

# Concerning Prayer

Proclus, Iamblichus and Hierocles

*“All who in the least degree participate of temperance always invoke divinity in the impulse to every undertaking, whether it be small or great.”*

I. All beings are the progeny of the Gods, by whom they are produced without a medium, and in whom they are firmly established. For the progression of things which perpetually subsist, and cohere from permanent causes, is not alone perfected by a certain continuation, but immediately subsists from the Gods, from whence all things are generated, however distant they may be from the divinities. And this is no less true, even though asserted of matter itself. *For a divine nature is not absent from any thing, but is equally present to all things.* Hence though you should assume the last of beings, in these also you will find divinity. For *The One* is every where; and in consequence of its absolute dominion, every thing receives its nature and coherence from the Gods.

As all things however proceed, so likewise, they are not separated from the Gods, but radically abide in them, as the causes and sustainers of their existence. For where can they recede, since the Gods primarily comprehend all things in their embrace? For whatever is placed as separate from the Gods has not any kind of subsistence. But all beings are contained by the Gods and reside in their natures, after the manner of a circular comprehension. Hence, by a wonderful mode of subsistence, all things proceed, and yet are not, nor indeed can be separated from the Gods; because all offspring when torn from their parents, immediately recur to the immense vastness of non-entity. But in a certain respect they are established in them; and in short, proceed in themselves, but abide in the Gods.

Since however, having proceeded, it is requisite that they should be converted and return, imitating the evolution into light, and conversion of the Gods to their cause, in order that these being arranged conformably to the perfective triad, may again be contained by the Gods and the first unities, - hence they receive from them a certain secondary perfection, by which they may be able to convert themselves to the goodness of the divinities, in order that being at first rooted in, they may again through conversion be established in them, forming a certain circle, which originates from and terminates in the Gods.

All things therefore, both abide in, and convert themselves to the Gods, receiving this power from the divinities, together with twofold impressions according to essence; the one, that they may abide there, but the other that, having proceeded, they may convert themselves [to their causes]. And these things we may survey not only in souls, but also in inanimate natures. For what else ingenerates in these a sympathy with other powers, but the symbols which they are allotted by nature, some of which are allied to *this*, but others to *that* series of Gods? For nature being supernally suspended from the Gods, and distributed from their orders, inserts also in bodies impressions of their alliance to the divinities. In some indeed, inserting solar, but in others lunar impressions, and in others again, the symbol of some other God. And these indeed, convert themselves to the Gods; some, as to the Gods simply, but others as to particular Gods; nature thus perfecting her progeny according to different peculiarities of the divinities.

The Demiurgus of the universe therefore, by a much greater priority, impressed these symbols in souls, by which they might be able to abide in themselves, and again convert themselves to the sources of their being. And through the symbol of unity indeed he conferred on them stability; but through intellect, he imparted to them the power of conversion.

But to this conversion prayer is of the greatest utility. For it attracts to itself the beneficence of the Gods, through those ineffable symbols which the father of souls has disseminated in them.<sup>1</sup> It likewise unites those who pray with those to whom prayer is addressed; conjoins the intellect of the Gods with the words of those who pray; excites the will of those who perfectly comprehend good to the abundant communication of it; is the fabricator of divine persuasion; and establishes in the Gods all that we possess.

To a perfect and true prayer however, there is required in the first place, a knowledge of all the divine orders to which he who prays approaches. For no one will accede to the Gods in a proper manner, unless he has a knowledge of their peculiarities. Hence also the oracle admonishes, *that a fire-heated conception has the first order in sacred worship.*<sup>2</sup>

But in the second place, there is required a conformation of our life with that which is divine; and this accompanied with all purity, chastity, discipline, and order, through which our concerns being introduced to the Gods, we shall attract their beneficence, and our souls will become subject to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Chald. Oracl. 95

<sup>2</sup> Chald. Oracl. 139

In the third place, contact is necessary, according to which we touch the divine essence with the summit of our soul, and verge to a union with it. But there is yet farther required, an approximating adhesion: for thus the oracle calls it, when he says, *the mortal approximating to fire will possess a light from the Gods.*<sup>3</sup> For this imparts to us a greater communion with, and a more manifest participation of the light of the Gods.

