

THE THEOLOGY OF ORPHEUS

G.R.S. Mead

From *Orpheus* (1896)¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library, George Robert Stowe Mead (1863-1933) used all of the existing materials available to him to provide one of the best pictures of ancient esoteric roots in his day. His interests and work included studies in Gnosticism, Hermetism, and great mystic figures of antiquity, such as Simon Magus, Apollonius of Tyana, and Orpheus. He served as Madame Blavatsky's private secretary from 1889 until her death in 1891. Combining the skills of scholar and esoteric practitioner, Mead brought vigor and illumination to all of the subjects he dealt with. In this introduction to the vast subject of Orpheus and Orphism, he reminds us that there is much in Orpheus beyond the tragic tale of his loss of Eurydice. Taking the sometimes complex and confusing fragments of the various Orphic Theogonies that have come down to us, he translates this evolution of the Gods and Goddesses into a form that is easier for the modern day person to understand.

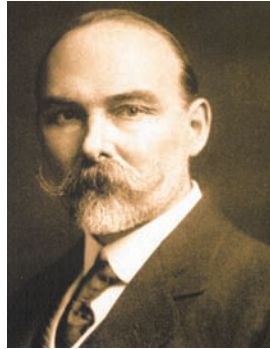
Who has not heard the romantic legend of Orpheus and Eurydice? The polished verse of Virgil, in his *Georgics* (4:452-527), has immortalized the story, told by "Caerulean Proteus." But few know the importance that mythical Orpheus plays in Grecian legends, nor the many arts and sciences attributed to him by fond posterity. Orpheus was the father of the pan-hellenic faith, the great theologer, the man who brought to Greece the sacred rites of secret worship and taught the mysteries of nature and of God.

To him the Greeks confessed they owed religion, the arts, the sciences both sacred and profane; and, therefore, in dealing with the subject I have proposed to myself in this essay, it will be necessary to treat of a theology "which was first mystically and symbolically promulgated by Orpheus, afterwards disseminated enigmatically through images by Pythagoras, and in the last place scientifically unfolded by Plato and his genuine disciples"²; or to use the words of Proclus, the last great master of Neoplatonism, "all the theology of the Greeks comes from Orphic mystagogy," that is to say, initiation into the mysteries.³ Not only did the learned of the Pagan world ascribe the sacred science to the same source, but also the instructed of the Christian fathers.⁴

The Science of Divine Things

It must not however, be supposed that Orpheus was regarded as the "inventor" of theology, but rather as the transmitter of the science of divine things to the Grecian world, or even as the reformer of an existing cult that, even in the early times before the legendary Trojan era, had already fallen into decay. The well-informed among the ancients recognized a common basis in the inner rites of the then existing religions, and even the least mystical of writers admit a "common bond of discipline," as, for instance, Lobeck, who demonstrates that the ideas of the Egyptians, Chaldaens, Orphics, and Pythagoreans were derived from a common source.⁵

[Thomas] Taylor says that the Grecian theology was first "mystically and symbolically" promulgated by Orpheus, and so at



G.R.S. Mead (1863-1933)
(Photo by Elliott & Fry, 1916).

once goes to the root of the whole matter. To understand that theology, therefore, we must treat it from the point of view of mysticism and symbolism, for no other method is capable of extracting its meaning. Moreover, in this we only follow the methods and opinions of its own adepts, for, as Proclus says: “The whole theology of the Greeks is the child of Orphic mystagogy; Pythagoras being first taught the ‘orgies’ of the gods [‘orgies’ signifying ‘burstings forth,’ or ‘emanations,’ from *orgao*] by Aglaophemus, and next Plato receiving the perfect science concerning such things from the Pythagorean and Orphic writings.”⁶

These symbolical Orphic fables have for ages baffled the intelligence of rationalistic literalists, and shocked the prudery of ecclesiastics who, erroneously regarding the Jewish myths as actual realities, have fallen into the same error with regard to the fables of Orpheus.

Nonnus states the simple fact in saying: “Orpheus describes the series of powers, and the modes, energizings and powers of being, by means of fabulous symbols; and these fables he composes not without shameful obscenity.”⁷ This “shameful obscenity,” refers to the stories of rape, incest, dismemberment, etc., of the Gods, so familiar to us in Grecian mythology; all of which things would be highly improper, if recited of men or anthropomorphic entities, but which are at once removed from such a gross interpretation, when understood as symbolical representations of the emanations of divine and lesser powers, and the interactions of occult natures. It is contrary to the most elementary ideas of justice to ascribe thoughts and intentions to the ancient makers of these myths, which only exist in the prurient minds and ignorant misconceptions of posterity.

