Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Writings of Philo

Yehoshua Amir

Introduction

In the present study we are concerned with the specific question of the place and treatment of Mikra within Philo’s extensive oeuvre. General questions on the understanding of Philo will be touched upon only insofar they seem inescapably relevant to the difficult subject of Philo’s views on Scripture.¹

We shall in this essay leave open the question whether Philo is to be regarded primarily as a philosopher, who uses the Bible as a vehicle² for a religious philosophy, nourished by Stoicism and Plato, which may be characterized as late Stoic³ or middle Platonic⁴ or whether, on the contrary, he is to be seen as a Bible exegete who places both his general education⁵ and the entire mass of contemporary thought in the service of the absolutely true doctrine of Divine revelation, set down above all by Moses in the Pentateuch.⁶ To take these two possibilities as alternatives is, I think, to pose the question in a wrong way. Both ways of looking at the problem have their own inner justifications, and each complements the other. The truth is surely that Philo’s thought-process oscillates between the two foci which were given him at the outset, namely the reliability of the word of Divine revelation as formulated by Moses, and the convincingness of the doctrine which emerged from the philosophical dis-

¹ A good survey of Philo’s activity as a writer and a look into the world of his thought, can be found in Borgen, ‘Philo of Alexandria’.
² Since the 19th century there has been a widespread notion among scholars, though as time goes on it takes milder and milder forms, that Philo was only using the biblical text as a pretext in order to pass Greek philosophical doctrines off as Jewish with the help of an artificial exegesis. His purpose has been variously fathomed as a wish to give the despised Jewish religion a little philosophical prestige in the eyes of a Hellenistic audience (Schwartz, in ‘Aporien im 4. Evangelium’, advocates this view in especially provocative form), or, on the contrary, as an attempt to make acceptable to a Jewish audience the suspect philosophy, and more than suspect mysticism, of the Hellenistic milieu (a position last taken by Goodenough in By Light, Light).
³ This classification is seen as the essential one by, e.g. I. Heinemann, Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung.
⁴ This view has been emphatically followed through by Dillon, The Middle Platonists.
⁵ On this subject see Mendelson, Secular Education.
⁶ Wolfson, Philo, may be regarded as the most prominent representative of this view. The same orientation is demanded by Völker, Fortschritt und Vollendung, and worked out with strict consequence by Nikiprowetzky, Le commentaire.
Use of Mikra

THE DISTRIBUTION OF QUOTATIONS OVER THE BIBLICAL BOOKS

To find out how Philo employs quotations from Scripture in the Greek texts that have come down to us, we need only consult the Scripture Index contained in the edition of the text with English translation. A casual glance at the Index reveals the remarkable fact that while quotations from the Pentateuch alone fill 65 pages, only five pages suffice for the listing of quotations from all other parts of the OT, and there are no quotations whatever from the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. This disproportion will increase when in the following pages we see what familiarity with the exact phrasing of the Pentateuch Philo assumes on the reader’s part in certain parts of his writings. When this is taken into account, the preponderance of the Pentateuch in Philo’s use of the Bible becomes downright overwhelming.

Yet it would not be accurate to say that Philo completely dismisses the other parts of Scripture, or fails to regard them as holy books. Philo’s concept of the Bible is clearly not that of the Samaritans, for whom only the Pentateuch is holy; at times he does make use of the Prophets and the Psalms as authorities. And while we have only a single quotation from the book of Job, his manner of quoting it leaves no doubt that he took his readers’ knowledge and recognition of the book of Job for granted. Without committing ourselves on the subject of the ‘canon’, for which concept as such we have no evidence among Jews, it is safe to say that books belonging to the Prophets and Hagiographa were regarded by Philo as holy books, to be quoted as such.

What is not clear is why Philo so seldom quotes these books, and in particular why he fails to quote them in passages where a quotation from one of these sources would have fitted into Philo’s train of thought better than the Pentateuch verses which he has to subject to a very cumbersome method of interpretation before they will serve his turn. Obviously the Prophets and Hagiographa have not the same status for him as the the Pentateuch. But the same is true for the Rabbis, who nonetheless did not hesitate to make extensive use of these books, and particularly in their interpretation of the Pentateuch. Heinemann gives a possible answer to the question: ‘The reason is not that the other books were not yet all translated, or all recognized. (...) The scattered quotations which we do find show that such was not the case. Rather, Philo knows the Bible only from the worship service and from occasionally looking things up.’ Now, this conclusion is based on circular reasoning, for Heinemann’s conjecture as to the source of Philo’s knowledge of these books is derived from Philo’s sparse use of them. Still, he may have hit on the truth. In such a case we should also have to assume that in the Alexandrian synagogue no portions of the Prophets were read, which is by no means certain. The question whether Philo was able to read the books of the Bible otherwise than in Greek translation is likewise moot.

If we do not accept Heinemann’s explanation, we may call to mind that in Hellenistic Judaism – to judge by the texts it has left behind – the figure of Moses was even more central than in the motherland. Evidence of this in Philo is the fact that although he is acquainted with other prophetic figures, when he deals with the concept of the prophet or friend of God he thinks first, and almost exclusively, of Moses. Thus wherever a word can be traced back to him he does so, bypassing all other sanctified words.

USE OF MIKRA IN THE DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF WRITINGS

The way in which Philo treats Mikra in one category of writings is not necessarily the way he treats it in another; we must therefore consider them separately.

(1) Books not concerned with the Bible

Only a few of the writings by Philo that have come down to us are not directly related to the Bible.” Even these writings are not completely devoid of biblical references. Thus even in a purely academic discussion of the doctrines held by various philosophical schools concerning the indestructibility of the world, there is a reference to ‘Moses the Lawgiver of the Jews’ who in Genesis, the first

7 All references to Philonic texts are taken from the LCL edition, of which the 10 volumes by Colson and Whitaker in the years 1919-1962 include all the Greek texts that have been preserved, together with English translations, while the supplement volumes, edited by R. Marcus, 1953, contain the English translations of works which were preserved only in Armenian. The Scripture Index is in LCL 10, 189-268.
8 The index references to these books refer not to Philo’s text, but to Colson’s notes.
9 Mut. 48I quotes Job 14:4 (all other references are to Colson’s notes).
of his five holy books, taught that the world is imperishable; in support of this
the first two verses of the Bible are quoted word for word. In another treatise,
written in the spirit of Cynic or Stoic ethics, he praises the Sage’s unshakable
strength of character, citing as a reference the ‘lawgiver of the Jews’, concerning
whom it is written: ‘The hands of Moses were heavy’. On the other hand one is
struck by the fact that when describing contemporary Jewish trends and condi-
tions Philo gives expression to a strong Jewish religiosity yet does not refer to
specific biblical sayings, even when describing the Therapeutic sect, whose
members dedicated their entire lives to the study of the books of the Bible.

All of Philo’s other writings refer in various ways to Mikra. They fall into
three groups, which we shall consider in turn.

(2) The Exposition of the Law

The ‘Exposition of the Law’ reads the Pentateuch as Moses’ book of law. Such
an approach compels Philo to ask a preliminary question which he, as a Greek
writer, could not evade: is a conception of the book as a law-code possible, from
the literary-critical point of view?

The question occurs with regard to Genesis, beginning with the first chapter.
Do such non-legislative elements have a legitimate place in a lawbook? Here
Philo recurring to Plato’s statement that a law needs a proem. As such a proem
Moses placed his philosophy concerning the creation of the world at the
entrance to his legislation, in order to make clear that what follows is not merely
one among innumerable territorial law-codes, but rather that ‘natural law’, that
‘law of the cosmos’ which, according to the Stoic view, stands idealliter behind
all local laws. A similar question confronts Philo when he comes to the stories of the
Patriarchs. These he integrates into the law code with the help of the concept of
‘unwritten law’, which, according to a Hellenistic theory, is present as ‘embod-
ied law’ in a perfect human being and precedes the written law as its archetype.

As such, the figures of the Patriarchs are an integral part of the law itself.

12 Aet. 19.
13 Prov. 29, after Exod 17:12.
14 LCL 9, pp. 103-69.
15 Borgen, ‘Philo of Alexandria’, 233-43; Exposition of the Law. Texts LCL 6-8; and additionally EI-137.
17 Op. 3. Here and in the following pages the reader will easily recognize that I differ with Borgen’s
(‘Philo of Alexandria’) view of Philo’s basic tendency. In the cosmopolitanization of the concept of
law I see rather a tendency to de-realization of the concrete concept of the nation. This is not the place
to explore this difference.
18 Abr. 267; on the history of this concept see Hirzel, ‘Agraphos Nomos’, llf. Whoever reads here
that Abraham was not only ‘one who obeyed the Law’ but ‘himself a law and an unwritten Statute’,
will agree with Heinemann. Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung, 10, who insists that Philo
has in mind here a different concept from the rabbinic Oral Torah, which one can keep, but not be.
19 Abr. 5. The passage continues: ‘The enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of
the ancients’, a notion which could scarcely be farther from the rabbinic conception.

