

CLEOBIS AND BITON (HERODOTUS 1.31)

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The meeting of Solon and Croesus (Herodotus 1.29–33) is placed prominently at the beginning of the Croesus story and near the beginning of the whole work. Solon's elaborate account of human happiness might thus be expected to have some application to what follows, and even to express Herodotus' own views. Some scholars have however argued that Solon's advice is incoherent, and especially that the story of Cleobis and Biton does not fit in with the rest. If this were so, and Herodotus were confused in this important programmatic passage, then there would be little hope of finding serious philosophical or religious thought anywhere in his history.¹

Solon's reply to Croesus' question about who is happiest (ὀλβιώτατος) is in three sections: first he names Tellus as happiest, and gives his reasons (1.30.3–5); then he names Cleobis and Biton as second happiest, and justifies this choice by telling a story about their death (1.31); and finally he explains to Croesus why he was not chosen as happiest (1.32).² There is no difficulty in seeing how Tellus exemplifies the discussion of human happiness in the third section: life is uncertain, and no one is happy in every respect; the happiest man is the one who has the greatest number of good things through his life and then dies well (32.9). Continuous happiness and a good death are two separate elements of the best life (ἐπεγένετο, 30.4, 31.3; πρὸς τούτοις, 32.7; ἔπειτα, 32.9), although Solon sometimes associates them both in a single expression. Thus, when he says that the happy man must 'end his life well' (εὖ τελευτῆσαι τὸν βίον, 32.5) he seems to mean both that the man must complete his life in prosperity and that the manner of his death should itself be good. Such formulations as this suggest that the emphasis on a good death is due simply to the ambiguity of τελευτάω ('bring to an end', 'complete', 'die')³: the idea that one cannot safely call a man happy until he has reached the end of his life without suffering disaster does not imply that the manner of his death need be especially glorious. But there is a serious thought behind the play on words: a good death is an essential element of the happiest life, and a crucial [end of p. 22] element would be lacking if the death were not good. Solon chooses Tellus as happiest because he has both enjoyed continuous prosperity and died well.⁴

¹ K. H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian* (London & Sydney, 1985), 112, denies that the placing of the episode is emphatic, and describes Solon's stories as 'two picturesque anecdotes'. Cf. F. Jacoby, R.E. Suppl. 2 (1913), 421, who thinks that Solon's stories are only introduced here 'weil er sie hübsch fand und sie sonst nirgends unterbringen konnte'.

² A good account of Solon's reasoning in 1.32 is given by H. R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, 1966), 158. Other stories in which a wise man gives a paradoxical answer to a *Superlativfrage* are discussed by O. Regenbogen, 'Die Geschichte von Solon und Krösus', in W. Marg, (ed.), *Herodot. Eine Auswahl aus der neueren Forschung* (Munich, 1962), 375–403 (Originally in *Das humanistische Gymnasium* 41 [1930], 1–20).

³ Cf. generally S. Goldhill, 'Two notes on τέλος and related words in the *Oresteia*', *JHS* 104 (1984), 169–76.

⁴ On the etymology of Tellus' name see Immerwahr (n. 2), 156 n. 21. T. Krischer, 'Solon und Kroisos', *WS* 77 (1964), 174–7, points out that Tellus' happiness is not an ideal, but only the best that is attainable. Tellus is a private citizen (ιδιώτης), but he

Solon's refusal to consider Croesus the happiest of men turns out to have been well justified when Croesus loses first his son and then his kingdom. Croesus himself later realises that Solon was indeed right (1.86.3), although he had been angered by his judgement at the time. Solon had stressed the power of chance (συμφορή), and it is prominent in the ensuing story of Atys and Adrastus.⁵ A sequence of unexpected and unpredictable events leads to the downfall of Croesus' empire, further showing that no human being can be safe from disaster.⁶ Herodotus elsewhere speaks in his own voice of the instability of human prosperity (1.5.4), and often reveals the importance of looking to the end (e.g. 3.125.4).⁷ Solon's advice has much in common with the warnings of Amasis to Polycrates (3.40) and Artabanus to Xerxes (7.10ε), although the emphasis in each case is rather different. Amasis thinks that prosperity is dangerous because of the jealousy (φθόνος) of the gods, while Solon says rather that prosperity is in any case unlikely to continue unabated because of chance (συμφορή) (although he too mentions divine jealousy at 32.1). Artabanus warns of the dangers of excessive greatness rather than of excessive happiness. All three characters give advice appropriate to the situation, and all three are justified by events. But although all three are essentially correct, none of them expresses the whole of Herodotus' own wisdom: Herodotus himself understands more than any individual character in his history.⁸ [end of p. 23]

Thus Tellus exemplifies Solon's general discussion of human happiness (1.32), and this discussion in turn applies to Croesus. But it is less obvious how Cleobis and Biton fit in, and why they are chosen as second happiest. The pessimism of the god's belief that death is better than life for humans (31.3) seems inconsistent with the description of Tellus, in which a happy life is shown to be possible.

