



MONTHLY LETTER

Dedicated to Spiritual and Philosophical Problems -- by Manly P. Hall

Los Angeles, April, 1937.

HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

Dear Friend:

The burning of the Alexandrian Libraries resulted in the destruction of most of the historical records of the Ancient World. From all parts of the earth the most valuable of books, scrolls, and tablets had been diligently gathered and housed in several great buildings, especially the Bruckion and Serapeum. When Cleopatra stood in the presence of the mountain of burned manuscripts, she wept for the lost glory of the world.

The modern Egyptologist possesses but limited facilities to assist him in his effort to restore the sublime theology of the ancient Egyptians. For the most part, the surviving literature of these people consists of mortuary rolls, most of these merely variants of the BOOK OF THE DEAD according to the various recensions. The Egyptian priestcraft guarded its secrets carefully, and so thoroughly were the Mysteries protected that only an occasional fragment has survived to the present day.

Among the principal deities of the Egyptian pantheon is Thoth, or Tahuti, or Theuth. In the Osiris Cycle Thoth is the friend of Nut, the mother of Osiris. When Nut is cursed by Ra and forbidden to deliver her children on any of the days of the year, Thoth plays a game of dice with the moon Goddess Selene and wins from her a seventieth part of her light. With this part he made

five days, which did not belong to the calendar and are called inter-calendarary and which he added to the previous Egyptian year that consisted of 360 days. On these five days the children of Nut were born, and because of this these days were always regarded as sacred by the Egyptians who would transact no business on them but reserved them for festivals. Thus in the early mythology of the Egyptians Thoth assumes his true role of teacher, protector, and God of Learning. He is the deity who devises means by which all divine concerns can be accomplished. It is Thoth who aids Isis in the administration of the kingdom while Osiris travels in distant countries. After the murder of Osiris, it is Thoth who assists Isis in the performance of her queenly duties and becomes, in turn, the mentor of Horus the Child. As Chiron was the preceptor of Achilles, so Thoth was the teacher of Horus and fitted him for the great battle against Typhon, the usurper of the empire.

It is customary to regard Hermes as the Grecianized form of Thoth and to assume that Thoth in his attributes as Hermes returned to Egypt under the Ptolemies to win new veneration as founder of the Hermetic sciences. A careful consideration of the Grecian Hermes forces one to the realization, however, that it is most unlikely that the two

deities are identical. It is true that *Hermes* was the Messenger of the Gods, according to the Hellenes, and that his worship was carried to Rome where he was named *Mercury* and usually represented with winged cap and sandals.

The Latin *Mercury* was merely an intermediary between the Gods and man. The Egyptian *Thoth* has an entirely different estate. He is the personification of Wisdom, he is the very intellect of the Great God who formed the world. He is not a messenger but a teacher. It is true that he is a bearer of divine secrets, but he participates fully therein and is in his own right both an Initiator and the First Initiate, revealing knowledge from his own inexhaustible supply. As Lord of the Writing Tablet, as bearer of the Stylus, he is frequently depicted as Ibis-headed recording the judgments of the dead before the throne of *Osiris*.

Yet *Thoth* as the God of Wisdom, *Hermes* as the Messenger of the Gods, and Winged *Mercury*, all fall short of being the *Hermes* of the Hermetists, the immortal mortal who, according to one writer, was the author of 30,000 books.

Most authorities on the subject of Egyptian metaphysics have taken it for granted that the Egyptian *Hermes* was an entirely mythological person, a god accumulated out of the tradition of centuries and finally accepted as the personification of all knowledge; especially of the sciences and arts. It is doubtful, however; whether this conclusion is entirely consistent with facts. It appears far more likely that this *Hermes* was a deified mortal who lived at some remote time and conferred unusual cultural benefits upon the people of Egypt.

For our present purpose, therefore, let us accept the Alexandrian *Hermes* as an entity separate from the mythological *Thoth* or the divine messenger of the Greek and Latin legends. That he may not be confused with these others, let us name him by the titles most frequently accorded him in the first centuries of the Christian era. These were *Hermes Trismegistus* or *Mercurius ter Maximus*. This *Hermes*, The Thrice Greatest, was identified as a person by Plato, who refers to him as an Egyptian *Theuth* and implies that he was a great learned man who lived in the antiquity of the Egyptian

people. This man is by some writers believed to have been a king of the Egyptians, belonging to the divine dynasty which preceded human rulerships. He is also spoken of as a high priest of the Egyptian temple, whose pontificate extended through the reign of Pharaoh *Ammon*. This last implication suggests that the other gods worshipped by the Egyptians as spiritual beings may have been deified heroes who ruled over the people in prehistoric times.

