On the Letters of Apollonius of Tyana

Most of what we know about Apollonius of Tyana comes from the biography of him written by Philostratus the Elder (c. 170–247 CE). The general picture of him that emerges in the letters is of a wandering philosopher of the Pythagorean school who, in his writings, emphasized the importance of disciplined spiritual work, was critical of the Greeks whom he believed had declined into moral depravity, and set out to advise his disciples about the ways in which one could arrive at knowledge of the ways of God. He was a contemporary of Jesus Christ, and this has led many scholars, both contemporary and classical, to draw comparisons between them. The Biblical scholar Bart D. Ehrman speaks of Apollonius in his introduction to his textbook on the New Testament. There he describes him as an important figure from the first century without first revealing he is writing about Apollonius of Tyana:

Even before he was born, it was known that he would be someone special. A supernatural being informed mother the child she was to conceive would not be a mere mortal but would be divine. He was born miraculously, and he became an unusually precocious young man. As an adult he left home and went on an itinerant preaching ministry, urging

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1 All of the following translations of Apollonius of Tyana are my own.
his listeners to live, not for the material things of this world, but for what is spiritual. He gathered a number of disciples around him, who became convinced that his teachings were divinely inspired, in no small part because he himself was divine. He proved it to them by doing many miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. But at the end of his life he roused opposition, and his enemies delivered him over to the Roman authorities for judgment. Still, after he left this world, he returned to meet his followers in order to convince them that he was not really dead but lived on in the heavenly realm. Later some of his followers wrote books about him.

Compare this to the words of Apollonius in a letter to the Ephesians who frequented the temple of Artemis. There, he writes,

There is come from Greece a man who is not Greek by race, and though not an Athenian or indeed a native of Megara, yet his name is synonymous with hard work and spiritual discipline. He comes to make his home among you and to dwell with your goddess. So I ask that you designate a place for me to stay, in an environment sufficiently clean and remote, where I would have no need for purification rites though I always remain inside its walls.

He speaks of himself in the third person. He is aware of his duty to the world as one in charge of propagating the true philosophy of the Pythagoreans. From this letter and the above excerpt, we can see how Apollonius conceived of himself as a kind of “alternate Christ” figure and how he himself maintained this image of a reformer of mankind. Indeed, Ehrman goes on to say that Apollonius was a real person whose disciples believed Jesus to be a fraud. In the third century, Sossianus Hierocles, the Roman aristocrat who campaigned for stronger policies against the Christians, argued that the doctrines and life of Apollonius were more valuable than those of Christ and compared his
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works with the miracles of Christ. This was a view held by both Voltaire and Charles Blount during the Age of Enlightenment. G.K. Chesterton, on the other, believed that the unique trial, suffering and death of Christ stood in stark opposition to the stories about Apollonius, which he felt were very likely spurious. Joseph Campbell, in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, offers a more sober view as he lists both Apollonius and Jesus as examples of individuals who shared similar hero stories, along with Krishna, Buddha, and others.

Apollonius was known in the medieval Islamic world. In the Arabic literature he appears as Balinūs (or Abūlūniyyūs) and the Arabic-speaking occultists referred to him as “Lord of the talismans” (Ṣāḥib ʾar-ṭilasmāt) relating stories about his achievements as a talisman-maker. He was appreciated as a master of alchemy and a transmitter of Hermetic knowledge. In the letter to Valerius, concerning the death of his son, Apollonius writes,

> There is no such thing as death or birth nor is it correct to speak of a coming into being, except in appearance only. When a thing passes from essence into nature we say that there is birth or that it is in the process of becoming and will assume a form. In the same way we speak of death as a passage from essence back into nature; in truth no thing ever comes into being or is destroyed.

From this basic tenet of Pythagorean philosophy, he goes on to explain an essential idea of the hermetic school:

> And yet both the visible and the invisible are essentially the same; they appear different because of changes in movement or state. And this change is not caused by any external factor, but is essential to a thing, and results from the division of the Whole into parts and a consequent return of the parts into the Whole, due to the fundamental unity of all that is.
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And furthermore, all those who have time to meditate on the truth will respond, “Yes, since that which exists is not lost, but by virtue of its existence will live forever. Nothing is destroyed.”

