

“The days seemed like years”

Thessalos Prepares to Encounter the God Asklepios¹

PHILIP A. HARLAND

1. Introduction

The first-century autobiographical letter attributed to Thessalos, which served as a preface for an astrological guidebook on medical materials, provides an important glimpse into ancient expectations regarding journeys in pursuit of wisdom and the role of purity in encountering the gods.² The full work, which often goes by the title *Thessalos the Philosopher on the Virtue of Herbs* (*Thessalus philosophus de virtutibus herborum*), was only rediscovered and published by Charles Graux in 1878. The opening letter (hereafter *Thessalos*) relates the story of Thessalos' early life and education in Asia Minor. There Thessalos demonstrates extraordinary abilities that lead him to pursue a medical education in Alexandria in Egypt. Towards the end of his education as a physician, Thessalos discovers an ancient book by King Nechepso, which promises twenty-four medical cures according to the signs of the Zodiac. Thessalos believes that the treatments will work and spreads word of the amazing cures to both his family in Asia and his colleagues in Alexandria, only to discover that he cannot make the prescriptions work. This leads him to thoughts of suicide.

Thessalos then wanders through Egypt in search of a solution, consulting holy men or priests. He only finds a solution after he meets a specific Egyptian priest at Diospolis (Thebes), who reluctantly prepares Thessalos to communicate with a god. After he attains purity, the story culminates in

¹ An early version of this paper was discussed at the Seminar on Culture and Religion in Antiquity at the University of Toronto in 2008. I would like to thank the respondent, Arthur Droge, and other participants for their comments. My wife, Cheryl, provided further feedback for revisions. For further discussion of the journey motif specifically, see my article “Journeys,” which explores Thessalos' material from another angle. The translation in the appendix here is drawn from that article.

² Charles Graux published the Greek Byzantine manuscript of 1474 known as Codex Matritensis Bibl. nat. 4631. A fourteenth century Latin translation of the Greek (Codex Montepessulanus Fac. mé. 227, f. 31–35) was later discovered and published in 1912. For further discussion see the critical edition of the texts by Friedrich, *Thessalos*.

Thessalos meeting Asklepios "face to face." Thessalos receives from this god of healing secret knowledge concerning sympathies between movements of the stars and medicinal plants, knowledge that will bring effective cures.

This tale of the adventures of Thessalos has not been widely studied by scholars of Greco-Roman culture, and it is not readily available in English translation (see my translation in the appendix).³ Along with other books on healing materials, Thessalos' work as a whole has been studied by those interested in the history of medicine or pharmacology, but the preface of *Thessalos* has not been the focus here.⁴ Thessalos' story is noted by some scholars of Greco-Roman religion or "magic," as when A. D. Nock cites Thessalos as an instance of "religious curiosity."⁵ Furthermore, those with an interest in the Hermetic or astrological literature, including Franz Cumont, A.-J. Festugière, and Garth Fowden, deal with Thessalos' herbal in the process.⁶ Festugière also feels that he could use Thessalos' vision as an instance of mystical experience or "personal religion" in antiquity.⁷

In recent decades, other scholars have employed the work in seeking to support specific theories regarding supposed cultural or religious developments in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. On the one hand, Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) approaches the story of Thessalos as confirmation that there was a major shift from the communally-centered sanctuary to the individually-focused holy man in antiquity. Smith attempts to push back several centuries (to the second century B. C. E.) what Peter Brown identifies as the "rise of the holy man" in late antiquity (fourth-fifth centuries C. E.).⁸ Sharing in common some facets of Festugière's view, Smith claims that this early shift was accompanied by a clear decline in sanctuaries, including traditional Egyptian temples and their priesthoods. In *Thessalos*, he suggests, we are seeing a "realistic portrait of the city in Late Antiquity," a "shadow of its former glory."⁹ Smith then claims to find in Thessalos' story inversions of typical motifs that undermine traditional forms of religious thought and life. Moreover, Smith's attempt to plug *Thessalos* into a broader and, in my view, problematic theory regarding the decline of traditional ways and the rise of individualism does not do justice to the story of Thessalos on its own terms.¹⁰

³ To my knowledge, the only English translation of the letter is the translation offered by Bob Brier (*Magic*, 258–60). Festugière ("L'expérience") offers a French translation.

⁴ See Scarborough, "Pharmacology," and the works cited there.

