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Donka D. Markus

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Divine love, mediation and the ontological
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Recent scholarship on Hierocles’ Commentary to the *Golden verses* (*In CA*) is split over Hierocles’ position on the question of whether humans remain fixed to their providentially allotted place in the divine hierarchy (Aujoulat and Izdebska)¹ or they can attain ‘assimilation to god’ as per Plato’s *Tht.* 176a-b and regain their ‘original state’ (Plato *R.* 547b) after they die.² There is also disagreement in regard to the degree to which Hierocles made concessions to the Christian perspective on this central Platonic objective with Praechter³ arguing on the side of Christian influence and I. Hadot⁴ proving the homogeneous nature of doctrinal evolution in Hierocles’ Neoplatonism. While Aujoulat and Izdebska do not explicitly return to Praechter’s views, they both highlight and emphasize those passages in Hierocles where he all but negates the fulfillment of the promise of the final verse of the GV’s which says,

if you leave your body behind and reach the free realm of the
ether,

you will be deathless immortal god, not mortal any longer.

(Ps. Pythagorean *Golden Verses* 70-71, tr. Thom 99)

The goal of my paper is to reconsider the dichotomy of these scholarly perspectives and to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the historical and pedagogical reasons for Hierocles’ softening stance in formulating the Platonic ideal of becoming like god. I find that he is not caving in to Christian pressure, but is aligned with Iamblichus’ notion about the fully descended soul, often seen in conflict with the Plotinian non-descended soul. In light of the problematic Iamblichean

¹ Aujoulat (1986); Izdebska (2016)

² O’Meara (1990); I. Hadot (2004)

³ Praechter (1913) col. 1482

⁴ (2004) 99ff

- Plotinian dichotomy⁵ we are in a position to see how Hierocles was influenced by both views and how he blends the boundaries between human and divine through his emphasis on the manifestation of the Platonic ideal in the sage and philosophical teacher. He emphasizes humans' amphibian nature, i.e. their fluctuating and unstable position in the ontological hierarchy which unfolds on a continuum and culminates in the embodied sage whom he makes equal to heroes and *daimones*. Heroes and *daimones* receive an innovative ontological ranking in Hierocles and that innovative ranking, I will argue, has to do with his effort to reconcile traditional views reflected in the *Golden Verses* with the philosophical systems of Plato, Aristotle, Iamblichus and Plotinus.

I. Hierocles' ontological hierarchy

When commenting on the *Golden Verses* that advise

The immortal gods do honor first, as ranked according to law
 Next revere the noble heroes
 and the earth-dwelling (καταχθόνιοι) *daimones*, offering them
 what is their due

(Ps. Pythagorean *Golden Verses* 1-3tr. mine from Thom's edition)

Hierocles finds himself in a difficult dilemma. The order of the living beings in these verses contradicts their order in Plato who placed heroes below the daimonic realm.⁶ This hierarchy, i.e. gods – *daimones* – heroes --- humans, found in the Chaldean Oracles and codified in Iamblichus, remained the standard ontological taxonomy until the end of the tradition.⁷ So Hierocles had to reckon with the ordering of heroes above *daimones* in the *Golden Verses*.

Hierocles uses this contradiction between the GVs and the standard view to make a particular point. He abundantly highlights humanity's potential for attainment of divinity, a potential that is actualized in its most accomplished representative, the sage whom he identifies with the *katakthonios daimon* mentioned in line 2 of the GVs.

⁵ Mazur (2004) 41ff, Finamore (1999) 83-94, and Shaw (1999) 121-143.

⁶ Aujulat (1986) 182; Hadot (1968) 390ff

⁷ Griffin and Olympiodorus (1915) 180 and 22,3

II. Hierocles' perspective on assimilation to god

Those who find Hierocles' adherence to the Platonic ideal of assimilation to god problematic, cite the following passage where he comments on the GV that says:

You will come to know, as is right, nature, alike in everything,
So that you do not expect what is not to be expected...

(*Golden Verses* 52-53, tr. Thom)

Hierocles comments on these lines:

Thus, when we fail to be aware of the substance of things, it turns out that we 'hope what cannot be hoped' and that we ponder impossibilities; for example, when someone, being a human, hopes to become one of the immortal gods or glorious heroes, this person does not understand the limits set by nature nor does he distinguish among the first, second, and last classes of existing beings.

