

{Section 3}

HERMES—WHO WAS HE?

What then is God? The Good that naught can change.

What man? The bad that can be changed.

—Hermes Trismegistus, *The Book of Tat*, from the *Corpus Hermeticum*

As we have seen, many philosophic systems have been inspired by the Hermetic Wisdom teachings. The Golden Dawn, Rosicrucians, Kabbalists and Sufis are all connected to the Hermetic mind. The fields of art, science, medicine, music, literature and architecture have all been touched by the Hermetic hand.

We have encountered the seven Hermetic Laws in the chapter devoted to the New Thought movement book, “*The Kybalion and the Seven Hermetic Laws*.”

But where do the Hermetic ideals originate? Who invented them?

Hermeticism is defined as a set of philosophical and religious beliefs based on the writings attributed to a man named Hermes Trismegistus. But this being named Hermes may not have been a man at all. It’s a name for a God, an angel, an avatar, and a man, depending upon the scholar or school of belief. Greek scholars, Arabic scholars and European scholars all butt heads regarding Hermetic identities.

The most acceptable idea seems to be that Hermes was in fact several people over time, perhaps even a direct line of sons who took over their fathers’ teachings and kept them alive in the hearts of mankind. No two scholars seem to agree upon exactly what that lineage was and who was involved.

Some of the older sources include such figures as Zoroaster, Orpheus, Mithra and Alaophemus.¹⁴ More traditional lineages usually state the following order: Poimandres, Thoth, Hermes, Asclepius, Tat.¹⁵

¹⁴ Marsilio, Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*.

¹⁵ Marsilio, Ficino, *De potestate et sapientia Dei*.

The most classic genealogy . . . starts the Hermes series with Thoth . . . His son was Agathodemon, who himself begat the second Hermes, called Trismegistus, whose son was Tat. Apollonius Rhodius tells us that Hermes, through his son Aithalides, was a direct ancestor of Pythagoras, but nothing is more uncertain than divine genealogies ¹⁶

The lineages are primarily derived from the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Hermetic writings. The writings are almost always a dialogue between two individuals. One addresses the other in such a way that they are handing down the knowledge. Other scholars hold that some of the Hermes in the lineage were translators.

Some say that Hermes Trismegistus and Thoth are two separate individuals; other scholars say they are one and the same.

Here are the different versions of Hermes through time:

Thoth

Known as the God of wisdom, learning, and communication, Thoth was the first Magus and the first medical doctor. Some put Thoth as far back as the perhaps mythical time of Atlantis, around 10,000 BC, while others count him in the party of angels who fell to earth after the historic “war in heaven.”¹⁷

Most Egyptian scholars say that Thoth lived in Egypt some time between 2000 and 1200 BC, but even this is highly debated. Thoth is also known as Djehuti (or Tehuti), Dhutii, and possibly Ptath.¹⁸ Djehuti is one of his older Egyptian names and comes from the root word “Dhu” or “Tehu” which is translated as the old Egyptian words for ibis.¹⁹ Thoth is affiliated with the ibis in Egyptian religion, and was usually depicted with the head of this sacred bird. The ibis was often mummified by ancient Egyptians as a symbol of the god Thoth, and was also invoked against incursions invasions of serpents, said Herodotus and Pliny the Elder. Thoth was also usually shown holding either a caduceus or a feather and a scroll. The caduceus was a symbol of his power, and the feather and scroll were to denote his role as the “scribe” of the gods. (Later the symbol was usurped by the medical community.)

¹⁶ Faivre, Antoine, *The Eternal Hermes*.

¹⁷ As listed in the *Book of Enoch*.

¹⁸ Some scholars separate these and others do not.

¹⁹ Mead, G.R.S., *Thrice Greatest Hermes*.

Even the description of Thoth's appearance has many variants. He is sometimes shown as a baboon or a dog, and was said to be capable of taking on any form he wished.

He was notorious for his ability to keep changing his shape and appearing as this or that, or simply as the whole of creation ²⁰

Thoth is a self-begotten god in the Egyptian creation myths. According to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Thoth has no mother and no father; he's a sourceless entity. In other versions of Egyptian cosmology, Thoth is an aspect of Ra. Thoth was said to have created the world by speaking it into being: "Thoth speaks forth the divine word which creates the world."²¹

This action is much like the Judeo-Christian God who creates the world with the Word, and the Vedic God Brahma who announces "*Nada Brahma*" (the world is sound). For this reason, Thoth was acknowledged to be the "tongue of Ra."²²

Thoth was in charge of all forms of communication and language; he is said to have originated the hieroglyph. According to the oldest medical documents, the Ebers papyrus of 1550 BC:

Thoth, who bestows on him the gifts of his speech, who makes the books, and illumines those who are learned therein, and the physicians who follow him, that they may work cures.²³

He is described in the Egyptian creation mythologies as "Logos," meaning "word," a name that was later applied to Hermes Trismegistus, and also to Jesus Christ. Thoth was known as the interpreter or translator. His role was to translate the word of God into a language that man could understand. For this reason, he was also known as the messenger of the gods.