There was great interest in Apollonius in Europe during the sixteenth century, but until the Age of Enlightenment he was usually treated as a magician who practiced black magic and was a great enemy of the Church who, in league with the devil, attempted to overthrow Christianity. The comparison between Apollonius and Jesus was commonplace in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and advocates of Enlightenment theories, such as deism and other anti-Church positions, saw him as a forerunner of their own ethical and religious ideas that proposed a universal, non-denominational religion that was, above all, compatible with Reason.

Despite the various and sometimes significant problems of identifying which of Apollonius’s letters are authentic and which are fabrications, it is clear that he and his letters have exerted much influence both in the Classical and the Modern world. The examples, a few of which I spoke of above, are too numerous to list in this essay, yet we will devote some time to the well-known example, among Contemporary poets, of Charles Olsen’s dramatic play on Apollonius’s life. My concern here is with the letters themselves and what they have to say about the man, Apollonius of Tyana, who lived in the second century CE and who encountered the Persian Empire and India in his many travels. In the series of letters to Euphrates Apollonius criticizes this philosopher’s way of life and in doing so offers his own life as an example. This is what he says:

Perhaps you’d like to charge me with some criminal act? I only wish you were honest and had the guts. Of course in doing so I know you would go on and on repeating the same obvious and worn-out phrases. For example, you’d say: “Apollonius never takes a shower.” And you’d be right except I never leave my house and so my feet are never dirty. “He hardly moves any part of his body.” You would be right again because I
care only for the motion of the soul. “He never cuts his hair.” Of course, just as the Greek does, and the reason is that I am a Greek and not a barbarian. “He wears linen clothes.” Yes, because these are the pure garments worn by priests. “He is adept in the art of divination.” True, for there are many things we are ignorant of and to be able to see into the future allows us to know beforehand what is going to happen. “But such occult practices are inappropriate for a philosopher.” But not for God and anyway a philosopher should aspire to such ultimate truths as only He knows. “He works miracles and heals those in physical agony and those suffering from various ailments.” You could just as well charge Asclepius with the same crime. “He eats alone.” That’s right, and the rest of the world eats like pigs. “He rarely speaks and then only on rare occasions.” Yes, I prefer to hold my tongue though there are times when I must voice my opinion. “He is a vegetarian and will not eat the flesh of animals.” True, and this shows that I am humane. Now if in addition to these complaints, Euphrates, you feel there are others, let me suggest this: “If there was an opportunity, he would have accepted any money offered to him as well as precious gifts and promotions to a higher position of authority as I have done.” I assure you that if I were offered any of these things, I would not have accepted them. “But surely you would have accepted honors on behalf of your fatherland.” A country that is unaware of its true riches is not one’s fatherland.

Apollonius does not concern himself with the motions of the material body because his concern is with the “motion of the soul,” he is a vegetarian because this is “humane,” and believes that the philosopher should aspire to “such ultimate truths” as only God knows. He also suggests that he is able to predict the future. In another letter to Euphrates, he writes,

The Persians have a name for divine beings; they call them magi. A magus is one who worships the gods or is by nature
himself divine. You are certainly no magus but instead like a man in the desert without God.

And furthermore, in yet another letter to Euphrates, Apollonius writes,

You say that philosophers who follow the teachings of Pythagoras practice Magic and should be called Magi, and you say the same about those who are followers of Orpheus. I believe that even those who are followers of Zeus should be called Magi, provided they comprehend the workings of Divine Law and are seekers of the truth.

