Man, God and the Apotheosis of Man in Greek and Arabic Commentaries to the Pythagorean Golden Verses

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the four preserved commentaries to a Pythagorean poem known as the *Golden Verses*. It deals with two Greek texts—Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* and Hierocles’ *Commentary to the Golden Verses*—as well as two commentaries preserved in Arabic, attributed to Iamblichus and Proclus. The article analyses how each of these commentators understood the relationship between man and god in the context of the eschatological vision presented in the poem. It also demonstrates how differences in the interpretation of particular verses and ideas within the poem were dependent on an author’s philosophical views and cultural background.

Keywords

Golden Verses – Pythagoreanism – Iamblichus – Hierocles – Proclus – Arabic translation movement – commentary

Introduction

Late antique Neoplatonic philosophers considered the Pythagorean poem known as the *Golden Verses* to be one of the classic texts from the founding period of philosophy. Consequently, those philosophers with a particular interest in the Pythagorean tradition composed commentaries whose aim was to introduce their readers to this special text. The work, moreover, was also popular in the Arabic Middle Ages and, in addition to the two extant Greek...
commentaries, we also possess two commentaries in Arabic, both of which claim to be translations of late antique texts (neither of which have survived in their original Greek). Until now, these four commentaries have not been analysed together, despite the fact that they offer an ideal body of material with which to study how the different philosophical backgrounds of the commentators influenced their interpretations of the poem. The existence of the Arabic commentary attributed to Iamblichus, which has more in common with the Muslim tradition than with the Greek culture, adds a further dimension to our exploration of how different cultural contexts and doctrines could influence the reading of a philosophical poem.

Despite the fact that neither the relationship between man and god, nor the destiny of man and his apotheosis feature as key elements of the poem’s contents (at least in terms of the numbered verses), these issues are central to the metaphysical vision which forms the foundation for the ethical precepts on which the poem is focused. For the Neoplatonic readers, it was precisely these metaphysical and theological questions—hinted at by the poem in only a few places—that played the most important role in the interpretation of the text; but due to the brevity of the verses that refer to these issues, the scope for potential interpretations of the poem’s metaphysics, theology and eschatology is unusually broad. Consequently, my analysis and comparison of the commentaries will focus on the ways in which these four authors dealt with the metaphysical issues arising in certain verses of the poem. Compared with the other philosophical motives present in the Golden Verses, these verses and their commentaries offer an unparalleled opportunity to explore how various cultural contexts resulted in different interpretations of this unique text.

The Poem and the Commentaries

The date and authorship of the so-called Golden Verses (Chrysa epê) was uncertain even for ancient authors.¹ They had no doubts, however, that its origins were Pythagorean, and that it accurately described the philosophical essence of the Pythagorean doctrine. Although the poem was quoted and mentioned by its title from the third century AD onwards, some verses had previously appeared in the works of various authors as sayings attributed to Pythagoras or the Pythagoreans.² Almost all the authors who refer to the poem—as well as its

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commentators—appeared to have held it in very high esteem, and recognised it as a classic text of Pythagoreanism or even of philosophy in general.

Modern scholars are not in agreement with regard to either the date or the origins of the text. The first modern scholar to investigate this issue in the modern era was August Nauck, who, at the end of the nineteenth century, concluded that the text was a forgery compiled in the fourth century AD. Armand Delatte, writing three decades later, accepted Nauck's skeptical view, but proposed that it came from the third rather than the fourth century AD. However, he also suggested that some of the verses must have been written much earlier, and that they may have come from the otherwise lost Pythagorean poem Hieros Logos (Sacred Discourse), dated to the fifth century BC. In 1932, Pieter Cornelis van der Horst published the first modern critical edition of the Golden Verses, with a commentary. His dating is earlier than that of his predecessors—no later than the second century AD—and, in his view, the text represents a coherent literary composition; he thus disagrees with those who saw it as a loose collection of various moral sentences. Sixty years later, Johan Carl Thom argued for a completely different dating, while reinforcing van der Horst's opinion on the coherence of the poem with new arguments. On the basis of parallels between the Golden Verses and a fragment of Chrysippus' work—as well as Cleanthes's Hymn to Zeus—he suggested that the text may have actually been written earlier than the third century BC. This proposition, however, has been criticised by Pieter van der Horst, on the grounds that the first quotations from the poem (with its title given) come from a third-century AD source (Alciphron). Thus, it remains unclear where, by whom, in which philosophical circles and, most importantly, why this text was composed.

For the present paper, however, the date and place of composition are less important than the fact that the poem started to attract interest from philosophers during the Late Roman period, around the time we observe a revival of general interest in Pythagoreanism, especially on the part of Platonizing philosophers. The Golden Verses became one of the most important and popular Pythagorean texts in both Late Antiquity—due, in part to Iamblichus's attempts to place Pythagoreanism at the heart of philosophy—and it retained its popularity into both the Latin and the Arabic Middle Ages. It was particularly important for Neoplatonic authors such as Hierocles of Alexandria and

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3 A. Nauck (1873); A. Nauck (1884).
4 A. Delatte (1915) 3-79.
7 D. O'Meara (1989); C. Macris (2002).
perhaps also Proclus (and, of course, Iamblichus), as we can see from the few philosophical commentaries preserved either in Greek original or in Arabic translation; in Greek, a full commentary by Hierocles of Alexandria and a section of Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* (*Exhortation to Philosophy*) in which he commented on the last part of the poem (verses 45–71) have survived. In addition there are Arabic versions of otherwise unpreserved commentaries attributed to Iamblichus and Proclus (see below).

