

THE WISDOM OF PYTHAGORAS

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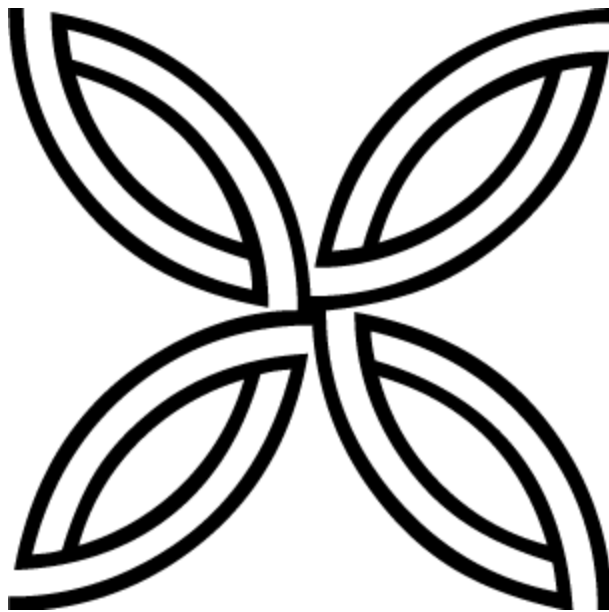
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CHAPTER I GREECE IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

THE soul of Orpheus had passed like a divine meteor across the troubled heavens of a new-born Greece. When the meteor had disappeared, the land was again wrapt in darkness. After a series of revolutions, the tyrants of Thrace committed his books to the flames, overthrew his temples and drove away his disciples. The Greek kings and numerous cities followed this example, more jealous of their unbridled licence than of that justice which is the source of pure doctrine. They were determined to efface his very memory, to leave no sign of his existence, and they succeeded so well, that, a few centuries after his death, a portion of Greece even doubted whether he had ever lived. It was in vain that the initiates kept alive his tradition for over a thousand years; in vain that Pythagoras and Plato spoke of him as divine; the sophists and the rhetoricians saw in him no more than a legend regarding the origin of music. Even at the present time, savants stoutly deny the existence of Orpheus, basing their assertion on the fact that neither Homer nor Hesiod mentioned his name. The silence of these poets, however, is fully explained by the interdict under which the local government had placed the great initiator. The disciples of Orpheus lost no opportunity of rallying all the powers under the supreme authority of the temple of Delphi, and never tired of repeating that the differences arising between the divers states of Greece must be laid before the council of the Amphictyons. This was displeasing to demagogues and tyrants alike. Homer, who probably received his initiation in the sanctuary of Tyre, and whose mythology is the poetical translation of the theology of Sankoniaton, Homer the Ionian might very well

have known nothing of the Dorian Orpheus whose tradition was kept all the more secret as it was the more exposed to persecution. As regards Hesiod, who was born near Parnassus, he must have known the name and doctrine of Orpheus through the temple at Delphi; but silence was imposed on him by his initiators, and that for good reasons.

And yet Orpheus was living in his work, in his disciples, and even in those who denied his very existence. What is this work, where can the soul of his life be sought? In the ferocious, military oligarchy of Sparta, where science was despised, ignorance erected into a system, and brutality exacted as being the complement of courage? In those implacable wars of Messenia in which the Spartans were seen persecuting a neighbouring people to the point of extermination, and these Romans of Greece preparing for the Tarpeian rock and the bleeding laurels of the Capitol by hurling the heroic Aristomenes, the defender of his country, into an abyss? Or should it rather be sought in the turbulent democracy of Athens, ever ready to convert itself into a tyranny? Or in the praetorian guard of Pisistratus, or the dagger of Harmodius and Aristogiton, concealed under a myrtle branch? Or in the many towns and cities of Hellas, of greater Greece and Asia Minor, of which Athens and Sparta offer us two opposing types? Is it in all these envious, these jealous democracies and tyrannies ever ready to tear one another into pieces?—No; the soul of Greece is not there. It is in her temples, her mysteries and their initiates. It is in the sanctuary of Jupiter at Olympia, of Juno at Argos, of Ceres at Eleusis; it reigns over Athens with Minerva, it sheds its beams over Delphi with Apollo, who penetrates every temple with his light. Here is the centre of Hellenic life, the heart and brain of Greece. Here come for instruction poets who translate sublime truth into living images for the masses, sages who propagate these

truths in subtle dialectics. The spirit of Orpheus is felt wherever beats the heart of immortal Greece. We find it in poetry and gymnastic contests, in the Delphic and Olympian games, a glorious project instituted by the successors of the Master with the object of drawing nearer together and uniting the twelve Greek tribes. We are brought into direct contact with it in the court of the Amphictyons, in that assembly of the great initiates, a supreme, arbitrary tribunal, which met at Delphi, a mighty centre of justice and concord, in which alone Greece recovered her unity in times of heroism and abnegation. 1

And yet Greece in the time of Orpheus; her intellect, an unsullied, temple-guarded doctrine; her soul, a plastic religion; and her body, a lofty court of justice with Delphi as its centre, had begun to decline early in the seventh century. The orders sent out from Delphi were no longer respected, the sacred territories were violated. The race of men of mighty inspiration had disappeared, the intellectual and moral tone of the temples deteriorated; the priests sold themselves to politicians. From that time the Mysteries themselves became corrupted.

