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Locating Theurgy

In Book III on Divination in Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*

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Introduction

The *De mysteriis* has been considered the most comprehensive surviving discourse from the ancient world on “polytheistic religious phenomena, such as divination and sacrifice, and on theurgy and the reasons for ritual.”¹ It presents a theoretical model for critically analyzing, classifying, and evaluating all of the divinatory practices prevalent at the time of its writing.² While this critical apparatus appears somewhat fluid, if not at times inconsistent, the text is thorough enough in this undertaking that it has been suggested appropriate to benefit historians “as a highly critical guide of divinatory practice at the close of the third century.”³ As such, the text has been regarded as the most extensive treatment of “the nature of divine inspiration and possession, the process of consulting oracles, the nature and operation of oracles and, in a wider sense, the phenomenon of divination.”⁴

The first section of this paper will provide some contextual background in the form of a concise biographical sketch of Iamblichus, a basic working definition of theurgy, and an basic overview of the *De mysteriis*, addressing its influences and aims.

The following section will examine the *De mysteriis*’ third book in order to clarify key areas of Iamblichus’ exegesis on divination. First, it will introduce his conception of the gods as the principle causes of divination and touch on their nature before discussing divine possession, including the dualistic typology employed to differentiate authentic as opposed to dubious ecstasy, a consequence of divine possession. Afterward, we recount details of the prominent diviners cited in book three to establish the conditions whereby they are said to have entered into authentic divine possession. Noteworthy details of preliminary processes and techniques of theurgic invocation are also recounted.

Inquiries directing this paper included: how might a cogent synopsis of theurgy be developed from the extensive treatment found in the third book of the *De mysteriis*? Can the critical apparatus advanced therein contribute to an evaluation of contemporaneous ritual practices like those located in the corpus of Graeco–Egyptian magical papyri?

The aim of this paper then is to disclose what Iamblichus reports in the third book of the *De mysteriis* as having occurred during divination, for what purposes, by what agencies, under what conditions, for whom, and by what means, in order to establish a coherent synopsis of theurgy. Future contributions may consider using such a synopsis as reference,

¹ Addey 2008: 2.

² Athanassiadi 1993: 117–119.

³ Athanassiadi 1993: 121.

⁴ Addey 2016: 215.

and critical apparatus as method, for advancing a taxonomy of pagan ritual practices relative to the period as well as formulating subsequent arrangements of theurgic ritual praxis.

The translation consulted throughout this essay is the modern scholarly translation in English by Emma Catherine Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbelle.⁵ Translations by Thomas Taylor⁶ and Alexander Wilder⁷ have been consulted when it was felt that passages from Clark, Dillon, and Hershbelle were particularly opaque or requested additional perspective or elaboration.⁸

Brief Contextual Overview – Iamblichus, Theurgy, and The *De mysteriis*

De mysteriis is a series of replies and refutations to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*, which proposed a set of aporia on the "nature, function and operation of religious ideas and practices, such as divination, sacrifice and theurgy."⁹ Authorship of the *De mysteriis* has been attributed to Iamblichus, a 3rd–4th century Syrian late Platonist philosopher and pagan theologian. He was influential during his lifetime and made notable contributions to Greek Neoplatonism,¹⁰ a mosaic of schools situated throughout the Roman Empire with some semblance of shared doctrine and approach.¹¹ We can assume that the intended audience for the *De mysteriis* was comprised of persons with similarly critical positions and concerns outlined by Porphyry in his epistle to Anebo, including contemporary philosophers and potentially prejudicial Christians. Additionally, readership was also likely comprised of philosophers, students, pagans and other literate persons with interests and sympathies aligned with the elaboration of beliefs and practices articulated.

