

THE PIG'S TESTIMONY*

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Abstract: The Pig's Testimony.

Archeological excavations in Israel have revealed a succession of sites from the end of the Late Bronze Age to the end of the Iron Age II (from the middle of the 13th century BCE to 586 BC), which have been defined by archeologists as Israelite. One of the characteristics of these sites is the unique zoo-archeological evidence. In some of the settlements archeologists found a very small amount of pig bones, while at other settlements they found none whatsoever. The picture differs in sites defined as non-Israelite, such as the Philistine settlements. In these pig bones reach 5 to 18 percent of the total, compared to zero to a few tenths in Israeli settlements.¹ Assuming that these findings indicate that the eating of pork was abstained from in Israelite settlements, I will discuss the following questions: Why did the Israelites abstain from eating pork? What can this custom indicate regarding the Israelites' origins?

Keywords: pig – food – Israelites – Iron Age

Resumen: El testimonio del cerdo.

Las excavaciones arqueológicas en Israel han revelado una sucesión de sitios desde fines de la Edad del Bronce Tardío hasta la Edad del Hierro II (desde mediados del siglo XIII a.C. hasta 586 a.C.), que han sido identificados por los arqueólogos como israelitas. Una de las características de estos sitios es la notable evidencia zoo-arqueológica. En algunos de asentamientos los arqueólogos encontraron una muy pequeña cantidad de huesos de cerdo, mientras que en otros asentamientos no encontraron ninguno. El cuadro difiere en sitios definidos como no-israelitas, tales como los asentamientos filisteos. En estos, los huesos de cerdo llegan a un 5 a 18 por ciento del total, comparado al cero o unas pocas décimas en los asentamientos

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¹ The statistical data can be found in the studies of Hesse and Wapnish 1990; 1995; 1998. Cf. also Sason 2002.

israelitas. Asumiendo que estos hallazgos indican que hubo abstinencia de consumo de cerdo en los asentamientos israelitas, discutiré las siguientes cuestiones: ¿por qué los israelitas se abstenían de comer cerdo? ¿Qué puede indicar esta costumbre con respecto a los orígenes de los israelitas?

Palabras clave: cerdo – alimento – israelitas – Edad del Hierro

ACCEPTED EXPLANATIONS CONCERNING ABSTINENCE FROM PORK

The Torah commanded the people of Israel to abstain from eating pork:

“And the swine, though he divides the hoof, and is cloven-footed, yet he chewed not the cud; he is unclean to you. Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcass shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you.”
(Leviticus 11, 7-8)

The medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote:

“... I say, then, that to eat any of the various kinds of food that the Law has forbidden us is blameworthy. Among all those forbidden to us, only pork and fat may be imagined not to be harmful. But this is not so, for pork is more humid than is proper and contains much superfluous matter. The major reason why the Law abhors it is its being very dirty and feeding on dirty things...With reference to the signs marking a permitted animal – that is, chewing the cud and divided hoofs in the case of beasts...know that their existence is not in itself a reason for animals being permitted nor their absence a reason for animals being prohibited; they are merely signs by means of which the praised species may be discerned from the blamed species.”²

Even today, many think that pork was forbidden because it caused diseases. Yet, if that belief were true, we would find that Jews and Muslims are healthier than believers of other religions who eat pork.

Others developed a theory according to which the Israelites did not raise pigs because of the hot climate which prevails in Israel. This theory disregards the fact that pigs have been raised in the Middle East by other nations throughout various periods (including in the mountainous areas

²Maimonides 1963: 598.

inhabited by the Israelites at first.) Pigs were and are still raised in tropical countries, such as Indonesia and India.

