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PHILO JUDEUS

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 - a. God.
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1. **Philo's background.** Philo lived in Alexandria. Assuming that he was a respected and even venerable figure, when chosen by the Jews to present their grievances before Caligula in A.D. 40, one may guess that he was born sometimes before the NT era. The date indicates that he could not have been influenced by Christian writings, and there is no evidence that he ever heard of Jesus.

The Jewish colony in Alexandria, protected by rights granted by Alexander the Great, had diverged from the Pharisaism of Pal. So many of the Alexandrine Jews had forgotten Heb., that before 200 B.C. it was necessary to tr. the OT into Gr. This LXX is supposed to reveal in a few places a little knowledge of Stoic terminology. In Psalm 51:12, for example, the Eng. "a willing spirit" (RSV), or a "free spirit" (KJV), is in the LXX (verse 14) πνευματι ηγεμονικω, "guiding spirit." The LXX is a good tr. of the Heb., but the second word is a technical term in Stoicism.

Such instances are far from proving a deliberate attempt to alter the meaning of the OT to advance the philosophy of a later Alexandrine school; they are evidence, however, of contact with Gr. culture.

The *Sibylline Oracles* (c. 140 B.C.) are strictly Jewish in content, but they put this thought into the mouth of a heathen prophetess. The apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* puts some Gr. ideas into the mouth of a Heb. king. It also makes use of allegorical interpretation, which Philo so greatly developed.

Many of the early Christian fathers not only adopted the methods of allegorical interpretation but directly borrowed many of Philo's particular details. Indeed, the Christian school at Alexandria may be considered as the heir of the Philonic school. Clement came to Alexandria in middle life, Origen was born there; the Gnostics Basilides and Valentinus taught there, not to mention the strictly pagan philosophers, chiefly Neoplatonics; and later Athanasius preached there—all of whom made Alexandria a center of scholarship.

With respect to Philo, two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand, he has been pictures as essentially a Gr. philosopher, who because born a Jew, felt it necessary to use the text of the OT so as not to offend his nation too greatly. The other extreme is see him as a miraculous anticipation of Christianity with its trinitarian Christology. Although opinions may continue to differ as to the amount of paganism he absorbed, and though some may continue to insist that he dimly recognized the second Person of the Trinity, the truth, more likely, is that he was indeed a learned philosopher but a fairly orthodox Jew for all of that.

2. **Allegorical interpretation.** The motivation for interpreting the OT allegorically is the impossibility of taking the anthropomorphic passages literally. Since these require a hidden meaning, it is possible that purely historical narrative also can reveal superior truth.

Examples are the best way to show what allegorical interpretation is. Philo's comments on Genesis 2:5 are reminiscent of Platonism:

What is the meaning of the words, "And God made every green thing of the field before it came into being on the earth, and every grass before it grew"? In these words he alludes to the incorporeal ideas. For the expression, "before it came into being" points to the perfection of every green thing and grass, of plants and trees. And as Scripture says that before they grew on

the earth he made plants and grass and other things, it is evident that he made incorporeal and intelligible ideas in accordance with the intelligible nature which these sense-perceptible things on earth were meant to imitate.

Another example of finding philosophical truth hidden underneath literal statements occurs in the *Allegorical Interpretations*, I. X (25):

He says, “for God had not rained upon the earth, and there was no man to work the ground.” These words discover a deep knowledge of the laws of being. For if God does not shower upon the senses the means of apprehending objects presented to them, neither will the mind have anything to “work” or take in hand in the field of sense perception. For the mind by itself is without employment when the Cause of all things does not pour down, like rain and moisture, colors on the sight, sounds of the hearing, savors on the taste. . . . Thus before the creation of particular concrete substance, God did not rain on the original idea of sense perception, which Moses calls “earth.”

A still more extreme example is Philo's comment on Genesis 16:16:

Why is Abraham said to be eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. Because that which follows the eighty, namely the number six, is the first perfect number [a perfect number is one whose divisors add up to the number, as $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$]. . . . And the number eighty is the most harmonious of numbers, consisting of two most excellent scales, namely, of that which is by doubles and that which is by triples in the scheme of fourths.

Perhaps the allegory that is best known—because it is a defense of the use of pagan philosophy in Hebrew and Christian theology—is the one concerning the newly emancipated Jewish slaves who borrowed or asked jewels of the Egyptians before marching E. Egyptians, explains Philo, means Greeks; and since jewels are precious possessions, they represent the precious Gr. philosophy; that the Jews asked for and took them means that Philo or any child of God may make use of Gr. Philosophy.

