

Magic and Theurgy

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1 Introduction

In order to address the utility of the concept of “magic” to interpret ancient theurgy, let me begin with a definition that might apply. Magic, let us say, is the use of rituals that are available only to those who have acquired them through special means—perhaps by being trained by a teacher, perhaps by purchasing the knowledge from a ritual specialist, perhaps by being initiated into a particular cult whose ritual technologies are kept secret from non-initiates, or perhaps by some combination of all three of these. These “magical” rituals enable those who perform them to accomplish extraordinary things in either the physical world, the spiritual world, or both. This definition has the drawback of not being entirely “etic”—that is, it reflects ancient views of *mageia* more than a modern comprehensive category “magic”—but it also has the advantage of capturing the sense of magic that was often applied to theurgy.

So what is theurgy? ‘Theurgy’ (θεουργία) is a word that has been applied to a number of religious systems that share three traits. First, theurgy involves the performance of rituals much like those that characterize “magic,” especially in their reflection of some learned tradition. For example, theurgists were initiated into a mystery cult and acquired knowledge of its special rituals from other initiates who served as teachers—although they also relied on written sources that either were transcripts of mediumistic trances or had been composed by earlier theurgists.

Secondly, theurgists claimed that the most important rituals they performed promoted the purification of their souls and, eventually, their ability to send them out of the material world into higher realms where they would interact with at least the lower ranks of the divine hierarchy. After death, a completely purified soul would escape reincarnation—the fate that awaited unpurified souls. Some of the theurgists’ other rituals worked on the material world: they claimed to be able to bring on rain during a drought, for example.

And thirdly, theurgists understood themselves to pursue both their material and spiritual aims with the willing support of the gods and other benign entities such as *daimones*, *angeloι*, and *archangeloι*. The theurgists used this claim to set themselves apart from *magoi*, whom ancient critics—and

sometimes, ancient magicians themselves—portrayed as coercing the higher powers. Indeed, some theurgists thought of themselves as having relatively little to do with the success of their rituals; rather, they understood that the gods (*theoi*) would charitably work (*ergia*) upon them as long as they had properly prepared themselves to receive the gods' beneficence, which they could do by learning how to align themselves properly within the cosmos and its powers.¹

While theurgists practiced rituals that we (or other ancient people) might identify as “magic”—that is, roughly evoking the features listed above—the theurgists themselves rejected that label. Later in this essay, I will look closely at some of the theurgic rituals that evoked the label ‘magic.’² But the theurgists claimed that, in contrast to *magoi*, they worked with the cooperation of the gods rather than by coercing them, and that they worked for the higher purpose, ultimately, of purifying their souls, rather than towards quotidian purposes such as the *magoi* did (e.g., the incitement of sexual passion or the acquisition of wealth).

Still, many have labelled theurgy ‘magic’: both the philosophers and Christians who railed against it during antiquity, followed by most of the scholars who have studied theurgy during the 20th and 21st centuries. This essay will discuss the history of theurgy on its own terms, followed by a review of the ritual elements common to theurgy that, in many cases, have invited the application of the term magic among ancient and modern writers.

2 A Brief History of Theurgy

The word ‘theurgy’³ was coined to apply to a ritual system that emerged during the second century CE, the doctrines of which were rooted in Platonic

1 E.g., Iamblicus *De Mysteriis*. 1.12, 42.2–15, and 3.17, 139.15, and cf. the discussions of Peter Struck, “Pagan and Christian Theurgies: Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Religion and Magic in Late Antiquity,” *The Ancient World* 32 (2001): 25–38; Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Springer, 1974), 85–88; and Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” *Traditio* 61 (1985): 1–28.

2 Further on definitions of the word ‘theurgy’ see Radcliffe Edmonds, “The Illuminations of Theurgy: Philosophy and Magic,” in *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

3 The first use of the word ‘theurgy’ comes from Porphyry, as quoted by Augustine e.g., *Civitas Dei* 10.9 = Porphyry, fr. 286 in A. Smith, *Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1993). The word appears frequently in Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries*, and is found in the emperor Julian (*Orations*, 7.219a) as well as many later authors. Julian’s case is interesting, as he says that it was in part through Dionysus’ knowledge of theurgy that he became a god. (see Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, “Nur der Weise ist Priester’: Rituale und Ritualkritik

philosophy. The system was further developed (and critiqued) by later Platonists such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus and Damascius.⁴ The earliest use of the cognate word ‘theurgists’ (θεουργοί) is found either in the works of the musician and mathematician Nicomachus of Gerasa⁵ or in a fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles*, divinely inspired hexameter poems that were considered theurgy’s sacred texts (the answer depends on how we date Nicomachus and the *Oracles*, each of which belongs somewhere in the middle to late second century).⁶ Nicomachus mentioned the theurgists in the course of discussing the ritual power of the seven vowels—although what he described the theurgists doing was somewhat different: he claimed that they performed invocations by making hissing and popping noises and other inarticulate sounds. As for the *Chaldean Oracles*, tradition said that they had been received from the gods by a ritual expert who called himself Julian the Chaldean, and by his son, who came to be known as Julian the Theurgist, both of whom lived under the reign of Marcus Aurelius.⁷ The younger Julian is also credited with having recorded other divinely inspired treatises on theurgic matters.⁸ Scholars now agree that the rudiments of this tradition are correct at least insofar as our fragments of the *Oracles* suggest a date in the late second century CE.⁹

bei Porphyrius,” in *Religion und Kritik in der Antike*, ed. U. Berner and I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, Religionswissenschaftliche Studien 7 (Muenster: LIT, 2008), esp. 135–40). We have no other information on this tradition—if, indeed, it was not just an idea of Julian’s himself.

4 As Polymnia Athanassiadi notes, ‘... from Iamblichus to Damascius, a commentary on the Oracles in oral or written guise was considered the crowning achievement of an exegetical career. Equally, for a student to be admitted to a course on the Chaldaean Oracles amounted to an acknowledgement that he was part of the golden chain and on the short list for the Platonic succession.’ (P. Athanassiadi, “The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy,” in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 149–84). On Plotinus and theurgy, see most recently Zeke Mazur, “Unio Magica: Part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus’ Mysticism,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 23–52, and Mazur, “Unio Mystica: Part II: Plotinus, Theurgy and the Question of Ritual,” *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 29–56, which argue, against long-standing scholarly opinions, that Plotinus incorporated some theurgic practices into his contemplative approach to purifying the soul.

5 Nicomachus of Gerasa, *Excerpta*, 6. 276–12–18.

6 *Chaldean Oracles* Fr. 153 = Lydus *De mensibus* 11, 10; 31, 16–19 W. The fragment reads ‘For the theurgists do not fall into the herd that is subject to Fate.’

7 Date: Suda, s.v. ‘Iulianus’ 434, Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii*, 11.123.12–13. According to one tradition, the elder Julian ‘introduced’ the soul of his son to that of Plato: Michael Psellus, *de Aurea Catena*, 217.2–7; now in Psellus, *Philosophica Minora*, ed. John M. Duffy, vol. 1: *Opuscula logica, physica, allegorica, alia* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1992), 46.

