General Introduction

There are five groups of philosophical Hermetic writings that do not appear in Brian P. Copenhaver's 1992 English translation entitled *Hermetica: The Greek "Corpus Hermeticum" and the Latin "Asclepius"*.[1] The first is the large group of Hermetic excerpts from Stobaeus, an early fifth-century CE anthologist. The second is the Coptic Hermetica (discovered in 1945) featuring two excerpts of previously known writings in addition to a formerly unknown Hermetic tractate (the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*). The third group is the collection of Hermetic *Definitions*, a set of maxims extant in Greek fragments but preserved only fully in Armenian. The fourth is the previously known set of diverse fragments quoted by various (largely Christian) authors in Late Antiquity. The fifth comprises recently discovered Hermetic fragments currently preserved in Vienna and Oxford.

The Coptic Hermetica are widely available in English translations of the Nag Hammadi library.[2] The *Definitions* are now conveniently accessible in English thanks to the work of Jean-Pierre Mahé.[3] What remains to be translated are the fragments from Stobaeus, the fragments and testimonies from various authors, and the fragments from the newly discovered papyri.

[1] Copenhaver's introduction to CH and *Ascl.* remain relevant (Copenhaver, xxxii–xlv). See also Peter Kingsley, "An Introduction to the Hermetica: Approaching Ancient Esoteric Tradition," in Roelof van den Broek and Cis van Heertum, eds., *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis: Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000), 17–40.

[2] See Marvin Meyer, ed., *Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 409–36. Introductions to the Coptic Hermetica can be found in *ibid.*, 409–12; 419–21; 425–29; Mahé, *HHE*, 1.31–51, 137–55; 2.47–144; Hans-Martin Schenke, Hans-Gebhard Bethge, and Ursula Ulrike Kaiser, eds., *Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 359–60; 367–68; 370–71.

[3] Mahé's translation can be found in Clement Salaman and others, trans., *The Way of Hermes: New Translations of "The Corpus Hermeticum" and "The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius"* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 109–22. Mahé introduces the Armenian *Definitions* in *ibid.*, 101–8.

It is high time to present a new translation and annotation of these (chiefly philosophical) Hermetica to the English-speaking world.

Hermes-Thoth

Nothing binds together the multifarious Hermetic fragments beyond their ascription to Hermes Thrice Great. Hermes Thrice Great is a fictional character. Yet for many in the ancient world that fiction was history. If we call Hermes Thrice Great a "myth," we thereby recognize that he is greater and more significant than any one historical figure. How do we introduce a figure that appears in so many different ages in so many different guises? If there was an "original" Hermes Thrice Great, we are obliged to pick up the thread at significant points of reception.

Iamblichus (about 245–325 CE) commences his book (later called *On the Mysteries*) with the following flourish:

> Hermes, the deity who presides over rational discourses, has long and rightly been considered common to all who practice the sacred arts. He who presides over true science concerning gods is one and the same throughout the universe. It is to him that our ancestors dedicated the discoveries of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes.[4]

Important here is the frank acknowledgement that many authors wrote under the name of Hermes. The practice of pseudepigraphy was logical for devotees of Hermes.[5] True wisdom and learning merited ascription to the lord of all learning. This is why many Egyptian scholars attributed their writings to Hermes. Iamblichus, himself writing under a false name ("Abammon," an Egyptian priest), calls these writers his "ancestors." These "ancestors" were probably Hellenized Egyptian scribes and priests who lived not very long before Iamblichus himself.

Later, Iamblichus gives a taste of how many persons were writing under the name of Hermes. In *On the Mysteries* 8.1, he passes on the report of a certain Seleucus, who attributed to Hermes a total of 20,000 books. A better-known source, the Egyptian priest and historian Manetho, nearly

[4] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.1.

