

# Mental Faculties and Cosmic Levels in *The Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI,6) and Related Hermetic Writings<sup>1</sup>

by  
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Along with Homer and Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus belongs to the very restricted circle of the imaginary poets. His historical existence is unsustainable, his works, apocryphal, and the various writers hiding under his mask, almost unknown. Yet the idea he embodies is perfectly clear: it is the firm belief that man has not completely lost the glory of paradise; the hope he can find either in his or in his ancestors' memory, somewhere in the past of humankind or in the unexplored regions of his innerworld, some kind of mysterious strength to come back up to the primordial times, when Adam was released from God's hand, endowed with divine likeness and the perfect knowledge of his Creator.

To hellenic minds, the remnants of such a remote memory can be found only in Egypt. For Greece, just as the rest of the planet, is a young civilization which appeared only after the flood. As soon as the Greeks try to inquire into their past, they are stopped by the abyss of the last cataclysm, which has swallowed up their former universe. And before that last catastrophe there have been many others of the same kind. Therefore Greece is a new world where everything is recent, transparent, devoid of mystery. On the contrary Egypt has been protected by the Nile from all of those periodic floods, which have swept off so many nations and cities of old. Therefore it displays to the sight of amazed visitors the enigma of its gigantic monuments which witnessed the life of primordial humankind conversing with their gods.

Who else could be able to retrace the secrets of creation but those self-begotten, self-impregnated deities which emerged spontaneously from the primordial chaos, such as Ptah-Hephaestus or Kamephis, "his mother's bull", or Khnum, the Good Genius? Nobody else but these Gods have taught Hermes-Thoth, the first scribe, the true names of everything; furthermore they inspired him to carve secret hieroglyphic inscriptions on stelae and obelisks, and to write hieratic books, which he and his descendants handed over to the scriptoria, the so-called "Houses of Life" of the Egyptian shrines.

Let us accept, at least temporarily, the data of this myth. As a result, Egypt is the mother of any hidden knowledge concerning the basic and genuine nature of all beings. The wise of other nations necessarily depend on her. Which truth can be found either in Moses' *Genesis* or in Plato's *Timaeus*, which must not be traced back to Hermes-Thoth's antediluvian writings? Therefore whoever would take the risk of mixing up Bible and Platonism, with some additional ingredients such as Egyptian cosmogony or Jewish gnosis, would by no means bear the blame (so obnoxious to modern philology) of syncretism. On the contrary he might well be on the way to rediscover the primordial science of an unanimous humankind, still speaking the language of their origins.

In order to translate the Egyptian equivalent of a superlative the Greek oracles delivered by

Thoth in the ptolemaic period are normally ascribed to “the greatest greatest god, the great Hermes” (HHE 1,1). Eventually this phrase is shortened into Hermes Trismegistus “the thrice greatest”.

Four or five hundred years later, when in the first three centuries A.D. the Egyptian god, who had already authored a lot of astronomical, alchemical and magical writings, was also credited with Greek philosophical dialogues, the etymology of Trismegistus had long ago sunk into oblivion. Therefore people sought more sophisticated explanations.

E.g. according to a hermetic fragment preserved in Byzantine chronicles, as well as in Syriac and Armenian philosophical anthologies, Hermes “was a man from Egypt outstanding in wisdom; he interpreted and said that the name of the ineffable One and the Creator consists of threefold powers of majesty, but the Godhead, he said, is one. For this reason he was called by the Egyptians ‘Trismegistos’, i.e. of three-fold greatness” (Brock 1983).

According to another explanation preserved in Hermias of Alexandria’s commentary on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Hermes was called Trismegistus because he came thrice to Egypt and each time led a most philosophical life, but the last time he remembered himself and recognized himself (NF 4, 148 s.).

Both of these explanations are also echoed by the sixth writing of Nag Hammadi codex VI, a hermetic dialogue whose lost title can be reconstructed as *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI<sup>6</sup>).

In this treatise, an anonymous disciple reminds Hermes of his former promise to bring his mind into the Ogdoad, i.e. the eighth sphere, and afterward into the Ennead, i.e. the ninth, according to the order of the tradition (NH VI,52,1-7). Then follows a theoretical dialogue concerning spiritual regeneration (52,8-55,5). Hermes and his disciple begin praying the Invisible God and are granted two mystical

illuminations, the first one including only the Eighth and the second one the Eighth and the Ninth (55,6-61,17). After giving thank to God for this favor, the disciple is prescribed to carve the book of his vision on turquoise stelae which shall be put in the court of Hermes’ shrine in Diospolis under the guard of frog- and cat-faced keepers. In addition Hermes writes an oath, in order to protect the book from any misuse by unworthy readers (61,18-63,33).