22 Decal. 30.
23 See Urbach, Sages 1, 360ff.
24 See esp. Jos. 42f. on the strictness of Jewish sexual morality in comparison with the Hellenic.
25 Spec. 11:2ff.
26 Heinemann, Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung 421, the distinction between theft and robbery.
Philo's exposition implies certain definite interpretations of the legal concepts in the Pentateuch; but it does not inquire explicitly into the precise meaning of this or that legal concept. Verbatim quotations from the Bible and linguistic explication of these quotations occupy more space in the treatise 'On the Account of the World's Creation' than in other parts of this series. This may be attributed to the fact that this treatise may also be regarded as the first part of another series, with which we shall deal presently.

A peculiarity of the series on legal exposition is that the reflections, which are generally guided by pragmatic considerations, are frequently interrupted by allegorical disquisitions which, while profound in themselves, could be omitted without prejudice to the general coherency. If anything these disquisitions detract from the coherency because in allegory the personality of the hero is lost, and it is precisely on the personality of the forefathers that their claim to be regarded as 'embodied law' rests! The inclusion of such passages leads us to suspect that the aspect under which the work of Moses is considered in this series is only of secondary importance to Philo, since even here he cannot refrain from pursuing the kind of thoughts that represent his essential nature.

(3) Allegorical Commentary
In this series the text of Mikra is treated quite differently. It is Philo's vast allegorical commentary, which despite its volume accompanies only a part of Genesis with its explications. This time the character of the Pentateuch as law code is simply ignored. It is a legal document only in its literal meaning, which this second series leaves far behind. The subject here is not Mosaic legislation, but Mosaic philosophy.

The main effort of this philosophy is devoted to revealing the essential, 'spiritual' meaning behind the 'sensible'. The act of allegorization, which purports to bring out the meaning really intended by Moses, consists of divesting the thing named by the word of its concreteness, leaving an intrinsic meaning which is conceptual, abstracted from all spatial-temporal being, absolutely valid, eternal. Where the living human beings of biblical narrative are concerned, it is precisely their personality which must be eliminated: 'Now probably there was an actual man called Samuel; but we conceive of the Samuel of the Scripture, not as a living compound of soul and body, but as a mind which rejoices in the service and worship of God'. Philo can therefore take the biblical personalities only as sensible representations of certain spiritual types. On this level of Bible interpretation it is irrelevant whether and when, historically speaking, a man called Samuel lived. It is quite possible for a certain type to appear in the Bible as Laban, and then again as Jethro. Allegorical interpretation treats these figures as identical.

This explains the diffuse compositional character of this series. Nearly every treatise begins with one or more biblical verses, which are given in the Septuagint version. But the text itself is only a point of departure for a lengthy symbolic exegesis. As we have seen, this entails finding the announced theme in all kinds of different, widely separated biblical contexts. The disjointed thought-process which makes the reading of these works so laborious, is that a necessary consequence of the inner presuppositions of the way of thinking that prompted this exegesis. The weight of symbolic meaning is borne by the isolate word, so that the exact wording of the text to be interpreted must be punctiliously attended to. In these works, then, Philo is addressing a reader who has in his head not only the law or the narrative in general, but the exact wording of the biblical text. Practically, only a Jewish reader would be able to follow the arbitrary stringing-together of biblical passages from widely varying contexts, without losing the thread.

With this method a single verse suffices to set the theme for an entire treatise; indeed the brief verse Gen 9:20 provides material for two treatises. In 'On Flight and Finding' the short story of Hagar in the desert becomes the starting-point for the development of the deepest motif in Philo's conception of the human being.

Thus the verse is only the point of departure for an often widely-ramified train of thought which sometimes loses sight of the verse and does not come back to it.

(4) Questions and Answers
In the third series of his writings on the Bible, 'Questions and Answers', Philo adopts the opposite procedure, keeping strictly to the form of the running commentary. The verses are discussed in biblical sequence, the discussion opening each time with questions that usually begin with 'Why does he say...' or 'What does he mean by...'. Here Philo limits himself in his answer to the verse under discussion and refrains from adding further parallels. Most of the
answers can be divided into two parts: in the first he gives the literal meaning of the verse, in the second he interprets it allegorically. In keeping with his basic attitude as exegete, Philo usually disposes of the literal meaning in a few words, while the allegorical interpretation may go on for several pages.

Here, then — in contrast to the great allegorical commentary — Philo has doubtless subordinated his own religious-philosophical thinking to his task as Bible exegete. It must be stated, however, that it is not the ‘Questions and Answers’ that define Philo as a Bible commentator, but rather the great ‘Allegorical Commentary’, in which his hermeneutic genius celebrates its most impressive triumph.

Authority of Mikra

Mikra More than Literature

We shall have to deal with the question of the degree to which Philo’s allegorical Bible interpretation is indebted to the Homeric allegory which originated in his native Alexandria. This way of interpreting the poet, which developed in close connection with Alexandrian philology, is a branch of that literary scholarship which regarded Homer as the perfect poet, learned both in science and in philosophy. The task of the allegorist was to extract evidence for this from Homer’s text.

Although, as we shall see, Philo pursues the deeper mysteries of the biblical text with similar methods, he is still far from naming the work of Moses in the same breadth with the Homeric epics. With a decisiveness whose pathos derives from the critique of poetry in Plato’s Politeia, he draws a sharp distinction between Moses and poetry: art, like the Sophists, is concerned with seeming, Moses with being. True, Philo thereby loses all sense of the aesthetic standard of biblical poetry; but that is only the lamentable reverse side of his philosophical sense of superiority.

Thus it is certainly no literary interest that leads Philo to devote almost his entire activity as a writer to Mikra. He regarded literature, which for the consciousness of that time also included historiography, as belonging to the preliminary studies whose worth is only relative, in contrast to the study of absolute truth:

Nou doubt it is profitable, if not for the acquisition of perfect virtue, at least for the life of civic virtue, to feed the mind on ancient and time honoured thoughts, to trace the venerable tradition of noble deeds, which historians and all the family of poets have handed down to the memory of their own and future generations. But when, unforeseen and unhoped for, the sudden beam of self-inspired wisdom has shone upon us, when that wisdom has opened the closed eye of the soul, then it is idle any longer to exercise the ear with words. For truly it is sweet to leave nothing unknown. Yet when God causes the young shoots of self-inspired wisdom to spring up within the soul, the knowledge that comes from teaching must straightway be abolished and swept off. (…) God’s scholar, God’s pupil, God’s disciple (…) can no more suffer the guidance of men.”

Thus science and art can form only an intermediate stage on the road to absolute truth. That is the subject of Philo’s exegesis of the story of the slave Hagar, who gives birth for her mistress Sara. In his exegesis Philo speaks in the first person and says that he has learned this and that science, ‘yet I took none of her children for my private use, but brought them as a gift to the lawful wife’, the mistress, who stands allegorically for Wisdom.

Mikra, then, must belong to the sphere of this wisdom, although simply to equate them, as some Philo commentators have done, is to reckon without the fundamental non-concreteness of his thinking. We shall also have to deal with the question of how, in the above quotation, it can be taught both that wisdom is of God (and not of man) and that it is self-inspired.

It is in any case clear that the biblical word, in contrast to the irresponsible productions of poetic fancy, has authority. As to the source of this authority, this is not quite so transparent in Philo as in rabbinic Judaism. Wherever interpreters have tried simply to apply the categories of rabbinic Judaism to Philo, they have either left part of his statements out of consideration or have robbed them of meaning by refusing to take them literally. This was possible because Philo’s work contains unambiguous proof that he regarded the biblical word as of Divine origin; this seemed to ensure the identity of his views with those of the rabbis.

If we wish to reopen this question, we must begin by reexamining some of Philo’s statements on the Divine origin of the biblical word.

The Biblical Word as Oracle

On what, according to Philo, is the authority of the biblical word founded? A
first answer to this question is provided by his designations for the biblical verse: he calls it an 'oracle' 44 or a 'logion'; 45 the two in his usage are synonymous. 46 Both designations are derived from the language of Greek oracular institutions. In order to evaluate this usage correctly, we have to take into consideration that we do not find in Philo that avoidance of pagan vocabulary which marks both the Septuagint and other Jewish-Hellenistic literature; thus he does not hesitate to extol an overwhelming love of God as 'Olympian'. 47 This insouciance must be attributed to the need to place the most resonant expressive resources of the Greek tongue at the service of religious fact and feeling; these resources are naturally most intimately bound up with paganism.

