

COMMENTARY

Silence, Intellect and Discourse in the Quest for the
True Teaching – Reflections on Hermes Trismegistos’
‘Definitions’²²

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In his article, Graham Ward offers us a reflection on verses 1:21–25 of the Epistle of James, in which, as he observes, the *Logos* (the ‘Word’ or a ‘discourse’) ought first to be received – to the point of becoming ‘im-planted’ (*emphytos*) – and then ‘enacted’. Here the Epistle’s author observes fundamental Biblical logic, according to which the word uttered by a prophet is always preceded by the word received by him from God. In the most striking way, perhaps, the link between the letting in of the word and its public expression is found in the vision of Ezekiel 2:8–3:3 in which the ‘son of man’ is told first ‘to eat a roll of a book’ – to the point of ‘filling with it his bowels’ – and then ‘to speak unto the house of Israel’. This episode also inspired the author of the book that closes the Christian Canon (cf. Rev 10:9–11).

In the Epistle of James, however, it is not the prophecy, or more generally the speech, that is in question but ‘working the righteousness of God’ (1:20). Ward suggests reading James’ binomial ‘hearers (*akroatai*) of the Word/doers (*poietai*) of the Word’ in the perspective of the Alexandrian exegetical theory of divinization. This provides him with a new key for the interpretation of this book which, ever since Luther, who had found it contradictory in every respect to Paul, has presented a particular challenge to Protestant Biblical commentators. Man, situated between the Word Creator and the created word, occupies according to Ward an intermediate position in the process of *theopoiesis* in which the ‘word’ appears contemporaneously as both the subject and the object of creative action. Ward thence comes to a consideration of human activity in the world, thus contributing to the discussion of the ontological value of man’s acts, the underlying exegetical problem regarding both James and Paul.²³ His emphasis on the aesthetical aspects of human activity and human experiences drives him away, however, from the central concerns of the Epistle’s author.

²² The author expresses his gratitude to Christoph Schneider for his invitation to take part in this exchange and to the Rev. Peter F. Johnson, Charles Lock and John Lindsay Opie for helping the author improve his English style.

²³ Cf. Hubert Frankemölle, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (2 vols, Gütersloh 1994), vol. 1, pp. 339–40, in which the author discusses the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the Epistle of James in twentieth-century Germany, stressing the role of this text in the activity of the Resistance under the Nazi regime.

Reflecting on James' language, Ward mentions a brief observation made more than half a century ago by W.L. Knox on the similarity between the 'types of speculation' proper to the Epistle of James and to the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos (Hermes 'the Thrice-Greatest').²⁴ A closer glance at Hermes will allow us to place James and his vision of man's activity in the wider perspective of coeval religious thought. The Hermetic corpus reaches back to the ancient Egyptian wisdom texts, but in its extant form reflects the cosmopolitan intellectual ambience of Roman Egypt²⁵ and in some parts notably carries traces of the Bible and Apocrypha, as well as of Alexandrian Jewish exegetical thought. The texts attributed to Trismegistos were therefore shaped in the same area in which, towards the end of the second century, the Alexandrian Christian theology was born.

As in Christianity, the relationship between God and man is at the core of the Hermetic tradition. The various texts of Hermetic literature reveal different perspectives on this matter however, and although they could have been studied and meditated upon in the same circles of adherents, each of them ought to be treated in its own right. We suggest here bringing James' anthropology, which Ward's article discusses, into juxtaposition with one of the older of the Hermetic philosophical works, which has only recently become accessible to western readers and has not yet received sufficient attention from New Testament scholars. We refer to the 'Definitions' attributed to Hermes, which are preserved in their fullest form in Armenian.²⁶ Jean-Pierre Mahé, the author of the critical edition of the Armenian text, dates the original Greek to the period from the first century BC to the first century AD, suggesting that its sources may go back much further.²⁷ The 'Definitions' or their direct sources, therefore, might have been known to the author of the Epistle of James.

