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Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation*

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῾Ελληνικὸν γὰρ ἡ ῎Ισις ἐστι.
(Plutarch, *Is.* 2.351f)

The *de Iside et Osiride* (*de Iside, Is.*),[1] written late in Plutarch's life,[2] offers some of the most sophisticated formulations of middle-Platonic metaphysics that have come down to us.[3] As scholars have long been aware, this is a deeply and explicitly philosophical text.[4] Classicists have generally maintained that in the *de Iside* Plutarch merely uses the Egyptian material as a vehicle through which to express middle-Platonic conceptions about the structure and genesis of the

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[1]The most important commentaries on the *de Iside* are Hopfner 1940, Gwyn Griffiths 1970, Betz and Smith 1972, Cavalli 1985, and Froidefond 1988. Recently, much interesting work on the *de Iside* has been done by Italian scholars; see Borghini 1991, Chiodi 1991, Casadio 1991, Casadio 1994, and Chiodi 1996.

[2]On its date see Bowersock 1965, Jones 1966, and Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 16–18.

[3]Fundamental to an understanding of Plutarch's metaphysics are Froidefond 1986 and Dillon 1989. For Plutarch's reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, see Froidefond 1987 and Hershbell 1987. The best overview of middle-Platonism generally is still Dillon 1977.

[4]See Feldmeier 1998.

cosmos; it is thus seen as incidental to the primary, philosophical aim of the text, an exegesis of Plato's *Timaeus*.[5]

In addition to its philosophical agenda, however, the *de Iside* has a fairly full discussion of the Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis and her consort Osiris as it existed in the Pharaonic period.[6] As historians of Roman religion have been impressed by the depth of knowledge reflected in Plutarch's *Quaestiones Romanae*,[7] so Egyptologists have often cited Plutarch's *de Iside* as a relatively accurate account of the cultic practices associated with Isis in the Pharaonic period.[8] Both Gwyn Griffiths[9] and Hani[10] felt that Plutarch, despite his inability to read hieroglyphics or to converse with non-Alexandrian natives, was a good religious historian.[11]

[5]Plutarch does not explicitly claim that the *de Iside* is meant to be read as an exegesis, as is his *de Animae procreatione in Timaeo*. He does, however, tell his sons that he intends this latter text to sum up various statements about Plato's view of the soul and the structure of the cosmos that he had himself made in other treatises. That the *de Iside* is one of those treatises seems clear from Plutarch's remark there that the Egyptian myths of Isis, Osiris, and Horus expound in myth and enigma metaphysical truths that Plato had formulated (1026c). The relationship of the *de Iside* to the *Timaeus* is made explicit towards the middle of *de Iside* itself when Plutarch states that in the remainder of the treatise he will relate "τὴν Αἰγυπτίων θεολογίαν" to Plato's "φιλοσοφία" (*Is*. 48.371a)—a passage that follows references to the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* (*Is.* 48.370e–f). For theological parallels between the *de Iside* and early Christian literature, see Betz and Smith 1972. Throughout, I have used the Greek text of Gwyn Griffiths 1970. Translations are from Gwyn Griffiths 1970, in some cases adapted.

[6]For the archaizing *Sitz im Leben* of the *de Iside*, see Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 44. Plutarch's emphasis on Osiris as the spouse of Isis rather than the Hellenistic Sarapis is itself an archaizing feature.

[7]For example Graf 1996.

[8]For good general treatments of the cult of Isis in the Greco-Roman world, see Festugière 1949, Witt 1971, Malaise 1972, Dunand 1972–73, Heyob 1975, and Gwyn Griffiths 1980.

[9]Gwyn Griffiths 1970.

[10]Hani 1976.

[11]Scott-Moncrieff, however, argued that the *de Iside* reflected Plutarch's narrow interest in the Hellenized Alexandrian cult, which, Plutarch felt, "alone held the key of the Egyptian true faith." This was, as Scott-Moncrieff remarked, "of course a total inversion of the facts" (1909: 90). For Plutarch's etymological (or ecphrastic?) interpretations of Egyptian hieroglyphics, see *Is.* 10.354e, 56.374a.

The present contribution seeks to answer the question of why Plutarch chose the ostensibly Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris as the vehicle for his most mature and developed thoughts on the divine and the structure of the universe. This is a question that has been posed before, both of Plutarch's text itself [12] and in broader intellectual histories of the early Roman Empire.[13] Most scholars, Hani among them, have assumed that the prestige of Egyptian wisdom motivated Plutarch's attempt to discover in the cult of Isis reflections of Greek philosophical speculation. Hani maintained that, despite Plutarch's general suspicion of non-Greek forms of cult,[14] the religions of Egypt and Persia "ont trouvé grâce devant lui (*sc*. Plutarch) … à cause de leur élévation morale."[15] Smelik and Hemelrijk see a similar motivation behind the *de Iside* and go so far as to claim that "in his well-disposed appreciation of Egyptian religion Plutarch exceeds all earlier authors including Herodotus."[16]

In what follows, I shall suggest that Plutarch's *de Iside* was motivated less by early imperial Egyptomania than by an unwillingness to accept what he saw as the culturally derivative status of Greece that an Egyptian origin of Greek wisdom implies.[17] This is not to say that the *de Iside* dismisses the Egyptian

[12]Most recently by Brenk 1999.

[13]See Hartog 1986, Hartog 1996 (especially chapter 2), and Vasunia 1995, with extensive bibliography. Armstrong (1978: 89) sees this form of Egyptomania as typical of the age: "most philosophers of the early centuries of our era were pious men and anxious to discover that the doctrines they regarded as those of the ancient masters of Greek philosophy were in perfect accord with the immemorial wisdom of the East—a discovery which their degree of knowledge of genuine oriental sources and their methods of exegesis easily enabled them to make."

[14]Hostility towards Attis at *Erotikos* 756c; the Syrian Goddess at *adversus Coloten* 1127d and *de Pythiae oraculis* 407c; the Jews at *Quaestiones convivales* IV.4–5 and *de Superstitione* 169c. The key text on this hostility, the *de Superstitione* (*Sup*.), is discussed below.

[15]Hani 1976: 8. For Hani's thoughts on Plutarch's relationship to Iranian dualism, see Hani 1964.

[16]Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1946.

[17]A clear formulation of which may be found at Diodorus Siculus 1.69.2–3: "For many of the customs that obtained in ancient days among the Egyptians have not only been accepted by the present inhabitants but aroused no little admiration among the Greeks; and for that reason, those men who have won the greatest repute in intellectual things have been eager to visit Egypt in order to acquaint themselves with its laws and institutions, which they considered to be worthy of note" (πολλὰ γὰρ τῶν παλαιῶν ἐθῶν τῶν γενομένων παρὰ Αἰγυπτίοις οὐ μόνον παρὰ τοῖς ἐγχωρίοις

material as worthless; a deep respect for the wisdom of Egypt and an insistence on the priority of Greek philosophical speculation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, I believe that Plutarch chose to explicate his middle-Platonic metaphysics via an allegorical interpretation of the cult and myth of the Egyptian goddess Isis in an effort to renegotiate the traditional, derivative status of Greek cult.[18] On my reading, the *de Iside* is an appropriative text that has as one of its central aims the demonstration of the priority of Greek philosophy over Egyptian cult.

