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THE NAMING OF THE NAASSENES: HIPPOLYTUS, REFUTATIO V.6–10 AS  
HIEROS LOGOS

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Were Gnostics in antiquity ever pagan? It has generally been assumed that they do not belong to the history of Classical religion, but some at least belong to the history of its explanation. I shall argue here that a text, which in its present form can be treated as the earliest extant document of Gnostic Christianity, began as an exposition of the Eleusinian mysteries. I shall not infer that the author was a pagan; since, indeed, the gnosis that he taught was not so much a revelation as an instrument for interpreting all previous revelations, I shall not attempt to show that he worshipped any gods at all.

As I shall observe below, the Papyrus of Derveni and the decipherment of Philodemus' library have added something to our knowledge of the ancient mysteries; how much the Coptic documents discovered at Nag Hammadi have contributed to Gnostic studies will always be a matter of controversy, since none of them professes to belong to any sect within Christianity or outside it. We can at least find the term "Gnostic" in Hippolytus, one of the earliest and soundest commentators on the Christian heresies of the second century<sup>1</sup>, who concludes his account of the Naassenes as follows:

Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν οἱ Ναασσηνοὶ ἐπιχειροῦσιν, ἑαυτοὺς γνωστικούς ὀνομάζοντες. ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ πολυκέφαλός ἐστιν ἡ πλάνη καὶ πολυσχιδῆς ἀληθῶς ὡς ἡ ἱστορουμένη ὕδρα, κατὰ μίαν ταύτης τὰς κεφαλὰς πατάξαντες διὰ τοῦ ἐλέγχου, τῇ τῆς ἀληθείας ῥάβδῳ χρησάμενοι, ἅπαν τὸ θηρίον ἀναιρήσομεν.

These, then, are the arguments of the Naassenes, though Gnostics is their own name for themselves. But since the error is truly many-headed and many-branched, like the legendary hydra, we, trampling on its heads one by one with our refutation, shall destroy the whole beast using the rod of truth (*Refutatio* V.11.1).

We are certainly familiar with pejorative applications of such names to deviant Christians who described themselves as Gnostics. One group whom Irenaeus mentions only as a variety of "Gnostic" was supposed in later times to be identical with those whom Origen mocks in his *Contra Celsum* as "the paltry sect of Ophites"<sup>2</sup>. The Ophites put the serpent at the centre of their mysteries and equated him with intellect, or nous. If we could prove that Naassenes were Ophites, we should be tempted to derive their name from nous, so making it a synonym for "Gnostic". It is, however, difficult to reconcile the cosmologies of the Naassenes and the Ophites, since, while the former do respect the serpent, it is only as a symbol of the original liquid essence which gives rise to matter and spirit, and they do not appear to credit him with any redemptive function; only among the Ophites and the groups that we call Sethian is he worshipped as the vilified yet benevolent antagonist of Jahweh<sup>3</sup>. There is no proof that the Naassenes conformed to the other teachings then called Gnostic by regarding the present world as the indiscretion

<sup>1</sup> My translations and references rely upon M. Marcovich (ed.) *Hippolytus: Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* (Berlin 1986). I do not know of any long discussion of the sources of Hippolytus since O. Staehlin, *Die gnostischen Quellen Hippolyts in seiner Hauptschrift gegen die Häretiker* (Texte und Untersuchungen VI.3: Leipzig 1890). The authorship of the *Refutatio* continues to be disputed: see most recently A. Brent, "Was Hippolytus a Schismatic?", *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995), 242–243, n. 51.