⁵ Nock, *Conversion*, 108–109. Cf. Moyer, "Initiation," "Thessalos."

⁶ Cumont, "Écrits hermétiques," "Thessali medici," *L'Égypte*; Festugière, *La révélation*; Fowden, *Egyptian*, 161–65.

⁷ Festugière, "L'expérience"; cf. Festugière, *Religion*.

⁸ Brown, "Rise."

⁹ Smith, "Temple," 178; italics mine.

¹⁰ See my critique of such theories of decline in Harland, *Associations*, 89–114.

A second scholar who has recently employed Thessalos' letter, Robert K. Ritner (1995), quite actively critiques Smith's use of the writing. In particular, Ritner brings in the evidence of *Thessalos* to further bolster a thesis of *continuity* (rather than decline) in the practice of Egyptian forms of ritual in and beyond the first century C.E. Here Ritner deconstructs common scholarly views regarding the decline of Egyptian customs.

Although I am largely convinced that the decline of Egyptian sanctuaries and ritual has been overstated in the past, Ritner's use of the Thessalos evidence as a window into specifically Egyptian rituals and contexts seems to miss the stereotypical or fictional features of the story. Ritner, like Smith at times, seems to take certain aspects of Thessalos' Egyptian experience at face value, as though the tale reflects actual activities or real conditions in Egypt.¹¹ Thus, for instance, Ritner argues that the priests' hesitancy in allowing Thessalos access to their magical knowledge is motivated by a fear of Roman imperial legislation. In this view, Thessalos' story actually "epitomizes" the "Egyptian reaction to the Roman prohibition" of magic.¹² More likely, in my view, is that the priests' hesitancy in the story reflects common idealized portraits of Egyptian priests who, for concerns of purity, exclusivity, and other matters, did "not associate with anyone who stood wholly outside their religion" (as stated by Chaeremon).¹³ I will show that in many respects there is more the *image* of the exotic or foreign than the actual Egyptian in this story.

Regarding the hesitancy of the priests in relation to Thessalos' requests, Smith instead argues that this is indicative of the *decline* of Egyptian rites: The priests simply do not believe in the efficacy of traditional ritual or "magic" anymore and, therefore, turn down Thessalos' request for instruction.¹⁴ Despite such opposing arguments, both Smith and Ritner agree that certain elements in Thessalos' adventures can be used as accurate reflections of cultic life in Roman Egypt. Scholarly choices about what is fiction and what is reality in Thessalos seem to be determined by the overarching theories these scholars seek to support. Although stated strongly, Strabo seems more on track regarding the fictional tendencies of journey stories when he

¹¹ For a more extreme case of taking Thessalos' story at face value, see Jack Lindsay's (*Origins*, 203–207) discussion of alchemy where he attempts to extract considerable historical information from the letter.

¹² Ritner, "Practice," 3356–57.

¹³ Translation by van der Horst, "Way," 65. Ian Moyer similarly rejects both Smith's decline of Egyptian rites view and Ritner's imperial legislation view, stating that "there is little reason to suppose that Egyptian priests would have feared prosecution on a day-to-day basis for carrying on traditional religious practices" (Moyer, "Initiation," 227). Moyer's subsequent article of 2004 ("Thessalos") changes direction and attempts to reconcile the views of Smith and Ritner.

¹⁴ Smith, "Temple," 178–79.

states that “every man who narrates his wandering is an imposter” (*Geography* 1.2.23).¹⁵ Silvia Montiglio’s recent work on the theme of wandering shows this intimate connection between travel tales, ancient ethnography, and fiction.¹⁶

Here I argue that we should understand the journeys of Thessalos within the context of typical patterns in, and expectations regarding, “autobiographical” stories among the elites. The tale provides less information about the actual experiences of the character Thessalos or Egyptian conditions and more about widespread notions among upper-class Greeks (and Romans) regarding journeys to foreign lands in pursuit of superior knowledge. It also provides insights into how the literary elites imagined encounters with holy men and gods, including the important role of purification.