Iamblichus

Iamblichus' primary extant works include precious few complete texts and numerous fragments; by far the greatest extent of writings have yet to be recovered and only known from references to their titles found in other authors' works.¹² Concurrently, details on

⁵ Clarke, Emma Catherine, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbelle, eds. 2003. *Iamblichus: De mysteriis*. Edited by John T. Fitzgerald, Writings from the Greco-Roman World. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature. All quotations and translations are from this edition, unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Taylor, Thomas. 1821. *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*. Walworth: Chiswick.

⁷ Wilder, Alexander. 1911. *Theurgia, Or, The Egyptian Mysteries: Reply of Abammon, the Teacher, to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, Together with Solutions of the Questions Therein Contained*. New York, NY: The Metaphysical Publishing Co.

⁸ Critiques by Clark, Dillon, and Hershbelle (2003: xvii) of Wilder's insufficient understanding of certain technical terminology used by Iamblichus is acknowledged.

⁹ Addey 2016: 127; see also, Clark 2003: xlviii.

¹⁰ Chiaradonna & Lecerf 2019, remind us that "unlike the Stoa, 'Neoplatonism' is not an ancient philosophical school, but a modern historical category (2.1).

¹¹ Chiaradonna & Lecerf 2019: 2.1.

¹² See Chiaradonna & Lecerf 2019: 1.2 Works and Bibliography, A. Primary Sources, A.1 Extant Works by Iamblichus; also, Clark (2003) clarifies, "Only his exoteric works, the *Compendium of Pythagorean Doctrine* and the *De mysteriis*, survived into later Byzantine times" (xxv).

Iamblichus' life are somewhat scarce with scholars placing Iamblichus' birth at c. 240–265 CE, with recent estimates tending to lean toward the earlier date over the traditional, later date.¹³ The biographical account given by the Greek sophist and historian Eunapius of Sardis (c. 4th–5th century CE) is largely hagiographical, but the consensus is that Iamblichus was born in Syria and belonged to an influential family. Eunapius accounts that he studied with Anatolius and was associated with Porphyry, possibly while in Rome. Iamblichus eventually returned to Syria where he is thought to have founded a school in Apamea. There he is thought to have remained until his death sometime in the early 320s CE.¹⁴

Theurgy

Among Iamblichus' primary objectives were to integrate Platonism and ancient pagan religious practices in fulfillment of the greatest aims of true philosophy. Seemingly for Iamblichus, theurgy is the fulfillment the aforementioned objective of synthesizing Platonic philosophy with pagan ritual practices; "Iamblichus was essentially interested in re-awakening and preserving man's contact with the ancestral gods through *Theurgy*."¹⁵ The aim of theurgy, "divine work," is communion with the gods, which entails a metaphysical ritual process whereby the human soul is elevated into harmonious communion with those entities. Such communion involves aligning various planes of the cosmos so that the soul and higher divinities cooperatively "participate in the eternal creative process of the cosmos"¹⁶

Thus, in Iamblichus' view, having purified and mastered the body through exalted virtue, prayer and ritual, theurgists were committed to preserving humanity's most important and sacred heritage, gifted by the gods. Due to Iamblichus' efforts, "Platonism also became more explicitly a religion."¹⁷ The *De mysteriis* is the most expansive doctrine on theurgy from Iamblichus' surviving extent works.

De mysteriis

The *De mysteriis* is comprised of Iamblichus' point-by-point responses to Porphyry's *Letter*, written with an "intensely corrective intent."¹⁸ It is thought to have been composed sometime between 280 CE and 305 CE, perhaps in Rome during the time when Iamblichus and Porphyry were in working proximity to one another. Two traditional genres of philosophy can be identified in the *Letter to Anebo* and the *De mysteriis*. One genre, an

¹³ Clark 2003: xviii–xix.

¹⁴ Clark 2003: xviii–xxiv.

¹⁵ Clark 2003: xxix, referring to Gregory Shaw's analysis, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Clark 2003: xxxv. Per Athanassiadi 1993, "theurgy is not just a technique...but rather a dynamic state of mind; I would describe theurgy as the often involuntary manifestation of an inner state of sanctity deriving from a combination of goodness and knowledge" (116).

