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HERMIPPUS, PYTHAGORAS AND THE JEWS

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According to Hermippus of Smyrna, Pythagoras reported that the soul of his departed disciple Calliphon « συνδιατρέψεν αὐτῷ καὶ νόστος καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν, καὶ ὅτε παρελεύετο, μὴ δέεγέσθαι τῶτον ἐν ὧν ἔν ὅντος ἐλάσσει, καὶ τῶν δούλων νόστων ἀπέγέσθαι καὶ πύργῳ [ἀπέγειν] διασπύλαι. » (Al. Josephus *Contra Apionem* 1, 164.)¹ Hermippus notes, « τὰν δὲ ἐπὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ἑαυτῷ καὶ Ἰουδαίων καὶ ἑσπερίων δόξαν μισοῦμενος καὶ μετὰ τῶν εἰς ἐκείνους. » *Ibid.* 1, 165. The notion that famous Greek philosophers adopted their beliefs and practices from the Jews is a familiar one from the Hellenistic-Roman period. Jewish intellectuals were eager to prove their worth and that of their race by claiming that philosophical thought was inherited by the Greeks from the Jews and, in a nicely complementary turn, Greeks were interested at least in the early Hellenistic period in glorifying the achievements of this newly-discovered exotic people. So the attribution to Pythagoras of "Jewish" beliefs and practices, while possibly a Jewish fiction, may very well have been the product of Greek romantics. All this is patent. What seems by and large to have been ignored is the question of whether the Jewish element here has any basis. To be sure, we cannot be certain whether Hermippus means that some of these practices are Jewish and others Thracian, or all connected to both peoples, or a mixture of these possibilities. I think in fact that there is a Jewish element in all these practices.² Let us examine them one by one.

- ἀπέγέσθαι διασπύλαι. This is the single example where one feels unhesitatingly certain about the Jewish connection.

1. The text is Thackeray's in the Loeb series. For a recent commentary on the passage, see M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, I (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 95 f.

2. Stern *ibid.*, p. 93 writes that "there is nothing specifically Jewish" in this passage. Even if this is true, this is not the same thing as saying "there is nothing Jewish" in it.

As the commentators note, one should compare Exodus 22: 27, אלהים לא חקלל ונשיא בעמך לא תאר. One might add that Philo (*QE* ii. 6), in his explication of this verse, designates the forbidden behavior βλασφημία.

— As for μή διέρχῃσθαι τόπον ἐφ' ᾧ ὄν ὄνος ὁκλήσῃ, translated by Thackeray "not to pass a certain spot, on which an ass had collapsed," the only interpretations commentators have offered are that this refers either to the tale of Balaam and his ass or to the alleged Jewish ass-worship. But the latter has nothing to do with collapsing asses, while the former is totally unlikely on two counts. First, Balaam was not a Jew. There is not the slightest reason why the Jews should have attached significance to the place where his ass collapsed nor, in fact, any evidence that they did. Second and decisive: the Greek will simply not admit such an explication. The construction makes clear that this is a general injunction not to pass any spot where an ass had collapsed.³ Once understood properly, the Jewish connection may be at least minimally illuminated. Consider Exodus 23: 5, כִּי תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֹׂנֵאךָ רֹכֵץ תַּחַת מִשְׁאֹר וְחִדַּלְתָּ מֵעֹז לֹו עֹזב תַּעֲזֹב עִמּוֹ.

That רֹכֵץ = ὁκλήσῃ is demonstrated by Josephus' ὁκλήσῃ (*Ad* iv. 109) for רֹכֵץ in the story of Balaam.⁴ Thus, the dictum enjoins not to pass a place where an ass had collapsed, i.e., one should stop and give help.⁵ What is of particular interest is that we have external evidence for this Pythagorean rule, whence we can see how the connection between Pythagoras and the Jews came to be made here. Diogenes Laertius viii. 17 reports that Pythagoras instructed φοβεσθαι στυγάζεσθαι καὶ μὴ στυγεῖν τοὺς θεούς.⁶ Exactly for what context and circumstances the Pythagorean rule was intended is unclear. Iamblichus (*VP* 18.81 and Porphyrius *VP* 42), whatever their value may be in such a matter, indicate that the dictum applies to helping a man carrying a burden. At any rate, one can be sure that Hermippus' words have been fitted to the Biblical phraseology and context.⁷ But there are

two further points of great interest here and I wish to point them out, though one can see various possibilities in interpreting them. Diogenes' report of Pythagoras' rule has two focal points. One is the emphasis on *syn*. This is not an injunction to act, but to act in concert with. The second is the inclusion of two distinct acts, loading and unloading here for purposes of distinction. Now, in Rabbinic discussions and elaborations of the Biblical command at Exodus 23: 5 it is precisely these two points that are emphasized: whether the rule only applies when one is acting with the owner *Bābā Meẓi'a* 31a and that there are two aspects to the rule's application, loading and unloading. Concerning the latter, lengthy discussions are devoted to the circumstances under which one must load or unload. One notes, for instance, the difference between the two Targūmim in their translations of the phrase עֹזב תַּעֲזֹב. Onqelos includes merely the one obligation, תַּפְרִיק וְתַטְעֵן, while Jonathan renders תַּפְרִיק וְתַטְעֵן. The Talmud expatiates on precisely this question *Bābā Meẓi'a* 32a-b. See too e.g., *Meḥilla* de Rab. Ishmael, *Mishpālīm*, ch. 20. All this is too much to be coincidence, but how are we to explain it? If the precise formulation of the Pythagorean rule as given by Diogenes is of late origin, then perhaps it has undergone Jewish influence under the impact of the by-then well-known view that Pythagoras learned from the Jews. But if it is indeed ancient—that is, pre-Hermippus—then one wonders whether Hermippus or his source may have had access to some Jewish texts in Greek that included explication and elaboration of Biblical passages in the manner of e.g., Philo or the Midrash or the Qumrān *Peshārīm*.⁸

Finally, τὸν δριμύτων ὕδατος ἀπέχεσθαι. This is clearly the most difficult of the three rules to understand, both as concerns its plain sense and its relation, if any, to Judaism. Reinach⁹ and Stern suspect "salty water" is meant here. But this seems a remote possibility. One scarcely needs an injunction from a cultic leader to avoid drinking salty water (if, as one presumes, drinking is the issue here). Further, one cannot find (not that one would expect to) any mention of such a prohibition in Jewish

3. Consequently, "not to pass a certain spot, on which an ass had collapsed" is a misleading translation.

4. The author of the Latin translation of the *Contra Apionem* seems to have sensed the connection, for he translates freely, "ut non transiret de loco unde asinus onus portaret."

5. Διέρχῃσθαι is here used loosely and is presumably the virtual equivalent of the Septuagint's παρελύσῃ, as at Acts 12.10.

6. The place of the negative is somewhat in dispute, but the issue is not important for our purposes. See the ap. crit. of Long's OCT and the texts of Iamblichus and Porphyrius cited *infra*.

7. One wonders whether the phraseology of the Pythagorean command τὸ ζυγὸν μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν played a part in inducing the association between the φοβεσθαι rule and

the Biblical law. See Diog. Laert. viii. 17; Porph., *VP* 42; Iamb., *VP* 30.186; Hieron., *Apol. adv. libros Rufini* iii. 39.

8. What this might say about the origins of such interpretative methodologies is a large question which I avoid here. I also refrain from speculation as to whether in fact Pythagoras or Pythagoreanism may have actually been influenced by Jewish thought.

9. In his Budé edition of *Contra Apionem* (Paris, 1930).

