

IAMBlichus

*DIVINATION AND THEURGY*



# *De Mysteriis*

## *A Caveat*

*De Mysteriis* is a difficult text with problems of understanding the writing style along with issues of interpretation.

So I'm very conscious that this brief presentation selects and simplifies theories and arguments that are much more complex and nuanced, and much debated in Iamblichus' time and by contemporary commentators nowadays.

The secondary sources listed towards the end were invaluable.



# OUTLINE OF SESSION

- PLATO
- NEOPLATONISM – 2 APPROACHES TO DIVINATION/THEURGY
  1. PLOTINUS
  2. IAMBlichus
- QUOTES FROM IAMBlichus
- MY RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS
- CONCLUDING THOUGHTS



# BACK TO PLATO!

- All material things around us in the world are imitations or shadows of a higher reality. Also applied to qualities e.g. beauty, goodness. (The “Forms”) (*Republic* -The Cave)
- The physical body was an impediment to the soul. (*Phaedo*)
- The soul has recollection of higher reality (*Meno* & *Phaedo*)



# NEOPLATONISM – DIVINATION & THEURGY

- Different views – different emphases
- Key question – how to achieve full contact with “the ONE”/gods
- At least two approaches



# Emphasis on contemplation/philosophy

(Plotinus/Porphyry)

- rational – stress on thought not action – contemplation – abstract thought
- Assumed soul not completely descended from higher realm
- Highest part of soul still linked to the higher realm of being
- Contemplation/philosophy sufficient to re-establish full contact with the “One”



# Emphasis on Ritual

(Iamblichus/Proclus)

- Assumed soul entirely descended from higher realm of being
- Completely different from any kind of soul “above” it
- Needs help of gods (divine love) through ritual acts rather than just thought
- Theurgy – used symbols of the gods – likeness – external/internal



## QUOTE 1

- “... the divinatory power of the gods is bounded by nothing divisible, neither by place, nor by a divisible human body, nor by a soul contained in any single form of divisible entities, but being separate by itself and indivisible, it is wholly present everywhere to those able to share in it. And it both illuminates from without and fills all things, and permeates all the elements: it embraces both earth, air, fire and water, and leaves nothing deprived of itself, neither living beings nor beings governed by nature, but to some it gives a greater portion of its foreknowledge, and to others a lesser portion. And existing itself prior to the totality of things, it is sufficient by its own separateness, to fill all things to the extent that each is able to share in it.”  
Iamblichus, De mysteriis 3.12 (129.1-11)

## QUOTE 2

- *“This, then, is one kind of mantic [i.e. divination], which is undefiled and sacerdotal, and truly divine; and ‘this does not need’, as you say, ‘either myself or anyone else as umpire, in order that I prefer it to any others’, but it is itself entirely removed from all, supernatural, and eternally pre-existent, neither admitting any comparison nor preeminence among many; it is free from all this, and takes precedence over all according to its uniform self. And it is proper for you and everyone who is a genuine lover of the gods to surrender himself to it wholly. For in such a fashion arises, at the same time, both infallible truth in oracles, and perfect virtue in souls. With both of these, ascent to the intelligible fire is granted to theurgists, a process which indeed must be proposed as the goal of all foreknowledge and of every theurgic operation.”* Iamblichus, De mysteriis 3.31 (178.13-179.8)



# How does Iamblichus characterize and conceptualise divination?

## Two types of divination

- Non-Divine - tied to material world – inductive e.g. augury – not as close to gods as Divine divination – depends on human interpretation of divine signs – conjecture – inductive - can lead to error
- True/Divine/Authentic – Union with the ONE – possessed- inspired – direct communion with gods – higher level of being – depends on/caused by divine power/love – transcends/surpasses rationality – has an ethical sense, not usually associated with other forms of divination-purity – changed nature



## What philosophical concepts underlie Iamblichus' explanation of the workings of divination and theurgy?

- Unity and interconnectedness of everything – *Monism*?
- Different levels/hierarchy of reality/being – *Ontological* concept – with divine linking chains of understanding between different reality levels
- Immanence of gods' divinatory power – everywhere!
- Concept of Divine Love – the key factor in theurgy practice - gives rise to sympathy
- Likeness and sympathy – symbols have *ontological* link to what they represent



# What is the relationship between divination and theurgy?

- Divination – Various means of communicating with or receiving communications from the gods - generally seems to emphasise knowledge
- Theurgy – wider term? – “God work(ing)” Aim – Divine possession & union
  - Does theurgy encompass divination? Or is it a kind of divination – i.e. “inspired divination”? Iamblichus does appear to claim it is a kind of mantic (divination). Above & beyond knowledge & rationality



## How do divination and theurgy relate to the gods in Iamblichus' view?

- They tap into the divinatory power of the gods – which exists prior to all nature & is literally everywhere, permeates everything, indivisible and surpasses rationality
- They recognise that some things have more of this power than others
- Theurgy relates to the gods by using truly divine power, divine love - for those able to share in it (not everyone) requiring full surrender with the reward of attaining a virtuous soul (salvation?)
- Theurgy as divine divination establishes the relationship with the gods via a process of utilising divine symbols (e.g. objects, utterances) for ascent of the soul to the gods' realm. This relationship is a union (co-joining) with the gods, sharing their insights. Stages of participation, communion, union. \*Is both ascent and descent involved?
- Importance of likeness/sympathy – interconnectedness -traces of divine in everything as link/cause – but primary cause of inspired divination is the divine power – Divine Love.



## SOURCES

- *De Mysteriis*

(Iamblichus) trans. Emma C Clarke, et al)

- *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods*

(Crystal Addey) Details on moodle

- *Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus*

(Polymnia Athanassiadi) Search on JSTOR

- *Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*

(Gregory Shaw) Search on JSTOR

FINALLY! SOME ADVICE ON READING *De Mysteriis*

*There was a young man near Rome  
On the 'Mysteries' wrote a small tome  
It's not easy to grasp  
So don't read it too fast  
Else the 'Mysteries' remain unknown!*