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## ON THE SUPPOSED ANTI-ASCETICISM OR ANTI-NAZRITISM OF SIMON THE JUST

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JUDAISM MAY CERTAINLY BOAST OF many remarkable features, but unanimity is not one of them. Not unlike the people who propounded it, Judaism seems to possess a special talent for stirring up controversy. Hardly an observation about Judaism has not been challenged by someone; an impression not contested; a point of view not questioned. What seems essential to one scholar is often viewed as unessential by another; what is meaningful to one may be superfluous to another. Agreement in Jewish studies is hard to come by.

One is a little surprised, therefore, to find that a semi-consensus exists among scholars that normative Judaism has a negative attitude towards asceticism, that it is anti-ascetic. Normative Judaism's detractors, as well as its supporters, share this supposition. Indeed, in some quarters this attitude has served as a criterion either to approve or disapprove of Judaism. Thus, for instance, Bousset-Gressmann<sup>1</sup> declared Judaism to be an inferior religion because it loves life too much; because it is this-worldly to excess. On the other hand, M. Lazarus,<sup>2</sup> among others, saw precisely in this attitude—in Judaism's concern with the here and now, in its affirmation of life, in the fact (to quote another writer)

<sup>1</sup> *Die Religion des Judentums in späthellenistischem Zeitalter* (1926), p. 428. cf. J. Unna, *Die Stellung Schopenhauers zum Judentum* (1928).

<sup>2</sup> *Die Ethik des Judentums* (1898) PP. 272-80. The references to Bousset-Gressman and Lazarus are taken from Professor E. E. Urbach, "Ascesis and Suffering Talmudic and Midrashic sources", Y. F. Baer's *Jubilee Volume* (Hebrew) 1960 P. 48-9.

that its saints are to be found in the market place rather than in the monasteries—Judaism's superiority over other religions.

Whence this consensus? From the late second and early third centuries (C.E.) there is considerable evidence to support it. Numerous quotations from the Talmud for this period can be cited. Outstanding among them are: 1.) the remark by ר' אליעזר הקפ"ר—a second century rabbi—that a Nazrite is called a sinner because he deprived himself of wine, על שציער עצמו מן היין.<sup>3</sup> 2.) The statement of Shmuel כל הישב בתענית שמואל— the third century Babylonian sage חוטא נקרא Whoever engages in fasting is called a sinner.<sup>4</sup> 3.) Rav's admonition in the ירושלמי Palestinian Talmud, at the end of Tractate *Kiddushin*: On judgment day, עתיד אדם ליתן דין והשבון על כל מה שראת עינו ולא אכל. A man will have to give account for every good thing "which his eye saw and he did not eat".

Were the claim that normative Judaism is anti-ascetic confined to the talmudic period, there would be little to quarrel with. However, one often hears (Professor Y. Baer's latest book, *Ysrael Ba-A'mim*, notwithstanding) that Judaism was anti-ascetic from its early beginnings; that Simon the Just<sup>5</sup> refrained from partaking of the guilt offering brought by the Nazrite because he disapproved of the latter's ascetic behavior. This assertion we believe to be without basis. It is the purpose of this paper to show that the passage which relates this incident about Simon the Just has been misunderstood and that a proper understanding of the passage will show that the reason Simon refused to eat of the guilt offering brought by the נזיר, Nazrite had nothing whatsoever

<sup>3</sup> B. Talmud Taanit- 11a (see H. Malter's edition (1930) p. 39 for complete parallels).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> According to some there were two "Simon The Just". To which of them our passage refers is a subject of dispute among scholars. See S. Spiegel, "The Language of the Early Paytanim", (Hebrew) *Hadoar* Vol. 42 No. 23, P. 398-9, NN. 1, 2.

to do with anti-asceticism or anti-Naziritism. The passage in question reads as follows: <sup>6</sup>

אמר שמעון הצדיק מימי לא אכלתי אשם נזיר טמא אלא אחד. פעם אחת בא אדם אחד נזיר מן הדרום וראיתיו שהוא יפה עינים וטוב רואי וקוצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים. אמרתי לו בני מה ראית להשחית את שערך זה הנאה? אמר לי רועה היית לאבא בעירי, הלכתי למלאות מים מן המעיין <sup>7</sup> ונסתכלתי בבבואה שלי ופחזו עלי יצרי וביקש לטורדני מן העולם. אמרתי לו רשע למה אתה מתנאה בעולם שאינו שלך וכו'. העבודה שאנלחך לשמים. מיד עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו, אמרתי לו: בני כמוך ירבו נזירי בישראל. עליך הכתוב אומר: איש כי יפליא לנדור נזיר להזיר לה'.