In a recent and provocative book, David Dawson has explored the potential of literary allegory for cultural appropriation.[19] According to Dawson's model, ancient authors, Philo and early Christian apologists prominent among them, used allegory as a means of appropriating pagan culture for their own ends. Frederick Brenk has argued that the *de Iside* is in fact an exception to Dawson's rule and that the ultimate end of the text is not the Hellenization of the Egyptian cult of Isis and that in Plutarch's text we find rather "Egyptomania and a kind of religious Egyptianization of Rome, up to a point."[20] I think that Brenk is right to observe that Plutarch's choice of the Isis material as the vehicle for the philosophical message perhaps unintentionally egyptianizes the Platonic text. But I am asking a different question here and would distinguish between the aim and the

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ἀποδοχῆς ἔτυχεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ παρὰ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν οὐ μετρίως ἐθαυμάσθη. διόπερ οἱ μέγιστοι τῶν ἐν παιδείᾳ δοξασθέντων ἐφιλοτιμήθησαν εἰς Αἴγυπτον παραβαλεῖν, ἵνα μετάσχωσι τῶν τε νόμων καὶ τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων ὡς ἀξιολόγων ὄντων). At this point, Diodorus mentions the Egyptian visits of Solon, Orpheus, Homer, and Pythagoras. Elsewhere, Diodorus is more specific about the borrowing that these Greek sages practiced in Egypt: Orpheus learned his "mystic ceremonies" there (1.96.4), Solon learns the law regulating professions and the law regulating debt from the Egyptian king Amasis (1.77.5, 1.79.4), and finally, towards the end of the Egypt Book, Diodorus claims an Egyptian education for Orpheus, Musaeus, Melampus, Daedalus, Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Plato, Pythagoras, Eudoxos, Democritus of Abdera, and Oenopides of Chios, all men who won fame "for their wisdom and learning" (1.96.1 ἐπὶ συνέσει καὶ παιδείᾳ). Herodotus had made a series of claims about the borrowings that the Greeks had made from the Egyptians in the fields of science, law, culture, and cult (oracles, 2.54; divination, 2.58; astrology 2.82, the names of the twelve gods, 2.50). The bibliography on Greek views of Egypt is enormous and readily available. For works pertaining to Plutarch's views of Egypt, see note 1 above.

[18]On allegory in the early Empire, see Lamberton 1986.

[19]Dawson 1992.

[20]Brenk 1999: 234.

ultimate effect of the text. The appropriative impulse that motivates the text does not preclude perhaps unforeseen consequences.

Etymology and the Names of the Gods

In the second introductory section of the *de Iside*, Plutarch makes what is, in the context of Greek writing about Egypt, an astonishing claim: "Isis is a Greek name" (*Is*. 2.351f ῾Ελληνικὸν γὰρ ἡ Ἶσις ἐστι). Plutarch's phrasing is somewhat ambiguous, but scholars have uniformly translated ῾Ελληνικόν as an adjective modifying τοὔνομα from the previous clause.[21] The meaning of this claim has been variously interpreted, but no scholar has attempted to explain its importance within the context of the *de Iside* as a whole. Cavalli notes that "Il nome Ἶσις è naturalmente la trascrizione di un analogo vocabulo egiziano," and assumes that this fact was not unknown to Plutarch.[22] She concludes that the proposed etymology served to explain the homophony of Isis' name with various forms of the Greek verb οἶδα. Cavalli's notes are typically short, and she does not ask why Plutarch might make this particular "falsa etimologia." Froidefond, for his part, refers the reader to *Is*. 60.375c, where Plutarch makes the related statement that the *ounoma* of Isis "is not a barbaric name" (οὐ γάρ ἐστι τοὔνομα βαρβαρικόν), but does not dwell on the significance of either statement.[23] Gwyn Griffiths is as usual more helpful and contextualizes Plutarch's assertion of the Greekness of Isis' name in terms of Herodotus' equations of Egyptian and Greek deities, noting that Plutarch's belief in the ontological sameness of Greek and Egyptian deities was unexceptional in antiquity. He also draws attention to the fact that Plutarch does not attempt Greek etymological explanations for all of the names of the Egyptian gods, noting Plutarch's suggestion that Sarapis is Egyptian in origin (*Is*. 29.362d). In distinction to Cavalli, however, Gwyn Griffiths is as convinced of the sincerity of Plutarch's etymological claims as he is of their inaccuracy.[24] Outside of these commentaries, however, Plutarch's claim for the Greekness of Isis' name has not drawn a significant amount of scholarly comment. Scholars have attended to the theological implications of Plutarch's claim, understandably enough. But the claim also has crucial cultural implications that are developed at length in both the content and structure of the *de Iside*.

[21]Gwyn Griffiths translates "Isis is a Greek name," Cavalli, "Iside, infatti, è un nome greco," Froidefond, "Isis, en effet, est un mot grec."

[22]Cavalli 1985.

[23]Froidefond 1988: 120.

[24]Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 257–58.

The assertion "Isis is a Greek name" was a radical position in antiquity. The Egyptian priests had given Herodotus the opposite impression and Herodotus, after inquiry, believed the priests to be correct. In Book Two Herodotus made the famous claim that "the names of nearly all the gods came from Egypt to Greece .... They came from the barbarians" (2.50.1 σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ πάντων τὰ οὐνόματα τῶν θεῶν ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐλήλυθε ἐς τὴν Ἑλλάδα. διότι μὲν γὰρ ἐκ τῶν βαρβάρων ἥκει). In the second half of this paper, we shall consider Plutarch's explicit reaction to this claim in his *de Malignitate Herodoti* (*Mal*.), but for the present, it is enough to point out that the origin of the names of the gods received a certain amount of thought in antiquity.

To claim, *contra* Herodotus, that the *ounoma* "Isis" is Greek necessitates a certain amount of commentary, commentary that Plutarch twice provides in the *de Iside* with (albeit sketchy and allusive) historical explanations. In one instance, Plutarch speaks of "words (or names) that came from Greece long ago and were transferred back" (*Is*. 29.362e τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἀπελθόντων πάλαι καὶ μετακομισθέντων ὀνομάτων). At another time, he suggests that these transferences were part of a more general trend, for "a whole host of other words came out of Greece with those who emigrated, and still remain as guests among strangers" (*Is*. 61.375e καὶ γὰρ ἄλλα μυρία τοῖς μεθισταμένοις ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλάδος συνεκπεσόντα μέχρι νῦν παραμένει καὶ ξενιτεύει παρ' ἑτέροις).[25] Just who these emigrants were and what the circumstances of the actual transfer of cultic forms may have been, we are not told.

In Plutarch's account of Greek colonization of Egypt and the resultant presence of Greek loan words in Egyptian, historical linguistics does not seem to be the concern, but rather the definition of cultural hierarchies. After Plutarch claims that words that look Egyptian are in fact Greek, he makes the rather enigmatic statement that "when poetry summons some of them to its use, poetry is attacked as resorting to an outlandish style by those who call such words 'barbarizing'" (*Is*. 61.375e βαρβαρίζουσαν). He then exemplifies the various names that Greeks and Egyptians give to the same divine powers: the Egyptians

[25]Plutarch may here be thinking of the settlement at Naucratis, which seems to have had a Greek presence from at least the first quarter of the seventh century B.C.E. Herodotus (2.178–79) considered Naucratis to be a foundation of the "φιλέλλην" Amasis that he gave to the Greeks as a trading post. Herodotus also tells us that Amasis allowed the Greeks to set up altars in Naucratis to their own gods (βωμοὺς καὶ τεμένα), the greatest of which was the Hellenion founded jointly by the Ionian cities of Chios, Teos, Phocaea, and Clazomenae, the Dorian cities of Rhodes, Cnidos, Halicarnassus, and Phaselis, and one Aeolian city, Mytilene. Strabo for his part (17.1.18) writes that Naucratis was a foundation of Milesian mercenaries. See Kees 1935 and Cook 1937.