If we compare Philo with Josephus in this respect, we find that the latter uses the word 'oracle' 7 (8) times. 48 Four of the passages speak of pagans consulting the oracle. In one passage he tells of an oracular saying which became current, and which the Jews trusted so far as to wage war on Rome because of it. 49 In one (uncertain) passage Moses perhaps expects to bring word from God down from Mount Sinai. 50 But in the only two passages which are of interest for our discussion, 51 biblical prophetic sayings, as such, are designated as oracles. These two sayings are naturally marked in the biblical original as words coming directly from God.

Philo, too, likes to speak of 'oracles' in connection with Bible texts where God is actually the speaker. Thus he enumerates four laws which, according to biblical report, came into being when Moses asked God and God gave him an answer via an 'oracle'. 52 When Moses asked to see God, he received an 'oracle' whose content corresponds to what is introduced in Exod 33:21 with the words: 'Thus spoke the Lord'. 53 Moses is commanded to tell Pharaoh: 'The people has received an oracle from me', 54 meaning the command reported in Exod 3:18. Moreover, when he describes the giving of the oracle, Philo makes liberal use of the hieratic terminology of the Delphic Oracle: 'an oracle falls out' 55 for Moses, harking back to the archaic technique of drawing the oracle by lot; and Abraham 'is smitten by an oracle'; 56 as in the ecstatic states of the Delphic Pythia.

Thus Colson is not quite methodically sound in frequently translating the Greek word not by 'oracle' but merely by 'command'. But Philo is not always speaking of a word from God reported in the Bible, when he uses the word 'oracle'. When Philo speaks of the loaves of showbread in the sanctuary as 'arranged by oracle', 57 we may still take this as an exalted way of speaking of the Divine directions so prosaically set forth in Exod 29:29; but when he has a 'logion' 58 tell us that on the way to the sacrifice Abraham and Isaac walked together, 59 or that Aaron's rod swallowed up the others, 60 we are dealing with passages where God is not introduced as speaker. They can be called logia only because they are in the Bible; the logion, then, is the biblical verse as such. The fact of being written in the Bible suffices, according to Philo, to give a saying oracular status. 'The Divine oracles' 61 - i.e. the report in Exod 20:21 - 'say' that Moses entered into the mysterious darkness of the Godhead. Nevertheless the fact that he speaks of 'oracles' here in the plural may be taken as evidence of a reluctance on Philo's part to allow the word 'oracle' to rigidify into a simple synonym for 'Bible verse'. The word 'oracles' in the last-quoted example is applied to a single verse; 62 in such cases 'the oracles' may be taken to mean the Bible as a whole. 63 The use of the word 'oracle' in this paler sense, which had established itself in his writing, seems to have been what prompted Philo, in passages where the actual word of God is the subject, to redundancies like 'proclaimed oracles' 64 or even an 'oracle proclaimed (by God) in person'. 65 Such words from God are proclaimed not only by Moses, i.e. in the Toro, but also by prophets. 66 The verbs that designate the act of proclamation are applied both to the Godhead and to earthly proclaimers; 67 the latter is thus both a receiver and a transmitter of oracles. How both sides of his function belong together is stated in the simplest possible way: 'Moses himself learnt it by an

---

44 χρησμός; see on this Mayer, Index Philoneus, s.v.
45 Both words are used synonymously in close proximity to each other, e.g. Mos. 157. Spec. 1:315.
46 έλεγχημα; see Index Philoneus, s.v.
47 οὐδέποτε; see Index Philoneus, s.v.
48 In one of the passages (Ant. 3:75) the manuscript versions give both χρησμός and χρησμός; the second reading is preferable.
49 War 6:109.
50 See n. 48.
51 Applied to biblical texts only in War 4:386; 6:109.
52 Mos. 2: 192.
53 Post. 169.
54 Mos. 1:73.
55 Post. 69.
56 Abr. 82.
57 Cong. 168: χρησμοίς προσέπτεται.
58 Mig. 166: the same goes for Ebr. 82, where the verse cited immediately afterward is introduced as 'the oracles'.
59 Mig. 85.
60 Mut. 7.
61 E.g. Mig. 60, 108; Heres 21; Fug. 50.
62 This is especially evident in Sobs. 17, where η χρησμός repeats what had just been called αι έρωτασσάτα βιβλία.
63 χρησμοκράτημα, e.g. Det. 48: χρησμοκρατούμενον, e.g. Som. 1:48 or λόγον προσκόπημα
64 Mut. 13. If Mut. 34 speaks of a χρησμοκράτητον τον Εγκύκλων and Som. 1:64 of a λόγονον αύτον, neither of which is the word of God in the text, then χρησμοκράτημα here is used not attributively, as an appositive, but predicatively, as a qualifier.
65 Mut. 13.
66 Of these Jeremiah (Cher. 49) is referred to by name; without naming them he also cites sayings of Hosea (Mut. 139), Isaiah (Mut. 169), and Zechariah (Conf. 62). It is worth noting that in the passage (Cher. 49) where he is named Jeremiah is called prophet, authorized hierarch, and one filled with God, so that he receives practically the same distinctions as Moses.
67 On Moses as receiver of oracles see Mos. 2:176; L.A. 3:142; Som. 2:227; Virt. 63; on Moses as giver of oracles see Fug. 138; Mos. 2:269.
oracle and has taught us how it was'.67 But it is not only Moses who exercises this double function. Concerning Jeremiah, Philo writes: 'I myself was initiated under Moses the God-beloved into his greater mysteries, yet when I saw the prophet Jeremiah and knew him not only as mystes but a worthy hierophantes, I was not slow to become his disciple'.68

The title 'hierophant', here applied to Jeremiah, is one of Philo's standard designations for Moses. In Hellas this term referred to the foremost cult official in the Eleusinian rites,69 i.e. the rites of the Attic mystery cult. Philo alternates this title with another which had been used since Homer for the priest of the oracle.70 In examining Philo's conception of Moses, we shall have to come back to these pagan associations.

After all that has been said, it is almost self-understood that Philo consistently speaks of Mikra as 'holy Scripture', the 'holy books', and the like.71 It has been rightly pointed out that such terms were widespread in Hebrew usage, and probably had been since much earlier times; probably they had come with the Egyptian Jews from the motherland.72 What we have yet to do is to show how the particular nuance of this holiness in Philo differs from that in other views.

It is first to be said in any case that for Philo the fact that something is stated in Mikra is sufficient proof that it is so. After allegorically extracting a Stoic proposition from a Bible verse, he says, 'This is no invention of mine, but a statement made by the holy oracles'.73 In another passage he writes that when the soul frees herself from all earthly things and clings only to God, then God grants her himself: 'This my affirmation is warranted by the oracle which says, “The Lord Himself is his portion”’.74 The fact that the statement is made in a Bible verse guarantees its truth. Again and again a Bible verse is called to determine how God is to be spoken of in this text.

How did Philo understand Moses' personal role as writer? We can gain some light on this matter from a remarkable exposition called forth by the verse 'And Abel became a Shepherd of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground'.75 Philo is struck by the sequence, as the younger Abel must have chosen his occupation after his brother. This is a violation of logic. 'But Moses sets no value on probabilities and plausibilities, but follows after truth in its purity'.76 This opposition between probability/plausibility and truth is of course a late echo of Socrates' debate with the Sophists in Plato's Apologia. What motive of truth it was that prompted Moses to dispense with plausibility, becomes understandable only from Philo's allegorical interpretation of the verses, which we need not go into. What is important for our purposes is the continuation of this sentence in Philo: 'And when he comes to God apart from all, he frankly says to God: “And Abel became a Shepherd of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground”.77 Philo uses a Greek word78 which may also mean: plausible, standing to reason'. The last sentence of course alludes to Moses' answer at the thornbush: 'I am not a man of words',79 which is translated by the Septuagint, in one variant which Philo was evidently using, with this Greek

---

67 Det. 86.
68 Cher. 49.
69 PW 2, 2 p. 1581.
70 θεοτόκος, see Index Philonae, s.v.
71 See Index Philonae, s.v. ἱερός.
72 Cf. M. Shabbat 16:1; M. Yadayim 3:5.
73 Mut. 152.
74 Cong. 134.
75 Thus Det. 166; Conf. 94; Fug. 178; Mut. 39; Som. 1:231; Som. 2:220.
76 Cher. 108f.
77 Cher. 124.

78 Gen. Rabba 8:8, p. 61-62.
79 See on the following the essay 'Moses als Verfasser der Tora bei Philon' in my book Die hellenistische Gestalt, 77-106.
80 Sac. 94.
81 Gen 4:2.
82 Sac. 12.
83 ἔλογος.
84 Apparently Philo's copy of the Septuagint had in this passage the variant ἤλογος, which is found in some Septuagint manuscripts. This reading was also used by the tragic poet Ezekiel, as we see from v.113 of the fragments of his tragedy.
word, so that the answer can read either ‘I am not eloquent’ or ‘I do not speak
plausibly’. Here not only is Moses named as the author of the ‘Tora, but a
stylistic peculiarity of the ‘Tora text as we have it is causally connected with
Moses as we know him through the Bible narrative itself. The authorship of the
Moses we know is taken as an explanation for a certain trait that characterizes
the style of the Bible.