Since the allegorical method continued in the medieval church until the Reformers replaced it with grammatico-historical exegesis, and since also it reappears today, its great defect should be made clear. Unlike the connection between types and shadows with their realistic fulfillment, there is in the allegorical method no logical or necessary relation between the text and the interpretation. Ingenuity can always invent equally plausible or implausible alternatives. *Abram* could mean Humean skeptic as well as natural philosopher, and *Abraham* could mean Kantian. Not only can many meanings be imposed on a single text, but the same meaning can be equally well obtained from several texts, so that Homer's *Iliad* could give the same message as the Pentateuch.

One must not suppose that Philo was as indifferent to the literal meaning of the text, as his allegorizing seems to imply. Philo accepted the OT as authoritative and its historical narratives and doctrinal explanations as true. Wherever the literal meaning is possible (anthropomorphisms and figures of speech are exceptions), it must be accepted. The emancipated slaves, actually, really, historically, asked for and received literal jewels. More important, however, than the bare events, are the moral lessons inculcated. Still more important are the philosophical truths obtained by the allegorical method; but neither of the two higher meanings contradicts or denies the literal account.

3. Philo's theology. That Philo was not introducing to Jewish culture an undiluted paganism is seen most clearly in his basic theology. Plato, for epistemological reasons (see GREEK RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY), asserted the existence of incorporeal ideas, absolute realities, of which bodily objects are no more than imitations and approximations. Mathematical Equality, Justice, Man, and

Horse are such Ideas; and the Idea of Good is the highest of all. The Maker of the visible world, the Demiurge, fashions the visible world by arranging chaotic space in order, according to the pattern of the World of Ideas. They exist eternally independent of him. This Platonic scheme conflicts with the sovereignty of God as taught in the OT; and Philo, although accepting the reality of the Ideas for the same epistemological reasons, completely reverses the relationship.

In the *Allegorical Interpretation*, III. xxxiii, Philo writes “but that world which consists of Ideas . . . how it was created we shall know if we take for our guide the activity of an architect who begins to build a visible city by first conceiving its invisible plan in his mind.”

The God is the creator of the Ideas (a thesis that would have horrified Plato) is in strict accord with the OT doctrine of transcendence. Greek philosophy never entertained the notion of divine transcendence, never even dreamed of an absolute creation. In contrast, the OT puts this idea in its very first lines. Therefore Philo's basic alteration of the Platonic theory shows how essentially Jewish his thought is.

Philo also expresses a view of divine incomprehensibility that is far from the classical philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, or the later Stoics. The concept of incomprehensibility is best anticipated by examining Philo's method of learning about God. First of all, Philo uses some forms of the cosmological and teleological arguments to prove God's existence. In these he stresses the analogy between the mind of man in his body and the mind of God in the universe. Of course, he is not willing to follow the analogy to the point of making the world God's body; and perhaps because of such weaknesses in the argument, he places greater reliance on a superior method of knowing God.

In the *Allegorical Interpretations*, III. xxxiii. (100), he states,

There is a mind more perfect and more thoroughly cleansed, which has undergone initiation into the great mysteries, a mind which gains its knowledge of the First Cause not from created things, as one may learn the substance from the shadow, but lifting its eyes above and beyond creation obtains a clear vision of the uncreated One, so as from Him to apprehend both Himself and his shadow. . . . One receives the clear vision of God directly from the First Cause Himself.

Whether this direction vision is a mystic trance or whether it is only a flash of illumination, it is at any rate only an occasional experience. Solitude, because God is solitary, and absence of bodily distractions, because God is spiritual, are necessary conditions for this intuition. Although God has breathed His own divinity into the mind of every man, there is no guarantee that any random person will attain the vision. But even so, the attempt to achieve the vision is itself a worthwhile spiritual exercise.

Yet for all that Philo says about such a direction vision, and in spite of all that can be learned of God in the OT, Philo also speaks of God as incomprehensible and in fact unknowable. To quote:

Nothing that can give assurance can give positive assurance touching God, for God has shown his nature to no one, but He has rendered it invisible to our whole race. Who can assert of the First Cause either that it is without body or that it is a body, that it is of such a kind of that it is of no kind. In a word who can make any positive assertion concerning His essence or quality or state of movement . . . [man] is unable to possess knowledge regarding His nature (ibid. III. Ixxiii. [206, 207]).

Elsewhere, Philo says God is nameless; he repeats that God has no qualities; God cannot be classified because He is unlike everything else, or, in contemporary language, God is “Totally Other.” Taken strictly, these phrases mean that God is utterly unknowable. Nevertheless Philo, consistently or inconsistently, tries to make room for that amount and kind of knowledge without which revelation and religion would be impossible.

b. The Logos. If Philo must be acquitted of the charge of having abandoned Judaism to offer just another variety of pagan philosophy, so too one must guard against the early Christian view that Philo anticipated the doctrine of the Trinity in his theory of the Logos. He was a Jew, neither Greek nor Christian.

