

Exposition of the Chaldean Oracles

ΕΞΗΓΗΣΙΣ ΕΙΣ ΤΑ ΛΟΓΙΑ

Plethon
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George Gemistos Plethon (c. 1355-1452) — the last great philosopher of Byzantium, teacher at Mistra, and the man whose lectures at the Council of Florence in 1439 rekindled Plato in the Latin West. Among his works was an edition of the so-called Chaldean, or Magian, Oracles — verse fragments he ascribed to Zoroaster and the Magi — and this brief exposition of their more obscure lines, read throughout in a Platonic key: the soul's descent into and ascent from the body, the paternal Mind, the divine Fire, and the rites that join the soul to God. Given here in Thomas Stanley's English of 1661, the first in our language, with its original spelling kept. Public domain.

“Seek thou the way of the Soul, whence or by what OrderHaving served the body, to the same order from which thou didst flow.Thou mayst rise up againe; joyning action to sacred speech.”

The Magi that are followers of Zoroaster, as also many others, hold that the Human Soul is immortal; and descended from above to serve the mortal Body, that is, to operate therein for a certain time; and to Animate, and Adorn it to her power; and then returns to the place from which she came. And whereas there are many Mansions there for the Soul, one wholly-bright, another wholly dark, others betwixt both, partly-bright, partly-dark: The Soul, being descended from that which is wholly-bright, into the Body, if she perform her Office well, runs back into the same place; but if not well, she retires into worse Mansions, according to the things which she hath done in Life. The Oracle therefore sayeth, seek thou the Souls path, or the way by which the Soul flowed into thee; or by what course (viz of Life) having performed thy charge toward the Body, thou mayst Mount up to the same place from which thou didst flow down, viz. the same Track of the Soul, joyning action to sacred speech. By sacred speech, he

understands that which concerns Divine Worship; by action, Divine Rites. The Oracle therefore sayeth, that to this Exaltation of the Soul, both speech concerning Divine Worship (Prayers,) and Religious Rites (Sacrifices) are requisite.

“Stoop not down, for a precipice lies below on the Earth, Drawing through the Ladder which hath seven steps; beneath which Is the Throne of Necessity.”

He calls the Descention into wickednesse, and misery, a Precipice; the Terrestrial and Mortal Body, the Earth: for by the Earth he understands mortal Nature, as by the fire frequently the Divine; by the place with seven Wayes, he means Fate dependant on the Planets, beneath which there is seated a certain dire and unalterable Necessity: The Oracle therefore adviseth, that thou stoop not down towards the mortal Body, which being Subject only to the Fate, which proceeds from the Planets, may be reckon'd amongst those things which are at our Arbitrement: for thou wilt be unhappy if thou stoop down wholly to the Body, and unfortunate and continually failing of thy Desires, in regard of the Necessity which is annex'd to the Body.

“For thy Vessel the Beasts of the Earth shall inhabit.”

The Vessel of thy Soul, that is this mortal Body, shall be inhabited by Worms and other vile Creatures.

“Enlarge not Thou thy Destiny.”

Endeavour not to encrease thy Fate, or to do more then is given thee in charge, for thou wilt not be able.

“For nothing proceeds from the paternal principality imperfect.”

For from the paternal Power, which is, that of the supream God, nothing proceedeth imperfect, so as thou thy selfe

mightest compleat it; for all things proceeding from thence are perfect; as appears, in that they tend to the perfection of the Universe.

“But the Paternal Mind accepts not her will,Untill she go out of Oblivion, and pronounce a Word,Inserting the remembrance of the pure paternal Symbol.”

The Paternal Mind, (viz. the Second God and ready Maker of the Soul) admits not her Will or Desire untill she come out of the Oblivion, which she contracted by Connexion with the Body; and untill she speak a certain Word, or conceive in her thoughts a certain Speech, calling to remembrance the paternal Divine Symbol or Watch-word, this is the pursuit of the good which the Soul calling to remembrance, hereby becomes most acceptable to Her Maker.

“It behooves thee to hasten to the Light, and to the beams of the Father:from whence there was sent to thee a Soul endued with much mind.”