Simon the Just said: Only once in my life have I eaten of the guilt offering brought by the defiled נזיר. Once a Nazrite came from the South and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, was of handsome appearance and with thick locks of hair symmetrically arranged. I asked him, "My son, what reason did you have to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?" He replied: "I was a shepherd for my father in my town. Once I went to draw water from a well. When I gazed at my reflection in the water my evil desires rushed upon me and sought to drive me from the world (through sin). But I said to myself, "Wretch! Why do you pride yourself with a world which is not yours! . . . I swear that I will shave them off for the sake of heaven." I immediately arose and kissed his head saying: "My son, may there be many Nazrites such as you in Israel. Of thee says the Holy Writ: 'When either a man or a woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazrite, to separate themselves unto the Lord.'" <sup>8</sup>

Why did Simon the Just refuse to partake of guilt offerings brought by Nazrites, and why did he make an exception in the case of the shepherd?

<sup>6</sup> This passage appears in talmudic literature in different versions. See S. Spiegel *op. cit.* However, they all agree on essential points. The one quoted here is from B. Talmud Nedarim 9b.

<sup>7</sup> The correct reading is probably נִיאֹב See S. Lieberman, *Tosefet Rishonim* IV, (1929), P. 195 and Spiegel *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>8</sup> The Soncino translation with slight changes.

The Talmud offers two interpretations, and modern scholars, (despite their disputes) have added little of substance to these two interpretations. The first is implied in a statement by Abeye—the fourth century Babylonian Amora.<sup>9</sup> He (and an anonymous sage in the Palestinian Talmud)<sup>10</sup> equated Simon's behavior with the view expressed by ר' אליעזר הקפרי quoted above, that the Nazrite is a sinner because he deprives himself of wine. The implication is that for this reason Simon also did not wish to eat of the Nazrite guilt offering, but made an exception in the case of the shepherd because of the latter's strong religious motives. This interpretation is responsible for the opinion that Simon was anti-ascetic.

The other interpretation is by ר' יונה and ר' מנא father and son.<sup>10</sup> They argued against associating abstention with sin. Is not every guilt offering, and for that matter every sin offering, the result of someone having committed a sin? Yet, it is extremely unlikely that Simon never partook of the flesh of guilt offerings or sin offerings. (The Bible explicitly permits, even commands, the priest—and Simon was a high priest—to eat of the flesh left over from the sacrifice.)<sup>11a</sup> Instead, these fourth century Palestinian scholars suggest that the reason for Simon's refusal to partake of Nazrite guilt offerings—and of Nazrite only—was that most Nazritic vows were contracted in a state of fear and anger (תורה). With a change of state came a change of heart. This is especially true in the case of a vow of prolonged duration, periodically interrupted by defilement—the only time a Nazrite brings a guilt offering—which forces him to start counting anew his Nazrite days. According to these two scholars, the regretting of the Nazritic vow makes the

<sup>9</sup> B. Talmud Ned. 10a

<sup>10</sup> Nedarim 36d, Nazir 51c

<sup>10a</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See B. Talmud Pes. 59b and parallels, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Maaseh ha Korbanot* 10, 1.

offerings a kind of **חולין בעזרה**, an unconsecrated offering, of which Simon did not wish to partake. An exception, however, was made with the Nazritic guilt offering brought by the shepherd because the strong religious motives that initiated the vow assured Simon that there was no regret. This interpretation is responsible for the opinion that Simon the Just was anti-Nazrite.<sup>12</sup>

While one appreciates the ingenuity of this interpretation, one must nevertheless admit that it is unsatisfactory. To be sure, most people indeed have second thoughts after they contract vows, but it is difficult to see why second thoughts should affect the offerings to such a degree that they become **חולין בעזרה**, unconsecrated offerings.

