

Studia graeco-arabica

6



2016

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Web site: <http://learningroads.cfs.unipi.it>

Service Provider: Università di Pisa, ICT - Servizi di Rete Ateneo

ISSN 2239-012X (Online)

Registration at the law court of Pisa, 18/12, November 23, 2012.

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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

J. Dillon - A. Timotin (eds.), *Platonic Theories of Prayer*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2016 (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, 19), ix + 228 pp.

This volume is a multi-authored collection stemming from a panel discussion on 'Prayer' at the annual meeting of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies held in Cardiff, June 2013. The only exception is the paper by John Dillon, "The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer", published in the proceedings of an earlier conference (2002): it is included in this collection because all the other essays refer to this study. 'Prayer' is analysed at all levels, from the lowest, the petitionary prayer, to the highest, the philosophic prayer in its various forms, with a focus on the Platonic practice of prayer. Today prayer is considered as an aspect of religion, not of philosophy, but in antiquity philosophers reflected on it, criticising the petitionary prayer of popular religion, and looking for the best way to talk to and about God. The papers of this collection deal exclusively with Greek tradition; the exclusion of Latin authors is accounted for by the fact that the only Latin author of Platonic allegiance who discussed at length the practice of prayer was Augustine, not taken into account because of the difficulty of distinguishing between Platonic influences and Christian faith (*Introduction*, p. 3, n. 2).

First comes Dillon's "The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer" (pp. 7-25). The use of prayer in the Platonic tradition begins with Plato himself, who uses prayer in what Dillon labels a "programmatically" way. The most important instances of programmatic prayer are the invocation to Pan and "the other deities of the place" in *Phaedr.* 279 B-C, and the prayer to gods introducing the cosmological account in *Tim.* 27 C. Another example is *Leg.* VII, 801 A-B, a passage which contains an indication of what one should pray for. After Plato, Dillon discusses Plotinus. His views about popular religion emerge from the well-known exchange with Amelius, related by Porphyry in *Vita Plot.* 10: "The gods ought to come to me, not I to them". Dillon comments: "A possible interpretation, surely, however, is that our relations with the gods should be based, not on our going out of our way to solicit them for favours which we have not made an effort to deserve, but rather on our making ourselves ready, by the practice of spiritual exercises, to receive their power. It is not the expression of an impious or arrogant attitude to the gods; merely a properly Platonist one" (p. 10). As shown by III 2[47], 8.36-46, the only correct form of prayer is the effort to accept the order of the All: this is confirmed by a comparison with IV 4[28], 30.1-17 and 40.19-41.4, where Plotinus claims that the heavenly bodies influence the lower soul, and magicians by their prayers can make use of them, but they have no power over the rational soul, whose prayer is contemplation. As V 8[31], 9.1-15 suggests, contemplation is a spiritual exercise of concentration on an image, a meditation that does not require any words. Meditation continues to be the central feature of philosophical prayer also for later Platonists, although it is possible to distinguish between the 'theoretical' tendency and the 'theurgical' one: while Plotinus and Porphyry think that contemplation is the only way to rise to the deity, Iamblichus believes that mental concentration alone is not enough, but should be implemented by theurgical practices.¹ Dillon wonders what kind of subjective experiences is behind these prayers:

¹ Dillon quotes Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, II 11, 96.11-97.2 = p. 72.25-73.8 in the Budé edition, published in 2013: *Jamblique. Réponse à Porphyre (De Mysteriis)*, texte établi, traduit et annoté par H.D. Saffrey et A.-Ph. Segonds† avec la collaboration de A. Lecerf, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2013 (CUF). Updating here the reference to the so-called *De Mysteriis* would have been better in my opinion, given that Saffrey discusses at length in his Introduction the fictitious nature of this title, given by Ficinus and kept by the nineteenth-century editor Gustav Parthey. When "The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer" was published for the first time, in 2002, this point was not clear; but now that we have been alerted on the real purposes and structure of Iamblichus' *Response to Porphyry*, I think that recalling Saffrey's point is important when citing this work.

