From Philosopher to Priest: The Transformation of the Persona of the Platonic Philosopher

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2010

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the transformation of philosophers into priests and demonstrates that the fusion of philosophy with religion was a complex literary and philosophical process that ultimately responded to metaphysical and epistemological questions raised by Plato himself. I focus on the period between the first and early fourth centuries CE, when Platonic philosophers such as Plutarch, Numenius, and Iamblichus began to energize the role that religion played in the philosopher’s search for the truth. In their texts, these authors gradually and increasingly adopted the persona of priests, which changed not only the textual presentation of philosophy, but also the very substance of that philosophy.

In my first two chapters, I study the Iamblichus, who, in the De Mysteriis, adopted the persona of an Egyptian priest in order to answer Porphyry’s objections to his programmatic fusion of Plato with theurgy, a set of rituals derived from the “Chaldeans.” I argue that Iamblichus’ main philosophical divergence from the Platonic tradition was related to his epistemological view that knowledge of the Good is possible, but attainable only through the grace of the gods.

In my third chapter, I turn to Plutarch, whose textual identity was primarily defined by his dual role as Platonic philosopher and priest of Apollo at Delphi. I specifically examine his Delphic Dialogues and his Isis and Osiris to show that Plutarch viewed his
role as priest at Delphi as a means to incite the shrine’s visitors to philosophy, and that both the religious rituals performed and the mysterious truths revealed there presented their participants with the unique opportunity to study them philosophically.

In my fourth chapter, I look at the centuries between Plutarch and Iamblichus by focusing on one transformative figure in particular: Numenius of Apameia. Numenius was a second-century Platonist, who called for a complete cleansing of the impurities of the Platonic tradition. I argue that Numenius represented the formative exemplar of Platonists who readily admitted that Plato’s inconclusiveness presented a challenge to the philosopher in search of wisdom. Because “Plato’s doctrines” were so obscured by the dialogue form, his successors actually subverted Platonic doctrine. His goal was to arrive at the true dogma of Plato, but this required divine aid and an appeal to other traditions, a claim that formed the fundamental basis for Iamblichus.

I conclude with Plato himself. I study two priestly figures in Plato, Diotima and Euthyphro, in order to show that while Plato did allow for priestly figures in philosophy, he did problematize the role that they played in the philosophical search for wisdom. I conclude that Iamblichus explicitly resolved both Plato’s and the Platonic tradition’s implicit ambivalence about whether knowledge is possible by invoking the help of the gods as the end, not the beginning of the philosopher’s search; that Iamblichus took direct aim at Plutarch and his mode of exegesis and was authorized to do so by the Platonic tradition itself; and that during the centuries in question, Plato and the Platonic texts had become apologetic tools for everyone.
For Mom, Dad, and Anna
It is impossible to include all the names of everyone who helped me with my dissertation. My greatest debt is owed to my advisor and friend, Anthony Kaldellis, whose unstinting intellectual support, guidance, inspiration, and encouragement have been felt in all aspects of this project. I cannot express what Anthony’s limitless patience, sharp wit, and keen eye have meant to me over the years, but they have improved nearly every page of this dissertation as well as all aspects of my thinking. My magister doctissimus, he will forever remain my model of rigor and clarity. “If it cannot be said in plain English, it’s not worth saying.”

I thank my teacher and friend, Richard Fletcher, who inspired this dissertation’s methodological commitments both through the first seminar he offered at Ohio State on Roman Philosophy and through our many conversations about genre, literary criticism, and literature. Richard generously offered invaluable comments on the various drafts of this dissertation that have, time and again, helped me think beyond my own limitations. Someday I will learn to love cricket as he has learned to love baseball.

I thank Sarah Iles Johnston whose guidance and advice have helped me throughout my graduate career. From her I learned as much about Pindar as I did about theurgy. I have been told many times that I am the foremost expert on the topics in my dissertation, but this is not true. Whenever I thought that I was breaking new ground, I found that Sarah had already been there.
I thank my friends, Kira Botkin, Todd Harris, Molly Ayn Jones-Lewis, and Rob Lewis for pub night and sci-fi Saturday. This has kept me good-humored and sane.

And, finally, I thank both my parents, who have always been there to extend an encouraging hand as well as Anna Peterson, whose patience during the writing of my dissertation I have tried unsuccessfully to repay during the writing of hers. It is to them that I dedicate this dissertation.
Vita

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Introduction

1. Religious and Philosophical Transformation

The period under investigation in this dissertation, the first four centuries CE, is marked by a series of world-changing transformations. Between the world of Plutarch and that of Constantine, we can detect radical changes in the institutions of intellectual authority. The Platonic Academy, for example, saw skepticism yield to dogmatism during this period and, with it, the use of sacred texts in philosophical discourse, the rise of holy men who present miracles as philosophical proof, and the abandonment of the Socratic persona, himself so tied to the city of Athens that he would not go into voluntary exile to avoid death, in favor of that of the Eastern (that is, *barbarian*) priest. This is not to say, of course, that we can detect such transformations only in intellectual circles. These shifts run so deeply that they exist in the office of the Roman emperor, the very seat of power. It is during this period that emperors begin to try their hands at philosophical and theological writing. Consider, for example Trajan and Constantine. The former, who most likely predeceased Plutarch by about three years, is said to have been addressed by Dio of Prusa on the subject of virtuous kingship.¹ Leaving the plausibility of this story aside, we may still see that philosophical, moral, and imperial advice is being given to an emperor openly, whether in person or through text, from an outside source. Shortly after

¹ See Kokkina 2004:490-500 for a recent discussion of Trajan and Dio’s ties.
Trajan, of course, Marcus Aurelius penned his own Stoic *Meditations*, but even these stand in stark contrast to the speech in which Constantine extolled Vergil’s *Fourth Eclogue* as prophecy for the birth of Christ or the texts in praise of theurgy Julian wrote.\(^2\)

The difference between Trajan and Marcus on the one hand and Constantine on the other relates to imperial ideology. Whereas Trajan and Marcus allow themselves either to be addressed by a Greek “philosopher” (in the case of the former) or to become one himself (in the case of the latter), Constantine sets policy on the basis of religious revelation and not just belief. To this speech of Constantine, the *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*, we will return below.

A similar trend was occurring among non-elites as well. Though we tend to end the period of the so-called Second Sophistic at 250 CE because of the sharp decline of material and epigraphic evidence thereafter,\(^3\) we do know that holy objects and holy places proliferated during the third and fourth centuries and, as a result, people traveled far and wide to visit them.\(^4\) To take one such example that is especially significant for two of the figures that I will discuss in this dissertation, Numenius and Iamblichus, Polymnia Athanassidi has shown that Babylon’s temple of Bel-Marduk, although originally a Babylonian god, was replicated in the late second century in two separate cities: Palmyra and Apamea. We know that these temples continued to be pilgrimage sites into the third and fourth centuries, both on the basis of the epigraphic evidence that

\(^2\) Athanassiadi 1981:134.

\(^3\) Swain 1998:6-17.

\(^4\) Athanassiadi 2005:117.
Athanassiadi cites and ancient testimony (to which we will turn in the next chapter) about the popularity of Numenius and Iamblichus, who made Apamea their base of operations and therefore lived and worked with the temple looming. But it is not that the presence of the temple itself caused anything, least of all the transformation of philosophy into a sort of religion. Rather, this transformation was part of a much broader trend: the fusion of *eastern* ritual and *western* philosophy.

We may look, moreover, to the pagan holy man for a comparandum. Garth Fowden’s work has suggested that the pagan holy man was defined by the close connection made in late antiquity between holiness and philosophical learning, so much so that Damascius is reported by Photius to have maintained a concept of a “holy race” of men who led a blessed life because they were simultaneously devoted to the pursuit of philosophy and the worship of divine beings (*Life of Isidore* 95). As Fowden points out, Eunapius, our main source for the pagan holy men, presents Iamblichus not as a bookish intellectual, but rather as a wonderworker, capable of summoning spirits of Eros at will or levitating (more on this in chapter 1). He spawned a new kind of philosopher, one who practices theurgy and, as the work of Sarah Iles Johnston has shown, has the ability to bring non-living things to life, to animate statues (see chapter 2). The philosophical proof of theurgy’s success, of course, is in the miraculous pudding.

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5 Athanassiadi 2006:125.

6 Fowden 1982:37.

7 Johnston 2008.
Put bluntly, then, the transformation that we can detect by the third and fourth centuries is of a religious nature. In fact, this has been articulated before, most recently last year, when Guy Stroumsa’s La fin du sacrifice, a book that developed out of a series of lectures he gave at the Collège du France in 2004, appeared in English translation. The book’s subtitle, Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity, sums this up nicely. In the first chapter, he connects his work to the large body of scholarship to which, in many ways, this dissertation is also connected:

Starting with Albrect Dieterich before the end of the nineteenth century, via Henri-Irénée Marrou and Eric Robertson Dodds, to Peter Brown and Robin Lane Fox, all historians interested in religious phenomena have not hesitated to speak of a new religiosity or piety, even a religious revolution, that sets in during the third century to assert itself during the fourth. 8

Stroumsa prefers the term “revolution” because, he says, what is really happening during this period is a kind of destruction of ancient systems, not only of the traditional religion of the Greeks and Romans but also that of Israel. He speaks of this phenomenon as a “paradigm shift,” or more strongly as an “axial age,” in which the thinkers of this period began to view the world through the lens of religion. Or, as Stroumsa himself puts it, “the transformations of the anthropological conceptions that we may detect in late antiquity are…of a religious nature.” 9 I, for my part, must qualify Stroumsa’s use of the term “paradigm shift” to describe a phenomenon such as this, especially since Thomas Kuhn originally coined the phrase in order to describe scientific discoveries. Ironic though this may be given our contemporary polarization of science and religion, “paradigm shifts”

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8 Stroumsa 2009:3.
9 Stroumsa 2009:10.
are generally initiated quickly and by a very few (e.g., Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and the like) who fundamentally change the way in which mankind thinks about the world. The chapters that follow suggest that what seems instantaneous was actually part of a longer process beginning with Plutarch (if not Plato himself, as my conclusion will suggest) and coming to a head with Iamblichus. Thus, if I am to continue to work with the terms established by the field, my Darwin, Curie, and Einstein, so to speak, would be Plutarch, Numenius, and Iamblichus, the engines of the so-called “paradigm shift.”

Thus my dissertation seeks to present a new solution to an old problem, but not to be, as it were, “a woe succeeding a woe, as a wave a wave.”¹⁰ This is not meant as a commentary on the work of my predecessors but a statement about my hope that my approach will be useful way to rethink a question that, I believe, should nag at anyone who reads Plato in tandem with the later Platonists. How did the philosopher of classical antiquity become the philosopher-priest of late antiquity? Or, to put it another way: How did it happen that the philosophers of this period sacralize their teachings? And concomitantly: How did the practitioners of religion intellectualize the priesthood? I will show that what appears to Stroumsa and his predecessors to be a “paradigm shift” is actually the result of a long negotiation between the roles of theology and science in philosophy. Iamblichus and his holy men did not appear out of nowhere; they reflect a new epistemology, one that, I argue, grew out of dissatisfaction with Plato’s ambivalence about whether knowledge was attainable for the philosopher. It is with this in mind that

¹⁰ Robert Herrick, “Sorrows Succeed.”
we shall begin with Constantine’s *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints* because this text exhibits many of the philosophical elements that this dissertation will dissect. By appealing to this text, moreover, I aim to show that it is not only among the Neoplatonists but among the Christians as well that this shift can be detected.

2. Constantine’s *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*

For the occasion of Good Friday in 325, the Emperor Constantine delivered an *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints* that reaffirmed his conversion to Christianity. The text is ostensibly a refutation of the critics of Christianity and a clear testimony to the truths of Christian doctrine. Because the speech was most likely delivered to a Christian audience, signaled by the very title of the work, it is unlikely that Constantine would be attempting to convince his audience of the truth of Christianity. Rather, it seems, Constantine was attempting to convince his audience that he was, in fact, one of them. Scholars have, of course, doubted not only the sincerity of Constantine’s belief (given that he may well have been trying to ingratiate himself to a growing minority) but also the authenticity of the document itself (given that Eusebius has preserved it for us by appending it to his own *Life of Constantine* in order to represent “a typical kind of speech the emperor was always giving”).

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11 The date of the text is problematic. See Schott 2008:110.

This document interests me for none of the usual reasons. For the purposes of this discussion, it does not matter when Constantine “converted” to Christianity, nor does it matter whether this document represents an actual speech delivered by Constantine (for most scholars already accept its authenticity), nor does it matter why he delivered it in the first place. The text, rather, reveals a radical change in the ways in which Greek intellectuals and Roman authorities (given that Eusebius of Caesarea preserved the speech by Constantine, a Latin-speaking Illyrian) viewed the relationship between their religious and philosophical identities alike on the cusp of late antiquity.

I want to discuss the *Oration* at length here because it contains the following surprising claims: that Greek philosophers have obscured the truth rather than illuminated it; that truth must be dispensed by God to man; and that the poets, because they ply their trade under divine inspiration, offer to their listeners the concealed word of God. One might be quick to attribute these claims to the author’s Christianity because this sort of rhetoric—that which boasts the special access to the truth to the exclusion of everyone else—is common in Christian apologetic writing. But Constantine’s pronouncements in this document transcend his faith because the beliefs espoused within it were common to pagans and Christians alike. This text, therefore, testifies to a greater problem that permeates the philosophical landscape of the first three centuries CE and I use it here to introduce the problems that I intend to examine in my dissertation.

In the first third of the text, Constantine rejects the possibility that philosophy leads to the truth. He begins by praising men who believe that the cosmos was created under the auspices of divine will and providence and not by chance. He goes on to say
that God is both above existence and the Creator of existence and, in a particularly Aristotelian vein, is the Good toward which the created strive. But the rub is that this truth, according to Constantine, cannot be ascertained through the persuasive influence of argument. On the contrary, rational discourses and inquiries into the origins and processes of the cosmos actually draw the philosopher away from the truth. The nature of the cosmos, just as the nature of its Creator, is ineffable and its magnitude “surpasses the powers of rational investigation” (Or. 9.1). Because of this, philosophers have tended to “adopt various devices for obscuring the truth” rather than for revealing it. By this he means that the arguments, dialogues, allegories, syllogisms, analogies, and scores of other philosophical strategies have only distracted the one in search of God’s wisdom.

The philosopher that spoke openly, Constantine claims, and boasted direct communication with God found himself condemned: one need look only at Socrates and his daimonion for proof. And although Plato did understand that there existed “a God exalted above every essence” and that there was “also a second, distinguishing them numerically as two, though both possessing one perfection,” he nonetheless went astray in positing still more gods (Or. 9.1). So where, if Socrates left no writing and Plato and his successors went too far off course, can the faithful turn to discover the ancient truths handed down to man from God?

Constantine’s answer is striking. He suggests that one must look outside the Greek philosophical tradition—contrary to the emperors before him such as Trajan or Marcus—to find clear pronouncements of the mysteries of the cosmos. The faithful should first look to the poets because, as he says in Assembly of the Saints 10, the poets
were moved by a divine impulse to attempt the poetic art and the faithful must believe and be persuaded by whatever they said under this inspiration. Although it is true that Plato seemed to allow for the direct communion between poet and god in the *Ion* and, therefore, the possibility that the poets can speak the truth, he did not claim its superiority to dialectic and philosophical discourse. In fact, for Plato, only a few are inspired; most are not (i.e., Homer versus the rhapsode). Constantine does suggest that in poetry is concealed the word of God; engaging in traditional Greek philosophy is a waste of time. Similarly, the faithful must also look to non-Greek sources that attest the divine nature of Christ. For this, Constantine suggests Vergil’s *Fourth Eclogue*. Constantine is the first to identify Vergil’s messianic child in the eclogue as Christ and is also the first to treat Vergil as writing the poem “out of an irresistible urge to bear witness to the truth.”

When read allegorically (because poets always shroud the truth in mystery), Constantine suggests, Vergil was clearly writing of Christ because “these things cannot have been spoken of a mere man” (21.1).

Constantine, ruler of the vast Roman empire, whom we know was surrounded in his court by every kind of legal, religious, and philosophical expert, says in this text something radical. In one fell swoop, Constantine rejects Greek philosophy on the grounds that the philosophical schools argued for a randomly generated universe (as the Epicureans did) or argued *too much* (as the Stoics and Platonists did), even if they argued for a providential God that created the cosmos with care. Philosophy, because of its adherents’ penchant for excessive argumentation, was no longer an avenue for

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discovering the truth whereas the poets were because they had direct access to the mind of God. Constantine, therefore, was part of the transformations with which I opened my introduction. What happened in the later empire that precipitated such a radical transformation?

One answer, at least as old as Foucault, is this: “Christianity happened.” One could argue plausibly that Constantine was a Christian, and that Christians of this period frequently adopted and adapted the teachings of the philosophers to suit their own needs. One need only look to Eusebius himself, the author who preserves Constantine’s oration, as one such example. Throughout his texts, he presents the history of philosophy as somehow leading up to the great Christian revelation and apologetically attempts to bring pagan philosophy into line with Christian doctrine. But there is something more radical in this text, as Schott has shown. Constantine, shortly after his “conversion” to Christianity in 312 after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, began to develop an imperial ideology that was based on the differences between the ancestral traditions of the people of his empire, which boil down to truth (Christianity) and falsehood (everything else). Thus, according to Constantine’s logic, the “bad” emperors of the third and fourth centuries (Decius, Valerian, and Aurelian) are laid low because of God’s retribution (Decius caused the humiliation of the Romans at the hands of the Getae; Valerian was captured and flayed by the Persians; Aurelian was killed in Thrace). Worst of all is Diocletian, who, because of his persecution of the Christians, “feared the lightning bolt” the rest of his life (25.2). As Schott puts it, “Constantine’s message is

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}} \text{Schott 2008, chapter 4.}\]
clear: devotion to savagery and traditional religion leads to war and destruction.”¹⁵ For Constantine, paideia (in his case, Christian paideia) is revealed and it is the vehicle through which harmony can be brought to everyone (11.6). Thus truth is revealed by God, not discovered by man. Clinging to traditional religion and philosophy leads man to ignorance, not wisdom.

Constantine’s claim that philosophical investigation about the world and its causes will not be effective in attaining wisdom we might expect to be common among Christians, given that the truth could be found in the mysteries surrounding God and Christ. The problem is, however, that, if we subtract the extreme “we’re right and you’re wrong” mentality of Christian apology, one sees similar pronouncements among pagans as well. Iamblichus, for example, the subject of the first two chapters of this thesis, begins his Life of Pythagoras with a similar claim: that if the philosopher is to attain knowledge and wisdom he must receive it from divine sources. Similarly, in the seventh book of his De Mysteriis, Iamblichus adopts the persona of an Egyptian priest and denounces the Greek philosophical tradition’s deliberate adumbration of the truth through excessive philosophical argumentation, dialectic, and discussion. Constantine’s religion, therefore, seems to be a symptom of, rather than a cause for a greater intellectual shift in the later Roman empire. Constantine’s intellectual and spiritual commitments are part of a trend that is clearly visible in pagan rather than Christian circles at least a generation before he penned the Oration to the Assembly of the Saints, and it is to the pagans that I turn in my thesis. I therefore pose my research as just one part of the larger question I

¹⁵ Schott 2008:117.
posed above: What happened in the later empire that precipitated such a radical transformation?

3. The Argument, Up Front

My approach to this question is to narrow it to the Platonic tradition because it is in this venue, I believe, that this transformation can be best understood. Scholars have long noted that by late antiquity Platonic philosophy had become a form of religion. This fact, while historically accurate, should be disconcerting to readers of Plato because, in his dialogues, Plato presents non-philosophical priestly authority as especially dangerous. In the *Apology*, Socrates is tried and executed on religious grounds, and in the *Euthyphro*, Plato presents Socrates as a possible reformer (and therefore not a “corruptor”) of the aberrant Euthyphro by dialectically challenging the young man’s self-appointed expertise in piety. Given that Plato’s dialogues reveal a definitive distrust of all social and intellectual authority based on non-dialectical knowledge about the gods, how did the Platonic philosopher ultimately become what Plato initially was so distrustful of?

The work previously done on this topic represents a nexus where many scholars with different interests converge, although there has not yet been considerable theoretical exchange among them. The problem has largely been ignored by classicists, and, as a result, the implications of the paradox have not been fully appreciated. Scholars of late antiquity have studied the transformation of philosophy into religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Polymnia Athanassiadi’s *La lutte pour l’orthodoxie dans le Platonisme Tardif*, for example, studies how the middle and later Neoplatonists developed the
Chaldean Oracles as ‘sacred texts’ that were used for the interpretation of the Platonic tradition. Scholars of philosophy have studied the problem with a view toward understanding the logical and metaphysical technicalities of later Neoplatonism. The solution offered in O’Meara’s *Pythagoras Revived* focuses on the incorporation of Pythagorean mysticism into Platonic philosophy. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, have been especially interested in studying the theurgy of Iamblichus and suggest that later Platonism represented, as Gregory Shaw put it in *Theurgy and the Soul*, “a revaluation of traditional cult practices.”

My dissertation reexamines the transformation of philosophers into priests and proposes a new model that brings these theoretical orientations together. I argue that the fusion of philosophy with religion was a complex literary and philosophical process that ultimately responded to metaphysical and epistemological questions raised by Plato himself. I focus on the critical period between the first and early fourth centuries CE, when Platonic philosophers began to energize the role that religion played in the philosopher’s search for the truth. In their texts, they gradually and increasingly adopted the persona of priests, which changed not only the textual presentation of philosophy, but also the very substance of that philosophy. My study, therefore, has two major goals: (1) to raise literary questions about the presentation of philosophy in texts that have often been read as sources for other disciplines, and (2) to locate and study the fault lines of the negotiation between philosophical and theological wisdom in middle and later Platonism that finally transformed philosophers into priests.

I have presented my argument in reverse chronological order for heuristic reasons.
Beginning at the end of the transformations under investigation here provides a convenient lens through which we may examine new connections and relationships between authors (such as Iamblichus and Plutarch), philosophical ideals, and textual personae that have been heretofore unnoticed. Because I am ultimately tracing one theme, the persona of philosopher-priest, even though this theme is intimately tied to all the transformations in intellectual authority that I mentioned above, it has been useful to begin with the most developed version of it (in Iamblichus), then to look to where the negotiation between these two personae began (in Plutarch), and finally to conclude with the hinge of the transition (in Numenius) between these two disparate figures.

As a word of warning, I do not want to give the impression that history is necessarily teleological. It may or may not be, but I am setting out a teleological construct—by beginning at the end—because it is just one useful heuristic device (of potentially many others). At no point do I claim that the figure of the philosopher had to turn into a priest because there was nothing else for it to do. By thinking of this in a literary way, I am studying authorial choices along with philosophical choices and thus am focusing on genre, persona, character as well as metaphysical and epistemological commitments. In other words, priests are not the only figures that can boast (and in fact have) direct communion with the gods and therefore a non-dialectical epistemology. The priest represents a personal (i.e., from persona) as well as an authorial choice. It is this choice that I aim to study here.

In my first two chapters, therefore, I study the Syrian Platonist Iamblichus (c. 245-327) because he would go on to fundamentally change what it meant to be a Platonic
philosopher. In his best-known work, the *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus adopted the persona of an Egyptian priest in order to answer Porphyry’s objections to his programmatic fusion of Plato with theurgy, a set of rituals derived from the “Chaldeans.” I argue that Iamblichus’ main philosophical divergence from the Platonic tradition was related to his epistemological view that knowledge of the Good is possible after all, but attainable only through the grace of the gods; and that Iamblichus’ adoption of the persona of the philosopher-priest indicated a redefinition of not only Platonic philosophy but also of the Platonic philosopher himself. I suggest that Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras* authorized this persona by subverting and ultimately redefining the Platonic tradition on the basis of recognizable Platonic figures, allusions, and tropes in order to establish Pythagoras as the “true” founder of Platonism. I then hone in on disentangling Iamblichus’ literary persona as a fusion of three major traditions: he adapted the theurgic model of the *Chaldean Oracles* to the metaphysical traditions of Plato’s *Timaeus* and Plotinus’ *Enneads* and interpreted them through Egyptian priestly wisdom. This new interpretive matrix allowed Iamblichus to reject Greek philosophical methodologies for discovering wisdom in favor of a return to the religious modes of enlightenment that brought about the final transformation of philosophers into priests.

The remainder of my thesis excavates the archaeology of Iamblichus’ radical claims. In my third chapter, I turn to Plutarch, whose textual identity was primarily defined by his dual role as Platonic philosopher and priest of Apollo at Delphi. I argue that Plutarch, too, was interested in the negotiation between theological and philosophical knowledge, but that the balance he struck between the two was far different from that of
Iamblichus. I specifically examine his *Delphic Dialogues* and his *Isis and Osiris* to show that Plutarch viewed his role as priest at Delphi as a means to incite the shrine’s visitors to philosophy, and that both the religious rituals performed and the mysterious truths revealed there presented their participants with the unique opportunity to study them philosophically. For Plutarch, the elements of religion and theology needed to be examined philosophically and scientifically to arrive at the truths contained within them. As these texts indicate, Plutarch argued that Delphi was an ideal place to begin one’s philosophical quest because the enigmatic and riddling nature of Apollo and his oracles lent itself well to examining religion (and everything else) with philosophical scrutiny, and it was with this goal in mind that he fulfilled his role as priest. In the *Isis and Osiris*, I find it significant that Plutarch’s objective was to bring the wisdom of the Egyptian mysteries into line with Platonic doctrines, primarily those derived from the *Timaeus*. Plutarch saw his role at Delphi as particularly philosophical, rather than, like Iamblichus, seeing his role as philosopher as particularly priestly. The contrast, then, put simply is this: Iamblichus was a philosopher-priest, Plutarch a priest-philosopher. Plutarch, therefore, stood right between a more rationalistic tradition and the onset of Pythagorean or Neoplatonic mysticism.

In my fourth chapter, I look at the centuries between Plutarch and Iamblichus by focusing on one transformative figure in particular who I believe had a profound impact on Iamblichus’ re-negotiation of Plutarch’s project: Numenius of Apamea. Numenius was a second-century Platonist, who called for a complete revision and cleansing of the impurities of the Platonic tradition, and he too, like Iamblichus, brought both
Pythagorean and exotic elements to bear on the interpretation of Plato. I begin by studying the fragments of *On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato* in order to show that Numenius’ text represented the formative exemplar of Platonists who readily admitted that Plato’s inconclusiveness presented a major challenge to the philosopher in search of wisdom for two reasons. First, because “Plato’s doctrines” were so obscure, reading the dialogues alone are problematic. Second, because the dialogues were inconclusive, his successors actually subverted Platonic doctrine as they argued over its true interpretation. His own goal, as I argue, was to arrive at the true dogma of Plato, but this required divine aid and an appeal to other traditions. I then turn to the remaining fragments to show that these critiques formed the fundamental basis for Iamblichus’ own philosophical project. The guiding thread through the chapters is Plato’s *Timaeus*, both in anchoring these thinkers in the Platonic tradition and in joining them in a single matrix of interpretation.

My concluding chapter, in keeping with my reverse chronology, turns to Plato himself. I study two priestly figures specifically, Euthyphro and Diotima, the former a philosophical failure and the latter a philosophical success, to show that the gradual emphasis on the priestly figure in Platonic discourse represents a response to problems delineated in Plato’s own dialogues. The *Euthyphro* is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Platonic text in which theological wisdom is subjected to philosophical scrutiny, though the exact relationship between philosophy and religion are not fully defined by the characters in it. A possible solution, I argue, may be found in the teachings of Diotima in the *Symposium*. She tells Socrates that the philosopher’s job is not necessarily
to know anything specific, but rather to question all matters physical and divine. Her lesson, I conclude, was re-presented especially by Plutarch, and again, although with more than a shaker full of salt, by both Numenius and Iamblichus. In this final section of the thesis, therefore, I demonstrate that Iamblichus explicitly took on both Plato’s and the Platonic tradition’s implicit ambivalence about whether knowledge is possible for man by invoking the help of the gods as the end, not the beginning of the philosopher’s search; that Iamblichus took direct aim at Plutarch and his mode of exegesis and was authorized to do so by the Platonic tradition itself; and that Plato did not outright reject traditional religion, only religion that was divorced from philosophy. Plato’s Diotima was one version of this, as was Iamblichus’ Abammon, but by the fourth century, the Platonic philosopher was no longer a skeptic, thanks in large part to Numenius’ criticisms. As such, while the lessons of Diotima necessarily faded, her persona remained.

4. Terminology Defined
In this dissertation, I will be using a variety of terms that have a long tradition in the fields of both religion and philosophy and so I must define them here. First, I want to be candid about my use of the unfortunately slippery term “priest” (the use of which has come under fire recently). Etymologically speaking, the English word “priest” derives from the Greek word πρεσβύτερος through the Latin presbyter. The word’s semantic sphere in English, as Albert Henrichs points out, extends far beyond what scholars mean

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by it in the context of Greek religion.\(^{17}\) For the term πρεσβύτερος, not usually associated with priests, originally meant “elder” in contradistinction to “younger.” See, for example, how Socrates uses it at Plato’s Apology 30a-b:

οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πράττων ἐγὼ πειράζομαι ἢ πείθων ὑμῶν καὶ νεωτέρους καὶ πρεσβύτερους μήτε σωμάτων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι μήτε χρημάτων πρότερον μηδὲ ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὁπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται…

I went around Athens doing nothing other than trying to persuade the younger and older of you not to care for your bodies or money ahead of or as vigorously as your soul and making it as good as possible…

The Christians, however, shift the semantics of the word to account for the hierarchies within the Church. According to Henrichs, who relies on Lampe’s Patristic Lexicon, Christian πρεσβύτερος was an “honorific term for teachers, bishops, and ‘any respected member of the Church,’ and more technically… ‘a member of a particular ministerial order’” who was, also generally speaking, male.\(^{18}\) Pagan religion was less hierarchical than Christianity and it was certainly not as gender biased. Henrichs insists that scholars should, if not do away with the term all together, openly acknowledge the problems associated with it. That said, I will continue to use the term priest anyway, but with a deferential hat-tip to Henrichs, because one of my goals is to grab firmly onto the slipperiness of the authorized speakers with and for the gods at the moment when philosophers became priests and priests became philosophers and when religion became intellectualized and philosophy became sacralized. Put differently, I am studying the term

\(^{17}\) Henrichs 2008: 1-14.

at a time when its definition and meaning was being negotiated and it is, for this reason, interesting.

The word most commonly used from Plutarch to Iamblichus, as we will see, is ἵερεύς (which I will always translate as priest). Fritz Graf has defined this word in the following way: “ein hiereus ist einer, der mit hiera umgeht.”19 Though it might seem obvious, to define an ἵερεύς as one who concerns himself with τὰ ἱερά, it is, actually, quite clever because it shifts the focus away from the ἵερεύς himself and onto τὰ ἱερά. And it is precisely this—what priests do rather than who they are—that has interested scholars. The reasons for this are plain. As Chaniotis has shown using primarily epigraphic evidence, priests could be, literally, anybody who was elected, by lot or by purchase, to be one.20 That is, with a few exceptions (such as hereditary priesthods and hierophants of mystery cults), a priest need not have had any special expertise when he took the job. This, of course, distinguishes him from the other type of priest that I discuss in this dissertation, the μάντις, which I will always translate as “seer.” The seer must have some knowledge or expertise, particularly of the future. This knowledge generally comes from direct divine inspiration.

I accept Graf’s definition for ἵερεύς, broadly speaking, but I do think he is moderately guilty of question-begging. Since my dissertation is about ἵερεύς-as-persona, I am interested far more in who the priest is rather than what he does. That said, during this period, the priest transforms from concerning himself with just τὰ ἱερά to intellectual

19 Graf 1997:473. See also discussion by Henrichs 2008:2.

20 Chaniotis 2008:33.
matters as well, especially those that reveal what has been obscured in nature, language, in philosophy. In short, he is concerned with τὰ ἀληθῆ, which means, in its most basic form, “things that are unobscured.” Thus, especially in this period, philosophers and priests concern themselves with the same thing: the truth.

This brings me to my second term, “science” and “scientific.” In the dissertation proper (that is, excluding what I have said earlier about Kuhn and science), when I use the word “science” and “scientific,” I am referring to the Greek ἐπιστήμη and its relatives, a word that most generally means any kind of knowledge. The semantic sphere of my “science” is much broader than our modern term because it means knowledge about the world that is verifiable (its opposite, of course, being δόξα). Therefore, “science” includes ancient notions or precursors of modern scientific disciplines (e.g., physics, astronomy, mathematics), but it should not be limited by them. Over the next two chapters, I will determine what Iamblichus meant by ἐπιστημονικῆς θεολογίας ἡ διάταξις and will argue that Iamblichus’ ultimate goal was to show (1) that theology is a kind of science, in the sense that what it aims at (i.e., knowledge of the gods) is verifiable in the world, and (2) that scientific inquiry (i.e., gaining verifiable knowledge about the cosmos) serves the philosopher’s theological ends. By the end of the thesis, it will become clear that ‘scientific theology’ is Iamblichus’ own invention, separating him from his philosophical predecessors (such as Plutarch, as we will see in chapter 3, and Numenius, as we will see in chapter 4), because ultimately what he means by it is his programmatic fusion of Plato with theurgy—achieving knowledge about the world through the gods.
Third, I must defend why I call this a literary study. I call it this partially because it is a handy way both to describe my approach and to distinguish it from the technical-doxographical and social-historical work that has already been done on the topic. The questions that I ask in this dissertation relate to the self-representation of the philosophers in the texts that they write and this, I am suggesting, is literary. One may object, as I myself have at more than a few points in preparing my thesis, that Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis* or Numenius’ fragments are not works of literature in the sense that, say, Homer’s *Odyssey* is or William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say.”21 By this we mean that the *Odyssey* exhibits such elements as games of narration (delays, flashbacks, embedded narrations, etc.), character development, foils, and so on and that Williams can make his audience poetically experience how delicious, sweet, and cold the stolen plums were. But Iamblichus is not interested in recounting the story of a hero nor does he care about plums. He is interested in how best to approach philosophy and with this comes a dialogue between the figures that I examine in this dissertation not only about the philosophical ideas themselves, but also about how best to present them. Rather than the treatise or pamphlet, all adopt and adapt a form of the dialogue. So my study is primarily about genre and persona and secondarily about doctrine, doxography, and history, though the two cannot easily be severed. It is with all this in mind that I now turn to my study proper.

21 I cite this because it is one of my favorite poems: “I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast / Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold.”
Chapter 1
Iamblichus’ Life of Pythagoras:
The Pythagorean Roots of the Philosopher-Priest Persona

1.1 Introduction
At the beginning of the Περὶ τῶν αἰγυπτίων μυστηρίων (hereafter, the Mysteries), Iamblichus, in the guise of an Egyptian priest named Abammon, claims that he is going to answer three types of questions: philosophical, theological, and theurgical. Each will be dealt with in the manner most suited to the question: philosophical questions will be answered philosophically, theological questions theologically, and theurgical questions theurgically (Myst. 1.2.7.1-5). This tripartite division of Iamblichus’ philosophical project brought to the fore a new set of philosophical commitments: (1) that dialectical discourse, logic, syllogisms, categories, definitions, and many other traditional methods for finding truth were simply not enough for the attainment of enlightenment, and (2) Iamblichus’ division implies a radical epistemological commitment: that knowledge about the divine and about how the divine relates to the physical world is the purpose of philosophy.

1 The work derives its title from Marsilio Ficino’s 1497 Latin translation.

2 καὶ τὰ μὲν θεολογικά θεολογικῶς, θεουργικῶς δὲ τὰ θεουργικὰ ἀποκρινούμεθα, φιλοσόφως δὲ τὰ φιλόσοφον μετὰ σοῦ συνεξετάσωμεν. All citations to the Mysteries are to the Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003 edition. On this passage, see below in chapter 2.
Iamblichus’ tripartite division seems to represent a radical break with the tradition that came before him, particularly Porphyry, Plotinus, and Plato himself. As a result, Iamblichus had largely fallen outside the scope of classical scholarship. In the early twentieth century, scholarship had excluded him from the canon (the effects of which are still felt today) and reduced him to a cataloguer of magical or cultic practices, an extreme exponent of the “irrational,” or one of the final thinkers still clinging to paganism before the rise of Christianity. Scholarship on Iamblichus took a turn for the better in the early 1970s, when he began to be taken more seriously as a philosopher both by scholars of philosophy and by scholars of religion, particularly because he was providing philosophical justifications for religious practices, in this case, theurgy, a hot topic among scholars of religion. In addition, he was seen as committed to Plotinian mysticism, metaphysics, and ontology, but disagreed with Porphyry on how to interpret

3 Dodds (1963:xix-xx) does separate the two sides to Iamblichus. He is at some points a brilliant philosopher and at others a religious theurgist. Yet his philosophy is to be regarded as inferior to Plotinus and Porphyry; Nilsson 1961 does not place much stock in Iamblichus’ philosophical ability either, claiming that the Mysteries is to be read as a handbook to religion in late antiquity. Recently, however, scholars have reevaluated Iamblichus’ position both in studies of Platonism and in studies of theurgy. See Nasemann 1991 and Shaw 1995 for the connections between theurgy and philosophy. Similarly, Struck’s superb study (2004) has connected Iamblichus to a philosophical and religious tradition of connecting the “symbol” to the physical world. In the second chapter, I engage more directly with Struck when I turn more specifically to the relationship between Platonic metaphysics and Chaldean theurgy.

4 Dodds 1951:287.


6 Theurgy has been studied with fervor, particularly among scholars of religion. Sarah Iles Johnston’s work is perhaps best, particularly with regard to theurgy and the Chaldean Oracles; see especially 1997, 2004a, 2004b, and 2008. On theurgy and Platonic philosophy, see Dodds 1951:283-311; Wallis 1972:104-105; and more recently, Shaw 1985 and 1995.
Plotinus. More recently, however, scholars have elaborated on Iamblichus’ interest in religion and the *Oracles* and credited him with fusing them with traditional Platonism. In an important study, Polymnia Athanassiadi adds yet another element to the debate by showing that the Neoplatonists developed the *Chaldean Oracles* as a ‘sacred text,’ which Iamblichus (and his predecessors) openly used in interpreting the Greek philosophical tradition. Iamblichus, therefore, was an essential link between Numenius of Apamea (a late second-century Neopythagorean) and Proclus. Iamblichus in other words has now largely been accepted on his own terms: a Platonist whose project attempted to combine philosophy, theology, and theurgy into a single coherent or complementary system.

This is the view that scholars generally hold, although different models have been employed to understand exactly what Iamblichus’ tripartite philosophical project entailed. Scholars of philosophy have tended to emphasize the influence of Pythagoras. Identifying Iamblichus’ Pythagorean project is important because it highlights his connection to Numenius’ attempts to dissociate Plato from his immediate successors,

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7 Wallis 1972:96-172.

8 Hadot 1985:477-487.

9 Athanassiadi 2006 is a more developed version of Merlan’s thesis 1963.

10 Wallis (1972) had suggested that Iamblichus’ influence on later generations was far too important to be disregarded, even to the extent that determining the original thoughts of his successors was impossible. More significantly for Iamblichus, Larsen 1972 proposed reading him as the first who attempted to give theurgic rites a philosophical basis. Iamblichus began to be read as a “divine revealer” of philosophical truth, but is echoed in Shaw 1995.

11 The seminal work, from which nearly everyone starts is Larsen 1972. He was the first to call Iamblichus a “divine revealer.” O’Meara 1989 refocuses the question to other potential influences.
calling instead for an interpretation of the Platonic tradition in terms of the rituals of the Brahmins, the Jews, the Magi, and the Egyptians (Numenius, fr.1a). Contemporary scholarship has therefore worked hard to associate Iamblichus with Numenius especially, because both emphasized a Pythagorean approach to understanding Plato, taught in the same city of Apamea, and advocated mysticism, spirituality, and psychology as integral to philosophical enlightenment. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, have adopted a different model, primarily based on the traditional mystery cult, “but a mystery cult significantly limited [in this case] by the difficulty of its intellectual and spiritual requirements to those few who had leisure and access to a competent teacher.” The theurgist in general was therefore someone who combined philosophical contemplation with ritual activity, but “in the hands of Iamblichus, theurgy represented a revaluation of traditional cult practices.” Both scholars of philosophy and scholars of religion agree on the importance of the Chaldean Oracles in Iamblichus’ philosophical project.

Scholars of late antiquity, furthermore, focus on the social aspects of the pagan holy man, and tend to exhibit an historical approach, seeking to learn more about how philosophical schools may have worked; scholars of religion look to Iamblichus as a

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12 See O’Meara 1989:1-30 and Athanassiadi 2005:124. Philostratus also recounts the travels of Apollonius of Tyana to these peoples where he combined their concept of holiness with his own Pythagorean leanings. On Iamblichus and Apollonius, see Staab 2002. On the syncretism between Platonism and Egypt in late antiquity, see especially Fowden 1986, which I turn to below in chapter 2.


14 Shaw 1995:5.

15 On the ‘pagan holy man,’ see Fowden (1982).
theoretical theurgist, and emphasize his place in the evolution of how the *Chaldean Oracles* were applied; scholars of philosophy see Iamblichus as the link in Neoplatonism between Plotinus and Proclus, and therefore study the technicalities of Iamblichus’ philosophical project. In this chapter, I would like to propose a new model that fuses these: Iamblichus as a philosopher-priest who proposed a tripartite division of philosophy, termed “scientific theology” (τῆς ἐπιστημονικῆς θεολογίας ἡ διάταξις, *Myst.* 1.4.10.7). This means that Iamblichus, as I will show, divided the search for wisdom along three planes distinctly, but that each served the others.

As I have stated in my introduction, by “science” and “scientific” I mean the Greek ἐπιστήμη and therefore the semantic sphere of my “science” is much broader than our modern term because it means knowledge about the world that is verifiable (its opposite, of course, being δόξα). Over the next two chapters, I will determine what Iamblichus meant by ἐπιστημονικῆς θεολογίας ἡ διάταξις and argue that Iamblichus’ ultimate goal was to show (1) that theology is a kind of science, in the sense that what it aims at (i.e., knowledge of the gods) is verifiable in the world, and (2) that scientific inquiry (i.e., gaining verifiable knowledge about the cosmos) serves the philosopher’s theological ends. By the end of the thesis, it will become clear that ‘scientific theology’ is Iamblichus’ own invention, separating him from his philosophical predecessors (such as Plutarch, as we will see in chapter 3, and Numenius, as we will see in chapter 4), because ultimately what he means by it is his programmatic fusion of Plato with theurgy—achieving knowledge about the world through the gods. I will show that scientific knowledge as well as theurgic practice was a means to the end of divine wisdom and
ultimate metaphysical transcendence.

Iamblichus’ philosophical theses are instantiated in the literary persona he adopts. The purpose of the work, the division of philosophy along three planes (philosophy, theology, and theurgy), is to create a new complete philosophy, one that actually works for its adherents by showing them the path toward enlightenment. Iamblichus’ Abammon, the Egyptian priest, both argues for and embodies the fusion of philosophy with theurgy, and the philosophical quest leads to truths only a priest has access to. Disentangling his literary persona, as I will show, will illuminate his project, much in the same way that studying how Plato’s dialogues work reveals Plato’s philosophical commitments.

I will therefore take my methodological lead from scholars of Plato because just as the literary study of Plato’s dialogues have illuminated Plato’s philosophical project, so too will the literary study of later Platonic texts help us understand their philosophical commitments. Over the last twenty years, scholars of Plato have published new and exciting works that have placed the literary study of the dialogues on the same level as the philosophical. The interpretive issues range from how to understand Plato’s literary genres; how Plato, the external author, relates to his characters, especially Socrates;[18]

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[16] Tanaseanu-Döbler (2008) has recently done similar work on Porphyry that has helped illuminate the relationship between philosophy and ritual in his texts.

[17] Strauss (1964) initiated the debate on how we are to read Plato’s dialogues as literary documents, contrived in such a way that every part of them is philosophically important, see esp. pp. 50-68.

and how the dialogues should be read and how they form a corpus. While works are still written that analyze different aspects of Plato’s philosophy, there is virtually no chance of a scholar now writing a version of Shorey’s 1933 *What Plato Said*. Because of the careful attention paid to literary questions, scholars have come to appreciate that Plato, though a silent narrator of the Sokratic conversations, said *everything* while saying *nothing* in his own voice. How Plato conveyed his philosophy has itself become a philosophical question.

This philosophically important literary question has yet to be asked by scholars of Iamblichus, but it must be, because Iamblichus’ literary choices are intimately tied to the textual presentation of his philosophy. The next two chapters therefore study Iamblichus’ philosophical persona in two works specifically: the Περὶ τοῦ Πυθαγορικοῦ βίου (hereafter referred to as the *Life*) and the *Mysteries*. These two texts, when read together, illustrate both the persona of the philosopher-priest and what Iamblichus’ “scientific theology” entails. I will attempt to study the reasons that Iamblichus adopts the persona of an Egyptian priest in the *Mysteries* and presents the ideal philosophical life through Pythagoras, and ultimately what was at stake in presenting his philosophy the way he

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19 See Nails 2002 as a reference for the historical figures in Plato’s dialogues; for a more general overview, see Blondell 2002; her analysis is particularly useful because it both synthesizes previous scholarly attempts to understand the characters of Plato and offers her own analysis. On the study of Socrates, the classic work is Vlastos 1991. On Platonic anonymity, see e.g., Press 2002.

20 For the Platonic corpus, beyond issues of chronology and dating, see Griswold 1988 and Kahn 1996. For responses to Kahn’s suggestions that the corpus should be arranged thematically rather than chronologically, see Griswold 1999.

21 In addition to the various examples in the notes above, there are other good scholarly attempts to understand Plato’s use of the dialogue form, see Frede 1992.
does. This is critical, especially since Iamblichus was probably the most significant link between the Neoplatonists of the third century (Plotinus and Porphyry) and those of the fourth and fifth centuries (Proclus and Damascius); moreover, what the later Neoplatonists admired about Iamblichus were the theurgical pronouncements espoused by his Egyptian persona in the *Mysteries*. In addition, Iamblichus’ project of fusing traditional Platonism with the *Oracles* lies at the philosophical core of the relationship between Greek and barbarian wisdom in his texts and thought. Barbarian wisdom as an ideal had usually taken one of two forms, either promoted by Greek writers appealing to the exotic or the foreign (as in the case of Herodotos’ Egypt) or presented polemically by actual foreigners (as in the case of the Hellenistic Jews).22 Iamblichus himself was a “Syrian” promoting “Chaldean” and “Egyptian” wisdom. He developed his philosophical authority, however, by incorporating elements of the Platonic and Pythagorean tradition, which stressed the barbarian, but oriental especially, origin of the master’s wisdom (whether Plato or Pythagoras).23 The underlying strand that ties the questions of Iamblichus’ persona, philosophical authority, and the project of “scientific theology” together is the problem of how we are to *read* Iamblichus.

Since my overarching project is to examine how and why the priestly persona became so deeply entrenched in the activity and self-presentation of philosophy in later Platonism, I am beginning with Iamblichus because he marks not only the most developed version of it, but also a radical vision about how philosophy is to be performed.

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23 Riedweg 2002:7.
both textually and socially. In the first part of this chapter, I will argue that Iamblichus’ “biography”—and by this I mean the syncretic of the historical, textual, and anecdotal Iamblichus—indicates that his lineage tied him to an illustrious line of priest-kings and that this deeply influenced his approach to Platonic philosophy. One aspect of this project was to unite the philosophical tradition of Plato to the tradition of the *Chaldean Oracles* through the figure of Pythagoras, and it was with this goal in mind that he developed his literary persona. The prologues to both the *Life* and the *Mysteries* show that Iamblichus insisted on divine inspiration for philosophical inquiry, a notion marginal to Plato, but common in the tradition of the *Oracles* or the *Hermetica*. Finally, the priestly persona adopted in the *Mysteries* aims at establishing a philosophical authority designed not only to compete with that of Porphyry, but to appeal to a class of students whose primary interest was in the *Oracles*.24 Iamblichus’ persona also served as a marketing device: to attract those students he had to promise results. But his project was not a gimmick; he engaged with philosophical questions in a way that later Neoplatonists respected. By drawing on two traditions, philosophy and revelation literature, Iamblichus drew his authority from two sources: the Platonic canon and direct communion with the gods. This gave him a distinct edge over Porphyry, whose authority was rooted in his connection to Plotinus and in traditional scholarship. The second half of this chapter will examine how Iamblichus was able to fuse these two independent traditions. In order to be successful, he had to face a difficult challenge: to seem authoritative to the Platonic community,

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24 One may object, of course, that Porphyry was himself interested in the collection of oracles. Determining the reasons why is a particularly thorny question, particularly because most of this collection comes down to us through Eusebius, who seems to have censored much of Porphyry’s material. The problem of the oracles and ritual is addressed by Tanaseanu-Döbler 2008.
particularly when speaking as a priest—a figure so antithetical in some respects to philosophical inquiry—and to seem seductive enough to compete with pagans and Christians alike, while still not portraying himself as a magician or sorcerer. Iamblichus’ elaborate persona in the Life and the Mysteries was designed to fulfill all of these requirements.

1.2 Iamblichus’ Biography

1.2.1 Interpretive Challenges

Biography was important to the Neoplatonists and was frequently used to preface a larger philosophical work. For example, Porphyry begins his four-book Philosophical History with a biography of Pythagoras, as Iamblichus does his ten-book work On Pythagoreanism. The purpose of beginning with biography was less to provide an historical account of the figure in question than a model on whom a philosophical life should be based. For the Neoplatonist, how one lived was intimately related to one’s philosophical commitments. In a sense, Neoplatonic philosophical authority is ad hominem: the man mattered as much as his arguments. Different sources, therefore, highlight different aspects of Iamblichus’ life and work to suit their own narrative purposes.

In the first part of this chapter, I want to reexamine the question of Iamblichus’ biography because Iamblichus’ literary persona is directly tied to both the traditions that

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25 On biography in Late Antiquity, see Cox 1983 and Clark 2000; see also Edwards (2000:52) for the observation about Neoplatonists beginning any large scale study with a biography.
influenced him and the traditions he influenced himself (a point we can see in Eunapius’ biography about him). I do not intend to list the biographical facts of Iamblichus’ life and then use those facts to historicize his texts. Rather, I want to examine how the “biography” that emerges in many rhetorical contexts both illuminates and responds to his literary persona. To clarify, by biography I mean (a) the historical Iamblichus (if we can actually attain this information), (b) the Iamblichus presented by ancient biographers, most prominently Eunapius, and (c) the Iamblichus that emerges from own texts. Each of these brings to the fore its own set of interpretive difficulties, two of which I want to draw special attention to. The first is the reliability of his biographers. Since every author has his own agenda, those concerns are reflected in their narratives. For example, Eunapius’ *Vitae* are deeply concerned with external pressures on Platonism, such as the rising influence of Christianity, the possibility that non-canonical texts might taint the Platonic tradition, or the execution of theurgists at the hands of Christians.\(^{26}\) Eunapius inserts into his life of Iamblichus a narrative about Sopater, a prominent student of Iamblichus and his possible successor, whose execution was instigated by Christians at the court of Constantine. Moreover, while we do have independent evidence that confirms some of the facts of Iamblichus’ life, we must be cautious about some of our sources: were their authors reading the works of Iamblichus and constructing a biography based on his personae, or was there reliable historical information they were drawing

\(^{26}\) Augustine, in *Civitatis Dei* 10.9, argues that theurgy, like forms of magic or necromancy, was the means through which deceptive demons distracted its adherents’ minds from proper worship of God—a view that was typical of Christian attacks on theurgy. It is interesting, however, that later Christians, such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Psellus, used the term positively to describe the ritualistic actions that aimed at the betterment of the soul. On pagan and Christian theurgy, see Struck 2001.
upon? The danger of making circular arguments about the relationship between the historical Iamblichus and the personae in his texts is a trap of which we should be wary. Either way, the syncretism of the historical, textual, and anecdotal Iamblichus, as we will see below, is strongly tied to his Egyptian persona, which places heavy stock in the supremacy of exotic wisdom.

While the anecdotes about Iamblichus in Eunapius can be clearly seen as a response to the historical circumstances of Christian threats to Platonism, Iamblichus’ texts themselves present a second interpretive challenge. Although many of them do not survive, we can still reconstruct his philosophical ideas based on what is extant. While it is possible that in other texts Iamblichus presented his philosophy in different ways, it seems that, historically speaking, the persona of the Life and the Mysteries became the most controversial in the later tradition. The Egyptian priest who boasts special theurgic knowledge leaves open the possibility for attack by Christians, who could (and did, as in the case of Sopater) spin theurgy as sorcery. The later Platonists, on the other hand, saw Iamblichus’ theurgy as the key to the pursuit and discovery of true divine wisdom. Iamblichus’ persona was, in many ways, a double-edged sword: what was a source of imitation and inspiration for those within Platonic circles became an opportunity for criticism and outright attack for those outside Platonism. What is at stake is how these texts are to be read, because they could be (and were) read, interpreted, and received in different ways. Iamblichus presented his philosophy textually in a carefully planned way, both with a view toward establishing himself as an authority within Hellenic Platonism (via Pythagoreanism), and by introducing new barbarian elements such as the Chaldean
Oracles and Egyptian wisdom, thus fusing previously independent traditions with mainstream Platonism (such was also the project of Numenius). Before we turn to Iamblichus’ persona of the philosopher-priest and his project of “scientific theology,” I want first to discuss the historical and anecdotal Iamblichus, because they represent the “before” and “after:” the historical circumstances and cultural milieu which informed Iamblichus’ textual persona and his biographers’ reaction to that persona.

1.2.2 The Historical Iamblichus

Historically speaking, Iamblichus is a relatively shadowy figure because Eunapius’ biography is symptomatic of Neoplatonic biography in general: that biography tends to be organized around philosophical ideals rather than the events of one’s life.27 Proclus and Damascius offer other small details about his life, though these too are vague. Iamblichus’ own texts are also of little value because he rarely inserts biographical information about himself into his texts, and when he does so, it is in an oblique manner (see below).

Iamblichus’ name is markedly Syrian, derived from the Syraic or Aramaic Yamlik-u, which could have a number of meanings. It could be a jussive, “may he rule!” or could be taken to mean something like “counseled by God,”28 and stands out both as

\footnote{27 On the general problems about using Neoplatonic biographies as historical sources, see Blumenthal and Clark 1993:1 and Blumenthal 1984.}

\footnote{28 Athanassiadi 2006:154, translates his name to “qu’il règne!,” or possibly “dieu a conseillé.” See also Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xix n. 22.}
barbarian and priestly. He was probably born around 245 in Chalcis,\textsuperscript{29} which was in northern Syria after Severus’ division of the Syrian command in AD 194. His city was therefore Chalcis \textit{ad Belum}, or modern Qinnesrin,\textsuperscript{30} about which there is “no history in our period except having been the native city of Iamblichus.”\textsuperscript{31} His family may have experienced the Persian King Shapur’s invasion of northern Syria in 256;\textsuperscript{32} in fact we know little of his family, other than that they were descended from a long line of priest-kings of Emesa. Photius (a 9\textsuperscript{th} century Byzantine scholar), who is urging his audience to read Damascius’ \textit{Life of Isodore}, claims that a certain Theodora, to whom Damascius’ book was dedicated, was “a descendant of Sampsigeramus and Monimus who were Iamblichus’ ancestors too.”\textsuperscript{33} Sampsigeramus was a priest-king of Emesa who first appears in history when reclaiming “independence from the Seleucids in the 60s BC and was in the entourage of Antony at the battle of Actium” in 31 BC.\textsuperscript{34} Sampsigeramus therefore stood in the center of the collision between East and West in the first century. He left a son Iamblichus, and the two names alternate in the dynasty until the “moment

\textsuperscript{29} On the date of Iamblichus’ birth, see Cameron 1968 and Dillon 1987; the state of the question is put nicely in Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xvii-xix.

\textsuperscript{30} This is generally accepted, see Athanassiadi 2006:153, who follows Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xvii-xix; still, there are dissenters. See, e.g., Vanderspoel 1988, who suggests Iamblichus’ Chalcis is in Lebanon.

\textsuperscript{31} Millar 1993:38, is specifically talking about the period between 31 BC and AD 337.

\textsuperscript{32} Potter 2004:245-251.

\textsuperscript{33} Athanassiadi 1999:334-335.

\textsuperscript{34} Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xx.
when the hegemony of the region passed from the Seleucids to the Romans,” in the mid-first century. Inscriptional evidence, however, shows that the family was still dominant well into the second century.

The second name cited by Photius is Monimos, and it is unclear who this actually is. It has been suggested that Monimus is a scribe’s misspelling of Monikos the Arab, called the founder of Chalcis by Stephanos of Byzantion. Iamblichus was therefore from a politically important family. Another possibility scholars have suggested, which highlights the priestly elements associated with Iamblichus’ family, is that this Monimos is a god who “assists Helios.” In Julian’s Oration to King Helios (Εἰς τὸν βασιλέα Ἡλίου πρὸς Σαλούστιον), Iamblichus himself is cited as an authority:

Οἱ τὴν Ἐδεσσαν οἰκοῦντες, ἱερὸν Ἐδεσσαν οἴκον, Μόνιμον αὐτῷ καὶ Ἀζιζον συγκαθιστοῦσιν. Αἰνίττεσθι δέ φησιν Ἰάμβλιχος, παρ’ οὗ καὶ τάλλα πάντα ἐν πολλάν οἰκων ἐλάβομεν, ως ὁ Μόνιμος μὲν Ἐμίθης εἶν, Αζιζος δὲ Ἀρης. Ἡλίου πάρεδροι, πολλὰ καὶ ἀγαθὰ τῷ περὶ γῆν ἐποχετεύοντες τόπῳ (Or. 4.150c-d).

The inhabitants of Edessa, a place long sacred to Helios, worshipped Monimos and Azizos along with him. He spoke in riddles, Iamblichus says, from whom we know many other details on this subject, like how Monimos is actually Hermes and Azizos is Ares. They are divinities that assist Helios and thus convey many good things to earth.

If Photios meant this Monimos, we can see the first direct connection between Iamblichus’ biography and his persona in the Mysteries, who is a mouthpiece for Hermes as the text’s introduction claims. It is possible that Iamblichus’ royal family had


36 Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xx.

37 Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xx.
traced its roots to this particular deity, a general theme echoed in Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras*, which questions the ancestry of the master to Apollo. It seems to me that a stronger case could be made for following this reading than has been previously suggested, given Iamblichus’ obsessions with Hermes and Hermetic literature in his own writing, as we will examine in the next chapter, and that a powerful line of priest-kings could have plausibly boasted also a divine ancestry.

While it is unclear who this Monimos was, Iamblichus came from a politically important family, and he certainly would have received a traditional Hellenic education in cosmopolitan Chalcis; in fact, Syria was a crossroads of intellectual activity, combining Hellenic and Semitic cultural elements.38 We do know from Eunapius that after his study with Anatolios, he “attached himself to” Porphyry, although the meaning of this is unclear, because this statement could mean either that Iamblichus went to study with Porphyry or simply that he *read or studied* Porphyry’s writings without ever having studied with him personally (Eunapius, *VSoph* 458). The way most scholars understand it, and I agree, is that Iamblichus was Porphyry’s most promising student, but eventually left to found his own school.39

Where exactly Iamblichus taught presents some difficulties because our evidence is conflicting. The majority of our evidence points to Apamea, since, as Libanius says, it became a ‘holy city’ because of Iamblichus’ presence there (Libanius, *Or.* 52.21 and *Ep.* 1389). This seems to be confirmed by the presence of Sopater in Iamblichus’ circle, a

38 On the cultural identity in Roman Syria, see Bowersock 2002.

39 Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003:xxiv.
wealthy landowner of Apamea, who apparently was Iamblichus’ patron and possibly provided several suburban estates in which Iamblichus’ students could have lived a communal life (Eunapius, VSoph. 458). Apamea is a good fit, given Iamblichus’ apparent identification with the philosophical project of Numenius, who was himself from (and possibly worked in) Apamea. Apamea’s status as a ‘holy city’ had already been established by the time of Iamblichus’ arrival, as evidenced by an inscription at the Temple of Bel, which was erected for the “oracles to be found at Apamea.” It certainly would have fit nicely both with his familial line and the persona of the philosopher-priest exhibited in the Mysteries. Malalas, however, presents conflicting evidence, claiming that Iamblichus established a school in Daphne, a luxury suburb of Antioch and stayed there until his death.

