

Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy

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It is commonly known that Iamblichus changed the course of Platonism. Plotinus and Porphyry believed that philosophy (*θεωρία*) alone could save the soul, whereas Iamblichus countered that it was ritual acts properly performed (*θεουργία*) that did so. I propose to examine this change from *θεωρία* to *θεουργία*. In particular, I will show that much of what Iamblichus taught about theurgy is a reaction to specific points of Plotinus' doctrine on the role of magic in the cosmos. Moreover I wish to look into what Iamblichean theurgy might have entailed and what role *σύμβολα* (magic tokens and words)¹ played in the theurgic ritual.

A. PLOTINIAN CONTEMPLATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND IAMBLICHEAN PHILOSOPHICAL THEURGY

Plotinus had argued that the human soul was always attached to its higher self, that in fact the higher soul did not actually descend into the body but rather 'illuminated' it or saw its reflection in matter, as in the mirror of Dionysus, and came wrongly to identify itself with that image.² In this way, the soul could be said to be 'trapped' in this lower world, yet still be above this world. Its highest aspect was 'there' with the Intellect and the Forms, but we human beings are unfortunately and disasterously unaware that this is so. To re-establish contact with this higher self, to turn ourselves to ourselves, Plotinus argued, all that is needed is the study of philosophy and contemplation. The 'reascent' is personal, effected by one's own efforts.

1. For these 'symbols' (*σύμβολα/συνθήματα*), see E. des Places, ed., *Les Mystères d'Égypte* (Paris, 1966) 96–97 n. 2; R. Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles* (Leiden, 1989) 141 and 182; G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (University Park, 1995) 47–51. Symbols include material objects in nature, such as rocks or herbs, as well as human-made objects such as statues and various kinds of sounds and music. By cosmic sympathy, any of these objects or sounds can be invested with divinity. The *symbola* become passwords or tokens in the soul's ritual ascent.

2. *Enn.* 4.3.12.1–13 and 1.1.12.24–32. Cp. 4.8.8.

Iamblichus attacks this Plotinian doctrine in his *De Anima*. He argues that the human soul is completely different from and inferior to every kind of soul above it: divine souls, angelic souls, heroic souls, demonic souls. This inferiority combines with an essential feature of Iamblichean philosophy. The soul is completely detached from the Intellect.

Iamblichus replies to Plotinus in a fragment of his *Timaeus* commentary, preserved by Proclus (*In Tim.* Fr. 87.18–22):

But if, whenever the best part of us is perfect, the whole of us is happy, what prevents us, the whole human race, even now from being happy, if the highest part of us is always engaged in intellectual activity and is always turned toward the gods? For if the Intellect is this highest part, then it has nothing to do with the soul. But if it is the highest part of the soul, then the rest of the soul is also happy.

Iamblichus' criticism is clear. Plotinus had assumed that we human beings always have an intellectual component of our souls blissfully enjoying intellection, but thought that we could have this intellection without knowing it. Iamblichus replies that this is preposterous. If a part of us—and the highest and best part, at that—is constantly enjoying intellectual activity and is in permanent contact with the gods, then how can we be unaware of it? It is like claiming that a part of us is now in Florence gazing at the Raphaels in the Uffizi, but that we are here, thousands of miles away, unaware of it. This is not possible. Either that part of us is really and truly a functioning part of us, in which case we are happily enjoying visions of Italian Madonnas, or it is not a part of us at all, and it has no effect on us here and now.

This opposition in viewpoints was a turning point for the future of neoplatonism. If there is no higher part of the soul always in contact with the Intellect and the gods above and if the soul is an innately inferior creature, how is it possible to re-establish contact with the divine? How can we mortal creatures ever hope to free ourselves from this world and rise again to a higher position? In the *de Mysteriis*, Iamblichus gives his famous reply (2.11, 96.13–97.2):

For it is not thinking (*ἔννοια*) that brings theurgists into contact with the gods, since what would hinder those who engage in contemplative philosophy from having theurgic union with the gods? As it is, the truth lies elsewhere. It is the ritual accomplishment (*τελεσιουργία*) of ineffable acts, performed divinely, surpassing any intellectual processes, and the power of unspeakable symbols known only to the gods that accomplish theurgic union.

