

## Orientalism in Iamblichus' *The Mysteries*

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### Abstract

Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians* is part of a larger Neoplatonic debate over the soundness of theurgical practices and Eastern ritual. The discussion of Egyptian practices in *The Mysteries* reveals the legitimating structures which underlie Iamblichus' argument, specifically, an Orientalizing discourse which contributes to a larger esoteric market of knowledge. This is figured both through stereotypes of Egypt as a site of ancient mysteries, but also from a very real inaccessibility of Egyptian religion to the Greeks. This emphasis on timeless, secret knowledge converts Iamblichian theurgy, a disputed new system of Platonic thought, into a unit of social currency which confers worth, prestige and power upon its creator and sets it apart from the dominant mode of philosophical rationalism.

Keywords: Egyptian religion; Neoplatonism; Orientalism; secrecy; theurgy.

Egyptian religion was a mystery in the Greco-Roman world. For those on the outside, Egyptian ritual practices were a source of fascination which fueled the imagination of Greek philosophers and historians.<sup>2</sup> One philosopher who was seized by such a view was

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2. I use the term "Greek" here with caution. While some examples, such as Herodotus, are indisputably Greek, others such as the Phoenician philosopher Porphyry (a defender of Greek rationalism) are not so easily categorized. When referring to "The Greeks," I am using this term broadly to mean those who could be cultur-

Iamblichus, a Syrian Neoplatonist best known for combining Platonic philosophy and Eastern ritual into a system called theurgy. His treatise, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*, is both a defence of theurgy as well as a reply to the major philosophical approach at the time, namely the hyper-rationalism of Porphyry and Plotinus which dominated Neoplatonic discourse in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Claiming to be able to understand and access the hidden meaning of foreign rituals, Iamblichus maintained that theurgy was a superior method of accessing the gods, especially in contrast to Greek rationalism. In making his case for his system's validity, Iamblichus relies on an Orientalizing discourse which authenticates theurgy within Platonic thought. This can be seen in his explication of Egyptian theology and especially in his discussion of the so-called barbarous words.

The way Iamblichus presents Egyptian religion in *The Mysteries* functions to create a specific style of discourse, one couched in a veil of "Oriental" secrecy which legitimates Iamblichian thought in the face of rationalistic Neoplatonic criticism. Two social theories operate in tandem to serve this purpose. First, there is the concept of Orientalism, the idea that Eastern locales—places like Egypt and Babylonia—are perceived as exotic worlds filled with mystery and special knowledge. Second, there is the notion that special knowledge can be used as a unit of social currency. Both these concepts suggest there is a possessor of information who maintains a privileged position through this possession.

In *The Mysteries*, Iamblichus becomes this privileged possessor of knowledge by engaging an Orientalist discourse that designates his philosophy as otherworldly, privileged, and esoteric (i.e. limited to an in-the-know elite). This gives his ideas value against an opposing dominant trend in philosophy. By situating his system of theurgy as a continuance of ancient Oriental practices in line with Platonic thought, Iamblichus imbues it with an inarguable foundation. This is especially apparent in his discussion of Egyptian practices in Book VII.

ally considered Hellenic, based on participation in what would be considered Greek institutional structures (i.e. Greek-style philosophical academies, government, etc.). For more background on this issue, see Jonathan M. Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 102–103. For multi-cultural dimensions of the philosophical milieu in which Iamblichus lived, see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 177–95.

*Who Was Iamblichus?*

From a family of priest-kings, Iamblichus was born around 240 CE in Syrian Chalcis, though he is also associated with Apamea, where his philosophical school was established.<sup>3</sup> While he strongly identified with his Semitic roots, it was Greek thought that Iamblichus chose to draw upon philosophically and which dominated his intellectual development.<sup>4</sup> Iamblichus' formal education in Greek thought came by way of Porphyry (the ardent student of Plotinus) with whom Iamblichus studied in Italy. The school of thought promoted by Plotinus, which emphasized rational introspection, was considered the dominant influence on philosophical thought at the time.<sup>5</sup> Taking as his foundation Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, Iamblichus developed his own philosophy within this tradition.<sup>6</sup> However, he was not content with a purely rational approach to spiritual matters, and so he incorporated what were believed to be Eastern ideas into his system.<sup>7</sup> The result—the synthesis of Greek thought and ritual praxis called theurgy—created tension between Iamblichus and Porphyry. Despite providing a solution to classical Platonic problems, such as how and why the soul ascends to the gods, the two men disagreed on fundamental tenets (the Plotinian conception of the soul being a major one) as well as method; Iamblichus believed in a strong ritual praxis to attain union with the gods, whereas Porphyry felt this could be achieved through intellectual inquiry alone.<sup>8</sup> This ideological rivalry provides a key context in which *The Mysteries* was written. But first it is important to understand how Iamblichian thought fits into Platonism.

*Iamblichian Theurgy and Influences*

Connecting Iamblichian thought with Greek philosophy, Gregory Shaw suggests that the Platonic problems Iamblichus attempted

3. Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 4; Paulina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 24–25.

4. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 4, 14–17.

5. Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 24, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 24.

7. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, introduction to *On the Mysteries*, by Iamblichus (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), xlix; Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 24.

8. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 10–11; Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 24–25; Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 131–34.

to solve also reflect themes of the dualistic Greco-Roman milieu in which Iamblichus lived.<sup>9</sup> Thus of paramount concern were questions of embodiment, the nature of the soul, and how a spiritual being engages with the physical world. To address these contemporary issues, Shaw observes that Iamblichus derived many of his theories from Plato and Pythagoras. Platonic theories on the soul's place in the universe and its interdependent relationship with the demiurge, ideas discussed in Plato's *Laws* and the *Timaeus*, respectively,<sup>10</sup> were picked up by Iamblichus and given new purpose. He also relied on Pythagorean theory to reconcile the Platonic problem of the many and the one, i.e. how a singular supreme being can contain a multiplicity without also being of that multiplicity.<sup>11</sup> To this mix of Greek principles Iamblichus added what he believed to be the practices of the Babylonians and Egyptians. In the case of the Egyptians, Iamblichus held that their ritual was consonant with Platonic thought, and thus represented an ancient validation of Greek philosophical principles.<sup>12</sup>

Iamblichan philosophy took the form of theurgy, a word that refers to activities which make "the human being worthy of or a likeness of a god."<sup>13</sup> For Iamblichus, Eastern ritual practices (such as chanting and manipulation of objects) contained the key necessary to unlock the divinity within humans so that they could actively engage in "cooperative demiurgy," whereby the gods and humans participated together in creation—completing the Platonic demiurgical cycle. This was accomplished in Iamblichan theurgy by the ritual use of sounds, symbols, and physical objects thought to contain divinity.<sup>14</sup> It has been observed by Dylan Burns that Iamblichus' addition of Eastern ritual elements to philosophy "marked a turn to esotericism in the Platonic tradition," one which allowed theurgy to "take on the status of a forbidden system of absolute, oriental knowledge passed on by ancient heathens."<sup>15</sup> It also marked a distinctive change in Neoplatonic philosophy, one which shifted the focus from

9. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 26.

10. *Ibid.*, 8, 15, 124.

11. *Ibid.*, 187.

12. *Ibid.*, 210.

13. Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 10.

14. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 23, 94–97, 123–24, 50.

15. Dylan M. Burns, "Ancient Esoteric Traditions: Mystery, Revelation, Gnosis," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2014), 4.

intellection to ritual praxis.<sup>16</sup> It is this shift that Iamblichus was compelled to defend in *The Mysteries*.

### *The Mysteries*

Marsilio Ficino gave Iamblichus' major work on theurgy the title of *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* (The mysteries of the Egyptians).<sup>17</sup> Scholars believe the work was composed around the turn of the fourth century.<sup>18</sup> *The Mysteries*, however, was not written in a vacuum. It was a direct response to Porphyry's critique of Egyptian (and other) ritual practices. In his "Letter to Anebo," Porphyry pointedly questioned the Egyptian priest Anebo (i.e. Iamblichus) on various points of theurgic practice. Porphyry specifically took issue with occult dimensions in Iamblichian thought, which he believed were unsound magical techniques.<sup>19</sup>

The "barbarous words," unintelligible vocalizations used in ritual, were one such point of contention. Porphyry asked of Iamblichus, "What also is the design of names that are without signification? And why, of such are those that are barbaric preferred to our own?" Porphyry concluded that the use of these nonsensical names are either "artificial contrivances of enchanter...or we ignorantly frame conceptions of divinity, contrary to its real mode of subsistence."<sup>20</sup> Iamblichus responded to Porphyry's inquiries as the Egyptian priest "Abammon."<sup>21</sup> It is within this pseudo-Egyptian context that he justified Eastern practices and thereby theurgy. I will speak more about this connection later, but for now it is enough to say that the two philosophers were engaging in a discussion about the philosophical "correctness" of theurgy, denoted by Porphyry's emphasis on the "real" way to understand God.

In short, Porphyry's issue with the barbarous names can be summed up as an opposition to irrationality and illusion—concerns germane to Platonists seeking to uncover the immutable truth behind

16. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 134; Clarke, et al., *Introduction*, xx-xxi.

17. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 134.

18. A. Hillary Armstrong, "Iamblichus and Egypt," *Les Études Philosophiques*, no. 2/3 (1987): 187.

19. Clarke, et al., *Introduction*, xxix.

20. Porphyry, "The Epistle of Porphyry to the Egyptian Anebo," in *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*, translated by Thomas Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 12.

21. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 135-37.

the changeable material world.<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline de Romilly has suggested that Plato criticised poetic and rhetorical language as being akin to acts of magic and concealment.<sup>23</sup> According to de Romilly, the rhetorical use of language, be it to persuade an audience or cajole a god, was “a struggle between the spell of the irrational and the desire to master it by means of reason.”<sup>24</sup> On the one side lurks the deceptive enchanter who wields words to bedazzle the gullible, on the other side stands the philosopher armed with the honest products of rational inquiry.

