

Porphyry: The Man and His Demons

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*The present essay is neither a definitive description of demons nor a comprehensive study of Porphyry as a writer and thinker. Nor, strictly speaking, is it a history of animal sacrifice as understood in the third century. It may best be described as an interpretive essay.*¹ It deliberately concentrates on demons, Porphyry, and imperial policy separately, attempting first to establish the main features of demons in *De abstinentia*,² or *On Abstinence*, then to examine Porphyry's viewpoint and assumptions in *Vita Plotini*,³ or *The Life of Plotinus*, and finally to use these two works to assess why Porphyry would support the imperial persecution of Christians during the reign of emperor Diocletian.

It goes without saying that Porphyry stands as one of the most significant Neoplatonist writers to have seriously investigated the supernatural world of demons. True, two later mainstream ancient scholars, Iamblichus in his *De Mysteriis* and Augustine in his *De civitate Dei*, took up the subject of demons. However, Porphyry's treatment of demons and sacrifice had a greater impact upon imperial religious

¹ This opening structure and method owes much to the preface and execution of T.D. Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius* (Barnes, T.D. *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981) v.

² Porphyry [*De abstinentia*. English] *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. Gillian Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) (hereinafter *Abst.*). *Abst.*, a four-volume treatise on applying philosophical ideas to daily life, defends the Pythagorean ban on animal sacrifice. Its manuscript tradition is not as well documented as that of the *Vita Plotini*. *De abstinentia* citations hereafter include book and chapter; citation occurs at end of paragraph, unless individual sentences need to be cited. I do not cite paragraphs because I am interested in concepts underneath a formalized deconstruction of Porphyry's work. Regrettably, scholars have responded to Porphyry's complex use of Greek with an effort to demarcate his language by subdividing his text. I am not convinced that this trend makes Porphyry's ideas easier to understand.

³ Porphyry [*Vita Plotini*. English] *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*. Plotinus, *Ennead 1*, Revised ed. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) (hereinafter *Plot.*). *Plot.* is a biography of Plotinus, precedes the first volume of the *Enneads* and explains the structure and order which Porphyry imposed on the work of Plotinus. Much work has gone into retracing the manuscript of the *Enneads*. Briefly, experts agree that the archetype upon which the modern editions are based accurately represents the text of Porphyry's edition. This archetype was written after the beginning of the sixth century and probably between the ninth and twelfth centuries (Armstrong, A.H. *Introduction to Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus; Ennead 1*, revised ed., trans. A.H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) xxviii). Moreover, the text is considered so faithful that there is little room for speculation or emendation (Armstrong xxix).

policy than his successors.

Demons in *De abstinentia*

De abstinentia articulates a wide-ranging description of demons as they relate to sacrifice, the most central ritual in ancient Greek religion. Though a single example *De abstinentia* offers little support for generalizations about Greek culture, it is nevertheless useful for the sake of illustration. Moreover, as a basis for examination, *De abstinentia* clarifies the way in which a highly educated Greek, Porphyry, understood demons and sacrifice. The importance of sacrifice cannot be overstated, as its revitalization gave cause to the great persecution of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century.

Humans offered animal sacrifice to both good and bad demons, and other mysterious powers.⁴ A diligent and devout individual knew what kind of person sacrificed to demons, the extent to which these sacrifices were useful, and the silence surrounding much of this subject. To explain the origin of demons, Porphyry drew on traditional Platonic themes about demons and their place in the world.⁵

The Platonists held that the first divine being was otherworldly, unmoving, and unbreakable. Its existence required neither food nor any other thing external to itself. In this last regard, the first divine being and the soul of the world were similar. This ‘world soul’ moved itself and its body—the world that was seen and touched—in a beautiful and orderly manner. Although free from emotion and material constraints, the world soul nevertheless knew and understood the world body.⁶ The stars in the sky—possessing both souls and bodies—were visible gods. Humans were to show them thanks through non-animal sacrifice. Below these visible sky gods were many invisible beings whom Plato called demons.⁷

Some demons were openly invoked by people, who honored them and gave them religious obser-

⁴ Demons are “daemons” in Taylor’s translation (Porphyry. [*De Abstinentia*] *On Abstinence from Animal Food*. trans. Thomas Taylor, ed. and intro. Esme Wynne-Tyson (London: Centaur Press Ltd., 1965)). The term daemon is often used to distinguish its use in Greek mythology as an intermediary supernatural being, from the more common definition of “demon” as an evil spirit. Porphyry’s “demons” include both intermediaries and evil spirits.

⁵ The Platonists in fact completely transformed the basic idea of demon (or “daemon”) in Greek culture. First, demons were unreasonable impulses, tempting a person from within; then they became personifications of natural disasters; finally, with Plato, demons were transformed into “lofty spirit-guides,” identified with pure reason in the *Timaeus* (Dodds, Eric Robertson. “Appendix II: Theurgy” *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964): 41-43). Most interestingly, however, Porphyry’s description includes Platonic and Pre-Platonic demons. Porphyry, operating within a greater Greek cultural tradition, is not exclusively Platonist.

