

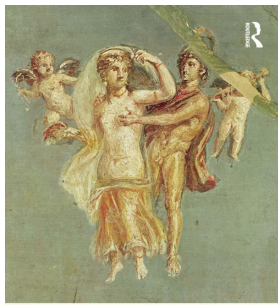
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### Porphyry and Iamblichus

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## PORPHYRY AND IAMBlichUS

Mark J. Edwards

Porphyry was born in 232, and commenced his philosophical studies in Athens under the eminent critic Longinus. He spent the years from 263 to 268 with Plotinus in Rome, as we learn from his own report in his *Life of Plotinus*, a preface to his edition of the *Enneads*, which became ours (*Life of Plotinus* 4, 11, 23). On the evidence of an ancient source, Iamblichus is believed to have been his pupil, and on evidence that some might think no evidence at all, his birth has been dated to 245 (Cameron 1968). What is certain is that Iamblichus was the younger, that, like Porphyry, he was a Platonist, and that both men hung a religious superstructure on a scaffolding erected by Plotinus, who in outward show was the least religious thinker of late antiquity. Porphyry was a Greek-speaking Phoenician from the great city of Tyre; the Chalcis that is said to have been the birthplace of Iamblichus is generally supposed to have been the town of that name in Syria. No date for the death of either is recorded, and we know little of their careers save what can be gathered from their writings. Porphyry was perhaps the more conventional, a stenographer to oracles and public cults, where Iamblichus purports to be an expositor of deep mysteries. Yet both, as heirs of Plotinus, were intolerant of irrationality even in the study of things above reason, and both were aware that, in framing a theology for barbarians, they were preserving a Greek tradition of enquiry for the Greeks.

## A PREFACE TO PORPHYRY

If Porphyry had a philosophy of religion – if, that is to say, he would not be more properly styled a religious polymath – it must be reconstructed from lost writings, the remains of which we owe to Christian sources. No dates can be attached, without circular reasoning, to his *Philosophy from Oracles*, *On Statues*, *On the Regression of the Soul* or *To Anebo*, as the aim of our principal tradent, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, was not to furnish matter for a biography, but to illustrate

the wilful gullibility of a Greek thinker who occasionally admitted to knowing better. Modern readers of Eusebius, finding sceptical passages from the letter to Anebo cheek by jowl with the pious credulity of the *Philosophy from Oracles*, have sometimes assumed that the latter represents only the cast-off weeds of Porphyry's schooling before his encounter with Plotinus, while the letter to Anebo testifies to a change of wardrobe in his intellectual prime (Bidez 1913 *passim*). But if that is so, we must posit a second childhood at the end of his career when, in writing the life of his mentor Plotinus, he included a number of miraculous episodes which that austere freethinker would certainly not have recounted in the same style. We must also assume that his idiom did not keep pace with his thoughts, since his *Philosophy from Oracles* and *Regression of the Soul* – the first a specimen of his apprenticeship and the second of his maturity, according to the most celebrated theory of his development – are in fact so alike in diction, tenor and content as to persuade one notable scholar that we have to do with a single work passed down under different titles.<sup>1</sup>

One change in his opinions is attested in his own works. To pass from the school of Longinus to that of Plotinus was to embrace the latter's innovatory doctrine that "the Forms are not external to the Intellect": that is to say, that the Demiurge or creator of the phenomenal realm and the paradigm that he contemplates in creating it are not distinct, as subject and object are in the lower plane, but one and the same. Plotinus would add that, if the intellect and the intelligible manifold are one, it follows that the one is at the same time many, and hence that the intellect cannot supply its own principle of unity. The One that he postulates as the cause of unity therefore lies beyond intellect, beyond determinate being, beyond all that is commonly called divine. It is often affirmed that Porphyry doubles back on his master's teaching and conflates the first principle with intellect; but the argument requires us to identify him as the anonymous referent in authors who are accustomed to use his name, or to accept the disputed attribution to him of an anonymous and undated commentary on the *Parmenides*.<sup>2</sup> It was indeed said of him that he took *nous* or intellect to be the Father of the first triad in the Chaldaean system (fr. 267 Smith);<sup>3</sup> but this is his exegesis of a text that, so far as we know, he did not regard as an infallible, or even a peculiarly authoritative, scripture.