We don't have to look very far to find evidence that Neoplatonic thought broke along these lines; Plotinus' assessment of the so-called gnostics will suffice here. Plotinus viewed the gnostic use of incantations, undecipherable breathings, and hissing noises as outrageous.<sup>25</sup> These techniques are also attested in magical papyri from the same period and consonant with the theurgical practices of Late Antique Pythagoreans.<sup>26</sup> According to Matthew W. Dickie, Porphyry viewed these approaches as ones which “deceive the senses and make the onlooker imagine he saw what was not in fact there.”<sup>27</sup> For Porphyry, who adhered closely to Plotinian views, the ritual use of bizarre vocalizations would be a key indicator that magic—and deception—was at work. In this view, Iamblichus' use of “names that are without signification” would be, at best, a misguided attempt to understand the gods; at worst, a deliberate mendacity which obfuscated the truth.<sup>28</sup> It is easy to see how this could draw ire.

Porphyry was no stranger to the role of critic; he had been tasked by Plotinus to debunk other Greek works of dubious Oriental provenience, such as the writings attributed to Zoroaster.<sup>29</sup> Thus his examination of Iamblichan theurgy is well within his remit. Iamblichus defends Egyptian practice, but he does so as a Platonist by relating Egyptian ideas to Platonic concepts and through appeals to the

22. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 60.

23. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 26–28.

24. *Ibid.*, 12, 85.

25. Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 208–209; Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 223.

26. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 208–209.

27. *Ibid.*, 207.

28. Porphyry, “Porphyry to the Egyptian Anebo,” 12.

29. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 145.

long-held notion that the great Greek philosophers, including Plato and Pythagoras, ultimately derived their knowledge from Egypt.<sup>30</sup> This both shows an Iamblichan emphasis on the primacy of Egyptian thought, but also the importance of Platonism within this debate.

The importance of Egypt in this discussion is not to be downplayed. In fact, it is emphasised by Iamblichus. *The Mysteries* is dense with Egyptian symbolism—from his adoption of the pseudonym “Abammon” to the emphasis on continuity between Greek and Egyptian thought, there is an overarching necessity of the Orient at work in Iamblichus’ treatise. My focus here is not a point-by-point analysis of whether or not the practices portrayed in *The Mysteries* are indeed Egyptian. (Clark, *et al.* have shown that Iamblichus does refer to some actual Egyptian practices, while others, such as Armstrong and Shaw, have emphasized Platonic similarities. In other words, the jury is still out on this question.<sup>31</sup>) Rather, it is how Egypt and Egyptian ideas are discussed. This discourse about Egypt has a functional component, one that privileges Iamblichan theurgy with regards to Porphyry’s “debunking” attacks. To better understand the way these ideas are discussed, we must now to turn to concept of Orientalism.

#### *What Is Orientalism?*

The seminal work on Orientalism is Edward W. Said’s study on the topic, titled simply *Orientalism*. Said’s core argument is that Orientalism frames cultural interaction within an imbalanced power dynamic premised on misrepresentation and perpetuated through the way these misrepresented cultures are studied and discussed.<sup>32</sup> Put simply, this Oriental world (usually taken to signify places like Egypt and the Middle East) has little grounding in fact and serves to reinforce the observing culture’s identity against a foreign “other.” For Said, this suggests an underlying power dynamic, whereby outsider knowledge about the Orient is intimately related to the ability to dominate and “have authority over it.”<sup>33</sup> By asserting this authority, the Orientalist creates and reinforces incorrect stereotypes about a foreign culture, simultaneously translating those perceptions into

30. Armstrong, “Iamblichus and Egypt,” 180; Clarke, *et al.*, *Introduction*, xxxii–xxxiii.

31. Clarke, *et al.*, *introduction*, xxxviii–xlvi; Armstrong, “Iamblichus and Egypt,” 180; Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 15–17.

32. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 73.

33. *Ibid.*, 32.

a meaningful source of value for the observer.<sup>34</sup> These processes of cultural translation which create new fictions in the absence of native voices are at the heart of the problem of Orientalism.

How does one spot Orientalist discourse? While there are several indicators to watch for, for our purposes we will focus on how narrative is structured and the sort of language used to describe the Orient.<sup>35</sup> A key indicator that one is dealing with an Orientalizing discourse is the portrayal of the Orient as “bizarre,” “antique,” “exotic,” and “unchanging.”<sup>36</sup> There is also the notion that the speaker speaks for the Orient in its absence. As Said observes, “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.”<sup>37</sup> That the speaker uses the Orient to serve a personal rhetorical purpose also points to another dimension arising in the process of Orientalization: that of appropriation of the subject’s culture. Ian Moyer defines cultural appropriation as “the taking from another culture particular creative or intellectual products, or traditional ways of thought and expression, including a culture-group’s history or other discourses of self-definition.”<sup>38</sup> Drawing from modern sociological work on the topic, he concludes that, especially with regard to esoteric knowledge, stereotypes and distortions are created as the original ideas are translated to new “regimes of value.”<sup>39</sup> While this can entail a loss of meaning as foreign cultural ideas are analogized to those of the interpreter (e.g. philosophizing Egyptian religion), this can also have another dimension whereby the translated cultural good loses its original meaning altogether. Thus, the “Orient” becomes “Orientalized.”<sup>40</sup> For Said, this means that when an Orientalist talks about “the Orient,” they are not talking about a real location as much as they are discussing a fictive construct whereby the Orient is depicted to suit the expectations of the Orientalist’s audience and what it expects to see in “the Orient.”<sup>41</sup> There is much evidence in