The only obvious connexion between the two stories is the glorious death: Tellus 'died gloriously' (30.5) in battle, while the death of Cleobis and Biton is described as 'an excellent end of life' (τελευτὴ τοῦ βίου ἀρίστη, 31.3). But there is clearly more to both stories than the glorious death: for Tellus, death comes as the final completion of a happy life; while for Cleobis and Biton death is explicitly said to be a reward which shows that death is better than life. Nor, if a glorious death were

is not a nonentity who is wholly surprising as a choice: his sons are gentlemen, καλοὶ τε καὶ αἰσχροὶ (cf. C. W. Fornara, *Herodotus* [Oxford, 1971], 50 n. 24), and he himself is highly honoured. Gomme (on Thuc. 2.34.1) argues that Thucydides is right that it was normal even in early times to bring those who died in battle back to Athens for burial, and an exceptional honour to bury them on the battlefield. Herodotus (1.30.5) clearly implies that it was a great honour for Tellus to be buried on the battlefield.

⁵ Cf. F. Hellmann, *Herodots Kroisoslogos* (Berlin, 1934), 58–68; Immerwahr (n. 2), 157 n. 24. It is striking to find someone considering himself to be 'most unfortunate' (1.45.3) so soon after a discussion of who is happiest.

⁶ Cf. Hellmann (n. 5), 73–7; Immerwahr (n. 2), 159–60. G. Schneeweiss, 'Kroisos und Solon. Die Frage nach dem Glück', in A. Patzer (ed.), *Apophoreta für U. Hölscher* (Bonn, 1975), 172, argues that the particular reasons for Croesus' downfall, for example the crime of Gyges, can be seen as examples of the general uncertainty of life.

⁷ Cf. W. Schmid & O. Staehlin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Munich, 1929–48), i.2.620 n. 4; Immerwahr (n. 2), 156–7.

⁸ G. De Sanctis, *Studi di Storia della Storiografia Greca* (Florence, 1951), 53–4, argues that Herodotus had no reason to put a philosophy in Solon's mouth that he did not believe in himself, especially as an interpretation of his own is especially needed at this point. But Solon's words can have interpretative value without being everything that Herodotus himself might have said about the matter.

the only important factor, would Cleobis and Biton be the obvious candidates to be second happiest.

Since Solon's criteria of happiness are a moderately happy life followed by a glorious death, scholars have naturally been tempted to argue that Cleobis and Biton, like Tellus, are shown to have enjoyed a moderately happy life as well as having a glorious death. They come second to him, it is alleged, because they died relatively young and thus had less complete lives.⁹ The most thoroughgoing attempt to assimilate Cleobis and Biton to Tellus has been made by Stahl. He argues that Cleobis and Biton are happy because '(a) they were citizens of Argos (a powerful city, we understand), (b) they were in good health and, so, in great honor so that even their mother was called happy, (c) they lived in sufficient circumstances, (d) the gods granted their lives the most beautiful ending'.¹⁰

It is certainly true that the words 'they lived in sufficient circumstances' (βίος ... ἀρκέων ὑπῆν, 31.2) suggests that Herodotus is going to offer another description of humble but contented lives, but the rest of the story does not bear this out. The story of Tellus is a concise account of why he is happiest, in which almost every detail explains an aspect of his happiness. The Cleobis and Biton chapter, on the other hand, is three times as long and deals only with their death, about which much circumstantial detail is given. The meaning of the story does not consist, as did that of Tellus, in the enumeration of aspects of their happiness, but in its climactic revelation of the pessimistic wisdom of the god (31.3). Herodotus says almost nothing about the overall quality of their lives, but concentrates on their deaths. He does indeed give some details of their lives, but these are necessary [end of p. 24] to explain his account of their deaths and are not in themselves aspects of their happiness. We need to know that they are Argives in order to understand why the temple (the Heraion) is at a distance from the city; there is nothing here to correspond to the remark about Athens in the Tellus story, 'their city was prosperous' (τῆς πόλιος εὖ ἡκούσης, 30.4). We need to know that they were strong in order to understand how they could pull an ox-cart such a distance: this is not a statement that they were generally healthy or free from disease, which might make them exemplify 'free from disability and disease' (ἄπηρος and ἄνουσος, 32.6). In fact, the only detail in the story that suggests that the quality of their lives was important is 'they lived in sufficient circumstances' (βίος ... ἀρκέων ὑπῆν, 31.2), and this is hardly enough by itself to convey the idea of a contented, if humble, life like that of Tellus. The function of this detail in the story is to show that there was nothing in the lives of Cleobis and Biton that would make death a blessing for them in particular: they were not, for example, wretched or impoverished. The point is that death is best for everyone, even for those with an adequate livelihood.