8 Suda, s.v. ‘Iulianus’, 434.

9 On the traditions concerning the Julians, the date of the *Oracles* (and thereby the date of the origin of theurgy) and the circumstances under which both the *Oracles* and theurgy may

It is on the ritual system attributed to the two Julians and its development during the first five centuries CE that I will focus in this essay.¹⁰ It is worth commenting first, however, on some of the later ways in which the word 'theurgy' was used. Early Christians with philosophical training, such as Synesius of Cyrene, knew the *Chaldean Oracles* (fragments 158 and 188 of the *Chaldean Oracles*, for instance, are quoted by Synesius), and their expositions of Christian doctrines at times show traces of theurgic influence, even if they do not explicitly credit it.¹¹ In the sixth century, a Christian who came to be identified with Dionysius the Areopagite went further, using 'theurgy' to describe Christian sacraments through which God manifested himself in the material world, such as the Eucharist.¹² Dionysius, then, like his pagan predecessors, understood 'theurgy' as a positive label for ritual actions directed towards improvement of the soul through the reception of divine beneficence, and thus he set theurgy in opposition to 'magic' as had the theurgists themselves. He further valorized the term by using it to characterize the miracles performed by Jesus.¹³

Dionysius stood in contrast to earlier Christians such as Augustine, who not only restricted the use of 'theurgy' to pagan rituals, but papered over any distinctions that the theurgists made between their own practices and those of magicians. Augustine argued that, like all other forms of magic, theurgy was nothing more than a ruse by which demons disguised as gods led people away from the proper worship of the real God.¹⁴ Arguments like these set the tone for centuries to come. Michael Psellus, a philosopher and historian of the 11th century, was a dedicated student of theurgic treatises and particularly of Proclus' works on the topic; we are indebted to him for many of our fragments of the *Oracles* as well as much of our other information about theurgy.¹⁵

have developed, see esp. Athanassiadi, "The Chaldean Oracles" (although I am hesitant about her suggestion that the Julians were attached to the temple of Bel in Apamea).

10 A more complete history of late antique theurgy can be found in Edmonds, "The Illuminations of Theurgy." See also Athanassiadi, "The Chaldean Oracles," for an excellent overview of the transmission of the fragments of the *Oracles* that remain to us, through Proclus, Damascius and later Psellus.

11 See now Tanaseanu-Döbler, "Nur der Weise ist Priester," esp. 225–60.

12 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. He used the term twice in the first three sentences and 31 times throughout. See the discussions of Struck, "Pagan and Christian Theurgies"; Gregory Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite," *J ECS* 7, no. 4 (1999): 573–99; and Sarah Klitenic-Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

13 E.g., *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 423b.

14 Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, 10.9–10, 16, 26–28, 32.

15 On Psellus and theurgy, see J. Duffy, "Reactions of Two Byzantine Intellectuals to the Theory and Practice of Magic: Michael Psellos and Michael Italikos," in *Byzantine Magic*,

But although Psellus' remarks often betray a deep interest in both theurgic rituals and the philosophical systems of theurgy (at times, he even suggested that the theology inherent in the *Oracles* agreed with Christian doctrine), officially he took care to repudiate such dangerously pagan ideas, and to distance himself from any suspicion that he might be practicing theurgy.

In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, an edition of the *Oracles* with commentary, heavily influenced by Psellus' work, was produced by Gemistus Pletho under the title *The Magical Oracles of the Magi of Zoroaster*.¹⁶ An ardent devotee of Platonism more generally (against the Aristotelian tide of the time—a point that eventually led to his being brought up on charges of heresy), Pletho saw in theurgy the potential for a new, universalizing religion. He does not seem to have gotten very far with that mission, but another endeavor bore significant fruit. Pletho encouraged Cosimo de Medici to found a new Academy, under whose roof Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) began to translate ancient theurgic texts, including a key treatise by Iamblichus to which Ficino was the first to give the title *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, and Proclus' *On the Hieratic Art*, from which we derive information about the theurgic uses of *symbola*.¹⁷

Ficino's own *Three Books on Life* includes extensive discussion of practices that we can trace to ancient theurgy (and to Hermeticism) such as the use of *symbola* to animate statues and to treat a variety of bodily and spiritual problems.¹⁸ And yet, although he tried to synthesize ideas such as these with Christianity, Ficino was careful to avoid calling the practices that he advocated

ed. Henry Maguire (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 83–97; and É. Des Places, ed., trans. and comm., *Oracles Chaldaïques* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971), 46–52.

16 We know of Pletho's work on the *Oracles* through secondary sources such as Johannes Opsopäus, *Oraculus magica Zoroastris cum scholiis Plethonis et Pselli nunc primum editi* (Paris: 1607) and Thomas Stanley, *The Chaldaick oracles of Zoroaster and his follower, with the expositions of Pletho and Psellus* (London: 1661). See also Brian Copenhaver, "Iamblichus, Synesius and The Chaldaean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino's *De Vita Libri Tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic," in *Supplementum Festivum. Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. James Hankins, John Monfasani and Frederick Purnell, Jr., *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 49 (Binghamton NY: Medieval and Renaissance texts and studies, 1987), 441–56.

17 Further discussion of the influences on Ficino in Copenhaver, "Iamblichus, Synesius and The Chaldaean Oracles," and Copenhaver, "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus and a Philosophy of Magic," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 79–110 and *passim*; and Carol Kaske and John R. Clark, eds, trans., and comms., *Marsilio Ficino. Three Books on Life*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 57 (Binghamton, NY: Renaissance Society of America, 1989).

18 Kaske and Clark, *Marsilio Ficino*, 25–31, and comm. ad loc.

'theurgy,' which, for him, implied the heretical worship of powers lesser than God.¹⁹

Theurgy, then, continued to fascinate the intellectuals who encountered it, but they were unable to disentangle its rituals from their pagan, and implicitly magical, roots and so they kept their distance from the term 'theurgy' itself. Towards the end of the following century, Giordano Bruno tried to rehabilitate the reputation of some forms of magic, particularly those that could be called 'natural' (i.e., those applying the physical laws such as sympathy and antipathy), but he utterly condemned theurgy as a form of cult paid to deceptive demons, which made the desperate worshipper into a vessel for their evil purposes.²⁰

The fate of the word 'theurgy' wavered throughout the later Renaissance and early modern period; the Solomonic *grimoire* known as the *Lemegeton* or *Lesser Key* contrasts *theurgeia* with *goeteia*, as a means of summoning good spirits rather than harmful, which suggests that in some quarters, at least, it had regained its more positive connotations. A glance at the *Oxford English Dictionary* entries 'theurgy,' 'theurgist,' 'theurgic' and 'theurgical' shows that among English-speakers, theurgy carried a variety of meanings and intonations between the 16th and 19th centuries, which can be summarized under four rubrics: (1) It was used in scholarly works such as Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (mid-16th century) more or less accurately to designate the ancient system as its original practitioners had described it. (2) it eventually became synonymous with 'the marvelous': thus, Prime Minister (and classicist) William Gladstone could write in 1858 of 'the Olympian court' being the 'masterpiece of the whole theurgy of Homer.' (3) It was used loosely to refer to any form of magic whose practitioners erroneously considered themselves to be superior in expertise and purity of aim. (4) And finally, it frequently continued to denote a deceptive or dangerous practice that corrupted the finer points of philosophy, threatened to draw people away from proper spiritual pursuits, or both: "The turbid streams of theurgy and magic flowed into the broad river of Christian thought by two channels, the later Neoplatonism, and Jewish Cabbalism."²¹

19 These matters are discussed throughout the introduction to Kaske and Clark, *Marsilio Ficino*. See also D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic, from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958; reprint: Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), which includes discussion as well of Ficino's transmission of theurgic ideas to Cornelius Agrippa, Campanella and others.

