

OXFORD STUDIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan-Christian Debate



MICHAEL BLAND SIMMONS

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Late Antiquity*

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Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity

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Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity
Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan-Christian Debate
Michael Bland Simmons

Dedicated to My Beloved Wife
MARÍA ANTONIETA RUIZ SIMMONS
“Tu eres ‘La Cosita’ de mi corazón.”

De las sierras morenas, Cielito Lindo, vienen bajando
Un par de ojitos negros, Cielito lindo, de contrabando
Una flecha en el aire, Cielito Lindo, tiró Cupido
Él la tiró jugando, Cielito Lindo y a mí me ha herido.
De tu casa a la mía, Cielito Lindo, solo hay un paso
Ahora que estamos solos, Cielito lindo, dame un abrazo
Ay, ay, ay, ay canta y no llores
Porque cantando se alegran, Cielito Lindo, los corazones

Preface

*"There must be some way out of here,"
Said the joker to the thief,
"There's too much confusion,
I can't get no relief."*

Bob Dylan,
All Along the Watchtower

Universal salvation—the offer of deliverance for all regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity, economic status, and intellectual aptitude from present or impending dangers, or the promise of safety procured by various ceremonies or rituals dedicated to a deity—is normally attractive, but especially when unprecedented crises threaten the very existence of an individual, group, or nation, and traditional rites and ideologies do not adequately answer new questions being posed or meet real or perceived needs. This book deals with Porphyrian soteriology, or the concept of the salvation of the soul in the thought of Porphyry of Tyre, the disciple of Plotinus, whose significance for Late Antiquity was summed up years ago by one of the greatest scholars of ancient Greco-Roman religious culture, Arthur Darby Nock: "For the study of the paganism of the third century of our era no writer is more important than Porphyry."¹ More recently he has been referred to as "a prototype of what we now call a historian of religion."²

Porphyry's concept of salvation is important for an understanding of those cataclysmic forces, not always theological, that caused the greatest transformation in antiquity when Europe and the Mediterranean were converted from paganism to Christianity.³ Andrew Smith has already shown the centrality of soteriology in Porphyry's works: "One word which dominates his thought is σωτηρία, the salvation of the soul."⁴ Elizabeth Digeser has analyzed the relevant texts from the Christian apologists Eusebius, Arnobius, and Lactantius, concluding that each one of these contemporary authors responded to

Porphyry's "associating Christian pollution and the abrogation of traditional cult with harms to the Roman polity."⁵ The Neoplatonic philosopher was the last and greatest anti-Christian writer to vehemently attack the Church before the Constantinian Revolution.⁶ His contribution to the pagan-Christian debate on universalism during the critical period of the last decades of the third century can thus help the ancient historian, Patristics scholar, philosopher, church historian, and the Roman historian to get a better understanding of both the failure of paganism on the one hand, and the triumph of Christianity on the other. In a broader historical and cultural context this study will address some of the issues central to the debate on universalism, or *the universal salvation of humankind*, in which Porphyry was passionately involved and which, I argue, was becoming increasingly significant during the unprecedented series of economic, cultural, political, and military crises of the third century in the Greco-Roman world;⁷ and these, in turn, had an indelible impact upon developing Mediterranean spirituality,⁸ particularly nuanced in the poignant conflict between Christianity and other salvation cults, and a growing perception during this critical period, when life was difficult for both the elite and the disenfranchised and hurting masses of the Late Roman Empire, that Christianity was the only authentic way of salvation for all people.⁹ Unprecedented empire-wide problems causing disunity and threatening the very survival of the imperial infrastructure were urgently requiring a political program of universal crises-management conducive to unification. In light of this, Porphyry's historical context is important both for the history of Christianity and of the Roman Empire: Between A.D. 260–300, the apex of the crises of the Empire,¹⁰ when the Christian Church¹¹ was apparently experiencing exponential growth due to the "Peace of Gallienus,"¹² this perception that Christ alone offered universal salvation regardless of one's social, economic, gender, class, racial, age, and even moral status was an increasingly attractive component that gave it the edge in its competition with all the other salvation cults of the empire, leading, first, to the Constantinian Revolution,¹³ then culminating in the eventual acceptance of Nicene Orthodoxy by around 400 owing to the Theodosian policies that made the latter official and paganism¹⁴ illegal.¹⁵ Cumulatively, these events laid a foundation for the success of Christianity centuries later. It was not therefore the case that Christianity saved the beleaguered empire of the third century, but rather the third century in a true sense might have saved Christianity; or to put it differently, Christian soteriology was the best equipped of all the religious cults of the period to provide an efficient *crisis-management* ideology. When the concept of Christ the *via salutis animae universalis* met face-to-face with the crises of the third century, the Christians took full advantage of a series of events that had been