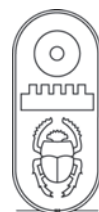
Thus we find Proclus writing, “the Orphic method aimed at revealing divine things by means of symbols, a method common to all writers of divine lore (*theomythias*)”⁸; and Plutarch, “formerly the

wisdom-lovers exposed their doctrines and teachings in poetical fictions, as, for example, Orpheus and Hesiod and Parmenides”⁹; and Julian, the so-called “apostate,” “many of the philosophers and theologians were myth-makers, as Orpheus,”¹⁰ etc. In the same Oration, he continues, “concerning the myths of the Mysteries which Orpheus handed down to us, in the very things which in these myths are most incongruous, he drew nearest the truth. For just in proportion as the enigma is more paradoxical and wonderful, so does he warn us to distrust the appearance, and seek for the hidden meaning.”¹¹

Philostratus also asserts that, in reading the disputes among the Gods in the Iliad, we must remember that the poet “was philosophizing in the Orphic manner”¹²; and Plutarch tells us that, the most ancient philosophers have covered up their teachings in a lattice-work of fables and symbols, especially instancing the Orphic writings and the Phrygian myths—“that ancient natural science both among the Greeks and foreigners was for the most part hidden in myths—an occult and mysterious theology containing an enigmatical and hidden meaning—is clear from the Orphic poems and the Egyptian and Phrygian treatises.”¹³

The Monadology of Orpheus

Another important point to bear in mind in studying the Orphic theology, is that the whole system is fundamentally a monadology, and if this is not clearly seized, much difficulty will be experienced in fitting the parts into the whole. The first writer who drew attention to this important tenet in modern times was Thomas Taylor, and so far as I know, no scholar has added to his researches. I shall therefore append here the most important passages in his books on this subject, advising my readers to carefully think out what he says, and this not in a material but in a mystic manner.



“Another and still more appropriate cause may be assigned of each of the celestial Gods being called by the appellation of so many other deities, which is this, that, according to the Orphic theology, each of the planets is fixed in a luminous ethereal sphere called a *holotes*, or *wholeness*.¹⁴

“In consequence of this analogy, each of these planetary spheres contains a multitude of Gods, who are the satellites of the leading divinity of the sphere, and subsist conformably to his characteristics.”¹⁵

These “wholenesses,” therefore, are something totally different from the physical planets, which are simply their symbols in the starry vault. Their hierarchies have each their appropriate dominant “colour,” and also their sub-colours contained in the dominant. The whole has to do with the “radiant egg” or “envelope” of the mystic universe, which has its correspondence in man. This is the basis of real astrology, the knowledge of which has been lost.

And again:

“In each of the celestial spheres, the whole sphere has the relation of a monad, but the cosmocrators (or planets) are the leaders of the multitude in each. For in each a number analogous to the choir of the fixed stars subsists with appropriate circulations.”¹⁶

Here we have the idea of every monad being a mirror of every other monad in the universe, and having the power of giving to and receiving from every other monad. The monad, as monad, is the “same,” or Self; the cosmocrators, or “planets,” in each are characterized as the “other.” The perfect number is *ten*. The triad contains the intellectual hypostases; the hebdomad the formative or demiurgic powers.

From this it follows that each of these “planets,” or “spheres,” contains its appropriate powers, which are the same in the various

spheres, and only differ from each other by having a predominance of the characteristic of any particular sphere.

As Taylor says: “From this sublime theory it follows that every sphere contains a Jupiter, Neptune, Vulcan, Vesta, Minerva, Mars, Ceres, Juno, Diana, Mercury, Venus, Apollo, in short every deity, each sphere conferring on these Gods the peculiar characteristic of its nature; so that, for instance, in the Sun they all possess a solar property, in the Moon a lunar one, and so of the rest.”¹⁷

And so in his explanation of terms prefixed to his translation of Proclus *On the Theology of Plato*¹⁸ he defines the monad in divine natures as “that which contains *distinct*, but at the same time *profoundly-united* multitude, and which produces a multitude exquisitely united to itself. But in the sensible universe, the first monad is the world itself, which comprehends in itself all the multitude of which it is the cause (in conjunction with the cause of all). The second monad is the inerratic sphere. In the third place, the spheres of the planets succeed, each of which is also a monad, comprehending an appropriate multitude. And in the fourth and last place are the spheres of the elements, which are in a similar manner monads. All these monads likewise are denominated *wholenesses*, and have a perpetual subsistence.”

