

Poimandres

Of all hermetic texts surviving from Alexandria, Poimandres is the prime source of gnostic speculation. The speaker in the Socratic dialogue, Poimandres, proposes a severely dualistic view of life in which the body represents everything dark, deceptive, temporal, and mortal while the mind (*nous*) represents light, truth, timelessness, and eternal salvation. The purpose of life is to free the soul from the prison of the body through gnosis and to return to the heavenly realm of light. So one leaves the physical universe by embarking on a celestial journey, through seven levels of spirituality, until one comes to the father of all. Then “he enters the eighth sphere of the fixed star” and becomes god. It is notable that for the hermeticists, god, despite the title “*father* of all,” is androgynous and contains both sexes. In the Revelation of Asklepios,¹ a hermetic text not included in this volume, god is defined as bisexual.

Poimandres has three sections. The first section, which tells of the creation of the world and human life, is a hermetic cosmogony and anthropogony, revealed to the speaker as a visionary experience. Part two recounts the soul’s escape from the world and its ascent to heaven and mystical union with god; the final part contains instructions for proselytizing the gospel of gnosis. The work ends with a prayer.

1. The Revelation of Asklepios is a Hermetic dialogue between Hermes and Asklepios. It exists in Latin translation from a lost Greek original, dated in the second century, entitled Perfect Teaching (*Logos teleios*). In it Hermes Trismegistos speaks of piety as knowledge and impiety as ignorance and equates sexual with mystical knowledge. A portion of the text is also present in Coptic translation in Codex VI of the Nag Hammadi library.

Poimandres serves as a rather severe mentor to the speaker in the dialogue, explaining, reproaching, ordering redemption. We soon understand that Poimandres is the *nous*, the highest godhead. The creations or divine emanations of the father of all are the logos, the mind-demiurge (who in turn creates the planetary system and the physical world in which people are trapped), and anthropos (human being). The human appears in god's image, since it is an androgynous generative principle and contains a divine soul, a spark of light.

In Poimandres we have perhaps the earliest full and detailed instructions in the mystical experience of darkness and purification from matter, ascent to the light, and entry into a oneness with god; this map of spiritual ecstasy was to be imitated, or reproduced in other forms, in innumerable works thereafter.

POIMANDRES²

POIMANDRES APPEARS

Once when I began to think about the things that are, and my thoughts soared exceedingly high, and my bodily senses were held down by sleep like people weighed down by overeating and weariness, I thought I saw a being of vast and boundless magnitude coming toward me, who called me by name, and said, "What do you wish to hear and see, to learn and know?"

"Who are you?" I said.

"I am Poimandres," he said, "the mind³ of absolute power. I know what you want and I am with you everywhere."

"I want to learn about the things that are, their nature, and to know god," I replied. "How I want to hear!"

He said, "Keep in mind what you wish to learn and I will teach you."

THE VISION OF CREATION

With these words he changed his form, and in a flash everything opened before me and I saw an unbounded vista. All was light, a soothing and happy light. And as I gazed I was entranced. But soon a stark and terrifying darkness descended gradually like a coiled snake, and I saw the darkness turn into a

2. Poimandres: translated from the Greek by Willis Barnstone.

3. *Nous*.

watery substance,⁴ unspeakably agitated, giving off smoke as from fire, emitting an indescribable sound of lamentation. And after that an inarticulate cry like the voice of fire.

Out of the light a holy word⁵ descended upon the watery substance, and I thought this word the voice of light; and unmingled fire leapt out of the watery substance and soared upward. The fire was quick and violent, and the air, being light, followed the breath⁶ as it rose from earth and water to the fire, so that the breath seemed suspended from the fire. But the earth and water remained intermingled, and the earth could not be seen apart from the water. All these elements were kept in audible motion by the breath of the word hovering above them.

POIMANDRES IS LIGHT AND MIND

Then Poimandres asked me, "Do you understand what that vision means?"

