

16 Stephanos of Alexandria

Stephanos of Alexandria wasn't really from nor lived in Alexandria. He was from Constantinople, in Byzantium (now Turkey). He only studied at Alexandria. He was a public speaker, and dabbled in alchemy. He taught Plato, Aristotle, mathematics, astronomy (probably based on Ptolemy's *Amalgest* alone) and music. The combination of mathematics and music means he was reading Pythagoras.



Stephanos' book *The Great and Sacred Art of the Making of Gold* is pure Hellenistic alchemy of Alexandria in its fullness. Nine lectures, probably meant for oral delivery, is more rhapsody on the glory and beauty of Nature than instructions. Subsequent lectures are a little more practical, but stray to dying and philosophizing.

The following is F. Sherwood Taylor's translation as found in as "The Alchemical Works of Stephanos of Alexandria. Part I," *Ambix* 1,1 (May 1937): 116–39. It is from 610 to 641 A.D.

“ Lecture 1, with the Help of God.

Having praised God the cause of all good things and the King of all, and his only begotten Son resplendent before the ages together with the Holy Spirit, and having earnestly intreated for ourselves the illumination of the knowledge of Him, we will begin to gather the fairest fruits of the work in hand, of this very treatise, and we trust to track down the truth. Now from a true theory of nature our problem must be set out. O nature superior to nature conquering the natures, O nature become superior to itself, well regulated, transcending and surpassing the natures, O nature one and the same yielding and fulfilling the All, O union completed and separation united, O identical and nowise alien nature, supplying the All from itself, O matter immaterial holding matter fast, O nature conquering and rejoicing in nature, O heavenly nature making the spiritual existence to shine forth, O bodiless body, making bodies bodiless, O course of the moon illuminating the whole order of the universe, O most generic species and most specific genus, O nature truly superior to nature conquering the natures, tell what sort of nature thou art – that which with affection receives itself from itself again, verily that which yields sulphur without fire and has the fire-resisting power, the archetype of many names and name of many forms, the experienced nature and the unfolding, the many-coloured painted rainbow, that which discloses from itself the All, O nature itself and displaying its nature from no other nature, O like bringing to light from its like a thing of like nature, O sea

becoming as the ocean drawing up as vapour its many-coloured pearls, O conjunction of the tetrasomia adorned upon the surface, O inscription of the threefold triad and completion of the universal seal, body of magnesia by which the whole mystery is brought about, O golden-roofed stream of heaven, and silver-crested spirit sent forth from the sea, O thou that hast the silver-breasted garment and providest the liquid golden curls, O fair exercise of the wisest intellects, O wise all-creative power of men most holy, O sea inscrutable by uninitiated men, O ignorance seized on beforehand by vainglorious men, O smoky kindling of disdainful mankind, O uncovered light of pious men, O countenance contemplated by virtuous men, O sweetly breathing flower of practical philosophers, O perfect preparation of a single species, O work of wisdom, having a beauty composed of intellect, O thou that flashest such a beam, from a single being upon all, O moon drawing a light from the light of the sun, O single nature itself and no other nature, rejoicing and rejoiced over, mastering and mastered, saved and saviour, what have you in common with the multitude of material things, since one thing is natural and is a single nature conquering the All? Of what kind art thou, tell me, of what kind? To you who are of good understanding I dedicate this great gift, to you who are clothed with virtue, who are adorned with respect to theoretical practice and settled in practical theory. Of what kind, show us, thou who hast indicated beforehand that we should have such a gift. Of what nature, I shall tell and will not hide. I confess the grace of the giving of light from above, which is given to us by the lights of the father. Hear ye as intelligences like to the angels. Put away the material theory so that ye may be deemed worthy to see with your intellectual eyes the hidden mystery. For there is need of a single natural □ thing□ and of one nature conquering the all. Of such a kind, now clearly to be told you, that the nature rejoices in the nature and the nature masters the nature and the nature conquers the nature. For it rejoices on account of the nature being its own, and it masters it because it has kinship with it, and, superior to nature, it conquers the nature when the corporeal operation of the process shall fulfil the initiation into the mysteries. For when the incorruptible body shall be released from death, and when it shall transform the fulfilment which has become spiritual, then superior to nature it is as a marvellous spirit; then it masters the body moved (by it), then it rejoices as over its own habitation, then it conquers that which in disembodied fashion haunts the whole which is engendered of the whole, that is admirable above nature. Which I say to you is the comprehensive magnesia. Who will not wonder at the coral of gold perfected from thee? From thee the whole mystery is fully brought to perfection, thou alone shalt have no fear of the knowledge of the same, on thee will be spread the radiant eastern cloud; thou shalt carry in thyself as a guest the multiform images of Aphrodite, the cupbearer again serving the fire-throwing bearer of coals (then carrying such a brightness from afar, in bridal fashion you veil the same, you receive the undefiled mystery of nature). I will show moreover also the lustre of thy nature, I will begin to indicate thy multiform images. For then he, who intelligently interweaves thee that hast fire within thee, rekindles the fiery thing. For looking

