

THESSALOS OF TRALLES AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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Over the last two decades, scholarship on “magic” in the ancient world has seen a recurrent debate over the definition of the word, its validity as a category, and its applicability to the beliefs and practices of different cultures, especially when “magic” is defined as a negative counterpart to “religion.” Scholars have struggled to free themselves of inherited preconceptions in describing and analyzing various phenomena in antiquity to which the conventional etic¹ term “magic” is applied, recognizing that distinctions derived from the evolutionary or oppositional schemes of early folklore and anthropology are not necessarily those indigenous to a given culture.² Recently, this question of emic

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1. The etic (as opposed to emic) approach to language and culture was defined by Kenneth L. Pike (*Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, pt. 1, preliminary ed. [Glendale, Calif.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954]) as one in which the scholar attempts to describe, classify, and analyze the data of a particular language and culture with reference to a generalized comparative scheme derived in advance of the study of that language and culture. The emic approach, by contrast, is an internal view of the particular elements of a language or culture as they relate to one another.

2. This is not the place to rehearse these arguments, and in any case that task has been admirably accomplished elsewhere. Fritz Graf (*Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997], 8–19, gives a clear and concise summary of the main lines of scholarship on Graeco-Roman magic and the debate on definitions of magic, though he argues (pp. 20–27) that the oppositions of the Frazerian triad “magic-religion-science” do have a legitimate basis in Graeco-Roman understandings of magic and religion. Christopher A. Faraone (*Ancient Greek Love Magic* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999], 16–18) gives another brief overview and further references. Other especially significant recent contributions to the discussion are the volume edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and essays by Alan F. Segal, “Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition,” in Roelof van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, eds., *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 349–75; H. S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion,” *Nu-*

and etic definitions of “magic” has been at the center of a disagreement in print between Jonathan Z. Smith and Robert Kriech Ritner, involving the interpretation of a treatise on astrological botany attributed to the Greek physician Thessalos of Tralles.³ The prologue to this treatise includes the marvelous tale of Thessalos’s search for magical knowledge, which ends in Thebes with an Egyptian priest and a divine revelation. At issue is whether the acquisition of the revelation represents the novel and creative reinterpretations of archaic practice typical of late antique *magic* or the continuity of traditional Egyptian *religion*. These conflicting readings reflect differing heuristic strategies, but a reconciliation is possible, since the question of magic versus religion is not solely one of scholarly distinctions. It is embedded in the text itself. The Thessalos prologue is a narrative of cross-cultural exchange and commoditization, in which religious rites and discourse belonging to traditional Egyptian civilization are transformed and given a new “magical” value.

Since the first publication of this text in 1878, historians and scholars of religion have recognized it as an important document for understanding the religious life of late antiquity.⁴ Departing from the evolutionary schemes of earlier studies such as those by A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugière,⁵ who saw the text as evidence of incipient spiritualization in a decadent paganism, Smith has used the Thessalos narrative to explore a shift from *locative* to *utopian* modes of religious practice typical of the Hellenistic world.⁶ In the wake of Alexander’s conquests (334–324 B.C.E.), the almost total cessation of native kingship in the Near East

men 38 (1991): 177–97; and Jonathan Z. Smith, “Trading Places,” in Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, eds., *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 129 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 13–27.

3. The debate is between the position outlined by Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 23 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), and the criticisms of Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 54 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993), 219–20, and “Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire: The Demotic Spells and Their Religious Context,” in *ANRW II* 18.5 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 3356–58.

4. Smith (*Map Is Not Territory*, 172) described Thessalos’s autobiographical account as “one of the most precious texts for an understanding of the religious life of Late Antiquity.” For the publication history of the text, see Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 172–74, with his notes and references. The various versions are assembled by H.-V. Friedrich, ed., *Thessalos von Tralles* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1968); all subsequent references are to the sections and page numbers of this edition.

5. A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 108–9; A. J. Festugière, “L’expérience religieuse du médecin Thessalos,” *RB* 48 (1939): 45–54; idem, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste I: L’astrologie et les sciences occultes*, 3d ed. (Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1950), 56–59.

6. A convenient summary of this theory is found in Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, xi–xv, and the themes of his argument are treated in more detail in chapters 4–9 of the same work, and pp. 293, 308–9. It is especially important to note that Smith’s scheme of a shift from *locative* to *utopian* modes is in no way intended to be construed as an evolution from one pattern of religious mentality to another. As Smith himself writes, “They are not to be identified with any particular culture at any par-

and Egypt led to radical reinterpretations of traditional religions. The locative religious formations characterized by strong ties to a particular homeland and to a temple or cult house in which the god dwelt or manifested himself, and by ideologies of sacred kingship and priesthood, were rivaled by diasporic and utopian formations in which access to the divine could be found anywhere, transcendence became central, and the primary operative was the mobile religious entrepreneur, the holy man, or the magician. The essential quality of Thessalos’s revelation, as Smith has argued, is that it is not found in the locative context of the archaic temple with the authorization of sacred kingship, but is procured in a more temporary location with the assistance of the late antique magician.

Ritner’s criticisms,⁷ however, have created some difficulties for Smith’s argument. From Ritner’s Egyptological perspective, the rite that gained Thessalos his interview with a god was conducted by a priest practiced in traditional modes of religious observation, not by an itinerant magician. The text itself, however, clearly describes the object of Thessalos’s quest as “some sort of magical operation” (Gk. τῆς μαγικῆς ἐνέργειας). Several scholars have argued that “magic” (Gk. μαγεία, Lat. *magia*) in the Hellenistic and Roman world was often a polemical category—that “their” religion was magic,⁸ but in Thessalos’s narrative, Egyptian “magic” is clearly desirable, and this differential valuation provokes cross-cultural exchange. A revelation produced by means of an Egyptian religious ritual becomes an exchange item, desired by a wandering Greek and supplied by a Theban priest.

As he describes his adventure, Thessalos reveals an awareness of similar narratives current in literature of the period, which record the tribulations of a hero passing from one fount of wisdom to another and eventually arriving at his goal.⁹ Thessalos’s tale takes the form of a letter addressed to the Roman emperor (either

particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man’s experience of the world” (309).

7. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire,” 3356–58.

8. See, e.g., Segal, “Hellenistic Magic,” and Richard Gordon, “Aelian’s Peony: The Location of Magic in the Graeco-Roman Tradition,” *Comparative Criticism* 9 (1987): 59–95. Segal has argued that the application of the term “magic” based on presumed universal characteristics is problematic in the Hellenistic period. A universalizing definition “creates an ideal type which can only be approximated by a specific occurrence.” Moreover, “magical” vocabulary was often applied by religious authorities to activities and groups perceived as threatening to the social order (“Hellenistic Magic,” 349–51). As Gordon has pointed out, one approach to the position of magic in Graeco-Roman society was to marginalize it as a foreign intrusion into the culture. In Pliny’s discussion of magic in the *Natural History*, for example, he follows a long tradition in attributing the origin of magic to Persia, whence it migrated into Greece and entered the Graeco-Roman world (Pliny, *Natural History* 30.3–13).

