

## “God Has Had Mercy on Me”: Theology and Soteriology in *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*

Philo of Alexandria’s treatise *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* contains a number of noteworthy soteriological themes, including the “taming of the passions,” transformative revelatory experiences expressed in mystery cult imagery, noetic ascent, and seeing God. Most significant, however, are the complex depictions of agency that occur throughout the treatise. Though Philo stresses the necessity of human “toil” as “the beginning of all goodness and true worth,” he repeatedly and unequivocally emphasizes the priority of divine agency. It is upon divine mercy that “all things are securely anchored.” An engaging and attractive portrayal of God also is apparent in this treatise. Though *Sacr.* 94–96 asserts that the deity transcends all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic human conceptions, this philosophical conceit fails to fully cohere with the relational and immanent God who is more commonly encountered in the treatise. Imparting his attributes of apathy and mercy, the “savior” of *Sacr.* graciously “draws the perfect human from earthly things to himself.” Recognizing these divergent depictions of the deity, and attempting to reconcile the fault-lines that divide them, is essential in interpreting this remarkable treatise. In so doing, we see yet again that Philo’s allegiances to philosophy are overshadowed by his commitment to the God of sacred scripture.

### **1. Theology**

Some of Philo’s most common theological notes are sounded in *De sacrificiis*, including transcendence, omnipresence, and absolute uniqueness. Anthropomorphic and anthropopathic conceptions of God are also considered and vigorously denounced. A number of relational attributes also are ascribed to God. God is both “the Father” and the “savior,” as well as the source of all that is good.

#### **1.1. Ontological attributes**

Divine transcendence is asserted in *Sacr.* 55, where the all too common human propensity to forget God’s blessings is attributed to a lack of self-awareness. The solution to ingratitude offered by Philo, however, paradoxically involves “remembering your own nothingness in all things” (περὶ πάντα οὐδενείας). This humbling memory presumably will trigger a praise-inducing memory of “God’s transcendence in all things” (περὶ πάντα ὑπερβολῆς).

This assertion of transcendence is balanced by a detailed defense of omnipresence, in *Sacr.* 67–68, which creatively emerges from the theophany attending the miraculous provision of

water at Massah and Meribah, offered in Exod 17:6. Philo capitalizes on the spatial ambiguities present in the divine claim, “Here I stand *there* before you were” (ὧδε ἐγὼ ἔστηκα ἐκεῖ πρὸ τοῦ σέ), which demonstrates

that his subsistence is before all created being, and that he who is here exists also there and elsewhere and everywhere, for he has filled all wholly and entirely and left nothing where his presence is not ... My motion is not one of transference in space, where the traveler leaves one place when he occupies another, but it is a motion of self-extension and self-expansion [ἀλλὰ τονικῶς χρώμενος τῇ κινήσει].

The term “self-extension” (τονική) is related to the more commonly encountered Stoic technical term, τόνος, “tension,” an essential psychological element which determines one’s ability to properly respond to impressions by maintaining harmony between expansive and contractive impulses.<sup>1</sup> In cosmological discourse τονική denotes “elasticity,” and “simultaneous activity in opposite directions.”<sup>2</sup> Though the Stoics primarily employed this term to express cosmological harmony and stability, Philo would appear to be adapting it to denote God’s ability to “stretch” himself throughout the cosmos. Significantly, this assertion of omnipresence presumably would afford the immanence required for the soteriological impartation of God’s primary characteristics: apathy and mercy.<sup>3</sup>

God’s absolute uniqueness finds expression in *Sacr.* 91–92. While discussing the propriety of divine oaths Philo acknowledges that some might find it “unworthy” and unfit to conceive of God swearing oaths, since “he needs no witness.” Even more problematic is the fact that “there is no god who is his equal in honor,” and “there is nothing equal to him” (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἄλλος θεὸς

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 160–164.

<sup>2</sup> A.A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Vol. 1: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 288.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cristina Termini, “Philo’s Thought within the Context of Middle Judaism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (ed. Adam Kamesar; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2009), 101:

Philo’s theology cannot be understood by reference to a scheme whereby an ever more extreme divine transcendence requires the presence of lower intermediaries to bridge the growing distance that separates God from the world. The transcendence of God does not limit His capacity to act and reveal Himself. God’s omnipotence guarantees that there is no barrier; rather it is a matter of safeguarding the *otherness* of God.