34. *Ibid.*, 65–67, 282; Ian S. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 268–69.

35. Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

36. *Ibid.*, 103, 180, 96.

37. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

38. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, 268.

39. *Ibid.*, 268–69.

40. Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

41. *Ibid.*, 65–67.

ancient Hellenic literature for these sorts of Oriental fabrications, especially with regards to representations of Egypt.

*Ancient Representations of "Oriental" Cultures*

Egypt was held in high esteem in ancient Greece.<sup>42</sup> According to Arnaldo Momigliano, the Greeks were portraying Egypt not as it was, but as a repository of mysterious and ancient ideas as early as the fifth century BCE.<sup>43</sup> Part of the reason for this cultural misunderstanding stems from the Greek inability to understand Egyptian language.<sup>44</sup> Thus the Greeks were never able to understand Egypt on its own terms, and its reputation as a land of mystery took root. One of the earliest Orientalist representations is found in Herodotus' *Histories*, which Moyer describes as "the classic formulation of Egyptian culture as exotic, topsy-turvy, and yet primordial."<sup>45</sup> Egypt's distinction as an ancient culture can be traced to Herodotus' account of his encounter with a priest who was able to trace his lineage back through hundreds of generations, thus making Greece seem young in comparison.<sup>46</sup> The depiction of this encounter, according to Phiroze Vasunia, contains a "powerful rhetoric of otherness...richness of detail, narrative sophistication, and the perceived usefulness of the text as a historical source" — all components of Orientalist discourse.<sup>47</sup> After Herodotus solidified Egypt as a locale of ancient wisdom, it became custom to link powerful figures with the mysterious land. Even Moses and Jesus could not escape this ancient craze, and they were depicted accordingly by the Greeks as magical wise men who had learnt their skills in Egypt. Greek philosophers also enjoyed a similar reputation. Thus, illustrious figures such as Pythagoras and Plato were said to have been educated in the wizened land.<sup>48</sup> Plato himself subscribed to the cliché that Egypt was a place of timeless wisdom. The following passage from the *Timaeus*

42. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 41.

43. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 4-7.

44. Phiroze Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 182.

45. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, 3.

46. Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 19.

47. Vasunia, *Gift of the Nile*, 76.

48. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, 7; Hornung, *Secret Lore of Egypt*, 76; Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 15.

depicts an exchange between Solon and an Egyptian priest, whereby the priest explains how Greek culture is young in comparison:

Here in Egypt, however, water never rains onto the fields from above – it never has, neither then, nor at any other time. Here it does the opposite: all our water rises up from below... This explains why the legends preserved here are the most ancient...from long ago every impressive or important or otherwise outstanding event we hear about, whether it happens in your part of the world or here or elsewhere, has been written down here in the temples and preserved. What happens in your part of the world and elsewhere, however, is that no sooner have you been equipped at any time with literacy and the other resources of city life than once again, after the usual interval, a heavenly flood pours down on you like a plague and leaves only those who are illiterate and uncivilized. As a result, you start all over again and regain your childlike state of ignorance about things that happened in ancient times both here and in your part of the world (22e-23b).

Plato portrays Egypt as an autochthonous land (it generates water from the ground-up, rather than receiving it from the sky!) whose tradition has endured over the years in an unbroken historical chain preserved by temple priests. In contrast, the Greeks are young and foolish, often having to begin their culture from scratch. Of course, like tales of Jesus learning magic in Egypt, this account is questionable. The point here is not to judge the validity of this story, but rather to show how Greek thinkers viewed Egypt in ways consonant with Orientalist discourse. Plato valorizes Egypt as self-created, ancient, and possessing knowledge the Greeks don't have. Egypt's reputation as special would only grow within Platonic circles. According to Burns, "Greco-Roman philosophers would later enshrine 'barbarian' speech, script, and emphasis on transcendence of the deity as 'oriental' wisdoms contributing to Greek wisdom, often phrased as secret, 'esoteric' doctrine."<sup>49</sup> It is within this context that Iamblichus makes sense of his philosophy.

