

RIISING TO THE OCCASION: THEURGIC ASCENT IN ITS CULTURAL MILIEU

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During the first few centuries CE, the Mediterranean world experienced an explosion of interest in revelatory wisdom.¹ The traditional oracles—at Claros, Delphi, and elsewhere—enjoyed a renaissance, now answering questions such as ‘Who is Iao?’ as well as the older, standard queries such as ‘how can I beget children?’² Revelatory religions, including various forms of apocalypse-based, eschatologically oriented millennarianism, spread throughout the area. Hermeticism, Gnosticism and various other esoteric religions, all of which validated themselves through divine revelations, began their influential careers. As never before, the words of the gods resounded throughout the Mediterranean basin, sanctioning an amazing variety of spiritual and political endeavors.

From out of this hubbub of divine voices emerged theurgy, an esoteric, revelatory religion that took as its authoritative basis the *Chaldean Oracles*, dactylic-hexameter poems that were divinely dictated to the sect’s leaders in the mid-second century CE.³ Theurgy was to

¹ Some of the ideas developed in this paper were initially explored during a 1995 fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study, and particularly in the context of Peter Schäfer’s seminar on magic and religion. I wish to thank the participants in the seminar for their helpful remarks, especially Professor Schäfer, Philippe Borgeaud and Glen Bowersock. I am also grateful for help provided by Michael Swartz while I was revising the paper for publication. Most particularly, I would like once again to thank David Frankfurter, that most stimulating of intellectual sparring partners, for the many challenging questions that he has raised in my mind during the past eight years, concerning this topic and others.

² Cornelius Labeo ap. Macrobian. *Sat.* I.18, 20. Cf. Lane Fox, particularly ch. 5; Athanassiadi 1991; Parke esp. 72–81.

³ Basic secondary literature on the ritual aspects of theurgy includes Johnston 1992 and 1990, Majercik, Luck, Shaw, Des Places, Geudtner, Cremer, Dodds, Lewy, Theiler, Kroll. The bibliographies in Johnston and Majercik give further references to works on specific questions. For works on the philosophical side of theurgy, see Majercik and Shaw, with bibliographies. In order to save space, I will not cite these scholars in my notes unless their views substantially anticipated or differ from mine.

enjoy a long life: it was still going strong when Proclus led the Academy in the fifth century and it flourished again, ten centuries later, in the writings of Marsilio Ficino and other Renaissance thinkers. One reason for its success was its flexibility: like many esoteric religions, theurgy left much to the imagination and therefore interpretation of its disciples: it could adjust itself well to the differing requirements of its followers. Pliancy alone, however, is never a guarantee of survival: the infinitely pliant religion soon dissolves. Some of theurgy's success must be credited to qualities that stayed the same—qualities that enabled it to thrive in the highly competitive marketplace of revelatory religions. It will be the task of this essay to discuss those qualities and particularly to focus, in the last and longest portion, on the most innovative: its creation of a ritual to achieve ascent of the soul while the individual was still alive. Although some other systems developed ascent rituals in later antiquity, the theurgic rite, so far as our sources indicate, was the earliest.⁴

Some preparatory remarks: in this article, I will restrict myself primarily to discussing theurgy as it is represented in the *Chaldean Oracles*. Unless I indicate otherwise, I will, correspondingly, use the term 'theurgy' and its cognates ('theurgical', 'theurgist') to refer to the 'Chaldean'⁵ form, rather than, for example, the altered form of

The fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* are cited by the numbers given in Majercik, which agree almost completely with those given in Des Place. Translations are my own.

⁴ Iamblichus tells us that the Hermetic priest Bitys wrote a whole book about it (*de myst.* 8.5.267–8). Lucian's satirical dialogue about a philosopher strapping an eagle's wing and a vulture's wing to his shoulders in order to visit the heavens hints that the idea of voluntary ascent was abroad in the late second century (*Icaromenippus*). Plotinus' pupils said he ascended to God four times during his life (Porph., *VPlot.* 23; cf. Dodds 286). In the late third century, Arnobius of Sicca wrote about *magoi* who taught their disciples to send their souls soaring to the heavens with the aid of magical seals and prayers (*Adv. Gen.* 2.62b cf. 2.13). The so-called Mithras Liturgy, handed down to us on a fourth-century papyrus, is an elaborate set of instructions for ascent (*PGM* IV.475–829).

Himmelfarb (to name the most recent treatment) offers good reasons for not understanding Jewish and Christian texts of the first two centuries BCE and CE as real ascent 'recipes'; more on this issue below, pp. 175–176. Majercik 44 thinks that some Gnostic texts describe rites for ascents during life; I would agree with the *opinio communis*, however, that the ascents described are postmortem (cf. Filoramo 139–41, Cuianu 11).

⁵ As I argue in a forthcoming article, the application of the term 'Chaldean' to these Oracles, which is first attested in Iamblichus, does not reflect their real ethnic origins ('"Chaldean" Oracles and the Hellenization of Mediterranean Magic'). I will continue to use the term 'Chaldean', however, as a short-hand way of referring to the Oracles and their religious system.

theurgy later practiced by Iamblichus. This is not to imply that later developments are unimportant for a full understanding of the phenomenon and its success; rather, it reflects the desire to keep the size of this essay within reasonable limits. Brevity will also prevent me from discussing all of the evidence available on even the circumscribed topic I have chosen. I will focus almost exclusively on what the Oracle fragments themselves say about ascent, turning to the remarks of later authors only when they are crucial to the point at hand. This has the additional advantage of avoiding what are often misleading interpretations on the part of the exegetes, who sometimes import elements from other esoteric systems into their interpretations. I also will leave untreated some aspects of theurgic ascent in the interest of discussing others in detail. Finally, throughout this article, 'Oracle' (with a capital 'O') refers to fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles*.

Revelation

Mediterranean revelation could on take a variety of forms.⁶ God or his messenger could descend to earth to speak to a chosen recipient (Isis to Lucius in Apul. *Met.* 11; the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*). Alternatively, the recipient could be snatched away by god or his messenger to otherworldly places ('rapture'), where he would see and hear with his own eyes and ears the marvels that demonstrated truths he was to carry home to the mortal world (Er in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic* [614b–621b]; the *Testament of Levi*). Revelation could also take place at an established oracular shrine (Claros, Delphi),⁷ or by means of dreams or dream-like visions (The *Shepherd of Hermas*; Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*).⁸

The mode in which these revelations were conveyed to the rest of

⁶ Many of these are usefully discussed in Collins. See also Frankfurter 1996, and Filoramo 31–34 for discussion of revelation in the Imperial age and later antiquity in particular. Cf. also Smith 1978, 67–87, for the influence of scribality and for discussion of the phenomenon in general.

⁷ Cf. Lane Fox esp. ch. 4; Athanassiadi 1991.

⁸ See most recently Miller pt. 2; Athanassiadi 1993; Eitrem; Lane Fox 150–67. As Lane Fox discusses, personal, quotidian dreams (as opposed to those with cosmic or eschatological significance) also made for big business in later antiquity. Perhaps the oddest example of revelation by dream is that of Aedesius (Eunap. *VSoph.* 464–5). It should be noted that quite a few of the spells of the *PGM* are for obtaining of dreams (e.g., VII.664–85).

the world varied, too. Often, the revelation was framed by a story that purported to describe the circumstances under which the god had appeared to the individual or the individual had been snatched away. The Jewish *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the Christian *Ascension of Isaiah* and Plato's tale of Er contextualized their revelatory material in this way, for example. Such frames legitimated the revelation and thus the information it conveyed in one or both of two ways. 1) Often, they surrounded their revelations with mysterious circumstances such as near-death experiences (Plato's Er, Plutarch's Timarchus)⁹ and frightening atmospheric disturbances (earthquakes, blasts of lightning);¹⁰ this served to give the material greater authority and glamor. 2) Frequently, they moved it to the distant past and/or associated it with a legendary holy man of earlier days such as Nechepso, Abraham or Moses.¹¹ Sometimes, especially in later antiquity, this sort of frame took the form of a revelatory book: a seeker of knowledge (e.g., Thesalos) was said to discover a long-forgotten text, written centuries before by a famous holy man or even a god, which contained cosmological or technical secrets.¹² Frames also served, occasionally, as a way of adapting revelatory material from another religious system to one's own: the revelatory material might remain virtually the same but be transferred to the mouth and thus the authority of a new figure and setting.¹³

Whatever the purpose, however, when a revelation was framed, its 'author' (that is, the person reciting or writing the work, as opposed to the person experiencing the revelation within the story) served as a secondary proselyte of the new information rather than as the central figure himself. Socrates—who is himself a character within Plato's dialogue—tells the story of Er. Revelations *without* frames, in contrast—direct recitations of occult knowledge as in the Mithras Liturgy—empowered the narrator himself and privileged his narration in a different way. These revelations were here-and-now, and therefore by implication were immediately relevant to the circumstances under which the auditors lived. Contemporaneity also helped to remove

⁹ Timarchus: Plut. *de gen. Socr.* 21–22 (589f–592e).

