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DID PYTHAGORAS FOLLOW NAZIRITE RULES?

ELLIOT A. GREEN

Twentieth century scholars of ancient philosophy, science, and literature have commonly tried to divorce what is known as the Greek tradition from the Israelites, from the Phoenicians (as much as possible), and from the Bible. This is true in the cases of the famous early philosophers, Thales and Pythagoras, among others. Thales, for instance, is called Phoenician in various ancient writings (Herodotus, Giogenes Laertius). Yet modern histories of philosophy and reference works, such as encyclopedias and handbooks of classical literature, usually refer to him simply as a "Greek," disregarding not only the ancient authorities, but the biblical and other Judaic parallels in the extant statements attributed to him. Now the ancients did call Thales the first of the Seven Sages of Greece. However, this does not make him a Greek any more than Albert Einstein, for example, an American.

The same treatment is accorded to Pythagoras. The account in Iamblichus' *Life of Pythagoras* has him growing up in Sidon, a Canaanite-speaking (tantamount to Hebrew-speaking) city, studying with prophets, and living on Mount Carmel. This version is commonly disregarded or, when mentioned, disparaged. The writer of the article on Pythagoras in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* discounts Iamblichus' account and others like it (Hermippus, Porphyry) by positing what he calls

*the general tendency of the Greeks of a later age to have the origins of their culture derive from intercourse with the Orient.*¹

1 G. C. "Pitagora e Pitagorismo," trans. by E. A. G.

This writer does not tell us why this "tendency" should be discounted, nor why the parallels between the rules of Pythagoras' brotherhood and his personal behavior on the one hand and the rules of the biblical Nazirite code on the other hand ought to be overlooked.

The view quoted from the *Enciclopedia Italiana* above is fairly typical, when moderns recognize the problem at all. The "Greeks of a later age" wanted, for some reason, to see "the origins of their culture" in the Orient (meaning the Middle East in this context, including Israel). This reference to "a later age" does not tell us why Herodotus (ca. 484-425 B.C.E.) who was born only about sixty years after the death of Thales (-546) and came from the same region (Ionia) calls the first of the Seven Sages a "Phoenician." Nor does it explain why Hermippus — who flourished in the third century B.C.E., only some 300 years after Pythagoras (ca. 572-497) and much earlier than Laertius, Porphyry, and Iamblichus — asserts Jewish influence on the teachings of the same Pythagoras. Even earlier than Hermippus, Theophrastus (ca. 372-288 B.C.E.), the leading pupil of Aristotle, had called the Jews "a race of philosophers," while the contemporary Megasthenes attributed to the Jews (and Brahmans) knowledge of nature before the Greek philosophers.

The author of the view quoted, and other authorities, impute a peculiar psychological motive to Greeks like Hermippus who mention Jewish influence on "the origins of their culture." However, were the ancient Greeks the kind of people who wanted to attribute their own accomplishments to others?

Be that as it may, it is curious, or perhaps symptomatic, that some modern writers who disregard or disparage Laertius' identification of Thales as a Phoenician, favor Laertius' report on Pythagoras over Iamblichus' biography. To be sure Laertius does not connect Pythagoras with Phoenicia whereas Iamblichus does make the connection emphatically. This curiously inconsistent approach to the different ancient accounts appears in what is probably the most broadly circulated modern history of philosophy. The book in question is *A History of Philosophy* by Frederick Copleston, a

multi-volume work which enjoyed several editions in Britain and the United States, including a paperback edition by a major American publisher.

It is not our purpose here to try to explain why most modern writers prefer one version over another, nor to determine which version is closer to the truth. We may note however that the biblical and other Judaic parallels in Laertius' record of statements ascribed to Thales are almost universally disregarded as are the biblical parallels to the teachings and practices of Pythagoras. This is true even with twentieth century writers with an outstanding exception. Peter Gorman, a recent biographer of Pythagoras, stands out from the crowd when he emphatically identifies both Thales and Pythagoras as Phoenicians. Yet he too fails to note any biblical parallels or to consider possible Israelite influence resulting from Pythagoras' stay on Mount Carmel.

Here are a number of excerpts from Iamblichus' *Life of Pythagoras* which indicate a Phoenician birth, upbringing, and education for the philosopher, as well as material concerning parallels.² Section A supplies references to Pythagoras' birth, family, upbringing, and education. B contains material about personal habits; and C relates his experiences on Mount Carmel and in Phoenicia:

A) . . . *Mnesarchus (who came to Delphi for the purposes of merchandize, with his wife not yet apparently pregnant, and who inquired of the God concerning the event of his voyage to Syria) . . .*

he called the infant, who was soon after born at Sidon in Phoenicia, Pythagoras . . .