For the Egyptians and the Greeks, all medicine originated with Thoth, who was also a lord of the underworld, the god of the moon, and a psychopomp (one who helped guide souls to the world of the dead). In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Thoth tells

20 Kingsley, Peter, *From Poimandres to Jacob Bohme*.

21 Mead, G.R.S., *Thrice Greatest Hermes*.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

Isis the secret of immortality by breathing it into her ear so that she may resurrect Osiris. Through this parable, Thoth became affiliated with the knowledge of immortality and resurrection; both play large roles in Hermetic literature.

Egyptologist Gaston Maspero offers this about Thoth the Egyptian:

Thoth represented an ibis or baboon, was essentially a moon god, who measured time, counted the days, numbered the months and recorded the years. Lunar divinities, as we know, are everywhere supposed to exercise the most varied powers: they command the mysterious forces of the universe; they know the sounds words and gestures by which these forces are put in motion, and, not content with using them for their own benefit, they also teach their worshippers the art of employing them. Thoth formed no exception to this rule. He was the lord of the voice, master of words and books, possessor and inventor of those magic writings which nothing in heaven, on earth or in Hades can withstand. He had discovered the incantations which evoke and control the gods; he had transcribed the texts and noted the melodies of these incantations; he recited them with that true intonation which renders them all powerful, and every one, whether god or man to whom he imparted them, and whose voice he made true became like himself the master of the universe. He had accomplished creation, not by a muscular effort to which the rest of the cosmogonical gods primarily owed their birth but by means of formulas or even of the voice alone, the first time when he awoke in the Nu. The articulate word and the voice were believed to be the most potent of the creative forces, not remaining immaterial on issuing from the lips, but condensing, so to speak, into tangible substances, into bodies which were themselves animated by creative life and energy.

Hermes Trismegistus

Was he one or many, merging
Name and fame in one,
Like a stream, to which, converging
Many streamlets run?
Who shall call his dreams fallacious?

Who has searched or sought
All the unexplored and spacious
Universe of thought?

Who in his own skill confiding,
Shall with rule and line
Mark the border-land dividing
Human and divine?

Trismegistus! Thrice times greatest!
How thy name sublime
Has descended to this latest
Progeny of time!

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Hermes Trismegistus”

The name Hermes Trismegistus first appears to us in Hermopolis, the Greek name for the Egyptian city of Khemmenu. The name Hermes Trismegistus was found on a statue in the temple of Thoth at Hermopolis.

Evidence of the worship of Hermes Trismegistus in this city dates back to 2000 BC, around the same time some scholars place Thoth in Egypt, which contributes to the confusion of their identities. By the time the Greeks built temples in Hermopolis, the name Hermes Trismegistus was used instead of Thoth. Was Hermes a god-like Thoth, since he was worshipped in temples? Or was Thoth the god and Hermes the man? Clement of Alexandria says that Hermes once lived as a man amongst the Greeks and was later deified: “Of those too who once lived as men among the Egyptians, but who have been made Gods by human opinion, Hermes of Thebes and Asclepius of Memphis [are among them].”²⁴

Hermes Trismegistus was also said to have translated the writings of Thoth into Greek. The Greek word for interpreter or translator is *hermeneus*, based on the name Hermes. The name “Trismegistus” means thrice great. The meaning of this title is debated; some take it to mean there were three of him over time,

²⁴ Mead, G.R.S. *Thrice Greatest Hermes*.

others take it for what was exclaimed in the Hermetic temples at the time of sacrifice: “Great! Great! Great!” Others say the name Trismegistus denotes Hermes’ teachings of the trinity of God with one Godhead.²⁵

Hermes Trismegistus was also said to be the father of Agathodaemon, a Greek deity usually represented by a snake. (In Greek mythology, Agathos Daimon or Agathodaemon was the god of the vineyards and wine. In his honor, wine was poured into the dirt before a meal, a tradition which still exists today in many cultures. Agathodaemon was later deemed the daemon of good luck, particularly of food and drink.) Agathodaemon was in turn said to have fathered the second Hermes. In this case, the Hermetic teachings were passed along the bloodline of a patriarchy. Of the Hermetic texts to be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, most were said to have been authored by Hermes Trismegistus specifically.