The 'Definitions', addressed by Hermes 'the Thrice-Great' (*Eramec*, in Armenian ← *Trismegas*) to his disciple Asclepius, were translated into Armenian in the second half of the sixth century. They belonged to the numerous Greek

²⁴ Wilfred L. Knox, 'The Epistle of St. James', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, OS-XLVI, 181–2 (1945): 14–16.

²⁵ The latest Hermetic texts were put into writing before the end of the third century AD; see A.D. Nock, in *Corpus Hermeticum. Asclepius*, ed. A.D. Nock, trans. A.-J. Festugière (4 vols, Paris, 1945) vol. 2, pp. 259, 275.

²⁶ The *editio princeps* of the 'Definitions' was published in 1956 by H. Manandian. 26 years later, J.-P. Mahé prepared a new critical edition, translation and detailed commentary; cf. Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte: les textes hermétiques de Nag Hammadi et leurs parallèles grecs et latins. Le fragment du Discours parfait et les Définitions hermétiques arméniennes* (2 vols, Québec 1978–82), vol. 2, pp. 358–405. Later, an edition of the surviving Greek fragments of the 'Definitions' datable by the eleventh century was prepared jointly by J. Paramelle and J.-P. Mahé, 'Nouveaux parallèles grecs aux Définitions hermétiques arméniennes', *REArm*, XXII (1990–91): 115–34.

²⁷ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, p. 278.

texts from which the Armenian divines, followers of the Alexandrian exegetical and doctrinal traditions, sought to obtain the dialectical instruments for defining Christological orthodoxy independently of the imperial Church.²⁸ The interest in Hermes could have been provoked in particular by the positive appreciation given him by Gregory of Nazianzos, one of the most quoted Greek fathers in Armenia, and by Cyril of Alexandria, the major authority for the Christology of the Armenian Church.²⁹ To evoke this text in connection with the present encounter between the orthodoxy shaped by the first half of the ninth century in the west of Asia Minor and a new, 'Radical', orthodoxy elaborated today at Cambridge has a particular significance: it offers us the opportunity to recall still another orthodoxy, that which had been sought by Armenians, Syrians, Egyptians and Ethiopians during several centuries following the rejection of the 'Definition' of the council of Chalcedon (451) across the area extending from Transcaucasia in the north to the Horn of Africa in the south.

The Hermetic 'Definitions' therefore link the Nile valley with the mountains of the Caucasus, that ancient frontier between Asia and Europe, thus bequeathing to Christendom the wisdom of ancient Egypt. The survival of this text in numerous Armenian manuscripts,³⁰ in spite of the adversities of Armenian history, as well as the wide use of the 'Definitions' made by mediaeval Armenian authors,³¹ demonstrates its importance for the articulation of Armenian orthodoxy in the period following the first great schism of the Christian Church.

In what follows, we shall outline several salient points of Hermes' vision of human activity and human discourse in the light of the relationship between man and God. The author of the 'Definitions' distinguishes five gifts with which, in their various combinations, the different kinds of living beings are endowed: life,

²⁸ After more than a century of debates and confrontations in the Near East resulting from the teaching of Eutyches and the ensuing council of Chalcedon, the Armenian Church rejected both the extreme monophysitism and the imperial doctrine at the council of Duin in 553–5. In the following centuries, Armenian divines elaborated an autonomous Christological theory along the lines of Cyril of Alexandria. The integral humanity of Christ was expressed by them in various ways, but the designation of Christ's divinity and humanity as *two* comparable entities belonging to one and the same abstract category of *nature* was avoided. On the schism provoked by the council of Chalcedon and on the formation of the autonomous Churches in the Near East, see the contributions of P. Maraval, N. Garsoïan and J.-P. Mahé in *Histoire du Christianisme*, ed. J.-M. Mayeur et al. (14 vols, Paris 1990–2001), vol. 3, pp. 457–81, 1125–67; *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 457–548.

²⁹ Claudio Moreschini, *Storia dell'ermetismo cristiano* (Brescia, 2000), pp. 94–101.

