Sacrifice to Demons in Porphyry and Origen

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the
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By
Ky Ranen Heinze
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Sacrifice to Demons in Porphyry and Origen

Ky Ranen Heinze, Ph.D.

Director: Philip Rousseau, D.Phil.

This dissertation traces the reactions of Platonists (particularly, Porphyry and Origen) to the traditional religious belief that sacrificial gifts helped to secure answers to prayers and to appease divine wrath – a system known to anthropologists as “reciprocity.” This dissertation shows that late antique pagan Platonists (in contrast to Plato) completely rejected the possibility of reciprocity with the gods – a rejection based partly on a theology of absolute impassibility, harmlessness and transcendence. This could have led them to reject traditional religion altogether, but they chose instead to reinterpret it. They proposed new functions for sacrifice and prayer to displace reciprocity and so to make these practices philosophically acceptable: for them, sacrifice was thanksgiving, aligning one’s will with the divine, or uniting oneself to it. In addition, Porphyry dismissed traditional stories of reciprocity with the gods as interactions with evil daemons. The theological ideas that led pagan Platonists to reject reciprocity led some Christian intellectuals (notably, Origen) to do the same. They reinterpreted Christian practices and scriptural passages that seemed to teach reciprocity, in order to bring them into line with philosophy. They allegorized Old Testament references to reciprocal interactions with God or explained them as interactions with the pre-incarnate, semi-passible Christ. The New Testament’s implication that the Father required the death of his Son as a ransom payment in return for the forgiveness of the world was, to them, philosophically unacceptable. Origen solved
this problem by saying that Jesus had been a ransom, not to the Father, but to the Devil. Thus, both Origen and Porphyry used evil spiritual powers to explain troublesome examples of propitiatory reciprocity in their traditions. I argue that pagan and Christian thinkers were attempting to keep their philosophical convictions without having to reject their religious stories and practices: they wanted to have their cake and eat it. By the fourth century, the theurgic reinterpretation of sacrifice reigned supreme in pagan Platonism. In contrast, Christian thinkers were turning back towards reciprocity. As a final note, I suggest that this may have given Christians a cultural advantage.
This dissertation by Ky Ranen Heinze fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Early Christian Studies approved by Philip Rousseau, D.Phil., as Director, and by Robin Darling Young, Ph.D., and J. Rebecca Lyman, D.Phil. as Readers.

Philip Rousseau, D.Phil., Director

Robin Darling Young, Ph.D., Reader

J. Rebecca Lyman, D.Phil., Reader
To Hannah
The maleficent daemons . . . prompt us to supplications and sacrifices, as if the beneficent gods were angry. They do such things because they want to dislodge us from a correct concept of the gods and convert us to themselves. . . . It is they who rejoice in the “drink offerings and smoking meat” on which their pneumatic part grows fat.

Oι κακοεργοὶ δαίμονες τρέπουσί τε μετὰ τοῦτο ἐπὶ λιτανείας ἡμᾶς καὶ θυσίας τῶν ἀγαθεργῶν θεῶν ὡς ὀργισμένων. . . . Οὗτοί οἱ χαίροντες «λοιβῇ τε κνίσῃ τε», δι᾽ ὅν αὐτῶν τὸ πνευματικὸν <καὶ σωματικὸν> πιαίνεται.

—Porphyry, On Abstinence 2.40.1-2, 42.3

But to whom did [Jesus] give his soul as a ransom for many? For it certainly was not to God! Might it then have been to the evil one? For he held us captive until the ransom on our behalf, the soul of Jesus, was given to him . . .

tίνι δὲ ἔδωκεν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν; οὐ γὰρ δὴ τῷ θεῷ· μήτε οὖν τῷ πονηρῷ; οὗτος γὰρ ἐκράτει ἡμῶν, ἐως δοθῇ τὸ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν αὐτῶ λύτρον ἢ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ψυχῆ . . .

—Origen, Commentary on Matthew 16.8
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Porphyry and Platonism</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Plato on Reciprocity</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Porphyry on Reciprocity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Porphyry’s Reinterpretation and Demonization of Reciprocity</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Porphyry in the Context of Imperial-Era Platonism</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: Origen and the Christian Tradition</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Origen on Prayers of Request</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Origen’s Reinterpretation of Propitiation and the Devil’s Ransom</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Origen in the Context of Early Christian Thought</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABBREVIATIONS


BIBLICAL BOOKS

Throughout this dissertation, English quotations from the Bible are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995) and Greek quotations from Kurt Aland et al., The Greek New Testament, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). The exceptions are biblical quotations that appear within an ancient author’s work, in which case I follow the standard edition and translation of that work.

Bel. Bel and the Dragon (Dan. 14).
Col. Colossians
Dan. Daniel
Deut. Deuteronomy
Eph. Ephesians
Ezek. Ezekiel
Gal. Galatians
Hab. Habakkuk
Heb. Hebrews
Mal. Malachi
Matt. Matthew
Num. Numbers
Isa. Isaiah
Jer. Jeremiah
Jon. Jonah
Judg. Judges
1 Pet. 1 Peter
Ps(s). Psalm(s)
Rom. Romans
1 Sam. 1 Samuel
2 Sam. 2 Samuel
1 Tim. 1 Timothy
Tob. Tobit
Wisd. of Sol. Wisdom of Solomon

ANCIENT AUTHORS AND WORKS

Abst. Porphyry, De abstinentia
Accus. Lucian, Bis accusatus sive tribunalia
Antro nymph. Porphyry, De antro nymphaum
Apol. Tertullian, Apologeticus
Apoll. Gregory of Nazianzus, De Incarnatione, adversus Apollinarium
Cat. Aristotle, Categoriae
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Author &amp; Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Cels.</em></td>
<td>Origen, <em>Contra Celsum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cleanth. Hymn.</em> I.</td>
<td>Cleanthes, <em>Hymnum in Iovem</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Clem. Al.</em></td>
<td>Clement of Alexandria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cohr. Gr.</em></td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Cohortatio ad gentiles</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Comm. Io.</em></td>
<td>Origen, <em>Commentarii in evangelium Ioannis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Comm. Isa.</em></td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Commentarius in Isaiam</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Comm. Matt.</em></td>
<td>Origen, <em>Commentarii in evangelium Matthaei</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Comm. Rom.</em></td>
<td>Origen, <em>Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Comm. Ti.</em></td>
<td>Proclus, <em>In Platonis Timaeum commentarii</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dem. Evang.</em></td>
<td>Eusebius, <em>Demonstratio evangelica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deus</em></td>
<td>Philo of Alexandria, <em>Quod deus sit immutabilis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dial.</em></td>
<td>Origen, <em>Dialogus cum Heraclide</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>D. Mund.</em></td>
<td>Sallustius, <em>De deis et mundo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Enn.</em></td>
<td>Plotinus, <em>Enneades</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ep. Aneb.</em></td>
<td>Porphyry, <em>Ad Anebonem</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Epict. Diss.</em></td>
<td>Epictetus, <em>Dissertationes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ep. Marc.</em></td>
<td>Porphyry, <em>Ad Marcellam</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Epp. Apoll.</em></td>
<td><em>Apollonii epistulae</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euseb.</td>
<td>Eusebius of Caesarea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Euthphr.</em></td>
<td><em>Euthyphro</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Exh. cast.</em></td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>De exhortatione castitatis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fr.Eth.</td>
<td>Hierocles, <em>Fragmenta Ethica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fr.Judg.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Fragmenta in Judices</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haer.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Haereticarum fabularum compendium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haer.</td>
<td>Irenaeus, <em>Adversus haereses</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hist. eccl.</td>
<td>Eusebius, <em>Historia ecclesiastica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hom.Exod.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Homiliae in Exodum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hom.Ezek.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Homiliae in Ezechielem</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hom.Gen.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Homiliae in Genesim</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hom.Lev.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Homiliae in Leviticum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hom.Num.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>Homiliae in Numeros</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IConf.</td>
<td>Lucian, <em>Iuppiter confutatus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ieiun.</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>De ieiunio adversus Psychicos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il.</td>
<td><em>Iliad</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interp.Eph.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Interpretatio epistulae ad Ephesios</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interp.Heb.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Interpretatio epistulae ad Hebraeos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interp.Ps.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Interpretatio in Psalmos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interp.Rom.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Interpretatio epistulae ad Romanos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interp.Tim.</td>
<td>Theodoret, <em>Interpretatio epistulae ad Timotheum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ir.</td>
<td>Lactantius, <em>De ira Dei</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iren.</td>
<td>Irenaeus of Lyons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITr.</td>
<td>Lucian, <em>Iuppiter tragoedus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td>Athenagoras, <em>Legatio pro Christianis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Leges</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marc.</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>Adversus Marcionem</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max. Diss.</td>
<td>Maximus of Tyre, <em>Dissertationes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosc.</td>
<td>Porphyry, <em>De nosce te ipsum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Od.</td>
<td><em>Odyssey</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>De oratione</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or.</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>De oratione</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or. 45</td>
<td>Gregory of Nazianzus, <em>Oratio 45</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or.Catech.</td>
<td>Gregory of Nyssa, <em>Oratio cathetica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or.Dom.</td>
<td>Gregory of Nyssa, <em>De oratione domini</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paed.</td>
<td>Clement, <em>Paedagogus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paen.</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>De paenitentia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasch.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>De pascha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pel.</td>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Pelopidas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phdr.</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Phaedrus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil.Orac.</td>
<td>Porphyry, <em>De philosophia ex oraculis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plt.</td>
<td>Plato, <em>Politicus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praep. evang.</td>
<td>Eusebius, <em>Praeparatio evangelica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prax.</td>
<td>Tertullian, <em>Adversus Praxeum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princ.</td>
<td>Origen, <em>De principiis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protr.</td>
<td>Clement, <em>Protrepticus</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q.G. Philo of Alexandria, *Quaestiones in Genesim*

Recog. Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones*

Rect.Fid. Adamantius, *De recta in deum fide*

Regr.anim. *De regressu animae*

Resp. Plato, *Respublica*

Resp.Porph. Iamblichus, *Responsum ad Porphyrium (De mysteriis)*

Sacr. Lucian, *De sacrificiis*

Scorp. Tertullian, *Scorpiace*

Sent. Clitarch. *Sententiae Clitarchi*

Sent. Pythag. *Sententiae Pythagoreorum*

Sent. Sext. *Sententiae Sexti*

Simulac. Porphyry, *De Simulacris*

Strom. Clement, *Stromateis*

Styg. Porphyry, *De Styge*

Tert. Tertullian

Test. Tertullian, *De testimonio animae*

Thdt. Theodoret of Cyrrhus

Tht. Plato, *Theaetetus*

Ti. Plato, *Timaeus*

Trin. Novation, *De Trinitate*

V.Apoll. Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*

V.Plot. Porphyry, *De vita Plotini*
V. Soph. Eunapius, *Vitae sophistarum*

MODERN WORKS, EDITIONS AND SERIES

*ANRW*  
*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*

*CJ*  
*Classical Journal*

*CSEL*  
*Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*

*GCS*  
*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*

*HThR*  
*Harvard Theological Review*

*JAC*  
*Journal of Ancient Civilizations*

*JECS*  
*Journal of Early Christian Studies*

*JEH*  
*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*

*JNStud*  
*The Journal of Neoplatonic Studies*

*JRS*  
*Journal of Roman Studies*

*JThS*  
*Journal of Theological Studies*

*LCL*  
*Loeb Classical Library*

*NPNF*  
*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*

*PG*  
*Migne, Patrologia Graeca*

*SC*  
*Sources Chrétiennes*
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Gloria in excelsis Deo.
INTRODUCTION

Contents

1 Summary of Argument ........................................................................................................ 2
2 Interaction with Secondary Literature ............................................................................. 10
   2.1 The Nature of Traditional Sacrifice ........................................................................ 10
   2.2 Conflict between Philosophy and Religion .............................................................. 17
   2.3 Philosophical Reinterpretation of Religion ............................................................... 19
   2.4 Late antique Evil Daemons ..................................................................................... 22
       2.4.1 Origen and the Devil’s Ransom ..................................................................... 23
       2.4.2 Porphyry and the Evil Daemons ................................................................... 24
3 Summary of Chapters ....................................................................................................... 29

According to this study, late antique Platonists – both Pagan and Christian – reinterpreted their religious traditions in order to reconcile them with philosophy. In particular, Platonists replaced the traditional reciprocal interpretation of prayer and sacrifice with new philosophical interpretations and, secondly, they used evil daemons to explain traditional sacrifices that could not be reinterpreted. In this way, they kept their philosophical convictions without having to reject their religious stories and practices. They had their cake and ate it.
Summary of Argument

For many anthropologists, the term “reciprocity” describes the way ancient religions typically interacted with their gods. This dissertation divides reciprocity into two categories. “Positive reciprocity” refers to the idea that, when people give sacrificial gifts, the gods often reciprocate by answering people’s prayers. In “propitiatory reciprocity,” sacrificial gifts appease the angry gods and avert the punishments they were inflicting upon humans for their mistakes. Plato rejected propitiatory reciprocity, but he accepted positive reciprocity – his gods were open to interaction with humans through sacrifice and prayers of request. But the gods of Middle and Neoplatonism were more immutable and impassible than the gods of Plato – they were beyond the reach of human analogies.¹ This called into question reciprocity. If the gods’ plans were immutable, they might not be able to answer human requests, especially requests for material things and worldly success. If the gods were impassible, they had no needs or desires, so sacrificial gifts could not persuade them to favor a person. Furthermore, impassible gods could not be hurt or angered or thwarted by human wickedness. According to some Platonists, their supreme goodness prevented them from harming anyone, even criminals. Thus, religious rites that intended to propitiate divine wrath, obtain forgiveness, or avert divine punishments were senseless and indicated a false view of the gods.

To differing degrees, these ideas appear in all the extant late antique pagan Platonic texts that deal with sacrifice and prayer. One might expect these philosophers to have rejected traditional Greco-Roman religion as a whole. If sacrificial gifts and prayers of request could not obtain blessings from the gods and if propitiatory offerings could not turn away disasters and

¹ Related to this was the monotheistic tendency of late antique philosophy considered by Polymnia Athanassiadi, ed. Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).
divine wrath – in short, if the gods could not respond in any way to religious rites – of what use was religion? But rejecting cult rites was not popular in Late Antiquity and could be dangerous. Furthermore, Platonists themselves respected ancient religion as a source of divine truth. This desire to take religion seriously increased in the imperial era and reached an all-time high in third and fourth-century Neoplatonism. More than ever, the goal was εὐσέβεια (piety) as well as θεωρία (contemplation).

This put these philosophers between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, their transcendent view of the divine nature made it more difficult for them to accept reciprocity than it had been for earlier Platonists. On the other hand, their desire to accept and integrate traditional religious rites was greater than that of their predecessors. Much of late antique Platonism can be described as an effort to resolve this tension. The most common solution was to reinterpret prayer and sacrifice – to say that the proper interpretation of these rites was not (and never had been) reciprocity. Middle Platonists, such as Maximus of Tyre, claimed that proper sacrifice and prayer did not request anything from the gods, who would do what was best for the cosmos regardless of human desires. Rather, prayer was an exercise in aligning one’s will with the unchanging divine purpose. The Neoplatonist Porphyry of Tyre agreed that sacrifice could not obtain good things from the gods. According to him, its purpose was merely thanksgiving. Prayers unattached to physical sacrifice might obtain spiritual blessings, but the gods would not answer requests for earthly things.

These reinterpretations had a weakness. Centuries of Greco-Roman history and experience seemed to prove that sacrifices and prayers were effective in obtaining benefits from the gods. Denying this lacked plausibility. In addition, Maximus and Porphyry failed to produce
a philosophical reinterpretation of propitiation: they simply rejected it as impossible. Also, Porphyry joined Neopythagoreans such as Apollonius of Tyana in condemning the animal offerings that played such a large role in Greco-Roman religion. The same problem applied here. Experience and tradition showed that animal sacrifice pleased the gods and that divine wrath was real and could be propitiated.

Porphyry offered a fascinating solution to this problem. He said that all the elements in traditional religion that he found objectionable could be explained as interactions with evil daemons posing as the true gods. In this view, Greco-Roman religion was right to say that angry supernatural beings caused disasters and could be propitiated with blood; and it was right that sacrificial gifts and prayers could secure protection. But the beings who interacted in these ways were cosmic thugs. In this way, Porphyry simultaneously validated the reciprocity of sacrifice and showed that it was not applicable to the gods or appropriate for good and wise people. Porphyry’s solution found no supporters in the Neoplatonists who followed him. Perhaps it was too reminiscent of Christian demonology. More likely, it was too disruptive to traditional religious practice. In his view, those who did not want to consort with evil daemons had to abstain from blood sacrifices and give up their expectation of benefit. A military general, for example, could no longer hope that his sacrifice would obtain victory.

In contrast, Porphyry’s student, the theurgist Iamblichus, offered a philosophical alternative to reciprocity that preserved traditional aspirations. According to him, sacrifices obtained benefits and averted evil, but they did not do so by persuading the gods. The victims, fire, and incantations of sacrifice served as mediators that linked the worshipper with various aspects of the cosmos, and, ultimately, with various gods. Through this proximity to cosmic and
divine powers, the worshippers were transformed. Their deficiencies, both earthly and spiritual, were purged away. In this state of union, the requests worshippers made were inspired by the gods’ own predetermined purpose. These prayers were “answered,” but only because they corresponded to what was already going to occur. In this view, farmers were right to sacrifice for rain, even if they were wrong to think that their sacrifices and prayers had obtained it.

In the second and third centuries, many philosophers attempted to reinterpret reciprocity in keeping with their philosophical commitments, but they did not agree on a method of reinterpretation. The theories of Apollonius of Tyana, Maximus, Porphyry and Imblichus existed in competition. But, by the beginning of the fourth century, theurgy had emerged victorious. It was clearly the most subtle and powerful reinterpretation – one that allowed the rites and expectations of traditional religion to continue almost untouched. Sallustius, the Emperor Julian and Proclus all followed in the steps of Iamblichus.

This is the narrative I tell in the first half of this dissertation. The second half concerns the Christian part of the story. In the second through the fourth centuries, many Christian intellectuals were culturally Greco-Roman and received a philosophical education. Especially those of an Anatolian or Alexandrian background shared many of the assumptions about the divine nature that led pagan Platonists to question reciprocity. They did not totally reject prayers of request (like Maximus), but they downplayed or ruled out requests for material benefits and protection (like Porphyry). They maintained that God never experienced the passion of anger – some argued that he kept no record of wrongs and that he never directly punished sinners. Thus, propitiating his wrath to obtain forgiveness made no sense.
These ideas conflicted with the Hebrew Bible and with the books that were coalescing into the New Testament. Successful prayers for material benefits and protection filled these Scriptures. Jewish tradition described God as angry with the wicked; it directed sinners to offer sacrifices for forgiveness. First-century Christians followed suit. They portrayed Jesus as a sacrificial lamb who “takes away the sins of the world” (John 1.29) – a savior who gave his life as “a ransom for many” (Matt. 20.28, Mark 10.45) and “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us” (Col. 2.14), “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1.14). To those educated in a Greek milieu, this sounded like the propitiation of an angry God. Words such as ransom (λύτρον) suggested a transaction to obtain forgiveness, a reciprocal interaction with God of the most degraded and philosophically objectionable kind. Origen and the Cappadocians were keenly aware of this problem.

The struggle to reconcile the prayers of request in Scripture with the philosophical view of God appeared in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian; it reached its apex in Clement and Origen; and it subsided a little in the Cappadocians. Origen’s struggle was particularly clear. He produced a landmark philosophical defense of prayers of request, but he himself downplayed them, and he rejected in principle all requests for earthly things. According to him, scriptural saints had never directly asked for such things. They had requested and received spiritual blessings. But these spiritual blessings were sometimes accompanied by parallel material blessings that tagged along like an object’s shadow. For example, Hannah had asked God to cure her spiritual barrenness, and God had done so. But the spiritual fruitfulness he gave was paralleled by physical fruitfulness in the form of Samuel. According to Origen, this was as insignificant as a shadow, compared to the spiritual blessing Hannah had received. Through this
remarkable method of reading, Origen made the troublesome scriptural record fit his philosophy. Holy people never asked for material things, and God, properly speaking, never bestowed them.

Origen also attempted to reinterpret scriptural references to propitiation and sacrifices for sin. According to him, “propitiation” in Scripture referred, not to the appeasing of God, but to the conversion of sinners. Ancient Jewish priests, Jesus the High Priest, and Christian priests propitiated *people* by inspiring them to live a holy life. This brought about forgiveness and reconciliation, which God freely offered to the repentant; but no payment for past misdeeds was necessary. This interpretation of propitiation solved many, but not all, of Origen’s problems. It did not explain why the New Testament referred to Jesus’ death as a ransom or payment that obtained forgiveness. To Origen, a God who required such a payment would have been unthinkable. He solved the problem by developing and emphasizing the “Devil’s ransom,” an idea that already existed in Christianity and Marcionism.

He admitted that Jesus’ sacrificial death had been a transaction, but he argued that it purchased sinners, not from God, but from the Devil. After all, he reasoned, it was the Devil, the “ruler of this world” (John 12.31), who was holding sinners captive. In this way, Origen upheld Scripture but saved his philosophical God from involvement in propitiatory reciprocity. His use of the Devil might be seen as a precursor to Porphyry’s use of evil daemons. For both philosophers, evil supernatural beings helped to explain troublesome elements in their respective religious traditions. As mentioned above, Porphyry’s theory was a dead end in pagan Platonism. In contrast, the Devil’s ransom lived on long after Origen. The Cappadocians, too, recoiled at the idea that Jesus had made a payment to the Father to redeem humanity or to obtain forgiveness.
The Cappadocians had a more difficult time accepting the Devil’s ransom as a solution because their unitive Christology required Jesus’ divinity to be included in the ransom. Gregory of Nyssa got around this problem by emphasizing the deception of the Devil and his ignorance of Christ’s divinity. He wrote the most developed extant discussion of the Devil’s ransom. Gregory of Nazianzus rejected the theory (or tried to do so), not because he favored a ransom to the Father, but because he could not find a way around the Christological problems involved.

In the pagan tradition, no late antique texts survive that defended traditional reciprocal views of prayer and sacrifice, though they regularly attacked these ideas as the position of the masses (οἱ πολλοί) or of philosophers who compromised with them. If anthropologists are correct, many practitioners of the cults retained a reciprocal view of religious rites, but history has not preserved their opinions. Regarding Christian texts, the situation is far different. A number of Christian writers, usually from western North Africa or from the Levant, explicitly opposed the philosophical view of God and explicitly defended reciprocity. Most notable were Lactantius (c.250-c.325), Eusebius of Caesarea (c.263-c.339), and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c.393-c.457), but they were not alone. According to these authors, God was angry towards sinners and kind towards the righteous. He was not immutable, for his anger could change to kindness. Otherwise, repentance would be useless. Furthermore, Prayers and sacrifices could turn away God’s anger and seek his favor. This was the whole point of religion. These authors (certainly Eusebius) were open to the idea that Jesus’ sacrifice was a payment to the Father, and the Devil’s ransom, if it appeared in their writings, did not play the role it played in the thinking of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.
In light of this, it is interesting to speculate that Christians (especially fourth-century Christians) may have been more open to reciprocity than fourth-century pagans.\(^2\) This could have contributed to Christianity’s success. Theurgists used what might be called the science of mediation to connect people with cosmic principles and gods and to transform them through this proximity. This was hardly a solace to the natural human religious impulse to interact with the gods, bring them gifts, receive their blessings, and appease their displeasure.\(^3\) Christianity, even in its most elite forms, was much more friendly to these human impulses.

A thorough examination of philosophical reinterpretations of reciprocity in paganism and Christianity from the second through the fourth centuries is far beyond the scope of one study. This dissertation focuses on two figures, the pagan Neoplatonist Porphyry of Tyre (\(c. AD 235-305\)) and the Christian Platonist Origen of Alexandria (\(c. 185-251\)).\(^4\) This catches the effort to reinterpret reciprocal rites at its most diverse and dramatic stage. In addition, Porphyry and Origen’s methods of doing so were strikingly similar, which highlights the fact that intellectuals of all stripes were dealing with similar problems and solving them in similar ways.

Porphyry was around sixteen years of age when Origen died, and he was still writing when Origen had been gone for half a century. Thus, it may seem odd that I begin with Porphyry. There are three reasons. First, the vision of the divine nature that conflicted with

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\(^2\) This suggestion is speculative. Since Christianity eventually gained ascendancy, pagan texts were selectively preserved. Christians respected (or reacted against) Neoplatonic texts, ensuring their survival. Perhaps the reason that no pagan texts supporting reciprocity survive is simply that Christians saw no use in preserving them.

\(^3\) I call this a “natural human religious impulse” based on the work of the cognitive scientists and ritual theorists mentioned in section 2.1 below.

reciprocity was primarily a Greek philosophical vision. The origin of the problem, so to speak, was in pagan thought. Second, Greco-Roman religion exemplified reciprocity more clearly than Jewish and Christian religion. This made the conflict between philosophy and religion stand out more starkly in paganism. For these reasons, considering Porphyry and his tradition is a helpful preliminary to considering Christianity. Finally, Origen’s thought was more influential after his death than during his life. When Porphyry, Iamblichus, Lactantius, and Eusebius were making their plays, Origen’s ideas were just coming into their own and entering the debate. Thus, discussing Porphyry first has a certain historical accuracy. Still, it must not be forgotten that Origen was prior, that Porphyry was familiar with some of his work, and that he may have borrowed some ideas from the Alexandrian master.

2 Interaction with Secondary Literature

The rest of this introduction situates this study in the secondary literature, showing dependencies, contributions, and disagreements. It addresses four areas of research: the nature of traditional sacrifice, the conflict between philosophy and religion, the philosophical reinterpretation of religious rites, and late antique evil daemons.

2.1 The Nature of Traditional Sacrifice

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor characterized sacrifice as a system of exchange with the gods. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim agreed. In the second half of the twentieth century, Henri Hubert and Marcel
Mauss championed and developed the idea. Sacrifice as exchange in the twentieth century was partly overshadowed by the influential theories of Karl Meuli, Walter Burkert, René Girard, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, Jean-Louis Durand and Guy Berthiaume. To be sure, these theorists made contributions. There may be some truth to the idea that sacrificial victims were scapegoats that allowed societies to dissipate their violent tendencies without destroying themselves. Perhaps sacrificial systems partly developed from ancient hunting rituals. Perhaps the sacrificial meal defined human relationships, consolidated cities, and identified male heirs. Perhaps religious rituals and claims about the willingness of sacrificial victims helped justify in the minds of ancient Greeks the slaughter and consumption of animals.

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6 For a summary of these scholars’ perspectives on Greek sacrifice, see Maria-Zoe Petropoulou, Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism and Christianity, 100 BC-AD 200 (Oxford University, 2009). 7-15.

7 In 1972, René Girard’s groundbreaking La violence et le sacré appeared. He points to mimetic desire – the human tendency to want what other humans want. This leads to desire for the same object and hence to conflict over that object. The violence escalates, and the object, which was never the origin of the problem, is forgotten. At this point, mimetic desire leads humans to imitate each other’s desire for the destruction of their rivals. Because of its imitative quality, this desire has the potential to converge upon a single victim, the destruction of which dissipates the conflict miraculously – hence the sacredness of the victim. This, Girard argues, was the origin of sacrifice. For a translation of the French, see Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977).

8 In the same year as Girard’s book, Walter Burkert published his influential work Homo necans. According to him, because human beings evolved as hunters for 40,000 years, killing became a fundamental part of (specifically) male psychology. Sacrifice developed in this context. This ritualized killing channeled the male killing instinct and allowed people to form successful social groups without internecine strife. For an English translation of the German, see Burkert, Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California, 1983).

These theories were thought-provoking, but a number of scholars in the last two decades argue that such ideas obscure the central fact that ancient sacrifice was part of a system of exchange (or “reciprocity” as it is often called). A volume edited by Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite and Richard Seaford (1998) shows that reciprocity was particularly central to ancient Greek religion.\(^\text{10}\) Daniel Ullucci (2012) shows how the insights of some ritual theorists and cognitive scientists, when brought together, tend to support interpreting sacrifices in terms of reciprocity.\(^\text{11}\) For example, the theorist Catherine Bell claims that rituals are everyday social actions endowed with a special significance.\(^\text{12}\) Cognitive scientists suggest something similar when they say that people imagine their gods as “humanlike agents with humanlike minds” and interact with them accordingly.\(^\text{13}\) In other words, relationships with the gods are patterned after the social conventions that govern human relationships in a given community. Since reciprocity was a central part of human relationships in many ancient cultures, it stands to reason that these cultures engaged in reciprocal relationships with their gods. They offered sacrificial gifts,


received divine answers to prayer, offered gifts of thanksgiving, and attempted to appease the
gods when they were angry.

F. S. Naiden (2013) does not use the term “reciprocity,” but his perspective on ancient
Greek sacrifice agrees in many ways with those who do. He points out that many of the
twentieth-century sacrificial theories sought to discern the social function of sacrifice while
ignoring the “emic” perspective of the ancients themselves. He encourages scholars to consider
what the *Greeks themselves* thought they were doing. According to Naiden, the central element
in sacrifice was not, as some twentieth-century theories suggested, a shared meal or the death of
an animal, and it did not focus on animal offerings to the exclusion of other gifts. The Greeks
saw sacrifice as an episode in a relationship with the gods. It was an attempt to honor and please
them through a host of different offerings and ceremonies, and it was nearly always accompanied
by some kind of request, even if that request were only for a continued relationship with the
divine or for the acceptance of the sacrifice. Naiden notes that there was no certainty that the
gods would honor one’s request. For one thing, worshippers might fail to perform the sacrifice
properly, leading to a negative divine response. Or the gods might simply choose not to grant the
request, depending on their own agendas or the appropriateness of the prayer.

Daniel Ullucci makes some similar points. He also warns, “Modern thinking on sacrifice
places enormous emphasis on what is actually given to the deity.” According to Ullucci, “This
preoccupation is simply not present in sacrificial systems.” Focusing on the type and value of the
gift goes along with thinking that sacrifice was a transaction with the gods and that the gods

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needed these offerings. Greek philosophy, comedic literature, and early Christian writings made accusations of this kind, sometimes with polemical intent. But, according to Ullucci, this missed the point. He compares ancient Greeks giving sacrifices to the gods to students giving apples to their teachers. Ullucci says, “We do not conclude from [the latter] either that teachers are too poor to purchase their own apples, or that teachers subsist solely on student-bought apples and will die without them. We immediately parse the social act for what it is: an attempt to create a reciprocal relationship.”

Ancient sacrifices had no more buying power than students’ apples. People did not, for the most part, think that they could pay the gods to answer their prayers. Ullucci compares reciprocity to the gift giving that occurs between friends. By giving something to one’s friends, one does not purchase return gifts. The exchange is a mutual expression of the relationship. It is this relationship that inspires further gifts, not the gifts themselves. One proof that gift giving is not a transaction is that the gifts exchanged are often of unequal value. For example, if a person makes donations to a relief organization, the latter often returns the favor in the form of Christmas cards and informative letters that have little monetary value. This is somewhat comparable to the ancient patron-client system. Neither relationship is a transaction, and yet there is a reciprocal relationship between the gifts given by one party and the gifts given by the

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15 Ullucci does not identify these misguided scholars.

16 It was polemical to the extent that it presented all Greco-Roman sacrifice as a transaction with the gods. It was legitimate, however, to warn people against slipping into this bartering mentality (see two paragraphs down).


19 This is my analogy, not Ullucci’s.
other. If either side withholds their gifts, the other side may do so as well. Similarly, if people never do anything for their friends, their friends often cease to do anything for them. This is not necessarily because they feel cheated: in healthy friendships, one party is often able to give consistently more valuable gifts than the other. Rather, because the gifts symbolize love, respect and camaraderie, their cessation is significant, and the entire relationship breaks down.

This is the model for healthy relationships, but Ullucci acknowledges that reciprocity can degrade into a transaction. Sometimes the gift giving relationship is a thin veneer laid over an attempt to obligate or compel reciprocation. All reciprocal relationships, both ancient and modern, are susceptible to this perversion. According to Ullucci, this is why many Greek intellectuals, including Plato and Menander, warned against seeing one’s interactions with the gods as transactions. This did not mean that Greek religion was an act of barter – it simply meant that reciprocal relationships with the gods, like reciprocal relationships with humans – were in danger of degradation.\(^{20}\)

By seeing ancient sacrifice as part of a reciprocal relationship with the gods, Seaford, Robert Parker, Sitta von Reden, Stanley K. Stowers,\(^{21}\) Ullucci, Naiden, and others have guided twenty-first-century scholarship down a fruitful path. But, while their insights have illumined the

\(^{20}\) This is complicated by the fact that, as Sitta von Reden observes, there was no clear distinction between gift exchange and economic exchange in ancient Greece. The two were related activities. See von Reden, *Exchange in Ancient Greece* (London: Duckworth, 1995), 1-9. It is further complicated by Marcel Mauss’ seminal study of gift-giving in archaic societies. The modern idea of private property, the ownership of which can be fully transferred to another, was absent. A gift was never completely alienated from the giver and thus it created a social bond and an obligation to reciprocate (Mauss, *The Gift*). This suggests that the ancients would have seen the degradation of reciprocity (if they thought of it in those terms) as a move from modes of obligation proper to a relationship with the gods to modes of obligation improper to such a relationship.

study of ancient Greek sacrifice, the study of sacrifice in Late Antiquity remains in twilight. Ullucci is attempting to raise the veil, but there is still much work to be done. Most studies of this period consider animal sacrifice almost exclusively, but it was only one piece of a broad religious system in which reciprocity was central. The unexplored implication is that reciprocity was also at the center of the conflict between philosophy and religion. Thus, in order to study this conflict, one must consider, not only animal offerings, but also other forms of sacrifice and service to the gods, including prayers – especially prayers of request.

This broad framing of the question makes pagan discussions of sacrifice relevant and connected to late antique Christian and Jewish perspectives on proper interactions with God, even when physical sacrifice was not involved. When reciprocity is put at the center of the discussion, the story of the second, third and fourth centuries changes, and formerly obscure connections come to light. It becomes apparent that diverse thinkers such as Maximus, Origen, Porphyry and Iamblichus all shared, to differing degrees, the rejection of reciprocity. Furthermore, one can interpret their divergent perspectives as various attempts to reinterpret reciprocity or to make it compatible with philosophy.

2.2 Conflict between Philosophy and Religion

As noted above, Plato accepted positive reciprocity. Ullucci points out that his condemnation of “bartering” with the gods was a condemnation only of degraded forms of reciprocity – most Greeks would have joined him in attacking them. As Ullucci notes, Plato explicitly encouraged the idea that one could have proper reciprocal relationships with the gods. Sacrifice and prayer helped to obtain blessings from the gods as long as they were not thought to “buy” these blessings or coerce the gods to do one’s will.

I hope to show that this attitude changed in Middle and Neoplatonism. Authors such as Porphyry and Lucian of Samosata continued to condemn the idea that sacrifices could coerce the gods or buy their favor. But, unlike Plato, they did not believe that there was a proper form of reciprocity apart from this. For them, all reciprocity was bartering and coercion. In addition, Platonists such as Maximus of Tyre argued that, because the gods were good, they would do the best thing for the cosmos regardless of human requests or sacrifices. This transition was of enormous significance. On the whole, Plato was able to accept the Greek vision of sacrifice and prayer. Many authors of the imperial period were not. The Platonic critique of traditional religion had become much more harsh.

The same pattern is apparent in Platonic reactions to propitiatory reciprocity. To Plato, offering a sacrifice to secure the pardon of a god was like bribing a judge to overlook one’s crimes. As Dale B. Martin shows in *Inventing Superstition*, Plato’s view of divine goodness was

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partly responsible for this rejection. If the gods were good and perfectly just, they would not let criminals off the hook in return for bribes. Also, according to Plato, good individuals (both human and divine) did “no harm.” By this, Plato meant that the gods did no harm to the soul. They were free to punish the wicked as long as these punishments were for the good of the offender, intended to reform and better the soul. Thus, wise people would not want to avert divine punishments, even if they could. To do so would be to avoid moral benefit. Fritz Graf’s work aligns to a degree with that of Martin. He notes that the philosophers’ emphasis on divine goodness led them to question reciprocity. He says that “pagan discourse,” from Plato to Late Antiquity, contained a “rethinking and contestation of religious tradition in its mythical and ritual expression . . . against the backdrop of a theology . . . that insists on the essential goodness of divinity.”

I wish to add to Martin and Graf’s work by pointing out that the Platonic definition of divine goodness became more extreme in Late Antiquity and that this resulted in a more extreme contestation of propitiatory reciprocity. The philosophers of the imperial era repeated Plato’s claim that the gods were “harmless” (οὐ βλάπτειν), but they meant something very different by it. For them, the gods inflicted no harm on soul or body – they did not even punish the wicked, at least not directly. This was a sea change in philosophy, but not one explicitly recognized by the ancients or by modern scholars. Plato’s main argument against propitiation was that it perverted justice. It made the wicked think that they could sin with impunity as long as they had the resources to pay for divine pardon. Plato reacted violently – no one could escape the discipline of the gods.

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24 Though Graf does not use this term.
Late antique philosophers rejected propitiation as well, but they did so for nearly the opposite reason. For figures such as Porphyry, it was anathema to think that the gods were angry at human wickedness (to do so would show passion) or that they caused any of the disasters or misfortunes of the world. Propitiation was wrong because it made both of these assumptions. Thus, Plato rejected propitiation because it denied the inevitability of divine punishments; Porphyry rejected propitiation because it assumed the reality of divine punishments. Once again, the late antique critique of traditional religion was harsher than that of Plato. The latter could agree with Greek religion that the gods caused many disasters and misfortunes, but Porphyry and his contemporaries could not.

2.3 Philosophical Reinterpretation of Religion

The idea that philosophers and other elite members of society reinterpret traditional rituals to make them compatible with their view of the divine is nothing new. According to Gerhard von Rad (1962), in ancient Judaism, ritual practice tended to continue unaltered while new ideas about God led people to interpret these rituals in new ways. In particular, he believed that ideas about divine sovereignty and the development of ethical monotheism led the prophets to reimagine the function of sacrifice. Frances M. Young sees this Jewish prophetic rethinking of sacrifice as parallel to and prior to the Greek philosophical rethinking of sacrifice.26 Today’s anthropologists express a similar truth when they say that ritual is “non-discursive.” As Ullucci explains, this means that the practice of sacrifice is independent of the interpretations or

meanings that are assigned to it.\textsuperscript{27} Interpretations of sacrifice may come and go, but the practice remains. This means that, when Greek philosophers and other “cultural producers”\textsuperscript{28} criticized a certain interpretation of sacrifice, they were not necessarily rejecting the practice of sacrifice; they were attacking certain interpretations and suggesting others. They were competing with other cultural producers over the right to define sacrifice.

According to Ullucci and the anthropologists upon which he depends, saying that ritual is non-discursive does not mean that it has no meaning for people apart from the ones cultural producers assign. As described above, anthropologists imagine that people naturally interact with their gods as they interact with each other – this gives rise to and explains the \textit{modus operandi} of rituals, which makes sense in terms of reciprocity. Friedrich Heiler’s seminal study, \textit{Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion}, made a similar claim almost a century ago. According to him, “primitive religion” naturally included “eudaemonism,” the idea that one could offer sacrificial gifts to the gods and ask them for earthly success and favorable seasons. For Heiler, this went along with a “powerful realism” and anthropomorphism.\textsuperscript{29} The philosophers’ exalted concept of the divine and their ethical emphasis typically led them to contest these “primitive” theologies. They rarely rejected prayer and sacrifice altogether. Rather,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ullucci takes this term from Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{Outline of a Theory of Practice} (Cambridge University, 1977).
\item \textsuperscript{29} Heiler writes, “Primitive prayer is a real communion of man with God; it rests on the belief that man can influence God, can win Him over to his side, can change His will.”
\end{itemize}
they developed a “positive ideal of prayer” in keeping with their philosophical convictions. They sought “to transform empiric religion into ideal religion.”

Ullucci’s reason for mentioning the non-discursive nature of ritual is to show that ancient figures who criticized reciprocity, or some other interpretation of sacrifice, were not rejecting sacrifice itself. They could propose new interpretations without losing the practice, for the practice was not dependent upon any given interpretation for its existence. This means that the ancient Jewish prophetic and Greek philosophical contestations of sacrificial function were not pointing the way to the end of sacrifice in the fourth century. The cessation of sacrifice under the Christian emperors was something new, not the culmination of a long process of “spiritualizing” ritual. This is a useful point within bounds, but I wish to go in a different direction. Granted, cultural producers sometimes reinterpreted sacrificial function, but surely this was not a constant process. Philosophy itself was not a constant. Its position changed and became more or less friendly towards traditional religion and the possibility of reciprocity with the gods.

Heiler observes this truth. He writes, “The relation of this philosophical religion to vital religion is now close, now loose.” In Chapter 4 of his book, he delineates various forms of “philosophical prayer,” ranging from those in close agreement with “vital religion” to those that completely excise human-like interactions with the divine. The present dissertation keeps this fluctuation in mind as it examines the relationship between philosophy and reciprocity. It asks


31 While it is true that Hosea (6.6) and Plato were not trying to end the practice of sacrifice, Guy Stroumsa convincingly shows that post-exilic Judaism’s spiritualization of sacrifice laid the foundation for the eventual cessation of physical offerings in the Roman Empire: Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago, 2009).

why, when, and to what extent, did philosophers reject reciprocity? Asking these questions reveals some insights already mentioned in the section above – it shows that the Platonists of the imperial period held a more transcendent view of divine goodness and impassibility that made it much more difficult for them to accept reciprocity than it had been for Plato. At the same time, Neoplatonists had a stronger desire than the predecessors to take traditional religion seriously. It was this heightened internal conflict that led to a myriad of competing philosophical reinterpretations of sacrifice in the second and third centuries. By the beginning of the fourth century, the competition was over. Theurgy had won.

2.4 Late antique Evil Daemons

As mentioned above, I will argue that Origen’s use of the Devil is comparable to Porphyry’s use of evil daemons. When their religious traditions recorded sacrificial interactions that seemed to them unworthy of the true God or gods, Origen and Porphyry said that these sacrifices had interacted instead with the Devil or with evil daemons. In this way, they were able to uphold their religious traditions and their philosophical views of the divine nature. Other scholars have made similar claims about Origen and Porphyry individually, but these scholars are not in conversation with each other: they have not noted that both thinkers used a similar method. The pages below point out the strengths and weaknesses in the relevant scholarship.

I argue that there is not much evidence for the wholesale reinterpretation of sacrifice until the imperial era. James B. Rives is getting at something similar when he notices that the philosophers of the imperial era were more concerned about the theology of sacrifice than their classical predecessors. Rives, "Theology of Animal Sacrifice."
2.4.1 Origen and the Devil’s Ransom

The most thorough and correct evaluation of the Devil’s ransom in Origen is still Frances M. Young’s *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers* (1979). She observes that Origen shared some Platonic beliefs about the divine. He claimed that God was never angry, even towards the wicked, and that he never required people to make up for their past sins. The pain he inflicted upon the wicked was not meant to punish them for their sins but to discipline them – to goad them towards a holy life. As soon as they repented, discipline ceased, for it had done its work. Young shows that these beliefs made it difficult for Origen to understand why God would desire sacrifices that dealt with sin – either ancient Jewish sacrifices or the sacrifices of Jesus and the martyrs. There was no need, in his view, to change God’s attitude, to persuade him to put away his anger and to be gracious. The only change that was possible and necessary was the change of the sinner in repentance. God’s forgiveness followed automatically.

In order to make Scripture fit this vision of God, Origen said that “to propitiate” meant to convert sinners so that they would be accepted by God, not to appease God’s wrath towards them; but this did not explain why sacrifices were necessary. Origen struggled with this problem, especially when it came to Jesus’ sacrificial death, which the New Testament described as a ransom or payment that obtained the forgiveness of sins. Especially from a Greek religious standpoint, this sounded like the propitiation of an angry God. According to Young, Origen got around this problem by saying that Jesus was a ransom or payment to the Devil. This made a certain amount of sense, as the New Testament described the Devil as the lord of this world. With his own blood, Jesus had purchased sinners from his dominion and brought them into the kingdom of his Father. Since 1979, no scholarship has interacted positively or negatively with
Young’s thesis. Neil Forsyth’s *The Old Enemy* (1987) makes a similar claim about the Devil’s ransom in Origen, but he does so in passing, and there is no evidence that he read Young’s work. Nonetheless, Forsyth adds some insights. He believes that the Devil’s ransom merged in conversation with the Marcionite idea that Jesus’s blood purchased humanity from slavery under the Demiurge. Furthermore, Forsyth thinks that the method of dismissing a disturbing story about God by saying that it was actually a story about the Devil was inherited from the Jewish tradition, where it had made its appearance in 1 Chronicles and Jubilees.34

2.4.2 Porphyry and the Evil Daemons

There has been a great deal of confusion over Porphyry’s evil daemons, and clarity has begun to emerge only in the last five years. Following Joseph Bidez’s foundational work in 1913,35 scholars have tended to think that Porphyry made Plotinian philosophy vulgar and palatable for the masses, which included admitting the existence of evil daemons.

Dale B. Martin’s *Inventing Superstition* (2004) makes a similar assumption, but it contributes by placing Porphyry’s daemons in the context of Greek philosophical history. Martin argues that, from around the fifth century BC, Greek philosophy held that all gods and daemons were good and committed no unnecessary harm. Martin calls this the “Grand Optimal Illusion,” the idea that ontologically superior beings must necessarily be morally superior. This conflicted with the traditional belief that divinities could be dangerous and were responsible for diseases, famines, and other human misfortunes. According to Martin, the philosophical consensus on the


goodness of all divinities was never complete, and it disintegrated in Late Antiquity.

Philosophers never admitted that the true gods could be evil, but Celsus (second century) and Plotinus (AD c.205-c.270) hesitantly said that some daemons might not be good. The real change occurred in Porphyry (c.AD 235-c.305), who wrote about evil daemons without embarrassment and explained their activities in detail.\(^\text{36}\)

Why finally in the third century did philosophers such as Porphyry and Iamblichus “give in to popular opinion”?\(^\text{37}\) Martin posits that the earlier philosophical belief in the goodness of all superior beings had been based on the Athenian democratic principle of ἱσορροπία, the idea that all citizens, including those in power, were subject to law. The philosophers applied this principle to the cosmic powers. The gods were part of the natural order, and the same rules of justice applied to them as to people. Therefore, the perfection of the gods had to include moral perfection. Any ontologically superior beings had to be morally superior. But in the Roman imperial age, the political underpinnings of this view were exchanged for the ideology of monarchy. The emperor was not governed by ἱσορροπία; he was above the civil law. In the cosmic realm, this implied that the gods were above the law of justice. It was now possible that some ontologically superior beings (certain daemons) might be morally inferior. The ultimate goodness of the cosmos no longer depended on the goodness of a natural order that included all divine beings but rather on the goodness of the highest god.\(^\text{38}\)

\(^{36}\) Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004). See particularly chapters 3-8, 10, and 12. For Celsus and Plotinus’ dates, see 140 and 189 of the same work.

\(^{37}\) For the phrase “give in to popular opinion,” see Martin, *Inventing Superstition*: 206. Presumably, Martin is referring to the opinion of those not influenced by the Grand Optimal Illusion.

\(^{38}\) For the reasons behind the fall of the Grand Optimal Illusion, see Martin, *Inventing Superstition*: Chapter 12 and Conclusion.
This may have allowed Neoplatonists to accept the existence of evil daemons, but why would they wish to do so? Martin has less to say about this, but he observes that the Grand Optimal Illusion “must have been a difficult faith to maintain in the face of all the messiness of nature in everyday experience.” The goodness of the natural order (including divinities) was not self-evident. Disasters had to have some cause. Thus, the “popular opinion” that evil or angry superhuman beings were often behind earthquakes, famines, and random mayhem on earth had great explanatory power. According to Martin, the philosophers of the third century capitulated to this logic.

Perhaps so, but why had they not capitulated earlier? The answer may lie in the changing definitions of divine harmlessness identified in this dissertation. Plato could explain earthly disasters as the disciplinary actions of the gods. But Porphyry’s gods caused no harm whatsoever, even in disciplining the wicked. Thus, Porphyry had no explanation for catastrophes. Evil daemons provided him with one. With these daemons as scapegoats, Porphyry’s extreme claims about the goodness of the high gods were defensible. It was his step away from traditional religion (in the area of absolute divine harmlessness) that made his step towards traditional religion (in the area of evil daemons) necessary.

In the last five years Heidi Marx-Wolf and Aaron P. Johnson have offered new explanations for Porphyry’s remarkable evil daemons. Since 2009, Marx-Wolf has published several papers on the “spiritual taxonomies” of certain third-century intellectuals who can be

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loosely defined as Platonists. The list includes Plotinus, Origen of Alexandria, Porphyry, and Iamblichus. According to Marx-Wolf, these Platonists competed with each other and with the ordinary priests of traditional religion for the right to be considered the religious authorities of the Empire, experts who could be depended upon to broker salvation and divine connections. In addition, third-century Platonists attempted to organize and unify the diversity of their religious traditions.41

In all of these efforts, Marx-Wolf believes that the production of spiritual taxonomies played a major role. By this, she means the division of superhuman beings into various ontological and moral categories, each with its own role in salvation and religious rites. The category of evil daemons was the most polemical part of these taxonomies, and its use was nowhere more apparent than in Porphyry. In order to discredit traditional priests, he claimed that many of their rituals interacted with evil daemons and not with the true gods. In contrast to these priests of evil daemons, he presented himself as a high priest of the highest god.42 By saying that only evil daemons wanted animal sacrifice, Porphyry also disparaged his former student, the theurgist Iamblichus, who valued blood offerings. Thus, in Marx-Wolf’s view, Porphyry’s belief in evil daemons did not represent a capitulation to popular or traditional ideas. Rather, it was a


42 In this, Marx-Wolf depends partly on Stephen Anthony Maiullo, "From Philosopher to Priest: The Transformation of the Persona of the Platonic Philosopher" (Ph.D. Diss., Ohio State University, 2010).
powerful polemical tool. Through it, he was able to demonize and discredit troublesome aspects of Greek tradition, as well as the practices of his rivals.\textsuperscript{43}

Marx-Wolf believes that Porphyry learned his demonology from Origen of Alexandria; for over a century, Christians had been claiming that the Greco-Roman gods were evil daemons that gobbled up animal sacrifices. According to Marx-Wolf, Porphyry commandeered this polemic from Origen for his own critique of pagan cult practices. There may be truth to this idea, but I argue that Origen’s Devil’s ransom, not his demonization of pagan religion, was conceptually parallel to Porphyry’s evil daemons.

In 2013, Aaron P. Johnson presented the most coherent view of Porphyry’s philosophical project to date, a view that partially coincides with that of Marx-Wolf. Johnson rejects Joseph Bidez’s claim that Porphyry was a \textit{vulgisateur} of Plotinian philosophy and an advocate of Greek religion. In his view, Porphyry’s many references to traditional sacrifices, oracles, and gods did not represent an acceptance of these along traditional lines. Porphyry “translated” the features of traditional religion into his own Platonic worldview. As Johnson points out, this project of translation was not necessarily flattering to religious rituals and ideas. Porphyry found places for these within his philosophical vision, but not places of honor. Some sacrifices and traditional practices were translated into the lowest level of the Neoplatonic world as interactions with evil daemons.\textsuperscript{44} In this way, Porphyry discredited these practices.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} For this paragraph, see Marx-Wolf, \textit{Spiritual Taxonomy}: especially Chapter Two. Marx-Wolf believes that Porphyry’s use of evil daemons is an example of the model proposed by David Frankfurter in which spiritual taxonomists impose moral order on the ambiguous popular conception of spirits in order to assert religious control: Frankfurter, \textit{Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History} (Princeton University, 2006). 17, 30-32, 69-72.

\textsuperscript{44} It is worth noting that Johnson does not treat the existence of evil daemons in Porphyry’s thought as something remarkable.
Thus, Johnson would seem to agree with Marx-Wolf’s claim that Porphyry’s evil daemons were part of his polemic against traditional priests and certain elements in traditional religion. This complicates Martin’s vision of Porphyry’s capitulation to the traditional belief in evil spirits. Ironically, Porphyry’s concession in this area, if it was a concession, only served to make his polemic against traditional religion stronger. This perspective corrects a number of earlier scholarly misconceptions. It contributes enormously to the study of Porphyry and of evil daemons in Late Antiquity, but it also invites further inquiry. In particular, Marx-Wolf and Johnson have not focused on the content of Porphyry’s disagreement with traditional religion and its priests. In this dissertation, I attempt to discern exactly what Porphyry demonized and why. To be sure, he dismissed blood offerings as sacrifices to evil daemons, but I show that he dismissed reciprocity as well. For him, all prayers or sacrifices intended to propitiate, persuade, compel, or request material goods and worldly success interacted with evil daemons and not with the true gods.

3 Summary of Chapters

The dissertation is divided into two parts, the first pertaining to Porphyry and the pagan Platonic tradition and the second pertaining to Origen and the Christian tradition. Part 1 begins with a short chapter on Plato. It shows how his view of divine goodness and constancy led him to reject propitiatory reciprocity but not positive reciprocity. Chapter Two considers how Plato’s ideas were received around six hundred years later. Porphyry claimed to carry on the Platonic tradition, and he made direct quotations from Plato concerning sacrifice and the goodness of the

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45 Johnson, *Religion and Identity*: Chapters Two and Three.
gods. But Porphyry’s interpretations of these Platonic principles would have shocked the ancient master. His harsher stance against reciprocity distanced him further from traditional religion.

Chapter Three shows that, simultaneously, Porphyry had a great respect for traditional religion. Somehow, he had to reconcile it with his philosophical view of the divine nature. In order to do so, he reinterpreted the function of sacrifice as thanksgiving only, and he explained propitiatory reciprocity and some aspects of positive reciprocity as interactions with evil daemons. Chapter Four places Porphyry within the context of Middle and Neoplatonism. It shows that many others shared his objections to reciprocity. Like Porphyry, they suggested new interpretations of sacrifice that were compatible with their philosophical convictions. These interpretations were in competition with that of Porphyry. In the end, Iamblichus and the theurgists triumphed. Fourth-century Platonists did not imitate Porphyry’s use of evil daemons. Even during his time, it seems to have been an anomaly within pagan philosophy.

Part 2 begins with Chapter 5, which examines Origen’s attitude towards positive reciprocity. His position was comparable to that of Porphyry. He rejected prayers for earthly things, but not for spiritual things. He reconciled this view with the earthy prayers of the Hebrew Bible through a unique spiritual reading. He stood against certain unnamed Christians who, like Maximus of Tyre, rejected prayers of request altogether. Origen left perhaps the first philosophical defense of these prayers. But, at the same time, he downplayed them and emphasized, like Maximus, the aligning of one’s will with that of God. Chapter 6 shows that Origen’s philosophical view of God led him to reject propitiatory reciprocity. In order to reconcile this view with the sacrifices in his tradition, Origen interpreted “propitiation” as the
conversion of the sinner and said that Jesus’ sacrificial payment had been made to the Devil rather than to God.

Chapter 7 puts Origen’s perspectives in the context of the Christian tradition. No one else except, perhaps, Clement, felt the need to defend the idea that God could answer prayers of request. Nearly all the Christian writers downplayed requests for material things, but none of them completely rejected them as Origen had done. Of special note, Christian thinkers in the fourth century were more at ease with prayers for earthly things than their predecessors. The Cappadocians shared Origen’s rejection of propitiatory reciprocity, and were drawn to the Devil’s ransom for the same reasons. However, a striking number of late-third and fourth-century Christians from North Africa and the Levant explicitly rejected the philosophical view of God and explicitly advocated the belief in both positive and propitiatory reciprocity. When the Devil’s ransom appeared in their thinking, it did not play the role that it did for Origen or Gregory of Nyssa.
PART ONE
PORPHYRY AND PLATONISM
As mentioned in the Introduction, Middle and Neoplatonists quoted Plato’s statements on the divine nature and his critiques of propitiatory reciprocity, but they meant something very different. In order to show this, it is necessary to examine briefly Plato’s perspective. This
chapter considers, first, his attitude towards positive reciprocity, second, his rejection of propitiatory reciprocity, and, third, his view of divine justice, goodness and harmlessness.

1 Positive Reciprocity

According to Plato (420s-340s BC), the Demiurge did not receive sacrifices, but the gods of traditional religion did receive them (Ti. 40a). Moreover, there is sufficient evidence that Plato accepted positive reciprocity as the primary meaning of these sacrifices. In his Statesman, the Visitor says, “And then too the class of priests, in its turn, has—as custom tells us—expert knowledge about the giving through sacrifices of gifts from us to the gods which are pleasing to them, and about asking from them through prayers for the acquisition of good things for us” (290c-d).

1.1 Against Bartering with Needy Gods

In Euthyphro, Socrates and his companion explore what it means to practice piety, which Euthyphro defines as paying proper service (ἡ θεραπεία) to the gods. People cannot give them benefit (ἡ ὠφελία) or make them better (βελτίονες) as they do when attending to dogs or

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3 καὶ μὴ καὶ τοῦ ἱερέων αὖ γένος, ὡς τὸ νόμιμον φησι, παρὰ μὲν ἡμῶν δωρεὰς θεοῖς δὲ θυσίων ἐπιστήμων ἔστι κατὰ νόμον ἐκείνος δωρεάθηκεν παρὰ δὲ ἐκείνον ἡμῖν ἐχθρὰς κτῆσαι ἁγαθῶν αἰτήσεις. The dialogue does not make it absolutely clear that this was Plato’s position, but, as Naiden observes, Christopher J. Rowe connects this statement with other passages where Plato says that priests have special hieratic knowledge: Naiden, Smoke Signals: 200; Christopher J. Rowe, Plato: Statesman (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1995).

horses (13a-c). Euthyphro suggests, as an alternative, that people attend to the gods as servants attend to their masters (13d). Socrates presses to know exactly what this service to the gods accomplishes (13e). In frustration, Euthyphro retorts, “I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything” (14b).

Socrates gathers from this that piety is “a knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods” and that “to sacrifice is to make a gift to the gods, whereas to pray is to beg from the gods” (14c-d). He does not challenge this perspective but warns against seeing this exchange as a transaction, rather than as a free relationship of reciprocity. He scandalizes Euthyphro with the question, “Piety would then be a sort of trading skill between gods and men?” Obviously, this is unacceptable. It would be absurd to think that the gods benefit (ὡφελεῖσθαι) from sacrificial gifts, since everything that humans have comes from them. If there is a divine-human exchange of commodities, humans always get the better deal. Euphyphro suggests as a solution that sacrificial gifts to the gods confer no material advantage but only honor (τιμή), praise (γέρα), and

5 τόδε μέντοι σοι ἄπλως λέγω, ὅτι ἐὰν μὲν κεχαρισμένα τις ἑπιστήτηται τοῖς θεοῖς λέγειν τε καὶ πράττειν εὐχόμενός τε καὶ θύων, ταῦτ’ ἐστι τὰ δείκτα, καὶ σώζει τὰ τοιαῦτα τούς τε ἱδίους οἶκους καὶ κοινὰ τῶν πόλεων: τά δ’ ἐναντία τῶν κεχαρισμένων ἀσεβή, ἐ δὴ καὶ ἀνατρέπει ἄπαντα καὶ ἀπόλλυσιν. Socrates does not oppose this view here; indeed, he seems favorable. But dialogue is inherently ambiguous, and it is worth noting that Socrates was executed for rejecting a similar religious vision.

6 ἐπιστήμη ἢρα αἰτήσεως καὶ δόσεως.

7 το θείεν δορεῖσθαι ἐστι τοῖς θεοῖς, τὸ δ’ εὐχεσθαι αἰτεῖν τοὺς θεοὺς.

8 ἐμπορικὴ ἢρα τις ἄν εἴη, ὁ Ἐὐθύφρων, τέχνη ἡ ὀσιότης θεοίς καὶ ἀνθρώποις παρ’ ἀλλήλων.
gratitude (χάρις) (14c-15a), a suggestion that Socrates seems to accept. As Daniel Ullucci points out, such statements do not rule out reciprocity but only “automatic reciprocity,” or reciprocity turned into transaction. The gods do not need gifts from humans, so they cannot be compelled to respond as a fishmonger is compelled to give fish in return for money. But it remains that people owe the gods honor and thanks, and to those who give this proper response, the gods bestow their blessings.

1.2 The Gods Listen Only to the Virtuous

In Laws, Plato emphasized that the only way to avoid the divine vengeance of the unswerving God who sustains all things is to “follow in the company of God” – to become of like character to him through temperance and moderation (715e-716d). Plato argued that, since virtue was so important to the gods, they would only enter into a reciprocal relationship with virtuous people. He called this principle “of all doctrines the finest and truest.” According to him, for the wicked, sacrifices, prayers, and devotions are useless. He explained, “the wicked man’s soul is polluted, and it is never right for a good man or for God to receive gifts from unclean hands” (716d-e).

Thus, virtue is a prerequisite for effective sacrifice. Plato wrote, “even if impious people do lavish a lot of attention on the gods, they are wasting their time, whereas the trouble taken by

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9 Ullucci and Harold North Fowler believe that Socrates accepts this conclusion, though the passage is not explicit: Ullucci, Christian Rejection: 35, 166, n. 17; Fowler, Plato in Twelve Volumes, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1966), 4-5.


the pious is very much in season” (717a).\(^{12}\) Again, he said, “If a good man sacrifices to the gods and keeps them constant company in his prayers and offerings and every kind of worship he can give them, this will be the best and noblest policy he can follow; it is the conduct that fits his character as nothing else can, and it is his most effective way of achieving a happy life” (716d-e).\(^{13}\) Plato went on to designate sacrificial honors in descending order for the Olympians, the gods of Hades, the daemons, heroes, ancestral deities, and even parents. The principle was that people should return service to these beings for the benefits they had received (717a-c). But Plato was not saying that sacrifice was merely thanksgiving. According to him, “If we do that, and live in accordance with these rules, each of us will get the reward we deserve from the gods and such beings as are superior to ourselves, and live in a spirit of cheerful confidence for most of the years of our life” (718a).\(^{14}\)

1.3 Plato’s View of Positive Reciprocity in Comparison to that of Traditional Religion

Taken together, the passages above clearly show that Plato expected material benefits to result from proper sacrificial service to the divine. But, he also emphasized several limiting points: 1) Sacrifice does not enhance the gods or their possessions. It provides them only with honor and thanks. 2) It must not be seen as a transaction but as a free relationship of reciprocity between unequal parties. 3) The gods only enter into reciprocal relationships with virtuous

\(^{12}\) μάτην οὖν περὶ θεοῦς πολὺς ἐστὶ πόνος τοῖς ἄνοσίοις, τοῦτον δὲ ὅσιος ἐγκαρδότατος ἀπαστόν.

\(^{13}\) ὡς τῷ μὲν ἀγαθῷ θύειν καὶ προσωπικὸν ἂν τοῖς θεοῖς εὐχαίς καὶ ἀναθήμασιν καὶ συμπάσῃ θεραπεία θεῶν κάλλιστον καὶ ἀριστον καὶ ἀνομιώτατον πρὸς τὸν εὐδαιμόνιν βιόν καὶ δὴ καὶ διαφερόντος πρέπον, τῷ δὲ κακῷ τούτων τάναντι πέροκεν.

\(^{14}\) ταῦτ’ ἂν ποιοῦντες καὶ κατὰ ταῦτα ζῶντες ἕκαστος ἕκαστος τὴν ἄξιαν ἂν παρὰ θεῶν καὶ ὅσοι κρείττονες ἡμῶν κομίζομεθα, ἐν ἑλπίσιν ἀγαθαῖς διάγοντες τῷ πλεῖστον τοῦ βίου.
people. Wicked people can never please the gods or receive any benefits from them, no matter how much they sacrifice.

As Ullucci and Naiden point out, these ideas were not revolutionary, or at least not unique. Others insisted that the sacrificer (and those who attended sacrifices) be morally pure.\textsuperscript{15} Menander made fun of characters who thought of sacrifice as a transaction with the gods.\textsuperscript{16} Ullucci argues that traditional religion would have agreed with Plato that the gods were not in need of sacrificial gifts. Reciprocity did not imply need on the part of the more powerful party, and “there is very little evidence that a majority of people in the ancient Mediterranean believed the gods were beholden to humans in any way, sacrifices included.”\textsuperscript{17} Naiden agrees with regard to “ordinary sacrifice,” in which the gods “supposedly battened on the smoke of burning offerings” but received only “satisfaction,” not “sustenance.” The gods’ portion – some of the blood splattered on the altar, the entrails, and burning bones and fat – was “not so much a substance as a sign.” In other words, like Christmas cards or apples given to teachers, sacrifices were valuable to the gods because of what they communicated, not for their intrinsic value or physical properties.

Naiden contrasts this with the τραπεζώματα that sometimes accompanied sacrifices. These tables with gifts of food lured the gods to be present, eat, and attend to the suppliant’s sacrifice and prayer. Occasionally, this hospitality elevated to become θεοξένια, full feasts with gods in attendance. In these rituals, the gods “supposedly ate” and received “sustenance.”\textsuperscript{18} But

\textsuperscript{15} Ullucci, \textit{Christian Rejection}: 35; Naiden, \textit{Smoke Signals}: 104-09.

\textsuperscript{16} Ullucci, \textit{Christian Rejection}: 35.

\textsuperscript{17} Ullucci, \textit{Christian Rejection}: 28-29.

\textsuperscript{18} Naiden, \textit{Smoke Signals}: 52-60, but especially 58 and 69.
Naiden believes that the practice of the θεοξένια was “aberrant.” Even if these practices had been mainstream, they would not have implied that the gods were in need. Such feasts might invite their presence; they might even eat, but none of this suggested physical dependency. Most people probably saw the τραπεζώματα and θεοξένια simply as other ways to bring honor to the gods.

Thus, Plato’s position on positive reciprocity probably did not differ significantly from that of mainstream Greek thought; but I emphasize mainstream because some people probably did implicitly hold the degraded views of reciprocity against which Plato and other intellectuals warned. As Ullucci says, gifts in the ancient world did apply social pressure on the recipient, even though the items or honor given were ostensibly free. Reciprocity was susceptible to degrading into a thinly veiled bartering. There is no doubt that certain people in Plato’s society downplayed the importance of their relationship with the gods and began to give “what the gods wanted” only to receive back what they wanted. The related assumptions (even if they remained implicit) that the gods were in need of sacrifices or that they would respond to them regardless of the moral standing of the worshipper might have existed in some circles. But this was a

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19 Naiden follows D. Flückiger-Guggenheim in thinking that “the notion of a divine guest is a compromise among competing needs,” and he observes J. P. Vernant’s claim that feeding the gods in this way was more characteristic of Mesopotamian sacrifice than Greek: Flückiger-Guggenheim, Göttliche Gäste: Die Einkehr von Göttern und Heroen in der griechischen Mythologie (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984), 24-26; Vernant, Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays, ed. F. Zeitlin (Princeton University, 1991), 302-03.

20 In another context, J. van Baal shows that people never expected the gods to eat the food left for them. Mice, ants or children ate it. “[T]he giving is a symbolic act of communication and so is the disappearance of the food a symbol of the participation of the gods and credulously ascribed to their acceptance” (van Baal, “Offering, Sacrifice and Gift,” Numen 23, no. 3 (1976), quoted in Ullucci, Christian Rejection: 29).

21 It is difficult to pin down precisely the circles in which such ideas existed. As the next section will show, Plato accused “begging priests and soothsayers” of convincing rich men of their errors. According to him, not only “the multitude” but also “states” and “men of the highest authority” believed that they could bribe the gods to pardon them. Dale Martin argues that Theophrastus’ criticism of δεισιδαιμονία and the scrupulous placation of angry divinities was a criticism of lower class assumptions and conduct (Martin, Inventing Superstition: Chapter 3,
degradation of reciprocity. On this, Plato and many of his fellow Greeks agreed. It was in the area of propitiatory reciprocity that Plato parted ways with his culture.

2 Propitiatory Reciprocity

2.1 Sacrifices Cannot Cure Misdeeds

In the Republic, after emphasizing divine justice, Plato observed that certain “[b]egging priests and prophets [ἀγύρται δὲ καὶ μάντεις]” convinced people that they could avoid divine punishment for their sins by making the right offerings. These priests “frequent the doors of the rich and persuade them that they possess a god-given power founded on sacrifices and incantations. If the rich person or any of his ancestors has committed an injustice, they can fix it with pleasant rituals” (364b-c). Furthermore, these priests say that they can harm even just people without the consequences of divine judgment, “for by means of spells and enchantments they can persuade the gods to serve them” (364c).

Plato went on: “Others quote Homer to bear witness that the gods can be influenced by humans, since he said: ‘The gods themselves can be swayed by prayer, / And with sacrifices and soothing promises, / Incense and libations, human beings turn them from their purpose / When

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especially p. 28). Around half a millennium later, Porphyry and Lucian of Samosata accused primarily the “masses” of believing that the gods were dependent upon human gifts and could be manipulated and propitiated when they became angry, though Porphyry included some “students of philosophy” among the misguided.


