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II

Hellenism

12. *What was Hellenism?*

One of the best descriptions has been given by the historian Simon Dubnow (1860- 1941), who wrote as follows:

> It was a duel between "The Eternal" on the one side, and "Zeus" on the other - between the Creator of the universe, the invisible spiritual Being, who had, in a miraculous way, revealed religious and ethical ideals to mankind, and the deity who resided upon Olympus, who personified the highest force of nature, consumed vast quantities of nectar and ambrosia, and led a pretty wildlife upon Olympus and elsewhere. In the sphere of religion and morality, Hellene and Judean could not come close to each other. The former deified nature herself, the material universe; the latter deified the Creator of nature, the spirit informing the material universe. The Hellene paid homage, first and foremost, to external beauty and physical strength; the Judean to inner beauty and spiritual heroism. The Hellenic theory identified the moral with the beautiful and agreeable, and made life consist of an uninterrupted series of physical and mental pleasures. The Judean theory is permeated by the strictly ethical notions of duty, of purity, of holiness; it denounces licentiousness, and sets up as its ideal the controlling of the passions and the infinite improvement of the soul, not of the intellect alone, but of the feelings as well.[1]

13. *But not all our readers can keep in their minds such a lengthy definition. Can you give us a more succinct definition of the difference between Judaism and Hellenism*?

No problem: The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty; the Jews in the beauty of holiness. The Greeks venerated the outer physical container; the Jews celebrated the soul within.

14. *Why was the Greek system called 'Hellenism?'*

Hellas was the Greek name for Greece, derived from the Hellen of Greek mythology. Hellen was the ancestor of the Hellenes, or Greeks. His sons, Dorus, Xuthus and Aeolus, were the progenitors of the main Greek nations: the Dorians, Ionians, Achaeans, and Aeolians.

A CLASH OF OPPOSITES

14. *Judaism and Hellenism have been described above as totally incompatible. In what way is this most obviously exemplified?*

In their respective concepts of God. Judaism believed in a personal God Who is an absolute unity, unseen, unknowable, All-knowing, All-powerful, and demanding of the highest standards of ethical and moral conduct from humankind.

The Greeks simply did not inhabit the same theological or moral universe. In the first place they believed in a whole panoply of gods whose mythological antics greatly influenced their art and architecture, their philosophy and literature, and even their leisure sporting activities at the gymnasia.

An axiom of mythology is that the events that occur in the celestial regions are carbon copies of what happens on earth, and the gods bear the identical variety of physical characteristics as men and women, with the sensual features being especially pronounced. The gods are susceptible, therefore, to the same desires, passions, jealousies, ambitions,

and moral aberrations as man. They have love affairs and marry; they go cavorting with other gods' partners; they commit incest; they are roused to anger and suffer envy; they engage in disputes and wage wars. Just as in the earthly experience there are the powerful and the privileged, the weak and the disadvantaged, so it was within the society of the gods assembled on Olympus. There were the twelve great gods and goddesses - such as Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo Artemis and Aphrodite - and a host of lesser gods.

The Greek gods constituted the celestial counterpart and the spirit that invests every emotion, skill and activity that was employed and developed in the physical world, as well as nurturing the growth of everything required by humans for their enjoyment and survival. So, there were gods of love, vengeance and war, wisdom and fortune, beauty and grace, wine and cereal, fauna and flora, fire and water, to name but a few. When Zeus, the supreme god wished his will to be communicated to man, he frequently charged some lesser god, often Iris or Hermes, to assume human form and fly down to earth (a concept which might have inspired Christianity's idea of incarnation). The gods lived on nectar and ambrosia; they enjoyed the finest luxuries. 'If the gods' daily life resembled that of men it was because, at least in appearance, their natures were not dissimilar. Their bodies were like mortal bodies, but superior in stature, strength, and beauty.'[2]

Not surprisingly, therefore, Judaism could have no truck with such a mythology. For, significantly, at the very dawn of Israel's nationhood, immediately after God's revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, Israel is warned, "Do not make with Me gods of silver or gods of gold" (Exodus 20:20). Thus, the making of the Golden Calf brought with it a swift retribution. No manifestation of deity - even of the Supreme God Himself - is permitted in Judaism. Hellenism was consequently a heresy, a deep offence to both the Judaic intelligence and its religious sensibility.