Thus, Iamblichus moves Platonic philosophy toward magical ritual. Theurgy is the ritual act whereby the human soul is freed from its body and carried aloft to the gods. Iamblichus uses the word *θεουργία* in contradistinction to *θεωρία*. It is not thought or philosophy, but the work of the god (*τὸ τοῦ*

θεοῦ ἔργον) that accomplishes the ascent of the soul.³ The world of philosophy has moved from the armchair to the altar. One can (and should) study the works of Plato and the other philosophers, but one must also examine the mystery writings, like those of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, of Hermes Trimegistus and so on. The reason is clear. If we cannot re-connect ourselves to the gods, the gods must perform that service. They must perform ‘the work of the gods,’ theurgy.

We know very little about this magical ritual. Hans Lewy, in his work on the *Chaldaean Oracles*, has done us a great service by tracking down and explicating various materials on the ascent of the soul.⁴ Briefly, the ritual involves an initiate who is illuminated by divine rays (via the Sun or other celestial body). The initiate, purified by previous rituals and armed with *symbola* (magical objects and words), is separated from his body, ascends via the ethereal rays to the Sun, and from there may ascend higher, beyond the visible cosmic gods to the Intellectual and Intelligible gods, whose own ‘illuminations’ are contained in the ethereal rays.

B. PLOTINUS ON MAGIC

Plotinus discusses his view of magic in *Enneads* 4.4.30–45.⁵ He begins by considering the role of astrology. Plotinus must have been faced with a multitude of students whose belief in astrology was ardent, especially since astrology had already become an integral feature of Platonism. The dilemma he faced was whether to deny that astrology (i.e., planetary influences) played any role in human lives or to accept astrology into his system but to modify it in such a way as to allow the highest efficacy to contemplation. Plotinus opts for the second alternative. He adopts and adapts the Stoic conception of universal sympathy. Plotinus begins by citing Plato’s *Timaeus*: the universe is a single living being that contains all living beings within it.⁶ As a

3. On the controversy over the meaning of the word “theurgy,” see H. J. Blumenthal, “From Ku-ru-so-wo-ko to θεουργός: Word to Ritual,” in H. D. Jocelyn and H. Hurt, eds., *Tria Lustra* (Liverpool 1993) 75–79. Blumenthal concludes (79) that the meaning of θεουργία involved the theurgists “doing something to the gods ... or making themselves more like them, and so, in a loose sense, making gods.” Although this is an etymologically correct meaning of the term, it is clear that Iamblichus rejected the possibility of humans forcibly acting on the gods. Thus whatever the original etymology of the term, θεουργία was not merely “acting on the gods.” See Majercik (above, n. 1) 22: “But theurgy involves more than just ‘working on’ the gods; it also involves the active participation of the gods themselves.” For Iamblichus, the term involves the human agent calling on the gods who then work on and through the agent.

4. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, ed. M. Tardieu (Paris, 1978) 177–226, esp. 184–200.

5. See also *Enn.* 2.3 and 2.9.

6. *Enn.* 4.4.32.5–6: ζῶον ἐν πάντα τὰ ζῶα τὰ ἐντὸς αὐτοῦ περιέχον. Cp. *Tim.* 30d3–31a1: ζῶον ἐν ὁρατὸν, πανθ’ ὅσα αὐτοῦ κατὰ φύσιν συγγενῆ ζῶα ἐντὸς ἔχον ἑαυτοῦ.

living being, it is attuned to its parts, so that any activity in its parts can affect another part, even if the parts are greatly distant. Plotinus compares the sympathy in the universe to distant parts of the body affecting one another (4.4.32.14–18) and to strings on a lyre that can affect themselves (when one end is plucked, the other is moved) or another string on the same lyre, or even another string on another lyre (4.4.41.3–10). In this way, then, a distant part of the cosmos (say, a planetary body) may affect us on earth.

