

# (DE)CONSTRUCTING AN AUTHORITATIVE NARRATIVE. THE CASE OF *THE LETTER OF ISIS*\*

LA (DE)CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN RELATO DE LEGITIMACIÓN:  
EL CASO DE LA *CARTA DE ISIS*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Letter of Isis to Horus* is a brief (and precious) piece of Greco-Egyptian alchemy. Beyond the technical interest of the processes it describes, its prologue is noteworthy for its intricate and surprising mixture of Greek, Hebrew, and Egyptian elements. In it, alchemy is presented as a secret knowledge of divine origin, which the goddess Isis received from an angel who fell in love with her. This preface is, therefore, a key element in the study of the discursive mech-

## RESUMEN

La así denominada *Carta de Isis a Horus* es una breve (y preciosa) pieza de la alquimia greco-egipcia. Más allá del interés técnico de los procesos alquímicos que describe, su importancia radica en el prólogo que introduce la parte técnica de este pequeño tratado, que sorprende por la intrincada mezcla de elementos griegos, hebreos y egipcios. Este prefacio es, por tanto, una pieza clave para el estudio de los argumentos y mecanismos discursivos

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anisms and arguments through which early alchemical tradition attempted to bestow authority on its writings and to justify the “Holy Art” label that is often conferred on this discipline. This article analyses these mechanisms and arguments according to the patterns around which this narrative was articulated.

empleados por la temprana tradición alquímica para dotar de autoridad a sus escritos y tratar de justificar su denominación de “Arte Sagrado”. Este artículo analiza dichos mecanismos y argumentos siguiendo los patrones narrativos en torno a los cuales se articuló este relato.

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**KEYWORDS**

Alchemy; Demotic Literature; Greco-Roman Egypt; Greco-Egyptian Magic; Greek Literature; Hermeticism; Rhetoric.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Alquimia; Egipto grecorromano; Hermetismo; Literatura demótica; Literatura griega; Magia greco-egipcia; Retórica.

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IN SPITE OF THE APPARENT REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN ALCHEMY in recent decades, to date, scholars have paid scant attention to one of the most ancient extant texts related to this discipline: *The Letter of Isis to Horus*. In fact, the most relevant study on this short treatise, a revised edition and commentary by Michèle Mertens (1983-1984), was never published (although it has recently been made public).<sup>1</sup> Some of Mertens' later articles,<sup>2</sup> however, exploit this study and its conclusions to analyse the *Letter* in a broader context of ritual and philosophical texts, such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Greek magical papyri, and Gnostic texts. Mertens' research showed that *The Letter of Isis to Horus* shares the same characteristic mixture of Greek, Jewish, and Egyptian ideas as these texts, and that this alchemical treatise is a key element in the analysis of the early interactions between alchemy and magico-religious beliefs. Nonetheless, our understanding of alchemy and, more specifically, of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy, has improved since the period in which Mertens' studies were conducted. Similarly, our knowledge of the Graeco-Egyptian ritual world has also experienced a quantitative and qualitative change. For this reason, a re-examination of *The Letter of Isis to Horus* is well worthwhile, as the recent work by Fabiana Lopes da Silveira has demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

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1. All Greek quotations from *The Letter of Isis* in this article are taken from Mertens' edition, which I also follow for the numbering of the text. Since September 2020, this edition has been freely available on the University of Liège website, see [https://explore.lib.uliege.be/permalink/32ULG\\_INST/1iujq0/alma990002612980502321](https://explore.lib.uliege.be/permalink/32ULG_INST/1iujq0/alma990002612980502321).

2. Mertens, 1988, 1989a, and 1989b.

3. Lopes da Silveira, 2022. This paper is a revised version of a chapter of her PhD dissertation: see Lopes da Silveira, 2020, pp. 33-90.

In keeping with the nature of the present volume, this analysis focuses on the narrative that frames this treatise and that justifies the divine origin of the alchemical knowledge contained within it. In order to avoid turning this article into a mere list of motifs and parallels, I propose to examine these elements in light of the chains of interconnections that they establish with each other. In this way, the parallels take on a meaning that goes beyond merely providing a textual precedent for the motifs present in the introduction to *The Letter*, helping us to establish the narrative patterns that structured the initial account of this alchemical treatise.

## 1. INTRODUCING THE TEXT

*The Letter of Isis to Horus* is the name by which modern scholars know a brief treatise originally entitled Ἴσις προφήτις τῷ υἱῷ αὐτῆς / τῷ υἱῷ Ὀρῷ, “Isis the *prophētis* to her son / to her son Horus”. The treatise is credited to the goddess Isis, which means that the actual author of the text is unknown to us. This places *The Letter* in the genre of *pseudepigrapha*. Two copies of the text with variants (hence the variation in title) have survived, compiled in the Byzantine manuscripts of the so-called *Greek Alchemical Corpus*.<sup>4</sup> In its current form, therefore, this text dates from the Byzantine period.<sup>5</sup> However, most scholars believe the composition date of the treatise, including its introductory narrative, is much earlier. The *terminus post quem* is determined by the paraphrase of Pseudo-Democritus’s aphorism in the text of the treatise (ll. 54-55). According to studies conducted by Matteo Martelli on the alchemical work credited to this author, it was not produced before the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE.<sup>6</sup> In turn, the quo-

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4. Ms. Paris. B.N. Gr. 2327, fol. 256r-258r (henceforth “version A”) and Ms. Paris. B.N. Gr. 2250, fol. 217r-223r (version B), see CAAG I, pp. 28-35 (I.XIII = version A; XIII<sup>bis</sup> = Version B).

5. Mertens (1988, pp. 9-10) points to the oath formula as an aspect of the text through which the Byzantine tradition would have left its mark. The reason was that the testimonies known at that time for ὀρκίζω σε εἰς + accusative dated from the 7<sup>th</sup> cent. onwards. However, its attestation in a formula almost identical to that contained in the first line of *The Letter*’s oath within the *Cyranides* (III 1, 22), which is roughly contemporary to *The Letter*, could suggest that it was extant, albeit rare, in early Imperial Roman time. I do not consider this fact to be indicative of an engagement between both texts, as suggested by Lopes da Silveira (2020, pp. 51-52), but rather proof of the diffusion and circulation of this adjuration/oath formula between contemporary Hermetic and magical circles (see below).

6. See Martelli, 2011, pp. 90-94. Martelli’s dating is based on both internal evidence, drawn from the four alchemical books of Pseudo-Democritus, and external data, provided by other ancient works. That said, the dating of the work of the alchemist Pseudo-Democritus is directly connected with the problematic identification of this author with Bolus of Mendes, a Hellenistic intellectual considered to be the author of part of the pseudepigraphic tradition attributed to Democritus of Abdera. However, despite the different dating of Bolus offered by modern scholars, they agree that he cannot be later than the 2<sup>nd</sup>

tation of some extracts from *The Letter* by Zosimos of Panopolis, who must have lived between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE, could provide the *terminus ante quem*.<sup>7</sup> This leads Mertens to locate the composition of this treatise at some point between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE.<sup>8</sup> The profusion of parallels between *The Letter of Isis* and hermetic and magical texts dated within this same time frame reaffirms this dating and the Egyptian provenance of the text.<sup>9</sup>

In the treatise, written in epistolary form, the Egyptian goddess Isis addresses her son, the god Horus, to instruct him on ἡ ἱερὰ τέχνη τῆς Αἰγύπτου, “the Holy Art of Egypt”, which is identified as “the preparation of gold and silver – τὴν τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευήν” (*i.e.* alchemy). The link between alchemy and Egypt has historical foundations: although some of the methods and technical expertise associated with alchemy can be traced back to Mesopotamia,<sup>10</sup> the multicultural crucible of Roman Egypt was likely the place where alchemy originated as an art distinct from craftwork. In fact, the earliest surviving texts and known authors of the alchemical tradition come from this milieu: Pseudo-Democritus (1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE) claims to have studied in Egypt (*Physika kai Mystika*, 1, 65 Martelli), and some later sources place him in Memphis (see n. 98, below); the tradition links Zosimos (late 3<sup>rd</sup> – early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE) to Panopolis,<sup>11</sup> an important cultural centre in the Thebaid, in Upper Egypt. In any case, he visited Memphis (*MA VII 8* Mertens) and stayed at Alexandria (*MA I 84* Mertens). His work also records that there were other alchemical circles active in his time, such as that of the Egyptian priest Neilos.<sup>12</sup> The names of other alchemists, such as Pibêchis, Pausiris, Pammenes, or Petasius, whose work has not been preserved, also indicate an Egyptian origin. Moreover, a number of papyri provide direct

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cent. BCE. This rules out his being the author of the alchemical work transmitted under the name of Pseudo-Democritus, which, as mentioned above, is dated from the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE, and not before. On this topic, see Gaillard-Seux, 2009; Martelli, 2011, pp. 99-114.

7. Mertens, 1983-1984, pp. 68-69 and 112.

8. Mertens, 1983-1984, p. 126. In later studies, Mertens (1988, p. 260; 1989a, p. 4) narrows down the dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and the early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE. Letrouit (1995, pp. 82 and 88), on the contrary, dates it to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cent. CE. However, Mertens (2006, p. 223, n. 54) refutes this dating, which does not consider version A of our text.

9. See the bibliography quoted in the previous note and, in general, the following discussion.

10. Oppenheim, 1966; Martelli & Rumor, 2014.

11. See Mertens, 1995, pp. xiii-xv. On the Egyptian background of Zosimos, see also the contributions of Marina Escolano-Poveda and Olivier Dufault in this volume.

12. As direct competitors of Zosimos, Neilos and his circle appeared repeatedly in his works, see, *e.g.* *On the Treatment of the Body of Magnēsia* (CAAG II 188-191, in *Chapters to Eusebeia*) and the Syriac version of Zosimos' seventh book *On the Letter Waw* (ed. and transl. in Martelli, 2017, p. 214). On the polemic between Zosimos and Neilos, see also Escolano-Poveda in this volume.

evidence of the practice of alchemy in Roman Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Notable among this direct evidence are the so-called Leiden and Stockholm alchemical papyri, two anonymous alchemical recipe collections dating from the early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, due to the profusion of sources linking the first stages of alchemy to Egypt, and because we are not aware of alchemical authors or works produced in places other than Egypt during this period or earlier, scholars locate the origin of alchemy in Roman Egypt and refer to this phase of this discipline's history as "Graeco-Egyptian alchemy". As will be shown, the textual parallels and the motifs of the initial narrative of *The Letter of Isis* support the idea that this treatise originates from this milieu.

It should be noted, however, that *The Letter of Isis* stands out among all the above-mentioned works for a particular idiosyncrasy. This relates less to the technical aspect of the described processes, which are very similar to those found in contemporary alchemical works, and more to its reference to alchemical activity as an art focused solely on "the preparation of gold and silver". This notion became predominant from the Byzantine period onwards, but a passage by Zosimos preserved in Syriac suggests that, even before the Byzantine period, the activity of some alchemical circles was focused on noble metals.<sup>15</sup> Graeco-Egyptian alchemy, by contrast, was characterised by a multidisciplinary interest that included, in addition to the treatment of metals, processes such as the production of textile dyes and the imitation of gemstones.<sup>16</sup> What interests me most at this point, however, is the peculiar narrative that frames the alchemical processes. This constitutes the introduction to the treatise, which is followed by a compilation of several recipes.

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13. *P.Laur.* inv. 22011 and *P.Gen.* inv. 127 (unknown provenance; 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE) reveal the multidisciplinary interest in dyeing methods characteristic of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy. However, given the complexity of making a clear distinction between alchemy and artisanal techniques in the case of fragmentary testimonies, the following papyri may also be added to this list, with all due reservations: *P.Oxy.* 467 (metallurgical recipes; Oxyrhynchus, late 1<sup>st</sup>-early 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE); *P.Iand.* 85 (textile dyeing; unknown provenance, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE); and the Demotic papyrus *P.Wien.* D 6321+6687 (textile dyeing; mid- or second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE, see Quack, 2021). The dating of all these papyri is based on palaeographical criteria.

