

Philo in Ethnographic Discourse

Some Observations to the Literary Context of *De Vita Contemplativa*¹

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In *De vita contemplativa* Philo of Alexandria depicts a community of female and male philosophers who live outside Alexandria on Lake Mareotis. Philo calls the group *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides*.² He describes their settlement, their ascetic life, their allegorical studies, their community meeting on the seventh day and finally their festal banquet with a dramatization of the Exodus from Egypt.

Because the location of their settlement, on Lake Mareotis, was so close to Alexandria that readers would have found it easy to test his statements for themselves, most scholars are convinced of the historical existence of the group.³ However, Philo is our sole witness for the historical *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides*. It is therefore troublesome that he does not explain how he gained his information.⁴ He notes no relationship of his own to the group, despite the fact that elsewhere he speaks of periods of sojourn in solitude and extols them.⁵ It is true that we can observe some differences between the ideals presented in *De vita contemplativa* and those in Philo's other writings, such as the praise of unmarried women (*Contempl.* 68), the ascetic diet of bread and water, and the rejection of slavery, otherwise known only from his writings on the Essenes.⁶ Still, as an extensive discussion about the authenticity of the work at the end of

¹ Short English version of a longer article German published (suddenly, I had not expected) in *JSJ* 46 (2015), 314 - 344.

² *Contempl.* 1–2.

³ Cf. François Daumas and Pierre Miquel, *De Vita Contemplativa* (Les Œuvres de Philon D'Alexandrie 29; Paris: Cerf, 1963), 39–46; Joan E. Taylor and Philip R. Davies, "The So-called Therapeutae of *De Vita Contemplativa*: Identity and Character," *HTR* 91 (1998): 3–24, at 10–14; Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria. Philo's "Therapeutae" reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 74–104.

⁴ David M. Hay, "Things Philo Said and Did not Say about the Therapeutae," *SBLSP* 128 (1992): 673; idem, "The Veiled Thoughts of the Therapeutae," in *Mediators of the Divine: Horizons of Prophecy, Divination, Dreams and Theurgy in Mediterranean Antiquity*, ed. Robert M. Berchman (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 167–68.

⁵ *Spec.* 3.1–2. However, Philo is critical of a life in isolation when he reflects in *Leg.* 2.85 on his own experience and, in *Migr.* 89–93, in reference to those who interpret Jewish customs solely in allegorical terms. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 142–53, seeks to identify the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* with the radical allegorists of *Migr.* 89–93.

⁶ Cf. the same ideal among the Essenes in *Prob.* 79. Hay, "Things Philo Said," 673–76; "Veiled Thoughts" 168–73.

the nineteenth century has shown, *De vita contemplativa* is marked from beginning to end by the theology Philo presents throughout his extensive work—including an overwhelming number of repetitive formulae.⁷

Therefore, in what follows I will ask what impelled Philo to describe this group of worshipers of God in their rural location in Egypt? What is the literary context within which Philo's writing is situated? And what is his purpose in depicting this ascetic group and its religious rituals? To that end I will first briefly review research on the genre of the work. After that I will show how, by means of his depiction, Philo inscribes the group on Lake Mareotis in Egypt within contemporary ethnographic discourse. Finally, I will once again raise the question of the identity Philo attributes to the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides.

1. The Genre of *De vita contemplativa*

Eusebius of Caesarea entitles the work Περὶ βίου θεωρητικοῦ (*On the contemplative Life*).⁸ But the portrait is not of the exceptional life and moral character of an individual. Instead, it is the description of a way of life. Troels Engberg-Pedersen describes *De vita contemplativa* as an “utopian fantasy done for a serious purpose,” strongly related to Plato's myth of Atlantis and Iambulus's utopian account of the journey to the islands of the sun.⁹ Philo, he thinks, is proposing an ideal Jewish society as counter to and negation of all others and thus as a generalized cultural critique. Mary Ann Beavis has undertaken a detailed comparison of Philo's *De vita contemplativa* and Iambulus's utopian travel novel. Both report on the place and its climate and the simplicity of food and clothing, describe forms of marriage and questions of progeny, the symposium culture, group organization, and the absence of slavery and sun-worship. Philo's description, however, differs in the concrete localization of its place and in avoiding anything marvelous or paradoxical.¹⁰

⁷ See the fulsome information in Frederick C. Conybeare, *Philo of Alexandria about the Contemplative Life or the Fourth Book of the Treatise Concerning Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 25–153, and Paul Wendland, “Die Therapeuten und die Philonische Schrift vom beschaulichen Leben: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums,” *Jahrbücher für klassische Philologie, Supplement 22* (1896), 720–31. For discussion of authenticity see Soham Al-Suadi, “Wechsel der Identitäten: Philos Therapeuten im Wandel der Wissenschaftsgeschichte,” *Judaica* 66 (2010): 209–28.

⁸ Cf. Eusebius, *Eccl. theol.* 2.18.7. The title apparently refers to *Contempl.* 1 and 58: οἱ τὸν θεωρητικὸν ἠσπύσαντο βίον: “our people who embrace the contemplative life.”

⁹ Troels Engberg-Pedersen, “Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa* as a Philosopher's Dream,” *JSJ* 30 (1999): 40–64, with reference to Plato, *Tim.* 19–26, and Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 2.55–60.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Beavis, “Philo's *Therapeutai*: Philosopher's Dream or Utopian Construction?,” *JSP* 14 (2004): 30–42.

With this conclusion Beavis implicitly agrees with the observations of Hans Lewy, who had pointed in the 1920s to the ethnographic *topos* of the work.¹¹ In fact, the first century C.E. could look back to a long tradition of describing foreign peoples and their religious rituals and customs. These entered into historical works with Herodotus, at the latest, but they were also a fixed element in descriptions of the world.¹² The historians and geographers relayed for their descriptions of foreign people not so much on their own observations as on an existing literary canon that was quoted and sometimes critically discussed.¹³ And “barbarian” peoples were by no means uniformly condemned for their alienating customs, but instead might be praised because of their supposedly “untouched,” “more unspoiled” ways of life and the religious knowledge they thus retained.¹⁴ From the third century B.C.E. onward there is evidence that autogenous authors participated in the discussion.¹⁵ In what follows I will try to show that Philo’s depictions of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides adopt conventions and *topoi* of this Greco-Roman ethnographic discourse.

¹¹ Cf. Hans Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der antiken Mystik*, BZNW 9 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1929), 31 n. 4: “: „Philo greift . . . mit seinem Traktat über die ‚theoretische Lebensform‘ in die Diskussion der griechischen ethnographischen Popularphilosophie ein, die unter den Barbarenvölkern die Inkarnation ihrer Staats- und religionsphilosophischen Utopien sucht. Besonders in den Priesterkassen der Barbaren, zu denen man seit Theophrast (Porph[yrus] de abst[inentia] II 26) auch die Juden rechnete, fanden die Griechen die Vereinigung erlesener Geister zum philosophischen Bios. Den ägyptischen Priestern, den persischen Magiern, den babylonischen Chaldäern, den indischen Brahmanen und Gymnosophisten, den keltischen Druiden etc. stellt nun Philo die jüdische Therapeutensekte entgegen und vereinigte alle Eigenschaften, die zum Lobe jener in der griechischen Ethnographie eingeführt waren, in der Darstellung des theoretischen Bios der Therapeuten (vgl. Quod Onmi 72-74). Philo ist also in seiner Konkurrenzschrift von der Topik der griechischen Ethnographie abhängig.“ Walter Bauer, “Essener,” *RE Suppl.* 4 (1924) 408–9 and 416–17, expressed already in by passing a similar observation.

¹² Herodotus, includes in his extensive description of the geography and climate of Egypt (2.2–34), the manners and morals there, religious myths and rituals and the customs of the inhabitants (2.35–98) and their history (2.99–102). This practice was continued by Thucydides, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, and Pliny the Elder. For the history of ancient ethnography see Karl Trüdinger, *Studien zur Geschichte der griechisch-römischen Ethnographie* (Basel: Emil Birkhäuser, 1918); Klaus E. Müller, *Geschichte der antiken Ethnologie* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997; repr. of the ed. of 1972/1980). Emma Dench, “Ethnography and History,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography vol. 2*, ed. John Marincola (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 493–503.

¹³ Grand R. Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 113–16.