Collectively, these letters suggest that Apollonius was a magician. But what kind of magician was he? In the popular imagination a magician could refer to a wizard, a sorcerer, or one who practices evil magic. In the above letter there is this word magos, which I have translated as magi, and in the previous letter there is a reference to the Persians. This suggests that Apollonius could be thinking of the Persian religious specialists known as Magians. But the Magians were a Median tribe originating in Iran who had nothing to do with magic or wizardry. The Magian faith was characterized by a belief in the principles of dualism,Ormazd and Ahriman; by a belief in the resurrection and a future life; by certain religious scruples against taking animal life, with the exception of destroying noxious animals, which was regarded as a meritorious and sacred duty. The fame of the Magi for learning and for the power of divination was widespread in antiquity. Furthermore, to complicate matters, by the first century CE, words like magos, astrologos, mathematikos, and chaldaios that were originally used to indicate, respectively, religious specialists in the Persian Empire, astrologers, astronomers, and the priests of the Esagila temple in Babylon, became interchangeable. So, when the word magoi is used to describe the men who came to see the baby Jesus after an astronomical observation, (Matthew 2:1) it does not mean that they are Persian religious specialists or Magians but astrologers. The leading astrologers of
Antiquity were of the Esagila, the temple of Marduk in Babylon; the Greeks usually called them Chaldaeans, but as we have seen above, this name had become synonymous with several other words. It is almost certain that Apollonius either travelled to Babylonia or otherwise had knowledge of their astrology. We know quite a lot about these officials: they made astronomical observations and were able to predict the course of the planets, observed the entrails of the victims, “read” the future from the smoke of the sacrifices, noticed what troubles were approaching, advised the authorities on the kind of sacrifices they had to bring to ward off the dangers, and they cured people with incantations and exorcisms. We can conclude that Apollonius’s concept of magic was essentially Babylonian in nature, originating with the magicians in the Persian Empire. A letter to the Priests at Delphi provides further evidence and recalls two other texts of Apollinius, *On Sacrifice* and *On Astrology*:

Priests desecrate the altar with blood, and the great masses of people are amazed, that in times of trouble, our cities are visited with plagues and other calamities, unaware that they have angered the gods in this way. How blind and stupid can they be? Even Heraclitus, with all his wisdom, could not persuade the Ephesians to purge mud with something equally filthy and to avoid using blood that carries the vital force.²

Finally, there is another letter to Euphrates that is illuminating in this context since it shows that when Apollonius is thinking of “magic” or the “magi” he is thinking of an art, that we have outlined above, that originated in the Near East. Here he criticizes Euphrates and offers an explanation of the Pythagorean way. He writes,

If any student is in a position to speak with a Pythagorean and to ask him what knowledge he will derive from studying

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² To the Ancient Greeks, blood carried the Vital Force and Innate Heat, which powered cellular metabolism.
with him, I would tell him this: he will gain knowledge of legal matters, geometry, astronomy, mathematics, knowledge of harmony and music, and of the art of medicine, all aspects of divination, he will become like a god, and even more importantly he will learn the qualities of being generous and forgiving, his soul will become elevated, he will achieve glory, endurance, he will revere and gain direct knowledge of the gods not based on mere opinion but in fact and he will directly observe the world of daemons and not base his conclusions on mere faith, he will befriend both, realizing that in one respect both god and daemon are the same, he will derive an independence of spirit, he will learn to persist in his studies against great odds, he will be frugal, find that he can live on little but basic needs, his perception will be sharpened and quick, his movements unhindered and forceful, his body will acquire a healthy color, he will be courageous in all things, with an eye to the final goal which is immortality. Now have any of your followers, Euphrates, gained anything, such as what I have spoken of, that they could use in order to acquire knowledge of the true philosophy? I imagine that they have acquired nothing but the sight of your great wealth and that is yours alone.

There is another class of letters that concern Apollonius’s moral system that is derived from his spiritual work. To his brother, Hestiaeus, he writes,

If we choose to follow the path of true philosophy, as it is the highest form of existence, then no one can say that we harbor feelings of hatred towards our neighbor, that we are intolerant or mean-spirited; and for no reason.

And in another letter to his brother he writes,

And yet you must know that a central idea of the true philosophy is to regard the entire earth as your country and all
men as your brothers and your friends, knowing they are all united under one God, that they are of one essential nature, that they speak the same language and experience the same feelings, no matter where each was born or how, whether he is barbarian or Greek, as long as he is a man aware of his true nature. But there is a bond even more essential than these truths of philosophy; it is a recognition that attracts to itself all others of the same kind.

He is critical of what he sees as the degeneration of once great cultures into cesspools of depravity. About the people of Sardis, he writes,

You grant no awards for ethical qualities, for what kind of ethical qualities do you have? But if you were to compete for the first prize in immoral acts then there could not be a winner because all of you are equally immoral. You may ask who spreads such gossip and unkind words about the people of Sardis? Well, it’s the people themselves. In Sardis no man is the friend of another, and each would rather save his own ass than testify on behalf of someone falsely accused of monstrous crimes.