Sopater’ departure for Constantinople does indicate a terminus ante quem for Iamblichus’ death, since at the time he left, roughly in 326 or 327, Eunapius tells us that Sopater would have been Iamblichus’ successor had he not left for the court (VSoph. 459). The letters between Iamblichus and a certain Julian, a member of the emperor Licinius’ staff, do confirm that Iamblichus was present in Apamea in the early 320’s.43


41 On the influence of Numenius on Iamblichus, see especially O’Meara 1989:10-14, though the extent of this cannot be judged for certain because of the lack of source material.

42 For more on the link between the temples and the Oracles in Apamea, see Athanassiadi 2005: 129-133 and 2006:43-47 and 58-64.

43 In general, letters in a corpus (as is the case with Plato) are often the first to be plundered for biographical information. These letters (see Ep. 181) have been attached to the emperor Julian’s corpus, because of Julian’s idolization of Iamblichus. On these letters, see Clarke 1998.
Iamblichus emerges historically as a figure that belonged to a line of priest-kings from Emesa. In Chalcis, he received a good education, and it was here that he probably began to synthesize Hellenism with Eastern religious traditions. He may have left Chalcis to study with Porphyry, or it may have been a part of the education he received in Chalcis. Either way, Iamblichus’ feud with Porphyry (to which we will turn our attention below in the analysis of the *Mysteries*) may have begun early on, when he recognized (as we will see later) a considerable lack in Porphyry’s philosophical outlook, and we thus have the typical trope of the student-teacher relationship, with the latter as corrective. The integration of priestly and philosophical elements, for which later Platonists credit him, was clearly a part of his biography as well and it became the substance of the anecdotes recounted by Eunapius. It is to these that we will turn our attention in the next section.

1.2.3 The Anecdotal Iamblichus

In Eunapius’ biography of Iamblichus, the philosopher appears, as Fowden put it, “enigmatic even to his disciples, a worker of miracles who yet deprecates such things as an impiety, a brilliant philosopher of penetrating insight, but capable of graceless obscurity in his writing.” 44 Eunapius does highlight, however, many of the themes we have already traced in the account of the historical Iamblichus: that he had “easy access to the ears of the gods” (ἐὐηκοΐας ἔτυχε θεῶν τοσαύτης); that as a result of his divine connections, he had a large number of followers (ὡστε πλήθος μὲν ἦσαν οἱ

44 Fowden 1977:374.
ὅμιλούντες); and that his city was considered ‘holy,’ because students “eager for learning would flock to him from all over the world” (πανταχόθεν δὲ ἐφοίτων οἱ παιδείας ἐπιθυμοῦντες). Eunapius, though quick to highlight Iamblichus’ priestly associations, does reveal his anxiety about the suspicion of sorcery, which is first addressed in his characterization of Iamblichus’ eloquence:

οὐκον κατέχει τὸν ἀκροατὴν καὶ γοητεύει πρὸς τὴν ἀνάγνωσιν, ἀλλ’ ἀποστρέφειν καὶ ἀποκναίειν τὴν ἀκοὴν ἔοικεν (VSoph 458).

He does not hold his reader and does not enchant him into reading more, but rather he is more likely to turn him away and irritate his ears.

On the surface, it appears that Eunapius is simply describing Iamblichus style, claiming that his writing is unpolished and without grace. Yet there is a more sinister undercurrent that points to the theme of sorcery (γοητεύει). This Greek of the passage is ambiguous. Does he mean by “hold” his reader, that Iamblichus is unable to hold his reader’s attention? This is how it is generally understood, as the quote from Fowden above suggests. The verb κατέχω, however, can also refer to being possessed by a god, or to hold one’s audience spellbound,45 a sense further redefined in the next colon as γοητεύει. Eunapius attempts to repudiate claims that Iamblichus was a sorcerer by highlighting the experience of reading Iamblichus: the reader will not be entranced, but will block his ears. Eunapius is intimating more than the fact that Iamblichus’ prose is turgid; he is saying that Iamblichus is not a sorcerous writer. Of course, it is entirely possible that γοητεύω is used in a Platonic sense, used “more loosely to refer to speakers so talented that they can enchant souls even of the living, persuading them to act against their better

45 LSJ s.v. κατέχω, 10.
judgment.”

It would be difficult to believe, however, that Eunapius was not playing on this word’s magical overtones.

This is a theme, moreover, that Eunapius returns to often in his biographies, especially in that of Sopater (see below). For Iamblichus, Eunapius seeks to rescue the master’s reputation in his first anecdote in which one of the students at Iamblichus’ school confronts his master about rumors that he levitated:

“τί δήτα μόνος, ὦ διδάσκαλε θειότατε, καθ’ ἑαυτόν τινα πράττεις, οὐ μεταδίδοις τῆς τελεωτέρας σοφίας ἡμᾶς; καίτοι γε ἐκφέρεται πρὸς ἡμᾶς λόγος ὑπὸ τῶν σῶν ἄνδραπόδων, ὡς εὐχόμενος τοῖς θεοῖς μετεωρίζῃ μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς πλέον ἡ δέκα πήχεις εἰκάζεσθαι· τὸ σῶμα δὲ σοι καὶ ἡ ἔσθης εἰς χρυσοειδές ἀμείβεται, παυομένῳ δὲ τῆς εὐχῆς σώμα τε γίνεται [καὶ] τῷ πρίν εὐχεσθαι ὡμοιον, καὶ κατελθὼν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἑταὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ποιῆσαι συνουσίαν. ὡς τῇ μάλα γελασεῖοι, ἐγέλασεν ἐπὶ τούτως τοῖς λόγοις Ιάμβλιχος (VSoph 458).

Most divine master, what is it exactly that you do when you go off on your own instead of imparting your more perfect wisdom to us? I should tell you, though, that there is a rumor circulating among us started by your own slaves, that when you pray to the gods you float ten feet above the earth—or that’s what it looks like, at least; your body and garments turn a beautiful shade of gold; when you have finished praying, your body returns to its original state, and you return to earth to be with us.” Iamblichus was not one to laugh, but when he heard this, he couldn’t help himself.

In the passage above, some of Iamblichus’ own students reveal their distrust and anxiety about such anecdotes they heard. This makes sense given the source: a slave who could have easily misunderstood the concept of contemplative ascent toward the One as a literal levitation above the earth. The students seek confirmation by asking Iamblichus directly, and he responds with deriding denial. Nevertheless, the point of this story is to highlight Iamblichus’ reputation for being some sort of strange combination of philosopher and

46 Johnston 1999:104n.53
sorcerer. The rumors must have been rampant if they were circulating among his students and if Eunapius found it important to address them a century later. Eunapius assures his reader that he has this anecdote on good faith from his own teacher Chrysanthius of Sardis, who heard it from Aedesius, one of Iamblichus’ leading students; the fact that the story was being retold indicates widespread curiosity about the reputation of Iamblichus.

That Iamblichus would isolate himself from his students to practice meditative ritual acts also may point to the fact that there was both esoteric and exoteric teaching at the school (to which we will turn in greater detail in the next section), a fact unsurprising in light of the political ramifications of Iamblichus’ teachings. While levitation may be laughed off, it is nonetheless clear that certain types of teaching were reserved for Iamblichus’ inner circle (particularly those who would pass his rigorous philosophical study, as we will see later). Furthermore, the fact that it was slaves who suspected Iamblichus of levitation could denigrate those who spread such rumors.

It is clear, then, that Eunapius rejects the accusations of sorcery, but confirms Iamblichus’ belief that intimacy with nature implies intimacy with the divine. In his second anecdote, Eunapius emphasizes both Iamblichus’ traditionally philosophical and strangely divine nature. After performing a sacrifice, Iamblichus and his students were walking back to the city when “Iamblichus became lost in thought in mid conversation...and for some time began to stare straight at the ground” (VSoph 458). Iamblichus’ actions here are reminiscent of Socrates (Plato, Symp. 174d and Plutarch, De genio Socratis 580). In the Symposium, Socrates never does inform us what had struck him when he lingered outside the dinner party so long, despite Agathon’s requests to be
imbued with wisdom; Socrates would never tell someone like Agathon his discoveries (Symp 175d-e). Iamblichus, on the other hand, informs his students what struck him: a funeral procession had recently passed through, and he feared contamination. To confirm the story, Eunapius says that Aedesius refused to go by another road and later met the funeral procession after the mourners had buried the body. Eunapius’ portrayal of Iamblichus in this anecdote reveals a unique combination of character traits, which draw on a variety of traditions. His behavior is like that of Socrates (particularly with reference to his daimonion), but with significant modifications. He is subject to getting lost in thought in the middle of conversations, but is nonetheless willing to communicate his thoughts to his disbelieving students. The type of knowledge Iamblichus offers is definitive, supernatural, and can be tested and proven. Iamblichus’ intimate connection to the supernatural world allowed him to realize that a funeral procession had passed, and his premonitions were proven correct.

1.2.4 Iamblichus’ Philosophical Outlook

From his biography, both historical and anecdotal, Iamblichus emerges as a philosopher who drew on traditions largely foreign to Platonism, something that distinguishes him from Porphyry and well within the Pythagorean, exotic, and even mystic traditions of Numenius and Apollonius of Tyana. His name was markedly un-Greek and with it he could draw attention to the barbarian roots of his native Syrian ancestry. His family line was both politically and religiously illustrious, possibly tracing its ancestry to divinity. He combined the aloof Socrates of the Symposium with the ritualistic ability to sense the
supernatural and summon the spirits of its world, as he had done at a spring of Eros before a group of students, according to Eunapius’ third anecdote.

Iamblichus, however, combined this religious background and orientation with study of the Platonic dialogues. According to the sixth century Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy 26, Iamblichus had organized the curriculum of his school around a syllabus designed to take its students through a proper course in Plato, most likely after reading his own Pythagorean cycle.

αὐτὸς τοίνυν πάντας εἰς ὅδε διήρει διαλόγους, καὶ τούτων τοὺς μὲν φυσικοὺς ἔλεγεν, τοὺς δὲ θεολογικοὺς πάλιν δὲ τοὺς δώδεκα συνήρει εἰς δύο, εἰς τὸν Τίμαιον καὶ τὸν Παρμενίδην, ὁν τὸν ὥδεκα συνήρει εἰς δύο, εἰς τὸν Τίμαιον καὶ τὸν Παρμενίδην, ὁν τὸν μὲν Τίμαιον ἐπὶ πάσι τοῖς φυσικοῖς, τὸν δὲ Παρμενίδην τοῖς θεολογικοῖς. τούτων δὲ ἀξίων ἔστην τὴν τάξιν ἐρήμησεν, διότι καὶ τούτους ἥξισαν πάντες πράστευον. πρῶτον τοίνυν δεῖ τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην πράττειν, διότι ἐν αὐτῷ γνώσκομαι ἐρωτούσιν, αὐτὸν δ᾽ ἐστὶν πρὶν ἢ τὰ ἔξω γνῶναι ἑαυτούς γνῶναι· πῶς γὰρ ἔχομεν ἑκεῖνα γνῶναι ἑαυτούς ἄγνωσται· ἔσχατον δὲ δεῖ τὸν Φίληβον, ἐπεὶ ἐν αὐτῷ περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ διαλέγεσθαι, ὃ πάντων ἐπέκεινα ἐστιν· οὐκοῦν καὶ αὐτὸν δεῖ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ τελευταῖον ἐστιν. τοὺς δὲ εἰς τὸν Τίμαιον καὶ τὸν Παρμενίδην, ἥν τὸν μὲν Τίμαιον ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς φυσικοῖς, τὸν δὲ Παρμενίδην τοῖς θεολογικοῖς, τούτων δὲ ἀξίων ἔστην τὴν τάξιν ᾠδήμησεν, διότι καὶ τούτους ἥξισαν πάντες πράστευον. πρῶτον τοίνυν δεῖ τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην πράττειν, διότι ἐν αὐτῷ γνώσκομαι ἐρωτούσιν,

He [Iamblichus] chose twelve dialogues, and these he categorized into two groups, the first of these were the “physical” dialogues, the second the “theological” dialogues. He again shortened these twelve into two, the Timaeus and the Parmenides, of which the Timaeus was the last of all the physical dialogues and the Parmenides was last of the theological dialogues. It is worth examining his arrangement of the dialogues because we [the author(s) of this text] think it is beneficial to study them too. It is necessary to first begin with the Alcibiades, because in it we find “self-knowledge,” and after that we should know that which is outside ourselves, because, how could we know other things
if we do not know ourselves first? Last of all we should read the *Philebus*, since in it there is discussion about the Good, which is beyond all things. Because of the nature of its subject matter, this dialogue should be read last of all. We still need to parse out the dialogues in the middle. There are five of these in our arrangement, according to the depth of virtue: physical, ethical, political, purificatory, and theoretical. First we should read the *Gorgias* for political virtue, then the *Phaedo* for purificatory virtue, since after one’s political life comes the purified life. Then we come to the knowledge of reality, which is known through ethical virtue. All of these realities we examine either in our minds or in our deeds. After we have read these dialogues, we come, fourth, to the *Cratylus* to learn linguistics, then the *Theaetetus* for concepts. After this, we read the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* since these are the theoretical dialogues about theology. Finally we read the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*.

It is unclear from the passage whether the course outlined in this passage was that of the text’s author(s) or of Iamblichus himself. It is entirely possible that Iamblichus is here cited as an authority for a general thematically organized that will be followed by the author(s). Dillon, however, has argued that the arrangement described here was Iamblichus’ and that it represented a thematically organized course, beginning with theoretical questions about knowledge and virtue. The student would first read the *Alcibiades* I for an understanding of ‘self-knowledge,’ then would progress to the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo*, for civic and purificatory virtue respectively. Once the student has passed this section, he would then move on to the discussion of ontology, beginning with the *Cratylus* (for linguistic theory), the *Theaetetus* (for concepts), the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (for cosmic realities), and finally to the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* (for theological realities), and the *Philebus*. The entire course would culminate in a study of the *Timaeus* for physics and the *Parmenides* for metaphysics.47

47 Dillon 2004:408.
It is clear that the study of Plato was an important component of the curriculum in Iamblichus’ school, but the question still remains: how did Iamblichus, drawing so deeply from a religious tradition that he advocated “scientific theology” attained through theurgy, engage with these dialogues? We can see from the passage above that Iamblichus divided the dialogues into two groups, those that dealt specifically with the natural world (τοὺς μὲν φυσικοὺς ἔλεγεν), and other which dealt with the supernatural world (τοὺς δὲ θεολογικούς). According to this formulation, the physical dialogues would sufficiently prepare the student for the theological, but both were necessary for a proper course in Plato. Even if Dillon is mistaken about this being the organization of Iamblichus’ own Platonic program in his school, we can say that the authors have divided the dialogues on his authority. In either case, philosophy is divided on two planes: the natural and supernatural as well as the objects of verifiable knowledge and ruminations about the divine.

The program of the Mysteries has its basis in Iamblichus’ reading of Plato, and theurgy was a supplement to this philosophical syllabus. Recall that in his tripartite division of philosophy, theurgy is only one aspect of philosophical enquiry (the other two are theology and philosophy). What is most significant is the fact that Iamblichus was dialoguing with Plato’s dialogues, and this certainly makes him a part of mainstream Platonism, but determining exactly how Iamblichus did so is tricky because Iamblichus’ commentaries on Plato survive not in his own words but in fragments quoted by others, namely Proclus, Damascius, and Simplicius. Certainly Iamblichus engaged in the debates among Platonists on the dialogues and their meaning, and much of his philosophical
authority came from his interpretations of Plato. These debates frequently centered on technical aspects of Platonic philosophy, such as how the cosmos is structured (In Philebem frs. 1-7 Dillon), the metaphysical reality of being and non-being (In Sophistam fr.1 Dillon), motion and rest (In Timaeum fr.7 Dillon), and other technical questions. Proclus, in his commentary on the Timaeus for example, often cites the ‘divine Iamblichus’ as an authoritative voice on the meaning of the dialogue.

There are even moments when Iamblichus gestures toward literary questions, and these are worth mentioning. In his commentary on the Phaedrus 11.16, Hermeias (AD 5th century) says that Iamblichus declared the dialogue to be “beautiful on every level” because everything in the dialogue related to “a single end,” namely love.48 Underlying Iamblichus’ thesis that everything in the dialogue has significance is a point made today by students of Plato, that “nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs.”49 The literary importance of every detail of the dialogues is discussed by Iamblichus, as well. He asks questions like: “Why would Solon have been eager to transmit the Atlantic War in poetic form?” (In Timaeum fr. 10 Dillon). He answers the question by relating the process of writing poetry to the process of imitation in the creation of the world. Every detail of the text for Iamblichus has philosophical meaning, and the dialogues themselves are designed to be read as a unit, a complete living being, its parts equally relevant to the whole (In Phaed. fr. 1a Dillon).

48 In Phaedr. fr. 1 Dillon: Πάντες <οὖν> οὕτωι μερῶν τινων τῶν ἐν τῷ διαλόγῳ δραέσαμενοι, περὶ τοῦ παντὸς ἀπεφήναντο τὸν σκοπὸν ἅνα δὲ πανταχοῦ χρὴ εἶναι τὸν σκοπὸν καὶ αὐτοῦ ἔνεκα <πάντα> παρειλήφθαι, ἵνα ὡς ἐν ζῷῳ πάντα τῷ ἐνι συντάττηται. Διὸ περὶ τοῦ παντοδαποῦ καλοῦ φησίν ὁ Ιαμβλίχος εἶναι τὸν σκοπὸν, ὡς ἐφεξῆς ἐρούμεν.

49 Strauss 1964:60.
Iamblichus was therefore engaged in reading the dialogues closely, searching for philosophical truths within them, the activity of which was central to traditional Platonism. We will be examining some of these truths in more detail in this chapter and the next, focusing especially on epistemology and metaphysics.

1.2.5 Preliminary Conclusion

In the preceding section, I have tried to show that that figure of Iamblichus, as seen both from the historical facts of his life and the anecdotes about his scholarly and ritual activities in his school, represents a unique fusion of two traditions. His family history, which may have boasted divine lineage, primarily tied him to an eastern religious tradition, and this perhaps had a formative impact on his philosophical outlook. This was apparently attractive to potential students, since Eunapius tells us that students would flock to his school from all over the Greek world. It is quite possible that the ritualistic components to his school set him apart from other Platonists, most notably Porphyry, and could draw students whose primary interest was in the Oracles and in the Hermetic treatises. Further, his theological interests may have prompted his division of the Platonic dialogues into physical and theological categories, which, as we will see, he incorporated into the articulation of his philosophical project in the Mysteries. The anecdotes that survive about him highlight the danger of fusing these two traditions. Eunapius sought to revive the master’s reputation by downplaying rumors that he levitated and highlighting the fact that his prose could never entrance an audience. Still,

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50 On the Hermetic treatises as well as the ‘theurgical’ treatises of the Iouliani, see Fowden 1986.
Eunapius does not deny that Iamblichus had a special connection to the *daimones* built into the fabric of the cosmos: he knew when a funeral procession had passed and could summon the spirits of Eros at will. Iamblichus’ school, however, was not designed to produce sorcerers. He required a rigorous study both of his Pythagorean program and the Platonic dialogues, the order of which was recalibrated to instill in his students lessons in physics and metaphysics as well as science and theology. Iamblichus’ biography, therefore, reflects his philosophical outlook.

In the section that follows, I will examine how the ‘authorial’ Iamblichus developed the persona of the philosopher-priest, which I will connect not only to his biography but his philosophical project as well. This requires that we try to determine both the philosophical and literary reasons for Iamblichus’ choice to conduct philosophy this way. Biography may help to explain why Iamblichus was inclined to present philosophy in the guise of an Egyptian priest in the *Mysteries*, but it does not show how Iamblichus was able to establish a philosophical authority that later Neoplatonists believed worthy of emulation. Furthermore, if Iamblichus’ priestly persona was to be considered authoritative by other Platonists, he needed to show its connection to Platonic precedents. In the rest of the chapter, I will look for his strategies in the *Life of Pythagoras* and the *Mysteries*, which deal with the ideal philosopher and his tripartite project respectively.
1.3 The figure of the Ideal Philosopher: Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras*

1.3.1 Pythagoras in Iamblichus’ ‘Academy:’ The Problem Redefined

Iamblichus has already been demonstrated to have tied Pythagorean doctrines to Platonic philosophy and I am suggesting that he proposed a unique combination of science and theology, I want to first review the question of what school he appropriately belongs to. Certainly to some extent, he must be a Platonist, since to be a philosopher in the third century was to be a Platonist. This is confirmed by the syllabus of the twelve Platonic dialogues read at his school provided in the *Anonymous Prolegomena*. Dillon has suggested a probable order of study at the school:

> The business of the school would seem to have involved, after the study of the basic principles of Pythagorean philosophy, first, a course in the logic of Aristotle (if we may conclude that from the existence of a massive commentary on the *Categories* and some evidence of the ones on the *De Interpretatione* and the *Prior Analytics* as well), and then the study of a carefully selected sequence of Platonic dialogues, designed to take one through the philosophy of Plato in a coherent order.\(^{52}\)

According to this sequence, Plato would have come only after the student had been sufficiently prepared by the study of Pythagoras and Aristotle. Dillon’s proposal seems persuasive, particularly given the order of Iamblichus’ Pythagorean texts: beginning with the *Life* and gradually taking the student through more esoteric philosophical matters. Presumably, once the student had passed his course in Plato, he would have been initiated into the theurgic rites described in the *Mysteries*.

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\(^{51}\) Fowden 1977:359-361.

\(^{52}\) Dillon 2004:408.
Given these three elements (Pythagoras, Plato, and theurgy) each scholar has her own suggestion about Iamblichus’ academic ties, or invents his own formula: how many parts Pythagoras to how many parts Plato to how many parts *Oracles* yields an Iamblichus? Either Iamblichus presents some form of Pythagoreanism-cum-Platonism traced back to Numenius’ criticism of the impurities of the Platonic tradition,53 or he is just one among a longer line of Platonists, whose main contribution is the combination of ritual practices with textual philosophical study both in Plato and ‘canonized’ texts such as the *Chaldean Oracles*.54 Both suggestions are important for different reasons. The Pythagorean model points to themes found throughout Iamblichus’ writings and in the tradition thereafter. Certainly, Iamblichus felt he had something to say about Pythagoras and deemed him a worthy model to emulate, although the reasons for this are hazy, nor have there been any solid suggestions about why Iamblichus presents him the way he does.

I am content with the formulation that Iamblichus tried to Pythagoreanize Platonic philosophy and that his main contribution was an emphasis on theurgy as a means to

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53 O’Meara’s (1989) analysis of Iamblichus as a Pythagorean is engaging, and he is particularly strong on examining Iamblichus’ influences. On Numenius’ influence on Iamblichus see pp. 10-14; for O’Meara’s concept of Iamblichus’ Pythagorean corpus, see pp. 86-105. This is not to say that Iamblichus had accepted everything Numenius had proposed, but O’Meara’s case that Iamblichus had Numenius in mind for his project is persuasive and we will return more fully to it in chapter 4.

54 Shaw (1995:3-17) attempts to understand Iamblichus’ Platonism, through an analysis of the difference between theurgy and theology. Shaw’s analysis of the *Mysteries* is quite good, the central thesis of which is illuminating how Iamblichus understood the Platonic ideal of ὧμοιωσις θεῶν. On the ‘canonization’ of the *Oracles*, see Athanassiadi 2006:112-114.
attain wisdom and purification (and thereby ascent) of the soul.\textsuperscript{55} But I want to reformulate the question: how could Iamblichus, potentially born from a line of priests and an advocate of ritual acts for philosophical enlightenment, be taken seriously as a philosopher? How could he build a philosophical authority within the Hellenic Platonic tradition as a \textit{barbarian priest}? And ultimately, how did he succeed? In this section, I want to look primarily at how he presents his ideal philosopher, an image that was most likely meant as an introduction to his philosophical teachings. I therefore turn to the \textit{Life of Pythagoras}.

1.3.2 Iamblichus’ \textit{On Pythagoreanism}: Pythagoras as the Model Philosopher

Iamblichus’ compendium \textit{On Pythagoreanism} was an ambitious project, consisting of ten books. It began with the \textit{Life of Pythagoras}, continued with a protreptic to philosophy (which was probably related to Aristotle’s lost \textit{Protrepticus}), and then concluded with the technical aspects of Pythagorean philosophy, with a book devoted to mathematics, arithmetic, physics, ethics, theology, geometry, music, and finally astronomy.\textsuperscript{56} The work could have been used as a course, beginning with the figure of the ideal philosopher, continuing with a discussion of why one should study philosophy, then treating its specific fields. Of the whole work only the first four books are extant, covering therefore the \textit{Life}, the \textit{Protrepticus}, and mathematics. O’Meara has reconstructed the content of

\textsuperscript{55} This claim is now fodder for introductions and no longer needs excessive argumentation; see, e.g., the introduction to the Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell translation of \textit{Mysteries} (2003:xx-xxvii).

\textsuperscript{56} O’Meara 1989:33-34.
Books V-VII based on excerpts from Michael Psellus,\textsuperscript{57} and we can trace some of the technical aspects of Iamblichus’ project to Pythagoreanize Platonic philosophy.

There is still work to be done, however, in evaluating why Iamblichus chose to present philosophy through Pythagoras and not a figure like Socrates. This question is complicated and we will return to it more fully later. I want to draw attention to two particular motives here. While there are quasi-Socratic figures, such as Lucian’s Demonax who cracks wise at the expense of everyone he meets, there are no such \textit{sustained} personae in philosophical works after Plato. One characteristic of Plato’s Socrates is that he was unique and inimitable. Even in the dialogues themselves there are imitators such as Aristodemus (in the \textit{Symposium}) or even Phaedrus to a certain extent, who, in trying to be like Socrates, end up looking foolish because they lack Socrates’ complex philosophical characteristics (such as his inexhaustible curiosity, unquenchable desire for the truth, or intellectual acumen) or his personal complexities (such as being physically ugly but attractive to young boys like Alcibiades), among many others.

Second, the persona of Socrates was contingent on democratic Athens, a face-to-face society when compared with the Roman Empire. Iamblichus, on the other hand, is aiming at a different market, and his world is far more cosmopolitan. In addition to the social differences, the course of post-Hellenistic philosophy on the whole played out as reading and understanding Plato rather than imitating him.\textsuperscript{58} Philosophers seem to be less interested in having questions posed than in having them examined more systematically.

\textsuperscript{57} O’Meara 1989:53-85.

\textsuperscript{58} See, e.g., Boys-Stones 2001:v-vi and 99-150.
Iamblichus, as we will see, was aiming at an audience looking for a new kind of philosophical exposition, and he set himself in opposition to Porphyry primarily by exploiting Numenius’ claim that the Platonic tradition rather than clarify the true meaning of Plato, had actually obscured it (fr. 1a).

O’Meara has dealt with the question of why “Iamblichus [sought] to Pythagoreanize Platonic Philosophy.” His initial suggestion is interesting: it is possible that the figure of Pythagoras was meant to rival the figure of Christ. As seductive as this theory is, O’Meara himself admits that this would be difficult to prove on the basis of the extant evidence. He hypothesizes also that Iamblichus’ Vita aimed to rival Porphyry’s Vita of his master Plotinus, citing as evidence the rivalry between Porphyry and Iamblichus exhibited especially in the Mysteries. O’Meara admits that this theory is “less attractive,” but does “appeal to some evidence,” particularly given that Porphyry’s own philosophical syllabus began with the Life of Plotinus and progressively reached higher philosophical truths. As already discussed, Iamblichus’ work On Pythagoreanism begins with a Life and follows a similar pattern.

It seems to me, however, that we could push O’Meara’s reading further. Iamblichus’ ideal philosopher was Pythagoras, although not the Pythagoras known to the Platonic tradition, especially to Porphyry, a distinction we will examine in detail. Iamblichus’ choice of Pythagoras is certainly related to his rivalry with Porphyry, but it reveals both his own personal priestly entanglements and the programmatic fusion of Plato with theurgy. Following the example of Porphyry, Iamblichus’ works were

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designed to showcase his philosophical authority, highlighting the power of the priest in philosophy while simultaneously establishing that persona as a traditional aspect of Platonic philosophy. In the discussion that follows, I will show that Iamblichus uses Pythagoras to establish his authority for the philosopher-priest by subverting and ultimately redefining the Platonic tradition on the basis of recognizable Platonic figures, allusions, and tropes in order to establish Pythagoras as the “true” founder of Platonism, and thus of philosophy in general.

1.3.3 Iamblichus’ Epistemology in the Life

Iamblichus’ Life of Pythagoras has not received much critical attention beyond O’Meara’s useful, but narrow introduction. Gregor Staab has produced the first large study of the work as a whole, focusing less on traditional Quellenforschung than on the author’s intentions. He proves that Iamblichus reshaped the figure of Pythagoras in accordance with his own virtues to provide a basis for his ideal philosopher. The text’s structure, as Staab argues, is divided into three parts: the first (sections 2-57) focuses on the life and philosophical accomplishments of Pythagoras; the second (sections 58-133) focuses on the doctrines of Pythagoras; and the third (sections 134-240) treats Pythagoras as the ideal philosopher because he instantiates all of the virtues necessary for the philosophical life. While Staab expertly evaluates how Iamblichus used Pythagoras to

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60 Staab 2002:144-237.

61 See also von Albrecht 2002. He argues that the focus on Pythagoras indicates Iamblichus’ expression of the value of human life in general, and is not limited only to the ideal philosopher.

embodi his own philosophical program, he does not explore the question of how Iamblichus manipulates the *Life* to develop both his own philosophical authority and his persona in the *Mysteries*, particularly with regard to the modes of exegesis the philosopher-priest employs, the subject of the next chapter. In this section, I will focus primarily on how Iamblichus reshapes the Platonic tradition through the figure of Pythagoras to authorize the philosopher-priest in Platonic philosophical inquiry. Because the persona implied a connection to the gods, the philosopher-priest required a new kind of epistemology, and it is to this that I now turn.

Iamblichus begins the work (both the *Life of Pythagoras* and by extension the compendium as a whole) with an invocation to the gods:

Ἐπὶ πάσης μὲν φιλοσοφίας ὁρμῇ θεὸν δήπου παρακαλεῖν ἐσται τοῖς γε σώφροσιν, ἐπὶ δὲ τῇ τοῦ θείου Πυθαγόρου δικαιῶς ἐπωνύμῳ νομιζόμενῃ πολὺ δήπου μᾶλλον ἀρμόττει τούτο ποιεῖν· ἐκ θεῶν γὰρ αὐτῆς παραδοθείσης τὸ κατ’ ἀρχὰς οὐχ ἐνεστιν ἄλλως ἢ διὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι. πρὸς γὰρ τούτῳ καὶ τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς καὶ τὸ μέγεθος ὑπεραίρει τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην δύναμιν ὡστε ἐξαιρῄσθη τοῦτο προσιὼν ἧρέμα ἂν αὐτῆς παρασπάσασθαι τί δυνηθεῖ. *(Life 1.1)*

At the beginning of every philosophical investigation, it is customary, I suppose, for those of sound mind at least, to invoke god, but when we begin a philosophical investigation rightly believed to be named after the divine Pythagoras it is all the more fitting to do this because philosophy was first handed down by the gods and it therefore cannot be understood except through them. In addition, the beauty and importance of his philosophy goes beyond the human capability to understand it immediately. Only if one of the gods through his good-will were to lead the way would it be possible for someone to approach it, a little bit at a time, and take some of it for himself.

At least initially, it appears that Iamblichus’ invocation of the gods is a trope in the Platonic tradition. For example, at the beginning of Timaeus’ speech to Socrates, Critias, and Hermocrates, Socrates first asks Timaeus to begin with an invocation to the gods, and
Timaeus readily complies:

ΣΩ. σον οὖν ἔργον λέγειν ἂν, ὦ Τίμαιε, τὸ μετὰ τούτο, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἰη καλέσαντα κατὰ νόμον θεοὺς.

ΤΙ. Ἀλλ’, ὦ Σώκρατες, τοῦτο γε δὴ πάντες δοῦ τι καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν, ἐπὶ παντὸς ὁμή καὶ συμφορὸ καὶ μεγάλου πράγματος θεὸν ἰδίας οὐ καὶ τούς περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι πη μέλλοντας, ἢ γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἁγενές ἕστιν, εἰ μὴ παντάπασι παραλλάττομεν, ἀνάγκη θεοὺς τε καὶ θεὰς ἐπικαλουμένους εὔχεσθαι πάντα κατὰ νοῦν ἐκεῖνος μὲν μάλιστα, ἐπομένους δὲ ἴμην εἰπεῖν. (27b-c)

Socrates: Now it’s your turn, Timaeus. But before you begin, maybe you could make an invocation to the gods as we usually do?

Timaeus: I suppose I could do this, Socrates. Anyone with half a brain always calls upon the gods before starting any task, no matter how big or small. As for us, we’re going to begin a discussion about the universe, particularly whether it came to be or has always existed. If we don’t want to go totally off course, we’ll need to call upon the gods and goddesses and pray, above all else, that everything we say will please us as much as it pleases them.

There are clear resonances of this Timaeus passage in Iamblichus’ preface, although Iamblichus has taken Socrates’ request to a radical extreme. Both the exchange between Socrates and Timaeus and Iamblichus’ preface acknowledge that it is customary for someone of sound mind (ἔθος ἄπασι τοῖς γε σώφροσιν: Iamblichus; σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν: Plato) to invoke the gods when entering upon a new pursuit. In the Plato passage, however, the custom is much more general because it is applied to everyone generally (ἐπὶ παντὸς ὁμῆ); Iamblichus specifies that the custom is for the philosopher (ἐπὶ πάσης μὲν φιλοσοφίας ὁμῆ). On one level, it is not surprising that Iamblichus emended Timaeus’ generalization because Iamblichus is recalling that Timaeus specifically followed the custom in his philosophical exposition of the origin of the cosmos, but what is clear is Iamblichus’ insistence that one’s philosophical quest should begin with an invocation, a claim, as we will see has important consequences.
The main difference between the prefaces is the intent with which the invocation is suggested. In the Plato passage, Timaeus agrees to Socrates’ request because he recognizes that everyone, even if he has no philosophical inclination (πάντες ὁσοὶ καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν) begins any task with an invocation to the gods. Timaeus says that because his project aims to discuss the nature of the universe, he is well advised to ask for divine aid. For Timaeus and Socrates, the request for this invocation appears formulaic and programmatic. Given that Timaeus is a statesman from Sicily, one would imagine that divine invocations and dedications were a part of his civic duties. Iamblichus converts the formulaic request into a philosophical necessity by focusing it to include philosophers and signaling it through the verbal resonance of κατὰ βραχὺ. Iamblichus highlights that philosophers need divine aid because knowledge is naturally out of human reach (κατὰ βραχὺ προσιὼν ἠρέμα ἂν αὐτῆς παρασπάσασθαί τι δυνηθείη). While Timaeus worries that his subject (whether the universe is eternal or not) might be beyond human comprehension, Iamblichus knows that all knowledge can be achieved only through the grace of the gods, not through dialectic as Socrates and Timaeus are trying to demonstrate. The underlying message of Iamblichus’ claim, therefore, is that Socrates and Timaeus are successful because they have invoked the gods. What Timaeus and Socrates do as a precautionary measure Iamblichus takes as integral to philosophical enlightenment.

At the very opening of the Life Iamblichus bases himself upon a recognizable Platonic trope, and is therefore working within the Platonic tradition, but is still establishing a new kind of authority. In the preface, Iamblichus takes on the role of
Timaeus, echoing many of his words, as responding to a Sokratic request. Iamblichus, however, has turned the role of the gods in philosophy from keeping the dialectic on course (εἴ μὴ παντάπασι παραλλάττομεν, ἀνάγκῃ θεοὺς τε καὶ θεᾶς ἐπικαλουμένους πάντα κατὰ νοῦν ἐκεῖνος μὲν μάλιστα, ἐπομένος δὲ ἢμῖν εἰπεῖν: Timaeus) to providing men with knowledge through their good will (ἀλλὰ μόνως ἂν τίς τοῦ τῶν θεῶν εὖμενοῦς ἐξηγουμένου: Life). The Platonic ἐπομένος and Iamblichean εὖμενοῦς, though not the same words, are close enough to warrant comparison and come at the critical point that reveals Iamblichus’ epistemological divergence. The difference is one between Plato’s gods as attendants and Iamblichus’ gods as integral. The Timaeus provides Iamblichus with traditional Platonic authority, but his use of the relevant passage paves the way for his persona as philosopher-priest.

1.3.4 Iamblichus’ Reworking of Plato’s Epistemology: Some Distinctions

Iamblichus’ radical epistemology represents a significant reworking of Plato, and exactly how they are different is important because, as I will argue, Iamblichus’ position, though not exactly derived from Plato, is still within the limits and requirements of Platonic discourse. I do not intend here to provide a detailed discussion of Plato’s epistemology, because this would be a subject unto itself.\footnote{Good essays on Plato’s epistemology may be found in Fine (1999). One of the standard treatments is White (1976).} Rather, I would like to make a more modest point: that for Plato, knowledge is not dependent on the grace of the gods, but on the soul’s ability to understand the Ideas; whether this is actually possible, however, is
unclear. For Iamblichus, human beings cannot achieve knowledge on their own (hence, it is Platonic), but it is nonetheless attainable through the gods. The gods are knowledge, as well as the means through which human beings attain it.

Iamblichus’ epistemological commitments do have their roots in Plato; there are a number of passages in Plato that allude to a difference between gods and men, and these are crucial for understanding Iamblichus’ arguments. In Republic 6, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus discuss the role of the Good in how men come to knowledge. In explaining how the Ideas relate to physical objects, Socrates reminds Glaukon that the Ideas are intelligible but not visible, while the physical objects informed by the Ideas are visible but not intelligible. The discussion then turns to examine what it means to be sensible, in particular to be visible. In order for an act of “vision” to occur, three components are involved: the object itself, the eyes that see the object, and light which makes the object visible. Socrates then asks Glaucon:

τίνα οὖν ἔχεις αἰτιάσασθαι τῶν ἐν οὐρανῷ θεῶν τούτου κύριον, οὗ ἡμῖν τὸ φῶς ὑπό συνεί ὡς ὁράν ὃτι καλλίστα καὶ τὰ ὁρῶμενα ὀρᾶθαι;

ὅπερ καὶ σὺ, ἐφι, καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι τὸν ἥλιον γὰρ δῆλον ὅτι ἐρωτᾶς. (508a)

Which of the gods in heaven would you say causes and is in charge of this, that is the one whose light causes our sight to see in the best way and causes visible things to be seen?

The very one that you and others would say. Clearly you mean the Sun.

In Socrates’ analogy, the Sun acts in the visible realm as the Good acts in the intelligible realm. Just as the Sun illuminates the physical objects in the world for the eyes to see, the Good illuminates the Ideas in the intelligible realm for the soul to know (οὐτω τοῖνυν καὶ τὸ τῆς ἰσχῆς ὁδε νόει). As Socrates says, unlike the Sun, the Good is not a god, but one

64 On Platonic perception, see Silverman 1990.
of the Ideas:

τούτο τούτων τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρέχειν τοῖς γιγνωσκόμενοι καὶ τῷ γιγνώσκοντι τὴν δύναμιν ἀποδίδον τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἴδεαν φάθι εἶναι αἰτίαν δ’ ἐπιστήμης οὕσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, ὡς γιγνωσκόμενης μὲν διανοοῦ, οὕτω δὲ καλῶν ἁμφοτέρων ὄντων, γνώσεώς τε καὶ ἀληθείας, ἀλλὰ καὶ κάλλιον ἐτι τούτων ἠγούμενος αὐτὸ ὀρθῶς ἠγήσῃ (508d)

Say, therefore, that what provides truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the Idea of the Good. Since it is the cause of knowledge and truth, know that it is also an object of knowledge. Though both of these things are beautiful, knowledge and truth, if you believe that the Good is other than and still more beautiful than these, you are right.

In Plato, knowledge derives from the Good’s illumination of the Ideas for the soul, and the Good itself also seems to be an object of knowledge.

In this passage, however, it is never made clear exactly how the soul comes to knowledge, particularly philosophical knowledge of the Good, the ultimate source of wisdom; this is really the key question because Iamblichus does provide an answer in the preface to the Life: human beings come to knowledge by the grace of the gods. Plato’s answer, however, is much more ambiguous. In the Phaedo 72e-76a, for example, Socrates, Cebes, and Simmias set forth the theory of Recollection: that a disembodied soul had already partaken in the Ideas before its incarceration in a new body, and knowledge is predicated upon the soul’s recollection of those Ideas. The theory is problematized, however, because the narrative reason for the exposition of the theory is Simmias’ claim not to “recall” it:

Ἀλλὰ, ὦ Κέβης, ἡ Ἵφη ο Σιμμίας ψιλομαθῶν, ποίαι τούτων αἱ ἀποδείξεις; ὑπόμνησόν με· οὐ γὰρ σφόδρα ἐν τῷ παρόντι μέμνημαι. (73a)

“But, Kebes,” Simmias interrupted, “what are the arguments for this? Remind me, because I do not remember them now.”

This moment of Platonic irony, where one of his characters cannot recollect the theory of

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Recollection, would seem to indicate that the theory is not a viable one. Later, when they have finished explaining the theory, Simmias laments that once Socrates has died, there will be no one left to explain it, implying that no one will remember it, or that they have not clearly understood it. Simmias, in effect, undermines the argument. Plato’s stance regarding the soul’s ability to come to knowledge is ambivalent.

It is unlikely, however, that Iamblichus would have read the *Phaedo* this way. In fact, according to Olympiodorus *In Phaedonem* 65.13, Iamblichus took Plato’s theory of Recollection not so much as an epistemology, but as proof for the immortality of the soul. Iamblichus’ claim, however, that human beings attain wisdom only through the gods because it is difficult for them to do so on their own does itself have Platonic precedents. There are moments in the dialogues when Plato hints at the fact that knowledge of the Good is difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to attain. In the *Symposium*, for example, Diotima’s speech highlights the fact that the lover of wisdom, that is the philosopher, is not wise because no one loves what he already has; to love wisdom, by definition, means not to have it (204a). In Plato’s other famous dialogue on love, the *Phaedrus*, Socrates’ second speech shows how difficult attaining knowledge of the Good, or wisdom, can actually be. The speech comes after a discussion of whether the soul is immortal (connecting in this way to the *Phaedo*), and in it Socrates, before he begins his discussion of the nature of the human soul, first recognizes that a full account is beyond his reach: “To explain it [i.e., the nature of the soul] would require a very long discussion,

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66 For the reading that the argument is intentionally unsound for dramatic effect, see Arieti 1986:132.
completely a divine narration in every way” (πάντη πάντως θείας εἶναι καὶ μακρὰς διηγήσεως, 246a). He instead describes it through a myth, the so-called “Chariot Analogy,” which likens the human soul to a chariot led by two horses (one horse is strong, the other weak) and a charioteer. Socrates describes the journey to the heights of reality as difficult and treacherous under the leadership of the gods in their perfect chariots. The human chariots, however, cannot keep up and many fall along the way, never managing to see Reality. Some may come closer than others, but:

\[\pi\alpha\sigma\alpha\ \delta\varepsilon\\ \pi\omicron\omicron\ \\varepsilon\chiουσαι \\pi\omicron\\omicron\\omicron\ \\alpha\uppi\ell\epsilon\ell\epsilon\iota\varsigma \\tau\eta\varsigma \\tau\omicron\nu \\d\upsilon\nu\omicron\ \\theta\epsilon\alpha\varsigma \ \\alpha\pi\acute{e}\varphi\chiο\eta\nu\tau\alpha\iota,\ \ \kappa\alpha\iota \ \\alpha\pi\ell\theta\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\omicron\phi\omicron\ \delta\omicron\xi\alpha\omicron\tau\omicron\eta \ \chi\omicron\omicron\omicron\tau\omicron\iota. \ \ (248b)\]

All of them, even after they’ve gone through so much work, leave without accomplishing their task, without seeing reality, and when they have gone, they depend on what they think was nourishment.

While Plato’s texts are clear about the source of wisdom, they are ultimately ambivalent about whether that wisdom can actually be achieved. Iamblichus seems to have been troubled by this point. According to Hermeias, Iamblichus read the Chariot Analogy as the soul’s desire to achieve union with the gods. For Iamblichus, however, there was a certain part of the soul rooted in the gods themselves (called the “one of the soul”) that needed to be cultivated in order to receive mystical inspiration (τὸ γὰρ ἐν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐνοὐσθαί τοῖς θεοῖς πέφυκεν, In Phaedr. 150.24-28; fr.6 Dillon) which was ultimately necessary for proper theurgy (Myst. 3.20.148). In reading the Phaedrus passage, Iamblichus equate the “helmsman” of Socrates’ chariot as this particular part of

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68 Dillon 1973:253-4. What is referred to here is the theurgic (and Iamblichean especially) theory of the vehicle of the soul. According to the theory, there was a part of the soul, created by the Demiurge (which is, in fact, implied by Plato at Timaeus 41b-c) that could be insulated from material influences and therefore could be receptive to this direct connection with the divine (particularly in its ability to receive divine light). On Iamblichus’ version of this theory, see Finamore 1985; on the reception of divine light, see Johnston 2004.
the soul. Implied here is that for Iamblichus, philosophical wisdom can only be obtained through mystical union with the gods, which can only happen if the gods are either pleased in theurgic rites or choose to inspire the soul on their own. We will deal with this in more detail in the next chapter regarding the philosophical implications of the Mysteries; for now, it is clear that Iamblichus’ epistemological stance is both encouraged by Plato’s ambivalence, since ultimately no souls manage to see Reality, and given authority by Socrates’ claims that only the gods know and can give a full account of the human soul.

Iamblichus’ epistemology in the preface to the Life of Pythagoras, therefore, is deeply rooted in Plato, but his view that knowledge is communicated through the gods lays the groundwork for his philosopher-priest persona. Iamblichus’ preface draws on the introduction to Timaeus’ speech, but his allusions to it change its meaning. Where Timaeus and Socrates invoke the gods for formulaic reasons to give a veneer of piety to their science (and thus is part of the literary mode of the dialogue), Iamblichus does so for epistemological reasons. These reasons are largely related to Iamblichus’ epistemological position that the gods must lead the way in man’s search for wisdom because of his inability to access it on his own. Man’s limitations are also acknowledged in Plato, whether through Socrates’ casual observation that a full account of the human soul could be given only by the gods, or in Socrates’ Chariot Analogy in which only the gods can successfully view the highest ontological truths, or even by analogy, where the divine Sun is likened to the Good. Iamblichus’ claim, then, that only the gods have knowledge of the universe means that our only access to that knowledge comes through
them. The philosopher for Iamblichus, therefore, should be a priest because communication with the gods is a necessary part of attaining wisdom. Iamblichus’ professed program of “scientific theology” in the *Mysteries* begins to make sense. The gods have created the world in a particular way, and our only access to its plan is to invoke them. Theology becomes intimately entwined with philosophical wisdom.

### 1.3.5 Divine Inspiration in Philosophy: Pythagoras as the New Thales?

In the previous section, we examined Iamblichus’ reworking of Plato’s epistemology in the preface to the *Life*, but one of the elements of the preface we have not yet discussed is the claim that Pythagoras’ philosophy comes directly from the gods. Iamblichus cites this, in addition to his view that philosophical enlightenment is impossible for man without the help of the gods, as the reason for the adumbration of the Pythagorean school’s major doctrines (*Life* 1.2). Since Pythagoras’ knowledge comes from the gods, one *must be* priestly to understand Pythagoras in addition to Pythagoras himself having to be priestly. Interpreting Pythagoras’ philosophy, therefore, requires one to be a priest in order to both receive instruction from the gods and then present it to mankind.

In his account of Pythagoras’ youth and education, Iamblichus stresses the combination of priestly and philosophical elements, along with theology and science, that was exhibited in Pythagoras’ philosophical character. Iamblichus initially highlights Pythagoras’ early connection to Apollo, but adamantly denies that he was the son of Apollo (contrary to the tradition of Apollonius):

\[
\text{τούτο μὲν οὐν \ οὐδαμῶς \ δεῖ \ προσίεσθαι, \ τὸ \ μὲντοι \ τὴν Πυθαγόρου \ ψυχήν \ ἀπὸ \ τῆς \ Ἀπόλλωνος \ ἡγεμονίας, \ εἶτε \ συνοπαδόν \ οὐσαν \ εἶτε \ καὶ \ ἄλλως \ οἰκείότερον \ ἐτὶ \ πρὸς \ τὸν \ θεόν \ τοῦτον \ συντεταγμένην,}
\]
καταπεπέμφθαι εἰς ἀνθρώπους οὐδεὶς ἄν ἁμφισβητήσειε τεκμαιρόμενος αὐτή τε τῇ γενέσει ταύτη καὶ τῇ σοφίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ τῇ παντοδαπῇ (Life 2.7-8).

We cannot accept this view at all [i.e., that Pythagoras was the son of Apollo]. Still, Pythagoras’ soul was sent to mankind under the leadership of Apollo (either as a follower or united to the god in some other more intimate way). No one could deny this. There’s clear proof: his birth and the overall wisdom of his soul.

It is curious that Iamblichus would deny Pythagoras’ divine lineage, but I would argue that Iamblichus does not want Pythagoras to be divine because he wants Pythagoras to be a priest: the archetypical communicator between gods and men and because it would run contrary to the tidy ontological divisions of the theurgists, as we will see. We should notice that Iamblichus highlights priestly connections throughout the whole passage. Pythagoras’ name is etymologically connected with the Pythia, both because his birth was prophesied by her and because he was sent by Apollo to mankind (Life 2.6). Iamblichus does not, however, call Pythagoras an oracle, but he does seem to indicate that Pythagoras had a special purpose and special knowledge, both derived from the gods.

In describing Pythagoras’ education, Iamblichus stresses his training in sacred matters (ἀπασι τοῖς τῶν ἱερῶν προϊσταμένοις, Life 2.9); as he grew older, he would combine religious observances with inquiry into natural science (ὅ δέ ἐπιφανεύμενος καὶ ὑπό τῶν τοιούτων δοξῶν καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς ἔξω βρέφους παιδείας καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς θεοειδείας, Life 2.10). For Iamblichus, to look ahead, Pythagoras embodied the philosophical project of the Mysteries and Iamblichus’ own priestly persona in that text: the exposition of “scientific theology.”

Iamblichus’ move is now becoming clear. He is beginning to link his own persona as reflected in the Mysteries (and perhaps his own biography) to the figure of Pythagoras, which he situates in the general context of Platonism; if Pythagoras was to seem authoritative to the Platonic community, Iamblichus needed to specify Pythagoras’
philosophical link to Plato. Initially, that would seem to have been easy, since Plato’s own doctrines reflected links to Pythagoreanism, for example, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates speaks with Kebs and Simmias, two Pythagoreans, and the cosmological system outlined in the *Timaeus* shows similarities to Pythagorean mathematics given the reliance upon geometrical principles in that text.\(^6^9\) Iamblichus’ challenge was not so much in linking Pythagoras with Plato, but in situating his version of Pythagoras with Plato. He does so first through the figure of Thales.

Thales’ place in the Platonic tradition is difficult to assess, and a number of questions arise: Was he the founder of philosophy for the Platonists? If so, when was this honor bestowed upon him? All of this matters, as we will see, because Iamblichus envisions a meeting between Pythagoras and Thales, in which Pythagoras, while younger, is treated as the superior philosopher:

καὶ δὴ καὶ ὁ Θαλῆς ἀσμενὸς αὐτόν προσήκατο, καὶ θαυμάσας τὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους νέους παραλλαγὴν, ὅτι μείζων τε καὶ ὑπερβεβηκυία ἦν τὴν προφοιτήσασαν ἣδη δόξαν, μεταδούσαν τοῦ ἡδύνατο μαθημάτων, τὸ γῇράς το τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἀσμενὸς καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀσθένειαν προστρέψατο εἰς Αἴγυπτον διαπλεῦσαι καὶ τοῖς ἐν Μέμφει καὶ Διοσπολίς ἑαυτόν καὶ τὸν γῆρας καὶ ἑαυτοῦ αἰτιασάμενος καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀσθένειαν ιερεύσατο,· παρὰ γὰρ ἐκείνων καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἑλέγετο, ἔλεγε τὸν Πυθαγόραν καθορᾶν,· ὅτι τὰς ἀνδρὰς ἑαυτὸν ἔσεσθαι, ἃς τὰς ἐνεπετευχέναι ἑαυτὸν ἐξαραξειαν, διὰ τοῦ πολλοῦ τοῦ ἀτόμου τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ, ὧστε ἀσμενὸς ἑαυτὸν ἁγιουργόν, εἰ δὲ τὰς δηλούμενας ἑρεύσει, συγγένοιτο, θειότατον καὶ σοφώτατον ὑπὲρ ᾧ ἀπαντᾷς ἑσεθαί ἀνθρώπους.

In fact, Thales gladly accepted him into his circle, and was amazed at how he surpassed all the other young men. Thales amplified the reputation Pythagoras had already acquired by sharing with him whatever kind of learning he could. He begged off on the grounds of old age and illness, and encouraged him to sail to Egypt and join the priests in Memphis and Diospolis. He did this because, by his own confession, the reason why he was regarded as wise by so many was largely derived from these priests. In fact, he even said that he had no prior understanding of this kind of knowledge [i.e., philosophical combined with priestly knowledge] by nature or by training—but that he could clearly see this ability in Pythagoras. As a result, for all these reasons, Thales announced to him

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\(^6^9\) On Pythagoreanism in Plato, see Burkert 1972:83-96.
that if he went to these Egyptian priests, they would show him everything, and he would become the most divine and wisest of all men.

We meet Thales here as the leader of some type of school, possibly scientific or philosophical. Thales’ self-proclaimed philosophical inadequacies, which here highlight Greek reliance upon Egyptian wisdom, are striking. Iamblichus claims that Thales was inferior to Pythagoras because he lacked a natural ability for philosophy. At the same time, because of his reputation as a philosopher, Thales’ claims about Pythagoras’ aptitude give a legitimacy to what Iamblichus wants to argue: that it was Pythagoras, not Thales who was the first philosopher of importance.

Yet it is unclear exactly when Thales began to be considered the founder of philosophy. Early in the tradition, in sources before 320 BC, Thales does not seem to be considered a philosopher. As Dicks put it, the Thales of this earlier tradition had a reputation chiefly as a practical man of affairs, who was capable of giving political advice (his recommendation to the Ionians to unite), was astute in business matters (his transaction with the olive-presses), and had an inquiring turn of mind with a bent towards natural science and the ability to put a practical use to whatever knowledge he possessed (the stories of the eclipse prediction and the diversion of the river Halys).70

Though it does seem that Aristotle considered him a philosopher (particularly a natural philosopher), he is cited as being able to combine the contemplative life with the practical (Metaphysics 1.3 983b6-27; Politics 1259a9-18). It is only after 320 BC when the sources herald Thales as a founder of philosophy proper.71 This is not to say, however, that all the anecdotes we have about Thales emphasizes his business smarts. In the middle of the

70 Dicks 1959:297.

71 On source criticism, see Dicks 1959:299-309.
digression of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates and Theodorus discuss the general opinion that the contemplative life of the philosopher is often the object of derision because of its impracticality:

Ὥσπερ καὶ Θαλῆν ἀστρονομοῦντα, ὦ Θεόδωρε, καὶ ἄνω βλέποντα, πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ, Θρᾷττά τις ἐμμελὴς καὶ χαρίεσσα θεραπαινὶς ἀποσκῶψαι λέγεται ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναι, τὰ δὲ ἐμπροσθεῖν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτὸν (174a4-8).

Take this example. Once, when Thales was pondering astronomy, Theodoros, and gazing upwards, he fell into a well, and a certain Thracian slave girl, clever and delightful though she was, is reported to have made fun of him, because he was so intent on studying what was in the sky he failed to notice what was right before his feet.

This passage goes against Dicks’ “practicality” thesis because Thales is presented as a kind of philosopher, given the dramatic context of the anecdote in the dialogue. Still, one could not say that Thales is here the *founder of philosophy*. This is a later development seen when the same story is told in Diogenes Laertios through a letter of Anaximenes to Pythagoras:

Θαλῆς Ἐξαμύου ἐπὶ γῆς οὐκ ἐὐποτμος οἴχεται εὐφρόνης, ὥσπερ ἐσθε, ἀμα τῇ ἀμφιπόλῳ προϊὼν ἐκ τοῦ αὐλίου τὰ ἄστρα ἐθηεῖτο ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναι, τὰ δὲ ἐμπροσθεῖν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτὸν (Diogenes Laertius 2.4).

Thales, son of Euxamouos, died in his old age, but he didn’t die prosperously. It was night time, and as he usually did, he went outside with his slave-girl to look at the stars. Suddenly, while walking along and gazing up at the sky—it totally slipped his mind—he fell into a precipitous place. That’s how the astronomer of Miletos met his maker. But we, his former students, remember him with pleasure, as do our children and students, and we will lecture on his philosophical contributions. In any event, the beginning of every philosophical claim ought to be attributed to Thales.

The context of the anecdote has changed from the derision philosophers face to Thales’ death. Diogenes clearly rejects the practicality thesis (οὐκ ἐὐποτμος) but has added to
Plato’s version, at the end of the letter, that the beginning of philosophy should be credited to him.

Iamblichus, working within Diogenes’ tradition, has used the philosophical authority of Thales to undermine not only the practical views of Thales attested in the earlier tradition but also the claim that he was the first philosopher in the very tradition Iamblichus is working in. In the meeting between Thales and Pythagoras, Thales himself admits that all the practical and philosophical knowledge for which he has earned his reputation has been derived from his study with the Egyptian priests. This implies that even scientific knowledge is predicated upon religious knowledge and that the Greek philosophical tradition begins not with the claims of Thales but with the claims of Thales’ sources: barbarian wisdom. This is precisely the major thesis of the *Mysteries* and in the *Life*, Iamblichus lays the groundwork for his philosopher-priest persona. Pythagoras has not only inborn talent (which Thales admits he does not have) but also the appropriate religious and scientific training. Iamblichus uses the authority of Thales, already established as the founder of philosophy, to boost Pythagoras’ claim to that very title.

1.3.6 Number and the Mind of God: Scientific Theology in the *Life of Pythagoras*

After relating Pythagoras’ travels through Italy, Greece, Egypt, and Babylonia, his initiation into the various mystery rites, and the business of his school in Samos, Iamblichus goes on to relate anecdotes about Pythagoras’ ability to predict natural disasters (feats traditionally attributed to Thales) and to perform miracles, but stresses that this ability was a reward from the gods because of his piety. This section of the work
represents a clear break from the preceding sections because it offers a new “pious” introduction, followed by several examples:

Let us begin first with the gods, as is our custom, and let us try to show his piety, and show for ourselves the marvels that arose from it and adorn them in our account.

There are myriads of other things more divine and amazing that are regularly and consistently told about the man: quick prevention of plagues and violent winds, immediate ending to hailstorms, and calming of river and sea waves to secure his disciples’ easy passage.

It is also said that he foretold an imminent earthquake by drinking from a well and prophesied that ship sailing would sink despite a fair wind.

Iamblichus, first and foremost, intends these miraculous deeds to be proof of Pythagoras’ piety and the feats described in the anecdotes go far beyond the capabilities of Thales. While Thales, in the tradition, was credited with predicting an eclipse, and potentially, if Aristotle is to be believed, could reap financial benefit from his predictions, he could not change the course of any natural event. Iamblichus’ Pythagoras can, and is equated more with the priestly than the practical Presocratics. Iamblichus directly likens the abilities of Pythagoras to those of Empedocles (whom Iamblichus called the ‘wind-averter’), Epimenides (the ‘purifier’), and Abaris (the ‘aether-treader,’ because he could “walk on air”, Life 28.136). There could be a veiled reference here to Iamblichus’ own biography.
in Eunapius, which, as we have seen, recounts Iamblichus’ possible levitation and sense of the supernatural.

