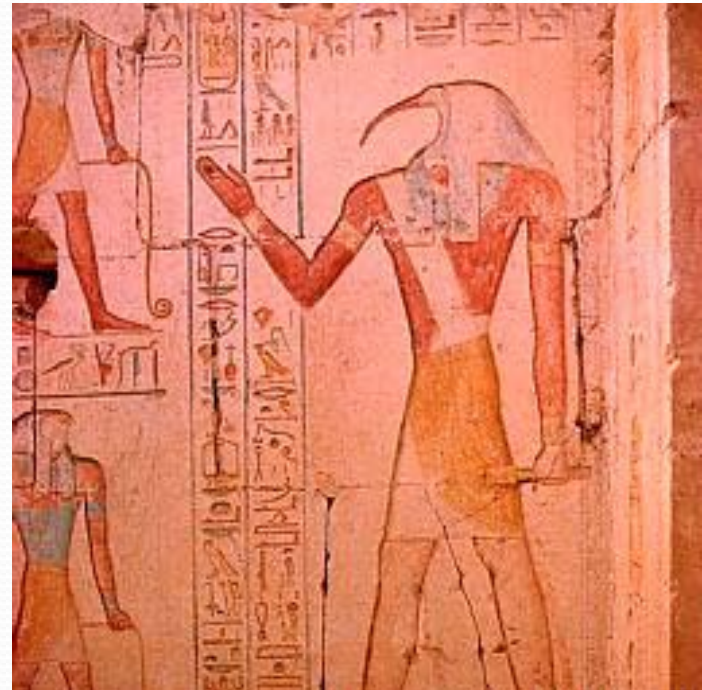


Crystal Addey

AHAN 7011: COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION

2012-2013: SEMINAR 4

IAMBlichUS' *DE MYSTERIIS*, PORPHYRY'S *LETTER TO ANEBO* AND THE *HERMETICA*



Revised Deadlines for Cosmology, Magic and Divination

- Assignment 1: 2,000 word Critical Review
- Date for completion: Monday 1 July 2013
- Date for submission: Monday 15 July 2013

- Assignment 2: 3,000 word Essay
- Date for completion: Monday 29 July 2013
- Date for submission: Monday 12 August 2013

Egyptian themes in the *De Mysteriis*

- When describing theurgy, Iamblichus states:
“Hermes also has set out this path, and the prophet Bitys has given an interpretation of it to King Ammon, having discovered it inscribed in hieroglyphic characters in a sanctuary in Sais in Egypt. He has handed down the name of god which extends throughout the whole cosmos, and there are many other treatises on the same subject.” (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 8.5 (267.11-268.4))
- Recent scholarship: Egyptian theology in *De Mysteriis* 7 and 8; and Iamblichus’ allusions to the *Hermetica*.
- But less attention has been paid to important similarities in structure and literary genre between Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis* and the *Hermetica*.

Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*

- Original title: “The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains.”
- Written under the guise of the Egyptian prophet Abamon as a reply to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*.
- The philosophical genre of Problems and Solutions.
- A series of replies to a set of problems proposed by Porphyry about the nature of the gods and proper ways of worshipping them.



The debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus in the *Letter to Anebo* and *De Mysteriis*

- Orthodox view: A hostile disagreement between Porphyry and Iamblichus. Porphyry launches a sceptical and scathing attack on theurgy and religious practices (following Plotinus' approach).
- Emma Clarke: “[The *Letter to Anebo* is] an epistle which launched a vicious attack on theurgy, more than likely aimed specifically at Iamblichus and his beliefs”; “It seems undeniable that the atmosphere between the *Letter* and *On the Mysteries* is manifestly hostile and betrays a considerable tension between the two philosophers.”

The debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus: current assessments

- Emma Clarke: “Iamblichus responds as an angry defendant against Porphyry’s attack.”
- Greg Shaw: accuses Porphyry of excessive and hubristic rationalism, views his stance in total opposition to that of Iamblichus, who emphasises the ineffability of theurgic rituals and symbols.
- John Dillon: construes the debate as one of scholarly necessity: “The refutation of one’s predecessors was a necessary part of staying afloat in the scholastic world, then and now...”

The Exchange between Porphyry and Iamblichus as Dialogue

- The exchange between Porphyry and Iamblichus functions within two traditional genres of philosophy:
- The genre of ‘Problems and Solutions’:
(Porphyry’s *Questions on Homer*; *Collection of Questions on Rhetoric*; Damascius’ *Problems and Solutions on First Principles*).
- The genre of philosophical dialogue:
Platonic dialogue; ‘philosophy in action.’

