

Is the Phoenix Kosher?

THE PHOENIX IS THE RAREST of game birds, indeed so rare that its snob appeal by far supersedes that of all other luxury foods. This mythical creature is described by Ovid in his classic account from the *Metamorphoses*:

There is one living thing, a bird, which reproduces and regenerates itself, without any outside aid. The Assyrians call it the phoenix. It lives, not on corn or grasses, but on the gum of incense, and the sap of balsam. When it has completed five centuries of life, it straightway builds a nest for itself, working with unsullied beak and claw, in the topmost branches of some swaying palm. Then, when it has laid a foundation of cassia, and smooth spikes of nard, chips of cinnamon bark and yellow myrrh, it places itself on top, and ends its life amid the perfumes. Then, they say, a little phoenix is born anew from the father's body, fated to live a like number of years.¹

The phoenix is doubly rare because only one is said to exist at any given time and because it is so very difficult to capture, as indicated by its life span. In the lowest estimate, Ovid places it at 500 years; Tacitus claims that it corresponds to the Egyptian Sothic Cycle of 1,461 years; Pliny puts it at the length of the Platonic Year, the 12,994-year period needed for the sun, moon, and five planets all to return to their original heavenly positions.

Haute cuisine has long been a symbol of status, and the cuisine of the hunt has long been associated with the privileges of aristocracy. The decadent Roman Emperor Heliogabalus—who shared with the phoenix a part of solar divinity—was a great gourmet and glutton, especially fond of such delicacies as flamingo heads, peacock tongues, and cockscombs cut from the live animals. He once sent hunters to the land of Lydia, offering two hundred pieces of gold to the man who would bring back a phoenix. None did.² An explanation for this prodigious culinary desire can be extrapolated from the analysis of Jean-Pierre Vernant, a specialist in ancient Greek religion:

The incandescent life of the Phoenix follows a circular course, increasing and decreasing, with birth, death and rebirth following a cycle that passes from an aromatic bird closer to the sun than the eagle flying at great heights, to the state of a worm in rotting matter, more chthonian than the snake or the bat. From the bird's ashes, consumed at the end of its long existence in a blazing aromatic nest, is born a small earth-worm, nourished by humidity, which shall in turn become a phoenix.³

What more appropriate dish for a solar emperor? Perhaps tired of the repeated human sacrifices made to his own divine nature, the emperor sought a rarer offering. For Heliogabalus, true to his own solar name, wished to bring heaven down to earth in a cruel and erotic scenario of death, so that the blood of the human sacrifices organized by the Priest of the Cult of the Sun, flowing from the sacrificial altars of the Temple of Emesa, would be augmented by some more decidedly supernatural offerings.

The life cycle of the phoenix is thus the very allegory of cuisine, taken in its structural instance, as it spans the antithetical conditions of raw/cooked, cold/hot, fresh/rotten, dry/moist, aromatic/gamy. The phoenix would therefore be the perfect dish and the ideal offering, paradoxically encompassing the contradictory possibilities of diverse cooking techniques, inherent alimentary differences, and sacred symbolism. Like the transubstantiation of the host, or cannibalistic communion, the eating of the phoenix would constitute a truly transcendental gastronomic act.⁴

Given the phoenix's origin and its habitat in biblical lands, the question as to whether the bird is kosher has long been debated. The dietary prohibitions detailed in Deuteronomy (xiv, 11–18) and Leviticus (x, 13–19) are considerably less equivocal about animals of the earth and the waters than about those of the air: while the former two categories bear structural descriptions of those characteristics that make an animal forbidden, there are no such categorical indications about aërial creatures, other than the claim that they must be “clean,” followed by a list of those which must not be eaten. According to the King



James Bible, these are the *eagle, ossifrage, osprey, glede, kite, vulture, raven, owl, night hawk, cuckow, hawk, little owl, great owl, swan, pelican, gier eagle, cormorant, stork, heron, lapwing, bat*. A recent translation, the New English Bible, gives a somewhat different list: *griffon-vulture, black vulture, bearded vulture, kite, falcon, crow, desert owl, short-eared owl, long-eared owl, hawk, tawny owl, screech owl, little owl, horned owl, osprey, fisher owl, stork, cormorant, hoopoo, bat*.

