

Divine Images: Zosimos of Panopolis's Spiritual Approach to Alchemy*

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The works of Zosimos of Panopolis, a renowned Egyptian alchemist writing in the latter part of the third century CE, are unique among the Greco-Egyptian alchemical corpus because he is the earliest writer to describe a spiritual approach to alchemy in any depth.¹ A.-J. Festugière, who translated some of Zosimos's writings, dubbed him the "father of religious alchemy."² However, the fact that his writings provide the earliest evidence does not necessarily mean that he was the first to take this approach. Zosimos indicates that he was a scribal priest involved with the production and consecration of divine statues and other ritual objects; therefore, his profession is embedded in temple traditions that have a long religious and technical history.³ If alchemy originated amongst Egyptian temple metallurgists (and I am convinced that it did), then as a priest, Zosimos is both a steward of these traditions and an innovator in the way he synthesizes different metallurgical techniques and religious ideas into a more universal way of thinking about alchemy.

In Roman Egypt, trade guilds were on the rise as temple economies declined; metallurgists from these groups were collaborating and contracting with each other.⁴ Zosimos's writings suggest that he was an advisor to metallurgists from

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¹ On dates for Zosimos, see Michèle Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis: Mémoires authentiques*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), xv–xvi. I will hereafter use Auth.Mem. as an abbreviation for this text, which is a translation of some of Zosimos's Greek works.

² André-Jean Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1950), 260-62.

³ On Zosimos as scribal priest see Shannon Grimes, *Becoming Gold: Zosimos of Panopolis and the Alchemical Arts in Roman Egypt* (Auckland: Rubedo Press, 2018), 69-76; on alchemy's roots in Egyptian religious traditions of statue-making, see, for example, Phillipe Derchain, "L'atelier des orfèvres a Dendara et les origines de l'alchimie," *Chronique d'Égypte* LXV (1990); and Aaron Cheak, "The Perfect Black: Egypt and Alchemy," in *Alchemical Traditions: From Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (Melbourne: Numen Books, 2013), 83-91.

⁴ Detailed discussions of the economic relationships between temple and trade guild metallurgists in Roman Egypt can be found in Grimes, *Becoming Gold*, ch. 2; and Shannon Grimes, "Secrets of the God-Makers: Re-thinking the Origins of Greco-Egyptian Alchemy," *Syllecta Classica* 29 (2018).

both groups. He frequently complains that the ancient traditions he reveres are getting corrupted by wrong-headed, greedy teachers, and he insists—even to metallurgists who aren't in the priesthood—that spiritual purification and self-knowledge is necessary for the proper execution of metallurgical procedures.⁵ This paper is neither a comprehensive account of Zosimos's priestly *Sitz im Leben* or his religious teachings (which often blend Hermetic and Gnostic thought⁶), but rather an attempt to explain why Zosimos insists that alchemy is both a spiritual and technical undertaking, and why he thinks it should be practiced in this manner even by metallurgists outside of the temples.

Using divine images as a theme, I begin by looking at the roots of alchemy among temple artisans and Zosimos's thoughts on the statues they are crafting. Statues, of course, are one type of divine image, but even more important for Zosimos is the inner work of realizing the divine image within the self. The last section focuses more in-depth on this inner work by examining Zosimos's theology in *On Apparatus and Furnaces (Letter Omega)*. This text contains his most detailed discussion of divine images and illustrates how he conveys these spiritual teachings to metallurgists who are unaffiliated with the temple. As I will show, Zosimos's priestly training is influential, and contributes to his belief that efforts to “know thyself,” which lead to divine understanding, is the very same path that leads to knowledge of the cosmos and the natural world.