<sup>2</sup> See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I.30.5; Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.24ff. Having spoken of *Gnostici* at I.29.1, Irenaeus (characteristically) does not name this sect. Origen's Ophites make Leviathan a symbol for the physical world (VI.25); Origen himself attributes serpentine deception to them at VI.24, citing 2Tim 3.6–7.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Nag Hammadi Codices II.4.89ff (*Hypostasis of the Archons*); II.5.118ff. (*Origin of the World*); not, however, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III.2), which recounts the history of Seth and is referred to by the Naassene commentator at *Refutatio* V.7.9. On the Sethians see J. D. Turner, "Sethian Gnosticism: a Literary History", in C. Hedrick and R. W. Hodgson (eds.), *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass. 1986), 55–86. However, the relation between "Sethianism" and the texts referring to Seth remains debatable.

of an ignorant creator<sup>4</sup>. Though they would seem to have been the earliest Gnostics, they did not assert an absolute divorce between matter and spirit, but believed that each was one strain of a single “blessed substance”. The Old Testament, though not their only book, was used with reverence; they conceived the earthly demiurge as an aspect of his namesake in the heavens; they justified the lower world as a mirror of the higher one, designed for the cure of souls<sup>5</sup>.

We should therefore seek a meaning for the appellation Naassene that does not imply perverse objects of worship; and much might still appear to speak in favour of deriving the name from Nous. Hermes is the Demiurge of the Naassenes, and nous is the first creative principle in Hermetic literature; it is also the originating principle of the world in a Naassene hymn<sup>6</sup>. None the less, the few surviving texts afford no evidence that Nous and Naas were ever retrospectively conflated, and no student of the usual laws of change in Greek phonetics will suppose that either term became the other by spontaneous corruption. Moreover, it is evident from Hippolytus’ own report of them that Naassene is not a delusive sobriquet, but their own term for themselves, and one to which they had attached their own etymology:

Τιμῶσι δὲ οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸν νάαζ οὗτοι, Ναασσηνοὶ καλούμενοι. νάαζ δὲ ἔστιν ὁ ὄφις. ἀφ’ οὗ φασὶ πάντα εἶναι τοὺς ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν προσαγορευομένους ναοὺς, κακείνῳ μόνῳ τῷ νάαζ ἀνακεῖσθαι πᾶν ἱερὸν καὶ πᾶσαν τελετὴν καὶ πᾶν μυστήριον, καὶ καθόλου μὴ δύνασθαι τελετὴν εὐρεθῆναι ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν, ἐν ἧ νὰός οὐκ ἔστι καὶ ὁ νάαζ ἐν αὐτῷ, ἀφ’ οὗ ἔλαχε ναός καλεῖσθαι.

They honour none but Naas, being called the Naassenes; and Naas is the serpent. From him they say come all the so-called temples under heaven, and every shrine and every rite and every mystery pertains to this Naas alone; and in general no rite can be found under heaven in which there is no temple, and a serpent in it, from which it derived the name of ναός (*Refutatio* V.9.11–12).

Is there any merit in this hypothesis, which is at least their own? The converse is, if anything, more probable: there are in fact many cults without the serpent, as the commentator knew, since most of his argument proceeds without any reference to the beast. As he also knew, however, no religion lacks a place of worship; I shall argue here that the Naassenes initially derived their name from ναός, subsequently amending this to νάαζ as the memory of their origins receded and their commentaries began to ingest the sacred texts of Christians and Jews. The clue to their name, in my view, lies in the form of main text paraphrased by Hippolytus, which we style the Naassene Sermon. This, although its English title renders the German *Naassenerpredigt*, was evidently a member of the class which the Greeks themselves called “sacred tales”, or *hieroi logoi*<sup>7</sup>. All the most notable specimens of this invite comparison with the Sermon:

1. Philodemus reports that “Cleidemus says that Rhea is the Mother of the Gods, as some have proclaimed in the *Hieros Logos*”<sup>8</sup>. The same author preserves the statement of Chrysippus that “all things are aether, which is both father and son, and so there is no contradiction in Rhea’s being both mother and daughter of Zeus”. Obbink remarks that “the συνοικείωσις of Rhea as the mother of the

<sup>4</sup> This is the definition for Gnosticism suggested by the Porphyrian title of Plotinus, *Enneads* II.9, as well as by the tenor of Marcionite and Valentinian thought.

<sup>5</sup> See especially *Ref.* V.7.18, V.7.29–30.

<sup>6</sup> For the primacy of Nous in Hermetic literature see *Hermetica* I (*Poimandres*) 6,8,24 etc. *Ref.* V.7.32 may suggest that the title *Poimandres* had already been connected with Hermes by the second century; if the Naassenes were indeed named after the serpent it is remarkable that the mention of the caduceus contains no allusion to the serpents who adorned it. For mind as the originating principle see *Ref.* V.10.2.

