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Title: Philo's Exegesis of the Biblical Festival Laws: Arithmology, Askesis, and Imitatio Dei

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Introduction

In the ancient Mediterranean, festivals were commonly viewed as an opportunity for humans to participate in the life of the gods. The gods, of course, are perpetually feasting, enjoying their divine music, food and rest. The Iliad, Book I, e.g., describes the Olympians in festal assembly partaking of ambrosia and listening to the lyre of Apollo and the song of the Muses. Through music, food, and rest, then, humans could occasionally enjoy the life of the gods. Plato, in his *Laws* (653d) represents what seems to be an ancient consensus when he says that festivals are a gift from the gods, as they allow humans “to be made whole again” by “participating in the festivals alongside the gods” (*suneortazein en tais eortais meta theōn*). This idea of festivals as divine mimesis is not in conflict with another purpose for the festivals, namely commemorating historical events. Indeed, the events typically commemorated were understood as times when fellowship with the gods was particularly vibrant. Perhaps the festival would commemorate the mythical golden age, as did the Kronia the time of Kronos before the introduction of the slave/free divide. By reenacting and retelling the events that took place *in illo tempore*,¹ festivals

¹ See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. W. Trask; New York: Harcourt, 1959), 90–95; 105–106.

and their rituals transport the celebrants back to the sacred pre-historical time and carve out a space for the divine life in the midst of the mundane.

In this paper, I propose to examine Philo's interpretation of the Jewish festivals in light of this rather widespread understanding of the festivals. My exploration has four strands: 1) I will establish that Philo views festivals as divine mimesis and participation. 2) I will show how his arithmological views work in concert with this understanding. 3) I will discuss the role that Philo's asceticism plays in his discussion of festival observance and how it relates to the theme of divine mimesis. 4) I will call attention to some of the significant ways that Philo adapts festival observance to his diaspora situation by spiritualizing, internalizing, philosophizing, and democratizing the Jewish festivals.

Festivals as divine participation and mimesis in Philo

The Sabbath as Divine Mimesis

Any discussion of Philo's view of the Jewish festivals must begin with his understanding of the Sabbath. For Philo the Sabbath is the cornerstone of the entire festival calendar. In his exposition of the Decalogue, he explains that the fourth commandment is a summary (κεφάλαιον) of the entire festival calendar and the body of festal halakah:

τὸ δὲ τέταρτον, τὸ περὶ τῆς ἑβδομάδος, οὐδὲν ἄλλ' ἢ κεφάλαιον νομιστέον ἑορτῶν καὶ τῶν διατεταγμένων εἰς ἐκάστην ἀγνευτικῶν, περιρραντηρίων τε αἰσίων καὶ ἐπηκόων εὐχῶν καὶ θυσιῶν τελείων, αἷς ἢ λατρεία ἐγίνετο (*Decal.* 158).

From another angle, we may say that the Sabbath is the model or archetype of all the festivals, as well. First, in terms of numeric structure, the Sabbath is, to state the obvious, hebdomadic or septenary. This septenary principle structures the rest of the festival calendar and Jubilee system as well, as we will note in a bit.

Second, the Sabbath establishes the basic and common significance of all the festivals: it is both commemorative, in that it celebrates the creation of the world,² but more importantly, it allows and encourages participation in and imitation of God. For Philo, human beings imitate by working six days a week and then resting on the Sabbath to contemplate nature, just as God rested on the seventh day in order to contemplate (θεωρεῖν) his works (*Decal.* 97–101).³ The Sabbath teaches humans, “Always imitate God.”⁴ By following the sabbath παράδειγμα, Philo says, humans can “make our mortal nature resemble, as far as possible, God’s immortal one” (ἐξομοιοῦντες θνητὴν φύσιν ὡς ἔνεστιν ἀθανάτῳ).⁵ Indeed, it is not only God, but all of heaven, that keeps Sabbath as a festival, according to Philo’s *On the Life of Moses* (2.210). Heavenly rest is the only true rest. All human Sabbath rest is derivative and partial—a copy of the archetypal contemplative heavenly leisure of God and the angels (*Cher.* 87).

