

## THE EMERALD TABLET

The meaning and structure of the alchemical work are summarized in the 'Emerald Tablet' (*Tabula Smaragdina*). This presents itself as a revelation of Hermes Trismegistos, and was accepted as such by the medieval alchemists. The earliest mention of it is to be found in an eighth-century text by Jâbir ibn Hayyân, and a Latin translation was already known to St Albert the Great. From its style, however, it is clearly of pre-Islamic origin, and as it is wholly in accord with the spirit of the Hermetic tradition – as the alchemists unanimously agree – there is no convincing reason to doubt its connection with the origins of Hermetism. This leaves open the question as to whether the name Hermes stood for a man or for a priestly-prophetic function stemming from Hermes-Thoth.

A translation of the 'Emerald Tablet', from the Latin version, is given below. For the clarification of certain points, reference is also made to the Arabic version<sup>1</sup>:

'1. In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.

'2. Just as all things proceed from One alone by meditation on One alone, so also they are born from this one thing by adaptation.

'3. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon. The wind has borne it in its body. Its nurse is the earth.

'4. It is the father of every miraculous work in the whole world.

'5. Its power is perfect if it is converted into earth.

<sup>1</sup> See J. F. Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*, Heidelberg, 1926.

'6. Separate the earth from the fire and the subtle from the gross, softly and with great prudence.

'7. It rises from earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquires the power of the realities above and the realities below. In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world, and all darkness will leave you.

'8. This is the power of all powers, for it conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.

'9. Thus the little world is created according to the prototype of the great world.

'10. From this and in this way, marvellous applications are made.

'11. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistos, for I possess the three parts of wisdom of the whole world.

'12. Perfect is what I have said of the work of the sun.'

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'1. In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below.'

In the Latin version the beginning is as follows: *Verum, sine mendacio, certum et verissimum*, but Jâbir's rendering 'In truth, certainly and without doubt' (*haqqân, yaqînân, lâ shakka fih*) is clearer, for the words 'In truth' refer to the objective source of the revelation, while the words 'certainly and without doubt' refer to its subjective reflection in man. The next sentence (the main part of the first clause) has a slightly different wording in the Arabic version, and appears to give a different meaning: 'The highest comes from the lowest, and the lowest from the highest.' This refers to the reciprocal dependence of the active and the passive, in the sense that the essential form cannot be manifested without passive *materia*, just

as, the other way round, passive potentiality can only reach development under the influence of the active pole. Likewise, in the 'greater work' the efficacy of the spiritual power depends on the preparedness of the human 'container' and vice versa. All this, however, is but one further example of the 'mirror-correspondence' of 'above' and 'below', as the Latin text expresses it. – 'To accomplish the miracles of one thing', that is, of the inward work. 'Above' and 'below' are thus related to this one thing and complement one another in its regard.

'2. Just as all things proceed from One alone by meditation on One alone, so also they are born from this one thing by adaptation.' This means that the Hermetic work proceeds from a single substance, following the pattern (and as the inverse, 'substantial' image) of the emanation of the world from the One Divine Being, by means of the One Spirit.

Instead of *meditatione unius* ('by meditation on one alone') some manuscripts have *mediatione unius* ('by the mediation of the one'). This does not essentially alter the sense, for what is meant here is that the undivided, invisible Light of the unconditioned One is refracted into multiplicity by the prism of the Spirit. Plotinus teaches that the Spirit (*nous*) constantly contemplates the Supreme Unity, without ever being able to comprehend or penetrate it fully, and that by this continuous contemplation, it manifests the 'many-sided' All, just as a lens transmits the light it receives as a bundle of rays. The Arabic expression *tadbīr*, which in some versions appears at this point, has the double meaning of 'consideration' and 'exposition' or 'deduction'. Instead of *adaptatione* ('by adaptation') Basilus Valentinus says *conjunctio* ('by combination').

'3. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon.' The sun as father of the 'Stone' is the spirit (*nous*), while the

moon is the soul (*psyche*). – 'The wind has borne it in its body': The wind, which carries the spiritual germ in its body, is the vital breath, and, more generally, the 'subtle stuff' of the intermediate world that extends between heaven and earth – that is, between the supra-formal (or purely spiritual) world and the corporeal world. The vital breath is also Quicksilver, which contains the germ of gold in a liquid state – 'Its nurse is the earth' that is to say, the body, as an inward reality.

