

## Non-corporeal Beings in Iamblichus' Chaldean Doctrine and in Mesopotamia

### *Introduction: the correspondence between Porphyry and Iamblichus*

In the 3rd century AD schools of thought bringing deeply innovative conceptions were stirring the religious and philosophical *milieu*. At that time the so-called “*Pagan Bible*”, the *Oracula Chaldaica* (2nd c. AD) had already appeared, after the rabbi from Alexandria, Philo<sup>1</sup>, had disclosed interpretative perspectives of great momentum by reading the Old Testament in the light of the Platonic thought. Philo's writings may be taken as a starting point of a productive flow of studies aimed at reevaluating ancient religious traditions through the glass of the current philosophic thought. Plotinus<sup>2</sup> had just died. He, who presented himself as a mere exegete of Plato's philosophy, proposed such a deep and exhaustive metaphysic system constituting the ground to future speculations. At the same time most of the treaties of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were composed, while the Gnostic tradition was flourishing. The rich *corpora* of the “Magical Papyri” and of the alchemic and astrologic texts provide evidence for a fervor of religious and salvific quest unparalleled in other historical periods.

I would need to highlight that such flourishing was circumscribed to the Hellenistic and Imperial Near East. I have just introduced Philo, while Plotinus was born in Egypt and studied in Alexandria, the two Julians – the authors of the *Oracula Chaldaica* – were Syrians, Porphyry<sup>3</sup> was a Phoenician from Tyre, and Iamblichus<sup>4</sup> was also born in Syria, originating from an old family of priest-kings in Emesa<sup>5</sup>; Photius attests that he had knowledge of Babylonian culture<sup>6</sup>. All these philosophers were Platonists, but all lived in an area where the “Oriental religions” were still practiced.

<sup>1</sup> Alexandria of Egypt c. 20 AD. - 50 AD.

<sup>2</sup> Lykopolis, Egypt 205 - Minturno 270 AD.

<sup>3</sup> Tyre 233/234 d. C. - Rome 305 AD.

<sup>4</sup> Calcis, Syria, c. 245 - c. 325 AD.

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Clarke - J.M. Dillon - J.P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2003, p. XIX.

<sup>6</sup> MELAMMU DATA-BASE, [www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/home/home.php](http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/home/home.php) “The Greek novelist Iamblichus absorbed Babylonian learning”.

On the background of these cultural events, a decisive struggle took place between the rising Christianity and the waning paganism, which was nonetheless able to generate the brightest and most vivid synthesis of those very traditions on which its roots were bedded. To provide just an example, it is enough to read Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, where some verses of Homer's *Odyssey* are interpreted under the point of view of platonic metaphysic and cosmology.

It was the philosopher Porphyry, a former Plotinus' pupil, to address the Egyptian priest Anebo asking him explanations of systematic doubts on both the divine world and the real possibility to reach union with the gods by means of the theurgic art. As a matter of facts, Porphyry did not refuse to celebrate theurgic rituals *tout court*, but for purification purposes only, because, following his master's teaching, he believed that the philosophical speculation was the only means to acquire Knowledge. His master Plotinus, so Porphyry himself related in his master's biography, reached more than once the divine extasis by meditating on the One.

It was Abamon (*nom de plume* of Iamblichus, whose pupil was Anebo) who answered Porphyry. This last one had been, in the past, master of Iamblichus himself. Almost all scholars identify Abamon with Iamblichus; for this reason I will use the true name of the author in this paper, instead of Abamon.

Iamblichus' role was pivotal in the frame of the fight of that period, because he conjugated the metaphysical Neo-Platonist system with the theologies of the religious systems named "heathen" or "polytheistic", by identifying both Greek and Oriental divinities with hypostases of the One. The long answering letter, where Abamon considers point by point Porphyry's objections, forms a book, which Marsilio Ficino<sup>7</sup>, in translating it into Latin, titled *De mysteriis Ægyptiorum*, by which it is known to us<sup>8</sup>.

It is noteworthy that in the earlier centuries of the Common Era the cultural heritage of cuneiform belles-lettres was not yet extinguished, if, as Geller thinks<sup>9</sup>, in the great temple complexes cuneiform texts were still copied, down to the beginning of the Sasanian Age.

The possibility of communications between cuneiform Mesopotamia and the Syrian *milieu* of the *Oracula Chaldaica*, and later of Iamblichus, cannot be ruled out, and the scientific research found evidence for it.

<sup>7</sup> Figline (Florence) 1433 - Florence 1499.

<sup>8</sup> I took as reference edition: E.C. Clarke - J.M. Dillon - J.P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*, cit. Passages are quoted by: a) book in Roman numerals, b) paragraph, c) pages of Parthey's edition.

<sup>9</sup> M.J. Geller, *The Last Wedge*, in «Zeitschrift für Assyriologie» 87(1997), pp. 43-95.

### 1. *The Chaldean / Assyrian Tradition*

The adjectives “Chaldean” or “Assyrian” frequently occur in the documentation of Late Antiquity; in my opinion, it is not to be excluded that the terms “*Chaldei*” and “*Assyrii*”, in Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, may also signify their original geographic designation, besides the recognised restrictive meaning of a category of persons who roamed through the Empire exerting magic or astrological arts<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, the passage *De Mys.* IX, 4, 278, where Iamblichus asserts: «... the observation of celestial phenomena preserved down the ages by both the Chaldean and ourselves» (i.e. The Egyptians), may be considered a punctual reference to the cuneiform documentation.