The Festivals of the Lord

Nowhere does Philo make this clearer than in his exegesis of the festival calendar in Numbers 28. In *Cher.* 84, Philo cites Num 28:2.⁶ In the MT the text instructs the Israelites to bring each offering at its proper time, or at its festival: *יְזַמְּנוּ*. Note the 3rd person suffix. In the Greek text

² *QG* 3.20; *Opif.* 89.

³ Philo’s preferred vocabulary for imitating God here is ἔπεσθαι θεῷ (*Decal.* 98).

⁴ ἔπου φησὶν αἰεὶ θεῷ (*Decal.* 100).

⁵ *Decal.* 101.

⁶ His citation reads: δῶρα καὶ δόματα καὶ καρπώματα, ἃ διατηροῦντες προσοίσετε ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἑορταῖς ἐμοί.

that Philo quotes, though, the Lord speaks of “my festivals” (ἐν ταῖς ἐμαῖς ἑορταῖς).⁷ Presumably the difference is due to a vav-yod exchange in the *Vorlage*. Philo latches onto the 1st person pronoun and derives a major theological point from it. The festivals are the Lord’s own. That is, the festivals are not properly festivals of mortals, but God’s own festivals (*Cher.* 85). Indeed, in the truest sense *only* the Lord is able to keep festival, since

he alone rejoices, he alone is delighted, he alone feels cheerfulness, and to him alone is it given, to pass an existence of perfect peace unmixed with war. He is free from all pain, and free from all fear; he has no participation in any evils, he yields to no one, he suffers no sorrow, he knows no fatigue, he is full of unalloyed happiness; his nature is entirely perfect (*Cher.* 86)

God, however, is gracious and gifts humans with participation in his joy through their festival observance. The primary example Philo provides here is the Sabbath, the prototypical festival where humans participate in God’s own rest by imitating him and his restful posture.

Philo pursues a similar argument in his exposition of the Special Laws (2.51ff) where he cites this time Lev 23:2 which refers to the “festivals of the Lord.” Philo again takes this to mean that the true feast is too beautiful and perfect for human nature—only God can truly observe the feast. Thus only by imitating God in his contemplation, pure delight, and harmony with nature, can the wise man participate in God’s festivals. Elsewhere Philo implies that angels also participate in God’s festivals and the pure joy that accompanies them. In *QG* 4.188, commenting on Gen 26:8b, Philo reads Isaac’s “playing” with Rebecca as a “festive enjoyment” in which only a perfect man can partake. He goes on to say that this “festive enjoyment” is akin to God’s own continual joy, which is mirrored by that of the angels and the stars. Thus, for Philo, all

⁷ Philo’s citation differs slightly from LXX (ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς μου), but witnesses to the same *Vorlage*.

heavenly beings have continual joy, and human beings at times of festal joy participate in that heavenly existence.

The Festival of Every Day

Along these lines, Philo intriguingly begins his exegesis of the festival laws in Numbers 28 by identifying the first feast as “every day” (*Spec. Leg.* 2.41). Philo recognizes the strangeness of this reading, noting that it may cause some surprise. After all, if every day is a feast, then no day is a feast, since festivals exist to mark out certain times as special and to distinguish them from ordinary time. But, Philo’s point is fairly profound. He goes on to explain that if someone were completely virtuous, his life from beginning to end would be an uninterrupted festival (2.42). How does Philo come to this conclusion? It may be that he is simply trying to get the number of festivals up to ten, which he views as a perfect number (τέλειος ἀριθμός). In other festival lists, he limits the number of feasts to seven. He does seem, however, to have an exegetical basis for his claim. Num 28:1-8 commands Israel to sacrifice two lambs on the altar every day (the *Tamid*). For Philo, sacrifice implies festival.⁸ Furthermore, Num 28:2 LXX makes it clear that the *Tamid* is a festival offering: προσφέρειν ἐμοὶ ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς μου. Here the LXX is clearer than the Hebrew יְמִינָה, which most modern translations render “at the appointed time.” Philo also draws on the Hellenistic philosophical tradition that depicted some wise men living every day as a festival. For example, Plutarch says that Crates and Diogenes both viewed every day as festal (*De tranquillitate* 4, 20). Plutarch is careful to stress that this means every day is lived in virtue and tranquility, not in the debauchery that typically accompanied Greek and Roman festivals. Perhaps most important, as we noted above, Philo interprets Num 28:2 LXX to say that God himself keeps festival; indeed he is the only one who can truly keep festival as he

⁸ J. Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship in Philo of Alexandria* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 25–28.

alone experiences uninterrupted joy. Human festival-keeping is thus actually a participation in this divine joy. This means that only the virtuous can truly observe the festivals, since they alone imitate God and participate in his excellence through the virtues. Thus, since God keeps festival every day, so also can the virtuous, through their *imitatio Dei*.

