

Stalking Those Elusive Ophites: The Ophite Diagrams Reconsidered

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Frederik Wisse's seminal article "Stalking those Elusive Sethians" (1981) provided a much-needed corrective for a growing tendency among scholars of Gnosticism to see Sethianism not only as a descriptor covering a set of documents with shared characteristics, but much more as a coherent school that, presumably, we could locate in a particular place and time.¹ Famously, Wisse likened the search for the Sethians to the historical quest for the mythical unicorn, that hybrid beast visible only from textual, mythological traditions but otherwise unsubstantiated through material and zoological record.² The Sethians, he suggested, were in danger of being hypostasized, conjured into existence from a limited set of heresiological fictions.

Following Wisse's lead, in this essay I will investigate two related documents that scholars have too quickly classified. The documents—actually two descriptions of diagrams—were long ago attributed to a group known as the Ophians or Ophites, since they revered the snake (*ophis*) of Genesis 3. My suspicion is that the Ophites have similarly been "conjured" out of heresiological fictions.

My aim in this paper is to re-place the "Ophite" diagrams into different contexts, intellectual, historical, and ritual. The diagrams share their imagery, language, and function with a variety of other source documents from the second century, many of them classified by modern scholars—problematically, I would say—as "Sethian." But neither label—"Sethian" or "Ophite"—helps us to unlock the mystery of these documents. More broadly, the diagrams have often been heralded as syncretistic exercises in Christian magic or "mystery religions," with Orphic, Mithraic, and Egyptian elements. I argue here, by contrast, that the diagrams reveal a system of cosmic salvation at once coherent and consistent, with its roots in distinctive ways of interpreting Jewish ascent traditions. Nevertheless, this cultural "borrowing" of Jewish elements is superficial rather than profound, operating subversively to create a *bricolage* of prior traditions, drawn out of context to yield an entirely new product.

The Ophites

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