Iamblichus, even in character of an Egyptian priest, places the Chaldeans / Assyrians<sup>11</sup> at the source of the knowledge of Divine inside a tripartite system, which Broze – van Liefferringe had clearly outlined, where the Chaldeans are taken as forerunners of the “Egyptian prophets” and of the “Hellenic philosophers”<sup>12</sup>. The prominence of the Chaldean / Assyrian doctrine should have appeared in first place in Marsilio Ficino’s title, before “*Aegyptiorum*”<sup>13</sup>.

#### 2.a *Anonymity of the authors*

Iamblichus relates on some features which accurately describe the modality of handing down the doctrine, as we learn from cuneiform sources.

First, we need consider the anonymity of the authors, even if it is certainly not an exclusive distinctive aspect of the cuneiform civilization.

Iamblichus deals with this topic at the beginning of his treatise, *De Mys.* I, 1, 1-5, when he states that the tradition of the sacred texts, handed down by Hermes by way of verbal communication, of priestly activity and of study of the doctrine, is identical everywhere, even if different masters teach it.

<sup>10</sup> Most recently P. Mander. *Hekate’s Roots in the Sumerian-Babylonian Pantheon According to the Chaldean Oracles*, in G. Sfameni Gasparro (ed.), *Religion in the History of Europe. Proceedings of the 9th European Association for the Study of Religions*, Annual Conference, Messina 14-17 settembre 2009 (in print), with previous bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> On the proposal that the two terms are not full synonyms, but had peculiar senses, see M. Broze - C. van Liefferringe *Jamblique, Les mystères d’Égypte. Réponse d’Abamon à la Lettre de Porphyre à Anébon, Traduction nouvelle et commentaire*, Editions Ousia, Bruxelles 2009, p. 20 fn 10 with bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> M. Broze - C. van Liefferringe *Jamblique*, cit., p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> The complete Ficino’s title is: *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldæorum, Assyriorum* (published by Aldus Manutius, Venice 1497 and again by Ionannes Tornæsium, Lugduni [Lyon] 1552).

The above mentioned paragraph of *De Mys.* and the following one legitimate a high Egyptian priest, Abamon, a character in the literary fiction, to speak on the Divine. From these two first paragraphs descends the value of the treatise / letter in its entirety, because they express, with few but incisive words, what are the sources of knowledge of Sacred, and how they are related to each other, as Broze – van Liefferringe had clearly outlined in the above quoted passage.

So, in spite of occasional divergences due to the peculiarities of single schools (Chaldaic, Egyptian, Greek) that Iamblichus assertively recalls at the incipit of *De Mys.*, the identity of the Tradition would make the mention of the name of a given author misleading for any written composition of religious nature, since a true author cannot exist, being Hermes the only author.

At paragraph *De Mys.* 1, 2, 5-7 Iamblichus again states that the «ancestral Assyrian doctrine»<sup>14</sup> is the earliest source of knowledge of the Divine. Obviously in the present contest the reference is rather to the *Oracula Chaldaica*, a work whose tight connections with *De Mys.* have been illustrated by Cremer<sup>15</sup>, than to the cuneiform documentation. Anyway, that poem of the II c. AD of Syrian *milieu*, ascribed to the two Julians, keeps memory of that ancient tradition, as I pointed out pursuing the line of research I started with the comparison of Hekate in the *Oracula Chaldaica* and Nin-hursanga in *Lugal-e*<sup>16</sup>.

Lambert studied in two different moments this question<sup>17</sup> and published a text named *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, where exorcistic, divination and mythological Mesopotamian compositions were said to have been dictated by the mouth of the god Ea himself or of the sages and masters (*apkallū* and *ummanū*) of the following centuries. In both cases the knowledge of the Divine is handed down by important divinities (Hermes / Thoth – Ea) or by qualified individuals (I will deal later with these characters). These latter ones are to be considered, because of their function of heralds of divine ascendant, as carrying out that priestly function, which Iamblichus refers to Hermes as one of the three ways of communication of the Sacred.

<sup>14</sup> ... τὰ Ἀσσυρίων πάτρια δόγματα ...

<sup>15</sup> F.W. Cremer, *Die Chaldäischen Orakel und Jamblich de mysteriis*, A. Hain, Meisenheim am Glan 1969.

<sup>16</sup> P. Mander, *Hekate's Roots*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> W.G. Lambert, *Ancestors, Authors and Canonicity*, in «Journal of Cuneiform Studies» 11(1957), pp. 1-14; id., *A Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, in «Journal of Cuneiform Studies» 16(1962), pp. 59-77.

In this regard we need to consider another text on the handing down of the divinatory science *via* the primeval king Enmeduranki, a text that has also been published by Lambert<sup>18</sup>.

According to Iamblichus the mantic has divine origin as well: in *De Mys.* III, 1, 99-102 he declares that it directly descends from heaven and nothing of human is to be found there.