2. The Journey Pattern in Context

As I explore more extensively in another article (Harland 2011), stories about one’s journeys in search of knowledge, including “magical” wisdom, were widespread within literature with biographical interests. Several common recurring motifs or elements in the pattern, which are also clearly evident in the story of Thessalos, include the protagonist: seeking out answers to life’s problems as a boy, youth, or young adult; failing to find answers from various teachers in various places; experiencing thoughts of despair or suicide; traveling to a foreign land or place in the East (e.g. Egypt, Babylon, Palestine) for education, or gaining access to such foreign wisdom in some other way; meeting a foreign holy or wise man; encountering some reluctance on the part of the holy man; slowly gaining the confidence of the holy man; and, gaining knowledge of the holy man’s secrets that provide access to wisdom or powers from the gods, sometimes involving significant preparations or purifications for the experience. These patterns should caution us against taking information from Thessalos’ story as though it reflected actual conditions on the ground, whether this information be cast in terms of decline (Smith) or continuity (Ritner) in Egyptian temples and priestly activities.¹⁷ These autobiographical types heavily shape the story of Thessalos

¹⁵ Cf. Plutarch, *On Talkativeness*, 514b; Lucian, *Stories*, throughout. Silvia Montiglio (*Wandering*, 252) drew my attention to this passage in her discussion of wandering in ancient novels.

¹⁶ Montiglio, *Wandering*, 251–61.

¹⁷ This also problematizes attempts to read the story as representing the actual experience of a particular, non-fictional person, such as Thessalos of Tralles. On Thessalos of Tralles, a physician associated with the “Methodists” (along with Asklepiades), see Edelstein, “Methodists;” Riddle, “Medicine;” Pigeaud, “L’Introduction.”

in a way that serves to legitimize the astrological and medical “knowledge” that is presented throughout the remainder of his work. Here I outline a few examples of this story-pattern to provide context for Thessalos’ tale.

Motifs regarding travel in pursuit of divine knowledge were common enough for Lucian to incorporate them regularly into his satires, with quite humorous effect. In the satirical *Lover-of-Lies* (*Philopseudes*), the character Tychiades recounts the autobiographical claims of a certain philosopher, named Eucrates (*Philopseudes*, 33–39 [LCL]; ca. 160s C. E.). Eucrates catalogues all the amazing things he experienced in his educational journeys: “When I was living in Egypt during my youth (my father had sent me traveling for the purpose of completing my education), I took it into my head to sail up to Koptos and go from there to the statue of Memnon” (*Philopseudes* 33). Eucrates then relates his encounter with a “holy man” (ἄνδρα ἱερόν) and scribe (γραμματεὺς) who had been learning “magic” (μαγεύειν παιδευόμενος) from the goddess Isis for twenty-three years in a temple at Memphis (*Philopseudes* 34). Eucrates sought an education from him and his description is reminiscent of Thessalos’ time with his holy man: “by degrees, through my friendly behaviour, I became his companion and associate, so that he shared all his secret knowledge with me” (*Philopseudes* 34; see *Thess.* 13–16).

As with Thessalos’ story, many other narratives of travel in pursuit of wisdom put even more stress on the youth’s initial failures to attain sufficient answers to intelligent questions. In Lucian’s tale of *Menippus*, for instance, Menippus explains that he traveled to consult the shadow of Teiresias on Menippus’ life-long dilemma regarding what mode of life was best. So, “I resolved to go to the men whom they call philosophers and put myself into their hands, begging them to deal with me as they would, and to show me a plain, solid path in life” (*Menippus* 4 [LCL]). This only exacerbates Menippus’ struggle to find his answers in life. As a result, Menippus begins to wonder whether an “ordinary man’s way of living is as good as gold,” which, ironically, is what he will find out later – at the end of his journeys – anyway. Disappointed in his expectation (ἐλπίζ), Menippus is even worse off and more uncomfortable than before. This is when Menippus, like characters such as Thessalos, travels far to seek the help of a foreign wise man, in this case a Babylonian wise man and “magician” (*magos*) named Mithrobarzanes. After some reluctance on the wise man’s part, Menippus convinces the “magician” to prepare him for a journey to the underworld to find the answer to his life-long questions regarding the meaning of life.

As in Thessalos’ preparations to meet Asklepios, there is an importance placed on purifications to encounter other-worldly (under-worldly) figures in order to find answers to long-held questions. The wise man prepares him by providing regular bathings, a special diet, and a final ritual of purifica-

tion: “taking me to the Tigris river at midnight he purged me, cleansed me, and consecrated me (ἐκάθηρέν τέ με καὶ ἀπέμάζε καὶ περιήγγισεν) with torches and squills and many other things, murmuring his incantation as he did so” (*Menippus* 7). Ultimately, in Hades, Menippus gains answers from the deceased Teiresias, who is reluctant to reveal things. True to the satirical context here, and unlike the divine revelations received by the likes of Thessalos, the answer is less than profound: “The life of the common sort is best ... laughing a great deal and taking nothing seriously” (*Menippus* 21).

