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Journeys in Pursuit of Divine Wisdom: Thessalos and Other Seekers

Philip A. Harland
YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO

Silvia Montiglio's recent *Wandering in Greek Culture* (2005) draws attention to the significant place that discourses of travel played in a wide variety of literature from Homer and Plato to Dio Chrysostom and novels of the Roman period. Journeys could function in many ways, and the actual process of wandering could be viewed both positively and negatively depending on the author and the purpose behind a given writing. In this wider context of literary representations, one especially important theme that Montiglio touches on pertains to the function of travel in furthering a character's own development, particularly in the pursuit of knowledge.

Ian W. Scott's chapter in this volume underscores the importance of travel as a means toward education in biographical literature about philosophers such as Apollonius of Tyana and Pythagoras. Yet his focus

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on disassembling the scholarly category of the itinerant "divine man" did not offer him opportunity to further explore the more specific motif of travel in pursuit of knowledge from the gods or from their earthly representatives. This motif is the focus of the present chapter on divine wisdom in discourses of travel among the elites.

Here I use a specific, less-studied instance of travel in pursuit of divine wisdom as a foray into widespread patterns in biographical literature. These stories provide a window onto the interplay of travel and things associated with the gods in the minds of many elite authors of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.

The story presented below takes the form of an introductory letter (usually dated to the first or second century CE) that served as a preface to an astrological herbal, a guidebook on medical materials and their interactions with astrological phenomena. This herbal often goes by the title of the Latin manuscript: *Thessalus philosophus de virtutibus herborum* (Thessalos the Philosopher on the Virtues of Herbs).[1] For our purposes, it does not much matter who wrote this tale. But among the attributions in surviving copies, Thessalos is most likely the original (rather than Harpocration or Hermes Trismegistos).[2] Though A.D. Nock briefly discusses this Thessalos case in connection with his survey of "religious curiosity" in antiquity, studies of Thessalos' preface have focused less on discourses of travel and more on issues of pharmacology, astrology, and "religious experience."[3]

Since the letter is not readily available in English translation, let me begin by presenting the autobiographical tale from the prologue itself (largely following manuscript "T"; the Greek text is presented in an appendix):[4]

> (1) Thessalos [or: Harpocration 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.
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> (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

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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 foolishness. (7) For despite the fact that I had prepared the solar medicine that had amazed 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 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 always 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 highpriests 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 highpriest. (17) As he was struck with amazement at the unexpected nature of what he saw and was inquiring why I was doing this,

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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 highpriest, 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 highpriest 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 favour 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 Thessalos, who has attained honour in the presence of the god, men will worship you as a god when time passes and your successes become known. 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 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. (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." (The herbal follows.)

This tale offers an opportunity to consider some common expectations among the educated elites regarding the role of travel in attaining wisdom from divine sources. Moreover, Thessalos instantiates a common journey

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pattern of the Roman era relating to the pursuit of true wisdom. This pursuit finds its culmination in accessing answers from those in close contact with the gods (holy persons) or from the gods themselves. This particular pattern further confirms Montiglio's suggestions regarding the ambivalent and varied functions of the wandering motif in Greco-Roman literature. For Thessalos and others, wandering is both a source of anguish or rootlessness and the only means to arrive at answers to ultimate questions from divine sources in exotic places.

The Journey Pattern

Stories about journeys in search of knowledge, including "magical" wisdom, were widespread in literature with biographical interests. The common patterns in such stories should caution against taking the adventures of Thessalos as though they represented the experience of a particular, non-fictional person (let alone the historical Thessalos of Tralles, the "conqueror of physicians" so disliked by Galen).[5] These patterns heavily shape the story of Thessalos in a way that serves to legitimize the astrological and medical "knowledge" that is presented throughout the remainder of his work. The following discussion, which supplements Scott's discussion of Apollonius and Pythagoras, draws attention to several common recurring motifs or elements in the pattern, which are also evident in the story of Thessalos:

- 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.
- Travelling 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.
- Gaining the confidence of the holy man.
- Gaining knowledge of the holy man's secrets that provide access to wisdom or powers from the gods.

Eucrates and Menippus in Lucian of Samosata

Motifs regarding travel in pursuit of divine knowledge were common enough for Lucian to incorporate them regularly into his satires, to quite humorous effect. The case of Eucrates' adventures leading him to Egypt in *Lover-of-Lies* is especially insightful and could well be considered a

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spoof on the sort of story encountered in Thessalos' book of remedies. In this satire, Tychiades (representing Lucian's skeptical perspective) challenges belief in stories about "magical" powers, visions, and other things such as "voices heard from inner shrines" (*Philops.* 33–39 [trans. LCL]; ca. 160s CE). Tychiades recounts the autobiographical claims of a philosopher named Eucrates. Eucrates catalogues all the amazing things he experienced in his educational journeys, including time in Egypt: "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" (*Philops.* 33). Eucrates relates his experience of the statue revealing information to him in a unique way before moving on to his encounter with a "holy man" (ἄνδρα ἱερόν) and scribe (γραμματεύς), reminiscient of Thessalos' priest.

