

Old Testament Prototypes for the Hermetic *Trishagion* in *Poimandres* 31— and Support for an Old Conjecture

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IT HAS LONG BEEN NOTED that there is a Jewish and Biblical influence on the texts making up the *Corpus Hermeticum*; in this short article I shall attempt to highlight and analyze one such instance—and attempt to draw some conclusions concerning the textual history of the tractate in question. Underscoring this type of influence is important not only for reconstructing the religious background of the *Hermetic Corpus* as such but also provides a window into the interactions between the groups(?) that produced those texts and the cultural milieu of which early Judaism was a part. Given the role that the *Corpus* came to play in the history of Western religion and ideas after its ‘rediscovery’ during the Renaissance and the subsequent intermingling of its ideas with others originating in the Hebrew (and Christian) Bible, it is fascinating to investigate the relationships that appear to have existed between these corpora even in antiquity.

The first of the Hermetic tractates, *Poimandres*, has at its conclusion (ch. 31) a majestic hymn, expressing the joy and elation of the unnamed first-person narrator at the salvific Gnosis that he has experienced, and at the opportunity to impart this sacred knowledge to others. The hymn mainly consists of three major passages, of which each in turn is made up of three utterances of the word ἅγιος, “holy,” and accompanying hymnic descriptions of God:¹

¹ Ed. A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste: Corpus Hermeticum*

ἅγιος ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τῶν ὅλων.
 ἅγιος ὁ θεός, οὗ ἡ βουλή τελεῖται ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων δυνάμεων.
 ἅγιος ὁ θεός, ὃς γνωσθῆναι βούλεται καὶ γινώσκειται τοῖς
 ἰδίοις.

ἅγιος εἶ, ὁ λόγῳ συστησάμενος τὰ ὄντα.
 ἅγιος εἶ, οὗ πᾶσα φύσις εἰκὼν ἔφυ.
 ἅγιος εἶ, ὃν ἡ φύσις οὐκ ἐμόρφωσεν.
 ἅγιος εἶ, ὁ πάσης δυνάμεως ἰσχυρότερος.
 ἅγιος εἶ, ὁ πάσης ὑπεροχῆς μείζων.
 ἅγιος εἶ, ὁ κρείττων τῶν ἐπαίνων.

Holy is God, and father of the All.
 Holy is God, whose will is perfected by his own powers.
 Holy is God, who wishes to be known and becomes known to
 his own.

Holy are you, who fashioned that which is through your *logos*.
 Holy are you, of whom all nature has become an image.
 Holy are you, whom nature did not form.
 Holy are you, who are stronger than all power.
 Holy are you, who are greater than every eminence.
 Holy are you, who are better than [all] praises.

This ‘three-times-three’ recurrence of the word ἅγιος is one of the clearest instances of Jewish/Biblical influence on the tractate: it is hard not to see in this structure an echo of the Biblical *Trishagion* of Isa 6:3, possibly as transmitted through the medium of the Septuagint—a correspondance clearly noted earlier by Birger Pearson.² The three declarations of “holy” are

¹ (Paris 1946).

² B. Pearson, “Jewish Elements in *Corpus Hermeticum* I (*Poimandres*),” in R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions presented to Gilles Quispel* (Leiden 1981) 336–348, at 342. Pearson saw the Jewish *Kedushah* as the medium of transmission. The relationship was also noted by Marc Philonenko, who pointed out that the word ἅγιος is rare in non-Jewish sources: “Le Poimandrès et la liturgie Juive,” in F. Dunand and P. Lévêque (eds.), *Les syncrétismes dans les religions de l’Antiquité* (Leiden 1975) 204–211. Cook also discusses the parallel, but strangely contends that the word ‘holy’ is used eight times, not nine (probably a simple mistake): J. G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tü-

even made three-fold, thus creating a form of *Trishagion* to the power of two, so to speak.³ This in itself is an important part of understanding the background of the hymn. But I believe that even more interesting information can be gleaned based on this insight.

It should be noted that even though possible Jewish or Old Testament influence on *Poimandres* has been discussed for a long time, the hymn in ch. 31 has not always been in focus in this context (despite the references in n.2 above). For example, the discussion of *Poimandres* as a Biblically influenced document in C. H. Dodd's *The Bible and the Greeks* does not include any reference to Isa 6:3.⁴ Neither does the recent Italian annotated translation edited by Paolo Scarpi (2009) refer to this verse in this context.⁵ This shows the need for a more thorough analysis of the phenomenon.