³⁰ The most important manuscript of the 'Definitions' is a florilegium composed in 1282 by the learned Məxit'ar of Ayrivank' († c.1290), prior of the Monastery of the Cavern which had been carved between the middle of the twelfth century and the second half of the thirteenth within the rock in the gorge of the river Azat in North-Eastern Armenia; see Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Égypte*, vol. 2, pp. 320–27.

³¹ Cf. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Égypte*, vol. 2, pp. 333–54; M. Van Esbroeck, 'J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*', *REArm*, XVII (1983): 692–3.

breath, soul, intellect and discourse. Man is the only being endowed with both intellect³² and discourse.³³ The intellect is the highest gift, which is superior to the natural world, the world of physical bodies, and is capable of supernatural and unlimited sight and thought ('Definitions' IV.2; V.1–3; X.5). It enables man to accomplish himself: 'The perfection of the soul is the knowledge of beings' (VI.3); 'Man's plenitude is the knowledge of God' (VII.5); 'Each man, insofar as he conceives of God, is a man' (IX.1). Man, for Hermes, is therefore a dynamic being who is realized in continuous becoming³⁴ and is ordained to the knowledge of the world and of God through the exercise of his intellect.

The intellect acquires knowledge³⁵ and understanding³⁶ in silence and expresses them in 'intelligent', or 'meditative',³⁷ 'discourse' which, according to Hermes, is its 'servant' interpreting the intellect's designs. Only the intellect is able to *conceive*³⁸ and to comprehend 'discourse' (V.1–3). Such discourse, proceeding from the intellect as its direct function inherits its qualities: since the intellect is infinite in its cognitive capacity, discourse is infinite in its capacity for articulating the wisdom acquired by the former. Therefore, meditative discourse, which through the intermediary of the intellect ascends to silence, becomes the image of silence; it links human existence to infinity and brings salvation to men: 'Man has become mortal because of his body, but because of discourse [he] is immortal' (V.2).

Meditative discourse is, similarly to James 1:21–2, at once man's creation and God's salvific gift. It is distinguished from the 'discourse of the crowd' (V.3; X.7) which necessarily proceeds from some other discourse – the crowd being deprived of intellect – and therefore does not establish any bond with the higher level of reality, i.e. does not represent a channel of the transcendent. The latter kind of discourse, which is merely 'man's invention', generates a vicious circle between

³² 'Intellect': *mitk'* in the Armenian version. It corresponds to *νοῦς* in the surviving Greek fragments and evokes the 'heart' of the ancient Egyptian wisdom texts; see Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, p. 297.

³³ 'Discourse': *ban* in the Armenian version, which corresponds to *λόγος* in the surviving Greek fragment.

³⁴ Similarly in the Epistle of James; cf. Frankemölle, *Der Brief des Jakobus*, vol. 1, p. 341; with respect to *James* 1.25^d, H. Frankemölle underlines: 'Der Mensch sein Glück nicht (instrumental) "durch sein Tun" erlangt, sondern (modal, durativ) "in seinem Tun" und "während des Tuns"' (ibid.).

³⁵ 'to know': *gitem* ← *οἶδα*; 'knowledge': *gitut'awn* ← *γνώσις*.

³⁶ 'to understand': *imanam* ← *νοέω*.

³⁷ 'Discourse' is once called *mtawor* (V.3), 'intelligent' (a term elsewhere also qualifying the 'soul'), and once *par-imac'akan* (X.7), 'meditative'. The latter term appears only once in the text. The Greek fragment does not contain the parallel verses, but we may presume that the second term could be the calque of *περινοηματικός*. These terms should be distinguished from 'intelligible' (qualifying 'world', 'things', 'good' and 'substance'), *imanañi* ← *νοητός*.

³⁸ 'conceive': *ylanam*, the same lexeme which describes the germination of embryos.

the bodies of this world and thus brings forth perdition (V.2–3).³⁹ Similarly, to Hermes, James – as Ward notices – distinguishes between true and false wisdom, between the wisdom which ‘descends from above’ and brings good fruits and that which is ‘earthly, animal and demoniac’ (Jas 3:14–18).