. . . after his father Mnesarchus had returned from Syria to Samos, with great wealth, which he had collected from a prosperous navigation . . . (Mnesarchus) took care to have his son nourished with various and the best disciplines, at

2 Ibid., pp. 3 to 8. Trans. Taylor, London, 1926.

one time by Creophilus, at another by Pherecydes the Syrian . . .

while he (i.e., Pythagoras — EAG) was yet a youth, his great renown having reached Thales at Miletus . . .

. . . departed to Pherecydes, to Anaximander, the natural philosopher, and the Thales at Miletus . . . they all loved him, admired . . .

B) the youth was everywhere celebrated as the long-haired Samian (emph. in orig. — EAG) . . .

. . . he entirely abstained from wine and animal food . . .

C) he sailed to Sidon, being persuaded that this was his natural country . . . there he conversed with the prophets who were the descendants of Mochus the physiologist, and with others, and also with the Phoenician hierophants. He was likewise initiated into all the mysteries of Byblus and Tyre, and in the sacred operations which are performed in many parts of Syria . . .

he immediately embarked for Egypt, through the means of some Egyptian sailors, who were very opportunely at that time landed on the Phoenician coast under Mount Carmelus, in whose temple Pythagoras, separated from all society, for the most part dwelt . . .

. . . they (e.g., the sailors — EAG) called to mind how unexpectedly he had appeared to them on their landing, when from the summit of Mount Carmelus, which they knew was more sacred than other mountains, and inaccessible to the vulgar, he leisurely descended without looking back, or suffering any delay from precipices or opposing stones . . .

We see from the above that Pythagoras was born in Sidon which he considered "his natural country," and lived there as a child. His father stayed in Sidon for an extended time carrying on a merchant shipping business. This suggests that his father was of Sidonian or at least Phoenician origin, since it is questionable whether the

Sidonians would have allowed a Greek maritime trader to operate from their port. The links of Mnesarchus to the isle of Samos, as reported by Iamblichus, Laertius, and others, do not contradict a Phoenician identity, since Phoenician trading colonies were spread throughout the Aegean.

Pythagoras must have known the Canaanite language spoken in Sidon, and therefore would have understood Hebrew. He was closely associated with other intellectuals of Phoenician and Syrian origin, namely Thales and Pherecydes. Miletus seems to have had a Phoenician (i.e., Canaanite-speaking) colony, and the possibility that Anaximander, too, was of Phoenician origin should not be excluded. Pythagoras' relationship with the three of them is described as warmly personal.

We also see that Pythagoras observed two of the three Nazirite prohibitions listed in the Book of Numbers (6:1-8); he is called "long-haired," suggesting that he did not cut his hair, and he abstained from wine (Laertius' report has Pythagoras advocating that people drink "pure water only.") The third ban, that on coming near to human dead, does not seem to appear in accounts of Pythagoras. On the other hand, Laertius ascribes to some earlier authorities the claim that Pythagoras

*forbade even the killing, let alone the eating, of animals
which share with us the privilege of having a soul.*

Now Numbers 6:6 in the original Hebrew uses the term *nefesh met* which is represented as human dead in various translations. The new JPS translates this as "a dead person," which seems reasonable. Yet we may bear in mind that *nefesh* can also mean "soul."

However, the present writer has never seen Pythagoras' rules and practices compared to the Nazirite rules. Instead, they are commonly compared to the Orphic cult. Now the Pythagorean order had something in common with both the Nazirite code and Orphism, namely a concern for bodily purity. Further, Pythagoras abstained from "animal food" (according to the quotes from both Iamblichus and Laertius above) and Orphism did forbid eating meat. Thus it

could have been an influence on him. On the other hand, Pythagoras' abstention from eating animal food could be taken as a modification of Num. 6:6 (through extending *nefesh* to animals), albeit that this abstention does not necessitate a prohibition on proximity to dead bodies. Further, letting the hair grow and abstaining from wine do not seem to have figured in Orphism.³ Indeed it seems that Orphism was close to the Dionysian cult which mandated wine-drinking. But be that as it may, why should the Nazirite rules be overlooked as a possible influence on Pythagoras?

We have noted above that Pythagoras observed two of the three Nazirite prohibitions listed in the Book of Numbers, with a curious, though inexact, parallel to the third ban.