9. Examples of this sort of tale are found in Plutarch *Moralia* 410A–B, 421A–B; Justin *Dialogue with Trypho* 1–8; Harpocration *Cyranides* prologue, lines 30–68, in Dimitris Kaimakis, ed., *Die Kyraniden* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1976), 15–17. More comical versions are found in Lucian *Menippus*; (Ps.)-Lucian *Onos*; and Apuleius *Metamorphoses*. For parallels to this sort of spiri-

Claudius or Nero), in which he claims to have outstripped all others in the search for the miraculous.¹⁰ According to this epistolary prologue, he set out from his home in Asia Minor with a large amount of money and devoted himself to the study of philosophy and medicine in Alexandria. After assiduously following the lectures of theoretical physicians (Gk. διαλεκτικῶν ἰατρῶν), he made the rounds of the libraries in preparation for his departure. There he came upon a book attributed to the legendary Egyptian king and astrologer Nechepso. It contained a collection of miraculous remedies based on the sympathies of plants and stones with signs of the zodiac and promised amazing results to the bearer of its arcane knowledge.¹¹

Unfortunately, Thessalos's attempt to put the remedies of Nechepso into practice ended in complete failure—a failure made worse by a hasty proclamation of his discovery to friends and relations in Asia Minor. Rather than face the ridicule of his Alexandrian colleagues or the disappointed expectations of the folks back home, he consigned himself to wandering in Egypt until he could accomplish something in accordance with his rash promises. Eventually he arrived in the Upper Egyptian city of Thebes (Diospolis), where—in order to discover magical powers—he tried to ingratiate himself with the priests, most of whom were scandalized at his propositions:

And so I came to Diospolis—the oldest city of Egypt, containing many temples—and spent some time there. For there were many learned high priests <there> and <elders> adorned with subtle learning. As time passed and my friendship with them grew, I inquired if some sort of magical operation was still preserved. Though the majority of them, I observed, were indignant at my rashness in such undertakings,¹² I was not shaken from friendship with one of them, who could be trusted because of the impres-

tual quest in search of the alien wisdom of Egypt, see the Ps.-Clementine *Recognitions*, and Lucian *Philopseudes* 34–36. A native Egyptian parallel is found in the story of Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah preserved in a Demotic papyrus (P. Cairo 30646) of the Ptolemaic period (323–30 B.C.E.); for an English translation, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 127–37.

10. “(1) . . . Many in their lives have tried, august Caesar, to deliver many marvelous things, and not a one has been able to bring his undertakings to completion, owing to the darkness of fate pressing upon their thoughts, but I believe I alone of the men of this age have been able to accomplish something marvelous [and known to few].” (Gk. Πολλῶν ἐπιχειρησάντων ἐν τῷ βίῳ, Σεβαστὲ Καίσαρ, παραδοῦναι πολλὰ παράδοξα, μηδενὸς πρὸς τέλος ἀγαγεῖν τὰς ἐπαγγελίας διωθθέντος διὰ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς εἰμαρμένης ταῖς διανοαῖς αὐτῶν ἐπικείμενον ξόφον, μόνος δοκῶ τῶν ἀπ’ αἰῶνος ἀνθρώπων πεποιηκέναι τι παράδοξον <καὶ ὀλίγοις γνωστόν>) Thessalos *proem.* 1 (Friedrich, *Thessalos von Tralles*, 45).

11. Thessalos *proem.* 3–6 (Friedrich, *Thessalos von Tralles*, 45–47).

12. The translation of this phrase poses some difficulty. I have more or less followed Festugière (“L’expérience religieuse,” 60), who translated the phrase ἐπαγγελίας ὁμοίας τῇ προπετείᾳ μου <ἐπι>

siveness of his character and the extent of his age. This man professed to have the ability to perform direct divination by means of a bowl.¹³

Thessalos drew aside this one priest who did not reject him outright. In a secluded grove away from the city, the desperate Greek implored the Theban priest to assist him with his predicament. The priest agreed, and at his bidding, Thessalos maintained purity for three days, then met the priest at dawn on the third day—having first concealed on his person a papyrus and some ink. The priest led Thessalos to a pure house he had prepared, and asked the Greek, with whom would he like to converse—some spirit of the dead or a god? Thessalos then revealed his intentions: to speak one-on-one (Gk. μόμῳ μοι πρὸς μόρον ὁμιλεῖν) with the god Asclepius (i.e., Egyptian Imhotep).¹⁴ The priest was visibly displeased. Nevertheless, he had promised, and so he carried out the rite. He seated Thessalos before the place where the god was to appear, summoned Asclepius/Imhotep with his ineffable names,¹⁵ and left the physician to question the god about the remedies of Nechepso. Soon the god appeared in a spectacular vision and spoke to Thessalos. As it turns out, the wisdom of King Nechepso was limited, and required supplementary knowledge of the correct times at which to harvest the plants—knowledge acquired directly from Asclepius himself and (ostensibly) forming the matter of the treatise that follows.

The insufficiency of Nechepso's treatise and its replacement by the direct “magical” revelation achieved by Thessalos are central to Smith's argument that this text represents a shift from *locative* to *utopian* modes of accessing the divine. In the world after Alexander's conquests, where native kingship had been displaced in so many territories, the divinely ordained king was no longer a sufficient guar-

φέρόντων as “s'indignaient de ma témérité à concevoir de telles espérances,” considering the construction a variant of φέρειν with an adverb χαλεπῶς, for example, which I have supplied in the English translation, though it does not appear in Friedrich's text, and the dative case. Cf. LSJ, s.v. φέρω III.2. Franz Cumont (“Écrits hermétiques,” *RP* 42 [1918]: 85–108) seems to have favored the restoration [ἐπι]φέρόντων, translating “reprochent.” In any case, some such solution must be accepted, since it is evident that the priests reacted negatively to Thessalos's inquiries.

13. (12) Γενόμενος οὖν ἐν Διὸς πόλει—ἀρχαιοτάτην <λέγω> τῆς Αἰγύπτου πόλιν καὶ πολλὰ ἱερὰ ἔχουσαν—διέτριβον αὐτοῖς ἥσαι γὰρ <ἐκεῖ> καὶ ἀρχιερεῖς φιλόλογοι καὶ <γέροντες> ποικίλους κεκοσμημένοι μαθήμασιν. (13) προβαίνοντος δὲ τοῦ χρόνου καὶ τῆς πρὸς αὐτοὺς μοι φιλίας μᾶλλον αἰξανομένης, ἐπιθανόμενι, εἰ τι τῆς μαγικῆς ἐνεργείας σώζεται. καὶ τῶν μὲν πλειόνων ἐπαγγελίας ὁμοίας τῇ προπετείᾳ μου φερόντων κατέγνων. (14) ἐνὸς δὲ τινος διὰ τὸ (οὐ) σοβαρὸν τῶν ἡθῶν καὶ τὸ τῆς ἡλικίας μέτρον πιστευθῆναι δυναμένου οὐκ ἀνεχαιτίσθην τῆς φιλίας. ἐπηγγέλματο δὲ οὗτος αὐτοπτικῇ ἔχειν λεκάνης ἐνέργειαν. Thessalos *proem.* 12–14 (Friedrich, *Thessalos von Tralles*, 49–51).