“Anything in the way of traditional prayerful utterance, such as we find, for instance, at the beginning of Proclus’ *Parmenides Commentary*, or in the preface to his *Platonic Theology*, can only relate to the lowest stage of prayer [...] they can have nothing to do with *henôsis*” (p. 20). The main point of this study is that only in Neoplatonism prayer becomes the way to unify the soul with God.

The essay of Gilles Dorival, “Modes of Prayer in the Hellenic Tradition” (pp. 26-45) has two purposes: on the one hand, to prove how petitionary prayer changes within the Greek tradition and, on the other, to highlight that the accounts of prayer in the works of the Greek Church Fathers are linked not only to the Biblical tradition, but also to the pagan petitionary prayer and its philosophical evolution. Petitionary prayer becomes very early the object of criticism pointing to its dangers: immorality,² mediocrity,³ impiety,⁴ and, from a more philosophical point of view, uselessness, if God is provident.⁵ As Maximus of Tyre points out in his treatise *Whether it be necessary to pray*, petitionary prayer is useless, because we usually pray for providence and destiny (that cannot be modified), for fortune (which is unstable by definition) or for some skill (although its attainment depends only on us); now, none of these can be influenced by the gods. Despite this criticism, the ancient thinkers do not reject petitionary prayer completely, but accept it if centred on true good. Petitionary prayer directed to the true good is accepted not only in the Platonic, but also in the Stoic tradition, although it seems incompatible with Stoic tenets: examples are given from Seneca⁶ and Marcus Aurelius.⁷ “In the end, it is all perhaps a question of point of view: from the point of view of the wise man and of spiritual life, actions are free, but from the point of view of the gods, everything conforms to the world order. Furthermore, these two points of view can be reconciled each time the wise man takes the gods’ point of view on matters – freedom thus appears as an expression of necessity” (pp. 37-38). Then a passage of Maximus of Tyre is analysed. Despite the progressive spiritualisation of prayer, the requests for material good things continues to be present also in Neoplatonic prayers, as shown by Proclus who, in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, claims that prayer can request not only the soul’s salvation, but also material benefits.⁸ The coexistence of popular religion and philosophical speculation in Neoplatonism is attested not only by the survival of petitionary prayer, but also by hymns, which often contain requests too. These texts are written in order to revitalise pagan religiosity against the rise of Christianity: since in late antiquity hymns are no longer part of a collective liturgy, as it was originally, they turn out to be forms of personal prayer.

Menahem Luz, “Philo on Prayer as Devotional Study” (pp. 46-57) discusses how Philo of Alexandria combines Jewish thought and Greek philosophy, developing innovative theories of intellectual contemplation and silent prayer. An example of this attitude is Philo’s interpretation of Temple sacrifice (λείτουργία): for him this practice is not a religious ritual with animal and cereal offerings, but a pious lifestyle which involves prayer and study: “religious worship” (λατρεία) is reserved for the virtuous and religious, the “civic synagogues” (διδασκαλεῖα) become schools for the study of virtuous behaviours, where prayer plays a central role. As Luz points out, “It has been noted that, in contrast to pagan usage, early Rabbinic sources also recommend the use of silent prayer [...]

² Dorival cites Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, I 10, 5.

³ Dorival refers to Lucian, *Icaromenippus*, 25.

⁴ Reference is given to Plato, *Leg. X*, 885 D.

⁵ This is, according to Dorival, Porphyry’s position as related by Proclus, *In Tim.*, II, pp. 207-208 Diehl.

⁶ The reference is to Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, I 10, 4.

⁷ Dorival refers to Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX 40.

⁸ Reference is given to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, pp. 213.19-214.13 Diehl.

although, in later liturgical usage, vocal prayer was obligatory in many instances” (p. 53, n. 46): this suggests that the practice of silent prayer in the Platonic tradition has its roots in the Alexandrian milieu. Another aspect of Platonic prayer that might have been influenced by Alexandrian culture is the use of a text as the basis for meditation (pp. 53-54): according to Philo, the study of Scripture gives the opportunity for inner reflection and prayer, something that may anticipate the later Platonists’ attitude towards Plato’s dialogues or the *Chaldaean Oracles*.