¹⁷ Clark 2003: xx.

¹⁸ Athanassiadi 1993: 117.

exegesis commonly used in Platonism, ‘Problems and Solutions’,¹⁹ and the other, identified by Crystal Addey, is the “Platonic dialogue and the dialogic process in general.”²⁰ She asserts that the discourse comprises a “mystagogic dialogue and a type of philosophical and religious discourse with protreptic, educational and initiatory functions.”²¹

Both letter and response are grounded in both authors’ expansive interests and learning and their dialogue involves a tripartite compilation of “some centuries of interpretation of Platonic and Aristotelian Greek philosophy, Chaldaean thought, and Aegyptio–Greek magic and religion.”²² A clear indication of such varied influences is offered by the way that the two texts are addressed and attributed; Porphyry’s piece is addressed to one *Anebo*, situated as an Egyptian priest, while Iamblichus’ reply is credited to *Abammon*, a self-attested priest of Egypt of even greater learning and higher rank than Anebo, his pupil. These intriguing elements have interesting implications pertaining to both the genre of the writings as well as how these writings may be mutually interpreted. Iamblichus, in the guise of an Egyptian priest, explicitly positions himself as deeply immersed in not only the literature of philosophy, but also seemingly more direct forms of participatory knowledge derived from a mosaic of oracular and initiatory mystery traditions. These include traditions relating to “the authorship of the Chaldaean Oracles and the Hermetic corpus, as well as Orphic and Pythagorean literature.”²³ Additionally, the inclusion of divine beings such as angels and archons in the hierarchy Iamblichus presents may also suggest familiarity with gnostic and Hebrew textual traditions.²⁴

The treatise is highly reflective of the intellectual and cultural synthesis underway during the Late Antique period. Iamblichus’ sources are quite eclectic. In addition to Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, he also makes mention of mytho–religious and initiatory traditions including “the most famous of Greek oracles to dream–interpretation, the

¹⁹ Clark 2003: xlvi; also, Addey 2016: 128.

²⁰ Addey (2016) states that the second genre of Platonic dialogue is suggested “more controversially” (2016: 128). She suggests that the two texts construe an intentional and collaborative dialogue between Porphyry, who possessed sufficient insight into the topics so as to craft the letter to begin with, yet and feigned naïveté, and Iamblichus, who had appropriately mastered the subject matter as respondent. The purpose for employing such a dialogue was, according to Addey, “primarily as an educational and didactic tool for pagans and philosophers, and, secondarily, as a defence of paganism and theurgy against contemporary Christian accusations and criticisms” (128) ; for an interesting explication, seemingly in opposition, see Athanassiadi (1993) wherein he portrays the intellectual approach of Porphyry as well as Iamblichus’ terse assessment of Porphyry’s ability to offer opinion found in *On the Soul* (117–119).

²¹ Addey 2016: 128.

²² Clark 2003: xviii; this area is represented by the Greek pantheon and the Hermetic texts, which Iamblichus deemed authentic source works for Greek philosophy.

²³ Clark 2003: xxxi.

²⁴ Likewise, this may just as well demonstrate the syncretic nature of the thought–world in this domain of Late Antiquity.

flutes of Olympus and Marsyas, Pan and his nymphs, and the priest at Kastabala.” Overall, as a treatise, *De mysteriis* offers “a detailed exposition of ‘pagan’ religious practices, primarily as an educational and didactic tool for pagans and philosophers, and, secondarily, as a defence of paganism and theurgy against contemporary Christian accusations and criticisms.”²⁵ Within the context of the ascendancy of Christianity and the decline of the ancient oracular sites, defining and situating the theurgists and their use of traditional rites is among the aims of *De mysteriis*. According to Polymnia Athanassiadi, the text “contains an apology for traditional cult while playing down the importance of sacred places as compared with the authority of holy men, the theurgists.”²⁶ One critical aspect of this defense for Iamblichus is to create a clear distinction between “worthless magic and divine theurgy” and correspondingly, this aim “dominates and defines the subject matter of the *De mysteriis*.”²⁷ The third section of the book, where the spectrum of contemporary divination practices is analyzed, is an especially pronounced effort to achieve that aim.