Taylor reproduces this passage from a note in his *Theoretic Arithmetic*,¹⁹ printed four years previously to his translation of Proclus on *The Theology of Plato*. He bases his definition principally on Proclus and Damascius. Seeing also that man is a mirror of the universe, man contains all these powers in himself potentially. If it were not so, the possibility of the attainment of wisdom and final union with the Divine would be an empty dream. What these “powers” are may be seen from the following outline of Orphic Theogony.

Orpheus

CHART OF THE ORPHIC THEOGONY



Unaging Time

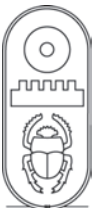
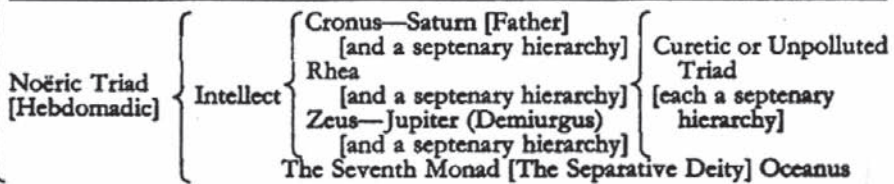
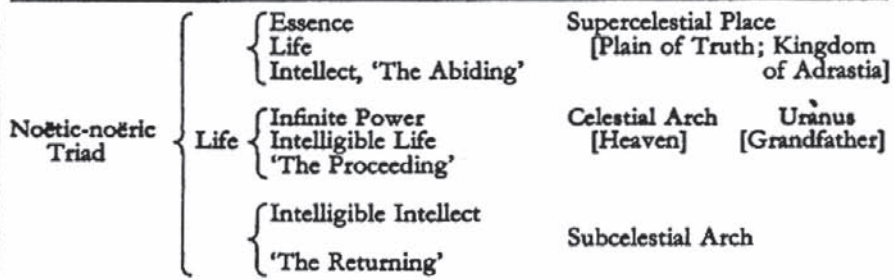
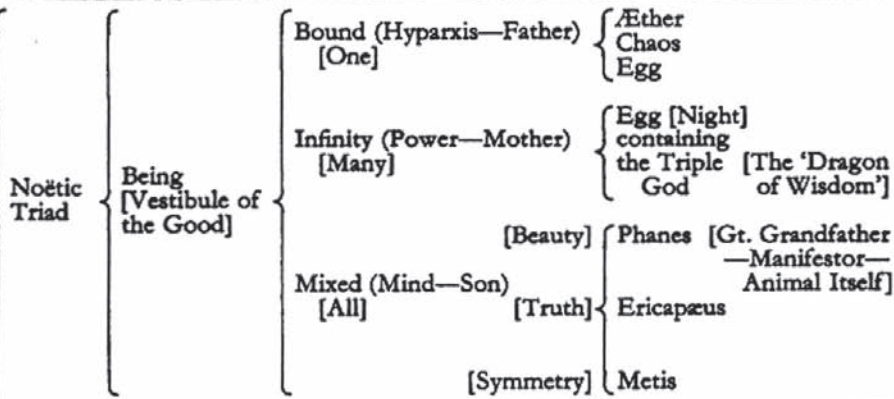
The
Primordial
Triad

