

# *The double act of Oedipus and Sphinx unriddled*

**Sphinx is the living palladium of humanity**



Oedipus and Sphinx (1864) Gustave Moreau,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

## *Train of Thoughts*

### **Sphinx is Imagination lighting up our blind senses**

Sphinx corresponds to Aether, Spiritual Insight (Buddhi-Manas) opened up. 3

### **There are two Oedipodes**

A Divine Oedipus, a ray of pure mind self-exiled from its celestial abode. 5

Inspired by the Imagination and Will of Divine Oedipus, animal man begins awakening his higher faculties. If he succeeds, he will ascend from star to star, from one world to another, circling onward to rebecome the once pure planetary Spirit that he had started from. 5

A Worldly Oedipus, a reflection of the same ray imprisoned in an impure body. Both are sentenced to suffer conjointly on earth. 5

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Sphinx is the greatest mystery of past, present, and future initiations. 5

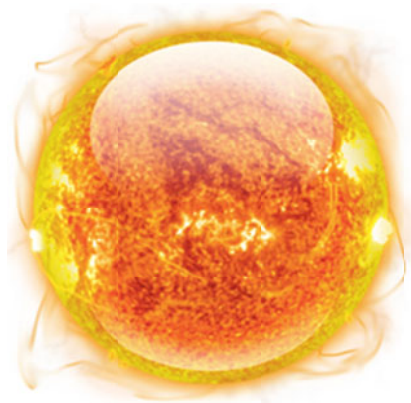
### **Sphinx is the granite pedestal of philosophy and the eternal enigma of the vulgar**

How the tetrad changing into a duad is explained by the triad. 7

Man clung to the form and allowed the idea to be forgotten. 7

Sphinx is the living palladium of humanity. 8

She devours only blind interpreters. 9



## Sphinx is Imagination lighting up our blind senses<sup>1</sup>

**Sphinx<sup>2</sup> corresponds to Aether, Spiritual Insight (Buddhi-Manas) opened up.**

“The following explanation of the sphinx is extracted from the notes to my translation of Pausanius,” says Thomas Taylor in *fn. 7* of his translation of Synesius’ *On Providence*.

The sphinx, according to Lasus Hermioneus, was the daughter of Echidna and Typhon; and according to Clearchus, she had the head and hands of a virgin, the body of a dog, a human voice, the tail of a dragon, the claws of a lion, and the wings of a bird. But it appears to me that the ancients, by the sphinx, designed to represent to us the nature of the phantasy or imagination. In order to be convinced of which, it is necessary to observe, that the rational soul, or the true man, consists of intellect, dianoia or the discursive energy of reason, and opinion; but the fictitious man, or the irrational soul, commences from the phantasy, under which desire and anger subsist. Hence the basis of the rational life is opinion, but the summit of the irrational life is the phantasy. But the phantasy, as Iamblichus beautifully observes, grows upon, as it were, and fashions all the powers of the soul; exciting in opinion the illuminations from the senses, and fixing in that life which is extended with body, the impressions which descend from intellect. Hence, says Proclus, it folds itself about the indivisibility of true intellect, conforms itself to all formless species, and becomes perfectly every thing, from which dianoia and our indivisible reason consist.

This being the case, as the phantasy is all things passively which intellect is impassively (on which account Aristotle calls the phantasy passive intellect) hence the head of the sphinx is human, but at the same time of the feminine sex; this sex being the image, from its passivity, of the irrational life. By the sphinx having the body of a dog, the discriminating power of the phantasy is implied: for a dog is the image of the discriminating power of the soul. Hence Hercules drew up this power from Hades, viz. from the obscurity of a sensible life. But by her having the tail of a dragon, and the claws of a lion, the communication of the phantasy with desire and anger is signified. And her wings are images of the elevating powers, which the phantasy naturally possesses; for it is re-elevated in conjunction with the returning soul, to the region every way resplendent with divine light. But the riddles of the sphinx are images of the obscure and intricate nature of the phantasy. He, therefore, who is unable to solve the riddles of the sphinx, *i.e.*, who cannot comprehend the dark and perplexed nature of the phantasy, will be drawn into her embraces and torn in pieces, viz. the phantasy in such a one will subject to its power the rational life, cause its indivisible energies to become divisible, and thus destroy as much as possible its very essence. But he who, like Oedipus, is able to solve the enigmas of the sphinx, or, in other words, to comprehend the dark essence of his phantasy, will, by illuminating its obscurity with the light of intellect, cause it, by becoming lucid throughout, to be no longer what it was before.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Compassion, the Spirit of Truth*, § “Validate Imagination by Faith and Will,” in our Major Works.