This scribe in the temple at Memphis has spent twenty-three years learning "magic" (μαγεύειν παιδευόμενος) from the goddess Isis (34). Amazed at the many wonders of this sacred scribe — including his ability to ride on crocodiles — Eucrates seeks an education from him. This is described in a manner reminiscent of Thessalos's story: "by degrees, through my friendly behaviour, I became his companion and associate, so that he shared all his secret knowledge with me" (*Philops.* 34; see Thess. 13–16). The education is not problem-free, however, as Eucrates at first fails to replicate the "magical" feats of his teacher. Eucrates is about to go on relating his journey home from Egypt, including his encounter with a hero who spoke to him at Amphilochus in Mallus (Cilicia) and similar divine manifestations at Pergamon and Patara. But Tychiades, the main character, cannot take any more of Eucrates' "gorging on lies," and he leaves.

Lucian's satirical biography of an actual person, Peregrinus, similarly emphasizes that figure's travels in Armenia, Asia, Palestine, and Egypt; Peregrinus likewise spends time with priests and scribes in a foreign place — namely Palestine — and with a particular ascetic teacher in Egypt. Scott's chapter in this volume discusses Peregrinus' case more thoroughly.

Less prominent in the story of Eucrates (with the exception of his failed attempt at "magic," as Lucian calls it), but more prevalent in many others that follow this pattern, is the emphasis on the youth's failure to attain sufficient answers to his intelligent questions. Often, this failure leads to despair before success is eventually achieved. Another satire by Lucian provides a good example of this theme, though in this satirical case the "success" is underwhelming.

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Though *Menippus* is a humorous satire on the journeys of Odysseus and similar otherworldly travellers, Lucian tells this tale in a way that clearly integrates the patterns we see in Thessalos and elsewhere regarding a youthful struggle to find wisdom or the meaning of life. Here Menippus returns from Hades and is asked by a friend why he engaged in the trip. Menippus explains that he travelled to consult the shadow of Teiresias on his lifelong dilemma regarding which mode of life was best.

Then Menippus relates the origins of this struggle in his boyhood. As a boy, he had read the poets, including Homer and Hesiod, only to struggle with the moralistic implications of the stories (incest, adultery, etc.). 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" (*Men.* 4 [trans. LCL]). This only exacerbates Menippus' struggle to find his answers in life. Lucian here takes some (expected) shots at philosophers, who are portrayed as ignorant, inconsistent, and hypocritical. Menippus now begins to wonder whether an "ordinary man's way of living is as good as gold," which, ironically, is what he will learn later anyways, at the end of his journeys.

Disappointed in his expectation (ἐλπίς), 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 "magician" (*magos*) named Mithrobarzanes. After some reluctance on the wise man's part, Menippus persuades the "magician" to prepare him for a journey to the underworld to find the answer to his lifelong questions regarding the meaning of life.

As in Thessalos' preparations to meet Asklepios, importance is placed on preparations to encounter otherworldy (underworldly) figures. The wise man prepares him by means of regular bathings, a special diet, and a final ritual of purification: "taking me to the Tigris river at midnight he purged me, cleansed me, and consecrated me (ἐκάθηρέν τέ με καὶ ἀπέμαξε καὶ περιήγνισεν) with torches and squills and many other things, murmuring his incantation as he did so" (*Men.* 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" (21).

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Cleombrotus in Plutarch: "Barbarian" Wisdom as Divine Wisdom

The focus on exotic, foreign wisdom is encountered in other materials relating to those pursuing wisdom. Philostratus' model philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana, is perhaps the best-known example (see Elsner 1997). 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" (*Def. orac.* 410a [trans. LCL]). He is presented as conducting research for his own work on the gods ("theology").

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 great "learning and knowledge of history" (*Def. orac.* 421b). This same man possessed prophetic inspiration. Cleombrotus has great difficulty finding the man, succeeding only after "long wanderings, and after paying large sums for information" along the way (421a–b). It is from this foreign wise man, who spends most of his time with "nymphs and demigods," that Cleombrotus gets answers concerning the gods and key cosmological debates among Greek philosophers since Plato (421a–c).

