

Writing a Commentary on a Philonic Allegorical Treatise

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I am delighted to speak at this session on the work in progress on another volume of the *Philo of Alexandria Commentary* series. This series has already made an excellent start with running commentaries on several treatises of Philo from different series, namely the *Exposition*, the historical writings and the *Allegorical Commentary*. David Runia rightly states in his introduction that the *Allegorical Commentary* arouses less interest in the modern period, because it is more difficult to read and more personal. Other treatises lend themselves more easily to an investigation of Judaism at the time of Philo, while the *Allegorical Commentary* holds many secrets about the human soul as seen by Philo. Whereas Philo in the historical writings is concerned with real events in the world, in the AC his look is turned inside to the individual soul. Runia hopes that the commentary series will make the treatises of the AC “more accessible to a broad circle of readers so that they can be recognized for the fascinating pieces of exegetical and philosophical literature that they are”. I wholeheartedly share this appreciation of the AC as well as the hope for an increased interest in this series.

While my comments today will focus David Runia’s analysis of the whole treatise, which is based on ca. thirty years of intensive work on the Philonic corpus, I would like to stress that I have enjoyed reading the draft of the translation and commentary of a sample passage. In the overall analysis of the treatise Runia advocates an “empirical approach”. What does this imply? Initially, the concept has a negative meaning, namely a minimum of prior assumptions about the text. Runia proposes to explore the treatise as it presents itself to the reader, offering an in-depth study of its structure and composition (p.16). In my view, this approach is extremely appropriate and beneficial, as it is based on Philo’s own language and ideas. Rather than judging him by external standards, he is carefully read from within himself.

Runia (as well as Geljon) are concerned to establish the place of the treatise within the series of the AC. For this purpose they analyze all of Philo’s cross-references to *De Plantatione*, which show that it is part of a cluster of treatises interpreting the life

of Noah and his sons, as reported in *Gen.* 9.21-7. Questions arise as to the precise boundaries between these different treatises, leading to speculations about a possible lost work. Runia wonders whether the second part of *De Plantatione*, where Philo embarks on a rather more independent discussion on the pros and cons of getting drunk, does not naturally belong to the following treatise on drunkenness. Why, in other words, did Philo not start a new treatise in par. 141 – or rather may he originally have done so, but this fact got lost at some point in the transmission of the Philonic corpus? Runia’s answer is as practical as it is convincing. In his view, Philo did not start a new treatise at par. 141. The oddity of two rather separate parts can be otherwise explained: “the only answer that comes to my mind is that he thought the contents of the book so far were a bit too short for a decent scroll, so he should add a bit more to it” (p. 4).

The opening of the last treatise in the cluster, namely *On Sobriety*, moreover suggests that one treatise is lost. Philo summarizes his interpretative efforts up to this point by referring to some themes, which are not covered in the extant works, thus lending support to the conjecture that he originally wrote two volumes *On Drunkenness*, only the first of which has survived. Runia convincingly argues this position by offering a characteristically balanced account of all the available interpretations of the matter. I can only agree with his conclusion that one treatise of the cluster has indeed been lost.

The main part of Runia’s discussion is devoted to an analysis of the structure and exegetical method of Philo in *De Plantatione*. Expanding on earlier research, Runia stresses that “the most important principle is the primacy of the Biblical text”. Philo consistently follows the Biblical text, offering an interpretation of each verse and also introducing verses from other Biblical passages, which often prompt rather independent exegesis. Runia inquires into the mechanisms of association, which led Philo in each case to introduce a particular verse and draw a connection between it and the base text from the story about Noah. His thoughts on this matter deserve our close attention:

In analyzing the different roles that secondary and tertiary texts play in determining the structure of the allegorical treatise, I have toyed with the idea of introducing further refinements, such as the distinction implied above between structural and illustrative texts. On the whole, however, it seems better to

recognize that Philo has all manner of different ways of linking together and interweaving biblical passages and that the best way forward is to emphasize the flexibility of his technique within the parameters of his basic exegetical and allegorical method” (p. 7).

Identifying Biblical verses as the main structural principle of the *Allegorical Commentary*, Runia provides a list of all the quotations, distinguishing between primary, secondary and even tertiary texts. This list is extremely clear and provides an excellent overview of Philo’s hermeneutic procedure. It also prompts further investigation into the role of Biblical quotations in the AC.