14. Thessalos *proem.* 22 (Friedrich, *Thessalos von Tralles*, 53).

15. Many of the words and phrases in the Greek magical papyri described originally by Karl Preisendanz as “Zaubervorte” have, on closer examination, turned out to be transcriptions of Egyptian words or divine names; see Ritner's notes in Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

antor of supreme knowledge.¹⁶ But the pseudonymous status of the astrologer-king Nechepso complicates the picture. The earliest treatises on astrology that went under his name, often with that of Petosiris, are generally agreed to have been written during the second century B.C.E. in Ptolemaic Egypt.¹⁷ The fragments preserved in various sources often refer to him as “the king,”¹⁸ and yet the exact royal identity of the astrologer is uncertain. As several scholars have noted, the recension of Manetho’s dynastic list in Julius Africanus does include a Nechepso among the forerunners of the (Saïte) twenty-sixth dynasty (664–525 B.C.E.), but there is little independent evidence confirming the existence of such a king.¹⁹ More likely is that “Nechepso” is a version of the name of the well-known Saïte king Necho II with the addition of the epithet “the king” [Eg. *p3 (n)swt*]. The epithet may have been added when a work on divination or astrology was attributed to his authorship in order to clarify the identification of the treatise with the king.²⁰ In any case, the name Nechepso is clearly linked with the Saïte dynasty, a period of great cultural revival in Egypt preceding the conquest by the Persian king Cambyses in 525 B.C.E.²¹ Since astrology was in reality adopted during the Achaemenid Persian period (525–404 B.C.E.),²² the attempt to beget Egyptian astrology on a Saïte figure is undoubtedly a native Egyptian attempt to claim a fictitious cultural and

16. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 185–89.

17. P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1:437, who follows Wilhelm Kroll, ed., *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1894–1972), 16.2:160–67.

18. E.g., Firmicus Maternus 4.22.2: “Nechepso, iustissimus Aegypti imperator et astrologus valde bonus” (Nechepso, the most just ruler of Egypt and an exceedingly good astrologer); he is also sometimes described simply as “the king,” e.g., Vettius Valens 3.16: ὁ γὰρ βασιλεὺς τοῦ πρώτου κλίματος μόνος τὰς ἀναφορὰς ἐδήλωσεν (For the king demonstrated the risings of the first latitude only). Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 2:630–31 nn. 487, 490, 491.

19. W. G. Waddell, trans., *Manetho*, Loeb Classical Library 350 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), frags. 68–69; J. D. Ray (“Pharaoh Nechepso,” *JEA* 60 [1974]: 255–56) has suggested that Nechepso is identical with that person found in an Egyptian inscription interpreted by W. M. Flinders Petrie as reading *Ny-k3.w-b3*. Ray, however, proposes that the name’s final hieroglyph, a ram (*b3*)—Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, 3d ed. [Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1998], 459, E10), was later read as *p3 sr*, resulting in the Greek transcription Νεχέψου. Rolf Krauss and Gerhard Fecht, “Necho II. alias Nechepso,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 42 [1981]: 49–60, dispute this interpretation.

20. This is the argument of Krauss and Fecht (“Necho II. alias Nechepso”), who also note that Eusebius’s version of the Manethonian king list equates Nechepso and Necho II and that Necheus is a variant of the name Nechepso in the astrological texts.

21. On the cultural renaissance of Late Period Egypt, see Helmut Brunner, “Zum Verständnis der archaisierenden Tendenzen in der ägyptischen Spätzeit,” *Saeculum* 21 (1970): 150–61; István Nagy, “Remarques sur le souci d’archaïsme en Égypte à l’époque Saïte,” *Acta Antiqua* 21 (1973): 53–64; and Alan B. Lloyd, “The Late Period,” in Bruce G. Trigger et al., eds., *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

22. A crucial study in this regard is Richard A. Parker, *A Vienna Demotic Papyrus on Eclipse- and Lunar-Omina*, Brown Egyptological Studies 2 (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1959).

intellectual primacy in the science of astrology during the second century—almost two hundred years after the hated Persian domination had been ended by Alexander the Great and replaced by the Macedonian dynasty of the Ptolemies. The astrological tradition of Nechepso is, therefore, a product of Hellenistic political configurations just as much as is Thessalos’s text.

It is this Hellenistic Egyptian literary tradition, discovered in the urban, Lower Egyptian, and largely Greek context of Alexandria, that disappoints Thessalos’s expectations, and it is no coincidence that the search for knowledge turns toward the south, toward Upper Egypt. In the passage from Alexandria to Thebes, Thessalos’s narrative invokes a geography of cultural authenticity. Upper Egypt was in many respects “more Egyptian” than the delta and Fayyum regions, which had been more thoroughly penetrated by Greek settlers in the Ptolemaic period. Studies of ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt have detected a general tendency toward adopting Egyptian names and language among Greek settlers in the predominantly Egyptian milieu of Upper Egypt.²³ Thebes itself was the center of several native Egyptian revolts in the second and first centuries B.C.E., one of which resulted in a twenty-year period of revived pharaonic rule over the Thebaïd.²⁴ The great seat of the god Amun was long a focus of native resistance to foreign rule and the preservation of cultural identity. Thessalos expressly describes Thebes as “the oldest city of Egypt, containing many temples,” and observes that “there were many learned high priests <there> and <elders> adorned with subtle learning.”²⁵ A couple of centuries after Thessalos’s visit, Thebes does indeed seem to have been a center in which traditional magico-religious knowledge was preserved. The Anastasi papyri, which constitute the bulk of the ritual materials known as the Greek and Demotic magical papyri, are Theban in origin.²⁶ This later reputation of Thebes

23. Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), reprinted as American Society of Papyrologists Classics in Papyrology, vol. 1 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1999), 155; Koen Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt*, Dutch Monographs on Ancient History and Archaeology 5 (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1988), 91.

24. The Theban dynasty of Haronnophris and Chaonnophris (205–186 B.C.E.) is treated by P. W. Pestman, “Haronnophris and Chaonnophris: Two Indigenous Pharaohs in Ptolemaic Egypt (205–186 B.C.),” in S. P. Vleeming, ed., *Hundred-Gated Thebes: Acts of a Colloquium on Thebes and the Theban Area in the Graeco-Roman Period*, Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava 27 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). Subsequent revolts were led by Petosiris in 164 and Harsiesis in 130 B.C.E. See Eric G. Turner, “Ptolemaic Egypt,” in F. W. Walbank et al., eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7, pt. 1, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 162; D. J. Thompson, “Egypt, 146–31 B.C.,” in J. A. Crook, A. Lintott, and E. Rawson, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 9, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 313. According to Pausanias 1.9.3, a final Theban revolt against the Ptolemies in 88 B.C.E. resulted in considerable damage to the city. Thompson, “Egypt, 146–31 B.C.,” 316–17.