'4. It is the father of every miraculous work in the whole world.' 'Miraculous work' is the approximate translation of *thelesma*, from which 'talisman' is derived. A talisman (Arabic: *tilism*) is, strictly speaking, a symbol into which something of the power of its prototype has entered, the symbol having been fashioned in a particular cosmic situation (constellation) and with a corresponding spiritual concentration. A theurgic action of this sort is based on the qualitative correspondence between visible form and invisible prototype, and also on the possibility of making this correspondence effective by means of a sort of 'condensation', on the subtle plane, of a spiritual state. This explains the similarity between the talisman, as the bearer of an invisible influence, and the alchemical elixir, as the 'ferment' of metallic transformation.

'5. Its power is perfect if it is converted into earth.' That is to say, when the Spirit is 'embodied', the volatile becomes fixed.

'6. Separate the earth from the fire and the subtle from the gross, softly and with great prudence.' The separation of earth from fire and of the subtle from the gross means the 'extraction' of the soul from the body.

'7. It rises from earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquires the power of the realities above and the realities below.' – The 'dissolution'

of consciousness from all formal 'coagulations' is followed by the 'crystallization' of the Spirit, so that active and passive are perfectly united. Thus the light of the Spirit becomes constant. – 'In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world', namely, by your union with the Spirit which is the source of all light. – 'And all darkness will leave you': This means that ignorance, deception, uncertainty, doubt and foolishness will be removed from consciousness.

'8. This is the power of all powers, for it conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.' – The subtle or the volatile (Arabic: *latif*) can only be conquered by uniting it with the solid or corporeal, just as one can only hold fast a mood of the soul by means of a concrete picture. Alchemical fixation is nevertheless more inward, and is related to what was said above about the role of bodily consciousness as the support of spiritual states. Through its union with the spirit bodily consciousness itself becomes a fine and penetrating power which can even have an effect outwardly.

About this Jâbir writes: 'When the body in its state of solidity and hardness has been so altered that it has become fine and light, it becomes as it were a spiritual thing, which penetrates bodies, although it retains its own nature, which makes it resistant to fire. At this moment it mingles with the spirit, since it has become fine and loose, and its effect on the spirit is to make it constant. The fixation of the spirit in this body follows the first process, and both are transformed, each one taking on the nature of the other. The body becomes a spirit, and takes on from the spirit fineness, lightness, extensibility, coloration, and all other of the spirit's properties. The spirit, for its part, becomes a body and acquires the latter's resistance to fire, immobility, and duration. From both elements a

light substance is born, which possesses neither the solidity of bodies nor the fineness of spirits, but, precisely, takes up a middle position between the two extremes . . .'<sup>2</sup>

'9. Thus the little world is created according to the prototype of the great world.' – In the Latin version this clause runs 'Thus is the world created.' The Arabic text, followed here, is obviously more complete. The 'little world', perfect image of the 'great world', is man, when he has realized his original nature, which was 'made in the image of God'.

'10. From this and in this way, marvellous applications are made.' – In the Arabic text this is: 'This way is traversed by the sages.'

'11. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistos, for I possess the three parts of wisdom of the whole world.' – Trismegistos means 'thrice-great' or 'thrice-powerful'. The 'three parts of wisdom' correspond to the three great 'divisions' of the universe, namely, the spiritual, psychic, and corporeal realms, whose symbols are heaven, air, and earth.

'12. Perfect (or complete) is what I have said of the work of the sun.' – *De operatione solis*: 'of the work of the sun'; but this can also mean: 'of the work of gold' or 'of the production of gold'.

The whole contents of the Emerald Tablet are like an explanation of the Seal of Solomon, whose two triangles respectively represent essence and substance, *forma* and *materia*, spirit and soul, Sulphur and Quicksilver, the volatile and the stable, or spiritual power and bodily existence:



<sup>2</sup> See Paul Kraus, *Jâbir ibn Hayyân*, Cairo, 1942–1943.