

The Hermetic Christ

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“Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

(Matthew 10:16)

As literary critic/historian of religions Jack Miles argues in his unique discussion of the Torah entitled *God: A Biography*, the development of Hebrew monotheism involved, amongst other elements, a radical act of amalgamation; what had been a diverse, albeit somewhat unincorporated pantheon of local cultic gods collected into a condensed and integrated single character—namely, YHWH. Several distinct faces of YHWH appear throughout the Torah, characterizing him as a complex and capricious god, often riddled with internal conflict and contradiction. “The Lord God has no father and mother,” writes Miles, “but the otherwise engendered contradictions in his character do find an enactment in his life. His character fuses, explodes, and [...] disintegrates without disappearing [by being preserved and held together in the many stories of the Torah]” (23). If such condensation is characteristic of the monotheistic process, then Jesus Christ, as the son of God and representation of God’s vastness contained in a singular form, must share some of these qualities of multiplicity as well. Indeed, Jesus represents a step even deeper into monotheistic complexity in that he is a confluence of God and human being. Not only is Jesus’ character complicated by the many cultic gods (contained in and contributed by YHWH) that it comprises, but as God-made-flesh it is even more deeply nuanced. Thus he, like his Father, has many faces in which can be glimpsed human characteristics as well as distinct gods (or archetypes) all harbored in his singular being.

This notion of a multiplicitous monotheistic god is associated not only with the monotheistic process described by Miles, but also with the archetypal Divine Child, as illuminated by Karl Kerényi in his prolegomena to *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth*

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of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis. Inherent in this character, he and co-writer C.G. Jung explain, is a sense of completeness, of all the paradoxes and contradictions and splits in him that will unravel and unfold as he matures in the world (8). This description seems to fit Jesus well; though only two of the Gospels of the New Testament include stories of his childhood, these tales of miraculous birth and trial-filled young years are undeniably foundational to his mythology. The Divine Child motif also serves the understanding of Jesus Christ's adult roles as savior and prophet, in that it acknowledges something fundamentally unique about him from conception, which foresees his ultimate divinity. In theologian John Dominic Crossan's words: "Greatness later on, when everybody was paying attention, is retrojected onto earlier origins, when nobody was interested. A marvelous life and death demands and gets, in retrospect, a marvelous conception and birth" (6). Indeed, though many critics and historians agree that the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood were inflated by Matthew and Luke. In retrospect, these stories have persisted as an integral facet of his divine character, mythologizing his entire life as the Son of God.

The reader can distinguish a multiplicity of deities in Jesus Christ using the ancient Greek pantheon as an exemplary system of Western archetypal metaphors for reference—in his rebellion against the Lawmakers and his young violent death one may recognize a Dionysian shape, for example; and in his love for community and his deep wisdom one glimpses Athena. Amidst these typical and more celebrated attributes, however, hides the visage of a trickster, an undeniably Hermetic aspect to Jesus' complex character. It is the Hermes in Jesus Christ, the subtle hues and silhouettes the two gods share -- this is the focus of this essay. Although the young thief god of the ancient Greeks is a notorious charmer (and though many fundamentalist Christians turn a forcefully blind eye to his trickster qualities, so was Jesus) he is also a master of

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rhetoric, a helper of humankind, and a spiritual guide. So if we allow the young Hermes of the Homeric Hymns to escort us to the shadowy places in Jesus Christ's mythology for a few moments, we may ultimately be better endowed to celebrate the Messiah's divine genius.

The God of Between

The story of Hermes begins in the shadows. Stir-crazy and overtaken by desire, Zeus leaves his throne under cover of night to ravish the beautiful and mysterious earth nymph Maia in the dark cave in which she dwells. Their affair is passionate and secret, a permeation of the dangerous boundaries of duty and class. The king of Olympus, mighty father of the gods, making love to a lowly nymph, a mere servant, a rustic farm-girl. This penetrable edge, on the outskirts of order, is the realm in which Hermes is conceived and born. Not quite high god, not quite terrestrial nymph, his very foundation lies with a foot in two different worlds. As a result, his nature is one of in-between-ness, of shadiness and illusion. He is born a misfit. But Hermes, an inventor from his first day, realizes this un-belonging as the windfall that it is. Though he may never fit fully into either the mortal world or the all-powerful pantheon, Hermes is free to participate in the workings of both, to serve as medium for each. As Godolphin describes him, "Hermes is a versatile god, concerned with a wide variety of activities. . . .among the Olympians, he is a messenger and errand boy, but among men he is a friendly and sociable god" (33). His domain is not limited to the terrestrial or the Olympian; rather, he is the point of connection between these two worlds.