These lists pose several problems. (1) There are major issues of translation. Not only do the two cited translations not coincide in naming all of the same species, but there are discrepancies in spelling, ordering, and even the number of birds. Contemporary biblical scholars almost unanimously agree that these discrepancies are not, strictly speaking, a matter of translation, but are rather due to the fact that we cannot actually determine to which birds the original texts refer. This does not, however, obviate the ambiguities that arise from such textual differences. (2) No mention is made of any group of characteristics that would explain why these animals are, in fact, “unclean.” The impure birds are merely enumerated, and one thus needs to deduce the reason for the restrictions based on principles of family resemblance, and consequently extend the list to

all like creatures. The most general apparent solution to this problem has been to speak of birds of prey and scavengers, though this determination is complicated both by the inclusion of the swan (an aquatic bird) and the bat (a nonbird). The swan poses the problem that, like the duck and goose (both kosher), the swan is web-footed (which would seem to mitigate against its kosherness, but doesn’t in the case of the two other birds) and domesticable (which would argue for its being kosher, but this is obviously not a sufficient condition). The inclusion of the bat poses a particular problem, for to let one nonbird into the category opens it up to total incoherence. The list is such that it cannot generate an unambiguous and coherent set of conditions for *koshruth*. (3) There are those who claim that the first bird mentioned in both Deuteronomy and Leviticus is in fact the *griffon* (griffin, gryphon), the legendary hybrid with the front of an eagle and the rear of a lion. This animal would, of course, be triply nonkosher: because of the lion component (clearly excluded by the specific imperatives concerning the edibility of carnivorous land animals), because of the eagle component (excluded insofar as it is a bird of prey), and because of the hybridity of the creature. But the more fascinating and troubling issue raised here is

the taxonomic one, for the translation of “eagle” or “griffon-vulture” for “griffon” *simpliciter* has been argued by some to dissimulate the fact that this list actually contains an imaginary creature, which would greatly complicate the practical side of talmudic and halakic exegesis. As might be expected, talmudic scholars consider the interpretation of this term as “griffon” to be heretical. (I have heard rumor that some Kabbalists indeed believe in the veritable ontological status of this being, though I strongly doubt it to be the case.)

(4) While Deuteronomy and Leviticus contain categories of prohibited animals from earth, water, and air, they admit neither the category nor even bear mention of animals from the fiery element (which would also include the seraphim, creatures that are *a fortiori* biblical). Consequently, the very possibility of the existence of the phoenix is denied.

These difficulties do not, however, imply the impossibility of determining whether or not the phoenix is kosher. First, we must set aside the logic of analogy: the fact that the heron, at times conflated with the phoenix, appears in certain translations of the Bible as not kosher is beside the point. We must seek a structural rationale, not a descriptive one. Contemporary biblical scholarship, as well summed up in Mary Douglas’s classic *Purity and Danger*, mostly agrees that the reasons for any given animal being impure are not practical or symbolic, but structural: the maintenance of an ordered universe necessitates the vigorous and perpetual guardianship of the integrity of creation, with everything in its proper place, guaranteed by strict categorical distinctions. The order of the biblical universe abhors hybrids, and those creatures that defy classification, or exist ambiguously in more than one category, are deemed impure.⁵ Within this general ontology, the system of dietary taboos functions as

a taxonomic classification, entailing a system of oppositions and a logic of separation that demarcate the sacred from the profane. To keep kosher is to refuse the impure, the mixed, the hybrid, the confusion of elements. Its purpose is to keep in place the major existential dichotomies: divine/human, male/female, life/death, spirit/body, blood/flesh.⁶ The phoenix, like the griffon and the bat, cannot be kosher, for it is hyperbolically hybrid, insofar as it is simultaneously the most heavenly and the most chthonic of birds: purer than the eagle, more earthly than the snake, more underworldly than the worm, and with a lifecycle that fuses earth, air, and fire in a sacred amalgam.

It is to be regretted, in gastronomic terms, that this noble animal joins the list of prohibited items within the ancient tradition of the *culinaria hebraica*. ☹

NOTES

This text is excerpted from Allen S. Weiss, *Comment cuisiner un phénix* (Paris, Mercure de France, 2004).

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (New York, Penguin, 1984), 345.

2. See Aelius Lampridius, “The Life of Elagabalus,” *Cabinet* 8 (2002), 16–18.

3. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Introduction,” Marcel Detienne, *Les jardins d’Adonis* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972), xxxiii.

4. For a study of the culinary symbolism and practice concerning the phoenix, see Allen S. Weiss, “How to Cook a Phoenix,” *Cabinet* 7 (2002), 19–21, from which the first half of this article is excerpted.

5. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

6. See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (Paris, Gallimard, 1980), 114–119, specifically her analysis of Jean Soler, “Sémiotique de la nourriture dans la Bible,” *Annales*, July–August, 1973.