# Epistemic Authority and Traditions of Wisdom: Iamblichus on Non-Hellenic Myths

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#### A model for the study epistemic authority in textual traditions

- Epistemic authority vs. executive authority
- The authority relation is the result of single acts of attribution:
- the <u>attributor (A)</u> attributes a certain <u>epistemic quality (Q)</u> some kind of epistemic reliability (a broad spectrum from prima facie, defeasible epistemic reliability to infallibility to the <u>bearer (B)</u> persons or texts (more generally: signs) in a specific <u>domain (D)</u> on the basis of certain <u>grounds (G)</u>.
- Heuristic role of the model: strive to be more precise by specifying A, B, D, G, and Q.
- Epistemic authority as a social reality (non-instrumentalist) for which actors have a competence, even if they lack an explicit concept, let alone a theory of authority.
- Descriptive approach of an inherently normative phenomenon.



## The Reply to Porphyry (= De mysteriis Aegyptiorum) or the "Egyptian fiction"

T<sub>1</sub> The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains.

Hermes, the god who presides over rational discourse, has long been considered, quite rightly, to be the common patron of all priests;

he who presides over true knowledge about the gods is one and the same always and everywhere.

It is to him that our ancestors in particular dedicated the fruits of their wisdom,

attributing all their own writings to Hermes (ῷ δὴ καὶ οἱ ἡμέτεροι πρόγονοι τὰ αὑτῶν τῆς σοφίας εὑρήματα ἀνετίθεσαν Ἐρμοῦ πάντα τὰ οἰκεῖα συγγράμματα ἐπονομάζοντες).

And if we, for our part, receive from this god our due share of favour, such as we are capable of receiving,

you, for your part, do well in laying before the priests questions about theology,

such as they love to deal with, and which pertain to their expertise;

and, at the same time, assuming that the letter sent to my student Anebo

may be addressed equally well to me,

it is reasonable for me to grant you a true reply to your enquiries (ἀποκρινοῦμαί σοι αὐτὰ τἀληθῆ ὑπὲρ ὧν πυνθάνῃ).

For it would not be right for Pythagoras and Plato and Democritus and Eudoxus and many other of the Hellenes of old

to have been granted suitable instruction by the scribes of their time,

but for you, in our time, who have the same purpose as they,

to fail of guidance at the hands of those who are accounted public teachers now.

So in view of this, I am presenting myself to take up the discussion;

and you, for your part, if you will, imagine that the same person is now replying to you as he to whom you wrote;

or, if it seems better to you, posit that it is I who discourses with you in writing,

or any other prophet of the Egyptians, for it makes no difference.

Or better still, I think, dismiss from your mind the speaker, whether he be better or worse,

and consider what is said, whether it be true or false, rousing up your intellect to the task with a will.

(*Reply* I.1, p. 1.1-2.21 Saffrey – trans. E.C. Clarke – J.M. Dillon – J.P. Hershbell)

### The authority of barbarian traditions in the *Pythagorean Life*

T 2 At the start of every philosophical investigation, it is after all the custom, at least for all who are sound-minded, to invoke God.
But at the outset of that philosophy rightly believed to be named after the divine Pythagoras, it is surely all the more fitting to do this; for since this philosophy was at first handed down by the gods (ἐx θεῶν γὰρ αὐτῆς παραδοθείσης),
it compatible comparison dod without the gode' oid (τ) μπτ' ἀπτός τὸν ὅνστστν ὅ) μτο ἀ διὰ τῶν

it cannot be comprehended without the gods' aid (τὸ κατ' ἀρχὰς οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἄλλως ἢ διὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι).