Alchemy and statue-making

Many Greco-Egyptian alchemical recipes are for coloring metals, which matches up with recent discoveries about coloring techniques used in ancient Egyptian metallurgy. It was known that polychromy was a distinctive feature of Egyptian metal statuary, but scholars had been unable to detect it because of the natural patinas and corrosion that color metals over time; however, since the early 2000s, new developments in microscopy and X-ray analysis have made it

⁵ See, for example, Marcellin Berthelot and Rubens Duvall, *La Chimie au Moyen Age*, Vol. II. (Reprint, Osnabruck: Otto Zeller, 1967 [1893]), 7.30-31; 9.28-29; 11.21. This text, which includes Duvall's translations of Zosimos's works in Syriac, will hereafter be abbreviated as *CMA*. All excerpts here are from Volume II of this 3-volume work.

⁶ On Egyptian priests as teachers and authors of the Hermetic tradition, see Christian Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). Gnosticism is a contested category among scholars of early Christianity. However, I find it useful as a descriptor of the type of metaphysics exemplified in the Nag Hammadi manuscripts. I capitalize “Gnostic” and related terms when referring to the Christian and Jewish varieties that flourished during the Roman period, especially in Egypt. For overviews of debates over the category “Gnosticism,” see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and April D. DeConick, “Gnostic Spirituality at the Crossroads of Christianity: Transgressing Boundaries and Creating Orthodoxy,” in *Beyond the Gnostic Gospels: Studies Building on the Work of Elaine Pagels*, ed. E. Iricinschi, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

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possible to identify the subtle, intentional uses of color by the artists.⁷ In his text *On Copper*, Zosimos gives recipes for several tinctures used in coloring statues, imparting hues of purple, red, coral-pink, yellow, black, white, blue, gold, and silver to the metals.⁸ “How moving it is to admire the invention of these arts,” he proclaims, “how beautiful is the sight!”⁹ He takes pride in his work, claiming that the coloration is so vivid and the form so perfect that when people see the statues, they are frightened and believe they are living beings.¹⁰ Experiencing fear and awe before a divine statue was considered a pious response, so Zosimos seems to be indicating that the artisans had achieved their desired goal.¹¹

The statues were brought to life, as it were, by a ritual called the “Opening of the Mouth,” which rendered the statues capable of receiving divine presence. It took place in a temple workshop called the House of Gold, where the finishing touches were put on the statues; only higher-ranking artisan priests were allowed to perform and witness these rites.¹² Zosimos alludes to this ritual in his alchemical allegory *On Excellence*, and as an artisan priest and overseer of metallurgists, it is possible that he was involved in its performance.¹³ This ritual was also performed on mummies as a means of rendering the corpse serviceable to the soul in the afterlife so that it could travel to the heavens and return to the physical body for nourishment when needed.¹⁴ This animating ritual, then, provided a vital link between matter and spirit; the god animates the statue as the spirit animates the body.

There is some ambiguity in Zosimos's discussion of statues, however, that needs to be addressed. In *On Copper* he mentions making figurines of several popular gods, including Agathodaimon, the Nile, Fortune, and Mother Earth, as

⁷ Élisabeth Delange, “The Complexity of Alloys: New Discoveries About Certain ‘Bronzes’ in the Louvre.” in *Gifts for the Gods: Images from Egyptian Temples*. ed. M. Hill and D. Schorsch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 39. For a technical description of some of the initial studies of Egyptian polychrome statues, see also Susan LaNiece, et al., “Polychromy and Egyptian Bronze: New Evidence for Artificial Coloration.” *Studies in Conservation* 47, 2 (2002).

⁸ See *CMA*, Syr. II.6.9 ff.

⁹ *CMA*, Syr. II.6.30. All translations are mine, based on Duval's French translations of the Syriac, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ *CMA*, Syr. II.6.31.

¹¹ On fear before statues, see Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. J. Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 197; and R.K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993), 24.

¹² See, for example, Derchain, “L'Atelier des Orfèvres;” David Lorton, “The Theology of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Creation of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. B. Dick (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 147-179; and Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. D. Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 310-329.