Three more details in Iamblichus' work deserve attention with regard to bequeathing the Tradition.

#### 1.a.1 *Gradual blunting of the knowledge of the Divine*

1. *De Mys.* IX, 4, 277-278 explicitly states that the knowledge of the Divine has been and still is gradually blunting with time passing by since Hermes' revelation. Answering Porphyry's objections on reliability of oracular responses, Iamblichus resumes what he had already affirmed in *De Mys.* I about the transmission of the sacred doctrines from the gods to humanity; but now he adds that continuous manumissions in human events had them flawed. We come across this same topic in Mesopotamia, not only in a famous passage of the *Poem of Erra*, when Marduk complains that there are no more masters able to infuse divinity in a statue, but elsewhere in the cuneiform belletrist *corpus*<sup>19</sup>.

#### 1.a.2 *Necessity of a liturgical language and the problem of coercion of the gods*

2. In two passages Iamblichus speaks about the need of a liturgical language, and in particular, he mentions the Chaldeans, whose «language with which they address the gods only» has been kept intact (*De Mys.* VI, 7, 247-249)<sup>20</sup>.

It is relevant that this statement occurs in a context dealing with that form of impiety consisting of trying to insult or coerce the gods. This topic is very problematic, as shown by the reference to it by Augustine of Hippo in *De civitate Dei* X, where Porphyry's opinions on theurgy are

<sup>18</sup> W.G. Lambert, *Enmeduranki and Related Matters*, in «Journal of Cuneiform Studies» 21(1967), pp. 126-138.

<sup>19</sup> E. Reiner, *The Etiological Myth of the "Seven Sages"*, in «Orientalia» 30(1961), p. 9; S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (State Archive of Assyria 10), Helsinki University Press, Helsinki 1993, p. xviii; B. Obed, *Apkalu and ummanu*, in «Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires» 69(1996/2), p. 60; P. Mander, *Espace et temps dans la pensée religieuse suméro-babylonienne*, in J. Ries - N. Spineto (eds.), *Le Temp et la destinée humaine* (Homo religiosus – Série II), Brepols, Turnhout Belgium 2007, pp. 71-87.

<sup>20</sup> Trad. C. Moreschini, *Giamblico, I Misteri degli Egiziani*, Rizzoli, Milano 2003, p. 391. E.C. Clarke - J.M. Dillon - J.P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*, cit., p. 289: «... among the Chaldean, by whom language used for the gods alone is preserved in its purity ...».

quoted. Augustine in this regard relates on an accident, which happened just to a Chaldean theurgist, whose benevolent daemons were forced to leave unsatisfied his pious request, because of a warlock's interference.

This topic had already been treated by Iamblichus in *De Mys.* iv, 1-3 180-186, when he answered Porphyry's objection on the possibility to coerce the gods, and again in *De Mys.* vi, 5-7, 245-249.

To explain the matter, Iamblichus distinguishes three classes of non corporeal entities. The first one includes those who reply for benevolence to the prayers, i. e. the gods. The intermediate entities belong to the second one, their intervention consists in inspiring the right advice; while in the third one are to be found the entities who are not provided of intellect (named: *pneumata*), who are able to accomplish only a single task, as a tool like a knife, which can only cut, as Iamblichus himself explains. Man can give orders to these latter ones only, Iamblichus clarifies, because he is overwhelming them for capacity of thinking. Therefore, Iamblichus concludes, the union with the divine intellect is the result of the irradiation of the divine power and not of human action.

We come across the same problem in a scarcely documented aspect of Sumerian mythology.

At the beginning of the 60s two texts were published, which provided the few information we have on primeval sages, whose tally was there given<sup>21</sup>.

Both the texts relate about supposed behaviour of *hybris* with respect to the gods. The interpretation of the passages is opposite for Reiner and van Dijk, the editors of the texts. The latter, against Reiner's opinion, ruled out the possibility of this kind of impious acts not relying on the grammar, which is ambiguously expressed, but because of the discrepancy of this concept with the general characteristics of the Sumerian religion<sup>22</sup>. Reiner translated indeed "*Nunpiriggaldim, the apkallu of Enmerkar, who brought down Ištar from heaven into Eanna*", while van Dijk proposed "*... den Inanna vom Himmel ins E-anna hat hinabsteigen lassen*".

Still, a short mythological poem informs us about an act of this kind, perpetrated by the first sage, Adapa, who, in a release of anger, broke the wings of the South Wind by means of an incantation.

Elsewhere I advanced the hypothesis that it was exactly abuses of their knowledge by the sages that sparked the decadence mentioned above or gave the sign of it. Jacobsen's interpretation of the *mīs pī* ritual, according to which it was the gods who wanted to descend inside their statue, being

<sup>21</sup> E. Reiner, *The Etiological Myth of the "Seven Sages"*, cit.; J. van Dijk, *ii. Die Tontafeln aus dem rēš-Heiligtum*, in *Vorläufiger Bericht über die von der Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft, 18* (Uruk vorläufiger Berichte 18), De Gruyter, Berlin 1962, pp. 44-5.