Book III – On Divination

Overall, the *De mysteriis* has been determined a “masterful attempt to combine the teachings of revelation literature with those of Neoplatonism, and to give theurgic rites a philosophical basis.”²⁸ Having examined the context and aims of the text broadly, we can move to the third book of the treatise which emphasizes Iamblichus’ views on divinatory practices.

The central tenant in Iamblichus’ exposition on divination in the third book of *De mysteriis* is that true divination is fundamentally gifted from and wholly reliant on “the gods.”²⁹ Correspondingly, at the outset of this section in reference to foreknowledge, he unequivocally affirms that “all of its supreme power belongs to the gods and is bestowed by the gods.”³⁰ Appropriately, these gods confer the powers essential to forecasting, since it is they who “possess the limits of all knowledge of existing things, from whom the mantic power is distributed throughout the whole cosmos, and among all the different natures found there”³¹ Hence, within Iamblichus’ Platonically-inspired cosmology, a complex polytheistic

²⁵ Addey 2016: 128.

²⁶ Athanassiadi 1993: 117.

²⁷ Clark 2003: xxvi.

²⁸ Clark 2003: xxxvi; the revelation literature referred to is the *Chaldean Oracles*, which Iamblichus affords elevated status, having written extensive commentaries on these works.

²⁹ Such supernatural entities, at least as pertain to divinatory practices, are most often referred to a “gods”, though English translations indicate that Iamblichus was being fluid, if not consistent, in his taxonomy and terms.

³⁰ DM III.1, from Clark 2003: 119.

³¹ DM III.1, from Clark 2003: 121.

framework comprised of numerous hierarchical levels and orders of beings, primordial gods are *inalienable*.³² Iamblichus ascribes this highest level of the divine the qualities of atemporality and omnipotence.³³ As well, in his view the divinatory power of gods is seemingly omnipresent, boundless, and all-pervasive in the constituents of the material cosmos.³⁴

Divination then is a means for communing with such gods and participating in their enhanced agencies. Iamblichus shares some potential ends, suggesting that “unification with the gods allow for genuine principles such as higher powers, purer visions, and what pertains to whatever contributes to the truth about intelligible things.”³⁵ Accordingly, for Iamblichus, foreknowledge does not exist as some independent process in nature.³⁶ Thus, it can be neither created or activated by natural conditions or human bodily faculties, skills, or behaviors. On the contrary, “the entire activity of divination comes to its fulfilment through the god acting by himself, purely detached from other things.”³⁷ Having determined the causes, potentials, and purposes for divination, we will examine how human beings fulfill their role in divination through divine possession.

Divine Possession

Beginning in section seven, Iamblichus deems it necessary to inform Porphyry what true divine possession is, its signs, and how it occurs;³⁸ not surprisingly, this is dependent upon the gods. Iamblichus constitutes transference of divinity as genuine enthusiasm and contends that the varieties of possessions, physical expressions, and apprehension of the “voices” of the gods are based upon the varieties of the gods who are sharing “levels of

³² While this framework is discussed at greater length in the second book, the model and its denizens are also developed in section three.

³³ “This principle cause is primordial and eminently universal, furnishes the truth requisite for divination and comprehends in advance both the essence and cause of things about to happen through which foreknowledge occurs” (DM III.1, from Clark 2003: 121). Also, in referring to “the god, stating”, “it is sovereign and primordial, both self-governing and prevailing, encompassing all things in itself, but itself neither encompassed by some things nor constrained by its participants. And it presides in itself over all, and exercises its power over all and without distinction, ruling over the universe with unlimited power” (DM III.17, from Clark 2003: 165).

