

The Divine Word: Hermes and the Power of Language

Horace, in his hymn to Mercury (*Odes* 1.10), praises the god's many boundary-making (e.g., setting rules for wrestling) and boundary-crossing (e.g. bringing messages from Olympus to earth) roles, but the key one, the one he starts with, is Mercury/Hermes' role in taming the bestial habits of the newly-emerged human race (*feros cultus hominum recentum*, 2) by teaching it to speak, by giving rational boundaries to previously irrational sounds so that all of the complexity of human language could be possible. Throughout the mythological tradition, Hermes is credited as the inventor or bestower of language, words, speech, and interpretation. Additionally, as far back as Homeric Hymn to Hermes, the consistent characterization of Hermes is eloquent (an important quality for a herald), quick-witted, and humorous, often in situations where he uses humor to diffuse tension and avoid conflict. Hermes' association with language, therefore, involves both his personal characterization as the most eloquent of the gods and his bestowing of the gift of speech and eloquence on mortals.

Identifying language itself as not only a divine gift but embodied by a divine person appears outside of Greco-Roman mythology in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Readers of the New Testament will be familiar with the opening of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος, John 1.1), in which Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Christian Triune God, is identified with the word the God of the Old Testament used to speak creation into existence in Genesis 1 ("In the beginning God created...and God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light," 1.1, 3). In the Old Testament the phrase "the word of the Lord came to..." is used of God giving divine instructions or messages to

human messengers such as Moses or Elijah. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as not only extraordinarily eloquent but also as able to speak with “power” (ἐξουσία, Luke 4.32).

This paper explores the relationship between the divine and human speech, particularly in Horace’ *Odes* and the New Testament. The power of language and its divine nature, according to boeht Horace and the biblical authors, warn against its misuse by mortal speakers and its potential loss if handled incorrectly.