<sup>7</sup> On this class of writings, see the recent studies of D. Obbink, “A quotation of the Derveni Papyrus in Philodemus’ *On Piety*”, *Cronache Ercolanensi* 24 (1994), 111–135; C. Riedweg, *Jüdisch-hellenistische Imitation eines orphischen Hieros Logos* (Classica Monacensia 7: Tübingen 1993).

<sup>8</sup> *PHerc.* 1428 fr. 3.23, trans. Obbink (n. 7), p. 116. For the following quotation see *PHerc.* 1428 col. 6.16ff. and Obbink, p. 113.

gods was a hallmark of the theology of late fifth-century Attic mysteries”<sup>9</sup>. The germ of the Naassene Sermon, as Wilamowitz and Reitzenstein observed, is a hymn to Attis<sup>10</sup>, on which the commentator hangs his texts of Scripture and his elucidation of the mysteries. The Phrygians are the oldest people, Attis the primal man; but, having been castrated by the Mother of the Gods, he enjoys the timeless self-sufficiency of his spirit which has freed itself from the play of sense and matter. It is also said, however, that he unites the male and female, becoming the inexhaustible progenitor of all things by virtue of having no fruit of his own<sup>11</sup>. The Naassenes, although they held no deity in such esteem as “Man and the Son of Man”, acknowledged only one originating substance, which must therefore have combined the same complementary relations that were credited to the aether by Chrysippus<sup>12</sup>. Rhea is found to testify to the infinite versatility of this substance, no doubt because her name was derived from the Greek verb ῥεῖν, “to flow”<sup>13</sup>.

2. Herodotus (*Histories* II.81) alludes to a *Hieros Logos* which forbids the wrapping of a corpse in wool. This ban, enforced in Egypt, he also finds in the Bacchic and Orphic mysteries, which he believes to have been imported from that country. The *Orphic Argonautica* (43) restores originality to its hero by declaring that it was he himself who wrote the *Hieros Logos* while in Egypt. The Naassene Sermon, reckoning the Egyptians second only to the Phrygians in antiquity, treats Osiris as a symbol for the water which gives rise to all existents, while the seven veils of Isis are equated with the planets who preside over the realm of generation<sup>14</sup>. Homer’s verses on the Egyptian Proteus are applied to the divine shepherd of Creation; Egypt in the Old Testament is construed as the realm of matter; and the commentator seems to applaud the myth which traces all material creatures to the mud of the river Nile<sup>15</sup>.

3. Orpheus, the mythical bard of Thrace, is the theologian to whom the *hieroi logoi* are most frequently ascribed. His *magnum opus*, according to the *Suda*, was a “*Hieros Logos* in twenty-four Rhapsodies”. The contents of this work, more often cited as “the Rhapsodic Theogony”, have been retrieved by Otto Kern and others from a multitude of witnesses<sup>16</sup>. The authors presented Orpheus as the literary ancestor of Hesiod, freely plundering the verses of the latter, and established the supremacy of Eleusis among Greek mysteries by making Dionysus a suppliant to Demeter<sup>17</sup>. While Attis and Osiris do not figure very frequently, Demeter is accorded a place at the head of every pantheon by receiving the title “Mother of the Gods”. Both the Derveni commentator and “the Orphic poems in Philochorus” treat her name as a synonym for Earth and Rhea, and the latter is recorded to have gathered the scattered limbs of Dionysus when he was murdered by his guardians<sup>18</sup>. The Naassene Sermon quotes an Orphic poem to describe the lesser mysteries of Persephone at Eleusis, but also speaks of “great and ineffable

<sup>9</sup> Obbink (n. 7), p. 131; his evidence begins at p. 123. The Greek term appears to signify here a philosophical interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, “Lesefrüchte”, *Hermes* 37 (1902) 328–331 = Kl. Schr. IV 164–167; R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres* (Leipzig 1904), pp. 81–102. Wilamowitz dates the hymn to the reign of Hadrian.