On the other hand, if we reject this interpretation and accept that of Abeye—namely, that the abstention was due to the sinning of the Nazrite—we are confronted with the question raised by **ר' יונה** and **ר' מנא**. Why did Simon single out the guilt offerings of the Nazrites when *all* guilt offerings and sin offerings are the result of sin?

But above all, we believe, the major question the scholars should have asked: Is it plausible to maintain that Simon the Just looked with disdain at Nazrites when in the Bible they are likened to prophets? God—through Amos 2: 11-12 reprimands the Jews, saying:

ואקים מבניכם לנביאים ומבחוריהם לנזירים . . . ותשקו את הנזירים יין ועל הנביאים צויתם לאמר לא תנבאו.

“And I raised up of your sons for prophets and of your young men for Nazrites. But ye gave the Nazrites wine to drink and commanded the prophets saying: Prophesey not!”—two not dissimilar wrongs. Is it logical to say that Simon condemned Nazritism?

In the Bible, people resorted to the Nazritic vow as a sign of piety—witness Samuel’s mother<sup>13</sup> and Samson. Would

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Urbach *pp. cit.* P. 52. N. 15.

<sup>13</sup> The Bible does not explicitly say that Samuel was a Nazarite.

Simon have dared to do away with that? Of course not! The truth is that Simon did not object to the Nazritic vow. He could not even if he had wanted for the Bible clearly favors Nazritism. Nor is there any record that he ever wanted to do so, or that he was anti-ascetic. What the above quoted passage tells us is that Simon was against the practice prevalent in his time, and even more common in subsequent times, of contracting Nazritic vows for primarily non-religious reasons, and in some cases for no other reason than to prove an argument. Whether her act was legal or not, one sympathizes with Helene, the Queen of Adiabene (ca. 30 C.E.) who, according to the Mishnah Nazir, 3, 6, when her son (Izates) went to war, said: 'If my son returns in safety from the war I would be a Nazrite for seven years.' What would a mother not do to save her child! (In principle she acted no differently from Hanna who vowed that if God would give her a son he would become a Nazrite.) But we are decidedly less sympathetic when we read a little further on in the Mishnah Nazir, 5, 7, instances, which, though theoretical, must nevertheless have had some basis in actual life. For example: "If a man saw a koy (a species of wild sheep and, as H. Danby remarks, "It remained a matter incapable of settlement whether it belonged in the category of cattle or wild animal), if a man saw such a creature and said, May I be a Nazrite if this is a wild animal (and another said), May I be a Nazrite if this is not a wild animal! (and a third said), May I be a Nazrite if this is a tame beast! (and a fourth said), May I be a Nazrite if this is not a tame beast! (and a fifth said), May I be a Nazrite if this is both a wild animal and a tame beast! (and a sixth said), May I be a Nazrite if this is neither a wild animal nor a tame beast! (and then one of another party said), May I be a Nazrite if one of you is a Nazrite! (and

However, the Septuagint I Samuel 1, 11 reads: *καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέθυσμα οὐ πίνειται*. The mishnah too, nazir 9, 5 says: According to R. Nehoral, Samuel was a Nazarite. Cf. F. M. Cross, *BASOR* 132 (1953) pp. 15-26. For this last reference, I am indebted to Mr. S. Brunswick.

another said), May I be a Nazrite if none of you is a Nazrite! (and a third said), May I be a Nazrite if ye are all Nazrites—they are all Nazrites.”<sup>14</sup> Well, our sympathy runs out.

