HERMES TRISMEGISTUS AND THE ORIGINS OF GNOSTICISM

BY

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Dedicated to Joost R. Ritman
mercurial agathodaimon

Armenian Hermes

In 1982 Jean-Pierre Mahé published his French translation of an Armenian gnomology entitled Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius. This contained the following Saying:

Who knows himself, knows the All.¹

Hermes was held to be an ancient Egyptian, but this saying of his was in tune with Greek philosophy. The temple of Delphi admonished its visitors to know themselves. And according to the Stoic philosopher Poseidonios of Apameia man should follow always and at all times the daimon within us, the Logos, who is akin to and of the same nature as the Daimon without, the Pneuma or God who pervades the universe.²

The Hermetic Saying can easily be older than the Poimandres. This writing describes how Anthrōpos descends from the world of God above to create, but falls in love with lower nature and falls into matter. Nature then brings forth the bodies after the shape (eidos) of Anthrōpos (17).³

The background of this myth has become completely clear in recent research.⁴ The prophet Ezekiel described the Glory of God in the form of a man, the demuth kemarēh adam or eidos anthrōpou. This became the stock theme of Jewish Gnosis until the present day. Already in the second century before Christ the dramatist Ezekiel Tragicus in Alexandria described this Glory as Phōs, Man, a hypostasis of the hidden God. The Anthrōpos of so many Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi is none other than Ezekiel's Kabod. Sometimes he is called Geradamas, Geraios Adam or Adam Qadmon. He is, as in the Poimandres, the
archetype of the human body. That looks like the Middle-Platonic concept of the idea of man applied to the Genesis story. But it is only in Manichaeism that the archetypal man falls into concupiscence and matter. Of course all this has nothing to do with a prechristian Iranian myth of the Saved Saviour, Gayomart or Mortal Life. It rather serves as an illustration of the Hermetic Definition quoted above which underlies a well-known passage in the Poimandres (13):

Let the spiritual man know himself as being immortal and (then he may know) that eros is the cause of death and (he may know) all things.

As is so often the case in the Hermetic writings, first was the Saying, then came the story.

Hellenistic Hermes

Inspired by the magnificent findings of Jean-Pierre Mahé his compatriot the Reverend Father J. Paramelle has identified a number of Hermetic abstracts in Greek in the manuscript Clarke II of the Bodleian library of Oxford, among which are some Greek fragments of the Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius preserved in Armenian. One of them runs as follows:

"Ανθρώπος ἄμφωτερα ἔχει τὰς φύσεις, καὶ τὴν θυμήν καὶ τὴν ἀθάνατον.
"Ανθρώπος τρεῖς οὐσίας ἔχει, τὴν νοητὴν καὶ τὴν φυσικὴν καὶ τὴν ψυχικὴν.

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Man has the two natures, Both the mortal and the immortal.
Man has three essences, spiritual, vital ("psychic") and material.

Of course this tripartition is grounded in Platonic and Platonist psychology. But Plato himself never uses hylé, nor does he ever oppose the "psychic" to the "noetic". It would seem that for him the nous is a part of the psyché. In a magical papyrus (PGM 4.524f and 510) "psychikos" denotes the life of the natural world and whatever belongs to it in contrast to the supernatural world, which is characterised by pneuma. But this papyrus must be of a later date than the Hermetic