20 Bruno, *On Magic*. The treatise is not divided into any sections; the portion I cite appears near the beginning.

21 W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1899).

The continuing dominance of the last two denotations makes it somewhat surprising that in the mid-twentieth century, 'theurgy' made a leap forward in respectability, at least in scholarly quarters, by being borrowed to describe certain strands of Jewish mysticism. It seems to have been Gershom Scholem who led the way, first by comparing Merkabah mysticism to theurgy in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*²² (although without specifying exactly what he meant by the word); and then by using 'theurgy' as a synonym for aspects of Jewish practice in *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*.²³ In the latter case his reasons for the comparison were probably in part historical (he investigated the relationship between the Lesser Hekhaloth and the magical papyri, which were composed at about the same time as ancient theurgy emerged), but in part they were phenomenological as well, for Scholem used the word 'theurgy' freely to describe ascent-centered mysticism as a category. Early in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Moshe Idel offered an overview of the relationship between ancient theurgy and early Jewish mysticism,²⁴ and then he used 'theurgy' more generally, and positively, to describe Jewish practices.²⁵ In recent years, other scholars of Jewish mysticism have adopted the term as well.²⁶

The application of 'theurgy' to Jewish mysticism—and the accompanying restoration of the term to full respectability, even admirability—was probably encouraged by the friendship between Scholem and Hans Lewy, the latter of whom wrote a massive book that began to make ancient theurgy and the *Chaldean Oracles* acceptable subjects of academic study.²⁷ And yet (to begin to return at last to the ancient system on which the rest of this essay will focus and to the topic to which the present volume is devoted) one of the first, and

22 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1941), e.g., 56, 77.

23 Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960), esp. chapter 10.

24 Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 40–41.

25 Idel, *Kabbalah*. In fact, an entire chapter is entitled 'Ancient Jewish Theurgy' (156–72). Idel defines 'theurgy' as '... operations intended to influence the Divinity, mostly in its own inner state or dynamics, but sometimes also in its relationship to man. In contrast to the magician, the ancient and medieval Jewish theurgian focused his activity on accepted religious values' (157).

26 E.g., Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—kabbalist and prophet: hermeneutics, theosophy, and theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000); Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and theurgy in the later strata of the Zohar* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1993).

27 Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1956), posthumously published in 1956 following Lewy's death in 1945; second corrected edition by Michel Tardieu, Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1978. According to Tardieu's *Notice* at the back of the new edition, Scholem spoke at Lewy's memorial service.

best qualified, reviewers of Lewy's book, E.R. Dodds,²⁸ observed that in 512 pages, relatively little had been said about practices that could be called magic, within either theurgy or other ancient systems to which theurgy might be compared; apparently Lewy was not as interested in contextualizing theurgy within similar ritual practices of the first centuries CE as he was in exploring its metaphysics and its philosophical background.

For many years following Lewy, work on the rituals performed by theurgists continued to lag.²⁹ There is some irony in this, for at the time of theurgy's origin, there was no doubt that ritual practices lay at its heart, and no lack of debate among other Platonists about whether this was a merit or not. The dividing line fell between those who, like Plotinus, recommended using only the powers of the human intellect (i.e., philosophical discussion and contemplation)³⁰ to improve the soul and achieve the soul's eventual ascent; and those who, like Plotinus' student Iamblichus, believed that rituals were necessary as well. The treatise that Ficino later dubbed *On the Mysteries of Egypt* was an extended defense of the value of theurgic ritual, written by Iamblichus under the adopted name of Abammon, an Egyptian priest, in response to a challenge by Porphyry.³¹ Porphyry himself seems to have wavered on the topic; he offers different opinions about the value of ritual in different works.³² The Plotinian opinion that intellectual endeavors alone were acceptable not only negated the value of ritual by rejecting the possibility that material objects could have

28 E.R. Dodds, "New Light on the 'Chaldaean Oracles,'" *HTR* 54 (1961): 263–73; rpt. at the back of Tardieu's second edition of Lewy's book, 693–701. Dodds had written his own essay on theurgy some years earlier (Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 [1947]: 55–69, reprint in Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951], 283–311), in which he focused on the ritual system, sometimes comparing aspects of theurgy to modern spiritualism. Cf. the remarks of Pierre Hadot, "Bilan et perspectives sur les *Oracles Chaldaïques*," also printed at the back of Tardieu's edition, 703–20, which are more positive about Lewy's contribution to the study of theurgic ritual.

29 Some of the work I have published on the topic will be cited below. See also several subchapters on the topic in Carine van Liefferinge, *La théurgie des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus*, *Kernos* Suppl. 99 (Liege: Presses universitaires de Liège, 1999). On Iamblichus and ritual, see also Beate Nasemann, *Theurgie und Philosophie in Iamblichs de Mysteriis*, *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 11 (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1991), and Emma C. Clarke, *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis: A Manifesto of the Miraculous* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

30 But see Mazur, "Unio Magica" and Mazur, "Unio Mystica" for an argument that Plotinus used rituals as well.

31 See the discussion in Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, trans., comm., *Iamblichus. On the Mysteries* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), xxvi–xxxvii.

32 Discussion in Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, "Nur der Weise ist Priester."

any effect on the soul, but tended to suggest as well that the material world was an active source of spiritual corruption.³³ That concern is not completely absent from theurgy—the *Oracles* warn theurgists to beware of the “demonic dogs” of Hecate, which represent the lure of corporeal pleasures³⁴—but theurgists were confident that the gods had taught them the proper ways to use material objects in rituals for the proper purposes.

But whatever the theurgists thought about their rituals and how they were, and were not, different from those contemporary practices they understood to be ‘magic’, as time went on, popular tradition increasingly portrayed the founders of the art as having a wide variety of ritual techniques at their command and as using those techniques for both spiritual and practical purposes. The two Julians, for example, came to rank among the most famous thaumaturges of antiquity. The older Julian was credited with using spoken commands to split stones, composing four books about *daemones*, and designing amulets to protect the body—all activities that would sit comfortably amongst the rites described by the Greek magical papyri and other ancient magical texts such as the *Testament of Solomon*.³⁵ The younger Julian was reputed to have composed treatises on theurgic rituals and to have served Marcus Aurelius on campaign by creating a mask that shot thunderbolts at the enemy and by conjuring up a rainstorm that saved the army from dying of thirst (the famous “rain miracle” of 172 CE, which different sources credited instead to an Egyptian philosopher named Arnouphis, to Jupiter or to the Christian God).³⁶ Proclus’ biographer, Marinus, similarly claims that Proclus used a tool called the *ynx* (which theurgic sources otherwise associate with spiritual pursuits, below, section 4) to call

33 See John Finamore, “Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy,” *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 83–94; Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1–27, esp. 4–5, 11–12 and 23–26; van Liefferinge “La théurgie des Oracles Chaldaïques,” esp. 38–84. I discussed the more general question of the perceived differences between magic (*goēteia*) and theurgy in Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate’s Roles in the Chaldaean Oracles and Related Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990; reprint: Oxford: Oxford University Press), chap. 6. Although I would now revisit some of my conclusions, the treatment is still a useful supplement to these others, as it focuses more closely on contextualizing theurgy within other rituals of the time and describing theurgic ritual as we see it in the *Oracles*.

34 Demon dogs as corporeal pleasures: see *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 87–91, and Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, chap. 9.

35 Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.18.7; Suda, s.v. ‘Iulianus,’ 433.

36 Suda, s.v. ‘Iulianus,’ 434; Psellus, *Philosophica Minora*, vol. 1 opusc., 3 lines 142–47. On the rain miracle, see Garth Fowden, “Pagan Versions of the Rain Miracle of AD 172,” *Historia* 36 (1987): 83–95, and M. Sage, “Eusebius and the Rain Miracle: Some Observations,” *Historia* 36 (1987): 96–113.

down rain and save Attica from a drought.³⁷ The younger Julian was also said to have competed with Apuleius and Apollonius of Tyana to save Rome from a plague; Apuleius promised to stop it in 15 days, and Apollonius in ten, but Julian won by stopping it with a single word.³⁸ Both Julians were credited with the ability to charm the soul out of and then back into the body.³⁹ In other words, when viewed from our modern perspective, the theurgists were practicing magic (as I defined it in the first section of this essay).