In these accounts, the motif of those beyond the limits of civilized Greece and Rome possessing true wisdom provides an ironic twist at times. In some cases, this involves finding wisdom where people do not expect it. Here authors could draw on ethnographic traditions in which the line between fact and fiction was blurry at best. Those describing the cultural ways of far-off lands or "barbarians" tended to one of two extremes, portraying such peoples as either savage and contemptible or mysterious and wise (see Chapter 1). Strabo advocated an idealizing and positive approach to describing peoples far from cultural centres.[6] That idealizing approach seems to prevail in the autobiographical tales dealt with here: only by travelling extensively in foreign lands can unparalleled or ideal wisdom be gained. This type of access to foreign wisdom places Apollonius, Cleombrotus, Thessalos, and others head and shoulders above the local competition.

J.Z. Smith (1978) contends that on several points Thessalos' story reverses common themes regarding travels in pursuit of knowledge, including the theme of accessing wisdom in foreign lands. However, Smith's emphasis on the inversion of typical motifs or "reversals" is prob-

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lematic. In this particular case, I see no evidence in the preface itself that the foreign land of 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 as a "necropolis" (Smith's term; 1978: 178).

Judean and Christian Authors

Though Lucian was my starting point, these patterns are by no means limited to *his* writings, as we are beginning to see. For instance, there are indications that some Greek-speaking Judeans and followers of Jesus likewise adopted and adapted these widespread notions about how one goes about finding the truth, notions that incorporated aspects of the overall travel pattern.

The second-century philosopher Justin Martyr integrates some autobiographical claims in the introduction to his debate with the Judean philosopher Trypho (*Dial.*, chs. 1–8). Here widespread geographical travel is not explicitly the focus, but rather wanderings from one philosophy to the next in search of truth and "seeing God." Justin's use of the pattern here resembles that of the biographers of Apollonius and Pythagoras. Justin's story is in some respects particularly comparable to Josephus' story in his account of the time he spent among each of the three Judean "philosophies" before finding guidance from the ascetic Bannus out in the desert, beyond civilization (Josephus, *Life* 8–12). These cases are especially illustrative of the legitimizing function of such stories, a function that is prevalent in Thessalos' introduction to his medical work.

Justin presents his own current position—adopting the wisdom of the Christians—as the result of systematic attempts to find the truth in each of the main philosophical schools, including the Stoic, the Pythagorean, and the Platonic. As Justin puts it, "my soul was eagerly desirous to hear the peculiar and choice philosophy" (ch. 2). As in Thessalos' story, here there is an emphasis on apparent progress and improvements, particularly with the Platonists. Yet there is more emphasis on disappointment, helplessness, and failure as Justin wanders from one philosophical school to the next in search of truth and knowledge of God. Overall, states Justin, "I failed in my hope" (ἀποτυχὼν τῆς ἐλπίδος).

Greatly disappointed and desperate for answers, Justin finally meets a certain old man, a philosophical follower of Jesus, who teaches Justin the true way to see god with the mind. This old man answers many of the questions that other philosophies cannot. All of this becomes the basis for the superiority of Justin's position in relation to his interlocutor in

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the dialogue, Trypho, who is likewise trained in philosophy, but of an "inferior" kind.

A further Christian example provides context for accounts that strongly emphasize the distraught, perhaps even suicidal, condition of the seeker, as is also the case with Thessalos. The story of Clement presented in the Pseudo-Clementine novel, which in some form likely dates to the third century or earlier, also highlights the importance of finding "the truth" in foreign or apparently barbarian wisdom.[7] In this narrative, Clement speaks in the first person regarding his ongoing thoughts since youth about the nature of existence and of death: "Again and again there came to me . . . thoughts of death" (*Hom.* 1.1.2). This continual quest makes him "painfully distressed" and "embittered" to the point that he falls seriously ill (*Hom.* 1.2.1–2).

Clement's probings into various philosophies yield no relief from these conditions; indeed, they only bring him further confusion. Only when a stranger named Barnabas comes from "the East," from Judea, with foreign wisdom does Clement experience "the truth" of how to attain eternal life (*Recogn.* 1.6.6–7). The narrative repeatedly underscores how this teaching is rejected by other philosophers as "barbarous." Clement retorts in a manner that reflects certain ethnographic traditions mentioned earlier: "it means sentence of condemnation that the truth is recognised by barbarous and uncivilised men" (*Recogn.* 1.6.9). This is knowledge from unexpected quarters, but the motif is expected in such stories. Clement himself then travels to the foreign land in order to meet the holy man Peter, a follower of the "Son of God," who recognizes that Clement is "appointed heir of good things that are eternal" (*Recogn.* 1.6.13).