¹³ On Zosimos's priestly status as a scribal and/or artisan priest and overseer of metallurgists, see Grimes, *Becoming Gold*, 71-76; and Grimes, “Secrets of the God-Makers,” 74-75.

¹⁴ In mortuary contexts, this ritual was performed in the entrance to the tomb of the deceased. See Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 139-145.

well as other ritual figurines, like serpents, fruit, and animals, and he concludes his list with: “and the image of those things which contribute to the error and illusion of duped individuals.”¹⁵ He goes on to say, “I scorn the disciples of Neilos who were admiring things unworthy of admiration; they were indeed ignorant, and we directed their attention to the saying ‘know thyself’—the very saying they did not admire.”¹⁶ This passage comes directly after the aforementioned one where Zosimos expresses admiration for the beautifully colored statues, so his objections aren’t entirely clear. Was it an unnamed image that caused offense? Or was he referring to all the images in the list? There is a marginal note on this page, probably by a Christian or Muslim scribe, which refers to statues as “idols” and calls an artisan whom Zosimos praises in the text an “imposter”¹⁷; therefore, it is possible that the statement about these images leading to error and illusion is a scribal interpolation.¹⁸ But if instead this is an accurate rendering of Zosimos’s words (the language and attitude does seem consistent with his), then perhaps he had some misgivings about how these statues were being viewed or used.

Beginning in the classical period, Greek thinkers classified images as belonging to the realms of *eikōna* (icons) or *eidōla* (idols); these concepts are useful not only for thinking about statues, but also for thinking about perspective, or ways of seeing. As Deborah Tarn Steiner explains, an *eikōn* is an image that shares an essential quality with its source: it is a “stepping stone pointing to the original that gives the viewer access to a hidden or absent reality.”¹⁹ Ideally, divine images are viewed and worshiped as *eikōna* that partake in and provide access to divine reality. By contrast, *eidōla* do not share this transcendent quality; they are merely visual resemblances.²⁰ However, these theoretical categories are not quite as simple and clear-cut when it comes to “real world” scenarios, which reveal a great deal of vacillation between the realms.²¹ This is evident in Zosimos’s statement about certain statues leading to error and illusion; the statues he mentions are popular pan-Mediterranean gods, which were probably sold in the marketplace rather than installed in the temples; the images themselves might be *eikōna*, but the ways in which they were viewed or ritually employed might cross over into the realm of *eidōla*, or surface resemblances devoid of spirit. Zosimos’s complaint is that certain priests admired things about these statues that were not worthy of reverence; they did not “know themselves.”

¹⁵ *CMA* Syr. II.6.31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As noted by Duval in *CMA*, Syr.II.6.30: “(A la marge.) Que tous les passants admirent l’idole et s’enorgueillissent de l’objet sculpté, comme le fit Pabapnidos, fils de Sitos, l’imposteur”. In the passage itself, Zosimos credits Pabapnidos with being the inventor of a shade of blue that he greatly admires for its beauty.

¹⁸ See *CMA* Syr. II.6.31.

¹⁹ Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

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Zosimos insists many times in his writings that one must “know thyself”; he believes that self-examination is a means of purifying the soul. By cultivating awareness of one’s thoughts and passions, the material stains of the soul—such as anger, greed, and lust—can be dissolved, thereby allowing the soul to reveal its divine nature.²² He tells his student Theosebeia: “If you are impure you won’t work well, you won’t understand.”²³ Purification was a very important part of the Egyptian priesthood, involving what one ate, wore, touched, said, and thought; the higher the rank, the stricter the requirements for purity.²⁴ Purity was required not only because priests were tending to the gods, but more importantly, because they performed their rituals by *acting as gods*.²⁵ This sheds light on Zosimos’s insistence that alchemy should be practiced in a spiritual manner. How can a priest properly supervise the making of gods or participate in rituals to animate divine statues without knowing something of his own divine nature? A priest’s theurgical mindset and degree of self-awareness is clearly important to Zosimos.²⁶ Self-knowledge reveals the soul as a divine image, an *eikōn* that radiates divine presence, whereas ignorance and superficial knowledge are more akin to idolatry, full of “error and illusion.”