(Hierocles, *In CA* XXIII.8, tr. Schibli)

This passage, however, is embedded into an extensive discussion that needs more careful examination. The human being has a changing nature, but throughout this change, there is an underlying "worth that is its due:"

The human being can be seen as occupying a median position, a kind of amphibian, the last of what exists above, the first of what exists below. Therefore at one time he associates with the immortals and by turning to intellect and virtue assumes his proper lot, but at another time he joins the herd of mortal kinds and by departing from the divine laws fails in the worth that is his due (προσηκούση αὐτῷ ἄξία).

(Hierocles, *In CA* XXIII.3, tr. Schibli, emphasis mine)

The changing nature of the human being notwithstanding, Hierocles emphasizes humanity's potential to attain "the worth that is its due":

As it stands, he is human, and although he is able to be brought to a better state through likeness [to god], by nature he comes below the immortal gods and glorious heroes, seeing that these are the first and middle classes within the cosmos. But just as he

comes below these by not thinking eternally, but occasionally becoming ignorant and forgetful of his own substance and the illumination that descends to him from god, so he excels the irrational creatures and plants because he does not forever remain in ignorance, and he surpasses in his substance all of earthly and mortal nature, seeing that he is naturally constituted to turn to god, to make his forgetfulness disappear by remembrance, to supplement by teaching what he has lost, and to cure his flight from the upper realm by the reverse flight.

(Hierocles, *In CA XXIII.4-5*, tr. Schibli with minor modifications, emphasis mine)

Whatever is lacking in human nature that keeps it from its divine heritage can be supplemented with teaching, according to this passage. It is around the figure of the teacher that Hierocles develops a philosophical and theological scaffolding aimed to resolve the conflict between the rest of the tradition and the GVs. For Hierocles, the GVs are a mouthpiece, a channel of communication between those who have already joined the sacred choir of the *Phaedrus* soul-chariot myth and those who are aspiring to follow in their footsteps:

These verses are nothing other than the most perfect impress of philosophy, a compendium of its more central doctrines, and a basic pedagogical exposition transcribed by those who have already gone up the divine path for those who come after. You could in truth say they are the most beautiful token of human nobility and the memorial of not just one of the Pythagoreans, but of the entire sacred assembly, and, as they themselves would say, an apophthegm common to all of the school.

(Hierocles, *In CA XXVII.11*, tr. Schibli, emphasis mine)

So, at the close of his commentary to the GVs, Hierocles expresses strongly the core Platonic ideal of the divine ascent.

But it is at the beginning of his commentary that he devotes a unique and puzzling section specifically to the ontological status of these divine human beings who lead others on the upward path. He renegotiates the meaning of *katakhthonioi daimones* in the third line of the GVs by associating the term with the enlightened philosophical teachers. He does that by expanding the meaning of the word from its

original sense of spirits of the deceased ancestors in general to make it mean “spiritual ancestors” and guides.⁸

III. Katakthonioi daimones

The immortal gods do honour first, in due order
 Next revere the noble heroes
 and the earth-dwelling (καταχθόνιοι) *daimones*, offering them
 what is their due

(Ps. Pythagorean *Golden Verses* 1-3, tr. mine)

The 3rd line of the *Golden Verses* could be read as a traditional injunction to offer due sacrifices to the recognized noble heroes and to the spirits of one’s dead ancestors. Hierocles, however, interprets *kathachthonios daimon* to mean a philosophical teacher with experience and knowledge of god (the etymological meaning of *daimon* from *daēmon*):

For the designation ‘earth-dwelling *daimon*’ fits no one else than one who is human by nature, but by relation (*skhesis*) has become a *daimon* and is experienced (*daēmon*) and knowledgeable about god.

(Hierocles, *In CA* IV.2, translation mine, cf Schibli 196)

Hierocles asks: “What now is the honour that belongs also to these beings?” (IV.4) and answers his own question by reinterpreting the meaning of sacrifice:

This means to obey the precepts they have left us, to abide by their words as though they were laws, and to pursue the same path of life... To obey these and to live accordingly is for them a more genuine honour than if we were to spend on them the most extravagant libations and expensive funerary offerings.”

