

## Review

**Sabino PEREA YÉBENES:**

*La idea del alma y el Más Allá en los cultos orientales durante el Imperio romano*

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In this recent publication, Sabino Perea Yébenes brings to his readers a brief study concerning the belief on the salvation and transmigration of the soul in mystical (oriental) religions during the Roman Empire. The book is structured in seven short chapters wherein the author traces a concise look through the beliefs related with the soteriological objectives of oriental creeds, the salvation of the soul after the death of the body and its transmigration to other “vessels”.

The first chapter consists in a sort of introduction, where Sabino Yébenes refers two prominent names in historiography that explored Roman and Greek religions, such as the archaeologist Franz Cumont and the Classics’ professor Walter Burkert, positioned in opposite fields. While Cumont defended the existence of a belief in the transmigration of the human soul associated to some cults as an essential principle of mystical religions, Burkert asserts that is not possible to have an absolute conviction that those cults indicated a collective belief in that concept. In his own reflections about this discussion, Yébenes regards that in the known texts of mystic religions during the Roman Empire, there are no explicit indications about a belief in the immortality of the soul. Regarding this absence of information, the author proposes that it was the secret character of the mystic cults which explains that silence about their rituals. However, the worship

of some deities can give some perceptions about these concepts, and so the following chapters are dedicated by the author to the particular cult of certain goddesses and gods.

The second chapter («Isis, Guardiania del Alma en el Hades Subterráneo y Celeste») is entirely focused on the Egyptian goddess Isis. Yébenes sustains that the most significant information about the worship of Isis is present in the book of Lucius Apuleius, the *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*<sup>1</sup>. This Latin novel, first published in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, is composed by eleven books telling the story of a man, called Lucius, which was transformed into an ass, and of his quest to return to human form. At the eleventh book Lucius prays to the Queen of Heaven to be succeeded in his pursuit. She appears to him with the solution to his problem. However, as he achieves his aim he would be an initiate on the Queen of Heavens' cult through the *Navigium Isidis*<sup>2</sup>. So, in accordance to Apuleius, it is the goddess Isis who is the queen of the celestial sphere.

Sabino Yébenes reasonably questions if this novel text is totally fictional or if the belief on the salvation of the soul among Isis' initiates was a reality. According to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Isis assures that her believers' souls would be immortal in the other world (Hades), advising them that, in order to achieve it, they should practise correctly the demands of the religion. In the goddess' own words, quoted by Yébenes, she was the only one with the power to prolong the existence of a soul beyond what was limited by Destiny. In fact, Isis described herself as the deity that separates Earth and Heaven, and that submits Fate to her will<sup>3</sup>.

Although Apuleius' novel may be considered as a suggestion of a possible belief in the salvation of the souls associated to the worship of Isis during the Roman Empire, Sabino Yébenes highlights that there

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<sup>1</sup> *The Golden ass (Asinus aureus)* is the designation given by St. Augustine to Apuleius' novel.

<sup>2</sup> *Navigium Isidis* is the Roman religious festival in honor to the goddess Isis, instituted by the emperor Caligula. It was celebrated at least until the early 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Perea Yébenes 2012: 20-21.

are other sources connecting the Egyptian goddess to the protection of the souls in Hades and their transmigration to other physical bodies.

The third chapter («Cibelle y Attis») is dedicated to two deities, Cybele and her consort Attis. Cybele was originally an Anatolian goddess associated to the mountains, later integrated on Greek mythology as a mix between the Earth Titaness Gaia, her daughter Rhea and the goddess of harvests, Demeter. These fusions gave place to a general designation of “Great Mother”, as Cybele was currently named among Romans. On this chapter, Yébenes starts to refer the importance of a discourse attributed to emperor Julianus, known as *To the Mother of the Gods*<sup>4</sup>.

Starting with this example, the author makes a brief summary of the story of Attis’ birth, who is saved by Cybele. She falls in love with him and, in an impulse of rage caused by the affection that Attis had for a nymph, attempts to kill him. However, because of her love, Cybele created an annual celebration in honour of her passion and the resurrection of her loved one on winter. In this chapter, the author highlights emperor Julianus’ discourse as the text closer to the perception of the symbolism of Attis’ resurrection, emphasizing the Mother of the Gods as the creator of the souls and the one that rescued Attis from the Hades.

The main idea of the chapter is that although Attis is frequently considered as a shepherd (possibly of human souls) and represented alongside Cybele and other celestial deities, this is not a conclusive proof of the existence of a general belief in the immortality of the soul.

Regarding the fourth chapter («Mythras, (además) Señor de la Bóveda Celeste»), the first approach is the same adopted in the previous ones<sup>5</sup>. Yébenes starts with the reference to an ancient text, *De Abstinencia De abstinencia ab esu animalium* [“On the abstinence

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<sup>4</sup> *Oratio VIII*.

<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 4 there is a blank page, corresponding to number 38, that seems to contain Cumonts’ theories about the relation between Mithras and the Cosmological World (the beginning of the following page mention in the first footnote Cumonts’ book *The Mysteries of Mithra*). Perea Yébenes: 2012: 39.

from eating animals”]<sup>6</sup>, of the Neoplatonic author Porphyry of Tyre. Dedicated to Persian religion, it is highlighted by Sabino Yébenes the Persian priests’ dissection in three groups, being the most important of them the one compounded by those who believed in *metempsychosis*<sup>7</sup>. However, this faith associated with the knowledge of the Mysteries of Mithras was, according to Yébenes, more founded in philosophical principles than in religious ones. This fourth chapter also mentions the Roman text *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* [“Commentary on the Dream of Scipio”] of Macrobius, its approach on the problems of the soul and the astrolatric<sup>8</sup> belief of influence on its immortality, conceptions later prohibited as erroneous by Christianity.