In spite of the place reserved by Hermes for silence in the cognitive process and of his condemnation of the ‘discourses of the crowd’, the author does not confine his hearers to interior and abstract meditation. Although he contemplates beauty and harmony (II.1; IX.4; X.1,7), he is also concerned with the concrete setting of human life in the world and with man’s responsibility with regard to everything his senses perceive. In Hermes’s view, man is endowed with free will; he creates salvific discourse and is divinized through his active acquaintance and his engagement with the world: ‘Will, comprehend, believe, love!’ (VIII.7). Work is connatural to men, so that ‘men working the earth’ are likened by him to ‘the stars adorning heaven’ (IX.7).

The world exists for the sake of man, just as man for the sake of God, and man is a ‘free living being’ in the world, the only being which has ‘dominion over good and bad’ (VI.1; VIII.6; IX.1). Man’s senses, by which he perceives and apprehends the world, testify that man and the world are ordained to each other as the Lord to his dominion: ‘If there were no seer [of the world], there would certainly be neither he himself, nor that what is seen [by him]’ (VI.1). Man therefore exercises his dominion over the world also through being its observer and interpreter. He thus occupies the key position in the universe wherein he plays the role of mediator between God and the natural world entrusted to him.

Man’s attentive reflection on the world has liberating effect: ‘If nothing seems to you an insignificant fact, you will discover both the fact and its artificer; if everything seems to you a joke, you will be made a joke yourself’ (VIII.5); the world exists in order that through it man may know God (VIII.6); God is intelligible, he ‘is invisible although observable in the things visible to us’ (I.2); ‘He who knows God, does not fear God; he who does not know God, fears God. He who knows nothing about the beings of this [world] fears everyone [of them], but he who knows all about these beings, fears no one ... he who reflects by the means of the intellect on himself, knows himself’ (IX.3–4). Through observation of the world, the intellect thus discovers its creator, and death is overcome through the understanding of the world: ‘Death comprehended is immortality, uncomprehended is death’ (VIII.5; IX.2,4; X.6).

³⁹ Other Hermetic texts suggest that he who follows the instructions of meditative discourse is on the ‘way of life’; see Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, p. 298; Id., ‘La voie d’immortalité’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991): 351–636. The accomplishment of God’s commandments as the ‘upright way’ which gives life, as the image of the way from bondage to freedom and of the way to the promised Land, is also fundamental to several Biblical books (see above all Deut 5:32–3; 10:12–13; 11:22–8; 28:11–14; 31:29) whence it has been inherited by ecclesiastical writers for the definition of orthodoxy, the ‘upright teaching’, that is the ‘upright way’ which deviates neither to the right nor to the left which are associated with different heresies.

The natural world is ‘the mirror of truth’, the embodiment of bodiless reality, as meditative discourse is the image of silence. Only the intellect, however, is able to look into this mirror. The intellect is also called by Hermes ‘light’, because it illuminates, by means of the discourse it creates, visible things in such a way as to see through them the invisible things. The relationship of discourse to silence is parallel to the relationship of the world to truth: in both cases, the latter is the image of the former. Moreover, whilst nature is ‘the light of non-manifest [things]’ (VIII.5), the intellect is the ‘light’ which enables the one who possesses it to see the ‘interior things’ (IX.2).

The parallelism between discourse and the world – as well as between their prototypes, truth and silence – could probably be extended further. Above we observed that meditative discourse is, for Hermes, at once a gift and man’s creation. We may consequently assume that the ‘Definitions’ implicitly allot a similar intermediate position also to the natural world. Indeed, we find there the following symmetrical statement in which the world occupies the central position between God and man: ‘God is in himself; the world is in God; man is in the world’ (VII.5). Hermes also seems to suggest that the world at once illuminates man and is the object of man’s enlightened action: on the one hand, nature is called ‘generous’ because it ‘teaches everybody’ the truth (VIII.5); on the other hand, ‘everything [exists] for the sake of man’, and man, who exists for the sake of God, is called to act in the world, thus transforming it by his action and conferring on it a new meaning by his interpretation. Only through this twofold activity does man attain to salvation. This *coincidentia oppositorum* in the definitions of the world and of discourse – comparable to that observed by Ward in the Epistle of James – can, according to J-P. Mahé, be traced back to the procedures of the mythical thought of ancient Egypt.⁴⁰

