

The Diagram of the Ophites: a Synthesis

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The Ophite Diagram: The Plight for Restoration.

The term 'Ophite' derived from the Greek *ophis* (serpent), rather than being a self-designation was a title imposed upon this Gnostic movement by Christian writers.¹ These early Church fathers, who allowed a significant bias to pervade their work, portrayed the Ophites as a cult of serpent worship; even though the serpent played a minor role within the Ophite religious system.² This essay will focus on the work of one such Christian heresiologist, especially his exposition of an important facet of the Ophite tradition; the Ophite diagram - a blueprint that was instrumental in the ritual life of the Ophites and which reflects many of the sentiments of Gnosticism at large.

Scholars perceive the diagram of the Ophites "as the classic account of the Gnostic-initiatory ascent through the spheres".³ Serving a dual function (i) it provides a comprehensive view of the Ophite cosmos, which in turn, (ii) elaborates the path an initiate travelled for communion with the Supreme God. Although invaluable to Ophite religious practices, no original sketch of the diagram exists today.⁴ The only evidence we have of the Ophite's diagram is the brief extract in *Contra Celsum*, written by the eminent Church father, Origen, in refutation of the heretical material produced by Celsus the Epicurean.⁵ Celsus familiarised his audience with the belief system of this Gnostic sect, including the ritual use of a diagram that he outlined in his work.⁶ Any documents produced by Celsus have long since vanished and the selected excerpts in *Contra Celsum* are all that remains. Origen's manuscript attempts to undermine Celsus' material by reinterpreting the Ophite's "impious diagram" (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 25); though in no part of this work do we find a reproduction. Henceforth, we may assume that both Celsus and Origen had access to a copy of the Ophite diagram. Thus, any attempt at reconstruction entails piecing together the often scanty and disjointed material found in Origen's text.

Several Gnostic scholars, principally Leisegang⁷, Hopfner⁸ and Welburn⁹ have attempted to recreate the elusive image, which Celsus and Origen once held in their hands. Owing to the obscurity of relevant passages, each scholar furnishes us with a divergent account of the Ophite diagram. These differences in opinion, rather than demonstrating the futility of this exercise, herald the need for an assembly of Gnostic scholars focussed on rediscovering this valuable artefact of human consciousness.

Leisegang, Hopfner and Welburn all afford reflection upon this Gnostic diagram of ascension and within each dissertation we can detect both enlightening elements together with glaring misapprehensions or omissions. None can claim to have reconstructed an identical copy of what once rested beside Origen's pen and if this is our objective then we must formulate a new diagram. This does not necessarily entail an audacious reinterpretation, but rather a compilation that synthesises the viable components of each of the preceding diagrams.

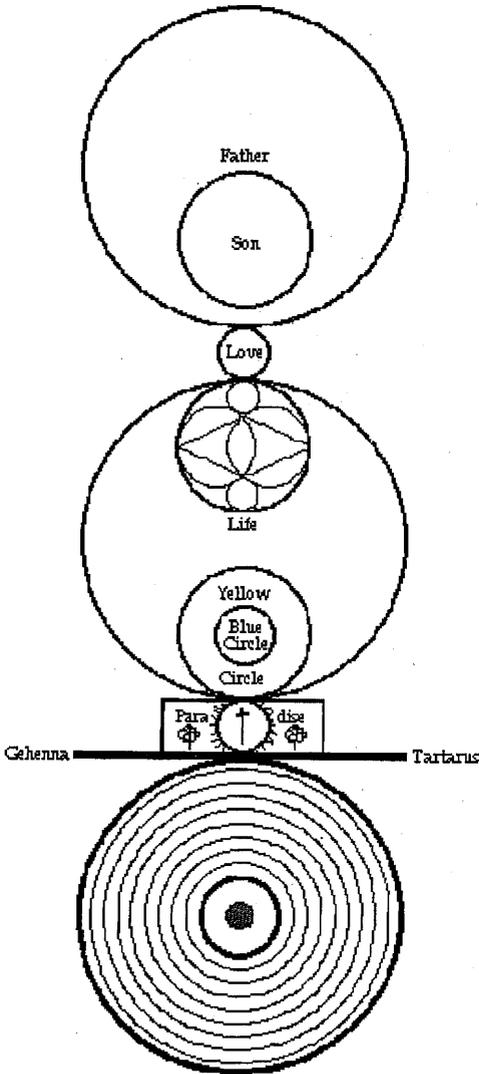


Figure 1.
The Ophite Diagram

An Overview of the Ophite Diagram.

