To adapt a saying, inside every ancient novel is a mystery-text wildly signalling. That, though the adverb is perhaps unfair, was the theory behind Reinhold Merkelbach’s *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich 1962). Although it has never won outright acceptance, it is a theory that continues to intrigue critics of this corner of ancient literature, and it is one of which students of ancient religion, and especially of the mysteries, might also profitably take cognizance; for if the theory is at all correct, the novels should yield up clues not merely about various isolated tenets of the mysteries but also about their sacred *structures*. By their very nature as novels, they present ordered and integrated sequences of events. Therefore, if they are allegories, it is plausible to suppose that their narratives should reflect the matter of the mysteries, whether it be the progress of the initiate or the cult myth or whatever, in a *systematic* way. Perhaps, then, one stands to learn from them as much as from, for example, the iconographies of the cults or their *symbola*. Elements of iconography and *symbola* are like still photographs to the narrative’s motion picture; they are static and their relationships are not always self-evident, while the allegorical narrative carries its own structure and its own dynamic. There is, however, a grave danger in this mode of explication: the allegory may be quite illusory; one risks drawing elaborate pictures of what is simply not there.

The ancient novels are tales of adventure; they tell of the trials and travels of hero and heroine (in the *Golden Ass* of hero alone) as they are driven by fate, aided or thwarted by forces physical, human, or divine, towards a final destiny of restful bliss, of harmony and hallowed love, and of recognition of true identity. If, then, they are allegories, it is fairly obvious what aspect of the mysteries they might be expected to allegorize: the progress of the initiates as they are redeemed from the order of the present world and its tribulations through the forces mediated to them by the cults. In sum, they would be allegories of a *via salutis*. 
As a test of the theory—a very limited test, I should warn—and to see if anything new can be elicited about the doctrines of the cults, especially on salvation, I shall be examining what is surely one of the strangest of the novels, the *Babyloniaca* of Iamblichus. The classic case is, of course, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, but that is well-trodden ground indeed; besides, it is somewhat exceptional, first in that its religious content and purpose become at the end quite explicit and the work thus ceases to be an allegory altogether, and secondly in that it is quite untypical of the ancient novel if for no other reason than that it is both comic and Latin. Another obvious choice might have been Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, a novel that is arguably mystic and descriptive of a sort of *paideusis* under the leadership of Eros and Dionysus. However, it seemed to me that the mystagogic dimensions of the work had been more or less definitively explored by H. H. O. Chalk some twenty years ago and there was little to add. Moreover, I was deterred by the shadowy nature and the limitations of our knowledge of the Dionysus cult (if that, as Merkelbach claimed, is the group whose tract the novel is) as an *organization*; there seemed so little to control the allegory against. With those two leading candidates ruled out, I have contented myself with Iamblichus' *Babyloniaca* as a third. Certainly, it is a very much more obscure work, but as a test-case it is not without promise. Merkelbach proposed that the *Babyloniaca* is a tract of Mithraism, and Mithraism is a religion certain of whose structures we know about, if only partially. If the novel is a Mithraic allegory, we should be able to discern in its sequences the disguised outline of some pattern that we are already familiar with in the cult, the grade structure perhaps, or the cult myth as it is preserved in the side scenes of the greater reliefs and frescos. An ordered set of correspondences between the novel and the cult would be the best indication that the novel is indeed allegorical and would furnish a secure base for further extrapolation; conversely, the absence of such a set would warn us to be sceptical and not to overvalue miscellaneous similarities that could be thrown up by mere coincidence.

The text of the *Babyloniaca* is no longer extant; it is known to us in the plot-summary of Photius and a modest number of quotations. The summary is extensive enough that just about every episode, we may be confident, is reported in substantial detail. What is lost, of course, is the rhetorical coloration of the whole, but the longer fragments, for example an *ekphrasis* of a royal cortège (Fr. 1) or an interchange of lovers' speeches (Fr. 61—hero and heroine happen to be violently at odds at the time), show that in both tone and content the rhetoric was broadly