The Light and splendour of the Father is that Mansion of the Soul which is circumlucid, from whence the Soul array'd with much of mind was sent hither, wherefore We must hasten to return to the same Light.

“These the Earth bewails, even to their Children.”

Those who hasten not to the Light, from which their Soul was sent to them, the Earth or mortal Nature bewails, for that they being sent hither to Adorn her, not only not adorn her, but also blemish themselves by Living wickedly; moreover the Wickednesse of the Parents is transmitted to the Children, corrupted by them through ill Education.

“The ungirders of the Soul, which give her breathing, are easie to be loosed.”

The Reasons which expell the Soul from Wickednesse, and give her breathing, are easie to be untied; and the Oblivion which keeps them in, is easily put off.

"In the side of the sinister bed there is a fountain of Virtue: Which remains entire within; not emitting her Virginity"

In the left side of thy Bed, there is the Power or Fountain of Virtue, residing wholly within, and never casting off her Virginity, or Nature void of Passion: for there is alwayes in us the power of Virtue without passion which cannot be put off; although her Energy or Activity may be interrupted: he saith the power of Virtue is placed on the left side, because her Activity is seated on the right: by the Bed is meant the seat of the Soul, subject to her several Habits.

"The soul of Man will, in a manner, clasp God to herself. Having nothing mortal, she is wholly inebriated from God. For she boasts Harmony, in which the mortal Body consists."

The human Soul will in a manner clasp God, and joyn him strictly to her self, (who is her continual Defence) by resembling him as much as she can possibly; having nothing mortal within her, she is wholly drench'd in Divinity, or replenished with Divine goods, for though she is fetter'd to this mortal Body, yet she glories in the Harmony or Union in which the mortal Body exists; that is, she is not ashamed of it, but thinks well of her self for it; as being a Cause, and affording to the Universe, that, As Mortals are united with immortals in Man, So the Universe is adorned with one Harmony.

"Because the Soul being a bright fire by the power of the Father; Remains immortal, and is Mistresse of Life, And possesseth many Completions of the cavities of the World."

The second God, who first before all other things proceeded from the Father and supreme God, these Oracles call all along, The power of the Father, and his intellectual Power, and the paternal Mind. He sayeth therefore, that the Soul procreated by this power of the Father, is a bright fire, that is, a Divine and Intellectual Essence, and persisteth immortal through the Divinity of its Essence, and is Mistress of Life, viz. of her self, possessing Life which cannot be taken away from her; for, how can we be said to be Masters of such things, as may be taken from us, seeing the use of them is only allowed us? but of those things which cannot be taken from us, We are absolute Masters: The Soul according to her own Eternity, possesseth many Rooms in the Receptacles of the World, or divers places in the World, which according as she hath led her Life past is allotted to every One.

“Seek Paradise.”

The circumlucid Mansion of the Soul.

“Defile not the Spirit nor deepen a Superficies.”

The Followers of Pythagoras and Plato conceive the Soul to be a Substance not wholly separate from all Body, nor wholly inseparate; but partly separate, partly inseparate; separable potentially, but ever inseparate actually. For they assert three kinds of Forms, One wholly separate from matter, the Supercelestial Intelligences; another wholly inseparable from matter, having a Substance not subsistent by it self but dependant on matter; together with which Matter, which is sometime dissolved by reason of its nature subject to Mutation, this kind of Soul is dissolved also and perisheth: this kind they hold to be wholly irrational. Betwixt these they place a middle kind, the rational Soul, differing from the Supercelestial Intelligences, for that it alwayes co-exists with Matter; and from the irrational kind, for that it is not dependant on matter; but, on the contrary, matter it is dependent on it, and

