Studies in Intellectual History

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In his admirable work *The Great Chain of Being*, Professor Lovejoy has shown the importance which the concept of the Scale of Being and its figurative expression, the chain, had for Western thought from the early Middle Ages down to the nineteenth century. In an introductory chapter he has outlined the genesis of the idea itself in Greek philosophy. Yet, not primarily concerned with the Greek development, he has refrained from inquiring how far back in ancient literature one can trace the metaphor, and by what process it became a phrase identified with the Neo-Platonic theory of emanation. These questions I propose to discuss here, taking as my point of departure the passage in Macrobius' commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis* (I, 14, 15) through which, as Professor Lovejoy says, probably most medieval writers became acquainted with the simile of the chain.¹

Speaking of the Supreme God, Mind, Soul and their creation, as well as of the creation of all subsequent things, Macrobius identifies "Homer's golden chain, which God, he says, bade hang down from heaven to earth" (*Homeri catena aurea, quam pendere de caelo in terras deum iussisse commemorat*) with the continuous succession of all things degenerating to the very bottom.

¹ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*² (1942), 63.
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of the series, "a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break" (a summo deo usque ad ultimum rerum faecem una mutuis se vinculis religans et nusquam interrupta connexio). The identification is made quite casually, and one can hardly believe that Macrobius should have been the first to offer it.

In general, he follows Neo-Platonic writers, and it would therefore seem natural to believe that he took this metaphor from the same sources. However, it does not occur in Plotinus, who uses the other comparison which Macrobius adduces in his context, namely the series of mirrors (e.g. Enneads, I, 1, 8); nor is the chain of Homer mentioned with similar connotations in the extant writings of Porphyry, Iamblichus, or Julian. Consequently, scholars have suggested that Macrobius must have borrowed the simile from a Neo-Platonic work now lost.

This supposition may well be correct. Yet, even if Macrobius depended on an earlier Neo-Platonic author, it is unwarranted to assume, as is usually done, that the metaphor was original with the Neo-Platonists. It was in fact employed at least as early as the first half of the second century after Christ. The rhetor, Aristides, in his speech On Zeus contends that all gods are endowed with an emanation of the power of the highest deity, the creator of the world, and, he continues, "in the manner of the chain of Homer everything is fastened upon Him and everything is suspended from Him, a chain much more beautiful than that golden chain or any other chain one might

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2 The translation is Professor Lovejoy's (loc. cit.).
4 E.g. W. Leaf, The Iliad, I (1900), ad VIII, v. 19; L. Priller-C. Robert, Griechische Mythologie, I (1894), 108, note 1; cf. also below, n. 33.
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imagine" (In Jovem, 15). Even granted that Macrobius gives a more elaborate picture of the chain, fundamentally the metaphor is used in the same sense by Macrobius as by Aristides. The latter, too, envisages a unity of unequal parts, a descending sequence of values (ibid., 15–17). His description of the position of Zeus reflects the doctrine of Middle Platonism with its tendency to elevate the might of the one and supreme god and to unify the various realms of being under his leadership. At least to this eclectic system, then, one can trace the chain as a metaphor of the Scale of Being.

Nor were the Middle Platonists the first to ascribe an exalted philosophical significance to the episode at the beginning of the eighth Book of the Iliad (vv. 1–40), where Zeus forbids the assembled gods and goddesses to meddle in the affairs of mortals, threatens them with dire punishment in case they disobey, and dares them to make trial of his strength in a rope-pulling contest, with a rope of gold to be suspended from heaven (v. 19);

5 "Ὅτε καὶ θεῶν δοσι φύλα ἀπορροήν τῆς Διός τοῦ πάντων πατρὸς δυνάμεως ἕκαστα ἐξεῖ καὶ ἀρετικῶς κατὰ τὴν Ὀμήρου σειράν ἀπαντά εἰς αὐτὸν ἀνήρτηται καὶ πάντα εἰς αὐτὸν ἔξηται, πολὺ καλλίων ἀλοις ἡ κατὰ χρυσῆν τε καὶ εἰ τῶν ἄλλων τῆς ἐπινοήσεως (43 Keil). For the date of the speech (around 142/3 A.D.), cf. J. Amann, Die Zeusrede des Ailios Aristëides, in Tübinger Beiträge z. Altertumswissenschaft, XII (1931), 36. Aristides’ statement is adduced in explanation of the chains mentioned in Proclus’ hymns by F. Jacobs, Animadversiones in Epigrammata Anthologiae Graecae, X (1801), 273; 277; cf. J. F. Boissonade, Marini Vita Procli (1814), 121. The passage is also quoted as an example of allegorical interpretation by C. G. Heyne, Homeri Carmina V (1802), 417. In the later discussion of the subject it has apparently been forgotten.

for in Homer surely it is a rope, not a chain, that is referred to, and it is called golden "to show its poetical character" (Scholia A, ad loc.). From the fifth century B.C. this passage seems to have been of singular importance to all allegorizers; the earlier interpretations, I suggest, gradually led up to the meaning which the Middle Platonists later discovered in the words of Homer.

