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Antiquity

Esteban Law. *Das Corpus Hermeticum—Wirkungsgeschichte: Transzendenz, Immanenz, Ethik.* (Clavis Pansophiae, 7,3.1.) 472 pp., bibl., index. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2018. €198 (cloth); ISBN 9783772818202.

Das Corpus Hermeticum—Wirkungsgeschichte is the first volume of what is to be a five-part series devoted to Hermetic literature and its transmission from late antiquity to the early modern period. Published in the same series as Colpe and Holzhausen's important annotated translation (1997), it is clearly a work of high ambition. Many readers of *Isis* may associate the "Hermetic tradition" primarily with the "Yates thesis," which saw modern science as crucially indebted to the revival of Hermetic philosophy in the wake of Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1471); however, the present volume is focused not on the "magical" traditions central to that now widely discredited thesis, but to what is commonly known as the Hermetic *philosophy* of late antiquity. This erudite volume contains detailed analyses of the relevant textual materials, and Esteban Law must be applauded for his diligent efforts. However, the enormous amount of time and energy devoted to this project makes it all the more regrettable that it is built on assumptions that have been overtaken by the progress of research since the 1980s and lead us backward rather than forward.

From the 1940s to the 1980s, research of the Hermetica was dominated by André-Jean Festugière, who saw the Hermetic literature as popular philosophy, not religion; as Greek, not Egyptian; and as consisting of "literary fictions" unrelated to community practices. His perspective, known as philhellenism, was dominant in classics at that time and saw Greek philosophy as broadly compatible with Christianity as well as evidently superior to what was seen as the decadent superstitions of "the Orient," including Egypt. From the 1980s onward, this perspective has been overturned completely in the wake of groundbreaking research by Jean-Pierre Mahé and Garth Fowden, who (for all their differences) moved the emphasis from Greek philosophy to Egyptian religion and from mere written speculation to ritual practices suggestive of small communities or groups. Crucial to this revolution was a collection of Coptic papyri discovered near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, including a Hermetic treatise ("The Ogdoad and the Ennead") that had been completely unknown before.

While Law of course acknowledges those publications and the wave of modern research built on these foundations, he evidently wants scholars to return to a philosophical/theological perspective similar to that of Festugière. His project is based on a programmatic request formulated by Heinrich Dörrie in a laudatory review of Festugière published as early as 1955, which is about three decades before the new scholarship of the Hermetica began to take off (see pp. 69–70, 89–90). Dörrie asked for a systematic analysis that would demonstrate the theological "structure" of the Hermetic literature as a whole; and in his attempt to provide such an analysis, Law reduces the entire Hermetic literature to a system of systematic theology

(or “theological philosophy”) centered on the triad “God—Cosmos—Man” (pp. 94–95, 101, and throughout).

The problem is that with the exception of the newly discovered Coptic papyri and one treatise known in Latin throughout the Middle Ages, virtually all our sources (most of them in Greek, one collection in Armenian) went through a long process of selection and transmission over more than a millennium, dominated by Byzantine scribes and scholars with heavily Christian theological interests and commitments. Participants in this scribal culture cared nothing about modern standards of philology and had no interest in preserving or passing on materials tainted with “pagan errors” or “idoltrous superstitions.” While selecting from a wealth of manuscripts only what seemed most relevant to Christian theological concerns, it was natural for them to “improve” the text while copying, so as to reveal the hidden presence of Christian doctrines in texts that originally had nothing to do with them. Moreover, as recently demonstrated by Christian Wildberg, marginalia with pious commentaries, theological refutations, or other scribal interventions could easily end up as parts of the main texts in subsequent copies, leading to grammatical chaos. On top of that, the material quality of the manuscript transmission is extremely poor, with all our copies of the famous *Corpus Hermeticum* going back to one single archetype from the eleventh century, which was badly damaged to begin with.

This state of affairs makes it impossible to treat the surviving manuscripts as a coherent and reliable corpus of doctrinal theology independent of later Christian interpretations and misunderstandings. Nevertheless, that is what Law is doing. His incredibly detailed 390-page analysis of “The Doctrine of the Corpus Hermeticum” (which he interprets, like Colpe/Holzhausen but against standard academic conventions, as including all the “philosophical” Hermetica) does not reveal an original Hermetic “doctrine” or “theological philosophy” that once existed in Roman Egypt. At best, it presents us with a medieval and early modern phenomenon best referred to as Christian-Hermetic theology. In short, whether this is intentional or not, we are dealing with a thoroughly apologetic project of theological appropriation. The *Stellenverzeichnis* alone (24 pp.), not to mention the footnotes, treat the Hermetic literature as though it were a rigidly organized and carefully edited corpus instead of the damaged, partly corrupt, and heavily edited bunch of surviving manuscripts that it actually is.

Law’s intellectual horizon seems to be largely that of pre-1980s scholarship, grounded in all the standard Greek-classicist philhellenist and Christian-theological patterns of bias and a disproportionate reliance on older publications. See, for instance, the cavalier dismissal of Egyptian backgrounds in just a few lines: “diese These konnte sich bei Nicht-Ägyptologen kaum durchsetzen” (pp. 56–57, n. 24). Is Egyptological expertise irrelevant to studying the Egyptian backgrounds of treatises written in Egypt? And since Law quotes Mahé and Fowden in support of positions they actually reject, could he have overlooked the programmatic titles of their books, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte* and *The Egyptian Hermes*? As for the question of Hermetic communities, we are told “davon kann keine Rede sein” (p. 63, with n. 48; but see p. 67). Never mind that mainstream research since the 1980s suggests exactly the opposite. With profound regret one has to conclude that regardless of the author’s considerable erudition and impressive diligence, this study is already several decades out of date.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Wouter J. Hanegraaff is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam. Among other things, he is the author of Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005; with Ruud M. Bouthoorn) and a series of articles on Hermetism and its reception history. He is currently working on a monograph about Hermetic spirituality in the original Roman-Egyptian context.