The two key assumptions that I rely upon when restoring the Ophite diagram are that it is (i) a blueprint of initiatory ascent, through (ii) a tripartite division of cosmic spheres;¹⁰ namely the “Earthly Cosmos”¹¹, the Intermediate Realm, and the Heavenly Kingdom. To aid in the comprehension of my Ophite Diagram (Figure 1) and its resources (ie. Celsus, Origen, Leisegang, Hopfner and Welburn), an examination of each division follows.

A. The Earthly Cosmos.

The primary focal point for neophytes of the Ophite sect, this section outlines the composition of the material universe.

It contained a drawing of ten circles, which were separated from one another and held together by a single circle, which was said to be the soul of the universe and was called Leviathan. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 25)

As propounded by both Leisegang and Hopfner, I perceive the Ophite terrestrial

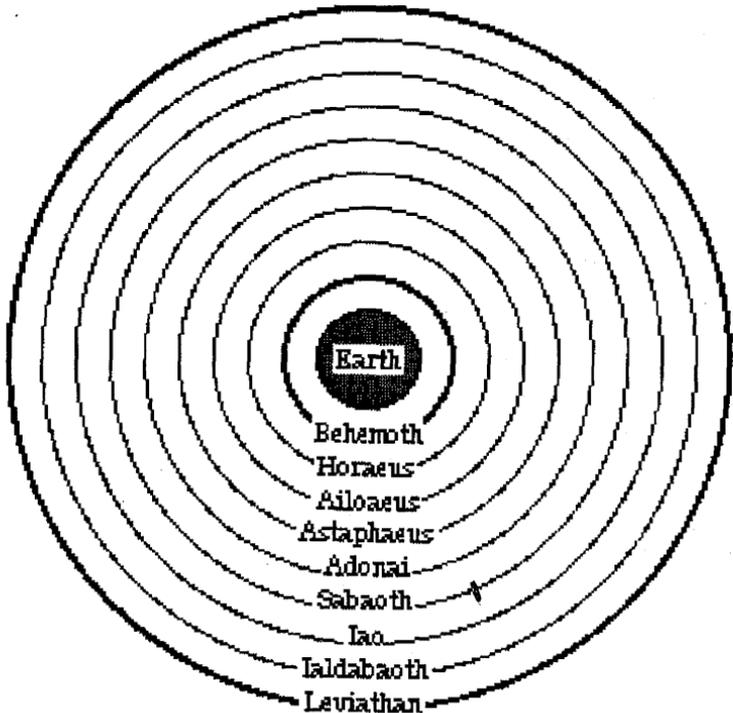


Figure 2.
The Earthly Cosmos

cosmos to have been a geocentric system orbited by the seven principal archons (hebdomad), enclosed by the serpent, Leviathan (world-soul)¹² and whose counterpart, Behemoth¹³, constituted the atmosphere that surrounds the Earth¹⁴.