<sup>11</sup> *Ref.* V.7.15. Cf. Sallustius, *De Diis et Mundo* 4. On the masculofeminine character of God, Marcovich (n. 1) compares a fragment of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, cited in Clement, *Stromateis* III.92.2ff.

<sup>12</sup> See esp. *Ref.* V.7.17–19. The titles “Man and the Son of Man” (*Ref.* V.6.4–5) appear to have been taken from the *Gospel of the Egyptians*; for an analogue see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.30.1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ref.* V.7.16; on the etymology of Rhea see Chrysippus, *SVF* II.318 etc.; and cf. the Naassene etymology of Geryon at *Ref.* V.8.4.

<sup>14</sup> See *Ref.* V.7.22–24. My references are to consecutive passages. Cf. *Ref.* V.8.6 on water.

<sup>15</sup> See *Ref.* V.8.35 (Proteus); V.7.41 (Egypt); V.7.5 (Nile).

<sup>16</sup> See O. Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Berlin 1922), esp. pp. 140–248, though Riedweg (n. 7) would add much of the *Diathekai* on pp. 255–266. The notice in the *Suda* (Suidas) appears as Fr. 223 in Kern. For an erudite though speculative discussion of the early Orphic theogonies, see M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983).

<sup>17</sup> See J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge 1903), pp. 559–564.

<sup>18</sup> See *Pap. Derv.* 16.11–12; *PHerc.* 1428 fr. 3.13–17; Obbink (n. 7), pp. 123–124. Also Kern (n. 16), Fr. 132.

mysteries”, which surround the birth of Brimos (perhaps another name for Dionysus), and are made accessible by the wand of Hermes<sup>19</sup>. The introduction of Hermes, who was the mystagogue *par excellence* in Hellenistic Egypt, may add weight to the analogy between the myth of Isis and the Eleusinian legend, which is presupposed in the Sermon and endorsed by recent scholarship on the fifth Homeric Hymn<sup>20</sup>.

The Naassenes were therefore fully entitled to believe that the Egyptian, Dionysiac and Eleusinian mysteries all fell under the hegemony of the “Mother of the Gods”. The fact that the sermon is built around a hymn to Attis is no proof that the author was primarily an exponent of the Phrygian cult; the antiquity of that nation prompted Apuleius to place them at the head of a catalogue of names for Isis, though he looked for her in Egypt and despised the Phrygian devotees who preyed on oriental superstitions<sup>21</sup>. There was little in the cults of either Attis or Osiris to give rise to a charge of worshipping the serpent<sup>22</sup>; but the presence of such creatures in the Eleusinian mysteries was notorious<sup>23</sup>:

Κατάβαλε τοὺς Τριπτολέμους σου καὶ τοὺς Κελεοὺς καὶ τοὺς μυστικούς δράκοντας, αἰσχύνθητί ποτε ταῖς τοῦ θεολόγου σου βίβλιοις Ὀρφέως. δέξαι τοῦ καιροῦ τὸ δῶρον, τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην σου συγκαλύπτοντος. εἰ δὲ ταῦτα μῦθοι καὶ πλάσματα, ἐγὼ σου τὰ τῆς νυκτὸς ἀποκαλύψω μυστήρια.

Down with your Triptolemi, your Celei and your mystical snakes. Be ashamed some time of the books of your theologian Orpheus. Receive the gift of the season, which at the same time will cover your dissipation. And if these things are myths and figments, I shall uncover your nocturnal mysteries (Gregory Nazianzen, *In Julianum* II.168).