Harpocration in the Cyranides: Medical Knowledge from the Gods

The basic story of Harpocration preserved in the *Cyranides*—which in some form likely goes back to the second century CE—shows that Thessalos' work is not the only medical guidebook to follow such patterns.[8] This Hermetic work also invokes an autobiographical story that involves gaining wisdom from divine sources in foreign lands in order to legitimize certain curative techniques. Here Harpocration, the ostensible author, relates his journeys to Seleucia in Babylonia, where he finds an "old man skilled in foreign learning."[9] This man shows Harpocration "everything," including a temple and certain pillars with strange letters written upon them. As the wise old man explains to Harpocration, one of the pillars has an inscription that outlines divine healing secrets concern-

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ing sympathies between the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, on the one hand, and stones, fish, herbs, and birds, on the other. Harpocration then publishes this knowledge from the gods in his book.

While this somewhat secret foreign inscription is seen as the answer to Harpocration's quest for divine knowledge, Thessalos seemingly finds only disappointment in his rediscovered book by the legendary king Nechepso. This, even though Nechepso, along with the wise man Petosiris, was renowned for his great wisdom, and for his astrological knowledge in particular.[10] J.Z. Smith suggests that this element of Thessalos' story is another reversal of common expectations; he goes so far as to suggest that the pattern of finding hidden books of wisdom is "radically altered" (1978: 177).

It is true that ultimately Thessalos does not find Nechepso's cures fully effective. However, the story itself emphasizes how this apparent failure of foreign wisdom leads Thessalos in the right direction.[11] The Nechepso material is just a further stage in Thessalos' move toward true knowledge. In the end, the god Asklepios himself defends rather than condemns the wisdom of Nechepso: "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." Thessalos' success comes from accessing the secrets of a god in a foreign land, rather than mere human wisdom, and this fits well with the portrayals of some other wanderers discussed already. Despite the differences in details, Thessalos' autobiographical story is in many respects typical, rather than inversionary as Smith claims.

Thessalos: Accessing Divine or "Magical" Wisdom in Egypt

The letter of Thessalos 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. It is clear that travel and wandering were integral to such stories. Thessalos' travels end in Diospolis (Thebes), where Thessalos finds his holy man and prepares to meet the god. With the assistance of the priest, he ultimately gains a positive answer to his ongoing questions about "whether any magical power saves a person from illness" (Thess. 13).

In some ways, the general portrait of the Egyptian priest in Thessalos' narrative fits well within the standard type of the wise or holy man

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encountered during other journeys I have outlined, whether that holy man was in Egypt, Babylonia, Judea, or elsewhere. In this respect, this is another instance of accessing wisdom in a foreign or exotic land, as when Harpocration found his Babylonian holy man and Clement found his Judean holy man.

Yet in other respects, it seems that common Greek ethnographic traditions and portrayals of Egyptian priesthoods, temples, and rituals are at work to some degree in Thessalos' tale. This is not at all surprising in light of the fact that many Greek travel narratives, such as those lampooned by Lucian in *A True Story* (see Chapter 1 of this volume), come in the form of ethnographies of far-off peoples. From the Greek perspective, Egyptian priests were commonly associated with knowledge in "magic," astrology, and related disciplines (cf. Fowden 1986: 166–68). David Frankfurter points to studies of Greco-Roman "magic" that demonstrate how the Greek terms *mageia* and *magoi* (terms also used in Lucian's accounts of Eucrates and Menippus and in Thessalos) were generally Greek outsiders' terms for exotic, foreign rituals or ritual power, whether used pejoratively or romantically.[12] The use of the term "magic" in Thessalos' letter underscores an outsider's perspective rather than reflecting a thorough understanding of Egyptian ritual activity, as Robert Ritner's (1995) discussion wrongly assumes. Thessalos' outsider perspective fits more with understanding the letter as a whole in terms of discourses of ethnography, of how to describe things Egyptian in Greek terms.

These Greek characterizations of the rituals of exotic foreigners should, then, be placed in the context of Greco-Roman Egyptomania, as Frankfurter suggests. He points to Thessalos, Kalasiris (in Heliodorus's novel *Aethiopica*), and others as instances of Greek perceptions of supposed Egyptian priestly expertise in "magic": "To the Greco-Roman novelists, and doubtless to much of their culture, the Egyptian priest had a wisdom in *mageia* that could be taught or bought—or imitated with dire consequences" (e.g., Apuleius' *Met.* and Panchrates' apprentice in *Philops.*, as noted by Frankfurter 1998a: 220).

In this context of the Greek fondness for things Egyptian, Thebes specifically was a focal point of attention, and Thebes was viewed as a key source of ancient Egyptian rituals with "magical" power.[13] Thessalos' narrative presents us with a picture of priests at Thebes ascribing to "various teachings." Those priests are known for their scholarly activity and are characterized as learned men (φιλόλογοι). The priest whom he befriends

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is an expert at lekanomancy, that is, "perceiving divine visions in the activity of a dish of water."