14. Dating based on palaeographical criteria. For the edition of the Greek text, with (French) translation and commentary, see Halleux, 1981. Blanco Cesteros (forthcoming) provides an exhaustive analysis of the reasons for its alchemical classification.

15. Syriac text edited and translated in Martelli, 2014, p. 12 and pp. 18-20 respectively.

16. On Graeco-Egyptian alchemy, see e.g. Martelli, 2014 and 2016.

“Isis the *Prophētis* to her son Horus.

O son, as you were about to leave and fight a battle against the unfaithful Typhon for the kingdom of your father, I went to Hormanouthis <...> (city, sanctuary?) of the Holy Art of Egypt – ἱερᾶς τέχνης Αἰγύπτου – where I spent a long time.

According to the succession of the convenient times – κατὰ δὲ τὴν τῶν καιρῶν παραχώρησιν – and to the necessary course of the spherical movement, one of those living in the first firmament, one of the angels – ἓνα τῶν ἀγγέλων – after looking at me from above, came with the desire to have sexual intercourse with me. When he arrived and started to approach, I did not give in, because I wanted to learn the preparation of gold and silver – τὴν τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευήν. After I asked him this question, he told me that he was not allowed to reveal this – οὐκ ἔφη ὁ αὐτὸς ἐφίεσθαι περὶ τούτου ἐξειπεῖ – because of the paramountcy of these secrets – διὰ τὴν τῶν μυστηρίων ὑπερβολήν – but (he told me) that the next day his superior, the angel *Amnaēl*, would come, and that he would be able to provide a response to (my) enquiry into these secrets. He told me about the sign that he (*i.e.* *Amnaēl*) had on his head, and that he would show (me?) an unpitched, ceramic vessel filled with clear water. He wanted to tell the truth.

The next day, his superior *Amnaēl* appeared, when the sun was in the middle of its course, and came down. Taken by the same desire for me, he did not await, but he hastened to get what he came for; but I was not less focused on what I was searching for. He longed for it, but I did not give myself and I was able to curb his desire until he showed me the sign on his head – τὸ σημεῖον τὸ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς – and conveyed to me the mysteries I was looking for without malevolence and faithfully – τὴν τῶν ζητουμένων μυστηρίων παράδοσιν ἀφθόνως<sup>17</sup> καὶ ἀληθῶς.

So, finally, (he) showed me the sign and began to reveal the mysteries, giving me the instructions and the concession oaths – ἐπὶ παραγγελίας καὶ ὄρκους ἐκχωρήσας:

I make you swear by the heaven and the earth, the light and the darkness.

I make you swear by the fire, the water, the air and the soil.

I make you swear by the height of heaven, the earth and the depth of the Tartarus.

I make you swear by Hermes and Anubis, the barking of Cerberus and the Guardian-Snake.

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17. This adverb literally means “without envy, free from envy”; see *LSJ*, s.v. “ἄφθονος”. However, in this context, as will be shown in Section 5, n. 133, below, it refers rather to the divine being acting without malevolence.

I make you swear by that passage-boat and the sailor of the Acheron.  
I make you swear by the Three Necessities, (their) whips and swords.

After administering this oath to me, he ordered me not to pass (this knowledge) on to anyone except my son and legitimate offspring – παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ μεταδιδόναι εἰ μὴ μόνον τέκνω καὶ φίλῳ γνησίῳ –, so that I may be you and you may be me<sup>18</sup>

A perceptive reader will quickly identify many elements in this narrative that act as rhetorical devices designed to imbue the technical knowledge of this treatise with authority and prestige.<sup>19</sup> Firstly, the revelation of the alchemical art is set in a mythical time (when Horus was fighting against his uncle Typhon, after the death of Osiris). The angelic origin of this knowledge and the figure of Isis legitimise the content of this treatise (*i.e.* alchemy) and elevate it to the “divine” or “sacred” (it comes from the angels and is transmitted to a goddess). In accordance with this motif, alchemical knowledge is also given the status of *mystērion* (μυστήριον), a knowledge restricted to the initiates. To reaffirm it, its revelation is preceded by an oath of secrecy. The epistolary form chosen was also a common rhetorical device in Hellenistic and Roman pseudepigrapha.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Mertens, 1983-1984, pp. 128-129 = CAAG II, pp. 28-29. Up to the oath, the translation of the Greek text mainly follows Martelli (2014, p. 8), except where the translation required some refining to better reflect the Greek or the sense of the text. The translation of the oath and subsequent lines is mine.

19. Compare, for instance, with those identified by Jacco Dieleman (2005, pp. 254-276) in connection with Greek magical papyri.

20. The use of the epistolary form with a didactic aim – *Lehrbriefen* – is widely attested in Antiquity, not only to develop narratives (*e.g.* the *Letter of Pseudo-Aristeas*) and to discuss philosophical or ethical issues (as Cicero’s *Letters*), but also to expose technical matters (see Langslow, 2007). To take a case in point, some of the alchemist Zosimos’ production is constituted by letters to his disciple Theosebeia, in which the alchemist discusses different aspects of the alchemical art supposedly in response to questions from his addressee. There is also a very popular variant of the treatise in epistolary form that employs a prefatory letter to introduce a technical exposition of knowledge or even recipes (Types A and B of the classification established by Langslow [2007, p. 216], both with several subtypes depending on the epistolary formal markers used). Famous scientific examples can be found from Hellenistic times onwards (see Langslow, 2007, pp. 218-219). The *Letter of Isis* belongs to this stylistic trend, since, in terms of content, it is actually a recipe collection not dissimilar to those in the anonymous alchemical papyri of Leiden and Stockholm. Other examples of recipes introduced by pseudepigraphic letters are found in Graeco-Egyptian magical handbooks: *The Letter of the Sacred Scribe Pnouthis to Keryx* (PGM I 42-194, 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE); *The Letter of Nephotes to the Pharaoh Psammetichos* (PGM IV 154-286, 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE); and *The Letter of Pitys to King Ostanos* (PGM IV 2006-2125, 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE). The use of imperatives and second-person verb forms in recipes and magical formularies is consistent with the epistolary second-person address, thus it was very easy to combine the recipe literature with a prefatory letter to give a didactic flavour to the whole. Through this “packaging” a collection of anonymous recipes not only acquired the status of a treatise, but, crucially, an aura of prestige, see Dieleman, 2005, p. 270. However,



This literary format became very popular in Antiquity because of its suitability for examining specific issues, and its ability to disseminate new texts under the name of a certain authority, thus ensuring their survival.<sup>21</sup> To further our research, we must ask ourselves what guided the choices of the *Letter's* author in terms of characters and narrative motifs – taking into account the great variety of those existing in the contemporary tradition – and what they tell us about the text.

The way in which individual motifs are combined allows us to establish three structural narrative patterns: (i) that of the angelic revelation of celestial wisdom, which serves as the fundamental framework of the narrative; (ii) the stock-theme of the goddess Isis as the receptacle of secret knowledge, which she passes on to her son Horus; and (iii) that of the initiation into esoteric knowledge through a revelation. I will discuss each in turn in order to structure the following discussion and to avoid becoming lost in the plethora of elements of this story.

## 2. THE ANGELIC ORIGIN OF THE ALCHEMICAL ART

The first element of this narrative that catches the reader's attention is, undoubtedly, the mixture of figures from different cultures: Isis, an Egyptian divinity, interacts with certain beings referred to in our text as "angels" (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*). *The Letter* describes these beings as corporeal entities subject to passions, organized in hierarchies and inhabiting heavenly spheres. This image, although far removed from the one proposed by Christian theology, corresponds to some of the ways in which Hebrew angels were conceptualised in Antiquity, above all in the Old Testament pseudepigrapha, an important stream of Second Temple Jewish literature, and Gnosticism.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the name *Amnaēl*, attested only once in a late magical text,<sup>23</sup> clearly features the semitic term 'Ēl ("god, divinity"), which was often used for the composition of angelic names (e.g., *Gabrī' ēl* [Gabriel], *Mīkā' ēl* [Michael], *Rēpā' ēl* [Raphael], etc.).<sup>24</sup> Despite the outstanding scarcity of parallels, *Amnaēl* could be related to the name

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within these conventions, *The Letter* also leaves room for originality (e.g. in the use of a divine sender and recipient), as Lopez da Silveira (2020, pp. 36-41) rightly points out.

21. These reasons were pointed out by Sykutris (1931, col. 205), and remain valid among modern scholars, who continue to regard Sykutris' work as a seminal text on the epistolary genre.

22. See Scopello, 2018 and Ratzon, 2021.

23. The name occurs in a 19<sup>th</sup>-cent. Ethiopic manuscript containing magical prayers (*P.Abbad.* 107, fol. 8b). See Mertens, 1989b, p. 389 and n. 33.

24. In her study, Mertens (1983-1984, p. 77) reviews the different etymologies that have been proposed for *Amnaēl*, concluding that Hebrew etymology does not satisfactorily explain the first element of this name.

*Anaēl*, attested in various angelic lists from magical texts.<sup>25</sup> Due to the fluidity of words and names in the magical tradition, one wonders whether *Amnaēl* and *Anaēl* are not simply transcript variants (or variants caused by error) of another angelic name: *Ananēl* or *Ananiel* (עננאל), the 14<sup>th</sup> Watcher of the twenty leaders of the 200 Fallen Angels, mentioned in the Ethiopian version of an Old Testament apocryphal known as the *Book of Enoch* (6.7 Knibb, 1978).<sup>26</sup> The link between our alchemical treatise and the *Book of Enoch* is not without foundation; the introduction of *The Letter* develops the germ of a narrative found in the initial part of this text, precisely in the section known as the *Book of Watchers* (= *1Enoch* 1-36). The Greek version that is most faithful to the original Aramaic text is preserved by the Greek author Syncellos.<sup>27</sup> It narrates how some heavenly angels descended, seduced by the beauty of mortal women, whom they took as wives and to whom they passed on certain celestial knowledge:

“These (*i.e.* the leaders of the heavenly angels) and all the rest (of the Watchers) took for themselves wives in AM 1170, and they began to defile themselves with them up to the Flood. And they bore for them three races. First, the great giants. Then the giants begot the *Napheleim*, and to the *Napheleim* were born *Elioud* and they were increasing in accordance with their greatness. And they taught themselves and their wives the uses of potions and spells. First, *Azaēl*, the tenth of the leaders, taught them to make swords and armours and every instrument of war and how to work the metals of the earth and gold, how to make them into adornments for their wives, and silver. He showed them also the use of cosmetics and beautifying the face, the precious stones<sup>28</sup> and the colouring tinctures. And the sons of men did this for themselves and their daughters and they transgressed and led astray the righteous. And there was great impiety on the earth. And they made their ways corrupt. And their chief *Semiazas* taught them [[to be

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25. See Mertens 1989b, pp. 388-389.

26. For a detailed discussion on the canonical status (and history) of this text among different religions and churches, see Lopes da Silveira, 2020, pp. 132-33. As for its dating, since the text is specifically known in the Hellenistic period, but not before, scholars date its composition to c. the early Hellenistic period. The text was originally composed in Aramaic and then translated into Greek. The Greek version preceded and served as the basis for the later Ethiopic version. For a general discussion on the different versions, their dating and how they relate to each other, see Knibb, 2009, pp. 17-35 and 36-55.

