1. Introduction

The *Chronographia* of George Synkellos, the 9th century Byzantine chronicler, preserves a curious fragment from the alchemist and Hermetic philosopher, Zosimos of Panopolis. In this passage, which is not extant in the Greek alchemical manuscripts, Zosimos seems to lend his support to a dark and unwholesome view of the alchemical art and its origins.

It is stated in the holy scriptures or books, dear lady, that there exists a race of daemons who have commerce with women. Hermes made mention of them in his *Physika*; in fact almost the entire work, openly and secretly, alludes to them. It is related in the ancient and divine scriptures that certain angels lusted for women, and descending from the heavens, they taught them all the arts of nature. On account of this, says the scripture, they offended god, and now live outside heaven—because they taught to men all the evil arts which are of no advantage to the soul.

These ‘ancient and divine scriptures’ to which Zosimos refers are no doubt the ancient Hebrew scriptures, specifically the Book of Enoch. Zosimos implies that Hermes knew this ancient Hebrew work, and made reference to its teachings about fallen angels in his ‘physical writings’ (*physika*). Although the Book of Enoch never attained canonical status for Jews or Christians, it was a formative influence in the world of Hellenistic Judaism, especially within those messianic and apocalyptic currents from which Christianity eventually emerged. Indeed, the book was widely read and circulated throughout the Hellenistic world in the first three centuries CE. The Synkellos fragment

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1 George Synkellos, *Ecloga Chronographica* (ed. A.A. Mosshammer), 14.4-11. Though this passage does not appear in the Greek alchemical corpus, there are close parallels in a 15th century Syriac manuscript. For a discussion of the parallels see Mertens, *Alchimistes Grecs*, Tome 4, LXX-LXXVIII.

2 These physical writings are not extant: everything that we know about the “Hermetic” view of alchemy (which is very little) has been reconstructed from references in Zosimos and the later commentators, like Olympiodoros. For a discussion of the evidence see Festugière, *Révélation I*, 240-256.
attests to this wider sphere of influence: Zosimos knows the book, and seems to endorse its teachings, as evidently does his Hermetic source.

The writings of Zosimos express a high regard for the Jewish alchemical tradition, in particular for Maria, to whom Zosimos appeals as his chief authority in questions of alchemical apparatus and technique. More generally, we see the influence of gnostic currents connected to developments within—or on the fringes of—Late Antique Judaism. Thus it is not surprising that Zosimos should refer to the Book of Enoch as sacred scripture. R. Patai describes an Arab tradition, according to which Zosimos was actually regarded as a Jewish author. He claims that the evidence does not permit us to determine whether this tradition is based on fact or fancy. In reality, it seems certain that Zosimos was not a Jew. In one passage, he clearly identifies himself as part of the Egyptian tradition, as distinct from the Jewish tradition: ‘Thus the first man is called Thoth by us, and Adam by those peoples’. Elsewhere he speaks of Jewish alchemists as imitators of Egyptian alchemy. In short, while Zosimos does regard Jewish alchemy as a genuine initiatory tradition, which has transmitted important alchemical wisdom, he also insists that it is derivative of the Egyptian tradition, to which he himself belongs. His reverence for Maria and Jewish alchemy, and his interests in esoteric Judaism, are best explained as reflecting the cosmopolitan outlook of an Alexandrian philosopher. It is in terms of this syncretic outlook—

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3 The passages from the corpus of Zosimos relating to Maria are collected and discussed by Patai, *Jewish Alchemists*, ch. 6. However, this source should be used with caution. Patai bases his translations directly on the French translation of Berthelot, which in turn is based on the often unreliable Greek text established by Ruelle. See also note 6 infra.

4 Patai, *Jewish Alchemists*, 56.


6 ‘Thus the Jews, imitating [the Egyptians] (hoi Ioudaioi autous mimêsamenoi), deposited the opportune tinctures in their subterranean chambers, along with their secrets of initiation . . .’, *Final Quittance* 5.26-27, as edited by Festugière, *Révélation I*, appendix 1, 363-368. Raphael Patai claims that for Zosimos ‘the Jews’ knowledge of alchemy was greater and more reliable than that of any other people, including even the Egyptians’ (p. 12). But this assertion is based on a faulty translation of the opening lines of *The True Book of Sophe the Egyptian*. Following the edition of Berthelot-Ruelle, Patai reads: ‘There are two sciences and two wisdoms: that of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews, which latter is rendered more sound by divine justice’ (Patai, *Jewish Alchemists*, 52). Though the Greek is admittedly tortuous, this is an implausible reconstruction. Much better is Festugière’s suggestion (*Révélation I*, 261, note 2), which Patai evidently does not know: ‘The true book of Sophe the Egyptian and the God of the Hebrews, Lord of the Powers, Sabbaoth (for there are two sciences and two wisdoms, that of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews), is more solid than divine justice’. The reference to the two sciences is parenthetical, and that which is ‘more solid than divine justice’ is just the *Book of Sophe* itself.