From several passages of the dialogue, we understand that the highest god, whose name (62,24) is ineffable, consists of threefold powers called the Unbegotten, the Self-Begotten and the Begotten (63,21-23), which provides a good explanation for the statement that Hermes Trismegistus has taught that three powers of Majesty form the essence of the Creator.

On the other hand during the two visions of our text, both Hermes and his disciple cry out “I see myself” (58,8. 60,32), which reminds us of the fact that Hermes was called Trismegistus after he had remembered or recognized himself. Indeed the word Trismegistos occurs only twice in the dialogue (59,15. 24), both times after Hermes has been able to see himself and before he communicates this spiritual gift to his disciple.

It must be granted that seeing oneself is not exactly the same thing as remembering or recognizing oneself. The latter sounds more intellectual. It can be the result of a long-lasting effort, whereas the former is a sudden and ecstatic vision. But we can easily account for this difference by noting that our text confessedly is nothing but an initiation dialogue, whose purpose is to bring about mystical enlightenment and that this experience is depicted as the final stage of a long intellectual cursus and spiritual progress.

As Hermes states, “Those who read this book should not bring the Name into abuse and not (use it) to oppose the acts of fate. Rather they should submit to the law of God, without hav-

ing transgressed at all, but in purity asking God for wisdom and knowledge. And he who has not been begotten at the start by God should limit himself within the *General Lectures* and the *Detailed Lectures*. He will not be able to read the things written in this book, although his conscience is pure within him, since he does not do anything shameful nor does he consent to it. Rather, by stages he advances and enters into the way of immortality" (62,24-63,11).

Thus we understand that recognizing oneself is a complex process which demands gradual efforts, methodical readings and moral perfection, the final stage of which is the mystical illumination described in our dialogue.

But since both of the traditional explanations of the name Trismegistus occur in this writing, we might ask what is the connection between the two of them? Can really recognizing the three powers of God be one and the same thing as remembering or seeing oneself? Indeed it should be so, since the Armenian *Hermetic Definitions* teach us: "Who knows oneself knows the All" (DH IX,4).

Moreover the "three worlds" God, the cosmos and Man are closely related to each other. "God: intelligible world; world: sensible god; man: destructible world. God: motionless world; heavens: moving world; man: reasonable world. Therefore there are three worlds. The motionless world is God and the reasonable world is Man: but both of them are one, God and Man in his essence" (DH I,1).

As a result, Unbegotten, Self-Begotten and Begotten can mean, as well as divine powers, categories of beings, and we may be fairly sure that these beings are located at different levels of the cosmos, e.g. the Unbegotten atop, and the Begotten down below.

On the other hand "seeing oneself" cannot possibly mean "looking at oneself in a mirror". It must be some more sophisticated kind of self vision. As we can read in the "Secret dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus (...) on being born

again, and on the promise to be silent", which bears close similarities to our text, "seeing within me an unfabricated vision that came from the mercy of God, I went out of myself into an immortal body, and now I am not what I was before. I have been born in mind. This thing cannot be taught, nor can it be seen through any elementary fabrication that we use here below. Therefore, the initial form even of my own constitution is of no concern. Color, touch or size I no longer have; I am a stranger to them. Now you see me with yours eyes, my child, but by gazing with bodily sight you do <not> understand what <I am>; now I am not seen with such eyes, my child" (CH XIII,3).

Thus the vision of oneself forces man to strip off his mortal body and to get an immortal one, that cannot be seen with the eyes of flesh. In other words, seeing oneself somehow means acquiring new mental faculties, or perhaps re-activating forgotten or latent virtualities.

Now gaining or recovering those faculties brings about an ascent through the different cosmic levels, from the Begotten, here below, up to the Unbegotten, there atop, from the mortal up to the immortal. That is what our text calls "the way of immortality", which other hermetic writings also name "the way of truth" (SH II B,5), "the road that leads above" (CH IV,11; SH II B, 8), to the "light of knowledge" (CH X,21), "to the beautiful" (CH VI,5), "to the good" (CH XI,21). This way is one and the same thing as the scale of beings. It includes all of the trip that the human soul has made before birth and during life (CH X,8), as well as after-death journey (CH XII,12).