¹⁴ Cf. Heinrich Dörrie, “Die Wertung der Barbaren im Urteil der Griechen,” in *Antike und Universalgeschichte: Festschrift Hans E. Stier*, ed. Ruth Stiehl (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), 145–75; Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Manetho(n) (3d c. B.C.E.), *Aegyptica*, from whom, however, there exist only quotations in Josephus and later fragmentary citations by Christian authors. See John Dillery, “Manetho,” in *The Romance between Greece and the East*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh and Stuart Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38–58. Chaeremon, cited below, might offer us such an “auto-ethnography,” but certainly this is the case for Josephus and Philo’s *Prob.* 72–91. For the influence of foreign peoples on Roman ethnography see Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

2. Philo's Therapeutae and Therapeutrides in Ethnographical Discourse

At the beginning of his work Philo presents himself as a scholarly historian. He does not intend to introduce anything of his own, “to improve upon the facts as is constantly done by poets and historians (ποιηταί καὶ λογογράφοι) through lack of excellence in the lives and practice which they record.”¹⁶ He thus takes up the approach of Thucydides, who asserts that his histories are founded solely on proofs and emphasizes: “Assuredly they [his proofs] will not be disturbed either by the lies of a poet (ποιητής) displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers (λογογράφοι) that are attractive at truth's expense.”¹⁷ In accordance with Thucydides's practice, Philo desires to hold “simply” (ἀτεχνῶς) to truth, for the “magnitude of virtue shown by these men” must not remain unspoken.

The fundamental purpose (πρόσρησις) envisioned by “the philosophers” is clear from their very title.¹⁸ They are called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides (θεραπευταὶ καὶ θεραπευτρίδες) “either because they profess an art of healing [. . .] which cures not only bodies but souls as well,” as the latter are beset by still worse ills, namely those that produce such things as lust, desire, sorrow, fear, greed, and injustice. Or else they were called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides “because nature and the sacred laws have schooled them to worship the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the One and more primordial than the Monad.”¹⁹ Etymologies of names are part of the standard repertoire in ancient depictions of foreign peoples.²⁰ Whether the group called itself Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, and whether Philo's etymologies correspond to their own view of themselves, is a question that must remain open.²¹ “Worshiper” and “servant” (θεραπευτής) could apply to members of many religions.²² As is often observed,

¹⁶ *Contempl.* 1. All translations are taken from F. H. Colson, *Philo* (10 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), 9: 112–69.

¹⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910), 1.21.1. It's a topic, cf. Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 20 [358F] etc.

¹⁸ Philo uses προαίρησις (purpose; *Contempl.* 2; 17; 29; 33; 67; 79) to describe philosophical principles and attitudes toward life. For the concept, cf. Plato, *Pol.* 306e.

¹⁹ *Contempl.* 2.

²⁰ Cf. Bauer, “Essener,” 401; Angela Ganter, “Ethnicity and Local Myth,” in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jeremy McInerney (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2014), 229–30; Woolf, *Tales*, 23–24; 54, and frequently. Philo derives the name “Essenes” from ὁσιότης (sanctity), “because they have shown themselves especially devout in the service of God, not by offering sacrifices of animals, but by resolving to sanctify their minds” (*Prob.* 75; cf. *Hypoth.* 11.1).

²¹ The latter opinion is held by Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 54–73.

²² Θεραπευτής: worshipers of God in Plato, *Phaedr.* 252c (Ares); *Leg.* 740b. Worshipers of Isis und Serapis: *UPZ* 8.19 (2d c. B.C.E.), *IG* 11(4).1226 (Delos, 2d c. B.C.E.). Philo can also say of proselytes that they are “worshipers of the Truly Existent” (*Spec.* 1.309, θεραπευταὶ τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος), rendering to Him [. . .] the supplication and service which are His right,” and that the Levites are “the ministering race” (τὸ

the first explanation is a summary of Stoic ethics.²³ In the second we hear a designation of God that Philo also uses elsewhere.²⁴ But it is scarcely recognizable as something formed by Judaism. Plutarch can say of Apollo:

In fact the Deity is not Many. [. . .] But Being must have Unity, even as Unity must have Being. [. . .] Wherefore the first of the god's names is excellently adapted to him, and so are the second and third as well. He is Apollo, that is to say, denying the Many and abjuring multiplicity; He is Ieïos, as being One and One alone; and Phoebus, as is well known, is a name that the men of old used to give to everything pure and undefiled. [. . .] Unity is simple and pure.²⁵

When Philo calls God “the One” (τὸ ὄν), “purer than the One” (ἐνὸς εἰλικρινέστερον), and “more primordial than the Monad” (μονάδος ἀρχεγονώτερον) he echoes the Platonic-tinted idea that Plutarch could also use for the religion of Apollo.

Philo continues his portrayal of Therapeutic piety (εὐσέβεια) by comparing it (via *synkresis*) to other forms of divine worship.²⁶ In descending order he describes the identification of the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air with gods (a Sophist invention, according to Philo), then astrology, the myths of the unbridled passions of the “blessed and divine natures” of the demi-gods (6), the worship of the statues of gods, and finally, as the lowest level, the Egyptian cult of animals. This list of false ideas about God also appears elsewhere in Philo's works.²⁷ It does not rest solely on the traditions of Jewish polemic against false gods.²⁸ Rather, its identification of the elements and fixed

θεραπευτικὸν γένος): *Fug.* 42; cf. *Contempl.* 11 and 21. See Roland Bergmeier, “Der Stand der Gottesfreunde: Zu Philos Schrift ‘Über die Kontemplative Lebensform,’” *Bijdr* 63 (2002): 47–48. The feminine θεραπευτρίς seems to be Philo's own invention; he also uses it in *Somn.* 1.332 and 2.273 to refer to the soul and in *Post.* 184 in reference to thought (διάνοια), but no such usage independent of Philo has yet been demonstrated.

²³ Cf. Hans-Gottfried Schönfeld, “Der Begriff ‘Therapeutai’ bei Philo von Alexandrien,” *RevQ* 3 (1962): 221.

²⁴ Differently from Exod 3:14 (ὁ ὄν), Philo translates the Tetragrammaton as τὸ ὄν, cf. *Spec.* 4.192; *Prob.* 43 For a similar definition of God cf. *Praem.* 40.

²⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, LCL (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936). Plutarch, *E Delph.* 393b–c: οὐ γὰρ πολλὰ τὸ θεῖόν ἐστιν [. . .] ἀλλ’ ἐν εἶναι δεῖ τὸ ὄν, ὡς περ ὄν τὸ ἐν. [. . .] ὅθεν εὖ καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἔχει τῷ θεῷ τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ τὸ δεύτερον καὶ τὸ τρίτον. Απόλλων μὲν γὰρ οἶον ἀρνούμενος τὰ πολλὰ καὶ τὸ πλῆθος ἀποφάσκων ἐστίν, Ἴηιος δ’ ὡς εἷς καὶ μόνος· Φοῖβον δὲ δήπου τὸ καθαρὸν καὶ ἀγνὸν [. . .] τὸ δ’ ἐν εἰλικρινές καὶ καθαρὸν.

²⁶ *Contempl.* 3–9.

²⁷ Cf. *Decal.* 52–81, in the explanation of the first commandment..

²⁸ Wis 14 speaks of the worship of stars and idols. For further parallels cf. Wendland, “Die Therapeuten,” 706–8.

stars with gods and goddesses reflects Platonic and Stoic thought.²⁹ The identification of gods can be traced to Egyptian wisdom around the turn of the era.³⁰ Polemic against Egyptian worship of animals was common at least from the time of Herodotus.³¹ Authors like Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch, who have high regard for the wisdom hidden in Egyptian myths and rituals, make extended attempts at this point to find rationalistic, symbolic, and allegorical explanations.³² The list places the author's learning clearly before the eyes of the reader and praises the piety of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides as the highest and superior form.

The false ideas about God on the part of “these” (οὗτοι)—presumably referring to the last-mentioned *ethnos*, the only one named, that is, the Egyptians, but remaining open for all other worshipers of God—“infect not only their own compatriots (ὁμόφυλοι), but the peoples in their neighbourhood (πλησιάζοντες) with their folly.” Hence their psychic vision is altogether mutilated; “they have lost the use of the most vital of the senses, sight.”³³ The case of the Therapeutic race (θεραπευτικὸν γένος) is altogether different. These are not only schooled in true seeing, but are “carried away by a heaven-sent passion of love, remain rapt and possessed like bacchanals or corybants until they see the object of their yearning.”³⁴

Having made a premature departure from earthly life, they have left property, children, family, and friends (13). In this way, as is described in a second extended comparison (*synkresis*), they act more nobly than the philosophers Anaxagoras and Democritus, so revered by the Greeks, for the latter allowed their property to become sheep pasture in order to be able to devote themselves entirely to study, but in doing so they thrust their descendants into poverty.³⁵ Contemporaries frequently refer to these anecdotes as *exempla* of a philosophical life free from luxury and succeeding in escaping the cares of daily life.³⁶ But for Philo the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides are acting in

²⁹ It is found also in Plato (*Crat.* 404b–c) and the Stoics (Zenon in Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, 7.147) and was systematically collected by Cornutus (*Nat. d.* 3–4; 19; 28) in the first century C.E.

³⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.12; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 32 (363D). Cf. also Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, 1.10; Chaeremon (*fragm.* 5 in Porphyry, *Aneb.* 2.12) holds the thesis that “the basic principles are the gods of the Egyptians and that there are no other gods than the so-called planets.” Cf. *fragm.* 17D in Porphyry, *De cultu simulacrorum fragm.* 10. There is a critique of a Platonist's ideas in Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.61–74.

³¹ Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.65–79; Juvenal, *Sat.* 15.1–8, and frequently elsewhere.

³² Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 1.83–90; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 70–76 (379D–382A).

³³ *Contempl.* 10.

³⁴ *Contempl.* 11. This suggests a reference to Plato's myth of the cave (*Pol.* 514a–518b). Plato also makes the comparison to bacchantes in *Ion* 533e–534a. Cf. *Phaedr.* 353a.

³⁵ *Contempl.* 14–16.

³⁶ Cf. Plutarch, *Per.* 16, where he declares Anaxagoras's behavior to be appropriate for a philosopher but not for a statesman. Cicero cites the example of Anaximander in favor of the thesis that through philosophy

accord with the Hippocratic principle, “life is short but art is long,”³⁷ and are close to the Mysian people of whom Homer sings: “The Mysians fighting hand to hand, and noble mare’s-milk-drinkers—Nought else but milk sustains their life, these men of perfect justice.”³⁸ The identity of the people named in the *Iliad* is discussed in the geographical and historical works of Xanthos (5th c. B.C.E.), Ephoros (5th c. B.C.E.), Poseidonius (2d–1st c. B.C.E.), Nicholas of Damascus (1st c. B.C.E.), and in Strabo’s geography (1st c. B.C.E.–1st c. C.E.), and thought to represent either Thracians or Asiatics, but more particularly some nomadic Scythians, of whom it could be said that they “excel all men in justice”³⁹ because they made no effort to earn money.⁴⁰ It is surely no accident that Philo adds a general remark about the striving for possessions that brings about injustice and the equality that creates justice.⁴¹ The Therapeutic abandonment of possessions is on a level with that of distant foreign peoples among whom one may still find an ideal, peaceful way of life free of property and greed.

Thus after the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides had separated themselves from their property and left their families and homelands (αἱ πατρίδες, 18), they settled in a rural area outside the city,⁴² and indeed, as Philo says, “not from any acquired habit of misanthropical bitterness but because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character” (20). Anti-Jewish stereotypes echo in the allusion to “misanthropy,” but they are transferred from ethical to philosophical discourse.⁴³ In particular, what Philo says next denies that the group has any ethnic particularity:

one can escape all the demands of life (*Tusc.* 5.49 [115]). But Democritus appears in the same list because of his blindness. Cf. also Horace, *Ep.* 12.12; Seneca, *De providencia* 6. Philo uses the same example in *Prov.* 2.12–13.

³⁷ Hippocrates, *Aph.* 1.1.

³⁸ Homer, *Il.* 13.5–6.

³⁹ So Ephoros in Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.9; Poseidonius in Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.3; Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.2–10; Nicholas of Damascus, *Fragmenta* 71; 123 (Xanthus). Whether all these older historians actually existed or whether the references are intended primarily to confirm and legitimate the information given by later figures is a question that must remain open here. On this see Parker, *Making of Roman India*, 113–16.

⁴⁰ Δικαιοσύνη πάντων διαφέρειν, Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.9 (Ephoros); refusal to engage in trade, Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.3, 7 (Poseidonius); Strabo himself *Geogr.* 7.3.2.

⁴¹ *Contempl.* 17. The basic idea appears to have been widely held. Lucian, *Cal.* 8, says: “Who will not admit that fairness in everything and unselfishness are due to justice, unfairness and selfishness to injustice?” (τίς γὰρ οὐκ ἂν ὁμολογήσειε τὴν μὲν ἰσότητα ἐν ἅπαντι καὶ τὸ μὴδὲν πλέον δικαιοσύνης ἔργα εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἄνισόν τε καὶ πλεονεκτικὸν ἀδικίας;).

⁴² *Contempl.* 18–20.

⁴³ For misanthropy see Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.291 (14); Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1; *Ann.* 15.44.1. Certainly, the concept does not necessarily refer to Jews; cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 7.80; Seneca, *Tranq.* 15.1. But the prejudice is ancient. An anecdote quoted by Diodorus Siculus and Josephus reports that Antiochos was advised to destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish people, “for they only of all people hated to mix with any other nations,

This race (τὸ γένος) exists in many places in the inhabited world, for the perfect goodness must needs be shared both by Greeks and the world outside Greece, but it abounds in Egypt in each of the nomes as they are called and especially round Alexandria. But the best of these votaries journey from every side to settle in a certain very suitable place which they regard as their fatherland. The place is situated above the Mareotic Lake. [. . .]⁴⁴

After what has been said about Egyptian animal worship, this privileging of Egypt is striking. But, as will soon become clear, it was by no means unusual in the first century C.E.⁴⁵ Beyond that, it is worth noting what Philo has thus far *not* said, namely, that these could be Jewish women and men. Instead, the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides make up a “race” (τὸ γένος) drawn from all peoples and dwelling throughout the world, but especially to be encountered in Egypt, a race whose elite (οἱ δὲ πανταχόθεν ἄριστοι) can be found in the neighborhood of Alexandria. The place, Philo continues, is located

[. . .] on a somewhat low-lying hill very happily placed both because of its security and the pleasantly tempered air. The safety is secured by the farm buildings and villages roundabout and the pleasantness of the air by the continuous breezes which arise both from the lake which debouches into the sea and from the open sea hard by. For the sea breezes are light, the lake breezes close and the two combining together produce a most healthy condition of climate.⁴⁶

Ancient geography and ethnography from the time of Herodotus onward proposed connections between place of residence and national character and mores.⁴⁷ An ideal situation and well-tempered climate are found not only in the utopian locales, such as Iambulus’s islands of the sun and the land of the Hyperboreans,⁴⁸ but also characterize

and treated them all as enemies” (μόνους γὰρ ἀπάντων ἐθνῶν ἀκοινωνήτους εἶναι τῆς πρὸς ἄλλο ἔθνος ἐπιμιξίας). Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 34/35.1; cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 13.245.

⁴⁴ *Contempl.* 21–22.

⁴⁵ People in Rome seem to have been especially impressed by Egyptian culture. Cf., e.g., Penelope J. E. Davies, “Aegyptica in Rome: Adventus and Romanitas,” in *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 354–70. See also Gruen, *Rethinking*, 76–114.

⁴⁶ *Contempl.* 22–23.

⁴⁷ Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.35. There is a systematic investigation in Hippocrates, *On Air, Waters, and Places* (*De aëre aquis et locis*).

⁴⁸ Iambulus in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.56.7: the land of the Hyperboreans in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.47.1. Cf. David Winston, *The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981), 317 n. 4, and Beavis, “Philo’s *Therapeutae*,” 35.

Italy, and especially Rome, which is praised for its median between heat and cold, its pleasant winds and perfect location between the seas.⁴⁹

After this, Philo describes the settlement (24), the religious lives of individuals (25–29), the gathering on the seventh day in the common sanctuary (30–33), and finally the group’s abstemious way of life (33–39). He says that the houses are not built too close to one another “since living at close quarters is troublesome and displeasing to people who are seeking to satisfy their desire for solitude,” but not too far apart either, because of the “sense of fellowship which they cherish” (24). Each contains a holy place (οἶκημα ἱερόν) dedicated solely to “the mysteries of a holy life” (τὰ τοῦ σεμνοῦ βίου μυστήρια τελοῦνται). In what follows it appears that the holy room is a place for studying laws, oracles, and psalms, “and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety” (25). Their days are given over to religious practice (ἄσκησις, 28); they pray at sunrise and sunset (27). During the nights they dream and sometimes even give utterance to “the glorious verities of their holy philosophy” (26), while they spend the day in allegorical studies (29) and in composing songs in different meters and to different melodies (30). Every seventh day they gather for a plain instruction, given by the oldest among them (31), that impresses itself on the soul all the more because of its simplicity. Women are seated within hearing distance behind a wall, so that “the modesty becoming to the female sex is preserved” (33).⁵⁰ “They lay self-control (ἐγκράτεια) to be as it were the foundation of their soul and on it build the other virtues” (34). They eat only at evenings, some of them only every third day or even less frequently. Only on the seventh day does everyone eat, though “only common bread with salt for a relish flavoured further by the daintier with hyssop” (37). Their houses and clothing are simple (38–39) and serve merely as protection from “the fiery heat of the sun and the icy cold of the air” (24; cf. 38).