ἰσότιμος αὐτῷ), who might function as God’s pledge or guarantor. Indeed, an “entire genus [ἅλω γένει] separates God from what comes after him.”<sup>4</sup>

This discussion of oaths then leads to one of Philo’s most memorable refutations of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic conceptions of God’s nature.<sup>5</sup> Since an oath is unable to augment or authenticate God’s trustworthiness, Philo wonders, “Why then did it seem well to the prophet and revealer to represent God as binding himself by an oath?” (94). As is often the case, Philo ascribes a pedagogical function to such anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, characterizing them as divine accommodations for human “weaknesses” and shortcomings.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Winston, “Philo’s Conception of the Divine Nature,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (ed. Lenn E. Goodman; Studies in Neoplatonism 7; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 21–42, here 21–22: Philo’s God is “*to genikotaton*, the most generic (*Gig.* 52). And, since He belongs to no class, we do not know what He is”; and John M. Dillon, “The Nature of God in the *Quod Deus*,” in *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria: A Commentary on De Gigantibus and Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* (BJS 25; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 217–227, here 221: “Our concept of God involves his transcending any genus or species, since there are divisions of created things, and involve having other things similar to him, and thus in some sense equal to him. This is not possible for God.”

<sup>5</sup> The God of the Hebrew Bible is famously anthropomorphic: he is a “living God,” not an abstract conceptualization. Cf. Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, 2 Vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995-1996), 1.244–245: “According to OT statements, Yahweh has a face, a mouth, eyes, a heart, hands, ears, feet, and a voice. He takes a walk in a suitable, invigorating time, comes, sees, laughs, breathes, tires, and smells. He experiences regret, hate, anger, and pain.” Such anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms “underscore the personal character” of Yahweh, and “make him accessible to human beings.” “Thus, one did not and cannot get along without an anthropomorphic way of speaking, if one wishes to speak as a human being about God.” Anthropomorphic representations are found throughout the Hebrew Bible, even in post-exilic texts (Isa 59:1–2, 16–17; 60:13; 62:2, 8; 63:1–6, 12; 64:8; 65:2–3, 5). Though one occasionally encounters assertions like Hos 11:9: “For I am God and not a man!” Cf. also Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 172: “The anthropomorphism of the gods is always a compromise between the visible and the invisible, the immanent and the transcendent; it is a way of representing what is ultimately impossible to represent.”

<sup>6</sup> So P. W. van der Horst, “Philo and the Problem of God’s Emotions,” *Études Platoniciennes: Philon d’Alexandrie* 7 (2010): 171–178, esp. 175–177. Cf. *Conf.* 98: anthropomorphic conceptions are “the form employed merely for our instruction because we cannot get outside [ἐκβαίνω] ourselves, but frame our conceptions of the Uncreated from our own experiences.”

Our imaginative and intellectual inadequacies, combined with God's absolute otherness, disallows "treasuring within ourselves the thought which worthily summarizes the nature of the Cause [αἴτιος]: 'God is not as man'" (Num 23:19). Completely trapped within our human frame, we cannot "rise above our conceptions," "escape our inborn infirmities," or "get outside ourselves in forming our ideas" of God. Like "snails in their shells," our own "covering of mortality" leads us to "think of the blessed and immortal in terms of our own natures." And though we may nobly confess that "anthropomorphic" (ἀνθρωπόμορφος) representations of God are "absurd," in "actual fact we accept the impious thought that he is of human passions [ἀνθρωποπαθής], and invent for him hands and feet, comings and goings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, and anger."

Philo's emphatic claim that humans are irremediably trapped within their mortal frame of reference fails to cohere with his oft-stated convictions concerning ecstatic experience and contemplative ascent, as affording a revelatory and redemptive "escape" from our embodied state (cf. *Her.* 69–70, 85, 264–265). In fact, the same verb used in *Sacr.* 95, ἐκβαίνω ("we cannot escape [μηδὲ ἐκβῆναι] our inborn infirmities"), also appears in *Leg.* 1.82, describing "the mind" that "goes out [ἐκβαίνω] from itself and offers itself up to God . . . making the confession of acknowledgement towards the Existent One." As we will see, throughout *De sacrificiis* Philo purposely refrains from describing or commending ecstatic states.

## 1.2 Relational attributes

Balancing this somewhat remote "god of the philosophers" are a number of relational attributes ascribed to God by Philo. God is "the Father" (ὁ πατήρ) who confers the "birthright of the firstborn" and even the "whole inheritance" upon those whose lives "progress to the better" (42).<sup>7</sup> He is also the "savior" from life-threatening maladies, though those who call on him as a last resort cannot assume that he will respond. And though the personified temptress Lady *Hedone* claims to possess the "treasure chest of human blessings . . . outside of which nothing good can be found" (22), it is in fact God who is the source of all that is good. Indeed, "unless God gives, you shall not have, since all things are his possessions." Even our magnanimous

---

<sup>7</sup> On God as Father in Philo, see Beatrice Wyss, "Vater Gott und seine Kinder und Frauen," in *The Divine Father: Religious and Philosophical Concepts of Divine Parenthood in Antiquity* (ed. Felix Albrecht and Reinhard Feldmeier; Themes in Biblical Narrative 18; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 165–179.