Dialogue in Neoplatonism

- Dialogue central to the teaching methods of the Neoplatonists.
- Once I, Porphyry, went on asking him [i.e. Plotinus] for three days about the soul's connection with the body, and he kept on explaining to me. A man called Thaumantias came in who was interested in general statements and said that he wanted to hear Plotinus speaking in the manner of a set treatise, but could not stand Porphyry's questions and answers. Plotinus said, "But if when Porphyry asks questions we do not solve his difficulties we shall not be able to say anything at all to put into the treatise." (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 13).

Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*

- Not a scathing attack on religious practices, but a constructive, philosophical inquiry in the dialogue tradition, a philosophical questioning from master to pupil, or from philosopher to philosopher.
- Identity of Anebo: Iamblichus calls him his student. The letter is aimed at Anebo, a student of Iamblichus or Iamblichus himself.
- A deliberate attempt on Porphyry's part to establish a form of Platonic dialogue. Porphyry knew the answers to his questions, but acts as a philosophical teacher to 'draw out' the philosophical explanations from his pupil / fellow philosopher.

Reassessing Porphyry

- Porphyry's interest in theurgy (lost commentary on the Chaldaean Oracles).
- Positive view of religion in *Philosophy from Oracles* and *On the Cave of the Nymphs*.
- Scholars: *Philosophy from Oracles* a credulous, superstitious work written early before he met Plotinus; *Letter to Anebo* a more 'rational' work written during or after his time with Plotinus (Joseph Bidez).
- This view has now been dismissed.
- Porphyry uses oracles in works written in his old age: the *Life of Plotinus* culminates in an oracle.

Reassessing Porphyry (2)

- Porphyry describes his recitation of a poem entitled *The Sacred Marriage* on Plato's birthday:
- ...because much in it was expressed in the mysterious and veiled language of inspiration someone said, "Porphyry is mad". But Plotinus said, so as to be heard by all, "You have shown yourself at once poet, philosopher, and expounder of sacred mysteries" (Life of Plotinus, 15)
- Porphyry: philosophy, poetry and religious ritual are interlinked.

The *Letter to Anebo*

- The sheer variety and broad spectrum of questions:
“Some questions, then, call for the clarification of issues which have been wrongly confused, while others concern the reason why various things are the way they are, and are thought of in such a way; others, again, draw one’s attention in both directions at once, since they contain an inherent contradiction; and still others call for an exposition of our whole mystical system. *This being the case, they are taken from many perspectives, and from very various branches of knowledge [my italics]*” (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 1.1 (4.5-9))

The Questions of the *Letter to Anebo*

- Porphyry: Is divination caused by deceptive *daimones*?
- “Moreover, there is an interpretation of the sacred operations even worse than this, attributing the cause of divination to “a certain kind of deceptive nature, both protean and versatile, which takes on the forms of gods, daemons, and ghosts of the dead”... In vain, then, do you introduce the opinion of the atheists that “all divination is accomplished by the evil daemon.” For such people do not deserve to be mentioned in discussions about the gods, and they are at the same time both ignorant of the distinction between truth and falsity, having been nurtured in the dark from the beginning, and not able to discern the principles from which these things come into being” (Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 3.31 (175.12-176.1; 179.9-180.3))
- The Christian nature of this question; the “atheists.”

The Parallel between Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* and the *Hermetica*

- The possibility of a parallel between the exchange of Porphyry and Iamblichus and the philosophical writings of the *Hermetica*, many of which were written in dialogue form for the purpose of philosophical paideia:
- The Egyptian pseudonym adopted by Iamblichus.
- Similarities in structure:
philosophical dialogue discussing
metaphysical and religious
phenomena.



The Prologue of Iamblichus' *De Mystериis*

“It is to him [i.e. Hermes] that our ancestors in particular dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes. And if we, for our part, receive from this god our due share of favour, such as we are capable of receiving, you, for your part, do well in laying before the priests questions about theology, such as they love to deal with, and which pertain to their expertise; and, at the same time, assuming that the letter sent to my student Anebo may be addressed equally well to me, it is reasonable for me to grant you a true reply to your enquiries.”
(Iamblichus, *De Mystериis*, 1.1 (2.1-7))

- The divine patronage of Hermes: The status of himself as an exegete and his text as a *symbolon* in the chain of Hermes.
- The “Hermaic chain”: Porphyry, Proclus
- References to “the way of Hermes” and “the books of Hermes.”

The education and initiatory functions of Religious Dialogue

- Garth Fowden: the educational and initiatory function of certain dialogues within the Hermetica; different dialogues are aimed at different levels of initiate.
- The teaching and learning structure of Hermetic initiates compared with that practised by Neoplatonists in their grading of Plato's dialogues (key role of Iamblichus).