Plato's mention of the golden rope is the oldest philosophical testimony that has survived. In his opinion, the poet indicates by the rope "nothing other than the sun, and reveals that so long as the heavens and the sun keep moving, all things divine and human remain safe; but if this motion were halted, bound as it were, all things would be destroyed and everything, as the saying goes, turned upside down" (Theaetetus, 153 c-d).

The allegory, as it is formulated here, probably is of Heraclitean origin, although it was hardly restricted to that school, and Plato adapts it to his own purposes. In his ironic manner, he blends physical and metaphysical speculations. Like the sun, the rope maintains the existence of the cosmos and of all its parts. But the sun also symbolizes movement, and eternal movement, one might say, is considered the rope, the bond, that holds

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1 Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem, ed. G. Dindorf, I (1875), 269. Cf. Leaf's comment on v. 19. Ps. Plutarch, De vita et poesi Homeri, 18, attributes to Homer an analogical use of the term, and so do some of the other scholia, but this surely is a later misunderstanding. The game referred to is described by Eusthatius, Commentarii in Homeri Iliadem, p. 1111.

8 For the Heraclitean origin of the allegory, cf. e.g. L. Campbell, The Theaetetus of Plato* (1883), ad loc. Euripides (Orestes, v. 982) calls the sun a rock held in suspense between heaven and earth by golden "chains" (ἀλάγησεω). The expression may be derived from Homer (cf. e.g. Leaf, on Iliad, VIII, v. 19); if so, this would be the earliest analogical interpretation of the Homeric seira which is attested; cf. below, n. 20. The explanation of the nature of the sun is that of Anaxagoras, as the scholia recall (Scholia in Euripidem, ed. E. Schwartz, I [1887], 193 f.), and he may have agreed with the allegorization of the Heracliteans. For Anaxagoras' interest in Homer, cf. F. Wehrli, Zur Geschichte der allegorischen Deutung Homers im Altertum, Diss. Basel (1928), 66; 84 f.
the phenomena in place. The student of the Platonic dialogues cannot fail to remember, in addition, that the sun is the offspring of the idea of the Good, the strongest of all bonds, and its analogue in the visible world (Republic, 508 b-c). If the movement of the sun is tied up, then the appointed order of the world will be disturbed, just as Zeus threatens to pull all the gods up to heaven, along with the earth and the sea, and to bind the rope around Olympus, so that all things would be hanging in the air (vv. 23–26).

Both the physical and the metaphysical aspects of the Platonic explication were broadened by succeeding generations, and in some instances were merged again to such an extent that it is not always possible to distinguish them clearly. As for that interpretation in which the physical component predominates, some people continued to see in the golden rope an allegory of the sun (Scholia A, ad v. 19), or of its rays and the days (Palaephatus, De incredibilibus, XVIII; cf. Ps. Lucian, De astrologia, 22). The rope symbolized the chain of days of the Aeon, binding together the days of mankind up to that one on which everything will be destroyed, except god himself (Eusthatius, p. 695). Others held that the rope points to the orbits of the stars, which all great naturalists define as firebrands (Heraclitus, Quaestiones Homericae, ch. 36). More particularly, it was taken to mean the orbits of the planets and their arrangement on the heaven (Eusthatius, p. 695, 10). Besides, the whole incident related by Homer was now exploited for its allegorical meaning. Zeus' boasting of what he might do to gods, earth, and sea (vv. 23–26) proved that in the poet's view the all-surrounding heaven could

9 F. Boll, Die Sonne im Glauben und in der Weltanschauung der alten Völker (1922), 21. He seems the only one to stress this implication of the allegory within the context of the Platonic work.