The question remains as to why Zosimos thinks a spiritual mindset is important even for metallurgists outside of the priesthood. This necessitates a closer look at his teachings about the divine image.

The divine image

Zosimos’s most detailed discussion of the divine image is found in *On Apparatus and Furnaces (Letter Omega)*, which he wrote for his student, Theosebeia, using Hermetic and Gnostic teachings to instruct her on the difference between “corporeal” and “incorporeal” knowledge and how each is obtained. Many of Zosimos’s surviving writings are addressed to Theosebeia. She appears to have been a teacher of metallurgy: Zosimos writes to her about both technical and spiritual matters, and refers to her apprentices and their craft secrets.²⁷ She may have been paying Zosimos and other priests to instruct her, as she was

²² See, for example, Zosimos’s instructions for meditation in Marcellin Berthelot and Ch.-Ém. Ruelle, *Collection des Anciens Alchimistes Grecs*, Vol. III (Reprint, Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1967 [1888]), no. 51.8. Henceforth this work will be abbreviated as *CAAG*. Translations from this work are mine, from the Greek and French, unless otherwise noted.

²³ *CMA*, Syr. II.11.21. In this text he discusses the corporeal and incorporeal aspects of the arts, the importance of purifying oneself, and his claim that the corporeal arts will be superseded by the incorporeal.

²⁴ See Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, rev. ed., trans. D. Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000 [1957]), 35-42; and Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*, 32-34.

²⁵ Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 246.

²⁶ For detailed discussions of Zosimean alchemy as a type of theurgy, see Grimes, *Becoming Gold*, ch.5; and Cheak, “The Perfect Black.”

²⁷ On Theosebeia and her circle, see *CMA* Syr. II.8.1 (*On Tin*).

also seeking advice from Zosimos's rival, Neilos (the priest discussed earlier) and another group of metallurgists—possibly connected with Neilos—who were using a particular type of astrology in their work.²⁸ Zosimos warns her against these people, claiming that they use improper methods and lack understanding.²⁹ I have not been able to find any evidence of female metallurgists working in temples, but there is evidence of women participating in trade guilds in Roman Egypt, which were often family run, and my guess is that Theosebeia was part of a guild, perhaps an overseer or owner of a workshop.³⁰ I also suspect that she and other members of her circle may have been Jewish and/or Christian, because the only time Zosimos expounds on Jewish and Christian religious teachings is in his letters to her.³¹

On Apparatus and Furnaces begins with a discussion of how “the matter of making tinctures at propitious times” has led a group of metallurgists to defame a book that Zosimos holds in high regard.³² He retaliates by ridiculing their methods, which yield inconsistent results: he says that when their operations fail, they admit there might be some truth to the older methods (i.e., those respected by Zosimos), but when they succeed, they forget “the former clear proofs” and credit their daimons for granting them success.³³ These alchemists, he says, are driven by Fate. Their personalities are as inconstant as the daimons, who, as they are “transformed in the course of the changing times of their fate,” are seen as beneficent one moment and maleficent the next.³⁴ The daimons he's referring to are astrological, perhaps associated with the degrees of the zodiac. Astrology was used by Egyptian priests to determine proper timing for all manner of activities. Zosimos, too, uses astrological timing in his work, but he is clearly not a fan of this particular approach, which to him exhibits a lack of spiritual understanding.³⁵ He writes: “They are always following Fate, now to this opinion and then to its opposite. They have no conception of anything other than the material; all

²⁸ Olivier Dufault, *Early Greek Alchemy, Patronage and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: California Classical Studies, 2019), ch.6. Dufault portrays Theosebeia as a wealthy patron, but not as a metallurgist. I agree that she might be a patron, but I think this patronage makes much more sense if we see her as a metallurgist in a trade guild context.