We also found that Behemoth is mentioned in it as if it were some being fixed below the lowest circle. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 25)

Hence, we can understand the position of Earth, Leviathan and Behemoth. What we now need to clarify are the natures of the remaining seven circles; associated with “the seven archontic daemons”. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 30)

Origen describes these principal powers by outlining “the formula to be addressed by an ascending soul to each of the princes of the hebdomad in order to propitiate him to grant a passage through his dominion”.¹⁵

The problem that arises when reconstructing this section of the diagram is Origen’s arrangement of these formulae. His passage begins with the crossing of ‘the Barrier of Evil’ (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 31), followed by the recitation at the seventh gate and progresses on until the final verse uttered to Horaeus at the first. If we presume the Ophite diagram to be a map of initiatory ascent then we must recognise that Origen states the hebdomad in inverse order. Otherwise, by indiscriminately assembling them in Origen’s sequence, the design contradicts Ophite belief; ie, (i) the initiatory journey is one of descent¹⁶, or (ii) the archons inhabit realms beyond the ‘Barrier of Evil’.¹⁷ Therefore, following the lead of Leisegang, Hopfner and Welburn, I construct an ‘Earthly Cosmos’ which consists of circles emanating from the central Earth sphere, with the archontic circles between Behemoth and Leviathan depicted in an ascending order, viz. Horaeus’ first gate preceding Ialdabaoth’s seventh.

In contrast to Leisegang and Hopfner, I have chosen to place Tartarus outside the ‘Earthly Cosmos’ and within the ‘Intermediate Realm’; it is in this following section that I will outline the attributes that led to its reorientation.

B. The Intermediate Realm

This region of the Ophite diagram is the most enigmatic of the three. In elucidating this nebulous section of Origen’s text and reporting the contrasting accounts of previous interpreters, I strive to present each component according to the ascendant nature of the Ophite diagram.

Gehenna or Tartarus

Celsus further says that *the diagram was divided by a thick black line*, and asserts that they informed him that *this was Gehenna, also called Tartarus*. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 25)

Gehenna and Tartarus, from the Hebrew scriptures and Greek mythology respectively, are terms that denote regions of evil; the former being associated with Sheol or Hell and the latter parallel with Hades.

Both Leisegang and Hopfner regard Gehenna/Tartarus as a line that divides the Earth. They may believe it divides that specific portion of the diagram as Origen refers to it immediately after outlining the hebdomad. We may recall that Origen is citing a diagram that lies before him and can assume that he viewed it in its entirety. Hence, if he specifies that this ‘thick black line’ divided *the diagram*, then we may grant it a greater range than the interior of the smallest sphere allows.¹⁸ My interpretation parallels Welburn’s notion of Gehenna/Tartarus resting above Leviathan. This emerges as a viable placement, considering Origen’s reference to a “Barrier of Evil”¹⁹ lying beyond the last gate and thus exterior to the archon’s domain²⁰.

Paradise

Origen obliges us with ample detail regarding the structure of Paradise, as it appears within the Ophite diagram.

In the diagram which we had we also found what Celsus called *a rectangular figure*, and what those wretches say about *the gates of paradise*. The flaming sword, as guarding the trees of knowledge and of life, was drawn as the diameter of a circle of fire. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 33)

What he fails to clarify is its position within the Ophite’s framework. Nevertheless, contrary to Welburn, this should not demand that we omit it from our interpretation entirely²¹. Any feasible reconstruction must retain ‘Paradise’ as an integral component, since Origen specified its inclusion within the original diagram. Aligned to both Leisegang and Hopfner, I situate ‘Paradise’ beyond the ‘Earthly Cosmos’ and before the ‘Heavenly Kingdom’; the gateway between the physical and the spiritual.

The Double Axe and the Circles (Yellow and Blue).

Although each of these components deserves individual treatment, Origen documents them in such a way that demands they be viewed in light of each other.

In this diagram we found the larger and the smaller circles, on the diameter of which was inscribed ‘Father’ and ‘Son’. And between the larger circle, within which was the smaller one, and another which was compounded of two circles, the outer circle being yellow and the inner blue, we found inscribed a barrier shaped like a double axe. (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 38)

I will examine the larger and smaller circles, ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ respectively, in the following section; ‘The Heavenly Kingdom’. In order to construct the ‘Intermediate Realm’ we need only keep in mind that ‘The Heavenly Kingdom’ constitutes the uppermost portion of the Ophite diagram²².