3 The Metaphysical System

But as a *system*—that is, as an *organized* body of rituals and beliefs that was passed from at least some teachers to their students—theurgy grew out of what we now call Middle Platonic philosophy and continued to develop alongside what we now call Neoplatonism for several centuries. The theurgists whose works we have inherited understood themselves as philosophers *as well as* ritual practitioners. Indeed, the theurgists insisted that what set their rituals apart from ‘magic’ was the fact that those rituals were rooted in philosophy and the understanding of the cosmos that this philosophy gave them. The theurgists claimed to be putting into effect metaphysical principles that had been woven into the universe at the beginning of time. In doing so, the theurgists claimed to be not only pursuing their private goals, but also participating in the on-going, demiurgic (re)creation of the cosmos.⁴⁰ Therefore, to understand why the theurgists performed the rituals that they did, we need to begin with a survey of the particular form of platonic metaphysics that they developed.⁴¹

37 Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 28.

38 St. Anastasios of Sinai, *Patrologia Graeca*, 89, col. 252ab.

39 Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii*, 11.123.9.

40 On theurgists participating in the demiurgic recreation of the cosmos, see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 47–50, 130–69, where crucial passages from Iamblichus are quoted and discussed) and also Beate Nasemann, *Theurgie und Philosophie in Iamblichs De mysteriis*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 231–82, esp. 247–82. An important related idea is that the descent of the individual soul is central to demiurgic recreation. On this, see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 81–126, and John Dillon, *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 155–58.

41 This survey is necessarily brief. Excellent fuller treatments can be found in Edmonds, “The Illuminations of Theurgy;” also in John Finamore’s contribution to an essay that I co-authored with him: John Finamore and S.I. Johnston, “The Chaldaean Oracles,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 161–73; and in Majercik’s comments on individual

The theurgists made Intellect (*Nous*) the highest god; this god was also called the Father.⁴² The Father had transcendently enclosed himself within a supermundane realm called the Empyrean,⁴³ but he could act upon the material world and its inhabitants through a series of divine hypostases. Thus, for example, there was a Second Intellect who demiurgically formed the material world, using as his models the Ideas that the Father “thought” forth.⁴⁴ There was also a World Soul (which probably was identified by the theurgists with the goddess Hecate—a goddess central to the practice of ancient magic as we see it in, e.g., the magical papyri)⁴⁵ who mediated between the divine and human realms, and through whom generative forces passed from above to below. There were other transmissive, connecting agents, too. For example, *daemones* known as *inyges* participated in the transmission of the Ideas from the Father into the material world (at times, the *inyges* were identified with the Ideas themselves) and in the transmission of requests from humans to divinities.⁴⁶ The *symbola*—objects, words or sounds that helped to forge connections between the material and divine worlds—had been ‘scattered’ by the Father throughout the cosmos.⁴⁷

More will be said about some of these agents in the section on ritual. For the moment, what I want to emphasize is that theurgic metaphysics and theurgic soteriology—and therefore the rituals that drew upon the metaphysics and that underpinned the soteriology—all depended upon the concept of

fragments of the *Oracles* (Ruth Majercik, trans. and comm., *The Chaldean Oracles*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 5 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989).

42 E.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 3, 7, 14.

43 E.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 3.

44 *Chaldean Oracles* frs. 5, 33, 37, 39, 40.

45 Hecate as World Soul: Lutz Bergemann, *Kraftmetaphysik und Mysterienkult im Neuplatonismus. Ein Aspekt neuplatonischer Philosophie*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 234 (Leipzig: De Gruyter, 2006), 271–95; Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*; Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 353–66. John Finamore, in his contribution to the essay mentioned in the previous note (in *Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Gerson), challenges the validity of this equation, positing instead that Hecate is the last of a number of female divinities who work to ensoul the world. He develops an earlier argument by R.M. van den Berg, *Proclus’ Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden E. J. Brill, 2001), 252–59.

46 *inyges* and Ideas: *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 77; Proclus, *In Cratylus*, 33.15. Much of the evidence is indirect and depends on context; for discussion and citations see Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 132–7; Fr. Cremer, *Die chaldäischen Orakel und Jamblich « De mysterioris »*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 26 (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1969), 74; O. Geudtner, *Die Seelenlehre der Chaldäischen Orakel*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 35 (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1971), 43–45; Des Places, ed., *Oracles Chaldaïques*, 14; Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 103–7.

47 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 108.

a stratified cosmos that became increasingly pure as one ascended, but also upon the possibility of interaction between humans and the entities inhabiting those higher strata. There was, necessarily, a tension inherent in this combination, but it was a creative tension: some of the most innovative and interesting aspects of theurgic ritual arise from the theurgists' understanding that, although the boundaries between realms had to hold firm for the cosmos to operate properly, they might be temporarily transcended when one used the proper ritual techniques. The concept of *sympatheia*, which was familiar to Neoplatonists—that one part of the cosmos or an object within the cosmos is connected to other, physically distant parts or objects—was important here as well.⁴⁸ A sympathetic view of the cosmos not only was central to theurgic metaphysics, but was also the key to identifying objects within the material world that could be used to contact entities who dwelt in the realms above it, as we will see.

One more aspect of theurgic metaphysics is important for understanding theurgic ritual. Following, again, the lead of Plato, the theurgists understood the Father to consist of pure, fiery light,⁴⁹ and what passed from him through the intervening strata into the material world to be fiery and light-filled as well.⁵⁰ Thus for example, the Second Intellect hurled the Ideas like thunder or lightning bolts into the 'lightning-receiving womb' of Hecate; from there, they subsequently moved into the material realm (*CO* frs. 34, 35, 37). Light itself (as we know it in our material realm) came from the Father, passing first through a hypercosmic sun and then through the sun of our own world. Because divinity was understood to be essentially light, theurgic rituals often involved the manipulation or invocation of light.⁵¹

48 Although the term *sympatheia* itself is not directly associated with theurgy until Psellus, *Expositio In Oracula Chaldaica, Patrologia graeca* [hereafter = *PG*] 1153 A, Iamblichus frequently adduces it under the name "*philia*" in order to explain the operation of the cosmos and how ritual can participate in it, and Synesius discusses it in a way suggesting its centrality to theurgy: e.g., Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 5.10, 211.3–6 and 5.26, 239.6–13. Further on Iamblichus and *philia*, see the discussions throughout Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (as cited in the index). Iamblichus' *philia* also draws on the theurgic Eros, who was a connecting force (see discussion at Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, 14–16).

49 E.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 3, 37.

50 Plato and light: e.g., *Republica*. 7, 541a ff. This was picked up by non-theurgic Platonists as well, such as Plotinus: *Enneads*, 1.1.4.12–18, 1.7.1.19–29, etc.

51 On the centrality of light in theurgy, see most recently Bergemann, *Kraftmetaphysik und Mysterienkult*.

4 Theurgic Rituals

In implementing their metaphysical ideas, as we will see in what follows, the theurgists were inclined to draw on rituals that were familiar from Greek religion as practiced by ordinary people and on magic as it was performed by the practitioners who used, for instance, what we now call the Greek Magical Papyri. However, the theurgists reinterpreted these ritual traditions both literally—theurgy's apologists went to some lengths to explain why their rites worked—and in practice—that is, they used some of the same objects or substances as did mainstream rites, but in different ways. In some cases, there was no existing ritual that suited the theurgists' purposes, even if they adapted it—but, as we will see, theurgists could be quite inventive in filling the gaps.