The paper “Prayer in Maximus of Tyre” by Carl Séan O’Brien (pp. 58-72) analyses the concept of prayer that emerges from Maximus’ *Orations*, where several reasons to criticise petitionary prayer are listed, all linked to the philosophical background described by Dorival in the essay presented above. Maximus does not reject prayer at all, and acknowledges the value of philosophical prayer, a kind of meditation where no request to gods is made. It is true that the philosopher is not the only example of virtuous man, but his prayers are the only fair way to come into contact with God. “This allows to philosopher to serve as a God’s messenger (*Or.* 11.9) and representative (*Or.* 11.6)” (p. 67). Maximus criticises the sacrifices, the offerings, and the iconography of Persians and Egyptians, because they depend on impious religious behaviour; he expresses the same attitude also against the oracles, considering them as instances of superstition. “This is in line with Maximus’ views that philosophy is important as an encouragement to virtue, but it can lead to excessive theological speculation and ‘sectarianism’, which itself is a further example of an incorrect religious understanding which serves to harm our morality” (p. 69).

The study of Michael Wakoff, “Awaiting the Sun: A Plotinian Form of Contemplative Prayer” (pp. 73-87) is focused on a kind of spiritual exercise based on light and sun imagery. As shown by IV 4[28], 40-44, Plotinus rejects petitionary prayer, considered as a form of sympathetic magic that, however, has no effects on those who live the contemplative life. The most explicit description of contemplative prayer is in V 1 [10], 6, where Plotinus lists its three essential features: it is “aspirational [...] wordless [...] and involves an emptying of the soul, a purification from outwards concerns, and a turning inwards” (p. 76). Wakoff thinks that Plotinus practiced spiritual exercises and, in his opinion, the one which is best attested in the *Enneads* is that of contemplation of the sun, which “combines aesthetic perception, reverential feeling, visualization, and inwardization of attention” (p. 77). Wakoff admits that there is no place in the *Enneads* where Plotinus describes a meditation on the sun, but he believes that the mystical experiences alluded to by Porphyry can explain the passages related to sun and light, like V 1[10], 2.14-23 or V 5[32], 8 and others.⁹ Wakoff is aware of the risk of overstatement: “what is perhaps the most powerful objection to my interpretation of these passages as evidence of a practice of contemplating the rising sun [is] that Plotinus is just using the sun as an analogy or a metaphor” (p. 82). But in his views the world itself is a metaphor for a Neoplatonist philosopher: thus, contemplation of sensible images (especially the sun) helps to intuit the truth about the intelligible world. The sun is the metaphor for the One; however, Wakoff does not consider the possibility that Plotinus’ reference to *Resp.* 516 A-C points simply to the causal role of sun, which is compared to that of the One as the principle of all things, without any reference to a spiritual practice.

In his “Porphyry on Prayer. Platonic Tradition and Religious Trends in the Third Century” (pp. 88-107) Andrei Timotin presents Porphyry’s theory of prayer. On the one hand, Porphyry criticises the petitionary prayer, considered as a sort of commercial request; on the other hand, he tries to define the correct way to come into contact with the deity. In the *Letter to Anebo* he states that

⁹ These passages are V 8[31], 3 and 10-11; IV 3[27], 11; VI 7[38], 21 and VI 4[22], 7.