²⁹ See especially *Auth.Mem.* I (On Apparatus and Furnaces) and CAAG III.51 (Final Account).

³⁰ See Peter van Minnen, “Urban Craftsmen in Roman Egypt,” in *Münstersche Beiträge zur Antiken Handelsgeschichte* VI (Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 1987), 51; and Grimes, *Becoming Gold*, 102-103.

³¹ The only exception I know of is CAAG III.42 (*The True Book of Sophe the Egyptian and of the Divine Lord of the Hebrews and the Powers of Sabaoth*), which is in a partial and corrupt state.

³² *Auth.Mem.* I.2. This book is called *On Furnaces and Apparatus*, but it is not the same as Zosimos's similarly titled text.

³³ *Auth.Mem.* I.2-3. I am working with the Greek and with Mertens' French translation of this text, as well the English translation by Howard Jackson, which is incomplete. Quotations here are from H. Jackson, ed. and trans. *Zosimos of Panopolis on the Letter Omega* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978).

³⁴ *Auth.Mem.* I.2. Jackson's translation.

³⁵ See Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis*, 66-67; and Kyle Fraser, “Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch: Alchemy as Forbidden Knowledge,” *Aries* 4, no. 2 (July 2004), 138-141.

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they know is Fate... Hermes calls such people mindless, merely marchers swept along in Fate's procession, with no conception of anything incorporeal, and with no understanding of Fate herself, who conducts them justly. Instead they insult the instruction she gives through corporeal experience and imagine nothing beyond the good fortune she grants."³⁶

Zosimos then proceeds to tell Theosebeia a story about the Anthropos, or primal human, who is a divine mediator between heaven and earth. Myths of the Anthropos are found in several Hermetic and Gnostic texts.³⁷ Typically portrayed as a divine entity called the "Son of God," or "Son of Man," the Anthropos is created in God's image and becomes the archetypal model for the creation of human beings. In some versions of the story, including the one presented by Zosimos, the primal human falls into matter and thus becomes associated with the spiritual principle, or divine image concealed within the material world.³⁸ The Anthropos also has a soteriological function in that he bestows spiritual knowledge upon creation, which enables humans to return to the divine source. The various emanations of the Anthropos as he appears in the divine and cosmic realms are sympathetic links that unite the human spirit with the cosmos and with the divine.³⁹

Zosimos explains that the doctrine of the primal human is known to many cultures: the Egyptians call him Thoth, the "interpreter of all things," and the Jews, Chaldeans, and other Near Eastern peoples call him Adam, or "earth."⁴⁰ Thoth and Adam, he says, are the names of the "man of flesh," but the Anthropos is also composed of an inner "man of spirit," whose name is Phōs, or Light.⁴¹ Zosimos gives an account of how the man of spirit became flesh. In Paradise, Phōs, who was "innocent and unactivated," was persuaded by the agents of Fate to "clothe himself with their Adam, who comes from Fate."⁴² The sinister agents

³⁶ *Auth.Mem.* I.3-4. Jackson's translation.

³⁷ The Anthropos also figures prominently in Manichean literature, but Zosimos is drawing particularly on Hermetic and Gnostic versions of the myth. Examples of these myths can be found in the Hermetic texts, *Corpus Hermeticum* I (i.e., *Poimandres*, which contains the most detailed account of the Anthropos), and *CH VIII*; and in the Gnostic texts, *On the Origin of the World* (*Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 5), and *Apocryphon of John* (*NHC II*, 1). This is by no means a comprehensive list, but a representative one.

³⁸ For detailed comparisons of the Anthropos myth in Hermetic and Gnostic literature, see Jonathan Peste, "The Poimandres Group in *Corpus Hermeticum*: Myth, Mysticism and Gnosis in Late Antiquity," (PhD Diss., University of Göteborg, 2002), 49-83.