(Hierocles, *In CA* IV.2, tr. Schibli)

Hierocles is advocating a more enlightened way of honoring those divine human beings than the libations in traditional worship at the graves of *daimones* and popular heroes. Hierocles views these

⁸ I owe Crystal Addey thanks for this insight.

katakthonoi daimones as spiritual ancestors who have passed down wisdom-teachings to their contemporaries and later generations:

They have traversed this path and do not begrudge us a share of it, but instead they have struggled to preserve it, just like some undying, paternal inheritance for their descendants, by setting down in writing for the common good the basic principles of the virtues and the standards of truth.

(Hierocles, *In CA IV.4*, tr. Schibli)

For him, *katakthonios daimon* is both a spiritual ancestor and an embodied exemplar who has mastered the highest Platonic ideal. These *daimones* (or daēmons) simultaneously live as “citizens on earth, enter earthly bodies, and settle down upon the earth” (IV.1) while exemplifying the viability of the lofty Platonic ideal of becoming like god.

Schibli and Thom⁹ both consider Hierocles’ interpretation of *katakthonoi daimones* as “human souls adorned with truth and virtue” a misinterpretation and distortion of the original meaning, which points to the worship of the ancestors whose spirits dwell below the earth. Hierocles’ mistake according to these commentators is in interpreting *katakthonios* as its opposite, *epichthonios daimones* found in Hesiod:

They are called holy *daimones* dwelling upon the earth (*epikthonoi*),
noble, warders-off of evil, guardians of mortal humans.¹⁰

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 122-3

His interpretation may be erroneous from the viewpoint of the intended archaic meaning in the GVs, but at the same time, his take on the Verse is not idiosyncratic. Porphyry also called “the person energized by the purificatory virtues” divine human being or a good *daimon*.¹¹

The *katakthonios daimon* is human by nature, but *daimon* by assimilation (*skhesis*), a term referring to mobility between ontological levels of being. Similar language comes up in a marginal note to Olympiodorus’ manuscript on the *First Alcibiades* where the annotator puts *daimones* into three classes: analogical (*kat’aitian*), essential (*kat’*

⁹ Schibli (2002) 195 and Thom (1995) 114.

¹⁰ cited in Griffin (2015) 88

¹¹ Porphyry, *Sent.* 32.4.

hyparxin) and finally, relational (*kath'methexin*). The words with which Olympiodorus describes the third class resembles Hierocles' description of the embodied divine human beings for whom he appropriates the traditional term *katakthonios daimon*:

The souls of those who have lived well are called 'daimons' by relation (κατὰ σχέσιν): for instance, the souls of the golden race, which depend upon *daimons*, and which are themselves addressed as 'daimons'. (Olympiodorus, *Commentary to the First Alcibiades* v. 1. 16,1 tr. Griffin)

Hierocles builds on an existing view (if Olympiodorus and his marginal annotator go back to earlier sources) about relational *daimones*. However, for him the *katachthonios daimon* could be a contemporary embodied teacher while Olympiodorus locates the relational *daimones* back into the golden age. In this respect too, Hierocles' interpretation of *katachthonios daimon* seems unique.

So why does Hierocles “misinterpret” this traditional term, as Thom and Schibli noted?

Part of the reason I believe, is that he is not producing a scholarly commentary in the modern sense of the word, but is using the Verses as a reenactment of the spiritual guidance that he finds himself in the flow of. He puts emphasis upon things that his students needed most to advance on the scale of the virtues. The impulse behind his commentary is entirely pedagogical and conveys the following lessons:

1. As per the discussion above, Hierocles stressed that the teachings of the advanced teachers of the tradition who have attained likeness to god had to be lived and applied.
2. The goal of ‘becoming like god’ can be misinterpreted and abused. Therefore it is necessary to emphasize the acquisition of the human virtues as the foundation for acquiring the divine virtues.
3. The tradition is rife with terminological instability and ambiguity concerning the class of the mediators. Instead of engaging in a pedantic effort to sort out the contradictions between Plato et al. and the *Golden Verses*, Hierocles organizes ‘assimilation to god’ around the imperative of following exemplars. Both the heroes and the *daimones* become for him exemplars that point the way for humans to the lofty objective of the Platonic tradition. Thus the

terminological porousness of the inherited ontological ladder plays into his hands and helps his pedagogical message.