4.1 Iynges

The theurgists' use of *iynges* is a good example of the way in which they could adapt existing magical rituals and techniques. The *iynx* was a magical tool in use from at least the mid-fifth century BCE; it was associated almost exclusively with drawing reluctant lovers to the doors of those who wielded it.⁵² The word has two different referents when it describes such a tool: it might mean a bird that could twist its neck around almost completely (which is usually identified by scholars with the European 'wryneck' or *jynx torquilla*), or it might mean a pierced wheel that was spun rapidly on a looped thong so as to make a high-pitched whirring noise. Pindar, using poetic license, combined the two when he portrayed the hero Jason as attaching an *iynx*-bird to an *iynx*-wheel that he then employed to seduce Medea.⁵³

'*Iynx*' comes from a root that means 'sonorous' and the whirring noise produced by the wheel lay at the center of its perceived effectiveness. The bird was also connected, through its mythic genealogy, with powerful sound (it began life as a nymph whose mother was either Echo or Persuasion).⁵⁴ The theurgists picked up on this idea: the *iynx-daemones* that they envisioned as

52 E.g., Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.213–19, Theocritus, *Idylls*, 2 passim—more loosely at Aeschylus, *Persae*, 988, Pindar, *Nemean*, 4.35. The verb frequently used of the *iynx*'s effect is that it 'draws,' or 'drags' (ἐλκω) desired people closer (e.g., Pindar, *Nemean*, 4.35, Theocritus, *Idylls*, 2 passim.).

53 Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.213–19.

54 See Sarah Iles Johnston, "The Song of the *Iynx*: Magic and Rhetoric in *Pythian* 4," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995): 177–206. (This article also includes references to all uses of the word outside of theurgic sources that I was able to find in ancient literature.)

traveling between the upper and lower portions of the cosmos are described as whirring or whistling (ροιζέω) through the air, down from the noetic realm into the life-giving womb of Hecate and then whirring from there into the material realm.⁵⁵ It is possible that these sonorous *daemones* were also associated with the ‘music of the spheres’ that Platonists felt was essential to the ongoing harmony of the cosmos.⁵⁶

The ability of the *ynx-daemones* to pass freely across otherwise impermeable boundaries between strata of the cosmos was crucial to their tasks. Either as transmitters of the Ideas or as the Ideas themselves,⁵⁷ the *ynges* used the noetic force of the Father to give form to the previously inchoate material world; they helped to ‘regulate’ the cosmos by continually going back and forth, binding together the different realms. In this role, they were compared by exegetes of the *Oracles* to the ferrymen-*daemones* that Plato described at length in the *Symposium*, who were charged with transmitting messages, prayers, oracles and the like between humans and gods.⁵⁸ According to Synesius, the *ynx-daemones* played an important role in sustaining cosmic *sympatheia* more generally.⁵⁹ The *ynx-daemones*, then, enacted—even epitomized—certain principles of Platonic metaphysics. Transforming what was once a love-charm into this loftier entity was a bold move, but it made a certain sense: what better to guarantee the integrity of the cosmos than an irresistible force of attraction? It was for similar reasons that Iamblichus chose to call *sympatheia* by the name of *philia*—‘affection.’

When the theurgists used *ynges* to work upwards—that is, to invoke an entity from a higher realm into the material world—they employed this tool. Psellus gives us the most detailed description of how this was done, explaining that the theurgists made ‘indiscriminate sounds’ or ‘sounds like an animal,’

55 *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 37.1–2 and 8–9. Cf. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 97–100, 104–8 and 122. Chaldean Hecate herself is described by Damascius as ‘sending forth a life-giving whirl (ροιζήμα) (*Dubitationes et Solutiones*, 11.154.18 [Ruelle]). *Ynges* are also described as ‘whirling’ or ‘rushing,’ which seems to reflect the motion of the *ynx*-wheel: e.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 76, 77, 87 and Proclus, *In Cratylus*, 74.26; cf. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 133–4; Cremer, *Die chaldäischen Orakel und Iamblich*, 73–74 and Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 93.

56 Discussion at Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 101–2, and Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 250.

57 Above n. 38.

58 *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 76, 77, 78; Damascius, *Dubitationes et Solutiones*, 11.201.3–4 and cf. 1.286.9; Proclus, *In Cratylus*, 33.14 and *In Parmenides*, 199.33–9; Plato, *Symposium*, 202e3. Discussion at Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 90–92, 103–6.

59 Synesius, *On Dreams*, 132c.

and laughed as they caused the *inyges* to whip through the air.⁶⁰ The theurgists also called these *inyx*-wheels 'Hecate's tops' (στροφάλοι), which suggests a nod both to Hecate's long-standing role as a goddess of magic and to her then more-recent equation with the theurgic Cosmic Soul, through whom various commodities were transmitted from the noetic realm to the material world and vice versa (including the *inyges* themselves, as I noted above).⁶¹ Damascius adds that 'being whirled inward, [the *inyx*-wheel] calls forth the gods; outwardly, it sends them away.'⁶² The second part of this statement suggests that the theurgists were not always as submissive to the gods as Iamblichus would have us believe, and a fragment that may come from the *Chaldean Oracles* is even blunter: Hecate says to her human listeners that, 'easily drawing these unwilling [gods] from the aether by means of secret *inyges*, you lead them earthward.'⁶³ Apparently, the *inyges* could call down rain as well, if we believe the story that Marinus told about Proclus, mentioned above.

The theurgists, then, innovated upon the well-known way in which a *inyx* could be used by *magoi* to seduce a mortal lover not only by making the wheel into a cosmogonic *daemon*, but also by assigning to the wheel itself a new purpose: formerly, it had been used to draw unwilling people towards their seducers, but in theurgy it guaranteed that even hesitant divinities would heed the calls of humans. This is where the line between wheel and *daemon* really began to blur. Although no ancient author expressly states that whirling the *inyx*-wheel set an *inyx-daemon* into motion to carry a request from human to god, cumulatively the evidence points in this direction: in particular, the fact that the *inyx-daemones* are compared to Plato's *daemones* suggests they carry messages and requests in both directions.⁶⁴ Notably, *inyges* were also called *symbola* or *synthemata* by the theurgists—that is, they were among a larger group of animals, objects and sounds in the material world that could be manipulated by the theurgist in order to facilitate contact with a god, as we

60 Making unusual sounds during invocations is attested in the magical papyri as well; the theurgists may have again been adapting existing practices to their own uses.

61 Psellus, *Exegesis of the Chaldean Oracles* = PG 122, 1133 a3-b4; now in Psellus, *Philosophica Minora*, vol. 1 opusc. 38.

62 Damascius *Dubitaciones et Solutiones*, II.95.15.

63 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. dub. 223. The fragment is taken from Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* v.8.6, a quotation from Porphyry's *On the Philosophy of Oracles* (Smith, *Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta*, fr. 347); cf. Nicephorus Gregoras, PG, 149, 604a-b). Further on the use of *inyx*-wheels to invoke gods, Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 98–101.

64 Cf. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 250; Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, 9; Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, chapter 7.

will see.⁶⁵ Their symbolic properties probably lay in the whirring noises they made—which one ancient source tells us could be ‘tuned’ or ‘harmonized’ in order to enhance contact with the gods.⁶⁶

4.2 Phôtagôgia

Almost everything that theurgists sought to accomplish depended upon direct contact with a god or some other higher entity (*angeloi*, *archangeloi*, etc.). Such contact was called *sustasis* (σύστασις, literally ‘standing together’ with the entity) or sometimes *autopsia* (αὐτοψία, a ‘face-to-face vision’ of the god). Both terms and their cognates are found in the magical papyri as well as in theurgic sources, which underscores the high degree to which theurgists shared methods with practitioners from whom they formally separated themselves.

