

# Hermetism and Gnosticism: The Question of the “Poimandres”

by  
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The problem of the relationship between Hermetism and Gnosticism is still puzzling scholars even after it has been discussed for a long time. This paper, however, does not intend to review the lengthy history of scholarship on this point<sup>1</sup>. Rather, we begin by asking the principal question, Which way may be best to approach the problem? Also, it must be admitted that finding an answer that applies to all the extant literature, both Hermetic and Gnostic, should not be expected from the outset. Both, the *Hermetica* and the *Gnostica* are too diverse in character and origin, and they lead to different results depending on the texts one takes into consideration. It may therefore be useful to concentrate on the “Poimandres”<sup>2</sup>, the first, most famous and most puzzling tractate of the “Corpus Hermeticum”<sup>3</sup>. As is well-known, this tractate is not only unique among the *Hermetica* – this, of course, is true of others as well – but its origin and relative date are still open to discussion. Was it the earliest of the tractates or the latest? What was its origin? Should one look, to mention only some of the more recent representative scholars, at the “Poimandres” as a kind of rewriting of the Book of Genesis, or at apocalyptic Judaism<sup>4</sup>, or at Egyptian religion in its late period<sup>5</sup>, or Platonism<sup>6</sup>, or Christianity<sup>7</sup>?

All of these scholars have advanced good reasons for their positions, but these positions also seem to be one-sided and strongly depend upon circumstantial conclusions, rather than the analysis of the text itself. There are, however, two literary indicators in the text itself.

## 1. Literary Indications of Sources in the “Poimandres”

First, the dialogue is, as Ernst Haenchen has convincingly shown, primarily interested in anthropology, which means, not in cosmology for its own sake. Needless to say, the “Poimandres” does include a cosmology as well as an eschatology, but they are in the service of an anthropology which stands in the center and takes up most of the space.

Second, the “Poimandres” points to sayings as a source. This sayings source may be identical with the “seminal sayings” (γενικοί λόγοι), quoted in other parts of the “Corpus Hermeticum”<sup>8</sup>. These sayings may also be related or even represented by the “Definitions” extant in the Armenian Hermetic tradition, which have been edited by Jean-Pierre Mahé<sup>9</sup>, and of which another fragment has been edited and re-translated into the Greek by Joseph Paravelle and Jean-Pierre Mahé. The Bodleian Library in Oxford possesses a collection of excerpts (MS Clark 11) from the 13th/14th century in Armenian translation, among them a Hermetic florilegium. What has emerged is a collection of sayings, some of which have parallels in the “Corpus Hermeticum”, others are new. In this collection we find the definition<sup>10</sup>:

“Toute chose peut être vue (de) qui a  
l’intellect; qui se réfléchit en intellect  
se connaît et  
qui se connaît connaît le Tout.  
Le Tout est dans l’homme.”

“Everything can be seen by the one who has the intellect;  
 he who reflects in his intellect recognizes himself and  
 he who recognizes himself recognizes the All.  
 The All is within the human being.”

This maxim is an interpretative reformulation of the famous Delphic maxim “Know yourself” (γνώθι σαυτόν), the ultimate source of which is without doubt Greek philosophy<sup>11</sup>. The definition states the consequence of the maxim, which merely recommends self-knowledge without explaining what the self is. What is the “self” that one is to know? The answer in Greek philosophy is that the self is the “human being” (ἄνθρωπος). But what is the “human being”? The standard answer in Platonism is that the ἄνθρωπος is the immortal soul, a kind of ἄνθρωπος within the ἄνθρωπος<sup>12</sup>. But Hermetic interpretation has further interpreted this answer, when in the re-translated “Definitions”<sup>13</sup> and the new florilegium from Oxford we read<sup>14</sup>:

Ἄνθρωπος ἀμφοτέρας ἔχει τὰς φύσεις  
 καὶ τὴν θνητὴν καὶ τὴν ἀθάνατον  
 Ἄνθρωπος τρεῖς οὐσίας ἔχει,  
 τὴν νοητὴν καὶ τὴν ψυχικὴν καὶ τὴν ὑλικὴν.

“The human being has both natures, the mortal as well as the immortal.  
 The human being has three essences, the intellectual and the emotional and the material.”

In the “Poimandres”, however, the Delphic maxim has been given still different interpretations, when it is quoted in §18 in this form<sup>15</sup>:

... καὶ ἀναγνωρισάτω <ὁ> ἔννουσ ἐαυτὸν ὄντα ἀθάνατον, καὶ τὸν αἴτιον τοῦ θανάτου ἔρωτα, καὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα.