The first of the triads of ἄγιοι especially merits a closer look based on the premise that it displays a Biblical influence: specifically, I think that an analysis of the passage from this perspective may actually tell us something about the textual history of the prayer itself and of its doctrinal background. The first of the triads is the only one in which God is programmatically described in the third person (as opposed to the

bingen 2004) 51. A similar Gnostic reception of the *Trishagion* can also be found in the Nag Hammadi tractate *Melchizedek* 16:16–17: see B. Pearson, “Introduction to IX, 1: Melchizedek,” in B. A. Pearson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X* (Leiden 1981) 19–40, at 26–27.

³ The three-times-three structure of the hymn may also allude symbolically to philosophical constructs such as that later found in the writings of Proclus, whose metaphysical system often uses the form of “triads of triads” —see R. Chup, *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge 2012) 125–126.

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London 1935, 1954²) 194–200. A somewhat more sceptical view of Biblical influences in *Poimandres* and ‘gnostic’ literature in general can be found in R. McL. Wilson, “The Gnostics and the Old Testament,” in G. Widengren and D. Hellholm (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism* (Stockholm 1977) 164–168; Wilson also has no reference to Isaiah in connection with *Poimandres*.

⁵ P. Scarpi (ed.), *La rivelazione segreta di Ermete Trismegisto I–II* (Milan 2009).

second), a fact that—combined with the position of the words at the very beginning of the hymn—gives us an indication that the first three lines with “holy” are in a sense the most important and defining ones.

Each of the proclamations of ἅγιος is followed by a specific description of God. In every line except the very first, the description is given using a relative pronoun in one case or another; the initial line is the only one that breaks this pattern with its more simple appellation καὶ πατὴρ τῶν ὅλων, “and father of the All.” At least, this is the reading of the manuscripts on which Nock and Festugière based their edition.

But there is another manuscript, showing markedly different readings. This is *Papyrus Berolinensis* 9794, a Christianized variant of the hymn, the text of which is also given by Nock and Festugière in their critical apparatus to ch. 31.⁶ In that version, the beautiful three-times-three structure is sorely lacking, as the text inserts another ἅγιος-line before the first one and another one after it, and omits some of the “holy”-s later on in the hymn. The relevant part of the papyrus runs (based on Nock and Festugière, but excluding their restorations of lacunae and arranged into lines):⁷

ἅγιος [—]εἶξας μοι ἀπὸ τοῦ νοῦς ζωὴν καὶ φ[—]⁸
 ἅγιος ὁ θεὸς κ[—]ν ὅλων.
 ἅγιος εἶ [—]ς ἀρχὴ[—]
 [—]ς ὁ θεός, ὁ[—]ται ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίω[—]

⁶ For a discussion of this papyrus as a parallel to *Poimandres* 31–32 see Nock and Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste* I xxxvii. That the papyrus contains a part of the hymn from *Poimandres* was first discovered by R. Reitzenstein and P. Wendland, “Zwei angeblich christliche liturgische Gebete,” *NAkG* 1910, 324–334. For a discussion and ample references see B. McNeil, “A Note on P. Berol. 9794,” *Numen* 23 (1976) 239–240.

⁷ Nock & Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste* I 18. I do not include their various text-critical remarks.

⁸ This first, extra line has no counterpart in the *Poimandres* version. Nock and Festugière restore this line as ἅγιος [ὁ θεός ὁ ὑποδ]εἶξας μοι ἀπὸ τοῦ νοῦς ζωὴν καὶ φ[ῶς].

[---] θεός, ὃς γν[---]λεται καὶ γινώσκεται τοῖς εἰ[---]
 ὁ λόγῳ συ[---]μεν[---]α
ἅγιος εἶ [---]ν ἢ φύσις οὐκ ἐμόρφωσεν
 ἅγιος εἶ ὃ πᾶσα φ[---]φυ
 ἅγιος εἶ ὁ πάσης δυνάστεως ἰσχυρότερος
 ἅγιος εἶ ὁ [---] μείζων
 ἅγιος εἶ ὁ κρίττων τῶν ἐπαίνων

Most of the discrepancies between the papyrus and the standard text of the hymn are, in themselves, not of great importance to this article, as the papyrus variants seem late and sometimes corrupt when compared to the codex version (the absence of the 3-3-3 structure is surely a sign of this). However, there is one instance in which the reading of *P.Berol.* 9794 may be of great importance to the question of the dependence of the hymn upon the text of Isa 6:3 and in which such a relationship may actually help to establish a possibly more authentic version of the text than the one given in the codex text as edited by Nock and Festugière.