All these are ideals of simplicity (εὐτελεία) and modesty (ἀνυψία) from the Stoic diatribe.⁵¹ As has long been known, Philo’s depiction is especially closely related to the description of Egyptian priests in one of the fragments of the Stoic Chaeremon (ca. 10–80

⁴⁹ Dionysios of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*, 1.37.5; Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.4.1; Pliny, *Nat.* 3.41; 37.201; Varro, *Rust.* 1.2.4, and frequently elsewhere. Strabo also notes the favorable location of Alexandria (*Geogr.* 7.1.7).

⁵⁰ The lecture room thus described, similar to a synagogue, is the sole example in antiquity of a segregation of the sexes in a synagogue; differently, e.g., Luke 13:10–17. Cf. Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, BJS 36 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 133–34.

⁵¹ Cf. Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.3.5–6; Musonius, *Oratio* 18A; 18B; 19; Seneca, *Ep.* 8.5, etc. See Paul Wendland, “Philo und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe,” in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Griechischen Philosophie und Religion*, ed. Paul Wendland and Otto Kern (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1895), 8–33.

C.E.) preserved by Porphyry.⁵² The fragment presumably comes from the “Egyptian history” by this younger contemporary of Philo,⁵³ who was known in Rome as a strict ascetic and was probably among Nero’s philosophical tutors.⁵⁴ It is frequently suggested that Chaeremon came from Egypt, in particular Alexandria.⁵⁵ The fragment preserved by Porphyry in *De abstinentia* 4.6–8 begins with the words:

Chaeremon the Stoic tells in his exposé about the Egyptian priests, who, he says, were considered also as philosophers among the Egyptians, that they chose the temples as the place to philosophize. For to live close to their shrines was fitting to their whole desire of contemplation (ἡ ὄρεξις τῆς θεωρίας), and it gave them security because of the reverence for the divine, since all people honoured the philosophers as if they were a sort of sacred animals. And they were able to live a quiet life (ἡρεμαίους δὲ εἶναι), as contact with other people occurred only at assemblies and festivals, whereas for the rest the temples were almost inaccessible to others. For it was requisite that those who approached them should have purified themselves and abstained from many things. This, too, is as it were a common law of the Egyptian temples. They renounced every employment and human revenues, and devoted their whole life to contemplation and vision of the divine. Through this vision they procured for themselves honour, security, and piety (τὸ εὐσεβές), through contemplation (θεωρία) they procured knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), and through both a certain esoteric and venerable way of life (ἄσκησις ἡθῶν κεκρυμμένη τινὰ καὶ ἀρχαιοπρεπής). For to be always in contact with divine knowledge and inspiration (γνώσις καὶ ἐπίπνοια) keeps them far from all kinds of greediness, represses the passions, and incites them to live a life of understanding. They practised frugality and restraint, self-

⁵² Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 = Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6–8. The link was first noted by Wendland, “Die Therapeuten,” 755. For dating see Michael Frede, “Chaeremon der Stoiker,” *ANRW* 36/3 (1989): 2079; Thomas Schneider, “Chaeremon,” *Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (2013): 1424.

⁵³ The title is given by Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.288, according to whom the work also contains a distorted picture of Israel’s history in Egypt. That the fragments belong together was suggested by Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer, *Chaeremon* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1932), 15; Pieter W. van der Horst, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher: The fragments collected and translated with explanatory notes*, EPRO 101 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), IX; Frede, “Chaeremon,” 2081, and Ilaria Ramelli, “Cheremone di Alessandria neostoico e allegorista,” in *Stoici romani minori testi greci e latini a fronte*, ed. Roberto Radice and Ilaria Ramelli (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 1299–1308, which also contains the most recent edition of the fragments, with Italian translation (1312–1358).

⁵⁴ Chaeremon’s asceticism is ridiculed by Martial, *Epigrammaton* 11.56. Suda (*Testimonium* 3) calls him a teacher of Nero, and elsewhere (*Testimonium* 4) the head of a grammatical school in Alexandria.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Testimonium* 5; Frede, “Chaeremon,” 2067–68, and elsewhere.

control and endurance (ἐγκράτειάν τε καὶ καρτερίαν), and in all things justice and freedom from avarice.⁵⁶

Thus Chaeremon's Egyptian priests are really philosophers who lead a retired, ascetic life devoted to contemplation of the divine, thus representing an example of morality worthy of imitation. They seem, indeed, to be a reflection of Philo's Egyptian Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, who because of their "ardor for the study of wisdom"⁵⁷ led a retired, ascetic, and pious life⁵⁸ in contemplation of nature and their sacred scriptures.⁵⁹ Chaeremon's continued description reveals further commonalities. During the periods of purification the Egyptian priests separate "from their families and fellows."⁶⁰ Some abstain from wine;⁶¹ during these periods of sanctification they eat no bread, and at other times eat it only with hyssop.⁶² They mark time in cycles of seven,⁶³ sleep on beds of palm leaves,⁶⁴ worship the (divine) sun several times a day,⁶⁵ spend the nights observing the stars,⁶⁶ and devote the remaining hours to arithmetical and geometrical studies and philology.⁶⁷ At some points the practices are so similar that mutual influence between the two writings has been proposed, for example, when Philo shows the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides sitting "in order [. . .] in proper attitude," with appropriate attire, "with their hands inside the robe," as the eldest lectures "with visage and voice alike quiet."⁶⁸ Compare Chaeremon:

They [the Egyptian priests] were always seen near the gods, or rather their statues, either carrying or preceding them in a procession or setting them up with order and dignity (σεμνηότης). And each of these acts was not empty gesture, but an indication of some allegorical truth (ἔνδειξις φυσικοῦ λόγου). Their gravity was also apparent from their behaviour. For their way of

⁵⁶ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6.1–17). Translation in van der Horst, *Chaeremon*.

⁵⁷ See *Contempl.* 16: αἱ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν ὄρμαί; cf. *Contempl.* 2; 27–28; 34; 67; 69; 74; 80; 89.

⁵⁸ Cf. ἐρημία, *Contempl.* 20; ἐγκράτεια, *Contempl.* 34; εὐσέβεια, *Contempl.* 2; 55; 88.

⁵⁹ *Contempl.* 1; 29; 58; 64; 57; 78–79; 90.

⁶⁰ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6.19–20). Cf. *Contempl.* 18; 30.

⁶¹ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6.32–34). Cf. *Contempl.* 40; 73–74, with reference to a law for priests.

⁶² Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6.34–37). Cf. *Contempl.* 37; 73; and see 81, on the table of show bread in the Temple.

⁶³ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.7.18–21). Cf. *Contempl.* 36; 65.

⁶⁴ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.7.27). Cf. *Contempl.* 69.

⁶⁵ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.8.5–7). Cf. *Contempl.* 89.

⁶⁶ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.8.4). Cf. *Contempl.* 66.

⁶⁷ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.8.7–10). Cf. the textual studies of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, *Contempl.* 28; 75.