We may, therefore, observe a similarity between James and Hermes both in their anthropology and in their speculative methods. However, whilst in James’ view (in accord with the idea dominant in the Bible and rabbinic literature) the Christian achieves perfection through the accomplishment of God’s commandments,⁴¹ for the author of the ‘Definitions’ man primarily expresses himself in cognition, thereby attaining to salvation. Nevertheless, Hermes’ perspective cannot hereby be associated with Gnosticism. The author of the ‘Definitions’ implies no split within the intellect;⁴² in sharp opposition to Gnostic perception, he implies monistic cognition and contemplates an optimistic anthropology in which all human faculties deliberately operate in the world in the effort to attain the knowledge of God.⁴³ Moreover, as we have seen, Hermes also envisages a piety enlightened by knowledge and implying

⁴⁰ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, pp. 290–91.

⁴¹ Cf. Frankemölle, *Der Brief des Jakobus*, vol. 1, pp. 318, 337–8.

⁴² Cf. Andreas Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos als Zeuge der Wahrheit. Die christliche Hermetikrezeption von Athenagoras bis Laktanz* (Berlin, 2002), p. 17, note 60.

⁴³ Mahé sees in the Trismegistus’ optimistic view of life the spiritual legacy of the pharaohs’ Egypt; cf. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, p. 454.

faith and love (VIII.7). Indeed, in his view, man's relation to God is not merely that of cognition, but also involves companionship, affinity and reciprocal longing: 'Where man is, [there is] also God ... God is man's friend, man is God's friend. [There is] a kinship between God and man ... Man is desirable for God, and God for man' (IX.6); 'What[ever] God makes, he makes for the sake of man' (VIII.2); it is solely man to whom 'God manifests himself' and 'to whom he listens' and, in order to talk to him, changes his form and 'becomes man' (IX.6).⁴⁴

In what direction do the 'Definitions' orient theological thought? Hermes suggests that man's discourse must always proceed from a personal spiritual experience which implies the engagement with both silence and the world; otherwise discourse risks degenerating into chatter. This intuition warns the theologian concerning two options, the excessive institutionalization of theology and the overproduction of theological texts, especially in times of diminishing religious life. In both these cases the source of supernatural knowledge, the encounter with the divine occurring in silence, is interposed, in the one case by an impersonal structure and in the other by the infinite chains of derivative commentaries or by invented meanings.

The special veneration accorded the fathers by the Armenian and other Eastern Churches does not seem to be extraneous to Hermes' intuition. In the consciousness of these Churches, the fathers are the spiritual athletes whose theology is particularly precious, not on account of the fathers' formal ministerial office, but rather because of the conviction that it sprang from singular encounters with the divine. To refer to their heritage is therefore to maintain a living bond with the privileged moments of human history. This special position allotted the fathers has safeguarded the Eastern Churches from an excessive dilation of their dogmatic corpora. To return to the fathers is to return to the essential verities over the centuries of religious writing (and, also, of religious chatter).

The Armenians, the guardians of Hermes' 'Definitions', like other miaphysites, were indeed 'radical' in their attachment to the founding events, figures and texts of their Church: even the Byzantine tradition was in their eyes excessive in its centuries-old development of dogma. To cite but one example: the ninth-century Armenian divine Isaac Mfut, a contemporary of Photius the Great, referring to the dogmas endorsed by the imperial Church since the council of Ephesus (431, the last Ecumenical council recognized by the Armenians), reproached