25. Thessalos, *proem*. 12. See note 13 above.

26. See W. J. Tait, “Theban Magic,” in Vleeming, *Hundred-Gated Thebes*, and Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (repr., Princeton: Princeton

was, it seems, already established in Thessalos's day. The city serves in his narrative as the geographic and cultural location in which revelation is to be found. The move from Hellenized Alexandria to the tradition and authenticity of the Theban milieu is as significant as the displacement of the astrologer-king Nechepso by direct divine revelation.

When Thessalos arrived in this religious center, he attempted to befriend the learned Theban priests in order to seek his objective, and as time went on, he made his intentions clear. He asked them whether "some sort of magical operation was still preserved."²⁷ The priests' reaction to Thessalos's inquiry has been one of the focal points of debate over the interpretation of this text. Smith has suggested that the reaction of the priests to Thessalos's propositions derived from a lost faith in the continued efficacy of traditional ritual powers.²⁸ This interpretation of the admittedly difficult Greek phrase describing the priests' reaction²⁹ seems to put too much weight on a fourteenth-century Latin translation, which, though a century earlier than the best Greek manuscripts, is a very loose approximation of the Greek. The Latin phrase *et quidam eorum faciebant ridiculum de me* ("and some of them mocked me") is clearly a gloss that garbles the rather more obscure Greek.³⁰ It seems unlikely that the priests were ridiculing Thessalos for his continued belief in the extinct power of magic. The traditional religious and magical practice of Egypt that Thessalos encountered in Thebes, though in transformation, was not yet a moribund and arid shell of its former self. A number of documentary papyri relating to the regulation of native Egyptian priests demonstrate that they

University Press, 1993), 168–76. Janet H. Johnson ("The Dialect of the Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden," in J. H. Johnson and E. F. Wente, eds., *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 39 [Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1976]) concludes on the basis of Demotic orthography and morphology and the dialect of Coptic glosses that the Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden (PDM xiv) was indeed written in the Theban area. Fowden (*Egyptian Hermes*, 173) links the Theban magical archive, the alchemical papyri of Leiden and Stockholm (P. Leid. x/1 397; P. Holm), and the Nag Hammadi Gnostic library as products of an Upper Egyptian milieu related to Hermetism.

27. For the translation of $\tau\iota\ \tau\eta\varsigma\ \mu\alpha\gamma\iota\kappa\eta\varsigma\ \epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$ as "magical operation" (i.e., rather than "power"), see *LSJ*, s.v. $\epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ 1.2, and cf. the translation of PGM iv.159 in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 40: "magical procedure."

28. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 179.

29. See note 13 above.

30. Thessalos *proem.* 13 (Friedrich, *Thessalos von Tralles*, 50). Though Friedrich and others have used the Latin ms (Codex Montepessulanus fac. med. 277) to provide restorations, elsewhere it is in general more abbreviated than the Greek, and especially here. Smith (*Map Is Not Territory*, 179 n 33), however, considers this an apt paraphrase. He also emphasizes that the priest who comes to Thessalos's aid "gives Thessalos the 'assurance' (a term which makes sense only if the interpretation of Thessalos' audacity just offered be accepted) that he has the power to produce a vision." At Thessalos *proem.* 14, however, the term is simply $\epsilon\pi\eta\gamma\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}\lambda\alpha\tau\omicron$, "professed." Perhaps the term $\pi\alpha\rho\eta\gamma\omicron\rho\eta\varsigma\alpha\varsigma$ "comforted, consoled," in *proem.* 18 is meant. There, however, the context is Thessalos's emotional appeal to the priest.

continued to exist and to function in Roman Egypt despite economic decline,³¹ as did the temples serving as the focus of their activities. Indeed, there is even evidence of some building and refurbishment of temples at Dendera, Philae, and Kom Ombo into the third century.³² Second-century literary discussions in Plutarch and Clement of Alexandria, moreover, portray the religion and priests of Egypt as still vital and active.³³ And as Ritner has pointed out, the elaborate collections of rites in temple inscriptions and in the third-century Demotic magical papyri are more than adequate testimony to continued belief in the efficacy of Egyptian "magic" (Eg. $h\kappa\dot{\iota}$).³⁴

Other scholars had previously proposed that the priests' indignation and unwillingness to help Thessalos are to be explained as fear of prosecution on charges of magic.³⁵ While it is true that Thessalos seeks $\tau\iota\ \tau\eta\varsigma\ \mu\alpha\gamma\iota\kappa\eta\varsigma\ \epsilon\upsilon\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$, it is doubtful whether Egyptian priests would have viewed the procedure by which Thessalos acquires a revelation as magical in the illicit and subversive sense.³⁶ A priest such as the one with whom Thessalos claims he dealt in Thebes would have produced this ritual within an entirely different cognitive framework, by virtue of the fact that he was still an Egyptian priest and that the rite he performed fell into a clearly defined sphere of traditional priestly activity.³⁷ Certain details of the performance confirm that the narrative draws attention to a realistic background of contemporary Egyptian religious practice. Thessalos's priest initially professed that he could procure a vision through lecanomancy (bowl divination). A number of

31. See, e.g., the texts discussed in Lewis, *Life in Egypt*, 90–94. For further evidence of the vitality of Egyptian religion under Roman rule, see also Robert Kriech Ritner, "Egypt Under Roman Rule: The Legacy of Ancient Egypt," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 9.

32. David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 199. On Egyptian temples as the focus of religious activity in the Roman period, see Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 37–82.

33. Plutarch *De Iside et Osiride*; Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis* 6.4.35, 37, *Paedagogus* 3.2.4, *Protrepticus* 2.39.

34. Ritner, "Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire," 3357, notes that the Egyptian concept of $h\kappa\dot{\iota}$ continued to be of religious importance in the Roman period. See also *ibid.*, nn. 38 and 39.

35. Cumont, "Écrits hermétiques," 92, writes, "La plupart des prêtres lui reprochent de concevoir des espérances téméraires; car la magie était sous les Romains une science réprouvée, et l'exercice de cet art était sévèrement prohibé par les lois pénales." Cf. Festugière, "L'expérience religieuse," 60 n. 16; Charles Graux, "Lettre inédite d'Harpokration à un empereur publiée d'après un manuscrit de la Bibliotheca nacional de Madrid," *RP* 2 (1878): 67–68. Smith (*Map Is Not Territory*, 179) rejects this interpretation, though it has been revived by Ritner (see below).

36. As Ritner (*Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 14–28) has shown, the Egyptian concept of "magic" ($h\kappa\dot{\iota}$, Cop. $\mathfrak{Z}\mathbf{IK}$) was an important divine attribute and a divinity itself in religious texts as early as the fifth dynasty. Magic in the Egyptian understanding was clearly not illicit.

