

Westcott, Hermes & the Occult

by James May^[1]

While advocates of the King James Only position have hurled a myriad of accusations at Brooke Foss Westcott, none is perhaps more serious in nature than the assertion that he was a practitioner of the occult. The first bit of evidence produced by Gail Riplinger in support of this thesis is his membership in a student association at Cambridge University named the Hermes Club. Actually the club was first called the Philological Society and only later renamed Hermes. Gail, with James Sightler^[2] and David Sorenson^[3] close behind, would have us believe that this club was, to get right to the essence of the whole mess, a group of devil worshipers.^[4] This idea is immediately obvious as New Age Bible Versions titles the section in which Hermes is discussed as "**Hermes: Alias 'Satan'**," and then proceeds to allegedly quote Helena Blavatsky to the effect that "Satan or Hermes are all one."^[5] I say "allegedly quote" because I have not personally looked up this reference, and I have learned NEVER to trust any quote from any King James Only defender without examining it myself. Two considerations supposedly demonstrate that the Hermes Club was concerned with the occult: The name of the club and the topics discussed in the club meetings. The only 19th century documentation that has been presented concerning the nature and activities of the Hermes Club is found in the biography of Westcott written by his son Arthur. Since this material is somewhat difficult to secure, I have reproduced the account of the club in full in the next three paragraphs:

Westcott's most intimate friends during his career as an undergraduate were J. Llewelyn Davies, C. B. Scott, and David J. Vaughan. These four, together with W. C. Bromhead, J. E. B. Mayor, and J. C. Wright, were the original members of an essay-reading club, which was started in May 1845, under the name of "The Philological Society." At a later date the society took the name of "Hermes." The society met on Saturday evenings in one or other of the members' rooms, when a paper was read, and a discussion, not infrequently somewhat discursive, ensued. The following were the subjects of papers read by my father:-- The Lydian Origin of the Etruscans; The Nominative Absolute; The Roman Games of (or at) Ball; The so-called Aoristic Use of the Perfect in Latin; The Funeral Ceremonies of the Romans; The Eleatic School of Philosophy; The Mythology of the Homeric Poems; The Theology of Aristotle; Theramenes.

On two joyful occasions the ordinary business of the society at the weekly meeting was suspended--the first being 7th March 1846, when Westcott was elected to the "Battie" Scholarship; the second, 6th March 1847, when Scott was elected to the "Pitt" Scholarship. In 1847 A. A. Vansittart and J. Simpson became members of the club. At times the society's philosophic gravity relaxed, as witnesses the following entry in the minute-book under date 8th May 1848: "Mr. Vaughan having retired to his rooms, and Mr. Davies within himself, the rest of the society revived the *ludus trigonalis* [a Roman game of ball], and kept it up for some time with great hilarity." Presumably Westcott took his share in this hilarious revival, though it did not form part of the discussion on his paper concerning Roman Games of (or at) Ball.

The last recorded meeting of the society took place on 15th May 1848. On that occasion the character of Theramenes was discussed in Westcott's rooms. Before separating for the evening the society chose the character of Philopoemen as the "next topic of discussion." So ends the minute-book. Whether the society survived to discuss the character of Philopoemen or not is not apparent. Probably not, for the four faithful members of the club had now graduated. There is an entry in the minute-book which indicates that in March the end was near. Above the initials B. F. W. occur these words: "Let me here offer my heartfelt tribute to a society from which I have derived great pleasure, and, I trust, the deepest good-not least under the feelings of today." The subject that evening had been "The Condition of Women at Rome"; but the discussion had wandered over a wide field, and, in its latest stages, was concerned with a comparison of Plato and Aristotle.^[6]

It hardly needs to be said that the description of this club as given in Westcott's biography strikes the reader much differently than the material found in Riplinger, Sightler and Sorenson. The term *philological*, as used in the original club name, refers to the study of classical Greek and Latin literature, religion and culture,

and the description of the activities of the club seems to very much fit this title. So why the change to "Hermes"? Should we see some hidden occult significance in this? To disarm Westcott's accusers on this point we must only show that "Hermes" has attributes and associations which are not connected to the occult and which would reasonably explain the choice of the club's title. To this end we note that Hermes was the messenger of the gods and was himself the god of eloquence:

In the Odyssey, however, he appears mainly as the messenger of the gods and the conductor of the dead to Hades. . . . He was also god of eloquence and presided over some kinds of popular divination.[\[7\]](#)

Interestingly this usage is also reflected in the pages of the New Testament:

And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker (Acts 14:12, New American Standard Bible).