Iamblichus is presenting a new balance of science and theology through these anecdotes, rejecting the scientific model of Thales and replacing it with that of Empedocles, Epimenides, Abaris, and, now, his Pythagoras. While science and mathematics remain an integral part of Pythagoras’ philosophy, in many respects, they are subordinate to theology. After recounting the marvels Pythagoras was able to perform, Iamblichus launches into a description of the worship of the gods whom Pythagoras and his followers took as guides (Life 28.137-8). Iamblichus says that the rationale (ὁ λόγος) behind Pythagorean philosophy is that human beings act like fools when they seek the Good anywhere other than in the gods (ὅτι γελοῖον ποιοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι ἄλλοθέν ποθεν ζητοῦντες τὸ εὖ ἦ παρὰ τῶν θεῶν). Many of the Pythagorean prohibitions, Iamblichus claims, were designed to please the god (δῆλον ὅτι ταῦτα πρακτέον, οἷς τυγχάνει ὁ θεὸς χαίρων) and part of their sacred mysteries (ἔστι δὲ καὶ τῶν ἀποταγμάτων τὰ πολλὰ ἐκ τελετῶν εἰσενεγμένα), both designed to purify the soul for the Good.

The underlying question to Pythagoras’ philosophical program is how communication with the gods works in practice for Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. How was it that the gods give knowledge and wisdom to the practitioners of Pythagoras’ mysteries? Iamblichus says that Pythagoras and his followers practiced the art of divination (περὶ τὴν μαντικὴν σπουδάζουσι) to interpret the gods’ purpose. There are instances in which Pythagoras has direct communication with the gods. For example,
Iamblichus relates one story in which Pythagoras was conversing with a river, and the river responded, “Hello, Pythagoras” (*Life* 28.134). The anecdote does not describe Pythagoras receiving any philosophical directive from the gods, and in fact there are no instances of the gods directly revealing truths to Pythagoras, though in some cases it is assumed (*Life* 28.143–4). The anecdote does reveal, however, Pythagoras’ connection to the supernatural world; he had some special means of communicating with the *daimones* through which Pythagoras derived his system of worship. Truths are contained in the prohibitions of the mysteries (such as the prohibition against eating meat, but much of these are described in more detail in the *Exhortation*), Iamblichus tells us, in the symbols of nature (about which Iamblichus is entirely unclear in the *Life*), and the divinely inspired mythic poems, especially those of Orpheus (*Life* 28.135–46).

Through these mythic poems of Orpheus and the mysteries associated with them, Iamblichus says that Pythagoras had special access to the mind of the gods derived in part from number theory:

> ἐκ δή τούτων φανερὸν γέγονεν ὅτι τὴν ἀριθμῷ ὁρισμένην οὐσίαν τῶν θεῶν παρὰ τῶν Ὀρφικῶν παρέλαβεν. ἐποιεῖτο δὲ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ἀριθμῶν καὶ θαυμαστὴν πρόγνωσιν καὶ θεραπείαν τῶν θεῶν κατά τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς ὅτι μάλιστα συγγενεστάτην (*Life* 28.147).

From this it is clear that he took number to be the *essence* of the gods, as he learned from the Orphics. He made, through these same numbers, a remarkable foreknowledge and system of worship for the gods in accordance with these numbers, as much akin to their nature as possible.

Iamblichus says that Pythagoras’ system of numbers had two effects, one rooted in natural science (foreknowledge), the other in theology (a system of worship). Pythagoras’ ability to predict and prevent natural events Iamblichus derives from his equation of number with the essence of the gods. “Number” was the rubric under which the gods
created the universe, and if one has access to those numbers, one can discern the fabric of the cosmos. While this was widely known as Pythagoras’ invention, what is new here is Iamblichus’ clear subordination of the mathematical science to theology, a formulation missing from Porphyry version (to which we will turn below in the conclusion of the chapter). Iamblichus’ Pythagoras used number as a means to access the will of the gods and could not only predict earthquakes and hailstorms, he could *prevent* them.

The second aspect of Pythagoras’ number theory was his system of worship, particularly bloodless sacrifice, which pleased the gods more than traditional sacrifice because it did not involve the butchery of animals sacred to them—a form of respect that would make the gods more well-disposed toward revealing their secrets. Iamblichus tells an anecdote about Pythagoras’ reaction to Abaris’ sacrifices to the gods for the purpose of discerning the truth:

βουλόμενος ὁ Πυθαγόρας μὴ ἄφαιρείν μὲν αὐτοῦ τὴν εἰς τἀληθὲς σπουδὴν, παρασχεῖν δὲ διά τινος ἀσφαλεστέρου καὶ χωρίς αἵματος καὶ σφαγῆς, ἄλλως τε καὶ ὅτι ιερὸν ἥγειτο εἶναι τὸν ἀλεκτρυόνα ἠλιῷ, τὸ λεγόμενον παναληθὲς ἀπετέλεσεν αὐτῷ, δι’ ἀριθμητικῆς ἐπιστήμης συντεταγμένον (Life 28.147).

Pythagoras, not wanting to discourage his [i.e., Abaris’] zeal for the truth, but to provide him with a surer means to obtain it, free from blood and butchery—especially because he considered the cock sacred to the sun—produced for him what he called the “all-true,” arranged through the science of arithmetic.

Iamblichus calls Pythagoras’ system of sacrifice a “surer way to discern the truth.”

Pythagoras therefore stressed a combination of religious ritual and mathematical principles in his school. Iamblichus specifically calls this a “synthesis of divine philosophy and worship of the gods” (σύνθετον αὐτὸν ποιῆσαι τὴν θείαν φιλοσοφίαν καὶ θεοποιεῖν, Life 28.151).
It is this same combination that Iamblichus himself elsewhere advocates, because “the synthesis of philosophy and religious worship was precisely the agenda Iamblichus took upon himself.” Iamblichus says that for Pythagoras, mathematics and geometry purified the mind in order to allow communion with the gods (*Life* 28.147). The reliance on number makes sense, particularly given the fact that number was so important to the Pythagorean metaphysical system. To understand number is to understand the blueprint of the world, and what is sacred to the gods.  

1.3.7 Pythagoras the New Socrates? Authorizing the Pythagorean Philosopher within Platonism

In order to seem authoritative to a Platonic audience and within the Platonic tradition as a whole, Iamblichus needed to draw a specific connection between his Pythagoras and Plato. Thales could easily be displaced as the founder of natural philosophy but it was Plato who was traditionally regarded as the major source for philosophical authority. In fact, the influence of Pythagoras on Plato was already recognized and well established in the tradition. Nearly every account of Plato’s travels in the biographical tradition says that Plato went to Magna Graecia to associate with the Pythagoreans. In addition, there are a few anecdotes which detail the great pains that Plato endured to obtain secret

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72 Shaw 1995:196, emphasizes this point by pointing to the significance of number in Pythagorean ritual, all part of his greater argument that mathematics plays an important role in theurgic *apotheosis*; see specifically 189-215.

73 For more on science and religion in Pythagoreanism, see Burkert 1972. For mathematics specifically, see Heath 1921 and Mueller 1997.

74 Riginos 1976:62-69; for full citation of ancient evidence, see 62n6.
Pythagorean books, which he used in composing some of his dialogues, particularly the *Timaeus*.75

Throughout the *Life of Pythagoras*, Iamblichus continually stresses Pythagoras’ impact on the development of Plato’s philosophy; to a large degree, Pythagoras even replaces Socrates in this regard, who is never mentioned in the *Life*. The most egregious example of this is Iamblichus’ claim that Plato’s *Republic*, and the view of justice expounded within it, should be credited to Pythagoras.76 Specifically in examining Pythagoras definition of Justice, Iamblichus says:

\[ \text{ἀρχὴ τοῖνυν ἐστι δικαιοσύνης μὲν τὸ κοινὸν καὶ ἰσον καὶ τὸ ἐγγυτάτω ἑνὸς σώματος καὶ μιᾶς ψυχῆς ὑμομορφηθέν πάντας, καὶ ἔπι τὸ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐμὸν φθέγγεσθαι καὶ τὸ ἀλλότριον, ὡσπερ δὴ καὶ Πλάτων μαθὼν παρὰ τῶν Πυθαγορείων συμμαρτυρεῖ (Life 20.167).}\]

In fact, the first principle of justice is the common and the equal and the idea that all should come as close as possible to having one body and soul and having the same experiences as everyone else, and everyone should have the same definition for “mine” and “not mine”; in fact Plato learned this from Pythagoras and is witness to the same point.

Iamblichus here claims the doctrine set forth in the *Republic* for Pythagoras (and by extension to Egypt). This particular passage relates more directly to *Republic* Book 5, where Socrates and Glaukon discuss the fact that “having the same experiences” can draw communities together, because private property creates rifts among its members (462a-63a). Iamblichus presents Plato’s primary influence not as Socrates, but Pythagoras, more specifically *his* Pythagoras. Iamblichus’ displacement of Socrates, the itinerant questioner, allows for the introduction of a new philosopher who professed


76 Dillon and Hershbell 2001:183n1.
knowledge of the Mind of God as the basis for wisdom.

Iamblichus’ Pythagoras is therefore both the first philosopher and the natural starting point for philosophical inquiry; Pythagoras was the first to call himself a philosopher, and was the first to hand down a tradition of philosophical exposition (*Life* 12.58 and 29.157-66). By attributing Plato’s doctrines to Pythagoras, Iamblichus has created a new philosophical genealogy—one that authorizes a philosopher-priest that proposed a system of inquiry that predicated study of the physical world on knowledge about the divine, or an expositor of “scientific theology.”

1.3.8 Conclusions: Porphyry versus Iamblichus’ Pythagoras

In this section, I have tried to show that Iamblichus presents Pythagoras as the forerunner of his own philosophical program, but he does so in order to legitimize his own persona and project in the *Mysteries*. This implies that Iamblichus has somehow deviated from the biographical tradition of Pythagoras, and I want to conclude with a comparison of Porphyry and Iamblichus’ *Lives of Pythagoras*, which is necessary because Iamblichus wrote the *Mysteries* to answer Porphyry’s objections to his philosophical project. I do not intend to review here traditional *Quellenforschung*, and cover all of Iamblichus’ possible sources.77 For our purposes, comparison with Porphyry is sufficient because of the contentious relationship the two had. Furthermore, I believe Staab’s argument is correct: the additional information Iamblichus provides about Pythagoras has less to do with the

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77 The most concise review of Iamblichus’ possible sources is Philip 1959.
sources he consulted than with presenting his version of the best philosophical life.²⁸ I
want to refocus Staab’s suggestion, however, because one of Iamblichus’ purposes in this
text, other than to provide an example of philosophical virtue, is to create authority for
his own persona, and a comparison with Porphyry’s version will show Iamblichus’
radical emendations.

Iamblichus’ version deviates from Porphyry’s in two major areas: the relationship
between philosophical wisdom and the divine and Pythagoras’ extreme piety.
Iamblichus’ preface reveals his epistemological commitment to the divine origin of
human wisdom, that the gods reveal the truths of the universe through their grace.
Porphyry’s version has no such introduction and begins simply with the details
surrounding Pythagoras’ birth (Porph. Life 1). Porphyry is much more careful about
naming his sources, accurately attributing the different accounts to their various authors.
This is significant, because Porphyry’s version feels more accurate: it seems as if
Porphyry is simply trying to relate the facts, cutting and pasting his sources into one
document. Iamblichus, on the other hand, speaks to us, and tells us what he intends to do.
In the Life and the compendium as a whole, he will expound the philosophy of
Pythagoras with the help of the gods.

Iamblichus’ account emphasizes Pythagoras’ education, with particular attention
to the role of religious knowledge in philosophy. Both authors recognize that Pythagoras’
learned from the Chaldeans and Egyptians; as Porphyry says, this was already well

²⁸ Staab 2002:217-237, includes other possible sources for Iamblichus’ Life beyond Porphyry and
Diogenes Laertius. Most significant is Philostratus’ Life of Apollonios, to which Staab draws
numerous parallels.
established in the biographical tradition (Life 6). Porphyry adds a specific journey to Egypt during which Pythagoras not only learned Egyptian mathematics and astronomy but was invited by the priests to be initiated into the mysteries and to perform sacrifices with them (Life 7-8). The debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry on this point does not seem to be about religious education. Rather, Iamblichus’ inclusion of Thales’ speech that claims his scientific and philosophical knowledge derived from Egypt sets a precedent for philosophical wisdom to derive from sources other than Greece. It may be possible that Iamblichus has veiled his own biography here, having himself been brought up in a family with religious roots, but it is more likely that Iamblichus is creating a model philosopher, not simply as a paragon of virtue, as Staab and other have suggested, but as a model scientific theologian: one who was educated in sciences such as astronomy, mathematics, and physics, but also one who exploits religion to have access to the mind of the gods.

Iamblichus’ and Porphyry’s Vitae agree that divine rewards were bestowed on Pythagoras for his piety, and in fact, recite the same list:

Iamblichus’ Version (Life 28.135-6):
καὶ μυρία ἑτερα τούτων θειότερα καὶ θαυμαστότερα περὶ τάνδρος ὁμαλῶς καὶ συμφώνως ἱστορεῖται, προορήσεις τε σεισμῶν ἀπαράβαται καὶ λοιμῶν ἀποτροπαι σών τάχει καὶ ἀνέμων ἀποτροπαὶ σὺν τάχει καὶ ἀβαρίων ἀπευδιασμοὶ πρὸς εὐμαρή τῶν ἑταίρων διάβαισιν. ὄν μεταλαβόντας Ἑμπεδοκλέα τε τὸν Ἀχαγαντῖνον καὶ ᾿Επιμενίδην τὸν Κρήτη καὶ ᾿Αβαρίν τὸν ᾿Ακραγαντῖνον καὶ ᾿Επιμενίδην τὸν Ἰπποπόδον πολλῇ καὶ αὐτοὺς τοιαῦτα τινα ἐπιτετελεσκέναι. δῆλα δ’ αὐτῶν τὰ ποιήματα ύπάρχει, ἀλλ’ ὅσα καὶ ἀλεξανέμας μὲν ὁν τὸ ἐπώνυμον ᾿Εμπεδοκλέας, καθαρτῆς δὲ τὸ ᾿Επιμενίδου, αὐθροβάτης δὲ τὸ ᾿Αβάριος, ὅτι ἄρα ὑστῷ τοῦ ἐν Ὑπερβόρεοις Ἀπόλλωνος δωρηθέντι αὕτῳ ἐποχυῖμενος ποταμοῖς τε καὶ πελάγη καὶ τὰ ἄβατα διέβαινεν, ἀεροβατῶν τρόπον τινά, ὑπερ ὑπενόησαν

79 Phillip 1959.
καὶ Πυθαγόραν τινὲς πεπονθέναι τότε, ἢνίακα καὶ ἐν Μεταποντίῳ καὶ ἐν Ταυρομενיו ὁτίς ἐκατέρωθι ἑταῖρος ὤμιλησε τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ.

There are thousands of other things more divine and amazing that are regularly and consistently told about the man: quick prevention of plagues and violent winds, immediate ending to hailstorms, and calming of river and sea waves to secure his disciples’ easy passage. These abilities Empedocles the Agrigenterine, Epimenides the Cretan, and Abaris the Hyperborean shared in various degrees, and they themselves accomplished many similar feats. Their poems clearly support this. Empedocles gained the epithet “wind-averter,” Epimenides the “purifier,” and Abaris “air-walker” because, riding on an arrow given to him by Hyperborean Apollo, he crossed rivers, seas, and other impassible places like he was “walking on air.” This is something that many believe Pythagoras could do at the time he was in Metapontion and Tauromenion and met with his students on the same day.

Porphyry’s Version (Life 28):
προφήτης τε γὰρ ἀπαράβατοι σεισμῶν διαμημονεύονται αὐτοῦ καὶ λοιμῶν ἀποτροπαὶ σὺν τάχει καὶ ἀνέμων βιαῶν χαλαζῶν τ’ ἐκχύσεως καταστολαὶ καὶ κυμάτων ποταμίων τε καὶ θαλαστών ἀπευδιασμοὶ πρὸς εὔμαρη τὸν ἑταίρων διάβασιν. ὄν νῦν μεταλαβόντας Ἐμπεδοκλέα τε καὶ Ἐπεμνίδου καὶ Ἀβάρα τούτοις ἐπιτετελεκέναι τοιαῦτα δῆλα δ’ αὐτῶν τὰ ποιήματα ὑπάρχει. ἀλλ’ ὡς καὶ ἀλεξάνεμος μὲν Ἰππομενίδου Ἐμπεδοκλέους, καθαρτὴς δὲ τὸ Ἐπιμενίδου, αἰθροβάτης δὲ τὸ Ἀβάριδος, ὅτι ἂν ὁμοίως τὸν Ἰππομενίδου Ἐπιμενίδους ὑπακούσε καὶ Πυθαγόρας τινὲς πεπονθέναι τότε ἢνίακα ἐν Μεταποντίῳ καὶ ἐν Ταυρομενίῳ τοῖς ἑκατέρωθι ἑταῖρος ὤμιλησε τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ.

We have heard that he prevented many earthquakes, also that he immediately cured a plague, suppressed violent winds and hail, calmed storms both on rivers and on seas, for the comfort and safe passage of his friends. As their poems clearly attest, Empedocles gained the epithet “wind-averter,” Epimenides the “purifier,” and Abaris “air-walker” because, riding on an arrow given to him by Hyperborean Apollo, he crossed rivers, seas, and other impassible places like he was “walking on air.” This is something that many believe Pythagoras could do at the time he was in Metapontion and Tauromenion and met with his students on the same day. It is believed that this was the method employed by Pythagoras when on the same day he discoursed with his friends at Metapontum and Tauromenium.

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While both Iamblichus and Porphyry provide essentially the same list of miracles, Iamblichus directly ties Pythagoras’ philosophical knowledge to his piety. In the passages that follow, Iamblichus goes on to review, as we have discussed above, the role of gods
in philosophical enlightenment, and how the philosopher must involve the gods in his philosophical quest. Iamblichus therefore implies that Pythagoras was rewarded for his piety with philosophical knowledge. Porphyry, on the other hand, while he does go on to stress the Pythagoras’ special knowledge, particularly his ability to discern the “universal music of the universe” (αὐτὸς δὲ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς ἀρμονίας ἠκροᾶτο). The majority of non-philosophers cannot hear this “because of the limitations of their weak natures” (συνεὶς τῆς καθολικῆς τῶν σφαιρῶν καὶ τῶν κατ’ αὐτᾶς κινουμένων ἀστέρων ἀρμονίας, ἡς ἡμᾶς μὴ ἀκούειν διὰ συμπρότητα τῆς φύσεως, Porphyry, Life 30).

Porphyry makes no mention here of Pythagoras’ relationship to the gods, but rather suggests that his enlightenment was possible because of his knowledge of music. Despite cataloguing the same miracles then, Iamblichus treats Pythagoras’ relationship to the gods as a philosophical virtue; Porphyry draws no such conclusion, or at least does not make it explicit.

The difference between Iamblichus and Porphyry can also be seen in their treatment of Pythagoras’ number theory. Iamblichus presents Pythagoras’ number theory as scientific, but only in so far as it explains the way the gods have fashioned the world. Because number is the mind of the gods, Iamblichus’ Pythagoras developed a system of bloodless sacrifice in accordance with number theory, and this sacrifice was specifically designed to convince the gods to share their knowledge. Porphyry makes no such leap. He does mention Pythagoras’ bloodless sacrifice, but it has nothing whatever to do with number theory or philosophical knowledge. Recall what Iamblichus says about sacrifice:

βουλόμενος ὁ Πυθαγόρας μὴ ἀφαιρεῖν μὲν αὐτοῦ τῆν εἰς τἀληθὲς σπουδὴν, παρασχεῖν δὲ διὰ τινὸς ἀσφαλεστέρου καὶ χωρὶς αἵματος καὶ οφαγῆς, ἄλλως τε καὶ ὅτι ἱερὸν ἤγειτο εἶναι τὸν ἄλεκτρυόνα ἡλίῳ, τὸ
Pythagoras, not wanting to discourage his [i.e., Abaris’] zeal for the truth, but to provide him with a surer means to obtain it, free from blood and butchery—especially because he considered the cock sacred to the sun—produced for him what he called the “all-true,” arranged through the science of arithmetic.

Iamblichus here clearly connects bloodless sacrifice with mathematics and the philosophical quest. In other words, one sacrifices to receive philosophical wisdom. Porphyry, on the other hand, presents the opposite scenario:

When Pythagoras sacrificed to the Gods, it was bloodless. He offered no more than barley bread, cakes and myrrh; least of all, animals, unless perhaps cocks and pigs. When he discovered the proposition that the square on the hypotenuse of a right angled triangle was equal to the squares on the sides containing the right angle, he is said to have sacrificed an ox, although the more accurate say that this ox was made of flour.

Porphyry presents Pythagoras as sacrificing after a discovery, not in order to receive one. Iamblichus has, in a sense, flipped the expected order to highlight his program of scientific theology.

In his *Life of Pythagoras*, Porphyry dealt with number theory, explaining in detail many of its technicalities, such as what the monad, dyad, triad and decad signify and how these geometrical principles were used to symbolically represent the world (*Life* 48-52). The overall purpose of mathematics, Porphyry says, was to purify the mind so that it might be capable of receiving incorporeal realities. Pythagorean mathematics for
Porphyry was aimed at contemplation, presumably of the Platonic Ideas (τὰ ὄντως ὄντα, Life 47). As we have seen above however, Iamblichus specifically claims that it was through number that Pythagoras understood the essence of the gods, developed a system of foreknowledge and ultimately of sacrifice.

In sum, as the differences between the two Lives indicate, Iamblichus developed Pythagoras as a model scientific theologian. He reset the Platonic tradition under this rubric by replacing Thales with Pythagoras and highlighting his influence on Plato. Iamblichus presents Pythagoras as a philosopher-priest, using scientific inquiry to discern the mind of the gods. Iamblichus’ point seems to have been two-fold: to develop an authority for his own persona in the Mysteries by providing Platonic authority for his version of Pythagoras, and establishing Pythagoras in that tradition in order to use him as an authority for himself. In the next chapter, I want to look more specifically at the Mysteries in terms of Iamblichus’ ‘authorial’ persona: the philosopher-priest.
Chapter 2
Iamblichus’ Mysteries:
Scientific Theology and the Philosopher-Priest Persona

2.1.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we studied how Iamblichus was able to establish a philosophical authority for himself through his reconstruction of the figure of Pythagoras. Iamblichus’ Pythagoras emerged as a proto-philosopher-priest, who claimed elements of science and theology as the basis for philosophical investigation. I have left out, however, an important thread present in the previous discussion: the role of barbarian wisdom in Iamblichus’ vision of philosophy as well as that of Plato’s dialogues. It is to this that I will turn in this chapter through an analysis of Iamblichus’ Mysteries.

Iamblichus’ Mysteries is a pivotal text because it marks the programmatic fusion of theurgy and Platonic philosophy. As its title suggests, even if that title was affixed by Ficino well over a millennium after it was originally penned, the Mysteries introduces elements of religion to philosophy. Leaving the title aside, we may also look to how Iamblichus partially defines the purpose of his work early in the first book, as an “exposition of our whole mystical system” (ἐνὶ δὲ καὶ τὴν ὅλην ἀπατεῖ παρ’ ἡμῶν

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μυσταγωγίαν, by which he seems to mean his system of theurgy.¹ For this reason scholars generally agree that in the Mysteries Iamblichus attempted to combine “eastern” revelation literature—that is, either the Chaldaean Oracles or the Hermetica—and ritual with Platonic philosophy. Gregory Shaw, for example, put it nicely when he said this: “Iamblichus established a new synthesis of cult and philosophy, becoming the first leader of a Platonic school to function simultaneously as a hierophant of a sacred cult.”² Shaw points to what I see as one of the most fundamental shifts in the Greek intellectual and spiritual activity of this period, the sacralization of philosophical doctrine as well as, it would seem, the intellectualization of the priesthood.

In this chapter, I will deal with only one part of this larger issue and it is this: why does Iamblichus adopt the persona of an Egyptian priest in the Mysteries? How does his persona affect a change in the relationship between Greek and barbarian wisdom? And, ultimately, how can we better understand his philosophical project by studying the literary elements—particularly the presentation of philosophy, both in terms of genre and character—of this work? As I will show, the structure of the text as an ἐρωταπόκρισις—a question and answer dialogue—represents the revaluation of the Platonic dialogue in light of Iamblichus’ new epistemology that relies upon non-dialectical wisdom about the gods. Iamblichus’ Egyptian and priestly persona, Abammon, transforms not only the literary medium through which philosophy is

¹ Clarke, Dillon, Hershbell 2003:7n8.
transmitted, in terms of both text and character, but also the very substance of that philosophy, particularly with regard to epistemology. As we saw in the previous chapter, Iamblichus endorsed a revelatory epistemology and, in this chapter, we will examine how this is related both to genre and persona. Then I will examine the prosopography of the text, its *dramatis personae* as it were, and its genre in order to show that Iamblichus reinterprets the project of Plato in accord with his new epistemology and on the basis of eastern authorities. I will then conclude with a discussion of how Iamblichus develops ‘ethnic’ philosophies.

### 2.1.2 Introduction to the Mysteries

Iamblichus’ real challenge, as I see it, was to convince readers of Plato—whose main character, Socrates, emphasized the dialectic nature of achieving wisdom—that true wisdom was *non-dialectical* and came directly from the gods. I intend to show that the *Mysteries* is structured, both in terms of character and genre, to resolve this apparent contradiction. Moreover, because Iamblichus was advocating a fusion of revelation literature and Neoplatonism, scholars have taken for granted the fact that Neoplatonic exegesis of Plato highlight the “Oriental elements” in Plato’s dialogues.\(^3\) As Shaw put it:

> Plato himself had acknowledged that his writings were a mere *propaideia* to deeper mysteries [in the Seventh Letter 341c-d], and in several dialogues spoke of the influence of “Oriental,” particularly “Egyptian,” wisdom on his thought. Although Plato probably never participated in Egyptian or Chaldean mysteries, he was believed to have done so by Platonists and therefore the Oriental

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\(^3\) Larsen 1972:151-2; 157-9.
element in Iamblichus’s Neoplatonism should not be seen as alien but as an attempt to reveal more completely the wellspring of Platonic wisdom.\(^4\)

Shaw explains the problem of Iamblichus’ persona away without really addressing it. For Shaw (and Larsen as well), Iamblichus’ Egyptian persona was related to the fact that Platonists had recognized Egyptian wisdom in Plato’s dialogues, and adopting an Egyptian persona was Iamblichus’ way of further tapping into Plato’s wisdom. Yet we should always be wary of sentences like “in several dialogues, Plato spoke of the influence of Egyptian wisdom on his thought,” because nowhere in the dialogues does Plato speak of anything *in propria persona*. What Shaw must mean here is that Platonists understood the references to Egyptian wisdom in Plato’s dialogues as statements about Plato’s own influences; and it is true, Platonists did work especially hard to ensure that Plato could be considered an authority on all kinds of wisdom, particularly barbarian wisdom.\(^5\) While this may explain why Iamblichus might have Platonist authority among Platonists, it certainly does not explain why Iamblichus adopted the persona himself to present his “new synthesis” of philosophy with cult.

This begs a number of questions: why did Iamblichus advocate this fusion in the first place? What, exactly, did he find unsatisfactory about the philosophical tradition that preceded him? And, finally, why did he recast the image of the ideal philosopher (not only in the *Mysteries*, but in the *Life* as well) as the priest who can communicate directly with the gods? As we have seen in the *Life*, though theurgy is not expressly mentioned or discussed in any detail, Iamblichus did present Pythagoras as a proto-


\(^5\) See Boys-Stones 2001:1-17.
theurgist, subordinating scientific inquiry to theological questions, while at the same time paving the way for the transformation of traditional religious practice (such as prayer or sacrifice) into theurgic rites. I will argue that the implied project of the *Life* is the express project of the *Mysteries*: scientific theology; that Iamblichus’ main philosophical divergence from the Platonic tradition was related to his epistemological view that *knowledge of the Good is possible*; and that the reason Iamblichus’ adoption of the persona of the philosopher-priest indicated a redefinition of not only Platonic philosophy but also of the Platonic philosopher himself.

Before turning to specific passages, I want to give a brief summary of the *Mysteries* as a whole. The *Mysteries* comprises ten books, which deal with the major theurgical issues: how the soul relates to the cosmos and the gods (Books 1 and 2); how the gods communicate knowledge to mankind (Book 3); how the gods are to be invoked and sacrificed to (Books 4, 5, and 6); how the gods have created the world and informed it with their ineffable characteristics (Books 7 and 8); and how one can use theurgy for philosophical enlightenment (Books 9 and 10).

In this section, I will primarily focus on how Iamblichus’ theurgy answered both epistemological (i.e., how do we know what we know) and metaphysical (i.e., what is *really* real) questions. My thesis is that the answer to both the epistemological and metaphysical questions is the same: the theurgist is philosophically tied to the gods, who are themselves really real and are the ends of philosophical knowledge and through whom that knowledge is attained. For Iamblichus, the practice of theurgy brings about philosophical fulfillment because through it we can locate the traces (*εἰκόνες*) and
symbols (συμβόλα and συνθήματα are used interchangeably)\(^6\) that the gods built into the cosmos and, in locating them, the theurgist *imitates* the gods’ demiurgic powers. To make my case, I will show that Iamblichus fuses three major traditions; he adapts the theurgic model of the *Chaldean Oracles* to the metaphysical traditions of Plato’s *Timaeus* and Plotinus’ *Enneads*, but does so through the persona of an Egyptian priest. Herein lies, as I will argue, the transformation of what it means to be a philosopher for Iamblichus.

### 2.2 The Prosopography of the Mysteries

Iamblichus authors the *Mysteries* in the guise of an Egyptian priest named Abammon (and so in this discussion I will use the names interchangeably unless I am making a particular point about Iamblichus’ persona).\(^7\) His initial reason for doing so is the connection that he sees between the philosopher and priest in the figure of Hermes:

> Ὁ θεὸς ὁ τῶν λόγων ἤγεμὼν, Ἑρμῆς, πάλαι δέδοκται καλῶς ἀπασί τοῖς ἱερεῖσιν εἶναι κοινός· ὁ δὲ τῆς περὶ θεῶν ἀληθινῆς ἑπιστήμης προεστηκὼς εἰς ἐστιν οὗτος ἐν ὅλοις οἱ ἡμέτεροι πρόγονοι τὰ αὐτῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας εὑρήματα ἀνετίθεσαν, Ἑρμοῦ πάντα τὰ οἰκεῖα συγγράμματα ἐπονομάζοντες (*Myst.* 1.1)

The god who presides over rational discourse, Hermes, has long been considered, quite rightly, to be the common patron of all priests. He who presides over the true knowledge of the gods is one and the same everywhere. To him, in fact, our ancestors dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes.

Hermes is presented here as both the patron of priests, because of his true knowledge

\(^{6}\) Struck 2004:211.

\(^{7}\) It is unclear where Iamblichus derived this name. See Clarke, Dillon and Hershbell 2003:xxxii-xxxvii, and Athanassiadi 2006:191-3 for the state of the question.
about the gods, and a leader in rational discourse, and he therefore represents for Iamblichus a syncretism of Egyptian and Hellenic identifications, known as Hermes Trismegistus. The Egyptian god Thoth (or Theuth) originated as a god of the moon very early on, from which arose his role as divine adviser to Re, the Sun God. Out of his function as a moon deity came his association with telling time and therefore religious observances and festivals. By the Ptolemaic Roman period, he was regarded as the origin of cosmic, religious, and civil institutions, and presided over, among other things, sacred rituals and texts, and the formulae and magic arts closely related to them. It was to him, given that he was a divine scribe, that the Egyptian priesthood attributed much of their sacred literature. Iamblichus, here, must be referring to the *Hermetica*, and is using this corpus in his justification of theurgy.

Though the Egyptians primarily attributed religious functions to Thoth, the Greek philosophers added philosophical associations to him as well. Iamblichus here is joining the Egyptian aspects of Hermes to the Greek philosophical tradition’s understanding of him. For example, Plato knew about Thoth’s function as scribe. In the *Phaedrus*, it is to Thoth that Socrates attributes the invention of writing, but Plato used this technology in crafting his dialogues (*Phaedrus* 274c-275b), thus recasting the religious connotations of Thoth in philosophical discourse. Plato’s Socrates, however, makes no mention of these religious connections. In Hellenistic philosophy, on the

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8 For more on Hermes Tresmegistus, see Fowden 1986:22-31.
9 Fowden 1986:22.
other hand, Hermes was seen as the interpreter of divine will for mankind. For example, Hermes played a central role in Stoic theology and metaphorically extended his influence over literal *logos* to the *logos* of the cosmos.\(^\text{11}\) Through his invocation of Hermes, Iamblichus is joining these two traditions: the religious to the philosophical, or the scientific (if Iamblichus has the Stoic demiurgic *logos* that designs the cosmos in mind).

Most importantly in this passage, however, Iamblichus defines himself as priest, connecting himself with the ἱερεύς, but not in traditional sense. He is not concerned with τὰ ἱερά, as Fritz Graf defines it (as we saw in the introduction), but rather “true knowledge of the gods (περὶ θεῶν ἀληθινῆς ἐπιστήμης). Analyzing this phrase, of course, we come across the roots for “scientific theology.” Here, Abammon claims that he is interested in the “science” of the “gods.” This science is to be “unobscured” and “true” (ἀληθινῆς), which means that Iamblichus is a priest concerned with τὰ ἀληθῆ.

Abammon then goes on to reveal the dramatic circumstances surrounding this text. Porphyry apparently had written a letter to a certain Anebo posing a variety of questions about Egyptian theology and theurgy. Though Porphyry is never mentioned by name as the text’s addressee, a number of ancient sources that discuss the letter to Anebo (as we will see below) confirm that Porphyry was its author.\(^\text{12}\) Here, Abammon directly addresses the author of the letter:

\[
Εἰ δὲ τοῦδε τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡμεῖς τὸ ἐπιβάλλον καὶ δυνατόν ἑαυτοῖς μέρος
\]

\(^{11}\) Fowden 1986:24.

\(^{12}\) See Psellus’ preface in Des Places 1996 and Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003, as well as Eusebios’ discussion of the letter at *Praeparatio Evangelica* 5.7.4; 14.9.9.
μετέχομεν, σύ τε καλῶς ποιεῖς ὃ εἰς γνῶσιν τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν, ὡς φίλοῦσα, περὶ θεολογίας προτείνον ἐρώτήματα, ἐγὼ τε εἰκότως τὴν πρὸς Ἀνεβὸ τὸν ἐμὸν μαθητὴν πεμφθεῖσαν ἐπιστολὴν ἐμαυτῷ γεγράφθαι νομίσας ἀποκρινούμαι σοι αὐτὰ τάληθε ὑπὲρ ὧν πυνθάνῃ (Myst. 1.2).

And if we receive from this god our share of favor, as much as we are capable of receiving, you do well in asking the priests questions about theology, since they love to answer them and they pertain to their expertise. And I think, assuming that the letter addressed to Anebo, my student, might equally be addressed to me, it is reasonable for me to offer a true answer to your questions.

We see here, again, Iamblicos’ epistemology as set forth in the Life. The revelations of a god, in this case Hermes, are necessary for human knowledge, and that Abammon, as an Egyptian priest, has special access to it. Abammon, on the one hand, praises Porphyry for posing his questions to a suitable authority, but also takes it upon himself to step in on behalf of his student. Porphyry had apparently written a letter to a certain Anebo, most likely in an attempt to raise questions that would undermine theurgic rites, but Iamblichus adopts the persona of Anebo’s teacher, Abammon, to answer Porphyry’s objections.

We now face a number of questions: what was this letter and who was this Anebo? Why does Iamblichus step in on his behalf under the persona of Anebo’s teacher? Porphyry’s letter is independently attested in a number of places, though most significantly in Eusebius and Augustine and has been reconstructed, along with the fragments found in the Mysteries (Praeparatio Evangelica 5.7.4; 14.9.9; Civitatis Dei 10.11).13 Scholars have also tried to determine the identity of Anebo. The general consensus is that Anebo is a fictitious name (invented either by Porphyry or Iamblichus

13 Sodano 1958.
as another pseudonym),\textsuperscript{14} though there are some who believe Anebo was real, not least of all Michael Psellos.\textsuperscript{15} Saffrey has suggested that according to Eunapios, there may have been at least one Egyptian at Iamblichus’ school in Apamea, and that this Anebo may well have been him.\textsuperscript{16} Though it fits well, Saffrey’s reading seems forced. I would like to present a different scenario. It could be that Anebo was a literary persona himself, like Abammon, presented in another theurgic text that fit into the Hermetic tradition, in which personal authorship was deemphasized in favor of inspiration from the gods.\textsuperscript{17} Clearly this Anebo must signify either a particular text or particular teaching that Porphyry had heard about, otherwise there would be no need for him to write a letter. In this scenario, Anebo is the name (whether real or pseudonymic) of an “Egyptian” (either by race or philosophical point-of-view) student, perhaps of Iamblichus, but perhaps not. When Porphyry wrote this letter against him, Iamblichus took up the debate as a higher-ranking Egyptian, coming to his student’s rescue.\textsuperscript{18} No matter what the case was with Anebo, it is certain that Iamblichus felt this letter was directed at him personally, and there are a number of instances where Abammon breaks

\textsuperscript{14} See, e.g., Sodano 1958:xxxvii and Bidez 1964:81.

\textsuperscript{15} See Psellos’ prefatory note attached to his edition of the text in Des Places (1996) edition and reprinted in Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell (2003), which seems to say (though not directly) that both the letter and Anebo were real.


\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., Fowden 1986:1-2.

\textsuperscript{18} Hopfner 1924:7; Athannasiadi 2006:160-162.
character to snidely address Porphyry.\textsuperscript{19}

The \textit{Mysteries} is therefore structured as an \ ἐρωταπόκρισις, or “question-and-answer dialogue,” between Iamblichus (through Abammon) and Porphyry regarding the place of theurgy in philosophy.\textsuperscript{20} This genre, according to Papadoyannakis, developed largely from sectarian debate over technical philosophical or religious commitments, and was used most often in late antique and Byzantine apologetic texts.\textsuperscript{21} As Papadoyannakis points out, Plotinus had used the genre in his school to write texts, as Porphyry makes clear in his \textit{Life of Plotinus}:

\begin{quote}
Τριῶν γοῦν ἡμερῶν ἐρωτήσαντος, πώς ἡ ψυχὴ σύνεστι τῷ σώματι, παρέτεινεν Ἀποδειχνόντος τοὺς καθόλου λόγους πρότετοντος καὶ εἰς βιβλία ἀκοῦσαι αὐτοῦ λέγοντος θέλειν, ὡστε καὶ Θαυμασίου τοῦ ἁγίου εἰς λόγους πράττοντος καὶ εἰς βιβλία ἀκοῦσαι τοῦ εἰς βιβλίον οὐ δυνησόμεθα” (\textit{VPlot} 13).
\end{quote}

I Porphyry spent three days asking questions about how the soul exists in a body. Plotinus kept on explaining it, which caused a certain man named Thaumasios to come in and say that he wanted to hear Plotinus set forth the universal principles with reference to texts,\textsuperscript{22} and said that he could not bear Porphyry’s \ ἐρωταπόκρισις. But Plotinus said, “If we don’t resolve Porphyry’s objections and questions, we can’t say anything definitively in the text.”

We learn here that \ ἐρωταπόκρισις was an important aspect of philosophical education in the Platonic schools. In a sense, the \ ἐρωταπόκρισις could have easily developed

\textsuperscript{19} Dillon, Clarke, and Hershbell (2003) point to many instances when Iamblichus lets his persona drop throughout the texts. See, e.g., 8.3.264, but there are many others.

\textsuperscript{20} Iamblichus’ genre is typically identified as “Problems and Solutions,” and is discussed by Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell (2003:xlvii), though they are following Saffrey (1973, 1992, and 1993). Here, I propose a slightly different model.

\textsuperscript{21} Papadoyannakis 2006:91-102.

\textsuperscript{22} For this phrase I accept Edward’s (2000) translation; I deviate for the rest of the passage.
from the Platonic dialogue itself. According to Plotinus in this passage, philosophical
texts cannot be written before going through the question-and-answer process (τὸ
βιβλίον οὐ δυνηομεθα), the very process Plato highlights in his dialogues.
Porphyry’s letter to Anebo was most likely meant to raise objections (ἐρωτωντος…τὰς
ἀπορίας, as seen in the quote from the Life of Plotinus above) designed to sink, or at
least problematize, the Egyptian’s claims (after all, we should generally be wary of a
philosopher who asks questions, for they are usually meant to be objections).
Iamblichus steps in to answer them like Plotinus had done earlier. What is interesting,
however, is that Iamblichus adopts a philosophical-priestly persona to do so.

I would argue that what we actually have here is a battle of personae.
Iamblichus’ persona, the Egyptian priest as font of theurgic and theological wisdom, is
answering the typically Greek philosophical persona of the insistent questioner, played
by Porphyry in his “objections,” which were posed as questions. Iamblichus’ ability to
answer them points to the fact that he is working within the Platonic tradition (that is,
acting in the role of the Platonic philosopher, whether it be Socrates, Plato, or Plotinus),
but in adopting his persona, shows the superiority of his Egyptian or theurgic
philosophical position. While Socrates used questions to show “experts” that they did
not know as much as they thought they did because they could not answer his questions,
Iamblichus can answer, at length, to the tune of ten books, every one of Porphyry’s
questions. Herein we begin to see the reasons behind and the philosophical significance
of Iamblichus’ choice to adopt the persona of the philosopher-priest. Iamblichus’
philosophical stance is not about asking questions, but providing answers. While Plato’s
dialogues are about the process of philosophy, that is, how to ask questions philosophically, he often provided no answers to them, as we saw in the Chariot Analogy and Diotima’s speech in the first chapter. Iamblichus’ adopts the persona in complete contradistinction to the Greek philosopher: his philosophical stance requires a new model.

In sum, the *Mysteries* is structured as a response to Porphyry’s letter, and the questions of that letter dictate the material Iamblichus’ “Abammon” covers. It is therefore possible not only to determine where the fault lines lie between these two contemporaries, and explain what it is that Iamblichus thought was unsatisfactory about Porphyry’s own philosophical outlook, but also to see exactly what was so revolutionary about Iamblichus’ theurgic proposals. Iamblichus is drawing on a number of traditions in his responses: Egyptian, Chaldean/Assyrian, and Greek. In the next section, I want to briefly outline the intellectual ethnography that makes up Abammon’s philosophical program that will at the same time highlight Iamblichus’ innovations.

2.3 An Intellectual Ethnography of the *Mysteries*

2.3.1 Barbarian Wisdom and “Ethnic” Philosophy

In his methodological statement in the *Mysteries*, Abammon proposes a tripartite division of philosophy that comprises examining questions philosophically, theologically, and theurgically. In so doing, Abammon appeals to three ethnicities that have inspired his program of scientific theology: the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Chaldeans (the three line up respectively, as we will see). We have already seen the role
that Egyptian wisdom played in the Life, and given Iamblichus’ Egyptian persona in the Mysteries, we can expect Iamblichus to give pride of place to Egypt in this text as well. Though scholars have already studied the role of Egypt in Iamblichus’ Mysteries,\(^\text{23}\) greater attention has been placed on the wisdom of the Chaldean Oracles, since, in large part, theurgic wisdom was derived from them.\(^\text{24}\) Yet while the Chaldean Oracles and the Hermetica represent an important backdrop for the De Mysteriis, as scholars have already shown, references to them are “largely general and sweeping.”\(^\text{25}\) In this section, I would like to map out the “ethnicity” of Iamblichus’ scientific theology, with special attention to which races Iamblichus credits for particular philosophical contributions, and the role each type of figure (the philosopher, the priest, the theurgist, etc.) plays in the Mysteries’ conception of philosophical enlightenment. I see barbarian wisdom (as well as the figures that espouse it) as integral to Iamblichus’ persona in the text because the negotiation among these figures contributes to Iamblichus’ choice to present his scientific theology through the persona of the philosopher-priest.

At the beginning of the Mysteries, Iamblichus’ agenda is to show the superiority of the philosopher with priestly knowledge over the philosopher without it. Abammon indicates that he will answer Porphyry’s questions using different methods, depending on which is best suited to the question. Implicit in this is the criticism that Porphyry uses only one form of discourse (namely, φίλοσοφία) to answer all questions, and that


\(^\text{24}\) For a survey of the scholarship on the Chaldean Oracles and Iamblichus, see Johnston 1997:20n5.

\(^\text{25}\) Clarke, Dillon, Hershbell 2003:xlix.
the problem with this is that human terms are inadequate to describe realities associated with the gods.\textsuperscript{26} Iamblichus’ priestly persona acts as an intermediary between gods and men, in addition to his methodological claim that there are three types of questions that require three types of answers:

\begin{quote}
Τὸ δ’ οἰκεῖον ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἀποδώσομέν σοι προσηκόντως, καὶ τὰ μὲν θεολογικά θεολογικῶς, θεουργικὸς δὲ τὰ θεουργικὰ ἀποκρινούμεθα, φιλοσόφως δὲ τὰ φιλόσοφα μετὰ οὐν συνεξετάσσομεν· καὶ τούτων μὲν ὅσα εἰς τὰ πρῶτα αἰτία διήκει κατὰ τὰς πρώτας ἀρχὰς συνακολουθοῦντες εἰς φῶς προαξομεν, ὅσα δὲ περὶ ἡθῶν ἢ περὶ τελῶν εἰσίται κατὰ τὸν ἡθικὸν τύπον διαιτήσομεν δεόντως, καὶ τάλα ὤσαύτως κατὰ τὸν οἰκεῖον τρόπον ἐν τάξει διαθησόμεθα· (Myst. 1.2.7)
\end{quote}

We will give to all of your questions the answer most appropriate to them. Theological questions will be dealt with in theological terms, theurgical questions will be dealt with in theurgical terms, but as for philosophical questions, we will join with you in dealing with them in philosophical terms. Of the last group (i.e., the philosophical), as far as they extend to the first causes, we will illuminate these by appealing to first principles. As far as they extend to the final causes, we will bring these to light through ethics, as we well should. As for everything else, we will go through them likewise, in the manner most suited to them.

As has already been well noted, Abammon’s response contains an unmistakable criticism of Porphyry because he implies that Porphyry’s ability to answer the questions he has posed is severely limited by his lack of theurgical and theological knowledge.\textsuperscript{27}

The statement also implies that Iamblichus not only has this knowledge that Porphyry does not, connecting with Iamblichus’ epistemological view that philosophy is itself inadequate to achieve enlightenment. For Iamblichus, philosophical enlightenment (that is, as we will see, transcendence to the One) can be attained only by the will of the

\textsuperscript{26} For a fuller discussion of the ineffability of the gods, see Smith 1974:83-99.

\textsuperscript{27} See, for example, Clarke, Dillon, Hershbell 2001:11n21.
gods, not through philosophical contemplation alone. Porphyry, according to Iamblichus, is limited by his exclusion of the theological truths of the Egyptians and theurgical wisdom of the Chaldeans.

From the outset, Abammon has characterized the traditional Greek style of philosophizing as inadequate for learning the truth, therefore implying the supremacy of barbarian wisdom. In proposing how he intends to answer Porphyry’s questions, Abammon says:

We will therefore truthfully (in our opinion) transmit the ancestral teachings of the Assyrians, and we will reveal our own ideas clearly to you, taking some from the innumerable writings of antiquity and others from the limited corpus (i.e., probably something like our *Hermetica*) in which the ancients collected everything they knew about the gods. But if you ask a philosophical question, we will answer you according to the ancient stelae of Hermes, which Plato before us, and Pythagoras studied carefully before establishing their philosophy, while problems from unknown sources or of a self-contradictory and contentious nature, we will solve gently and harmoniously—or we will show their absurdity.

Abammon’s intellectual ethnography, on the surface, appears to have three components: Egyptian, Chaldean/Assyrian, and Greek. Egyptian wisdom seems to be primarily based in theology (οἱ παλαιοὶ τῆν ὀλην περὶ τῶν θείων εἰδήσιν), a fact confirmed by

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28 Cremer 1969:8-10, has shown that Iamblichus uses Assyrian and Chaldean interchangeably throughout the *Mysteries*.
the Egyptian analysis of theology in Books 7-8; Greek wisdom refers to philosophy (Πλάτων ἤδη πρόοθεν καὶ Πυθαγόρας διαναγόντες φιλοσοφίαν συνεστήσαντο); and Chaldean wisdom, though not further specified here, tends to be theurgical wisdom in the *Mysteries* (6.31.176).29

Abammon’s tightly knit package, however, quickly unravels, because these categories are not as strict as the introduction makes them seem. Abammon expressly states that he is going to transmit Assyrian wisdom, but does not specify exactly what this implies. He is clear that Egyptian wisdom does refer to theology, but also claims that Greek philosophy is primarily dependant upon the stelae of Hermes, which refers to the Hermetic tradition defined at the outset of the *Mysteries*. Earlier in his text, after Abammon snidely praises Porphyry for bringing his questions to a priestly authority (pretending not to know that Porphyry intended to use those questions as refutations), he cites the example of previous philosophers, namely Pythagoras and Plato, who had also gone to Egypt to discover wisdom. Porphyry himself would not dispute Pythagoras’ or Plato’s travels to Egypt. In Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras*, as we have already seen, Pythagoras does visit Egypt and does study with the priests there, though Porphyry makes no explicit connection between that and his philosophy. Iamblichus, on the other hand, had already established in his *Life of Pythagoras* that Greek philosophical knowledge was indebted to Egyptian and barbarian wisdom, a notion revisited in his claim here that Plato and Pythagoras had consulted the Hermetic stelae,

29 Johnston 1997, 2004a, and 2004b discuss a number of passages that show similarities between Iamblichus’ theurgy in the *Mysteries* and the *Oracles*.
which seem to have been sacred tablets set up on obelisks or in the temples themselves, inscribed by Thoth himself with secret mysteries.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{2.3.2 Egypt and the Biographical Tradition of Plato}

It appears that Plato’s visit to Egypt was not an innovation of Iamblichus. Based on Iamblichus’ initial address to Porphyry, however, it is clear that Iamblichus’ belief that Egyptian theological wisdom was both a part of Platonic wisdom and necessary for answering philosophical quandaries was indeed an innovation. As we have seen above, Shaw argued that Iamblichus’ Egyptian persona was a natural outgrowth of the Platonic tradition’s belief that Plato was initiated into Egyptian mysteries. Yet there is a definite hesitance on Porphyry’s part (at least as presented in the \textit{Mysteries}) to use the Egyptian tradition in his philosophical quest. For Iamblichus, Egypt is necessary for understanding not only Plato but also theological matters in general. Iamblichus’ move is an important one: he is Egyptizing Plato in a novel way. In this section, I want to first establish when Egyptian travels were introduced into the Platonic biography and how Iamblichus was able to authorize his Egyptian persona in the Platonic tradition.

Abammon’s claim that Plato had visited Egypt to learn philosophical truths has precedent in the tradition—a biographical detail that first appeared, as far as we can tell, in the first century BC. Cicero, in the \textit{de Finibus}, mentions Plato’s travels to Egypt, specifically the fact that he studied with the priests.

Omnis auctoritas philosophiae, ut ait Theophrastus, consistit in beata vita comparanda; beate enim vivendi cupiditate incensi omnes sumus. quare hoc videndum est, possitne nobis hoc ratio philosophorum dare. Nisi enim id

\textsuperscript{30}Thompson 1932:33.
The authority philosophy has, Theophrastus says, rests entirely in living the good life. I say this because living well is a desire that burns in all of us. For this reason, we must look into this subject: “is it possible for us to assign this as the ratio of philosophy?” If it did not provide it, why did Plato travel to Egypt to hear from the barbarian priests numbers and astronomy?

In trying to define philosophy as *beata vita comparanda*, Cicero cites as his first example Plato’s travels to Egypt for the purpose of hearing the priests speak on numbers and astronomy. In this tradition, however, Plato is not consulting the Hermetic stelae on theological matters, but the priests themselves on scientific calculations. The reasons Plato visits Egypt vary within the tradition, however, because different authors (each with his own agenda) interpreted Plato’s Egyptian travels in a variety of ways. In philosophical circles, like the example from Cicero above, Plato’s travels to Egypt allow him to become a master of eastern wisdom, and could therefore work in favor of his philosophical authority. In the first century AD, Philon of Alexandria, on the other hand, treated Platonic doctrine as if it were greatly indebted to Moses,\(^31\) which points to the Hellenistic Jews’ understanding of Plato’s contact with Egypt in a different way: Plato’s instruction by Egyptian wise men emphasized his lack of originality. Christian writers followed the tradition of the Hellenistic Jews. They understood Plato’s travels to Egypt not as an attempt to learn Egyptian wisdom, but to learn the writings of Moses. The Christians did not treat Plato as unoriginal, but rather saw him as having been thoroughly educated in the *Old Testament*,\(^32\) and therefore he became a suitable

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\(^{31}\) See Riginos 1976:65n17.

\(^{32}\) See, e.g., Clement, *Strom* 1.15.68.2-3 and 1.15.69 and Riginos’ 1976:64-65.
authority for their own apologetic attempts to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christian theology.\textsuperscript{33}

Certainly by the time we come to Iamblichus, Plato was not a master of \textit{Old Testament} theology, but Egyptian theology in addition to other branches of philosophy. Iamblichus’ innovations in this tradition emphasize that the \textit{substance and majority of} (not simply some particular points here and there) Greek philosophy had Egyptian origins. He made this point in the \textit{Life} where Thales directly admits his reliance upon Egyptian priests for his knowledge (both scientific and theological) and also when Pythagoras goes to Egypt, where he learned and developed the teachings that would be found later in own philosophical school. In the introduction to the \textit{Mysteries}, Abammon makes exactly the same claim: that Porphyry is right to bring theological questions to the Egyptian priests, because Plato and Pythagoras before him had done the same. In addition, Abammon says in his methodology for the tripartite division of philosophy, that if Porphyry has posed a specifically “philosophical” question, an answer will be derived in consultation with the stelae of Hermes, the very derivation of Plato and Pythagoras’ philosophy. Iamblichus’ claim is essentially that Greek philosophy comes from Egypt; his threefold ethnographic categories then shrink to two: Egypt and Chaldea.

For Iamblichus, philosophy must therefore be pursued only in consultation with the sacred texts of Egypt and interpreted through its theology. What we will find,

\textsuperscript{33} See, e.g., Justin Martyr, \textit{Cohort. ad gent.} 14.15B-C and Riginos’ 1976:.65n18.
therefore, are interpretations and expansions of Platonic philosophy through Egyptian discourse. This claim that has possible precedent in Plato himself, particularly in the *Timaeus*, a text that we know (from the *Anonymous Prolegomena* as well as surviving fragments from commentaries on this text) Iamblichus wrestled with more systematically; exactly how Iamblichus understood the role of the *Timaeus* will be the subject of the second part of this chapter. The dramatic setting of the dialogue is the day after Socrates and four other interlocutors (Hermocrates, Critias, Timaeus, and a certain fourth who did not return) had discussed the Republic (though not our Republic, since books 5-7 appear to be missing from the recap of the previous day’s discussion at *Tim.* 17d-19b). The discussion in the *Timaeus* attempts to examine the ideal city in practice (i.e., the physical realization of Kallipolis). Critias’ speech contains a story told to him by his grandfather which details Solon’s visit to the Egyptian priests. Though Critias’ story is meant to show ancient Athenian society (as well as the Egyptian society modeled on it) as an historical example of Socrates’ ideal state (*Tim.* 24a-d), Critias does present some general reflections on the nature of Egyptian wisdom. Upon Solon’s arrival in Egypt, he discovered that the Greeks are a young race when compared to Egypt, a point made by one of the elder priests:

‘Σόλων, Σόλων, Ἐλληνες ἡ τι παιδές ἐστε, γέρων δὲ Ἐλλην οὐκ ἐστιν.’ Ἀκούσας οὖν, ‘Πός τί τούτο λέγεις;’ φάναι. ‘Νέοι ἐστέ,’ εἰπεῖν, ‘τὰς ψυχὰς πάντες: οὐδεμίαν γὰρ ἐν αὐτάς ἔχετε δι’ ἀρχαίαν ἀκοὴν παλαιὰν δοξᾶν οὐδὲ μάθημα χρόνῳ πολὺν οὐδὲν. (22b)

‘Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children, there’s not a single old man in Greece.’ When he heard this, he said, ‘What do you mean by that?’ He replied, ‘You’re young, all of you, young in your souls. You have no ancient beliefs

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34 Clay 1997:49.
Critias then goes on to discuss Egyptian record-keeping on all the natural disasters that had afflicted the earth to date: floods, fires, and plagues. In the *Timaeus*, however, though attention is drawn to the special wisdom of the Egyptian priests, that wisdom is largely historical: they keep records about natural disasters and have knowledge about a wide-scale struggle between a technologically advanced Atlantis and prehistoric Athens. Nowhere does Critias mention anything about religious wisdom or theology. In fact, one might argue that Plato specifically draws a distinction between the historical wisdom of the Egyptians and the philosophical account of the creation of the cosmos *Timaeus* will later give, as I will show below. Iamblichus’ project restores the philosophical authority to the Egyptians Plato neglected in the *Timaeus*. While it may be difficult to show how Iamblichus read Critias’ Egyptian tale (there is little mention of it in the extant fragments of his commentaries on the *Timaeus*), we can argue for Iamblichus’ rehabilitation of Egyptian and barbarian supremacy absent from Plato’s account. We will turn to this in section 2.3.4 after a brief discussion of Plotinian metaphysics.

While Plato’s travels to Egypt were a prevalent part of his biographical tradition in Roman times, Iamblichus’ innovation was to posit the supremacy of barbarian priestly wisdom over Greek philosophy, something Porphyry was not willing to concede (as many of his questions to Anebo suggest). Abammon argues that proper understanding of Platonic philosophy *requires* reference to the Egyptian wisdom that
provoked it in the first place, a project most suited to the philosopher-priest. I now want to turn to exactly what this implies.

2.3.3 Egyptian Wisdom and Plotinian Metaphysics

At the center of the debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry is not only the place of Egyptian wisdom in the Platonic tradition, but also the role that wisdom plays in the interpretation of Platonic philosophy. In order to fully understand this debate, the discussion requires a brief foray into Neoplatonic metaphysics (and by this I mean specifically Plotinian metaphysics) because Iamblichus’ insistence on Egypt’s supremacy is directly related to his disagreements with Plotinus and Porphyry on soteriology, epistemology, and philosophical fulfillment.35 Plotinus’ interpretation of Platonic metaphysics is related to Plato’s description of the Good. In Republic 6, directly after the passage we discussed in the first chapter about the Good’s role in illuminating the ideas for the Soul to know, Socrates discusses the Good (though he does not define it, despite Glaucon’s request):

Καὶ τοῖς γιγνωσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γιγνώσκεσθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἄγαθοῦ παρείναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ’ ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἄγαθοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας προσβεία καὶ δυνάμει ὑπεφέχοντος. (509b)

Say then that not only being known is present in the things known because of the Good, but also existence and being in them is also because of the Good, although the Good is not being, but is beyond being, exceeding it in age and power.

35 Wallis (1972:94-137) argues that the debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus centers on their interpretation of the Soul’s reunion with the One. Struck (2004:209-210) also locates the debate here.
The idea that there is something that exists beyond being, both in the sense of age and potency gave rise to Plotinus’ hypostatic divisions: the One, the Intellect, and Soul. In laying out the order of the three hypostases, Plotinus quotes this passage:

Τοῦ αἰτίου δὲ νοῦ ὕποτερα φησὶ τάγαθυν καὶ τὸ ἐπέκεινα νοῦ καὶ ἐπέκεινα ὦσίας. Πολλαχοῦ δὲ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸν νοῦν τὴν ἴδεαν λέγει ὦσιε ὦστε Πλάτωνα εἶδέναι ἐκ μὲν τάγαθυν τοὺς νοούς, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ νοοῦ τὴν ὑπαγόμεν. (Ennead 5.1.8)

The author of cause, the author of Nous, he [Plato] says, is the Good and that which is beyond Nous and beyond being. Often he uses the term “Idea” to mean being and Nous. Thus, Plato knows that from the Good comes Nous and from Nous comes Soul.