What then of the celestial bodies? Are they parts that are so moved? Plotinus thinks not, although they have such movements potentially (4.4.42.23–24). Rather, because they are attuned to the Cosmic Soul, sharing its thoughts and always being directed toward Intellect, they remain unaffected (4.4.42.24–27).⁷ Thus we cannot say that the celestial gods hear our prayers (for their souls are directed upwards); rather, they respond through sympathy, as other parts of the whole do.⁸ When the Sun, for example, acts on the lower world, we must say that it is looking above (*ἄνω βλέποντα*)⁹ but “just as it warms the things on the earth, so too actions after this proceed from it by a communication from its soul (*ψυχῆς διαδόσει*)” and so any celestial body “similarly gives a kind of illumination from itself without any deliberation on its part”¹⁰ (4.4.35.40–44).

Plotinus then turns from astrology and prayer to magic. It too works by cosmic sympathy (*Enn.* 4.4.40.1–4). While the influence of the celestial bodies occurs, as it were, spontaneously from the universe, magic occurs through the agency of a magician (*Enn.* 4.4.42.5–14). Magicians can compel parts of the All to influence other parts. Magic, however, is effective only against the lower aspect of soul. The soul’s rational part (which, of course, never descends and is always engaging in intellection) remains unaffected (*Enn.* 4.4.43.1–8).¹¹ The lower soul and body of the philosopher may be affected by magic (through illness or death, say), but the higher soul (which is what the philosopher really is) is not affected (*Enn.* 4.4.43.9–12).¹² Thus, Plotinus can conclude, contemplation (*θεωρία*) cannot be affected by magic (*Enn.* 4.4.44.1–5).

7. Cf. *Enn.* 2.3.8.5–9.

8. *Enn.* 4.4.40.32–41.3; 4.4.42.1–8; 4.4.38.1–6.

9. Cf. *Enn.* 2.3.9.34–39.

10. καὶ ἄλλο δὲ ὁμοίως οἶον ἐλλάμπον δύναμιν παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἀπροαίρετον διδόναι.

11. Porphyry tells us that Olympius, a philosopher/magician, tried to harm Plotinus through magic, but that Plotinus was able to turn Olympius’ own spells against him. *Vit. Plot.* 10.1–14. For more on this episode, see A.H. Armstrong, “Was Plotinus a Magician?” *Phronesis* 1 (1955): 73–76.

12. Cf. *Enn.* 4.4.40.31–32: ἀπάθες δ’ αὐτῶ τὸ ἡγούμενόν ἐστιν.

C. IAMBlichUS ON THEURGY

Iamblichus himself discusses the workings of theurgic ritual in the *De Mysteriis*. This work is a reply to a work by Porphyry, in which the latter questions various tenets of those who believe in the power of sacred rites. Porphyry, himself a student of Plotinus, followed his master in allowing the superiority of *θεωρία* over *θεουργία*. In the first book, Iamblichus begins a point by point refutation of Porphyry's arguments. In *De Mysteriis* 1.17, Iamblichus agrees with Plotinus' view that the celestial gods, although they have bodies, transcend these bodies and are not affected by them.¹³ As with Plotinus, their connection to the Intellect is unimpeded. Unlike Plotinus, however, Iamblichus wants to argue that they do care for us, respond to our prayers, and become involved with us through theurgic rituals.

Iamblichus defends the view that although the gods are superior to us and exist separately, they illuminate this realm with their light.¹⁴ It is this light that allows the gods' presence in this lower world. Iamblichus, then, modifies the Plotinian doctrine that neither the souls of the gods nor the higher souls of human beings descend. For Iamblichus, the human soul is fully separated from its divine origin whereas the gods are fully attached to it.¹⁵ But since the gods do enjoy immediate participation in Intellect, they never descend. This would seem to threaten their role in theurgic ritual, and indeed in any contact with human agents. Iamblichus' solution is a further development of Plotinus' theory of "illumination." For Plotinus, the celestial body's illumination was almost incidental. Its true activity was directed upwards; its body could have influence downwards, but without the deliberate intention of the god. For Iamblichus the illumination 'downwards' was intentional.

In chapter 12, Iamblichus applies these principles to theurgy (41.5-11).

The gods, who are kindly and propitious to theurgists, illuminate them with their light, summoning their souls to themselves and leading them into union with themselves, accustoming them even while they are yet in bodies to separate from their souls and to be led around to their eternal and intelligible origin.