37. As argued by Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 219–20, and "Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire," 3356–58.

such rituals, called “vessel inquiry” (Eg. *šn hn*), are preserved in the Demotic magical papyri.³⁸ When the appointed day arrived, however, Thessalos requested a direct interview with the god, face-to-face,³⁹ and in the description of the revelation that follows, there is no mention of a bowl.⁴⁰ In the Demotic magical papyri, such a rite, in which the god is seen in a direct vision, is usually called “god’s arrival” (Eg. *ph-ntr*),⁴¹ a term not applied to “vessel inquiry.” Thessalos’s “magical” revelation of the god Asclepius was an Egyptian *ph-ntr* and therefore belongs to a category of rites that from the New Kingdom onward consisted of oracular petitions to divine images. Such procedures were frequently used as a form of legal arbitration.⁴² This was a normal religious method of making decisions and seeking the help or advice of a divinity in Egyptian religion. In the Ptolemaic *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, the term is mentioned in a context suggesting that even if used for personal inquiries, it was not particularly secretive or illicit: “You should ask three wise men about an individual matter if it is important enough for a *ph-ntr* of the great god.”⁴³ The *ph-ntr* survives at least into the third century C.E. in the Demotic papyri just mentioned. There it is associated with a number of spells that resemble the praxis of Thessalos’s revelation experience in the

38. PDM xiv.1–92, 239–95, 295–308, 395–427, 528–53, 627–35, 670–74, 695–700, 805–40, 841–50, 851–55, 1110–29.

39. Thessalos *proem*. 22: ἀνακρίνοίτο δέ με τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, πότερον ψυχῇ νεκροῦ τινοῦ ἢ θεῷ ὁμιλῆσαι βουλοίμην, ἔφη· Ἀσκληπιῷ· εἶναι δὲ τὸ τέλειον τῆς χάριτος, εἰ μόνῳ μοι πρὸς μόνον ὁμιλεῖν ἐπιτρέψειεν. “When the priest asked me whether I wanted to converse with some spirit of the dead or a god, I said to him, ‘With Asclepius,’ and that it would be the perfection of his favor if he would permit me to converse one-on-one with the god.”

40. Smith (*Map Is Not Territory*, 180–81) notes the inconsistency of this description with the professed practice of lecanomancy, since Thessalos is to sit opposite the “throne,” where Asclepius is to appear: καθίσαι κελεύσας ἀντικρυς τοῦ θρόνου, εἰς ὃν ἔμελλεν ὁ θεὸς καθέζεσθαι . . . “Having instructed me to sit opposite the throne, in which the god was about to settle . . .” This need not be entirely inconsistent, in light of an oracle of Serapis described in PGM v.1–53, in which the god is described as manifesting himself in a throne (ἐάν εἴπῃ ὅτι ‘χρηματίζω’ λέγε· ‘εἰσερχέσθω ὁ θρόνος τοῦ θεοῦ’ . . . κτλ.—“If he says, ‘I prophesy,’ say, ‘Let the throne of the god enter . . .’”), but the contrast may be significant for the reasons outlined below.

41. See Janet H. Johnson’s original publication of the text, “Louvre E3229: A Demotic Magical Text,” *Enchoria* 7 (1977): 55–97, which now appears in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, as a PDM supplement. The term appears as follows: PDM xiv.117 (5/1), 145 (5/29), 170 (6/20), 176 (6/26), 232 (8/12), 828 (27/24), 833 (27/29), 836 (27/32) (numbers in parentheses refer to column and line number of PDM xiv as published in Francis Llewellyn Griffith and Herbert Thompson, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, 2 vols. [London: H. Grevel & Co., 1905]); PDM suppl. 130, 149, 168.

42. See Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 214–20.

43. Eg. *hw=k šn rmt rh s-3 r w.t mt.t hw=s m-šs n ph-ntr ntr* 3. S. R. K. Glanville, ed., *The Instructions of Onchsheshonqy (British Museum Papyrus 10508)*, Catalogue of the Demotic Papyri in the British Museum 2 (London: British Museum, 1955), col. 8, line 6. The translation is that of Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 215; note also the alternate reading by H. J. Thissen, *Die Lehre des Anchsheshonqi (P. BM. 10508)* (Bonn: Habelt, 1984), 21.

use of purified houses and invocations based on the true names of the gods. In fact, two of the *ph-ntr* spells are “god’s arrivals” of Imhotep.⁴⁴ Given the priestly milieu of these texts, the *ph-ntr* continues to be located firmly in a native religious tradition into the third century and cannot be viewed as illicit from the Egyptian cultural perspective.⁴⁵

If, in fact, these rites were viewed as illicit, it could only have been from the perspective of Roman political and judicial authorities. Despite their own beliefs, Egyptian priests may have feared prosecution through Roman misunderstanding of their religious activities. Ritner has argued that Roman attitudes and legal restrictions drove certain Egyptian religious practices “underground,” to be practiced away from the potential scrutiny of Roman officials. Adducing the evidence of the *ph-ntr* spells in the Demotic papyri as well as Thessalos’s consultation with the Egyptian priest, he has argued that these represent private, individualistic versions of traditional rites, whose apparent proliferation in the period of Roman rule was a reaction to Roman oppression of Egyptian religion.⁴⁶ *Ph-ntr* rituals, formerly practiced openly, had been under attack by the time of the London and Leiden Demotic magical papyrus through the well-known decree of Q. Aemilius Saturninus, prefect of Egypt under Septimius Severus (193–211 C.E.).⁴⁷ This decree, issued in 199 C.E., prohibited divination throughout Egypt and referred specifically to native Egyptian practices, such as producing oracles through the procession of cult images (διὰ κοίμαστας) or the return of written responses from the god (ἐν γράφῳ διαγραφῶν ὡς ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ διδομένῳ).⁴⁸ A major category of Egyptian religious practices, therefore, apparently became illegal at least for a time.⁴⁹ The efficacy of such decrees is not beyond doubt, however, and the practice of processional oracles seems to have continued, though in decline, well after this legislation.⁵⁰ The decree against divination, moreover, was promulgated more than a century later than the dramatic date of Thessalos’s visit to Egypt. Be-

44. PDM xiv.93–114, PDM suppl. 168–84.

45. Ritner further argues, *contra* Smith, that the rite might have taken place in a traditional temple context, since the word *oikos* (usually “house, home”) could, like the Demotic *tey*, signify a room in a temple as well as a profane dwelling. This seems unlikely, since the *oikos* was prepared and purified specifically for the rite, and parallels in the great Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden (PDM xiv) suggest that this was an Egyptian procedure for such rites at least by the third century. See, e.g., PDM xiv.117–21, 150–52.

46. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire,” 3355–56.

47. P. Yale inv. 299; see George M. Paraglossou, “Circular from a Prefect: Sileat Omnibus Perpetuo Divinandi Curiositas,” in A. E. Hanson, ed., *Collectanea Papyrologica* (Festschrift Youtie) (Bonn: Habelt, 1976), 261–74 and pl. 12, though his comments and translations for this portion of the text contain some errors.

48. On Roman-period “ticket” oracles, see Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 161–62.

49. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire,” 3356.

50. See Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 153–56.

fore Saturninus's decree, Roman regulation of Egyptian religion, despite progressive economic and social restrictions on the Egyptian priesthood, does not seem to have included specific legislation against the practices of Egyptian religion.⁵¹ Although there were occasional Roman imperial decrees against divination and sorcery, most were concerned with the city and politics of Rome,⁵² as were outbursts of official hostility toward Egyptian religion in the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E.⁵³ Within Egypt, before the time of Saturninus, there appears to have been at least uneasy tolerance, despite the distant railing of critics like Juvenal.⁵⁴ Thus, there is little reason to suppose that Egyptian priests would in ordinary circumstances have feared prosecution for carrying on traditional religious practices.

