

# The Concept of our Great Power<sup>1</sup>

## Annotated translation

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This translation has been made from the text (NH Codex VI, 4) edited in the publication of P. Chérix.<sup>2</sup> There are minor gaps in the text that cannot be reconstructed, and these will be signalled by square brackets and dots. The numbers in brackets throughout the text are the folio numbers (fol. 36-48). The abbreviation CD refers to W.E. Crum *Coptic Dictionary* (1939).

The text is a sort of teaching document, in which the teacher is identified at the beginning of the text in the phrase 'everyone in whom my form is revealed will be saved:'. The imperative 'know/recognize' indicates that answers to questions (spoken or unspoken) are being provided. Essentially, the information provided by the teacher is about the aeons: two perishable and one imperishable. The first is the aeon of the flesh, in which all but Noah and his family were destroyed (38); the second is the aeon of the soul, the present aeon, full of sin and impurity, in which everything will come to an end in a great fire. The knowledge provided about these two aeons is followed by an interlude (40-43) that may be of Christian origin. This interlude is followed by a lecture on the third and final imperishable aeon, to be ushered in by a great fire that will last for 1468 years and consume all: the pure will find eternal rest, while the impure will suffer eternal punishment. It is not known where the text was composed.

Like many of the 4th cent. NH texts the dialect of the text is somewhere between Subakhmimic (SA<sub>2</sub>) and Sahidic (S), and it was only towards the end of that century that Sahidic emerged as something resembling a standard dialect, at least in the Nile Valley. My translation is the product of an informal gathering throughout a semester in which I took part and attempted to help theology students at the university where I teach English (Kassel) to make sense of the text.

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- 1 This translates the title at the end, the usual place for the title of a work. The two lines at the head of the text, perhaps a later addition, read: **ⲧⲉⲐⲞⲬⲒⲐⲐ ⲛⲁⲓⲁⲛⲟⲓⲁ - ⲡⲓⲛⲟⲩⲙⲁ ⲛⲧⲛⲁⲟⲩ ⲛⲟⲩⲁⲙ** : *διάνοια* seems to refer to critical faculty of thinking, while *νόημα* seems to refer to the object of thinking. The first line may be an attempt to explain the title proper. It might be understood perhaps as an exhortation to use reason to understand the thought of the Great Power. The term Great Power also occurs in Acts 8, 9ff., where it is clearly used of Simon Magus and in the Gospel of Thomas logion 85, where it is the progenitor of Adam.
  - 2 P. Chérix *Le concept de notre Grande Puissance* (1982), which the text, a translation and detailed linguistic notes. Various text and translation publications of the entire corpus have been made by scholars, in various countries and for various reasons, but they are too numerous to mention here.

**The perception of thinking**  
**The thought of the Great Power**

(36) And he who knows our Great Power will become invisible. No fire will be able to burn him. It<sup>3</sup> will be pure. It will destroy all claims to power over you. For everyone in whom my form is revealed, from the age of seven days to one and twenty years, will be saved, that is, they will be obliged<sup>4</sup> to gather together all that has fallen apart and the letters<sup>5</sup> of our Great Power so that it<sup>6</sup> will write your name in our great light and perfect them, the thoughts and deeds, so that they will be purified, strengthened, destroyed and reassembled in the place which is not seen by anyone in it. But you will see me and you will prepare your dwelling places in our Great Power.

Recognize<sup>7</sup> that which has gone,<sup>8</sup> how it came into being so that you will know how to recognize that which is to come:<sup>9</sup> what it looks like, that aeon, of what (37) sort it is, how it is to come into being. Why do you not ask what you are to become or indeed how you have been ?

Know how extensive the water is, that it is unattainably boundless, without beginning or end, supporting the earth and blowing in<sup>10</sup> the air where the gods and angels dwell. What<sup>11</sup> is above all these things, fear and light are in it and my letters are revealed in it. I provided these letters to assist with the creation of corporeal beings because nothing can remain

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3 The fire.

4 Coptic: **εΤΕΝΕΕΙΣΤΟΡ ΕΡΟΟΥ**, which can be parsed as the relative converter + demonstrative pl. + noun + prep. with pronoun, lit. 'who these constraints are upon them'.