I am referring to one of the poorly preserved extra ἅγιος-lines in the papyrus (the third line in the transcription above, marked with bold face). This line appears to praise God using additional terminology. It ends with some form of the word ἀρχή (which form is unclear because of the following lacuna), followed by what was apparently a very short word—only a couple of letters long. Both editions of the *Poimandres* text (Scott and Nock-Festugière) restore this word, in my view quite correctly, as ὄν (“being” or “the one who is”).⁹ In this article, I will argue that this restoration is given further support by the very connection to the Isaiah *Trishagion* discussed above, and that it can be given quite a specific meaning when compared to that text.

According to the admittedly overly emendation-prone edition of Scott, the very first line of the *Poimandres* hymn describes

⁹ As did Schmidt and Schubart in their early edition of the papyrus: C. Schmidt and W. Schubart, *Altchristliche Texte* (Berlin 1910) 112.

God as ὁ πρὸ ἀρχῆς ὢν,¹⁰ i.e., “the one who existed before the beginning.” The whole first line in his version thus runs:

ἅγιος ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τῶν ὄλων, (ὁ πρὸ) ἀρχῆ(ς ὢν)

That is, Scott tried to incorporate the extra line of the *Papyrus Berolinensis* into the text of the prayer proper and make the words of the papyrus an integrated part of the three-times-three structure. With this one may or may not agree, but it is quite possible that there is good reason for regarding the emended line with ἀρχῆ and ὢν as an original part of the text. First, Scott’s emendation would create a better balance between the first line and the two following ones, which (as we have seen) both end with an attributive description of God introduced by a relative pronoun (οὗ ἡ βουλή τελεῖται ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων δυνάμεων and ὃς γνωσθῆναι βούλεται καὶ γινώσκεται τοῖς ἰδίοις). Scott’s version gives the first line a similar ending, not, of course, using a relative pronoun, but with a participle and a definite article, which naturally creates a very similar effect and thus balances the lines well. The other editors, while accepting the restored ὢν, have slightly different reconstructions of the line, presupposing different prepositions: Nock and Festugière have [εἰ]ς ἀρχῆ[ν ὢν], while Schmidt and Schubart have [ἀπ’] ἀρχῆ[ς ὢν]. Nock-Festugière’s version may well be the most plausible, as they read an uncertain *sigma* as the last letter of the preposition, but the identity of that word is not of any importance for the point made in this article, and I shall thus continue to use Scott’s version of the line, as it exemplifies the possibility of reading these words as a part of the first line of the *Poimandres* hymn, which creates a compelling poetic balance in the lines.

There is, however, yet another and more fascinating reason to believe that something along the lines of Scott’s reconstruction may have been the original version of the hymn’s first line (regardless of which preposition may have been involved). I

¹⁰ W. Scott, *Hermetica* I–IV (Oxford 1924–1926).

would argue that it also has a distinct and very specific religio-historical background that goes back to Isa 6:3.

The Hebrew *Trishagion* is:

qādōš qādōš qādōš YHWH šēbā'ōt

The beginning of this phrase is, of course, the threefold repetition of the word “holy,” which is then followed by the Sabaoth name of the Israelite God, the version of the divine name most clearly associated with God’s presence in the Jerusalem Temple.¹¹ This name consists of two parts, the first of which is the *Tetragrammaton* itself and the second the plural of the word *šābā’*, “army, host.” That is, there are two parts of the expression, parts which can easily be interpreted as two individual names of God—as, indeed, we know that they were, as *Sabaoth* appears in many sources interpreted as a name and not as the second part of a construct chain (“YHWH of hosts”), as it originally was.

We now return to the first line of the *Poimandres* hymn according to Scott, and to the expression ὁ πρὸ ἀρχῆς / εἰς ἀρχὴν ὄν. This, I would propose, might not simply be a generic description of a pre-existent divinity, but rather a Hermetic exegetical comment on or interpretation of the first part of the Sabaoth expression, that is the *Tetragrammaton* itself. As is well known, there was an ancient and very persistent tradition of interpreting the YHWH name as being somehow derived from or connected to the Hebrew verb *hyh/hwh*, “to be.” This interpretation is of course in evidence in the Hebrew Bible itself, in the very famous passage Ex 3:14, where God defines himself (and seemingly interprets his own name) as *’ehyē ’āšer ’ehyē*, “I am that I am.” This explanation is rendered by the Septuagint as ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ὄν, “I am the being [one].”