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 Abstinentia* 4.6–8; see van der Horst 1982). Though 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.[14] 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" (*Abst.* ch. 8; trans. van der Horst 1982). 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 medical and "magical" knowledge he had been seeking all along. After gaining the friendship of one high priest, 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" (Thess. 17). This is the point at which the high priest directs Thessalos to "keep . . . pure for three days."

After attaining the state of purity, the high priest brings Thessalos to a pure room or building (*oikos*), most likely within the temple area.[15] 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. Even so, the priest obliges. Thessalos is then brought into the room and seated opposite the throne where the god will appear.

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

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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 emphasizes that though 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 a pen and paper he sneaked into the room, becomes the basis for the rest of Thessalos' astrological-medical work.

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. Yet the cases discussed above do not involve meeting the god face to face, as in the climax to Thessalos' access to divine wisdom.

The notion that meeting a deity rather than merely meeting a holy man with access to the divine could be the end point of one's wanderings is found in Apuleius' well-known, humorous play on the wandering theme (*Metamorphoses*). As is well known, Apuleius' novel is based on an earlier Greek story and reflects some themes found in other Greek novels, including the use of travel to advance the plot. Like other figures I have discussed, Apuleius' character, Lucius, spends a good deal of time wandering in search of the solution to life's problems—primarily the problem of being an ass. Like Thessalos, Lucius' wanderings end in meeting the deity—in this case, Isis—and in salvation from his dilemnas.

Conclusion

Thessalos' "autobiographical" letter provides some idea of what a typical upper-class Greek author would have imagined taking place in a far-off land at the end of sometimes frustrating journeys in pursuit of wisdom. Greek authors in the Roman period had a common set of expectations regarding how one went about accessing true wisdom from divine sources. The notion of wandering from one possible solution to the next

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was integral to these expectations. Travel was intimately bound up in these assumptions about how one accessed divine wisdom.

Nonetheless, there were variations on how these motifs and discourses of travel were employed. Thessalos shares in common final access to long-sought knowledge through the holy man, but Greek perceptions of Egyptian "magical" expertise specifically play a significant role in this case, as in some others. The tale of Thessalos also provides a specific instance of the travel motif ending in the seeker's face-to-face encounter with holiness, so that he acquires divine wisdom directly from the god.

Appendix: Greek Text of the Letter

(The text presented here is that of manuscript "T" = Codex Matritensis Bibl. Nat. 4631, based on Friedrich 1968).

(1) Ἀρποκρατίων Καίσαρι Αὐγούστῳ χαίρειν.[16]

Πολλῶν ἐπιχειρησάντων ἐν τῷ βίῳ, Σεβαστὲ Καῖσαρ, παραδοῦναι πολλὰ παράδοξα, μηδενὸς πρὸς τέλος ἀγαγεῖν τὰς ἐπαγγελίας δυνηθέντος διὰ τὸν <ἀπὸ> τῆς εἱμαρμένης ταῖς διανοίαις αὐτῶν ἐπικείμενον ζόφον, μόνος δοκῶ τῶν ἀπ' αἰῶνος ἀνθρώπων πεποιηκέναι τι παράδοξον <καὶ ὀλίγοις γνωστόν>. (2) ἐπιχειρήσας γὰρ πράγμασιν, ἅπερ θνητῆς μέτρα φύσεως ὑπερβαίνει, τούτοις γε μετὰ πολλῶν βασάνων καὶ κινδύνων τὸ καθῆκον τέλος ἐπέθηκα. (3) ἀσκήσας <γὰρ> γραμματικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἐν τοῖς τῆς Ἀσίας κλίμασι καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐκεῖ βελτίων γενόμενος διέγνων ἕως τινὸς τῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀπολαύειν. (4) καὶ πλεύσας ἐπὶ τὴν περισπούδαστον Ἀλεξάνδρειαν μετὰ συχνοῦ ἀργυρίου τοῖς ἐντελεστάτοις τῶν φιλολόγων παρώδευον καὶ φιλοπονίας ἕνεκα καὶ συνέσεως ὑπὸ πάντων ἐπαινούμενος. (5) ἐφοίτων δὲ συνεχῶς καὶ εἰς τὰς τῶν διαλεκτικῶν ἰατρῶν διατριβάς· ἤρων γὰρ περισσῶς ταύτης τῆς ἐπιστήμης. (6) ἐπεὶ δὲ καιρὸς ἦν εἰς οἶκον ἀπιέναι, κατὰ τρόπον ἤδη μοι καὶ τῆς ἰατρικῆς προιούσης, περιῄειν τὰς βιβλιοθήκας ἐκζητῶν <τὴν ἀναγκαίαν ὕλην>· εὑρὼν δὲ βίβλον τινὰ <τοῦ> Νεχεψὼ κδ' θεραπείας ὅλου τοῦ σώματος καὶ παντὸς πάθους κατὰ ζῳδι<ακ>ὸν περιέχουσαν διὰ λίθων τε καὶ βοτανῶν τὰ τῆς ἐπαγγελίας παράδοξα ἐξεπληττόμην. ἦν δὲ, ὡς ἔοικε, βασιλικῆς μωρίας κενὸς τῦφος· (7) σκευάσας γὰρ τὸν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ θαυμαζόμενον τροχίσκον ἡλιακὸν καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς δυνάμεις ἐν πάσαις τῶν παθῶν θεραπείαις ἠστόχησα. (8) θανάτου δὲ τραχυτέραν ὑπολαβὼν εἶναι τὴν πλάνην ὑπὸ τῆς λύπης ἐδαπανώμην· καὶ γὰρ προπετέστερον τῇ γραφῇ πεπιστευκὼς ἔγραψα περὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτῶν καὶ τοῖς γονεῦσιν ὡς ἤδη πειράσας καὶ ὑποστρέφειν ἐπηγγελλόμην. (9) ἐν μὲν οὖν τῇ