call the power in charge of the sun's course Horus, the Greeks Apollo; the power in charge of the wind the Egyptians call Sarapis, the Greeks Osiris; the Egyptians say Sothis has power over the earth, the Greeks Sirius. The name Sothis, for which Plutarch provides the etymological and phonological links between Egyptian and Greek, leads him to a general comment on the ontological sameness of divinities with the same names (*Is.* 61.376a):

> σημαίνει ⟨δὲ⟩ κύησιν ἢ τὸ κύειν. διὸ καὶ παρατροπῆς γενομένης τοῦ ὀνόματος Ἑλληνιστὶ κύων κέκληται τὸ ἄστρον, ὅπερ ἴδιον τῆς Ἴσιδος νομίζουσιν. ἥκιστα μὲν οὖν δεῖ φιλοτιμεῖσθαι περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων, οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὑφείμην τοῦ Σαπάπιδος Αἰγυπτίοις ἢ τοῦ Ὀσίριδος, ἐκεῖνο μὲν [οὖν] ξενικόν, τοῦτο δ' Ἑλληνικόν, ἄμφω δ' ἑνὸς θεοῦ καὶ μιᾶς δυνάμεως ἡγούμενος.
>
> It (Sothis) means "pregnancy" (*kyêsis*) or "to be pregnant" (*kyein*) and so, with a modification of the word, the star which they regard as peculiar to Isis is called "the Dog" (*kyôn*) in Greek. We should indulge very little in rivalry, then, with regard to names; indeed I should prefer to yield that of Sarapis to the Egyptians than that of Osiris, for I believe that the former is foreign and that the latter is Greek, but that both belong to one god and one power.

That is, "Sirius" and "Sothis" may be shown to be in fact the same word, meaning both "dog" and "pregnant." The etymologies can be pushed even further—παρατροπῆς γενομένης τοῦ ὀνόματος—to include the name for the Dog Star sacred to Isis as well. The larger point seems to be that speculation into the origins of names is meaningless, since the gods are neither Egyptian nor Greek. Rather, meaning lies in interpretation. And so Plutarch's claim, here presented almost as an aside, that the name of Osiris, like that of Isis, is Greek, is not meant in an historical sense. Rather, "Isis" and "Osiris" are meaningful in Greek.

Plutarch's various Greek etymologies of the name of Isis come at crucial points in the argument of the *de Iside* and offer an entry into the way in which he conceived her Greekness. The first such etymological speculation comes at the end of the introductory section of the work (*Is.* 2.352a):

> τοῦ δ' ἱεροῦ τοὔνομα καὶ σαφῶς ἐπαγγέλλεται καὶ γνῶσιν καὶ εἴδησιν τοῦ ὄντος. ὀνομάζεται γὰρ Ἰσεῖον ὡς εἰσομένων τὸ ὄν, ἂν μετὰ λόγου καὶ ὁσίως εἰς τὰ ἱερὰ τῆς θεοῦ παρέλθωμεν.

> The name of her sanctuary as well clearly proclaims both understanding and knowledge of reality. For it is called an Iseion to indicate that we shall know (εἰσομένων) the "real" if we approach the sanctuaries of the goddess rationally and piously.

Plutarch here uses two interrelated terms to describe the knowledge of the divine available to devotees of Isis: cognates of the verb *oida,* from which word he would derive the name of Isis, and the term *gnôsis*. These Greek etymologies for the Egyptian divine name clearly align the cult of Isis with the rationalizing tendencies of Greek philosophical religion. This is a point to which Plutarch immediately returns: "(this goddess) whom you worship is one who is exceptionally wise and a lover of wisdom. Her name certainly seems to imply that to her more than anyone belongs knowing (τὸ εἰδέναι) and experiential knowledge" (*Is*. 2.351e ἣν σὺ θεραπεύεις ἐξαιρέτως σοφὴν καὶ φιλόσοφον οὖσαν, ὡς τοὔνομά γε φράζειν ἔοικε παντὸς μᾶλλον αὐτῇ τὸ εἰδέναι καὶ τὴν ἐπιστήμην προσήκουσαν).[26] Plutarch here introduces several terms for knowledge of the divine in rapid succession: forms of the verb *oida*, *gnôsis*, and *epistêmê*, and clearly indicates that the form of worship most welcome to Isis is appropriately an intellectual contemplation of the divine. Indeed, as we shall see, knowledge is valued here more highly than cult. This is explicit at the outset of the text (*Is*. 2.351e):

> διὸ θειότητος ὄρεξίς ἐστιν ἡ τῆς ἀληθείας μάλιστα δὲ τῆς περὶ θεῶν ἔφεσις, ὥσπερ ἀνάληψιν ἱερῶν τὴν μάθησιν ἔχουσα καὶ τὴν ζήτησιν, ἁγνείας τε πάσης καὶ νεωκορίας ἔργον ὁσιώτερον.
>
> The longing for truth, particularly truth about the gods, is a yearning after divinity, since it involves the learning of and quest for sacred lore as a means of ascent—a holier task than all ceremonial purification and temple service.

In the *de Iside*, Plutarch returns repeatedly to the theme of the emptiness of cult in the absence of understanding. The idea is perhaps most clearly formulated at the end of the third chapter (*Is*. 3.352c):

[26]Plutarch here introduces a third term for knowledge of the divine associated with Isis, ἐπιστήμη, which I have translated "experiential knowledge." The semantic fields of *oida*, *gnôsis*, and, *epistêmê* shade into one another. Whereas *oida* seems somewhat experiential and *gnôsis* evokes the context of the mysteries, *epistêmê* is associated with a certain ritual knowledge. Throughout, I translate *gnôsis* as "understanding," forms of *oida* with cognates of "knowledge," and *epistêmê* as scientific knowledge. On evidence for Gnosticism in Plutarch, see Betz 1990.

> ἀλλ᾽ ᾽Ισιακός ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς ὁ τὰ δεικνύμενα καὶ δρώμενα περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς τούτους, ὅταν νόμῳ παραλάβῃ, λόγῳ ζητῶν καὶ φιλοσοφῶν περὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀληθείας.
>
> The true devotee of Isis is he who, whenever he receives what is customarily displayed and done with regard to the gods, examines and investigates rationally what truth there may be in them.

Here, at the outset of the text, Plutarch creates an implicit hierarchy of Greek philosophy over Egyptian cult. The "δεικνύμενα" and the "δρώμενα" that are associated with the cult of Isis are of course Egyptian in origin and are to be understood as such. Hence Plutarch's repeated reference to Egyptian cultic places, objects and myths and his avoidance of reference to Isis worship in the Greco-Roman world.[27] One must, however, interpret these myths philosophically, rationally: the true *Isiakos*, the devotee of Isis who would behold the truth contained in her mysteries, is in fact imbued with the *paideia* of philosophical rationalism.[28]

The cultural centrism of Plutarch's text emerges from the fact that this philosophical training is characterized as peculiarly Greek. This becomes clear from the Greek authorities, both philosophical and poetic, whom Plutarch adduces as examples of learned men who have correctly apprehended the truth contained in the mysteries of Isis.[29] It matters little whether there is conscious reference to Egyptian cult, as is suggested in the section that directly follows the text cited above (*Is.* 3.352c). Plato and Hesiod are there adduced as those who

[27]See Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 47. Burial of Egyptians at Abydos, 20.359a–b; tomb of Osiris at Taphosiris, 21.359c; statue of Pluto/Sarapis in Alexandria, 28.361f; eating of crocodiles at Apollonopolis, 50.3371d; the body of Osiris at Busiris, 21.359b; Horus' connection to Buto, 18.357f; burning men alive at Eileithyiaspolis, 73.380d; inundations of the Nile at Elephantine, Mendes, Xoïs, and Memphis, 43.368b; Isis as leader of the Muses at Hermopolis, 3.352a; image of Typhon at Hermopolis, 3.352a; abstention of the Lycopolitans from sheep, 72.380b; the Apis in Memphis, 20.359b. Further mention of Egyptian cult sites in the *de Iside* are listed by Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 47–48.