<sup>2</sup> [Cf. Purushamriga or “man-beast,” the Indian Sphinx, and Shesep-ankh or Atum’s “living image,” the Egyptian Sphinx. — ED. PHIL.]

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Hence we may see the propriety of the Egyptians placing a sphinx in the vestibule of the temple of Isis, who is the same with Minerva. For what the phantasy is in the microcosm man, that aether<sup>3</sup> is in the universe. But opinion may be called the vestibule of the rational soul, and the rational soul is as it were the temple of that intellectual illumination which proceeds from Minerva. In this vestibule, therefore, the phantasy is seated. And in a similar manner aether is seated in the vestibule of that divine soul, which is suspended from the deity of Minerva, and which may be called her temple. So that aether is the sphinx of the universe.



Purushamriga, the Indian Sphinx

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<sup>3</sup> [Not Ether! See "Aether & Ether differ" in our Confusing Words Series.]

## There are two Oedipodes

### **A Divine Oedipus, a ray of pure mind self-exiled from its celestial abode.**

*Inspired by the Imagination and Will of Divine Oedipus, animal man begins awakening his higher faculties. If he succeeds, he will ascend from star to star, from one world to another, circling onward to rebecome the once pure planetary Spirit that he had started from.*

The Sphinx is the same now, as it was four centuries before the Christian era; but the [Divine] Oedipus is no more. He is slain because he has given to the world that which the world was not ripe enough to receive. He was the embodiment of truth, and he had to die, as every grand truth has to, before, like the Phoenix of old, it revives from its own ashes.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Worldly Oedipus, a reflection of the same ray imprisoned in an impure body. Both are sentenced to suffer conjointly on earth.**

*Bereft of Ariadne's thread of philosophy, Worldly Oedipus remains spiritually blind and unlearned, unable to escape from the labyrinth of matter. Enmeshed in the darkness of duality, his unmastered passions condemn him to involuntary exile from the solidarity of the One: a perfect recipe for drama.*

Oedipus unriddled but one-half of the enigma offered him by the Sphinx, and caused its death; the other half of the mystery avenged the death of the symbolic monster, and forced the King of Thebes to prefer blindness and exile in his despair, rather than face what he did not feel himself pure enough to encounter. He unriddled the man, the form, and had forgotten God — the idea.<sup>5</sup>

If the [Sphinx] threw herself into the sea and perished, it is not because Oedipus *had* unriddled the secret of the ages, but because, by anthropomorphizing the ever-spiritual and the subjective, he had dishonoured the great truth for ever.<sup>6</sup>

Theosophy being the way that leads to Truth, in every religion as in every science, occultism is, so to say, the touchstone and universal solvent. It is the thread of Ariadne given by the master to the disciple who ventures into the labyrinth of the mysteries of being; the torch that lights him through the dangerous maze of life, forever the enigma of the Sphinx. But the light thrown by this torch can only be discerned by the eye of the awakened soul, by our spiritual senses; it blinds the eye of the materialist as the sun blinds the owl.<sup>7</sup>

### **Sphinx is the greatest mystery of past, present, and future initiations.**

In the Christian legend, the “Redeemer” is the “Initiator” who offers his life in sacrifice for the privilege of teaching his disciples some great truths. He, who unriddles the Christian sphinx, “becomes the Master of the Absolute” for the simple reason

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<sup>4</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, I p. 288

<sup>5</sup> *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (FROM MADAME H.P. BLAVATSKY TO HER CORRESPONDENTS) I p. 127

<sup>6</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, II pp. 516-17; [on the “Fallen Angels” and the dead-letter of Dualism.]