The focus on exotic, foreign wisdom that is integrated into such stories is attested in other materials relating to those pursuing wisdom. Philostratus’ model philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana, is perhaps the best known example. Less noticed is Cleombrotus of Sparta in Plutarch’s discourse *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*. Plutarch portrays Cleombrotus as a philosopher and “holy man” who “made many excursions in Egypt and about the land of the Cave-dwellers, and had sailed beyond the Persian Gulf” (410a [LCL]). Once again, there is an emphasis on what these wanderings to foreign lands bring in terms of answers to long-held questions. In particular, the story goes that, when Cleombrotus was near the Persian Gulf, he sought out a famous man with prophetic abilities and great “learning and knowledge of history” (421b). Cleombrotus then gains answers concerning the gods and key cosmological debates among Greek philosophers since Plato (421a–c). In this connection, I disagree with Smith’s claim that Thessalos inverts the normal expectations regarding the importance of gaining knowledge from foreign lands. I see no evidence in *Thessalos* itself that Thebes (or Egypt) is viewed by that author as “a shadow of its former glory, with a handful of religious specialists inhabiting a few ruined temples,” let alone a “necropolis” as Smith asserts.¹⁸

Although Lucian was my starting point, these patterns are by no means limited to his writings, then. For instance, there are indications that some Greek-speaking followers of Jesus, such as Justin Martyr (*Dialogue*, chapters 1–8) and the author of the Pseudo-Clementine writings, likewise adopted and adapted widespread notions about how one goes about finding the truth, and I discuss these more fully in my other article (Harland 2011).

Furthermore, the basic story of Harpocration preserved in the *Cyranides*, which in some form likely goes back to the second century C. E., shows that Thessalos’ work is not the only medical guidebook to incorporate such patterns in a travel narrative.¹⁹ Here Harpocration, the ostensible author,

¹⁸ Smith, “Temple.”

¹⁹ On *The Cyranides*, see Waegman, *Amulet*; Fowden, *Egyptian*, 87–91. Dioscorides’ *Medical Materials* (first century C. E.) lacks the claims to divine origins that we find in both Thessalos and the *Cyranides* yet still stresses the knowledge that Dioscorides gained through travel. See Scarborough and Nutton, “Preface.”

relates his journeys to Seleucia in Babylonia, where he finds an “old man skilled in foreign learning.”²⁰ This man shows Harpocraton “everything,” including a temple and certain pillars with strange letters written upon them. As the wise old man explains to Harpocraton, one of the pillars has an inscription that outlines divine healing secrets concerning sympathies between the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, on the one hand, and stones, fish, herbs, and birds, on the other. Harpocraton then publishes this knowledge from the gods in his book.

While this somewhat secret foreign inscription is seen as the answer to Harpocraton’s quest for divine knowledge, Thessalos seemingly finds only disappointment from his re-discovered book by the legendary King Nechepso. This despite the fact that Nechepso, along with the wise man Petosiris, was renowned for his great wisdom, particularly astrological knowledge.²¹ Smith suggests that this element of Thessalos’ story is another reversal of common expectations, and he goes so far as to suggest that the pattern of finding hidden books of wisdom is “radically altered.”²²

It is true that, ultimately, Thessalos does not find Nechepso’s cures fully effective. However, the story itself stresses how this apparent failure of foreign wisdom leads Thessalos in the right direction.²³ The Nechepso material is just a further stage in Thessalos’ move to true knowledge, and the god Asklepios himself defends rather than condemns the wisdom of Nechepso in the end: “King Nechepso, a man of most sound mind and all honourable forms of excellence, did not obtain from an utterance of the gods what you are seeking to learn. Since he had a good natural ability, he observed the sympathy of stones and plants with the stars, but he did not know the correct times and places one must pick the plants.”

Despite the differences in details, Thessalos’ autobiographical story is in many respects typical, rather than inversionary as Smith claims. It offers very little in terms of information about particular persons or places, let alone the question of whether Egyptian temples, priests, and ritual power (or “magic”) were thriving (Ritner) or in severe decline (Smith). Instead, it provides one specific variation on how upper-class Greeks told stories of education, foreign wisdom, and access to knowledge from holy men and the gods.

