

THE GOLDEN VERSES OF PYTHAGORAS: A NEW TRANSLATION

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For many years, the translations of the *Golden Verses*, usually formatted as 71 discrete sentences, puzzled me. Some were insightful, others unusual, and I found little context with which to understand them.

Although they are traditionally attributed to Pythagoras himself, the form we have them in today would probably have been

composed by a Pythagorean considerably later, sometime between the fifth and third centuries BCE.¹ Our evidence for this is confirmed as the author or composer swears by Pythagoras toward the end of the poem, using the "Pythagorean Oath" taken by Initiates (see note 9 below). Pythagoras would not have sworn in his own name.

We have no reason to doubt, however, that the advice and guidance are from the teachings of Pythagoras, in a similar way that, although the received text of the

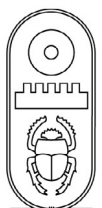
Corpus Hermeticum dates from the second or third centuries CE, its contents are from the teachings in the Houses of Life of ancient Egypt.²

In preparing for the fresh translation, my research led me to as wonderful discovery. In 1995, Dr. Johan C. Thom, Professor of Classics at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, published

what is now the definitive study on the *Golden Verses*.³ His notes and discussion of the text were invaluable to me in doing a new translation. While my translation differs from his, not in substance, but in expression, occasionally there really is only one way to say something!



Detail of Raphael's School of Athens showing Pythagoras.



Key to reimagining the *Golden Verses* and making them fully intelligible is the discovery that they are not 71 discrete aphorisms, but a consistent narrative. Thom fully develops this analysis, which had only been suggested earlier.⁴ I have used a greatly simplified schema for the sections in my translations, as appropriate for this venue.

Translating this text from its Ancient Greek original was a great experience. Ancient Greek is highly inflected, as are all of the older Indo-European languages, such as Latin. This means that the case endings of nouns, pronouns, and adjectives indicate how the word is being used, as a subject, an object, etc., and the relationship to the other words in the sentence. The many permutations of verb forms communicate a depth of information far greater than modern English verbs.

Word order, therefore, is not essential for meaning, it is a tool for emphasis, and style. The inflections do the heavy lifting in Ancient Greek. Due to the inflected nature of Ancient Greek, it is far more compact than most modern western European languages, and small particles can be used to indicate the author's viewpoint about what he or she writing.

Translating this text was therefore a task of not only representing the literal meaning of the words. To translate the meaning of the text overall and not just the individual words, English generally must use quite a few more words than Ancient Greek.

In some ways, those who first wrote and used this text thought differently than we do because of the central role of language in thought processes. However, in the most important ways, like how we interact with each other for example, we are much the same, and these *Golden Verses* are therefore perennial in their importance for humanity today.

Where there was a choice, and the opportunity, I chose expressions and terms that Rosicrucians would recognize, as these verses demonstrate that much of our inheritance comes from the Pythagoreans. Understanding the fundamental importance of Pythagoras to our civilization, these verses communicate his spirit, advice, and mysticism across the millennia to us.

The Golden Verses of Pythagoras

True Piety – Right Relationships:

First honor the Deathless Deities, since this is set forth by Law, and be in awe of your Oath. Then honor the heroes worthy of admiration, then the *Daimones*.⁵ in the depths of Earth, performing Lawful Sacrifices to them, and honor your parents and those born in close kinship with you.

Of all the rest of humanity, take as a friend the one greatest in virtue. Take heed to his or her friendly words, and benefit from his or her actions. As far as you can, do not hate a friend because of a small fault, for Power dwells not far from Necessity.

The Practice of Virtue:

Know these things in this way, and be accustomed to mastering these: first the appetite and sleep, then lust and rage. Never do anything shameful whether alone or with another: but most of all, feel shame in your own eyes.⁶

Practice Justice in both word and deed, and accustom yourself to not be thoughtless about anything, but know that since death is prepared for everyone, property that you loved to procure at one time will be lost at another.

As far as the sufferings that mortals experience by divine acts, whichever part you have, bear it and do not feel violently upset. It is proper to heal what you can, and point out to yourself: Altogether, Fate

does not give many of these trials to good people.

Words:

Many words fall upon human beings, both cowardly and helpful; do not be confused by them, or allow yourself to be hindered by them. If indeed, some untruth is told, leave in a friendly way.

What I am going to say to you should be done every time –

Let no one convince you, not by word and not by deed, to do or say anything that is not the best for you.

Deliberation must come before action, so that no folly may come about: let me assure you, unpremeditated words and deeds accompany a cowardly person.

But on this account, finish that which will not vex you later.

So do not do anything of which you do not already know; rather, learn as much as you can of what must be, and in this way, you will live a most delightful life.

The Body and Physical Matters:

You ought not to harbor indifference concerning the health of your body, but you must have moderation in drink, food, and exercise. When I say, “moderation,” therefore, it is that which will not vex you.

Ready yourself to have an unbroken, pure way of life,⁷ and keep doing the sorts of things that hold back envy.