It was to this type of Nazrite, and to this type only, that Simon the Just objected and therefore, it was only of the offerings of this type of Nazrite that he refused to partake. His image of a Nazrite—which is essentially the Biblical image—was of a man who renounces the pleasure of drinking wine for the sake of God as a token of his devotion to Him, and not as one who contracts a Nazritic vow in order to impress his friends with his acumen. As Philo<sup>14a</sup> puts it, “As they have no more material resources with which to give a pledge of their piety, they dedicate and consecrate themselves, thus showing an amazing sanctification and a surpassing devotion to God. (ἄλεκτον ἐπιδεικνύμενοι ὁσιότητα καὶ ὑπερβολήν τινα γνώμης φιλοθέου). And therefore it is fitly called the Great Vow.” Nowhere in the Bible is the Nazritic vow called the “Great Vow”. But Philo is citing here from the Septuagint’s translation of Numbers 6, 2:

כי יפליא לנדור נדר נזיר להזיר לה·

ὁς ἐὰν μεγάλως εὐξῆται εὐχὴν ἀφαγνίσασθαι ἀγνεῖαν κυρίῳ

Who “shall make ‘a Great Vow’ to preserve the strictest purity for the Lord.”

Simon the Just—in company with the Septuagint and Philo—interpreted the phrase נזיר להזיר לה literally, to the Lord; that the Nazritic vow was not valid unless it was contracted for the sole purpose of consecrating oneself to God. But most Nazrites, already in Simon’s time, had no such high religious motives for their cause—and from the point

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also M. Nazir 5,5: If (six) persons were on a journey and another came towards them and one of them said, May I be a Nazrite if this is such-a-one! and another said, May I be a Nazrite if this is not such a one! (and a third said) May I be a Nazrite if one of you is a Nazrite! (and a fourth said) May I be a Nazrite if one of you is not a Nazrite! (and a sixth said) . . . if ye are all of you Nazrites! according to the school of Shamma they are all Nazrites.

<sup>14a</sup> *De specialibus legibus*, 1.248.

of view of Simon the Just, they were not genuine Nazrites. No wonder, then, that he refused to partake of their offerings, for it was a clear case of *חולין בעזרה*, unconsecrated offerings. Only once in his life was he completely satisfied with the motivation for the Nazritic vow; only once in his life did he eat of a guilt offering brought by a Nazrite—and that was when the shepherd came to him. He recognized in the shepherd the Biblical Nazrite—and was delighted. Jubilantly he cried out: *בני כמוך ירבו נזירי בישראל. עליך הכתוב אומר: איש כי יפליא לגדור נדר נזיר להזיר לה'.*

“My son, may there be many Nazrites such as you in Israel. Of thee says the Holy Writ: ‘When a man or a woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazrite to separate themselves unto the Lord.’”

This last phrase should have alerted scholars to the true understanding of the passage, namely that Simon the Just objected only to those Nazrites who did not comply with the explicit instruction contained in the verse *נזיר להזיר לה'.* He was neither anti-ascetic or anti-Nazritic. Moreover, the interpretation proposed here is not entirely new. It is already implied by Sifrei Numbers.<sup>15</sup> The Sifrei prefixes the story of Simon the Just with the following clause: *המצוה להנזיר לשם.* It is a *מצוה* to separate oneself unto the Lord. Presumably, this bit of exegesis is necessary for the understanding of Simon’s refusal to partake of guilt offerings brought by Nazrites. This makes good sense when one supposes that the Sifrei already was aware that Simon’s refusal stemmed from the fact that most Nazrites did not live up to the requirement of this clause. Hence, the proximity of the clause to the story.

I would like to add that I have no hesitation acknowledging that there are clauses in the Mishnah or the Midreshei Halakah that date back to the time of Simon the Just, and indeed, I believe them to be far more numerous than is commonly

<sup>15</sup> Chapter 22.

supposed. Hence, I have no difficulty in principle in assigning this clause to the time of Simon the Just and making it the basis for his behavior, were it not for the use of the word **המצוה**, which makes one suspect that the clause is of much later date. The word **מצוה**, when not at the beginning of a lengthy procedural description like **מצות לולב**, **מצות חליצה**, generally connotes preferability, desirable, although not obligatory.<sup>16</sup> (לכתחילה אבל לא בדיעבד) Now, it is my distinct feeling that Simon the Just viewed a Nazrite vow that was not contracted 'לה, unto the Lord, as not valid and not merely imperfect—as the word **המצוה** would suggest. I believe that the Septuagint and Philo would have concurred in this. It is too important, too much a part of a general philosophy to be merely a matter of preferability. Besides, since when is an instruction contained in a specific verse of the Bible to be treated as a kind of option?