23 ἐπεὶ τι αδίκημα τοῦ γέγονεν αὐτοῦ ἢ προγόνων, ἀκείσθαι μεθ᾽ ἡδονῶν τε καὶ ἔστων.

24 ἐπαγγαγάς τισι καὶ καταδέσμοις, τοὺς θεοὺς, ὡς φασίν, πείθοντες σφίσιν ύπηρετεῖν.
someone has transgressed and sinned” (364d-e, cf. Il. 9.497-501). Such people “persuade not only individuals but whole cities that the unjust deeds of the living or the dead can be absolved or purified through ritual sacrifices and pleasant games” (364e-365a). “These initiations, as they call them, free people from punishment hereafter, while a terrible fate awaits those who have not performed the rituals.” (365a).

Plato observed the social consequence of this: young men would determine to commit injustice as often as it was to their advantage (365a-b). Plato concluded that, if propitiation were effective, the best course of action would be to commit injustice freely and then to “offer sacrifice from the fruits of our injustice” to the gods. In this way, we will “get the profits of our crimes and transgressions and afterwards persuade the gods by prayer and escape without punishment” (365e-366a). According to Plato, this was the perspective of “eminent authorities” as well as of “the many” (366b).

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25 οἱ δὲ τῆς τῶν θεῶν ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων παραγωγῆς τῶν Ὠμηρον μαρτύρονται, ὅτι καὶ ἐκεῖνος εἶπεν λίστοι δὲ τε καὶ θεοὶ αὐτοῖ, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θυσίας καὶ εὐχαλαίς ἁγαναίσιν λοιφή τε κνίσῃ τε παρατρωπὸς ἀνθρώποι λισσόμενοι, ὅτε κέν τις ὑπερβηκαὶ καὶ ἀμαρτηκαὶ.

Plato’s quotation differs from the original in having λίστοι instead of στρεπτοί and in omitting the following line: τῶν περὶ καὶ μεῖζον ἀρετὴς τιμὴ τε βῆ τε.

26 πείθοντες οὐ μόνον ἰδιώτας ἀλλὰ καὶ πόλεις, ὡς ἁρα λύσεις τε καὶ καθαρμοὶ ἀδικημάτων διὰ θυσιῶν καὶ παιδίας ἡδονῶν εἰσὶ μὲν ἐτὶ ζῶσιν, εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ τελευτησιν.

27 ἂς δὴ τελετὰς καλοῦσιν, αἳ τὸν ἑκεῖ κακῶν ἀπολύουσιν ἡμᾶς, μὴ θύσαντας δὲ δεινὰ περιμένει.

28 ἀδικητέον καὶ θυτέον ἀπὸ τῶν ἀδικημάτων.

29 ἀδικοὶ δὲ κερδάνυμέν τε καὶ λισσόμενοι ὑπερβαίνοντες καὶ ἀμαρτάνοντες, πείθοντες αὐτούς ἀζήμιοι ἀπαλλάξομεν.

30 οἱ τῶν πολλῶν τε καὶ ἄκρων λεγόμενος λόγος could also refer to the perspective of “[m]any eminent authorities,” as Grube renders it. I have altered his translation, believing that the strong τε καὶ connects two different groups of people.
2.2 Inescapable Divine Justice

In *Laws* 904-907, Plato treated the same topic. He began with the claim that no one could escape the just sentence of the gods. In both life and death, “you’ll pay the proper penalty for your crimes” (904e-905a). Some wicked people may seem to prosper, but judgment will come eventually (905b). Then Plato observed that some people tried to escape the principle of divine judgment by saying that the gods “can be bought off by the gifts of sinners.” According to Plato, “No one should ever assent to this thesis, and we must fight to the last ditch to refute it.” (905d).

His main argument was that the nature and role of the gods made propitiation nonsensical. They had the essence and character of those who ruled the entire heavens. Humans could never seduce such exalted rulers (905d-e). Plato described the gods and daemons as the allies of humans, protecting people and watching over them like guard dogs or shepherds or “masters of the utmost grandeur” (906a-b). And, since they were gods, they were necessarily “the most supreme guardians of all . . . distinguished . . . for their personal skill” (907a). To let one human harm another without punishing the offender would show the height of incompetence (906d-e). Moreover, to do so in return for sacrificial gifts would show the gods to be unjust as well as controllable. In reality, the gods “are absolutely above being corrupted into flouting
justice” (907b).\(^{35}\) How could they be “inferior to dogs, or the mere man in the street, who’ll never abandon justice [τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄν ποτὲ προδοῦεν], in spite of the gifts that the unjust immorally press upon him?” (907a). That would be like saying that “if wolves, for instance, were to give watch-dogs a small part of their prey, the dogs would be appeased by the gift\(^{36}\) and turn a blind eye to the plundering of the flock.” Plato finished, “Isn’t this what people are really suggesting when they say that gods are susceptible to persuasion [παρατητοῦς ἔναι θεοὺς]?” (906c–d).\(^{37}\)

According to Plato, such people are asking “to be condemned—and with every justification—as the worst and most impious of the impious” (907b). They are “in possession of ill-gotten gains,” and “in their obviously brutish way throw themselves before\(^{38}\) the souls of their guardians . . . and by wheedling words and winning entreaties [θωπείαις λόγων καὶ ἐν εὐκταίαις τισὶν ἔπωδαίζ] try to persuade them of the truth of the line put about by scoundrels—that they have the right to feather their nest with impunity\(^{39}\) at mankind’s expense” (906b–c). Not only are they mistaken in thinking that they will avoid divine judgment but also their vice of acquisitiveness is like a disease in the body, injurious to the entire community (906c). On the basis of this danger to the community, Plato justified speaking “with some force” in his desire “to get the better of these scoundrels” who might have thought that “victory in argument was a license to do as they please” (907b–c).

\(^{35}\) παρὰ τὸ δίκαιον ὡς παντάπασιν ἀπαραίτητοι.

\(^{36}\) ἡμεροῦμενι τοῖς δόροις.

\(^{37}\) Here I have altered the translation of Saunders, who renders παρατητοῦς ἔναι θεοὺς “that gods can be squared.”

\(^{38}\) προσπίπτειν.

\(^{39}\) πάσχειν μηδὲν χαλεπόν.
In the passages from the *Republic* and *Laws* presented above, Plato pointed out the social consequences of the belief in propitiation: it encouraged the practice of injustice. But he also claimed (particularly in *Laws*) that propitiation was inconsistent with the kingly power, unswerving justice, and effective regency of the gods. Even if the gods were willing to compromise their justice, they could never be constrained, seduced, or persuaded by sacrificial gifts. After all, as Socrates and Euthyphro agreed, sacrifices did not provide the gods with necessities, but only with honor and praise.

2.3 Plato’s View of Propitiatory Reciprocity in Comparison to that of Traditional Religion

In Plato’s mind, propitiatory sacrifices always implied the degradation of reciprocity that Greek thinkers deplored. Proper reciprocity entailed the giving of ostensibly free gifts with no expectation of immediate or equal return. The gifts fed a relationship, and within the context of this relationship, the gods delighted to answer human requests. According to Plato, propitiatory sacrifice was different because it was meant to turn the gods from just punishment, to cause them to go against their natural course of action. This would no longer be reciprocity, but transaction, or worse, bribery. Furthermore, if the gifts were so valuable in the eyes of the gods as to turn them from justice, this would imply that they were in need of such gifts.

Of course Greek culture did not view propitiation as the bribing of the gods. Plato argued that this was its essential character, but how fair was his accusation? As literature and

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40 As Gabriel Herman shows, Greeks in the archaic era had no concept of, or specific word for, “bribe.” Relationships of *ξενία* included the giving of gifts that carried with them some obligation—a situation that was not condemned. Only with the rise of the *πόλις* were such gifts seen to be problematic, and then only when they created an individual loyalty that conflicted with one’s loyalty to the *πόλις* as a whole. See Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge University, 1987), 75-81. Plato appears to have applied this civil reasoning to the divine realm: the gods could receive gifts, but not gifts that obligated them to the detriment of the people. One could not pay the gods for the freedom to exploit others. If we can believe Plato, many common people, rich men,
history relate, the Greeks sometimes offered a sacrifice to a god in order to somehow do away with the destructive wrath of that god. Several Greek words bear witness to this: ἀποτρέπεσθαι (to turn away), παρατρέπειν/παρατρωπᾶν (to turn away), μειλίττεσθαι/ἀπομειλίττεσθαι (to make mild, to appease). As Fritz Graf observes, the Delphian oracle often prescribed sacrifices to appease an angry Zeus. Honoring him in this way presumably mollified him and caused him to desist from inflicting misfortunes (such as earthquakes) on offending communities. At first, this category of propitiation seems open to Plato’s charge of bribery; but perhaps pious Greeks considered propitiatory sacrifice to be an expression of real sorrow and of an intention to right wrongs committed. In this case, it would not technically be the sacrifice that turned away divine wrath but the human attitude that the sacrifice supposedly indicated. This would have been in keeping with the principles of reciprocity.

Perhaps this was so, but such an interpretation would have been precarious. It would have been all too easy for the operative element to shift from the attitude indicated by the sacrifice to the sacrifice itself. From this, it would have been a small step to the idea that one could commit religious and political authorities and even states (πόλεις) disagreed; but surely Plato was not the only one to project the rules of the πόλις upon the divine administration of the cosmos.

41 But many references to propitiation use the more generic θάνατος.


43 I ignore, for the moment, the possibility that the gods might unjustly punish humans who had committed no egregious wrong. The propitiation of this capricious divine anger would be even more open to Plato’s charges of bribery.
wrongs when it suited one’s purpose and avoid divine judgment through propitiatory sacrifice. It seems likely that a contingent in Greek culture would have adopted this view. If not, it is difficult to imagine why Plato would have been so concerned about the social consequences of the belief in propitiation. He would have engaged in a remarkable amount of tilting at windmills, which seems unlikely, since he had particular groups (and perhaps individuals) in mind when he made his objections.

3 Justice and the Gods

Especially in light of later developments in philosophical thought, one more point – Plato’s concept of divine goodness – requires attention. If there is one theme that dominated Plato’s thinking, it was the definition of justice, the nature of justice, and the advantage of justice. Moreover, Plato pushed people to consider the relationship between the gods and justice. Socrates asks Euthyphro, for example, whether holiness is defined as what the gods love or whether holiness is a standard beyond the gods but to which they subscribe (10a). For Plato, justice was clearly that which was consistent with the nature of God. He said, “In our view it is God who is preeminently the ‘measure of all things’” (Leg. 716c). Though Plato believed in other categories of propitiation existed that were not so susceptible to the charge of bribery. Sometimes, the wrong committed had been the neglect of a god’s cult rites. In this case, the propitiatory sacrifice was itself the righting of the wrong, and this correction obtained divine mercy. Other propitiatory sacrifices requested one god to defend people from the wrath of another god. For example, Fritz Graf cites a Delphian oracle to the city of Tralleis in Asia Minor: “In order to free yourself [ἐξανέλυσας] from Zeus’ wrath [μήνειμα] of a thousand years, erect an altar in a sacred grove to the gentle He-Who-Shakes-the-Earth and sacrifice [θύεο] according to tradition (do not ask me for more, city) to Kronos’ son in the sea, offerings plucked from wheat and from fruit by the priest’s bright hand.” Apparently, the Trallians were to sacrifice to Poseidon, requesting that he intercede for them with the angry Zeus. Graf, “Earthquakes,” 99. Graf is citing and translating F. B. Poljakov, Die Inschriften von Tralleis und Nysa, vol. 1 (Bonn: Habelt, 1989), no. 1. Sometimes the Greeks sacrificed to a god to request that god’s aid in turning away some external evil of undesignated origin. For example, the Hippocratic document Regimen directs those who receive dreams with contrary signs to pray to the chthonic gods and the heroes, whose job it is to avert evils (4.89). See Martin, Inventing Superstition: 48.

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different levels of divine beings, he assumed that all of them (including daemons) were good (Leg. 906a).

3.1 The Just Man Does no Harm, Even to His Enemies

As mentioned in the Introduction, Dale Martin argues that Plato’s concept of divine goodness was in conflict with the traditional perception that divinities could be capriciously dangerous. Other scholars seem to disagree, or at least to offer a nuanced perspective. Jon Mikalson observes that classical, Athenian religion also saw the gods (at least the Olympians) as good and beneficent. Robert Parker claims that, when the principles of reciprocity are understood, the actions of the Greek gods no longer appear to be unjust. This may be true, at least from the perspective of ancient Greek culture; but the fact remains that, to Plato, the traditional gods seemed unjust, or at least he accused them of being so. This may have been because Plato’s definition of justice differed from that of his culture. In the Republic, Socrates and Polymarchus consider the traditional definition of justice (doing good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies) (332d). Socrates pushes Polymarchus to alter the definition to

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47 This is an important point. Especially in Late Antiquity, it was common to claim that another group believed in an evil god, but this did not mean that the group in question consciously did so. Gnostics and Marcionites claimed that Yahweh was an unreasonable (or even an evil) divinity. But of course Jews and mainstream Christians claimed to believe in a good God. They either read the Pentateuch differently to allow for this, or their definition of goodness differed somewhat from that of their opponents.

48 For the claim that this was the traditional understanding, see Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge University, 1989). Plato, however, presented this as a tyrants’ definition of justice, subversive to the true tradition. It is unlikely that Plato was completely alone in this conviction.
emphasize virtue rather than social connections: justice means doing good to just people (not just to friends) and evil to unjust people (not just to enemies) (334d). Then Socrates overturns this, too, claiming that the just man does no harm, either to his friends or to his enemies (335d-e). 49

3.2 Harm as the Degradation of the Moral Faculty

Before evaluating this theory of justice, careful attention must be given to Plato’s unique definition of doing harm (βλάπτειν). For him, it meant the harming of the distinctive virtue (ἁρετή) of a thing. Since the distinctive virtue of humanity was justice, harm to a human being meant the degradation of that person’s moral faculty (335b-c). This allowed inflicting any amount of physical suffering on people, so long as it resulted in individuals more inclined to justice.

In keeping with this, the ideal state of the Laws was to make significant use of punishments. More importantly, Plato repeatedly emphasized the just judgments of the gods in this life and the next. 50 The important thing for Plato was that harm be inflicted for the moral betterment of the offender. Divine punishments always followed this rule, meaning that wise people would not wish to avoid them, even if they could buy the gods’ pardon. In light of this, a very important distinction must be made. Plato did not reject justly and benevolently harmful

49 οὐκ ἔδρα τοῦ δικαίου βλάπτειν ἔργον, ὦ Πολέμαρχε, οὕτε φίλον οὕτ᾽ ἄλλον οὐδένα, ἄλλα τοῦ ἐναντίον, τοῦ ἄδικον.

50 For example, “Justice, who takes vengeance on those who abandon the divine law, never leaves [god’s] side. . . [H]e who bursts with pride . . . pays to Justice no trifling penalty and brings himself, his home and state to rack and ruin. Thus it is ordained” (Leg. 716a-b). Clearly, Plato’s concept of divine punishment included material suffering; but Paul Shorey points to some passages in which the real punishment for sin is separation from fellowship with the good (Thit. 176d-e; Leg. 728b, 367a): Shorey, Plato in Twelve Volumes, vol. 5-6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1969), see his comment on Resp. 363e.
gods; but he did reject the idea that the gods (or even daemons) could be personally offended or cause random, undeserved, or capricious harm. In this, he conflicted with traditional religion, which left room for some malicious divinities and held that the Olympians could be angered, not simply by injustices, but by the neglect of their cults. Plato’s belief that just punishments should ideally achieve the moral betterment of the offender also conflicted with the traditional Greek view. The traditional gods did not punish the wicked to do them good.

The next chapter will consider how these ideas were received around six hundred years later. Porphyry claimed to carry on the Platonic tradition, and he made direct quotations from Plato concerning sacrifice and the goodness of the gods; but Porphyry’s interpretations of these Platonic principles would have shocked the ancient master.
2
PORPHYRY ON RECIPROCITY

Contents

1 Positive Reciprocity 54

1.1 Sacrifice as the Offering of First-fruits 54

1.2 Sacrifice of Noetic First-fruits 56

1.2.1 Purity and Contemplation as Sacrifice 56

1.2.2 Theological Science 57

1.2.3 Theological Drama 59

1.2.4 Prayer for Virtue and by the Virtuous 61

1.2.5 Good Daemons Warn Philosophers 63

1.3 Sacrifice of Physical First-fruits 65

1.3.1 The Limited Importance of Physical Offerings 65

1.3.2 The Gods are Not in Need 66

1.3.3 All Reciprocity is Bartering with the Gods 67

1.3.4 The Sacrifices of the Wicked 71

2 Propitiatory Reciprocity 72

2.1 Animal Sacrifice Implies the Belief in Propitiation 73

2.2 Abstraction Instead of Analogy 75

2.3 The Absence of Direct Divine Punishments 76

2.3.1 The Gods Cause no Harm at All 77
Chapter 1 considered Plato’s attitude towards the traditional Greek interpretation of sacrifice and prayer. It shows that he accepted positive reciprocity with qualifications and that he rejected propitiatory reciprocity. This chapter skips forward six hundred years to the Neoplatonist Porphyry of Tyre in the third century AD. Porphyry repeated Plato’s statements on sacrifice, but he interpreted them through a new lens. In contrast with the ancient master, he almost completely rejected positive reciprocity and he rejected propitiatory reciprocity for different reasons.¹ Porphyry was not singlehandedly responsible for this transformation of the Platonic tradition. He inherited much of it from Plotinus and Middle Platonism, a topic discussed in Chapter 4. The goal of the present chapter is to show what had changed by Porphyry’s time, not to identify when that change occurred.

¹ An obvious difference between the two is that Plato accepted animal sacrifice and Porphyry (a Neopythagorean) rejected it. As mentioned in the Introduction, studies of Porphyry often focus on this rejection of blood offerings. No studies, to my knowledge, address the more important fact that Porphyry almost completely rejected reciprocity. Fritz Graf comes the closest to doing so when he observes that animal sacrifice, and even sacrifice in general, were only a part of the philosophical contestation of religions in the imperial period: Graf, “Satirist's Sacrifices.” Aaron P. Johnson does not specifically mention reciprocity, but he recognizes that, in contrast with Plato, Porphyry and Plotinus showed a noteworthy “emotional and intellectual reserve towards” cult practices and “popular religious activity:” Johnson, Religion and Identity: 179. The present chapter identifies some of the reasons for Porphyry’s greater reserve.
Plato believed that the gods often responded to sacrificial gifts by answering people’s prayers and giving them good things; but, like many other ancient Greeks, he warned against wrong views of this positive reciprocity. He said that the gods would not enter into a gift-giving relationship with wicked people. Furthermore, they did not need sacrifices – they simply appreciated the honor and χάρις expressed through the rites. This meant that sacrifice could not buy the gods’ blessings. It was a humble and worshipful appeal.

In Porphyry’s hands, Plato’s warnings became arguments against positive reciprocity as a whole. For him, those who tried to obtain good things from the gods through sacrifice always believed that the gods needed their gifts and could be forced to reciprocate, as in a business transaction. Perhaps evil daemons could be coerced in this way, but not the true gods. According to Porphyry, the only proper role of sacrifice was to thank the gods for their blessings – it could not aid in making requests.

Even if it could have done so, Porphyry would have ruled out all requests for material things or earthly success. In his ascetic vision, such things were not true goods – they bound the soul more firmly to the blindness and injustice associated with the passions, hindering its ascent to the divine. To pray for these things was useless and revealed a misconception of the gods. The only proper prayers, in Porphyry’s mind, requested the gods’ help in living the ascetic and contemplative life that led to salvation. The gods would answer these prayers, he said, only if the orantes were already striving to live such a life. Thus, the life of virtue (which Porphyry occasionally called “noetic sacrifice”) aided one’s prayers for virtue. One might call this a sort of intellectual reciprocity, but it is doubtful that Porphyry saw it in this way.
Like Plato, Porphyry rejected propitiatory reciprocity, but not for the same reasons. Plato believed that the gods blessed the righteous and disciplined the wicked. This had a positive effect upon society, for the wicked refrained from committing injustice for fear of divine punishment. If propitiatory sacrifice could avert this punishment, the wicked would no longer need to fear. They would freely do wrong so long as they had the resources to propitiate the gods. In one passage, Porphyry mentioned this idea for the sake of argument, but he himself showed no concern about it. His rejection of propitiation was not an attempt to uphold the inevitability of divine punishments.

This was because he did not believe that the gods punished the wicked – at least not directly. Plato’s gods were harmless only in the sense that they did not damage the soul’s moral aspirations. Porphyry’s gods were harmless in the sense that they did no damage at all, either to body or soul. Only ignorant people thought that the gods caused disasters or misfortunes or punished people for their mistakes. These people offered propitiatory sacrifices to avert such punishments. Thus, propitiation implied the faulty belief that the gods were “harmful,” according to Porphyry’s definition of the word. In contrast, Plato had rejected propitiation because it implied that one could avert the punishments the gods inflicted.

There was a second difference between these philosophers’ views of propitiation. Plato compared the gods to good watchdogs, herdsmen, or guardians. Being divine, they were supremely competent and consistent. They would not allow one human to harm another without punishing the evildoer. Propitiatory sacrifices could not persuade them to overlook such a fault any more than bribes could persuade a good human magistrate to let criminals off the hook. In contrast, Porphyry used abstract terms instead of metaphors to describe the gods. Their absolute
impassibility made them incapable of being persuaded or influenced in any way. This ruled out propitiation, but it also threatened the possibility of any divine response to human action. Perhaps this was an additional factor leading to Porphyry’s rejection (or near rejection) of positive reciprocity.

The following pages demonstrate these points, beginning with positive reciprocity and finishing with propitiatory reciprocity.

1 Positive Reciprocity

1.1 Sacrifice as the Offering of First-fruits

In On Abstinence\textsuperscript{2} 2.34-37, Porphyry outlined a hierarchy of divinities with different sacrifices appropriate to each.\textsuperscript{3} To the highest gods one offered immaterial, noetic things, such as contemplation. To the lower gods and good daemons one offered material things, such as crops. All of these sacrifices were “first-fruits offerings.”\textsuperscript{4} Porphyry wrote, “the act of sacrifice\textsuperscript{5} has the value of a first-fruits offering and of thanksgiving to the gods for what we have from them for...


\textsuperscript{3} Fritz Graf notes that Porphyry begins to articulate a similar hierarchy in a fragment of De philosophia ex oraculis (Phil.Orac.) (Eusebius, Praeparatio evangelica (Praep. evang.) 4.14). Graf, "Satirist's Sacrifices," 207. For the indebtedness of Porphyry’s hierarchy to Apollonius of Tyana, see Rives, "Theology of Animal Sacrifice," 195-97. I suggest that these hierarchies of sacrifices to different levels of gods were Middle and Neoplatonic developments of a similar hierarchy in Plato (Leg. 717-18).

\textsuperscript{4} Ἀπαρχή, along with its verbal form (ἀπάρχεσθαι), are Porphyry’s favorite words for sacrifice in Abst. He also uses θυσία and θύω, but, as in this passage, the context usually shows that he wants to redefine θυσία as a bloodless offering of thanksgiving.

\textsuperscript{5} In this passage, “the act of sacrifice” refers to the customary (and, presumably, material) sacrifices “which prevail among each people” and are “in accordance with the law of the city.” Porphyry was “not trying to destroy” these customs, since they allowed philosophers to limit themselves to inanimate offerings, but he was trying to define the “value” or purpose of these sacrifices and to rule out inappropriate interpretations of them (2.33.1). In the next chapter (2.34), Porphyry broadened this customary definition of sacrifice to include “noetic” offerings.
Different levels of divinities in the hierarchy bestowed different blessings on humanity and thus required different first-fruits offerings. “For sacrifice is an offering to each god from what he has given, with which he sustains us and maintains our essence in being” (2.34.4). The same concept appears again near the end of Book 2, where Porphyry spoke of proper sacrifice as a repaying of the gods’ favor through remembering their goodness, loving them, and honoring them (2.61.1-3).

Porphyry’s emphasis on sacrifice as a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving was not necessarily incompatible with a belief in reciprocity. Like Porphyry, Plato emphasized that sacrifice was an act of thanksgiving to one’s benefactors, but he did not think that it was simply an act of thanksgiving. It invited further reciprocation, and dutiful sacrificers could expect additional blessings from the gods and a life full of happiness (Leg. 717-18). The pages below consider whether or not Porphyry assigned this additional reciprocal function to the sacrifice of first-fruits. Noetic sacrifices are considered first, and then material offerings.

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6 τὸ τῆς θυσίας ἀπαρχῆς ἐχει ἀξίων καὶ εὐχαριστίας ὃν παρὰ θεόν ἐξομεν εἰς τὰς χρείας. I believe the “if” (εἰ) that proceeds this sentence is rhetorical.

7 Ἀπαρχὴ γὰρ ἐκάστῳ ὅν δέδωκεν ἡ θυσία, καὶ δι᾽ ὅν ἡμῶν τρέφει καὶ εἰς τὸ εἶναι συνέχει τὴν οὐσίαν.

8 Again, he used the terms ἀπαρχῆ and ἀπάρχεσθαι.

9 Though he did not use the terms ἀπαρχῆ or ἀπάρχεσθαι.
1.2 Sacrifice of Noetic First-fruits

1.2.1 Purity and Contemplation as Sacrifice

At the top of the hierarchy are “the god who rules over all” and “his offspring, the noetic gods.” According to Porphyry, these gods granted to humanity internal and external expression.\(^\text{10}\) To those who were fit, they manifested themselves, leading to the salvation of the soul. “So, as a farmer offers first-fruits of corn-ears and fruits, so we offer as first-fruits to [the noetic gods] fine thoughts about them,\(^\text{11}\) giving thanks for what they have given us to contemplate, and for feeding us with the true food of seeing them, present with us, manifesting themselves, shining out to save us.” This return of immaterial first-fruits, or “noetic sacrifice” (2.45.4),\(^\text{12}\) was the “best offering” to the gods (2.61.1).\(^\text{13}\) It included abstaining from the passions of the body and the soul, thinking rightly about the divine nature, and becoming like god in “our own uplifting” (2.34.1-5, 2.45.4).\(^\text{14}\) In other words, it was the life of ascetic virtue, contemplation and philosophy.

This raised the notion of sacrifice to a higher level. It remains to determine whether this noetic sacrifice retained any sense of reciprocity – whether it aided one’s prayers and obtained good things from the gods. One strange passage on early Pythagoreans suggests that it might.

According to Porphyry, these philosophers made their sacrifices geometric figures and numbers,

\(^{10}\) “Expression” translates λόγος.

\(^{11}\) I have altered Clark’s translation here to make Porphyry’s use of ἀπάρχεσθαι apparent.

\(^{12}\) Τῇ νοερά θυσία.

\(^{13}\) Θεοίς δὲ ἄριστη μὲν ἀπαρχή νοος καθαρός καὶ ψυχή ἀπαθής. In 2.45.4 and 2.61.1, it is not clear to which gods Porphyry advocated offering noetic sacrifice. He used the words θείου, τοῦ θείου, τῷ θεῷ, and θεοῖς. Note that this concept of worship to the highest God was not confined to a philosophical ivory tower. As the epigraphic and archaeological evidence shows, the cult of θεὸς ὑψιστὸς was one of the most widespread cults in the eastern Empire, and its practices (as described by Stephen Mitchell) resembled in some ways the worship described by Porphyry. Mitchell, “The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians,” in Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), especially 99.

\(^{14}\) “Becoming like” translates ὁμοίωσο and “lifting up” translates ἀναγωγῆ.
which they associated with particular virtues. Their offerings so “pleased” the gods that they received help from them in their philosophical research and in divination (2.36.1-2). Porphyry cited this story as evidence that only non-physical sacrifices were appropriate for the high gods. So his point was not to demonstrate the effectiveness of reciprocity. Still, it is an odd citation for him to have made if he were trying to avoid the concept of reciprocity altogether.

Beyond this passage, Porphyry never said that noetic or immaterial sacrifice gained benefits from the gods. But he did believe that the life of ascetic virtue and contemplation (which he occasionally called noetic sacrifice) obtained divine help along the path to salvation. In other words, the gods helped the virtuous to be more virtuous. Whether this help can be described as reciprocation is questionable and partly depends on which passages one reads. Sometimes Porphyry said that virtuous people had access to divine benefits because of natural (and rather impersonal) laws that had nothing to do with reciprocity. I suggest calling this mode of thought “theological science.” At other times, Porphyry said that the life of virtue “pleased” the gods and invited, or at least allowed, their positive response – a perspective I refer to as “theological drama.” The two will be considered in turn.

1.2.2 Theological Science

Scattered throughout On Abstinence and To Marcella\textsuperscript{15} are references to the principle that like things attract.\textsuperscript{16} But the idea is most prominent in To Gaurus.\textsuperscript{17} In this work, Porphyry


\textsuperscript{16} Ep.Marc. 16, 19, Abst. 2.43.1, 2.46.2.
argued that newborn bodies were joined to souls that were suitable to their dispositions. There is no compulsion. The two unite naturally “according to the harmony of the [things] joined together with respect to their capacity for being joined into one.”\textsuperscript{18} Thus, “what is well-fitted for the soul’s steering [draws] the soul that is suitable to the well-fitted thing.\textsuperscript{19} And neither willing nor aiming nor choosing contribute anything to its presence” (11.1.5-11.2.15).\textsuperscript{20}

Porphyry used several analogies to illustrate this principle. The most compelling is that of tuned musical strings. Suppose that a tuned instrument is played. Near it is an un-tuned instrument with wood chips on its strings. Farther off is tuned instrument, also with wood chips on its strings. Porphyry pointed out that the strings of this instrument would vibrate sympathetically with those of the played instrument, even though the two are at some distance, causing the wood chips to fall off. But the strings of the un-tuned instrument, even though they are closer, have no sympathetic vibration. The wood chips remain. Porphyry’s point is that things that are tuned to the same pitch have a natural, sympathetic union that no distance can inhibit. This explains the instantaneous, natural, involuntary joining of souls and bodies that are appropriate to each other (11.4).

According to Porphyry, the same principle is at work in the human acquisition of intellect and even of union with god. He wrote that, later in life, intellect naturally joins with “he whose


\textsuperscript{18} φυσικὴ γὰρ ἡ ἐμψυχωσις καὶ δι᾽ ὅλου ἡ ἐξαγως κατὰ συμφωνίαν τῶν ἀρμοσθέντων πρὸς τὸ ἑναρμόσαι οὐδὲν τε.

\textsuperscript{19} τὸ ἀρμοσθέν πρὸς ψυχῆς κυβέρνησιν τὴν ἐπιτηδείαν ψυχῆς τῷ ἀρμοσθέντι.

\textsuperscript{20} οὐδὲν οὔτε βουλήσεως οὔτε ἐπιτηρήσεως οὔτε προαιρέσεως πρὸς τὴν παρουσίαν συμβαλλομένης.
soul becomes suitable for union with intellect” (12.2). In such cases, things “form a natural unity through the suitability and likeness of the things on the receiving side.” Porphyry added, “This also explains why he who knows god has god present in his possession, while he who is ignorant [of god] is absent to him who is present everywhere” (12.3). Clearly, the “knowledge” of god in this sentence refers to more than head knowledge; it is a likeness to the divine in virtue and mind that results in natural and instantaneous union. When salvation is conceived in this way, the divine response to a person’s virtuous life is not a personal response but a natural law. This is theological science and cannot be described as reciprocity.

1.2.3 Theological Drama

But Porphyry also described the process of salvation in terms of theological drama, in which the gods were treated as personal agents. In a passage already quoted above, Porphyry said that the noetic gods gave humans material for contemplation; they feed us “with the true food of seeing them, present with us, manifesting themselves, shining out to save us” (Abst. 2.34.5). This emphasizes the gods’ personal initiative in revealing themselves and making salvation possible for humans. Their help was critical. In To Marcella Porphyry wrote, “the soul

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21 ὡς ὁμος ἄνθρωπος παρατίθηται καὶ οὐδὲ πᾶσιν οὕτως, σπάνιος δὲ ὅτα ἐπιτηδεία ψυχή πρὸς νοῦ γίνεται συνουσίαν.

22 ταῖς δ᾿ ἐπιτηδείτης τῶν δεχομένων καὶ ὁμοιότης συμφωνέμενα.

23 διὸ καὶ ὁ γνωστὸς τῶν θεῶν ἔχει τῶν θεῶν παρόντα καὶ ὁ ἁγγείων τῷ πανταχου παρόντι ἀπεστὶ.

24 Ep.Marc. (especially 16-17) repeatedly treats true wisdom (the knowledge of God) as synonymous with virtue (the conforming of one’s life to the nature of the God one knows). On this topic, see Stéphane Toulouse, "La théosophie de Porphyre et sa conception du sacrifice intérieur," in La cuisine et l’autel: les sacrifices en questions dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 337.

25 ἡμᾶς διὰ τῆς αὐτῶν θείας ἀληθινὰς τρέφουσι, συνόντες τε καὶ φανόμενοι καὶ τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ σωτηρίᾳ ἐπιλάμποντες.
is a dwelling-place . . . either of gods or of evil spirits. If the gods are present, it will do what is good both in word and in deed; but if it has welcomed in the evil guest, it does all things in wickedness” (21, cf. 20). He went so far as to say, “let us consider [God] the author of all our good deeds” (12).

The divine only gave this help to those who were already striving after virtue and thus were receptive to it. According to Porphyry, “God strengthens the man who does noble deeds” (16). He wrote, “If the ruler takes pleasure in the ruled, then God too cares for the wise man and watches over him. Therefore is the wise man blest, because he is in God’s keeping” (16).

Finally, Porphyry said, “God listens only to those who are not weighed down by alien things, guarding those who are pure from corruption” (33).

Thus, in this world of theological drama, the life of virtue pleased the gods and invited their response. They helped those who were already making an effort on the road to salvation. Whether this can be called reciprocity is open to question. Stéphane Toulouse believes that Porphyry’s concept of noetic sacrifice contained the traditional element of gift-giving to the

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26 Sometimes Porphyry said that the gods bestowed this help upon those who were virtuous. At other times, he said that they made their help available to all, but that only the virtuous were receptive to it. For the latter, see Abst. 2.41.4, Ep.Marc. 11.

27 Θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπων βεβαιωθεὶς πράσοντα καλά. The wording in the Sententiae Sexti (Sent. Sext.) 304 is similar: ὁ θεὸς ἀνθρώπων βεβαιωθεὶς καλας πρᾶξεις. For critical edition of these sententiae and of those to be cited below, see Henry Chadwick, The Sentences of Sextus (Cambridge University, 1959). Especially beginning with Ep.Marc. 9, there are many parallels with anthologies of pagan and Christian writings. These collections of sententiae date from the first few centuries AD. Questions regarding them and their relationship to Ep.Marc. are complex: see Des Places, Porphyre: Vie de Pythagore, Lettre à Marcella: 94-100. The point relevant to my study is that many of the ideas Porphyry expressed in Ep.Marc. had a wide appeal.

28 Εἰ δὲ χαίρει τῷ ἄρχομένῳ τῷ ἄρχον, καὶ θεὸς σοφὸν κήδεται καὶ προνοεῖ· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μακάριος ὁ σοφός, ὅτι ἐπιτρέπεται ὑπὸ θεοῦ. This is a near-quotation from the Sent. Sext. 422-24.

29 μόνον γὰρ τοῦ μὴ τοῖς ἄλλοτρίοις περιφροσυμένου ἑπίκους ὁ θεὸς, καὶ τὸν καθαρὸν ἀπὸ τῆς φθορᾶς ὑπερκείμενος. The first part is identical to the Sententiae Pythagoreorum (Sent. Pythag.) 17.
gods. The critical moment was when philosophers, after imitating the divine and becoming akin to it, offered themselves back to the divine as images of and for god.\textsuperscript{30} To the extent that Porphyry thought in terms of theological drama, the gods could be thought to respond personally to these “sacrificial” gifts by manifesting themselves and helping philosophers pursue the life of virtue. As the next section will show, Porphyry also spoke as if the gods responded to the prayers that accompanied the life of virtue, at least when they requested spiritual help.

1.2.4 Prayer \textit{for} Virtue and \textit{by} the Virtuous

\textit{To Marcella} contains Porphyry’s most extensive comments on prayer.\textsuperscript{31} He made two points. The first was that prayers for God’s help in the life of virtue were useless unless people were already striving towards virtue. “[T]he prayer of the slothful is but vain speech,” Porphyry warned, “and we must pray that we may attain after our labors those things that are preceded by toil and virtue.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, prayer must not be imagined to bypass the necessity for human effort. The two must go together: “practice yourself in that you will need when you are set free [from the body], calling on God to be your helper” (12).\textsuperscript{33} Later in the letter, Porphyry made the same point: “The prayer which is accompanied by base actions is impure, and therefore not

\textsuperscript{30} Toulouse, "La théosophie," 335-38.

\textsuperscript{31} In this letter, Porphyry used εὐχή and εὐχεσθαι often, αἰτέω more rarely.

\textsuperscript{32} ὃν ἤγεμόνες οἱ μετ᾽ ἄρετῆς πόνοι, ταῦτα εὐχόμεθα γενέσθαι μετὰ τοῦς πόνους. See Sent. Sext. 125 and Sententiae Clitarchi (Sent. Clitarch.) 21.

\textsuperscript{33} ὃν ἂν ἀπαλλαγέσσα δεσθής εἰς ταῦτα σοι ἁσκομένη τὸν θεὸν παρακάλει γενέσθαι συλλήπτωρα. See Sent. Pythag. 121.
acceptable to God; but that which is accompanied by noble actions is pure, and at the same time acceptable” (24).\textsuperscript{34}

The object of these prayers could only be ascetic virtue, union with the divine, and salvation. This was the second point made in To Marcella. Porphyry exhorted his wife to pray to God for “that which is worthy of Him, and we should pray for what we could attain from no other,”\textsuperscript{35} meaning help along the path of salvation. As the context makes clear, “that which is worthy” of God did not include the bodily or practical concerns of this world: “What you will not require when you are rid of the body, that despise” (12). In the next chapter, Porphyry reiterated this point: “Wherefore desire and ask of God what is in accordance with His own will and nature, well assured that, inasmuch as a man longs after the body and the things of the body in so far does he fail to know God, and is blind to the sight of God” (13).\textsuperscript{36} “It is impossible,” Porphyry wrote, “for someone who loves God also to love pleasure and the body” (14).

According to him, the desire for material affluence or even the fixation on bodily survival was antithetical to salvation and to the nature of the gods. Not once did Porphyry advocate prayer for necessities, let alone for luxuries. Furthermore, he never promised an easy life to the accomplished philosopher. Virtue did not necessarily lead to affluence. But there are a few passages in On Abstinence that promise divine communications of a practical nature to the virtuous.

\textsuperscript{34}`Not acceptable” and “acceptable” translate ἄπρόσδεκτος and εὐπρόσδεκτος.

\textsuperscript{35}`ἐὐκτέον θεῷ τὰ ἄξια θεοῦ’. Καὶ ἀιτώμεθα ὃ μὴ λάβοιμεν ἂν παρ’ ἑτέρου’. See Sent. Sext. 122, 124.

\textsuperscript{36}`Ταῦτ᾿ οὖν θέλε καὶ αἰτοῦ τὸν θεὸν ἃ θέλει τε καὶ ἔστιν αὐτῶς’, εὖ ἐκεῖνο γινώσκουσα ὡς ἃ ἐφ’ ὃσον τις τὸ σῶμα ποθεῖ καὶ τὰ τοῦ σώματος συμφυλα, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἁγνοεῖ τὸν θεὸν’ καὶ τῆς ἐκείνου ἐνοράσεως ἡ τῶν ἄπεσκότες. See Sent. Sext. 134, 136.
1.2.5 Good Daemons Warn Philosophers

In *On Abstinence*, Porphyry rejected divination based on the inspection of entrails: killing animals was unjust, and the responding souls or divinities might be of a questionable nature (2.51.2-3). He also claimed that the true philosopher would not want to make inquiries about the future: “we say with good reason that the philosopher whom we describe, who is detached from external things,\(^{37}\) will not importune the daemons or be in need of diviners or the entrails of animals.” This is because “he has practiced detachment\(^ {38}\) from the things with which divination is concerned. He does not stoop to marriage, so as to importune the diviner about marriage, or to trade; he does not ask about a slave, or about promotion and the other kinds of human fame (2.52.2-3).

But, Porphyry allowed, “If some necessity presses hard, there are good daemons who run before a man who lives like this, the house-slave of the god, and will tell him through dreams and tokens and voices what will happen and what it is necessary to guard against” (2.53.1).\(^ {39}\)

Elsewhere, Porphyry stated something similar: the good daemons “forewarn, so far as they are able, of the dangers impending from the maleficent daemons, by revelations in dreams, or through an inspired soul, or in many other ways. And everyone would know and take precautions, if he could distinguish the signs they send; for they send signs to everyone, but not everyone understands what the signs mean, just as not everyone can read what is written, but

\(^{37}\) άφιστάμενον τῶν ἕκτως.

\(^{38}\) άφιστασθαι.

\(^{39}\) Εἰ δ’ ἄρα καὶ ἐπείξει τι τῶν τῆς ἀνάγκης, εἰσίν οἱ τῷ οὕτῳ ζῶντι τῷ οἴκετη τῷ θεῷ καὶ δι’ ὀνειράτων καὶ συμβόλων καὶ δι’ ὅτις ἁγαθοὶ δαίμονες προτερχόντες καὶ μηνύσοντες τὸ ἀποβήσομεν καὶ δ’ ἀναγκαῖον φυλάξασθαι.
only the person who has learned letters (2.41.3-4, cf. 3.5.5). These two accounts illustrate once again theological drama and theological science. In the first, the good daemons have a special relationship with the philosopher because of his ascetic virtue. In the second, their revelations come to all impersonally, rather like radio broadcasts, but only the philosopher has the expertise to interpret them.

These warnings of coming evils are the only practical benefits Porphyry promised to virtuous philosophers. In general, they could only expect the gods’ help in the process of salvation, and this was the only legitimate object of prayer. To the extent that this process was seen in terms of theological drama, one might say that the life of virtue invited divine response, but whether this can be called reciprocity is doubtful. The next section turns to Porphyry’s view of physical sacrifices of first fruits; it considers whether he saw them in terms of reciprocity.

40 oĩ ἴγαθοι . . . προσημαίνουσιν εἰς δύναμιν τοὺς ἐπηρημένους ἀπὸ τῶν κακοεργῶν κινδύνους, καὶ δι᾽ ὀνειράτων ἐμφαίνοντες καὶ διὰ ἐνθέου ψυχῆς ἄλλων τε πολλῶν. Καὶ εἰ ἰκανός τις εἰς τὰ σημαινόμενα διαφεύγῃ, πᾶς ἂν γιγνομένου καὶ προφυλάττοιτο. Πάσι γὰρ σημαίνουσιν, οὐ πᾶς δὲ ξυνιησίς τὰ σημαινόμενα, οὐδὲ πᾶς τὰ γεγραμμένα δύναται ἀναγιγνώσκειν, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ μαθὼν γράμματα.

41 Porphyry did not explain in these passages what gave philosophers this interpretive power. Presumably, their greater affinity to the divine increased their receptivity to divine communications. As an interesting parallel, Book 3 recounts stories of those who could understand the speech (often prophetic) of various animals. Certain ethnic groups (Arabs, Etruscans) possessed this ability, in addition to certain individuals, such as a slave boy and Apollonius of Tyana. One individual gained the talent when a snake cleaned his ears; another lost it when his mother urinated in his ears (3.3.6-3.4.1).

42 Unless one calls the help in research and divination received by Pythagorean sacrificers mentioned above a “practical benefit.”
1.3 Sacrifice of Physical First-fruits

1.3.1 The Limited Importance of Physical Offerings

As mentioned above, in the hierarchy of gods and sacrifices in _On Abstinence_ 2.34-37, Porphyry said that ascetic virtue and contemplation were the proper first-fruits offerings in return for the noetic gifts of the God over all and his offspring. Porphyry claimed that this noetic sacrifice was the best first-fruits offering to the gods (2.61.1). But he also advocated physical first-fruits offerings to the lower gods, whose gifts were of a physical nature. Since the celestial gods played a role in the growing of plants and the cycle of seasons, Porphyry allowed barley grains, flowers, and honey to be burned in their honor. After all, fire was appropriate to their nature (2.36.3-4).

Porphyry identified the good daemons as lower divinities, regents of certain animals, crops, rain, and even of human crafts and skills (2.38.2-3). People were to sacrifice to them first-fruits from the things they ate and with which they fed their bodies and souls (2.58.2). To neither the celestial gods nor the good daemons were people to offer animals, which had souls and had not been given to humans for food. Other passages also support the offering of physical sacrifices. In addition to noetic sacrifice, “it is also appropriate to make them moderate offerings of other things, not casually but with full commitment” (Abst. 2.61.1). In _To Marcella_ 18,

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43 Porphyry said this explicitly with regard to the celestial gods: “not a single animate creature should be sacrificed” (2.36.4). His comments regarding good daemons are, initially, more ambiguous. He wrote, “Someone concerned for piety knows that no animate creature is sacrificed to the gods, but to other daemons, either good or bad, and knows whose practice it is to sacrifice to them and to what extent these people need to do so” (2.36.5). But 2.58.2 said that the good daemons “will not trouble us” if we do not offer them animals. Indeed, according to Abst., desiring to eat meat or blood was antithetical to goodness, justice, and the divine nature. Porphyry also emphatically claimed that the good daemons never harmed anything and were completely good and just with no shadow of badness (2.39.5, 2.41.1-2). Clearly, there was no “extent” to which “these people need to” offer animals to the good daemons. Some might venture to do so, but the good daemons did not desire it.

44 οἰκεῖον δὲ καὶ τὸ μετρίος μὲν ἀπάρχεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων, μὴ παρέργος δὲ, ἄλλα σὺν πάσῃ προθυμίᾳ.
Porphyry admitted that the virtuous ascetic would honor the gods according to custom. This seems to have referred to physical sacrifices, since he went on to oppose those who abstained from altars completely: “We are not harmed by reverencing God’s altars, nor benefited by neglecting them.”

These passages show that such sacrifices could be appropriate, but, as the following pages show, there was a long list of caveats. Porphyry’s discussions of sacrifice read like a modern product manual: the warnings and disclaimers far outnumber the instructions and endorsements. As noted, Porphyry prohibited blood sacrifice and extravagance (2.60-61). He emphasized that physical things could be offered only to the lower gods, not to the God over all and his offspring (2.34.1-2.36.2). In addition, Porphyry was habitually concerned about the misinterpretation of sacrifice. Like Plato, he warned against the idea that the gods needed sacrificial gifts from humans or that sacrifice was an act of barter with the gods.

1.3.2 The Gods Are Not in Need

For Porphyry, any kind of sacrifice, even noetic sacrifice, was in danger of misinterpretation. In To Marcella 11, Porphyry described the “wise man” as the one who honors “God” or “the divine” best. Because he knows the divine and imitates it, his mind is the “only” place “sanctified as its temple.” And in this temple, he “honors” the divine by presenting it “with a living statue, the mind molded in His image.” But even such a rarified form of “presentation”

45 κατὰ τὰ πάτρια.
46 Βοιμοὶ δὲ θεοὶ ἱεροφαγοῦμενοι μὲν οὐδὲν βλάπτουσιν, ἀμελοῦμενοι δὲ οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦσιν.
47 τὸῦτο δὲ εἶναι εἰκότος μόνον τὸν σοφὸν, ὃ τιμητέον διὰ σοφίας τὸ θεῖον καὶ κατακοσμητέον αὑτῷ διὰ σοφίας ἐν τῇ γνώμῃ τὸ ἱερόν, ἐμψύχῳ ἁγάλματι τῷ νῷ ἐνεικονισαμένου ἁγάλλοντα <τοῦ θεοῦ>.
to God made Porphyry worry. He immediately added, “Now God is not in need of any one.”

Of course, Porphyry’s concern was even greater when it came to physical sacrifice. According to him, “The chief fruit of piety” was that one’s traditional honoring of the divine *not* imply that it was in need. One performed this service only because the divine “calls us to honor Him by His truly reverend and blessed majesty. . . .” But whoever honors God under the impression that He is in need of him, he unconsciously deems himself greater than God” (18, cf. *Abst.* 2.60.4).

This would make the gods subject to bartering relationships with humans and thus subject to human control.

1.3.3 All Reciprocity is Bartering with the Gods

Porphyry explicitly reiterated the Platonic warning against seeing sacrifice as a transaction. In *On Abstinence* 2.61.2, immediately after endorsing physical sacrifices, Porphyry

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48 Or perhaps “anything.” Θεὸς μὲν γὰρ δεῖται οὐδένος.


50 ἄλλ᾽ ἀπό τῆς ἐκείνου εὐλαβεστάτης καὶ μακαρίας σεμινότητος εἰς τὸ σέβας αὐτοῦ ἐκκαλοῦμενον.

51 Porphyry’s emphasis on this point was greater than that of Plato. The only evidence from the latter comes from Socrates’ dialogue with Euthyphro in which the two concluded that sacrifice did not provide the gods with necessities but only with honor, praise, and gratitude.

52 In Porphyry’s mind, people who thought in this way were mistaken about the gods. As the pages below will show, their misconceptions were punishment enough and would inhibit their ascent to the divine. But Porphyry believed that evil daemons did enter into bartering relationships with humans in which they controlled and were controlled (see Chapter 3).
said, “Honors to the gods must be like the front-seats given to good men, and like standing up for them and asking them to sit down, not like paying taxes.” Governments need taxes to function, and they supposedly offer protection and services in return for them. With this clever analogy, Porphyry attacked both the idea of divine need and the idea that sacrifice was a transaction. He went on to say that the proper function of sacrifice was to repay the gods’ favor by loving them and remembering their good deeds (2.61.3). Then he wrote, “That is why Plato says ‘it is right for a good man to sacrifice and always to be in conversation with the gods by prayers and dedications and sacrifices and all forms of worship’, but for a bad man ‘great effort about the gods is in vain’” (2.61.4).54

In other words, the fact that sacrifice can be interpreted positively as an expression of love for (and remembrance of) the gods’ favor justifies Plato’s endorsement of sacrifice for the good man. But in the cited passage (Leg. 716-17), Plato endorsed sacrifice for the good man, not simply as an expression of love and thanksgiving, but also as an invitation for further divine reciprocation. According to him, we who sacrifice properly will “get the reward we deserve from the gods” and will “live in a spirit of cheerful confidence for most of the years of our life” (718a). Even in the midst of the few sentences quoted by Porphyry (716d-e), Plato had said that the sacrifices of good men were an “effective way of achieving a happy life” (716e). But Porphyry left out this phrase, quoting only “it is right for a good man to sacrifice” (emphasis added). He omitted Plato’s endorsement of positive reciprocity for the virtuous.

53 Ἐοιλέναι γὰρ δεὶ τὰς τιμὰς ταῖς ἐπὶ τῶν ἁγαθῶν προεδρίαις, ὑπαναστάσεις τε καὶ κατακλίσεις, οὐ συντάξεων δόσειν.

54 Διόπερ ὁ Πλάτων «τῷ μὲν ἁγαθῷ θύειν» φησί «προσήκει καὶ προσομιλεῖν ἀεὶ τοῖς θεοῖς εὐχαίς καὶ ἀναθήμασι καὶ θυσίαις καὶ τῇ πᾶσῃ θεραπείᾳ», τῷ δὲ κακῷ «μάτην περὶ θεοὺς τὸν πολὺν εἶναι πόνον». 
A similar omission appears in two other passages. In *To Marcella* 23, Porphyry exhorted people to find out “in what manner [the divine] delights to be honored”\(^{55}\) before engaging in worship. Porphyry suggested three possibilities. Here is the first: “If, then, [the divine] is gratified and won over by libations and sacrifices, it would not be just that while all men make the same requests they should obtain different answers to their prayers.”\(^{56}\) Next, Porphyry presented a second option for honoring God: “But if there is nothing that God desires less than [libations and sacrifices], while he delights only in the purifications of the mind, which every man can attain of his own free choice, what injustice could there be?”\(^{57}\) This would solve the problem, but it would make physical sacrifice utterly irrelevant, which is inconsistent with several passages mentioned above.

Porphyry’s own position must be represented by the last option: “But if the divine nature delights in both kinds of service, it should receive honor by sacred rites according to each man’s power, and by the thoughts of his mind even beyond that power.”\(^{58}\) The question of great import is what function these “sacred rites” fulfilled. Obviously, they did not “win over” the divine, but could they have played a part in proper reciprocity? Porphyry did not directly answer this

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55 ὅτι πρότειν χάρει τὸ θεῖον τιμώμενον.

56 Εἰ μὲν γὰρ προχοαί ᾧ θυηλαίς τερπόμενον πείθεται, οὐκ ἂν εἶ δίκαιον τὸ τὴν ἱσθὶν πάντας ἀμοιβὴν αἰτεῖν μὴ τὴν ἱσθὶν λαχώντας τύχην.

57 Εἰ δὲ τούτων οὐδὲν ἡττον, μόνῳ δὲ ἢδεται τῷ καθαρεύειν τὴν διάνοιαν, ὃ δὲ δυνατὸν ἐκ προσαρέσεως παντὶ τῷ προσεῖναι, πῶς οὐκ ἂν εἶ δίκαιον;

58 ἐὰν δὲ ἐξ ἀμφοῖν τὸ θεῖον θεραπευόμενον ἢδεται, ἱερείας μὲν κατὰ δύναμιν, διανοιαὶ δὲ ὑπὲρ δύναμιν αὐτὸ τιμήτων. Κατὰ δύναμιν might also be translated “as much as possible,” meaning that the ἱερεία had a limited ability to honor the gods by virtue of their materiality. Ὑπὲρ δύναμιν might mean that mental honors to the divine transcended material limitations. Or perhaps Porphyry meant that the mind that honored the gods gained union with them and thus gained an ability to resemble them and honor them that surpassed its initial power.
question, but he finished with a statement that seems to justify sacrificial prayers only as acts of thanksgiving: “It is not wrong to pray to God, since ingratitude is a grievous wrong.”

*To Anebo* provides the third example. In the remaining fragments of this book, Porphyry repeatedly claimed that traditional rites and prayers implied inappropriate things about the nature of the gods they addressed. In fr. 64.10, he argued that, if the gods were impassible, the common practices of invoking them, summoning them on command, propitiating their wrath, and compelling them were useless, “For the impassible cannot be enchanted or forced or constrained.” These attempts to compel the gods’ support seem to have included requests for worldly success, for Porphyry immediately went on to say, “Wisdom has been practiced by them in vain, who trouble the divine mind about finding a runaway slave or buying a field or a marriage (if it should be) or sea-commerce” (fr. 64.11).

In all three of the passages discussed above, Porphyry attacked the idea that one could bargain with the gods. One could not compel them to answer one’s prayers in return for sacrificial gifts. Plato, too, had attacked this degraded view of reciprocity. The difference between the two was that Porphyry never endorsed a proper view of reciprocity. Indeed, he implied that such a view did not exist. For him, *all* attempts at a giving and receiving relationship

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59 Εὔχεσθαι θεῷ οὐ κακόν, ὡς τὸ ἄχριστειν ποιητότατον.


61 The whole passage runs thus: εἰ δὲ οἱ μὲν ἀπαθεῖς, οἱ δὲ ἐμπαθεῖς, οἱ δὲ τούτων φαλλοῦσα φασιν ἑστάναι καὶ ποιεῖσθαι ἀισχρορρημοσύνας, μάταιοι αἱ θεῶν κλήσεις ἐσονται, προσκλήσεις αὐτῶν ἑπαγγελλόμεναι καὶ μηνίδος ἐξιλάσεις καὶ ἐκθύσεις, καὶ ἐπὶ μάλλον αἱ λεγόμεναι άνάγκαι θεῶν. ἀκήλητον γὰρ καὶ άβιαστον καὶ άκατανάγκαστον τὸ ἀπαθὲς.

62 Μάτην αὐτοῖς ἢ σοφία ἐξήκοσκηται, περὶ δραπέτου εὐρέσεως ἢ χαρίου ὑνῆς ἢ γάμου, εἰ τύχοι, ἢ ἐμπορίας τὸν θεῖον νοῦν ἐνοχλήσασιν.
with the gods were attempts to bargain and compel. Material sacrifice was an act of thanksgiving only, with no expectation of return.63

1.3.4 The Sacrifices of the Wicked

This rejection of reciprocity with regard to physical offerings appears again in Porphyry’s discussions of wicked people’s sacrifices. Plato contrasted the wicked, whose sacrifices were useless, with the righteous, whose sacrifices were effective in obtaining benefits from the gods.64 Porphyry contrasted the wicked, whose sacrifices and prayers could not please the gods, with the righteous, whose virtuous deeds could please the gods. The emphasis had shifted from virtue as a prerequisite for pleasing sacrifice (Plato) to virtue as the only way to please the gods (Porphyry).

In To Marcella, he observed, “though [the unrighteous man] slay whole hecatombs in sacrifice, and adorn the temples with ten thousand gifts, yet is he impious and godless, and at heart a plunderer of holy places” (14).65 Two chapters later, he made a similar point. After emphasizing that it was the good deeds of the wise man that made him acceptable to God, he wrote, “for the wise man honors God even in his silence, while the fool dishonors Him even

63 There may be some ambiguity on this point. Compare a passage from De nosce te ipsum (Nosc.) (fr. 273.1-6). According to Porphyry, the command given by the Pythia to know oneself “does not seem to encourage the one ignorant of himself to honor the god with fitting [offerings], nor again [does it offer a promise] that he will obtain the things asked from the god.” Translation by Johnson, Religion and Identity: 180.

64 Plato’s point was also that people who habitually committed injustice could not retain the gods’ favor by offering many sacrifices. Presumably, unjust people who repented regained divine favor, not because they sacrificed but because of their changed lives, but Plato did not consider this scenario. Porphyry’s view of this matter (discussed in sections 2.3, 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 below) was clearer. Sin was self-punishing. Thus, as soon as the sinner turned from sin, punishment ceased. The gods and sacrifice (at least physical sacrifice) had no role.

65 ὁ δὲ ἄδικος καὶ εἰς θεόν καὶ εἰς πατέρας ἀνόσιος καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους παράνομος. Μήπετε κἂν ἐκατόμβας θύη καὶ μύριος ἀνακάθεισα τοὺς νεὼς ἁγάλλη, ασεβῆς ἐστι καὶ ἄθεος καὶ τῇ προαιρέσει ἱερόσυλος. Far from promising benefits to righteous sacrificers, Porphyry emphasized that the righteous distinguished themselves from the unrighteous by despising pleasure, the body, and riches – the typical benefits people requested from the gods (14).
while praying and offering sacrifice” (16). Again, philosophers “show [their] piety not by continued prayers and sacrifices but by [their] actions” (17). Finally, “nor yet is God honored by sacrifices nor glorified by plentiful offerings; but it is the godlike mind that remains stably fixed in its place that is united to God. For like must needs approach like. But the sacrifices of fools are mere food for fire, and the offerings they bring help the robbers of temples to lead their evil life. But, as was said before, let your temple be the mind that is within you” (19).

Thus, it was virtuous action, not physical sacrifice and prayer, that honored the gods and made people acceptable and unified with the divine. And if physical sacrifice was not a way to honor the gods, it was, a fortiori, not a way to obtain benefits from the gods either. This did not mean that physical sacrifice was wrong, as To Marcella itself makes clear, but simply that its only role was to thank the gods – it could not gain their favor.

2 Propitiatory Reciprocity

The following pages will show that Porphyry, like Plato, rejected propitiatory reciprocity but that he did so for very different reasons.

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66 ‘Σοφὸς γὰρ ἄνηρ καὶ σιγῶν τὸν θεὸν τιμᾷ’ · ‘ἀνθρώπος δὲ ἄμαθής καὶ εὐχόμενος καὶ θύων μαίνει τὸ θεῖον.’ For close parallels, see Sent. Pythag. 14-15 and Sent. Sext. 427-29. Des Places also points to a similar statement in Hierocles’ In aureum carmen 1.18: see F. G. Köhler, Hieroclis in aureum Pythagoreorum carmen commentarius (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974).

67 ‘ο σοφίαν ἀσκῶν ἐπιστήμην ἄσκει τὴν περὶ θεοῦ’, οὐ λειτανεύων άεί καὶ θύων, διὰ δὲ τῶν ἔργων τὴν πρὸς θεῶν ἄσκον εὐσέβειαν. See Sent. Pythag. 94.

68 ‘οὔτε θυηπολίαι θεῶν τιμῶσιν οὔτε ἀναθημάτων πλήθος κοσμοῦσι θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἔνθεον φρόνημα καλὸς ἡδρασμένον συνάπτει θεῷ. Χωρεῖν γὰρ ἀνάγκη τὸ ὁμοιον πρὸς τὸ ὁμοιον’. ‘Θυηπολίαι δὲ αφρόνων πυρὸς τροφῆ καὶ τὰ παρὰ τούτων ἀναθήματα ἱεροσύλοις χορηγία τῶν ἀκολασίων.'
2.1 Animal Sacrifice Implies the Belief in Propitiation

The primary purpose of *On Abstinence* was to convince a general Platonic audience that killing, sacrificing, or eating animals was immoral and inconsistent with the ascetic practices incumbent upon the philosopher. One might object that the gods themselves desired animal sacrifice. Porphyry countered this objection using an argument drawn from the late-classical philosopher Theophrastus. He cited several traditional stories in which the gods preferred the regular offerings of poor men to the hecatombs of the rich (2.13.4-2.21.4). The implication was that the gods did not like expensive or extravagant sacrifices. Since animal sacrifice was always expensive and extravagant, Theophrastus and Porphyry reasoned, the gods did not desire it.

At the end of Book 2, Porphyry added a further component to this argument. According to him, the extravagance of animal sacrifice not only displeased the gods but also bred all the misconceptions of sacrifice that irked Platonists. He wrote,

> Those who introduced extravagance into sacrifices do not know that they introduced with it a swarm of evils: superstition, luxury, the belief that the divine power can be bribed and that injustice can be cured by sacrifices. Why else have some sacrificed triads with gilded horns, and others hecatombs, and Olympias mother of Alexander used to make all her sacrifices thousands, when once extravagance had led to superstition?

Porphyry’s point was that it was inconsistent for philosophers to accept animal sacrifice but to reject superstition, luxury, and the propitiation of the gods. The one implied the other. The belief in angry and capricious deities who demanded a high price for leaving humans alone led people to the expense of animal sacrifice. Others resorted to such extravagance because they were trying

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69 Άγνοοδι δὲ οἱ τὴν πολυτέλειαν εἰσαγαγόντες εἰς τὰς θυσίας ὅπως ἡμι ταύτη ἐσμὼν κακῶν εἰσήγησον, δεισιδαιμονίαν, τρυφήν, ὑπόληπνην τὸν δεκάζειν δύνασθαι τὸ θεῖον καὶ θυσίας ἀκέφαλα τὴν ἀδίκιαν.

70 Ἡ πόθεν οἱ μὲν τριττῶς χρυσόκερως, οἵ δὲ ἐκατόμβας, Ὀλυμπιάς δ’ ἡ Ἀλεξάνδρου μὴτηρ πάντα χίλια ἔθεν, ἄπαξ τῆς πολυτέλειας ἐπὶ τὴν δεισιδαιμονίαν προαγοῦσιν;
to pay for their sins – to bribe the divine judges. Furthermore, blood sacrifice suggested the
belief that the gods loved luxury, which seemed to justify human passions.\footnote{It can be difficult to discern who held the opinions Porphyry and other Platonists criticized. As noted in Chapter 1, Plato accused “begging priests and soothsayers,” who convinced not only “ordinary men” but also “rich men” and even “states.” As Chapter 3 will show, Porphyry had in mind “the masses,” but also “some students of philosophy.” The “belief of the masses” may have been a stock caricature in the minds of philosophers that did not fully reflect reality. In addition, the “students of philosophy” Porphyry accused of holding the beliefs of the masses would probably not have owned up to it (see the discussion of Iamblichus in Chapter 4).}

Since the extravagance of animal sacrifice went along with a belief in propitiation, it was
responsible for the social consequences of bribing the gods that Plato feared. Porphyry wrote,

When a young man thinks that the gods delight in extravagance, and, as they say, in
feasts of cattle and other animals, when will he voluntarily act with temperance?\footnote{Ὅταν δὲ νέος θεοὺς χαίρειν πολυτελείας γνῷ καὶ ὡς φασίν, ταῖς τῶν βοῶν καὶ ἄλλων ζῴων θοῖναις, πότ᾽ ἂν ἐκών σωφρονήσειεν;} If he
supposes that the gods delight in his sacrifices, how will he not think that he is allowed to
do wrong, since he intends to redeem his fault with sacrifices?\footnote{Πῶς δὲ κεχαρισμένα θύειν ἡγούμενον τοῖς θεοῖς ταύτα όκ ἐξεῖναι ἀδίκειν οἰήσεται αὐτῷ μέλλοντι διὰ τῶν θυσιῶν ἐξωνεῖσθαι τὴν ἁμαρτίαν; cf. (Resp.) 365a-b.} If he

In many particulars, Porphyry had repeated Plato’s perspective on propitiation: it was the bribing
of the gods to let criminals off the hook, and it would allow people to commit injustice freely so
long as they had the money to pay off the gods with sacrifices. However, it is very important to
keep Porphyry’s audience and purpose in mind. His intent was not to attack propitiation or to
warn against its dangers. Rather, he hoped to show that animal sacrifice engendered the belief in
propitiation and all the accompanying evils that Platonists feared. The extent to which he himself
shared these fears is not clear in this passage.
2.2 Abstraction Instead of Analogy

Porphyry’s own concerns are more apparent in To Anebo, where he consistently warned that propitiation and other traditional practices implied that the gods were passible and could be influenced. In fragment 64.10 (already cited), Porphyry argued that, if the gods were impassible (ἀπαθεῖς), “the invocations of the gods will be in vain, the ordered summoning of them, the propitiations and aversions of wrath, and still more those things called the bindings of gods.” This was because, “the impassible cannot be enchanted or forced or constrained.”74 People who thought they could constrain the gods had projected their own state of πάθος onto the divine (fr. 64.9); their sacrificial practice incorrectly assumed that the recipients were impassioned (ἐμπαθεῖς) (fr. 26) and could be compelled (fr. 64.1). Porphyry said, “the things that are brought forward are brought forward as if to sensing and animate beings” (fr. 20).75 Such people did not understand that “Entreaties are alien to being offered to the purity of mind” (fr. 19).76

In a similar way, Plato had objected to propitiation because it wrongly implied that the gods could be seduced (παρατητοί) and persuaded (πείθοντες) by sacrifices to overlook the wicked exploitation of the innocent (Leg. 905d-e, Resp. 364c). But his refutation of these ideas differed from that of Porphyry. Plato used analogies to show that the gods could not be influenced. He described the gods as cosmic rulers, exalted masters, herdsmen, or even faithful watchdogs, whose job it was to keep injustice at bay. Their divine nature made them supremely good at performing this role. Thus, it was unthinkable that “wheedling words and winning

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74 For the Greek, see the footnote in section 1.3.3 above.

75 Ἀλλὰ τὰ προσαγόμενα, φησίν, ὡς πρὸς αἰσθητικοὺς καὶ ψυχικοὺς προσάγεται.

76 Αλλ᾽ οί λιτανείαι, ὡς φήγας, ἀλλότριαι εἰσι προσφέρεσθαι πρὸς τὴν τοῦ νοῦ καθαρότητα.
entreaties” could convince them to let the wicked “escape without punishment” (Resp. 366a; Leg. 906c). This would show the height of incompetence; it was not in the nature of exalted rulers to be seduced.

In contrast to Plato’s analogies, Porphyry described the divine nature with abstract terms. It was because the gods were pure mind (νοῦς) and not passible (ἐμπαθεῖς) or sensing (ἀισθητικοί) or animato (ψυχικοί) that they could not be persuaded or coerced. The constancy of the gods was tied up with their supra-mundane qualities – their absolute self-sufficiency and imperturbability of nature – largely beyond the reach of humans and beyond human analogies. The transcendent, ἀπαθεῖς gods were hardly susceptible to human interaction. This view ruled out not only propitiation but also “invocations” and “entreaties.” Porphyry’s gods could not even be said to “delight” in sacrifices (Abst. 2.60.3).

2.3 The Absence of Direct Divine Punishments

As shown in Chapter 1, Plato’s main objection to propitiation was that it taught people not to fear divine judgments. Such people were mistaken. According to Plato, no amount of sacrifice could persuade the gods to pervert justice and pardon the wicked. It is important to note that the passages from Porphyry’s work cited above do not emphasize this concern. It is true that On Abstinence 2.60 portrays propitiation as the bribery of the gods and the license to commit injustice with impunity, but Porphyry’s point, as mentioned above, was not about propitiation. He simply repeated typical Platonic concerns in order to show that animal sacrifice was responsible for them and should be rejected. In To Anebo, the problem with propitiation was not

77 Though Porphyry may be inconsistent on this point. In Ep.Marc. 23 (already cited), he mentioned the possibility that the divine nature “delights” (ἡδεσθαι) in both “sacred rites” and the “purifications of the mind.”
its attempt to divert the gods from just punishments. Porphyry never mentioned this. The problem was that it (and a host of other sacrificial practices) attempted to influence the gods in any way at all. Thus, Porphyry’s rejection of propitiation was not an attempt to preserve the fear of divine judgment. This was because, as the next section will show, Porphyry did not believe in divine judgments – at least not in the way Plato had imagined them.