³⁴ “The divinatory power of the gods is bounded by nothing divisible; it is wholly present everywhere to those able to share in it, it both illuminates from without and fills all things, and permeates all the elements, giving a greater or lesser portion of its foreknowledge, existing itself prior to the totality of things and filling all things to the extent that each is able to share in it” (DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 149).

³⁵ DM III.3, from Clark 2003: 127.

³⁶ Foreknowledge is considered “divine, supernatural, sent from heaven above; both unbegotten and eternal, it takes priority by its own nature” (DM III.1, from Clark 2003: 119).

³⁷ DM III.7, from Clark 2003: 135.

³⁸ Notably, similar to the fluidity of use of categorical terminology when speaking of higher divine beings, Clark’s translation of the terms used for divine “possession” also include several other terms that become difficult to distinguish or confirm are used synonymously; these include inspiration, madness, and enthusiasm. These will be employed interchangeably herein as well as a critical analysis of the nomenclature is beyond our scope.

power, participation, and benefit.”³⁹ Iamblichus clarifies the specific cause of divine possession as being “the illuminations descending from the gods, the spirits given off by them, and the full power from them which both encompasses everything in us, and entirely banishes our own consciousness and movement.”⁴⁰ Clearly, once possession occurs the host is no longer in control of their awareness, nor maintains agency to communicate or move independently; “their actions are in no way human, because what is inaccessible becomes accessible under divine possession.”⁴¹ For Iamblichus, humans are divinized by gods and the process of divination is not accomplished in accordance with human agency.

An intriguing reveal of Iamblichus’ schema pertains to the above-mentioned gods as originators of “illuminations” which are made parallel to the spirits who incite humans into these frenzied and enthusiastic states. Iamblichus asserts that such spiritual radiance or brilliance emanates or transmits from the gods, therefore “it is proper to trace them back to divine causes, wholly other and primordial.”⁴² Book three sustains an analogue between these spirits and illumination, radiance, and fire and Iamblichus identifies the descending spirit who is to enter into the person with a godly or divine fire, alleging that “if the presence of the gods’ fire and an ineffable form of light from without invades the person possessed, these fill him completely with their power, and encompass him.”⁴³ That various expressions of light are correspondent to spirits is a topic that will be revisited later when discussing techniques of invocation.

As Iamblichus makes mention of numerous practices used for receiving spiritual insight, the third book of *De mysteriis* differentiates between two types of ecstasy experienced in pursuit of them. One is viewed positively, referred to as *oriented toward the higher* where divine beings are present and united to the human diviner. This type is aligned with divinity, and thus unchanging and superior to nature. A second type is viewed in negative terms, considered *diverted toward the inferior*, and is “disorderly, discordant, and material movement.”⁴⁴ Appropriately, this inferior type is divested of knowledge, changeable, and reliant on materiality. This lesser type is said to cause the “descent of the

³⁹ DM III.5, from Clark 2003: 131. Such sharing seems to only occur for certain persons; theurgists, oracles, and others suitable for co-participation. This is dependent on “if they have subjected their entire life as a vehicle or instrument to the gods who inspire them, either they exchange their human life for the divine, or they direct their own life towards the god” (DM III.4, Clark 2003: 129). Iamblichus’ method for discriminating what is genuine possession is addressed herein.

⁴⁰ DM III.8, from Clark 2003: 137.

⁴¹ DM III.4, from Clark 2003: 129.

⁴² DM III.10, from Clark 2003: 145.

⁴³ DM III.6, from Clark 2003: 133.

⁴⁴ DM III.25, from Clark 2003: 181.

soul.”⁴⁵ I find it compelling to consider this not merely as a value judgement, but also as an possible indication that such practices possess inherent *chthonic* aspects; this appears in alignment with text’s embedded hierarchical cosmology as well as its less than positive apperception of magical practice.

