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There and Back Again: Temporary Immortality in the Mithras Liturgy

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Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

There and Back Again: Temporary Immortality in The Mithras Liturgy

This immortalisation takes place three times a year.

γίγνεται δὲ ὁ ἀπαθανατισμὸς οὗτος τρις τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ.¹

Abstract: This article argues that many rituals previously categorised as rites of initiation because they fit the tripartite structure in Gennep’s rites of passage should be analysed in terms of another model, that of rites of purification or sanctification. In such rituals, the religious focus is upon the shifts in relationship with the god, rather than upon the change of status on earth or any change of lifestyle afterwards.

To the modern sensibility, to become immortal three times a year seems a paradox.² Immortality should be a permanent thing if anything is, so becoming immortal should be a once for all time transformation, a departure from the condition of mortality and passage into the permanent state of immortality. The temporary immortality promised by the ritual instructions for the so-called “Mithras Liturgy” challenges our assumptions about the nature of

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- 1 PGM 4.748–49. I make use of the text of the PGM in K. Preisendanz / A. Henrichs (eds.), *Papyri Graecae magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 vols., Stuttgart ²1973–1974, and the translation by Meyer in H.D. Betz *et al.*, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. Including the Demotic Spells*, Chicago 1997, with some modifications, especially from Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”. Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Tübingen 2003, where noted. I would like to thank Birgitte Bøgh and the other participants of the Conversion and Initiation conference for providing the opportunity to explore the issues in this paper and for their help and critiques, both during the conference and after. All errors remaining are the products of my own ignorance, carelessness, or obstinacy.
 - 2 As S.I. Johnston has noted, immortalisation “has a permanent ring to our ears, trained as we are to think in terms of the dichotomy ‘immortal vs. mortal’, and yet the Mithras Liturgy specifically mentions ‘immortalisation’ procedures that last only a day and that can be undertaken up to three times a year (line 747). Clearly, ‘becoming immortal’ (ἀπαθανατισμὸς) did not mean that the Liturgist became a god, as Heracles had for example, but rather that for the duration of the ritual he was of a status equal to the gods, or perhaps simply that he was protected from death” (*Rising to the Occasion. Theurgic Ascent in its Cultural Milieu*, in: P. Schäfer / H.G. Kippenberg (eds.), *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Symposium and Seminar*. Leiden 1997, 165–194 (179)). This paper is an attempt to take Johnston’s observation further and contextualise it within the practices of purification that were a necessary part of the interactions of mortal and divine.

immortality in the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, calling into question as well the modern models of initiation and conversion that have been used to understand the nature of rituals that bring the ritualist into a state of closer contact with the divine. In this paper, I examine the ritual ascent in the spell from the Great Paris Magical Papyrus (PGM 4.475–834), commonly known as the “Mithras Liturgy”, as a way to problematise these models and to argue that many rituals previously categorised as rites of initiation should be analysed in terms of another model, that of rites of purification, sanctification, or consecration.

The “Mithras Liturgy” was so named by Albrecht Dieterich, who saw in the text the traces of a genuine ritual of initiation into the cult of Mithras. The text gives detailed instructions for a rite of immortalisation (*ἀπαθανατισμός*) through a vividly described journey through the heavens to a meeting with the supreme god Helios Mithras. The spell occupies lines 475 to 834 of a 36 page papyrus codex now in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, labelled number 4 in Preisendanz’s collection of the Greek Magical Papyri, a group of texts dating mostly from the third and fourth centuries CE, probably from the region of Thebes in Egypt. For Dieterich, “a genuine Mithras liturgy of an ascension of the soul and its immortalisation, an *ἀπαθανατισμός*, has been inserted into a magical ritual for the exploration of the future.”³

While most scholars now agree with Nock that the “Mithras Liturgy” is neither a liturgy nor, properly speaking, “Mithraic”, recent scholars have nevertheless followed in Dieterich’s footsteps seeking the original ritual which has been inserted into the magic spell.⁴ Reinhold Merkelbach has argued that the text preserves the remnants of an initiatory ceremony for the consecration of priests of the Egyptian Pshai-Aion, adapted for magical use.⁵ The most recent editor, Hans Dieter Betz, rejects Merkelbach’s hypothesis, but nevertheless presumes that the magic spell has been adapted from a

3 A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig 1903, 85: “In die zur Erforschung der Zukunft ausgestaltete Zauberhandlung eine echte Mithrasliturgie der Himmelfahrt der Seele und ihrer Unsterblichmachung, ein *ἀπαθανατισμός*, eingelegt ist” (trans. of Betz, 2003, 136).

4 A.D. Nock, *Greek Magical Papyri*, in A.D. Nock / Z. Stewart (eds.), *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, Cambridge 1972, 176–194 (192). Originally published in *JEA* 15 (1929), 219–235.

5 R. Merkelbach / M. Totti, *Abrasax. Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen*, vol. 3 (*Zwei griechisch-ägyptische Weihezeremonien*), Opladen 1992, 40: “Es wird sich also auch bei der Pariser Unsterblichkeits-Liturgie ursprünglich um die Weihezeremonie für einen Priester hohen Ranges oder sogar einen König handeln, was in Ägypten beinahe dasselbe war. Das Ritual wird dann später so angepaßt worden sein, daß es auch bei Initiationen minderen Ranges Verwendung finden konnte.”

ritual that originally provided initiation.⁶ For many modern scholars, as for Dieterich, the fact that the ritual provides immortalisation indicates that it could not originally be intended for divination, but rather for the permanent transformation of the status of the ritualist, whether into the formal status of a priest or as an initiate of some kind of mystery cult.⁷ In the analysis, the Christian ritual of baptism often provides the model for such a transformation, a permanent rebirth into immortal life as a member of a privileged group. From such a perspective, the question to be asked is what was the *original* religious context of the rite? And what kind of mystery cult or temple *originally* used this ritual to admit members transformed by this process of deification?