[5] On Hermetic pseudepigraphy, see Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 85–98; and more generally, Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11–145; 534–48.

doubled this number, crediting Hermes with 36,525 volumes (or 100 volumes for each single day in a 4-year period).[6] So many books would easily fill the shelves of a large temple library (the Egyptian "House of Life"). Perhaps this is the point – all the wisdom of the Egyptian sacred priesthood ultimately reverts to Hermes.

According to Iamblichus, Hermes wrote hundreds of tomes on specialized topics like "the gods in the fiery zone," "the gods in the aether," and "the gods in the heavens."[7] Hermes was the ultimate theologian, yet the scope of his expertise was in fact more vast. There are existing treatises on astrology, the virtues of stones, the principles of creation, the origin and nature of the soul, alchemical practices, Fate, the effects of climate on intelligence, healing, and even why children resemble their parents – all ascribed to Hermes.[8]

The many genres of Hermetic learning are well illustrated by a passage in Clement of Alexandria. This Christian writer around 200 CE describes a procession of Egyptian officials in which forty-two fundamental writings of Hermes were displayed (the number of Egypt's districts or "nomes"). The highest-ranking priest, whom the Greeks called "Prophet," carried the ten "hieratic" books on laws, the gods, and the training of priests. The Stolekeeper presented ten books on education and sacrifice. The Sacred Scribe held up a decade of books on hieroglyphs, geography, and the temples. Then came the Astrologer, who showed four books on astronomical matters (fixed stars, planets, conjunctions, and the risings of astral bodies). Finally, the Singer held in his hands a songbook and an instruction manual for kings. As a supplement, six books on medical matters (anatomy, medicines, medical instruments, and gynecology) were displayed.[9] All this vast store of knowledge was ascribed to Hermes.

Who was this Hermes? We must first of all distinguish a Greek deity from a significantly different Egyptian one. The Greek Hermes was the "winged son of kindly Maia," racing on the winds as Zeus's crafty herald,

[6] The number has yet deeper significance in Egyptian astrology, as pointed out by Christian H. Bull, "The Tradition of Hermes: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom" (Ph.D. diss., University of Bergen, 2014), 82–83.

[7] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 8.1–2.

[8] See, for instance, the small treatises *On Earthquakes* and the *Brontologion* attributed to Hermes Thrice Great in *CCAG* 7.167–71; 226–30.

[9] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.4.35.1–6.4.38.1. On books in temple libraries, see further Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, new edition, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 110–67; Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57–60; Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 75, 135–36, 201 nn.35–36.

helmeted with the cap of invisibility, wielding the twisted caduceus with the power to put even Argus with his hundred eyes to sleep.[10] The Egyptian Hermes, on the other hand, was Thoth, depicted as the ibis-headed scribe of the gods, secretary of Re, giver of oracles, master of magic, lord of the moon often appearing in the form of a dog-faced baboon. When the Greeks dominated Egypt, they identified the Egyptian god Thoth with Hermes. But why? What did they see in these two gods that was similar?

There are several overlaps, yet we will focus on two.[11] First of all, Hermes as *psychopomp*, or escort of the dead, resembled Thoth as seen in the various versions of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (or the *Book of Going Forth by Day*), chapter 125. In the Hall of Two Truths, Thoth hears the confession of the deceased person. After the person's heart is weighed against the feather of Maat ("Justice," or "Truth"), Thoth carefully inscribes the result with his tablet and stylus. If the heart is pure, Thoth leads the candidate into the presence of Osiris, the ultimate judge of the dead, and finally into the Field of Reeds.[12] Perhaps the most famous scene of Hermes leading souls is the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*, book 24. In this scene, Hermes guides the freshly slaughtered suitors of Penelope to the netherworld. Mindless, the suitors squeak like bats on their way to the halls of Hades.

Yet there was a more basic similarity between Hermes and Thoth. Hermes is more than a herald or messenger. He is the Logos – the Reason, Speech, or Word of God.[13] The Word devises speech and brings his own interpretation, which the Greeks called *hermeneia*.[14] Thoth is also the god who presides over speech and interpretation. He is called "the heart of Re, the tongue of Atum, the throat of the God whose name is hidden." As

[10] The "winged son of kindly Maia" derives from Horace, *Odes*, 1.3.