An alternative suggestion is more likely. The shocked reaction of the priests in Thessalos's narrative was not intended to represent fear or disbelief so much as chagrin at the "audacity" (Gk. *προπετεία*) of an outsider who wished entrée into the besieged, yet still privileged, world of the Egyptian priesthood and its ritual secrets.⁵⁵ The text focuses attention on the difficulty and therefore the desirability of acquiring the power of Egyptian religion. An existing religious tendency to secrecy and esotericism, perhaps exaggerated by progressive Roman interference in the administration of Egyptian priesthoods and later the practice of Egyptian religion itself, would have made the priests unwilling to allow foreigners to witness the mysteries of their ritual practice. Certainly, the *PDM* spells that so closely resemble the praxis of Thessalos's revelation are written in a Demotic script that clearly belongs to an exclusive priestly milieu. They are consciously archaizing in their frequent use of hieratic, and some passages are written in an Egyptian cipher script; these measures were perhaps intended to protect the underground practice of Egyptian religion even from casual Egyptian knowledge.⁵⁶ But well before the historical conditions that produced the Demotic magical spells, there existed a priestly and cul-

tural imperative to exclude outsiders from Egyptian sacred rites and spaces. A hieroglyphic and hieratic ritual papyrus of Persian or Ptolemaic date (P. Salt 825–B.M. 10051) contains a passage describing the temple scriptorium, or "House of Life" (Eg. *pr-ḥb*), as a place that must remain secret and closed to outsiders: "An Asiatic [a general term for foreigners from the East] must not enter it; he must not see it."⁵⁷ General injunctions to secrecy were inscribed on the doorposts of passages through which priests would enter the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu: "Do not reveal anything secret that you see in the temple" and "Be discreet concerning the appearance in his sacred throne; do not go out with what you have seen."⁵⁸ The latter is especially pertinent to Thessalos's vision of the enthroned Asclepius/Imhotep. An Egyptian text from one of the crypts of the Gracco-Roman temple of Hathor at Dendera reads, "No Phoenician should approach it, no Greek enter it, no Bedouin tread it; one should not see the magic [*ḥk3*] within it."⁵⁹ This and other more or less contemporary expressions of the same sentiment provide the best cultural and historical explanation for the reaction of the Egyptian priests to Thessalos's inquiries. Their indignation and unwillingness to provide a direct revelation to the Greek doctor represent traditional Egyptian religious restrictions on entering sacred space and viewing manifestations of the divinity.

Though this evidence of Egyptian ritual antecedents and a traditional priestly tendency toward secrecy supplies the necessary cultural information to understand

57. P. Salt 825 (B.M. 10051) vii.5: *nm ʿk ʿm r=f nm m33=f sw*; Philippe Derchain, *Le Papyrus Salt 825 (B.M. 10051), rituel pour la conservation de la vie en Égypte* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1965), 140, 168. In this regard, it is relevant to note that the downfall of Setne Khamwas in the tale of Setne and Naneferkaptah begins just after the phrase "there was no occupation on earth for Setne besides unrolling the scroll [of Thoth] and reading it to everyone" (*hw nm mtw Stne wp.t n p3 t3 m-s3 prh p3 dmʿ mtw=f ʿs n-bm=f llr-br rmt nb*). Setne 1 4/38; for an English translation, see Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 133.

58. The former text (*m pr hr ḥ.t m33=tn m s3t3 nb m r-pr*) is among the general injunctions on the south doorpost of the eastern entrance to the pronaos (Émile Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou*, vol. 3 [Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1928], 361.2; Maurice Alliot, *Le culte d'Horus à Edfou au temps des Ptolémées* (BdÉ 20, fasc. 2) [Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1949–1954], 185); and the latter (*hbs [. . .] tw hr m33 m s.t=f dsr, tm pr hr m33=tn*) is among the texts on the north doorpost of the southeastern entrance to the courtyard (Émile Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou*, vol. 5 [Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1930], 343.13–344.11). For translations of both texts, see Dieter Kurth, *Treffpunkt der Götter: Inschriften aus dem Tempel des Horus von Edfu* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1994), 148, 151. Another injunction to maintaining ritual secrecy is found in P. Salt 825 v.10–v1.2; Derchain, *Le Papyrus Salt 825*, 139. Other examples are also noted in Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 203–4; see esp. the Esna inscription, p. 197, line 20, in Serge Sauneron, *Le temple d'Esna III*, Esna, vol. 3 (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1968), 12: "Do not permit any Asiatic to enter the temple whether he be old or young" (*m rdt ʿk ʿm nb r ḥ.t-ntr m ur m nḥn*).

59. Émile Chassinat, *Le temple de Dendara*, vol. 5 (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1952), p. 60, line 10–p. 61, line 2: *nm tkn s Fnhw nm ʿk Ḥbw-nbw nm nmt s ḥryw-sʿ nm m33 ḥk3 m-ḥnw=s*. In the same volume, see also p. 54, lines 6–8, and p. 97, line 4.

51. See pages 43–44 of this essay.

52. See Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 53–55.

53. In the fifties B.C.E., under the first triumvirate, various attempts at repressing the cult of the Egyptian gods were undertaken in Rome. See Michel Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie*, Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 365–77. Octavian opposed the worship of Egyptian gods in Rome by prohibiting Egyptian cults within the *pomerium*, a prohibition extended by Agrippa in 21 B.C.E. (Cassius Dio, *Histories* 53.2.4, 54.6.6). The most severe repression, resulting from the affair of Decius, came under Tiberius (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.65–80). All of these actions were localized in Rome.

54. Juvenal *Satire* 15, an attack on Egyptian religion and a fine example of Roman bigotry, dated to 127 C.E.

55. This interpretation was originally proposed by Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 219 n. 1021, and "Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire," 3357.

56. See, e.g., Janet H. Johnson, "Introduction to the Demotic Magical Papyri," in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, lv, and Ritner's comments in "Egyptian Magical Practice Under the Roman Empire," 3356.

elements of the Thessalos narrative from an Egyptian perspective, it does not explain the nontraditional activity of the one priest who actually does perform the *ph-ntr* rite for the Greek physician. The secrecy that surrounds Thessalos's solicitation of this one priest is neither traditional secrecy, aimed at protecting the rite from nonpriests and outsiders, nor avoidance of Roman prosecution. It is necessitated by the fact that the Egyptian priest is portrayed as transgressing an Egyptian restriction in order to provide a ritual service for a nonpriest and a *foreigner*. Thessalos and the priest must be circumspect because of the disapproval already expressed by the other priests. The ritual, and the revelation it is intended to procure, are therefore diverted from their usual place in the traditional structures of Egyptian religion for the purposes of a cross-cultural exchange. Thessalos's narrative of this process—the diversion of an Egyptian ritual revelation normally intended only for Egyptian priests, its commoditization, and its subsequent Graeco-Roman consumption and “repackaging” for further consumption—transforms the character and value of the rite.⁶⁰