Consequently human ascension along this road is necessarily tridimensional. It simultaneously takes place in space, in time and within oneself.

As to the spatial dimension, we may quote the final oath of our dialogue, where Hermes provides a vertical section of the universe by naming, first upwards, the different levels of

the lower world, then downwards, the entities of the upper one.

“I make him who will read this holy book swear by heaven and earth and fire and water and the seven Ousiarchs and the demiurgic spirit dwelling in them – thus far for the lower world, then the upper one – by the Unbegotten God, the Self-Begotten one and him who has been Begotten, that he keeps the things that Hermes has said” (NH VI,63,16-24).

Above the ground floor, where the material elements (air, earth, fire and water) are, dwell the seven Ousiarchs, who, in this context, must be identified with the seven planetary Governors of *Poimandres* (CH I, 14. 16). They constitute the harmonia, i.e. the cosmic framework moved by fate (CH I,19) or the demiurgic spirit (CH I,11). Then comes the Begotten one, i.e. the rational soul of the cosmos, level with the Eighth, abode of the individual souls and angels (NH VI, 58,17-20; 59,29-30). One step higher we meet the Self-Begotten one, that is mind, level with the Ninth. Over the heights of heaven reigns the Unbegotten God “and in his place there is neither heaven, nor stars, and nothing like a body” (NH VI,75,9-13).

It would be easy to show that the after death ascent of *Poimandres* also takes place along these ten cosmical levels. Once man has stripped off his material body, “he rushes up through the cosmic framework” (CH I,25), i.e. the seven spheres or the Hebdomad (NH VI,56,27), “then he enters the regions of the Ogdoad; he has his own proper power, and along with the beings he hymns the Father” (CH I,26), just as the soul and the angels in our text (NH VI,58,17-20; 59,29-31). But there are two additional levels, since “certain powers dwell above the ogdoadic region and hymn God with a sweet voice” (CH I,26). According to our text the Ennead is specifically the abode of powers (NH VI,59,31-32) and the Unbegotten God is the one “who rules over the kingdom of power” (55,24-26). Therefore from that

kingdom, you “rise up to the Father” (CH I,26), on the tenth level.

As we know from the *Three stelae of Seth* (NH VII<sup>5</sup>) “the way of ascent is the way of descent” (NH VII, 127, 20-21). However, since the descent leads from God and the primordial man to present humankind it sheds light on the anthropogonic process and may help us understand which parts of the human compound, i.e. which mental faculties are related to the different cosmic levels.

According to *Poimandres*, the “essential man” (CH I,15) has been brought forth by “Mind, the father of all, who is life and light” at his own image and form (CH I,12). Since this man has received “every power” (*pasan exousian*, CH I,13. 14), we may assume he was first living in the realm of power (NH II,55,24-26), i.e. the Ennead, just below the divine Decade. Then this noetic man wants to create craftworks, and he enters the demiurge’s sphere (CH I,13), which must be one stage, lower, i.e. in the Ogdoad, where he probably receives something of the demiurgic mind, i.e. a rational soul derived from the soul of the universe.

Eventually the seven planetary Governors also give him “part of their order”, i.e. of the irrational passions they rule over. Finally the man breaks through the planetary spheres and embraces material nature (CH I,14). As a result, he receives a body made of the four elements. Therefore, “humankind is the only living thing that is twofold: one part of it is simple, what the Greeks call *ousiodes*, essential, what we call a form of divine likeness. What the Greeks call *hulikos*, material, and we call earthly is fourfold: from it is made the body that covers over what we have already termed divine in humankind” (Ascl 7).

Since each element of the human compound has been gained at a different level of the universe, we can live either on earth or in heaven depending on which part of ourselves we decide to give leadership.

Let us consider the case of people who "divert their attention to the pleasures and appetites of their bodies, believing that humankind came to be for such purpose" (CH IV,5). Such individuals are sprawling on the ground, like "unreasoning animals" (ibid.). Instead, those who want to raise themselves to heavens should first "rip off the tunic that they wear, the garment of ignorance, the foundation of vice, the bonds of corruption, the dark cage, the living death, the sentient corpse" (CH VII,2). For bodily delight "is a noose round the soul's neck that keeps humankind tied to the part that makes them mortal" (Ascl 12).