2.3.1 The Gods Cause no Harm at All

In the Republic, Plato claimed that justice meant doing no harm, even to one’s enemies (332d-335d). The implication seemed to be that the gods, who were supremely just, could not make evildoers suffer for their crimes. Plato avoided this problem by defining “harm” as diminishing the distinctive virtue of a thing. Since the distinctive excellence of humanity was its aspiration to justice, Plato defined harming a person as degrading that person’s moral faculty (335b-c). This meant that the just gods could inflict any amount of physical or monetary suffering on people, so long as it resulted in individuals who were more inclined to justice.

Porphyry cited this passage from the Republic to support his claim that good divine beings did no harm to people. But he skipped over Plato’s definition of harm as damage to the human moral faculty. Porphyry’s point was that good divine beings never caused people to suffer. They were harmless in an absolute sense; they did not even punish the wicked. To demonstrate this claim, I turn to Book 2 of On Abstinence. In Chapters 38-41, Porphyry’s purpose was to show that the gods, including good daemons, did no harm. According to him, it was only the evil daemons who caused harm. Porphyry wrote, “[the] good daemons . . . do
everything for the benefit of those they rule” (2.38.2).<sup>78</sup> They go about “healing and setting to rights” (2.39.4).<sup>79</sup> According to Porphyry, “It is impossible for these daemons both to provide benefits and also to cause harm” to their earthly subjects (2.38.2).<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the evil daemons are “wholly violent and deceptive;” they “make sudden intense onslaughts, like ambushes” (2.39.3).<sup>81</sup> In the most vehement terms, Porphyry warned against what he called “the worst of absurdities: that is, supposing that the daemons are "wholly violent and deceptive;" they “make sudden intense onsludhats, like ambushes” (2.39.5).<sup>82</sup> In other words, the good daemons never made onsludhats and the bad never healed or set things to rights.

Porphyry went on: “One thing especially should be counted among the greatest harm done by the maleficent daemons: they are themselves responsible for the sufferings that occur around the earth (plagues, crop failures, earthquakes, droughts and the like), but convince us that the responsibility lies with those who are responsible for just the opposite,” meaning the good daemons and the gods (2.40.1).<sup>83</sup> By perpetrating these crimes under the guise of the gods (2.40.3),<sup>84</sup> “they prompt us to supplications<sup>85</sup> and sacrifices, as if the beneficent gods were

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<sup>78</sup> ταύτας δαίμονας τε ἀγαθούς νομιστέον καὶ ἐπ’ ὡφελείας τῶν ἄρχομένων πάντα πραγματεύομαι . . .

<sup>79</sup> Porphyry wrote of Αi δ’ ἀκέσεις καὶ αἰ κατορθώσεις αἰ ἀπὸ τῶν κρειττῶν δαίμονον . . .

<sup>80</sup> Τούτους γὰρ ἀδύνατον ἔστι καὶ τὰς ὡφελείας ἐκπορίζειν καὶ πάλιν αὐ ἑλάβῃς ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς αἰτίως γένεσθαι.

<sup>81</sup> Βίαιον γὰρ ὅλος καὶ ὑπολογὸς ἔχοντες ἡθος . . . σφοδρὰς καὶ αἰψυχίους οἷον ἑνέδρας ὡς τὸ πολὺ ποιοῦνται τὰς ἐμπτώσεις . . .

<sup>82</sup> Οὕτω δὲ σοι δοξάζοντι οὐδέσποτ’ ἀν εἰς τὸ ἀτοπώτατον ἐμπίπτειν ἐνέσται, τὸ περὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν τὰ κακὰ ὑπολαμβάνειν καὶ περὶ τῶν κακῶν τὰ ἀγαθά.

<sup>83</sup> Ἔν γὰρ δὴ καὶ τοῦτο τῆς μεγίστης βλάβης τῆς ἀπὸ τῶν κακοεργῶν δαίμονον θετέον, ὅτι αὐτοὶ αἰτίως γιγνόμενοι τῶν περὶ τὴν γήν παθημάτων, οἷον λοιμῶν, ἀφορίων, σεισμῶν, αἰχμῶν καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων, ἀναπείθουσιν ἡμᾶς ὡς ἄρα τούτων αἰτίων ἔστιν σύμφωνα καὶ τῶν ἔναντι τῶν [τούτων τοῖσιν ἔφοροι], ἐς αὐτοῦς ἐξαρπόντες τῆς αἰτίας καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο πραγματεύομενοι πρῶτον, τὸ λανθάνειν ἀδικοῦντες.

<sup>84</sup> ὅσπερ ὑποδιδόντες τὰ τῶν ἄλλων θεῶν πρόσωπα . . .
Porphyry castigated “the masses” and “some of those who study philosophy” for being taken in by this lie (2.40.5). He also accused “literature” of casting a “spell” to “create belief” in these “most impossible things” (2.41.1). But wise philosophers knew that the gods and good daemons were never responsible for disasters.

In support of his position, Porphyry cited Plato’s claim in the Republic that justice meant doing no harm. He wrote:

But one must be firmly convinced that the good never harms and the bad never benefits. As Plato says, ‘cooling is not done by heat but by its opposite’, and similarly ‘harm is not done by the just man’. Now the divine power must by nature be most just of all, or it would not be divine. So this [harmful] power, and this role, must be separated from the beneficent daemons, for the power which is naturally and deliberately harmful is the opposite of the beneficent, and opposites can never occur in the same (2.41.1-2, cf. Resp. 335d).

Plato had gone on to define harmlessness in such a way that it allowed for the punishment of the wicked, but Porphyry left no room for this. According to him, good divine beings were never responsible for any earthly disasters or misfortunes.

To Marcella 17-18 confirms that this was Porphyry’s perspective. He described an impious person whose inappropriate views of the divine were displeasing to God. In the

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86 So Gillian Clark translates λιτανείαι. According to Emma C. Clarke and John M. Dillon, the “specific meaning” of λιτανείαι (at least in Porphyry and Iamblichus) is “prayers of petition.” See Clarke and Dillon, eds., Iamblichus: On the Mysteries (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 59, n. 87.

87 Τρέπουσι τε μετά τοῦτο ἐκτὸς λιτανείας ἡμᾶς καὶ θυσίας τῶν ἁγαθοεργῶν θεῶν ὡς ὑργησμένων.

88 Πεπόνθασι δὲ τοῦτο ὁ λάθος τῶν ἅγαθον ἀποκράτισεν ὡς κακοφθαγόνον καὶ τῶν ἐν θεομορφίᾳ διατριβοῦντων οὐκ ὁλίγοι.

89 Τὸ ποιητικὸν.

85 So Gillian Clark translates λιτανείαι. According to Emma C. Clarke and John M. Dillon, the “specific meaning” of λιτανείαι (at least in Porphyry and Iamblichus) is “prayers of petition.” See Clarke and Dillon, eds., Iamblichus: On the Mysteries (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 59, n. 87.

86 Ὑποδοθήσει δὲ τοῦτο οὐκ ἵδυται μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατριβῶν οὐκ ὁλίγοι.

88 Ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἔμπισεν ἀλλ᾽ ἔρθεν τὸ ἁγαθὸν βλάπτει ποτὲ ὡς ὁμοιότητας ἰδιαντικῆς. «Ὅτι γὰρ θερμότητας, ὡς φησίν Ἡλία, ἡ τῆς ἁγαθοφυλακῆς ἀνακεφαλέων» διήλθεν ἀνακεφαλαίωσιν τοῦ ἡμῶν τοῦ δικαίου τοῦ ἁγαθοφυλάττοντος. Δικαίωσιν ἀντικαθίστατο διὰ δήσων φύσιν πάντων τοῦ θεοῦ, ἐπεὶ οὐδ᾽ ἔν θεον. Οὐκεὶν ἀποτελείσατο διὰ ταύτην τὴν ὑδατίνα καὶ μοῖραν τῶν δαίμόνων τῶν ἁγαθοφυλάττων, ἢ γὰρ βλάπτειν πεφυκαί τε καὶ βουλευμένη ἐναντία τῇ ἁγαθοφυλάττῃ: τὰ δ᾽ ἐναντία περὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ὁλίγον ἄν ποτὲ γένοιτο.
traditional view, impiety incurred the judgment of the gods. But Porphyry wrote, “God does not injure him (since the divine nature can only work good), but he injures himself, chiefly through his wrong opinion concerning God” (17). Thus, the divine nature could do no harm, even in punishing the unjust. According to Porphyry the gods would not even punish those who mistakenly thought that the gods were in need of sacrifices. He wrote,

It is not when they are angry that the gods do us harm, but when they are not understood. Anger is foreign to the gods, for anger is involuntary, and there is nothing involuntary in God. Do not then dishonor the divine nature by false human opinions, since you will not injure the eternally blessed One, whose immortal nature is incapable of injury, but you will blind yourself to the conception of what is great and chiefest (18).

Thus, the gods harmed no one, not even those who were so impious as to misconstrue the divine nature. But these miscreants did not escape scot-free. Their own misconceptions of the divine and of virtue itself were punishment enough, keeping them in bondage to materiality, unable to achieve union with the gods and salvation. That this was the case is demonstrable from nearly all of Porphyry’s work. In his mind people generally misunderstood the gods because they valued the πάθη. Such people failed to find earthly happiness as well as spiritual ascent. They expended enormous effort to satisfy their own appetites, but these appetites were insatiable and required more and more labor without ever delivering contentment.

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90 ὁὐχ ὑπὸ θεοῦ πάσχον κακῶς, ἀγαθοποιόν γὰρ μόνον τὸ θεῖον, ἀλλ᾽ ὑπὸ ἑαυτοῦ διὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ τὴν περὶ θεοῦ κακὴν δόξαν.

91 ‘Οὐ χωλοθέντες οὖν οἱ θεοὶ βλάπτουσιν, ἀλλ᾽ ἀγνοηθέντες· οργή γὰρ θεῶν ἄλλητια, δὴ ἐπ᾽ ἀβουλήτοις μὲν ἢ ὀργῆ, θεῷ δὲ οὐδὲν ἀβουλητῶν. Μή τοινύν μιαν τὸ θεῖον ἀνθρωπίας ἀνθρωπογενεύσεως· οὗτος γὰρ ἐκεῖνος βλάψεις τὸ γε μακάριον διὰ παντὸς καὶ οὐ πάσα βλάβη τῆς ἀφθονίας ἐξελήλυται, σαυτὴν δὲ τυφλόσεις πρὸς τὴν τῶν μεγίστων καὶ κυριωτάτων διάγνωσιν. For the initial quotation, see Sent. Pythag. 8.
2.3.2 Punishments as the Natural Consequences of Human Errors

Several objections may be raised against my claim that Porphyry believed in absolute divine harmlessness and in the self-punishing nature of sin. The first is that his view of justice within the human realm allowed for just punishments. In a discussion of human conduct in *On Abstinence*, Porphyry said, “justice lies in restraint and harmlessness towards everything that does not do harm” (3.26.9). In keeping with this principle, he allowed people to kill threatening animals and habitually harmful humans (3.26.2-3). The ideal was to discipline for the good of the offender (as in Plato) and to do so without anger. Porphyry instructed Marcella, “Strive not to wrong your slaves nor to correct them when you are angry And before correcting them, prove to them that you do this for their good, and give them opportunity for excuse” (35). This possibility of just punishment in the human realm might be expected to exist in the divine realm. But the connection is not a necessary one, especially given Porphyry’s transcendent view of the divine nature.

A second, more challenging point is that several passages explicitly state that the gods punish the wicked and discipline the righteous. Many of these references appear in sections from other authors, cited to support the argument at hand, which often has nothing to do with divine justice. Therefore, it is uncertain that Porphyry vouched for the cited author’s opinions in this area. There are, however, other references to divine justice that were clearly penned by Porphyry himself and more dependably reflect his own worldview. In *To Marcella*, he wrote, “The wicked

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92 ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη ἐν τῷ ἁγετικῷ καὶ ἀβλαβεῖ τεῖται παντὸς ὁτουοῦν τοῦ μὴ βλάπτοντος.

93 Contrast with Ep.Marc. 27, which says that civil laws “are made for the benefit of good men, not that they may do no wrong, but that they may not suffer it.”

94 Οἰκέταις πειρῶ μὴ ἀδικεῖν μηδὲ ὅργιζομένη κολάσης· κολάζειν δὲ μέλλουσα πείθε πρότερον ὅτι ἐπὶ συμφέροντι κολάζεσι, διδόσα αὐτοῖς καρίδον ἀπολογίας.
soul flies from God, and would fain that His providence did not exist, and it shrinks from the divine law which punishes all the wicked” (16). This is pages away from Porphyry’s claim that the divine nature “can only work good” and thus cannot harm the impious (17).

Chapter 22 shows how these two opposing claims may have been reconciled in his mind. In this passage, Porphyry condemned those who believed that “the gods do not exist and that the universe is not governed by God’s providence.” Such people “cannot flee and escape the notice of the gods or of justice their attendant,” and “they are known by [the gods] and by justice that dwells with the gods.” At first, this seems to be a straightforward endorsement of divine justice. But Porphyry described the punishment people suffered as the natural consequence of their wrong beliefs, which lead them to accept a universe “void of reason.” This cast them “into unspeakable peril, trusting to an unreasoning and uncertain impulse in the events of life.” The gods’ only direct action was to withdraw: “Assuredly such men are forsaken by the gods for their ignorance and unbelief.”

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95 ‘Ψυχὴ οὖν πονηρὰ φεύγει μὲν θεόν, πρόνοιαν δὲ θεοῦ εἶναι οὐ βούλεται, νόμου τε θείου τοῦ πᾶν τὸ φαῦλον κολάζοντος ἀποστατοί πάντως.’ See Sent. Sext. 312-13. In Chapter 21, Porphyry seems to have implied that the divine law also disciplined the wise. He said that those who believed in God’s existence and in his providence had learned “that there exist angels, divine and good spirits, who behold all that is done, and from whose notice we cannot escape. Being persuaded that this is so, they are careful not to fall in their life, keeping before their eyes the constant presence of the gods whence they cannot escape” (21).

96 αὐτοὺς δὲ θεοὺς καὶ τὴν ὑπάνω τῶν θεῶν Δίκην οὔτε φυγεῖν οὔτε λαθεῖν δύνανται . . . γιγνώσκονται θεοῖς καὶ τῇ δίκῃ τῇ παρᾷ θεοῖν.

97 δίκης κόλασιν πεπόνθασι.

98 ἀλόγῳ φορᾷ διοικεῖται τὰ πάντα.

99 Εἰς κίνδυνον οὖν ἄφατον ἐαυτοῦ ἐμβαλόντες ἀλόγῳ ὀρμή καὶ εὐδιαπτώτῳ τοῖς κατὰ τὸν βίον ἑπιτίθενται . . .

100 Καὶ δὴ τούτους μὲν ἀγνοίας ἐνεκα καὶ ἀπιστίας θεοὶ διαφεύγουσιν.
Thus, the gods were involved in punishing the wicked to the extent that they left people alone to suffer the consequences of their own wrong beliefs. In doing so, they inflicted no harm on anyone. Furthermore, divine withdrawal was a personal response to wickedness only to the extent that Porphyry thought in terms of theological drama. As noted above, he could also see a person’s proximity to the gods in terms of theological science – the virtuous were naturally united with the gods because of their similarity and the wicked naturally drifted away because of their dissimilarity. This would make the withdrawal of the gods the consequence of a person’s wickedness rather than a direct divine action.

As in To Marcella 22, the divine punishments Porphyry discussed nearly always turned out to be the natural results of human error. This is particularly apparent in On the Styx,\textsuperscript{101} Porphyry’s allegorical reading of literature on Hades. Drawing from Homer, Porphyry said that Hades was divided into two sections, the near side and the far side of the river Acheron. He identified the near side as a place of punishments\textsuperscript{102} (fr. 377.36) and the far side as a place of blessedness. The souls of the unjust who “deserve punishment”\textsuperscript{103} could not cross it (fr. 377.30-1). Some of Porphyry’s wording implied that the gods themselves imposed these punishments. The unjust were “prevented” from entering rest (fr. 377.31-2).\textsuperscript{104} Their punishments were

\textsuperscript{101} For translation of fragments 376-8 of De Styge (Styg.), see Johnson, Religion and Identity: 331-38. For critical edition, see Andrew Smith, Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993). 442-61. I follow Smith’s numbering of the fragments.

\textsuperscript{102} τὰ κολαστήρια.

\textsuperscript{103} κολάσεως ἄξιαι.

\textsuperscript{104} εἰργεσθαι τοῦ ἐνδον.
“assigned” (fr. 377.39-41). It was Minos the “judge” who “punishes according to the worth of the sins: to some he determines the place outside the river for punishment; he allows others to cross the river” (fr. 377.45-50). But the punishments imposed by the gods, with one exception, turned out to be the natural consequences of people’s sins. The wicked were punished in that they were never fully free of their human condition. Their former sins were always on their minds. They were tormented by the “memory of their life experiences” and by “appearances of all the terrifying things” they had done (fr. 377.35-40).

In contrast, the blessedness of those on the far side of the Acheron consisted in their freedom from the human condition and from thoughts about human things (fr. 377.33-4). Even those who were within the river had “abandoned human reasoning” did not “speak about human things,” and were “no longer humans” (fr. 377.56-61). For them, “the thing imagined is also taken, and when it joins in leaving, the soul’s bodily experiences are also taken away. When they

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105 τὸν ἄφορισμένον ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις κολάσεων. The gods may have assigned the punishments, but note from the context that sin itself was the active agent.

106 εἶναι γὰρ καὶ κριτὴν ἐκτὸς τοῦ ποταμοῦ διατρίβοντα, Μίνω, ὃς κατ᾽ ἀξίαν τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων κολάζειν, τοῖς μὲν τὸν ἐξω τοῦ ποταμοῦ τόπον ἄφορίσαντα ἐπὶ τὴν δίκην, τοῖς δὲ περάσας τὸν παταμόν ἐπιτρέψαντα, δὲ ἀνάπαυσις ἤ ἄναπαυσία τοῖς ψυχαῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων κακῶν διὰ τὴν λήψιν.

107 Porphyry wrote, “Heracles also is outside and punishes the unjust, producing fearful appearances of one throwing [a spear] and shooting [an arrow], just as when he was alive he would defend himself, even in Hades he attacks those worthy of punishment” (fr. 377.50-54). Unless Porphyry intended this Homeric scene to be interpreted allegorically, it was a reference to a very active and external form of punishment, not consistent with his usual emphasis on the self-punishing nature of sin.

108 διὸ καὶ τὸν ἄδικον ἐκτὸς εἶναι τὰ κολαστήρια διὰ τοῦ λογισμοῦ καὶ τῆς μνήμης τῶν βεβιωμένων τὰς κολάσεις ἑγότων. φαντασίας γὰρ λαμβάνει τῶν δεινῶν διὰ τῷ βίῳ δεδράκασι καὶ κολάζεσθαι, τῆς ἁμαρτίας παρεστώσης αὐτοῖς κατὰ λογισμὸν καὶ τιμωροῦσας διὰ τῶν ἄφορισμένων ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις κολάσεων.

109 τάς δὲ τὸν ποταμόν ὑπερβαλλόντις ἐπιλαυνθάνεσθαι τῶν λογισμῶν τῶν περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπων μεθείσες.

110 τῶν δὲ ἐντὸς τοῦ ποταμοῦ καὶ ἄφηρισμένον τὸν λογισμόν τὸν ἀνθρώπινον μόνος ὁ Τειρεσίας καὶ τοῦτον ἔχει παρόντα: οἱ δὲ ἄλλοι ἄλλης μὲν γινόμενους κατ᾽ ἰδιότητα φρονήσεως ἢν ἢν Ἀιδοὺ κέκτηνται, τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώποις ὑποκέπτε· οὐδ᾽ ἂν φθεγγαζότα περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων . . .
have left these behind, the soul’s punishment also has ceased, since there is around it only an intellectual environment and it passes its time with the wise god” (fr. 378.13-17). Thus, punishments and blessings after death were simply a reflection of the choices made during life. Those who, through ascetic virtue, had freed their souls from the passions and appetites of the body and the material world gained the object of their effort – complete separation from the human condition and union with god. But those who had indulged their passions in life and so strengthened the bonds of the soul to the material world continued to experience the effects of those bonds, even after death. Their souls could not be free of the world.

Clearly, Porphyry was not afraid to speak of the gods as the agents of punishment, but this was not inconsistent with divine harmlessness, for the punishments he described nearly always turned out to be the natural consequences of sin. Given this vision, propitiation was nonsensical. People suffered, not because of divine judgments, but because of their own actions. Asking the gods to relent was like putting one’s hand in a fire and asking the gods to prevent it from burning. The problem was a human one. The only way to stop the burning was to voluntarily remove one’s hand. Similarly, as soon as people turned to virtue, the painful consequences of their lack of virtue began to subside.

Plato had rejected propitiation because it taught people not to fear divine punishments. Nothing could have been farther from Porphyry’s mind. Indeed, he rejected propitiation because it implied the reality of divine punishments. As seen in On Abstinence 2.40.2-3, those who offered appeasing sacrifices and supplications to the gods and good daemons had been taken in by the posing of evil daemons. They were guilty of “the worst of absurdities” – assuming that
these good daemons and gods were capable of causing harm. For Porphyry, thinking that the
divine inflicted even the wicked with suffering was a grave misconception. To Plato, for whom
the divine policing of the world was indispensible, Porphyry’s perspective would itself have
seemed “the worst of absurdities.”

3 The Ascetic Background

Porphyry’s perspective on reciprocity differed from that of Plato partly because of the
ascetic vision that permeated his cosmology. According to Gillian Clark, *On Abstinence* is “the
fullest surviving text of philosophical asceticism.” It depends upon Platonic assumptions and
particularly draws upon the *Theaetetus* and the *Phaedo*. But, as Clark puts it,

Porphyry’s version of philosophical asceticism . . . is more extreme than Plato’s. *On Abstinence* seems almost obsessively concerned to protect the body from contamination incurred by taking in food and by social contacts of any kind. Plato’s Socrates is always among friends in Athens. Plotinus lived among friends in Rome, teaching, celebrating Plato’s birthday, arbitrating disputes and listening to his wards practice their lessons. But Porphyry’s spiritual elites seek distance from the city, solitude and silence even within their communities, and finally death. In *On Abstinence*, physical death is not just a metaphor for the end of disruptive desire: it is a longed-for release.

Clark believes that “so extreme a version” of asceticism may have been due partly to Porphyry’s
depression after the death of Plotinus and the scattering of his circle of friends. But she
acknowledges that this personal context does not “explain away” the rigor of his position.112 The
following pages show how Porphyry’s ascetic vision informed his view of reciprocity.

"Philosophy and Asceticism,” 15-19. Clark does not mention here the fact that Porphyry’s extreme asceticism can
partly be explained by his indebtedness to the works of Pythagoreans such as Empedocles, who emphasized the
spiritual inhibitions incurred by ingesting meat. Theophrastus, whom Porphyry often quoted, was an example of
how even very early Platonists integrated these ideas into their thinking.
3.1 Passions and Needs as the Source of Injustice, Irrationality, and Alienation from the Divine

In Book 3 of *On Abstinence*, Porphyry explained what was wrong with the world.\(^{113}\) According to him, material existence was characterized by the need for and the desire for external things. In contrast to divine self-sufficiency, embodied beings were in constant need of external things in order to live. But humans wanted much more than they needed. Driven by an insatiable desire for pleasures, they appropriated more and more external things. Porphyry referred to this impulsive desire for ever-greater fulfillment as the passions (πάθη).

According to Porphyry, the πάθη (and, to a lesser extent, basic physical needs) were the source of all the evils of the world. To begin with, satisfying needs and πάθη always meant taking “by force what belongs to others” (3.27.11).\(^{114}\) People constantly killed plants and animals to feed their bodies. For their own material advantage, they stole from other people and even killed them. Thus, bodily existence entailed incessantly depriving, harming, and murdering other entities. Porphyry defined injustice as doing harm to others, which made bodily needs and πάθη the source of injustice. They were also the source of irrationality. Reason indicated that depriving other beings in order to satisfy one’s passions was improper. But people did so anyway because they were ruled by desire rather than by reason. Moreover, they pretended that the injustices they committed were rational. In this way, the πάθη overrode reason and created counterfeit versions of it that justified human impulses.

The rule of needs and πάθη alienated embodied souls from the divine (cf. 4.20.13-15). The gods were completely self-sufficient because they possessed ἀπάθεια. They had no needs

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\(^{113}\) For the rest of this section, see *Abst.* 3.26-27 unless otherwise noted.

\(^{114}\) τὰ ἄλλατρα βία ἀφαιρούμενος.
and no impulses towards external things. Nothing could attract them or arouse their desire. This was the source of their perfect harmlessness towards all things, for they had no reason to take anything from another being. The gods’ ἀπάθεια also allowed their reason to be in complete control. No desire or impulse existed to persuade them to depart from a rational course.

In light of all this, the solution to the human problem was detachment from the πάθη (ἀπάθεια) and even from bodily needs. This led to justice and rationality on earth; it also made the soul akin to the gods and allowed it to ascend and unify with the divine at death. For Porphyry, ἀπάθεια meant holding back (ἀποχή) from external things. Because of the “defect of our nature,” this could not be practiced comprehensively. People had to eat plant matter to survive, but they were to limit themselves (ideally) to fruits that naturally fell and to crops that had reached the end of their life cycle (3.26.12, 3.27.2-3).

One of Porphyry’s most powerful analogies for the ascetic life was borrowed from Plotinus. He said that souls were like people who had been filled with the “alien passions and habits and customs” of a “foreign land” and “have acquired an inclination towards them” (1.30.2).

Someone who is preparing to return from there to his homeland is not only eager to be on the journey, but also, in order to be accepted, practices putting aside everything foreign that he has acquired, and reminds himself of what he once had but has forgotten, and without which he cannot be accepted among his own people. In the same way we too, if

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115 τὸ τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν ἐλάττωμα. The context leaves some doubt whether the defect was always present and inescapable.

116 In fact, Porphyry criticized the person who “does not think that if it were possible one should abstain from all food” (1.38.1).

117 Clark notes the dependence upon the image of return to one’s homeland in Ennead (Enn.) 1.6.8 (Clark, On Abstinence: 18, 134. n. 104).

118 ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκ τῆς ξένης ἐμπληθεῖσα παθῶν τε καὶ ἐθῶν καὶ νομίμων ἐκφύλων καὶ πρὸς ταῦτα ῥοπὴν ἐσχηκόσιν.
we are going to re-ascend from here to what is really ours, must put aside everything we have acquired from our mortal nature, and the attraction to those things which itself brought about our descent, and must recollect the blessed and eternal being and eagerly return to that which is without color or quality (1.30.3-4). 119

3.2 Asceticism and Positive Reciprocity

This ascetic vision (apparent in the quote above) partly accounts for Porphyry’s critical stance towards positive reciprocity in sacrifice. In traditional religion, positive reciprocity had to do with requests for material goods, professional success, riches, or pleasures. Plato’s moderate asceticism had allowed for this. But, for Porphyry, the desire for these things and the acquisition of them were antithetical to justice, rationality, and the divine nature. This has already been demonstrated from Book 3 of On Abstinence. To Marcella makes the same point, particularly with regard to the ascent to the gods.

Porphyry wrote, “no two things can be more entirely opposed to one another than a life of pleasure and ease, and the ascent to the gods” (6). “For it is not those who live a life of pleasure that make the ascent to the gods, but rather those who have nobly learnt to endure the greatest misfortunes” (7). “In as far as a man turns to the mortal part of himself, in so far he

119 Ὁ νπὲρ οὖν τρόπον ὁ ἐκεῖθεν εἰς τὰ οἰκεῖα μέλλων ἐπανήκειν οὐ μόνον προθυμεῖται ὁδεύειν, ἄλλα καὶ, ἱνα παραδεχθῇ, μελετὴ μὲν ἀποτίθεσθαι πάν εἰ τί προσέλαβεν ἀλλόφυλον, ἐπαναμιμηθῆκαι δ᾽ ἐαυτὸν ὅν ἔχων ἐπελάθετο, ὅν ἄνευ παραδεχθῆναι οὐχ οἴδον τι πρὸς τὸν οἰκείον, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ ἡμᾶς δεῖ, ἐνετέθην ἐπερ πρὸς τὰ ἄντως οἰκεῖα μέλλομεν ἐπανείναι, ἃ μὲν ἐκ τῆς ἰδιότητος προσελήφθημεν φύσεως ἀποθέσθαι πάντα μετά τῆς πρὸς αὐτὰ προσπαθεῖας, δι᾽ ἥς ἡ κατάβασις γέγονεν, ἀναμιμηθῆναι δὲ τῆς μακαρίας καὶ αἰωνίου οὐσίας καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἀγρόματον καὶ ἄποινον σπεύδοντας ἐπανείλθειν.

120 Αὐτὸ γὰρ τὸ πράγμα ἀς οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἄλλῳ ἀντίκειται πράγματι, ἡδονή τε καὶ ρᾳθυμία τῇ πρὸς θεοὺς ἀνάφ. 121 Ὁ γὰρ ἐκ τῶν δι᾽ ἡδονῆς βεβιωκότων ἀνθρώπων αἱ εἰς θεῶν ἀνάδρομαι, ἄλλ᾽ ἐκ τῶν τὰ μέγιστα τῶν συμβαίνοντος γενναίως διενεγκεῖν μεμαθηκότος.' See Sent. Pythag. 72.
makes his mind incommensurate with immortality” (32).122 “[A]s a man longs after the body and the things of the body in so far does he fail to know God, and is blind to the sight of God” (13).123 “But what the body produces is held corrupt by all the gods” (33).124 “[L]abors conduce to virtue more than do pleasures” (7).125 “It is impossible for a man who loves God also to love pleasure and the body, for he who loves these must needs be a lover of riches. And he who loves riches must be unrighteous. And the unrighteous man is impious towards God and his fathers, and transgresses against all men. . . . Wherefore we should shun all addicted to love of the body as godless and impure” (14).126

Given this perspective, it is not surprising that Porphyry rejected the traditional view of positive reciprocity, which included requests for worldly things. For him, asking the gods to fulfill one’s πάθη would have been nonsensical.

3.3 Asceticism and Propitiatory Reciprocity

Porphyry’s belief in absolute divine harmlessness, which made propitiation unthinkable, was connected to his belief in divine ἀπάθεια and thus to his ascetic theology. As shown above, On Abstinence 2.38-41 contrasted good and evil daemons. The good daemons did no harm

122 ὡς τις τέτραπται πρὸς τὸ θνητὸν, τοσοῦτος τὴν ἐαυτὸς γνώμην ἄσυμμετρὸν παρασκευάζει πρὸς τὸ τῆς ἄφθαρσίας μέγεθος.

123 ἓφῳ ὅσον τὸ σῶμα ποθεὶ καὶ τὰ τοῦ σώματος σύμφολα, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἄγνωστὸν τὸν θεὸν’ καὶ τῆς ἑκείνου ἐνοράσεως ἐαυτὸν ἀπεσκότισε . . . For quotation, see Sent. Sext. 136.

124 οὐ δὲ τίκτει τὸ σῶμα, μιαρὸν πάσι τοῖς θεοῖς ἐνομίσθη.


126 ἢ ἄνδρα τὸν αὐτὸν φιλόθεον τε ἢ ναὶ καὶ φιλήδονον καὶ φιλοσώματος. Ο ἡγός φιλήδονος καὶ φιλοσώματος, ὡς ἐνόρασεν καὶ φιλοχρήματος, ἡγός ἢ ἀδικός καὶ θεόν καὶ εἰς πατέρας ἀνόσιος καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους παράνομος . . . Διὸ καὶ πάντα φιλοσώματον ὡς ἄθεον καὶ μιαρὸν ἐκτρέψεσθαι χρή.’ See Sent. Pythag. 110; cf. Sent. Sext. 76.
whatsoever, and the evil did only harm and benefited no one. According to Porphyry, this difference in conduct was explained by the absence or presence of ruling πάθη.

Ontologically, both sets of daemons were similar. They consisted of souls that rested on airy bodies (πνεύματα). According to Porphyry, this difference in conduct was explained by the absence or presence of ruling πάθη. Their “pneuma, insofar as it is corporeal, is passible and corruptible” (2.39.2). Whether daemons did good or harm depended on whether they controlled their passible πνεύμα “by reason” (2.38.2) or were “mostly controlled by it.” The latter “are for that very reason too much carried away, when the dangers and appetites of the pneuma lead to impulse.” These daemons “may reasonably be called maleficent” (2.38.4).

Because the pneumatic bodies of daemons were passible, they did not hold their form forever. Moreover, “it is reasonable to suppose that something continuously flows from them and that they are fed” (2.39.2). “In the good daemons this is in balance,” which seems to have meant that they fed their pneumatic bodies only enough to sustain them, just as the ascetic philosopher. But “in the maleficent” daemons, this bodily intake and evacuation were “out of balance.” This meant that “they allot more to their passible element” (2.39.3).

Porphyry wrote

127 I call these πνεύματα bodies because they were corporeal entities upon which the ψυχαί of the daemons rested, but Porphyry himself never called them σώματα, except perhaps in Abst. 2.42.3.

128 Τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ᾗ μέν ἐστι σωματικόν, παθητικόν ἐστι καὶ φθαρτόν.

129 Ὅσαι μὲν ψυχαὶ . . . ἀπερείδομεν μὲν πνεύματι, κρατοῦσαι δὲ αὐτῶν κατὰ λόγον, ταῦτας δαίμονας τε ἁγαθοὺς νομιστέον . . .

130 Ὅσαι δὲ ψυχαί τοῦ συνεχοῦς πνεύματος ὃς καρτοῦσιν, ἀλλ’ ὃς τὸ παλάκα καὶ κρατοῦνται, δ’ αὐτὸ τούτῳ ἄγονται τε καὶ φέρονται λίγα, ὡστε αἱ τοῦ πνεύματος ἁγαθοὶ τε καὶ ἐπιθυμίαι τὴν ὀρμὴν λάβωσιν. Αὕτα δ’ αἱ ψυχαὶ δαίμονες μὲν καὶ αὐταί, κακουργοὶ δ’ ἂν εἰκότως λέγοντο.

131 τῷ δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν ψυχῶν οὕτως δεδέσθαι ὦστε τὸ εἴδος αὐτῶν διαμένειν πλέον χρόνον, οὐ μὴν ἐστίν αἰώνιον. Καὶ γὰρ ἀπορρέειν αὐτῶν τί συνεχῆς εἰκὸς ἐστὶ καὶ τρέφεσθαι.

132 Ἡν συμμετρία μὲν οὖν τὸν ἁγαθὸν ὡς καὶ τὰ σώματα τῶν φανομένων (meaning the visible celestial gods), τῶν δὲ κακουργοῦν ἁπλόμετρα, οἳ πλέον τὸ παθητικὸ νέμοντες . . .
later that they literally gorged themselves on the smoke and blood of sacrifices, eating more than they evacuated and so becoming fat (2.42.3). But in this passage, he seems to have referred to the indulgence of the πάθη in general, not just of the πάθος of physical hunger.

It is precisely this indulgence of the πάθη that resulted in there being “no evil that they do not attempt to do to the regions around the earth.” This is why “Their character is wholly violent and deceptive,” and why “they usually make sudden intense onslaughts, like ambushes.” “So,” Porphyry finished, the “passions [πάθη] which come from them are acute” (2.39.3). This was a clever play on words: by indulging their πάθη (in the sense of violent appetites), the evil daemons caused πάθη (in the sense of human sufferings or misfortunes). In contrast, the actions of the good daemons reflected the rule of the rational over the πάθη. Their hallmark was slow, consistent, “healing and setting to rights . . . progressing in good order and not going beyond what is right” (2.39.4).

For Porphyry, the ἀπάθεια of the gods and good daemons resulted in harmlessness for several reasons. For one thing, they had no needs and no desire to fulfill πάθη, so they had no reason to cause harm by taking “by force what belongs to others” (Abst. 3.27.11). Furthermore, they never experienced the πάθος of anger, so rage never drove them to harm

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133 Οὕτωι οἱ χαίροντες <λοιβῇ τε κνίσῃ τε>, δι᾽ ὧν αὐτῶν τὸ πνευματικόν <καὶ σωματικόν> πιαίνεται. Ζῇ γὰρ τούτω ἁμαρτίας καὶ ἀναθηματίσει . . . καὶ δυναμότατοι ταῖς ἕκ τῶν αἰμάτων καὶ σαρκῶν κνίσαις.

134 τὸν περίγειον τόπον οὐδὲν ὁ τί τῶν κακῶν σῶκ ἐπιχειροῦσι δρᾶν.

135 For the Greek, see the footnote in section 2.3.1.

136 Όθεν ἀδέξα ἐν τὰ ἀπ’ ἐκείνων πάθη.

137 Αἱ δὲ ἀκάστεις καὶ αἱ κατορθώσεις αἱ ὁποῖς κρειττῶν δαιμόνων βραδύτερα δοκοῦσιν. Πάν γὰρ τὸ ἀγαθὸν εὐηνύον τὸ ὑπὸ καὶ ὀμαλὸν τάξει πρόεισι καὶ τὸ δέον οὐχ ὑπερβαίνει.

138 For a fuller discussion of this passage, see section 3.1.
This does not explain why the gods were absolutely harmless. It would seem to have allowed for administering punishments without anger for the good of the offender, as Porphyry instructed Marcella to discipline her slaves (Ep.Marc. 35). But the ἀπάθεια of the gods differed from the ἀπάθεια of embodied philosophers in that they were completely free from matter. Any involvement with earthly things was incompatible with their nature. This is why asking the gods for material things was an oxymoron. Perhaps it also explains why Porphyry could not imagine the gods policing the cosmos by inflicting material misfortunes upon the wicked.

Porphyry replaced the concept of direct divine punishment with the idea that sin punished itself. But this solution was made plausible by his ascetic theology. According to him, material goods and worldly success were not true goods. Real goods consisted of purity of body and soul, kinship with the divine, and eventual salvation through freedom from materiality. Thus, the worst punishment was stagnation in one’s ascent to the gods, and this was exactly the type of punishment Porphyry imagined to be the natural result of sin. It was easy to maintain this position because sin obviously made the soul unfit for union with the divine. Because of his disregard for material goods, Porphyry did not have to prove the dubious claim that injustice always materially impoverished the offender. He did not believe that it did.

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139 These passages are quoted above in section 2.3.1.

140 See section 3.2 above.

141 In this regard, Porphyry’s treatment of the good daemons and the celestial gods was problematic. On the one hand, they were absolutely harmless, and could not be asked for material things. On the other hand, they were responsible for weather, seasons and crops – the good daemons even had a passible element, though they did not allow themselves to be controlled by it. Discerning Porphyry’s view of the good daemons and the celestial gods is made difficult by the fact that he often referred to “the divine” or “God” or “the gods” without specifying which categories of divinity were included. For the best analysis of Porphyry’s divine terminology (though not a resolution of the problem just mentioned), see Johnson, Religion and Identity.
Conclusion

According to Porphyry, one could offer material things to the lower gods and good daemons, provided that they were inanimate and moderate. These were first-fruit sacrifices of thanksgiving for these divinities’ administration of the cosmos. Such offerings played no role in obtaining material blessings from the gods – Porphyry rejected all prayers for earthly things, the desire for which was incompatible with virtue and with the divine nature. He also believed that sacrificing in hopes of divine reciprocation was always an attempt to barter with the gods and that it implied their dependency upon human gifts. 142 Thus, Plato’s warnings against degraded views of reciprocity became, in Porphyry, warnings against reciprocity as a whole. Furthermore, Porphyry so subordinated physical sacrifices to the life of virtue that there seemed little reason to continue it at all.

At several points, Porphyry referred to the philosophic life of ascetic virtue and contemplation as “noetic sacrifice.” This, too, was a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving – this time to the high gods for their noetic gifts and for their illuminating presence. With the exception of his account of Pythagorean sacrifice in On Abstinence 2.36.1-2, Porphyry did not directly say that noetic sacrifice obtained benefits from the gods. But if one takes every reference to philosophic virtue as a reference to noetic sacrifice, this changes – in other words, Porphyry believed that the gods blessed the virtuous. He encouraged accomplished philosophers to expect and pray for divine help along the path to ἀπάθεια and salvation. In general, the virtuous could

142 Thus, Porphyry slandered the traditional view of reciprocity, perhaps because he found this caricature (bartering) easier to defeat than the authentic vision of a free relationship of gift-giving with the gods. But there may have been some legitimacy to Porphyry’s method. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, gift-giving relationships always involve a certain amount of “misrecognition,” meaning that both parties ignore the fact that their gifts obligate the recipient. To the extent that this was true of late antique sacrifice, Porphyry was merely uncovering what all chose to ignore. For a discussion of misrecognition, see Ullucci, Christian Rejection: 26, citing Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice: 5-6.
not expect practical or material benefits, but good daemons would occasionally warn them about impending disasters. It is doubtful that these divine blessings (whether spiritual or material) can be called reciprocation. Porphyry characterized virtue more as an imitation of the gods than as a gift to the gods. Furthermore, he often thought in terms of theological science, in which the virtuous received divine help and presence because of the natural law that like things unite rather than because of any direct response from the gods as free agents.

Plato’s attack upon propitiatory reciprocity had been an attempt to uphold the inevitability of divine justice. He had warned people that the gods would strike the unjust no matter how many sacrifices they offered. In contrast, Porphyry believed that the gods struck no one. He interpreted Plato’s claim that the gods did no harm in an absolute sense, such that it ruled out even the just punishment of the wicked. To think that the gods were responsible for punishments showed a misconception of the divine nature and the height of impiety. It was on this basis that Porphyry rejected propitiation. Asking the gods to relent wrongly implied that they had caused one’s hardships.

Thus, the two philosophers’ reasons for rejecting propitiation were diametrically opposed. To simplify the matter somewhat, Plato rejected propitiation because he believed in divine punishments. Porphyry rejected it because he did not believe in divine punishments. This difference is apparent in the different ways they described the gods. According to Plato, they were like faithful and competent herdsmen or magistrates who could not be convinced by bribes to pardon the wicked. But Porphyry’s polemic did not focus on the gods’ unwillingness to

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143 It is important to note that Porphyry never acknowledged his departure from Plato’s views of divine justice or reciprocity (either positive or propitiatory). Perhaps he never even acknowledged it to himself. Porphyry was not necessarily the author of his interpretation, or rather reinterpretation, of Plato. It may have found its source in Plotinus, his antecedents, or even in Christian thinkers with whom Porphyry was familiar.
pardon the wicked because he did not think that they had sentenced the wicked to punishment in the first place. In contrast to Plato’s analogies, Porphyry described the gods in abstract terms. Their absolute impassibility and insensibility made the unsusceptible to influence or invocation or entreaty. Porphyry was concerned, not merely about propitiation, but about any religious practice that implied that the gods would interact with humans in human ways.

All of this presented Porphyry with a problem that Plato had not encountered. Though Plato rejected propitiation, he accepted most of the principles and practices of traditional religion. He believed in divine justice – that the gods punished the wicked and blessed the righteous, even in material ways – and he accepted positive reciprocity, so long as it was not understood as a transaction. But Porphyry’s extreme asceticism and his commitment to the absolute ἀπάθεια and harmlessness of the gods called into question the entire traditional religious vision. It was bad enough that he forbade animal sacrifice, but he also marginalized all physical offerings and ruled out prayers for earthly things. Worst of all, he denied divine justice: the wicked did not need to fear earthly retribution, and the righteous could not hope for material blessings.

These perspectives would have been harsh enough to earn Porphyry the title “atheist,” given the ancient definition of the word. But Porphyry, like most Platonists and Stoics, did not want to reject traditional religion outright. He respected it as an ancient and authoritative (if somewhat corrupted) source of divine truth. Thus, there was conflict in Porphyry’s mind between the claims of philosophy (as he saw them) and the claims of traditional religion. The next chapter shows how Porphyry attempted to reconcile the two.

144 Porphyry’s work was not entirely void of human analogies describing the divine, but they were fewer and less central than those employed by Plato.
# PORPHYRY’S REINTERPRETATION AND DEMONIZATION OF RECIPROCITY

## Contents

1 Porphyry’s Respect for Traditional Religion  99
   1.1 Finding Divine Wisdom in Traditional Cult  99
   1.2 Homer’s Geographical Accuracy and the Exegesis of Cult  102
   1.3 Traditional Religious Ideas in Porphyry’s Audience  105

2 Philosophy and Traditional Religion in Tension  109

3 Reconciling Philosophy and Religious Tradition  111
   3.1 Appropriation of Cult Sacrificial Terms  111
   3.2 Reinterpretation of Sacrificial Practice  114
   3.3 Allegorical Interpretation  116
   3.4 The Demonization of Reciprocal Sacrifice and Blood Offerings  117
      3.4.1 Preservation through Demonization  117
      3.4.2 The Challenge of Tradition in *On Abstinence*  119
      3.4.3 Evil Daemons Account for Animal Sacrifice, Harmful “Gods,” and Propitiation  120
      3.4.4 Evil Daemons Account for Positive Reciprocity  123
      3.4.5 Three Types of Sacrifice to Evil Daemons  124
      3.4.6 Daemons as Scapegoats  128

Conclusion  129
Chapter 2 showed that Porphyry’s critique of traditional sacrifice was harsher than that of Plato. Porphyry ruled out positive reciprocity almost completely, and he claimed that the gods cause no harm to humans – they did not even punish the unjust. This made reconciliation with traditional religion harder. The present chapter shows that, ironically, Porphyry’s respect for traditional religion as a source of divine truth was also greater than that of Plato. Thus, Porphyry’s work exhibited a greater polarization between philosophy and traditional views of sacrifice, and, at the same time, a greater desire to reconcile the two. This tension explains why Porphyry’s work contained polemics and efforts to reconcile and appropriate traditional sacrifice that were absent in Plato’s work. The present chapter identifies these efforts as Porphyry’s concept of noetic sacrifice, his insistence on the first-fruits offering (ἀπαρχή) of thanksgiving as the only proper function for sacrifice, and his association of reciprocity with evil daemons. In particular, his use of evil daemons served to validate and appropriate traditional views of sacrifice while at the same time upholding Porphyry’s philosophical principles.

1 Porphyry’s Respect for Traditional Religion

1.1 Finding Divine Wisdom in Traditional Cult

Given the previous chapter’s emphasis on Porphyry’s fundamental differences with traditional religion, it may come as some surprise that Plotinus called him a teacher of religious rites (ἱεροφάνης) and that Porphyry owned up to it (V.Plot. 15.5-6). The latter believed that Homeric texts, religious shrines, cult images and oracular utterances (even those that pertained to the mundane or prescribed bloody sacrifices) spoke with divine authority. He seems to have had a certain respect even for astrology. Aaron P. Johnson speaks of Porphyry’s “deep spirituality”
and “religious seriousness.” His respect for traditional religion (as interpreted by himself) can be seen from his comments in the preface to On the Philosophy from Oracles: “Firm and steadfast is the one drawing his hope of salvation from here [from the wisdom behind the oracles] as from an only firm source . . . I call the gods to witness that I have neither added nor taken away any of the thought which was prophetically uttered” (fr. 303.15-25).

Furthermore, Johnson observes that Porphyry’s attention to some of these features of traditional religion is “surprising” and departed from earlier philosophical practice. In spite of Porphyry’s resistance to astrology, “he shows a willingness to take it seriously as a potential rival form of knowledge . . .” Especially in his works on the interpretation of oracles and cult images, Porphyry shows a “persistent interest in teaching specifically religious texts to philosophy students.” He “evinces a significant shift in pagan isagogical literature to focus upon religious texts as worthy of an introduction.” Again, Johnson notes, “The exploratory nature of the enterprise lies in the type of texts chosen for interpretation: verse oracles and visual images. There seems to be no previous literary treatment of oracles or statues that had been aimed at a student readership and dedicated to overtly pedagogical purposes.”

As Johnson observes, Porphyry’s writings in these areas account for his image as “a friend of daemons and defender of sacrifices.” Eusebius of Caesarea, Augustine, and Firmicus

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1 Johnson, Religion and Identity: 175-6.

2 For translation of this section of De philosophia ex oraculis (Phil.Orac.), see Johnson, Religion and Identity: 175. For critical edition, see Smith, Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta.

3 Johnson notes that Porphyry goes on to give himself the option to correct or selectively quote from the oracles.

4 Johnson uses this phrase to refer to works “containing eisagōgai, ‘introductions.’”

5 Johnson, Religion and Identity: 146-47, 56-57, 64-65. This might simply imply that Porphyry was trying to reach a broader audience, but I tend towards Johnson’s view that the philosopher and his students were trying to produce a comprehensive philosophical vision that took all phenomena, including religious phenomena, into consideration.
Maternus delighted to selectively read his texts to produce this impression. Modern scholars have followed them in portraying Porphyry as a popularizer of philosophy and a defender of Greek religion. But Johnson argues convincingly for another perspective. According to him, Porphyry’s works exhibit a consistent elitism. His discussions of images and oracles and blood sacrifices do not validate these as they were traditionally interpreted. Porphyry believed that much of traditional religion communicated divine truths, but he claimed that only the philosopher had the ability to read these truths.

Johnson argues that a number of Porphyry’s works, including Introduction to Ptolemy’s Tetrabiblos, On Images, On the Philosophy from Oracles, On the Inscription “Know Thyself,” were intended to be read with an inner circle of philosophy students – students prepared to look beyond the outward appearance of religious objects and behind the surface meaning of religious texts to the divine wisdom contained therein. Porphyry was not a popularizer. He was, in Johnson’s words, a “master reader,” a “spiritual guide in the pursuit of truth,” a “translator,” who read traditional cults and texts through a philosophical lens, believing that, in the end, “religious and philosophical truth were one.” Thus, On Images “offered a sustained symbolic exegesis of

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7 It seems that religious rites, objects and texts had become cultural capital over which Porphyry and other religious authorities fought. This puts Porphyry’s context in sharp contrast to that of Plato, though the effort to reinterpret religion and claim it for philosophy had not been totally absent from classical Greece.

8 Indeed, it is difficult to find a truly popularizing late antique philosopher. Porphyry accused Iamblichus of this, but Iamblichus philosophically interpreted religious rites more than he compromised philosophy for their sake (see Chapter 4).
religious iconography as part of a serious philosophical mode of viewing,” but this exegesis was “limited to the philosopher’s circle,” and not intended for “the public festival or the temple.”

Johnson’s perspective helps to correct the tendency to see Porphyry’s references to the earthiest elements of traditional religion as an allegiance to “crass superstition, magic and exotic religiosity.” But the fact remains, as Johnson says, that Porphyry and his inner circle of students respected the texts, images, oracles, and astrology of traditional religion as sources of divine truth. They did not interpret these traditional elements in traditional ways, but they valued them, and valued them to a degree probably unprecedented in earlier philosophy.

1.2 Homer’s Geographical Accuracy and the Exegesis of Cult

Porphyry’s exegesis of Homer is concentrated in On the Cave of the Nymphs and On the Styx. In these works, he took “into consideration the ancient wisdom and the vast intelligence of Homer, along with his perfection in every virtue.” Based on this, he argued, “one cannot reject the idea that he has hinted at images of more divine things in molding his little story” (Antro nymph. 36.2-5). Porphyry’s respect for Homer and his allegorical reading of Homeric texts

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9 Johnson, Religion and Identity: Chapter 4, especially 171.
10 Johnson, Religion and Identity: 13. He cites as examples of this tendency Bidez, Vie de Porphyre: 35; Romano, Porfirio: 112, 32; Robert Turcan, Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 63-64.
12 ἐν μυθαρίῳ πλάσματι εἰκόνας τῶν θειοτέρων ἔνισσετο.
were not uncommon in the imperial era. But he was distinct in arguing for a different kind of allegory than was used by his recent predecessor, the second-century AD Platonist and Neopythagorean Cronius. Porphyry’s objection, expressed in the introductory material of both works, was that Cronius and others thought that Homer had fabricated some of his accounts out of thin air. Their non-historicity and implausibility of these accounts were signs that they were to be taken allegorically. But Porphyry claimed, both in his discussion of the Styx and of the cave of the nymphs, that Homer had been describing physical realities (Styg. fr. 372, Antro nymph. 2-4).

For example, On the Styx (fr. 376) claims that the mythic river existed on earth; it surfaced twice in India, as related by an Indian embassy and by Apollonius of Tyana. According to Porphyry, the Indians had recognized the River as a miraculous judge of character, since it flooded the guilty but let the pure pass. Similarly, he countered Cronius’ assertion that the cave of the nymphs was unhistorical. Porphyry had found geographical accounts, particularly that of Artemidorus of Ephesus, that described the narrow harbor of Phorcys with “a beach where the sacred cave of the nymphs is located” (Antro nymph. 4). Here, a very important distinction must be made. Porphyry did not say that the physical River Styx in India was the same as the one in Hades, haunted by the souls of the dead and guarded by a three-headed dog. Nor did he think that a cave in Ithaca contained a special “path of descent for man and one for the gods,” nor

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13 On allegory as a common feature of the imperial era, see Johnson, Religion and Identity: 175, citing P. Struck, Birth of the Symbol (Princeton University, 2004); Struck, "Divination and literary criticism?,” in Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston and Struck (Leiden: Brill, 2005).


15 For translation of De Styge (Styg.), see Johnson, Religion and Identity: 331-33. For critical edition, see Smith, Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta.

According to Porphyry, the cave was an ancient shrine in honor of the gods, containing *cultic representations* of nymphs with purple cloth, pots of honey, and the other features Homer related. It was not a special site of human descent and divine ascent, but the ancients had constructed it in such a way as to symbolically communicate divine truths about this process. Porphyry wrote, “The ancients who founded shrines would not have done so without incorporating mysterious symbols” (4.21-22). He acknowledged that Homer might have “added something” in his description of the cult, but “To the extent that one undertakes to show that the business of the cave is not a Homeric creation [πλάσµα] but rather that of those, before Homer’s time, who consecrated the place to the gods, one will be establishing that the dedication [τò ἄναθηµα] is full of the wisdom of the ancients and on this account that it deserves investigation [ἀξίων ἐρεύνης] and its cult symbolism should be interpreted [τῆς ἐν αὐτῶ συµβολικῆς καθιδρύσεως δεόµενον τῆς παραστάσεως]” (4.19-27).

With respect to the Styx, the situation was slightly different. Its physical manifestation in India appears to have held divine power. The Indians had not simply constructed a shrine with symbolic significance; they had recognized the presence of divine power and had established cult practices associated with it. The place manifested divine truths both miraculously and symbolically. Thus, in Porphyry’s discussions of both the Cave of the Nymphs and the Styx, he shifted the location of divine insight from Homer to “the ancients” and the gods, who constructed places with manifest divine power and cult representations, both of which symbolically pointed to eternal truths. Homer was partly a mediator of this ancient and revealed wisdom.

16 ὡς ἄν µήτε τῶν παλαιῶν ἄνευ συµβόλων µυστικῶν τὰ ἱερὰ καθιδρυσµένων . . .
Several points can be made from this. First, though Porphyry was not opposed to reading texts allegorically, he emphasized reading *cults* allegorically.\(^{17}\) This allowed ancient practices to become fuel for contemporary philosophical reflection.\(^{18}\) Second, Porphyry showed a consistent tendency to take Homer more seriously than his predecessors. According to him, passages to be allegorically interpreted were not necessarily false at the literal level. There *was* a cult site on Ithaca, much as Homer had described it, and there *was* a physical River Styx. Finally, Porphyry distanced himself from “forced” (βεβιασμένη) allegory, “the sort of thing fanciful interpreters try to render plausible”\(^{19}\) (*Antro nymph*. 36.1-2).\(^{20}\)

1.3 Traditional Religious Ideas in Porphyry’s Audience

Heidi Marx-Wolf summarizes recent scholarship on the types of religious and philosophical figures characteristic of the second and third centuries. She cites David Frankfurter and Jacco Dieleman, who show that the disenfranchised Egyptian priests of the imperial era were leaving temple precincts and peddling their ritual expertise to a broader clientele. They

\(^{17}\) On the importance of cults in *Antro nymph.*, Johnson cites Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus*: 66. Johnson takes Porphyry’s insistence on the physical reality of the Cave of the Nymphs to indicate a broader audience, outside the inner philosophical circle. But, in fact, Porphyry’s emphasis on the philosophical “reading” of cults in this work is consistent with his allegorical reading of cult statues in *Simulac.*, where he encouraged his students to “see painted or carved images as letters signifying a reality beyond themselves.” Johnson identifies Porphyry’s tendency to offer “a sustained symbolic exegesis of religious iconography” to be part of a larger late antique trend identified by Jaś Elsner: *Johnson, Religion and Identity*: 167, 71, 84; *Elsner, Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge University, 1995). Surely, Porphyry’s allegorical reading of cult imagery in his Homeric exegesis should be seen as part of the same tendency and not as inconsistent with his other works.

\(^{18}\) This shows Porphyry’s marked respect for these practices and his desire to appropriate traditional religion for philosophy.

\(^{19}\) εὑρεσιλογούντοι πιθανότητας.

\(^{20}\) This may seem incredible, given Porphyry’s own allegory of the Cyclops as the bodily existence of Odysseus, the philosopher (*Antro nymph*. 34-35), but the fact remains that Porphyry perceived his allegorical method to be less fanciful than that of others.
appropriated the Greco-Roman stereotype of the Egyptian priest as an expert in esoteric subjects, such as astrological divination. They were religious entrepreneurs who assimilated ritual elements from the various ancient traditions in the Empire. These priests were the authors of the so-called “Greek Magical Papyri,” which Marx-Wolf takes to be partially representative of traditional religion across the Greco-Roman world.21

Marx-Wolf observes that these Egyptian priests assimilated not only Greco-Roman religious elements, but also Greco-Roman philosophy. As Garth Fowden shows, third-century Syrian and Egyptian priests were often students or even teachers in philosophical schools. They produced hybrid versions of Platonism and traditional religion and expressed themselves in texts such as the Chaldaean Oracles and the Hermetic corpus.22

This literature show that, outside of Porphyry’s inner circle of students, there were a number of attitudes towards traditional religion. Most philosophers and intellectuals respected it, but some adopted its principles and practices in ways Porphyry would have thought inappropriate. This accounts for the consistent critique of traditional ideas and practices outlined in Chapter 2. The present section returns to many of the texts familiar from Chapter 2, this time to point out passages in which Porphyry specifically complained that philosophers were compromising with traditional religious ideas.


22 Marx-Wolf, Spiritual Taxonomy: 151-58; Garth Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind (Cambridge University, 1986), 166-68.
On Abstinence provides particularly clear examples. This treatise was an open letter to Porphyry’s friend Firmus Castricius, a Neoplatonist who had once been a vegetarian but had now returned to meat and to animal sacrifice. Porphyry and Castricius had been fellow students of Plotinus in Rome in the 260s. Most of those in Plotinus’ circle were vegetarians but some were not. Thus, Porphyry’s treatise was addressed to Neoplatonists who lacked vegetarian convictions or had lost them. In his mind, these philosophers were compromising with the blood sacrifice and meat-eating of traditional religion.

A careful reading of On Abstinence shows that Porphyry’s most fundamental justification for his vegetarian position was ascetic. According to him, what the soul decided to do with the body affected the soul. The indulgence of the body strengthened the soul’s material connections. Ascetic detachment from the passions began to free the soul from its material bonds. Thus, all indulgence, including the eating of meat, was injurious to salvation. In this, Porphyry strongly disagreed with those who believed that no bodily action could affect the immortal soul, making bodily indulgence a matter of indifference. Porphyry argued that one could not go to an animal sacrifice and indulge in the feast without endangering one’s soul. In other words, true philosophy required some level of withdrawal from traditional, public religion. Finally, and most importantly for this study, a number of passages in On Abstinence show Porphyry’s concern that his philosophical audience was compromising the Platonic position (as redefined by Porphyry).

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23 We learn this from Porphyry’s Life of Plotinus 7.25-26, 10.33. For discussion, see Clark, “Introduction,” 1-2, 4; Clark, “Porphyry and Iamblichus: philosophic Lives and the philosophic life,” in Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity, ed. Thomas Hagg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

24 Porphyry particularly accused some “barbarians” of this, probably referring to Gnostics (1.42). For discussion, see Clark, On Abstinence: 139, n. 52.
on the goodness of the gods and the function of sacrifice. In his mind, these philosophers were backsliding into the errors of traditional religion.

Porphyry made this explicit. In 2.35.1, he accused “many of those who are committed to philosophy [πολλοὶ τῶν φιλοσοφεῖν ἐσπουδακότων]” of sacrificing traditional, physical offerings to the “intelligible gods,” to whom one should only offer contemplation and hymns. Several chapters later, he listed misconceptions about the gods, including the idea that they get angry, require propitiation, and satisfy people’s passions in return for sacrifices. Then he observed,

> It is not only lay people who are victims of this, but even some of those who study philosophy; and each is responsible for the other, for among the students of philosophy those who do not stand clear of the general opinion come to agree with the masses, whereas the masses, hearing from those with a reputation for wisdom opinions which agree with their own, are confirmed in holding even more strongly such beliefs about the gods (2.40.2-5).^{25}

Thus, Porphyry felt compelled to address these traditional misconceptions of the gods within his own philosophical community.

Several of Porphyry’s other works show a similar concern. The fragmentary To Anebo ostensibly addresses the errors of traditional “Egyptian” religion; but the named recipient, Anebo, was clearly Iamblichus, Porphyry’s former student.^26 The master philosopher thought his disciple had compromised dangerously with traditional ideas. As noted in Chapter 2, To Marcella, Porphyry’s letter to his wife (and to other philosophically minded individuals) is full of warnings against overemphasizing the importance of traditional sacrifices in pleasing the gods

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^{25} Πεπόνθασι δὲ τούτῳ οὐκ ἰδίωται μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατριβήσαντων οὐκ ἀλλοίοι. Ἡ δὲ αἰτία δι’ ἀλλήλων γέγονεν. Καὶ γὰρ τῶν φιλοσοφοῦντων οἱ μὴ ἀποστάντες τῆς κοινῆς φορὰς εἰς τὰ αὐτὰ τοῖς πλῆθεις συνέβησαν, καὶ πάλιν εἰ τὰ πλῆθη σύμφωνα ταῖς ἑαυτῶν δόξαις παρὰ τῶν δοκοῦντων <σοφῶν> ἀκούοντα ἐπερράσθη φρονεῖν ἐπὶ μάλλον περί τῶν θεῶν τὰ τιμώτα.

and against misconceptions of the function of these sacrifices. All of this suggests that, in Porphyry and his audience, there was a respect for traditional religion and a desire to integrate it with philosophy. There was a spectrum of approaches in this area, and much of Porphyry’s work was devoted to navigating this territory and to opposing inappropriate compromises with traditional ideas and practices.

2 Philosophy and Traditional Religion in Tension

Chapter 2 showed that Porphyry’s stance towards traditional sacrifice (and its traditional interpretation) was more critical than that of Plato. Porphyry rejected reciprocity completely, and he held an absolute definition of divine harmlessness that ruled out even just divine punishments. To some extent, these perspectives were connected to his ascetic cosmology and his ascetic withdrawal from the public arena, including public religious practice and ideas. As Gillian Clark observes, Porphyry’s more extreme asceticism set him off from Plato, and even from Plotinus.27 Johnson recognizes,

There was no question in Plato of turning away from civic cult forms; by contrast, the emotional and intellectual reserve towards such practices by Porphyry (and Plotinus) are noteworthy. The force of their reserved posture towards popular religious activity is keenly felt if we briefly rehearse the various declarations marking out the distance between the philosopher and the general populace.28

All of this meant that, for Porphyry, the intellectual and practical gulf between philosophy and traditional religion was greater than it had been for Plato. This was the subject of Chapter 2. In contrast, the present chapter has, thus far, shown that Porphyry and his audience respected

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27 Clark, "Introduction," 15-19. See her comment quoted at the beginning of Section 3 in the Introduction to this dissertation.

28 Johnson, Religion and Identity: 179.
traditional religion and attempted to integrate it with philosophy in a way unprecedented in earlier times.

The greater polarization and, simultaneously, the greater efforts at integration may be two sides of the same coin. Plato only had relatively minor differences with traditional sacrifice and its interpretation. Thus, he could simply dismiss those elements with which he disagreed without condemning traditional religion as a whole. There was no great need for him to reconcile the points of disagreement. But, for Porphyry, the points of disagreement were many. If he had simply dismissed all those elements of traditional religion with which he disagreed, it would have amounted to a rejection of traditional religion as a whole. Without animal sacrifice, meat-eating, propitiation, reciprocity, and prayers for material benefits and worldly success, what would have remained of traditional religion?

In order to claim adherence to traditional religion, Porphyry had to radically reinterpret it so as to bring it into line with his philosophical commitments. Thus, it was precisely Porphyry’s greater alienation from the principles of traditional religion that called for great efforts at reconciliation that did not appear in Plato’s work. Similarly, hostile royal families, not friendly ones, attempt to intermarry. Porphyry’s efforts to reconcile traditional religion with philosophy can be divided into three main categories. First, he used cult terminology to describe the philosophic life of asceticism and contemplation. According to him, it was the best and highest \([\text{θυσία}}\text{ and } \text{καθάρσιον and } \text{εὐχή} – \text{the } \text{θεραπεία} \text{ that the gods had really wanted all along. This appropriation of religious terminology allowed Porphyry to criticize much of traditional cult}

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29 Johnson writes, “Perhaps we should not dismiss Plotinus’ evaluation of Porphyry, preserved though it is in the self-congratulatory Life of Plotinus [15]. He was at once ‘a philosopher and a hierophant.’ Any attempt to emphasize unduly one characterization over the other misleadingly severs the intricately poised rational spirituality of the philosopher.” Johnson, Religion and Identity: 144-45.
while presenting himself as the champion of its truest and highest form. Second, Porphyry claimed that the purpose of sacrifice had never been reciprocity with the gods. It was a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving with no expectation of return. This allowed him to support physical sacrifices (provided they were inanimate) while attacking reciprocity. Finally, Porphyry claimed that all the religious practices he found objectionable, such as reciprocity and blood sacrifice, were interactions with evil daemons. This allowed him to explain why these practices seemed to be effective, and, at the same time, to argue that no good person would engage in them. The rest of this chapter will explore these three strategies in turn. A short section on allegory has been added for perspective.

3 Reconciling Philosophy and Religious Tradition

3.1 Appropriation of Cult Sacrificial Terms

As observed in Chapter 2, Porphyry applied cult sacrificial terms to the philosophic life. In particular, in On Abstinence, he spoke of a first-fruits sacrifice to the “god who rules over all” and to his offspring, the noetic gods. This consisted, on the one hand, of living the ascetic life – of purifying one’s self from the indulgence of the body or of the passions – and, on the other hand, of contemplating the divine nature and being conformed to its image. Once, On Abstinence specifically refers to this as noetic sacrifice (ἡ νοερὰ θυσία) (2.45.4). Porphyry also presented the philosopher as the “priest of the god who rules over all [θεοῦ τοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἱερεύς]” (2.49.1) and as “the priest of the father [ὁ τοῦ πατρὸς ἱερεύς]” (2.50.1, cf. 2.45.4). He wrote, “just as a priest of one of the particular gods is expert in setting up cult-statues of this god, and in his rites and initiations and purifications and the like, so the priest of the god who rules all is expert in the
making of his cult-statue and in purifications and the other [rites] by which he is linked to the god” (2.49.3).

In the context, “purifications” clearly refer to abstinence from animate foods and from other indulgence. The philosopher’s statue-making (ἀγαλματοποιία) probably refers to the molding of his mind into the likeness of god. To Marcella 11 supports this interpretation. Here, Porphyry wrote, “only the mind of the wise man is sanctified as [the divine’s] temple.” “It is properly this wise man alone who must honor the divine through wisdom and through wisdom adorns in his mental faculty the temple, which glorifies [the divine] through his mind, as a living cult-statue of the one who is represented.” The priesthood of the philosopher is also a recurring theme in To Marcella. Porphyry repeatedly presented the philosophic life of ascetic virtue and contemplation as the true “piety” (ἐυσέβεια) and the truly pleasing service to god, in contrast to

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30 Καὶ ὁσπέρ ὁ τινὸς τὸν κατὰ μέρος <θεῶν> ἱερεὺς ἐμπειρὸς τῆς ἱδρύσεως τῶν ἀγαλμάτων αὐτοῦ τῶν τε ὄργισμῶν καὶ τελετῶν καθαρσεῶν τε καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων, ὁδός ὁ τοῦ ἐπὶ πάσι θεοῦ ἱερεὺς ἐμπειρὸς τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀγαλματοποιίας καθάρσεων τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων δὴ ὁν συνάπτεται τῷ θεῷ.