Do not incur expenses at the wrong time, ignorant of what is good; neither be miserly. Moderation in all things is best.

So do that which will not harm you, and ponder before an action.

Reflection:

Do not accept sleep upon your soft eyes before approaching the works of the day three times each:

“Where have I lapsed? What have I done? Which of my obligations have I not completed?”

Starting with the first, carefully examine them, and afterwards, if they were cowardly, castigate and chastise yourself, if they were useful, be delighted.⁸

Exhortation:

Take pains with these things, meditate on them, and you ought to be enamored of them: these things will put you on the path of Divine Virtue, Yea! Truly by the one who gave our souls the *Tetraktys*, the source of eternal Nature.⁹

But let us get to work, imploring the Deities for completion!

Once you have a firm command of these things, you will have inner knowledge¹⁰ of the essence of the deathless Deities, and of mortals, of how this essence interpenetrates each thing, and how it governs each thing.

You will have gnosis, as law and custom permit, of that nature that is common in all things, so that you neither look for that which should not be looked for, nor should anything be missed.

The Problem of Suffering:

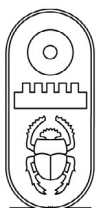
You will have the inner knowledge that the sufferings that people endure are self-inflicted; those in misery neither see nor hear their boon which is near them.

Few comprehend how to escape their evils. This is the fate that damages their minds: like rolling stones they are tossed here and there, experiencing misery without end.

For their baneful inner companion, Strife, has damaged them, unknown to them. They should not advance this Strife, but take flight from it.

Theosis—Deification:

O Father Zeus, you would certainly free all from many ills if you would



teach everyone what type of *Daimon* they possess.¹¹

But take heart, because mortals spring from Divinity,¹² and for mortal beings, Nature brings to light each sacred thing.

If you participate in these Mysteries, you will become Master of that which I tell you.

Having healed, you will rescue your soul from these troubles.

But stick to foods that we have spoken about in *The Purifications* and in *The Liberation of the Soul*, and ponder, discerning each thing, setting your best judgment in charge as the charioteer.¹³

So, when you depart the body and come to the free *Aither*,

You will be deathless, an immortal Deity, a mortal no longer.

ENDNOTES

1. See Hermann S. Schibli, *Hierocles of Alexandria*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14 and Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier. *Measuring Heaven: Pythagoras and his Influence on Thought and Art in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 60.
2. On the genuine Egyptian source of the *Hermetica*, see for example, Peter Kingsley, “Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993), 1-24.
3. Johan C. Thom, *The Pythagorean “Golden Verses”* (Leiden; NY: E.J. Brill, 1995).
4. In Thom, Chapter six.
5. These are not the English “demons,” they are the tutelary spirits, *Genii*. See Steven Armstrong, “What’s in a Name: Pappus and its Mystical Significance,” *Pantacle* 16 (2016), 21-25. Accessed Sept 13, 2018 at <https://www.martinists.org/downloads/Pantacle2016.pdf>.

6. That is, “honestly assess your own faults.”
7. Here, and also below, “pure” (καθάρειον—*katháreion*) is the Greek

term which becomes “The Cathars,” the Pure Ones.

8. See Ralph M. Lewis, “Reviewing our Acts,” *Rosicrucian Digest* 87:1 (2009), 55-56. Accessed Sept 13, 2018: <https://www.rosicrucian.org/rosicrucian-digest-pythagoreans>

9. This echoes the “Pythagorean Oath” that is well attested, taken by Initiates:

Οὐ, μὰ τὸν ἀμετέρα κεφαλᾷ παραδόντα τετρακτῶν

παγὰν ἀενάου φύσεως ῥίζωμά τ’ ἔχουσιν. (Aët. 1.3.8).

“No! Truly by the one who gave our souls the *Tetraktys*, the source of eternal Nature.”

Swearing an oath by Pythagoras was an acknowledgement of his status as divine (an incarnation of Hyperborean Apollo).

See Thom, 173, and the work of Peter Kingsley, discussed in Steven Armstrong, “Piercing Truths” *Rosicrucian Digest* 96:2

(2018), 1-7. Accessed Sept 21, 2018: <https://www.rosicrucian.org/rosicrucian-digest-mystical-italy>

10. The knowledge spoken of here is *Gnosis*, inner knowledge.

11. This is reminiscent of Jakob Böhme’s *Signatura Rerum: The Signature of All Things* wherein we can discern their ultimate Source.

12. This is a common theme of all of the Mystery Schools. See the Rosicrucian Timeline issues of the *Rosicrucian Digest* at <https://www.rosicrucian.org/rosicrucian-digest>, and Thom, 205.

13. I agree with Thom (215-216) here that the best way to read this passage is to take the highlighted words as the titles of Pythagorean texts that would have been known to students and initiates:

ἀλλ’ εἴργου βρωτῶν ὧν εἶπομεν ἐν τε

Καθαρμοῖς

ἐν τε Λύσει ψυχῆς, κρίνων καὶ φράζου ἕκαστα

ἠνίοχον γνώμην στήσας καθύπερθεν ἀρίστην.