<sup>22</sup> J. van Dijk, *ii. Die Tontafeln aus dem rēš-Heiligtum*, cit., p. 49 fn. 120.

in no way compelled by the ritual operations men celebrated, is, in my opinion, very authoritative<sup>23</sup>.

Van Dijk's and Jacobsen's interpretations agree with Iamblichus, who censures even Homer himself on this regard, because he believes that Homer's verse «the gods may be turned (by prayer)» was impious (*De Mys.* VIII, 8, 271-272).

It seems that there was neither transparency nor unambiguousness of opinions on this topic neither in Babylon nor in Greece nor among the Platonists in Late Antiquity.

The necessity to keep a sacred language is confirmed by Iamblichus later on (*De Mys.* VII, 4, 254-256), when he affirms that particular languages, as Chaldean and Egyptian, have been created by the gods and given to humanity in order to address the gods themselves, hence the need to keep “barbarian names” occurring in those languages (cf. *De Mys.* VI, 6, 247-249).

Both passages may refer to the liturgical and sacral use of Sumerian, which was still protracted in the earliest centuries of the Common Age<sup>24</sup>.

### 1.a.3 “Abracadabra” Language

3. Both passages quoted in the preceding paragraph, the former in particular, may validate texts either liturgical or in any way related to the Divine, drawn in “abracadabra language” (*De Mys.* VII, 4, 254-256). Iamblichus affirms that words, which are incomprehensible to us – and this makes the difference with everyday language we use in the world of the becoming – have a symbolic value that relates them directly to the world of the gods. This phenomenon is not peculiar of Mesopotamia only, where exorcisms written in this way have been found – let us think of KAR 4!<sup>25</sup> –, but words of this kind occur also elsewhere, as, for example, in the magical papyri.

This third point is consonant with the preceding one, if both refer to experiences known from cuneiform texts.

The topic of the “language of the gods” for men, that now has gone lost, is documented in the Sumerian epos, in the poem “*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*”, where the primeval event which led to the diversification of the languages because of Enki (Nudimud) was told. The primeval one was common to everybody and by means of it men addressed the god Enlil.

<sup>23</sup> T. Jacobsen, *The Graven Image*, in P.D. Miller *et alii* (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia PA 1987, pp. 15-32, in particular p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> M.J. Geller, *The Last Wedge*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> E. Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts. Erster Band*, Hinrichs, Leipzig 1919.

#### 1.a.4 *Conclusions on the doctrinal transmission*

The circumstantiated affinities surveyed in this paragraph 1 advocate plausibility to Iamblichus' statements on the existence of a Chaldean or Assyrian "doctrine", which hints not only and mainly to the one disclosed in the *Oracula Chaldaica*, the greatest part of which is lost to us, but to reflections and reminiscences of the Mesopotamian religious thought, as known to us by cuneiform tablets, so confirming the other parallel affinity, mentioned above, among the latter and the *Oracula Chaldaica* themselves.

#### 2. *Nature of non corporeal entities*

I will not deal in the present paper with the exposition and history of the Platonic doctrine of the daemon, for which I refer to the specialized bibliography: there is no doubt that Iamblichus is placed in the Platonic stream, therefore that tradition is paramount in the formation of his thought. I will limit myself to outline those features which reflect concepts present in Mesopotamian cuneiform texts.

##### 2.a. *Physicality of the gods and the cosmic net*

The first question concerns the physical being of the gods: to this Porphyry's objection – that today scholars made their own by limiting their perspective to the mere anthropomorphic aspect of the divinities – Iamblichus very clearly answers in *De Mys.* I, 9, 29-33.

Porphyry was questioning about localizing the gods and about the reasons of their unlimited power in spite of being circumscribed in confined corporeal realities. Iamblichus, in the character of the old priest Abamon, begins from the top, by explaining the constituting principle of the cosmos. He says that the world of becoming, of the generation, is the effect of the divine celestial cause which, as light does, irradiates the divisible universe, the one of the single entities, and, by enlightening joins them to itself. In this way the cosmos is made turn around in imitation of the sky, and so the single entities are connected to each other. Their connections creates a concord relation of everything with all. This typically Platonic conception might nonetheless mirror aspects of the Mesopotamian cosmology or mythology, where an analogous connection of the single parts with all is to be found in more than one text.

Before considering them, it is necessary to better understand what Iamblichus states. In *De Mys.* III, 27, 164-167, speaking about the divine origin of the mantic, Iamblichus affirms that an imprinting of divine essence is to be found in every single thing of the world, and therefore it is



possible to acquire knowledge of it. From this principle descends that the mantic has celestial origins and may not in any way be derived from whatever aspect of the world of the becoming (I already mentioned the comparison with the Enmeduranki text, that proclaims the same conception).

This idea is resumed more soundly in *De Mys.* v, 7, 207-208, where it is said that the universe is a sole living being, the parts of which, even if remote, are brought together by sympathetic or antipathetic links. Here Iamblichus is no more dealing with divination, but with the art of rituals and of sacrifices in particular. Life is possible because of the interaction of cosmic elements, each of them being allotted to a non corporeal power. The topic is still continued a little further, in *De Mys.* v, 20, 227-228, where he tells how the visible (or: cosmic) gods are linked by the principle of "like to like". A little further, in v, 23, 232-234, Iamblichus clarifies the possibility to shape divine statues or talismans by means of the overflowing divine power, hidden even in the lowest matter. From this descends the opportunity to urge the gods to manifest by employing appropriate techniques with the objects associated to the invoked god.

