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Philo of Alexandria Seminar

## Does Philo accept the doctrine of reincarnation?

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### *1. A retrospective glance*

One of the compensations for growing older is that one can look further back in time. Readers will forgive me if on this occasion I commence my paper with a retrospective glance. When studying Dr Sami Yli-Karjanmaa's truly outstanding dissertation for this paper,<sup>1</sup> I could not help thinking of my own dissertation published in its definitive edition in 1986, but actually written in the years 1979 to 1982.<sup>2</sup> This was not just because of the similarity of the process that we both underwent, but particularly because Sami constantly refers to my dissertation and uses it as a kind of yardstick for his own views. To be used in this way is not necessarily a wholly pleasant experience. Of course it is gratifying to observe that there was much in my research on Philo and Plato's *Timaeus* which he could use to build his research upon. But his findings also drew attention to shortcomings of the work done at the time. The consolation here might be to note that we all want research on Philo to make progress, and this has certainly happened in the case of Sami's work that is a main point of focus in this session.

Looking back, a further point that I would like to make is that my dissertation stood strongly under the influence of my revered teacher Valentin Nikiprowetzky. It was his research that persuaded me that Philo should be seen in the first place as an exegete and commentator on scripture. He regards himself as a disciple of Moses who participates in a tradition of such disciples who have studied the sacred writings for many centuries, a tradition that began long before the founding of Alexandria. But the impressive Hellenic culture of his native city also exerted a strong influence. The tradition of Greek philosophy which he had absorbed to such an astonishing degree provides a language of reason that enables him to expound the hidden wisdom of the Mosaic writings.

Prime among the philosophers is the 'most clear-voiced Plato' (λιγυρώτατος, *Prob.* 13). Without doubt in Philo's view it was Plato's writings that proved the most useful for plumbing the

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<sup>1</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2013), (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Runia (1983), (1986).

depths of scriptural wisdom. His doctrines of incorporeal being, of theology, of creation, of psychology, and of the goal and end (τέλος) of life show many affinities to key scriptural texts and themes, especially when these are interpreted spiritually through the allegorical method. Naturally it is inherent in Philo's method that he is selective in his use of philosophical material. If adduced to explain scripture, it must be suitable for the task at hand. So we may well ask whether Philo had a use for the doctrine of reincarnation or metempsychosis, which plays a prominent role in three of the dialogues that were most read and studied in Philo's time, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*.

## 2. A highly significant study

When I was asked to examine the dissertation of a Finnish scholar and received the provisional text from its author in early 2013, I very soon realized that this was a highly significant study, perhaps the most innovative piece of research to be carried out on Philo's thought in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> Sami Yli-Karjanmaa's study is the first ever to specifically address the question of whether the theme of reincarnation is present in Philo's writings and whether the Alexandrian accepts the doctrine. It is characteristic of his careful method that he defines the term 'accepts' (or its alternatives 'adopts,' 'approves,' 'endorses') as meaning 'receive with favour' or 'receive as valid.'<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of his investigation is that Philo indeed accepts the doctrine. This was the view of the majority of 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars but lost favour in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the most part scholars just made brief comments on the question, not regarding it as of very great importance. Yli-Karjanmaa takes a different approach, studying it in meticulous and fascinating detail.

A laudable feature of the study's method is that it wishes to take all the available evidence into account regardless of which answer to the main question of the work it tends to support (p. 7). The evidence is divided into two categories, indirect and direct, and the two resultant treatments form the main parts of the study. The third and final part, entitled Synthesis, applies the results of the earlier parts and attempts to show that they present a feasible reconstruction of Philo's thought.

In the first main part Yli-Karjanmaa sets out the indirect evidence for the doctrine of reincarnation and this necessitates a wide-ranging examination of themes in Philo's psychology and eschatology. Naturally there is a strong focus on the texts of the Allegorical Commentary, which is wholly focused on the life-journey of the soul, but numerous texts in the *Quaestiones* are also adduced, as well as some important passages in the Exposition of the Law. The starting-point has to be the dualistic make-up of the human being, consisting of soul and body (p. 30). Following a fundamental tenet of Platonic philosophy, Philo is committed to the view that the soul exists before it enters the body and, being immortal, will outlive its association with the body (p. 32). But the human being is more complex than just consisting of soul and body. The soul itself has a

<sup>3</sup> See above n. 1. See also his article (2016), which I have also utilised in preparing the present paper.

<sup>4</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 4.

complex structure involving parts or faculties that interact with the body. There are on the one hand the senses and the lower parts of the soul, which experience passions and pleasures. There is also the higher part of the soul, its rational part or mind, which must guide the human being so that he or she can lead a life of piety and virtue (pp. 36–37).

In order to conceptualize the process which the soul undergoes, Yli-Karjanmaa introduces two key terms for his argument. The former refers to the process of salvation whereby the soul shakes off the influence of the body and becomes purely rational, i.e. a mind (νοῦς). This process he calls ‘monadization,’ defined as ‘the salvific phenomenon whereby the soul’s becom[es] pure mind through dismissal of its other constituent parts’ (p. 41). The term is based on the description of Moses’ death in *Mos.* 2.288. When the mind is in such a state it is able, as in the case of Jacob–Israel, to ‘see God,’ that is to know him and to reside with him. This is the ultimate stage of the soul’s life and represents the climactic stage of Philo’s eschatology.