Because theurgic entities were fiery and filled with light, a more precise term for bringing on *sustasis* with one of them was ‘leading in the light’—*phôtagôgia* (φωταγωγή).⁶⁷ The very presence of such divine light conferred benefits. Iamblichus tells us that:

when the gods impart their light, that which is evil and demonic vanishes ... the gods’ light bestows on the theurgists every virtue, causes them to become orderly and well-mannered in the behavior, liberates them from passions and disordered movements, and purifies them from atheistic and unholy conduct.⁶⁸

Such psychic improvements paved the way for the soul later to be able to ascend. There were more immediately practical benefits as well, however. When a fiery divinity was present, he or she could convey information—and in fact, it was *only* when divine light was present that theurgists considered such information to be trustworthy. The *Oracles* warn against using most other means of divination, such as *haruspicina*, because they were either empty of meaning (the ‘props of commercial fraud’) or might be manipulated by demons and

65 *Iynges* as *symbola*: the evidence is strong, but indirect and depends on context; discussion and citations at Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 132–34; Geudtner, *Die Seelenlehre*, 45–46; Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 104–6.

66 Philostratus *Vita Apollonii*, 1.25; the source is not explicitly theurgic, but is contemporary with the beginnings of theurgy. Discussion at Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, 96–100.

67 The term itself is not found in the *Chaldean Oracles*, but is in Iamblichus *De Mysteriis*, 3.14, 133.10–11. The first scholar to treat the topic was Samson Eitrem, “Die σύστασις und der Lichtzauber in der Magie,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 8 (1929): 49–53, a discussion still worth reading.

68 Iamblichus *De Mysteriis*. 3.31, 178.8–16.

therefore convey deceptive information.⁶⁹ Iamblichus was willing to at least consider the validity of some forms of traditional divination, but he carefully explained how divine light, in one way or another, lay at the bottom of them. For example, he said that when the Pythia became overcome with *mania*, it was because her *pneuma* (a substance that ancient philosophers believed surrounded the human soul like an envelope and mediated between it and the body) had become drenched in divine light that was 'led down' into her during the preparatory rituals. When one divined by gazing into water, similarly—a practice mentioned several times in the magical papyri—Iamblichus claimed that success was due to the fact that both one's *pneuma* and the water itself had been pervaded by divine light.⁷⁰

Divine light could also appear right in front of the theurgist. In a series of fragments from the *Oracles*, Hecate explains that gods and other beneficent entities might choose to manifest themselves in the shapes of fiery children, fiery horses, or fiery children riding on fiery horses—shooting fiery arrows from fiery bows. Higher still on the divine ladder was an epiphany shaped like a 'formless fire'—that is, a god who appeared to the theurgist looking very much like what divinity really was, according to platonic ideas. When this entity (who was probably supposed to be equated with Hecate herself) manifested itself, the theurgist was expected to pay very close attention to what it said.⁷¹ Even in these cases, however, the theurgist had to prepare his *pneuma* before the gods arrived; if he did not, his *pneuma* would not be able to process the sight.⁷²

The term *phôtagôgia* also appears several times in a spell from a fourth-century CE magical papyrus, which is entitled 'Charm for an *autopsia*' and

69 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 107; Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 3.31, 175.12–180.4.

70 Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 3.11, 126.4–128.3; 3.14, 133.13–134.15. On gazing into liquids in the magical papyri, see instances discussed in Sarah Iles Johnston, "Charming Children: The Use of the Child in Ancient Divination," *Arethusa* 34.1 (2001): 97–118.

71 *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 146–8 and Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, book 2 and passim. See also Sarah Iles Johnston, "Fiat Lux, Fiat Ritus. Divine Light and the Late Antique Defense of Ritual," *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Transformative Vision*, ed. Matthew Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5–24; Johnston, "Riders in the Sky: Cavalier Gods and Theurgic Salvation in the Second Century AD," *Classical Philology* 87.4 (1992): 303–21, and Johnston, *Hecate Soteira*, chapter 8; Clarke, *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis*, chapter 6. On Proclus seeing fiery *phasmata* of Hecate, see Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 26.

72 Iamblichus specifically mentions the need for a luminous vehicle during divination at *De Mysteriis*, 3.14, 133.10, and Proclus similarly says 'those who see the gods witness them in the luminous garments of their souls (*augoeidê tôn psychôn periblemata*),' a phrase that brings us very close to the idea of the vehicle, which similarly was imagined to be wrapped around the soul. Cf. discussion at Shaw, "Theurgy: Rituals of Unification," 219–22; Finamore, "Plotinus and Iamblichus,"; John Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*. American Classical Studies 14 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 145–46.

opens with a ‘prayer for *sustasis*.’⁷³ But the venue through which the *phôtagôgia* occurs here is quite different from what we have seen for theurgy: the fiery divinity will enter into the room where the practitioner waits by passing through a flame produced by a lamp. Technically, this is a variation of a fairly common ritual practice called *lynchnomanteia* or ‘lamp divination,’ which usually involved someone gazing at the flame of a lamp until he or she saw visions (somewhat like gazing at a crystal).⁷⁴

The papyrus spell seems to straddle the line between *lynchnomanteia* and theurgic *phôtagôgia*. It improves upon the former insofar as the practitioner meets a god face-to-face instead of glimpsing only a vision in the flame, but theurgists would have considered the nature of the light involved here to be inferior to what they experienced during *phôtagôgia*. For although the lamp and its wick are specially prepared according to directions given in the spell, and although it is filled with the highest quality olive oil, these materials are all the products of human labor, and the flame that they create is therefore a human product as well. As Iamblichus tells us several times, the light that enables true divination comes from higher realms; it is the very essence of the Father himself.

4.3 *Inhaling Light*

I have mentioned that the *pneuma* of the theurgist had to be prepared to receive light before any form of *phôtagôgia* could occur, for divinatory purposes or otherwise. Because the theurgists operated on the sympathetic principle of ‘like to like,’ this meant that if the *pneuma* were to receive fiery light, the *pneuma* already had to be somewhat fiery and filled with light itself (Iamblichus called this process making the *pneuma* ‘*augoeidês*,’ ‘looking like light’).⁷⁵ Given that divine light was usually available in our world only in the form of sunlight, this would seem to present a problem—how can one incorporate sunlight into one’s interior, after all?—but theurgists rose to the challenge.

73 *PGM* IV.955, 975, 1103. The term *phôtagôgos* also appears at *PGM* V.190 but the use is metaphorical: the eyes of Helios, are asked to ‘bring to light’ a thief.

74 Eitrem, “Die σύστασις” and Dodds, “Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism,” 299, were the first to discuss the similarities between the theurgic procedures and the procedures of the papyri. See also Sarah Iles Johnston, “Sending Dreams, Restraining Dreams. *Oneiropompeia* in Theory and in Practice,” in *Sub Imagine Somni*, ed. Christine Walde and Emma Scioli (Pisa: ETS, 2010), 1–18; Johnston, “Charming Children”; and Theodor Hopfner, “Mittel- und neugriechische Lekano- Lychno-, Katoptro- und Onychomantein,” in *Studies Presented to F. Ll. Griffith* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1932), 218–32.

75 Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 3.11, 125.5; 3.14, 132.10; 5.26, 239.8.

First, they posited that there was an order of *angeloi* that was in charge of helping to illuminate souls—these are perhaps the same angels whom the Emperor Julian said were under the special control of Helios, and who helped the soul of the theurgist ascend (a ritual I will discuss below, which also depended on making the *pneuma* fiery). In one fragment of the *Oracles*, it is said that this order of angels ‘illuminates’ the soul (φέγγουσα); in another fragment the angels are said to make it less dense (κουφιζουσα) with their warming breath.⁷⁶

But the theurgists had their own work to do as well. Fragments 124 and 130 of the *Oracles* say that ‘those who drive out the soul by inhaling are set free,’ and that the souls who ‘find rest in the divine’ have done so by ...