Elsewhere I have dealt with the Mesopotamian concept of "cosmic net"<sup>26</sup>, as it is explicitly documented in texts from different periods (the most ancient comes from III millennium Lagash<sup>27</sup>; a later one has recently been published by Heeßel)<sup>28</sup> which associate entities and objects of different nature. It is this concept to provide a basis for the arts of ritual and mantic to be effective. Under this aspect, Iamblichus explains in Platonic terms a cosmology which is coincident with the one known from cuneiform texts.

## 2.b. Stars and divinities

Reiner exposed thorough the relation between divinities and celestial bodies<sup>29</sup>. Stars play the intermediary role with the gods, and constitute in this way nodal points in the "cosmic net", through which they convey

<sup>26</sup> P. Mander, *La religione dell'antica Mesopotamia* (Quality Paperbacks 290), Carocci, Roma 2009, pp. 46-49; Id., *Divinazione e magia cerimoniale nelle civiltà mesopotamiche*, in G.M. Cazzaniga (ed.), *Esoterismo* (Storia d'Italia. Annali 25), Einaudi, Torino 2010, pp. 5-6, 15-23.

<sup>27</sup> R.D. Biggs, *Pre-Sargonic Riddles from Lagash*, in «Journal of Near Eastern Studies» 32(1973), pp. 26-33.

<sup>28</sup> N.P. Heeßel, *Stein, Pflanze und Holz. Ein neuer Text zur 'medizinischen Astrologie'*, in «Orientalia» 74(2005), pp. 1-22.

<sup>29</sup> E. Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society NS 85/4), American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia 1995, pp. 3-9; cf. P. Steinkeller, *Of Stars and Men: The Conceptual and Mythological Setup of Babylonian Extispicy*, in A. Gianto (ed.), *Biblical and Oriental Essays in Memory of William L. Moran*, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, Roma 2005, p. 20 and A. Zgoll, *Traum und Welterleben im antiken Mesopotamien* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament Band 333), Ugarit-Verlag, Münster 2006, p. 224.

the celestial power and radiate a direct but not necessarily beneficial influence.

The relation between divinity and its relative celestial body, in the way it is outlined in Mesopotamia, finds its match in *De Mys*.

Iamblichus provides accurate explanations on celestial bodies, because Porphyry asked for it. In *De Mys*. I, 8, 24-29 he enunciates the general principles of the relationships between non corporeal beings and corporeal realities in the world of the becoming. The incorporeal is not bound to the spatial dimension, which is peculiar of the corporeal world, and can therefore be anywhere. In a figurative sense the incorporeal entity wraps the body it has chosen as its instrument: a concept that is repeated in *De Mys*. I, 17, 50-52, where it is explicitly said that stars are bodies included in the divine vital forces. Answering a further question by Porphyry about the localization of the gods, in *De Mys*. I, 9, 29-33, Iamblichus states that it is not true that the gods are in heaven, but that everything is full of them. He then clarifies this concept with the example of the light that illuminates everything while still remaining distinct from what it illuminates.

The problem of the localization of divinities, in the history of Assyriological thought was risen in several occasions, and, in particular, was introduced with regard of the presence in the sky, in the poem of Adapa, of two ctonic gods, guardians of the netherworld gates, namely Dumuzi and (Nin-)Gizida. It was solved by Lambert<sup>30</sup>, who indicated a text where both the same divinities were present in form of constellations in the sky, and, in the historic-religious field, by Bianchi<sup>31</sup>, who highlighted how the divine world (and the netherworld as well) is a different world from the one of the "earth on which man lives".

But it is the distinction between hypercosmic and cosmic gods that suggests a meaningful reference to the Mesopotamian thought. The passage is *De Mys*. I, 19, 57-58, where the stars are taken as a subclass of the divine world, because they are incorporeal but visible, while the gods do not possess a body and are purely intelligible. A topic treated again in *De Mys*. V, 17, 222-223 and VIII, 8, 271-272. *De Mys*. VIII, 2, 261-262 presents a classification of different typologies of divinities, either hyper- or cosmic, and in the following paragraph, different Egyptian mythological systems are discussed in the light of a philosophical interpretation. This discussion may be considered paradigmatic of the preceding passage *De*

<sup>30</sup> W.G. Lambert, *A New Babylonian Descent to the Netherworld*, in T. Abusch - J. Huehnergard - P. Steinkeller (eds.), *Lingering over Words. Studies in the Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of W. L. Moran* (Harvard Semitic Studies 37), Scholars Press, Atlanta 1990, pp. 296-297.

<sup>31</sup> U. Bianchi, *Il destino dell'uomo nella letteratura mesopotamica. Un esempio: Adapa*, in M. Mele (ed.), *Gli Assiri*, De Luca, Roma 1981, p. 40.