In the last place, union succeeds establishing *the one* of the soul in *The One* of the Gods, and causing our energy to become one with divine energy; according to which we are no longer ourselves, but are absorbed as it were in the Gods, abiding in divine light, and circularly comprehended by it. And this is the best end of true prayer, in order that the conversion of the soul may be conjoined with its permanency, and that every thing which proceeds from *The One* of the Gods, may again be established in *The One*, and *the light which is in us may be comprehended in the light of the Gods.*

Prayer therefore, is no small part of the whole ascent of souls. Nor is he who possesses virtue superior to the want of the good which proceeds from prayer; but on the contrary the ascent of the soul is effected through it, and together with this, piety to the Gods, which is the summit of virtue. Nor in short, ought any other to pray than he who is transcendently good, as the Athenian guest [in Plato] says. For to such a one, converse with the Gods becomes most efficacious to the attainment of a happy life. But the contrary is naturally adapted to befall the vicious.<sup>4</sup> For it is not lawful for the pure to be touched by the impure.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, it is necessary that he who generously enters on the exercise of prayer, should render the Gods propitious to him, and should excite in himself conceptions full of intellectual light. For the favor and benignity of more exalted beings, is the most effectual incentive to their communication with our natures. And it is requisite to continue without intermission in the worship of divinity. For [according to the oracle] the rapid<sup>6</sup> Gods perfect the mortal constantly employed in prayer.<sup>7</sup>

It is also necessary to observe a stable order in the performance of divine works; to exert those virtues which purify and elevate the soul from

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<sup>3</sup> § Chald. Oracl. 121, 126

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Laws* IV, 716d.

<sup>5</sup> cf. *Phaedo* 67b.

<sup>6</sup> *i. e.* The intelligible Gods.

<sup>7</sup> Chald. Oracl. fr. 140.

generation, together with faith, truth, and love;<sup>8</sup> to preserve this triad and hope of good, this immutable reception of divine light, and segregation from every other pursuit, that thus becoming *alone*, we may associate with *solitary deity*, and not endeavour to conjoin ourselves with multitude to *The One*. For he who attempts this, effects the very contrary, and separates himself from the Gods. For as it is not lawful in conjunction with non-entity to associate with being; so neither is it possible with multitude to be conjoined with *The One*.

Such therefore are the particulars which ought first to be known concerning prayer; *viz.* that the essence of it congregates and binds souls to the Gods, or rather, that it unites all secondary to primary natures. For as the great Theodorus says, *all things pray except the FIRST*.

The perfection however of prayer, beginning from more common goods, ends in divine union, and gradually accustoms the soul to divine light. But its efficacious energy both replenishes us with good, and causes our concerns to be common with those of the Gods.

With respect to the causes of prayer too, we may infer, that so far as they are *effective*, they are the efficacious powers of the Gods, converting and calling upwards the soul to the Gods themselves. But that so far as they are *final* or perfective, they are the immaculate goods of the soul, which they derive as the fruits of being established in the Gods. That so far also as they are *paradigmatical*, they are the primordial causes of beings, which proceed from *The Good*, and are united to it, according to one ineffable union. But that so far as they are *formal*, they assimilate souls to the Gods, and give perfection to the whole of their life. And that so far as they are *material*, they are the impressions or symbols inserted by the Demiurgus in the essences of souls, in order that they may be excited to a reminiscence of the Gods who produced them, and whatever else exists.

Moreover, we may likewise define the modes of prayer which are various, according to the genera and species of the Gods. For prayer is either demiurgic, or cathartic, or vivific. And the *demiurgic* is such as that which is offered for the sake of showers and winds. For the *demiurgi* are the causes of the generation of these. And the prayers of the Athenians for winds procuring serenity of weather are addressed to these Gods. But the *cathartic* prayer is that which is offered for the purpose of averting diseases originating from pestilence, and other contagious distempers; such as we have written in our temples. And the *vivific* prayer is that with which we worship the Gods, who are the causes of vivification, on account of the origin and maturity of fruits.

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<sup>8</sup> Chald. Oracl. fr. 46

Hence prayers are of a perfective nature, because they elevate us to these orders of the Gods. And he who considers such prayers in a different manner, fails in properly apprehending the nature and efficacy of prayer. But again, with reference to the things for which we pray; those prayers, which regard the salvation of the soul; obtain the first place; those which pertain to the good temperament of the body, the second; and those rank in the third place, which are offered for the sake of external concerns. And lastly, with respect to the division of the times in which we offer up prayers, it is either according to the seasons of the year, or the centres of the solar revolution; or we establish multiform prayers according to other such-like conceptions.