⁴⁴ In order to render our presentation less cumbersome, we have ignored all those concepts present in the 'Definitions' which do not directly relate to our topic: we have not spoken of the 'derivative' gods, nor of the distinctions between mortal and immortal beings, between the sensible and the intelligible worlds, between elements, substances and natures constituting the world. We have also ignored the qualities of genders and of souls and bodies. There are, however, passages in the 'Definitions' that complicate the picture of man we have drawn here. Thus, in VIII.4, the author affirms that there are in fact two intellects, one with which every man is endowed (in the Greek version called 'divine') and that 'pertaining to the soul' which, however, is not present in every human soul.

the Byzantines that their ‘synods of all colours convoked here and there’ drove them ever farther from the ‘orders and the definitions of the faith which had been established by the power of the Holy Ghost’.⁴⁵ Therefore, although the Armenians continued along the centuries to seek further definitions for their pre-Chalcedonian orthodoxy, they have never attached to the results of these attempts an absolutely binding character.

To return to our main subject, Hermes’ awareness of the danger of interposition between the voice sounding in silence and the receptive ear can probably also explain the ‘incomplete’ and ‘moving’ character of the Hermetic texts.⁴⁶ Since the word that breaks its bond with silence loses its meaning, every thought that pretends to the position of a rigid and accomplished system is distrusted. At each moment the word ought to spring anew, it can never get hardened, being otherwise unable to represent the image of the one who inspires it.

Could such a thought find room in Christian theology? This question merits a whole series of studies. One of the possible directions of such research would be the investigation of the impact of Hermes’ ideas upon theological writing in Armenia and the consequent reception (and rejection) of post-Ephesian texts by the Armenian Church. But the Hermetic writings may also be of interest to contemporary Western religious thought. In this respect, we cannot but limit ourselves to a brief final remark. Dwelling on the fact that Hermetic literature, in J.-P. Mahé’s words, ‘puts itself continuously into question’, we in fact approach – by a different route – what Gianni Vattimo has called *il Pensiero debole*, ‘Weak Thought’, a thought which avoids metaphysical categories, peremptory affirmations and closed systems. Vattimo’s starting point is not, however, the encounter with silence, but rather God’s *kenosis*: if the Creator of heaven and earth ‘emptied himself taking the form of a slave’ (Phil 2:7), then every systematic thought and every ‘natural law’ ought to be put into question.⁴⁷ He suggests that the thought which continuously overcomes itself derives from the very shape of Christianity: ‘Revelation does not reveal a “truth-object”; it speaks of a salvation

⁴⁵ Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, *Arméniens et Byzantins à l’époque de Photius: Deux débats théologiques après le Triomphe de l’orthodoxie* (Leuven, 2004), pp. 50, 427–8.

⁴⁶ Cf. the striking description given to Hermetic literature by J.-P. Mahé: ‘C’est une littérature qui, par son essence même, refuse la perfection écrite et cherche systématiquement ce qu’il y a d’incomplet, de mouvant’; ‘la véritable prière ... ne cherche pas à accumuler litanie sur litanie, et louange sur louange; elle tend, au contraire, à un approfondissement progressif; elle ne cesse de se remettre en cause pour chercher, insatiatement, un contact plus vrai, plus direct avec Dieu. Aucun terme ne lui suffit, aucun dépassement ne la satisfait, elle finit toujours par constater son impuissance’, in Mahé, *Hermès en Haute Egypte*, vol. 2, pp. 437, 455.

⁴⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Credere di credere* (Milan, 1996), pp. 31, 35; *Dopo la cristianità: per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milan, 2002), pp. 24–6, 63–73; These points of Vattimo’s conception of Christianity are discussed in Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, ‘La découverte de la kénose de Dieu par la “Pensée faible”’: La religion dans l’œuvre de G. Vattimo’, *Istina*, 49/4 (2004): 361–77.

in process ... Christ presents himself as the authentic interpreter of the prophets, but at the moment of parting from his disciples, he promises to send them the Spirit of truth which will continue to teach and will therefore pursue the history of salvation.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, p. 43; cf. also *Dopo la cristianità*, pp. 29–43, 90, 131–3.