

## Chapter 50

# Iamblichus of Chalcis

c. 245 AD—c. 325 AD

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Further yet, we preserve the mystical, ineffable image of the gods complete in our soul and through them lead our soul up toward the gods, and when it is elevated as much as possible, we unite it with the gods. (Iamblichus (DM vii.4))

It used to be fashionable to dismiss Iamblichus as representing the final decadence of classical Greek philosophy, but in recent decades we have come to appreciate him for his revitalization and reorientation of Platonic philosophy in the 4th century AD and as a critical link in the transmission of Platonic ideas into the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and modern world. This reassessment is partly a result of our own improved understanding of the role and function of ancient philosophy. But first, some biographical background.

Iamblichus was born in Chalcis (modern Qinnasrin) in north Syria, an intellectually lively city in a prosperous region, which had been at peace for over 200 years. He became a student of Porphyry, an important neo-Platonic philosopher, and probably studied with him in Rome or Sicily. Although they came to differ on many philosophical points, there is no reason to suppose that they did not respect each other.

Eventually, perhaps around 305, Iamblichus returned to Syria to found his own school at Apameia (near Antioch), a city already famous for its neo-Platonic philosophers. Among the philosophers he trained was Aedesius (died c. 355), himself the teacher of Maximus of Ephesus (died 370), who in turn initiated the Emperor Julian (331-363) into the mysteries of neo-Platonism and encouraged him in his unsuccessful attempt to revitalize paganism in the face of spreading Christianity.

At a time when most wealthy families chose Greek names, Iamblichus decided to retain his Semitic name, perhaps to honor his noble ancestors, who included several priest-kings of Emesa. This choice was consistent with his general view of Greek culture for, like Plato (*Laws* 657a), he felt that the Greeks changed ancient traditions too capriciously and had too little respect for the 'old nations':

For the Greeks are naturally followers of novelty and, being volatile, are carried off everywhere, neither possessing any stability themselves, nor preserving what they

have received from others, but rapidly abandoning this, they transform everything through an unstable love of novel arguments. (Iamblichus, *DM VII.5*)

Therefore, in his philosophy, Iamblichus tried to harmonize the rational discourse of classical Greek philosophy with the ancient religious practices of Egypt, Assyria, and Chaldea.

Iamblichus wrote a great deal, but much of it has been lost. He also established the definitive neo-Platonic curriculum, which was followed for the next two centuries. The first part was his own *Collection of Pythagorean Doctrines* in ten books, a compendium of extracts from ancient philosophers. (Only the first four books, and perhaps fragments of the fifth, survive.) The next subject was the works of Plato and Aristotle, for which Iamblichus wrote a number of commentaries (only fragments survive). In particular, he set down the order in which the Platonic dialogues should be studied, for each was supposed to effect a specific transformation in the student's soul, and he also defined principles for their allegorical interpretation.

Already in the 6th century BC Pythagoreans had devised allegorical interpretations of Homer, and by the second century AD neo-Platonic philosophers had applied them to Plato's dialogues by distinguishing three or four levels of meaning, based on correspondences between the levels of reality (the macrocosm) or of human existence (the microcosm); but it was Iamblichus who systematized these methods of interpretation and applied them consistently. Neo-Platonic theologians had also applied allegorical methods to Jewish and Christian scriptures (as early as the 1st century AD), but Iamblichus' systematic formulation laid the foundations for biblical exegesis by theologians and also influenced others, such as Dante.

With his emphasis on respect for ancient wisdom, Iamblichus treated Plato's dialogues as divinely inspired scripture. He also accorded great respect to the *Chaldean Oracles*, a collection of inspired verses dating to perhaps the 2nd century AD. He devoted at least 28 books to their interpretation and taught their doctrine of *theurgy*, explained below.

Like other neo-Platonists, Iamblichus explained reality as an inevitable, hierarchical emanation into multiplicity from an Inexpressible One. Within the Inexpressible One are two opposed principles, Limit and the Unlimited (or the One and the Many), the mixture of which generates the levels of reality. The One is the ultimate principle of Limit, whereas the multiplicity of pure, unformed, chaotic matter is the ultimate expression of the Unlimited. The emanation proceeds through the Forms, the eternal archetypal principles of all things, to the World Soul, which unites the Forms with matter and thereby imparts order to the cosmos. The individual soul is a microcosm, that is, an image in miniature of the cosmos.