### *Orientalism in The Mysteries*

We do not have to guess at the connection between Greek philosophy and Egyptian wisdom; Iamblichus himself emphasises these ties. In his biography of Pythagoras, Iamblichus accentuated the Oriental origins of Pythagorean philosophy, which he believed was instructed to initiates in Egyptian temples along with matters of

49. Burns, "Ancient Esoteric Traditions," 1.

mystical import, such as first-hand knowledge of the gods.<sup>50</sup> This idea is reinforced in *The Mysteries* where in Book I he suggests that both Plato and Pythagoras studied “the ancient stelae of Hermes.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Iamblichus (working within this tradition) identifies his philosophy with, and premises his argument on, the fundamental origination of Greek philosophy in Egypt. This is one way he defends theurgy against Porphyry. Another way is by constructing his argument within a larger Orientalist framework.

It is in the later part of *The Mysteries*, starting with Book VII, that Iamblichus gets into Egyptian ritual proper. While many ideas are discussed, I would like to emphasize how he talks about signs and symbols of the Egyptians, notably the barbarous words and Egyptian language used in theurgical ritual. His framing suggests that his interpretation is highly coloured by this tradition of Egyptian idealization. Thus he adopts the Orientalist stance outlined by Said in three ways: first, by producing a view of Egypt that his audience (Porphyry) expects to see; second, by remodelling Egyptian ideas along Greek philosophical models; and third, by speaking for the Orient in its absence.<sup>52</sup> Take for example, the opening paragraphs of Book VII:

I would like to explain to you the mode of theology practised by the Egyptians. For these people, imitating the nature of the universe and the demiurgic power of the gods, display certain signs of mystical, arcane and invisible intellections by means of symbols, just as nature copies the unseen principles in visible forms through some mode of symbolism, and the creative activity of the gods indicates the truth of the forms in visible signs. Perceiving, therefore, that all superior beings rejoice in the efforts of their inferiors to imitate them...it is reasonable that they should proffer a mode of concealment that is appropriate to the mystical doctrine of concealment in symbols. (VII.1)

Hear, therefore, the intellectual interpretation of the symbols, according to Egyptian thought: banish the image of the symbolic things themselves, which depends on imagination and hearsay, and raise yourself up towards the intellectual truth. (VII.2)

For our purposes, we do not need to find out what symbols Iamblichus is going to explain. It will be well enough to observe the way he talks about them. For starters, he is going to be the one to

50. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 196-97.

51. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), I.2.

52. Said, *Orientalism*, 65-67, 282.

explain Egyptian theology, immediately signalling that he is speaking for his subject from a position of authority. We are reminded by Said that “to have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it.”<sup>53</sup> It is clear that Iamblichus is assuming this authoritative stance over his subject. But this is no ordinary subject; the Egyptians do not just practice any religion. According to this passage, Egyptian ritual embodies the mechanisms of the universe, and it possesses symbols key to accessing this hidden knowledge. And make no mistake: this knowledge is hidden, as it is wrapped in “the mystical doctrine of concealment in symbols.” Iamblichus, however, will not just explain what these symbols are, he is going to interpret these ideas intellectually, thus addressing the material in a way immediately recognizable to a Greek philosopher – in this case Porphyry. In one short passage we have the idealization of Egypt as a repository of ancient knowledge, a mystification of Egyptian practice, and an outside perspective asserting enough dominance over the material to assert that he is able to interpret it according to different cultural standards.

Iamblichus later goes on to explain the use of barbarous words. He responds to Porphyry’s critique by justifying this practice as especially sacred:

For you inquire, “what is the point of meaningless names?” But they are not “meaningless” in the way that you think. Rather, let us grant that they are unknowable to us – or even, in some cases, known, since we may receive their explanations from the gods – but to the gods they are all significant, not according to an effable mode, nor in such a way that is significant and indicative to the imaginations of human beings, but united to the gods either intellectually or rather ineffably, and in a manner superior and more simple than in accordance with intellect... Thus, the symbolic character of divine similitude, which is intellectual and divine, has to be assumed in the names. And indeed, if it is unknowable to us, this very fact is its most sacred aspect: for it is too excellent to be divided into knowledge... And, moreover, we preserve in their entirety the mystical and arcane images of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as is possible, when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods (VII.4).

Iamblichus again traffics in ideas that are highly privileged – the true meaning of the barbarous names is unknowable but closely tied to divine truth. He argues that the divine quality of the words is not

53. *Ibid.*, 32.

diminished by their lack of intellectual apprehension. In fact, this is what makes them even more valuable than philosophical inquiry – they are beyond rational intellection! What Iamblichus is implying here is that access to the gods is not acquired through philosophical discourse but by a mystical experiential process. Of course, this is completely in line with the practice of theurgy, which relies on ritual acts to induce communion with the gods.<sup>54</sup> It is also germane to the specific debate of rationalism versus ritualism in which Porphyry and Iamblichus were engaged. Therefore, Iamblichus explains that not only are these ideas secret and unknowable (except to Iamblichus!), they also have an immediacy to theurgic practice that the rationalistic philosophy of Porphyry and Plotinus lacks.