<sup>7</sup> *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE BEACON OF THE UNKNOWN – IV) XI p. 266

that the greatest mystery of *all* the ancient initiations — past, present, and future — is made plain and divulged to him. Those who accept the allegory *literally*, will remain blind all their life and those, who divulge it to the ignorant masses, deserve punishment for their want of discretion in seeking to “feed pigs with pearls.” *The Theosophist* — read but by the intelligent who, when they understand it, prove that they deserve as much of the secret knowledge as can be given them — is permitted to throw out a hint. Let him, who would fathom the mystery of the allegory of both Sphinx and Cross, study the modes of initiation of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, ancient Jews, Hindus, etc. And then he will find what the word “Atonement” — far older than Christianity — meant, as also “the Baptism of Blood.” At the last moment of the Supreme Initiation, when the Initiator had divulged the last mysterious word, either the Hierophant or the “newly born,” *the worthier of the two*, had to die, since two Adepts of *equal* power must not live, and he, *who is perfect*, has no room on earth. Éliphas Lévi hints at the mystery in his volumes without explaining it. Yet he speaks of Moses who dies mysteriously, disappears from the top of Mount Pisgah after he had “laid his hands” upon the initiated Aaron; of Jesus who dies for the disciple “whom he loved,” John the author of the *Apocalypse*, and of John the Baptist — the last of the real *Nazars* of the Old Testament,<sup>8</sup> who, in the incomplete, contradictory, and tortured Gospel accounts, is made to die later through Herodias’ whim, and, in the *secret* Kabalistic documents of the Nabathaeans, to offer himself as an expiatory victim after “baptizing” (*i.e.*, initiating) his chosen successor in the mystic Jordan. In these documents, after the initiation *Aba*, the Father, becomes the Son, and the Son succeeds the Father and becomes *Father and Son* at the same time, inspired by Sophia Achamoth (secret wisdom) transformed later on into the Holy Ghost. But this successor of John the Baptist was not Jesus, the Nazarenes say. But of this anon. To this day, the initiation *beyond* the Himalayas is followed by *temporary* death (from three to six months) of the disciple, often that of the Initiator; but the Buddhists do not spill blood, for they have a horror of it, knowing that blood attracts “evil powers.” At the initiation of the Chhinnamasta Tantrikas (from *chhinna* “severed” and *masta* “head” — the Goddess Chhinnamasta being represented with a decapitated head), the *Tantrik Shastras* say that, as soon as the Adept has reached the highest degree of perfection, he has to initiate his successor and — die, offering his blood as an atonement for the sins of his brothers. He must “cut off his own head with the right hand, holding it in the left.” Three streams of blood gush out from the headless trunk. One of these is directed *into the mouth* of the decapitated head (“ . . . my blood is drink indeed” — the injunction in John that so shocked the disciples); the other is directed toward the earth as an offering of the pure, sinless blood to mother Earth; and the third gushes toward heaven as a witness for the sacrifice of “self-immolation.” Now, this has a profound Occult significance which is known only to the initiated; nothing like the truth is explained by the Christian dogma, and imperfectly as they have defined it, the *quasi-inspired* “Authors of the *Perfect Way*”<sup>9</sup> reveal the truth far nearer than any of the Christian commentators.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See *Isis*, Vol. II, p. 132

<sup>9</sup> [Anna B. Kingsford & E. Maitland]

<sup>10</sup> *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (FOOTNOTES TO “GLEANINGS FROM ÉLIPHAS LÉVI”) IV pp. 264-66

## **Sphinx is the granite pedestal of philosophy and the eternal enigma of the vulgar**

The seven gates of Thebes, attacked and defended by seven chiefs who have sworn upon the blood of victims, possess the same significance as the seven seals of the sacred book interpreted by seven genii and assailed by a monster with seven heads, after being opened by a living yet immolated lamb, in the allegorical work of St. John. The mysterious origin of Oedipus, found suspended from the tree of Cithaeron like a bleeding fruit, recalls the symbols of Moses and the narratives of Genesis. He makes war upon his father, whom he slays without knowing — alarming of the blind emancipation of reason without science; he then meets with the sphinx — the sphinx, that symbol of symbols, the eternal enigma of the vulgar, the granite pedestal of the science of the sages, the voracious and silent monster whose invariable form expresses the one dogma of the great universal mystery.

