

Translators' Note

In the translation that follows, lettered note references a, b, c, etc. refer to the Notes on the Greek Text on pp. 89-92. Numbered references 1, 2 etc. refer to the notes at the end of each book of the translation. There is no Book 15 (see below, p. 85).

The Corpus Hermeticum

Book 1

Poimandres to Hermes Trismegistus

1. Once, when mind had become intent on the things which are, and my understanding was raised to a great height, while my bodily senses were withdrawn as in sleep, when men are weighed down by too much food or by the fatigue of the body, it seemed that someone immensely great of infinite dimensions happened to call my name and said to me:

'What do you wish to hear and behold, and having beheld what do you wish to learn and know?'

2. 'Who are you?' said I.

He said, 'I am Poimandres the *Nous* of the Supreme. I know what you wish and I am with you everywhere.'

3. 'I wish to learn,' said I, 'the things that are and understand their nature and to know God. O how I wish to hear these things!'

He spoke to me again. 'Hold in your *Nous* all that you wish to learn and I will teach you.'

4. When he had thus spoken, he changed in form and forthwith, upon the instant, all things opened up before me; and I beheld a boundless view. All had become light, a gentle^a and joyous light; and I was filled with longing when I saw it. After a little while, there had come to be in one part a downward moving darkness, fearful and loathsome, which I experienced as a twisting and enfolding motion. Thus it appeared to me.

I saw^b the nature of the darkness change into a watery substance, which was indescribably shaken about, and gave out smoke as from fire, culminating in an unutterable and mournful echo. There was sent forth from the watery substance a loud, inarticulate cry; the sound, as I thought, was of the light^c.

5. Out of the light came forth the Holy Word which entered into the watery substance, and pure fire leapt from the watery substance and rose up; the fire was insubstantial, piercing and active. The air, being light, followed the breath, and mounted up till it reached the fire, away from earth and water, so that it seemed to be suspended from the fire. The earth and water remained in their own place mingled together, so that they could not be distinguished, and they were kept in motion by the breath of the Word, which passed over them within hearing.

6. Poimandres spoke to me and said:

'Have you understood what you have seen and what it means?'

'I shall come to know it,' I said.

'That light,' he said, 'is I, *Nous*, your God, who was before the watery substance which appeared out of the darkness; and the clear Word from *Nous* is the Son of God.'

'How can this be?' said I.

'Know this,' he said. 'That which sees and hears within you is the Word of the Lord, and *Nous* is God the Father. They are not separate from each other, for their union is life.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'But perceive the light and know it,' said Poimandres.

7. And when he had thus spoken, he looked at me full in the face for a long time, so that his form made me tremble. When he had looked up, I saw in my own *Nous* that the light was in innumerable powers, having become an infinite world. I saw a fire encompassed by a mighty power, being under command to keep its place; I was intent upon these things, seeing them by means of the word of Poimandres.

8. As I stood amazed, Poimandres spoke again to me, saying:

'You saw in *Nous* the first form, which is prior to the beginning of the beginningless and endless.' Thus spoke Poimandres to me.

'Then,' I said, 'whence did the elements of nature have their origins?'

He answered: 'From the will of God, which, holding the Word and seeing the beautiful cosmos made one exactly like it, fashioned from her own constituent elements and the offspring of souls.

9. '*Nous*, God, being male and female, beginning as life and light, gave birth, by the Word, to another *Nous*, the Creator of the world; he, being the god of fire and air, formed seven powers who encompass in their circles the sensory world, and the governance of these powers is called destiny.

10. 'Immediately, the Word of God leapt forth from the downward moving elements to the pure work of the Creator, and was united with the Creator *Nous* (for he was of the same substance) and the downward moving elements of the creation were left behind, without the Word, to be matter alone.

11. '*Nous*, the Creator, together with the Word, encompassing the spheres and spinning them round with a rushing motion, caused those things he had made to revolve and he allowed them to revolve from no fixed beginning to an end without limit, for it begins where it ends. The rotation of these spheres, as *Nous* willed, brought forth from the downward moving elements living beings without speech (for they did not contain the Word) and the air produced winged creatures and the water swimming creatures. The earth and the water were separated from each other, as *Nous* willed, and the earth brought forth from herself what she possesses, four-footed animals, reptiles, beasts; wild and tame.

12. '*Nous*, the Father of all, who is life and light, brought forth Man, the same as himself, whom he loved as his own child, for Man was very beautiful, bearing the image of his Father. It was really his own form that God loved, and he handed over to him all his creation.