⁶⁸ *Contempl.* 30: καθ' ἡλικίαν ἐξῆς καθέζονται μετὰ τοῦ πρόποντος σχήματος, εἴσω τὰς χεῖρας ἔχοντες; 31: καθεστῶτι μὲν τῷ βλέμματι. Cf. also 66: μετὰ τῆς ἀνωτάτων σεμνότητος.

walking was disciplined (εὐτακτος), and they took care to have a quiet look (βλέμμα καθεστηκός) . . . They always kept their hands within their dress.⁶⁹

However, even though it is possible that Philo and Chaeremon were personally acquainted, a literary connection can neither be excluded nor demonstrated.⁷⁰ The relationship between Philo's and Chaeremon's praise of Egyptian worshipers of God lies at a deeper level. What links them is an increasing interest, from the first century B.C.E. onward, on the part of authors shaped by Stoicism and Platonism, in the customs, myths, and rituals of foreign peoples, and Egyptian religion in particular. Plato himself laid the trail to Egypt with his story of the Egyptian journey of the Greek sage and lawgiver Solon; it was there that a priest told him of an ideal constitution, in connection with the Atlantis myth.⁷¹ If Chaeremon really came from Egypt his writing may represent an "auto-ethnography"⁷²; in any case it is "an attempt to integrate genuinely Egyptian ideas, concepts of Stoic philosophy, and astrological interest, and to identify astrology, ethics, and asceticism as basic elements of the pristine 'philosophy' of the Egyptians."⁷³

Chaeremon was not alone in his interest in Egyptian priests and their rituals.⁷⁴ Diodorus Siculus begins his Greek history of the world with Egyptian teachings about the gods because the Egyptians "were the first to introduce the worship of the gods."⁷⁵ His first book concludes with a statement that all the great figures of antiquity, from Orpheus and Homer to Solon and Plato, had been influenced by Egyptian wisdom.⁷⁶ Plutarch, in *De Iside et Osiride*, portrays his platonizing interpretation of the myths and rituals of the Isis religion as a search for truth.⁷⁷ He also notes the fasting of the priests, for example

⁶⁹ Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.6.25–29): Ἐφαίνοντο δὲ αἰεὶ θεῶν ἢ ἀγαλμάτων ἐγγύς, ἤτοι φέροντες ἢ προη γούμενοι καὶ τάσσοντες μετὰ κόσμου τε καὶ σεμνότητος ὧν ἕκαστον οὐ τῦφος ἦν, ἀλλὰ τινος ἔνδειξις φυσικοῦ λόγου. Τὸ δὲ σεμνὸν κὰκ τοῦ καταστήματος ἐωρᾶτο. Πορεία τε γὰρ ἦν εὐτακτος καὶ βλέμμα καθεστηκός ἐπετηδεύετο, ὡς ὅτε βουληθεῖεν μὴ σκαρδαμύττειν· γέλως δὲ σπάνιος, εἰ δὲ που γένοιτο, μέχρι μειδιάσεως· αἰεὶ δὲ ἐντὸς τοῦ σχήματος χεῖρες.

⁷⁰ A Chairemon, son of Leonidas, appears in a rescript of the emperor Claudius among the emissaries from Alexandria (*Testimonium* 5, van der Horst, *Chaeremon*, 3). Wendland, "Die Therapeuten," 755–56, thinks that Chaeremon's writing inspired Philo's, and that the latter intended to surpass the former. Schwyzer, *Chairemon*, 81, assumes that Chaeremon was inspired by Philo.

⁷¹ *Tim.* 21e–25d; cf. *Critias* 113d.

⁷² Dench, "Ethnography," defines autoethnography as "the process whereby African and South American people [today] constructed accounts of themselves through engagement with European ethnographical traditions that depicted them as 'other peoples'" (493–94).

⁷³ Schneider, "Chaeremon," 1424. See also Frede, "Chaeremon," 2069.

⁷⁴ Cf. Frede, "Chaeremon," 2103, and *passim*.

⁷⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.6, 1.11–26; 83–90. Seneca seems also to have shown interest in Egypt, as the fragment *De situ et sacris Aegyptiorum* shows; cf. Frede, "Chaeremon," 2076.

⁷⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 1.96–98.

⁷⁷ Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 2 (351E).

from salt⁷⁸ and wine,⁷⁹ as well as other dietary rules, and praises their efforts at “studying, learning, and teaching religious matters.”⁸⁰ Plutarch also grounds the ascetic practices of the female and male priests by saying that abstinence from food as well as preservation of virtue is necessary in order to attain to knowledge of the divine and to abide with it, or with her (Isis).⁸¹

Chaeremon’s view that in Egypt “[t]he true philosophizing was found among the prophets, and priests who had charge of the sacred vestments, the sacred scribes, and also the astrologers”⁸² was, as Michael Frede shows, due to the idea that ancient peoples had access to truth in its original purity, a truth that had been lost in the course of history because of the general decline in virtue. Seneca traced this thesis to Poseidonius.⁸³ Chaeremon and Plutarch agree that this truth can be regained through a symbolic or allegorical interpretation of the myths of the gods and priestly rituals.⁸⁴ Chaeremon in particular thought that such methods were invented by the Egyptian priests.⁸⁵

Chaeremon’s praise of the model and ascetic way of life of the Egyptian priests also served to hold up a mirror to the (supposed) current decline in virtue.⁸⁶ Philo takes up this feature especially in his third extended comparison (*synkresis*), in which he caricatures the Greek symposium culture. Drinking wine leads at best to “slavish taste”

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5 (352F); 32 (363E). Cf. Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 684A; 668E. On the contrary, Philo emphasizes that the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides eat bread with salt, *Contempl.* 37; 73; 81.

⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 6 (353B).

⁸⁰ Ibid.: φιλοσοφοῦντες καὶ μανθάνοντες καὶ διδάσκοντες τὰ θεῖα διατελοῦσιν.

⁸¹ Ibid., 2 (351F).

⁸² Chaeremon, *fragm.* 10 (Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.8.z.18–19).

⁸³ Seneca, *Ep.* 90.3–6, in Frede, “Chaeremon,” 2088–92. For Plutarch cf. also *fragm.* 157: “Ancient natural science, among both Greeks and foreign nations, took the form of a scientific account hidden in mythology, veiled for the most part in riddles and hints, or of a theology such as is found in mystery-ceremonies: in it what is spoken is less clear to the masses than what is unsaid, and what is unsaid gives cause for more speculation than what is said. This is evident from the Orphic poems and the accounts given by Phrygians and Egyptians. But nothing does more to reveal what was in the mind of the ancients than the rite of initiation and the ritual acts that are performed in religious service with symbolical intent.” Cf. also Cornutus, *De natura deorum* 17.1: “Many and varied are the mythical poems on the gods that have been composed among the Greeks, others by the magi and still others by the Phrygians and the Egyptians, Celts, Libyans, and other peoples”

⁸⁴ Frede, “Chaeremon,” 2086–92. Cf. Ramelli, “Cheremone,” 1301–4; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 76 (382C/D).

⁸⁵ Cf. Chaeremon, *Testimonium* 9 (Porphyry, *Christ fragm.* 39); *Testimonium* 12 (Tzetzes, *Exegesis of the Iliad* 1.193): “Chaeremon says the Egyptians were the first to teach—since they wanted to teach the great and lofty things to the uninitiated by means of allegories and myths—Athena is, mythically spoken, a goddess.” *fragm.* 2 (Michael Psellus): “Egyptian wisdom is to say all things symbolically.” Plutarch makes a sharper distinction between the ‘obscure and clearer symbols.’ “Wherefore in the study of these matters it is especially necessary that we adopt, as our guide in these mysteries, the reasoning that comes from philosophy” (Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 67–68 [377e–378b]).

⁸⁶ This, too, was one of the standards of ancient ethnography. Thus the Spartans know that discord ceases when greed and luxury (πλεονεξία καὶ τρυφή) are eliminated (Strabo, *Geogr.* 10.4.18); the Indians are happy “because of their simplicity and moderation” (διὰ τὴν ἀπλότητα καὶ τὴν εὐτέλεια) (15.1.53).

(45), and at worst to enmity and wild fist-fights.⁸⁷ Men “attack and bite each other and gnaw off noses, ears, fingers and some other parts of the body, so that they make good the story of the comrades of Odysseus and the Cyclops by eating ‘gobbets’ of men, as the poet says.”⁸⁸ The revelers show themselves enemies to their families and homeland, and even to themselves. The reflection of Stoic moral discourse, comedy, and satire is unmistakable.⁸⁹ Consequently, such things as the luxurious decorations of the dining rooms, well-upholstered ivory couches, purple coverlets, expensive dishes and drinkware, erotically-dressed slaves, artistic confections, and other exotic foods fall under Philo’s eye and are branded as “Italian luxuries” beloved of Greeks and barbarians.⁹⁰

Finally, Philo also criticizes Xenophon’s and Plato’s literary symposia. It is true that there were pleasures at both, but only human ones. In Xenophon’s account musicians, dancers, and comedians appear, and the subject of discussion at the Platonic banquet is ordinary and also homoerotic love.⁹¹ “But [. . .] the story of these well-known banquets is full of such follies and they stand self-convicted in the eyes of any who do not regard conventional opinions” (64), despite the common notion that they are successful undertakings.