### **How the tetrad changing into a duad is explained by the triad.**

How is the tetrad changed into the duad and explained by the triad? In more common but more emblematic terms, what is that animal which in the morning has four feet, two at noon, and three in the evening? Philosophically speaking, how does the doctrine of elementary forces produce the dualism of Zoroaster, while it is summed by the triad of Pythagoras and Plato? What is the ultimate reason of allegories and numbers, the final message of all symbolisms? Oedipus replies with a simple and terrible word which destroys the sphinx and makes the diviner King of Thebes: the answer to the enigma is Man! . . . Unfortunate! He has seen too much, and yet with insufficient clearness; he must presently expiate his calamitous and imperfect clairvoyance by a voluntary blindness, and then vanish in the midst of a storm, like all civilisations which may at any time divine the answer to the riddle of the sphinx without grasping its whole import and mystery. Everything is symbolical and transcendental in this titanic epic of human destinies. The two hostile brethren express the second part of the grand mystery, divinely completed by the sacrifice of Antigone; then comes the last war; the brethren slay one another, Capaneus is destroyed by the lightning which he defies, Amphiaraüs is swallowed by the earth, and all these are so many allegories which, by their truth and their grandeur, astonish those who can penetrate their triple hieratic sense. Æschylus, annotated by Ballanche, gives only a weak notion concerning them, whatever the primeval sublimities of the Greek poet or the ingenuities of the French critic.

### **Man clung to the form and allowed the idea to be forgotten.**

The secret book of antique initiation was not unknown to Homer, who outlines its plan and chief figures on the shield of Achilles, with minute precision. But the gracious fictions of Homer replaced speedily in the popular memory the simple and abstract truths of primeval revelation. Humanity clung to the form and allowed the idea to be forgotten; signs lost power in their multiplication; magic also at this period became corrupted, and degenerated with the sorcerers of Thessaly into the most profane enchantments. The crime of Oedipus brought forth its deadly fruits, and the science of good and evil erected evil into a sacrilegious divinity. Men, weary of the

light, took refuge in the shadow of bodily substance; the dream of that void, which is filled by God, soon appeared to be greater than God himself in their eyes, and thus hell was created.

When, in the course of this work, we make use of the consecrated terms God, Heaven and Hell, let it be understood, once and for all, that our meaning is as far removed from that which the profane attach to them as initiation is distant from vulgar thought. God, for us, is the AZOT<sup>11</sup> of the sages, the efficient and final principle of the Great Work.

### **Sphinx is the living palladium of humanity.**

Returning to the fable of Oedipus, the crime of the King of Thebes was that he failed to understand the sphinx; that he destroyed the scourge of Thebes without being pure enough to complete the expiation in the name of his people. The plague, in consequence, avenged speedily the death of the monster, and the King of Thebes, forced to abdicate, sacrificed himself to the terrible manes of the sphinx, more alive and voracious than ever when it had passed from the domain of form into that of idea. Oedipus divined what was man and he put out his own eyes because he did not see what was God. He divulged half of the great arcanum, and, to save his people, it was necessary for him to bear the remaining half of the terrible secret into exile and the grave.

After the colossal fable of Oedipus we find the gracious poem of Psyche,<sup>12</sup> which was certainly not invented by Apuleius. The great magical arcanum reappears here under the figure of a mysterious union between a god and a weak mortal abandoned alone and naked on a rock. Psyche must remain in ignorance of the secret of her ideal royalty, and if she behold her husband she must lose him. Here Apuleius commentates and interprets Moses, but did not the Elohim of Israel and the gods of Apuleius both issue from the sanctuaries of Memphis and Thebes? Psyche is the sister of Eve, or

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<sup>11</sup> [Azot is the *Seventh* and highest state of matter — Life. Cf. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (FOOTNOTES TO “GLEANINGS FROM ÉLIPHAS LÉVI”) IV p. 264. It is the Intelligent, Living yet invisible Power of the Divine Monad behind the veil of matter. In other words, Azot is the Pythagorean Tetraktys.