According to Origen between ‘The Heavenly Kingdom’ and two circles, yellow being the larger one that contains the smaller blue circle, there exists a barrier shaped like a double axe. Hopfner intuited the geometry of the double axe arising from the exterior manifestation of two smaller circles (A & B) enclosed within a larger circle

(C); where A and B lie directly opposite one another and upon C's circumference²³. Therefore, in Figure 3 below, the darkened area of circle C constitutes the double axe shaped barrier.

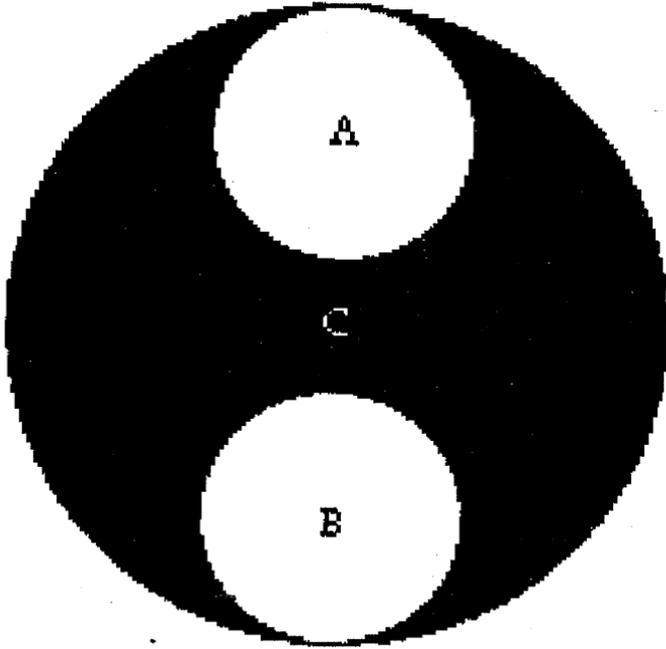


Figure 3

The Double Axe Shaped Barrier

Hence, circle B corresponds to the area, within the Ophite diagram (Figure 1), in which I have placed the yellow and blue circles²⁴.

The Life and Love Circles.

The final emplacement for the 'Intermediate Realm' is the domains of 'Life' and 'Love'; undoubtedly the most perplexing section in Origen's text and consequently an area of great contention for hopeful reconstructionists.

Above it [the double axe] there was a small circle touching the greater of the first two circles, which had been inscribed with the word 'Love'; and below it next to the circle there was written the word 'Life'. In the second circle, within which were intertwined and enclosed two other circles and another figure in the shape of a rhombus, there was inscribed 'Providence of Wisdom'. And inside the sector common to them there was written 'Nature of Wisdom'. Above the sector common to them there was a circle in which was inscribed the word 'Knowledge' (Gnosis), and below it another in which was inscribed the word 'Understanding' (Synesis). (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 38)

The 'Love' circle touches "the greater of the first two circles" that, in concurrence with preceding scholars, I interpret as the 'Father' circle²⁵; the highest region of our diagram. Thus, I situate 'Love' directly beneath this circle and somewhere above the 'double axe'. Origen notes that written below the 'Love' circle is the word 'Life'; before detailing the interior structure of the 'second circle'. Although Origen's reference is ambiguous I believe, alongside previous scholars, that the configuration occupies another circle, drawn below the 'Love' circle, attributed to 'Life'.