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Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ μένειν οὐχ οἷόν τε ἦν διὰ τὸν τῶν ὁμοτέχνων γέλωτα· καὶ γὰρ ἰδίως τὰ καλὰ φθονεῖται. (10) εἰς οἶκον δὲ ἀπιέναι πάλιν προθυμίαν οὐκ εἶχον μικρότερος τῶν ἐπαγγελιῶν εὑρημένος, περιήειν δὲ τὴν Αἴγυπτον οἴστρῳ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐλαστρούμενος καὶ ζητῶν τι <τῆς> προπετοῦς ἐπαγγελίας ἐργάσασθαι ἢ τούτου μὴ τυχὼν θανάτῳ λοιπὸν ἀφιέναι τὸν βίον. (11) ἀεὶ δέ μου τῆς ψυχῆς προμαντευομένης θεοῖς ὁμιλῆσαι, συνεχῶς εἰς οὐρανὸν τὰς χεῖρας ἐκτείνων τοὺς θεοὺς ἐλιτάνευον δι' ὀνείρου φαντασίας ἢ διὰ πνεύματος θείου χαρίσασθαί μοί τι τοιοῦτο, δι' οὗ γαυριάσας ἱλαρὸς εἰς τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν καὶ τὴν πατρίδα κατελθεῖν δυνηθῶ.

(12) Γενόμενος οὖν ἐν Διὸς πόλει - ἀρχαιοτάτην <λέγω> τῆς Αἰγύπτου πόλιν καὶ πολλὰ ἱερὰ ἔχουσαν — διέτριβον αὐτόθι· ἦσαν γὰρ <ἐκεῖ> καὶ ἀρχιερεῖς φιλόλογοι καὶ <γέροντες> ποικίλοις κεκοσμημένοι μαθήμασιν. (13) προβαίνοντος δὲ τοῦ χρόνου καὶ τῆς πρὸς αὐτούς μοι φιλίας μᾶλλον αὐξανομένης, ἐπυνθανόμην, εἴ τι τῆς μαγικῆς ἐνεργείας σῴζεται. καὶ τῶν μὲν πλειόνων ἐπαγγελίας ὁμοίας τῇ προπετείᾳ μου <ἐπι>φερόντων κατέγνων· (14) ἑνὸς δέ τινος διὰ τὸ <οὐ> σοβαρὸν τῶν ἠθῶν καὶ τὸ τῆς ἡλικίας μέτρον πιστευθῆναι δυναμένου οὐκ ἀνεχαιτίσθην τῆς φιλίας. ἐπηγγείλατο δὲ οὗτος αὐτοπτικὴν ἔχειν λεκάνης ἐνέργειαν. (15) παρεκάλεσα οὖν αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς ἐρημοτάτοις τόποις τῆς πόλεως σὺν ἐμοὶ περιπατῆσαι μηδὲν ὧν ἔχρῃζον ἐκφήνας. (16) ἀπελθόντων οὖν ἡμῶν εἴς τι ἄλσος ἡσυχίᾳ βαθυτάτῃ περιεχόμενον, αἰφνίδιος περιπεσὼν ἐπὶ στόμα καὶ κλαίων τῶν ποδῶν εἰχόμην τοῦ ἀρχιερέως. (17) ἐκπλαγέντος δὲ αὐτοῦ διὰ τὸ ἀπροσδόκητον τῆς θέας καὶ πυνθανομένου, τίνος ἕνεκε τοῦτο ποιήσαιμι, ἔφασκον ἐν αὐτῷ τὴν ἐξουσίαν εἶναι τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς· ἔχειν γὰρ με ἀνάγκην θεῷ ὁμιλῆσαι· ἧς ἐπιθυμίας ἂν ἁμάρτω, μέλλω ἀποτάσσεσθαι τῷ βίῳ. (18) ἀναστήσας δέ με ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς καὶ παρηγορήσας προσηνεστάτοις λόγοις, ἀσμένως ταῦτα ποιεῖν ἐπηγγέλλετο καὶ ἐκέλευσέν <με> ἁγνεύειν ἡμέραις τρισίν. (19) διαχυθείσης δέ μου τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐπαγγελίαις τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, ἠσπασάμην αὐτοῦ τὴν δεξιὰν καὶ ηὐχαρίστουν κρουνηδόν μοι τῶν δακρύων φερομένων· φυσικῶς γὰρ ἀπροσδόκητος χαρὰ πλείονα λύπης ἐκκαλεῖται δάκρυα. (20) ἐπανελθόντες δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ἄλσους ἐπὶ τὴν ἁγνείαν ἐγιγνόμεθα ἐμοὶ τῶν ἡμερῶν διὰ τὴν προσδοκίαν <ὡς> ἐνιαυτῶν ἀπαριθμουμένων. (21) ἐπιστάσης δὲ τῆς τρίτης ἡμέρας ὑπὸ τὸν ὄρθρον πορευθεὶς ἠσπασάμην τὸν ἀρχιερέα <ταπεινῶς>.

