

Jasnow, R. & K.-Th. Zauzich. 2005. The Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth: A Demotic Discourse on Knowledge and Pendant to the Classical Hermetica (Volume I & II). – Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz

Book review by F. Hagen



This book is the long-awaited text edition of a composition that was first announced by the authors at the Seventh International Congress of Egyptology held in Cambridge in September 1995 (Jasnow & Zauzich, 1998: 607–618). The text, dubbed ‘The Book of Thoth’ by the authors, is a complex and multi-layered discourse in the form of a dialogue between the god Thoth and a student designated as *mr-rh*, ‘lover of knowledge/wisdom’ (cf. Greek *philosophos*). As with most Egyptian papyri, the manuscripts of the text are fragmentary and dispersed, with even a single papyrus often being split between various collections around the world. The dates of the manuscripts fall between the 1st Century BC and 2nd Century AD, and they are said to come from various sites in Egypt, including a considerable number from Tebtunis and Dime, as well as Elephantine (P. Louvre AF 13035 and P. Louvre E 10614; the only copy of the Book of Thoth in hieratic) and perhaps Edfu (P. Berlin P 15531, the best preserved manuscript).

The composition date is unknown. The authors note that the text “may well go back to the Ptolemaic Period” (p. 77) and “may partly derive from much older material” (p. 109), but conclude that it probably originated in a House of Life in the later Ptolemaic or early Roman Period (e.g. p. 34). On several occasions they associate the Book of Thoth with the role of contemporary temples as repositories for Egyptian language and religion (e.g. p. 72, 75), approvingly citing the work of Jan Assmann (1992). While Assmann’s description of these temples as “codifiers of knowledge” may be accurate, a simplified cause-and-effect analysis of this cultural process as an answer to increased pressure from Hellenism is an academic shortcut. Recent research shows that the situation is more complex than this, and the old assumption that Egyptians were excluded, by definition, from high offices in the ‘Greek’ administration has been laid to rest (*contra* Assmann, 1992: p. 77 n. 272). The nature of the sources simply does not allow us to determine the ethnic affiliation of an individual a lot of the time. The most famous example of this is that of the *dioiketes* Dioskourides (2nd Century BC) who shows up in all the Greek sources as a ‘Greek’ official. He was in fact buried in an Egyptian coffin with inscriptions mentioning his mother, who had an Egyptian name, in hieroglyphs (Collombert, 2000). The dichotomy ‘Egyptian’ vs. ‘Greek’ did not exist: there was a continuous cultural exchange (in which the Book of Thoth itself no doubt played a part).

As a composition it is in some ways a ‘missing link’; it sits easily between the Egyptian and Greek traditions as a multi-faceted and highly intertextual work, influenced by both cultures. The formal structure of the text as a dialogue between a ‘teacher’ and a ‘student’ echoes the frames of traditional Egyptian wisdom instructions (compare the influence of this corpus on pp. 226–232), but also that of Greek philosophical works. The subtitle of the book mentions the classical *hermetica*, a group of writings that may be unfamiliar to most Egyptologists. The manuscripts of these writings date to the 1st through late 3rd Century AD and so are roughly contemporary with the Book of Thoth. They are cast in a similar dialogue form, and occasionally claim to be copies or translations of ancient Egyptian originals – a claim that has been thoroughly discredited by scholars like A.–J. Festugière (1944–1954). The relationship between the hermetic literature and the ancient Egyptian literary tradition has long been a point of debate, and although there is evidence that some of the hermetic texts

incorporate Egyptian influences (e.g. Fowden, 1986: 28–29), it has been difficult to establish the extent of this. It was hoped by many that the publication of the Book of Thoth would clarify the picture, and although this is in a sense the case, the evidence remains ambiguous. Despite the composition's thoroughly Egyptian language and script, there are points of contact with the later Greek writings, such as the designation of Thoth as *wr wr wr* (cf. Hermes Trismegistus, "Hermes the thrice-great"), but these are not numerous – indeed, they are surprisingly few. The authors' discussion of the relationship between the text and the Egyptian tradition on the one hand, and the Greek hermetic tradition on the other hand (pp. 65–78) is necessarily brief, but it remains one of the most interesting parts of the book for anyone interested in the interplay between Greek and Egyptian influences. A more in-depth study is no doubt in order, and it is to be hoped that future research may further clarify the position of the Book of Thoth in relation to these traditions.

The first part of the first volume consists of 'Preliminary Essays on the Book of Thoth' (pp. 1–78), where, in addition to the subjects described above, the authors discuss various deities (Thoth, Seshat, Imhotep), institutions (House of Life), localities (Chamber of Darkness, sacred geography), people (the craftsman, the assistant, the prophet) and concepts (initiation and mysticism, knowledge) that occur in the book. This is perhaps an unorthodox approach, but one that works well, partly because the text is exceedingly complex and fragmentary, but also because thematically the text is so wide-ranging that a simple introduction to its content is not possible. The essays allow the reader to focus on those particular aspects of the text that are of interest to him/her, and combined with the index it renders an otherwise unwieldy mass of information easily accessible.

