

Letter to the Egyptian Anebo

Porphyry



Translated by Thomas Taylor, 1812

Porphyry to the Prophet Anebo greeting.

I commence my friendship towards you from the Gods and good daemons, and from those philosophic disquisitions, which have an affinity to these powers. And concerning these particulars indeed, much has been said by the Grecian philosophers; but, for the most part, the principles of their belief are derived from conjecture.

In the first place, therefore, it is granted that there are Gods, But I inquire what the peculiarities are of each of the more excellent genera, by which they are separated from each other; and whether we must say that the cause of the distinction between them is from their energies, or their passive motions, or from things that are consequent, or from their different arrangement with respect to bodies; as, for instance, from the arrangement of the Gods with reference to etherial, but of daemons to aerial, and of souls to terrestrial, bodies?

I also ask, why, since [all] the Gods dwell in the heavens, theurgists only invoke the terrestrial and subterranean Gods? Likewise, how some of the Gods are said to be aquatic and aerial? And how different Gods are allotted different places, and the parts of bodies according to circumscription, though they have an infinite, impartible, and incomprehensible power? How there will be a union of them with each other, if they are separated by the divisible circumscriptions of parts, and by the difference of places and subject bodies?

How do theologists, or those who are wise in divine concerns, represent the Gods as passive, to whom on this account, it is said, erect phalli are exhibited, and obscene language is used? But if they are impassive, the invocations of the Gods will be in vain, which announce that they can appease the anger of the divinities, and procure a reconciliation with them; and still more, what are called the necessities of the Gods, will be vain. For that which is impassive cannot be allured, nor compelled, nor necessitated. How, therefore, are many things, in sacred operations, performed to them as passive? Invocations, likewise, are made to the Gods as passive; so that not daemons only are passive, but the Gods also, conformably to what Homer says,

“And flexible are e’en the Gods themselves.”

But if we assert with certain persons, that the Gods are pure intellects, but that daemons, being psychical, participate of intellect; in a still greater degree will pure intellects be incapable of being allured, and will be unmingled with sensible natures. Supplications, however, are foreign to the purity of intellect, and therefore are not to be made to it. But the things which are offered [in sacred rites] are offered as to sensitive and psychical essences.

Are, therefore, the Gods separated from daemons, through the former being incorporeal, but the latter corporeal? If, however, the Gods are incorporeal alone, how will the sun and moon, and the visible celestials, be Gods?

How, likewise, are some of the Gods beneficent, but others malefic?

What is it that connects the Gods in the heavens that have bodies, with the incorporeal Gods?

What is it that distinguishes daemons from the visible and invisible Gods, since the visible are connected with the invisible Gods?

In what do a daemon, hero, and soul, differ from each other? Is it in essence, or in power, or in energy?

What is the indication of a God, or angel, or archangel, or daemon, or a certain archon, or soul being present? For to speak boastingly, and to exhibit a phantasm of a certain quality, is common to Gods and daemons, and to all the more excellent genera. So that the genus of Gods will in no respect be better than that of daemons.

Since the ignorance of, and deception about, divine natures is impiety and impurity, but a scientific knowledge of the Gods is holy and beneficial, the ignorance of things honourable and beautiful will be darkness, but the knowledge of them will be light. And the former, indeed, will fill men with all evils, through the want of erudition, and through audacity; but the latter will be the cause to them of every good. [I wish you, therefore, to unfold to me the truth respecting these particulars.

And, in the first place, I wish you to explain to me distinctly] what that is which is effected in divination? For we frequently obtain a knowledge of future events through dreams, when we are asleep; not being, at that time, in a tumultuous ecstasy, for the body is then quiescent; but we do not apprehend what then takes place, in the same manner as when we are awake.

But many, through enthusiasm and divine inspiration, predict future events, and are then in so wakeful a state, as even to energize according to sense, and yet they are not conscious of the state they are in, or at least, not so much as they were before.

Some also of those who suffer a mental alienation, energize enthusiastically on hearing cymbals or drums, or a certain modulated sound, such as those who are Corybantically inspired, those who are possessed by Sabazius, and those who are inspired by the mother of the Gods. But some energize enthusiastically by drinking water, as the priest of Clarius, in Colophon; others, by being seated at the mouth of a cavern, as those who prophesy at Delphi; and others by imbibing the vapour from water, as the prophetesses in Branchidse. Some also become enthusiastic by standing on characters, as those that are filled from the intromission of spirits. Others, who are conscious what they are doing in other respects, are divinely inspired according to the phan-tastic part; some, indeed, receiving darkness for a cooperator, others certain potions, but others incantations and compositions: and some energize, according to the imagination, through water; others in a wall, others in the open air, and others in the sun, or in some other of the celestial bodies. Some also establish the art of the investigation of futurity through the viscera, through birds, and through the stars.