¹¹ On the Sabaoth name see e.g. T. N. D. Mettinger, “YAHWEH ZEBAOth,” in K. van der Toorn et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*² (Leiden/Boston/Cologne 1999) 920–924, and H. J. Zobel, “*šēbā’ōt*” in G. J. Botterweck et al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* XII (Grand Rapids 2003) 215–232, both with ample references.

Given the strong and already noted correspondence in structure between the Hermetic hymn at the end of *Poimandres* and the Isaian *Trishagion*, I propose that the possible expression with ὄν in the hymn has as its background such a philosophical reinterpretation of the YHWH name as “the being one,” which would fit perfectly with the prototype in Isa 6:3. That is, if (for the sake of argument) we base ourselves on Scott’s proposed reconstruction, we get the following equation:

$$\acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma [-] \acute{\omicron} [-] \acute{\omicron}\nu = q\bar{a}d\acute{o}\check{s} YHWH$$

This would mean that the Septuagint—or a tradition similar to it—would indeed have been the path of transmission, and it provides a new piece of circumstantial evidence pointing towards the commonly adopted restoration of the papyrus with ὄν being correct, as it fits with the probable historical background of the hymn. A connection via the participle ὄν would also give the first line a deep sense of theological and philosophical import, grounding the definition of the Deity not only in Jewish religious thought but also, of course, in Platonist discourse.

The next line of the *Poimandres* hymn speaks of God as the one whose will is perfected “by his own powers” (ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων δυνάμεων). What are these “powers”? In the thirteenth Hermetic tractate, *On Rebirth*, a list of various “powers” is indeed given as part of an initiatory experience, powers which are imparted to the soul of the initiand. These may very well be the powers alluded to here—but we must not forget that the hymn is talking here of God’s powers, not those attainable by a man. These may be the same, but of that we cannot be sure, and in any case *Poimandres* and *On Rebirth* are two different texts, albeit closely related to each other.

If we apply the same reasoning to this second line as we did to the first, another source for the “powers” comes into focus: the second part of the Sabaoth name, the word *šēbā’ôt* itself, “hosts” or “armies.” Thus, continuing our previous exercise:

$$\acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma [-] \tau\acute{\omega}\nu [ιδίων] \delta\upsilon\nu\acute{\alpha}\mu\epsilon\omicron\nu = q\bar{a}d\acute{o}\check{s} [-] šēbā’ôt$$

The hosts of the Israelite God thus provide a conceptual backdrop for the second line, making yet another exegetical transformation of Old Testament material by combining this idea with the more ‘spiritual’ powers associated with other Hermetic texts such as *On Rebirth* and completing the Sabaoth name as inherited from Isa 6:3. This name explicitly defines God as the “Lord of the Powers” that the Hermetic text ascribes to him.

The idea that the Hermetic reference to τῶν ἰδίων δυνάμεων is derived from the Sabaoth name is rendered all the more probable by the fact that *YHWH šēbā’ōt* is actually rendered by the LXX translators as κύριος (ὁ θεός) τῶν δυνάμεων in a number of places—as a matter of fact, this is the translation used exclusively in the LXX Psalter.¹² To be sure, this rendering does not occur in the LXX version of Isa 6:3 (which uses κύριος σαβαωθ), but its well-attested existence proves that this exegetical interpretation of the Sabaoth name was known and current in Hellenistic Judaism. Therefore, it is my contention that the author of the *Poimandres* hymn used this interpretation as a way of integrating the ideas of the Jerusalemite Sabaoth title and the Hermetic idea of the “powers,” as described in *On Rebirth*.

The allusion to the Sabaoth name places this Hermetic *Trishagion* in the tradition of the presence of the Israelite God in the Temple and his rule from the throne of the Cherubim. Also, it is notable that the three *qādōš* utterances in Isaiah are given by the quasi-angelical Seraphim. In the *Poimandres*, the words are spoken by a human being transformed by Gnosis and thus taking part in the angelic realm—and this fact is reinforced by the quotation from the words of the Seraphim. The protagonist has, so to speak, risen to their level, to the level of the heavenly hosts themselves, praising God. This is yet another illustration of how God’s will is “perfected by his own powers”: the narrator in one sense *becomes* one of those powers,

¹² Mettinger, in *Dictionary* 920, and Zobel, in *Theological Dictionary* 217. Zobel gives a complete list of these instances.

through his identification with the “hosts” of YHWH. The “powers” in the passage are both the angelic and/or astral powers of the Israelite God and the metaphysical powers of *Corpus Hermeticum* XIII, which are homologically identified with one another.

