

**COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION:
NEOPLATONISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF THEURGY IN LATER NEOPLATONISM
WEEK 7 SOURCES**

What is Neoplatonism?

- A philosophical school / movement in the Late Antique Period. A development within Graeco-Roman philosophy and religion.
- The Neoplatonists were pagan philosophers, beginning with Plotinus, who gave a new direction to Platonic philosophy between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD.
- The word 'Neoplatonists' and 'Neoplatonism' are modern terms. These philosophers thought of themselves as simply 'Platonists,' philosophers who followed Plato.
- They synthesised the thought of Plato with other main schools of Greek philosophy, for example, with the thought of Aristotle. They wrote philosophical commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as their own works on philosophical topics.
- Impact of their work: their religious and moral ideals, their conception of reality as spiritual activity or states of consciousness. For the Neoplatonists, philosophy was a way of life.
- They viewed the human soul as a voyager with its ultimate aim the re-ascent to its divine origins.

Important Neoplatonist Philosophers

Plotinus (AD 204/05 – 270)

Neoplatonist philosopher, founded a Platonic School in Rome. Teacher of Porphyry.

Porphyry (AD 234 – c.305)

Scholar, Neoplatonist philosopher and student of religions. Student of Plotinus and editor of Plotinus' *Enneads*. Porphyry was the most vocal of these philosophers in his criticism of Christianity.

Iamblichus (c. AD 245 – c. 325)

Neoplatonist philosopher. Possible student and colleague of Porphyry. Established his own Platonic school in Syria. The first Neoplatonist to use and advocate the use of theurgy.

Proclus (AD 410/ 412 - 485)

Neoplatonist philosopher. He became head of the Academy (the Platonic school) at Athens in AD 437. He made extensive use of theurgy and other types of polytheistic religious rituals.

Theurgy

- Literally means 'god-working.'
- A form of pagan ritual originally associated with the Chaldaean Oracles and used by the later Neoplatonist philosophers (Iamblichus, Proclus).
- It can possibly be considered a form of higher magic, designed to establish a contact between the practitioner (a more priest-like figure than the *magos*) and deities (gods and goddesses) of the highest order.
- It covered a range of religious and philosophical practices, including the use of divination and oracles.
- Theurgy claimed a highly spiritual goal or purpose: it was thought to effect the union of the human soul with the divine.

- Proclus, *In theologiam Platonis* (ed. Dodds, 1963), states that theurgy is a: “power higher than all human wisdom, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all the operations of divine possession.”
- Theurgy, as opposed to the more vulgar *goeteia* (magic), was supposed to be grander, more exalted and full of deep religious feeling, but the procedures and rituals it uses are very similar.

Chaldaean Oracles

A collection of mystical pagan oracles from the second or third century AD. These were used by the later Neoplatonists, who quote them extensively in their writings. According to Neoplatonic tradition, the authorship of the Chaldaean Oracles is attributed to two Julians, who were father and son. According to this tradition, the elder Julian invented the term ‘theurgy’ and developed the practices it describes. In support of this, the term ‘theurgy’ is not found in any literature earlier than the Chaldaean Oracles.

Types of Theurgic Ritual

There are three types of theurgic ritual or operations mentioned in the ancient sources:

- 1/ *Telestika* - the consecration and animation of cultic statues of the gods.** The primary purpose of inducing the presence of a god in an inanimate object was to obtain information from that god: because this information was of a divine nature it comprised an oracle.
- 2/ Divine possession rituals - involving the induction of a trance state in an individual.** This branch of theurgy aimed at incarnating the god temporarily in a human being.
- 3/ The invocation of a god’s epiphany** - in order to gain divine information (oracular divination directly from the deity).

Theurgic Operations and Explanations *Sympatheia* (sympathy) and *symbola* (symbols)

- Theurgists used the *symbola* (symbols), which are the physical expressions of divine “chains” in order to gain direct and practical understanding and wisdom of the divine world and the nature of the universe, including the relationship between the divine and mortal worlds.
- *Symbola* (symbols) used by the theurgist are embedded in nature (stones, plants, herbs etc) and are not limited to dense matter but are also present in certain incantations, concoctions and characters traced on the earth.
- The *symbola* were thought to bear the impress of the god and were able to awaken souls to the divinity they symbolised.
- *Symbola* enabled the theurgist to partake of *sympatheia*, were mixed into the material of telestic statues used by the theurgists, inscribed or placed within statues, worn by the theurgist, spoken by him or otherwise handled by him during theurgic rituals

The gods and theurgy

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.15¹

You refer to the gods as pure intellects, knowing no declension or contact with the world of sense, and wonder whether we should pray to them. My belief is that we should pray to them and to no others.

¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.15. Cited from and translated by John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.148.

