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"TIMAEUS", THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES, AND THE "CHALDAEAN ORACLES"

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# 'BECOMING LIKE GOD' ACCORDING TO PROCLUS' INTERPRETATIONS OF THE *TIMAEUS*, THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES, AND THE *CHALDAEAN* *ORACLES*

ROBBERT VAN DEN BERG

## 1. Introduction

We all know how the story ends. Once Timaeus has established that the cosmos is 'a perceptible god, supreme in greatness and excellence, in beauty and perfection', and that man is himself a microcosm, he admonishes us to perfect ourselves by imitating this god. The idea is famously expressed in *Ti.* 90a-d. There is something divine about us, 'the most sovereign form of our soul', i.e. its rational part. If we care for it in the proper way 'it raises us up towards what is akin to us in the heaven from the earth.' To care for it means to give it its proper nourishment, for what you eat is what you become. If you nourish it with passing things like appetites and ambitions, it will itself become mortal. However, when we feast on unchanging wisdom, when we have thoughts immortal and divine, 'we shall not fail to possess immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits'. Now, since the thoughts and motions of the universe, as visibly expressed by the movements of the heavenly bodies, are akin to the divine part in us, it is on these that we should concentrate. Ultimately, the contemplating subject will become like the object of contemplation (90d4 τῷ κατανοουμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοίωσαι). Because of this resemblance to this perceptible god we will win the fulfilment of the best possible life (90d5f. τέλος ἔχειν τοῦ προτεθέντος ἀνθρώποις ὑπὸ θεῶν ἀρίστου βίου) and thus actually enjoy divine bliss (90c5f. διαφερόντως εὐδαίμονα εἶναι).

As various commentators have observed,<sup>1</sup> this passage recalls a famous expression in the *Theaetetus* (176b1f.) which admonishes us to become like god to the extent possible by fleeing this earthly realm: φυγῆ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δύνατον. Here we touch on a central doctrine of Platonism. How exactly one was supposed to do this, however, was a heavily disputed matter. Ever since the earliest days of the Academy, the prevalent opinion

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., A.-J. Festugière, *Personal religion among the Greeks* (2nd edn, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1960) 51; D. Sedley, "Becoming like god" in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle', in *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias. Proceedings of the IV symposium Platonicum. Selected papers*, eds T. Calvo and L. Brisson (Sankt Augustin 1997) 327-39 and an elaborated version in id., 'The ideal of godlikeness', *Oxford readings in philosophy: Plato*, ed. G. Fine (Oxford 2000) 791-810.

has been that in order to become like god we have to do astronomy of some sort.<sup>2</sup> In other words it is mainly an intellectual enterprise. In a critical review article on Julia Annas' *Plato's ethics: old and new*, Francis Sparshott lucidly explains what it was probably all about.<sup>3</sup> In the notion of the divine it is the eternal or unchanging life that is central, hence a life preoccupied with timeless truths. In the context of the *Timaeus*, these are the truths of mathematical astronomy. Furthermore, Sparshott observes that 'becoming like god' involves the improvement of oneself into a different kind of person, hence to make oneself be not what one was, to make one's old self cease to be. In this vein, Socrates in the *Euthydemus* (283c-d) compares educating people to killing them. According to Sparshott, this is just a non-solemn way of referring to the 'practice of death' in the *Phaedo*. In this paper I shall examine how Proclus hoped to achieve the goal of becoming like god, especially in the context of his commentary on the *Timaeus*. He, it will appear, did not subscribe to the standard interpretation as outlined above. He did not attach any special significance to astronomy.<sup>4</sup> Instead, he is firmly convinced that we can only become godlike by participating in purifying mysteries, like those associated with the *Chaldaean Oracles* (also known as theurgy) and, remarkably enough, the Eleusinian Mysteries. He maintains that the transformation into a divine being indeed involves some sort of murder and death, but this too is understood against the background of mystery rites. This, it should be stressed, does not mean that Proclus lets go of philosophy altogether. Rather he tries to harmonize the content of the philosophical *Timaeus* with the teachings of the sacred texts of the mysteries. We may be puzzled by these efforts. However, in Late Antiquity the lines between philosophical and sacred texts, between scientific cosmology and religious soteriology were often at best fluid.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Returning to whence we came

Discussing the notion of becoming like god in the context of the *Timaeus*, one scholar recently observed that:

... becoming like god is, cosmologically speaking, the return of the rational soul to its own original nature, mythically described earlier in the dialogue in terms of the creator concocting it in the same mixing bowl, and with the leftover ingredients, previously used for making the world soul.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As one may gather from Philip of Opus' *Epinomis*.

<sup>3</sup> F. Sparshott, 'Plato's ethics dead or alive', *Apeiron* 33,2 (2000) 145-61 (155-56).

<sup>4</sup> For Proclus' attitude to astronomy, see A.-Ph. Segonds, 'Proclus: astronomie et philosophie', in *Proclus, lecteur et interprète des anciens: Actes du colloque international du CNRS Paris (2-4 octobre 1985)*, eds J. Pépin and H. D. Saffrey (Paris 1987) 319-34.