Iamblichus then addresses why one would use foreign words to access the gods instead of Greek ones. Again, this is a discussion steeped in Orientalist tropes of a perpetually ancient Egypt:

But “why, of meaningful names, do we prefer the barbarian to our own?” For this, again, there is a mystical reason. For, since the gods have shown that the entire dialect of the sacred peoples such as the Assyrians and the Egyptians is appropriate for religious ceremonies, for this reason we must understand that our communication with the gods should be in an appropriate tongue. Also, such a mode of speech is the first and the most ancient. But most importantly, since those who learned the very first names of the gods merged them with their own familiar tongue and delivered them to us, as being proper and adapted to these things, forever we preserve here the unshakeable law of tradition. For, whatever else pertains to the gods, it is clear that the eternal and the immutable is connatural with them (VII.4).

He defends using foreign names by appealing to the primacy of Egyptian tradition – it is “first and most ancient” and thus closer to the gods than Greek terminology. We have already seen in Plato how it could be believed that Greek ideas were young and worthless compared to timeless and valuable Egyptian ones. From this, we can understand that the effectiveness of incantation depends on the otherness of these names; and this otherness acquires its significance from its perceived antiquity, here embodied in language. The Egyptian language itself is portrayed as having privileged access to the divine based on its ancient status and understanding of sacred ways (which have conversely been lost to the Greeks). This results in a foreign other who is sanctified by default of its location; this other physically inhabits a spiritually superior space. The identification of

54. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 178–80.

a specific location with certain mystical qualities has been described by Moyer as a “geography of cultural authenticity.”<sup>55</sup> What this means is that a locale’s status and history can be invoked by those within it in a way that is more reflective of outsider expectations than actual cultural practices. However, this false appearance seems authentic to the outsider whose expectations are confirmed.<sup>56</sup> This is what is happening here with Iamblichus. Egypt, a location of sacred antiquity, is where the gods can truly be found. It is in this apparently timeless Egyptian culture, and not in the capricious world of the Greeks, where one finds the most “authentic” route to the divine. This dependence on the exotic other is evinced in the following discussion of why the barbarous names work.

“But,” so you say, “a listener looks to the meaning, so surely all that matters is that the conception remains the same, whatever the kind of words used.” But the situation is not as you suppose. For if the names were established by convention, then it would not matter whether some were used instead of others. But if they are dependent on the nature of real beings, then those that are better adapted to this will be more precious to the gods. It is therefore evident from this that the language of sacred peoples is preferred to that of other men, and with good reason. For the names do not exactly preserve the same meaning when they are translated... Moreover, even if one were to translate them, this would not preserve their same power. For the barbarian names possess weightiness and great precision, participating in less ambiguity, variability and multiplicity of expression. For all these reasons, then, they are adapted to the superior beings (VII.5).

Iamblichus ironically critiques the very thing he sets out to do: translate Egyptian ideas into Greek concepts! He argues that one cannot simply paste a Greek term onto an Egyptian idea because the words do not contain the same meaning. Many of our earlier observations apply here (i.e. Egyptian ritual privileged as ancient and aligned with the gods). However, there is one dimension which necessitates further discussion, and that is the idea that Egyptian language is imbued with an inherent mystical energy. The barbarous words cannot be changed or translated. Their ancient and direct origination contains a primordial power embodying divine principles in ways that Greek approximations never can. For this reason, adaptation of these ideas by the Greeks results in a loss of sacred power.

55. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, 249.

56. Stephen Williams, *Tourism Geography: A New Synthesis* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 135–36.

To wit: it is not enough that these ideas come from Egypt, they must remain, in essence, Egyptian. Like the earlier passage, this too can be read as a critique of Porphyry, whose philosophical knowledge of the divine is incomplete and derivative compared with the timeless and foundational principles on which Iamblichan theurgy, however ironic in this context, is based.

This split between Greek rationalism and Iamblichan theurgy speaks to a functional dimension of Orientalist discourse within *The Mysteries* and points to the larger debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry. Under attack, Iamblichus had to figure out a way to address Porphyry's concerns, which were also Platonic questions. As a Platonist, Iamblichus was compelled to respond in a way which underlined the philosophical soundness of theurgy and its reliance on ancient practices. The Orientalism we have seen thus far in Iamblichus serves this purpose: It functions as a way to accrue status, and this status—based on the possession of secret knowledge—especially resonates within this debate.

#### *Esoteric Knowledge as Social Currency*

It should not be forgotten that *The Mysteries* is a response to an attack by Porphyry. Within this context, it is incumbent upon Iamblichus to not just explain theurgy but to legitimate it as normative and relevant within Platonic tradition. We know these issues are important to Iamblichus because he engages in this debate with Porphyry in the first place. (The corollary being, if it were not important, why bother responding?) Furthermore, he goes to great lengths to assert the validity of theurgical practices, especially those presumably derived from what is perceived to be Egyptian ritual.

