

## *Book Reviews*



**John Dillon and Andrei Timotin (eds)**

*Platonic Theories of Prayer, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition* 19, Brill: Leiden – Boston, 2016. €104, US\$135.

Before being sent an offprint from this volume it had not occurred to me that there was such a thing as a Platonic *theory* of prayer, let alone several such theories. But Layne's essay on 'Cosmic Etiology and Demiurgic Mimesis in Proclus' Account of Prayer' was immediately recognizable as dealing with an aspect of Procline theory, which was fully Platonic insofar as it was rooted in Timaeus' prayer at the beginning of his monologue in Plato's dialogue; fully philosophical theory insofar as it dealt with that passage as an integral part of Plato's study of natural philosophy, bound up as it was with the three primary causes and two secondary causes, as well as with his important theory of reversion upon the cause; and fully about a religious phenomenon labelled 'prayer' in the Platonic text. Hence there was at least one instantiation of a 'Platonic theory of prayer': one that deviated considerably from 'prayer' as usually understood in antiquity, though in accord with the editors' initial definition. Had it not been for Proclus we might not have had this book at all. Proclus' treatment of the prayer early in the second book of his *Commentary on the Timaeus* is central to several essays, and of the sixteen columns of the *Index Locorum* almost four relate to Proclus' corpus, half of that to the *Commentary on the Timaeus*, all of that to the first Teubner volume and nearly all of that to book two. Some 37 passages (51 separate references) are to that single passage.

Dillon's essay on 'The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer' had begun the volume, mentioning at the outset the prayer to Pan that concludes the *Phaedrus* and the prayer with which Timaeus had commenced. So beginnings and ends seem important, particularly if one is to believe Dillon's next passage, *Laws* 801a-b, but Plato was acutely conscious that great care is needed when one prays. The bulk of Dillon's essay, however, is given over to what 'prayer' could mean to the Neoplatonist, and what devotion they could practise in their efforts to achieve their highest wish, divine illumination. It becomes clear that Dillon had long

thought about such matters, and done so from a recognizably Platonist point of view.

In Dorival's 'Modes of Prayer in the Hellenic Tradition' we begin rather with Plato's *Euthyphro* and the *Second Alcibiades*: a work of doubtful authorship but subtitled *On Prayer*, for which reason one might have liked more treatment of it. Surely it merits more than one entry in the *Index Locorum*, and indeed Dorival cites three passages from 142c to 143b. The article is packed with information and includes an important section on the 'transformation of petitionary prayer', in which the god is left to decide what is good.

There follow Luz on Philo and Carl O'Brien on Maximus Tyrius, the former distinctly atypical, the latter more like a regular Platonizing author late in the second century. O'Brien's article was one that was needed, able to underline the way that petitionary prayer as practised sits uneasily with the notion of divine providence and verges on an attempt to bribe immutable gods, often without the recognition that our difficulties are indeed better for us. Prayers uttered in the correct frame of mind, however, may be useful and accord with philosophy. Luz's contribution perhaps reflects a different tradition altogether, in which we meet the idea of prayer as thanksgiving and also that of scriptural study as prayer, but such ideas already illustrate how the very notion of prayer must somehow be transformed to become attractive to the Platonic mind.

Wakoff in 'Awaiting the Sun: a Plotinian Form of Contemplative Prayer' offers an interesting if not entirely convincing exploration of the possibility that sunrise and sunset experiences may influence Plotinus' picture of contemplative experiences. But what in Plotinus qualifies as prayer? A little too much is here made of some familiar imagery, though Plutarch, an author who only features in the *Index Nominum*, might suggest that associations of the Sun with divinity (and desire) are typically Egyptian (*Eroticus* 764a-e).

Timotin chooses 'Porphyry on Prayer: Platonic Tradition and Religious Trends in the Third Century', with emphasis on Porphyry, often as tentatively reconstructed from Iamblichus: but also involving Origen, Maximus, and Plotinus. And here prayer can be silent, wordless. I am in this article credited with translating book two of Proclus *On the Timaeus*, but that credit belongs to Runia and Share (as elsewhere in the volume that Timotin has co-edited!). I should add that even this important material did not really need to be given both in translation and in Greek quite so extensively in the volume.

Brisson is much as one might expect in 'Prayer in Neoplatonism and the Chaldaean Oracles: Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus'. Sound, systematic, and concerned with the interplay of the virtuous life and the approach to the divine. Unusually there isn't quite enough Greek here, specifically in discussion of the