<sup>5</sup> This point is driven home by Luc Brisson in 'Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Chaldaean oracles*', in *Plato's Timaeus as cultural icon*, ed. G. J. Reydam-Schils (Notre Dame 2002) in which he shows that Plato's *Timaeus* in a Middle Platonic interpretation was re-utilized by the authors of the *Chaldaean Oracles* in order to provide a context for the vicissitudes of the human soul. So, to some extent, the present paper may be regarded as a companion piece to his, since in part it examines how the *Chaldaean Oracles* were used in the composition of a Neoplatonic commentary on the *Timaeus*. Brisson stresses that '[a]n investigation of this type raises several original questions of primary importance: 1) that of the practice of commentary, conceived as a philosophical activity properly so called; 2) that of the reconciliation of a philosophical with a sacred text; 3) that of the foundation of soteriology upon cosmology'.

<sup>6</sup> Sedley, 'Becoming like god', above n. 1, 332.

He finds himself in agreement with Proclus. The latter writes right at the beginning of his massive commentary on the dialogue:

T1. [Plato] says explicitly towards the end that one has to 'make the contemplating subject like the contemplated object' (*Ti.* 90d4), if one wants to have a share in the blissful life. For the cosmos is forever in a state of bliss and ours too will be a blissful existence once we have become like the universe. For in this way we will have ascended to our cause (*In Tim.* I 5.26-31).

So far, so good. But now see what Proclus had said some lines earlier about our original nature:

T2. ... man is a microcosm and everything that is in the cosmos in a divine and complete way is in him too in a partial manner. For we have intellect in act, and a rational soul that came forth from the same father and the same life-producing goddess as that of the universe, and an aethereal vehicle analogous to the heaven, and an earthly vehicle mixed from the four elements to which it corresponds (*In Tim.* I 5.11-17).

The 'father' is the demiurge. The life-producing goddess corresponds to the κρατήρ, the mixing bowl, of the *Timaeus*, as we are about to see. Where did Proclus get the idea from to change a piece of pottery into a goddess? Whosoever may she be? And, most important of all, what good does it do to multiply mythical elements in a discussion of the *Timaeus*? Is it not rather the task of any interpreter to demythologise the dialogue, to get rid of the κρατήρ and to explain in sober language what the philosophical principle is that it represents? In order to answer these questions, we will now take a look at Proclus' commentary on *Ti.* 42c4-d2. From this it will appear that for Proclus the κρατήρ is a real goddess and that we need to practise rites associated with her.

### 3. The salvation of the soul

In the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge, after having mixed the World Soul, returns once more to the κρατήρ to mix the individual souls. He distributes these among the several stars, themselves gods, on which they are mounted 'as if on vehicles'. He then shows them the nature of the universe and declares to them the laws of Destiny. The souls are told that of necessity they will be planted in bodies. They will thus be exposed to the passions that go with the bodily existence. If they master these by means of reason and if they live in accordance with the revolution of the Same of the World Soul, they will bring their character in the best possible condition and be righteous. As a result they will be allowed to return to their native star and enjoy an appropriately blissful life (βίον εὐδαίμονα). The souls that get carried away by the body, though, will be subjected to reincarnation into lesser creatures such as women and animals. Proclus comments:

T3. The unique salvation of the soul is shown by the Demiurge, the salvation that sets free from the 'Circle of Generation' and the many wanderings and the useless life. It is the ascent towards the noeric form of the soul and the flight away from everything that has grown on us because of generation. For soul, cast downwards like a seed in the sowing

field of generation, must, as it were, get rid of its stem and its husk that it has because of its generation, and, once it has purified itself from what surrounds it, become a noeric flower and fruit, taking pleasure in the noeric life instead of in δόξα food, following the uniform and simple activity of the revolution of the Same instead of the much wandering circuit of the movement of the Other. ... For the revolution of the Same and the Like sends the soul towards Nous and the noetic nature and the first and best state of existence. That state in which the soul that has grown wings administers the universe with the gods, since it has become like the gods, that is the whole form of life in the soul, like the partial form is that of the soul that has fallen in the extreme depth of the body and has become something instead of everything ... (In *Tim.* III 296.7-297.1)

The 'flight from everything that has grown on us because of generation' recalls the flight of the *Theaetetus*, whereas 'becoming like god' here appears to mean becoming like the astral gods that govern the world. Up till now everything is what one expects it to be: to flee the world of becoming towards Nous by following the revolutions of the Same is the normal thing for a Platonic philosopher to do. But note the strange way in which Proclus describes the process. How can a plant bear 'fruit' and 'flower' when it rids itself of its stem? Such a plant is surely to die, not to blossom. It is my contention that this image has its background in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which had allegedly been founded by Orpheus.<sup>7</sup> A first indication for this is the fact that the phrase 'Circle of Generation' stems from Orphic mysteries, as becomes evident a few lines further down in the commentary. The blissful life that results from following the revolution of the Same, Proclus remarks while quoting an Orphic text (Fr. 299 ed. Kern), is the one that

T4. the followers of Orpheus who have been perfected by Dionysos and Kore hope to obtain, in their desire 'to quit the Circle and to get a break from their misery'  
(In *Tim.* III 297.8-10)

The perfection by Dionysos and Kore of the followers of Orpheus refers to mystery rites. In the case of Dionysos the reference is, of course, to the Bacchic mysteries. In what follows, I hope to show that those of Kore are the Eleusinian Mysteries, whereas she herself is the daughter of the life-producing goddess mentioned in T2.