⁶ In this sense, the world soul becomes a model for human salvation during life. Andrew Smith provides an illustrative passage based on *Sententiae* viii and ix, in which “Porphyry declares that the soul both binds itself to and releases itself from body.... The soul may separate itself from body before body has separated itself from soul—this would be the ascent of the soul during life” (Smith, Andrew. *Porphyry’s Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) 22-3) (hereinafter *Porphyry’s Place*). The world body is alive, and simultaneously, the world soul ascends to a higher level of purity.

vance similar to that of the sky gods. Other demons received secret worship, from both villagers and city-dwellers. Both kinds of demons, however, were angry if neglected, and could become dangerous. In such situations, prayers, supplications, sacrifices, and other rituals were needed to appease them. Yet, reason could only distinguish between good and bad demons with difficulty.⁸

Some demons were the progeny of the world soul.⁹ They controlled the physical world below the path of the moon, and whether presiding over animals, fruits, rains, or winds, they governed according to reason, and with the best interests of their charges in mind. They were responsible for human achievements in music, medicine, sports, and all forms of education. These demons were purely good. It followed that pure good was unable to cause evil. Plato called these good demons “transporters” because they carried, or transported, news of humanity to the sky gods, and brought back the will of the sky gods to humanity; specifically, they carried human prayers and announced divine judgments. Other demons, however, at the mercy of troubled desires and short-temper, could not control themselves. These demons did evil. By the same logic that made good demons unable to do evil, bad demons were unable to do good.¹⁰

All demons were invisible, with neither fixed form nor solid body, and humans were unable to sense them. However, demons could reveal themselves as apparitions. Bad demons changed their forms, but when visible their energy became weak and began to fade.¹¹ Nevertheless, the forms of these demons lasted, if not forever, for much longer than human forms. Demons radiated and were sustained by spiritual energy.¹² While good demons possessed orderly spiritual energy similar to the order of the sky gods, bad demons possessed uncontrollable spiritual energy of a lesser quality, and it was for this reason that they existed on a lower level, the earth. This lesser quality, this base nature, led bad demons to commit the most reprehensible actions. Although irregular, their attacks were sudden and violent, and could be either open or concealed. Quite the opposite, good demons proceeded in an orderly, even-paced manner, responding slowly but surely with good deeds to undo the evil caused by bad demons.¹³

Bad demons caused pestilence, earthquakes, droughts, and other misfortunes: even impotence. Then they concealed their responsibility for doing evil by convincing humans that bad demons were the source of peace, prosperity, and other good deeds. Even worse, they convinced people to pray to the good sky

⁷ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.37.

⁸ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.37-8.

⁹ Soul of the world equates to “whole soul of the universe.”

¹⁰ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.38.

¹¹ Weak and fades is “passive and corruptible” in Taylor. Visual words mirror an underlying concept of demon mortality; demon forms may last longer than human forms, but both are transient.

¹² Spiritual energy is “pneumatic substance” in Taylor’s translation (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.39). The term “substance” is unsatisfactory in describing demons, which have no substance. Energy, at least, describes a force without substance capable of affecting the material world.

gods, as though the sky gods were responsibility for disaster and other misfortunes. Bad demons even masqueraded as the sky gods, enjoying human prayers and sacrifice, making themselves popular among the ignorant masses, promising riches and glory but delivering treachery and war. Worst of all, bad demons persuaded people that the source of all that was good in the world, the first divine being, was also the source of the confusion and disorder which they themselves had created.¹⁴ Often even philosophers did not see through these clever deceptions.¹⁵

Good demons were just, like the first divine being. They never ceased to do good and, to the extent possible, warn humanity of impending attacks from bad demons, which were unjust and nothing like the first divine being. The good demons communicated through oracles, dreams, and other signs, though humans often understood these warnings too late. Those who enchanted, which were cast with the aid of bad demons, worshipped bad demons and their power.¹⁶

Bad demons wanted to be considered as great gods and were consumed by a desire to strengthen themselves and achieve this status. Libations,¹⁷ sacrificial smoke, and even living breath¹⁸ strengthened their spiritual energy.¹⁹ Above all, bad demons delighted in the energy released from blood and flesh, and therefore were attracted to animal sacrifice.²⁰ For that reason, intelligent people were justified in fearing and distancing themselves from sacrifice of this kind, and furthermore, trying to purify their souls. Bad demons did not attack pure-and by pure, good-souls among humans, because good and evil never associated with each other. A person had a pure soul if they were free of emotion and aware of true divinities, and aware that true divinities were the source of salvation.²¹ Moreover, pure souls rose above the

¹³ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.39.

¹⁴ First divine being is “the most excellent of the divinities” to Taylor. A singular article, “the” implies one superlative deity. However, even if Taylor is providing imprecise language and instead means a plural set of gods, the point still stands that bad demons tricked people into believing that the ultimate source(s) of good in the world is (are) the cause(s) of evil. By emphasizing that bad demons laid blame on the greatest source of good, the first divine being, the point is reinforced.

¹⁵ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.40.

¹⁶ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.41.