Reading David Runia’s analysis, I indeed began to pay special attention to the secondary and tertiary verses in *De Plantatione*, which have recently caught my attention in the context of *De Migratio Abrahami*. In the process of preparing a commentary on the new German translation of this treatise, I was struck by the different introductions of various quotations. Studying these references carefully, I began to realize that they hold the key for important insights into the relationship between Philo and his readers. Ultimately, we may better understand Philo’s place in the Alexandrian community and his innovations in the field of Biblical interpretation.

Let me share some examples from the *Migratio* and then ask what they can teach us about *De Plantatione*. At the beginning of the *Migratio* Philo illuminates the expression “depart from your father’s house” by adducing *Gen. 28.17*, where Jacob says of the vision he just saw: “this is assuredly not the House of God” (*Migr. 5*). Philo interprets this expression in the sense that God is not contained in the visible realm. Applied to *Gen. 12.1*, this means that Abraham is ordered to leave the material realm altogether rather than only his father’s house. This secondary text from the *Book of Genesis* has been adduced in a strikingly simple fashion. Philo merely says that the “ascetic” or self-trained man said “this is assuredly not the House of God”. This manner of adducing the verse presupposes that the reader will recognize Jacob without explicitly being told about his identity. The reader is moreover expected to be familiar with the context of Jacob’s vision, which is crucial to understand the relevance of the verse to the story of Abraham. In other words, this secondary quotation indicates intimate familiarity

with *Genesis* on the part of both Philo and his readers. Philo is evidently able to freely associate a verse from a different context and integrate it into the flow of his argument about *Gen.* 12.1. His audience shares his intellectual background and is similarly trained, probably from early childhood, in the Jewish Scriptures.

The next secondary verse in the *Migratio* is introduced more explicitly. Philo says that “Moses teaches in many places ‘heed to yourself’ (*Migr.* 8). This reference to Moses clearly points to the Torah. Philo may have thought especially of the *Book of Deuteronomy*, where the expression appears several times.¹ Philo apparently quotes from memory, once more expecting his readers to be familiar with the verse. A few paragraphs later he refers without further ado to Lot, assuming his readers to know the story of his wife’s instability, which associates the quality of “inclining” or wavering with his name. In addition, Philo expects his readers to recognize Abraham in the reference to the “wise man, who is introduced as saying: depart from me”. Philo explains this separation of the two men as a demonstration of the principle that “one possessed by a love for ethereal things cannot dwell together with the lover of material goods”.²

Philo then associates Abraham’s departure from Chaldea with two stories of migration from Egypt, namely the Exodus and the Joseph story. The relevant verses, which are quoted in this context, are again introduced in very interesting ways. Regarding the first one Philo uses a more formal introduction, which relies on terminology from the mystery cults. He identifies Moses as a “hierophant” and praises him for entitling one “whole book of the holy legislation *Exagoge*” or “Leading Out” (*Migr.* 14). This is Philo’s regular title for the book we know as *Exodus*, a title, which apparently came into vogue at a later stage in the transmission of the LXX.³ It is also confirmed by Ezekiel the Jewish tragedian from Alexandria, who named his tragedy “*Exagoge*”.⁴ Philo draws attention to this title, which may well imply God’s drawing the human soul out of its material confines. It thus perfectly suits the story about Abraham’s departure from Chaldea, following God’s instruction to leave his homeland and family or, in Philo’s

¹ *Gen.* 24.6, 34.12, *Deut.* 12.13, 12.19, 12.30, 15.9.

² *Gen.* 13.9, quoted in *Migr.* 13.

³ *Her.* 14, 251, *Somn.* 1.117.

⁴ Thus far, LXX experts have not been able to help me clarify this point.

interpretation, the material realm. In both narratives God initiates the departure and prompts man to locate himself spiritually in a new place. In a way *Exagoge* thus serves also as a title for *Gen.* 12.1-9 and provides an important inter-text, to which Philo refers throughout his treatise. Having identified the *Book of Exodus* as a significant point of reference, Philo introduces a direct quotation from *Ex.* 2.23 by the simple expression $\lambda\epsilon/\gamma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota\ \gamma\alpha\rho\ \omicron/(t\iota$ (*Migr.* 15).