set into action by the religious programs of the emperors of the third century, which culminated in the inevitable success of the Church in the Roman world, owing principally to the fact that none of the other religious cults or philosophical sects of the period contained such a *crisis-management* soteriology.

Scholars for many years have posited a dual soteriology in Porphyry's works.¹⁶ First, there is one way of salvation for the (Neoplatonic) philosopher, which is analyzed below. For a vast majority of human beings, however, who are uneducated and thus not possessed with the intellectual aptitude for philosophy, theurgy¹⁷ enables them to cleanse the lower or spiritual part of the soul and experience a temporary period in a lower ontological realm in the afterlife, most probably the Ethereal level,¹⁸ until the soul returns to earth and is reincarnated into another human body for the sole purpose of learning its evils, ideally experiencing the philosophical way of salvation, and all the salvific benefits appertaining thereunto.¹⁹

In addition to the philosophical and theurgical ways to salvation, however, Porphyry also posited what I refer to as a *third way* for the salvation of the soul.²⁰ In this book—the first ever on this subject²¹—I shall argue that although Porphyry failed to find one way of salvation for all humanity, as Augustine informs us,²² he nonetheless arrived at a hierarchical soteriology, something natural for a Neoplatonist, which resulted in an integrative system based on religious and philosophical paganism and offered in a sense universal salvation, according to which stage on the ascending scale one belongs as the result of one's choice.²³ Even as far back as 1913 the Belgian scholar Bidez could refer to the author of the *Philosophia ex oraculis* (Porphyry) as one committed “a prêcheur une religion universelle.”²⁴ Smith has correctly described Porphyrian soteriology as a *tiered approach* in which the “divine operates at different levels and each level has its appropriate form of worship,”²⁵ and a recent work argues that Porphyry “claims to have discovered a *via universalis*” in the *Philosophia ex oraculis*.²⁶ By using Porphyry's own definition of universalism found in *De civitate dei* X, I shall analyze the structure and function of his soteriology in the context of his intensive research for the one universal way for the salvation of the soul, how the Neoplatonic *scala virtutum* of *Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes* xxxii formed the philosophical basis of his system, and the *Ad Marcellam* was written for the purpose of indoctrinating novice philosophers into the basic teachings of the second soteriological tier for novice philosophers. In this study I reevaluate the contents and the chronology of the *Philosophia ex oraculis* to show in the last section how Porphyry's soteriological paradigm is best understood in the context of developing universalist ideologies, which were used by the emperors as agents of political and religious unification during a period of unprecedented imperial crises. Christianity finally triumphed over its

competitors owing to its being perceived to be the only universal salvation cult that was capable of bringing about this unification. In short, it won due to its unique universalist soteriology.

I further argue that Porphyry studied under Origen at his theological school in Caesarea, and it was there that he was first exposed on a grand scale to the theological and exegetical teachings of the great Alexandrian theologian on soteriological universalism from a Christian perspective. Porphyry's time spent at Origen's school helped to lay a solid ideological foundation for his future investigations into the possibility of a *via salutis animae universalis* for religious and philosophical paganism during a period when both were in decline and all of the crises of the third century were being blamed upon the Christians. During the 260s this interest in finding a way of salvation for the masses was intensified by the idealistic concept of *Platonopolis*, the city of philosophers, and by the need to find a connecting link or conveyor that might enable individuals to "move up" the traditional Neoplatonic *scala virtutum*. It will also be made clear in the pages that follow that Porphyry never abandoned his interest in the traditional cults and how they played a role in his "ascending scale" soteriological paradigm.