5 Whether the **ϢΖΑΙ** are letters of the alphabet or texts cannot be determined, cf. Chérix p. 24 n.10

6 Our Great Power.

7 The imperative may be understood as providing the answer to a question or unspoken wish for knowledge. Coptic has two words for 'know': **ΕΙΜΕ** and **ϢΟΟΥΝ**, the pharaonic ancestors of which are, respectively, *‘m* (know, understand) and *swn* (see, recognize).

8 There is sometimes a difficulty for English, which no longer has grammatical gender, in translating pronouns, especially when there is no clear antecedent noun to which the pronoun must refer. as in the present case.. **ΠΕΝΤΑϞΕΩΚ** can also be 'the one who has gone'

9 The contrast is between what has been and what is to be. The grammatical expression of the former seems clear enough, but the the phrase **εΤΕΤΝΑϢΟΥΩΝ ΠΕΤΑΝΖ ΛΩΩΠΕ** is not easy to construe: 'you will know that which lives to become'.

10 If this a Biblical ref., I can think only of Gen. 1,2, where the spirit (breath/wind) moves over the water. I have translated 'in', but the prep. **ΖΝ**, in certain combinations, can also mean 'from'.

11 The pronoun refers to one of its antecedents: the 'water' or the 'air' cf. Chérix, p. 26 n. 29

upright without it and no aeon can exist without it. It has what is in it because its knowledge is pure.<sup>12</sup>

So, see the spirit and know where he is from. He has given himself to human beings that they may live in him every day. His life is within him and he gives it to them all.

So, darkness and Amente<sup>13</sup> received fire. That which belongs to me will be released by it. Its<sup>14</sup> eyes were unable to bear the light. The spirits and the waters moved. **(38)** The rest came into being. This entire aeon of creation and their powers,<sup>15</sup> the fire has come from them. The power came into existence in the midst of the powers and the powers conceived a desire to see my image. The soul became its form. This is the thing that happened. Look what sort they are. Before this thing came into being, it had no sight. The aeon of the flesh was that of the giants,<sup>16</sup> and it was customary for many<sup>17</sup> days in the creation to be allotted to them. For when they were defiled and had become beings of the flesh, the father of the flesh, water, made his own judgement. When he found that Noah was pious and deserving, he made his angels obey<sup>18</sup> and announced piety for one hundred and twenty years.<sup>19</sup> Nobody heard him. He made an ark of wood and what he found went into it. The flood came **(39)** and in this way Noah and his children were saved, for if the ark had not been for people to go into it, there would have been no flood,<sup>20</sup> as he thought: his idea was to save the gods and the angels and the great powers of them all, the luxury and ways, transferring them to the aeon and nourishing them in places of permanence. The judgement of the flesh is dissolved. The single work of the power remains.

Now for the psychic aeon. It is one mingled with the body and generates defiled souls. The first pollution of creation found strength and generated every form of energy, of which there

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12 A paraphrase of: 'It has what is in it, knowing in purity'.

13 The Egyptian term for the afterlife. lit. the West.

14 The sing. possessive **-NEQBAX-** probably refers to the two antecedents 'fire' and 'Amente'

15 Text has **COM** 'lower place' (CD 819a). One might also understand **COM** 'power'.

16 Probably an allusion to the **גפילית/גפילית** of Gen. 6,4, where the Bohairic text uses the term **αφοφι**, the plural form of **αφοφ** (*ʿpp*), the opponent of the sun-god in pharaonic Egypt. There is no Sahidic version of this passage.

17 Lit. 'great'

18 If one understands the Gk vb to be in the middle voice, the translation would be '... submitted to his angels' cf. Lk. 10, 17

19 Gen. 6, 3: God fixed the (maximum) life span of humans at 120.

20 The reasoning behind this escapes me.

are many: angry powers, wrath,<sup>21</sup> jealousy, envy, hatred, calumny, contempt and war, deceit and bad advice, pain and pleasure, disgrace and uncleanness, dishonesty and sickness, unfair judgements (40) made arbitrarily. You are still asleep, dreaming. Wake up and turn back. Taste and eat the food of truth, give forth<sup>22</sup> the Logos and the water of life. Desist from evil desires and the Anomeans<sup>23</sup> and baseless wicked heresies.

The mother of fire was powerless. She brought fire upon the soul and the earth and burned all the houses/couples that were in her/it.<sup>24</sup> Her pasturing<sup>25</sup> is exhausted, and not finding anything to burn, will destroy herself. The fire will become incorporeal for those without bodies and destroy matter until it purifies everything and all wickedness. If it does not find anything to burn, it will turn on itself and consume itself.