Finally, Philo introduces a tertiary story, which is closely connected to the *Exodus*, namely the transfer of Joseph's bones from Egypt to the Land of Israel. He signals this transition by starting the new section with an explicit reference to "Joseph's bones". This expression is interpreted along the same lines as Abraham's departure and the Exodus, namely as a separation of the spiritually pure and resistant from the material and weak. Having provided a hermeneutic key, Philo adduces further key-verses from the Joseph story, which he introduces with a striking sense of familiarity. He speaks about "believing that "God takes care", about an alienation from Pleasure, who says "let's sleep together", about confessing that "true and clear interpretations come by the favor of God", about "being a ruler over the whole of Egypt rather than a servant" and, finally, about "taking pride to be of the Hebrew race" and "taking credit that he has done nothing there". All of these quotations refer to Joseph, who is not explicitly named, but assumed to be recognized by the reader. Philo easily weaves these references into his text, apparently quoting from memory and often paraphrasing the verse in a way that suits the flow of his own exposition. Let me just go over the details in order to clarify the point of Philo's (and his readers!) striking familiarity with the Biblical text: *Gen.* 50.25 is verbally quoted, while the expression $u(ma=j$ is left out. *Gen.*39.7 is freely paraphrased, replacing Potiphar's wife's famous address to Joseph $koimh/qhti$ by the even more explicit expression $suneunasqw=men$. *Gen.*40.8 is paraphrased based on a combination of the LXX expressions $su/gkri=sij$ and $diasa/fhsij$. *Gen.*41.41 is paraphrased using the LXX expression $e)\pi\lambda\ pa/shj\ gh=j\ Ai)gu/ptou$. *Gen.*40.15 is freely paraphrased on the basis of the expressions $e)k\ gh=j\ Ebrai/wn$ and $w((de\ ou)k\ e)poi/hsa$. Philo's original readers will not have needed these explanations. They were in all likelihood able to enjoy Philo's rich text and automatically pick up all the Biblical references.

To sum up the evidence from the opening of the *Migratio*: it has become patently clear that the books of *Genesis* and *Exodus* are of utmost importance to Philo, who not only knows the texts by heart, but creatively thinks and writes with them. He quotes from memory, sometimes repeating the precise wording of the Septuagint, while at other times relying on key-expressions, which he weaves into his own phrases. The reader is expected to be intimately familiar with the Biblical stories so that he requires neither an identification of the speakers nor background information, which would contextualize the quotation. Moreover, the secondary and tertiary verses are primarily adduced on account of their relevant content. They provide further evidence of Moses' teaching about the separation of material and spiritual things. They moreover show that the righteous in different generations rejected the material realm and were guided by God to approach Him.

What light does the evidence from the *Migratio* shed on the treatise we are celebrating today, namely *De Plantatione*? Initially, it is conspicuous that most secondary and tertiary verses in this treatise, too, come from the *Book of Genesis* and are adduced with virtually no introduction. Philo regularly says *le/getai ga\l* or *fhsin* or *ei)sa/getai* or simply uses a key-word in his own exposition without indicating its Biblical origin.⁵ This conspicuous presence of secondary verses from *Genesis* may indicate that Philo is especially familiar with this book and thus most naturally draws on it or else that he considers it most relevant for an interpretation of the story of Noah, which also belongs to *Genesis*. Probably both aspects apply and mutually reinforce each other. The terms Philo most frequently uses to indicate quotation marks, namely *le/getai ga\l* or *fhsin*, vividly remind us of the rabbinic expression *שנאמר* and testify to a similar immersion in the Biblical text. Moreover, in *De Plantatione* Philo once uses an expression – not listed by Runia, if I am not mistaken – that confirms our impression that he is quoting from memory. He says that “Moses somewhere (*pou*) says...” (*Plant.* 108). The reference is to *Num.* 5.15, from where Philo takes the expression of a sacrifice, “which recalls the sin”.

⁵ *Plant.* 19 (*Gen.* 2.7, 1.27), *Plant.* 32 (*Gen.* 2.8), *Plant.* 44 (*Gen.* 2.9, 25.27), *Plant.* 73 (*Gen.* 21.33), *Plant.* 78 (*Gen.* 32-3), *Plant.* 85 (*Gen.* 28.21), *Plant.* 110 (*Gen.* 30.37), *Plant.* 132 (*Gen.* 29.35), *Plant.* 134 (*Gen.* 30.18), *Plant.* 140 (*Gen.* 9.21-2).

He apparently does not bother with the precise context, which is irrelevant to his interpretation of the story of Noah.