Iamblichus is not responding to just any questioner but to one who is the student of a significant teacher and respected Platonist in his own right. Thus he is negotiating theurgy within an existing social construct as well as suggesting a new construct with which to work. As Peter L. Berger observes, "When a challenge appears, in whatever form, the facticity [of assumed social constructions] can no longer be taken for granted. The validity of the social order must then be explicated, both for the sake of the challengers and of those meeting the challenge... The seriousness of the challenge will determine the degree of elaborateness of the answering legitimations."<sup>57</sup>

57. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 31.

What Berger refers to are situations where fundamental premises are questioned, requiring a response which both reifies the questionable structure and posits it as legitimate. When I talk about legitimacy, I am again borrowing a concept from Berger, who says that legitimation is “socially objectivated ‘knowledge’ that serves to explain and justify the social order.”<sup>58</sup> These legitimations create a body of knowledge which is taken to be a reliable account of what things are. They are often perceived as “self-evident” and justify social institutions and conventions.<sup>59</sup> In other words, they are accepted assumptions about the way things are. Through elaborate and often supernatural explanations, legitimated social structures (such as religion or spiritual practices) are “given a semblance of inevitability, firmness and durability that is analogous to these qualities as ascribed to the gods themselves.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, they are inherently unquestionable, intrinsically authoritative, and beyond reproach in their otherworldliness by dint of humans being humans and gods being gods, the latter being more powerful than, and unknowable to, the former.<sup>61</sup> Thus when Iamblichus engages in Orientalizing discourse, he is doing more than simply talking about Egypt: he is gaining access to a set of ideas which serve a broader legitimating purpose in the face of criticism. These Egyptian ideas, by virtue of their closeness to the gods, become immune to interrogation and hence inevitable. It also helps that they are unknowable and hence secret.

How is secrecy constructed in *The Mysteries*? When Iamblichus references Egyptian practices, he is, in many ways, referring to the way the Greeks were able to engage with and understand the Egyptians and their practices. In short, they weren't able to do so. There was a fundamental impenetrability of Egyptian culture for the Greeks, and the insular world of Egyptian temple religion – represented by its restricted priesthood, strange writings and even stranger gods, contributed to both Greek exoticism of Egypt, and also to a very real secrecy of its practices.<sup>62</sup> The allure of Egypt and its priests no doubt was enhanced by the place of hieroglyphic writing in Egyptian society. This symbolic language was limited to the priesthood, itself a select group, thus positioning it as an elite currency of knowledge

58. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 29.

59. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

60. *Ibid.*, 36.

61. *Ibid.*, 37.

62. Burns, “Ancient Esoteric Traditions,” 1.

which few had the ability to understand.<sup>63</sup> In fact, by the time of Iamblichus, fewer and fewer Egyptian priests were able to read hieroglyphs. Thus, hieroglyphs became purely symbolic of mystical knowledge and were—in reality—mostly incomprehensible.<sup>64</sup> This “mystical appeal” was only enhanced by their inability to be understood by a largely illiterate society.<sup>65</sup> To claim access to understanding priestly rites, especially those which contained a linguistic component, was to both make claims to insider knowledge as well as to claim an ability to understand a written phenomenon that was fundamentally inaccessible to most. We know Iamblichus is making this claim to priestly knowledge because he responds as the Egyptian priest Abammon, thus inserting himself within this tradition. Furthermore, we will do well to remember that priests are representatives of religious institutions, a role which Berger observes “is mysteriously endowed with the power to represent superhuman realities” (Berger 92). By its very nature, the superhuman is beyond human control or investigation. However, the Egyptians were believed to have special access to this world, and this access was exclusive to the priesthood.<sup>66</sup> When Iamblichus claims to explain “the mode of theology practiced by the he tacitly invokes a language of the esoteric in which the options for the audience (who do not have the same access to the information presented) are limited and skewed towards the possessor of said knowledge; the audience is in a double-bind where one must either “assume a suitably reverent attitude or throw up one’s hands in exasperation.”<sup>67</sup> This is a failsafe argument which assumes that (1) both parties will respect the “esoteric secret” disclosed and (2) others do not know the true contents of the message. Bellman observes that, “When information is told to someone as a secret, it is assumed that there is much more to the message than the content.”<sup>68</sup> Iamblichus is accessing this “much more” through his references to Egyptian ritual. This legitimates Iamblichan thought

63. David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 198–99, 212.

64. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 249.

65. Burns, “Ancient Esoteric Traditions,” 3.

66. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, 257.

67. Thomas Willard, “What is Mystical Language?” in *Papers in the History of Linguistics: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of Language Sciences (ICHoLS III)*, Princeton, 19-23 August 1984, ed. Hans Aarsleff, Louis G. Kelly and Hans-Josef Niederehe (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1987), 206.