Next, in this aeon that is called the psychic, the man will come into being who knows the Great Power and will accept and know me. He will drink from the milk of the Mother of the Work.<sup>26</sup> He will speak in parables and preach the aeon to come (41), as Noah said in the first aeon of flesh. Concerning the words he said, he spoke them all in seventy-two languages.<sup>27</sup> He opened the gates of the heavens with his words and shamed the one who presides over Amente. He raised the dead and destroyed his<sup>28</sup> kingdom. There was a great disturbance. The archons raised their anger against him. They wanted to deliver him<sup>29</sup> to the one who presides over Amente. Then one of his followers was identified. His soul was assailed by a fire and he betrayed him, nobody having recognized him. They promptly<sup>30</sup> seized him and brought judgement upon themselves. They handed him over to the one who presides over Amente and gave him to Sasabek and Berôth.<sup>31</sup> He made ready to descend and

21 CD 38a, as a derivation from the verb **ΒΩΛΚ** 'be angry'. The meaning 'throne' in J. Černý *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (1975) p. 23 can be ignored.

22 The verb **† ΕΒΟΛ** most often means 'sell' cf. CD 394b, but the above seems to be the only meaning that makes sense to mean.

23 A name that refers to a 4th cent. group stigmatized by Christians as heretics who believed that the Logos had a substance and will different from those of the Father.

24 **ΗΕΙ** can mean 'house' or 'couple'. The pronoun in the preposition **ΝΖΗΤΕ** is fem. and can refer either to the 'mother' or the 'soul'.

25 The noun is probably derived from the verb **ΜΟΟΝΕ** 'pasture' CD 173a

26 According to Chérrix p. 27 n. 64 this figure is the 'Great Power'

27 On the numerological resonance cf. Chérrix p. 28 n. 66

28 The lord of Amente.

29 i.e. the one who knows the Great Power

30 This adverb renders **ΑΥΕΙΡΕ** 'they acted'. In the foregoing passage it seems not to fanciful to recognize elements of the NT account of the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

31 Probably two archons. For an in-depth analysis of the passage cf. V, Chiga 'Sasabek and Beroth' *BIFAO* 110 (2010)

test them. The one who presides over Amente took him (42) and, because of the manner of his flesh, he could not find him to seize him and show him to the archons, but he kept saying: "Who is this ? What is he ? His Logos has dissolved the law of this aeon. He is from the Logos of the power of life. He has overcome the order<sup>32</sup> of the archons, but they, for<sup>33</sup> their work, have been unable to master him." The archons wanted to know what had happened but did not understand that this one was the sign of their dissolution to come and the change of the aeon. The sun set in the day. The day became dark. The demons were troubled. After this he will appear, ascending, and the sign of the aeon to come will appear. The aeons will pour and those who understand the things about which they will be told and which will be revealed will become blessed, and they will become blessed because they will understand<sup>34</sup> the truth, for you<sup>35</sup> have found rest in heaven. Many will then follow him and they will be active in the places of their birth. (43) They will walk about and set forth his words as they wish.

Consider that the aeons which are these have passed. Consider how much water there is of that aeon has dissolved, how big the aeons are and how people will prepare and stand and become indestructible aeons.

First, after his preaching, he announces the second aeon and the first aeon, which was destroyed by time. He became<sup>36</sup> the first aeon, walking in it until it was destroyed, preaching one hundred and twenty years, which is the perfect number and highly exalted. He laid waste the edge of the west and destroyed the east. Then your seed with those who wish to follow our great Logos and his preaching.<sup>37</sup>

Then the anger of the archons flared up. They felt shame at their dissolution. They were consumed<sup>38</sup> and raged against life. Cities were destroyed and mountains crumbled. The archon<sup>39</sup> with (44) the archons of the west came to the east, for that was the place in which

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pp. 91ff.

32 Chèrix translates 'volonté' and cites an article which I have not been able to consult to explain the translation.

33 I understand the preposition 'for' to mean 'despite', as in colloquial English: 'For all his effort he failed.'

34 Coptic uses a structure that involves a periphrasis, quite possibly to emphasize the durative nature of the verb: **ϸΕΝΑΦΩΠΕ ΕΥΡ̅ΝΟΕΙ** 'they will be understanding'.