“Let the one who has the Intellect recognize himself as immortal,  
 love as the cause of death,  
 and all the things that are.”

This interpretation of the Delphic maxim “Know yourself” specifies that not everybody is capable of self-knowledge, but only the one who is by nature an οὐσιώδης or ἔννουσ ἄνθρωπος, that is, the one who possesses the essential capacity for knowing, the νοῦς. While only this νοῦς is capable of knowing immortality, it will thereby also understand the cause of death to be ἔρωσ, and knowing that amounts to knowing the origin of everything else.

## 2. The Connection with the Nag Hammadi Texts

This interpretation is confirmed by another passage, to which Gilles Quispel calls attention in an article<sup>16</sup>; it is found not in a Hermetic tractate but in the “Teachings of Silvanus” from Nag Hammadi (NHC VII,4,92,10-11)<sup>17</sup>:

“But before everything (else), know your birth.  
 Know yourself, that is, from what substance you are, or from what form, or from what species.

Understand that you have come from three races: from the earth, from the formed, and from the created.

The body has come into being from the earth with an earthly substance, but the formed, for the sake of the soul, has come into being from the thought of the Divine.

The created, however, is the mind, which has come into being in conformity with the image of God.”

This Christianized version, coming from a Hellenistic-Jewish wisdom background, has combined Platonic anthropology with the

cosmology and anthropology of LXX Genesis (Gen 1:27; 2:7). The important fact is that behind this interpretation of the maxim appears the narrative account of the Book of Genesis.

The connection with the Delphic maxim is also made in another important saying from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas from Nag Ham-madi, Logion 67<sup>18</sup>:

“Jesus said: If one who knows the all still feels a personal deficiency, he is completely deficient.”

The saying starts from a hypothetical misunderstanding of a “scientific” knower of the all, a polymath who fails in the one element most important to the gnostic, knowledge of the self, and concludes that such a person is not only partially deficient but totally, and in reality knows nothing.

If then the knowledge of the self connects us with the knowledge of the All, it connects us also with the cosmology of the “Poimandres”. This linkage is important for the understanding of the reasons why the “Poimandres” was written in the first place.

The Hermetic interpretations of the Delphic maxim cited in the “Poimandres” point out elements of special interest to the author. Recognizing the immortality of one’s self requires an explanation of the opposite, of death, that is, the origin and cause (αἰτία) of death. This cause and origin, we learn from the “Poimandres”, was “love” (ἔρως). The different versions of the Delphic maxim cited in the tractate indicate an entire process, beginning at the initiative of the νοῦς (§21)<sup>19</sup>:

ὁ ἔννοος ἄνθρωπος ἀναγνωρισάτω ἑαυτόν.

“Let the man who has the intellect recognize himself.”

The νοῦς residing in those ἄνθρωποι who have it tells that ἄνθρωπος to recognize his self, which is none other than the νοῦς, so that self-knowledge in effect means that the νοῦς knows itself. This knowledge then implies the return of the self to its origin (§21)<sup>20</sup>:

ὁ νοήσας ἑαυτόν εἰς αὐτὸν χωρεῖ

“He who has recognized himself departs into him(self).”

As the initiate in the same context (§21) has learned, that self is identical with the nature of the divine, “life and light.” Thus, “out of life and light consists the Father of the All, out of whom originated the Anthropos” (“Ὅτι ἐκ φωτὸς καὶ ζωῆς συνέστηκεν ὁ πατήρ τῶν ὅλων, ἐξ οὗ γέγονεν ὁ Ἄνθρωπος.”). Then the process concludes (§21)<sup>21</sup>:

ἐὰν οὖν μάθῃς αὐτὸν ἐκ ζωῆς καὶ φωτὸς ὄντα καὶ ὅτι ἐκ τούτων τυγχάνεις, εἰς ζωὴν πάλιν χωρήσεις.

“If you learn that he is out of life and light and that you are constituted of these (same substances), you will return into life.”

### 3. From the Sayings to the Cosmogonic Myth

As we shall see in the following, these variations of the Delphic maxim provide the fundamental outline of the narrative of cosmology, anthropology and eschatology which make up the story of the “Poimandres”. Before we look at the details of the narrative more closely, it should be pointed out that the very “raison d’être” of the tractate is deeply connected with the problem of theodicy. The reason for making such a claim is that another saying of great antiquity stands behind the statement about ἔρως being the αἰτία of death. This saying has

its roots both in the ancient Egyptian and the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition.