In Plotinus’ metaphysical system, the One is beyond being, that is, prior to being, and therefore the cause of being (c.f., Ennead 5.2.1; 5.4.1). According to Plotinus, the two hypostases, Intellect and Soul, come into existence because of the One’s diffusive nature. The One, though simple, is entirely infinite and free of any limitation (Ennead 5.5.11). As such, it cannot be characterized in linguistic terms. Plotinus, therefore, uses a number of metaphors to describe the One’s absolutely transcendent nature. In Ennead 3.8.10, for example, the One is likened to a river that overflows into its various tributaries and streams without itself being diminished. Intellect emerges from the One, constitutes all the elements of the intelligible world, contains the Platonic Ideas, and therefore is an aggregate of everything that exists in the cosmos (Enneads 1.8.2 and 6.2.22). Intellect’s hypostatic separation from the One began at the very moment it became a plurality (Ennead 3.8.8). Plotinus’ Soul is a natural outgrowth of Intellect’s

36 See Armstrong 1940 and 1970, part III; and Torchia 1993. It is from these works that most of the analysis that follows derives.
activities, and is closely related to it, though the Soul’s ontological status in Plotinus’ metaphysics is a particularly thorny question given the inconsistencies in the Enneads themselves.\(^{37}\) Soul seems to serve two purposes, and stands between Intellect and the sensible world, both joining with Intellect in contemplation of the One (Ennead 2.3) and in creating the individual souls that make up the universe (i.e., the souls of men, dogs, plants, etc.). The individual soul is in a sense ‘undescended,’ and the connection between the divine One and the sensible world is already apparent in human beings (Ennead 4.9). This doctrine we will turn to again below.

According to Plotinus, human beings want nothing more than to be reunited with the One and this is best achieved through contemplation; in fact, contemplation is the activity that ties Plotinus’ entire metaphysical system together. The One contemplates itself, Intellect and Soul join to contemplate the One, individual souls contemplate the Cosmic Soul, and so on down the ontological chain (Ennead 3.8). Just as being overflows from the One to create the different hypostases, there is a strong desire for the lower levels to aspire to what is higher. As Struck put it, “all Neoplatonists pair the downward procession out from the One with an equally strong upward current.”\(^{38}\) Human beings (and everything else in the cosmos, including a dandelion or an insect), therefore, aspire to transcend to the One (and in so doing desire also to forsake their individuality); for Plotinus (and Porphyry), this transcendence is achieved through contemplation, since Plotinus adopted an Aristotelian philosophy of


\(^{38}\) Struck 2004:209.
mind (i.e., that the distinguishing characteristic of man is his ability to contemplate “form” apart from “matter;” in thinking about a tree, man can mentally abstract “treeness” from any individual or material instantiation of it): “thinking” implies that the thinker can psychically become the thought (Ennead 3.8).

Turning to the debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry, the disagreement is not based on metaphysics. Both Iamblichus and Porphyry have Plotinian metaphysical and ontological commitments (though Iamblichus has many more intermediary emanations, Myst. 1.5.14). The tension between the two is related to how one comes to union with the divine One. For Porphyry it is strict contemplation, or as Abammon’s criticism of Porphyry’s limited approach suggests, philosophy (along the lines of Plotinus); Iamblichus is, as we have already seen, far less confident in human reason and insists on divine inspiration. The Mysteries is concerned with how we can coax this divine aid—and it can be done specifically by appealing to Chaldean and Egyptian wisdom, not by recourse to Greek philosophy. There is a central paradox that Iamblichus has in mind here (and is posed by Porphyry to Anebo): how can the human soul, imprisoned in a body that communicates through language ever have contact with the Neoplatonic One, which is described as a self-contemplator and therefore has no contact with derivative beings except through its own diffusiveness (Myst. 6.7.248-89)? Plotinus and Porphyry, like Plato’s Chariot Analogy above, see this is an uphill battle (though

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39 Note the verbal echoes between Iamblichus and Plotinus: Ἐστι δὴ οὖν τὰ γαθῶν τὸ τε ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τὸ κατ’ οὖσιαν ὑπάρχον· ἐκείνην λέγω τὴν οὐσίαν τὴν πρεσβυτάτην καὶ τιμωτάτην καὶ καθ’ αὐτήν οὗσιν Ἀσώματον, θεῶν ἱδίωμα ἔξωρτον καὶ κατὰ πάντα τὰ γένη τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ ὄντα, τηροῦν μὲν αὐτῶν τὴν οἰκείαν διανομὴν καὶ τὰξιν καὶ οὐχ ἀποσπώμενον ταύτης, τὸ αὐτὸ δ’ ὃμως ἐν ὅλοις ὡσαύτως ὑπάρχον.
possible to attain, as seen in Porphyry’s claim in the *Life of Plotinus* that the master Plotinus has transcended to the One four times in the five or six years he knew him.

Iamblichus presents an alternative scenario. At the beginning of Book 7 of the *Mysteries*, Abammon deals specifically with this problem and claims that it can be resolved by appealing to Egyptian theology:

Τῆς δ’ αὐτῆς θεοσόφου Μούσης κάσεϊνα δείται εἰς τὴν διάλυσιν τὰ ἀπορήματα: πρότερον δὲ σοι βούλομαι τῶν Αἰγυπτίων τὸν τρόπον τῆς θεολογίας διερμηνεύσαι: οὔτοι γὰρ τὴν φύσιν τοῦ παντὸς καὶ τὴν δημιουργίαν τῶν θεῶν μιμούμενοι καὶ αὐτοὶ τῶν μυστικῶν καὶ ἄποκρυφώμενοι καὶ ἁφανῶν νοήσεων εἰκόνας τινὰς διὰ συμβόλων ἐκφάνουσιν... Εἰδότες οὖν χαίροντα πάντα τὰ κρείττονα ὁμοιώσει τῶν ὑποδεεστέρων καὶ βουλόμενοι αὐτὰ ἀγαθάν ὀὕτω πληροῦν διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν μιμήσεως, εἰκότως καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸν πρόσφορον αὐτῆς τρόπον τῆς κεκρυμμένης ἐν τοῖς συμβόλοις μυσταγωγίας προφέρουσιν.

Resolving these problems requires the same theosophical Muse. But first, I would like to explain to you the mode of theology practiced by the Egyptians. These people in imitation of the nature of the universe and the demiurgic power of the gods display certain signs of mystical, arcane, and invisible intellections through symbols…and they know that all superior beings rejoice when their inferiors attempt to imitate them, and therefore wish to bestow good things upon them (as much as is possible through imitation). It is reasonable that the Egyptians should also offer a mode of concealment appropriate to the doctrine of concealment in symbols.

Abammon introduces here Egyptian use of the symbol, which is integral for coming to knowledge. Peter Struck has argued that for Iamblichus, the symbol is a central link between the divine and human realms because the demiurgic emanations of the god, in imitation of a more perfect reality, have put symbolic traces of the One in nature. These traces can be harnessed in ritual acts and can do the impossible: bring form to formless things and bring speech to unspeakable things. Through these traces, the gods have given us the linguistic means to communicate with them, which is necessary given the
ineffable nature of the One. Struck, however, does not point to an even more integral (if not simpler) part of Abammon’s argument. If we look at the logic of the argument, we really come to knowledge by the will of the gods. The gods are pleased when they see the Egyptian priests employing the same symbolic language that they did in creating the universe and, as a result, “bestow good things upon them.” Herein we see the crucial difference between Iamblichus and Porphyry: knowledge is possible with divine aid. Abammon becomes an important intermediary between Iamblichus and Porphyry; however, this symbolic language must be guarded from misuse (the gods might become angry or a novice might call up a malicious daemon, as in Myst. 3.28-9), and so the Egyptians have concealed the doctrine in the same way as the gods have left their traces in the universe.

The epistemological debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry, therefore, rests on their linguistic commitments. Language for Abammon is not an agreed set of representational noises that somehow represents a link between the sounds of words and the nature of the things that the words refer to, a notion that Plato played with in the Cratylus (which is Porphyry’s position, at least according to Iamblichus’ characterization of it in Myst. 7), but language has been handed down to the Egyptians by the gods themselves, and, as a result, has the ability to unite men with the gods intellectually. Struck’s analysis of the symbolic nature of barbarian words shows that the gods communicate with man through traces and symbols, and therefore must not be

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40 Struck 2004:213-226, which has influenced the reading that follows.

41 There are many studies of language in Plato’s Cratylus; see, e.g., Ackrill 1994; Annas 1982; Barney 2001; Sedley 2003; and Silverman 2001.
translated.\textsuperscript{42} Language for Iamblichus, as Struck shows, bears no “naturalistic” mark;\textsuperscript{43} rather, the barbarian words are the mind of the gods and can help mankind achieve union with them—even if one does not understand what they mean (\textit{Myst.} 7.4.256).

Abammon’s disagreement with the Greek philosophical tradition lies in translating “barbarian words,” a topic of central debate in antiquity. Abammon’s position about Egyptian symbols has an analogue, for example, in Origen’s treatment of Hebrew. For Origen, Hebrew represented a sacred language that contained the secrets of the cosmos set forth by its Creator (\textit{Contra Celsum} 1.24).\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, the \textit{Chaldean Oracles} are clear about the use of barbarian names; they simply say: “Do not translate them” (\textit{CO} 150).\textsuperscript{45} This, again, points to Iamblichus’ belief in the limitations of human rationality and criticizes Porphyry’s doctrine of the ‘undescended’ soul (that the human soul is still intimately connected to the Cosmic Soul, Plotinus’ third hypostasis) because it implied that contemplation is enough for transcending to the One. For Iamblichus, it is actually the philosopher’s insistence on contemplation that has detracted from Porphyry’s ability to reach the truth. In a passage that bemoans the Socratic model of searching for wisdom, Iamblichus chastises Porphyry (specifically) and the Platonic tradition (more generally):

\begin{quote}
Σχεδὸν γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο αἰτίων νυνὶ γέγονε τοῦ πάντα ἔξυπνα καθεστηκέναι καὶ τὰ ὄνοματα καὶ τὰ τῶν εὐχῶν, διότι μεταβαλλόμενα
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Struck 2004:218-223.

\textsuperscript{43} Struck 2004:225.

\textsuperscript{44} Shaw 1995:181.

This what I mean when I say that everything now no longer has power: both names and prayers, because they are always being changed through the Greeks’ penchant for novelty and acting against theological norms, and they will never stop! They will never stop because it’s in their nature to experiment, and so are eagerly pulled in every direction. They leave nothing alone! None of what they receive from anyone else do they keep unchanged. In fact, as soon as they get it they abandon it and shape it anew (μεταπλάττουσιν) because they are always discovering new ways of saying things, and they keep nothing fixed (πάντα κατὰ τὴν ἀστάτον εὑρεσιλογίαν). But the barbarians, they are fixed in their customs and remain constant in the way they say things. It is for this reason that they are beloved by the gods and proffer the words that please them.

This passage is important because Iamblichus sharply breaks with the Platonic and Hellenic tradition. Though Athanassiadi believes that Iamblichus is here aiming specifically at Porphyry,46 he may be making a more general point about Platonic philosophy, and more specifically the Socratic method of asking questions and delving deeply into philosophical problems through elenchos. Socrates was noted for questioning common definitions of words (i.e., courage, piety, moderation, justice, etc.), and examining what words mean became a prominent part of Platonic discourse (as we find with the etymologizing of the names of gods in the Stoic tradition, which later merged with the Platonic tradition). There may even be a subtle jab at the Platonic tradition in Abammon’s pun on Plato’s name (in μεταπλάττουσιν) at the exact moment when he is complaining about Greek philosophers’ changing of traditional ideas.

Abammon’s main criticism here is that the Greeks change (or possibly even “Platonize,” depending on how far we are willing to take Abammon’s pun) divine names and symbols (and therefore miss the demiurgic traces left behind in the universe by the gods) because they argue about what words mean. In doing so, they move away from the symbolic power the words have, and as a result have upset the gods and have difficulty attaining knowledge.

Iamblichus’ appeal to Egyptian priestly wisdom is therefore aimed at the Platonic tradition, particularly in his claim that scientific discovery and philosophical contemplation of the demiurgic structure of this world is simply beyond the reach of human reason. For Iamblichus, when the philosopher studies ‘science,’ (natural disasters, plants, weather, the motions of the planets), what he should be looking for are the divine traces left in those natural objects by the gods. Science therefore aims at theology. Combination of science and theology yields Iamblichus’ project (‘scientific theology’), which is a response to the strong “upward current” felt in Plotinus’ metaphysics in that the objects of this world are designed to direct the philosopher’s gaze toward the gods. But the philosopher is successful in his pursuit of scientific theology only if he appeals to the symbols with which the gods have encoded the universe. This activity pleases the gods, and they reward the scientific theologian for his efforts with philosophical knowledge.

Abammon’s claim that original words must be kept in the philosopher’s philosophical search requires a revaluation of the Platonic tradition; and this is exactly the project of the Mysteries: to reexamine philosophical questions in terms of scientific
theology. Yet one of the reasons the gods aid the priests on their search is because the priests imitate their demiurgic power. In the following section, I want to explore the idea that the priests act like demiurges in decoding the divine symbols and traces. We will therefore turn our attention to the role of Plato’s *Timaeus* in Iamblichus’ *Mysteries*, since it is in this Platonic dialogue that the demiurge was introduced to the Platonic tradition. How Iamblichus adapts the demiurgic figure is central to understanding the metaphysical commitments of his theurgy. It is to this that we will turn in the next section.

**2.3.4 Chaldea, Theurgy, and the Metaphysics of the *Timaeus***

As we have already seen, Abammon advocates the integration of philosophical with theological and theurgical elements, which become the aggregate scientific theology. In the preceding section, I have tried to show that for Abammon, philosophy and theology are two sides of the same coin, both are encoded versions of the divine wisdom built into the universe by the gods. In this section, I want to look at the place of the wisdom derived from the Chaldeans: theurgy. As Abammon says, “theurgy…is performed by men and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but it controls divine symbols, and in virtue of them is raised up to union with higher powers…which enables us to assume the mantle of the gods” (*Myst.* 4.2.184). Theurgy is the key to ultimate philosophical enlightenment, and is the ritual activity that men can perform to properly achieve scientific and theological wisdom. The true philosopher is, therefore, one who
performs all three activities. As we will see, this is the reason for Iamblichus’ persona; Abammon is the physical instantiation of Iamblichus’ philosophical program.

The issue of central concern here, however, is whether a Platonist would be willing to accept that the objects of this world contain symbolic traces of the Neoplatonic One left by the demiurge and that they could be accessed through ritualistic, not contemplative activity. To mediate between these two seemingly contradictory positions (the fusion of ritual with philosophical study), Iamblichus relies mostly on the Timaeus, one of the Platonic dialogues (in addition to the Parmenides) that Iamblichus considered to be integral to Platonic physics and metaphysics. As Iamblichus said in one surviving fragment from the introduction to his commentary on the Timaeus, “the whole philosophic treatment of things in the cosmos and above the cosmos has its best culmination in [the Timaeus and Parmenides], and no level (or system) of beings has been left uninvestigated” (In Tim. fr. 1 Dillon).

In this section, I will consider the Timaeus especially because it is from this dialogue that the demiurgic language referred to above derives, and it is to this text that Iamblichus appeals most in elucidating his fusion of philosophy with theurgy. While scholars have demonstrated that Neoplatonists (including Iamblichus) often drew upon Plato’s Timaeus to articulate the process by which “that which is beyond all forms and shapes manifests itself in the forms and shapes that we see around us,”47 there has yet to be satisfactory analysis on Iamblichus’ fusion of the Timaeus with theurgy. This fusion,

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47 Struck 2004:221.
I believe, is crucial for illuminating why Iamblichus adopted a philosophical-priestly persona in the *Mysteries*.

Methodologically speaking, in this section I will be less concerned with drawing specific parallels between the *Oracles* and the *Mysteries* because significant work has already been done on this topic; rather, I want to look at theurgy as Iamblichus’ response to Porphyry’s understanding of Platonic metaphysical claims and its role in transcending the One, the answer to which is key for understanding both Iamblichus’ “scientific theology” and his persona. I will argue that the metaphysics of Plato’s *Timaeus* informed Iamblichus’ formulation of scientific theology according to Chaldean wisdom in the *Mysteries*; in short, he is linking the Chaldean with the Platonic.

I begin my analysis with a question that lies beneath Iamblichus’ epistemological position I have presented above: why does Iamblichus reject contemplation as the primary means for attaining philosophical wisdom, and why does he replace ascent through contemplation with ascent through divine intervention? As we have seen, he advocates the invocation of the gods for attaining wisdom and highlights the importance of discovering their symbolic traces in one’s scientific study of the cosmos. My initial thesis was that it derives from Plato’s own ambivalent views human attainment of knowledge, particularly knowledge of the Good. I would like, at this point, to deepen this thesis by asking a question that presupposes Iamblichus’ epistemological position: why should Iamblichus appeal to the divine *at all*? I see this as a primarily metaphysical problem, and I want to determine what it was about Platonic metaphysics that left Iamblichus feeling so alienated in the physical world that
he needed to search for traces of his divine ancestry in the inner-workings of the cosmos. We have already seen that in the Platonic tradition, the Good was understood as a metaphysical entity starting with Plato who, as we have seen, called it “beyond being,” through Plotinus who transformed Plato’s Idea of the Good into the “One,” and Iamblichus who, in adopting Plotinian metaphysics, equated the Good with the gods. It seems to me that an answer to Iamblichus’ discomfort with Platonic alienation can be found in the sections of the *Mysteries* that deal with theurgic and Chaldean wisdom particularly. Given the predominance of demiurgic imagery in the *Mysteries*, we will first examine the role of the demiurge and the cosmos he is responsible for in the *Timaeus*. I will then draw textual (both verbal and philosophical) parallels between these two texts.

Plato’s *Timaeus* was written, it seems, to answer for the objects of sensible experience, dealing with the metaphysical question “why is there cosmos rather than chaos,” or put differently, why are there sensible objects rather than the Ideas alone? This theme is brought to the fore almost immediately in the dialogue, when Socrates asks specifically for examples of physical instantiations of Kallipolis, that is, *practical* or *historical* examples of the ideal. Socrates likens his desire to see the ideal city in action to the unsatisfactory feeling of looking at a painting that depicts animals standing still because the viewer “finds himself longing to look at them in motion or in conflict with one another” (*Tim. 19b-d*).\(^48\) Philosophical longing, as we have seen in the first

\(^{48}\) προσέπηκεν δὲ δὴ τινὶ μοι τοιῷδε τὸ πάθος, ὡς ὄντι ὡς καλὰ ποὺ θεασάμενος, εἰτε υπὸ γραφῆς εἰργασμένα εἰτε καὶ ζώντα ἀληθινῶς ἠσθίαν δὲ ἄγοντα, εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ἄφικοιτο θεάσασθαι κινούμενά τε αὐτά καὶ τι τῶν τοῖς σώμασιν δοκούντων προσήκειν κατὰ τὴν ἄγωνίαν ἄθλούντα.
chapter, means that there is something missing; what seems to be missing for Socrates (and possibly Plato as well) is an account of the sensible world, particularly with regard to investing it with metaphysical value. To put it crudely, Socrates wants to see animals, humans, or cities doing things, for which, Socrates says, a sufficient account has yet to be given. Timaeus’ account seeks to combat Socrates’ feelings of alienation from the physical world and longing to see individuals acting. In fact, as we have seen above, Critias’ Egyptian tale about prehistoric Athens’ struggle with Atlantis seeks to do just this, though it paves the way for Timaeus’ later speech about physical instantiations of the Ideas. Even Iamblichus knew that the dialogue’s introduction related to the metaphysical themes to be explained later. As he said in his commentary on Critias’ tale, “we should raise this conflict from the human level and extend its significance throughout the whole cosmos” (In. Tim. fr. 7 Dillon).

While Socrates seems to have been left unsatisfied by his recounting of the Republic at the beginning of the Timaeus, one might also argue that the Timaeus exists because of Plato’s dissatisfaction with never having accounted for the objects of this world in general, though this would be nearly impossible to prove. What we can say, however, is that the Timaeus does attempt to make the objects of this world instantiations of the Good and may be attempting to recover the metaphysical reality of the sensible realm. In the Republic, for example, the predominant metaphor is that the objects of this world are shadows and their metaphysical reality is derived from principles that are purely exterior to them. The Timaeus tells an alternate story. In his speech, Timaeus
provides metaphysical grounding to the objects of this world, and it is through this account that Iamblichus found Platonic precedent for his own reliance on divine traces. To summarize Timaeus’ speech briefly, Timaeus gives a cosmological account in which Timaeus posits three ontological objects that came together to create the world: the Demiurge, Chaos, and the Ideas. The Demiurge, because he was “good and free of jealousy” (ἀγαθὸς ἦν, ἀγαθῷ δὲ οὐδείς περὶ οὐδενὸς οὐδέποτε ἐγγίγνεται φθόνος) and wanted everything in the universe to be good and orderly (βούλησθε γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθὰ μὲν πάντα), took chaos and brought it to order in accordance with the Ideas (τὰξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας, 29e-30d). The objects of this world are physical realizations of the Good and therefore have real value. According to this account, the cosmos is a living and intelligent being that actively knows and loves the Ideas.

Timaeus’ emphasis on the Good endeavors to show that ‘whatever is’ is the way it is because it is best that it be that way. In this sense, Plato’s Timaeus does exactly what Socrates says (in Phaedo 97b-98d) Anaxagoras did not do. The ultimate reason for saying one thing is better than another is the extent to which it can promote the return of the intellect (which is itself immersed in the materiality of the world of becoming) to contemplation of the Ideas. Within the ‘becomingness’ of becoming lies an invitation for the mind to return its gaze to the Ideas (46c-47e).

Iamblichus’ account of theurgic practice and wisdom, as I will show, is authorized by the Timaeus. As we began this section, Abammon defined theurgy: “theurgy…is performed by men and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but it controls divine symbols, and in virtue of them is raised up to union with higher
powers…which enables us to assume the mantle of the gods” (Myst. 4.2.184). For Porphyry and Plotinus, since both had a doctrine of the undescended soul (as mentioned above), the human soul was by nature connected to the Cosmic Soul, and theurgy was not a necessary part of philosophy; one can contemplate his true essence (that is, what he is) and arrive at transcendence. Iamblichus, on the other hand, adopts the demiurgic model from the Timaeus and true knowledge comes from locating the symbols of this demiurgic activity through cult.\footnote{Iamblichus outright rejects the ‘undescended’ soul of Porphyry and Plotinus; see Myst. 1.5.15: \( \Psi ρυχαίς δὲ ταῖς ἀρχούσαις τῶν σωμάτων καὶ προηγουμέναις αὐτῶν τῆς ἐπιμελείας καὶ πρὸ τῆς γενέσεως τεταγμέναις ἁμισίος καθ’ ἑαυτὰς οὐσία μὲν τὸν ἀγαθὸν οὐκέτι πάρεστιν, οὐδ’ ἐαυτὴ τοῦ ἁγαθοῦ προτέρα οὐσία καὶ τῆς οὐσίας, ἐποχὴ δὲ τὶς ἀτ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔξεις παραγίγνεται.} Herein we find Iamblichus’ “scientific theology:” to understand the science of how the world works is to find the demiurgic code that informs it. Just as in Plato, the ‘becomingness of becoming’ directed the mind toward the idea, for Iamblichus, the divine traces built into the fabric of the cosmos can be theurgically harnessed to lead the soul upward to ineffable union with the divine.\footnote{This is the thesis of Plato’s ‘way of reason’ as well} In the section that follows, I want to examine more specifically how the Timaeus informs the theurgy of the Mysteries and ultimately how the fusion informs Iamblichus’ persona.

2.3.5 The Mysteries and the Timaeus: The Theurgist as Demiurge

To best illustrate why Iamblichus proposes a theurgic approach to philosophy, I will examine one particular example of how Abammon addresses Porphyry’s objections.

Toward the end of the first book of the Mysteries, Abammon takes up one of Porphyry’s
questions about the impassability and passability of the gods (i.e., can the gods be affected by human beings?), a question that relates to the ultimate self-contemplating simplex, the One. Porphyry’s objection points to the fact that if the One is simple and its interaction with the derivative realm is primarily diffusive, it should not be influenced by cultic practices. Iamblichus must address Porphyry’s objection because it involves a contradiction in Plotinian metaphysics: the One cannot have its mind changed; ritual or sacrifice would imply that the One (or the ineffable gods) could be persuaded to extend ascent to mankind. Yet, as we have seen before in the Life of Pythagoras, Iamblichus does not conceive of sacrifice this way; just as Pythagoras had created a system of bloodless sacrifice through number, Iamblichus likewise suggests that theurgy is not aimed at convincing the gods to do anything. As Abammon says, the demiurge has left traces and symbols that connect men ineffably with the gods:

Was this very (cult) not established at the beginning intellectually according to the laws of the gods? It imitates the order of the gods, both the intelligible and in heaven. It possesses the eternal model of being and wondrous tokens, such as have been sent down here from the Demiurge and the father of all, through which unspeakable truths are spoken through secret symbols, beings beyond the Ideas are brought under the control of the Ideas, things superior to image reproduced through image, and all things brought to completion by a single divine cause, which itself so far transcends passion that reason is incapable of grasping it.

In reading this passage, Struck has shown that the picture of “a paternal Nous that sends
down wonderful traces into the mundane world recapitulates the *Chaldean Oracles,* particularly in the idea that the divine father has sprinkled secret symbols throughout the universe. The theurgist saw himself as gathering these traces (in the form of plants, herbs, stones, etc.) for his theurgic ascent through the Platonic hierarchy (*Myst.* 5.23.233-4). Struck sees these symbols as talismanic because they have real power in linking the divine and human realms in one’s philosophical quest because they can do the *impossible.*

It seems to me, however, that Iamblichus is claiming that the Demiurge created theurgy (and the cult associated with it) in the same way as Plato describes him creating the universe, and therefore the parallels to the *Timaeus* should be highlighted. The description of the cult bears a number of striking verbal resonances to the Demiurge’s attempt to bring value to individuals in creating the cosmos. As we have already seen, the Demiurge begins with two ontological primitives: the Ideas and Chaos, and then shapes material Chaos in the image of the Ideas. The *Timaeus* suggests that the physical objects of the world of becoming are *material copies of* the Ideas and *instatations of* ethical Ideas such as the Good, the Just, the Beautiful, etc. To take a perhaps crude, but necessary example (given Socrates’ request at the beginning of the *Timaeus*), because of the *Timaeus,* the individual man is *metaphysically* justified to love his *particular* dog,

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52 See Johnston (2008b)

53 Struck 2004:216

54 In discussing a later passage, however, Struck (2004:221-2) does deal with the *Timaeus* in distinguishing between the kinds of symbols in Iamblichus’ system.
who is an individual, who came to be two years past and will pass away at some point in the future, who wags his tail, and so on. The dog’s value lies in the fact that it can redirect his viewer’s mind back to the intelligible doghood, an Idea intimately connected to the Good, or the Just, or the Beautiful. The Demiurge has created individuals through which human beings can have contact with what is really real. In terms of what Abammon claims here, both theurgic cult and the symbolic traces of the divine (which are necessary for the performance of the ritual) were created by the Demiurge as a means to attain higher truths and ultimately, as we have seen before, “to assume the mantle of the gods.” It is the philosopher-priest that imitates the Demiurge on earth, engages in Demiurgic activity, and harnesses the power of those symbols to initiate ascent toward the gods.

The verbal parallels between the Timaeus and the description of theurgy are striking and show that Iamblichus brought Chaldean wisdom and ritual to his understanding of Plato. Abammon states that theurgic cult imitates the order of the divine and intelligible realm (μιμεῖται δὲ τὴν τῶν θεῶν τάξιν, τὴν τε νοητὴν καὶ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ), and is therefore a vehicle for ascent and ultimate transcendance. In the Timaeus, the elements of the universe are said to imitate more perfect realities. For example, time is said to imitate number and circles according to number (χρόνου ταῦτα αἰῶνα μιμουμένου καὶ κατ’ ἁρμόδιον κυκλουμένου γέγονεν εἴδη, 38a), the contemplation of which can noetically unite men with the designer and the objects of intellection (that is, the Ideas) that were the his model. For Iamblichus, however, mere contemplation and realization of the fact that the time imitates numbers and circles is
not enough. Calling the universe the arrangement of the gods is also a line taken directly from the *Timaeus*, where the demiurge is said to bring order to chaos (εἰς τὰ ἔξω ἠγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας. 30a), a point with which Abammon credits theurgic symbols for being able to bring that which was not in control of the Ideas under their control (τὰ δὲ ἀνειδέα ὄρατεται ἐν εἴδει). As Iamblichus says, theurgic symbols can bring form to formless things and bring speech to unspeakable things (καὶ τὰ μὲν ἀφθεγκτα διὰ συμβόλων ἀποφημῶν ἐκφωνεῖται), just as Plato’s Demiurge can bring order to disorder. In describing the cult, Abammon also says that it possesses the eternal model of being (μέτρα τῶν ὑπόν ἀίδια), which is just the model on which the Demiurge created the best of all possible universes (εἰ μὲν δὴ καλός ἐστιν ὁ κόσμος ὁτὲ δημιουργὸς ἀγαθός, δῆλον ὡς πρὸς τὸ ἀίδιον ἐβλεπεν· εἰ δὲ ὦ μηδ’ εἰπεὶν τινι θέμισ, πρὸς γεγονός. παντὶ δὴ σαφὲς ὅτι πρὸς τὸ ἀίδιον· ὦ μὲν γὰρ κάλλιστος τῶν γεγονότων, ὦ δ’ ἄριστος τῶν αἰτίων, 29α). Iamblichus uses Chaldean wisdom to take Plato to the next level: theurgy can bring about ascent, not just the intellectual realization that there is an eternal truth behind the objects one observes. Iamblichus’ philosopher-priest represents the kind of figure necessary for bringing about philosophical wisdom; he understands that the scientific observations of the universe should be understood in terms of the gods, and the power of the symbols in the universe can be used to bring about transcendence.

For Abammon, theurgic cult engages in the very same activity as the demiurge, with some modifications. As Abammon describes it, theurgic cult can bring things beyond the control of the Ideas under the control of the Ideas, implying that
metaphysically there are two categories: the Ideas and that which is beyond them. This echoes the *Timaeus*’ two ontological primitives: the Ideas and Chaos, with the Demiurge as the mediator. For Abammon, there exist the objects of this world and greater realities, and the theurgic cult is the mediator to bring these two together. Similarly, as Abammon says, things that are beyond image are *reproduced through* image. Theurgic cult is again the mediator between these two, and here there are a number of examples, specifically statues that could be animated through cultic practices and especially the power of the *symbola*. Abammon is not simply saying that the theurgist can do the impossible, as Struck argues, but that the theurgist is an imitator of the Demiurge. At stake here is that the theurgist *brings value* to this world by evoking and participating in divine traces. The philosopher-priest, therefore, is a Demiurgic mediator between god and man.

Theurgic cult is therefore intimately connected to the very fabric of the cosmos, and the two should be joined if ultimate philosophical fulfillment is to be achieved. This essentially means that the gods have not thrown mankind into a universe marked by pure exteriority in which there are no real objects. The sensible world is real (in that there are traces of the divine and realizations of value in it), but not *really* real (that is not the Divine or Value itself), and, as a result, reason itself cannot grasp it (μηδὲ λόγον αὐτῆς δυνατὸν εἶναι ἐφάπτεσθαι). These traces make it possible to *scientifically* locate the traces of the *gods* in the world, and then use those traces in ritual. Abammon is therefore adopting the model of the benevolent creator alleviating

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55 Johnston (2008)
alienation in Platonic metaphysics as seen in the *Timaeus*’ “way of reason,” and transcendent experience is possible not through contemplation but in imitating the activities of the divine demiurge. The gods are therefore not affected by human activity (in that they can be *persuaded* by prayer) but have left a map for humans to achieve ascent. This is what Iamblichus means by scientific theology in the *Mysteries*, and this theurgic skill is derived from the Chaldeans.

These demiurgic traces inspire theurgic ascent to the gods, and in describing this process, Iamblichus maintains the fusion of Platonic and Chaldean texts. In Book 2 of the *Mysteries*, Iamblichus further explains the process of emanation (*προόδος*) of Soul, both with regard to how many emanations there are and their activities in the cosmos. Shaw has detailed the ontological levels of emanations in Iamblichus’ metaphysics, though for our purposes, it is enough to say that the emanations of Soul are specifically designed to perform particular functions in the human’s quest for psychic purification.

Some emanations are helpful, others not:

Καὶ μὴν τὸ γε ἀποκαθαρτικὸν τῶν ψυχῶν τέλεον μὲν ἐστιν ἐν τοῖς θεοῖς, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀρχαγγέλοις ἄναγκον· ἄγγελοι δὲ λύουσι μόνον τῶν δεσμῶν τῆς ὕλης, δαίμονες δ᾽ εἰς τὴν φύσιν καθέλκουσιν· ἥρωες δὲ κατάγουσιν εἰς τὴν ἑπιμέλειαν τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐργῶν· ἄρχοντες δ᾽ ἣτοι τὴν προστασίαν τῶν περικοσμίων ἢ τὴν τῶν ἐνύλων ἐπιστασίαν ἐγχειρίζουσι, ψυχαὶ δ᾽ ἐπιφαινόμεναι κατατείνουσί πως ἐπὶ τὴν γένεσιν (*Myst.* 2.5.79).

The purification of souls is brought to fruition in the gods, while ascent is brought to fruition in the *archangeli*. *Angeloi* loosen the bonds of matter, while *daimones* draw souls down toward nature. *Heroes* lead the soul down toward a concern with perceptible works. *Archontes* take up leadership over cosmic affairs or authority over material ones. Souls, when they appear, provoke a tendency in one way or another toward generation.

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56 Shaw 1995:70-80, details the differences between the divine and human realm along the line of *ousia* (essence) – *dunamis* (potency) –*energia* (activity). He follows Saffrey (1973).
In this passage, Abammon explains how it is that human beings can achieve transcendence. For Iamblichus, ascent can be achieved only through these divine helpers, but just as there are helpers, so too are there obstacles. In the description of the emanations, there appear to be two cosmic forces: those that draw men up (ἀναγωγόν) and those that draw Souls down (κατάγουσιν). The former bring about purification (ἀποκαθαρτικὸν) and release from the prison of matter (λύουσι τῶν δεσμῶν τῆς ὕλης), while the latter entice men to nature (εἰς τὴν φύσιν). What differentiates human souls from the gods tends to be matter and the body, and the idea of ascent from this state combines elements of both the Chaldean Oracles and Platonic philosophy. Chaldean ἀναγωγή primarily designates the soul’s liberation from the body, often effected by a god (especially Apollo) through the divine rays of the sun. Yet ἀναγωγή is also used in a Platonic context, both in Plato’s description of the philosopher’s egress from the cave (Rep. 7.517b-21c) as well as in Plotinus’ Enneads where it is most often found in reference to the soul’s contemplation of the Good (see, e.g., Enneads 1.3.1; 4.9.4; 5.4.1). Similarly, the idea that the daimones drag soul downwards (καταγωγή) refers in the Chaldean Oracles to the soul’s assumption of matter, but also in Plato to the embodied soul’s reliance on “unnecessary” pleasures (Rep. 8.560e).

Iamblichus is in this passage (as well as other descriptions of the same phenomenon) merging the Chaldean with the Platonic. The fact that there are two


58 Lewy 1978:308.
forces, one moving up and the other down, marks this as particularly Neoplatonic. Iamblichus’ metaphysical system requires a downward force if there is to be eventual ascent. It seems to me here, however, that Iamblichus is speaking more so of the challenges faced by souls that have already descended rather than providing a metaphysical account for descent. Iamblichus, it seems, has adapted the *Timaeus* which itself, as we have already seen, accounts for the denotative ‘thisness’ of the objects of our experience, to make room for theurgy. As Plato had suggested in the *Timaeus*, the demiurge created mankind in a divine mixing bowl (*Tim.* 41d). According to Iamblichus’ commentary on the passage, this was the cause of man’s fallen state; even though the human soul had within it the *logos* of the demiurge, time away from the gods caused man’s ultimate separation.\(^59\) It is also no accident that the demiurge’s clay mixture is the very moment when *soul* was introduced to *matter*. Man, though dragged downward, nonetheless had a divine spark. It is precisely because of the claims of the *Timaeus* that Abammon argues that reason is inadequate, for there are too many distractions. In man’s search, the *daimones* detain him on his way toward divine fire as Abammon says later in *Myst.* 2.6.82. The *angeloi*, on the other hand, free man from the constraints of being a material thing, the *archangeloi* bring about philosophical and theurgic ascent (*ἀναγωγή*), and the gods ultimate transcendence.

Because of soul’s combination with matter and the malicious detainment at the hands of the *daimones*, the human mind can easily be deceived, and therefore theurgic union with the divine cannot happen through intellect alone. The problem with being

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\(^{59}\) *In Tim.* frag. 86 in Dillon 1973; see also Shaw 1995:72-74.
human, that is a composite of the soul and matter, is precisely the matter part of the equation. Once the angelo\textit{i} release the bonds of matter, soul unites with universals.

Abammon says:

\begin{quote}
Καὶ ταύτης δ’ ἐτι τελειοτέραν ποιεῖται μαντείαν, ἣνία αὐτὰ τοῖς ὅλοις, ἀφ’ ὧν ἀπεμερίσθη, συνάστη τὰς μοῖρας τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τῆς νοερᾶς ἐνεργείας ἀπλυουτα γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν ὅλων τότε τῆς πάσης εἰδήσεως, ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλεῖστον ἐξικνεῖσθαι τὰς ἐννοιας τῶν περὶ τὸν κόσμον ἐπιτελουμένων. Οὐ μὴν ἀλλ’ ὧποταν γε καὶ τοῖς θεοῖς ἐννοθῇ κατὰ τὴν ταιώτην ἀπόλυτον ἐνεργείαν, αὐτὰ τὰ ἀληθέστατα δέχεται ημικεύτα πληρώματα τῶν νοήσεων, ἀφ’ ὧν ἀληθῆ μαντείαν προβάλλει (2.11.96-8)
\end{quote}

And it [i.e., the “soul”] produces a still more perfect divination when it unites to the universals (from which it has been separated) its apportioned lots of life and intellectual activity. It becomes full from the universals of complete knowledge, so that for the most part, it comes to an understanding of the things that occur in the cosmos. Still, whenever it is united to the gods through such a free activity, it receives in this case the truest and fullest aggregate of intellections from which it produces true divination.

As we saw in Plato’s \textit{Timaeus}, what made an individual a spacio-temporal particular was the very fact that the demiurge shaped unformed matter (or chaos) in accordance with the Ideas. The ‘becomingness’ of becoming, for Plato, was designed in such a way that it could redirect the mind back to the Ideas. Abammon here is suggesting that the Soul, when engaging in the activity the demiurge intended for it, is rewarded with the ability to become incorporeal, so to speak, in seeing form \textit{apart from} matter. The theurgist in uncovering the symbols placed into the universe imitates the demiurge and therefore understands the blueprint according to which the universe was fashioned. In so doing, he receives from this unity with the gods perfect divination, and is comes to complete philosophical knowledge.

As he tells Porphyry, “philosophy” proper only achieves a small portion of attaining wisdom. It is the place where one begins, just as the \textit{Timaeus’} claim that the
objects of this world are realizations of value or Plotinus’ metaphysics are the \textit{a priori} assumptions of the \textit{Mysteries} as a whole. But even Greek philosophy depended on Plato and Pythagoras’ consultation with the Hermetic stelae in Egypt. Philosophy becomes just one of the ways the Egyptian priests had demiurgically shrouded the wisdom of the gods in symbols. In combination with the special secrets of the Chaldeans, the Egyptians can show how to theurgically use these symbols to provoke the gods to initiate the dematerialization of the human soul, to allow man to bond with them in friendship (\textit{φιλία}, 5.9.209), and ultimately to escort him to the divine choir (\textit{θείου χοροῦ}, 5.21.229) denied by the \textit{Phaedrus} (247a). Though it might seem to be the easy path to wisdom, Abammon is clear: transcendence may not happen for everyone, and even if it does, it will only happen at the end of one’s life (5.22.230-1). This is particularly striking since we end up at the same place we started: philosophical wisdom may or may not be attainable.

2.4 Conclusion: The Persona of the Philosopher-Priest

To conclude the chapter, I want to reopen the question I began with in light of the project of scientific theology: why does Iamblichus adopt the persona of the philosopher-priest in the \textit{Mysteries} only to ultimately claim that ascent may not be possible? Shaw’s answer to the question centers on Iamblichus’ mode of communicating philosophy as a “divine revealer.” He argues that Iamblichus’ main interest was to resolve the conflict between the “old ways” and “new ways,” that is, between the ancient traditions handed down by the Egyptian gods and the innovative
philosophy of the Greeks. Iamblichus, in arguing for the preservation of man’s contact with the divine, emphasized theurgy (the work of the gods) over theology (the words of the gods) as the only means to achieve this. Shaw understands the persona as integral to the theurgic “divine revealer” in contradistinction to Porphyry’s “philosopher:”

Just as Plato turned to his Lady of Prophecy, Diotima Mantinike, to reveal erotic Mysteries, so Iamblichus deferred to his persona, the Egyptian priest Abamon, to explain theurgic mysteries...In the role of Egyptian mystagogue responding to the questions and criticisms of Porphyry the ‘philosopher,’ Iamblichus played ‘divine revealer’ to the wayward Hellene, guiding Porphyry back to the primitive institutions that Plato and Pythagoras received from the Egyptians.

While Shaw is correct to point to the revelatory language with which Iamblichus explains theurgy, he sees Iamblichus’ persona as a narrative and philosophical necessity: because Iamblichus argued for theurgy, he “deferred to his persona to explain theurgic mysteries.” The argument begs the question, because Iamblichus certainly did not feel obligated by his subject matter to present his philosophy as an Egyptian priest. Rather, he chose to do so for a purpose, and that purpose was Iamblichus’ effort to redefine the Platonic philosopher not as the itinerant questioner (the role in the Mysteries played by Porphyry) who may or may not come to knowledge through contemplation, but as the scientific theologian, who, in imitation of the demiurge, can not only reveal the symbols of the gods, but can defer to the gods, thus inviting them to lead their philosophical quest.

The casual comparison with Diotima that Shaw suggests is fruitful, although it

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could be pushed further. We must be cautious about making too much of Diotima here because nowhere in the extant texts of Iamblichus is Diotima mentioned directly. In one instance in the *Mysteries* Iamblichus quotes her:

"Ὅ δὲ μεῖζον ἐρώτημα καὶ περὶ μειζόνων πυθάνη, πώς ἃν σοι δυνηθείην δυσβάτου καὶ μακρᾶς δεόμενον διερμηνεύσεως ἀποκρίνωσθαι διὰ βραχέων καὶ ἱκανῶς; ἑρῶ μὲν οὖν ἐγώ, καὶ προθυμίας οὐδέν ἀπολείψω· πειρῶ δὴ ἐπεσθαί τοῖς συντόμως ὑποδεικνυμένοις καὶ μέχρις ἐνίοις προϊοῦσιν· (*Myst.* 5.5.205-6).

As for that more important question you raise about more important subjects, how can I give you a response that would be both brief and adequate when it requires a long and extended discursus? Well, "I will speak and I won’t spare any effort. Try to follow"63 these concise explanations of mine, some of which will expand into longer discussions.

Abammon quotes the passage of the *Symposion* right before Diotima initiates Socrates into the erotic Mysteries. The teacher-student relationship shared by Diotima and Socrates is meant to reflect the relationship Iamblichus and Porphyry share. Porphyry, as we have seen, has played the role of the Socratic questioner in his letter to Anebo; Iamblichus has therefore taken up Diotima’s role in his answers. What is more interesting, however, is the fact that dramatic provenance of this passage of the *Symposion* also calls to mind a time before Socrates had become a philosopher. Socrates himself admits in his speech that Diotima had brought about his conversion to the philosophical life. Iamblichus’ Abammon, by quoting the passage here, subtly implies that Porphyry, like the younger Socrates, has yet to become a philosopher. What we actually have here is a dig at Porphyry’s expense, not a sustained *reason* for Iamblichus’ persona. The implication of Shaw’s theory is that theurgy represents a short-cut to wisdom: performing the ancient rituals will bring about ascent and wisdom.

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63 *Symposium* 210a
Yet this does not account for the claim that performing the rituals does not guarantee philosophical fulfillment. So why does he advocate joining the two just as he (the philosopher) adopts the persona (the priest)?

On the one hand, we can point to the historical circumstances of Iamblichus’ birth and upbringing as a possible reason for the philosophical positions he later held with regard to Pythagoras and theurgy. Iamblichus’ familial connection to priest-kings would certainly have influenced his approach to Platonic philosophy, because he would have been able to join these two independent traditions. But historical circumstances alone should not explain why he presents his philosophical program as a philosopher-priest.

As we have seen in his Life of Pythagoras, Iamblichus’ epistemology stresses the active role of the gods in man’s enlightenment. Iamblichus relates many of the characteristics of Pythagoras to his own epistemological view. According to Iamblichus, one of Pythagoras’ chief contributions was his adaptation of number theory from Orphic mythology and the application of that number theory to gain access to the mind of the gods. In Iamblichus’ view, the ideal philosopher has a special relationship to the gods that brings about knowledge. Because Pythagoras understood the mind of the gods, he could provide suitable sacrifices, the power of which could be harnessed for philosophical success. The philosopher becomes the interpreter of the gods.

For Iamblichus, Pythagoras’ philosophical prowess was related to the lessons he learned from the Egyptian priests. In an imagined meeting between Thales and Pythagoras, Thales admits that he earned his philosophical reputation (particularly his
ability to understand the cosmos scientifically) because of the lessons he learned from the priests. Iamblichus, in presenting a new version of Pythagoras, whose piety, religious education, and divine connections are stressed as the causes of his philosophical success, presents the Platonic tradition anew. Iamblichus downplays Socrates’ influence on Plato in favor of Pythagoras’. This is important because it allows Iamblichus to emphasize not only the supremacy of barbarian wisdom but also the subordination of scientific knowledge to religious study.

The ideal philosopher of Iamblichus’ Life is therefore a proto-theurgist. He is well versed in the secrets of the Egyptian priests, has been able to derive a system of sacrifice, and therefore communication with the gods, using the principles with which the gods themselves have fashioned the cosmos, and as a result has been rewarded with philosophical enlightenment. The characteristics of Pythagoras are developed in more detail in the Mysteries. Through Abammon, Iamblichus argues in favor of a return to the ancient customs, not only of the Egyptians, but even of Greek philosophy itself. Through Pythagoras, Iamblichus has established a philosophical authority for Abammon. Abammon’s insistence on the tripartite division of philosophy, termed “scientific theology,” is, in many ways, the Pythagoreanization of Platonic philosophy first proposed by O’Meara. Iamblichus is not so much introducing Pythagorean elements to Platonism as he is redefining Pythagoreanism by recasting Pythagoras as a forerunner of theurgy.

This new philosophical genealogy (Egyptian Priests—Pythagoras—Plato) authorized Iamblichus to claim that the metaphysics of the Timaeus—that the objects of
the experiential world are realizations of Value Ideas—allowed for the theurgic symbols and traces to be intimately tied to the demiurge himself. The real value of plants and stones is not only the fact that they are physical instatiations of the Good, but also that in them rests the demiurgic code that informs the cosmos. In applying these objects in ritual, the theurgist was engaging in demiurgic activity, thus pleasing the gods and inciting them to share their wisdom, being, and eventually granting transcendence to mankind.

Herein lies the reason for Iamblichus’ new persona. The philosopher-priest can produce results. Iamblichus does not adopt the priestly persona in imitation of Diotima, he adopts the persona in spite of Diotima. For Diotima, the philosopher as “lover of wisdom” implied a lack, for Iamblichus it implied a fullness achieved through the grace of the gods. The philosopher is no longer left alienated and abandoned in the physical world, and no matter how hard he tries, he will never see the heavenly choruses of the Phaedrus. Rather, Iamblichus’ metaphysics allows for the world to be filled with invitations to the gods once the demiurgic symbols have been uncovered. Iamblichus’ persona of the philosopher priest who knows how to find and use these sacred symbols is therefore a philosophical choice that transforms the figure of the philosopher. The philosopher was no longer left alone in the world trying to make his way to the Good; provided that he performed the proper rituals, the gods would lead the way.

Iamblichus adopts the persona of the philosopher-priest for reasons more than just necessity. Nothing forced him to reveal theurgic rites as a priest. Rather, it seems to me, that in presenting Platonic philosophy in terms of ritual, theurgy, and the Oracles,
the older models of what it meant to be a philosopher became irrelevant. Certainly
Socrates would no longer fit the bill, particularly because Porphyry was already playing
that role in his letter to Anebo. In redefining philosophy, Iamblichus also redefined the
philosopher. The philosopher still “loves wisdom” because he does not have it, but
Iamblichus’ philosopher-priest opens up the possibility for the philosopher to attain it.
Since the ultimate source of that knowledge is the interpretation scientific knowledge
through divine traces (or, “scientific theology”), the priest would be the natural next
step from the Socratic position.
Chapter 3
Plutarch’s Delphic Dialogues and Isis and Osiris:
Theological Science and the Priest-Philosopher Persona

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I have argued that disentangling Iamblichus’ philosophical-priestly persona in the Mysteries is crucial for understanding his philosophical project. His emphasis upon scientific theology, rooted in a Pythagorean approach to Platonic doctrine, implied that religious ritual, specifically in this case theurgy, became the purpose of philosophy because of its ability to bridge the gap between ignorance and wisdom, man and divine, and potentially even being and non-being. Iamblichus’ Abammon in the Mysteries represented the programmatic fusion of theurgy and philosophy, which itself became the goal of scientific discovery, since knowledge about the cosmos implied knowledge about the gods. He advocated the study of the verifiable ontological facts about the objects of this world because they were integral to ritualistic ascent as opposed to studying them for their role in the sensible world. Thus Iamblichus took a fundamentally priestly approach to philosophy.

If Iamblichus stands at one end of the spectrum, emphasizing that theurgic ritual is necessary for philosophical ascent, then Plutarch, who was himself a Platonic philosopher and priest of Apollo at Delphi, stands at the other. In this chapter I will argue that, in sharp contrast to what Iamblichus would do two centuries later, Plutarch viewed
his role as priest at Delphi as a means to incite the shrine’s visitors to philosophy, and that both the religious rituals performed and the mysterious truths revealed there presented its participants with the unique opportunity to begin one’s philosophical quest. For Plutarch, the elements of religion and theology needed to be examined philosophically and scientifically if the truths contained within them were to be exposed and understood. This chapter, therefore, will shed new light on the persona that Plutarch adopts in his *Moralia*. As we will see below, while scholars have been especially interested in Plutarch’s political identity as a Greek living under the Roman empire, I will offer a new Plutarch here: one that replaces the “Greece-versus-Rome” polarity with Athens versus Delphi and, given what each of these cities signifies for Plutarch, philosopher versus priest. Plutarch lived and worked at a critical time when the philosophical and literary tides were turning and transitioning, particularly with regard to philosophy, from the Hellenistic to the Imperial period, and Plutarch played, as I will argue, a major role in bringing about that cultural shift that eventually informed the way the later Platonists approached the question of theology and science in philosophy.

In order to make my case, I will first examine three problems in connection with the broader theme of science and religion in this chapter: biography, philosophical affiliation, and genre. These questions need answers because if we are to understand Plutarch’s identity as a priest of Apollo and Platonic philosopher, we must first understand how his biography and philosophical affiliations inform that identity. Since the identity I am examining is primarily textual, we must also consider how Plutarch presented it in his writing. As we will see below, scholars have found Plutarch difficult to
characterize particularly with regard to these questions, and we must deal with them in order to situate Plutarch within his cultural, intellectual, and literary contexts. I will then turn to an analysis of the interface between the two sides of Plutarch’s persona—the Platonic philosopher and the Delphic priest—and the integration of philosophical and religious wisdom in three key texts from Plutarch’s *Moralia: The E at Delphi, The Obsolescence of Oracles*, and the *Isis and Osiris*. I will therefore be following the methodology of my first two chapters by studying Plutarch’s presentation of philosophy in his literary dialogues set in Delphi (in the case of *The E at Delphi* and *The Obsolescence of Oracles*) and in a treatise written from the perspective of the priest-philosopher (*Isis and Osiris*) in order to see where the fault lines lie between philosophy and religion, and what kinds of bridges Plutarch tried to construct across that gap. After we have examined more closely Plutarch’s resolution to some of these problems, we will see that he and Iamblichus struck a different balance between religion and philosophy in their respective expositions of how one achieves (if such a thing is actually possible) philosophical perfection. In fact, I will show that Iamblichus was indirectly responding to and critiquing Plutarch’s approach. We have already explored Iamblichus’ solution; so it is to Plutarch that we shall now turn.

3.2.1 Plutarch’s Biography

As with Iamblichus, Plutarch’s biography is a particularly thorny question because of the interpretive difficulties associated with autobiographical statements embedded in philosophical texts (as we saw in chapter 1). Unlike Iamblichus, however, Plutarch
received no ancient biography and, as a result, we must rely almost solely on his own writings (in addition to some meager epigraphic and propsopographical evidence).

Philostratus, the biographer of the figures of what he and we after him call the Second Sophistic, mentions Plutarch by name only three times in his corpus, none of them in his *Lives of the Sophists* (*Heroicus* 678.16 and 29; *Epistulae et Dialexeis* 73.38). The reasons for this are unclear; it may well have been that Philostratus did not think of Plutarch as belonging properly to what he called the Second Sophistic or, as he reveals in one of his letters, he was bothered by the fact that Plutarch rejected his own idol, Gorgias (*Epistulae et Dialexeis* 73.38). Whatever his reasons, well over a century later, the Iamblichean-Neoplatonic biographer Eunapius gently criticized Philostratus for his omission of Plutarch (as well as of Plutarch’s teacher, Ammonius), but excused him on the grounds that Plutarch should be considered a philosopher rather than a sophist—in fact, the charm and lyre of all philosophy (φιλοσοφίας ἁπάσης ἀφροδίτη καὶ λύρα, VSoph 454). Interestingly enough, Eunapius did not go on to write Plutarch’s biography himself; rather, he tells us, as Lamberton has observed,¹ that Plutarch has “scattered here and there in his texts both his own life and that of his teacher” and that if, while reading Plutarch, “one keeps a sharp lookout for these references and tracks them down as they occur, reading them intelligently one after the other, then one would know the events of their [i.e., Plutarch and Ammonius] lives.”²

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¹ Lamberton 2001:3-4.

² Eunapius *Lives* 454: αὐτίκα οὖν ὁ θεσπέσιος Πλούταρχος τὸν τε ἐαυτοῦ βίον ἀναγράφει τοῖς βιβλίοις ἐνδιεσπαρμένος καὶ τὸν τοῦ διδασκάλου, καὶ ὅτι γε Ἀμμώνιος Ἀθήνης ἐτελεύτα, οὐ βίον προσεπιτον. καὶ τοῦ κάλλιστον αὐτοῦ τῶν συγγραμμάτων εἰσὶν οἱ καλούμενοι παράλληλοι βίοι τῶν ἀρίστων κατὰ ἔργα καὶ πράξεις ἀνδρῶν.
What are we to make of Eunapius’ treatment of Plutarch, or rather, his lack thereof? On the one hand, Eunapius states the obvious: we need to cobble together Plutarch’s biography from his writings; on the other, Eunapius reminds us of the deeply personal nature of Plutarch’s texts, which are full of so many biographical details regarding both himself and the characters in his dialogues.\(^3\) It seems, however, that Eunapius directs his audience to actually read Plutarch, and to read him carefully, not just because we will come to discover his biography, but also because he was “the grace and lyre of all philosophy.” It is significant that a post-Iamblichean Neoplatonist singled out Plutarch for close reading and granted him the status of a kind of Muse, a fact which situates him at the beginning of a new tradition, at least in Eunapius’ perspective. As we will see below, Plutarch reanimated Plato’s rehabilitation of physics by thinking hard about the role of science and theology in philosophy, a project that, as we have already seen, was a crucial part of the post-Iamblichean branch of Platonism to which Eunapius himself belonged.

Scholars have, for the most part, followed Eunapius’ advice in writing biographies of Plutarch, and I do not intend here to cover this already well-trod ground.\(^4\)

Plutarch’s life spanned the fall of the Julio-Claudians, the rise of the Flavians, Domitian’s reign of terror, marked by the autocratic stripping of the Senate’s power and the exiling of philosophers, and finally the accession of Nerva and his successors. He himself was

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\(^3\) Lamberton 2001:4.

\(^4\) For the most detailed accounts, see especially Ziegler 1951:639-96, Jones 1971:2-64 (to be supplemented by the criticisms of Babut 1975 and Swain 1991), and Russell 1973:1-17. For a biography that emphasizes Plutarch’s intellectual activities, see Lamberton 2001:1-59.
born sometime in the late 40s or early 50s (if we may take him to be just under twenty in 66 or 67 during Nero’s visit to Greece, when he was a student just beginning his philosophical study under Ammonius, the head of the Platonic Academy in the mid-to-late first century, *E at Delphi* 385b). He was born and raised in Chaeronea, a small town in western Boeotia, and exhibited the hometown spirit typical of the Second Sophistic. Plutarch came from a fairly affluent family (though not of any literary fame), given that his father’s hobbies of horse breeding and hunting would have been expensive and that Plutarch himself received higher education in both rhetoric and philosophy (*Sea-Land Animals* 959b). His youth (in the 60s) was most likely spent in preparation for the local political arena and he may well have served in diplomatic delegations representing Chaeronea in the province of Achaea as well as attending the Academy and beginning his

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5 On Ammonius, see also Dillon 1977:185-192 now also to be supplemented by Donini 1986:97-110 and 1992:99-120.

6 Plutarch throughout his corpus is interested in Chaeronea’s legendary, historical, and political tradition (see, e.g., *Theseus* 27.8 and *Sulla* 16-19) and in some cases adds a persona touch. In his *Life of Antony*, for example, Plutarch recounts the impact the war between Octavian and Antony had on Chaeronea, citing the words of his grandfather Nicarchus as an authority on the famine that ensued. As Russell 1973 said, quoting the *Precepts on Statecraft* 814d, “one reason why Plutarch stayed in his small home town was ‘to prevent it from getting smaller.’” The passage mirrors more generally the relationship between cities and towns and their leading citizens in the Imperial period. In the second century Rome’s empire was made up of thousands of towns and villages, which were largely maintained through the euergatism of their wealthy citizens. The phenomenon is well attested and discussed by Boatwright 2000, though she focuses more closely on the cities of the empire under Hadrian, and thus after Plutarch’s death. For the idea that individuals performed local functions in the provinces, see Dmitriev 2005:189-216. For a representative sample of a particular individual’s gifts to a particular city, see Tobin 1997 on Herodes Atticus in Athens. Plutarch himself did not fund the extravagant building projects that Herodes did, but he certainly did perform local civic duties. Plutarch’s modesty in the *Precepts* is betrayed by his probably influential role in Chaeronea’s local government. On Plutarch and Chaeronea, see Jones 1971:2-21.

7 Jones 1971:9.
philosophical education (Precepts 816c). Under the Flavians (AD 70-96), Plutarch was probably involved in politics, though this is conjecture because the details of his life during this period are poorly documented given Plutarch’s general reticence about his political career. His role, based on what Zeigler and Jones have reconstructed from his writings, was probably an extension of his rhetorical functions as an ambassador to Rome, most likely representing his native Chaeronea, Athens, or Delphi, and, as Russell has suggested, would have included a number of local civic functions at Chaeronea or Delphi as well including the supervision of the temple’s dedications near the end of his life. Sometime at the end of the first century or at the beginning of the second, Plutarch became one of the two permanent priests at Delphi, a role he took seriously, if his concern for the shrine’s welfare in the Delphic dialogues is any indication. Plutarch probably died sometime around 120, and there is still debate about whether or not he met Hadrian, though he did supervise the erection of a statue of him at Delphi in his old

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8 For a fuller discussion of Plutarch’s probable activities during these middle years, see Jones 1971:20-27.