Whoever longs to enter the way to heaven and immortality shall reactivate his mental faculties and go through three successive stages which the *Prayer of Thanksgiving* of Nag Hammadi codex VI calls "Nous, Logos and Gnosis" (NH VI,64,9-10). Since we know from another text (CH IX,10) that Logos and Nous are the last two stages, we must assume the Gnosis is the first one.

Within hermetism *Gnosis* is indeed a portal (CH VII,2), and a starting point: "it furnishes us the beginning of the good that will be known" (CH IV,9). It consists in rejecting *agnosia*, i.e. sinful ignorance of God and getting sure that He exists (CH XIII,8) and wants to be known (CH I,31). This spiritual research is one and the same thing as reverent piety (CH I,27. VI,5. IX,4).

But soul cannot possibly gain piety without waging war against oneself (CH X,19). It has got to fight and "make a great division in order to be defeated by one part of itself. There begins a struggle of one against two, the former trying to escape, the two latter dragging it down towards the bottom" (SH II B,6). The adversaries of this combat are to be identified with the rational part of soul and its two irrational parts, *thumos* "passionate will" and *epithumia* "desire". The psychic force which is specially intended for controlling desires and passions

is called *logismos*, i.e. "reasoning faculty". "When passionate will and desire agree with each other to create a balanced disposition by adhering to the reasoning faculty, they become justice" (SH XVII,3).

When we overcome our passions with the help of the *logismos* we somehow get over the planetary influences which determine our temper and fix our fate. Therefore we ascend to the highest of seven spheres ruled by the Ousarchs or the Governors, as we can read in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*: "We have already advanced to the Hebdomad, since we are pious and walk in thy law" (NH VI,56,28-30).

In the new hermetic fragments *On Soul* discovered in the manuscript Clarke 11 of the Bodleian Library (Paramelle-Mahé 1991), we are told that "when the reasoning faculty raises its head out of the irrational, it drags along with itself the irrational and fills it up with understanding <which cures> the irrational impulses" (HO IV,4). The verb "to raise one's head" (*anakuptein*) is particularly interesting because it describes the opposite motion to that of the Primordial man falling into the material world: "he broke through the vault and stooped (*parakuptein*) to look through the cosmic framework" (CH I,14). The image is very clear: man belongs by his essence to a place located above the seven planets. When he bends his head to watch the lower world, he falls under the dominion of the cosmic framework; on the contrary, if he overcomes his instincts with the help of the *logismos*, he comes back to his former position and gets his head raised again over the planetary fate.

No extant hermetic writing or fragments exactly tell us about the location of the *logismos* within the human body and which level it mirrors in the Macrocosm. According to the Oxonian fragments, "between (*metaxu*) mind and reason (*logos*) is the reasoning faculty (*logismos*), escorting mind" (HO IV,4). Whatever "between" may mean in this context we cannot

possibly regard the *logismos* as the upper part of the rational soul (*logike psukhe*), because its function is to domesticate the lower irrational parts. Therefore it must be located somewhere at the bottom of the rational soul, or perhaps constitute a septum separating the rational from the irrational.

There is indeed such a septum both in the cosmos and in the human body: “Since the cosmos is a sphere – a head that is – and since there is nothing material above the head (just as there is nothing of mind below the feet, where all is matter), and since mind is a head which is moved spherically – in the manner of a head, that is – things joined to the membrane of this head (in which is the soul) are by nature immortal, as if they have more soul than body because their body has been made in soul; things far away from the membrane, however, are mortal, because they have more body than soul” (CH X,11).

The membrane (*humen*) which separates the head from the body also marks the limit between rational and irrational. On a cosmic scale, it must be identical to the *kutos* i.e. the envelope wrapping up the seven spheres (CH I,14). This provides a good location for the *logismos*. Just above, in the Ogdoad, must be the rational soul itself, and one level higher, mind, in the Ennead. Thus “the mind is in the reason; the reason is in the soul” (CH X,12).

Once man has fully domesticated his irrational soul, he enters the Ogdoad, which is the realm of Logos, the second stage of spiritual progress. Since Hermes-Thoythos is the “first man, the interpreter of all beings, the one who gave a name to all material things” (FH 21), the Hermetic writings contain the Logos par excellence, i.e. the true name and the true essence of everything.