There is, therefore, the distinct possibility that someone later—much later, in fact—who correctly understood Simon the Just's reason for not partaking of the guilt offering

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., M. Yoma, 6.1 (a similar passage appears in negaim 14.5) שני שעירי יום הכיפורים מצותן שהיו שניהן שוין . . . ואע"פ שאין שוין, כשרין; B. Talmud, yebamoth 106b: מצוה הכי, ואי אפיך לית לן בה.

Perhaps the distinction between whether or not the word **מצוה** appears at the beginning of a lengthy procedural description is implied in the very answer given by the B. Talmud quoted above from Yebamoth 106b. The passage in full reads:

R. Judah stated: **מצות חליצה**: She recites, he recites etc. And the Talmud asks: What does R. Judah teach us! It is all in the Mishnah and answers: it teaches us that the procribed procedure is such, but if the order was reversed, it does not matter.

But why is not that teaching too contained in the Mishnah since it uses the same words as R. Judah, namely **מצות חליצה**? What does R. Judah's language have over the Mishnah's language? Perhaps that the Mishnah gives us a lengthy procedural description and when this is done the word **מצוה** does not necessarily connote preferability, whereas R. Judah merely singles out a few features of the procedure and in that case the word **מצוה** generally does connote preferability.

We say "generally" because there are exceptions. See, e.g., M. Negaim 14,10 together with M. Parah 11, 7; Mekilta Tractate Pisha Ch. 11.

brought by the Nazrite, and who nevertheless wanted to harmonize the story of Simon the Just with the vogue of frivolous Nazritism in his time (the contracting of Nazritic vows for various reasons—the least of which religious), interpreted the verse **נויר להויר לה'** as merely preferable. By doing so, he reconciled the irreconcilable.

Be this as it may, what is important is that we conclude that Simon the Just, by not participating in the sacrificial rites of the Nazrites, did not oppose asceticism or the Nazritic vow but, rather, the use of holy vows for unholy purposes—a spiritual malady from which many suffer.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Another example where the Septuagint helps in the understanding of a tannaitic passage is the M. Nazir 1, 1. It counts among the **כינויים** substitutes for the form of words used to utter a Nazaritic vow (or **ידות**, handles), **הרי עלי לשלח פרע**. This is a slightly modified form of Ezekiel 44, 20. **ופרע לא ישלחו**

The phrase is usually taken to mean—in the Talmud too—to let one's hair grow long. But in the context of the Mishnah this meaning constitutes a difficulty. A person who pledges to let his hair grow long does more than use a substitute form (or a handle) of a Nazaritic vow; is taking upon himself to observe one of the three prohibitions enjoined on the Nazrite. They are: uncleanness (**טומאה**), cutting off the hair and partaking of "what comes from wine". Such a vow should be considered as though he nearly declared himself to be a Nazrite (and not as if he were merely employing a substitute form).

The Septuagint, however, renders **ופרע לא ישלחו** as οὐ ψιλάσουσιν. This word means something like "not to pull out their hair by the roots". The entire verse reads then: They (the priests) shall not shave off their heads. **לא יגלחו** and shall not pull out their hair by the roots.

This seems also to have been the understanding of the Mishnah, and that is why when a person said **הרי עלי לשלח פרע**, he did not vow to take upon himself any essential feature of the Nazrite but merely used a substitute word **כינוי** (or, more correctly, a handle) because this phrase **שלח פרע**, appears in Ezekiel immediately after **יגלחו לא יראשם**, they shall not shave off their heads. Neither can the Nazrite do so. Instead of explicitly taking the Nazaritic vow, individuals would sometimes quote the beginning or the end of a Biblical verse which contains reference to Nazaritic behavior. (Hence, the term **ידות**, "handle.") This is also the case with the clause immediately following this one in the Mishnah, namely, **הרי עלי צפרים**.