

Diagrams in the *Books of Jeu*

The large number of diagrams in the *Books of Jeu* is one of the most noteworthy—and fascinating—aspects of these texts. It is the only extant early Gnostic document containing diagrams or images. That even among the paucity of scholarship on the texts so little has been written on them is a testament to their mysteriousness and obscurity. P.C. Finney notes these pictures “have nothing to do with the world as we know it. They are conceptual images, abstracted from nature and nonrepresentational.”¹ Unfortunately, the concepts they depict are quite esoteric and largely lost, in part never to be recovered due to the poor state of the manuscript. Thus this chapter must begin with the cautionary statement that what follows is not an attempt at a definitive interpretation of their meaning. Rather, it is an opening investigation into what will hopefully result in a scholarly conversation on their possible significance in the context of their users. Since the diagrams appear only in the two *Books of Jeu*, and their general format and probable usage appears to be similar between the two texts, here they will receive in-depth treatment in a chapter of their own.

The fact that so many diagrams are included in these two texts, the primary ritual handbooks of the innermost Jeuian mysteries, is evidence of their importance in the beliefs and practices of the group that utilized them. That they are meticulously given in extensive systematic patterns demonstrates how vital they were considered to be—it was necessary to have knowledge of the whole system, including the characters and seals of each individual head or ruler. Even in the *Pistis Sophia* texts, which do not themselves include such diagrams, knowledge of them is *presumed* necessary (2PS 99[247]; 3PS 112[289–291]). Despite the suggestion that some aspects of these mysteries might be considered unnecessary in the later stages of the group’s development, the mysteries Jesus promises to present the disciples still include “the heads of the mysteries ... in all their types and their ciphers and the seals of the last space” (2PS 99[247]). This strongly reflects the traditions found in *1Jeu* especially, as each treasury has a head and an associated seal and cipher, and indeed in that text *Jeu*’s development is described in terms of types. It is thus probable that 2PS still considers the material contained in *1Jeu*, if not *2Jeu* as well, to be nec-

1 P.C. Finney, “Did Gnostics Make Pictures?”, 437; in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, Vol. 1, B. Layton, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 434–454.

essary for the soul's ascent and salvation. Knowledge of the diagrams and their use is therefore useful for an understanding of the system of the Jeuian texts as a whole.

Although similar symbols with comparable usage abound in the Medieval and Renaissance periods,² there are few other surviving examples from the period in which the Jeuian texts likely arose. Since it is impossible to determine whether a continuous tradition or mindset existed between these periods, the focus shall remain on the diagrams present in the *Books of Jeu* themselves.³ Some preliminary discussion of the use of mystical diagrams and images in the Greco-Roman period will, however, provide a helpful introduction to the topic.

1 Religious and Magical Use of Seals, Diagrams and Images

1.1 *Hekhalot or Jewish Ascent Literature*

Hekhalot literature can be defined as “the pre-kabbalistic corpus of mystical texts that give instructions on how to ascend (or ‘descend’) to the celestial ‘palaces’ or the ‘merkabah,’ God’s heavenly throne-chariot,” elements of which can be identified from the early centuries of the Common Era.⁴ The Hekhalot, or palaces of the divine world, may suggest images similar to the treasuries to be traversed in *1 Jeu*. The palaces each have angelic guardians, whose names the person ascending must memorize and to which they must show the appropriate seals: “The name of each one (angel)—you show to him his seal and he brings you into his palace.”⁵ However, it is not clear of what the seals consisted,

2 See, for example, the *Picatrix* (10th/11th century), Peter de Abano's *Heptameron seu elementa magica* (1496), Johannes Trithemius' *Steganographia* (1500), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Occulta Philosophia* (1533), John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564), the *Arbatel de magia veterum* (1575), *The Lesser Key of Solomon*.

3 When possible, the image from the codex will be included, but frequently the manuscript has become so damaged the images have not been preserved. In those cases C. Schmidt's reconstructions will be included, which are in turn often based on C.G. Woide and M.G. Schwartze's transcriptions, done when the manuscript was in better condition. They are the form most scholars have used to this point; however, frequently they are not an accurate reflection of the original.

4 J.R. Davila, “The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature,” 105, in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, A.D. DeConick, ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 105–125.

5 *Hekhalot Zutarti*, § 413, quoted in R.M. Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 257.