¹⁷ Libation is defined as “the pouring of a drink-offering, often from a special, valuable vessel, [...] a core Indo-European religious practice” (Dowden, Ken, “Sacrifice” *European Paganism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 167). Significantly, libation comes before burnt offering in Porphyry’s list. Yet Porphyry later argues that burnt offerings are historically the first sacrifices. Reason would suggest that libations came before plants, yet Porphyry does not argue a liquid was the first sacrifice. This may be because pouring downward, as opposed to burning upward, would appear to benefit lower demons and therefore not constitute proper sacrifice. Then again, Porphyry does not necessarily argue from reason, but from authority. He bases his argument on the treatise *On Piety* by Theophrastus, Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum in Athens (Price, Simon, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 139). In *Abst.* Porphyry often cites a source without giving reference or warning (Smith, Andrew, “Porphyrian Studies since 1913” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Band II.36.2 (1987): 749) (hereinafter “Porphyrian Studies”). Taking this into consideration, Porphyry selectively cites sources—Theophrastus and later historians including Manetho—whose collective authority extended throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. The wide range of sources is evidence that Porphyry operated beyond Platonic thinkers and valued principles beyond Platonic reason.

¹⁸ Living breath, “exhalations” to Taylor, emphasizes how nourishing air comes from a living body.

lesser, more earthly, and more material nature which weighed down evil souls and bad demons. As an Athenian philosopher, Theophrastus, advised, one should sacrifice what was right according to experts, but never neglect reason or awareness. In the end, though, if people wanted to free themselves of emotional and material constraints, they first had to know how to ward off bad demons.²²

The entire world was a place of worship to the first divine being.²³ Yet bad demons were present wherever blood and flesh were sacrificed.²⁴ People who ate animal flesh attracted bad demons to themselves.²⁵ Moreover, bad demons were kindred spirits to violently departed souls.²⁶ When the body of an irrational-and by irrational, without reason-soul died violently, such as with suicide or sacrifice, its soul remained near its body.²⁷ When an animal was sacrificed, its soul, which possessed little reason,²⁸ remained at the place of sacrifice.²⁹ For example, people who wanted to be prophets swallowed the sacred parts of prophetic animals, such as the hearts of crows, moles, or hawks, and in so doing received prophetic powers.³⁰ Moreover, when a body was left unburied or was reanimated by a wizard, many such souls converged and mourned their slaughtered companion.³¹

A good soul among philosophers therefore avoided eating animal flesh for two reasons: first, the presence of bad demons impeded the effort to be purely good; and second, departed souls assembled around dead bodies.³² Moreover, a good philosopher did not need to consult oracles or magicians.³³ Instead,

¹⁹ In *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus denies this, saying, “For although Daimones possess a kind of body which some believe is nourished by sacrifices, this body is unchangeable, impassive, luminous, and without needs, so that nothing flows from it and, in addition, it does not need anything outside to flow into it” (Iamblichus, [*De Mysteriis*. English.] *On The Mysteries on the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*, 3rd ed. trans. Thomas Taylor (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1968)) (hereinafter *DM*). Iamblichus continues, “[Daimones] bring into manifest activity the invisible good of the Gods, reveal what is ineffable in them, shape what is formless into forms, and render what is beyond all measure into visible ratios” (Iamblichus *DM* 16.17, 17.4).

²⁰ Energy is “vapors” in Taylor.

²¹ True divinities being the only source of salvation comes from “a vital tendency towards them [truly existing beings]” in Taylor.

²² Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.42-3.

²³ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.46. ²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.44.

²⁶ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.47. ²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.51.

²⁹ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.47. However, Porphyry does argue for the “rationality of animals” in *Abst.* 3.1-24. Indeed, he gives five arguments: first, animals appear to behave rationally; second, animals and humans are physiologically similar, which implies mental similarities; third, animals are aware of their special talents; fourth, animals have ethical virtues and vices; and fifth, animals go mad: they could not do so unless they were sane to begin with (Preus, Anthony. “Biological Theory in Porphyry’s [sic] *De abstinentia*” *Ancient Philosophy* 3, No. 2 (1983): 154-6). Animals possess intellect and reason, “though in an imbecile and turbid manner, just as a dull and disordered eye participates of sight” (Porphyry *Abst.* 3.23). Humans possess superior rationality to animals, just as good demons possess superior qualities to the bad. Porphyry’s comparisons are consistent.

a good philosopher meditated inwardly, where the first divine being had established itself, to discover the path to salvation.³⁴

Through dreams, signs, and omens, the good demons helped good philosophers find this true path: departure from evil, knowledge of honor, and knowledge of what is safe and familiar in the world. Through this assistance, good souls knew it was wrong to sacrifice animals to gods or demons. And just as animals should not be eaten, they knew that humans should not be eaten. Good souls knew that humans should not be sacrificed.

Human sacrifice to gods and mediating demons, however, was not unheard of, and many examples were recorded by Theophrastus, amongst others.³⁵ In Rhodes, convicts were once sacrificed to the god Saturn. On the island of Salamis, human lives were offered first to Agraule, a daughter of Cecrops, then to the nymph Agraulis, and then to Diomed. King Diphilus prevented human sacrifice in Cyprus, but then a bad demon intervened, substituting an ox, an example that suggests bad demons considered animals and humans of equal worth.³⁶ On the other hand, the writer Manetho testifies that in the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, Amosis ended human sacrifice to the goddess Juno by replacing humans with wax images.³⁷ In Chios, the residents would tear a human to pieces in honor of the god Omadius Bacchus. Eulpis Carystius says this same practice was adopted in Tenedos, and Apollodorus says the Lacedaemonians sacrificed a human to the god Mars.³⁸

During great calamities, the Phoenicians selected human sacrifices by a vote. Ister records that the Curetes of Crete once sacrificed children to Saturn. Pallas says that the Emperor Hadrian abolished human sacrifice as late as the second century AD.³⁹ The Laodiceans of Syria once sacrificed virgins to Minerva,

³⁰ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.48.

