

## Theosophy: Reconstructing a Compendium of Greek Wisdom

How should Greek philosophy and theology be confronted in the context of a new religious sensibility? Early Christian thinkers struggled with this question, some denouncing, others assimilating "pagan" sources. One intriguing example of this sort of deliberation was titled *Theosophy*. Composed c. A.D. 500, this was a collection of oracles and sayings of philosophers compiled with the intention of demonstrating *agreement* between the wisdom of ancient pagan sages and the Christian religion. A significant repository of late antique Greek oracles, from Claros and Didyma in particular (cf. Busine 2005), it is also an important document in the development of Christian intellectual methods of re-envisioning paganism. Much of the text, however, has been lost. Only an 8th-century *epitome* (the "Tübingen Theosophy") and a some pages dealing with Sibylline oracles (the "Theosophy of the Sibyls") survive, along with numerous small collections of similar oracles and sayings that appear to have something to do with the *Theosophy*; additionally, some Byzantine chroniclers incorporated similar material into their works.

The perennial questions about this work remain to be answered satisfactorily: What exactly were the contents and scope of the *Theosophy*, and what exactly was its view of the pagan material it compiled? Two competing editions make the questions difficult. Erbse (1941 and 1995) traces the textual history of the individual components and prints them separately. Beatrice (2001), by contrast, following indications in the *epitome*, attempts to reorder and reconstruct the text much more audaciously, incorporating material from the smaller collections and Byzantine chroniclers, as well as a text of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, statements attributed to Hystaspes, and a brief chronicle of world history. The skepticism of Alpi and Le Boulluec (2004), who find Beatrice's treatment too speculative, his suggestion of a possible author

(Severus of Antioch) unconvincing, is justified. In the end, Erbse's presentation is truer to the tattered remains of this fascinating work and should be retained as the edition of reference.

In its attitude toward the oracles and philosophers' statements it cites, the *Theosophy* is in fact one of the most inclusive early Christian statements on the validity of pagan thought. While Beatrice is right to emphasize connections with the Christian apologetic tradition, the *Theosophy* goes beyond it to acknowledge positive value in pagan expressions of piety—more than any early Christian apologist besides Clement of Alexandria. By reconstructing the train of thought of the prologue and its citation of Diodorus Siculus, I argue that the author of the *Theosophy* even accepts the pagan use of names such as Zeus, Helios, Osiris, and Phanes for God (cf. also Suarez de la Torre [2003]). The text stresses the unknowability of the divine—but also God's revelation of himself, even to pagan prophets and sages. It includes some Christian forgeries which "foretell" the fall of paganism, but the oracular gods are *not* simply dismissed as demons—they show piety themselves.

With respect to scope, I argue that the material in the smaller collections *should not* be assumed to have been taken from the *Theosophy*. Despite a small amount of overlap, these compilations were parallel rather than completely derived from it. They appear to have different intentions (especially visible in the prologue of the so-called *Symphonia*) and later dates of composition than the *Theosophy*; their comparative carelessness with respect to attributions also distinguishes them from the larger text. Furthermore, in the test case of one area of overlap, an oracle found in a shorter form in the *epitome* and a longer form in other texts, Beatrice's argument that the longer version originally was in the complete *Theosophy* cannot be sustained (cf. Daley 1995). *A fortiori*, Beatrice's insertion of the *Tiburine Sibyl* is unjustifiable.

Finally, new perspectives in evaluating the content and context of these late antique compilations also come from recent discoveries—a new inscription from Icaria containing one of the *Theosophy's* texts (Kaldellis 2009); manuscripts with similar collections in Syriac (Brock 1984)—and from new editions, particularly of John Malalas (Thurn 2000). These details generally confirm and refine Erbse's account of the relationships between the sources.

#### Works Cited

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