In order to gain sound knowledge of these teachings, we must follow the cursus described in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI, 63,1-2): first the *General Lectures*, a summary

of which is provided in *The Key of Hermes Trismegistus* (CH X,1), then the *Detailed Lectures*. The meaning of this latter title, *Diexodikoi Logoi*, can be explained by the preamble to a hermetic gnomology: “Now, my child, I want to enumerate (*diexelthein*) in brief sentences the complete series of all beings” (SH XI,1). Detailed lectures are those teachings which aim at going through all of the existing creatures “in order to hasten toward the One and Only” (CH IV,8).

But can human speech and *logos* exhaust the infinite of being? It is all the more impossible that we want to reach God himself beyond his creature, the eternal and the invisible beyond the temporal and visible. “What the eye can see, the tongue can say; but what has got neither a body, nor an outline, nor any aspect, what is not even made out of matter cannot possibly be perceived by our senses. I see it within my mind, o Tat, I see it: but what cannot be expressed is God” (SH I,2).

Therefore spiritual progress still demands another mental faculty, which is mind: “For reason and *logos* do not get to the truth, but mind is powerful, and when it has been guided by the *logos* up to a certain point of the road, it has means to get as far as the truth. After mind has included everything in an all-embracing glance and has discovered that all of it is in harmony with the interpretation of the Logos, it comes to believe, and in this beautiful belief he finds his rest” (CH IX,10).

Mind is much more than a mental faculty. It “comes from the very essence of God”, however, it “has not been cut off from God’s essentiality; it has expanded, as it were, like the light of the sun. In humans this mind is God; among humans, therefore, some are gods and their humanity is near to divinity. For the Good Demon (i.e. Khnoum-Agathos Daimon) has said that gods are immortal <humans> and humans are mortal gods” (CH XII,1).

Therefore “one who gives thanks to God

must pray to acquire a good mind" (CH X,22). We need not describe here in every detail the various exercises man should perform in order to develop his mind, or to shift up from logic to noetic existence. Mere rational teaching has got only a limited impact. E.g. we can lead somebody up to a monument or tell him about the way to go there. But in the last analysis he will not be able to see the monument unless he looks at it with his own eyes. Likewise in the intellectual field, the teacher's words enable the disciple to understand, provided he thinks with his own mind. Then he will get sudden and complete understanding. Whereas the logos goes forward, as it were, step by step, mind, which is the eye of heart (CH VII,2) and the sight of soul (DH VII,3) has got the same all-embracing abilities as glance: it catches everything at once. It immediately fills the gap or covers the distance between the sum of our successive impressions and total reality.

Therefore in order to develop our mind we must learn to see or to contemplate. Any trivial experiment, any humdrum sight from everyday life can virtually become a matter for contemplation. "If you want to learn how (God) creates (...) consider this lovely image, that is very like him: see a farmer casting seed upon the earth, here the wheat, there the barley, elsewhere seed of some other kind (...). In the same way, God sows immortality in heaven, change in the earth, life and motion in the universe" (CH XIV,9-10).

But we can also raise our eyes up to heaven and look at the sun, which is an image of the Creator above the sky: "Just as this latter has at once created the world, the sun models the living beings, begets the plants and rules over the breaths" (SH XXI,2; CH X,2). Beyond the sun, contemplation can also extend as far as the whole cosmos: "if you want to see God, consider the sun, consider the circuit of the moon, consider the order of the stars" (CH V,3).

Since man as well as the world is an image of

God, we can also behold the creator within ourself: "if you wish also to see the vision through mortal things on earth and in the deep, consider how the human being is crafted in the womb, examine the skill of the craftwork carefully, and learn who it is that crafts this beautiful, godlike image of humankind" (CH V, 6).

Even the innermost feelings of our body enable us to go further into the secrets of divine creation: "notice what happens to you when you wish to beget; it is not quite like the work of God, for God takes no pleasure in his work nor does he have assistance in it" (CH XI,14).

By frequently training our mind in contemplation we gradually learn to combine and catch at a glance both of God's images, the world and man, that we formerly used to look at separately. We suppress the limit that consciousness normally fixes between me and others, inside and outside, present, past and future. Whoever gets rid of these distinctions becomes Aion, i.e. Eternity. He no longer sees with a human and partial glance, now this thing and now that one, he embraces at once the totality of being, space and time.

In other words his mind compares with God's intellect. "Unless you make yourself equal to God you cannot understand God; like is understood by like. Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become Aion, eternity; then you will understand God (...). Be everywhere at once, on land in the sea, in heaven; be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death. And when you have understood all these at once (...) then you can understand God" (CH XI,20).