The Therapeutic symposium presents an entirely contrary picture.⁹² The people gather for prayer on the fiftieth day, clothed in white, with the utmost dignity (μετὰ τῆς ἄνωτάτω σεμνότητος), lifting their hands and eyes to heaven, because “they have been trained to fix their gaze on things worthy of contemplation” (66). After the prayer, the women and men recline at table, with the women taking their places on the left side (69). The first places belong to those who “from their earliest years have grown to manhood and spent their prime in pursuing the contemplative branch of philosophy” (67). The voluntary “chastity” of the women is superior to that of Greek priestesses (68). Hostile to the pleasures of the body, they recline on hard benches, covered only “with quite cheap strewings of native papyrus” to “mitigate somewhat the harsh austerity of Sparta” (69).

⁸⁷ *Contempl.* 40–47.

⁸⁸ *Contempl.* 40.

⁸⁹ Cf. Wendland, “Philo,” 8–33; Reiner Bernhardt, *Luxuskritik und Aufwandsbeschränkungen in der griechischen Welt* (Historia, Einzelschriften 168; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 2003), 203–6; Maren Niehoff, “The Symposium of Philo’s Therapeutae: Displaying Jewish Identity in an Increasingly Roman World,” *GRBS* 50 (2010): 98–112. For fights at symposia see, e.g., Lucian, *Symp.* 43–47.

⁹⁰ *Contempl.* 48–56. For this topic cf. Musonius, *Or.* 18A; 18B; 19A; 19B; Bernhardt, *Luxuskritik*, 199–203; 214–17.

⁹¹ *Contempl.* 57–64. For a praise of of Homer’s banquets in contrast to those of Plato and Xenophon, cf. Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 5.1–20 (85a–193c), esp. 5.8 (180a–b); 5.13 (187f–188d); Plutarch, *Pyth. orac.* 401c; Pseudo-Plutarch, *Lib. ed.* 11D.

⁹² For a juxtaposition see Wendland, “Die Therapeuten,” 704–5.

Serving is done by free younger members in modest clothing, “ungirt and with tunics hanging down.”⁹³ The meal again consists of bread, salt, and “as a luxury,” hyssop.⁹⁴

However, in the first place the course of the meal does not involve much in the way of a happy and active conversation on the part of the assembled participants.⁹⁵ Instead, the presider gives a lecture, discussing questions from sacred scripture and using an allegorical method (75). His lecture style follows the rhetorical ideal of the unadorned character of an instruction that “proceeds in a leisurely manner; he lingers over it and spins it out with repetitions, thus permanently imprinting the thoughts in the souls of the hearers” (76).⁹⁶ The others listen silently, indicating praise or questions only by movements of the head or lifting a finger (77). Only after the goal of the scriptural interpretation has been reached do those present applaud (79), and they take part in the event only according to an established hierarchy.

After that the presider sings an original hymn to God or “an old one by the poets of an earlier day.”⁹⁷ It is probably correct to think of the Psalms here, as many do, but Philo describes them as coming from those “who have left behind them hymns in many measures and melodies, hexameters, and iambic, lyrics suitable for the processions or in libations and at the altars, or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing” (80).⁹⁸ As Peter Jeffery shows, these song genres had a cultic character in Philo’s world; they indicate the gradual approach to the altar until the singing culminates in a choral dance as in Greek tragedy.⁹⁹ Philo hints at such a dramatization when he writes that the choir, responding to the lead singers, listen “in the proper order” and “in complete silence” until, at the end, they sing the refrain (80).

⁹³ *Contempl.* 72. Cf. the high-girdled transparent garments of the luxury slaves at other banquets (*Contempl.* 51).

⁹⁴ *Contempl.* 73; cf. 37.

⁹⁵ Differently Niehoff, “Symposium,” 112–16, who attributes the hierarchical and monological character of the meals of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides to Roman tastes. But Roman authors of the imperial period also speak of the convivial character of the meal, something not suited to monologues. Cf. Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser, “‘Täglich lade ich alle meine Nachbarn zu einem Mahl’. Cicero und das *convivium* im spätrepublikanischen Rom,” in *Der eine Gott und das gemeinschaftliche Mahl: Inklusion und Exklusion biblischer Vorstellungen von Mahl und Gemeinschaft im Kontext antiker Festkultur*, ed. Wolfgang Weiss, *Biblical-theologische Studien* 113 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012), 97.

⁹⁶ For these ideals cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 40; Quintillian, *Institutio* 8.3.41, and frequently elsewhere.

⁹⁷ Peter Jeffery, “Philo’s Impact on Christian Psalmody,” in *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler, *SBLSymS* 25 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 166.

⁹⁸ Philo is well known for his reflections on musical theory. Cf. Louis H. Feldman, “Philo’s Views on Music,” in *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. idem, *AGJU* 30 (Leiden et al.: Brill, 1996), 504–28.

⁹⁹ Jeffery, “Philo’s Impact,” 167–8.

The symposium of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, which to this point has little in common with the wine-fueled joy and excitement of ancient symposium culture,¹⁰⁰ nevertheless culminates, like other symposia, in “honorable drunkenness”¹⁰¹ and bacchantic enthusiasm—and indeed, in the “sacred vigil,” which, as the word παννυχίς suggests, has orgiastic features here as well.¹⁰² For here the Exodus event is acted out dramatically. Men and women, each conducted by a choral leader, sing stationary songs (*stasimon*), strophes and antistrophes, and ultimately form a mixed choir. Thus they present the Exodus event, as Philo describes:

Then when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast, having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the strong wine of God’s love, they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy (μίμημα) of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honour of the wonders there wrought. For at the command of God the sea became a source of salvation to one party and of perdition to the other. As it broke in twain and withdrew under the violence of the forces which swept it back there rose on either side, opposite to each other, the semblance of solid walls, while the space thus opened between them broadened into a highway smooth and dry throughout on which the people marched under guidance right on until they reached the higher ground on the opposite mainland. But when the sea came rushing in with the returning tide, and from either side passed over the ground where dry land had appeared, the pursuing enemy were submerged and perished.¹⁰³

Thus, as Philo says next, the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides “represent” (ἄπεικονίζειν) the choir with Moses and Miriam at the Reed Sea.¹⁰⁴ It is thus “cultic theater,” part of the “cultic mythos,” here, of course, the decisive moment in Israel’s history with God, staged, and thus imitated, through drama.¹⁰⁵ The readers constitute the audience.

¹⁰⁰ But cf. *Contempl.* 40, where Philo promises to write about “the cheerfulness of their convivial meals.”

¹⁰¹ *Contempl.* 89: μεθυσθέντες [. . .] τὴν καλὴν ταύτην μέθην. For this concept, which takes up Philo’s concept of “sober drunkenness” and its relationship to the Platonic idea of “divine drunkenness,” cf. Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas*, 1–8.

¹⁰² Cf. Euripides, *Bacch.* 882; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 6.55 (250a); 14.6 (647c); 15.7 (668d).

¹⁰³ *Contempl.* 85–86.

¹⁰⁴ *Contempl.* 88.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Inge Nielsen, *Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama: A Study in Regional Development and Religious Interchange between East and West in Antiquity* (Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity 4; Aarhus: University Press, 2002).

Philo also describes the choirs at the Reed Sea and the leadership of Miriam and Moses in the same words elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ In the whole such a religious celebration rendered plausible for some Jewish communities in antiquity as we possess an Exodus-drama of Ezekiel the Tragedian.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, however, the degree of abstraction with which Philo describes the Exodus event is striking. The miracle at the Reed Sea is either “source of salvation” or “[source] of perdition.” The Egyptians are not mentioned. The people depart from an unnamed land and are led safely, in very general terms, on “a highway smooth and dry” to higher ground, while their enemies are destroyed. The event could scarcely be described in more neutral terms. The conclusion of the feast as well, the adoration of the rising sun, can be shown to be part of many other religions.¹⁰⁸

As the crowning conclusion of his writing, Philo praises those who so completely devote themselves to contemplation of nature (θεωρία φύσεως) as “citizens of Heaven and the world” (οὐρανοῦ μὲν καὶ κόσμου πολίτης). They are set beside the “Father and Maker of all” (πατρὶ καὶ ποιητῇ τῶν ὅλων γνησίως συσταθέντες) because they have sought the highest degree of virtue (καλοκάγαθία) and happiness (εὐδαιμονία).¹⁰⁹ This combination of Stoic and Platonic ideals raises the question who, in fact, the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides were in the eyes of Philo.