*Mys.* I, 15, 45-49, where Iamblichus, still answering Porphyry's questions, highlights the importance of prayers. The passage has a philosophical pattern and provides the interpretation of the figurative language of myths. The gods are the Intellect ( $\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\varsigma$ ), first hypostasis of Being, intellect *in potentia*, superior to intellect *in actu*. The prayer can elevate the divine part closed into man, because it is similar to the divinities. These passages are relevant to detect the relationship Iamblichus – with others thinkers before and after him – draws between philosophical speculation of Platonic matrix and a mythological system. The sequence from the One to multiplicity is unified by the Supreme Principle, who drew matter out from essence. With the matter he took the Demiurge made first the celestial spheres and afterwards the corruptible bodies (again *De Mys.* VIII, 3, 263-265).

The relationship between Enlil and Enki might be compared to this conception, where Enlil is the endower of life and unifies all the cosmos under his rule, while Enki's task is the demiurgic action, which is represented by the cosmic order. The hypercosmic gods are those who lead the circular motion of the cosmic gods. Either the intelligible gods or the cosmic gods (i. e. the stars) proceed from the One and constitute a unity which is referred to the One, because they are levels of this proceeding: *Hen kai pan*, a sentence which became an epigraph of schools of thought through the ages, up to modern times.

In ancient Mesopotamia the vault of the sky was divided in three paths, each allotted to a great god: Anu, Enlil and Ea, and all the stars were included in them<sup>32</sup>. The three great gods are therefore beyond the visibility of the stars, and they are not as a matter of fact, represented in an astral form<sup>33</sup>. When we consider the position of these great gods with respect to minor divinities, the Neo-platonic classification of "hypercosmic" and "cosmic" constitutes only the rendering, in abstract terminology, of the same idea which in Mesopotamia is meant in figurative terms. The greater divinities (An, Enlil, Ninhursanga and Enki) are characterized by invisibility (that corresponds, in the figurative language, to the hypercosmic state), while the subsequent generation is that of the gods of light.<sup>34</sup> The Moon-god Nanna, a both visible and invisible aster, after its phases, constitutes the bridge among the two generations<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> F. Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> E. Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, in the Mesopotamian tradition is illustrated a hierarchy of heavens, on parallel levels: see A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986, pp. 79-88 and W.G. Lambert, *Mesopotamian Creation Stories*, in M.J. Geller - M. Schipper, *Imagining Creation*, Brill, Leiden 2008, pp. 22-23.

<sup>35</sup> P. Mander, *General Considerations on Main Concerns in the Religion of Ancient Mesopotamia*, in S. Graziani (ed.), *Studi in Memoria di P.L.G. Cagni, Vol. II*, Università degli Studi

### 2.c. *The fire in the rituals*

The gods cannot be reached by matter. Iamblichus clarifies this concept in *De Mys.* v, 4, 201-205, when he ironically says that the vapour of the sacrifice cannot approach the gods, since it rises hardly five *stadia* into the air. Once again the relationship of corporeal and incorporeal is further analyzed.

The sacrifice the *atram hasīs* Utanapištim celebrates when he goes ashore comes to mind. The gods mass like flies on the vapour of that sacrifice<sup>36</sup>: a passage which seems to contradict explicitly Iamblichus' statement, had not the concept of "fly" assumed a symbolic meaning, as it has been highlighted<sup>37</sup>. The interpretation of the passage has to lead to another direction, towards a meaning other than the literal one.

In this perspective it is relevant the passage of the *De Mys.* v, 10-11, 210-215, that confirms that sacrifice can satisfy neither the gods, who have no necessities, nor the daemons, who do not have a body like the animals. The consummation with fire, this is the explanation, destroys the material bodies and by analogy expresses the desire to burn what is material in a person, raising him free towards the heaven of the gods.

I propose to draw near to this context the ritualistic practices with fire, intended to free a person that was somehow polluted: *šurpu* and *maqlû*.

### 3. *Hierarchy of the non corporeal entities*

Iamblichus' treatise provides a meticulous hierarchy of non corporeal entities, whose peculiarities are carefully considered.

*De Mys.* I, 3, 7-10 constitutes the starting point to enumerate and classify the "superior classes", as Iamblichus names the superior non corporeal entities (to be distinguished from the inferior evil ones), i.e. divinities, daemons and heroes. It must be noted that this classification is expanded in book II, where angels and two different kinds of archonts are added. These superior entities, even if they are of different essences, are not submitted to the change of the becoming, the one which transforms a child into an old man.

di Napoli "L'Orientale", Napoli 2000, pp. 636-642; Id., *La religione dell'antica Mesopotamia*, cit., pp. 69-79.

<sup>36</sup> *Atra-hasīs*, Tav. III v 34-37 = W.G. Lambert - A.R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1969, pp. 98-99.

<sup>37</sup> A.D. Kilmer, *The Symbolism of the Flies in the Mesopotamian Flood Myth and some further implications*, in F. Rochberg-Halton (ed.), *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (= Fs Reiner), American Oriental Society, New Haven 1987.

They enjoy different properties, which concern power and capability to operate. They fill the gap between the heaven of the gods and the animal world, connecting heaven with earth.

