

Hans Dieter Betz: The “Mithras Liturgy”. Text, Translation and Commentary. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 18). 274 pp. Euro 69. ISBN 3-16-148128-3.

When the motif of the so called *Himmelsreise der Seele* was investigated at the beginning of the twentieth century by the most important representatives of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, and by Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein in particular, they sought the origins of this doctrine in Iranian religion. Bousset, in a well-known article published in 1901,<sup>1</sup> inferred from eschatological Middle-Persian or Pahlavi texts that they reflected an ancient Iranian lore, which had influenced Greek culture too. Of course, the *Religionsgeschichtliche* position must in some way be shaded (e. g. in considering possible Mesopotamian borrowings), as Carsten Colpe and, more recently, Ioan Petru Couliano have shown.<sup>2</sup> However, though we possess only late documents concerning Iranian eschatology, it seems very likely that ancient ecstatic or initiatory experiences, sometimes obtained by means of narcotics or hallucinogens, were further developed into ritualistic practices, so that a voyage in an extraordinary dimension or a vision of spiritual realms became a symbolic representation or a devotional liturgy. For this reason a text like the *Arda Wiraz Namag*, the so called “Iranian Divine Comedy”, (probably written in the ninth century AD)<sup>3</sup> cannot be simply regarded as a product from post-Sasanian times, its relative antiquity of contents being not concealed by the long development of Zoroastrian cultic practice and liturgy.

At the same time it is nevertheless true that in the second half of the first millennium BC the Greeks were acquainted with the initiatory and mystical-ecstatic aspects of Iranian religious doctrines, which are partly reflected, among other sources, also in the Platonic accounts about Zoroaster or in the eschatological section at the end of the Republic.<sup>4</sup> This doctrine became more and

1 Die Himmelsreise der Seele, ARW 4, 1901, 136–169.

2 Carsten Colpe: Die „Himmelsreise der Seele“ ausserhalb und innerhalb der Gnosis, in: *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. by U. Bianchi. Leiden 1967, 429–445; Die „Himmelsreise der Seele“ als philosophie- und religionsgeschichtliche Problem, in: *Festschrift für Joesph Klein*, ed. by E. Fries. Göttingen 1967, 85–104; I. P. Culianu: *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance*. Leiden 1983; *Expériences de l’extase: Extase, ascension, et récit visionnaire de l’hellénisme au Moyen Age*. Paris 1984.

3 The text has recently been edited by Ph. Gignoux: *Le livre d’Arda Viraz*. Paris 1984, and by F. Vahman: *Arda Wiraz Namag: The Iranian “Divina Commedia”*. London/Malmö 1986.

4 Seminal hints can be found in J. Duchesne-Guillemin: *Fire in Iran and Greece*. *East and West* 13, 1962, 198–206; they are further developed by Gh. Gnoli:

more fashionable during the Hellenistic and imperial period, when manifold sources conflated together: not to mention philosophical interpretations, like Cicero's Dream of Scipio or Virgil's doctrine of the immortal souls in Aeneid 6, or the Plutarchean eschatological dialogues, which were influenced by Stoicism as well as Platonism and Pythagorism, the doctrine of the heavenly ascent of the soul through the spheres is a central tenet in Hermetism and Gnosticism too. Moreover, the heavenly journey is a constant pattern of Jewish and, later, Christian apocalypses, which we cannot here discuss in further detail.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, according to many religious traditions, such a heavenly ascent involves a journey into the divine realms from which the soul become initiated into a new, sacred status, reaping spiritual knowledge and even assimilation to the gods.<sup>6</sup>