Εὐτρέπιστο δὲ αὐτῷ οἶκος καθαρὸς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τὰ πρὸς τὴν ἐπίσκεψιν· ἐγὼ δὲ κατὰ προμήθειαν τῆς ψυχῆς εἶχον, ἀγνοοῦντος τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, χάρτην καὶ μέλαν ἐπὶ <τῷ> σημειώσασθαι τῶν λεγομένων,

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<ἃ> ἐὰν δεήσῃ. (22) ἀνακρίνοντος δέ με τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, πότερον ψυχῇ νεκροῦ τινος ἢ θεῷ ὁμιλῆσαι βουλοίμην, ἔφην Ἀσκληπιῷ· εἶναι δὲ τὸ τέλειον τῆς χάριτος, εἰ μόνῳ μοι πρὸς μόνον ὁμιλεῖν ἐπιτρέψειεν. (23) ὅμως οὐχ ἡδέως μέν (τοῦτο γὰρ ἐνέφαινον οἱ τῆς ὄψεως χαρακτῆρες), πλὴν ἐπηγγείλατο. καὶ ἐγκλείσας με εἰς τὸν οἶκον καὶ καθῖσαι κελεύσας ἄντικρυς τοῦ θρόνου, εἰς ὃν ἔμελλεν ὁ θεὸς καθέζεσθαι, προαγαγὼν διὰ τῶν ἀπορρήτων ὀνομάτων τὸν θεὸν καὶ ἐξελθὼν ἔκλεισε τὴν θύραν. (24) καθεζομένου δέ μου καὶ ἐκλυομένου τοῦ σώματος καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς διὰ τὸ παράδοξον τῆς θέας (οὔτε γὰρ τοὺς τῆς ὄψεως χαρακτῆρας οὔτε τὴν τοῦ περικειμένου κόσμου καλλονὴν ἀνθρώπου λόγος διασαφῆσαι δύναιτ' <ἄν>)· ἀνατείνας οὖν τὴν δεξιὰν ἤρξατο λέγειν·

(25) ὦ μακάριε παρὰ θεῷ τυχὼν τιμῆς θεσσαλέ, προϊόντος δὲ τοῦ χρόνου καὶ γνωσθέντων τῶν σῶν ἐπιτευγμάτων ὡς θεὸν ἄνθρωποί θρησκεύ<σ>ουσιν. ἐπερώτα οὖν <ἀδεῶς> περὶ ὧν θέλεις ἀσμένως ἐμοῦ πάντα παρέξοντος. (26) ἐγὼ δὲ μόλις μὲν ἤκουσα· - κατεπεπλήγμην γὰρ καὶ ἐπεπληρώμην τὸν νοῦν εἰς τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ βλέπων μορφήν· - ὅμως <δ'> οὖν ἐπυνθανόμην, δι' ἣν αἰτίαν ἐπὶ ταῖς τοῦ Νεχεψὼ δυνάμεσιν ἠστόχησα. πρὸς ὃ ὁ θεὸς εἶπεν · (27) ὁ βασιλεὺς Νεχεψώ, ἀνὴρ φρενηρέστατος καὶ πάσαις κεκοσμημένος ἀρεταῖς παρὰ μὲν θείας φωνῆς οὐδὲν ὧν σὺ μαθεῖν ἐπιζητεῖς εὐτύχησε· φύσει δὲ χρησάμενος ἀγαθῇ συμπαθείας λίθων καὶ βοτανῶν ἐπενόησε, τοὺς δὲ καιροὺς καὶ τοὺς τόπους ἐν οἷς δεῖ τὰς βοτάνας λαμβάνειν οὐκ ἔγνω. (28) ὥρια γὰρ πάντα τῇ τῶν ἄστρων ἀπορροίᾳ αὔξεται καὶ μειοῦται· τό τε θεῖον ἐκεῖνο πνεῦμα λεπτομερέστατον ὑπάρχον διὰ πάσης οὐσίας διήκει καὶ μάλιστα κατ' ἐκείνους τοὺς τόπους, καθ' οὓς αἱ τῶν ἄστρων ἀπόρροιαι γίνονται {τῆς} ἐπὶ τῆς κοσμικῆς καταβολῆς. ἐξ ἑνὸς δὲ <τοῦ> - το πρὸς πίστιν τῶν λοιπῶν παραστήσω.