¹⁰ *Apocryphon of John* II.1.30–22.2; I Enoch 14.8; *Chaldean Oracle* frs. 146–48 (on which, see below pp. 190–191); *PGM* IV.694–98 (= the 'Mithras Liturgy').

¹¹ Smith 1978 172–89; on Moses as the revealer of all magical knowledge, Gager.

¹² On this see Smith 1978, 172–89.

¹³ On this point and on the significance of framing generally, see Frankfurter 1996 135–37 and 159; Himmelfarb 96–103; Smith 1978 esp. 77–8 and Koenen 1968 with Koenen 1970, 249–54.

any doubt as to whether the information had been transmitted accurately. Hesiod understood this quite well. When he described *himself* as pasturing sheep on Mt. Helicon when the Muses appeared and endowed him with the power to sing about the origins of the world, he insisted on the fact that he himself was a confidant of the gods, and incontrovertibly legitimated, thereby, the version of the theogony he was about to recite (*Theog.* 1–46).

This brings me to the first important point about theurgy. Like Hesiod, the founders of theurgy represented themselves as the direct recipients of divine revelation. Hekate and Apollo were supposed to have spoken the verses of what later became known as the *Chaldean Oracles* to Julian the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist themselves; this is why the extant fragments are couched in the form of first-person addresses to the second person singular.¹⁴ In contrast to many revelations of the time, then, the messages of the Oracles were legitimated not by purported age or legendary source, but by the direct, personal involvement of those who were promulgating them. It should be noted that this is particularly unusual for esoteric revelatory materials coming out of a *post-classical Greek* background. Although there are a few archaic and early classical poems that present themselves as direct revelations (Hesiod's *Theogony*, Parmenides' poem on the nature of being, some Orphic poems and, apparently, the lost *Arimaspea* of Aristeeas),¹⁵ by and large, Greek sources, especially during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, preferred to frame their revelatory knowledge (e.g., the story of Er, Plato's *Axiochus*, Plutarch's three revelatory stories, Heraclides Ponticus' story of Empedotimus).¹⁶

Theurgy did, nonetheless, manage to validate itself by reference to long established and revered sources of wisdom. For, like some other esoteric religions of the time, the Oracles resonated with Platonic doctrines. The Platonic Cosmic Soul, the Platonic Ideas and Platonic Eros all had important cosmological and soteriological roles to play in the theurgic system.¹⁷ Platonic metaphor is found as well: the theurgist's soul had Phaedrean wings and had to be reined in like a

¹⁴ Later devotees frequently refer to them as θεοπαράδοτα, e.g., Marinus *VProc.* 26; Psellus *PG* 1132 c, *Procl. in Rem.* I.111, 1. Cf. the discussion of Lewy 6–7.

¹⁵ On Orpheus, see West esp. 5–7. On Aristeeas, Bremmer 34 and Bolton.

¹⁶ Plutarch: *de gen. soc.* 589f–592e, *de fac.* 940f–945d, *de ser.* 563b–568a; Heracl. Pont. frs. 93–98 Wehrli.

¹⁷ Cosmic Soul: Johnston 1990 *passim*. Platonic Ideas: Johnston 1990 ch. 7 and earlier works cited there. Platonic Eros: Geudtner 34–41, Cremer 139–43. More broadly on the whole topic: Lewy ch. 6.

Phaedrean horse, for example (Oracle frs. 85, 97, 113, 127). The cumulative effect is such as to suggest that the gods themselves were finally declaring, through their chosen messengers, what the esteemed Plato had hinted at five centuries earlier. Theurgy gave place of privilege to other old Greek values as well; in fact, its Hellenism was almost militant, as if to challenge the popular images of Egypt and the East as the homes of magic and esoteric knowledge.¹⁸ It worshipped deities such as Apollo and Hekate and used the language of Homer, for example.¹⁹ This aggressive Hellenism was probably one of the reasons that theurgy was attractive to the Emperor Julian, who sought to reinstate what he believed to have been traditional paganism. Despite its newness, theurgy could present itself as 'homegrown' esoterica, recommended by familiar gods and commending familiar philosophical schools.

The image of theurgic revelations as recent was enhanced by the fact that the theurgist could bring them on himself. Like the *γόνος*, the theurgist knew words and actions that could invoke the gods. Thus, when he wanted information about the way the cosmos worked and his role within it, he need not leave divine favor to chance, as had Enoch, Er and Scipio: he called on the gods and requested answers. That the gods fully approved of this is implied by the fact that they were the ones who taught the theurgist how to do it. In frs. 146, 147 and 148 of the Oracles, for example, Hekate describes to the theurgist the divine epiphanies that will appear and speak to him after he has recited certain words that she has taught him. In fr. 142, she explains that, although the gods have no true form that mortals can comprehend, they graciously assume comprehensible forms when they make their epiphanies out of consideration for the theurgists.²⁰ Nor was it only esoteric cosmological and soteriological information that the gods bestowed on the theurgist. Like many a magician of the time, he learned his magical *technai* from the gods as well. In fr. 224, for example, Hekate teaches the theurgist how to construct a statuette of herself, which he can use in further rituals. This idea of learning magic from the gods had old roots: in *Odyssey* 10.277–307, Hermes unexpectedly appears to Odysseus, gives him a

¹⁸ For a recent discussion of this phenomenon, see Fowden 1986, with bibliography of earlier work.

¹⁹ This is a topic that I take up in more depth in a forthcoming article, "Chaldean" Oracles and the Hellenization of Mediterranean Magic'. Cf. Johnston 1992 and Lewy s.v. 'Homeric expressions' in the index.

²⁰ Cf. Lane Fox 106, who points out that this motif goes all the way back to Homer.

magical plant and tells him how to use it; in *Pythian* 4.213–19, Aphrodite gives Jason an *ynx* and teaches him how to whirl it. But just as the theurgist improved on the old apocalyptic tradition, in which revelations came only unexpectedly, so he surpassed traditional heroes such as Odysseus and Jason, who could only hope for technical help from the gods.²¹

Location

The theurgists were not the only sources of direct revelation during the Imperial Age. Another significant source would have been the traditional oracular shrines, which, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, were answering newer, more recondite kinds of question. Like theurgy and other revealed religions, some of these oracles could even offer a complete *modus vivendi* for those who sought it: Philostratus tells us that Apollonius of Tyana descended into the subterranean oracle of Trophonius in Lebadea in order to ask the god which philosophical school preached the true way (*VA* 8.19). By the first century CE, the ancient shrine apparently had become known as a place to gain such knowledge. The answer that Apollonius received may be more revealing than the fact that he posed the question, however: Trophonius acclaimed the teachings of Pythagoras, thus sanctioning the lifestyle that Apollonius had already embraced. Who was validating whom in this exchange? Did the established shrine or the new holy man come out on top?²²

Even if oracles and holy men gave similar advice in some instances however, oracular shrines did differ from the personal revelations of a holy man in several ways. Although immediate and tailored to the occasion, the revelations of some popular oracles were not really, in fact, direct: the gods usually delivered them through the mouths of a pythia or other inspired representative, whose words were then mediated by a priest and/or interpreter. At these shrines, at least, the enquirer had little opportunity to experience prophetic charisma himself.²³

²¹ Cf. Graf 1994a 162–3 and 1994b 110–113, who rightly notes that earlier holy men also were portrayed as learning their craft from the gods.