Corpus Hermeticum XIII:

Concerning Rebirth

Tat to his 'father' Hermes Trismegistus: "In your general discourses, father, you spoke in riddles and did not make your meaning clear, when you were discussing the divinity of man. You said that no one can be saved until he has been born again; but you did not make known to me what you meant by this. After your talk with me..., I besought you to let me learn the doctrine of Rebirth, as this was the one part of your teaching that I did not know; but you did not think fit to transmit it to me at that time; you said, 'When you are ready to alienate yourself from the world, then I will teach it to you.' I am now prepared to received it; I have alienated the thoughts of my heart from the world's deceptions; and I entreat you to supply what is yet lacking to me, as you said you would, when you promised to transmit the Rebirth to me." (C.H. XIII.1-2, *On Rebirth*)



An initiatory dialogue: *Corpus Hermeticum* I: The *Poimandres*

- Describes the dream vision of a Hermetic initiate (Hermes Trismegistus) and his dialogue with the supreme Mind, Nous:
“Once on a time, when I had begun to think about the things that are, and my thoughts had soared high aloft, while my bodily sense had been put under restraint by sleep...methought there came to me a Being of vast and boundless magnitude, who called me by name, and said to me, ‘What do you wish to hear and see, and to learn and come to know by thought?’ ‘Who are you?’ I said. ‘I,’ said he, ‘am Poimandres, the Mind of the Sovereignty.’ ‘I would fain learn,’ said I, ‘the things that are, and understand their nature, and get knowledge of God. These,’ I said, ‘are the things of which I wish to hear.’ He answered, ‘I know what you wish, for indeed I am with you everywhere; keep in mind all that you desire to learn, and I will teach you.’” (C.H. 1.1-2)

Educational and initiatory functions of Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*

- *De Mysteriis* Book 3: a textual *symbolon* and a sacred, ritualistic invocation of the divine reality which it describes.
- This idea depends on the view that language itself can be a *symbolon*.
- Sara Rappe: Proclus' *Platonic Theology* presents itself as a theurgic, textual *symbolon* with the status of a ritual invocation, since it enumerates successive orders of gods and metaphysical reality.
- H.D. Saffrey: for Proclus, metaphysical enquiry becomes an act of worship (equally applicable to Iamblichus).
- Structure of *DM* 3: reflects and symbolises the course of procession and illumination from the divine realm to the mortal realm and the reversion to the divine from the mortal world through different types and levels of divination and divine possession. Book 3 reflects the cycle of procession and reversion and traverses the metaphysical and psychic landscape of ascent and descent.
- Structure as an initiatory tool for philosophical and ritual contemplation leading to theurgic visions for the suitably receptive 'theurgic reader.'

Further Reading: Primary Sources

- *CORPUS HERMETICUM*, ed. and trs. W. Scott (1924; reprint: 1993), *Hermetica* I and II, Boston: Shambhala.
- IAMBlichus, *De Anima*, eds. and trs. J.F. Finamore and J.M. Dillon (2002), *Philosophia Antiqua* 42, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- ———— *De Mysteriis*, eds. and trs. E.C. Clarke, J.M. Dillon and J.P. Hershbell (2003), Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus*, ed. and trs. A.H. Armstrong (1966), *Plotinus* I, Loeb Classical Library, London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press.

Further Reading

- Crystal Addey (forthcoming), *Oracles of the gods. Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.
- ADDEY, C. (2007) "Oracles, Dreams and Astrology in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*," in Patrick Curry and Angela Voss (eds.), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 35-57.
- ATHANASSIADI, P. (1993) "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus," *JRS* 83: 115-130.
- CLARK, D.C. (2008) "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*," *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2: 164-205
- CLARKE, E.C. (2001) *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis: A Manifesto of the Miraculous*, Burlington: Ashgate.
- COPENHAVER, B. (1988), "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance," in I. Merkel and A.G. Debus (eds.) (1988), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Modern Europe*, London: Associated University Presses, 79-110.
- RAPPE, S. (2000) *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further Reading

- SAFFREY, H.D. (1971) “Abammon, Pseudonyme de Jamblique,” in R.B. Palmer and R.G. Hamerton-Kelly (eds.), *Philomathes: Studies and Essays in the Humanities in Memory of Philip Merlan*, The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 227-39.
- SHAW, G. (1985) “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” *Traditio* 41: 1-28.
- ——— (1991) “Embodying the Stars: Iamblichus and the Transformation of Platonic *Paideia*,” *Alexandria* 1: 97-103.
- ——— (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- SMITH, A. (1992) “Neoplatonism and Religious Experience,” *Classical Review* 42.1: 82-83.
- ——— (1993) “Iamblichus’ Views on the Relationship of Philosophy to Religion in *De Mysteriis*,” in H.J. Blumenthal and E.G. Clark (eds.), *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 74-86.
- ——— (1997) “Porphyry and Pagan Religious Practice,” in J.J. O’Cleary (ed.), *The Perennial Tradition in Neoplatonism*, Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 29-35.
- SZLEZÁK, T.A. (2007), “Platonic Dialectic: The Path and the Goal,” in K. Corrigan and J.D. Turner (eds.), *Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern*, Leiden: Brill, 17-40.