

THE HERMETIC TRADITION

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Learning esoteric scholar Joscelyn Godwin traces the outlines of the Hermetic Tradition from Thoth to Hermes Trismegistus, and its essential teachings. He demonstrates how the unique character of the tradition has enabled it to influence much of the Western world and its many paths.



The idea of a primordial wisdom leading directly from the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus to the Greek Orpheus had more than a grain of truth in it. Even though the Egypt of classical times was far past its zenith, its temple traditions attracted aspirants of the caliber of Pythagoras and Plato, who made the journey to gain its initiations and incorporate them into their own philosophies. At the level of popular religion, the Egyptian cults entered the classical world in the fourth century B.C. with Alexander the Great's conquests. Alexander himself was pictured with the ram-horns of the Theban god Amon. To Rome went the goddess Isis, whose cult became one of the most splendid of the imperial era. In Alexandria and other Greek-speaking centers, a new god, Serapis, arose as a friendly rival to Zeus. Ibis-headed Thoth reappeared under the turban of Mercurius Trismegistus, Thrice-Greatest Hermes.

In polytheism, each god or goddess has a particular function. Each is an aspect of the unknowable One, and doubtless they all point to the same goal, but each appeals to a different psychospiritual type. Thoth, in Egyptian mythology, was the first giver of

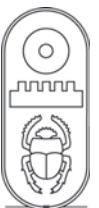
useful knowledge to mankind. A god who relates to mankind by giving knowledge is far different from a suffering savior god like Osiris or Jesus, or a loving mother goddess like Isis or the Virgin Mary, and will attract a different type of devotee. The way that leads through knowledge is, on the whole, an esoteric path, as opposed to the exoteric one of devotional religion. This knowledge, which is the goal of true philosophy, has a dual purpose. First, it teaches techniques and practices for overcoming human limitations, such as the trauma of death. Second, it studies the cosmic order and seeks to work within it. Wherever these two purposes meet, we have a form of Hermetism.

Characteristics of Thoth

In Egyptian myth, Thoth is described variously as the spirit and intelligence of



Olga Deulofeu, SRC, *Thoth*.





Seated Baboon representing Thoth. (Saite Period, ca. 664–525 BCE.) The Baboon is seated in the position of a scribe, and therefore is associated with Thoth (Djehuti). The base of the figure may have been used to dispense incense, making this a practical temple tool. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

the Creator; god of learning and of healing; judge of celestial disputes and secretary of the gods; weigher of the souls of the dead. It was he who uttered the words that reunited the severed members of Osiris after the latter's murder by Set. Thoth invented numbers; he measured time and created the calendar. At his most abstract, he was a god of transitions: from chaos to cosmos, strife to friendship, death to rebirth, causes to effects. More concretely, he was seen by the people as a god of magic spells and astrology, folk medicine, and the lore of plants and minerals.

All of these qualities followed Thoth as the Alexandrian Greeks adopted him,¹ finding the nearest equivalent in their own pantheon as Hermes. The Greek god Hermes had also been a god of transitions: a marker of boundaries, guide of souls to Hades, messenger between Olympus and earth, patron of merchants and thieves. When his name was given to Thoth, with the epithet Trismegistus, he moved up the

social scale, becoming a philosopher-king. Thus he recreated for the Hellenistic age the memory of those divine men, or incarnate gods, who are said to have been the first teachers and lawgivers of the human race. There are echoes of them in every land: in India as Rama, Krishna, and Manu; in Persia as Zoroaster; in China as Fo-Hi; in the Americas as Quetzalcoatl and Viracocha; in Greece as Dionysus and Orpheus, in Ireland as the Tuatha Dé Danann; and in Northern Europe as Odin.