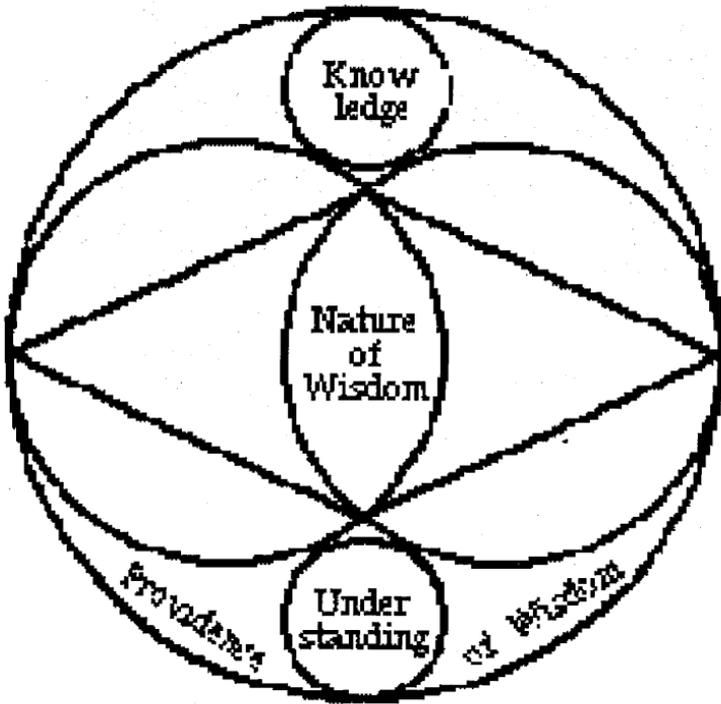


Figure 4
Internal Geometry of the Life Cycle

I agree with the interior structure of Welburn's 'Life' mandala, as it appears to adequately satisfy Origen's conditions²⁶, and I position it in the vacant area of circle A (Figure 3)²⁷.

C. The Heavenly Kingdom

This section of the diagram accommodates the primary and secondary emanations of Father and Son.

In this diagram we found the larger and the smaller circles, on the diameter of which was inscribed 'Father' and 'Son' [...] the larger circle, within which was the smaller one [...] (*Adv. Cels.* VI. 38)

Although this passage may appear clear-cut, each previous interpreter has developed a contrasting response. Both Leisegang and Hopfner seem to have overlooked Origen's explicit reference to an inscription existing *on the diameter*. Leisegang's spherical representation, owing to its very nature, lacks diameters within the regions reserved for 'Father' and 'Son'. While Hopfner's concentric circles allow no space for inscription. Welburn strives to rectify this oversight by the inclusion of a diameter, above which he places the appropriate terms.

I agree that both Leisegang and Hopfner may neglect the issue of diameters, however Welburn appears to overemphasise them. It seems unlikely that the Ophites would install a line of division within the divine natures of light. If we assume these initial emanations consist of pure spirit (Pneuma), then it is difficult to believe that physical manifestations traverse their kingdoms. Origen's account of inscribed diameters seems to indicate where he found the inscriptions positioned within these spheres.

Welburn also posits that the circumference of the smaller 'Son' sphere rests upon that of the larger 'Father' sphere and though this form of construction allows room for a diameter, the text does not account for such a formation. When orientating the 'Love' circle, Origen declares that it touches the greater of the first two circles (ie, 'Father') but does not, as Welburn would have us believe, describe an intersection of three circumferences. I concede that Origen's commentary is far from lucid, nevertheless the Ophite diagram's restoration must conform to the heresiologist's guidelines.

A Path Discovered, Restored and Travelled

By accurately restoring the Ophite diagram we are granted an uninterrupted view of the Ophite's cosmos and escorted along the path travelled to recommune with the Pneuma above. An initiate must transcend this inherently evil Earth, and move beyond Behemoth. Armed with formulae s/he next walks freely through the archontic gates and Leviathan, to arrive unhindered, at a point where the Barrier of Evil is behind them. Between the trees of life and knowledge, Paradise in the rear, they cross the circles of light and darkness; the yellow and blue. A little further beyond the void, and through Life, to be surrounded by Love. Here is the culmination of the journey, a few more steps and they are in Heaven; at home with Father and Son. Thus, the Ophites have reversed creation and achieved communion.

Regrettably, Origen's *Contra Celsum* is our only primary source on the

diagram of ascension formulated by the now extinct Ophites. The references are quite obscure though it is possible to arrange a structure indicative of its nature; as the proposed diagrams of Leisegang, Hopfner and Welburn demonstrate. Although each interpretation appears to supervene the other, none can claim to have composed an equivalent to what once arrested Origen's critical attention.