Demosthenes’s notorious attack on the mother of Aeschines confirms that female votaries danced with snakes, which were inseparable, at least in myth, from the cult of Dionysus<sup>24</sup>. For Clement of Alexandria the Eleusinian mysteries were a diabolic parody of the Fall<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, in Naassene theology the snake is a supervenient emblem, not the heart of doctrine. It became so for those sects that modern scholarship has described as their epigoni<sup>26</sup>; but these, as ancient testimonies gladly and rightly say, were a diverse brood. The Ophites use the serpent as a symbol of the intellect which opens heaven to the aspiring Gnostic; in the Paraphrase of Seth he is the force that traps the intellect in matter, and in other Nag Hammadi texts the body of the Demiurge; the Peratae maintain that the vicissitudes of the physical creation are embodied in the Dragon who revolves about the pole<sup>27</sup>. Narratives based on Genesis commend him as the one who courts the anger of the Demiurge to acquaint humanity with the

<sup>19</sup> *Ref.* V.8.43 (lesser mysteries); V.8.40 (Brimos). On Brimos see Harrison (n. 17), p. 548 n. 1; for Persephone or Rhea as mother of Dionysus see Kern (n. 16), *Frs.* 58, 153, 195, 303, with R. Parker, “Early Orphism”, in A. Powell (ed.), *The Greek World* (London 1995), pp. 492–496. Obbink (n. 7), p. 132 quotes the *De Pietate* of Philodemus on the restoration of Dionysus by Rhea.

<sup>20</sup> See N. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford 1974), pp. 165 and 181–182. On echoes of the Isis-myth in Classical literature see R. Merkelbach, “Eros und Psyche”, *Philologus* 102 (1953), 103–116.

<sup>21</sup> See Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.5 and IX.29–30, where the Syrian and Phrygian Mothers appear to have been conflated.

<sup>22</sup> At least there is no obvious reference to the Agathos Daemon of Hermeticism, often portrayed as a serpent.

<sup>23</sup> See Kern (n. 16), p. 142. Since the rare conjunction of the names Celeus and Triptolemus recurs at *Ref.* V.20.4, it is possible that Gregory derives his information from the Sethians. Note the citation of Orpheus as defender of the mysteries, and the parody of language which appears in my extracts from the Naassene Sermon.

<sup>24</sup> See *De Corona* 260, possibly with a pun on the name of Aeschines at 264–265.

<sup>25</sup> At *Protrepticus* 12 the Bacchic cries are said to be invocations of Eve, and her name is alleged to denote the serpent.

<sup>26</sup> See R. P. Casey, “Naassenes and Ophites”, *JTS* 27 (1925–26), 374–387, esp. p. 386.

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.30.6 (Ophites); *Ref.* V.16.16 (Peratae); *Ref.* V.19.19 and V.20.2 (Sethians). In the last case, we should note: (a) that the serpent’s role is ambivalent, and (b) that Hippolytus’ title, *Paraphrase of Seth*, is likely to be more accurate than *Paraphrase of Shem*, the Nag Hammadi treatise of this title differing from his own report in many important details.

fruit of knowledge<sup>28</sup>; the Naassenes made nothing of this story, and we gather that, although they bequeathed the serpent to their offspring, the reason for his presence in their system was unknown.

As Gregory Nazianzen shows, it is not the elasticity of the serpent but the ubiquity of the phallus that gives rise to ἀσχημοσύνη in the Naassene exposition of the mysteries; if Attis was castrated and the penis of Osiris unrecovered, the mysteries of Athens could provide the commentator with an ithyphallic Hermes. In asserting that such images are present everywhere, the commentator perhaps hints at a better etymology for the name of his co-religionists<sup>29</sup>:

καὶ τοῦτ' εἶναι τὸ μέγα καὶ κρύφιον τῶν ὅλων (καὶ) ἄγνωστον μυστήριον παρὰ τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις, κεκαλυμμένον καὶ ἀνακεκαλυμμένον. οὐδεὶς γάρ, φησὶν, ἔστι ναὸς ἐν ᾧ πρὸ τῆς εἰσόδου οὐχ ἔστηκε γυμνὸν τὸ κεκρυμμένον, κάτωθεν ἄνω βλέπον καὶ πάντα τοὺς καρποὺς τῶν ἑξ' αὐτοῦ γινομένων στεφανούμενον.

And this is the great secret of all secrets and the unknown mystery among the Egyptians, veiled and unveiled; for there is no temple, he says, before whose entrance the hidden thing does not stand unclad, looking above from below and crowned with the fruits of all that it engenders (*Refutatio* V.7.27).