However, this third prohibition is also missing from the story of Samson, the most famous Nazirite of all. Instead, the angel instructing Samson's mother supplies another prohibition, that of eating "anything unclean" (Jud. 13:4, 14), together with bans on drinking wine (extended as in Num. 6 to other intoxicants and to fresh grapes) and shaving the head (Jud. 13:5, 14), corresponding to the rules in Numbers 6. Laertius' report, which appears as a compilation of earlier reports, represents mutually contradictory claims about Pythagoras' diet and the dietary rules he prescribed, and specifically as to whether he forbade *all* "animal foods." However, he did at least forbid beans, which might be considered unclean, because they are believed to cause flatulence. Indeed, the Egyptian priests considered beans "unclean," according to Herodotus (11:37) who adds that Egyptians did not eat them. Porphyry quoted Pythagoras enunciating the command: "Do not eat those things that are unlawful."⁴ This pronouncement has a ring close to that of the ban on "unclean" food in Judges 13:4-5. In the

³ One authority among the many consulted for this inquiry — the Britannica Micropedia, Vol. VII — does mention an Orphic prohibition on wine.

⁴ *The Pythagoras Sourcebook and Library*. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1987, Guthrie, K. S.

matter of beans, we may have an overlapping of Israelite and Egyptian influences on Pythagoras.

Returning to the account of Iamblichus, we see that Pythagoras forbade his "intimates" the eating of meat. (i.e., the initiates of his brotherhood), whereas

*eating of the flesh of certain animals was permitted to those whose lives were not entirely purified, philosophic and sacred; but even for these he appointed a definite time of abstinence.*⁵

This last quote may resolve the contradictions between various older reports compiled by Laertius in regard to Pythagoras' dietary practices and prohibitions for others. More importantly for our argument here, it shows that Pythagoras thought in terms of two moral classes in society, the "purified," and the "not entirely purified." Can this be compared to the distinction of Nazirites who were governed by more stringent rules than ordinary Israelites? In any case, the notion of permitted meat from "certain animals" and forbidden meat of other animals is obviously parallel to the very ancient Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* (Deut. 14:4ff.; Lev. 11:3-12; *inter alia*).

It is unfortunate that the foods that are "unclean" for the Nazirite, as envisaged by Judges 13:4-5, are not specified. (Num. 6:3-4 bans all products of the grapevine for Nazirites, but this is part of the prohibition on wine and intoxicants. These products are also forbidden for Nazirites in Jud. 13:14, but not designated unclean there or anywhere else in the Bible). We may assume that certain foods were especially designated "unclean" for Nazirites that were not forbidden for the ordinary Israelite by the laws of *kashrut*.

Leaving the domain of food, we can draw another parallel between Pythagoras and the story of Samson. Laertius' report quotes Pythagoras as warning that "When you want to lose what strength you have, consort with a woman."

5 Ibid.

Samson, of course, loses his strength because of his relationship with Delilah. She entices him to reveal to her that the secret of his strength lies in his hair which she then proceeds to cut off, thus robbing him of his superior physical power while he sleeps (Jud. 16:6-19).

In light of the several Nazirite parallels mentioned above, not only with Iamblichus' more coherent account, but with Laertius' compilation of often contradictory sources, it would seem unreasonable to overlook them in discussions of the origins of Pythagoras' doctrines and rules. This is so, the Pythagorean similarities to Orphic doctrines notwithstanding. The remaining issue is how Pythagoras could have learned about the Nazirite code and, perhaps, the story of Samson.

The references to Mount Carmel show how Pythagoras might have obtained this knowledge — as well as learning about other Jewish Israelite teachings. It is true that Mount Carmel was the site of an altar to Baal. However, an altar to the Lord God of Israel was there too (I Kg. 18:30). And it was there that Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal (Ibid. 18:17-40). Most crucially, it is reported that Elijah's pupil Elisha lived there for some time (II Kg. 4:25). Was Elisha the only prophet of Israel to live on Mount Carmel? Did Nazirites lodge there? In addition, the reference to "prophets who were the descendants of Mochus" is intriguing. Could "Mochus" be a garbled reference to Moses? As a matter of fact, Sabatino Moscati and the Pauly-Wissowa refer to a Mochus who was a Phoenician historian and author of a cosmogony, but this Mochus is not described as the ancestor of prophets, biologically or spiritually. K. S. Guthrie's translation of Iamblichus adds another "s" to the name, spelling it "Moschus." A footnote in Guthrie's translation (first published early in this century) explains "Moschus" this way: "That is, Moses."

One might object at this point that the Temple was destroyed and the Exile began in 586 B.C.E., not long before Pythagoras was born about 580. However, the Exile mainly affected the leading classes of

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