The diagram I have assembled is not entirely original. That was not its intention. Rather it compiles, what I believe are, the more cogent elements in each of the preceding diagrams. It offers a synthesis, which complying with Origen's narrative, seeks to grant another perspective on the diagram of the Ophites. A component of an often overlooked Gnostic sect who deserve increased awareness. For if we seek to better understand the Gnostic tradition we cannot neglect such a pivotal mechanism of its ritual arm.

Notes

1. Salmon, G, 'Ophites', in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography: Literature, Sects and Doctrines During the First Eight Centuries*, Smith, W, & Wace, H, (eds), New York: AMS Press Inc., 1994, vol. 4, p. 81
2. "The honour paid to the serpent is not particular to the Ophites, for there are traces of it among other Gnostics. It is not even the most important part of their system: but it is the part which gave the deepest offence to the Christians." (Gwatkin, H M, *Early Church History to AD 313.*, London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd. 1909. pp. 56-57.)
3. Welburn, A. J., 'Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram', *Novum Testamentum*, XXIII, 3 (1981), p. 261.
4. Some believe it may have been destroyed alongside much other heretical material, while others seek to attribute the Ophites to a form of mystery association that shunned material representations of the divine and were thus forbidden to write (This hypothesis is quite unlikely since Origen, obviously not an Ophite, had access to a copy of the diagram that played a central role in their ritual practice). Many scholars anticipate the rediscovery of possibly lost Gnostic material and those who do so may not necessarily be waiting in vain. We must keep in mind the Nag Hammadi library which was a modern discovery, stumbled upon by a native shepherd-boy.
5. Numerous scholars venture parallels between the Ophites of Origen and the heretical Gnostics found in the works of other Church Fathers such as; Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 1. 30. 1-15), Hippolytus (*Refutation of All Heresies*, 5. 6. 3-11.1; 10. 9. 1-3), Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 37) and though there are detectable similarities that may warrant them as Ophites, none mention an Ophite diagram. Hence, our investigation will focus primarily on Origen's work; ie, *Adv. Cels.* VI. 24-38.
6. We must note that Celsus does not name the sect that formulated this diagram. It is Origen who attributes the diagram, of which Celsus refers, to the Ophites. See *Adv. Cels.* VI. 24.
7. 'The Diagram of the Ophians' in Rudolph, K. *Gnosis: the Nature and History of an Ancient Religion.* trans. & ed. Wilson, R. M., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983, pp. 67-70.
8. 'The Ophite Diagram' in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Chadwick, H., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953. pp. 338-339.

9. Welburn, op. cit. p. 283.

10. “[T]he tripartite division of the cosmos which was standard for most Gnostic sects[...]” Rudolph, op. cit., p. 69.

11. A term borrowed from *ibid*.

12. This image of a water serpent that encloses the cosmos is reminiscent of the Tiamat myth of the Babylonians, the Sumerian myth of Kur and the account of the Ophite myth of Irenaeus. “And when [Sophia Prunikos] had received power from the moist nature of light, [she] recoiled and rose to the heights, where it spread out like a covering and formed our visible Heaven out of [her] body.” (*Adv. Haer.* 1. 30. 3.)

13. Leviathan and Behemoth are common to a ‘species’. Leviathan as a female (water) serpent (I Enoch ix. 7f.), While Behemoth represents the male (earth) of the serpentine monsters (II Baruch xxix. 4. & IV Ezra vi. 49-52).

14. Rudolph, op. cit.

15. Salmon, G., op. cit., pp. 83-84.

16. Claiming the Ophites practiced rituals of descent seem improbable since, according to Origen’s sequence, the ultimate destination of a successful descent ritual would be Earth; the very place the Ophites are struggling to transcend. Welburn cites instances of initiatory descents in both Gnostic sects (Marcosians) and Jewish mysticism (see Welburn, op. cit., p. 264. n.12.), We are assuming that the Ophites initiatory journey was one of ascent.