31 Clark notes Plotinus’ exhortation to make oneself into an image of God: “do not cease sculpting your own statue” (ἀγαλμα) (Enn. 1.6.9.13). She observes that this concept reflects Phdr. 252d, where Plato refers to the “philosopher” as “a cult-statue . . . who is like Zeus in soul.” It is, perhaps, in keeping with this reasoning that Jean Bouffartigue prints αὐτοῦ (making the statue the philosopher’s own) rather than A. Nauck’s αὐτοῦ (making the statue that of the god). But I suggest that this matters little, since, either way, the statue can be the philosopher. This perspective is confirmed by Stéphane Toulouse’s observation that Porphyry’s concept of noetic sacrifice does contain the traditional element of gift giving to the gods. The philosopher, after imitating the divine and becoming akin to it, offers himself back to the divine as an image of and for God. See Clark, On Abstinence: 159, n. 399; Nauck, Porphyrius philosophus platonicus: opuscula selecta, 2nd ed. (Olms: Teubner, 1977); Toulouse, “La théosophie,” 335-38; and Bouffartigue and Patillon, Porphyre: De l’abstinence, 2: 2.

32 ‘νεών δὲ τούτῳ παρ’ ἀνθρώποις καθιερόθεται τὴν διάνοιαν μάλιστα τοῦ σοφοῦ μόνην.’ The wording is the same as in Sent. Pythag. 66 and the Sent. Sext. 144.

33 I have altered Zimmermann’s translation for greater precision. The Greek runs, τοῦτο δὲ εἶναι εἰκότως μόνον τὸν σοφὸν, ὃς τιμήθην διὰ σοφίας τὸ θεῖον καὶ κατακοσμηθέντος αὐτῷ διὰ σοφίας ἐν τῇ γνώμῃ τὸ ἱερόν, ἐμπύρῳ ἀγάλματι τῷ νῷ ἐνεκοσμημένου ἀγάλματον <τοῦ θεοῦ>.

34 For example: The way to “best honor God,” Porphyry wrote, is “by making your mind like unto Him, and this you can do by virtue alone [διὰ μόνης ἀρετῆς]. For only virtue can draw the soul upward to that which is akin to it.” Thus, “the wise man only is a priest; he only is beloved by God, and knows how to pray” (16).
traditional sacrifices and rites.\textsuperscript{35} In \textit{On Abstinence} he wrote, “The best offering to the gods is a pure intellect and a soul unaffected by passion” (2.61.1).\textsuperscript{36}

Porphyry was not alone in applying cult terms such as “priest,” “sacrifice” and “temple” to the philosophic life. As Stephen Anthony Maiullo observes, Platonic philosophers of the imperial period began to present themselves as priests.\textsuperscript{37} To an extent, this was the analogical extension of the Greek view of sacrifice to gods who (Porphyry believed) had nothing to do with the material realm. Of course, they, too, had to receive service, but this service could not be material in nature.\textsuperscript{38} However, Porphyry drew a clear distinction between noetic sacrifice as the only way to please god and traditional sacrifice as secondary and liable to misinterpretation. It is impossible to ignore his polemical intent. As Heidi Marx-Wolf argues, Porphyry was attempting to discredit ordinary, traditional priests and to present himself and his fellow philosophers as the true religious experts, worthy of being the advisors of the empire.\textsuperscript{39}

Very likely, this is so; but Porphyry would not have found it useful to present his philosophy in cult terminology unless this terminology carried a respect and authority that he wished to access. As the first section of this chapter has shown, Porphyry himself shared this respect for traditional cult. Perhaps he was trying to prove, not only to the empire, but also to

\textsuperscript{35} The wise man “shows his piety \[τὴν πρὸς θεῶν ἀσκῦν εὐσέβειαν\] not by continued prayers and sacrifices \[λιτανεύων ἀεὶ καὶ θύων\] but by his actions.” And, “he makes himself well-pleasing and consecrated to God by assimilating his own disposition to the blessed and incorruptible nature” (17).

\textsuperscript{36} Θεοὶ δὲ ἄριστη μὲν ἀπαρχὴ νοῦς καθαρὸς καὶ ψυχὴ ἅπαθής.

\textsuperscript{37} Maiullo, “From Philosopher to Priest.”

\textsuperscript{38} Johnson believes that the “notions of intellectual or spiritual sacrifice” are “best understood not as a rejection of ritual as the physical, embodied cult of gods or daemons, but rather its metaphoric extension” (Johnson, \textit{Religion and Identity}: 103).

\textsuperscript{39} Marx-Wolf, \textit{Spiritual Taxonomy}: especially Chapter 4.
himself and to his fellow philosophers, that the philosophical life was a higher reflection of cult.\textsuperscript{40} In reality, the continuity was little more than verbal, but that did not make it inconsequential. Like the habit of invading generals to call themselves by the titles of ousted native kings, Porphyry’s “priesthood” might have gained him some respect, but it was a more genuine act, for he was largely trying to reconcile different sources of truth within his own mind.

3.2 Reinterpretation of Sacrificial Practice

As shown in Chapter 2, Porphyry rejected the traditional understanding that sacrifices sought reciprocation from the gods. In order to avoid rejecting sacrifice altogether, he had to give it a new interpretation. This is why he claimed that the only proper understanding of sacrifice was that of a first-fruits offering (ἀπαρχή) of thanksgiving. The ἀπαρχή as a category of sacrifice went back at least to classical times.\textsuperscript{41} Though he did not use the same word, Plato spoke of sacrifice as the return of a portion of divine gifts in thanksgiving (\textit{Leg.} 717-718). For Plato, this sacrifice of thanksgiving clearly invited further response from the gods. Porphyry differed from Plato in 1) claiming that the function of sacrifice was \textit{only} to thank the gods and 2) insisting that the first-fruits offering was the \textit{only} proper offering.

By redefining the function of sacrifice in this way, Porphyry was able to reject propitiation and positive reciprocity without rejecting the practice of sacrifice itself. This was a momentous move. As the rest of this dissertation will show, this method and others like it were a

\footnote{\textsuperscript{40} On the concept of noetic sacrifice as a common feature in late antique philosophy, see Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Sacrifice in Early Christianity and Its Environment," \textit{ANRW} 2, no. 23.2 (1980): 1151-89.}

defining intellectual characteristic of the second, third and fourth centuries. Plato did not have to redefine sacrificial function, for he largely accepted the traditional concept of reciprocity. He could reject the few elements with which he disagreed (propitiation, for example) without jettisoning sacrifice in its entirety. In contrast, Porphyry’s differences with traditional sacrificial interpretation were so great that he had to reinterpret sacrifice in order to retain the practice at all. But this act of reinterpretation made sacrifice more consonant with philosophy than it had been in Plato’s day. This is why Plotinus could call Porphyry a ἱεροφάντης. Plato found religion concerning but largely acceptable: he held it arm’s length. Porphyry found it unacceptable, and so he transformed it into the bedfellow of philosophy.  

This episode in intellectual history shows the importance, but also the limitations, of Daniel Ullucci’s claim: that the practice of sacrifice is non-discursive, meaning that its existence is not dependent upon a particular interpretation of it, and that cultural producers compete over the proper interpretation that should be assigned to it. This is a helpful model as far as “etic” models go. It describes a phenomenon that appears in certain situations, but it does so from a decidedly external perspective. This dissertation has shown the “emic” side of this phenomenon – the internal thought processes and conflicts that led Porphyry to retain the practice of sacrifice but to redefine its function. These intellectual circumstances of Porphyry’s day were not constants. They did not exist, at least to the same degree, in Plato’s time. This shows that the

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42 As the next chapter will show, Porphyry was not alone. He was a representative (if a rather strange one) of a trend in imperial-age philosophy.


44 For a discussion of the terms “etic” and “emic,” which originated with Kenneth Pike, see Naiden, Smoke Signals: Chapter 8.
characterization of sacrifice as non-discursive has only limited applicability. Each figure and era must be studied on its own terms.

3.3 Allegorical Interpretation

As observed above, Porphyry interpreted traditional texts, oracles, cults, and their images as symbols of divine truths. This sometimes allowed him to dismiss the surface meaning of cult while honoring it as a veiled representation of philosophic ideas. He might be expected to have employed allegory to get around references to sacrifices or sacrificial interpretations that seemed inappropriate to him, but there is little evidence that he did so. On the Philosophy from Oracles (fr. 14-15) contains an oracle of Apollo on sacrifices and a small piece of Porphyry’s commentary. He asked, “Must we exegete the symbols of the sacrifices since they are clear to the person who understands well?” (fr. 315.27-29), but then he proceeded to do so. He pointed out that the color of the victims prescribed by Apollo matched the level of divinities to which they were offered, “since like rejoices in like” (fr. 315.30). For example, to the lower gods associated with earth, black animals were sacrificed, “for such is the naturally dark earth.” Furthermore, the fact that there were three victims prescribed in this case was appropriate, since “three is the symbol of the bodily and earthy [element]” (fr. 315.33-35).

Porphyry certainly had more to say that Eusebius chose not to preserve, but the allegory that survives, surprisingly, does not explain away the animal sacrifice prescribed by Apollo, nor does it make a special effort to steer the reader away from incorrect interpretations of sacrifice. As the next section will show, Porphyry obviated troublesome references to sacrifice in oracles.

45 ἄρ’ οὖν δεήσει ἐξηγήσασθαι τῶν θυσιῶν τὰ σύμβολα τῷ εὔσυνέτῳ δήλῳ;

46 For translation and further comments on these fragments, see Johnson, Religion and Identity: 127-29.
as well as in Homer, not through allegory, but through his concept of evil daemons. In fact, it was the practice of demonization that allowed Porphyry to read Homer, oracles, images, and cults in a relatively literal way.

3.4 The Demonization of Reciprocal Sacrifice and Blood Offerings

3.4.1 Preservation through Demonization

In keeping with their different approaches, Heidi Marx-Wolf and Aaron P. Johnson note that Porphyry’s theory of evil daemons allowed him to dismiss certain elements of traditional religion. This section goes beyond these scholars’ work by identifying (in the area of sacrifice) precisely what Porphyry demonized and why he found it necessary to do so. Porphyry explained all stories and experiences of divine harmfulness, propitiation, blood sacrifice and reciprocity as interactions with evil daemons. This served, ironically, to validate tradition as well as to dismiss it. According to Porphyry, traditional religion was right that superhuman beings grew angry, caused disasters, were bought off with blood sacrifice, and bartered with humans. Thus, contemporary traditional religion, in addition to the oracles and Homeric texts, could be taken at face value when they described sacrifice. The only catch was that their references to “gods” were actually references to “evil daemons.” Porphyry indicated that many of the “divine” authors of the past were fully conscious of this. According to him, Homer called evil daemons “gods” according to an ancient convention.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Homer “supposed that the cosmic gods, whose races we have enumerated, were not entirely impassible, calling them <gods> according to the ancient practice” (Styg. fr. 377.85-87, translated in Johnson, Religion and Identity: 335). In the context of Porphyry’s corpus, the κοσμικοὶ θεοὶ are daemons.
Thus, demonization reconciled sacrificial tradition with philosophy in a way unparalleled by the other methods mentioned in this chapter. When Porphyry called the philosopher a high “priest” and his ascetic, contemplative life a “sacrifice,” he preserved traditional cult terms, but he marginalized or rejected the traditional definition and practice of these terms. When he insisted that thanksgiving was the only proper function of sacrifice, he allowed the practice of sacrifice to continue, but he also implied that traditional and historical accounts of reciprocity and propitiation were just plain wrong. Even allegory, had Porphyry applied it to sacrificial tradition, would have had limited power. Recent or ostensibly historical accounts of divine-human reciprocity would have resisted symbolic interpretation. Furthermore, Porphyry’s ascetic philosophy led him to reject animal sacrifice outright. He could have offered allegorical interpretations of it, but he would still have been left trying to explain the habitual presence of this criminal action in traditional religion.

Only demonization would serve Porphyry’s purpose. Platonists had always believed that, ultimately, philosophical and religious truth were one. For Plato, this had not been a difficult principle to maintain. But, for Porphyry, the gulf between philosophy and traditional religion was much wider. The reconciliation of the two required desperate measures, including evil daemons. I say “desperate measures” because, as Dale Martin claims, Plato and the early philosophical tradition claimed that all superhuman beings were good.48 Porphyry broke with that tradition, but I do not believe that he did so consciously. The seeds of change were already in the air (as Martin notes), and, ironically, Porphyry departed from Plato only to preserve his own version of Platonism and to reconcile it (in some sense) with religious tradition.

48 Martin, Inventing Superstition; Johnson, Religion and Identity: 335.
3.4.2 The Challenge of Tradition in *On Abstinence*

Porphyry’s use of evil daemons to address the claims of tradition regarding sacrifice is clearest in *On Abstinence*. In Book 1, Porphyry acknowledged that some people thought killing and eating animals must be right because sacrificial tradition, oracles, and numerous historical accounts had proven it to be acceptable to the gods (1.22, 25). In Book 2, he began to address this objection by rehearsing an argument from the late-classical philosopher Theophrastus. According to him, the tradition of animal sacrifice was not authoritative because it was actually a corruption of an earlier religious tradition in which animals were never eaten or offered to the gods (2.5-12). This argument may have been persuasive to the Roman mind, which was quite ready to believe in a decline from a golden age.

But the argument from tradition had not yet been overcome. Perhaps animal sacrifice was a corruption of the pure tradition of inanimate offerings; but if this was true, Greco-Romans had been offering displeasing and even criminal sacrifices to the gods for centuries. Why, then, had the gods encouraged blood offerings through oracles and miracles? Why did historical accounts and even present practice prove that animal sacrifice worked so well? The same went for Porphyry’s rejection of reciprocity or propitiatory sacrifice or the idea that the gods cause no harm. Greco-Roman history and experience seemed to confirm that disasters often had a divine...

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49 Porphyry seems to have attributed this objection to the “common man,” whom he called ὁ πολὺς καὶ δημοῦδης (1.13.1, cf. 1.26.4). However, Gillian Clark (in her notes) and Jean Bouffartigue and Michel Patillon (in their introduction) claim that the arguments introduced as those of the ordinary man in 1.13-26 are drawn from the work of Clodius the Neopolitan (possibly an Epicurean) and Heracleides Ponticus (a student of Plato and Aristotle). They attribute to the latter the chapters of particular note for my study (1.22 and 1.25), which use histories, oracles, and sacrificial traditions to argue that animal slaughter and sacrifice are pious. Perhaps the ambiguity here between the ideas of the commoner and the philosopher support my thesis that Porphyry was addressing philosophers whom he perceived to be capitulating to traditional ideas. See Jacob Bernays, *Theophrastos' Schrift über Frömmigkeit* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1866). 10f, 141; Bouffartigue, *Porphyre: De l'abstinence*, trans. Bouffartigue and Patillon, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977). 25-30; and Clark, *On Abstinence*: 123-24 n.13-14, 29 n. 53.
source and that the gods relented when placated.\textsuperscript{50} In other words, the proof was in the pudding of actual sacrificial experience, and the pudding was full of slaughtered animals and propitiated gods.

3.4.3 Evil Daemons Account for Animal Sacrifice, Harmful “Gods,” and Propitiation

As just noted, demonization was uniquely suited to answer this object – Porphyry proceeded to employ it in Book 2 of On Abstinence. The story begins with Porphyry’s hierarchy of different sacrifices to different divinities (2.34-37). At the bottom of the hierarchy were the daemons. These were souls that had airy bodies composed of πνεῦμα.\textsuperscript{51} They were confined to the lower regions between the moon and the earth and they (at least the good ones) were in charge of various crops, animals, weather, seasons, and human arts and skills. Some of these had names in the pantheon and received worship like the celestial gods, but they were at a lower level. Unlike the celestial gods, Porphyry acknowledged that daemons had the potential to receive blood sacrifices. So far this would have been unremarkable to a Platonic audience, but Porphyry now broke with the typical account by dividing the daemons into good and evil and claiming that only the evil daemons wanted blood. The good daemons did not demand it and were content with simple vegetal offerings (2.36.5, 2.37.4-2.39.5, cf. 2.58.1-2).

Both types of daemons had pneumatic bodies that had to be fed and had some corresponding evacuation. The good daemons, however, did not want animals to be murdered for


\textsuperscript{51} The traditional translations “spirit” or “breath” do not reflect Porphyry’s use of the word.
them. Like good philosophers, they controlled their physical needs with their intellects. They practiced moderation and did not choose to overindulge in blood and smoke. But the maleficent daemons, like carnal people, did not control their bodies with reason but were controlled by them (2.38-39). They indulged their appetites with animal sacrifice. Porphyry wrote, “It is they who rejoice in ‘drink-offerings and smoking meat’ on which their pneumatic part grows fat … and it draws power from the smoke that rises from blood and flesh” (2.42.3). This reference to “drink-offerings and smoking meat” came from the *Iliad* 9.497-501. In this passage, Phoenix advised Achilles to relent and forgive. Even the gods, Phoenix argued, are pliable: “when one has transgressed and gone wrong, people placate them with sacrifices and gentle prayers, drink-offerings and smoking meat.”

For centuries, philosophers had rejected this passage from the *Iliad* because it misrepresented the gods and sacrifice. According to Plato, people who thought they could bribe the gods to overlook their faults by means of propitiatory sacrifices cited this exact passage (*Resp*. 2.364b-e), and this was one of the reasons that Plato rejected Homer. Five hundred years later, in the second century AD, the Stoic Hierocles quoted the same passage. He, too, criticized Homer for his off-the-cuff presentation of the gods as changeable and unjust judges (*Fr.Eth*. 48). Porphyry’s approach was completely different. According to him, Homer was right, but

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52 Οὐτοὶ οἱ χαίροντες «λοιβῇ τε κνίσῃ τε», δι᾽ ὅν αὐτῶν τὸ πνευματικὸν <καὶ σωματικὸν> πιαίνεται. Ζῆ γὰρ τοῦτο ύμοῖς καὶ ἀναθημάτισί ποικίλως διὰ τῶν ποκίλων, καὶ δυναμοῦται ταῖς ἐκ τῶν αἰμάτων καὶ σαρκῶν κνίσαις.


when he said that the “gods” rejoiced in smoking meat (and could be placated by it?), he only meant that evil daemons could be placated (cf. Styg. fr. 377.85-87). It is they (not the true gods) who were changeable, unjust and thirsty for blood.

According to Porphyry, these evil daemons were responsible for “plagues, crop failures, earthquakes, droughts and the like,” which people thought were caused by angry gods (2.40.1). They perpetrated these disasters in order to blackmail humans into propitiating them with blood sacrifice (2.40.2). In return for a good feeding, they removed the disasters they had imposed, at least until they got hungry again. Thus, when people thought they were propitiating the gods, they were actually propitiating evil daemons. This is why traditional religion mistakenly believed the gods to be base, violent and capricious.

People were not wholly to blame for this, since the daemons themselves promoted the idea. Porphyry said, “they want to dislodge us from a correct concept of the gods and convert us to themselves.” According to him, one of the greatest harms they did was to “convince us that the responsibility [for the disasters they cause] lies with those who are responsible for just the opposite,” that is, the good daemons and the gods. They do so by “slipping on [ὑποδύντες] (as it were) the masks [πρόσωπα] of the other gods.” “Most terrible of all,” Porphyry went on, these daemons persuade people that their conduct is characteristic even of “the greatest gods, to the extent that even the best god is made liable to these accusations” (2.40.1-4).

55 In this passage, Porphyry did not specifically mention Homer’s claim that the gods (read “evil daemons”) could be placated. But because Porphyry was certainly aware of this aspect of the Homeric passage, and because the association of blood and the placation of evil daemons is such a recurring theme in On Abstinence, Porphyry’s reference to the daemons joy at blood sacrifice should be taken to include the idea of placation.

56 ἔτε ἐπὶ λιτανείας ἡμᾶς καὶ θυσίας τῶν ἁγαθοεργῶν θεῶν ὡς ὕργησμένων.

57 μεταστήσαι ἡμᾶς ἐθέλοντες ἀπὸ τῆς ὑπόθησις ἐννοίας τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἑρ’ ἕαυτοὺς ἐπιστρέψαι.
3.4.4 Evil Daemons Account for Positive Reciprocity

While under the guise of the other gods, these daemons also “profit from our lack of sense, winning over the masses [προσεταιριζόμενοι τὰ πλήθη] because they inflame people’s appetites [τὰς ἐπιθυμίας] with lust and longing for wealth and power and pleasure, and also with empty ambition from which arise civil conflicts and wars and kindred events” (2.40.3).

Apparently, they not only caused disasters in order to blackmail people into propitiating them with blood; they were also dealers in the fulfillment of passions and in worldly success. Three chapters on, Porphyry touched on this again. In contrast to ascetic philosophers, he wrote, “In cities, riches and external and corporeal things are thought to be good and their opposites bad, and the soul is the least of their concerns.” To preserve their material interests, cities might have “to appease [ἀπομειλέτεσθαι] even these beings,” referring to the evil daemons. But, according to Porphyry, “that is nothing to do with us. . . . [W]e, as far as possible [κατὰ δόναμιν], shall not need what those beings provide [ὡν οὗτοι παρέχουσιν]” (2.43.2-3). These passages suggest that the evil daemons bartered with worldly people and cities by providing them with riches and corporeal benefits in return for sacrifices and honors.58

The evil daemons seem to have had a similar arrangement with sorcerers, for it was through them that “all sorcery [γοητεία] is accomplished [ἐκτελεῖται].” And “those who try to achieve bad things through sorcery honor especially these daemons and in particular their chief” (2.41.5).59 They “abound in impressions of all kinds [Πλήρεις γὰρ πάσης φαντασίας], and can deceive by wonder-working. Unfortunate people [οἱ κακοδαιμονεῖς], with their help [διὰ τούτων],

58 They also remove philosophers, in theory, from cities. This connects to Gillian Clark’s observation that Porphyry surpassed even Plotinus in ascetic zeal.

59 On the unexpected chief of the daemons, see Clark, On Abstinence: 156-57, n. 320.
prepare philtres and love-charms. For all self-indulgence and hope of riches and fame comes from them, and especially deceit, for lies are appropriate to them. They want to be gods, and the power that rules them wants to be thought the greatest god” (2.42.1-2).

It is immediately after this sentence that Porphyry mentioned the evil daemons’ delight in “drink-offerings and smoking meat.” He implied that, in return for the divine honors and sacrifices they wanted, the evil daemons fulfilled the worldly ambitions and desires of sorcerers and cities. The relationship was one of mutual dependence, not of mutual love. This was reciprocity at its worst – a transactional relationship that could turn sour at any moment if the daemons felt neglected. The more people were enslaved to their own passions, the more they were “like to the evil power” and so more vulnerable to the daemons’ nasty moods. For such people, “it will be necessary to appease \( \text{ἀπομειλὴτεσθαι} \) the evil power; “[I]f they do not, their troubles will not cease” (2.43.4-5).

3.4.5 Three Types of Sacrifices to Evil Daemons

Dividing the people who sacrifice to evil daemons into three categories helps to clarify Porphyry’s thought. The first and largest group included the cities just mentioned. These people mistakenly thought that they were sacrificing to the true gods. They used blood sacrifice to propitiate the harmful anger of the daemons and so to ensure the prosperity of their communities. They also, though this is less explicit, engaged in positive reciprocity (in its degraded, transactional form) with the daemons, who satisfied their passions and worldly desires in return for animal offerings and religious service. Such people had been duped into believing that the

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60 In this passage, Porphyry also used the term \( \text{ἀποτρέπεσθαι} \).
actions of the evil daemons were the actions of the gods; but they were culpable for thinking that the gods could be so base. Their indulgence of their own passions had blinded them to what was best and caused them to imagine the gods in their own image (cf. Ep.Aneb. fr. 64). The daemons tried to inflame these passions, and the more people became entangled in them, the more vulnerable they became to daemonic manipulation and the more akin they became to the daemons themselves.\(^6^1\)

There were also sorcerers. As observed above, Porphyry claimed that magic (γοητεία) was done exclusively through evil daemons. The relationship between γοητεία and traditional cult is hazy in Porphyry, as well as in late antique practice; it is a point much debated in modern scholarship. For the purposes of this study, it suffices to say that, for Porphyry, γοητεία went beyond propitiaiton or transaction with evil daemons. It invited or compelled them to accomplish one’s desires (especially unjust or illicit desires). In doing so, sorcerers, like cities, slaughtered animals for evil daemons. But Porphyry treated them as more culpable than cities because, he implied, they self-consciously connected with these beings. They were not the dupes of the evil daemons but their partners.

Finally, Porphyry may have left room for the “theologians” of the past, the wise man, and the philosopher to occasionally pay off the evil daemons, or at least to advise others to do so on certain occasions. At first, this seems out of the question: “an intelligent, temperate man will be wary [ἐχθρεύεται] of making sacrifices through which he will draw [ἐπισπάσεται] such beings to himself” (2.43.1). Only those “bound by external things and not yet in control of

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\(^6^1\) In this vision, cities were by their very nature incompatible with the philosophic life and salvation. Similar attitudes can be found among the Christian ascetics, but the growing importance of bishops validated the city as a place where the “philosophic” Christian life could be conducted. Perhaps this was one way in which Christianity scored in its struggle against paganism.
passions must avert the evil daemons (2.43.5). The virtuous ascetic did not want the material pleasures the daemons provided (2.43.2). In addition, he did not need to appease them to avoid their attacks; instead, he worked “to purify [καθαίρειν] his soul in every way, for they do not attack a pure soul, because it is unlike them” (2.43.1)

Notice, however, that the wording in these passages did not indicate absolute prohibition. The temperate man was to be “wary” (ἐўλαβείσθαι) of making blood sacrifices. He “will work [σπουδάσει] to purify his soul.” We “as far as possible, shall not need what those beings provide.” We “will make every effort [πᾶσαν σπουδήν] . . . to become like God and those who accompany him . . . and to become unlike wicked people and daemons and anything else that delights in things mortal and material” (2.43.1-3, emphasis added).

This implicit admission of exceptions becomes explicit in the next chapter: “even if it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice” animals, it is “necessary not to eat them” (2.44.1). Thus Porphyry allowed the possibility that good people might sometimes have to avert evil daemons with blood. But, “All the theologians agree that in apotropaic sacrifices [ἐν ταῖς ἀποτροπαίοις θυσίαις] one must not partake of the victims.” For those “assigned the task of sacrifice,” they stipulated preparatory fasting, especially from ensouled (ἔµψυχον) foods (2.44.2). The principle was that this ascetic purity or holiness was “a token or a divine seal that guards against

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62 ἀποτρέπεσθαι.

63 Ingvild Gilhus has ascertained Porphyry’s strategy here. By claiming that all animal sacrifices are made to evil daemons, he made all animal sacrifices apotropaic. Since apotropaic sacrifices were not traditionally eaten, he was able to argue that even those who choose to appease evil daemons should not eat the victims. See Gilhus, Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas (New York: Routledge, 2006).
suffering harm from those the sacrificer approaches and appeases.” This was because one was in a condition “opposite” to that of the evil daemons and so safe from their attacks, “surrounded by holiness as by a rampart” (2.44.3-4).

A similar strategy appears in On the Philosophy from Oracles. As Johnson shows, the work is explicit in condemning religious reverence for evil daemons: only the ignorant and impious “do not hate the prohibited daemons, but rather revere them” (fr. 346.20-21). And yet fragment 326.12-20 of the same work seems to support an apotropaic rite (ἔλασις) designed to drive evil daemons away from temples. According to Porphyry, “Among the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and all those wise in divine things, straps are rent in temples and animals are dashed to the ground before the worship of the gods, for the priests drive away [the daemons] by giving them the πνεῦμα or blood of animals and through striking the air, in order that, when [the daemons] have left, the presence of the god may be manifest.” The principle seems to be that one throws some meat to the dogs (so to speak). While the daemons are busy around the animal sacrifice, one is free to worship the true gods in peace.

This should not be taken to have condoned the regular propitiation of evil daemons. It was a concession to an imperfect world. As noted above, Porphyry believed that the ideal

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64 Ἐναι γὰρ τὴν ἀγνείαν φυλακὴν πρὸς εὐλάβειαν, οἷον σύμβολον ἤ σφραγίδα θείαν περὶ τοῦ μηδὲν παθεῖν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνου οἰς πρὸς σέσει καὶ ἀπομελήττεται.

65 Ἐναντίως γὰρ διακέιμενος ἢ ὑπὸ δρᾶ καὶ θεωτέρους, ὅτι καὶ καθαρωτέρους, καὶ κατὰ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὰ πάθη τῆς ψυχῆς μένει ἀβλαβῆς, οἷον ἐρμία περιβεβλημένος τὴν ἀγνείαν. This philosophical protection against the attacks of evil daemons may be compared to the protection that Christians promised through the patronage of the divine Christ.

66 Johnson persuasively shows that all of Porphyry’s work treats evil daemons consistently. He never presented them in a positive light. See Johnson, Religion and Identity: Chapters 2 and 3; on Phil.Orac., see 126-36.

67 This is my own translation. Ἴδια προσοδίζεται πρὸ τῆς θρησκείας τῶν θεῶν, ἐξελαυνότων τῶν ἱερέων τούτων διὰ τοῦ δοῦναι πνεῦμα ἢ αίμα ζώων καὶ διὰ τῆς τοῦ ἀέρος πληγῆς, ἵνα τούτων ἀπελθόντων παρουσία τοῦ θεοῦ γένηται.
ascetically pure philosopher was so unified with the divine and so alienated from evil daemons that he was invulnerable to their attacks; but this did not prevent the philosopher from directing that less pure individuals should avert the daemons whose domain they had not yet escaped.

3.4.6 Daemons as Scapegoats

The pages above have shown that Porphyry made evil daemons responsible for all the sacrifices and sacrificial interpretations that he found disturbing: blood offerings, needy gods, harmful gods, propitiation and positive reciprocity. Thus, Porphyry’s evil daemons were scapegoats upon which he piled misconceptions of the gods and of sacrifice and sent them off into a desert of intellectual shame. This validates the general perspective of Johnson and Marx-Wolf (shared by this dissertation) in which Porphyry’s demonology played a role in discrediting certain religious ideas and figures.

Porphyry did not simply demonize unacceptable aspects of traditional sacrifice; he also presented them in the most negative terms possible. The evil daemons did not simply account for the supposed errors of traditional religion; they accounted for these errors as Porphyry and some other philosophers slanderously presented them. Porphyry’s evil daemons were much worse than

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68 I go beyond their work by showing that Porphyry demonized reciprocity and by identifying his reasons for doing so. I also disagree with them on some points. We cannot treat Porphyry’s evil daemons as a standard part of Neoplatonism, as Johnson does: they stuck out like a sore thumb. Marx-Wolf overemphasizes the role that evil daemons played in Porphyry’s polemic against rival religious authorities, failing to see that they played perhaps an even greater role in reconciling within his own mind contrary sources of truth (religious tradition and philosophy).

69 In opposition to those scholars who see Porphyry’s evil daemons as an indication of his solidarity with traditional and even popular religion: e.g. Joseph Bidez, A. R. Sodano, F. Romano, M. B. Simmons, P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, and Dale B. Martin. Also note that, contrary to the view of James B. Rives in “Theology of Animal Sacrifice,” Porphyry’s view of evil daemons was not the reason that he rejected animal sacrifice but a tool he used to justify this rejection.
the gods imagined by traditional religion. They not only needed sacrifices, they passionately desired them; they literally ate them and grew fat. They not only punished people for their sins or became angry when their cults were neglected, they inflicted random mayhem in order to blackmail people into placating them with a good feeding. Propitiation was not just bribing judges; it was paying off thugs. As noted in Chapter 2, Porphyry thought that the traditional view of reciprocity boiled down to nothing more than a transaction. This is confirmed by the present chapter, which shows that, for Porphyry, the only manifestation of positive reciprocity was the transactional relationship with evil daemons involving blood feedings and the fulfillment of indulgent or illicit passions. Porphyry also slandered animal sacrifice by associating it only with this degraded reciprocity and with the blackmail of propitiation.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 showed that, for Porphyry, the gulf between philosophy and the traditional view of sacrifice and the gods was much wider than it had been for Plato. The first part of the present chapter has shown that, in spite of this wider gulf, Porphyry retained the Platonic respect for traditional religion. Indeed, Porphyry’s belief (and that of his inner circle) that traditional texts, oracles, cults, and images contained divine truths was greater than that of his predecessors. This created a tension in Porphyry’s mind between two sources of truth: his extreme and ascetic version of Platonism, on the one hand, and an ancient and revered religious tradition, on the other. This tension had not existed to the same degree in Plato, and it drove Porphyry to attempts

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70 It would be more accurate to say that the evil daemons perceive themselves to be in need of sacrifices, just as greedy humans perceive themselves to be in need of luxuries. Daemons, both good and bad, required some sustenance, but this did not have to include blood or offerings of any kind (Abst. 2.38-39, cf. 2.36, 58).

71 Note that later Christians echoed this polemical view of pagan sacrifice.
to reconcile and appropriate traditional views of sacrifice that had not appeared in his classical predecessor.

First, Porphyry appropriated cult sacrificial terminology: the philosopher was the highest priest of the highest god, his mental faculty was the true temple of this god, his mind (molded into the likeness of the divine) was an acceptable cult image of the god, and his life of ascetic virtue and contemplation was a noetic sacrifice – in fact, the highest sacrifice. This was not simply the description of philosophy through the analogy of cult. At least in part, Porphyry was attempting to legitimize philosophy as the highest form of religious service and to attack the centrality of physical cult. Porphyry did allow some role to moderate, inanimate, physical sacrifices, but he insisted that their only role was that of a first-fruits offering of thanksgiving. Thus, he redefined the function of sacrifice, which allowed him to retain sacrificial practice while avoiding objectionable traditional ideas about positive reciprocity and propitiation.

Porphyry’s redefinition of sacrificial function may have allowed him to retain the practice of sacrifice, but it did not explain the presence of unacceptable sacrifices and sacrificial interpretations in the tradition. Revered texts (such as Homer), as well as Greco-Roman history and experience seemed to prove that angry gods sometimes caused disasters, that they could be propitiated (even by blood sacrifice), and that they promoted human ambitions for power, success, and pleasure when properly honored in sacrifice. It would have been difficult for Porphyry simply to deny this evidence. But, by attributing the objectionable aspects of traditional sacrifice to the activity of evil daemons, Porphyry was able to validate Greco-Roman sacrificial experience and tradition and, at the same time, to dismiss it as inappropriate for the wise and virtuous. This remarkable strategy explains how Porphyry was able to take Homeric texts,
oracles, etc. relatively seriously. None of the concepts and strategies mentioned above appeared in Plato, or not to the same degree.

Chapters 2 and 3 have had the limited goal of comparing Porphyry’s views with those of Plato. Though Porphyry claimed the authority of Plato, his philosophical vision, his attitude towards traditional religion, and his methods of reconciling it with philosophy were quite distinct. To the extent that Porphyry was representative of his time, these chapters show several ways in which the Platonic tradition had been transformed by the third century AD. But to what extent was Porphyry’s perspective representative? Chapter 4 attempts to answer this question by examining the work of Porphyry’s contemporaries. To a limited extent, it also attempts to discern when and where the distinctive ideas of Porphyry and his fellow intellectuals had their origin.
PORPHYRY IN THE CONTEXT OF IMPERIAL-ERA PLATONISM

Contents

1 Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius of Tyana 134

2 Maximus of Tyre’s Discourses 137

  2.1 Providence Unmoved by Prayers 138
  2.2 Destiny, Fate, and Expertise Unmoved by Prayers 139
  2.3 Prayer and Sacrifice Do not Obtain Benefits from the Gods 140
  2.4 The Redefinition of Prayer as a Conversation with the Gods about what One
      Already Has 141

3 Lucian of Samosata 144

  3.1 The Helpless and Hungry Gods 144
  3.2 No Appropriate Form of Reciprocity 145

4 Iamblichus’ Response to Porphyry 146

  4.1 Traditional Sacrificial Language and Purpose 147
  4.2 Sacrificial Language not to be Understood in a Human Way 149
  4.3 The Impassible Gods Cannot be Changed 150
  4.4 The Divine Prerogative 152
  4.5 Sacrifice as Affinity and Union with Higher Powers 155
  4.6 Efficacy through Union 157
  4.7 Union and the Divine Prerogative 161
Chapter 2 showed that Porphyry’s view of divine harmlessness and impassibility was more extreme than that of Plato. This meant that, unlike Plato, Porphyry had to reject all reciprocity in sacrifice and even the direct divine punishment of erring humans. This made the reconciliation of Platonic philosophy and traditional religion much more difficult. Chapter 3 showed that, ironically, Porphyry was also more keen than Plato to achieve this reconciliation. The heightened tension between the philosophical view of the divine nature and the traditional view of sacrifice as reciprocity led Porphyry to new methods of reconciliation. In particular, he limited sacrificial function to thanksgiving and demonized all the sacrifices and sacrificial interpretations he found objectionable. This allowed him to retain certain sacrifices (when properly interpreted) and to validate (after a fashion) other sacrificial practices and ideas, while claiming that many of them were inappropriate for wise and temperate individuals.
The present chapter shows that other intellectuals in the imperial era felt a similar tension between their view of the divine nature and traditional views of sacrifice. But their methods of reconciling the two differed from those of Porphyry. In particular, Porphyry’s method of explaining all the elements of traditional religion he found objectionable as interactions with evil daemons appears in no other extant non-Christian texts from the imperial era. Reinterpretations of sacrifice and prayer that avoided reciprocity, however, were prevalent. Apollonius of Tyana (according to Philostratus’ account) and Maximus of Tyre reimagined sacrificial prayer without requests; but the most subtle and ultimately successful reinterpretation of sacrifice was that of the theurgic Neoplatonists. Iamblichus and his forth- and fifth-century followers accepted the traditional goal of sacrifice as the obtaining of benefits from the gods and the aversion of evil, but they claimed that sacrifice accomplished these things, not by reciprocity, but by making worshippers receptive to divine benefits and by mediating their union with the gods.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*  
Lucius Flavius Philostratus was a Greek sophist of the late second and third centuries. His *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*\(^2\) records the journeys and teachings of the first and second-century philosopher of that name. Apollonius had Pythagorean leanings: like Porphyry, he

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1 The claim that fourth- and fifth-century Neoplatonists followed Iamblichus in this regard can be made on the basis of works such as Sallustius’ *De deis et mundo* (*D.Mund*.). Eunapius’ *Vitae sophistarum* (*V.Soph*.) tends to confirm the dependence of later figures upon Iamblichus.

abstained from meat and blood sacrifice. In the account of Philostratus, upon entering Rome, Apollonius enters into a discussion with the Consul Telesinus (4.40). When questioned by the latter, he describes the wisdom he teaches as “[t]heology [θειασμός], and how to pray and sacrifice to the gods.” Telesinus responds, “My good philosopher, is there anyone who does not know that?” “Many do not,” replies the sage (4.40.1). Of course the forms of sacrifice and prayer were well established, but Apollonius’ mission was to teach a practice and interpretation of these forms that was consistent with philosophy.

Telesinus immediately recognizes people’s attitude towards reciprocity as the crux of the matter. He asks, “What do you pray when approaching the altars?” Apollonius answers that he prays “that justice may be done, that laws be not broken, that wise men may be poor and all others may enjoy wealth, but honestly.” Telesinus says that this is a lot to ask (αἰτεῖν) from the gods, but Apollonius is confident he will obtain (τυγχάνεσθαι) the things for which he asks:

3 For simplicity, I will refer to the ideas in this account as those of Apollonius, recognizing that Philostratus may have shaped them to suit his own purpose.

4 The fact that Apollonius describes his philosophy as a perspective on religion is critical. As Simon Swain observes, “What is new about Apollonius is the combination of religion and philosophy with a very intense Hellenism, which looks forward to pagan intellectual activity in late antiquity . . .” (Swain, "Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” in Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians, ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (Oxford University, 1999), 194). In Philostratus’ Apollonius, one can indeed see the roots of Porphyry’s project – the utter rejection of normal religious sensibilities and yet the simultaneous respect for religion and desire to reinterpret it in philosophical terms.

5 There are other indications that Apollonius was concerned with sacrifice: the sage wrote a book entitled περὶ θυσιῶν, which addressed sacrifice, prayer and libation and circulated widely in Philostratus’ time (I.Apoll. 3.41, 4.19). Eusebius preserved a fragment of the work indicating that all material and verbal cult worship were insufficient for communicating with the supreme deity (Praep. evang. 4.13). Philostratus presented Apollonius as a Neopythagorean who rejected only blood sacrifices, but the letters attributed to Apollonius seem to rule out sacrifice altogether (Epp. Apoll. 26-27). See Jaap-Jan Flinterman, Power, Paideia & Pythagoreanism: Greek Identity, Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophers and Monarchs, and Political Ideas in Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1995). 62, 76-77.

6 τί εὑχὴ προσιῶν τοῖς βωμοῖς;
... because I include them all in one prayer, and when I approach the altars asking for this, this is my prayer: “Gods, give me my deserts.” If I am a good person, I will get more than what I mentioned, but if the gods count me among the wicked, they will give me the opposite. I will not blame the gods for thinking me to deserve evil, if in fact I am not good (4.40.2). 7

In other words, Apollonius prays for what he knows the gods already desire – particularly that they will give to him and to others what each deserves. In addition, he implies that the gods will give to each whatever is due, regardless of prayer. This concept distanced sacrificial prayer from reciprocity. Sacrificial gifts were no longer intended to initiate a relationship with the gods that invited them to bestow special benefits. Prayer was no longer a true request; it simply aligned one’s own desires with those of the gods.

In the account, Telesinus respects this perspective and recognizes it as a transformation of religious service: “You may visit any shrine, and I will write to the priests, telling them to welcome you and to accede to your improvements.” 8 Plato’s Socrates had also claimed to pray for what he deserved; 9 but, as Chapter 1 of this dissertation showed, Plato was not opposed to sacrificial prayers that requested special benefits from the gods. Apollonius took one element from the Platonic teaching on sacrifice and made it into an absolute principle; it became for him the center of a reform movement. In a similar way, Porphyry reinterpreted the Platonic idea of divine harmlessness and made it absolute.

Both Apollonius and Porphyry shared a dim view of reciprocity. For Plato, only the sacrifices of virtuous people could obtain benefits from the gods; but for Apollonius and

7 “ξυνείρω γὰρ τὰ πάντα ἐς εὐχήν μίαν καὶ προσεύχων τοὺς θεοὺς ὕπειρος ὑδα εὐχομαι· ὃ θεοὶ, δοθῆτε μοι τὰ ὁφειλόμενα. εἰ μὲν δὲ τῶν χρηστῶν εἰμὶ ἀνθρώπων, τεῦξομαι πλεῖόν ὡς ἐὰν, εἰ δὲ ἐν τοῖς φαύλοις με οἱ θεοὶ τάττωσι, τάναντα μοι παρ’ αὐτῶν ἤξει, καὶ οὐ μέμοιμαι τοὺς θεοὺς, εἰ κακῶν ἀξιοῦμαι μὴ χρηστός ὁν.”
8 “φοίτα” ἐφ’ ὡς τὰ ιερὰ πάντα, καὶ γεγράφεται παρ’ ἐμοῦ πρὸς τούς ἵερωμένους δέχεσθαι σε καὶ διορθομένως εἶκειν.”
9 Swain, “Defending Hellenism,” 194.
Porphyry, virtue was the *only operative element* – offerings played no role at all in receiving divine blessings. Both philosophers reinterpreted sacrifices (and the requests that went with them) so as to avoid reciprocity, but they did so in different ways. Porphyry made sacrifice into thanksgiving only, eliminating requests altogether. Apollonius retained the formula of making requests, but he vitiated them by limiting requests to what one’s conduct merited; the only real purpose of prayer was to conform one’s will to that of the gods.

2 Maximus of Tyre’s *Discourses*

This approach was even more marked in the late second-century Platonist Maximus of Tyre, who supposedly delivered thirty-five *Discourses* during the first of his visits to Rome. Discourse 5 considers whether (and how) one should pray. A few references to sacrifices and service to the gods make it clear that here, as in most Greek thought, sacrifice and prayer are considered as a unit. Maximus begins by observing that life events are brought about by several different factors. Some things, providence oversees (*ἡ πρόνοια ἐφορεῖ*); other things destiny necessitates (*ἡ εἰμαρμένη καταναγκάζει*); still others, fate changes (*μεταβάλλει ἡ τύχη*); finally, human expertise regulates others things (*οἰκονομεῖ ἡ τέχνη*). Maximus proceeds to argue that

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10 Translations from the *Dissertationes* (*Diss.*) work are my own. For critical edition, see Michael B. Trapp, *Maximus Tyrius: Dissertationes* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1994).

11 Fritz Graf notes that both Apollonius and Maximus are described as teaching large crowds in major cities: Graf, "Satirist's Sacrifices," 208.

12 See especially 5.5.12-24 and 5.7.28-30. For the connection of prayers of request and sacrifice in Greek thought, see Graf, "Satirist's Sacrifices," 208-09.

none of these forces respond to prayer. The conclusion is that prayers of request are useless and annoying to superhuman powers (5.4).

2.1 Providence Unmoved by Prayers

Maximus considers providence first, which he calls a work of God (θεοῦ ἔργον) (5.4.4). If something will take place (συντελεῖν) by god’s providence, why should one pray about it (τί δεῖ εὐχῆς)? God works for the good of the whole world (τὸ ὅλον), which means that he cannot attend to individual concerns. Similarly, kings save their cities through the general principles of law and justice. They cannot take into account individual problems. The only acceptable request would be for the preservation (ἡ σωτηρία) of the whole world (τὸ ὅλον). Any other request will not persuade (πείθεσθαι) god but will annoy (ἐνοχλεῖν) him (5.4.6-15).

Supposing, Maximus says, that a doctor had to cut one part of someone’s body in order to save the person’s life (ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τοῦ ὅλου). It would be ludicrous if that body part prayed not to be cut. Asclepius would not answer such a prayer, for that body part’s destruction would be necessary for life (5.4.16-21). Similarly, a plague in Athens or an earthquake in Sparta or a flood in Thessaly seem to be evils (φθοράι), but “the doctor” knows the reasons for them, and he saves the whole, disregarding the prayers of the parts because he cares about all (5.4.22-26).

Suppose, however, that God were to exercise providence over individual people – even if this were true, one ought not to pray (οὐδὲ ἐνταῦθα τοῖν εὐκτέον). Patients should not ask their doctor for certain medicines or foods; he knows better than they what is needed. The doctor will give people the right medicine, even if they do not ask for it; and he will refuse to give them the

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14 ὁ δὲ ἰατρὸς οἶδαν τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ ἁμελεὶς εὐχομένων τῶν μερῶν, σώζει δὲ τὸ πᾶν· φροντίζει γὰρ τοῦ ὅλου.
wrong medicine, even if they do ask. So, one must not request (αἰτεῖν) or pray (ἐὑχεσθαι) for things controlled by providence (5.4.26-31).

2.2 Destiny, Fate, and Expertise Unmoved by Prayers

What about those things determined by destiny (κατὰ εἰμαρμένην)? According to Maximus, it would be most ridiculous to pray about these things. Destiny is a tyrant without master. It binds (ἐμβάλλειν) the flocks of men as with a chain (ψάλιον) and drags (σπᾶν) and coerces (προσαναγκάζειν) them by force (βία) to move in unison (συναπονεύειν) with its purpose (5.5.1-6). Maximus argues that people cannot free themselves (ἐκλύεσθαι) from the necessity (ἀνάγκη) and bondage (δεσμός) of destiny. There are no ransoms (ἄποινα) or service (θεραπεία) or sacrifice (θυσία) or prayer (εὐχή) that can change the decisions of destiny. Even Zeus mourned because he could not find any aversion (ἀποτροπή) for them. Maximus finishes:

So how could one pray to destiny, which cannot be moved by petition (5.5.12-24)?

Maximus makes a similar argument with respect to fate (κατὰ τὴν τύχην). According to him, one cannot dialogue with (διαλέγειν) or pray to (ἐὑχεσθαι) fate because it is an irrational power (ἀνόητος δυνάστη). It does not exercise its rule in accordance with a resolution (βούλευμα) or a judgment (κρίσις) or a prudent tendency (ὁρμή σώφρων) (5.6.1-4). It ebbs and flows like the tide, born hither and thither without a steersman (κυβερνήτης) by the force of anger (ὀργή), irrational longings (ἄλογοι ὀρέξεις) and a succession of appetites (ἐπιθυμίαι). How could one pray to such an unstable (ἄστατον) and irrational principle (χρῆμα) (5.6.4-10)?

Maximus observes that those things that are not governed by providence or destiny or fate are determined by human expertise (ἡ τέχνη). A carpenter does not pray (ἐὑχεσθαι) for a

15 πῶς οὖν τις ἐὑξαίτο ἀπαρατήτω εἰμαρμένη;
good plow, for he has the skill (ἡ τέχνη) to make it. Maximus extends this principle to all other craftsman and experts, even to experts in virtue. According to him, a valorous man does not pray for courage because he has it, and a good man will not pray for happiness (περὶ εὐδαιμονίας), for he has the virtue (ἡ ἀρετή) necessary to achieve it (5.6.11-16). Maximus claimed that people should not pray about these things but rather work (ἐπιτηδεύειν) to achieve them. Why ask (ἀίτεῖν) about sea trade? It is the ship and the sea and the bearing of the winds that give it success. It is a matter of commerce; why annoy (ἐνοχλεῖν) the gods about it (5.7.10-18)?

2.3 Prayer and Sacrifice Do Not Obtain Benefits from the Gods

Maximus draws these threads together: whenever people pray (εὐχεῖσθαι) to the gods for something that is contrary to the purpose of providence or destiny or fate or expertise, they achieve nothing but annoying (ἐνοχλεῖν) these various powers (5.7.1-9). As noted above, Maximus argues that prayers to God are useless because, like a good doctor, he will do what is best for the world, regardless of people’s requests. Maximus now returns to this topic, but this time from a different angle. Those who present prayers (εὐχαί) to the gods come to an exacting court of law (ἀκριβὲς δικαστήριον) that cannot be influenced by requests (ἀπαραίτητον). No god will be content with you (οὐδεὶς ἄνεξεται σου θεός), he said, if you pray for what should not be desired (τὰ μὴ εὐκτά), and he will not give (δοῦναι) what has not been granted to you (τὰ μὴ σοι

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16 The relationship of “the gods” or “the god” to destiny and fate is unclear in Diss. 5. Here, it seems that the gods are above fate; but, earlier, Maximus implies (through a literary allusion) that even Zeus was subject to fate. Given the philosophical juggling of divine identities in the imperial era, it would be helpful to determine whether Maximus considered Zeus to be a god or daemon and how he defined these superhuman categories.
δοτά). With keen examination and consideration, God attends to the prayers of each and
guides your affairs in the moderation that is most beneficial (5.7.20-25).\textsuperscript{17}

This beneficent guidance is unchanged, even by the most pitiful of entreaties. Maximus
emphasizes that people cannot manage (μεταχειρίζειν) the gods by presenting (ἀναβιβάζειν) to
them, as to a court of law, their longings – screaming pitifully, shouting laments and pouring
dust upon their heads. Sometimes this may be an attempt to reproach (ονειδίζειν) the god for not
reciprocating one’s gifts of favor (χάρις), as when Chryses reminded Apollo of his sacrifices and
temple building (5.7.25-30, cf. \textit{Il.} 1.39).\textsuperscript{18} The point is clear: no prayers, sacrifices, tears, or gifts
can manipulate the gods into changing their plans for the good of the earthly system. But what if
one asks for a good thing that is in accordance with their plan? Maximus writes, “the god says,
‘Are you asking for something good? Receive it, if you who ask are worthy.’” Maximus goes on,
“When you are in this situation, there is no need to pray; you will receive [the gift], even if you
are silent” (5.7.31-33).\textsuperscript{19}

2.4 The Redefinition of Prayer as a Conversation with the Gods about What One Already Has

The conclusion one expects is that people should not pray, but Maximus was not willing
to give up an ancient and universal practice. As he points out, Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras and all
those in communion with the gods (θεοῖς προσήγορος) regularly prayed. Maximus’ solution was

\textsuperscript{17} ἐξεταστής καὶ λογιστής ἐφέστηκεν τὰς ἐκάστου εὐχαῖς πικρός, εἰθύνον τὸ τοῦ συμφέροντος μέτρῳ τὰ σά. This
sounds as if the gods accommodate human requests whenever possible, but the analogy of the doctor, as well as
comments farther on, do not allow human prayers to affect divine decisions in any way.

\textsuperscript{18} In reality, Maximus misrepresents Chryses, who asked Apollo to answer him \textit{if} he had pleased the god with his
past religious service. This was no reproach, and none was needed, since Apollo answered his prayer.

\textsuperscript{19} ἀλλ᾽ ὁ θεὸς λέγει, ἐπὶ ἁγάθῳ αἰτείς; λάμβανε, εἰ ἄξιος ὄν αἰτεῖς; ταύτη ἔχοντι σοι οὐδὲν εὐχῆς δεῖ, καὶ σιωπῶν.
to jettison all prayers of request. He writes, “you think that the prayer of the philosopher is a
request for what he does not have, but I think that it is a communion and discussion with the
gods about what one has and a demonstration of virtue.” In support, Maximus observes that
Socrates would have prayed no matter how rich he had been – even if he had been the ruler of
the Athenians. “But, though he prayed to the gods, he received from himself, the gods joining in
assent, virtue of soul and quietness of lifestyle and a blameless life and a cheerful death, the most
remarkable gifts that may be granted by the gods” (5.8.1-12).

Socrates worked to achieve goodness, and, since his aspiration was in accordance with
the purpose of the gods, he received it; but prayers of request were not the effective cause. In
Maximus’ vision, proper prayer and sacrifice had nothing to do with reciprocity. The goal was to
fellowship and dialogue with the gods about one’s situation and to demonstrate one’s virtue. This
could not change the gods, but (Maximus implied) it could change people. Thus, Maximus
retained the practice of prayer and sacrifice, but he redefined its function so as to exclude
reciprocity.

Maximus’ rejection of reciprocity was based on three points. First, he kept the entire
cosmos in mind, and he assumed that the gods kept it in mind. This universal concern
constrained their ability to answer individual prayers, which were most likely incompatible with
the good of the whole. This brings us to the second point: the gods always act for the good. Even
if one considers a person in isolation from the rest of the cosmos, the gods would always act for
that person’s good, regardless of his or her prayers. The gods’ pursuit of the good is unswerving

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\] άλλα οι μην ηγετη την τον φιλοσόφου εὐχήν αἰτησιν εἶναι τῶν οὐ παρὸντων, ἐγὼ δὲ ὀμιλίαι καὶ διάλεκτον πρὸς
tοὺς θεοὺς περὶ τῶν παρὸντων καὶ ἐπιδείξειν τῆς ἀρετῆς.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\] άλλ' εὖχετο μὲν τοῖς θεοῖς, ἐλάμβανεν δὲ παρ’ έαυτοῦ συνεπικενόντων ἐκείνων ἀρετήν ψυχῆς καὶ ἡσυχίαν βίου
καὶ ζωήν ἁμεμπτὸν καὶ εὐδελπίν θάνατον, τὰ θαυμαστὰ δῶρα, τὰ θεοῖς δοτά
and unresponsive. This is the third point. Maximus emphasized that the gods represented an absolutely unyielding tribunal. No prayers or entreaties or tears or sacrifices or attempts at coercion could move them.

In some ways, this account resembles that of Porphyry. He, too, would stress that the gods were unchanging and unresponsive to human requests; they were ἀπαθεῖς and thus invulnerable to desires and coercion. Porphyry would also claim that the gods did not answer prayers that were contrary to the good. This included, given his ascetic inclination, all prayers for physical benefits. Maximus’ tendency to keep the whole cosmos in view would not be as apparent in Porphyry’s work. But one can see in both philosophers a shift in emphasis away from individual gods and towards the high God, or at least towards a vision of unified and transcendent divinity. Both philosophers were thinking rigorously about the divine in terms of ontology, ethics and providence – it was these considerations that led them to reject reciprocity. But Maximus did so more completely than Porphyry would. For him, no prayers of request, even for spiritual goods, were effective. The only thing to do was to conform one’s will to that of the gods and to exercise one’s expertise to acquire the material goods one desired.

22 For literature on this shift, see Athanassiadi, Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity; Simon Pulleyn, Prayer in Greek Religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
3 Lucian of Samosata

3.1 The Helpless and Hungry Gods

A number of Lucian’s (c.120-180 AD) works discuss sacrifice: *The Double Indictment*, *On Sacrifices*, *Zeus Rants* and *Zeus Refuted*. These contain the most extended comedic and satiric treatment of sacrifice that is extant from antiquity. Daniel Ullucci helps to identify several themes in Lucian’s thought. To comedic effect, Lucian presents the gods as eating and being hungry. In *Double Indictment* (3.89, 103), they are dependent on sacrifices for their food supply. This idea also appears in *Zeus Rants* (4, 53), where the gods worry that Epicureans will persuade more and more people that the gods do not act in the world. This will cause people to stop sacrificing, and the gods will starve. Zeus calls the gods to council to determine how to address this problem, but they realize that they can take no action because they are controlled by unalterable fate. The irony is that, if the gods are controlled by fate, sacrifices and requests are useless.

Ullucci joins Fritz Graf in pointing out that “good satire does not run in open doors.” Lucian’s hungry gods would not have been funny if people had really believed that they would starve without sacrifices. I add, however, that satire does not run through doors that are bolted shut. There would have been no comedy unless some people’s sacrificial practices could be

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25 Ullucci believes that Lucian misrepresented the position of Epicureans. They may have rejected divine providence and the possibility of any interaction between humans and the gods; but, if Philodemus of Gadara (c.110-40 BC) can be believed, they continued to attend and value sacrifice as a time to contemplate the divine nature (Ullucci, *Christian Rejection*: 37-38, 54).

misread so as to imply divine need. It was the theoretical plausibility of this misreading that was funny. In other words, satire opens doors that are already cracked open. This is clear with regard to Lucian’s comments on fate. As seen above, Maximus could easily have been read to mean that the gods were controlled by fate. Just because Lucian made fun of the idea did not mean that no one held the position, or at least was thought to hold the position. Clearly, Lucian’s comedy played on themes that were at the center of philosophical discussions in the imperial era.

3.2 No Appropriate Form of Reciprocity

Usually Lucian’s own position is veiled behind comedy, but occasionally it emerges. *On Sacrifices* attacks the religious ideas of the multitude: “In view of what the dolts do at their sacrifices and their festivals and processions in honor of the gods, what they pray for and vow, and what opinions they hold about the gods, I doubt if anyone is so gloomy and woebegone that he will not laugh to see the idiocy of their actions” (1.1-6).27 According to Lucian, people’s main fault was to think that the gods needed them and could be bribed or flattered with sacrifices to answer their prayers (1-2). Like Maximus, Lucian quotes Chryses’ prayer in the *Iliad* 1 as an example of this attitude. Also like Maximus, he made Chryses’ prayer to reproach (ὀνειδίζειν) and demand (ἀπαιτείν) that Apollo help him as a return (ἡ ἀµιοβή) for his sacrificial gifts, which Lucian describes as a monetary advance.28 Thus, in Lucian’s re-writing of the *Iliad*, Chryses represents a transactional view of sacrifice: “My good Apollo, I have often dressed your temple

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27 Ά µέν γάρ ἐν ταῖς θυσίαις οἱ µάταιοι πράττουσι καὶ ταῖς ἔορταῖς καὶ προσόδοις τῶν θεῶν καὶ ἢ αἰτοῦσι καὶ ἢ εὐχονται καὶ ἢ γινώσκουσι περὶ αὐτῶν, οὐκ οἶδα εἴ τις οὕτως κατηφής ἐστι καὶ λελυπημένος ὅστις οὐ γελάσεται τὴν ἀβελερίαν ἐπιβλέψας τῶν ὀρωμένων.

28 He uses the verb προσδανείζω with Apollo as its object.
with wreaths when it lacked them before, and have burned in your honor all those thighs of bulls and goats upon your altars, but you neglect me [ἀμελεῖξ μου] when I am in such straits and take no account of your benefactor [τὸν εὐεργέτην]” (3.4-11).

Of course this is not what Homer’s Chryses had said. He merely requested the god’s help, if his earlier service had been successful in giving favor (χάρις) to Apollo and initiating a relationship of reciprocity. Ullucci says that Lucian’s audience would have immediately recognized the misquotation. No doubt they would; but Lucian’s refusal to recognize that any proper form of reciprocity existed and his presentation of all reciprocity as a transaction implying divine dependence – this approach cannot be completely discarded as comedy. 29 Porphyry, Apollonius and Maximus exhibited the same perspective. They may have been misrepresenting (even intentionally slandering) the traditional view of reciprocity, but they were in earnest, and there is no reason to doubt that Lucian would have agreed with them. 30 What we lack from Lucian is a reinterpretation of sacrificial function that avoided reciprocity; but, given the pattern apparent in Porphyry, Apollonius and Maximus, it is likely that he ascribed to such a reinterpretation. The only alternative would have been to reject sacrificial practice altogether.

4 Iamblichus’ Response to Porphyry

The second-century Chaldean Oracles were a unique blend of Platonism and ostensibly eastern religious beliefs. They emphasized the importance of ritual in making contact with the

29 Laurent Pernot shares my reading, though without reference to Porphyry, Apollonius, or Maximus. Pernot, "Le sacrifice," 323.

30 Thus, Ullucci’s claim that Lucian was criticizing degraded forms of reciprocity and not reciprocity itself is probably incorrect. Intellectuals of the imperial era seem to have shared the belief that reciprocity could not exist in any but a degraded form.
gods and in the salvation of the soul – a perspective known to ancients and moderns as “theurgy.” It became integrated into the thinking of Iamblichus (c.245-c.325), who was followed by Sallustius (mid-fourth century), the Emperor Julian (c.331-363), Syrianus (died c.437) and Proclus (412-485). The following pages argue that these Neoplatonic theurgists shared with Porphyry, Apollonius, Maximus and Lucian the idea that reciprocity necessarily meant transaction and coercion and was inconsistent with the divine nature. The theurgists, however, agreed with traditional religion that sacrifice (including animal sacrifice) obtained benefits from the gods and averted evil. According to them, sacrifice obtained these things, not by reciprocity, but by making worshippers receptive to divine benefits and by mediating their union with the gods. Sacrifice changed people, not the gods. This redefinition of sacrificial function was subtler and more irenic towards traditional religion than the solutions of Porphyry, Apollonius and Maximus.

4.1 Traditional Sacrificial Language and Purpose

Iamblichus’ *Response to Porphyry* contains his most detailed account of sacrifice and sacrificial function. A number of passages from this work seem to endorse the traditional view of sacrifice.
sacrifice as reciprocity. He writes, “we have recourse to sacred rites [ἱερουργίαις χρώμεθα] in seeking to obtain [δεόμενοι] from the higher powers [παρὰ τῶν κρειττόνων] the necessities of human life, that is to say, those things that provide care for the body, or secure those things that we seek to acquire for the body’s sake” (2.4.6 [5.16]). Iamblichus also says that the practice of physical rites is “capable of introducing successful functioning into our life, and able also to avert such reverses as may arise, endowing the race of mortals with symmetry and integration” (2.4.6 [5.17]).

Iamblichus states that the gods are above fate (ἡ εἰμαρμένη) and thus able to unbind (λύειν) it: “It is reasonable, then, that we should bestow all worship upon the gods [τοῖς θεοῖς ἁγιστεῖαν πᾶσαν προσάγομεν], in order that, being the only ones who can dominate necessity by means of rational persuasion, they may free us from the evils that lie in wait for us from fate [τὰ ἀπὸ τῆς εἰμαρμένης ἀποκείμενα κακὰ ἀπολύωσιν]” (5 [8.7]). Iamblichus speaks of the “effectiveness of sacrifices [τὸ δραστήριον τῶν θυσιῶν]” and the fact that they accomplished so much (μάλιστα τοσαῦτα ἐπιτελεῖ). According to him, “there can be no cessation of plagues or famines or barrenness without them, nor petitions [αἰτήσεις] for rain, nor yet more honorable ends than these, such as contribute to the purification or the perfection of the soul or to its freeing from the bods of generation . . .” (2.4.1 [5.6]). These passages are remarkable because they

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33 δυνατὸς μὲν ἐμποιεῖν τινας εὐπραγίας εἰς τὸν βίον, δυνατὸς δὲ ἀποτρέπειν καὶ τὰς ἐνισταμένας δυσπραγίας, συμμετριάν δὲ καὶ κράσιν τῷ θνητῷ γένει παρεχόμενος.

34 ὅσα εἰς ψυχῆς κάθαρσιν ἢ τελείωσιν ἢ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς γενέσεως ἀπαλλαγήν συμβάλλεται.
seem to endorse, not only positive reciprocity, but also propitiation, which even Plato had rejected; but appearances are deceiving.

4.2 Sacrificial Language not to be Understood in a Human Way

Iamblichus emphasizes that the language of reciprocity did not mean the same thing when applied to interactions with the gods as it did when applied to human interactions. He writes, “[People] should not . . . in the case of actions performed alike to gods and humans, such as acts of prostration, adoration, and the offering of gifts or of tithes, interpret these in the same way in both cases” (3.7 [1.21]). Iamblichus remarks, “we think it right, in our invocations, to eliminate such prayers as seem to be addressed to men.” The performance of hieratic rites [must] be truly divine and transcend all action known and common to men . . . [T]he name of no human activities can apply to it.” Iamblichus went on, “[N]or does one employ invocations in the way that one does in order to draw near to one things that are distant, nor to give orders to things separate from us, as when we take in hand one thing after another” (2.1 [4.3]).

These passages show that Iamblichus wanted to dismiss the mental image of the gods as human-like individuals whom one could summon and with whom one could exchange words and gifts. In this regard, he writes:

I propose, then, to impart to you my views on sacrifices. These are that one should never indulge in them simply for the sake of conferring honor, in the way in which we honor our benefactors, nor in acknowledgment of graces, in return for the good things which the

35 ἔχρην δὲ γε καὶ τῶν ὀσαύτως δρωμένων πρὸς θεοὺς καὶ ἄνθρωπους, οἷον προκυλλέσεως προσκυνήσεως δωρεάν ἀπαρχῆν, μὴ τὸν αὐτὸν ὕπολαμβάνειν τρίτον ἐπ’ ἀμφότερον . . .

36 ἀφαιρέων ἁξιοῦμεν τὰς ὡς ἐπ’ ἄνθρωπων φαινομένας ἐν τῷ καλεῖν παρακλήσεις . . .

37 οὕτε τὸ προσκαλεῖν οὕτως, ὡς τὰ ἀφεστηκότα ἡμεῖς προσαγόμεθα, οὕτε τὸ κελεύειν τοιοῦτον ὑπὸ οὕτος κεχωρισμένοις, ὡς ἐτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου ἐγχειρίζομεν.
gods have bestowed upon us, nor yet by way of first-fruits or a return of gifts, in recompense for the far superior gifts which the gods have provided for us; for all these procedures are common also to our dealings with men, and are borrowed from vulgar social relations, whereas they do not at all preserve the utter superiority of the gods and their status as transcendent causal principles (2.4.1 [5.5]).

This is reminiscent of Porphyry’s tendency (see Chapter 2) to present the gods as transcending human categories and analogies. It was partly on this basis that Iamblichus, like Porphyry, rejected reciprocity. As the passage above shows, Iamblichus took the principle even farther. According to him, the gods were so transcendent that one could not even honor them or thank them or return a first-fruits offering from the gifts they had given – actions of which Porphyry approved. As a final note, these passages show that Iamblichus (like Porphyry, Apollonius and Maximus) left no room for a proper form of reciprocity that was relational and consistent with the divine nature. For him, all giving of gifts, and, indeed, all human-like interactions with the gods were inconsistent with the divine nature.

4.3 The Impassible Gods Cannot Be Changed

The concept of impassibility was central to Iamblichus’ understanding of the divine nature, as it was for Porphyry. Both believed that, because the gods were impassible, they

38 ἐγὼ δὲ σοι λέγω τὸ γε ἐμὸν δόγμα περὶ θυσίων, ὡς οὐδέποτε αὐτὰς δεῖ προσίεσθαι τιμῆς μόνης ἕνεκα, καθάπερ δὴ τιμῶμεν τοὺς εὐεργέτας, οὐδὲ ὅμολογίας ἕνεκα χαρίτων, ἢρ᾽ οἷς ἦμιν οἱ θεοὶ δεδώκασιν ἀγαθοῖς, οὐδὲ ἀπαρχῆς χάριν ἢ δόρων τινὸς ἀντιδόσεως, ἢρ᾽ ὧν ἦμιν παρέχουσιν οἱ θεοὶ πρεσβυτέρων δόρων· κοινὰ γὰρ ταῦτα καὶ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν, ἀπὸ τε τῆς κοινῆς εἰλημπται πολιτείας, τὸ τῶν θεῶν παντελῶς ὑπερέχον καὶ τὸ τῆς τάξεως αὐτῶν, ὡς αἰτίων ἐξηρημένον, μηδαμός διασώζοντα.