³¹ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.47.

³² Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.47. Good soul is “philosopher” in Taylor. Although Porphyry would insist a good soul must be a philosopher, a lover of knowledge, he would disagree that all philosophers were necessarily good souls. The concept of good soul is therefore more precisely good philosopher. Moreover, the use of soul instead of philosopher relates this concept to the soul’s ascension to the level of the first divine being through inward reflection.

³³ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.52.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Inward meditation to achieve “salvation” segues into Smith, who suggests that Porphyry sees a double nature in humanity: a higher and lower soul, an inner and outer person (Smith, *Porphyry’s Place*, 23). The higher soul can achieve salvation. Higher/lower being degrees on the same scale and inner/outer being two sides to the same being creates a tension between good and evil: Porphyry constantly affirms that good cannot cause evil, and evil cannot cause good, but despite this rigid distinction, he observes both natures in demons and people. In contrast, the first divine being (the source of good) and the sky gods (purely good) have only one nature. To be more like them, a human had to bring out the good in themselves. This motivation would not exist if the gods possessed both natures. On a basic level, Porphyry displays ethical concern.

³⁵ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.53.

³⁶ Bad demon is “Daemon” in Taylor, whose capitalization of “Daemon” implies a specific individual demon. “Daemon” may or may not refer to a specific demon. Either way, “Daemon” is a bad demon at work, because a good demon by definition would never request animal sacrifice. Throughout Porphyry’s work, bad demons prove to be dangerous for those who want to avoid

but later sacrificed a stag. Iphicrates ended human sacrifice among the Carthaginians of Libya. The Dumati of Arabia annually sacrificed and buried a boy under a sacred altar. According to Phylarchus, all Greeks used to immolate soldiers before going to war. In Rome they killed a man during the festival of Jupiter Latialis. All these examples show sacrifice to gods and demons had been practiced, or continued to be practiced, throughout the Mediterranean world.⁴⁰

Still, sacrificing humans and eating human flesh were perceived very differently. Porphyry held that humans should eat humans only when there was nothing else to eat, but that those who survived by doing so were reprehensible.⁴¹ Two Carthaginian generals, Hamilcar and his son Hannibal, dealt with cannibalism among their troops, Hamilcar trampling the cannibals with elephants because he considered their actions to be unholy, whilst Hannibal took human flesh into consideration as a means of feeding his soldiers during a lengthy expedition into Italy.⁴² Nevertheless, outside of the most extreme of circumstances humans were not to eat humans.⁴³

A parallel could be drawn between eating human meat and eating animal meat; under normal conditions people did not need to eat animal flesh.⁴⁴ In the most ancient times, the sky gods received thanks through the burning of grass.⁴⁵ This practice suggested that animal sacrifice was not necessary to appease the gods. Animal sacrifice came much later, first accidentally, then in response to disorderly animals, but never because it was requested by the sky gods.⁴⁶ Yet even if animals were to be sacrificed, they did not need to be eaten.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, some sacrifices had their worth. Animal sacrifice was dangerous, but humans who recognized the good done by good demons needed to present them with different, superior sacrificial

animal sacrifice. Clark uses "daimôn," which supports a more general sense (Clark, Gillian's introduction to [*De abstinentia*. English] *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. Gillian Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 77).

³⁷ Manetho, an Egyptian high priest at Heliopolis during the early Ptolemaic period, wrote a history of Egypt from creation to 342 BC. The quoted work is *Antiquity and Piety* (Porphyry, *Abst.* 2.55). His history provides the underlying framework for ancient Egyptian history. Porphyry makes a habit of quoting leading authorities. See "Manetho." (Hornblower, Simon and Tony Spawforth, eds. *Who's Who in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 242).

³⁸ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.54-5.

³⁹ Pallas was an authority on the mysteries of Mithras (Porphyry, *Abst.* 2.56).

⁴⁰ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.56. Porphyry explicitly omits examples from the Thracians, Scythians and Athenians (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.56). Significantly, he does not mention sacrifice among peoples of the westernmost regions of the Roman Empire. Then again, Porphyry was a Greek, informed by Greeks; also, the West did not have the mature historical tradition of the East, and Porphyry is citing examples from history.

⁴¹ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.56.

⁴² Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

offerings.⁴⁸ For example, humans rightfully sacrificed cakes and fruits, the best of their foods, to Apollo.⁴⁹ Misguided and expensive, however, animal sacrifices promoted superstition, extravagance, and the wrong belief that divinities could be corrupted by gifts.⁵⁰ Quite the opposite, the best sacrifice was right belief in the sky gods, the good demons, and the world.⁵¹ Thus human reason was the best sacrifice to the gods.⁵² If good people remained vigilant and never followed false beliefs, the sky gods and the good demons would never have just cause to be angry with humans.⁵³

Demons and Politics

Porphyry incorporates elements from Pre-Platonic and Platonic demons when he describes demons and their place in the universe. His description includes the demon “interior” (with the ingestion of prophetic animals), the demon disaster (which include all natural disasters), and demon mediator (between humans and the sky gods). The demon “interior” and the demon disaster existed in Pre-Platonic Greek literature (e.g., appearing in Homer’s *Odyssey*), while Plato introduced the demon mediator. By going beyond Platonism, Porphyry distinguished himself by embracing the larger Greek cultural tradition. Moreover, he supported his views on demons and animal sacrifice with the words of leading authorities: Theophrastus, Manetho, and Pallas, to name a few. Porphyry’s description of demons did respond to this wide range of sources, but it was not systematic. However, it can provide the basis for a diagram of the universe (see Appendix 1).