Iamblichus’s *Protrepticus* constitutes the second part of his *Collection of Pythagorean Doctrines*. It is preceded by *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, and the subsequent books discuss particular disciplines of Pythagorean philosophy, including arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The *Protrepticus* is, as the title suggests, an exhortation designed to attract its readers to philosophy. It also provides a simple introduction to the more specialized subsequent parts of Iamblichus’ work, as well as to Pythagorean philosophy or, more specifically, to living a philosophical life according to the Pythagorean example outlined in the first book. In order to achieve his goal, Iamblichus comments on three practical Pythagorean writings: the last part of the *Golden Verses*; Archytas’ *On wisdom* (*Peri sophias*); and the Pythagorean *acousmata*. It is interesting to note that the *Golden Verses* are the very first text on which he comments and, in some sense, it prefigures his entire literary construction: the *Collection of Pythagorean Doctrines* begins with the practical aspect of philosophy—the Pythagorean way of life—and finishes with abstract, theoretical disciplines; in a similar way, the poem itself can be divided in two parts, the first practical, and the second theoretical, concluding with an eschatological perspective.

Contrary to Iamblichus (or, at least, to the Greek texts that survive), Hierocles of Alexandria wrote a full commentary on the *Golden Verses*; it is the only text of this author to have survived, although another work, *On providence*, is known from two summaries in Photius’ *Library* (codices 214 and 251). Structurally, Hierocles follows the classical form of the commentary: the *lemmata* are quoted, and each is followed by a few explanatory lines. Hierocles openly states that the text is ideal for propaedeutic purposes, and constitutes the best introduction to philosophy; in this way his approach is very similar to that of Iamblichus. It is quite probable that Hierocles made use of the poem while teaching his students, and that the commentary constituted a kind of textbook for his class. He presents his own work as an elementary pedagogical


9 This division of the *Golden Verses* into two parts was also noticed by some of its commentators (Hierocl. *In CA* 6,11-26, ed. Köhler (1974); Iamb. Arab. 88,327, ed. Daiber (1995)).
course (\textit{paideutike stoicheiosis}) and as an epitome of basic Pythagorean dogma written for beginners (Hierocl. \textit{In CA} 122,1-5).\textsuperscript{10}

As for the commentary attributed to Proclus (which will be referred to as Arabic Proclus for the purposes of this paper), its exact provenance is uncertain; although the editor and English translator, Neil Linley (1984), was skeptical of its Greek origins, other scholars\textsuperscript{11} have demonstrated that it probably represents a translation of a genuine late antique, Greek, and Neoplatonic text. If it was not composed by Proclus Diadochus, it may have been written by the lesser known Proclus of Laodikeia. Moreover, even if it were only a selective summary made by the translator Ibn al-Tayyib, it still has the appearance of a text written originally in Greek. The author does not offer a verse by verse commentary but, rather, has structured the work according to his own interpretative vision of the poem; thus, direct quotes are not very common, consisting of only a few verses which are used to form part of the argument. These verses were undoubtedly translated together with the text of the entire commentary and, as a result, their Arabic translation differs substantially from the full Arabic translation of the \textit{Golden Verses} preserved in other sources.

The second Arabic commentary is attributed to Iamblichus, although the attribution is difficult to confirm. While its editor, Hans Daiber (1995), considered it a translation of an otherwise unknown work by Iamblichus, other scholars were far more skeptical.\textsuperscript{12} A detailed analysis of the form and content


\textsuperscript{11} L. Westerink (1987); H. Daiber (1988).

\textsuperscript{12} N. Linley (1984) mentioned it briefly on p. v of his introduction to the edition and translation of Arabic Proclus. He only observed that it was attributed in the title to Iamblichus and that it was based upon \textit{lemmata} of the \textit{Golden Verses} identical with the standard Arabic translation. D. O’Meara (1989) 230-231) wrote that the text “gives the impression of being little more than a series of glosses on and paraphrases of the \textit{Golden Verses}” and that “it gives expression to rather banal moral ideas”, but in his opinion it cannot be “regarded simply as Muslim (or perhaps Christian) glossing of the \textit{Golden Verses}, for there are signs of some dependence on Greek Neoplatonic exegesis of the \textit{Golden Verses}”. However, in his opinion, some traces of the original Greek Neoplatonic elements which can be found in the commentary do not suffice “to determine how seriously the attribution in the title of the commentary to Iamblichus should be taken. Such an attribution is not impossible, allowance being made for many omissions and later additions in the text of the commentary. But at present at any rate there is little that could confirm the attribution”. D. de Smet (2001), 64) demonstrated that the pagan Greek theology that appears in the poem had underwent the process of monotheisation and islamisation in this Arabic commentary. This analysis led him to a hypothesis that this Arabic text is not
of this work would suggest that it is neither a translation from Iamblichus nor from any other Greek author. While it may be a summary or a selection from a Greek text, it seems equally possible that it represents a collection of glosses on the *Golden Verses* put together by an Arabic author. There can be no doubt that the author was working with the Arabic translation of the poem: he does seem aware of many elements from the Greek intellectual world, in particular elements of Pythagorean philosophy that are mentioned in the Greek text of the poem but not in the Arabic translation. This commentary also has very little in common with the works of Iamblichus, especially his commentary on the *Golden Verses* in the *Protrepticus*; indeed, the two texts contradict each other on some points.