The second key term focuses more directly on the soul’s experience of the body once it is incarnated. Yli-Karjanmaa speaks of the ‘corporealization of the mind,’ which is ‘phenomenon whereby the mind (or soul) orientates towards, and desires to experience, the world of matter in general and a physical body in particular’ (p. 70). It occurred first through the transgression of Adam, but can also characterize the life of any human being, bringing about that when death takes place, it may happen that the soul does not rise to heaven and God, but has to submit to the process of reincarnation. A key text here is *Leg.* 1.105 (exeg. Gen 2:17), where Philo says that death is of two kinds: for the human being it is the separation of body and soul (cf. Plato *Phd.* 64c, 67d), but for the soul it is the destruction of virtue and the taking up of wickedness. The death of the soul is a punishment (*Leg.* 1.107), and by implication it involves the process of reincarnation (pp. 57–70), perhaps not just once but as many times as needed until the soul is purified and reaches its goal in residing with God.

Examination of a large number of passages, mainly in *Leg.* and *QG* (esp. 1.51 on Gen. 3:19), allows Yli-Karjanmaa to arrive at a compact schema of Philo’s conception of the journey of the soul involving six stages (p. 73):

- (1) incorporeal existence with God;
- (2) incarnation;
- (3) corporealization and transgression;
- (4) reincarnation until the prerequisites of salvation are met;
- (5) liberation from the life in the body; and
- (6) eternal incorporeal existence with God.

It is rightly emphasized that such a schema runs the risk of simplification and over-systematization.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless it has the virtue of clarity, showing in the clearest possible way how reincarnation can be fitted in to a journey of the soul that extends far beyond the confines of the single life of the human being.

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<sup>5</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa repeats the schema in his article at (2016) 261.

In the final section of the presentation of the indirect evidence Yli-Karjanmaa approaches his subject from a different angle. He sets out in impressive and fascinating detail Philo's use of Platonic reincarnational terminology and imagery in Philo's writings. Primarily drawn as we already saw from three dialogues, the *Phaedo*, the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus*, it focuses on themes such as being bound to a mortal body, being plunged in a river, paying back the borrowed elements of which the body consists are fixed periods, the body as a grave or a prison, changing to animal form, practising death, and being weighed down by earthiness (pp. 111–127). Such extensive use of literary means is typical of Philo's use of Plato. For Philo Moses provides the basic (and faultless) framework, but Plato (and also the Stoics) allows him to flesh out that framework. Philo takes over major ways of thinking from the Athenian philosopher, but it is done in bits and pieces through the exegetical process (p. 112).

In the second main part of the study Yli-Karjanmaa examines the direct evidence on reincarnation in Philo's writings. This is confined to four texts. The first is the *locus classicus* for the presence of the doctrine in the corpus Philonicum, *Somn.* 1.137–139 (cited on p. 131). In explaining the meaning of the ladder (κλίμαξ) in Jacob's dream at Gen 28:12, it describes the descent and ascent of the discarnate souls, making use of a good deal of Platonist terminology and explicitly stating that some souls 'hurry back again' (παλινδρομοῦσιν ἀθίς) to the life in the body. The second text is found at *Cher.* 114 (cited on pp. 153–154), part of a long allegorical reflection on God's sovereignty and the fact that we human beings are God's possession (and not our own, as impiously thought by Cain, whose name means 'possession,' *Cher.* 52). What, Philo asks, really belongs to us? He asks a number of questions about our make-up. In the case of soul, do we possess it as our own? What about after death takes place? But then we shall exist no longer, but 'hasten to a regeneration' (εἰς παλιγγενεσίαν ὀρμήσομεν).<sup>6</sup> The third text is found at *QE* 2.40 and is preserved in full in the Armenian translation and partly in a Greek fragment (cited at pp. 169–170). Yli-Karjanmaa argues that when the text speaks of the souls 'being dragged down to Tartarus,' it is an explicit reference to a new reincarnation. The final text is even more difficult. It is one of the texts from Byzantine florilegia collected by J. Rendel Harris and located in a section entitled 'Fragments from the lost fourth book of the Allegories of the Sacred Laws' as fr. 7.3 (cited on p. 187). The text is only six lines long in Harris' collection. In an impressive display of philological expertise Yli-Karjanmaa demonstrates that it is very likely to be authentic and argues that the comparison of sleeping and awakening with the salvific rebirth after death points to the process of reincarnation. He concludes (p. 212) that in all four texts Philo speaks of the idea of reincarnation with approval.

The final part of Yli-Karjanmaa's study is entitled Synthesis. He emphasizes that in his view it can be assumed that Philo's body of 'texts form a whole, and that what is said in one text is, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, implied in the others' (p. 215). The task is for the scholar is to 'explain Philo by Philo,' i.e. do what Philo fails to do and build up a description of his views (cf. p. 244). This method allows a synthesis of reincarnational passages to be put together which also

<sup>6</sup> The passage is difficult to summarize accurately and needs to be consulted in the original.

gives us an understanding of Philo's individual eschatology. The fate of the soul is intimately tied to what it determines to be the object of its love, whether that be God or earthly things which are primarily associated with the body and its desires (p. 220). There are four reasons why the soul fails to leave the bodily realm and keeps on returning to it: ignorance, unwillingness, inability and a lack of God's grace. The first three are obstacles for the soul as it makes progress towards perfection. Philo's soteriology is synergistic: 'the soul needs to make progress on its own but recognize its dependence on God's grace in order to be saved' (p. 243). Ultimately it is God who determines whether the soul has to return to the earth and to the body.