27. See Knibb, 2009, p. 39.

28. Regarding τούς ἐκλέκτους λίθους, I gave myself permission to adjust Adler and Tuffin’s version, which translates this as “the choice stones”. Λίθοι ἐκλεκτοί is an Old Testament fixed formula for referring to precious stones (*2Esd* 5:8; *Is* 28:16 and 54:12). It is logical, therefore, to assume that, here, the Greek translation of the *Book of Watchers* is trying to emulate the style of the Old Testament and that λίθοι ἐκλεκτοί simply means “precious stones” and not “the chosen stones” or “the special stones”.

objects of wrath against reason]] [enchantments], and the roots of plants of the earth. The eleventh, *Pharmaros*, taught them the uses of potions, spells, lore, and the remedies for spells. The ninth taught them the study of the stars. The fourth taught astrology. The eighth taught divination (...).<sup>29</sup>

This account is actually based on *Gen* 6:1-2, according to which there was a time when angels, seduced by the beauty of mortal women, descended from heaven to take them as wives and cohabit with mortals on Earth.<sup>30</sup> Because God could not allow the heavenly essence to mix with the mortal, and because of the wickedness of men, God decided to send the Flood (*Gen* 6:7). *Genesis* does not mention any exchange of knowledge between angels and mortals; this motif, as far as we know, appears for the first time in the Enochian account, which points to this interchange as the reason for the disgrace of these angels and mankind.

As for the revealed wisdom, the Enochian account identifies it as very specific knowledge. This includes potions and spells (*i.e.* magic), metalworking, the preparation and use of cosmetics, and the use of tinctures, herbalist knowledge, the study of the stars, astronomy, astrology, and so on. Although the different versions of the *Book of Watchers* vary slightly in the arts included in this list and their number, they all comprise a range of technical expertise included in the ancient category of *ars*. At the same time, their negative connotations implied in the text (as a cause of moral corruption and sin) relate to the link between some of these *artes* and physical adornment, lust, and superfluous ostentation; others undoubtedly belong – or were related – to the field of magic and divination. The set of knowledge attributed to *Azaël* is of particular interest. This angel is credited with the metalworking – and the Enochian account specifically highlights silver and gold in this regard – (the use of?) precious stones, tinctures, and the use of cosmetics. As Martelli has stressed,<sup>31</sup> the similarity between the crafts taught by *Azaël* and the fields of interest of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy is striking; even the use of cosmetics is not at odds with the Graeco-Egyptian notion of alchemy.<sup>32</sup> In addition, these crafts were grouped together, linked to a single

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29. *1Enoch* 6-8, *apud* Sync. P.12, ll. 8-17 Mosshammer, transl. from Adler & Tuffin, 2002, pp. 16-17.

30. *Gen* 6:1-2 (English standard version): “When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose”.

31. Martelli, 2014, p. 10. I agree with this author that the Graeco-Egyptian alchemist would have identified with the entire body of knowledge transmitted by *Azaël*. In contrast, Fraser (2004, p. 127) and Bull (2018b, p. 17) consider that the link with alchemy comprised only τὰ βαφικὰ.

32. Cosmetics means nothing more than the use of pigments for personal adornment, so alchemy and cosmetics made use of the same mineral and plant substances.

angel, as if they were somehow related. That said, there is neither textual nor material evidence to interpret *Azaēl*'s teachings as an early allusion to the notion of alchemy found in Graeco-Roman Egypt. What is more certain, however, is the fact that the Graeco-Egyptian alchemists took advantage of this similarity to appropriate the Enochian account.<sup>33</sup> They set aside the obvious criticism contained within this story and use it to justify the sacred character of the “Holy Art” (ἱερὰ τέχνη).<sup>34</sup>

In addition to *The Letter*, this type of reuse is well documented, thanks to Zosimos of Panopolis. In fact, Syncellos records in his work the specific passage in which Zosimos refers to this tradition somewhat after narrating the Enochian account:<sup>35</sup>

“But it is also fitting to cite a passage regarding them (*i.e.* the divine scriptures) from Zosimos, the philosopher of Panopolis, from his writings to Theosebeia in the ninth book of *Imouth*, which read as follows: ‘The Holy Scriptures – αἱ ἱερὰ γραφαί –, that is, the books – βίβλοι –, say, my lady (*i.e.* Theosebeia), that there is a race of demons who avail themselves of women. Hermes also mentioned this in his *Physika*, and nearly every treatise, both public and esoteric, made mention of this. Thus the ancient and divine scriptures – αἱ ἀρχαῖαι καὶ θεῖαι γραφαί – said this, that certain angels lusted after women, and having descended taught them all the works of nature – πάντα τὰ τῆς φύσεως ἔργα –. For this reason, they fell into disgrace, he (Hermes?) says, and remained outside heaven, because they taught mankind everything wicked and nothing benefiting the soul. The same scriptures say that from them the giants were born. So theirs is the first teaching concerning these arts – ἡ πρώτη παράδοσις {Χημεῦ}<sup>36</sup> περὶ τούτων τῶν τεχνῶν –. They called this book *Chēmeu* – Χημεῦ – whence also the art is called *chēmeia* – χημεία (*i.e.* alchemy) –’ and so forth.”<sup>37</sup>

The interpretation of Zosimos’ words in this passage is not always crystal clear and remains the object of scholarly discussion,<sup>38</sup> but “the ancient and divine scriptures” to which he refers in connection with this narrative are most likely the aforementioned *Book of Enoch*.<sup>39</sup> It is also worth noting that, according to Zosimos, the

33. In this vein, Mertens (1989b, p. 185) correctly points out that “*un lecteur alchimiste n’avait guère besoin de forcer le texte*”.

34. See Martelli, 2014, p. 14.

35. In addition to Syncellus’ quotation, a Syriac version of Zosimos’ work is preserved in Cambridge Ms. 6.29, fols. 49<sup>r</sup>-50<sup>r</sup>. The Syriac text is edited and translated in Martelli, 2014.

36. Editors generally expunge this first Χημεῦ because it is agrammatical. It is likely a gloss of ἡ πρώτη παράδοσις περὶ τούτων τῶν τεχνῶν.

37. Sync., p. 14, 2-14 Mosshammer (Greek transl. from Martelli, 2014, pp. 10-11).

38. See Idel, 1986; Fraser, 2004; Martelli, 2014; Bull, 2018b.

39. Fraser, 2004, p. 125; Bull, 2018b, p. 7.

account of angelic revelation was widely attested in Hermetic writings “both public and esoteric”. In fact, the existence of such a tradition is attested to by the first book of the *Cyranides*,<sup>40</sup> which is usually included within the so-called technical Hermetica. According to its prologue, “the god Hermes Trismegistus, after receiving from angels a greatest gift of God, shared this book with all the men fit for receiving the mysteries”.<sup>41</sup> It follows, then, that the Graeco-Egyptian alchemists were not the only ones to profit from the Enochian narrative. However, as can be seen, the account about the angelic revelation alone does not contain all the narrative elements that we find in the introduction of *The Letter of Isis*. The reason for this, as I will show below, is that it was combined with other structural narrative patterns.

### 3. ISIS: RECEPTACLE AND TRANSMITTER OF SECRET KNOWLEDGE (TO HER SON, HORUS)

*The Letter* is credited to the goddess Isis, and the main voice in this treatise is hers. This begs the question as to why a collection of alchemical recipes would be credited to this goddess. Why not attribute this treatise, like the *Cyranides*, to Hermes-Toth, who was thought to be the inventor of different types of knowledge and was thus credited with a long sapiential tradition?<sup>42</sup> Once more, the Enochian account provides us with the first clue regarding the choice of Isis. According to this account, the first recipient of angelic knowledge was a woman,<sup>43</sup> so a female character was

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40. See Festugière, 2014, pp. 219-220 [203-204].

41. *Cyran.* 1, pro. 7-8 Kaimakis, 1976: Θεοῦ δῶρον μέγιστον <ἀπ’> ἀγγέλων λαβῶν Ἑρμῆς ὁ τρισμέγιστος θεὸς ἀνθρώποις πᾶσιν μετέδωκεν δεκτικοῖς μυστικῶν βιβλίων τόδε. This parallel was already noted in Mertens, 1989b, p. 388; see also Lopes da Silveira, 2020, p. 58.

42. This tradition goes back to Ancient Egypt (Fowden, 1986, pp. 57-67) and, in addition to literature of a philosophical-theological nature, it also included technical treatises and magic. See Fowden, 1986, pp. 79-86; Bull, 2018a, pp. 398-426.

43. According to Rebecca Lesses (2006 and 2014), the reason for the gendering of this recipient as feminine and its connection with sin and ruin must be sought in a motif of Old Testament denunciations against the enemies of the Israelite nation, such as Canaan, Babylon, and Nineveh. In the Old Testament discourse, these places were condemned for the immorality of their people, their opulence, and the perversion of their practices, which included different forms of divination and magic. The danger that such places embodied the corruption of Israelite values is often personified in the image of a temptress woman or harlot. For this same reason, non-Israelite women, such as Jezebel, were also imbued with these same characteristics: they are dangerous, even evil, seductive, and practice magic. It is nevertheless remarkable that the technical expertise comprised in Graeco-Egyptian alchemy originates in Near East civilisations and can be traced back to Babylonian cuneiform texts. See Oppenheim, 1966; Martelli & Rumor, 2014.

required for this role. And, as the examination of Isis will reveal, had the potential to develop this personage.

In Egyptian tradition, Isis is the protagonist of mythological episodes in which she succeeded in obtaining secret knowledge. In the narrative of *The Secret Name of Ra*,<sup>44</sup> Isis wants to obtain the only thing she has not been allowed to know: the true name of her father, the supreme god Ra. Thus, the goddess, who is said to be “cleverer than millions of gods”, devises a stratagem. She creates a snake that bites and poisons Ra, and then she offers to heal him, arguing that she needs to know his true name to do so. Ra falls for his daughter’s deception and reveals the secret to Isis, ordering her to not divulge it to anyone, with the exception of her son, Horus. In this way, Isis acquires power over Ra himself and, simultaneously, manages to make her son the future ruler of Egypt, but not before remaining impassive and obstinate in her objective in the face of her father’s pain. This myth, which is an aetiological explanation of Isis as embodiment of the ruling power,<sup>45</sup> obviously differs in many respects from the narrative we find in *The Letter*. However, its general narrative pattern also offers an ancient precedent for one of the structural themes that we find in our treatise: Isis, portrayed as a cunning goddess, tenacious in her quest for wisdom, obtains secret knowledge that she passes on to her son. It is worth remembering that *The Letter* also characterises her with a particular determination (“I was not less focused on what I was searching for. He longed for it, but I did not give myself and I was able to curb his desire until he showed me his sign”). This is not the only episode in Egyptian mythical lore in which she is depicted in this way. According to some versions of the myth *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*,<sup>46</sup> which describes the struggles between these two gods for supreme power, Isis defies the Ennead – the divine tribunal that judges the dispute – and uses several tricks to help her son and overcome the obstacles that appear in her way. She transforms herself into an old woman to deceive the divine boatman guarding access to the place of judgement, and into a young temptress girl – thus adding an element of seduction to her deception – who tricks Seth into admitting his guilt in the struggle. These narratives, however, belong to the tradition of Isis as “Great of Magic”, but which have little or nothing to do with alchemical knowl-

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44. This narrative is found in several sources from the Ramesside period (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties). See Nagel, 2019, p. 776, n. 1682 for a detailed list with specific bibliography.

45. The name Isis means “throne” and, originally, this goddess embodied ruling power. See Griffiths, 2001, p. 188. The recent study by Nagel (2019) is an essential work on Isis in Graeco-Roman Egypt.

46. The papyrus in which this tale is preserved (*P.Chester Beatty I*) dates from the reign of Ramses V (1147-1143 CE, 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty). See Lichtheim, 1976, pp. 214-223 for an English translation of the text.

edge. One might therefore wonder on what foundations the link between Isis and alchemy is based.