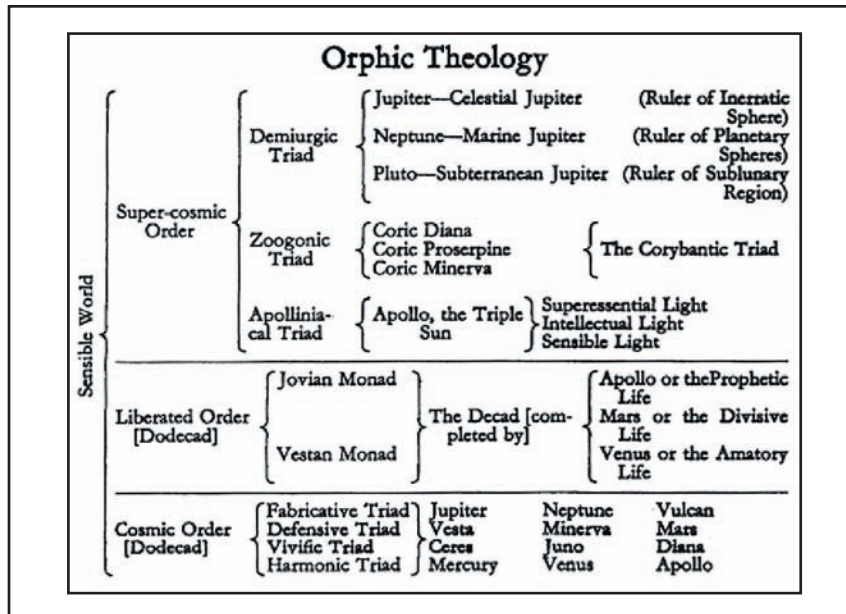
The
One-Many-
All



{ Universal Good
Universal Soul
Universal Mind

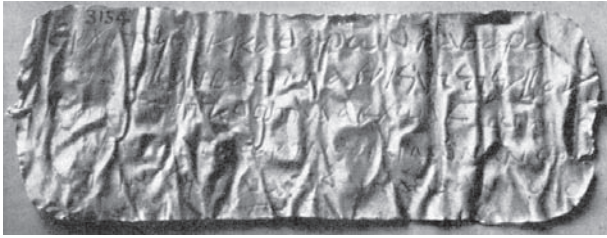
Super-sensible World





Endnotes

- ¹ G.R.S. Mead, *Orpheus* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896), 9-10, 55-60.
- ² Thomas Taylor's translation of Proclus's *On the Theology of Plato*, Introduction (London: Printed for the Author, 1816), l.
- ³ C.A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* (Regimontii Prussorum: Brothers Borntraeger, 1829), 723.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 466.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 946.
- ⁶ Quoted by Lobeck, 723, who unfortunately gives no reference, and so far I have not been able to discover the passage in Proclus. Ed. Note: The passage is in Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, i, 6 (*Testamenta*, 250 in Otto Kern, ed., *Orphicorum Fragmenta* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1922 {1963}]).
- ⁷ Nonnus, *Exposition of a Second Inveictive*, 100:18, 526 (4th-5th centuries CE).
- ⁸ Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, 1:4, 9.
- ⁹ Plutarch, *On the Pythian Oracle*, 18.
- ¹⁰ Julian II, Emperor, *Oration*, 7, 215b.
- ¹¹ Julian II, 217.
- ¹² Philostratus, *Heroicus* 2, 693.
- ¹³ Plutarch, *On Daedalus*, Fragment 9, 1, 754.
- ¹⁴ Each of these spheres is called a *wholeness*, because it contains a multitude of *partial* "animals" co-ordinate with it, because it is a part with a total subsistence, and is analogous to the sphere of the fixed stars. cf. Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*, with Macrobius's *Commentaries*.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Taylor, *The Hymns of Orpheus* (London: Printed for the Author, 1792), xxviii.
- ¹⁶ See Proclus, *On Timaeus*, 2, 270, where the theory is much further developed.
- ¹⁷ Taylor, *Hymns of Orpheus*, xxxii.
- ¹⁸ Taylor, *On the Theology of Plato*, 1xxx.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Taylor, *The Theoretic Arithmetic of the Pythagoreans* (London: Printed for the Author, 1816), 5.



Orphic Gold Tablet found at Cecelia Secundina



Orpheus Petitions before Hades, 1591, illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

aphorisms, prayers, and instructions for the departed such as: “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grand me cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory.”⁵

- Circa 340 BCE: During the reign of Philip II of Macedon, a Greek theologian writes a commentary on the Protoponos Theogony, showing very early evidence of textual analysis and sophisticated theological discussion, previously thought not to have existed before the Neoplatonists beginning in the third century CE. The papyrus scroll was burned as part of a funeral ritual, at Derveni in Macedonia, northern Greece.

3rd–1st Centuries BCE

- “Hieronyman Theogony” (third century) composed, harmonizing Orphic themes from the Protoponos Theogony with Stoicism and Hellenistic thought, showing Water to be the original element.
- The “Testament of Orpheus” (third-first centuries BCE), a Greek poem probably from the Jewish community in Alexandria,



Orpheus in a Roman Era Mosaic panel in Jerusalem.

makes Orpheus a disciple of Moses, who would eventually recant his paganism and adhere to the Mosaic God on his deathbed. This would be used by Jewish and Christian apologists in later years.

1st Century BCE–1st Century CE

- The classic version of the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was written by Virgil in his *Georgics* (29 BCE). In this now familiar story Eurydice is pursued by Aristeus, and is killed while fleeing him. Orpheus journeys to Hades to beg for her release. His art is so touching that permission is given, so long as he does not look back at her until they are out of Hades. At the last moment, he doubts, and turns to see her fade from his grasp.
- Ovid’s version of Orpheus and Eurydice is published in his *Metamorphoses* (8 CE).

2nd– 6th Centuries CE

- Pausanias (second century CE) says of Orpheus: “In my opinion Orpheus excelled his predecessors in the beauty of his verse, and reached a high degree of power because he was believed to have discovered mysteries, purification from sins, cures of diseases and means of averting divine wrath.”⁶

Building the Argo for the Voyage to the Golden Fleece. From the J. Hatzigeorgiou Collection.