A final question that remains to be answered is why Philo is so reticent about speaking in explicit terms about reincarnation. After all, he never makes any clear pronouncements on the subject and even when the theme is mentioned explicitly in the four passages it is only done so in passing. Nevertheless, Yli-Karjanmaa argues, he did wish to communicate his view that souls transmigrate and his vagueness is not impenetrable. A good explanation for this approach is Winston's view that Philo was reluctant 'to give undue prominence to a Platonic conception that was essentially alien to Jewish tradition' (p.246),<sup>7</sup> with the proviso that we do not know a lot about what Jewish tradition is in the case of Alexandrian Judaism. Given that the theory of reincarnation is closely linked to the allegorical tradition, which met with opposition in the Alexandrian tradition, it is probable that 'reincarnation was for Philo an esoteric tradition' (p. 247), only to be disclosed to those who had the required level of understanding of the hidden meaning of scripture.

### 3. Three significant advances in our understanding of Philo

There can be no doubt, therefore, that this monograph has made a highly significant contribution to Philonic studies. It has placed the subject of the place of the doctrine of reincarnation in Philo's mental universe firmly on the map. No study of his views on psychology and anthropology will want to set it aside. Among the many advances that it makes in our understanding of Philo, there are three aspects which I would like to emphasise in particular.

Firstly Yli-Karjanmaa introduces a clear distinction between two kinds of allegory, protological and universal.<sup>8</sup> The former, protological allegory, is related primarily to the creation account in Gen 1–3, so refers to events *in illo tempore*, to use Mircea Eliade's famous phrase. These happened at the beginning of time and in the early history of humankind, but still have a direct significance for human life through the recognition that the cosmos and the human beings in it owe their existence to God's creative activity and that human life is most often not conducted on earth in a way that corresponds to what God wishes it to be. The latter, universal allegory, denotes explanations of the biblical text in terms of how life is *in hoc tempore*, as human beings live and conduct their lives, whether on earth or potentially beyond it. This distinction is particularly

<sup>7</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa cites here Winston (1985) 42.

<sup>8</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 4–5, 35; cf. also (2016) 255. At (2015) 5 n. 10 he states that it is related to the distinction made between history and actualization in Runia (2001) 333–334.

relevant to the jump from the limited allegory at the end of *Opif.* and the commencement of full-blown allegory in *Leg.* Of course, as is now generally recognised most of our editions and translations err in suggesting a continuity between these two works.<sup>9</sup> This involves crossing over from the Exposition of the Law to the Allegorical Commentary, which have long been recognised as being different, if sometimes overlapping commentary series. It does not help that we may be missing an allegorical commentary on the first chapter of Genesis.<sup>10</sup> *Leg.* 1 certainly does seem to start *in medias res*, without any kind of introductory section. I vividly recall how disconcerting I found the first book of *Leg.* when I first started to read Philo. Yli-Karjanmaa's analyses do much to clarify the train of thought of the early books of the Allegorical commentary, where Philo regularly elaborates on foundational matters pertaining to the human make-up, but not from a protological viewpoint, even though he is commenting on the creation account.

Secondly Yli-Karjanmaa's research has improved our understanding of Philo's appropriation of the dialogues of Plato. The main relevant dialogues for his subject are the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*. He rightly points out deficiencies in my treatment of the passages describing reincarnation in the *Timaeus*. I made categorical pronouncements on the subject without sufficiently surveying the evidence, particularly as it occurs in combination with texts from other dialogues (notably the *Phaedo*). My treatment also focused too much on the subject of the transmigration of human souls into animals.<sup>11</sup> For the *Phaedrus* he usefully augments the research of Anita Méasson.<sup>12</sup> But for the *Phaedo* he is the first scholar to show in detail how extensive the use is that Philo makes of this seminal dialogue, far surpassing the unsatisfactory treatment in the dissertation of Billings published nearly a century ago.<sup>13</sup> For Philo the dialogue is fundamental in supplying language, imagery and thematics that describe the relation between the body and the soul, the journey of the soul, the nature of the philosophical life and the meaning of death for the soul.<sup>14</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa is right when he says that the relative importance of Plato's dialogues for Philo depends on the subject matter at hand. It might be fair to say, using the distinction between protological and universal accounts introduced above, that the *Timaeus* is the key dialogue for his explanation of the creation account and what happened *in illo tempore*, but that the *Phaedo* leads the way when Philo explores the life and journey of the soul once it has been created and resides in the material realm. When reading Philo's allegories in the Allegorical Commentary and in the *Quaestiones*, the presence of the *Phaedo* in the background must be constantly borne in mind.

The third advance that Yli-Karjanmaa's study makes to our knowledge flows on directly from the second. His research clearly demonstrates that Philo makes very considerable use of the language and conceptuality of the reincarnation of the soul in his allegory of the soul. This has

<sup>9</sup> See Terian (1997); Royse (2009) 46–47.

<sup>10</sup> As noted by Goulet (1987) 136–139; Tobin (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Runia (1986) 260–266, 346–351. See Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 20–25 and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Méasson (1986).

<sup>13</sup> Billings (1919).