This is particularly evident when considering the various religious streams which constituted the motley universe of the imperial and late antique age. It is worth noting also the dialectic and sometimes polemic attitude shown towards astrology, so that a strict relationship was established between the seven planets and the levels that the soul had to transverse in its heavenly ascent. For example, according to a very influential Hermetic doctrine, during its ascent, the soul had to put off the concretions previously acquired when descending into the material world. Gnostic systems presented a far more complicated doctrine, where the soul had to transverse an enormous number of archontic levels, which represented the planets, the signs, the decans, and the 360 degrees of the zodiacal circle or the 365 days of the solar year. They also developed ritual performances or "mysteries" intended to assure the soul an easy and safe passage through the spheres. The adept was supposed to learn by heart the formidable names of the aeons and of the watchers, together with a series of *mots de passe*, magic numbers and seals or protective talismans corresponding to each aeon. What's more, the techniques intended to assure the gnostic's soul a safe passage through the spheres of the hostile archons up to the *pleroma* actually form the most important part of gnosis, if we consider, with Hans Jonas, that gnosis, insofar as it is a kind of saving knowledge, led to an *Entweltlichung*, that is "a shedding of one's cosmic nature". Furthermore, accounts of an heavenly ascent

Asavan. Contributo allo studio del Libro di Arda Viraz, in: *Iranica*, Napoli 1979, 387–452.

5 Among the huge mass of secondary literature see I. Gruenwald: *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. Leiden 1980; M. Himmelfarb: *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. Oxford 1993; J. R. Davila: *Descenders to the Chariot. The People behind the Hekhalot Literature*. Leiden/Boston/Köln 2001.

6 For further information on this subject see my forthcoming entry "Ascension" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition, ed. by L. Jones et alii.

are often recorded in the form of an apocalyptic vision, that is one of the most productive and meaningful literary genres of Gnostic writings.<sup>7</sup>

Bousset (to come back where we started from) argued that the belief in the ascent of the soul and Gnostic dualism originated in Iran and were propagated in late antiquity by means of the so-called mysteries of Mithra. It is well known how this Persian god gained an increasing favour during late antiquity and his original *facies* was largely reshaped to suit the changed religious attitude of Hellenism, so that Mithraism became a totally different religion if compared to the role played by Mithra in early Zoroastrian literature.<sup>8</sup> This view can be in some way still maintained. The second-century Platonic writer Celsus, for example, provides an important testimony, which offers a partial confirmation of Bousset's theory. In a long fragment<sup>9</sup> Celsus offers an extensive description of a ritual object consisting of a ladder with seven steps or "gates", which represent the planets and shares many similarities with the ones depicted in Mithraic temples. According to the philosopher, this object symbolized the passage of the adept's soul through the planetary spheres and could be paralleled to a similar diagram ascribed to the Gnostic sect of the Ophites. Recent interpreters argued that these rituals represent a meditative technique to obtain the inner knowledge of the self and they are structured as an interior journey.

The most important example, however, is provided by a long section from the famous Parisian magical papyrus, edited by Preisendanz in volume one of his *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM VI, 475–824 [820, according to Betz's proposal]), which is conventionally called *Mithrasliturgie* after the outstanding edition and commentary by Albrecht Dieterich, who recognized in this text not only a typical product of late antique religious syncretism, but, more specifically, a devotional formulary of the Mithraic mysteries. In this document it is described how to gain immortality by an elevation process. In addition, the already outlined motifs of ascension through celestial spheres, heavenly watchers, *voces magicae*, merge themselves with ritualistic and magic practice (of apparent Egyptian origin), and therefore demonstrate how often theoretical

7 On Gnostic visions see – after G. Casadio: La visione in Marco il Mago e nella gnosi di tipo sethiano. *Augustinianum* 29, 1989, 123–146 – G. Quispel: Transformation through Vision in Jewish Gnosticism and the Cologne Mani Codex. *VCh* 49, 1995, 189–191 (= From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition, ed. by R. van den Broek, C. van Heertum, Amsterdam 2001, 265–269); W. Attridge: Valentinian and Sethian Apocalyptic Tradition. *J ECS* 8, 2000, 173–211.

8 Among the most recent studies on Mithra and Mithraism it is worth citing the various contributions by R. Beck and R. Gordon.

9 Apud Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 6, 22 ff. This long passage is extensively discussed by B. Witte: Das Ophitendiagramm nach Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6, 22–38. Altenberge 1993.

doctrine cannot be sharply divided from a lower level of knowledge, exemplified by an often far-fetched magical praxis: it is the same opposition which features (though on a wider scale) the Hermetic writings.