The general aspect of Greece had changed. The old sacerdotal and agricultural royalty was succeeded either by tyranny pure and simple, by military aristocracy, or by anarchical democracy. The temples had become powerless to check the threatening ruin. A new helper was needed. It was therefore necessary to popularize esoteric teaching. To enable the thought of Orpheus to live and expand in all its beauty, the knowledge of the temples must pass over to the lay classes. Accordingly, under different disguises, it penetrated the brains of civil legislators, the schools of the poets, and the porticoes of the philosophers. The latter felt

in their teachings the very necessity Orpheus had recognized in religion, that of two doctrines: the one public and the other secret, manifesting the same truth in different degree and form, and suited to the development of the pupil. This evolution gave Greece her three great centuries of artistic creation and intellectual splendour. It permitted the Orphic thought, at once the initial impulse and the ideal synthesis of Greece, to concentrate its entire light and radiate it over the whole world, before her political edifice, undermined by internal dissensions, tottered beneath the power of Macedonia and finally crumbled away under the iron hand of Rome.

Many contributed to the evolution we are speaking of. It brought out natural philosophers like Thales, legislators like Solon, poets like Pindar, and heroes like Epaminondas. It had also a recognized head, an initiate of the very first rank, a sovereign, organizing, creating intelligence. Pythagoras is the master of lay as Orpheus is the master of sacerdotal Greece. He translates and continues the religious thought of his predecessor, applying it to the new times. His translation, however, is a creation, for he co-ordinates the Orphic inspirations into a complete system, gives scientific proof of them in his teachings and moral proof in his institute of education, and in the Pythagorean order which survived him.

Although appearing in the full light of historical times, Pythagoras has come down to us as almost a legendary character. The main reason for this is the terrible persecution of which he was the victim in Sicily, and which cost so many of his followers their lives. Some were crushed to death beneath the ruins of their burning schools, others died of hunger in temples. The Master's

memory and teaching were only perpetuated by such survivors as were able to escape into Greece. Plato, at great trouble and cost, obtained through Archytas a manuscript of the Master, who, it must be mentioned, never transferred to writing his esoteric teachings except under symbols and secret characters. His real work, like that of all reformers, was effected by oral instruction. The essence of the system, however, comes down to us in the Golden Verses of Lysis, the commentary of Hierocles, fragments of Philolaus and in the Timaeus of Plato, which contains the cosmogony of Pythagoras. To sum up, the writers of antiquity are full of the spirit of the Croton philosopher. They never tire of relating anecdotes depicting his wisdom and beauty, his marvellous power over men. The Neoplatonists of Alexandria, the Gnostics, and even the early Fathers of the Church quote him as an authority. These are precious witnesses through whom may be felt continually vibrating that mighty wave of enthusiasm the great personality of Pythagoras succeeded in communicating to Greece, the final eddies of which were still to be felt eight hundred years after his death.

His teaching, regarded from above, and unlocked with the keys of comparative esoterism, affords a magnificent whole, the different parts of which are bound together by one fundamental conception. In it we find a rational reproduction of the esoteric teaching of India and Egypt, which he illumined with Hellenic simplicity and clearness, giving it a stronger sentiment and a clearer idea of human liberty.

At the same time and at different parts of the globe, mighty reformers were popularizing similar doctrines. Lao-Tse in China was emerging from the esoterism of Fo-Hi; the last

Buddha Sakya-Mouni was preaching on the banks of the Ganges; in Italy, the Etrurian priesthood sent to Rome an initiate possessed of the Sibylline books. This was King Numa, who, by wise institutions, attempted to check the threatening ambition of the Roman Senate. It was not by chance that these reformers appeared simultaneously among such different peoples. Their diverse missions had one common end in view. They prove that, at certain periods, one identical spiritual current passes mysteriously through the whole of humanity. Whence comes it? It has its source in that divine world, far away from human vision, but of which prophets and seers are the envoys and witnesses.

Pythagoras crossed the whole of the ancient world before giving his message to Greece. He saw Africa and Asia, Memphis and Babylon, along with their methods of initiation and political life. His own troubled life resembles a ship driving through a storm, pursuing its course, with sails unfurled, a symbol of strength and calmness in the midst of the furious elements. His teachings convey the impression of a cool fragrant night after the bitter fire and passion of an angry, blood-stained day. They call to mind the beauty of the firmament unrolling, by degrees, its sparkling archipelagoes and ethereal harmonies over the head of the seer.

And now we will attempt to set forth both his life and his teaching apart from the obscurities of legend and the prejudices of the schools alike.