<sup>14</sup> See now Runia (forthcoming), a paper I prepared for the XIth Symposium Platonicum held in Brasilia, which focused exclusively on the *Phaedo*.

never been previously shown in anything like the kind of detail that we find in his study. It appears in his use of technical terms such as *παλιγγενησία* and *παλινδρομέω*,<sup>15</sup> in the frequent language of descent, in the descriptions of the soul being bound to or imprisoned in the body, in the soul being tainted by the body, in the imagery of immersion and drowning, in the conception of the death of the soul while in the body, and so on. This language and conceptuality describes a fundamental experience of the soul, i.e. what happens to it when it is corrupted by the association with the body, its sense-organs and its passions. To use Yli-Karjanmaa's terminology, it expresses the process of corporealization of the soul. It is also relevant to the life of the soul when it leaves the body behind or departs from the body, when it undergoes a process of purification, and when it ascends to the heavens or ultimately to God. These notions too are integral to Philo's allegory of the soul. They might be summarised under the term 'decorporealization' of the soul, even if Yli-Karjanmaa does not express it in this way. In analysing Philo's use of the language and conceptuality of reincarnation he goes far beyond anything that has been achieved in Philonic research before. It will prove indispensable for anyone working on Philo's allegorical system in the future.

#### 4. *Is reincarnation a fundamental part of Philo's views on the soul?*

The question before us now is whether we can follow Yli-Karjanmaa when he takes the decisive further step and claims that the doctrine of reincarnation, 'was a fundamental part of Philo's views on the soul.'<sup>16</sup> The doctrine can be formulated as follows. Originally the soul was created by God, placed in a body and endowed with mind to form the human being. There then took place an initial transgression *in illo tempore* caused by the corporeal environment that the human being found himself in.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence humanity enters a process which follows the six stages of the schema outlined above<sup>18</sup> involving incorporeal existence with God, incarnation, transgression, reincarnation, liberation and return to existence with God. Utilizing the distinction between protology and universal experience,<sup>19</sup> one can say that, when Philo speaks of God as creator in relation to humanity, he will sometimes be thinking of the original creation of Adam and Eve as the beginning of humanity, but his allegories most of the time are working with a history of the soul involving pre-existence, life in the body, post-existence and reincarnation in an unspecified number of iterations, before ending for some souls at least in an eschatological future with God. This cosmic history of the soul is seldom alluded to, but can be discerned in the background by the reader who knows his or her Plato and has been initiated into this esoteric knowledge in Philo's

<sup>15</sup> For *παλιγγενησία* see *Cher.* 114, *Post.* 124, *Legat.* 325, Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 163–166; *παλινδρομέω* *Post.* 156, *Somn.* 1.139, *QE* 2.40 etc., Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 140, 252–254.

<sup>16</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2016) 259, summarizing the main argument of his dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa rightly argues (2016, 260) that love of the body cannot be the original cause of the soul's incarnation. It must have been God's creative act.

<sup>18</sup> See above p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> A legitimate extension of the earlier distinction between protological and universal allegory. See above §3.

school. It will be agreed that this is a major rewriting of Philo's psychology and anthropology. It considerably strengthens the influence of Platonic philosophy on his thought, but aligns him with a small minority of thinkers in the Jewish tradition. It separates him from Patristic authors that followed him, but perhaps not entirely in the case of the early Alexandrians Clement and Origen.<sup>20</sup>

I would wish to put forward an alternative interpretation, which recognizes the three important advances in our understanding of Philo that were outlined above, but takes them in a less radical direction. It is possible to argue, I submit, that Philo is *not strongly committed* to the Pythagorean-Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis, but that he uses its language and conceptuality to illustrate the journey and fate of the soul while it is joined with the body in the *συναμφότερον* that is the human being. The allegory of the soul focuses on the universal experience of the life of the soul in the body and its struggle to shake off the influences of the body which prevent it from living the good life and ascending to the divine. The decisive notion on which the allegory turns is that of orientation. The soul can orientate itself towards heaven and God or it can do so towards earth and the corporeal. Philo illustrates the former with descriptions of the ascent of the soul to the heavens, using imagery from the *Phaedrus*. The earth and the body are left behind and can even be gazed upon from above, but this experience need not take place only after physical death. It can take place while in the body but after removing all traces of its negative influence. This is the kind of language that Philo uses of his own experience in the rare autobiographical passage *Spec.* 3.1–6. In contrast the soul can also be dragged down to the earthy and corporeal realm by giving into the desires and passions associated with the body. This is the death of the soul while joined with the body,<sup>21</sup> dying to the life of virtue and suffering the penalty associated with the life of wickedness (equivalent to death in allegorical terms). This process can be interpreted as occurring during human life in the physical sense of living on earth, but the language of entombment of the soul in the body as if in a grave, which in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition refer to the trajectory of reincarnation, is used to illustrate it. It is a particularly vivid way of expressing the descent of the soul into a life of bodily passion and wickedness, in which the progression to a better life is thwarted. We might compare how in modern parlance, for example, we speak of people being caught in a downward spiral of drug addiction or crime. The language of ascent and descent uses a vertical metaphor, whereas the language of migration stays on a horizontal plane of journeying away from or turning back.<sup>22</sup> These are rich metaphors and the complex way that Philo weaves them into the tapestry of his allegorical exegesis is, to our knowledge at least, unmatched in antiquity.