“offerings” simply represent the return of God’s gifts back to him! (97). An equally important lesson is offered to the person who thinks that they have earned God’s favor. Philo first reminds them that Israel was chosen not for their own merits, but “because of the iniquity of the other nations,” and the “covenant of God” that was made with Israel is in fact “an allegory of his gifts of grace” (χάρις).

## **2. Soteriology & the soteriological communication of God’s attributes**

A rich array of soteriological themes appear in *De sacrificiis*, including the struggle against the passions, the allegory of the soul, transformative revelatory experiences expressed in the language of the mysteries, salvific worship, contemplative ascent, and the vision of God. Moreover, the agential acts and roles played by God and humans are complexly intertwined, demonstrating a sophisticated, experientially-informed soteriology. Most significant, perhaps, is the manner in which the supposedly transcendent God communicates soteriological attributes. Indeed, the anti-anthropomorphic and anti-anthropopathic God of the philosophers, though entirely self-sufficient and capable of maintaining his utter transcendence from creation, nevertheless “transcends his transcendence” and reaches out in his mercy to his people.

### **2.1. Human agency**

The struggle against passions is prominent in *De sacrificiis*. Despite its prevalence, Philo is relatively consistent concerning the primacy of human agency in the war against the passions. In only one context is divine “revelation” accorded an efficacious role in the struggle (62). Furthermore, the primary weapons in this war, the “disciplined practice of virtue” and reason, are regularly appealed to and exercised, in a variety of contexts. Also consistently represented is the expected outcome of this battle: the complete victory of the virtuous person.

The power of the passions to overwhelm and lead astray the virtuous person is a common concern in Philo’s corpus.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, in *De sacrificiis* they are characterized as a “fiery furnace” (15), a “throbbing fever” (16), “savage and untamed” (62), and “the worst enemy of the soul” (16). Though Philo often commends a Middle Platonic allowance for “moderate emotions” (μετριωπάθεια) and “limits,”<sup>9</sup> in *De sacrificiis* he consistently follows the Stoic ideal of

---

<sup>8</sup> On this, see my essay, “The Passion of Eve and the Ecstasy of Hannah: Sense Perception, Passion, Mysticism, and Misogyny in Philo of Alexandria, *De ebrietate* 143–52,” *JBL* 133.1 (2014): 141–163, esp. 146–154.

<sup>9</sup> Philo occasionally admits the necessity of the passions, since pleasure and desire are essential to the propagation of the human species (*Opif.* 161–163), while fear and anger play essential roles in its survival (*Leg.* 2.8). Furthermore,

completely removing, or “extirpating,” the passions (Diogenes Laertius 7.117; Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.57).<sup>10</sup> Thus the war against the passions involves their ruinous fall and full conquest: they are “quenched” (σβέννυμι, 15), “abated” (χαλάω) and “lulled to rest” (νηνεμίας ἐπιγενομένης, 16), “fully surrendered” (ἀπειπεῖν χεῖρας, 17), “overthrown” (πτερνίζω, 42), “passed over from” (διάβασις, 63), and “utterly destroyed” (διαφθείρω, 134).

Philo also consistently represents the means whereby the passions are subdued: the pursuit of virtue and the exercise of reason. In at least three contexts Philo appeals to the “disciplined practice of virtue” (ἄσκησιν ἀρετῆς, 63; cf. also 16–18). Explicitly soteriological in orientation is *Sacr.* 134, though here virtue is acquired and not exercised: “when the most dominant elements of blind passion are utterly destroyed then comes the sanctification of the elder and precious offspring of Israel who has the clear vision of God” (τοῦ θεοῦ ὀξυδερκῶς ὁρῶντος). This “exodus” from evil passions then affords the “entry of virtue.” More prominent in *De sacrificiis*, however, is the role of reason. The passions are “vigorously” and “strongly” “ruled over” by “mind” (νοῦς) and reason (λογίζομαι) like a “king” or “charioteer” (9, 49), “kneaded” and “softened” by

---

he believes the “person of worth” should “express true emotions” (*Her.* 19), chief of which is perhaps “compassion” (ἔλεος), “the most vital of passions and the one most closely resembling the rational soul” (*Virt.* 144). On the passions in Middle Platonism, see George Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation* (Cambridge Source Books in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 482–484, 487.