Just hundred years after the first edition of Albrecht Dieterich's *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig, 1903; 1923<sup>3</sup>), the present book offers a new complete edition of so complex a text.<sup>10</sup> It provides the Greek text, an English translation, a punctual introduction, an extensive commentary, an index of Greek words and of the various *voces magicae*, and, finally, also an appendix, with photographic reproductions of the papyrus. The introduction is divided into five sections, which deal respectively with the title of the work, a palaeographic description of the papyrus, including the circumstance of discovery and a possible date of composition (fourth century AD), a biographic section about Dieterich's life and works,<sup>11</sup> a general discussion of the text and of its religio-historical context. Not only Hans-Dieter Betz is one of the most gifted scholars in the domain of primeval Christianity and Hellenistic religions,<sup>12</sup> but he already devoted to the Mithras Liturgy a monographic essay,<sup>13</sup> which is here enriched and largely supplemented. We particularly appreciated how Betz deals with the critical debate which spread from Dieterich's book (in particular the criticism put forward by one of the most important scholars of Mithraism, the Belgian Franz Cumont) and how he sets Dieterich in the historical and cultural milieu of his age. He also provides a thorough description of his career and of his conspicuous scientific production, which was abruptly interrupted by a premature death at the age of forty-two years in 1908. Dieterich had been a pupil and later became the son-in-law of the prominent Bonner philologist and historian Hermann Use-

10 Scholarship, however, paid already attention to the Mithras Liturgy from Dieterich's times onwards, the text being variously edited and commented (the present editor indeed gives a punctual discussion on the different critical perspectives).

11 Betz's information has now to be also supplemented by these essays, which were also published in 2003: S. Marchand: From Liberalism to Neoromanticism: Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein, and the religious turn in fin-de-siècle German Classical Studies, in: *Out of Arcadia. Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz*, ed. by I. Gildenhard and M. Ruehl, London 2003, 129–160; A. Wessels: *Ursprungszauber. Zur Rezeption von Hermann Useners Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung*. Berlin/New York 2003, 96 ff.

12 See, for example, his manifold essays about Hellenism and early Christianity, which are collected in the four volumes of *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen 1990–1998).

13 *Gottesbegegnung und Menschwerdung. Zur religionsgeschichtlichen und theologischen Bedeutung der Mithrasliturgie* (PGM IV, 475–820), Berlin/New York 2001.

ner.<sup>14</sup> Largely influenced by Usener's legacy, which treated as a whole both the problems of literary and religious history, Dieterich showed his concern not only for historical and linguistic comprehension of elements in marginal documents of the Greco-Roman religion, which at a first glance seemed 'irrational', but also aimed to disclose their inner strains. He thus investigated magical and astrological texts, showing also a remarkable mastery over Orphic, Hermetic and Gnostic literature, which were considered in some way the aberrant and disturbing fringes of Greco-Roman paganism and as such neglected by classical philologists. In doing so he wanted to stress the importance of beliefs of popular origin at the periphery of official cults or of Classical paganism. At the same time Dieterich was interested in the Hellenistic-Oriental religions and in early Christianity: such an interest is displayed in the well-known book *Nekyia* (1893), which was inspired by the discovery of the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter* and provides an in-depth study of the Greek tradition of descent to the underworld and of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition. In the *Mithrasliturgie* Dieterich seems to recall these motifs, as well as those which featured his previous essay on magic literature, *Abrahas* (1891), since the text is explicitly described by its anonymous author as an *apathanatismos*, or ritual of immortalisation, and it provides the description of an heavenly ascent.