The second part of the book deals with the various sources and their orthography, palaeography, corrections and additions, grammar, vocabulary, textual variants and transmission history. The fragmentary nature of the manuscripts makes interpretation of the text's transmission history rather difficult, so that despite the number of sources a clear picture does not emerge. There are still features that throw some light on copying and editing practices, and these are worth noting for those working on earlier material where the evidence is more patchy (as noted by Quack, 1994: 14–15). For example, in cases where two manuscripts differ substantially, "both readings often yield sense" (p. 137), and there are paratextual indications of copyists using several different *Vorlage* through the use of the phrase *ky d<m<*, "another book" (p. 137), followed by an alternative rendering. This need not reflect pharaonic editorial practices, especially outside a temple context, but the methodological implications for those seeking to reconstruct stemmata for earlier texts are obvious.

The bulk of the book is taken up by the transliteration, translation and commentary of the composition itself (pp. 139–439). This is done following the traditional Egyptological model of a synoptic layout where each line is presented with the various sources side by side, although thankfully the authors have refrained from trying to reconstruct a mythical 'Ur-text'. Whether this is done as a concession to the fragmentary nature of the sources, or whether it is a conscious decision in recognition of the insights provided by philological theory (like New or Material Philology), is not made clear. The commentary is extensive and wide-ranging, but the inclusion of a consecutive translation (pp. 441–471) means that readability is retained for the more casual reader.

The broad range of subjects and themes discussed in the 'Book of Thoth' is impossible to summarise in a short review. One of the areas worthy of a more in-depth analysis than that possible in an *editio princeps* is the complex intertextual aspect of the composition. The denseness of this intertextuality is illustrated by the passage B02 6/1–12 (on pp. 224–231) where the text moves from a question-and-answer pattern on obscure (esoteric?) knowledge reminiscent of certain passages from the funerary literature (Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead) to a didactic mode of address that echoes earlier wisdom instructions:

The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: 'What is its nature? What is the shape of the papyrus plant, O excellent of love?'

He speaks, namely, The-one-of-Heseret, he says: 'They have named it the 't-plant, namely, the 't-plant of life, which the land of mooring will touch it.'

The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: 'Let one command for me the word which gives birth to the prophets, that I may cause that they become pregnant in my flesh'

....

He speaks, namely, The-one-of-Heseret, he says: 'Come that I may instruct you concerning...the writing which Thoth gave to the hand of his disciple. Write, O little one! Take counsel with the wise man. Do not come forth [...]. Ask the one less important than yourself. Desire to listen to the voice of the wise man. Do not [...]. Do not command fighting against a prophet. Take a magic book of protection (?). Do not be weak of heart (?) concerning reaching its end. Take thought for tomorrow. Be troubled (?) with regard to its like (i.e. the day after tomorrow)'' (translation by Jasnow and Zauzich).

Here the vetitive structure, as well as the concern for the (unknowable) tomorrow, are aspects that invoke traditional wisdom instructions that go back to the New Kingdom (Hagen, 2005: 145–146, 153–155), and the advice to consult both ‘the wise man’ (*ndnd rh*) and ‘the one less important (or ‘more ignorant’? *hm*) than yourself’ may be, as the authors point out (p. 230), an allusion to The Instruction of Ptahhotep. Such examples highlight the inherently deficient nature of our understanding of the multiple layers of Egyptian texts: if the Book of Thoth was as highly intertextually charged as, for example, Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ or Dante’s ‘The Divine Comedy’, would we know?

The second volume of plates contains black and white photographs of all the identified fragments, a hieroglyphic transcription of the single hieratic manuscript (pl. 60–61), along with a schematic representation of the parts of the composition preserved in the various sources (pl. 66–67).

The importance of the text is considerable. Based on the geographical distribution of the manuscripts throughout Egypt, and the significant number of fragments, it was a central composition in the religious and cultural traditions of its time, so its publication has filled one of the many gaps that are still so apparent to all scholars of the period. Together with the highly anticipated edition of the ‘Book of the Temple’, in preparation by J.F. Quack (e.g. 1997, 2003, 2005), it will no doubt inspire a thorough re-appraisal of the cultural processes and priestly traditions of late Ptolemaic/early Roman Egypt.

The sheer amount of work that has gone into collecting the primary sources, not to mention their transcription/transliteration, translation and commentary, is testament to the dedication and skill of the authors, and they are to be congratulated on the completion of what must have been a daunting undertaking. It is an outstanding piece of work that no Egyptological or classical library can afford to be without.

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