Yom Kippur and Festal Divinization

Apart from the Sabbath, Philo also clearly ties other Jewish festivals to participation in and imitation of the divine. For example, Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, serves for Philo as a model of the human approach to the divine. The bronze altar, outside the holy place is visible and sensible. It represents the public or political life which deals with the body. The tabernacle, however, is unseen. It is where the bloodless and rational worship of the incense ritual takes place (*Ebr.* 87; 134–36). Most sacred and inaccessible is the holy of holies. Only the high priest, whom the Law requires to be free from any defect and perfect in nature, is allowed to enter (135–136).

The linen clothing worn by the High Priest only on Yom Kippur indicates that he has separated himself from the merely human. Linen, not derived from mortal animals, represents immortality. The robe is colorless, and unadorned. It is moreover silent, in contrast with the bells attached to the multicolored robe used for other high-priestly duties.⁹ Philo links the multi-colored robe with the political life, while linen corresponds to the contemplative.

When the high priest enters on Yom Kippur, it is for Philo a picture of the perfect man's mind entering the realm of the forms that are incorporeal and imperishable (*Ebr.* 136). Notably, he

⁹ See *Leg.* 2.56

describes this vision in terms of visionary ecstasy: the high priest “examines the unseen” (ἐπισκοπεῖν τὰ ἀθέατα ἄλλοις) and understands the divine beauty (κατανοῶν . . . τὸ θεοειδέστατον κάλλος). The sacrifice he makes in the holy of holies is likewise philosophical. Philo interprets the blood and incense of Leviticus 16 as the “blood of the soul . . . and the whole mind.”¹⁰

Perhaps most striking, Philo appears to attribute immortality and divinity to the High Priest while he is in the inner sanctum. In his treatise *On Drunkenness*, Philo exegetes Lev 10:9 as a promise of immortality to the high priest. Lev 10:9 prohibits (on threat of death) the high priest from entering the tent of meeting and drinking wine or strong drink. Philo, however, turns this threat into a promise, likely depending on the LXX’s οὐ μὴ ἀποθάνητε.¹¹

Similarly, in *Who is the Heir?*, Philo portrays the ideal high priest as God’s friend, who is thus like God (83). Even more, Philo quotes Lev 16:17 to establish that the high priest, in his soul, is no longer simply a human being, but is divinized in some sense. Lev 16:17 was clearly intended to prohibit anyone other than the high priest from entering the tabernacle on Yom Kippur while the high priest was fulfilling his duties. Philo, however, cites the text as ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἔσται . . . ἕως ἂν ἐξέλθῃ: He will not be a human until he exits (84).¹² He explains that this divinity is not bodily. Rather, “when the mind is ministering to God in purity, it is not human, but divine.”¹³

The prayers of the High Priest in the inner sanctum also reflect this motif of deification. The

¹⁰ *Leg.* 2.56. His phrase τὸ ψυχικὸν αἷμα probably derives from Lev 17:11: ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ πάσης σαρκὸς αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἐστίν.

¹¹ This, in contrast to ἵνα μὴ ἀποθάνητε, which we would expect. See Lev 10:6, where the same Hebrew phrase (כָּל־יְהוָה) is translated with ἵνα μὴ ἀποθάνητε.

¹² LXX reads καὶ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἔσται ἐν τῇ σκηνῇ, which would not support Philo’s point. Philo’s version shows up later in Origen, *Hom.Lev.* 9.11.1–11 and *Lev.Rab.* 21:12

¹³ See the similar nuanced idea in *Spec. Leg.* 1.116 and *Somn.* 2.189; 2.231.

priest asks God to “give a portion of his own merciful and human nature to the things which he has created.”¹⁴

Because Philo views the Levitical priest as an ideal or archetype of the contemplative, this radically democratizes the significance of Yom Kippur. While he does not reject the literal meaning and significance which attaches to a physical high priest entering a physical holy space in Jerusalem, Philo emphasizes that Yom Kippur is a reality available to the contemplative every day. The one who loves God, even if he is not from Levi and is physically separated from the temple, nevertheless abides in the temple spiritually (83). Indeed the wise man has access to God that a high priest in Jerusalem might not even experience on Yom Kippur if he is not wise (82). This was no doubt a powerful message to a diaspora audience.