And in order to drive the point home he writes two shorter letters,

Even the names of your social clubs are vile like ‘Ass-Fuckers’ and ‘Cock-Shavers.’ These are the first names that you give to your children, hoping they prove worthy of them. So you have the names ‘Ass-Fuckers’ and ‘Cock-Shavers’ for the men. Now what will you call the women, your daughters and wives? For they frequent the same social clubs as you do and are also greater whores than you could ever be.

In another letter to the Ephesians, who frequent the temple of Artemis, he is critical about their lack of respect for the sacred. He writes,
You devote yourselves to the sacred rituals of the goddess and are no less devoted to the Emperor. In general, I cannot censure your custom of inviting others to the festivals as well your own commitment; but what I do condemn are all the people who day and night inhabit the shrine of the goddess, because I see thieves and criminals of all sorts issuing from the enclosed and sacred space. Your shrine has become home to sacrilegious looters and thugs who defy the Law.

And like the Ephesians, the people of Sais have also let their belief in the sacred decline into mere lip service. He writes,

Plato says, in his *Timaeus*, that you are descended from the Athenians, and though you were expelled from Attica, the goddess that you have in common with them is called Neith, whereas they call her Athena. But they are no longer true Greeks, and I will tell you why. No man who has acquired wisdom and experience through many years of disciplined work calls himself an Athenian; no Athenian ever grew a full beard, and wherever you looked, you saw that all their faces were smooth. The sweet-talkers stand before their doors, conmen before their gates, pimps near the long walls, free-loaders in front of Munychia and in front of the Piraeus; and the goddess no longer has the temple at Sunium devoted to her.

And again, he writes to the people of Sardis about the impossibility of attempting to convert them to a code of morality and belief in God,

It is quite right for a traditional philosopher like myself to be somewhat anxious about visiting your city that is so ancient and has such a considerable history; and I would not have hesitated in taking on the journey if I had any hopes of success in reconciling your city to a code of morality, of respect for the laws of nature and the public sphere, and of the supreme law of God. And, in any case, I would have done
everything in my power to convert you; but infighting among the various factions is crueler than the most violent war.

In the above letters, Apollonius is critical of the moral decline into which great cultures have fallen. He sees people less concerned with the spiritual life and who base their hopes on material things. In the following letter, also to the people of Sardis, he is concerned with the once great Greek culture and what it has become. He writes,

You think you deserve to be called Greeks because of your noble heritage and because at one time there were colonies of strong men who called themselves by this name. But just as the Greeks are characterized by their customs, their laws, their common language and their private life, so too are men in general by their actions and appearance in public. But most of you no longer use your ancestral names; and on account of your recent wealth, you have abandoned the traditions of your forefathers, rejecting all links with your past glory. Therefore, these aged men who have acquired wisdom are justified in no longer greeting you even in their tombs, since they don't recognize the men you have become.

Many authors refer to Apollonius of Tyana in their works but perhaps the most sustained creative work dealing with his life is Charles Olson's play, *Apollonius of Tyana: A Dance, with Some Words, for Two Actors*, written in the summer of 1951 at Black Mountain College. Through the figure of Apollonius, Olson dramatizes his own new life, the vocational choice he had made in undertaking his modern epic poem, the Maximus poems. Tyana, the place of his origin and also a character in the play, tells how Apollonius “knows … that his job, at least, is to find out how to inform all people how best they can stick to the instant, which is both temporal and intense, which is both shape and law.” Furthermore, Tyana says,
It is curious about ignorance, how it thrives—even ignorance of such a common thing, such an easily found out thing as the contours and peoples of what any of us share, the earth. Or ignorance, for that matter, of time—what has gone on in time amongst others as well as yourselves, you who have quarreled largely, have moved from civil war of farming brothers to civil war of all of us—and for what?

So Apollonius makes his way through the Mediterranean world of the first century CE, that is “already the dispersed thing the West has been since,” conducting “a wide investigation into the local, the occasional, what you might even call the ceremonial, but without … any assurance that he knows how to make objects firm, or how firm he is.”