Proclus explains that we can only live in accordance with the circuit of the Same once we have been purified from the material accretions that have grown on us as a result of our descent into the realm of matter. Proclus refers to these accretions as 'tunics' or 'vehicles' that consist of the elements air, fire, water, and earth (cf. T2 'an earthly vehicle mixed from the four elements to which it corresponds'). These should not be confused with the vehicle on which the soul is placed by the Demiurge (cf. T2 'an aethereal vehicle analogous to the heaven'). Whereas the latter is an integral part of the soul that will always be with it, the earthly vehicle is something we should try to get rid of. Perhaps it is even just a poetic

<sup>7</sup> For Orpheus as the founder of the Eleusinian mysteries, see H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, *Proclus: Théologie Platonicienne. Livre VI* (Paris 1997) 150, additional n.3 to p.50.

description of the body. If not, it had no function distinct from that of the ordinary body, as H. J. Blumenthal has pointed out.<sup>8</sup>

One may object that from what has been said so far it does not automatically follow that this purification does actually entail partaking in these mysteries. After all, Platonists readily talk about mysteries, but that does not necessarily mean that what they say should be taken literally. Proclus, though, leaves no doubt as how we should understand him. He ends his commentary on *Ti.* 42c4-d2 thus:

T5. To the removal of such vehicles, whose nature Plato has made clear by mentioning each of the elements apart, the philosophical life certainly contributes, as Plato himself says. However, the greatest contribution, to my mind at least, is made by the telestic life, when it removes through divine fire all the 'defilements' caused by generation, as the [*Chaldaean*] oracles teach, and all that is alien and irrational that the pneumatic vehicle of the soul has attracted.  
(*In Tim.* III 300.13-20)

The telestic life is that according to mysteries (τελεταί). Given the fact that Proclus refers here explicitly to the *Chaldaean Oracles*, we must assume that he has especially theurgy in mind, the ritual practices that go with the *Chaldaean Oracles*. All the more so, since Proclus explicitly refers to the Chaldaean sacrament of purification by fire. The fact that Proclus cites both from Orphic material (T4) and from Chaldaean sources need not worry us here. As we will see, these mysteries were thought to be highly compatible. Apparently the salvation of the soul is thought to depend on ritual purification, rather than on some sort of intellectual effort like astronomy. This is a truly remarkable conclusion in the context of a commentary on the *Timaeus*, but one in line with the teachings of the *Chaldaean Oracles* that warn people to flee the scientific study of the universe, if they want to enter 'the sacred paradise of piety'.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Rhea and Hecate as the κρατήρ

By now it is time to bring out the life-producing goddess. Proclus is intrigued by the κρατήρ in which the Demiurge is said to mix the World Soul and the individual souls. It is a subject that he thinks 'deserves the closest study possible'<sup>10</sup> and that is exactly what he gives it.<sup>11</sup> The first question that troubles him is whether there are two different κρατήρες, one for the mixing of the World Soul and one for the mixing of the individual souls, or that the same κρατήρ is used on both occasions. Both interpretations had been defended by leading Neoplatonists. In the end, Proclus, not very surprisingly, sides with his venerated master,

<sup>8</sup> See Proclus, *In Tim.* III 298.2-299.9. For a discussion of the passage, see H. J. Blumenthal, 'Soul vehicles in Simplicius', in *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, eds S. Gersh and C. Kannengieser (Indiana 1992) 173-88 (174-76), reprinted as Essay XVII in H. J. Blumenthal, *Soul and intellect. Studies in Plotinus and later Neoplatonism* (Aldershot 1993); cf. H. J. Blumenthal, 'Marinus' Life of Proclus: Neoplatonist Biography', *Byzantium* 54 (1984) 469-94 (481), reprinted as Essay XIII in Blumenthal, *Soul and Intellect*. On the topic, see further E. R. Dodds, 'Appendix II. The astral body in Neoplatonism', in *Proclus. The elements of theology. A revised text with translation, introduction, and commentary* (2nd edn, Oxford 1963) 313-21.

<sup>9</sup> See especially *Chaldaean Oracles* Fr. 107. Brisson, 'Plato's *Timaeus*', above n.5, comments: 'salvation thus does not come from the contemplation of the world, as Plato seems to indicate in the final pages of the *Timaeus*.'

<sup>10</sup> *In Tim.* III 246.31 f.

<sup>11</sup> For Proclus' discussion of the κρατήρ, see *In Tim.* III 246. 29-250.28.



Syrianus,<sup>12</sup> who in his interpretation 'follows the guidance of the theologians'.<sup>13</sup> The latter first postulates the existence of the universal life-producing goddess who comprehends in herself all the causes of life. This goddess is equated to Rhea. Elsewhere we learn that Proclus locates Rhea in between the pure Nous (also known as Kronos) and the Demiurgical Nous, i.e. the Demiurge properly speaking (also known as Zeus). Rhea is the Orphic name of this deity. The Chaldaean theologians call her Hecate.<sup>14</sup> From this goddess originates

T6. ... a unique life-producing goddess, the source of the procession and generation of all souls, who together with the Demiurge, with whom she is co-ordinated, generates the whole order of the souls, bringing forth all hypercosmic soul, all encosmic soul, rushing forth to everything and giving life to the whole cosmos. ... Plato calls her κρατήρ because she is the source of the life of soul. (In *Tim.* III 248.30-249.6)