It is certain that he speaks from time to time of the highest principle in more quotidian terms than those customarily employed by either Plotinus or his successors. But it seems that, in certain instances at least, he was accommodating his speech to that of his vulgar interlocutors. He is credited in the *Suda* (a Byzantine lexicon) with some fifteen *logoi* or discourses against the Christians. We have at most a few vestiges of any work under that title, but excerpts survive from

1. See O'Meara (1959), against Bidez (1913).

2. See further Bechtle (2000).

3. On the Chaldaeans see below.

essays under different names that obliquely rebuke the new sect for its failure to see the fruit beneath the rind of custom. The treatise *On Statues* undertook to explain the symbolism of divine images to unlettered men who lacked the art to read them (fr. 1 Bidez [1913: appendix 2]);<sup>4</sup> the false apocalypse of Zoroaster, which he rebutted more than once, is ascribed in *Life of Plotinus* 16 to certain “Gnostics”, whom he regards as heretical Christians. Perhaps it was in the hope of suborning the faith of Christians under persecution that he spoke of the One as “god above all” in his memoir of Plotinus (*Life* 23.16), and affixed the title *On the Three Hypostases* to a text (*Enneads* 5.1) in which his master traced the procession of mind and soul from the suprasubstantial source of unity. If more of Porphyry’s extant work were strictly exegetic – if there were less that could be discounted as polemical, accommodatory or experimental – we could hope to ascertain whether this apostle of Plotinus upheld his master’s teaching on the ineffability of the first principle. As it is, we can study only what remains, with the caveat that what remains is only what was not suppressed in the triumph of his adversaries.

#### PORPHYRY’S PHILOSOPHY FROM ORACLES<sup>5</sup>

Philosophers of the Roman world debated not the existence of divine beings, but their number and variety. Platonists could deduce the true marks of deity from first principles, but hitherto they had owed their knowledge of lesser gods, or demons, to the lore of priests, the long memories of the poets and the discernment of a few enlightened souls. Porphyry’s *Philosophy from Oracles* seems to have been the first attempt to lay an incorrigible foundation for beliefs that were otherwise merely intuitive or hereditary. The first extract in Eusebius, which appears to come from the proem to the opening book, declares that none of the oracles collected in the treatise have suffered change or augmentation, but for occasional corrections to the syntax, metrical supplements and pruning of otiose matter (fr. 303.15–22 Smith). Wherever, then, the reader of this collection meets a philosophic doctrine, it is not because the editor has insinuated his own thoughts into the text but because the gods have a natural propensity to speak the truth. The veracity of the oracles will be gauged best by those who, after years of fruitless labour in search of truth, have seen that there is no escape from perplexity except through revelation (303.30–34). This, however, the gods will not vouchsafe to those of dissolute life or sluggardly understanding: they reserve the gift for those

4. Here, and nowhere else to my knowledge, Porphyry opines that God is luminous (fr. 2), and that his properties, which the sculptor is forced to represent symbolically, can be adequately rendered by an Orphic poet’s collage of human and bestial attributes (fr. 3).

5. See Porphyry (1993). Most excerpts are drawn from the *Preparation for the Gospel* by Eusebius, a Christian apologist born a generation after Porphyry.

whose one concern in life has been the liberation of the soul.<sup>6</sup> Such is the disparity between mortals and immortals that the most formidable powers can be known only from the verses in which they state their own name and lineage (310–13, 317, 319, 320). From Apollo, the chief expositor of divine mysteries, we learn that gods are of four orders – chthonic or earthly, marine, subterranean and celestial – each demanding the sacrifice of a different kind of victim (314, 315). To the gods of earth one offers four-footed animals – swine to Demeter, for example – which, in keeping with their habitat, must be black (315.29–34). A trench must be dug for offerings to subterranean powers; to those who live above the soil we raise altars (315.35–7). Winged fowl suffice the other gods, and these again must be black for those who dwell in the dusky ocean (315.20). White birds are the portion of the supernal gods, the whole carcass being presented to those of the air, while those of the aether and upper heaven require no more than the extremities (315.21–5). Precepts for the fashioning of images follow. Those of Pan should be goat-legged, cloven footed and two-horned (318); Hecate’s waxen effigies should bear a lamp, a whip and a sword and be encircled by the figure of a snake (319, 320). Her colours should be white and red and gold, which reinforce her triple character; this in turn corresponds (308.21–2) to the three divisions of the soul and to the demiurgic and unitive power that Hecate exerts in all three provinces of matter.