39 My point here is that they rejected reciprocity for similar reasons. Of course, the modes of interacting with the gods they proposed as alternatives to reciprocity were very different. In contrast to Porphyry’s intellectual ascent to the divine, Iamblichus advocated an ecstatic conjunction through the mediation of physical religious rites. It is in light of this difference that their rejection of reciprocity upon similar bases is so striking.

40 According to Iamblichus, “[N]one of the superior classes is subject to passions, nor ye tis if free form passions in the sense of being contrary to what is possible, nor as being of a nature subject to passion, but being freed from this through its moral excellence or some other good disposition. It is rather because they completely transcend the
could not interact reciprocally with humans through sacrifice and prayer; but the
philosophers differed over how to treat traditional stories that presented sacrifices as reciprocal.
A particular bone of contention was the *Iliad* 9.500, which stated that the gods were pliable
(στρεπτοί) and could be turned from wrath by sacrifice and supplication. As seen in Chapter 3,
Porphyry said that such sacrifices had been effective, but only in placating low, evil, passible
daemons, not the true gods. In this way, he was able to take Homer (and much of traditional
religion) seriously.

Iamblichus disagreed that there could be a category of passible daemons. His view of
divine impassibility was more comprehensive than Porphyry’s, extending to all superhuman
races, including all daemons. Thus, no divine beings, in his mind, could be στρεπτοί. This made
Homer’s statement was wrong, no matter which beings it referred to. For Iamblichus, it was
“plain that those verses of Homer which you quote, to the effect that ‘the gods may be turned (by
prayer),’ are impious even to utter.” Alongside of Homer’s misguided thinking, “from long
ages past . . . the works of holy theurgy have been determined by immaculate and intellectual
laws . . .” Nothing in these works is “accomplished contrary to the ordinance laid down from the
beginning so that the gods should change their plans in virtue of some subsequently performed

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41 Ὡσεσε οὐδ᾽ ὑπὲρ ἐκ τῶν Ὁμηρικῶν σὺ παρέθηκας, τὸ στρεπτοῦσιν τῶν θεῶν, ὃσιον ἔστι φθέγγεσθαι.
theurgic ceremony” (5 [8.8]). Thus, the correct theurgic understanding of sacrifice, which avoided the attempt to influence the gods, had existed from time immemorial; but certain misguided individuals, including Homer, had not adhered to it. According to Iamblichus, no “cult celebrated according to hieratic laws . . . is accomplished by the utilization of passion” (3.7 [1.21], cf. 3.3.1 [1.11]).

4.4 The Divine Prerogative

Thus, Iamblichus retained the traditional idea that sacrifice was involved in obtaining worldly success, the aversion of evil, and even the salvation of the soul, but he vehemently rejected the idea that it accomplished these things through reciprocity. How, then, did sacrifice function? Iamblichus clearly considered this to be an important question. He sought to explain “the greatest thing, the effectiveness of the sacrifices, the particular reason that they achieve such impressive results” (2.4.1 [5.6]); but his explanation was less clear than could be wished.

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42 οὐ παρὰ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς τι θεσμὸν ἐπιτελεῖται ἐν τῷ τοιχῳ, ἵνα μεταστραφῶσιν οἱ θεοὶ κατὰ τὴν εἰς δόστερον γνωμοδέεν ἱερουργίαν . . .

43 Ποία γὰρ ἀγιστεία καὶ κατὰ νόμους ἱερατικὸς θεραπεία δρωμένη διὰ πάθος γίγνεται . . . Both Porphyry and Iamblichus were working with similar assumptions from their Plotinian heritage, but they disagreed over what role physicality – especially physical religious rites – could have in the philosophic life. Porphyry generally disparaged such rites as incompatible with the impassible divine nature. This is why many physical rites had to be interactions with passible evil daemons. In contrast, Iamblichus revered physical rites, so he strove to interpret them in a way that was compatible with the impassibility of the divine. Having managed this, he had no need of passible evil daemons to explain such rites and he criticized Porphyry for positing them.

44 Τὸ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ δραστήριον τῶν θυσιῶν, καὶ διὰ τί μάλιστα τοσαῦτα ἐπιτελεῖ . . . Elsewhere, Iamblichus intriguingly states that this question was a popular one among his contemporaries: “The question you [Porphyry] raise next is one that is a common concern for virtually all men, both those who have given time to education and those relatively lacking in experience of philosophic reasoning; I mean the question of sacrifices—what is the utility of them, or what power they have in respect of the universe or the gods, and on what principle they achieve their purpose, both suitably for those honored, and usefully for those presenting the gifts” (2.4 [5.1]).
We have already noted Iamblichus’ claim that the gods, not sacrifices, were the ultimate causes of beneficial events. This idea reappears several times in the Response. After mentioning those who gave a reciprocal interpretation of sacrifice, he observed, “[N]o one would properly approve them as giving an adequate account of the cause of the achievements resulting from [sacrifices], but, if anything, one would accept them as giving a lower-level account, and one that is dependent, as secondary, on the primary and most basic causes” (2.4.1 [5.6]).

A sacrifice is made; evil is averted or benefits are obtained; but, properly speaking, it is not the sacrifice that causes these benefits, but the gods. Sacrifices (and the prayers of request that accompanied them) were successful because they coincided with the prearranged purposes of the gods: “[I]t is as a consequence of the conjunction of divine causal agencies and of mortal preparations aligning themselves with those that the performance of sacrifice achieves its end, and confers its great benefits” (2.4.9 [5.23]). Iamblichus teaches that the first degree of prayer “leads to contact and acquaintance with the divine.” The second “is conjunctive, producing a union of sympathetic minds, and calling forth benefactions sent down by the gods even before we express our requests, while achieving whole courses of action even before we think of them” (4 [5.26]). In other words, the divine gifts for which people prayed were given prior to their prayers. Iamblichus emphasizes that the gods themselves had given humans sacrificial rites.

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45 Ὡστε οὖ ὅ̣̊̄ τ̄̄ς αὐ̣̄τ̄̄ς δοκῑ̣̣μασεῑ̣̣ς δικαῑ̣̣ως ὡ̣̄ς ἐ̣̣̄παξί̣̣̄ος τὸν ἐν αὐ̣̄τ̄̄ς ἔ̣̣̄ργον τὴν αἰτίαν ἀπολογιζομένους, ἀλλ᾽ εἴ̣̣̄περ ἄρα, ὡ̣̣̄ς ἐ̣̣̄πακολοθοῦντας καὶ κατὰ δεύτερον τρό̣̣̄πο̣̣̄ν συνηρτημένους τοῖς πρώτοις καὶ πρεσβυτάτοις αἰτίοις δευτέρως ὅ̣̣̄ν αὐ̣̄τ̄̄ς παραδέξατο.

46 Καὶ μήν συνόντων γε εἰς τὸ αὐ̣̄τ̄̄ τῶν θείων αἰτίων καὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων παραπλησίων αὐ̣̄τ̄̄ς παρασκευών, πάντα τελεῖ καὶ μεγάλα ἁγαθά τῆς θυσίας ἢ τελεσιουργία παρέχεται.

47 Φημὶ δὴ οὖν ὅ̣̄ς τὸ μὲν πρῶτον τῆς εὐχῆς ἐιδός ἐ̣̣̄στῑ̣̣ συναγωγῶν, συναφῆς τε τῆς πρὸς τὸ θεῖον καὶ γνωρίσεως ἐξηγούμενον· τὸ δ᾽ ἐπὶ τούτῳ κοινωνίας ὁμονοητικῆς συνυπολογίας, δόσεις τε προκάλουμενον τὰς ἐκ θεῶν καταπεμπομένας πρὸ τοῦ λόγου, καὶ πρὸ τοῦ νοῆσαι τὰ ὅλα ἐγγα ἐπιτελοῦσας.
They orchestrated these rites (and the prayers that went with them) to coincide with their own eternal purposes. In other words, (though he does not state this as explicitly as could be wished), Iamblichus believed that the gods inspired people to pray for what providence already intended to do.

Porphyry had argued that, if divine gifts followed prayer and sacrifice, the gods must be subject to humans. Iamblichus disagreed:

[Y]ou don’t properly understand what you call “service” when applying this word to the overwhelming power of the gods, and their superabundant goodness, and their all-encompassing responsibility, their care and patronage. Moreover, you ignore the manner of their activity, that this is neither drawn down nor turned toward us, but, being transcendent, it guides and gives itself to its participants; and is neither altered in itself nor made less, nor is it subservient to its participants, but, on the contrary, it makes use of all that is subservient to it (4 [3.17]).

Sacrifice did not cause the gods to give good things. It was the gods who were in control of everything: they guided the “participants” and made use of their prayers for their own purpose. This could be taken to mean that there was no intelligible causal connection between sacrifice and the benefits that followed it -- the two were merely juxtaposed in the divine will -- but, in fact, Iamblichus went into detail concerning how sacrifice connected one with the gods and obtained their blessings. His point was simply that effective sacrifice and the benefits it obtained fell under the overarching providence that orchestrated both events.

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48 Ἐπειτα ἄπορεῖς εἰ ἄχρι τοσοῦτον κατάγεται εἰς ὑπηρεσίαν ἀνθρώπων τὸ θεῖον ὡς μὴ ὀκνεῖν τινας καὶ ἀλφιτομάντεις εἶναι. Τὸ δὲ οὐ καλῶς ὑπολαμβάνεις, τὴν περιουσίαν τῆς δυνάμεως τῶν θεῶν καὶ τὴν ὑπερβάλλουσαν ἀγαθότητα καὶ τὴν πάντα περιέχουσαν αἰτίαν κηδεμονίαν τε ἡμῶν καὶ προστασίαν ὑπηρεσίαν ἐπονομάζων. Καὶ ἐτι ἄγνοεις τὸν τρόπον τῆς ἐνεργείας, ὡς οὕτω καθέλκεται οὕτω ἐπιστεφέται οὕτος εἰς ἡμᾶς, χορηστὸς δὲ προηγεῖται καὶ δίδωσι μὲν τοῖς μετέχοντοι ἑαυτῶν, αὐτὸς δὲ οὕτω ἐξίσταται ἀιτίαν οὕτω εἰς ἐλάττων γίγνεται οὕδὴ ὑπηρετεῖ τοῖς μετέχονσιν, ἀλλὰ τούναντιν πάσιν ὑπηρετοῦσι προσνυχήται.

49 This tendency to see religion from the perspective of an all-controlling providence was present, in a different form, in the thinking of Maximus. Imperial-age philosophy attempted to take the entire system into account.
4.5 Sacrifice as Affinity and Union with Higher Powers

Apart from being predestined to do so, how did sacrifice obtain benefits? Iamblichus recognizes, “The argument therefore demands that we state in what respect sacrifices possess the capacity to produce results and connect us to the gods, who are the principle causes of what comes to be.” By way of explanation, he observes that the universe is like one living being (ἐν ζώον), in all of which exists one and the same life force (μία ζωή ἣ αὐτή πανταχοῦ). Because everything that is has the same life pulsing within it, everything is connected to everything else. In consequence, “[T]he communion of like powers, or the conflict of contrary ones, or a certain affinity of the active for the passive principle, propels together like and suitable elements, pervading in virtue of a single sympathy even the most distant things as if they were most contiguous.” This states “something of the truth and of the necessary consequences of sacrifices” (2.4.1 [5.7]).

Sacrifice was like an action in one part of the cosmic body that resulted in a sympathetic reaction in another part. Technically, the gods were not part of this cosmic body (2.4.1 [5.7]), but they were associated with aspects of it:

“Let us posit, then, that for each part of the cosmos there is on the one hand this body that we can see, and on the other hand the various particular incorporeal forces associated with bodies. Now the rule of cult, obviously, assigns like to like, and extends this principle from the highest to the lowest levels, incorporeal entities to incorporeal, and bodies to bodies, apportioning to each what is comfortable to its own nature (2.4.8 [5.20]).”

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50 κοινωνία τῶν ὁμοίων δυνάμεων ἢ τῶν ἑναντίων διάστασις ἢ τῆς ἑπιτηδειάτης τοῦ ποιοῦντος πρὸς τὸ πάσχον συνκινεῖ τὰ ὅμοια καὶ ἑπιτηδεία, ὡςαύτως κατὰ μίαν συμπάθειαν διήκουσα καὶ ἐν τοῖς πορρωτάτω ὡς ἐγγίστα ὤσι . . .

51 Ὁδὲ μὲν οὖν καθ’ ἕκαστην περικόσμῃν μερίδα εἶναι μὲν τι καὶ σῶμα τοῦτο ὅπερ ὁρῶμεν, εἶναι <δὲ> καὶ τὰς περὶ τοῖς σώμασι μεριστὰς δυνάμεις ἀσωμάτους. Ο δὴ τῆς ἃρσηκείας νόμος τὰ ὅμοια δηλονότι τοῖς ὁμοίοις ἀπονέμει καὶ
This seems to suggest that physical sacrifices would only activate other physical elements in the cosmos, while intellectual rites would activate higher divine principles. But Iamblichus also implies that, when a physical sacrifice caused a sympathetic reaction in some aspect of the cosmic body, it also caused a reaction in the god who was responsible for that part of the cosmos and felt for it a special love: one should “seek the cause (of the efficacy of sacrifices) in friendship and affinity, and in the relation that binds together creators with their creations and generators with their offspring.”

Iamblichus goes on, “When therefore, under the guidance of this common principle, we comprehend that some animal or plant growing in the earth simply and purely preserves the intention of its maker, then, through this intermediary, we set in motion, in an appropriate manner, the creative cause which, without in any way compromising its purity, presides over this entity” (2.4.2 [5.9]).

Sacrifice achieved a union between the worshipper and the god with whom one’s sacrifice had a special affinity: “So whether it is a case of animals or plants or any other product of the earth that are administered by higher beings, they have no sooner received a share in their

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διατείνει δι’ ὅλων οὕτως ἀνοθεν ἄχρι τῶν ἑσχάτων, ἀσώματα μὲν ἀσωμάτοις, σώματα δὲ σώμασι, τά | σύμμετρα κατά τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν ἑκατέροις ἀποδιδούς.

52 Ὡς τοιοῦτον ὁ φιλίαν καὶ οἰκείωσιν αἰτίασθαι, σχέσιν τε συνδετικὴν τῶν δημιουργοῦντων πρὸς τὰ δημιουργούμενα καὶ τῶν γεννῶντων πρὸς τὰ ἀπογεννώμενα.

53 The idea that sacrifice is an intermediary itself implies that it has the power to connect one to an entity higher than itself, not simply to a parallel entity.

54 Ὅταν οὖν ταύτης προηγουμένης τῆς κοινῆς ἀρχῆς λάβωμεν τι ζῴου ἢ τῶν φυομένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀκραιφνῶς καὶ καθαρῶς διασξόμεν τὸ βούλημα τοῦ πεποιηκότος, τότε διὰ τοῦ τοιούτου τὴν ἐπιβεβηκτὴν αὐτὸς ἀχράντως ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ δημιουργικῆν αἰτίαν οἰκείως κινοῦμεν.
authority than they procure for us indivisible communion with them.” Some of these physical mediating entities increased one’s kinship with the gods without being sacrificed; others “make the kinship more prominent through being sacrificed.” Their dissolution into primary elements (by fire) “makes them akin to the causal principles of the higher beings,” and “as this kinship is progressively brought to perfection, the benefits deriving from it become ever more perfect also” (2 [5.24]). Thus, sacrifice achieved kinship with the gods, and kinship with the gods produced benefits for the worshipper. This was a central concept for Iamblichus and requires further examination.

4.6 Efficacy through Union

Iamblichus rejected the idea that sacrifice was the exchange of requests and gifts between distinct human and divine individuals. According to him, the “much better” explanation of sacrifice was that “the works of the gods are not brought to completion in any mode of opposition or differentiation, in the way that works in the realm of generation are normally performed, but each work as a whole is accomplished on the divine level through identity and unity and concord” (2.1 [4.3]). The “unity” achieved by sacrifice was efficacious because people gained the strength and power of that with which they were unified.

Iamblichus writes of the physical benefits of sacrifice, “often it is by reason of bodily necessity that we are involved in some relationship with the gods and good daemons that watch

55 . . . διακυβερνᾶται ἀπὸ τῶν κρειττόνων, ὡμοῦ τῆς ἐπιστασίας αὐτῶν μετείληψε καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν ἡμῖν προέφεξεῖ πρὸς αὐτῶς ἀδιαίρετον.

56 συγγενὴ ποιεῖται τοῖς τῶν κρειττόνων αἰτίοις . . .

57 . . . ταυτότητι δὲ καὶ ἐνώσει καὶ ὁμολογία τὸ πᾶν ἔργον ἐν αὐτοῖς κατορθοῦσθαι.
over the body; as for instance when we are purifying it from long-standing impurities or freeing it from disease and filling it with health or cutting away from it what is heavy and sluggish . . . or furnishing it with some other among all the goods.” How did sacrifice accomplish this? Iamblichus observes,

[I]t is . . . through participating in what is akin to itself [τῶν δὲ συγγενῶν ἐαυτῷ μεταλαγχάνον], through bodies, in fact, that a body is nourished and purified. The procedure of sacrifices for such a purpose [ό τῶν θυσιῶν θεμιῶς ἐπὶ τῆς τοιαύτης χρείας] will be, then, necessarily corporeal, on the one hand cutting away what is superfluous within us and completing what is lacking in us, while on the other bringing into symmetry and order those elements that are disordered and confused (2.4.6 [5.16]).

Thus, physical sacrifice mediated a connection between human bodies and aspects of the cosmos that correspond to it but were well ordered. In this, the human body was conformed to the well-ordered image of that to which it was connected. This was a critical principle in Iamblichus’ thought: it meant that sacrifice brought benefits, not by changing the cosmos or the gods, but by changing human beings – conforming them to supra-mundane things.

This was true, not only of the healing of the body, but also of the healing of the soul. This becomes apparent in a passage in which Iamblichus protests against Porphyry’s accusation that sacrifices and invocations imply passion:

[N]ot even in the case of the invocations [αἱ προσκλήσεις] is it through the experiencing of passion that they link [συνάπτουσι] the priests to the gods; it is rather in virtue of the divine love which holds together all things [ὅτα δὲ τῆς θείας φιλίας τῆς συνεχοῦσας τὰ πάντα] that they provide a union of indissoluble involvement [κοινωνίαν παρέχουσι τῆς ἀδιαλύτου συμπλοκῆς]—not, as the name seems immediately to imply, inclining the mind of the gods to humans [τὸν νοῦν τῶν θεῶν προσκλίνουσαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις], but rather, as the truth of things itself desires to teach us, disposing the human mind to participation in the gods [τὴν γνώμην τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπιτηδείᾳ ἀπεργαζόμενα πρὸς τὸ μετέχειν τῶν θεῶν], leading it up to the gods and bringing it into accord with them through harmonious persuasion (3.3.2 [1.12]).
In other words, sacrifices did not make the gods favorably inclined to humans; they inclined
humans to conformity with the divine nature. Iamblichus writes that sacrifice “renders all [things
in us] conformable to all the beings superior to us.” And when “the divine causal agencies” and
the human preparations aligned with those meet together to the same end (εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ), “the
performance of sacrifice achieves its end, and confers its great benefits” (2.4.9 [5.23]).

Iamblichus’ clearest explanation of the power of sacrifice to transform humans and unify
them with the divine pertained to fire. According to him, sacrificial fire mirrors the fire of the
gods, who want to burn up (ἐκκόπτεσθαι) the matter (ὕλη) in us through fire and to render
(ἀπεργάζεσθαι) us impassive, as they are (2.4.3 [5.11]). He writes,

Even so the fire of our realm, imitating the activity of the divine fire, destroys all that is
material in the sacrifices, purifies [καθαίρει] the offerings with fire and frees [ἀπολύει] them
from the bonds of matter, and renders [ἀπεργάζεται] them suitable [ἐπιτήδεια],
through the purification of their nature, for consorting with the gods [πρὸς τὴν τὸν θεόν
cοινωνίαν], and by the same procedures [διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν τρόπων] liberates [ἀπολύει] us
from the bonds of generation and makes us like [ἀφομοιοῖ] to the gods, and renders us
worthy to enjoy their friendship [φιλίαν], and turns round our material nature towards the
immaterial (2.4.3 [5.12]).

Here, again, the function of sacrifice is join (and so conform) human beings to the unchanging,
impassive goodness of the divine nature.

The same principle applied to propitiatory sacrifice. According to Iamblichus, it was
critical to understand the true nature of the divine anger (ἡ μῆνις) that was averted by
propitations (αἱ ἐξιλάσεις). It was not, “as is believed in some quarters, any sort of ancient and
abiding anger [ἐμιμονος ὀργή].” The reason people were deprived of the gods’ beneficent
guardianship (ἡ ἀγαθοτεργός κηδεμονία) was that they themselves had turned away from it: “it is

58 . . . πάντα δὲ προσήγορα τοῖς ὀλοίς κρείττοσιν ἠμῶν ἀπεργάζεται.
59 . . . πάντα τελεῖ καὶ μεγάλα ἄγαθα τῆς θυσίας ἢ τελειουργία παρέχεται.
just as though in the middle of the day we were to hide ourselves from the light, and so bring darkness upon ourselves and deprive ourselves of the excellent gift of the gods.”

The problem was not that the gods had ceased to rain down goodness, but that people had withdrawn from it into the dark cave of evil. The only way to solve the problem was to bring people back into the light, and this was exactly what propitiation did. Iamblichus writes, “‘Propitiation,’ then, has the capacity to turn us towards participation in the higher realm, and to bring us into communion with the divine care which had been denied us, and to bind together harmoniously with one another, participants and participated.”

Thus, propitiation did not work by placating passible gods – it transformed humans to make them once more receptive to unchanging divine goodness.

Iamblichus did not think that all people’s misfortunes, however, were the result of their turning away from divine blessing. He acknowledges that there was “evil present in the terrestrial realm . . . [and] harm emanating from influences from the sensible world.” Expiatory rites (αἰ ἐκθόσες) could heal (ιατρεύειν) these evils. Their purpose was to “invoke [gods or daemons] as helpers and protectors [ἀλεξικάκους] and saviors, and through them to conjure away all harm . . .” In this way, they “turn aside the assaults of the world of nature and generation,” but they did not do so through passions (διὰ παθῶν) (3.3.4 [1.13]).

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60 Iamblichus also speaks of the gods turning away from their beneficent guardianship, but by this he seems to mean that humans cut themselves off from this blessing.

61 Δύναται οὖν ἡ ἢ ἡ ξίλας ἡμᾶς ἐπιστρέψαι πρὸς τὴν κρεῖττονα μετονομάσαν τὴν ἀνεσταλμένην ἁρ’ ἡμῶν θείαν κηδεμονίαν εἰς κοινωνίαν προαγαγέν καὶ συνόδεαι συμμέτρως τὰ μετεχόμενα ἐκ καὶ μεταλαμβάνοντα πρὸς ἄλληλα.

62 “Conjure away” translates the verb ἀποδιοπομπεῖσθαι.

63 “Turn aside” translates the verb ἀποτρέπειν.
4.7 Union and the Divine Prerogative

Iamblichus’ concept of sacrifice as union with divine powers dovetailed with his belief that the gods were the ultimate causes and initiators of both sacrifices and the benefits they obtained. Worshippers and their sacrifices were unified with the gods they invoked. Therefore, the worshipper’s requests were conformed to the purpose of the gods and could not be considered separate from it. Similarly, the efficacy of sacrifice could not be distinguished from the actions of the gods themselves, for all was brought into a single, divine harmony. Iamblichus writes, “If, then we make any distinction between invoker and invoked, or commander and commanded, or, in general, superior and inferior, we are in a way transferring the spirit of opposition to the ungenerated goods of the gods” (2.1 [4.3]).

According to Iamblichus, one could not make this distinction. Rather, it had to be understood that “the hieratic prayer-formulae have been sent down to mortals by the gods themselves, and that they are the symbols of the gods themselves, and not known to anyone but them, and that in a way they possess the same power as the gods themselves” (3.4 [1.15]). The priest might seem to be wielding great authority when he spoke arcane prayers, but these prayers came directly from the gods; in a way, the priest was merely a tool in the hands of the holy symbols he used. Iamblichus took the union of worshipper and the gods so far as to claim that the theurgic priest was able to act as the gods under certain circumstances. This is how he

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64 Ἐὰν μὲν οὖν καλοῦν ἡ καλοῦμεν ὥ ἐπιτάττον ἢ ἐπιταττόμενον ἢ κρεϊττον ἢ χεῖρον διαφέρομεν, τὴν τῶν γενέσεων ἐπὶ τὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀγέννητα ἀγαθὰ μεταφέρομεν ποι ἑναντίοτητα.

65 Εἰ δὲ τις ἐννοήσει καὶ τὰς ἱερατικὰς ἱκετείας ὡς ἄπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν θεῶν ἀνθρώπους κατεπέμφθησαν, καὶ ὀτι τῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν εἰσὶν συνήματα καὶ μόνος τοὺς θεοὺς ὑπάρχουσι γνώριμοι, τρόπον τέ τινα αὕτη τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχουσι δύναμιν τοῖς θεοῖς . . .
explained the threatening of superhuman powers to which Porphyry objected so strongly.

According to Iamblichus,

The theurgist, through the power of arcane symbols, commands cosmic entities no longer as a human being or employing a human soul but, existing above them in the order of the gods, uses threats greater than are consistent with his own proper essence—not, however, with the implication that he would perform that which he asserts, but using such words to instruct them how much, how great and what sort of power he holds through his unification with the gods, which he gains through knowledge of the ineffable symbols (3.1 [6.6]).

5 Sallustius’ On the Gods and the World

Sallustius (possibly the Spanish Flavius Sallustius, mid-fourth century) was a friend of the Emperor Julian and an apologist for paganism against the rising challenge of Christianity. As mentioned above, he was only one among several fourth- and fifth-century Neoplatonists who carried on and developed Iamblichus’ theory of sacrifice; but his concise expression of it makes him a particularly apt example. The relevant passage appears in On the Gods and the World 14-16.67

66 Ο θεουργός διὰ τὴν δύναμιν τῶν ἀπορρήτων συνθημάτων οὐκέτι ὡς ἄνθρωπος οὐδ’ ὡς ἄνθρωπινη ψυχῇ χρώμενος ἐπιτάττει τοῖς κοσμικοῖς, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐν τῇ τῶν θεῶν τάξει προοπάρχον | μείζοσι τῆς καθ’ ἑαυτὸν οὐσίας ἐπανατάσσει χρῆται· ὁμί ποιήσων πάντα ἄπερ διασχίζεται, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῇ τοιαύτῃ τῶν λόγων χρήσει διδάσκει διδάσκειν ὅσην καὶ ἥλικην καὶ τίνα ἔχει τὴν δύναμιν διὰ τὴν πρὸς θεοὺς ἐνοσίν, ἢν παρέσχετεν αὐτῷ τὸν ἀπορρήτων συμβόλων ή γνώσει.

5.1 Divine Immutability Rules out Reciprocity

Sallustius’ first point was that the gods were immutable, which was the “reasonable and correct view.” This immutability included the absence of passion. Sallustius acknowledges that such a view caused people to question the possibility of reciprocity in human-divine interactions:

one “is unable to see how they take pleasure in the good and turn their faces away from the bad, are angry with sinners and propitiated by service.” And, according to him, divine immutability did indeed rule out these things: “a god does not take pleasure (for that which does is also subject to pain) or feel anger (for anger also is an emotion), nor is he appeased by gifts (that would put him under the dominion of pleasure), nor is it right that the divine nature should be affected for good or for evil by human affairs.” This was because the gods were immutable, but also because they “are always good and do nothing but benefit us, nor do they ever harm us: they are always in the same state” (14.1).

Thus, sacrifices and other honors offered to the gods could not function reciprocally. How, then, did they function. Sallustius proposed to solve (λέλεσθαι) the inquiry (ζήτησις) (15.1). He accepted traditional ideas about what sacrifice accomplished. People did experience divine favor after sacrificing and divine wrath after erring; they even experience the restored favor of the gods after averting their wrath with prayers and sacrifices. But in all of this, the

68 τὸ μὴ μεταβάλλεσθαι.

69 ἀπορεῖ δὲ πῶς ἀγαθοὶ μὲν χαίρουσι κακοὶ δὲ ἀποστρέφονται καὶ ἀμαρτάνουσι μὲν ὁργίζονται θεραπεύομενοι δὲ ἔλεος γίνονται . . .

70 ῥητέον ὡς οὐ χαίρει θεὸς (τὸ γὰρ χαίρει καὶ λυπᾶται) οὐδὲ ὁργίζεται (πάθως γὰρ καὶ τὸ ὁργιζομένοι) οὐδὲ δώρος θεραπεύεται (ἠδονής γὰρ ἢ ἀριστερήθη) οὐδὲ θέμις ἐκ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων οὕτε καλῶς οὕτε κακῶς έχειν τὸ θεῖον.

71 ἐκεῖνοι μὲν ἀγαθοὶ τὲ εἰσὶν ἀει καὶ ὠφελοῦσι μόνον βλάπτουσι δὲ οὐδέποτε, κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ ὡςαύτως ἔχοντες.
divine attitude towards people only *seemed* to change. In fact, humans were the only ones to change. Like Iamblichus, Sallustius saw sacrifice as self-transforming. Since the divine was in want of nothing, the honors people gave the gods in sacrifice were not for their delight or benefit but “for our good” (15.1).  

5.2 Sacrifice Makes People Open to Unchanging Divine Goodness

Sallustius writes,

We, when we are good, have union with the gods because we are like them; if we become bad, we are separated from them because we are unlike them. If we live in the exercise of virtue, we cling to them; if we become bad, we make them our enemies, not because they are angry but because our sins do not allow the gods to shed their light upon us and instead subject us to spirits of punishment.  

If by prayers and sacrifices we obtain release from our sins, we do not serve the gods nor change them, but by the acts we perform and by our turning to the divine we heal our vice and again enjoy the goodness of the gods. Accordingly, to say that the gods turn their faces away from the bad is like saying that the sun hides himself from those bereft of sight (14.2-3).  

Sallustius implies that propitiation through prayer and sacrifice is comparable to the repairing of people’s moral blindness such that the unchanging sun is once more apparent; but how propitiatory sacrifice made people more virtuous is not clear.

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72 αὐτὸ μὲν γὰρ τὸ θείον ἀνενδέξει· αἰ δὲ τιμαὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας ὀφελείας ἑνεκα γίγνονται.

73 Whether the daemons work in the service of the gods or contrary to them and whether they can be called good or evil is unclear.

74 ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀγαθοὶ μὲν ὄντες δὲ ὀμοιότητα θεοῖς συναπτόμεθα κακοὶ δὲ γενόμενοι δι’ ἀνομοιότητα χωριζόμεθα, καὶ κατ’ ἄρετας μὲν ζῶντες ἐξώμεθα τῶν θεῶν κακοὶ δὲ γενόμενοι ἐχθροὶ ἡμῖν ποιοῦμεν ἐκεῖνους, οὐκ ἐκεῖνον ὀργιζομένον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀμαρτημάτων θεούς μὲν οὐκ ἐὰντον ἐλλάμπειν δαιμόσι δὲ κολασικὸς συναπτόντων, εἰ δὲ εὐχαῖς καὶ θυσίαις λύσιν τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων εὐρίσκομεν οὔτε τοὺς θεοὺς θεραπεύομεν οὔτε μεταβάλλομεν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸν ὄρθωμον καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὸ θείον ἐξεταρθῆς την ἡμετέραν κακίαν ἰώμενοι πάλιν τῆς τῶν θεῶν ἀγαθότητος ἀπολαμβάνουμεν, ὥστε ἐμοίνοι τοὺς θεοὺς λέγειν τοὺς καικοὺς ἀποστρέψονται καὶ τὸν ἴλλον τοῖς ἐστηρικμένοις τῶν ὄψεων κρύπτεσθαι.

75 The lack of clarity on this point reveals the abstract philosophical nature of this explanation for sacrifice. Practical ascesis and pastoral concern were missing from the Neoplatonic system. In this area, Christianity had a distinct advantage.
5.3 Sacrifice Mediates Union with the Gods

According to Sallustius, “The providence of the gods stretches everywhere and needs only fitness for its enjoyment,” and “all fitness,” he says, “is produced by imitation and likeness.” Sallustius believed that ritual, as well as virtue, played a role in this fitness – meaning receptivity to divine blessings. As in Iamblichus, the source of ritual power appears to have been the correspondence between religious ceremonial things and divine powers or elements of the cosmos with which people wished to connect:

That is why temples are a copy of heaven, alters of earth, images of life (and that is why they are made in the likeness of living creatures), prayers of the intellectual element, letters of the unspeakable powers on high, plants and stones of matter, and the animals that are sacrificed of the unreasonable life in us [τὴν ἐν ἡμῖν ἄλογον ζωήν]. From all these things the gods gain nothing (what is there for a god to gain?), but we gain union [συναφή] with them” (15.2).

Thus, for Sallustius, the principle of similitude, leading to conjunction with the gods, was the active ingredient in sacrifice (15.3).

He expands upon this concept: “since everything we have comes from the gods, and it is just to offer to the givers first fruits of what is given, we offer first fruits of our possessions in the form of votive offerings, of our bodies in the form of hair, of our life in the form of sacrifices.” Sallustius emphasizes the last category most. Prayers to the gods were “words only.” Sacrifices (θυσίαι) of life (ζωή) were necessary to make these words (λόγοι) animate (ἐμψυχοι), while the words gave power (δύνειν) to the life of the sacrifice (16.1). Sallustius explains further: “So, since, though the highest life is that of the gods, yet man’s life also is life

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76 It is interesting to see how Sallustius combined Porphyry’s emphasis on sacrifice as a first-fruits offering with Iamblichus’ emphasis on sacrifice as a mediator connecting one with the gods.

77 πρῶτον μὲν ἐπειδὴ πάντα παρὰ θεῶν ἔχομεν δίκαιον δὲ τοῖς διδοσί τῶν διδομένων ἀπάρχεσθαι, χρημάτων μὲν δὲ τὰ ἀναθημάτων, σωμάτων δὲ διὰ κόμης, ζωῆς δὲ διὰ θυσιῶν ἀπαρχόμεθα.
of some sort, and this life wishes to have union with that, it needs an intermediary (for objects most widely separated are never united without a middle term), and the intermediary ought to be like the objects being united.”

He went on, “Accordingly, the intermediary between life and life should be life, and for this reason living animals are sacrificed by the blessed among men to-day and were sacrificed by all the men of old, not in a uniform manner, but to every god the fitting victims, with much other reverence” (16.2).

Thus, Sallustius offered two perspectives on sacrifice. According to the first, offerings to the gods morally transformed the worshippers, making them open once more to unchanging divine goodness. According to the second, sacrifices (especially the ζωή of animal sacrifices) acted as mediators that facilitated a divine-human union. No doubt, these two ideas were connected in his mind: union with the divine made one receptive to its gifts. A serious problem was that Sallustius did not address the relationship between moral disposition and sacrifice. Could sacrifice engender a moral disposition and so make one receptive to divine blessings? Did it make one receptive but without moral transformation? Was moral transformation a prerequisite for successful sacrifice? Finally, if a proper moral disposition was the primary cause of one’s receptivity to divine goodness, why was sacrifice necessary at all? In all of this, one senses a lack of practical concern.

78 ἐπεὶ τοῖνυν ζωὴ μὲν πρώτῃ ἢ τῶν Θεῶν ἐστι, ζωὴ δὲ τις καὶ ἢ ἀνθρωπίνη βούλεται δὲ αὕτη συναφθῆναι ἐκείνῃ, μεσότητος δέεται (οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν πλείστων διεστῶτων ἁμέσως συναπτείτην) ἢ δὲ μεσότης ὥμοια εἶναι τοῖς συναπτομένοις ὄφελεί . . .

79 ζωής οὖν μεσότητα ζωῆν ἐχρήν εἶναι, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ζῷα θύουσιν ἀνθρώποι οἱ τε νῦν εὐδαιμόνες καὶ πάντες οἱ πάλαι, καὶ ταῦτα οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἀλλ᾽ ἐκάστῳ θεῷ τὰ πρέποντα, μετὰ πολλῆς τῆς ἄλλης θηρσκείας.
Observations on the Reinterpretation of Sacrifice in the Imperial Era

The pages above have shown that imperial-era Platonism tended to take into account the entire cosmic system and to think rigorously about the divine in terms of ontology, ethics and providence. These philosophers considered religion from the perspective of the all-controlling, immovable and completely good God. This led to a consistent rejection of reciprocity. But imperial-era Platonism did not reject religious practice. On the contrary, it was marked, as Simon Swain puts it, by “the particular quasi-religious direction it took.” These Platonists largely retained the practices of sacrifice and prayer, but they claimed that the proper interpretation of them was not reciprocity. They disagreed, however, over what the proper interpretation might be.

The solutions they proposed increased in subtlety and plausibility from the second to the third and early-fourth centuries. Apollonius and Maximus said that the purpose of sacrifice and prayer was to align one’s will with that of the gods, but it was not clear how burning an offering on an alter contributed in any way to this enterprise. These thinkers left philosophers little reason to sacrifice and more worldly-minded people little reason to engage in religion at all. Porphyry’s solution was superior in that it explained sacrifices to the gods as a return of first fruits in thanksgiving. This helped to justify the act of sacrifice while still excluding reciprocity. In addition, Porphyry’s evil daemons explained why objectionable religious rites seemed to be effective – something Apollonius and Maximus had not explained.

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80 Fritz Graf comes the closest to recognizing this. He writes, “There is a consistency in the religious discussion in the imperial epoch insofar as it addresses the same arguments over and over: anthropomorphic myths, statues as images of the gods, prayer, and sacrifice. And there is a consistency in the way these arguments are addressed. . . . Prayer is acceptable only if it does not ask for material things, since the gods know much better than we do what we should receive from them . . .” Graf, "Satirist's Sacrifices," 209-10.

81 Swain, "Defending Hellenism," 161.
Porphyry’s system still left little practical or philosophical reason to make physical sacrifice. Iamblichus, Sallustius and the theurgists solved this problem with the subtlest reinterpretation of sacrifice so far – one in which sacrifice and prayer were effective in obtaining goods, but not through the principles of reciprocity. Unlike Porphyry, the theurgists valued physical things and physical rites as having a power to mediate an ecstatic union with the divine, a union that somehow transformed the sinner and obtained worldly and spiritual blessings. For all that, theurgy showed a marked lack of pastoral concern and practical ascesis. As the second half of this dissertation will show, Christians were dealing with some of the same philosophical problems as the pagan Platonists. They even proposed some similar solutions; but they generally showed a greater concern for the practical holiness of people living in a physical and civic world. In the context of Ramsay MacMullen’s study, this may be considered one of the reasons for Christianity’s success.

7 Demonizing Sacrifice in the Imperial Era

7.1 The Failure of Porphyry’s Theory

A final note is in order. Clearly, Porphyry’s demonization of objectionable sacrifices and sacrificial interpretations was not prevalent among his contemporaries, nor was it picked up by future Neoplatonists. It is easy to see why. Porphyry’s evil daemons were very disruptive to traditional ideas. Intellectuals who accepted the theory could not make sacrificial requests,

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82 Ramsay MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100-400) (New Haven: Yale University, 1984).

83 This was not because these philosophers disbelieved in evil daemons. Iamblichus and Sallustius, for example, mentioned such beings, but they did not use evil daemons to explain objectionable sacrificial practices. Heidi Marx-Wolf correctly observes Iamblichus’ warnings that low, nefarious daemons could take advantage of inexperienced priests. But he stopped with this ad hominem remark; one passage might even suggest that evil daemons were an epiphenomenon of bad theurgy. Iamblichus did not assign to evil daemons whole categories of religious rites.
propitiate their sins, or sacrifice animals without becoming involved with evil daemons. Porphyry required either a significant withdrawal from cult or, on the other hand, a significant reworking of cult. This could not have been popular, especially in years to come, as traditional religion began to feel the challenge of Christianity.\textsuperscript{84} Porphyry’s theory would have looked suspiciously like giving ground.

In contrast, theurgy could claim (though with little justice) to be the way in which pious people had interpreted sacrifice since ancient times. It is true that Porphyry offered a special solution for Neopythagoreans: his evil daemons explained the presence (and apparent effectiveness) of blood offerings in the tradition while still providing grounds for their rejection. They also allowed Homer to be read relatively literally as a source of divine insight. To my knowledge, Porphyry was alone in the non-Christian philosophical tradition in accepting Homer’s statement that the “gods” (read “evil daemons”) could be turned (στρεπτοί) by sacrifices. These advantages, however, were not enough to recommend Porphyry’s demonization of sacrifice for the generations to come. The price was too high. Perhaps the fact that emperors began to use animal sacrifice as a sign of loyalty had something to do with it.

7.2 The Source of Porphyry’s Theory

The fact that Porphyry’s demonization of sacrifice was not mainstream in the philosophical world of the imperial era does not mean that it was totally absent. He attributed his discussion of good and evil daemons in Chapters 37 and 38 of On Abstinence (probably including the demonization of sacrifice) to “certain Platonists.” A strange dialogue in Plutarch (c. AD 46-120) may give a clue to their identity. In On the Cessation of Oracles 416d-417d, a

\textsuperscript{84} See the discussion above on Neoplatonism’s lack of practical ascesis.
character named Cleombrotus argues for a position on daemons that he attributes to
Xenocrates, a pupil of Plato and a leader of the Academy. According to him, daemons are not
necessarily good. They, not the gods, are the recipients of human sacrifices and apotropaic
offerings. In fact, they are the “gods” whose questionable deeds are recorded in the Greek myths.

In *Isis and Osiris* 361b, Plutarch again attributes to Xenocrates the idea that apotropaic
rites are offered to “malevolent and morose” evil daemons. They rejoice in such sacrifices and
are thus kept from causing more harm.\(^8\) Dale Martin notes a similar concept in Plutarch’s *On the
E at Delphi* 394A-C, in which the character Ammonius argues that daemons were responsible for
the harmful actions people traditionally attributed to the gods. Martin notes that Ammonius gets
the last word in the dialogue, though Plutarch himself is one of the characters and does not
endorse Ammonius’ position. In addition, Plutarch’s life of the fourth-century BC Theban general
Pelopidas contains an intriguing story in which Pelopidas is instructed in a dream to sacrifice a
girl in expiation for the earlier murders of two women (*Pel.* 21). According to Plutarch,
Pelopidas refused, saying that, if evil daemons existed who required such expiations, they must
be impotent and should not be revered or obeyed.\(^9\)

As Frederick Brenk points out, Plutarch was far from advocating the demonization he
attributed to Xenocrates. In *On the Cessation of Oracles*, the other participants in the dialogue
immediately condemn Cleombrotus’ suggestions as “extraordinary and presumptuous
hypotheses” (418d).\(^10\) All of this suggests three conclusions: 1) Xenocrates demonized

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\(^8\) For a discussion of these sources, see Frederick E. Brenk, "'A Most Strange Doctrine': *Daimon* in Plutarch," *CJ* 69, no. 1-2 (1973): 5.


\(^10\) Brenk, "'A Most Strange Doctrine,'" 6.
objectionable sacrifices. 2) At the time of Plutarch, there were probably real-life
“Cleombrotians” who shared Xenocrates’ position, or at least were thought to share his position.
3) The idea was despised by Plutarch’s circle and was not mainstream. In light of this, the
Platonists to whom Porphyry attributed his demonology may have included Xenocrates, as well
as a few contemporary Cleombrotians whose texts do not remain extant.

Perhaps there is a hint to the identity of the latter in the argument of Hans Lewy (and a
number of others) that the source of Porphyry’s demonology was On Daemons, written by an
individual named Origen. This text is not extant, but one can speculate that it contained the
demonization of objectionable sacrifices. This Origen, however, may not have been the pagan
Neoplatonist he was once thought to be. Proponents of the “one Origen hypothesis,” such as Pier
Franco Beatrice and Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, claim that the author of On Daemons was one
and the same as the Christian Origen of Alexandria. Building upon the claims of Lewy, Digeser

88 Gillian Clark does not directly address the demonization of sacrifice, but she observes that Xenocrates “was a
likely source for [Porphyry’s demonology], because he had Pythagorean interests.” She suggests Numenius as a
possible intermediary, but there is no evidence that Numenius demonized sacrifice. See Clark, On Abstinence: 154,
For the reception of Plato’s demonology and its interaction with “Chaldaean” influences, Clark points to Frederick

89 Lewy, Chaldaean Oracles: 497-508. Lewy observes that Porphyry’s comments on daemons in Abst. 2.36-44 are
similar to those that appear in his allegory of Plato’s legend of Atlantis, preserved in Proclus’ Comm. Ti. 1.77. Abst. 2
identifies the source for its demonology as “certain Platonists,” but the fragment preserved by Proclus names
Numenius and the Neoplatonist Origen. In the V.Plot. 3, Porphyry identified “Origen” as the author of a work on
daemons, of which Proclus gave a very brief summary (Comm. Ti. 1.76.30f). The other book Porphyry attributed to
Origen in V.Plot. 3 – The King is the only Creator (ὁτι μόνος ποιητής ὁ Βασιλεύς) – was an attack on Plotinus for
differentiating the “First God” from the Demiurge. Since this perspective appears in the midst of the demonology
attributed to “certain Platonists” in Abst. 2.36-44, one may conclude that Porphyry’s source in this passage was
Origen’s book on daemons. Lewy does not think that this Origen was the Christian Origen of Alexandria.

90 The foundational article is that of Beatrice, "Porphyry's Judgment on Origen," 351-63. See also Elizabeth
DePalma Digeser, "Origen on the Limes: Rhetoric and the Polarization of Identity in the Late Third Century," in The
Rhetoric of Power in Late Antiquity: Religion and Politics in Byzantium, Europe, and the Early Islamic World
(London: Taurus Academic Studies, 2010), 197-210. Digeser notes H. A. Drake’s claim that elite Christians and
Hellenes under Constantine held very similar beliefs and that their differences cannot account for Christianity’s
ascendancy. In a similar way, she believes that doctrinal differences are powerless to explain the onset of the Great
and Beatrice, Heidi Marx-Wolf suggests that Porphyry learned to demonize sacrifice from Origen of Alexandria. Marx-Wolf’s contention is that Christian and pagan intellectuals were not as polarized as the sources present them. They were in the same schools, sharing the same conversations and addressing some of the same problems. The truth of this general perspective will become apparent in the discussion of Christian sources in the second half of this dissertation.

Marx-Wolf’s claim about the origin of Porphyry’s evil daemons is intriguing and has great plausibility. Origen was heir to a Christian and Jewish heritage that had demonized Greco-Roman religion and sacrifice for several centuries. Origen himself made much of the idea. He claimed that daemons were responsible for famines, plagues, and earthquakes, that they feasted on blood and inspired Greek animal sacrifice, and that they deceived pagans into thinking that they were gods. But if Porphyry got his demonology from Origen (or from any Christian or Jewish source), he modified it significantly to fit his own needs. While Origen dismissed all of Greco-Roman religion as the service of evil daemons, Porphyry did so selectively. For him, judicious sacrifice, praise, and worship were appropriate for a whole range of divine beings from


91 For this claim, she partly depends upon Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2012), Chapters 1-3.


93 I part ways with this perspective (particularly that of H. A. Drake), however, to the extent that I believe Christian intellectuals (even of the most philosophic bent) were more open than pagan Platonists towards reciprocity, and towards human-like interactions with God in general. Christianity was friendlier towards the natural human religious impulse, and this gave it an advantage.
the god over all down to the beneficent daemons. Origen may have expected the help of ministering angelic spirits, but he rejected the offering of worship or sacrifice to such beings.

Still, the similarity between Porphyry and Origen’s demonization of sacrifice is striking, and Marx-Wolf is right to point to it. In fact, Porphyry and Origen shared even more than Marx-Wolf has identified. This dissertation has shown that Porphyry’s demonology was partly an attempt to reconcile traditional accounts of reciprocal sacrifice with a philosophical view of the divine nature that ruled out reciprocity. If this is true, the question must be asked: How did philosophically-minded Christians of the imperial era deal with the reciprocity of sacrifice in their own tradition? The aspect of Origen’s thought that most profoundly paralleled that of Porphyry was not Origen’s relegation of Greco-Roman religion to evil daemons; it was his navigation of sacrifices in the Judeo-Christian tradition that were inconsistent with his philosophical understanding of the divine nature. This included, as Chapter 6 will show, one of the most curious of Origen’s ideas – the so-called “Devil’s ransom.”
PART TWO

ORIGEN AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION
This dissertation began with the claim that Greco-Roman religion envisioned a reciprocal relationship with the gods. On the positive side, sacrifices were gifts to them that solicited (but did not compel) their answers to human requests. On the negative side, when the gods were offended or angered by human transgressions, propitiatory sacrifices could avert their wrath and stop them from inflicting disasters upon humanity. The first half of this dissertation traced the Platonic philosophical perspective on reciprocity from Plato to the fourth-century Neoplatonists. Chapter 1 showed that Plato accepted positive reciprocity, but that he rejected propitiatory reciprocity because it was inconsistent with divine justice and encouraged wickedness in society.

Chapters 2-4 showed that Middle and Neoplatonists held more extreme ideas about the divine nature that ruled out reciprocity almost completely. Not only propitiation, but also prayers and sacrifices intended to obtain benefits (at least material benefits) from the gods were nonsensical. This amounted to a rejection of traditional religion as a whole; but late antique Platonists were not willing to become atheists, a term that sometimes referred to those who rejected religious forms, as well as to those who denied the gods’ existence. Moreover, they respected traditional religion as an ancient source of divine truth, and their desire to take it seriously surpassed that of earlier Platonists.

This put them between a rock and a hard place and drove them to seek ways to reconcile traditional religion with philosophy. They achieved this reconciliation by assigning new purposes or functions to sacrifice and prayer and, in Porphyry’s case, by explaining errant traditional rites as interactions with evil daemons. Thus, they retained (or at least took into account) the practices
of reciprocal sacrifice and propitiation, but they brought them into line with their philosophical vision of the divine nature. They had their cake and ate it too.

The second half of this dissertation concerns Christian thinkers who were part of the intellectual world of the Middle and Neoplatonists and felt a similar conflict between their view of the divine nature and the tradition of positive and propitiatory reciprocity in their own Judeo-Christian heritage. This conflict appeared in the thinking of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, but it reached a high in Origen, making him a natural subject for comparison with the pagan Platonists already discussed. The Greek view of sacrifice as a gift inviting return from the gods was not as prominent in later Judaism, but prayers of request played an enormous role and continued to do so in early Christianity. This troubled many Christian intellectuals. Their subordination of the material to the spiritual led most of them to limited or excluded prayers for earthly things – an impulse comparable to that of Porphyry. Others, whose texts do not survive, appear to have rejected all prayers of request, rather as Maximus had done.

Later Jewish tradition had emphasized the role of sacrifice in taking away sin, and early Christians shared this view. Christian intellectuals only began to think critically about the mechanics of sin offering in the third century. For some, this was a disturbing exercise. New Testament descriptions of Jesus’ blood as a ransom or payment that brought about forgiveness sounded, from a Greek perspective, like the propitiation or even the bribery of an angry God.¹ Like the pagan Platonists, many Christians argued that God did not experience anger. In certain

¹ Perhaps ancient Jewish and first-century Christian ideas about how sacrifices dealt with sin did not match Greek views of propitiation, but they presented some of the same problems to the philosopher. Furthermore, the relevant issue for this study is not how ancient Jews or first-century Christians viewed propitiation but how scriptural accounts of propitiation appeared to second, third, and fourth-century Christian intellectuals.
passages, Origen went so far as to say, as Porphyry would, that God did not punish anyone directly for their sins.

Like their pagan counterparts, these Christians tried to reconcile the conflict between their philosophical views and their religious tradition. They allegorized or reinterpreted scriptural prayers for earthly things. Origen and others avoided saying that Jesus had propitiated an angry God by saying that his death had been a ransom, not to God but to the Devil. In a similar way, Porphyry would avoid saying that Greco-Roman sacrifices had propitiated the gods by claiming that they had actually appeased evil daemons. Thus, the second half of this dissertation shows that Christian and pagan intellectuals were dealing with similar problems and that they were using similar strategies to resolve them. Significantly, however, the Christian philosophical critique of reciprocity was never as extreme or universal as that of the pagan Platonists. Christians such as Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea and Theodoret rejected the philosophical view of the divine nature. For them, God responded to prayers, become angry with sinners, and was appeased by sacrifice.

As explained in the Introduction to this dissertation, we began with Porphyry and the Platonists of the imperial era because the conflict between the philosophical vision of the divine nature and traditional reciprocity was most clear in pagan thought. And Origen’s view of the divine nature owed a great deal to Platonism, even though not to Porphyry in particular, who was active half a century later. Thus, the philosophical-religious conflict identified by this dissertation was inherited from pagan Platonism; but it does not follow that the solutions pagans and Christians used to resolve this conflict also had their origins in Platonism. Allegorical reading had deep and ancient roots in Greek philosophy; but reinterpreting earlier tradition to
bring it into line with present theological commitments filled the atmosphere of Judaism and Christianity in the imperial era.\(^2\) One might identify this tendency as the wellspring of Marcionism and Gnosticism, but it was not absent from Christian thinking outside of these movements. In particular, the Judeo-Christian tradition lent itself to using evil daemons to re-understand troublesome ritual or scriptural elements. Very likely Porphyry learned this method from Christianity – perhaps directly from Origen.\(^3\)

The next two chapters show how Origen’s philosophical perspectives led him to call into question positive reciprocity and prayers of request (Chapter 5) and propitiatory reciprocity (Chapter 6). These chapters also show how Origen used allegory, reinterpretation and the figure of the Devil to bring Scripture and Christian tradition into line with his philosophical commitments. Chapter 7 examines the extent to which these conflicts and efforts at reinterpretation appeared in other Christian thinkers before and after Origen.

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\(^2\) See Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*: Chapter 3 (especially p. 66), 130. He notes that Jews in the diaspora, and especially post AD 70, were in the process of reinterpreting Temple traditions and Biblical directions for ritual. Stroumsa observes, “Judaism seems to have experimented before other religious systems with all these aspects of the ‘new’ religion that emerges in Late Antiquity.”

\(^3\) Origen followed a long Jewish and Christian tradition in saying that pagan religion interacted with evil daemons. Heidi Marx-Wolf believes that Porphyry learned this method from Origen and used it to discredit ordinary pagan priests and their rites. But I wish to make a different connection. Both Origen and Porphyry explained troublesome propitiatory sacrifices *in their own respective traditions* by saying that they had interacted with evil daemons and not with the true God or gods. As Chapter 6 will show, it was Origen’s claim that Jesus’ death had been a ransom to the Devil, not his polemical demonization of Greco-Roman religion, that was parallel to Porphyry’s use of evil daemons.
ORIGEN ON PRAYERS OF REQUEST

Contents

1 The Audience of On Prayer and its Relationship to Origen’s Other Works 183
2 Christian Objectors to Prayers of Request 185
3 Christian Objections to Prayers of Request 188
4 Origen’s Defense of Prayers of Request 192
   4.1 Prayer of Request as Act of Virtue, Taken into Account in God’s Unchanging Plan 192
   4.2 Prayers Regarding the Choices of Others Justified 195
5 Prayer Beneficial Even Apart from Obtaining Answers to Prayer 196
6 Request only the “Great Things” 199
   6.1 Earthly Benefits are Only the Shadows of Spiritual Benefits 199
   6.2 Give Us this Day Our Supersubstantial Bread 202
   6.3 Some Inconsistency 204
7 Bargaining with God 206
Conclusion 209
The Hebrew Bible contained a few instances of reciprocity parallel to those in Greek religion. King Saul, for example, offered something to God in hopes that he would reciprocate by answering their prayers. Apart from a few accounts such as these, Jewish sacrificial tradition emphasized the expiation of sin or the giving of thanks more than positive reciprocity. This emphasis continued in the theology of the diaspora and in the Jewish and Christian traditions after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Both groups described prayer, alms giving, and martyrdom as sacrifices. In addition, Christians referred to the Eucharistic meal with sacrificial terminology. But these sacrifices were largely seen as expiations of sin or as acts of thanksgiving. There was no clear connection between gifts to the divine and answers to prayer, as there was in Greco-Roman religion.

Thus, unlike the pagan Platonists, Origen did not have to grapple with the theological implications of exchanging gifts with the gods. There was less danger in late antique Judaism and Christianity that sacrificial gifts would be seen as attempts to bargain with God so as to

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1 In 1 Sam. 13.8-12, Saul offered a “burnt offering” and “peace offerings” and thereby “asked the favor of the Lord” in his coming battle against the Philistines. Samuel condemned Saul’s action, but only because the King had usurped Samuel’s priestly role.

2 1 Sam. 1.10-11.

3 Judg. 11-12.

4 For references to the increasing focus of Jewish sacrifice on the expiation of sin, see the introduction to Chapter 6.

5 On prayer as sacrifice in Judaism after AD 70, see Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*: 62-63. Jews and Christians often pointed to Pss. 107.21-22 and 141.2.

6 Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*: 75-76.

7 As Frances Young observes, votive offerings played some role in early Hebrew religion, but the *do ut des* variety did not predominate in later Judaism. The prevalent Nazirite vows were of a different sort. See Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 36, citing R. de Vaux, *Les sacrifices de l’Ancien Testament* (Paris: Gabalda, 1964), 465 and Royden Keith Yerkes, *Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religion and in Early Judaism* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 64. Surely there were Jews and Christians who thought that God was likely to answer their prayers because they had been kind to the poor or persisted in prayer, but the connection between giving cult honor to God and receiving answers to prayer was not as close.
obtain answers to prayers for benefits. Unlike the pagan Platonists, Origen did not have to emphasize that God did not need gifts from people. In this area, Origen felt less conflict between his philosophical vision of the divine nature and his religious tradition.

But if classical Greek ideas of positive reciprocity played relatively little role in the Judeo-Christian tradition, prayers of request for material as well as for spiritual benefits played an enormous role. And, as Chapters 2 and 4 showed, the Platonic views of the divine conflicted to varying degrees with prayers of request, even apart from encouraging the gods to answer by giving them sacrificial gifts. The Platonic critique can be divided into two arguments. First, there was the extreme position of Apollonius of Tyana and Maximus of Tyre, who ruled out all requests. The gods pursued the one best course for the cosmos, and, to a lesser degree, for each individual. Any deviation from that plan would be an evil, and it was ludicrous to think that the gods would change this plan in response to human requests. Origen was aware of “Gnostic” Christians who held a very similar position, but he soundly rejected the idea as fit only for pagan atheists. He accused these Christians of redefining the word “prayer” in Scripture such that it referred to something other than requests. One wonders if this redefinition could have been similar to that of Maximus, who defined prayer as the alignment of one’s will with that of the gods.

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8 Regarding propitiatory reciprocity, the situation was very different. There was the distinct danger (from a late antique philosophical perspective) that the propitiatory sacrifices of ancient Judaism, of Jesus’ death, or of the martyrs be thought to bribe God to overlook human offences. This is where the parallel between late antique Platonism and Alexandrian Christianity was most apparent – a topic discussed in the next chapter.

9 A number of passages in the Hebrew Bible warned that God would not accept sacrifices from immoral people and that justice was more important than cult service (1 Sam. 15, Pss. 50 and 51, Hosea 6.6, Amos 5.21-24, Isa. 1.11-12, Jer. 7.21-24). Ps. 50 included the observation that God did not eat the blood and flesh of sacrificial animals. Even if he had, he would not have required humans to offer them, for he had at his disposal all the animals in the world. This is reminiscent of some comments in Plato and Porphyry. But the concern that a belief in divine need would make people think that they could bargain with God or compel him to answer their prayers was missing.
Origen admitted to these Christians that God did not change his plan on the fly in response to human prayers. But he said that, when God formulated his plan, he took human prayers into account. Thus, God’s plan was, indeed, shaped by human requests. And yet Origen engaged in some backpedaling. He emphasized that the greatest benefit from prayer was not obtaining answers to one’s requests but gaining spiritual maturity through contemplating the holy God and cultivating contentment with whatever he willed. This edged towards Maximus’ definition of prayer and tended to marginalize requests.

The second Platonic position in this area was that of Porphyry, who accepted prayers of request for spiritual goods, but not for material or worldly benefits. Origen wholeheartedly accepted this idea. It was against the nature of God, who transcended the material realm and wished to help the human νοῦς to transcend it as well, to aid human ambitions to wealth and success. Earlier Christian thinkers, such as Tertullian and Clement, had downplayed requests for earthly benefits, but Origen denied them altogether. This conflicted with the many scriptural accounts of prayers for worldly things, but Origen read these worldly things as types of the spiritual benefits for which the saints (in his view) had actually prayed. Thus, like pagan Platonists, Origen reinterpreted these practices and texts in his religious tradition in order to bring them into line with his philosophical view of the divine nature.

The present chapter demonstrates these thought processes in Origen. It focuses on the treatise *On Prayer*, making references to Origen’s other works when relevant.
1 The Audience of *On Prayer* and its Relationship to Origen’s Other Works

Origen wrote *On Prayer*\(^{10}\) in Caesarea between 231 and 250, probably in the first half of this period.\(^{11}\) This treatise was his most systematic treatment of the subject. He addressed it to his patron, Ambrosius, and to the lady Tatiana, who requested that he write on the topic (2.1). Origen’s purpose was to designate “the manner in which one should pray, and what one should say to God in prayer, and what occasions, and how many occasions, are most fitting for prayer” (1-2.1). A special concern was to teach people to “know what we ought to request” (2.1).

Origen began by saying that only the Incarnation and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit made it possible to pray and to discursively discuss prayer (1, 2.3-6). Next came a lexical discussion of the scriptural words used for prayer (3.1-4.2). His patrons had particularly requested that he respond to those “who assert that nothing comes about as a result of prayer and allege therefore that prayer is superfluous” (5.1). Origen articulated these objections to prayer and gave a preliminary answer (5-7). Chapters 8-17 provided instructions for how, to whom, and for what one should pray. These principles found further expression in Origen’s extended exegesis of the Lord’s Prayer (22-30).

Adalbert-Gautier Hamman suggests that *On Prayer* was meant to instruct the catechumenate in the Lord’s Prayer before their entry into the Church at Easter. In other words, Origen wrote it for the *traditio orationis* mentioned by Augustine.\(^{12}\) But Alistair Stewart-Sykes

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points out that the abstruse lexical and philosophical arguments in the first half of the treatise and the complexity of the examination of the Lord’s Prayer in the second half tell against an audience of catechumens. More likely, Origen intended to convince a more advanced audience of a particular practice and interpretation of prayer.\footnote{Stewart-Sykes, \textit{On the Lord's Prayer}: 103-04; Wilhelm Gessel, \textit{Die Theologie des Gebetes nach 'De Oratone' von Origenes} (München: Schöningh, 1975).}


P. S. A. Lefeber (1999) generally disagrees with these scholars. He points to several themes that appear in both Origen’s treatise \textit{On Prayer} and in his homilies. These are: specific conditions for prayer, prayer’s expression of human dependence upon God, and prayer as
struggle to turn to God and say yes in the midst of other inclinations. Though Lefeber encourages reading Origen’s entire corpus, he concludes that On Prayer contained the essence of Origen’s teaching on prayer and did not represent a significant distortion of his position. Furthermore, like G. Bardy, he sees a methodical structure in On Prayer, rather than the weakness and disorder identified by Völker and Gessel.

The present study uses On Prayer as the foundational text for studying prayer in Origen. To this extent, it follows Lefeber. But it also acknowledges that Origen’s other works sometimes presented a different perspective, and these differences are noted when relevant.

2 Christian Objectors to Prayers of Request

One of the driving forces behind On Prayer was Ambrosius and Tatiana’s “demand” that Origen respond to Christians who claimed that prayer was superfluous and brought about no results. Origen retorted that this lack of “belief in prayer” had no adherents “[a]mong those who accept providence and set God over the universe.” In other words, the idea was fit only for pagan atheists. But Origen immediately retreated from this claim, admitting that some who accepted the divine and divine providence questioned the efficacy of prayer. This was the work of the Devil, who had convinced some Christians that prayer was superfluous in order to discredit them through association with “the most impious of teachings.” According to Origen, these were Christians who “have done away altogether with the things of sense, and who have no use either for baptism or for the eucharist” (5.1). Presumably, these Gnostic individuals rejected all physical religious actions, including prayer.

18 Lefeber, "Same View on Prayer," 33.
Clement of Alexandria had made a similar accusation in *Stromateis* 7.7.41. He spoke of “the opinions which are being secretly propagated by certain heterodox persons, belonging to the heresy of Prodicus, against the use of prayer.” Several passages in Clement and Tertullian identify Prodicus as a Gnostic in the company of Valentinus who founded a school that prided itself in the possession of secret books of Zoroaster. According to Clement, the “impious knowledge of these falsely-called gnostics” (i.e., their rejection of prayer) was nothing new but merely “followed in the steps of the so-called Cyrenaic school.” Thus, both Clement and Origen claimed that Christian opponents of prayer were heretics associated with Gnosticism, and both accused them of carrying on ideas only fit for pagan atheists who denied both gods and divine providence.

No evidence survives to corroborate Clement and Origen’s accusation that Gnostics rejected prayer. If they did, there are strong reasons to question Origen’s claim that they did so as part of their rejection of all service to God that involved “things of sense.” Stewart-Sykes points out that Theodoret and Irenaeus accused Marcionism and Gnosticism of being inconsistent with offering any kind of physical or material service to God. But, as Stewart-Sykes observes, there is no evidence that either of these groups gave up the sacraments on these grounds.

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21 Cf. 1. Tim. 6.20

22 Clement was referring to the allegedly hedonistic philosophical school supposedly founded by Aristippus of Cyrene and functioning in the fourth and third centuries BC. Chadwick points to Diogenes Laertius (2.97) as a source on this school (Oulton and Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*: 118).

difficult to imagine Gnostics and Marcionites rejecting prayer as being too material, since it was one of the least material of religious acts.

If these groups did object to prayer, it is more likely that they objected to its presumption in making requests of God. This could have been in conflict with the division some Gnostics made between pneumatic, psychic and hylic people whose spiritual destinies were more or less fixed. They might have argued that prayer was powerless to alter these destinies. This suggestion gains support from the fact that Origen’s defense of prayer against these critics was not a defense of the materiality of prayer but a defense of prayers of request against objections based on divine foreknowledge and predestination. If God knew all along what one needed, and especially if he predetermined what one would receive, there was no point in asking him for anything, either spiritual or material. Thus, Origen’s hint that Gnostics denied prayer because of their rejection of “the things of sense” was a red herring.

The identity of these opponents is more difficult to discern. The fact that Clement and Origen associated them with heretics and pagan atheists proves only that they did not like their ideas. What can be deduced is that some people calling themselves Christians in second- and third-century Alexandria and Caesarea claimed that prayers of request were futile, and that they were prominent enough to catch the attention of Clement, Ambrosius, Tatiana and Origen, who disagreed with the position. Finally, it is not out of the question to draw a line of connection between the Christians who denied prayers of request on the basis of divine predestination and the Middle Platonists who denied prayers of request based on the goodness and immutability of the divine plan. A similar intellectual atmosphere may have been at work in both cases. Thus, Clement and Origen’s claim that these Christians’ ideas were reminiscent of those of pagan
atheists may not have been completely empty. The recognition of this fact is remarkably absent from the literature. For example, Wilhelm Gessel’s study of the theology of Origen’s *On Prayer* makes no mention of the connection.  

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### 3 Christian Objections to Prayers of Request

Before launching his defense, Origen set out to articulate the position of his opponents. To begin with, they asked, “what point is there in sending up prayer to one who knows our needs before we pray?” (cf. Matt. 6.8). God did not need to be informed of human needs. Moreover, being good, he was inclined to provide for these needs: “It is reasonable to suppose that the Father and maker of all that is, who loves all that is and hates nothing that he has made (Wisd. of Sol. 11.24), should have concern for the welfare of each of us, without regard to prayer, like a father who provides for and looks after his little children without waiting for them to ask.” Not only do God’s human children not need to ask, but also they are often “incapable of asking” or do not want the things that are “to their profit and advantage” (5.2).

The next and primary argument against prayer rested on the “likelihood” that God not only foresaw the future but also that he “predisposes it.” “And nothing happens contrary to his predisposition.” If people prayed for an event in keeping with God’s predetermined purpose (Origen’s example was the rising of the sun), they should not think that their prayers brought it about. It “would have happened even if [they] had never prayed.” On the flip side of the coin, if people prayed for something contrary to God’s predetermined purpose, they should not expect it to occur any more than they would expect summer to turn into spring. “[I]t would be the height

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of folly should anyone imagine that, through praying, he might avoid the misfortunes which
meet the human race as a matter of necessity” (5.3).