Because Porphyry constantly related demons to sacrifice, his description became relevant to his role in imperial politics: he provided a philosophical justification for the great persecution of Christians at the beginning of the fourth century. The Christians stubbornly refused to take part in animal sacrifice. They held that it was idolatrous and prevented their salvation in the afterlife. Unfortunately for the Christians, the Roman government deemed animal sacrifice necessary for state security. Animal sacri-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.5.

⁴⁶ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.9-10.

⁴⁷ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.57.

⁴⁸ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.58. Good demons are “beneficent daemons” in Taylor. “Beneficent daemons” must not be confused with bad demons, which demanded sacrifice. Nonetheless, perhaps paradoxically, it appeared good demons responded favourably to such worship as well.

⁴⁹ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.59.

⁵⁰ Porphyry *Abst.*, 2.60.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Price suggests that “contemplation,” or a reasoned approach, involves material sacrifice (Price 139-40), but his suggestion neglects Porphyry’s asymmetrical relationship between soul and body: soul accesses body, but body does not access soul. Consider the relationship between the world soul and the world body.

⁵² Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.61. “Reason” is “a pure intellect and impassive soul” in Taylor.

⁵³ Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.61.

fice appeased bad demons, which prevented natural disasters and improved relations with prophetic demons, which could prepare Roman leaders for future troubles. Priests argued that refusing to participate in sacrifice undermined the sacrificial ritual. Non-participation was therefore deemed treasonous, and treason was punishable by death. Porphyry, who held that only reason led to an individual's salvation, argued that animal sacrifice was not necessary for salvation, but necessary for the proper maintenance of the state.

Granted, *De abstinence* offers little support for generalizations concerning demons. Nevertheless, both *De abstinence*, which may have been written as early as AD 263, and the *Vita Plotini*, which expresses Porphyry's viewpoint in AD 301, illustrate consistency in two of Porphyry's larger surviving works.⁵⁴ Porphyry wrote *De abstinence* as an open letter to a Firmius Castricius, a statesman and landowner among Plotinus' former social circle,⁵⁵ who it appears had become disillusioned with an ascetic, philosophical life and had gone back to eating meat.⁵⁶ Porphyry's audience, therefore, was one man with a significant position in society. Conversely, in the *Vita Plotini*, as much a work of self-promotion for Porphyry as a biography of Plotinus, the audience was the educated elite interested in the life of the philosopher Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. Porphyry's viewpoint and assumptions begin with his mentor, Plotinus (AD 205-270).

Porphyry and his mentor Plotinus

Plotinus was the center of an influential social circle, including philosophers, doctors, senators, a rhetorician and financier, prominent wives, an Egyptian priest, even the Emperor Gallienus (AD 253-268) and his wife Salonina.⁵⁷ The main source for the life of Plotinus, the main source also for the life of Porphyry, is the biography written by Porphyry as a preface to Plotinus' *Enneads*, a collection of fifty-four treatises by Plotinus edited and published by Porphyry. Porphyry's account concentrated on the last six years of the life of Plotinus, when both he and Plotinus were in Rome.⁵⁸

Plotinus never spoke about his parents, his race, or his native country.⁵⁹ Though he was often sick, he refused any medical treatment or medicine derived from animal flesh. His last illness was so incapacitating that he had to leave Rome to convalesce in the countryside. Plotinus died in the second year of the reign of Claudius Gothicus (AD 268-270), at the age of sixty-six, which indicates a date of birth in AD 205. His last words were, "Try to bring back the god in you to the divine in the All."⁶⁰ Plotinus

⁵⁴ *De abstinence* shows the influence of Plotinus, whom Porphyry first met in 263.

⁵⁵ Porphyry, *Plot.* 7.

⁵⁶ Firmius Castricius, who is named in the first line of each of the four volumes of *Abst.*, had owned a "place in the country, six miles from Minturnae" and was "an admirer of Plotinus who had chosen a public life" (Porphyry, *Plot.*, 7); these features imply landowner and statesman.

⁵⁷ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 7-12.

never shared his birthday, because he did not want it to be a day of honor, as was the custom on the birthdays of Plato and Socrates.⁶¹ But Porphyry did know something of Plotinus' early life: ⁶²

As a seven-year-old schoolboy, Plotinus continued to seek milk from his wet nurse. When he was twenty-seven, he went to Alexandria to learn philosophy; unsatisfied, he studied with the self-taught Ammonius.⁶³ Under his guidance, Plotinus became interested in Persian and Indian religions. At thirty-nine, after studying with Ammonius for eleven years, Plotinus joined the ill-fated Persian expedition of Emperor Gordian III (AD 238-244). When Gordian was killed in Mesopotamia, Plotinus fled safely to Antioch. At the age of forty, when Philip the Arab (AD 244-249) became emperor, Plotinus came to Rome.