Porphyry’s second book defines the instruments and the bounds of divine activity. A long oracle divides angels into three classes: those who are always in the presence of the Almighty, those who depart to carry out his errands or convey his decrees, and those who intone perpetual hymns of praise (325.15–23). In addition to these ministers, there are evil daemons, subjects of the Egyptian god Sarapis, who must be exorcised in preparation for the approach of gods (316). It is to them that the ignorant offer bloody and unwholesome sacrifices, and their reward is to be puffed up with crass vapours that give rise to wordless gibbering and bombast (326.26–34). The daemons have their symbol, the three-headed Cerberus, who once again represents the three realms ensouled and ruled by Hecate (327). Apollo tells one suppliant that he cannot reveal himself until the daemons have received their tribute of wine, milk, fruits and entrails (329); asked on another occasion to foretell the sex of an unborn child, he replies that she will be a girl by the edict of the stars (333).

In the third book Apollo warns us still more candidly of impending deceit (341). Verses ascribed to Pythagoras make Hecate submit to the conjurations of a “mortal man”, while other lines prescribe expressly that incantations should be accompanied by a “mortal flute” (fr. 347.23, 349.9, from Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 5.8). A passage eagerly cited by Augustine declares that only ignorant and brutish folk would worship any god below the heavens, and that even the higher deities are subject to one whose law has been enshrined in the Hebrew

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6. This claim suggests that this is not an early work, as some scholars have opined.

scriptures (Augustine, *City of God* 7.23 [= fr. 346 Smith]). But for this passage, Porphyry's regulations for animal sacrifice in this treatise would have stood in bald contradiction to his repeated advocacy of bloodless sacrifice in other works.<sup>7</sup> That is some evidence of its authenticity and, if a Christian had interpolated the reference to the Hebrews, he would surely have deleted two other texts that are hostile to followers of Christ, although they spare the man. "Man he was and all that man can be", declares an oracle that is attributed to Hecate (fr. 345 Smith, from Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.7.1–2), although Augustine hints that Porphyry himself had more than a hand in it (Augustine, *City of God* 19.23.107 [= fr. 346 Smith]); the oracle goes on to lament that worshippers of Christ parade their folly by paying to his exalted soul the honours due to a god alone. Another passage, cited only by Augustine, relates that when a pagan asked Apollo how to reclaim his Christian wife, the god replied that one might as well attempt to write on water as to cure those who have succumbed to this disease (*City of God* 19.22.17 [= fr. 343.8–14]).

## PORPHYRY AND THEURGY

We have remnants of another book in which Porphyry commended the practice commonly known as theurgy, or divine work, as a purgative to the lower soul, and hence as a means of freeing the higher soul from the contagion of the body. The conventional title *On the Return of the Soul* is attested only in Augustine's *City of God*, and even there was intended only as a description of its contents (*City of God* 10.29).<sup>8</sup> The excerpts in Augustine are compatible with the teaching of the *Philosophy from Oracles*, but coincidences of thought and style are not common enough to justify the thesis that the two works were identical. It is only in the Augustinian excerpts that the Chaldaeans are represented as the true adepts in theurgy, and only here that we find express quotations from the *Chaldaean Oracles*.<sup>9</sup> By their precepts angels are brought down from the fiery space beneath the firmament to assist in the exorcism of the passions; other rites must be observed to persuade our evil genius not to hinder the approach of a better guardian; offerings to the sun and moon, however, are proscribed because

7. See, above all, *On Abstinence*, books 1 and 3, a book undoubtedly written after the death of Plotinus in 270.

8. The fragments, all derived from Augustine, are collected in an appendix to Bidez (1913). O'Meara (1959) contends that the *Return of the Soul* is the same work as the *Philosophy from Oracles*.

9. *Chaldaean Oracles* is a work ascribed to two second-century prophets, in which the divine world is conceived as a series of descending triads, in each of which power or *dunamis* mediates between being and life, although being predominates in the first triad, power in the second and mind in the third. Porphyry seems to have held that the One is the Father of the highest triad.

the destiny of the rational soul is to rise above the spheres and join the Father in incorporeal beatitude (Augustine, *City of God* 10.23). Theurgy differs from magic in aiming only at the good, and in being collaborative rather than coercive: it is not by charms but by the virtue of continence, nurtured inwardly, that ignorance is expelled from the rational soul (10.29).