Anyone acquainted with rabinic Bible exegesis will immediately see that
nothing could be more alien to the rabbis than this way of thinking. But still
more immediately, we are faced with the question: how does the authorship of
Moses, which Philo assumes as a thing self-understood, consort with Philo’s
own view of the biblical word as ‘oracle’, for which we have just presented
detailed evidence? In one of the passages quoted above, Philo himself drew a
sharp distinction between instruction by God and instruction by human be-
ings. Does not Moses’ authorship imply a human, that is, if we maintain the
sharpness of the alternative, a non-divine status for Mikra?

Here we find ourselves in a blind alley, from which we can exit only by seeing
through the hasty conclusion which we drew by equating Mikra too directly with
the Divine instruction which Philo enthusiastically praises. In the above quota-
tion85 the opposition between human and Divine teaching was accentuated in a
very particular fashion:

When (...) the sudden beam of self-inspired wisdom has shone upon us, when that wisdom has opened the closed eye of the soul and made us spectators rather than hearers of knowledge, and substituted in our minds sight, the swiftest of senses, for the slower sense of hearing, then it is idle any longer to exercise the ear with words.

Here Philo distinguishes between human instruction, which is absorbed
through the ear, and Divine instruction, which appears to the eye.87 Divine wisdom as a ray of light perceived only by the eye rather than the ear preoccu-
pies Philo quite intensively, especially in connection with the revelation at Sinai, where ‘All the people saw the voice’.88 In his allegorical commentary Philo writes of this verse:

The writer distinguishes things heard from things seen and hearing from
sight, (...) making a very subtle distinction, for the voice dividing itself
into noun and verb and parts of speech he naturally spoke of as “audible”’, for it comes to the test of hearing; but the voice of sound that was

85 In my essay cited in note 79 I have adduced a large amount of further evidence for this view in
Philo.
86 In the quotation given above, n. 40 from Sac, 78.
87 See my book, Die hellenistische Gestalt, 143-53, where I examine the notion of the visible voice in
connection with the Sinaiic revelation.
88 Exod 20:15, translated according to the text of the Septuagint.

Thus for Philo the language of Divine revelation is not that which is articulate
and can be grasped in the grammatical categories of verb and noun. To facilely
equate what ‘God’s scholar, God’s pupil, God’s disciple’ experienced with
Mikra is to miss this dialectic between the audible and the visible word. In order
to understand the precise nature of the holiness of Mikra in Philo, we must be
very careful in our use of statements of this kind.

On what sources, then, shall we rely? First we must again recall that Philo,
alone among Hellenistic Jewish writers, makes free use of pagan cult terminol-
gy. Not only does he designate the biblical word as an ‘oracle’, he also speaks of
its proclamation as ‘soothsaying’,91 and of its human carrier as hierophant,
priest of the oracle, and prophet.92 We would do well, then, to cast a brief
sidelong glance at certain views held in the pagan milieu concerning these
phenomena of its religious life.

The main line of Plato’s view of prophecy, which Philo adopts to a consid-
erable extent in his own prophetology,93 seems to me less fruitful for the
understanding of Philo’s concept of Scriptural authority than the treatment of
mantic utterance in the Timaeus,94 which in many respects contradicts Plato’s
other statements. Here, apparently following the practice of the Delphic
oracle of his time, he makes a sharp distinction between the soothsayer who, in
the grip of the god, can only utter incomprehensible sounds, and the insightful
prophet, who, using his reason to the fullest, ‘critically judges’95 these sounds
and extracts a reasonable meaning from them.

There is a passage in Plutarch96 which points in somewhat the same direction.
True, Plutarch lived two generations after Philo, but the thought which his work
incorporates is partly of a much older date. Plutarch has one of the participants
in his dialogue explain why the oracles assume an artless form which is un-
worthy of the god: this is because the oracles are formulated by the soothsayer
priestess, who is a simple woman of the people: ‘The voice is not that of a god,
nor the utterance of it, (...) but all these are the woman’s; he puts into her
mind only the visions, and creates a light in her soul in regard to the future; for
inspiration is precisely this’.

91 Mig. 48.
92 Sac. 79.
93 θεομαχεια, see Index Philoneus, s.v.
94 On προφητείας cf. Fascher, ΠΡΟΦΗΤΗΣ, Even the Septuagint could not manage without this
word taken from the terminology of pagan cults.
95 Fascher, ibid., pp. 17-20, 66-70.
96 Fascher, ibid., 152-60.
97 Plato, Timaeus 72ab.
98 κατάφροναι.
99 Plutarch, De Pythiae Oracula, 397c.
Though their accounts differ in many respects, Plato and Plutarch concur on one point: they show that the concept of inspiration, as understood at many points in Philo’s spiritual milieu, left room for autonomous linguistic activity on the part of the human being. Both authors assume that such autonomous activity does not detract from the authenticity of the Divine word which finds expression in the saying.

What is true of the oracle-priest would seem to apply with even greater force to the mystery priest, i.e. the hierophant. The hierophant is considered as the human representative of his god. As such, his task is to initiate those who approach into the mysteries of his God. Thus it is perfectly appropriate for Philo to invoke Moses as hierarch and to beg of him: ‘Be our prompter and preside over our steps and never tire of anointing our eyes, until conducting us to the hidden light of hallowed words thou display to us the fast-locked lovelinesses invisible to the uninitiate’. 98

Elsewhere we are urged to call on Moses for help in order that ‘as he learned when he did not know, he may teach us too’. 99

Moses, then, can assist us in fathoming the holy words, because they were given to him. He is both receiver and transmitter of the Divine teaching. As receiver he not only receives a knowledge of Divine teaching from without; he also receives from within a share of the Divine being, as Philo likes to explain in connection with the verse ‘Stand thou here with Me’. 100 Thus for Philo the word of Mikra can be a word that comes to Moses and a word that proceeds from him, at one and the same time. Even the fact that in two passages 101 the Tora conditionally refers to Moses as ‘God’ = a fact that the rabbis did their best to explain away 102 is enthusiastically welcomed by Philo. 103

This being so, what does Philo have to tell us about the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch? The answer is to be found in the second book of his ‘Life of Moses’, where he describes Moses’ personality under three headings: Moses as lawgiver, priest and prophet. In the first part Moses is treated without reservation as the author of the law, with the excellence of the laws serving as proof of their author’s outstanding human qualities. For the non-Jewish reader, to whom this work is addressed, 104 such a line of reasoning would have seemed logical and quite sufficient; he had met with it in the biographies of other great lawgivers. But for us the critical point is reached only in the section on Moses as prophet, where Philo recurs to this theme. We approach this section with the question: is Philo going to present the Tora as a whole as a revelation which came to Moses and which he now has to interpret as prophet? If so, how is he

98 Som. 1:164.
99 Som. 21.
100 Deut 5:31, e.g. Som. 2:227. This thought is clearly formulated in Mos. 2:190.
101 Exod 4:6;7.1.
102 See for instance Targum Onkelos on both verses.
103 See the Scripture Index to both verses, LCL 10.
Thus the biblical creation story is not simply a communication from God through Moses about what He did in the six days of Creation; rather it is an ‘exalted theology’ formulated by Moses about the Creation. In order to understand it we must, for instance, retrace the line of reasoning that led Moses to set a time of six days for the creation of the world, an act which in truth occurs outside the dimension of time. Moses was capable of this outstanding philosophical accomplishment ‘both because he had attained the very summit of philosophy, and because he had been instructed by oracles in ( . . . ) Nature’s lore’. These two reasons, which Philo gives in paratactically juxtaposed clauses, can hardly have been intended by him to mean two separate processes; but he had no better linguistic means of conflating the intrahuman and the suprahuman aspects. This double determination of Moses’ position makes it impossible for us to regard Philo as representing a clear-cut dichotomy which would place Moses, as the possessor of Divine wisdom, in opposition to the philosophers, who are apendent on human wisdom alone. Moses is for him both the receiver of Divinely proclaimed truth and a member of the philosophic guild. In a wide-ranging disquisition on the merits and demerits of drunkenness, Philo first gives the opinions of ‘the other philosophers’ and then that of Moses. To be sure, Moses is of all philosophers the one who reached the peak of philosophy, and Philo will pronounce him right in any dispute with the rest. But this does not take Moses out of the category of philosophers.