²² Cf. *VA* 4.1 and the remarks of Athanassiadi 1991.

²³ There were exceptions to this rule, most notably the oracular temple in Talmis where the god called Mandulis Aion appeared to at least one enquirer in a spectacular vision (Nock).

And the opportunity for adherents to experience personal charisma is an important element in understanding the success of theurgy and other religious movements that centered on individual teachers. Witness the extraordinary career of Alexander of Abonoteichus. Certainly, he had great personal charm to begin with, if we can believe Lucian (*Alex.* 3–5), but just as certainly, every miraculous prediction he made from the steps of Apollo's temple (*Alex.* 18–24) increased his fame. His 'autophonic' oracles, in which Asclepius spoke directly to the inquirer through the mouth of the pet snake wound around Alexander's shoulders, must have been particularly compelling; if, again, we can believe what Lucian tells us, one of them convinced a Roman governor to undertake an ill-advised and ultimately disastrous invasion (*Alex.* 27).²⁴

Like Alexander, the promulgators of theurgy undoubtedly had a great deal of charisma, judging from the remarkable collection of 'miracle' stories that grew up around them. Proclus said that they could conjure men's souls in and out of their bodies. The younger one supposedly accompanied Marcus Aurelius on campaign, aiding him in battle by creating masks that could throw thunderbolts at the enemy, by splitting stones with magical commands, and by conjuring up a rain storm to save the army from dying of thirst. This latter miracle was coveted by a number of religions in antiquity: Christians, Egyptians, and theurgists all tried to claim it for their own gurus. According to a Christian legend, the younger Julian competed with Apuleius and Apollonius to end a plague that was threatening Rome: Apuleius stopped it in one section of the city in fifteen days, Apollonius in another section in ten, but Julian was able to stop it immediately, with a single magical command.²⁵ This story, like the rain miracle, moved Julian into the big leagues of charismatic power. Although the veracity of all of these stories is open to question, the

It should also be noted that Psellus, writing in the twelfth century, hypothesized that the Juliani's role in transmitting the Oracles was no more than that of the Delphic priest: he suggested that they simply turned the gibberish of possessed mediums into neat hexameters that suited their needs (*Scripta Minora* I.241.29). On the history of the question of the relationship between the Juliani and the Oracles, Dodds 284.

²⁴ Cf. Brown 1981 esp. 106–7 and 120–22; Frankfurter 1996 esp. 131–33. On Alexander, Lane Fox 244–50.

²⁵ Conjuring souls: Proc. *In Rem.* 2.123.9; thunder-throwing mask: Psellus, *Script. Min.* I.446.28; splitting stone: Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* I.18; rain miracle: Suid. s.v. Ἰουλιανός (434 Adler) and see Fowden 1987 and Sage; plague: St. Anast. Sinai, PG 89, col. 525a.

fact that the founders of theurgy attracted such tales to themselves indicates their power as magnetic leaders. As Peter Brown has noted, any thaumaturgic *coup de théâtre* that we hear about bespeaks an immense amount of prestige and power that had been slowly accrued by the holy man through day-in, day-out interaction with his followers; 'the miracle condenses and validates a situation built up by more discreet means'.²⁶

By serving as the focus of his religious movement, the charismatic leader obviated the need for any geographic center of sacred power. He himself became the 'cosmic axis', connecting mortal to immortal, earth to heaven, and he moderated their interaction.²⁷ An interesting demonstration of this point is offered by another episode in Philostratus' biography of Apollonius. Initially denied admission to the Eleusinian mysteries because, the hierophant said, he was a γόνις, Apollonius retorted that he knew the real reason: it was because he understood the mysteries more deeply than the hierophant himself: how could the lesser man initiate the greater? When the crowd applauded Apollonius's remark, the hierophant reversed his decision, only to be rebuffed by Apollonius, who prophesized that he would be initiated some years later, after another hierophant had assumed office. While not rejecting traditional, locus-based cult, Apollonius—the itinerant, charismatic holy man, in whom spiritual power dwelt—demonstrated its subordination to him.²⁸ Similarly, although theurgy adopted a number of practices from traditional Greek religion and, so far as we can tell, never spoke against any of its established shrines or mysteries,²⁹ it formally affiliated itself with none of the famous religious centers. We get very few glimpses of the theurgist in action, but when we do, like Apollonius he seems to be a peripetetic practitioner: Julian travelled on campaign with Marcus Aurelius and worked his miracles where they were needed, Iamblichus used theurgy to demonstrate a point

²⁶ Brown 1981 esp. 105–106 and 120–21. I should note that, throughout this essay, I use the term 'holy man' more broadly than Brown does, to include as well the category that he would define instead as *'theios anēr'*.

²⁷ Cf. the remarks of Brown 1981 151–2 and Smith 1978, 172–89.

²⁸ Philostr. *VA* 4.18, cf. Eus. *Treatise against Philostr.* *VA* 26. A very similar drama was played out at the shrine of Trophonius, which I mentioned above (*VA* 8.19); there, in fact, Trophonius himself appeared and rebuked his priests for rejecting Apollonius. Philostratus' work is full of examples where Apollonius upholds traditional cults and yet proves his superiority to them by 'correcting' the rites that are being practiced; cf. also for example *VA* 4.24.

²⁹ It did, however, speak against some traditional means of prophecy: see fr. 107.

about Platonic Love at a local bathing spot (Eunap. *VSoph.* 459). Maximus practiced theurgy in Ephesus, Proclus in Athens, Iamblichus in Syria. Sosipatra was initiated into the Chaldean mysteries at her home, by two divine strangers who arrived on the doorstep one day and asked her father to leave, turning over the girl to their care. The astonished man did just that (Eunap. *VSoph.* 467–8).

Lack of geographic affiliation made a striking statement in a late antique world that offered, perhaps, too many potential loci of spiritual power: Eleusis, Samothrace, Stratonicea, Alexandria, Thebes, Ephesus and Rome, to name just a few, were replete with monuments, redolent with centuries of mythic *aitia*. Where amongst all of these was a new cult, promoting a new message, to locate its spiritual center? Perhaps the best place was no place at all. This would have been a particularly smart choice when the very thrust of the cult was anti-material, as was the case with theurgy: in refusing to plant itself in any place within the physical world, theurgy reiterated its message that spiritual fulfillment lay outside of this world altogether.³⁰

Ritual: preparation for the ascent

Theurgy, then, offered a revelatory religion that aligned with many of the popular trends of the age and yet improved upon them. Overall, its biggest advantage might be described as 'immediacy'. Rather than represent its doctrines as ancient revelations, theurgy used the past to endorse what it presented as its own, contemporary revelations. Rather than wait for those revelations to occur, theurgy learned to cause them, and learned its magical techniques from the gods as well. Rather than tie itself to any of the numerous locales that already

³⁰ There were, it should be noted, other reasons that religions might adopt this policy: the *orpheotelestai*, itinerant priests who wandered the Greek countryside during the classical period, initiating those would pay into the mysteries of Orpheus, and the *metragyrtai*, itinerant priests of Cybele during the Imperial Age, rejected a fixed locale because they aimed to spread their cult as far as possible, initiating as many people as possible. This was certainly not a concern of theurgy, which began as and always remained a religion for the most intellectually and socio-economically elite.

Cf. also the remarks of Smith 1995, on the rejection of permanent temples in favor of temporary sacral space on the part of magicians during later antiquity; Smith emphasizes the practical advantages of mobility. Also Smith 1978, 172–89, which reprises his thesis (explored in several earlier articles) that the transference of spiritual power from temple to holy man is a reaction to the cessation of localized political power. Cf. also Frankfurter 1996, 174.

had sacred associations, theurgy located power within the individual and thus made it infinitively transportable, as well as making the individual the focus of the movement and rejecting earthly concerns. Rather than rebelling against the current political regime, theurgy subtly legitimated it.