35 The abrupt change of pronoun seems to signal that the speaker is once again addressing an audience.

36 Or: 'he made'.

37 Probably verb missing

38 CD 502b

39 The Greek term so often in Gnostic texts refers to a servant of the Creator (Demiurge) and is a rather negative

the Logos first revealed himself. The earth moved and cities quaked. The birds ate and sated themselves on their carrion flesh. The earth grieved and the whole world became a desert.

When the times were completed, wickedness rose greatly, reaching even the limit of the Logos. The archon of the west arose and from the east he will act<sup>40</sup> and teach men about his wickedness, wishing to destroy all the teachings that speak of true wisdom in favour of false wisdom, For he has gone after the old, wishing to bring in wickedness under the guise of respectability. He did not succeed because his polluted acts and his garments were so numerous. So he became angry and revealed himself. He wished to rise and pass over to that place.

The time<sup>41</sup> came. He approached and changed the rules. The time came for the small boy to grow up. When he became of age (45), the archons sent the imitator<sup>42</sup> to that man so that they might know our Great Power. They were waiting for him to give a sign, and he raised great signs and became king of the whole earth and all those under him. He placed his throne at the limit of the earth, saying: "I will give you as a god to the world."<sup>43</sup> He will make signs and miracles. They will move away from me and fall into error. Those who follow him will introduce circumcision, and he will judge those who are circumcised, that is, the people. He began by sending many heralds to preach about him.

When he completes the time fixed for the kingdom on earth, the purification of souls will come because wickedness has overcome you. The forces of all the seas will tremble and become dessicated. The sky will no longer rain. The springs will become dry. The rivers will no longer flow (46) to their sources. The waters of the springs of the earth will dry up. The abysses will bend<sup>44</sup> and open. The stars will increase and the sun will decrease. I will withdraw with all who recognize me. They will enter the immeasurable light, where they are not seized by flesh or voracious<sup>45</sup> fire. They will become light and pure, nothing dragging

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figure. In this case it may be understood as a secular ruler. Whether it refers to any 4th cent. Roman Emperor in the West is not known.

40 Lit. 'do a thing'

41 The Greek word *καίρος* usually means 'appointed time' or opportunity

42 For the occurrence of this term in other Gnostic texts cf. Chérix note 92

43 Perhaps a ref. to the temptation of Jesus by the devil, cf. for example Matt. 4, 8ff.

44 CD 107b

45 The Gk word is *τροφή* 'delicacy', which also occurs earlier with a meaning I do not understand. Here it seems to me

them down. I will protect them by myself, wearing their holy garments and untouchable by fire or darkness or wind or a moment of the sort that closes the eye.<sup>46</sup>

So, it is coming to destroy them all and they will be punished until they are purified. The time given to them to seize what has been allotted to them is 1468 years.<sup>47</sup> When the fire burns them all and is unable to find anyone else to burn, it will extinguish itself. (47) The [judgement of the fire],<sup>48</sup> which is the second power, will be completed. Mercy will come through wisdom . . . The firmament . . . down to the abyss. The children of matter will perish and cease to exist from this point in time.

The souls will be revealed as pure through the light of the power which is higher than all the powers, immeasurable and catholic. I am with all those will recognize me. They will be in this aeon of beauty<sup>49</sup> of the aeon of judgement. They are prepared in wisdom. They give glory to the unattainable one in complete unity. They see him because of his love which is in them. They have all become the image of his light. He has shone upon them all. They take their rest in his repose. The souls which are punished will be annihilated by him and they will live in purification and see the saints and cry out to them: 'Have mercy on us, power above all powers because (48) [. . . *the next three lines are fragmentary* . . . ] and they will not seek us or believe us but they have acted according to the archon creation and also its archons and we have acted against<sup>50</sup> our corporeal origin of the archon creation that gives law. We have come to be in the eternal<sup>51</sup> aeon.

### The concept of Our Great Power

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that τροφή 'nourishment' would be more appropriate.

46 Perhaps an allusion to ἐν ῥιπῇ ὀφθαλμοῦ in 1 Cor. 15, of which the Coptic is **ϩΝΟΥΡΙΚΕ ΝΒΑΛ**

47 Attested only in Manichaean sources, but what the association might be is not known cf. Chérix p, 29 n.106

48 The words in square brackets translate the suggestions of Chérix in his critical apparatus on p. 21

49 The word 'of' has to be understood because it is not in the text.

50 Gk κατά can also mean 'according to'

51 Probably ἄτροπος