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II. Prayers are not to be directed to the Gods, as if they were passive, and could be moved by supplications: for the divine irradiation which takes place through the exercise of prayer, operates spontaneously, and is far remote from all material attraction; since it becomes apparent through divine energy and perfection; and as much excels the voluntary motion of our nature, as the divine will of *The Good* surpasses our election.

Through this volition, the Gods, who are perfectly benevolent and merciful, pour their light without any parsimony on the supplicating priests, whose souls they call upwards to their own divine natures; impart to them a union with themselves, and accustom their souls, even while bound in body, to separate themselves from its dark embrace, and to be led back by an ineffable energy to their eternal and intelligible original.

Indeed it is evident that the safety of the soul depends on such divine operations. For *while the soul contemplates divine visions, it acquires another life, employs a different energy, and may be considered, with the greatest propriety, as no longer ranking in the order of man.* For it often lays aside its own proper life, and changes it for the most blessed energy of the Gods. But if an ascent to the Gods, through the ministry of prayer, confers on the priests purity from passion, freedom from the bonds of generation, and a union with a divine principle, how can there be any thing passive in the efficacy of prayer? For invocation does not draw down the pure and impassive Gods to us who are passive and impure; but, on the contrary, renders us who are become through generation impure and passive, immutable and pure.

But neither do invocations conjoin, through passion, the priests with the Divinities, but afford an indissoluble communion of connection, through that

friendship which binds all things in union and consent. Nor do invocations incline the intellect of the Gods towards men, as the term seems to imply; but, according to the decisions of truth, they render the will of men properly disposed to receive the participations of the Gods; leading it upwards, and connecting it with the Divinities by the sweetest and most alluring persuasion. And on this account the sacred names of the Gods, and other divine symbols, from their anagogic nature, are able to connect invocations with the Gods themselves.

That which in our nature is divine, intellectual, and one, or (as you may be willing to call it) intelligible, is perfectly excited by prayer from its dormant state; and when excited, vehemently seeks that which is similar to itself, and becomes copulated to its own perfection.

But if it should seem incredible that incorporeal natures can be capable of hearing sounds, and it is urged, that for this purpose the sense of hearing is requisite, that they may understand our supplications; such objectors are unacquainted with the excellency of primary causes, which consists in both knowing and comprehending in themselves at once the universality of things.

The Gods, therefore, do not receive prayers in themselves through any corporeal powers or organs, but rather contain in themselves the effects of pious invocations; and especially of such as though sacred cultivation are consecrated and united to the Gods: for, in this case, a divine nature is evidently present with itself, and does not apprehend the conceptions of prayers as different from its own.

Nor are supplications to be considered as foreign from the purity of intellect: but since the Gods excel us both in power, purity, and all other advantages, we shall act in the most opportune manner, by invoking them with the most vehement supplications. For a consciousness of our own nothingness, when we compare ourselves with the Gods, naturally leads us to the exercise of prayer. But through the benefits resulting from supplication we are in a short time brought back to the object of supplication; acquire its similitude from intimate converse; and gradually obtain divine perfection, instead of our own imbecility and imperfection.

Indeed he who considers, that sacred prayers are sent to men from the Gods themselves; that they are certain symbols of the divine natures; and that they are only known to the Gods, with whom in a certain respect they possess an equal power; I say, he who considers all this, cannot any longer believe that supplications are of a sensible nature, and that they are not very justly

esteemed intellectual and divine: and must acknowledge it to be impossible that any passion should belong to things the purity of which the most worthy manners of men cannot easily equal.

Nor ought we to be disturbed by the objection which urges, that material things are frequently offered in supplications; and this as if the Gods possessed a sensitive and animal nature. For, indeed, if the offering consisted solely of corporeal and composite powers, and such as are only accommodated to organical purposes, the objection would have some weight: but since they participate of incorporeal forms, certain proportions, and more simple measures; in this alone the correspondence and connection of offerings with the Gods ought to be regarded. For, whenever any affinity of similitude is present, whether greater or less, it is sufficient to the connection of which we are now discoursing: since *there is nothing which approaches to a kindred alliance with the Gods, though in the smallest degree, to which the Gods are not immediately present and united.*

A connection, therefore, as much as is possible, subsists between prayers and the Gods: at the same time prayers do not regard the Divinities as if they were of a sensitive or animal nature; but they consider them as they are in reality, and according to the divine forms which their essences contain.