But at this point the divine name as given in the Isaiah *Trishagion* is ‘used up’, so to speak. The first triad of the hymn has a third description, which has no prototype in the Biblical text: the third line states that God “wishes to be known (γνωσθῆναι) and becomes known (γινώσκεται) to his own.” Why does the Hermetic text add this further description?

It is highly significant that the description contains no less than two forms of the verb γινώσκω, which, of course, shares a root with the word Gnosis itself. This third line is clearly focused on what is the specific message of the whole tractate: that divine self-knowledge is the way to salvation. It is thus no coincidence that this line was added to those apparently inherited from Isaiah: it is this specific line that highlights what is special about the text, what separates it from the tradition it received. The hymn begins by praising God in terms related directly to Biblical prophecy and the *Sitz im Leben* of the Jerusalem Temple, but it then adds its own, ‘Gnostic’, twist: ὃς γνωσθῆναι βούλεται καὶ γινώσκεται τοῖς ἰδίοις. Thus, both the inherited similarities with the Isaiah text and the new additions to it help cement a deep message of the hymn: that the Hermetic initiate can rise to the level of the Seraphim in the temple and utter the *Trishagion* that they do, and that this takes place through salvific Gnosis. Birger Pearson was of the view that the formulations of the first *trishagion* part of the hymn are “nothing that could not have occurred in a Jewish community,”¹³ but in this final phrase about God wanting to be known to his own, I believe the specific theological views of the Hermetic author come into focus, a fact highlighted by the lack of a corresponding phrase in the Isaiah prototype.

¹³ Pearson, in *Studies* 342.

There may be yet another influence from Isaiah on this Hermetic *Trishagion*. Certain phrases of the hymnic passage bear a resemblance to the titles of the ideal royal child, whose birth is announced in Isa 9. That child (today often identified with Hezekiah or some other royal offspring) is there given the ceremonial names *pele' yô'ēs*, *'ēl gibbôr*, *'ābī 'ad*, and *sār šālôm* (“wondrous counsel-giver,” “mighty god,” “eternal father,” and “lord of peace”). Three of these four titles have close analogues in the *Poimandres* passage. The second line speaks of God’s βουλή or “counsel,”¹⁴ the first describes him as a “father” who has existed since before the beginning of time. The description of a “mighty god” reminds one of the whole third triad, especially the phrase ὁ πάσης δυνάμεως ἰσχυρότερος. If this parallel is indeed due to historical influence, it is not strange that the last epithet (“lord of peace”) finds no clear correspondence in the Hermetic text, as that title is more overtly tied to a perceived political role for the coming ruler, which would of course not be very relevant as a description of the God of the *Poimandres*. Indeed, as the text very much focuses on the ‘other-worldliness’ of the deity, such an expression would seem quite out of place in the context.

The mention of God’s βουλή may itself serve a very specific religio-historical purpose. The Platonizing milieu from which the Hermetic writings emerged did not originally have the *Heilsgeschichte*-perspective so pervasive in Old Testament thought. The express reference to God having a “counsel” or

¹⁴ The idea of God’s “counsel” or “plan” occurs at many places in the Old Testament. The noun *'ēsā*, which is the usual term for this concept, is derived from the same root as the verb *yā'as* (“to advice”) and its participle *yô'ēs*, discussed above. Job 38:2 describes the Israelite God as the lord of this *'ēsā*, meaning his supernal plan for the world. In a previous study, I have discussed a possible Mesopotamian background for this expression and its implications—in Job, the “plan” or “counsel” seems to consist of God’s creative activity combined with his battles against the forces of chaos: O. Wikander, “God’s Plan in Job and the ‘Wise Things’ of Marduk,” in G. Eidevall and B. Scheuer (eds.), *Enigmas and Images: Studies in Honor of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger* (Winona Lake 2011) 227–236.

“plan” gives the text such a salvific historical dimension, in which the enlightenment of individual humans is part of a great scheme of God’s calling them to himself through Gnosis.

All in all, we can see how the author of the *Poimandres* hymn used ancient Israelite material in order to make certain special points; it is my belief that these points (and thus the meaning of the hymn as such) can be elucidated more clearly if these historical antecedents and alterations are recognized.¹⁵

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