I argue that this approach fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the ritual in the “Mithras Liturgy”. This text is better understood, not as an initiation ritual that brings the performer to a new status, but rather as a ritual that temporarily purifies him for a brief meeting with a god. Rather than looking to models of initiation into groups or conversion to a new mode of religious life, scholars should look instead to the pattern of rituals

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- 6 Betz seems to suggest that the text was devised by an Egyptian priest for the worship of Mithras in Egypt: “Conceivably, Egyptian learned priests such as the author of the Mithras Liturgy became devoted to Mithras, even while they served as priests in the Egyptian temples. The author’s intense devotion to Mithras should not be denied its own integrity. [...] Given the syncretistic aura of Hellenistic Egypt, there was plenty of room in the Egyptian temples for Egyptian as well as Greek deities, so why not Mithras? If the priests were charged with developing the liturgies appropriate for worshipping so many other deities, why not for Mithras?” (Betz, 2003, 23). He raises the possibility that it might not have been a strictly Mithraic cult, but he assumes that the ritual comes from the context of an initiation into a mystery cult: “Since he was initiated in a mystery cult, it could indeed have been an Egyptian adaptation of Mithraism, but it could have been just as well some other mystery cult which had appropriated Mithraic elements” (Betz, 2003, 137f.).
- 7 E.g., M. Smith: “The reviser turned it into a ritual for divination, which had to be repeated as new questions arose, but kept the wording of the earlier text which shows that its original purpose was once-for-all ‘immortalisation’, i.e., deification” (*Transformation by Burial (1 Cor 15:35–49; Rom 6:3–5 and 8:9–11)*, in: S.J.D. Cohen (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, vol. 1, Leiden 1996, 110–129 (127)). Cf. N. Janowitz: “As a ritual for immortalisation, the *Liturgy* was probably originally meant to effect a one-time transformation” (*Magic in the Roman World. Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, London 2001, 81). Merkelbach / Totti, 1992, 233: “Man wird doch eher vermuten, daß die aufwendige Zeremonie ursprünglich nur zu wenigen, ganz besonderen Anlässen benützt worden ist und erst sekundär zu verschiedenen Zwecken herangezogen wurde.” Even Johnston, 1997, 180, suggests that “initiation might magically help the magician resist” the lure of the evil demons encountered in the ascent.

designed to admit worshippers into a temple or other sacred space. Such rituals of purification or sanctification are common in the religions of the Graeco-Roman world, and they range in complexity from simple lustrations to elaborate practices of abstinence and purification. The greater the sanctity and the more significant the contact between mortal worshipper and the divine, the more complex the ritual must be, but scholars have often failed to see some of these most elaborate rituals of sanctification as part of the same spectrum of purification rituals, classifying them instead with initiation rituals. Petersen, however, draws some useful distinctions between initiations and purifications, pointing out that, while both are concerned with changing the state or essence of persons, the change wrought by an initiation is permanent, irreversible without other special ceremonies.⁸ By contrast, the change in state of a rite of purification is temporary, a special improvement along the spectrum of profane to pure that quickly wears off as the individual returns to contact with the ordinary world.

The “Mithras Liturgy”, then, must be understood as a form of extreme purification rather than the relic of an initiation. Rather than using the text to look back for some imagined original rite of initiation worthy of this process of immortalisation, we should analyse it for a better understanding of the dynamics of mortal and divine interactions in the religions of the ancient Graeco-Roman world. The ritualist goes through a process of temporary immortalisation in order to meet face to face with his god because he needs to be of the status of the immortals to meet with the immortals in their immortal world. The transformation in the “Mithras Liturgy” is not an initiation, a permanent movement from one status to another, but rather a journey there and back again – and again and again, if the magician so chooses.

The Mithras Liturgy à la van Gennep

The model most often employed by recent scholars for understanding rituals of initiation is van Gennep’s tripartite *rite de passage*, which handily divides the ritual into three phases of separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The initiand leaves his former state, passes through a liminal phase that involves contact with the divine, and returns to the world but with a new status. The new status may be that of an adult rather than a child, a married person

8 A.K. Petersen, *Rituals of Purification, Rituals of Initiation. Phenomenological, Taxonomical and Culturally Evolutionary Reflections*, in: D. Hellholm / T. Vegge / Ø. Norderval / C. Hellholm (eds.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism. Waschungen, Initiation und Taufe*, vol. 1, Berlin 2011, 3–40 (30): “The qualitative changes acquired by the ritual participant through the completion of the ritual are of an irreversible nature, i.e., they cannot be lost unless, and very seldom, a new narratively staged ritual process is initiated.”

instead of unmarried, a shaman or priest instead of a layman, an initiate instead of one of the profane mob, but the rite effects the transformation. The “Mithras Liturgy” is easily analysed as a rite of passage according to the schema of van Gennepe, with a phase of separation from the mortal world, a liminal phase at the very threshold of the divine world, and a return to the mortal world. This correspondence with the famous tripartite schema has led scholars to see the “Mithras Liturgy” as a rite of initiation, transposed perhaps in the decadent world of the syncretistic magician to a vulgar divinatory ritual, but whose *original* nature is revealed by this tripartite structure to be the initiation into some mystery cult. It is worth considering the “Mithras Liturgy” à la van Gennepe.