Moreover, its nobility and greatness exceed human ability to understand it immediately:

only when the goodwill of the gods leads the way, can someone with gradual approach slowly appropriate something from it (ἀλλὰ μόνως ἄν τίς του τῶν θεῶν εὐμενοῦς ἐξηγουμένου κατὰ βραχὺ προσιὼν ἠρέμα ἂν αὐτῆς παρασπάσασθαί τι δυνηθείη). (*VP* 1.1, trans. J.M. Dillon – J.P. Hershbell)

T<sub>3</sub> For all these reasons, then, invoking the gods as leaders, and entrusting ourselves and our discourse to them, let us follow wherever they lead,

in no way discouraged by the long time this philosophical school has been neglected,

concealed by outlandish teachings and secret codes (tisin àporphitois sumbólois)

obscured by numerous false and spurious treatises (ψευδέσι τε καὶ νόθοις πολλοῖς συγγράμμασιν),

and entangled in many other similar difficulties.

For us the will of the gods is sufficient, with which we can endure even more difficult circumstances than these.

And after the gods, we shall choose as our leader the founder and father of this divine philosophy. ( $VP_{1,2}$ )

T 4 [Thales] urged [Pythagoras] to sail to Egypt,

and especially to meet with the priests in Memphis and Diospolis (Thebes).
For it was by these, he said, that he himself had been provided with the very things in virtue of which the multitude believed he was wise.
Indeed, Thales said that he himself had gained neither by nature nor by training so many privileges as he saw in Pythagoras.
Hence, he could proclaim nothing but good news:
if Pythagoras associated with the priests, he would be most divine, and wisest beyond all humans. (VP 12)

T 5 There he joined the descendants of Mochus, the prophet and natural philosopher, and other Phoenician hierophants, and was initiated into all sacred rites of the mysteries celebrated especially in Byblos and in Tyre, and in many parts of Syria. Pythagoras did not experience these as a result of superstition, as some one might foolishly suppose, but much more with a desire and yearning for theoretical knowledge, and a reverent concern that nothing worthy of learning kept in the secrets or mystic rites of the gods escape his notice.

Having learned besides that those which existed there (in Syria) were somehow derived and descended from the sacred rites in Egypt,

he hoped thus to participate in the more noble, more divine and pure rites of Egypt. (VP 14)

- T 6 He thoroughly studied perfect worship of the gods with them, and reached the highest point in knowledge of numbers, music, and other mathematical sciences.
   (VP 19, τὰ παρ' αὐτοῖς σεμνὰ καὶ θεῶν θρησκείαν ἐντελεστάτην ἐκμαθών, ἀριθμῶν τε καὶ μουσικῆς καὶ τῶν ἄλλων μαθημάτων ἐπ'ἄκρον ἐλθών παρ' αὐτοῖς)
- T 7 He tried to present his symbolic manner of instruction, entirely like the teachings which he learned in Egypt.
   (VP 20 : τὸν τῆς διδασκαλίας τρόπον συμβολικὸν ποιεῖν ἐπεχείρει καὶ πάντῃ ὅμοιον τοῖς ἐν Αἰγύπτῷ διδάγμασι, καθ' ἂ ἐπαιδεύθῃ)
- T 8 "This (discourse) is what I Pythagoras, son of Mnemarchus, learned on initiation in the Thracian Libethra, from Aglaophamus the initiator, who communicated to me that Orpheus, son of Calliope, taught by his mother on Mt. Pangaeon, said: '*The eternal being of number is a most provident principle of the whole heaven, earth, and of the intermediate nature; moreover it is a source of permanence for divine (men) and gods and daemons.*" From this, then, it is clear that he derived the idea of the essence of the gods as defined by number from the Orphics.
- T 9 Most indispensable for him was his manner of teaching (ἀναγκαιότατος τρόπος διδασκαλίας) by means of symbols (ὁ διὰ τῶν συμβόλων).
  For this style of teaching was treated with respect by nearly all Hellenes inasmuch as it was of ancient origin (ἅτε παλαιότροπος ῶν), and especially employed by the Egyptians in very subtle ways. Likewise, Pythagoras considered it of great importance if someone carefully and clearly elucidated the meanings and secret conceptions of the Pythagorean symbols, and discerned how much rightness and truth they contained when revealed and freed from their enigmatic form, and when adapted with simple and unadorned teaching for the lofty geniuses of these philosophers, deified beyond human thought