In this quotation Proclus stresses two things. First, he points out that this goddess is unique, hence that there is just one κρατήρ. Secondly, there is the fact that the goddess who is the κρατήρ is of the same ontological rank as Zeus, the Demiurge. This goddess may therefore be identified with Hera, the spouse of Zeus in Greek mythology.<sup>15</sup> In corroboration of this claim, Proclus continues by adducing the evidence from the *Chaldaean Oracles* (Fr. 51) according to which Source-Soul springs forth from Hecate's right flank, whereas primal Virtue streams from her left flank. This description may echo a (now lost) cultic image of Hecate.<sup>16</sup>

This analysis of Proclus' discussion of the κρατήρ allows us to reject two claims concerning Rhea-Hecate. First, Hecate is not the κρατήρ, as has recently been argued.<sup>17</sup> She produces the κρατήρ from her right flank. Second, far more important, Hecate is not the World Soul.<sup>18</sup> That she is, is a widespread misunderstanding of consequence. Hecate is a central deity in the theology of the *Chaldaean Oracles* since she is in some way responsible for the salvation of those initiated in theurgical mysteries. In the standard interpretation she has this role because she is the World Soul and can thus act as the mediator between the individual souls and the divine world. However, as we have seen, she produces the goddess Hera who produces in turn the World Soul. This means that Hecate stands in a very distant

<sup>12</sup> Proclus, *In Tim.* III 247.26-249.26.

<sup>13</sup> Proclus, *In Tim.* III 247.28. As A.-J. Festugière observes, *Proclus. Commentaire sur le Timée. Livre V* (Paris 1968) 115 n. 1, these are not just the theurgists, but also Greek theologians like Orpheus and Hesiod.

<sup>14</sup> On Rhea/Hecate on the level of Nous, see L. Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques* dans la *Théologie Platonicienne*', in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du colloque international de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink*, edd. A.-Ph. Segonds and C. Steel (Leuven-Paris 2000) 108-62 (139-42); Brisson, 'Plato's *Timaeus*', above n.5.

<sup>15</sup> *In Tim.* III 249.16; on the relation between the κρατήρ and Zeus, see also Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques*', above n.14, 145f.

<sup>16</sup> On this description, see Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques*', above n.14, 140-41; Brisson, 'Plato's *Timaeus*', above n.5.

<sup>17</sup> Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques*', above n.14, 140, 145f.

<sup>18</sup> For an attempt to show that Hecate is the World Soul, see S. I. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: a study of Hecate's roles in the Chaldean Oracles and related literature*, *American Classical Studies* 21 (Atlanta 1990) 153-63. Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques*', above n.14, 145f. and 151, to the contrary, correctly presents Soul as the offspring of Hecate.

relation to the individual human souls and hence cannot act as a mediator between us and the gods. This begs the question how she can be the saviour of the human souls that she is supposed to be. This question will now be addressed by studying the series of goddesses that Rhea produces.

### 5. Two triads

The two major sources of our knowledge about the life-producing series are Proclus' *Theologia Platonica* VI 11 pp. 48.1-55.27 ed. Saffrey-Westerink, and his commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*, especially his comments on *Crat.* 404 a-d. The commentary has failed to attract much attention even from Proclean scholars. Unjustly so, for it provides us with valuable information on several important divinities in the Neoplatonic pantheon that could not be found elsewhere. For those whose curiosity has been incited, it may be good to know that soon there will be an easy access to the work, since an English translation is due to appear in Richard Sorabji's *Ancient Commentators* series.<sup>19</sup>

What has this work to tell us about the life-producing goddesses? To start with, Rhea is identified with Demeter in so far as she is the mother of Zeus, the Demiurge:

T7. When Orpheus says that Demeter is the same as Rhea, he means that when above with Kronos and non-processive she is Rhea, but when projecting herself and generating Zeus she is Demeter. For he says: 'Though Rhea before, when she came to be the mother of Zeus, she became Demeter'.  
(*In Crat.* §167, pp. 90.28-91.4)

This identification of Rhea with Demeter in so far as Rhea produces Zeus the Demiurge and the fact that this identification is based on Orphic theology is essential to this story. Above, I claimed that the Orphic mysteries which cleanse us and in this way allow us to become like god (T4) are really the Eleusinian Mysteries. As is well-known, Demeter and her daughter Persephone are the central goddesses in these mysteries. As we have already seen in the commentary on the *Timaeus*, Rhea does not just produce Zeus: from her right flank springs Hera as the source of all souls, whereas from her left flank springs Virtue. This image is referred to once again in the commentary on the *Cratylus*.<sup>20</sup> Virtue, it appears, is the power that perfects the souls that have been produced by the life-producing goddess and makes them return to their origin.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation of the *Oracles* reflects the Neoplatonic theory of causation. Emanation from a cause necessarily goes together with reversion upon that same cause. This reversion is understood as a perfection of the product since it reverts upon something superior to it. Proclus illustrates this with a curious image. Rhea is known as the Great Mother. Human mothers are a last distant echo of this Great Mother. But even in their case, we see that production comes with perfection. For at once they both bear their infant and naturally supply the child with milk, i.e. with perfecting nourishment, but they do this neither before nor after.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Translations of the commentary on the *Cratylus* in this paper will be based on this forthcoming volume. For the Greek, see G. Pasquali, *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Cratylum commentaria* (Leipzig 1908).