The spell illustrates, with vivid and graphic images, the phases of a van Gennepe rite of passage. The separation phase involves the magician leaving the familiar world of mortals and going to the fantastic world of the divine. The magician must first replace all of the mortal elements of his (or her) body, leaving behind the perishable nature of mortals in the corruptible mortal realm. The magician invokes the *archai*, the primal elements or original nature, of his being, going through air (*pneuma*), fire, water, and earth:

First origin of my origin, ΑΕΪΟΥΩ, first beginning of my beginning, PPP SSS PHR[] spirit of spirit, the first of the spirit in me, MMM, fire given by god to my mixture of the mixtures in me, the first of the fire in me, EY EIA EE, water of water, the first of the water in me, OOO AAA EEE, earthy substance, the first of the earthy substance in me, YE YOΕ, my complete body.⁹

Each of these mortal elements must be replaced with immortal elements – immortal water, immortal fire, immortal spirit – so that the magician may “envision the immortal [...], envision with immortal eyes – I, born mortal from mortal womb, but transformed by tremendous power and an incorruptible right hand!”¹⁰

Once the process of separating himself from his mortal elements and replacing them with immortal ones has taken place, the magician literally separates himself from the world of mortals, rising up through the heavens by breathing in the rays of the divine sun:

9 PGM 4.486–495: [Γ]ένεσις πρώτη τῆς ἐμῆς γενέσεως· αειριουω, ἀρχὴ τῆς ἐμῆς ἀρχῆς< > πρώτη πῖπῖ σσς φρ[·], πνεῦμα πνεύματος, τοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ πνεύματος πρῶτον μίμι, πῦρ, τὸ εἰς ἐμὴν κρᾶσιν τῶν (490) ἐν ἐμοὶ κρᾶσεων θεοδώρητον, τοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ πυρὸς πρῶτον ην ηια εη, ὕδωρ ὕδατος, τοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ ὕδατος πρῶτον ωω ααα εεε, οὐσία γεώδης τῆς ἐν ἐμοὶ οὐσίας γεώδους πρώτη υη υη, σῶμα τέλειον ἐμοῦ.

10 PGM 4.504–505; 517–520: Ἐποπτεύσω τὴν ἀθάνατον ἀρχὴν τῶ ἀθανάτῳ πνεύματι [...] τοῖς ἀθανάτοις ὄμμασι, θνητὸς γεννηθεὶς ἐκ θνητῆς ὑστέρας, βεβελτιωμένος ὑπὸ κράτους μεγαλοδυνάμου καὶ δεξιᾶς χειρὸς ἀφθάροτο.

Draw in breath from the rays, drawing up three times as much as you can, and you will see yourself being lifted up and ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in mid-air. You will hear nothing either of man or of any other living thing, nor in that hour will you see anything of mortal affairs on earth, but rather you will see all immortal things.¹¹

Through these preliminary rites, the magician has removed himself from the realm of mortal affairs and has set off on his journey to the divine.

This journey to the center of the universe takes place in the realm betwixt and between the realm of mortals and the fully divine world, and this journey is again easily understood in terms of the liminal phase of van Gennep's schema. While the magician does not pass through seven planetary spheres, he does pass through a celestial realm of the stars and planets, the visible gods, at the center of which lie the doors of the sun.¹² The magician then recites an incantation to open the fiery doors of the sun, at which point he stands upon the very limen, the threshold of the world of the supreme gods:

You will see the doors open and the world of the gods which is within the doors, so that from the pleasure and joy of the sight your spirit runs ahead and ascends. So stand still and at once draw breath from the divine into yourself, while you look intently.¹³

11 PGM 4.537–544: Ἐλκε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀκτίνων πνεῦμα γ' ἀνασπῶν, ὁ δὴ δύνα[σ]ται, καὶ ὄψῃ σεαυτὸν ἀνακουφιζόμενον [κ]αὶ ὑπερβαίνοντα εἰς ὕψος, ὥστε σε δοκεῖ[ν μ]έσον (540) τοῦ ἀέρος εἶναι· οὐδενὸς δὲ ἀκούσει [ο]ὔτε ἀνθρώπου οὔτε ζώου ἄλλ<ου>, οὐδὲ ὄψῃ οὐδὲν τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς θνητῶν ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ, πάντα δὲ ὄψῃ ἀθάνατα.

12 PGM 4.545–585. Dieterich saw a Mithraic passage through the seven spheres, an argument immediately rejected by Cumont and others because of the lack of correspondence with Mithraic monuments. Betz, 2003, 134–141, still divides the passage into seven scenarios, which he thinks do have a resonance with Mithraic imagery, but these seven scenarios do not correspond to planetary spheres. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the cosmology of the Mithras Liturgy is the tripartite division between sublunar material world, ouranian world of the stars and planets, and a hyperouranian realm of the gods; see R. Edmonds, *At the Seizure of the Moon. The Absence of the Moon in the Mithras Liturgy*, in: S.B. Noegel / J.T. Walker / B.M. Wheeler (eds.), *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, Pennsylvania 2003, 223–239; and id., *The Faces of the Moon. Cosmology, Genesis, and the Mithras Liturgy*, in: R. Boustan / A.Y. Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, Cambridge 2004, 275–295.

13 PGM 4.624–629: Καὶ ὄψῃ ἀνεργυῖας τὰς θύρας καὶ τὸν κόσμον τῶν θεῶν, ὅς ἐστιν (625) ἐντὸς τῶν θυρῶν, ὥστε ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ θεάματος ἡδονῆς καὶ τῆς χαρᾶς τὸ πνεῦμά σου συντρέχειν καὶ ἀναβαίνειν· στὰς οὖν εὐθέως ἔλκε ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀτενίζων εἰς σεαυτὸν τὸ πνεῦμα.

The magician does not enter fully into the world of the gods, but stands at the door to ask the Sun himself for an audience with the supreme ruler of the universe. This liminal experience continues as the advent of the greatest of gods is preceded by a chorus of seven asp-faced maidens and seven bull-faced youths, whom the magician must greet appropriately. Finally comes the epiphany of the supreme god:

You will see lightning-bolts going down, and lights flashing, and the earth shaking, and a god descending, a god immensely great, having a bright appearance youthful, golden-haired, with a white tunic and a golden crown and trousers, and holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young bull: this is the Bear which moves and turns heaven around, moving upward and downward in accordance with the hour. Then you will see lightning-bolts leaping from his eyes and stars from his body.¹⁴

The Persian trousers and the bull's shoulder mark this deity as Mithras, the higher sun for whom the visible sun is merely the door warden. The magician stands face to face with this supreme god and asks the god directly for favour, and the god responds directly. This direct contact of human and god is the ultimate liminal moment, the point at which the two worlds meet.