In the literature of the Middle Kingdom of Egypt there appear pessimistic complaints about the state of the land and its people. In some parts, criticism is levelled at the deity for not having prevented evil from occurring or for not having punished and eliminated the wicked<sup>22</sup>. Well-known is a passage in "The Admonitions of Ipuwer"<sup>23</sup>:

"Lo, why does he [sc. the sun-god] seek to fashion <men>, when the timid is not distinguished from the violent? If he would bring coolness upon the heat (12,1) one would say: 'He is the herdsman of all; there is no evil in his heart. His herds are few, but he spends the day herding them.' There is fire in their hearts!

If only he had perceived their nature in the first generation! Then he would have smitten the evil, stretched out his arm against it, would have destroyed their seed and their heirs! But since giving birth is desired, grief has come and misery is everywhere.

So it is and will not pass, while these gods are in their midst. Seed comes forth from mortal women; it is not found on the road. Fighting has come, (5) and the punisher of crimes commits them! There is no pilot in their hour.

Where is he today? Is he asleep?

Lo, his power is not seen."

In other words, the world is out of order, the creator god has failed to create it right in the first place, and he has also failed to straighten things out<sup>24</sup>. Obviously spoken against such criticism are declarations of defense made by the deity, such as in the Coffin Text Spell 1130, where the god provides a list of his accomplished deeds; among the items is this<sup>25</sup>:

"I made every man like his fellow; and I did not command that they do wrong. It is their hearts that disobey what I have said. This is one of the deeds."

Extraordinary is the fact that we find a similar statement in some very old Greek texts which may be derived from Orphic-Pythagorean sources<sup>26</sup>. Of course, Greek religion allows no reason for accusing Zeus or the other Olympian gods for having created a deficient world because the cosmos was not created by him or them. Yet, the problem of theodicy is present in Greek thought seemingly from very early times.

In the center of Plato's myth of Er, most likely going back to Orphic-Pythagorean traditions, a prophet makes a statement that looks very much like a quotation from an earlier source. This statement also sums up the essence of the myth of Er itself (Plato, "Rep." 10.617e)<sup>27</sup>:

αἰτία ἐλομένου· θεὸς ἀναίτιος.

"The blame is his who chooses;  
God is blameless."

As the myth narrates, the soul in its primordial state makes the choice that determines its destiny henceforth. The choices offered include an option of what is "the best life" (ὁ ἄριστος βίος). As a result, each person has chosen his or her own destiny, and "the divine judgment of the soul is right" δικαία ἡ κρίσις, "Plato, "Gorg." 523e-524a).

Plato returns to the creation of humans in the "Timaeus", when he has the supreme deity, who calls himself ἐγὼ δημιουργὸς πατήρ τε ἔργων and ὁ τόδε τὸ πᾶν γεννήσας, make a speech (41a-d) and mix the souls in the mixing-bowl. After ordaining what needs to be done, Plato reports: Διαθεσμοθετήσας δὲ πάντα αὐτοῖς ταῦτα, ἵνα τῆς ἔπειτα εἴη κακίας

ἐκάστων ἀναίτιος ... (“When he had fully declared unto them all these ordinances, to the end that He might be blameless in respect of the future wickedness of any one of them ...), the demiurge then turns the actual moulding of humans over to the younger gods (νέοις θεοῖς)”<sup>28</sup>.

Blaming the gods for the calamities of life is a common human excuse, as Zeus tells his fellow gods already in Homer, “Od.” 1.32-33: “Look you now, how ready mortals are to blame the gods. It is from us, they say, that evils come ...”<sup>29</sup>. Exonerating the deity from such blame is the purpose of the saying from Plato’s “Rep.” 10.617e. This saying is often quoted, and myths explain how it is to be understood. Thus, Plutarch deals with the matter in his myth of Thespesios<sup>30</sup>, as well as Iamblichus in his Life of Pythagoras<sup>31</sup>. Surprisingly frequent are citations and discussions in Christian sources: Justin Martyr (“Apol.” 44.8)<sup>32</sup>, Clement of Alexandria (“Strom.” 1.1)<sup>33</sup>, and the “Pseudo-Clementine Homilies”<sup>34</sup>, to name only the earliest passages<sup>35</sup>.