I likewise ask concerning the mode of divination, what it is, and what the quality by which it is distinguished? All diviners, indeed, assert, that they obtain a foreknowledge of future events through Gods or daemons, and that it is not possible for any others to know that which is future, than those who are the lords of futurity. I doubt, therefore, whether divinity is so far subservient to men, as not to be averse to some becoming diviners from meal.

But, concerning the causes of divination, it is dubious whether a God, an angel, or a daemon, or some other power, is present in manifestations, or divinations, or certain other sacred energies, as is the case with those powers that are drawn down through you [priests] by the necessities with which invocation is attended.

Or does the soul assert and imagine these things, and are they, as some think, the passions of the soul, excited from small incentives?

Or is a certain mixed form of subsistence produced from our soul, and divine inspiration externally derived?

Hence it must be said, that the soul generates the power which has an imaginative perception of futurity, through motions of this kind, or that the things which are adduced from matter constitute daemons, through the powers that are inherent in them, and especially things adduced from the matter which is taken from animals.

For in sleep, when we are not employed about any thing, we sometimes obtain a knowledge of the future.

But that a passion of the soul is the cause of divination, is indicated by this, that the senses are occupied, that fumigations are introduced, and that invocations are employed; and likewise, that not all men, but those that are more simple and young, are more adapted to prediction.

The ecstasy, also, of the reasoning power is the cause of divination, as is likewise the mania which happens in diseases, or mental aberration, or a sober and vigilant condition, or suffusions of the body, or the imaginations excited by diseases, or an ambiguous state of mind, such as that which takes place between a sober condition and ecstasy, or the imaginations artificially procured by enchantment.

Nature, likewise, art, and the sympathy of things in the universe, as if they were the parts of one animal, contain premanifestations of certain things with reference to each other. And bodies are so prepared, that there is a presignification of some by others, which is clearly indicated by the works performed in predicting what is future. For those who invoke the divinities for this purpose, have about them stones and herbs, bind certain sacred bonds, which they also dissolve, open places that are shut, and change the deliberate intentions of the recipients, so as from being depraved to render them worthy, though they were before depraved. Nor are the artificers of efficacious images to be despised. For they observe the motion of the celestial bodies, and can tell from the concurrence of what star with a certain star or stars, predictions will be true or false; and also whether the things that are performed will be inanities, or significant and efficacious, though no divinity or daemon is drawn down by these images.

But there are some who suppose that there is a certain obedient genus of daemons, which is naturally fraudulent, omniform, and various, and which assumes the appearance of Gods and daemons, and the souls of the deceased; and that through these every thing which appears to be either good or evil is effected; for they are not able to contribute any thing to true goods, such as those of the soul, nor to have any knowledge of them, but they abuse, deride, and frequently impede those who are striving to be virtuous. They are likewise full of pride, and rejoice in vapours and sacrifices.

Jugglers likewise fraudulently attack us in many ways, through the ardour of the expectations which they raise.

It very much indeed perplexes me to understand how superior beings, when invoked, are commanded by those that invoke them, as if they were their inferiors; and they think it requisite that he who worships them should be just, but when they are called upon to act unjustly, they do not refuse so to act. Though the Gods, likewise, do not hear him who invokes them, if he is impure from venereal connexions, yet, at the same time, they do not refuse to lead any one to illegal venery.

[I am likewise dubious with respect to sacrifices, what utility or power they possess in the universe, and with the Gods, and on what account they are performed, appropriately indeed, to the powers who are honoured by them, but usefully to those by whom the gifts are offered.]

Why also do the interpreters of prophecies and oracles think it requisite that they should abstain from animals, lest the Gods should be polluted by the vapours arising from them; and yet the Gods are especially allured by the vapours of animals?

Why is it requisite that the inspector [who presides over sacred rites] ought not to touch a dead body, though most sacred operations are performed through dead bodies? And why, which is much more absurd than this, are threats employed and false terrors, by any casual person, not to a daemon, or some departed soul, but to the sovereign Sun himself, or to the Moon, or some one of the celestial Gods, in order to compel these divinities to speak the truth? For does not he who says that he will burst the heavens, or unfold the secrets of Isis, or point out the arcanum in the adytum, or stop Baris, or scatter the members of Osiris to Typhon, [or that he will do something else of the like

kind], does not he who says this, by thus threatening what he neither knows nor is able to effect, prove himself to be stupid in the extreme? And what abjectness does it not produce in those who, like very silly children, are possessed with such vain fear, and are terrified at such fictions? And yet Chaeremon, who was a sacred scribe, writes these things, as disseminated by the Egyptians. It is also said, that these, and things of the like kind, are of a most compulsive nature.

What also is the meaning of those mystic narrations which say that a certain divinity is unfolded into light from mire, that he is seated above the lotus, that he sails in a ship, and that he changes his forms every hour, according to the signs of the zodiac? For thus, they say, he presents himself to the view, and thus ignorantly adapt the peculiar passion of their own imagination to the God himself. But if these things are asserted symbolically, being symbols of the powers of this divinity, I request an interpretation of these symbols. For it is evident, that if these are similar to passions of the Sun, when he is eclipsed, they would be seen by all men who intently survey the God.