The final phase in van Gennepe's schema is reaggregation; the ritual must end with the magician's return to the ordinary world. The god departs (728), and the magician stands speechless in awe, but the impact of this meeting is so great that the magician will remember, in future times after the ritual has ended, every detail of the epiphany.¹⁵ Apart from this reference to the future, however, the "Mithras Liturgy" has nothing that corresponds to van

14 PGM 4.694–705: Ὅψη κατερχομένης ἀστραπᾶς καὶ φῶτα (695) μαρμαίροντα καὶ σειομένην τὴν γῆν καὶ κατερχόμενον θεὸν ὑπερμεγέθη, φωτινὴν ἔχοντα τὴν ὄψιν, νεώτερον, χρυσοκόμαν, ἐν χιτῶνι λευκῷ καὶ χρυσῷ στεφάνῳ καὶ ἀναξυρίσι, κατέχοντα τὴ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ μόνου (700) ὤμον χρύσειον, ὅς ἐστιν Ἄρκτος ἢ κινούσα καὶ ἀντιστρέφουσα τὸν οὐρανόν, κατὰ ὥραν ἀναπολεύουσα καὶ καταπολεύουσα· ἐπειτα ὄψη αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν ὀμμάτων ἀστραπᾶς καὶ ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἀστέρας ἄλλομένους.

15 PGM 4.724–733: "After you have said these things, he will immediately respond with a revelation (725). Now you will grow weak in soul and will not be in yourself, when he answers you. He speaks the oracle to you in verse, and after speaking he will depart. But you remain silent, since you will be able to comprehend all these matters by yourself; for at a later time (730) you will remember infallibly the things spoken by the great god, even if the oracle contained myriads of verses" (Ταῦτά σου εἰπόντος εὐθέως (725) χρησιμωθήσει. ὑπέκλυτος δὲ ἔσει τῆ ψυχῇ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σεαυτῷ ἔσει, ὅταν σοι ἀποκρίνηται. λέγει δέ σοι διὰ στίχων τὸν χρησιμὸν καὶ εἰπῶν ἀπελεύσεται, σὺ δὲ στήκεις ἐνεός, ὡς ταῦτα πάντα χωρήσεις αὐτομάτως, καὶ τότε (730) μνημονεύσεις ἀπαρραβᾶτως τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ ῥηθέντα, κὰν ἦν μυρίων στίχων ὁ χρησιμός).

Gennep's phase of reaggregation. The vivid images of the journey up to the heavens are not repeated in a journey back to earth, nor does the magician take an alternate route, shooting down as a star like the souls at the end of Plato's myth of Er.¹⁶ The spell provides no information about the magician's life after this ritual, no explanation of how this epiphany of Helios Mithras has changed his life, no description of the magician's new status in earthly life as a result of his experience.

The mystery of the Mithras Liturgy

This gap in the perfect van Gennepian schema is usually explained with reference to the presumed differences between the *original* ritual, which of course must have been a perfectly formed initiatory ritual, and the later, corrupted version, which merely made use, in magic's parasitical fashion, of the liturgy from a mystery cult. The *original* ritual, various scholars have argued, must have been an initiation that transformed the initiand into divine status. As Smith claims, "The reviser turned it into a ritual for divination which had to be repeated as new questions arose, but kept the wording of the earlier text which shows that its original purpose was once-for-all 'immortalisation' i.e., deification."¹⁷

However, the wording of the text does not, in fact, suggest that this hypothetical *original* ritual was cut off by the redacting magician just before the reaggregation phase. On the contrary, the text shows throughout that the immortalisation performed in the ritual is a temporary and repeatable experience, rather than a once-for-all deification. The performer of the rite never seeks a permanent change in identity, nor does his performance grant him admission into a group comprised of others who have been similarly deified. The references to mysteries in the text have led scholars to imagine a mystery cult group into which the performer was initiated (in the imagined *original* rite), but a closer examination of these references shows that such speculations depend less upon the text and more upon scholars' assumptions about the evolution of religion from authentic mystery cults to decadent magical syncretisms.

To be sure, the text does show that it is the product of redaction and revision. In the first set of instructions following the description of the ascent

16 Plato, R. 621b: "And after they had fallen asleep and it was the middle of the night, there was a sound of thunder and a quaking of the earth, and they were suddenly wafted thence, one this way, one that, upward to their birth like shooting stars" (ἐπειδὴ δὲ κοιμηθῆναι καὶ μέσας νύκτας γενέσθαι, βροντὴν τε καὶ σεισμὸν γενέσθαι, καὶ ἐντεῦθεν ἐξαπίνης ἄλλον ἄλλη φέρεσθαι ἄνω εἰς τὴν γένεσιν, ἄττοντας ὥσπερ ἀστέρων).

17 Smith, 1996, 127.

into the heavens, the reader is informed that the ἀπαθανατισμός, the immortalisation, is to be performed three times a year (748). Later in the text, however, the author claims to have received a revelation from the god to change some of the aspects of the ritual. The rite is to be performed once a month, at the full moon (798), rather than three times a year beginning in a new moon (at the seizure of the moon, 754).¹⁸ It is worth noting that no explanation is deemed necessary for multiple immortalisations taking place instead of a once-for-all transformation, but the change from three to twelve in a year needs the explanation of a direct revelation from the god.