The word "Hermes" in this verse is transliterated from Greek into English by the NASB and other modern translations. The KJV obscures the use of the name by following the Latin and thus translates the Greek "Hermes" as "Mercurius." The obvious point is that the people in Lystra did not call Paul Hermes because they believed that he was Satan or because they thought that he was somehow connected with the occult. No, he was the chief speaker, and it seems most likely that the young Cambridge students called their club Hermes because they considered themselves to be eloquent speakers in their meetings.

There is a second occurrence of Hermes in the New Testament in Romans 16:14:

Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them (Romans 16:14, King James Version).

The name Hermes in Romans 16:14 is identical to the name in Acts 14:12. Those who read no Greek will be helped by knowing that it has the Strong's concordance number 2060 assigned to it. It appears a very safe assumption that the early Christians did not agree with Gail Riplinger that "Hermes" = "Satan". The first century church would not have accepted anyone into its midst with a name associated with the devil, but would have demanded that the name be changed, which leads us to conclude that the use of the name Hermes provides no reasonable indication that the Cambridge club was associated with the occult.

Riplinger and Sightler also imply that the topics covered by the Hermes Club in its meetings indicate an occult connection. To this end they chose only the most sinister sounding topics to relate to their readers. The full list of topics presented by Westcott, as given in his biography, is as follows:

1. The Lydian Origin of the Etruscans
2. The Nominative Absolute
3. The Roman Games of (or at) Ball
4. The so-called Aoristic Use of the Perfect in Latin
5. The Funeral Ceremonies of the Romans
6. The Eleatic School of Philosophy
7. The Mythology of the Homeric Poems
8. The Theology of Aristotle
9. Theramenes

Of these topics Riplinger mentions only numbers 5, 6, 7 and 9; Sightler only number 6. The others perhaps sounded too innocuous for a band of devil worshippers. It takes little research in a good encyclopedia to confirm that these are indeed subjects that young classical scholars might discuss. Since these papers have not been presented to us, we have no way of knowing the opinions which Westcott expressed toward his topics. For example, we do not know what aspects of Aristotle's theology were discussed, and we do not know what criticisms were offered. In other words, and to get right to the point, the Hermes Club provides no indication whatsoever that Westcott was involved in

the occult.

Addendum: An Important Correction

With what appears to be but one exception, quotations in Riplinger, Sightler and Sorenson associating the god Hermes with the occult are completely irrelevant and do not prove that Westcott wished such an identification. The information below first appeared in Riplinger and was then copied by Sorenson:

The designation [Hermes] is derived from "the god of magic. . .and occult wisdom, the conductor of Souls to Hades,. . .Lord of Death. . .cunning and trickery, (Riplinger, p. 400).

The latter title [Hermes] was so named by Westcott because it derived from "the god of magic. . .and occult wisdom, the conductor of Souls to Hades,. . .Lord of Death. . .cunning and trickery, (Sorenson, p. 175).

While both versions claim to relate Westcott's motives, the second by Sorenson contains a particularly egregious error. Instead of referencing Riplinger as his source, Sorenson here has a footnote (number 36) informing his readers that this information was derived from volume 1, page 47 of the biography of Westcott written by his son. This statement would indeed be a strong indictment if it had been written by Westcott's son, but it was not.^[8] Sorenson's footnote is simply wrong. There remains not one shred of evidence that Westcott chose the name Hermes for any reason except that Hermes was the god of oratory.

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^[2] James Sightler, A Testimony Founded For Ever (Greenville, SC: Sightler Publications, 1999), pp. 103-4.

^[3] David H. Sorenson, Touch Not The Unclean Thing (Duluth, MN: Northstar Baptist Ministries, 2001), p. 175.

^[4] Sightler does not make the statement as directly as Riplinger, but no one can miss his idea. Sorenson does not take his accusation quite this far.

^[5] Gail Riplinger, New Age Bible Versions (Ararat, VA: A.V. Publications, 1993, eleventh printing 2000) p. 400.

^[6] Arthur Westcott, Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903), Vol. I, pp. 46-48.

^[7] "Hermes" The Encyclopedia Britannica (Electronic Edition, 2001).

^[8] I have, of course, read Westcott's biography and have examined this page in particular.