

Hermès en Haute-Égypte. Le Fragment du Discours parfait et les Définitions hermétiques arméniennes (NH VI,8.8a)

Volume

tome II

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In the second of his two volumes on Hermeticism, Professor Mahé examines the third Hermetic text from Nag Hammadi codex VI, a Coptic translation of an excerpt from the *Logos Teleios*, the scribal note that precedes that text, and the hitherto little-known Armenian *Hermetic Definitions*. Professor Mahé's volume is an ambitious work, of great scope, that originally served as his doctoral dissertation. In addition to, and drawing from, his examination of these texts, he argues for a new understanding of the origin of the Hermetic literature, rooting it in the gnomic sentence, the self-contained wisdom statement. As well as this new approach to the study of Hermeticism, which has significant implications for gnostic studies, Professor Mahé argues for a more nuanced view of the social and intellectual roots of Hermeticism, building on but also extending the pioneering work of Scott and Festugiere. Limitations of space prevent us from describing the work here: we must be content with merely sketching out its contents.

The two Nag Hammadi texts are the last and second-last texts in Nag Hammadi codex VI, being preceded by the *Acts of Peter and the 12 Apostles*, the *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, the *Authentikos Logos*, the *Concept of Our Great Power*, the excerpt from Plato's *Republic*, the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, and the *Prayer of Thanksgiving*. The language of both texts is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic. The original language of the *Logos Teleios* would have been Greek: its date of composition is unknown. The scribal note was composed in Coptic, and written by the scribe who copied the rest of codex VI.

The first modern publication of the *Hermetic Definitions*, preserved in 6 Armenian manuscripts copied between the 13th and 16th centuries, was in 1956, but attracted little notice. The first published French translation of the *Definitions* was done by Professor Mahe himself in 1976: his translation here is a revision of this original work. The original language of this text would have been Greek: Professor Mahé dates its translation into Armenian to the mid to late 6th century.

The lost Greek *Logos Teleios* was (quite loosely) translated into Latin as the *Asclepius*, and the corresponding section of this text, ch. 21-29, is given in parallel columns with the Coptic Nag Hammadi text and its French translation. The text itself, allegedly a dialogue between Hermes Trismegistus and his disciple Asclepius, begins with a surprisingly explicit comparison of sexual intercourse with the transmission of the holy mysteries (65,35). This association between initiation and begetting was also present in the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NH VI,7) but is much more explicitly presented here. There follows a discussion of the origin and nature of mankind, where humans are said to be superior to gods, because they are less limited: they are both mortal and immortal, immortality being acquired through learning and knowledge. There follows what seems to be a defense of idol-worship.

After this, Egypt is exalted as being the image of Heaven (70,4-5), but dire tidings are predicted for it. The dialogue is alleged to have taken place in the distant past: its author uses this fiction to give his view of past events, the desacralization of the land of Egypt as the gods abandon it (71,12-13). In a beautiful and moving passage, Hermes mourns for a time when the world will become a burden to men, rather than a thing to be marvelled at (71,35-72,26). However, a regeneration of the world will come, or rather is in a mysterious sense ongoing (74,7-16). The text ends with a description of the soul's post-mortem fate (76,22-78,43). Upon leaving the body, it flies upwards where it is met by a

great demon. If it has been good, it is permitted to continue its ascent, but if not, it is kept in the region between earth and heaven and punished cruelly.

The scribal note that precedes this text is quite brief. It consists merely of an apology on behalf of the scribe for copying this text, if it should be the case that the recipient already has a copy, and the statement that the scribe possesses many discourses of this type.

The *Hermetic Definitions* is, as the name suggests, a series of definitions and brief discussions of concepts and entities, including the nature of God, the soul, man, the intellect, and so forth. In structure, it makes a great deal of use of rhetorical questions, which are then answered in dogmatic formulas. Ideas are developed not through the dialectical to-and-fro of, for example, the Platonic tradition, but rather by the association and progression of key words or images.

Although Professor Mahé's discussion of these two texts in specific and Hermeticism in general covers many topics, its heart lies in his understanding of the origin of Hermeticism. He argues that the Hermetic literary corpus was structured around the linking and interpretation of, and commentary upon, individual sentences, each expressing fundamental concepts and, even more significantly, fundamental concerns and structures. However these sentences came to be, whatever earlier wisdom they may have been distilled from, they formed the basis for all future Hermetic speculation. Thus, for Mahé, specific mythological, theological, or philosophical doctrines are secondary: they arise out of traditions of speculation on these sentences, and these sentences remain embedded in all later writings, serving as anchors, fitted more or less subtly into their context. His demonstration of the existence, and his analysis of the nature and function, of these sentences draws on an impressively wide assortment of sources, from ancient Egyptian wisdom literature to Biblical texts and Hellenistic rhetorical standards, as well as texts from Nag Hammadi.

Professor Mahé also discusses the eschatological content of the *Logos Teleios*, contextualizing it with regard to some of the other eschatological material found at Nag Hammadi. This leads him into a wider discussion of why exactly this material was included in the Nag Hammadi library. He argues that the emphasis that the Hermetic texts placed on asceticism, their focus on revealed knowledge, and the aforementioned eschatological content—all of which being characteristics shared with many other Nag Hammadi texts—would have made them attractive to the people compiling the collection.

This volume contains the texts mentioned above, their French translations in parallel columns, commentaries on the texts, Coptic and Greek indexes, extensive bibliographies of both ancient and modern works, introductions to the texts as well as a general introduction and conclusion, and complements and corrections to *Hermes en Haut-Egypte I*.