Firstly, it should be noted that, in Antiquity, Isis appears to have developed a facet as a divinity discoverer or transmitter of technical knowledge. Both aspects appear, for instance, in an Egyptian tradition referred to by Diodorus of Sicily (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE), according to which Isis was considered the initiator of medical knowledge:

“She (Isis) was the discoverer of many health-giving drugs – φαρμάκων τε πολλῶν – and was greatly versed in the science of healing – ἰατρικῆς ἐπιστήμης. (...) Furthermore, she discovered also the drug which gives immortality – τὸ τῆς ἀθανασίας φάρμακον –, by means of which she not only raised from the dead her son Horus, who had been the object of plots on the part of the Titans and had been found dead under the water, giving him his soul again, but also made him immortal. (...) Moreover, they say that the name Horus, when translated, is Apollo, and that, having been instructed by his mother Isis in both medicine and divination – τὴν τε ἰατρικὴν καὶ τὴν μαντικὴν ὑπὸ τῆς μητρὸς Ἰσιδος διδαχθέντα – he is now a benefactor of the race of men through his oracular responses and his healings”<sup>47</sup>

In fact, Isis had a long tradition as a healer in Egypt, appearing not only in the myth of *The Secret Name of Ra* healing her father, but also in numerous medical-magical narratives in which her son Horus suffers for various reasons (an illness, injury, scorpion or snake bite).<sup>48</sup> And we must not forget that, in the main myth of the Osiris cult, Isis revived the corpse of her husband.<sup>49</sup> This tradition probably gave rise to that referred to by Diodorus, as an explanation or development of Isis’ healing power. In addition, and as in *The Secret Name of Ra*, in this tradition the goddess transmitted her knowledge to her son.

The image of Isis as instructor of technical knowledges is also found in Hermeticism. At the end of the treatise known as *Korē Kosmou* (SH XXIII; 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE),<sup>50</sup> Hermes (as Hermetic demiurge and supreme god) give Isis, and her brother

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47. D.S., I 25, 2-7 (transl. by Oldfather, 1933, p. 81).

48. The presence of these narratives, known as Isis-Horus *historiolae*, is attested from the ancient Egyptian *cippi* to Christian-Coptic magic, see Frankfurter, 2009.

49. This is the main myth of the Osiris cult, according to which Seth killed his brother to assume supreme power, dismembered his body, and scattered it all over Egypt. Isis then began a pilgrimage to retrieve it and reconstituted Osiris’ body, revivifying him, see Smith, 2017, p. 6 for a general summary with specific bibliography.

50. For the dating of this Hermetic treatise, see Litwa, 2018, p. 13; on the passage discussed here, see Nagel, 2019, pp. 797-800.



and husband Osiris, permission to pass on some civilizing knowledge to humankind. The treatise then lists the teachings of the divine pair:

“They (*i.e.* Isis and Osiris) alone, after learning from Hermes the secrets of divine legislation – τὰς κρυπτὰς νομοθεσίας τοῦ θεοῦ – taught arts, sciences, and all occupations, became initiators of the humankind and legislators – μαθόντες τεχνῶν καὶ ἐπιστημῶν καὶ ἐπιτηδευμάτων ἀπάντων εἰσηγηταὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐγένοντο καὶ νομοθέται”.<sup>51</sup>

Although in this text the goddess (along with Osiris) directly instructs humankind, she is most often the medium through which the secret teachings of a divine authority reach her son, Horus.<sup>52</sup> The proper *Korē Kosmou* belonged to a collection of Hermetic philosophical treatises, which Isis addresses to her son,<sup>53</sup> as is also the case with *The Letter of Isis*.

A passage from the *Korē Kosmou* (*SH XXIII*) that touches on this very image of Isis can help us to clarify the remaining question, that is, the link between Isis and alchemy. The text reads as follows:

“Pay attention, my son Horus, for you listen to a hidden teaching – κρυπτῆς θεωρίας – which my ancestor *Kamephis* chanced to hear from Hermes the recorder of all deeds. <I, in turn,> received the tradition from *Kamephis*, ancestor of all, when he honored me with the perfect black – ὁπότε ἔμὲ καὶ τῷ τελείῳ μέλανι ἐτίμησε –. Now you hear it from me”.<sup>54</sup>

The interpretative possibilities regarding what exactly it is that Isis receives from *Kamephis* – *i.e.* the τέλειος μέλας – illustrate the complex series of reciprocities and identifications that could have been set in motion to connect Isis and alchemy.

A few parallels have been identified for the passage from the *Korē Kosmou*, which show that we are dealing with a formulaic expression of praise.<sup>55</sup> The oldest of

51. *SH XXIII* § 68 (my translation).

52. Litwa, 2018, p. 100.

53. Some of them (*SH XXXIII-XXVII*) have survived and are compiled and excerpted in Stobaeus' *Anthology* (5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE), see Litwa, 2018, p. 100. Some ancient authors also speak about the existence of “the books of Isis”, such as Lucian (*Gall.* 18, 5-6; this passage is quoted below).

54. *SH XXIII* § 32 (transl. by Litwa, 2018, pp. 115-116).

55. In addition to the Demotic parallel quoted in the main text, this formula appears in two magical texts. The first one, *PGM VII*, is contemporary to the *Korē Kosmou*: “I call on you, Lady Isis, whom *Agathos Daimon* permitted to rule in the complete black – ἢ συνεχώρησεν ὁ Ἄγαθος Δαίμων βασιλεύειν ἐν τῷ τελείῳ μέλανι” (l. 427). An additional witness from the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE has recently been provided in



these, a Demotic letter to the gods (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE), contains what could be the Egyptian version of this formula: “Isis, the great goddess to whom the Black (?) Land – *km* – was given” (*P.Berlin* 15660, l. 2).<sup>56</sup> The Demotic term *km* or *kemet* means “black”, but it was used also to refer to Egypt.<sup>57</sup> The blackness of the soil of the Nile’s valley was already perceived in Egyptian culture as the most representative characteristic of this land in opposition to the desert and its sands (*deshret*, the “Red One”). There is no doubt that this perception was inherited by Greek and Roman sources, which referred to the Egyptian country with various designations that underline this characteristic (μελλάγγειον, μέλαινα γῆ, μελανίτις γῆ, etc.).<sup>58</sup> It is possible, then, that many of these expressions, including that of τέλειος μέλας, were renderings of the Egyptian term *kemet*.<sup>59</sup> One of these passages deserves special attention. In it, Plutarch (*ca.* 40/50-120 CE) does not translate the term *kemet*, but transcribes it as χημία, *chēmia*:

“Egypt, moreover, which has the blackest of soils – ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα μελλάγγειον οὔσαν – they (*i.e.* Egyptians) call by the same name as the black portion of the eye,<sup>60</sup> “*chēmia*” – ὥσπερ τὸ μέλαν τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ, χημίαν καλοῦσι.”<sup>61</sup>

It should be noted that the term χημία reappears in later Greek sources to refer to the alchemical art.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the modern word “alchemy” comes from the Arabic *al-kīmiyā*, which was composed by adding the Arabic article *al-* to the Greek

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Zellmann-Rohrer & Love, 2022, pp. 172-176. It is in a bilingual Greek-Coptic iatromagical invocation from the Michigan Ms. 136 (fol. 2,17 – 3,15; the Isis passage is in Coptic). On the divinity who instructs Isis, whose name varies from one testimony to another, see Nagel, 2019, pp. 818-821.

56. This parallel is noted in Nagel, 2019, p. 819.

57. *P.Berlin* 15660 confirms what has so far been the prevailing interpretation, that τέλειος μέλας refers to Egypt, see Reitzenstein, 1904, pp. 139-142 (however, this author also points to alchemy as a possible alternative, see below); Festugière, 2014, III, p. clxviii; Robert K. Ritner in Betz, 1986, p. 131, n. 70; Jackson, 1986, pp. 117-118. For alternative interpretations proposed by other scholars (the night sky, black ink, or female genitalia), see Zellmann-Rohrer & Love, 2022, p. 173.

58. See a detailed elenchus of sources in Bain, 1995, pp. 191-196.

59. If we are talking about a land or region, τέλειος is better translated as “complete” rather than “perfect” (see *LSJ*, s.v. “τέλειος”). The latter, however, is the conventional way of translating this term in the expression τέλειος μέλας. The ambiguity between “complete” and “perfect”, however, may not be accidental.

60. The reasons why Plutarch associates the term *chēmia*/χημία with the eye pupil are unclear, beyond the obvious colour link. Nor does Hopfner (1941, p. 18) shed any light on this connection of ideas.

61. Plu., *De Is. et Os.* 33 [*Moralia* 364c] (transl. by Cole, 1936, p. 83).

62. The first attestation of this term with this specific meaning is in the passage from Zosimos quoted in the previous section of this study.

term χημία.<sup>63</sup> However, scholars agree that it does not seem to be Greek, since the alchemists themselves were not sure how to interpret it and its spelling fluctuates between χημία (*chēmia*) and χυμία (*chymia*). Precisely on the basis of Plutarch's passage, this word has been etymologically linked to the Egyptian term *kemet* and given the meaning of "blackness".<sup>64</sup> In support of this interpretation, scholars often point to the special link of early alchemy with Egypt (remember that even *The Letter* refers to it as "the Holy Art of Egypt") and the importance of the blackening of metals in alchemical practice.<sup>65</sup> It is worth noting in this regard that there is a passage by Zosimos of Panopolis, quoted by Olympiodorus (6<sup>th</sup> cent. CE),<sup>66</sup> in which the alchemists play with the same images used by Plutarch (including that of the pupil – τὸ μέλαν τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ) to talk about the blackening of metals.

If we return to the *Korē Kosmou*, the general context and the wording of the passage obscure the interpretation of τέλειος μέλας, which lends itself to being interpreted as the κρυπτή θεωρία that Isis received from *Kampehis* and that she will expose later in the treatise. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to think that this image of Isis as holder of the Black Land/*kemet*/χημία could have been confused with the alchemical meaning of χημία, or re-read in alchemical circles as a link between Isis and alchemical knowledge. This is a mere hypothesis and thus any assumption must be tentative; however, the fact is that τέλειος μέλας is polysemic<sup>67</sup> and therefore its identification with alchemy is plausible.<sup>68</sup>

Through the testimonies discussed in this section, I have sought to show that the image of Isis as the transmitter of divine knowledge to her son was well known in Antiquity, and how, over the centuries, the nature of this knowledge transformed from being knowledge linked to sovereign power to technical knowledge. In this respect, it has been suggested that the image of the goddess as the first receptacle of alchemical wisdom may have benefited from the "alchemical" interpretation of a praise formula that presents Isis as ruler or holder of *kemet*. It is now better understood why, given the need for a female recipient of the angelic revelation in the Enochian narrative, the author chose not just any woman or goddess, but Isis, who, as her tradition shows, had

63. See e.g. Martelli, 2016, p. 217.

64. On this and other etymological proposals, see a detailed discussion in Martelli, 2019, pp. 17-21.

65. See e.g. Bain, 1995, pp. 207-208. This process, named in alchemy *nigredo* or μελάνωσις, was in fact the first chromatic phase of the alchemical transformation.

66. CAAG II, pp. 92, ll. 6-7 [§ 38].

67. See Oréal, 1998; Bain, 1999; Bull, 2018a, pp. 172-173; Zellmann-Rohrer & Love, 2022, p. 173.

68. Proof of this interpretative potential is its modern reading as alchemy by some scholars, e.g. Reitzenstein, 1904, pp. 139-142; Zielinski, 1905, pp. 356-358; Festugière, 1939a, p. 116.

the potential to develop this role. The author then modelled the Enochian account to suit the characteristics of the goddess in the Egyptian tradition. To do so, he used a third stock-theme that was very popular in contemporary literature: that of the initiation of a wise man and/or priest into esoteric knowledge through a revelation.

#### 4. EXPLAINING ISIS' PRIESTLY STATUS AND THE THIRD NARRATIVE PATTERN

In 1989, Mertens devoted an entire article to pointing out that the title held by the goddess Isis in the title of this treatise, *prophētis* (προφήτις, the feminine of *prophētēs* [προφήτης]), should be interpreted from an Egyptian perspective. The relevance of this clarification lies in the fact that, in a Greek cultural milieu, the term *prophētēs/prophētis* designated a specific type of person linked with divinity, but it was also used to translate a very concrete Egyptian priestly title: *ḥm-ntr* (“god’s servant”) into Greek.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, when dealing with Egyptian figures or, as in this case, Graeco-Egyptian texts, this term can have a specific value different from what it would have in a purely Greek cultural milieu. With this in mind, a couple of further remarks on the use of the term *prophētis* can still be made.

