

The Philosophy of the Few against the Christians

An Inquiry into the Textual Transmission of
Porphyry's *Philosophy according to the
Chaldean Oracles*

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments XI

Abbreviations XVII

Introduction 1

PART 1

Preliminary Questions

1 A Philosophy Conforming with the “Chaldean Oracles” 11

2 An Esoteric Philosophy for the Salvation of the Soul of the Initiates 19

3 The First Commentary on the “Chaldean Oracles” 27

4 Zoroaster, the Magi, and the “Chaldean Oracles” 34

5 Polemics against the Christians 46

6 Some Further Consequences 58

PART 2

Χρηστική Πραγματεία

Statues, Sacrifices and Oracles

7 Philosophy versus Theurgy 69

8 The Orphic *Prorrhesis* and the Statues of the Gods 80

9 The Universal Way for the Salvation of the Soul 96

10 Sacrifices and Oracles 112

11 The Letter to Anebo and the Reply by Iamblichus 122

- 12 Chaldean Philosophy versus Chaldean Theology 136
- 13 The Anti-Christian Oracles of Hekate and Apollo 152
- 14 Against Origen's Allegorical Interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures 163
- 15 Against Origen's Allegorical Interpretation of Homer 176

PART 3

Πολλων Των Κατα Φιλοσοφιαν Δογματων Αναγραφη
The History of Philosophy and the Encyclical Disciplines

- 16 The Chronicle of Greek Philosophy from the Fall of Troy to the Reign of Claudius 185
- 17 The History of Greek Philosophy from Homer to Plato 196
- 18 The History of Greek Philosophy from the Old Academy to Plotinus 211
- 19 The Two Editions of the Life of Plotinus 221
- 20 The Truest Philosophy of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle 230
- 21 The Oracle of Apollo on Plotinus's Soul 244
- 22 Porphyry and the Encyclical Disciplines 253
- 23 The Mathematical Disciplines 267
- 24 Augustine on the Encyclical Disciplines 276
- 25 The Encyclical Disciplines against the Christians 284

PART 4

*Θεοσοφία**Theological Wisdom for the Salvation of the Soul*

- 26 The Threefold Division of Philosophy 297
- 27 Two Preliminary Methodological Issues 306
- 28 On the Union of Soul and Body 314
- 29 A Collection of *Hieroi Logoi* on the Soul 321
- 30 The Immortality of the Soul 330
- 31 Self-Determination and Transmigration of the Soul 341
- 32 Homer's Philosophy of the Soul 350
- 33 From Anthropology-Ethics to Physics 364
- 34 From Physics to Metaphysics-Theology 377
- 35 Theology as the Fulfilment of Theosophy 386
- 36 Further Theological Fragments 400
- 37 Three Books against the Religion and Name of the Christians 411

PART 5

Reception in the Latin, Byzantine, and Arabic Traditions

- 38 The Latin Reception 429
- 39 Augustine and Macrobius 439
- 40 The Byzantine Reception 447
- 41 The Relationship with "On Abstinence" 457

- 42 A Byzantine Epitome of Porphyry's Theosophy 466
- 43 An Arabic Translation of Porphyry's Theology 476
- 44 The Philosophy of the Few 486

Conclusion: A Tentative Reconstruction of the *Philosophy according to the Chaldean Oracles* 492

Bibliography 497

Index of Authors and Anonymous Works 570

Index of Subjects 581

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in gestation.

I first met Porphyry in Rome in the year 1963, at the age of 15, in high school where I was studying the role played by his *Isagoge* in medieval philosophy. I have no difficulty in admitting that I was not particularly attracted by him, and that was as far as it went. I encountered Porphyry again several years later (1971–1978) at the Catholic University of Milan, this time in the context of my new interests in the religious history of Late Antiquity and the relations between early Christianity and the Greco-Roman civilization. The essay by Wilhelm Nestle on the main objections raised by pagan thinkers against Christianity, “Die Haupteinwände des antiken Denkens gegen das Christentum”, prompted me to take new paths.¹ What struck me was the discovery of something of which I had been blissfully ignorant, namely that Porphyry was the author of the harshest attack made by the pagans on Christianity, and since then I have not ceased to be curious about this man and his anti-Christian work.

I at once realized that this topic is one of those that makes you tremble at the mere thought of its intrinsic difficulties. I therefore began my research with the works that were then considered the most reliable, that is Wolff’s edition of Porphyry’s *Philosophia ex Oraculis Haurienda*,² the biography of Porphyry by Joseph Bidez,³ and the collection of the fragments of the anti-Christian treatise edited by Adolf von Harnack.⁴ On the strength of the knowledge acquired, I enthusiastically accepted the invitation to write a short entry on “Porphyry” for the *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* edited by Angelo Di Berardino,⁵ and for some time I also entertained the notion of publishing a new, critically updated edition of the fragments of Porphyry’s anti-Christian treatise, based on Harnack’s edition, which was then universally deemed irreplaceable.

But that illusion was short-lived, and those fragile, initial certainties gave way to a more and more marked scepticism. Lecturing on the works by Arnobius, Lactantius, Eusebius, Firmicus Maternus, Marius Victorinus, Macarius of Magnessia and Augustine, in the courses on ancient Christian literature that I held during the Eighties at the University of Padua, took me in unexpected directions. After reading the harsh review by Pierre Hadot of the book by John J.

1 Nestle 1941.

2 Wolff 1856.

3 Bidez 1913.

4 Harnack 1916, 1921 and 1921a.

5 Beatrice 1992b (original Italian edition 1984).