But the most striking attestation of theurgy's immediacy is yet to be discussed: its development of ritualized ascent. During ascent, the soul of the theurgist visited the noetic (heavenly) sphere. The 'rapture' stories that I briefly mentioned above undoubtedly served as ideological predecessors to ritualized ascent by suggesting that such journeys were possible. They could not, however, serve as practical models, for the enraptured individual seldom did anything to cause his ascent; god or god's messengers chose him and usually did all of the work.³¹ Moreover, the purpose for which the theurgist ascended was significantly different from that of the enraptured individual. The former ascended and interacted with the gods in order to derive personal spiritual benefits; the latter usually returned from his trip with important information for his society and was charged with disseminating it. Indeed, as Segal, Himmelfarb and others have noted, the underlying purpose of many rapture stories was the establishment of a theodicy or new eschatological doctrine. Schäfer and Himmelfarb have further argued that even those with very specific descriptions of the ascent are intended for liturgical recitation as part of worship rather than for imitation.³²

Another likely ideological precursor to theurgic ascent is what some scholars have called the Greek 'shamanistic' tradition.³³ Beginning in the archaic age, stories were told about men such as Abaris and Hermetimus, whose souls travelled great distances over the earth while their bodies remained behind, seemingly dead.³⁴ Like the ascent rites

³¹ Exceptions: in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Paul speaks passwords as he ascends (*NHC* V.5.19–23, 23.18–28); Allogenes 'prepares himself' for an ascent that has been promised him (*NHC* XI.3.57.29–39; the text does not specify how, however); in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, God commands Abraham to fast before he is taken to heaven (9.7–8).

³² Segal 1341–45; Himmelfarb 5, 95–8, 106–110; Schäfer 140, 150–55.

³³ I will not enter into a discussion of its geographic origins here, or the appropriateness of the term 'shamanistic' when talking about Greek materials. See Dodds ch. 5, and Bremmer for arguments *contra*.

³⁴ For a résumé of the topic, see Dodds ch. 5, and more recently, Bolton and Bremmer (criticism). Culianu 1, briefly discusses Greek shamanism as a precedent for ascent.

of later times, at least some of these shamanistic journeys were undertaken voluntarily, by means of rituals that included fasting and undressing.³⁵ Unlike the later ascents, however, the shamanistic journeys did not involve travel to the heavenly regions, so far as we can tell. Moreover, as was the case with involuntary journeys, the shamanistic travellers typically brought back important religious or geographical information that they would pass on to others; sometimes they also used their skills to end plagues or other disasters. There is no indication that the journeys brought any benefit to their own souls. In fact, in most cases, the souls of both the shamanistic travellers and the enraptured travellers were exceptional to begin with; this was why they were chosen for their journeys.

The theurgic ascender, then, represented a new type, who resembled the holy men who had gone before him in some ways but by no means simply replicated them. As I will show below, an equally strong influence on the development of theurgic ascent was the traditional mystery religion, which promised spiritual benefits to the individual initiate.

Although ascent was the highest goal of the theurgist, it was preceded by other rites. In order to understand ascent completely, therefore, within the fuller context of theurgy itself as well as the context of other contemporary movements, we need to start at the beginning.³⁶

Before the ascent

The vocabulary of several fragments indicates that the theurgist underwent some sort of initiation. *Chaldean Oracle* fr. 132, for example, includes the term *μύστης*:

Keep silent, initiate (*μύστα*)!

³⁵ See the story of Abaris, as told at Hdt. 4.36 and that of Hermotimus, as told by Pliny, *HN* 7, 174 and Apollonius *Mirab.* 3 Discussion at Bremmer 38.

³⁶ One question that I will eliminate from further consideration at the start is whether the extraordinary form of contemplation described in a few Oracle fragments was part of ritualized theurgic ascent, or, instead, was a separate exercise (e.g., frs. 1, 9a). I do not reject the question because it is unimportant—far the contrary. Rather, I do so because, in my opinion, the evidence is too fragmentary to support any conclusion. I will focus on the physical rites associated with ascension, for which our information is somewhat fuller. For comments on contemplation and references to earlier discussions, see Majercik 33–46 and Shaw.

and fr. 135 includes the verb *τελέσθαι* and its cognate noun *τελετή*:

For it is necessary that you do not look upon [these dogs] before you initiate your body (*πρὶν σῶμα τελεσθῆς*);
For being chthonic, difficult dogs, they are shameless,
And enchanting souls forever they lead them away from the initiations (*τελετῶν*).

Details are lacking. The only bit of information we get directly from the fragments themselves is that initiation protected the theurgist's body against dangerous, corrupting demons (referred to as 'dogs'), who would otherwise attempt to obstruct his progress.³⁷

Even so, the very use of the words *μύστα*, *τελεσθῆς* and *τελετῶν* are significant. Assuming that they carry the same implications here as they do in cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries, we can infer that the theurgist experienced something that endowed him with special knowledge and that changed his status, either within a group of his peers, in relationship to the gods, or both.³⁸ 'Both' is probably the likeliest. The whole point of ascent was for the theurgist to enhance his relationship to the gods by undergoing theurgic rituals, as will become clearer by the end of this article. The use of the word 'priest' (*ἱερεὺς*) in fr. 133 (quoted below, p. 179) implies a hierarchy of participants, particularly in combination with the use, in fr. 132, of the word *μύστης* to describe the initiate himself. Thus, a theurgic group, rather than individually isolated theurgists, seems implied. The group need not have been large; from what we can tell, training and initiation took place on a one-to-one level, or within the context of a small group of disciples, some of whom were even related to each other; this would have heightened the exclusivity of these esoteric mysteries. We hear about 'Julian the Chaldean' teaching his son 'Julian the Theurgist' and, in later times, about Maximus of Ephesus privately instructing the Emperor Julian. Maximus himself had been a student of Aedesius, the student of Iamblichus. Aedesius was a close friend of Sosipatra, whose son Antoninus was also a theurgist. Maximus,

³⁷ On the dogs and other fragments related to this one, see Johnston 1990 ch. 9.

³⁸ Many of the exegetes describe theurgic initiations as mysteries, too. Proclus goes so far as to say that there were three degrees of initiation (*τελετή, μύσις, ἐποπτεία*), just as in the Eleusinian mysteries (*Theol. Platon.* 4.16). Further see Lewy's index, s.v. 'mystery-religions, terminology'. The magic rites of the Imperial Age frequently adopted the terminology and sometimes even the practices of mystery religions. See Graf 1994a and 1995b, 114–37, and Betz 1991. The differences between the ways in which theurgy and magic reflected the mysteries will be discussed below.

too, was an associate of Sosipatra. Proclus was initiated by Asclepiogeneia, the daughter of the theurgist Plutarch, himself the son of the theurgist Nestorius.³⁹

Both the restricted nature of the group and the chain of discipleship would have aligned theurgists with other mystics of the time such as the Hermetics, who validated themselves through affiliation with prestigious teachers, some of whom had learned their skills from the gods themselves, as well as with the way in which the magical papyri present spells as being handed down, from one individual to another.⁴⁰ The Mithras Liturgy, in fact, purports to be the recitation of a father to his daughter, which reminds us of Plutarch and Asclepiogeneia. It is notable that most of the theurgists whom we know by name were either members of the important philosophical schools (Proclus, for example, belonged to the Athenian Academy) or the Imperial family. Clearly, theurgy was an intellectual's pursuit, lacking any ambition to draw large numbers of adherents. In this sense it stands in stark contrast to many other religions of the time, such as Mithraism, which similarly emphasized a concern for the fate of the soul and had a heliocentric basis with some underlying platonic notions, but which spread widely throughout the Empire among all classes.⁴¹ It also stands in some contrast to traditional magic, as Graf has portrayed it. The magician, Graf argues, sought to isolate himself, to find power in separation from and even rejection of his culture, perhaps because he felt this singled him in the eyes of the gods, perhaps because it singled him out in the eyes of those whose business he desired. The theurgist (and others like him) sought instead to build a small community of like-minded people. There was exclusivity, and separation from *hoi polloi*, certainly, but not an utter and deliberate isolation from all other individuals. The model—for this and other aspects of theurgy, as we shall see—was the traditional mystery cult, but a mystery cult significantly limited by the difficulty of its

³⁹ On the Juliani, see Psellus *de Aur. Cat.* 217, 2–7 (quoted and discussed by Lewy, 224 n. 195 and 252 n. 96). On Proclus, Marinus, *VProc.* 28. The story of all the other relationships is told by Eunapius, *VSoph.* see esp. 461–75.