THE JEWISH THREAT TO HELLENISM

16. *One can understand, therefore, why the Jews were so offended by Hellenism, but why did the Greeks care about Jewish beliefs to the extent that they were so determined to eradicate them?*

This issue is rarely raised, namely, why the mighty, conquering Greeks were so deeply troubled by the religious beliefs of one tiny subject state that they were prepared to go to such lengths to eradicate them. Later, we shall sketch in the immediate factors that brought matters to a head in the reign of Antiochus IV (See Questions 37-41), but we may assume that long before that period Hellenism must have viewed Judaism as a mortal threat. The Hellenists were especially concerned that, because their polytheism was so inextricably interwoven with almost every facet of their civic, cultural and leisure activity, it followed that the appeal and dissemination of Judaism's political and religious philosophy - and, in particular, its refined concept of monotheism, rendering every individual of inestimable value in the eyes of God, and therefore in his or her own sight - carried within it the seeds of a revolution of the spirit that could, with ease, sweep away even the most confident and numerically powerful of civilisations. The Hellenists realized that Judaism might well be perceived not just as another competing system, but as *the* authentic system, the "real thing." They must have feared that if ever Judaism borrowed a leaf from their own book, and set their sights on winning converts beyond their own borders, the Hellenized world might well be captivated.

With hindsight they were right to be so apprehensive, for the Graeco-Roman civilisation is the only one, other than Judaism, to have influenced the history of Western man. As Max Dimont observes, 'The Chinese, Hindu and Egyptian peoples are the only ones living today who are as old as the Jewish people. But these three civilizations had only one main cultural period, and their impact on succeeding civilizations has not been great.'[3] The

Greeks recognized Judaism's unbounded potential as a world religion and culture; and hence, for their own survival, and their pretensions to become *the* world culture, they determined that far more radical action was called for than merely to clip the Jews' wings.

17. *But is that not a rather biased and exaggerated assessment of Judaism's appeal?*

I do not believe so. Corroboration of this view may be derived from the simple fact that Judaism's value-system was borrowed, lock, stock, and barrel - albeit in a modified and less rigorous form - some 300 years later, to become the basis of the Christian religion which did, indeed, exploit that potential, enabling it to become a world religion which succeeded in confronting and supplanting the legacy of Greece and Rome.

WAS HELLENISM REALLY PLAUSIBLE?

18. *But how could the Greeks, whose education system covered music, art, literature, philosophy, science, math, and politics, have been so gullible and irrational as to make such naïve and absurd mythological ideas the basis of a belief system?*

However incomprehensible it may appear, yet modern-day surveys in many countries have revealed that people today are only slightly less committed to belief in the paranormal than their ancient Greek counterparts! Nicholas Humphrey refers to a study he conducted of a representative cross-section of people in the middle-class town of Reading, U.K. His findings were that some 70 per cent of people believe, for example, that some houses are haunted by ghosts; and over 50 percent believe in transmigration, namely that we have been here before our present existence, inhabiting different bodies. The latter group also believed that some people can truly remember those past lives.[4] A pertinent statistic is that 'three in four Americans acknowledged at least one paranormal belief, and the reporting of paranormal experiences is also relatively common.'[5]

Humphrey reminds us that "the celebration of the paranormal has long been woven into the fabric of Western culture…Our most impressive buildings, from Stonehenge to Chartres Cathedral to Disney World, are monuments to paranormal ambitions and paranormal imagery…In bookshops the 'New Age' and 'Occult' sections dominate the shelves."[6]

So, modern-day man is so gullible, why should we express incredulity that the dominant belief of Greek culture, some two and a half thousand years ago, followed such a similar inclination toward belief in celestial beings and their widespread influence on our world. *Plus ca change*…

HELLENISM'S INROADS AND JEWISH RESPONSES

19. *So did Hellenism fail, therefore, to make any inroads at all into the Jewish consciousness*?

Quite the contrary. The Greeks succeeded quite remarkably in changing the whole complexion of life in Judea, by importing their network of educational, leisure and entertainment institutions, their language, their coinage, their dress and their art. Alas, though, it was not the finest fruits of classical Greek thought - that of Pythagoras, Socrates, Euripides, Aristotle and Plato - which was offered to the Jews, but a debased form of Hellenism which expressed itself rather in paganism, barbarity, sensuality and immorality, which constituted an allure which many, especially of the Jewish youth, could not resist.

20. *How did Greek language influence the Jews?*

Until the arrival of the Greeks, the Jews spoke Aramaic. Their native language was, of course, Hebrew. But, during the Babylonian captivity, the masses had gradually assimilated Aramaic, the Eastern-Semitic *lingua franca*, into their everyday speech. The

rabbis continued to employ Hebrew, especially for teaching and religious expositions; but even they found themselves resorting to the conceptual and technical vocabulary of Greek. By Mishnaic times (100 BCE-200 CE) the Greek language had gained supremacy, to the extent that many Jewish religious and philosophical tracts were produced in that language. In Alexandria, which had the largest Jewish concentration of that period, a Greek translation of the Bible, the *Septuagint*, was required by the communities; and one of Alexandria's most distinguished sons, Philo (1st century BCE), produced a major Bible commentary in the Greek language, saturated with Greek philosophical conceptions. Other Greek translations followed during the succeeding century, such as those by Aquila and Theodotion.