### 3.a. *Daemons and heroes*

In *De Mys.* I Iamblichus considers only divinities (divided in hypercosmic and cosmic gods, the latter receiving their form from the former ones), daemons, heroes and souls, and provides detailed descriptions of each class. It is noteworthy the opposite tendencies of daemons and heroes (*De Mys.* I, 6, 19-20): the daemons are multiplied in unity without contamination by the inferior beings they attract, while heroes, supported by the force daemons give them, act on multiplicity in an unifying function. It is difficult to refer the Greek word ἥρως to any Sumerian or Akkadian term, mainly because of the cultural valence of this concept, which is specific of the Hellenic world. Nonetheless *De Mys.* I, 5, 15-19 explains that hero is set in between gods and souls, since he exceeds souls by virtue, beauty, even if akin to them because heroes as well are compound with corporeal bodies.

Now the tradition which makes Gilgameš descended from a divine element<sup>38</sup> comes to mind: *De Mys.* II, 1, 67-68 clarifies that heroes have power to lead humanity, heading them out of the world of generation, a feature fitting perfectly to the quest for Life Gilgameš did<sup>39</sup>.

The parallels between Ninurta and Heracles are also relevant for this topic<sup>40</sup>, since the god struggles in order to unify the cosmos under his father's rule and to that purpose after his victory he puts it in order. An aspect of this Ninurta's myth pertains to my present paper. In fact, it refers to a figurative metaphysical representation (on Platonic ground, in particular centred on *Timaeus*), as it is possible to outline from the *Oracula Chaldaica* fragments<sup>41</sup>. I am referring to the pattern Enlil – Ninurta – Ninlil / Ninhursanga which parallels the two Fathers and the *Anima mundi*.

The above observed contiguity between heroes and daemons is consequence of the limitation of power of the daemons (*De Mys.* I, 20, 61-

<sup>38</sup> Most recently S.M. Maul, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos*, C.H. Beck, München 2005, pp. 155 ad 36, 48.

<sup>39</sup> P. Mander, *Gilgamesh e Dante: due itinerari alla ricerca dell'immortalità*, in V. Placella - M.A. Palumbo (eds.), *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Raffaele Sirri*, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli 1995, p. 285, where an interpretation on the concept of "Life" is offered based on a comparison with Dante's ideas.

<sup>40</sup> MELAMMU DATA-BASE, cit., "Ninurta and Heracles (1)"; P. Mander, *Augeas' Stables in Elis and the Tigris*, in «Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires» 43(2007/3), p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> P. Mander, *Hekate's Roots in the Sumerian-Babylonian Pantheon According to the Chaldean Oracles*, op. cit.

64), whom “prefectures”<sup>42</sup> are allotted to, which they administrate. This occupation is the cause of a certain inclination towards the world of the generation, which attracts them, and therefore they are in some way conatural to those whom they administrate.

These specificities remind entities of *lama*<sup>43</sup> type (among whom other kinds of protective daemons have to be included), especially those specific to places like buildings related to Holiness (temples, palaces), towns, countries (see also *De Mys.* vi, 6, 246-247). I will explore the issue of personal protection in the following paragraph. The assignation of *lama* to divinities (i.e. to their respective temple, which constitutes the sensible body of the divinity itself) stresses their intermediate function, as Iamblichus affirms (and emphasizes, about cult, in *De Mys.* v, 19, 225-226). In the present context the idea fits well that the sovereign (some ones at least) were *lama* of their own country, a concept that I should refer rather to the hero, who, not by chance, is sometimes said “flesh of the gods”<sup>44</sup>.

#### 4. *The personal god*

Iamblichus, in the above quoted *De Mys.* i, 19, 57-58, highlighting the Platonic doctrine of the unity of essence of cosmos and hypercosmos in the One, discusses also on the relationship soul – body, which depends on that conception. The union of soul and body comes into being by the action of superior entities and is going to last a definite time, since it is to be solved at the individual’s death.

Klein treated the double birth of the human person, the former birth at a divine level and the latter one by means of the parental couple, two events that are meant by two different verbs<sup>45</sup>: *du*<sub>3</sub> / *dim*<sub>2</sub>, *banû* in opposition to *tud*, *walādu* respectively for the generation by the personal god and goddess and for the corporeal one. The doctrine of the double human nature is explained in *De Mys.* viii, 6, 268-269, which ascribes to the Hermetic thought the theory of a soul descending into man from the primary intelligible (i. e. the Being), who has demiurgic power. The other soul descends from the planetary orbits and functions as a vehicle of the former one; this concept is confirmed further on in *De Mys.* x, 5, 290-292.

Oppenheim provided a synthetically overview of the system of multiple “external” souls of the human being<sup>46</sup>. In this system two elements, *ilu*

<sup>42</sup> This is the translation given by T. Taylor, *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of Egyptians, Chaldaeans, and Assyrians*, C. Wittingham, Chiswick 1821, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> D. Foxvog - W. Heimpel - A.D. Kilmer, *Lamma / Lamassu*, in «Reallexicon der Assyriologie» 6, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1980-1983, pp. 446-453.

<sup>44</sup> MELAMMU DATA-BASE, “The flesh of the gods (1)”, cit.

<sup>45</sup> J. Klein, “*Personal God*” and *Individual Prayer in Sumerian Religion*, in «Archiv für Orientforschungen – Beiheft» 19(1982), p. 296.