Iamblichus is primarily concerned here with invocations (*κλήσεις*) to the gods. Human agents call on the gods, but the gods do not descend to them;

13. The ethereal bodies of the gods are therefore unaffected by material things. See *Myst.* 5.2, 200.1-19 and 5.4, 202.13-203.12.

14. For the role of light and divine illumination in Iamblichus' philosophy, see J.F. Finamore, "Iamblichus on Light and the Transparent," in H.J. Blumenthal and E.G. Clark, eds., *The Divine Iamblichus* (London, 1993) 55-64.

15. For the close connection of the gods to Intellect and their ability to transcend their own ethereal bodies, see *Myst.* 1.17. Cf. J.F. Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (Chicago, 1985) 34-35 and the notes there.

human souls ascend to the gods. This ascent is effected by divine illumination, but the illumination is sent by the gods willingly and deliberately.

Iamblichus continues by discussing what is accomplished for the soul through these rites (41.12–18):

It is evident from these very rites (ἔργα) that what we are now describing is the salvation of the soul. For in contemplating the blessed sights (μακάρια θεάματα)¹⁶ the soul achieves another life and enacts a new activity. It is no longer considered human, and rightly so. Often, abandoning its own life, it takes on the most blessed activity of the gods.

Thus the rites effect a great change. The soul actualizes another life, that is a life of intellectual activity.

Compare this to Plotinus' view. For Plotinus, the soul is already actualizing that life, but 'we' (i.e., the embodied aspect of soul) are unaware of that fact. Further, the celestial gods themselves are permanently engaged in the same kind of contemplation as philosophical souls. They do not then respond to our prayers or invocations. If we are affected by the celestial god's body, it is only in our irrational aspect via the sympathy of things in the universe. Iamblichus, on the other hand, separates us from that higher life entirely. We cannot reach it on our own. The gods impart it to us through the ascent ritual after we have called upon them. As Iamblichus goes on to say, "the ascent (ἀνοδος) through invocations provides priests (ἱερεῦσι) with purification from passions, freedom from the realm of generation, and union with the divine first principle" (41.18–42.1). Further, this ritual "makes the human understanding fit for participation in the gods, elevates it to the gods, and adapts it to the harmonious persuasions of the gods" (42.12–15).

It is clear, then, that theurgical ritual has replaced Plotinian contemplation. But how does the ritual operate? Iamblichus and other late antique writers are not forthcoming about sacred rites. As with the famous rites at Eleusis, a great silence surrounds the theurgical ritual of ascension. Iamblichus, however, drops some hints.

In book 3 of the *de Mysteriis*, Iamblichus discusses various kinds of divination. In chapter 6, he indicates that some theurgic rites, at least, involve a theurgist, an initiate, and an audience. This chapter will also draw our attention to the importance of the soul's vehicle in its reascent.¹⁷

16. For the reference to the *Phaedrus* 247a4 (μακάριαι θεαί) and 250 b7 (μακαρίαν ὄψιν τε καὶ θέαν), see des Places (above, n. 1) 218.

17. On this chapter and the vehicle, see des Places (above, n. 1) *ad loc.*; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951) 298–99; Finamore (above, n. 15) 128–30; and Shaw (above, n. 1) 51–52, 88–92, 104–05.

Iamblichus is discussing divine possession. In chapter 5, he enumerated various signs by which one may know that divine possession has occurred: bodily movements, sounds, levitation, musical tones. Then he turns in chapter 6 to the most important sign that someone is possessed (112.10–15):

The greatest indication that the theurgist¹⁸ sees is a breath (*πνεῦμα*) descending and entering the initiate, of what sort and of what size it is. He persuades and controls it in a mystical manner. The one who receives it also sees the form of fire before it enters him. And sometimes it is evident to all those who are watching, either when the god is ascending or descending.