10 Heraclitus' book was probably composed in the first century A.D.; it is in the main indebted to Stoic sources.
justly be called the upper part of the spherical cosmos and the region of the earth the part below (Ps. Plutarch, De vita et poesi Homeri, ch. 94). Zeu’s threat to throw the rebellious gods down into Tartarus, as far below as heaven is high above earth (v. 16), indicated the central position of the earth (Heraclitus, Quaestiones Homericae, ch. 36). If Anatolius, the Peripatetic of the third century A.D., is to be trusted, already the “Pythagoreans” found this dogma confirmed by Zeu’s words. Finally, the metaphor of the rope was interpreted by the Stoics in two different ways. The rope could be a simile of the “chainlike intertwining,” the interlacing of the elements whose nature was to be changed in the end through the general conflagration of the world (Eusthatius, p. 695). Or the rope signified the sun drying up the sea by which it is nourished; eventually, the sun will annihilate even the earth, and thus all that was below will be drawn above into “the heart” of the cosmos; Zeu alone, the personification of the ether, will not be absorbed into it (Eusthatius, p. 695, 10). To put it differently, the altercations between the Olympians, properly understood, yielded the cosmology and cosmography of Homer.

11. This work shows an eclectic-Pythagorean tendency; its date can perhaps be set at the beginning of the Roman Empire, cf. Wehrli, op. cit., 21; 39.


13. Lucretius (II, 1153 ff.) denies that men descended from heaven by the golden rope, and as Professor Louis A. MacKay, reminds me, the poet is usually understood to refer to a Stoic allegorization of the golden rope mentioned in Iliad, VIII. Moreover, Themistius (Orat. 32, 363d) is said to prove that the passage “was used in the way hinted at by Lucretius” (Lucretius, ed. H. A. J. Munro, I 3 (1873), ad. loc.). Yet, although Themistius speaks of a στερω of eternal birth, the adjective ἄρκτος seems to make certain that what he has in mind is the δεσμὸς ἄρκτος with which Zeu fastened the hands of Hera (Iliad, XV, 19 ff.). This bond actually was interpreted by the Stoics as the unbreakable unity of the elements (Ps. Heraclitus, ch. LX finis) that
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On the other hand, the metaphysical side of the argument comes to the fore in a statement of Aristotle. Those who believe the origin of motion to be outside of motion, he says, should find appropriate Zeus' assertion (vv. 20–22) that the gods would be unable to overcome him and to drag him down from heaven to earth, even if they tried to do so with all their strength (Movement of Animals, 699 b 35 ff.). And Theophrastus expresses a similar thought, claiming that the prime mover can be expected to be even stronger than the Homeric Zeus who boasts (v. 24) that he can do what his fellow gods are unable to accomplish (Metaphysics, II, 9, 5b15–17). While Aristotle and Theophrastus avail themselves of Homer's verses to illustrate the position of the transcendental prime mover, others were more realistic and thought that the poet in Zeus' menacing speech enigmatically suggested the merit of monarchy, for the rule of the many would be even worse in heaven than on earth (Eusthatius, p. 695, 10; Scholia A, ad vv. 25–26). Moreover, this Zeus, the Stoics claimed, is the personification of fate that holds sway over heaven and earth (v. 27; Eusthatius, p. 695). Homer, like all great philosophers, acknowledged one supreme deity. Does not Zeus end his warnings (v. 27) by affirming his superiority over men and gods alike? Does not Athena humbly answer the father of all, the supreme of lords (v. 31)? Does she not concede (v. 32): "We know only too well that your might create animals and men (ibid., init.). The whole description of Hera's punishment through Zeus (XV, 18-21) symbolized the genesis of the cosmos (cf. J. Stern, Homerstudien der Stoiker [1893], 16). I should therefore suggest that Lucretius too was thinking of an interpretation of Iliad, XV rather than of Iliad, VIII (for superne . . . de caelo, cf. ὑψόθεν [XV, 18] and Ps. Heraclitus on this word).

The genuineness of this treatise has been proved by W. Jaeger, Hermes, 48 (1913), 33, who has also pointed out that the use of the Homeric verses here agrees with Aristotle's general attitude as expressed in Book XII of the Metaphysics.
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is dauntless" (Ps. Plutarch, De vita et poesi Homeri, 114)? Thus, he who challenged his peers to a tug of war emerged as the highest deity, an understanding of the Homeric account that apparently was quite commonly accepted. Lucian, in his Menippean dialogues, repeatedly pokes fun at the golden chain of Zeus and his pretense at being omnipotent, whereas Christian Apologists of approximately the same time concluded from the same evidence that Homer agreed with their own monotheistic teaching.