... drawing in the flowering flames that descend from the Father; from these flames, as they descend, the soul plucks the soul-nourishing flower of fiery fruits.⁷⁷

We might hazard a guess that what the fragments are advocating is inhaling sunlight (that is, sun-lit air). The picture would be closely similar to that which we find in the so-called ‘Mithras Liturgy’ (a spell from the same fourth-century papyrus that includes the ritual I discussed just above), in which the human who wishes to ascend to the divine realms prepares to do so in part by inhaling sunlight. At one point, the spell tells its reader: ‘Draw in breath from the rays, drawing up as much as you can three times, and you will perceive that you have been lifted up and are ascending to the height ...’⁷⁸

If this guess is correct, then once again we find the theurgists putting into ritual effect their metaphysical principles: the Father’s light constitutes the essence of divinity and is also the medium through which that divinity can be transmitted to the material world; to make oneself capable of interacting with the divine, one must incorporate that light. But then the theurgists had to innovate. Unless the techniques described in the ‘Mithras Liturgy’ are significantly older than the papyrus in which they are recorded, then as far as we know it was the theurgists who invented the rather odd, but for them completely logical, idea of inhaling light—and it would have been people we

⁷⁶ *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 122 and 123; cf. *Julian Orationes*, 4.142a.

⁷⁷ *Chaldean Oracles*, 130.

⁷⁸ *PGM* IV.538–40. Further on these fragments and their relationship to the ‘Mithras Liturgy,’ see Sarah Iles Johnston, ‘Rising to the Occasion: Theurgic Ascent in its Cultural Milieu,’ in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans Kippenberg (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 165–94.

call magicians, then (the ritual experts who read and/or used *PGM* IV, which includes the 'Mithras Liturgy') who adopted and adapted a theurgic technique.

4.4 Telestikê

There were yet further ways of achieving *sustasis* with the divine. One of the most important theurgic rituals—and one that was to remain famous down through the centuries, prompting discussion by Ficino and others—involved the creation of statues that gods could temporarily inhabit, speaking forth oracles from within.⁷⁹ Modern scholars usually refer to these as 'telestic statues' and refer to the process as *telestikê*,⁸⁰ although the term (or more properly *hê telestikê technê*, 'the perfecting art') actually referred to two types of rituals. The first were those in which the soul of the theurgist or its *pneuma* was perfected and thereby made ready to ascend; some of these have been discussed in the section above and more will be treated below. The second involves the statues; the concept of 'perfection' in this case refers to the fact that the physical structure into which the god will enter must become as perfectly fitting to divinity as possible. The same principle that governed the preparation of an individual human *pneuma* to experience the divine during *phôtagôgia*—'like to like'—governed the telestic endeavor as well: a statue would become capable of receiving a god if its composite ingredients were similar to the god.

This brings us to the *symbola*—those objects, words or sounds that helped to forge connections between the human and divine worlds, which the Father had 'scattered' throughout the cosmos at the time of its creation. The objects included plants, animals, minerals and other substances that could be mixed together to form the raw material from which a statue would be made. For example, in a fragment that most scholars consider to have come from the *Chaldean Oracles*, Hecate tells the theurgist to make her statue out of wild

79 The idea is also glimpsed in the Hermetic *Asclepius* as well, which dates to approximately the same time as the *Chaldean Oracles*—no surprise, given that as Garth Fowden has shown, it is fruitless to try to separate Hermeticism from theurgy too strictly (Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]). See esp. *Asclepius* 23–24 and 38 and cf. Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, 8.22–24.

80 Very little work has been done on theurgic *telestikê*. For an in-depth treatment that offers a more complete review of ancient citations see Sarah Iles Johnston, "Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual" *Arethusa* 41 (2008): 445–77. Brief treatments are also available at Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," 291–95; P. Boyance, "Théurgie et téléstique néoplatoniciennes," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 147 (1955): 189–209; Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 495–96; and Van Liefferinge, *La théurgie des Oracles Chaldaïques*, 88–100 (although I find that she applies the term 'telestic' too widely).

rue, resin, myrrh, frankincense and the sort of small lizard that dwells near the house—items that were among Hecate's *symbola*.⁸¹

Every *symbolon* (which in effect means every object, creature or sound in the material world) belonged to a divine 'chain' that stretched from our world up into the highest realms of the cosmos. Each chain also included a god, a celestial body and certain angels, archangels, etc.⁸² Proclus discusses some of these chains in his treatise *On the Hieratic Art*, noting, for instance, that the chain on which Helios was located was also the chain that included the Sun, roosters, lions, laurel trees and heliotropes, among other things.

Items on the same chain were linked to one another and therefore could affect each other. By properly manipulating a branch from a laurel tree, one could in theory make contact with Helios; by manipulating small domestic lizards, one could make contact with Hecate. One might wonder why it was necessary, therefore, to mix several *symbola* together in order to make a telestic statue, as Hecate tells the theurgist to do. Proclus' explanation was that no object or sound available in this world was alone adequate to call forth a god, because they were all too distant from the upper realms—one needed to assemble a variety of substances to make the statue sufficiently divine.⁸³

One might also wonder why the theurgists needed to shape the resulting compound into a recognizable form—that is, into a statue. Why wouldn't a lump of combined materials suffice? The word that was sometimes used to designate a telestic statue, *hypodochê*, is borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, where it refers to the unformed material that receives the Ideas and participates in them—and by doing so, becomes the "mother" or "nurse" of generation in our world.⁸⁴ Viewed from this Platonic background, *hypodochê* is an apt term for a statue that will receive a god, but there is still no implication that such a receptacle needs to have a special, anthropomorphic form.

The ancient intellectuals who commented on theurgy were apparently uncomfortable with this requirement themselves, for they made several attempts to justify it. Porphyry insisted that it had been the gods who demanded that they be represented anthropomorphically, and that they had taught their worshippers 'what kind of figure (*schema*) should be given to their statues (*agalmata*) ... and from what sort of material they should be made.'⁸⁵ But why

81 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 224.

82 See, e.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 203, with commentary in Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentarii*, I.11.9 ff. and III.271.1; Psellus, *Hypostases*, 28, PG 76.2; now = Psellus, *Philosophica Minora*, vol. II opusc. 40.

83 *On the Hieratic Art*, 150.23–151.5; cf. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 5.23, 233.2–234.4.

84 E.g., Plato, *Timaeus*, 49a–51b.

85 Porphyry, *Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta*, fr. 316–318.

did the gods do this? Proclus, citing a *Chaldean Oracle*, insisted that it was for our own good: 'Although we are incorporeal (*asômatoi*),' says a god, 'for your sakes bodies (*sômata*) have been bound onto our self-revealed appearances.'⁸⁶ The Emperor Julian similarly reasoned that, because humans are embodied, they are capable only of worshipping something that similarly has bodily representation—this was the reason that the gods had taught us to make statues (both telestic and non-telestic).⁸⁷ Of course, from our own vantage point we can discern another, more powerful even if unacknowledged, reason for the theurgic use of representational statues: such statues were a well-established part of traditional cult. I have been describing the theurgists as philosophers who wanted to put their beliefs into ritual effect, but I should note again that, as inhabitants of their own time and place, they naturally adopted and adapted, whenever they could, practices that carried the prestige and apparent reliability of age. Indeed, some theurgists—notably Iamblichus—went to great lengths to defend traditional practices in the face of philosophic critics.