[28]On the importance of a philosophical approach to myth and ritual, see column 21 of the Derveni Papyrus with Laks and Most 1997.

[29]On citations in the *de Iside*, see Casadio 1991. The number of Classical and Hellenistic Greek authors cited in the *de Iside* is striking, even for a text produced during the Second Sophistic. For a full list see the references in square brackets in Gwyn Griffiths' index. Among the authors frequently quoted or alluded to are: Aeschylus, Aristotle, Eudoxus of Cnidos, Euhemerus, Euripides, Hecataeus of Abdera, Hesiod, Homer, Manetho, Plato, Pythagoras, Solon, Thales, and Xenophanes of Colophon.

have correctly understood the reason why the Egyptian priests cut off their hair and wear linen clothes (*Is*. 4.352.d–e). In the following section, when Plutarch discusses the reasons for priestly abstentions from salt, he cites Aristagoras for an alternative explanation (*Is*. 5.352f). Ultimately, as we shall see below, it is an understanding of middle-Platonic metaphysics, here presented as an exegesis of Plato's *Timaeus*, that enables a perfect understanding of the Egyptian cult of Isis.

In demonstrating that the cultic activities of the Egyptians lack meaning in the absence of a Greek interpretive frame, however, Plutarch privileges only the elements that "belong" in this frame; non-philosophical elements—described here as "barbarian"—are consistently excluded from this text. Thus in section 20, after he has finished re-telling the myth of Isis and Osiris, Plutarch mentions to Clea that some elements of the myth have been expunged (ἐξαιρεθέντων) in his account, on the grounds that Clea, like himself, has no patience with those who "hold transgressive and barbarous opinions about the gods" (*Is*. 20.358e παρανόμους καὶ βαρβάρους δόξας περὶ θεῶν). As an example of barbarous tales Plutarch cites the dismemberment of Horus and the decapitation of Isis, stories that the Egyptians themselves tell (*Is.* 20.358e). Indeed, when one hears such horrors "about the blessed and incorruptible nature in terms of which the divine is above all known" (περὶ τῆς μακαρίας καὶ ἀφθάρτου φύσεως, καθ' ἣν μάλιστα νοεῖται τὸ θεῖον), Plutarch tells Clea, citing Aeschylus, "one must spit and purify the mouth" (*Is*. 20.358e "ἀποπτύσαι δεῖ καὶ καθήρασθαι" τὸ "στόμα").[30] Our Greek author chooses from among the Egyptian traditions those stories that will on the one hand help him explicate his metaphysical scheme, and on the other hand satisfy certain basic criteria that he has for the appropriateness and sanctity of myth.

In the *de Audiendis poetis* (*Aud*.), Plutarch likewise rejects fantastic stories about the gods that lead to an improper understanding of the nature of the divine. The *de Audiendis poetis* is a work in which Plutarch informs his readers how to teach poetry to children. The danger of poetry, especially poetry about the nature of the gods, is that poets often say things about the gods that are completely preposterous, such as Homer's accounts of the gods being wounded by men (*Aud*. 20e). Such passages, Plutarch feels, if they do not admit of an easy interpretation that will direct a child's thoughts "πρὸς τὸ βελτίονα," must be cast out.[31] On the other hand, poetic descriptions of the gods that do accord with truth ought to be presented to children often. Above all, it is the responsibility of

[30]Mette 1959, fr. 310b, pr. 112.

[31]*Aud.* 20d–e.

those who educate children to know the difference between true and false stories about the gods. After giving examples of both types, Plutarch remarks that, whereas some poets have written "sound opinions about the gods, and true ones, those (other) accounts have been fabricated for the astonishment of men" (*Aud.* 20f ὑγιαίνουσαι περὶ θεῶν δόξαι καὶ ἀληθεῖς, ἐκεῖνα δὲ πέπλασται πρὸς ἔκπληξιν ἀνθρώπων).

As in the *de Audiendis poetis*, so in the *de Iside* Plutarch would remove the mythical treatments about the divine that do not accord with the "true." In section 58 of the *de Iside*, Plutarch writes that "we must not use the myths as wholly factual accounts, but take what is fitting in each episode according to the principle of likeness" (*Is.* 58.374e χρηστέον δὲ τοῖς μύθοις οὐχ ὡς λόγοις πάμπαν οὖσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ πρόσφορον ἑκάστου [τὸ] κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα λαμβάνοντας).[32] Thus in removing the stories about the dismemberment of Horus and the decapitation of Isis, for example, Plutarch has "purified" the myth of Isis and Osiris of all fantastic elements and left only those stories about the gods that will lead the soul towards an understanding of the divine. When one compares the prescriptions for censorship in the *de Iside* and the *de Audiendis poetis*, an interesting conjunction of categories emerges: what is "fabricated for the astonishment of men" in the latter text is "barbarian" in the former. In the *de Iside*, those stories that lead the soul away from the divine are Egyptian.

Plutarch's retelling of the episode of Isis' wanderings (*Is.* 15.357a–16.357c) provides an excellent example Plutarch's hellenization of the Egyptian myth in an effort to make it "true." Plutarch tells us that Isis, while searching for the body of Osiris, comes to Byblos where she sits down by a fountain and speaks with no one except the queen's maids. The maids for their part, struck by the beauty of the stranger and the fragrance of her skin, take her to the queen who makes Isis the nurse of her child. Plutarch then tells us that the Egyptians say that Isis nurses the child by day, but by night burns away the mortal parts of his body in the fire and herself turns into a swallow, crying as she flies around the pillars of the great hall. One night the queen, having heard the lament, comes to the hall and sees her child in the flames; her cry causes Isis to remove the child from the fire and deprive the queen's child of immortality.

The extent to which the elements of this story are related to Egyptian Isis mythology is unclear,[33] though Isis was a mourning goddess in Egypt from the earliest periods.[34] Gwyn Griffiths cites an interesting parallel in a hematite cyl-

[32]Gwyn Griffiths (1970: 211) translates, "likeness to truth."

[33]See Hopfner 1940: 52–53.

[34]Michaïldes 1956: 200–201, cited at Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 324.

inder in which the goddess Astarte is depicted as a *Venus lugens*.[35] However, these parallels are, as Gwyn Griffiths himself concedes, rather unsure. Clearer are the parallels with the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. Like Plutarch's Isis, the Homeric Demeter in the midst of her search for Persephone sits by the fountain in Eleusis (*h.Cer.* 98–100) where she meets the daughters of Metaneira. Like Plutarch's Isis with the prince of Byblos, Demeter becomes the nurse of the child Demophoön and burns away his mortal parts until the panic of Metaneira causes her to stop and reveal herself.