"I will understand," I said.

"I am that light," he said, "and I am the mind, the first god, who existed before the watery substance appeared out of the darkness. And the luminous word that issued from the mind is the son of god."

"In what way?"

"Understand that what sees and hears inside you is the word of the lord, its son, but the mind is god the father. And they are not divided one from the other, for they are united by life."

"Thank you," I said.

"But think about the light, and understand it."

WHERE EVERYTHING COMES FROM

Having said this, he gazed intently at me for a long time, and I trembled at his aspect. When I raised my head I saw in my mind the light, consisting of innumerable powers, which had become a limitless cosmos, and the fire, contained by a mighty power, was held in place. This is what I saw and understood from the words of Poimandres.

4. Or "nature" (Greek, *physis*).

5. Logos.

6. Greek *pneuma*, "spirit" or "breath."

I was amazed, and he spoke to me again. "You have seen in your mind the archetypal form, infinite and prior to the beginning."

"But where do the elements of nature come from?" I asked.

"From god's will, which received the word, and saw and imitated the beautiful world. The watery substance of nature received the word and made itself into an orderly world from its diverse elements, and a brood of living creatures came forth.

ANOTHER MIND, THE DEMIURGE

"And the first mind, being both male and female, both life and light, conceived through the word another mind, the demiurge, and this second mind of fire and breath fashioned seven rulers, who encompass within their orbits the world perceived by the senses. Their government is called destiny.⁷

"Suddenly, the word of god leaped out of the downward-moving elements of nature to the pure body of heaven and was united with the mind of the demiurge. For the word was of one substance with the mind. And the lower elements of nature were left wordless,⁸ that is, without reason, and became mere matter.

"Now the demiurge-mind worked together with the word to encompass the spheres of the rulers and to whirl them with thunderous speed, with no fixed beginning or determined end, since their revolutions begin where they end. And according to the mind's will, the lower elements of nature became animals devoid of reason, for they did not have the word. And the air brought forth winged creatures, and the water brought forth fish, and by then earth and water were separated from each other according to the will of the mind. And earth brought forth four-footed creatures and creeping things and wild and tame beasts.

MIND, FATHER OF ALL, GIVES BIRTH TO A PRIMAL HUMAN

"But mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a human being like himself. And he loved him as his own child, for he was very beautiful,

7. Greek, *heimarmene*.

8. Greek, *alogos*.

9. Greek, *anthropos*.

bearing the likeness of his father. And god was very pleased with his own beauty in the primal person⁹ and delivered to him all that he had created.

“And the primal person took station in the highest sphere of heaven and observed the things made by its author, his brother the demiurge, who ruled over the region of fire. Now that the human had seen those things made in fire, he wished to create things of his own. And his father permitted him to do so. And since the rulers loved him too, each gave him a share of his own nature.

“When the human learned their characteristics, he wished to break through the bounding orbits of the rulers and to share the power of him who rules over the fire.

THE HUMAN DESCENDS INTO THE WORLD OF NATURE

“Then the primal person, who possessed all authority over the world of mortal creatures and irrational animals, leaned down through the harmony¹⁰ and, having broken the vault, showed lower nature the beautiful form of god. When nature saw the beautiful form of god, it smiled on the human with love, for it had seen the wondrous beauty of the human reflected in the water and its shadow on the earth. And the human too, on seeing this form, a form similar to his own reflected in the water, loved it and wanted to live in it. And his wish was immediately realized, and he began to inhabit a form devoid of reason. And nature received its loved one, embraced him, and they mingled, for they were lovers.

HUMANKIND IS MORTAL AND IMMORTAL

“And this is why the human, of all creatures on the earth, is twofold: mortal in his body but immortal through the eternal human. Though he is immortal and has power over all things, he also suffers mortality, since he is subject to destiny. Though above the world of the spheres, he is a slave of destiny. Though he is male and female,¹¹ being born of a father who contains male and female, and is sleepless as his father is sleepless, he is vanquished by love and oblivion.”