From the testimony adduced it is clear, I think, that when the Middle Platonists expressed their concept of the structure of the universe through the metaphor of the golden chain, they merely followed an old-established procedure. At that time, the episode at the beginning of the Eighth Book of the Iliad had long been of central importance for philosophical allegorizers. To the modern reader, the Homeric tale has alternately appeared as a burlesque mockery of the divine, or as a poetical description of the gods' character that is imbued with tragic grandeur.

To the ancients, at least to those who wished to extract Homer's philosophy in agreement with their own predilections, it was fraught with deep meaning, a clue to Homer's physical and metaphysical beliefs. How this came about, it is difficult to determine. The love of etymologies may have provided the starting point for speculation. The rope, the seira, may have

15 For Lucian, cf. e.g. Juppiter confutatus, 4; other passages have been collected by R. Helm, Lucian und Menipp (1906), 137. Even the Scholia A. ad vv. 25-26 raise the question, how Zeus can be the strongest, if once he was overcome by others (Iliad, I, 400). On the other hand, Vettius Valens, Anthologiae, IX, 8, p. 347, 7 ff. Kroll, sees in lines 19 ff. proof of Zeus' self-restraint and willingness not to overstep the law; this "mystic" interpretation unfortunately is mutilated by a lacuna. For the Christian view, cf. Ps. Justinus, Cohortatio ad Graecos, 24 (Patrologia Graeca, VI, p. 284 Migne).

16 Cf. e.g. W. Nestle, Anfänge einer Götterburleske bei Homer, in Griechische Studien (1948), 14.
been brought together with the star, \textit{Seirios}, or with \textit{Zeus Seiren}, of whom the poet, Antimachus, affirms that he was named after \textit{Sirius}, the dog-star rising in the month of the greatest summer heat.\footnote{17 M. Wohlrab, \textit{Platonis Opera}, III²,1 (1891), commenting on the \textit{Theaetetus} passage, where the golden \textit{seira} is identified with the sun, quotes a gloss of \textit{Suidas}: \textit{σείρα, σειρός}: \textit{ὁ ἡλιος}; cf. also O. Apelt's note in his translation, \textit{Platons Dialog Theitet} (1923), 161. For Antimachus, cf. B. Wyss, \textit{Antimachi Colophonii Reliquiae} (1936), Fr. 31. Wyss interprets: \textit{Juppiter torrens}; cf. A. B. Cook, \textit{Zeus}, I (1914), 740. For the rôle which etymologies played in early interpretations, cf. the Platonic \textit{Cratylus}, and in general \textit{Wehrli}, \textit{op. cit.}, 85 ff., who has also drawn attention to the fact that the allegorization of the golden chain is the oldest philosophical allegorization of a Homeric concept that has survived (88). Whether or not an ethical interpretation preceded the philosophical one, in this instance as perhaps in all others, I am not prepared to decide.} Orphic poets referred to a golden rope which Zeus, "in accordance with the laws laid down by the goddess, Night, winds around all things." It is not certain that this statement formed part of the early Orphic doctrine, and consequently one cannot be sure that it helped in instigating the preoccupation of philosophers with the golden rope of Homer. But at one moment or other it must have provided at least an additional reason for the interest in the Homeric scene.

In the third century B.C., at any rate, the question could be asked, whether the Orphic rope may not be identical with that of Homer, for, as Philodemus attests, Cleanthes and Chrysippus tried to reconcile their own views with those of Homer and Orpheus and Musaeus.\footnote{18 For the Orphic references to a golden chain, cf. O. Kern, \textit{Orphicorum Fragmenta} (1922), Fr. 166; for Cleanthes and Chrysippus, cf. I, 539 Arnim. \textit{W. Nestle, Vom Mythos zum Logos} (1942), 129, apparently considers Fr. 166 part of the old Orphic theogony; he is even inclined to trace the beginning of all allegorization of Homer to the Orphics. But the only fact that can be established is that the goddess, Night, was regarded as the supreme deity in the older stratum of the Orphic tradition; cf. Fr. 28 Kern (Eudemus) and I. M. Linforth, \textit{The Arts of Orpheus} (1941), 154 f.} Decisive perhaps was the fact that Zeus' threat to pull up earth, sea, and gods is indeed rather puzzling,
and that hardly any other passage in the *Iliad* sketches so briefly and succinctly a scheme of the whole world. Zeus' words about Tartarus and its precise location in regard to Hades, as well as in regard to the distance between heaven and earth (v. 16), are spoken in the manner of a philosopher, as a late commentator remarks (Eustathius, p. 694, 40); they recall an almost identical assertion in Hesiod's *Theogony* (v. 720). And surely, no scene in Homer gives a more vivid and unmistakable impression of the true distribution of power among the Olympians.¹⁹