For the divine in ourselves, the unity of intellect, or the intelligible part, if you prefer to call it so, is wakened to life and made manifest in prayer, and when wakened aspires to its kin and becomes united with its own perfection. If you find it incredible that incorporeal being should hear our voice, supposing that to hear the words of our prayers the gods would need sensation – and ears, indeed – then you are deliberately ignoring that the first causes possess knowledge in perfection, and that they contain within themselves all that derives from them, holding all that exists together in a unity. It is not, therefore, by special faculties or organs of sense that the gods take in our prayers: they contain within themselves the realisation of the blessings for which we pray, and especially in answer to words hallowed among the gods and brought in union with them through sacred ritual. At such moments, the Divine literally converses with itself and shares the thoughts expressed in the prayers as its own.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.12²

“But invocations,” the objection goes, “are addressed to the gods as if they were subject to external influence, so that it is not only daemons that are thus subject, but also the gods.” In fact, however, your assumption is not correct. For the illumination that comes about as a result of invocations is self-revelatory and self-willed, and is far removed from being drawn down by force, but rather proceeds to manifestation by reason of its own divine energy and perfection, and is as far superior to (human) voluntary motion as the divine will of the Good is to the life of ordinary deliberation and choice. It is by virtue of such will, then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon theurgists, summoning up their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, even while still in the body, to detach themselves from their bodies, and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.

It is plain, indeed, from the rites themselves, that what we are speaking of just now is a method of salvation for the soul; for in the contemplation of the “blessed visions” the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself then to be no longer human – and quite rightly so: for often, having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most blessed activity of the gods.

...But not even in the case of the invocations is it through the experiencing of passion that they link the priests to the gods; it is rather in virtue of the divine love which holds together all things that they provide a union of indissoluble involvement – not, as the name seems immediately to imply, inclining the mind of the gods to humans, but rather, as the truth of things itself desires to teach us, disposing the human mind to participation in the gods, leading it up to the gods and bringing it into accord with them through harmonious persuasion. And it is for this reason, indeed, that the sacred names of the gods and the other types of divine symbol that have the capacity of raising us up to the gods are enabled to link us to them.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.15³

And if one were to consider also how the hieratic prayer-formulae have been sent down to mortals by the gods themselves, and that they are the symbols of the gods themselves, and not known to anyone but them, and that in a way they possess the same power as the gods themselves, how could one any longer justly believe that such supplication is derived from the sense-world, and is not divine and intellectual?

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What does Iamblichus say about the nature and characteristics of the gods in the above passages?

² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.12. Cited from and translated by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell (eds. and trs.), *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.15. Cited from and translated by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell (eds. and trs.), *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

- 2/ How does Iamblichus explain how theurgy and theurgic ritual works? How are his explanations linked with his understanding of the nature of the gods?
- 3/ What are Iamblichus' views on hieratic (i.e. sacred or mystical) prayer-formulae and divine utterances used in theurgic rituals? Why are his views important for an 'accurate' understanding of theurgy? Do these views contribute anything towards possible distinctions or similarities between 'theurgy' and 'magic'?

Divination and Theurgy

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 10.4⁴

Only divination, therefore, in uniting us with the gods, truly enables us to share in the life of the gods, and since it participates in the foreknowledge and thought of the Divine, we ourselves may truly attain to divinity by means of it; and divination is the authentic guarantee of our good, since the blessed Intellect of the gods is replete with goods of every kind.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.5⁵

There are many forms of divine possession and many ways by which the divine inspiration is effected, so that its symptoms are very varied. On the one hand, the gods, by whom we are inspired, are different gods and inspire us in different ways; on the other, the manner of possession changes and produces a different type of inspiration. Either the god possesses us, or we surrender entirely to the god, or we act in co-operation with him; and sometimes we participate in the god's power at the lowest level, sometimes mediately, and sometimes in the primal power; similarly, we may attain simply to participation, or to communion, and sometimes to union with the divine in these states of possession.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.7⁶

It is a mistake to think that [divine] possession is a movement of thought under daemonic influence. In genuine possession it is not the human mind which moves, and the inspiration is not daemonic but from the gods. Nor is it simply a trance, but rather an ascent and reversion to higher reality, whereas derangement and trance may also be a sign of decline to a lower level. Again, although this account may tell us something of the experiences of those who are inspired, it misses the essential point, which is that they are wholly possessed by a god before the ensuing state of trance. It is wrong therefore to attribute possession to the soul or one of its powers, or intellect or one of its powers or activities, or to physical weakness or its absence; none of these explanations is plausible. Inspiration is no work of man, nor does its efficiency depend on human nature or activities; they are merely there to be used as the god's instruments, and he accomplishes the act of divination entirely by himself, working unassisted by any movement of the soul or body.

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What do the above quotations tell you about the role of divination (such as oracles) and divine inspiration / possession in the Neoplatonist practice of theurgy?
- 2/ What was the purpose of divination and theurgy thought to be?

⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 10.4. Cited from and translated by John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.152.

⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.5. Cited from and translated by John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.151.

⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.7. Cited from and translated by John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.152.

- 3/ Does the practice of theurgy indicate that Neoplatonism was a religion, philosophy, a type of magic or a spiritual activity, or a combination of these?

Theurgic Rituals: *Telestika* (the consecration and animation of statues)

***Telestika* - the consecration and animation of cultic statues of the gods.** The primary purpose of inducing the presence of a god in an inanimate object was to obtain information from that god: because this information was of a divine nature it comprised an oracle.

Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Book 4: 3.155.18 (=287C-D)⁷

... the telestic art (or the art pertaining to mystic ceremonies) should establish on earth places fitted for oracles, and statues of the Gods, and through certain symbols (*symbola*) should cause things generated from partial and corruptible matter, to become adapted to the participation of deity; to be moved by him, and to predict future events.

Porphry, *Philosophy from Oracles* = *Chaldaean Oracles*, *Fragmenta dubia* 224 (=Eusebius, *Preparatio Evangelica*, V.12)⁸

The goddess Hecate speaks an oracle addressing the theurgist:

But make me a statue, purified as I shall teach you.
Make the form from savage rue, and then add little creatures –
domestic lizards – as adornments. And kneading with these animals a
mixture of myrrh and gum and incense,
and going outside under the crescent moon,
finish this imprecation, praying it yourself.

Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, 475⁹

Eusebius the philosopher relates a story about Maximus, another philosopher who studied under Aedesius who himself had been a pupil of Iamblichus:

He [i.e. Maximus] invited us to the temple of Hecate and summoned many witnesses. When we had arrived there and had saluted the goddess: ‘Be seated,’ said he, ‘my well-beloved friends, and observe what shall come to pass, and how greatly I surpass the common herd.’ When he had said this, and we had all sat down, he burned a grain of incense and recited to himself the whole of some hymn or other, and was so highly successful in his demonstration that the image of the goddess first began to smile, then even seemed to laugh aloud. We were all much disturbed by this sight, but he said: ‘Let none of you be terrified by these things, for presently even the torches which the goddess holds in her hands shall kindle into flame. And before he could finish speaking the torches burst into a blaze of light.

⁷ Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Book 4, 287c-d, translated by Thomas Taylor (1820), *Proclus' Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, Volume II, Dilton Marsh, Westbury: The Prometheus Trust, 1998, p.865.

⁸ Porphyry, *Philosophy from Oracles* = *Chaldaean Oracles*, *Fragmenta dubia* 224. Cited from and translated by Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990, pp.130.

⁹ EUNAPIUS, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* (*Vitae Sophistarum*), trs: W.C. Wright (1922), Loeb, London and New York: Heinemann.

Theurgic Rituals: The invocation of a god's epiphany

The invocation of a god's epiphany - in order to gain divine information (oracular divination directly from the deity).

Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 26.¹⁰

...the philosopher was purified by the Chaldaean purifications, and experienced the fiery apparitions of Hecate with his own eyes, as he himself records in one of his own writings.

Chaldaean Oracles, Fragments 146-148¹¹

Hecate speaks to the theurgist in an oracle, describing the nature of her epiphany:

Having spoken these things, you will behold a fire leaping skittishly like a child over the aery waves;
or a fire without form, from which a voice emerges;
or a rich light, whirring around the field in a spiral.
But [it is also possible] that you will see a horse flashing more brightly than light,
or a child mounted on the swift back of a horse,
a fiery child or a child covered with gold, or yet again a naked child;
or even a child shooting arrows, standing upon a horse's back.

If you say this to me many times, you will observe all things growing dark,
For the curved bulk of the heavens disappears
and the stars do not shine; the light of the Moon is hidden
and the Earth does not stand steady. All things are revealed in lightning.

But when you see the sacred fire without form,
Shining skittishly throughout the depths of the Cosmos,
Listen to the voice of the fire.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, II.9¹²

Finally, then, the dispositions of the souls of those making invocations receive, at the epiphany of the gods, a perfection freed from and superior to passions, and at the same time an activity entirely better (than themselves), and they participate in a love divine and an enormous gladness of mind...Along with these, the epiphany of the gods provides truth and power, success in deeds and gifts of the greatest goods.

QUESTIONS

- 1/ What do we learn in the above passages about these two types of theurgic ritual? How are the workings of these types of theurgic ritual explained in the above passages?

¹⁰ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 26, translated by M.J. Edwards (2000), *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

¹¹ *Chaldaean Oracles*, Fragments 146-148. Cited from and translated by Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hecate Soteira: A Study of Hecate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990, pp.111-112.

¹² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 2.9. Cited from and translated by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell (eds. and trs.), *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

- 2/ What are the main purposes and benefits for the theurgist of performing these types of ritual?
- 3/ Can you see any examples of *symbola* (symbols) being used in any of the above passages?