



Detlef Melsbach (ed.): Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios. Eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays versehen von Nicole Belayche, Robbert M. van den Berg, Adrien Lecerf, Detlef Melsbach und Jan Opsomer. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022 (*Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia* 41). XI, 217 p. € 84.00. ISBN 978-3-16-157667-6.

With the ascension of Julian to the imperial throne 361, Saturninius Salustius Secundus (Salustios) was appointed by Julian *praefectus praetorio orientis*, a bureaucratic title that cast him in the role of the highest political and juridical representative of the emperor. Salustios continued in this role after Julian was killed in 363 under the reigns of Jovian and Valentinian. He was sufficiently respected, at least by the military, to be offered the imperial crown himself after Julian's death. He declined the honor, citing his advanced age. Apart from his apparent administrative competence, his appointment was owing to the fact that he shared with Julian a dedication to the continuation and renewal of the Hellenic culture whose decline was accelerated by the conversion to Christianity of Julian's uncle, Constantine the Great, in 312. Probably in 363, and shortly before the death of Julian, Salustios wrote a short book titled *Περὶ θεῶν* (*On the Gods*). It is to this book that the present work is dedicated. It contains an introduction (Detlef Melsbach: "Einführung in die Schrift", pp. 3–19), a text based largely on the texts of Arthur D. Nock (1926) and Gabriel Rochefort (1960),<sup>1</sup> and a translation (Detlef Melsbach/Jan Opsomer: "Text, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen", pp. 21–65), and four substantial essays situating this work in its historical, philosophical, and literary context.

Although the intended audience for this work is not obvious, it has both an introductory and an apologetic quality. It is not unlike the *Didaskalikos* of Alcinoüs in aiming to summarize many of the various elements of the Hellenic philosophical and theological tradition into a perspicuous summary statement. It is a work frequently referred to as 'Neoplatonic,' although this term seems to me to be used here with little content beyond indicating a rather notional historical period, sometime after the works of Plotinus,

1 A. D. Nock (ed.): *Sallustius, Concerning the Gods and the Universe*. Edited with Prolegomena and Translation. Cambridge 1926; G. Rochefort (ed.): *Saloustios, Des Dieux et du monde*. Texte établi et traduit. Paris 1960 (Collection des universités de France. Série grecque – Collection Budé 144).

Porphyry, and Iamblichus. By the middle of the fourth century, Platonism had eliminated virtually all other Hellenic philosophical schools from the field. Self-declared Platonists had only living Platonists and dead non-Platonists to refute, in particular in their exegesis of Platonic texts and, with increasingly intense focus, the integration of Plato's philosophy with the tradition of religious literature. Probably beginning with Porphyry (234–c. 305), however, Platonists realized that the implacable enemy of Platonism as the paradigmatic expression of Hellenic culture was Christianity. Salustios's work, whether it was commissioned by Julian or not, was surely intended as a tool in the defense and reinvigoration of Hellenic religion and culture.

In a series of ninety or so brief paragraphs (some only one sentence in length), Salustios sets forth the main tenets of the common core of Hellenic religion: the gods exist, they are provident, although unchangeable, the cosmos is everlasting, and our optimal communication with the gods is via prayers and animal sacrifices. The inescapability of divine providence and retribution for wrongdoing is guaranteed by the immortal nature of the soul. In particular, divine retribution is facilitated by metempsychosis. Salustios rarely elaborates on these traditional claims, more or less acknowledging the introductory nature of the work and assuring the reader that sophisticated defenses of Hellenic theology are in fact widely available. He refers to a "unique primary cause" (τὴν πρώτην ἀτάλαντον), which within a Platonic context must be the Idea of the Good or the One. Of crucial significance is his inference that *all* the gods must be subordinate to this first principle. This implicit subsumption of theology – civic theology at any rate – under metaphysics is, I suppose, one of the unbridgeable gaps felt to exist by pagans in relation to Christianity.

