

Reading Religion in Porphyry of Tyre

Aaron Johnson
Loyola University, Chicago

The religious texts (scriptural, oracular, or otherwise) that were written and circulated throughout the late antique Mediterranean landscape – and in particular the reading of those texts – provided sites for the contestation over competing visions of the religious, ethnic and moral worlds in which readers found themselves. Furthermore, they also created locations for social differentiation and the maintaining of intellectual, social and religious hierarchies. The paper proposed here seeks to identify the ways in which Porphyry’s now fragmentary religious corpus could be used in confirming and legitimizing his philosophical elitism as well as creating a locus for the display and enactment of religious authority in the textually-centered interaction between spiritual master and aspiring pupil.

The majority of Porphyry’s religious writings are built upon the interpretation of religious texts – whether these were oracular verses, lines of Homer, Orphic hymns, Hebrew Scriptures, or even cult statues (which possessed signs that were to be “read” just as letters on a page). The proposed paper will highlight certain salient features of his *Philosophy from Oracles* (the interconnection of reading and initiation [F303], the presence of *ainigmata* in oracular utterances [F305], and the consequent need for a master interpreter to guide the budding reader in discernment of the truth hidden in the oracle, and the injunction to safeguard this truth [F304]) and attempt to follow their implications broadly in his other religious writings (in particular the *On Images* and *On Abstinence*).

In spite of the dearth of external evidence on Porphyry as a teacher, related pedagogical material illuminates the context of reading in which these writings worked. The process of learning to read exhibited in Porphyry’s treatises was modeled on the philosophical curricula of Platonic and other “schools” in the Roman period, in which an introduction (*eisagoge*) to the writings and doctrines of the school provided a framework for reading (e.g., the order in which the student should approach a corpus of texts, the literary genre of a dialogue, or the major philosophical themes of a given corpus). Already recognized as a master of the *eisagoge* (his own *Eisagoge* to logic became a staple of the medieval curriculum with its own host of commentaries), in his religious writings as well, Porphyry poses as the master-teacher, expounding correct reading strategies to a small circle of pupils. The reading of texts thus became integral not only for forming relations of power where philosophical and religious authority was performed, but also for creating discursive spaces (that is, the philosophical exposition of religious texts) that required asymmetrical roles of teacher and student in a textual and spiritual apprenticeship. Power and religion thus converged in the performance of late antique reading practices.