From the predetermination of physical events, Origen moved to the predetermination of
people’s spiritual destinies. Here, perhaps, he expressed Gnostic arguments. Origen cited various
passages of Scripture that seemed to say that people’s standing before God was determined from
birth (Ps. 57.4, Gal. 1.15). The crucial passage was Romans 9.11-12, where Paul claimed that
God chose to favor Jacob and alienate Esau “whilst they are yet unborn and have done nothing of
good or evil.” If we are in the category of Jacob, Origen observed, “the best of things will come
our way without our praying.” If we are in the category of Esau, we will be hated from before
birth, no matter what we do or pray. Ephesians 1.4-5 affirmed the same truth, saying that the
Father “chose all those who are to be saved in Christ” before the foundation of the world. Thus,
the chosen received adoption even if they did not pray, and the many prayers of those who had
not been chosen could not gain adoption (5.4-5).

Origen ended by summing up the arguments against prayers of request:

Hence, it seems that, since God is unchangeable and understands all things beforehand,
and is steadfast in his pre-arranged purpose, it would be absurd to think that his
disposition might be altered by prayer or to intercede as though he was not predetermined
but awaited each individual’s prayer, as though he would arrange whatever is proper for
the one who prays, ordering at that time whatever would seem to be right and approved,
as though he had not envisaged this in advance (5.5).

This passage is significant, for it makes a subtle but significant shift from a scriptural frame of
reference to a philosophical frame of reference. Origen began by articulating objections to
prayers of request using scriptural categories and scriptural language. But, here, the scriptural

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25 Αὐτόθεν δὲ ἀπεμφαίνει, ἀπρέπτου ὅντος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὰ ὅλα προκατεταγμένας μένοντός τε ἐν τοῖς
προδιατεταγμένοις, εὐχεσθαι, οἰόμενον μετατρέψειν διὰ τῆς εὐχῆς αὐτοῦ τὴν πρόθεσιν ἢ ὡς μὴ προδιαταξαμένος
ἀλλὰ περιμένοντι τὴν ἐκάστου εὐχήν ἐντυγχάνειν, ίνα διὰ τὴν εὐχήν διατάξηται τὸ πρέπον τῷ εὐχομένῳ, τότε
τάσσον τὸ δοκιμαζόμενον εἰναι εὐλογον οὐ πρότερον αὐτῷ τεθεωρημένον.
veil has dropped to reveal the Platonist argument against reciprocity and prayers of request, expressed in Platonic vocabulary. The following paragraphs reveal this shift by showing how two themes in Origen’s discussion are subtly transformed in the quotation above.

While still in a scriptural frame of reference, Origen noted that “It is reasonable to suppose that the Father . . . loves all that is” (5.2; Wisd. of Sol. 11.24). Thus, he has “concern for [our] welfare,” “provides for,” and looks after his children, regardless of their prayers (5.2).\(^{26}\) The key word here is “loves” (ἀγαπᾶν). It is based on this that God gives his children whatever is to their profit and advantage. But in 5.5 (quoted above), the emphasis shifts from love to justice and appropriateness.\(^{27}\) God gives to the suppliant “whatever is proper [τὸ πρέπον]” and what “would seem to be right and approved [τὸ δοκιμαζόμενον εἶναι εὖλογον].” This concept and vocabulary are reminiscent of the arguments against prayers of request in the Life of Apollonius and, to a lesser degree, in Maximus of Tyre’s Discourses. Origen has moved from a scriptural argument against prayer (God knows what people need and provides it regardless of requests) to a characteristic Platonic argument against prayer (God will give people what they deserve regardless of their requests).

The second theme apparent in Origen’s discussion of objections to prayer is divine predestination. This theme, too, underwent a subtle shift as Origen moved into the closing sentence quoted above. This sentence emphasized, not simply that God predestines, but also that he cannot be convinced to change his mind: God himself (not just his plan) is unchangeable.

\(^{26}\) εὖλογον δὲ πατέρα καὶ δημιουργὴν αὐτὸν ὡντα τοῦ παντὸς, ἀγαπῶντα „τὰ ὡντα πάντα“ καὶ μὴ<δὲν> βδέλυσσόμενον ὡν πεποίηκε, σωτηρίως τὰ περὶ ἐκατόν καὶ χωρίς τοῦ εὔξασθαι οἰκονομὲν δίκην πατέρος, νηπίων προστατεύοντος καὶ μὴ περιμένοντος ἔκεινὼν τὴν ἀξίωσιν . . .

\(^{27}\) To be sure, the “love” of the divine played a significant role in Plotinus and other late antique Platonists, but it did not form the basis for the Platonist critique of reciprocity.
(ἀτρεπτος); he is “steadfast in his pre-arranged purpose;”28 his disposition (πρόθεσις) cannot be altered (μετατρέψειν) by prayer. It is subtly but significantly different to say 1) that God predestines everything and 2) that his disposition is incapable of being altered by requests and that he cannot, by nature, respond to prayer. The first case can be made from Scripture, as Origen showed. But the second case had its source elsewhere.29 The term ἀτρεπτος does not appear once in the Septuagint or in the New Testament, let alone in the passages Origen quoted on predestination. It was the Platonists who emphasized the immutability of God and his inability to respond to human requests.30

As Chapters 3 and 4 showed, Porphyry and the Platonists just mentioned reconciled the conflict between the philosophical view of the divine nature and the traditional view of sacrifice and prayer as reciprocity by redefining the function of sacrifice and prayer in their tradition. Significantly, Origen criticized the “heretical” Christians who rejected prayer for doing the same thing. According to him, they “accuse the Scriptures of not intending prayer but teaching that

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28 μένων ἐν τοῖς προδιατεταγμένοις.

29 I am aware of scriptural passages that say that God does not change, but they are of a different character than the claims of the Platonists. Num. 23.19 says that God does what he says he will do. 1 Sam. 15.28-29 made the point that God’s decision to take the Kingdom from Saul and give it to another was irrevocable. The point of Ps. 102.26-27 was that God, unlike all creation, would not wear out and perish; he endured unchanging. Mal. 3.6 claimed that, because of God’s unchanging nature, he would not indiscriminately consume the Sons of Jacob. In Rom. 11.29, Paul wrote that, even though the Israelites had rejected Jesus, God’s gifts to them would not be totally withdrawn, for his calling was “irrevocable.” Heb. 6.17-18 said that, because of the “unchangeableness of [God’s] purpose,” his promise to Abraham and his promise through Christ could be depended upon. James 1.17 claimed that the “Father of lights” experiences no “variation or shifting shadow,” but the author did not mean to suggest that God was not capable of answering prayer. On the contrary, he emphasized repeatedly that God answered the prayers of the righteous, just as he had answered Elijah’s prayers for drought and for rain in ancient Israel. Thus, it is hard to see how these scriptural references could be used as an argument against prayers of request. In contrast, in the Platonic tradition, the unchanging nature of the divine was consistently seen as incompatible with answers to prayer.

30 The word does appear in Philostratus’ V.Apoll. or in Maximus of Tyre’s Diss., but it is remarkably prominent in Iamblichus’ Resp.Porph. and in Origen’s works.
something else entirely is signified in that word” (5.1). \(^{31}\) Whatever redefinition of prayer they chose would have avoided making requests to God, since this was the crux of the matter. Perhaps, like Apollonius and Maximus, they redefined prayer as the alignment of one’s will with the divine purpose.

4 Origen’s Defense of Prayers of Request

In response to the criticisms he had just articulated, Origen offered several “propositions” he believed to be “useful in solving the difficulties that lead to unwillingness to pray” (5.6).

4.1 Prayer of Request as Act of Virtue, Taken into Account in God’s Unchanging Plan

He began by defending human free will. According to him, it was impossible for humans to practically deny free will; by nature, they “ascribe praise and blame” according to the merit of a person’s actions, and they cannot do otherwise (6.1-2). Predestination did not vitiate free will. God did not cause human actions: he saw ahead of time all the free choices each human would make and orchestrated the succession of events in keeping with these choices. In particular, divine providence “prearranges” to give “what is fitting to each action under free will” (6.3-4). According to Origen, prayer was one of the human actions in response to which God orchestrated world events. He pre-comprehended “how each will pray, and with what disposition

\(^{31}\) . . . συκοφαντοῦντες τάς γραφὰς, ὡς καὶ τὸ εὐχεσθαι τοῦτο οὐ βουλομένας ἄλλ᾽ ἐπερόν τι σημαίνομεν παρὰ τοῦτο διδασκούσας.
Thus, God was not constantly changing his plan in response to human prayers and actions. His unchanging plan, fixed from the beginning, had already taken into account all the free actions humans would make and included responses (both positive and negative) to their prayers. Thus, Origen used the idea that God was outside of time to reconcile the immutability of God’s plan with answers to human prayers. In a somewhat similar way, Iamblichus used divine timelessness to explain how the gods could answer prayers without changing their plan. According to him, the gods predetermined both human prayers and the answers to these prayers they would give. This preserved the efficacy of prayer and the immutability of the gods, but it marginalized human freedom. In contrast, Origen’s God did not predestine human prayers but merely foresaw them.\footnote{In both cases, people engaged in prayers of request were fulfilling their destiny, but Origen imagined that they were themselves determining that destiny at the moment of their prayer, while Iamblichus believed that they were fulfilling the path laid down for them by the gods. And yet Iamblichus apparently allowed some role to human freedom: by seeking union with the gods, people could assure that their prayers would echo the divine will in a special way. In this sense, they could seek to fulfill their destiny – or, more accurately, they could ensure that their destiny was good.}

Origen’s argument, on its own, would not have convinced the Middle Platonists and it might not have convinced his Christian opponents. Maximus believed that the one, perfect, divine plan for the universe would necessarily be worse if it took into account human requests. Origen’s claim that this happened before the course of the cosmos would not have solved the problem. From the perspective of Apollonius and Maximus, the divine plan would, as far as

\[\piοίαν \ διάθεσιν^{\text{32}} \, \epsilonχων\], and with what faith, and what his desire is to be.’’ In keeping with the merit of the prayer and one who prayed, God listened or did not (6.4).
possible, give people what they deserved, but it would not give them what they asked for.

Note the assumption being made here. Saying prayers did not change what one deserved, but acts of virtue did change what one deserved and merited the response of the divine plan. Thus, prayer was not an act of virtue – it was a way to ask for what one had not earned.

Origen was working with a different set of assumptions. For him, prayer was not merely a spoken request for a change in reality. It was itself an act of virtue. As such, it deserved good things, just as any other act of virtue. Note Origen’s wording: God pays attention to “how” people pray, to their disposition (ἡ διάθεσις) in prayer, and to the wisdom, “faith” and “desire” of their prayer. If people are deserving and ask for what is “profitable” to them and are “without reproach” in prayer and are not “careless in . . . approach to prayer,” God grants their requests (6.4). For Origen, the requests themselves (not just the διάθεσις of the worshippers) could be virtuous, for requests displayed dependence upon God,34 and the acknowledgement of one’s need for God was one of the primary virtues.

In this way Origen vitiated (perhaps unconsciously) one of the Middle Platonic arguments against prayers of request. Platonists generally agreed that the divine often rewarded acts of virtue. So by seeing prayers of request as acts of virtue, Origen made them worthy of reward. God’s answers to prayers were not deviations from justice but fulfillments of it. Origen owed this solution to Jewish tradition. In his book The End of Sacrifice, Guy Stroumsa says that Jews in the diaspora, particularly post AD 70, began to define prayer as an act of virtue. Christians and other religious groups picked up on the idea, which became an instrument of religious transformation in the late antique world. He writes, “The new religious status of the

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34 Origen said, “Everyone who is genuinely dependent upon God, and has become worthy of being heard, can now, in a spiritual sense, perform the mightiest act, which Samuel is said to have performed through prayer” (13.5). On Origen’s view of prayer as dependence, see Lefeber, “Same View on Prayer.”
word [prayer] gives it a power of action: to say is now to do, to use the title of a classic of modern philosophy, John Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words.* According to Stroumsa, this concept was “critical for the religious and cultural history of Europe.”

4.2 Prayers Regarding the Choices of Others Justified

According to Origen’s earlier account, the Christian critics of prayer claimed that it would be stupid to assume that prayers brought about regular events such as the rising of the sun. To answer this objection, Origen noted that the sun, moon and stars were beings with free will. God foresaw the steadiness and consistency of the choices these beings would make. In consequence, he gave them charge over the lighting of the world, where consistency was especially important. Origen noted that, because humans lived in an earthly environment, “sense-impressions” sometimes deranged their choices. But the heavenly beings were exempt from this deflecting influence. He concluded, “So if I do not pray in vain with regard to a matter which concerns another’s free will, much more is this true when it concerns the free will of the stars of the sky, which contribute to the well-being of the whole as they pursue their course” (7).

The idea that the celestial bodies were rational beings was unremarkable at this time. The surprising thing is that Origen took it for granted that prayers to influence the “free” choices of other beings might be successful. There is more at stake in this discussion than prayers for the rising of the sun. In the treatise, Origen often emphasized intercessory prayers for others. If these

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35 With regard to Jewish communities, Stroumsa also notes, “Telling has replaced doing to such a point that the recitation in the synagogue of sacrificial injunctions is now equivalent to their former practice in the Temple” (*End of Sacrifice*: 62-63, 68). It becomes apparent that, though third-century Christian and pagan intellectuals were tackling similar theological problems in similar ways, the solutions they proposed differed, sometimes significantly. The idea that prayer is action may be one of the “differences” Christianity made, in the terminology of MacMullen’s *Christianizing the Roman Empire.*
prayers included requests for the conversion of others, they sought to influence another’s free will. Thus, it would have made sense for Origen to defend such prayers. The curious thing is that he did not defend them; he simply assumed that they were valid. On the basis of this assumption, he argued that prayers for the rising sun were also valid.  

5 Prayer Beneficial Even Apart from Obtaining Answers to Prayer

According to Stewart-Sykes’ outline of On Prayer, the rest of the treatise gives directions for praying in the correct manner and making appropriate requests. But much of this material, certainly Chapters 8-13, can be seen as further responses to the critics of prayer. Origen intended his comments in Chapter 8 “for the encouragement of prayer and to discourage the neglect of prayer.” But here, his point was not to defend requests but to show that prayer was beneficial, even if God did not answer one’s prayers.

His argument began with the claim that one “obtains particular things” only by praying “with a particular disposition [μετὰ διαθέσεως τοιᾶσδε], believing in a certain way, [and] having lived in a certain way prior to prayer.” These were prerequisites for successful prayer, just as the presence of a woman and conjugal desire were prerequisites for the “making of children.” One had to be pure and not babble in prayer (Matt. 6.7) or “ask after petty things” or “plead for

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36 Perhaps Origen’s acceptance of prayers regarding the free choices of others rested on the doctrine of the pre-existence of souls, which may lie behind Origen’s discussion of the celestial bodies in this chapter. God knew ahead of time what choices each soul would make and what prayers each would offer respecting the choices of others. Thus, Origen may have implied, God put the right souls in conjunction with each other in their embodied state such that the successful prayers of one matched the choices of the other for whom the first prayed.


38 On the life of virtue as a prerequisite for prayer, see 12.2. For Origen, the life of virtue was itself a ceaseless prayer in which spoken words to God played only a part.
earthly things” or “come to prayer in anger” or with confused thoughts. If one wanted to “obtain forgiveness of sins in prayer,” one had to have “forgiven from the heart one’s brother who [had] trespassed and [had] asked to receive pardon” (8.1). To those who followed these directions “[b]enefit accrued” (8.2).

Origen’s intent was to show that those who prepared themselves to make successful requests of God had already, by this preparation, morally benefited. Indeed, Origen suggested that this moral benefit was the “first” of the “many” advantages of prayer. “Even if we might suppose that no further benefit [no answers to requests] comes about for the one who has fixed his mind on prayer, we must realize that the one who so devoutly disposes himself at the time of prayer receives no ordinary result.” It was of great advantage “to fix one’s mind upon prayer, through this composure to be present to God, and to speak to him who is present as one who both looks upon us and who hears.” This “recollection of the God in whom we have put our trust” is “beneficial.” “For if the memory and recollection of a man who is renowned and who has found benefit in wisdom encourages us the more to emulate him and often restrains our impulses to do evil, how much more should the recollection of God”?

Origen spent Chapters 9 and 10 reiterating the same point with examples from Scripture. Building from 1 Timothy 2, Origen observed that a woman preparing for prayer had to maintain simplicity and decency and reverence towards God, putting away all licentiousness and lavishness and expensive clothing. Clearly such a woman was blessed by coming to prayer, even before she made a request (9.1). Next, Origen turned to the Psalms. David often described the entry into prayer as the lifting up of his soul to God in heaven (Pss. 24.1, 122.1), meaning that he turned his attention from interest in earthly matters to the contemplation of God. Thus, the 39 τὸν οὖν ὁμοφῶς εὐλαβῶς ἔκατον ῥυθμίσαντα.
preparation for prayer was a preparation to behold the Lord with an unveiled face and so to be transformed into his image, from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3.18, cf. Ps. 4.7). In this way people separated themselves from earthly concerns and from the body. They became spiritual, put behind their existence as souls, and were joined to the Spirit (9.2).

In case the reader had forgotten the point, Origen reiterated, “We have said all this on the basis that, if nothing else should accrue to us in praying, we have nonetheless received the best of gains by praying with understanding of the manner in which we should pray and keeping to this.” Most importantly for this study, Origen said that those who approached prayer in the proper manner had “cast away all discontent with providence.” This was an advantage, “For whoever is best pleased with whatever should occur is made free from every bond, and does not put out a hand against God (who ordains whatever he wishes for our training) and [this person] does not even murmur secretly in his thoughts with a voice which cannot be humanly heard” (10.1).

This was a curious perspective for one who had just defended prayers of request. If prayer was (at least partly) the conforming of one’s will to that of the divine purpose, requests became marginalized, almost superfluous to the mature worshipper. This resembled the position of Maximus and Apollonius. Perhaps it also resembled the position of the Christian critics of prayers of request whom Origen opposed. Their redefinition of the word prayer in Scripture quite

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40 One possible implication of this volitional union with God is that whatever one prays for matches the divine will and thus is “answered.” Around half a century later, Iamblichus would use this argument to explain how prayers could be linked with divine blessings without having influenced or persuaded the impassible gods. Origen did not go in this direction. He did mention Paul’s statement that Christians do not know how to pray or for what to pray but that the Spirit fills up what is lacking by making intercessions with God (2.3, cf. Rom. 8.26). This principle, however, did not play a role in Origen’s theology of prayer. His defense of prayers of request rested on other bases.

41 I have added parenthesis and brackets to show that it is the person, not God, who “does not even murmur secretly” – a fact that is clear in the Greek.
possibly revolved around a contemplation of the divine, a release from the material world and the fostering of contentment with the will of God. Perhaps Origen’s position was practically closer to that of his opponents than he would like to have admitted. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Origen spent most of the remaining chapters of *On Prayer* emphasizing that people should only ask God for spiritual blessings and not for material things or worldly success.

6 Request Only the “Great Things”

6.1 Earthly Benefits Are Only the Shadows of Spiritual Benefits

In Chapter 13, Origen returned to the efficacy of requests: “If Jesus prays and does not pray in vain, since he obtains what he asks through prayer, and since he might not have received this except through praying, which of us can neglect prayer?” Jesus’ example “shows that whoever always prays is always heard” (13.1). Origen proceeded to cite scriptural examples of those who, “through praying in the manner in which we should, have obtained the greatest blessings from God.” Hannah received baby Samuel; King Hezekiah received health; Mordecai and Esther received the protection of their people; Judith received God’s help in overcoming Holofernes; Ananias, Azarias and Mizaël received protection in the fiery furnace; Daniel received deliverance from the lions; Jonah was expelled from the belly of the monster (13.2).

Origen went on to say that present-day Christians could also recall many of God’s answers to their prayers. In listing these, Origen’s agenda emerged, for the benefits obtained by Christians were the spiritual parallels of the material benefits obtained by scriptural saints. Like Hannah, Christians who recognized “the barrenness of their own minds . . . have become pregnant from the Holy Spirit through constancy in prayer, and have given birth to words of
salvation filled with the perception of truth.” Like Judith, Christians by their praise of God were able to “cut down even the captain of the adversary, guileful and persuasive speech, which causes many, even of those considered to have faith, to tremble.” Prayer allowed Christians to overcome trials more fiery than the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. Like Daniel, Christians muzzle “through prayer” the “many wild beasts ranged against [them] in the form of evil spirits or cruel people.” And, like Jonah, those who have “fled the commandments of God” and have been “swallowed up by death” for their sins obtain salvation through repentance and prayer (13.3).

Origen wrote, “I reckon that it was most necessary that I should say these things, after enumerating the benefits received through prayer, as a means of turning those aspiring to the spiritual life in Christ away from prayer for petty and earthly concerns and summoning those who read this writing toward mystical matters, of which the matters above mentioned were types” (13.4). Characteristically, Origen was concerned about the material and earthly scriptural interpretations employed by the *simpliciores*. He wrote, “we should give preference to whatever, after study, is presented by analogy, over the obvious blessings that, according to the surface meaning, were supplied to those who prayed” (13.4). Scripture “is pointing to the heavenly and great things which are expressed *in* the earthly and the petty, so that we might make our requests according to the reality of which the achievements of the saints were a type” (14.1).

Christians were to ask for the “reality,” not the type, since “your Father will supply, in accordance with your need, the earthly and petty things which you use for the body out of necessity.” As Jesus said in Origen’s version of Matthew 6.33, “Ask for the great things and the petty things shall be added to you. And ask for heavenly things and mundane things shall be
added to you” (14.1). Later, Origen reiterated that people were not to ask for earthly things, for “God does not know how to bestow anything mundane or minor” (16.2).

How, then, could one explain the fact that scriptural saints received “material gifts . . . through prayer”? According to Origen, the saints had received material gifts, but they had not asked for them and God could not properly be said to have bestowed them. Suppose, said Origen, that someone gave a material object to another. Under the right conditions, this object would cast a shadow, but one would not say that the giver bestowed the shadow on the recipient. The “intention of the giver is to give a material object, and thus . . . our receipt of the shadow is dependent upon the gift of the object.” Sensible people gave little thought to the shadow. Similarly, those who were noble in mind requested only the “principle gifts” given by God. These “great and heavenly spiritual graces” were sometimes accompanied by material things that were types and shadows of the true gifts (16.2). But these material things were so incidental to the spiritual gift that one could not properly say that God gave them.

Material types did not always accompany heavenly gifts any more than shadows always accompanied physical objects. Depending on the position of the sun, shadows were lesser or greater or non-existent.

So just as the person who seeks the sun’s rays is neither pleased nor pained by the presence or absence of the shadows of objects, in that he has what he most requires, since he has the light shining upon him, whether he is casting a large shadow or a small one, so if we are in the possession of spiritual things, and are illuminated by God and are

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42 Origen quoted something similar in 2.2: “Ask for great things, and minor matters will be provided for you . . . Ask for heavenly things, and mundane things will be provided for you.” Stewart-Sykes notes that the same quotation appears in Cels. 7.726 and in Clem. Al., Strom. 1.24 (Stewart-Sykes, On the Lord's Prayer: 113, 43). He suggests that it is an Alexandrian addition to Matt. 6.33, which runs thus: “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things [food, drink, clothing]; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”
altogether in possession of what is truly good, then we shall not quibble over such a trifling matter as the shadow (17.1).\textsuperscript{43}

By using this analogy of objects and shadows, Origen was able to explain why the scriptural saints seemed to receive material benefits in answer to their prayers. The surface meaning of the Scripture was true in this regard. But the real object of the saints’ prayers and the real gifts they received were of a spiritual nature. “Thus the soul of Hannah, when changed from barrenness, bore more fruit than did her body when she conceived Samuel. . . . And Judith cut off the might of the ruler who sought to destroy her soul yet more than that of Holophernes” (16.3). Like the scriptural saints, “We should pray . . . for principle gifts, for those that are truly great and heavenly, and the matter of the shadows that accompany these principle gifts should be left to God, who knows what we need for our perishable body ‘before we ask him’ (Matt. 6.8)” (17.2).\textsuperscript{44}

6.2 Give Us this Day Our Supersubstantial Bread

Origen’s instruction to pray only for heavenly benefits was arguably the most prominent theme in \textit{On Prayer}. His exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, which comprised most of the rest of the treatise (18-30), was largely an effort to show that Jesus had not commanded prayers for earthly things. According to Origen, the prohibition of “babbling” in prayer (Matt. 6.7, in the prologue to the Lord’s Prayer) was a prohibition of requests for material things: “For, according to the saying of the Gospel, only the heathens babble, and in their requests they have no notion of what is great

\textsuperscript{43} As Stewart-Sykes observes, Plato’s allegories of the sun and the shadows in the cave are surely in the background (Stewart-Sykes, \textit{On the Lord’s Prayer}: 151).

\textsuperscript{44} The point of Matt. 6.8 was not to rule out prayers for necessities but to show that repetitious prayer was not necessary to make God aware of one’s needs. But Origen took this passage to mean that prayers for one’s needs were superfluous. By this principle, requests for spiritual needs would also be superfluous, since God would be aware of them as well.
or heavenly, but the only prayer which they offer concerns bodily and external matters. So whoever asks inferior things from the one who is in the heavens and who dwells above the heights of the heavens is to be likened to the babbling heathen” (21.1).

Origen was particularly concerned “to refute [the] false opinions” of those who “assume that we are being charged [in the Lord’s Prayer] to pray for corporeal bread.” Had Jesus forgotten his earlier command to pray only for the great and heavenly things? Obviously not (27.1). Origen discussed at some length what the Lord’s Prayer meant by calling the bread ἑπιούσιος, usually translated “daily” in modern Bibles. He observed that Greek literature, philosophy, and common speech did not use the word. The Evangelists, he said, coined it by joining οὐσία (indicating that the bread was “conjoined with the divine essence”) with ἐπί (indicating “the proximity of people to the essence and their participation in it”) (27.7-17). Thus, the bread for which Christians were to pray was not physical bread but “supersubstantial” bread. And, as John 6 made clear, this bread was the flesh of Jesus himself, who was the Word of God (27.1-4). To pray for supersubstantial bread was to pray for understanding of the Word of God, to be sustained by the divine doctrines and to perform the works of God (27.1-13).

Finally, Origen argued that Jesus’ direction to pray that God not “bring us into testing” did not seek the cessation of earthly trials and suffering. If it had, all the saints, who suffered so greatly, would have failed to obtain the object of their prayer in this regard. Rather, Jesus intended Christians to pray that they not succumb to testing when it occurred (29.1). God let people go through trials, not to punish them, but to train them. Thus, suffering did not indicate God’s displeasure. Similarly, material blessings did not indicate divine approval, but rather an attempt to teach. For example, God gave the Israelites who grumbled for meat in the desert so

45 Thus Stewart-Sykes translates ἑπιούσιος in On Prayer.
much meat that they would “come to hate what [they] desire, and so hurry back to good things, and to the heavenly nourishment so despised by those who long for wickedness” (29.13-14, cf. 29.15-16). Thus, the reception of physical benefits from God might indicate, not people’s holiness, but their spiritual poverty and need for elementary instruction.46

6.3 Some Inconsistency

Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria gave precedence to requests for spiritual goods, but they allowed some prayers for material things. In On Prayer, Origen broke new ground by claiming that the prayers of the saints never had been, and never should be, for earthly things. But Origen had difficulty in maintaining this position. Even in On Prayer, there may have been some inconsistency. He said that Christians did not need to ask God for necessities because God already knew about their needs and would provide for them. Furthermore, as just noted, Origen admitted that God might give material gifts to people to show them the futility of such things. Thus, God did give some earthly things to people, and with the specific purposes of sustaining them or instructing them. This was hard to reconcile with Origen’s claim that God did not know

46 The pages above have concentrated on what Origen believed Christians should not request. This note attempts to clarify his position by defining what he believed Christians should request – by defining, in other words, what he meant by “great and heavenly things.” In On Prayer, three themes emerged. Most importantly, one was to pray for salvation and for the forgiveness of sins, both for oneself and for others: 10.2-11.2, 13.3, 13.5, 16.3, 28. This theme often appeared in Origen’s other works: Num. 20.5 [198.21-25], Isa. 5.2. Second, one was to pray for a true spiritual understanding of the Scriptures. As seen above, this was a prayer for the supersubstantial bread, the Word of God: 11.1, 27.1-13. This theme, scanty in Or., was ubiquitous in Origen’s homilies, though not with specific reference to supersubstantial bread: Hom.Gen. 2.3 (30.4-7), 4.6 (56.17-19); Hom.Exod. 3.2 (164.23-25), 11.1 (424.13-16), 12.4 [266.20-23]; Hom.Lev. 1.1 (281.18-20), 5.5 (343.15-18), 5.8 (348.5-8), 6.1 (359.10-14); Hom.Num. 7.2 (40.27-29), 13.4 (112.8-11). Finally, Origen urged Christians to pray for the destruction and failure of evil spirits and evil people who tried to impede the salvation of individuals and to harm their souls: 12.1, 13.3, 16.3. This theme also appeared in Origen’s homilies, though, as the next section will show, he sometimes extended it to prayer for protection from earthly persecution (Hom.Judg. 7.2 [506.22-507.3]). For the references to Origen’s homilies in this note, I am indebted to Sheerin, "The Role of Prayer in Origen's Homilies," 204-06.
how to bestow anything petty, or that material blessings were mere shadows, so incidental to spiritual blessings that God could not properly be said to have given them.

If one moves beyond *On Prayer* to Origen’s other works, further inconsistencies emerge. The emphasis on spiritual things remains, but earthly concerns occasionally make an appearance. For example, in Caesarea, during the same period from which *On Prayer* dates, Origen delivered a homily on the book of Judges in which he encouraged his congregation to pray for protection from powerful people who were at that time threatening the church: “let us beseech the Lord, confessing our frailty to Him, that . . . He may not give us over into the power of those who say ‘When will the time come when we will be given power against the Christians?’” 47 Origen contrasted this prayer for deliverance from earthly domination with a prayer for deliverance from spiritual domination, if God allowed persecution to occur: “But if we are given over, and they receive power over us, let us pray that we may be able to endure, that our faith may be even brighter in persecutions and tribulations, that we may overcome their wantonness by our patience, and, as the Lord said, we may win our souls by our patience” (*Hom.Judg.* 7.2). 48 Thus, at least when addressing a broader audience, Origen allowed some requests for material shadows, however inferior they might be to true riches. It was not quite true that God did not know how to give petty things.

47 This seems to conflict with Origen’s statement in *Or.* that Christians should pray only for endurance under trials, not for deliverance from trials.

Plato warned people not to think of sacrifice and prayer as an act of barter with the gods. Porphyry repeatedly emphasized that human gifts could not buy the gods’ favor or compel their help. This theme did not appear in Origen’s work for the very good reason that positive reciprocity played little role in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as mentioned above. Little role, but not none – there were the stories of Saul, Jephthah and Hannah in the Hebrew Bible, stories in which people tried to obtain answers to prayer by offering God sacrifice or service in return. In commenting on these passages, one would expect Origen to have said (at least in passing) that it was impossible to bargain with God because God was not in need of what humans had to offer. But Origen never said this. Once, he criticized Jephthah for making a promise to God that resulted in the sacrifice of a human being. But Origen did not criticize Jephthah’s attempt to bargain with God (Fr.Judg. 12).

The most puzzling fact of all is that an extended discussion of these scriptural vows or if-then prayers appears in On Prayer, a theoretical work in which the philosophical problems inherent in bargaining with God would surely have been brought to the fore. The discussion in question is the lexical introduction, where Origen distinguished and defined the various words used for prayer in Scripture. The one and one-third lines that introduced this section are missing (2.6). When the text resumes, Origen is observing that the word “prayer” (εὐχή) appeared first when Jacob “vowed a vow” in Genesis 28.20-22: “If the Lord God is with me and keeps me safe on this road which now I am traveling, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear and brings be safely back to my father’s house, then the Lord will be my God, and this stone, which I have
set up as a pillar, shall be the house of God for me, and I shall make return of a tenth of all
that he should grant me” (3.1).

Origen said that Scripture “frequently” used the word εὐχή in this way, “to refer to
somebody who promises with a vow to do certain things should he obtain certain other things
from God” (3.2). Other examples included Leviticus 27.1-3, where Moses stipulated how much
money corresponded to “the price of [a person’s] life,” which people were in the habit of vowing
(εὐχή) “to pay to the Lord.” Origen went on to cite further directions for vows in Numbers 6.1-
21, 30.1-4. These passages from the Law did not indicate what people asked of God in return for
the vow, but Origen put them in the same category as Jacob’s bargain with God. He also noted
the warnings against hasty vows and against breaking one’s vow in Proverbs 20.25 and
Ecclesiastes 5.5. Finally, Origen mentioned Acts 21.23, which referred to four Christian Jews
who bound themselves with a vow (3.4).

But the classic examples were still to come. Hannah “vowed [εὐχεσθαι] a vow [εὐχή] and
said: ‘Lord of hosts, if indeed you will look upon your servant’s affliction and give the seed of a
man to your servant, I shall hand him over to the Lord as a gift for all the days of his life, and no
razor shall come upon his head’” (4.1; cf. 1 Kings 1.9-11). According to Origen, Jephthah did the
same thing when he “vowed [εὐχεσθαι] a vow [εὐχή] to the Lord and said: ‘If you deliver the
children of Ammon into my hand as a gift, then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to
meet me upon my return in peace from the children of Ammon shall be the Lord’s, and I will
offer it up as a whole burnt offering’” (4.2; cf. Judg. 11.30-31).
Origen then considered the related words προσευχή and προσεύχεσθαι. He said that Scripture sometimes used these words for vows as well. But, according to him, Scripture also used both sets of words – εὐχή (and its verb) and προσευχή (and its verb) – in the way that was “customarily used by ourselves” or was “usual” or “common” or “customary for us” or “among us” (3.2, 4; 4.1, 2). By “customary” prayer, Origen seems to have meant straight requests with nothing vowed to God in return. His scriptural examples of the customary usage of εὐχή were Moses’s requests that God remove each of the plagues from Egypt after Pharaoh’s acknowledgements of sin (3.2-3).

Thus, the point of Origen’s introductory lexical discussion was to note that Scripture used εὐχή and προσευχή sometimes to refer to vows and other times to refer to simple prayers of request. The latter usage, he said, was the one customary “for us.” This immediately preceded Origen’s discussion of objections to prayers of request. He said that he would answer these objections “as far as I am able, now using the term “prayer” in its more common and simple sense” (5.1). In other words, Origen wanted to make it clear that his defense of prayer would be a defense of simple petitionary prayer, not a defense of vows. In doing so, Origen distanced himself from vows. They were not customary “for us,” and he would not defend them.

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49 His only example was the story of Hannah, in which προσεύχεσθαι appeared in addition to εὐχή and εὐχεσθαι (4.1).

50 τάσσεται μέντοι καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς κατὰ συνήθειαν ἡμῶν λεγομένωι ὢν ονομασία (3.2); τὸ ὄνομα τῆς εὐχῆς μὴ κατὰ τὸ σύνηθες τετάχθαι (3.4); πρὸς τῷ κοινῷ καὶ συνήθει (4.1); ἐπὶ τῆς συνήθως ἡμῶν ὄνομαζομένης τέτακται εὐχῆς (4.2).

51 Origen did not give any examples of the customary usage of προσευχή in this section. Mid-way through the treatise, he mentioned various different scriptural instances of προσευχή (not necessarily reflecting its “customary” usage). He pointed to Azarias’ prayer in the midst of Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace (Dan. 3.25), Tobit’s prayer (Tob. 3.1-2), Hannah’s vow (1 Sam. 1.10-11), Habakkuk’s prayer of awe and praise (Hab. 3.1-2), and Jonah’s prayer for deliverance from the belly of the monster (Jon. 2.2-4) (Or. 14.4). Stewart-Sykes chooses to translate προσευχή as “intercession,” but this does not fit Origen’s usage, nor that of the Septuagint.
The curious fact is that Origen’s lexical discussion served to show that vows were common in the Hebrew Bible and even appeared in the New Testament. This would have been a strange strategy if Origen had thought vows attempted to interact with God in an inappropriate way. One would at least expect him to have addressed the troubling fact that they appeared in Scripture. An allegorical reading of these vows might have been expected to follow. Instead, Origen dropped the subject.

There are two possible explanations. First, Origen could have been indifferent to vows. But it is difficult to imagine Origen accepting even the possibility of bargaining with God by giving him sacrifice or dedicating a child. Origen’s God gave people what was good for them; he did not require return service. The second possibility is that vows were so commonly considered inappropriate by Christians that Origen felt no need to make the point. But one would still have expected him to explain why they appeared so often in the Scripture.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the views of the divine nature and of providence that led Apollonius of Tyana and Maximus of Tyre to reject positive reciprocity and prayers of request were also present in Origen’s Christian community in third-century Caesarea. A passing comment in Clement’s *Stromateis* suggests that these ideas made themselves felt in second-century Alexandria as well. Middle Platonism may not have been directly responsible for this perspective, but there was at least an intellectual atmosphere affecting both pagan and Christian thinkers.
Clement and Origen, however, rejected the idea. Origen did not agree that God’s foreknowledge, unchanging plan, and ἄτρεπτος nature made it impossible for him to answer prayers. But God did not answer these prayers by changing his plan on the fly. Rather, he foresaw human requests before the course of the world and took them into account in formulating his plan. By itself, this argument would not have convinced a philosopher such as Maximus. He would have said that there was one best plan for the cosmos and that taking into account human requests would necessarily have changed this plan for the worse. As far as was possible, the gods would give people what they deserved, but not what they asked for. But Origen believed that requests were themselves acts of virtue. As Platonists generally agreed, the divine often rewarded acts of virtue. So in Origen’s view, God’s answers to prayers were not deviations from justice but fulfillments of it.

Thus, Origen believed there to be no conflict between God’s nature and answers to prayer. In this area, there was no need to reinterpret traditional texts or practices to bring them into line with philosophical perspectives. Indeed, Origen criticized the supposedly heretical Christians who rejected prayers of request for reinterpreting the word εὐχή in Scripture such that it excluded requests. This reinterpretation may have been similar to that employed by Maximus.

Though Origen so valiantly defended prayers of request, he spent most of his treatise On Prayer limiting them. He emphasized that the greatest benefit from prayer was not obtaining answers to one’s requests but gaining spiritual maturity through contemplating the holy God and cultivating contentment with whatever he willed. This edged towards Maximus’ definition of prayer and tended to marginalize requests as the practice of the spiritually immature. Second,
Origen rejected (at least in principle) requests for earthly benefits or success. According to him, one could only ask for great and heavenly things.

Origen’s perspective was more extreme than that of Tertullian and Clement, who allowed limited requests for material blessings. He had to work hard to reconcile his position with the Scriptures, which contained many stories of saints who had asked God for worldly benefits and received them. Here, Origen employed an allegorical reading to solve the problem. No saints had ever asked for worldly things, and God could not properly be said to have given them. Thus, like the “heretical” opponents of prayers of request, Origen reinterpreted scriptural references to prayer to bring them into line with his position. Both were struggling with similar problems and using similar methods to achieve solutions, but they disagreed about where the lines should be drawn.

Among the pagan Platonists, Origen’s position was most comparable to that expressed by Porphyry half a century later. Both accepted prayers of request, but only for spiritual benefits. Both thought that the divine nature was incompatible with giving material things to humans. Both sought to reinterpret their religious traditions in order to bring them into line with their philosophical beliefs, but they did so in different ways. While Origen used allegory to solve the conflict, Porphyry said that the traditional Greco-Roman sacrifices and prayers that ensured the flow of material benefits were offered, not to the true gods, but to evil daemons. Only these wicked beings were willing to support human passions for worldly success. As the next chapter will show, Origen used the Devil, the prince of daemons, in a similar way to explain the troublesome propitiatory sacrifices of Jesus and the martyrs.
ORIGEN'S REINTERPRETATION OF PROPITIATION AND THE DEVIL’S RANSOM

Contents

1 A Philosophic God without Anger or Punishment 215
2 The Incompatibility of the Philosophic God with the Sin Offerings of Scripture 221
3 The Spiritualization of Sacrifice: An Insufficient Solution 222
   3.1 Propitiation Spiritualized as the Transformation of the Sinner 224
   3.2 Eating Sin or the Contagious Purity of the Victim 226
4 Ransoming Humanity from the Devil 231
5 Problems Raised by the Devil’s Ransom 236
   3.1 Ransom and the Forgiveness of Sins 236
   3.2 Jesus Offered Himself to the Father as a Ransom to the Devil 240
   3.3 Jesus did not Remain in the Power of the Devil: Conquest as well as Ransom 241
   3.4 Jesus Offered his Human Soul and Blood to the Devil, not his Divinity 242
Conclusion 243

This chapter will show that Origen, like the pagan Platonists, believed that God was not “angry” with sinners and that he did not vindictively punish them, but rather disciplined them to reform them; in some passages, Origen even argued that God never afflicted people in material
or bodily ways – that he was, as Porphyry would say, completely harmless and that the suffering sinners experienced was self-inflicted. As the first half of this dissertation showed, pagan Platonists found these philosophical beliefs about the divine nature inconsistent with propitiatory sacrifice, since it implied that the gods punished sinners with sicknesses and misfortunes and that they could be induced to relent, not because their discipline had succeeded in reforming a person, but because they had received a sacrificial bribe.

Origen, too, found these beliefs about the divine nature difficult to reconcile with propitiatory sacrifice: he struggled to understand why the Judeo-Christian God required the sin offerings that played such a significant role in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Many of the sin offerings in Scripture mysteriously expiated sin rather than crudely appeased the wrath of God, but they still implied that the stain of past sins had to be dealt with in some way before one could find forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This was problematic for Origen because his philosophical God did not keep account of past sins – to do so would have been vindictive. In his mind, God granted, almost automatically, forgiveness and favor to those who repented and lived a life of virtue: there was no need for sacrifice.

Thus, there was a conflict between Origen’s philosophical commitments and the sin offerings in the Scriptures he so greatly revered. Like the pagan Platonists, Origen used various

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1 In post-exilic Judaism, sin offerings became a more and more central element in cult practice. The New Testament followed this lead. The Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, assumed that sacrifice was essentially a way to deal with sin. On the growing importance of sin offerings in Judaism, see Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 40 and Robert J. Daly, *Christian Sacrifice: The Judaeo-Christian Background before Origen* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1978), 92-98. According to Daly, Second Temple Jewish religion ceased to differentiate much between the various types of sacrifice and tended to see them all as sacrifices of atonement for sin. This is supposed to have reflected the post-exilic desire never to be driven from the land again. Atonement became of paramount importance.

2 According to Frances Young, there are some clear references to propitiation in early Jewish tradition (2 Sam. 24.25), but the emphasis turned to expiatory offerings in which the priests or Yahweh made atonement (*lekhapper*) for the Temple or the altar or the sin: the object was not God’s wrath (*Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 42-3).
methods to reconcile his religious tradition with his beliefs about the divine nature. First, he said that the propitiatory animal sacrifices of Judaism had been symbols of the true propitiatory sacrifice, which was a contrite heart and the demonstration of a morally changed life. Origen inherited this perspective from diaspora Judaism, mediated by Philo, but he adapted it to fit his supersessionist Christian viewpoint. This spiritualization (perhaps moralization would be a better term) made sacrifice philosophically palatable because it avoided the idea that an angry God required sacrificial payment before he would relent; but there were problems with the solution. To begin with, in Origen’s scheme (unlike in that of Philo), the symbolic link between Jewish sacrifice and moral transformation was not sufficient to justify the existence of physical sacrifice. This was probably because, for Origen, Jewish sacrifice was primarily a symbol or an anticipation of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This would not have been a problem if Jesus’ sacrifice, too, could have been understood as a symbol of repentance and moral transformation, but Origen was able to understand it in this way only to a certain extent. It was hard to justify a human sacrifice as a symbol, but also, the New Testament described Jesus’ sacrificial death in decidedly non-symbolic terms – as a ransom or redemption that accomplished forgiveness. Thus, Origen’s Philonic spiritualization of sacrifice failed to justify or explain the necessity of physical sacrifices, either in the Hebrew Bible or in the case of Jesus.

This failure forced Origen to look for another way to explain physical sin offerings (especially that or Jesus) in a philosophically acceptable way. His only coherent solution, as Frances Young showed in 1979, was the “Devil’s ransom.” He said that Jesus had offered

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3 It can also be compared to Porphyry’s later claim that the highest sacrifice was contemplation and the life of virtue (noetic sacrifice).

4 The question of importance to this study is not what the New Testament authors meant by this language but how this language sounded to third and fourth-century Christians.
himself as a ransom to the Devil, not to God – he had bought humanity from the dominion of
the Enemy. In this way, Origen upheld the New Testament account of Jesus’ death but avoided
saying that God required a payment for sin. This use of the Devil to save God from involvement
in a philosophically problematic sacrifice was similar to Porphyry’s future use of evil daemons to
save the pagan gods from involvement in propitiatory offerings. The Devil’s ransom helped
Origen’s explain why Jesus’ sacrifice had been necessary, but it introduced a host of theological
problems, the implications of which are explored near the end of this chapter.

1 A Philosophic God without Anger or Punishment

The first half of this dissertation showed that Plato firmly believed in divine justice. The
gods blessed the righteous and inflicted the wicked with suffering. This punishment was not
vindictive or punitive – it was a benevolent disciplinary measure to reform sinners. Thus, the
gods might harm people’s bodies but only for the good of their souls. In addition, Plato pointed
out that the wicked often punished themselves through the consequences of their sin. Porphyry
developed Plato’s position to an extreme. He said that the gods never harmed anyone in any way.
To the extent that the wicked were punished, they punished themselves through their own folly.
The gods were only indirectly responsible for this.

These ideas also found expression in Origen’s work, written around fifty years before
Porphyry. Like Plato, the Alexandrian emphasized that divine punishments were not vindictive
or punitive. God caused the wicked to suffer only to do their souls good – to purge away their
sins and to reform them. Origen also joined a Platonic consensus in claiming that God never
experienced anger. As a πάθος, it was incompatible with the divine nature, but it also implied a vindictive, punitive approach rather than the disciplinary approach Origen thought worthy of God. Apart from their benevolent, disciplinary intent, Origen was unclear about the nature of these punishments. Some passages suggest that they were of a physical and earthly nature (Cels. 3.75 and 6.56). For example, in his commentary on John, Origen wrote that Christ chastised people to remove their sins “by scourges, and evil spirits, and very difficult diseases, and very painful sicknesses” (6.58.299). In On First Principles, however, he said that the physical punishments Scripture frequently described were metaphors for the punishments of the soul (2.10.6). In other words, God never afflicted people in material or physical ways – a statement that sounds very much like the theory of divine harmlessness that Porphyry and Iamblichus would hold. Like these later Neoplatonists, Origen also claimed (in some passages) that sin was self-punishing apart from any direct divine action.

Origen most often expressed these beliefs when defending the Hebrew Bible from those who said that it taught an angry and vengeful God. These people fell into three groups, which will be considered in turn. The first group was composed of pagan philosophers, represented by Celsus. He accused Christians of believing in a God who would “come down and bring fire like a

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5 Young, Use of Sacrificial Ideas: 167-70.


8 Origen did not explain what he meant by the punishment of the soul.

9 For examples in Origen’s work, see below.
torturer.” Origen responded by saying that the fire of God was not a sensible or material fire that tortured people with physical pain. The fire of “God consumes evil and the actions resulting from it, which are figuratively described as ‘wood, hay, and stubble’” in 1 Corinthians 3.12. This fire was the fire of smelting and cleansing (Mal. 3.2). God intended to “mold the rational nature which has been filled by the lead of evil and other impure substances which adulterate the soul’s golden or silver nature, so to speak. . . . He makes the evil which has permeated the whole soul to disappear” (Cels. 4.13.1-2).11

Later in the same book, Celsus’ accusation was that some passages in Scripture “speak of God as though He were subject to human passions, in which angry utterances are spoken against the impious and threats against people who have sinned.” According to Origen, Scripture spoke of God’s “anger” because it was a concept that human beings could understand. God was like a parent who used words that were appropriate to his children’s level of understanding (cf. Deut. 1.31). He “assumed, as it were, human characteristics for the advantage of men,” but this did not mean that human anger was part of God’s “real character” (Cels. 4.71). “The word would not, then, have attributed to God himself the emotion which he wants us to abandon altogether” (cf. Ps. 36.8; Col. 3.8). Christians might, like Scripture, “speak of God’s wrath,” but they did “not hold that it [was] an emotional reaction on His part.” Thus, Origen assured, “we do not attribute human passions to God” (4.72).12 God merely “assumed” anger and threatening looks, not to make people suffer for what they had done, but for the “benefit of the hearers,” just as parents

10 Ἐπεὶ δὲ χλευάζων ὁ Κέλσος φησὶν ἡμᾶς λέγειν τὸν θεὸν δίκην βασανιστὸν πῦρ φέροντα καταβαίνειν.


12 The question of whether God was angry, and, if so, what “anger” meant in the divine context was not limited to Origen. As the next chapter will show, it appeared in other Christian writings – most notably those of Lactantius.
“do what seems to [them] to be of advantage for the conversion and correction of the children” (4.71). The “so-called wrath of God and what is called His anger” was a tool he used with “corrective purpose” to turn sinners from their errors. God’s “threats” were like the “threats” of a physician, “when he says to patients ‘I will cut you and apply cauterizing irons if you do not obey my orders and regulate and conduct yourself in this way and that’” (4.72).

This analogy implied that God directly afflicted sinners, but in the preceding section Origen had described divine wrath as that which “each man brings on himself by his sins.” According to him, this was what Paul meant by saying that, through people’s hardness of heart, they were “treasuring up for [themselves] wrath in the day of wrath” (4.71; cf. Rom. 2.4-5). Henry Chadwick points out that this theme appeared elsewhere in Origen’s writings:13 in *On First Principles*,14 he explained, “every sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire” (2.10.4).15 In a homily on Ezekiel, Origen wrote, “God does not make punishments, but we ourselves prepare the things that we suffer” (3.7).16 Either way, the suffering sinners experienced was part of God’s plan. Origen’s main point was that this suffering was not vindictive or punitive – it was a benevolent effort to reform sinners, to purge away the imperfections that marred their true natures.

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15 unusquisque peccatorum flammam sibi ipse proprii ignis accendat.

Origen made a similar defense of Scripture against the attacks of Marcion and the Gnostics. Like Celsus, Marcion thought that passages in the Hebrew Bible referring to Yahweh’s anger, his vengeance upon sinners, and his imposition of evils on humanity were inconsistent with the nature of the true God (Princ. 4.2.1). He concluded that Yahweh was a lower god, separate from the supremely good and loving God revealed in Jesus. Thus, according to him, Christians who retained the Hebrew Bible believed in a vindictive god. Not if they interpreted the Bible properly, Origen countered. As in Against Celsus, he said that those capable of spiritual reading knew that scriptural references to God’s wrath and punishment were consistent with divine goodness. The Marcionites, Origen wrote, “believe as they do because they are ignorant how to interpret any passage except literally” (2.5.2).

Immediately after his response to Marcion in Book 4 of On First Principles, Origen turned to consider a third group, the simpler individuals (simpliciores) in the Church, who also read scriptural references to God’s wrath and punishment in a troublingly literal way. He wrote, “Moreover some of the simpler of those who appear to remain within the faith of the Church, while holding that there is none greater than the Creator God, in which they maintain a right and

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17 Origen’s defense against Gnostic and Marcionite arguments was almost identical: as Joseph Wilson Trigg observes, he often spoke of Marcion, Basilides and Valentinus in the same breath (Trigg, Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 46-47). But since Princ. 2.4.1 speaks of those who thought that the Creator God “should be believed to be merely just, and not good as well,” Origen particularly has Marcion in mind.

18 Note that, in this statement, Origen showed that he shared (or took on) some of the Marcionite dissatisfaction with the Hebrew Bible: even in his view, it required a special reading. Perhaps the biggest question the early followers of Jesus faced was how to interpret or explain the Hebrew Bible in keeping with their various beliefs. This became an especially complex question when philosophical commitments became part of their beliefs. One sees more and more why Adolf von Harnack placed chapters on Gnosticism and Marcion near the beginning of his Dogmengeschichte.

19 Sed haec ita sentiunt, quoniam nihil audire ultra litteram norunt. For Origen’s other arguments against the Marcionite attack in Princ., see 2.5.1-4.
sound opinion, yet believe such things about [God] as would not be believed even of the most unjust and savage of men” (4.2.1). The reason that these simple people hold “a false apprehension of all these matters is nothing else but this, that the holy Scripture is not understood by them in its spiritual sense, but according to the sound of the letter” (4.2.2).

Several times in his homilies, Origen tried to instruct the simpliciores in this area. In a homily on Jeremiah, Origen, said, “If you hear of the anger of God and his wrath, do not suppose that anger and wrath are passions of God.” In using these terms, God was simply putting on the “manners of man” or “pretending,” just as parents used simple, immature words when speaking to little children. Parents sometimes had to put on a “fearful expression with children” “for converting and bettering the infant.” Similarly, “God is also said to be angry and wrathful in order that you can convert and become better” (18.6.7). God was like a physician who inflicted pain only to heal and to help (20.3).  

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20 In other words, they were not Marcionites.


22 Cf. Comm.Rom. 7.18, where Origen again described God as a father who inflicted pain on his children only to discipline them and help them. In the same homily on Jer. (18.6.2-6), Origen dealt with references to God’s change of mind as well as to his anger. From a Platonic standpoint, these issues were connected; part of the problem with attributing a πάθος such as anger to God was that it implied instability and change. Origen pointed out that even human beings were dishonored when they changed their minds. How much less could God change his mind, especially since he knew the future? Scripture’s use of the word “change” was, like “anger,” an accommodation to human concepts and ways of speaking.

23 Comm.Rom. 4.11 may be an exception. In this passage, Origen described the wrath of God at length in order to impress upon his hearers the magnitude of what Christ’s blood had saved them from. According to Origen, God never kindled more than a tiny bit of his wrath – more would overturn the world.
The Incompatibility of the Philosophic God with the Sin Offerings of Scripture

The last few pages have shown that Origen’s response to three different groups of people (pagan philosophers, Marcionites, and the simpliciores) expressed a consistent perspective on God’s approach to sinners. God was not emotionally angry at the wicked, nor did he punish them for their past deeds. Like a physician, God inflicted them or allowed them to suffer the consequences of their sin in order to heal them and restore them. This perspective made it difficult for Origen to accept sacrifices intended to deal with sin or divine anger. As Frances Young observes, “If God’s anger is a means of discipline, reformative rather than retributive, then the concept of propitiation is ridiculous. There is no mercy in letting off a sinner unless punishment has had its effect. A loving father disciplining his children will cease as soon as the child repents and reforms.”

There is no payment (besides repentance) necessary to bring about the end of disciplinary measures.

To illustrate this, Young points to a key passage in Origen’s commentary on Romans 2.1.2-3. He wrote, “By common acknowledgement a good man ought not to be punished, nor should an evil one obtain good things.” So how could it be right, Origen wondered, for God to forego the punishment of evil people just because they repented or were baptized or suffered martyrdom? Did not their evil deeds still require punishment? This question implied that divine law was like civil law, in which criminals had to be punished however repentant they seemed and whatever cleansings they underwent. Origen’s answer suggests that, in fact, divine law was nothing like this:

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24 Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 168-69.

25 Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 169.

26 *Communis professio est bonum non debere puniri nec malum consequat bona.*
[I]t is certain that [a man] was evil at that time when he was doing evil things. However, suppose he, repenting of his past deeds, reforms his mind toward good things, behaves well, speaks well, thinks well, and turns his will toward the good. Is it not clear to you that he who does these things is a good man who deserves to receive good things? In like manner if someone should convert from good to evil, he shall no longer be judged as the good man he was and is no longer, but as the evil man that he is. You see, deeds pass away, whether good or evil. . . . Accordingly it shall be unjust to punish a good mind for evils committed or to reward an evil mind for good deeds.\(^{27}\)

In this passage (the tone of which reminds one of a Socratic dialogue), Origen defined “good” and “bad,” not based on one’s record of deeds, but on the present state of one’s mind. Those who repented were no longer bad. God could forgive, essentially, because there was nothing to forgive. Justice meant paying no attention to past actions. If this was true, past sins did not separate one from God, so why was it necessary to make a sacrifice for sin? The only thing God cared about was repentance and virtue in the present. Thus, Origen had a problem. He needed to find an explanation for sin offerings that did not compromise his philosophical commitments. The rest of this chapter demonstrates his efforts to do so.

3 The Spiritualization of Sacrifice: An Insufficient Solution

Like Origen, the Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo of Alexandria (c.25 BC-c.AD 50) had found scriptural references to the expiation of sin and to divine wrath and vengeance disturbing.\(^{28}\) Part of his solution was the claim that sin offerings symbolized repentance and a

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\(^{27}\) certum est quia malus erat tunc cum agebat mala ; is uero si praeteritorum paenitiens mentem suam corrigat ad bona et bene agat bene loquatur bene cogitet bene uelit, qui haec agit non tibi uidetur bonus et merito recipere bona? Similiter et si ex bono quis convurtatur ad malum non iam bonus quod fuit et non est sed malus iudicabitur quod est; actus enim siue boni siue mali praeterent . . . Erit ergo iniquuum uel bonam mentem pro malis gestis punire uel malam pro bonis actibus munera.

\(^{28}\) According to him, Scripture used these words and concepts as a concession to the hardness of human hearts. God’s purpose was always the benevolent correction of sinners. See Quod deus sit immutabilis (Deus) 59-69 and Quaestiones in Genesim (Q.G.) 2.54, cited in Jean Laporte, "Sacrifice in Origen in the Light of Philonic Models," in
change of life, which were, of course, supposed to accompany the sacrifice. This made the moral state of the human being (rather than the sacrifice) the active ingredient in regaining fellowship with God – a perspective that was philosophically acceptable. As Jean Laporte shows, Origen followed and developed Philo in this regard. For him, the bulls, sheep, goats and birds of ancient Jewish sacrifices were types of the spiritual sacrifices Christians were to offer in their souls – contrition, brokenness of spirit, repentance and genuine confession (*Hom.Lev*. 5.2). Of course, Philo imagined physical sacrifice as a symbol that accompanied repentance and the moral life, while Origen saw it as a symbol that was superseded by repentance and the moral life. In either case, the spiritualization of sacrifice was the attempt to explain the sin offerings described in Scripture in a philosophically palatable manner. This attempt was fairly successful for Philo, but it failed for Origen, primarily because of its inability to account for the sacrificial death of Jesus. The next two sections demonstrate this failure. They begin with Origen’s use of the verb “to propitiate” (ἵλασκεσθαι), which, as Frances Young observes, he did not employ in its “normal sense.”

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29 For a comparison of Philo and Origen’s spiritualizations of sacrifice, see, in addition to Laporte, Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 124-26.


31 For Philo, physical sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem was ideal but not necessary. Many could not manage the trip.

32 Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 170.
3.1 Propitiation Spiritualized as the Transformation of the Sinner

According to the vast majority of Origen’s work, the propitiatory victim that Jesus offered to the Father was not himself but the virtue of the people he had converted and purified. In other words, Origen spiritualized Jesus’ high priestly role and divorced it from his death and from the spilling of his blood. This allowed him to avoid the idea that there was a sacrificial gift that paid the debt for past sins. He agreed with Ephesians 2.14-16 that Jesus had “broken down the barrier of the dividing wall” that he “might reconcile them both in one body to God” (cf. Comm.Rom. 4.8), but, as Frances Young observes, “he did this by perfecting man, not by changing God (Comm.Rom. 8.4).”

Origen said that God could not justify the unjust. Therefore, he sent Jesus to deal with sin by converting human beings and so making God propitius towards them (Comm.Rom. 2.1, 2.8).

Origen expressed this in his exegesis of Leviticus 16: he said, “But if it ascends into your heart ‘to think the things that are of God,’ (cf. 1 Cor. 7.34) about mercy, about justice, about piety, about peace, these are from ‘the lot of the Lord,’ these are offered at the altar. The high priest [Jesus] receives these and in them reconciles you to God” (Hom.Lev. 9.6.1). In other words, Jesus did not propitiate God with his own merits but with the virtues of Christians who had been transformed by his ministry. This is confirmed in Against Celsus, where Origen wrote, “We bring [our prayers] to [Jesus] first, asking him who is a propitiation for our sins to act as a high priest and to bear our prayers and sacrifices and intercessions to the supreme God” (8.13).

Young, Use of Sacrificial Ideas: 172.

Jesus propitiated, not with his own blood or death, but with the “sacrifices” of Christians, which Origen defined as their own virtue and piety (8.64).

Christian priests could bring about propitiation in a similar way. In a homily on Leviticus, Origen said that “the priests of the Lord who preside in the churches” were to “make a propitiation for a transgression,” just as the Levitical priests killed a ram “for transgression” (5.4). He explained, “If you should take the sinner, and by admonishing, exhorting, teaching and instructing, lead him to repentance, turn him from his error, free him from vices, and make him such that God becomes gracious to him converted, you will be said ‘to have made a propitiation for transgression’” (5.4.4). Finally, individual Christians could also make propitiation. In Against Celsus, Origen wrote, “We ought, then, to propitiate the one supreme God and to pray that He may be gracious, propitiating Him by piety and every virtue” (8.64).

Thus, for Origen, propitiatory sacrifice was the conversion and virtue of the sinner, offered to God by Jesus the High Priest, by Christian priests, or by individual Christians. It is very important to note that this was, practically speaking, a spiritualization of sacrifice rather than an explanation of the function of physical sacrifice. There was no clear link, for example, between Jesus’ propitiatory conversion of sinners and his physical self-sacrifice on the cross. Similarly, Origen never explained how the animals in Jewish sacrifice played a role, even a symbolic role, in converting sinners. Thus, Origen’s understanding of propitiation did not help him explain why any literal victim had to be offered for sin. The next section shows another of his unsuccessful attempts to explain it.

35 repropitasse delictum.

36 Ἐνα οὖν τὸν ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεόν ἡμῖν ἔξευμενιστέον καὶ τοῦτον ἔλεω εὐκτέον, ἐξευμενιζόμενον εὔσεβεῖα καὶ πάση ἄρετη.
3.2 Eating Sin or the Contiguous Purity of the Victim

At least in his commentaries, Origen did not hide his struggle to find an explanation for physical sacrifice – by his own admission its function was mysterious. The best example appears in Book 6 of the commentary on John, where Origen tried to defend and explain the sacrifice of Jesus and of the martyrs. For him, Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter in Judges 11.29-39 was parallel to these (6.54.277). Origen observed, “Such accounts give an appearance of great cruelty to God to whom such sacrifices are offered for the salvation of men. We need a generous and perceptive spirit in order to refute the reproaches made against providence and, at the same time, to make a defense of all the sacrifices insofar as they are rather mysterious and beyond human nature. ‘For the judgments of God are great and hard to narrate; for this reason uneducated souls went astray’” (6.54.278, cf. Wis. of Sol. 17.1). In reference to Revelation 5.9, Origen wrote, “This lamb, indeed, which was slain in accordance with certain secret reasons, has become the expiation of the whole world” (6.53.274). On a similar note, Origen quoted Hosea 14.10: “But who is wise that he shall understand these things? Or intelligent, and he shall know them?” (6.276). This emphasis on the inscrutable nature of sacrifice and the repetition of the

37 Origen was not consistent in his treatment of this story. In one of the fragments that remain from his discussion of Judges, Origen wrote, “And Jephthah vowed a vow to the Lord. If the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, how did he vow what was not proper? For it was possible also that a dog greet the returning Jephthah. So was the Spirit foiled? Never! The Spirit was present to help, not to suggest the monstrous [ἀτοπον] vow [ὑποχνέομαι]. It was he himself who was foiled when he made a thoughtless promise [ὑπισχνεομαι]” (12.949.4-10). The translation is my own. For critical edition of Fr.Judg., see PG 12.col.949.

38 Ἔμφασις μὲν οὖν πολλῆς ὁμότητος διὰ τούτων παρεισ<φέρεται θεό>, ὃ τοιαύτα ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας ἀνθρώπων ἐπιτελοῦνται θύσια. Μεγαλοφυεστέρος δὲ νοῦ καὶ βλέποντος <πρὸς τὸ> τὰ λεγόμενα κατὰ τῆς προνοίας λόγων χρήζομεν, ἵνα περὶ πάντων ὡς ἀπορρητοτέρων ὄντων καὶ ὑπὲρ ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ἀπολογούμεθα· «Μεγάλαι γάρ αἱ κρίσεις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ δυσδιήγητοι· διὰ τούτο ἄπαιδευτοι ψυχαὶ ἐπλανηθήσαν.»

39 “Expiation” translates καθάρσιον; “in accordance with certain secret reasons” translates κατὰ τινὰς ἀπορρήτως λόγους.
words “secret” and “mysterious” indicate that Origen struggled to find an explanation for sacrifice that was consistent with his philosophical view of the divine nature. He set out to “understand the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in a manner worthy of the goodness of the God of the universe” (*Comm.Io. 6.57.296*), but it was clearly a difficult task.

The following pages demonstrate two of his unsuccessful attempts to do so. For those who want to know how Origen believed sacrifice dealt with sin, *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.3 appears promising, but it ultimately disappoints. In this passage, Origen considered the sacrifices for sin prescribed in Leviticus 6.18. He immediately turned to an allegorical reading in which the worshippers were penitents who offered a “broken spirit” (Ps. 50.19) as a sacrifice for sin. Leviticus directed that this sacrifice be offered “in the sight of the Lord,” which, according to Origen, meant that proper penitents did not flee from God’s presence like Cain (Gen. 4) but stood before him even though they were aware of their sins (5.3.1). Then Origen proceeded to a new level of interpretation – the “more daring assertion” that the sacrifice for sin was Jesus, the priest “Who offered himself to God” (cf. Heb. 9.14). But how did either of these sacrifices take away sin? In answer, Origen noted Leviticus’ statement that the priests were to eat “it” – referring, Origen claimed – to sin itself (cf. Hosea 4.8). According to him, as the ancient “priest ought to eat the sin of the one who is offering,” so the priest Jesus consumed the “sins of the people” (5.3.2).

Origen linked Jesus’ eating of sin to his role as a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4.24) that burnt up the “straw” and “hay” of unworthy Christians (1 Cor. 3.12). He quoted Isaiah 1.25: “I will purge you with fire for purity.” This was the purgatorial fire of God’s wrath that threatened to consume the earth and its people (Deut. 32.22); and this was the fire that Jesus came to kindle

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"ἀξίως τῆς ἀγαθότητος τοῦ τῶν ὅλων θεοῦ."
(Luke 12.49) (5.3.2). So far, Origen had not explained what it practically meant to burn sin, but he moved on to a discussion of Christian priests that clarified this question. Like Jesus, these priests were to “receive ‘the sins of the people’” and, “[i]mitating their teacher, let them grant the people forgiveness of sins” (5.3.3). Origen wrote, “let the priest of the Church consume ‘the sins of the people’ so that when he kills the sacrifice of God’s Word and offers sacrifices ‘of holy doctrine’ (cf. 1 Tim. 1.10) he may cleanse the consciences of the hearers from sins” (5.3.5).

Thus, Christian priests ate sin when they cleansed people’s consciences through the preaching of Scripture and true doctrine. Presumably, Jesus had eaten sin a similar way, that is, through his ministry of teaching and conversion. Notice that there was no function for a sacrificial victim. By defining that which the ancient priests ate as sin rather than as victim, Origen dropped the physical offering to God out of the discussion. Only the priests remained, and they did not need a sacrifice in order to eat sin. Origen’s attempt to explain propitiatory offerings had failed again, resolving into a spiritualization of sacrifice that was not linked, even symbolically, to the act of offering up a victim.

A similarly unsuccessful attempt to account for the necessity of physical sin offerings appears in the preceding homily. Regarding Leviticus 6, Origen observed, “the priests are given the manner of sacrifice and observance by which God appears to be worshipped and the people to be purified” (Hom. Lev. 4.7.2). The text said that this purification or “sanctification” was communicated to those who touched the sin offerings (4.7.1). According to Origen, this could not be read literally: it would be “impossible and irrational” to imagine that anyone, even the worst of sinners, who happened to wander into the Temple and to touch the meat of the victim

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41 In the next sentence, Origen explained what it meant for the priest to eat the “flesh of the sacrifice ‘in the court of the Tent of Witness’” (Lev. 6.19). The focus was on the tent, but it is interesting that, here, it was the sacrifice itself (not the sin) that the priest ate.
would have been sanctified. The passage could only be defended when the veil of the Law was removed and the fulfillment of these types and figures was recognized to be Christ, “the one perfect sacrifice” (4.7.3-4.8.1).

Origen wrote, “If anyone should ‘touch’ the flesh of this sacrifice [Christ], immediately, ‘he is sanctified.’ If he is unclean, if he is in ‘affliction,’ he is healed. So, finally, she ‘who was suffering from a flow of blood,’ whom I mentioned a little earlier, understood that Christ was this flesh of the sacrifice, flesh ‘of the most holy.’” The efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice extended beyond Judaism. All “‘of the Gentiles’ (Acts 15.19) who believed touched this flesh.” Origen quoted Titus 3.4-5: “when the kindness and humanity of God our Savior illumined us, he saved us through the bath of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.” Again, in the words of 1 Corinthians 6.11, “you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God.” Origen finished the section, “For if, as we said, anyone touches the flesh of Jesus in the way we explained above, with complete faith, and comes to Jesus just as to the Word made flesh, with all obedience, he has touched the flesh of the sacrifice and is sanctified” (4.8.2).

