

The Corpus Hermeticum An Introduction



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By

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THE FIFTEEN TRACTATES OF THE CORPUS HERMETICUM, along with the Perfect Sermon or Asclepius, are the foundation documents of the Hermetic tradition. Written by unknown authors in Egypt sometime before the end of the third century C.E., they were part of a once substantial literature attributed to the mythic figure of Hermes Trismegistus, a Hellenistic fusion of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth.

This literature came out of the same religious and philosophical ferment that produced Neoplatonism, Christianity, and the diverse collection of teachings usually lumped together under the label "Gnosticism": a ferment which had its roots in the impact of Platonic thought on the older traditions of the Hellenized East. There are obvious connections and common themes linking each of these traditions, although each had its own answer to the major questions of the time.

The treatises we now call the Corpus Hermeticum were collected into a single volume in Byzantine times, and a copy of this volume survived to come into the hands of Lorenzo de Medici's agents in the fifteenth century. Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Florentine Academy, was pulled off the task of translating the dialogues of Plato in order to put the Corpus Hermeticum into Latin first. His translation saw print in 1463, and was reprinted at least twenty-two times over the next century and a half.

The treatises divide up into several groups. The first (CH I), the "Poemandres", is the account of a revelation given to Hermes Trismegistus by the being Poemandres or "Man-Shepherd", an expression of the universal Mind. The next eight (CH II-IX), the "General Sermons", are short dialogues or lectures discussing various basic points of Hermetic philosophy. There follows the "Key" (CH X), a summary of the General

Sermons, and after this a set of four tractates - "Mind unto Hermes", "About the Common Mind", "The Secret Sermon on the Mountain", and the "Letter of Hermes to Asclepius" (CH XI-XIV) - touching on the more mystical aspects of Hermeticism. The collection is rounded off by the "Definitions of Asclepius unto King Ammon" (CH XV), which may be composed of three fragments of longer works.

The Perfect Sermon

The Perfect Sermon or Asclepius, which is also included here, reached the Renaissance by a different route. It was translated into Latin in ancient times, reputedly by the same Lucius Apuleius of Madaura whose comic-serious masterpiece *The Golden Ass* provides some of the best surviving evidence on the worship of Isis in the Roman world. Augustine of Hippo quotes from the old Latin translation at length in his *City of God*, and copies remained in circulation in medieval Europe all the way up to the Renaissance. The original Greek version was lost, although quotations survive in several ancient sources.

The Perfect Sermon is substantially longer than any other surviving work of ancient Hermetic philosophy. It covers topics which also occur in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but touches on several other issues as well - among them magical processes for the manufacture of gods and a long and gloomy prophecy of the decline of Hermetic wisdom and the end of the world.

The Significance of the Hermetic Writings

The *Corpus Hermeticum* landed like a well-aimed bomb amid the philosophical systems of late medieval Europe. Quotations from the Hermetic literature in the Church Fathers (who were never shy of leaning on pagan sources to prove a point) accepted a traditional chronology which dated "Hermes Trismegistus," as a historical figure, to the time of Moses. As a result, the Hermetic tractates' borrowings from Jewish scripture and Platonic philosophy were seen, in the Renaissance, as evidence that the *Corpus Hermeticum* had anticipated and influenced both. The Hermetic philosophy was seen as a primordial wisdom tradition, identified with the

"Wisdom of the Egyptians" mentioned in Exodus and lauded in Platonic dialogues such as the Timaeus. It thus served as a useful club in the hands of intellectual rebels who sought to break the stranglehold of Aristotelian scholasticism on the universities at this time.

It also provided one of the most important weapons to another major rebellion of the age - the attempt to reestablish magic as a socially acceptable spiritual path in the Christian West. Another body of literature attributed to Hermes Trismegistus was made up of astrological, alchemical and magical texts. If, as the scholars of the Renaissance believed, Hermes was a historical person who had written all these things, and if Church Fathers had quoted his philosophical works with approval, and if those same works could be shown to be wholly in keeping with some definitions of Christianity, then the whole structure of magical Hermeticism could be given a second-hand legitimacy in a Christian context.

This didn't work, of course; the radical redefinition of Western Christianity that took place in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation hardened doctrinal barriers to the point that people were being burned in the sixteenth century for practices that were considered evidences of devoutness in the fourteenth. The attempt, though, made the language and concepts of the Hermetic tractates central to much of post-medieval magic in the West.

The Translation

The translation of the Corpus Hermeticum and Perfect Sermon given here is that of G.R.S. Mead (1863-1933), originally published as Vol. 2 of his Thrice Greatest Hermes (London, 1906). Mead was a close associate of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder and moving spirit of the Theosophical Society, and most of his considerable scholarly output was brought out under Theosophical auspices. The result, predictably, was that most of that output has effectively been blacklisted in academic circles ever since.

This is unfortunate, for Mead's translations of the Hermetic literature were until quite recently the best available in English. (They are still the best

in the public domain; thus their use here.) The Everard translation of 1650, which is still in print, reflects the state of scholarship at the time it was made - which is only a criticism because a few things have been learned since then! The Walter Scott translation - despite the cover blurb on the recent Shambhala reprint, this is not the Sir Walter Scott of *Ivanhoe* fame - while more recent than Mead's, is a product of the "New Criticism" of the first half of this century, and garbles the text severely; scholars of Hermeticism of the calibre of Dame Frances Yates have labelled the Scott translation worthless. By contrast, a comparison of Mead's version to the excellent modern translation by Brian Copenhaver, or to the translations of CH I (*Poemandres*) and VII (*The Greatest Ill Among Men is Ignorance of God*) given in Bentley Layton's *The Gnostic Scriptures*, shows Mead as a capable translator, with a usually solid grasp of the meaning of these sometimes obscure texts.

There is admittedly one problem with Mead's translation: the aesthetics of the English text. Mead hoped, as he mentioned at the beginning of *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, to "render--these beautiful theosophic treatises into an English that might, perhaps, be thought in some small way worthy of the Greek originals." Unfortunately for this ambition, he was writing at a time when the last remnants of the florid and pompous Victorian style were fighting it out with the more straightforward colloquial prose that became the style of the new century. Caught in this tangle like so many writers of the time, Mead wanted to write in the grand style but apparently didn't know how. The result is a sometimes bizarre mishmash in which turn-of-the-century slang stands cheek by jowl with overblown phrases in King James Bible diction, and in which mishandled archaicisms, inverted word order, and poetic contractions render the text less than graceful - and occasionally less than readable. Seen from a late twentieth century sensibility, the result verges on unintentional self-parody in places: for example, where Mead uses the Scots contraction "ta'en" (for "taken"), apparently for sheer poetic colour, calling up an image of *Hermes Trismegistus* in kilt and sporran.

The "poetic" word order is probably the most serious barrier to readability; it's a good rule, whenever the translation seems to descend into gibberish, to try shuffling the words of the sentence in question. It may also be worth

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noting that Mead consistently uses "for that" in place of "because" and "ought" in place of "any", and leaves out the word "the" more or less at random.

Finally, comments in (parentheses) and in [square brackets] are in Mead's original; those in <angle brackets> are my own additions.



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