Once again the phrase “there is no temple” is used to say that some religious artefact is universal. Again the claim is false, but it is true at least that temples are as nearly universal as any instrument of worship, and our learned commentator may have known a local variant of the Eleusinian cult which honoured Naos as a personal appellation:

Φενεάταις δὲ καὶ Δήμητρός ἐστιν ἱερὸν ἐπὶ κλησὶν Ἐλευσινίας, καὶ ἄγουσι τῇ θεῷ τελετὴν, τὰ Ἐλευσίνι δρώμενα καὶ παρὰ σφίσι τὰ αὐτὰ φάσκοντες καθεστηκέναι. ἀφίκεσθαι γὰρ αὐτοῖς Ναὸν κατὰ μάντευμα ἐκ Δελφῶν, τρίτον δὲ ἀπόγονον Εὐμόλπου τοῦτον εἶναι τὸν Ναόν . . . Φενεατῶν δὲ ἐστὶ λόγος, καὶ πρὶν ἢ Ναὸν ἀφίκεσθαι καὶ ἐνταῦθα Δήμητρα πλανωμένην.

The people of Pheneus have also a temple of Demeter under the epithet Eleusinia, and perform a rite to the goddess, saying that the same things that are done at Eleusis were also established in their locality. For Naos came to them, in accordance with a prophecy from Delphi, and this Naos was a third-generation descendant of Eumolpus . . . And there is a tale at Pheneum that Demeter's wanderings brought her there even before the advent of Naos (Pausanias, *Periegesis* VIII.15).

As this is an Arcadian tradition, and the Arcadians (like the Athenians) professed to be indigenous, it could hardly fail to interest commentators like the Naassenes, who were zealous antiquarians and indemnified their arguments with a list of names applied by diverse ancient peoples to the earliest man<sup>30</sup>. The Naassenes aimed to write the hieros logos which would elucidate all mysteries; they were thus in a way the adepts of a new cult, and a cult must have a founder. Of all the names supplied by the various national traditions, that of Naos was the most obscure and the least distinctive, being merely an eponym from the Greek word meaning “temple”. National predilections would oppose the invocation of Triptolemus or Moses as the father of this compendious theosophy; but how could one resent a name that signified nothing more than “Mr Church”?

To us it seems perverse to derive a name from such forgotten ceremonies. But Hippolytus himself denounces Orpheus as an ancestor of heresies, and has borrowed from the Sethians an account of the Lycomidae at Phlya, which remains our principal source of information on this priesthood and the

<sup>28</sup> See Casey (n. 26), 382; for discussion of the derivative sects, see 382–387. Casey observes that the serpent of the Naassenes must have come from pagan cults, but, despite his passing reference to the temple of the Great Mother on p. 387, does not attempt a different etymology.

<sup>29</sup> It is not clear what the author means to elucidate, since the account of Osiris has been interrupted by quotations from the Old and New Testaments. The latter at least are difficult to fit into a logical sequence. It is clear at least that the mystery itself consists in the generative properties of the original “blessed substance”.

<sup>30</sup> See *Ref.* V.7.4–6, where the Arcadians are said to call the first man Pelasgus. Most of the races cited here are laid under contribution in a later part of the Sermon, so the full text may have made its debt to Arcadia more apparent.

rituals at which they officiated<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, his etymology for the Naassenes is palpably invidious, and, together with the sobriquets that he and others conferred on their descendants, should awaken our distrust<sup>32</sup>.

How, then, did the interpreters of Naos become the worshippers of Naas? For an answer we must turn once again to Orphic literature, a quarry which is known to have served the Sethians and other sects, together with the more orthodox apologists<sup>33</sup>. The pagan deposit was indeed too rapidly exhausted, but only to be piously replenished with new forgeries by Christians and Jews. Orphic lore was known for its ἀσχημοσύνη, maintaining as it did that even Zeus became supreme by the castration of his father<sup>34</sup>. Perhaps the philosophical expositors would have argued, like Iamblichus, that obscenity in sacred things will force the mind aloft by the simple pressure of repugnance<sup>35</sup>; our commentary goes further by contending that deformity in ritual is an emblem of the formlessness which underlies all material phenomena. Since Naos was alleged to be a founder of these mysteries, it was only to be expected that his character would, if possible, be discovered in the totems; it was when the Naassene commentators came upon the Jews that the possibility arose.