If there was a comparable episode in the Egyptian myth of Isis, the way Plutarch has reworked the Egyptian material is regrettably beyond the present state of the evidence. In the absence of such knowledge, we might try to interpret Plutarch's interpolation of the Demeter material into his version of the Egyptian myth in light of the methodological statements we have considered above. Unfortunately, Plutarch seems to have considered the difference between true and false in poetic representation of the divine to be a matter of common sense and offers no hint about the criteria behind his evaluations of the "astonishing" in the *de Audiendis poetis* and the "barbarous" in the *de Iside*. But it is clear from both works that stories about the gods that lead to knowledge of the divine are to be preferred to those tales that do not. It seems that the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, poetically and theologically canonical, provides an appropriate interpretive frame in terms of which Plutarch explains the Egyptain myth.

In the *de Iside*, Plutarch's tendency is to interpret Egyptian material in light of the Greek poetic and philosophical tradition. Mythic material unsuitable for such interpretation, described in the *de Iside* as "barbarous" and in the *de Audiendis poetis* as "fabrication" (20f πέπλασται, cf. 21d ἀτόπως εἰρημένων) is to be cast out. Plutarch's substitution of the wanderings of Demeter for those of Isis and removal of Egyptian stories that he deems "barbarous" puts the prescriptions of both texts into practice: at least in the matter of the wanderings of Isis, Greek myth is more suitable than Egyptian. As the hermeneutic with which the material will ultimately be interpreted is Greek, this seems to make eminent sense. I shall now turn to a closer discussion of this hermeneutic.

The Structure of the Text

The *de Iside* is a philosophical text and is meant to be read as such—philosophically. As the true *Isiakos* is he who participates in the mysteries according to the dictates of *logos*, so Plutarch's text provides the appropriate

[35]The cylinder dates from the second millennium B.C.E. See Seyrig 1955: 37–38 and Gwyn Griffiths 1970: 324–25.

interpretive frame. This is implicit in the very structure of the *de Iside*. Plutarch begins with programmatic statements about a proper, philosophical approach to myth and cult, and then offers his own version of the myth "with all of the barbaric elements removed" (*Is.* 20.358e). Plutarch then proceeds to lead the reader through a series of successive hermeneutic levels that increase in complexity and closeness to the ultimate goal of the text: an allegorical interpretation of the myth and cult of Isis that accords with Plutarch's own middle-Platonic metaphysics. Inherent in the structure of the *de Iside* then, is an *exemplum* of the ideal marriage of Egyptian cult and Greek philosophy. As the participant in the cult of Isis, with the aid of philosophy, ascends to greater degrees of understanding, so the reader of Plutarch's text moves upwards through hermeneutic levels.

After a preliminary discussion of the myth and cult, Plutarch begins with Euhemeristic interpretations, rejecting them out of hand as a foolish evasion of truth "that quite cleverly transfers everything from gods to men" (*Is.* 22.359d οὐ φαύλως ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἐπ᾽ ἀνθρώπους μεταφέρουσι).[36] Those who offer the grounds for these atheistic ideas are in fact the Egyptians themselves (*Is.* 22.359e ἱστοροῦσι ... Αἰγύπτιοι) when they say that Osiris was a general (στρατηγὸν ὀνομάζουσιν Ὄσιριν). Moving from the lowest of interpretive levels, Plutarch at the same time shifts from Egyptian lore to Greek philosophical speculation and poetic expression. With an allusion to Plato's *Laws* (4.716a) Plutarch dismisses men who woul claim divine honors for themselves, rounding off his charges with a verse of Empedocles (fr. 2.4 D-K).

Plutarch explicitly identifies the next interpretive level, that of daemonological speculation, as an advance over the fallacies of Euhemerus when he says that it is better (βέλτιον οὖν) to understand the stories about Isis, Osiris, and Typhon as describing the deeds of "great daimons" (*Is.* 25.360d). It is better, though not, in fact, best, to think in this way.[37] The comparatives, as we shall see, suggest that these interpretations are offered at a point in the *de Iside* that makes no claim to ultimate interpretive authority. Whereas daemonological speculation raises us above the atheism of Euhemerus, we are nevertheless far below the metaphysical heights towards which the text is tending.

[36]Though at *Thes*. 31.4 Plutarch interprets the *katabasis* of Theseus in what are obviously Euhemeristic terms. For Plutarch's use of rationalizing, Euhemeristic interpretations in the *Lives*, see Hardie 1992.

[37]Plutarch's demonology has been the subject of much scholarly speculation. Most important on this subject are Brenk 1986 and Brenk 1973. See also Soury 1942 and Vernière 1977.

In section 32, Plutarch moves from these etymological and syncretistic speculations to "... those who seem to have something more philosophical to say from another standpoint" (*Is.* 32.363d ἀπ᾽ ἄλλης δ᾽ ἀρχῆς τῶν φιλοσοφώτερόν τι λέγειν δοκούντων). We here enter the level of very simplistic Stoic physical *allegoresis*. And although Plutarch still distances himself from the results of this hermeneutic (δοκούντων—note the comparative φιλοσοφώτερον here as βέλτιον before) the key interpretive concept of the treatise, philosophy, has here surfaced along with the mode of interpretation, *allegoresis*, (albeit ultimately on a subtler and more complicated level) which will ultimately inform Plutarch's own claims.

Plutarch does not reject allegory as such, but rather its crude, simplistic, physical application.[38] One should not simply state that "Osiris is the Nile uniting with Isis as the earth" (*Is.* 32.363d) but instead follow the "wiser of the priests" who speak somewhat more subtly of Osiris as "the general principle and power of moisture" (*Is.* 33.364a). Such a reference to a principle of nature rather than a single phenomenally occurring object allows Plutarch to raise allegorical discourse from the specific to general metaphysics—from the Egyptian Nile to "the principle of moisture."

Allegory is a teleological process: one begins with a goal and shows how a given set of steps lead to that goal. In the *de Iside*, Plutarch reduces the myth and the "δεικνύμενα καὶ δρώμενα" of the cult of Isis to a series of manipulable symbols whose internal, original, Egyptian, organizing logic is subsumed by the overriding concerns of Plutarch's metaphysical *telos*. That is, the three main characters—Isis, Osiris, and Horus—are reduced to symbols: mother, father (generative element), and offspring. Plutarch then (re)organizes these symbols so that they become mythical expressions of Plato's *Timaeus* and Plutarch's own metaphysical scheme. The final product of this allegorical process is a philosophical, metaphysical discourse that comprises the last half of the *de Iside*.

Plutarch has been preparing his reader for this allegorical process from the first section of this text. The true *Isiakos* is the worshipper who interprets the symbols and myth of the cult in a philosophical (sc. allegorical) manner, and

[38]For a fuller rejection of physical Stoic allegory, see *Aud.* 19e–f: "By forcibly distorting (παραβιαζόμενοι) these stories through what used to be called 'deeper meaning' (ὑπονοίαις) but are nowadays called 'allegorical interpretations' (ἀλλεγορίαις), some persons say that the sun is represented as giving information about Aphrodite in the arms of Ares because the conjunction of the planet Mars with Venus portends births conceived in adultery and when the sun returns in his course and discovers these, they cannot be kept secret."

Plutarch has led his reader to perform precisely this task along with him in the *de Iside*; the allegorical manipulation or interpretation of the myth and symbols of the cult is, according to the consistent, internal logic of the *de Iside*, what is most welcome to the goddess.