Whatever the adequate cause of the allegorization, the Middle Platonists only did what all the philosophers on whose systems they based their own doctrine—Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics—had done before them. Moreover, allowing for certain changes made necessary by their own peculiar theories, their reading of the time-hallowed cipher was but the almost logical consequence of earlier interpretations. The theology that Aristides expounds in his speech *On Zeus* presupposes the dogma of Zeus' predominance; it takes it for granted that the golden rope has some cosmic significance. But Zeus is now regarded not only as a deity, incorporeal and comprehensible by reason alone (Ps. Plutarch, *De vita et poesi Homeri*, 114), or as fate (Eustathius, p. 695); he is thought of as a personal god, as the creator of the world over which he rules, the one who unifies the diversity of being. Thus, while according to Homer Zeus is able, if he feels it necessary or if he so wishes, to pull up by a rope to his heavenly abode gods and sea and earth, according to Aristides he holds forever all things that he has created; in the manner of Homer's chain they are fastened upon and suspended from

¹⁹ The similarity between *Iliad*, VIII, 16 and Hesiod, *Theogony*, 720, was noted by K. Ameis-C. Hentze, *Homers Ilias*, I (1894), ad loc. Linguistic peculiarities of the lines and Hesiodic parallels are discussed by R. Mackrodt, *Der Olymp in Ilias und Odyssee*, Programm Eisenberg (1882), 9 f.
him. The epic picture of what might happen under certain circumstances is transformed—as is fitting for a symbol—into a description of what does happen from eternity to eternity. The rope is taken to mean a chain, the links of which are made up of the various parts of the cosmos connected and held together by Zeus.\(^{20}\)

Moreover, this chain of Zeus Aristides finds worthy of praise in preference to “that golden chain or any other chain one might imagine.” The binding power of Necessity, or Eros and Aphrodite had played a primary part in early cosmological theories; Necessity as the “concatenation of causes” and the golden chain of Aphrodite were familiar expressions in Aristides’ time.\(^{21}\) Yet these chains symbolized a force that works from without, that coerces matter into a unity alien to itself. Aristides subordinates them to Zeus. Eros and Ananke, he continues immediately following his pronouncement on Zeus, are themselves children of the king of gods, begotten by him at the beginning.

\(^{20}\) My interpretation of Aristides’ understanding of the Homeric description presupposes that he did not read vv. 25-26, according to which Zeus intends to bind the rope around Olympus, so that all things will be hanging in the air. These lines were deleted by Zenodotus, because they seemed to contradict a statement previously made by Homer about Mount Olympus; cf. Lehrs, *op. cit.*, 168. They are also omitted in another speech of Aristides (28, Par. 45 Keil), where he quotes *Iliad*, VIII, 17-27. *Scholia A, ad vv* 25-26, however, give the impression that it was just these lines which were taken to mean that everything is dependent on god. The Middle Platonic commentary on the *Theaetetus, Berliner Klassikertexte*, II (1905), 49, explains only Plato’s statement on the golden rope and does not help to clarify Aristides’ views. I should note that Aristides paraphrases σειρά by ἀλήθεια; to him, then, as to all later philosophers, the “rope” definitely was a “chain.” Whether or not the two terms were used interchangeably before him, cannot be ascertained. Some of the Stoic allegorizations (cf. above p. 52) seem to indicate such a usage, especially the identification of the rope with Fate.

\(^{21}\) For Aristides’ polemic against older cosmogonies, cf. Amann, *op. cit.*, 76 ff. The chain of Aphrodite is mentioned e.g. by Lucian, *Demosthenis Encomium*, 13. For Fate as the concatenation of causes, cf. *St. V. Fr.*, II, 917 Arnim, and Ps. Plutarch, *De fato*, 570 b; also 574 c: ὁ τῆς ἀλήθειας λόγος.
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of the world "so that they should bind the universe together for him" (In Jovem, 15). In this way, the work of Eros and Ananke becomes an effluence of Zeus' own power. Their chains, as well as that of Zeus himself, are taken to symbolize a unity that resides within, for all creation is itself part of the creator to whom it owes its existence.