Yet angels, too, are prone to vice, and in this daemonic character are ready to assist a malignant theurgist. “A good man in Chaldaea”, Porphyry writes, “complains that his laboured efforts to purge the soul were baffled when a man skilled in the same arts, touched by envy, checked the powers from granting his petitions though he adjured them in sacred prayers” (Augustine, *City of God* 10.9). Nevertheless, when Porphyry admits that he has not discovered a universal means of purification (10.32), he appears to be speaking only of the lower soul. The purgatives that Greek philosophy offers to the higher soul, on the other hand, are sufficient, and (for all that we know) unique.

#### THE LETTER TO ANEBO<sup>10</sup>

Porphyry has no quarrel with the Egyptians in most of his writings. Nevertheless in the shortest of his extant works – if the letter to Anebo is an entire work, not an excerpt – he accosts the Egyptian priesthood with a series of paradoxes that, to judge by the growing acerbity and sarcasm of his tone, he considers fatal to their pretensions. The interrogation commences bluntly: how is it, Porphyry wonders, that the priests invoke the gods as their superiors, yet command them as inferiors? Why is spotless purity demanded of the postulant when the gods themselves not only assist us in lechery, but command it? Why does ‘theagogy’ make use of carcasses when its adepts are required to abstain from meat and shun the smoke of sacrifice? How can gods as powerful as the sun and moon be awed into speaking the truth by threats that they know to be fictitious? Are they children, to believe that a man can open the pit of Hades or disperse the limbs of Osiris once again? The Egyptians may profess to have seen their deities ensconced in mud or seated on a lotus, or even changing form to match the constellations of the zodiac; but in that case they have failed to unmask the products of their own fantasy, having no conception of any god who is not a physical element. If all this is said in riddles, can they not divulge the meaning of the riddle? Why are all their mysteries wrapped up in barbarous terms that (we are told) will not bear translation into Greek? We cannot suppose that Egyptian is the language of the gods, or indeed that they use any language heard among mortals. If the higher gods are

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10. For text and commentary, see Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 14.10 and Scott (1936: 28–102).

impassible, then none of our menaces, prayers and immolations can subdue them, while the lower gods will be too weak to do us good or harm.

This, then, is the assault to which the great treatise *On the Mysteries* replied under the pseudonym of an Egyptian priest, Abammon, who is generally assumed to be fictitious. That Iamblichus was the true author would appear to be proved not only by the testimony of Proclus (see Saffrey 1971), but by the dense and convoluted prose of the treatise, by coincidences in detail with his undisputed writings and, above all, by the theology of the eighth book, which concurs with his at the points where he diverged from his predecessors. In the following summary I shall argue that he makes his defence on grounds that would have seemed rational and cogent to fellow-Platonists, and indeed to most Greeks. Where he contradicts a view held by Porphyry, it is not because he is reasoning less Platonically, less systematically or with less concern to vindicate the dignity of reason and the absolute transcendence of the gods.

#### IAMBlichUS, ON THE MYSTERIES

Theurgy, as Iamblichus defines it, is a human work, but one that owes its efficacy to *sumbola*, which unite divine powers to those of the mortal adept. The Greek word, like its English derivative ‘symbol’, denotes the use of a cryptic locution or image to convey truths for which common speech provides no glossary, but at the same time it retains its etymological sense of ‘contract’. It is the bounty of the gods, not any force that earthbound wisdom can impart to our words and actions, that makes such a contract possible. Beings who can be threatened or cajoled are not gods, but daemons of low rank who share the traits of their seducers. True deity is bodiless and therefore imperturbable; it is not affected even by the operation of that cosmic sympathy which vouchsafes to the soul some knowledge of things to come in the lower realm. When we speak of divine necessity, we mean not that the gods are subject to coercion, but that goodness has an indefeasible tendency to impart itself to lower planes of being. Such benefits are proportioned to the capacities and deserts of the recipient, and the rites that cannot sway a supernal intellect may nonetheless help the worshipper to rid himself of ignorance, vice or passion. Success depends, in short, on a friendship that can be earned but not exacted: if the Greek magus clings to the barbarous formulae with which Egypt and Chaldaea have clothed their mysteries, that is not because reason sleeps, but because the rational man is one who does not presume to correct the gods.