[Azot is] the creative principle in Nature, the grosser portion of which is stored in the Astral Light. It is symbolized by a figure which is a cross (See “Éliphas Lévi”), the four limbs of which bear each one letter of the word *Taro*, which can be read also *Rota*, *Ator*, and in many other combinations, each of which has an occult meaning. . . . [It is the] Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and ending of all active existence; the Logos, hence (with the Christians) Christ. See *Rev.* xxi, 6, where John adopts “Alpha and Omega” as the symbol of a Divine Comforter who “will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” The word *Azot* or *Azoth* is a mediaeval glyph of this idea, for the word-consists of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, A and Ω, of the Latin alphabet, A and Z, and of the Hebrew alphabet, A and T, or *aleph* and *tau*. (*Theosophical Glossary*: Azoth, A and Ω)

This mysterious thing is the universal, magical agent, the astral light, which in the correlations of its forces furnishes the *alkahest*, the philosopher’s stone, and the elixir of life. Hermetic philosophy names it *Azoth*, the soul of the world, the celestial virgin, the great Magnes, etc., etc. Physical science knows it as “heat, light, electricity, and magnetism”; but ignoring its spiritual properties and the occult potency contained in ether, rejects everything it ignores. It explains and depicts the crystalline forms of the snowflakes, their modifications of an hexagonal prism which shoot out an infinity of delicate needles. (*Isis Unveiled*, I pp. 507-8) If the uninspired reader may be pardoned for looking aghast at this abracadabra of chemical science, why should not its teachers restrain their mirth until they have learned the philosophical value of the symbolism of the ancients? At least they might spare themselves from being as ridiculous as Monsieur de Mirville, who, confounding the Azoth of the Hermetic philosophers with the azote of the chemists, asserted that the former worshipped nitrogen gas! *Ibid.* I p. 462; see Éliphas Lévi, *La Science des esprits*, Preface.]

<sup>12</sup> [Cupid, the *god*, is the seventh principle or the Brahm of the Vedantin, and Psyche is its vehicle, the sixth or spiritual soul. As soon as she feels herself distinct from her “consort” — and sees him — she loses him. Study the “Heresy of Individuality” — and you will understand. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (FOOTNOTES TO “GLEANINGS FROM ÉLIPHAS LÉVI”) IV p. 264.]

rather she is Eve spiritualised. Both desire to know and lose innocence for the honour of the ordeal. Both deserve to go down into hell, one to bring back the antique box of Pandora, the other to find and to crush the head of the old serpent, who is the symbol of time and of evil. Both are guilty of the crime which must be expiated by the Prometheus of ancient days and the Lucifer of the Christian legend, the one delivered, the other overcome, by Hercules and by the Saviour. The great magical secret is, therefore, the lamp and dagger of Psyche, the apple of Eve, the sacred fire of Prometheus, the burning sceptre of Lucifer, but it is also the Holy Cross of the Redeemer. To be acquainted with it sufficiently to abuse or divulge is to deserve all sufferings; to know as one should alone know it, namely, to make use of and conceal it, is to be master of the absolute.

**She devours only blind interpreters.**

Everything is contained in a single word, which consists of four letters: it is the Tetragram of the Hebrews,<sup>13</sup> the AZOT of the alchemists, the Thot of the Bohemians, or the Taro of the Kabalists. This word, expressed after so many manners, means God for the profane, man for the philosophers, and imparts to the adepts the final term of human sciences and the key of divine power; but he only can use it who understands the necessity of never revealing it. Had Oedipus, instead of killing the sphinx, overcome it, harnessed it to his chariot, and thus entered Thebes, he would have been king without incest, without misfortunes, and without exile. Had Psyche, by meekness and affection, persuaded Love to reveal himself, she would never have lost Love. Now, Love is one of the mythological images of the great secret and the great agent, because it at once expresses an action and a passion, a void and a plenitude, a shaft and a wound. The initiates will understand me, and on account of the profane, I must not speak more clearly.<sup>14</sup>

Who, therefore, can be against us if God and reason are with us? Does it matter if man prejudice and slander us? Our entire justification is in our thoughts and our works. We come not, like Oedipus, to destroy the sphinx of symbolism; we seek, on the contrary, to resuscitate it. The sphinx devours only blind interpreters; and he who slays it has not known how to divine it properly; it must be subdued, enchained, and compelled to follow us. The sphinx is the living palladium of humanity, it is the

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<sup>13</sup> *Note to Students:* The Tetraktys by which the Pythagoreans swore, was not the Tetragrammaton, but on the contrary, the higher or superior Tetraktys. In the opening chapters of *Genesis* we have a clue to the discovery of this lower Tetragrammaton. . . . The Tetragrammaton, therefore, is simply Malkuth; when the bridegroom comes to the bride on Earth, then it becomes Humanity. The seven lower Sephiroth must all be passed through, the Tetragrammaton becoming more and more material. The Astral Plane lies between the *Tetraktys* and Tetragrammaton. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (TRANSACTIONS OF THE BLAVATSKY LODGE) X p. 357