From A.D. 260–300, Porphyry became concerned (so I argue) about the unprecedented institutional and numerical growth of the Church resulting from the Peace of Gallienus, and early in this period began a lengthy process of research, reflection, and writing whose dual purpose was (1) to demonstrate the false claims of Christian soteriological universalism and (2) to construct a pagan counterpart to the latter that offered various ways of salvation (purification) for the souls of individuals based upon their specific spiritual and ontological levels. In accomplishing these two goals, Porphyry believed that Christianity would lose its attraction as a universal saving cult and religious and philosophical paganism would be revitalized. I suggest that during the decades between 270–300, Porphyry wrote a trilogy on pagan soteriology: the *De regressu animae* (c. the late 290s), the *Contra Christianos* (c. 300), and *De philosophia ex oraculis* (c. 302). The first work in this trilogy (*De regr. an.*) represents Porphyry's first attempt at designing a soteriological counteroffensive by offering two distinct ways for the salvation/cleansing of the soul: one by means of theurgy to purify the spiritual soul, and the other by Neoplatonic philosophy to purify the intellectual soul.

By the beginning of the fourth century, Porphyry had modified his soteriological system sufficiently enough to incorporate another way for the cleansing of the lower soul by means of the virtue of continence, which enabled especially novice philosophers (among whom were his wife Marcella and her colleagues) to wean themselves from the soul's attachment to corporeal reality and begin its

focus upon the intelligibles. Augustine's undeniable reference to this *via salutis* is corroborated by such Porphyrian works as *Sententiae*, *Ad Marcellam*, and as I shall argue below, Book II of the *De philosophia ex oraculis*.²⁷ This second tier within Porphyry's soteriological paradigm enabled the novice philosopher to move up the Neoplatonic *scala virtutum* and thus from the civic to the exemplary virtues. The third tier or final way of salvation was reserved for the mature Neoplatonic philosopher.

In light of the aforementioned outline of the main points of the argument developed in this book, and turning now to the individual chapters, chapter 1, "Porphyry of Tyre: Life and Historical Contexts" places Porphyry in his original Phoenician and ultimately his broader Greco-Roman cultural and historical contexts, noting particularly the Semitic milieu and that Phoenicia was not only a crossroads for cultural exchange, but also a melting pot where East converged with West. It is furthermore accentuated, after a careful analysis of the Greco-Roman and Semitic religious background of Tyre, where Porphyry was reared, that this city provided him a seedbed where his ideals of a *via salutis animae universalis* were cultivated, and this cosmopolitan *Weltanschauung* was made possible by the universal empire established by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. The ancient religious traditions of both Semites and Greco-Romans produced a rich and varied complex of ritual, myth, and belief during the Hellenistic Age (323–30 B.C.), which positively impacted the multifaceted ideology related to civic and personal views of σωτηρία/*salus* bestowed upon the towns, villages, and cities of the Mediterranean world. It is important to note here my argument that Porphyry attended Origen's exegetical and theological school in Caesarea where he received a sound foundation in biblical theology and exegesis, hermeneutics, the importance of virtue for the religious life, and his first exposure on a grand scale to Christian views on soteriological universalism. The tradition that states that Porphyry was a Christian at some time during his youth coheres well with the plausible period of study at Origen's school.²⁸

His further studies at Athens under Longinus and other prominent teachers laid the foundation for his eventual reputation as a polymath: Eunapius informs us that no branch of learning was neglected, but especially the science of literary and philological criticism, which was refined in the 260s at Plotinus' Neoplatonic School in Rome. And the latter's concept of a city of philosophers called *Platonopolis*, though it never materialized, certainly provided Porphyry with the necessary inspiration to sharpen his inquisitive mind and to continue his search for knowledge and ultimate spiritual meaning. The Plotinian ethos was not an elitist system for philosophers only, as we can indisputably show in Plotinus' care for children and adults who might not have an aptitude for philosophy in