Firstly, if we focus on the use of this term as a divine epithet, *prophētis* is not only a *unicum* in relation to Isis,<sup>70</sup> but it is also unusual as a divine epithet in both the feminine and masculine forms.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, the witness of magical papyri – roughly contemporary to *The Letter* – is revelatory. Although in magical practices the divinities receive a plethora of epithets and titles, this title is restricted to (mortal) ritual practitioners.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that, in the Egyptian milieu, there was a terminological specification, and that the term *prophētēs/prophētis* was not considered appropriate as a divine epithet.

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69. Graeco-Egyptian inscriptions and papyri show that the Egyptian priesthood was divided into six classes, from the high priests at the top to the *wab* priests at the bottom, under which there were a multiplicity of minor, low-ranking priestly positions. See Vandorpe & Clarysse, 2019, pp. 416-418. The *ḥm-ntr* (“god’s servant”), which was among the highest positions, developed administrative and ritual duties, including maintenance of the temple complex, conducting and performing the main rituals, and being among the few people who had access to the innermost part of the temple, where the cult images – the tangible manifestations of the gods – were located. See Doxey, 2001a, p. 69.

70. A fact already pointed out by Mertens (1989, p. 260) and still applicable today.

71. As far as I know, there is only one parallel for the use of this title (either masculine or feminine) to refer to a god. It is found in the Treatise XVII of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which the god Toth is interpellated as *prophētēs* (l. 13) by his addressee, an innominate king.

72. This is the conclusion reached by García Molinos (2006) after the analysis of all the occurrences of this term in the Greek magical papyri.

Secondly, the use of this term in our text is even more striking if we examine the different evolution of its feminine and masculine forms in the preserved documentation, in both Demotic and Greek. It demonstrates that the use of the masculine *ḥm-ntr/prophētēs* continued during Roman times, as a designation for priests with similar functions and prerogatives over time,<sup>73</sup> but this was not the case for the feminine form. Although attestation of women holding the title of “god’s servant” (*ḥmt-ntr*) is well-documented in Pharaonic Egypt,<sup>74</sup> in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods the title appears only in Demotic documentation, while the Greek *prophētis* is not confirmed.<sup>75</sup> Equally significant is the fact that the concordances of the Demotic form are limited to some papyri linked to religious feminine associations;<sup>76</sup> none are linked to temple priesthood.<sup>77</sup>

Taking this into account, the utilisation of *prophētis* to refer to Isis in our text is striking and requires further explanation.

There are several arguments to suggest that Isis was bestowed with this title as a result of a confluence of commonplaces and stock-themes. Firstly, *The Letter* is part of a current that tends to associate those who had privileged knowledge, be it alchemy or magic or otherwise, with Egyptian ritual practitioners, and vice versa, and which represents Egyptian priests as experts in magic and other esoteric arts. To mention a couple of the best-known Graeco-Roman literary examples, the Egyptian priest Pankrates, in Lucian’s *Philopseudes* (§ 34; 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE), is able to animate objects, and Apuleius’ Zatchlas (*Met.* II 27-31; 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE), who is bestowed with the priestly title of *propheta primaries* (“prophet of the first rank”, II 28), performs a necromantic rite.<sup>78</sup> The fact is that this same association is also found in magical sources: the authors of the practices collected in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri used the term *prophētēs* as a self-designation (e.g. *PGM* III 256; V 109; VII 323 and XII 229) as well as to refer to their authorities (e.g. Pacrates, *prophētēs* of Heliopolis *PGM* IV 2447 and 2454). However, the identification of magical practitioners with Egyptian priests

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73. See Dieleman, 2005, p. 208.

74. Onstine, 2016, p. 619

75. The only attestation of this term related to Egyptian priestesses is in *P.Tebt.* II 292, l.5 (a letter sent by Isidora, daughter of Pakebkis, priestess at Tebtunis; 189-190 CE). However, it is an editorial reconstruction in lacuna. The term that is actually found on the papyrus is *hiereia* (ἱέρεια, “priestess”, l. 4).

76. Colin, 2002, pp. 111-113.

77. Colin, 2002, *passim*; Schentuleit, 2019, p. 353-354.

78. I mention here only two examples of the many that could be provided; for a detailed overview, accompanied by a thorough analysis, the interested reader may consult Escolano-Poveda, 2020. This conceptualisation of the Egyptian priest as a character able to perform prodigious or magical deeds is ancient, and has its origin, as Marina Escolano-Poveda has shown, in Egyptian literature.

goes beyond a mere quest for authority and prestige. It is now generally assumed that many of these practices, as well as their ritual practitioners, emanated from the Egyptian priestly milieu.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, without denying the existence of a rhetorical motif in some of these identifications, this collective was thus composed of ritual practitioners who are not easily, or necessarily, distinguishable from the Egyptian clergy.

A similar phenomenon can be noted in connection with alchemical figures. Chronologically, the first to be ascribed to the Egyptian priesthood within the alchemical tradition is Pseudo-Democritus (see below). Some centuries later, Dioscoros, the addressee of Synesius' commentary to Pseudo-Democritus, is identified as an Egyptian priest.<sup>80</sup> Other authorities of Graeco-Egyptian alchemy, such as the enigmatic *Chymes/Chimes*<sup>81</sup> in a passage by Zosimos (CAAG II, p. 183, ll. 22), the alchemical Moses<sup>82</sup> (CAAG II, p. 353, ll. 19), and Maria the Jewess (CAAG II, p. 404, ll.16-17) in Byzantine tradition, were also said to be *prophētai*. The latter three examples demonstrate that any ascription of Graeco-Egyptian alchemists to the Egyptian priesthood should be approached with great caution and not simply accepted at face value: the existence of an author named *Chymes/Chimes* is doubtful; that of Moses is a pseudographic tradition; and Maria the Jewess was definitely not Egyptian. However, the fact remains that there were also actual Egyptian ritual practitioners involved in the practice of alchemy. Proof of this is found in several passages by Zosimos of Panopolis, in which he mentions a contemporary Egyptian priestly circle interested in the practice of alchemy: that of the priest Neilos and his disciples.<sup>83</sup> A second piece of evidence comes from the alchemical papyri of Leiden and Stockholm. These recipe books, roughly contemporary to Zosimos, were found along with an important set of Graeco-Egyptian magical handbooks, so they likely belonged to the library<sup>84</sup> of a circle of Graeco-Egyptian ritual practitioners. This fact provides a direct witness to these ritualists' interest in alchemical matters. In this regard, the presence of several

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79. Dickie, 1999; Dieleman, 2005; Escolano-Poveda, 2020, pp. 281-327.

80. Specifically, as "priests – ἱερεῦς – of Sarapis at Alexandria" (Syn. Alch. ll. 1-2 = Martelli, 2011, p. 224). This placed Dioscoros in a period before the destruction of the Alexandrian *Serapeion* in 391 CE. See Martelli, 2011, pp. 114-117.

81. This alchemical character seems a personification of alchemy, or a reinterpretation to explain the term *χημία/χυμία*, see Letrouit, 1995, pp. 72-74.

82. The first attestation of Moses as an alchemical author comes from Zosimos (late 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. – early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE), who also mentions several methods credited to this author (see Martelli, 2011, pp. 373-374).

83. See n. 12, above. In this same volume, Escolano-Poveda and Dufault discuss Zosimos' links with Egyptian religion and his attitude towards Egyptian priests.

84. This collection is known as the Theban Magical Library, see Dosoo, 2016.

recipes of alchemical nature within these same manuals reasserts such an interest.<sup>85</sup> It is likely, therefore, that, as in the case of magic, the interest of actual Egyptian priestly figures in alchemy was intertwined with the authoritative use of the ascription to Egyptian tradition, and that both drove each other in the creation of the stereotyped image of the alchemist-priest.

This phenomenon alone may have been reason enough for Isis to be given the title of *prophētis* in this treatise. In my view, however, the characterisation of Isis as a priestess in *The Letter* is reinforced by the presence of a particular stock-theme.

In the introduction, Isis relates that she went to Hormanouthis, a place whose toponym, although unknown,<sup>86</sup> has clear Egyptian resonances and that – in the narrative – seems to be relevant to the Holy Art of Egypt (*i.e.* alchemy). There, she was initiated into this discipline by a divine being. The narrative pattern of a stock-theme with parallels in both Egyptian and Greek tradition can be easily identified in the general lines of this account: that of the character who obtains a certain knowledge in an Egyptian sanctuary or temple through a divine revelation.

In fact, there was a relative early and widely developed Greek tradition<sup>87</sup> according to which it was believed that many Greek intellectual authorities travelled to Egypt as part of their training and that there they accessed the knowledge kept by priests in the Egyptian temples. The underlying reason for the development of such narratives was the great admiration that ancient Greeks had for the antiquity and wisdom of Egyptian culture. As a result, these narratives become a commonplace linked with many figures, from mythical heroes (*e.g.* Orpheus and Daedalus), to poets such as Homer and intellectuals such as Pythagoras, Thales of Miletus, Democritus of Abdera, and Plato, among others.<sup>88</sup>

“I was a sophist, for I must tell the truth, I suppose. However, I was not uneducated or unacquainted with the noblest sciences. I even went to Egypt to study with the *prophētai*

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85. See Blanco Cesteros, 2020.

86. The identification – or even exact nature – of this place is so far unknown. The two versions of the text are unanimous in recording ορμανουθι, but there is no recorded place in Egypt with such a name or even a similar one. If it is a Graecised rendering of an Egyptian toponym, it is unknown; if Greek, the term might be corrupted. See Mertens, 1983-1984, pp. 56-59. According to Lopes da Silveira (2020, p. 43), the possibility that this name is fictitious should not be ruled out. However, its resemblance to the toponym Hermonthis, a city with which Isis was closely linked (see Nagel, 2019, pp. 422-431), is suspicious.

87. Moyer, 2011, p. 58.

88. For a detailed catalogue of figures and sources, see Moyer, 2011, pp. 58-63.

– συγγενοίμην τοῖς προφήταις – penetrated into their sanctuaries – τὰ ἄδύτα – and learned the books of Horus and Isis by heart – τὰς βίβλους τὰς Ὠρου καὶ Ἴσιδος.<sup>89</sup>

Without detracting from the value of the image of Egyptian temples as places of esoteric knowledge, there is another Egyptian institution governed by priests that may have contributed to this idea: the House of Life (*pr-ʿnh*).<sup>90</sup>

“The House of Life appears to have functioned as a *scriptorium*, a place where Egyptian scribes and priests copied primarily religious compositions, but perhaps also literary texts and scientific treaties; this presupposes access to, and probably institutional storage of, collections of manuscripts that would correspond to most definitions of a library.”<sup>91</sup>

This work must certainly have been accompanied by intellectual activity,<sup>92</sup> although the functioning of this institution as a school is also a matter of debate.<sup>93</sup> In whatever case, as pointed out by Escolano-Poveda (2020, p. 250):

“Knowledge of writing was already a barrier for the access and understanding of Egyptian religious and magical texts,<sup>94</sup> but within the (Egyptian) priestly class there were also different degrees of training and initiation that marked different levels of access to particular types of knowledge”.

Therefore, those educated in the temples, and above all those belonging to the high priestly classes, not only mastered the scribal profession, but also received a

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89. Luc., *Gall.* 18, 1-6 (transl. by Harmon, 1915, pp. 207-208). The character speaking is Pythagoras, reincarnated as a rooster. This passage can be related to the previous section of this study, which discusses the sapiential tradition linked to the goddess Isis.

90. The generally assumed fact that this institution was attached to temples or palaces, as would be expected, seems to lack solid evidence, see Hagen, 2019, pp. 255-256.