It is exceedingly difficult to assign any reasonable date for *Hermes*. Cicero gives us a clue to the situation when he declares that the fifth *Mercury* slew *Argus* and fled for protection to Egypt. Arriving in this distant country, he gave up his life to educating its people. Among the arts and sciences which he established were writing, history, mathematics, art, medicine, law, religions, astronomy, chemistry, astrology, divination, architecture, and chronology. He set down the rules for kings, determined the rights of peoples, taught how land and properties should be divided, worked out the system of measurements and weights, and founded the city of *Hermopolis*. This would be an extensive group of labors for a mythical person to accomplish. In fact, it may be reasonable to assume that this was far more than even a highly enlightened human being could have done.

When Cicero speaks of five *Mercuries*, the answer becomes apparent—several persons, probably living over a period of centuries or even thousands of years and accorded similar title, have been merged into the one, and this one has descended in the memory of man as the most profound, ingenious, and diversified of intellects, the personification of all knowledge and all thought.

Most ancient historians were of the opinion that the historical *Hermes*, whom Cicero calls the fifth *Mercury*, was a contemporary of *Moses*. Some give him an even greater antiquity and acknowledge him to have lived in the second millenium B. C. Efforts have been made to prove that he was *Moses*, but there is nothing tangible to sustain such an opinion. Nor is there any proof that the older Hermetic writings were particularly indebted to the Jewish metaphysical systems. Hermeticism is

evidently indigenous to the Egyptians. The Gods of Egypt are given first place in the Hermetic theology, and the older doctrine attributed to Hermes is built up around the Osiris Cycle and the great Gods of Hermopolis.

There is not the slightest surviving hint as to the parentage of Hermes or the circumstances sur-



*The Initiate Priest of the Egyptians,
HERMES TRISMEGISTUS*

rounding his birth or early life. If the Greek legends of Mercury are of any importance, it may be inferred that he was of royal or, at least, noble ancestry and enjoyed all the advantages of his day. In the Arab traditions Hermes is the disciple of the mysterious being called Agathodaemon. This name is usually associated with supernatural being, but it is possible that Hermes was the disciple of some very wise sage or hierophant of ancient Egyptian Mysteries.

The oldest likenesses of Hermes, and these are of no great antiquity, depict him as a tall man,

dressed in flowing robes of Greek rather than Egyptian style. He is usually represented wearing a turban wrapped around a conical mitre-like helmet. He is bearded and of venerable appearance, and is usually surrounded by the symbols of his cult. The picture which illustrates this article was drawn by the celebrated engraver of mystical and theosophical works, Theodore de Bry. The plate was cut in the early years of the seventeenth century and is one of the best examples of the appearance attributed to Hermes.

Kenealy in ENOCH THE SECOND MESSENGER OF GOD tries to prove that Hermes was the Enoch of the Jews. But the opinions of Kenealy, like those of an earlier mythologist, Bryant, who believed Hermes to be Cadmus of the Greeks, are entirely speculative and are not supported by tangible evidence.

From Hermetic writings it appears that the ministry of Hermes was preceded by a vision or an illumination. This illumination is recorded in the DIVINE PYMANDER, or as it is more commonly called, THE SHEPHERD OF MEN. After the vision Hermes went forth to convert the world to the great truths. Thus preached The Thrice Greatest:

"O people of the earth, men born and made of the elements, but with the spirit of the Divine Man within you, rise from your sleep of ignorance! Be sober and thoughtful. Realize that your home is not in the earth but in the Light. Why have you delivered yourselves over unto death, having power to partake of immortality? Repent, and CHANGE YOUR MINDS. Depart from the dark light and forsake corruption forever. Prepare yourselves to climb through the Seven Rings to blend your souls with the eternal Light."