<sup>20</sup> *In Crat.* §167, pp. 91.25-92.5.

<sup>21</sup> *In Crat.* §168, p. 92.9-25.

<sup>22</sup> *In Crat.* §168, p. 92.21-25.



Good Neoplatonists see triads everywhere, so in the series of Rhea-Demeter and Hera, there must be a third goddess. This is Persephone or Kore,<sup>23</sup> in Greek mythology the daughter of Demeter. According to the commentary on the *Cratylus*, Persephone mirrors the triple structure of Rhea.<sup>24</sup> The superior one of the three goddesses that are contained in Persephone is called Artemis but she may also be called Hecate, as by Proclus elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, Rhea too may be called Hecate. Of the two other goddesses of the triad, the middle one, also sometimes called Persephone, is concerned with the psychic realm and the production of beings, whereas the last one, Athena, is concerned with virtue. This recalls the fact that from Rhea's right flank Hera, the source of all souls, gushes forth, whereas from her left Virtue comes forth.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. Eleusis: deathly perfection

How does the Virtue of Persephone operate? By murdering us. Proclus, following a hint in *Cratylus* 404c, derives the name of Persephone from φόνοϛ, murder. Proclus explains:

T9. Persephone has been so named ... because she separates the souls perfectly from their bodies by turning them back to what is above—and this is the most fortunate sort of 'murder' and death for those worthy of it. (In *Crat.* §173, pp. 95.29-96.4)

Here our story, in Neoplatonic fashion, starts to revert upon its own origin. We have seen (T4 and T5) that the mysteries of Kore freed us from the Circle of Generation by cleansing us from the material defilements, the χιτῶνες, that come with descending into a body. Persephone sets us free from these.<sup>27</sup> Death in the normal sense of the word can bring about this longed for separation from the body and the reversion and ascension towards what is above, at least in the case of souls that have lived their lives in the right way. If not, they are submitted to the purifying punishments of angels and daemons. Here, Proclus hints at the possibility to experience the separation from the body, hence death, before the end of one's lifetime. Whereas the first form of ascent of the soul is associated with Pluto, the second is associated with Zeus, the Demiurgical Intellect that contemplates the intelligible realm. The soul that ascends with him enjoys these visions too. Proclus sometimes describes this as the soul reaching the paternal harbour. I have discussed the image of the 'paternal harbour' elsewhere and on that occasion I have tried to show that reaching this paternal harbour involved mystical ritual, the nature of which escaped me at that time.<sup>28</sup> Now, I believe that it is connected with a kind of ritual death as celebrated in the Chaldaean and

<sup>23</sup> On Kore, cf. Brisson, 'La place des *Oracles Chaldaïques*', above n.14, 150-51.

<sup>24</sup> In *Crat.* §171, pp. 94.16-95.4.

<sup>25</sup> In *Crat.* §179, p. 107.1-6; *Theol. Plat.* VI 11 p. 51.27.

<sup>26</sup> See also *Theol. Plat.* VI 11 p. 51.27-8 with Saffrey-Westerink, *Proclus: Théologie Platonicienne*, above n.7, p.152, additional n.8 to p.51.

<sup>27</sup> For the purifying power of death, see also *In Crat.* §155; §§158-62.

<sup>28</sup> For the separation from the body through death and that during our lifetime, see *In Crat.* §162; for the purifying powers of death, see also *In Crat.* §155; for the fact that only pure souls will profit from death, see *In Crat.* §160; for the discussion of the paternal harbour, see R. M. van den Berg, "'Towards the paternal harbour'. Procleanurgy and the contemplation of the forms', in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, above n.14, 425-43.

Orphic-Eleusinian Mysteries. Mysteries at which Proclus hints in his commentary on the *Timaeus*.

The contents of mysteries are by their very nature a secret that should not be communicated to the *profani*. Little is thus known about the Eleusinian Mysteries. They were dedicated to the goddesses Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The latter was also known as the 'Maiden', Kore, who was abducted by Pluto, the god of the nether world. Demeter, the goddess responsible for the growth of grain, was so overcome by grief that she neglected her duties and hence a famine was imminent. In the end, the matter was settled in a way that was acceptable to both Pluto and Demeter. Persephone dwells in the nether world with Pluto for one half of the year, the other she spends in the world of the living with her mother. During that period the grain grows, whereas in the other half it does not.

Mysteries had been organised around this myth in Eleusis. The initiates were purified and then shown 'the sacred things' in a nocturnal celebration in a building called the Telesterion, the Hall of Initiations, by the hierophant, literally 'the one who reveals the holy things'. Among these holy things was an ear of grain. The whole proceeding must have been an extraordinary experience for those initiated, something to which Proclus bears witness.<sup>29</sup> Participation in these mysteries was supposed to secure blessedness in the afterlife for the initiates.<sup>30</sup>

As is well-known, these mysteries captured the minds and the imagination of Platonists. On the one hand, doing philosophy was presented as an initiation into a profound mystery. On the other hand, the Eleusinian Mysteries were interpreted in Platonic terms. Proclus was no exception to the rule. He provides his readers with a sophisticated interpretation, which I will pass over here, of the fact that Persephone spends half the year with Pluto in the nether world and half the year with her mother in the upper world. The interesting thing about it in the present context is that Proclus points out that his interpretation is in accordance with 'the teachings of the theologians who have handed down to us the most holy initiations in Eleusis'.<sup>31</sup>