91. Hagen, 2019, p. 259.

92. “It (*i.e.* the House of Life) may be supposed to be the institution of Egyptian temple in which the priests formed, transformed and transmitted the religious traditions of their country. Consequently, it must have been much more than just a place where books were stored. It was rather the place where scholars, *i.e.* priestly scribes, worked with the texts” (Stadler, 2015, p. 190).

93. Hagen, 2019, p. 258.

94. This barrier intensified over time, as Egyptian culture changed its writing system over the centuries (hieratic writing was replaced by demotic and, after several centuries of coexistence with Greek, Coptic emerged). Accessing hieratic texts housed in the temple libraries or understanding hieroglyphic texts written on the walls of temples implied an extra level of education to which only priestly castes would have had access. On this topic, see Escolano-Poveda, 2020, p. 245.



thorough education in multiple disciplines. This explains the Hellenistic and Roman image of Egyptian priests and their association with privileged or esoteric knowledge. For the same reason, the reader will understand that individuals educated in this intellectual environment were interested in subjects such as alchemy. But, even in Egyptian literature, stories were told of priests who had gained access to even more secret knowledge. This is the case with Horus, son of Paneshe, a character of the Demotic narrative known as *Setne II* (*P.BM* EA 10822; 1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE).<sup>95</sup> Horus is presented as a high-ranking priest and a powerful magician, whose deeds include saving Pharaoh's life. To this end, Horus travelled to Hermopolis to consult the god Toth through an incubation ritual in Toth's temple. The god, appearing to Horus in a dream, directs him to the library. There, Horus finds a locked "chamber" (or "shrine") where there is a chest with a book inside (*Setne II* 5, 4-15). This story presents several commonplaces<sup>96</sup> that are also found in the introduction of a Demotic astrological treatise preserved in two papyri from the Tebtunis temple library (*P.CtYBR* 422v and *P.Lund* 2058v; 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE).<sup>97</sup> This is said to be derived from an original by the wise Imhotep and to have been discovered when a fragment of stone from a wall in the temple of Heliopolis fell. The "god's servant" Peteisis (*hm-ntr*, *P.CtYBR* 422v, l. 7) deciphers the treatise and offers it to the pharaoh Nechepsos. This stock-theme transcended the boundaries of Demotic literature, since it can also be found in contemporary Graeco-Egyptian writings, such as the narrative that frames the work of the alchemists Pseudo-Democritus (Ps.-Dem. Alch., *Physika* ll. 35-66 [§§ 3-4] Martelli). In this case, however, it is also combined with the *topos* of the Greek intellectual who travels to Egypt. Thus, Ps.-Democritus explains in the first person that he travelled to Egypt to learn about τὰ φυσικά ("the natural substances", ll. 65-66 [§ 4]) and that this training took place in a temple.<sup>98</sup> In fact, the alchemist refers to his audience as συμπροφῆται ("you who are *prophētai* with me", Ps.-Dem. Alch., *Physika* l. 155 [§ 15] Martelli), implying that he himself belongs to this category of ritual practitioners. In this setting, the author relates that the master died before completing his disciples' instruction, so he decides to perform a ritual to invoke his master's ghost and thus

95. See a detailed analysis of this narrative in Escolano-Poveda, 2020, pp. 68-69 with specific bibliography.

96. For the "find-*topos*", see Hagen, 2019, 256-257.

97. Edited and commented in Quack & Ryholt, 2019b. On this narrative, see also Escolano-Poveda, Section 5, in this volume.

98. Ps.-Dem. Alch., *Physika*, § 3, 35-64 (Martelli, 2011, pp. 183-187, with commentary at pp. 280-290). Although the exact place is not stated by the author, later commentators identified it with Memphis (Syn. Alch. § 1, ll. 9-11 Martelli; Sync., pp. 297, 24-28 Mosshammer).



complete his education. However, although he manages to contact the ghost, the spirit is silent about the knowledge that Democritus craves, since “he was not allowed to do so by his daemon” (ll. 42-43 [§ 3] Martelli). Nonetheless, Ps.-Democritus’ perseverance in the pursuit of knowledge will be rewarded and the master’s final teachings are revealed during a banquet in the temple, when a στήλη breaks by itself, revealing the master’s writings (as in Peteisis’ narrative).<sup>99</sup> Similarly, both themes come together again in the prologue to the astrobotanical treatise *De virtutibus herbarum* (whose composition is placed between the late 1<sup>st</sup> to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE).<sup>100</sup> Here, a first-person narrative by the author – a certain Thessalos –<sup>101</sup> introduces and contextualises the technical material of the treatise, reporting how this knowledge came into his hands.<sup>102</sup> According to the account, Thessalos travelled to Alexandria to increase his knowledge and there he came upon a pharmacological book written by the Egyptian king Nechepso.<sup>103</sup> However, none of the remedies work. To find the reasons for this, Thessalos embarks on a quest and travels through Egypt until he reaches Thebes. There, after spending time befriending the priests, one agrees to conduct a ritual for Thessalos to communicate with the divine sphere and to ask about Nechepso’s book (Thessalos I prooem. 14 Friedrich). It is significant that, before beginning the ritual, the priest asks Thessalos whether he wants to invoke a god or the spirit of a dead person (perhaps Nechepso himself?, cf. Thessalos I prooem. 16 Friedrich). Thessalos chooses to communicate with the god Asclepios and, as in the case of Peteisis’ story, the result of the revelation is the treatise that follows the narrative. As can be seen, the parallel between these texts and *The Letter* goes beyond the simple motif of revelation pointed out by Festugière.<sup>104</sup> The introduction of *The Letter* presents the same narrative pattern as these stories and the same function, serving as a prologue to a technical treatise.

In addition, all the characters of these stories share a common priestly status: Horus and Peteisis are already priests when they acquire the special knowledge; for Pseudo-Democritus, it is precisely its acquisition that ends the period of apprentice-

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99. This narrative is also discussed in Escolano-Poveda in this volume.

100. Moyer, 2011, pp. 296-297.

101. Moyer (2011, pp. 212-216) argues that it is unlikely that this Thessalos is the physician Thessalos of Tralles.

102. Thessalos I prooem. 1-33 (Friedrich, 1968, pp. 45-61). For a detailed analysis, see Moyer, 2011, pp. 208-264; Piperakis, 2016, pp. 15-19 and Escolano-Poveda, 2020, pp. 204-211.

103. This narrative is connected to the tradition of technical writings to which the demotic astrological treatise in the library of the temple of Tebtunis also belongs, see Piperakis, 2016, pp. 18-19.

104. Festugière, 1939b, pp. 48-49.

ship and makes him *prophētēs*. Thessalos' travel and stay at Thebes, and his preparation before the ritual culminating in a direct communication with the god under the guidance of a senior priest, have also been interpreted as a religious journey with a final *rite de passage*.<sup>105</sup> It should not be forgotten that all of them have access to knowledge that is sacred in nature. Thus, this priestly status is required. This could reassert Mertens' thesis that the introduction of *The Letter* also describes a scene of initiation into a mystery knowledge (Mertens, 1988).<sup>106</sup> If so, implicit to this access to a restricted Egyptian "holy art", Isis would have been endowed with a priestly status, although this does not prevent such an identification from also benefiting from the *topos* discussed at the beginning of this section. Mertens' suggestion is further strengthened by a more detailed analysis of the ritual elements in this scene.

## 5. LOOKING FOR RITUAL TRACES IN THE INITIATION SCENE

One of the most striking elements of the initial account of Isis, to which we have not yet paid attention, is the oath of secrecy that the angel *Amnaël* administers to the priestess-goddess before giving her access to alchemical knowledge (ll. 33-40):

(i) Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς οὐρανὸν, γῆν, φῶς καὶ σκότος, Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς πῦρ καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ ἀέρα καὶ γῆν. Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς ὕψος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς καὶ Ταρτάρου βάθος. (ii) Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς Ἑρμῆν, καὶ Ἄνουβιν, ὕλαγμα τοῦ Κερβέρου, δράκοντα τὸν φύλακα. Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὸ πορθμεῖον ἐκεῖνο, καὶ Ἀχέρωντος ναυτίλον. Ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὰς τρεῖς ἀνάγκας καὶ μάλιστα καὶ ξίφος.

(i) "I make you swear by the heaven and the earth, the light and the darkness. I make you swear by the fire, the water, the air and the soil. I make you swear by the height of heaven, the earth and the depth of the Tartarus. (ii) I make you swear by Hermes and Anubis, the barking of Cerberus and the Guardian-Snake.

I make you swear by that passage-boat and the sailor of the Acheron. I make you swear by the Three Necessities, (their) whips and swords".

105. Moyer, 2011, p. 249.

106. Interestingly, in the second version of this work, Isis is said to have received the revelation while in a retreat, and the text also seems to hesitate between whether the figure approaching Isis for the first time is an angel or a *prophētēs*: Ἐνταῦθα δὲ, ἰκανὸν χρόνον διατρίψασα, ἐβουλόμην παραχωρῆσαι. Ἐν δὲ τῷ ἀναχωρεῖν με ἐπιτεθεώρηκέ μέ τις τῶν προφητῶν ἢ τῶν ἀγγέλων ὃς διέτριβεν ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ στερεώματι, ὃς προσελθὼν ἐμοί, "There, having spent the appointed time, I wanted to retire. While I was in the retreat, one of the *prophētai* or the angels living in the first firmament, after observing me, approached me" (ll. 11-15, Greek text from CAAG I, p. 33; my translation).

The sources and parallels of this oath have already been analysed in depth by Mertens (1988), so I will not repeat such an analysis. However, I will offer a number of new parallels and discuss the function of this oath in the light of its content.

As Mertens (1988) pointed out, the closest parallel for this oath, in terms of form and function, can be found in Vettius Valens' *Anthologiae* (around the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE).<sup>107</sup> In the introduction to some of his books, this astrologer demanded that his disciples conceal his teachings "from the unworthy or uninitiated" with the following oath, which appears three times in Valens' work and was clearly formulaic in nature:

"Concerning this book, then, I must before all prescribe an oath for those who happen to encounter it, that they may keep watch over what is written and withhold it in a manner appropriate to the mysteries [...] I make you swear – ὀρκίζω σε – by the sacred circle of the Sun and the irregular courses of the Moon, and by the powers of the remaining stars and the circle of the twelve zodiacal signs, to keep these things secret, and not to impart them to the unlearned or the uninitiated, and to give a portion of honor and remembrance to him who introduced them [to this discipline]. May it go well for those who keep this oath, and may the afore-mentioned gods be in accord with their wishes, but may the opposite be the case for those who forswear this oath."<sup>108</sup>

The hypothesis of a Hermetic origin for Valens' oath, initially advanced by Joanna Komorowska (2004), can be corroborated on the basis of two testimonies. The first comes from a Nag Hammadi Hermetic treatise of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE:<sup>109</sup>

"I administer an oath to you, who will read this holy book, by heaven and earth and fire and water, and seven rulers of substance and the creative spirit in them, and the <un>begotten God and the self-begotten and the begotten, that you guard what Hermes has communicated. God will be at one with those who keep the oath and everyone we have named, but the wrath of each of them will come upon those who violate the oath."<sup>110</sup>

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107. According the *Anthologiae*, Valens born in 120 CE. For the dating of this author and his work, see Riley, 1996. Likely inspired in Valens' work, later astrologers such as Firmicus Maternus (*Mathesis*, 7, 1: 2-3 and 8, 33: 2; 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE) also included similar oaths in their astrological treatises.

108. Valens, *Anthology VII proem.*, 1-4 = 251, 1-3 and 18-23 Pingree; transl. by Brennan, 2017, p. 47. In order to be consistent with the translation of ὀρκίζω throughout the paper, I have slightly modified Brennan's original translation of this formula.

109. This parallel is pointed out by Chris Brennan (2017, p. 48). The oath is in the sixth tractate of Nag Hammadi Codex VI, entitled *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*. For a translation with comments, see Mahé & Meyer, 2009, pp. 409-419.

110. *NHC VI [Discourse on the Eight and Nine]*, 6, 63 (English transl. from the Coptic original by Meyer in Mahé & Meyer, 2009, p. 418).