⁴⁰ Fowden 1986 esp. part III. Graf (1994a 164) would understand the statement that a spell has been handed down from parent to child (found in several papyri of the *PGM*) as only a *topos* used to accredit the spell. This may well be correct in the case of the *PGM*.

⁴¹ Cf. the remarks of Brown 1981 *passim*, who emphasizes the fact that in later antiquity, holy men served primarily the lower classes.

intellectual and spiritual requirements to those few who had leisure and access to a competent teacher.⁴²

There probably were certain rites that, once undertaken, never had to be repeated by the theurgist. But some other changes described by the term 'initiation' were of only short duration, and repeatable. Fr. 133 says:

In the first place, let the priest himself, the one guiding the rituals of the fire,

Be sprinkled with the icy waves of the deep-echoing sea.

Proclus, from whose treatise on the *Cratylus* we derive this fragment, says that it describes purification rituals that precede initiation. If, as Theiler has convincingly suggested (pp. 291–93), 'rituals of the fire' refers to ascent itself, then Proclus' comment suggests that the initiatory process was considered to be complete only when ascent itself had taken place. This would help to explain the reference to 'bodily' initiation in fr. 135, which I quoted above (p. 177). We can hypothesize that at an earlier stage, the theurgist initiated his body to ward off the demonic influences that could obstruct the later stages of initiation and ascent; his soul was then initiated during ascent itself.

One does not ascend to heaven and stay there unless one is dead, of course. Proclus refers to theurgic ascent as 'immortalization', *ἀπαθανατισμός*,⁴³ which has a permanent ring to our ears, trained as we are to think in terms of the dichotomy 'immortal vs. mortal', and yet the Mithras Liturgy specifically mentions 'immortalization' procedures that last only a day and that can be undertaken up to three times a year (line 747). Clearly, 'becoming immortal' (*ἀπαθανατισμός*) did not mean that the Liturgist became a god, as Heracles had for example, but rather that for the duration of the ritual he was of a status equal to the gods, or perhaps simply that he was protected from death. Surely the same is true of the immortalization that resulted from theurgic ascent. Perhaps, in fact, when speaking of this highest level of theurgic initiation it would be better to translate the Greek word *τελέσθαι* as 'to be perfected' or 'completed': during ascent, the soul

⁴² On the self-imposed isolation of the magician, see Graf 1994a and 1994b 114–37. Graf rightly notes that the magician also used the terminology of the mysteries to describe his initiation (which was often a 'self' initiation) and adopted some other features of the mysteries, but emphasizes the general *lack* of community among magicians. See also Betz 1991.

⁴³ *Proc. In Rem.* I.152.10.

of the theurgist enjoyed a moment of perfection, in much the same way as the soul described in the *Phaedrus* enjoyed momentary bliss when it rose to gaze upon the divine realm before falling back to earth.⁴⁴

Before leaving the topic of theurgic initiation, let us return for a moment to the bodily initiation mentioned in fr. 135. Like many other entities described in the Oracles, the demonic 'dogs' against which initiation was to protect the theurgist had two referents: on the one hand, the dogs represented the material desires and corporal passions that the theurgist, like many platonists of the time, were taught to reject in favor of spiritual concerns.⁴⁵ Initiation might magically help the theurgist resist these. On the other hand, ancient sources also tell us that real demons threatened to interrupt theurgic rites: Oracle fr. 149 mentions a terrestrial demon whom the theurgist must avert with a magical stone and an invocation of a more powerful, beneficent demon; the exegetes describe other *apotropaia* used by the theurgists. Gregory Nazianzus tells of how Maximus of Ephesus had to ward off demons from Julian, as they descended into a subterranean temple for Julian's initiation.⁴⁶

This idea that demons would attempt to thwart an initiate's progress was far from new: much earlier, demons had persecuted initiates into the traditional Greek mysteries. The orator Demosthenes described the initiates into some mystery (he does not say which) as being frightened by demonic apparitions leaping out of the dark. Origen talks of ghosts and demons who appear during the Bacchic mysteries; is this, perhaps, what the dark and winged female in the Pompeian frescoes represents? Proclus tells about how 'the effluvia of chthonic demons and phantoms became manifest during the holiest of mysteries [i.e., the Eleusinian], terrifying those who wanted to be initiated, distracting them from the gods' gifts and drawing them towards the material [world]'; Aristophanes' *Frogs* 283–305 probably parodies this part of the Eleusinian mysteries by the sudden arrival of the repulsive

⁴⁴ Contrast the remarks of Graf 1994a 164, who suggests translating such uses of the verb (when it occurs in the *PGM*) as 'consecrate', and suggests that an important purpose of such rites would be to protect the magician against hostile divine powers. On the repeatability of some processes, cf. his remarks on pp. 167–71.

⁴⁵ Johnston 1990 ch. 9.

⁴⁶ For fr. 149, see the discussion at Psellus, *PG* 122 1148 b 13–c 14 (pace Lewy 289 n. 116). For further examples of theurgic phylacteries, Lewy 290–93. On demons threatening Julian's initiation, Greg. Naz. *Orat. IV in Julian.*, 55.

Empousa.⁴⁷ In its belief that demons would interrupt initiation, as in its use of initiation in general, theurgy aligned with older Greek mysteries.

Beginning the ascent

Because the earlier 'rapture' stories gave few if any hints as to how one might initiate ascent, those who wanted to do so had to start from scratch. Given the sort of analogic thinking that underlay much Mediterranean magic and science, it would be natural for the prospective ascender to begin by making his soul similar to the stuff of the heavenly realm that he was trying to reach. This was imagined to be hot and radiant, like the Sun.⁴⁸ The theurgist received some divine aid from *angeloi*, for fr. 122 says that they helped the soul of the theurgist separate from his body by 'causing it to shine with fire' (τὴν ψυχὴν φέγγουσα πυρί). Oracle fr. 123 seems to describe the same process when it mentions that the *angeloi* 'lighten' the soul of the theurgist with a 'warm breath' (... πνεύματι θερμῷ/κουφίζουσα ...).

But the theurgist had work to do on his own, as well. Fragment 124 reminds the theurgist that 'those who send out their souls by means of inhaling are set free' (ψυχῆς ἐξωστήρες ἀνάπνοοι εὐλντοὶ εἰσιν). Fragment 130 talks about souls 'drawing in' the 'flames that descend from the Father', so as to be nourished and eventually 'repose in God'. Together, these fragments suggest that the theurgists 'inhaled' or 'drew in' the fiery essence of the heavenly sphere in order to release their souls upwards.⁴⁹ We might find it hard to go further, were it not for the fact that we find a closely similar ascent ritual in the 'Mithras Liturgy' (lines 539–541):

⁴⁷ Demosth. ap. Idomeneus *FGrHist* 338 F 2; Or. *Contr. Cels.* 4, 10; Procl. *Alc.* 340, 1; Ar. *Ran.* 293. The question of Aristophanes' Empousa (and the whole question of demons and the mysteries in general) is usefully discussed by Brown 1991. Cf. also Burkert 96–97 and n. 36.

⁴⁸ This point is discussed by several scholars, e.g., Lewy s.v. 'fire, noetic' in the index. To give but two examples of how it shows up in the fragments of the Oracles, the armor that Hekate tells the theurgist to put on in fr. 2 is made of 'resounding light'; the final goal of theurgic ascent is the very 'center of resounding light' as fr. 111 indicates: 'urging yourself to the center of resounding light' (κέντρον ἐπισπέρχων σαυτόν φωτός κελάδοντος).

⁴⁹ Many other scholars have reached this conclusion. See discussion at Majercik 38, to mention only the most recent treatment.

Draw in breath from the rays [of the Sun], drawing up 3 times as much as you can, and you will see yourself being lifted up and ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in midair (Meyer's translation).