We meet the same proviso against translation in the *Hermetica*, a collection of Greek tracts in which the gods of Egypt blend a cosmopolitan theology into an idiom drawn from Plato and the Stoics. Yet just as in this Hellenistic broth there are some ingredients that are genuinely Egyptian, so in the treatise of Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* – and above all in the theology that his eighth book ascribes to Hermes Trismegistus – there are elements that do not belie his priestly pseudonym.



The cause of all, according to this account, is One, “remaining immovable in the singularity of his own oneness” (*On the Mysteries* 8.2, in Places 1971: 262). From him proceeds the “first god and king”, the self-fathering Good, who, as the monad prior to essence, is the transcendent source of intellect and its objects. Hermes, we are told, could not give a full account of these transcendent principles in fewer than a hundred volumes: after them he places another monad, the unitive principle of the intellectual realm, in whom resides the “primordial object of intellection”, to be worshipped only in silence (*ibid.*). The intellectual realm takes shape through Kneph, the “self-thinking mind” (*ibid.*), who is the leader of the celestial gods; the visible world, however, is shaped and governed by a demiurgic intellect, who is called Amoun when he brings forth, Ptah or Hephaestus when he perfects his work, and Osiris when he makes this work productive of further goods (8.3, in Places 1971: 265).<sup>11</sup> In another text the elements are assigned to an Ogdoad or group of eight, in which four masculine deities are paired with their feminine counterparts under the regency of the sun, while the generated world itself is subject to the authority of the moon (*ibid.*). Of matter the Egyptians say – in contrast to the Greeks – that it is not a mere passivity but a source of life, abstracted from the principle of essence by the self-fathering god who entrusts it to the Demiurge (*ibid.*, *fnis.*).

In his reference to the Ogdoad, Iamblichus may be thinking of the sodality of eight gods, male and female, who are depicted in a famous relief at the city of Hermopolis (Gwyn Griffiths 1996: 260). It is wrong, he maintains, to imagine all such agents as a single genus, divided (as in Plato) by dichotomous characteristics or (as in Aristotle) by constellations of accidental properties that are notionally, if not physically, separable from the universal substance in which they inhere (*On the Mysteries* 1.4). The truth is that the higher gods, the daemons and the heroes – the only species named at this point, although Abammon will later add angels and archangels – differ in essence as in rank, and that it is only when the properties that define each class are ascertained that we know what to hope from any member of it. In the class of gods, we cannot speak, in fact, of individuated members, for deity is pure intellect, identical with its thoughts and grasping all thought in the undivided unity of truth (1.6–7).

The contemplative faculty of a daemon or a hero, on the other hand, is limited and discrete, although this is not, as Porphyry seems to presuppose, the consequence of their being confined to the regions that furnish the elements of their bodies (1.5). Porphyry shows his ignorance by assigning an aerial body to the gods themselves, thus rendering it impossible for them to know, let alone to regulate, whatever is done outside their own sight and hearing (1.8). And he commits another fallacy when he supposes that the daemon or hero owes his identity to his

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11. Cf. Porphyry, *On Statues* fr. 10 Bidez. All these gods appear (although not together) in Egyptian triads: Gwyn Griffiths (1996: 100–110).

corporeal envelope, for the principle of individuation at any level of being resides not in the substrate but in the form: that is to say, in the higher entities from which all form proceeds. The more remote a class of beings is from the unity of the ruling principle, the greater will be the difference among its members, but it is not the remoteness itself that differentiates. Even the soul, which dwells in matter, is characterized by immaterial properties (1.10); heroes, daemons and gods are properly incorporeal, and hence imperceptible to our physical senses. Bodies, when they employ them, remain extrinsic, so that if, for example, the gods employ such visible instruments as the sun and stars, they remain superior to the daemons, however tenuously the latter may be clothed (1.17). It is almost a logical consequence that heroes, daemons and gods alike are immune to the passions that afflict their votaries (1.10). It is in fact our own rebellious spirits that we propitiate when we offer prayers to wrathful gods, and the evils that we hope to avert by sacrifice are born of our own false reasoning and desire (1.11). If obscenity and licence are admitted in public rituals, it is not to amuse the gods, but to remind us that these ceremonies are tempered to human understanding – often to the grossest understanding – and can offer us at best a turbid image of the reality beyond sense and imagination (1.12). Impassibility and incorporeality are universal properties in the transcendent realm, which, for all disparities of rank and nature, is as continuous as a field of radiant light.