on thy many-coloured visions I shall be powerless as I circle round its beauties. For thy radiant pearl blinds the sight of my eye. Thy phengites rekindling astounds all my vision, thy shining radiance gladdens all my heart, O nature truly superior to nature, conquering the natures. Thou, the whole, art the one nature. The same by which the whole becomes the work. For by an odd number thy all-cosmos is systematized. For then thou shalt understand in what respects thou shalt look ahead, then thou shalt discover in what things shall be thy ambit, then thou shalt stop the struggles of the place, then thou shalt disclose the kingly purple, which also thou shalt bring with thee by the help of thy maiden. Then will not be the recent labour but a couch canopied with gold, then not a multiform ability but an all-wise sagacity, then no deprivation of virtuous men is found, but a fruition of perfect men is displayed. For such is the measure of it found in the odd number.

Thus those full of virtue will discover thee; hear ye who are lovers of wisdom and know the mighty deeds of the all-ruling God. For he it is that furnishes all wisdom, unapproachable light of houses, light which illumines each man as he comes into the world. For we are nothing apart from his Supreme Divinity; altogether nothing is the gift which is sought, in respect of his blessedness. Approach, O lovers of virtue, to that immaterial desire. Learn how sweet is the light of God. Unworthy are the things which are now wondered at, in respect of that happy lot. Alone we are made friends with him by love, and we receive from him the wisdom springing forth as an abyss from the abyss, that we may be enabled by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to gush forth rivers of living water; so that wondering at such wisdom of the demiurge we may praise his great kindness towards us. Why should we marvel at the species Chrysocorallus? We should wonder rather at the infinite Beauty. So also I will fulfil your desire, that you may be made worthy to love such a One \square and \square with hymnody to discourse of the more than good goodness of God.

Second Lecture of the same Stephanos with the Help of God.

The multitude of numbers compounded together has its existence from one atom and natural monad; this, which itself exerts a mutual condition, comprehends and rules over the infinite as emanating from itself. For the monad is so called from its remaining immutable and unmoved. For it displays a circular and spherical contemplation of numbers like to itself, I speak of a completion of the five numbers and of the six. For from these they come round again to themselves. And every side of a rectangle generated from the same length has kinship to its like that it may restore a perfect fulfilment. For the sixtieth part of every great quantity and of fractions, taking origin from it \square the monad \square and returning again to it, being contracted together, complete the natural monad. The symbol of every circular sphere is the centre, likewise of every triangle and plane and solid figure set out by lines; let this same be thought of.

Also of the musical learning, both the lowest strings and that next the first, whether of four strings or upon the third ratio, that which is before it must be the antecedent and that after it the consequent, by which we preserve the binding together of the proportions and of the whole scale of harmony as a result of such musical learning.