After looking at this evidence it is not surprising that the old Orphic-Pythagorean “sententia” turns up in the “Corpus Hermeticum”, and in contexts in which we would expect it. The fourth tractate, entitled ὁ κρατήρ ἢ μόνας, “The Mixing Bowl or the Monad”, is based on Plato’s “Timaeus” 41d, where the mixing of the world-soul is described<sup>36</sup>. Again, the deity is being exonerated, now of course in Hermetic terms. Thus, in IV.7-8 the old “sententia” is quoted and given a Hermetic interpretation: ἐπεὶ ὁ μὲν θεὸς ἀναίτιος, ἡμεῖς δὲ αἴτιοι τῶν κακῶν, τὰ ταῦτα προκρίνοντες τῶν ἀγαθῶν (“Since the god is blameless, we are the ones who are to be blamed for the evils, because we give preference to them rather than the good things.”)<sup>37</sup>.

Also the tractate “Asclepius”, its Greek original lost but Latin and Coptic versions extant, brings up the issue of the origins of evil in §16, the speaker being Hermes Trismegistos<sup>38</sup>:

“Thus, Asclepius and Hammon, I have not said what the many say: ‘Was god not able to put an end to evil and banish it from nature?’ One need not respond to them at all, but for your sake I shall pursue this question as well since I have opened it, and I will give you an answer.”

“ne ergo dixi, o Asclepi et Hammon, quod a multis dicitur: ‘non poterat deus incidere atque auertere a rerum natura malitiam?’ quibus respondendum nihil omnino est; uestri tamen causa et haec prosequare, quae coeperam, et rationem reddam.”

The answer is given in a short paragraph that follows, but the remainder of the tractate explains it in greater detail.

“Now these people say that the god should have freed the world of every kind of evil, yet evil is so much in the world that it seems almost to be an organ of the world. Acting as reasonably as possible, the supreme god took care to provide against evil when he deigned to endow human minds with consciousness, learning and understanding, for it is these gifts alone, by which we surpass other living beings, that enable us to avoid the tricks, snares and vices of evil. He that avoids them on sight, before they entangle him, that person has been fortified by divine understanding and foresight, for the foundation of learning resides in the highest good.”

“dicunt enim ipsi deum debuisse omnifariam mundum a malitia liberare; ita enim in mundo est ut quasi membrum ipius esse uideatur. prouisum cautum que est, quantum rationabiliter potuisset a summo deo, tunc cum sensu, disciplina, intelligentia mentes hominum est munerare dignatus. hisce enim rebus, quibus ceteris antestamus

animalibus, solis possumus malitiae fraudes, dolos uitiaque uitare. ea enim qui, antequam his implicatus est, ex aspectu uitarit, is homo est diuina intelligentia prudentiaque munitus; fundamentum est enim disciplinae in summa bonitate consistens.”

While this brief explanation has all the appearance of Greek philosophy, the subsequent sections turn to more Egyptian doctrines, such as the lament over the conditions of the land, its coming devastations and the withdrawal of the gods from Egypt. The upshot of it all is that the creator god is exonerated because through the mysteries he has provided a way out of the calamity<sup>39</sup>. The tractate concludes with the great thanksgiving prayer (§41, p. 353-55), of which we find versions also in the Nag Hammadi Library<sup>40</sup>, and in the Greek Magical Papyri (Papyrus Mimaout, “PGM” III.591-609)<sup>41</sup>.

#### 4. The Interpretation of the Cosmogony in the “Poimandres”

It should be made clear that up until now we have discussed only the presuppositions for the Poimandres. These must first be clarified, if one wants to understand the force of the tractate. To say it in brief, the author of the “Poimandres”, on the one hand, restates anew the old Egyptian complaint that the divine creation, in particular the creation of the human race, was a failure and that the present condition of life is the result of that failure. On the other hand, he intends to show that the deity has provided a way out of that failure. These goals are revealed by a didactic dialogue between the god Poimandres and an initiate, in which a vision of the creation myth is received by the initiate and then interpreted in dialogue with the god. The vision, which is narrated by the initiate, is actually a re-vision of an older cosmogonic myth. In the dialogue, therefore, the reader is led through what appears to be

theological reflection on the major issues of the Hermetic doctrine of fall and redemption. Reasons of time preclude a detailed examination of all the important points that ought to be examined. Thus, we must confine ourselves to looking at the essential argument the author is trying to make.

How did the created world go wrong? Basically, the Hermetist agrees that primordial failure occurred because of the way the cosmos originated. The problem is not that the creator god had intended such a failure. Rather, as we have learned in the saying quoted in §18, the cause of death was ἔρωσ. This is explained in detail in the tractate.