Let us now home in on the details, the stem and the husk of T3. Walter Burkert, in his book on ancient mystery cults, draws attention to a remarkable Platonic interpretation of the ear of grain:<sup>32</sup> in Platonic circles the ear of grain exhibited by the hierophant in the Telesterion was equated with the castrated Attis. The link between Eleusis and Attis is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Attis was the lover of the Great Mother, Cybele. This goddess is comparable to Rhea and Demeter, for she too was associated with the growth of vegetation. The castration of Attis was believed to symbolize the fact that the movement of the soul towards generation had come to a halt and that the return back to the metaphysical realm had started. The link between the ear of grain and the castrated Attis is obviously that in both cases something has been cut away. In the case of the ear of grain, it has been separated from its stem. I take it that this was the reason why the stem was explicitly mentioned in T3.

<sup>29</sup> Proclus, *In RP II* 108.17-30; on this passage, see W. Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England 1987) 113-14.

<sup>30</sup> For the blissful afterlife, see Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults*, above n.29, 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Theol. Plat.* VI 11, p. 50.12-14 ed. Saffrey-Westerink, above n.7; cf. their additional n.3 to p.50, on p.150.

<sup>32</sup> Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults*, above n.29, 85.

According to the myth, Attis' castration, the act that in the Neoplatonic interpretation brought about his salvation, resulted in his death.

As for Proclus' involvement with the Great Mother and Attis, we know from Marinus, *Vita Procli* § 33, 12-20 ed. Saffrey-Segonds that he wrote a now lost book on the Great Mother and Attis, in which he gave a philosophical interpretation of the myth. In his hymn to Helios (vs. 25) he makes a passing reference to Attis from which it is evident that he attached indeed a deeper meaning to the myth.<sup>33</sup>

The emperor Julian offers the most extensive interpretation of the myth in his preserved treatise on the Great Mother. Interestingly enough, he explicitly connects the rites of Attis to the Chaldaean doctrine of the salvation of the soul. Both Attis and the human soul are semi-divine beings who made the mistake of descending into the material realm. In the myth of Attis this is symbolized by the fact that Attis, the lover of the Great Mother, commits adultery with a nymph. However, both the erring Attis and the straying human soul are saved. According to the *Chaldaean Oracles* the sun elevates the human soul to the intelligible realm, just as in the myth of the Great Mother and Attis the sun pulls the vegetation (i.e. Attis) out of the earth.

We will come back to the Chaldaean doctrines shortly, but let us first seek to interpret the shedding of the husk mentioned in T3 within the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries. As just said, the initiates in Eleusis went through purifying rites before they were shown 'the holy things'. A relief depicts the annuitant sitting on a ram's fleece, while a priestess holds a winnowing basket over his head.<sup>34</sup> In daily life, a winnowing basket was used for purifying grain from husks by throwing it in the air. In this context, Burkert refers to purification by the elements of water, air, and fire. The winnowing basket purifies by means of air.<sup>35</sup>

The 'noeric flower and fruit' mentioned in T3 do not have an Eleusinian background. The expressions are taken from Chaldaean sources. As we have seen, the *Timaeus* teaches that souls will only escape the Circle of Generation when they observe the laws of Destiny as they have been shown to them by the Demiurge. Proclus, as always eager to show that the teachings of Plato and the *Chaldaean Oracles* are in harmony with each other, cites some verses from the *Chaldaean Oracles* in the course of his commentary on *Ti.* 42c-d.

T10. Therefore, (the souls), by perceiving the works of the Father,  
'flee the shameful wing of allotted fate,'

as the oracle says,

'and rest in God, drawing in the flowering flames which  
come down from the Father. From these flames, as they are  
descending, the soul plucks the soul-nourishing flower of fiery  
fruits.'

(Proclus *In Tim.* III 266.18-23 = *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 130; translation after Majercik).

<sup>33</sup> On this verse and the Neoplatonic interpretation of the myth in general, see R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus' hymns: essays, translations, commentary* (Leiden 2001) 171-73.

<sup>34</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, above n.29, 94-95 and his figure 3.

<sup>35</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, above n.29, 98.

The Oracle describes the unification with the rays of the Sun. According to the *Chaldaean Oracles* the soul of the annuitant in the Chaldaean mysteries mingles with the solar rays, ascends by means of these, thus reaches the Sun, i.e. God and reposes in him.<sup>36</sup> For the Chaldaeans, the Sun is not just the sun. It is the Paternal Intellect that is the cause of the harmony in the universe. Proclus hence equates him to the Platonic Demiurge. The 'flower of fiery fruits' that the soul plucks consists in this unification with god, a blissful existence away from the material realm of Fate.