He remains, similarly, in the category of lawgivers. Philo’s whole Exposition of the Laws is dedicated to the proposition that the laws of Moses are the most excellent ever conceived by the human mind. If he speaks of them as laws ‘which could not possibly have been conceived by the human mind without divine inspiration’, this is not to deny that they were conceived by a human mind, only that this could have occurred without divine inspiration. Divine inspiration stands behind human thought, but does not replace it. The idea of God, whose content is the gift of participation in Divine being, is the connecting link. This alone makes it possible to understand how Philo can say in one breath, ‘Oracles which are both words of God and laws given by men who are friends of God’. The words of God and the laws of friends of God, i.e. of Moses, are identical. They represent two ways of looking at the same thing. Whether I choose one formula or the other, the authority, the unimpeachable validity of the laws is guaranteed. The same goes for the doctrinal aspect of Mikra: whether I speak of the philosophy of Moses or simply of oracles, both are legitimate ways of confirming the authority of the word of Mikra.

What has led many scholars to portray Philo as the advocate of a fundamental dichotomy between (human) philosophical knowledge and (Divine) communication of absolute truth, is a line of thought most clearly expressed in the allegory of Hagar and Sara. In general this allegory is said to mean the subordination of general education to philosophy, but in one passage it is taken to mean, on a higher level, the subservience of philosophy itself to sophia. Moreover, sophia and philosophy (which means literally love of sophia or striving for sophia) are furnished with definitions familiar from Stoic teaching. If one then maintains the association of sophia with the figure of Hokhma (Wisdom) from the Hebrew Bible – a figure which since the book of Ben-Sira, as throughout rabbinic literature, had been identified with the Tora – then it is possible to read into Philo’s allegory the doctrine of philosophy as ‘handmaid of Scripture’, in analogy to the famous formula of philosophy as ‘ancilla theologiae’ which was later developed by Christian theologians.

Tempting as this combination is, there are objections to it. The concrete, mythologically-coloured figure of ‘Tora’, such as we find in rabbinc Judaism, is nowhere to be found in Philo and seems to me incompatible with a way of thinking which attributes only superficial importance to the concrete. But if this figure is missing, there is nothing on which to base the identification of Tora with ‘Wisdom’.

On the other hand, Leisegang has shown that in Philo the attainment of sophia acquires for the first time the ecstatic meaning that reaches its highest expression in the philosophy of Plotinus. But from this ecstatic view which permeates his depiction of Moses as prophet, Philo, as we have seen, excludes the reception of the Tora, even though the Tora as a whole could be called an ‘oracle’, by distinguishing prophecy in the narrower sense from Tora. What the soul receives directly from God, that before which all human instruction must fall silent, is no longer a ‘hearing’ but a ‘seeing’, a ‘light’ which may be called a ‘voice’, but a voice which does not express itself in ‘verbs and nouns’ and so...
cannot be received discursively, still less written down as a text. As to how the
gulf between an inspiration sublimed beyond the word and the nevertheless available and interpretable text is to be bridged, Philo himself refrains from all speculation. He offers us no theory to explain how words that are really ‘all oracles’ can at the same time express the opinions and wisdom of the ‘all-wise’ Moses himself. But it is methodically unsound to establish a harmony between the two positions by interpreting one of them away with inadequate means.

PHILO’S AUTHORITY: THE GREEK TEXT

Philo’s appeal to the authority of Mikra contains yet a further complication with which we must deal in closing: the text from which he takes the truth imparted or mediated by Moses is not the Hebrew text of Moses himself, but its Greek translation. From a purely technical point of view this is to be expected of any author who writes in Greek; Josephus too always gives his Bible quotations in the Septuagint translation, though it goes without saying that, as a priest from Jerusalem, he has read the Hebrew original.

Nonetheless, Philo’s situation is fundamentally different. Even if we assume that he knew enough Hebrew to consult the original—a question which is highly controversial—he can have done so only very seldom. And this, given the kind of questions he asks of the text, is a far more serious matter for him than for Josephus. Josephus is concerned only with the content of the biblical stories, whereas Philo’s allegorical commentary is, as we have seen, entirely founded on a sensitive investigation of the verbal formulations, of whose precise and deliberately-chosen rightness the interpreter is convinced, and whose fine nuances often have far-reaching exegetical consequences.

One example will suffice to illustrate how important the differences between linguistic versions can be for such interpretations. In the treatise ‘Who is the Heir of Divine Things’ there is an exposition of the concept of ‘ecstasy’, an extremely important key concept for Philo. The interpretation starts from a verse which in the Septuagint reads: ‘About sunset an “ecstasy” fell upon Abraham and lo a great dark terror falls upon him’. This word ‘ecstasy’, Philo tells us, has various meanings in Moses’ work:

Sometimes it is a mad fury producing mental delusion due to old age or melancholy or other similar cause. Sometimes it is extreme amazement at the events which so often happen suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes

122 See n. 86.
123 ἀναπληρῶν, e.g. Abr. 13.
124 Wolfson’s confident assertion (Philo, 1, 88): ‘His knowledge of Hebrew was such that he could himself without too much effort provide his own translation’ is shared by few. The latest discussion on the question: Sandmel, Philo’s Knowledge of Hebrew.
125 Εχθρός 2:49ff.
126 Gen 15:12.

it is passivity of mind, if indeed the mind can ever be at rest; and the best form of all is the divine possession of frenzy to which the prophets as a class are subject.

Philo gives examples for each of these six meanings, taken from widely-differing Pentateuch verses in which ‘Moses’ uses the word ‘ecstasy’. The last-named meaning is the one supposedly represented in the verse from Genesis on which he is commenting. How important this compilation is for Philo becomes evident when we realize that he is here using the famous Platonic depiction of the different kinds of ‘mania’ as a model. But when we consult the Hebrew text we see that Philo in the passages quoted by Philo the word ‘ecstasy’ represents not one but five different words. Thus all this lofty train of thought is quite devoid of any Mosaic textual basis.

Such examples could be multiplied ad libitum. They show that Philo uncritically accepted the Septuagint text he had before him as identical with the Hebrew Bible. Otherwise he could not have extracted from it the deeper layers of Mosaic wisdom supposedly hidden in every fine nuance of word-choice.

This would make Philo the only interpreter in the two-thousand-year history of Jewish Bible exegesis whose hermeneutics were not— or at the very least not consistently— based on the Hebrew text. This makes him an exceptional and problematic figure for anyone who is at home in rabbinic literature, in the medieval commentaries, in the textual interpretations of the philosophers and kabbalists, or even in modern Jewish Bible scholarship. For the Jewish traditional consciousnesses ‘Tora study’ starts, by definition, from the maseoretic text. No wonder, then, that Jewish scholars have tried again and again at least to soften Philo’s position as an outsider, by showing that certain of Philo’s interpretations make use of the Hebrew original and then going on to assume that it was always possible for Philo to refer to the Hebrew original, but that he had in general kept to the Septuagint out of consideration for his readers who did not know Hebrew. In the light of the above example we must approach such theses with skepticism.

In order to understand the trust Philo places in the Septuagint version, we must briefly consider:

1. the status of the Septuagint in Hellenistic Judaism generally;
2. Philo’s own evaluation of the Septuaginta.

(1) The status of the Septuagint among Hellenistic Jews may best be illumined by a comparison with the status of the Aramaic targum in the motherland. The name ‘Septuagint’ by which the Greek translation is conventionally designated goes back to a story which has come down to us in several versions, according

127 Plato, Phaedrus 244a ff.
129 See above n. 31.
to which this version is the work of 70, or more precisely 72, translators who traveled from Jerusalem to Egypt in order to translate the Pentateuch into Greek." Whether or not the main features of this story correspond to some own account, in world literature. This, at least, is how the Jews saw it, and the saga of a later he refers to it equates with the urnambiguous comes to the work of the translators themselves, who are and his Alexandrian contemporaries but now that the law of Moses can In all probability this yearly celebration took place on the 8th of Tevet. In an undatable Hebrew no longer. Of course he knows that the original text For them, then, the publication of the Septuagint was a major historical event. Again we may compare this with the sparse information which we have on the making of the Aramaic targums. Thus the Hellenistic Jews saw the Greek Bible not as an unfortunately indispensable aid to the understanding of the Hebrew Tora, but a treasure and source of pride in its own right. And this is not surprising, given the fact that Hellenistic society as a whole accorded to books (which meant, practically speaking, books in Greek) a prestige unprecedented in any earlier society. With their own book in hand, the Jews could move up to a respected position in this milieu; they now had a share in Greek literature which in the Hellenistic world meant world literature. This, at least, is how the Jews saw it, and the saga of a Bible translation commission led by a Hellenistic king is simply a palpable expression of this self-evaluation.