²⁰ See the critical edition by Kaimakis, *Kyraniden*. To my knowledge, the only English translation of the preface is: Anonymous, *Magick*.

²¹ Sayings attributed to Nechepso and Petosiris (probably from the second century B. C. E.) survive in fragmentary form as cited by authors such as Vettius Valens (see Riess, “Nechepsonis;” Kroll, “Nechepso;” Fraser, *Ptolemaic*, 1.436–38).

²² Smith, “Temple,” 177.

²³ Cf. Fowden, *Egyptian*, 164: The herbal’s “tendency is to complete Nechepso rather than to supersede, far less refute him.”

3. Preparation and Purity in Context

So far I have concentrated on contextualizing the supposed journeys of Thessalos. These travels end in sanctuaries of the ancient city of Diosopolis (Thebes) where Thessalos finds his holy man and prepares to meet the god. It is there that Thessalos gains a positive answer to his ongoing questions about “whether any magical power (τῆς μαγικῆς ἐνεργείας) saves a person from illness” (*Thess.* 13). Purification plays an important role in Thessalos’ final steps towards divine wisdom, so it is important to provide some background for Thessalos’ portrayal of his time in the Egyptian sanctuaries among priests, as well as the process involved in meeting the god Asklepios. Once again, the narrative is an idealized one that provides a window into the worldview of an upper-class Greek author.

The general portrait of the Egyptian priest in Thessalos’ narrative fits well within the standard type of the wise or holy men found within many other journeys that I have already outlined, whether that holy man was in Egypt, Babylonia, Judea, or elsewhere. Yet in some respects, it seems that common Greek ethnographic traditions and portrayals of Egyptian priest-hoods, temples, and rituals specifically are at work to some degree in Thessalos. From some Greek and Roman perspectives, Egyptian priests were commonly associated with knowledge in “magic,” astrology, and related disciplines.²⁴ The use of the term “magic” in Thessalos’ letter suggests an outsider’s perspective, rather than familiarity with actual Egyptian ritual activity as Ritner proposes. This fits more with understanding the letter as a whole in terms of discourses of ethnography, of how to describe things Egyptian in Greek terms. Within this context of the Greek fondness for things Egyptian, Thebes specifically was a focal point of attention: “Thebes distilled the country’s very essence and focused the religious traditions for which the whole of Upper Egypt was renowned.”²⁵ Thebes was especially viewed as the source of ancient Egyptian rituals with “magical” power.²⁶

Thessalos’ narrative presents us with a picture of the priests at Thebes, who are known for their scholarly activity, ascribing to “various teachings.” The priest whom he befriends is an expert in “perceiving divine visions in the activity of a dish of water,” lekanomancy. The general picture of Egyptian priests’ activities here is reminiscent of other contemporary and idealized portraits, the most important of which is a passage by the Egyptian sacred-scribe (*hierogrammateus*) and Stoic philosopher Chaeremon, preserved by Porphyry (*De Abstinencia* 4.6–8; see van der Horst 1982).

²⁴ Cf. Fowden, *Egyptian*, 166–68; Frankfurter, *Religion*, 219–20.

²⁵ Fowden, *Egyptian*, 168.

²⁶ See Fowden, *Egyptian*, 168–76; Ritner, “Practice,” 3335–36.

Although Chaeremon is an Egyptian himself, he is a thoroughly Hellenized and Romanized author who here presents his own customs in an idealized manner typical of descriptions of foreign yet admirable peoples.²⁷

Writing for his Greek audience in the first century, Chaeremon presents Egyptian temples as a “place to philosophize” and engage in a life of scholarly pursuits, including astrology and other disciplines “They divided the night for the observation of the heavenly bodies, sometimes for ritual; and the day for worship of the gods ... They spend the rest of the time with arithmetical and geometrical speculations, always trying to search out something and to make discoveries, in general, always busy about science.”²⁸ These priests were “always in contact with divine knowledge” (ch. 6). Chaeremon also stresses the importance of purification among these scholarly priests, which brings us to Thessalos’ portrayal of his preparations to see the god.