[11] Other similarities between Thoth and Hermes are catalogued by Maria-Theresia Derchain-Urtel, *Thot à travers ses épithètes dans les scènes d'offrandes des temples d'époque gréco-romaine* (Brussels: Egyptology Foundation Queen Elizabeth, 1981), 136–46; Andreas Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos als Zeuge der Wahrheit: Die christliche Hermetikrezeption von Athenagoras bis Laktanz*, Theophaneia 36 (Berlin: Philo, 2002), 26–29.

[12] See Raymond O. Faulkner, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, ed. Carol Andrews (London: British Museum, 1985), 28 (spell 30b); C. J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth: Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 145–50.

[13] For Hermes as Logos (or Word), see *Ref.* 5.7.32; Seneca, *On Benefits* 4.7; Cornutus, *Nature of the Gods* 16; Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* 72; Acts 14:12; Varro in Augustine, *City of God* 7.14; Justin, *First Apology* 1.22; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 54 (*Moralia* 373b).

[14] For devising speech, see Plato, *Cratylus* 407e–408b; compare Diodorus, *Library of History* 1.16 (τὰ περὶ τὴν ἑρμενείαν).

divine speech personified, Thoth is also a creator. "What bursts from his heart has immediate existence; what he pronounces exists for eternity."[15]

In the Hellenistic period (roughly 323–31 BCE), Greeks living in Egypt and Hellenized Egyptians crafted an amalgam of Thoth and Hermes who was called "the Egyptian Hermes" or later "Hermes Thrice Greatest" (*Trismegistos*, *Termaximus*). This Hermes is superlatively great in a superlative (threefold) way. Following English convention, however, here we call "Thrice Greatest Hermes" simply "Hermes Thrice Great."

Greeks typically conceived of Hermes Thrice Great in a Euhemeristic fashion. That is to say, they often considered him to have been an ancient man – a real scribe of a real Pharaoh, often the first divine Pharaoh called Ammon (the Egyptian god Amun). This scribe, named Thoth or Theuth, invented the alphabet and the art of writing.[16] Ever since, humans have been using writing to preserve the vast array of accumulated knowledge. Thoth was later deified to become a recognized Egyptian god or *daimon* (a kind of mediating deity).[17] Writing was the best-known benefit that Thoth offered to human beings, but it was not the only one.

Greeks attributed to Thoth the invention of a host of other arts. Plato (427–347 BCE) made Thoth the discoverer of mathematics and astronomy.[18] Hecataeus of Abdera (fourth century BCE) ascribed to him the invention of a common language, religious ritual, music, wrestling, dancing, and the culture of the olive.[19] The Jewish writer Artapanus (third

[15] These titles derive from hieroglyphic inscriptions from the temple of Denderah printed in Festugière, *RHT*, 1.69 and Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 394–95. The temple is dated to the time of Nero (mid first century CE). Compare the inscription on the door of the library of the great temple of Philae: "the glorious Ibis who came forth from the heart of the god [Re]; tongue of Tenen [Ptah] when he gives command, throat of him of the hidden name [Amun]" (quoted in Patrick Boylan, *Thoth, the Hermes of Egypt: A Study of Some Aspects of Theological Thought in Ancient Egypt* [London: Oxford University Press, 1922], 214–15). In the Shabaka text, Thoth functions as creator in the form of Ptah (*ibid.*, 119). According to a fourth-century CE papyrus fragment called the *Strasbourg Cosmogony*, Hermes is depicted as creator of the world. For an introduction see Jean-Marie Flamand, "Cosmogonie de Strasbourg," *DPA* 2.478–80. See further Youri Volokhine, "Le dieu Thot et la parole," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 221 (2004): 131–56.