prayers can have some effects only on demons, since the gods, being passionless, cannot be affected by human voices. The distinction between gods and demons plays a central role in his criticism of traditional prayer also in the *De Abstinencia*, where it is combined with a theory of sacrifice: the inferior demons want bloody sacrifice, the good demons like vegetal offers, and superior gods only appreciate the intellectual sacrifice of philosophers. A similar idea is expressed also in *De Regressu animae*, where Porphyry affirms that the inferior part of the soul can be purified by theurgic prayer, but the superior one is purified only by intellectual life. Consequently, as is affirmed in the *Letter to Marcella*, the philosopher is the only person who prays to God appropriately, combining virtue, silent prayer and intellectual contemplation. Before Porphyry, Philo and especially Plotinus had already stated that we can communicate with God only in silence and contemplation, but in this process a central role was played, according to Timotin, also by Plutarch: “The idea, expressed by Plotinus and Porphyry, of an intellectual communication between man and God which defines the philosophical notion of ‘silent prayer’, has a counterpart in the Middle Platonic idea of an intellectual language of δαίμονες, an idea developed by Plutarch in relation to the question how Socrates was able to receive messages from his personal δαίμων. [...] The idea had a Neoplatonic posterity, but already from Plutarch’s time the intellectual reception of divine messages and the intellectual prayer could be seen as two complementary and mutually dependent ideas” (p. 103).

Proclus’ theory of prayer is the topic of the three subsequent papers. In his “Prayer in Neoplatonism and the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus” (pp. 108-33) Luc Brisson compares Proclus’ conception of prayer with the one that emerges from the *Orphic Rhapsodies* (representative of the Greek theology) and the *Chaldaean Oracles* (seen as the expression of the theology of Barbarians). The union of Platonic philosophy, Orphic myths and the *Chaldaean Oracles* is present in Proclus’ commentary of the prayer which opens Timaeus’ speech (*Tim.*, 27 C-D). Proclus assimilates Timaeus to the Orphic Zeus, who, following the advice of Night, prays the god Phanes before he begins creating the world;¹⁰ then, Proclus goes on to describe the nature of prayer, and his sources are both Plato and the *Chaldaean Oracles*.¹¹ The Platonists cited by Proclus as authorities on prayer are Porphyry and Iamblichus. A long passage from Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella* is cited,¹² where prayer is defined as the soul’s conversion toward divinity, that can be achieved only if it is associated with the four virtues mentioned in the *Chaldaean Oracles*: faith, truth, love and hope.¹³ Then, after affirming that all beings proceed from the gods, remain in them and convert toward them, and that inanimate things keep in themselves the reasons (λόγοι) sown by the Demiurge, Proclus refers to the doctrine of prayer expounded by Iamblichus.¹⁴ Brisson concludes his essay showing that Proclus presents himself as the master of a sort of scientific religion based on the Platonic texts accompanied by Orphic theology and Chaldaean images. Soul ascends not only through prayer and contemplation, but also through theurgy, which includes divination, rituals and divine possession.¹⁵

Prayer in Proclus is analysed also by Danielle Layne in her study “Proclus is Cosmic Etiology and Demiurgic *Mimesis* in Proclus’ Account of Prayer” (pp. 134-63). In his commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* (I, pp. 267-8 Diehl) Proclus develops a theory of prayer that involves a criticism of

¹⁰ Brisson refers to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, pp. 206.26-207.2 Diehl.

¹¹ Brisson refers to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, p. 207.21- 23 Diehl.

¹² The reference is to Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 24.1-11.

¹³ Brisson refers to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, pp. 207.24-209.1 Diehl.

¹⁴ Reference is given to Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, V 26, p. 177.11-20 Saffrey-Segonds (see above, n. 1).

¹⁵ Brisson refers to Proclus, *Theol. Plat.*, I, 25, pp. 112.25-113.10 Saffrey-Westerink.

Aristotle's doctrine of the final cause: this kind of cause fails to operate as a creative principle, but Aristotle credits the supreme God with it (p. 135). Proclus criticises Aristotle's account for two reasons: on the one hand, celestial bodies cannot be moved without a demiurgic cause; on the other, without an intelligible paradigm Nature becomes a blind force, analogous to Anaxagoras' Mind. According to Proclus, the causes are six in number, i.e. material, formal, instrumental, efficient, paradigmatic, and final;¹⁶ matter, form and instrument are immanent in the cosmos, whereas the true causes transcend it. The true causes are the demiurgic intellect (productive cause), the intelligible (paradigmatic cause) and the Good (final cause).¹⁷ This is the supreme principle; the intelligible causes is placed at the level of Being, and the Demiurge is located in the intellective sphere, because Plato has defined him as a νοῦς.¹⁸ To Aristotle's causes Proclus opposes the Demiurge. The latter creates through prayer: the Demiurge ascends to the intelligible causes by intuitive thinking.¹⁹ In addition to the paradigmatic cause, the Demiurge contains in himself also the final cause: because of his union with the supreme principle, the Demiurge is "good" (*Timaeus*); otherwise, he would be like Aristotle's God: an intellect that creates without providence.²⁰ Proclus applies his doctrine of causes also to prayer: understood as a form of the ascent to God, the prayer is an imitation of the demiurgic intellect.