Des Places, following Verbeke,¹⁹ thinks that the “descending pneuma” is the soul’s vehicle. This is not the case. The vehicle (*ὄχημα*) of the soul is, for Iamblichus, an ethereal body housing the soul in its descent to this realm. It is eternal, the seat of images (*φαντασίαι*), and the literal ‘vehicle’ that carries the soul into and out of the body. The ethereal vehicle is raised by the ethereal rays of the cosmic gods to the ethereal divine body. While the vehicle pauses there, the rational soul housed within the vehicle can rise higher to the Intellect, and even to the One.²⁰ To return to our text, we notice that Iamblichus says that the theurgist, the initiate, and even onlookers can see this pneuma as it descends into the body. Whose pneuma is it? Certainly not that of the god, because the divine ethereal body stays in the heavens. It also cannot be the pneuma of the initiate, for his vehicle is within him awaiting ascent. This pneuma originates from the outside. The correct referent is the divine illumination. A passage a little further along in this chapter confirms this proposition (113.8–14):

If the presence of the fire of the gods and some ineffable form of light comes to the person possessed from the outside, fills him entirely with its power, and covers him completely in a circle so that he is unable to use any of his own powers, what personal power of sensation or awareness or apprehension could be present to the one receiving the divine fire?

This divine fire or light is the illumination from the gods.²¹ It emanates from the god’s ethereal vehicle to our ethereal vehicle, which at this point has already been purified and made fit to receive the god. When contact is made,

18. Literally, “the one who leads the god” (*θεαγωγὸς*). This is slightly misleading because, of course, the god is not ‘led’ by any human agency. The role of the theurgist seems to be to prepare the initiate’s body and soul for reception of the divine light. As we shall see, it is this divine light that the theurgist “leads.” The theurgist must himself be pure and learned so that he does not call the wrong divinity or attach the initiate to the wrong divinity. See 113.1–8.

19. Des Places (above, n. 1) 105 n. 1.

20. Finamore (above, n. 15) chapter 4.

21. For other examples of this illumination from the gods, see *Myst.* 3.14.

the initiate's vehicle is empty of its own images and receives those from the god.²² It is ready to begin its ascent.

Another difference between the Plotinian and Iamblichean systems can be noticed here. Plotinus had stated that the magician could compel one part of the universe to give its power to another (*Enn.* 4.4.42.9–11), as for instance he could call down the power of an ethereal body to heal or harm a part of the human body. This occurs, of course, without any intention on the part of the celestial god. In *Enn.* 2.9.14.1–6, Plotinus complains that the magic spells of the Gnostics would (if they were effective) compel the gods to obey mere human beings. Porphyry too says that those who believe in theurgy think that theurgists can compel the gods themselves, which he thinks is impossible (*apud* Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.18, 145.4–7 and 4.1, 181.3–4). Iamblichus' reply is that the gods are not compelled, but remain above and shed their divine light willingly upon the theurgist. The theurgist then controls this light but does not control the god. The god is a willing participant in the act.

The initiate's vehicle is filled with the images coming from the godhead and he himself is not actively creating his own images. Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis* 3.14 explains how this process works. Referring all forms of divination to "leading of light" (*φωτὸς ἀγωγή*),²³ which is the basis for theurgy as well, Iamblichus says (132.10–18, 133.3–8):

This [magical practice of leading light] somehow illuminates with divine light the ethereal and luminous vehicle that lies around the soul. From it divine images take hold of the image-making power in us, and these divine images are moved by the will of the gods. For the whole life of the soul and all the powers subject to it are moved as the gods will.... The attention and thinking of the soul follow along with what is occurring, since the divine light does not affect them. The image-making faculty, however, is inspired by the gods because its images are aroused not from itself but from the gods, and one's human character is completely changed.

Thus, in any form of this light-leading, including the theurgical rite of ascent, the image-making faculty, that is, the soul's vehicle, is taken over wholly by the gods. This, for Iamblichus, explains how divination occurs. The future events are pictured in the soul's imagination, and these 'pictures' come from the gods. The rational soul, however, is unaffected by the divine light and still functions.²⁴

For Plotinus, it will be recalled, the fact that our rational soul remained unaffected by any magical practice meant that the rite did not affect the

22. *Myst.* 3.14, 132.10–133.8.

23. See des Places (above, n. 1) 117 n. 2.

24. See Finamore (above, n. 15) 146 and n. 61.

highest part of our soul. Iamblichus takes over Plotinus' conception that the rational soul is unaffected, but adapts it to the theurgic ritual. Theurgy affects the lower soul and thus frees our rational soul from the confines of the body. Theurgy does not, however, leave the rational soul untouched. There is both a higher and lower form of theurgy.²⁵ The lower theurgy is material and based (at least in part) upon cosmic sympathy. The higher form goes beyond the material and is intellectual in nature. This is the operation that allows the soul to lead its true, higher life.