The dichotomy of Iamblichus’ ecstatic types shares some similarity to his dualistic categorical distinctions between theurgy and magic, as well as other related human-made techniques for interpreting signs and inferring probabilities. This distinction among the core aims of the *De mysteriis* as a whole. The treatise situates magic as “operating within the bounds of nature, manipulating and exploiting natural forces rather than demonstrating the causative power behind and beyond them”⁴⁶ which is what the theurgists are purported to commune with.

Preparation for True Divination

In reading Iamblichus then, it appears that he places theurgy, whether interpreted as a process to achieve a state, either, or both, on a higher plane of being and accomplishment than other processes relating to vulgar magics and unreliable divinations.⁴⁷ Having addressed their distinction, we will outline what Iamblichus imparts in book three about how those theurgists *oriented toward the higher* prepare themselves, and what results ensue.

Book three, section eleven, presents three well-known contemporary oracles for use as case studies.⁴⁸ Characteristically, Iamblichus attributes the oracles as mere instruments of the luminous spirits bestowed by the gods, he also describes the oracular process prior to and subsequent to their reception of the god; these accounts contain notably similar features.

The preliminary practices attributed to the priest at Colophon include fasting, withdrawal to sacred and inaccessible places where he undergoes purificatory practices in order to receive the “inspiration of god illuminating the pure sanctuary of his soul, providing for it an unhindered divine possession.”⁴⁹ The prophetess of Delphi occupies the second example and is presented as having three means of giving oracles, one from evoking a fiery spirit through an “aperture”, one seated on a three-legged bronze stool in the innermost

⁴⁵ DM III.25, from Clark 2003: 181.

⁴⁶ Clark 2003: xxvii.

⁴⁷ In book three Iamblichus also presents a host of occurrences and states having some outward similarities to divine enthusiasm. These include daemonic inspiration, ecstasy, frenzy, psycho-physical processes, emotions or passions, maladies, and drunkenness, dissociating these as aberrations from what he discerns as genuine spirit possession imparted by the gods.

⁴⁸ The priest of Clarian Apollo in Colophon (while drinking water), the female oracles at Delphi (while sitting near apertures/chasms), and the prophetesses of the Branchidai (while inhaling vapors from waters), see DM III.11.

⁴⁹ DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 147.

sanctuary, and situated on four-legged seat “sacred to the god.”⁵⁰ In all cases, she surrenders herself completely to the divine spirit, becoming “illuminated by the ray of divine fire.”⁵¹ The “fiery spirit evoked through the aperture fills her with the “divine brightness” and such “preparations” allow her to become the “god’s possession.”⁵² The third case of preliminaries concern the woman at Banchidai, and are more detailed than those from Delphi. They include bathing, fasting, and seclusion in sacred spaces, “all these things show that the god has been invoked.”⁵³ She then either grasps a staff, first given by a particular god, or uses water and its vapor from a sacred spring in order to adequately prepare for receiving the god, after which time she is permeated with a divine radiance.

Iamblichus imparts these rather involved preliminaries for genuine receptivity of the gods by theurgists and then raises the “great difference” between them and, quoting Porphyry, “those who stand upon the characters”⁵⁴ as being one of, whether through ignorance or willful negligence, *lack* or procedural insufficiency.⁵⁵ This distinction between theurgists and magicians, idol-worshippers, demonolaters, necromancers, and charlatans has been a recurring theme for the intended readership of the *De mysteriis*, particularly in the third book.

Evoking the Light

The language used by Iamblichus in book three to describe phenomena indicating the presence and nature of spirits and gods includes radiance, illumination, brilliance, and fire. Such nomenclature is correspondingly used in reference to theurgic techniques. Book three section fourteen addresses various forms of divination “encompassed by one power which someone might call ‘evoking the light.’”⁵⁶ This is explained as the divine light irradiating the field or “vehicle” that encompasses the soul, wherefrom “divine appearances” endowed from the gods “take possession of the imaginative power in us.”⁵⁷ While the presence of the gods bestows such illumination, we are also treated to how practitioners, assumingly theurgists, situate themselves using the full spectrum of lighting conditions; some allying with sunlight,

⁵⁰ DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 147.