<sup>10</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 389–401; Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181–210. Of course the variety of psychological models in the Stoic school – as well as ambiguity about what constituted and generated a πάθος – led to ambiguity concerning what passions/emotions were in need of extirpation. Chrysippus allowed for only a small assortment of “good emotions” (εὐπάθειαι), while Zeno was concerned with emotions that were disobedient to reason. Posidonius, in allowing for an irrational/emotional part of the soul, ostensibly allowed for more emotional expression. On this, see Sorabji, *ibid.*, 196, 206–210. A more detailed consideration of Philo’s views on *apatheia* and *metriopatheia* can be found in David Winston, “Philo of Alexandria on the Rational and Irrational Emotions,” in *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought* (ed. John T. Fitzgerald; London: Routledge, 2008), 201–220, esp. 203–204, 207–213. Sorabji (*ibid.*, 385) believes “Philo started a tradition . . . of seeing moderation and eradication of emotion as ideals for different people. In his view, Aaron and Abraham represent moderation, Moses and Isaac eradication.” See also John Dillon, “The Pleasures and Perils of Soul-Gardening,” *SPhA* 9 (1997): 190–197.

“reason” (λόγος) and divine “revelation” (62), “conquered and robbed of strength by reason” (λόγος, 81). Perhaps most notably, in *Sacr.* 80 it is “the invincible power of reason” (ἀνικήτῳ λόγῳ) that imposes “the perfect tension necessary to reduce to weakness the impulses of irrational passion” (τοῦ ἀλόγου πάθους ὀρμὴν εὐτόνος ἐκλύειν).

The prominence of reason and the consistent goal of extirpation seem to suggest that the Stoic theory of the passions was foremost in Philo’s mind while composing *De sacrificiis*.<sup>11</sup> The language of *Sacr.* 80 is particularly Stoic in tone and texture (cf. Arius Didymus 5b4–5b5). For the Stoics, the passions were seen as possessing a unique capacity to subvert their efforts to live according to reason, virtue, and nature. Furthermore, the early Stoics rejected the part-based psychological model of Platonism, and adhered instead to a strict monistic and materialistic psychological model in which reason reigns uncontested. Their denial of any non-rational parts of the soul may have been motivated by a desire to emphasize personal responsibility; since everything “is up to us,” emotions are entirely within the agent’s control.<sup>12</sup> According to the influential early Stoic Chrysippus, the origin of passion may be traced to two faulty evaluative judgments: (1) a present or future circumstance is good or bad, and (2) a particular emotional reaction to that circumstance is appropriate.<sup>13</sup> A. A. Long notes that these erroneous beliefs are “prompted by giving highly positive or highly negative value to things that are essentially indifferent: worldly success or failure, sensual pleasure or pain, and, in short, everything outside the mind’s direct and sure control.”<sup>14</sup> As assent is issued to these faulty judgments, an intense and uncontrollable “psychophysical” reaction arises (Galen, *PHP* 4.2.8–18, 4.3.2–5), one

---

<sup>11</sup> The claim that “all the movements of the soul [τῆς ψυχῆς κινήματων] belong to God” (72) may reflect an optimistic and monistic Stoic psychology.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Plato, who believed that the simultaneous presence of desire and aversion (perhaps most vividly illustrated by the necrophile Leontius in *Resp.* 439e–440a) testified to a composite psyche, the Stoics attributed these apparent conflicts of desires to a sequence of rapid changes in the psyche (Plutarch, *Mor.* 446f–447a).

<sup>13</sup> See Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 29–54; Margaret Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 90–93; Teun Tieleman, *Chrysippus’ On Affections: Reconstruction and Interpretation* (Philosophia Antiqua 94; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 124–132.

<sup>14</sup> A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245. As Sorabji (*Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 154) observes, Chrysippus believed that “most evaluative judgments are mistaken because most things are indifferent.”

afforded by the soul's weak "tension" (τόνος) and lack of harmony.<sup>15</sup> It is this reaction, or excessive "impulse" (ὄρμη), that many early Stoics identified with passion (Diogenes Laertius 7.110).<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2. Divine agency and synergism

The emphasis on human agency in the struggle against the passions is exceptional in *De sacrificiis*. Much more commonly encountered are depictions of unexpected and unsolicited divine soteriological acts, with human effort emerging solely in response to divine demonstrations of mercy.

### (a) The dualistic struggle of the rational soul

The treatise begins with a characteristic soteriological concern: the allegory of the soul's heavenward journey.<sup>17</sup> And offering a perfect template for this dualistic "allegory of the soul" is the scriptural account of the antagonistic relationship between the first human offspring, Cain and Abel. These brothers represent "two opposite and contending views of life," with Cain

---

<sup>15</sup> See Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 374–381. A synergistic mutuality is apparent in this process. Though πάθος carries connotations of passivity, suggesting something that is done to someone, the Stoic view ascribes full responsibility to the agent. By assenting to the faulty judgment, the agent allows his or herself to be acted upon.