## 7. Theurgical death

As we have seen above (§4), the goddess Rhea-Demeter of the Greek theologians corresponds to Hecate. Her daughter is the Greek Kore, consisting of Artemis, Persephone, and Athena. She corresponds to the Chaldaean triad of encosmic Hecate, Soul, and Virtue. According to (Proclus' interpretation of) Greek theology, the daughter of Demeter, Persephone, saves the human soul by killing it in the Eleusinian Mysteries and subsequently elevating it to the noeric realm of her mother and Zeus, the κραιτήρ and the Demiurge. Given Proclus' desire to find a close correspondence between Greek and Chaldaean theology, one expects to find references in Proclus to something similar in the Chaldaean Mysteries. And indeed Proclus reports that

T11. ... the theurgists order the burial of the body with the exception of the head in the most secret part of the mysteries.<sup>37</sup>

The burial represents the death of the initiated. According to Plato *Ti.* 69d-70a, the immortal part of the soul resides in the head. Hence, apart from more practical considerations, the head is not buried since it represents the part of the soul that is not subjected to the death of the body. The context in which Proclus refers to this ritual is interesting. It is about the contemplation of the intelligible world, i.e. what the soul does when it rests in God. Proclus draws attention to the fact that in the *Phaedrus* Plato compares the process that results in a vision of the Forms (hence the intelligible world) to the phases of an initiation into mysteries. At *Phdr.* 250b5-c1 he calls the actual contemplation of the Forms 'the most blissful among the initiations'. In the *Phaedrus*, the soul that contemplates the Forms does so by sticking his head out of the celestial dome, while the rest of him and his chariot remains within the celestial realm.<sup>38</sup> Proclus triumphantly concludes from this that the teachings of the *Oracles* and of Plato are in perfect harmony.<sup>39</sup> The fact that the head alone sticks out in both cases indicates that the initiated 'possess a life in the intelligible that is completely separated from

<sup>36</sup> On the elevation of the soul to the Sun by means of its rays, see H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and theurgy. Mysticism magic and Platonism in the later Roman Empire. Nouvelle édition par M. Tardieu* (Paris 1978) 196-204.

<sup>37</sup> Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* IV 9, p. 30.17-18 (τῶν θεουργῶν θάπτειν τὸ σῶμα κελευόντων πλὴν τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐν τῇ μυστικωτάτῃ τῶν τελετῶν); for a discussion of the passage, see Lewy, 'The death of the body', in *Chaldaean Oracles*, above n.36, 204-07, and H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, *Proclus: Théologie Platonicienne. Livre IV* (Paris 1981), 135, additional n.2 to p.30. The latter observe that this is the only explicit reference to the most secret of the theurgist initiations. However, see also *In RP* II 122.17-124.27, especially 123.12 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Phdr.* 248a2-3; Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* IV 9, p. 31.3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Proclus calls the fact that at the climax of both the Platonic and the Chaldaean mysteries the head is separated from the body the 'most impressive (θαυμαστότατον) of all' (*Theol. Plat.* IV 9, p. 30.17).

the body'.<sup>40</sup> This formulation recalls T9 where Persephone is said to 'separate the souls perfectly from their bodies' by means of murder.

#### 8. Marinus on how Proclus became like god

Marinus' *Life of Proclus* corroborates my claim that for Proclus 'becoming like god' is brought about by ritual purification, not by intellectual effort. Marinus, Proclus' successor as head of the Neoplatonic school of Athens, composed an eulogy in honour of his teacher and predecessor. The work has a subtitle *On blessedness* (Περὶ εὐδαιμονίας). It is Marinus' explicit aim to show that Proclus was the most blessed man of his time. This means that the latter possessed all the virtues to such a degree that he enjoyed 'perfect and in every way complete bliss' (*Vita Procli* §2, 14-16 ed. Saffrey-Segonds: τελείαν τινὰ καὶ πάντη ἀνελλιπή εὐδαιμονίαν). Bliss (εὐδαιμονία) is, let us recall, exactly what we were promised at the end of the *Timaeus*. The biography is organised according to the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, seven in ascending order of importance: physical, moral, political, purifying, contemplative, and theurgic virtues.<sup>41</sup> The physical virtues include such things as sensitivity in regard to sight and hearing, bodily strength, physical beauty, and health (*VP* §3). Then follow the moral virtues, including a love for truth, justice, courage, and temperance (§§4-5). After a discussion of Proclus' political virtues, we reach the purifying virtues (αἰκαθαρτικὰ ἀρεταί). Marinus starts his discussion (§18) by pointing out that the political virtues are different from the purificatory virtues, which are superior to the former:

T12. For even if the task of these (*scil.* the political virtues, RMB) too is in some way to purify the soul and prepare it to the extent possible to care for human affairs in a detached way, in order that it too obtains 'likeness to god', which is the best fulfilment of the soul, it is still true that not all virtues separate in the same way, but some separate more than others. ... But the purifying virtues, that surpass those (*scil.* the political virtues, RMB) completely separate and free (us) from the truly leaden weight of generation and make an unhindered flight from this world. These too the philosopher (*scil.* Proclus) practised throughout his whole philosophical life, in words by his wonderful explanations about them, what these virtues are and how these too help man, but especially by living in accordance with them, and by practising them on each and every occasion for separation that presented itself to the soul. Day and night he occupied himself with apotropaic rites, sprinkling lustral water and other purifying rites, sometimes Orphic ones, sometimes Chaldaean ones; each month he resolutely went into the sea, sometimes even twice or three times a month. And he did not just endure these things in his prime, but also in the autumn of his life he fulfilled unintermittently such customs as if ordained by law.

(Marinus *VP* §18, 5-34)

First, note the references to the *Timaeus* and the *Theaetetus*: The expressions 'likeness to god', 'fulfilment of the soul' and 'flight from this world' recall the expressions φυγῆ δὲ

<sup>40</sup> Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* IV 9, p. 31.1-3.