A word about “commoditization” as I apply the term in this context should explain how a ritual of revelation can become a commodity and how the transaction between the Egyptian priest and Thessalos can be compared to a commodity exchange. Commodities are conventionally understood as goods created for the purpose of exchange in a capitalist economy, but as Arjun Appadurai has argued, this unnecessarily limits the usefulness of the category to the historical conditions of modern capitalist societies. In discussing the processual dimension of commodity exchange, he includes in the category of “commodity” goods and services that enter a “commodity situation” through a variety of modes of exchange in different social and historical conditions.⁶¹ By his definition “the commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ [is] defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.”⁶² In the case of the Thessalos narrative, the direct revelation the priest is capable of procuring enters a commodity situation when it is valued by the wandering Greek physician for its usefulness in clearing up his problem with the remedies of Nechepso. Though ritual and revelation are normally made inaccessible to nonpriests, and especially foreigners, in traditional religious observance, the priest agrees to provide Thessalos with his much desired revelation. The value of this rite for Thessalos is clear. Not only does he resolve his quest for revealed knowledge, but he gains for his treatise a prestige and authority that Graeco-Roman culture locates in the mysterious creeds and cults of Egypt.

60. Cf. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 181.

61. Arjun Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

62. *Ibid.*, 13.

Thessalos's voice controls the narrative and thus the representation of the exchange, so the advantages an Egyptian priest might gain through this process are difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the social and economic position of the Egyptian priesthood in the Roman period may indicate a plausible motivation for the priest's actions. No cash is mentioned in the course of negotiations between Thessalos and the priest, but it should not be ruled out. Some Egyptian priests outside of Egypt, at least, were known to charge a great deal for their initiation services, if the faint criticisms of priestly venality in the final book of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* are to be credited.⁶³ Certainly, increasing pressures on the Egyptian priesthood at this time would provide sufficient motivation for some priests to seek supplementary income. In the first century of Roman rule, the priesthood was already subject to a number of economic and legal restrictions, especially under the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*. This document summarizes various laws that came under the purview of a Roman administrator known as the *idios logos* (or “privy purse”), whose authority apparently included certain matters pertaining to Egyptian priests. Though priests were exempt from some taxes, eligibility for this exemption was progressively restricted, and the economic activities of priests were limited.⁶⁴ Priests were not permitted to take up any occupation or business other than temple service, and fines were levied against them for failing to wear their distinctive habit.⁶⁵ Priests were also inspected for suitability and lineage by Roman officials prior to the circumcision required of them.⁶⁶ Private individuals could not control or possess priestly rank.⁶⁷ There were restrictions on the inheritance of certain priestly offices and on the conditions under which they could be transferred.⁶⁸ The making of votive offerings (Gk. ἀναθήματα)⁶⁹ was punishable by a fine of five hundred drachmae. The nature and practice of native Egyptian religion, therefore, changed not only through occasional

63. Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.28; cf. John J. Winkler, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 219–23; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 45.

64. On the change in circumstances for Egyptian priests in the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Roman era, see esp. Ritner, “Egypt Under Roman Rule,” 4–10.

65. *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*, § 71: “It is not permitted for priests to be involved in any business other than the worship of the gods, or to go about wearing wool, or to sport hair, not even when they are away from the festival of the god.” (Gk. ἱερεῦσι οὐκ ἔξωι πρὸς ἀλλῇ χρεῖα εἶναι ἢ τῇ τῶν θεῶν θρησκείᾳ οὐδὲ ἐν ἑρεῇ [ἐ]σθῆτι προικέσθαι οὐδὲ κόμην φορεῖν οὐδὲ ἐὰν [ξ]ενοθῶσιν τοῦ θ[ε]οῦ ψάου.)

66. See Lewis, *Life in Egypt*, 92–93; the minutes of an inquiry concerning suitability for circumcision are found in Martin David and B. A. van Groningen, *Papyrological Primer*, 4th ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 128–29 (= BGU 347).

67. *Gnomon* § 96.

68. *Gnomon* §§ 77, 78, 80, 91, 92, 93.

69. *Gnomon* § 97. The original commentators (Emil Seckel, Wilhelm Schubart, and Woldemar Graf Uxkull-Gyllenband, *Der Gnomon des Idios Logos*, 2 vols. [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhand-

acts of legislation and the ideological constraints concomitant with foreign rule but also through the Roman fiscal administration of the priesthood.⁷⁰ Thessalos, moreover, traveled to Alexandria with a “large amount of money” (Gk. μετὰ συχνοῦ ἀργυρίου—*proem.* 4), intending to get a good education, and yet no mention is made of the payments his lecturers undoubtedly would have demanded. It is possible that mention of payment for the priest’s ritual services is simply omitted.

The narrative of the interaction between Thessalos and the priest, however, is constructed more in accordance with conventions of Greek *xenia*, a ritualized guest friendship based on reciprocal exchange rather than purely economic exchange. Thessalos claims he spent time in Thebes cultivating the friendship (Gk. φιλία) of the priests, and though shunned by the others for his impetuous curiosity, he is not shaken from friendship (φιλία, again) with the one priest.⁷¹ This man he supplicates, throwing himself on the priest’s mercy in a pitiful scene and begging him for the favor of a divine revelation (*proem.* 15–19). The priest agrees, apparently without compensation. The deferral of reciprocity, however, should not obscure the interests of the Egyptian priest and the strategic dimensions of such an exchange, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued.⁷² Despite the risk of censure from his fellow priests, he stands to gain prestige and currency in a wider Hellenistic and Roman cultural milieu through what David Frankfurter calls “stereotype appropriation.”⁷³ By playing the “wise and powerful magus” role expected of him by Graeco-Roman Egyptomania, he stands to gain a certain amount of “cultural capital” in return for the benefits he confers on Thessalos. Unfortunately, the Greek manuscript (Codex Matritensis Bibl. nat. 4631 [T]) breaks off in the fourth chapter of the first book, so the conclusion of the entire process is uncertain. The Thessalos narrative is, however, continued after the revelation in two Latin versions of the epilogue.⁷⁴ As we have seen, these manuscripts contain some errors of translation, as is evident where comparison with the Greek text is possible, but their contents are worth cautious consideration. In the epilogues of both texts, Thessalos asks the priest to assist him in proving the efficacy of the remedies revealed by the god, and in the longer of the two this is carried out in Alexan-

lung, 1919–34]), believed this law was aimed at preserving a temple monopoly on the practice, but no such monopoly is identified.

70. In general, see also Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 198–237; Lewis, *Life in Egypt*, 90–94.

71. On the ritual and politics of and of *xenia* in the shift from the world of the Greek polis to the context of Hellenistic royal courts, see Gabriel Herman, *Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

72. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 4–9, 177; see also Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” 12–13.

73. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 225–33.

74. Codex Montepessulanus fac. med 277 (M) and Codex Vindobonensis 3124 (V).

dria.⁷⁵ It is tempting, therefore, to imagine the priest, in the last scenes of Thessalos’s narrative, drawn into the Graeco-Roman intellectual circles of the city through his services to Thessalos and enjoying the benefits of prestige in that great transcultural center. Both the Greek doctor and the Egyptian priest gain something.