Thus the aurea catena Homeri was established by the Middle Platonists as a figurative expression of the Scale of Being. A poetical phrase became a philosophical catchword; the implement of an athletic contest became a metaphor of the innermost essence of the universe. Could it be that behind Homer's own fancy a symbol was hidden which he playfully transformed, and that later philosophers in their attempts to find an allegorical meaning in his story only reverted to its original significance? The romanticists among the nineteenth century writers on mythology were prone to call the golden chain a mythical or religious Ursymbol, clearly expressed in Hindu sacred literature by Vishnu, who speaks of the cosmos as suspended from himself "like a row of pearls on a string." Such an opinion will nowadays hardly be acceptable to anyone. Nor does the more recent interpretation of the chain as an astronomical Ursymbol seem any more satisfactory. In the view of certain peoples, the Milky Way was thought to be an immense rope, and the golden rope hung from heaven, it has therefore been said, may have been suggested to Homer by a popular conception of the galaxy. But no remnant of such a belief on the part of the Greeks has survived, and what may be true of other times and other countries need not necessarily be true of them.
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In Greek popular tradition the rope is of some importance. In the fantasy of the people it is connected with the figure of death. It occurs in magic beliefs and rituals. Binding by a rope is a means of sorcery. Closely related to such ideas is the simile of the thread of life which the Fates spin on their distaff, and which in Germanic mythology reappears as the rope of Fate. These views apparently were widely current. Even Homer takes notice of some of them. He frequently speaks of the thread of life. Once, the gods attempted to bind their king and father (Iliad, I, 400), a fact that ancient interpreters found it hard to reconcile with the strength of Zeus, as it is pictured in the Eighth Book of the Iliad (Scholia A, ad vv. 25–26). Zeus himself fastened around Hera’s hands a golden bond “that might not be broken” (Iliad, XV, vv. 19–20). That he threatens to fasten the golden rope around Olympus and thus to hold earth and sea in mid air, could be another reminiscence of such popular beliefs in the power of the rope. Still, in this way one may explain a detail of the story, but it can scarcely be the explanation of the whole tale.24

Among the divine figures it seems that Hecate, and she alone, Way as a rope in Babylonian mythology, cf. R. Eisler, Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt, I (1910), 98. The philosophical use of such a simile, as for instance in the myth of the Platonic Republic (616 b-c), is of course quite a different matter.

24 The testimony on Greek popular beliefs has been collected by J. Heckenbach, De nuditate sacra sacrisque vinculis, R. G. V. V., XI, 3 (1911), esp. 87 ff., and J. Scheftelowitz, Das Schlingen- und Netzmotiv im Glauben und Brauch der Völker, R. G. V. V., XII (1912-13), Heft 2, passim. For folktales in Homer, cf. G. M. Calhoun, Homer’s Gods, T. A. P. A., LXVIII (1937), 17, and A. J. P., LVIII (1937), 267. For the thread of life in Homer, cf. Iliad, XX, 128; XXIV, 210; Odyssey, VII, 198. The reference to the rope of Fate in Germanic mythology I found in J. J. Bachofen, Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten (1825), 315; cf. W. Mannhardt, Germanische Mythen (1858). Bachofen interprets the rope of Ocnus, the plaiter, as the rope of life; even if this interpretation were correct, it would not help to explain Homer, since the story seems to be of much later origin.
appears on late monuments with a key and a rope as her attributes. They are commonly understood to be identical in meaning and to indicate her power to open and close the gates of Hades, the rope being the older means by which to fasten a door. But originally, Hecate was not a goddess of the nether world. She was one of the great mother goddesses, one of the most highly revered deities of Asia Minor. Hesiod's *Theogony* describes her might, the privileges granted to her by Zeus "in earth and in heaven and in sea" (v. 427). Homer never mentions Hecate. She belongs to a world that was superseded by the Olympian religion and mythology. Could the rope have been an ancient attribute of Hecate, who was sovereign over the three realms of the cosmos, signifying her all-pervading power? Could Homer have thought of this attribute when he let Zeus challenge his peers to a rope-pulling contest in which the king of gods threatens to pull up gods and earth and sea? Did he smile deprecatingly at another, a defeated mythology? Or does Homer's account betray the faint memory of a fight between some opposing powers? In Germanic mythology, Thor, the god of thunder and lightning, is said to have pulled up by a chain the Midgard serpent, a monster that surrounded the whole earth. The similarity of the Homeric account and the Nordic saga does not suffice to assume a common source of the two, or to aver that there must have been a deeper significance behind the Homeric tale. But the parallel is striking, and it