3. The Identity of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides

As soon as the reader recognizes the author, she is inclined to suppose that the group of Therapeutae and Therapeutrides are Jews. The surpassing of all other forms of worship of God in *Contempl.* 3–9 is part of the tradition of Jewish polemic against idols. Worship belongs to “the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the one and more primordial than the Monad” (*Contempl.* 2) and thus lies within the tradition of Jewish monotheism. The people gather on the seventh day, that is, on the Sabbath (*Contempl.* 30). The identification of the feast on the day after seven times seven (*Contempl.* 75), on the other hand, is disputed, though it does recall the preference for the number seven in the book of *Jubilees*. The instruction at the festal gatherings is like Philo’s description of

¹⁰⁶ *Mos.* 1.180; 2.256; *Agr.* 80–82. The mixing of the two choirs seems to reflect an exegetical tradition attested in Wisdom 10:20. . Peter Enns, “A Retelling of the Song at the Sea in Wis 10,10–21,” *Bib* 76 (1995): 1–24.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. also the song of Mirjam in Exodus-manuscript or retelling 4Q365.

¹⁰⁸ *Contempl.* 89. The practice is also described in *Flacc.* 121–122 as a joyful celebration after the arrest of Flaccus. For the Essenes, see Josephus, *B.J.* 2.128–29, but cf. Plato, *Symp.* 220d, and further examples in Steve Mason, *Judean War 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 105–6 n. 804.

¹⁰⁹ *Contempl.* 90. On this mixture of Stoic and Platonic ideas cf. Bergmeier, “Stand,” 67–68.

synagogue worship in *De specialibus legibus* and *De vita Mosis*. Here, as there, people come together on the seventh day in “schools” (*Spec.* 2.62) or “places of prayer” (*Mos.* 2.216) to listen “quietly in order”¹¹⁰ to the lecture by “one of special experience”¹¹¹ who instructs them, with the aid of “the philosophy of their fathers,”¹¹² in “the study of truths of nature”¹¹³ and all virtues.¹¹⁴

But the words “Hebrews” or *Ioudaioi* do not appear in *De vita contemplativa*.¹¹⁵ Nor is there any reference at all to male circumcision and the other *halakah*, even though the meal of water, bread, salt, and hyssop is kosher. Only in the last third of the writing is it mentioned, for the first time, that the group “have dedicated their own life and themselves to knowledge and the contemplation of the verities of nature, following the truly sacred instructions of the prophet Moses” (64). The only other undoubted reference to Jewish identity is the identification of the choral leaders in the Exodus event as Moses and Miriam (87).

Philo seems determined to keep his description of the “Therapeutic sect” (τὸ θεραπευτικὸν γένος, 10) as generalized as possible. It exists everywhere among Greeks and barbarians, and in every district of Egypt, though especially at Lake Mareotis (21). Every house belonging to this group contains a “consecrated room” (οἶκημα ἱερόν), so that it resembles a temple. There are other numerous comparisons of cultic features. Philo praises the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides for banning wine from their diet, because “abstinence from wine is enjoined by right reason as for the priest when sacrificing, so to these for their lifetime” (74). They eat leavened bread, salt, and hyssop “out of reverence for the holy table enshrined in the sacred vestibule of the temple.”¹¹⁶ Which temple is in view remains unsaid. They also have mystical experiences when, “carried away by a heaven-sent passion of love, [they] remain rapt and possessed like bacchanals or

¹¹⁰ *Spec.* 2.62: ἐν κόσμῳ καθέζονται σὺν ἡσυχίᾳ. *Contempl.* 30–1: καθ’ ἡλικίαν ἐξῆς καθέζονται [. . .] καθ’ ἡσυχίαν δὲ οἱ ἄλλοι πάντες ἀκροῶνται; *Contempl.* 75: πολλῆς ἀπάντων ἡσυχίας γενομένης [. . .] μᾶλλον ἢ πρότερον, ὡς μηδὲ γρύξαι τινὰ τολμᾶν ἢ ἀναπνεῦσαι βιαιότερον. Cf. also *Hypoth.* 7.13: οἱ μὲν πολλοὶ σιωπῆ.

¹¹¹ *Spec.* 2.62; *Contempl.* 31: ἐμπειρότατος. Cf. *Hypoth.* 7.13: τῶν ἱερέων δὲ τις ὁ παρὼν ἢ τῶν γερόντων εἰς ἀναγνώσκε τοὺς ἱεροὺς νόμους αὐτοῖς καὶ καθ’ ἕκαστον ἐξηγεῖται μέχρι σχεδὸν δειλῆς ὀψίας.

¹¹² *Contempl.* 28; *Mos.* 2.216: τὴν πάτριον φιλοσοφίαν.

¹¹³ *Mos.* 2.216: ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρία τῶν περὶ φύσιν; *Contempl.* 64: ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρία τῶν τῆς φύσεως πραγμάτων. In *Contempl.* the instructor, of course, is Moses (ὀφηγεῖσθαι) and not the one speaking at worship (*Mos.* 2.215; *Spec.* 2.62).

¹¹⁴ *Mos.* 2.216; *Spec.* 2.62; *Contempl.* 90.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Ellen Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes*, BJS 290; SPhilo Monographs 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 119–20.

¹¹⁶ *Contempl.* 74; 81. Cf. also *Contempl.* 68: “the feast is shared by women also, most of them aged virgins, who have kept their chastity not under compulsion, like some of the Greek priestesses, but of their own free will in their ardent yearning for wisdom . . .”

corybants until they see the object of their yearning” (καθάπερ οἱ βακχευόμενοι καὶ κορυβαντιῶντες ἐνθουσιάζουσι, 12). Their “consecrated room” is “dedicated to the mysteries of a holy life” (τὰ τοῦ σεμνοῦ βίου μυστήρια τελοῦνται, 25), and during the sacred night festival they are filled with the love of God, like those who celebrate Bacchus (85). They occupy themselves with “holy laws” (2; 25) and “sacred scriptures” (28; 75; 78), but these are not specified either.¹¹⁷ Their hymns and songs are not identified as psalms, but as altar hymns and choral songs of ancient drama.¹¹⁸

Thus the identity of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides remains uncertain. This Egyptian community of philosophers and priests proves, with its studies of the “laws and oracles delivered through the mouth of prophets, and psalms and anything else which forster and perfects knowledge and piety”¹¹⁹ the equal of the Egyptian priests and their religious knowledge and practice, so highly acclaimed by Diodorus, Cornutus, Chaeremon, and Plutarch. According to Chaeremon the allegorical method used to discover the deeper truth behind these myths and rituals was developed by the Egyptian priests themselves.¹²⁰ That of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides is likewise very ancient. It comes from the books of the ancients and “founders of their way of thinking (οἱ τῆς αἰρέσεως ἀρχηγέται), who left many memorials of the form used (καθάπερ τισὶν ἀρχετύποις) in allegorical interpretation and these they take as a kind of archetype and imitate the method in which this principle is carried out” (29). And the content of their scriptures goes beyond the etymological methods described by Cornutus and Chaeremon and points to the highest idea of reality:

The exposition of the sacred scriptures treats the inner meaning conveyed in allegory (δι’ ὑπονοιῶν ἐν ἀλληγορίαις). For to these people the whole law book seems to resemble a living creature with the literal ordinance for its body and for its soul the invisible mind laid up in its wording.¹²¹ It is in this mind especially that the rational soul (ἡ λογικὴ ψυχὴ) begins to contemplate the things akin to itself (τὰ οἰκεῖα θεωρεῖν) and looking through the words as through a mirror (ὥσπερ διὰ κατόπτρου) beholds the marvelous beauties of the concepts, unfolds and removes the symbolic coverings and brings forth the thoughts and sets them bare to the light of day for those who need but a

¹¹⁷ *Contempl.* 25: νόμους καὶ λόγια θεσπισθέντα διὰ προφητῶν καὶ ὕμνους καὶ τὰ ἄλλα οἷς ἐπιστήμη καὶ εὐσέβεια συναύξονται καὶ τελειοῦνται.

¹¹⁸ *Contempl.* 29; 80; 84.

¹¹⁹ *Contempl.* 25.

¹²⁰ See n. 96 above.

