

## The Story of the First Herm

*A retelling of Hermes' first act of divine wrath*

Presented as a devotional offering

by Nathan Large



Travelers, wait a moment! Don't be afraid! Yes, I speak, and stones usually don't, but I am no ordinary stone. I am a Herm, though it is not Hermes you hear. I was once human, like you. Now, I stand by this roadside, taking your offerings and holding coins for the God.

I was a humble farmer once, before I became this stone, this Herm... the very first Herm, in fact. I was alive and already old when Hermes was born. I had a farm, a family, a name... now, all I have is my story. I don't even remember my birth name, only the nickname my neighbors gave me, the name poets now use in my story: "Battus," yes, 'the chatterer'.

Yes, I talk, even as a stone. The story-tellers say that talking too much was how I earned this form. Strange, to be punished for speech by its own patron God, but there you are.

So... I have a story, and a story needs hearing. It would be a blessing if you listened. Perhaps you'll learn something useful. Rest a moment. Sit and be comfortable. Good, good.

Let's begin with Hermes' birth. Although it occurred here in Arcadia, His native land and mine, I didn't witness the event, nor even know it had happened. Only one being knew, at first. Only one saw Him emerge into the world: his mother, the nymph Maia. She bore Him in the darkness, in a cave beneath the earth. This concealment was necessary for her safety, for the child's father was none other than mighty Zeus. The child was one of His many offspring... and an especially powerful one.

Hermes was born with the potential to become a God, and not just any God, but one of the mighty few who rule Olympus. Maia did not sense this power, though, nor possess any foresight of it. She knew only that Zeus' lawful wife, Hera, would be furious, jealous as always of Her husband's affairs... and especially jealous of their results.

So, Maia had been in hiding. She gave birth in secret. She meant to keep the child unseen forever, but exhausted from her labors, she had to sleep. Hermes, the newborn child, did not *want* to remain beneath the earth, unseen and unknown. He did not need to sleep. From the moment His eyes opened, He already knew His origins and his worth. He knew what He must do to claim his birthright. So, He left the cave and went out into the world, a plan already in mind.

I know these things now because He told me. Hermes explained my error in every detail, telling me about the folly that earned me this stony form. I had no choice but to listen.

I certainly did not know His potential, when I was alive. Who would suspect it, of a child barely hours old? I suppose the fact that He was already walking, talking, and stealing at that age should have been my clue... but I'm getting ahead of my story.

The newborn Hermes went forth from His cave, seeking a suitable offering for the Gods of Olympus. Owning nothing Himself, He turned to theft. He walked to the fields of Pylos, where the cattle of Apollo had wandered from their original, safer fields. Hermes gathered up these cattle, herding them together with a switch. Then, He drove those cattle to a place of sacrifice, to be slaughtered and burned.

On His way there, He passed my home, which stood high upon a rock, just past Mainalos. I was hard at work, tending my vineyards... or was I watching my herds? I forget, myself. I've since heard several conflicting stories, which makes it even harder to know which is true. Still, I know for certain that I was minding my own business.

I was distracted from it by an unexpected sound: the cries of passing cattle, calling out in distress and confusion. I could hear their voices clearly. I knew they were being driven against their will, likely far from their home.

I walked to the edge of my height and looked down. There, below me, was an infant, yet he was walking upright, switch in hand, driving fifty of the most beautiful cattle I had ever seen! Stranger still, he had somehow trained them to walk backward, so that their hoof prints faced the wrong way around! Clearly, he meant to deceive their rightful owner and make them impossible to track. The child noticed me as I stared at this strange spectacle, and he paused.

He said... I think it was... "Old man, I see your fine vineyards. You must spend a great deal of time tending them. If you keep working so diligently - not seeing anything strange, not hearing anything unusual, and staying silent about matters that don't concern you - you will surely be blessed with an abundance of wine. If not... things could go badly for you."

I understood his meaning right away, and seeing that I was clearly in the presence of something supernatural – a spirit, if not a God - I nodded and went back to work, "not seeing anything strange."

Now, some claim that the child gave me one of those cattle as a gift for my silence. I don't think that's right. I wouldn't have accepted stolen goods, and especially not such a grand creature, which was clearly the property of someone wealthy and powerful!

Others say that I swore an oath, pointing to the rock upon which my house was built and saying, "That stone will tell sooner than I." That's possible, I suppose. I really did mean to keep to myself. If true, though, it was a terrible choice of words. Talking too much is one thing, but saying foolish things, especially foolish oaths, is worse!