Love or Desire, conceived as a cosmic force (the active power of unity) and a deity (firstborn of the One), is essential to the structure of reality, for it coordinates the Forms and draws multiplicity into a cosmic unity. The One 'inserts, by union, the indissoluble principle of love, which supports and preserves both things that exist [eternally] and those that come into being' (*DM IV.12*), 'an affection that embraces all things, producing this bond through a certain ineffable communion' (*DM VI.10*).

Further, it is necessary for the One to proceed outward into matter—and for individual souls to become embodied—for otherwise desire could not manifest: there can be no desire without an ‘other’ to be desired. Thus, by means of embodied souls, the One loves and desires itself, and so binds the cosmos in unity.

Iamblichus’ view contrasts with that of the Gnostics and of some other neo-Platonists. Gnosticism refers to a loose group of 2nd century (primarily) Christian sects, which had adopted ideas from a variety of sources and practised rites directed toward salvation by *gnōsis*, knowing God. They shared with neoPlatonists the idea that reality is an emanation from the One, which makes it a divine unity, but like some neo-Platonists their focus on ascent to the divine led them to devalue this world. Iamblichus, however, did not consider matter to be evil or the embodied soul to be ‘fallen’. Rather, humans have an essential role in the creation and providential ordering of the cosmos, for ‘from the first descent, divinity sent souls down here so that they might return again to him’ (*DM VIII.8*). They fulfill this role best through the practice of theurgy.

‘Theurgy,’ which may be translated ‘god-work’, refers to practices (rituals) directed toward the gods, in contrast to theology (god-talk), which is rational discourse about the gods. It also refers to the subsequent action of the gods by which they transform the theurgist, for it aims at ‘purification, liberation, and salvation of the soul’ (*DM X.7*). The theoretical basis for theurgy is described in one of Iamblichus’ surviving works, *The Reply of the Master Abammon to ‘Porphyry’s Letter to Anebo’*, better known as *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians (De Mysteriis)*; it is a systematic reply to a number of objections raised by Porphyry against the practice of theurgy.

Theurgy is based on the idea that the Demiurge, the creator god of Plato, has organized matter in accord with the eternal Forms, and therefore material objects reveal the Forms and can be used as a means for the soul to realign itself with Providence and to unify itself with divinity. In particular, a theurgic rite makes use of certain *symbols* (signs, tokens), which the gods have imprinted with the Forms. ‘For there is nothing that is in the smallest degree assimilated to the gods, to which the gods are not immediately present and conjoined’ (*DM 1.15*). For example, the heliotrope is a symbol for the sun because it turns toward it, as is the cock because it heralds the rising sun. Likewise, the sun, as source of light and life, governing our cosmos, points toward the Inexpressible One. Similarly, the Demiurge has placed symbols within each embodied soul, but most people are unconscious of them.

Through emanation a unified, eternal Form is scattered into multiplicity in space and time. The theurgist attempts to restore the unity of the Form by reassembling its symbols: materials, objects, images, shapes, sounds (invocations, hymns), and so forth. In this way the theurgist creates a suitable receptacle for the god. In addition, these external symbols awaken the symbols in the theurgist’s soul, which bring it into alignment with the god.

Although Form proceeds from its essence into matter, by theurgy the embodied soul returns to its essence. Furthermore, the love or affinity that draws together all of a god’s symbols also draws the god and theurgist closer together. Therefore love, which has proceeded outward into the world, is redirected by the

theurgist back towards its source. Thus the theurgist completes the erotic circuit that binds the universe into a whole. ‘And with a knowledge of the gods there comes a conversion to, and a knowledge of, ourselves’ (*DM X.I*).

Iamblichus’ philosophy and theurgy were very influential on later neo-Platonists, such as Proclus (c. 410-485). From Proclus, in turn, perhaps by way of Damascius (fl. c.529), these ideas passed to pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century?), whose works laid the foundation of the Christian mystical tradition. Theurgy was rediscovered by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose Platonic Academy helped engender the Italian Renaissance. More recently, Iamblichus’ ideas have influenced the psychological theories and practices of C.G. Jung (1875–1961) and his followers.

### References and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Clarke, Emma C. *Iamblichus’ De Mysteriis: A Manifesto of the Miraculous*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.
- Dillon, John M., *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973. The introduction (in English!) is an excellent overview of his life, works, and philosophy.
- Fowden, Garth. *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*. Rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Chapters 5 and 6 are especially relevant to Iamblichus and theurgy.
- Iamblichus. *Iamblichus On the Mysteries and Life of Pythagoras*. Transl. Taylor, Vol. XVII of the Thomas Taylor Series. Somerset: Prometheus Trust, 1999. Classic 19th century translation, now outdated.
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- Shaw, Gregory. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.