The sermon of Hermes seems to have been spoken directly to certain disciples, but there is evidence that he went up and down the land, staff in hand, teaching, guiding and calling men to the life of wisdom.

In one discourse Hermes addresses his son Tatian, but whether this is to be taken literally cannot be ascertained. Tatian may have been only a disciple to whom Hermes spoke as a father in wisdom. The inferences in the texts regarding this matter are not clear, and it is quite possible that

Tatian was actually a son. From the DIVINE PYMANDER, we gain the impression that Hermes lived a long and useful life and died of natural causes, for it is said that "at last came the evening of his life." On this occasion he gathered disciples about him and preached a last discourse. The great adept concluded his sermon with:

"Blessed art Thou, o Father! The man Thou hast fashioned would be sanctified with Thee as Thou hast given him power to sanctify others with Thy Word and Thy Truth."

There is only one other fragment of information available. Albertus Magnus, the great Catholic Father, wrote that Hermes was buried in the valley of Ebron and that Alexander the Great visited the tomb which was in a cave. At the order of Alexander the grave was opened. It was found that the body of the master had turned to dust. Where the body had lain rested a great emerald that had been buried with the magus. The emerald contained the secrets of the Hermetic art deeply embossed upon its surface. It is called Tabula Smaragdina Hermetis and it is believed the stone was artificially made, having been cast in a mold and fixed by alchemical processes to the hardness and color of a genuine emerald.

The writing upon the gem includes a statement of analogy, which is the principal key to the Hermetic sciences. Simply translated, it reads:

"That which is above is like unto that which is below, and that which is below is like unto that which is above."

In the literature of the Egyptians there is a curious story of the lost books of Hermes, which had been deposited in the bed of the Nile within nested caskets. The books were guarded by strange monsters and contained upon their hieroglyphically adorned pages all the secrets of magic such as the invocations of spirits, prayers for the dead, and incantations to be used on all occasions to bring about secretly desired purposes.

It is worth noting that Hermes was one of the few pagan philosophers who was not attacked by the early Christian Church. He is accepted as a true messenger of God, a great prophet, and his books were in considerable demand among the

priests of the North African Church. In his STROMATA, Clement of Alexandria describes the forty-two books of Hermes which were carried by the priests in religious processions. He says that one book of Hermes contained hymns to the Gods, the second, the regulations for the life of a king. Then there were four relating to fixed stars, the sun and the moon, the conjunctions and risings of the heavenly bodies. He mentions also ten books of honors to the Gods and ten called HIERATIC, which embodied the laws, and six treating of disease. It is extraordinary that these works which existed in the first centuries of the Christian era should have entirely disappeared so that no copy in the Egyptian language is known to exist. There can be but one answer: the books were jealously guarded by the priests, were destroyed or hidden at the time the religion declined so that they would escape profanation at the hands of the unworthy.

The Hermetic books now known are probably only late versions of older writings. The DIVINE PYMANDER, which is the most important of the Hermetic fragments, does not seem to have been known earlier than the second century, A. D. This has led to the belief that the Hermetic books were actually written after the beginning of the Christian era by a scholar or a group of scholars, profoundly versed in ancient lore and tradition. It seems to me, however, that there is a deep inspirational quality about these writings which suggests a high and sacred origin. They are too noble intrinsically to be the production of ordinary mortals. It seems more likely that the older works were fading from the memory of man, and an effort was made to preserve this memory and save the old wisdom from disappearing entirely under the pressure of early Christian proselyting.

Nor is it fair to say that the doctrines of Hermes are plagiarized from the Christian revelation. A deep examination shows that whoever wrote or compiled the Hermetic dialogues was not a Christian nor was he greatly influenced by Christian opinion. The whole production is distinctly pagan, but deeply and reverently so. The PYMANDER can stand beside any sacred book of the world and is equal to any in the sheer beauty of its composition

and the luminousness of the doctrines which it expounds. There can be no doubt that the Hermetic philosophy was the product of a noble, transcendent soul who, indeed, walked with God in some distant age. In the words of Longfellow:

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

The principal source of the Hermetic doctrines is the PYMANDER, or VISION. This sets forth a complete system of metaphysical theology and philosophy. Certain other dialogues and fragments with the PYMANDER make up the CORPUS HERMETICUM. Nearly all of the Hermetic books are under controversy. Scholars differ widely as to the period of their composition and their place in the religious literature of the world. It is generally acknowledged by most experts that the Hermetic writings in their present form are of no great antiquity. They were apparently unknown to the Egyptians prior to the Christian era and first came into prominence in the third and fourth centuries A. D., although they were probably in circulation as early as the first century A. D.