10. This is the world of the spheres.

11. That is, androgynous.

SEVEN EARTHLY HUMANS ARE BORN

And after this I said, "O mind, tell me the rest. I too love your teaching."

And Poimandres answered, "Here is the mystery that has been hidden until this day. Nature, intimately mingled with the primal person, produced a most wondrous miracle. The human had in himself the world of spheres of the seven rulers, which, as I told you, was made of fire and air. Nature immediately made seven humans corresponding to the natures of the seven rulers, and they were androgynous and sublime."

Then I said, "O Poimandres, a powerful desire has seized me and I want to hear more. Do not stop."

"Silence," Poimandres replied. "I have not yet finished with the first discourse."

"See, I am silent," I said.

"These seven humans were born as follows: nature brought forth their bodies. Earth was the female element, water the generative male element; from fire came their nature, from ether their spirit.¹² Nature brought forth their bodies in human likeness. And humankind, which was formed of life and light, became soul¹³ and mind:¹⁴ soul from life and mind from light. And all creatures in the world of senses remained that way until the end of an era.

MALE AND FEMALE ARE CREATED

"Now I will tell you what you long to hear. When that era was completed, the bond uniting all things was loosened by god's will. All living creatures, being androgynous, were suddenly divided into two, and the primal person became at once male and female. God immediately spoke a holy word: 'Increase and multiply, all you creatures and creations. And let humankind, being with a mind, recognize itself as immortal and know that the cause of death is eros.'¹⁵

"And when god said this, his providence,¹⁶ by means of destiny and the world of spheres, brought male and female into union and established generations. And all creatures multiplied according to their kind. And whoever

12. Greek, *pneuma*.

13. Greek, *psyche*.

14. Greek, *nous*.

15. Genesis 1:22.

16. Greek, *pronoia*, elsewhere translated as "forethought."

recognized himself attained that good that is supreme, while whoever was led astray by desire, by love for the body, will wander in the darkness of the world of senses and suffer death.”

LIFE AND DEATH

“But what kind of sin do the ignorant commit that they should be deprived of immortality?” I asked.

“You do not seem to have thought about what I told you. Did I not tell you to pay attention?”

“I understand and remember, and at the same time I thank you.”

“If you understand, tell me why those who are ignorant deserve death.”

“Because the material body has its source in the abhorrent darkness, from which came the watery substance of which the body is composed in the sensible world, and from this body death slakes its thirst.”

“You have understood correctly. But why is it, as the word of god has it, that whoever recognizes and knows himself enters into the good?”¹⁷

I answered, “Because the father of all consists of light and life, and from him human beings were born.”

“You are right. Light and life are god and father, out of which humans came. And if you learn that you are also made of light and life, you will return to light and life.” These things Poimandres said.

THE PLACE OF THE MIND AMONG THE GODLY AND GODLESS

“But tell me,” I said, “how I shall come into life, for god told me, ‘Let the thinking person know himself.’ Don’t all people have a mind?”

“Do not speak that way, for I, mind, am present to the holy and good and pure and merciful, and my presence is a help to them, and all at once they recognize everything and win the mercy of loving god, and thank him and praise him and sing hymns to him, and turn to him with devotion. And before they abandon the body to death, they loathe the bodily senses, since they know how they work. I, the mind, will not allow the workings of the body to attain their purpose. As a guardian of the gates, I bar the way to evil and shameful energies. I cut off their strategies.

17. This recalls the Delphic maxim “Know yourself,” used here and in other gnostic texts.

“And I am far removed from those who are foolish and evil and sly and envious and covetous and murderous and godless. I yield place to the avenging demon¹⁸ who visits such a person with the sharpness of fire, piercing his senses and driving him to further lawlessness so that he may incur greater punishment. Never ceasing his dark struggle, and giving in to boundless appetite, he inflicts upon himself greater torment and hotter fire.”

THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL THROUGH SEVEN ZONES

“Mind, you have instructed me well in all things. But tell me more about the ascent. How shall I come to life?”

At this Poimandres said, “First, with the dissolution of your material body, you yield your character to the demon. Your image vanishes. The bodily senses return to their own sources, becoming part of the cosmos, and, combined in new ways, do other work. And anger and desire enter thoughtless nature.

“And then man rises into the harmony, the world of the spheres. In the first zone he leaves behind the force to grow and decrease, in the second the machinations of evil, in the third the guile of lust, in the fourth his domineering arrogance, in the fifth his unholy daring and rashness, in the sixth his striving for wealth by evil means, and in the seventh zone the malicious lie: all rendered powerless.

ENTERING THE EIGHTH AND BECOMING DIVINE

“Then, stripped naked by the force of the harmony, he enters the eighth sphere of the fixed stars,¹⁹ and possessing his own energy he remains there with others, singing hymns to the father. And the others are happy at his coming. Resembling those who live there, he hears the powers who have their place in the substance of the eighth sphere and who sing to god with a special voice. They move in order up to the father. They surrender to the powers, and become the powers, and are in god. This is the good, the aim of those who have gnosis: to become god.

“Why then do you hesitate? Now that you have received everything from me, why not make yourself a guide to the worthy so that people may be saved

18. Greek, *daimon*.

19. The ogdoad. See also the hermetic Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth.

by god through you?" And, having said these things, Poimandres before my eyes mingled with the powers.

GOING FORTH TO PREACH

I thanked and blessed the father of all, and was sent forth, empowered and instructed concerning the nature of all and with a supreme vision. And I began to preach to the people of beauty, of piety and gnosis: "O people born of the earth, given over to drunkenness and sleep and ignorance of god, end your drunkenness and unreasoning sleep."

When they heard this, they gathered around me. I said, "Why have you accepted death when you have been given the power to enjoy immortality? Change your ways, you who walk with error and keep company with ignorance. Free yourself of darkness and seize the light. Abandon corruption and receive immortality."

And some of them mocked me and left me, for they had given themselves to death. But others begged me to teach them, and they threw themselves at my feet. I raised them up and became a guide to people, teaching them the word and how they might be saved. And I sowed words of wisdom in them, and they were nourished with ambrosial water. When evening came and the rays of sun began to fade, I called on them to thank god. And when they completed the thanksgiving, each sought his or her own bed.²⁰

I recorded the beneficence of Poimandres, and how my hopes had been fulfilled. For the body's sleep became the soul's awakening, the closing of my eyes the true vision, my silence pregnant with the good, and my words the expression of good things. And all this happened to me, since I had received it from my mind, that is, from Poimandres, the word and mind of absolute sovereignty. I became god-inspired, god-minded, and came with the truth.

PRAISE TO GOD THE FATHER

So with all my soul and strength I praise god the father:

Holy is god the father of all, who precedes all beginnings.

Holy is god, whose will is accomplished by his own powers.

20. Such giving of thanks is also to be found in the Prayer of Thanksgiving, below.

Holy is god, who wishes to be known and is known to those
who are his own.

You are holy, who by your word made all things that are.

You are holy, who have become the image of all nature.

You are holy, who are not formed by nature.

You are holy, who are stronger than all domination.

You are holy, who are greater than all eminence.

You are holy, who are superior to all praise.

Accept the pure offering of words from a soul and heart that rise to you,
unnamable, ineffable, whom only silence calls!

I beg you, let me not be removed from gnosis, which is our nature. Fill me
with strength, and with your grace let me bring light to those of my race who
are in ignorance, to my brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. Therefore I
believe and bear witness. I go to life and to light.

Father, bless you. Your child wishes to share the holy salvation you confer
through your total authority.