[16] For Thoth the inventor of writing, see Philo of Byblos in Eusebius, *Preparation of the Gospel* 1.9.24 (= TH 6a), as well as the writers cited in the next paragraph.

[17] Plato (*Philebus* 18b) expressed uncertainty as to whether Hermes (Thoth) was a god, a *daimon*, or divine man. Perhaps he was a man guided by a *daimon*, as in Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historical Events* 21.14.5 (TH 15). In some Hermetic texts, Hermes Thrice Great is distinguished from his grandfather Thoth (*Ascl.* 37, with Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 174–75). A purely Euhemeristic conception of Hermes Thrice Great is taken up by Christians such as Lactantius, *Wrath of God* 11.12 (with the comments of Löw, *Hermes* 111–13, 140–42), *Institutes* 1.6.3 (= FH 3a); Augustine, *City of God* 18.39 (TH 19b).

[18] Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c–d; 275a.

[19] Diodorus, *Library of History* 1.16.

to second centuries BCE), after identifying Moses with Hermes, makes him the teacher of navigation, devisor of weapons, machines of war, and philosophy.[20] According to the Roman orator Cicero (mid first century BCE), Hermes-Thoth "gave the Egyptians their laws and letters."[21] In the early first century CE, the Roman poet Manilius called Hermes "first founder of this great and holy science" – meaning astrology.[22] The Christian writer Tertullian in the early third century CE dubbed Hermes Thrice Great "teacher of all the natural philosophers."[23] This tradition of philosophy stretched back to Thales in the sixth century BCE. When one reads these testimonies (printed more fully at the end of this volume), one gains a sense of the vast knowledge ascribed to Hermes.[24] There was nary a branch of learning over which the Thrice Great did not preside.

To the question: "Why was the Egyptian Hermes called 'Thrice Great'?" one can answer: triple greatness was the special prerogative of Thoth.[25] A god twice or thrice great was a god supremely great – greater indeed than all his divine competitors (at least in the minds of his devotees).[26] Clay shards in the archive of Hor (around 168 BCE) yield a Greek translation of Thoth's Egyptian epithet: "the greatest, yes, greatest god, great Hermes!"[27] In Egyptian, the repetition likely had a

[20] Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 9.27.4–6 = frag. 3 in *OTP* 2.898–99. See further Gerard Mussies, "The Interpretatio Judaica of Thot-Hermes," in M. Heerma van Voss, among others, eds., *Studies in Egyptian Religion Dedicated to Professor Jan Zandee* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 89–120 at 90–108.

[21] Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 3.56 (= TH 2).

[22] Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.30 (= TH 3).

[23] Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 15.1 (= FH 1a). See further Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 198.

[24] See in particular TH 21 from Cyril of Alexandria.

[25] Florian Ebeling notes that, "From the second millennium BCE on, Thoth was revered as the 'twice great,' which was then escalated into 'thrice great,' that is, 'greatest of all'" (*The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, trans. David Lorton [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007], 30).

[26] Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 185–88. Greek usage is analogous. Plutarch comments that, "We customarily express 'many times' also by 'three times,' just as we say 'thrice blessed'" (*Isis and Osiris* 36 [*Moralia* 365c]).

[27] Mahé, *HHE*, 1 (μέγιστος καὶ μέγιστος θεὸς μέγας Ἑρμῆς). The text is printed in J. D. Ray, *Archive of Hor* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1976), 2, 159–60; Maria Totti, *Ausgewählte Texte der Isis- und Sarapis-Religion* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1985), 140–44. Alternatively, we could translate: "the greatest and greatest, the great god Hermes." The exact epithet to which the Greek translation corresponds remains unclear because of the great variation of Thoth's epithets. These variations are summarily listed by Jan Quaegebeur, "Thot-Hermès, le dieu le plus grand!" in Hartwig Altenmüller, ed., *Hommages à François Daumas*, 2 vols. (Montpellier: University of Montpellier, 1986), 2.525–44 at 537–38. See further Jacques Parlebas, "L'origine égyptienne de l'appellation 'Hermès Trismégiste,'" *Göttinger Miszellen* 13 (1974): 25–28 with the correctives of Maria-Theresia and Philippe Derchain, "Noch einmal Hermes Trismegistos," *Göttinger Miszellen* 15 (1975): 7–10; and Bull, "Tradition of Hermes," 35–38.