Telestic statues were also the perfect solution to another problem to which theurgy's debt to philosophy had given rise. The idea that the cosmos was divided into discrete realms, each of which was inhabited by its own proper entities, was central to middle platonic metaphysics. Firm boundaries between realms ensured the integrity of this structure. And yet, theurgic soteriology depended on the possibility of communication, and even travel, between realms: the souls of the purified had to be able to ascend, and the gods needed to be able to visit us. The telestic statue—a place within the material world where gods could properly dwell because the place was itself 'divine', in a sense—was an elegant solution that allowed the theurgists "to have their cake and eat it, too."⁸⁸

In closing this discussion of the telestic art, I should mention that the theurgists also thought it possible to call a god into a specially prepared human being—what the theurgists called a 'receiver' (δοχεύς) and what we would call a medium. Preparations included not only making the medium as pure as possible from corporeal pollutions, but also dressing him or her in clothing marked with *eikonismata* (i.e., pictures or words that were *symbola*) and doing other things that were much like those used to prepare telestic statues.

86 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 142. Proclus, from whom we receive the fragment (Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii*, II.242.812) says that only the second half is actually from the *Oracles*.

87 Julian, *Frag. Epistulae*, 293b–c; Empedocles, *The Extant Fragments*, ed. and comm., M.R. Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

88 For more on the theurgists as the inventors of ritualized invocation of gods into statues, Johnston, "Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual."

The divine could be seen to enter and leave the medium in a fiery form. But it was difficult to find the right people to serve in this role and keep them pure; telestic statues were assumedly an easier solution.⁸⁹

4.5 Anagôgê

The final ritual process that I will discuss was the culmination towards which all the others led: the temporary ascent (*anagôgê*, ἀναγωγή) of the theurgist's soul into the upper realms, where, like the charioteer of Plato's *Phaedrus*, it could gaze upon the beauty of the divine and further improve itself.⁹⁰ (A completely purified soul could ascend permanently after death to the angelic realm, although theurgists believed that the truly devout would choose to descend into corporality once more in order to lead other souls to blessedness.⁹¹)

A pure *pneuma* was essential to ascent, and as I noted above, one way of accomplishing this was to make the *pneuma* as fiery and filled with light as possible, by inhaling sunlight and asking for the help of angels. But other preparations were necessary as well. On a daily basis, the theurgist had to take care not to 'defile' or 'deepen' his *pneuma* by indulging in the passions of the material world (which the *Oracles* characterized as the 'demon dogs' of Hecate in her darker role).⁹² We also hear, from Psellus (who had probably read it in Proclus), that rituals to purify the *pneuma* included incantations and the manipulation of certain stones and plants, which might guess were *symbola* of the Sun—the divine agent who would be most helpful during the ascent itself.⁹³ Here we come very close to the rituals described in many of the ancient magical papyri.

Once the theurgist was ready to ascend, he had to turn not only his soul but his intellect to the task—which apparently meant engaging in the sort of

89 Proclus, *In Cratylus*, 100.19–25, and *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii*, 11.246.23–5; Porphyry, *Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta*, fr. 350; cf. Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," 295–99 and Johnston, "Charming Children."

90 More detailed discussion of ritualized ascent in Johnston, "Rising to the Occasion"; Johnston, "*Fiat Lux, Fiat Ritus*"; Bergemann, *Kraftmetaphysik und Mysterienkult*, 297–321 and 372–410.

91 On this, see Sarah Iles Johnston, "Working Overtime in the Afterlife or, No Rest for the Virtuous," in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. R. Boustan and A. Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85–102.

92 E.g., *Chaldean Oracles*, frs. 88–91, 104 and 105, and discussion at Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, chapter 9.

93 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 104 with comm. ad loc. in Des Places, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, and Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*; Psell. *Exegesis of the Chaldean Oracles* = PG 122, 1132 a 9–12; now in Psellus, *Philosophica Minora*, vol. 1 opusc. 38. On the Sun as anagogically important, Julian *Orations*, 5, 172a–173a.

contemplative exercises that Plotinus advocated.⁹⁴ In one of the *Oracles*,⁹⁵ a god directs that:

Clothing yourself in the full-armored force of the resounding light,
And equipping the soul and the intellect with the three-barbed strength,
You must cast into your mind the complete password (*synthema*) of the Triad⁹⁶ and wander
Amongst the fiery channels not in a haphazard manner but with concentration.

The 'fiery channels' along which the soul would travel are elsewhere called 'rays',⁹⁷ and refer to the beams of sunlight that descend from the Sun.⁹⁸

The 'password' mentioned here is probably a verbal *symbolon* that intensifies the theurgists' connection with the god(s) who oversees the ascent, but it certainly also serves as a marker of identity. As with the passwords used in earlier Greek mystery cults, knowledge of otherwise secret words or phrases proved that the initiate had undergone training and experiences that made him deserving of the special favors the gods had to offer.⁹⁹ Apparently one password was not enough, however: as he ascended through the different strata, the theurgist had to keep pronouncing *synthemata*. The Paternal Intellect would not cooperate with the soul until it had spoken the 'pure paternal *synthema*,' for example. Again, the 'Mithras Liturgy' from the magical papyri provides a parallel insofar as that ascender must pronounce passwords each time he encounters any of the numerous ranks of divine entities that lie between him and his goal.

94 On the importance of a contemplative as well as ritual element in ascent and the difficulty of determining precisely what the theurgists and their commentators thought on the matter, see the review of ancient materials and modern opinions at Majerick, *The Chaldea Oracles*, 30–45 and more recently Tanaseanu-Döbler, "Nur der Weise ist Priester," 27–56.

95 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 2 and cf. fr. 1.

96 The "Triad" probably refers to three divine hypostases of the Father; see comments ad loc. in Des Places, *Oracles Chaldaïques*; Majerick, *The Chaldean Oracles*; and Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 192–97.

97 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 115.

98 They are the same channels as those through which the soul had originally descended into incarnation: *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 110. Cf. the 'pipes' along which the soul will ascend in the "Mithras Liturgy," 542–51, which are described as hanging down from the Sun.

99 For passwords in mystery cults, Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 46.

There are traces of other rituals that might have helped to prepare the theurgist for psychic ascent, although it is difficult to be certain of what was done or exactly what it was intended to accomplish. Proclus says that 'in the most wondrous of all the mystic ceremonies of perfection,' the theurgist was buried up to his neck. If we are right to understand this burial as part of the preparation for ascent, then the idea seems to have been to symbolically 'kill' the body so as to facilitate the soul's release.¹⁰⁰ This we also hear about hymns being sung by the ascending soul.¹⁰¹

Elsewhere I have discussed the differences between the ascent rituals used by the theurgists and the author of the 'Mithras Liturgy,' and the ascent narratives found in ancient Mediterranean works such as the *Testament of Levi* (probably mid second century BCE) or the *Ascension of Isaiah* (first century CE).¹⁰² One difference is that the main purpose of the latter is to present a theodicy or eschatological system that the ascender learns about when on high (the ascent story serves as a validating 'frame' for this information) whereas in the former, those reading or listening to the ritual instructions aspire to ascend themselves. The ascents in the latter, moreover, typically are spontaneous; figures such as Isaiah are chosen by God and 'raptured' to the heavens without needing to perform preliminary rituals. The theurgists, as we have seen, were expected to prepare themselves for ascent at great length. These differences again underscore what I have emphasized in this essay, but from a different angle: theurgic ritual grew organically out of its philosophical system, but grow it did. The theurgists were not content only to think about how the cosmos worked; they wanted to participate in those workings.

Suggested Readings

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100 Proclus, *Theol. Pl.* iv.9; ed. and comm. H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink, *Théologie platonicienne: Book 5* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003), 30, 17–25 with their comments (I adopt their interpretation here) and cf. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 204–7, and Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, 37–8.

101 *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 131 with Damascius' comments at *In Phaedrus*, 371, ed. L.G. Westerink and J. Combès, *Damascius. Traité des premiers principes. Tome III. De la procession de l'unifié*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002).

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Edited by

David Frankfurter



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