The second is in the *Cyranides* (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE).<sup>111</sup> As explained in Section 1, above, this treatise is usually included among the “technical Hermetica”. This second example does not function as secrecy oath, but equally serves to illustrate the circulation of this formula in hermetic circles. Properly speaking, it is an adjuration, as it is within a spell, so ὀρκίζω should not be translated in this case as “to make someone swear/ to administer an oath to someone”, but as “to conjure”:

“I conjure you by the god of the heaven and the earth, and by the four elements – ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ εἰς τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα.”<sup>112</sup>

Without forgetting that claiming that certain knowledge is of a secret nature was also used as a rhetorical device to encourage readers’ interest in the content of a text,<sup>113</sup> the fact remains that such mystery circles did exist. Their existence in Hermeticism is recorded in the passage by Zosimos discussed in Section 1, in connection with the Enochian tradition,<sup>114</sup> while Valens’ oaths suggest the existence of such groups among astrologers. These circles would have kept their doctrines secret, passing them from master to the initiated disciple in private.<sup>115</sup> In this respect, another passage from Zosimos attests to a similar practice among Graeco-Egyptian alchemists:

“I know, this is not beyond your understanding (my lady), but you know it well, since you are one of those who would have liked to hide the art, if it had not been put in writing. For this reason you formed an assembly and administered the oath to each other. But you (my lady) moved away from the various topics (of this book); you presented them in a shorter form, and you taught them openly. But you claim that this book cannot be possessed unless in secret.”<sup>116</sup>

Here, Zosimos criticises the way in which his disciple Theosebeia (the addressee of this work) teaches the alchemical art. The text suggests that she was always in favour of restricting access to alchemical knowledge and, in Zosimos’ opinion, this showed

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111. On the complex tradition of this treatise and the discussion about its dating, see Bain, 1995, pp. 281-86.

112. *Cyran.* III 1, 22 Kaimakis, 1976 (my translation).

113. See Dieleman, 2005, pp. 254-276.

114. *I.e.* “Hermes also mentioned this in his *Physika*, and nearly every treatise, both public and esoteric – ἅπας λόγος φανερός καὶ ἀπόκρυφος – made mention of this” (Sync. p. 14, l. 6 Mosshammer)

115. Brennan, 2017, p. 47.

116. English transl. from the Syriac original by Martelli, 2014, p. 12. For a preliminary edition of the Syriac text, see Martelli, 2014, pp. 17-20.

disdain for the work of previous alchemists, such as Ps.-Democritus, who strove to unveil this art. It seems that when Theosebeia formed her own intellectual circle, she constituted a closed group, imposing an oath of secrecy on her followers. Zosimos' words also suggest that she based her teachings on her own treatise or compilation of alchemical knowledge ("you presented them in a shorter form"), which, like Valens' astrological books, was accessible only to those who were part of her circle.<sup>117</sup>

The testimonies mentioned up to this point combine to suggest that the oath in *The Letter* may be more than a mere literary motif; it may be inspired by – or have originated from – actual practices in esoteric intellectual circles, as attested to in contemporary astrology and 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. alchemy. That said, Vettius Valens' work and the Nag Hammadi treatise not only demonstrate the existence of this practice, but also reveal the similarities and, above all, the differences between our text and this type of oath.

Mertens (1988, p. 18) already pointed out the presence of two sections in the oath of *The Letter of Isis* that are distinct both in terms of subject and textual parallels. In the first section (i), the oath comprises the entirety of the cosmos through three resources: a geographical course from the top of the sky to the depth of Tartarus; a play on contrasts (matter-space, light-darkness) with parallels in the initiatory oath of Osiris' mysteries;<sup>118</sup> and finally, the enumeration of the four elements, found also in the Hermetic parallels examined above and alluded to in one of the three versions of Valens' oath (ὀρκίζω σε ... καὶ τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα, *Anthology* VII, 6, 231 = 281. 6 Pingree). The second section (ii), by contrast, focuses on chthonic powers, while the parallels identified by Mertens situate the sources for these lines "essentiellement dans les pratiques magiques".<sup>119</sup> However, the magical nature of this second part goes beyond the textual sources.

If we concentrate on the divine figures mentioned in our text and their function, they all play the role of gatekeepers between the world of the living and the world of the dead: Hermes (in his chthonic facet) and the Egyptian Anubis guided the souls of the dead to the Underworld, a role that Anubis complemented with that of divine embalmer, protector of graves and cemeteries, and participant in the Judgement of the Afterlife, weighing the heart of the deceased against Ma'at.<sup>120</sup> Charon, as the Greek ferryman of Underworld, was another psychopomp divinity, while Cerberus was a mythological dog that guarded the gates of the Greek Underworld to prevent

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117. Martelli, 2014, p. 14.

118. See a list of sources in Mertens, 1988, pp. 10-11.

119. For a detailed analysis of these parallels, the interested reader is referred to Mertens, 1988, pp. 12-17.

120. Doxey, 2001b.

the dead from leaving. Similar functions are attributed to the Guardian-Snake, which can be identified with various Greek and Egyptian divinities.<sup>121</sup> The Three Necessities, as characterized in our text (with whips and swords), comes from the chthonic imaginary of Graeco-Egyptian magic, where these divinities are part of the Underworld cohort, assistants of Selene-Hecate-Persephone or a manifestation of the triple goddess herself.<sup>122</sup> They are also invoked together with – or identified with – the Erinyes (divinities in charge of punishing those who break divine laws – parricides, perjurers, etc.) and the Moirai (divinities of Destiny and Fate). Their function in magical practices was to bring *daemons* (the spirits of death) to the ritual practitioner,<sup>123</sup> whom they whip up to accomplish the magician's will.<sup>124</sup> With the sole exception of Hermes, all these divine figures, individually but mostly as a group, only appear in magical practices that require the participation of a *daemon* either to perform some task for the magician or to imbue the magician with knowledge about the present or the future (practice for *gnosis* and *prognosis*).<sup>125</sup> As psychopomps and the ones in charge of controlling who passes from one side to the other, these divinities were essential in these practices as guarantors that the *daemons* reached the human sphere and arrived at the ritual. A case in point highlighting their configuration as a *topos* of magical ritual is the necromantic scene of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (61-65 CE). In it, the witch Erichtho forces a spirit to attend his necromantic rite by means of Pluto, Hecate, and the Erinyes, to which Erichtho, visibly irritated by the ritual's non-immediate efficacy, asks "will you not drive with your cruel scourges that wretched soul through the waste of Erebus?" (B.C. VI 722-23, transl. by Duff, 1928, p. 359). That said, the ancient category of *daemon* was very fluid. Although in Graeco-Egyptian magical texts this term mainly refers to the spirit of a deceased person, it can also be applied to intermediate divinities, intersecting with the categories of *theoi* (θεοί, "gods") and, above all, with that of *angeloi*, because of their role as mediators and messengers.<sup>126</sup>

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121. Mertens, 1988, pp. 13-15.

122. See e.g. PGM IV 2855-57.

123. See e.g. PGM IV 1399, 1455; SM 45, 1.

124. E.g. PGM IV 1420-22 or SM 42, 3-4 and 65. In PGM XIX 11, the names Βία, Μάστιγξ, Ἀνάγκη, "Force, Whip, Necessity", are invoked to conjure up a spirit.

125. E.g. in SM 42, *passim*, the *defigens* invoke Cerberus and the Erinyes (on Cerberus developing this same role, see also PGM IV 1906); a formula that repeats in several curse tablets (SM 46-49) invokes the chthonic Hermes and Anubis, together with Pluto and Persephone. The most complete elenchus is in PGM IV 1443, where, among others, Hermes, the Moirai, Charon, and Anubis are mentioned.

126. On the fluidity of these categories in Graeco-Roman magic, see Ciruolo, 2001; Pachoumi, 2017, pp. 35-62; Canzobre Martínez, 2020, pp. 309-400. On the concept of *angelos* in Late Antiquity, see Cline, 2011.

Hence, the set of chthonic divinities listed above appears also in practices in which *angeli* were summoned.<sup>127</sup> It is unlikely that, in the context of the production of *The Letter of Isis*, contemporary to the parallels examined in this section, its author and its readers did not identify this group of divinities with this very specific magical ritual context.

It is worth remembering at this point that several of the initiation narratives discussed in Section 4, above, involve the invocation of a *daemon* or god by magical means: Ps.-Democritus invokes the spirit of his master and Thessalos communicates with Asklepios by means of a (magical) ritual of lecanomancy. Yet, the possibility of invoking a *daemon* is also offered to him. Peteisis, the *prophētēs* of the astrological treatise of Tebtunis temple library, also starred in a story in which consulting a ghost for some restricted knowledge (perhaps about the future, since the answer he finally gets concerns his death) played a key role in triggering the action: the so-called *Story of Peteisis*.<sup>128</sup> Some of these narratives also share another motif: the *daemon's* reluctance to respond to the ritual practitioner.<sup>129</sup> Pseudo-Democritus fails to make the ghost of his master speak openly, and Peteisis, in the story to which I have just referred, only obtains his revelation after doing something that frightens the spirit,<sup>130</sup> which initially does not satisfy the priest's demands. The *daemon's* refusal to answer the ritual practitioner's questions also appears in Graeco-Roman literature: Erichtho, like Peteisis, must constrain the ghost she invokes (B.C. VI 720-750) and, in the *Aithiopika* by Heliodoros of Emesa (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE), the spirit summoned by the ancient Egyptian woman of Besa not only fails to respond to her, but even rebukes her for her audacity (*Aeth.* 6, 15). This motif is also found within *The Letter*, albeit adapted to the angelic narrative, since the first angel refuses to reveal the alchemical knowledge to Isis and, even when *Amnaēl* arrives, the goddess does not immediately get her answer. The practices described in the magical papyri show that this was not merely a literary motif, but a ritual reality. When this occurred, as in the case of Peteisis and Erichtho, the ritual practitioner resorted to coercive means (ἐπάναγκος) such as threats and, above all, conjuration formulas (ὄρκισμός, ἔξορκισμός) in which

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127. E.g. PGM VII 862-919. In PGM I 1-163, Hermes and Hecate send a spirit referred to as both *daemon* and *angelos*. Because of this web of identifications, Hebrew angels can also act as *daemons* in erotic practices (PGM XXXVI 295-310) and curses (PGM XXXVI 231-251).

128. See Escolano-Poveda, 2020, pp. 28-39. The Demotic manuscripts that preserve this narrative date from the Ptolemaic period to the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE (Escolano-Poveda, 2020, p. 27, n. 94).

129. This motif can be added to those listed by Daniel Odgen (2001, pp. 27-30) in relation to the way *daemons* communicate with mortals in literary necromantic scenes.

130. P.Petese Tebtunis A 2, l. 11. See Escolano-Poveda, 2020, p. 30.



the divinities listed above were usually named.<sup>131</sup> In this respect, we should note that the conjuration formula employed in magic was the same as that used to swear the oath in *The Letter* and Valens (ὀρκίζω σε).<sup>132</sup> The *Cyranides* passage quoted above proves, once again, its ambivalence with respect to functioning with an adjuration value. These points reinforce the impression that the second part of the oath originally belongs to a summoning spell.

In the search for points of contact with a possible magical ritual for communicating with a divine power, I would like to point out three additional aspects, with which I will conclude this study.