Although the references to *mysteria* and a *mystes* have led scholars to assume that the immortalisation rite is a relic of the ritual that initiated someone into membership of a mystery cult, the use of the terms in the text actually suggests an entirely different background. On the hypothesis that the initiate is immortalised or deified by his initiation into the mystery cult, immortality is the end result of initiation – he becomes a *mystes* through this rite of immortalisation.¹⁹ However, the text itself begins with a request to provide immortality to a *mystes*, “Be gracious to me, O Providence and Psyche, as I write these mysteries handed down and for an only child I request immortality, for a *mystes* of this our power.”²⁰ The one to whom the mysteries are being handed down, perhaps the daughter mentioned a few lines later, is already a *mystes*, but she is in need of the ritual to provide immortalisation. This daughter and the fellow initiate (*symmystes*) mentioned later are the only others who appear in the text; there is no group into which the magician – or his daughter – are initiated by means of the spell. The ritual, then, does not make her a *mystes*; it makes a *mystes*

18 PGM 4.791–799: “Many times have I used the spell and have wondered greatly. But the god said to me: ‘Use the ointment no longer, but, after casting it into the river, consult while wearing the great mystery (795) of the scarab revitalised through the twenty-five living birds, and consult once a month, at full moon, instead of three times a year.’” (Πολλάκις δὲ τῆ πραγματεία χρησάμενος ὑπερεθαύμασα· εἶπεν δέ μοι ὁ θεός· μηκέτι χρῶ τῶ συγχρίσματι, ἀλλὰ ῥίψαντα εἰς ποταμὸν <χρῆ> χρᾶσθαι φοροῦντα τὸ μέγα μυστήριον (795) τοῦ κανθάρου τοῦ ἀναζωπυρηθέντος διὰ τῶν κε ζῶων ὄρνεων, χρᾶσθαι ἅπαξ τοῦ μηνός, ἀντὶ τοῦ κατὰ ἔτος γ’, κατὰ πανσέληνον).

19 Betz, 2003, 193: “The decisive insight gained from his initiation is that he has come to understand himself as an individual self (ἐγὼ εἰμι), identified by his secret name.”

20 PGM 4.475–478: “Ἰλαθί μοι, Πρόνοια καὶ Ψυχῆ, τάδε γράφοντι τὰ <ᾗ>πρατα, παραδοτὰ μυστήρια, μόνῳ δὲ τέκνῳ ἀθανασίαν ἀξιῶ, μύστη τῆς ἡμετέρας δυνάμεως ταύτης. Betz reads ἀθανασίαν instead of ἀθανασίας and μύστη instead of μύσται. I here follow Betz’s suggestion (Betz, 2003, 92) that πρατα may be a scribal error for παραδοτὰ, rather than a reference to “for profit” or, with an alpha privative supplied “not for profit”.

temporarily immortal, just as the *symmystes* brought along to hear the revelation from the god purifies himself to be immortalised along with the performer of the ritual:

If you also wish to use a fellow initiate, so that he alone may hear with you the things spoken, let him remain pure together with you for 7 days, and abstain from meat and the bath.²¹

To be sure, the ritual is referred to as *mysteria*, both in the exordium and in the rite itself. The author of the text is writing down the *mysteria*, and the magician in the text tells the supreme god that the god himself has founded and created the *mysterion*:

O Lord, while being born again, I am passing away; while growing and having grown, I am dying; while being born from a life-generating birth, I am passing on, released to death – as you have founded, as you have decreed, and have established the mystery.²²

However, *mysterion* does not always mean an initiatory rite, and even within the text it is also used to describe the ritual for creating the special ointment needed for the ritual.²³ Indeed, the magician anoints the face of his *symmystes* with the “mystery”, that is to say, the ointment, while uttering the words of the invocations under his breath so that the other cannot hear the words for himself (745–747). When the new revelation comes to change the ritual, the god tells the magician to cast the ointment into the river and use instead the *mysterion* of the scarab revitalised through the twenty-five living birds (795). The mysteries involved in the “Mithras Liturgy” are special rituals that bring direct contact with the supreme god, but they are not initiations. Just because the rite can be analysed in terms of van Gennepe’s tripartite schema does not mean that it is actually an initiation.

The Mithras Liturgy as a rite of extreme purification

These mysteries are in fact better described as consecrations or sanctifications, or even simply purifications. An initiation involves a permanent

21 PGM 4.733–735: ἐὰν δὲ θέλης καὶ συνμύστη χρήσασθαι ὥστε τὰ λεγόμενα ἐκεῖνον μόνον σὺν σοι ἀκούειν, συναγνευέτω σοι <ζ> (735) ἡμέρας καὶ ἀποσχέσθω ἐμψύχων καὶ βαλανείου.

22 PGM 4.719–724: κύριε, παλιγενόμενος ἀπογίγνομαι, αὐξόμενος καὶ αὐξηθεὶς (720) τελευτῶ, ἀπὸ γενέσεως ζωογόνου γενόμενος, εἰς ἀπογενεσίαν ἀναλυθεὶς πορεύομαι, ὡς σὺ ἔκτισας, ὡς σὺ ἐνομοθέτησας καὶ ἐποίησας μυστήριον.

23 Cf. the remarks of Nock, *Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments*, in Nock / Stewart (eds.), 1972, 796–801.

change of status and identity and admission into a group whose members are defined, at least in part, by their performance of the initiation ritual.²⁴ A ritual of purification involves a change in status, from impure to pure, from unconsecrated to consecrated, from profane to sacred. As the Latinate *profane* indicates, such a transformation of status marks the difference between something that belongs outside of the temple or other sacred space – *profanum*, and something that belongs within the sacred space.²⁵ Purification is a relative process; one can be more or less purified, brought to a level of sanctity appropriate for different circumstances. As Parker notes, there is no real difference in concept between washing one’s hands to go in for dinner and purifying oneself before entering a temple to worship a god, only a matter of scale.²⁶ The appropriate level of purity to meet with a god is far greater than that required to partake of food with one’s family. Then again, the level of purity required to dine with the Queen is far greater than with one’s children, and the level of purity required to meet face to face with the supreme ruler of the universe is naturally far greater than that required to enter a small shrine set up to a local hero. These rituals of preparation and purification to enter the presence of the deity can be called *mysteria* if they are so special that they are secret from the general populace, especially if, as in the “Mithras Liturgy”, they are directly created and founded by the deity himself.²⁷

Rather than a liturgy, which etymologically means a communal festival, or even a solitary shamanic initiation, the “Mithras Liturgy” is this kind of

24 Cf. Petersen, 2011, 30 (cited in n. 8). He also notes the element of incorporation into a group: “Intransitive/reflexive ritual with an ambivalent final state as in initiations into associations or special cults” (Petersen, 2011, 31). See Beck in this volume for actual Mithraic initiations which involves becoming a member of a group, and Marshall for the importance of the group in theurgic conversions.