That Iamblichus has Plotinus in mind when he makes this distinction is clear from *De Mysteriis* 5.7. Here Iamblichus discusses sacrifices (*θυσίαι*) (207.10–208.6):

If we should say that there exists a community of similar powers in one living being, the universe, which has one and the same life everywhere ... extending in the same way by a single sympathy, existing in things near and far, we would be speaking a partial truth about what necessarily accompanies sacrifices but not demonstrating the true mode of sacrifices. For the essence of the gods does not lie in nature and physical necessity ... but is restricted outside of these to itself, not having anything in common with them in essence or power or any other way.

Iamblichus says that the doctrine of sympathy of the kind Plotinus adopts can explain only a part of the efficacy of sacrifices. The true cause is the gods themselves, who transcend the sympathy that they themselves engender in the natural world.²⁶ Thus Plotinus has grasped only half the truth, and the lesser half at that. There is more to magic, to sacrifices, to theurgy than sympathy can explain. Furthermore, when Iamblichus distinguishes between fallible and infallible forms of divination, he argues that the fallible is based upon sympathy while the infallible derives from the gods.²⁷ In the realm of sacrifices (including, of course, theurgical ones) and in the realm of divination, the higher form is more pure, immaterial, and more closely connected to the gods.

Iamblichus has already told us that it is the vehicle that is filled with divine images and that the rational soul is unaffected by these and is alert. If

25. The scholarship on the question of 'higher' and 'lower' forms of theurgy is nicely summarized by Majercik (above, n. 1) 39–44. I agree with her conclusion that for the compilers of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, Iamblichus, and Proclus, the soul's ascent is throughout dependent on theurgical ritual.

26. Iamblichus seems to have *Enn.* 4.4.32.5–6 in mind: ζῶον ἐν πάντα τὰ ζῶα τὰ ἐν τὸς αὐτοῦ περιέχον. Iamblichus writes: ἐν ἐνὶ ζῶῳ τῷ παντί (207.10). For the doctrine, compare *Myst.* 5.10, 210.15–211.9, where Iamblichus associates the phrase again with sympathy: ἐν ἐνὶ ζῶῳ κατ' ἐπιτηδεύματα ἢ συμπάθειαν (210.16). Cf. 3.27, 164.7–8.

27. *Myst.* 3.26, esp. 162.13–163.2; 3.27, esp. 165.4–8 and 166.3–13; 6.4; and 10.3.

there is a higher theurgy, it must surely apply not merely to the images created in the vehicle but also to the rational soul. Just as the vehicle (the seat of images) is united with the gods through its capacity to take on divine images, so the rational soul is united with the gods through its intellectual capacity.

Even before the ascent begins, the soul may engage in prayer. Prayers for Iamblichus are not merely or even primarily the spoken words. Rather, they are an intellectual activity (*Myst.* 1.15). Iamblichus calls prayers symbols (*συνθήματα*, 48.7) of the gods. They are not therefore *merely* spoken words, as Porphyry had mistakenly claimed (46.10–12 and 48.14–15).²⁸ As such prayers and other *symbola* are intellectual powers that act on the rational soul.

It will be recalled that Plotinus denied that the celestial gods heard or answered prayers. Iamblichus responds that they do, but carefully interprets what ‘hear’ and ‘answer’ mean. Plotinus had said that the celestial gods do not have sense organs (*Enn.* 4.4.42.3), and Iamblichus would certainly agree. In *De Mysteriis* 5.26, Iamblichus discerns three kinds of prayer (237.16–238.6).²⁹ These are given in a hierarchical fashion. Prayers first lead the soul toward union with and knowledge of the gods; then effect a connection between the gods and us; and finally bring about “ineffable union” with the gods. The first leads us to illumination; the second to a common activity; and the third a complete filling from their fire (238.10–12). Thus prayers lead in stages to the mystical union. Iamblichus says that sacrifices cannot take place without prayers (238.14–15), and the reason is plain. Prayers are the intellectual power that bring about the goal of the theurgical ritual, union with the gods. This occurs not by the perceptible words but by the intellectual power contained in the words. The gods ‘hear’ prayers, because the gods and the prayers are intellectual. The gods ‘answer’ prayers by bringing about the ascent of the soul and its union with them.³⁰ The process works by the principle of like-to-like. In this way, it is similar to the way that ascent