<sup>16</sup> Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 128–129. On "excessive/exceeding impulses," see Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 66–70. This account is by no means applicable to all Stoics, as almost every significant Stoic thinker possessed varying psychologies and theories of the passions. For example, Chrysippus identified emotion/passion solely with the two mistaken judgments (Galen, *PHP* 4.2.5–6, 4.3.1–2, 5.1.4; Diogenes Laertius 7.111; see also Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 34–36), while Seneca insists "the mind itself is converted into a passion" (*Ira* 1.8.2; see also Brad Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 49–50). Sorabji's *Emotion and Peace of Mind* offers the most detailed account of the varying views of the major Stoics.

<sup>17</sup> David M. Hay, "Philo of Alexandria," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Siefrid; WUNT 2/140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 364–365, notes that "the allegory of the soul" is "at the heart of Philo's religious philosophy," and the "the chief object of his concern." David M. Hay ("The Psychology of Faith in Hellenistic Judaism," *ANRW* 2.20.2 [1987], 881–925, here 920) aptly notes that allegory in Philo's "hands became largely a tool for transforming scriptural narratives and laws into observations about the inner life of the individual." Moreover, in these contexts, quite often "biblical characters become symbols of tendencies in everyone's personality." Philo's "allegory of the soul" charts the means whereby the soul frees itself from the deceptive snares and futile cares of earthly existence, and returns to its true home, heaven.



figured as the “self-loving principle” whose “mind is his master,” and Abel the “God-loving principle” who “follows the deity” (2–3). Since Philo locates these opposing “principles” (δόγμα) and “opinions” (δόξα) within every soul, their ongoing antagonism is “shown more clearly” by the twin boys Jacob and Esau, whose struggles began in the womb (Gen 25:22; *Sacr.* 3–4).

The salvific “healing” (ἰασις) of this predicament principally involves their “separation” (4),<sup>18</sup> and this separation is demonstrably achieved in the contemplative ascent described in *Sacr.* 8.<sup>19</sup> Divine agency is foregrounded in this text, as Philo describes the wise person who is “advanced [προάγω] even higher” by God, “trained to soar above [ὑπερέτομαι] species and genus alike, and stationed them to stand beside himself.” The instrumentality of the Logos also is enlisted in this ascent: “God prizes the wise person as the world, for that same Logos [λόγος], by which he made the universe, is that by which he draws [ἀνάγω] the perfect person from earthly things to himself.” Because the contemplative wise man is said to enjoy a “translation” comparable to that enjoyed by Moses at his death (8), Ronald Cox believes this text accordingly blurs the most profound mystical experience obtainable in this life and the “sustained experience of the divine” which can only be enjoyed post-mortem.<sup>20</sup>

The soteriological “separation” promised in *Sacr.* 4 also is evidenced in the ability to “hold sway and exercise sovereign power over the passions of the soul” (9), a transition “to him that ‘Is,’” and a “change to better things,” namely, being “filled with the divine” (ἐπιθειάζω, 10). Finally, Philo concludes this description with an extraordinary monergistic claim: “God does not consult with those whom he blesses as to the gifts he means to bestow. He is inclined to extend

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hay, “The Psychology of Faith in Hellenistic Judaism,” 920: “Hellenistic Judaism tended to atomize human personality into mind, senses, passions, and body. Inner conflict was diagnosed as a war between reason and passions; the ideal was subjection of the passions to a mind itself obedient to the law of God. Salvation thus came to be conceived largely as a matter of inner harmony.”

<sup>19</sup> Though section 8 contains a lacuna of some four lines, a number of terms and themes connect sections 8 and the preceding context, including, “genus,” “translation,” and the concept of separation.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Cox, “Travelling the Royal Road: The Soteriology of Philo of Alexandria,” in *This World and the World to Come: Soteriology in Early Judaism* (ed. Daniel M. Gurtner; Library of Second Temple Studies 74; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 167–180, here 176.

his loving-kindness unstinted to those who have no thought of them” (μη̄ προλαβόντι δὲ τὰς εὐεργεσίας ἀφθόνους εἴωθεν ὀρέγειν).<sup>21</sup>

**(b) Divine mercy**

The astonishing assertion of unsolicited, and perhaps unmerited, favor offered in *Sacr.* 10 finds its match in section 87, where Philo undermines his prior condemnations of procrastination, which were offered in sections 52–53 and 69–71. Coming at the conclusion of a lengthy consideration of the “offering of the first fruits,” in *Sacr.* 87 Philo asserts that “even if we are slow to do this offering, he himself is not slow to take to himself those who are fit for his service [αὐτὸς οὐ βραδύνει τοὺς ἐπιτηδεῖους πρὸς θεραπείαν λαβεῖν ἑαυτῶ]. ‘I will take you,’ he says, ‘to be my people and I will be your God’ (Exod 6:7), and ‘you shall be to me a people. I am the Lord’” (Lev 26:12).