distributive sense as well: Thoth is great on every occasion, at all times, in every respect.[28]

The earliest that Hermes attains the actual epithet "Thrice Great," it seems, is with Thrasyllus of Alexandria, famous astrologer of the emperor Tiberius (reigned 14–37 CE).[29] In Greek, threeness evokes the notion of perfection and pluri-potentiality. Hermes is the greatest god, and his manifold powers were available in multiple ways. In this respect, Martial's playful line about the gladiator called Hermes ironically sums up the essence of the Greco-Egyptian god: "Hermes – all things in one and thrice unique!"[30]

As the god of human sciences, both esoteric and empirical, Hermes Thrice Great remained a fundamentally Egyptian deity. The Greek Hermes was never really a scholar or patron of scholars until Late Antiquity.[31] Though "an interpreter, a messenger, a thief and a deceiver in words," the Greek Hermes was never a scribe. Yet writing and the scribal wisdom it represents were associated with Thoth centuries before the Homeric Hermes.

The Egyptian character of the Thrice Great is highlighted in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (*PGM*). These papyri are priceless testimonies of Egyptian domestic religion from the first to the fourth centuries CE. In a hymn recorded in *PGM* 5.400–21, Hermes is called, "Ruler of the world," the "circle of Moon," the "founder of the words of speech, pleader of Justice's cause ... eye of the Sun ... founder of full-voiced speech," sender of oracles, universal healer, and the one "who brings full mental powers." In a slightly longer version of the hymn, Hermes is called lord of the elements, helmsman of the world, and the world's very order.[32] The creative role of Hermes is further underscored in *PGM* 7.551–57, where he is, "the one who [made] the four quarters of the heaven and the four foundations of the earth." According to *PGM* 13.270–77, Thoth, much like the Hebrew god, "brings existence out of the nonexistent, and nonexistence from

[28] Quaegebeur, "Thot-Hermès," in Altenmüller, ed., *Hommages à François Daumas*, 2.537. See also H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus: Isis, Dionysus, and Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 237–44.

[29] Thrasyllus (ὁ λεγόμενος Τρισμέγιστος Ἑρμῆς). The fragment comes from Thrasyllus's *Pinax (or Tablet) for Hieroclea* (= TH 4). Later attestations of the "Thrice Great" title occur in the early to mid second century with Philo of Byblos from Eusebius, *Preparation of the Gospel* 1.10.17 (= TH 6); and Athenagoras, *Embassy* 28.3 (= TH 7). See further Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 26, 162, 216–17; Löw, *Hermes*, 41–46; Bull, "Tradition of Hermes," 38–40.

[30] Martial, *Epigrams* 5.24.15 (*Hermes omnia solus et ter unus*). Compare CH 16.3: the Father of the universe is "the all who is one and the one who is all." See further Versnel, *Ter Unus*, 227–51; Löw, *Hermes*, 30–40.

[31] Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 201–2.

[32] *PGM* 17b.15–19; compare *PGM* 7.668–85.

existent things . . . the true sight of whose face none of the gods can endure to see." As universal creator, Hermes is also the universal knower of "the things hidden beneath heaven and earth."[33]