Central to the overall story of Thessalos is his preparation and purification in order to receive his vision of the god, which brings the knowledge he was seeking all along. After gaining the friendship of one of the high-priests of Diospolis, Thessalos invites him to a secluded sacred forest. There he begs the priest, declaring that “it was necessary for me to converse with a god or else – if I failed to meet this desire – I was about to commit suicide” (17). This is the point at which the high-priest directs Thessalos to “keep ... pure for three days.” For Thessalos, who had long been searching for the answers to his questions, “the days seemed like years” (20).

After attaining the state of purity, the high-priest brings Thessalos to a pure room or building (*oikos*), most likely within the temple area.²⁹ Contrary to Smith’s assertion, there is no indication that this special room is independent of the high-priest’s regular context in the sanctuary. Smith’s claim is among the supposed “inversions,” which are then used to support his argument that temples were being replaced by something else, namely the mobile holy man removed from the sanctuary.³⁰ Instead, the story of Thessalos gives the impression that the high-priests, including this specific priest, were closely tied to the sanctuary at Diospolis.

The high-priest then asks Thessalos whether he wants to speak with the soul of a dead person or with a god. Thessalos’ response – that he would like to speak directly to the god on his own – is not well-received. Yet, the priest obliges despite his hesitancy. Then Thessalos is brought into the room and seated opposite the throne where the god will appear.

²⁷ Cf. Philo’s *Contemplative Life*. See van der Horst, “Way,” 62–63 on Festugière, *La révélation*, 19–44.

²⁸ Ch. 8; trans. van der Horst, “Way.”

²⁹ See Frankfurter, *Religion*, 167–69, where he discusses a similar use of chambers in the cult of Isis and Serapis at Kysis. Cf. Ritner, “Practice,” 3357.

³⁰ Cf. Smith, “Temple,” 180–89.

Ritner places Thessalos' request for a direct encounter with the god and the description of the throne in this passage within the context of the traditional Egyptian "reaching god" (*ph-ntr*) ritual, which is described in the Demotic manuals regarding direct revelations from a god, using bowls, lamps, or dreams.³¹ Ritner also proposes that Asklepios is to be taken here as the equivalent of the Egyptian god Imhotep (= Imouthes), as in some other inscriptional and papyrological cases.³² Whether or not the Greek author of the story was to any extent familiar with the details of Egyptian understandings of the god or ritual is questionable, however.

When Asklepios finally appears to Thessalos, the author describes the inexpressible and "incredible nature of the spectacle," as he first sees the god. Asklepios recognizes the special status of Thessalos: "When your successes become known, men will worship you as a god" (*Thess.* 25). Asklepios states his willingness to answer anything that Thessalos wishes to ask. Thessalos' question is quite simple: Why did the cures outlined by Nechepso in the book fail? Asklepios' answer stresses that, although Nechepso had a good natural ability and recognized the "sympathy of stones and plants with the stars," he did not gain this knowledge directly from the gods.

The divine secret that is revealed to Thessalos pertains to the times when the plants must be picked in order to access power. This power is described as the "divine spirit" that "pervades throughout all substance and most of all throughout those places where the influences of the stars are produced upon the cosmic foundation" (*Thess.* 28). The remainder of Asklepios' revelation, which Thessalos documents using the pen and paper he snuck into the room, becomes the basis for the rest of Thessalos' astrological-medical work.

The final stages of Thessalos' adventure here, with the preparation and vision, can once again be understood within the context of Greek notions of meeting gods and engaging in foreign or Egyptian rites. Several of the journeying figures discussed in the previous section found answers to their questions from holy figures, who had special access to the wisdom of the gods.

The notion that one's travels could end in meeting a god is also attested in Apuleius' well-known, humorous play on these motifs (*The Golden Ass*). As is well known, Apuleius' novel is based on an earlier Greek story and reflects some themes also found in other Greek novels, including the use of travel to move the plot forward. Like other figures I have discussed, Apuleius' character, Lucius, spends a good time wandering in search of the solution to life's problems, primarily the problem of being an ass. Ulti-

³¹ E.g., *PLeiden* I 384 3, 4, 7–10, 14; *PLouvre* E 3229; Ritner, "Practice," 3346–47, 3357.