11 Swain 1991:318-330; Bowie 1997:1. The debate is related to questions about the role philosophers played in the court of emperors, a topic that still needs further study. Jones (1971:28-32) ruminates for pages about whether Plutarch and Trajan were in contact and whether Plutarch’s Lives were designed to please him. This is another trope popular in the second sophistic, given that Dio’s Kingship Orations were supposedly delivered before Trajan, though even this is debatable. On the Kingship Orations, see Swain 1996:192-206, and Whitmarsh 2001:186-200. But Plutarch’s meeting with Hadrian is desirable, because, as Swain 1991 put it, “the most philhellenic of emperors and the most Hellenic of Greeks” could come together.
age,\textsuperscript{12} from which dedication we learn that he was given Roman citizenship, something he himself was also reticent about in his texts (\textit{Sulla} 829a; \textit{CIG} 1713; \textit{SIG} 829A).\textsuperscript{13}

In constructing his biography, scholars have focused primarily on Plutarch’s interactions with the capital cities of both culture and the empire itself in order to determine his cultural identity, a theme prevalent among scholars of Imperial Greek literature, a juxtaposition first established by Jones in his \textit{Plutarch and Rome}.\textsuperscript{14} Jones sought to examine not only Plutarch’s direct interactions with the city of Rome, but also his attitudes toward both the city itself and the empire it controlled. Jones’ biographical work has been pushed further into the theoretical realm of “cultural identity” by Simon Swain, who in his \textit{Hellenism and Empire} studied Plutarch’s understanding of the “meaning of Roman rule,” emphasizing Plutarch’s feelings on the Hellenization of Romans and his attitudes toward the Romanization of Greece rather than the personal interactions Plutarch had with Rome.\textsuperscript{15} Swain’s conclusions show that Plutarch was both “highly sympathetic to the Romans,” who in his view ruled by divine providence, and that he also “had a strong racial and cultural identity as a Greek;”\textsuperscript{16} as a result, Swain

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Jones 1971:28-9.
\item \textsuperscript{13} For the debate over Plutarch’s silence about his Roman citizenship, see Preston 2001:89 and her note 22.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Jones’ book (1971) roughly divides into two halves. The first is an extensive biography that details Plutarch’s potential political career. The second deals primarily with the \textit{Parallel Lives} and his political treatises, attempting to determine Plutarch’s interactions with Rome. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is Jones’ insistence on a narrative that tells Plutarch’s conversion from rhetoric to philosophy, which, as Russell (1972) has pointed out, is too simplistic.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Swain 1996:135-186.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Swain 1996:161. The problem with Swain’s approach is that it is insensitive to the full literary complexities of Plutarch’s writing and persona. Tim Whitmarsh (2001) critiqued Swain’s
sought to uncover Plutarch’s ambivalent attitude toward Rome, showing that one of the polarities Plutarch had difficulty in resolving was his own identity as a Greek living under the Roman empire.\footnote{The “identity” question for Plutarch (as well as the figures of the Second Sophistic more generally) has been much contested in the last decade. The “Greece versus Rome” polarity has been deepened by combining it with a different polarity “past versus present,” which centers on how authors of this period cultural and literary identity was created in their inheritance of and contribution to the Greek literature of their predecessors. Whitmarsh (2001:1-39) sets this out clearly in his introduction and his thesis about the importance of literary paideia is echoed in Preston 2001 as well as Lamberton 2001, though they are drawing more on earlier versions of this thesis (see Anderson 1993; Gleason 1995; and Swain himself 1996), specifically about Plutarch. As Lamberton (2001:xv)says, Plutarch offered us an invitation “to share in his interrogation of present phenomena, which include the vast accumulation of facts and anecdotes about the past.”}

Swain was right in pointing to the balance between the Greekness and Romanness as a point of tension in Plutarch’s texts. The problem with Swain’s approach, however, is related to the general problem of reconstructing biographies from philosophical texts: we can see only what the author wants us to see.\footnote{For a discussion of the problems associated with philosophical biography, see my first chapter.} Eunapius was right when he said that Plutarch’s readers could reasonably grasp the events of Plutarch’s life if they read carefully enough, but, as we have seen, Plutarch’s texts do not reveal much about his political career, indicating that this is not what Plutarch wanted to highlight. Rather, the biography we do find is part of the literary construct of “Plutarch” created in the Lives approach (not just to Plutarch, but to the second sophistic in general). For Whitmarsh, it is impossible to determine on the basis of literary texts the views about Greece and and Rome than informed them, only the tensions that lie beneath them. For this reason, Whitmarsh focused more critically on the role mimesis played in the creation of literary identities, showing that authors of the second sophistic created literary personae and identities by adapting and changing classical models in new and innovative ways. Whitmarsh does not deal with Plutarch as much as other authors, but his general critique of Swain is still applicable.
and *Moralia*, and Plutarch’s interactions with Rome are only one such biography or identity that can be reconstructed.

In the following section, I will argue that one of the aspects to Plutarch that Eunapius intended us to follow is his development from a beginning student under Ammonius in the Academy in *The E at Delphi* to the more mature and priestly version of himself in the *Obsolescence* or the *Isis and Osiris*. This provides not only a better understanding of what Eunapius meant, but also a model of ‘philosophical biography’ and ‘textual hermeneutics’ that would have been practiced in the transition from the second to the fourth centuries: that biography and philosophical personae informed and reflected philosophical ideas. Eunapius seems to say that his audience should read Plutarch, following his life story, and then grants him the status of a Muse. The questions that Plutarch raises about the role of science and theology in philosophy as well as his development from philosopher to priest is, in fact, the very same set of questions and developments that his “teacher,” Iamblichus dealt with in the *Life and Mysteries* we saw above. In this chapter, therefore, rather than trying to determine a political Plutarch (since his texts offer little in the way of political biography), I am offering a new Plutarch: one that centers on his identity as a priest-philosopher. Rather than seeing Plutarch solely as an author that looks back at the past, he may also be seen as an author that looks forward, particularly in the philosophical biography that emerges from his own texts. Though a full study of the development of Plutarch and the characters in his dialogues is beyond the scope of this chapter, we will be looking at just one part of the that narrative here: his
combination of theology with philosophy and natural science combined with the emerging image of him as philosopher priest.

3.2.2 Plutarch the Delphic Priest

Before turning to Plutarch’s Platonism, I want to tease out the priestly side of his identity, a part of his biography and identity that has been neglected in favor of the historical and cultural polarities discussed above, his role at Delphi because in this chapter I want to shift the polarity from “Greece versus Rome” to “Delphi versus Athens,” and by extension to “religion versus philosophy.” My aim here is not to give an historical account of Delphi at the beginning of the second century; nor do I claim that this polarity was real in the sense that Plutarch actually worried about his loyalties to these cities along the lines that Swain set for his polarity of “Greece versus Rome.” Rather, my polarity is literary and philosophical because Plutarch’s texts do reveal an anxiety about the place of both the Oracle and philosophy in Greek intellectual life and their relationship to each other. In the first chapter, we examined the importance of the ‘holy’ city of Apamea in Iamblichus’ project and, interestingly enough, some of the same questions arise with regard to Plutarch’s Delphi. Like Apamea in the third century, Delphi was traditionally a place considered to have special access to the mind of the gods (given that one would go to Delphi for Apollo’s Oracle and to Apamea for interpretation of the Chaldaean Oracles), but unlike Apamea, it was not explicitly connected with philosophy until Plutarch, a point we will turn to in the following section.
While I do believe that the “Delphic” dialogues may give some insight into the business of Delphi during Plutarch’s time and that (in combination with other evidence) we can come to a reasonable understanding of how the shrine may have worked,\textsuperscript{19} Plutarch’s purpose with these dialogues was not to record his activities as the priest there, even if they do deal with some of the challenges he faced (see below). Re-imagining Plutarch’s understanding of his \textit{actual} role as priest at Delphi is difficult because we have access only to the literary construct of Plutarch in the dialogue, whose obsession was not the day-to-day activity of the shrine but his the philosophical project of fusing theology with philosophy.

This is not to say, however, that we know \textit{nothing} about the historical Plutarch at Delphi. As both Lamberton and Preston have pointed out, one of the few independent attestations of Plutarch’s activities as priest of Delphi is the dedication of the statue of Hadrian he supervised toward the end of his career.\textsuperscript{20} The inscription specifically calls him an \textit{hiereus}, the highest position at the shrine that included both financial and religious obligations:

\emph{αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα, θεοῦ Τραϊανοῦ Παρθικοῦ υἱόν, θεοῦ Νέρβα υἱόν, Τραϊανὸν Αδριανὸν Σεβαστόν, τὸ κοινὸν τῶν Αμφικυόνων, ἐπιμελητεύοντος ἀπὸ Δελφῶν Μεστρίου Πλουτάρχου τοῦ ἱερέως (CIG 1713=DittenburgerSyll\textsuperscript{3} 843B).}

Emperor Caesar Trajan Hadrian Augustus, son of the divine Trajan Parthicus, grandson of the divine Nerva: the Amphictyonic Council honors you. Mestrius Plutarch the priest officiated as curator from Delphi.

\textsuperscript{19} For one such recent reconstruction, see Johnston (2008), pp. 37-60.

The Delphic Amphictyonic Council was a committee that supported the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and in this inscription, Plutarch served as its Boeotian representative for this dedication.\textsuperscript{21} Plutarch’s duties as such would have included not only officiating as curator over statues, but also, as \textit{Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Life} indicates, presiding over the Pythian games, the Amphictyonic Council, and most certainly over sacrifice and the interpretation of theological pronouncements (785c and 729f).\textsuperscript{22} Thus, in addition to religious duties, Plutarch was also an administrator at the shrine.

The Delphic dialogues do, as I alluded to above, provide some insight into the kinds of duties Plutarch may have faced during his tenure there: (1) the interpretation of the symbols at the shrine for its visitors (in \textit{On the E at Delphi}); (2) the decline of visitors to the shrine itself, and therefore its influence in the Greek world (\textit{The Obsolescence of Oracles}); (3) changes in the way the Oracles were communicated (\textit{The Oracles No Longer Given in Verse}). Each of these posed both interpretive and administrative challenges, though the dialogues themselves do not present them as such. In this chapter, I will be looking at how Plutarch handles the first two problems as priest at Delphi: through the lens of philosophy. As he casually says at the \textit{Isis and Osiris} 378d, “I exhort people who come here to think and reflect philosophically on what they have heard, but most do not…” Plutarch’s statement here encourages not just his visitors but us, his readers, to treat what he says about Delphi philosophically. Before looking at how


\textsuperscript{22} Lamberton 2001:53.
Plutarch envisioned his role at Delphi, we must first examine his own philosophical affiliations because they will be necessary in determining what was at stake in his fusion of philosophy with theology.

3.2.3 Plutarch the Platonic Philosopher

If Delphi sits at one side of Plutarch’s pole as representative of his priestly functions, Athens is at the other, the city of the Platonic Academy. While he certainly served as priest of Apollo at Delphi, Plutarch also saw himself, in his writings at least, primarily as a philosopher. In the first chapter, we looked likewise at Iamblichus’ philosophical affiliation in order to determine what some of his reasons for presenting philosophy in the guise of a priest might have been; in this chapter, we will study why Plutarch viewed his role at Delphi as philosophical. That Plutarch considered himself a philosopher and took a philosophical approach to Delphi can be seen, for example, in the biographical hints he provides in *The E at Delphi*. Scholars have determined Plutarch’s earliest dates based on the fact that he was around twenty when he entered the Platonic Academy in 66 or 67, when we see him as a beginning student on a field trip to Delphi. Since Plutarch gives no earlier autobiographical information in his writings, it may be significant, from the standpoint of his literary persona that the first real event in his life is the beginning of his studies, and thus stands as the starting point for Eunapius’ biography. Furthermore, in this same passage, we see Plutarch first interacting with Delphi in a philosophical, not a religious, context. For this reason, I suggest that one of the ‘biographical’ narratives Plutarch intends us to follow in *Moralia* is the development of his priest-philosopher
persona. We must, therefore, first contextualize Plutarch within the history of Platonism before turning to his adaptation of it because, as I will argue, it was specifically his reaction to the tradition that came before him that set the stage for what we saw in Iamblichus.

During Plutarch’s lifetime, Stoicism ceased to be the prominent philosophical school in the Roman empire and its place was taken by Platonism.\textsuperscript{23} During the first century, Platonists had begun to take a harder look at the skepticism that had dominated their school in the Hellenistic period.\textsuperscript{24} Recent work has significantly advanced our understanding of how the Platonists of this period redefined their position within the Platonic tradition as a response to both skepticism and Stoicism by focusing more clearly on issues such as primitive wisdom\textsuperscript{25} and ethics.\textsuperscript{26} Yet Plutarch, a man who was both a philosophical teacher and a priest of Delphi, clearly worried not only about ethics, but

\textsuperscript{23} See, for example, Russell 1973:63-4 and also Trapp 2007, who argued that the Stoics in fact set the philosophical table, so to speak, for the Imperial period by focusing on issues relating to ethics, the self and others, and political theory rather than metaphysics or cosmology. For the most part, Trapp is correct about this, though Plutarch does, significantly at times, provide a number of counter-examples to Trapp’s thesis (see below). As Boys-Stones’ 2007 review pointed out, “Trapp’s partiality for the Stoics, although expressed as a dispassionate historical thesis, is in the end not furnished with any evidence independent of his Stoicizing selection of topics; and the fact that other schools, especially and strikingly the Epicureans, end up with so little to say, and that of such little value, suggests that the story could have been told very differently.”

\textsuperscript{24} The seminal work on this topic is Glucker 1978, who looked more carefully into Antiochus of Ascalon’s return to dogmatism; one should also consult Dillon (1977:52-113) for a broader discussion. On the Middle Platonists and skepticism, see Tarrant 1985, Opsomer 1998, and Bonazzi 2003. More recently, Brittain 2007 examined the way in which Middle Platonists responded to the skeptical or pessimistic epistemological commitments of the Hellenistic period. In this essay, Brittain points to Plutarch’s own skeptical leanings (304-309). On this, see below.

\textsuperscript{25} Boys-Stones 2001:3-59 and 99-122.

\textsuperscript{26} Trapp (2007:3-23) especially argues that ethics was central to philosophy during this period.
also about the role that the gods play in the philosopher’s search for wisdom, and therefore like Iamblichus with epistemology.

Many independent studies of Plutarch’s philosophy have focused on his views in contradistinction to those of the Stoics and Epicureans, though his place in Platonism has been considered problematic, particularly with regard to epistemology. At times Plutarch appears to belong to the New Academy, especially in his essays countering Stoic epistemology, about which there has been general agreement. As Opsomer put it, Plutarch “remains loyal to the New Academics, professes Academic caution, uses the strategy of arguing both sides of the question in his polemics against the Stoics and Epicureans, and endeavors to refute the apraxia-reasoning.” At other times, however,


28 The earliest systematic study of Plutarch’s Platonism is Jones (1916), which is still valuable. This is now to be supplemented by Dillon (1977), pp. 184-230, which still stands as the best introduction.

29 On Plutarch and Skepticism, see Schröter (1911); DeLacy (1953); Tarrant (1985). On Plutarch and the Academy, see Nikolaidis (1999).


31 Opsomer 1997:27. Apraxia-reasoning refers to the Stoic claim that Skepticism is a self-refuting position because Academics invalidate their own arguments simply by living their lives (i.e., they do not suspend judgment about where to place food, what particular objects might be for, etc.). For a familiar formulation of this, see Epictetus Diss. 2.20.
he identifies himself with the dogmatic tendencies of the Alexandrian Platonists, particularly given that his teacher, Ammonius, was one of them. We can see this in Plutarch’s interests in the transcendence and immateriality of god, mathematics, and mystical numerology as a way to arrive at knowledge about the cosmos.

Already in his wavering between New Academic skepticism and Antiochean dogmatism, Plutarch’s negotiation between rationalism and mysticism begins to emerge. Plutarch questions the role that the gods play in bringing man to wisdom because Plato treated mathematical truths in the *Timaeus* as subordinated to divine. His solution, to which we will turn below, was to highlight god as a providential and kind creator (as we will see in the *Isis*) that wants his adherents (particularly at the Oracle) to know both the physical and divine causes of the universe. As we will see in our discussion of the Obsolescence, direct experience of god is possible (which led Plutarch to a position we might call mystical), most attainable through divine symbolism (as we will see in *On the E at Delphi*) is the more common way the philosopher arrives at truth. Nevertheless, at least from the perspective of the Neoplatonists, Plutarch could not ultimately be accepted as “an orthodox Platonist [because] his view on the origin of the world [namely, a dualistic struggle between good and evil forces—which we will see in the *Isis*] became a notorious heresy for the Neoplatonists, all the worse for its resemblance to the doctrine of

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33 Donini 1986.

the Christians."\textsuperscript{35} Plutarch therefore exists in a no-man’s-land right at the beginning of
the rise of later imperial Platonism, standing between a tradition of rationalism and
mysticism. For this reason, in this chapter I will examine how we are to understand
Plutarch as both a philosopher and a priest, and how the balance he struck relates to the
tradition that followed him.

3.2.4 Plutarch’s Genres
One of the most significant ways by which Plutarch connected himself to the Platonic
tradition was his adoption and adaptation of the dialogue form. Though a full analysis of
this is beyond the scope of this chapter, I would argue here that thinking of dialogue as
Plutarch’s primary genre is a helpful way of organizing his extensive corpus. While it is
true that Plutarch wrote in nearly every genre found in the Platonic tradition as it had
developed to that point—biography, dialogues (both Platonic and question-and-answer),
treatises, popular orations, and even (to a certain extent) commentaries—these generic
categories can often be best characterized as dialogic. Plutarch’s \textit{Parallel Lives}, for
example, while typically read as History or Biography, are in fact neither, but probably
constitute a sub-genre of these that is primarily based in dialogue because each individual
life was part of a tripartite structure: a Greek \textit{Life} paired with a Roman \textit{Life} followed by a
\textit{Syncrisis} in which the two figures were compared and contrasted. The \textit{Lives} were
therefore designed to dialogue with one another and the reader was meant to examine the
character traits of his figures philosophically as one was supposed to do in Plato’s own

\textsuperscript{35} Dillon 1977:230.
dilaogues. Similarly, the *Platonic Questions*, ostensibly an early form of the ἐρωταπόκρισις (see chapter 2), actually serves as a commentary on a number of passages from the *Timaeus*,\(^{36}\) again reaffirming Plutarch’s primary interest in the dialogue form. Even the *Isis and Osiris*, also on the surface a treatise that offers a Platonic explanation for Egyptian religion, is addressed as a kind of question-and-answer dialogue, as we will see below. Bringing dialogue to bear on other philosophical genres was already a part of the Platonic tradition before Plutarch, but Plutarch was especially aware of the consequences (both literary and philosophical) of doing so, which directly addressed his interest in mediating between the polarities pointed out, as we have seen above, by Swain, Lamberton, Anderson, and myself. In the section that follows, we will examine how Plutarch attempted to redefine the Platonic dialogue as an integral part of his philosophical project.

Since I argue that Plutarch’s generic outlook was fundamentally dialogic, my approach to Plutarch’s literary persona is primarily influenced by recent work that has studied his appropriation of the literary medium of the Platonic dialogue. Though the full extent of Plutarch’s “dialogue” has yet to be explored, there has been some good preliminary work. Because Plutarch has been seen as a New Academic Skeptic, the dialogue provides “a perfect vehicle for the juxtaposition of competing interpretations.”\(^{37}\) This is only part of the problem, however, because the dialogue (at least the dialogues we

\(^{36}\) Opsomer 1996.

\(^{37}\) Lamberton 2001:155-79. Lamberton is, however, sensitive to the literary element in Plato’s own dialogues and does significant work with the frames of Plutarch’s dialogues, particularly with regard to the texts I will be exploring below, arguing that Plutarch’s dialogues are “deeply personal.”
will be looking at) not only presents competing interpretations, but also tries to mediate between them. Plutarch does this, as I will argue, in order to find a place for Delphi in philosophy—a goal that is dramatized within the interpersonal relationships and interactions of the characters themselves. In *The E at Delphi*, as we will see, six characters present six different interpretations of the possible symbolic value of the *E*, the true meaning of which is never revealed (just as the true definition of a given virtue is rarely revealed in Plato’s own dialogues). Plutarch’s point in the dialogue is not to provide an answer to the problem, but as in many of Plato’s own dialogues, to show his readers how to go about approaching it (and how not to). In this text, for example, Plutarch combines something traditionally Platonic (i.e., the use of the *aporetic* dialogue) with something traditionally skeptic (i.e., the presentation of several different points of view) in one text. In fact, one of Plutarch’s own broader philosophical projects was to show that “the skeptical Academy did not constitute a break in the Platonic tradition,” which required Plutarch to find common ground between many different positions.

Lamberton has studied Plutarch’s adaptation of two elements of Plato’s dialogues in particular—the frame and myth. He argues that Plutarch employed the frame to show the great distance between human beings and the truth, while he told myths to show the power of human reason to interpret them. For Lamberton, Plutarch’s dialogues serve as a powerful protreptic to philosophy, simultaneously reminding his readers of the distance between them and the truth while encouraging them to attain it nonetheless. While I think Lamberton is right in his assessment of the frame and myth, his general approach could

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39 Lamberton 2001:140-150.
be pushed further, particularly with regard to the arguments themselves in the dialogues I want to examine more closely. It is clear that in *The E at Delphi*, for example, the true meaning of the *E* is out of human reach (and therefore an epistemological impossibility), but the dialogue itself (despite there being no mythical element in it) shows the variety of ways the human mind may approach the problem. Plutarch shows an epistemological progression of increasingly better ways to approach it. It so happens that in this text, moreover, the *E* is a religious symbol, the subject of priestly knowledge that is ultimately subjected to philosophical investigation. In the section that follows, we will therefore look more closely not only at Plutarch’s mediation between the Platonic and Academic dialogues but also at how he employed this medium to integrate the two sides of his persona into a coherent philosophy that accounts for the place of theology in philosophy and for his own ambiguous place in the tradition.

### 3.3.1 The Delphic Dialogues

In the ancient world, Delphi was the one place where individuals and cities could go to seek all kinds of knowledge, but, as far as we know, Plutarch was the first to actually set a series of Platonic dialogues there. Since the majority of the Platonic dialogues are set in and around the city of Athens, Plutarch’s choice of Delphi is striking. By Plutarch’s time, Athens was associated with philosophical study (despite the decentralization of
philosophy in the Hellenistic period),\(^{40}\) and Delphi with the Oracle. Plutarch’s choice is deliberate and shows, as we will see more fully below, that he conceived of Delphi as a center for philosophical reflection. In fact, at the beginning of *The E at Delphi*, Plutarch himself draws attention to the fact that the inscriptions at Delphi (here he refers specifically to the ‘γνῶθι σαυτόν’ and ‘μηδὲν ἁγαν’) inspired many philosophical debates, inquiries, and discourses, taking direct aim at the Stoics and Epicureans (*The E 385d*). Plutarch is unique because of his claim that Delphi was not simply a place where one could begin his philosophical journey, it was the *ideal place*.\(^{41}\) In doing this, Plutarch not only joined the two aspects of his persona together, he also crossed cultural expectations and categories: the shrine at Delphi also became a center of philosophical enlightenment and the priest of Apollo also became a Platonic philosopher.

The contentious relationship between Delphi and philosophy is also well attested

\(^{40}\) On the decentralization of philosophy and Athens, see Sedley (2003). In contrast, one might also point to Tertullian’s famous questions at *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7.9 to show that Athens was nonetheless equated with philosophical study: *quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? quid academiae et ecclesiae? quid haereticis et christianis?* (What do Athens and Jerusalem have in common? The Academy and the Church? Heretics and Christians?) Here, Athens is equated with the Academy and therefore the city is equated with a particular ideal: philosophy. One must keep in mind, of course, that Tertullian was writing after Plutarch (c. 160-220) and approached the problem from a Christian tradition, speaking specifically about the old Platonic Academy. But it was true by the Roman period that one would go to Athens to study philosophy, particularly the Platonic Academy. See, for example, Plutarch’s *Life of Cicero* 4, in which he states that Cicero had gone to Athens to specifically hear the lectures of Antiochus of Ascalon and had vowed, despite disapproving of Antiochus’ break with the New Academy, that if driven out of public life, he would “change his home to Athens where one could quietly enjoy the pursuit of philosophy.”

\(^{41}\) Plutarch’s Delphi, even in the *Lives*, gives particularly philosophical advice. In the *Life of Cicero* 5, for example, Plutarch relates a story of a young Cicero visiting the Oracle to learn how he could become more illustrious in his political career. The Oracle’s response was “to make his own nature his guide, and not the opinion of the many.” We are reminded here of Stoics (“live in accordance with nature”) as well as Plato (who expressed a definitive distrust of knowledge derived from the ‘majority’).
in the Platonic tradition. In fact, the difficult and dangerous relationship between Socrates and the Delphic Apollo is a theme of the *Apology*. In his response to the charges of his “first accusers” that he teaches subterranean physics and astronomy (περιεργάζεται ξητῶν τά τε ὑπὸ γῆς καὶ οὐράνια) and makes the weaker speech the stronger (τὸν ἢπτο λόγον χρείττο ποιῶν), Socrates claims that these are not part of his teachings (ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τούτων, ὥς ἄνδρες Ἀθηναίοι, οὐδὲν μέτεστιν) and are merely the product of slander (ἀλλ’ ὅστις φησὶ ψεύδεται τε καὶ ἐπὶ διαβολῇ τῇ ἐμῇ λέγει), because he admits that he was unclear about what sort of wisdom he had. He then goes on to tell the story of Chairephon, who went to Delphi to ask the oracle “whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates” (εἴ τις ἐμοῦ εἴη σοφώτερος). The source of the charges, Socrates argues, was his philosophical investigation of the priest’s proclamation that no one was wiser by visiting the politicians, poets, and craftsmen to disprove it (Plat. *Apol.* 19b-23a). For Socrates, it was precisely this challenging of priestly claims that led to the charges brought against him. Plutarch in the Delphic dialogues subjects Apollo to the same philosophical scrutiny. Plutarch’s claim that Apollo incites his consultants to pursue philosophy has a precedent in Socrates himself.

Plutarch’s Delphic dialogues consist of three texts: *The E at Delphi* (περὶ τοῦ Εἰ ἐν Δελφοῖς), *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse* (περὶ τοῦ μὴ χρημ. ἐμετρα νῦν τήν πυθίαν), and *The Obsolescence of Oracles* (περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπῶν χρηστηρίων). Most scholars have placed the writing of these dialogues later in Plutarch’s life while he was already priest at Delphi and set the order of composition as

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Obsolescence, The E, and finally Oracles No Longer in Verse. Each of these texts presents a philosophical dialogue on issues facing Delphi during Plutarch’s tenure: the meaning of the dedicatory “E” at the Delphi Oracle; the reasons why oracular pronouncements were given in prose rather than in verse; and possible reasons why the influence of the oracular shrine had experienced a marked decline. Though these texts have been generally read as providing information about how the shrine may have worked in the second century and potentially even earlier (given that Plutarch’s characters often give historical accounts), there is the general feeling that they are “infuriatingly indirect and notoriously difficult to use” as solid evidence for divination at Delphi. There are a number of reasons for this, not least that The Oracles No Longer

43 Becchi (2000), following Babut (1992), has this sequence. I am ultimately not trying to determine the probable order of these texts because they are so interrelated by character, ideas, and overall structure that the question is irrelevant to my discussion. To take just one example, Plutarch’s brother, Lamprias, appears foolish in The E at Delphi and unable to make a philosophical argument, but in The Obsolescence, he is virtually the leader of the discussion. As readers, Plutarch surely intends us to compare the two portraits, but we have no idea which he intended us to read first; it was probably neither. For this reason, I begin with The E because the events of the narrated dialogue are prior to The Obsolescence, but my choice to do so is solely based on this and not an admission or argument about order of composition.


45 See, e.g., Russell 1973:15-17; for a more recent treatment, see Johnston 2008:45-49. Her analysis, however, is sensitive to the literary problems associated with using Plutarch’s Delphic Dialogues as solid evidence for the function and activity of the shrine.


47 For a standard introduction to the traditional views about Delphi, see Parke and Wormell 1956. See also Fontenrose (1978) for another examination of the evidence for Delphi. Interestingly enough, Fontenrose opposes the view that the oracle was deliberately ambiguous. Still, the actual historical circumstances of the activity of the oracle is not my interest here, only Plutarch’s portrayal of them.
*Given in Verse* is misleading because we know from inscriptional evidence from the period in which this text may have been written (most likely between 79 and 120) that there were in fact oracles given in verse.\(^{48}\) Plutarch’s reasons for saying that they were not are puzzling, but it does allow us to say that Plutarch’s intention with these texts was not to provide a catalogue of the challenges he faced at Delphi during his tenure as one of the two permanent priests there. Rather, as we will see below, Plutarch intends the Delphic dialogues to interrogate the relationship between Apollo and philosophy. Furthermore, Lamberton has suggested that if Plutarch were to catalogue religious practices, it may violate the general reticence imposed on priests about the mysteries they observed that we find throughout Greek literature.\(^{49}\) We can resolve these two problems—both of historical inaccuracy and a conflict of interest in revealing sacred mysteries—by recognizing that providing information about the oracular shrine was not Plutarch’s aim to begin with. It has been suggested that it was Plutarch’s goal to use Platonic philosophy to interpret the religious mysteries of Delphi\(^{50}\) but in this section, I will show that this cannot be the *whole* story because Plutarch presented these specific challenges as an occasion for writing philosophical dialogue, given the fact that, for Plutarch, religious phenomena were invitations from the gods to philosophy. I contend that Plutarch is not simply applying Platonic arguments to the religious symbols at Delphi; he uses those symbols to highlight their power as protreptic to philosophy. As my

\(^{48}\) Lamberton 2001:159.


\(^{50}\) Becchi 2000:72 and 72 n. 5: “così dal piano religioso il discorso si allarga a temi più schiettamente filosofici che permettono a Plutarco di fondere religione delfica e philosofia platonica,” as well as his citations for this particular position. He follows Babut (1994) especially.
reading of *The Obsolescence of Oracles* will show, it is not only that Plutarch wanted to
Platonize the Delphic rites, but also that the Delphic rites were in fact aiming at
philosophical inquiry to begin with and should be best interpreted through those means.

### 3.3.2 The E at Delphi

*The E at Delphi* is a philosophical dialogue that presents six interpretations of the
dedication of a series of objects at Delphi in the form of the letter *epsilon* (*The E 385f-386a*).51 The interpretations, however, extend beyond just the letter itself, to include the
diphthong ‘ει,’ because pronouncing the letter would have presumably made this sound
(not unlike, I suppose, our spelling ‘jay’ for the letter ‘J’).52 The *epsilon* for Plutarch
apparently had some symbolic value, which could be accessed only if subjected to
philosophical scrutiny. In this text, Plutarch’s goal is not to provide the “true
interpretation” of the E at Delphi—because the point of the E is in fact to incite
philosophical discussion—nor to simply provide a Platonic interpretation of it. As we
will see, for Plutarch the real power of Delphi is its ability to spur on philosophy.

Religious artifacts therefore should be used as an introduction to philosophy.

*The E at Delphi* is the only Delphic dialogue in which Plutarch appears himself,
but there is a definite distinction between the authorial *ego* and the speaker in the framed
dialogue. The text begins with a dedication to an Athenian poet Sarapion, whom we

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51 On the archaeological record of this particular type of dedication, see Bates 1925. This kind of
dedication may have been first introduced in the archaic period, but by Plutarch’s time there may
have been at least three different examples of it. For ancient evidence, see Pausanias 10.24.1.

52 See also Lamberton 2001:157.
know both from *Table Talk* and *The Oracles No Longer Given in Verse*. In this opening frame, Plutarch distances himself from the philosophical opinions he professes within the dialogue itself by making his occasion for writing the dialogue as clear as possible. He says in a passage that we will discuss in more detail below that a number of visitors to Delphi had asked him about the E and that this reminded him of a conversation he had many years ago when he had first begun his study at the Platonic Academy under Ammonius. The Plutarch in the dialogue proper is therefore a much younger version (and presumably a literary creation) of the narrator of the work’s introduction, clearly before he had ever become priest at Delphi. The distance Plutarch establishes in this text is as temporal as it is personal, thus allowing us to make a distinction between the *aspiring* philosopher Plutarch and the elder priest-philosopher. The frame device therefore not only sets the debate between theology and philosophy in the figure of Plutarch, but also in the dialogue proper because it interrogates the discrepancy between the knowledge kept by the gods and the limited capacity of human beings to attain it. The inner dialogue attempts to provide a possible path for the interpretation of the religious symbol, through priestly and philosophical means. The E stands in as both a symbol meaningful to the gods and a potential occasion for aspiring philosophers to interpret it. But it is not that Platonic philosophy (or any philosophy for that matter) can provide the answer to the puzzle; it, in fact, cannot. For Plutarch, rather, the very act of engaging in interpretation

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53 At *Table Talk* 1.10, Sarapion is given a banquet for his victory with a chorus.

54 Contrary to what I suggest here, Lamberton (2001:155-6) has argued that the “distancing static of the frame is minimal.”

proves that Delphi and religious wisdom are serving their purpose: giving human beings the opportunity to become philosophers and to subject divine signs to philosophical scrutiny.

Before turning to the dialogue itself, I want to draw attention to the initial dedication because Plutarch subverts the cultural and intellectual associations that accompany both Athens and Delphi that we discussed at the beginning of this section in order to treat Delphi as an ideal place for philosophical study. Plutarch also conflates the categories of philosophy and religion as he both treats the dialogue as a sacrifice and reverses the directionality of philosophy: instead of coming from Athens to Delphi, philosophy goes to Athens from Delphi.⁵⁶ Plutarch dedicates the text to Sarapion, a poet in Athens, and, in so doing, appeals to the language of sacrifice:

ὅρα δ’ ὅσον ἔλευθερότητι καὶ κάλλει τὰ χρηματικὰ δῶρα λείπεται τῶν ἀπὸ λόγου καὶ σοφίας, καὶ διδόναι καλὸν ἕστι καὶ διδόντας ἀντατεῖν ὡμοία παρὰ τῶν λαμβανόντων. ἐγὼ γοῦν πρὸς σὲ καὶ διὰ σοῦ τοῖς αὐτῷ φίλοις τῶν Πυθικῶν λόγων ἐνίους ὥσπερ ἀπαρχὰς ἀποστέλλων ὄμολογῳ πρὸς Πυθικῶν λόγων ἐνίους ἀποστελλόμην ὑμῖν παρὲ ὰμόν…(The E 384d)

Observe that, as far as generosity and beauty are concerned, monetary gifts fall short of gifts of discourse and wisdom. There is beauty in giving these and beauty in asking for similar ones in return from those who received them. At any rate, I am sending to you, and then through you, to my friends down there, some

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⁵⁶ The reversal of the directionality of philosophy is a theme revisited in the Second Sophistic more generally. Dio, for example, suggests in a number of places that his awakening to philosophy occurred during his exile away from Greece. The same seems to have been true of Favorinos and Musonius Rufus; for a discussion of exile, philosophy, and identity see Whitmarsh’s essay “‘Greece Is the World’: Exile and Identity in the Second Sophistic” in Goldhill 2001. Plutarch here, of course, is not speaking of exile, but of a direction reversal. An analogous, but by no means exactly similar case may be Lucian’s Nigrinus, in which a student of Nigrinus goes to Rome to study with the philosopher (though his initial purpose was not to study with the philosopher, but to cure a mysterious “eye disease”) and brings back his newfound philosophical enlightenment presumably to Greece (though Lucian does not make this as clear as Plutarch does in his dedication). But it is nonetheless interesting that Nigrinus is not operating in Athens.
of our Delphic Dialogues, as first-fruits, so to speak; and in doing so, I admit that that I expect others—both more of them and of better quality—from you…

Plutarch’s formulation of his dedication here inverts the expected order. Typically, one would expect philosophical dialogues to be coming from Athens, the place where Socrates lived, where Plato wrote his dialogues, and where one would go to study in the Academy. Clearly Plutarch expects to find a receptive audience there, since he intends the text to be read by both Sarapion and his friends who live in Athens. What is striking, though, is that Plutarch writes the dedication of his text in the form of a dedication to the god. He calls his dialogue the “first-fruits” (ἀπαρχάς), mimicking the language of sacrifice (as we will see below when Lamprias calls the E the “first-fruits” of the Wise Men for Apollo), with the expressed and hoped for expectation (ὁμολογῶ προσδοκᾶν) of something in return, in this case, better dialogues (ἐτέρους καὶ πλείονας καὶ βελτίων παρ’ ὑμῶν). From this we can infer that Plutarch intended this his text to inspire further discussion and literary creation, and as we will see, this is actually inspired by Delphi; further, this indicates a reversal of directionalities: Plutarch is sending philosophy to Athens and sacrifices from Delphi, rather than the other way around. By conflating the categories and expectations of philosophy and religion, Plutarch is setting the stage for his philosophical treatment of his priestly duties. Plutarch’s comparison of a philosophical work to a sacrifice, moreover, points to the limited human nature of philosophy, given that sacrifices are offered by men to the gods, not something that comes from the gods to men (as Iamblichus might say).

Since Plutarch’s claim to be sending sacrifices from Delphi is blatantly tongue-in-cheek (marked by the apologetic ὡσπερ), I am far more interested in how Plutarch
envisions the role of Delphi in philosophical discourse. As the dedication continues,

Plutarch reviews Apollo’s sphere of influence over “the problems connected with our

life” and widens that sphere to include philosophical investigations:

"ὁ δ’ όν φίλος Ἀπόλλων ἔσωκε τὰς μὲν περὶ τὸν βίον ἀπορίας ἰάσθαι καὶ
dιαλύειν θεμιστεύων τοῖς χρωμένοις, τὰς δὲ περὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτὸς ἐνίέναι
καὶ προβάλλειν τῷ φύσει φιλοσόφῳ τῆς ψυχῆς δρεξίον ἐμπιστεύων ἄγωγόν ἐπὶ
tὴν ἀλήθειαν, ὡς ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς δήλον ἔστι καὶ τῇ [περὶ] τοῦ εἶ
καθιερώσει. (The E 384f).

Well, then, our beloved Apollo seems to cure and to solve the difficulties of our

lives in the oracles which he gives his consultants, while the difficulties

connected with our reason, he actually seems to inspire and propound for the man

who is naturally a philosopher, implanting a desire in his soul to ascend to truth.

This is clear in many other ways, but particularly in the consecration of the 'E'.

In this passage, Plutarch acknowledges Apollo as a patron of philosophers in much the

same way as Socrates presents him in the Apology. He says explicitly that though Apollo

can help men solve the practical problems of their daily lives (by this he must surely

mean the questions included later in Nicander’s speech: “should I wed?” “should I travel”

etc.), he actually poses deeper questions to those who have philosophical natures. For

those that are naturally predisposed to philosophy, a trip to the Oracle can awaken a

desire for a higher truth. In this text, however, Plutarch’s focus is an interpretation of the

epsilon, in fact many interpretations of the epsilon, that are philosophical in nature.

Delphi is the perfect place for philosophy, not only because Apollo himself implants the

desire for truth in men there, but also because there are many riddles located in Delphi,

riddles that can only be examined through philosophical investigation.

Apollo is thus presented as a kind of inspiration to philosophy, in the sense that

human beings may not be awakened to it without divine aid. One should note, however,

that unlike Iamblichus, Plutarch is not saying that the gods bring about ultimate

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philosophical fulfillment. Plutarch deliberately contrasts in a μὲν... δὲ construction the
difficulties he solves and the difficulties he propounds. Apollo not only inspires (ἐνιέναι)
his consultants to approach the difficulties that require reason (τὰς δὲ περὶ τὸν λόγον
αὐτὸς) philosophically, but he actually poses new ones of his own (προβάλλειν), and
then these aporiai implant within men the desire to aspire for higher truth (τῆς ψυχῆς
ὄρεξ ἐμποιῶν ἀγωγὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν). Apollo provides no more assistance; in
fact, the only difficulties he definitively solves are those that regard human life. The only
help the potential philosopher will receive from Apollo is an awakening to philosophy,
not the deliverance of wisdom. It is this fact that makes Delphi an ideal location from
which to send a philosophical dialogue and in which to stage one.

But Plutarch himself, the author of the text and priest of Apollo, admits that his
interest in the epsilon is a new development; it is only after he became the priest that he
wanted to address it. By the end of the dedication, Plutarch finally discloses his persona,
that of the priest-philosopher:

πολλὰκις οὖν ἄλλοτε τὸν λόγον ἐν τῇ σχολῇ προβαλλόμενον ἐκεῖνας ἄφρεμα καὶ παρελθὼν Ἐξαγχον ἐπὶ τῶν ἐν ἐνδήληθην ἐξόντες τοῖς συμφιλοτιμομένοις, οὕς εὐθὺς ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀπάφειν μέλλοντας οὐκ ἦν εὐπρεπὲς παρατείνειν πάντως ἄκουσαί τι προθυμουμένους. ὡς δὲ καθίσας παρὰ τὸν νεών τὰ μὲν αὐτὸς ἠξέλειμην ζητείν τὰ δ’ ἐκεῖνοις ἐρωτάν, ὑπὸ τοῦ τόπου καὶ τῶν λόγων αὐτῶν ἀνεμνήσθην ἃ πάλαι ποτὲ καθ’ ὅν καθώς ἐπεδήμει Νέρων ἤρχοσαμεν Αμμωνίου καὶ τινῶν ἄλλων διεξάντων ἐνταῦθα τῆς αὐτῆς ἀπορίας ὁμοίως ἐμπεσοῦσθης.57

Many other times this discussion (i.e., what the E at Delphi signified) came up in
school, but I tried to avoid it and declined to engage with it. Recently, however,
my sons caught me in a heated discussion with some visitors, who were going to
leave Delphi right away. It was not appropriate for me to avoid the subject or
excuse myself, since they really wanted to hear something about it. As we sat

57 The E at Delphi 385a-b.
down near the temple, I began to raise questions myself, and to put others to them. The place and the discussion itself reminded me of what we heard a long time ago from Ammonius and others, at the time of Nero's visit, when the same problem had been posed in the same way.

In this passage, there are clear lines of demarcation between the Plutarch who is narrating the text and the Plutarch who speaks within it. The Plutarch who is narrating the text and addressing it to Sarapion is clearly the priest of Apollo since he was in a heated discussion with visitors and thought it inappropriate to avoid the topic. Further, the way Plutarch describes his interaction with his sons and the visitors (τὰ μὲν αὐτὸς ἱμαμην ζητεῖν τὰ δ’ ἐκείνους ἐρωτᾶν) reminds us of the “question-and-answer” methodology we saw operating in both Plotinos’ school and in the way Iamblichus addresses Porphyry in the Mysteries (σύ τε καλῶς ποιεῖς ἃ εἰς γνῶσιν τοῖς ἱερεύσιν, ὡς φιλούσι, περὶ θεολογίας προτείνων ἐρωτήματα: Myst. 1.2). Plutarch’s dialogic persona is at this point also revealed. He was a beginning philosopher, at least at the time the dialogue was set (during Nero’s visit to Delphi in AD 67), and as a philosopher he apparently had little interest in interpreting divine signs. Yet, after assuming the duties of a priest of Apollo, he found that he was forced to engage with it. But being forced to engage with it does not necessarily mean that Plutarch was forced to write a text about it, or to send that text to Sarapion and his friends in Athens. The narrator Plutarch found value in this interpretive exercise at least at the time of writing, inspired by his new-found understanding of Apollo and the oracular shrine in Delphi.

After the initial dedication, Plutarch recounts the conversation of six interlocutors on the meaning of the E. Ammonius, Plutarch’s teacher, opens the discussion by referencing the Stoic etymologies of Apollo’s various epithets and how they correspond
to the philosophical process: Pythian is related to inquiry (διαπυνθάνεσθαι); Delian and Phanaian to clarity and revelation of the truth (δηλοῦται καὶ ὑποφαίνεται τῆς ἀληθείας); Ismenian to knowledge (τοῖς ἔχουσι τὴν ἐπιστήμην); and Leschenorian to dialectic and philosophical discourse (χρώμενοι τῷ διαλέγεσθαι καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, *The E* 385b-c). 58 Ammonius then goes on to speak of the power of Delphi to incite philosophical thought:

"Since," Ammonius said, "inquiry is the beginning of philosophy, and the beginning of inquiry is wonder and confusion, it makes good sense that the majority of what has to do with the god is concealed in riddles and needs an account of ‘the why’ and an explanation for its cause.”

Ammonius whose base was in Athens here reveals his reasons for bringing his students to Delphi: Apollo is the god who makes human beings ask questions, a statement that signals another role reversal since it is usually human beings who ask the god questions, implying, again, the limited human capacity to achieve philosophical fulfillment.

Ammonius goes on to cite a number of these ‘riddles:’ the fact that there are only two fates depicted in Delphi, where everywhere else there are three; the fact that pine is used for an undying fire rather than laurel; and the fact that women cannot touch the shrine. All of these things, Ammonius says, “act as a lure to incite investigation, research, and discussion” (παρακαλεῖ πρὸς τὸ σκοπεῖν τι καὶ ἀκούειν καὶ διαλέγεσθαι). 59

58 For the Stoic background of Apollo, see Cornutus 13 and the *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 1.543. For a discussion of Stoic etymology and allegory, see Long 2001:58-83.

59 Compare Ammonius’ claim that wonder inspires philosophical discourse with the *Theaiteutos*.
It is now becoming clear how religious ritual relates to philosophy in Plutarch: it incites us to philosophy, and what follows in the text are various philosophical interpretations of the *Ε*. Each of the text’s six speakers offers his own interpretation. The first to speak, after Ammonius’ introduction, is Plutarch’s brother Lamprias. He explains that the *Ε* is symbolic of the number five (it being the fifth letter in the Greek alphabet), which stood for the Five Sages. As Lamprias explains, the number is traditionally seven (including, according to Lamprias’ list, Chilon, Thales, Solon, Bias, Pittacus, Cleobulus and Periander), but since Cleobulus and Periander were tyrants, the other five went to Delphi and dedicated the *Ε*, “thus testifying on their own behalf before the god that they were five in number and renouncing and rejecting the seventh and sixth as having no connection to themselves” (*The Ε* 385f: μαρτυρομένους μὲν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν πρὸς τὸν θεόν ὁτι πέντ’ εἰσὶ, τὸν δ’ ἔβδομον καὶ τὸν ἐκτὸν ἀποστοιουμένους καὶ ἀποβάλλοντας ὡς οὐ προσήκοντας αὑτοῖς.) This traditional explanation, though not really philosophical, is quickly rejected by Ammonius and the other speakers in favor of epistemologically more sophisticated approaches. Having dealt with the traditional explanation, the other characters begin philosophizing.

If we treat Ammonius as introducing the debate and the group’s rejection of Lamprias as a rejection of non-philosophical explanations, the first pair of speakers (Nicander and Theon) addresses the possibility that the *Ε* signifies the particle “εἰ,” meaning “if” or “whether.” Nicander, the priest at Delphi at the time, first suggests the

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155d: μάλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν· οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἄρχη φιλοσοφίας ἢ αὐτή. See also Becchi 2000:74-5.
“εἰ-if,” because, as one might expect, his interest regards ritualistic procedure:

σχῆμα καὶ μορφὴ τῆς πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐντεύξεως καὶ ταξιν ἡγεμονικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐρωτήμασιν ἔχει τῶν χρωμένων ἐκατότετο διατυπωθεῖσα, εἰ νικήσουσιν, εἰ γαμήσουσιν, εἰ συμφέρει πλεῖν, εἰ γεωργεῖν, εἰ ἀποδημεῖν. (The E 386c)

It (i.e., the “If”) is the figure and form of consultation of the God; it has a leading place in the questions of those who consult him, and inquire, If they will conquer; If they will marry; If it is advisable to sail; If to farm; If to travel.

The argument seems practical enough, but Ammonius’ students have yet to chime in.

Nicander’s respondent is Theon, a friend of Plutarch (and presumably of Sarapion as well, given that Plutarch assumes their acquaintance), who expands the “εἰ-if” argument to include a discussion of logic and the syllogism (i.e., “if it is day, then it is light”), a fact which Theon connects with Ammonius’ initial claims that Apollo is a god of philosophy:

ἐπεὶ τοῖνυν φιλοσοφία μὲν περὶ ἀλήθειαν ἐστιν ἀλήθειας δὲ φῶς ἀπόδειξεν ἀποδείξεως δ’ ἀρχὴ τὸ συνημμένον, εἰκότως ἡ τοῦτο συνέχουσα καὶ ποιοῦσα δύναμις ὑπὸ σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν τῷ μάλιστα τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἡγαπηκότι θεῷ καθιερώθη. (The E 387a)

Since then philosophy is concerned with truth, and the illumination of truth is demonstration, and the principle of demonstration is the syllogism, it seems likely that the faculty that includes and produces this was consecrated by the wise men to that god who is above all a lover of truth.

Theon connects the logical E to Apollo because the protasis-apodosis connection is itself the root of the philosophical search for truth. According to Theon’s argument, the E was consecrated by philosophers to their patron god because the E is symbolic of the syllogism, the vehicle through which philosophical reflection and progress occurs. For Theon, this kind of philosophical inquiry is connected with the mantic associations of Apollo. The ability to know the future derives from knowing the results of the present and past (καὶ μάντις μὲν ὁ θεὸς μαντικὴ δὲ τέχνη περὶ τὸ μέλλον ἐκ τῶν παρόντων ἢ παρωφχημένων), but understanding what will result based on present and
past conditions requires that one understand Nature itself. Apollo, then, is a prophetic god simply because he has a superior understanding of Nature.

Theon’s statement about Nature’s role in predicting the future introduces a discussion about the E’s cosmic implications: that somehow the E is more than just a symbol for the philosophical process, but something symbolic for what the philosophical process aims at. In the next pair of speeches, Eustrophus and the young Plutarch consider Pythagorean possibilities as the two speak from numerology, which is significant because, as we saw in the first chapter, Iamblichus had understood Pythagorean numerology to be the origin of both scientific inquiry and sacrificial practices. Here we have, two centuries earlier, a similar claim: that numbers are intimately tied to dedications to the gods. As Eustrophus explains, mathematics is the principle upon which proper sacrifice is based:

οὕτως οὐδ’ ἡμᾶς τοὺς πάντα συλλήβδην πράγματα καὶ φύσεις καὶ ἄρχας θείων ὤμοι καὶ ἀνθρωπείαν ἐν ἀριθμῷ τιθεμένους καὶ πολὺ μᾶλιτα τῶν καλῶν καὶ τιμῶν τούτων ἣγεμόνα ποιομένους καὶ κύριον εἰκὸς ἔσχισαν ἄγειν, ἀλλ’ ἀπαρξασθαί τῷ θεῷ τῆς φύλης μαθηματικῆς, αὐτὸ μὲν ἐφ’ ἑαυτῷ μήτε δυνάμει μήτε μορφῇ μήτε τῷ ῥήματι τὸ Ε̣ τῶν ἄλλων στοιχείων διαφέρειν ἤγουμένους, ὡς δὲ μεγάλου πρὸς τὰ ὅλα καὶ κυρίου σημείου ἀριθμοῦ προτετιμῆσθαι τῆς εἰκόνας, ἀφ’ οὗ τὸ ἀριθμεῖν οἱ σοφοὶ πεμπάζειν ὀνόμαζον.

Now then for those of us who assign all things collectively, all natures and principles divine as well as human, to number and make this theory more than any other our leader and authority in all that is beautiful and honorable, we can no longer be silent, rather we should offer to the god the first-fruits of our beloved Mathematics. We believe that the E, taken by itself, is not unlike the other letters either in power, shape, or word but that it has been held in honor as a symbol of a great and authoritative number, the “pempad,” from which wise men gave the name pompazein for counting by fives.

Eustrophos claims that the E represents the number five (since epsilon is the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet), and intimates that the E is a “first-fruit” offering to the god, and therefore anticipates what Iamblichus would claim claimed about the Pythagorean development of proper sacrifice in accordance with Number Theory. Eustrophus, however, like Theon, is does not know what exactly the E may be symbolic of, though he does clearly
articulate that it is certainly a symbol for the most authoritative number (σημεῖον ἀριθμοῦ προτετιμῆσθαι) thereby indicating that the E signifies something that connects Nature, Apollo, and philosophical discovery.

It is in the next speech, that of the younger Plutarch, that the cosmic implications of the number five are expressed, relating not only to the relationship between numbers, but also to how those numbers appear over and over in Nature. According to Plutarch, the number five is the first real number in the sense that it is created from adding the first even number (i.e., two) with the first odd number (i.e., three) and therefore comes to symbolize marriage itself because it represents the union of the female even with the male odd. Similarly, the number five stands for Nature itself, because Nature is continuously repeating itself in time (i.e., a chicken produces an egg, which produces another chicken, which produces another egg, and so on) in the same way that the multiples of five produce either itself repeatedly (as in 5, 15, 25, 35, 45…) or a zero (as in 10, 20, 30, 40…). Since the five appears eternal or at least as a part of the eternal process, it symbolizes Apollo, a deathless and consummately young god, and the E is therefore dedicated to him. The significance of the number five, as Plutarch argues, is especially

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60 This topic is revisited by a more mature Lamprias in Obsolescence 427a-431a, a passage we will not discuss below. See Plese 1999 for a discussion of the Platonic background to the arguments.

61 According to the Pythagoreans, “one” is not really a number since it is itself the rubric by which other numbers are measured. We could also compare this with the Neoplatonic “One,” which is itself the reason for the existence of everything else, and thus plurality. See my discussion in chapter 2.

62 Plutarch contrasts the number five with other numbers which do not continually reproduce itself in their multiples, with the exception of six (which does so when it is squared). Apollo is then equated with five and Dionysus six, since his form is forever changing. On Plutarch’s
pertinent to music and harmonics, but even more so to Plato, who seems to have organized ontologically the physical world, the human being, and even the cosmos itself around the number five. At the most basic level, there are five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and aether or light), which are organized into the five different formations of triangles in the *Timaeus* (pyramid, cube, octahedron, icosahedron, and dodecahedron).

Each of these are perceptible to the five senses, which correspond to each element: touch depends upon earth (since touch requires something sturdy and resistant), taste on water (since taste must absorb the thing tasted), hearing on air (since it is through the air that sound travels), smell on fire (since smell is “an exhalation and engendered by heat”), and sight on light or aether. Similarly, the world is organized into five parts (one part above, another below, and three in the middle), with five beings that occupy it (gods, demigods, heroes, humans, and animals). The human soul is divided into five parts (nutritive, perceptive, appetitive, spirited, and reasoning) and there are five first principles according to *Cratylus* 409a (Being, Identity, Difference, Motion, and Rest). To top it all off, there is more than just this one world, there are, of course, five according to *Timaeus* 31a.

Plutarch’s analysis of the potential symbolism of the “E-as-5” theory is perhaps the most comprehensive anthology of different philosophical positions we have seen thus far. It combines many different interests of Middle Platonism: in Pythagorean numerology, daimonology, Aristotelian and Platonic physics.\(^{63}\)

Ammonius speaks once again as a response to what he has heard and brings the contrast between Apollo and Dionysus as symbolic of Middle Platonic Dualism, see Chlup 2000:138-58.\(^{63}\)

Dillon 1977:114-183. On the Platonism of the *E at Delphi*, particularly on Plutarch reliance on the *Philebus* for this and Ammonius’ speech, see Cosenza 1999.
text to a close, carrying an authority that the other speeches lack. He rejects Plutarch’s “E-as-five” theory because the number seven was equally significant both to the god and in Pythagorean Number Theory. As Ammonius explains, his interpretation of the E is entirely a question of metaphysics:

"The "E" does not signify number, nor order, nor a conjunction, nor any other subordinate parts of speech as I see it. No, it is perfectly complete in itself as an address and salutation of the god, which, as soon as he utters it, brings to its speaker’s mind the god’s power. What I mean is that the god welcomes each and every one of us who comes here with the words ‘know thyself,’ which is certainly of no less value than “hello,” and we reply to the god with “you are!,” a truthful, completely honest, and entirely fitting to him alone way of addressing him—an assertion of Being.

Ammonius, here, appears as more authoritative than any of the other speakers and, as such, gives the most authoritative explanation for the meaning of the E. For Ammonius, the E signifies a version of “epsilon-iota,” but this time it is not the “εἰ-if” but the second person singular of the verb “to be,” accented differently: ‘εἶ.’ As Ammonius continues, he rehearses the same metaphysical problems that Plato addresses in his dialogues, as we have seen in the second chapter, the problem of permanence and change in the Timaeus. Ammonius recounts for his beginning students the arguments of Parmenides (i.e., that change is not really real, since whatever changes is not what it was and not what it will be), by contrasting the nature of Apollo as “true being” with that of human beings’ constant growth and development (and thus “change”). For Ammonius, Apollo’s address to us is a reminder of our less than perfect state, and our response of ‘εἶ’ is our human..."
acknowledgement of his metaphysical perfection.

What we have here is actually an epistemological progression in the arguments that inform the speeches, from history to metaphysics. Even though the text itself is aporetic, not all the speeches are equally useful in thinking about the E. Certainly Lamprias’ suggestion is dissatisfactory, but they become progressively more sophisticated in dealing with the activity of the shrine itself (Nicander), philosophical logic (Theon), number theory (Eustrophus), physics (Plutarch), and ultimately metaphysics (Ammonius). In a sense, Plutarch offers here a crash course in the kind of philosophy Delphi can inspire.

In this text, the oracular shrine at Delphi has become something it had not previously been in Greek tradition (with the exception of Socrates’ Delphi in the Apology): a center for philosophical discussion. While all of the characters suggest that Delphi has inspired many philosophical debates and reflections, unique to this text is (1) that the dialogue itself is set there and (2) that a dedication there is taken to have some symbolic value for the philosophical process itself. Ammonius acknowledges that though the inscriptions “know thyself” and “nothing in excess” have been associated with philosophy, they have been taken as sayings rather than investigations. The E requires more imagination and debate as to what it might mean. Plutarch’s dialogue presents us with a number of possible interpretations, of which some are clearly to be rejected while others should be given more weight. As for the former category, Lamprias’ historical suggestion that the E stands for the Wise Men in their assertion that they were five and not seven, as well as Nicander’s suggestion that the E stands for the ritualistic requests of the god are both deepened in the later speeches. Theon takes the “E-as-if” thesis to include the philosophical process of syllogistic and logical argumentation, while Eustrophus and Plutarch redeem the “E-as-five” argument to have its basis in Pythagorean numerology as well as Platonic assertions about the cosmos. Ammonius, with whom we are meant to fully engage, brings the text to a close with a reflection on metaphysics.
Thus, in *The E at Delphi*, Plutarch uses a ritual dedication to inspire philosophical discussion. We may now begin to see how Plutarch envisioned his role as priest at Delphi. His position as priest is *not* to provide answers about what one *should* think in a given situation, a fact which is antithetical to the purpose of those who consult him, as we saw in Nicander’s speech (who viewed the *E* as symbolic of the consultant’s request). The fact that the priest will not provide definitive answers is further exemplified by the medium of the text’s presentation. Though there are six speeches and six opinions, no *definitive* interpretation of the *E* is given, despite some clearly being privileged over others. Whereas it has been previously suggested that the text reflects Plutarch’s skepticism, it seems to me that it points to the fact that he wanted to be seen substantially as a philosopher rather than a priest. The fact that the text is not so much about explaining what the *E* signifies as it is about showing the different interpretive traditions by which one can approach such questions philosophically may even reflect the general Platonic ambivalence about whether knowledge is possible that we discussed in the first chapter. Most importantly, though, Plutarch presents his priestly role and Delphi itself as proper venues for an introduction to philosophy. At the dramatic date of the dialogue, Plutarch as well as the other interlocutors are beginning students; their teacher, Ammonius, has brought them to Delphi to engage in philosophical debate. At the date of composition, however, Plutarch sends the dialogue to Athens with the hope of inspiring further discussion there. Plutarch uses his role as priest to *begin the philosophical process*, not to provide the ultimate end of philosophy: namely knowledge and wisdom.

All this, of course, contrasts with what we have seen in Iamblichus, who posited the ritual practices of theoretical theurgy as bridging the gap between man and god, between ignorance and wisdom. For Iamblichus, the study of theology will eventually help us arrive at knowledge (*episteme*), as we saw, his scientific theology. For Plutarch, a proper understanding of the gods comes not through ritual or through direct contact with the gods.
but through fusing philosophy with theology. Theology may get us started on our journey, but theological tenets, dedications, rituals, and beliefs must be examined philosophically. Plutarch is therefore not a “philosopher-priest,” but a “priest-philosopher,” and his object is not “scientific theology,” that is knowledge about the world as dependent upon knowledge that is given by the gods, but “theological science,” that is, the examination of how the gods have been represented in the world as a place to begin the quest for philosophical enlightenment (what Porphyry would call aphormai, ‘launching-points’). In the next section, we will turn to the Obsolescence of Oracles because in this text we can see both theological and physical explanations for the disappearance of the Oracles and a philosophical approach to priestly wisdom.