For they who pluck the strings say that Orpheus made melody with rhythmical sounds so that the symphony should re-echo the co-ordinated movement of the elements and the sounding melody should be harmoniously perfected. For from the one instrument the whole composition takes its origin, whence also the organization of the articulate body is ordered in the bones and joints and parts and nerves, and by the plectrum of the air, given forth in the fashion of a moving instrument, a voice is sent forth to the One which is joined to its essence and which conquers and organizes it by its own life: the very mode and blending of the air. For of two extreme qualities there is found one mediator and conciliator which preserves the qualities of both on account of its resemblance and close kinship to them. And also the movement of the pole being spherical and stable, the light of the hemisphere which is above the earth, arising from the line dividing the mundane and the diaphanous pole, also radiates forth the fires of the sunlight – derived – from that which supplies it to all things. For from it not only do the stars partake of the order of the light, but also the appearance of the moon, giving out rays derived from the light, displays its nightly allotted torchbearing. And you shall have all such things to speak of singly, as derived from one of them, and as the essence of the very first returned again; they preserve the things of the nature and fulfil the contemplation. But were there time enough to consider our discourse in the progress of a proem, (I would speak of) that which falls from the moon's waning, how it is found, how it is treated, and how it has an unburnt nature. O wisdom of teaching of such a preparation, displaying the work, O moon clad in white and vehemently shining abroad whiteness, let us learn what is the lunar radiance that we may not miss what is doubtful. For the same is the whitening snow, the brilliant eye of whiteness, the bridal procession-robe of the management of the process, the stainless chiton, the mind-constructed beauty of fair form, the whitest composition of the perfection, the coagulated milk of fulfilment, the Moon-froth of the sea of dawn; the magnesia of Lydia, the Italian stibnite, the pyrites of Achæa, that of Albania, the many-named matter of the good work, that which lulls the All to sleep, that which bears the One which is the All, that which fulfils the wondrous work . . . Speak, tell to us the secrets of the work [of 'the marvellous making of gold']. 'After the cleaning of the copper', and how is one to clean the copper yet bearing all its ionic? How? I will tell you the accurate meaning of the phrase – Aphrodite walking through a cloud. 'After the cleaning of the copper', that is a trituration well managed, a consideration well taught beforehand; 'After the attenuation of the copper', that is a finer condition of trituration, he also speaks of the blackness placed upon it and following upon these for the purpose of the later whitening; then is the solid yellowing. For

when it shall spurn the blackness of the wrinkled crust, it is transformed to whiteness; then the moon of shining light shall send forth the rays; then ☐ one comes☐ to the later whitening, when you shall see the white compound. For when the full of the moon appears, then the full moon discloses its light. Then solid is the yellowing. What is this? Say. The whiteness perceived. And how do you render the white yellow? Ye wisest of men, over-pass the reasoning, this answer is a secret, a mystic speech and consideration. I will tell you the hidden mystery, whence it is proclaimed above you. 'After the cleaning of the copper and its later attenuation and the blackening for the later whitening, then is the solid yellowing.' When you see the whitening taking place within it, recognize the concealed yellowing, then know the whitening as being yellow; then also being white, it becomes yellow by the hidden yellowness, by possessing the depths of its heart, by having the corporeal possession of the whiteness of the silver and, unutterably, the pervading whiteness in it. 'Then is the solid yellowing.' What is this? That which has become white, it is the yellow. For the same white appears in the colour, but the yellow nature overrules it. 'Nothing is left remaining, nothing is left behind except the vapour and the raising of the water'. Consider the most ancient one. Do you not see what the wise man has declared? Thus he speaks in riddles as completely as possible. Thus he declares, as a teacher demonstrates everything, saying 'nothing is left remaining, nothing is lacking, except the vapour and the raising of the water'. Having shown in this the preparation of the whole, rendering all in few words, that ye may not overwhelm the moving things with much matter, that ye may not think about saffron of Cilicia and the plant of anagallis, and the Pontic rhubarb for themselves, and of other juices, gall of quadrupeds and certain beasts, of stones and of destructive minerals, things that are dissimilar to the perfection-making, single and one nature, that men wandering shall not be led away from the truth, in order that in a natural existence they shall not seek for a non-existent tendency. What else? The most eminent man and counsellor of all virtue turns them around and draws them to the view of truth, that you may not, as I said (take note of) material furnaces and apparatus of glasses, alembics, various flasks, kerotakides and sublimates. And those who are occupied with such things in vain, the burden of weariness is declared by them. But see how the All is fulfilled in the phrase. 'Nothing is left remaining, nothing is lacking save the vapour and the raising of the water.' What kind of vapour? Say. What is the vapour and what is the work brought to perfection by it? Show us most clearly the way in which we may recognize the power of the word. And on this matter the philosopher says: 'the vapour is the work of the composition of the whole', that which shines brightly through the divine water, that which makes the trituration naturally, that which appears in the course of the method, and is apprehended intellectually. The vapour is the unfolding of the work, the level manifestation, the thread bought with silver, the air-displaying voyage, the Celtic nard, the Atlantic sea, the Britannic metal, the ocean garlanding the world, the unmeasured abyss, the sphere-shaped universe, the heavenly body, that which encompasses and embraces the all, the despised species, the longed-