³⁹ The emanations of the Anthropos are specifically described as sympathetic links in Hermetic texts, for example, in *CH VIII*: "According to the father's will, and unlike other living things on earth, mankind, the third living thing, came to be in the image of the cosmos, possessing mind as well as a relation not only of sympathy with the second god but also of thought with the first god." Translated by Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

⁴⁰ *Auth.Mem.* I.8. Zosimos lists several etymological renderings of the name Adam, including "blood-red earth," and "fiery earth." Of course, in Genesis 2:19-23, Adam is also an "interpreter of all things" in that he names all the living creatures.

⁴¹ *Auth.Mem.* I.10.

⁴² *Auth.Mem.* I.11. Jackson's translation.

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of Fate rejoiced that they had deceived Phōs and enslaved him. A similar theme is found in several Gnostic texts, where Adam's body is created by the cosmic creator and his minions, the planetary archons, but Adam's spirit is created by a divine source. The notion of two different creators for the spirit and body of the Anthropos, one good and one evil, is not found in Hermetic literature; Zosimos uses a Gnostic version of this story to underscore the difference between corporeal and incorporeal knowledge, since he plays upon the distinction between flesh and spirit throughout the text.⁴³ It is important to note that just as different cultures have different names for the Anthropos, so too the name of the Anthropos will change to indicate different manifestations of the divine image. In this text, Adam is the flesh, Phōs is the spirit within the flesh, and the Son of God is the Anthropos in both its awakened cosmic state and its prelapsarian state, where it is an aspect of the supernal Godhead, one of the "triad which cannot be named."⁴⁴

Hermetic and Christian theology both have trinitarian ideas about the divine, and Zosimos plays with this throughout the text.⁴⁵ Here he connects the Son of God with Jesus:

Adam was attached to Jesus Christ, who made him ascend to where those named *phōtes* have sojourned before. He even appeared to men quite helpless by becoming a man who suffered and was beaten with rods; while in secret, he who did not suffer at all, but instead showed that death could be trampled underfoot and repelled, he carried off his own *phōtes*. And to this day—and (he will do it) until the end of the world—he comes to carry off his own, both secretly and openly, counseling them secretly and through their intellect to get rid of their Adam. By cutting off and slaying their Adam, whose guidance is blind and who is jealous of the man of spirit and light, they kill their own Adam.⁴⁶

Zosimos seems to be giving a docetic account of Jesus, in which Christ only *appears* as a man of flesh and does not actually suffer at the hands of man. Gnostic christologies are often noted for their docetic doctrines, which have been (prob-

⁴³ In Hermetic literature it is strongly emphasized that one god is the sole creator. See, for example, *CH XI*, in which debates about two creators are addressed, and it is insisted that there is only one creator: "Clearly, there is someone who makes these things, and quite evidently he is one, for soul is one, life is one and matter is one. But who is this someone? Who else but the one god? To whom, if not to god alone, might it belong to make ensouled living beings? God is one, then. (How entirely absurd!) Since you have agreed that the cosmos is always one, that the sun is one, the moon one and divinity one, do you propose to number god himself among them?" Trans. B. Copenhagen.

⁴⁴ *Auth.Mem.* I.7. My translation, based on Mertens.

⁴⁵ On the Hermetic trinity (or trinities, since this has been imagined in different ways), see Peste "The Poimandres Group," 49-54; Jackson, *Zosimos of Panopolis on the Letter Omega*, 44-45, nn. 26-27 and 30; and Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis: Mémoires Authentiques*, 76-80. In *CMA*, Syr. II.12.3-4 (*On Electrum*), Zosimos refers to the Son of God as the "Holy Spirit," and "the Word," which underscores the conceptual and terminological slippage between Hermetic and Christian notions of the Trinity.

⁴⁶ *Auth.Mem.* I.13. My translation, based on Mertens's and Jackson's.