As I said, I did attend to my own business, not rushing off to tell anyone what I had seen. As the day grew late, though, I was visited by a young shepherd, an unbelievably beautiful young man, yet wearing simple clothes. He told me he had been out grazing a herd of cattle, but while he slept, some of them wandered away and were lost. Worse, he suspected that the cows had been stolen!

I meant to keep my promise and stay silent, truly I did. After all, as the walking baby had said, it was no business of mine... but that poor shepherd looked so upset, so hurt by his loss, that I became angry for his sake. Further, he offered me a reward for any information that might identify the thief. Some say he gave me a beautiful robe, woven of gold or spun of the rarest colors. Others say he offered me one of those same cows and a bull besides, so that my herds would be forever blessed by their offspring.

Riches right away, compared to the uncertainty of a future harvest? Breeding cattle, wealth far into the future, compared to a single cow or a single season's wine? Whatever the his offer was, I'm sure it was better than the promise – or the threat – of some thieving child!

Moved by righteousness... or, yes, by greed... or perhaps just the urge to tell an interesting tale to a willing listener... I told the shepherd what I knew.

I think I probably said something like, “I am old, and it is sometimes difficult to see clearly. I do not always know who I see, or who is good or evil. However, while I was working today, I *think* I saw a child, barely an infant, walking past with some cattle. He was driving them along, backwards in fact, with their heads behind and their tails in front!”

The shepherd nodded, as if I had only confirmed his suspicions. I think he already knew what had happened, and who was to blame. He hardly needed *my* testimony on that account. What he didn't know, though, was where the cattle had gone. My words told him where they passed, when, and in which direction.

That information was all that great Apollo, the Far-Seer, needed to track down His cattle and their thief. It was too late for the cows, though, as Hermes had already slain and burned most of them as offerings, serving one portion to each of the Olympian Gods – including Apollo, too, isn't that funny? – but also including Himself among them.

Obviously, Hermes got away with it, pardoned by His father, the great king and judge, Zeus. He became a God and an Olympian. He even made peace with Apollo. It's not like *my* testimony caused Him any lasting harm.

But still, a promise is a promise, and foresworn is foresworn, and offending a God, even to aid another God, is always trouble. I suppose I'm grateful that it was Hermes who came back to punish me and not the Furies. I could be screaming in Tartarus now, not chattering by the roadside... even if I *am* forever too cold or too hot, drenched when it rains and dusty when it's dry...

Sorry, I'm skipping over the most important part of my story, aren't I?

Several days later – after the trial on Olympus was over – I was visited by another young shepherd, a different one, this time carrying a staff. He met me by the road near my home and asked me about any recent odd events. Had I heard about cattle being stolen and driven past the area, that sort of thing?

I worked around the topic for a while, but he eventually got me talking - again - about everything I had seen. I suppose I would have thought: *I already told one person, what's another? Surely the matter is old and done already.*

But then, my new guest laughed and said, “You indeed betray me, even to myself!”

I remember that part quite clearly, since those were the last words I ever heard with my living ears. Though, if I *did* say that the stone would speak before I did, He likely added something like, “If a stone is more silent, then a stone you will be!”

And then, He hit me with that staff, which was no ordinary stick or cattle-switch. It was a magical rod, His rod of office, and with it, Hermes called upon His power to change the forms of things. Instead of changing Himself – as from an infant to a youth, as He had done to deceive me – He transformed me. Into stone. *This* stone, that you see before you.

My days of farming were over, not to mention, my days of walking or eating or breathing or doing anything but standing still. Indeed, like any ordinary stone, I could no longer speak.

Hermes then explained what had happened, saying that my testimony had revealed His theft and forced Him to defend himself in court. As I said, I didn't have much choice but to listen. I couldn't ask forgiveness or mercy, much less explain myself... just listen.

Then, He left, after informing me of my new duties: to stand still, to hold offerings to Him, and to say nothing. I was the first Herm, the first shrine in honor of Hermes. This form is my penance for betraying the God. I must pay off my debt through service.

My muteness lasted for... years? Centuries? I'm not sure exactly how long it lasted, but at some point, I remembered how to speak again... or figured out how to speak as a stone. Maybe I can talk now because I've finally earned that much mercy? Who knows, maybe in another millennium or two, I'll be able to see again, or maybe move.

That's my story. Thank you for listening. If there's a lesson to be learned here, it's...

Oh, you have to go? So soon? Well, travel safely. I'm certain you will, if you leave a coin or two here and ask for His blessing. You know, they say...

Ah, all right, then. Goodbye. Stop again when you pass this way?

Please?