THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN (NHC II, 1) AND THE GRAECO-EGYPTIAN ALCHEMICAL LITERATURE

BY

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ABSTRACT: The hermetic science known to us under the modern term of ‘alchemy’ was practised by Egyptian and Jewish ‘lovers of wisdom’ in the first centuries of the Christian era, as a sacred and mystical art of transformation, regeneration and ultimately of salvation, applied to the human soul as well as to the material elements, especially metals. The remaining Greek writings of these philosophers were collected and edited in 1888 by M. Berthelot, as the Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs. To the few scholars who, in the first half of the last century, devoted their attention to the study of these challenging texts, it appeared that there were links between the salvific doctrine of the alchemists and that of the so-called Gnostics described by the Church Fathers. The purpose of the present article is, first, to introduce the reader to the alchemical literature and, second, to demonstrate that not only the doctrinal, but also the ‘practical’ side of alchemy shows significant similarities with the rituals of both ‘Valentinians’ and ‘Sethians’ communities, better known to us since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to a corpus of ancient Greek source texts which, more than a century after its first edition, still remains today a kind of terra incognita. This corpus is the collection of Graeco-Egyptian alchemical writings, first edited in 1888 by M. Berthelot, under...
the title _Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs_. This is a very significant piece of scholarship, consisting of approximately 450 pages of Greek text, but since it was poorly edited and the material itself is quite difficult to survey, it was ignored by most scholars of the humanities. In the first half of the twentieth century, a few scholars did, however, make fruitful attempts at exploring parts of the corpus; nonetheless, their works have been neglected in the decades that followed. No doubt, they deserve to be re-examined for their possible value to current research being carried out in the fields of Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism. Two volumes of a projected twelve volume critical edition of this corpus have already appeared in the French “Collection Budé.”

We must hope that this series, with its commentaries, will make the texts more accessible and attractive to scholars in general, and to Nag Hammadi research in particular. The links between “alchemy”—which is a Hermetic “discipline”—and Gnosticism have long been recognized, and it is not my intention here to address this topic in a general way. It may, however, prove useful to mention some of the most evident reasons for relating the collection of alchemical writings to the Nag Hammadi Library. First, the original redaction was done at approximately the same time and

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