The final part of Betz's learned introduction deals with 'generic' and compositional questions (including an examination of the stylistic or literary texture and of the redaction phases, which seem to be accurate and intrinsically coherent, despite the different strata of the text) and, most of all, with the global historico-religious setting of the Mithras Liturgy. Dieterich's assumption that this magical prescription could suit the 'canonical' Mithraism of the Hellenistic age is of course to be rejected – as it was almost immediately demonstrated by Cumont. Dieterich's position can be, however, maintained in considering, as he did, the Mithras Liturgy as a prominent testimony of the syncretistic aura by which late antiquity was permeated: this includes a sort of mysticism and personal religiosity, according to the great fresco sketched out by Nock in his book on *Conversion*; a deep henotheistic tendency (here exemplified in the almost coincident figure of Helios-Mithras-Aion), which features many late antique religious streams, and which the same Dieterich also seminally outlined in the 'artificial' god Sarapis;<sup>15</sup> as well as an intermingling of magical practice

14 There is a wide-ranging bibliography about Hermann Usener (a complete and detailed list is provided at the following website: [www.bautz.de/bbkl/u/usener\\_h\\_c.shtml](http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/u/usener_h_c.shtml)); among recent titles it is important for the present subject the miscellaneous volume *Aspetti di Hermann Usener, filologo della religione*. Seminario della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, 17–20 febbraio 1982, preface by Arnaldo Momigliano, Pisa 1982).

15 For this particular kind of henotheism it is still worth quoting A. D. Nock: A vision of Mandulis Aion, in: *Essays on Religion and ancient World*, ed. by Z.

or ritual and theoretical construction. Finally the text shows striking parallels with magic literature and, most of all, with well known Hermetic doctrines, the Egyptian background of which nowadays no one discards any more.<sup>16</sup> These parallels were already put forward by Richard Reitzenstein (in his controversial essay on the *Poimandres*) and are profitably recalled by Betz in the conclusive part.

Therefore, the importance of the Mithras Liturgy for those who are interested in Graeco-Roman religion of the imperial age is – I think – undeniable, just because of the combination of such multifarious motifs and themes. Much more, then, it appears valuable the recovery of Dieterich's thesis, which is inserted in a long *lignée* and leads to examine thoroughly with erudition and critical insight a secular scholarly tradition. Dieterich's seminal inquiries were in fact very influential in orienting the subsequent scholarship, not only the members of the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in Göttingen, and Reitzenstein above all, but also their ideal fellows or heirs, like Weinreich or Norden,<sup>17</sup> and, a generation or two later, Nock or Dodds. At the same time a massive part of their work still remains valuable and still stands out as an exemplar model for the present generation, which often seems to discard or forget their lesson.

Stewart, Oxford 1972, 357–400, which must be supplemented with R. van den Broek: The Sarapis Oracle in Macrobius, Sat. I 20,16–17, in: *Hommage à M. J. Vermaseren. Recueil d'études offert par les auteurs de la Série Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain . . .*, éd. par M. B. de Boer et T. A. Edridge, Leiden 1978, 123–141. For a global consideration of late antique 'pagan' monotheism see, after the much-celebrated but rather superficial (besides the essays by Mitchell and Liebeschuetz) miscellaneous book edited by P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede: *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, some contributions in the forthcoming volume *Monothéisme: exclusivisme, diversité ou dialogue?*, edited by Charles Guittard, which is going to collect the Proceedings of the International EASR Conference held in Paris (Sept. 12th–14th 2002).

16 See E. Iversen: *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*. Copenhagen 1986 and G. Fowden: *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*. Princeton, 1986; 1993<sup>2</sup>. J. Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian*, Harvard 1997 investigates the interesting survey of Hermetic writings and 'Egyptian' exoticism in Europe from the late Renaissance onwards, insofar as they represented a sort of intellectual fashion and characterized exoteric conventicles or intellectual circles (it is possible to ascribe to the same domain a masterpiece of European music, that is Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, on the sources of which see S. Morenz: *Die Zauberflöte. Eine Studie zum Lebenszusammenhang Ägypten – Antike – Abendland*. Münster/Köln 1952).

17 On Eduard Norden, his life and cultural legacy together with as a balance of his research see now my *Per un bilancio di Agnostos Theos*, which appears as introduction to the Italian translation of *Agnostos Theos*, Brescia 2002, 9–122.