**The Commentators’ Understanding of the Poem**

The text of the *Golden Verses* praises piety and strongly encourages the reader to respect gods, heroes, daemons and parents, to love and have understanding for friends, and to obey the laws; it teaches that the way of achieving peace and happiness involves reconciling oneself with fate, the inevitability of death and the passing of earthly riches. In addition, the poem contains the famous verses—quoted by Greek historians of Pythagoreanism, including Diogenes Laertius, Porphyry, and Iamblichus—containing the exhortation to perform a daily “examination of conscience” in the form of three questions one should ask one’s soul before going to sleep: “What have I transgressed? What have I accomplished? What duty have I neglected?” (verses 40-42; ed. & trans. J. Thom 1995). Finally, the practice of asceticism and the application of some specific

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A literal translation of a lost Greek original but at most its paraphrase. J. Thom ((1995) 18–21) analysed the evidence for the existence of such a commentary of Iamblichus in the Greek tradition. There is actually only one possible reference to it in the entire ancient literature as we know it: Jerome’s *Contra Rufinum* 3,39,27–32. This testimony is very dubious, since “latissimo opere” from this passage can be a reference to Iamblichus’ commentary on the *Golden Verses* as well as to his *Collection of Pythagorean Doctrines*. In conclusion, J. Thom stated that “One may wonder whether this relationship between the Arabic commentary and Iamblichus’ other known works does not rather point towards a later Neoplatonic influenced by Iamblichus”. A. Izdebska (2012) undertook a full source-critical analysis of this text in the context of the Arabic commentary attributed to Proclus and the entire Neoplatonic tradition, arguing that it is improbable that a Greek author, especially Iamblichus, composed the Arabic text we have. On the contrary, some elements of this text could serve as arguments for the hypothesis that this text was composed by an Arabic author.
rules in life were clearly important to the author of the poem. In general, the philosopher’s way of life presented in this poem may be understood as a means of purifying the soul of earthly stains through everyday exercises and rational choices. The adoption of this way of life should lead to immortality and apotheosis, as promised openly in the final verses of the poem. The very literary form of the *Golden Verses* corresponds to the practical, gnomic wisdom literature, the purpose of which was to teach how to live everyday life, and to provide simple advice in the form of sentences which were easy to memorise. These memorable precepts conveyed clear moral content with a small amount of eschatology, and were often written in the second person singular, as if revealed to a listener by a mysterious author.\(^{13}\)

It is not surprising that Neoplatonic philosophers treated the *Golden Verses* as ideal material for beginners and students embarking on a philosophical way of life. Hierocles, in the introduction to his commentary, wrote:

> Of such rules that are directed to the whole of philosophy I would with good reason rank among the first the Pythagorean verses, the so-called ‘golden’ verses. For these encompass the universal doctrines of all philosophy, both practical and contemplative, through which one may acquire truth and virtue, regain one’s purity, succeed in obtaining likeness to god.


Iamblichus offered a similar understanding of the poem in his introduction to the *Protrepticus*. He explained that the *Protrepticus* is actually an exhortation to philosophy in general; only later does it introduce the reader to a specifically Pythagorean way of life. For Iamblichus, the exhortation to philosophy is not merely an introduction to philosophical theory, but to “paideia, knowledge and virtue in general” (21) (Iamb. *Protr.* 40,7-8; ed. É. des Places (1989)).\(^{14}\) Focusing on the proper way of life is always the first step in becoming a philosopher, for it is necessary to purify the eyes of the soul through which one may see philosophical theory. It is primary importance to encourage a man to lead a good life: the concept of good exists as a hierarchy, and only by ascending from one level to another can one understand the next; this idea is well demonstrated in the *Golden Verses*. Hierocles does not differ from Iamblichus in this respect and he repeatedly emphasizes how the practical pursuit of virtue and the purification of the soul may lead to the philosophical contemplation of truth. Thus, the *Golden Verses* is an ideal propaedeutic text because it deals primarily with

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\(^{14}\) All translations from Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* have been prepared by the author.
this very first stage of the philosophical life, and gives hints of the later stages only in the form of promises.

Arabic Proclus also understands the poem as offering a detailed image of the philosophical way of life, the specific goal of which is to pass from the human condition to divinity. In the introductory part of his commentary, he summarises the main subject and the aim of the poem by stating:

_The object of the Golden Sayings is to inspire souls with longing for their perfection and purity, to make people human, and to guide them towards a proper way of life (sīra hasana); man achieves perfection by means of absolute virtue, certain knowledge, and virtuous conduct. Some maintain that the Golden Sayings act as a guide towards divine life, the imitation of God and liberation from matter._

_(Procl. Arab. 6, ed. & trans. Linley (1984))_

Only in the case of Arabic Iamblichus are we unable to reconstruct the author's general understanding of the poem. This commentary lacks an introduction, and the author does not express any opinions about the subject of the poem or its purpose, nor does he give an overview of its contents. Rather, the commentary begins with the first verses of the poem, followed immediately by an interpretation. Of course, the commentator must have believed that the Golden Verses were important enough to merit a commentary. However, since we know nothing about his identity—we do not even know whether he was a late antique Greek or a medieval Arabic author—it is impossible to provide a concrete hypothesis about his reasons for being interested in this text.

In the case of Iamblichus and Hierocles—the two late antique Greek authors, whose identities are known to us beyond any doubt—we can see how their interpretations reveal certain issues which were especially relevant to their philosophical doctrines. In the _Protrepticus_, for instance, Iamblichus elaborates on how the poem characterises philosophy as “training for death” (in the classical Platonic sense, which originates from _Phaedo_ (67c-d)). Hierocles also emphasises that the practical wisdom of the poem allows one “to bear death bravely and the loss of possession lightly and even-handedly” (Hierocl. _In CA_ 35,25-27; Schibli (2002) 214). However, it is Iamblichus who recalls the Platonic notion of philosophy as “training for death” in his comments on verses 55 and 56 (which are as follows: “the wretched people, who do not see the good

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15 The only exception is the commentary to the verses 45-46 where he notices the division of the poem in two parts: a practical and a theoretical (Lamb. Arab. 88,326).
even though it is near, nor do they hear it. Few understand the deliverance from their troubles.”).¹⁷

*Deliverance from evil, which only few perceive, exhorts them to become free from the body, to let the soul live only for itself—this we call the training for death.*

(IAMB. PROTR. 45,25-46,3)

Iamblichus interprets the verses in an eschatological way, as dealing with death; although there are verses in the poem that address death directly, these particular verses are not clearly related to this topic. They are, however, general enough to serve as a starting point for his reflection on philosophy as a means of separating the spiritual from the material (good versus evil in the commented verses), and thus practicing in this life what is actually going to happen after one has died.

