

**THE THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL
WORKS OF HERMES TRISMEGISTUS,
CHRISTIAN
NEOPLATONIST. TRANSLATED FROM THE
ORIGINAL GREEK, WITH PREFACE,
NOTES, AND INDICES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649719839

The Theological and Philosophical Works of Hermes Trismegistus, Christian Neoplatonist.
Translated from the Original Greek, with Preface, Notes, and Indices by John David Chambers

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JOHN DAVID CHAMBERS

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HERMES TRISMEGISTUS,
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*TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL GREEK, WITH
PREFACE, NOTES, AND INDICES.*

BY

JOHN DAVID CHAMBERS, M.A., F.S.A.,
OF ORIEL COLLEGE, OXFORD, RECORDER OF NEW SARUM.

"With thrice-great Hermes."—MILTON'S "Il Penseroso."

EDINBURGH:
T. & T. CLARK, 38, GEORGE STREET.

MDCCLXXXII.

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1598
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1002

PRINTED BY THE COMMERCIAL PRINTING COMPANY

FOR

T. & T. CLARK, EDINBURGH.

LONDON,	HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.
DUBLIN,	GEORGE HERBERT.
NEW YORK,	SCHIRMER AND WELFORD.



33,368.

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Addendum to Note 2 on page 9.

It is possible also that Hermes may here refer to the traditional "Seven Wise Men" mentioned by Philo Judæus in his Treatise, "Every man virtuous also free," ch. xi., whom he speaks of as then "being very ancient."

PREFACE.

THE Mercurius or Hermes Trismegistus of legend was a personage, an Egyptian sage or succession of sages, who, since the time of Plato, has been identified with the Thoth (the name of the month September) of that people. This Thoth is the reputed author of the "Ritual of the Dead," or, as styled in Egyptian phraseology, the "Manifestation of Light" to the Soul, who through it declared the will of the Gods and the mysterious nature of Divine things to Man.¹ Dr Pietschmann, in his work on Hermes, which exhaustively treats of this subject,² gives a list of authorities for these facts, ranging from Plato down to Syncellus, *circa* A.D. 790. He states, however (p. 33), that by the time that the so-called Hermeneutical writings were collected together, the identity of Hermes with Thoth was forgotten, and Thoth became his son Tat, and Asclepius his disciple, both of whom he instructs in the writings now translated. Subsequently Pietschmann informs us, quoting Letronne,³ that the epithet "Trismegistus" appears first in the second century of the Christian era, and that, before that period, Hermes was designated by the repetition of the "μῆγας, μῆγας, μῆγας" only, as on the Rosetta Stone.

He was considered to be the impersonation of the religion, art, learning, and sacerdotal discipline of the Egyptian priesthood. He was, by several of the Fathers, and, in

¹ Rawlinson's Egypt, i. 136, and the authorities there quoted.

² Leipzig, Engelmann, 1876, pp. 31-33.

³ *Ibid.* p. 35, "Inscription Grecque de Rosette," Letronne, Paris, 1841.

modern times, by three of his earliest editors, supposed to have existed before the times of Moses, and to have obtained the appellation of "Thrice greatest," from his three-fold learning and rank of Philosopher, Priest, and King,¹ and that of "Hermes," or Mercurius, as messenger and authoritative interpreter of divine things. In the Hieroglyphics he, like Horus, is represented by a bird with a hawk's head, and to him was sacred the Ibis and the Moon.²

This Hermes—and there was but one among the ancient Egyptians³—was worshipped as a god by them. Tertullian⁴ says, "In ancient times most authors were supposed to be, I will not say god-like, but actually gods; as, for instance, the Egyptian Hermes, to whom Plato paid very great deference."

Clement of Alexandria⁵ writes, "Hermes of Thebes and Esculapius of Memphis *ex vate Deus*;" and he subsequently gives a detailed account of his works, forty-two in number—four of astrology, others of astronomy, geology, and hieroglyphics, and thirty-six of philosophy, hymns to God, religious ceremonies, and sacerdotal discipline.⁶ Lactantius⁷ expresses himself thus (quoting Cicero, "De Naturâ Deorum," Lib. iii.): "Although a man, he was of great antiquity, and built Hermopolis, and is there worshipped as well as at Pheneus. He was most fully imbued with every kind of learning, so that the knowledge of many subjects and arts acquired for him the name of

¹ See the edition of the works of Hermes by François de Foix, Comte de Candalle, assisted by the younger Scaliger.

² Champollion the younger ("Panthéon Egyptien"). Several hieroglyphical representations of him, under various Egyptian names, are given by Pietschmann, p. 1.

³ See Pietschmann, *ibid.* pp. 35, 36.

⁴ "De Animâ," ch. 2.

⁵ Stromata, I., ch. 21, p. 389, Oxford Edition, Lib. vi., ch. 4, p. 737.

⁶ The "Ritual of the Dead," vulgarly attributed to Hermes, as at present discovered, consists of three Books redivided into 23 portions and about 165 chapters. See Rawlinson's Egypt, i. 138.

⁷ Lib. i., ch. 6.

Trismegistus." Further, S. Augustine¹ relates, "He, the fifth Mercury (as Lactantius had thought also), and his friend Esculapius (or Asclepius, grandson of the first) were men, and became gods, Mercurius and Æsculapius, after the Greek fashion." Cyril of Alexandria ("Contr. Julian," i. 30*a*, circa 412), speaks of Hermes in general thus:—"This Hermes then, him of Egypt, although being initiator (τελειωτής), and having presided at the fanes of idols, is always found mindful of the things of Moses, &c.; and made mention of him in his own writings, which, being composed for the Athenians, are called 'Hermaica,' fifteen books." And subsequently, "I speak of Hermes, him having sojourned, third, in Egypt" (Lib. v., 176*b*).²

The majority of the Fathers, in their uncritical mode, even Lactantius himself, confounded the original Hermes with our author, in the same way that they ascribed to the Sybilline verses a far too high antiquity; and the later Fathers, moreover, especially Lactantius, made no distinction between the genuine works of our Hermes and others which falsely bear his name; some of them, as, for instance, "Asclepius," having been written at least a century later; and those, as, for instance, "The Sacred Book" and the Dialogue between Isis and Horus (Stobæus, "Physica," 928, 1070, edit. Meineke, i. 281, 342), to which it is impossible to assign a date, are all indiscriminately ascribed to the same Hermes, although it is absolutely certain that the author of "Poemandres" never can have written them.

What is strange is, that several of the learned editors of the works of our Hermes consider him to have lived before Moses. Vergicius, in his preface to the edition printed at Paris by Turnebus in 1554, states this. Flussas (1574), after discussion, leaves the question as to his age undetermined; but Patricius (Patrizzi), in his "Nova de Universis Philosophia," printed at Ferrara in 1591, and at Venice

¹ "City of God," viii. 23, 26.

² See the extracts from Cyril of Alexandria, *post*, Part III., and the note from Pietschmann there.