(2) Let us now turn to Philo’s own account, in Life of Moses, 2: 26-44, of how the Bible was translated into Greek. The account begins with the following curious remark:

13 For further details see Tov, above, pp. 164-65.
13 Mos. 2:41-44.
13 In all probability this yearly celebration took place on the 8th of Tevet. In an undatable supplement to Megillat Taanit this date is included in a list of days on which one should fast, for on this day ‘the Tora was translated into Greek in the days of King Ptolemy’ and darkness came over the world for the space of three days.’ This late tradition is in the spirit of the Rabbis, who regarded the Greek translation as a disaster; but it is likely that the calender date we have here comes from an ancient tradition and designates the day which for Philo and his Alexandrian contemporaries was a day of rejoicing. Cf. Megillat Taanit, p. 201.
134 This section has been closely analysed by Otto, Das Sprachverständnis, 32-43, in which, however, by a tricky way of translating, he burdens Philo with dimensions of existential philosophy of language, which the unprejudiced reader will hardly find in him.

In ancient times the laws were written in the Chaldaean tongue, and remained in that form for many years, without any change of language, so long as they had not yet revealed their beauty to the rest of mankind.

Our own logic would lead us to expect something like ‘remained restricted to that language’. But the word-for-word meaning of Philo’s sentence is that the language of the book was originally Hebrew (or as Philo likes to say, ‘Chaldaean’), but is Hebrew no longer. Of course he knows that the original text continues to exist – later he refers to it – but now that the law of Moses can reveal its beauty to all humankind in the garment of the Greek language, the Hebrew is of no importance. He could hardly have expressed this estimate more bluntly than in the grotesque sentence we have just read. Only in the Greek version can the law become available to all of humanity and thus assume the position to which its excellence entitles it. Hence the ‘importance and public utility of the task’ of translation. A great king undertakes the work, and the high priest with whom he consults also favours the plan, reflecting that ‘the King would not have taken on such a task without God’s guiding care’. Finally Philo comes to the work of the translators themselves, who are conscious of their mission to ‘translate laws which were soothsaid in oracles’. They concentrate utterly on ‘bringing the soul alone into contact with the laws alone’. Their activity is designated by verbs derived from ‘prophet’, ‘hierophant’, and ‘enthusiasm’, the same words which Philo uses elsewhere in connection with Moses himself. In their choice of words, he tells us, they did not let themselves be led astray by the Greek language’s wealth of synonyms; rather they found each time the one word that was equivalent to the Hebrew word, exercising a linguistic’ stringency which Philo equates with the unambiguous terminology of geometry or dialectics. That, in his view, is the explanation for the famous linguistic miracle: the versions of all 72 translators corresponded word for word, although they had worked independently of one another!

The clearest proof of this is that, if Chaldeans have learned Greek, or Greeks Chaldean, and read both versions, the Chaldean and the translation, they regard them with awe and reverence as sisters, or rather one and the same, both in matter and words, and speak of the authors not as translators but as prophets and priests of the mysteries, whose sincerity and singleness of thought has enabled them to go hand in hand with the purest of spirits, the spirit of Moses. 140
It is scarcely conceivable that Philo would have maintained this extravagant opinion if he had had sufficient linguistic knowledge to compare the two texts in detail. What guarantees for him the congruence of the Septuagint with the Hebrew original, is the miracle of the different translators’ word-for-word agreement.\(^{141}\) We must understand that this was no rhetorical exaggeration, but represents Philo’s serious belief in the quality of this translation, however little our own critical judgment agrees with him; for this is the inner justification for Philo’s use of the Septuagint. Of course, the Holy Scriptures were originally given in Hebrew; but now they are (also) available in Greek, and in the making of the Greek version the same prophetic forces were at work as in the Hebrew text. In the Greek version, too, every word was chosen with Divinely\(^{142}\) inspired accuracy, so that the exegete, probing the depths of meaning in every Greek word, has the same chance as the Hebrew exegete of arriving at the original truth which dictated the word.

With this the question whether Philo could read the Hebrew original becomes theologically irrelevant. Even supposing him capable\(^{143}\) of offering his own translations rather than relying on the Septuagint ‘out of consideration for his Greek-speaking readers’, he would have had to refrain from so doing, unless he wanted to lay claim to the same supernatural gifts which, in his view, made the Septuagint possible.

Finally we may draw attention to the last words of the above quotation, which epitomize Philo’s particular view of Scriptural authority. In certifying that the translators have adequately rendered the content of Mikra, he does not say that they have captured ‘the word of God’ but that they captured ‘the spirit of Moses’. If all the words of the Bible may be called ‘oracles’, then certainly they must be the word of God; but to attribute them to ‘the spirit of Moses’ is also to do justice to them.

**Exegesis of Mikra**

**PHILO’S BATTLE ON TWO FRONTS**

We have already stated that Philo’s exegesis is fundamentally double-tracked. Everything in the Bible is capable of, and indeed requires, both a literal\(^{144}\) and allegorical\(^{145}\) interpretation. In general\(^{146}\) these two modes of interpretation are kept strictly separate; in innumerable instances, Philo tells us exactly when he leaves the ground of literal interpretation and ventures into allegory. Both ways of looking at Mikra are justified and necessary, and even where Philo is dissatisfied with the literal sense of a passage, he feels obliged to begin by conveying it.

In the literal sense the book of Moses, as we have seen,\(^{147}\) is a book of laws, with narrative appendages. In the allegorical meaning it reveals itself as the teaching of God’s transcendent being and of the soul’s distance from and nearness to God. From the foregoing analysis it will be clear that both ways of interpretation are legitimate in his eyes, but that the two are not in balance. Philo repeatedly makes it clear that Moses’ deepest concern was his religious-philosophical doctrine, which may be arrived at by allegorical interpretation.

Thus Philo as interpreter of the Bible is fighting, as it were, on two fronts: against the extreme allegorists who abolish the literal meaning of Mikra, and against the literalists, who do not want to go beyond the literal sense. Both these extremes he rejects; but given the predominance of allegorical interpretation in his thinking, we may expect him to take a more resolute position on the second front than on the first. Let us look at his confrontations with both extremes:

1. Philo confronts the extreme allegorists explicitly in one passage. Characteristically, what is in question here is the literal meaning, not of the biblical narratives, but of the biblical laws. Let us see how the battle is conducted.

   In the discussion of the promises God makes to Abraham when He commands Him to leave his birthplace\(^{148}\) Philo comes to the words: ‘I will make thy name great.’\(^{149}\) On this he comments that while the name a person has, i.e. the good reputation he enjoys in society, is less important than his real moral standard, still it is ‘a great matter and of much advantage to the life which we live in the body’. The way to preserve one’s good name is to keep strictly to the way of life inherited from the fathers. However, ‘there are some who, regarding laws in their literal sense in the light of symbols of matters belonging to the intellect, are overpunctilious about the latter, while treating the former with easygoing neglect ( . . . ) They ought to have given careful attention to both aims’. Philo chides them for behaving ‘as though they were living alone by themselves in a wilderness, or as though they had become disembodied souls’ and human society, in which they after all live, did not exist. ‘These men are

\(^{141}\) Scholars have pointed out that the story of the linguistic miracle is also found in the writings of the Rabbis, but it has not been noted that here the tables are turned. Thus in Massekhet Soferim 19:9 it is said of the sages who ‘translated the Tora for king Ptolemy’ that ‘God put a counsel into the heart of each of them; they agreed together in one opinion and wrote the Tora for him, each one apart, and changed 13 passages in it’, which the Rabbis then enumerate, pointing out where they deviate from the original (which for the Rabbis of course means the masoretic) text. Thus the Rabbis are aware of the linguistic miracle reported in the Greek sources, but they use it to point out not the congruence but the incongruence of the Greek with the Hebrew text.

\(^{142}\) See n. 124.

\(^{143}\) ἐπιστεύω.

\(^{144}\) Especially ἀληθεύειν and ἐπιστανομαι, see Index Philem. s.v.; of the rich literature on Philo’s allegory we cite Stein, Die allegorische Exegese; Christiansen, Die Technik; Sowers, Hermeneutics; Heinisch, Der Einfluss, as well as the articles in the pertinent encyclopaedias.

\(^{145}\) Only for the treatise De Opificio Mundi is this clear distinction not valid; this treatise was apparently written as the first piece both of the Exposition of the Laws and of the Allegorical Commentary. But the relation of literal and allegorical interpretation in this work would require a study to itself.

\(^{146}\) See n. 15.

\(^{147}\) Mig. 88-92.