the strict sense. Platonopolis was to be a city where philosophers lived with bakers, carpenters, unskilled laborers, and their wives and children, and the Platonic *scala virtutum* will have offered some sense of σωτηρία/*salus* or a true sense of *spiritual safety* for all residents according to their spiritual and ontological levels of existence. The entire complex of philosophical and religious concepts formed the ideological basis and spiritual inspiration for what eventually became a decades-long search for a universal way for the salvation of the soul.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the unenviable task of contextualizing Porphyry's works with a keen sensitivity to the central theme of his entire literary corpus—the salvation of the soul (Bidez, A. Smith, Digeser, Simmons), which, it must be made clear here, for the ancient Platonic philosopher meant the *purification of the soul*. This soteriological interest spanned most of Porphyry's career as an author and is the best compass for understanding the composite picture of his apparently diverse and disparate religious, theological, and philosophical writings. In this trailblazing chapter, the Wolff-Bidez hypothesis is both analyzed and rejected as spurious. This posits that all of the religious and superstitious works should be dated to Porphyry's pre-Plotinian period; and the philosophical works should be dated to the post-Plotinian period. One of the weaknesses of this chronology is its insensitivity to the age in which Porphyry lived and wrote most of his works, the unprecedented crises of the third century, which was characterized by the convergence of a keen interest in oracular revelation with philosophical inquiry. As one who came under the influence of this cultural confluence, Porphyry sought a universal way for the soul's salvation during the last decades of the century, which, in turn, had a direct influence on the political and social ambience leading up to the Great Persecution. Having failed to find one way of salvation for everyone including philosophers and the uneducated alike, Porphyry worked out a brilliant soteriological system that provided three distinct ways: one for the uneducated by means of the traditional cults and theurgy; the second by means of the virtue of continence; and the final way for the mature Neoplatonic philosopher.

We find snippets of this developing theology of the soul's purification for all people in what I call Porphyry's Soteriological Trilogy: The *De regressu animae* (c. 290s), which offered two distinct ways; the *Contra Christianos* (c. 300), which most probably had the central theme of disproving the doctrine that Christ was the *via salutis animae universalis*; and the *De philosophia ex oraculis* (c. 302), which offered the three ways noted as a proactive, positive soteriological system that resulted from Porphyry's attendance at Diocletian's conference whose objective was the creation of a plan for persecuting the Christians. This last component of the trilogy aimed at supporting Diocletian's attempt to revitalize religious paganism. It should be noted here that the conventional chronology

for the two “bookends” of this soteriological trilogy is reversed: I argue that the *De regr. an.* was written some years *before* the *Phil. orac.* was written, and not afterward.

Chapter 3 gives a detailed analysis of the soteriological structure and contents of *De philosophia ex oraculis*, showing how Gustavus Wolff’s thematic classification of each of the three books (1. Gods; 2. Demons; 3. Heroes), as Busine has already observed, is totally arbitrary, and a fresh appraisal is necessary. I thus show that many of the books designated per theme by Wolff are not supported by the evidence found in the fragments collected by Andrew Smith, and a new classification according to the tripartite soteriology of Porphyry coheres much better with the evidence. Hence the conclusion that Book I’s theme was the first way of salvation; Book II’s, the second way; and Book III’s, the third way. Supplementary data derived directly from Smith’s fragments primarily related to the salvific benefits of theurgy are further analyzed to show the weakness of the argument (e.g., Beatrice, A. Johnson, G. Clark²⁹) that the *Phil. orac.* was written only for a very small and elitist group of philosophers.³⁰

Chapter 4 addresses a question which has never been asked: Did Porphyry address Christian soteriological universalism in the fifteen books of the *Contra Christianos*? In an attempt to contextualize universalism themes in the CC a list of Christian authors who are relevant for this great anti-Christian work are placed in chronological order, and the reader is then taken from the first writer to respond to Porphyry, Arnobius, to the late medieval works which either allude to or cite Porphyry. My conclusion is that although the present evidence cannot give us a clear picture as to the details of the structure and content of the CC, enough evidence can be gleaned from the works of such authors as (e.g.) Arnobius, Eusebius, Lactantius, Jerome, and Didymus the Blind to suggest that universalism may indeed have played a central role in the polemical argument of the CC.