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25 The Hecate monuments are surveyed by E. Petersen, *Die dreigestaltige Hekate, Archael.-epigraph. Mitt. aus Oesterreich*, IV (1880), 140-74; V (1881), 1-84, esp. 80; cf. also W. H. Roscher, *Lexikon der griech. u. röm. Mythologie, s. v. Hekate*, I, 2 (1886-90), col. 1906. For key and rope, cf. Eusthatius, *In Odysseam*, p. 1923, 50, For Hecate and her original power, cf. O. Kern, *Die Religion der Griechen*, I (1926), 45 ff., who has also shown, *op. cit.*, 245 ff., that one cannot eliminate the hymn on Hecate as an "Orphic" interpolation and that the lines form an intrinsic part of the *Theogony*. 

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emphasizes the possibility that Homer may not merely have given free rein to his fantasy.²⁶

Which one of these speculations comes nearest to the truth, or whether it is legitimate at all to ask if the Homeric story originally had a symbolic meaning, will probably never be known for certain. To the Greeks, at any rate, Zeus' warnings addressed to the assembled gods and goddesses revealed nothing more than the thought of Homer. The Middle Platonists, like all earlier philosophers, turned to Homer not as a writer of hieratic poetry, but as the father of philosophy, whose ideas, expressed in mythological language, needed and demanded translation into rational concepts.

Once they had found in the chain a metaphor of the Scale of Being, one would almost expect Plotinus to have adopted the simile for his intellectual vision of the One and the Many and their interrelation. He himself is inclined to speak, in terms similar to those used by Aristotle and by the Middle Platonists, of things as fastened upon the Good (e.g. Enneads, V, 5, 9); in the same context he refers to a hand grasping the universe at its extremity (VI, 4, 7). Yet his favorite illustrations of the process of emanation are heat emanating from fire, cold originating from snow, rays sent forth by the sun, light reflected by a mirror, a stream that issues from its source, sap that ascends from the root. In other words, Plotinus usually selects physical or biological processes for his comparisons. His highest transcendent being is above will and intellect, as it is above the activity of the demiurge. Besides, his allegorizations are few and cautious. He pays scant attention to the gods of mythology.²⁷

²⁶ The comparison between the episode in Homer and the Thor story has been made by L. Radermacher, Mythos und Sage bei den Griechen (1938), 110. I should mention that Kern, op. cit., 202; 209, considers the Homeric lines a remnant of hieratic poetry.

²⁷ Cf. Enneads, V, 4, 1, and E. Bréhier, Plotin, Ennéades, V (1931), ad
Who then introduced the metaphor of the chain into Neo-Platonism and transmitted it to Macrobius? Porphyry and Iamblichus are the two philosophers to whom Macrobius is indebted for his understanding of the Plotinian teaching, and Porphyry has been suggested as the one to whom he may owe the concept of the *aurea catena Homeri*.\(^\text{28}\) However, reflecting on the general attitude of Porphyry one wonders whether this disciple of the master could really have added the metaphor in question. Much as he was given to allegorizations of Homer and to a belief in the traditional religion before he became a Neo-Platonist, after his conversion he closely followed in the footsteps of Plotinus; he interpreted religion and mythology in an ethical, rather than in a metaphysical sense. With Iamblichus, a change set in. The value of the religious inheritance was reaffirmed. Allegorization was now extended to be all-inclusive, it became systematic and was concerned with the transcendental significance of religion. The will of the gods, their power, was strongly emphasized. Within the context of such an interpretation of the world, the chain of Zeus, who possesses all the qualities which he creates, seems to have its proper place, and it therefore appears likely that Iamblichus or one of his followers, rather than Porphyry, was the source of Macrobius.\(^\text{29}\)


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One other fact should be noted. Among the later Neo-Platonicists—all of them deeply influenced by the teaching of the "divine Iamblichus"—Proclus is the first to have glorified the golden chain of Homer as a cosmic symbol. He identifies it with the golden chain of Orpheus and with the Platonic desmos, "the fairest of all bonds." The concept of the chain, or series, is basic for his whole explanation of the universe. But he also speaks of chains linking men to specific gods, their patrons or patronymic deities, as it were, and taken in this sense, the metaphor of the chain is part and parcel of its usage as a figurative expression of the Scale of Being. Now, the chain symbol of spiritual lineage can be traced to earlier writers, to the generation preceding Macrobius or contemporary with him. Thus, to Eunapius, Julian's claim to being descended from the sun is not comparable to Olympia's assertion that her son, Alexander, was the offspring of Zeus; Julian's statement rather implies the belief that he was bound to the solar kingdom by a "golden chain," in the same way in which the Platonic Socrates affirms: we are the followers of Zeus; others are the followers of other gods. The theoretical exegesis is derived from Plato, as Eunapius himself states; the language in which it is couched is not. In the passage of the Phaedrus (250 b) to which Eunapius refers, Plato does not speak of a chain. Even in the Ion, where poets and