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. . . . Ἀλλ' ἔρχεσθ' ἐπ' ἔργον  
Θεοῖσιν ἐπευξάμενος τελεσαι.

*i.e.* "Betake yourself to the work, having implored the Gods to bring it to perfection."

III. The verse briefly describes all that contributes to the acquisition of good, *viz.* the self-moved nature of the soul, and the co-operation of Divinity. For, though the election of things beautiful<sup>9</sup> is in our power, yet, as we possess our freedom of the will from Divinity, we are perfectly indigent of his co-operating with and perfecting the things which we have chosen.

For our endeavour appears to be similar to a hand extended to the reception of things beautiful; but that which is imparted by Divinity is the supplier and the fountain of the gift of good. And the former, indeed, is naturally adapted

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<sup>9</sup> By things beautiful, with Platonic writers, every thing excellent and good is included. – Taylor

to discover things beautiful; but the latter to unfold them to him by whom they are rightly explored. But prayer is the medium between two boundaries, *viz.* between investigation by us, and that which is imparted by Divinity, properly adhering to the cause which leads us into existence, and perfects us in well-being. For how can any one receive well-being unless Divinity imparts it? And how can Divinity, who is naturally adapted to give, give to him who does not ask, though his impulses arise from the freedom of his will?

That we may not, therefore, pray only in words, but may also corroborate this by deeds; and that we may not confide only in our own energy, but may also beseech Divinity to co-operate with our deeds, and may conjoin prayer to action, as form to matter; and, in short, that we may pray for what we do, and do that for which we pray, the verse conjoining these two, says, "Betake yourself to the work, having implored the Gods to bring it to perfection."

For neither is it proper alone to engage with alacrity in beautiful actions, as if it were in our power to perform them with rectitude, without the co-operation of Divinity; nor yet should we be satisfied with the words of mere prayer while we contribute nothing to the acquisition of the things which we request. For thus we shall either pursue atheistical virtue (if I may be allowed so to speak) or unenergetic prayer; of which the former, being deprived of Divinity, takes away the essence of virtue; and the latter, being sluggish, dissolves the efficacy of prayer. For how can any thing be beautiful which is not performed according to the divine rule? And how is it possible that what is done according to this should not entirely require the co-operation of Divinity to its subsistence? For virtue is the image of Divinity in the rational soul; but every image requires its paradigm, in order to its generation, nor is that which it possesses sufficient, unless it looks to that from the similitude to which it possesses the beautiful.

It is proper, therefore, that those should pray who hasten to energetic virtue, and having prayed, that they should endeavour to possess it. It is likewise requisite that they should do this, looking to that which is divine and splendid, and should extend themselves to philosophy, adhering at the same time in a becoming manner to the first cause of good. For that tetractys,<sup>10</sup> the fountain of perennial nature, is not only the eternal cause of being to all things, but likewise of well-being, expanding proper good through the whole world, like undecaying and intellectual light.

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<sup>10</sup> This *tetractys* which is the same as the *Phanes* of Orpheus, and the *αὐτοζῶον*, or *animal itself*, of Plato, first subsists at the extremity of the intelligible order, and is thence participated by Jupiter, the fabricator of the universe. See the Introduction to the *Timæus*. - Taylor.

But *the soul, when she properly adheres to this light, and purifies herself like an eye to acuteness of vision, by an attention to things beautiful, is excited to prayer*; and again, from the plenitude of prayer she extends her endeavours, conjoining actions to words, and by divine conferences giving stability to worthy deeds. And discovering some things, and being illuminated in others, she endeavours to effect what she prays for, and prays for that which she endeavours to effect. And such indeed is the union of endeavour and prayer.

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I. *Proclus, Commentary on The Timaeus of Plato, II, 64D-66A (1, 209-212)*

II. *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries, I, xii & xv, 46 ff.*

III. *Hierocles, Commentary on The Golden Verses, XXI,*

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