The anthropologist Marvin Harris tried to find an economic-environmental explanation for the prohibition of pork.³ He relied on the fact that pigs like to eat acorns. Harris claimed that at the Israelite settlement areas on the highlands there were no forests, a fact which prevented them from raising pigs. This claim is no longer acceptable, for, although the presence of an oak forest can be of much assistance when raising pigs, it does not present an exclusive condition. Furthermore, Harris relied on outdated information. As shown by research conducted by Nili Liphshitz and Gideon Biger, we know today that the central mountain area was covered with the Israeli forest, and oak was one of its main trees.⁴

In a recent book Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman write:

“A ban on pork cannot be explained by environmental or economic reasons alone. It may, in fact, be the only clue that we have of a specific, shared identity among the highland villagers west of the Jordan. Perhaps the proto-Israelites stopped eating pork merely because the surrounding people –their adversaries– did eat it. [...] Half a millennium before the composition of the biblical text, with its detailed laws and dietary regulations, the Israelites chose –for reasons that are not entirely clear– not to eat pork.”⁵

Finkelstein and Silberman, however, do not clarify the reason why the pig was chosen to serve as a symbol of differentiation. The Israelites could have also chosen differentiation by banning the eating of other animals, e.g. sheep.

The entry on pig raising in the Anchor Bible Dictionary emphasizes all of the animal's economic advantages, its digestive problems, and the fact that it's unsuitable for a nomadic way of life. And yet, this information did not prevent the author from writing:

“Archaeological excavations show that during certain periods, in areas where pork is now prohibited because of Jewish or Islamic law, pigs

³ Harris 1987.

⁴ Liphshitz and Biger 1990: 67-70.

⁵ Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 119 f.

were once raised in substantial numbers, a fact which suggests that the prohibition of pork is more a matter of culture than of environment.”⁶

“A matter of culture” leads us to the assumption that there was a communal decision process which ended with the public’s agreement.

Brian Hesse dedicated long years and much effort to solving the riddle of the pig. In a study dedicated to the subject of pork production in ancient Israel, he mentions that the reason for the ban on pork stems from the Israelites’ nomadic origins.⁷ Yet, he treats this idea with a certain amount of scepticism and concludes that the reason for the ban remains unknown.

All the explanations mentioned above are insufficient. They are based on the problematic assumption that the ideological-religious ordainment of some leader or the other could prevent an entire nation from eating an important meat. They assume that this rule can prevail for a long period of time, even though the pig is a profitable animal for the meat economy. Apart from Harris, who tried to find an explanation, researchers assume that this was an act of choice, and not an imposition.

ABSTENTION FROM PORK AS A RESULT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Unlike the various explanations above, I assume that ancient societies abstained from eating certain foods because these were inaccessible. In other words, if certain people did not eat pork, it was due to the fact that they could not raise pigs in the environmental-economical conditions in which they lived.

An ancient custom should be examined by identifying its foundations. There are cultural customs which grew from a cultural environment and they express the world view of the inhabitants of that society. Yet, there are customs which derive from the economic environment and with time have become customs with cultural characteristics. Abstinence from pork is a cultural custom. However, the inability to raise pigs is an economic circumstance enforced upon a society by environmental conditions. The custom of pork abstinence stems from these conditions. Most scholars, believers and non-believers, misunderstood the anthropological “stratigraphy” and examined the custom of pork abstention only from a later stratum, when it was already

⁶Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 6: 1133 (E. Firmage).

⁷Hesse and Wapnish 1990 : 197 f.

embedded as a cultural custom. The only way to study the custom's origin is by going down to the deepest stratum from which the first economic reality grew.

A society that cannot raise pigs due to its environmental-economical constraints is the society of desert nomads. The pig simply is not built for desert life. It is unable to walk continuously for long distances, and the food available in the desert is unsuitable for its stomach. In order to digest dry and sparse grass the animal needs a ruminant's digestive system. Thus, sheep, goats, and cattle are able to survive in desert conditions while the pig does not.

I would like to suggest that the abstinence from pork among the Israelites indicates their origins as nomads who arrived from the desert. Although they inhabited a country that enabled them to raise pigs, they maintained their earlier customs and nutrition habits.

Finkelstein and Silberman assume that pork abstinence was the Israelites' reaction to their encounter with the Philistines, who consumed a large amount of pork. This claim is hardly acceptable since the Philistines of the Early Iron Age lived along the southern coastal plain, while the main Israelite settlement was in the highlands. The meeting between the two populations was limited to the frontier areas and certainly did not encompass the entire Israelite population.

