On this level it is invaluable; however Graves's interpretation of the myths tend to be highly idiosyncratic and should be treated with a degree of caution.

(b) Studies

CUMONT, F. The Mysteries of Mithra (Chicago, 1903)
Reprint currently available.

HINNELLS, J. (Ed.) Mithraic Studies (Manchester,
1975) 2 vols.
Thirty papers from the Proceedings of the First
International Congress of Mithraic Studies.

LEGGE, F. Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity
Being studies in religious history from 330 BC to 330
AD (Cambridge, 1915) 2 vols. Later reprints exist.
A pioneering study which is still of great value.

VERMASEREN, M.J. Mithras, the Secret God (1963)
A standard work.

VERSLUIS, A. The Egyptian Mysteries (1988)
An examination of the Egyptian Mystery tradition in
the light of the continuing Tradition.

WITT, F. Isis in the Greco-Roman World (1971)

ZAEHNER, R.C. The Dawn and Twilight of
Zoroastrianism (1961).
A comprehensive work with an excellent analytical
bibliography. Mithraism, which developed from the
Zoroastrian religion, is well covered.

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The following work may profitably be avoided:

WYNE-TYSON, E. Mithras, the Fellow in the Cap
(1972) Second edition.

Although the book may appeal to latter-day hermetic-
ists by reason of its sympathy with esoteric ideas, it
is opinionated, meandering and virulently and uncritic-
ally hostile to Christian orthodoxy.

Alternatives to Orthodoxy: the formation of the Tradition in the early Christian World.

Gnosticism and the Apocryphal Gospels

(a) Texts

APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS: JAMES, M.R. The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford, 1924) In print.

A convenient translation of most of the apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Apocalypses. Whilst superseded as regards early Christian material, it remains of value for its translations of medieval texts.

APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS: HENNECKE, E. New Testament Apocrypha Edited by W.Schneemelchar. English translation edited by R.McL. Wilson (1963 - 1965) 2 vols

It should here be pointed out that one commonly met with translation - William Hooper's Apocryphal New Testament (1820 and many reprints) - is utterly worthless from any academic viewpoint, but it undoubtedly influenced the more uncritical of nineteenth century hermeticists.

FOERSTER, W. Gnosis. A selection of Gnostic Texts. English translation edited by R.McL.Wilson (Oxford, 1972, 1974) 2 vols

An excellent handbook on Gnosticism. The two volumes contain translations of both patristic texts on Gnosticism and original Coptic and Mandaic sources, with concise introductions to each text.

LAYTON, B. The Gnostic Scriptures. A new translation with annotations and introductions (1987). A comprehensive collection covering both early and later Gnostic texts and associated material.

PISTIS SOPHIA: SCHMIDT, Carl (Ed.) Pistis Sophia. Translation & notes by Violet Macdermot (Leiden, 1978)

Schmidt established the textus receptus of this highly important Coptic Gnostic document in 1905. It is difficult to see how either the text or this outstanding English translation can be superseded.

PISTIS SOPHIA: MEAD, G.R.S.(trans.) Pistis Sophia, a Gnostic Miscellany: being for the most part extracts from the Books of the Saviour, to which are added excerpts from a cognate literature.

(1921) Revised edition.

The first English translation which is important because of its influence upon scholars and Gnostic enthusiasts during the first half of this century (The earlier edition of 1896 was not based, as was the revised edition, on Schmidt's text).

ROBINSON, James (Ed.) The Nag Hammadi Library in English (1977)

A complete English translation of the forty-five Gnostic codices (and others: it includes a fragment of Plato and several strictly Hermetic texts) discovered at Nag Hammadi on the Nile in 1945 - together with two related texts from the Berlin Codex. It gives a far more comprehensive view of Gnostic beliefs and attitudes than any earlier collection of texts could have done.

(b) Studies

JONAS, H. The Gnostic Religion The message of the Alien God and the beginnings of Christianity (Boston, 1963) 2nd edition.

A classic work of what may be termed the 'pre-Nag Hammadi' period.

KING, C.W. The Gnostics and their Remains, ancient and medieval. (1887)

2nd edition. A modern reprint exists.

The writer was an authority on ancient engraved gems, and the value of the work lies in its detailed discussion of Gnostic gems. The author's speculations on the perpetuation of Gnostic symbols among the Templars, Rosicrucians and Freemasons have no scholarly foundation, but they illustrate nicely the manner in which the Hermetic Tradition has been continually created and reinforced.

KRAUSE, M.; ROBINSON, J.; and WISSE, F. (Ed.)

Nag Hammadi Studies. (Leiden, 1971 - continuing).

The most important scholarly series of texts and studies relating to Gnosticism. It is also, alas, a very highly priced series.

MANSEL, H.L. The Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries. Edited by J.B.Lightfoot (1875)

A modern reprint exists.

A very dated work, but important as the principal source of information on the Gnostics available to those who were active in the 'Occult Revival' (most of whom did not read Latin or Greek and thus could not cope with the Church Fathers in the original).

MEAD, G.R.S. Fragments of a Faith Forgotten (1906) 2nd edition - later reprints exist.

A valuable, if somewhat dated, overview by a sympathetic scholar.

