

## Numenius of Apamea on Moses: An Allegorical Interpretation

This paper gives a new interpretation of one of the fragments of the second-century Middle Platonist Numenius of Apamea. Fragment 9a (des Places) retells the story of Moses and his leadership of the Jewish Exodus, and in particular his battle with the Egyptian priests Iannes and Iambres. Moses is called “Musaeus,” and is described as “most able to pray to God.” The Egyptian priests with whom he contends are “second to none in wizardry (*mageuein*).”

Iannes and Iambres are the grammatical subject of this fragment. This has led some to assume that the Egyptian priests should be taken as the heroes of this passage, that they are the sympathetic characters attempting to save the Egyptians from the wizard Musaeus (see Petty *ad loc*). There are several reasons why this interpretation should be rejected. First of all, the name “Musaeus” suggests Orphic ties for the Jewish prophet. Second, and most importantly, there is a contrast that Numenius sets up between Musaeus and his prayer to god as opposed to the Egyptian priests and their magic. It is obvious who should be the hero of the passage: Musaeus prays to god. If God is good, then the “most able to pray to God” must be a good agent. Opposed to prayer is the magic of the Egyptians. Here we see implied a radical opposition.

I propose a Platonic allegorical interpretation to this passages: Musaeus’ power to pray represents the power of Platonic Providence in the world. The Egyptians’ magic must be the opposite of this Providence. It is thus a force of necessity (i.e. chaotic matter). This is the opposition that runs through Numenius’ fragments and testimonia: a transcendent good God is radically opposed to evil matter.

There is a very useful parallel that a testimonium of Numenius provides.

Porphry tells us that Numenius gave a similar allegorical interpretation to the war between the Athenians and the Atlanteans at the beginning of Plato's *Timaeus*. This fits very nicely into Numenius' general system of thought, which is generally described as "dualist." This also fits well with Origen's statement that Numenius "interpreted allegorically" the books of the Jewish prophets (des Places 20).

#### Works Cited

Petty, R. 2012. *Fragments of Numenius of Apamea*. Prometheus Trust.

des Places, E. 1973. *Numénius. Fragments*. Budé.