68. Beryl L. Bellman, “The Paradox of Secrecy,” *Human Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 8.

by providing theurgy with a social capital which goes beyond rational discourse by engaging in what Moyer terms "esoteric marketing," the way in which the holder of esoteric knowledge is esteemed by virtue of its possession.<sup>69</sup>

Iamblichus' access to privileged Oriental knowledge confers social status by positioning him as cultural mediator between the hidden world of the Egyptians and the apparent one of Greek philosophy. His ability to take possession of this hidden knowledge and disseminate it produces what is called "social capital," the idea that secret knowledge can confer power upon its holder within social exchanges.<sup>70</sup> Of course, the value is not in the secret itself, but in its value to the discloser and their audience in terms of what the expectations are of the information disclosed and how it functions within these expectations.<sup>71</sup> Thus, Iamblichus expects Porphyry to understand that when he speaks of Egyptian mysteries, he is referring to a specific view of the Orient prevalent in Platonic thought. This set of referents not only legitimates Iamblichian theurgy as beyond scrutiny (because it is ancient and divine and thus superhuman), but places it within a fanciful history whereby all the great philosophers gained their knowledge from the Egyptians—a chain of distinction which now includes Iamblichus. In his discussion, Iamblichus is not disclosing a secret *per se*, as much as engaging in a rhetoric which relies on the notion that the material he discloses is secret. As Hugh Urban suggests "the strict guarding of information transforms knowledge into a scarce resource, a good that is 'rare and worthy of being sought after'."<sup>72</sup> By couching theurgy within the edifice of Egyptian theology, Iamblichus turns an otherwise new development in Platonism (Iamblichian theurgy) into something old, rare, and worthy. Tanya Luhrmann has observed that "Secrecy elevates the value of the thing concealed,"<sup>73</sup> and this is what is going on here. Theurgy—and Iamblichus—are imbued with a value derived from this storehouse of esoteric Orientalist tropes. It positions Iamblichus on the offence in an otherwise defensive exchange. How can Porphyry disagree with him? After all, Iamblichus has access to information that

69. Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*, 264.

70. Hugh B. Urban, "The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions," *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 210, 217–18.

71. Bellman, "Paradox of Secrecy," 13.

72. Urban, "Torment of Secrecy," 220.

73. Tanya M. Luhrmann, "The Magic of Secrecy," *Ethos* 17, no. 2 (June 1989): 161.

Porphyry – and by extension contemporary Greek philosophy – can never access. The Oriental tropes become Oriental mysteries which, in their inherent secrecy, become social capital with which Iamblichus can trade on in his debate with Porphyry. Iamblichus doesn't have to actually be representing Egyptian theology; he doesn't have to actually possess secret knowledge. It only has to appear that he does.

This is not to condemn Iamblichus or even to suggest that Iamblichus intentionally constructed his argument to take advantage of these social benefits – as historians, we are not privy to Iamblichus' thoughts and motivations, and we should not overstep our boundaries in this regard. Rather, this is to observe how an Orientalizing view of Egypt could serve to function within a larger debate which was, at its heart, one of Greek philosophy. What is clear is that, by invoking a specific view of Egypt, one based on inaccessible mysteries, Iamblichus gains access to a wealth of established stereotypes and assumptions which could plausibly serve to legitimate his argument. The veracity of these stereotypes matters not, what matters is how they functioned in the Greco-Roman period, and it is clear that they held significant weight regardless of their actuality.

### *Conclusion*

Iamblichus' main work on theurgy, *The Mysteries*, undoubtedly contains an Orientalized view of Egypt that depicts Egyptian religious practices in ways consonant with an Orientalizing discourse as outlined by Said. This is exemplified by Iamblichus claiming to be able to explain the hidden mysteries of the Egyptians as well as the way he contends that the power of barbarous words is related to the locative antiquity of Egypt itself. Iamblichus' authority does not stop here though. His Orientalizing discourse contributes to a larger esoteric market of knowledge, figured both through Orientalist stereotypes of Egypt as a site of ancient hidden knowledge, but also from a very real inaccessibility of Egyptian religion to the Greeks. This emphasis on timeless, secret knowledge which only a few can access converts Iamblichian theurgy, a disputed new system of Platonic thought, into a unit of social currency which confers worth, prestige and power upon its creator. Furthermore, this argument from the esoteric creates a foundation which is immune to criticism, and thereby self-legitimizing. Whether or not Iamblichus intended his defence of theurgy to be self-sufficient in this way, we can never

know. What is clear is that his debate with Porphyry engages within these constructs and that Iamblichus socially benefits from them.

Despite Porphyry's concerns, Iamblichan theurgy became a popular system of thought and practice that influenced not just other Platonic philosophers, but also Roman rulers and Christian thinkers.<sup>74</sup> I have suggested one reason for its popularity: That it was a system of thought which claimed direct access to hidden mysteries which were outside the bounds of scrutiny. Iamblichus would not be the last author to turn to Egypt and its secrets—Aleister Crowley and other *fin de siècle* traditions such as the Golden Dawn, immediately come to mind as relying on and benefiting from Orientalist world-views.<sup>75</sup> But make no mistake, all these traditions, be they ancient or modern, owe much to the imaginations of their creators. For some, that might have been magic enough.

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74. Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 25–27; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24–25.

75. Caroline Tully, "Walk Like an Egyptian: Egypt as Authority in Aleister Crowley's Reception of *The Book of the Law*," *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 1 (2010): 40–44.

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