The 'vigorous flames' or 'fiery fruits' of the heavens that the theurgist was to inhale, then, probably were rays of the Sun, descending from the fiery heavenly realm; inhaling the rays would give the soul of the theurgist the same qualities as the heavenly realm, and thus supplement the work done by the *angeloi*. Julian confirms this picture when he says that the 'Seven-rayed God' (i.e., the Sun) was responsible for the soul's ascent and that it was by his rays (*ἀκτίνες*) in particular that the action worked (*Ch. Or.* fr. 194 = *Jul. Or.* 5, 172a–173a).⁵⁰ Fr. 115 offers some further confirmation:

It is necessary to hasten towards the light and towards the rays (*αὐράς*) of the Father, whence your soul was sent forth, clothed in much intellect.

The 'rays of the Father' from which the soul once was sent forth and towards which it must again hasten are probably those of the Sun, the hylic representation of the Father, the only representation that we can see in our own world.⁵¹

As I have mentioned, the inhalation of sunlight makes sense as an attempt to liken the soul of the theurgist to the divine realm. But it also can be understood as a variation of an idea that was common in Graeco-Egyptian magic of later antiquity: the incorporation of power through the ingestion of something that represents it. In the magical papyri, the practitioner occasionally is told to eat or drink various substances that will 'make him divine', or 'fortify his soul with divine power'. For example, the practitioner of *PGM* I.1–42 must drink honey-milk in which a falcon, the bird of Horus, has been drown. This will cause there to be 'something divine' in his heart. In other cases, the magician was to ingest the very spell that he was using, by swallowing the dissolved ink with which it had been written, for example (*PGM* XIII.124–36). By incorporating the magical words, one incorporated their force.⁵² If one were to apply this concept of magical ingestion to the intangible essence of the Sun, inhalation of sunlight would be the logical result—indeed, it is hard to imagine

⁵⁰ Cf. Procl. *In Tim.* I.34, 20–21; Majercik 212 (with citations of earlier scholarship).

⁵¹ Lewy 151.

⁵² For comments on this phenomenon and further examples, see Graf 1994a 168–9 and Frankfurter 1994 198. Schäfer, 92–95 and 110–113 discusses the ingestion of spells in Merkavah mysticism. Cf. also Naveh and Shaked 16.

any other way in which one *could* incorporate the Sun's power into one's soul.

On the way up

Our information concerning the rest of the theurgic ascent process is very fragmentary. It agrees in several important ways, however, with the far more complete picture of ritualized ascent given in the Mithras Liturgy.⁵³ For the next few sections, I will proceed by looking at the relevant portions of the Liturgy and the relevant fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* side-by-side, using the Liturgy, where possible, to shed light on the theurgic process.⁵⁴

After the Liturgist⁵⁵ had risen to midair by inhaling the rays of the Sun, he saw a 'pipe' (*αὐλός*) hanging down from the Sun, out of which flowed the 'source of a ministering wind':

You will hear nothing either of man or of any other living thing, nor in that hour will you see anything of mortal affairs on earth, but rather you will see all immortal things. For in that day and hour you will see the divine order of the skies: the presiding gods rising into heaven, and others setting. Now the course of the visible gods will appear through the disk of god, my father; and in similar fashion [there will appear] the so-called pipe, the origin of ministering wind. For you will see it hanging down from the sun's disk like a pipe (lines 542–51, Meyer's trans., slightly emended).

This too has its correlates in the Oracle fragments. Fragments 2 and 110 mention 'conduits' or 'pipes' (*ὄχετοι*) down which the soul of the theurgist had once travelled into 'enslavement in the body' (i.e., incarnation) and through which it could again travel back if it knew the password (*σύνθημα*), or the sacred word (*ιερός λόγος*) and the correct ritual (*ἔργον*). Fragment 2 describes the conduits as 'fiery', which suggests their connection to the Sun, or at least to the heavenly realm

⁵³ There has been much debate on which religious system is reflected in the Mithras Liturgy, which I review in the article cited in the next note. A thorough bibliography on this question and on the Liturgy in general can be found in Brashear, 3518–20.

⁵⁴ In a forthcoming article ('Theurgic Ascent and the Mithras Liturgy'), I discuss the similarities between theurgic ascent and the ascent of the Liturgy in detail, arguing that the Mithras Liturgy is in fact a theurgic text.

⁵⁵ From this point on, I will use the term 'Liturgist' as a concise way of referring to the practitioner of the Mithras Liturgy.

of which the Sun was an important part. Whether the conduits *are* the rays of the Sun themselves or are simply pervaded by the Sun's rays is impossible to tell. Fragment 2 reads:

Being dressed in the full-armored force of resounding light, and having armed your soul with triple-barbed strength, cast into your mind the password of the Triad (τριάδος σύνθημα), so that you will not wander amongst the fiery conduits (όχετοίς) randomly, but with purpose.

Fragment 110 reads:

Seek out the conduit of the soul (ψυχῆς όχετόν), whence it descended in a certain order having been enslaved to the body, and [seek out] how you may cause it to rise again to its order by combining ritual with a holy word.

There is evidence that conduits or pipes extended from other parts of the heavens as well. In Oracle fr. 61, we hear of 'lunar conduits' and 'conduits of the air' (μήνης and ήέρος όχετοί, line 13). Fragment 65 describes a fiery conduit as being the 'fifth' conduit, implying that there are four others (although perhaps they are all fiery, i.e., solar, conduits as Lewy, 153-4, suggests). The same fragment also mentions 'material conduits' (ύλαιοι όχετοί). Fragment 66 mentions a 'mingling of conduits' (μυγνυμένων όχετών) that enables the rituals of the fire to be completed. We also hear about 'rays' (αύγαι, άκτίνες) emanating from Hekate, alias the Cosmic Soul (frs. 34, 35), which suggests that conduits also extended from the Soul, which was imagined to form the border between the sensible and noetic realms. Together, these fragments suggest that a whole series of conduits extended from various portions and strata of the cosmos, each of which could send forth energies of some type to the strata below it, and through at least some of which souls could travel up and down through the various strata. These energies can be represented as fiery energies (as sometimes in the Oracles), or as a 'ministering wind' (as in the Liturgy).

Like the Oracle fragments, the Liturgy implies a multiplicity of conduits or pipes, for the passage quoted earlier goes on to say:

You will see the outflow of this [pipe] towards the regions westward, boundless as an east wind, if it be assigned to the regions of the east—and the other (viz., the west wind), similarly, toward its own regions.

Here, the difference seems to be not between pipes extending from completely different heavenly bodies or strata, but rather between identical pipes aimed in different directions, both of which existed in

the aery region to which the soul had ascended. Yet it does suggest the possibility that the Mithraic practitioner believed there to be other pipes in other parts of the cosmos, each of which exuded beneficial substances. The Liturgist and the theurgist alike could partake of these divinely provided substances, once they knew the correct methods.⁵⁶

To my knowledge, there is nothing like these cosmic pipes in other Mediterranean religions of the second century or earlier; they seem to be unique to the Oracles and the Liturgy.⁵⁷ Broadly, it is best to understand them as a more ordered way of portraying the passage of materials in and out of the mortal and immortal worlds; the assumption that such a passage was possible underlay most such esoteric religions and philosophical schools of the time. The emphasis, in Oracle fr. 2, on the soul finding *one particular* conduit through which to travel, and the implication elsewhere that there were a multitude of conduits exuding other materials, complicates the matter: special knowledge or training was necessary if the practitioner were to make full use of the benefits the conduits provided.⁵⁸

Passwords

At the same time that the Mithraic practitioner, floating in mid-air, saw the solar pipe from which emerged the ministering wind, he saw gods 'staring intently' at him and 'rushing towards' him. When this happened, he was to put his finger to his mouth and say: 'Silence, Silence, Silence!' Next, he had to pronounce a secret password (σύμβολον) that was given to him by the god—the writer of the papyrus has not included it⁵⁹—say 'Guard me, Silence, NECHTHEIR

⁵⁶ Cf. Geudtner 53-56 on Synesios' use of the term όχετός and the accompanying concepts.