13. 'When Man had observed in the Father the creation of the Creator^d, he himself wished to create; and he was given permission to do so by the Father, being begotten in the sphere of the Creator, he observed carefully the creations of his brother from which^e he obtained every power. The Father and the brother loved him, and each gave him of their own authority. Having acquired knowledge of their essence and partaking in their nature, he wished to break through the circumference of the spheres and to come to know the power of him who was set in authority over the fire.

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14. 'Having all power over the world of mortals and living creatures without speech, he looked down through the harmony of the cosmos and, having broken through the sovereignty^f of the Divine Power, he showed to downward moving Nature the beautiful form of God.

'When she had seen the beauty^g which never satiates of him who had in himself all the energy of the powers and the form of God, she smiled with love, because she had seen the image of the most beautiful form of Man in the water and his shadow upon the earth. He, seeing in himself^h a similar form to his own in the water, fell in love with her and wished to dwell there. No sooner wished than done, and he inhabited a form without speech. Nature, having taken her beloved, enfolded him completely and they united, for they loved each other.

15. 'For this reason, of all living beings on earth, Man alone is double: mortal because of the body, immortal because of the real Man. For, although being immortal and having authority over all, he suffers mortal things which are subjectⁱ to destiny. Then, although above the harmony of the cosmos, he has become a slave within it. He is beyond gender as he has been born from a Father beyond gender; and he never sleeps as he is ruled by one who never sleeps.'

16. 'And what after that, my *Nous*? For I love the conversation.'

Poimandres said: 'This is the mystery which has been kept secret until this day. For Nature, united with Man, has brought forth a wonder of wonders. Man, as^k I told you, was of the Father^l and of spirit and had the nature of the harmony of the seven spheres. So Nature did not wait, but immediately brought forth seven men corresponding to the natures of the seven powers, beyond gender and sublime.'

'And what after this, Poimandres? I greatly desire to hear more. Please, do not stop.'

Poimandres said: 'Be silent, I have not yet fully expounded what I have begun to say.'

17. 'Indeed, I shall say nothing,' said I.

'As I said, the generation of those seven took place in the following way: the earth was female and the water potent and from

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the fire came the fruit, and from the ether nature received the breath and produced the bodies according to the form of Man. From life and light Man became soul and *Nous*, from life soul, from light *Nous* and all things of the perceptible world remained so until the end of a cycle and the beginning of ages.

18. 'Listen further to the word you were longing to hear. On completion of the cycle, the bond of all was loosed according to the will of God, for all living beings, which were of both genders, were parted asunder at the same time as Man and became in turn male and female. God forthwith spoke the Holy Word: "All that has been fashioned and brought into being, may you increase and continue to increase, may you multiply and continue to multiply and may the man endowed with *Nous* recognise that he is immortal, that desire is the cause of death, and may he come to know all things that are."

19. 'God having thus spoken, Providence brought about acts of union through destiny and the harmony of the cosmos and established the generations and all things were multiplied according to their species. He who had recognised himself came to the Supreme Good, while he who had prized the body, born from the illusion of desire, remained wandering in the dark, suffering through the senses the things of death.'

20. 'In what terrible way do the ignorant go wrong,' said I, 'that they have been deprived of immortality?'

He said, 'You seem not to have taken heed of the things you have heard, did I not tell you to keep these things in mind?'

'Thank you,' I replied, 'I will do so and remember.'

He continued, 'If you have remembered, tell me, why are those who are in death, worthy of death?'

I replied, 'Because the grim darkness is the first origin of one's own body, from which darkness arose the watery nature, from which darkness^m the body is formed in the sensory world of which death drinks.'

21. 'You have observed correctly,' he said. 'But why does he who has remembered himself go to the Father, as the Word of God says?'

I replied, 'Because the Father of all is constituted out of light and life, whence Man has been begotten.'

Poimandres then said, 'The truth is: light and life is God and Father, whence Man is begotten. If, therefore, you realise yourself as being from life and light and that you have been made out of them, you will return to life.'

'But tell me further, how I shall return to life, my *Nous*? For God declares: Let the man endowed with *Nous* remember himself.'

22. 'Do not all men have *Nous*?' I asked.

'Mark your words,' he replied. 'I, *Nous* itself, come to the aid of the devout, the noble, pure, merciful, and those who live piously, and my presence becomes a help, and straightaway they know all things. By a life full of love they win the favour of the Father and lovingly they give thanks, praising and singing hymns to him in due order. Before giving up the body to its own death, they shut down the senses, having seen their effects; or rather, I *Nous*, will not allow the activities of the body which assail them to have effect. Being the gatekeeper I shall close the entrances to evil and dishonourable actions, cutting off their thoughts.'