3.3.3 Theological Science in The Obsolescence of Oracles

According to the Greek mythological tradition, Delphi was the center of the earth. Lamprias, the text’s narrator and primary interlocutor, addresses Terentius Priscus with a reminder of this fact: “certain eagles or swans, flying from the furthest parts of the earth towards its center, met in Delphi at the omphalos as they say” (Obs. 409e). Yet Plutarch’s Delphi is not the center of the earth, because, as he says, according to Epimenides of Phaestus, “there is no center of the earth…and if there were, only the gods know it, but it is hidden from mortals” (Obs. 409f; Epimen. fr. B11 Diels). Rather, he recasts it as the center of the philosophical universe—the place where grammarians, theologians, and philosophers meet and can discuss topics beyond the oracle itself.

The dialogue restages the famous omphalos myth by replacing the eagles that
flew from opposite ends of the earth and met in Delphi with two philosophers. Both of these philosophers were traveling on intellectual business: Demetrius, the grammarian, was on his way to Tarsus from Britain when he met the Spartan Cleombrotus on his way from the Libyan desert to the Persian Gulf. While not much is known about Demetrius’ project, Lamprias tells us that Cleombrotus had been in Egypt, researching his new work:

συνήγεν ἱστορίαν ὀἷον ὑλὴν φιλοσοφίας θεολογίαν ὡσπερ αὐτὸς ἐκάλει τέλος ἐχούσης

a research that would serve as material for a philosophy that had as its goal theology.

These two met in Delphi in the middle of their respective journeys only to find another contingent of philosophers already there. It is in this dialogue, therefore, that theology, in the form of Cleombrotus and the sciences (i.e., epistemai) of philosophy, in the form of the philosophers already present at Delphi, come together.

The object of Cleombrotus’ study is initially unclear (what exactly does a history or research based in philosophy and having “theology” as its end look like?), but in his first exchange with Demetrius, priestly knowledge and philosophical knowledge are set against one another. As Lamprias reveals, Cleombrotus had recently been at the shrine of Ammon in Egypt, and, though generally unimpressed with what he discovered there, was particularly struck by a “lamp that consumed less and less oil each year.” As the priests interpret it:

64 The theme of philosophers heading to Delphi may not be unique to Plutarch. Some scholars have thought that a lost dialogue of Timon of Philos, called Pytho, recounted Timon’s first meeting with Pyrrho at a shrine of Amphiaras when Pyrrho was on his way to Delphi. Scholars speculate that the attempt to connect Pyrrho with Delphi recalled Chairephon’s question to the Oracle about Socrates in the Apology. This makes sense given that the skeptics adopted the trope of Socratic ignorance. See Long 2006:80.
ἀεὶ γὰρ ἐλαττον ἀναλίσκειν ἐλαιον ἐτους ἐκάστου, καὶ τούτο ποιεῖσθαι
tεκμήριον ἑκάστου τῆς τῶν ἐνιαυτῶν ἀνωμαλίας τὸν ὑστερον τοῦ
προάγοντος ἀεὶ τῷ χρόνῳ βραχύτερον ποιούσης· εἰκὸς γὰρ ἐν ἐλάττονι
χρόνῳ τὸ δαπανώμενον ἐλαττὸν εἶναι (Obs 410b-c)

Every year without fail, it (i.e., the lamp) consumes less oil, and they (i.e., the
Egyptian priests) take this as a sign of the lack of consistency in the length of
years with the one year always being shorter in length than the previous one,
because it is reasonable that in less time, the amount of oil the lamp consumes be
less.

Cleombrotus’ recounting of the Egyptian priests’ interpretation evokes surprise
(θαυμασάντων) and ridicule (γελοῖον) in Demetrius and the others present (including
Lamprias and Ammonius) because “with a wick and a lamp” (θρυαλλίδι καὶ λύχνῳ)
they have postulated “a change in the heavens and universe” (τὸν οὐρανὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ τὰ
σύμπαντα μεθιστάντας) and have done away with “mathematical science completely”
(τὴν μαθηματικὴν ἄρδην ἀναιροῦντας). Demetrius’ real problem with the priestly
interpretation is the fact that the priests have drawn big conclusions from small data, and
judging by the reaction of the others present, no one is comfortable with either the
possibility that the years are getting shorter or that the science of mathematics could be
imprecise. Cleombrotus nonetheless defends the priestly interpretation, on the grounds
that individuals draw big conclusions based on small data all the time. In fact,
Cleombrotus’ first set of examples is based in an arena where a grammarian would feel
most comfortable: language. He claims that based on the appearance of the word ‘razor’
(ξυρόν) in Homer’s poems, we assume that the Homeric heroes shaved with a ‘razor’
(which is not itself a ‘big’ conclusion, thus pointing to Cleombrotus’ limited
philosophical abilities). Cleombrotus continues to direct similar examples from Homer to
his audience of philosophers, addressing the sciences of medicine, mathematics, and
physics, all to show that philosophers draw big conclusions based on small data as part of their usual methodology. Plutarch’s Cleombrotus introduces a new kind of analysis to Demetrius, Ammonius, and Lamprias—and one that brings theology and philosophy together by interrogating the priestly claim in terms of physics and astronomy.

Ammonius is the first to recognize the possibilities of what Cleombrotus suggests—that the years may be getting shorter—and does seem to recognize the fact that mathematics may not be able to account for the phenomenon of the mysterious lamp, but certainly the science of physics can, and Ammonius will accept no theological explanations for the phenomenon at all. In fact, there is a funny exchange between Ammonius and Cleombrotus in which the two men are talking about the same phenomenon, but cannot understand one another. Below I quote Ammonius’ speech at length, but it is not essential for the purposes of this argument that I expound the logic or details of it (they can be quite confusing). I wish only to show that while Ammonius is unwilling to accept theological explanations over scientific ones (i.e., those based in physics), Cleombrotus is unwilling to deviate from priestly wisdom.
οὐδὲν δεῖ περαιτέρω τὴν ἀλαζονείαν τοῦ λόγου διελίττειν’ (Obs. 410f)

Ammonius the philosopher was also present and exclaimed: it’s not only the sun, but the whole universe (that may be changing its movements), because the sun’s course in passing from solstice to solstice must inevitably become shorter and not continue to be so large a part of the horizon as the mathematicians say it is, since the southern portion is constantly subject to contracting movement, which brings it closer to the northern portion; and so our summer must become shorter and its temperature lower, as the sun turns about within narrower limits and touches fewer parallels of latitude at the solstitial points; moreover, the phenomenon observed at Syene, were the upright rods on the sun-dials cast no shadow at the time of the summer solstice is bound to be a thing of the past; many of the fixed stars must have gone below the horizon, and some of them must be touching one another, or have become coalescent, as the space separating them disappeared! But if, on the other hand, they are going to assert that, while all the other bodies are without change, the sun displays irregularity in its movements, they will not be able to state the cause of acceleration which affects the sun alone among so many bodies, and they will throw into confusion almost all the celestial mechanics, and into complete confusion those relating to the moon, so that they will have no need of measures of oil to prove the difference. In fact the eclipses will prove it, as the sun more frequently casts a shadow on the moon and the moon on the earth; the other facts are clear, and there is no need to disclose in further detail the quackery of their argument.

I do not want to get into the details of Ammonius’ argument itself, but it is clear that Ammonius will not accept the ‘oil and lamp’ argument from the Egyptian priests as proof for the shortening of the year. Ammonius recognizes the possibility, of course, but he insists on scientific explanations based in the epistemai of philosophy. Cleombrotus, however, neither fully understands Ammonius’ position nor sees anything wrong with the priestly interpretation. Cleombrotus cannot answer Ammonius in the terms Ammonius specified, he can only say:

‘ἀλλὰ μή’ ὁ Κλεόμβροτος ἔφη ‘καὶ τὸ μέτρον αὐτὸς εἶδον· πολλὰ γὰρ ἐδείκνυσαν· τὸ δ’ ἐπέτειον ἀπέδει τῶν παλαιότατων οὐκ ὀλίγον.’

“But,” Cleombrotus said, “I actually saw the measure myself! They showed me many! And this year’s failed to come up to the oldest—and not by a

65 Much of the science expressed here are themes that appear elsewhere in the Moralia. See especially Gallo 1992.
Frustrated by Cleombrotus’ inability to recognize the disastrous consequences and implications of the shortening of the year, Ammonius again tries to seek a natural explanation based on the quality of the oil or the effect of the climate on the combustion of the oil. Recognizing that Cleombrotus and Ammonius will find no common ground, since Cleombrotus can only be convinced by theological authority and Ammonius can only be convinced by scientific proof, Lamprias suggests a new topic: the obsolescence of the oracles, which will satisfy both Cleombrotus (since he can fully explore theological explanations) and Ammonius (who can base his arguments in natural science) and, as we will see, Lamprias can mediate between them. The switch of topic indicates that Plutarch’s primary interest in this text is to fuse theology with science.

The sole purpose of the joke at Cleombrotus’ expense is not to show that he is unintelligent; rather, it gets at a greater issue within the dialogue itself, namely that theology and priestly interpretations of small data are not sufficient for proper investigation about the cosmos, particularly with regard to physics. Lamprias’ suggestion that the topic be changed from questions about the loss of time to the oracle itself may not only seem to be more suited to Cleombrotus, but also serves to show him that philosophical reflection must also be brought to questions generally reserved for theology, in its very sanctum sanctorum, as it were. Lamprias goes on to set out the problem more fully by recounting Delphi’s glorious past and influence on the political decisions of Greece. Lamprias’ first suggestion is that population decline may be a partial explanation for Delphi’s lack of bustle, but the dialogue will take a more philosophical tone. As they walk through the sacred precinct and contrast Delphi’s glorious past with
its meager present, Ammonius, Lamprias, Cleombrotus, and Demetrius all arrive at the Cnidian Clubhouse in the northeast corner, where they meet another group of philosophers in debate (about what, however, is left unclear in the text). Present there are Didymus the Cynic, Heracleon the Peripatetic, and Phillipus the historian, and Lamprias invites them as well to discuss the same problem. Thus, similar to *The E at Delphi*, Plutarch presents a group of people, each with his own particular way of approaching problems, coming together to discuss a common issue. Plutarch, however, has added a seventh participant, which could, in fact, be related to Ammonius’ ultimate claim in the *E*: that the number seven was itself significant for Apollo. Whatever the case, the problem of this dialogue is fundamentally of religious import, but they approach it from the perspective of both theology and philosophy.

The story of the ‘oil and lamp,’ though never again revisited in the dialogue, nonetheless introduces the text’s two major themes. The first theme, and by far most important for the purposes of this discussion, is the scientific and philosophical examination of theological assumptions and explanations. Neither Demetrius nor Ammonius were satisfied by Cleombrotus’ recounting of priestly interpretation of priestly evidence but they seemed to accept the evidence itself and insisted on a philosophical explanation based on philosophical reasoning. Cleombrotus, who appears a bit dimwitted—at least in his response to Ammonius’ critique—is not up to the challenge (and it makes us wonder if he is really accurately representing Egypt or whether the Egyptian priests found him as tiresome as Ammonius and so would not share anything

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66 Though Demetrius later tells a story at 421a-431a that revisits the apocalyptic theme.
with him except a strange story about a lamp), but this does provide the occasion to philosophically interrogate priestly wisdom. The second theme of the dialogue that emerges from the story about the lamp is more literary: the idea that the cosmos, itself a complex living being, may be coming to an end.\footnote{Lamberton 2001:165-172. There are others as well, but to examine them would distract our purpose in this chapter. As a result, there are a number of speeches that I will pass over, such as the discussion of how long a ‘generation’ is, a return to the significance of ‘E-as-five,’ the nature of Platonic solids, and numerology.} While we have seen this manifested in the fact that the years may be getting shorter, it appears again in the central debate about why the oracles have been disappearing and whether it is the death of the demigods in charge of the oracles that caused their obsolescence. Plutarch’s characters jockey between theological and philosophical explanations for the disappearance of the oracles, the balance of which is the subject to which we now turn.

The bulk of the dialogue is concerned with two particular explanations for the obsolescence of oracles, one theological, and the other physical. In fact, while the first to speak is Didymus, his position that human nature has so degenerated that the gods are refusing to give oracles meets with the resounding objection that the gods are, by their nature, beneficent and would not cease giving oracles (Obs. 413a-d). This is the first theological answer and it provides the basis for a deeper discussion of the nature of the gods themselves. Ammonius suggests that the group reject answers that involve human beings because “prophecy is something created by a god, and certainly no greater force exists destroy it” (οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη γέ τις ἔστι μεῖζων οὐδὲ κρείττων δύναμις, ὡστ’ ἀναφείν καὶ ἀφανίζειν ἐφ’ ᾧ τὴν μαντικὴν οὖσαν: Obs 413e). Therefore, any viable explanation will have to approach the problem by thinking about the gods and not...
about mortals, despite arguments in the past that have been based on population decline.\textsuperscript{68}

While the theological debate is engineered by Ammonius (probably with the hope of teaching the unphilosophical Cleombrotus),\textsuperscript{69} Cleombrotus leads most of the discussion in the middle of the dialogue (414f-421e). Cleombrotus, for example, picks up on Ammonius’ claim that the gods could destroy prophecy if they \textit{wanted to}, wondering if the gods themselves have chosen to do so. This claim incites Lamprias to offer a more subtle explanation than the image of gods as creators and destroyers. As he argues, the gods only create, but the medium in which they create, namely matter, is by its very nature capable of destruction:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\textit{ἡ ὕλη στέρησις οὖσα διαφθείρει πολλάκις καὶ ἀναλύει τὸ γιγνόμενον ὑπὸ τῆς κρείττονος αἰτίας} (\textit{Obs} 414d)
\end{center}
\end{quote}

Matter is itself nothingness and often quickly dissolves, reverting rapidly to its original state and causing the disintegration of what was created by a more powerful being.

Thus, Lamprias’ initial hypothesis about why the oracles have ceased (that the gods create through matter, which is itself in a constant state of degeneration) is rooted in the theory that everything the gods create will eventually die, and his dualistic view is typical of Plutarch’s Platonism.\textsuperscript{70} But there are theological implications to Lamprias’ view, as

\textsuperscript{68} Ammonius does not say here whether population decline is a viable historical answer or not, only that such reasoning should not be included in the scope of their particular discussion. As Ammonius claims, only one Pythian priestess was employed at the Oracle rather than two (with a third in reserve) as it was done in the past. Population decline is treated here as an external historical circumstance.

\textsuperscript{69} Lamberton 2001:172. As he suggests: “\textit{The Disappearance of Oracles}, like his other dialogues, is best understood as a protreptic piece, seducing the reader or listener into a predisposition to delve deeper into philosophy, particularly speculation about metaphysics and psychology.”

\textsuperscript{70} On Plutarch’s dualism and the relationship between gods and matter, see Dillon 1977:202-6.
Cleombrotus is quick to point out: that the gods created demigods, which themselves must be mortal. The discussion then moves to the nature of demigods, whom Cleombrotus introduces as helpers of men. They are, therefore, the beings that preside over humans and the beings that humans aim to please in ritual, sacrifice, festivals, and mystery rites (*Obs.* 417a).\(^{71}\) As helpers of men, the demigods are in charge of prophecy, but as creations of the gods (by Lamprias’ logic) they are subject to death. Thus, we find Cleombrotus’ *Q.E.D.*: prophecy is dead because the demigods in charge of it are dead.

The rest of the participants, while not convinced by Cleombrotus’ argument, humor him. In a charge led by Heracleon, they say that they agree with his claim that the demigods are in charge of prophecy, and though they have *heard* stories (that is, they may or may not be true) that demigods have died,\(^{72}\) it is too bold and barbarous a claim to say that this is the reason for the disappearance of the oracles (*θρασύτερον ἠγούμαι καὶ βαρβαρικώτερον* says Heracleon at *Obs.* 418e).

In search of a more satisfying answer, the group then proceeds into a dizzying and digressive discussion of the possibility for a plurality of worlds as well as of Platonic physics and psychology. When the conversation turns toward metaphysics and sorting out an ontology that reflects not only the role of the demigods but also how the cosmos was

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\(^{71}\) Cleombrotus also says, however, that the purpose of these sacred practices is to ward off evil spirits (417d).

\(^{72}\) Philippus, Demetrius, and Cleombrotus each provide stories about the deaths of demigods. Philippus, for example, relates a story he heard about the death of Pan (419b-d); Demetrius tells a story he heard in Britain about the eternal sleep of Kronos (419e-420a; also, *Face of the Moon* 941a-f); and Cleombrotus tells a number of stories, but most significant is that of Isis and Osiris (420a-421f). For further discussion, see Lamberton 2001:170-2.
Lamprias presents a new theory about the origin of prophecy. His theory attempts to mediate between Cleombrotus’ theological approach and Ammonius’ demand for scientific explanations: he suggests that prophecy was created by exhalations from the Earth (that is, Gaia), herself who was an adjunct to the creator (therefore, a helper and thus demigod), which the exhalations “dispose souls to inspiration and impressions of the future” (Obs. 433c). As Lamprias suggests, his theory has combined the physical with the theological—a combination that is necessary for success in philosophy, just as Plutarch claims that Plato had done:74

73 The ontology of this dialogue is fairly typical of what we find in Plutarch elsewhere. For further study, see Dillon 1977:199-225 and Plese 1999.

74 See, for example, Plutarch, Life of Nikias 23.1-6. In this passage, Plutarch relates how an eclipse hindered the superstitious general during the retreat from Syracuse, giving the opportunity to his enemy Gylippos to strike and crush Nikias and his troops. Plutarch, however, excuses Nikias because at the time an eclipse was understood to be “a sign from god predicting some misfortune or calamity.” Plutarch then digresses to tell a history of the eclipse beginning with Anaxagoras and other early natural scientists and claims that their arguments never took hold, first because Anaxagoras did not dare to publish his theories openly for fear of persecution and also because men could not endure the scientific reduction of divine agency to chance, necessity, or other blind forces. For Plutarch, it was not until Plato that science and philosophy “were given free course among all men” because he rehabilitated physics by subordinating the study of the physical world to divine causes. From this passage we can see that Plutarch believed that Plato struck a balance between science and religion that was palatable for public consumption. In so doing, Plato had determined not only Plutarch’s own world-view, but all the Greeks’ as well by using philosophy to answer age-old questions previously a matter of religious belief, verging on superstition (as viewed by the later, philosophical perspective).

75 Orph. fr. 21a v. 2.
“In general,” as I say, “though every form of creation has two causes, the old theologians and poets chose only to pay attention to the superior one, pronouncing this generality for all things:

‘Zeus is the beginning, Zeus is the middle, and from Zeus all comes.’

But even now they have not approached the necessary and natural causes. But the more recent generation, the physicists, pronounce the opposite as they deviate from a beautiful and divine origin and attribute everything to bodies and their behavior, to clashes, transmutations, and combinations. For this reason, the accounts given by both sides is deficient in the essentials, since the one ignores and leaves out the “through which” and the “from which” [i.e., the intermediary and the agent] and the other the “out of which” [i.e., the cause]. He who was the first to deal with both and to take matter—which underlies everything and is pure potential—as a necessary helper of the creator and mover frees us from all suspicion and fraud.

Thus, Lamprias sees that any truly philosophical account of anything will require attention to both theology and physics, and therefore account for the positions of both Cleombrotus and Ammonius. Lamprias’ suggestion that prophecy is derived from an earthly vapor seems to try to satisfy each of these requirements. As he explains it, the material of prophecy is the human soul (i.e., it is what is acted upon), while the vapor or exhalation is the instrument of the gods by which the soul is acted upon. The vapor comes from the Earth, nourished by the Sun, and created by the gods. To put it simply, the Gods created the earth where the vapor is located—the part of the argument that satisfies the theological side of the question. Similarly, the vapor is actually what causes the prophecy as an agent of the gods and therefore represents the physical side of the argument. For Lamprias, the “one who was the first to deal with both” was Plato, and in keeping with Plato, he authorizes his rehabilitation of physics, with physical explanations subordinated to divine causes. The demigods are not dead, nor is the vapor. As Lamprias says, the vapor will go through periods of strength and weakness; at the present, the
vapor is weak (Obs. 437c).

This is just one possibility; the dialogue itself actually ends on an aporetic note. Lamprias closes with an address—to his interlocutors, to Terentius Priscus, and to us—asking us to reconsider the problem and to debate it further. As Lamprias admits, one could raise a number of objections to his solution (like Socrates in the Phaedo). As we saw with The E at Delphi, the purpose here was not to explain the origin of prophecy or any of the other topics in the dialogue for that matter. Rather, the dialogue asks for further consideration of its major problems—the relationship between theological and physical knowledge—in the context of philosophical debate. Delphi is again the setting of the dialogue because it is the perfect place in which to set a dialogue that attempts to mediate between philosophy and theology. The dialogue is left open precisely because Plutarch invites us to join theological and scientific approaches in Platonism, just as Socrates wished Anaxagoras had done in the Phaedo.76 For philosophy to survive, the role of the gods must be considered alongside the role of necessity and the principles of physics.

Yet what balance between science and theology did Plutarch strike? In a sense, if we follow what Lamprias has suggested here, a good philosophical account of anything requires both an appeal to the gods and physical study of the world. For Lamprias, knowledge about the gods necessarily comes from a study of the gods’ agents. In the case of prophecy, one cannot immediately assume that the demigods are dead, as Cleombrotus had suggested. The jump was ‘barbarous,’ because it is a big conclusion based on small

76 This episode is alluded to at Obs. 435f-436a.
data. Human beings approach the gods through the god’s creation and knowledge about the gods is never direct. The gods communicate through intermediaries—whether those intermediaries are demigods or exhalations—because the gods are benevolent and want to help mortals. Philosophical enlightenment comes not from the gods but entirely from us to the extent to which we can understand theological knowledge scientifically. Or, put differently, knowledge about the gods comes through our understanding of the world and how they created it.

If we return now to the initial conflict between Cleombrotus and Ammonius over the meaning of the ‘oil and lamp,’ Cleombrotus was perfectly content with accepting the Egyptian priests’ interpretation of the phenomenon. Ammonius was far more skeptical, seeking instead a verifiable and quantifiable explanation based on the epistemai: physics, mathematics, astronomy, and meteorology. While these may be examples of what we mean by “science” in the modern world, for Ammonius these were philosophical disciplines. The protreptic of The Obsolescence of Oracles is just as much for Ammonius as it is for Cleombrotus: theology should be examined scientifically, and science should be subordinated to theological axioms. All of this, of course, contrasts with what we have seen in Iamblichus in the first two chapters. For him, scientific theology (i.e., knowledge derived from the study of the gods) essentially meant theurgy. For Iamblichus, one studied and gathered knowledge about the world (in all of its various aspects) with the eventual aim of performing the set of rituals that would allow the transcendence of the human soul toward the One. In his epistemology, Iamblichus showed no confidence in the human ability to achieve knowledge on its own: knowledge came from the gods.
Further, priestly wisdom and interpretations were accepted without question, and Egypt was introduced as an interpretive matrix for Plato. For Plutarch, knowledge does come through the gods (i.e., through oracles), but it also comes from the world itself. Priestly wisdom inspires philosophical debate and study, and Egyptian interpretations were a place to start, not a place to end. In the next section, we will see how Plutarch used Plato and philosophy to approach theological wisdom in the *Isis and Osiris*. Whereas Iamblichus Egyptianizes Plato, Plutarch Platonizes Egypt.

### 3.4 Platonizing Egypt: *The Isis and Osiris*\(^{77}\)

Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris* has interested many scholars because of its subject: it proposes to be a philosophical investigation of a mystery cult.\(^{78}\) Scholars of religion have been generally impressed with Plutarch’s accuracy with regard to the subject of ritual, not just Greek, but Roman\(^{79}\) and Egyptian as well.\(^{80}\) In addition, the text has been seen as a particularly mature piece of exegesis on Middle Platonic metaphysics\(^{81}\) and more specifically as a way for Plutarch to examine and comment on the cosmology and

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\(^{77}\) This text is probably the most commented upon of the *Moralia* over the last fifty years. See Hopfner 1940, Gwyn Griffiths 1970, Betz and Smith 1972, Cavalli 1985, and Froidefond 1988.

\(^{78}\) On the topic of religion in the *Isis and Osiris*, see Casadio 1994.

\(^{79}\) Graf 1996.

\(^{80}\) Gwyn Griffiths 1970 in the introduction to his commentary admits that even though Plutarch could not read hieroglyphs, he was a good historian of religion. Gwyn Griffith’s sentiment is echoed in Hani 1976.

\(^{81}\) On the date, see Gwyn Griffiths 1970:16-18; on Plutarch’s metaphysics in the *Isis and Osiris*, see Friedefond 1986.
cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, something he explicitly says toward the end of the text. Naturally, recent treatments have tried to explore why Plutarch would have used Egypt as a vehicle for studying Platonic philosophy, and how he was able to allegorize the myth to fit his Platonic interests. As he says at *Isis* 371a, he intends to “reconcile Egyptian theology with Platonic philosophy.” Answers to this question generally appeal to the increasing influence of Egypt and Egyptian wisdom in this period, or as part of Plutarch’s greater effort to “renegotiate the traditional, derivative status of Greek cult.” The debate is, ultimately, over Hellenism: is the *Isis and Osiris* a definitive statement of Plutarch’s Hellenism as an attempt to Hellenize Egyptian religion or is it symptomatic of the general Egyptianization of Greek philosophy and religion? Rather than coming down on one side of the debate, both sides of which have strong arguments, I argue instead that there are in fact elements of both: Plutarch believed that the Egyptians held an encoded wisdom necessary for attaining the truth, but that truth needed to be decoded

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83 Richter 2001:191-2, esp. 192 n. 5.
85 For the most recent treatment on Plutarch’s allegory (especially in contradistinction to that of the Stoics), see Schott 2008:21-30. On this, see below. See also Brenk 1999:227-9 for survey of this question.
86 ὡς τὰ ἐπίόντα δηλώσει τοῦ λόγου τῆς Αἰγυπτίων θεολογίας μάλιστα ταύτῃ τῇ φιλοσοφίᾳ συνοικειούντος.
89 The question is put nicely by Brenk (1999:234), though he sides with the latter formulation. See also Richter 2001:4-5, for a similar statement of the problem.
through Platonic philosophy. In this section, I want to focus more directly on how Plutarch explains this myth and how this explanation reveals his own commitments to Plato’s rehabilitation of physics by subordinating physical causes to the divine as we saw in the *Life of Nicias*.

In his analysis of the *Isis and Osiris*, Jeremy Schott argues that Plutarch’s approach to myth is “exegetical,” and therefore differs from the Stoics (an example of which we have seen above in Ammonius’ allegorizing of Apollo’s various epithets in *The E at Delphi*, where Ammonius later advocates explanations based primarily in metaphysics). Plutarch likens his role as “exegete to a priest” and likens “the practice of exegesis to participation in mystery cults.” As a result, he sees himself as Plato or Pythagoras, who also participated in the same kind of analysis on their respective trips to Egypt.\(^\text{90}\) Schott’s observation here is important because it points to a movement toward the kind of analysis and self-presentation that Iamblichus was engaged in: connecting himself to Plato and establishing that connection as an authority for his own persona and analysis of the Platonic tradition. Picking up where Schott left off, I argue that Plutarch was engaged in a different project: using the mysteries as an introduction to philosophy, rather than its ultimate end.

I have chosen to conclude my chapter on Plutarch with this text because it deals with many of the same themes we saw in Iamblichus, not least epistemology. Plutarch opens the text with a dedication, just as he had done in the Delphic Dialogues, but this time it is clear he is speaking *in propria persona* as the Platonic priest-philosopher at

\(^{90}\) Schott 2008:22.
Delphi. The text’s addressee is Clea, whom we know, based on this text, was a servant and devotee of Isis (οὐχ ἤκιστα δὲ τῇ θεῷ ταύτῃ κεχαρισμένον, ἣν οὐ θεραπεύεις, 351c) and a leader of the Dionysian Thyiades at Delphi (ἀρχηίδα μὲν οὖσαν ἐν Δελφοῖς τῶν Θυιάδων, 364e). We know her as well from Womanly Virtues, which is also dedicated to her. We can assume that Plutarch knew her personally because they were both religious leaders in the same city and because in Womanly Virtues Plutarch references a philosophical conversation the two had on the occasion of the death of her mother, implying that the two shared a close relationship.\(^91\) His address to her, however, primarily engages with the question of the limits of human knowledge:

Πάντα μέν, ὦ Κλέα, δεῖ τάγαθα τοὺς νοον ἔχοντας αἰτεῖσθαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ τῆς περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιστήμης ὡς οὖν ἐφικτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώποις μεταδίδομεν τυγχάνειν παρὰ αὐτῶν ἐκείνων· ὡς οὐθέν ἀνθρώπως λαβεῖν μεῖζον, οὐ χαρίσασθαι θεῷ σεμνότερον ἀληθείας, τάλλα μὲν γὰρ ἀνθρώπως ὁ θεὸς ὑπίσταται δίδωσιν, <νοῦ δὲ καὶ φρονήσεως μεταδίδομαι,> οἶκεια κεκτημένος ταῦτα καὶ χρώμενος.

All good things, Klea, intelligent men must ask of the gods, and we especially pray that in our search we gain knowledge of those gods as much as such a thing is possible for men. There is nothing better man can receive, nor anything more solemn for god to grant than truth. For God gives man everything he needs, but he only gives a part of intelligence and insight, since these are solely for his possession and use.

If we compare this passage with Iamblichus’ introduction to the Life of Pythagoras that we discussed in the first chapter, Plutarch himself acknowledges the limits of human knowledge and argues that the gods do not dispense wisdom directly to human beings. In fact, though the gods give us everything we need, they dispense only a share of wisdom, a claim that echoes what we have seen Plutarch and Ammonius say earlier about Apollo in The E at Delphi—the god who “seems to cure and to solve the difficulties of our lives…but those connected with our reason, he actually seems to inspire…implanting a

\(^{91}\) Griffiths 1970:253-4.
desire in the soul (τῆς ψυχῆς ὄρεξιν) to ascend to truth.” The difference between mortal and divine is precisely this knowledge, and here Plutarch echoes the epistemological problem of Plato’s dialogues we saw in chapter 1. Recall that there we examined the Chariot Analogy in the *Phaedrus*, in which human beings never arrive at real truth or knowledge, while the gods do because they are borne along on chariots equipped with a stronger team of horses. Plutarch here reiterates that the difference between the gods and mortals is the fact that the gods have knowledge and it is precisely this knowledge that makes them divine.

While Plutarch does recognize that human capacity for knowledge is limited, he is not willing to claim that all knowledge comes directly from the gods. What makes us philosophers is precisely the desire for the knowledge that we are unable to attain and so the role of the priest and of religion is not to provoke the gods to give that knowledge, but to understand that what the gods have given us can help us on our quest toward wisdom if we examine them philosophically. As the dedication continues, Plutarch regards the religious mysteries of Isis as important for bridging that gap:

> ὁ θειότητος ὄρεξίς ἐστιν ἡ τῆς ἀληθείας μάλιστα δὲ τῆς περὶ θεῶν ἔφεσις, ὥσπερ ἀνάληψιν ἱερῶν τὴν μάθησιν ἔχουσα καὶ τὴν ζήτησιν, ἀγνείας τε πάσης καὶ νεωκορίας ἔργου ὅσιωτον, ἴνα θεραπεύεις ἐξαιρέτως σοφὴν καὶ φιλόσοφον οὖσαν.

The desire for truth, particularly truth about the gods, is a yearning for the divine. The search for truth requires for its study and investigation the consideration of sacred subjects, and it is a work holier than all forms of purification and temple service. This is especially true of the goddess you serve, since she herself is exceptionally wise and a lover of wisdom.

The desire for truth, according to Plutarch, is rooted in our desire to become like the gods and have the knowledge that the gods have. But Plutarch does not believe that the gods
dispense it because we ask them to. Rather, attaining that knowledge requires a search (τὴν ζήτησιν) not only into the world they have created (as we saw in the *Obsolescence*) but also into the sacred rites. Thus performing those rites is not sufficient to attain wisdom; a search must be conducted to learn their true meaning.\(^{92}\) Plutarch explicitly says here that knowledge does not come directly from the gods themselves: human beings must be their own agents in gaining knowledge; performing the rites does not itself guarantee wisdom.

Plutarch suggests that we must approach the mysteries philosophically to enjoy the benefits that the mysteries promise, and this is the purpose of the *Isis and Osiris*. The role of the priest is to *encourage* philosophical thinking about religious rites. As Plutarch says, merely performing the rites does not an Isis devotee make:

οὔτε γὰρ φιλοσόφους πειραματοφόροι, ἢ Κλέα, καὶ τριμονοφόροι θεοὶ ποιούσιν οὔτε Ἰσιαχοὺς καὶ λινοστολίας καὶ ξυρήσεις ἀλλ’ Ἰσιαχός ἐστιν ὃς ἄληθώς ὁ τὰ δεικνύμενα καὶ δρώμενα περὶ τούς θεους τούτους, ὅταν νόμῳ παραλάβῃ, λόγῳ ζητῶν καὶ φιλοσοφῶν περὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀληθείας. (325b)

Growing a beard, Klea, and wearing a worn-out cloak are not the mark of philosophers and wearing linen and completely shaving does not make Isis devotees. The true discoverer of Isis is he who—whenever he hears the traditional opinion of what was shown (τὰ δεικνύμενα) and what was done (δρώμενα)—conducts an inquiry into them to see find the truth in them.

What Plutarch is suggesting here is actually quite controversial because he is bordering on exposing the mystery rites. While we do not know exactly what happened at the mystery rites, we do know that there were “things heard, seen, and done.” Far from

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\(^{92}\) The notion of the search for wisdom is particularly Platonic, as any reader of the *Symposium* will recall. As Diotima explains to Socrates, the lover of wisdom is neither wise nor ignorant, but between the two, engaged in an exhaustive search for wisdom. See *Symp.* 204b.
revealing what these things might have been Plutarch wants us to conduct our own independent inquiries into the mysteries, inciting Clea, and by extension us as well, to probe the secrets of the mysteries for truth. In what follows, as many scholars have already noted, Plutarch provides an exegesis and commentary of Plato’s *Timaeus*, and an interpretation of the myth of Isis and Osiris as a means to do so.

Before turning in conclusion to Plutarch’s greater project of using philosophy to interpret religious practices, I first want to review Plutarch’s method of exegesis in this text. He generally begins with a specific cultic practice or aspect of Egyptian myth, giving folk etymologies or commonly held beliefs about the reasons behind them. He then proceeds to offer a philosophical interpretation of those practices and re-interprets them in those terms. As he says to Klea at *Isis* 355b, interpretation of this kind is necessary for a full understanding of Egyptian wisdom:

> ὅταν οὖν ἃ μυθολογοῦσιν Ἀἰγύπτιοι περὶ τῶν θεῶν ἀκούσῃς, πλάνας καὶ διαμελισμοῖς καὶ πολλὰ τοιαύτα παθήματα, δεῖ τῶν προειρημένων μνημονεύειν καὶ μηδὲν οἴεσθαι τούτων λέγεσθαι γεγονὸς οὕτω καὶ πεπραγμένον.

Whenever you hear the traditional tales that the Egyptians tell about the gods, their wanderings, dismemberments, and many other sufferings, you must remember what we’ve already said, and you must not think that any of these tales actually happened in the manner in which they are related.

To take just one example from the beginning of the text, at *Isis* 353, Plutarch discusses the general practice of Egyptian abstention from eating fish. Some Egyptians, he says, refrain from all fish, others only certain kinds. But the priests, he says, abstain from all fish. The folk reason for it, Plutarch says, is that “fish is an unnecessary and superfluous
“food” because it derives from the sea and is naturally not for human consumption (353d-e: οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον οὐδ’ ἀπεφέρηκαν ὅψιν and ὅλος δὲ καὶ τὴν θάλατταν ἐκφυλον ἠγούνται καὶ παρωφισμένην οὐδὲ μέρος οὐδὲ στοιχεῖον ἀλλ’ οἶνον περίττωμα διεφθορὸς καὶ νοσώδες). It is only after retelling the part of the myth that recounts Isis’ inability to find Osiris’ dismembered ‘member’ -- because it was tossed into the Nile -- that Plutarch reveals the real reason why the priests abstain from fish: “the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon Osiris’ member” (358b). In the *Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch appears as priest who has consulted all of the various books necessary to distinguish between real and folk interpretations.

Plutarch follows this same methodology when explicating the Isis and Osiris myth in terms of Platonic philosophy, which he, as an authoritative priest-philosopher, intends for his reader to follow. In his analysis of the struggle between Typhaon and Osiris, Plutarch first explains that the Egyptian priests understood the struggle to be an indication of the scientific forces that control the waters of the Nile, the movement of the stars and heavens, and eclipses, a view that Plutarch ultimately rejects because of its similarity to Stoic allegory and other unsubstantiated historical and philosophical writing (366c-69c). Plutarch’s criticism here is that these interpretations are ungrounded but firmly believed:

παμπάλαιος αὕτη κάτεισιν ἐκ θεολόγων καὶ νομοθετῶν εἰς τε ποιητὰς καὶ φιλοσόφους δόξα, τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀδέσποτον ἐχεισα, τὴν δὲ πίστιν ἵσχυραν καὶ δυσεξάλειπτον, οὐχ ἐν λόγοις μόνον οὐδ’ ἐν φήμαις, ἀλλ’ ἐν τε τελεταῖς ἐν τε θυσίαις καὶ βαρβάροις καὶ Ἑλληνικοὶ πολλαχοῦ περιφερομένη, ὡς οὗτ’ ἄνουν καὶ ἅλλον καὶ ἀκυβέρνητον αἰωρεῖται τῷ ἀυτομάτῳ τῷ πᾶν, οὐδ’ εἰς ἐστὶν ὁ κρατῶν καὶ κατευθύνων ἄστερ σίαξεν ἢ τινι πειθηνίοις χαλινοῖς λόγος…(369b-c)
This very ancient opinion that comes down from writers on religion and from
lawgivers to poets and philosophers can be traced to no source, but it carried a
strong and almost indelible conviction, and is in circulation in many places
among barbarians and Greeks alike, not only in story and tradition but also in
rites and sacrifices, to the effect that the Universe is not of itself suspended aloft
without sense or reason or guidance, nor is there one Reason which rules and
guides it by rudders, as it were, or by controlling reins…

Plutarch’s reinterpretation of the myth, therefore, seeks to philosophically challenge
scientific conclusions drawn from theological data. His criticism also reminds us of
Ammonius’ objections to Kleombrotos’ blind acceptance of the Egyptian interpretation
of the ‘wick and lamp’ as evidence for the shortening of the calendar year. Plutarch
instead resolves to philosophically interrogate the myth of Isis and Osiris to uncover the
Platonic cosmology that informs it.\(^\text{94}\) As Schott has pointed out, Plutarch argues for a
dualistic cosmology, in which the world is subject to two antagonistic principles in
struggle with one another, and interprets the Isis and Osiris myth along these lines. He
cites both Zoroaster, who also encrypted this dualistic cosmology in the competing
figures of Oromazes and Areimanios, and the Chaldeaens in their astral theology, as
evidence for his own reading of Typhaon as the irrational principle and Osiris as reason
(369e-370c).\(^\text{95}\)

Plutarch’s interpretive matrix becomes even more complex as he then proceeds to
further explain how Osiris, Isis, and Horus are representative of the ontology found in the
*Timaeus*. As we saw in the second chapter, the *Timaeus* attempted to account for the
individual objects of this world, by positing three ontological primitives: Chaos, the

\(^{94}\) Schott 2008:22.

\(^{95}\) Schott 2008:21-23.
Demiurge, and the Ideas. The Demiurge, as we saw, created the world by fashioning Chaos in accordance with the Ideas. The act of generation itself, however, occurred in the Way of Necessity through an intermediary, the matrix. As Plutarch says at Isis 373f, the Isis and Osiris myth should be understood in the following terms:

ἡ δὲ κρείττων καὶ θειότερα φύσις ἐκ τριῶν ἐστί, τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς ὑλῆς καὶ τοῦ ἐκ τούτων, ὁμοίου Ἕλληνες ἔνομαζον. ὁ μὲν οὖν Πλάτων (Tim. 50c d) τὸ μὲν νοητὸν καὶ ἱδέαν καὶ παράδειγμα καὶ πατέρα, τὴν δ’ ὑλήν καὶ μητέρα καὶ τιθήνην ἔδραν τε καὶ χώραν γενέσεως, τὸ δ’ ἔξ ἀμφότερος ἐγγονὸν καὶ γένεσιν ὀνομάζειν εἰσώθεν.

The better and more divine nature consists of three parts: the conceptual, the material, and that which is formed from these, which the Greeks call the world. Plato is wont to give to the conceptual the name of idea, example, or father, and to the material the name of mother or nurse, or seat and place of becoming, and to that which results from both the name of offspring or becoming.

Plutarch here refers specifically to the Way of Necessity at Timaeus 50c-d, in which Plato talks specifically about the generation of the physical objects of the sensible world. In this part of the Timaeus, Timaeus specifically notes that the earlier formulation of “Chaos-Ideas-Demiurge” is insufficient because it only accounted only for “two forms of reality” (being and becoming or the real and the copy), and to fully explain how the two relate, a “third must be added.” Timaeus means the matrix (ὑποδοχή), the “nurse of all becoming and change” (πάσης εἶναι γενέσεως ὑποδοχήν αὐτὴν οἷον τιθήνην) because “the things which pass in and out of the matrix are copies of the eternal realities” (τὰ δὲ εἰσίν τοῖς ἐξιόντος ὄντων ἄει μιμήματα); the matrix itself does not become the objects that pass in it, it only receives them (δέχεται τε γὰρ ἄει τὰ πάντα): it is therefore the nurse of becoming, the ontological mediator between the two.

According to the Timaeus, therefore, there are three categories of being: that which
becomes, that in which it becomes, and the model it resembles (τὸ μὲν γιγνόμενον, τὸ δ’ ἐν ὧ γίγνεται, τὸ δ’ ὁθὲν ἀφομοιόμενον φύεται τὸ γιγνόμενον). To explain this ontological system, Timaeus appealed to a metaphor, equating the matrix to the mother, the model to the father, and the copy (i.e., what is produced between them) to the child (καὶ δὴ καὶ προσεικάσαι πρέπει τὸ μὲν δεχόμενον μητρί, τὸ δ’ ὁθὲν πατρί, τὴν δὲ μεταξὺ τούτων φύσιν ἐκγόνῳ). For Plutarch, Osiris, Isis, and Horus represent Platonic metaphysics and ontology: “Osiris may be regarded as the origin, Isis the recipient, and Horus the perfected result.”

3.5 Conclusions

In the previous section, we saw that Plutarch presented Delphi as an ideal place to pursue philosophy because the oracular shrine provided many opportunities for philosophical investigation. In The E at Delphi, Ammonius and his students offered a variety of possible interpretations of the E, each progressively becoming more sophisticated than the last. Similarly, in the Obsolescence of Oracles, Plutarch pitted the theology of Kleombrotos against the philosophy of Ammonius and presented Lamprias as offering a resolution between the two. The text interrogated the relationship between theology and philosophy, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that theological matters required philosophical investigation for properly understanding man’s place in the world because the objects of this world (whether they be prophecy, the combustion of oil, the motion of the stars in heaven) were created by the gods and so in understanding those objects one

96 Schott 2008:23.
could understand the gods as well. Theological knowledge is therefore attained through science.

Similarly, encoded within the mysteries and myths of Isis and Osiris is Platonic philosophy, and for this reason, as Plutarch says at Isis 378b, “it is especially necessary that we adopt, as our guide in these mysteries, the reasoning that comes from philosophy.” The mysteries of Egypt are not appealed to as secret wisdom that can somehow ritualistically lead man to knowledge; rather, Platonic philosophy is used as the decoder ring to understand the mysteries. For this reason, Plutarch tells us that translating Egyptian names into Greek is perfectly acceptable, if not preferable: “there is no occasion to be surprised at the revamping of these words into Greek,” because many of them “belong to one god and one power” (375f and 376a). This claim certainly stuck in Iamblichus’ craw since he is explicit about the necessity of appealing to Egyptian wisdom for philosophical success as well as maintaining and not translating its original words. While Plutarch did see himself as engaging directly with the tradition of Plato by uncovering the philosophical truths hidden in the Egyptian mysteries, he still advocated appealing to Plato to interpret them. Iamblichus’ vision two centuries later will be completely different.

But the question still remains: how did Plutarch envision the role of barbarian wisdom in Platonic philosophy? Certainly throughout the Isis and Osiris, Plutarch interprets the Egyptian myth through the Greek lens of Platonic allegory: the name Isis, for example, is derived from the Greek verb οἶδα, and Plato’s Timaeus stands as his primary interpretive tool when providing his exegetical reading of the Isis and Osiris
myth. Similarly, as Schott has pointed out, “Isis’ restoration of Osiris represents the restoration of the hieros logos, the sacred truth, which is the possession of those who practice the philosophical life” (Isis 352a). Nevertheless, Plutarch supports his own reading of the Timaeus and his use of Platonic allegory through these myths and uses not only the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris but also that of the Chaldaean Zoroaster, showing “the universality of Platonic allegory.” Yet there is also the sense that Plutarch is engaged in the same project as was Plato himself, who, as Plutarch says at Isis 354e-f, cites “Solon, Thales, Plato, Eudoxus, Pythagoras, who came to Egypt and consorted with the priests,” but Pythagoras especially, who “admired the Egyptian priests, and, copying their symbolism and occult teachings, incorporated his doctrines in enigmas.” Thus we find Plutarch saying both that the Egyptian mysteries contain symbolic truths that have had import in philosophy and that Platonic philosophy should be employed to interpret Egyptian wisdom. For Plutarch, the beauty and importance of the mysteries, theological wisdom, and religious symbols is found in their ability to inspire philosophy.

This may well have been this approach that Iamblichus was critiquing in his own Mysteries. Plutarch, too, recognized that Pythagoras incorporated Egyptian wisdom into philosophy, but he had not claimed that Platonic philosophy needed to be interpreted through Egypt, even though “Egypt” did contain philosophical truths. Instead, Plutarch advocated translation and allegory to arrive at that truth. For Iamblichus, Plutarch’s approach had failed both in the way that it translated barbarian names and because it

97 Schott 2008:26-7. See also Brenk 1999.

98 Schott 2008:27.
refused to recognize that philosophy needed to be understood through Egypt, not Egypt through Plato. While the evidence I have presented in the first two chapters shows that Iamblichus took direct aim at Porphyry, there may, therefore, also be in Iamblichus’ texts and philosophy an implicit criticism of Plutarch. It is certainly no accident that Plutarch’s wavering about Egypt hinges on its influence over Pythagoras and its symbolic encoding of metaphysics turned into Iamblichus’ own philosophical project: using the figure of Pythagoras to authorize and reinterpret the Platonic tradition. Further, Iamblichus’ project of “scientific theology,” using religious mysteries and ritual to bring about philosophical fulfillment, stands in direct contrast to Plutarch’s theological science, the use of religious rites to inspire philosophical searches—which implies that Iamblichus was responding to (if only indirectly) what Plutarch had started: the negotiation between the personae of priest and philosopher through their respective epistemological and metaphysical commitments.
Chapter 4
The Fragments of Numenius of Apamea:
From Priest-Philosopher to Philosopher-Priest

4.1. Introduction

In our examination of both Iamblichus and Plutarch in the previous three chapters we have uncovered a fundamental shift within the Platonic tradition that centered not only on epistemology, metaphysics, and ontology but also on the literary presentation of that philosophy, particularly with regard to genre and persona. I have tried to show that in tracking doctrinal transformations we must also account for changes in the figure of the philosopher himself. Plutarch, as we have seen, exhibited elements of New Academic skepticism particularly given that he presented his philosophy through the literary medium of the aporetic dialogue because it best showcased his belief that the gods (especially Apollo) provided mankind with opportunities to study philosophy but not with secure knowledge. In the *Moralia*, he presented his primary responsibility at Delphi facilitating this protreptic message. He merged his priestly duties with his philosophical interests by urging his petitioners to conduct philosophical investigations of theological wisdom. I therefore called Plutarch a priest-philosopher, both because he reanimated Plato’s rehabilitation of physics by subordinating the mechanistic and physical processes of the cosmos to their divine causes and because he redefined what it meant to be a priest on these philosophical terms. The goal of the priest, as Plutarch argues in the *Moralia*, is
not to answer petitioners’ questions, but to make them better questioners and dialecticians by showing them how to ask the right questions and how to formulate their own answers.

Iamblichus, on the other hand, stands in stark contrast to Plutarch. He was a committed dogmatic, insistent that knowledge could be achieved if it were approached through the right ritual avenues. He wrote in the dialogue form in the Mysteries, but the text was in no way aporetic given that it consists of answers to Porphyry’s aporiai. Iamblichus agreed with Plato’s position that knowledge and wisdom are unattainable for mankind on its own, but deviated from him in claiming that philosophical success can be achieved through the good will of the gods. As we saw in the opening to the Life of Pythagoras, Iamblichus implied that one must invoke the gods in order to achieve ultimate ascent. He provided a philosophical justification in the Mysteries for the role that theurgic rites could play in achieving enlightenment. Iamblichus’ justification of theurgy is problematic because it appears, at least on the surface, counter-intuitive to readers of Plato’s dialogues, especially given that it was based in non-dialectical knowledge about the gods. But we must keep in mind, of course, that Iamblichus’ justification of theurgy comes through dialectic, as a response to Porphyry, as well as through a complex reading of Plato’s Timaeus. The Timaeus thus authorizes his radical claim that the creator of the cosmos, the Demiurge, also created theurgy and, in so doing, invited human beings to perform theurgy and mimic his divine activities. The role of the priest, therefore, was to communicate the will of the gods to the practitioners of theurgy, placing emphasis more on the end result (i.e., ascent) than on the journey. For Iamblichus, philosophy alone could not solve the mysteries of the gods. The philosopher had to be a “barbarian priest”
in order to have access to the proper modes of exegesis for interpreting the demiurgic symbols built into the fabric of the cosmos. Given, then, the differences between Plutarch and Iamblichus, the question remains: how did Plutarch’s priest-philosopher become Iamblichus’ philosopher-priest and how did theological science become scientific theology?

In order to trace the development between Plutarch and Iamblichus, we must locate the origin of these doctrinal shifts that influenced the change in literary persona. Since one of Iamblichus’ main divergences from Plutarch was his turn to dogmatism through Pythagorean doctrine and his reverence for the figure of Pythagoras, we must determine how the rejection of skepticism in favor of dogmatic Pythagoreanism was incorporated into Platonism. Similarly, Iamblichus attacked the Platonic tradition for its ignorance not only of Pythagorean wisdom but exotic wisdom as well, we must locate earlier forms of the integration of these sources in the interpretation of Plato. Though the integration of barbarian wisdom was clearly part of Plutarch’s philosophical agenda, as we saw in the *Isis and Osiris*, the philosophical truths encoded in the barbarian mysteries required significant translation and interpretation through Platonic modes of discourse and analysis. But Iamblichus, in *Mysteries 7*, would reject this use of barbarian wisdom, arguing, as we have seen in the second chapter, that the Greeks’ penchant for novelty caused them to subvert the theological truths contained in that wisdom.

Despite these differences, Iamblichus still engaged with fundamentally Platonic questions, particularly with regard to the role of the priest in the examination of theology, the role of the philosopher in studying natural science, and the role of barbarian wisdom
in attaining philosophical enlightenment. In this chapter, I will argue that the hinge of the transition between Plutarch and Iamblichus is Numenius of Apamea, who connects Plutarch to Iamblichus because he strongly rejected skepticism in favor of dogmatism, called for the incorporation of Pythagorean and barbarian doctrines in the creation of that ‘dogma,’ and did so through the reinterpretation of the *Timaeus*. The connection between Numenius and Iamblichus is all the more clear not only on the basis of their shared philosophical beliefs, but also in that they both lived and worked in the same city: Apamea.

To make my case, therefore, we will first examine Numenius’ potential activities in Apamea, his own professed scholastic affiliations in *On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato*, and finally conclude with a study of how he merged Pythagorean and barbarian sources of wisdom with his theological reading of the *Timaeus*. Though I will be unable to make any claims about the persona that he may have adopted in the textual presentation of his philosophy (given that his texts survive only in fragments), I will argue that the philosophical positions he held paved the way for Iamblichus’ own critiques of the Academy, his turn to Pythagoreanism and barbarian wisdom, and ultimately his reliance on theurgy to resolve the problems that Plato raised with regard to epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics.
4.2 Numenius’ Biography and Philosophical Affiliation

4.2.1 Numenius in Apamea

Before examining his break with the Academic tradition and his integration of Pythagorean and barbarian wisdom into his interpretation of the *Timaeus*, we must first review what we know about Numenius and the different ways in which scholars have approached this elusive author. Little is known of Numenius’ biography other than the fact that he lived and worked in Apamea in the latter part of the second century. Porphyry testifies to this in his *Life of Plotinus*, in which an ardent admirer of Numenius, Amelius, systematically collated and transcribed Numenius’ texts and dedicated them to his adopted son Hostillanus Hesychius, himself from Apamea (*VPot*. 3). Though Porphyry says nothing more of Amelius’ relationship to Apamea, Edwards, in his commentary on this passage, hypothesizes that the adoption of this otherwise unknown person suggests a period in which Amelius lived in Apamea to study with Numenius and potentially even to succeed him. Whether Numenius remained in Apamea all his life is uncertain, though a cryptic reference to Numenius the Roman’s discussion of Hermes (Νουμήνιος δὲ ὁ Ῥωμαῖος τὸν Ἑρμῆν τὸν προχωρητικὸν λόγον εἶναι βούλεται) found in John the Lydian may indicate a period in which Numenius was in Rome (*De Mens*. 480 = fr. 57d).

The connection with Apamea, as well as Porphyry’s anecdote about Amelius’ presence there, if Edwards is correct, is one way we may begin to understand the importance of Apamea as a place where philosophers would go in order to study the combination ritual

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1 Dillon 1977:361.

2 Edwards 2000:8 n. 50.

activity with philosophy. Numenius’ precedent may well have been Iamblichus’ motivation to found his school there. The question is, of course, what was Numenius actually doing in Apamea?

This question is difficult to answer because the works of Numenius are lost, and we have no testimony as to his activities in Apamea. Based on Porphyry’s story about Amelius, we can with a fair degree of certainty assume that Apamea was the city in which he conducted his philosophy. It is likely, then, that he penned at least seven texts during his tenure there: On the Good, On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato, On the Secrets in Plato, On the Indestructibility of Soul, Epop, On Numbers, and On Places. Including testimonia, sixty fragments from these works survive in a dozen authors, both pagan and Christian, ranging from the second to the sixth century. Of these, Eusebius is perhaps our best source since he alone provides direct quotations of Numenius’ works in his Preparation for the Gospel. Based on Eusebius, we know that Numenius wrote in the dialogue form in On the Good, which, like Plato’s Sophist and Statesman, dramatizes a conversation between a philosopher and stranger about the metaphysical problems of permanence and change. We can also say that Numenius’ On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato was a history of the Platonic Academy focusing on the internal wrangling over dogma between Platonists in the centuries after Plato. Little is known about the four other texts, since we have only one surviving

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4 Athanassiadi (2006:71-2) however, has brought together some of the evidence to describe his genres and writing style: “à en juger par les lambeaux de son œuvre, Numénios a cultivé le dialogue philosophique, l’exposé théorique, la parabole et la fable parénétique, le genre de paradoxa, ou contes merveilleux, et la polémique…son texte révèle un homme à la fois passionné et sensible, également épris d’absolu dans ses amours et mépris. C’est aussi un grand poète dont les images n’ont rien de conventionnel ou de prétentieux.” While I agree for the most part with
fragment for two (On the Indestructibility of Soul and On the Secrets in Plato) and the
title alone for the remaining three (Epop, On Numbers and On Places).

From the standpoint of the present study, sixty fragments can hardly be enough to
make any claims about the textual presentation of his philosophy, what persona he may
have adopted, or even what his social role may have been at Apamea. I will therefore
approach this problem indirectly through a discussion of his philosophical ideas that, as I
will show, had a formative impact on Iamblichus’ own persona. Dealing with fragments
is always a tricky enterprise because, after all, they have been carefully (or, in some
cases, not so carefully) selected according to the interests of later writers and may not
necessarily be representative of the author from whom they have been excerpted.
Fortunately, because Eusebius quotes him directly and because Numenius is most often
cited for his interpretations of Platonic texts, the surviving fragments do give us some
insight into what Numenius thought, allowing us to infer some aspects of his
philosophical project.

This project, even based on the titles of his works alone, clearly aimed at the
integration of Pythagoreanism with Platonism, something that we have seen Iamblichus
doing in Apamea a century later. Further evidence of this trend is equally visible in the
fragments, as we will see below in section 4.2.3. Though Numenius is called a

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this assessment, I am uncomfortable with making any claims about the kind of person Numenius
was, as Athanassiadi does here.

5 Guthrie 1917 attached one fragment (des Places 38) to the Epop, but there is too little evidence
to do so with any degree of certainty.
Pythagorean by those who quote him,\(^6\) writing a dialogue between a philosopher and a stranger about the nature of the Good definitively ties him to Plato. Despite the fact that *On Numbers* is completely lost, we can imagine that it may have been a treatise or dialogue that dealt closely with Pythagorean number theory. We know, moreover, based on the fragments themselves, that Numenius was also interested in the philosophical exposition of religious practices, especially the Eleusinian mysteries and Serapis mysteries (fr. 53 = Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.38). His interest apparently extended to the interpretation of the philosophical myths of Plato (fr. 35), the theological myths of Homer (fr. 37), the Egyptians, and the Hebrews (fr. 56), and potentially even the theurgic mysteries of the Chaldeans.\(^7\) We may thus conclude, if we are right to say that the fusion of Plato, Pythagoras, and sacred cults was a major component of his work in Apamea, that Numenius not only picked up on Plutarch’s project to bring barbarian sources to bear on the interpretation of Plato’s dialogues and to highlight the role of ritual in the exegesis of philosophical theology, but he also incorporated elements of Pythagoreanism into that exegesis. This is the basis for considering Numenius as the missing link between Plutarch and Iamblichus.

This genealogy has, in fact, been outlined before by scholars such as Dillon (1977), Lamberton (1986), O’Meara (1989), and Athanassiadi (2006), to name just a few. What is missing, as I suggested in my earlier chapters, is a proper study of the way in which these philosophers enacted this genealogy. The case that these scholars have made

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\(^6\) See especially Porphyry, Origen, and Eusebius; for full citation, see O’Meara 1989:10 n. 4.

is generally based on three agreed-upon principles: (1) that Numenius was the first significant figure to radically break with the Platonic tradition; (2) that he called for a reinterpretation of the Platonic tradition through Pythagoras and barbarian wisdom; and (3) that he was a paradigmatic exponent of reinterpreting the Greek literary tradition through philosophical allegory, an approach that marked the philosophical activity of his Neoplatonist successors. In this chapter, I am suggesting a new factor that, when viewed in conjunction with those, begins to explain the radical shift in persona from priest-philosopher to philosopher-priest: namely that the gods play such an important role in philosophical enlightenment that barbarian theology becomes a major sub-discipline of Platonic philosophy and that the philosopher, given his intimate knowledge of the gods, is effectively a priest. To make my case, therefore, I will first situate Numenius within the context of second-century Platonism and Neopythagoreanism and then turn to the theological advances he proposed on the basis of his reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*.