While *Sacr.* 10 and 87 surely evoke the imagery of divine mercy, this indispensable divine attribute comes to explicit expression only in *Sacr.* 42:

And if your life to the end be a progress to the better, the Father will give you not only the birthright of the elder, but the whole inheritance, even as he did to Jacob, who overthrew the seat and foundation of passion [πάθος] – Jacob who confessed his personal experience [ὁς ὡμολόγησεν ὃ ἔπαθεν] in the words, ‘God has had mercy [ἐλέεω] on me and all things are mine’ – words of sound doctrine and instruction for life, for on God’s mercy [ἔλεος], all things are securely anchored [ὀρμέω].

As Ronald Williamson has noted, “For Philo there is only one thing worse than anthropomorphism and that is anthropopathism.” An exception is made, however, for compassion/mercy (ἔλεος).<sup>22</sup> It is in fact the sole emotion predicated of Philo’s otherwise apathetic God, though perhaps it should be considered a rational virtue, rather than an emotion.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly Philo was influenced in this regard by the LXX, which makes “pity a constant and defining attribute of the deity.”<sup>24</sup> He also evinces awareness of its importance in human

---

<sup>21</sup> Literally: “For without anticipation are the free from envy [ἀφθονος] acts of kindness [εὐεργεσία] which God is accustomed to extend.”

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo* (Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World, 200 BC to AD 200; 1.2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 79.

<sup>23</sup> Françoise Mirguet (*An Early History of Compassion: Emotion and Imagination in Hellenistic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 202) appeals to *Post.* 31 (God has “lifted pity from the Hades of emotions to the Olympian place of virtue”) while contending that Philo transforms pity from an emotion to a virtue.

<sup>24</sup> Mirguet, *An Early History of Compassion*, 100.

relationships. As he elsewhere contends, “compassion” (ἔλεος) is “the emotion most necessary and one most closely related to the rational soul” (*Virt.* 144). Furthermore, Moses “has filled almost the whole of the law with commands to show pity and love for humankind” (ἔλεον καὶ φιλανθρωπίαν, *Spec.* 4.79).<sup>25</sup>

It is not beyond the bounds of probability that Philo’s own personal spiritual experiences also served to convince him of the absolutely essential role played by God’s mercy in the divine-human relationship. Together with Jacob, this text perhaps reveals Philo “confessing his personal experience in the words, ‘God has had mercy on me.’” Characterizing it as “instruction for life” may further reflect its personal import and transformative impact. This all stands in marked contrast to the gods of the Greco-Romans, who “are typically represented as being indifferent to human sorrow and invulnerable to pity.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, since the Stoics “classified pity as a species of distress,” it was presumably excluded from the repertoire of divine emotions (cf. Seneca, *Clem.* 2.4.4–2.5.1).<sup>27</sup>

### (c) Divine inspiration

Divine inspiration plays a prominent role in *De sacrificiis*. Notably absent, however, is the ecstatic dimension which is prominent in texts like *Opif.* 71, *Her.* 69–70, and especially *Migr.* 34–35. In *Sacr.* 76, Philo thoroughly subverts the “golden age/race” theme, in which primitive

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mirguet, *An Early History of Compassion*, 57–60, 168–178. Mirguet (*ibid.*, 169) describes *Spec.* 4.79 as transforming the law into “an embodiment of pity,” as pity “becomes one of its central precepts.” She also contends that “the Torah – even in its Greek translation – does not prescribe pity a single time.” This assertion, however, fails to take into account the characters who express compassion and pity in the Torah, such as Joseph (Gen 43:30) and Moses (Exod 32), as well as laws like the requirement to return a poor man’s pledged cloak every night (Exod 22:26–27), and to not oppress strangers, “since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger” (23:9).

<sup>26</sup> David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 111.