De Plantatione, however, also offers more elaborate introductions to secondary and tertiary verses, which turn out to be of special significance. Two quotations from *Leviticus*, for example, are introduced by precise references. Philo once writes “it is said in the book of Leviticus” and another time “it is said in the law regarding leprosy”.⁶ On another occasion Philo also quotes from *Leviticus* without identifying the book, merely introducing his quotation by the formula “it is said” (*Plant.* 94-5). The scarcity of quotations from *Leviticus*, however, as well as their special introduction in two out of three cases, suggests that Philo expects his readers to be less familiar with this law codex. While *Genesis* is assumed to be well known and constantly used, *Leviticus* may have been less familiar.

Most interesting, however, are Philo’s quotations from books outside the Pentateuch. In *De Plantatione* he quotes once a verse from *Hosea*, introducing it in the following way: “this is in harmony with the oracle transmitted by one of the prophets” (*Plant.* 138). This expression suggests that Philo is familiar with a collection of prophetic writings, which have been mentioned for the first time as part of a tri-partite canon by the grand-son of Ben Sira, who began around 132 BCE to translate his grand-father’s work for a Greek speaking Alexandrian audience (*Prologue*). Philo recognizes these books, without discussing their precise status, while assuming that they are less known.

Moreover, the Book of *Psalms* is twice quoted in *De Plantatione*. Philo offers the following explanation on the first occasion: “a divinely inspired man testifies to my explanation, saying thus in the *Hymns* [apparently another case of an earlier title]: he who plants the ear – will he not hear? He who fashions the eye – will he not see?” (*Ps.* 44.9). The Psalmist emerges here as a divinely inspired poet, separate from Moses, but perhaps enjoying a similarly elevated status. Philo seems to continue the tradition of Ben Sira’s grand-son, who spoke about the writings of the prophets and “others, who followed them”. For the grandson it was clear that those additional writers somehow participate in

⁶ *Plant.* 26 (*Lev.* 1.1), *Plant.* 111 (*Lev.* 13.12).

Israel's prophetic tradition. He probably included among them his own grand-father. Writing approximately a century and a half later, Philo quotes from the *Book of Psalms*, still considering it necessary to establish its prophetic inspiration.

A little later in *De Plantatione* the Psalmist is introduced with even more detail and concern:

One of the Bacchic company of Moses (ο(tou= Mwuse/wj dh\ qiasw/thj), who has tasted of this unadulterated light and is not found among the indifferent ones, addresses himself in the *Hymns* to his own mind, speaking thus: "delight in the Lord" (LXX *Ps.* 36.4, Mas. *Ps.* 37.4). Moved by the voice to a heavenly and divine love..., he is snatched away in his whole mind by sting of divine possession and finds true joy only in God (*Plant.* 39).

In this passage Philo is careful to introduce the Psalmist to his readers, who are obviously not used to the idea of reading *Genesis* in light of *Psalms* – a practice, which should later become very common among the Church Fathers (Origen and Eusebius) and the rabbis (*Genesis Rabbah*). We have no evidence of such reading practices from Alexandria before Philo. It is thus not surprising that Philo introduces the Psalmist in a special way. He is identified as a mystic in the "company of Moses", which is apparently responsible for the composition of the various books of the Bible. Philo obviously likes the Psalmist, because he expresses his religious fervor in an especially intensive and personal manner, perhaps more explicitly so than even Moses himself. Philo stresses his inward, mystical orientation by interpreting the Psalmist's imperative "delight in the Lord", originally appealing to another person, as an address to himself. It is in his view part of an ongoing dialogue with his mind. For Philo, the Psalmist demonstrates the kind of inner spirituality, which he claims for the whole Pentateuch. Indeed, reading *Genesis* in light of *Psalms* enables Philo to suggest that the first book of the Torah has also been written with a full awareness of individual spirituality. This suggestion is informed by his

allegorical approach and mystical tendency, so prominent in the early phase of his career, when he wrote the *Allegorical Commentary*.⁷

In summary, I have found David Runia's overall analysis of *De Plantatione*, with its emphasis on the Biblical quotations, to be singularly stimulating and productive. I am sure that the resulting translation and commentary will be of the highest academic quality. As a suggestion for the work in progress I recommend seriously taking into account the author-reader relationship in the context of the Jewish community in Alexandria.

⁷ The early date of the AC is recognized by many scholars, for a detailed discussion of the *status questionis*, see Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria* (forthcoming), chap. 1 and 9.