It is an incontrovertible fact that in Philo's extant writings, he never makes an explicit pronouncement on the truth and validity of the doctrine of metempsychosis. It would not have been difficult for him to do so. As far as we know he never wrote a systematic work of theology

<sup>20</sup> See Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 249, the final lines of the book.

<sup>21</sup> *Leg.* 1.105–108, where at §106 Yli-Karjanmaa rightly interprets *σύννοδος* as 'union' (2015, 57).

<sup>22</sup> Of course they can be combined when there is emigration to heaven and God and migration back to or down to the corporeal or to Egypt.



such as the Περὶ ἀρχῶν that Origen wrote before leaving Alexandria. The list of key doctrines at *Opif.* 170–172 is far too limited, being confined to theology and cosmology and making no reference to mind or soul. It would not have been difficult for him to make a corrective statement though an appeal to Mosaic scripture, as he does in the case of the Stoic doctrines of ἐκπύρωσις at *Her.* 228 or πνεῦμα as moving air at *Det.* 83. Of course we have to bear in mind that he may have done so in a work that is no longer extant, for example the lost books of the *Legum allegoriae*.

Given the centrality of scriptural exegesis in Philo's understanding of his task as thinker and teacher, it can be pointed out that not only does he not tell us whether the doctrine of reincarnation is scriptural or not, but also that there were undoubted opportunities to base the doctrine on scriptural texts. A case in point is the text at Gen 3:19 when God is reported as saying to Adam 'by the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread until returning to the earth from which you were taken, for you are earth and to earth you will turn back'.<sup>23</sup> Of course a literal protological interpretation of the verse would not have been difficult. The words ἐξ ἧς ἐλήμφης can be taken to refer to the creation of the human body in Gen 2:7 and the return to earth as the dissolving of the corpse into the elements, as appears to be indicated in *Leg.* 3.253 and *QG* 2.61. But in both the former passage and in *QG* 1.51, Philo also appears to give a universal interpretation about the corrupted man who undergoes 'spiritual death' (*QG* 1.51, Marcus's translation) or the foolish mind which turns away from the right principle (*Leg.* 3.252), so that beginning and end are one. Yli-Karjanmaa argues that both texts point to the six-stage model of the soul's fall and rise, and he thinks that the change to the future indicative in his paraphrase at *Leg.* 3.253 to μεχρι ἀποστρέψεις εἰς τὴν γῆν points to a translation 'for as long as you return to earth' rather than 'until' as in all existing translations, thereby hinting at the doctrine of reincarnation.<sup>24</sup> My point here is that the text could easily furnish Mosaic authority for the doctrine, but Philo does not take the opportunity to make this at all clear. Similarly the ladder in Jacob's dream could be used for the same purpose and maybe Philo does make this clear, depending on how we read the passage at *Somn.* 1.133–145, to which I will return shortly. Yli-Karjanmaa's explanation is that Philo is being deliberately reticent and writes for the discerning initiated reader. In my view a simpler reading whereby the text is taken in universal terms to mean 'giving oneself wholly to the earth,' i.e. the body and its bodily concerns, is possible.

When I was rereading Yli-Karjanmaa's monograph for the purposes of this paper, there was a passage that struck me forcibly (and it is very relevant for the topic of our session in San Antonio). It commences a section on 'Afterlife and Salvation':<sup>25</sup>

Explicit speculation on the hereafter is not one of Philo's main concerns. Termini's statement that Philo "spiritualizes the very notions of life and death, and minimizes the importance of physical death" is valid. In my view the background for this minimization lies in the view that the details of

<sup>23</sup> NETS translation (modified). The LXX text is: ἐν ἰδρώτι τοῦ προσώπου σου φάγη τὸν ἄρτον σου ἕως τοῦ ἀποστρέψαι σε εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἐξ ἧς ἐλήμφης· ὅτι γῆ εἶ και εἰς γῆν ἀπελεύση.

<sup>24</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 76–78.

<sup>25</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 81. The reference is to Termini (2009) 108.

afterlife do not in themselves determine the way in which the life on earth should be lived. In his thought the orientation must in any case be away from the corporeal and towards the divine; this brings happiness, its opposite misery. This is sufficient for Philo to be able to justify his ethical standards.

This is not, however, the entire picture, for the above does not mean that Philo had no concept of the after-life; nor does it follow that he had not view of what the misery resulting from body-oriented life leads to *post mortem*, nor that he was uninterested in these issues. But for some reason, when he expresses his thought of what follows the death of a “wicked” person, he usually does so quite sparingly and inexactly.

I would argue that in his universal allegory, Philo indeed is not very interested in eschatological issues. The main focus is on the orientation of the soul while in the body, whether towards the corporeal and spiritual death or towards the incorporeal and spiritual life. Punishment (and perhaps even damnation) can occur in this life through what human beings do to themselves. Salvation similarly can start to occur during one’s life through an orientation towards the divine. The language and conceptuality of metempsychosis taken over from the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition are powerful literary instruments in depicting these processes, but I believe that for Philo the doctrine itself is not essential. He does not need to be for the purposes of his allegorical interpretations of scripture and his extrapolations from it. It is to be agreed that we cannot conclude that he had no views on the eschatological process. The question is how can we determine what they are if he is so vague about them.