25 *Ibid.*, 32: “The idea of the ontological difference characteristic of religions of blessing in particular permeates all rituals of cleansing. There can be no ritual approach towards or even encounter with the god/gods, unless the ritual object has been transformed into a state in which it poses no contaminating danger to the god/gods.”

26 R. Parker, *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Oxford 1983, 20: “Cleanliness is, in fact, not a special preparation for worship but a requirement for formal, respectful behaviour of any kind; there is no generic difference between the lustrations that precede prayer and those that precede a meal.”

27 Cf. the Eleusinian mysteries, given to the people directly by the goddess Demeter. Of course, there must often be an intermediary in the transmission, like Orpheus who was credited with establishing the Eleusinian mysteries, or, as in the “Mithras Liturgy”, the double intermediary of the archangel who transmits the mystery from Mithras to the author of the text, who, by writing, hands it down again.

purificatory ritual of sanctification. In the text, the magician indeed describes his own rebirth through the replacement of mortal elements by immortal ones as a *hagiasma*, a process of making holy. These rites of sanctification are not ordinary purifications, but especially holy ones, so the magician may claim to be ἀγίοις ἀγιάσθεις ἀγιάσμασι sanctified by holy consecrations (522) – Greek embraces the cognates as much as English avoids them.

The “Mithras Liturgy” seems to share the idea, expressed for example in Firmicus Maternus’ treatise on astrology, that the mortal man is a microcosm of the cosmos, an image composed of the same elements as the whole.²⁸ In order to ascend to the higher levels of the cosmos, the magician must replace the material, sublunar elements of his being with the higher elements that belong to the immortal world of the gods (502–508). The magician asks to be given over to immortal rebirth (τῇ ἀθανάτῳ γενέσει) so that he may gaze upon the immortal element with immortal spirit (ἐποπτεύσω τὴν ἀθάνατον ἀρχὴν τῷ ἀθανάτῳ πνεύματι) (501–505). The magician explicitly claims that “it is impossible for me, born mortal, to rise with the golden brightnesses of the immortal brilliance” (529–530); nevertheless, “I, born mortal from mortal womb, but transformed by tremendous power and an incorruptible right hand,” [...] “today I am about to behold, with immortal eyes [...] and with immortal spirit, the immortal Aion and master of the fiery diadems.” The immortal rebirth is a transformation of his elements from mortal to immortal so that he can behold, as like to like, the immortal world of the gods. This process of assimilation to the divine (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ) is likewise important in the Platonic tradition, from the appearance of the idea in Plato’s *Theaetetus* to the late Neoplatonists like Olympiodorus who saw it as the ultimate goal of philosophy.²⁹ The magician stresses the change from mortal origins to divine in his address to Helios at the doors of the sun:

I, so and so, whose mother is such and such, who was born from the mortal womb of such and such, and from the fluid of semen, and who, since he has been born again from you today, has become immortal out of so many myriads in this hour according to the wish of god the exceedingly good.³⁰

The fleshly womb and semen that produced his mortal nature have been replaced by the immortal elements.

28 Firm., Math. 1.90–91 (proemium to book 3); cf. Betz, 2003, 109.

29 Cf. Pl., Thet. 176d. Olympiodorus, In Phd. 1.2, simply defines philosophy as the assimilation to the divine, ὁμοίωσις γὰρ θεῶ ἢ φιλοσοφία.

30 PGM 4.644–650: ἐγὼ ὁ δεῖνα τῆς δεῖνα, γενόμενος ἐκ θνητῆς ὑστέρας τῆς δεῖνα καὶ (645) ἰχῶρος σπερματικῆς καὶ, σήμερον τούτου ὑπὸ σου με<τα>γεννηθέντος, ἐκ τοσούτων μυριάδων ἀπαθανατισθεὶς ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ κατὰ δόκησιν θεοῦ, ὑπερβαλλόντως ἀγαθοῦ, προσκυνῆσαι σε ἀξιοῖ.

This transformation, although it may be described in terms of death and rebirth, is not a permanent change. While Betz compares the consecrations to Christian baptism, the ritual does not welcome the magician into a new group of the baptised nor permanently change his status.³¹ On the contrary, the change is only for a short time, *πρὸς ὀλίγον* (523), and the magician will fall once again under the yoke of “present bitter and relentless Necessity” (525) that burdens all those in the realm of mortals. This Necessity (*Anangke*) is not simply death, as Merkelbach suggests, but rather the entire apparatus of fate that rules over the sublunary world.³² In Stoic and Neoplatonic cosmologies, the highest levels of divinity are beyond the control of Fate or Necessity, and the cosmology of the “Mithras Liturgy” seems to share this notion. While he is in the celestial realm, wandering about with the planets and stars, he is free from Fate, but after his meeting with the supreme god he returns to the mortal world, back to his mortal nature and the oppression of the Necessity that shapes all mortal affairs.

Once again, however, this return is only temporary, for the magician can ascend again, out of the material and mortal world to meet with the god. The freedom from *Anangke* is temporary, just for the duration of the ritual, but the bondage is escapable every time the magician performs the ritual, whether that is thrice a year or even once a month. The magician has attained no new status as a result of his journey there and back again, no permanent transformation of life; the only thing that survives the transition back between worlds is the divine revelation, the hexameter oracles the god speaks that will remain indissolubly in the magician’s memory.

Patterns of purification rituals from simple to extreme

This apparently paradoxical form of temporary immortality is not as peculiar as it seems to our modern sensibilities; the ancient world provides a number of illuminating parallels. Perhaps the closest is the report in Porphyry’s

31 Betz, 2003, 123, and n. 209. Cf. F. Graf, *Baptism and Graeco-Roman Mystery Cults*, in Hellholm / Vegge / Norderval / Hellholm (eds.), 2011, 101–118 (105), who suggests that the absence of discussion of the distinction between one time permanent washing and repeated purifications in the ancient evidence stems from the polytheist argument against Christian originality – baptism was no different from regular lustrations.