Ammonius taught the metaphysicist Erennius, the Christian theologian Origen, and the philosopher Plotinus. The three promised not to teach his doctrines, but Erennius, Origen, and finally Plotinus began to base lectures on studies with Ammonius. Plotinus taught for ten years, but wrote nothing and gave undisciplined and fruitless lectures. During his third year in Rome, however, a student with a background in the school of Lysimachus, Amelius, arrived and began taking notes on Plotinus' lectures for twenty-four years.⁶⁴

Porphyry arrived at Rome from Greece at the age of thirty, during the tenth year of Emperor Gallienus' reign (AD 263).⁶⁵ When he arrived, Plotinus was away on holiday, so Porphyry first met Plotinus' colleagues. Since AD 253, Plotinus had written twenty-one treatises, some of them published.⁶⁶ During the six years he spent with Porphyry, Plotinus wrote a further twenty-four treatises before his health began to fail him, and completed nine final treatises despite illness [In all, Plotinus wrote fifty-four treatises].⁶⁷ The first seven of the latter were sent to Porphyry while he was living in Sicily, between 268 and 270.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ Although Porphyry leaves Rome for Sicily in 268, he remains in close contact with Plotinus.

⁵⁹ The fourth century writer Eunapius says Plotinus' birthplace was Lyco, or Lycopolis, in Egypt. It is difficult to see what sources Eunapius would have had that Porphyry did not; then again, Porphyry wrote as a friend and fellow philosopher to Plotinus: personal information could have been a friendly omission.

⁶⁰ Alternately, Porphyry wrote "I am trying to bring back the divine in us to the divine in the All." Either way, Porphyry was away in Sicily when Plotinus died, so he got the quote second-hand. Interestingly, with both translations, the concept of inward salvation, coupled with evading bad demons, echoes Plotinus' last words (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.52).

⁶¹ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 1-2.

⁶² Porphyry, *Plot.*, 3.

⁶³ Eusebius of Caesarea, a Church bishop and historian (flourish third/fourth century), claims in *Ecclesiastical History* to include a further description of Ammonius by Porphyry: "For Ammonius, being a Christian, and brought up by Christian parents, when he gave himself to study and to philosophy straightway conformed to the life required by the laws. But Origen, having been educated as a Greek in Greek literature, went over to the barbarian recklessness" (Eusebius. 1991. *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1. <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-01/Npnf2-01-11.htm#P3489_1626863> Eusebius Hist. eccl. 6.19) (hereinafter PE). While again it is possible that Porphyry makes another friendly omission, refusing to associate Plotinus with Christianity, it is equally possible that Eusebius, who does not cite a specific work by Porphyry, wants to establish a tradition of Christian scholarship that includes Origen's teacher. Either way, Ammonius' ambiguity blurs the line between pagan and Christian scholarship, probably in a way that neither Porphyry nor Eusebius would care to admit.

Plotinus entrusted to Porphyry the editing of his writings.⁶⁹ An old man, Plotinus had poor vision and sloppy handwriting.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, over his lifetime he had mastered geometry, arithmetic, mechanics, optics, and music.⁷¹ Moreover, his treatises went into Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines, and in particular, the ideas of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁷² Yet Plotinus did more than simply repeat their words; he reinterpreted them.

When he spoke, reason lit up his face with enthusiasm.⁷³ Yet he applied the teachings of Ammonius to such a extent that, when Origen, another pupil of Ammonius, came to hear him speak, Plotinus immediately ended the lecture, explaining, "It damps one's enthusiasm for speaking when one sees that one's audience knows already what one is going to say."⁷⁴

Although Plotinus would not speak publicly before Origen, he had much to say to his students and his words were kind. Once Porphyry gave a poetic recital in honor of Plato. Afterward, Plotinus said, "You have shown yourself at once poet, philosopher, and expounder of sacred mysteries."⁷⁵ When Porphyry inquired deeply about the relationship between the soul and the body, Plotinus gave answers patiently for three days.⁷⁶

With his students Porphyry and Amelius, Plotinus refuted what he considered to be wrong thinking. He spoke against astrologers, Christians, Gnostics, and other fraudulent groups outside the Roman mainstream.⁷⁷ He had Porphyry refute a rhetorician, Diophanes, who claimed a student should submit to the sexual desires of his or her teacher for the sake of virtue.⁷⁸ Amelius wrote forty volumes against the Zoroastrians, against whom Porphyry also argued, calling them "spurious and modern".⁷⁹

The refutations by Plotinus and his students were considered of the highest quality by a prominent Athenian literary critic, Longinus, who had also studied under Ammonius and was a former teacher of

⁶⁴ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 3.

⁶⁵ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 4. Because Porphyry says he is thirty in the year 263, it is thus the crucial date in identifying his year of birth (either 234 or 235) and the year he published the *Life* and *Enneads* at the age of sixty-eight (301).

⁶⁶ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 4.

⁶⁷ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 5.

⁶⁸ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 6.

⁶⁹ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 7. Plotinus really had no choice beyond Porphyry. Amelius, his oldest pupil, was a sloppy editor (Porphyry, *Plot.* 1.19). Significantly, Longinus only approved of Plotinus' work after Porphyry had edited it (Porphyry, *Plot.*, 1.20).

⁷⁰ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 8, 13.