Greek philosophers tapped into the wisdom of Hermes by – according to legend at least – visiting Egypt and sitting at the feet of Hermes's heirs: Egyptian priests. These priests were naturally reluctant to share their sacred wisdom, but their visitors proved persistent.[34] According to tradition, all the greatest philosophers – among them Pythagoras, Solon, Eudoxus, Plato, and Democritus, among many others – came to "study abroad" in Egypt.[35] Even if one grants the historicity of these sojourns, one reasonably doubts that all these Greeks learned the specific wisdom later associated with the Thrice Great. Yet if all Egyptian wisdom ultimately derives from Thoth, then Greece's finest sages could later be viewed as the god's disciples. Only on occasion, however, is the connection between the philosophers and Hermes himself made explicit. According to Tertullian, Plato was especially intimate with the Egyptian Hermes.[36] Iamblichus affirms that Pythagoras and Plato, during their visits to Egypt, carefully studied the stelae (inscribed pillars) of Hermes with the help of native priests.[37]

By Late Antiquity, Hermes the Egyptian was viewed as the supreme philosopher, or rather the one who stood at the head of the Greek philosophical tradition. Hermes was not a historical author, but he did possess an important "author function."[38] His name guaranteed the antiquity and validity of a host of Greco-Egyptian writings that addressed important scientific and philosophical topics of the time.

[33] *PGM* 8.1–52.

[34] See especially the case of Thessalus, discussed by Festugière, *Mystique*, 141–80; Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Temple and the Magician," in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 172–89.

[35] For Pythagoras, see Isocrates, *Busiris* 28; for Solon, see Plato, *Timaeus* 21e–22b; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 10 (*Moralia* 354e); for Pythagoras, Plato, and Democritus, see Cicero, *On Ends* 5.87; for Plato and Eudoxus, see Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.29; for Pythagoras and Solon, see Diodorus, *Library of History* 1.69.4; for Solon, Pythagoras, Eudoxus, and Democritus, see *ibid.* 1.96.2; 1.98.2; for Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Solon, and Plato, see Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historical Events* 22.16.21–22. These and other texts are collected by Heinrich Dörrie, *Der hellenistische Rahmen des kaiserzeitlichen Platonismus Bausteine 36–72: Text Übersetzung, Kommentar*, vol. 2 of *Der Platonismus in der Antike* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromman, 1990), 166–74, with commentary on 425–53. Peter Kingsley argues that Pythagoras's (i.e. Pythagoras's trip) trip to Egypt was historical ("From Pythagoras to the *Turba philosophorum*: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtland Institutes* 57 [1994]: 1–13 at 1–3). See further Sauneron, *Priests*, 110–15.

[36] Tertullian, *On the Soul* 2.3 (= FH 1b).

[37] Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.2 (= TH 12).

[38] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in R. C. Davis and R. Scheifer, eds., *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 3rd edn. (New York: Longman, 1994), 262–75.

Yet Hermes the Egyptian meant more than Hermes the ancient sage. His Egyptian identity guaranteed the importance and prestige of Egypt throughout the Hellenistic world. To the Greeks, Hermes Thrice Great represented the wisdom of Egypt, just as Moses came to symbolize the wisdom of the Jews, Ostanes the wisdom of the Persians, and Dandamis the wisdom of India. In terms of the discursive practices of Late Antiquity, the Hermetic writings were deeply Hellenic in form and language. Nevertheless, Hermes never stopped being Egyptian, and the Hermetic writings never lost their Egyptian roots and local color.

Hermetic Communities?

The Hermetic literature refers to named teachers and disciples like Hermes, Tat, Ammon, Isis, Horus, and so on. Do these literary characters reflect a social reality of Hermetic teaching?[39] If so, what group did Hermetic teachers belong to or represent? Where did this group or groups meet, and what did they do in their meetings? Theories have come and gone. Richard Reitzenstein initially proposed a kind of Hermetic mother church located in Egypt. By contrast, Jean-André Festugière found, "no trace in the Hermetic literature of ceremonies belonging to supposed believers in Hermes, nothing that resembles sacraments . . . There is no clergy, no appearance of hierarchical organization, no degrees of initiation . . . On the contrary . . . Hermeticism forthrightly expresses its loathing for material acts of worship."[40]