### 4.2.2 Numenius’ Platonism and Pythagoreanism

Perhaps the most significant trend among the Platonists of this period was “to interpret Plato’s dialogues so as to reach a systematic Platonic dogma.” According to the

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8 O’Meara 1989:10; see also Waszink 1966:37-9. Athanassiadi (2006:73-4) situates Numenius within the context of the second sophistic, as does (Lamberton 1986:57), who contrasts Numenius’ use of Homer with his relative contemporaries. See also Schott 2008:25-6, following Frede 1997, who attributes Numenius’ “broadening of horizons” to general trends in the first- and second-century empire: “just as the Roman Empire facilitated commerce and contact between disparate peoples, philosophers were seeking to bridge cultural gulfs and cultivate an intellectual ecumenism.”
will return below in section 4.2.3), Numenius fits into this trend under the premise that Plato’s doctrines had been obscured by his immediate interpreters. The majority of the scholarship on Numenius, however, bypasses his break with the Academy in favor of exploring how some of the philosophical tenets he espoused either connect him to what came before him or what came after him, particularly how his metaphysics and ontology anticipated and consequently influenced Plotinus\(^9\) or developed out of Middle Platonism.\(^{10}\) Those who have studied Numenius’ criticism of the Academy focus on Numenius’ fusion of Platonism with Pythagoreanism and theology. O’Meara has argued that Numenius returned to Pythagoreanism in order to arrive at the ‘purer’ truth obscured by the internal wrangling of the successors of Plato.\(^{11}\) Athanassiadi, building on O’Meara’s work, has argued that Numenius used Pythagorean and barbarian wisdom to establish ‘orthodoxy’ within the contentious Platonic tradition.\(^{12}\) In terms of theology, Lamberton has shown that Numenius allegorized the literature of the past, most extensively Homer, to arrive at the philosophical truths that he was in search of.\(^{13}\) More broadly, Lamberton argues that Numenius’ interest in Homer as well as in the exotic stories of the Egyptians, Hebrews, and Christians, was related to the fact that he saw them

\(^{9}\) For a general survey, see Guthrie 1917:109-135; on “being” in Numenius, see O’Meara 1976:120-9; on ‘the first principle,’ see Whittaker 1978:144-54; on the three ‘hypostases,’ see Holzhausen 1992:250-255; on a variety of metaphysical questions ranging from the activities of the first principle, Demiurge, soul, and matter, see Dillon 2007:397-402.

\(^{10}\) Dillon 1977:361-379.

\(^{11}\) O’Meara 1989:10-14.


\(^{13}\) Lamberton 1986:56-59.
as sources of “primitive revelations of the structure of reality and the fate of souls,”
which could satisfy “the search for truth about the gods.”  
In this sense, we may see Numenius as part of the greater project of post-Hellenistic philosophy, which, as Boys-Stones argues, was to see archaic poetry and foreign traditions as sources for primitive wisdom. 

This rejection of the Academy seemingly prompted Numenius to adopt Neopythagoreanism. Calling Numenius a Neopythagorean, however, does not clarify matters because we are unsure exactly what the label should refer to or which Pythagorean philosophers should be called ‘Neopythagoreans.’ In a recent essay on the Neopythagoreans, Michael Trapp has argued that Pythagoreanism proper ended around 350 BC, shortly before Plato’s immediate successors revived Pythagoras in their interpretation of Plato’s dialogues, especially the *Timaeus*. The veiled use of Pythagoras within the Academy seems to have continued and extended to other schools (especially the Stoics) as well, largely with the aim of understanding Plato’s sources or further developing an ethical system for living the philosophical life. Within the Academy, however, dominated as it was by skepticism in the first and second centuries, these dogmatic interpretations of Plato may have been ascribed to the Pythagoreans for

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15 Boys-Stones 2001:3-8.
18 For discussion, see Kahn 2001:72-85 and Trapp 2007:348.
rhetorical reasons, given that dogmatism would not have been in line with the thrust of
the Academy’s teachings in this period.\footnote{Frede 1987:1043.} By the first century, we find philosophers such
as Eudorus and Moderatus beginning to break with their schools, especially the
Academy, and identifying themselves primarily as Pythagoreans. At this point, it seems,
we find a new set of Pythagoreans interested in reviving the previously (and formally)
defunct sect. It is this second wave of Pythagoreans that scholars typically label
‘Neopythagoreans.’

A second and perhaps more crucial problem is identifying what doctrinal
commitments defined Neopythagoreanism. As Johansen explains, the term comprises a
number of different associations: “both number mysticism, theosophy, belief in miracles
appealing to wider circles, and philosophy; but the name is a loose catch-all—what holds
it together is the semi-religious belief in Pythagoras’ wisdom.”\footnote{Johansen 1998:514.} Because of the wide
application of the term, some scholars have either rejected it altogether\footnote{For discussion, see Bonazzi 2000:38-73.} or limited it to
specific philosophers, rather than applying it to a philosophical movement.\footnote{Kahn (2001:94) names six: Posidonius, Eudorus, Philon, Moderatus, Nicomachus, and Numenius.} It seems to
me, however, that Numenius’ project was more organized than Johansen’s description
suggests because, in his history of the Academy, he advocates a sharp break with the
skeptics in favor of a dogmatic Pythagorean approach, a premise that would have been
the basis for the foundation of his own separate school in Apamea. Moreover, Numenius
adds another element to Neopythagoreanism: barbarian wisdom. We will return to the potential influence of Moderatus on Numenius in section 4.3.2.

In this chapter, I will be attempting to situate Numenius within a Platonic genealogy, rather than considering him as a Neopythagorean alone. Though he was influenced by Pythagoreanism, his ultimate goal was the proper interpretation of Plato’s dialogues and doctrines. I will therefore fuse the various scholarly approaches outlined above in order to show that the result of this exegesis extended beyond doctrine. Numenius’ contribution to this genealogy can be found in his redefinition of the philosopher as a priest based on the emphasis laid upon reaching a universal theology derived from Platonic, Pythagorean, and barbarian elements. In what follows, we will see how Numenius appeals to primitive wisdom, a major part of the tradition he attacks, to re-envision that tradition. In other words, Numenius participates in the modes of exegesis established by his predecessors in order to reject those very predecessors, much as we saw Iamblichus do with the tradition of Thales in the first chapter. The way he does so, as I will argue, anticipates Iamblichus’ theurgic approach to both epistemology and metaphysics. It is to his break with the Academy that we turn first.

4.2.3 Numenius’ Critique of the Platonic Academy

According to fragment 24 of *On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato*, the purpose of Numenius’ treatise on the Platonic Academy was to differentiate Plato from his immediate successors, based on the fact that “Plato was a Pythagorean” (προθέμεθα χωρίζειν αὐτὸν Ἀριστοτέλους καὶ Ζήνωνος...αὐτὸν ἔφ’ ἐαυτοῦ νῦν 220
εἶναι Πυθαγόρειον). Eusebius preserves Numenius’ criticisms of New Academic skepticism from Arcesilaus to Antiochus of Ascalon’s turn to dogmatism (late fourth- to early first-century BC), which allows us to see to some extent what differentiated Numenius from the Academy. The basis for Numenius’ critique of the Academy was its internal conflict, which, he claims, shows that Plato’s successors did not succeed in properly honoring their master. He ultimately places the blame on Plato himself because his teachings were “hidden somewhere between clearness and uncleanness” (ἐπικρυψάμενος ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ δῆλα εἶναι καὶ μὴ δῆλα). This fact, Numenius argues, led to his successors’ subversion of Platonic doctrine as they argued over its true interpretation (αὐτὸς δ’ αἰτίαν παρέσχε τῆς μετ’ αὐτὸν στάσεως τε ἀμα καὶ διολκής τῆς τῶν δογμάτων). His own goal, therefore, was to arrive at the true dogma of Plato, but this required divine aid and an appeal to other traditions:

τοῦτο δὲ χρὴ μαθόντας ἡμᾶς ἐπανενεγκεῖν ἐκεῖσε μᾶλλον τὴν γνώμην, καὶ ὥσπερ ἔξ ἀρχῆς προφετεύοντα μηδέναι στάσεως καὶ Ζήνωνος, οὕτως καὶ νῦν τῆς Ἀκαδημίας, ἦν ὁ θεὸς ἀντιλάβητα, χωρίζοντας ἐόσομεν αὐτὸν ἕπ’ ἐαυτῷ νῦν εἶναι Πυθαγόρειον ὡς νῦν μανικώτερον ἦν Πενθεῖ τινι προσῆκε διελκόμενος πάσχει μὲν κατὰ μέλη, ὅλος δ’ εἶ ὅλου ἐαυτοῦ μετατίθεται τε καὶ ἀντιμετατίθεται ὦν διολκής (fr. 24 = Eusebius, Preparation 14.4.16-59).

But now that we have understood this, we ought rather to turn our judgment to a different point and, as we proposed at the beginning, to distinguish Plato from Aristotle and Zeno, so now again separating him from the Academy, if God help us, we will allow him to be in and of himself a Pythagorean. Since now he is torn into pieces more furiously than any Pentheus deserved, he suffers limb by limb, but he is by no means transformed from his whole self and retransformed.

It is difficult to assess from this passage exactly how Numenius intended us to understand this appeal to divine aid, a theme to which we will return below, but it is clear that he did want to present Plato as a disciple of Pythagoras and the Platonic texts as somehow
exhibiting Pythagorean doctrine, a rhetorical trope that we have already seen Iamblichus would adopt in his *Life of Pythagoras*. For Numenius, the texts of Plato have been tragically distorted and torn apart, as his allusion to Euripides’ *Bacchae* suggests, and can be properly understood only through the correct interpretive matrix: Pythagoras.  

Numenius, therefore, like Plutarch, wanted to establish a direct line between himself and Plato, though he did not argue for it by situating himself within the Academy as we saw Plutarch attempt to do. Rather, he sought to restore the interpretation of Plato to its purest form, which meant eschewing the tradition itself in favor of an appeal to Pythagoras and barbarian wisdom. Numenius’ line is therefore direct but discontinuous.

One who has spoken on this point and confirmed it by calling Plato to witness will have to go back and fuse it with the teachings of Pythagoras, and call upon the nations of good repute and cite, far as they agree with Plato, the mysteries, teachings, and conceptions of the Brahmins, Hebrews, Magi, and Egyptians.

Like Plutarch, Numenius suggests that barbarian wisdom should be brought to bear on the interpretation of Platonic doctrine because it shares in the same universal knowledge as Plato.  

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24 Or as Schott 2008:26, put it: “Philosophers like Numenius and Plutarch resolved these disruptions (i.e., the fact that cross-cultural comparison threatens the security of distinct
as divorced from the wrangling that has plagued the Platonic tradition and tries to reassert the purity of Plato’s teaching by removing all innovation and change. In this sense, he was a forerunner of Iamblichus who advocated the same practice in *Mysteries* 7 (as we saw in chapter 2). To barbarian wisdom we will return more fully in the next section.

This tragic distortion and discord, it seems, Numenius traced back to the fact that Plato’s successors did not fully appreciate the role that Pythagoras should play in philosophical discourse. As the following fragment reveals, he saw a close and harmonious relationship between Pythagoras, Plato, and Socrates, with Pythagoras and Socrates sitting on both ends of a spectrum of extremes (solemnity for the former, mockery for the latter) with Plato mediating between them:

ὅπως οὖν ἀνήρ μεσεύων Πυθαγόρου καὶ Σωκράτους, τοῦ μὲν τὸ σεμνὸν ὑπαγαγὼν μέχρι τοῦ φιλανθρώπου, τοῦ δὲ τὸ κομψὸν τοῦτο καὶ παιγνήμον ἀναγαγόν ἀπὸ τῆς εἰρωνείας εἰς ἄξιωμα καὶ ὄγκον καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο κεράσας Σωκράτει Πυθαγόραν, τοῦ μὲν δημοτικώτερος, τοῦ δὲ σεμνότερος ὄφθη.

As a man therefore who stood midway between Pythagoras and Socrates Plato reduced the sternness of the former to benevolence, and the wit and playfulness of the latter he raised from irony to dignity and gravity, and by making just this mixture of Socrates and Pythagoras he showed himself more affable than the one and more grave than the other.

Plato was successful precisely because he was able to humanize the figure of Pythagoras through Socrates and elevate the figure of Socrates through Pythagoras. As we saw in his allusion to the *Bacchae* in fragment 24 above, just as Pentheus’ body was torn apart, removing Pythagoras from the equation caused Platonic dogma to be unrecognizable and

identities) not by abandoning the search for barbarian wisdom process but by (re)asserting the univocity of that quest.”

O’Meara 1989:11.
thus reassembled incorrectly. This would imply that Numenius’ criticism of the Skeptics related to the fact that they, in mimicking Socrates alone, seemed to lose some of philosophy’s solemnity. In his attack on skepticism, for example, Numenius relates an amusing story of a certain Lacydes, whose slaves have been robbing him blind. Lacydes takes the skeptic ‘suspension of judgment’ to such a radical extreme that despite being faced with incontrovertible evidence that his slaves are to blame, he refuses to acknowledge the fact (fr. 26 = Eusebius, Preparation 14.7.1-5). The point of the anecdote is to refute skepticism, but Numenius shows no mercy to Antiochus’ attempts to resolve these kinds of problems because Antiochus proposed a return to the Old Academy through Stoic dogmatism (fr. 28 = Eusebius, Preparation 14.9.1-4). Numenius’ objection to Antiochus was not that he tried to resolve the logical problems of skepticism by reviving dogmatism, but that he turned to the dogmatism of the Stoics, rather than that of the Pythagoreans. Numenius argues that Antiochus, by appealing to the Stoics, introduced “a mass of strange doctrines” into Platonism (μυρία τε ξένα προσῆψε τῇ Ἀκαδημίᾳ) while Numenius’ return to Pythagoras signified a return to the true Plato. We must also keep in mind that, according to fragment 1a, barbarian wisdom is integral to uncovering the real Plato. According to Numenius’ formulation, while the barbarians are not ξένοι to Platonism, certain Hellenic philosophical schools are, a key theme of Iamblichus’ Mysteries. Numenius’ move was radical in that it redefined what it meant to be a Platonist by sidestepping the Academy itself and claiming that non-Greek sources were less “foreign” to Platonism than later Greek sources. In this way, Numenius was a forerunner of Iamblichus. To be a Platonist now meant a return to Plato through
Pythagoras and barbarian wisdom, which was precisely Iamblichus’ project, though the latter would take the argument to its limit: that barbarian wisdom was actually the source of Plato and Pythagoras.

4.3. Numenius’ Theology: Combining Platonic, Pythagorean, and Exotic Wisdom

Having outlined the parameters of Numenius’ project, we must turn to how he implemented it. Given that our subject is the transformation of the philosopher into a priest, we must focus on the theological doctrines that facilitated the transformation from Plutarch to Iamblichus’ persona. As I will show, what authorized Iamblichus’ project was the theology that Numenius developed out of his fusion of Platonic, Pythagorean, and barbarian sources. In this section we will see that one of Numenius’ main contributions was the philosophical investigation of the gods, which was the central motivation behind employing allegorical readings of not only Homer but Plato as well. In looking at his allegorical interpretations of Plato, I will demonstrate that Numenius read Plato as a philosopher stifled by the external historical and political circumstances of classical Athens in his quest for theological wisdom and sought to expose the esoteric theological doctrines in Plato’s own dialogues. The text that interested Numenius was the *Timaeus* because it both engaged with the question of the relationship between the physical world and the divine and was best suited for the application of Pythagorean and barbarian interpretive methods. As I will show, Numenius picked up on Plutarch’s project to understand the physical processes of the cosmos in terms of their divine causes and foregrounded Iamblichus’ push to see those physical properties as instruments in
inducing enlightenment from the gods. It was Numenius’ theology that precipitated the final and radical transformation of the philosopher into a priest.

As we saw in the previous section, Numenius’ claim that Platonic wisdom must be found outside the Academy implied that the Platonic philosopher had to dissociate himself from the school Plato himself founded and return to his doctrinal predecessors. This radical claim involved a new philosophical genealogy that began with Pythagoras as well as the sources of Pythagoras and Plato: primitive and barbarian wisdom. Thus, Numenius saw a direct line between Plato and himself, though it was discontinuous because he called for a rejection of Plato’s immediate successors on the grounds that they did not appreciate this genealogy. Ironically, at least the part of his project that involved the search for “primitive wisdom” had its roots in Stoicism, the very school that Numenius critiqued Antiochus for appealing to, but was brought into Platonism via Plutarch. As Boys-Stones argues, even though traces of “primitive wisdom” could be found in Plato’s dialogues, it was the Stoics who first highlighted the reinterpretation of ancient myth and poetry in terms of philosophy. Plutarch extended this Stoic methodology to include, as we saw in the Isis and Osiris, barbarian myth and ritual as symbolic vehicles for uncovering this more ‘ancient’ philosophy. Boys-Stones, however, fails to see that in terms of the history of later Platonism Numenius’ contribution to this debate was more far-reaching than Plutarch’s, especially given his new interpretive matrix that combined Pythagoreanism with exotic wisdom as a means to understand the real truth contained in Plato. Perhaps even more influential in the history of Platonism

was Numenius’ proposal of a radical theology that initiated the shift from theological science to scientific theology. In this section, therefore, I will examine how Numenius read the Platonic dialogues and deployed barbarian wisdom in his interpretation of them. The result was a new theology that influenced Iamblichus’ own tripartite division of philosophy in the Mysteries and Life of Pythagoras.

4.3.1 Numenian Allegory

The importance of allegory in the history of first- and second-century Platonism is now well understood because of Lamberton’s impressive and learned study, Homer the Theologian. The overarching thesis of this book is that the Platonists viewed Homer as a serious contributor to the philosophical field of theology, but that approaching that theological wisdom required allegorical readings of Homer’s poems. Though Lamberton locates the origin of treating Homer as a primitive philosopher to Plato himself, he argues that the allegorical approach to the poems was introduced to Platonism by Philo of Alexandria and, even more so, by Numenius. Lamberton convincingly suggests that allegorical approaches to literature could be traced back to the early Pythagoreans and their successors, underscoring the role of Numenius in this form of literary criticism.27 Thus, if Lamberton is correct, allegory was one part of the broader movement of Pythagoreanization among Platonists.

Allegory, however, was not limited to Homer, but extended to include Plato as well. As we have already seen in the previous section, because of the ‘literary’ and

‘dramatic’ elements of the dialogues, Numenius dubbed Plato an esoteric author. We have a number of fragments in which Numenius applies the allegorical approach to Plato, two of which I want to draw special attention to because they are indicative of Numenius’ theology. The first deals with the opening myth of the *Timaeus*, which describes the struggle between prehistoric Athens and Atlantis. According to Numenius’ reading, this ‘myth’ represented the conflict of the better souls that are assigned to Athena and recognize the Ideas against lesser souls (the followers of Poseidon) that are still attached to the world of becoming (fr. 49). 28 Though we are told nothing more about the details of Numenius’ reading of this passage, we can say that he here exhibits a fundamentally dualistic view between being and becoming, the very same metaphysical struggle we saw Plutarch dealing with in the previous chapter. Numenius, therefore, saw the same struggle within the *Timaeus* as Plutarch and determined, like Plutarch, that understanding this dualistic ontology required an exposition of theology, given that the physical processes of the cosmos are dependent upon their divine causes.

This connection to Plutarch is further strengthened by Numenius’ reputation regarding the mystery cults. According to Origen in *Against Celsus* 5.38, Numenius publicized the rituals of the Serapis mysteries and, according to Macrobius, “a dream announced to Numenius, who of all philosophers was most intrigued by the mysteries, that the gods were offended by his publication of his interpretation of the Eleusinian mysteries” (Numenio denique inter philosophos occultorum curiosi offensam numinum,

28 See also Baltes 1975:242: “Der Kampf der Athener gegen die Bewohner von Atlantis versinnbildlicht nach Numenios den Widerstreit der besseren Seelen, die Zöglinge der Athene sind, gegen die übrigen Seelen, die dem Werden zugeordnet und außerdem der das Werden beaufsichtigenden Gottheit zugehörig sind.”
Numenius was therefore, like Plutarch, interested in subjecting theological and priestly claims to philosophical scrutiny. In another fragment in which he tries to read between Plato’s murky lines, Numenius claimed that a precedent for philosophically questioning the gods could be found in the *Euthyphro*. According to Numenius’ reading, in this dialogue Plato had philosophically challenged traditional Athenian religion, but did not do so openly for fear that it would “have given the Athenians reason to commit another wrong and kill him, like Socrates” (εἴπερ ὁ Πλάτων ταυτὶ λαβὼν εἰς τὸ φανερὸν κατηγόρει, παρασχεῖν ἃν δοκεῖ μοι τοῖς Ἀθηναῖοῖς αἰτίαν πάλιν κακοῖς γενέσθαι ἀποκτείνασι καὶ αὐτὸν ὡσπερ τὸν Σωκράτην, fr. 23=Eusebius *Preparation* 13.4.4-5). Instead, according to Numenius, Plato staged this questioning between Euthyphro, the mouthpiece for traditional religion, and Socrates, the philosophical questioner. Thus, Numenius suggests that each character instantiates a particular point of view with regard to theology, and the dialogue between them is Plato’s indirect way of stating his point of view about the nature of religion. Though not strictly allegory in the way that Zeus’ sexual predilections and Hera’s subsequent anger in Homer could be read as the struggle of the first elements, Numenius is nonetheless applying similar esoteric principles. Because Plato did not directly divulge his opinions, his readers must carefully tease out his philosophical purpose by carefully approaching his texts. In fact, given that the early Pythagoreans were the first philosophical sect to employ allegorized and esoteric readings of mythic texts, as Lamberton convincingly showed, we find Numenius

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presenting himself as the answer to the problems of the Academy that he identified in *On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato*. Recall that there he argued for Plato as a *mediator* between Pythagoras and Socrates, with the former raising the dignity of the latter and the latter humanizing the image of the former. In using Pythagorean methods to interpret Plato, Numenius is restoring that proper balance and re-presenting to his readers this restored order of Pythagoras-Plato-Socrates. It is precisely here that Numenius diverges from Plutarch and begins to set the stage for Iamblichus because he presents Pythagoras as the true founder of Platonic philosophy and Pythagorean doctrine and methodologies as the keys to unlocking the truth about the gods. This approach, as we will see, authorizes Iamblichus’ transformation of the philosopher into a priest.

In addition to restoring the proper hierarchy of Pythagoras-Plato-Socrates to the Academy, Numenius sought to treat barbarian wisdom allegorically in order to uncover the same truths expressed in the Greek philosophical tradition. Unfortunately, our evidence is scant as to how Numenius did so. What survives testifies to the fact that he *allegorized* exotic stories but does not give much indication of how he did so. We know, for example, that he offered allegorical interpretations of the Moses and Jesus stories, but we have no evidence as to what exactly he may have said about them. In fragment 10, Origen tells us that “Numenius relates in *On the Good* 3 a story about Jesus, without mentioning his name, and interprets it allegorically; whether he was right or wrong will have to wait for another time” (ἐκτίθεται καὶ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἱστορίαν τινά, τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ οὐ λέγων, καὶ τροπολογεῖ αὐτήν· πότερον δ’ ἐπιτετευγμένως ἢ)

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30 On Numenius and Moses, see Edwards 1990b:64-75.
Though we have little to go on here regarding exactly which story about Jesus Numenius may have allegorized, we can be more certain about the reasons why Numenius may have cited these stories in the first place. Based on his criticisms of the Academy, it is likely that Numenius saw in these barbarian sources the same access to pure wisdom that Plato and Pythagoras had enjoyed. Reading them would help the potential philosopher achieve access to that wisdom. What seems to be critical here is that many of the stories Numenius is said to have allegorized relate primarily to understanding the wisdom of the gods. In the cases of Moses and Jesus, we know that each were believed to have been responsible for bringing God and man together. Moses as a prophet communicated the will of Yahweh to the Hebrews and Jesus as the son of God was effectively a bridge between human and divine. Numenius’ interest in theology, particularly with regard to the way in which the gods informed the cosmos, may well have attempted to view the exotic traditions as engaged with this same problem. Even though we cannot say how Numenius read the stories of Moses or Jesus, certainly his interest in them was related to the fact that they both had special access to the very divine wisdom that informs the cosmos.

We can therefore see Numenius engaging in a project similar to Plutarch’s: subjecting theological and religious traditions to philosophical scrutiny. Though we are not entirely sure what secrets he may have revealed about the Eleusinian mysteries, the fact that he revealed them at all points to his interest in investigating them philosophically, much in the same way we saw Plutarch do in his Isis and Osiris.
Similarly, though we are unsure what he may have said about Moses or Jesus, it is clear, given the way in which the Eusebius and Origen themselves authorized their use of Plato through Numenius, that Numenius would have tied the Judeo-Christian heroes to Platonic theology in some way. Despite the similarities to Plutarch’s project, Numenius engaged in the markedly Pythagorean activities of allegory and introducing barbarian wisdom as proof for Plato’s philosophical tenets. How Numenius was able to construct a new theology that would both authorize and influence Iamblichus with this new methodology will be the subject of the following section.

4.3.2. Numenius’ *Timaeus*: A Case Study

Crucial in the thread that ties Plutarch to Iamblichus, therefore, is Numenius’ interest in how the gods lead men to knowledge. As we have already seen, Numenius advocated an interpretive matrix that ranged Pythagorean philosophy and “barbarian wisdom” with the Platonic dialogues. In this section, I want to examine how Numenius’ philosophical program of combining these three elements is reflected in his exposition of theology. We can best approach this through what we know of his representation of the relationship between the divine and physical worlds originally found in Plato’s *Timaeus*, the central dialogue, as we have seen, in the late antique negotiation of the role of theology in philosophy. As we have already seen in chapter 2, at *Timaeus* 29e Plato describes the activity of the Demiurge as moved by the beauty of the Ideas to order Chaos in accordance with them. From this act, the Demiurge creates the cosmos. In this section, on the basis of three fragments in particular, we will examine how Numenius adapted this
ontological schema: one from Proclus’ commentary on the *Timaeus*, another from Eusebius, and the third from Calcindius’ Latin commentary on the *Timaeus*. Each of these three authors cites Numenius’ engagement with Plato’s philosophical story of creation, but, as we will see, his modifications to it reveal the very Neopythagorean approach that ultimately would authorize Iamblichus.

For Numenius, the *Timaeus* provided evidence for Plato’s Pythagoreanism, particularly his exposition of the ‘way of reason’ at *Timaeus* 29d-47e, which posited that the act of creation occurred when the Demiurge shared Form with Matter. In the surviving testimonia and fragments, Numenius appears to have envisioned Plato’s three ontological primitives (Demiurge, Chaos, and Ideas) as deities. According to Proclus’ commentary on the *Timaeus*, Numenius envisions three Gods in his ontology:

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\text{Numenius mentions three Gods: he called the first ‘father,’ the second ‘creator,’ and the third ‘creation.’ The cosmos according to him is this third god.}
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Though this fragment does not provide a full account of Numenius’ theology, it is nonetheless a succinct expression of the basic schema. To fill this out, we must read this fragment alongside Eusebius’ exposition in fragment 16.

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\text{Though this fragment does not provide a full account of Numenius’ theology, it is nonetheless a succinct expression of the basic schema. To fill this out, we must read this fragment alongside Eusebius’ exposition in fragment 16.}
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31 See also Dillon 1977:366-7, and Baltes 1975:260.

Now if essence and the idea is discerned by the mind, and if it was agreed that
the mind is earlier than this and the cause of it, then mind itself is alone found to
be the good. For if god the Demiurge is the beginning of generation, the good is
the beginning of essence. And god the Demiurge is related to the good, of which
He is an imitator, as generation is to essence, of which it is a likeness and an
imitation.

The “first god” anticipates Plotinus’ “One” in that it is a self-contemplating indivisible
simplex (ὁ θεὸς ὁ μὲν πρῶτος ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁν ἐστιν ἄπλοῦς, διὰ τὸ ἑαυτῷ
συγγιγνόμενος διόλου μή ποτε εἶναι διαφημῆς, fr. 11 = Eusebius, Preparation
11.17.11-18), equated with the Good (ὁν τὸ ἀγαθόν), and the model upon which the
Demiurge created the cosmos (fr.16 = Eusebius, Preparation 11.22.3-5, along with the
following passages). The Demiurge, the second deity mentioned by Proclus, is the god of
creation and becoming (ὁ μὲν δημιουργὸς θεὸς ἐστι γενέσεως) and is an “imitator” of
the “first god” (ὁ δημιουργὸς θεός, ὃν αὐτοῦ μιμητής), and is himself good in virtue
of his imitation in the “first god” (ὁ μὲν πρῶτος θεὸς αὐτοάγαθον ὁ δὲ τούτου
μιμητής δημιουργὸς ἁγαθός).

Numenius’ schema, comprised of three separate divinities, probably had its roots
in Neopythagorean doctrine. Though little survives of the Neopythagoreans, we do have
testimony regarding a certain Moderatus, a first-century Pythagorean, who seems to have
been influential with the later Neoplatonists. He, like Porphyry and Iamblichus, wrote a
Life of Pythagoras, which may well have been their model (Porph. VPyth 48-53).

According to a fragment preserved by Simplicius, Moderatus equated the ‘first god’ (or
‘first One,’ as the fragment says, though the choice may reflect Simplicius’ own word
choice rather than Moderatus’) with the ‘Good,’ the ‘second god’ with the realm of the
Ideas and the creation of matter, and the ‘third’ as soul (In Phys. 1.7.230.34). The extent to which Numenius has adapted Moderatus’ model to Plato’s *Timaeus* is unknowable because so little of Moderatus actually survives. Certainly the equation of the ‘Good’ with the ‘first god’ is a Neopythagorean reading of the *Timaeus* as is the equation of the Demiurge with the ‘second,’ because the Demiurge is responsible for the creation of physical objects according to the pattern of the Ideas. We can therefore say with some degree of certainty that Numenius’ tripartite ontological division does reflect striking similarities to Neopythagoreanism in general, particularly in his theology. For a visual representation of the similarities and differences between Numenius and Plato, see figure 1 on the following page.

Numenius’ Demiurge was also responsible for the good in the world and not the evil, another aspect borrowed from Plato. In describing the Demiurge’s creation of the world by shaping matter in the image of the Ideas, Calcidius, a fourth-century Christian commentator on the *Timaeus*, says of Numenius’ interpretation (as evidenced by the *inquit Numenius* that heads this discussion):

Itaque si deus eam correxit, ut in Timaeo loquitur Plato, redegitque in ordinem ex incondita et turbulentâ iactatione, certe confusa haec intemperies eius casu quodam et inprospera sorte habebatur nec ex prouidentiae consultis salubribus (fr. 52 = Calcidius, *Platonis Timaeus et commentarius* 247).

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33 The authorship of the fragment has been much disputed. Dillon (1977:348) rightly attributes it to Moderatus, which is corroborated by Dodds (1928:129-42). He outlines Moderatus schema essentially as I do here.

34 There are a number of fragments, however, that suggest the Demiurge created the cosmos because of his intense desire for matter (i.e., rather than his desire to share the beauty of the Ideas with matter as Plato describes), and the Demiurge is therefore split between contemplating the Good and the desire for physical world. See Dillon 1977:369 and discussion below.
And so if god corrected matter, as Plato says in the *Timaeus*, and imposed order upon its unformed and turbulent state, then certainly it must have derived its confused contrariness by chance and an unfortunate lot, and not by the intentions of Providence.

Figure 1: Plato and Numenius Compared

Calcidius here comments on *Timaeus* 51a-53b, where Timaeus accounts for evil. Because of Chaos’ natural propensity toward dissolution and disorder, the Demiurge could only ‘persuade’ matter to conform to the Ideas; he could not prevent it from reverting to its former nature (τὸ δὲ ἢ δυνατὸν ὡς κάλλιστα ἀριστά τε ἐξ ὦχ ὦτῳς ἑχόντων τὸν
θεὸν αὐτὰ συνιστάναι, παρὰ πάντα ἡμῖν ὡς ἀεὶ τούτο λεγόμενον ὑπαρχέτω, Tim. 53b). Calcidius attributes to Numenius the view that evil is not the fault of God, but of matter itself because “the world arose out of matter and God: God persuaded and matter obeyed” (Calcidius, Timaeus 249: ex qua et deo mundi machinam constitisse deo persuadente, necessitate obsecundante).35

While Calcidius’ Christian agenda is readily perceptible here (given that he seeks to answer the ‘problem of evil’), there are other fragments that describe the activities of the Demiurge and point to the possibility that the Demiurge’s soul is split between his judgment (based on the Ideas) and his desire (for matter). Eusebius quotes a passage from On the Good that compares the Demiurge’s activity to that of a helmsman:

κυβερνήτης μὲν ποι ἐν μέσῳ πελάγει φοροῦμενος ὑπὲρ πηδαλίων ὑψιτάτης τοῖς οὐσίωσι διαθείμηται τὴν υδάτων ὑφεξόμενος, ὀμοίως δ’ αὐτὸι καὶ νοῦς εὐθὺς τοῦ αἰθέρος συνετέσταται πρὸς τὰ μετάρσια καὶ ἥ ὁδὸς αὐτῶ ἀνω δι’ ὑφαρχον ὑπετείλει, πλέοντα κάτω κατὰ τὴν θάλασσαν ὑπὸ ταῦτα καὶ ὁ δημιουργὸς τὴν ὑλὴν, τὸ νάυον διανοοῦσαι μήτε ἀποπλαγχθῆναι αὐτὴν, ἀρμονίᾳ συνδησάμενος αὐτὸι μὲν ὑπὲρ ταῦτα ὑδράτητα, οἶνον ὑπὲρ νεως ἐπὶ θαλάττης. 

While sailing in middle of the ocean, sits high above the helm and steers the ship by the rudders, but his eyes and mind (νοῦς) are trained directly at the sky, looking at things aloft, as his course comes to him from above through the heaven while he sails upon the sea below. So also the Demiurge binds matter (τὴν ὕλην) together in harmony (ἁρμονίᾳ), so that it may neither break out nor slip away, is himself seated above matter, as above a ship on the sea and in directing the harmony he steers by the Ideas (ταῖς ἱδέαις), while instead of the sky he looks to the God above who attracts his eyes, and takes his judgment from

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35 On these fragments, see Baltes 1975 who argues that Numenius’ tension between soul and matter was primarily influenced by the Timaeus. While Baltes’ analysis focuses on the technical aspects of Numenius’ doctrine of soul, he argues that the doctrine is so reminiscent of Plutarch that “Numenius ist einer der ersten Zeugen für die Wirkung der Timaeusinterpretation des Plutarch auf die Nachwelt.” To this we return below.
that contemplation (τὰ ὀμματα λαμβάνει τε τὸ μὲν κριτικὸν ἀπὸ τῆς θεωρίας) while he derives his impulsive faculty (ὄμμητικόν) from his desire.

This image presents the Demiurge’s activities as split between competing faculties: judgment (τὸ μὲν κριτικὸν) and desire (ὄμμητικόν). In the analogy, the Demiurge stands in between (ἐν μέσῳ) what is above (ἄνω) and below (κάτω). The contemplative faculties (ἀπὸ τῆς θεωρίας) of his eyes and mind (ὁμματα τίς αὐτοῦ καὶ νοῦς) are directed at the Ideas (τῷ καὶ οἰακίζων) while his desire (τῆς ἐφέσως) is truly for matter (ὕλην). The Demiurge successfully and harmoniously binds (συνήθρόμενος) matter to the Ideas, but this very act of creation implies a split on the Demiurge’s part from the “first god.” In one sense, Numenius accounts for the physical world (a point of great importance to Plato in the Timaeus and its subsequent readers), but also recognizes that the physical world was created by a divinity that was itself split between perfection and imperfection. This reflects a similar dualistic ontology that Plutarch saw in Isis-Osiris and Zoroaster. The addition of the Demiurge as a being that cares for matter itself is proleptically suggestive of Iamblichus’ Demiurge who left traces of himself in the physical objects of the cosmos. Numenius, possibly through Moderatus and the Neopythagoreans, is the first to picture the Demiurge as physically tied to the universe and balanced between being and becoming.

Yet there seems to be another element of this ontology here because the metaphor of the helmsman comes directly from the central myth of Plato’s Statesman. In it, the younger Socrates and the ‘stranger’ from Elea (the characters that probably inspired Numenius’ own On the Good) discuss the nature of ‘government’ in a former time when the gods themselves were in charge of human affairs. At that time, the cosmos was
subjected to alternating periods of order and disorder, depending on whether the god was controlling ‘the rudder’ of the cosmos himself or leaving the ship to float without direction:

τότε δὴ τοῦ παντὸς ὁ μὲν κυβερνήτης, οἷον πηδαλίων οἴακος ἀφέμενος, εἰς τὴν αὐτοῦ περιωπὴν ἀπέστη, τὸν δὲ κόσμον πάλιν ἀνέστρεφεν εἰμαρμένη τε καὶ σύμφυτος ἐπιθυμία (272c).

Then the helmsman of the universe dropped the rudder and withdrew to his observation post, and fate and innate desire made the earth turn backwards.

Numenius most likely read into this myth the dualism of Plato’s ontological primitives in the Timaeus. The Ideas are themselves good and orderly, while matter is always tending toward dissolution. Without the Demiurge-helmsman, the cosmos would completely self-destruct. The ‘second god’ for Numenius was therefore the cause of the cosmos itself and bridged the gap between the physical world and the Ideas. It may not be that the Demiurge is a ‘lesser’ God in the sense that his soul is somehow imperfect because of its attraction to matter, as others have argued. It appears instead that the Demiurge must pay attention to his desire for matter because if he does not the cosmos could unravel. The Demiurge is therefore the mediator between gods and men, being and becoming, and potentially even existence and non-existence. This is, as we have seen, the way in which Iamblichus envisioned the Demiurge, theurgy, and the priest in the Mysteries. As we saw in the second chapter, the Demiurge created both the cosmos, leaving traces of the divine in the physical world, and theurgy, the set of rituals that aimed at exposing these traces

36 Dillon 1977:369-71

37 Compare also with fr. 12, which points to the notion that the cosmos is extinguished when the gods turn their back on it.
and reconnecting with the divine. The function of the philosopher-priest was to facilitate this ascent.

Numenius’ Demiurge therefore brings together elements of two different traditions: Neopythagoreanism and Plato. The Timaeus itself, as we have seen, attempts to account for the physical objects of this world and argues that those objects have real value because they participate in the Good (as well as other Value Ideas, such as Beauty, the Just, etc.). In reading the dialogue, Numenius interpreted Plato’s three ontological facts—the Ideas, the Demiurge, and Chaos—through Neopythagorean theology by equating the Ideas with the “first god” and the Demiurge with the “second god.” If we can assume that Moderatus reflects doctrinal positions similar to what Numenius held (and it seems to be a reasonable enough assumption when we compare the fragments), Numenius’ innovation was to replace both Plato’s “Chaos” and Moderatus’ “Soul” with the “Cosmos,” the composite of Ideas and Matter enacted through the Demiurge.

The reason Numenius deviated from both Plato and Moderatus in replacing Chaos and Soul with Cosmos seems to have been his desire to posit the Demiurge as the intermediary between the corporeal and incorporeal realms. In describing the Demiurge’s role, Numenius has adopted a dualism similar to what Plutarch found in the myths of Isis-Osiris and Zoroaster: that the world is a constant struggle between forces of order and disorder. Numenius’ solution was to posit, under the authority of Plato’s Statesman, a mediator.

This, in turn, allows us to see Numenius’ readings of Plato’s dialogues meta-metaphysically, since Plato mediated between the two extremes of order and solemnity
(in the case of Pythagoras) and disorder and irony (in the case of Socrates). It is precisely here that we can see Numenius himself as the hinge that connects Plutarch to Iamblichus. Numenius’ search for the metaphysical middle ground attempts to solve the problems of dualism (found in Plutarch) by positing a figure to mediate between man and divine (just as Iamblichus would envision the role of theurgy). Having access to the wisdom of the gods in trying to understand the cosmos is now becoming essential, and so we must now conclude with some reflections on how Numenius thought man came to knowledge: was it through philosophical investigation of religious phenomena as Plutarch had claimed or ritual approaches to philosophy as Iamblichus would later advocate?

4.4. Numenius’ Epistemology: Introducing the Chaldaean Oracles to Platonism

With regard to epistemology, Numenius would not have been one to suspend judgment, particularly given his attacks on Skepticism in On the Dissension between the Academics and Plato. Unfortunately, the evidence is scant on this particular topic, though there are a number of fragments that may point to how Numenius envisioned the way in which a philosopher comes to knowledge, and these must be placed in the context of what we have already seen of his ontology. It is clear from the previous section that Numenius saw the world as held together by the Demiurge. Without him, the world could not exist because he mediates between the order of the Ideas and the disorder of matter by carefully steering the cosmos toward the “first god.” Numenius, like Plutarch before him, understood that the physical processes of the universe depend upon their divine causes and to understand the world meant looking to the divine. Because we have no surviving
fragments that detail the scientific study of the world in Numenius, we must approach this topic indirectly, by examining the fragments that suggest the soteriological role of the gods, an idea which, as we will see, points to the Chaldaean Oracles. This theme represents the final and definitive tie that connects Plutarch to Iamblichus.

Numenius seems to be making steps toward Iamblichus in the role that he ascribes to divinity in philosophical discourse because, according to his system, the physical world was created out of a desire to order matter and understanding that world requires divine aid (frs. 19-20 = Eusebius, Preparation 11.22.6-10). In a fragment of On the Good preserved by Eusebius, Numenius presents a dialogue between a “philosopher” and a “stranger” about the procession of divinities in his metaphysical system. At the beginning of the dialogue, the two decide to invoke the gods themselves for guidance:

θεὸν δὲ προσκαλεσάμενοι ἑαυτοῦ γνώμονα γενόμενον τῷ λόγῳ δεῖξαι θησαυρὸν φροντίδων, ἀρχώμεθα οὕτως·

εὑρτέον μὲν ἡδη, διελέσθαι δὲ δεῖ (fr. 11 = Eusebius, Preparation 11.17).

Let us invoke God to be the interpreter of our discussion concerning him, and to show us the treasure of his thoughts, let us then begin thusly.

At once we must offer our prayer, and then make our distinction.

Numenius here has his philosopher and stranger invoke the gods to guide their discussion (as Timaeus and Socrates do at Timaeus 27b-c), but also implies that the gods are responsible for the revelation of wisdom. As the discussion continues about the nature of God giving himself fully and not ever diminishing, the philosopher and the stranger apply the following argument to the nature of knowledge:

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38 On Numbers would most certainly have been helpful here, if we assume that it was a study of Pythagorean numerology.
'Now this excellent thing is good knowledge. It profits the receiver but does not diminish the giver. Take this example: you see a lamp lit from another lamp. The first lamp shines with its own light and did not deprive the latter; rather, it had its own material kindled because of the other's flame. Knowledge is just this sort of thing. When knowledge is given and received, it remains the same with the giver and is communicated to the receiver. And the cause of this, stranger, is not anything human; but that the state and essence which possesses knowledge is the same both in God who has given and in you and me who have received it.

Numenius here seems to indicate that the gods give their knowledge to the human beings who are in search of it. In fact, it also seems that philosophical knowledge is by its nature divine and that human beings can have a share of it if the gods dispense it. While it is unclear from the extant fragments how one actually gets this knowledge, on the basis of these two passages we can say that Numenius’ epistemology looks forward to the introduction to Iamblichus’ Life of Pythagoras, which, as we have seen in chapter 1, claims that wisdom comes only through the gods.

Numenius thus believed that the gods were integral to success in philosophy. In fact, according to fragment 15, the gods play a soteriological role as well:

εἰσὶ δ’ οὕτως βίοι ὦ θεοῖ, ὁ μὲν πρῶτος, ὁ δὲ δεύτερος θεοῦ. δηλονότι ὁ μὲν πρῶτος θεὸς ἔσται ἔστώς, ὁ δὲ δεύτερος ἐμπαλίν ἐστι λιγνύμενος· ὁ μὲν οὖν πρῶτος περὶ τὰ νοητά, ὁ δὲ δεύτερος περὶ τὰ νοητά καὶ αἰσθητά. μὴ θαυμάσῃς δ’ ἐτούτ’ ἐγὼ· πολὺ γὰρ ἐγὼ θαυμαστότερον ἀκούει. ἀντὶ γὰρ τῆς προσούσης τῷ δευτέρῳ κινήσεως τὴν προσούσαν τῷ πρῶτῳ στάσιν φύσις εἶναι κάμην ἑνώπιον, ἀφ’ ἑς ἤ τε τάξις τοῦ κόσμου καὶ ἡ μονὴ ἡ ἀδίκαι καὶ ἡ ζωτικαὶ ἀναχεῖται εἰς τὰ ὅλα (fr. 15 = Eusebius, Preparation 11.18.20-1).
These are the lives of the first and second gods. Evidently, the first god is ‘standing’ and the second god is ‘in motion.’ The first god is concerned with ‘the intelligible,’ while the second god is concerned with ‘the intelligible’ and ‘the perceptible.’ Do not be surprised at what I’ve said because you will hear something even more amazing. In contrast to the ‘motion’ of the first god, I call the characteristic of the second god ‘stasis,’ which is natural to it. From this comes the arrangement of the cosmos, eternity, and salvation for everything.

In this passage, again we can see the role of the first and second divinities in Numenius’ schema. The first god is a contemplator, while the second moves between the Ideas and matter. This passage, however, adds another responsibility to the Demiurge: salvation. Numenius’ novelty here is assumed by the primary speaker. He suggests that what he was saying about the ‘first’ and ‘second’ gods is surprising (μὴ θαυμάσῃς) and that the addition of a new property, salvation, is even more surprising (πολὺ γὰρ ἐτὶ θαυμαστότερον).

The element of salvation may point to the influence of the *Chaldaean Oracles* as one of the ‘barbarian’ elements necessary for the proper interpretation of Plato.³⁹ Polymnia Athanassiadi has argued that Julian the Theurgist, to whom we owe the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and his father Julian the Chaldaean, belonged to a priestly caste linked with the Temple at Bel in Apamea and probably moved within the same intellectual circles as Numenius and that the three influenced each other.⁴⁰ While we cannot say for sure whether Numenius influenced the *Oracles* or vice versa, Numenius’ theology shares a number of striking similarities with that of the *Chaldaean Oracles*.⁴¹

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³⁹ Dodds (1961:271) argues that Numenius represents the link between the *Oracles* and Porphyry.

⁴⁰ Athanassiadi 2006:84-89.

⁴¹ Dillon 1977:393-5; Athanassiadi 2006:85-86. Athanassiadi points to fr. 17 and *Chaldaean Oracles*, fr. 7 both about the procession of divinity and argues that even if the textual parallels are
This represents the most crucial step toward Iamblichus’ philosophical project: the fusing of the *Chaldaean Oracles* with Plato’s dialogues. The *Oracles* posited a distinction between a ‘first’ and ‘second’ god (fr. 7), just as Numenius had done, with the Second God being superior to the creation of the world, though he is responsible for the creation of matter. The second god in this tradition proceeded from the first god (fr. 4), created the world in imitation of the Ideas, and stands as a mediator between the intelligible and perceptible realms (fr. 8). For both Numenius and the *Oracles*, the world is a place that must be fled from and one’s salvation is received from the gods. Though the surviving fragments of Numenius do not say much about how the philosopher can attain this salvation, it is clear that knowing about the gods and asking them for help in the philosophical search was clearly the first step. One fragment in particular reveals similarities between the *Oracles* and Numenius, because there Numenius justifies his argument that human and divine nature is identical. He claims that “knowledge has descended to humanity through Prometheus as by a radiating light” (σοφίαν ὑπὸ Προμηθέως ἐλθεῖν εἰς ἀνθρώπους μετὰ φανοτάτου τινὸς πυρὸς ἔφη, fr. 14). The

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42 πάντα γὰρ ἐξετέλεσε πατήρ καὶ νῦ παρέδωκε δευτέρῳ, ὃν πρῶτον κληΐζετε πᾶν γένος ἀνδρῶν.
43 See Lewy 1978:78-83.
44 νοῦς δ’ ἀπ’ ἑκείνου.
45 Lewy 1978:117-129.
46 ἀμφότερον γὰρ ἔχει, νῦ μὲν κατέχειν τὰ νοητά, αἰσθηθήναι δ’ ἐπάγειν κόσμως.
Chaldaean Oracles likewise urge the theurgist to “rush toward the divine light” (χρήσεσπεύδειν πρὸς τὸ φῶς, fr. 115), the strength of which can be salvific (σωζόμεναι δι’ ἑῆς ἀλκῆς, fr. 117).

4.5. Conclusion

While we can say little about what authorial persona Numenius may have adopted, his work in Apamea certainly foregrounded Iamblichus’ own persona and philosophical project. The answer to the question of how we get from Plutarch to Iamblichus is, simply put, the contribution of Numenius’ interpretation of Plato’s Timaeus. Numenius shares many similarities to Iamblichus: both lived and worked in Apamea; both claimed that wisdom is attainable through divine aid; both re-imagined the ideal philosopher as Pythagorean; both saw the Demiurge as the binding divinity between gods and men; both used the Chaldean Oracles to define the gods’ soteriological role in philosophy; and, perhaps most importantly, both insisted that barbarian theology was a crucial sub-discipline to philosophy. It was, however, in Iamblichus’ adoption of the barbarian and priestly persona, Abammon, that Plutarch’s theological science became Iamblichus’ theurgy and scientific theology. Numenius, whatever his authorial persona, provided the authority for Iamblichus to do so.

Numenius therefore serves to connect Plutarch to Iamblichus, and it seems to have been Numenius’ critiques of the Platonic tradition that inspired Iamblichus’ programmatic fusion of theurgy with Platonic philosophy. While Plutarch did try to range barbarian wisdom with Greek philosophy, Numenius insisted that Greek philosophy
could be accessed only through Pythagoras and exotic wisdom, which Iamblichus took to a radical extreme. Iamblichus authorized his persona through Numenius’ Pythagoreanism and then deployed that persona to interpret Plato solely through “Egypt” and “Chaldaea,” the alleged sources of Greek philosophy itself. Similarly, Plutarch’s project to examine religious symbols, rituals, and mysteries philosophically represented his reanimation of Plato’s rehabilitation of physics. Numenius then argued for the intimate connection between physics, metaphysics, and theology by insisting that this kind of knowledge comes through knowledge of the gods themselves. Iamblichus would ultimately claim that all knowledge comes through the gods and the verifiable study of the objects of this world serves the purpose of inciting the gods to offer ultimate ascent. Theological science, therefore, became scientific theology and the priest-philosopher became the philosopher-priest through Numenius’ attempt to interpret the “impure” Platonic legacy through Pythagoras and barbarian wisdom.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, we will look back to Plato in order to imagine what the master’s response to all of these shifts might have been. We will first examine the turbulent and contentious relationship between philosophers and priests in those of Plato’s dialogues that these later Neoplatonists were trying to resolve. We will then turn to how Plato employed all the themes we have been tracing so far (priests, philosophers, science, theology, exotic wisdom, oracles, and mysteries) and how they come together in Plato in a way that ultimately, beyond any of the other reasons I have been suggesting so far, contributed to the process by which philosophers turned into priests.
Chapter 5
Conclusion:
Priests in Plato

5.1 Ending at the Beginning

In the preceding chapters I have traced the radical and final transformation of the Platonic philosopher of antiquity into the Neoplatonic priest of late antiquity. My argument has proceeded on two fronts: first, I have studied how the philosophers of the first three centuries CE defined the role of both “science” and “theology” in philosophical discourse; and second, I have shown that these philosophers gradually and increasingly adopted priestly personae as literary impersonations of their approaches not only to epistemology but also to metaphysics. To reassemble the story into a narrative, Plutarch, priest of Apollo and Platonic philosopher, highlighted the importance of approaching the religious mysteries associated with the oracle from the perspective of philosophy. The gods, for Plutarch, did not directly dispense knowledge to mankind; rather, the shrines and religious practices associated with them presented the participant with questions for further investigation. According to Plutarch, the oracle’s riddling responses invited the questioner to philosophically examine his life and the cosmos. In so doing, the newly converted philosopher must consider theological explanations alongside scientific ones because to understand the cosmos was to understand the divine processes that governed it. This was the goal, at any rate. Plutarch himself, much to the frustration of scholars of
religion, never explained in certain terms the mechanics or mysteries of the shrine that he
oversaw.

Plutarch’s version of the priest-philosopher was not to last for too long because, as was
evident from the dialogues that we studied, it smacked too much of skepticism for the later
Platonists. As we have seen in chapter 4, the independent, parallel process to the
transformation of the philosopher into the priest was the shift from skepticism to
dogmatism. Since Plutarch had emphasized the search for the truth over its end result, the
balance that he struck between science and theology had to be renegotiated as
philosophers began to infuse Platonism with Pythagoreanism and hold up Pythagoras, not
Socrates, as the ideal philosophical model. Still, Plutarch’s thesis in the Isis and Osiris,
namely that the Egyptians held an encoded wisdom necessary for attaining the truth but
that truth needed to be decoded through Platonic philosophy, was re-echoed by the later
dogmatics. Numenius, as far as we can tell on the basis of scant evidence, later attempted
to cleanse the Platonic tradition of its skeptical impurities by appealing to foreign
traditions, such as those of the Egyptians and Jews, as well as to more ancient Greek
traditions, such as Pythagoreanism. Iamblichus subsequently redefined Plutarch’s priest
through his turn to dogmatism on the authority of Numenius and shifted the philosopher’s
focus from using religious mysteries as a starting-point to using them for the final stretch
in the search for the truth. The gods had all the answers, but it took priestly qualities to
connect the philosopher to the ultimate source of wisdom. Unlike Plutarch, Iamblichus,
when he donned the mask of Abammon, was willing to explain exactly how the
connection could be achieved. It was precisely this—the discourse that promised to bring
together the human and divine worlds through the right balance of philosophy and religious ritual, of science and theology, of philosopher and priest—that underpins Iamblichus’ theurgy.

I have also demonstrated that this transformation can be tracked especially in the reception of Plato’s *Timaeus*. Plutarch read the dialogue as Plato’s definitive claim to have finally subordinated the physical processes of the universe to their divine causes. Iamblichus, on the other hand, found in the *Timaeus* a precedent for his theurgy. Because the *Timaeus* places so much emphasis on the value of objects in this world, since they are physical instantiations of what is really real (i.e., a copies of the Ideas), Iamblichus claimed that the gods imbued the perceptible realm with traces and symbols that could, if the correct ritual procedures were employed, direct the theurgist back to the gods. It was through their respective readings of Plato’s dialogues, notably the *Timaeus*, as well as what each believed to be the spirit of Plato’s philosophy, that Plutarch’s priest-philosopher became Iamblichus’ philosopher-priest.

But this problem—that Plutarch and Iamblichus reached such radically different conclusions while at the same time claiming to accurately represent the spirit of Plato’s philosophy—invites me to address one more question: did Plato himself, the interpretation of whom is at the very heart of the transformation that I have been studying, authorize any kind of priestly involvement in philosophy? This question is an apt way to end my study because we are only now, after we have seen the ways in which the tradition problematized the figure and persona of the priest, prepared to examine it. The conclusion at which I have been hinting throughout my thesis is that because Plato is
a difficult author to pin down, what Plato “said” or “meant” at any given moment in any
given dialogue was the source of most disagreements and was, to put it bluntly, the
reason that we have the Platonic tradition as we have it. There is virtually nothing in
Plato that is not perfectly ambivalent, capable of birthing generations of philosophical
discussions to which there are completely inconsistent conclusions—and the role of the
priest is no exception. Even within Plato’s dialogues there is no definitive statement on
priests. I will therefore examine two priests in Plato’s dialogues, Euthyphro and Diotima,
the former a philosophical failure and the latter a philosophical success, in order to
demonstrate that Plato’s own ambivalence about priests as well as his own interest in the
relationship between religion and philosophy sparked his successors to, once and for all,
come to a definite conclusion. My dissertation, therefore, draws to a close at this story’s
complex beginning.

5.2 Plato’s Inconclusiveness

Before turning to the Euthyphro and Symposium, however, I first want to give the reader
a sense of the difficulty associated with the reading and interpretation of Plato. Although
I cannot, in the interest of space, address all the problems that one encounters in the
drama of Plato,¹ I do want to draw special attention to the inconclusive nature of the

¹ For the drama of the dialogues as well as the dialogue form in general, I suggest Zuckert’s
(2009:1-48) fine treatment, both for her own arguments and for her review of previous
scholarship on the topic. Zuckert’s methodology, to treat the dialogues in order of dramatic date,
both problematizes what we mean by corpus (on which I recommend Griswold 1999), Platonic
anonymity (see the following note), and the play of character (on which I suggest Arieti 1991 and
Blondell 2002) among others and offers an alternative to the ‘unitarian’ approach to Plato (best
represented by Shorey 1933) as well as the ‘historicist’ approach (i.e., that Plato’s thought
dialogues. To take just one, but striking nonetheless, example from the Republic, directly before Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus move through the sequence of analogies about the nature of the Good in books 6 and 7 (commonly referred to as the short-hand, “Sun,” “Line,” and “Cave”), Glaucon asks Socrates a direct question: “You’re not going to withdraw [from our argument] now that we’re at the end, are you, Socrates? It will satisfy us even if you go through the Good just as you went through justice, moderation, and the rest” (506d). At this critical moment in the digression that comprises the middle books of the Republic, Glaucon asks Socrates for an answer to one of the most important metaphysical questions of the entire dialogue and perhaps the whole corpus: ‘what is the nature of Good?’ In typical Platonic fashion, Socrates gives no answer. He claims that he is afraid that he “will not be up to it” and that “it is out of range for the present thrust of the argument.” This is the closest that we ever come in all thirty-five Platonic dialogues to finding a clear definition of the Good, and the opportunity slips away.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is that Glaucon fully expects Socrates not to answer this question (in the form, “you’re not going to leave me like this, are you?”). I, perhaps along with Glaucon too, take this as the most critical silence in the entire Platonic corpus and, as such, it is for me the paradigmatic example of just how difficult it is to say anything definitively about the philosophical views of Plato himself. While Platonic anonymity and reticence to reveal the truth are certainly clearest in the so-called

developed through the from the ‘early’ dialogues to the ‘middle’ and ‘late’ dialogues, as seen in Vlastos 1991).

‘aporetic’ dialogues, such as the *Euthyphro* and *Laches*, even in the dialogues that have been read as dogmatic, such as the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*,\(^3\) Plato is just as inconclusive. As Arieti has pointed out, because the arguments about the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* are unconvincing, and intentionally so, the reader is left wondering at the end of the dialogue whether the soul lives on eternally or, as Socrates puts it at *Apology* 40d, “death is like a dreamless sleep.”\(^4\) For a number of times in the *Phaedo*, Socrates’ interlocutors seem to accept the impossibility—at least for mortals—of truly knowing about the afterlife,\(^5\) a point emphasized at the end of the dialogue when they weep over the impending loss of Socrates. If death were not the end of an individual’s consciousness, it seems, it would not be such a sad occasion. Moreover, given the narrative frame of the *Phaedo*, in which Echecrates of Phlius asks about the day of Socrates’ death, we can see not only how Plato highlights the wide sphere of influence that Socrates had over his own and subsequent generations\(^6\) but he also shows how the dialogues represent a starting-point for philosophical investigation rather than a

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\(^3\) These dialogues have been frequently read as introductions to a number of so-called Platonic theories or dogmas. One such example would be Plato’s ‘Theory of the Soul,’ purportedly ‘most clearly’ expounded in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic*. The arguments of the *Phaedo* are systematically studied by Bostock 1986, Woods 1987, and Robinson 1995. On the ‘Theory of the Soul’ in the *Republic*, Cooper (1979) is still best.

\(^4\) Even in the above discussions of Plato’s ‘Theory of Soul,’ there is a sense that the arguments themselves are unsatisfactory. See, e.g., Bostock 1986:119 as well as Bobonich’s (2002) accusation of infinite regress. On the other hand, Arieti (1986:131) shows that the arguments of the *Phaedo* are intentionally bad for dramatic effect, particularly because the dialogue is not about the immortality of the soul, but about the heroism of Socrates in the face of death.

\(^5\) See *Phaedo* 63b-c and Arieti 1986:136.

\(^6\) On the narrative frames of Plato, see Clay 1992.
repository for solutions. As the *Phaedo* (and many other dialogues for that matter) suggests, even after Socrates is dead and gone, the philosophical beat goes on.

It is therefore not without an appreciation for irony that I conclude my dissertation with the Platonic tradition’s most inconclusive and elusive author. As I will show, it is precisely Plato’s ambiguity that allowed for Numenius and Iamblichus, two thinkers who were well aware of the traps Plato set for his readers, to respond with a dogmatism that rivaled Plato’s vagueness. Numenius, as we have seen in the previous chapter, claimed that the reason for the adumbration of Platonic doctrine was Plato’s lack of clarity and refusal to provide dogmatic statements in the dialogues. Similarly, as I have argued, Iamblichus’ project to bring theurgy to bear on philosophy sought to uncover the esoteric truths obscured in Plato’s dialogues—a project that was seductive indeed given the fact that it changed the face of Platonic philosophy in late antiquity.