Notes

1 Charles Graux (1878) 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. med. 227, f. 31–35) was later discovered and published in 1912. For further discussion see the critical edition of the texts by H.-V. Friedrich 1968.

2 Harpocration is identified as author at the beginning of manuscript "T," but the name Thessalos is preserved in garbled form further on in the story, suggesting that Thessalos is the original attribution, as presented in this translation.

3 See Nock 1933: 108–9. On the pharmacological context, see Scarborough 1991. On the Hermetic and astrological context, see Cumont 1918, 1921, 1937; Festugière 1944; Fowden 1986: 161–65. Festugière (1967; cf. Festugière 1960 [1954]) uses Thessalos as a case of "personal" or mystical religious experience,

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but his category of "personal religion" is highly problematic (see Harland 2003a: 119–121). Also see the recent studies by Moyer (2003, 2004).

4 The translation here mainly follows manuscript "T" (Codex Matritensis Bibl. Nat. 4631). The Greek text for "T" (presented in the appendix below) is based on the critical edition by Hans-Veit Friedrich 1968. There is a parallel Latin text of the entire letter, M (Codex Montepessulanus Fac. med. 227, a fourteenth-century translation). The main differences in the versions of the prologue include these: 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. Germanicus Claudius is the addressee in "M"; Caesar Augustus is the addressee in "T." From line 25 on there is an additional parallel Greek text (= BH) that addresses Hermes Trismegistes rather than Thessalos.

5 The quotation comes from the epitaph of Thessalos of Tralles as reported by Pliny the Elder, 29.5.9. On Thessalos of Tralles, a physician associated with the "Methodists" (along with Asklepiades), see Edelstein 1987[1967]; Riddle 1993; Pigeaud 1993.

6 Strabo, *Geography* 7.3.9 and 15.1–57; see Romm 1992: 45–81, 94–104; cf. Hartog 2001[1996]: 98–101, 110.

7 Long ago, Franz Boll (1916) noted similarities between the Clementine novel and both Lucian's *Mennippus* and Thessalos' story. Yet his identification of supposed structural and verbal parallels seems to assume a more direct relationship among these tales than what I suggest here.

8 On the *Cyranides* see Waegman 1987; Fowden 1986: 87–91. Unlike Thessalos' herbal and the *Cyranides*, Discorides' preface to his pharmacological work, *Materia Medica*, merely mentions that he has "travelled a great deal," without expanding on any adventures associated with that educational travel, let alone stories of accessing divine wisdom (see Scarborough and Nutton 1982).

9 See the critical edition and discussion by Dimitris Kaimakis 1976. To my knowledge, the only English translation of the preface to date is: Anonymous, *The Magick of Kirani, King of Persia, and of Harpocration Containing the Magical and Medicinal Vertues of Stones, Herbes, Fishes, Beasts, and Birds*.

10 Sayings attributed to Nechepso and Petosiris (probably from the second century BCE) survive in fragmentary form as cited by authors such as Vettius Valens (see Kroll 1935; Fraser 1972: 1.436–38). The fragments are gathered in Riess 1891.

11 Cf. Fowden 1986: 164: The herbal's "tendency is to complete Nechepso rather than to supersede, far less refute him."

12 Frankfurter 1998a: 219–20.

13 See Fowden 1986: 168–76; Ritner 1995: 3335–36.

14 Cf. Philo's *Contemplative Life.* See van der Horst 1982: 62–63; and Festugière 1944: 19–44.

15 See Frankfurter 1998a: 167–69, where he discusses a similar use of chambers in the cult of Isis and Serapis at Kysis. Cf. Ritner 1995: 3357.

16 Manuscript "M" preserves the original attribution to Thessalos: *Thessalus philosophus Germanico Claudio regi et deo eterno salutem et amorem*. See Friedrich 1968: 45.