The serpent was already known as an ornament to the dances at Eleusis; Egyptian lore was known to teach that the origin of all things was liquid matter. The opening words of Genesis, which appear to have been well known in the second century<sup>36</sup>, apprised them that both earth and heaven were made from formless water; and they may have possessed the tradition known to Origen, that the serpent, which the prophets use as a metaphor for Egypt, was not only the most subtle but the first of created beings<sup>37</sup>. Among the works purporting to be Orphic, they could have found – although they might not have detected – a Jewish forgery, in which Moses, here equated with Musaeus, is styled Hylogenes (“born of matter”), with an obvious allusion to the story of his being “drawn from water”<sup>38</sup>. This prophet who destroyed the brazen calf had none the less preserved his people when he raised the brazen serpent in the wilderness; much later Hezekiah removed an icon from the Temple which was venerated as the Mosaic instrument<sup>39</sup>. This he called sarcastically Nehushtan (“thing of brass”), from which we may infer that its original appellation, if not Naas, had been something not dissimilar.

This, then, is the Naas of the Naassenes, the idol of a temple which professed to be the one true house of God. Yet, as we have seen, the sect was not initially a Jewish heresy – not indeed a heresy of any kind, but a school of interpretation which compared the sacred texts of ancient peoples in the hope

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<sup>31</sup> See *Ref.* V.4 and V.20. On Orpheus as the founder of the Eleusinian mysteries, see F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens* (Berlin 1974). On Orpheus and Egypt see S. Morenz, “Ägypten und die altorphische Kosmogonie”, in S. Morenz ed., *Aus Antike und Orient. Festschrift W. Schubart* (Leipzig 1950). On the Lycomidae see *Ref.* V.20.4ff. (= Fr. 243 Kern); Obbink (n. 7), 129–130; P. Tannery, “Orphica Fr. 3 Abel”, *Revue de Philologie* 24 (1906), 97–100; M. Marcovich, “Phanes, Phicola and the Sethians”, *JTS* 25 (1974), 447–451.

<sup>32</sup> Thus we have only Theodoret’s authority for applying such terms as Sethian and Ophite to the heresies described by Irenaeus, and we can hardly suppose that the “Valentiniani” styled themselves by this name, any more than we can believe in the “Ptolemaeani”, “Secundiani” etc. of Epiphanius.

<sup>33</sup> See Athenagoras, *Legatio* 18, 20 and 32; Tatian, *Oratio* 8; Theophilus *Ad Autolyicum* III.2, III.17.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio II Contra Julianum* 168,30. 31. See especially *Ref.* V.7. 23 and 29; at V.7.23 the display of genital organs is expressly associated with the temples of Egypt. For the Orphic cognates see Plato, *Euthyphro* 6a (= Kern, Fr. 17); *Pap.Derv.* col. 9.4 (Fr. 6); cf. the reference to confusion of genital organs in the Sethian source at *Ref.* V.20.4.

<sup>35</sup> Iamblichus, *De Myst.* I.11 (p. 39 Parthey); cf. Julian, *Hymn VII* p. 222c–d.

<sup>36</sup> Galen, *De Usu Partium* XI.14; [Longinus], *De Sublimitate* 9.9; Numenius, Fr. 30 Des Places.

<sup>37</sup> See Origen, *CommJohn* I.17; Ezekiel 29.3; and the Gnostic *Hymn of the Pearl*.

<sup>38</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XIII.12.5 = Aristobulus Fr. 4. The word ὕλογενής appears at line 36 of the poem; Riedweg (n. 7), p. 41 argues for the emendation ὕδογενής, but in my view the MS reading already has the desired implication. There is no doubt that Aristobulus was a Jew; Riedweg argues, against the prevailing consensus, that even the so-called Urfassung of this text in Ps.-Justin, *De Monarchia* 2.4 is likely to be of Hellenistic Jewish provenance.