Already in 1922 Otto Antonius wrote:

“Let us look at one piece of evidence, the absence of pigs with the nomads. The pig, as opposed to other mammals, cannot travel long distances to pasture. Therefore, its existence in the livestock of some tribes testifies that they are sedentary. Nomads, real herdsmen, never raised pigs. Because they saw themselves as superior to sedentary tribes, they also scorned the pig as a domestic animal of such people. As a result they rejected the pig itself and declared it to be impure. Herodotus described such a situation with relation to the Scythians. But this phenomenon is well-known especially among shepherds who were nomads, Semitic and Hamitic. Those tribes overlaid a religious framework onto their relation to the pig, even when the nomads became sedentary themselves [...]. The religious prohibition on eating pork is a result of the nomads' loathing of sedentary farmers” (translated from German by G. Eilat).⁸

⁸ Antonius 1922: 241 f.

This unambiguous opinion was also supported by Simon Bodenheimer:

“It is important to mention that all nations who loathe the pig are nomads or descendants of nomads. In contrast, the pig is the domestic animal of settled tribes who have always practiced agriculture. [...] Antonius was absolutely right when he contradicted the opinion that the so-called hygienic rules influenced pig prohibition. Neither a defect in its flesh loved by so many residents of hot climates, nor the prevention of trichinosis, served as a significant incentive for its ban. It’s obvious that the nomads despised an animal which proved useless for them during their long wanderings. Antonius assumes– and it is accepted by many scientists – that at every place that we’ll find a ban on pigs, such as in Sumer, Canaan and Egypt, as well as with all the Semites, Hindus, etc. –there was an ancient agricultural, pig-raising population rejected by the nomadic invaders.”⁹

Zeuner also supported the opinions of Antonius and Bodenheimer, long before the decisive archeological discoveries.¹⁰ And yet, Hesse, who was well acquainted with the archeological findings, rejected this opinion. As a result, the discussion surrounding the environmental and economical reasons came to a halt and the scholars continued searching only for religious reasons for the prohibition.

PORK ABSTINENCE AS A RELIGIOUS COMMAND

Let’s return and rethink the assumption that it is possible to force a large public to refrain from their eating habits for a long period of time.

In Leviticus 1, 21-23, among the rules of *kashrut*, there is an interesting reference to insects (“flying creeping things”):

“Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth; even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper

⁹Bodenheimer 1958: 378.

¹⁰Zeuner 1963: 261.

after his kind. But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination unto you."

The law-giver forbids eating insects, although does allow the locust, the bald locust, the beetle, and the grasshopper. These were different than others because eating them was accepted when the rules of the Bible were written. Here as well, we return to the desert. Wherever food is sparse and unattainable, man "compromises" with nature and eats things that he would not have eaten if he were in a place with food in abundance. The locust is common in the desert, and when it arrives in large swarms, it is difficult to ignore its nutritional advantages. The custom of locust eating spread to the sedentary tribes and is also accepted in certain modern day societies. It seems as if the lawgivers knew that they would not be able to prevent locust eating, and therefore they permitted it. Thus, we can assume that the lawgivers could not force people from eating a certain food solely because of a religious outlook.

Examining how Christianity and Islam, both stemming from Judaism, have approached pork abstinence can also help us comprehend the matter. Christianity began among Jews, who indisputably abstained from pork. Yet, after Jesus was rejected by the Jews, his followers turned to the non-Jewish sector. This community was ready to receive the new religion, yet, it was not ready to give up pork. Thus, the new religion adapted itself to the eating habits of its believers and did not insist upon pork abstinence.

Islam approached a population that consisted mostly of nomadic tribes (Bedouins), or city dwellers who were the descendents of desert nomads. In this group, the raising and eating of pigs was not customary, so that the ban passed easily. On the other hand, the Muslims are allowed to eat camel, while in Judaism, the camel is considered non-*kosher*. The reason is obvious: the Bedouins used to eat camels, and it was impossible to enforce camel abstinence on them.