Being of the Pythagorean school he learns

of the ancient world disciplines for the body and its health which rested on the concept that to heal it is necessary first to know, and that to know is more than mechanics, however much any knowing of the body must rest on a complete knowledge of its behavior. It is a concept we have only known the ragged end of, and so we have doctors for the mind and doctors for the body and neither of them know what a dancer now has to know, or a composer, or a poet, if any of these latter craftsmen are honestly attacking their craft.

He “is on the lookout for man, and he is already on this side of Caesarism or Christism, has found out that either of these dividings falls into ugly halves—of materialism or immortalism.”

In his journeys he also learns that two ills were coming on man:

(1) unity was crowding out diversity (man was getting too multiplied to stay clear by way of the old vision of himself, the humanist one, was getting too distracted to abide in his own knowing with any of his old confidence); and (2) unity as a goal (making Rome an empire, say) had, as its intellectual pole an equally mischievous concept, that of the univer-
sal — of the “universals” as Socrates and Christ equally had laid them down. Form … was suddenly swollen, was being taken as a thing larger a thing outside a thing above any particular, even any given man.

These issues that confronted Apollonius clearly apply to those Olsen himself was encountering at Black Mountain as he began to think about the larger work before him. After travelling to India Apollonius finally winds up in Egypt where he discovers, “a community of men who call themselves the GUMNOI, or, THE NAKEDS.” The dance has become, 

a sort of happiness, a “Naked” happiness, non-interference with others, not so much ecstatic as we know ecstatic, but what ecstatic is, the discipline and joy of anyone when he or she has come to see that compulsion is no good, that nothing is so good as each allowed to be himself alone in the midst of the phenomenal world raging and yet apart. Apollonius dances in such joy, for these NAKEDS have taken up direct from energy where he believes it is, a part of the daimonos (which is also become a false word, but it is what Apollonius told his friend, the Roman consul Tellesinus, he knew wisdom to be, “The recognition of the daemonial nature in anything, including ourselves, and only these guileless paths give health”).

Here we recall Apollonius’s letter to Euphrates concerning the student of Pythagorean philosophy. He writes,

he will revere and gain direct knowledge of the gods not based on mere opinion but in fact and he will directly observe the world of daemons and not base his conclusions on mere faith, and he will befriend both, realizing that in one respect both god and daemon are the same.
Olsen speaks of the knowledge of “daemonic” energy, as opposed to the mechanics of knowing through repetition. He will experience things in the instant as a body moves in the dance, keenly aware of his movements and of the fact of the body not apart from the mind. In accessing this energy, the Aristotelian duality is broken, there are no “universals” as the dance is in constant change, and furthermore this energy is not an intellectual concept based on opinion but a fact. He has managed “to locate what he himself feels: that life as spirit (daemon) is in the thing, in the instant, in this man.” I can only suggest here the richness of Olson’s play as an example of a consummate work of art that makes imaginative use of the life of Apollonius of Tyana. A more extensive commentary on the play is beyond the scope of this essay. But the interested reader can go further, and by examining the letters, see the great extent to which Olson understood and appropriated the life and work of Apollonius in order to examine his own life as he began to undertake his great work, The Maximus Poems.

And I think it is fitting to close this essay on the letters of Apollonius of Tyana with Olsen’s own words,

He had done his work. He was near home. And with pride and ease, let the dancer go back to Tyana, let him come in slow to her as she sat at the beginning of the play, and let him come down to her, go forward into her arms, and as the lights go down, the color over the whole stage area (the known world) should first go off, color by color, and then, when the same stick of light with which the play opens is all that picks out the two of them, let that light go down … now Apollonius’s back is to the audience, and they shape together an ambiguous, double backed thing as darkness returns and is final.

As for Apollonius’s philosophical convictions, we have an interesting, probably authentic fragment of one of his writings, On Sacrifices, where he expresses his view that God, who is the most beautiful being, cannot be influenced by prayers or sac-
rifices and has no wish to be worshipped by humans but can be reached by a spiritual procedure involving nous (intellect), because he himself is pure nous, and nous is also the greatest faculty of humankind.

Works Cited