⁷¹ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Porphyry.⁸⁰ In a book dedicated to Porphyry, Longinus called Porphyry by a Syrian equivalent name, Malcus, or king, and then translated it into the Greek title “Basileus of Tyre,” which referred to Porphyry’s homeland in Phoenicia.⁸¹

Above all, Plotinus was gifted with extraordinary spiritual energy. When an Egyptian priest invoked Plotinus’ spirit companion inside the sacred temple of Isis in Rome, a good demon came instead of a bad one.⁸² The Egyptian said, “Blessed are you, who have a god [sic] for your spirit and not a companion of the subordinate order.” Afterward, when Plotinus refused to attend temple rituals with Amelius, he explained, “They ought to come to me, not I to them.”⁸³ And when Plotinus died, the prophetic Apollo said:⁸⁴

Spirit, man once, but now nearing the diviner lot of a spirit, as the bond of human necessity has been loosed for you, and strong in heart, you swam swiftly from the roaring surge of the body to that coast where the stream flows strong, far apart from the crowd of the wicked, there to set your steps firm in the easy path of the pure soul, where the splendour of God shines round you and the divine law abides in purity far from lawless wickedness [...]. O blessed one, you have borne so many contests, and now move among holy spirits, crowned with mighty life.

Often in life Plotinus had raised his contemplation above even reason to the first divine being.⁸⁵ He raised himself in thought, purifying himself, striving for the divine. Once, Porphyry transcended the boundary of reason as well. And now, with Plato, Pythagoras, and all who “set the dance of immortal love,” Plotinus lives a happy and eternal life above humanity.⁸⁶

Though the death of Plotinus ends the biography in *Vita Plotini*, more can be said about Porphyry’s life. For example, his *Ad Marcellam*, or “Letter to Marcella,” records his concern for the philosophical well being of a rich widow, Marcella. Clark observes that Porphyry married her late in life to protect

⁷⁴ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 14.

⁷⁵ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 15.

⁷⁶ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 13.

⁷⁷ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 15-6.

⁷⁸ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 15.

⁷⁹ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 16.

⁸⁰ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 20.

⁸¹ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 17.

⁸² Armstrong uses “god.” However, “god” cannot refer to one of the sky gods, who move in an orderly fashion in the sky (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.37). This “god” is more likely an intermediary agent, a good demon.

⁸³ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 10. Porphyry goes on to say he did not ask what Plotinus meant. Again, however, a statement by Plotinus fits in nicely with Porphyry’s account of demons: the purpose of sacrifice is to make possible the purification of the soul; however, the purification of the soul occurs within the individual, not within a temple (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.52).

⁸⁴ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 22.

her from pressures to remarry and to provide himself as a good role model for her seven children.⁸⁷

Moreover, when Porphyry wrote the *Vita Plotini* in AD 301, over thirty years had passed since the death of Plotinus. Porphyry spent this time arranging Plotinus' fifty-four treatises according to subject, dividing them into six sets of nine, or Enneads, in three volumes.⁸⁸ This project provided direction and content for Porphyry's teaching, with the philosopher and critic Iamblichus being foremost among his students. But during this time Porphyry also wrote original works that may have directly impacted imperial religious policy under emperor Diocletian (AD 284-305).

Porphyry and Politics

In an oration that he may have delivered to an imperial conference in Nicomedia in 303, Porphyry may have given clear reasons for the persecution of wrong religious practice, specifically, that of the Christians.⁸⁹ Porphyry linked good worship with the stability of the state. If Diocletian needed to justify persecution, he may have relied on Porphyry,⁹⁰ who seems to have supported sacrifice not because it led to salvation, but because sacrifice was beneficial to the Roman State. Diocletian, seeking imperial stability, would rely on sacrifice.

When Porphyry died, most probably before AD 305, his world was vigorously pagan.⁹¹ In AD 303 Diocletian issued the first edict of persecution against the Christians. As the Christian Lactantius records in *De mortibus persecutorum*,⁹² or *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, Christians were persecuted because they were an obstruction to sacrifice. In a crucial episode, Lactantius himself illustrates the role of sacrifice in imperial administration.

According to Lactantius, Diocletian worried about the future state of the empire. At his eastern palace, he had priests extract livers from victims to attract prophetic demons. But the demons were unwillingly repelled from the livers. Christian attendants had made a sign of the Christian God, perhaps the Sign of the Cross, which warded off the demons. Despite the unfavorable silence, priests frequently repeated the sacrifices. Intuitively the high priest Tages said, "Unholy people are here, preventing the prophe-

⁸⁵ Clear reason is "intellect and all the intelligible" in Armstrong. The key point is that Plotinus transcends the world by rising to the level of the first divine being. Clear reason is the greatest good, the highest boundary of the world, the greatest thanks to the first divinity (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.61).

⁸⁶ Porphyry, *Plot.*, 23.

⁸⁷ Clark 5.

⁸⁸ Armstrong ix-xi.

cies.” Furious, Diocletian ordered everyone in the palace to participate in the sacrificial rituals. Anyone who refused was thrown out. Diocletian then ordered a similar purge in the military.⁹³ The persecution of Christians had begun.

In *De abstinencia* and *Vita Plotini*, however, Porphyry explains why he would oppose anything that prevented communication between humans and demons. Sacrifice was not a matter of salvation. Rather, sacrifice prevented natural disasters and allowed leaders to foresee and to prepare for future crises. Could Roman society survive if members of its community were preventing sacrifice? Was the emperor willing to take that risk? Obstructions to sacrifice had to be removed. If unholy people were obstructions, then unholy people had to be removed, for the greater good of society.