I will proceed to elaborate on these pedagogical agendas which, I hope, will help re-contextualize the discussion about Hierocles' approach to the ontological status of humans.

IV. Importance of the human virtues

Throughout his commentary, Hierocles operates with the dichotomy of human vs divine virtue. Given the fact that two-thirds of the GVs dwell on the civic and purificatory virtues, he too emphasizes those:

And so one must become first human, and then god. The civic virtues make the human being good, while the experiences (*epistemai*) leading up to divine virtue make the human god.

(Hierocles, *In CA* Proem 4, tr. Schibli with modifications)

The human – divine ontological continuum is simultaneously scaffolded and porous. Only through complete realization of one's humanity can one attain divinity. One has to become fully human, has to master the human virtues to engage in the experiences or sciences that lead to divine virtue. Hierocles paves the way in this respect for his younger contemporary Proclus for whom becoming like our leading god requires that we "play our parts seriously and well."¹²

Hierocles reiterates the same point later in this commentary as well:

In fact, the exhortation at the beginning, 'respect the oath' [v. 2], affirms most earnestly that human virtue, successfully obtained, prepares the path for likeness to the divine.

(Hierocles, *In CA* XX.9, tr. Schibli, emphasis mine)

Hierocles is affirming the idea of likeness to the divine, but ensuring that human virtue is not overlooked, hence, the stipulation about 'successfully obtained'.

This rootedness in the human virtues is rife with echoes from Aristotle who says that "humans become gods by overflowing

¹² Baltzly (2004) 319.

abundance of virtue (ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γίνονται θεοὶ δι' ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν).”¹³

Hierocles is close to Aristotle¹⁴ for whom the heroic and daimonic realm are attained through human virtue. He formulates this in a way similar to Aristotle:

We will honour none of those inferior to human substance, but we will honor primarily only the classes superior to us by nature as well as those of equal rank, provided they have been adorned with surpassing virtue (ἀρετῆς ὑπεροχή).

(Hierocles, *In CA* III.3, tr. Schibli, emphasis mine)

At the same time, Hierocles is also aligned with Plotinus:

He will leave that [life of civic virtue] behind, and choose another, the life of the gods; for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like.

(Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.7, tr. Armstrong)

Hierocles says:

To gain in addition an experiential knowledge of these beings, about whose honor we have learned earlier from the transmitted text, belongs to those who adorn practical virtue with contemplative truth or exchange a good human condition for divine virtue.

(Hierocles, *In CA* XXII.6, tr. Schibli, emphasis mine)

Aristotle had also said that ‘there are three classes of beings endowed with Intelligence: gods, humans and those like Pythagoras’.¹⁵ Hierocles is also securing a distinct ontological slot for the beings who,

¹³ πρὸς δὲ τὴν θηριότητα μάλιστ' ἂν ἀρμόττοι λέγειν τὴν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ἀρετὴν, ἥρωικὴν τινα καὶ θείαν, ὡσπερ Ὅμηρος περὶ <τοῦ> Ἑκτορος πεποιήκε λέγοντα τὸν Πρίαμον ὅτι σφόδρα ἦν ἀγαθός, “οὐδὲ ἐφάκει ἀνδρός γε θνητοῦ παῖς ἔμμεναι ἀλλὰ θεοῖο.” ὥστ' εἰ, καθάπερ φασίν, ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γίνονται θεοὶ δι' ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, τοιαύτη τις ἂν εἶη δῆλον ὅτι ἡ τῆ θηριώδει ἀντιτιθεμένη ἐξίς· καὶ γὰρ ὡσπερ οὐδὲ θηρίου ἐστὶ κακία οὐδ' ἀρετή, οὕτως οὐδὲ θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ἡ μὲν τιμιώτερον ἀρετῆς, ἢ δ' ἕτερόν τι γένος κακίας. ἐπεὶ δὲ σπάνιον καὶ τὸ θεῖον ἄνδρα εἶναι, καθάπερ οἱ Λάκωνες εἰώθασι προσαγορεύειν, <οἷ> ὅταν ἀγασθῶσι σφόδρα του, θεῖος ἀνὴρ φασιν, οὕτω καὶ ὁ θηριώδης ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις σπάνιος· *Eth. Nic.* VII.1.1.