<sup>39</sup> See Exodus 17.11; 2Kings 18.4, with the comment of M. Cogan and H. Tambor in the Anchor Bible series (New York 1988), p. 217.

of ascertaining a common denominator of belief. The Phrygians and Egyptians were agreed to be the oldest races: Attis and Osiris were two names for Primal Man, and the associated goddesses were identified with Demeter and Rhea under the mystic title “Mother of the Gods”. Israel agreed with Egypt on the primacy of water, whose natural property is ἀσχημοσύνη; the moral sense of this term is exemplified in the mutilation of Attis and the dances at Eleusis. United as they are by veneration of the serpent, the Palestinian Moses and the Eleusinian Orpheus conspire to give the Naassenes a name.

This conclusion cannot fail to prompt a few reflections on the character and purpose of the movement. First, the evidence indicates that the provenance of the Naassenes has not been fairly represented by our only source. A sect which owes its name to the eponymous founder of pagan mysteries cannot be regarded as a branch of Christianity, or even as a deviation from it. The interest of Greek authors in the mysteries of Attis would most commonly be inspired by their adherence to the Eleusinian mysteries, which were agreed to be derived from the Phrygian cult (cf. Clement, *Protrepticus* 13–16). Greeks had always noticed the ubiquity of temples (cf. *Ref.* V.7.23), and had been disposed to argue that the gods were as universal as the forms of piety. Whether they be primitive ingredients of the Sermon or late accretions<sup>40</sup>, the Jewish or Christian passages have ceased to be Jewish or Christian as soon as they are cited to endorse and not exclude the other cults.

Secondly, we have linked the Naassenes with the Orphic mysteries, but many would contend that there was never an Orphic faith<sup>41</sup>. If there ever was a sect of Orpheus, with its own initiations and beliefs, it was eclipsed by an autonomous Orphic literature, which lent its plumage to the secular poetry of the Hellenistic era. The forgeries by private hands, which detached the prophet’s name from his adherents, began as early as the fifth century B.C.<sup>42</sup> In late antiquity Orpheus was adopted as a mystagogue by readers who desecrated their own philosophy under every pious heirloom, and were therefore bound to none. The one ubiquitous fact in Orphic literature is also the one sure fact about the Naassenes – the use of ancient mysteries, not as precedents for worship, but as substrates of discourse.

Thirdly, whatever knowledge it is that makes a Gnostic, it comes by reason, not by revelation. There are no new names for gods, and no immediate intuition of divinity; there is no hieratic preaching, but an erudite critique of every oracle; the mysteries are opened, not by ecstasy or vision, but by rational comparison of texts. The purpose of the exegete, here as everywhere, is not to enunciate a private creed, but to divine the sense behind another’s teaching; the key to all mythologies, here as everywhere, is the proof that all are one. In modern times the Cambridge School, some Structuralists and Jungian psychoanalysts have maintained that all religions have a meaning, yet denied the metaphysical claims of any; elsewhere I have argued that the Derveni commentator was prepared to cull the thoughts of all philosophers because his task (or privilege) as an exegete debarred him from adherence to a school<sup>43</sup>. The *gnosis* of the earliest Gnostics, therefore, would appear to be: not a mystery, but a studious collocation of the mysteries; a philological discipline which aims to be the master, not the servant, of philosophy; a parliament of symbols which does not proclaim a new code of belief<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Against Reitzenstein (n. 10), see J. M. Creed, “The Heavenly Man”, *JTS* 26 (1924–25), esp. 118. But see also n. 29 above. The Sermon being designed to invite accretions, no part can be said to be less germane to it than another; some parts are, however, less felicitously contrived.

<sup>41</sup> See I. A. Linforth, *The Arts of Orpheus* (Berkeley 1941). For Hellenistic allusions to Orphic formulae, see e.g. Callimachus, *Hymn* I.1.

<sup>42</sup> On Onomacritus see Herodotus, *Histories* VII.6, and testimonia 182–195 in Kern (n. 16). On the original corpus of “authentic” Orphic poems see Parker (n. 19), 483–487.

<sup>43</sup> M. J. Edwards, “Notes on the Derveni Commentator”, *ZPE* 86 (1991), 203–211.

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Dirk Obbink for the information that led to the writing of this paper.