Some scholars have thus admitted that the basic meaning of the story is pessimistic, while arguing that Herodotus has changed the emphasis of the Cleobis and Biton story by stressing the positive happiness in their lives in order to fit them in with Tellus.¹¹ But this raises the question of why Herodotus should have chosen such

⁹ Thus H. Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot* (diss. Marburg, 1932), 32; Schneeweiss (n. 6), 168; P. Oliva, 'Die Geschichte von Kroisos und Solon', *Das Altertum* 21 (1975), 176; J. Hart, *Herodotus and Greek History* (London, 1982), 29.

¹⁰ H.-P. Stahl, 'Learning through suffering? Croesus' conversations in the history of Herodotus', *YCS* 24 (1975), 5.

¹¹ Thus M. Pohlenz, *Herodot* (Leipzig & Berlin, 1937), 113; Schneeweiss (n. 6), 167, argues that it is a good death, and not death as such, that is better than life. But Herodotus is explicit that Cleobis and Biton have a good death and that this also shows that death is better than life (31.3).

a story in the first place if it did not cohere naturally with that of Tellus. If he had needed a story illustrating a humble but contented life there are many others that he could have chosen which would have been far more appropriate than Cleobis and Biton.

These difficulties in finding a common meaning in the two stories have led other scholars to argue that they are indeed fundamentally incompatible, and that Herodotus has taken them from different sources without adequately reconciling them.¹² Indeed it seems that some elements are Athenian in origin, and other elements Delphic: Tellus was an Athenian, and Solon's ideas reflect those of the historical Solon;¹³ while the Cleobis and Biton story seems to have been influenced by Delphic ideas.¹⁴ Von Fritz argues that Herodotus was not a philosopher from whom consistent thought can be [end of p. 25] expected, but that he reflects different possible outlooks on life without feeling the need to reconcile them.¹⁵ Von Fritz allows that Herodotus has done something to tone down the inconsistency: Cleobis and Biton have had some happiness, so that it is not suggested that it would have been better never to have been born.¹⁶ But this does not, he thinks, alter the fact that the stories are fundamentally incompatible.

One possible explanation of the connexion between these two apparently contradictory stories is to be found in a formulation of Solon's wisdom that does not actually occur in 1.29–33 at all. When Croesus is on the pyre he recalls Solon's advice as 'no one alive is happy' (1.86.3). Aristotle formulates the idea in somewhat similar terms: 'no one should be called happy while they live' (*EN* 1100a10–11). In criticizing Solon, Aristotle distinguishes two possible meanings of the paradox: first, that someone is only happy when he is dead (*EN* 1100a11–13); and second, that it is only safe to call someone happy when he is dead, and thus beyond any further fluctuations of fortune (*EN* 1100a14–17). In Herodotus, Solon's explanation of his choices (1.32), which fits the story of Tellus, clearly implies the second of Aristotle's alternative meanings. Tellus can safely be called happy because he has enjoyed

¹² Thus L. Weber, 'Tellos, Kleobis und Biton', *Philologus* 82 (1927), 154–66; K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung* (Berlin, 1967), i.216–23. J. Defradas, *Les thèmes de la propagande delphique* (2nd ed.; Paris, 1972), 217–23, argues unconvincingly that the whole episode has a Delphic source. Even less plausible is the religious significance that he finds in the achievements of Tellus and of Cleobis and Biton.

¹³ Cf. K. Nawratil, 'Solon bei Herodot', *WS* 60 (1942), 1–8; von Fritz (n. 12), i.217–18.

¹⁴ Cf. Regenbogen (n. 2), 383–9; H. W. Parke & D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1956), i.379–80. The story seems to have been modelled on that of Trophonius and Agamedes (cf. Pindar, fr. 2, 3). L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford, 1961), 154–6, thinks that the script on the plinths of the surviving statues of Cleobis and Biton is Argive, but doubts if there was a long inscription: part of the story was indicated on the base 'perhaps elaborated in detail by his guide' (156). The basic story could thus have been elaborated with Delphic ideas.

¹⁵ von Fritz (n. 12), i.218–19. Cf. K. Latte, 'Die Anfänge der griechischen Geschichtsschreibung', in *Entretiens Hardt* 4 (1956), 16: 'Das sind zwei völlig verschiedene Lebensideale, die sich nicht vereinen lassen. Nicht zufällig stammt Tellos aus Athen. Wenn er vor Kleobis und Biton gestellt wird, so überwindet hier das tätige Bürgerideal Athens im 5. Jh. die müde Resignation des 6. Jh.'.

¹⁶ This even more pessimistic piece of wisdom is offered by Silenus to Midas (Aristotle fr. 44 Rose = Plutarch, *Mor.* 115B–E). Cf. Theognis 425–8; Bacchylides 5.160–2.

moderate prosperity and reached the end of his life without suffering disaster. But the story of Cleobis and Biton illustrates the first possible meaning of the paradox which Aristotle considers: the point here is that death is actually the happiest state.