If these various opinions are in substance correct, and they are the result of extensive scholarship, there must remain a grave doubt as to the authenticity of even the PYMANDER. It is almost certain that the entire Hermetic literature that has survived to this day is but a restatement of much older tradition now hopelessly lost. It is extraordinary in itself that the name Hermes should be known throughout the world and yet neither the records of his life nor even his words have survived. Hermes has become a patron of learning associated with all wisdom, and it is in this capacity that his name has lived.

It is also significant that the Hermetic doctrines, though frequently referred to, have never assumed definite shape but remained themselves a sort of shadowy force entirely abstract and obscure. In the earlier times Hermeticism seems to have been cosmologic and regenerative. Later it took on the appearance of alchemy and chemistry. Even the

Qabbala and the Pythagorean mathematical teachings were included in its province, and at last in this generation the word has become synonymous with all metaphysics, New Thought, transcendentalism, and even Spiritualism. This wide diffusion is due to man's lack of actual knowledge of the original teachings of Hermes. Where nothing is known everything is suspected; and a dignified name has been frequently attached to unmeritorious undertakings.

For our present purpose I think we should limit our consideration of Hermeticism to certain well defined phases of the subject. We shall, therefore, consider two headings: the older Hermetic which we shall designate the philosophical, and the later Hermetic which we shall call alchemical. The earlier school is the most authentic, and the writings of the second group are distinctly apocryphal. The principal doctrines of the philosophical are as follows:

Hermes taught that the universe was sustained through the energies of certain secondary Gods who were the manifestors and administrators of the Divine Will. Of the First God, the recondite Source of all things, Hermes says little, regarding this matter as too profound to be discovered by intellectual process. Although Hermes did not define the First Cause, he seems to prefer to denominate it the Primordial Mind, or the Supreme Being from whom emanated Reason, the sustainer and orderer of all natural phenomena. Thus Hermes was monotheistic in principle and pantheistic in his concept of the secondary principles, which emerging from the one become the sustaining power administering to the many.

In this concept Hermes parallels Plato who in slightly different words expresses the same thought, thus revealing the secret of mythologies. The ancient pantheons of divinities are really the personifications of the various attributes of Universal Life. The Universal One first emanates superior beings and with these, its first progeny, rules over the mundane sphere and its creatures. This mundane sphere and all that it bears upon itself belongs to secondary emanations and is, therefore, less proximate to the Divine Reason.

The Gods, or administrators who do the will of the Father, circulate through their own natures the heavenly fire which is the life of all things. These first Gods are, therefore, the planets and stars who move in orbits or within certain boundaries. These orbits are called thrones and from their fiery rings the Governors rule the sublunary sphere, controlling it by the strange force which Hermes calls destiny. Thus in the Hermetic teachings we have an authority for the ancient belief in astrology. The planetary Governors, ruling terrestrial concerns, manifest by Their ponderous motions and mutual combinations the purposes or the will of the Great Mind.

In cosmogony the Hermetic system is probably either the source or the principal determining factor in the Ptolemaic theory. The earth is placed in the center, the planets and the luminaries circle around the earth in orbits which the Egyptians symbolized by the cross-section of the onion. Beyond the orbits of the planets was the circle of the fixed stars which constituted the wall of heaven or the outer boundary of the mundane complex. This is the system which is used in the Revelation of St. John and forms the working key to nearly all occult cosmogonies. St. John going through the little door in the wall of heaven emerges into the empyrean or the divine world outside the bubble of the cosmos.