Grounds for Assessment

Though *De abstinencia* and *Vita Plotini* provide grounds for assessing why Porphyry supported the

⁸⁹ Digeser emphasizes the religious intolerance of Porphyry’s lost oration, the Philosophy from Oracles (Digeser, Elizabeth, “Lactantius, Porphyry and the Debate over Religious Toleration,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 129-146). She then compares it to the writings of Lactantius, a tutor to Constantine’s children, who she says articulates a policy of true religious tolerance. It may seem evident that Porphyry’s support for Diocletian’s tetrarchy and Lactantius’ support for Constantine’s monarchy demand two considerably different, perhaps mutually exclusive, imperial policies. Yet, this comparison may be a misrepresentation of Porphyry.

First, this comparison depends on a crucial quote by Augustine. He records an oracle used by Porphyry: “For God, indeed, Who is the Father of all, has no need of anything; but it is good for us to adore Him by means of justice, chastity, and the other virtues, and to make our whole life a prayer to Him by imitating Him and seeking to know Him.” (Augustine. [*De civitate Dei*] *The City of God against the Pagans*, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 19.23). It has been interpreted as “For Porphyry, God needed, not sacrificial offerings, but justice, chastity, and other virtues” (Digeser, 136). Yet, it seems that the suggestion made in Augustine’s passage is that God needs nothing (not even sacrifice) and it is humans who benefit from justice, chastity, and the other virtues. This actually reflects Porphyry’s concern (echoed in Porphyry’s *Abst.* and *Plot.*) for the needs of Roman people.

Second, there is the question of sources. Although Eusebius can be used to sum up Porphyry’s divine hierarchy, “God the Father was at the top, next the gods and celestial bodies, then daemons, and finally divine men (Eusebius *PE* 4.5).” (Digeser, 137), it must be remembered that he is a hostile source. In actuality, Porphyry holds that a pure, living human (such as Plotinus) could ascend to the top to the first divine being (Porphyry *Plot.* 23). Eusebius overlooks this dynamic upward mobility in *Plot.*

Finally, the paths of salvation presented by Porphyry and Lactantius should be carefully studied. It has been said that Lactantius argues for one path, and Porphyry argues for many (Digeser, 140-141). But in *Abst.* and in *Plot.* Porphyry articulates only one path to salvation, inward meditation (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.52). Lactantius considers reason, a “purity of mind,” more important than ritual, and how it is the basis for true religious tolerance (Digeser, 142). But Porphyry also considers reason the most important human interaction with the divine (Porphyry, *Abst.*, 2.61). At the very least, Porphyry and Lactantius are not so different.

⁹⁰ Digeser, 143, 146.

⁹² Lactantius. 1900. [*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, English.] *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII (public domain) <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-07/anf07-15.htm#P3916_1567226> (Hereinafter *Mort.*).

persecution of Christians, they have yet to be fully utilized by modern scholars. To the contrary, as Gregory Shaw observes,⁹⁴

[Neoplatonic religion, known as theurgy, or divine-working] has erroneously been portrayed as an attempt to manipulate the gods [and] it has been dismissed as a debased and superstitious form of Platonism.

Theurgy was the art of influencing a divinity. But it should not be dismissed as a 'debased and superstitious form of Platonism.' Even if this were the case, we should reflect further on modern attempts to reason with an unreasonable world. Porphyry employed a Platonic myth to explain the origin of things, a moral cosmology to exhort good behavior, and even scientific methods of observation and experiment to evaluate the merit of sacrifice. Porphyry's comprehensive understanding of demons and sacrifice responded to the social needs of his time, in a way that may have persuaded Emperor Diocletian to take the first step towards the persecution of Christians.

Unlike the Christians, Porphyry held that reason alone led to salvation. Though he held that a reasonable man had ample reason to fear sacrifice, he also held that most people did not possess sufficient reason to ever hope for salvation. If this life was all the masses had, then they should have the best life possible. If bad demons were appeased, then the best life was possible. Therefore, for the sake of the masses, sacrifice was a necessary evil. Though it attracted demons and dead souls, it prevented catastrophe and allowed better guidance. If this indeed became an influential viewpoint among Roman leaders, eager to assure the Roman citizens that the empire could protect them, then the revitalization of sacrifice and the following persecution of those who obstructed sacrifice are more understandable. This viewpoint underscores elitism during the era and broadens an explanation for the rise of Christianity.

The Christians promoted a relatively universal salvation, one that did not require a minimum amount of reason or intellect. More than many may care to admit, just as Porphyry was adept in incorporating non-Platonic elements into his worldview, early Christianity proved adept at incorporating non-Christian elements into its message. Once it incorporated enough elements from Roman society, it joined the Roman mainstream. But this is a discussion for another paper.

De abstinentia and *Vita Plotini* are fascinating. They illustrate how demons and sacrifice were perceived during a key transition from pagan to Christian culture in the third century AD and provide grounds for assessing the philosophical reasons for the persecution of Christians at the beginning of the

⁹³ Lactantius, *Mort.*, 10.

⁹⁴ Shaw, Gregory, "Cult and Cosmos," *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 241.

fourth century AD.

Appendix 1
Universe of Porphyry in
De abstinentia and Vita Plotini

Basic depiction demonstrating dynamic nature of good demons
and pure living souls, which both transcend boundaries.

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