This space between, the liminal realm of Hermes, is the birthright of Jesus as well. Born of divinity and mortality, Jesus is at once the Son of God and the Son of Man, serving as the medium between God the Father and humanity. This dual nature is a mythological culmination of Jesus' conception by a mortal mother of a divine father. As Kerényi writes, "[...] the Rebecca Diggs. "The Hermetic Christ." *Mythological Studies Journal* 3 (2012).

beginning and end of an ontogeny coincide: begetting and birth are identical, as also the begetter and the begotten” (56). Thus, Hermes’ conception in a dark and secret cave, far away from radiant Olympus and the knowing eyes of the high gods, imbues his character with its shadiness, its subtle evasiveness; and Jesus’ conception imbues his own character with a mysterious and powerful mettle. He may be, in a sense, a bastard child, but his very strength lies in this unique blending of human frailty and immortal power, making him “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). As the Son of God, Jesus is the carrier of God’s spirit and divine message; as the Son of Man, he is a teacher and healer amongst men, ultimately able to sacrifice his mortal body and free his spirit to eternal life as an ultimate lesson on faith. “The New Testament,” writes Alister McGrath, “refers to Christ as a *mediator* between God and humanity at several points (e.g., Hebrews 9:15; 1 Timothy 2:5). Christ here is understood to mediate between a transcendent God and a fallen humanity” (65). Like Hermes, had Jesus been born of either Earth or Heaven, his role as mediator and messenger would not be possible.

When Jesus prayed for his disciples in the Gospel of John, he pled to God that because they had accepted His word and were therefore hated in the world, they, like Jesus himself, were not of the world and thus might be saved. “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of this world any more than I am of this world” (John 17:14). Jesus’ deeds, however, are worldly deeds—because he is a man, his feet walk the dusty ground, his community is a human one, his pedagogy teems with rich earthy images. Though his nature is divine, his works are terrestrial, and, as McGrath asserts, “there is a close link between the Christian understanding of the *person* of Christ and the *work* of Christ” (53). His ministry on the streets and in the slums is elemental to the power of his character—he is a god who likes to get his hands dirty. Like Hermes, Jesus Christ is a god in the world, not above it; he interacts with

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his surroundings and experiences them hands-on rather than lingering in the clouds in heaven or atop Mount Olympus, merely observing and speculating. As his mythos reminds us, Hermes is the god of liminality, a god with one foot on Olympus and one in the Underworld (and, indeed, one foot between these poles, stirring the dust of the earth). Stated succinctly by Christine Downing, “every threshold is Hermes” (43). The god of the crossroads, the doorway, and the messy terrain between underworld and upper world, Hermes finds a brother in the god of the cross, of the ethereal, of the transcendent power of God born into the human world, Jesus Christ.

Divine Children

On his very first day of life, Hermes accomplishes many incredible feats—he invents the lyre using the shell of a tortoise, he sneaks away to Apollo’s hallowed pasture and rustles a choice selection of cattle, he invents the cooking fire and grills meat for a ritual sacrifice to the gods, and he covers the whole story up by means of his quick wit. Much of Hermes’ known character comes from the stories of this eventful first day. Though he may not have leapt from the cradle with such mature capabilities, Jesus derives a portion of his character from the stories of his dramatic birth and childhood as well. John Dominic Crossan asks: “What are those infancy stories supposed to do? They are not so much the first chapters of Jesus’ life, from which other chapters about the rest of his infancy and youth have been, as it were, hidden or lost, as they are overtures, condensed intertwining of the dominant themes in the respective gospels to which they serve as introduction and summary” (5). Indeed, these stories illuminate in Jesus the Divine Child archetype expounded by Kerényi and Jung, which, as was noted earlier, anticipates his miraculous adulthood. As Jung declares (though a bit too rigidly), “the occurrence of the child motif ... signifies as a rule an anticipation of future developments, even though at first sight it may seem like a retrospective configuration. ... the ‘child’ paves the way for a future change ...”

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(83). And not only do the Divine Children Hermes and Jesus “pave the way” for their own wise and powerful adulthoods, they also burst into their respective worlds with characteristic suddenness and change these realms radically.

Jesus and Hermes represent epiphany—needed epiphany—amidst their static, established cultures. Their births bring about a rejuvenation, a reinvention of the world. As Kerényi describes, “The gods are so ‘original’ that a new world is always born with a new god—a new epoch or a new aspect of the world” (7). Into Hermes’ world erupts a power to subtly undermine all powers, a charmer who can penetrate golden Apollo’s walls and amuse heretofore unchallenged Zeus into soft acquiescence. Into Jesus’ world is born a similar such Divine Child, a trickster who subverts the powers that be from the day of his advent, and who presents his people with a wholly new avenue to spiritual communion. The epiphanic nature of these divinities’ appearances is reinforced by the fact that their stories begin at birth and infancy. Says Kerényi, “where one divinity appears among others as a child it means that its epiphany occupies the central place” (52). In other words, the god who erupts suddenly onto the scene as a Divine Child is consistently of central importance—is soon-to-be psycho pomp like Hermes, or someday savior like Jesus Christ.