J.M. Redondo, "The Transmission of Fire: Proclus' Theurgical Prayers" (pp. 164-91) examines the overlap between prayer and theurgy. In late Platonism, theurgy is considered as a true philosophical practice which involves the active imagination of the philosopher, understood as the faculty which raises his soul to the contact with the gods. In performing theurgic acts, the philosopher tries to identify himself with them, and he lives an emotional experience. Redondo discusses also the links between theurgy and astrology. Theurgy is astrological in a technical sense, because its rituals are performed at the right time, in order to integrate them into cosmic harmony, thus allowing the soul to get in touch, through the astral figures, with its δαίμων. "In Proclus' integral approach to theurgy there is both an intellectual as well as an erotic, incomprehensible element related to an individual intimate experience" (p. 183).

The collection ends with the paper by Marilena Vlad, "Damascius and Dionysius on Prayer and Silence" (pp. 192-212), devoted to explore "the way in which prayer and silence are articulated in the discourse of Damascius and Dionysius the Areopagite. This analysis is meant to prove that, despite certain similarities, these two authors had rather different understandings of the divine, as well as different manners of searching for it" (p. 192). Damascius invokes the gods both because he needs their help to talk about truth, although in an inadequate way,²¹ and because he asks for forgiveness, after having talked about the ineffable principle.²² "Damascius breaks the traditional silence, only in order to impose a different kind of silence: an 'active' one, imposed by the impossibility of expressing the principle in any way" (p. 195). This silence is not a lack of words, but the status of the principle, that we discover through philosophical research.²³ Instead, Dionysius' aim is to reach the divine

¹⁶ Layne cites Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, p. 2.1-8 Diehl.

¹⁷ Layne refers to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, pp. 2.30-3.4 Diehl.

¹⁸ Layne compares Plato, *Tim.* 29 A 3-6 and Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, pp. 310.9-311.14 Diehl.

¹⁹ Reference is given to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, p. 324.20 Diehl.

²⁰ Layne refers to Proclus, *In Tim.*, I, p. 361.9-17 Diehl.

²¹ Vlad cites Damascius, *De Principiis*, II, p. 51.9-15 Westerink-Combès.

²² Vlad cites Damascius, *De Principiis*, II, p. 61.4-6 Westerink-Combès.

²³ Vlad refers to Damascius, *De Principiis*, I, p. 11.14-16 and p. 21.18-22 Westerink-Combès.

silence, and he prays to have access to this condition because what it hides is God.²⁴ He tries to talk about God elaborating a discourse where “all names must be affirmed about God, but, if God is absolutely everything, this implies that he is nothing in particular [...] and that all names must be negated of him. Therefore, this ‘total discourse’ is at the same time a non-discourse, because, by saying and suppressing everything, it doesn’t say anything in particular any more, and it doesn’t leave room for any object of speech” (pp. 201-2). The “total discourse” has two effects: on the one hand, God is beyond every predicative language and, on the other, prayer brings from ‘names’ to the consciousness of their incapability to express the inexpressible. For Dionysius all names were born from silence, and turn back to it.

This interesting volume ends with an *Index locorum* (pp. 213-20), *nominum* (pp. 221-3), and *rerum* (pp. 224-8).

Giulia Guidara

²⁴ Cfr. ps.-Dionysus, *Mystical Theology*, I 1, p. 141.1-2 Suchla.