The supposed anticipation of Christ, the Logos of God, depends on some of Philo's picturesque phrases. He calls the Logos the First Born Son of God. The Logos is also the image of God, the wisdom of God, unbegotten and eternal when compared with the world, yet when compared with God begotten though still eternal.

This language, to which a Christian interpretation can indeed be given, must not in Philo be pressed too far. If one concludes that the Logos is a divine Person because He is called Son, what does one do with Laughter, also called the Son of God? Note too that God is the husband of Wisdom, Wisdom is the daughter of God, and Wisdom is also the mother of the Logos.

Since these phrases, if taken literally, are mutually inconsistent, the language of personification must be taken as nothing more than fig. expression. So understood, the material forms a reasonably plausible metaphysical or cosmological theory. The problem Philo faces is not narrowly theological. His Logos doctrine is not a speculation on the internal nature of the divine Being, but rather an account of the framework of the universe. He writes,

No material thing is so strong as to be able to bear the burden of the world: the everlasting Logos of the eternal God is the strongest and most certain support of the universe. Stretched from the center to the extremities and from the extremities to the center, it runs its long course throughout nature, combining and conjoining all its parts. For the Father who begat [him or it] made his Logos such a bond of the universe as nothing can break (*De i*, I. 8-9).

The best interpretation of Philo, so it would seem, equates the Logos with the world of Ideas. Philo calls the Logos the thought of God. It comprehends the whole intelligible cosmos. It is the "place" of the cosmos and is an Idea, a pattern, or seal, stamped on physical things, the frame of the visible world.

This Platonic (versus a trinitarian) interpretation of Philo is supported by his subsuming logoi as particular Ideas under the Logos. This is supported by the illustration, previously given, of the architect who forms a complete picture in his mind of the city he is to build. The pattern as a whole is the Logos; the various building and bridges are logoi. The passage (*De Opificio Mundi*, IV. 18) ends with these words: "like a good craftsman he begins to build the city of stones and timber, keeping his eye upon his pattern and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in each case to the incorporeal Ideas."

At the same time, in addition to such a "static" Platonic framework, Philo also has borrowed a certain dynamic outlook from Stoicism. Platon had construed the details of the world as approximations of a perfect never-changing model. The Stoics explained these details by means of seminal reasons that developed like living, growing beings. To preserve their materialism in the face of idealistic objections based on epistemology, they tried to analyze the meaning of "the rose is red" into "the rose reddens." Platonic predicates are thus turned into the activities of living powers. Thus, Philo speaks of the logoi as the powers of God. The sun and moon, for example, are the results of forces impressing matter. In Philo the dynamic action of Plato's Demiurge is transferred to the multiple powers. Whether Platonism and Stoicism can thus simply be harmonized, and whether such Idea-Powers can then be thought of as OT angels, are questions Philo never distinctly asked. Not that for a cent. the philosophic schools themselves were accommodating their views to one another and losing their distinctiveness and consistency.

Presumably without detriment to the unity of the Logos, Philo heads up the powers under two that are supreme. His thought, or at least his mode of expression, can be seen in a concluding quotation. It is part of the allegorical interpretation of Abraham and his three angelic visitors. But if Platonic Ideas

are hard to combine with Stoic powers, their identification with Heb. angels makes still a stranger combination.

When as at noon-tide God shines around the soul, and the light of the mind fills it through and through and the shadows are driven from it by the rays which pour all around it, the single object [God, The Father] presents to it a triple vision, one representing the reality, the other two reflected from it . . . The central place is held by the Father of the Universe, who in the sacred scriptures is called He That Is as his proper name, while on either side of him are the senior powers, the nearest to him, the creative and the kingly. The title of the former is God, since it made and ordered the universe; the title of the latter is Lord, since it is the fundamental right of the maker to rule and control what he has brought into being. So the central Being with each of his powers as his squire presents to the mind that has vision the appearance sometimes of one, sometimes of three: of one, when the mind is highly purified and, passing beyond not merely the multiplicity of other numbers, but even the dyad which is next to the unit, pressed on to the unmixed, uncompounded, self-contained Idea that stands in need of nothing, of three, when as yet uninitiated into the highest mysteries. . . it is unable to apprehend the Existent alone by Itself apart from all else, but only through its actions, as either creative or ruling. . . . That the triple vision is in reality a vision of a single object is clear not merely from the principles of allegory but from the literal text. When the Sage [Abraham] supplicates the three seeming travelers to accept his hospitality, he discourses with them as though they were one and not three (*De Abrahamo*, XXIV-XXV, 122-132)

To the later Christians at Alexandria, subject to the same eclectic tendencies, this sounds trinitarian. Therefore they praised him, and perhaps for the same reason the Jews virtually disowned him.

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