By focusing on his infancy, stories of Hermes not only foreshadow his destiny as a bonfire god, but also emphasize his relationship to Zeus the father. In the Homeric Hymn which tells his story, Hermes is largely motivated for his midnight cattle raid by a desire to earn recognition and honor for his lowly mother and himself, as part of the (dysfunctional) family of Zeus. Ultimately, what legitimizes him (and truly, all the Olympian gods) is his connection to Zeus, the high god’s recognition that Hermes is his son and has displayed some commendable, even enviable, traits. Similarly, Jesus’ relationship to God is the source of his legitimacy as the

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Christ. As McGrath argues, the New Testament differentiates between Jesus as the “Son of God” and believers as adopted “children of God.” “At every level in the New Testament—in the words of Jesus himself, or in the impression which was created among the first Christians—Jesus is clearly understood to have a unique and intimate relationship with God” (58). Where other prophets had been visited by God, touched in their dreams and moments of meditation, Jesus outshines them as the ultimate prophet, the one Son of God. He does not become a conduit to God; as child of the divine, he is the conduit to God.

Being “children of God,” though not *the* child of God like Christ, is a vital aspect of the proper religious attitude for Christian followers. To assume a childlike nature means being innocent and open, the state favored by Jesus Christ (as well as his wide-eyed mythological brother Hermes). Jesus teaches his followers throughout his ministry that God’s truth shall be revealed only to the innocent, not the hardened and wise. In Jesus’ words, according to Matthew, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:3-5). Many Christians have made a cult out of innocence, literalizing this notion of turning a childlike face to the world, but if one can see the complete picture of the Divine Child in Christ, one may see both sides of this Hermetic archetype—the cunning, the manipulation, the shadiness as well as the wonder, the openness, and the innocence. For after all, Hermes’ greatest deed on his first day of life is the theft of his brother Apollo’s precious cattle herd. Jesus Christ is undeniably a thief as well, having whisked away a substantial flock of followers from the guarded pastures of Israel and of Rome. Though Christ’s innocence seems largely genuine, it is as much an element of his complex rhetorical prowess.

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Masters of Rhetoric

When Hermes returns to the safety of his blankets after his first busy night of stealing and sacrificing Apollo's cattle, he relaxes, confident that he'll not be found out for his trickery. As it may be expected, Apollo is not so pleased with his baby brother's heist. Realizing the culprit of his missing cattle, he charges into Hermes' home and dangles the baby god before his great face, threatening to expel him to dark Tartaros if he refuses to admit to the crime. When Hermes laughingly refuses to yield in the face of such an adamant demand for truth, Apollo demands a hearing in the court of Zeus to bring him to justice. As the brothers stand before mighty Zeus, however, Hermes' silver tongue goes to work, spinning a tale so fantastic and persuasively sweet that his father cannot help but admire the boy and reward this unique power of rhetoric rather than punishing him for the stolen cattle. Despite the weighty evidence against him, Hermes, realizing this rhetorical facility, insists to Zeus that that which is probable is true, and what the facts say is simply absurd: "a baby, / just new-born, / who could walk right in the door / with a herd of cows. / What you're talking about is ridiculous. / I was just born yesterday!" (*Homeric Hymns* 37). It doesn't matter what actually happened, logic says Hermes is just a baby and any story about him executing such grand feats as the notorious cattle raid is absurd. And Zeus the father, and even furious Apollo, are so taken by his mastery of rhetoric that little Hermes, downplaying his truly immense power, charms his way into the pantheon before anyone is able to stop him.

While Hermes is the god of words, Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. Like Hermes, Jesus is "no small verbal master" (Caputo 43). And Like Hermes', some of the facets of Jesus' verbal mastery are the manipulation of political power structures and of people's perceptions of truth. As he declares in the early days of his ministry, "I do not come to abolish the Law of the

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Prophets” (Matthew 5:17). Indeed, Jesus’ rhetorical power is not colored by aggressive confrontation or head-to-head battle against the established laws of his society. Rather, he infiltrates society and undermines the overpowered rulers using sermons and parables—subtle words and images. “He taught as one with authority, not as their teachers of the law,” says Matthew of Christ’s compelling pedagogy (Matthew 7:29). His authority comes not from Zeus-like overt brawn, but from Hermetic sleight-of-hand. As John Caputo writes in his Postmodernist look at the Christian tradition, “The divinity that shows through Jesus consists not in a demonstration of might but in a complete reversal of our expectations” (84). A low-class carpenter, a mere man, is the last threat to established society that the heads of state expected. Yet, like little baby Hermes, Jesus Christ slips in and calmly and boldly changes everything.