Through this example Yébenes refers to the bound between the deity Mithras, Astrolatry and the Platonic conception of the souls’ immortality related with the cosmological universe, especially with the Sun (represented by the Greek god Helios). The author also mentions the particular example of a representation of Eros, founded in a *Mithraeum* (designation of the places where the several steps to complete the Mysteries of Mithra were realized) in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, southern Italy. The deity is receiving the *psyche*, which can be the mind or soul, of a dead human that seems to be embodied by a female figure in what concerns to the physical attributes<sup>9</sup>. However, the author refers that Merkelbach assumes that the defunct is male since the Mithraism was reserved only to man, which give us the perception that the transmigration of the soul was forbidden to women.

The fifth chapter, entitled «Plutarco» (“Plutarch”), is dedicated to this ancient Greek intellectual. Initiated on the Mysteries of the sun god Apollo, Plutarch was the most important priest of the Delphos’ Oracle of his time, and an imperative name for the transmission of Platonic ideas about the issues related with the soul, such as extra-

<sup>6</sup> *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*, Jean Bouffartigue, M. Patillon, and Alain-Philippe Segonds (eds.), 3 vols., Paris, Budé, 1979-1995); *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, transl. by Gilliam Clark, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000

<sup>7</sup> Transmigration.

<sup>8</sup> Worship of the constellations associated to heavenly deities like the sun and the planets.

<sup>9</sup> This image is present at the end of the book. Perea Yébenes 2012: 61.

corporeal sensorial experiences, death and “almost death” experiences. Again, Yébenes chooses to start his approach to the subject through the reference of a text, this time *De genio Socratis* [“On the Sign of Socrates”]<sup>10</sup>. The author gives the readers a brief synopsis of the book, mentioning the main character, Timarch, and his extra-corporeal sensorial experience that transported him to a celestial dimension between the Earth and the Moon, where the Underworld elements could be found, like the Tartarus and the Styx River, usually placed by mythology beneath the Earth. Timarch is guided on his journey by a voice, assumed to be the Moon, which has a major importance in Plutarch’s work by its association with the moments of birth and death<sup>11</sup>. The Moon, in the writings of Plutarch’s, as denoted by Yébenes, has the attribute of judging the souls. In one side of its surface there is a place for the condemned ones and on the other side a place equivalent to the Christian Paradise, where the good souls rest peacefully.

The role of cosmological aspects, especially of the Moon, in the souls’ journey on the world mirrored on Plutarch’s work is unquestionable. However, Yébenes affirms that this probably has nothing to do with the principles of Mystic religions. Instead, it reflects the interest of Plutarch in the ancient Hellenic paganism and his aspiration to spread Plato’s idea of a celestial origin for all Souls, which descend to Earth and must eventually return to their “birthplace”.

The last thematic part before the final conclusions is dedicated to the philosopher Themistius, whose name entitles this sixth chapter. Yébenes starts it with a reference to a text, the aforementioned Julianus’ *To the Mother of all Gods*. Both Themistius and Julianus were contemporary, friends and followers of the ancient religion.

The main idea in this chapter is related with Themistius’ search for a symbiosis between Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideals about the problematics of the soul. The belief in a celestial origin for all souls is

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<sup>10</sup> *De genio Socratis* is part of Plutarch’s 1<sup>st</sup> century collection entitled *Moralia* [“Morals”].

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch dedicated a part of his *Moralia* to this subject, called *De facie in orbe lunae* [“On the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon”].

present in this symbiosis, just like in Plutarch's work, which, according to the author, comes from the Pythagorean conceptions, since Pythagoras was a true believer of *metempsychosis*. Perea Yébenes also emphasizes in this chapter the renaissance, on Late Antiquity, of the idea (supported by the mystical principles) that the souls have a transcendental nature. The oriental religions were focused on the practice of rituals which improved the purity of the Souls' existence in its vessel life, death and on the "after life". These purification rituals existents during Roman Empire were a syncretism between mystic religion and philosophy adapted to those purposes.

As the title indicates, the last chapter, «Reflexiones Finales» ["Final Remarks"], is a conclusion of the entire book, synthesizing the author's reflections on different deities' cults, by the perspective of the salvation and transmigration of the soul. These concepts, characteristic of the Mystical and Oriental religions, were also present in the Roman Empire, being subject, already in Antiquity, to the scope of ancient authors that contemplated those problems in their works.

The mentioned worship of Isis, of Cybelle, Attis and Mithra were directly connected with a belief on the salvation of the soul, by divine protection or through a path of rituals to achieve purification. The evidence on these beliefs is reflected in iconography and in ancient texts of philosophers, which were presented throughout the book's chapters. However, the author considers that these cults, based on mystical religions, as practiced during the Roman Empire, although related with the concept of the salvation of the human soul, give no evidence, for now, of a common acceptance of its transmigration.

In conclusion, this work offers an introduction to a comparative analysis on the subject of the salvation and transmigration of the soul in Antiquity. By suggesting a deeper insight about its problems, especially resorting to ancient authors and to iconographic sources, Yébenes puts his public in closer contact to this topic, which still has much to explore.