According to Hermes, the orbits of the seven planets (known to the ancients) formed a ladder connecting heaven with earth, and conversely, earth with heaven. This was the sacred Ladder of Seven Rungs, the Ladder of Jacob, and also the Ladder of Golden Cords by which Mohammed ascended to the footstool of God in the celebrated Night Journey. The planets are also the Seven Seals of Revelation which must be opened, the Seven Gates of the Mithraic Mysteries. They are the Seven Trumpets and the Seven Vials, and the Seven Churches which are in Asia. The powers which emanate from them are the Seven Cardinal Virtues, and the perversions of these powers are the Seven Deadly Sins. They are the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Elohim of the Jews, the Seven Great Gods of the Egyptians, the Cabiri of Samothrace, Ildabaoth

and his six Sons, the Titans, the Seven Logoi, in fact, all the mysterious septenary powers of antiquity. In the PYMANDER it is described that upon their thrones sat the Seven Governors administering the whirlwind of the cosmic power.

When the divine emanations were complete, the One Mind caused nature and the lower elements to be manifested out of Its own Being, and It established nature on its eternal foundations, gave it to the Governors to be ruled over with eternal wisdom. And nature out of its yearnings brought forth life, creeping and crawling things, and creatures of the deep, and soulless monsters who had forms but were too distant from the Light to have souls. Out of the strivings of the earth came forth also dragons and monsters and the strange creatures described by Berosus. Thus was nature formed, and the Governors gave it shape, but it did not live because the Great Mind had not bestowed life.

And in Its wisdom, the Supreme Mind, Father of all things, fashioned Man, a superior and beautiful creature made in the likeness of the Light and full of effulgency in all its parts. And this Man dwelt with the Father, and like unto the Father, to this Man was given dominion not only over the world but over the Governors of the world. (This reminds us of story of the infant Bacchus to whom Zeus gave the universe as a plaything, or Dionysus who was presented with the spinning top which he might whirl for ever.) And the Governors bowed down to the Man who had been fashioned, the metaphysical Man who had no body but was all soul. And each of the Governors bestowed upon the Man one of His qualities so that He gained inwardly seven natures, which were gifts of the Gods of the Seven Worlds.

Now, this divine Man, gazing down into the deep, saw the physical world as though it were a mirror or a smooth ocean, and He beheld his own likeness shadowed in the deep, and like Narcissus in the Greek legend, He became enamoured of his own shadow and desired to descend unto it. Thus desire came into being, and with desire came the fulfillment of it, for that which Mind desires It accomplishes. And the Man descended into the abyss, He entered into the shadow, and the shadow

entered into Him, and the Mind which had been above the Mystery became part of the Mystery, and the lower world received the Mind, and the creatures of the abyss became MIND-FULL and the Man forgot His kinship with the Light and began to struggle outwardly to gain that which was its own inner nature.

Ages passed, the One Man had become humanity, and all human beings together were one supermundane entity, and in all men was the longing of the One—to be returned to the Light. The seven principles which the Seven Governors had bestowed upon the Divine Man had become seven bodies or physical principles, and the Governors, working upon their own principles in man, enslaved him and left him victim of the limitations which bodies and senses impose.

Such was the state of affairs when Hermes, sitting alone on the side of a mountain, received the vision. The heavens parted, and the Dragon of Wisdom stood before him, and the Dragon Poimandres said:

"I Thy God am the Light and the Mind which were before substance was divided from Spirit and darkness from Light."

Hermes bowed to the Great One and besought Poimandres to reveal the way by which men might be restored again to the Light, and Poimandres replied:

"The path of immortality is hard, and only a few find it. The rest await the Great Day when the wheels of the universe shall be stopped and the immortal sparks shall escape from the sheaths of substance. Woe unto those who wait, for they must return again, unconscious and unknowing, to the seed-ground of stars, and await a new beginning. Those who are saved by the light of the mystery which I have revealed unto you, O Hermes, and which I now bid you to establish among men, shall return again to the Father who dwelleth in the White Light, and shall deliver themselves up to the Light and shall be absorbed into the Light, and in the Light they shall become Powers in God. This is the Way of Good and is revealed only to them that have wisdom."

In the VISION it is further described how the

Truth-seeker, climbing the ladder of the stars returns to the Governors that portion of their natures which was derived from them. Thus, he returns to the Sun and its Lord his ambitions, to Mars and its Governors his boldness, to Jupiter his wealth—until at last purified of all temporal things, the soul escapes from the rings because there is nothing left of the nature of the rings in itself. Until such time as this escape is possible, life and death are merely alternatives between an embodied and disembodied state. But whether physically alive or physically dead, the entity remains in the natural world. Only wisdom can release it from the rings of temporality to the empyreal diffusion where dwells the Supreme Mind. Therefore, we may say that the Hermetic philosophy in its older form is a redemptive teaching, leading man to a state of well being through the practice of virtues and through rites of purification.