PORK ABSTINENCE TURNED INTO SOCIAL SEGREGATION

The Israelite political entity was not the only one established in the ancient Near East by nomadic tribes. The Aramites established several states before and after the crystallization of the Israelite entity. Yet, unlike others, the Israelite entity survived until the Roman period and the cultural-religious setting survived until this day. This fact, and the close acquaintance with

the Bible and the history of Israel, enables us to attempt to write a tentative reconstruction of the history of pork prohibition, from nomadic necessity to the ingredient that is the trademark of the Jewish culinary culture. First of all, zoo-archeology teaches us that the Israelite settlers, even as they established permanent settlements, abstained from pig-raising. From this we may assume that they were not in a hurry to learn from the Canaanites how to raise pigs for food purposes. We can find an explanation for their reservation in the traditional relationship between the farmer and the nomad (and in modern times, between the Bedouin and the Arab peasant), as described by Antonius. In order to clarify this, let us re-emphasize that we are discussing desert nomads who could not raise pigs under any circumstances. Nomads from inhabited lands, just like Bedouins within a settled country, were closely acquainted with pigs. These, while settling for the winter, tend to sow a crop and then they may also raise one generation of pigs or purchase pork for food purposes. This was not an option for desert nomads. Therefore, Finkelstein and Silberman's claim, that the Israelites were the descendants of nomads from inhabited lands, provides only a partial and ambivalent answer.

Antonius wrote that in the first stage the settlers did not want to raise pigs in order to maintain their separatism from the farmers. This was not an ethnic or religious separatism, but rather a cultural one. The Israelites accepted the situation as it was, as part of their identity and ideology. Violation of this custom was perceived as the violation of the existing order and as a drastic change of the ancient customs. One could expect that hostility and contempt would diminish with time and the new farmers would get used to the local economy and adapt themselves to the pig. Yet, zoo-archeology teaches us that this is not what happened. Perhaps this expected process would have occurred after a long period of assimilation. Perhaps, it occurred in other countries, a possibility which demands a different study altogether. Yet, the facts teach us that in Israel and Judah pork abstinence dominated, meaning, that the customs of the former nomads, became a custom imposed on the Canaanites who assimilated with the Israelites and together they created the Israelite entity. This fact calls for a study of models of domination based on the relationship between archeological and zoo-archeological findings.

The Bible testifies that pork was indeed not eaten in Israel. The prophets complained that the Israelites and their kings committed the sin of idolatry to the Canaanite gods and various other sins of morality. Yet they never complained of the people consuming pork. The revulsion to pork remained so intense that there was no need for prophetic preaching. Most probably, people

no longer remembered the origin of pork prohibition during the kingship period. At a certain stage, perhaps during the days of Josiah or possibly even before, the prohibition of pork was inserted into the religious codex. From that time onwards, it was considered unclean and aversion to it was considered sacred.

The pork ban was not invented or chosen in order to segregate Israel from the rest of the nations. Yet, it became the Israelite culture's trademark. It can be assumed that the Jewish exiles in Babylon, who preserved the Jewish tradition until their return to their homeland, were the first ones who used it to actively and symbolically announce their separation from other groups.

CONCLUSIONS

We have archeological evidence regarding the ancient tradition of pork abstinence. The analysis of this custom, with the aid of environmental and economic means, enables us to suggest a likely explanation regarding its evolution. This explanation is preferable to the attempts to ascribe the abstinence to climatic or medical restrictions. The pig can grow in various weather conditions and the health of pork eaters remains intact. Pig abstinence did not have a religious origin. Yet, with time, it was included in the Jewish religious codex and as a result it became as holy as the rest of the religious Jewish elements. It is unlikely that the residents of Judah and Israel were familiar with the source of the prohibition. However, they were bound by their ancestral commandment, which they accepted even before it became a written law.

Without the archeo-zoological evidence it was possible to develop the "Canaanite origins" theory which conceives of the Israelites as being of Canaanite origins. Yet, this important new evidence on pig farming proves that the Israelites were originally desert nomads. Revulsion of the pig could not evolve in a group which separated from the autochthonous Canaanite population and not even among the nomads who lived west of the Jordan River. Therefore, if we accept the explanation that the pig laws stem from a nomadic lifestyle, we cannot accept the "Canaanite option" for Israel's origins.

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