##### 5. A closer look at two key passages

It will of course not be possible in the present context to examine all the magnificently explored detail of Yli-Karjanmaa’s examination of allegorical passages. Particularly in his exposition of texts in the *Quaestiones* he breaks much new ground. Every scholar who makes a serious study of Philo’s writings and thought must read his book. At this point—perhaps a little self-indulgently but I hope not defensively—I want to zoom in on two passages in the Allegorical Commentary which are important for his thesis and on which I have made pronouncements in the past.

The first is at *De agricultura* 89, taken together with §169 and §174, located in a treatise on which Albert Geljon and I have written a commentary.<sup>26</sup> It is not one of the four passages in which Yli-Karjanmaa sees a direct reference to reincarnation. But when summarizing his treatment of those passages he claims that when read together with some other passages ‘we have all the reason to consider especially the *Agr.* passage as an allusion to reincarnation.’<sup>27</sup>

The passage is part of the exegesis of a secondary lemma Deut 17:15b–16a in which Israel is told that it will not be able to establish a foreign person over itself ‘for the reason that he will not multiply for himself cavalry, not will he return the people back to Egypt.’ We note that the verb

<sup>26</sup> Geljon–Runia (2013). It is the first commentary on an allegorical treatise published in the Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series (PACS).

<sup>27</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 213.

translated ‘return’ here is ἀποστρέφω, the same verb used in the text on Adam in Gen 3:19 discussed above.<sup>28</sup> The text reads as follows:<sup>29</sup>

(§88) ... (the passage) is concerned ... with the irrational, uncontrolled and disobedient motion in the soul, which it will be advantageous to restrain, lest ‘it return all its people back to Egypt,’ the region of the body, and by force make it a lover of pleasure and passion rather than a lover of excellence and of God. For, as Moses himself has said, the one who has acquired a multitude of horses must necessarily make his way to Egypt. (§89) For whenever the soul, like a boat, is buffeted and slung, now to the one side of the intellect and now to the other side of sense-perception, by the violence of the passions and the evil deeds that blow over it and it is overwhelmed by the looming wave, then as is likely the intellect becomes waterlogged and drowns. The depths (βυθός) into which it sinks and drowns is the body that is likened to Egypt.

The text in Deuteronomy does not speak being drowned in the depths, and as Yakir Paz already pointed out in a review of our commentary,<sup>30</sup> there is probably an allusion to Exod 15:5 which we missed, where the Egyptian horse and rider ‘sank to the depths like a stone,’ incidentally the only time in the Pentateuch that the word βυθός occurs.<sup>31</sup> Philo had given an exposition of this incident just before the present passage in §§79–83. A further mention of the ἔσχατος βυθός is found at §169 with reference to those had reached perfection but had believed that their improvement was due their own efforts and so disappeared into the ‘deepest abyss,’ while in §174 the metaphor of the boat is continued but there is no mention of sinking, but only of not reaching the harbour.

In a note Yli-Karjanmaa draws attention to the fact that in our commentary on §89, we ‘do not comment on the issue of returning to the body.’<sup>32</sup> Most certainly, if we were writing our commentary now, we would mention the possibility that in the final words of this passage Philo is hinting at the process of reincarnation, as proposed in his study. We might, however, still hesitate to take the passage as evidence that Philo himself was committed to the doctrine. In the context of the allegory the passage can be taken to refer to a severe setback that the soul experiences when overwhelmed by the force of passion, interpreted as sinking back into the body’s sphere of influence. One might compare the exegesis of the ‘return to Egypt’ in Num 4:14 at *Leg.* 3.175 (where the return is to ‘passion’) and especially at *Post.* 156, where the return is to ‘the inlet of a dissolute and licentious life’ and this might have happened if the saviour had not thrown into the soul a ‘sweetening tree’ (cf. Exod 15:25) which produced a love of hard work (φιλοπονία) rather than a hatred of it. Yli-Karjanmaa argues that the reference to βυθός in §89 (and also §169) becomes clearer as a reference to reincarnation in the body when read together with texts such as *QG* 4.234 and *QE* 2.40.<sup>33</sup> One may legitimately ask whether the reader of the treatise is meant to make this

<sup>28</sup> This link is, I think, not mentioned by Yli-Karjanmaa. The verb is common in the Pentateuch and Philo’s treatment deserves further examination.

<sup>29</sup> My translation at Geljon–Runia (2013) 60–61. Yli-Karjanmaa offers a partly different translation at (2015) 182, but there are no essential divergences between the two, except perhaps that he translates βυθός with ‘bottom’. The NETS translation reads ‘into the deep.’

<sup>30</sup> Paz (2013).

<sup>31</sup> It also occurs only once in Plato’s works in a literary expression (‘abyss of nonsense’) at *Parm.* 130d7.

<sup>32</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 183 n. 587.

<sup>33</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 69, 83, 181. Note that the main discussion of *Agr.* 89 is part of his interpretation of *QE* 2.40 and its reference to Tartarus as direct evidence of Philo’s endorsement of the doctrine.

link. Is this the way that Philo's allegorical method works? If the *Quaestiones* are to be regarded as preliminary notes for composing exegetical treatises or a repository of exegetical themes,<sup>34</sup> does this mean that the readers of the allegorical commentary were meant to have the contents of that work at the back of their minds?