⁵¹ DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 147.

⁵² DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 149.

⁵³ DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 149.

⁵⁴ Assuredly, lower magicians and inferior diviners, DM III.11, from Clark 2003: 153.

⁵⁵ “For there are some who overlook the whole procedure of effective contemplation, both in regard to the one who makes an invocation and the one who enjoys the vision; and they disdain the order of the sacred observance, its holiness and long-protracted endurance of toils, rejecting the customs, prayers and other rituals, they believe the simple standing on the characters to be sufficient” DM III.13, from Clark 2003: 153.

⁵⁶ DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

⁵⁷ The use of “us” in this quote may imply Iamblichus is self-identifying as being among such ritualists; DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

others with moonlight, or even in complete darkness “to assist their illumination.”⁵⁸ Alternately, or perhaps in coordination, there is then mention of certain objects sympathetic and crafted specifically for “the gods’ reception, their presence and manifestation”⁵⁹ as well as specific incantations or other means of correspondence by which “the imagination is inspired.”⁶⁰ Iamblichus refers to techniques for projecting light, both through water as well as onto a wall that has been previously inscribed with “sacred inscriptions of magical symbols.”⁶¹ All such techniques are summarized as directing lighting conditions in whatever way on whichever material is found conducive to divination.⁶²

Conclusion

In the third book of *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus clearly espouses a negative view on magic, deeming it largely inferior to theurgy by way of it being less effective and fraught with uncertainties as well as risks. However, his commentary hardly discounts notions that both systems share sacred technologies that may include preparation of *materia magica*, undergoing ritual purifications, occupying sacred spaces, reciting invocations, and manipulating the influence of light. The technologies are utilized so as to become divinized and commune with the spirits and gods that inspire the imagination and bestow immense powers of insight.

Iamblichus’ critical apparatus for discerning between higher and inferior states and approaches very much concerns itself with ritualists’ systematic orientation; their way of being and living, their intentions, the level or type of divinity they invoke, relate with, and derive influence and power from. Such aspects comprise key distinctions in the third book. Regarding magic, while determined less effective than theurgy for divination, to some degree, for some objectives, a close reading of book three does not reveal such practices as wholly ineffective, only degraded. Refinement of Iamblichus’ critical apparatus may be beneficial in creating a taxonomy for various pagan ritual operations relative to the period, such as those in the corpus of the Greek Magical Papyri.

The purpose of this paper was to critically read the third book the *De mysteriis* in order to provide a cogent synopsis of crucial aspects of Iamblichus’ perspectives on theurgy

⁵⁸ DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

⁵⁹ DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

⁶⁰ DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

⁶¹ DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 155.

⁶² “[The] shining of the bright light in whatever way and through whatever instruments it may shine forth. Since, then, this light is from without and alone achieves all its effects serving the will and intelligence of the gods, the greatest light has a sacred brightness which, either shining from above in the aether, or from the air, or moon or sun, or any other heavenly sphere, appears apart from all these things to be such a mode of divination that is autonomous, primordial, and worthy of the gods”; see DM III.14, from Clark 2003: 157.

and divination. Such a synopsis aspires to offer a coherent foundation of those perspectives as contributing to a formulation of applied theurgy. Appropriately, identifying what transpires for whom, under what recommended circumstances, and to what ends by which means, seems a necessary step. The third book of the *De mysteriis*, is not ideally systematically organized to outline divination and theurgy, and can be ambiguous, inconsistent and fluid with its terminology. Nonetheless, it stands as a critically important portion of a uniquely comprehensive Late Antique treatise on polytheistic pagan ritual practices in general, while revealing the intricacies of theurgy with unparalleled insight.

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