RECONSTRUCTING THE OPHITE DIAGRAM

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The so-called 'Diagram of the Ophiani' known to us through Origen (contra Celsum VI, 24-38) has for many years been cited by scholars as the classic account of the Gnostic-initiatory ascent through the spheres. Considerable attention has been lavished on various of its features—in particular the formulae by which the archons are to be vanquished—and the passage has several times been translated. It would therefore seem regrettable if, as G. BORNKAMM concluded, it is impossible from the description to gain a totally clear picture of the Diagram as a whole 1). It is true that the problem is aggravated by our having two descriptions, one from Celsus and the other by Origen, of what may not be exactly the same figure, confusingly compressed into a single passage 2). A more or less acceptable division of the material was proposed by R. M. GRANT in his 'split translation' 3). But it is clear that if the systems are not absolutely identical, the implied theology of the Diagram matches quite acceptably the doctrines of the Ophites reported by Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. I, 30), making it fairly certain that Origen has rightly identified the group which used it 4). I am also inclined to accept that our descriptions relate to two copies of the same drawing, with only minor discrepancies between them. Proceeding on similar assumptions, an attempt was made (some considerable time ago now) by T. HOPFNER to reconstruct the Diagram from Origen and certain parallel ideas from elsewhere 5).

1) BORNKAMM, art. 'Ophiten' in Pauly-Wissowa XVIII, i, 654- (657).
5) HOPFNER, 'Das Diagramm der Ophiten' in Charisteria Alois Rzach (Reichenberg 1930) pp. 86-98. He derived some of his ideas from LEISEGANG, who in the third edition of his Die Gnosis (Freiburg 1941) revised his own partial reconstruction in the light of HOPFNER's article—see his p. 170 n. 3. I do not feel called upon to discuss the earlier efforts of J. MATTER in his Histoire Critique du Gnosticisme (1843), or GIRAUD in his 'Dissertation on
His reconstruction was apparently accepted by H. Chadwick, who included it in his translation ; nor have more recent scholars questioned it. It is certainly valuable as a pioneering attempt, but it lacks what seem to me some of the essential features of a 'mystic diagram'. Such figures undertake to manifest to the initiated the truths and interconnections of the spiritual worlds through mathematical-geometrical proportions. Ideally, a kabbalistic diagram (in the widest sense) shows an utterly interdependent system of structural ratios, where no single measurement is left to chance. In contrast Hopfner’s version often shows a disquieting arbitrariness: there is no necessary connection between the sizes of the larger and smaller circles, and the latter are disposed with an unpleasing asymmetry. Moreover his drawing does not always fit the descriptive text very closely, and he plainly failed to recognize allusions to a number of figures familiar to any reader of the somewhat later kabbalistic works proper. It seems to me worthwhile, therefore, to make another attempt at reproducing the Diagram, especially since we may call upon some of the recently recovered Sethian writings from Nag Hammadi for parallels and confirmation at some points, notably when we come to discuss the implicit system or theology behind its network of circles and lines.

I. The Planetary Angels and the Hayyoth ha-Kodesh

It will prove most convenient to begin at the beginning of Origen’s own description, and consider some of the details before enquiring into the general shape of the Diagram.

He says (VI, 25): έν ὧν διαγραφῇ κύκλων, i.e. it included a drawing of these circles, not that it consisted of them. As Hopfner rightly saw, they make up only one area of the Diagram; having once seen this, I do not fully appreciate the motive behind his additional ‘planimetric’ drawing in which the whole Diagram is demonstrated revolving around the earth. There is no evidence the Ophites’ (1884), as their positive results were taken up into later attempts, culminating in Hopfner’s complete reconstruction, along with some of their errors.


7) It is cited e.g. by W. Fauth in his thorough study of Seth-Typhon, Onoel, und der eselsköpfige Sabaoth', Oriens Christianus 57 (1973), 79-120 (97).

8) As it is taken in Grant, Anthology p. 85.