<sup>46</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia – Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, The Univer-

e *išturu*, constitute a couple, and the latter is related to the *šimtu*. According to Oppenheim, its translation as “destiny” or “fate” is misleading. He rather considers the meaning of this term «a disposition originating from an agency endowed with power to act and to dispose ... acting under specific conditions and for specific purposes»<sup>47</sup>. This couple of entities mirrors the one described by Iamblichus in this and the following paragraphs, that is the couple of divine and the natural soul, the latter determined in its fate by the astral configurations.

Time ago I have followed M. Eliade's interpretation on the personal god as divine element into man<sup>48</sup>, a concept that Abusch had fully clarified<sup>49</sup>.

The relationship between the personal god and the gods' wrath is outlined in *De Mys.* 1, 13, 43-44, where it is stated that gods can have no passions, and therefore no anger. In fact, it is the person who turned toward the darkness, thus losing the gods' protection. Iamblichus recommends expiatory rites to expel evil and reconcile with the gods. The same relationship is documented in Mesopotamian texts, which unequivocally show the personal god abandoning the human the gods are angry with. This topic is going to be considered in the next paragraph.

##### 5. Lack of purity and evil daemons

The cuneiform texts very seldom give explicit reasons of an evil attack. Some recurring terms are *nam-tag*, *arnu*, *šērtu*, *ner-da* and others, the general sense of which is “sin”, “fault”, “offence”; Geller studied this nomenclature<sup>50</sup>. The situation of a person who lost his purity, by which I mean the general condition of fault or sin is present in important compositions in the Sumerian and Akkadian *belles-lettres*, as “*Hymn to Nungal*”<sup>51</sup>, “*Babylonian Theodicy*”<sup>52</sup> or “*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*”<sup>53</sup>.

sity of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1964, Revised Edition Completed by E. Reiner 1977, pp. 198-206.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 201-202.

<sup>48</sup> P. Mander, *A 60 anni da “cosmologia e alchimia babilonesi”*: prospettive di ricerca, in L. Arcella et alii (eds.), *Confronto con Mircea Eliade. Archetipi mitici ed identità storica*, Jaca Book, Milano 1998, pp. 219-38; Id., *La religione dell'antica Mesopotamia*, cit., pp. 2-64.

<sup>49</sup> T. Abusch, *Ghost and God: Some observations on a Babylonian Understanding of Human Nature*, in A.I. Baumgarten - J. Assmann- G.G. Stroumsa, *Self, Soul & Body in Religious Experience*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 1998, pp. 363-383.

<sup>50</sup> M.J. Geller, *Taboo in Mesopotamia*, in «Journal of Cuneiform Studies» 42(1990), pp. 105-117.

<sup>51</sup> First edition: Å. Sjöberg, *Nungal in the Ekur*, in «Arciv für Orientforschung» 24(1973), pp. 19-46.

<sup>52</sup> W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1960 (new edition: Winona Lake [IN] 1996), pp. 63-91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 21-62.

Iamblichus in *De Mys.* III, 31, 175-180 and X, 5, 290-292 examines the nature of evil. In the mentioned passage he asserts that – according to the Chaldeans (this is indeed found in the *Oracula Chaldaica*) – evil is darkness, and as light shining forth dispels it; under an ontological point of view evil is deficiency of being. The attachment to the corporeal world determines the bright energy to flaw and the consequent breaking in of the “anti-gods” (ἀντίθεος), real *udug-hul* or *dingir-hul*, whose devastating action Iamblichus describes in vivid terms. In the latter passage, already mentioned above in § 4 apropos of the double human soul, this concept is resumed under a gnoseologic point of view, by considering oblivion and deception as deficiency of knowledge of the divine: evil as ignorance.

The “*Hymn to Nungal*” well clarifies this topic, because the person abandoned by his god, after the expiation in the goddess Nungal’s jail, has to undergo the river ordeal, which not only establishes whether that person is guilty or not, but anyway purifies him. The § 5 of the *Code of Hammurabi* (CH) renders explicit this double function by means of the verb *ebēbu* “to be pure”: a person who has been charged of sorcery, even if innocent, is anyway in a condition of pollution, were it not he would not have been wrongly charged.

If deficiency of purity is the reason for the abandonment of the personal god, as “*Hymn to Nungal*” and CH 5 induce to think, then the distance from Iamblichus’ concepts is truly minimal.

#### ABSTRACT

*Broze e Liefferinge hanno chiarito che delle tre forme di conoscenza divina delineate da Giamblico nel suo De Mysteriis Ægyptiorum, la più antica e la più autorevole è la Caldaica. Di fatto i concetti basilari del trattato di Giamblico corrispondono a idee fondamentali del pensiero religioso mesopotamico. In questo intervento ne è data la lista delle più significative di tali corrispondenze.*

*Broze and Liefferinge had recently pinpointed that the most ancient and therefore authoritative of the three forms of divine knowledge Jamblichus figured out in his De Mysteriis Ægyptiorum is the Chaldean one. As a matter of facts, the key concepts of Jamblichus’ treatise match tenets in Mesopotamian religious thought. In the present paper is given a list of the most relevant correspondences.*



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