Greek was regarded as the prestige language, to the extent that public notices and inscriptions around the Temple and on its ritual objects, as well as on synagogues and epitaphs, were frequently written in that language. It is reckoned that there are some 3,000 Graeco-Roman loan words in Talmudic literature. Indeed, the Talmudic sages praised the Greek language for its beauty, and it was the only language into which they tolerated the Torah to be translated.[7]

21. *But how could such a concession to a heathen culture have been justified by Israel's Sages?*

The Sages were, if anything, pragmatic, and where they could not readily beat an enemy, they sought ways of coexisting with it. Realising that the Greek language and culture had, in fact, made great inroads into Judean life, some Sages began to disseminate the quaint tradition that it actually had its roots in Israel's own native wisdom. Hence the Midrash that when Alexander the Great conquered Jerusalem he discovered there a library of Solomon's wisdom. He gave this to his teacher, Aristotle, who derived all his ideas from

it. Thus, Greek wisdom, they alleged, was, in essence, Solomonic, and therefore acceptable![8]

22. *So, were there no attempts by the rabbis to curtail the inroads of Greek language and culture?*

There were sporadic attempts to do so, as reflected in certain Talmudic statements on the subject. In the following passage, the Midrashic method is quaintly applied to the issue:

> Rabbi Joshua was asked, 'May one teach one's son the Greek language?' He replied, 'Teach it him [in that split second] when it is neither day nor night, for it says, *You shalt meditate in it* (that is, exclusively in Torah) *by day and by night* (Joshua 1:8)!' [But one might then object that] if so, one ought never to teach one's son a livelihood! 'That is no objection,' said Rabbi Ishmael, 'since the Torah states, *Choose life* (Deut. 30:19), and "life" means a livelihood.'[9]

23. *But are there not some Talmudic references which categorically denounce Greek culture?*

A distinction was made between the Greek language, on the one hand, and Greek culture (*chokhmat yevanit*), on the other. The former was, to some extent, a necessity at that period, in order to compete and survive in the real world of commercial and diplomatic enterprise. The Sages perceived Greek culture, on the other hand, as a morally and spiritually harmful preoccupation. Hence such Talmudic references as "Cursed be the man who teaches his son Greek culture."[10] In another passage, the Talmud states that it was during the war against Titus that they forbade a man to teach his son Greek.[11] This suggests that there was no blanket prohibition, but that, at times of national trauma, when Jewish nationalism was being whipped up in order to throw off the yoke of the oppressors, the religious and national leaders became more introvert, joining forces to outlaw any

secularist tendency. Such a rejection of Greek culture thus came to meet the perceived spirit of the hour but was not intended as an entrenched and universal Jewish attitude.

24. *Were there any exceptions made in the Talmud to the prohibition of learning Greek?* Interestingly, in the same passage that the Talmud warns against teaching one's son Greek, it states, 'But one may teach Greek to one's daughter, because it is an adornment to her.'[12] The whole tenor of that passage seems to be suggesting that it is not treachery to study Greek; it is simply to be discouraged because it takes one's thoughts away from Torah, which ought to be our sole preoccupation when we are not earning a livelihood. Since that obligation to study Torah does not devolve upon women, the Sages were indulgent when it came to them occupying their time with such "secular culture."

One cannot escape the conclusion that the Talmudic Sages had a secret admiration for the wisdom of Classical Greece - its philosophy, mathematics, logic, astronomy and medicine - and its capacity to elevate the spirit and sharpen and cultivate the mind, while recognising its assimilatory dangers for the weak and naïve among their coreligionists.

NOTES

1. S. Dubnow, *History of the Jews from the Beginning to Early Christianity* (N.Y: Thomas Yoseloff, 1967), vol. 1, p.453.
2. Larousse *Encyclopedia of Mythology* (ed. Robert Graves. London, Paul Hamlyn, 1959), p. 103.
3. Max Dimont, *Jews, God and History* (London: W.H.Allen, 1964), p.18.
4. Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Searching* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1995), p.4.
5. See Kenneth G. Drinkwater *et al*, "Paranormal Belief, Thinking, Style and Delusion Formation," *Frontiers in Psychology* (vol. 12, June 2021), p.1.
6. Humphrey, o*p. cit*., pp. 5-6.
7. Mishnah *Megillah* 1:8

8. See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), vol. VI, pp.282-283.
9. Tal. *Men*. 99b.
10. Tal. *B. Kam.* 82b.
11. Mish. *Sotah* 9:14. Another, preferred, reading refers the prohibition to '*the days of* Quietus' rather than 'the war.'
12. Jer. Tal. *Pe'ah* 1:1 (Krot. ed., 16b).