After the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Hermetic writings, however, Gilles Quispel could declare that, "It is now completely certain that there existed before and after the beginning of the Christian era in Alexandria [Egypt], a secret society, akin to a Masonic lodge. The members of the group called themselves 'brethren,' were initiated through a baptism of the Spirit, celebrated a sacred meal and read the Hermetic writings as edifying treatises for their spiritual progress."[41] More cautiously, Jean-Pierre Mahé observed that the prayers in the Hermetic corpus "provide evidence that there were communities placed under the patronage of Hermes in

[39] On spiritual teaching in antiquity, see Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 13–62; Anna van den Kerchove, *Le voie d'Hermès: Pratiques rituelles et traits hermétiques* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 45–183.

[40] Festugière, *RHT*, 1.81–84. [41] Quoted in Salaman and others, *Way of Hermes*, 10.

which . . . prayer, characterized as . . . 'sacrifice of speech,' . . . could have the place of a true sacrament."[42]

Today, most scholars seem persuaded that references to "pure food,"[43] a ritual embrace,[44] and formal prayers[45] suggest some sort of ritual and community life.[46] Christian H. Bull in part revives the idea of Reitzenstein that Hermetic community leaders were Egyptian priests increasingly detached from temple service and administration.[47] Partial support for this idea comes from the *Book of Thoth*, a book written in an Egyptian priestly language (demotic) which circulated in the first and second centuries CE. In the book, Thoth – or someone who shares his epithets – dialogues with one seeking knowledge. The book emerged from Egyptian priestly circles and deals with native Egyptian lore. Although most of this lore does not overlap with the contents of the philosophical Hermetica, the genre and format of the *Book of Thoth* strongly resembles these writings.[48]

It must be kept in mind, however, that the community life of the Hermetic practitioners is almost entirely reconstructed from the Hermetic texts themselves. External witnesses sometimes refer to Egyptian priests living in temple complexes and passing on their wisdom.[49] None of these,

[42] Quoted in Copenhaver, 123. See further R. van den Broek, "Religious Practices in the Hermetic 'Lodge': New Light from Nag Hammadi," in van den Broek, ed., *From Poimandres*, 77–96.

[43] *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7), 65.6.

[44] *Disc. 8–9* (NHC VI,6), 57.26–27; *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7), 65.4.

[45] For example, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7), parallel to *Ascl.* 41.

[46] Van den Kerchove concludes that the "way of Hermes" is "a sequence of concrete ritual practices, some regular, some occasional, some temporary, others developing as a consequence of the disciple's formation. Some are a simple gesture, like a kiss. Others combine words and gestures like the rite of absorption or certain prayers. Almost all are based on a performative word, that of the teacher" (*Voie*, 374–75). See further S. Giversen, "Hermetic Communities?" in J. P. Sorensen, ed., *Rethinking Religion: Studies in the Hellenistic Process* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 1989), 49–54; Gebhard Löhr, *Verherrlichung Gottes durch Philosophie: Der hermetische Traktat II im Rahmen der antiken Philosophie- und Religionsgeschicthe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 385–97; Matthias Heiduk, "Offene Geheimnisse – Hermetische Texte und verborgenes Wissen in der mittelalterlichen Rezeption von Augustinus bis Albertus Magnus" (Ph.D. diss., Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, 2007), 41–59.

[47] Bull, "Tradition of Hermes," 437–70; see also David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 198–237; Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 261–74; Françoise Dunand and Christiane Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt 3000 BCE to 395 CE* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 210–13; Ian S. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 264–73.

[48] Richard Jasnow and Karl-Theodor Zauzich, eds., *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth: A Demotic Discourse on Knowledge and Pendant to the Classical Hermetica*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), especially 65–70.

[49] See especially Chaeremon, frag. 10 (van der Horst) = Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 4.6.8, also printed in Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 54–55, and discussed by P. W. van der Horst, "The Way of Life of the Egyptian Priests according to Chaeremon," in van Voss, ed., *Studies in Egyptian Religion*, 61–71.