On the other hand, I believe that Yli-Karjanmaa's interpretation of the three passages in *Agr.* that they indicate progress on the part of the soul is illuminating and gives us insight into Philo's intentions when composing the allegorical structure.<sup>35</sup> §89 is located in the first part of the treatise in which there is an antithesis between Noah the cultivator who is on the path to being a sage and workers of the earth focused on the body and its passions. The other two texts are located in the treatise's second part, in which Noah is interpreted as a beginner who makes progress on the path of perfection. It is to be agreed that the two later passages are meant to be linked up with the earlier one. Philo uses language and imagery that in other contexts could be taken to refer to the soul departing from and returning to the body, but can equally be taken as imagery illustrating the death of the soul to virtue or a setback on the path to the ultimate goal.

In our commentary on §89 Geljon and I draw attention to the possible background of the allegorization of the nautical adventures of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* in terms of the quest of the soul for virtue and perfection. Unfortunately references to such allegorical themes are scattered, both in Philo and elsewhere, and they have to my knowledge never been systematically collected.<sup>36</sup> The only extant example of the allegorization of a substantial piece of the text of the *Odyssey* is Porphyry's essay on the cave of the nymphs, based at least in part on earlier interpretation by Numenius.<sup>37</sup> Reincarnation figures prominently in the exegesis. Porphyry outlines (§11) various kinds of souls, including those who drag a body with them and become embodied through an attraction to moisture. The nymphs in *Od.* 13.104 for whom the cave is a sacred place are then identified as 'souls proceeding to becoming' (αἱ εἰς τὴν γένεσιν ἰοῦσαι ψυχαί, §12). Both Porphyry and Numenius are much later than Philo, but there are already references to allegorization of themes from Odysseus' travels in Cicero, as pointed out by Boyancé,<sup>38</sup> so the method in fact precedes Philo. It is thus possible though as yet unproven that the covert references to reincarnation that Yli-Karjanmaa discovers in the texts in *Agr.* make use of language and themes used in this Greek allegorical tradition.

I turn now to the second passage at *Somn.* 1.137–139. As Yli-Karjanmaa states, this text is the *locus classicus* for the view that Philo espoused the doctrine of reincarnation. It is part of a long section of text interpreting the ladder in Jacob's dream in Gen 28:12. In giving a typology of souls which ascend and descend in the air, Philo includes a category which, 'longing for the for and

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Runia (1986) 381, Sterling (1991) 122.

<sup>35</sup> On the treatise's structure see Runia (2010) and Geljon–Runia (2013) 10–16.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to the references given at Geljon–Runia (2013) 182, see also Boyancé (1963) 67–79, Lambertson (1992).

<sup>37</sup> Text in Nauck (1886) 53–81; text and translation Seminar Classics 609 (1969).

<sup>38</sup> Boyancé (1963) 73. Note also the interpretation of the transformation of Odysseus' men into swine at *Od.* 10.239–240 in terms of reincarnation at Plutarch fr. 200 Sandbach (probably erroneously attributed to Porphyry by Stobaeus).

accustomed ways of mortal life, hurry back again<sup>39</sup> and by implication return to the body. Philo uses the verb *παλινδρομέω* here. As was noted earlier,<sup>40</sup> it appears to be a technical term for the process of moving back from the higher to the lower and from the incorporeal to the corporeal.<sup>41</sup> In my dissertation I noted this text and stated that Philo appeared not to have ‘fully integrated’ the doctrine it alludes to in his thought. Yli-Karjanmaa is rightly critical of my treatment of the question, which was indeed superficial and apodictic to a fault.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless I would persist in saying that there are puzzling aspects to this text, not in what it says, but in how it is used.

The passage in *Somn.* is one of four in which Philo sets out a cosmological interpretation of the angels which play such a prominent role in the Pentateuch.<sup>43</sup> In each case there is reference to incorporeal souls which range through the air (and heaven in *Conf.* 176). Only in *Somn.* is there an explicit reference to reincarnation. There seem to me to be two difficulties. Firstly it is difficult to give a reason why the return of the souls to bodies is mentioned in only one of the passages and not in the others. Secondly, in each case Philo is focused on explaining the references to angels in the biblical texts in terms of incorporeal souls and by comparing them with the role of *δαίμονες* in Greek philosophy. Yli-Karjanmaa persuasively suggests this might be a theme that was ‘part of a Hellenistic *Jewish* tradition.’<sup>44</sup> Gen 28:12 cited in §133 speaks of angels ascending and descending (*ἀνέβαινον καὶ κατέβαινον*). The verbs in §138 *κατίασαν* and *ἀνέρχονται* might be inspired the biblical text (though their order is reversed). But when Philo refers back to the text in §142 (*ἀνερχομένους αὐτούς καὶ κατίοντας*) he only applies the words to the angels. If he had taken the opportunity to say that Moses had applied ascent and descent also to another category of souls, then the issue of whether reincarnation was a feature of Mosaic thought would have been beyond doubt. But he did not do so. The reference to the doctrine of reincarnation cannot be doubted, but it is not central to Philo’s purpose in this text and he does not apply it to the human soul in his exegesis when he looks at Jacob the practiser’s life in 1.150–152.

Yli-Karjanmaa argues that ‘with regard to *Somn.* 1.134–151 and its parallels, I think that simply copying but not really digesting what he had copied would not fit well the kind of thinker Philo was, one who paid so much attention to textual detail in the Bible.’<sup>45</sup> Most certainly Philo is a careful reader of the biblical text. The references to the verbs in Gen 28:12 that we just noted is a small case in point. But his exegeses generally focus on specific and detailed aspects of the text or questions raised by it, once again as in the case just discussed. In addition, it is also a feature of Philo’s exegesis that he sometimes cites extensive slabs of philosophical material in order to

<sup>39</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa’s translation at (2015) 131.

