Iamblichus, the Commentary Tradition, and the Soul

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Iamblichus, the third major Neoplatonic figure after Plotinus and Porphyry, was born in Chalcis in northern Syria around 245 CE.¹ Eunapius tells us that he studied first with Anatolius and then “attached himself to Porphyry” (Πορφυρίῳ προσεθείς ἑαυτόν),² which suggests that he may have studied with Porphyry, possibly in Rome. Subsequently and possibly after Porphyry’s death in approximately 305 CE,³ Iamblichus returned to Syria, to either Apamea or Daphne, and set up his own school.⁴ Iamblichus died in Syria around 325 CE.

Iamblichus was a Platonist, but he differed from other Platonists in significant ways. He is probably most widely known for coupling Platonic philosophy with religious practice. He had, of course, plenty of precedent in the Middle-Platonic period. Authors such as Plutarch and Apuleius brought religion and magic into their writings, and the Chaldaean Oracles made use of both Platonic metaphysics and common magical practices. Iamblichus, however, gave religious practice an ascendancy over philosophy. His arguments were based on his interpretation of Plato as well as on the accepted religious practices.

In the De Mysteriis, a foundational work for his religious/philosophical outlook, Iamblichus argued against a more traditional, philosophical view (represented by Porphyry in this work, whom Iamblichus attempts to refute point by point). The work is a careful, rationalist argument for the central role of philosophical magic (theurgy) in his system. At De Myst. 2.11, 96.13–97.2 he states his case boldly:

It is not thinking that brings theurgists into contact with the gods, since what would hinder those who engage in contemplative philosophy from

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¹ For Iamblichus’ biography, see Dillon (1987), 863–75.
² Eunapius, VS 457–8.
³ But see Dillon (1987), 869, where he proposes that Plotinus left Porphyry while the latter was still alive.
⁴ Eunapius does not say where Iamblichus settled. John Malalas (c.491–578), Chronographia XII.312.11–12 writes that Iamblichus taught at Daphne. Dillon (1987), 869–70 admits the possibility that Malalas is correct but thinks that Apamea is more likely.
having theurgic union with the gods? As it is, the truth lies elsewhere. It is the ritual accomplishment of ineffable acts, performed divinely, surpassing any intellectual processes, and the power of unspeakable symbols known only to the gods that accomplish theurgical union.\(^5\)

Unlike Plotinus’ ascent, which is based solely on the philosophical contemplation of the individual philosopher, Iamblichean philosophy depends on both philosophy and ritual acts properly performed.

This sea-change in Platonism was accepted by all subsequent Neoplatonists of the Athenian School, although there were other areas in which some or all later Neoplatonists differed from Iamblichus, in spite of the high regard in which they held him. In this chapter I propose to examine how some of these idiosyncratic doctrines together with his belief in religious ritual combine with his interpretation of key Platonic passages to create a single, logical whole. The result is a rational, coherent, unified philosophical stance.

\section{Iamblichus and the Platonic Commentaries}

We know from the \textit{Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy} (26.10–34) that Iamblichus created the canon of ten Platonic dialogues plus two “perfect” dialogues read in his school and subsequently in the Academy: \textit{Alcibiades, Gorgias, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Phaedrus, Symposium, Philebus, Timaeus}, and \textit{Parmenides}.\(^6\) He also argued that each dialogue had its own aim or theme (σκόπος).\(^7\) This concept of a σκόπος allowed Iamblichus to narrow the focus of his interpretations of the dialogues but conversely it also allowed more opportunities to innovate and create sometimes startling interpretations as well (although, of course, Iamblichus would not have seen it that way). To take one example, Iamblichus determined that the σκόπος of the \textit{Sophist} was the sublunar demiurge (\textit{In Sophistam} fr. 1.1–2). This allowed Iamblichus to support his metaphysical and psychological theories about Plato’s philosophy, including the role of lower-order divinities in the chain from the gods to human beings.\(^8\) The combination of advancing a canon of dialogues

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\item\(^5\) This and all subsequent translations are my own.
\item\(^6\) On the canon, see Westerink (2011), XXXVII–XL; on Iamblichus and the canon, see Tarrant (2014), 23–25.
\item\(^8\) See Dillon (1973), 245–7 and Tarrant (2000), 94.
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