\(^{148}\) Gen 12:2.
taught by the sacred word to have thought of good repute, and to let go nothing that is part of the customs fixed by divinely empowered men greater than those of our time’. As examples of what he means, he mentions the Sabbath, the holidays, circumcision and the Temple service. Of the Sabbath he says: ‘It is quite true that the Seventh Day is meant to teach the power of the Unoriginates and the non-action of created beings. But let us not for this reason abrogate the laws laid down for its observance, and light fires or till the ground or carry loads or institute proceedings in court’, etc. ‘We should look on all these outward observances as resembling the body, and their inner meanings as resembling the soul. ( ... ) If we keep and observe these, we shall gain a clearer conception of those things of which these are the symbols; and besides that we shall not incur the censure of the many and the charges they are sure to bring against us’. Thus Philo does not say: these are the commandments, in black and white, this is what God has ordered you to do; you have broken the Law, therefore you are a sinner. Rather he says: Of course what is really commanded is in the realm of religious knowledge, and this you are following very well; all the same, you ought not simply to shrug off what has literally been said. Why not? We have heard two answers. First, by corporally fulfilling the symbolic commandment you also come to a clearer understanding of it. This is an answer which, pursued to extraordinary depths, reverberates again and again through the history of Jewish thinking on the problem. But in Philo it is only a momentary idea, which receives no further development in his writings and indeed is not in consonance with his views on the relation between body and soul. Much more solidly anchored in his argumentation is the second answer: If you disregard the outward forms, you will acquire a bad reputation in the community to which you belong and want to belong. One must say that, coming from a thinker so imbued with the Stoic pride in the asocial self-reliance of virtues and the Socratic pathos of the opposition between being and seeming, such arguments make a very feeble impression. He ‘censures’ the radical allegorists, but his rebuke does not have much substance.

(2) On the other hand, his dispute with the literalists is scattered all over his oeuvre and surfaces on many occasions. A typical epithet for them is ‘Micropolitians’,149 or ‘men of narrow citizenship’, to whom he contrasts ‘those who are on the roll of a greater country, even this whole world’. Their narrow-mindedness is opposed by the Stoic doctrine of the cosmos as the only true home of the sage. Here Philo contents himself with claiming that the literal sense is insufficient; elsewhere he goes so far as to say that the idea that God literally planted a garden in Eden is irreligious,150 ‘as though God tills the ground and plants pleasances’.151 Relations with the literal meaning become especially tense whenever God is spoken of in anthropomorphic terms. Moses, according to Philo, has two ways of talking about God, as he informs us in two contradictory verses,152 ‘two leading statements about the Cause (= God), one that “God is not as a man”; the other that “He is as a man”’. Of these two statements only the first, naturally, is correct; the second is ‘introduced for the instruction of the many’, who can only be induced to follow the law through fear of an anthropomorphic God. One naturally acquires such a conception of God if one gives the literal meaning to many biblical statements on God, of which Philo cites examples. The literal meaning of these verses is thus not true, still there is a point to it: ‘All such may learn the untruth, which will benefit them, if they cannot be brought to wisdom by truth’.153 Here, then, the literal meaning is insufficient, even wrong; and yet it is not a simple misunderstanding of the text.154 Those who do not go beyond it remain caught in a baseless mythological fiction, and that is irreligious.

The representatives of literal meaning do not always come off quite so badly. Thus if someone reads the story of the Tower of Babel as an account of the origin of different languages, ‘I would not censure such persons, for perhaps the truth is with them also. Still I would exhort them not to halt there, but to press on to allegorical interpretations’.155 To the story of Jacob’s placing a stone under his head he responds – an exceptional thing for him – with a full appreciation of the literal content, before getting on with the allegorical interpretation: ‘Our admiration is extorted’, he writes, not only by the deeper meaning but also ‘by the way in which the literal narrative inculcates (... ) endurance’.156

But the literal meaning as such cannot always be retained. The verse ‘The strong current of the river makes glad the city of God’ cannot refer to the concrete city, for Jerusalem lies neither on the sea nor on a river.157 ‘Cain went out from the face of God’ cannot be understood literally, since, first, God has no face, and, second, no one can escape his field of vision.158 From here it is not far to cases where Philo destroys the possibility of literal comprehension in order to prove the rightness of allegory. Thus various motifs of the story of Paradise—the planting of the garden,159 the creation of Eve from

149 μικροπολίται Som. 1:39.
150 Gen 2:8.
151 L.A. 1:43. Other passages of this kind, whose literal interpretations Philo rejects, are listed by Shoyer, ‘Alexandrian Jewish Literalists’ 272.
The speech of the serpent— are shunted off into the realm of fable, to leave room for their allegorical interpretation. Yet such rebellions against the simple meaning are after all not to be taken seriously, as we can see by comparing such passages with the ‘Questions and Answers on Genesis’ in which these motifs are allowed their literal validity. At times Philo brings a Sophistic-sounding rhetoric into play even against legal prescriptions; but in the Exposition of the Laws these prescriptions are upheld, and sometimes even praised for their rational character.

We may conclude, then, that on the whole, despite certain escapades, Philo recognizes a dual meaning in Scripture, neither sacrificing the literal meaning to the allegorists, nor allowing the literalists to contest his right to allegorize.

**THE RELATION BETWEEN THE TWO LAYERS OF MEANING**

This brings us to the question how the two layers of meaning in Mikra relate to each other according to Philo.

First let us see how Philo expressed himself on the subject. When he writes of the Therapeutic sect, ‘To these people the whole law book seems to resemble a living creature with the literal ordinances for its body and for its soul the invisible mind laid up in this wording’, he is basically describing his own position. As we saw, he himself used the same image, when he admonished the radical allegorists to see the relation between the holiday and its concrete prescriptions as a relation between body and soul. As a Platonist he of course attached a vastly greater importance to the soul than to the body.

In the account of the Therapeutés this image is followed by another: ‘Looking through the words as through a mirror the rational soul beholds the marvellous beauties of the concepts’. The mirror is only an instrument for the perception of the object. This image suggests that the literal meaning is of no importance in itself, it is only intermediate to the perception of the one thing which is to be seen.

Elsewhere the relationship between the two is likened to that between an object and the shadow it casts. A shadow is not even an instrument which helps me to examine the object; it is merely an indication of the object’s being there.

There is food for reflection in the fact that this image is used precisely in the passage where a literalist interpretation (of the Tower of Babel story as an explanation of linguistic difference) is recognized as correct as far as it goes. In still another passage a biblical report of a dream is first presented as a ‘foundation’; then comes the ‘wise builder’, namely Allegory, to erect the building on it. Here the literal meaning is treated as the precondition.

We see that these different images do not quite add up to the same notion of the relation between the two modes of exegesis. But all of them do suggest that Philo thought he could capture some kind of communication between the two methods he practiced. If we are right in this surmise, the next question would be to what extent his own work fulfills this notion.

It seems to us that it does so only very partially. True, it has been demonstrated that the Abraham of his Exposition of the Laws is the same Abraham whom we meet in his allegorical writings. But this conclusion cannot be generalized. The Joseph of the allegorical writings is a problematic character, who is always in the wrong in the confrontation with his brothers; the Joseph of the biography of the Patriarchs is an ideal ruler. The story of Cain, which provided material for four allegorical treatises, is completely omitted from the Exposition of the Laws. Likewise in the latter Noah is dealt with, but only in connection with the Deluge, which is not mentioned in the four allegorical treatises on Noah. On the other hand, Enoch figures in the biography of the Patriarchs, but is completely forgotten in ‘The Posterity and Exile of Cain’. Thus it would hardly seem that the two ways in which Philo worked were coordinated with each other. We saw that when Philo cites a law in one of his allegorical works, he does not base his speculations on its literal meaning; on the contrary, he has to dispose of the literal meaning before he feels he can use the text allegorically. The same goes for the narrative parts of Mikra: Probably there was an actual man called Samuel; but we conceive of Samuel (…) not as a living compound of soul and body, but as a mind (…). Once we have scaled the heights of allegory — or in Platonic terms, of the idea — we are no longer dealing with a man named Samuel, but only with the species of soul-being which is meant by this figure. We need not deny the historical Samuel, but he is now irrelevant.

---

155 Agr. 97.
156 Q. G. 1: 14; 20-22; 32.
157 In Fug. 108 he denounces the law of negligent homicide for inner lack of logic, yet in Spec. 3: 131ff. this same prescription is demonstrated to be reasonable. The freeing of certain categories of soldiers before the battle (Deut 20:5-8) is extensively criticized in Agr. 148-156 as senseless and immoral; in Virt. 28-31 it is explicitly praised as reasonable.
158 Cont. 78. On the question of the reliability of Philo’s report on this sect in Cont. see the critical article of I. Heinemann, ‘Therapeutés’. The very objections against the reliability of his description reinforce the value of Philo’s explanations as evidence of his own attitudes.
159 See above n. 148, Migr. 93.
160 Conf. 190.
161 Som. 2:8.
162 This thesis follows in its essentials the contribution of Pépin, ‘Remarques’, 139.
163 This thesis is worked out in Sandmel, Philo’s Place.
164 This is shown in detail in Goodenough, Politics. The disputed political explanation which the author gives to the phenomenon need not concern us here.
165 All contained in LCL 2.
166 Abr. 27-47.
167 Abr. 17-26.
168 See above n. 167.
169 Ebr., 144; similarly on Terah Som. 1:58, on Isaac Fug. 167.
PHILO’S TRUST IN THE ALEGORICAL METHOD

If I am seeing rightly, the same goes, as far as Philo is concerned, for Israel. Of course Israel is first of all the chosen people to whom He belongs. But Israel means ‘beholding God’. Once we have reached the summit of religion and philosophy, Israel as a concrete reality becomes, in a manner in which existentialist thinking cannot sympathize, irrelevant in the face of the eternal reality symbolized by Israel, namely the contemplation of God.