<sup>41</sup> On Marinus' *Life of Proclus* and its organization according to the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, see Blumenthal, 'Marinus' Life', above n.8; for text and commentary, see now H. D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds, *Marinus: Proclus ou sur le bonheur* (Paris 2001).

ὁμοίωσις θεῷ from the *Theaetetus* and τῷ κατανοουμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοιωῶσαι and τέλος τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου from the *Timaeus*. Secondly, the passage stresses that 'becoming like god' is a matter of separation from the material world. The political virtues do their bit in so far as they help us to check our appetites and ambitions, but the true separating virtues that set us completely free from the body are the purificatory ones. Thirdly, these virtues are practical ones. Proclus taught about them, but the important point is that he lived his life in accordance with them, as Marinus stresses. Proclus must have taken them very seriously indeed. He practised them 'at day and at night', more often than strictly necessary, like his baths in the sea, even in his old age. These rites are Orphic and Chaldaean in nature. As we have seen, according to the passage from the commentary on the *Timaeus* on the salvation of the soul (see T4 and T5 above), it was especially the Orphic and Chaldaean rites that allow us to rid ourselves from the stem and chaff of the life in the material realm.

The commentary on the *Timaeus* promised us that, once we have escaped from 'the wandering circuit of the movement of the Other,' 'the revolution of the Same and the Like will send the soul towards Nous and the noetic nature and the first and best state of existence' (see T3). And indeed next on Marinus' scale of virtues come the contemplative ones (αἱ θεωρητικαὶ ἀρεταί). The soul that has completely purified itself from the world of becoming<sup>42</sup> and has transcended it, no longer practises discursive thought, but contemplates in an intuitive fashion the Ideas in the mind of God.<sup>43</sup> Such a soul, Marinus explains, is not just a mere narthex-bearer but has become a true Bacchant.

## 9. Conclusions

In this paper I have examined Proclus' interpretation of the notion of 'becoming like god' against the background of the *Timaeus*. With most commentators, both ancient and modern, Proclus agrees that 'becoming like god' consists in the return of the soul to its origin, hence to the Demiurge and his κρατήρ. For Proclus, this takes the form of a return to the divine demiurgical Intellect in which the soul finds rest and is able to contemplate the Forms. Contrary to most commentators, he does not attach a special value to astronomy in the process. Instead he puts his trust in mystery rites that include ritual purifications, like the Eleusinian Mysteries and the rites connected with the *Chaldaean Oracles*. These are supposed to separate the soul of the initiand from the body. He refers to this separation as 'death', a conception that is partially rooted in Plato's own writings. A special role is reserved here for the goddess who is also the cause of life for the soul, since, according to the general law of Proclus' metaphysics, there can be no emanation from a cause without reversion upon it. This life-bringing goddess, who manifests herself on different levels of reality, consists of Rhea, Demeter, and Persephone in the Orphic-Eleusinian Mysteries and Hecate in the Chaldaean tradition. This goddess is the κρατήρ of the *Timaeus*. The soul, thus separated, was supposed to contemplate the Forms in the divine Mind. Marinus' reports about Proclus' life corroborate this interpretation. He reports that Proclus actively

<sup>42</sup> Marinus VP §22, 4-5 ed. Saffrey-Segonds: ... κεκαθαρμένος καὶ τῆς γενέσεως ὑπερανέχων ...

<sup>43</sup> Marinus VP §22, 11-12 ed. Saffrey-Segonds: ... ἀπλαῖς ἐπιβολαῖς ταῖς <τε> νοεραῖς ἐνεργείαις θεώμενος τὰ ἐν τῷ θεῷ νῷ παραδείγματα ...



participated in both Orphic and Chaldaean purificatory rituals. These rituals, considered as part of the so-called purificatory virtues, were supposed to separate body from soul, and hence make the participant like god. In a next stage the now godlike Proclus was able to contemplate the Forms which are in the divine Mind.

Does Proclus' version of how to become like god helps us to understand the *Timaeus* better? Although his rejection of astronomy as a way of becoming like god in favour of a ritualistic approach is impossible to accept, he makes an important point. As is well-known, Socrates in the *Republic* considers mathematics and astronomy as being only propaedeutic in the education of the philosopher. Dialectics, culminating in the vision of the Forms is the real thing. The importance that Plato attaches to astronomy and mathematics in the *Timaeus* seems to stand in flat contradiction to the educational curriculum of the *Republic*. If doing astronomy is enough to become godlike, why bother about dialectics at all? This is all the more problematic, if one takes into consideration the fact that the conversation of the *Timaeus* is presented as if having taken place the day after that of the *Republic*. It seems to me that the curriculum of the *Republic* is still maintained in the *Timaeus*. After all, the god to whom we are supposed to become like is the World Soul, who, as already Cornford noted,<sup>44</sup> is in part occupied with doing dialectics. The study of the pure Forms requires a godlike soul, i.e. a purified soul that has left behind anything associated with the material world. One does not strive to become godlike in order to be it, but to act like god. In the words of the *Life of Proclus*, the restoration of the order of the movements of the soul is just a preparation for the Bacchic frenzy of the contemplation of the Forms. To become godlike, then, is not the end of the story, it is just the beginning.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Plato's cosmology: the Timaeus of Plato translated with a running commentary* (London 1937) 95-97 commenting on *Ti.* 27b-c.

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