¹⁴ See Schibli (2010) 448-9,

¹⁵ Rose (1967) fr 192

while human, have attained divine nature (the *katakthonioi daimones*) and serve as instructors and models for others. For Hierocles, the class of the heroes is the closest to the gods and consists of deceased humans while the *katachthonioi daimones* are embodied mediators. Hierocles ends up lumping together all mediators and the criterion along which he lumps them together is their exemplary status. They have actualized qualities that those aspiring to 'likeness to god' strive for.

V. Mediators as exemplars

Hierocles takes uninterrupted love and remembrance of the gods as the main criterion in his ontological ranking of beings. The heroes whom he etymologically links to *eros* (as in Plato *Cra.* 398C) are in a state of constant love and remembrance of the gods:

They are quite rightly called 'glorious heroes': 'glorious' because they are 'good' and forever resplendent and never become evil or forgetful, and 'heroes' because they are, so to speak, 'loving ones', like 'erotics' and 'lovers' of god versed in dialectics, 'raising' us up and bearing us aloft from our sojourn on earth to citizenship with the divine. It is also customary to call them '*good daēmones*' insofar as they are 'experienced' and knowledgeable in the divine laws, and sometimes 'angels' as they bring to light and define for us the guidelines for happiness.

(Hierocles, *In CA* III.7, tr. Schibli)

Later in the same chapter, Hierocles says that the quality that distinguishes humans from non-rational beings is remembrance of the divine, even though human love and remembrance is intermittent and unlike divine love which is constant:

Here one can make an analogy to the third and human class, given its occasional inclination to evil and forgetfulness, on account of which the human being ceases to keep god always in its thoughts. By failing, now and then, to think of god, it falls short of those who think of him always. On the other hand, it comes before the irrational beings by thinking of god at times and by being called to return to a scientific (experiential) knowledge of the divine, when it takes its assigned place in the divine chorus, having fled the malice of the material world and shaken off its mortal attachments.

(Hierocles, *In CA* III. 8-9, tr. Schibli with minor modification)

So assimilation for him is predicated upon love and remembrance which humans are also partially capable of. What distinguishes the different classes, the mediator class from humanity, is the consistency of this remembrance and its duration in time. The gods have engaged in it through eternity while the heroes from a point in time. They are superior to humans because their love and remembrance is more stable than that of humans.

Significantly, he also erases ontological divides by creating a common category for those “who have become worthy of divine acceptance” whether their remembrance and likeness to god stretches back to eternity, or has a beginning in time. Most likely the *katakthonioi daimones*, the spiritual ancestors who live or have lived on earth are among the general category of “beings that in whatever way are like god:”

Therefore one who has become worthy of divine acceptance is then also worthy of honor from us, seeing that he has adorned his natural equality with a superior communion. For it is proper for the lover of god to honor beings that in whatever way are like god, whether they have possessed this likeness from eternity or just have been working at it from some point in time.

(Hierocles, *In CA III. 9*, tr. Schibli)

Here he blurs the distinction between the classes, reducing the various names given to the mediators to a terminological formality. This is also evident from the following passage:

Often we use the three conceptions to divide the expanse of the median class into three, calling the class that borders on the heavenly beings 'angels', the class that connects with the beings on earth 'heroes', and the class that is positioned equidistant from both points 'daemons', as Plato does in many a passage. Others address the whole median class with one of the three names, calling them all 'angels' or 'daemons' or 'heroes', for the reasons we spoke of above. Just so our text has now spoken of the entire median class as 'glorious heroes', who relate towards the first class as a beam of light to the fire and a child to its father. Hence the heroes are also properly hailed as children of the gods, not because they are born from mortal intercourse with the gods, but because they have come forth from a single kind of cause

like a light that naturally accompanies a shining body, through a clear and pure light.