What also is the design of names that are without signification? and why, of such, are those that are barbaric preferred to our own? For if he who hears them looks to their signification, it is sufficient that the conception remains the same, whatever the words may be that are used. For he who is invoked is not of the Egyptian race; nor, if he was an Egyptian, does he use the Egyptian, or, in short, any human language. For either all these are the artificial contrivances of enchanter's, and veils originating from our passions, which rumour ascribes to a divine nature; or we ignorantly frame conceptions of divinity, contrary to its real mode of subsistence.

I likewise wish you to unfold to me, what the Egyptians conceive the first cause to be; whether intellect, or above intellect? whether alone, or subsisting with some other or others? whether incorporeal, or corporeal; and whether it is the same with the Demiurgus, or prior to the Demiurgus? Likewise, whether all things are from one principle, or from many principles? whether the Egyptians have a knowledge of matter, or of primary corporeal qualities; and whether they admit matter to be unbegotten, or to be generated? For Chaeremon, indeed, and others, do not think there is any thing else prior to the visible worlds; but in the beginning of their writings on this subject, admit the existence of the Gods of the Egyptians, but of no others, except what are

called the planets, the Gods that give completion to the zodiac, and such as rise together with these; and likewise, the sections into decans, and the horoscopes. They also admit the existence of what are called the powerful leaders, whose names are to be found in the calendars, together with their ministrant offices, their risings and settings, and their significations of future events. For Chaeremon saw that what those who say that the sun is the Demiurgus, and likewise what is asserted concerning Osiris and Isis, and all the sacred fables, may be resolved into the stars and the phases, occultations and risings of these, or into the increments or decrements of the moon, or into the course of the sun, or the nocturnal and diurnal hemisphere, or into the river [Nile]. And, in short, the Egyptians resolve all things into physical, and nothing into incorporeal and living essences. Most of them likewise suspend that which is in our power from the motion of the stars; and bind all things, though I know not how, with the indissoluble bonds of necessity, which they call fate. They also connect fate with the Gods; whom, nevertheless, they worship in temples and statues, and other things, as the only dissolvers of fate.

Concerning the peculiar daemon, it must be inquired how he is imparted by the lord of the geniture, and according to what kind of efflux, or life, or power, he descends from him to us? And also, whether he exists, or does not exist? And whether the invention of the lord of the geniture is impossible, or possible? For if it is possible he is happy, who having learned the scheme of his nativity, and knowing his proper daemon, becomes liberated from fate.

The canons, also, of genethliology [or prediction from the natal day] are innumerable and incomprehensible. And the knowledge of this mathematical science cannot be obtained; for there is much dissonance concerning it, and Chaeremon and many others have written against it. But the discovery of the lord, or lords, of the geniture, if there are more than one in a nativity, is nearly granted by astrologers themselves to be unattainable, and yet they say that on this the knowledge of the proper daemon depends.

Farther still, I wish to know whether the peculiar daemon rules over some one of the parts in us? For it appears to certain persons, that daemons preside over the parts of our body, so that one is the guardian of health, another of the form of the body, and another of the corporeal habits, and that there is one daemon who presides in common over all these. And again, that one daemon presides over the body, another over the soul, and another over the intellect;

and that some of them are good, but others bad.

I am also dubious whether this daemon is not a certain part of the soul, [such, for instance, as the intellectual part;] and if so, he will be happy who has a wise intellect.

I see likewise, that there is a twofold worship of the peculiar daemon; the one being the worship as of two, but the other as of three. By all men, however, the daemon is called upon by a common invocation.

I farther ask, whether there is a certain other latent way to felicity, separate from the Gods? And I am dubious whether it is requisite to look to human opinions in divine divination and theurgy? And whether the soul does not devise great things from casual circumstances? Moreover, there are certain other methods which are conversant with the prediction of future events. And, perhaps, those who possess divine divination, foresee indeed what will happen, yet are not on this account happy; for they foresee future events, but do not know how to use this knowledge properly. I wish, therefore, that you would point out to me the path to felicity, and show me in what the essence of it consists. For with us [Greeks] there is much verbal contention about it, because we form a conjecture of good from human reasonings. But by those who have devised the means of associating with beings more excellent than man, if the investigation of this subject is omitted, wisdom will be professed by them in vain; as they will only disturb a divine intellect about the discovery of a fugitive slave, or the purchase of land, or, if it should so happen, about marriage, or merchandize. And if they do not omit this subject, but assert what is most true about other things, yet say nothing that is stable and worthy of belief about felicity, in consequence of employing themselves about things that are difficult, but useless to mankind; in this case, they will not be conversant either with Gods or good daemons, but with that daemon who is called fraudulent; or, if this is not admitted, the whole will be the invention of men, and the fiction of a mortal nature.