In chapter 5 I exhibit the pioneer spirit by entering the *terra incognita* of Eusebius’ last apologetic work, the *Theophany*, and make some unprecedented connections between this work and Porphyry’s soteriological universalism.³¹ Since only seventeen fragments from the original Greek text have survived and the complete is extant in an early fifth century Syriac translation, I exegete several representative passages to show that Eusebius, reflecting upon the tremendous transition which occurred in the Roman Empire between Diocletian and Constantine and having been an eye-witness of the Great Persecution in the East, develops a heightened triumphalism undergirded by a nuanced soteriological universalism. In the case of Book V, it is evident that Eusebius has reworked and theologically modified passages derived from the original *Demonstratio evangelica* and inserted in each one ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢܐܘܪܐܝܐ, or *Universal*

Savior, to demonstrate to his readers in the post-Constantinian period (I date the text to c. 337–8) that Jesus Christ is the one universal savior for all peoples in the Roman world regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and intellectual aptitude. Many passages in the *Theophany* presuppose a Porphyrian connection, and the passage in V.3 which alludes to the *فلاسفة الجدد* or *New Philosophers*, has ideological parallels with the *virī novi* of Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* II.15 and the *τῶν νέων* of Eusebius, *PE* III.6, and is placed in the group of fragments of the *De philosophia ex oraculis*. It is hoped that this chapter in particular will help shed new light on the place of the *Theophany* in the Eusebian corpus, the conflict/dialogue between pagan and Christian intellectuals in the fourth century, and in a much broader context the religious and philosophical developments of Late Antiquity.

Painting with broad strokes on my historical canvass in chapter 6, I delineate with the support of a great many data from inscriptions and archaeological works the general notions of *salvation* from a Greco-Roman pagan perspective, laying here a foundation that I build upon in later chapters when Porphyry's concept of the purification of the soul becomes the focus of attention. The evidence indicates that pagans prayed for the same kinds of assistance from their gods that Christians emphasized in their prayers, for example deliverance from dangers, good health, an abundance of food, success in one's business, safety in an unstable and unpredictable environment, victory in war, and many other real or perceived needs. By classifying the epigraphic data around the general themes of salvation from, for, in, and beyond the world, I show how representative pagan cults of the late third and early fourth centuries offered various ways to meet the spiritual and material needs of their adherents. The conventional wisdom claiming that traditional Roman religion was devoid of any means to provide for what often is called individual or personal experiences of salvation or *salvific blessings* is shown to be without support from the evidence; nor were the traditional cults on the whole as formal, detached, and mechanical as hitherto assumed. The same can be said concerning a strong interest in eschatology. It has been often assumed that there was not a keen interest in the afterlife in traditional Roman religion, but I show that there is evidence for this during the Regal Age of Rome (753–509 B.C.). The eastern mystery religions simply added to this eschatological substratum by offering an emotional appeal, a sense of worth for the individual, and a personal spiritual rebirth by means of an initiation rite. Motivated by an acute interest to find a way of salvation for the common masses, Porphyry incorporated this rich complex of religious concepts and practices for the first way of his tripartite soteriology.

Chapter 7 contains an analysis of *De philosophia ex oraculis*. Opposing again conventional wisdom, I suggest that Porphyry's *De regressu animae* was written

before the *Phil. orac.*, and the latter was a product of the events preceding the Great Persecution. The philosopher who dined at Diocletian's court and was mentioned by Lactantius was undoubtedly Porphyry, and not only is the work to which he alludes the *De philosophia ex oraculis* in three books, but the thematic structure of each book has been long overdue for a critical evaluation. The reason for this reevaluation of the contents of this important work on oracular revelation is due to the fact that a vast majority of scholars have uncritically accepted the arbitrary classification proposed by Gustavus Wolff: Book I concerned the gods; Book II, the demons; and Book III, the heroes. I show that only twenty-six of the fifty-eight extant fragments of the *Phil. orac.* can be indisputably identified as deriving from a named book; and more that 55% of the fragments cannot be so designated. After a careful analysis of the fragments, I suggest that the thematic classification should now be: Book I: Salvation of the Soul for the Common Masses; Book II: Salvation of the Soul for the Novice Philosopher; and Book III: Salvation of the Soul for the Mature Neoplatonic Philosopher. The *Phil. orac.* was thus the closest that paganism ever came to providing a proactive soteriological universalism during a period when the traditional cults needed revitalization and Christianity was becoming increasingly attractive.