<sup>27</sup> David Winston, “Judaism and Hellenism: Hidden Tensions in Philo’s Thought,” *SPhA* 2 (1990): 1–19, here 9. Though Seneca differentiates between the emotion of “pity” (*miser cordia*) and the virtuous disposition of “mercy” (*clementia*), and allows the latter a place in the emotional life of the sage. On this, see Robert A. Kaster, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Seneca: Anger, Mercy, Revenge* (trans. Robert A. Kaster and Martha C. Nussbaum; The Complete Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 133–145, esp. 135–140.

humans were thought to freely possess virtue and happiness.<sup>28</sup> Philo critiques “those who cling to the old-world days with their fabled past,” and “feed on effete fables, which the long course of the ages has handed down for the deception of humankind.” The best antidote to such “false opinions” is the actual experience of the “instantaneous and timeless power of God” which attends the acceptance of “ideas that are new and fresh and in the vigor of youth . . . the blessed thoughts from the ever ageless God” (ἀλλὰ παρὰ τοῦ ἀεὶ ἀγήρω [νέου] θεοῦ τὰ νέα καὶ καινὰ ἀγαθὰ μετὰ πάσης ἀφθονίας λαμβάνοντες). In fact, with God “nothing is ancient, nothing at all past, but everything is in its birth and existence timeless.”

In *Sacr.* 78–79 divine illumination comes “unforeseen and un hoped for,” as a “sudden beam of self-taught wisdom [φέγγος αἰφνίδιον ἐπιλάμψη αὐτοματοῦς σοφίας] that shines upon us.” This unexpected and unsolicited “wisdom opens the closed eye of the soul,” transforming “us from hearers of knowledge into spectators, and substituting in our minds sight, the swiftest of senses, for the slower sense of hearing.” Philo the biblical exegete then qualifies his earlier condemnation of the “golden age/race” motif: “we should make it our aim to read the writings of the sages and listen to proverbs and old-world stories from the lips of those who know antiquity, always seeking knowledge about the men and deeds of old.” Nevertheless, he yet again marginalizes this “knowledge that comes from teaching” by unfavorably comparing it to “the young shoots of self-inspired wisdom” that “God causes to spring up within the soul (νέας δὲ ὅταν ἀντείλη βλάστας αὐτοδιδάκτου σοφίας ὁ θεὸς ἐν ψυχῇ).

Finally, in *Sacr.* 86 Philo commends the “disciplined exercise [ἄσκησις] that creates solid knowledge”; for just as manna was made from “grinding” the “heavenly food,” so one should meditate on “virtue’s heaven-sent discourse” (τὸν οὐράνιον ἀρετῆς λόγον), so that “its impress [τυπώω] on the understanding will be firm.” This text notably enlists the epistemological imagery of a wax seal which impresses itself on the *nous*/memory, thereby permanently inscribing the thing seen in the mind/memory of the percipient. This popular epistemological construct is attested in Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and Cicero,<sup>29</sup> and Verity Platt and Michael Squire have noted

---

<sup>28</sup> On this theme, cf. George Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 191c-d: “If there’s anything we want to remember . . . we hold it under the perceptions and conceptions and imprint them on it, as if we were taking impressions from seal rings.” Aristotle, *On the Soul*

that “the uncanny, almost metaphysical properties of wax” provides a perfect conceptual framework for expressing “the ambiguous status of the human *psyche* as a malleable medium that is at once corporeal and conceptual, capable of receiving and storing information that is acquired through sense perception and converted into something far less tangible.”<sup>30</sup>

**(d) The “two wives,” *Hedone* and Virtue, and the necessity of human toil**

One of the most important instances of divine inspiration occurs at a crucial narrational turning point in Philo’s lengthy personification of the “two wives,” *Hedone* (ἡδονή) and Virtue (ἀρετή), that “each one of us are mated to” (20–45). The vivid depiction of the temptress *Hedone* persuasively establishes her nearly irresistible power over the mind/soul. In fact, the fine detail of her personification almost seems to betray personal acquaintance!<sup>31</sup> Human agency is prominent in this lengthy passage. Though the soteriological watershed moment accompanying divine inspiration opens

The temptation of Lady *Hedone* addresses and entices the whole human person: sensuality, the will, and the *psyche* are all addressed and engaged. First, this passage is suffused with

---

2.12.424a19: “Sense is that which can receive perceptible forms without their matter, as wax receives the imprint of the ring without the iron or gold, and it takes the imprint which is of gold or bronze, but not qua gold or bronze.”

Diogenes Laertius 7.45-6 (Zeno): “A *phantasia* is an imprint on the soul: the name having been appropriately borrowed from the imprint made by the seal-ring upon the wax.” Cf. also Cicero, *On the Orator* 2.353–360.