¹²¹ The image comes from Plato, *Phaedr.* 246c. Cf. also Philo, *QG* 3.3.

little reminding (ὀπόμνησις) to enable them to discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible.¹²²

Therapeutic allegoresis is thus the path to the Platonic contemplation of ideas. It helps one to rise above the visible world, to remember original Being, and so to behold original Beauty. Plutarch, in very similar fashion, regards the garments of Isis and Osiris as the culmination of his Platonic interpretation of the religion of Isis. The white garment of Osiris, donned only once, is for Plutarch a symbol for the thought of the pure and holy Intelligibility, for “the apperception of the conceptual, the pure, and the simple, shining through the soul like a flash of lightning, affords an opportunity to touch and see it but once.”¹²³

For this reason Plato and Aristotle call this part of philosophy the epoptic (ἐποπτικὸν) or mystic part, inasmuch as those who have passed beyond these conjectural and confused matters of all sorts by means of Reason proceed by leaps and bounds to the primary, simple, and immaterial principle; and when they have somehow attained contact with the pure truth abiding about it, they think that they have the whole of philosophy completely, as it were within their grasp.¹²⁴

Therefore when the Egyptian priests now conceal the Truth and call Osiris the leader and king of the dead, it is clear to the Platonic philosopher that this can mean nothing other than that “the immaculate and non-substantial Godhead is the leader and king of souls released from their bodies, who adhere to him and behold the “unutterable and indescribable beauty.”¹²⁵

Philo and Plutarch share the fundamental Platonic conviction that the goal of human understanding is beholding the highest Idea and Beauty. Both make use of religious tradition to point out a path to that goal. So there is discussion about whether Plutarch is egyptianizing Platonic thought or platonizing Egyptian myths and rituals.¹²⁶ In any case Plutarch thinks that the myths and rituals of the religion of Isis and Osiris show

¹²² *Contempl.* 78. For the idea of reminding cf. Plato, *Menon* 81a; Philo, *Praem.* 9.

¹²³ Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 77 (382c–d).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77 (382d–e). From *Plutarch's Moralia: In Fifteen Volumes*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. 5, LCL (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

¹²⁵ *Is. Os.* 78 (382e–383a).

¹²⁶ Frederick E. Brenk, “Isis is a Greek Word: Plutarch’s Allegorization of Egyptian Religion,” in *Platón y Aristóteles: Actes del V congreso internacional de la I. P. S. (Madrid-Cuenca, 4–7 de mayo de 1999)*, ed. Aurelio Pérez Jiménez, José García López, and Rosa Aguilar (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 1999), 227–38; Daniel S. Richter, “Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation,” *TAPA* 131 (2001): 191–216.

themselves to be a correct and original expression of Middle Platonic philosophy. Philo, on the other hand, in essence describes nothing different from the methods of allegorical interpretation he himself practiced in reading the texts of the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek on an island near Alexandria.¹²⁷ These may certainly be identified with the “writings of men of old, the founders of their way of thinking” (συγγράμματα παλαιῶν ἀνδρῶν, οἱ τῆς αἰρέσεως ἀρχηγέται γινόμενοι) alluded to in *Contempl.* 29. Certainly the allusion remains ambiguous and could apply equally to a collection of the group’s own interpretive commentaries. One way or the other, Philo traces the origins of the allegorical method to his Egyptian God-worshippers, who on closer inspection prove to be Jewish interpreters of scripture.

Philo presents the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides as a separate community or “sect” that—like the Egyptian priests—is distinguished from the surrounding world through its remoteness and its ascetic ideals. But it unmistakably shares many features of ordinary Jewish practice, not least synagogal worship and the celebration of the Exodus. A good deal, in particular the sustaining basis of the group’s life, remains unclear. Other aspects, such as women’s membership, are particularly striking in contrast to Philo’s writings on the Essenes.¹²⁸ The longer I consider this elaborate integration of particular and universal religious practice, the more am I convinced that the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides are nothing other than the ascetic idealization of the Judaism Philo treasured. To put it another way: Philo here constructs Judaism as a religious practice comparable to that of “barbarian” and Egyptian priests, in order to assert that within contemporary religious-philosophical discourse it constitutes a locus of original and untouched truth. Here original truth is to be found not only behind the “myths and rituals”; here, as among Chaeremon’s Egyptian priests, the hermeneutical methods of interpreting rituals and myths through allegorical exegesis were invented. If this “sect,” with its virtuous and sober way of life, ultimately experiences the highest form of divine ecstasy, the race truly beloved by God and honoring God has also established itself as the locus of the supreme religious experience.

¹²⁷ *Mos.* 2.35. The island is called Pharos. For the comparability of allegorical methods cf. Maren Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 165–68.

¹²⁸ Philo’s Essenes are a community of males; cf. *Hypoth.* 11.14. Descriptions of the major commonalities between the groups may be found in C. T. R. Hayward, “Therapeutae,” *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* 2 (2000): 944–45; Bergmeier, “Stand,” 59–66, and elsewhere.

4. Conclusion

I hope I have shown that in *De vita contemplativa* Philo presents the ethnography of an ideal group of people who are philosophers. The “Therapeutic” race exists among all the peoples of the world, but the best of them are to be found in Egypt, more precisely at Lake Mareotis. Their abilities in the most important arts of healing, the cure of souls, and the piety of true worship of God are evident already from their name. The physical place of their dwelling, distinguished by its livable climate, their renunciation of possessions, their houses, food, and clothing, and the rejection of slavery express the simplicity of their way of life. They resemble the “milk-drinking and mare-milking Mysians” of whom Homer sang, and thus the ideal barbarians on the borders of the inhabited world, as sketched in a long tradition of ethnographic portrayals. Their study of scripture and composition of hymns show them to be philosophers. Not only was the allegorical method discovered by their group, but it has been preserved to the utmost degree among them. Through their piety they surpass others’ ideas about God; with their care for their family-members they act more nobly than the pre-Socratic philosophers Democritus and Anaximander, and their feast without luxury and decadence is revealed to be the only truly enthusiastic symposium.

Philo’s depiction thus contains nearly all the points of the topic of description of foreign peoples that were typical of such descriptions since Herodotus: geography and climate, ethnic determination with derivation of the name, manner of settlement, clothing, food customs, social organization and gender ordering, religious practice and customs.¹²⁹ As was also common after Herodotus, the focus is on religious and cultural usages. But what is lacking in Philo, apart from a few hints such as the mention of books of the founders of the school (29) is any information about the origins and history “of the race.” This is scarcely surprising, however, if, as I have suggested above, Philo’s depiction of the Therapeutic people represents an ethnographic “construction” of Judaism itself.

As in other ethnographies, an essential impetus to the presentation is critique of social conditions in one’s “own” group. In this case it also involves a critique of Greek and Egyptian ideas about God, the way Greek philosophers dealt with the issue of property, and the luxurious presentation and moral decline of the symposia that were common in Philo’s own time as well as their archetype, Socrates’ table fellowship. Philo presents us with an “auto-ethnography,” but he keeps his Jewish “self” entirely in the background. It is true that the author uses the first person singular pronoun eleven times,

¹²⁹ On this see Müller, *Geschichte*, 113–14, and cf. Parker, *Making of Roman India*.

something astonishing in such a short document,¹³⁰ but this “I” communicates primarily with the readers. It gives internal indicators, introduces clarifications, and anticipates possible ridicule and lack of understanding of a wine-free symposium.¹³¹ But in nearly half of his self-referential statements Philo places himself on the side of Greco-Roman culture. Like the Greeks, he also admires Anaximander and Democritus (14). He interprets Hippocrates’s famous saying in terms of what Homer says about the mare-milkers and milk-drinkers (17). He agrees with Plato’s statement that because of their singing, cicadas are able to nourish themselves on air (35).¹³² He refers to his own bad experiences at contemporary Greek banquets (46), and he maintains a polite reserve in his description of mythological poetizing in Plato’s *Symposium* (63). The authorial “I” in this writing is not Jewish, but Greek. It underscores the moral impetus of ancient ethnography as a mirror to one’s “own” decline in morals.

Philo offers us Therapeutic Judaism as the best of all cultural and religious practices. In doing so he advocates for Judaism as a religion for humanity. At the same time, his ascetic religious group on Lake Mareotis remains an exceptional phenomenon, separated from the world and incorporating the highest philosophical ideals. Here is a group that stands beyond the world, at the side of the “Father and Creator,” a group no one can join, but only imitate its goals of happiness through perfect virtue.

¹³⁰ Cf. Hay, “Foins for the Therapeutae,” 345–46.

¹³¹ *Contempl.* 73. Philo shows his intentions clearly, supporting what has just been said, in *Contempl.* 10; for internal indicators see *Contempl.* 40; 64; 75, and for reference to a writing on the Essenes see *Contempl.* 1.

¹³² Cf. Plato, *Phaedr.* 259c; Philo, *Prob.* 9.