⁵⁷ I omit here an oracle quoted by Porphyry in his *Philosophy from Oracles* (Wolff 144) that describes the divine Father as nourishing the divine Intellect through όχετοί. Even if Lewy (9-17) is not right in thinking it a fragment of the Oracles themselves, it bears such resemblances to other *Chaldean Oracles*, as he notes, that it seems to come out of a closely related system.

⁵⁸ This is as close as any theurgic materials come to an interest in divine geography, which is such a strong characteristic of Jewish and Christian ascent tales: Schäfer 79 (Ma'aseh Merkavah); Himmelfarb 53; Smith 1987, 47-73.

⁵⁹ 'Symbol of the living, incorruptible god', is taken by both Meyer and Preisendanz (ad loc.) to be a continuation of what the practitioner says (they include it with in the quotation marks that start with 'Silence'), but I would suggest rather that it is a reference to pronounce the secret words.

THANMELOU' make a 'long hissing noise' and 'a popping sound', and finally, finish with a string of undecipherable words, many of which have the linguistic elements 'fire' and 'light' (φωρ-, φωγ-) in them (lines 557–75). These may be secret names of the gods. The whole performance is intended to convince the threatening gods that the practitioner has a right to be where he is. After they had been intoned, the papyrus tells us, the gods would look graciously upon the practitioner and go about their own affairs. He could then proceed to the next stage of the ritual, which included further calls for silence, a declaration of his equality with the heavenly dwellers ('I am a star, wandering about with you . . .', 'ἐγώ εἰμι σύμπλανος ὑμῖν ἀστήρ' line 575), a prayer praising a fiery god and more secret names of the gods. Eventually, doors opened to reveal the inner world of the gods (line 625).

This part of the Liturgy also has its theurgic equivalent, for the theurgist is at one point told to cast a 'password' (σύνθημα) into his mind, i.e., either remember it or else silently repeat it, as he prepares to ascend (fr. 2). Unfortunately, we don't get any details from the Oracle fragments as to what the theurgic passwords were, or to whom they were spoken.⁶⁰ They may well have been some of the ὀνόματα βάββαρα that are mentioned in Oracle fr. 150, or they may have been a complete phrase such as the Liturgist's 'I am a star, wandering about with you . . .'. Certainly, this declaration would have been at home in theurgic endeavors, considering that the theurgist wished to affiliate himself with the divine realm and those who inhabited it.

It is notable that, although there are several parallels for this use of passwords in later ascent texts,⁶¹ there are, to my knowledge, no parallels in the earlier apocalyptic literature that I posited as a partial model for the ascent tradition. The reason for this is clear: the

⁶⁰ I am eliminating from discussion here the identity between the Platonic Ideas and συνθήματα in the theurgic system; both were also identified with the *tynges*. This is a broad identification, embracing all means of communication between the divine and human realms, of which the use of συνθήματα or σύμβολα as passwords in the more restricted, traditional sense I am treating here is an important subcategory. There is also some evidence that συνθήματα or σύμβολα could be used to refer to physical 'tokens' used in rites. See Johnston 1990 ch. 7 and Dodds 292.

⁶¹ E.g. *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHC V.5.19–23, 23.18–28). Discussion at Filoramo 139–41 (Gnostic); Culianu 11 and 48; cf. Majercik 44 (Gnostic); Schäfer 30–33 and 88. Sometimes, the 'password' consisted of displaying knowledge of the Torah: Schäfer 30–33.

individual snatched away in rapture typically is accompanied by an angelic guide, who protects him from threats and enables him to pass through checkpoints. Even when there is no angel, as in the case of the Platonic Er, such involuntary journeys have been caused by and thus have the implicit approval of the powers-that-be; no obstacles will be allowed to stand in the traveller's way. The individual who initiates ascent himself, in contrast, is 'storming heaven'; he must prove his worth by passing certain tests set by angels or gods that bar his way.⁶² One obvious way to do this is to display knowledge of secret names or other secret information.

Once we focus on this aspect of the theurgic and Liturgical passwords, we realize that there was, indeed, a precedent for them in the Graeco-Roman tradition. Passwords—called συνθήματα and σύμβολα—were also important in mystery cults, where they were spoken by the initiate at some point during the ceremony in order to prove his worthiness to continue.⁶³ We hear nothing of divine guardians, in front of whom the passwords had to be spoken during these ceremonies, but the mystagogue, hierophant or other official must have played a similar role, listening to the initiates' recitations before allowing them to go further.

The goal of mystery initiates was broadly analogous to that of the theurgist and Liturgist: they sought an extraordinary experience that would leave them with an enhanced relationship to divinity.⁶⁴ Archaic and classical sources say nothing about the initiates really meeting the gods, but in later sources, it seems to be indicated: the scene on the Lovatelli Urn, which shows an initiate touching the snake on Demeter's lap, may represent what the initiates imagined to be a real encounter with the goddess. The more fantastical figures in the Pompeian frescos are surely allegorical, but Ariadne and Dionysus may indicate an expectation of real interaction with divinity during initiation. Firmicus Maternus says that the initiate of the mysteries of Attis declared that he had 'worshipped [the gods] face-to-face' (*de err. prof. rel.* 18.1 pg. 85 Heuten).

The sources I have mentioned thus far make no mention of *otherworldly journeys* such as the theurgist and Liturgist undertook, however. In this respect, Apuleius' description of initiation into the

⁶² Cf. Schäfer 49–50 and on angels barring the way 83, 129 and Himmelfarb 67.

⁶³ Burkert 46, Griffiths 294.

⁶⁴ Burkert ch. 4.

mysteries of Isis may be a closer comparandum: the living Lucius approaches Proserpina's threshold and then, having returned from Hades, 'openly addresses and adores' both the celestial and infernal gods (*Meta.* 11.23). The text is unclear as to where he was imagined to be when the adoration itself took place, and it is important to remember that we are dealing with a literary passage—we cannot assume it is a completely factual description of the Isaic mysteries—but nonetheless it demonstrates that both the idea of otherworldly journeys and the idea of an encounter with god could be found in the context of a second-century mystery religion.⁶⁵

To return to the specific topic of passwords, a very close functional parallel to the passwords used by the theurgist and Liturgist are those used by Bacchic initiates after death.⁶⁶ Having arrived in the Underworld, the soul of the initiate had to prove its right to enter those sections of Hades reserved for the chosen by reciting special phrases or words in front of guardians or even Persephone herself. These would have been learned by the initiate while he was alive, but were also engraved on the tiny tablets that accompanied him to the grave in case his soul suffered from post-mortem forgetfulness. On some of these tablets, the passwords are whole phrases, similar to the Liturgist's 'I am a star, wandering about with you . . .'. Tablets B1.6, B2.6, B8.4, and B10.10 say, 'I am a child of Earth and starry heaven' and tablet B2.7 adds 'My name is "Starry"'.⁶⁷ These phrases declare the soul's merit and/or equality with those whom it addresses. The newest gold tablet, in contrast, offers only single words: 'Man-child-thyrsus, Man-child-thyrsus. Brimo, Brimo!' The word 'σύμβολα' precedes them, indicating that they are passwords, and the phrases 'Enter the holy meadow' and 'For the initiate is redeemed' follow them, perhaps indicating the response that the initiate could expect after pronouncing the σύμβολα.⁶⁸ The repetition of 'Brimo', a name sometimes used for Persephone,⁶⁹ reminds

⁶⁵ See the commentary of Griffiths ad loc. and particularly 294–6.

⁶⁶ On the tablets, see Graf 1993 and 1991, who cites earlier works on the tablets. A transcription of all the tablets available at the time is given in the notes to Lloyd-Jones. This can be supplemented with Graf 1991, 240–41 and Chrysostomou 372.

⁶⁷ Cf. also tablets A1.1, A2.1 and A3.1 say 'I come pure from the pure' (cf. A5.1); tablets A1.3, A2.3 and A3.3 say, 'I boast to be of your happy race'.

⁶⁸ Similar, syntactically disconnected passwords appear in the mystery text from the Gurōb papyrus (reconstruction and translation at West 171). Plutarch seems to refer to these Dionysiac passwords for the afterlife when he reminds his wife that initiates into the mysteries share with each other the σύμβολα, *Consol. Uxor.* 611 d.