17. This belief opposes a fundamental tenet of Gnosticism; ie, that matter is inherently evil and Ialdabaoth, principal of the archons, is responsible for its manifestation. The Ophites are reportedly in agreement with Gnosticism at large, see *Adv. Cels.* VI. 27-29. Hence, if the Ophites consider the archons as the epitome of evil, it would seem ridiculous to place them outside the evil region.

18. We can extend the debate about whether Gehenna/Tartarus exists within the Earth or above its orbit, by drawing upon the nature of these areas in both the Hebrew scriptures and Greek myths. For example, in Greek mythology, Tartarus, is the deepest region of the underworld, which may account for its inclusion underneath the Earth, and is said to be the same distance from Hades (Underworld) as Heaven is from Earth, which may justify placing it beyond Earth. Thus, reflecting upon the mythology, from which these regions are born, would encourage an interesting debate and though this would enliven the enquiry. Limits of space (regrettably) do not permit this discussion.

19. Although attributing the ‘Barrier of Evil’ with Leviathan may at first seem reasonable, it appears inconsistent, since no password needs recounting to Leviathan’s counterpart, Behemoth.

20. Likewise, the region of Gehenna in the Old Testament lies outside Jerusalem; reserved for outcast citizens who transgress Jewish law and a dumping ground for Jerusalem’s garbage.

21. Welburn, op. cit., pp. 271-272.

22. We know that there was nothing before or above the Supreme Good God; as confirmed by Irenaeus’ text on Ophite cosmology (*Adv. Haer.* 1. 30. 1-15) and Gnosticism at large (as demonstrated in *The Apocryphon of John II, 1, 2-5*). Therefore, I cannot imagine the Ophites placing any structure above the circle of the Father.

23. Welburn agrees with Hopfner’s interpretation and integrates its structure in his rendition of the Ophite diagram. Welburn, op. cit., pp. 272-275.

24. Hopfner and Leisegang have speculated upon the nature of the yellow and blue circles,

believing the former circle to be a circle of light and the latter a circle of darkness.

25. Although the placement of the 'Love' circle differs in Hopfner, Leisegang, Welburn and my own diagram, they all agree on the 'Father' circle being its point of contact.

26. Welburn, op. cit., p. 281. Although I concur with the internal structure of Welburn's 'Life' circle, I have not replicated its form within our 'Love' circle. This oversight is due wholly on the fact that Origen has not specified a composition existing within the 'Love' circumference.

27. I agree that this hypothesis may at first appear conjecture, but I urge you to consider the options. Origen states that the structure of Sophia (Wisdom) is the content of "the second circle"; to which we may otherwise attribute to (i) the circle of the 'Son' or (ii) the Blue circle. Nowhere in Gnostic texts do we find a reference to the Son (the Second Anthropos, according to Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1. 30. 1-2, or Barbelo in *The Apocryphon of John*) being pregnant with Sophia. It is the Ennoia (Thought) of the primary Power and an entity in its own right. Also we cannot believe Sophia dwells within the Blue Circle of Darkness treated much earlier by Origen; placing it further down the diagram. Looking to Irenaeus we may justify our placement of Sophia within 'Life'; below the 'Father', 'Son' and 'Love' as well as above the double axe shaped barrier. "Between [the Father and Son] is the Holy Ghost and below it, which is above, are the separated elements, Water, Darkness, Abyss and Chaos, over which hovers the Spirit whom they call the First Woman. Then the [Father] rejoiced with his Son over the beauty of the female Spirit, filled it with Light and from it generated an Imperishable Light, the Third Man whom they call Christ [...] After Father and Son had lain with the woman whom they call also the Mother of the Living, since she could neither bear nor receive the mass of Light, it flowed and overflowed on the left side." (*Adv. Haer.* 1. 30. 1-2) This overflow goes on to create the rest of the cosmos. Thus, the Father and Son through Love create Life.

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