Hierocles in turn is the only one who mentions theurgy—an idea that becomes an important element within late antique Neoplatonism—in the context of the *Golden Verses*. He discusses it in his commentary on verses 67-69 (“But keep away from food that we have mentioned in *Purifications* and in *Deliverance of the Soul*, with discernment, and consider each thing by putting the excellent faculty of judgment in control as charioteer”). He writes:

*Surely one who is not ignorant of the Pythagorean symbols can be instructed from the present verses as follows, that along with the practice of virtue and recovery of truth we should also pay attention to purity in regard to our luminous body, which the Oracles also call the fine vehicle of the soul.*

(HIEROCL. IN CA 112,5-9; TRANS. SCHIBLI (2002) 312)

Afterwards he explains that the purification of the luminous body takes place through the observance of a proper diet on the part of the mortal body, as well as through “the purification of the soulish body, which must be accomplished by following the sacred ordinances and the arts of sacred rites” (Hierocl. In CA 113,6-8; Schibli (2002) 312). This is how Hierocles explains the enigmatic and unclear expressions of the poem which appear in the commented verses: “keep away from food” and “in purifications and deliverance of the soul” (which J.C. Thom considered to be titles of Pythagorean books).¹⁸ For him,

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¹⁷ All translations from the *Golden Verses* are from J. Thom’s critical edition (1995).
these are theurgic practices; they refer to the mortal and the luminous body, or the “ochema of the soul”. The “ochema of the soul” is a Late Platonic term, with origins in statements from Plato and Aristotle, as well as in certain elements from Stoicism. It was developed gradually by Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic authors, and it also occurs in the Chaldean Oracles (to which Hierocles makes explicit reference in his commentary). The ochema-pneuma, or vehicle of the soul, is a specific “soulish” or pneumatic body which enables the immaterial soul to be connected with the material body.19 Various Neoplatonic authors had different conceptions of the nature and function of this “vehicle of the soul”.20 In his Commentary, Hierocles describes this doctrine as “the doctrine of Pythagoreans”, which Plato subsequently used in his image of a soul as a vehicle (ochema) with two irrational parts: the soul as horses and the intellect as charioteer (in Phaedrus 246a-245e) (Hierocl. In CA 111,13-16).

The text of the poem undoubtedly made it possible for Hierocles to recall this image, since it mentions “putting the excellent faculty of judgment in control as charioteer” (v. 69). In attributing the doctrine of the “vehicle of the soul” to the ancient Pythagoreans, Hierocles’ interpretation is somewhat anachronistic, especially when he sees its fulfilment in the theurgic practices (specifically the “sacred rites of purification” (Hierocl. In CA 111,16) and the purification of the “soulish body” as described in the Chaldean Oracles (Hierocl. In CA 112,8-9)).21 He is not interested, however, in the details of the “symbolic precepts” or in the dietary prohibitions; rather, he gives “the scheme of abstinence in general” (Hierocl. In CA 115,17-19) and concludes that “the details have been transmitted in the sacred sayings” (Hierocl. In CA 115,19-20). The context leaves no doubt he is referring, at least in part, to Pythagorean precepts. He then introduces some of the Pythagorean rules of food abstinence and explains their sacred meaning.

Later in his commentary, he offers a longer exposition on theurgy, and integrates this activity with his view of philosophy, which he teaches to his students with the help of the Golden Verses:

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19 About Hierocles’ doctrine of the vehicle of the soul in the context of other Neoplatonic thinkers’ ideas concerning it, see I. Hadot (2004) 36-42.
21 Hierocles was not the only late antique philosopher who believed that ancient Pythagoreans practiced theurgy. Iamblichus expressed similar views, in particular in On the Pythagorean way of life, as demonstrated by G. Shaw (1993).
Philosophy has been joined to the art of sacred rites, on the grounds that this art engages in the purification of the luminous body. If you should separate it from the philosophical intellect, you will find that it no longer has the same power.


He then divides philosophy into two categories—contemplative (connected with intellect) and practical—the latter of which is further divided into civic and telestic: “the former purifies us of the irrational through the virtues, the latter cuts off our materially based imaginations through the methods of sacred rites” (Hierocl. In CA 118,7-8; Schibli (2002) 319). These three parts of philosophy represent the ways by which the different elements of man may be perfected, and the efforts focused on these elements should be uniform and harmonious. Only by leaving his earthly existence, and returning to a state similar to that before his incarnation, can man achieve perfection and become more like god (Hierocl. In CA 118,28-119,2).22 This chapter therefore offers one of the best examples of how Hierocles made use of the Golden Verses as a pretext for presenting his own vision of philosophy, skillfully turning phrases from the poem into convenient starting points for the exposition of his own ideas.