Gradually Hermes Trismegistus acquired a body of scripture of his own, now known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*.² Generally dated to between the first and third centuries A.D., it is a collection of doctrinal and inspirational writings by several authors, playing variations around a few great themes: the absolute goodness of God, who is both One and All; the self-revelation of the Divine Mind in the cosmos; the universe as an emanation of living beings in hierarchical order; the unique constitution of the human being as microcosm; the way to regeneration and the direct knowledge of God. The Hermetic scriptures restated these themes for the



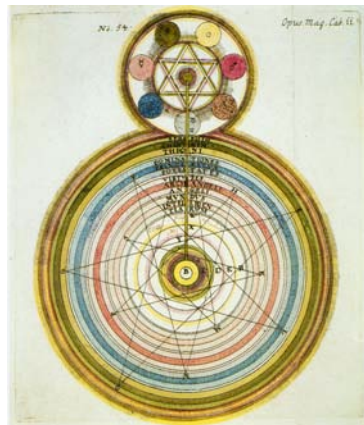
Hermes and Herse (ca. 470 BCE). Attic red-figure amphora. From the collection of the National Archaeological Museum of Spain. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

benefit of cosmopolitan Greek-speakers living under the Roman Empire.

Master and Revealer of Esoteric Sciences

Just as Thoth had a popular side, so Hermes became a master of the occult sciences, a revealer of astrological medicine and of the sympathetic magic by which one draws down influences from the heavens and fixes them in talismans. An example occurs in the Latin Hermetic text *Asclepius*, in the description of how the Egyptians infused gods into statues: an idea that both fascinated and scared Christian writers.³ Last but not least, Hermes's natural philosophy and secret knowledge joined to make him the father of alchemy, the Egyptian art of transmutation. It is no chance that alchemy accords such a vital role to Mercury, both as the most mysterious of the known metals and as a symbol of the elusive faculty of the soul that mediates between matter and spirit. The transmutation in question could be understood chemically, as turning base metals into gold, but also in terms of inner transformations within the human being (see chapter 13 [of *The Golden Thread* —Ed]).

Another mythic image for the latter process occurs in the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, "Poimandres."⁴ It is the description of the ascent of the soul after death, and the surrendering of its energies to the successive spheres of the seven planets. (The cosmos is assumed to be geocentric, with the earth at the center surrounded, like the layers of an onion, by the spheres of the moon, planets, sun, and stars.) When the soul has given up all its downward tendencies, it can soar up through the eighth sphere (the fixed stars) and join the company of the Blessed. This is a cosmic version of the ordeal described in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (or *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*), where the soul must traverse the several halls of the Otherworld and be weighed against a feather, before it can enter the paradise of Osiris.⁵



Georg von Welling, *The Circles of the Cosmos* (1735) in *Opus Mago-cabbalisticum Et Theosophicum*. From the Rosicrucian archives.

The Doctrine of Correspondences

The philosophic side of Hermetism is based on the doctrine of correspondences. In the Hermetic ascent, each planet corresponds to a certain power of the soul: Mercury to the intelligence, Venus to desire, Mars to anger, etc. The human being is thus a microcosm, containing in little the same energies as the macrocosm. If we picture earth at the center of the universe, the soul has acquired these energies on its downward (or inward) journey from the celestial regions through the planetary spheres. It emerges into earth life via the womb, full of potentials and tendencies that are delineated by its natal horoscope. Through life it works with these potentials, hopefully refining them so that they emerge as virtues. If this is accomplished, the soul when it leaves the body at death is light and unencumbered, and well able to rise upward (or outward) to the place of its origin. If instead the energies have coagulated in vices, then the upward journey will be difficult and the soul may even remain trapped in the earth's atmosphere, a torment to itself and a bane to its fellows.

Hermetism in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

After the Roman Empire, Hermetism, or the religious philosophy that gave rise to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, expanded to include