THE CHARACTER OF PHILONIC ALEGORY

Philo’s trust in the allegorical method rests on a certain assumption concerning the possible content of the ‘all-wise’ Moses’ divinely inspired wisdom. For a thinker of Platonic orientation such wisdom would have to transcend the world of the senses, ascend to the world of ideas, and, passing beyond even that, bring the mind in contact with the absolute God Who is exalted even above the world of ideas. The literal sense of Mikra, with its earthbound stories and commandments, could not do this; therefore the teaching of the all-wise Moses must be something more than this. The text must be ‘saying something else’ (the meaning of the Greek words allaagoreuein), beyond the meaning comprehensible to everyone.

It was this assumption, no doubt, that set Philo on the way to allegory, just as, some hundred years before, it had been developed by the Greeks for the reinterpretation of their mythological traditions. A few Jews had begun in recent years to apply the method to Mikra. The influence of the Greek exegetical tradition is particularly obvious where Philo simply takes motifs familiar from the interpretation of Homer and applies them to biblical motifs. Nor is there anything contradictory in his also taking over many midrashic motifs from the motherland. It has been shown that he occasionally also employs the rabbinic rules of interpretation; however, one should not forget that these rules themselves owe a great deal to Greek rhetoric.

The Stoic allegorists of Philo’s time had a strong tendency to explain away whatever they found morally or religiously offensive in the old songs. This tendency rubs off on Philo’s way of thinking only occasionally, as when he writes, ‘We shall avoid that which is unanswerable …, and for which we should not like to be held accountable, if we attempt to get at the secret physical meaning’. What Philo here and in many places calls ‘physical’ was a direction in Homeric allegory which had originally attempted to read knowledge of modern physical science into the poets’ words, but which in recent times had shifted to the final, supramundane ground of being. Hence Philo too calls the search for divine mysteries in the biblical word ‘physical’. Whenever Philo takes issue with earlier Jewish allegories, it is invariably in order to fathom more deeply the ‘physical’ in this sense.

For instance, he tells us that according to some the tree of life in Paradise means the human heart, ‘since it is the cause of life and has been allotted the central place in the body’. That is why the tree stands ‘in the middle of the garden’. But these people should remember that they are setting forth a medical interpretation, not a physical one. Instead he considers the central essence represented by the tree to be virtue. Again we clearly see the logic of his thought: an interpretation leading only to a piece of ‘medical’ information cannot represent the real meaning of the all-wise Moses’ utterance, or of an oracle entrusted to him.

When at Abraham’s death he is said to have been gathered to his ‘fathers’, others take the ‘fathers’ to mean the four elements into which the dead body decomposes; but Philo tells us that the fathers are ‘the incorporeal Logoi of the Divine world, whom elsewhere it is accustomed to call “angels”’. Here the exegesis of the biblical word has led Philo into the seldom-trodden territory of belief in immortality, since a purely physical process would not suffice to constitute what Philo calls a ‘physical’ teaching.

Philo is convinced that in such cases he is offering not only a deeper interpretation, but thereby necessarily a more correct one. Only when he has arrived at the real grounds of being can he be satisfied that he has indeed completed his methodological task, brought to light what Moses, the perfect philosopher, really meant. In this sense he feels indebted to science with its strict method, and speaks of the ‘rules of the art’ of allegory.

Still and all, his allegorical method never became a system of rules to be routinely applied. Occasionally he presents an interpretation in a tone which tells us that it came to him as a religious experience. In speaking of the two Cherubim which stand in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle,‘’ he first interprets them cosmologically as the two hemispheres of the sky. But then he continues:

187 Fug. 106.
188 L.A. 159.
189 Gen 3:3.
190 Gen 15:15.
191 Heres 281ff.; Q.G. 3:11.
192 cf. la'gala'gorias kai'anos, Som. 1:73.
193 Exod 18:19.
But there is a higher thought than these. It comes from a voice in my own soul, which oftentimes is god-possessed and divines where it does not know. This thought I will record in words if I can.194

After this unusual prologue he then presents an interpretation which indeed leads us into the core of his religious thought. The Godhead is flanked by its two highest potencies, which are called sovereignty and goodness. These two are what the two Cherubim in the Holy of Holies represent:

This is not the place to discuss Philo’s doctrine of the two highest potencies, or its obvious connection with the rabbinic doctrine of God’s two aspects;195 we are concerned only with the profoundly moving way in which this doctrine comes to him through exegesis, or goes into it. This is not the only passage, though it is the most impressive, in which he speaks of such an exegetical inspiration. But we must not lose sight of the fact that even in such exalted moments Philo feels his allegorical interpretation to be bound by a strict discipline which leaves no room for what is merely arbitrary and subjective.

Bibliography

A general bibliography on Philo is appended to Borgen, ‘Philo of Alexandria’ in Compendia u/2 (pp. 280-82).

As to the status of Mikra in Philo’s work, Wolfson, Philo, in his chapter ‘Handmaid of Scripture’ (1, 87-163) pleaded for an absolute opposition between the Bible as God’s word and philosophy as a purely human endeavour. For restrictions against his view see Amir, Die hellenistische Gestalt, 71-106. For a detailed study of the interrelation between the divine and the human aspect in the authorship of Mikra, the present writer could not rely on any previous research.

As to Philo’s reliance on the Greek text of Mikra, see the diligent analysis of Otte, Dus Sprachverständniss. Katz’s book (Philo’s Bible) has a misleading title; it has no relevance to our subject.

The most comprehensive survey of Philo’s exegetics was presented already by Siegfried, Philo von Alexandria als Ausleger, complemented by his Studien. For Philo’s versatility in the various parts of Mikra, Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung, made valuable observations. His relation to rabbinic midrash has been studied by Stein, Philo und der Midrasch.

As to allegorical interpretation, for the Greek background the reader may be referred to Buffière, Les mythes d’Homère and Pépin, Mythe et allégorie. For Philo’s connection with this background, see Amir, Die hellenistische Gestalt, 119-28. His place in this Greek tradition is aptly formulated by Leisgang, Der heilige Geist, 160. His handling of this kind of exegesis is presented by Stein, Die

194 Cher. 27.
195 Hebrew: הַדְּרָכָה הַדָּמָם הַרְּחָפָה
Chapter Thirteen

Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in the Writings of Josephus

Louis H. Feldman

Josephus' Biblical Text

Second only perhaps to his significance as a historian is Josephus' importance for our knowledge of the text and interpretation of the Bible in the first century. The question as to which biblical text or texts he had before him is complex, however, since there seems good reason to believe that he had access to three texts, one in Hebrew, one in Greek, and one in Aramaic; and his use of one or more of these texts appears to have varied from book to book in his paraphrase of the Bible in the first half of the Antiquities. The fact, moreover, that in Rome, where Josephus composed his Antiquities, Jews had settled in large numbers from all over the Roman Empire meant that Josephus, if he had any contact at all with these Jews, was brought in touch with various texts, at least in Greek, and diverse paraphrases of these texts.

Strangely, despite Josephus' importance for the biblical text, no systematic study of Josephus' biblical Vorlage has been made, with the exception of Mez's study for Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. Assertions range from the statement of Tachauer that Josephus employed only a Hebrew text to that of Schalit that Josephus used only the Greek Bible. The overwhelming majority of scholars, however, have taken an intermediate position, suggesting that Josephus used both, in addition to, perhaps, an Aramaic targum. What complicates the matter is that apparently at the time of Josephus there were a number of divergent Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible; and the presence of proto-Lucianic readings in the Dead Sea fragments of Samuel, in Josephus, and in his presumed contemporary Pseudo-Philo, would seem to confirm this situation.

The only published attempt to study this question for even a portion of the Pentateuch is Shutt's examination of the biblical names in Josephus' version of Genesis. He notes that in four cases Josephus' names follow the Hebrew text

1 See Attridge, 'Josephus and His Works' 185-232.
2 Mez, Die Bibel; Tachauer, Verhältniss; Schalit, Namenwörterbuch, 108. S. Cohen, Josephus in Galilee and Rome, 36, n. 45, concludes that of the twenty proofs cited by Schalit, 'Introduction', xxvii-xxxv, for Josephus' use of the Septuagint, only four are more than conjecture.
3 E.g., H. Bloch, Quellen; Schirer, Geschichte 1, 80; Rahlfs, Septuagentudien, 3, 80; Thackeray, Josephus, 81.
4 Shutt, 'Biblical Names', 167-82.