Such an experiment results from a transformation of mental faculties, so that individual mind is lifted up to the universal. According to the *Hermetic Definitions*, "there are two minds, the godly one and that which belongs to soul" (DH VIII,4). Soul's mind levels with heaven

since “heaven is an eternal body, an immutable unchanging body, mixed up out of soul and mind” (DH II,2). By heaven we should here understand the Ogdoad, abode of the star-gods, for “men cultivate earth, and stars decorate heaven. Gods have heaven, and men, earth and sea” (DH IX,7).

On the contrary when individual mind becomes universal, it also becomes superior to the world, being raised from the eighth up to the ninth sphere, since “soul is bound to be born in this world, but mind is superior to the world” (DH X,5).

That godly mind is male and female like God himself (CH I,9). Along with its female partner, called Silence, it begets a pure Logos: “For mind conceives Logos in Silence” (DH V,2). This Logos is identical to the Primordial man who was conceived in a womb made out of “intelligible wisdom in silence, whereas the seed is the true god”, i.e. mind itself (CH XIII,2). Needless to stress the similarity of this myth, with gnostic and especially valentinian traditions.

We can now more fully understand why reaching the Eighth and the Ninth has both a cosmic and a mental significance. Mental elevation requires renouncement of evil, moral conversion and long-lasting spiritual exercises aimed at freeing the rational soul from the irrational, then again intellectual vision, mind, from mere discursive reason. This last stage which results in ecstatic enlightenment, cannot be reached without mystic initiation as described in the Nag Hammadi *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*.

For mind’s illumination does not depend on human virtue nor can it be taught “but God reminds you of it when he wishes” (CH XIII,2). Therefore it is a grace which must be asked for by prayer. “What is fitting is to pray to God with all our intelligence and all our heart and all our soul (Dt 6,5), and to ask him that the gift of the Eighth extend to us” (NH VI,55,11-16).

In fact, despite our efforts to progress and

overcome deficiency (54,13-17), we advance only as far as God comes down and condescends to visit us. The only thing we can possibly do is to prepare ourselves to welcome him and take advantage of his indulgence. Oral prayer styled “sacrifice of words” (57,19) can help us reach the Ogdoad which is the abode of Logos and rational soul, but “language is not able to reveal” (58,16-17) the silent hymn of souls and angels to the Ennead (58,20).

Therefore we must train ourselves to speechless praise which can be understood only by mind (58,21-22). A transition from articulate prayer to mental orison can be provided by the vocalic invocations of God’s hidden name (56,17-22; 61,10-15; cf. Ro 8-26) which at once may symbolise the location of the divine Triad above the Seven planetary spheres. The insistence of our text on silence (56,10-12; 58,20. 25-26; 59,20-22; cf. HHE, t. 2, p. 302) is nothing like a commonplace usual in revelation discourses since Silence is the female partner that enables divine mind to perform spiritual regeneration.

The godly triad – Unbegotten, Self-Begotten and Begotten – is also to be found in *Eugnostos* and the *Sophia Jesu Christi*. There we can read that “the source of what is revealed, i.e. the beginningless First Father, beholds himself within himself as with a mirror. He was revealed in his likeness as Self-Father, i.e. Self-Begetter, and as confronter, since he confronted the Unbegotten First-Existing One (...). Afterward he revealed a multitude of confronting, self-begotten ones, equal in age (and) power, being in glory and without member” (NH III, 74,23-75,16).

From this, we may understand that God, the Unbegotten, is like an ever-gushing source of glorious light. This gush is mirrored, as it were, in water and brings forth the Self-Begotten Mind that confronts him, so that he beholds himself in it. The Self-Begotten One in turn reveals a crowd of Self-Begotten minds, i.e. the elected spiritual human beings.



This myth is no doubt also known to the author of the *Eighth and the Ninth*, to whom the "Beginning of the Power that is above all Powers, the One that has no beginning" is also "a source bubbling with life" (NH VI, 58,10-14). We may assume that the Self-Begotten is Mind, i.e. his own reflection in the luminous water of this source. Therefore "seeing oneself" (58,8; 60,32) through mystic initiation must also mean being self-begotten as God's Mind in the ninth sphere.

When we undergo this process we do not only free our individual mind from soul and matter, but we also catch up with time. We go back up to the creation of the first man, who had got no human parents, but was – so to say – self-begotten from godly mind. On the contrary the son of this first man must have been born in a time when men had somehow already been divided into male mind, and female soul (CH I,17). Consequently he must have been begotten.