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lematically) used to support claims that Gnostic teachings are radically dualistic and utterly devalue the cosmos and the flesh.⁴⁷ But elsewhere Zosimos says that the man of light inhabits body, mind, and soul.⁴⁸ He writes: "He must proceed through that one search to understand himself... And with this way of thinking and regulating one's life... you will see the Son of God become everything... See him become everything! –god, angel, man subject to suffering; for being capable of everything, he becomes everything he so wills, and obeys the Father by pervading every body."⁴⁹ The appearance of the Son of God in the material realm, or in physical form, does not diminish the divine in any way, it only makes the divine image harder to see. Zosimos *does* make sharp distinctions between the flesh and the spirit in this text, but it is not his intention to denigrate the physical world, which he believes is essentially divine. In antiquity, the terms "flesh" and "spirit" were used to signify spiritual ignorance (or worldliness) and spiritual wisdom, and this is the sense in which Zosimos is using them. His emphasis on the manifold appearances of the spiritual man is meant to show that the divine is omnipresent, but that this is only *apparent* to those who are spiritually aware. Zosimos calls those who are saved by Jesus Christ "*phōtes*"; they are enlightened human beings who recognize their true spiritual nature and have shed their "Adam," or their ignorance.⁵⁰ They have transcended Fate, and therefore death, through realizing the immortal spirit within.

Zosimos indicates that this spiritual knowledge is available to all humans who make the effort to understand themselves and their divine nature. The way to do this is to kill one's Adam. Adam, who blindly guides the men of flesh, is an *eidolōn*, a superficial image associated in this text with a figure called the Mimic Daimon (*antimimos daimōn*), which is not otherwise found in Hermetic literature. The Mimic, who blasphemously calls himself the Son of God, is described as having an ugly body and an ugly soul; he is jealous of the *phōtes* and wishes to deceive them.⁵¹ Zosimos is clearly drawing from Gnostic teachings in this myth. The Mimic resembles the Gnostic Demiurge, the cosmic ruler who is often portrayed as ugly, ignorant, and jealous of the spiritual realities above him. A "counterfeit spirit" (*antimimon pneuma*) is also mentioned in Gnostic texts (though far less frequently) that is like an image of the Demiurge (the false god) within the human soul. The Demiurge designed the counterfeit spirit to be an instrument of Fate within the human; its role is to keep people ignorant and forgetful, and entice them to sinful behavior.⁵² Zosimos also describes the Mimic Daimon as

⁴⁷ On the problematics of docetism in interpretations of Gnostic theologies, see Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 208-213.

⁴⁸ *Auth.Mem.* I.12.

⁴⁹ *Auth.Mem.* I.7. My translation, based on Mertens's and Jackson's.

⁵⁰ *Auth.Mem.* I.10.

⁵¹ *Auth.Mem.* I.14.

⁵² The counterfeit spirit is found in the *Apocryphon of John* and *Pistis Sophia*. For further details, see Jackson, *Letter Omega*, 53, n. 67; and Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis: Mémoires Authentiques*, 104-106, n. 89.

one who has not yet appeared, which calls to mind the Antichrist from the New Testament; in fact, in Zosimos's story the Mimic dispatches his own version of an antichrist, "a forerunner from Persia telling deceptive, fabulous tales and leading men on about Fate."⁵³ The Mimic Daimon is the reverse image of the Son of God; it is a pretender to divinity, a deceptive shadow that obscures, rather than reveals. Only the light can cast it out. Zosimos writes of the *phōtes*, the men of light: "But because they had had become wiser by their apprehension of him who is the true Son of God, they give him their own Adam to kill him, and preserve their shining spirits in their own realm, where they were even before the world."⁵⁴