The entire cosmogony and anthropogony is a result of acts of erotic love, begetting and giving birth<sup>42</sup>. These processes started out with the creator god and replicate themselves at every stage of the development. It is the “beauty” (κάλλος) of the cosmos that caused the creator god to fall in love with his creation. Sexual metaphors occur as early as in the description of the movements of the primordial elements, such as the “λόγος ἄγιος” “coming upon nature” (ἐπέβη τῇ φύσει), and there is report of “clinging” (κρεμᾶσθαι) and “mixing together” (καθ’ ἑαυτὰ συμμεμιγμένα, §5). The very next paragraph (§6) states that the Father god Intelligence (Νοῦς) who is identical with Poimandres begat Logos, a son of god (ὁ δὲ ἐκ Νοῦς φωτεινὸς Λόγος υἱὸς θεοῦ). Father and son were not separate but their “union” (ἔνωσις) was “life” (ζωή). Next (§8), the “elements of nature” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς φύσεως) are explained as having been born by the “will of god,”<sup>43</sup> a female deity, who “received the Logos, and beholding the archetypal beauty of the cosmos imitated it, thereby creating the world through her own elements and their fruits, the souls”<sup>44</sup>. In §9 the Father god, divine Nous, who is androgynous became pregnant and gave birth to a duplicate, the Νοῦς δημιουργός. This second Nous then created the seven planetary gover-

nors which encompassed the visible cosmos, their government making up what is called Fate (είμαρμένη). In §10, the “Logos of god” “leaped upon the pure creation of Nature, and united with the other Nous (ἠνώθη τῷ δημιουργῷ Νῶ). This act left behind the lower, “logos”-less elements of nature, and that is what is called “matter” (ύλη), from which the animals are produced (§11).

As we have pointed out as the center of the cosmogony, the anthropogony begins in §12, when the Father god Nous became pregnant with another son, the Anthropos, “who is like himself and whom he loves as his own child” (... αὐτῷ ἴσον, οὐ ἠράσθη ὡς ἰδίου τόκου). He loved this son so much because he was exceedingly beautiful (περικαλλῆς γάρ, τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς εἰκόνα ἔχων). In fact, the result of this love was that he turned over to him all the creatures thus far created. And when this son, the Anthropos, contemplated this creation, he himself also wanted to create (§13). Having obtained the permission from his Father, he, now having his own creative powers, went and explored the creations of his brother. They loved him (οἱ δὲ ἠράσθησαν αὐτοῦ) and let him take part in their order. And after having learned and partaken in their nature, the Anthropos wanted to go further and break through the periphery of the planetary orbits, so as to understand the power of fire. Once he had broken through the vault and bent downward to take a look at the lower nature, he showed his own divine beauty to that lower nature. The catastrophe came with unrelenting speed (§14). Nature below, a female, smiled with love when she saw the mirror image of the divine Anthropos in the water and his shadow on the earth, beholding his immense beauty and absolute power. The Anthropos above, however, saw his own mirror image in the water. He loved it and wanted to inhabit it. Instantly, his will became power, and he inhabited the lower nature. “And Physis took the beloved and em-

braced him wholly and they mingled, for they were lovers” (ἡ δὲ φύσις λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐρώμενον περιεπλάκη ὅλη καὶ ἐμίγησαν· ἐρωμενοὶ γὰρ ἦσαν).

The consequences are quickly told (§15). First of all, the result of the love affair of the divine Anthropos and the lower Physis is that all living beings are subject to death and that the human race has a double (δίπλους) nature: as far as the body is concerned, humans are mortal, and as far as their immortality is concerned, it pertains only to “the essential human” (ὁ οὐσιώδης ἄνθρωπος). This is called “the mystery that has been kept hidden to this very day” (Τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ κεκρυμμένον μυστήριον μέχρι τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας. [§16]). Physis then produced from the four elements seven ἄνθρωποι, of the kind of the seven governors, all of them androgynous. After that she brought forth the human bodies, modelled after the divine Anthropos and containing in themselves the ingredients of heaven and earth (§17). Finally, the male-female units were cut apart, and empirical humanity had become reality (§18-19). That done, the god could order all the creatures “by a holy word” to “increase and multiply,” and this is what they have been doing ever since. For the human being, however, there was the special order which we have quoted above (§18):

“... καὶ ἀναγνωρισάτω <ὁ> ἔννοος ἑαυτὸν ὄντα ἀθάνατον, καὶ τὸν αἴτιον τοῦ θανάτου ἔρωτα, καὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα.”

“Let the one who has the Intellect recognize himself as immortal, love as the cause of death, and all the things that are.”