⁶⁹ Brimo = Persephone: *EM* 213, 49; schol Lyk. 1176 and 698; cf. Prop. 2.2.12.

us of the use of ὀνόματα βάρβαρα in both theurgy and the Liturgy. For the Bacchic initiate, then, as for the theurgist and Liturgist, passwords were essential to the success of otherworldly journeys.

None of our fragmentary evidence for any single traditional mystery cult provides a complete parallel for what we find in the theurgic sources and the Liturgy. In some cases, we find passwords used to progress further in the cult, in others, to win admission to otherworldly realms after death. In some cases, meeting the gods seems to take place in this world, in others, in otherworldly places. We do not have sources mentioning passwords in connection with all the mysteries, nor sources for all of them that mention meeting the gods. Taken as a whole, however, our fragmented evidence for what went on in traditional mysteries during the Hellenistic and Imperial ages is very close to what we see in the Liturgical and theurgic mysteries; it seems likely that the former served as the ideological basis for the latter.

Different strata

One password probably was not enough as the theurgist ascended. Oracle fr. 109 refers to what seems to be a separate, special σύνθημα that will win the support of the Paternal Intellect—a very high-level emanation of theurgy's Supreme God, which we would expect the soul to encounter only at the final stages of ascent.⁷⁰

But the Paternal Intellect does not entertain [the soul's] wishes until it emerges from forgetfulness and utters the pronouncement, remembering the pure, paternal password (πατρικὸν συνθήματος ἀγνοῦ).

Here again, the Mithras Liturgy can help to confirm our hypothesis. For, as the Mithraic practitioner continued his heavenly journey, he twice again was required to pronounce passwords that would cause doors to open, revealing groups of gods (lines 625–27, 662). He then had to greet each of these groups with just the right prayer and string of magical words in order to gain their protection. The Mithraic practitioner also used ὀνόματα βάρβαρα to invoke a god at one point after he had ascended and to persuade a god to stay at another

⁷⁰ Fragment 110 mentions the use of both a 'holy word' (ἱερὸς λόγος) and a ritual (ἔργον) during ascension. This holy word may be synonymous with the silent password of fr. 2, although it also is possible that it refers to a different phrase, to be spoken aloud.

(lines 710, 630). In some of the Merkavah ascent texts, similarly, the names of the angelic gatekeepers are necessary for the ascender to proceed through each of various checkpoints. At one point (lines 591–603) the Mithraic practitioner had to sing a hymn of praise in honor of an unnamed, fiery god as well as pronounce $\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\mu\alpha\tau\alpha\ \beta\acute{\alpha}\rho\beta\alpha\rho\alpha$ in order to get the next set of doors to open. This finds its equivalent in the fact that the soul of theurgist sang a paeon as it ascended, according to fr. 131. The idea is probably adopted from earlier Jewish and Christian 'rapture' stories, which tell of ascending mortals taking part in angelic choirs or reciting prayers; the hymns and prayers sometimes actually aid in ascent.⁷¹

Awareness of these repeated and differing uses of magical pronouncements may help us to interpret Oracle frs. 147, 146 and 148, all of which are spoken by Hekate. Fragment 147 reads:

If you say this to me many times, you will see all things growing dark.⁷² For the curved bulk of the heavens disappears and the stars do not shine; the light of the Moon is hidden and the Earth does not stand steady. All things are revealed in lightning.

In fr. 146, Hekate describes a variety of divine epiphanies that may appear:

... Having spoken these things, you will see either a fire leaping skittishly like a child, over the aery waves, or an unformed fire from which a voice emerges; or a rich light that whirls around the field in a spiral. But [it is also possible] that you will see a horse flashing more brightly than light, either also a fiery child mounted on the swift back of the horse, armored in gold or without armor; or even a child shooting arrows, upright upon the horse's back.

Fragment 148 finishes her instructions:

When you see the very sacred, formless fire shining skittishly throughout the depths of the whole cosmos, listen to the voice of the fire.

Fragment 146.2 mentions an epiphany that leaps over the aery waves, which seems to indicate that it appears in the *aer*, the lower region of the heavens in which, according to the Liturgy (lines 541 and

⁷¹ Merkavah: Schäfer, 30–33, 88. On singing of hymns, Himmelfarb 33–6, 61–4. The idea continued in the Merkavah texts (Schäfer, *passim* e.g. 37, 61, 86). Proclus also mentions the theurgists' singing of hymns as they ascend (*Th. Pl.* 2.11, p. 65 5–15 S-W).

⁷² Accepting Lobeck's emendation. See Johnston 1990 112–14.

694), the Mithraic practitioner pronounces his series of words and sees several groups of gods. Another epiphany in fr. 146.4 is described as whirling around a field. This might seem to suggest the earth itself, but two observations indicate that it, too, could be occurring in the *aer*. First, $\gamma\omicron\eta\varsigma$ can be used to mean a geographic 'region' rather than 'earth' in the physical sense of 'ground' (e.g., Eur. *Hel.* 89 and *Bacch.* 13). Second, even if we are to take $\gamma\omicron\eta\varsigma$ as 'ground', the fact that the Mithraic practitioner feels the ground ($\gamma\eta\nu$, line 695) shake while he is at his final stage of his heavenly journey warns us not to expect too much conceptual precision. Wherever the soul was thought to be, the body apparently was aware of what was happening on earth. This observation may also shed some light on fr. 147.4, where the sky grows dark and the ground ($\chi\theta\omega\nu$) shakes after magical words are pronounced. Despite the reference to the ground, it could refer to events that take place in the *aer* as well. Lightning bolts are also mentioned in both fr. 147 and lines 694–6 of the Liturgy, which further encourages the idea that the two passages describe analogous experiences.

It is a reasonable hypothesis, then, that the theurgist was in the region of the *aer* when he spoke the words or phrases referred to in fr. 146.1 and 147.1 and witnessed the resulting epiphanies. But are frs. 146 and 147 to be linked to one another? Most scholars (including myself)⁷³ have assumed so, and have also assumed that fr. 148 is part of the same group, since it admonishes the theurgist to listen to the voice of one of the deities who makes an epiphany in fr. 146. On the analogy of the Mithras Liturgy, however, where the practitioner progresses gradually through the heavenly checkpoints, speaking a password and meeting different gods at each stage, it must be admitted that fragments 146 and 148 could describe phenomena that occurred at a different stage from those of fr. 147. In the Liturgy, earthquakes and heavenly disruptions occur only before one of the several epiphanies described, that of the final and greatest god. The same may be true of the theurgic epiphanies; perhaps frs. 146 and 148 represent the epiphanies of lesser gods, including Hekate, whereas fr. 147 describes the atmospheric disturbances that precede the epiphany of the greatest god.

⁷³ Johnston 1992 and 1990, ch. 8.

Summary

Much still remains to be investigated concerning theurgic ascent. I have had to leave aside, to take but one example, the important roles that Eros and the *inyges* play in the process. I have endeavored, however, to clarify at least some essential details of theurgic ascent by comparing our evidence closely to *comparanda* of the time.

I have also endeavored to shed some light on why theurgy as a whole system proved to be so attractive during the later Imperial Age. In the first, introductory section of this paper, I sketched a picture of theurgy as one among many revelatory religious movements of the time, but a movement distinguished by the *immediacy* of many of its aspects. Theurgic ascent can be viewed through this lens, as well. Certainly, it drew upon influential phenomena of its time, in particular the long-standing tradition of stories about journeys to otherworldly realms and the age-old concept of the mystery cult. But theurgy combined, innovated and improved on what it adopted. Like the Hellenistic mystery cult, theurgic ascent guaranteed an encounter with the gods, but drawing on the contemporary idiom of rapture stories, which suggested the possibility that mortals might rise to the very heavens, theurgy encouraged the new hope that the initiate could meet the gods within their own realm, rather than here on earth in the Telesterion or mithraeum, or only at the end of earthly life, in some realm of Hades. In theurgy, rapturous ascent fell under the control of the initiate himself and the ancient mysteries rose to new heights.

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