30 Concerning the golden chain of Homer, cf. especially Proclus, In Timaeum, 28 c (I, p. 314, 17 ff. Diehl); also Fr. 166 Kern (cf. above, note 18). For φυλα in a general sense, cf. e.g. The Elements of Theology, ed. E. R. Dodds (1933), Propositio 21, and Dodds' note ad loc. The hymns of Proclus provide numerous instances of the chain connecting gods and men. After Proclus, Damascius, Dubitationes et Solutiones, ed. C. A. Ruelle, I (1889), esp. 154, is most explicit about the meaning of the chain.

31 Cf. Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum, ed. C. Müller, IV (1868), 24 (Fr. 24). The passage is referred to by F. Crewer, Plotini Opera Omnia, III (1835), 323, ad Enn. VI, 1, 3. Eunapius uses the simile of the chain also in his Vita Porphyrii, 457 Boissonade.
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Rhapsodes are said to be suspended from the Muses, while from them a cluster or chain "of other persons is suspended to take over the inspiration" (533e), he bases his simile not on the example of the chain, but on that of the magnet and the iron rings which it attracts. Obviously, then, Eunapius, the historian of the school of Iamblichus, has replaced the terminology of Plato by that of Homer. For him, the Homeric chain must have been an established symbol of the connection between god and man, between the divine and part of the cosmos. The same figure of speech repeatedly occurs in the hymns of Synesius, another follower of Iamblichus and a contemporary of Macrobius. This, I think, is additional reason to hold that it was Iamblichus, or the circle around him, who considered the chain a figurative expression applicable to Plotinus' theory of the Scale of Being; in other instances, too, they were not averse to accepting pre-Plotinian concepts.

In this context it is interesting to recall that Lucian, whose writings Eunapius must have known quite well (Vita Sophistorum, Prooemium, 454 Boissonade), describes a statue of the Celtic Heracles, the god of eloquence, from whose tongue chains of gold and amber are suspended, by which in turn the god's worshippers are fettered (Hercules, 3; cf. F. Koepp, Ognios, in Bonner Jahrbücher, Heft 125 [1919], 38 ff.). Whether or not such a statue actually existed, the description, which was to have great influence on Renaissance art, certainly agrees with Lucian's own views, for he says that the teacher "lets down his words, just as the Homeric Zeus lets down his golden chain," thus pulling up his pupils (Hermotimus, 3); he applies the picture of the chain also to his own speech (Hercules, 8). Lucian, then, sees in the chain a simile of inspiration through oratory, and such a figure of speech may be a contamination of the Homeric language with the theory of the Ion—a similar contamination occurs in alchemistic literature, where the "Platonic rings" and the "Homeric chain" are used interchangeably; cf. F. Hoefer, Histoire de la chimie, II (1866) 245 ff.; H. Kopp, Aurea Catena Homerii (1880). On the other hand, Eusthatius, p. 695, 60, maintains that the golden chain and the whole passage in which it occurs formed a topos for the encomiastic literature on kingship. Even if Eunapius knew of such a rhetorical theory, he transformed it into a philosophical doctrine.

Wilamowitz, Sitzungsber. Berlin Akad. (1907), 272 ff., has shown that,
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Through the works of Macrobius and Proclus above all, the metaphor of the chain then came to be a phrase typical of Neo-Platonic teaching. Later generations forgot that the *aurea catena Homeri* had been interpreted and reinterpreted by writers preceding the Neo-Platonicists, that in fact it had been a concept highly important in all Greek philosophy and literature, just as, in Professor Lovejoy's words, it was to be "one of the most famous in the vocabulary of Occidental philosophy, science, and reflective poetry." 84

before Proclus, the chain as a symbol of human descent occurs in Synesius. As the ultimate source of the simile he names Homer and Orpheus (cf. also Dodds, *op. cit.*, 208 f.), and he points out the necessity of determining the intermediate steps in the history of the metaphor. For other examples of a "harking back to pre-Plotinian sources . . . in later Neo-Platonism," cf. Dodds, *op. cit.*, 258.