The human being, therefore, continues to have the ability to recognize himself, to escape from loving “the body of the error of love” (τὸ ἐκ πλάνης ἔρωτος σῶμα), and to ascend to the higher world of the good (§19). There is, how-

ever, a difference at this point between Hermetism and main-line Neoplatonism. Hermetism assumes that self-knowledge, in order to facilitate the redemption of the human being, must be rekindled by a cultic initiation of the kind the "Poimandres" presupposes, an initiation that has been instituted by the deity. At this point, to some degree Hermetism and Iamblichus agree, and one wonders whether Iamblichus has learned his lesson from the Hermetists<sup>45</sup>.

How this can be accomplished is the subject of the final part of the tractate (§§21-29). Basically, the way out is through self-knowledge. This self-knowledge leads to the dissolution of the body through radical asceticism (§§22-25) and, stripped of the body, to the ascension through the planetary spheres to the ogdoad and, finally, to the reunion with the Father god, the "being in god" (ἐν θεῷ γίνεσθαι), and the "becoming god" (θεωθῆναι). "This complete return from where things began is, of course, reserved only "for those who possess the knowledge" (τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ ἀγαθὸν τέλος τοῖς γνῶσιν ἐσχηκόσι [§26]).

Seemingly a paradox, the end of the works of ἔρως and radical asceticism does not mean the end of love altogether. Rather, the initiates love in a non-sexual sense. From the beginning the initiate "loves" (ἐρᾶν) and "desires" (ποθεῖν) the words of Poimandres (§§4; 16; 18; 22), and he enjoys the company of the god who promises to be together with him always (§§ 2; 30-32), as well as the company of the fellow-initiates (§29).

The final hymn (§§31-32) is the expression of the love of god: "Therefore, I give praise to the Father god out of all my soul and strength" (διὸ δίδωμι ἐκ ψυχῆς καὶ ἰσχύος ὅλης εὐλογίαν τῷ πατρὶ θεῷ (§30)). It is the testimony of the reconstituted οὐσιώδης ἄνθρωπος ("essential human"), reunited with god: "Your human being wishes to be sanctified together with you, as you have handed over to him your whole pow-

er" (ὁ σὸς ἄνθρωπος συναγιάζειν σοι βούλεται, καθὼς παρέδωκας αὐτῷ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν [§32])."

## 5. Conclusion

The syncretistic interpenetration of Hermetism and Gnosticism should be clear from the preceding examination of the texts<sup>46</sup>. Apart from the narrative framework (§§1-3, 27-29) and the concluding hymn (§§30-31), the dialogue between Poimandres and the initiate constitutes the upper literary level in the tractate. The sayings in §§18-21, derived from Greek philosophy, provide the key elements of "self-knowledge" (γνῶσις) which lead to the questions of cosmology and anthropology pursued in the dialogue (cf. §3: Μαθεῖν θέλω τὰ ὄντα καὶ νοῆσαι τὸν τούτων φύσιν καὶ γῶναι τὸν θεόν). This question, in turn, raises the issue of theodicy, an issue that is deeply embedded in both Egyptian and Greek thought. Proceeding from this basis, the older Egyptian creation myth is then examined.

This examination takes two steps: (a) the recalling of the myth by way of an ecstatic vision. This re-visioning of the myth, then, constitutes the narrative of the cosmogony, anthropology, and eschatology; (b) the dialogue critically reinterpretes the myth in accordance with gnostic concerns. These gnostic concerns are identified with redemptive γνῶσις, so that the old Delphic maxim "Know yourself," now reformulated in several versions, serves to express the basic concern of gnosticism and also contains the basic outline of the tractate as a whole. Accordingly, also the older creation myth is re-narrated in such a way that it corresponds to the reformulated philosophical maxims.

The fact that similar hermeneutical procedures can be observed in some of the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi can explain why the Gnostics took an interest in the Hermetic writ-



ings, took over some of them and included them in the Nag Hammadi library. Why those who collected that library seem not to have

known the “Poimandres” remains a puzzle, – just one of the many puzzles that will no doubt keep scholars busy for years to come.