Why so many gradations of divinity? Because its operations are as manifold as the cosmos that it governs and sustains. Daemons represent the creative and generative powers of deity, heroes represent those which communicate life and shape the conduct of the soul (2.1). Archangels and angels rank between the gods and daemons; archons are of two kinds, the cosmic or sublunary and the material or hylic. The first resembles the gods in its stability while the second is diverse in aspect, turbulent in action. In most of the subsequent catalogues, the heroes (if present at all) precede both categories of archon, and the soul holds the lowest place, although it often seems to be the hylic archons who sit furthest from perfection. The properties of each order are now described, with a scholastic predilection for taxonomy far more redolent of Iamblichean commentary on Plato than of any ancient work from a priestly hand. We have room here only for a few specimens:

- Gods are simple and uniform in aspect; archangels and angels may fall short of their simplicity, but do not adopt such heterogeneous guises as the daemons. Variety is more pronounced in subaltern beings who inhabit matter, while souls present themselves “in every form” (2.3, in Places 1971: 71).
- Gods are immutable, even in semblance; archangels fall short of them in “sameness”, but even angels, although inferior, cannot yet be said to change. Daemons “appear at different times in different forms”; heroes resemble demons, while the soul is a weak simulacrum of the hero (2.3, in Places 1971: 72).
- Gods bestride earth and heaven in their epiphanies, while an archangel has only so much light as he has authority. The radiance of an angel is still more

circumscribed, while that of a daemon is prone to fluctuation. Heroic apparitions are smaller in bulk but nobler in bearing. Cosmic archons are capable of great epiphanies, hylic archons only of pretending to greatness; the soul is more mercurial than the hero (2.4, in *Places* 1971: 75–6).

- Through the approach of a god we receive perfection and deliverance from passion; archangels bring serenity of contemplation, angels rational wisdom, daemons a longing to complete the works required of us in the sphere of generation. From heroes we derive zeal, and from the archons an inclination of the soul to heaven or earth (2.8, in *Places* 1971: 87).

We have noted above that Iamblichus does not ascribe any power of illumination to a psychic or physical “sympathy” between elements in the cosmos. True divination, he argues, is imparted by the gods, although receptivity may be perfected by an exquisite attenuation of the senses: the prophetess at Delphi yields herself to the “fiery spirit”, while her counterpart at Branchidae is overwhelmed by the radiance that proceeds from her sacred wand (1.11). It is not, as Porphyry thinks, because the soul contains scintillae of divinity (1.20) that it serves the gods as a vessel of inspiration, but because it submits to powers that it does not possess by nature. Souls of females or males unmanned by ecstasy are favoured because they offer less resistance to their divine mentors, while the orgies of Sabazius and Bacchus are all the more efficacious because they expel all “human and natural qualities”. To propose that it is only through cosmic sympathy that the irrational and inanimate can become portents is to suggest that we acquire knowledge from something lower than the intellect, and thus to overthrow the very premise on which Porphyry attributes vaticination to the soul (3.15–17).

Practitioners of the mysteries are unjustly accused of making the gods accomplices in unjust designs (4.1). It is often the case, Iamblichus explains, that the gods appear to condone injustice because they see that it conduces to a more distant goal, which we too – could we perceive it – would acknowledge to be just (1.5). When an act performed in the name of the gods miscarries, it is not because there is ignorance or error in the divine realm, but because the practitioner lacked the means to make better use of the strength that he acquired by exploiting the sympathy of the elements (1.6). While there are daemons who effect their illicit purposes through just but unlearned ministers (1.7), that is only a further proof that the wisdom by which gods judge good and evil is not immanent to the world or to our own unassisted faculties. The object of theurgy is in fact to make a science of our religion, purging the mind (with divine assistance) of its natural and hence superstitious propensity to imagine that a crime against one’s neighbour may be a duty to the gods.