Passover and Visionary Activity

Similarly, Philo emphasizes participation in God and imitation of God in his explanations of the significance of Passover. In *QE* 1.2 Philo ties the vision of God to the observance of Passover. The Passover observer begins by preparing his body through abstinence and his soul through cleansing the passions. The Passover experience is a visionary one: “When bright and visible visions appear to souls, they begin to hold festival, hoping for a life without sorrow or fear as their lot and seeing the cosmos with the weight of understanding as full and perfect, in harmony with the decad.”¹⁵ This contemplative-mystical view of the Passover is reinforced in *QE* 2.15, where Philo interprets Ex 23:18b:

¹⁴ *Spec. Leg.* 1.97.

¹⁵ This accepting Marcus’s emendation of the text (8).

every soul which piety fattens with its own mystical and divine piety is sleepless and watchful for the vision of things worthy to be seen. Now this experience is the festival of souls and the greatest of festivals, an occasion of true joy, which not unmixed (wine) but sober wisdom produces.

Here Philo may be alluding to the custom of observing a vigil on Passover eve. This vigil is not one which looks for eschatological redemption, however. Rather it is a mystical experience where the observer's soul may participate in a universal festival through contemplation of the ideal. In his treatise *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, Philo exegetes Ex 12:11, where the feast is called the "Passover of the Lord." As he did elsewhere, Philo stresses then that this festival is properly understood as a gift from God in which he allows participation in his own nature (63–64). As he says in *De Congressu*, the "spiritual Passover" (τὸ ψυχικὸν Πάσχα) is when the soul crosses from the passions and the senses in order to properly contemplate upon the divine (106).

Similarly, the Passover imagery is meant to teach the need for the soul to pass over from passion to virtue. Here Philo again draws on the meaning of his name for the feast, διάβασις, or "crossing over."¹⁶ For him, Passover is a festival of migration, or departure. Egypt, of course, symbolizes the passions which enslave the soul and from which the soul must migrate in its pursuit of perfection.¹⁷ The crossing of the Red Sea is compared to the struggle against passions, "which overwhelms him like a torrent, unless the rushing current be dammed and held back by the principles of virtue."¹⁸

¹⁶ In *Spec. Leg.* 2.145–49, he calls it τὰ διαβατήρια.

¹⁷ *Leg. All.* 3.94; 3.165.

¹⁸ The primary referent here may be the crossing of the Jordan, which also occurs at Passover.

Other elements are also allegorized in this fashion. The command in Exod 12:11 to gird the loins is taken to refer to bringing the appetites under restraint and abstaining from excess. Indeed, Moses commands the taking of the sheep on the 10th of the month to allow time for the celebrant to “prepare his soul and body . . . by quietly giving himself up to God” that it might gain release from the passions.¹⁹ Passover is sacred time, the temporal equivalent of sacred space, and just as one does not stroll into the temple with unwashed feet, so one must cleanse the soul before entering the sacred season. Elsewhere Philo explains that “the Passover is when the soul is anxious to unlearn its subjection to the irrational passions, and willingly submits (ἐκουσίως πάσχη) itself to a reasonable mastery over them.”²⁰ Here Philo is interpreting the name of the feast, Πάσχα, as a reference to submission to rationality.

As he did with Yom Kippur, Philo democratizes the Passover for his diaspora audience who are unable to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He stresses the spiritual aspects of the festival in such a way that diaspora Jews can celebrate the inward meaning of the feast even if they are separated from the physical ritual by thousands of miles. Here it is especially notable how much Philo emphasizes that at Passover the whole nation enters into the priesthood and every home becomes a temple and an altar.²¹ He derives this from his exegesis of the original Passover in Exodus 12, as opposed to other later festival legislation where a centralized Passover is envisioned. It is quite possible that Philo knows and approves of a diaspora version of the Passover sacrifice and meal, where a lamb was eaten that was (obviously) not slaughtered at the Jerusalem temple. If this is the case, it only reinforces the way that he views Passover almost entirely through the lens of Exodus 12 where the emphasis is placed on haste, simplicity, and transition.