The main body of Betz's book is undeniably the commentary. This is not displayed line to line, but offers a more general discussion of the many sections in which the text can be divided and which are well outlined in a recapitulative table (pp. 60 ff.): it is therefore easier to follow and to sketch out the different constitutive nucleuses of the text. Not only the commentary provides a detailed explanation of linguistic and textual questions (involving also the different readings of some controversial lessons or the various attempts at translating difficult passages), but it is especially rich and wide-ranging in discussing the historical and cultural context too. Such multifarious a context ranges from the Egyptian background of some magical formulas and of the practical instructions displayed at the end (concerning scarabs and plants with thaumaturgic properties) to the Greek style of the introductory prayer and invocation and the hymnic address to the god Aion in lines 587 ff. Therefore, the Mithras Liturgy represents one of the most interesting testimonies of the religious syncretism which features late antiquity. This is particularly palpable in the bulk of the ritual, which displays a long series of divine or angelic figures and culminates with a vision of grace and the immortalisation of the initiate, who had been sifted by the heavenly watchers and had to transverse the celestial spheres. We found of singular interest the section that displays the epiphany and provides also an iconography of the gods Helios in lines 634 ff. and Mithra in lines 696 ff. They are both followed by a self-presentation of the initiate, usual in magical texts, which, again, recalls some fixed patterns of the so-called (after Norden's *Agnostos Theos*) *Ich-Stil*, although they concern not a divine, but a human figure.

Due to the various influences conflating in the text, which we tried here to sum up, a sheer drudgery was committed to the editor as far as the more and more increasing amount of secondary literature is concerned. Nonetheless, secondary literature is lavishly quoted and each question receives exhaustive discussion and extensive comment. However in so vast a domain it is possible that some bibliographic entries escaped to the author's attention, despite the richness of information provided and the huge material collected: for example, we strangely noticed the absence of Witte's monographic inquiry about Celsus and the diagrams of the Ophites, and likewise we regret that some important contributions by Italian scholars on the same subject are rather neglected (one name above all, Ugo Bianchi, with his various essays on some historico-religious problems involved in Mithraism, including the quest for ultramundane salvation).<sup>18</sup> Finally, if I may conclude with a remark, it seems at least singular for a scientific book (written by a mother-speaking German author and printed by

18 The perspective adopted by this important Italian scholar is now investigated and discussed by P. Pachis: Ugo Bianchi e il Mittraismo, in; G. Casadio (ed.), Ugo Bianchi. Una vita per la storia delle religioni, Roma 2002, 219–231, who also offers a detailed list of Bianchi's contributions on this subject.

a German publisher) that all the German quotations or passages (for example Dieterich's ones), also in the footnotes, are translated into English, perhaps in order to suit the Anglophone audience and the non-German speakers. It is so bitter to notice how the German language, which had been characterizing the *Altertumswissenschaft* for the last two centuries and formed the backbone of classical studies, is now rather ignored . . . .

#### Zusammenfassung

Das Buch bietet eine neue Edition eines wichtigen Zeugnisses des spätantiken religiösen Synkretismus. Es handelt sich um einen Auszug aus einem bedeutenden magischen Papyrus, nämlich um die sogenannte Mithrasliturgie. Dank seiner Struktur, bestimmt durch Apokalypse und Himmelfahrt, bezieht sich der Text auf das Thema der Himmelsreise der Seele, er stellt aber zugleich auch ein konkretes Beispiel eines magischen Rituals zur Erlangung der Unsterblichkeit dar. Die verschiedenen Einflüsse (Hermetismus, magische Handlungen ägyptischer Herkunft, Mithraismus, henothetische Lehren) werden durch die Einleitung und besonders durch den ausführlichen Kommentar klar herausgearbeitet; dabei kann der Leser auch ein Bild des Religionswissenschaftlers Albrecht Dieterich und seines Werkes gewinnen; ihm wird die erste bedeutende Exegese dieses schwierigen Texts verdankt.

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