But why – the question is Porphyry’s – are priests enjoined to shun contact with the dead, when they habitually avail themselves of the carcasses of beasts in their invocations (6.1)? Iamblichus replies that priests are not required to hold aloof from every corpse, but only from those of human beings, since the animal form

has never housed a divine soul and is thus not rendered unclean by its departure. It is not through the animal's flesh but through its emancipated soul that we approach the divine, for a soul acquires some kinship with the daemons by the mere fact of having shed its carnal envelope (5.3). A corpse creates no defilement in a daemon, because these super-human beings are not susceptible of corruption (5.2). But now it seems that Iamblichus has bared his flank to the next thrust: how can beings so impassible be intimidated by the threats of mortals? The great ones, he replies, suffer no coercion (6.5): it is not such potentates as the sun and moon but lower agents – senseless, limited, irrational – who permit themselves to be overawed, or perhaps the terrestrial daemons, not because they are compelled but because they are not so indifferent as the higher powers to the threat of sacrilege (6.6). Furthermore, it is possible that the magician gains an ascendancy over lesser gods by becoming one with their overlords, whose symbols he employs (6.6).

#### DIVINE SYMBOLISM, HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Iamblichus proceeds to explain these symbols in his seventh book, with the caveat that a symbol fails in its purpose unless we grasp the intellectual truth behind the pictured emblem (7.1). Mud, for example, signifies the corporeal, and (by virtue of this) whatever gives life and nourishment, hence the generative principle, and finally (for those who can ascend so far) the First Cause (7.2). The lotus enthroned on mud betokens mastery of the corporeal, while the image of a piloted ship bears witness to the divine administration of the cosmos (7.2, in *Places* 1971: 252). The stars are both the symbols and the instruments of divine government, and the sacred guides of Egypt are therefore not ashamed to parcel out the heavens into spatial quarters, the twelve signs of the zodiac, or even thirty-six decans (8.4). It would not be true, however, to say with Porphyry that the Egyptians imagine human life to be subject to the stars, for soul and intellect have their origins outside the natural realm. We have in fact two souls, the higher and more elusive of which is naturally receptive to divine influence. It can indeed afford to despise the lower manifestations of divinity, for it is only the supracosmic gods who are able to assist it in its ascent from the toils of matter (8.6).

The Egyptians can be acquitted of maintaining that our destiny is fixed for us at birth by a personal daemon, or that a soul can procure its happiness by appeasing it with material sacrifices (9.1). The daemon – a product of not one element but of all the elements in due combination – represents the lot that the soul elects for itself before descent into the body. It is therefore not the agent of the soul's release but only its coadjutor in fulfilling the sublunar decrees of fate. When this is achieved the daemon yields to a higher god, whom the astrologers style the *oikodespotēs*, “master of the house” (9.2). The aim of theurgy is the realization or enjoyment of the Good. The soul that aspires to union with this sublime and ineffable source of being must not only attain to the “plenitude of intellect” but

submit to divine assistance, and for most this will entail some use of theurgical machinery (10.5).

Iamblichus is perhaps the first Greek philosopher to forbid the representation of the gods in painted or sculpted images (see especially *On the Mysteries* 3.28). He is, in fact, the arch-rationalist among the Platonists: more rational than Porphyry, who believed that in this lower world we are answerable to daemons who are themselves weaker than fate.<sup>12</sup> The true god, in Iamblichus' view, personifies all that is highest in the intellectual faculty, and is thus superior both to the natural sympathies between the powers and elements of the cosmos and to the arts by which the sorcerer transforms these cosmic sympathies into instruments of vanity and greed.

#### FURTHER READING

- Blumenthal, H. & E. Clark (eds) 1993. *The Divine Iamblichus*. London: Bristol Classical Press.  
 Lewy, H. 1956. *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.  
 Shaw, G. 1995. *Theurgy and the Soul*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.  
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On ANGELS/DEMONS see also Chs 14, 20. On FIRST CAUSE see also Ch. 15; Vol. 2, Ch. 14; Vol. 3, Ch. 6. On SYMBOLS see also Vol. 5, Ch. 11. On THE ONE see also Chs 3, 11, 14, 19; Vol. 4, Ch. 9; Vol. 5, Ch. 15. On THEURGY see also Ch. 20.

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12. In addition to the literature cited above, see *To Marcella* 275.5–25 Nauck on the necessity of appeasing the natal daemon, who seems in this case to personify the sexual instinct.