This is the background to the truth claim made here in the text. Contrary to those who would interpret the meaning of the cult of Isis according to the lower hermeneutics that have been dismissed earlier in the text, the "true" interpretation of the myth follows (*Is.* 45.369a). Because this dualistic metaphysics is true, it is universal, and it has thus been understood, or at least been available for understanding, Plutarch claims, by both Greeks and barbarians (*Is*. 45.369b):

> διὸ καὶ παμπάλαιος αὕτη κάτεισιν ἐκ θεολόγων καὶ νομοθετῶν εἰς τε ποιητὰς καὶ φιλοσόφους δόξα, τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀδέσποτον ἔχουσα, τὴν δὲ πίστιν ἰσχυρὰν καὶ δυσεξάλειπτον, οὐκ ἐν λόγοις μόνον οὐδ' ἐν φήμαις, ἀλλ' ἔν τε τελεταῖς ἔν τε θυσίαις καὶ βαρβάροις καὶ Ἕλλησι πολλαχοῦ περιφερομένη ...
>
> There has, therefore, come down from theologians and lawgivers to both poets and philosophers this ancient belief which is of anonymous origin, but is given strong and tenacious credence, and has been widely transmitted to barbarians and Greeks not only in sayings and reports but also in rites and offering-festivals …

This statement seems almost Herodotean in its openness and apparent willingness to give credence to non-Greek forms of cult—we are reminded of Herodotus' famously relativistic statement that, "all men know equally about the gods" (2.3.2 πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἴσον περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπίστασθαι). Indeed, what is almost expressed here is the belief that Greek and Egyptian divine names, myth, and cult are all equally valid reflections of the divine. The Hellenizing impulse of the *de Iside* is, however, subtle. For we must bear in mind the central claim with which the text opens: Ἑλληνικὸν γὰρ ἡ Ἶσίς ἐστι. The progress to wisdom, to truth towards which the text has led us through successively more complicated hermeneutics, has been progress away from Egyptian myth—a purging of the myth of Isis of all its "barbaric" elements until its kernel of "Greek" truth is laid bare. The assertion that this wisdom is universal is anything but a relativistic claim. Rather, as Philostratus in his biography of Apollonius of Tyana would later put it, "for the wise man, Hellas is everywhere" (Philostr. *VA* 1.34 σοφῷ ἀνδρὶ Ἑλλὰς πάντα).

Towards the end of the treatise, Plutarch makes a statement about the gods that again seems eminently ecumenical but is in fact fundamentally Plutarchan

in its Hellenocentrism. I quote this passage at length as it encapsulates the core assumptions of Plutarch's methods (*Is*. 67.377f–378a):

> οὐχ ἑτέρους παρ᾽ ἑτέροις οὐδὲ βαρβάρους καὶ Ἕλληνας οὐδὲ νοτίους καὶ βορείους· ἀλλ᾽ ὥσπερ ἥλιος καὶ σελήνη καὶ οὐρανὸς καὶ γῆ καὶ θάλασσα κοινὰ πᾶσιν, ὀνομάζεται δ᾽ ἄλλως ὑπ᾽ ἄλλων, οὕτως ἑνὸς λόγου τοῦ ταῦτα κοσμοῦντος καὶ μιᾶς προνοίας ἐπιτροπευούσης καὶ δυνάμεων ὑπουργῶν ἐπὶ πάντα τεταγμένων ἕτεραι παρ᾽ ἑτέροις κατὰ νόμους γεγόνασι τιμαὶ καὶ προσηγορίαι, καὶ συμβόλοις χρῶνται καθιερωμένοις οἱ μὲν ἀμυδροῖς οἱ δὲ τρανοτέροις, ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα τὴν νόησιν ὁδηγοῦντες οὐκ ἀκινδύνως ...
>
> Nor do we regard the gods as different among different peoples nor as barbarian and Greek and southern and northern. But just as the sun, moon, heaven, earth and sea are common to all, though they are given various names by the varying peoples, so it is with the one reason which orders these things and the one providence which has charge of them, and the assistant powers which are assigned to everything: different honors and modes of address exist among different peoples according to custom, and some people use hallowed symbols that are obscure and others clearer ones directing thought toward the divine, but not without danger.

Plutarch further claims that, "the gods are our common heritage" (ἡμῖν τοὺς θεοὺς ... κοινούς) and not "peculiar to the Egyptians" (*Is*. 66.377c Αἰγυπτίων ἰδίους). As Gwyn Griffiths noted, this looks very much like the kind of divine syncretism that we find in Herodotus, and indeed, ontologically speaking, it is. The gods of the Egyptians are in fact the gods of the Greeks. But Plutarch's words are culturally charged as well as theological. Isis and Osiris, in origin, name, and meaning, are Greek. Plutarch's seeming openness to foreign cult forms goes only so far as his philosophical interpretation of cult will allow him to go—in other words, to the boundary of what on the one hand jibes with good Greek philosophical and poetic writings about the gods and, on the other hand, supports the ultimate conclusions of Plutarch's own metaphysical speculations.

Plutarch's decision in the *de Iside* to demonstrate the presence of these ideas among the barbarians stems not from an impulse to appreciate native traditions on their own terms; the text is rather a Greek measuring rod according to which barbarian wisdom is evaluated. The Greekness of Isis, or rather, the way in which the name of Isis is understood to be Greek, emerges in the process. For the mythic and cultic activities of the *Iseion* contain sacred symbols that, when interpreted philosophically, afford the philosopher/worshipper an understanding

of the nature of the divine. The meaning of the Egyptian symbols emerges only in the context of a Greek interpretive frame. As Isis is knowledge herself, she both embodies and is the object of the hermeneutic frame. The cultural logic of the text might be formulated in the following way: as the true *Isiakos* is a philosopher and philosophy is the peculiar possession of the Greeks, the true *Isiakos* is a Hellene imbued with the philosophical training of Greek *paideia*.

The barbaric in religion is for Plutarch both a theological and a cultural issue. In the *de Iside*, the barbaric elements of the myth are removed from Plutarch's retelling in the same way as barbaric interpretations are disallowed. In the *de Iside*, what is barbaric and false is consistently Egyptian—in the same way, Greek allegorical interpretation, via citations from canonical Greek authorities, leads the soul towards knowledge of the divine.

This is not an idea that is confined among Plutarch's works to the *de Iside*. On the contrary, in the *de Superstitione* Plutarch consistently equates superstition with non-Greek cult forms and contends that barbaric cult leads the mind to superstition while Greek philosophy leads the soul towards knowledge of the divine.[39] *Deisidaimonia* is here characterized as a mental state produced by emotion in which the gods are believed to exist but considered harmful, a misapprehension of the nature of divinity that "produces the notion that good is evil" (*Sup*. 167e κακὸν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὑπονοοῦσα). Directly contrasted with *deisidaimonia* is a philosophical approach to religion that attempts to show that "the majesty of God is associated with goodness, magnanimity, kindliness, and solicitude" (*Sup*. 167e τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ σεμνότητα μετὰ χρηστότητος καὶ μεγαλοφροσύνης καὶ εὐμενείας καὶ κηδεμονίας).[40]

Whereas Plutarch equates superstitious cults and rites with those of the barbarians, those philosophically inclined forms of worship that elevate the soul are Greek. What is more, superstitious rites that have entered the Greek world are in

[39]The most recent edition of this text with translation and commentary is that of Moellering 1963. The epideictic flavor of the text and its somewhat unpolished style have led scholars to date it early in Plutarch's career (Brenk 1977: 15). Other arguments for reading this text as a product of Plutarch's youth are based upon the "development" theory whereby Plutarch's youthful rationalism ultimately gave way in his mature years to a full-fledged, Neoplatonic demonology. See especially Volkmann 1869. Brenk 1975 posits a good deal more continuity in Plutarch's thought than the traditional "development" model has allowed.

