

Subjugating the Divine: Iamblichus on the Theurgic Evocation

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One of the most distinctive soteriological paths to have emerged in late Antiquity was theurgy. The Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus (writing in the first quarter of the fourth century) described theurgy as a practice intellectually ordained according to the sacred laws of the gods, imitating the divine order and revealing the inexpressible through ineffable symbols. While theurgic doctrine largely remains a matter of speculation, this much is clear: theurgy was primarily a 'religious ritual demonstrating supernatural power' [E. Clarke, *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis: A Manifesto of the Miraculous* (Aldershot, 1999) 19]. By means of theurgy, the practitioner could evoke and control higher forces which might guide him in his ascent towards celestial realms. Christian apologists were keen to emphasise the apparently coercive character of theurgic invocations in order to equate the practice with wizardry (*goeteia*). Even a militantly pagan writer like Porphyry, while accepting the validity of theurgy as a means for spiritual advancement, expressed strong reservations concerning the claims Egyptian theurgists made to manipulate the gods through the use of magical characters.

This paper will discuss Iamblichus' theory of theurgic power as it is presented in his treatise, *On the Mysteries of Egypt (De Mysteriis)*. Here Iamblichus addressed Porphyry's criticism and concluded that those who claim to control the gods by 'standing on characters' are indeed misguided, for 'a divine nature is incapable of being allured, is impassive and uncompelled' (45.4-5). At the same time, however, Iamblichus also argued that by means of the symbols theurgy imparts on its practitioners, the theurgist can command and even threaten lesser deities: for 'through arcane symbols, he, in certain respects, is invested with the sacred form of the gods' (184.11-13).

The issue of supernatural coercion cuts to the very heart of the theurgic debate, and proves central to Iamblichus' own definition of theurgy as legitimate religious practice. In the eyes of Iamblichus, what distinguished theurgy from manipulative ritual practice was primarily the divine causality of theurgic power. By exploring Iamblichus' doctrine of symbols, this paper will emphasise the consistency of the philosopher's notion of divine impassibility with his belief in the authority of theurgists to compel higher forces. By resting the power of the theurgist entirely on the will of the gods, Iamblichus could suggest, without any hubris, that the theurgist 'invokes the powers of the universe as his superiors, since the one making the invocation is a man. But in a sense, he also commands them, since by means of the ineffable symbols he is clothed in the shape of the gods' (47.18-9). Conversely, by arguing that wizards seek to subjugate divine forces while disregarding the divine will, Iamblichus could draw a sharp distinction between his own esoteric practice and sorcery. In its formulation of a theory of theurgic power, *De Mysteriis* is highly relevant to contemporary debates on magic in the ancient world; through its emphasis on theurgy as a legitimate and necessary ritual observance, Iamblichus' treatise also provides compelling evidence for post-Porphyrian Neoplatonism as a religious phenomenon.