“The Pythagorean world,” Plutarch tells us “consisted of a double quaternary.” (Plutarch, *De anim. procr.*, ¶ 30) This statement corroborates what is said about the choice, by the exoteric theologies, of the lower *Tetraktys*. For:

“The quaternary of the intellectual world [the world of *Mahat*] is To Agathon, Nous, Psychē, Hylē; while that of the sensible world [of matter], which is properly what Pythagoras meant by the word *Kosmos* — is Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. The four elements are called by the name of *rhizomata*, the roots or principles of all mixed bodies” (Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 112),

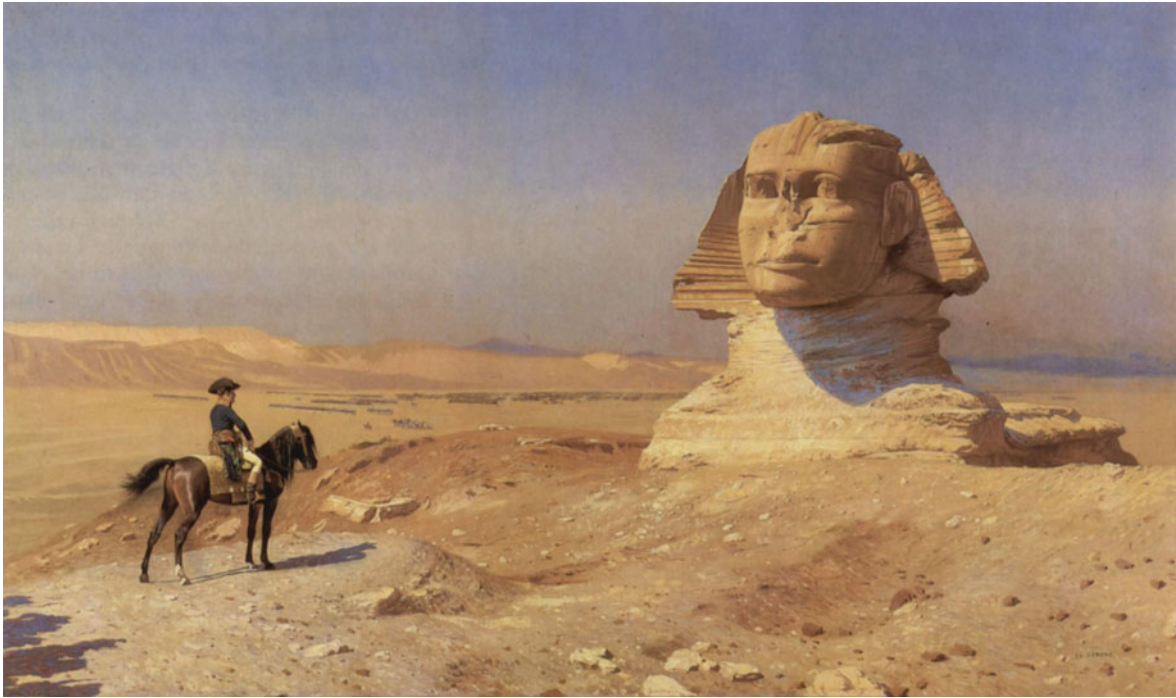
*i.e.*, the lower Tetraktys is the root of *illusion* of the world of matter; and this is the Tetragrammaton of the Jews, and the “mysterious deity,” over which the modern Kabalists make such a fuss! *Secret Doctrine*, II p. 599

[For further comments see Diagram and Notes in our *Secret Doctrine's* First Proposition Series. — ED. PHIL.]

<sup>14</sup> *Transcendental Magic*, pp. 14-18; [Introduction]

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BY ÉLIPHAS LÉVI

conquest of the King of Thebes; it would have been the salvation of Oedipus, had Oedipus completely divined its enigma!<sup>15</sup>



Bonaparte before the Sphinx (1867-68) Jean-Léon Gérôme, San Simeon, California, USA



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<sup>15</sup> *Transcendental Magic*, p. 385; [The Book of Hermes]