28. So too Plotinus, in his tract against the Gnostics, *Enn.* 2.9.14.1–11: especially, lines 8–9: ἀλλὰ πῶς φωνᾷς τὰ ἀσώματα

29. On this chapter, see J.M. Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973) 407–11.

30. Compare also *Myst.* 7.2, where Iamblichus discusses the symbols used by the Egyptians: mud (*ιλύς*), the god sitting on the lotus, and the god sailing in a ship. Iamblichus interprets each of these symbols (*σύμβολα*) intellectually: “Listen to the intellectual interpretation (*νοερά διερμήνευσις*) of the symbols in accordance with the intellect of the Egyptians, leaving behind the impression (*εἶδωλον*) from the images (*φαντασίαι*) and sound of the symbols themselves and rising to the intellectual truth (*νοερά ἀλήθεια*)” (250.13–17). Just as the Egyptian symbols can lead the human mind away from images and to intellectual truth, so prayers and *voces mysticae* in theurgic rites can lead the soul from the workings of its imaginative and irrational faculties to the Intellect itself.

via divination operates. There the ethereal body of the god shines its ethereal light on the ethereal vehicle. Here the intellectual soul calls on the divine intellect via an intellectual prayer.

Let us take a specific case. Iamblichus discusses *vores mysticae* in the form of *nomina barbara* in *De Mysteriis* 7.4. Porphyry questioned the usefulness of these barbaric words in sacred rites, wondering how words without meaning could ever be efficacious (254.15–16). Iamblichus replies that even if we grant that the words are meaningless to us, the gods understand them³¹ although

... not in a way expressible in words (*ῥητόν*), or meaningful or significant through human images (*φαντασίῳ*), but either intellectually (in accordance with the human intellect, which is itself divine) or in a way more unspeakable, better, and more simple (in accordance with the Intellect attached to the gods).

Thus these *nomina barbara*, like other kinds of prayer, are meaningful not sensibly but intellectually. Iamblichus says that there is in them “an intellectual and divine character symbolic of divine resemblance” (255.9–11). That is to say, the barbarous names are theurgic symbols that when thought by the conscious rational soul actualize in that soul its intellectual part and adapt it to the divine, which is itself intellectual and directly attached to the Intellect. The *vores mysticae* then are outward signs with an inner, intellectual power. Their importance lies in their theurgic power to unite our souls to those of the gods. Iamblichus says that through them “we preserve in our souls a mystical and ineffable image of the gods, and we elevate our souls through them to the gods, and we unite our elevated souls to the gods as best we can” (255.17–256.3).

D. CONCLUSION

The picture arising from the *De Mysteriis* concerning the theurgic rite of ascension is relatively clear. The theurgist prepares an initiate for the ritual through training and purification of his vehicle. In the actual rite, the theurgist draws down the illumination of the god. This illumination is visible and may be seen by all those present. It envelops the initiate, irradiates his purified vehicle, causes divinely inspired images in it, and draws the soul upward. The rational soul is still alert and uses the intellectual *symbola* to effect intellectual union with the gods.

Iamblichus' conception can now be seen to be very closely allied to his criticisms of Plotinus. Plotinus had argued that since the highest aspect of the human soul did not descend, magic (which worked only through cosmic

31. Cf. *Myst.* 3.24, 157.13–16.

sympathy) could not affect it. Further, since the cosmic gods are engaged eternally in contemplation of Intellect, they do not hear or respond to prayers. Thus, the human soul's salvation could not depend on any magic ritual but only on contemplation. Iamblichus argues that the human soul descended entirely into this realm. Cosmic sympathy has a role to play in a lower form of theurgy, but the highest form requires the willing participation of the gods. Thus, although the cosmic gods are indeed involved in direct contemplation of the Intellect, they also look down and care for human beings. They do not descend to this realm nor do theurgists compel them to do so, but rather they illuminate us with their divine light willingly. Thus, contemplation is insufficient for the soul's salvation, since salvation requires the participation of the gods in theurgic rites.