¹⁹ *Quest.Ex.* 1.2.

²⁰ *Her.* 192.

²¹ *Quest.Ex.* 1.10.

Harmony with Nature and Festal Arithmology

The idea of harmony with nature is key to Philo's understanding of the philosophical life and thus of the festivals. The wise man is one who lives in harmony with nature. Indeed, he is a law unto himself. Absent a written law, he nevertheless naturally keeps God's laws which are written into the cosmos. Moses and Abraham, of course, are Philo's main examples. Philo does not explicitly depict the patriarchs observing Israel's festivals prior to the giving of the Law, the way that Jubilees so notably does. There are, nevertheless, hints that Philo would agree on one major point with Jubilees, namely it seems that he thinks the festivals are eternal ordinances, not the creation of the Mosaic Law. Rather, they are actually written into the fabric of creation, in some sense.

Philo does not, of course, speak of the heavenly tablets the way *Jubilees* does. Instead, he sees the festival calendar as an expression of the divine Logos. They reflect the laws of nature and the structure of the cosmos. This is made clear by Philo's arithmological discussions, which we have touched on briefly above. Philo sees the hebdomad as the basic structuring principle of the calendar and cosmos. He explains the entire festival system in terms of this septenary system. The sabbath day is the obvious example. Passover, being observed on the 14th and the following 7 days, also follows this pattern. The feast of weeks, likewise, is determined by counting seven sevens. The seventh month is especially prominent—it is the holy month (ἱερομηνία), beginning with the feast of trumpets, and concluding with a 7-day festival 2 weeks later. The main 7-day festivals, Matzot and Sukkot, each occur at equinoxes and are each in the 7th month from an equinox.

All of this is not too far from the septenary calendar that Jubilees insisted upon. While Philo does not seem to be insistent on a solar calendar or a 364 day calendar as Jubilees is, he nevertheless appears to value calendrical stability and to view the calendar as a constant, in keeping with the unchanging structure of the Logos. He does not betray any knowledge of interpolary months and never uses names for the months, but rather numbers. Further, his festal calendar includes only those feasts mentioned in the Torah. Hanukkah and Purim are excluded, just as they are at Qumran.

I will conclude with one other striking point of confluence between Philo and the apocalyptic traditions of *Jubilees* and the Qumran sect. Just as Philo sees the Sabbath as participation in the divine life, so also does *Jubilees*. The main passage to consider in this regard is *Jubilees* 50:10. In the midst of a discussion of Sabbath halakah, the text states that Israel should refrain on that day from “any work that belongs to the work of mankind.” This strongly suggests that on the Sabbath Israel is engaging in activities that are super-human or divine. Support for this comes from the second chapter in *Jubilees*. In 2:1, Jubilees sees God as observing the first, archetypal, sabbath. Sabbath observance is thus properly a divine activity. Just a bit later, in 2:17–18, God commands the highest two (of seven) classes of angels to observe Sabbath with him. The other five classes appear to have the task of governing the elements of the world, thus allowing the two highest or heavenly classes to rest along with God. Finally, in 2:19–20, God gives the Sabbath as a sign constituting Israel as a special nation. By resting, Israel observes Sabbath along with the higher angels and thus along with God. More specifically, they imitate the angels in blessing God, but also in performing other priestly labors (e.g., incense offerings). The fact

that *Jubilees* allows priestly work on the Sabbath indicates that it does not view such work as “human labor.” For *Jubilees*, angels are the original priests and Israelite priests are imitating angels when they perform their priestly work—thus it is super-human work. Israel, as a nation, is priestly (Exod 19:6, emphasized throughout *Jubilees*) and thus angelic, a status made especially evident on the Sabbath and festivals. The parallel with Philo’s semi-divinization of the priest when he enters God’s presence is clear. I want to suggest that while we may have here some evidence that Philo is familiar with Palestinian apocalyptic traditions, it is more likely that both *Jubilees* and Philo reflect a widely-held religious understanding in the ancient Mediterranean that festivals are those special times of the year when humans are allowed to participate in the leisurely and joy-filled life of the divine.