³² Ritner, "Practice," 3357; cf. *POxy* XI 1381. On bowl divination, see *PGM* IV 154–285.

mately, his wanderings end in meeting the goddess and in salvation from his dilemma, including the promise of success within his profession, in this case as a lawyer. Isis appears to the ass, Lucius, and provides orders to follow that involve a particular priest, “in whom lay my hope of salvation” from the cruel enemy, Fortune. Lucius then follows the orders and is transformed into his former self. With guidance from the goddess, he seeks initiation into at least three forms of mysteries for the Egyptian gods. The preparations to join the order of devotees are also an important component in the story: Lucius, like Thessalos, expresses the difficulties in meeting the requirements of purity, here chastity and abstaining from forbidden foods for ten days.

As with the character Lucius, purification has an important place in Thessalos’ preparation to meet the god. Yet the letter of Thessalos reveals little about what a Greek author such as this imagined would be involved in purifications in the context of an Egyptian sanctuary. Chaeremon’s idealizing account once again provides some insights into how Egyptian concerns of purity were presented to, or imagined by, Greeks or Romans in the first century. In fact, issues of purification occupy much of Chaeremon’s description of the Egyptian priesthood for his Greek-speaking audience.

Chaeremon notes that certain Egyptian priests had specific requirements that may have differed from others. Nonetheless, all priests are presented as maintaining purity in order to be near the gods. He suggests that it was customary to have specific “rooms” allotted for purification and fasting (ch. 6), reminiscent of the room in which Thessalos achieves his vision of the god. Furthermore, there is a stress on the avoidance of contact with the impurity of outsiders. Those approaching the priests needed to attain some level of abstinence and purity as well.

There are two main components to purity in this model – abstinence from certain foods and abstinence from sexual intercourse – both of which were likely in mind when Thessalos’ story was composed:

The periods of purification and fasting were clear from all animal-food. As to the duration (of these periods), whenever they were to perform something pertaining to the sacred rites, one (?) spent a number of days in preparation, some forty-two, others more, others less, but never less than seven days, and during this time they abstained from all animal food, from all vegetables, and pulse, but above all from sexual intercourse with women ... They washed themselves three times a day with cold water, viz. when they rose from bed, before lunch, and before going to sleep.³³

Thessalos’ three days of preparation pale in comparison with the ideal numbers mentioned by Chaeremon. Still, this description provides some idea of what a Greek would have imagined taking place in a far-off land at the end of a long journey in pursuit of wisdom from the gods.

³³ Ch. 7; trans. by van der Horst, “Way,” 68.

Appendix

English Translation of the Letter from Thessalos’ Preface to *Thessalos the Philosopher on the Virtue of Herbs*

This translation of Thessalos’ letter largely follows manuscript “T” (as published by Friedrich 1968), which is Codex Matritensis Bibl. Nat. 4631, a Byzantine manuscript in Madrid first published by Graux (in 1878). Throughout there is a parallel Latin text, “M” (Codex Montepessulanus Fac. med. 227, a 14th century translation). From line 25 on there is an additional parallel Greek text (= “BH”) that addresses Hermes Trismegistes rather than Thessalos. The main differences in the versions of the prologue include: Thessalos is identified as the author of the letter in “M”; Harpokration is identified as author at the beginning of “T,” but the name Thessalos is preserved in garbled form further on in the story, suggesting Thessalos is the original attribution. Germanicus Claudius is the addressee in “M”; Caesar Augustus is the addressee in “T.”

(1) Thessalos (or: Harpokration in manuscript “T”) to Caesar Augustus (or: Germanicus Claudius in “M”), greetings.

While numerous people have attempted to transmit many incredible things in their life, august Caesar, none has been able to bring such plans to completion because of the darkness which is imposed on his thoughts by destiny. Of all those who have lived since eternity, I alone seem to have done anything incredible and known to a precious few. (2) For attempting the deeds, the very deeds which surpass the limits of human nature, I brought them to completion with many trials and dangers.

(3) For as I was being trained in grammatical knowledge in the regions of Asia, I was also being distinguished from all the better students there until I enjoyed the benefits of knowledge. (4) After sailing to highly regarded Alexandria with plenty of silver, I was systematically studying with the most accomplished scholars. I was being commended by everyone on account of my love of hard work and my intelligence. (5) I was also continuously studying the teachings of dialectic physicians, for I passionately desired this knowledge in an extraordinary way.