23. 'As for those without *Nous*, the evil, the worthless, the envious, the greedy, murderers, the ungodly, I am very far from them, having given way to the avenging spirit, who assaults each of them through the senses, throwing fiery darts at them. He also moves them to greater acts of lawlessness so that such a man suffers greater retribution, yet he does not cease from having limitless appetite for his lust nor from fighting in the dark without respite. The avenging spirit then puts him to torture and increases the fire upon him to its utmost.'

24. 'You have taught me these things well, as I wished, O *Nous*. Now tell me how the way back is found?'

To this Poimandres replied: 'First, in the dissolution of the material body, one gives^o the body itself up to change. The form you had becomes unseen, and you surrender to the divine power your habitual character, now inactive. The bodily senses return to their own sources. Then they become parts again and rise for action, while the seat of emotions and desire go to mechanical nature.'

25. 'Thus a man starts to rise up through the harmony of the cosmos. To the first plain he surrenders the activity of growth and diminution; to the second the means of evil, trickery now being inactive; to the third covetous deceit, now inactive, and to the fourth the eminence pertaining to a ruler, being now without avarice; to the fifth impious daring and reckless audacity and to the sixth evil impulses for wealth, all of these being now inactive, and to the seventh plain the falsehood which waits in ambush.'

26. 'Then, stripped of the activities of the cosmos, he enters the substance of the eighth plain with his own power, and he sings praises to the Father with those who are present; those who are near rejoice at his coming. Being made like to those who are there together, he also hears certain powers which are above the eighth sphere, singing praises to God with sweet voice. Then in due order, they ascend to the Father and they surrender themselves to the powers, and becoming the powers they are merged in God. This is the end, the Supreme Good, for those who have had the higher knowledge: to become God.'

Well then, why do you delay? Should you not, having received all, become the guide to those who are worthy, so that the human race may be saved by God through you?'

27. Having said that to me, Poimandres mingled with the powers. When I had thanked and praised the Father of the All, I was freed by him, having been strengthened and instructed in the nature of all and in the most high vision, and I began to proclaim to men the beauty of piety and knowledge:

'O people, men born of the earth, who have given yourselves over to drink and sleep, and to ignorance of God, be sober, cease being intoxicated, cease being beguiled by dull sleep.'

28. Those who heard came to my side with one accord. I said: 'Why, O men born of earth, have you given yourselves over to death while having the power to partake of immortality? Repent. You who have kept company with those who have wandered and have shared in ignorance, be released from the dark light, take part in immortality. Put an end to destruction.'

29. Some of them kept on chattering and stood aloof, giving

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themselves over to the path of death; others begged to be instructed, having thrown themselves at my feet. Lifting them up, I became the guide of the race, teaching the words of God, how they could be saved. I sowed in them the words of wisdom and they were nourished by the water of immortality. As the evening came and the rays of the sun began fully to set, I bade them to thank God; when they had fully given thanks each returned to his own bed.

30. I engraved in myself the beneficent kindness of Poimandres and having been filled with what I desired, I was delighted. For the sleep of the body became the sobriety of the soul, the closing of the eyes became true vision, my silence became pregnant with the Supreme Good, and the utterance of the Word became the generation of riches. All this came to me who had received it from my *Nous*, that is to say from Poimandres, the Word of the Supreme. I have come, divinely inspired by the truth. Wherefore, I give praise to God the Father with my whole soul and strength:

31. Holy is God the^p Father of all.
Holy is God whose will is accomplished by his own powers.
Holy is God who wills to be known and is known by those
that are his own.
Holy art thou who by the Word has united all that is.
Holy art thou of whom all Nature became an image.
Holy art thou whom Nature has not created.
Holy art thou who is stronger than all power.
Holy art thou who art higher than all pre-eminence.
Holy art thou who surpasses praises.

Receive pure offerings of speech offered to you by inner mind and heart, thou who art unutterable, vast, beyond description, who art spoken of by silence.

32. I beg you that I may not fall from the knowledge that leads towards our essence, and endow me with vitality; by this grace, I shall enlighten those of the race who are in ignorance, my brothers and your sons. Wherefore, I have faith and I bear witness. I go to life and light. You are blessed, Father. He who is your man wants to share in your holiness, as you have given him all authority.

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