<sup>40</sup> See above at n. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 140, 251–254; noted earlier by Mansfeld (1985) 144.

<sup>42</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 144, referring to Runia (1986) 348.

<sup>43</sup> See the useful table at Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 145, which does not however contain all the common elements. As noted in n. 460 a passage in *QG* 4.188 also refers to the interpretation of ‘angels’ without all the cosmological details. On these texts see also Runia (1986) 228–229.

<sup>44</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 145 n. 461 (his emphasis).

<sup>45</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 144.

illustrate or give background for biblical exposition. Two very striking cases are found at *Opif.* 89–128 (the long exposition of arithmological material on the hebdomad) and *Ebr.* 167–202 (the sceptical tropes), but there are many others.<sup>46</sup> This means that some aspects of this illustrative material are more relevant to Philo's purpose than others. This is how I took the undoubted reference to the process of reincarnation in this particular passage.

### 6. Concluding remarks

There is much that we cannot be certain about when we have to determine Philo's views on the Greek religious and philosophical doctrine of reincarnation and decide whether he regarded it as a fundamental part of Mosaic thought. We do not have all the texts that Philo wrote. He may have indicated more clearly his views on reincarnation, whether positively or negatively in a treatise now lost.<sup>47</sup> A single critical remark like the one about ἐκπύρωσις in *Her.* 228 or an unambiguous linkage with a biblical text would have put the matter beyond doubt. As already noted,<sup>48</sup> we do not really know enough about Alexandrian Judaism to be able to determine whether it had groups of thinkers who were an exception to the general rule that the doctrine of reincarnation was 'essentially alien to Jewish tradition.'<sup>49</sup> It would also be helpful to know a lot more about the role that reincarnation played in Greek philosophical allegories, for example of the wanderings of Odysseus.<sup>50</sup> Above all, it is difficult to determine which doctrines are regarded as essential for an understanding of the deeper meaning of scripture which the allegorical method of interpretation laid bare. As has already been noted,<sup>51</sup> Philo never wrote a work comparable to the *Περὶ ἀρχῶν* of Origen, which aims to present the 'rule of faith' containing the key doctrines handed down from the apostles, among which is the resurrection of the body, but not the reincarnation of the soul.<sup>52</sup>

But we have to work with the texts that we have. These reveal, in my view, that Philo was not strongly committed to the doctrine of reincarnation, the reason being that it was not essential for what he was trying to achieve in his allegorical interpretations. At most its language might illustrate the process whereby the incarnate soul becomes 'corporealized'—to use Yli-Karjanmaa's very useful term—when it comes under the baleful influence of the body, its senses and its passions. Philo had many opportunities to be more explicit about this doctrine if he was committed to it in his role as exegete, but he did not make use of them. It is of course possible that he was being deliberately secretive, as Yli-Karjanmaa argues,<sup>53</sup> but I am (as yet) not convinced.

<sup>46</sup> Another copious example on division in *Agr.* 131–145.

<sup>47</sup> The fragment that Yli-Karjanmaa analyses in depth at (2015) 186–212 is most likely from the lost Book 4 of *Leg.* Given the lack of context a full interpretation of the fragment's seemingly positive reference to reincarnation is not possible.

<sup>48</sup> See above n. 44 and text thereto.

<sup>49</sup> Winston's phrase cited by Yli-Karjanmaa as noted above in n. 7.

<sup>50</sup> See above n. 36 and text thereto.

<sup>51</sup> See above pp. 7–8.

<sup>52</sup> An expansion of the δόγματα εὐσεβείας καὶ ὁσιότητος set out in *Opif.* 170–172 would have been a good start. Origen accepts the ἐνωματώσις of pre-existent intellects, but not the μετενωματώσις of human souls.

<sup>53</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 247 concludes: 'These considerations favor the possibility that reincarnation was for Philo an esoteric teaching.'

In the end the answer we give to the question posed by the title of this paper turns on how we think we should read Philo. Do we need to connect some of the dots that he leaves scattered throughout his writings, leading to conclusions about what he thinks based on what he does not say?<sup>54</sup> This is certainly the way that he himself reads Mosaic scripture, which he regards as forming a coherent whole, but one that is not immediately accessible in all the riches of its meaning. Yli-Karjanmaa argues that Philo must have regarded the Bible as a ‘model for his lack of explicitness.’<sup>55</sup> In a sense his method is a return to a more dogmatic reading of Philo, though done with a much greater sensitivity to genre and context. The alternative is that we adhere to the view that Philo regards himself as an interpreter and even a servant of scripture, unfolding its hidden meaning to the best of his ability and especially as it relates to the moral and spiritual life of his readers? For this purpose the doctrines of Greek philosophy give valuable assistance, but ultimately they are only acceptable if they derive their authority from scripture, taking into account how it can and should be interpreted. Philo’s method entails that his thought will always remain to some degree obscured and enigmatic. The discussions on how we should read him will long continue. Sami Yli-Karjanmaa has made a very substantial contribution to these discussions and all Philonists should be very grateful to him.

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<sup>54</sup> As argued by Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) xi.

<sup>55</sup> Yli-Karjanmaa (2015) 246.

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