In much the way Hermes downplays his divine might to avoid the wrath of Apollo and Zeus, Jesus too insists that his power be kept secret until the appropriate time. As McGrath explains, “Jesus does not appear to have been prepared to accept the title ‘Messiah’ in the course of his ministry. [...] When Peter acclaims Jesus as Messiah—‘You are the Christ!’—Jesus immediately tells him to keep quiet about it (Mark 8:29-30). It is not clear what the full significance of the ‘Messianic secret’ is” (54). Yet if this “Messianic secret” is a similar rhetorical device to baby Hermes’ denial of his great powers, then Jesus was making a deliberate and strategic move to avoid the consequences of his fate until the time foretold him. An effective move indeed, this rhetorical maneuver transforms Jesus’ persecutors’ aggression from an act of spiteful murder into a carefully planned moment of divine fate. Though his mortal body is slain, Jesus’ godly strength triumphs.

Return from the Underworld

As a means of managing Hermes' newly realized capacity for mayhem, Zeus assigns him a role, a place in the pantheon where his swift feet and gift for communication can be assets rather than tools of destruction. The young trickster is named the messenger to the gods, the giver of gifts and overseer of transactions among humans, a seer of prophesy, and the one and only liaison between Hades and those who dwell in the upper levels of the world. These are the titles which distinguish the adult Hermes from the newborn Hermes, granting him the characteristics by which he is best known. As messenger of the gods, he is present in all moments of rhetoric and communication. And from his meetings with Hades, god of the underworld, Hermes brings to the surface pure and powerful treasures from this sub terrain, truths that dwell only in the depths. Christine Downing describes their relationship as a unique combined effort: Hades pulls down to the underworld, and Hermes leads back up (39). While all souls are someday stolen away to the underworld, Hermes is one of only two who are allowed to ascend again to the earth, and even up to the heights of Olympus. And when he arises, he brings with him valuable wisdom and deep essential power, gifts from the underworld.

Among the miracles Jesus Christ performed which distinguish him as a god on Earth; his resurrection from the grave after three days of burial is, to many, the most spectacular. During his three days in the tomb, Jesus dwells in the underworld, his soul ripening and his spirit being lightened of its fleshly fetters. And when he finally ascends to join his father in Heaven, he brings to the sacred heights a unique wisdom which was earned in the world and in the underworld. This is not the first time in Jesus' life such an underworld journey imbued him with sacred wisdom; as Crossan describes of Jesus' childhood escape from Herod to Egypt, as told in the book of Matthew, "it is pagan wisdom from abroad, not civil power at home, that accepts and

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worships newborn Jesus” (15). If pagan Egypt represents a metaphorical underworld, then it follows that Jesus is accepted even in his infancy by the underworld, and that such acceptance makes him all the stronger and wiser for his fateful journey to the cross and beyond.

Jesus’ journey to and from the underworld is thus not simply an escape from or rejection of the dark recesses of the world; rather, it represents his embrace of those shadowy areas, a willingness to be contaminated by the taboo mysteries of death and decay for the sake of completeness. By opening himself to the underworld’s wisdom, the Christ’s character becomes deepened and more complex, more whole than it could have been had he dwelled only on earth or in the heavens. In his return from the darkness, he brings knowledge of the realms beyond flesh that proves his dominion over not only the dusty earth and the pure transcendent heaven, but the strange shadiness of death as well.

Perhaps most vital amongst the treasures Jesus delivers after his underworld trek is his embodiment of the utter interdependence of death and birth, womb and tomb. As Jung argues of the Divine Child, “Just as the ‘child’ is, in certain circumstances [...] closely related to the phallus, symbol of the begetter, so it comes up again in the sepulchral phallus, symbol of a renewed begetting (97). Without his death and entombment, Jesus could not have been reborn, resurrected in a form pure and whole. That he belongs equally to underworld as to earth or the heavens shows that Jesus’ divinity, his kind of purity, emanates from his wholeness, not from negating death or transcending the terrestrial realm. Just as Hermes reminds us on his daily wanderings across the lowest and highest planes of being, Jesus Christ reminds us that the cradle and the grave are intimately and eternally related, that life itself (as well as all that life symbolizes—growth, perseverance, renewal) depends upon death, decay, darkness.

Mythical Brethren

In the tension between mortality and godliness, in his divine childhood, in his beautifully nuanced and persuasive rhetoric, and his journey to and return from the underworld, Jesus Christ shows the mythological roots he shares with young Hermes. While these roots represent but one of Jesus' many faces, they assume the many other archetypal characters encapsulated in his being. The more one is able to recognize and appreciate the complexity inherent in this multiplicity of faces, the more one may see and relate to Jesus wholly, to suspend judgment either positive or negative and celebrate all the shadow and light, the sacred and mundane, the myth in his character.

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