Francis Barrett, born in the late eighteenth century and author of the occult classic *The Magus*, had this to say about Hermes Trismegistus:

He was called Ter Maximus, as having a perfect knowledge of all things contained in the world (as his Aureus, or Golden Tractate, and his Divine Pymander shews) which things he divided into three kingdoms, viz. animal, vegetable, and mineral; in the knowledge and comprehension of which three he excelled and transmitted to posterity, in enigmas and symbols, the profound secrets of nature; likewise a true description of the Philosopher’s Quintessence, or Universal Elixir, which he made as the receptacle of all celestial and terrestrial virtues. The Great Secret of the philosophers he discoursed on, which was found engraven upon a Smaragdine table, in the valley of Ebron. There is no doubt but that he possessed the great secret of the philosophic work; and if God ever appeared in man, he appeared in him, as is evident both from his books and his Pymander; in which works he has communicated the sum of the abyss, and the divine knowledge to all posterity; by which he has demonstrated himself to have been not only an inspired divine, but also a deep philosopher, obtaining his wisdom from God and heavenly things, and not from man.²⁶

²⁵ Suidas, as quoted *ibid*.

²⁶ Barrett, Francis, *The Magus*.

General Albert Pike, the Confederate General and Grand Commander of Scottish Rite Southern Jurisdiction Freemasonry, wrote about Hermes in his iconic book, *Morals and Dogma*:

Hermes Trismegistus invented many things necessary for the uses of life, and gave them suitable names; he taught men how to write down their thoughts and arrange their speech; he instituted the ceremonies to be observed in the worship of each of the Gods; he observed the course of the stars; he invented music, the different bodily exercises, arithmetic, medicine, the art of working in metals, the lyre with three strings; he regulated the three tones of the voice, the sharp, taken from autumn, the grave from winter, and the middle from spring, there being then but three seasons. It was he who taught the Greeks the mode of interpreting terms and things, when they gave him the name of [Hermes], which signifies Interpreter. In Egypt he instituted hieroglyphics: he selected a certain number of persons whom he judged fitted to be the depositories of his secrets, of such only as were capable at attaining the throne and the first offices in the Mysteries, he united them in a body, created them Priests of the Living God, instructed them in the sciences and arts, and explained to them the symbols by which they were veiled.

There is also the Greek god Hermes. And later, the Romans syncretized this god and called him Mercury. Some say that this Hermes is a different figure than Hermes Trismegistus, and others say he is the same. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Hermes was a deity and was worshipped as such. Countless cults were affiliated with Hermes throughout Greece and parts of Europe. Hermes was recognized by the Greeks as the god of science, commerce, language and writing. He is shown with a caduceus, just as Thoth was by the Egyptians. Hermes, like Thoth, also served as a psychopomp, an escort for the dead to help them find their way to the afterlife.

Hermes was the trickster god, like Thoth, and could also shift his shape.

A faceless prophet, Hermes possesses no concrete or salient characteristics, differing in this regard from most of the major figures of the Bible and the Quran.²⁷

²⁷ Faivre, Antoine, *The Eternal Hermes*.

And like Thoth, Hermes is credited with founding of the art of Healing:

While modern physicians accredit Hippocrates with being the father of medicine, the ancient Therapeutae ascribed to the immortal Hermes the distinction of being the founder of the art of healing.²⁸

In Greek mythology, Zeus was Hermes' father, and Maia was his mother. (We owe our month of May to Maia's namesake.) There are some, like Augustus Le Plongeon, who made the connection between Egyptian deities of Egypt and those from the Christian faith. Le Plongeon wrote that Maia was later used by Christians to become their Mary who bore Christ from virgin birth.²⁹ An interesting idea when we consider that Hermes was born of God also, having been sired by Zeus when he lays with a mortal woman. Le Plongeon was not alone in noting this similarity, as Justin Martyr points out;

But as to the son of God called Jesus, even though he were only a man born in the common way, yet because of his wisdom worthy to be called Son of God . . . and if we say that he was born in a special way, beyond his common birth, begotten of God as word of God, let us have this in common with you who call Hermes the word who brings tidings from God.³⁰

Asclepius

Asclepius was a skilled physician who practiced in Greece around 1200 BC. He eventually became deified as the Greek god of medicine, and was written about in Homer's *Iliad*. He is traditionally depicted as a bearded man holding a staff with his sacred single serpent coiled around it, resembling the caducei of Thoth and Hermes. (From the early sixteenth century onwards, the staff of Asclepius and the caduceus of Hermes were widely used as printers' marks, especially as frontispieces to pharmacopoeias in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.)

According to Greek mythology, Asclepius is the son of Apollo and the nymph Coronis. While pregnant with Asclepius, Coronis secretly took a second, mortal lover. When Apollo found out, he sent

²⁸ Hall, Manly P., *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*.

²⁹ Le Plongeon, Augustus, *Origin of the Egyptians*.

³⁰ Mead, G.R.S., *Thrice Greatest Hermes*.