In this discussion, Origen did not indicate that the efficacy of Christ’s flesh for cleansing arose from his self-sacrifice on the cross. This impression is confirmed in the next section: Origen wrote, “this one also touches the flesh of the Word about whom the Apostle says, ‘Solid food is for the perfect . . .’” (Heb. 5.14). He who examines “the inner realities [of Scripture] and

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42 According to Origen, Leviticus 6.11 was talking about this, not about the cleansing power of ancient Jewish sacrifices. Through this interpretive move, Origen was “able to preserve the [plausibility of the] words of Moses” (4.8.1).

43 One might counter by pointing to the reference to “the bath of regeneration,” since Romans 6.3 associated baptism with Jesus’ death.
can explain the secret mysteries also touches the Word of God.” Such people “discern by a
spiritual interpretation the individual things which were written in the Law” (4.8.3). Thus,
touching Christ’s flesh meant approaching Scripture with faith and obedience and perceiving its
spiritual sense – these people were sanctified.

In this exegesis of Leviticus 6, Origen focused on the idea that the holiness of the victim
would be communicated to those who touched it (v. 18). He passed over in silence verses 6-7,
which explained that the sinner should bring “a guilt offering, and the priest shall make
atonement for him before the Lord, and he will be forgiven for any one of the things which he
may have done to incur guilt.” In other words, Origen avoided the idea that the sacrifice was
efficacious as an “offering to the Lord” (v. 6, emphasis added). This allowed him, when he
turned to Jesus’ purifying sacrifice, to ignore the possibility that Jesus’ role as an offering to God
had been the active ingredient. For Origen, the important elements were the sanctifying truth of
Christ (the Word of God), and the belief, faith, and obedience of those who approached him. Any
concept of Jesus himself as a literal sacrifice could be dropped out of this equation and nothing
would be lost. Once again, Origen had failed to explain why physical sacrifices (especially that
of Jesus) had been necessary to deal with sin.

One of the reasons for this was that Origen’s various attempts at explanations, discussed
in the pages above, show a surprising hesitation to allegorize or explain symbolically the image
of sacrifice as an offering or gift. He built spiritual interpretations from other images – that of the
priest eating the offering and of the infectious purity of the offering – but he made nothing of the
role of the sacrifice as something offered up or burnt up or given away. Thus, this aspect of
sacrifice was left unexplained, even symbolically, both in the case of Jesus’ sacrifice and in the
case of ancient Jewish sacrifices. But one senses that, even if Origen had demonstrated that
sin sacrifice as offering symbolized repentance and moral conversion, this explanation would
have seemed insufficient to justify the human sacrifice of the Son of God. A better justification
would have been to show that Jesus’ self-sacrifice was an act (not a symbol) of converting the
nations, making it the fulfillment of earlier merely symbolic sacrifices. But, had Origen
employed this solution, it, too, would have been unsatisfying: the disturbing, transactional
language that the New Testament used to describe Jesus’ sacrificial death was not conducive to
explaining it as an act of converting the nations (a point that begins the next section). Thus,
Origen’s Philonic spiritualization of sacrifice failed in the Christian context – it could not explain
Jesus’ sacrificial death. Origen needed a further solution – one that upheld the importance of the
physical death on the cross while avoiding the problematic belief that it had appeased an angry
God. His solution was the Devil’s ransom, discussed in the next section.

4 Ransoming Humanity from the Devil

Avoiding the problematic belief just mentioned (that the cross appeased an angry God)
was particularly difficult because some passages in the New Testament referred to Jesus’
sacrificial death using transactional terms. “You were bought with a price [τιμής],” Paul told the
Corinthians (1 Cor. 6.20, 7.23). According to the Gospels, Jesus came “to give His life a ransom
[λύτρον] for many” (Matt. 20.28, Mark 10.45). The epistles claimed that this redemption

44 One might make a case that Origen did see it in this way: at the cross, he believed that Jesus’ human soul had
demonstrated supreme obedience to his divine nature, fusing the two and bridging the gap between material images
and spiritual realities. It taught people to “read” the world. It was a portal through which those who were ready
could begin their ascent to God. In this sense, Jesus’ death had converting power, but I suggest that these ideas did
not become a structural part of Origen’s thinking about Jesus’ act of sacrifice, which make them of marginal
relevance to the present discussion.
(ἀπολύτρωσις) came through Christ’s blood and was “the forgiveness of sins” (Eph. 1.7, Col. 1.14). Since only God could forgive sins, the natural conclusion was that Jesus had paid a ransom price to the Father in return for the forgiveness of the human race. In a similar vein, the author of Colossians wrote, “He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions having canceled [ἐξαλείψας] out the certificate of debt [χειρόγραφον] consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (2.13-14).

These passages presented a grave challenge to Origen’s theological vision. He did not believe that God kept certificates of debt. In his mind, no ransom price had to be paid for sin to gain forgiveness. Nevertheless, he could not deny the clear witness of Scripture. Origen’s solution was to admit that Jesus’ death had been a ransom or payment but to deny that it had been offered to God. Jesus’ blood had bought humanity from the power of the Devil. This idea already existed in the Christian tradition but Origen made it a keystone of his soteriology. The Devil’s ransom explained the transactional language of the New Testament, while avoiding the necessity of saying that God had required sacrifice as a payment for sin.

Origen’s extant works contain at least eleven recognizable articulations of the Devil’s ransom. One of these appears in Against Celsus. The rest are found in the commentaries. None appear in On First Principles or in the homilies. Two of the most striking passages appear in

45 See Chapter 7.

46 I am indebted to Frances Young for the insight that Origen used the Devil’s ransom to reconcile his Platonic views of the divine nature with New Testament descriptions of Jesus’ sacrificial death (Young, Use of Sacrificial Ideas: 167-90).

47 Perhaps the audience of the homilies saw no problem with Jesus having offered himself to the Father as a payment for sin. In this case, Origen might have been silent about the Devil’s ransom because he knew that his audience would not accept it.
the commentaries on Matthew and Romans. In the former, Origen devoted a few pages to Jesus’ statement that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20.28). Origen wrote, “To whom was his soul given as a ransom for many? For it certainly was not to God. Then might it not have been to the Evil One? For he was dominating us until Jesus’ soul should be given as a ransom for us” (16.8.300-305). The theory had great plausibility, for, as Origen pointed out, ransoms were typically given to enemies, and the Devil was the enemy who (the New Testament made clear) had power over sinners.

In his commentary on Romans 2.13, preserved only in Rufinus’ Latin translation, Origen attempted to explain the distinction that Romans 2 made between the circumcision of the heart and that of the body. In order to do so, he reminded his readers of their redemption through Christ’s blood. He quoted I Peter 1:18-19: “we have been redeemed, not by the corruptible price of gold and silver but by the precious blood of the Only Begotten.” Origen went on,

Therefore, if we were bought at a price [I Cor. 6:20], as Paul also agrees, doubtless we were bought from someone whose slaves we were, who also demanded the price that he wanted for releasing from his power those he was holding. Moreover, the Devil, to whom

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49 ὁ γιος του ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονήσας καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν ἀυτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν.

50 τίνι δὲ ἐδώκε τὴν ψυχὴν ἀυτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν; οὗ γὰρ δὴ τῷ θεῷ, μήτι οὖν τῷ πονηρῷ; οὗτος γὰρ ἐκράτει ἡμᾶς, ἐως δοθῆ τὸ υπὲρ ἡμῶν αὐτὸ λύτρον ἢ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ψυχῆ.

51 For two examples among many, τῶν ἁρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (1 Cor. 2:6-8) and ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου (John 12:31).


53 Quia redempti [Gk ἐλυτρώθημεν] sumus non corruptibili pretio argenti et auri sed pretioso sanguine unigeniti.
we had been sold for our sins, was holding us. Therefore, he demanded as our price the blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{54}

Origen then returned to the topic of circumcision. According to him, when the Israelites shed their own blood in circumcision, they did so in imitation (\textit{imitatio}) of their future redemption.\textsuperscript{55} This was the circumcision of the body. But now that the price of Christ’s blood had been paid on the behalf of Christians, they no longer needed to offer the blood of circumcision.\textsuperscript{56} Thus Origen implied that the Christian circumcision of the heart to which Paul referred in Romans 2 was Jesus’ ransom to the Devil, or, perhaps, the Christian acceptance of that ransom on their behalf.

The fact that Origen’s discussion of circumcision led him to a lengthy description of the Devil’s ransom is puzzling. The context shows that Origen was in the process of answering Marcionite critiques of circumcision as a barbarous rite of the lower creator god. Origen began his response by indicating that scriptural references to circumcision could be read allegorically, but he noted that Marcionites rejected allegory. He seemed to concede to this rejection for the sake of argument: circumcision literally happened in ancient Israel and it was in keeping with God’s intent. Origen justified the rite, in spite of its apparent barbarism, through the claim that it was an imitation of Christ, who ransomed humanity from the Devil. Thus, the Devil’s ransom allowed Origen to avoid the accusation that God desired the blood of circumcision, just as it allowed him to avoid the idea that God wanted the blood of his own Son as a ransom.

Gustaf Aulén’s ground breaking work in 1930 suggested that early Christian thinkers made a division between “sacrifice,” which Christ offered to the Father, and “ransom,” which he

\textsuperscript{54} Si ergo pretio empti sumus, ut etiam Paulus astipulatur ab aliquo sine dubio empti sumus cuius eramus servi, qui et pretium posposcit quod voluit ut de potestate dimitteret quos tenebat. Tenebat autem nos diabolus cui distracti fueramus peccatis nostris. Posposcit ergo pretium nostrum sanguinem Christi.

\textsuperscript{55} velut ad imitationem quandam futurae redemptionis.

\textsuperscript{56} sanguinem circumcisionis offerre.
offered to the Devil. But Frances Young argues that this clean division is not apparent in most texts. Origen, for example, described Christ’s ransoming work as a sacrifice comparable to Greek aversion sacrifices. In Against Celsus he wrote,

[He who was crucified quite recently accepted his death willingly for the human race, like those who have died for their country to check epidemics of plague, or famines, or stormy seas. For it is probable that in the nature of things there are certain mysterious causes which are hard for the multitude to understand, which are responsible for the fact that one righteous man dying voluntarily for the community may avert the activities of evil daemons by expiation, since it is they who bring about plagues, or famines, or stormy seas, or anything similar (1.31).]

Origen’s commentary on Romans 4.11 repeats this explanation but, as Young points out, with more sacrificial overtones.

Now the question of how Christ died for us and in what way he, since he is the Lamb of God, would take away the sin of the world . . . has been frequently discussed by us in other passages. There we have cited instances reported in secular histories, that even among the heathen several individuals are regarded to have averted plagues, storms, and similar things by devoting themselves to death, or to have delivered their own homeland or nation from the destruction of a threatening scourge. To what extent these recorded events are actually true, or what significance they may have if they are true, God alone knows. However, none of those concerning whom these stories are told, not even in fiction, is presented as having absolved the sins of the whole world—except Jesus alone, who . . . offered himself as a sacrifice for the whole world by handing over his own blood to the ruler of this world (4.11.4).


58 Young, Use of Sacrificial Ideas: 181-83.

59 ὁ χθὲς καὶ πρόην σταυρωθέν τοῦδε ὑπὲρ τῶν θάνατον ὑπὲρ τὸν γένους τῶν ἰδρυσάων ἀνεδέξατο, ἀνάλογον τοῖς ἀποθανόντων ὑπὲρ τῶν πατρίδων ἐν τῷ σβήσαι λοιμικά κρατήσαντα καταστήματα ἢ ἀφορίας ἢ δυσπλοίας; Εἰκός γὰρ εἶναι ἐν τῇ φύσει τῶν πραγμάτων κατὰ τινας ἀπορρήτους καὶ διαλήπτους τοῖς πολλοῖς λόγοις φύσιν τοιαύτην, ὡς ἢν δικαίων ὑπὲρ τοῦ κοινοῦ ἀποθανόντα ἐκοιμηθεῖς ἀποτροπισμοὺς ἐμποιεῖν φαύλων δαιμονίων, ἐνεργοῦντων λοιμοῖς ἢ ἀφορίας ἢ δυσπλοίας ἢ τί τῶν παραιτησίων.

60 Cf. Comm.Io. 6.55ff; 28.19; Cels. 1.31 (just quoted).

61 This section survives only in Rufinus’ Latin translation: Quomodo autem Christus pro nobis mortuus sit et quomodo cum sit agnus Dei tulerit peccatum mundi et infirmitates nostras portauerit et pro nobis doluerit, saepe a nobis in aliis dicta sunt locis; ubi adhibuimus et ea quae in saecularibus historiis referuntur quod etiam apud ipsos nonnulli pestilentias uel turbines aliquaue his similia perhibentur morti se uouendo reppulisse, et patriam uel gentem
These passages are particularly helpful because they show Origen attempting to understand the mechanics of ransoming. It paid off evil daemons and so stopped disasters. It also seems to have absolved sins, but how it did so or what absolving sins meant was not clear. Thus, although the Devil’s ransom solved Origen’s main problem by explaining the necessity of Jesus’ physical sacrificial death in a philosophically viable manner, it did not account for all the ways in which Scripture described that death. It also introduced a host of theological problems that stressed the ingenuity of Origen and the Christian thinkers who followed him. The next section examines these problems, including the relationship of the ransom to the forgiveness of sins, and shows how Origen attempted to solve them.

5 Problems Raised by the Devil’s Ransom

5.1 Ransom and the Forgiveness of Sins

The Devil’s ransom did not explain how Jesus’ death had accomplished the forgiveness of sins, a claim made by several New Testament passages. Origen faced this problem in his commentary on Ephesians⁶² (4.11-15), where he considered Paul’s statement that, in Christ, Christians had redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1.7). Origen observed that redemption or ransoming pertained to captives who were under their enemies, which was the situation in which people found themselves: they had come under the power of their enemies, who were the ruler of this age (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-8 and John 12:31) and the evil powers under him.

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⁶² Translations from the Commentarii in epistolam ad Ephesios (Comm.Eph.) are my own. For critical edition, see J. A. F. Gregg, "Documents: The commentary of Origen upon the epistle to the Ephesians," JThS 3(1902).
Thus, people needed ransoming and someone to buy them back, in order that, once they were freed from the Devil, Christ might receive them back. This is why the Savior gave his own blood as a ransom for them.\(^{63}\)

Having thus expressed his Devil’s ransom theory, Origen implicitly acknowledged that the passage in question (Eph. 1.7) presented a challenge to his position. Paul treated the redemption (\(\text{ἀπολύτρωσις}\)) through Christ’s blood as synonymous with the forgiveness of sins (\(\text{ἡ ἄφεσις τῶν παραπτομάτων}\)). This was awkward for Origen because it was not easy to explain how a ransom could forgive sins. He solved the problem by saying that the ransom was a prerequisite for free, moral action. Only after it had occurred did forgiveness make sense: “So first we must be ransomed and be no longer under the power of the one who had captured us and was controlling us, in order that, set free and coming out from his hands (so to speak), we may be able to receive to our advantage the forgiveness of transgressions and, healed from the wounds of sin, be able to effectively act in accordance with piety and the other virtues.”\(^{64}\) In this way, Origen explained why Scripture often associated redemption with the forgiveness of sins, but, at the same time, he avoided the idea that Jesus’ death accomplished forgiveness.

This method of making the forgiveness of sin dependent upon, but not synonymous with, the ransom should be distinguished from a second strategy that can be discerned in Origen’s

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\(^{63}\) ἀπολύτρωσις <ἡ> λύτρωσις γίνεται τῶν αἵματων καὶ γενομένων ὑπὸ τοῖς πολεμίοις· γεγόνα μὲν ὑπὸ τοῖς πολεμίοις τὸ ἁρχοντι τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτο καὶ ταῖς ὑπὸ αὐτὸν πονηραῖς δυνάμεις, καὶ διὰ τούτῳ εὐδείημεν ἀπολυτρόσεως καὶ τοῦ ἐξαγοράζοντος ἡμᾶς Ἰησοῦς· ἡ ἄφεσις τῶν παραπτωμάτων. Ὁ Ἰησοῦς δὲ αὐτὸν ἀπολύτρωσεν καὶ ἀπολάβης· ἔδωκεν ὁ Σωτῆρ τὸ ἄρχοντι τοῦ αἰῶνος τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἱππέῃ ἦμοι καὶ ἔξω ἐξομμένων τοῖς ἱππέοις τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτος, καὶ κατεργάσθη ἐν σωτηρίᾳ ἠθικῶς καὶ αὐτοῦ ἀμαρτιῶς ἐνεργήσατε κατ’ ἐυσεβείαν καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς ἀρετὰς.

\(^{64}\) πρῶτον οὖν ἀπολυτρωθῆναι ἡμᾶς δεῖ καὶ μηκέτι εἶναι ὑπὸ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν πολεμίων καὶ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἡμῶν ἐξελευθερώθηναι καὶ ἐξελευθερωθῆναι καὶ ἐξομμένων τῶν ἱππέων, ἐπὶ ὑφελείᾳ δυνηθόμενοι λαβεῖν τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων καὶ θεραπευθῆναι ἀπὸ τῶν τραυμάτων τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἐνεργήσατε κατ’ ἐυσεβείαν καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς ἀρετὰς.
writings – the habit of re-reading Scripture such that Christ’s ransom did not deal with sin itself but with the bondage to evil powers that sin brought about. The most striking examples of this are Origen’s treatments of Colossians 2.14-15. The author of this letter had written,

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, [Christ] made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Like Ephesians 4, this passage associated redemption with the forgiveness of sins, the canceling of the debt. Origen either altered the text to remove this problem or the version of Colossians to which he had access had already suffered the alteration. In Origen’s reading, it was not the “certificate of debt” that Jesus nailed to the cross, but the powers of evil: “he fastened the principalities and opposing powers upon his cross and he triumphed over them” (Hom. Lev. 9.5.2).  

At first, one cannot help thinking of the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter and the Gospel of Judas (55-6), in which the “intellectual Spirit” or the “incorporeal body” of the “living Jesus” was “glad and laughing” “on the tree,” watching while another was crucified. In this Gnostic vision, the one crucified was Jesus’ “fleshly part,” “the man that clothes me,” “the body” that was his “substitute.” This body was, in some sense, associated with evil: it was “the first-born, and the home of demons.” Origen’s concept was quite different. The evil powers and authorities that he said Jesus nailed to the cross were clearly spiritual beings, not bodily substitutes. Here are the relevant passages from the Gnostic texts: “The Savior said to me, ‘He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness’” (James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard, “The Apocalypse of Peter,” in The Nag Hammadi Library in English, ed. Richard Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1996)). “Jesus said, ‘Truly I say [to you], this baptism […] my name [--about nine lines missing--] to me. Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas […] God [--three lines missing--] everything that is evil. ‘But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me’” (Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, The Gospel of Judas (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006)).
On the Passover \textsuperscript{66} (142-144) reflects a similar perspective and contains the same reading of Colossians 2. Origen quoted extensively from Exodus 2, in which God assured Moses that he had seen the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt and that he would free them from the hand of the Egyptians and bring them to the land that he swore to give to their fathers. Origen connected this ancient redemption from Egypt with the redemption of Christ.

Which [God] also did ‘in the fullness of the ages,’ when he came ‘for the setting aside of sin through his flesh (Heb. 9.26),\textsuperscript{67} having put to death the enmity. When he had come, he preached to us who are far and who are near (Eph. 2:16-17),\textsuperscript{68} having ransomed ‘us from the power of darkness and transferred us (Col. 1:13)\textsuperscript{69} into his light. For assuredly, he transferred us from Egypt and from its powers, which he ‘nailed to the cross,’ ‘making a public example of them and triumphing over them in it’” (144.3-4).

Once again, Christ nailed the evil powers to the cross instead of the record of debt.\textsuperscript{70} Sin and enmity dropped out of the equation.\textsuperscript{71}


\textsuperscript{67} “Setting aside” translates ἀθέτησις. Origen used σάρξ where Heb. used θυσία.

\textsuperscript{68} With the omission of a few words around the period, this section in single quotes appeared in Eph. 2.16-17. In Eph., Christ’s purpose was to reconcile (ἀποκαταλλάσσω) both Jews and Greeks in one body to God through his cross, putting to death enmity (ἡ ἐχθρα). This ἐχθρα seems to have referred to the alienation of Jews and Greeks from God and from each other. But in the context of Origen’s discussion of the Exodus, it referred to “Hatred” as a personified enemy, parallel to the Egyptians.

\textsuperscript{69} Origen used λυτρόω where Col. used ἐρώματι.

\textsuperscript{70} In the section that followed, Origen discussed Jesus’ sacrifice. He referenced Ps. 40.6-8, which was applied to Christ in Heb. 10:5-7: “You did not desire sacrifice [θυσία] and offering [προσφορά], but you prepared a body for me, since you were not pleased with burnt offering or with those concerning sin.” The point in Heb. 10 was that the insufficient blood sacrifices of the old covenant were superseded by the single efficacious sacrifice of Christ. Origen wrote, “Through his offering [προσφορά], the erring world is cleansed [καθαρίζεται] as he comes for its conversion [σις ἐπιστροφήν],” and he makes peace for all things in the blood of his cross, since enmity [τῆς ἐχθρας] has been put to death, everything that is wrath for the destruction of unbelievers [ὁτις ὑστεν ὅργῃ εἰς ὀλίθρους τῶν ἀπειθοῦντων].” At first glance, this looks like propitiation, but note that Christ cleansed the world through converting it. The enmity that Christ put to death through his cross may once again have been the power of evil that kept people in bondage to repeated sin. There was no clear statement that Christ paid a price to God.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Hom.Jer.} 14.11.7-22 showed a similar pattern. Scriptural references to sin dropped out of the discussion and were replaced by references to oppression (θλίψις) under the Devil.
3.2 Jesus Offered Himself to the Father as a Ransom to the Devil

Origen also had to explain why some passages in Scripture said or implied that Jesus’ sacrificial death had been directed towards God. How could this be reconciled with the idea that Jesus was a ransom to the Devil? The fourteenth homily on Jeremiah suggested a solution to the problem. Origen read the Septuagint’s ambiguous version of Jeremiah 15 as a type of the Devil’s ransom. The prophet said that, when the people were suffering “evils” and “oppression” under the power of an enemy, he saved them by presenting an offering (παριστάναι) to God intended “for good towards the enemy.” And “Who,” Origen asked, “is the enemy except our adversary the Devil [1 Pet. 5:8], who oppressed us? . . . And clearly it was in the time of his enmity against humanity that our Savior offered to the Father and was required with regard to our captivity, in order that we might be ransomed and rescued from the Enemy” (14.11.7-22). Origen’s solution was that Jesus offered himself to the Father as a potential ransom that could be given to the Devil. The Father required Jesus, not to satisfy his own demands, but to redeem sinners from the enemy. Thus, there was a sense in which Jesus was both an offering to God and a ransom to the Devil. This perspective sheds light on Gregory of Nazianzus’ supposed rejection of the Devil’s ransom, discussed in Chapter 7. To say that Jesus offered himself to the Father did not rule out a ransom to the Devil.

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72 γένοιτο, δέσποτα, κατευθυνόντων αὐτῶν, εἰ μὴ παρέστησιν σοι ἐν καιρῷ τῶν κακῶν αὐτῶν καὶ ἐν καιρῷ θλίψεως αὐτῶν εἰς ἀγαθὰ πρὸς τὸν ἐχθρὸν.

73 καὶ σαφῶς ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς ἐχθρᾶς ἔκεινοι τῆς κατὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων παρέστη τῷ πατρί ὁ σωτὴρ ἡμῶν καὶ ἐδεήθη περὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας αἰχμαλωσίας, ἵνα λυτρῶθημεν καὶ ῥυσθῶμεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐχθροῦ.

74 This reminds one of Gustaf Aulén’s distinction between a sacrifice to God and a ransom to the Devil, but Origen’s understanding of Jesus’ offering to God can hardly be called a sacrifice, at least not as defined by Aulén.
3.3 Jesus Did Not Remain in the Power of the Devil: Conquest as Well as Ransom

Ransoms typically remain in the power of the enemy. If Jesus had been a ransom, how did he become the risen and triumphant King? Origen addressed this problem in his commentary on Matthew. According to him, when the Devil accepted Christ’s soul as a ransom, he was “clearly deceived and imagined that he was able to control it and did not see that he could not bear the agony of possessing it.”

Similarly, “death” thought that he would be able to dominate him, but Christ was free from and stronger than the power of death. He was stronger than death to such an extent that he was able to free all those who were dominated by death who wanted to follow him. “For,” Origen finished, “everyone who is with Jesus is impervious to death” (16.8.305-320). This observation that Jesus would have been impossible to control prevented the unthinkable situation in which he remained eternally in the power of evil.

The principle here is that enemies are only entitled to keep a ransom if they have the power to do so. God did not deceive the powers of evil in this regard; they deceived themselves. Not only did they give up their captives to gain the ransom price – the ransom they desired was more powerful than they and destroyed their kingdom from the inside out, rather like the Trojan horse. Jesus was conqueror as well as ransom, and there was some confusion concerning which role brought about the freedom of the captives. Origen indicated that the Devil had freed sinners

75 ἀπατηθέντι <δηλονότι και φαντασθέντι> ὡς δυναμένῳ αὐτῆς κυριεύσαι καὶ οὐχ ὁρῶντι διὸ ὃι φέρει τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ κατέχειν αὐτήν βάσανον.

76 In this passage, Origen emphasized that the ransom included only Christ’s human soul or blood, not his divinity. But how could these human elements have defeated the Devil and death on their own? Origen did not answer this question. For Gregory of Nyssa, both of Christ’s natures were involved. The Devil accepted the human ransom, not knowing that divinity was hidden inside. Christ’s divinity soon manifested itself and destroyed the Devil’s kingdom (see Chapter 7).
in return for the ransom, but death, it seemed, had been divested of his captives by force after Jesus had entered his dominion. This second image is that of a special agent who allowed himself to be incarcerated as a prisoner in order to affect a mass jailbreak. It is unclear how these two salvation models related in Origen’s mind.77

3.4 Jesus Offered His Human Soul and Blood to the Devil, Not His Divinity

The Devil’s ransom presented one more problem. There was scandal in the idea that the divine Christ could have given himself into the power of the Devil, even if he did not remain there. Indeed, Origen said that this would be an absurd statement. According to him, Christ delivered only his human parts to the Devil. Origen believed that Scripture specifically supported this by naming Jesus’ blood or soul as the ransom payment (Comm. Matt. 16.8). This implied that Jesus’ divine and human components78 were capable of functioning separately, which was the point that Origen wanted to make in this passage. His main intent was not to defend the Devil’s ransom, which he almost took for granted in this passage. Rather, the Devil’s ransom served as the major premise in a Socratic-style argument,79 leading to the conclusion that Jesus’ divine and human components were separable and retained their own identities – these components were

77 According to Nicholas E. Lombardo, the ambiguity between the Devil and death indicate that Origen was using multiple images to approach the truth without intending to teach a literal transaction with the Devil (Lombardo, The Father’s Will: Christ’s Crucifixion and the Goodness of God (New York: Oxford University, 2014), Chapter 10).

78 Origen did not use the word φύσις to refer to Christ’s human or divine nature. “Components” are my attempt to capture phrases such as τὰ περὶ τοῦ πρωτότοκου πάσης κτίσεως or τοῖς περὶ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος Ἰησοῦ (Comm. Matt. 16.8).

79 Major premise: The divine-human Jesus was a ransom to the Devil. Minor premise: a divine ransom to the Devil would be absurd. Conclusion: only Jesus’ humanity was a ransom to the Devil, implying that it could function separately from his divinity.
not, as Origen’s opponents in Christology believed, mixed (συγχείν) so as to result in one wholly uncompounded being (ἐν πάντῃ ἄσυνθετον).

Thus, in his mind, the Devil’s ransom bore witness to a split Christology. But one could turn the syllogism around: surely it was also true that Origen’s split Christology made the Devil’s ransom possible. Only this saved him from saying that Christ’s divinity had been offered to the Evil One, a statement he would have considered absurd. One hundred fifty years later, Gregory of Nazianzus could no longer imagine Christ’s human components functioning separately. For him, a ransom to the Devil would have to have been a divine ransom. No wonder he considered the idea an outrage. Given the same Christology, Origen would have agreed.

Conclusion

This chapter and the one preceding it have shown that Origen made assumptions about the divine nature that might be called philosophical – assumptions that he shared, to one degree or another, with the pagan Platonists and with figures such as Philo and Marcion. These assumptions conflicted with the reciprocal interactions between God and human beings described in the Scriptures – at least, that is what Marcion and Celsus claimed. Origen objected strenuously. He wanted to claim that the Scriptures were consistent with his Christian (and philosophical) perspective, just as Porphyry and Iamblichus would claim that the Greco-Roman religious tradition was consistent with their Neoplatonic vision.

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80 Note, however, that Origen envisioned this split Christology as temporary. As J. Nigel Rowe points out, he believed that the resurrection resulted in a full union of flesh and Word such that omne quod in Christo, iam nunc Filius Dei est (Comm. Rom. 1.6). Eventually, all that belonged to one nature would belong to the other (Rowe, Origen’s Doctrine of Subordination: A Study in Origen’s Christology (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 201).

81 Chapter 7 will consider Gregory’s position in greater detail.

82 They made this claim about propitiatory reciprocity, not about positive reciprocity.
In order to demonstrate this consistency, Origen engaged in allegorical or spiritual reading. As seen in Chapter 6, he said that the material things ancient Hebrew saints had, according to Scripture, requested from God were the shadowy material counterparts of the spiritual things for which they had actually asked. In this way, Origen avoided the idea that God responded to prayers for earthly things, which was problematic from a late-Platonic standpoint. The present chapter has shown that Origen also used spiritual interpretation to bring scriptural references to sin offerings (or propitiatory reciprocity) into line with philosophy. In this, he was particularly indebted to Philo. As shown, the Philonic spiritualization of sacrifice failed in the Christian context because Jesus death (which all sacrifice anticipated) could not be reduced to a symbol of conversion or the moral life. This led Origen to the Devil’s ransom, which explained the necessity of Jesus’ literal self-sacrifice while avoiding the problematic idea that his blood had propitiated an angry God.

As noted, this solved the problem, but it introduced a number of other theological problems, which Origen attempted to resolve with varying success. Similarly, Origen’s spiritualization of scriptural accounts of prayers for material things and propitiation (discussed in the last two chapters) reconciled these accounts with philosophy but produced some theological (or at least exegetical) tensions. The next chapter shows how Christians who inherited Origen’s thought navigated the tensions and problems introduced by his “solutions.” It also shows that an increasing number of Christian intellectuals rejected the philosophic view of God that Origen had been trying to reconcile with Scripture. For them, Origen’s solutions were not only problematic, but also unnecessary.
The Conclusion to this dissertation will compare the Christian approach to these issues with that of the pagan Platonists, but some preliminary comparative observations pertaining to Origen are in order. Origen’s efforts to reconcile reciprocity in his Judeo-Christian tradition with his philosophical commitments bring to mind the similar efforts of the Neoplatonists outlined in the first half of this dissertation. Of particular note, the Devil, the prince of daemons, played the same role in Origen’s thought as evil daemons would play in that of Porphyry. Both of these thinkers could not imagine how the true God or gods could have received the propitiatory sacrifices recorded in their respective traditions. At the same time, they did not want to deny the validity of these traditional accounts or the effectiveness of the sacrifices they described. Both thinkers solved the conflict by saying that the propitiatory sacrifices in question had been offered to the Devil or to evil daemons. The next chapter will speculate on the sources of the Devil’s ransom theory and consider the possibility that Porphyry inherited its method from the Christian tradition.

One can also draw parallels between Origen’s Philonic spiritualization (or moralization) of sacrifice and Porphyry’s concept of noetic sacrifice as the life of ascetic virtue and contemplation. One difference is that, while Philo and Origen attempted to spiritualize propitiatory sacrifice, Porphyry spiritualized only non-propitiatory sacrifices: he relied solely on his theory of evil daemons to explain and dismiss propitiation. As a final note, it is intriguing to speculate what Origen would have thought of Iamblichus’ theurgic interpretation of sacrifice. It would have solved Origen’s problems more neatly than Philonic spiritualization and the Devil’s ransom, for it explained the necessity of physical offerings apart from symbolism and upheld the divine involvement in these offerings without the need for introducing troublesome evil
daemons. This would have made theurgy attractive to Origen as a way of making sacrifice philosophically acceptable, but it is doubtful that he could have successfully imposed it upon the Christian tradition. Theurgy would have implied that ancient Jewish sacrifices were effective, in themselves, apart from their anticipation or symbolization of Jesus’ future sacrifice. Thus, it would have been hard for Origen to explain why they were no longer necessary. Suppose Origen successfully navigated this problem. Could he have explained Jesus’ death in theurgic terms as a mediating sacrifice that joined worshippers to the divine in an ecstatic union? Perhaps not: for Origen, such union was gained through the free choices of souls who harmonized their wills with that of God – a far cry from the almost mechanical mediation accomplished by theurgic sacrifices.  

This illustrates the fact that matter played a greater role in the process of salvation in Iamblichus’ system than it did in Origen’s. Had Origen been a pagan Neoplatonist in the late third century, he would surely have sided with Porphyry against Iamblichus.

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83 Also, the transactional language the New Testament used to describe Jesus’ sacrificial death would not have been conducive to a theurgic interpretation.
ORTGEN IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Contents

1 Prayers of Request 252
   1.1 Does God Answer Requests? 252
   1.2 Can One Ask for Material Benefits? 255

2 Propitiation and the Devil's Ransom 261
   2.1 Divine Wrath and Punishment in Early Christian Thought 262
   2.2 Rejecting the Philosophical God 263
   2.3 The Impassible Christian God 267
      2.3.1 Marcion and the Demiurge's Ransom 268
      2.3.2 “The Impassible Father and the Irascible Son” 275
      2.3.3 Divine “Anger” Not the Same as Human Anger 278
   2.4 Wrath, Ransom and Propitiation in the Fourth Century 279
      2.4.1 Gregory of Nyssa 281
      2.4.2 Gregory of Nazianzus 284
      2.4.3 Lactantius and Theodoret 288
      2.4.4 Eusebius of Caesarea 290

Conclusion 293
So far, the second half of this dissertation has examined Origen’s thought. This is because there was a striking similarity between the theological problems faced by Origen and those faced by the Middle Platonists who preceded him and the Neoplatonists who followed him. The present chapter considers the extent to which other Christian thinkers beyond Origen shared the same concerns and responses.\(^1\) The first half discusses Christian approaches to positive reciprocity as they appeared in discussions of prayers of request; the second half considers Christian views of God’s changeability, anger, and punishments and the implication of these views for propitiatory reciprocity and the doctrine of the redemption.

Regarding prayers of request, this chapter will make two points. Chapter 5 showed that certain Christians in the Alexandrian (and perhaps Caesarean) context believed in a philosophical God who could not respond to prayers of request. Proper prayer was something else – perhaps the alignment of one’s will with the divine will, as Maximus of Tyre had claimed. Clement and Origen leaned in this direction, but they were not willing to completely reject prayers of request. Indeed, Origen philosophically defended such prayers at length. The first point made by the present chapter is that this philosophical concern over the possibility that God could answer prayers was almost completely absent from Christian discourse outside of Clement and Origen. This was an Alexandrian problem and not one that persisted past the middle of the third century.

The second point made by this chapter pertains to the extent to which one could ask God for material or earthly benefits. According to Origen, and to Porphyry after him, prayers for these things were completely out of bounds – the divine would not approve or listen. From the first

\(^1\) By “concerns,” I mean perceived conflicts between philosophical assumptions about the divine nature and scriptural accounts of reciprocity; by “responses,” I mean ways of reconciling the two: allegory, spiritualization, the Devil’s ransom, etc.
century to the fourth century and beyond, Christians limited or excluded prayers for luxuries and the fulfillment of ambitions. But, beginning in the second century, some Christian thinkers extended the principle so as to limit prayers for all material things, even for necessities. This tendency reached a high point in third-century Alexandrian thought: as seen in Chapter 5, Origen said that no saints had ever, or should ever, ask for material things. The present chapter will show that Christian intellectuals in the late third and fourth centuries retreated from this hard line. Even philosophically trained individuals such as the Cappadocians were willing to say that God condescended to answer prayers for material things and success, even if his intent in doing so was to lead people to desire higher spiritual things. Lactantius went further: in addition to explicitly defending positive reciprocity, he had no problem with the idea that God materially blessed those who made supplication and “sacrifice” (according to the Christian definition of the word). Thus, the Christian rejection of prayers for material things can be depicted as a bell curve, rising in the second century, peaking in the mid-third century, and decreasing in the late third and fourth centuries. As a final point on prayer, this chapter considers how those Christians who did limit or reject prayers for material things reconciled their position with the many stories of such prayers in the Hebrew Bible. A number of figures, but above all Origen, used allegorical reading. In contrast, Tertullian employed supersessionism: Christian prayer for spiritual things fulfilled and surpassed Jewish prayers for material things.

The second half of this chapter turns to Christian attitudes towards propitiatory reciprocity. Few Christian intellectuals, especially in the first and second centuries, were directly concerned with questions of propitiation because they did not precisely define the function of sacrifices for sin, either those in the Hebrew Bible or that of Christ. Thus, they did not have to
grapple with the philosophical implications of propitiation or whatever theory of redemption they could have proposed. Many Christian intellectuals, however, were concerned with the broader issue of scriptural references to God’s changeability, anger and punishment of sinners. They knew that, if taken literally, the Scripture passages in question conflicted with the philosophical view of the divine. Some Christians tried to reconcile the two through allegorical readings or by saying that the disturbing emotions and actions attributed to God in Scripture were the emotions and actions, not of the High God, but of the evil Demiurge (Marcion and some Gnostics) or of the semi-passible Son of God (Justin and Tertullian). Other Christian intellectuals explicitly rejected the philosophical view of God and took scriptural references to God’s anger and punishment of sinners relatively literally. This approach appears to have gained the upper hand in the late third and fourth centuries, especially among Latin-speaking African Christians and those working in the Levant: Eusebius, Lactantius, Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrrhus are examples.

The trajectory of this broad discourse on divine anger, changeability and punishment provides the context for discussions of the function of sin offerings and the redemption, which appear less frequently in the early Christian tradition. Thinkers such as Origen and the Gregories, who were friendly towards the philosophical view of God and hesitated to interpret literally scriptural references to divine anger and punishment, rejected the idea that the Father required the blood of his own Son as the price for the forgiveness for humanity. Chapter 6 showed that this conviction led Origen to the Devil’s ransom. The present chapter suggests that this also explains why Gregory of Nyssa opted for the Devil’s ransom and why Gregory of Nazianzus would have done so, had his Christological commitments not prevented him. Eusebius, on the
other hand, was more critical of the philosophical God and read more literally scriptural references to divine wrath and punishment. Thus, he was open to the idea that Jesus’ death had propitiated the Father and won forgiveness for the human race. Correspondingly, the Devil’s ransom played almost no role in his thought, and, when it did appear, it did not preclude a ransom to the Father. Thus, Christians who were philosophically open to the idea of propitiation did sometimes mention the Devil’s ransom, but it did not play the same role in their thought as it played for Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.

In the light of the broader Christian attempts to reconcile the philosophical view of God with scriptural references to God’s anger, changeability and punishment of sinners, the Devil’s ransom (and, indeed, Porphyry’s use of evil daemons) reveal themselves as similar responses to troublesome aspects of one’s religious tradition. Marcion and some Gnostic groups saved their God from involvement in disreputable scriptural stories by saying that these stories described a lower evil being rather than the High God. Similarly, Origen and Porphyry and Gregory of Nyssa saved their God (or gods) from involvement in propitiatory sacrifice by saying that these sacrifices had been received by the Devil (or by evil daemons) rather than by the true God (or gods). Although Marcion came first, he did not necessarily invent this method. Rather, he inherited it from Judaism, in which monotheism implied an ambiguity as to whether actions were caused by lower evil beings (including humans) or by the God who orchestrated all things for his purpose.
1 Prayers of Request

1.1 Does God Answer Requests?

As seen in Chapter 5, the writings of Clement and Origen indicate that there were certain people calling themselves Christians in Alexandria and Caesarea in the second and third centuries who completely rejected prayers of request. Their objections were of a philosophical nature,\(^2\) which is not surprising given the status of Alexandria as an intellectual center. Thus, Clement and Origen’s polemical claim that this “heretical” position had pagan atheism as its heritage was not entirely untrue. Like the Middle Platonist Maximus of Tyre, these Christians may have rejected prayers of request because they could not be reconciled with the immutable, impassible, philosophical God. But, unlike Maximus, such Christians had to explain why Scripture contained so many prayers of request. According to Origen, they claimed that the word “prayer” in these passages referred to “something else.”\(^3\)

To a lesser extent, Origen shared the same theological impulses (see Chapter 5). He systematically deemphasized prayers of requests until they could have been removed from the Christian life with little loss. He noted that the greatest benefit of prayer was the purification of life and conscience necessary to approach God. Communion with God, like communion with

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\(^2\) Michael Joseph Brown characterizes the objections to prayer to which Clement and Origen responded as “philosophical reservations” (\textit{Lord's Prayer}: 266).

\(^3\) Given the negative ancient connotation of the words πάθος and ἐμπαθής, I take it that most Christians in this period believed that God was ἀπαθής. The crucial bit was what they meant by the word and what implications they believed it had for one’s interactions with God. My suggestion here is that these mysterious Alexandrian Christians defined ἀπάθεια in a very Middleplatonic or Neoplatonic way, which tended to bring into question the efficacy of prayers of request. Other Christians, such as Origen, defined ἀπάθεια in a similar way but managed nonetheless to defend prayers of request. Still others, such as Lactantius, believed that divine ἀπάθεια allowed for anger (of a sort) and positive and propitiatory reciprocity. This last perspective might have correlated at some point with the idea that the ἀπαθής God could suffer, but I do not address this possibility, both because divine suffering is not central to my project and because the debates over it were most explicit in the fifth century, which is beyond the period considered in this dissertation. On Christian definitions of ἀπάθεια with respect to divine suffering, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, \textit{The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought} (Oxford University, 2004).
virtuous people, encouraged one in righteousness. Furthermore, Origen said that those devoted to prayer aligned their wills with the will of God such that they were content with whatever might occur. In such a vision, prayers of request had little relevance and were, perhaps, limited to the practice of the spiritually immature.

A similar impulse is apparent in Origen’s predecessor, Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-214).\(^4\) For him, prayer was “to speak somewhat boldly . . . converse with God” (Strom. 7.7.39).\(^5\) It did not obtain good things from God; rather, it had a morally therapeutic effect upon the one praying (Strom. 7.7.38).\(^6\) The high prayer of the gnostic requested whatever “is expedient for us,” and committed to “receive as expedient all the trials that meet us, whatever they may be, which thy ordering employs for our training in steadfastness” (Strom. 7.12.72). As Michael Joseph Brown points out, this approach to prayer resembled that of the Stoics Epictetus and Cleanthes.\(^7\) Clement quoted with approval the prayer of a pagan athlete: “If I, O Zeus, have now done all that was fitting on my part in preparation for the contest, do thou make haste to bestow the victory I deserve” (Strom. 7.7.48).

According to Brown, Clement viewed prayer as a monologue rather than a dialogue. It had no effect upon God. Clement wrote that prayer was “a return back on itself of Providence and a responsive feeling of loyalty on the part of the friend of God” (Strom. 7.7.42). As Brown puts it, “prayer is the verbalization of the goals of the gnostic life and the rededication of the

\(^4\) I am grateful for the work of Michael Joseph Brown and Eric George Jay for pointing me to the relevant passages in Clement.

\(^5\) ἔστιν οὖν, ὡς εἰπεῖν τολμηρότερον, ὀμιλία πρὸς τὸν θεόν ἢ εὐχή. For translation of Strom. 7, see Oulton and Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*. For critical edition, see Stählin and Früchtel, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 3.


nostic to the way of providence.”

Given this view, it is no wonder, Brown observes, that Clement never made use of the Lord’s Prayer. Its emphasis on requests did not fit his theology of prayer, which, according to Brown, he adopted from pagan philosophy.

Given this theological vision, it is surprising that Clement did not join those Alexandrian Christians who rejected prayers of request altogether. He explicitly opposed these Christians, though none of his arguments against them remain extant. Moreover, Clement’s theology of prayer allowed certain requests. He advocated prayers for the conversion of other people (Strom. 7.7.41; 7.14.84) and for the gnosis that one needed to act virtuously (Strom. 7.7.38-39; 7.12.74). Gnostics were also to pray for the forgiveness of their tormentors (Strom. 7.13.81). Most surprisingly of all, they were allowed to pray that God would provide for the material needs of poor people. Clement’s only stipulation was that they “not ask for a superfluity of wealth for [themselves] to distribute.” The material gift was not to pass through the hands of the gnostic (Strom. 7.13.81). Origen surpassed Clement in opposing Christians who denied all prayers of request. His systematic and philosophical defense of such prayers may have been a first in the intellectual history of the Mediterranean.

These Christian Alexandrian debates over whether God could answer prayers of request seem to have been unique in the first half-millennium. Such debates did not appear in earlier

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10 Cf. Jay, *On Prayer*: 31. I point out that Clement’s discussion of prayer appears in the Strom., intended for the instruction of advanced Christian gnostics. Perhaps, if he had discussed prayer in the *Protr.* or the *Paed.*, he would have made even more room for prayers of request and material concerns.

11 Friedrich Heiler observes, “Origen was the first to attempt a really profound defense of prayer” (*Prayer*: 100-01).
texts, and as Brown shows, they did not reappear in the late third and fourth centuries. Even Gregory of Nyssa had nothing to say on the subject. John Chrysostom came the closest to addressing the matter in his homily on Matthew 19. He mentioned the idea that since God knew all human needs, there was no point in asking him to provide for them. But Chrysostom did not launch a philosophical rebuttal. He merely cited various scriptural passages to show that prayer was effective, especially as a defense against the Devil, sin, and the passions. Thus, most Christian thinkers did not worry whether God could answer prayers, at least not for material benefits, until the second century, when the idea that God might only answer prayers for spiritual benefits, in order to save the soul and disentangle it from worldliness, which was, some thought, incompatible with answering human requests for material success. The next sections surveys Christian perspectives on this topic.

1.2 Can One Ask for Material Benefits?

The Jesus of the Gospels never advocated praying for worldly success or luxuries, but the prayer he gave his disciples included the request for daily bread (Matt. 6:11-13, Luke 11:4), and there were no obvious restrictions in the dramatic promise, "if you ask the Father for anything in his name, he will give it to you." Dale Martin characterizes his position as follows: "If fate were true, morality would be impossible. Moreover, we should certainly recognize that prayers are senseless if the futures of both ourselves and those to whom we pray are predetermined" (Martin, Inventing Superstition: 212).

Perhaps Eusebius' defense of prayer from the idea of an all-controlling fate is an exception. Dale Martin characterizes his position as follows: "If fate were true, morality would be impossible. Moreover, we should certainly recognize that prayers are senseless if the futures of both ourselves and those to whom we pray are predetermined." (Martin, Inventing Superstition: 212).
My name, He will give it to you” (John 16.23). The Acts of the Apostles included prayers for healings, resurrections, and release from prison (4.30, 9.40, 12.5). The Epistle of James promised that the elders’ prayer in faith for sick people would succeed. According to the Epistle, Christians should expect God to answer their prayers for benefits, such as rain, just as he answered Elijah’s prayers (5.15-18). The author observed that the members of his audience were in conflict with one another, competing for the pleasures they wanted. But the reason they did not have what they wanted was that they had not requested it in prayer. This seems a *carte blanche* for requesting anything, but the author added, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (4.2-3). Thus, one could ask for material blessings, but the motive could not be self-gratification. Some second-century texts, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, are compatible with this vision.

By the third century, this perspective had changed. The treatises on the Lord’s Prayer that began to emerge downplayed requests for all temporal things, even for necessities.¹⁵ In the last chapter of *On Prayer*,¹⁶ Tertullian wrote,

Indeed, the old [Testament] prayer brought deliverance from fire and from wild beasts and from starvation, even though it had not been given shape by Christ. How much more effective, then, is the Christian prayer? It does not situate the angel of dew in the middle of the fire (Dan. 3.49-50), nor blocks the mouth of lions (Dan. 6.22), nor brings a peasant’s dinner to the hungry (Bel. 33). By delegated grace it turns away no feeling of pain, but it arms with endurance those who are suffering and knowing pain and grieving. It increases grace with bravery so that faith might know what it obtains from the Lord, understanding what it is suffering for the sake of the name of the Lord.

¹⁵ Suddenly, in the third century, treatises on the Lord’s prayer appeared from the hands of Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian of Carthage (Jay, *On Prayer*: 3). I suggest a qualification of Jay’s claim that Tertullian shows a practical approach to prayer (Jay, *On Prayer*: 21). He does, perhaps, in contrast to Clement and Origen, but not in comparison with his predecessors or with the fourth-century Fathers.

¹⁶ For translations of *De oratione* (Or.), see Stewart-Sykes, *On the Lord’s Prayer*. 
Thus, Christians were not to request material necessities, including food for the starving.

According to Tertullian, the “daily bread” for which Christians were to pray in the Lord’s Prayer was not physical bread but the ability “to live perpetually in Christ and undivided from His body” (Or. 6).

Tertullian’s position was, however, inconsistent, or at least multifaceted. In the same chapter, he noted, Christ “commands that bread be sought, which is all the faithful need” (Or. 6; cf. Ieium.15), as if it were physical bread. In other words, Jesus had sanctioned prayers for necessities but not for luxuries. Later in On Prayer, Tertullian advocated prayers for a healthy climate and a peaceful political situation (39). In his Apology, he recorded the story of the “Thundering Legion”: when the troops of Marcus Aurelius were cut off from water supplies and soon to be defeated by the Quadi, some Christians in the legion prayed for rain. God answered them with a torrential downpour that provided water for the Roman troops and confused the Quadi (Apol. 5; cf. Euseb., Hist. eccl. 5.5). Apparently, in Tertullian’s mind, prayers for physical benefits and temporal victory had not been completely superseded by prayers for spiritual endurance.

As noted above, Clement almost ruled out prayers of request altogether. The few requests he allowed were to be made for the conversion, forgiveness, gnosis and salvation of the world (cf. Strom. 6.9). He quoted a version of Matthew 6.33 that would feature prominently in Origen’s treatise on prayer: “Seek what is great, and the little things shall be added” (Strom. 1.24). Material blessings, in Clement’s mind, were “little,” and Christians were not to pray for them

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God’s response to human needs had been predetermined and could not be altered by human requests (Strom. 7.7.43). He would give to the deserving and withhold from the undeserving, regardless of their prayers (Strom. 7.7.41). Clement was particularly hard on prayers for luxuries, but he compromised slightly in allowing prayers for the sustenance of others who were destitute (Strom. 7.13).

Clement admitted that Christians sometimes received the luxuries and success for which they prayed, but he argued that this was not a sign of God’s favor. The “pieces of good fortune” people sought often did not lead to happiness. God used such things to reveal the emptiness of the world and to turn people towards spiritual goodness. In some cases, God bestowed riches on people, not to favor them, but because he knew that the money would eventually end up in the hands of needy Christians (Strom. 7.7, 12).

It should now be apparent that Origen carried forward and systematized Tertullian and Clement’s negative attitude towards prayers for material things. Tertullian had allowed that the daily bread of the Lord’s Prayer might sometimes be literal bread, but, for Origen, it was always “supersubstantial” bread for which Christians prayed. Tertullian had contrasted the physical benefits obtained by ancient Jewish saints with the spiritual fortitude obtained by Christian saints. Thus, he use Christian supersessionism to explained prayers for material things in the Old Testament. In contrast, Origen argued that the ancient Jewish saints themselves had never asked

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19 This reference to needy people points to the fact that Christian beliefs about the efficacy of prayers for material things had sociological implications. Was one to pray for the poor, or give them alms, or both? Those who held material things to be irrelevant to salvation and the life of virtue, and thus of no concern to God, might even have concluded that providing for the poor was of little value. I will argue in the Conclusion that the increasingly positive view of material things and reciprocity in the late-third and fourth centuries (the end of the bell curve) correlated with the rise of bishops and their unavoidable involvement in the practical life of cities and the people who lived in them.
for material benefits or physical protection – they had received these things only as the occasional shadowy parallels of the spiritual things they had requested. Although Origen rejected requests for material things more completely than his predecessors, he was not able to rule them out altogether, as his homily on Judges 7.2 shows (see Chapter 5).

Brown believes that the different cultural milieux of western North Africa and Alexandria largely explain the fact that Tertullian had a more practical view of prayer than Clement and Origen. Certainly, Clement and Origen’s unique struggle with philosophical objections to prayers of request was born from the Alexandrian context. Perhaps this also explains the fact that they came the closest to completely rejecting requests for material things. But in this area, Clement and Origen surpassed Tertullian only by a little. Christian thinkers from one end of the Empire to the other were dealing with similar questions. Perhaps Origen took the line of reasoning further than others, not simply because he was an Alexandrian, but also because he stood at a particular point in the development of Christian thought.

20 Origen said that, just as an object (σῶμα) that one person gives to another is sometimes (depending on the condition of the light) accompanied by a shadow (σκιά), so God’s principle (προηγουμένως) gifts of spiritual graces sometimes go along with the material things that are their “suitable accompaniments” (οἰκειότατα . . . παρακολουθήματα) (Or. 16.2). Such material things had the value of a fleeting and feeble shadow (σκιά ἁμενηνοῦ καὶ ἄρανοῦς ἔχει λόγον) and were “utterly incapable of comparison with the saving acts and holy gifts of the God of all things” (Or. 17.1).

21 Brown (Lord’s Prayer: 231-50) is referring to Tertullian’s greater openness to prayers for material things (Or. 10.3, 29.17-23) and his belief that prayer could influence God, bringing about both the protection of the Christian and the aversion of divine wrath (Or. 29.13-24). Note, however, that isolated comments in Tertullian seem in conflict with this. In Or. 1.30, he said that God would provide for Christians even if they did not ask him to do so. Thus, the purpose of prayer, he said, was to align one’s will with that of God, not to get anything from him (Or. 5.3-4).

22 The following paragraphs will argue that the mid-third century represented a high point in the Christian rejection of prayers of request for material things. Authors in the late third and fourth centuries were more positive about such prayers. One indication that we are dealing with chronological progression, not simply regional tendencies, is that this shift is apparent in both the East and the West. For example, the Latin-speaking African Lactantius held a much more positive attitude towards prayers of request (including requests for material things) than the earlier Latin-speaking African Tertullian. As the following paragraphs show, this same transition can be seen in the East. Since
This supposition gains some legitimacy from the fact that, in the late third and fourth centuries, even the most philosophical Christian thinkers, such as Gregory of Nyssa,23 began a retreat from Origen’s hard line. To be sure, Gregory continued to discourage prayers for luxuries and affluence. He criticized people who prayed only for success in trade. Such prayers dishonored God, just as a great and benevolent king would be dishonored if one asked him for something low and cheap. God had much greater gifts to bestow. He wanted to give people freedom from the passions and from the sickness of sin (Or.Dom.1.2-8).

And yet, Gregory believed that God sometimes answered people’s prayers for material blessings. By so doing, God communicated his faithfulness to worldly Christians. By teaching them to trust him with material things, he led them to trust him with great spiritual matters: they learned to ask for the heavenly blessings that were alone worthy of God (Or.Dom. 1.10). Thus, requests for material success showed immaturity and a misapprehension of the divine nature, but God did not despise them. According to Gregory, mature Christians would not engage in these requests for wealth and success, but they would still ask for physical necessities. He departed from Origen, and even from Tertullian, in consistently interpreting the “daily bread” of the Lord’s Prayer as literal bread (Or.Dom. 4.5-8).

John Chrysostom24 showed a similar retreat from the position of Tertullian, Clement and Origen. Like Gregory of Nyssa, he believed that the Lord’s Prayer commanded Christians to pray for literal bread (Hom.Matt. 19),25 and he approved of requests for material necessities.

Lactantius’ acceptance of positive reciprocity was linked to his acceptance of propitiatory reciprocity, I delay a discussion of his work until the second half of this chapter.

23 Crépey points to the relevant passages in Gregory’s work ("La prière," 158-9, 67-8, 72).

24 Crépey points to the relevant passages in Chrysostom’s work ("La prière," 159, 67, 72).
Such prayers paled in comparison to the contemplative ascent to God and to prayers for spiritual blessings, but they were not out of bounds.\textsuperscript{26}

The brief study above reveals a pattern in patristic attitudes towards prayers for material benefits between the first and the fourth centuries. All condemned prayers for luxuries, but they accepted prayers for necessities to a greater or lesser degree. First and early second-century texts unabashedly accepted them. Tertullian sometimes accepted prayers for necessities and sometimes rejected them. Clement rejected them with one exception. Origen went even further. He devised a hermeneutic that banished prayers for worldly things from the entire scriptural record. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom turned back to a more positive view of prayers for necessities – more positive even than the so-called practical view of Tertullian.

\textbf{2 Propitiation and the Devil’s Ransom}

Origen tried to explain how sacrifices for sin worked with a precision unprecedented in the Christian tradition. Earlier thinkers followed New Testament texts in saying that Jesus was a sacrificial lamb who “took away the sins of the world” (John 1.29) – a savior who gave his life as “a ransom for many” (Matt. 20.28, Mark 10.45) and “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us” (Col. 2.14). But these Christians did not explain the precise meaning of these images. The question Origen posed – to whom did Jesus offer his soul as a ransom? – shows the indefinite nature of Christian thought on the redemption. Even in the fourth

\textsuperscript{25} PG 7.1, col. 280.

\textsuperscript{26} On Chrysostom’s view of prayer, Crépey cites Guinot, "Un souci pastoral," 215, no. 138.
century, Gregory of Nazinanzus admitted that most people ignored the question, though he considered it to be important.\footnote{As Philip Schaff aptly observes, “[The] primitive church teachers lived more in the thankful enjoyment of redemption than in logical reflection upon it” (History of the Christian Church, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner, 1870), 295). J. N. D. Kelly remarks that this patristic attitude has often caused scholars to despair “of discovering any single unifying thought” (Early Christian Doctrines, 5 ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 376).}

Although many Christians were not concerned to define precisely the function of Jesus’ sacrifice, they were concerned, from at least the middle of the second century, with the Hebrew Bible’s descriptions of Yahweh’s anger, punishments and changes of mind. They knew that, if interpreted literally, these passages conflicted with the philosophical view of the divine nature. Some Christians rejected the philosophical view in favor of a literal reading. Others tried to reconcile these scriptural passages with philosophy. One’s view of these topics had implications for one’s view of the redemption. These implications were clear to those few Christian thinkers who made the redemption a topic of direct theological reflection. Thus, we must consider the broader discourse on divine anger, punishment, and changeability in order to understand the more specific discourse on the redemption in Origen, Eusebius and the Gregories. It is to this broader discourse that we now turn.

2.1 Divine Wrath and Punishment in Early Christian Thought

The first half of this dissertation showed that the Middle and Neoplatonists believed that divine goodness excluded anger and even the direct punishment of evildoers. The gods never caused disasters and misfortunes. Epicureans and Stoics held similar convictions, though not necessarily for the same reasons. In light of this, Ermin F. Micka observes that it was inevitable that educated Christians would respond to these ideas or attempt to reconcile them with
Scripture. Micka’s study (1943) is still the authoritative voice on Christian views of divine wrath and punishment up until the early fourth century, and I depend upon it for many of the references that follow. The following pages consider, first, the Christian critics of the philosophical view of God and, second, those who sought to reconcile it with the Christian tradition.

2.2 Rejecting the Philosophical God

The shadowy second-century figure Theophilus of Antioch wrote a defense of the Christian faith to his pagan friend, Autolycus. In this work, Theophilus answered his friend’s challenge concerning the angry God of the Hebrew Bible. Without embarrassment, he affirmed, “Yes, he is angry with those who do evil, but he is good, kind, and merciful to all who love and fear him.” A number of passages expressing a similar perspective survive from the third and fourth centuries, particularly in Latin Christian writings. The third-century poet Commodian, in his Instructions 1.2, warned pagan idolaters that they should fear the wrath of God; he freely threatened sinners with God’s displeasure. The third-century Cyprian of Carthage joined him in


29 The works of Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Joseph M. Hallman are not of great relevance to this dissertation because they focus on impassibility as it related to the incarnation and Christ’s ability to suffer: Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*; Joseph M. Hallman, *The Coming of the Impassible God: Tracing a Dilemma in Christian Theology* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007).

this. According to Cyprian, present misfortunes were early manifestations of God’s anger, which would be inescapable on the Day of Judgment.\textsuperscript{31}

According to Micka, Cyprian and Commodian’s approach reflected the Western conviction that stern discipline was a necessary part of power. For them, Micka says, God tended to be seen as a stern lord instead of as a kindly and loving father.\textsuperscript{32} But Latin authors were not alone in affirming divine wrath. Nicole Kelly places the author of the \textit{Recollections} (part of the pseudo-Clementine literature) in fourth-century Syria.\textsuperscript{33} This text, written in Greek but surviving only in Rufinus’ translation, faced the problem head on: it explicitly stated that anger was compatible with the divine nature. According to the author, a God who did not become angry at the wicked and punish them for their misdeeds would not be just (10.48).\textsuperscript{34}

Lactantius, a third and fourth-century Christian teacher of rhetoric and advisor to the Emperor Constantine, was a native of North Africa, but he spent much of his career in the eastern Mediterranean. The purpose of his book \textit{On the Anger of God}\textsuperscript{35} was the refutation of Stoic and Epicurean claims that God was never angry or punished people for their misdeeds.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Micka, \textit{The Problem of Divine Anger}: 19.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Micka, \textit{The Problem of Divine Anger}: 19-20.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Nicole Kelley, \textit{Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines: Situating the Recognitions in Fourth Century Syria} (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Micka, \textit{The Problem of Divine Anger}: 31.
\end{itemize}
According to Lactantius, this was contrary, not only to Scripture, but also to human reason.

Proper anger was not opposed to goodness in humans or in God (15).

It is “not right,” Lactantius wrote, “that, when [God] sees [crimes committed], he should not be moved, and arise to take vengeance upon the wicked, and destroy the pestilent and guilty, so as to promote the interests of all good men” (16.5).\(^36\) “It is necessary that [God] should be moved with anger against the man who has broken or despised [his] eternal and divine law” (17.5).\(^37\) Epicurus was wrong to say that, if “God does harm to any one . . . He is not good”.\(^38\) According to Lactantius, “They are deceived by no slight error who defame all censure, whether human or divine, with the name of bitterness and malice, thinking that He ought to be called injurious who visits the injurious with punishment” (17.6).\(^39\) Rather, a “judge is called upright and good when he punishes crimes.”\(^40\) Similarly, when God “opposes the evil, [he] is not injurious.”\(^41\) The injurious person is he who “either injures an innocent man, or spares an injurious person that he may injure many” (17.7).\(^42\)

Just as God was moved to anger and punishment by wickedness, so he was moved to kindness by righteousness. Moreover, people could seek God’s kindness and ask for deliverance

\(^36\) Non est enim fas eum, cum talia fieri uideat, non moueri et insurgere ad ultionem sceleratorum et pestiferos nocentesque delere, ut bonis omnibus consulat.

\(^37\) Necesse est igitur ut ira moueatur deus aduersus eum qui hanc aeternam diuinamque legem aut uiolauerit aut spreuerit.

\(^38\) Si nocet, inquit, alicui deus, iam bonus non est.

\(^39\) Non exiguo falluntur errore qui censuram siue humanam siue diuinam acerbitatis et malitiae nomine infamant, putantes nocentem dici oportere qui nocentes adficit poena.

\(^40\) Iudex integer ac bonus dicitur cum male facta uindicat.

\(^41\) Ergo et deus cum malis obest, nocens non est.

\(^42\) Is est autem nocens qui aut innocent nocet aut nocenti parcit, ut pluribus noceat.
from his anger through prayer and sacrifice. Based on this principle, people try to “appease and entreat Him, believing that he is able to repel injuries from them.” With “continual prayers and repeated vows [they] offer gifts and sacrifices, following up his name with praises, striving to gain his favor by just and good works” (16.1-2). Clearly, Lactantius accepted both positive and negative reciprocity, and he rejected the philosophical concept of God that threatened it.

A similar perspective appears in Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, who worked in the first half of the fifth century. In the *Exhortation to the Gentiles*, once attributed to Justin Martyr, he wrote:

So why does Plato blame Homer for saying that the gods are changeable, when Homer said this to advantage, as is clear from the very things that have been said? For it is the habit of those who think it worthy to seek philanthropy through prayer and sacrifices to cease and to repent from those things in which they had sinned. For those who think that the divine is implacable have never chosen to abstain from sins, since they think that they will have no benefit from repentance (23.b).

According to this perspective, the plight of sinners is hopeless if God’s attitude cannot be changed from anger to philanthropy through repentance, prayers, and sacrifices for sin. There is no attempt here to make Scripture fit the Greek philosophical vision. The philosophers were wrong.

Lactantius and Theodoret’s primary aim was to convince Christians that they should not be swayed by philosophical ideas that challenged reciprocity. They had reason for concern.

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43 *Primum accidentibus malis adflicti homines ad deum plerumque confugiunt mitigant obsecrant, credentes eum posse ab his iniurias propulsare. . . . precibus adsiduis ac frequentibus uotis, dona et sacrificia offerunt, nomen eius laudibus prosequuntur, iustis ac bonis operibus demereri eum laborantes.*

44 Translations from *Cohortatio ad gentiles (Cohr.Gr.*) are my own. For critical edition, see J. C. T. Otto, *Cohortatio ad gentiles*, 3 ed. (Jena: Mauke, 1879).

45 Πῶς οὖν ὁ Πλάτων Ὅμηρον μέμψεται τοὺς θεοὺς στρεπτοὺς εἶναι λέγοντι, καθοι Ὅμηρον διὰ τὸ χρήσιμον τοῦτ’ εἰρηκότος, ὡς ἐστι δῆλον ἀπ’ αὐτὸν τῶν εἰρημένων; Ἰδιὸν γὰρ τὸν δι’ εὐχῆς καὶ θυσιῶν φιλανθρωπίας τυγχάνειν ἀξιούντον τὸ παύεσθαι καὶ μεταγινώσκειν ἐφ’ οἷς ἦμαρτον. οἱ γὰρ ἀνεπιστρεφές τὸ θέλον οἴσειν εἶναι, οὐδαμῶς ἀφίστασθαι τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων προήρηται, οὐδὲν δὲν καθ’ ὅκ τῆς μετανοίας ἐξειν οἴσειν.
Many Christian thinkers from the second century on accepted to one degree or another the philosophical belief that God was without the passion of anger and that he did not directly punish the wicked. The next section examines this current in Christian thought, paying special attention to the methods these Christians used to reconcile Scripture with their philosophical beliefs.

2.3 The Impassible Christian God

As Micka observes, Christian claims that their God was without passions, and especially without anger, survive from the second century on. The Athenian Christian philosopher Aristides wrote in his *Apology*, “I say that he is God who is without beginning and without end, immortal, self-sufficient, free from all passions and infirmities, above anger, forgetfulness, ignorance, and the rest.” Coming from a similar context, Athenagoras declared that the Christian God was without anger and impassible (*Leg.* 10.1). Many Christian intellectuals shared these ideas, but they disagreed over how the philosophical vision should be reconciled with the Hebrew Bible. This was arguably the most violent disagreement in second-century Christianity. The sections below outline three ways in which Christians attempted reconciliation: 1) Marcion and the Gnostics used the evil Demiurge to explain the disreputable stories of the Hebrew Bible; 2) Justin Martyr and Tertullian did something similar but using the semi-passible, preincarnate Christ; 3) Irenaeus, Novatian, Clement, Origen and others said that Scripture used terms such as repentance, anger, vengeance and punishment analogically or allegorically: they did not mean the same thing when applied to God and humans. These three different methods are relevant to our discussion of the redemption because they (at least 1 and 3) played a role in the thinking of Christians who tried to reinterpret Christ’s sacrifice in philosophically acceptable terms.
2.3.1 Marcion and the Demiurge’s Ransom

The villain of the story, from a later Christian perspective, was Marcion of Sinope (born c.105). Marcion wondered how the goodness of God could be reconciled with the evil and suffering in the world he had supposedly created. He also wondered how divine goodness could be reconciled with the “ignorant, cruel, the creator of evil, angry, remorseful, inconsistent, and mutable” God of the Hebrew Bible. For Marcion, these scriptural references could not be reinterpreted. Yahweh was indeed the angry god the Hebrew Bible made him out to be, responsible both for the disreputable elements in Jewish religion and for the suffering and evil in the world he had created. He was a lower god, separate from the High God of goodness and mercy whom Jesus came to reveal – a God free from all passions, anger, and punishments.