(εἴ τις διαρθρώσειε σαφῶς τὰς τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν συμβόλων ἐμφάσεις καὶ ἀπορρήτους ἐννοίας, ὅσης ὀρθότητος καὶ ἀληθείας μετέχουσιν ἀποκαλυφθεῖσαι καὶ τοῦ αἰνιγματώδους ἐλευθερωθεῖσαι τύπου, προσοικειωθεῖσαι δὲ κατὰ ἁπλῆν καὶ ἀποίκιλον παράδοσιν ταῖς τῶν φιλοσόφων τούτων μεγαλοφυΐαις καὶ ὑπὲρ ἀνθρωπίνην ἐπίνοιαν θεωθεῖσι). (VP 103)

- T 10 When, however, these utterances are explicated in accord with the manner of these symbols, they become splendid and sacred instead of obscure to the many, rather analogous to the prophecies and oracles of the Pythian god. And they reveal marvelous thought, and produce divine inspiration in those scholars who have grasped their meaning . (*VP* 105)
- T 11 On the subject of his wisdom, in a word, let the greatest proof be the commentaries written by the Pythagoreans, containing the truth about all things. They are well-rounded in all other respects, and encrusted with an old-fashioned and ancient style, exuding as it were a bloom not touched by hand. Composed perfectly with heaven-sent knowledge, they are full of most sagacious conceptions, and especially varied and versatile in form and content, remarkably simple and, at the same time, not lacking style, and filled to the utmost with clear and indisputable realities accompanied by scientific and full demonstration, what is called "deductive argument" (πραγμάτων έναργῶν καὶ ἀναμφιλέκτων ὡς ὅτι μάλιστα μεστὰ μετὰ ἀποδείξεως ἐπιστημονικῆς καὶ πλήρους, τὸ λεγόμενον, συλλογισμοῦ). All this, if someone goes through them making use of the proper methods, and is not content with a casual or careless perusal. These commentaries, then, transmit knowledge about the intelligibles and about the gods beginning from first principles. (*VP* 157-158)

#### Epistemic authority in religious matters: the introduction to the Reply to Porphyry

T 12 At the outset, perhaps we should identify the number and types of problem set before us. We should also examine from what theological perspectives the questions are being raised, and demonstrate what are the branches of knowledge according to which they are being pursued.

Some questions, then, call for the clarification of issues which have been wrongly confused, while others concern the reason why various things are the way they are, and are thought of in such a way;

others, again, draw one's attention in both directions at once,

since they contain an inherent contradiction; and still others call for an exposition of our whole mystical system. This being the case, they are taken from many perspectives, and from very various branches of knowledge. Some, in fact, require us to address them on the basis of the traditions of the sages of Chaldaea; others will derive their solution from the teachings of the prophets of Egypt; and others again, which relate to the speculations of the philosophers, need to be answered on that basis. There are also some that, deriving from other opinions not worthy of note, involve one in unseemly controversy, while others are drawn from the common conceptions of men. Each of these problems, then, appear in complex aspects, and are variously related to one another, and for all these reasons demand a mode of exposition which will organise them suitably (3. 22-24 : ὅθεν δὴ διὰ πάντα ταῦτα λόγου τινός ἐστιν ἐπιδεῆ τοῦ κατευθύνοντος αὐτὰ προσηκόντως). (*Reply* I.1, p. 3.1-24 Saffrey)

### Barbarians in the third part of the Reply to Porphyry

T 13 Those documents which circulate under the name of Hermes contain Hermetic doctrines, even if they often employ the terminology of the philosophers; for they were translated from the Egyptian tongue by men not unversed in philosophy. (*Reply* VIII.4, p. 196. 22-26 : τὰ μὲν γὰρ φερόμενα ὡς Ἐρμοῦ ἑρμαϊκὰς περιέχει δόξας, εἰ καὶ τῇ τῶν φιλοσόφων γλώττῃ πολλάκις χρῆται· μεταγέγραπται γὰρ ἀπὸ τῆς αἰγυπτίας γλώττῃς ὑπ' ἀνδρῶν φιλοσοφίας οὐκ ἀπείρως ἐχόντων)