Footnotes

6:1 The Amphictyonic oath of the allied peoples gives some idea of the greatness and social might of this institution: 'We swear that we will never overthrow Amphictyonic towns, never, during either peace or war, prevent them from obtaining whatever is necessary for their needs. Should any power dare to attempt this, we will march against it and destroy its towns. Should impious hands remove the offerings of the temple of Apollo, we swear that we will use our feet, our arms, our voice, and all our strength against them and their accomplices.'

CHAPTER II YEARS OF TRAVEL

AT the beginning of the sixth century before our era, Samos was one of the most flourishing islands of Ionia. Its harbour fronted the violet peaks of a slumbering Asia Minor, the abode of luxury and charm. The town was situated on a wide bay with verdant coasts, and retreated, tier upon tier, up the mountain in the form of an amphitheatre, itself lying at the foot of a promontory on which stood the temple of Neptune. It was dominated by the colonnades of a magnificent palace, the abode of the tyrant Polycrates. After depriving Samos of her liberty he had given the island all the lustre of art and Asiatic splendour. Courtesans from Lesbos had, at his bidding, taken up their abode in a neighbouring palace to which they invited the young men and maidens of the town. At these fêtes they taught them the most refined voluptuousness, accompanied with music, dancing and feasting. Anacreon, on the invitation of Polycrates, was transported to Samos in a trireme with purple sails and gilded masts; the poet, a goblet of chased silver in his hand, sang before this high court of pleasure his languishing odes. The good fortune of Polycrates had become proverbial throughout Greece. He had as a friend the Pharaoh Amasis who often warned him to be on his guard against such unbroken fortune, and above all not to pride himself on it. Polycrates answered the Egyptian monarch's advice by flinging his ring into the sea. "This sacrifice I offer unto the gods," he said. The following day a fisherman brought back to the tyrant the precious jewel, which he had found in the belly of a fish. When the Pharaoh heard of this, he said he would break off his friendship with Polycrates, for such insolent good fortune would draw down on him the vengeance of the gods.— Whatever we may think of the anecdote, the end of

Polycrates was a tragic one. One of his satraps enticed him into a neighbouring province, tortured him to death, and ordered his body to be fastened to a cross on Mount Mycale. And so, one evening as the blood-red orb of the sun was sinking in the west, the inhabitants of Samos saw the corpse of their tyrant, crucified on a promontory in sight of the island over which he had reigned in glory and abandonment.

To return to the beginning of Polycrates' reign. One star-lit night a young man was seated in a wood of agnus castus, with its glimmering foliage, not far from the temple of Juno, the Doric front of which was bathed in the rays of the moon, whose light added to the mystic majesty of the building. A papyrus roll, containing a song of Homer, had slipped to the ground, and lay at his feet. His meditation, begun at twilight, was continued into the silence of the night. The sun had long ago disappeared beneath the horizon, but its flaming disc still danced in unreal presence before the eyes of the young dreamer. His thoughts had wandered far from the world of visible things.

Pythagoras was the son of a wealthy jeweller of Samos and of a woman named Parthenis. The Pythoness of Delphi, when consulted during a journey by the young married couple, had promised them: "a son who would be useful to all men and throughout all time." The oracle had sent them to Sidon, in Phoenicia, so that the predestined son might be conceived, formed, and born far from the disturbing influences of his own land. Even before his birth the wonderful child, in the moon of love, had been fervently consecrated to the worship of Apollo by his parents. The child was born; and when he was a year old his mother, acting on advice already received from the priest of Delphi,

bore him away to the temple of Adonai, in a valley of Lebanon. Here the high priest had given him his blessing and the family returned to Samos. The child of Parthenis was very beautiful and gentle, calm and sedate. Intellectual passion alone gleamed from his eyes, giving a secret energy to his actions. Far from opposing, his parents had encouraged him in his precocious leaning towards the study of wisdom. He had been left free to confer with the priests of Samos and the savants who were beginning to establish in Ionia schools in which the principles of natural philosophy were taught. At the age of eighteen he had attended the classes of Hermodamas of Samos, at twenty those of Pherecydes at Syros; he had even conferred with Thales and Anaximander at Miletus. These masters had opened out new horizons, though none had satisfied him. In their contradictory teachings he tried to discover the bond and synthesis, the unity of the great whole. The son of Parthenis had now reached one of those crises in which the mind, over-excited by the contradictions of things, concentrates all its faculties in one supreme effort to obtain a glimpse of the end, to find a path leading to the sun of truth, to the centre of life.

Throughout that glorious night Pythagoras fixed his gaze on the earth, the temple, and the starry heavens in turn. Demeter, the earth-mother, the Nature whose secrets he wished to pierce, was there, beneath and around him. He inhaled her powerful emanations, felt the invincible attraction which enchained him, the thinking atom, to her bosom, an inseparable part of herself. The sages he had consulted had said to him: "It is from her that all springs. Nothing comes from nothing. The soul comes from water, or fire, or from both. This subtle emanation of the elements issues from them only to return. Eternal Nature is blind and inflexible, resign thyself to her fatal laws. The only