

# Hermes Trismegistus and Isaac of the Old Testament

by [Petr Chylek](#) (May 2023)



*Hermes Trismegistus* (floor inlay in the Cathedral of Siena), 1480s

Have you ever heard about Hermes Trismegistus in the Bible? I

had not until this year when I noticed something that was like a hidden reference to him. Thus, today I want to connect two great legends: one from the Biblical Old Testament (Torah) and the other one a combination of Greek and Egyptian gods. I am sure that most of you know about Isaac, the second son of Abraham. I am not sure, however, that you have heard about Hermes Trismegistus.

Hermes Trismegistus<sup>1</sup> is a legendary mysterious wise sage of long ago. When the Greek God Hermes met Thoth, an Egyptian god of wisdom, Hermes Trismegistus was formed by their combination. Hermes Trismegistus gave to people alphabet and ability to communicate, arts, alchemy, astrology, philosophy, mathematics and other sciences. According to some legends he was a grandson of Adam who lived before the flood, according to others he imparted wisdom to Abraham and thus was responsible for Jews becoming Israel. Still others say that he was a teacher of Moses and a prefiguration of Christ. St Augustine (396-430) believed that Hermes Trismegistus was a real person. Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) tried to convince the Pope (Alexander VI) that Kabbalah and hermetic teaching (called Hermetica) were compatible with Christian doctrines. A few decades later the Church turned against hermetic teaching and started a campaign to eliminate it from among the clergy. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was burned at the stake not so much because of his heliocentric system, as most historians claim, as for his believe in and teaching of hermetic philosophy. Today, hermetic teaching at least in some form is limited to special societies like Rosicrucians or Free Masons.

Hermes Trismegistus is supposed to be an author of mystical and philosophical writings called Corpus Hermeticum. He is also supposed to be at least a co-author of a Chinese book of wisdom called I Ching, meaning Book of Change. It was believed, that in ancient past men walked more closely with God. It was believed that, at that time, man received God's

revelation, which was soon lost and corrupted by mouth to ear transmissions. According to a legend, the remnants of this revelation is partially preserved in the Corpus Hermeticum and it forms a common core of major religions. A few Hermetic writings were found among the Nag Hammadi library.<sup>2</sup> Modern scholarship, however, suggests that Corpus Hermeticum is a collection of writings by different authors from different times. Trismegistus means three times great. Thus he was “great, great, great,” Trice-Great One.

According to Old Testament, Isaac was the second son of Abraham. We already know<sup>3</sup> that Isaac is treated in Old Testament very minimally, compared to his father Abraham and his son Jakob. He is most famous for being an object of Abraham’s desire to fulfill God’s assumed instruction to demonstrate his love for God by being willing to sacrifice (to kill) his own son. This theme was also adapted by Christian teaching as a model of later sacrifice of Christ by his Father in heaven.

Isaac’s spiritual achievements are concealed in Torah and misinterpreted by translators and commentators of all ages. The Genesis 26:12 usually translated as “Isaac sowed in the land, and in that year, he reaped a hundredfold”. On the other hand, the original Hebrew says “Isaac sowed in the land and in that year, he found a hundred gates.”<sup>4</sup> A gate stands here as an opening, as a door to secrets of Torah.

As you probably know the Torah is not a collection of stories. It contains spiritual teachings. But those teachings are not apparent; they are concealed and require a special effort to uncover them. Most of medieval as well as current commentators interpret Torah based on a literal meaning of the stories. Thus, since they could not understand the meaning of Hebrew words “hundred gates” they replaced it by “hundredfold”.

The next sentence, Genesis 26:13, in Hebrew says about Isaac “The man became great and kept becoming greater until he was

very great." The wise sages of old tell us that if some word is repeated twice or more in Torah, it means pay attention; here is a secret. Thus, a repetition of the word *great* three times means a special attention. A hidden mystery is here. It looks like no commentator considered this statement of any importance. Most commentators just completely neglect this sentence, as though it did not exist. Some translations are good and others are not so good. The King James version avoids three repetitions by shortening the sentence to "And the man waxed great, and went forward and grew until he became very great."<sup>5</sup> Some others translated the sentence by saying that Isaac became rich and up to very wealthy.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word GADOL means great; definitely not rich or wealthy. According to my understanding none of the interpreters noticed Isaac's connection to the "Thrice Great," to Trismegistus.

Thus, the Genesis 26:13 suggests that Isaac was great, greater, and the greatest. Trice Great–Trismegistus. I don't think that it means that he was Hermes Trismegistus, but perhaps that he was equally wise as Hermes Trismegistus. It seems that the author(s) of Torah was familiar with the Egyptian and Greek mythology. However, the medieval and current commentators and translators apparently were not.

Some legends claim that Abraham received a part of his wisdom during his stay in Egypt from Hermes Trismegistus. You may notice that Pharaoh gave to Abraham before he left Egypt only "sheep, cattle, donkeys, slaves and maidservants, female donkeys, and camels." (Gen 12:16). However, when Abraham went up from Egypt "Abraham was very laden with livestock ... and with silver, and gold." (Gen. 13:2). How he managed to get silver and gold?

Silver and gold are often metaphors for spiritual wisdom and knowledge. How he got them? Perhaps from Hermes Trismegistus? Also Abraham's nephew Lot left Egypt with him, but Lot had only flocks, cattle, and tents. No silver and no gold. No wisdom and no knowledge. Thus, Torah makes it quite likely

that there was some other unnamed source of Abraham's wisdom that he acquired in Egypt. Egypt is usually connected, according to Torah stories, with slavery to material world. However, in the time of Abraham, Egypt represented one of the peaks, even if imperfect, of human civilization.

Finally, what is that simple theology that is supposed to be an essence of all today's major religions, according to Hermetica? Can you find an essence that is in common to all religions? Not only to Christianity, Judaism and Muslim religions, but to all, including Hinduism, Buddhism and others? I know that you may find many common links. I tried and I found a few common features. Two of those that impressed me the most are: (1) An effort to improve the ethical and moral level of humankind, and (2) The existence of angels, especially of guardian angels. You are of course welcome to make your own assessment and to disagree with me.

[1] e.g. Gary Lachman, The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus, Floris Books, 2011

[2] Marvin Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, HarperOne 2009

[3] Petr Chylek, New English Review, January 2023

[4] Genesis 26:12

[5] The Holy Bible, Authorized Kings James Version, Collins World

[6] Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah, Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1981

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