The essay by Adrien Lecerf ("Salustios' Schrift als Propagandadokument", pp. 69–113) focuses on establishing the *genre* of *On the Gods*. As Lecerf notes, the treatise appears to have two distinct audiences in mind: (1) those who are not apt for complex argument, but who could benefit from a concise and authoritative summary statement of Hellenic wisdom in regard to the gods and (2) those who are somewhat more sophisticated and require further argument in order to remove apparent inconsistencies in the basic theology. For example, if the gods are unchanging or immovable, how can they be in charge of rewards and punishments for the virtuous and the wicked? Lecerf explores Salustios's treatment of "atheists" (ἄθεοι), who are not to be identified with those "who say that the gods do not exist" (θεοὺς μὴ

εἶναι λέγουσιν), but with those who deny the traditional Greek gods. These would, of course, include the Christians, whom Salustios does not name explicitly, but whom he surely means to include. These are the ones who are not so far gone that they do not even recall having had a traditional education, something which they have or are inclined to have abandoned. In contrast to the polemics of Julian himself, Salustios emphasizes the reasonableness of the old and the irrationality of the new. The mid fourth century was at least in the Byzantine Empire a transitional period not just politically but in the content of education. As mentioned above, I think Lecerf is right to claim that Salustios's strategy aims to show that his opponents do not have an enlightened metaphysics (i. e., Platonism) within which to situate their theology. Accordingly, they are driven to wild and unsupportable dogmas. He is probably also correct to pick out Salustios's reliance on Iamblichus for a defense of theurgy as the appropriate currency for human-divine communication. In addition, Salustios, in collaboration with Julian, was also interested in the purifying of traditional ritual, rationalizing it on the basis of a philosophical theology and a critical representation of traditional myths.

A fundamental issue only briefly touched on by Lecerf is that Platonism was losing to Christianity in part because of the elitism of the former and the mass appeal of the latter. Salustios aimed to infuse his treatise with just enough philosophy in order to persuade ordinary, intelligent readers of the superiority of the Hellenic legacy without alienating them and driving them into the arms of those who preached an intellectually accessible *gospel*. One of his tactics was to argue for the essential goodness of the universe owing to the first principle of all, something that by this time Christians themselves wanted to do in separating themselves from various Gnostic heresies.

Lecerf's conclusion is in effect that there is so much going on in this treatise that it is impossible to fit it into one classical genre. Salustios is trying to present philosophy, myth, and general cultural knowledge to various audiences who no doubt read this work with widely differing concerns. Perhaps if Julian had lived longer, Salustios would have written more in defense of what was in hindsight a doomed cause.

Jan Opsomer's chapter ("Spuren einer wissenschaftlichen platonischen Theologie in Salustios' *De deis*", pp. 115–138) focuses on the Platonic theological basis of the *On the Gods*. He shows clearly that Salustios has constructed a theological primer set within a comprehensive Platonic framework. Plato's tripartitioning of the soul with the attendant doctrine of virtue,

his arguments for the immortality of the soul, the everlasting creation of the universe by the demiurge, and the lives of the pantheon of gods are all referenced in the treatise. Opsomer's central claim is that *On the Gods* reflects a systematic Platonic theological tradition, in all likelihood best represented for Salustios in the now lost theological writings of Iamblichus. I find problematic his argument that what Salustios identifies as "the first god" (ὁ πρῶτος θεός) is by Salustios conflated with "the first cause" (τὴν πρώτην αἰτίαν). For in section 5.1 of the treatise, Salustios seems to clearly distinguish these. There is, of course, a well known Middle Platonic doctrine that conflates the first principle of all with the demiurge, but this seems to me to accord neither with Plato nor with Platonism from Plotinus onward. And even though the honorific "god" or "divine" is occasionally used within the later Platonic tradition for the first principle of all, the religion of Platonism does not incorporate this principle into the discussion of all the issues pertaining to human-divine interaction that Salustios is concerned to address. It is certainly true that the first principle of all needs to be integrated into theological analysis and argument for Platonists, but this is so precisely because the Platonists do not view the first principle of all as a part of religion, or at least the civic religion that Salustios and Julian were so eager to promote. If Salustios really believed that the Idea of the Good could be invested with the properties that he attributes to the Olympian pantheon, he surely would have emphasized this as an antidote to the emotionally compelling Christian story of the first principle of all as a person. I find Opsomer's references to Proclus not particularly persuasive in this regard even if in some sense Proclus does identify theology and metaphysics mainly because the theology Proclus develops, especially in the six volumes of his *Platonic Theology* is rather far removed from the Hellenic religion defended by Salustios. This seems to me to be true even if Salustios tells us that there is a sophisticated philosophical theology undergirding his discourse on the gods. The remainder of the chapter contains Opsomer's many acute observations on the rationale employed by Salustios in providing an "ordering" (τάξις) of the gods. This ordering is no doubt intended to be reflected in religious practices.