MEAD, G.R.S. The Gnostic John the Baptist. Selections from the Mandaean John-Book (1924)

The Mandaeans of southern Iraq are important as perpetuators of a debased form of Gnosticism down to the present day. Mead's work is one of the few in English that treats of them.

PAGELS, Elaine The Gnostic Gospels (New York, 1979)

An admirable introduction to the Nag Hammadi texts and to Gnosticism in general. Unlike many other commentators, the author offers her personal opinions on and interpretations of the value of Gnosticism today - and thus, all unknowingly, helps to perpetuate the Hermetic Tradition.

RUDOLPH, Kurt Gnosis, the Nature and History of an ancient Religion. Translated and edited by R.McL.Wilson (Edinburgh, 1983)

The best modern survey of the subject, well illustrated and with a very full bibliography.

YAMAUCHI, E. Pre-Christian Gnosticism. A survey of the proposed evidences. (1973)

A scholarly argument for Gnosticism having been

derived from Christianity rather than having been a formative influence upon it.

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Readers may well come across two other recent works which, for different reasons, are best left alone:

CHURTON, Tobias The Gnostics (1987) Designed to accompany a television series, this book fails to make its case for the continuation of Gnostic ideas down the centuries. It is not an implausible notion but the author is not its best advocate.

LACARRIERE, J. The Gnostics. Foreword by Laurence Durrell. (1977) The association of so distinguished an author with so worthless and irrational a book may lead to its being taken up by the undiscerning as of some value. For any rational understanding of Gnosticism it should be left on the critical dung-heap.

Neoplatonism and later Classical Paganism

(a) Texts

IAMBlichus On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians. Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor (1895).
2nd edition. Later reprints exist.

PHILOSTRATUS The Life of Apollonius of Tyana.
With an English translation by F.C. Conybeare (1912)
2 vols. Currently in print.

Apollonius has been taken as a model of Christ by Rationalists and Hermetic Traditionalists alike (despite the manifold chronological and typological differences) and a knowledge of the Life throws light on the religious attitudes inherent in the Hermetic Tradition.

PLOTINUS The Enneads. Translated by Stephen MacKenna. 3rd edition revised by B.S. Page (1962)

The standard modern translation, and a model of both clarity and elegance.

PYTHAGORAS: GUTHRIE, K.S. The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library. An Anthology of Ancient Writings which relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy. Introduced and edited by D.R.Fideler, with a Foreward by Joscelyn Godwin. (Grand Rapids, 1987)

The text includes not only the various Lives (by Iamblichus and others) but a wealth of extracts from Neoplatonist sources.

For minor Neoplatonist writings the translations of Thomas Taylor (listed in Thomas Taylor the Platonist) are a convenient source. Many of them are available as modern reprints from either the Philosophical Research Society of Los Angeles, or the Wizard's Bookshelf of Minneapolis. Other translations are to be found in G.R.S.Mead's Echoes from the Gnosis (1906-1908), an eleven volume series of Gnostic, Mithraic and Neoplatonic texts; these have been recently reprinted in a single volume.

(b) Studies

INGE, W.R. The Philosophy of Plotinus (1929) 3rd edition 2 vols.

The final version of Dean Inge's famous Gifford Lectures of 1917-18; it constitutes the most significant study of Plotinus to appear in English.

MEAD, G.R.S. Apollonius of Tyana, the Philosopher-Reformer of the First Century A.D. (1901)

Written in Mead's theosophical period and thus pre-eminently of a piece with Hermetic views on the subject.

WALLIS, R.T. Neoplatonism (1972)

A lucid account of the whole philosophical movement termed Neoplatonism.

WHITTAKER, T. The Neo-Platonists. A Study in the History of Hellenism. (Cambridge, 1928) 2nd edition.

A standard work in its day and the only general survey in English before the publication of R.T.Wallis's book.

Mani and the spread of Dualism

(a) Texts

EPHRAIM, S. Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan. Transcribed by C.W. Mitchell (1912 - 1921) 2 vols. A modern reprint exists.

The Syriac text and translation of the most important of the works attacking Manichaeism. It was through such texts, rather than those of the Manichees, that Manichaeism was known to follow of the Hermetic Tradition.

CONYBEARE, F.C. The Key of Truth. A Manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia. The Armenian text edited and translated with illustrative documents and introduction (Oxford, 1898)

Although hostile to Manichaeism, the Paulicans continued the unorthodox dualist tradition of Gnosticism. This is the only accessible translation of the text, but it has become a very rare book.

(b) Studies

BURKITT, F.C. The Religion of the Manichees (Cambridge, 1924)

An excellent introductory survey.

WIDENGREN, G. Mani and Manichaeism (1965)

Manichaeism viewed in a wider context than Burkitt's Christian setting.

The Society publishes a Series of Booklets reprinted from Papers given at Study Groups and Circles. Those available relating to the above themes are:

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| No.1 | PLOTINUS | by George Bonner |
| No.5 | PRE-CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM | by The Revd. F E Crate |
| No.7 | THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES | by F B Brook |
| No.10 | ZOROASTER | by Bernard H Springett |
| No.12 | MITHRAISM | by Lt.Col. Bruce Wilson |
| No.15 | THE GNOSTIC THREAD | by E Hugo Ball |