## Notes

1. For recent surveys of the research see Antonino González Blanco, “Hermetism: A Bibliographical Approach,” *ANRW* II, 17:4 (1894) 2240-81; David N. Wigtul, “Incorrect Apocalyptic: The Hermetic ‘Asclepius’ as an Improvement on the Greek Original,” *ANRW* II, 17:4 (1984) 2282-2297; Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Hermès Trismégiste et Nag Hammadi,” *Histoire et Archéologie* 70 (1983) 34-43; Harry J. Sheppard, Alois Kehl, Robert McL. Wilson, “Hermetik,” *RAC* 14 (1988) 780-808, esp. on the “Poimandres” 790-94, and on the question of Hermetism and Gnosticism 802-5.
2. For the possible origin of the name Poimandres which refers to the god as well as to the tractate, see Peter Kingsley, “Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica,” *JWCI* 56 (1993) 1-24.
3. In the following, the “Poimandres” is cited according to the edition by Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière, “Corpus Hermeticum”, vol. I: “Traité I-XII” (Paris: Société d’édition “Les belles lettres,” 1945). Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are mine.
4. See for references Sheppard, Kehl, Wilson, “Hermetik,” 794-95.
5. *Ibid.*, 786-94; Garth Fowden, “The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Egyptian Mind” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
6. André-Jean Festugière, “La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste”, vol. 3: “Les doctrines de l’âmes” (Paris: Galbada, 1953), 26: “La gnose hermétique, dans son fond, reste dans la tradition platonicienne.”
7. See Sheppard, Kehl, Wilson, “Hermetik,” 795-800; Jörg Büchli, “Der Poimandres: Ein paganisiertes Evangelium. Sprachliche und begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum 1. Traktat des Corpus Hermeticum” (WUNT 2.27; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987).
8. This name occurs several times in the C. H. (e.g., X.1,7; XIII.1); see Nock & Festugière, “Corpus Hermeticum”, 1.112, n. 2; William C. Grese, “Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature” (SCHNT 5; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 67-71; Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Hermès en Haute Égypte”, vol. 1: “Les Textes Hermétiques de Nag Hammadi et leur parallèles Grecs et Latins” (Quebec: Université Laval, 1978), 1.95-96.
9. “D’Hermès Trismégiste à Asclépius: Définitions,” in: Jean-Pierre Mahé, ed., “Hermès en Haute-Égypte” vol. 2 (Quebec: Université Laval, 1982).
10. “Definitions,” IX,4, ed. Mahé, “Hermès en Haute Égypte”, 2.393, with notes. The English translation is mine.
11. See my article, “The Delphic Maxim ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ in Hermetic Interpretation,” in: “Hellenismus und Urchristentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze I” (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 92-111, esp. 94-95.
12. *Ibid.*, 98-99.
13. Mahé, “Hermès en Haute-Égypte”, 2.375.
14. Section VI,1, eds. Joseph Paramelle and Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Nouveau parallèles grecs aux Définitions Hermétiques arméniennes,” “Revue des Études Arméniennes” 22 (1990-91) 115-34, with the citation on p. 119. The English translation is mine.
15. Nock & Festugière, “Corpus Hermeticum”, 1.13; see also Betz, “Hellenismus und Urchristentum”, 94; for other forms of the maxim in “Poimandres” see *ibid.*, 94-95.
16. Gilles Quispel, “Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism,” “Vigiliae Christianae” 46 (1992) 1-19, with the citation on p. 3.
17. Cited according to the translation in James M. Robinson, ed., “The Nag Hammadi Library in English” (3rd ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 384. See also “The Book of Thomas the Contender” (NHC II,7,140,39-40) and “Allogenes” (NHC XI,3,63,14-15), translated in Robinson, *ibid.*, pp. 203, 498.
18. Cited according to the translation by Thomas O. Lambdin, in: Bentley Layton, ed., “Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7” (NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1.53; also in Robinson, “The Nag Hammadi Library in English”, 134. See, furthermore, the exegesis of the Delphic maxim “Know yourself” in the Greek sayings collection of the P. Oxyr. 654, Log. 3,15-21, in Layton, “Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7”, 1.114.
19. Nock and Festugière, “Corpus Hermeticum,” 1.14.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*

