

The culture and civilization which has come down to us is our precious heritage. Too often, we take for granted the arts and sciences which, "stone by stone," have been erected by others for our living Temple. To re-appraise and appreciate the dedicated lives of great men is both instructive and fitting. One of the greatest men of all time, one who is legendary since he embodies the sciences, the arts and the philosophy of the ancient world was Hermes Trismegistus.

There is no historical record, as such, of this great Egyptian, but tradition states that he flourished about 2670 B.C.

"Hermes Trismegistus" is the Greek equivalent for the Egyptian, "Thoth" and means "The Thrice Great," "The Master of Masters." Albert G. Mackey's monumental Encyclopedia of Freemasons states that Hermes or Thoth was a celebrated Egyptian priest, legislator and philosopher. He is said to have written thirty-six books on theology and philosophy and six books on medicine. All have been lost.

Mackey further states that Eusebius claimed that Hermes introduced the art of writing into Egypt.

It is interesting to conjecture that Hermes, after his death, was deified, and became known as the god of wisdom. Clemens Alexandrinus speaks of him as the "scribe of the gods," "the secretary of Osiris," "the greatest god of them all," and "the Lord of divine words".

Works are extant in papyri and on temple walls, treating of Hermes' studies of geography, astronomy, ritual, myths and medicine. The forty-two books attributed to him were subdivided into six divisions. The first consisted of ten books and dealt with laws, deities and the education of priests. The second, also consisting of ten books, treated of sacrifices, offerings, prayers, hymns, and festive processions. The third group, also ten in number, was called hieroglyphics and was a repertory of cosmographical, geographical information. The fourth division, of four books, was devoted to astronomy and astrology. The fifth group, of two books, contained a collection of songs in honor of the gods and a description of royal life and its duties. The sixth, and last group, contained six books known collectively as the pastophorous. These dealt with medical subjects.

These writings, known as Hermetic philosophy, were imparted, tradition says, to the great Greek philosophers Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Herodotus, and served, in part, as a basis for their approach to God and the affairs of men.

During the early Roman period, one of the great writings attributed to Hermes, De Potestate et Sapientia Divina (On Divine Power and Knowledge), was especially studied in the schools of higher learning. This treatise, consisting of fifteen chapters, treated subjects as the nature of God, the origin of the world, the creation and fall of man, and the Divine Illumination which is the sole means of his (man's) deliverance.

The life work of Hermes seems to have been in the direction of planting the seed of truth rather than establishing a school of philosophy which would dominate the world's thought. Nevertheless, many of the great Mysteries found their source in these earliest Hermetic teachings. The Mysteries of Osiris and Isis, in Egypt; Cybele and Dionysus in Asia Minor, and the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter in Greece were but the outgrowth and development of Hermes' philosophy. Some of our Masonic degrees find their spiritual ancestor in Eleusis and Egypt.

Joseph Fort Newton, in *The Builders* says: "Masons, tiring of the endless quarrels of sects, turned for relief to the ancient Mysteries as handed down in their tradition - the old, high, heroic faith in God and in the soul of man as the one unconquerable thing on earth. If, as Aristotle said, it be the mission of tragedy to cleanse and exalt us, leaving us subdued with a sense of pity and hope and fortified against ill fortune - it is permitted us to add that in simplicity, depth and power; in its grasp of the stupidity of evil and the splendor of virtue, its revelation of that in our humanity which leads it to defy death, giving up everything, even life itself, rather than defame, defile or betray its moral integrity; and in its prophecy of victory of light over shadow - there is not a drama known among men like the Third Degree of Masonry."

What is the basic philosophy that Hermes left to us as a legacy? Largely, they may be considered as consisting of seven principles:

MENTALISM: This principle states that "ALL is Mind." It explains that God is the Substantial Reality which underlies all the outward manifestations and appearances of the material universe and all that is apparent to our senses. The ALL is spirit which in itself is unknowable, and undefinable, but which may be considered and thought of as a Universal, Infinite, Living Mind. It also explains that all the phenomenal world or universe is simply a Mental Creation of the ALL, subject to the laws of created things and that the universe in its parts or units has its existence in the Mind of the ALL.

CORRESPONDENCE: There is always a correspondence or analogy between the laws of phenomena and the various planes of Being and Life. The old Hermetic axiom stated: "As above, so below; as below, so above." The ancient Hermetists considered this principle as one of the most important mental instruments by which man was able to pry aside the obstacles which hid truth from view. Just as a knowledge of the principles of geometry enables man to measure distant suns and their movements, a knowledge of correspondence enables man to reason intelligently from the known to the unknown.

VIBRATION: All things are in constant motion. The difference between different manifestations of matter, energy, mind and even spirit result largely from varying rates of vibration. From the ALL, which is pure spirit, EVERYTHING is in vibration - the higher the vibration, the higher its position in the scale. A proper understanding of this principle was said to enable Hermetic students to control their own mental vibrations as well as those of others.

POLARITY: Everything is dual. In everything about us there are two poles, or opposite aspects, which are, in fact, only the two extremes of the same thing, with many varying degrees between them.

For example, heat and cold, although opposites, are really the same thing, the difference consisting merely of degrees of the same thing. There is no such thing as absolute heat or absolute cold. The same principle manifests itself in the case of light and darkness, which, again, are the same thing, the difference being between varying degrees between the two poles of the phenomena.

RHYTHM: This principle holds that in everything there is manifested a measured motion, to and fro, a flow and an in-flow, a swing backward and a swing forward. There is always an action and a reaction, an advance and a retreat. This is the rhythm of the universe, suns, worlds, men, mind, energy and matter.

CAUSE AND EFFECT: This principle embodies the teaching that there is a cause for every effect and an effect for every cause. It explains that everything happens according to law—that nothing "merely happens." There is no such thing as chance. While there may be varying levels of cause and effect, nothing escapes this law. The Hermetic philosopher believes that by self-mastery and by rising mentally to a higher plane he becomes a "cause" rather than an "effect." The masses of people are carried along, obedient to their environment. The wills and desires of others stronger than themselves, heredity, suggestion, and other outward causes move them about like pawns on a chessboard of everyday living. But the Hermetic master, rising to the plane above, dominates his mood, character, qualities and powers, as well as the environment that surrounds him, and becomes a "mover" instead of a pawn. He helps to play the game of life, instead of being played and moved about by other wills and surroundings.

GENDER: There is gender manifested in everything. On the physical plane, the principle manifests itself as sex. No creation is possible without this law. This principle is constantly working in the direction of generation, regeneration and creation. We find, for example, a distinct manifestation of gender among the corpuscles, ions or electrons that constitute the basis of matter and which, by forming certain combinations, create the atom. The formation of the atom is really due to the clustering of negative ions or electrons around a positive one. The positive electrons exert their influence upon the negative, causing the latter to assume new combinations and thus "create" or "generate" the atom.

Thus, the principles, or philosophies, expressed by Hermes is of a deeply esoteric and mystical nature. Any study of this sage requires careful analysis to separate the true from the traditional. Where one begins and the other leaves off, it is difficult to tell, but the Light coming to us from across the centuries is nevertheless fundamental and a part of our treasured spiritual and cultural heritage. Let us "ponder well" the philosophy of Hermes Trismegistus.