

Hermes Trismegistus - Prophet or Fraud?

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In my first contribution to *Labyrinth* (Issue 82), I introduced the character of Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian semi-divine figure whose mythical existence and very real writings are likely sources for the image of the "wise magician" in our culture. In one of these writings, he is said to have predicted the downfall of the ancient Egyptian gods, such as Horus and Osiris. This prophecy is one of the most moving passages of prose I have read from Classical Antiquity, and deserves a closer examination.

The passage in question is drawn from a book entitled *Asclepius*, written in the format of a dialogue between a wise teacher, Trismegistus, and his disciple, Asclepius. It begins with the teacher explaining that Egypt is the place where the gods act most upon the earth. He then launches into his prophecy, claiming that (I'm translating a bit loosely here)

there will be a time in the future when the Egyptians will have piously served the gods in vain; all of their holy veneration will perish to no effect. The gods will return from earth to heaven, leaving Egypt behind.

He then goes on to assign blame for this state of affairs:

With strangers filling the land, there will not only be a neglect of the cults, but the worship of the gods will be expressly prohibited under the penalty of law, which is far worse. ... Then, this holiest of lands, seat of temples and shrines, will be filled with tombs and corpses. O Egypt, Egypt, only stories, words inscribed in stone, will survive to tell of your piety, and these will seem unbelievable to your descendants.

The prophecy goes on to say that morality will be completely inverted, that good will be considered evil and vice versa, and that general mayhem will prevail. This particular passage, however, requires further comment. It is, in fact, one of those sections which may allow us to assign a more specific date to the text. There are 2 hints pointing us in this direction: the reference to "strangers filling the land", and the mention of laws prohibiting pagan religion. We must ask ourselves at this point what is more likely: Is the author an honest-to-goodness prophet, predicting the downfall of the gods once some group of foreigners arrive and take over Egypt? Or could the author simply have been writing about, and expressing his disenchantment with, recent events which he had perhaps witnessed? If the latter seems more likely, we can attempt to assign a date to this passage.

There were several different instances in Antiquity of Egypt being invaded by foreign powers. The first of these was, of course, Alexander the Great, who deposed the reigning pharaoh and left Egypt under Macedonian (essentially Greek-speaking) rule. Neither his successors, the Ptolemaic kings of Egypt, nor the Romans who eventually incorporated Egypt into their Empire, ever banned Egyptian religion. In fact, Egyptian priests were highly praised, and certain Egyptian cults, such as the worship of the goddess Isis, spread widely throughout the Roman Empire. So, this passage of prophecy does not date from the time of Alexander, nor from the time immediately following the Romans' occupation of Egypt.

In later times, in particular during the time of severe crisis which hit the Roman Empire during the 3rd century CE, Egypt was briefly invaded by one of the most interesting characters from the Late Antique period: a Syrian noble woman by the name

of Zenobia. She was the wife of a prominent Roman ally in the Eastern Empire who had defended Rome's borders against the depredations of their enemies, the Parthians. Established in the Syrian city of Palmyra, she took over her husband's role as Rome's proxy ruler in the area after he was assassinated in the year 267. In 270, however, she decided to exploit Rome's instability - there were plenty of other problems at the time, and the reigning emperors didn't have the resources to spare to keep her in check - by invading Egypt and having herself declared empress. So, the "prophecy" in the Asclepius text may well be referring to the events of 270. Since forces loyal to Rome managed to oust her by 272, it seem unlikely that she would have had the time to enact the kind of sweeping religious legislation which would have brought the kind of bitter and invective which comes from the lips of Hermes in the passage cited above. Besides, from what is known of her character, Zenobia was more politically ambitious than pious toward any specific cult at the expense of any other.

So, if the invasion of Zenobia is not the source of our Hermetic prophecy, what is? A more probable answer involves the anti-pagan legislation which began to be enacted throughout the Roman Empire once its rulers had officially converted to Christianity in the early 4th century. In particular, the emperor Constantius - one of Constantine the Great's sons and successors - issued a decree in 353 which ordered temples to be closed and pagan sacrifices to be banned; those who disobeyed the law were to be put to death. This is a likely source for the reference to legal prohibition of cult in our prophecy, but it does not explain the reference to "strangers filling the land". Since Christianity was brought to Egypt by others (e.g., converted Jews), and that the legislation, in this scenario, was issued by a Christian ruler, Christians may well have appeared as outsiders from the perspective of a native, pagan Egyptian.

Therefore, we have in this prophecy an expression of intense discontent on the part of an Egyptian pagan of the late 350's toward the repressive religious legislation which was recently enacted. The fact that this sentiment was attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus would serve to increase its credibility as prophecy while at the same time shielding its true author from blame for his criticism of Imperial policy - emperors at this time were not known for their tolerance of dissent.

On the other hand, the possibility does indeed remain that it was an honestly prophetic passage which dates from a time prior to Constantius' legislation...