32 Merkelbach / Totti, 1992, 237: “Nicht mehr von jener ‘Schuld’ beschwert, welche man der ἀνάγκη zurückzahlen muß = nicht mehr vom Tode beschwert. Der Initierte hat seine frühere Existenz hinter sich gelassen.” Betz, 2003, 115, cites a variety of parallels for “liberation from the oppression by ἀνάγκη, εἴμαρμένη, τύχη, and χρεῖα.”

Life of Plotinus that his master achieved the supreme union with the One principle of the cosmos four times in his life. “For to him the goal and aim of life was to achieve oneness and to come near to the god over all things. And this aim he achieved perhaps four times while I was with him by his ineffable power.”³³ Plotinus’ One did not appear in the vivid images of the “Mithras Liturgy” with lightning bolts flashing around the trousered form of Mithras, but abstractly, “that God appeared, the God who has neither shape nor form, but sits enthroned above the Intellectual-Principle and all the Intellectual-Sphere.”³⁴ While the Master attained this height four times, Porphyry tells us that he has achieved this union only once so far.³⁵ This Neoplatonic union with the supreme divinity of the universe, while not quite as frequent as the once a month “Mithras Liturgy”, is nevertheless a temporary and repeatable process that leaves the philosopher back in the same mortal status he had before the union.

The hexameter oracles provided by Mithras at the culmination of the meeting also find a parallel in the Chaldaean oracles so revered by the Neoplatonists. While these verses remain only in scattered fragments quoted by Proclus and other Neoplatonists, many similarities appear between the cosmology of these Oracles and that which appears in the “Mithras Liturgy”.³⁶ The theurgical practices associated with these Oracles bear numerous resemblances to the magical techniques of the “Mithras Liturgy”, especially the ascent with the rays of the sun, and there is every reason to believe that the composition of the “Mithras Liturgy” comes out of a religious context familiar with these theurgical practices.

Of course, the “Mithras Liturgy” and the entirety of the Great Paris Magical Papyrus come from an Egyptian religious context, and scholars have speculated about Neoplatonic theurgy in Egypt.³⁷ Not only does

33 Porphyry, Plot. 23.15: Τέλος γὰρ αὐτῶ καὶ σκοπὸς ἦν τὸ ἐνωθῆναι καὶ πελάσαι τῷ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεῷ. Ἐτυχε δὲ τετρακίς που, ὅτε αὐτῶ συνήμην, τοῦ σκοποῦ τούτου ἐνεργεῖα ἀρρήτῳ.

34 Porphyry, Plot. 23.10–12: ἐφάνη ἐκεῖνος ὁ θεὸς ὁ μήτε μορφήν μήτε τιὰ ἰδέαν ἔχων, ὑπὲρ δὲ νοῦν καὶ πᾶν τὸ νοητὸν ἰδουμένος.

35 Porphyry, Plot. 23.12f.: “And indeed I myself, Porphyry, declare that I drew near and became one with him, when I was in my sixty-eighth year” (Ὡς δὴ καὶ ἐγὼ Πορφύριος ἅπαξ λέγω πλησιάσαι καὶ ἐνωθῆναι ἔτος ἄγων ἑξηκοστὸν τε καὶ ὄγδοον).

36 Cf. the arguments in Edmonds, 2003 and 2004, Johnston, 1997, and, ultimately, H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy. Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Paris 1978 (ed. by M. Tardieu), whose reconstruction of the Chaldaean Oracles relies heavily on the Mithras Liturgy.

37 Betz, 2003, 35, sees the cosmology as middle Stoic with no trace of Neoplatonic influence, comparing the ideas of the 1st century CE Stoic and priest of Isis,

Iamblichus put his exposition of the theory of theurgy in the mouth of an Egyptian priest, but the Hermetic writings mingle theurgical ideas with an Egyptian revelatory background. Other scholars, however, have noted the similarities between the prescriptions for purification and ascent in the “Mithras Liturgy” and the rites of entering the presence of a god in an Egyptian sanctuary, arguing that the rite can be simply traced back to Egyptian temple rituals.³⁸ Such rituals, however, should not be called “initiations” any more than the “Mithras Liturgy”, since they too provide a temporary shift of status for the individual to enter the presence of a god rather than a permanent change of status and entry into a group. Likewise, the purity regulations for entering a temple, found in various of the so-called Greek Sacred Laws, show a similar pattern of purification before entering the place of the god.³⁹ Indeed, such sanctification rituals for approaching a god are neither specifically Greek nor Egyptian, but part of a general pattern of purification rituals in the ancient Mediterranean. As the author of a Hippocratic treatise theorises about the general principle of separating sacred and profane and requiring purification to pass from ordinary space into the place of the gods:

We mark out the boundaries of the temples and the groves of the gods so that no one may pass them unless he be pure, and when we enter them, we are

Chaeremon of Alexandria, but see Edmonds, 2003 and 2004, for a discussion of the similarities with Neoplatonic materials. See G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Princeton 1993, for a discussion of theurgy and Hermetism.

- 38 J. Gee, *Review of Betz 2003*, in: *Review of Biblical Literature* 2 (2005), provides a chart of parallels with a sequence from the *Book of the Dead*, scenes from the Bark Shrine at Karnak, and the *Document of Breathings Made by Isis* that shows the acts of purification before entry into the sanctuary of the god, which is sometimes referred to as a heaven.
- 39 E.g., IG 2², 1365, 8–11; 18–25 (Attica, 1st century CE): “No one is to enter unpurified. Let him be made pure from garlic and pork. [...], and he is purified from a corpse on the tenth day; from a woman on the seventh; from manslaughter never around this place; from abortion the 40th; from a woman, those having washed from the head down on the same day (μηθένα ἀκάθαρτον προσάγειν· καθαρῖσζέστω δὲ ἀπὸ σκόρδων καὶ χοιρέων· [...]) Καὶ ἀπὸ νεκροῦ καθαρῖσζεσται δεκατ<α>ίαν, ἀπὸ γυναικέων ἐβ<δ>ομαία<ν>, ἀνδροφόνον μηδὲ περὶ τὸν τόπον, ἀπὸ δὲ φθορᾶς τετραρακοσταίαν, ἀπὸ δὲ γυναικὸς λουσάμενοι κατακέφαλα αὐθήμερῖ). Cf. SEG 28, 421, a *lex sacra* from Megalopolis in Arcadia that restricts entry into the sanctuary for sacrifice to those who have been purified, specifying different number of days after various causes of impurity (ranging from eating goat to having sex to giving birth). Purification again seems to consist of waiting and washing (in some cases, from the head down).