First, Isis' caution in gaining the knowledge she craves from the angel "without malevolence and faithfully – ἀφθόνως καὶ ἀληθῶς" leads us to the formulaic language of magic. In fact, the need for divine beings to communicate with the practitioner without falsehood, deceit, or malevolence is a common concern of magical practices of communication with a divinity, which is expressed by using precisely these two adverbs.<sup>133</sup> Apparently, the divine powers did not like to be invoked in non-normative ritual contexts, and so, in addition to disobeying the ritual practitioner, they could convey untruthful information or even appear in a hostile mood.<sup>134</sup>

Secondly, but in line with this idea, it is also common in magical practices of communication with the divine for the ritual practitioner to have indications of how the divinity will appear, what he or she will look like, and what objects he or she will

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131. By way of example, the complete chthonic court (including Hermes, Anubis, Charon, and the Erinyes-Necessities) is invoked in the erotic practice described in *PGM IV* 1390-1494, to compel a *daemon* if the first ritual fails to summon it. The ritual for a *paredros* of *PGM I* 79-81 prescribes "adjure him (*i.e.* the *paredros*) with this [oath] in order that he, after meeting you, remain inseparable from you and that he neither [keep silent] nor disobey in any way" (transl. by C. Faraone, A. Nodar and S. Torallas Tovar in *GEMF*, 2022, pp. 391).

132. See Zografou, 2015.

133. See *e.g.* "What is your inspired name? Reveal (it) to me without malevolence – μὴνυσόν μοι ἀφθόνως" (*PGM I* 161); in *PGM XII* 377, the offering of a rooster is prescribed for the god to act "without malevolence – ἀφθόνως"; "accomplish without falsehood – ἀψευδῶς – lord, the vision of every practice" (*PGM III* 289); "appear and prophesy to me without falsehood – ἀψευδῶς –" (*PGM V* 420); "prophesy to me with truthfulness, without falsehood, in an understandable way – ἐπ' ἀληθείας, ἀληθῶς, ἀψευδῶς, ἀναμφιλόγως – about this matter" (*PGM XIV* 6).

134. *E.g.* in *PGM IV* 450-52 = *IV* 1966-70 = *I* 319-22 this idea appears combined with the petition of truthfulness: "Let him (*i.e.* the *daemon*) tell me by speaking the truth – ἀληθείην καταλέξας – however many things I am wishing in my thoughts, gentle, gracious and harboring no hostile thoughts towards me – πραῦν, μελίχιον μηδ' ἀντία μοι φρονέοντα. And you yourself do not be angry – μηδὲ σὺ μηνίσης – at my incantations" (transl. by C. Faraone, A. Nodar and S. Torallas Tovar in *GEMF*, 2022, pp. 409). See a study of this aspect of the magical practice in Chronopoulou, 2015.



carry. Some of these theophanies include vessels, as in *PGM VII 735*, in which the god Apollo presents with a cup of libations (σπονδειον) from which he will permit the magician to drink if he asks him to do so; or *PGM IV 1109-1110*, where the god appears seated on a goblet (κιβώριον). Such signals send us back to the passage in *The Letter* in which the first angel indicates to Isis how to recognize *Amnaēl* (ll. 19-21):

ἔλεγεν δὲ περὶ σημείων αὐτοῦ ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, καὶ ἐπιδείκνυσθαι κεράμιον ἀπίσσωτον ὕδατος διαυγοῦς πλήρες. “He told me about the sign that he (*i.e. Amnaēl*) had on his head, and that he would show (me?) an unpitched, ceramic vessel filled with clear water”.<sup>135</sup>

However, according to the development of our narrative, *Amnaēl* does not immediately show these signs to Isis. On the contrary, the goddess must resist *Amnaēl* and impose herself on the angel (the Greek text literally says “I prevail over his desire – ἐπεκράτουν τῆς τούτου ἐπιθυμίας”) until receiving the signs, just before obtaining the longed-for revelation of the alchemical knowledge (ll. 27-31):

οὐκ ἐπεδίδουν ἑαυτήν, ἀλλ’ ἐπεκράτουν τῆς τούτου ἐπιθυμίας ἄχρις ἂν τὸ σημεῖον τὸ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐπιδεικνύηται καὶ τὴν τῶν ζητουμένων μυστηρίων παράδοσιν ἀφθόνως καὶ ἀληθῶς ποιήσῃται, “I did not give myself and I was able to curb his desire until he showed me his sign on the head and carried out the transmission of the mysteries I was looking for without malevolence and faithfully”.

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135. The symbolic meaning of the two *Amnaēl* symbols is difficult to decode. The image of the vessel is so widespread in myth, religion(s), and philosophy, and its symbolism varies so much from one religious and cultural context to another, that it is impossible to conjecture any concrete interpretation. However, that the vessel is unpitched is a requirement of ritual purity, so one might wonder whether this is not part of the initiation ritual. As for the sign on *Amnaēl*'s head, Mertens' suggestion that it could be related to the hieroglyphs that Egyptian divinities sometimes wear on their heads when represented in paintings or reliefs (Mertens, 1983-1984, p. 83) is tempting. These hieroglyphs indicate the name of the god. That *Amnaēl* reveals his name to Isis makes perfect sense in the story. The myth of *The Secret Name of Ra* exemplifies a long and widespread Egyptian tradition that continues into Imperial Roman times (as the practices of the magical papyri show) that the name is closely linked to the essence of beings (in fact, it is an essential part). Therefore, to know the name of someone or something is to have power over that being. That is, by making *Amnaēl* show her the symbols above his head (*i.e.* his name), Isis subjugates him to her will, as is indeed the case. If so, this would imply that the author of *The Letter*'s introduction had the representations of Egyptian divinities in mind when he described the (Hebrew) angels in this narrative. Escolano-Poveda, in this volume discusses how Egyptian temple imagery influenced the way in which the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis conceptualised his alchemical allegories. For an alternative interpretation, see Lopes da Silveira, 2020, pp. 46-47.

Similarly, in some magical practices of communication with the divine, the magician gets a signal when the divinity is favourable to such a practice, as an indicator that the consultation can begin and the god will speak truthfully.<sup>136</sup>

The fact that the advent of the angels might not be accidental, but rather motivated by ritual action, is also suggested by a third aspect: the reference to the reach of “the succession of the convenient times – τῶν καιρῶν – and to the necessary course of the spherical movement” that precedes the arrival of the first angel. In this passage, the author explicitly evokes the astrological concept of *kairós* (καιρός), the astrological moment propitious for doing something. Just as astrobotanical treatises (such as that by Thessalos) believed that the curative properties of plants depended on the astrological moment when they were harvested and prepared, Zosimos’ treatise *On the Letter Omega* informs us about an alchemical current that disregarded technical knowledge on substances and apparatus and instead based its practices on astrological premises (*MA* I 30-37 Mertens).<sup>137</sup> However, in *The Letter*, the reach of the *kairós* does not precede any alchemical operation, but rather an encounter with a divine being. This circumscribes this astrological moment to communication with the angels. In this respect, the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri show that certain magical practices also rely on the *kairós*<sup>138</sup> and, in fact, two astrological calendars for the practice of magic are extant (*PGM* III 276-284 and VII 272-299).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding discussion, I have attempted to demonstrate that *The Letter of Isis* is a unique text in terms of its richness and its many and varied aspects. Nowhere is this more evident than in the narrative that serves as the introduction to this alchemical treatise. It fuses (apocryphal) Old Testament and Graeco-Egyptian literary traditions with a complex web of ritual elements. This demonstrates some-

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136. In *PGM* III 271-273, a falcon will perch on a tree if the god is favourable to communication; in *PGM* IV 3225-3228, the goddess Aphrodite will extend her hand to the ritual practitioner as a sign of assent of the magical consultation. For an exhaustive list of passages, see García Molinos, 2015, pp. 38-41.

137. This alchemical practice is called by Zosimos καιρικά καταβαφαί, “the well-timed tinctures” (*MA* I 11-12 Mertens).

138. The astronomical timing is especially relevant in connection with the practices of communication with the divinity collected in *GEMF* 30 (addressed to Apollo and Daphne with oracular aims) and *PGM* V (e.g., ll. 47-52, 242-245 and 378-379). However, and contrary to what one might think, not all magical practices were subject to this ritual precept. In fact, the vast majority do not contain astronomical indications and some even stress the advantage of working “at any time” (e.g. *PGM* IV 162 and 1099).

thing that has been repeatedly emphasised in this study: that *The Letter of Isis* participated in – and thus it originated from – the same intellectual milieu as Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, Hermetic philosophical treatises, and other works emanating from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

The introduction of *The Letter* is the result of a careful combination of three contemporary stock-themes with their corresponding network of *loci communes*. In Section 2, I analysed the most recognisable of these: the narrative about the angelic revelation of secret knowledge to a feminine recipient in exchange for sexual favours. This, as already said, stems from the reinterpretation of an account from the *Book of Enoch* within alchemical circles. The witness of Zosimos of Panopolis confirms it, while also bearing witness to its dissemination in other fields, such as Hermeticism (in turn, confirmed by the *Cyranides*). In fact, *The Letter of Isis* is not alien to the Hermetic tradition, with which the introduction to this alchemical treatise has many points of contact, even at the textual level. Although this might give it a Hermetic flavour – especially to modern eyes – the fact is that most of these links come from the pool of stock-motifs shared by the Graeco-Egyptian authors and do not necessarily imply that our treatise was produced in a Hermetic environment. In this respect, although this possibility cannot be ruled out either, it should be noted that, unlike the Hermetic works, our text does not establish any link between the goddess (or alchemical knowledge) and Hermes, who is not mentioned or even alluded to. Rather, the goddess' quest for secret wisdom, her image in *The Letter*, as well as the transmission of this knowledge to her son Horus could come from the Egyptian mythological tradition of Isis, as I have shown in Section 3. They were used in her sapiential tradition, to which many Hermetic opuscles were also linked. To merge these two narrative patterns, the author of this literary fiction used a third stock-theme. As analysed in Section 4, this describes how a character, driven by intellectual curiosity, acquires a certain knowledge in an Egyptian sacred place using supernatural means. This stock-theme can be noted in both Greek and Egyptian literature, merging in Graeco-Roman narratives or Roman imperial period. As is often the case with the protagonists of these narratives, Isis could have been imagined as an initiated priestess, which would justify the designation as *prophētis* attributed to her in the title of this treatise. This does not exclude other arguments, however, such as the stock identification of alchemists as *prophētai* within alchemical tradition. In fact, both motifs could converge, as the case of Pseudo-Democritus demonstrates. Finally, the thorough analysis of the initiatory scene developed in Section 5 has revealed a complicated frame of ritual motifs pertaining to magical practices of communication with the supra-human sphere. These would be in keeping with the narrative pattern of the initiation theme, which, in most of the surviving versions, incorporates a ritual intended to bring

the protagonist into contact with non-human powers. However, just as the Enochian narrative endows women with a passive role (as opposed to the active role of angels), so, too, has the female protagonist in our narrative been deprived of ritual agency. As in the *Book of Enoch*, in *The Letter of Isis* the angels descend of their own free will, but this does not seem to have entirely eliminated the ritual packaging that accompanied the initiation scene. As a result, the remaining ritual elements appear poorly merged with the Enochian account about the angelic revelation. That said, an alternative explanation cannot be excluded: that, during the process of transmission of *The Letter*, our text would have been progressively (re)influenced by the stock-theme of the initiation theme, favouring the introduction of additional ritual details.

Finally, I cannot conclude without drawing attention to the choice of Isis as protagonist. In Graeco-Egyptian technical traditions, this goddess usually appears portrayed as the instructor of Horus, which was not only in line with the general rhetoric of this work, but also offered a narrative framework for the closed transmission of alchemical knowledge. Dieleman's analysis of exhortations and narratives about the secret transmission of magical knowledge shows that they do not necessarily imply that it is esoteric.<sup>139</sup> In fact, in many cases, they function as a rhetorical strategy to enhance the prestige of a practice or text. However, the initial narrative of *The Letter of Isis* would not only have served as a rhetorical framework for making alchemical knowledge reliable and attractive in the eyes of its audience. New alchemical texts, such as the Syriac Zosimos, in which this author confirms the actual practice of administering secrecy oaths within certain alchemical circles, offer us a new perspective for re-reading this narrative. Moreover, if we take into account that the first section of the oath has parallels in actual oaths of secrecy preserved in roughly contemporary sources, the hypothesis that this narrative could have also offered a mythical frame for such a ritual practice is a reasonable conjecture.

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139. See n. 113, above.

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