The chapter by Nicole Belayche ("Kommunikationsformen zwischen Göttern und Menschen", pp. 139–170) focuses on Salustios's account of the appropriate interactions between humans and gods, a topic of particular importance in the light of the fact that Christians were successfully promoting

a vastly different account. The problem that Belayche sees Salustios addressing is how there can actually be *any* communication between human beings and unchanging gods. For Salustios, the central activity for achieving communication with the divine is ritual (θρησκεία). The goal of all ritual is “to attach” (συνάπτειν) ourselves to the gods and the gods to us. The lack of symmetry here is patent. We can attach ourselves to the gods perhaps through our devotional practices, but there is no guarantee that the gods will – or how they will – attach themselves to us. The rational grounds for optimism about the results of ritual is that the gods have already given us everything, in which case the appropriate and certainly long established analysis of these divine gifts should provide us with the requisite tools for the continuation of divine favor. The appeal to material symbols or concrete natural items such as stones or minerals is to put us in mind of divine bounty and to allow us to think along the lines according to which the gods providentially managed the cosmos. As Belayche indicates, this is evidently the point of animal sacrifice as an indispensable addition to prayer and the employment of symbols. Our success in prayers and sacrifices is our redemption, not via intercession from unchanging gods, but via our own re-establishment of connection with them. The gods have no need for our offerings; they are entirely tools of our own spiritual healing. Belayche aptly cites Varro who distinguishes three types of *theologia*: natural (philosophical), mythical, and civic. Salustios evidently saw his task as uniting these for the purpose of preserving his own culture.

The final chapter by Robbert M. van den Berg (“Salustius’ Composite Theory of Myths”, pp. 171–196) is devoted to the analysis of Salustios’s complex theory of myth. Salustios was acutely aware that the heart of his case for Hellenism rested at least in part on the ancient myths that infused its culture. Homer and Hesiod and the Orphic poet were irreplaceable as pillars of an ancient and dominant cultural legacy. Salustios, like all Platonically inspired authors, takes Plato’s critique of myth as his starting point. As van den Berg shows, Salustios draws on Plotinus, Porphyry, and, above all, Iamblichus in situating the use of myth within a more comprehensive philosophical framework. That is, myths contain truths that are otherwise inaccessible to all but the most advanced thinkers. Theurgy is the commensurating device, so to speak. For rituals are available and beneficial to all. And for most people, myth helps understand their value. For Salustios, myths absolutely do not exclude philosophy; they magnify its results, especially for

the many. Against the polemic of Colotes, according to whom myths are pointless because philosophers do not need them and ordinary people cannot understand them, Salustios says in effect that this is false because ordinary people can and should appeal to philosophers to explain the myths. As van den Berg shows in a careful analysis of Salustios's typology of myth – theological, cosmic (or physical), and a mixture of the two – he follows the basic architecture of late Platonic metaphysics in correlating particular myths with divine and human interactions. Van den Berg ends by speculating that the elaborate analysis by Salustios of types of myth and their value in enriching Hellenic religion may actually be an original contribution of his. Although Iamblichus is a more likely source, Salustios's use of this material is impressive, especially given the rather modest scope of his project.

Altogether, this is a very useful introduction to a valuable document in Late Antiquity. There are so many complex issues only touched on in this book that the reader will no doubt want to consult the comprehensive bibliography for directions on further reading.

---

Lloyd P. Gerson, University of Toronto  
Department of Philosophy  
Professor  
lloyd.gerson@utoronto.ca

**www.plekos.de**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Lloyd P. Gerson: Rezension zu: Detlef Melsbach (ed.): *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios*. Eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays versehen von Nicole Belayche, Robbert M. van den Berg, Adrien Lecerf, Detlef Melsbach und Jan Opsomer. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022 (*Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia* 41). In: *Plekos* 25, 2023, S. 569–574 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2023/r-melsbach.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

---