sprinkled with holy water, not as being polluted, but as laying aside any other pollution which we formerly had.⁴⁰

Entering a temple to worship a god can easily be analysed à la van Gennepe, with the purification separating the person from profane status, the encounter with the statue of the god in the temple as a liminal moment, and a return to profane space upon exiting the temple.

A quick sprinkling of water from one of the *perirrhanteria* located at the entrance to a temple is of course far less elaborate and intense than the entire element by element reconstruction in the “Mithras Liturgy”, but the procedure for consulting the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadea provides a more complex parallel. Pausanias recounts the elaborate process of preparation, involving days of abstinence, special baths and anointings, and draughts from the fountains of Lethe and Mnemosyne.⁴¹ The specially prepared one then goes to the oracle to consult with the god, sometimes receiving an audible message from the god, sometimes a vision. As Bonnechere has noted in his study of the evidence pertaining to this shrine, the terminology of mysteries is sometimes used of the rites, but there is no evidence that undergoing the rituals involved in the consultation provided initiation into some group of people especially dedicated to Trophonius.⁴² The rite did produce a change of state, in that the one returning from the consultation lost his ability to laugh, but even this change was temporary. Like the magician in the “Mithras Liturgy”, the one consulting Trophonius is struck out of his wits, but after he recounts his experience to the priests at the shrine, he begins his return to normal life:

After his ascent from Trophonius, the inquirer is again taken in hand by the priests, who set him upon a chair called the chair of Memory, which stands not far from the shrine, and they ask of him, when seated there, all he has seen or learned. After gaining this information they then entrust him to his relatives. These lift him, paralysed with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings, and carry him to the building where he lodged before with Good Fortune and the Good Spirit. Afterwards, however, he will recover all his faculties, and the power to laugh will return to him.⁴³

40 Hp., Morb. Sacr. 148.55: αὐτοὶ τε ὄρους τοῖσι θεοῖσι τῶν ἱερῶν καὶ τῶν τεμενέων ἀποδεικνύμενοι, ὡς ἂν μηδεὶς ὑπερβαίνειν ἦν μὴ ἀγνεύη, εἰσιόντες τε ἡμεῖς περιῴραίνόμεθα οὐχ ὡς μαινόμενοι, ἀλλ' εἴ τι καὶ πρότερον ἔχομεν μύσος, τοῦτο ἀφαγνιούμενοι.

41 Paus. 9.39,2.

42 P. Bonnechere, *Trophonios de Lébadée. Cultes et mythes d'une cité béotienne au miroir de la mentalité antique*, Leiden 2003, 217, cf. 132.

43 Paus. 9.39,12: τὸν δὲ ἀναβάντα παρὰ τοῦ Τροφωνίου παραλαβόντες αὐθις οἱ ἱερεῖς καθίζουσιν ἐπὶ θρόνον Μνημοσύνης μὲν καλούμενον, κεῖται δὲ οὐ

As Bonnechere has shown, the Trophonius oracle, despite similarities of pattern and even the use of some terminology of mysteries, cannot be considered an initiatory mystery cult. The Trophonius oracle, like the “Mithras Liturgy”, fits the tripartite schema of van Gennepe, but is likewise an elaborated version of the sanctification process for approaching a god, not an initiation into a group or even into a new status or identity.

Such rituals of purification or sanctification, whether as complex as the descent to Trophonius or the “Mithras Liturgy’s” ascent to Mithras or as simple as a quick sprinkling of water before entering a sanctuary, are a part of a long tradition of rituals that enable mortals to make contact with the gods. In such rituals that bring close contact with the divine, the religious focus is upon the shifts in relationship with the god rather than upon the change of status on earth or any change of lifestyle afterwards. A better understanding of this model may aid in the understanding of the religious conflicts and confusions during this period, when ideas of conversion or initiation into a select group are in competition with this longstanding idea of ritual contact with the divine. Paul’s transformative experience on the road to Damascus or the ordeals the Roman legionaries underwent to change themselves into Mithraic initiates stand out all the more in contrast to the temporary immortalisation in the magician’s journey there and back again in the “Mithras Liturgy”.

πόρρω τοῦ ἀδύτου, καθεσθέντα δὲ ἐνταῦθα ἀνερωτῶσιν ὅποσα εἶδέ τε καὶ ἐπύθετο· μαθόντες δὲ ἐπιτρέπουσιν αὐτὸν ἤδη τοῖς προσήκουσιν· οἱ δὲ ἐς τὸ οἶκημα, ἐνθα καὶ πρότερον διητᾶτο παρὰ τε Τύχη καὶ Δαίμονι ἀγαθοῖς, ἐς τοῦτο ἀράμενοι κομίζουσι κάτοχόν τε ἔτι τῷ δέϊματι καὶ ἀγνώτα ὁμοίως αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν πέλας· ὕστερον μέντοι τὰ τε ἄλλα οὐδέν τι φρονήσει μείον ἢ πρότερον καὶ γέλως ἐπάνεισιν οἱ· γράφω δὲ οὐκ ἀκοῆν ἀλλὰ ἐτέρους τε ἰδῶν καὶ αὐτὸς τῷ Τροφονίῳ χρησάμενος.

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY

Edited by David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Jörg Ulrich

Birgitte Secher Bøgh (ed.)

Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity

Shifting Identities – Creating Change

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