When Croesus remembers Solon's advice (1.86.3) both interpretations are equally appropriate. He realises that he was premature in considering himself to be supremely happy, and he now understands that the uncertainties of life make it unsafe to call any man happy while there is still the chance that he might suffer disaster. He thus accepts that Solon was correct on the second of Aristotle's interpretations of his paradox. But he also seems to accept that Solon was correct on the first interpretation of the paradox: in his despair he naturally believes that no living person is happy.¹⁷

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Thus Solon's stories are linked by the ambiguity of one possible formulation of the paradox, even though this formulation does not occur in 1.29–33. He is evidently convinced of the truth of the paradox 'call no one happy until he is dead' even though he, like Aristotle, is unsure what the paradox actually means. Since the dramatic point of his interview with Croesus is that he shows that Croesus is not the happiest person, he must demonstrate that someone else is happiest whichever way the paradox is interpreted. On one interpretation Tellus is happiest, on the other Cleobis and Biton are happiest. Either way, he cannot call Croesus happiest.

This connexion between the two stories is latent and inexplicit: Solon never uses the ambiguous formulation of the paradox, and does not propose the two stories as alternative interpretations of it. He states explicitly that Tellus is happiest, and Cleobis and Biton second happiest. A deeper connexion between the two stories can be seen if it is understood they illustrate different kinds of happiness, Tellus the best kind, and Cleobis and Biton the second best kind. The key to the relationship between these stories is the idea, commonly expressed in Greek literature, that unhappy life is worse than death.¹⁸ Solon himself mentions the suffering that must be endured in life (1.32.2), and this is emphasized even more strongly by Artabanus: 'since life is wretched, death is the most desirable refuge for humans' (7.46.4). The best that can be hoped for is to enjoy continuous moderate prosperity as Tellus does. But if this is not possible then the second happiest condition is death. Thus Cleobis and Biton are specifically said to be second happiest. The third and worst condition is unhappy life, or even a life, like that of Croesus, which falls from prosperity into disaster.

There is, on the surface, a difference of opinion between Solon, who thinks that some sort of happy life is possible, and the god who thinks that death is better than life. Since one might expect the wisdom of the god to be more profound, some scholars have argued that Cleobis and Biton exemplify a deeper sort of happiness. Hellmann, for example, thought that the Cleobis and Biton story puts in context the question of how to live to be happy: Tellus is an example of how men ought to live to be happy, but the god shows that in reality human life is insignificant and that death is best.¹⁹ But no such contrast is present in Solon's words, where Tellus is said specifically to be happiest and not merely happiest from a limited, human point of view. On [end of p. 27] Hellmann's view it would have been more logical to have placed Cleobis and Biton first and Tellus second. But Solon does not necessarily

¹⁷ Cf. the words of Croesus at Bacchylides 3.47: 'to die is sweetest'.

¹⁸ Cf. Herodotus 5.4.2; Sophocles, *OC* 1211–38; Euripides, *Alc.* 935–40, *Hcl.* 593–6, *Tro.* 634–42; Plutarch, *Mor.* 106C–109D; R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs* (Urbana, 1942), §56.

¹⁹ Hellmann (n. 5), 41, criticized by von Fritz (n. 12), ii.123–4. A similar view to that of Hellmann is taken by S. Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague, 1969), 133–4.

disagree with the view of the god. He says that no one can be completely happy (32.2, 8), and strongly implies that unhappiness is more likely than happiness. If unhappiness is more likely than happiness, and is also worse than death, then the rational choice for any human at any time is always death. But this probability does not alter the fact that continuous moderate prosperity is possible and that if anyone has, like Tellus, actually attained it then he will be happiest. The god thus rationally chooses death as the best thing for any human at any time. But humans are ignorant of the future suffering that is likely to be in store for them, and continue to live in the hope of a happy life.²⁰ Such hope will normally be disappointed, but in exceptional cases like that of Tellus it can, at least partially, be justified.

Solon's advice to Croesus is thus coherent. The uncertainties of life mean that no one can be completely happy. The best that can be hoped for is the continuous moderate prosperity enjoyed by Tellus. The second best condition is death, and this is granted as a reward to Cleobis and Biton. The third and worst condition is to live unhappily. The two stories with which Solon illustrates his advice have different sources, but have been combined by Herodotus to form a coherent whole. Another link between the two stories is that they illustrate two possible interpretations of the Solonic paradox. Solon's advice to Croesus, while it does not express the whole of Herodotus' wisdom, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Croesus story and thus of the whole work.

²⁰ Cf. Solon 13.33 ff.; West on Hesiod, *Op.* 96; K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1974), 132–4.