T 14 Hear, therefore, the intellectual interpretation of the symbols, according to Egyptian thought (κατὰ τὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων νοῦν τὴν τῶν συμβόλων νοερὰν διερμήνευσιν):

banish the image of the symbolic things themselves,

which depends on imagination and hearsay,

and raise yourself up towards the intellectual truth ( $\dot{\epsilon}\pi\dot{\iota}$  dè thu uoepau althu éautou éautou éautou éautou). (*Reply*, VII.2, 186.4-8)

T 15 But "why, of meaningful names, do we prefer the barbarian to our own?"

For this, again, there is a mystical reason.

For, since the gods have shown that the entire dialect of the sacred peoples

such as the Assyrians and the Egyptians

is appropriate for religious ceremonies,

for this reason we must understand that our communication with the gods should be in an appropriate tongue.

Also, such a mode of speech is the first and the most ancient.

But most importantly, since those who learned the very first names of the gods merged them with their own familiar tongue and delivered them to us,

as being proper and adapted to these things, forever we preserve here the unshakeable law of tradition. For, whatever else pertains to the gods, it is clear that the eternal and the immutable is connatural with them. (*Reply*, VII.4, p. 190.10-25)

T 16 For the <u>names</u> do not exactly preserve the same meaning when they are translated (οὐδὲ γὰρ πάντως τὴν αὐτὴν διασώζει διάνοιαν μεθερμηνευόμενα τὰ ὀνόματα); rather, there are certain idioms in every nation that are impossible to express in the language of another
(ἔστι τινὰ ×αθ' ἕ×αστον ἔθνος ἰδιώματα, ἀδύνατα εἰς ἄλλο ἔθνος διὰ φωνῆς σημαίνεσθαι).
Moreover, even if one were to translate them, this would not preserve their same power. For the barbarian names possess weightiness and great precision, participating in less ambiguity, variability and multiplicity of expression. For all these reasons, then, they are adapted to the superior beings. (*Reply*, VII.5, p. 191.9-19)

T<sub>17</sub> Far better to understand this:

that since the Egyptians were the first to be granted participation with gods, the gods when invoked rejoice in the rites of the Egyptians. (*Reply*, VII.5, p. 191. 23-26)

#### Conclusions

1. Attributors of authority

- Iamblichus (the author)
- Abamon
- intradiegetic personae: Pythagoras, Porphyry, ...

2. Bearers of authority

- These can be persons or texts, or more generally signs (stories, texts, names, cult elements, rituals).
- We have focused on non-Greek traditions: Egyptians, Assyrians/Chaldeans, Phoenicians, and
- various persons: Pythagoras, Iamblichus, Abamon, Anebo, Porphyry

3. The quality of Q

- The texts (signs) examined here are generally considered to be expressions of truth and wisdom (with some reservations in case certain myths are mere human products or even falsifications).
- The quality varies depending on specific epistemic domains.

4. The epistemic domain for which the attributions of authority are made

- In principle no limitations.
- Pythagoras: Iamblichus attributes a high authority to him in all epistemic domains, and singles out some. The quality of his authority varies across domains.

5. Grounds for the attribution

- direct divine revelation.
- Notions implanted by nature.
- Studies
- Epistemic virtues of the bearer of authority (or the author of an authoritative text), e.g. Pythagoras' intelligence, capacity of discernement, patience, circumspection etc.
- Initiations in mystery cults or religions, e.g. Pythagoras' initiation into the Orphic mysteries.

Threats:

- Problems of transmission.
- Problems of intelligibility (obscurity).

6. The communicative and rhetorical aspect

7. Institutionalising authority: the Pythagorean compendium instrumental for creating a αίρεσις