it hath a proper substance potentially subsistent by it self; it is also indivisible, as well as the supercelestial Intelligences, and performing some works in some manner allied to theirs, being it self also busied in the knowledge and contemplation of beings even unto the Supreme God, and for this reason is incorruptible. This kind of Soul is alwayes co-existent with an Ætherial Body as it's Vehiculum, which she by continual approximation maketh also immortal: neither is this her Vehiculum inanimate in it selfe, but is it self animated with the other species of the Soul the irrational, (which the Wise call the Image of the rational Soul) adorned with Fantasie and Sense which seeth and hears it self whole through whole, and is furnished with all the Senses and with all the rest of the irrational faculties of the Soul. Thus by the principal faculty of this Body, Phantasie, the rational Soul, is continually joyned to such a Body and by such a Body sometimes the humane Soul is joyned with a Mortal Body by a certain affinity of Nature, the whole being infolded in the whole enlivening Spirit of the Embryon. This Vehiculum it selfe being of the nature of a Spirit. The Dæmons Souls differ not much from the humane, onely they are more noble and use more noble Vehicles: Moreover, they cannot be mingled with corruptible Nature: Likewise the Souls of the Starres are much better than the Dæmons, and use better Vehicules; are Bodies splendid by reason of the greatnesse of the operative faculty: These Doctrines concerning the Soul the Magi, followers of Zoroastres, seem to have used long before. Defile not this kind of Spirit of the Soul, sayeth the Oracle, nor deepen it being a superficies; He calls it Superficies, not as if it had not a triple Dimension for it is a Body, but to signifie its extraordinary rarity: nor make it become grosse by accession of more matter to its Bulk: for this Spirit of the Soul becomes grosse, if it declines too much towards the mortal Body.

“There is a room for the Image also in the circumlucid place.”

He calls the Image of the Soul that part which being it self voyd of irrational, is joyned to the rational part, and depends upon the Vehicle thereof: now he saith that this kind of Image hath a part in the circumlucid Region; for the Soul never layeth down the Vehicle adherent to her.

“Leave not the drosse of matter on a Precipice.”

He calls the mortal Body the Drosse of matter, and exhorteth that We neglect it not being ill affected, but take care of it whilst it is in this life, to preserve it in Health as much as possible, and that it may be pure, and in all things else correspond with the Soul.

“Carry not forth, lest going forth she have something.”

Carry not forth, meaning the Soul, out of the mortal Body lest by going forth thou incurre some danger, implying as much as to carry her forth beyond the lawes of Nature.

“If thou extend the fiery mind to the work of Piety, thoushalt preserve the flexible Body.”

Extending up thy divine Mind to the Exercise of Piety or to religiou Rites, and thou shalt preserve the mortal Body more sound by performing these Rites.

“Certainly out of the cavities of the Earth spring terrestrial Dogs;Which show no true signe to mortal Man.”

Sometimes to many initiated Persons there appear, whilst they are sacrificing, some Apparitions in the shape of Doggs and several other figures. Now the Oracle saith, that these issue out of the Receptacles of the Earth, that is, out of the terrestrial and mortal Body, and the irrational Passions planted in it which are not yet sufficiently adorned with Reason, these are Apparitions of the passions of the Soul in performing divine Rites; meer appearances having no substance, and therefore not signifying any thing true.

“Nature perswadeth that Dæmons are pure;The bourgeons even of ill matter, are profitable andgood.”

Nature or natural Reason perswadeth that Dæmons are Sacred, and that all things proceeding from God who is in himself good are beneficial; and the very bloomings of ill Matter, or the forms dependant upon Matter are such: also he calls Matter ill, not as to it's substance, for how can the substance be bad the bloomings whereof are beneficial and good? but for that it is ranked last among the substance; and is the least participant of good, which littlenesse of good is here exprest by the Word ill: now the Oracle meanes that if the bloomings of ill matter viz. of the last of substances are good, much more are the Dæmons such, who are in an excellent Rank as partaking of rational Nature and being not mixed with mortal Nature.

“The furies are Stranglers of Men.”

The furies or the Vindictive Dæmons clasp Men close, or restrain and drive them from Vice and excite them to Vertue.

“Let the immortal depth of the soul be predominant; butall thy EyesExtend quite upward”

Let the divine depth of thy Soul governe, and lift thou all thy Eyes or all thy knowing faculties Upward.

“O Man, the machine of boldest Nature”

He calls Man the Machine of boldest Nature, because he attempts great things.