The Relation of Man and God According to the Commentators

Because the Golden Verses culminates in the promise of apotheosis for those who follow its precepts, each of the commentators have had to propose a vision of the relationship between man and god in their interpretation of the poem; in particular, they have needed to address the issue of whether a man becomes similar to god or simply unites himself with god. This issue appears in the final verses of the poem (v. 70-71): “Then, if you leave the body behind and go to the free aither, you will be immortal, an undying god, no longer mortal”.23 Moreover, earlier verses of the Golden Verses claim that “mortals have a divine

22 For Hierocles’ idea of theurgy and the place it occupies in his philosophical system, see I. Hadot (2004) 47-49.
23 It is worth bearing in mind that similar words (theos ambrotos ouketi thnetos) appear also in one of the fragments (112 DK) attributed to Empedocles, describing himself: “as an immortal god, no longer mortal”. Moreover, similarity between these verses and some texts found on the famous golden leaves from southern Italy (promising divinization of an initiate) recalls the context of the Orphic mysteries (S. Panagiotou (1983); J. Thom (1995) 226).
origin (genos)” (v. 63) and that Zeus has placed a daemon inside every man (v. 62). However, one can find references to divine reality and its connection with human affairs throughout the entire poem. This issue was particularly interesting for Neoplatonic authors, especially those attached to the Pythagorean tradition. The Neoplatonic biographers of Pythagoras (Porphyry or Iamblichus, for instance) reiterate on numerous occasions that the union with god or the imitation of god was one of the main goals of Pythagorean philosophy. In these sources, Pythagoras himself was presented as a god or, at least, as someone considered to be a god by his followers.

For Iamblichus, these verses fit perfectly into a Platonic vision taken from Phaedrus (246e-249d): the human soul returns to the procession of gods in heaven—where it resided before the fall, that is before being born into a body—and to the very essence of the universe. Apart from this image, the whole of the (reasonably brief) commentary on the final verses of the poem refers several times to the question of the soul's return to the gods and the soul’s divine nature:

> Therefore, in the highest order, to place as a guide the finest mind is to preserve the purity of the resemblance of the soul to gods; to which resemblance he exhorted at the beginning. Abandoning the body, moving away to the ether and changing the human nature into the most pure nature of gods, and accepting the immortal living instead of the mortal life, results in the restoration of the very essence and the procession with gods, the same which we used to have before we accepted the human form.

(Iamb. Protr. 48,8-16)

According to his interpretation, the goal of the philosophical way of life as presented in the Golden Verses is to allow man to achieve a complete apotheosis, that is, a transformation of the human form into the divine. Arabic Proclus undoubtedly shares this view when he refers to man using such phrases as “divine life” (Procl. Arab. 6; 40), “unity with God” (Procl. Arab. 76), “divine essential nature” (Procl. Arab. 86), or when he speaks about “living a life of unalloyed divinity and even becoming united with its [human soul’s] creator” (Procl. Arab. 14). He speaks openly about the union of the soul with god as the aim of the philosophical life; its achievement is tantamount to the liberation of the soul from the body, and the attainment of a purity relating to man's true essence (that is, his reason); for Arabic Proclus, the intellect is “the divine...

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24 Porph. VP 41,1-2; Iambl. VP 15,66; 16,69-70; 18,86; 28,137; 32,228; 33,240; cf. Stob. II 7, 3f., 1-2.
25 D.L. 8,11; Porph. VP 20,15-16; 28,2-3; Iambl. VP 6,30; 19,91; 27,133; 28,140; Ael. VH 2,26.
faculty within us” (Procl. Arab. 62). He interprets verse 63 (“But take courage, for mortals have a divine origin (genos”)—which is worded “there is a divine nature in man” in the Arabic translation included in the commentary—as follows:

*If it adheres to these excellent admonitions, it will return to its own world, and be delivered from bodily suffering. This divine nature in man is the intellect, called also the rational soul.*

(Procl. Arab. 94)

Consequently, he also interprets the final verses of the poem as a description of the final goal or destiny of man: attaining immortality and becoming god, in the process of which, one returns to their eternal source (Procl. Arab. 100-104).

Hierocles presents a view that differs substantially from those of Iamblichus and Arabic Proclus. According to him—and he emphasises this several times in his commentary—the division into classes or orders (taxeis) within the hierarchy of beings is very firm (Hierocl. In CA 12; 92-93; 95-97; 120-121). It is not possible for any being—including man—to transcend its nature (physis), which is given once and forever, or to enter into a different class. Consequently, not only is man unable to become a god, but he cannot even become a hero or a daemon. Furthermore, Hierocles openly rejects the notion that Pythagoras was a god, hero or daemon (Hierocl. In CA 89,21-24; Schibili (2002) 282), thus opposing the tradition attested by the biographers of Pythagoras (Diogenes, Porphyry, and Iamblichus). Significantly, Hierocles comments on verse 63 (concerning the “divine origin” of man) together with the two preceding and the three following verses, which allows him to limit his reference to that particular verse.

Among modern scholars, there is an ongoing discussion concerning Hierocles’ view on the existence of a transcendent One/god, since one finds no references to this classic Neoplatonic idea in his preserved writings (the commentary and fragments from On Providence). On the contrary, he writes about a god/demiurge whom he identifies with the Pythagorean tetrad or tetractys. According to Ilsetraut Hadot this identification implies, on the grounds of the Neopythagorean numerology, that he assumed the existence of the One corresponding to a monad. Furthermore, she demonstrates that it was not necessary for him to refer to the transcendent One in a propaedeutic commentary that was focused solely on instruction for beginners. As for On Providence,
Photius provides information on only a small part of the original text, and may not have been especially interested in Hierocles’ approach to Pythagoreanism. Nevertheless, it remains true that the idea of the transcendent One is absent from the writings of Hierocles that have survived. Nevertheless, based on his extant writings one may conclude that the Plotinian idea of the return of the soul to its source (the One) was foreign to him. In the view presented in his Commentary, a man can only become similar to god—that is, purify his soul of all things material and irrational—and retire to the most perfect place within his sphere of reality, i.e. the Isles of the Blessed. Thus, he interprets the apotheosis of man as becoming similar to god, but only to the extent that it is possible for a human (Hierocl. In CA 118,28-119,2; 119,20-120,3; 120,9-18). Hierocles considers the hope expressed by the poem to be vain, and it is precisely the abandonment of this hope which leads to true happiness:

_Thus, when we fail to be aware of the substance of things, it turns out that we “hope what cannot be hoped” and that we ponder impossibilities; for example, when someone, being a man, hopes to become one of the immortal gods or glorious heroes, this person does not understand the limits set by nature nor does he distinguish among the first, second and last classes of existing being._

(HIEROCL. IN CA 96,15-21; H. SCHIBLI (2002) 292)

And later:

_The pinnacle of virtue is to remain within the bounds of creation, by which all things have been separated according to kind, and to follow the laws of providence, through which all things in accordance with their own capacity are adapted to their proper good._

(HIEROCL. IN CA 121,14-18; H. SCHIBLI (2002) 323)

More insight into how our authors understood the relationship between man and god can be found in the commentaries to verses 45-46 of the poem: “Work hard at this, meditate on this, you should passionately desire this; This will put

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27 Cf. H. Schibli (2010) 439-440. It is possible that Hierocles adhered to the theory of the Demiurge as the highest god, without the transcendent One, since he certainly was influenced more by the _Chaldean Oracles_ than by the Platonic tradition. As regards the lack of the transcendent One-beyond-Being and the role of the Demiurge-Intellect as the highest god in the _Chaldean Oracles_, see J. Finamore and S. Johnston (2010) 162.
you in the footsteps of divine virtue”. To begin with, Iamblichus’s *Protrepticus* contains the following words:

*In these verses he [=Pythagoras] encourages to all the beautiful sciences and activities, being convinced that one should not avoid hard work nor abate from any exercise. He arouses to love and desire beautiful things, and reduces all of that to the practice of virtue, but not of whatever virtue, but of the virtue which drives us away from the human nature and leads us to the divine essence and the knowledge and possession of this divine virtue.*

(IAMB. PROTR. 43,25-44,5)

As in his entire commentary, what matters for Iamblichus is the idea of man becoming god, of freeing oneself from his human nature (*physis*) and coming closer to the eternal and immutable divine essence. It is through this process that one acquires perfect knowledge and virtue.

Arabic Proclus presents a very similar interpretation:

*The “divine virtues” are the attainment of divine knowledge; and divinity in one’s actions is for the purpose of acquiring everlasting life and realizing exalted intellectual felicity, whereby we may be united (yuttisal)28 with God; anyone who has attained this stage is truly good.*

(PROCL. ARAB. 74-76)

Here, too, one can identify three levels on which man may achieve the divine: nature/essence, knowledge, and ethics. Arabic Proclus offers a vision of a certain state characterized by both the highest intellectual fulfilment—having knowledge equal to god—as well as the immortality that comes from being closely connected to (or almost united with) god.

For Hierocles, these verses constitute a transition from practical philosophy—which “makes man good through the acquisition of the virtues”—to contemplative philosophy, which “brings him to likeness to god through the illumination of intellect and truth” (Hierocl. In CA 84,7-10, H. Schibli (2002) 271). He also makes the connection between ethical perfection and epistemological fulfilment which, together, make man similar to god:

*This likeness the text also calls a divine virtue, since it rightly transcends the human kind that precedes it.*

(HIEROCL. IN CA 86,17-19; H. SCHIBLI (2002) 276)

28 This verb can mean both “to be united” as well as “to be joined, connected, to be near”. 
However, in Hierocles, one does not find here the idea dominant in both Iamblichus’ and Arabic Proclus’ commentaries—acquisition of divine nature—which may be interpreted as further evidence of Hierocles’ view that man cannot be united with god, but at most attain likeness to god.

In this respect, Arabic Iamblichus comes closer to Hierocles’ interpretation than to that of Iamblichus or Arabic Proclus. First of all, he points out that these verses mark the point where the poem makes the transition from presenting practical philosophy (action, morality, and politics) to dealing with the “divine element in the soul and the universe” (Iamb. Arab. 88,326). While commenting on verse 46, in which the “divine virtue” (fadiila ilahiya) appears, he writes:

*Perfection in human virtues is like stairs and a ladder which you can climb to achieve divine virtue; it [perfection in human virtues] is like preparations, [it is] an image and example of the true things that remain in one state, immutable and imperishable.*

(Iamb. Arab. 88,331-335)

Interestingly, Arabic Iamblichus does not develop the idea of divine virtue, and does not explain what its achievement might mean for a human. Rather, he focuses on the dichotomy of human and divine affairs, whose relationship is similar to the means and the end, or the imitation and the model. Arabic Iamblichus avoids making any closer connections between man and God.

**Commenting on the Poem and the Muslim Culture**

Of all the commentaries, Arabic Iamblichus is the most general, and it can be difficult to identify a consistent philosophy governing its interpretations (especially as it has no general introduction). It is important, at this point, to remember that the text is a commentary not on the Greek version of the *Golden Verses*, but rather on an Arabic translation composed at the very beginnings of the translation movement in the circle of the great translator Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq. The Arabic translation stripped away most of the inconvenient or simply incomprehensible elements, as well the theological or metaphysical terms; the translator’s aim was most probably to present the *Golden Verses*.

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29 All translations from the Arabic Iamblichus have been done by the author on the basis of the Arabic critical edition by H. Daiber (1995).

30 F. Rosenthal (1941); M. Ullmann (1959); C. Baffioni (1994).
to Arabic readers as a purely ethical poem, and to make it accessible regardless of philosophical or cultural contexts. For this reason, the noun “tetractys” was simply rendered by the adjective “quadruple”, and terms such as “Moira” or “Eris”—as well as the apostrophe to Zeus—were removed. Similar modifications occurred in the final verses, where the motif of apotheosis is made vague by the following rendering: “You will then become an itinerant without return to the human condition and unsusceptible to death”.31 Thus, the promise of becoming a god no longer appears in the translation of the poem.