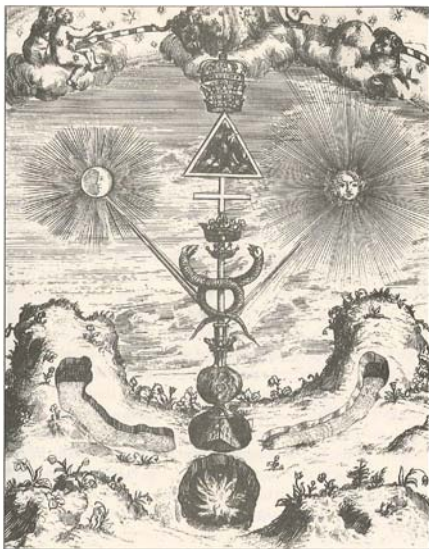
alchemy and the occult sciences (divination, astrology, magic, etc.). All three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) found a place for it, though sometimes a grudging one. It entered Islam thanks to the Sabaeans of Harran, the center of an ancient copper industry now in Turkey near the Syrian border. The Sabaeans, who receive favorable mention in the Qur'an, blended star worship with Neopythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, and practical alchemy.⁶ Their patron divinities were Hermes and Agathodaimon, who were made respectable as the Muslim prophets Idris (the Enoch of the Bible) and Adam's son Seth. For a century or more Harran was also the home of a school of translators who specialized in Greek mathematics and astronomy, thus transmitting much of the Pythagorean tradition to the Muslim world. Their work was taken over in the tenth century by the Brethren of Purity of Basra (Iraq), who compiled an encyclopedia of all the arts and sciences, including theurgy and magic. This was studied by the Druses, by the sect of the Assassins, and by most Sufi schools, in which it is still read today. In this way, Hermetism has passed into the very heart of Islamic esotericism.

In Judaism, the Hermetic influences emerged in the Kabbalah. The short and fundamental Kabbalistic text *Sepher Yezirah*⁷ (the "Book of Creation," ca. third century A.D.) expounds a cosmology based on the doctrine of correspondences, notably the sevenfold one of the planets, days of the week, openings in the head and body, etc., and the twelve-fold one of the zodiac, directions of space, months, organs of the body, etc. It describes a cosmos not torn between good and evil, but held in polarity by positive and negative energies. The method of salvation is through becoming aware of oneself as a microcosm, seating the "King on his Throne" (the divine presence) in the center of life. Again we have a doctrine that is affirmative of nature and the body, and dedicated to the realization of the macrocosm in the microcosm. The esoteric idea of Israel is also a Hermetic one: it is that the Jews are called upon to bear witness to the divine order on earth. Just as in Hermetism the earth, including the human body, is replete with celestial influences, so the Jewish way of life is designed to ensure that every action carries a spiritual significance.

In the West, the only Hermetic treatise known through the Middle Ages was the *Asclepius*, which was viewed with some mistrust as a magical text. Only in 1460 did the greater part of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrive in Florence; one of Cosimo de' Medici's scouts had discovered a manuscript in Macedonia. Three years later, Marsilio Ficino presented his translation to the aged Cosimo, and for the next century and a half the Hermetic writings had a marked effect on the intellectual world. The idea that God had spoken not only to the Jews but to the pagans led, in select circles, to the renewal of a universal religious sense, such as had last existed under the Roman Empire. In the Renaissance era, the Hermetic philosophy served as neutral ground for Protestants and Catholics alike. Alchemy and the other occult



Stefan Michel Spacher, *The Cave of the Ancients* (1616), in *Cabala: Spiegel der Kunst und Natur in Alchymia*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Limojon de Saint-Didier, *Hermetic Cadeuceus and the Seven Steps* (1689) in *Le Triomphe Hermetique*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

sciences to which it provided the intellectual under-pinning flourished as never before.

Because it is essentially a cosmological and practical teaching, rather than a theology, Hermetism can coexist with any religion. It offers an analysis of the human condition within the cosmos, and a variety of methods for making the best use of this condition. Its historical record is innocent of intolerance and bloodshed, its way of life one of science, contemplation, and self-refinement. For these reasons, the Hermetic territory is an ideal meeting place for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and those of other religions or none. John Michell writes of how the Hermetic science of sacred geometry, which he demonstrates as underlying the city of Jerusalem, might potentially unite “Jews to the east, Muslims to the south, Christians to the west and, in the direction of the north pole, followers of that ancient religious system that preceded the others.”⁸