for contemplation, the sought-for spectacle, the one whole and whole one, the holy whitening of the whole worthy work, the whole preparation, the one work of wisdom, the conclusion of the fulfilment, that which is triturated and well managed, the perfectly fulfilled. 'For nothing is left remaining except the vapour and the raising of the water.' Having been wisely led on the path with respect to the way of the vapour, I will pursue my speech upon the raising of the water. What then is this which has been brought in? What is this raising of the water? Tell us, O guide: fulfil the gifts of thy grace. Enlighten our dim-sighted eyes, make plain the articulate substance of your doctrine, what is this raising of the water? And he is not silent on this matter: he says, the unmixed beauty does not receive into itself matter. The immaterial being, it is a single composition, the good thing of a myriad names. For being of a single essence, it is reduced into itself. Around it, it extinguishes the single ray. He does not wholly put in the moistening juices. For he did not perceive the loss, the life of the liquids. For he rejects the flowings of the water. For how is one to see the motion of that which does not shake off these things? Nothing is able to be filled full of it, unless first the ambient waters are drained dry from it. It is therefore needful that it should be swimming on the water, if it be not itself watery; that it may not be taught, that it may not be able, □ to vanish□ from us, that it may remain moist in a moist being. But we remove from it the embrace of the waters that we may see the great comeliness of its beauty. How shall we push it back from the participation with the waters? How shall we separate it, that there may easily be a raising of the water? There is need of panoply and courage. Who is man enough for this? Who is able to dry up the overflowing stream of waters? Who is to be found for the contest? Who is ready for service? There is found a purgation of the matter, so that we may clearly see the beauty of the cloud. The same is the practical gentle coction by means of sulphur. For just as the washing with water is in the mind, so also is the purification of the All by sulphur. For washing with the divine (sulphurous) waters now and managing the process fairly, we purify it again by fire and sulphur, that the body of the moon (or silver) may be revealed, that they may see the cloud the gift of the sun. O unspoken mysteries of a wise God, O rich gifts to those who have loved the Lord, O depth of wealth and wisdom and gnosis of the mysteries. If the present things are such marvels and extraordinary, from what source are everlasting things which no mind is able to explain? If the material work is displayed thus to us by some unspeakable discourse, from what source are thy undefiled good and unfading beauties, which no one is capable of perceiving? I hymn and adore and glorify thee, triad superior to being, more than good and more than god. Who can speak forth to hymn thy marvels, that they may be glorified? All thy works, O Lord, thou hast made in wisdom.

The Alchemy Reader (pp. 54-60). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.