It is important to note that the Golden Verses were more popular in the Arabic Middle Ages than it was even in Late Antiquity. It was frequently quoted as a source of knowledge about Pythagoras and his philosophy and, in certain Arabic histories of Greek philosophy, it was the sole source of information on Pythagoreanism.32 The popularity of the Golden Verses was probably rooted in the gnomic formulation of its ethical prescriptions, as well as in its universal content (especially as found in its modified, popularised Arabic version). As a result, it had strong impact on the image of Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism in the Medieval Arabic world. The popularity of the Golden Verses may have resulted in the demand for commentaries, not only those translated from Greek (as was probably the case of Arabic Proclus), but also those newly composed by Arabic intellectuals; we know, for instance, that such a commentary was written by Ahmad Ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī, a student of al-Kindi.33 Arabic Iamblichus serves as a good example of this phenomenon, with its mixture of Greek contents and Arabic interpretations, and a strong focus—implied by the Arabic tradition of the poem—on the more popular practical side of philosophy. Certainly, for Arabic intellectuals, the Golden Verses were an important part of the gnomological tradition: selected verses of the poem, mixed with sentences originating from other gnomologies—such as the Pythagorean Sentences—were included in the collections of sentences of Pythagoras attached by al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik and Ibn Abi Uṣaybiʿa to their chapters on Pythagoras in their historical writings.34 These collections are significant for the understanding of the role of the Golden Verses in the Arabic world, for they treat the poem simply as a gnomological text.

31 One can find the text of the Arabic translation of the Golden Verses in several sources. Among the earliest is one by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, ed. in ‘A. Badawī (1985) 116-119.
33 G. Flügel (1850) 169; A. Müller (1882) 294; F. Rosenthal (1943) 55.
Within this context, one can more easily understand the specificity of Arabic Iamblichus, who comments on the modified Arabic translation of the poem and does not engage in the same philosophical discussions as the Greek commentators. On the other hand, his commentary has also been adapted to the Arabic milieu for which it was written, and it is characterised by a strong focus on practical advice concerning the ethical and rational life. Virtue, understood as living one’s life in accordance with reason, features as one of the key subjects of this commentary (Iamb. Arab. 65), while bodily desires are presented as being contrary to reason and virtue (Iamb. Arab. 49; 59; 71). Thus, the commentator recommends moderation and taking equal care of body and soul.

The vision of the relationship between man and god found in Arabic Iamblichus is perhaps the most skeptical among the four commentaries. This skepticism is illustrated in his commentary to verses 49-51, in which he makes explicit reference to the insurmountable gap separating God from man. He emphasises that there is no way of knowing God other than through obeying his commands (which sounds Muslim rather than Greek). In this way, one can attain knowledge of God himself:

[He] is immutable and has no end. (…) And as regards humans, we know about them that a particular man, that is a human from among humans, is not permanent (bāqin), and concerning men in general, i.e. the human form, this one is permanent.

(Iamb. Arab. 94,392-395)

In this short passage, the immutable and eternal God is opposed to the ephemeral and mutable man. The idea that a man is completely mortal is unusual in the context of both Muslim and Greek cultures. The only thing that can survive in the transcendental sphere is the human form; the realisation of that form—man—can survive for only a finite amount of time, as is the case with all of the animals, plants and inanimate objects that occupy the physical world. Consequently, man cannot possess a privileged position in the world, nor can he have a special relationship with God. Arabic Iamblichus’ critical view of the idea of the ‘divinity of man’ is also apparent in his commentary to verses 63-65 (in the Arabic version: “But you, man, take courage, for there is a divine race in man. And the divine nature leads him to comprehension of every one of the things. You will participate in them, if you follow my counsels” (Iamb. Arab. 108,494-110,499)). Our author comments that a man should ask God for help, because without God’s help he cannot achieve salvation from evil (Iamb. Arab. 110,502-505). The similarity of man and God described in these verses—specifically, man’s participation in the ‘divine race’—means only that man possesses
reason, the ability to discern, and free will. These attributes make him similar to God and give him the power to overcome evil in his own life, which can be compared to God’s power over the entire universe. Finally, Arabic Iamblichus explains the “divine nature” (referred to as the “sacred nature” in the Greek original) as “knowledge of all things that you should do and that you should avoid” (Iamb. Arab. 110,513-515). As in his previous comments, he clearly circumvents any occasions that might encourage or require a discussion of the relationship, or kinship between man and God. The only thing that man can achieve is knowledge which, instead of being understood as contemplation of divine reality, is meant as knowledge of the laws that man should obey.

This austere view of man is further developed in the commentary to the final verses of the poem. First, their Arabic translation:

_Truly, you will then leave this body, so that you become free in the air. You will then become an itinerant without return to the human condition and unsusceptible to death._

(IAMB. ARAB. 118,571-574)

And the commentary:

_And as regards his expression “without return to the human condition”, he [=Pythagoras] means that the soul does not return to unite for a second time with man, so that from the union of these two [sc. soul and body] once more a man was made, likewise susceptible to death, but rather it [soul] remains separated from the body, unsusceptible to death._

(IAMB. ARAB. 120,586-589)

First of all, we should note that the author of the commentary continues to distance man from God, and makes no reference to the soul’s relationship with God in this new stage. Neither does he refer to the possibility of apotheosis or of becoming similar to God, an idea which is discussed by all of the other commentators on the _Golden Verses_, including Iamblichus. The Arabic version of the poem undoubtedly makes it easier to avoid addressing this issue. Arabic Iamblichus thus understands these verses as a promise of immortality for the soul, which contradicts the idea that man is perishable. By accepting the traditional belief in the immortality of the human soul, it would seems that the author was being somewhat inconsistent; however, the structural features of this commentary suggest that it may have been more a collection of glosses from different sources, than a fully-fledged philosophical commentary, and we cannot expect the author of such a collection to be wholly coherent.
However, the fact that the author shared the traditional idea of immortality of the soul would seem to be confirmed by his commentary to verse 3, recommending the cult of “subterranean daemons” (*katachthonioi daimones*), or in Arabic translation “inhabitants of the earth” (*ʻumār al-arḍi*). The author explains that the “inhabitants of the earth” are “the souls who have left bodies and reached the place where they stopped for the judgment” (Iamb. Arab. 42,25-27). This explanation presupposes a belief in the personal immortality of a particular human soul, as well as in the judgment over its life on earth. But even in this vision of the afterlife, there is no place for any contact with a divinity, apart from that which occurs at the judgment.