[40]For an all too brief treatment of Plutarch's understanding of the relationship between τὸ βαρβαρικόν and δεισιδαιμονία, see Schmidt 1999: 224–34 (with my review: Richter 2001).

origin barbarian. Indeed, at *de Superstitione* 166a Plutarch explains the presence of these disgraceful rites in the Greek world with a passage from Euripides' *Trojan Women*: "Greeks discovering evil barbarian ways" (764 ὦ βάρβαρ' ἐξευρόντες Ἕλληνες κακά). In contrast to these rollings in the mud and debasing prostrations, we Greeks rather (*Sup.* 166b)

> τοῖς θεοῖς ἀξιοῦμεν ὀρθῷ τῷ στόματι καὶ δικαίῳ προσεύχεσθαι, καὶ μὴ ... τὴν δ' ἑαυτῶν διαστρέφοντας καὶ μολύνοντας ἀτόποις ὀνόμασι καὶ ῥήμασι βαρβαρικοῖς καταισχύνειν καὶ παρανομεῖν τὸ θεῖον καὶ πάτριον ἀξίωμα τῆς εὐσεβείας.
>
> think it worthy to pray to the gods with the mouth straight and just ... and not to distort and sully our own tongues with strange names and barbarous phrases and disgrace and transgress the god-given, ancestral dignity of our religion.

As we read on in the *de Superstitione*, we notice that all behavior deemed superstitious—magic charms, spells, rushings about, impure purifications and dirty sanctifications—is described as "barbarous" (*Sup.* 171b). The Gauls, the Scythians, and the Carthaginians practice the ultimate impiety of child sacrifice (171b), the Persians bury men alive (171d), and the Egyptians wail and beat their breasts before the silent majesty of the altar (171e). Plutarch puts the matter somewhat more succinctly in his *Life of Sertorius*. After relating the story of how the basically rational Roman general took advantage of the native Spaniards' superstitious awe of a white doe who followed him around, Plutarch concludes with the gnomic statement, "εὐάλωτον εἰς δεισιδαιμονίαν εἶναι φύσει τὸ βαρβαρικόν" (*Sert.* 11.3)—by its very nature, "φύσει," "τὸ βαρβαρικόν" is easy prey for superstition—the state of mind characterized as a misapprehension of the very nature of the divine.[41]

The *de Iside* is not a systematic treatment of the problem of δεισιδαιμονία, but towards the end of the treatise Plutarch makes explicit what has been implicit and offers several examples of how Egyptians misunderstand the meaning of their own cults of the gods and in doing so, easily fall into superstition. When discussing the tendency of Egyptians to bewail their gods and to participate in excessively gloomy rites, Plutarch cites with approval Xenophanes of Colophon who "… rightly requested the Egyptians, if they believed in the gods, not to bewail them, and if they bewailed them, not to believe they were gods" (*Is.* 70.379b ἠξίωσε τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, εἰ θεοὺς νομίζουσι, μὴ θρηνεῖν, εἰ δὲ θρηνοῦσι, θεοὺς μὴ νομίζειν). The Egyptians are most culpable, however, in their mis-

[41]Schmidt 1999: 224–25.

guided worship of animals. For they fail to understand that the animals are not sacred in and of themselves, but are rather sacred to certain deities. In contrast to this Egyptian error, Plutarch avers that (*Is*. 71.379d–e)

> Ἕλληνες μὲν γὰρ ἔν γε τούτοις λέγουσιν ὀρθῶς καὶ νομίζουσιν ἱερὸν Ἀφροδίτης ζῷον εἶναι τὴν περιστερὰν καὶ τὸν δράκοντα τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς καὶ τὸν κόρακα τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος καὶ τὸν κύνα τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος, ὡς Εὐριπίδης
>
> Ἑκάτης ἄγαλμα φωσφόρου κύων ἔσῃ·
>
> Αἰγυπτίων δ' οἱ πολλοὶ θεραπεύοντες αὐτὰ τὰ ζῷα καὶ περιέποντες ὡς θεοὺς οὐ γέλωτος μόνον οὐδὲ χλευασμοῦ καταπεπλήκασι τὰς ἱερουργίας, ἀλλὰ τοῦτο τῆς ἀβελτερίας ἐλάχιστόν ἐστι κακόν· δόξα δ' ἐμφύεται δεινὴ τοὺς μὲν ἀσθενεῖς καὶ ἀκάκους εἰς ἄκρατον ὑπερείπουσα τὴν δεισιδαιμονίαν.
>
> the Greeks use the correct expressions in these matters, and regard the dove as the sacred animal of Aphrodite, the serpent of Athena, the raven of Apollo, and the dog of Artemis, as Euripides says (fr. 968), "a dog shalt thou become, an image of bright Hecate." But most of the Egyptians venerate the animals themselves and treat them as gods, and thus not only have they involved the sacred rites in laughter and scorn—this is the smallest evil resulting from their folly—but a baneful belief becomes established which hurls the weak and innocent into stark superstition.

The logic of this passage of the *de Iside* is entirely consistent with that of the *de Superstitione*: Egyptians are prone to superstition and worship the animal itself rather than the deity to whom it is sacred. The Greeks for their part interpret the ritual correctly (ὀρθῶς) and so are possessed of a more elevated understanding of the divine.

I have argued that in the *de Iside* generally, the Egyptian cult of Isis, left uninterpreted by Greek philosophy, is barbaric in the sense that it leads the soul to a superstitious and false apprehension of the divine. Rather than attempting to raise the status of Greek philosophy by claiming that it reflects Egyptian wisdom, I have tried to show that the *de Iside* begins with the assumption that philosophy alone, a Greek possession, gives meaning to all forms of cult, both Greek and barbarian. In a very important sense, this attitude runs counter to ancient Greek accounts of Egypt and in the last section of this paper I shall try to clarify the way in which the *de Iside* might be understood as a Plutarchan renegotiation of Greek writing about Egypt.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc?

Plutarch's fullest expression about the tradition of Greek views of Egypt is to be found in the *de Malignitate Herodoti*.[42] This is a text primarily devoted to correcting the errors of fact that Plutarch felt Herodotus had made with respect to the exploits of the Boeotians and the Corinthians in the Persian Wars: Plutarch tells his dedicatee, an otherwise unknown Alexander, that he writes the text "on behalf of his ancestors and truth" (*Mal*. 1.854f ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων ἅμα καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας).

In the first half of the *de Malignitate Herodoti*, however, Plutarch criticizes what he sees as a fundamental methodological error pervading the *Histories*. The story of Io is the case in point: against the less than flattering version of the story that Herodotus heard from the Phoenicians themselves (that Io, pregnant and in love, voluntarily fled with Phoenician sailors), Plutarch puts forward what he characterizes as the opinion that "all the Greeks hold" (πάντες Ἕλληνες ... νομίζουσι), namely, that Io is divine and worshipped all over the inhabited world as a Greek goddess (*Mal*. 11.856e). In short, Greek thought is to be preferred to barbarian thought. To do otherwise, as Plutarch says (coining a term),[43] is the mark of a "barbarophile" (φιλοβάρβαρος, *Mal*. 12.857a). Herodotus' methodological error is a result of his flawed, barbarophilic cultural perspective. When Plutarch comes to deal with Herodotus' claims for the origins of the cults of the Greek gods in Egypt, he is more explicit about the consequences of this issue: Plutarch attacks Herodotus for his claim that (*Mal.* 13.857c)

> Ἕλληνας δὲ μαθεῖν παρ' Αἰγυπτίων πομπὰς καὶ πανηγύρεις καὶ τὸ τοὺς δώδεκα θεοὺς σέβεσθαι· Διονύσου δὲ καὶ τοὔνομα παρ' Αἰγυπτίων Μελάμποδα μαθεῖν καὶ διδάξαι τοὺς ἄλλους Ἕλληνας· μυστήρια δὲ καὶ τὰς περὶ Δήμητραν τελετὰς ὑπὸ τῶν Δαναοῦ θυγατέρων ἐξ Αἰγύπτου κομισθῆναι.
>
> the Greeks learnt festivals and processions from the Egyptians, including the worship of the twelve gods; that the very name (*ounoma*) of Dionysus was picked up from the Egyptians by Melampus who taught it to the rest of the Greeks; that the mysteries and rituals concerning Demeter were brought from Egypt by the daughters of Danaus.