(6) When it was the right time to return home – for I had already achieved medical advancement according to custom – I went around the libraries seeking out the necessary medical materials. When I found a certain book of Nechepso dealing with twenty-four medical treatments of the whole body and of every condition according to the signs of the Zodiac through both stones and plants, I was astounded by the incredible nature of its promised cures. Yet it was, as it seemed, an empty delusion of royal foolish-

ness. (7) For despite the fact that I had prepared the solar medicine that had astounded me and the remaining prescriptions in all the medical treatments of conditions, I failed to affect a cure. (8) Supposing that this failure was worse than death, I was being consumed by anguish. Indeed, having very rashly believed in the writing of Nechepso, I had also written to my parents concerning the effectiveness (activity) of the prescriptions as if I had already attempted them, and I was promising to return.

(9) It was not possible, therefore, to remain in Alexandria because of the hysterics of my colleagues – in a peculiar manner, good intentions are resented. (10) I was not willing to return home since I had accomplished very little of what I had promised. Now I wandered around Egypt, driven by a sting in my soul and seeking to deliver on some aspect of my rash promise or, if that did not happen, to commit suicide.

(11) Now my soul was constantly anticipating that I would converse with the gods. Continually stretching out my hands towards the sky, I was praying to the gods to grant me something by a vision in a dream or by a divine spirit so that I could proudly return as a happy person to Alexandria and to my homeland.

(12) Arriving, then, in Diospolis – I mean the most ancient city of Egypt which also has many temples – I was residing there, for there were scholarly high-priests and elders ascribing to various teachings there. (13) Now as time advanced and my friendship with them increased, I was inquiring whether any magical power saves a person from illness. I observed the majority protesting strongly against my rashness concerning such an expectation. (14) Nonetheless, one man, who could be trusted because of his patient manner and the measure of his age, did not throw away the friendship.

Now this man professed to have the ability to perceive divine visions in the activity of a dish of water. (15) So I invited him to walk with me in the most solitary place in the city, revealing nothing about what I wanted him to do. (16) Departing, therefore, into some sacred woods where we were surrounded by the deepest silence, I suddenly fell down crying and was clinging to the feet of the high-priest. (17) As he was struck with amazement at the unexpected nature of what he saw and was inquiring why I was doing this, I declared that the power of my soul was in his hands, for it was necessary for me to converse with a god or else – if I failed to meet this desire – I was about to commit suicide. (18) As he raised me up from the ground and comforted me with the most gentle words, he gladly promised to do these things and commanded me to keep myself pure for three days. (19) After my soul had been soothed by the promises of the high-priest, I was kissing his right hand and expressing thanks as my tears flowed like a gushing spring. For, naturally, unexpected joy brings forth more tears than grief does. (20) Once we returned from the woods, we were attaining the state of purity. The days

seemed like years to me because of the expectation. (21) Now at the dawn of the third day, I went to the priest and greeted him humbly.

Now, he had prepared a pure room and the other things that were necessary for the visitation. According to the foresight of my soul and without the priest’s knowledge, I brought a papyrus roll and black ink in order to write down what was said, if necessary. (22) The high-priest asked me whether I would want to converse with the soul of some dead person or with a god. I said, ‘Asklepios’, and that it would be the perfection of his favor if he would turn it over to me to converse with the god alone. (23) However, as his facial expressions showed, he did not promise me this gladly.

Now when he had shut me in the room and commanded me to sit opposite the throne upon which the god was about to sit, he led me through the god’s secret names and he shut the door as he left. (24) Once I sat down, I was being released from body and soul by the incredible nature of the spectacle. For neither the facial features of Asklepios nor the beauty of the surrounding decoration can be expressed clearly in human speech. Then, reaching out his right hand, Asklepios began to say: (25) “Oh blessed Thesalos, attaining honor in the presence of the god. As time passes, when your successes become known, men will worship you as a god. Ask freely, then, about what you want and I will readily grant you everything.” (26) I scarcely heard anything, for I had been struck with amazement and overwhelmed by seeing the form of the god. Nevertheless, I was inquiring why I had failed when trying the prescriptions of Nechepso. To this the god said: (27) “King Nechepso, a man of most sound mind and all honorable forms of excellence, did not obtain from an utterance of the gods what you are seeking to learn. Since he had a good natural ability, he observed the sympathy of stones and plants with the stars, but he did not know the correct times and places one must pick the plants. (28) For the produce of every season grows and withers under the influence of the stars. That divine spirit, which is most refined, pervades throughout all substance and most of all throughout those places where the influences of the stars are produced upon the cosmic foundation.”

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