“If thou speak often to me, thou shalt see absolutely that which is spoken;For there neither appears the cælestial concave bulk;Nor do the Stars shine: the light of the Moon is covered,The Earth stands not still, but all things appear Thunder.”

The Oracle speaks as from God to an initiated Person, If thou often speak to me or call me, thou shalt see that which thou speakest, viz. Me whom thou callest every where: for then thou shalt perceive nothing but Thunder all about fire gliding up and down all over the World.

“Call not on the self-conspicuous image of Nature.”

Seek not to behold the self-seeing Image of Nature, viz. of the Nature of God, which is not visible to our Eyes: but those things which appear to initiated Persons, as Thunder, Lightning, and all else whatsoever, are only Symbols or Signes, not the Nature of God.

“Every way to the unfashioned Soul stretch out the reins offire.”

Draw unto thy selfe every way the reins of fire which appear to thee when thou art sacrificing with a sincere Soul; viz. a simple and not of various habits.

“When thou seest a sacred fire, without form, Shining flashingly through the depths of the World Hear the voice of Fire.”

When thou beholdest the divine fire voyd of figure brightly gliding up and down the world and graciously smiling, listen to this Voice as bringing a most perfect Prascence.

“The Paternal mind hath implanted Symbols in Souls.”

The Paternal Mind viz. the sedulous Maker of the Substance of the Soul, hath ingrafted Symbols or the Images of Intelligibles in Souls, by which every Soul possesseth in her self the reasons of beings.

“Learn the intelligible, for as much as it exists beyond thy Mind.”

Learn the Intelligible, because it exists beyond thy Mind, viz. actually; for; though the Images of intellectual things are

planted in thee by the Maker of All, yet they are but potentially in thy Soul; but it behooves thee to have actually the knowledge of the Intelligible.

“There is a certain Intelligible which it behooves thee to comprehend with the flower of thy Mind.”

The Supream God, who, is perfectly One, is not conceived after the same manner as other things, but by the flower of the Mind, that is, the Supream and singular Part of our understanding.

“For the Father perfected all things and delivered them over to the Second Mind, which the Nations of Men call the First.”

The Father perfected All things, viz. the Intelligible Species, (for they are absolute and perfect) and delivered them over to the second God next him to rule and guide them: whence if anything be brought forth by this god, and formed after the likeness of Him, and the other intelligible Substance, it proceeds from the Supream Father; This other God Men esteem the First, that is they who think him the Maker of the World, to whom there is none Superiour.

“Intelligent Jynges do themselves also understand from the Father; By unspeakable counsels being moved so as to understand.”

He calls Jynges the Intellectual Species which are conceived by the Father; they themselves also being conceptive, and exciting conceptions or Notions, by unspeakable or unutterable Counsells: by Motion here is understood Intellection not transition, but simply the habitude to Notions so as unspeakable Counsels is as much as unmoved, for speaking consists in Motion: the meaning is this, that these Species are immoveable and have a habitude to Notions not transiently as the Soul.

“Oh how the World hath intellectual Guides inflexible?”

The most excellent of the Intelligible Species, and of those which are brought down by the Immortals in this Heaven, he calls the Intellectual Guides of the World; the Coryphæus of whom he conceives to be a God, which is the second from the Father. The Oracle saying that the World hath inflexible Guides, meanes that it is incorruptible.

“The Father hath snatched away himself; Neither hath he shut up his own fire in his Intellectual power.”

The Father made himself exempt from all others, not including himself neither in his own Intellectual Power, not in the second God who is next him; or limiting his own Fire his own Divinity; for it is absolutely ungenerate, and it self existing by it self; so that his Divinity is exempt from all others; neither is it communicable to any other, although it be loved of all: That he communicates not himself, is not out of envy, but only by reason of the impossibility of the thing.

“The Father infuseth not fear but perswasion.”

The Father makes an impression of fear, but infuseth perswasion or love, for He being extreamly good, is not the cause of ill to any, so as to be dreadful; but is the cause of all good to all; whence he is loved of all. These Oracles of Zoroaster many Eminent Persons have confirmed by following the like opinions; especially the Pythagoreans and Platonists.