22. See Eberhard Otto, "Der Vorwurf an Gott. Zur Entstehung der ägyptischen Auseinandersetzungsliteratur" (Orientalische Tagung Marburg 1950, Fachgruppe: Ägyptologie, Vortrag no. 3; Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1951); Winfried Barta, "Das Gespräch des Ipuwer mit dem Schöpfergott," "Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur" 1 (Hamburg: Ruske, 1974), 19-33; Erik Hornung, "Verfall und Regeneration der Schöpfung," "Eranos-Jahrbuch" 46 (1977) 411-49; Wolfgang Westendorf, "Theodizee," "Lexikon der Ägyptologie" 6 (1986) 474.
23. Cited according to the translation by Miriam Lichtheim, "Ancient Egyptian Literature", vol. 1: "The Old and Middle Kingdom" (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 159-60.
24. Cf. Otto, "Der Vorwurf", 7: "Die Schöpfung ist unzulänglich, u. zw. wiederholt sich ihre Unzulänglichkeit in der wiederholten Schaffung der gleichen Menschentypen. Verantwortlich ist der Schöpfer des 'ersten Geschlechts', wie der Ägypter sagt, und ebenso die Götter, die auf des Schöpfers Geheis die Unzulänglichkeit in immer neuen Schöpfungsakten fortsetzen."
25. Lichtheim, "Ancient Egyptian Literature", 1.132.
26. Cf. the statement by Erik Iversen, "Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine" (Copenhagen: Tusculanum Press, 1984), 43: "As an additional example of direct accordance between the Egyptian and the Hermetic approach to philosophical problems, it is highly interesting to observe their identical attitude toward the theodicean question raised by the Asclepius (16; vol. II, 314, 24-25): Whether God would not be able to abolish evil. By the Hermetist the question is answered in the negative in the doctrine: 'God is not responsible for our evil deeds; but we ourselves are responsible for them because we prefer evil to goodness' (treatise IV, 8; p. 52, 7). In the Coffin texts exactly the same solution of the problem is propounded by the creator himself in the authoritative statement 'I did not order them (i.e. mankind) to commit evil, it is their hearts which have violated my commands' ..." Iversen does not discuss the parallels in Plato, although he regards the "Timaeus" "the most 'Hermetic' of the dialogues" (p. 32).
27. The translation is by Paul Shorey, "Plato" (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1935), 6.507; see also "Rep." 2.379b-c.
28. "Tim." 42d, according to the text and translation by R. G. Bury, "Plato" (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1929), 9.93.
29. Cited according to the edition and translation by A. T. Murray (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1919), 1.5.
30. Plutarch, "De sera num. vind." 560A-B and 563E-568A; see Betz, "Hellenismus und Urchristentum", 196-97, 204.
31. Iamblichus, "De vita Pythagorica liber" 218, ed. Ludwig Deubner (BT; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1975), 118, lines 14-15: ... ἐπέδειξεν ὅτι οἱ θεοὶ τῶν κακῶν εἰσὶν ἀνάιτιοι, ...
32. Justin quotes Plato, claiming that he got the quote from Moses.
33. See the edition by Otto Stählin, Ludwig Früchtel, Ursula Treu, "Clemens Alexandrinus" (GCS 17.2; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960), p. 427.
34. 3.55-56; 4.9.1-2; 8.9-11; 15.18; 19.1-25, ed. Bernhard Rehm, "Die Pseudoklementinen", vol. 1: "Homilien" (GCS 42; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969).
35. For further bibliography see my Hermeneia commentary, "The Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27; Luke 6:20-49)" (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 313-15; 324 with n.1006.
36. The doctrine is related to Orphic traditions. See for further references West, "The Orphic Poems", (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 10-13.
37. Nock & Festugière, "Corpus Hermeticum", 1.52; the translation is mine.
38. The Latin text follows the edition by Nock & Festugière, "Corpus Hermeticum", tome II: "Traité XII-XVIII, Asclepius" (Paris: Société d'édition "Les belles lettres", 1945), p. 314-15. The English translation is by Brian P. Copenhaver, "Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 76. For the Coptic text and commentary see also Mahé, "Hermès en Haute-Égypte", 2.54, 215-16.
39. For the concept of "mysterium" see "Ascl." 19 (p. 318, l. 5); 21 (p. 322, l. 13; 323, l.3; 32 (p. 341, l. 24); 37 (p. 347, l.18).
40. See Peter Dirkse and James Brashler, in: Douglas Parrott, ed., "Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4" (NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), VI,7,63,33-65,7; for bibliography on the prayer see Copenhaver, "Hermetica", 259.
41. See Hans Dieter Betz, "The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation" (2nd ed.; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33-34.
42. For an examination of the terminology of creation see Mahé, "La création," 10-15.
43. For this concept, see Mahé, "La création," 21-23.
44. The translation follows Festugière who takes up a suggestion by Benedict Einarson and translates "... selon ses propres éléments et ses propres produits, les âmes ..." See Nock and Festugière, "Corpus Hermeticum", 1.20, n. 23.
45. See Carlos G. Steel, "The Changing Self. A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus" (Verhandelingen van de Konin-

klijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en  
schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, Jaar-  
gang XL, Nr. 85; Brussel: Paleis der Academiën, 1978),

esp. 21-75. Steel, however, does not consider the role of  
the Hermetica at all.

46. Cf. Sheppard, Kehl, Wilson, "Hermetik," 802-5.