Iamblichus seems to have brought to the fore one of the original aims of theurgy since its inception sometime in the latter half of the second century. Though significantly later, Michael Psellus in the eleventh century relates a fantastical, but apparently widely circulated story about the two Juliani, who were themselves reportedly the direct recipients of the *Chaldaean Oracles* from Apollo and Hecate (*Phil. Min. Opusc.* 46).⁷ According to this story, the elder Julian (known as ‘Julian the Chaldaean’) “introduced his son” (known as ‘Julian the Theurgist’) shortly after his birth “to all the gods and the ghost of Plato” (γεννηθέντα τοῖς θεοῖς πάσι συνέστησε καὶ τῇ Πλάτωνος ψυχῇ). When his son grew up, Julian also taught him to employ the “priestly arts” to discover the

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truth (ταύτην ἐποπτεύων ἐκ τινος τέχνης ἱερατικῆς ἐπυνθάνετο περὶ ὧν ἐβούλετο, 46.46). Although Psellus seems to disavow the truth of this anecdote, calling it φλυάρημα (a word probably best translated by our “bullshit,” itself a category of discourse that is now beginning to receive serious philosophical attention\(^8\)), the story nonetheless reveals precisely what the theurgists were after: direct access to the gods and to the doctrines of Plato. It seems to me, therefore, that the anecdote serves to show more than just the special magical powers that the elder Julian wielded, as Dodds argued.\(^9\) Through the story we can see that the theurgists used the τέχνη ἱερατική to gain access to the gods and to Plato himself, implying that Plato had earned divine status and that even in the second century (or, barring that, in the eleventh) Plato’s texts and the truths contained within them were viewed as obscure, not obvious.

Thus it is with Plato’s inconclusiveness in mind that we approach the character of the priest in Plato’s dialogues because, as the anecdote above shows, it was not only we who struggle to understand the meaning of Plato’s dialogues, but his ancient readers as well. We will not, therefore, be seeking to determine Plato’s “official” philosophical opinion on the role that the priest should play in philosophy because such a claim could never be made with certainty. Rather, we will be attempting to locate the kinds of questions Plato raised concerning the priestly figure because it is in response to these, as I will show, that the later authors were ultimately responding. In order to do this, I will, as I have said before, offer my reading of the two priests in order to show that Plato did, in

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\(^8\) See, for example, Frankfurt 2005.
\(^9\) Dodds 1951:258.
fact, authorize the figure of the priest, but only a priest who would be willing to adopt a philosophical approach to his profession. What follows will appear like a summary of the Euthyphro and the sections of the Symposium that deal with Diotima, but it is not. Because the philosophical activity of these dialogues is transmitted through a dramatic medium, with words spoken by characters who do things, and not a treatise, I must analyze not only what the characters say but how they say what they say, what the circumstances are surrounding Socrates’ encounter with them, and how the characters react to Socrates’ questioning of their expressed (or sometimes unexpressed, as in the case of Agathon below) assumptions. In order for my reading to be persuasive, I must try to pull together as much information as Plato gives us about character and setting. As my interpretation of the characters of Euthyphro and Diotima will reveal, the Platonic tradition really did pick up where Euthyphro, Socrates, and Diotima left off with regard to the place of the priest in philosophy. In the following pages, we will try to understand both what Euthyphro and Diotima are for Plato and how Iamblichus’ Abammon revamped their place in philosophy as the later Platonists opted for “science” over Plato’s aporia.

5.3 Re-reading Plato’s Euthyphro: Piety Re-examined

I begin my discussion with the Euthyphro because it contains many of the themes I have been discussing in this dissertation: that subjecting wisdom about the gods to

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10 I cannot, in the interest of space, review here all the scholarship on this dialogue, but West (1998:182-84) includes a helpful annotated bibliography that reviews the major work on the Euthyphro. For the most recent treatment, see Zuckert 2009:639-50.
philosophical inquiry reveals something about the ways in which human beings know their world and their place within it. In this section, therefore, we will first examine the dramatic background of the dialogue with special emphasis on the figure of Euthyphro himself and then turn to how the dialogue subordinates theological expertise to philosophy. As I will show, even though Plato offers no definition of piety by the end of the dialogue, he uses Euthyphro, as self-appointed expert in divine matters, to set out a philosophical contradiction about piety that problematizes man’s relationship both to the gods and philosophy. Even though Euthyphro shrinks from this challenge at every turn, Plato’s successors, especially Porphyry and Iamblichus, accept it and set out a Euthyphronic position that would pass Socratic muster.

At the beginning of the dialogue, both Socrates and Euthyphro are en route to appear before the archon on charges of impiety, the former as a defendant and the latter as plaintiff. The two men first discuss their business with the archon and exchange pleasantries. When Socrates reveals that he has been charged with corrupting the youth, not believing in the gods of the city, and inventing new gods, Euthyphro lends a sympathetic ear. He commiserates with Socrates about the general intolerance exhibited by the Athenian citizens concerning the nature of the divine, especially when confronted with “innovations.” He therefore dismisses the charges that Socrates faces as mere slander (ὡς διαβαλών δὴ ἐξεύρεται εἰς τὸ δικαστήριον), citing a story of his own as proof:

καὶ ἐμὸν γὰρ τοι, ὅταν τι λέγω ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ περὶ τῶν θείων, προλέγων αὐτοῖς τὰ μέλλοντα, καταγελώσιν ὡς μαινομένου· καίτοι οὐ δὲν ὅτι οὐκ ἄλληθες εἴρηκα ὅν προείπον, ἀλλ’ ὃμως φθονοῦσιν ἡμῖν πάσι τοῖς τοιούτοις. ἀλλ’ οὐδὲν αὐτῶν χρή φροντίζειν, ἀλλ’ ὁμόσε ἰέναι. (Euth. 3a-b)
I know how you feel. Whenever I say something in the assembly about the gods or predict the future for them, they mock me as if I were a madman, even though I’ve never made a false prediction. I think they’re jealous of anyone like us. Rather than just worrying about them, we should confront them.

Euthyphro not only sympathizes with Socrates, he also seems to believe that the two were cut from the same cloth because he thinks that his own prophetic power is something akin to Socrates’ *daimonion*. But, as Clay put it, “any similarity ends here.” First, Socrates faces criminal charges, the very ones that will ultimately bring about his death; moreover, Socrates’ ‘divine innovations,’ of which the *daimonion* was apparently one, evoke anger, not laughter among the Athenians. Second, Euthyphro has actually missed the point. Socrates is not at all interested in ‘making predictions’ or ‘revealing the future;’ rather, as his response to Euthyphro suggests, his focus is on the quest for knowledge and wisdom because he “freely says whatever (wisdom) he possesses to any man” (*Euth*. 3d). Thus while the similarity between Euthyphro and Socrates is that the two are interested in the nature of the divine and both are interested in revealing the truth (*ἀληθὲς εἴρηκα*) to the Athenians the differences between them lie in their approaches. As I will show, whereas Euthyphro approaches wisdom as a religious expert and a priest of sorts, Socrates does so as a philosopher. The dialogue that ensues, therefore, pits the priest against the philosopher.

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12 This is an odd claim, as Strauss (1989:204-6) points out. Plato never shows Socrates actually doing this; in fact, he often does quite the opposite, as Thrasymachus’ complaint at *Republic* 1 suggests.
5.3.1 The Character of Euthyphro

The question of pinning down the kind of priest Euthyphro was or what his expertise in religious matters entailed has received much scholarly attention, with nearly every possible permutation of religious affiliation suggested. An early, persistent, and most certainly incorrect attempt views Euthyphro as a “docteur en théologie traditionelle,” representing in the dialogue the normative views of traditional Athenian religion in the face of the non-normative Socrates. This position has little credibility on the grounds that Euthyphro’s religious views were the object of ridicule in the Assembly, as we have seen above, and so it would appear that the Athenians themselves did not share them. For this reason and others to which we will turn below Euthyphro could never be understood as ‘traditional.’

Based on the average Athenian’s reaction to Euthyphro, we get the impression that he was more aberrant and unorthodox in the eyes of his contemporaries. We therefore cannot call him as an exponent of traditional religion. In his authoritative commentary on the *Euthyphro*, Burnet highlighted Euthyphro’s connection to Naxos, where his father held land and committed the crime for which Euthyphro is prosecuting him, as the reason why Euthyphro appears so strange. Burnet suggests that Naxos was

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13 Croiset 1920:179. For other discussions of Euthyphro as representative of traditional views on religion, see Grote 1875:322 and Horber 1958:96 n. 1. More recently, Euthyphro as a representative of traditional religion has been championed by Most 2003.

14 Furley 1985:203-4: “Euthyphro’s position is that of one cleaving to a tradition which has begun to come under fire from progressive thinkers.”

15 For scholarly discussion that Euthyphro’s views are unorthodox, see Taylor 1949:147; Hoerber 1958:96; and discussion below. For a very close reading of this issue in particular, see also the invaluable essay by Strauss 1989:187-206.
close to Paros, a veritable hotbed of Pythagorean intellectual activity, which could well have caused Euthyphro to hold beliefs that would have been largely foreign to the Athenians.\(^{16}\) The problem with this position is, of course, that Euthyphro does not appear to have any especially Pythagorean commitments. Still others have explained Naxos, \textit{contra} Burnet, for its connection to the cult of Dionysus and therefore Orphism. This position relies not only on the geographical connection but also on Euthyphro’s own words: “Euthyphro's implicit faith in militant Olympians reflects Orphic beliefs rather than popular tenets.”\(^{17}\) This position does not fully explain what Euthyphro’s views are nor what he means for Plato. It certainly is not Pythagoreanism; for it is in the \textit{Phaedo}.

More recently, scholars have abandoned the idea that Euthyphro represents a single religious system. Edwards, for example, has argued that Euthyphro was a serious theologian, whose views extended beyond banal religiosity, merely “derived without reflection from the same Athenian public which was soon to condemn the more rational and heartfelt piety of Socrates.”\(^{18}\) For Edwards, Euthyphro is a true prophet, given that Socrates calls him a \textit{μάντις}, and that he is able, like Socrates, to see further than the average Athenian (\textit{Euth.} 3e). Euthyphro accepts that the gods are perfect in their dealings with humankind, a belief most clearly visible in his interpretation of the stories of succession in Hesiod. Just as Zeus had to end the cycle of violence in his family initiated

\(^{16}\) Burnet 1924:5-6.


by the castration of Ouranos, Euthyphro was motivated to prosecute his father in order to remove pollution from the family line.19

Edwards is certainly right about Euthyphro’s motivations for prosecuting his father, but he goes too far in assigning philosophical credence to his theology; a closer reading of Plato himself, I think, cannot support this. Plato does seem to imply that Euthyphro felt justified in prosecuting his father because of his special understanding of the gods. According to Euthyphro’s account of the murder, the victim was himself a murderer, having slit the throat of another slave in a drunken rage. Euthyphro’s father bound the killer’s feet and hands and then sent a messenger to Athens for the purpose of consulting the interpreter of the sacred and ancestral laws about what to do. By the time the messenger had returned with a response from the exegetes, because Euthyphro’s father neglected the man, the slave had starved to death (4b-c). As a ‘prophet,’ then, Euthyphro sets himself as a rival to the ‘exegete,’ and one who does not need to consult the sacred and ancestral laws to manage the pollution; he would have direct access to the will of the gods. And Euthyphro certainly does maintain this air of confidence when he describes his purpose at the Porch of the King, convinced that “pollution turns out to be equal if you knowingly associate with such a man and do not purify yourself, as well as him, by proceeding against him in a lawsuit” (4c). Euthyphro’s words are authoritative, though not necessarily widely accepted by his contemporaries.

Even if Edwards is right to call Euthyphro a theologian, he is not the kind of theologian whom Plato would hold up as an ideal model because his choices are

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19 Kahn 1997:56.
unreflective. This is perhaps most clear in his groundless case against his father. Most scholars agree that it would have been a difficult task for Euthyphro to secure a conviction on charges of murder. Even if it were plausible that Euthyphro had a strong case for manslaughter,\textsuperscript{20} certainly bringing a criminal case against one’s own father on behalf of a hired hand, a murderer himself, would have been considered ludicrous (as Socrates himself says, see below). Moreover, given that Athens had given up landholdings of the sort that Euthyphro’s father had on Naxos by 404,\textsuperscript{21} about five years have passed since the murder took place. Thus not only is Euthyphro prosecuting his own father for the murder of the slave, he is doing so at least five years after the events in question. Plato offers no reasons for Euthyphro’s delay, but it is possible that Plato intends Euthyphro to be an example of a ‘corrupted youth,’ corrupted by untempered belief in the stories of the gods (therefore, perhaps, alluding to Republic 2 and 3), much in the same way that Aristophanes portrayed Pheidippides in the Clouds. Both men treat their fathers unjustly, with the former hauling his father into court and the latter nearly beating his to death, and sophistically cite theological laws as justification for their deeds (Euth. 5e-6a; Cl. 380-81 and 1464-75). Plato therefore may be painting Socrates, himself at the Porch of the King to answer for the charges of corrupting the youth, as a corrector of Euthyphro and therefore not a corrupter. As Furley has suggested, “Plato here is using

\textsuperscript{20} This case is made by Panagiotou 1974. But as Saxonhouse (1988) has shown, because Socrates has to explain to Euthyphro the difference between a graphê and a dikê at the beginning of the dialogue, one may assume that Euthyphro knows little about Athenian law.

\textsuperscript{21} Burnet (1924:4-5) suggested that the lapse was caused by the necessary revision of the Athenian constitution after the democracy was dismantled. Hoerber (1958:97), on the other hand thinks that Euthyphro chose to wait this long because it characterizes Euthyphro as a zealot, looking for any excuse to champion the divine cause.
Euthyphro as a means of securing a vote of ‘not guilty’ on the charge of impiety, at least from the reader of the dialogue, if not from the jurymen at the actual trial.” But this cannot be the whole story because Euthyphro actually believes in the stories told by Hesiod and they are not a mere ploy to ‘make the weaker argument the stronger.’

Euthyphro, for Plato, is worth interrogating because he is engaged in a project similar to that of Socrates (particularly in the Apology), as we saw above in Euthyphro 3a-b, namely to speak the truth (ἀληθὲς εἰςῃς) to the Athenian assembly. He is therefore not a ἱερεύς concerned with τὰ ἱερά, for the Athenians have not appointed him to anything as the traditional priest elected by purchase or by lot to a traditional priesthood would be (as we saw in the introduction), but a freelance ἱερεύς, potentially a μάντις (if Socrates is to be believed), concerned with ἀληθὲς. Euthyphro claims to have knowledge about the gods, perhaps even more than a non-specialized ἱερεύς would. He therefore, as we saw with Abammon above, intends to use his knowledge gained from the gods (for he is a μάντις) to make things “unobscure.” And through him Plato interrogates non-dialectical wisdom derived from the gods in a dialectical way. This reminds us of what I argued about Iamblichus’ project in the Mysteries in chapter 2: that the text is a dialectical defense of non-dialectical wisdom.

As we will see in the following section, Plato uses Euthyphro to interrogate three self-contradictory ideas: that the stories about the gods are true; that there are universally true values in the world; and that the gods are perfect. But before I turn to these, I must

23 See, for example, what he says at the opening of the Apology (17a-b). He claims that he is not a clever speaker as his accusers suggest, unless, of course, by “clever speaker” they mean “the one who speaks the truth” (εἰ μὴ ἀρχα δεινὸν καλόν ὡς ὄστει λέγειν τὸν τἀληθὴ λέγοντα)
issue a warning. Before Euthyphro met Socrates on the morning of the dialogue, it is probable that Euthyphro could not have articulated his beliefs about the gods. All he knew, it seems, is that he had a special knowledge about the gods that entitled him to prosecute his father. In fact, I would argue that the reason why so many suggestions have been proffered for Euthyphro’s religious affiliation is precisely because he does not identify with only one. While Edwards is right to call Euthyphro some kind of theologian, it is unclear as to whether Euthyphro was self-reflective about his position before he met Socrates or whether Euthyphro was as serious a theologian as Edwards makes him out to be. He is inconsistent and, at times, incoherent; he is obsessive, completely enamored with the idea of being pious; and he is unreflective, a point driven home in the very reason for his visit to the office of the Archon. His sole motivation for charging his own father with the murder of a hired farmhand seems to be that he is fully convinced that doing so is both pleasing to the gods and pious (4d-e). This point is signaled by Socrates’ response:

ἔστιν δὲ δὴ τῶν οἰκείων τις ὁ τεθνεὼς υπὸ τοῦ σοῦ πατρός; ἢ δὴ λα οὐ γὰρ ἂν που ὑπέρ ἀλλοτρίου ἐπέξησθα φόνου αὐτῷ.24

Is it a member of your family that your father killed? Or don’t you know? I say this because surely you wouldn’t prosecute your father for murder on an outsider’s behalf.

Socrates is amazed that Euthyphro would be committed to such an action, let alone think it pious, and Euthyphro’s response, that it should not matter who the offender is, hooks Socrates into pursuing the dialogue about piety. For Euthyphro has a point here and it

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24 See also Edwards 2000:216. He points out a comparandum in the reaction to the contemporary Andocides' speech On the Mysteries, especially 19-24. See also Parker 1983:168-70.
goes beyond traditional religion; it suggests that Euthyphro does, in fact, believe in a universal, absolute (that is, a non-relative) ethical system. As we will see, Socrates is probably most impressed with Euthyphro’s understanding that piety is a kind of eternal and universal virtue and that it is intimately bound up with justice. The problem is, however, that Euthyphro has not yet clearly thought through the implications of his position. The dialogue that follows will be a philosophical examination of not only belief in the gods, but also the nature of the gods themselves.

The Euthyphro therefore represents one of the earliest (if not the earliest) examples of the philosophical investigation of priestly wisdom in the Platonic tradition. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, Numenius read the dialogue as Plato’s interrogation of traditional Athenian religion. While I am not convinced, as I have argued above, that Euthyphro represents traditional religion, Numenius’ greater point still stands: the dialogue is a philosophical investigation into religious belief, with the philosopher pitted against the priest. As is common in other Platonic dialogues, Socrates enlists the help of Euthyphro, since, as an expert in piety, he might be able to teach him how to defend himself against the charges of impiety (5a-b). However ironic Socrates’ request might be, it does provide the occasion for Plato to stage his duel between philosophical and priestly knowledge.

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25 See also Strauss 1989:187-206. This essay examines not only Socrates’ critical and rational examination of piety, but also, more generally, the relationship between reason and revelation.

26 For an examination of irony in the Euthyphro with emphasis on this passage, see West 1993: 147-67.
5.3.2 The Aporia of the *Euthyphro*

Plato stages the dialogue between his philosopher and eccentric priest through the interrogation of three basic ideas: belief that the stories about the gods are true and that imitation of the gods in those stories is ‘piety’ (5e-6c); that there are universal, ethical Ideas in the world that intrinsically belong to objects and it is through these ethical Ideas that objects are considered good, just, or pious (7a-10e); and that the gods are perfect (13c). As we will see, Socrates attempts not only to show Euthyphro that these three ideas are inconsistent but also to inspire him to philosophically resolve the inconsistency. Euthyphro, however, shrinks from the challenge—a challenge that I argue is directly addressed in the texts that we have already studied in the first two chapters. In this section we will examine each of these three ideas in order to highlight how Plato sets the stage in this dialogue for the later debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus’ Abammon that we examined in the second chapter. As I will show, the contradictions that Plato intended to elucidate in the *Euthyphro* served as the basis for Iamblichus’ response to Porphyry in the *Mysteries*. I will argue that because Iamblichus attempted to resolve (among other things) the inconsistencies of the dialogue’s three ideas, he succeeded where Euthyphro failed, and thus Iamblichus’ persona was as much an answer to the challenges presented in the *Euthyphro* as it was to Porphyry’ objections in the *Letter to Anebo*.

The dialogue’s first idea is immediately revealed in Euthyphro’s first definition of piety, when it becomes clear that Euthyphro believes in the poets’ stories about the gods. When asked what piety is, Euthyphro initially responds that it is “what I am doing right
now” (λέγω τοίνυν ὅτι τὸ μὲν ὁσίὸν ἐστὶν ὅπερ ἐγὼ νῦν ποιῶ, 5d), referring to the prosecution of his father. He cites as proof (τεκμήριον) the action that Zeus had taken in response to Cronus’ injustice against his children:

αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἱ ἄνθρωποι τυχχάνουσι νομίζοντες τὸν Δία τῶν θεῶν ἀριστον καὶ δικαιότατον, καὶ τούτον ὁμολογοῦσι τὸν αὐτοῦ πατέρα δήσαι ὅτι τοὺς ἅρμαινειν οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ, κἀκεῖνον γε αὐτὸ τόν αὐτοῦ πατέρα ἐκτεμεῖν δὴ ἔτερα τοιαῦτα· ἔμοι δὲ χαλεπαίνουσιν ὅτι τῷ πατρὶ ἐπέξεχομαι ἀδικοῦντι, καὶ οὕτως αὐτοὶ αὐτοῖς τὰ ἐναντία λέγουσι περὶ τῶν θεῶν καὶ περὶ ἐμοῦ. (5e-6a)

Now these men happen to believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, and they agree that he bound his own father because he gulped his sons down unjustly. Cronus in turn castrated his own father because of other things like this. And they are angry with me because I am proceeding against my father? He committed an injustice! And so they actually contradict themselves both about the gods and about me!

In Euthyphro’s justification for his action and his definition of piety, we can see that he believes in the stories about the gods and assumes that most men do as well. Socrates seeks to clarify this point further and asks him directly: “do you really believe that these events happened like this?” (σὺ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἤγη ταῦτα οὕτως γεγονέναι). Euthyphro answers in the affirmative, adding that there are many more wondrous stories too that most do not know (τούτων θαυμασιώτερα ὁι πολλοὶ οὐκ ἴσαις, 6b). Socrates does not take the bait (for Euthyphro seems to want to tell Socrates these “more wondrous” stories, but Socrates has already had his fair share of shock, signaled by ὡς ἀληθῶς above), but rather presses his interlocutor to admit that he believes in the gods and that piety consists in imitating them. For Euthyphro, Zeus is the ultimate standard of just behavior and for this reason punished Cronus for his acts of injustice. Euthyphro sees his prosecution as an imitation of Zeus because he, like Zeus, is proceeding against his
father’s injustice. Here we can begin to see the difference between Socrates and Euthyphro, whose answers put distance between the priest and the philosopher. Other dialogues, for example Republic 3, seem to suggest that while the stories about the gods are true, they are not literally true, as Euthyphro takes them to be here. Plato’s readers at this point learn something crucial about Euthyphro: that he is a theological fundamentalist, so to speak, and takes these stories as gospel. Thus the standoff between philosopher and priest begins, with Euthyphro’s commitment to the truth of the stories about the gods first on the agenda.

Socrates objects to Euthyphro’s definition on two grounds. First, according to the original question, Socrates wanted Euthyphro to teach him “not one or two examples of the many pious things, but the very eidos by which all pious things are pious” (ἐν τι ἡ δύο με διδάξαι τῶν πολλῶν ὡσίων, ἀλλὰ ἐκείνο αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος ὁ πάντα τὰ ὡσία ὡσὶά ἐστιν, 5d). Euthyphro’s response, “what I am doing right now,” therefore does not answer the question and Socrates asks him to elaborate on his definition, or rather to broaden his scope, so that they may derive a rubric under which all pious things fall.27 Second, within the stories that Euthyphro himself cites, the gods seldom agree, and thus determining which god to imitate can be a challenge:

οὐδὲν θαυμαστὸν εἰ τούτῳ δρῶν τῷ μὲν Δί προσφιλὲς ποιεῖς, τῷ δὲ Κρόνῳ καὶ τῷ Ὀὐρανῷ ἔχθρόν, καὶ τῷ μὲν Ἡφαιστῷ φίλον, τῇ δὲ Ἡρᾷ ἐχθρόν, καὶ εἰ τις ἄλλος τῶν θεῶν ἔτερος ἐτέρω ἐπερχεται περὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐκείνοις κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ.

By doing what you are now doing, I wouldn’t at all be surprised if you were doing something dear to Zeus but hateful to Cronus and Ouranos and something

Socrates’ point is that there exist certain gods that would not want someone to imitate Zeus in the prosecution of one’s parents. Of course Zeus might be pleased, but Cronus would not be; similarly, because Zeus, according to *Iliad* 1.586-94, cast Hephaestus down from the heavens, Hera might find her power threatened if Hephaestus were to imitate the measures that Zeus applied to Cronus. Moreover, even Zeus, the supreme arbiter of justice according to Euthyphro, has taken severe actions against his children. Socrates thus presents Euthyphro with his first inconsistency: that if the same action is loved by some gods and hated by others, then the same action is both pious and impious. Piety, therefore, cannot be defined on the basis of one action by one god and it must be something more than mere imitation of the gods. This is the first “conclusion” we are meant to draw from the interrogation between philosopher and priest.

Euthyphro’s second definition, that piety is what is dear to the gods, as well as Socrates’ revision of that definition introduces the dialogue’s second idea: that there are objective Value-Ideas that make an object pious, just, or good. The search begins in response to Socrates’ second objection that not all the gods would agree that a particular act is pious, as we have seen above. Socrates attempts to show Euthyphro that there must be an independent means to judge whether a particular action is good, such that none of the gods would disagree. He begins by differentiating between two different kinds of ‘opinions:’ those that can be quantified or measured objectively (such as “how many apples are in my refrigerator?”) and those that cannot (such as “blue is the best color”). Because the number of apples in my refrigerator can be researched and confirmed by a
simple count, the opinion that I have (“I believe there are four”) can be verified (“there are actually five”). Conversely, my claim that blue is the best color cannot be verified by the same means and still stands as a matter of belief. The search for what piety is, then, must be based on a universal truth, something that all the gods would believe to be good because once they had seen the action as good, they could not say it were otherwise.

Euthyphro, recognizing the validity of Socrates’ arguments, immediately notes that there must be some things with which all the gods agree, taking his own court case as his example:

ἀλλ’ οἶμαι, ὦ Σώκρατες, περὶ γε τούτου τῶν θεῶν οὐδένα ἔτερον ἑτέρῳ διαφέρεσθαι, ὡς οὐ δεὶ δίκην διδόναι ἐκείνων ὃς ἂν ἀδίκως τινὰ ἀποκτείνῃ (8c).

But I suppose, Socrates, concerning this not one of the gods would be in disagreement: that whoever kills someone unjustly must pay the penalty.

Euthyphro essentially rewords his first definition of piety by appealing to a universally true principle: “what I am doing right now” is converted to “it is wrong to kill unjustly and the unjust killer must be held accountable.” Euthyphro is now making philosophical progress. But now a greater and more philosophical burden of proof rests on his shoulders. He must now show that his father “killed someone unjustly” (9a).

At this point in the dialogue, Euthyphro finds himself both challenged by Socrates’ philosophical investigation into piety as well as moving toward the position that Socrates intends. He is now faced with a contradiction because the dialogue’s first two ideas (that the stories about the gods are true and there are objective values in the world that make an object good, just or pious) are inconsistent because either the stories about the gods are true and the gods do have disagreements or the stories about the gods are
exaggerated and they do not disagree about objects of knowledge. This presents an added difficulty for Euthyphro’s understanding of piety because if the gods cannot all agree, it is difficult to determine which of the gods one should imitate. Moreover, if the poets’ stories about the gods are exaggerated, then his understanding of what is pious, rooted in the imitation of the gods, comes into question. Either way, Euthyphro is faced with inconsistencies that he must resolve. We soon see that Euthyphro understands at this point what Socrates is up to, especially when he accuses Socrates of twisting his words:

οὐκ ἔχω ἔγωγε ὡς σοι ἐποὶ δ νοῦ· περιέρχεται γάρ πως ἡμέν ἂεὶ ὅ ὁν προθώμεθα καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλει μένειν ὅπου ὅν ἰδρυσόμεθα αὐτό (11b).

I cannot say what I have in mind because whatever we put forward keeps going all around and does not want to stay where we put it.

Euthyphro’s complaint here reveals his feeling that he is not in control of the argument and his suspicion that he is no longer Socrates’ ‘teacher.’ Socrates’ response is to encourage Euthyphro to remain steadfast (καὶ μὴ προαποκαμῇς) as they continue their discussion.

Socrates will not solve this problem for Euthyphro, though we must infer where he wants to lead him. Piety must be more than just the mere imitation of the gods. When human beings perform a pious act, they should do so on the basis of the objective value in that act not on the basis of poetic stories. The discussion with Euthyphro to this point implies that human beings have access to the same objective truths that the gods do. Pious men are not pious because they imitate the gods, but because they are following the same rational order already present in the cosmos. The problem with merely imitating the gods, as Socrates has shown and, it seems, Euthyphro has begun to realize, is that,
because these stories may well be exaggerated, human beings run the risk of acting unjustly by imitating them. It is for this reason, then, that Socrates goes on to show Euthyphro that piety is part of justice, emphasizing that there must be an element to the pious act that pertains to human beings as well as the gods (12d). As one commentator put it, “Socrates may mean that the terms of man’s obligation to the gods flow from a consideration of the altogether human virtue of justice” and “the example of Euthyphro shows why political or philosophic control of enthusiasm is necessary.”

Having seen that a pious act must also be just, Euthyphro redefines piety as “service paid to the gods,” which introduces the dialogue’s third idea: that the gods are perfect. Socrates asks Euthyphro what he means by “service paid to the gods” and what kind of obligation there is for human beings to render the gods their due:

ΣΩ. ἡ ὑ πο ς καὶ ἡ ὁ σιότης θεραπεία οὐσα θεων ὠφελία τε ἐστι θεων καὶ ἑλτίως τοὺς θεους ποιει; καὶ ὃν τοῦτο συγχωρήσας ἂν, ὡς ἐπειδὰν τι ὰισιν ποιής, ἑλτίῳ τινὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀπεργάζῃ;

ΕΥΘ. μὰ Δί’ ὤν ἔγωγε (13c).

Socrates: So does piety, defined as a service paid to the gods, benefit the gods and make them better? And would you grant that whenever you do something pious you make one of the gods better?

Euthyphro: I would never make such a claim.

Socrates’ question appears to rub against Euthyphro’s commitments (and therefore the primary motivation behind the prosecution of his father): if the gods are perfect and are therefore models of imitation, then what need do they have of human worship? The


29 West 1998:15.
things that human beings do for the gods, such as sacrifice, prayer, and ritual, are *gratifying* to the gods (φίλον τοῖς θεοῖς, 15b) rather than beneficial. The gods, in other words, do not *need* sacrifice because it does not *benefit* them, though it might *be pleasing* to them.

Euthyphro’s image of himself and his religious views are shaken when Socrates subjects them to philosophical inquiry. When he met Socrates earlier, he was convinced that his lawsuit against his father was pious on three grounds: (1) that his father had stained the familial lineage and taking him to court would remove that stain; (2) that he was imitating Zeus, the most just of all the gods, in challenging his father’s misdeeds; (3) that he had special knowledge about the gods and he *knew* that his actions would please them. During the course of the dialogue, Socrates puts each of these motivations (and the three theses that lie behind them) to the test. When it becomes clear that Euthyphro must revise his position because of the inconsistencies that he has come to realize, he runs away:

εἰς αὖθις τοίνυν, ὦ Σώκρατε, νῦν γὰρ σπεύδω ποι, καὶ μοι ὡρα ἀπέναι.

Some other time, Socrates, because now I’m in a rush and it’s time for me to go.

Thus Euthyphro, the representative of intense religiosity and inspired priestly wisdom in the dialogue, fails. To be precise, he does not fail merely because he was wrong or mistaken; he fails because he is unwilling to engage in the philosophical examination of both his belief and, more generally, the relationship between gods and men. The dialogue ends on an ‘aporetic’ note, with no definition of piety reached, and the reader is left to ponder how one might reconcile the three commitments of the dialogue: that the stories
about the gods are true, that there are objective values in the world that make an action worth doing, and that the gods are perfect. Iamblichus’ *Mysteries*, as I will argue in the next section, represents one attempt to circumvent the pitfalls that Euthyphro could not.

5.3.3 Iamblichus and Euthyphro

Even though there are no clear parallels that would indicate a direct relationship between the *Mysteries* and the *Euthyphro*, the two texts, nevertheless, make an excellent pair because they interrogate similar ideas. In the first two chapters, we saw how Iamblichus adopted the persona of an Egyptian priest named Abammon in order to answer Porphyry’s objections to his integration of theurgic rites into philosophy. The core problems that the *Mysteries* seeks to address are not only those raised by Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*, but also those that are the subject of the *Euthyphro*.

To review, in the *Euthyphro* Plato presents his readers with three incompatible premises (belief in the stories about the gods, the existence of objective values in the world, and divine perfection) that are not resolved by the end of the dialogue. Interwoven within the first book of the *Mysteries* are quotations of the *Letter to Anebo*, many of which recall the three beliefs of the *Euthyphro*. After setting forth his program of answering philosophical questions philosophically, theological questions theologically, and theurgical questions theurgically, a passage we discussed in detail in the first two chapters, Abammon states that Porphyry “concedes the existence of the gods” (φῂς τοίνυν πρῶτον διδόναι εἶναι θεούς) but adds that “this is not the right way to put it” (τὸ δ’ ἐστὶν οὕτω καθότιν οὕτως εἴρημεν). Abammon suggests instead that
knowledge of the existence of the gods is innate (ἔμφυτος) within the soul and exists in tandem with “the soul’s striving toward the Good” (καὶ τῇ πρὸς τἀγαθόν οὐσιώδει τῆς ψυχῆς ἐφέσει συνυφέστηκεν, Myst. 1.3). What we have here, actually, is a redefinition by what one means by the term ‘god.’ The gods exist for both Porphyry and Abammon, but they are not like Zeus, Hera, or Hephaestus. Rather, the gods are the Good, a version of Plato’s Good, which, as you may recall, was left undefined in the Republic. Abammon has therefore entirely rejected Euthyphro’s gods and replaced them with the notion of the Good. There is, for this reason, no danger of running Euthyphro’s risk in which the gods would disagree about pious acts. In this sense, Abammon has sanctified the thrust of Socrates’ position about the Good being independent of the gods.

The redefinition of the gods (as well as the Good) implies a rejection, or perhaps a reworking of Euthyphro’s first commitment: that the stories about the gods are true and that imitating those stories constitutes piety. Here Abammon notes that it is perfectly natural for human beings to want to strive for the Good and imitate the gods qua the Good. In answering Porphyry’s objections, Abammon has also at the same time resolved the incompatibility of the Euthyphro’s first and second ideas. If belief in the gods and the stories about the gods do not refer to the gods of Homer, Hesiod, and myth, then the problem of the gods disagreeing about the nature of the Good is no longer a concern. Moreover, if belief in the gods is equated with the soul’s natural striving toward the Good, then the human being no longer finds himself in conflict about which gods to imitate because all pious actions will lead to the same place: the Good. Since the gods are good and human beings have an innate desire to attain the good, the imitation of the
good gods will be pious since none of the gods would disagree about what the Good is.

This leaves us with the third idea: that the gods are perfect. Abammon goes on to further explain the proper classification of divine beings (Mysteries 1.5-7), addressing the fact that not all divine beings are good and perfect as well as how to differentiate between them (Mysteries 1.8-10). This discussion culminates in the problem raised by the third premise of the Euthyphro: Why should one be pious if the gods are perfect? Abammon raises a similar question at Mysteries 1.12:

ἀλλά ἐκ λήσεις, φησίν, ὡς πρὸς ἐμπαθεῖς τοὺς θεοὺς γίγνονται, ὡστε οὐχ οἱ δαίμονες μόνον εἰσὶν ἐμπαθεῖς, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ θεοὶ.

But invocations, he says, are addressed to the gods as if they were subject to external influence, so that it is not only daimones that are subject to external influence, but the gods as well.

For Iamblichus, as we have already seen, these invocations do not affect the gods and somehow cause them to act in a certain way; rather, when the theurgist makes these invocations in the language in which the gods first communicated them to mankind, the gods are pleased and “in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon the theurgists” (οἱ θεοὶ τὸ φῶς ἐπιλάμπουσιν εὐμενεῖς καὶ ἱλεῷ τοῖς θεουργοῖς, Myst. 1.12). This reminds us of the end of the Euthyphro, where mimetic acts are termed φίλον τοῖς θεοῖς. The theurgist, however, much more than Euthyphro is willing to admit, relies on the good will of the gratified god/Good.

The Euthyphro also seems to have a more global effect on the arguments in the Mysteries as a whole. Iamblichus’ adoption of the priestly persona in the attempt to marry the concerns of theology to those of philosophy through his “scientific theology” (as I termed it in the first chapter) does exactly what the character of Euthyphro refused to do:
to provide a consistent and philosophical account of the role that reason and revelation, science and theology, and philosophy and religion in the search for the truth. The *Mysteries* and its spokesman Abammon take up the discussion where Euthyphro left it off in frustration. Iamblichus does little with stories that one might find in Hesiod and Homer, but he does believe that what is traditionally told about the gods is true. Tradition for Iamblichus, as we saw, meant something other than what one might find in Hesiod and Homer. Iamblichus searches for the ultimate source of Homer, Hesiod, and Plato—the gods themselves. As he suggests in the *Mysteries* and the *Life*, the Egyptians and the Chaldeans have special knowledge that was handed down directly by the gods. Therefore both Euthyphro and Iamblichus believe that the gods are the kinds of things that are knowable. The second claim in the *Euthyphro* is that there are objective values in the world that make certain actions and objects good. Iamblichus, too, holds this to be true as we saw in the second chapter when we examined the role that *symbola* play in coming to knowledge. When Socrates seems to suggest that piety is imitating the activities of the gods, Iamblichus suggests that the purpose of theurgic cult is to *imitate* the creative power of the Demiurge by locating the *symbola* or traces that the gods left behind in the cosmos. Thus, for Iamblichus, the valuable objects of this world are valuable precisely because the gods made them valuable, a Euthyphronic position, though modified to account for a Socratic theology. But, when theurgists find those objects and harness their power, they have the ability to become godlike because they are decrypting the divine code written into the cosmos. Examining the objects of this world, then, has value because they can be used in purifying the soul for ascent. The philosopher, therefore, who
investigates the relationship between reason and revelation becomes the philosopher-priest and Iamblichus presents his Abammon as his solution to the *Euthyphro*. Abammon smoothes out Euthyphro’s inconsistencies by defining the gods as the Good and, at the same time, radicalizes Socrates’ theological position to account for religion and revelation in philosophy. Thus the link between the *Euthyphro* and the *Mysteries* is in the fact that the latter responds to questions about the role of non-dialectical wisdom in philosophy raised by the former.

If the *Euthyphro* and the *Mysteries* represent bookends in that the former presents the philosopher and the priest as separate and the later brings them together in Abammon, “philosopher-priest,” is there precedent in Plato for Plutarch’s “priest-philosopher?” As I will show in this final section, while Euthyphro and Socrates seem to be worlds apart in their cosmic outlook, Diotima in the *Symposium* represents Plato’s attempt at joining priestly wisdom with philosophical investigation—a combination that, I will argue, was already latent in Plato before being highlighted in the patrilineal sequence I have highlighted in this dissertation from Plutarch to Iamblichus.

### 5.4 Diotima

Diotima has always been a subject of fascination. In the Platonic tradition, particularly in post-Iamblichean Neoplatonism, the figure of Diotima was invoked to authorize the claim that man’s quest for wisdom requires unity with the divine. In his commentary on the *Alcibiades I*, Proclus finds Iamblichus’ claim that the philosopher must be elevated by the gods in order to attain knowledge already present in Diotima’s lessons in the *Symposium*. Proclus says that divine love (θεῖος ἔρως) leads the soul upward (ἀναγωγός), causes it
to become good (ἀγαθουργός), bestows perfection (τελειώσεως χορηγός), and brings about clarity and knowledge in the philosopher (νοῦ καὶ τῆς κατὰ νοῦν ζωῆς αἴτιος).

Proclus quotes Diotima to authorize his claim that man’s desire for the gods and the gods’ benevolence toward man are the key components in enlightenment and ascent:

“Diotima says ‘a better compatriot than love in the search for wisdom is not easy to find’” (‘ἀμείνω γάρ φησιν ἔρωτος συνεργὸν εἰς φιλοσοφίαν οὐ ῥᾴδιον εὑρεῖν,’ 1.61, quotation from Plat. Symp. 212b). Throughout the commentary, Proclus treats Diotima as a philosophical-priestly voice independent of Socrates that authorizes the fusion of Platonic philosophy with Orphism and the Chaldaean Oracles.\(^{30}\)

The view that Diotima was an important figure in showing human beings the way to knowledge has persisted into the modern era. Even in 1969, an anonymous author, following the example of Plato himself, published a work entitled *The Dialectics of Diotima* in which Diotima holds fictional discourses with ten different members of society.\(^{31}\) The imagined conversations with Diotima, the author tells us, “deal with various subjects which eternally exercise the reason of man, in the way we might expect Diotima to deal with them if she returned to earth and remained faithful to her original premise argued so conclusively in *The Symposium*.”\(^{32}\) Though I do not know what the

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\(^{30}\) See especially *In Alcib. 69, 111, 129, and 189; for the fusion of Orphism with the Chaldaean Oracles* in Proclus, see Rappe 2000:143-166 (esp. 149-57 for the *Symposium* and Diotima).

\(^{31}\) The book imagines Diotima’s discussion with a modern materialist, lover, citizen, humanitarian, patriot, educationalist, sinner, cleric, artist, and seeker.

\(^{32}\) Anonymous (1969:9-12), “Publisher’s Note.” The author of the foreword imagines humanity as drunkenly wandering through life, falling into the grasp of lust, desire for power, and other vices. The voice of someone like a Diotima, if revisited and reborn, can straighten out mankind, presumably back onto the road of wisdom. This must be a reaction to the social struggles of the
author thinks Diotima’s ‘original premise’ was, both Proclus and the author of this book have made an important observation: that Diotima’s presentation is conclusive in a way that neither Plato nor Socrates were. It is for this reason, in addition to the fact that she is a woman and that Socrates claims her as his teacher that she has attracted so much attention.33

Who she was, exactly, is difficult to determine. Diotima is someone for whom all we have is Socrates’ word, a fact problematized by the complex narrative structure of the Symposium. Because the Symposium is a third-hand account, all we have for Diotima is Apollodorus’ recollection of Aristodemus’ account of Socrates’ retelling of Diotima’s words.34 The distance between the reader and Diotima is further complicated by the fact that the two narrators, Apollodorus and Aristodemus, are unreliable. Aristodemus himself, according to Apollodorus’ account anyway, could not remember all of the speeches given by some of Agathons’s guests (180c) and what Socrates said to Agathon and Aristophanes as the festivities came to a close (223b-d). We are also forced to trust that Apollodorus remembers everything Aristodemus told him, a fact that would make late 1960s. 1969 was, of course, an interesting year including events such as the Moon Landing, the Harvard University Administration Building takeover, the Nixon Doctrine, the Chappaquiddick incident, as well as Jim Morrison’s arrest for indecent exposure in Miami, Florida. The spirit of the year is well captured by John Updike in his novel Rabbit Redux.

There is a strong tradition of ‘Feminist’ interpretations of Plato, of which Diotima has been a focus. A valuable volume is Tuana 1994, which contains both (a translated version of) Irigary’s essay as well as Nye’s response. On Plato’s use of feminine imagery, a good survey is Hobbs 2006:252-72. For the state of the question more generally on how both the speech and character of Diotima has been approached, see Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 2004:112. It is especially important to note, however, that an early attempt was to see Diotima as a mouthpiece for Socrates, a position that is now generally considered untenable. See Scott and Welton 2000:147.

any reader of Plato’s *Ion* suspicious. For when many men address the same subject, the individual with special expertise is the only one who can judge whether the speech was good (531a-532b). The further from the original source we move, the more likely the story is to be impure. If Clay is right in his assessment that the style of the framed dialogue especially involves the question of authority, searching for any kind of authoritative voice on what transpired at Agathon’s house is problematic. Yet the speech that has in many ways defined the *Symposium* (except perhaps for the dialogue’s centerpiece, Aristophanes’ speech), that of the priestess Diotima, appears to be authoritative.

If the treatment of the priestly but unreflective Euthyphro is any indication of the distrust that Plato must have felt about those who claimed to have special knowledge about the gods, Diotima is a safe distance away from his readers indeed. At *Symposium* 201d, Socrates calls Diotima “a woman from Mantinea…who was wise in *eros* and in many other things” (γυναικὸς Μαντινικῆς Διοτίμας, ἣ ταύτα τε σοφή ἤν καὶ ἄλλα πολλά) and says that she delayed the plague “by telling the Athenians what sacrifices to make” (Ἀθηναίοις ποτὲ θυσαμένοις πρὸ τοῦ λοιμοῦ δέκα ἐτη ἀναβολὴν ἐποίησε τῆς νόσου). Her place of birth, as many scholars have pointed out, is related to *mantis*, the very same word that Socrates uses to label Euthyphro, which has prompted scholars to point to the similarities between her speech and the language associated with the


36 See Corrigan and Corrigan 2004:111 and Zuckert 2009:190n20 for full citation of scholars on this point.
mysteries.\textsuperscript{37} Yet in much of the modern scholarship the priestly aspect of her character has been brushed aside in favor of the fact that she is female. As Andrea Nye has put it, “How can the great Socrates, founder of philosophy, be saying that he learned everything he knows from a woman?” The question aims to shock the reader, as does: “What is Plato doing, letting Socrates repeat respectfully the teachings of a woman, teachings not always in keeping with Plato’s own?”\textsuperscript{38} In this section, I would like to refocus these questions: How can Socrates, the founder of philosophy and in so many ways antithetical to priestly wisdom (if we read this against what we have seen in the Euthyphro), be saying that he learned everything he knows from a priestess? And what role does Plato intend her to play in the dialogue itself? In dealing with the Symposium, I will focus on one particular set of exchanges, those between Agathon and Socrates, because I believe it is in these exchanges that Plato shows the role of priestly wisdom in philosophy. This is justifiable because, after all, the banquet is at his house, it is he that Socrates first addresses when he arrives, and it is to his speech that Socrates responds in greatest detail.

After Plato’s complex introduction to the Symposium, and after Socrates’ stroll with Aristodemus to Agathon’s house, Apollodorus tells us that Socrates came in late to

\textsuperscript{37} Evans (2006:1-27) argues that “Plato borrowed Eleusinian language because it criticized conventional notions of the divine, thereby allowing him to re-imagine the possibilities for the philosophical process among humans.”

\textsuperscript{38} Nye (1994:198) asks these questions in response to Irigary’s (1989) essay “L’amour Sorcier,” which treats Diotima as an intermediary figure between ignorance and wisdom. As I will argue below, I do not think Diotima is meant occupy this role, but Socrates himself. Actually, the best essay on the significance of Diotima as a woman is probably Saxonhouse (1976), who studies not only Diotima but the fifth book of the Republic and shows that Socrates exhibits both male and female characteristics.
Agathon’s banquet because “Socrates began to think about something, lost himself in thought, and kept lagging behind” (174d). When Socrates finally enters, Agathon invites his tardy guest to sit on the couch next to him because of his desire to share in the philosopher’s “wisdom:”

δεῦρ’, ἔφη φάναι, Σώκρατες, παρ’ ἐμὲ κατάκεισο, ἵνα καὶ τοῦ σοφοῦ ἀπτόμενός σου ἀπολαύσω, ὅ σοι προσέστη ἐν τοῖς προθύροις. δήλον γὰρ ὧτι ηὗρες αὐτὸ καὶ ἔχεις· οὐ γὰρ ἂν προαπέστης (175d-e).

‘Come here, Socrates,’ Agathon said, ‘recline next to me; if I touch you, perhaps I can benefit from that bit of wisdom that came to you under the porch. Clearly you have found it and still have it because you would not have left there otherwise.’

Agathon’s request indicates an epistemology consistent with poetic and therefore priestly revelation. For Agathon, wisdom is the kind of thing that can be transmitted through osmosis, simply by coming into contact with the person who has it (ἅπτόμενός σου), it is the kind of thing that just “comes to you” (προσέστη), a notion contradicted by Agathon’s claim that Socrates has “found” it (ηὗρες) and is holding it. This is a priestly, or more accurately, a mantic or inspiration-driven epistemological stance. In the Ion, a clear distinction is made between knowledge and divine inspiration. Knowledge requires some kind of special expertise or skill that an individual has; divine inspiration requires no such special skill because those who have it speak when filled with a divine power, with Socrates as his god (531a-535a). Agathon here wants to be filled, even inspired like a poet (he is, after all, a tragedian), prophet, or seer. It is to this epistemology that Diotima responds later, as we will see.

Socrates in his response adopts the same ironic attitude as he did when hooking Euthyphro into a discussion, saying that he would be the one to learn from Agathon:
καὶ τὸν Σωκράτη καθίσεσθαι καὶ εἴπειν ὅτι ἐὰν ἄν ἔχοι, φάναι, ὦ Ἀγάθων, εἰ τοιούτον εἶν ἡ σοφία ὅστ´ ἐκ τοῦ πληρεστέρου εἰς τὸ κενώτερον δεῖν ἡμῶν, ἐὰν ἀπτώμεθα ἄλληλών, ὡσπερ τὸ ἐν ταῖς κύλιξιν ὑδάτω τὸ διὰ τοῦ ἔριου ὅριον ἐκ τῆς πληρεστέρας εἰς τὴν κενωτέραν. εἰ γὰρ οὕτως ἔχει καὶ ἡ σοφία, πολλοῦ τιμῶμαι τὴν παρὰ σοὶ κατάκλισιν· οἶμαι γὰρ με παρὰ σοῦ πολλῆς καὶ καλῆς σοφίας πληρωθήσεσθαι.

Socrates sat down and said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if wisdom were the sort of thing that could flow from those of us who have it to those of us who don’t if we touched one another, just like water flows through a piece of wool from a fuller cup to an emptier. If only wisdom were like that! It would be my honor to sit next to you, because I suppose it would be me who would be filled with your abundant and fine wisdom.

Although Agathon’s epistemological commitments are rooted in a poetic and priestly tradition, as I have shown above, he nonetheless shows some characteristics of the sophist. As they appear in Plato’s dialogues, sophists claim to know things that they can reveal to their students. Gorgias, for example, boasts that he can answer any question (Gorgias 447a-c) and can transmit knowledge to his students, such as how to be just (458e). That Agathon is like a sophist is confirmed at the end of his speech. The other speakers at the banquet stand up and cheer, while Socrates specifically addresses the quality (that is, not the content) of the speech, drawing an explicit connection between Agathon and Gorgias (καὶ γάρ με Γοργίου ὁ λόγος ἄνεμμησεν, 198c).

For Socrates, however, as his exchange with Diotima will show, wisdom is not the kind of thing that can be revealed by someone who has it to someone who does not; there must be something to mediate, and for Socrates this seems to be dialectic. After Agathon speaks, Socrates breaks the agreement the other participants made earlier to give speeches: “allow me to ask Agathon a few questions,” Socrates asks Phaidros (ὦ Φαῖδρε, πάρες μοι Ἀγάθωνα σμίκρ’ ἄττα ἐρέσθα, 199c). Before presenting the
speech of Diotima, Socrates engages in dialectic with Agathon, primarily pointing out that *eros* indicates a relationship *between* two things: e.g., in order for a man to *love* wisdom, it means that there is a relationship between two independently existing entities: man and wisdom. At *Symp.* 200e, Socrates deepens the argument by showing that *eros* indicates a lack: one does not love what one already has.

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\begin{align*}
καὶ \ οὕτως \ ἄρα \ καὶ \ ἄλλος \ πᾶς \ ὁ \ ἐπιθυμῶν \ τὸν \ μὴ \ ἑτοίμων \ ἐπιθυμεῖ \ καὶ \ τὸν \ μὴ \ παρόντος, \ καὶ \ ὁ \ μὴ \ ἔχει \ καὶ \ ὁ \ μὴ \ ἔστιν \ αὐτὸς \ καὶ \ οὐ \ ἐνδείχθαι \ ὁ \ ἐστι, \\
τοιαῦτα \ ἐστὶ \ ὧν \ ἡ \ ἐπιθυμία \ τε \ καὶ \ ὁ \ ἔρως \ ἐστίν;
\end{align*}
\]

So this man or any other who has a desire desires not what he has close at hand and not what he has present before him, but rather [he desires] what he does not have, and what he is not, and what he needs. These are the things that are the objects of desire and love.

To love wisdom, then, means not to have it. Eros is therefore not beautiful, it is the desire for beauty.

We may now begin to reevaluate the initial exchange between Agathon and Socrates in these terms. When Agathon invites Socrates to sit down, he wants Socrates to share with him the wisdom that came to him and the wisdom that he had. Socrates, as a philosopher, would not have had wisdom according to his speech; he would have been struggling to find it. And in many ways, I think, this is the purpose of Diotima in the dialogue. Whether Socrates had an actual meeting with Diotima is irrelevant; he says that he did in order to get Agathon (and the other speakers at his house) to see the kind of thing wisdom is and how one can attain it through a philosophical life. Agathon, perhaps more than anyone else, missed the point: Socrates’ lingering on the neighbor’s porch was not about the discovery, but about the *process* of discovery, emphasized here by the switch to dialectic.

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It is at this point in the narrative, at *Symp.* 201e, that we meet Diotima, and Plato draws a connection between Agathon and Socrates: Socrates was once like Agathon, before his encounter with Diotima.

I spoke nearly the same things to her as Agathon has just now to me, that Eros was a great god and aimed at the beautiful. She then refuted me with the same arguments with which I have just now refuted him, that Eros is not beautiful, according to my argument, and not good.

I will not discuss the speech of Diotima at length here both because what she says is not as pertinent to my discussion as the role Socrates claims for her, real or fictional, in his intellectual development and because she has been discussed by many others. The key point that I want to emphasize here, however, is that before Socrates presents her speech, she engages in *elenchos* with Socrates. This is important, because we might expect Diotima, as a priestess, to reveal her teachings to Socrates. Diotima’s example for Socrates is indicative of his epistemological stance: that the philosopher, that is, the man who *loves wisdom*, constantly mediates between *ignorance* and *wisdom*, and is, therefore, engaged in a search.

Well then, Diotima, who are *lovers of wisdom*, if they are not wise and not ignorant?
That’s so clear a child could tell you. Those who are lovers of wisdom are between both of these. Eros would be one of them because wisdom is extremely beautiful, and Eros is in love with the beautiful, so it necessary follows that Eros would be a lover of wisdom. To be a lover of wisdom means being between wisdom and ignorance.

Through this example, Diotima illustrates that Eros is a daimon, that is, one who mediates between the gods and men, practicing divination, sacrifices, prophecy and sorcery—a point that reminds us of the debate Lamprias led at Delphi in On the Obsolescence of Oracles, in which the role of the daimones is discussed at length (see my discussion in chapter 3). Socrates appeals to Diotima to combat Agathon’s view that wisdom can be revealed, for it needs to be sought after.

What makes Diotima successful with Socrates is that, crucially, she represents a revaluation of priestly knowledge in light of the Platonic dialogue and, in a sense, comes to represent the process of the dialogue, and therefore philosophy, itself. Socrates met Diotima before he was a philosopher, according to the text, and, through his conversation with her, became wise in the matters of love (or so he claims at 201d-e). Similarly, Socrates tells us, as we have seen above, before his conversation with Diotima he was exactly like Agathon and believed the same things as Agathon. Thus in order for Socrates, who is now “wise in the matters of love,” to show Agathon the error of his epistemology, Socrates uses his exchange with Diotima as a mediator. Socrates therefore replaces Diotima as the teacher, and Agathon replaces Socrates as the student, but the mediator between them remains the dialectical discourse about the nature of love itself.

If, now, we ask again why the Symposium is written as a third-hand account, the events of the banquet are told to an unnamed companion by Apollodorus, and therefore the
‘knowledge of what happened’ at Agathon’s house is dialectically transferred from one who has the knowledge to one who does not. That is, the narrative is retold at the prompting of another (i.e., first from Aristodemus to Apollodorus) and then continually retold (represented by the second retelling from Apollodorus to the unnamed companion) and then again, presumably, in ancient commentaries and modern analyses such as this one. This dialectical process highlights the ways in which the ignorant moves to the wise in a consecutive and constant chain.

To summarize, Diotima teaches Socrates through question-and-answer. Then, Socrates takes the place of Diotima and teaches Agathon through question-and-answer. This is mirrored by the opening sequence of the dialogue in which Aristodemus teaches Apollodorus through question-and-answer. Then Apollodorus takes the place of Aristodemus and teaches the unnamed companion through question-and-answer. We could even see this working on perhaps a third level: Plato teaches the reader through question-and-answer, and the Platonic reader teaches someone else through question-and-answer (i.e., through the dialogue form). It is this process (i.e., of teacher becoming student), I believe, that sets the Platonic tradition in motion (much of it lies before what we have already seen of Plutarch in Chapter 3) and proves to me at least that Plato intended to create a tradition of the sort that we find in the Plutarch-Numenius-Iamblichus sequence I have highlighted in this dissertation, which is, I think, another version of the tradition that Socrates hoped to inspire, say, at the end of the Phaedo when he urges his companions to continue the conversation after his death. And it seems to me that it was not by accident that the philosophical and dialectical process is enacted.
through the priestly Diotima, who is successful in her ability both to know the truth and to inspire others to search for it precisely because both her speech and her character stand for the philosophical process and the project of Platonism itself. Thus philosophers have long been taught by priests and have long engaged in some kind of priestly-turned-philosophical discourse: even Socrates himself. We thus truly end at the beginning.

5.5. Concluding Remarks

In the introduction, I noted that the question driving my dissertation had been nagging at me and should nag at every student of Plato as well: How is it that the Platonic philosopher became a priest, and how did it happen that these new ‘philosopher-priests’ sacralized a tradition that was, in many ways, defined on the premise of discounting and distrusting non-dialectical wisdom about the gods? I made my case by pointing to the fact that Plato presents non-philosophical priestly authority as especially dangerous. I pointed both to the Apology, in which Socrates is tried and executed on religious grounds, and to the Euthyphro, in which Plato presents Socrates as a possible reformer (and therefore not a “corruptor”) of the aberrant Euthyphro by dialectically challenging the young man’s self-appointed expertise in piety.

But after examining the Euthyphro and the Symposium in light of the tradition from Plutarch to Iamblichus, we were able to see that these texts actually represent the two important dialogues for the question of what role the priest should play in philosophy. The Euthyphro was a philosophical investigation of religious belief, the sort that, as I have shown in my thesis, marked Platonism for the next millennium and the Symposium represents the very first instance of a philosopher adopting the persona of a
priest in the Platonic tradition: the moment when Socrates takes on the voice of Diotima in order to question Agathon. The contrast between these two characters, Euthyphro and Diotima, initiated a debate about the role of religious belief in philosophy. These two dialogues show redefine religious belief and ritual in terms of philosophy. Plato, it seems, could not have been anti-religious, if, by religion, we mean something like a true, direct, and engaged epistemic and metaphysical experience with the mysteries of the cosmos.

Euthyphro is a failed priest because he was never going to inspire this in anyone; Diotima is successful because she could and did, in the case of Socrates, inspire her petitioner to become wise, to learn what was at stake in calling oneself wise, and to share this with others dialectically. Read in this light, as I have argued above, Diotima, the philosopher-priestess, essentially represents what it was that Plato was after: a philosophical tradition that thought about the world seriously and critically.

We saw that Iamblichus’ project in the Mysteries was to resolve the problems of religious belief set forth by the Platonic dialogues as much as it was to point out the inadequacies of Porphyry. Whether Iamblichus was successful is unclear, but any discussion of Iamblichus and the Platonic tradition that led up to him must readily admit that Iamblichus was attuned to the literary problems of Plato and responded in kind with his own literary, philosophical, and religious interpretations of Platonic questions. Plutarch, Iamblichus, and Numenius read Plato in exciting and interesting ways and grappled with the unanswered questions bequeathed by Plato in his dialogues. It is in their attempts to answer those unanswered questions that we find them adopting personae, arguing with one another about the role theology and science should play in
coming to understand the world and their place within it, and writing texts that seem to set out expositions of religious rituals that they believed were helpful in decoding the cryptic Plato. It is for this reason, I think, that we should begin to view these figures as more than mere cataloguers of religious practices, extreme exponents of the ‘irrational,’ or mystics and magicians who could perform wild and wondrous deeds. They were readers and interpreters of Plato and can, as in the case of my conclusion, lead us to questions that we may not have otherwise asked.
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