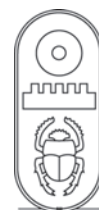
Essence as Immortal and Impersonal

However, if we try to penetrate this deeper wisdom with the help of modern Hermetic schools, we meet a more esoteric and perhaps disturbing doctrine. According

to these schools, while the essence of each human is immortal, it is also impersonal. The personality does not survive, at least not long after bodily death, and consequently there is nothing left of most people’s souls once they have been filtered through the planetary spheres.⁹ The vast majority will be extinguished as personalities soon after death, while their essence may be recycled as entirely different entities. To put it plainly, there is no guarantee of personal immortality, whatever comforting doctrines may say to the contrary. The ambition of the Hermetic adept is to survive this general dissolution, and if he should incarnate again, to do so only through deliberate choice, not through bondage to a natural process like everyone else. In order to pass beyond the boundaries of the cosmos (symbolized by the starry sphere) and enter consciously into another mode of existence, the adept must have forged, during life, a “radiant body” as vehicle for his individuality.¹⁰ This is obviously similar to the process described in the *Chaldean Oracles* and discussed in the previous chapter [of *The Golden Thread*—Ed].



Hildegard of Bingen, *Humanity in the Universal Creation* (thirteenth century), in *Liber diviorum operum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



But it would be a great mistake to assume that only the adept's life is worthwhile, because only he or she achieves personal immortality. In a sense, the adept's goal of preserving individuality is against nature, and because, like all science, it is amoral, it may preserve evil personalities as well as good ones. As one of the few experts in this field writes:

The *permanent* preservation of a personal identity beyond death is a very rare achievement, accomplished only by those who wrest her secrets from Nature, and control their own super-material development. . . . [It is] accomplished only by adepts and sorcerers—the one class having acquired the supreme secret knowledge by holy methods, and with benevolent motives, the

other having acquired it by unholy methods, and for base motives.¹¹

Hermetism is not limited to the aim of personal immortality in this sense. Unlike the world-rejecting philosophies, it accepts and joyfully embraces the entire process of incarnation and excarnation. The physical world, because it is infused with celestial influences, is a place of beauty and wonder. Nature is a book from which the wisdom of the divine Mind can be read. Thoth, we recall, was concerned with *useful* knowledge: arts and sciences that improve the quality of life, such as music and mathematics and writing. Alchemy itself obviously began with the technology of metals. Wherever mere animal existence is enhanced by the arts or sciences, and people become aware of the divine Mind through the works of Nature, the gifts of Thoth are bearing fruit.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes, from Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, trans. J. Godwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995); and Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

² The standard English translation is Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Previous versions are by John Everard, *The Divine Pyramider of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus* (London, 1650 and reprints); G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice-Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis*, 3 vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906 and reprints); Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926 and reprints).

³ See D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), 40–44; Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1964), 66–68.

⁴ “Poimandres” is sometimes translated as “shepherd of men,” but recent scholarship suggests that it is derived not from the Greek *poimen*, “shepherd,” but from the Egyptian *pe-men-re*, meaning “enlightened mind.” See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 95.

⁵ See Normandi Ellis, *Awakening Osiris: The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988), 87–94.

⁶ See Nick Kollerstrom, “The Star Temples of Harran,” in *History and Astrology: Clio and Urania Confer*, ed. A. Kitson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 47–60.

⁷ See *The Book of Creation*, trans. I. Friedman (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977).

⁸ John Michell, *The Temple at Jerusalem: A Revelation* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 2000), 60.

⁹ See *Introduzione alla magia quale scienza dell'Io*, 3 vols. (Genoa: Fratelli Melitta, 1987). A translation of the first volume into English has been published as Julius Evola and the Ur Group, *Introduction to Magic: Rituals and Practical Techniques for the Magus*, trans. G. Stucco, ed. M. Moynihan (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2000); J. Godwin, “The Survival of the Personality According to Modern Esoteric Teachings,” in *Esotérisme, Gnosés Imaginaire Symbolique, Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, ed. R. Caron, J. Godwin, W. J. Hanegraaff, J. L. Viellard-Baron (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 403–14.

¹⁰ See Ea [Julius Evola], “The Doctrine of the ‘Immortal Body,’” in *Introduction to Magic*, 196–202.

¹¹ H. P. Blavatsky, “Death and Immortality,” *Collected Writings* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969), 4:250–56.