It is highly significant that Marcion did not simply dismiss the Hebrew Bible as the falsehood of foolish sages. According to him, it was true. The catch was that it did not describe the true God but the lower, evil “Demiurge.” By now, this should be a familiar strategy. Around a century later, Origen used the Devil to uphold the ransom language of the New Testament while saving God from the ignominy of requiring the blood of his own Son as a payment for sin. Fifty years after that, Porphyry would explain objectionable stories and practices in his own

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47 Stephen Butler Murray, Reclaiming Divine Wrath: A History of a Christian Doctrine and its Interpretation (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 54; Micka, The Problem of Divine Anger: 23. Note that scholars do not agree that Marcion was motivated by a commitment to the Greek philosophical vision of the divine nature. But it is undeniable that he was working with similar concepts. I suggest that Marcion floated in the same intellectual current that led the Middle and Neoplatonists to question the stories of divine wrath, propitiation and appeasing sacrifice in their own pagan religious tradition.

48 Moll claims, “Marcion’s original distinction was in fact between an evil and a good God, whereas the figure of the just God was only introduced by later generations of his followers” (Moll, The Arch-Heretic Marcion: 47).
tradition as interactions with evil daemons. The stories were true, but they did not provide a model for interacting with the true gods.

Even in his own age, Marcion’s method was not unique. Certain individuals in the Gnostic movement agreed that the God of the Hebrew Bible was a lower being of questionable character. They delighted to turn scriptural narratives on their heads by making Yahweh the villain and the villains – such as the snake of Genesis and Judas Iscariot – the heroes. Such reversals allowed these Gnostics to rewrite cosmology and salvation history in keeping with their own vision. To what extent this vision was influenced by Greek philosophy is unclear. The fact that Plotinus and Porphyry rebutted certain Gnostic ideas suggests that the Gnostics mingled in Neoplatonic circles and shared some philosophical assumptions.

Thus, one can say with a fair degree of certainty that Marcion, the Gnostics, Origen and Porphyry all used evil spiritual beings to vitiate (without totally dismissing) elements in their traditions that conflicted with the philosophical view of God. It remains to consider whether Irenaeus or Origen borrowed the Devil’s ransom directly from Marcion. At the turn of the century, historians such as Adolf von Harnack and Jean Rivière viewed the Devil’s ransom with disdain and claimed that it had entered the Christian tradition from “popular imagination” or from heretical thinkers, meaning Marcion and the Gnostics.49

In the 1980s, Neil Forsyth made a similar argument, beginning with the claim that Christian ideas about the Devil owed much to Marcion: “For Irenaeus and Tertullian, the devil is an alternative to the Demiurge, and the character of the devil enables them to salvage the Jewish scriptures from these heretics who would separate the Creator of Genesis, Job, and Isaiah from

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the God revealed by Christ.” According to Forsyth, “the early redemption theory of the church is deeply affected by [Marcion]. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen all wrote against him, and their idea of the devil owes much to their efforts to refute his view of the Old Testament God.”

In the Marcionite view, the evil Demiurge had created humanity and had just claims over it. To save people from his dominion, Jesus had to purchase them with his blood. I suggest calling this the “Demiurge’s ransom.”

According to Forsyth, the Devil’s ransom was the mainstream Christian version of this story. But Forsyth does not think that this kind of thinking emerged fully formed from the head of Marcion. Rather, the Hebrew tradition already contained the beginnings of a method in which “Satan or some equivalent was gradually substituted for Yahweh at the more embarrassing moments of religious history.” The theory of a ransom to the Demiurge or to the Devil simply “extended [this] process.” Forsyth believes that the Marcionites were the first to take this step – then Christians such as Irenaeus and Origen developed their theories in dialogue with Marcionite

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52 Forsyth (The Old Enemy: 182, 337) gives two primary examples. 2 Sam. 24.1 says that God incited King David to sin by numbering the people, but, when 1 Chron. 21.1 retells the same story, it blames Satan, not God, for inciting David to sin. According to Forsyth, this approach is even clearer in Jubilees, where the less savory acts attributed to Yahweh in the Torah—for example, the demand for the sacrifice of Isaac and the attempt to kill Moses—were in fact prompted by the prince of the hostile angels, whose name in Jubilees is usually ‘Mastema.’ Very likely, Forsyth is right to see these passages as precursors to the Demiurge/Devil’s ransom. I would like to add that Jewish authors’ ability to substitute a satanic figure for God may have depended upon the monotheistic idea that God is ultimately responsible for all things and guides even the actions of evil beings in keeping with his purpose. This view is clear in Job, where the stealing of his flocks, for example, can justifiably be called the action of bandits, of Satan, or of God. Thus, the monotheistic viewpoint made identifying the perpetrator of any event an ambiguous project – one might say that the author of Jubilees and the formulators of the Demiurge/Devil’s ransom took advantage of this ambiguity.
thought. For these Church Fathers, “It was not now Yahweh but the old enemy who exacted such a cruel price from Christ.”

Forsyth’s theory is plausible, but it is difficult to prove that the Marcionite ransom theory had priority because references to it are few and uncertain. The most firm of these appears in the late third or fourth-century Christian Dialogue on the True Faith in God, which mentions both the Demiurge’s ransom (as a Marcionite idea) and the Devil’s ransom (as a Christian idea). This work was attributed to “Adamantius,” a name sometimes given to Origen. The content of the work, however, is not in keeping with Origen’s thought and depends heavily on Methodius (d. 311); it even contains an excerpt from Methodius writing. The characters in the dialogue include Adamantius (an orthodox Christian), two Marcionites, a follower of Bardenas, a Valentinian Gnostic, and a pagan adjudicator who becomes an orthodox Christian by the end of the book.

In the course of the dialogue, the Marcionite Megethius points to the Apostle Paul’s claim that Christ “redeemed us.” According to Megethius, there is no need to “redeem” those who belong to one. One only redeems what belongs to another – what is alien to one. Thus, the transactional language Paul used to describe Jesus’ death proves that human beings were alien to

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55 For the dating and authorship of the dialogue, I depend on Pretty’s introduction to the work, including his evaluation of earlier scholarship (Pretty, Dialogue: 9-20).


57 Παῦλος λέγει ὅτι Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασε (cf. Gal. 3.13).
Christ and belonged to another, the Demiurge who had created them. It was from this alien power that Christ bought humanity (1.27.820a).58

The orthodox character, Adamantius, solves the problem by saying that people were alienated from Christ through their sin, not because they belonged to an alien god or to the Devil. Scripture said that sinners were the “servant[s] of sin” (John 8.34), enslaved under the “lordship” of sin (Rom. 6.14). Thus, Christ bought sinners from the power of their own sin. According to Adamantius, both the Demiurge’s ransom and the Devil’s ransom were contrary to reason and Scripture. The latter theory suggested that Christ had amicable dealings with the Devil, which implied that the Devil had become a good figure and had given up “jealousy and all evil.” Furthermore, if the Devil had received Christ’s blood as a ransom, he would not have given it up, so Christ would not have been able to rise from the dead. The author ignored, or did not know, Origen’s claim that Christ’s blood overcame the Devil and destroyed his power after the transaction. Adamantius thought a ransom to the Demiurge was also problematic. Megethius, as a Marcionite, would claim that the Demiurge was “just,” but was it just to sell one’s servants? If they were good servants, they did not deserve to be sold, and if they were bad servants, then the Demiurge was guilty of selling faulty merchandise to another (1.27.820a-e).

Harnack, who was no friend of the Devil’s ransom, believed that Adamantius was suspicious of the idea because he perceived it to be a Marcionite theory.59 It is true that Adamantius dealt with the Demiurge’s ransom and the Devil’s ransom in the same breath, but he

58 The fact that this could be an argument, even a mock argument in a dialogue, shows how difficult it would have been to reconcile the transactional language of the New Testament with a sacrifice made to God the Father at the turn of the third century.

59 For Harnack, Adamantius’ refutation “is as acute as it is true and victorious” (History of Dogma: vol. 2, 290-1, no. 2). Perhaps this could be said of Adamantius’ solution (that humans were in bondage to sin rather than to the Devil), but his arguments against the Demiurge/Devil’s ransom theory were ill-informed and illogical.
did not necessarily give the Marcionite version the priority. Even if he had, earlier extant references to ransom theory would not back up the claim. It is to these earlier references that I now turn.

J. Christopher Edwards sees a reference to the Devil’s ransom in the third-century *Acts of Thomas* 39 (156, 18). 60 Perhaps the earliest mention of Christ’s offering to an evil figure in Marcionite or Gnostic thinking appears in the *Gospel of Judas*, which H.-C. Puech and Beate Blatz tentatively place between 130 and 170. 61 The earliest reference to the Devil’s ransom in mainstream Christian sources comes from around the same period in the writings of Irenaeus (c. 130-202). Irenaeus did not systematically explain the theory – he mentioned it in passing (*Haer*. 3.18.7, 5.1.1, 5.21.1-3). This led nineteenth and twentieth-century historians to conclude that the theory was in its infancy, waiting for Origen to develop it. 63 But, in my view, the reason

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61 The relevant passage from the *Gospel of Judas* runs thus: “Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, this baptism [ . . . ] my name [--about nine lines missing--] to me. Truly [I] say to you, Judas, [those who] offer sacrifices to Saklas [ . . . ] God [--three lines missing--] everything that is evil. ‘But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me’” (55-6). If one literally reads between the lines, one might infer that the sacrifice of the body that clothed Jesus was made to the Devil, since it surpassed earlier “sacrifices to Saklas” (a variant of Satan). I am not aware of other scholars who have made this claim. For translation, see Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas*.


63 Harnack writes, “We see that the idea of the blood of Christ as a ransom does not possess with Irenaeus the value of a fully developed theory, but is suggestive of one” (*History of Dogma*: vol. 2, 290-1, no. 2). According to F. W. Dillistone, Origin was the first for “pressing the matter further” (*The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 95). Jaroslav Pelikan even argues that the Devil’s ransom was absent from Irenaeus’ thought (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600), 5 vols., vol. 1 (University of Chicago,
Irenaeus did not explain the theory more fully was that it was already common and needed no explanation. How, then, did it arise? Marcion, whose active period was about fifty years prior, could have been the source of the ransom theories that appear in the *Gospel of Judas* and *Against Heresies*, but if the idea had been strongly associated with Marcion, surely Irenaeus would have been hesitant to mention it without defense. Thus, it is conceivable that the Devil’s ransom already existed by the time Marcion or Gnostics began speaking of a ransom to the Demiurge.

The idea that Jesus’ life and death were a battle with the Devil for the redemption of humanity – the *Christus victor* theory identified by Gustaf Aulén – had deep and early roots in the Christian tradition, and it was this vision that provided the context for the Devil’s ransom. Based on the letter concerning martyrdoms in Vienne and Lyons, Candida R. Moss shows that the *Christus victor* idea appeared early and that it was not limited to theological texts. An article by Bezalel Narkiss tends in a similar direction. He notes that early Jewish Midrash claimed that Jonah, though he was trapped for three days in the belly of the monster, would one day draw up Leviathan (a Satanic figure) with a hook and feast upon him in the Messianic Kingdom. Matthew’s Jesus may have referred to this vision when he said that he, like Jonah, would spend three days in the heart of the earth (12.40). The implication was that, after being

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1971), 148). Edwards seems to take the same view, claiming that the Devil’s ransom did not appear until the third century in Origen and the *Acts of Thomas*. According to him, “This motif appears to be a later development, although it makes sense of the emphasis on possession in the first part of Jesus ministry (especially in Mark 1-8)” (*Ransom Logion*: 108).

64 This implies that there was some discussion of the function of the redemption very early, but (as mentioned above) it was not a focus of theological reflection until later.


overcome by evil powers, he would turn and overcome them. Nicholas E. Lombardo draws together scholarship from Moss, Narkiss, and others to suggest that the Christus victor theory, and probably the Devil’s ransom, was a very early feature in Christian thought. In light of these studies, one should exercise caution in saying that the Devil’s ransom derived from the Demiurge’s ransom, but the two were certainly sister theories – similar methods used to solve similar problems.

This section has shown that the Marcionite and Gnostic use of the Demiurge to explain the philosophically problematic presentation of God in the Hebrew Bible exhibited a similar method as the Demiurge’s or Devil’s ransom. This is one way in which the broader discussion about divine anger and changeability informed discussions about the redemption, which only came to the fore in the third and fourth centuries. The next section explores another relevant argument in the broader discussion, this time made by Justin Martyr and Tertullian.

2.3.2 “The Impassible Father and the Irascible Son”

According to Irenaeus, Justin Martyr (c.100-165) wrote a treatise against Marcion – a work that has not survived. Justin shared Marcion’s belief that the nature of the High God was without the passion of anger, but he refused to dismiss the Hebrew Bible as the record of interactions with a low and evil Demiurge. Instead, he saved Scripture by attributing instances of

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divine anger and threats of punishment to the Logos or Son, who was, to some extent, passible. Troublesome manifestations of God in Scripture were actually manifestations of the Logos.\(^\text{69}\)

The work of Tertullian of Carthage (c.160-220) showed a similar pattern. At first, he appears to be saying that God was angry, even jealous and potentially harmful. If he were not, Tertullian argued, he would not be a competent judge, and discipline would have no meaning (\textit{Marc}. 1.26).\(^\text{70}\) But it soon becomes apparent that Tertullian attributed these passionate elements only to the Son. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
Whatever, therefore, you demand as worthy of God must be attributed to the Father and, as I might say, to the God of the philosophers who is invisible, inaccessible, and mild.\(^\text{71}\) On the other hand, whatever you reprehend as unworthy, must be imputed to the Son who was seen, heard, and spoken to, the witness and servant of the Father, uniting in himself man and God, in great deeds God, in weak ones man, in order that he might confer upon man as much as he takes from God (2.27.6).\(^\text{72}\)
\end{quote}

Micka observes, “Tertullian attempted to overcome the difficulties of the Old Testament concerning divine anger by applying these references to the Son,” who was, in his view,


\(^{71}\) As Micka points out, this is an odd statement, given that, in other passages, Tertullian argued that “God” knew anger, at least in a divine sort of way (e.g. \textit{Test}. 2; \textit{Marc}. 1.26).

susceptible to anger and could pardon and repent. As Micka puts it, Tertullian countered Marcion’s dualism with a dualism of his own: “the impassible Father and the irascible Son.”

Thus, both Justin and Tertullian felt the pull of the philosophical view of a passionless God. Like Marcion, they reconciled this view to accounts of divine wrath in Scripture by saying that these accounts referred to a being other than the High God. But of course Justin and Tertullian differed violently with Marcion over the nature of this other being and the nature of goodness itself. For them, anger and punishments were part of good earthly administration, even if they were not part of the exalted nature of the High God. Christ’s demonstration of these qualities was proper, and the Hebrew Bible’s accounts of his punishment of sinners were instructive for the Christian community. It is important to note that Justin and Tertullian’s method of reconciling the philosophical God with the Hebrew Bible would not have helped them to solve the philosophical problems inherent in the redemption, had they tried to use it in this context. It would have been problematic (or at least odd) to say that the seemingly passible motives leading the Father to desire the blood of his own Son had actually been the motives of the passible Son.

73 In this regard, Micka cites Prax. 16: ipse [filius] enim et ad humana semper colloquia descendit, ab Adam usque ad patriarchas et prophetas, in visione, in somnio, in speculo, in aenigmata ordinem suum praestruens ab initio, semper quem erat persecuturus in fine. For critical edition, see Emil Kroymann, Quinti septimi florentis Tertulliani opera, 3 vols., vol. 3, CSEL (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1906), 256-57.


75 Tertullian “expounded a soteriology maintaining that good deeds accumulated merit and bad deeds demand satisfaction (e.g., Paen. 5; Exh. cast. 1; Scorp. 6)” (Brown, Lord's Prayer: 232).
2.3.3 Divine “Anger” Not the Same as Human Anger

In this section I will discuss the third method of philosophical-scriptural reconciliation, which first appeared in Irenaeus (c.130-202). He dealt with scriptural references to divine punishment and wrath, not by passing them off on a possible Logos, but by saying that the word “wrath” did not mean the same thing when used of God. For, he wrote, “the Father of all is far removed from those affects and passions which have their place in men.” Similarly, Novatian (c.200-258) wrote:

[I]f we read of God’s wrath and recall that certain expressions of indignation have been ascribed to him and acts of hatred referred to him, we, nevertheless, are not to understand that these have been spoken of as human vices. All these things, though they can corrupt man, cannot vitiate in the least the divine power. Such passions would properly be told of men, but would not rightly be assigned to God (Trin. 5).

This kind of thinking also appeared in Clement and Origen. Both claimed that Scripture used terms such as “anger,” not because they were proper for God, but because this condescension to human terms was necessary in order to get through to people. The Alexandrians held a high philosophical view of the divine nature and, in consequence, distanced divine wrath and punishment far from the human realm. While Irenaeus and Novatian claimed that God’s wrath was not a passion or vice (as it was among humans), they nonetheless believed that it was a force

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76 The various methods of reconciling philosophy and Scripture I list often appeared together in the thought of the same author. Tertullian, for example, used an argument very like the one I describe here (Marc. 2.16) (cf. Micka, The Problem of Divine Anger: 28-29).


78 *cuius etiam si iracundias legimus, et indignationes quasdam descriptas tenemus, et odia relata cognoscimus, non tamen haec intellegimus ad humanorum relata esse exempla uitiorum. haec enim omnia, etsi hominem possunt corrumpere, diuinam uim non possunt omnino utiare. passiones enim istae in hominibus merito esse dicentur, in deo non merito iudicabantur.* For translation, see Micka, The Problem of Divine Anger: 30. For critical edition, see W. Yorke Fausset, *Novatiani Romanae urbis presbyteri De Trinitate liber* (Cambridge University, 1909).

79 Based on Joseph M. Hallman’s *The Coming of the Impassible God*, this was also Augustine’s position.

80 On Clement, see Murray, *Reclaiming Divine Wrath*: 61. On Origen, see Chapter 6 of this dissertation.
to be reckoned with and that God’s punishments were real. In contrast, Origen sometimes dismissed divine punishments altogether; at other times, he claimed that they were punishments of the soul rather than punishments of the body and that they were purely disciplinary (see Chapter 6).

This allegorical or analogical reading of scriptural references to divine anger and punishment was a prerequisite for Origen’s reinterpretation of propitiation and redemption (as seen in Chapter 6). One can see how hairs started in the second century had consequences for third-century problems: solutions to earlier dilemmas made themselves available as solutions to later dilemmas.

2.4 Wrath, Ransom and Propitiation in the Fourth Century

The pages above have considered how Christian intellectuals viewed scriptural references to God’s anger and the punishment of sinners. Some, especially in the late third and fourth centuries, read these passages fairly literally and rejected the philosophical view of the divine nature that seemed opposed to them. Others sought to reconcile these passages with philosophy. Three methods of doing so have been identified: Some said that Scripture was not speaking in these cases of the High God but of a low and evil Demiurge (Marcion and some Gnostics) or of the semi-passible Son of God (Justin and Tertullian). Others argued that words such as anger and punishment did not mean the same thing when applied to God as when applied to people: if God punished at all, he did not do so in passionate anger.

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81 According to Irenaeus, people were to learn from scriptural stories of divine wrath; if they sinned, they would experience the same punishments (Haer. 4.37.1-5; 4.27).
This discourse sets the stage for the discussions of redemption theories that began to appear in the third and fourth centuries. Those who questioned the philosophical view of God and read scriptural references to divine wrath and punishment literally, such as Eusebius, were comfortable with saying that Jesus had propitiated the Father. In contrast, those who believed that God was not really angry with sinners and that his punishments were disciplinary rather than punitive, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, rejected the idea that Jesus’ sacrificial death had paid a price to God so that he might let sinners off the hook. These Christians’ efforts to interpret Jesus’ death in philosophically acceptable terms were indebted to earlier efforts in the broader struggle to reconcile disturbing stories in the Hebrew Bible with the philosophical God. Origen’s analogical or allegorical reading of propitiatory language had roots in Irenaeus’ reading of scriptural reference to divine wrath. Origen’s use of the Devil to save the Father from the ignominy of having demanded the blood of his own son exhibited a similar method as Marcion and the Gnostics’ use of the Demiurge and Justin and Tertullian’s use of the semi-passible, preincarnate Christ to save the High God from involvement in troublesome accounts in the Hebrew Bible.

In light of this background and in light of the discussion of Origen’s view of redemption in Chapter 6, the rest of this chapter will consider the thinking of Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Theodoret. For thematic reasons, I begin with the Bishop of Nyssa.

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82 Athanasius might be expected to feature here. He says that Jesus’s death was a ransom payment “to death” – a ransom that was necessary because God had decreed at the beginning that human beings would die if they sinned. In order for God’s honor to be preserved, death had to be satisfied. Thus, Jesus died on behalf of sinners. This avoided, on the one hand, the propitiation of an angry God, and, on the other hand, the problematic ransom to the Devil. Frances Young is right to highlight the effectiveness of this solution (Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*: 192-211). Nevertheless, I do not discuss Athanasius at length because 1) unlike Young, I do not think that his solution was picked up by Gregory of Nazianzus, and 2) discussing his perspective would add length to the discussion without clarifying the main point I wish to make.
2.4.1 Gregory of Nyssa

The Cappadocians, and the bishop of Nyssa in particular, were “Sons of Hellenism.” Gregory agreed with the philosophers that the divine nature was without anger. Moreover, some of his thinking was comparable to that of Origen. It is not surprising that the most extended articulation of the Devil’s ransom appears in Gregory’s *Great Catechetical Oration*, probably produced in the years following 381. Ostensibly, the oration’s intent was to prepare catechumens for baptism, but its content identifies it as a handbook of apologetics for established Christians. In particular, Nyssa called attention to the logical coherence of the Christian faith. John Behr calls the oration “the first attempt to present a comprehensive treatment of Christian theology since Origen’s *On First Principles*.“ Raymond Winling divides the Oration into three sections: the first few chapters discussed the Trinity and the last few were concerned with the sacraments; but the central bulk of the Oration dealt with the plan or οἰκονομία of salvation. Nyssa devoted almost half of this central section to answering a specific question: why did God

save humanity through the incarnation and not through a simple act of power? God could have changed the world with a single word. Why did he come to earth?\(^89\)

Nyssa’s main defense of the incarnation was that it demonstrated all the divine virtues (19-20); it bore the marks of God; it was the sort of thing God would have done. Accomplishing salvation with a word of command might have demonstrated God’s power, but it would not have demonstrated God’s other virtues, which were just as important. Nyssa argued that the incarnation uniquely revealed God’s goodness, wisdom, and justice (20.36-38), but he spent the most time discussing justice. He began with an examination of the human predicament. According to Nyssa, the human ψυχή chose what it perceived to be good, but the Devil deceived it by making evil look good. He molded the appearance of excellence around the hook of evil like a bait (21.38-43).\(^90\) The human ψυχή chose this false good. Thus, the Devil “hooked” humanity and brought it under his control. The Devil’s dominion over people was lawful and legitimate (22.1-13).\(^91\) People may have been deceived, but they freely chose the bait the Devil presented (21.43-52). They were like people who had sold their freedom in return for goods and were thus the legal slaves of the buyers (22.5-13; cf. 22.13-18.).\(^92\)

The consequence of the Devil’s legal right over people was that God could not rescue them from him by the force of his abundant power (22.1-13). If he had, he would have acted unjustly and tyrannically (22.5-13). He would have provided the Devil with a pretense for legal

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\(^89\) In the course of fifteen chapters, Nyssa stated this same question four different times.

\(^90\) “Appearance of excellence” translates τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ φαντασίας, “the hook of evil” translates τῷ τῆς κακίας ἀγκίστρῳ, and “like a bait” translates δελέατος δίκην.

\(^91\) “Legitimate” translates αὐθεντίᾳ, and “lawful” translates νόμῳ.

\(^92\) οἱ χρημάτων τὴν ἐλευθερίαν ἀποδόμενοι δοῦλοι τῶν ὀνησιαμένον εἰσίν.
God had to devise a just way of rescuing humanity (22.5-18). He had to legally buy people back. No law prevented him from doing this (22.5-13), but God had to provide the Devil with whatever ransom he demanded (22.5-18). The Devil’s price was Jesus, the most remarkable man who had ever lived, surrounded by miracles surpassing those of the Old Testament saints (23.4-12). In return for this ransom, the Devil released those he held “in the prison of death” (23.37-41).

In this transaction, God deliberately concealed the fact that the divinity was hidden in Jesus’ flesh. To the Devil, Jesus was simply a man, familiar and natural. His appearance was more desirable than it was fearful (23.42-59, cf. 24.29-40). The ruse succeeded. The Devil took Jesus into his power and released sinners from his clutches. Then the divinity in Jesus manifested itself and overcame the Devil and his kingdom. God’s deception of the Devil was not unjust any more than the Devil’s deception of human beings in the garden had been unjust. Justice, Nyssa said, meant that the punishment fit the crime, and God’s deception of the Devil fit the Devil’s crime perfectly.

Nyssa’s overarching point was that the incarnation and death of Jesus, which seemed so un-godlike to some people, was the perfect demonstration of God’s justice, goodness and

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93 καταλαμβάνει τινα δικαιολογίας ἀφορμήν.
94 “Devise” translates ἐπινοηθῆναι and “a just way” translates τὸν δίκαιον τρόπον.
95 “Buy back” translates ἐξονείσθαι πάλιν.
96 οὐδεὶς ὁ κωλύων νόμος ἐστί.
97 ὁ θεός δὲ ἐστὶ τοῖς ἔπει τὸ κεφαλαίων ποιήσαι πάν ὅπερ ἂν ἐθέλοι λύτρον ἀντὶ τοῦ κατεχομένου λαβέιν.
98 περικαλύπτεται τῇ σαρκὶ ἡ θεότης.
99 τὸ σύντροφόν τε καὶ συγγενές.
100 “Appearance” translates τὸ φανέν, “desirable” translates ἐπιθυμητὸν, and “fearful” translates φοβερὸν.
wisdom. The Devil’s ransom was the central element in this argument, but it does not follow that Nyssa professed the Devil’s ransom because it demonstrated God’s justice and served to defend the incarnation. It might be argued that other theories of redemption would have demonstrated God’s justice just as well. It is likely but impossible to prove that, like Origen, Nyssa professed the Devil’s ransom in order to avoid the implications of a ransom to God. This hypothesis is made more likely by the fact that Nyssa’s friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, explicitly struggled with the conflict between his vision of God and the idea that Jesus sacrificed himself to the Father.

2.4.2 Gregory of Nazianzus

In *Oration 45,* he last homily, Gregory of Nazianzus set himself to “examine another fact and dogma, neglected by most people, but in my judgment well worth enquiring into.” He was referring to the function of Jesus’ sacrifice: “To whom was that blood offered that was shed for us, and why was it shed? I mean the precious and famous blood of our God and high priest and sacrifice.” Gregory acknowledged that a ransom to the Devil made sense. “[A] ransom belongs only to him who holds in bondage,” and “We were detained in bondage by the evil one, sold under sin, and receiving pleasure in exchange for wickedness.” This made it difficult to imagine a ransom to the Father. If Jesus offered himself “to the Father, I ask first, how? For it

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102 Ἐστι τοίνυν ἐξετάσαι πράγμα καὶ δόγμα, τοῖς μὲν πολλοῖς παραρέμενον, ἐμοὶ δὲ, καὶ λίαν ἐξεταζόμενον.

103 Τίνι γὰρ τὸ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν αἷμα, καὶ περὶ τίνος ἐχέθη, τὸ μέγα καὶ περιβόητον τοῦ Θεοῦ, καὶ ἀρχιερέως, καὶ θύματος;

104 τὸ λύτρον οὐκ ἄλλου τινὸς, ἢ τοῦ κατέχοντος γίνεται.

105 Κατειχόμεθα μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ, πεπραμένοι υπὸ τὴν ἀμαρτίαν, καὶ ἀντιλαβόντες τῆς κακίας τὴν ἡδονήν.
was not by him that we were being oppressed.”

But there was a further problem: “On what principle did the blood of his only begotten Son delight the Father, who would not receive even Isaac, when he was being offered by his father, but changed the sacrifice, putting a ram in the place of the rational victim?” (Or. 45.22.8-10, col. 653).

Like Origen, Gregory did not believe that God required sacrificial payments as the price of forgiveness. It was difficult for him to imagine any reason that God would have wanted such a sacrifice. Thus, Gregory was a perfect candidate for the Devil’s ransom. Surprisingly and famously, he rejected it. He said, “If [Jesus offered himself] to the evil one, fie upon the outrage! If the robber receives a ransom, not only from God, but a ransom which consists of God himself, and has such an illustrious payment for his tyranny, a payment for whose sake it would have been right for him to have left us alone altogether” (Or. 45.22.9-10, col. 653).

The problem was two-fold. First, Gregory did not agree with his friend, Gregory of Nyssa, that the Devil’s dominion over humanity was lawful. According to the Nazianzen, the Devil was a robber and a tyrant. It would have been inappropriate, he thought, for God to have paid off such an outlaw. Second, the price was too high. The ransom consisted of “God himself,” who was infinitely more valuable than the captives he ransomed. It was an unfair deal – God was gypped, which surely was unworthy of his majesty.

The key to this puzzle may lie in Gregory’s Christology. As Chapter 6 showed, Origen believed that Jesus’ divine and human components had separated at the point of death and that

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106 Ὠψ ύπ’ ἐκεῖνου γὰρ ἐκρατούμεθα.

107 τίς ὁ λόγος, Μονογενοῦς αἷμα τέρπειν Πατέρα, δὲς οὐδὲ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ ἐδέξατο παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς προσφέρομενον, ἀλλὰ ἀντιλλάξατο τὴν θυσίαν, κριόν ἀντιδοὺς τοῦ λογικοῦ θύματος:

108 Εἰ μὲν τῷ πνεύματι, φειδά τῆς ὕβρεως· εἰ μὴ παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν Θεὸν αὐτὸν λύτρον ὁ ληστής λαμβάνει, καὶ μισθὸν οὗτος ὑπερφυή τῆς ἑαυτοῦ τυραννίδος, δὴ ὅν καὶ ἡμῶν φειδάσθαι δίκαιον ἴν.
only Jesus’ humanity – his soul and blood – had been given to the Devil as a ransom. Origen assumed that a ransom consisting of Christ’s divinity was out of the question. Thus, for Origen, the Devil’s ransom would have been nonsensical without a split Christology in which the human and divine could function separately. Gregory of Nazianzus worked over a century later in a different theological climate. He emphasized the inseparable union of human and divine in Christ. For Gregory, a ransom to the Devil would have to have included Jesus’ divinity as well as his humanity. This is why he proclaimed the idea to be one of unthinkable hubris. Given the same Christological position, Origen would have agreed. Nazianzus differed from Origen, not because he viewed God, sin, and justice differently, but because he held a different Christology.

Nyssa, too, held a more unitive Christology than Origen. In his mind, Jesus’ divinity was included in the ransom. But this was not an outrage to Nyssa because he emphasized so emphatically God’s deception of the Devil, who did not know that he was receiving a divine ransom. For Nyssa, the divine nature of the ransom was not the overpayment of a tyrant – it was the strategy for overcoming the tyrant. Gregory of Nazianzus could have saved the Devil’s ransom in a similar way, but he did not do so for reasons that remain obscure.109

It is important to note that Gregory of Nazianzus did not reject the Devil’s ransom because he favored a sacrifice to God. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. In the end, Gregory did conclude that Jesus had offered himself to God, but not to satisfy any demand God

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109 Perhaps Gregory of Nazianzus rejected Gregory of Nyssa’s solution because it envisioned God using a deceptive strategy, but this is unlikely, given that Nicholas P. Constanas has pointed to a myriad of Church Fathers who believed in the deception of the Devil, though not necessarily in the Devil’s ransom (“The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative,” *HTiR* 97, no. 2 (2004)). Perhaps, on the other hand, Gregory of Nazianzus was not aware of his friend’s theory. As H. E. W. Turner observes, “It is . . . hard to believe that [Gregory of Nazianzus] has really grasped the significance of the views which he criticizes” (*The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (London: Mowbray, 1952), 60-61).
had made. This offering was necessary, “on account of the oikoumēna, and because humanity must be sanctified by the humanity of God, that he might deliver us himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to himself by the mediation of his Son, who also arranged this to the honor of the Father, whom it is manifest that he obeys in all things.” Here, Gregory failed to explain the mechanics of Jesus’ sacrifice to God and satisfied himself with stating that the “humanity of God” had been necessary to the process. Quite so; but in what way had this “humanity of God” sanctified sinners or overcome the Devil or reunited people to God?

These questions are partly answered in a similar passage that appears in Gregory’s poem Against Apollinarius, written around the same period. Once again, Gregory wrote, “I ask to whom the blood of God was poured out?” Note that this quotation does not treat the blood of sacrifice or ransom as purely human: it is the “blood of God.” After presenting, once more, objections to the idea of an offering to the Devil as well as to the idea of an offering to God, Gregory suggested, “Or this is true, that he offers [his blood] to God in order that he himself may snatch us from our captor and receive Christ in exchange who had utterly fallen; for the one who anointed [ὁ χρίσας] cannot be captured.” Christ made his offering to God. So much is clear. But now the passage becomes difficult to understand unless we take αὐτός as a reference to God

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110 οὐκ αἰτήσας, οὐδὲ δεηθείς.

111 διὰ τὴν οἰκουμέναν, καὶ τὸ χρῆμα ἀγιασθῇ τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ τοῦ θεοῦ τὸν ἀνθρωπὸν ἵνα αὐτὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξέληται, τοῦ τυράννου βίαν κρατήσας, καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἐπαναγάγῃ διὰ τοῦ Υἱοῦ μεσιτεύσαντος, καὶ εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ Πατρὸς τοῦτο οἰκονομήσαντος, ὅ τα πάντα παραχωρῶν φαίνεται.

112 Translations from De Incarnatione, adversus Apollinarium (Apoll.) are my own. For critical edition, see Poemata dogmatica 10 (PG 37.470.65-73).

113 Ζητῶ τὸ αἷμα τῷ προσερήψθῇ θεοῦ;

114 Ἡ τοῦτον ἅλθες, αὐτὸν προσφέρειν θεῷ, ἵνα αὐτὸς ἡμᾶς τὸν κρατοῦντος ἀρπάσῃ, ἔλθῃ τε ἀντάλλαγμα τοῦ πεπτωκότος / Τον Χριστὸν ὁ χρίσας γὰρ οὐχ ἀλώσιμος.
himself. In this case, Christ’s offering to God somehow resulted in a rescue mission in which God snatched humanity from the Devil.\(^{115}\) Why Christ’s sacrifice was necessary to accomplish this is not clear, but note that the redemption was a rescue from “our captor” the Devil, not a deliverance from the wrath and just punishment of God.\(^{116}\) It is interesting to compare with this Origen’s idea that Jesus offered himself to the Father in the sense that he made himself available as a ransom that could be given to the Devil (see Chapter 6). In both cases, Jesus’ offering to the Father preceded a ransom to (or conquest of) the Devil.

2.4.3 Lactantius and Theodoret

This chapter has shown that certain Christian thinkers, such as Origen and the Gregories, espoused a relatively philosophical view of God. There are indications in their work that they found this view of God difficult to reconcile with the idea that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice or ransom to God the Father. Perhaps this was why all three thinkers were drawn to the Devil’s ransom as an alternative, even if, in Gregory of Nazinazus’ case, he could not accept it.

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\(^{115}\) If this is the correct interpretation, the last phase in the quotation indicates that God (“the one who anointed”) could affect a rescue mission without being susceptible to captivity himself. This would seem to go without saying.

\(^{116}\) Karl Holl seems to find in Gregory a proto-Lutheran position (Amphiloctius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den grossen Kappadozieren (Tübingen: Mohr, 1904), 178-96). I find other scholarly interpretations of Gregory equally unsatisfying. Frances M. Young believes that, behind Gregory’s vague language about the atonement, there is the concept of what she calls the “Divine Dilemma,” which she attributes to Athanasius. She explains Athanasius’ position. God had decreed that if people sinned, they would die. God wanted to save his fallen people, but he could not simply annul his decree that they would die. A debt was owed to death to preserve God’s integrity. God accepted Christ’s blood as a payment of that debt, in this way saving humanity and preserving the honor of God at the same time. Young admits that Gregory did not directly articulate this view, but she believes that it very likely lay under the surface (Use of Sacrificial Ideas: 192-211). In my reading, this interpretation is very unlikely to be correct. On the other hand, Donald F. Winslow argues that the overarching theme in Gregory’s soteriology is the \(\theta\varepsilon\omega\sigma\iota\) of human beings through the incarnation and death of Christ. Winslow believes that \(Or. 45.22\) fits into this framework. In this view, it would appear that Gregory has left the term “ransom” behind and is expressing a traditional organic view of salvation, which includes multiple elements that are not systematically reconciled (The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979)). Especially the poem Apoll., which Winslow does not mention, shows Gregory grappling with the precise meaning and function of Jesus “ransom” and payment of blood. This cannot be subsumed under the umbrella of Gregory’s theory of \(\theta\varepsilon\omega\sigma\iota\).
This chapter has also shown that other Christians, such as Lactantius and Theodoret, rejected the philosophical God. They affirmed that God was angered by sin, that he punished sinners, and that he could be turned from anger to kindness by repentance, prayer, and sacrifice. One would expect these Christian thinkers to naturally accept the idea that Jesus offered himself to the Father for the remission of sins. Unfortunately, the data is complex. There was no clean division between philosophically minded Christians who espoused the Devil’s ransom and non-philosophically minded Christians who espoused a theory of sacrifice to the Father.

Lactantius is not a helpful witness in resolving this question, for he said almost nothing about the function of Jesus’ death. Theodoret is a confusing witness: since he accepted propitiatory reciprocity and sin offerings, one would expect him to have said that Jesus propitiated the Father, but the few times he touched upon Jesus’ ransom, he envisioned it being offered to death or to the Devil. Theodoret hesitated to develop this theory precisely. He qualified the term λύτρον with οἶόν τι – “a sort of ransom.” His main point in these passages seemed to be, not that there had been a transaction with the Devil, but that Jesus had layed down his life in love on our behalf. This followed a pattern apparent in earlier Christian thinkers. Clement of Alexandria, for example, used the word λύτρον to mean that Jesus had laid down his life in love for people, but he did not speculate on the function of Jesus’ death.

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117 *Interp. Rom.* 2.43 (*PG* 82.col.84C), 8.81 (*PG* 82.129A).


119 *Paed.* 1.9.85; *Quis dives salvatur* (q.d.s.) 37.4-5.
2.4.4 Eusebius of Caesarea

Theodoret’s example is a warning against making grand assumptions. Still, figures such as Eusebius tend to confirm that there was a correlation between the philosophical view of God and the Devil’s ransom, on the one hand, and between a non-philosophical view of God and the idea that Jesus had paid a price to the Father, on the other hand. Eusebius (c.263-339) was fully comfortable with the wrath and judgement of God in salvation history, as can be seen in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Thus, the propitiation of God presented no problem. In the *Demonstration of the Gospel*, Eusebius countered the Pythagorean view that animals possessed rational souls and that sacrificing them was murder. The Pythagoreans claimed that the earliest peoples sacrificed only inanimate things and that the corruption of animal sacrifice emerged at a later date. Eusebius disagreed. According to the Hebrew Bible, one of the first men, Abel, sacrificed animals, which pleased God more than the vegetal offerings of Cain. Noah and Abraham followed Abel’s example (1.10.34-35a).

Such animal sacrifices were not accidental. These men were holy, close to God, and their souls were illumined by the Divine Spirit. Thus, they knew “that there was need of great stress on the cleansing of the sons of men.”

They thought that a ransom was due to the source of life and soul in return for their own salvation. And then as they had nothing better or more valuable than their own life to sacrifice, in place of it they brought a sacrifice through that of the unreasoning beasts, providing a life instead of their own life. . . . [They had] learned that it was the animal’s blood, and that in the blood is the principle of life, which they offered themselves, sacrificing as it were to God one life instead of another (1.10.35.a-b).\(^\text{121}\)

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\(^{121}\) ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἔωρον, ἂν τὸν τρόπον εὔσεβείας καὶ θεῷ προσφεκτομένου θείῳ τε πνεύματι τᾶς ψυχῆς περιστερισμένου, μεγάλης αὐτοῦς θεραπείας δεῖν εἰς ἀποκάθαρσιν τῶν θνητῶν πλημμελημάτων, λύτρον τῆς αὐτῶν σωτηρίας τῷ καὶ
In support, Eusebius quoted Leviticus: “For the life of all flesh is the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your sins: for the blood shall make atonement for the soul” (1.10.35.c, Lev. 17.11). According to Eusebius, Moses in this passage “says clearly that the blood of the victims slain is a propitiation in the place of human life” (1.10.35.c). This is why the law “requires him who is sacrificing always to lay his hands on the head of the victim . . . as one offering a sacrifice on behalf of himself” (1.10.35.d).

By “the offering of animals to pay a ransom for their own life . . . the holy men of old [were] anticipating by the Holy Spirit that a holy victim, dear to God and great, would one day come for men, as the offering for the sins of the world, believing that as prophets they must perform in symbol his sacrifice.” This was “Christ of God . . . sacrificed like a sheep for the whole human race” (1.10.36.b-c). He was, as Isaiah said, “wounded on account of our sins . . . the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed” (1.10.36.d).

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122 ψυχή πάσης σαρκός ἁμα αὐτοῦ ἔστιν, καὶ ἐγὼ δὲ δῶκα υἱὸν τοῦ ἁμα ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστήριον, ἐξίλασκεσθαι περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν υἱῶν. Lev. 17.11 posed various problems and opportunities for Hellenistic Jews and Christians. In the Dialogus cum Heraclide (Dial.), Origen countered those who used it to argue for the mortality of the soul. For the verse’s role in Philo and Origen’s considerations of the composition of the human person and the location of its ruling principle, see Brent Douglas Gilbert, “The Image of God, Greek Medicine and Trinitarian Polemic in Gregory of Nyssa’s De Hominis Opificio” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2014), 57-60, 108-10.

123 σαρκὸς γὰρ ἀντὶ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ψυχῆς τὸ τῶν σφαγιαζομένων ψυχῶν ἁμα φησιν ἐξίλασκεσθαι.

124 ταῖς διὰ ψυχῶν θυσίας λύτρα τῆς ἑαυτῶν ψυχῆς . . . ως καὶ ἔπραττον οἱ πάλαι θεοφιλεῖς, σεμνόν τι καὶ θεοφιλές καὶ μέγα ἱερέων ἤξειν ποτὲ εἰς ἀνθρώπους τῷ θείῳ πνεύματι προειληφότες, τοῦ τῶν παντὸς καθάρσιον κόσμου. οὔ καὶ τὰ σῶμαλα τέως ἐπίτελεν αὐτοὺς, προφήτης ὡς τί καὶ τὸ μέλλον ἔσεσθαι προτυπομένους.

125 Οὕτως δ’ ἦν ὁ Χριστὸς τοῦ θεοῦ . . . προβάτου δίκην ὑπὲρ παντὸς τοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους σφαγῆσεθαι.

126 αὐτός δὲ ἐτραυμάτισθη διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν . . . παιδία εἰρήνης ἡμῶν ἐπ’ αὐτῶν, τῷ μόλωπι αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς ἰάθημεν.
He was “the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world,” “the great and precious ransom,” the “propitiation for the whole world, the life given for the life of men” (1.10.37.a).127

Eusebius’ view in this regard was diametrically opposed to that of Origen. Eusebius’ God, like the God of Lactantius and Theodoret, was angry with sinners, punished evildoers, and could be moved to kindness by repentance, prayer, and sacrifice. Thus, Eusebius had no problem with the idea that Jesus had offered himself as a sacrifice or ransom to the Father in place of the souls of sinners, and he had no need to use the Devil’s ransom to dismiss this idea. Not surprisingly, the Devil’s ransom was almost completely absent from Eusebius’ work – almost, but not quite.

In the *Demonstration of the Gospel* 10.8, Eusebius again described Jesus’ redemptive work, using the terms λύτρον, ἀντίψυχον and καθάρσιον (10.8.33). His description paralleled the one quoted above in many ways. “[T]o wash away our sins he was crucified, suffering what we who were sinful should have suffered, as our sacrifice and ransom” (10.8.35).128 But, in this passage, Jesus was “delivered up by the Father,” who “gave him for our sins.” God forsook Jesus on the cross so that he might “ransom the whole human race, buying them with his precious blood from their former slavery to their invisible tyrants, the unclean daemons, and the rulers and spirits of evil” (10.8.37).129

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127 “The great and precious ransom” translates τὸ μέγα καὶ τίμιον λύτρον, “the propitiation for the whole world” translates τὸ τοῦ παντὸς κόσμου καθάρσιον, “the life given for the life of men” translates τὸ πάντων ἀνθρώπων ἀντίψυχον. Eusebius’ understanding of redemption, like that of the other Fathers, was complex and multifaceted. The passage just quoted was followed by the statement: “by [Christ’s] inspired and mystic teaching all we Gentiles have procured the forgiveness of our former sins” (τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τῶν προτέρων ἁμαρτημάτων) (1.10.37.b). Eusebius did not explain how the didactic and substitutionary elements of Christ’s ministry fit together.

128 καὶ ἐπὶ πρὸς τούτοις τὰς ἡμετέρας ἁμαρτίας ἀναμαξάμενος ἐσταυρώθη, ὃ ἐχρήν ἡμᾶς τοὺς πρὶν ἁσκεῖς παθένην, ἀντίψυχον ἡμῶν καὶ ἀντίλυτρον γεγενημένος.
This fascinating passage implies that people were justly suffering for their sins under the power of evil daemons. God freed them from this suffering by delivering his own Son to suffer under the daemons in the place of sinners. This is certainly the Devil’s ransom, but it distinguishes itself from the theory of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa in that the daemons appear to be carrying out God’s just sentence against sinners. They are, in a sense, his agents. This gave Eusebius the flexibility of saying, in this passage, that Christ was a ransom to the demons, and, in Book 1, that he was a ransom to the Father.

In his mind, both could be true. The important point is that Eusebius was not using the Devil’s ransom to avoid saying that Jesus propitiated the Father. By this period, the Devil’s ransom had been a component of the Christian tradition for over one hundred years. It was part of the theology of many Christian thinkers. But they did not all use it in the same way. Origen used the Devil’s ransom to avoid theories of propitiating God. Very likely, Gregory of Nyssa did the same. Gregory of Nazianzus would have done so if his Christology (or his aversion to divine strategies of deception) had not prevented him. But Eusebius did not use it in this way; neither did Theodoret.

Conclusion

A consistent theme emerging from this chapter is that Christian intellectuals in the late third and fourth centuries were more likely than their predecessors to question philosophical assumptions about the divine nature and to read scriptural references to reciprocity (both positive and propitiatory) relatively literally. This tendency was strongest in Christians from North Africa.
and the Levant, but even the philosophically minded Gregories in Cappadocia were more open to prayers for material things than Origen, Clement or Tertullian. While noting this trend, it is important to emphasize that, at least regarding reactions to propitiatory reciprocity, the late third and fourth centuries were not a time of Christian consensus. Eusebius, Lactantius and Theodoret were favorable towards propitiation, but the Cappadocians were decidedly not.

The first half of this dissertation showed that late antique pagan Platonists held views of the divine nature that made reciprocity largely nonsensical. They were not, however, willing to reject outright traditional Greco-Roman religion, to which the reciprocal view of sacrifice was so central, so they used various strategies to reinterpret traditional sacrifice and prayer so as to bring them into line with philosophy. The second half of this dissertation has shown that, in the same period, similar ideas about the divine nature and similar strategies for appropriating traditional religion were playing out in the Christian tradition. What remains for the Conclusion is to consider the relationship between the pagan and the Christian story in this regard. In particular, the Conclusion will recognize the extent to which pagans and Christians came to different conclusions about reciprocity by the fourth century and speculate on how this difference might have helped Christianity to gain the upper hand in the socio-religious struggles of the age.
CONCLUSION

Contents

1 Validating Texts Versus Preserving Rituals 296
2 Concerns about the Sociological Consequences of Theological Beliefs 298
3 Contrasting pagan and Christian Responses to Reciprocity 302
   3.1 Christian Reinterpretations More Loyal to Religious Tradition 302
   3.2 Greater Openness of Fourth-Century Christians to Reciprocity 303
   3.3 The Christian advantage over Pagan Platonism 306

This conclusion will compare and contrast the pagan Platonic discourse on prayer and sacrifice (Chapters 1-4) with the Christian discourse on these topics (Chapters 5-7). It will also speculate that the greater openness of late-third and fourth-century Christian intellectuals towards reciprocity gave them an advantage over pagans in the socio-religious contests of that era. This speculation risks reaching beyond the topical bounds of this dissertation, but it serves to illustrate the potential historical significance of the data that has been considered.
Porphyry and Iamblichus disagreed sharply over the direction that Plotinian (perhaps we should say Ammonian) philosophy was to take. Unlike Porphyry, Iamblichus emphasized that the material things used in theurgic sacrifice could mediate a union with the gods. This meant that even unphilosophic individuals could be moved towards an ascent to the divine through sacrifice – something Porphyry largely denied. I have claimed in Chapter 4 that there was (connected to these differences) another disagreement of equal or greater importance – a disagreement over how one was to reinterpret traditional religion and appropriate it for philosophy. At the risk of oversimplification, one might say that Porphyry emphasized the preservation of religious texts, while Iamblichus emphasized the preservation of religious rituals.

Their different approaches to the *Iliad* 9.497-501 illustrate the point. In this passage, Phoenix advises Achilles to relent and forgive. Even the gods, he argues, are pliable: “when one has transgressed and gone wrong, people placate them with sacrifices and gentle prayers, drink-offerings and smoking meat.” Porphyry’s theory of evil daemons allowed him to read this passage very literally and to honor Homer for the divine wisdom it contained. According to this view, Homer had been right to say that the gods (meaning evil daemons) were changeable and could be turned from wrath by blood sacrifices. For those who had not achieved philosophical

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1 The central place of Ammonius has been emphasized recently in Elizabeth DePalma Digeser’s *A Threat to Public Piety*.

2 A fragment of *De regressu animae* (*Regr. anim*.), found in Augustine, indicates that physical sacrifice could advance unphilosophic people to a certain point but no further. Digeser and those who believe that Porphyry helped to incite the Great Persecution make much of this, but note that it is one fragment with few parallels in the rest of Porphyry’s work.

3 For translation, see Clark, *On Abstinence*: 157, no. 322. The Homeric text is as follows: στρεπτοὶ δὲ τε καὶ θεοὶ αὐτοί, / τὸν περ καὶ μείζων ἀρετῆς τιμή τε βίη τε. / καὶ μὲν τοὺς θεόεσσαι καὶ εὐχολῆς αγανήσι / λοιβὴ τε κνίση τε παρατρωποῦσ’ ἄνθρωποι / λισσόμενοι, οὗτος τε ὑπερβήνη καὶ ἀμάρτη.
purity, such aversions were a necessary part of life. Using the same method, Porphyry could have read and honored as correct almost any religious account or story of reciprocal sacrifice in the tradition. What Porphyry could not do was condone contemporary blood sacrifice as something that led towards the higher life. For him, such propitiation of evil daemons bound one more and more firmly to the material and passionate world and increased one’s susceptibility to the daemons. Thus, Porphyry’s theory, so facile in validating the texts of the religious tradition, involved the disparagement of present ritual practice.

Iamblichus’ theurgic reinterpretation of sacrifice exhibited the opposite tendency. Because he did not give himself the option of using evil daemons as scapegoats, he had to reject outright Homer’s statement in the *Iliad* 9.497-501 that propitiatory sacrifices could persuade the gods to relent. By the same principle, Iamblichus would have had to reject nearly all the traditional texts and stories about sacrifice as impious delusions. He argued that, from time immemorial, wise people had known that theurgy was the proper understanding of sacrifice, but he would have been hard pressed to validate this claim. However, theurgy had the advantage of allowing Iamblichus to preserve almost untouched the practice of religious rites. Unlike Porphyry, he was able to argue fairly persuasively for the importance of ongoing physical sacrifices.

In light of Chapters 5-7, this conflict between Porphyry and Iamblichus should catch our attention: it mirrors in some ways the conflict between the Marcionites and Christian thinkers such as Origen. Marcion’s evil Demiurge, like Porphyry’s evil daemons, allowed him to read very literally the Hebrew Bible’s references to divine changeability, anger and vengeance. Thus he validated the text, but, in doing so, he made it irrelevant for the future. In contrast, Origen
reinterpreted (sometimes dramatically) references to divine wrath, etc. in the Hebrew Bible. This did some violence to the text but it ensured its continuing relevance for true religion as Origen saw it.

2 Concerns about the Sociological Consequences of Theological Beliefs

One of the contrasts between Plato and late antique Platonism made in Chapters 1-4 requires further consideration in light of the Christian sources discussed in the second half of this dissertation. Plato had a practical bent. In his discussions of propitiation, he assumed that the gods generally blessed the righteous and punished the wicked. This was good for society. Fear of divine judgment discouraged people from committing injustice and led to a moral and safe community. Plato’s main reason for attacking the belief in propitiation was that it undermined this positive effect. He observed that, when people believed that they could avoid divine punishments through sacrifice, they committed injustices freely. It is true that Porphyry once repeated this perspective, but he did so without conviction and for the sake of argument. In general, he and other late antique Platonists showed none of Plato’s concern about the social consequences of theological beliefs.

For example, Porphyry believed that the gods (because they were utterly harmless) did not directly punish the wicked for their sins. In this view, there was no reason for the wicked to fear disaster or for the virtuous to hope for material reward. Quite the opposite. The wicked very well might prosper, and the righteous might suffer greatly. In Porphyry’s ascetic scheme, this was of no consequence: the wicked were punished in the only way that mattered – the ascent of their souls was inhibited – and the righteous were blessed in the only way that mattered – their
souls freed themselves from matter and joined with the divine nature. To Plato, the social consequences of this perspective would have been appalling. He would have worried that, without the fear of temporal divine judgments, the wicked would run rampant. As far as we know, this worry never occurred to Porphyry. For him, cities and those who valued material things were already entangled in relationships with evil daemons. As far as Porphyry was concerned, this was of no concern to philosophers: cities could, quite literally, go to the Devil.⁴

Like Plato, Porphyry rejected the belief in propitiation; but he did so, not because it encouraged wickedness, but because it revealed a misconception of the gods – it implied that they were responsible for material disasters and misfortunes and that they were liable to persuasion and change. In his mind, such a misconception was the height of impiety. While Plato was concerned about social consequences, Porphyry was concerned about correct theology, personal ascent and salvation. In this area, Iamblichus exhibited the same tendency as his former master. Note that he never defended his belief in propitiation against Plato’s old argument that it would corrupt society. One can see a similar trend half a century earlier in Origen. For example, he complained in *On First Principles* that the *simpliciores* read the Hebrew Bible literally and thus believed that God was worse than the most reprehensible of men. This was a problem, in Origen’s mind, because it showed a misconception of God and played into the hands of Marcionites and Gnostics. Significantly, Origen did not seem to have been worried that the *simpliciores’* belief in an angry, vengeful God would lead them to be angry and vengeful themselves.

⁴ See particularly *Abst.* 2.41-43. The fact that Porphyry spent considerable time in Rome does not necessarily indicate that he valued civic aspirations or concerned himself with the city’s future.
Let us contrast the attitude of Origen, Porphyry and Iamblichus with that of the Christian bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus, in whom Plato’s concern about the social consequences of theological belief lived again, albeit in a very different form. As seen in Chapter 7, Theodoret criticized Plato’s claim that propitiatory sacrifice and prayer could not persuade the gods to pardon sin. If Plato were right, he reasoned, sinners had no means of getting back on God’s good side: thus, there was no reason for them to repent. They might as well continue in their unjust ways (*Cohr.Gr.* 23b). Both Plato and Theodoret were concerned about the social consequences of these ideas, but, while Plato thought that *belief* in propitiation bred wickedness, Theodoret thought that *disbelief* in propitiation bred wickedness.

Theodoret’s criticism of Plato was based on misreading. The philosopher had said that divine judgments upon sinners could not be changed by sacrifices, but Theodoret took this to mean that divine judgments remained upon a person forever. In actuality, Plato saw divine wrath as a temporary disciplinary measure that would pass when the offender reformed. Therefore, when Plato said that propitiation did not work, he did not cut off all hope from those experiencing divine discipline. In light of this, Theodoret’s disagreement with Plato is of little consequence. The important point is that both worried (or at least argued) that false theological beliefs would encourage wickedness in society – a worry that was absent from the thinking of Origen, Porphyry and Iamblichus.

Perhaps one could explain this phenomenon by noting that Plato and Theodoret were firmly rooted in the πόλις but that Origen and the Neoplatonists were not. Plato and his community cared to shape future generations so as to preserve the stability and honor of Athens.

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5 Perhaps Iamblichus was rejecting a view like this when he said that divine wrath was not, “as is believed in some quarters, any sort of ancient and abiding anger [ἐ̄μονος ὀργή]” (*Resp.Porph. 3.3.3* [1.13]).
The philosopher worried about the influence the false theology of the poets would have on young men. On the other hand, his countrymen worried about the dangerous effects of Socrates’ theological ideas. The Neoplatonists lived in a different world. They may have dreamed of Platonopolis and aspired to advising emperors, but they were more distant from the daily life and future of their communities than their ancient master. Origen, too, had led a life formed in the late antique philosophical mold, in spite of his work as a catechist, priest and homilist. His commentaries suggest a small audience of intellectual Christians working through problems together, reminiscent of the study groups that would form around Plotinus in Rome. In contrast to this, the Christian thinkers of the fourth and fifth centuries were bishops – men in charge of communities and with a vested interest in their wellbeing. They would have been keenly aware how theological ideas could encourage or discourage morality in their congregations. Surely this explains why Theodoret, unlike Origen and the Neoplatonists, mentioned the social consequences of theological beliefs. The effect the Christian episcopate may have had upon theological reflection should be kept in mind as we turn to compare the responses of Christian and pagan intellectuals to reciprocity.

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7 To be sure, some of the figures described by Eunapius had a vested interest in the civic good, but I suggest that this was not generally true of the Neoplatonists, or not to the same degree. Cf. Clark, "Introduction," 15-19; Johnson, *Religion and Identity*: 179.

8 See Aaron P. Johnson’s discussion of the groups that formed around Plotinus (Religion and Identity: 152-53). Johnson points to his discussion of similar study groups in Christian communities in his paper “Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica as literary experiment,” in *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

9 In addition, as Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* shows, the Christians of this period sometimes portrayed membership in the Church as citizenship. Cf. Mark Humphries, *Communities of the Blessed: Social Environment and Religious Change in Northern Italy, AD 200-400* (New York: Oxford University, 1999).
3 Contrasting Pagan and Christian Responses to Reciprocity

3.1 Christian Reinterpretations More Loyal to Religious Tradition

Chapter 7 depicted Christian attempts to bring scriptural stories of reciprocity into line with the philosophical view of God as a bell curve, ramping up in the Apologists, peaking with Origen, and tailing off with Eusebius, Lactantius, the Cappadocians, Chrysostom and Theodoret, some of whom explicitly rejected the philosophical God and explicitly accepted both propitiatory and positive reciprocity. With this in mind, I wish to highlight two contrasts between the Christian and pagan narratives. First, even at the height of the bell curve, Origen’s attempts to reinterpret his Judeo-Christian tradition in keeping with philosophy were less destructive to that tradition than the reinterpretations of Greco-Roman religion employed by the Middle Platonists before him and the Neoplatonists after him. Origen and Porphyry’s use of evil daemons is a case in point. The daemons allowed Porphyry to take Greco-Roman traditions of reciprocal sacrifices as accurate accounts; but, in the process, these sacrifices were shown to be injurious to (and unnecessary for) the religion of the wise. In contrast, Origen’s theory of the Devil’s ransom did not dismiss the significance of Jesus’ sacrificial death. According to him, Jesus’s act of ransom was a necessary and wondrous redemption from the Devil’s power with ongoing significance.\[10\]

Origen’s defense of prayers of request, as compared to that of Iamblichus, is another example of Christianity’s greater loyalty to its tradition. Iamblichus explained answers to prayer in two ways. First, he said that the gods predestined people to pray for what they already

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\[10\] It echoed pagan stories of human self-sacrifices of aversion to evil daemons (in Origen’s interpretation) that had also been necessary in some mysterious way. Thus, ironically, Origen was more positive about these stories than Porphyry.
intended to give or do. \(^{11}\) Second, he said that, when people were ecstatically united with the divine through theurgic sacrifice, their purpose was so united with the purpose of the gods that their prayers matched the intention of the gods. In neither of these explanations did people’s requests affect the divine plan. In contrast, Origen said that God foresaw all the prayers that would be made, decided what he would answer in each case, and incorporated these answers into his one, unchanging plan, formulated before time. This made prayers of request acts of human freedom that affected the divine plan, even if that effect took place before the prayer was made (or outside of time altogether). Thus, both Origen and Iamblichus avoided the philosophically problematic idea that God changed his plan on the fly in response to human requests, but Origen’s solution accorded real power to prayer.

3.2 Greater Openness of Fourth-Century Christians to Reciprocity

The second point of contrast is that the pagan Platonists’ rejection of reciprocity did not fit a bell curve. As mentioned above, Christian thinkers in the late third and fourth centuries became increasingly open to reciprocal interactions with God, even when they included prayers for material blessings. \(^{12}\) To some extent, this transition had a pagan parallel in theurgy, which became dominant in fourth-century Neoplatonism and valued the role of material things in contrast to the immaterial focus of Middle Platonism, Plotinus and Porphyry. Notwithstanding, the theurgists Iamblichus and Sallustius rejected reciprocity even more firmly than Porphyry, as

\(^{11}\) I recognize that this idea was also present in some Christian texts.

\(^{12}\) Everett Ferguson makes a related observation. He writes, “What began in Christianity as a metaphorical and spiritual conception was by the age of Constantine ready to be taken literally again. The extension of sacrificial language had come to encompass the ministry as a special priesthood (Cyprian), the table as an altar, and buildings as temples (Eusebius). Sacrifice was increasingly materialized and traditional content was put into the words” (“Spiritual Sacrifice,” 1189).
Chapter 4 showed. The latter had accepted (to the extent that he thought in terms of theological drama) that virtuous people pleased the gods and received answers to their prayers for spiritual help. In contrast, the theurgists drained religion of theological drama. Due to the subtlety of the theurgic reinterpretation of religion, these philosophers were able to retain traditional rituals almost untouched, but they conceded almost nothing to the traditional understanding of human interactions with the gods.\(^\text{13}\)

This raises a question: why were late-third and fourth-century Christian intellectuals moving towards reciprocity when their pagan counterparts were keeping their distance? It may be helpful to consider first why Christian intellectuals in all periods were more open to reciprocity than the pagan Platonists – as mentioned in the section above, even the philosophically minded Origen was more loyal to his religious tradition than his pagan counterparts. Part of the answer lies in the high Judeo-Christian view of scriptural authority. It is true that Porphyry devoted a number of books to the philosophical interpretation of oracles, images, and astrology, but his attitude towards them does not come close to Origen’s devotion to the Scriptures – a devotion that kept him and other Christian intellectuals from dismissing traditional reciprocity with Neoplatonic abandon.

This does not explain, however, the increasing Christian acceptance of reciprocity in the late third and fourth centuries. I suggest two reasons for the transition. First, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement and Origen were engaged in a battle for the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps their desire to save

\(^{13}\) Perhaps one of Anthony Meredith’s comments is pertinent here. In summing up pagan criticisms of Christianity from Celsus to Julian, he writes, “The Christian and the Jewish God was too particular, too bound up with a particular race and with particular historical circumstances; he was also far too little bound by the rules of the predictable and the fitting. He was too arbitrary and therefore too irrational to fit into the impersonal, static picture of god taught either by Middle or by Neoplatonism” ("Porphyry and Julian against the Christians," *ANRW* 2, no. 23.2 (1980): 1148).
it from the accusations of pagan Philosophers, Marcionites and Gnostics led them to overemphasize its compatibility with philosophy. In the late third and fourth centuries, the battle had abated: theologians no longer feared that a more literal reading of the text would result in the loss of the Hebrew Bible and the victory of the heretics. This may account for the greater openness to reciprocity that characterized Christian thinkers in this later era.

Also, the growth of the Christian episcopacy, once again, may have played a role in the transition. As mentioned above, Tertullian, Clement and Origen were scholars, teachers and philosophers. In contrast, many of the theologians of the late third, fourth, and fifth centuries were bishops – directors of communities and shepherds of souls. This is of enormous significance. These men were arguably more aware of the religious aspirations and needs of the average Christian than their predecessors had been. As much as they may have wanted a life of philosophic asceticism and retreat from the arena of the city, they were immersed in this arena and were forced to deal with its complexities and concerns. No wonder they were more open to prayers for material blessings; no wonder they gravitated towards the reciprocal, human-like interactions with God that would have resonated with their congregations. The episcopal influence upon fourth-century Christian thought also helps to explain its contrast with pagan Platonism. Neoplatonists were not bishops, and their views of prayer and sacrifice showed it.¹⁴

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¹⁴ In this area, I part ways with Garth Fowden.
3.3 The Christian Advantage over Pagan Platonism

The upshot was that, in the fourth century, Neoplatonic theology was more distant from what some anthropologists\(^{15}\) would see as the natural religious impulses and needs of humanity, including the impulse to enter into reciprocal, human-like relationships with divine beings. This may have given Christians an advantage in the socio-religious contests of that era.

A hypothetical example will illustrate the point: imagine the different instructions that Sallustius and Chrysostom would have given a nobleman who sought divine protection before a dangerous voyage. Sallustius would have allowed him to pray for safety, but he might have added (perhaps in a philosophically superior tone) that his prayer, and the positive or negative outcome that would follow it, had been predetermined by the gods – there was no sense in which, by prayer, he would change this predetermination. Or Sallustius might have said that the nobleman could offer a sacrifice under the direction of an accomplished theurgist and that the sacrifice would mediate his union with the gods or cosmic forces. This would mean that his prayers would match the divine purpose (whether that be positive or negative regarding his voyage). In addition, through sacrificial union with the divine, the man himself and his material concerns would become strong and rightly ordered through association with perfect divine principles. This last point would have afforded the nobleman some encouragement, but there would have been no social pattern to make sense of it. He would not have been allowed, as was surely his custom, to supplicate the gods as a client supplicated a patron in the Greco-Roman social system.

Had a similar nobleman (this time with Christian leanings) come to Chrysostom, the Bishop would probably have told him to value spiritual things above physical safety and business

\(^{15}\) See the Introduction to this dissertation.
success, but he would not have ruled out the possibility that the nobleman could humble himself before God, petition for a safe voyage, and receive divine protection. Gregory of Nyssa would have responded similarly. In this vision, God was not an impersonal force: he listened to prayer, considered the humility and spiritual state of suppliants, and sometimes chose to bless them. This would have been intelligible to the average Greco-Roman, and it would have offered encouragement and hope.

So, too, in the case of propitiation. Suppose our fictitious nobleman felt the curse of divine judgment after having committed some egregious injustice and wished for release. Sallustius would have told him that the mediating power of sacrifice could morally transform him and make him open once again to receiving divine blessing, but Sallustius would not have been able to explain how this moral transformation was accomplished.¹⁶ Sallustius’ response would not have resonated with the man’s sense that something or somebody was judging him for his actions. In contrast, Christian bishops would have said that baptism would apply to the nobleman’s sin the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice (whether made to God or to the Devil), a payment that appeased divine wrath towards the sinner or freed him from the bondage to evil that had resulted from his sin. If the nobleman were already baptized, the bishops would have prescribed confession, humility, and works of penitence. He would have been directed to seek the forgiveness of God rather like one sought the forgiveness of an angered patron. This was a god one could call “my God” – a being who condescended to the social forms that made him humanly intelligible. This more natural approach to religion may have given Christianity an advantage over paganism and contributed to its success in the fourth and fifth centuries. Perhaps

¹⁶ In my opinion, theurgy featured an unsuccessful coupling of the moral and ritual dimensions.
this helps to explain why there were many people in Antioch taking the body and blood of Jesus at the time when the Emperor Julian found the city ready to offer only one goose in honor of Apollo.¹⁷

¹⁷ Julian relates the disappointing episode in Misopogon 361d-362b [34]: “In the tenth month, according to your reckoning, -- Loos I think you [Antiochenes] call it -- there is a festival founded by your forefathers in honor of [Apollo], and it was your duty to be zealous in visiting Daphne. Accordingly I hastened thither from the temple of Zeus Kasios, thinking that at Daphne, if anywhere, I should enjoy the sight of your wealth and public spirit. And I imagined in my own mind the sort of procession it would be, like a man seeing visions in a dream, beasts for sacrifice, libations, choruses in honor of the god, incense, and youths of your city their surrounding the shrine, their souls adorned with all holiness and themselves attired in white and splendid raiment. But when I entered the shrine I found there no incense, not so much as a cake, not a single beast for sacrifice. For that moment I was amazed and thought that I was still outside the shrine and that you were waiting the signal from me, doing me that honor because I am supreme pontiff. But when I began to inquire what sacrifice the city intended to offer to celebrate the annual festival in honor of the god, the priest answered, ‘I have brought with me from my own house a goose as an offering to the god, but the city this time has made no preparations.’” For this translation, see Wilmer Cave Wright, Works of the Emperor Julian, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1913).
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308

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De principiis


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