[42]On the *de Malignitate* see most recently Hershbell 1993. Legrand 1932 is still useful. The most recent edition is Bowen 1992.

[43]Although Philodemus (*Herc.* 994.6) had used the verb, "φιλοβαρβαρίζω" in the sense of "enjoying the use of linguistic barbarisms" (*LSJ* s.v.).

Plutarch's suspicion of non-Greek cult, present, as we have seen, in the *de Iside* and the *de Superstitione*, is here expressed in more explicit terms. He rejects the Herodotean idea that the Greeks learnt the *ounoma* of Dionysus, festivals and processions, and the worship of the twelve gods from the Egyptians. The insistence on the worship of the twelve gods is interesting. Plutarch next turns to Herodotus' claims for the temporal and theological priority of the Egyptian and Tyrian Heracleses over their Greek counterpart (*Mal*. 13.857d):

> οὓς μὲν Αἰγύπτιοι (σέβονται), ἀποφαίνων θεούς, Ἕλληνες δέ, ἀνθρώπους καταγεγηρακότας, οὐδαμοῦ ταύτην προὔθετο τὴν εὐλάβειαν ... ἀλλ' ὅμως ἐκείνους μὲν ἀποφαίνει θεούς, τούτοις δ' ὡς φθιτοῖς καὶ ἥρωσιν ἐναγίζειν οἴεται δεῖν ἀλλὰ μὴ θύειν ὡς θεοῖς. Τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ περὶ Πανὸς εἴρηκε, ταῖς Αἰγυπτίων ἀλαζονείαις καὶ μυθολογίαις τὰ σεμνότατα καὶ ἁγνότατα τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν ἱερῶν ἀνατρέπων.
>
> Those whom the Egyptians worship he declares to be gods, but those whom the Greek worship he declares are men who grow old and should not be offered reverence. … Nevertheless, he presents the Egyptian ones as gods whereas the Greek ones he thinks should not be offered sacrifice as gods but should be worshipped as mortals and heroes. He has said the same of Pan, overthrowing the most solemn and holy truths of Greek religion with Egyptian myth and false pretensions.

Herodotus' erroneous accounts of the relationship between Greek and Egyptian cult, according to Plutarch, stem from his sources. He has trusted what the Egyptians themselves have told him and, in so doing, has overturned "τὰ σεμνότατα καὶ ἁγνότατα τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν ἱερῶν." Against the "ἀλαζονείαι" of the Egyptian priests, Plutarch adduces the venerable authority of the Greek literary tradition (*Mal*. 14.857e–f):

> Καίτοι τῶν παλαιῶν καὶ λογίων ἀνδρῶν οὐχ Ὅμηρος, οὐχ Ἡσίοδος, οὐκ Ἀρχίλοχος, οὐ Πείσανδρος, οὐ Στησίχορος, οὐκ Ἀλκμάν, οὐ Πίνδαρος, Αἰγυπτίου ἔσχον λόγον Ἡρακλέους ἢ Φοίνικος, ἀλλ' ἕνα τοῦτον ἴσασι πάντες Ἡρακλέα τὸν Βοιώτιον ὁμοῦ καὶ Ἀργεῖον.
>
> And yet, of the learned men of old, not Homer, not Hesiod, not Archilochus, not Peisander, not Stesichorus, not Alcman, not Pindar mentioned an Egyptian or a Phoenician Heracles: they all knew of one Heracles only, the Heracles of Boeotia and Argos.

In this passage, Plutarch directly addresses Herodotus' methodological problems. These problems are, moreover, largely similar to those that inform the

cultural agenda of the *de Iside*. Herodotus, in this instance as elsewhere,[44] relies explicitly upon the information which he had gained from the Egyptian priests: "λέγω δὲ τὰ λέγουσι αὐτοὶ Αἰγύπτιοι" (2.50.2). For Plutarch, this privileging of native accounts over Greek authorities lies at the root of Herodotus' errors. Similarly, in the *de Iside*, as I have noted, Plutarch consistently refers to Egyptian interpretations of their own cult as barbaric and misguided (*Is*. 20.358e βαρβάρους δόξας περὶ θεῶν), rejecting the Egyptian stories of the dismemberment of Horus and the decapitation of Isis, recalling to Clea Aeschylus' advice that when one hears such stories, one must, "spit and purify the mouth."

In both the *de Malignitate Herodoti* and the *de Iside*, the Greek literary tradition is the authority in terms of which both Egyptian cult and its relationship to Greek philosophy is to be interpreted. Whereas Plutarch's privileging of the Greek literary tradition is implicit in the structure, the hermeneutic technique, and the content of the *de Iside*, he is far more explicit in the *de Malignitate Herodoti*. Herodotus' error regarding the Egyptian and the Tyrian Heracleses is made manifest by the testimony, or rather lack thereof, of the Greek epic and lyric traditions. These men have written only of a Greek Heracles—*ergo*, the barbarian Heracles does not exist.

Conclusions

Throughout Plutarch's corpus, one observes a tendency to denigrate non-Greek forms of cult. This is most explicit in the *de Superstitione* but forms the conceptual framework, I have suggested, of the *de Iside* as well. Egyptian religion may be appropriated as a series of symbols and subsequently reorganized according to the dictates of middle-Platonic metaphysics, but this seems more indicative of cultural chauvinism than an ecumenical respect for barbarian wisdom. This is not to say that Plutarch viewed contemporary, largely Hellenized Isism as degenerate barbarism. On the contrary, the *de Iside* would elevate Egyptian cult—via Platonic exegesis—to the level of holy mystery.

The cultural centrism of the text, I argue, lies in the hermeneutic itself. As in the *de Malignitate Herodoti*, so in the *de Iside* the Greek literary tradition is the repository of truth about the gods. In the absence of this interpretive frame—a Greek interpretive frame—Egyptian cult remains at the level of barbaric superstition.

I have tried to show that this cultural hierarchy is implicit in the statement, "Isis is a Greek name." To derive the name of the Egyptian goddess from a Greek word renegotiates the historical relationship Greek and Egyptian cult that

[44]Cf. Hdt. 1.1 for the Persian versions of the causes of the war.

Plutarch found so objectionable in the *de Malignitate Herodoti*. Over against the Herodotean statement that "the names of the gods came from Egypt to Greece," Plutarch claims that the name of the most important Egyptian goddess is in fact Greek. The historical and etymological arguments with which Plutarch supports this claim seem specious, but the statement is nevertheless programmatic. Temporal priority becomes a metaphor, in a sense, for theological superiority. The *de Iside* would convince its readers that truth, and especially truth about the gods, is available only to those imbued with the *paideia* of Greek philosophy.

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