Chapter 8 analyzes Porphyry's soteriological system synthetically by showing how he incorporated (a) the traditional Platonic doctrine on the tripartite nature of the soul (appetitive, spirited, rational), (b) the four virtues of his *scala virtutum* (political, purificatory, contemplative, exemplary), and (c) the three paths of salvation that he developed (for the uneducated masses, novice philosophers, mature philosophers). This three-path soteriology is then contrasted with that of Iamblichus, who interestingly posited three classes of souls (the herd, the median class, which is further subdivided, and the noetic class) in *De mysteriis* V.18, existing at different spiritual and ontological levels whose members, in turn, require a corresponding type of theurgical ritual for their salvation. I suggest that the rift that developed between Porphyry and Iamblichus most probably occurred before the latter left Rome for Syria to start his own school, it centered on the salvific importance of theurgy as opposed to philosophy, and the sparks began to fly in specifically how souls in the median class (Porphyry's Path II group) can receive purification: Porphyry stressed philosophy through discursive thought, and Iamblichus concluded that theurgical ritual was salvifically efficacious for all three classes. These serious disagreements about the process of temporal salvation led to even more dramatic conflicts over eschatological salvation which is the theme of chapter 9.

In this chapter I first give an overview of the eschatological myths found in Plato's *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Laws*, and the *Republic*, especially the latter's

Myth of Er. While modern scholars often ignore completely or downplay the importance of eschatology in Platonism as a whole, but specifically Neoplatonism as a later development of it,³² I argue that the eschatological myths were accepted by the Neoplatonists as stories that contained truths about the afterlife. In other words, Neoplatonists from Plotinus to Olympiodorus believed in these myths, and recent studies continue to ignore this fact.³³ Like Plato, they were taken seriously, though not all Neoplatonists had the same interpretation of stories like Er's out-of-body experience in the underworld. Very generally I then give an overview to the reception history of these eschatological doctrines in the thought of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus, showing also, where applicable, how Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*, and primarily his exegesis of the *Myth of Er*, may shed light on their teachings about the status of the soul in the afterlife. For Porphyry, Path I and II souls go to the Ethereal Region after death, where they remain until they are recycled and descend to earth. I argue that, according to Porphyry's interpretation of *Phaedrus* 249, the cycle of rebirths (reincarnations) is broken permanently when the soul chooses three consecutive philosophical lives, at which time the soul is perpetually in union with the One. The locating of the soul of Plotinus by the Oracle of Apollo at the end of the *Vita Plotini* (22–3) in the Ethereal Region is explained in light of this interpretation of the *Phaedrus*.

Basing his own views of the afterlife on the same text (*Phdr.* 249), Iamblichus came to a different conclusion: Purified souls remain for a period of time with the gods and angels, then they descend back to earth. Those of the median class will receive an amelioration of their characters before being recycled again; and the highest class, the noetic souls, descend as John Dillon has suggested, like Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist tradition, so that they can help other souls to achieve purification. I conclude that the apparently sharp disagreements between Porphyry and Iamblichus concerning the proper interpretation of the *Phaedrus* myth—Porphyry understanding that the text should be read as a permanent release of the soul after it chose three philosophical lives; and Iamblichus following conventional hermeneutics by arguing that there is no promise that the recycling process is ever terminated—added more fuel to the fire between the two philosophers and may have been another reason for Iamblichus leaving Rome for the East.

Notions of salvation, whether pagan or Christian, did not develop in a vacuum, and for this reason chapter 10 attempts to place Porphyry's search for the *via universalis animae salutis* in its proper historical context. I argue that owing to the decline of the Senate's power during the period, there were now only three major components of the imperial infrastructure: the emperor, the army, and Roman religious culture. From Caracalla to Constantine imperial policies