Let us recall now Zosimos's reason for writing this letter. He is trying to warn Theosebia not to be swayed by the daimonic astrological methods used by his competitors, which are unreliable and give inconsistent results. He criticizes these people for having "no conception of anything other than the material; all they know is Fate."⁵⁵ Fate is sympathetically linked in this text with the Mimic Daimon (cosmic ruler) and with Adam, the man of flesh "who comes from Fate, from the four elements."⁵⁶ The mixing and mingling of the four elements generates all things in the natural world, and elements are the very thing that alchemists study and work with. Zosimos has a deeper understanding of Fate. He says his competitors "insult the instruction she [Fate] gives through corporeal experience," and have "no understanding of Fate herself, who conducts them justly."⁵⁷ We have already seen that the Son of God is the divine presence is concealed within the cosmos, within nature. The path of "knowing thyself" can also be applied to nature: through efforts to understand the divine workings of nature, delusions are dissolved, and the natural order reveals itself as divine providence.⁵⁸

At the end of this letter, Zosimos acknowledges to Theosebia that there are diverse approaches to any art, and that people's "different dispositions and the different astral conjunctions... make one person a consummate craftsman, another person a craftsman *tout court*, another a less skilled craftsman, another a worse craftsman unable to make any progress. It is so for every art and one can see people performing the same art by using different instruments and different methods, and they differ in their intelligence and their success."⁵⁹ The approach

⁵³ *Auth.Mem.* I.14., Jackson's translation.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* My translation, based on Mertens's.

⁵⁵ *Auth.Mem.* I.3. Jackson's translation.

⁵⁶ *Auth.Mem.* I.11, Jackson's translation. On Adam's connection with the four elements in this text, see also I.9.

⁵⁷ *Auth.Mem.* I.4. Jackson's translation.

⁵⁸ Scholars of the Hermetic school of thought have long proposed that there is a "way" of Hermes, but they have not come to agreement on this path. Christian Bull has recently argued for a "way" that begins with knowing thyself, and proceeds from dualism to monism (as opposed to Fowden, who argues the reverse). Bull's version of the Way of Hermes matches up with Zosimos's path to some extent, and worth further investigation, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. See Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 241-243.

⁵⁹ *Auth.Mem.* I.17-18, trans. Martelli. See Matteo Martelli, "Alchemy, Medicine and Religion: Zosimos of Panopolis and the Egyptian Priests," *Religions in the Roman Empire* 3,2 (2017), 204-205.

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he recommends to her is one that aims for the most profound knowledge there is: a *gnosis* that illuminates the fundamental unity of the self, the world, and the divine. This path to divine knowledge, which seeks out the divine image within the “flesh” of the world, gives alchemists a deeper understanding of nature and is at the root of why Zosimos believes that alchemy should be practiced in both a spiritual and technical manner, regardless of whether one is a priest.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explain two things: why Zosimos, an Egyptian priest, believes that alchemy is both a spiritual and technical undertaking, and why he thinks it should be practiced in this manner even by metallurgists outside of the temples. Using divine images as a lens, I have shown that Zosimos's work as a scribal/artisan priest, whose work involved making statues of the gods, is steeped in ancient Egyptian religious traditions, including the ritual animation of these statues which enabled the god to be “birthed” into the statue. Furthermore, Egyptian priests performed rituals *as gods*, which necessitated the purification of body and soul. Zosimos's spiritual approach to alchemy is influenced by these priestly traditions. Zosimos associates the maxim “know thyself” with efforts to purify the soul and reveal the divine image within. I examined this inner work in one of his writings addressed to Theosebeia, *On Apparatus and Furnaces (Letter Omega)*, in which he discusses both self and world as divine images, and I showed how they can be seen as both *eikōna* (revealing divine realities) and *eidōla* (superficial likenesses). As we have seen, Zosimos weaves together Gnostic and Hermetic teachings to illustrate the differences between these types of divine images and the quality of knowledge they represent. Zosimos promotes *gnosis*, a profound inner experience of divine reality, as a spiritual approach to alchemy because it offers penetrating insight into the human condition and the natural order, and encourages perfection of mind and spirit, as well as excellence in one's art.

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