The Latin conclusions to the narrative suggest that Thessalos may have represented the end result in terms of a reciprocal valuation and some implicit agreement on the equivalence of the perceived advantages exchanged, but there is also—as in any story of exchange—a competitive dimension: a desire to demonstrate that one has got the better deal out of the process. Since Thessalos relates the narrative of exchange, he represents himself as the “winner,” and this accounts for the omission of any benefits accruing to the priest. Thessalos certainly claims for himself as much advantage as possible in his negotiations. He claims that he circumvented the secrecy of the Egyptian priesthood by finding a priest who was willing to assist him in his inquiries; that he hid on his person papyrus and pen to record the knowledge he hoped to gain (*proem.* 21); and that, at the last minute, he sprang a request for a direct interview with Asclepius, rather than lecanomancy, on the apparently unsuspecting priest (*proem.* 22–23). Thessalos, after all, is telling the tale with the intention of adding value to his treatise on the magico-medicinal uses of plants. This value derives not only from the status and cultural location of the priest as a guardian of exotic Eastern wisdom but also from Thessalos’s claimed success in manipulating the process of exchange. These two factors combine to form the “exchange biography” of Thessalos’s revelation. It is the successful process of exchange that creates value for the item, in this case a ritual revelation, now embodied in a written text.⁷⁶ Put simply, this is Thessalos’s story of “how I went to great lengths to trick one of those notoriously tight-lipped Egyptian priests into sharing with me his cultural patrimony of ritual and revelatory secrets—secrets that I can now pass on to you, the reader.”

The narrative of exchange that creates value for Thessalos’s ritual revelation also transforms its cultural value—that is, the revelation and the rite used to procure it take on a different meaning and use-value in their new cultural context.

75. M (epilogue 16): “Nevertheless, I asked him to come with me, so that we could demonstrate together the powers of the plants transmitted by the god, after the time for gathering came” (*verum tamen rogabam ipsum, ut veniret mecum, ut probarem simul virtutes herbarum traditarum a deo, postquam venerit tempus collectionis*). V (epilogue 16–19): “Nevertheless, I asked him to come so as to prove with me the power of the herbs transmitted to me by the god. And after the time for collecting herbs arrived, I came to Alexandria and, collecting plants containing sap, I demonstrated the greater power and found it to be as was proclaimed” (*rogavi tamen ipsum, ut veniret ad probandum mecum virtutem herbarum a deo mihi traditarum. et postquam advenit tempus colligendi herbas, veni in Alexandriam et colligens herbe sucum habentis maiorem probavi virtutem et inveni sicut dictum est*).

76. For a brief discussion, see Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” 18–19; on the “exchange biography” of commodities, see Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*.

To continue the economic metaphor, the ritual revelation acquires a certain polyvalence in the commodity situation as it crosses the gap between the cognitive modes of the producer and the consumer. The exchange of this revelation as a commodity represents a sort of intersystemic religious practice in which the cultural distance between the participants enhances the “coefficient of weirdness”⁷⁷ for the consuming culture. To an Egyptian priest, as we have seen, the rite belongs to a ritual repertoire with a traditional Egyptian religious pedigree. But for Thessalos or his Graeco-Roman audience, who would have had little knowledge of the social function or cultural meaning of the *ph-ntr*, the service is “consumed” as though it were a powerful and mysterious *magical* means of procuring a revelation. In this way, the performance of a ritual and its results, which are in any case susceptible by nature to multifarious interpretations, become even more open to the demands of the outside consumer. His requirements reshape the phenomenology of the ritual and the revelation it produces.

The final point I wish to make is that this transformation from religion to magic in the context of an exchange narrative is not solely a passive function of the cultural distance between Thessalos and the priest but a strategy on the part of Thessalos to repackage a revelation experience for further consumption. What began as a traditional Egyptian revelation ritual is fully commoditized when its primary function consists in enhancing the exchangeability of the revealed wisdom with which it is associated. The entire narrative is framed as a letter to the Roman emperor, in which Thessalos professes to have defeated all rivals in his field, including the pseudonymous king Nechepso, thereby establishing himself as the pre-eminent arbiter of magical knowledge, a connoisseur of the transmundane, and a merchant of foreign wisdom. As a mediating figure between Egypt and the wider Graeco-Roman world, he panders to a demand for the magical powers of “the East,” further exacerbating the cultural and cognitive divide between the “producer” and the “consumer.” This illustrates the principle that “magic” in the Hellenistic world is not only a polemical category but also an appropriative category. By examining Thessalos’s narrative of his encounter and exchange with the Egyptian priest in terms of commodity exchange, I have described the processual and active dimension of the commonplace that one culture’s religion is another’s magic. This process of appropriation complicates the *locative* and *utopian* axes identified by Smith as characteristic of Hellenistic religions by adding an intersystemic dimension, in which politics of value and cultural exchange transform the nature of religious phenomena.

77. On this marked quality of magical language, see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, 2 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), 2:218–23.

3

THE PRAYER OF MARY IN THE MAGICAL BOOK OF MARY AND THE ANGELS

Marvin Meyer

When the late, great Coptologist Angelicus Kropp, in his study of the Prayer of Mary in a text from Giessen (Papyrus Janda 9 A.B.), raises the issue of authentic prayer and wonders whether there is any of it in the versions of the Prayer of Mary, it may set our ritual teeth on edge, but we understand why he puts the matter like this.¹ The versions of the Prayer of Mary are often referred to as versions of the Prayer of Mary in Bartos, on account of a reference to a locale associated with Bartos—perhaps the Parthians—in some versions of the prayer, for example an Ethiopic version. This Prayer of Mary presents the pious and powerful words of Mary as a prayer, yet the contents of the prayer, or at least large portions of the prayer, seem overwhelmingly magical. Hence Kropp, in his *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, has an entire section devoted to versions of the “Gebet Mariae ad Bartos,” and Richard Smith and I include a version of the Prayer of Mary in *Ancient Christian Magic*.²

In the context of discussion of prayer, magic, and the stars, it is appropriate to reflect on issues raised by the Prayer of Mary. In this essay I examine one version of the prayer, from a parchment codex I have entitled the *Magical Book of Mary and the Angels* (Heidelberg Coptic text 685 = P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685), in order to (1) analyze its contents, (2) imagine how it was used, and (3) relate it to issues of prayer and magic.³ Through this examination I hope to address fundamental

1. Angelicus M. Kropp, *Oratio Mariae ad Bartos: Ein koptischer Gebetstext aus den Giessener Papyrus-Sammlungen*, Berichte und Arbeiten aus der Universitätsbibliothek Giessen, vol. 7 (Giessen: Universitätsbibliothek, 1965).

2. Angelicus M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, 3 vols. (Brussels: Fondation Egyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1930–31); Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, Mythos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

3. On the Prayer of Mary, see Marvin Meyer, “The Magical Book of Mary and the Angels (P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685),” in Stephen Emmel, Martin Krause, Siegfried G. Richter, and Sofia Schaten, eds., *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit: Akten des 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongresses, Münster, 20.–26. Juli 1996*, Sprachen und Kulturen des christlichen Orients, vol. 6, 2

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