Finally, it is worth looking at the commentary to verses 1-2 (“Honor the immortal gods first, in the order appointed by custom, and revere your oath. Pay reverence next to the noble heroes”). Again, their Arabic translation is substantially modified:

*The first thing to which I exhort you is to honor those who are unsusceptible to death, that is the angels of God (blessed and exalted is he) and his saints/helpers, and to give them glory through the obligations of the law. And revere the oath. Then, I recommend you to follow gods, who in their conduct offer [you] help.*

(IAMB. ARAB. 38,5-40,10)

Interestingly, this particular translation differs slightly from other preserved Arabic translations of the poem: it is always God who deserves glory, and only after he is mentioned do other quasi-divine beings appear. Still, this translation is a good example of how Arabic translators dealt with the anachronistic and polytheistic nature of Greek theological terminology. In this case it was made vague, so that it was possible to reconcile the statements of the text with a Muslim (or Christian) view.

Arabic Iamblichus starts his commentary with the following words:

*Among the Greeks, there are three categories which by their level [of hierarchy] are more worthy of respect than man and better than him: the first level among them is God, the second is the level of the highest angels, the third—of gods.*

(IAMB. ARAB. 40,11-14)

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35 The expression *ʻumār al-arḍi* refers to rarely witnessed house spirits which were a remnant of the Arab pagan, folk beliefs. See G. Strohmaier (1996) 243.

This short passage is undoubtedly meant to explain Greek theology, but the outcome is a strange mixture of Islamic/Christian theology and an unclear category of gods; they are later presented as souls incarnated in humans who have been freed from earthly realities through their virtuous life and who look after human affairs from above (Iambl. Arab. 40,17-20). As a result, we are presented with a conception that diverges from Arabic Iamblichus’ tendency to deny any possibility of fellowship between God and man. In this passage, he appears to suggest that, by living in accordance with the divine law, it was possible to achieve a supra-human level. This view was not uncommon within the late antique and medieval Muslim (or Christian) worldview; indeed, it is the idea of sainthood that helps our author to interpret these troublesome verses. However, the presence of this idea in his commentary prevent him from promising his reader that one could achieve likeness to God through individual perfection. This could be interpreted as yet another sign of the commentator’s eclectic and incoherent approach, which consisted of collating sources and ideas of very different origin.

Conclusions

The *Golden Verses* was an attractive text and its perceived importance encouraged several late antique philosophers to consider it a classic. The name of Pythagoras, which appealed very strongly to both the late antique Neoplatonics and the medieval Arabic intellectuals, undoubtedly contributed to its popularity. It was included in the corpus of fundamental writings taught in the course of philosophical education and, as a result, would have required a commentary.

The existence of both Greek and Arabic commentaries provides a rich basis for a study of the poem’s potential interpretations. Furthermore, the linguistic diversity of the surviving commentaries allow us to better understand the specific approach of the late antique commentators, as well as their interests and their ways of dealing with the philosophical traditions associated with the themes in subsequent verses. The interpretation of the last part of the *Golden Verses* presented by Iamblichus can be considered highly Platonic, in so far as he refers to well-known motifs originating in Plato’s dialogues; the idea of the final apotheosis of man is crucial to his understanding of the poem. For Arabic Proclus, the aspiration of man to change his human nature into divine essence is also the principal theme of the poem. While he is not as Platonic
as Iamblichus, his interpretations are undoubtedly Neoplatonic in nature. Hierocles, in turn, differs from these two authors both in his philosophical doctrine and, consequently, in his interpretation of the poem. He is even able to locate elements—such as theurgy or Hierocles’ idea of the providence understood as unchangeable hierarchy of beings—that, at first glance, might seem unrelated to the text of the poem itself. His idea of providence informs his opinion about the relation of man and god, and helps to explain why his vision of the apotheosis of man is different to that of Iamblichus or Arabic Proclus: in his opinion, man can never become a god, because he cannot go beyond his human nature. At most he can become similar to god, but only within the bounds of his human nature.

The Arabic commentary attributed to Iamblichus demonstrates how this text could function in a different cultural world—and how the poem’s links with its original cultural milieu could become so weak as to be no longer visible. The fact that the glosses in this commentary were probably taken from several different sources explains its incoherent and, at times, contradictory nature. However despite its inconsistency, it is possible to find enough arguments to conclude that the author’s theology is much more Muslim or Christian than Greek. The Greek idea of the apotheosis of man is completely foreign to this commentator, and he does not even perceive the presence of this issue in the poem itself. Indeed, it is typical for him to ignore many of the elements that would have been crucial to the Greek Neoplatonists; his interpretation of the poem is much more practical, and does not engage with theology and metaphysics as much as his Greek predecessors. However, it would be an over-simplification to juxtapose the late antique commentators (including Arabic Proclus) with Arabic Iamblichus; the case of Hierocles clearly demonstrates, there had already been substantial differences in interpretations of the poem. Rather, by comparing the different ways of understanding the relationship between man and god in the four commentaries, we can see how the vision of each commentator was deeply rooted in their general philosophical doctrine and culture.

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