If we remember that between Seth, the first begotten man, and Noah, the father of post-diluvian, i.e. historical humankind, there are seven generations (Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech), that can be compared to the "seven exalted men" of *Poimandres* (CH I,16) "whose natures were like those of the seven (planetary) governors" we understand that reaching the Ogdoad also means coming back to the time of Seth, and reaching the Ennead equals coming back to the time of Adam.

Recent research has proved that hermetism is not a philosophical system but a way (cf. HHE, t. 2, p. 455 s.; Fowden 1986, p. 111 s.). From this standpoint, traditional charges of inconsistency, by such eminent scholars as Festugière, Zielinski or even Bousset, are completely irrelevant. When you progress on a way, essential realities assume different aspects, depending on the stage you have reached. E.g. when you are

on earth and raise your eyes up to heaven it looks magnificent. Such is the position of the *Perfect Discourse*, parallel to the Latin *Asclepius*, from which an excerpt has been preserved in Nag Hammadi codex VI: "the beautiful world of God, the incomparable work, the energy that possesses goodness, the many-formed vision, the abundance that does not envy, that is full of every vision" (NH VI,72,9-16).

However once we have begun ascending to sky, the heavenly vault, which shortly before seemed so attractive, suddenly turns into an obstacle thwarting our spiritual ascension: "Can you see how many bodies we must pass through, how many troops of demons, <cosmic> connections and stellar circuits in order to hasten toward the One and Only?" (CH IV,8). Thus the same material world can look good in a preliminary stage and evil in a more advanced section of the road.

The Hermetic spiritual way runs always upwards. Nevertheless, as we have tried to show, we ascend simultaneously in space, in time and within ourselves. Therefore our mental faculties – senses, irrational soul, reason and mind – level with the cosmic spheres and these, in turn, level with the antediluvian ages and generations as depicted in *Genesis*.

Should we locate the three Hermetic writings preserved in Nag Hammadi codex VI on the "way to immortality" (NH VI,63,11), we would say that the fragment of the *Perfect Discourse* (NH VI<sup>8</sup>) belongs to the first stage, i.e. conversion and gnosis, whereas the *Eighth and the Ninth* (NH VI<sup>6</sup>) concerns the "most perfect that is" (63,32), namely the final stage, mystic enlightenment and spiritual regeneration. The *Prayer of thanksgiving* (NH VI<sup>7</sup>) recapitulates the three main stages: noûs, logos, gnosis (64,9-10).

The main interest of the *Eighth and the Ninth* lies in three essential reasons: 1) unlike the two other hermetic writings of Nag Hammadi, it was, thus far, completely unknown 2) by de-

scribing an initiation mystery, it shows us the real religious and existential dimension of Hermetism. Many Hermetic writings deal with theoretic or philosophical issues. But the real concern of Trismegistus is to open a path, to guide his disciples up to spiritual rest and illumination. This goal could hardly be met without the organization of brotherhoods (NH VI,52,27-29; 53,5-15. 26-30; 54,20-22) and mystery ceremonies, whose existence can now be proved despite the traditional doubts or objections of previous researchers on Hermetism (See Giversen 1989). 3) The mythological basis of our treatise (along with CH I. XIII) displays both very clear allusions to Egyptian religion and to the same tradition as *Eugnostos* (and secondarily *Sophia*

*Jesu Christi*). *Eugnostos* points at a Jewish interpretation of *Genesis*; but from the Hermetic point of view there is no contradiction, not even the slightest discontinuity between Egyptian and Jewish inspiration, since Moses supposedly was a disciple of Hermes Trismegistus.

Other similarities could be pointed at with many writings of Nag Hammadi, mainly with the *Paraphrase of Sem*, which uses the same *Genesis* commentary, and with the so-called Sethian treatises, which also offer a “threefold path of Gnostic enlightenment”, as has brilliantly been proved by the pioneering works of John Turner. It would certainly be worthwhile in the future to compare the Hermetic and the Sethian paths.

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## Notes

1. See abbreviations and bibliography below. We use (sometimes with minor changes) the following English translations: Brashler-Dirkse-Parrott for NH VI 6.7.8 (Robinson 1977, p. 292-307); Copenhaver 1992 for CH

and Ascl.; Parrott, for NH III 3. 4 (Robinson 1977, p. 206-228); Robinson-Wisse, for NH VII 4 (Robinson 1977, p. 362-367).