(Hierocles, *In CA* III. 6-8, tr. Schibli)

Both heroes and *katakthonioi daimones* are valuable exemplars to amphibian humans regarding the qualities required to ‘become like god’, i.e. love and remembrance of the divine in a stable unbroken fashion. By bringing heroes closer to the gods and humans closer to the daimonic realm, Hierocles confounds the rigidity of the ontological hierarchy. While heroes are deceased humans who had attained an excess of virtues, *katakthonioi daimones* specifically refer to those advanced beings who still walk or have walked the earth.

Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shed light on the methodological and pedagogical framework that Hierocles himself refers to as the *metron*, the measure that prevented him from extending his commentary on the *Golden Verses* “to encompass all of philosophy.”¹⁶ Hierocles openly says that his Commentary is not a comprehensive metaphysical account¹⁷ and if modern interpreters take it as such, they do so at their own peril.¹⁸ For Hierocles, the verses encompass both practical and theoretical philosophy. His emphasis is on the practical because the commentary was intended for beginners. To be fair to Hierocles, we need to read his *Commentary on the Golden Verses* with context and pedagogical aim in mind. The Christian context is not a decisive force behind his formulation of the Platonic ideal of ‘becoming like god.’ His defiant and brave encounter with the authorities in Constantinople who wanted to bar him from teaching is sufficient evidence that he was willing to continue to teach Platonism even under the threat of torture.¹⁹ We also need to take into account that not all who would receive instruction from the commentary were intending to advance to the deeper contemplative levels that life-long philosophers aspired to. So why initiate them fully into the core Platonic doctrine of “assimilation to god”?

¹⁶ Koehler (1974) XXVII.10

¹⁷ Cf. Schibli (2002) 324 n.18

¹⁸ See Hadot (2015) 77, 96 on Hierocles’ pedagogy-driven simplifications of Platonic principles.

¹⁹ Damascius in Athanassiadi (1999) fr. 45B

Given the constraints of context and pedagogical aim, Hierocles' weak rhetorical formulation of the lofty Platonic ideal of 'assimilation to god' in his interpretation of the last verse of the *Golden Verses* can be explained without casting doubts on his adherence to the Platonic ideal. Hierocles' rhetorical dance around this key Platonic doctrine offers valuable insights into the refined attention to context and audience that 5-6 century Alexandrian Neoplatonists exhibited.²⁰ It also offers a fascinating window into how the Platonic axioms of divine love and mediation underwent some rhetorical modifications and theological adjustments, but remained alive and attuned to the sensitivities and receptivity of a changing audience.

While during this period humanity felt more than ever its low ranking at the bottom of the ontological hierarchy, both Hierocles and his younger contemporary Proclus elevated their philosophical teachers to divine status: Hierocles calls Plutarch of Athens reverentially his *καθηγητή*²¹ and Proclus calls Syrianus *ἡγῆμῶν*.²² In Hierocles, we see tremendous care lavished on carving out an ontologically elevated rank for the earth-dwelling *daimones*, the philosophical teachers who end up subsumed in the category of heroes, the divine lovers, whom he treats as a catch-all category for all mediators uninterruptedly remembering and loving the divine and serving as examples for humans.

Just like his older contemporary Augustine, who waged a terminological warfare in his *City of God*, repurposing traditional Roman ideals like glory and virtue for Christian use, so Hierocles refills many traditional pagan terms with new content repurposing them for his needs in his role as teacher of philosophy in Alexandria. He redefines the term earth-dwelling *daimon* from the *Golden Verses* and bends the ontological hierarchy he inherited to give the philosophical teacher an ontological rank as exemplar for the attainability of the coveted Platonic ideal. As for Proclus in whom "assimilation to the gods takes on a much more human form than it does in Plotinus,"²³ so for Hierocles unfolding the full potential of one's humanity was the prerequisite for the attainment of divinity.

²⁰ For parallels to Olympiodorus, cf. Watts (2006) 234 ff

²¹ Schibli (2002) 6-7.

²² Proclus and Luna and Segonds, eds. (2007) v. 1, p. 2

²³ Baltzly (2004) 319.

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