The later Hermetic school was founded upon the doctrines of Hermes which circulated among the eclectics of Alexandria and later among the Arabs and, drifting back into Europe through the Dark Ages, assumed an almost exclusively chemical terminology and interpretation. The difference between the philosophical and alchemical schools may be more apparent than real, but certainly for the alchemists of the Middle Ages Hermes was a transmuter of metals and not a redeemer of men.

Thousands of sincere human souls built furnaces in their spare rooms and became a prey to a violent and insidious superstition. The street of the gold-makers at Prague is an example of a road faced on either side by the houses of alchemists. Man, ever elevating the temporal state above his divine expectations, brewed and distilled, evaporated and condensed, fermented and decomposed practically every substance distinguishable to the senses in the hope that by some amazing dispensation he would find a lump of purest gold in his furnace. Hundreds of writers called upon the Hermetic Gods for aid, and numerous chemical formulas accredited to Hermes himself were published and distributed to an avid populace.

It probably all began when some chemist-philosopher discovered the secrets of human regeneration

could appropriately be concealed under a chemical terminology. Gold was Spirit or God; the seven base metals were the powers of the seven Governors; the retort was the human body; the fire was aspiration; and the tortured chemicals seething in the bottles aptly illustrated man's troublous state. But the moment you clothe any idea in a symbolism, a certain part of mankind will lack the penetration to discover the real under the figure. As a result Hermetic science descended into a frenzied effort to find the powder of projection, the elixir of life, and the philosopher's stone.

One alchemist announced that one grain of this powder would transmute into purest gold one hundred thousand times its own weight. But his readers did not realize that this powder is wisdom, one grain of which can transmute all the ignorance in the world. Nor did the reader properly understand that the philosopher's stone is knowledge, the great miracle worker, or that the elixir of life was Truth, which makes all things new. It was sad that misunderstandings should exist, but wherever great truths are given to small minds, misunderstandings are inevitable. Thus in mediaeval literature, the word Hermetic means actually chemical, or, more correctly, philosophy in terms of chemistry.

Of the later Hermetic philosophers, the most important were probably the Rosicrucians and the Paracelsists. The Rosicrucian Order was composed of persons who had come to realize that the Hermetic arcanum was a cleverly concealed story of human regeneration. Deeply thoughtful men, not to be intrigued by the promise of material gold, discovered and set forth the secret keys to the chemical fable. Having restored the philosophy they sought to privately circulate it among the learned of Europe in the hope that it would bring about in the end the transmutation of empires and would tincture with the fire of immortality the crumbling creeds and cults that lived on from age to age unaware of their divine birthright.

There is a divine science hidden under the chemical writings of such men as Paracelsus, van Helmont, Ripley, Roger Bacon, and Nicholas Flamel. There can be no doubt that these men were genuine Hermetic adepts who, realizing that pearls must not be cast before swine, wrote obscurely but included in their writings sufficient hints and suggestions that the worthy would not be deceived. Each man read into the writing that which was his own vision. Some, therefore, sought the redemption of themselves, but most lived on striving with athanor and alembic for the fabled red lion and the hope of terrestrial immortality.

QUOTATIONS

"Listen within yourself and look into the infinitude of Space and Time. There can be heard the songs of the Constellations, the voices of the Numbers, and the harmonies of the Spheres."

"To know divine thought, O souls, you descend and painfully ascend the path of the seven planets and of their seven heavens."

"The sleep of the body is the sober watchfulness of the mind and the shutting of my eyes reveals the true Light."

"Holy is God, who is determined that He shall be known, and who is known by His own to whom He reveals Himself."

"My silence is filled with budding life and hope, and is full of good. My words are the blossoms of fruit of the tree of my soul. For this is the faithful account of what I receive from my true Mind through whom I became inspired by God with the Truth. Since that day my Mind hath been ever with me and in my own soul it hath given birth to the Word: the Word is Reason, and Reason hath redeemed me."

Yours sincerely,

Manly P. Hall