<sup>30</sup> Verity Platt and Michael Squire, “Getting to grips with classical art: rethinking the haptics of Graeco-Roman visual culture,” in *Touch and the Ancient Senses* (ed. Alex Purves; The Senses in Antiquity; London: Routledge, 2018), 75–104, here 102. See also Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18–37. Philo offers a representative description of this concept in *Deus* 42–43:

sensation or sense ... introduces what has appeared to it to the mind. For the mind is a vast and receptive storehouse in which all that comes through sight or hearing and the other sense organs is placed and treasured. Impression [φαντασία] is an imprint [τύπωσις] made on the soul. For, like a ring or seal, it stamps on the soul the image corresponding to everything which each of the senses has introduced. And the mind like wax receives the impress and retains it vividly, until forgetfulness the opponent of memory levels out the imprint, and makes it indistinct, or entirely effaces it.

<sup>31</sup> This text substantially expands on the famous “allegory of Prodicus,” as found in Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.20–34. The allegory was apparently a popular one; cf. Ovid, *Amores* 3.1; *Tabula of Cebes* 5–7, 9–10, 15–22; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 1.64–84; Silius, *Punica* 15.18–128; Lucian, *Somn.* 6–16; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.10; *Vit. Soph.* 1.482–483, 496; and the discussion in Verity J. Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature, and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 312–316.

conditional statements, in which Lady *Hedone* acknowledges that her victim's volitional assent must be attained: "If you will dwell with me" (ἤν ἐθέλῃς μοι συνοικεῖν, 22), "if you assent [συναίνεω] ... with willingness and gladness, and if you turn ... and refuse" (23), and "if you are willing to spend your time with me" (24). Lady Virtue also expresses her fear that the mind/soul will "assent" (συναίνεω) to these deceptions (28), and she soberly promises that "if you are wise, you will see in time" (29).<sup>32</sup> Second, a host of psychological benefits are promised by Lady *Hedone*, most significantly, a "multitude of joys," a "life without care," and "freedom from the sense of restraint, the fear of punishment, the stress of business, and the discipline of labor" (23). Third, sensual enticements abound, beginning with the extravagant description of the Lady herself. In vacillating between allure and disgust, the depiction attempts to reflect the emotional and psychological turmoil of a scrupulous young man (21). After Lady *Hedone* promises a life filled with "beautiful music, costly food and drink, the seduction climaxes with an arousing description of orgiastic sexual pleasure: "unending love [ἔρωσ], unsupervised play, adventurous sexual intercourse [μίξεις ἀνεξέταστοι], explicit language, uncontrolled deeds," and "unfulfilled overindulgence" (23). Fourth, a cryptic parable of nature's influence appears to be offered in *Sacr.* 25. That influence is represented by "evergreen plants," which perpetually "bloom and bear fruit," and whose "roots dive deep and far below" while their "branches" "soar into the heavens." Nurtured by "earth" (γῆ) herself, this symbolic plant appears to reflect the innate sexual drive that propels humans towards both reproduction and the destructive "fruit" that Lady *Hedone* villainously offers. Finally, the hapless and presumably helpless "victim" is threatened by supernatural forces, as Lady *Hedone* is characterized as a "sorceress" and a "lewd dealer in magic," one who employs "talismans and witchcrafts" (26, 28).

This withering onslaught meets its match, however, in *Sacr.* 26, when Lady Virtue, hitherto "hidden from sight," yet immanently positioned nearby, "steps forward" and makes a "sudden appearance" (ἔξαιφνης ἐπιφαίνεται) which brings deliverance from Lady *Hedone*. This characterization of Lady Virtue's salvific "sudden appearance" probably is dependent upon two well-known Platonic texts, found in the *Seventh Letter* and the *Symposium*. In the *Seventh Letter*

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Cox, "Travelling the Royal Road," 176: "It would thus appear no great leap to say that Philo is a proponent of free will, at least for those not enslaved to the body." Though in *Sacr.* 48 Philo seems to indicate that an inclination toward evil also seems to be a matter of the will: "wickedness is a willful malady of the soul."

it is asserted that Plato’s “most important doctrines” do not “admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to and communion with the subject itself,” these doctrines are “suddenly [ἐξείφνης] brought to birth in the soul, like a light that is kindled by a leaping spark” (341c–d).<sup>33</sup> A passage in the ascent myth of the *Symposium* similarly recounts the “sudden [ἐξείφνης] revelation” of a “wondrous vision” (θαυμάσιος, 210e) to the contemplative “initiate,” namely, the “unique Form of divine Beauty itself” (211e). Thus in both influential Platonic texts, the limitations of language and human cognition are overcome with an epiphanic revelation, vividly portrayed as a divine gift of illumination.<sup>34</sup>

The lengthy list of vices offered in *Sacr.* 32, which the “pleasure-lover” would have been “caught in” like a “net,” serves to illustrate both the gravity of the situation and the magnitude of the salvation effected by Lady Virtue. Nevertheless, Lady Virtue’s impassioned call to embrace and engage in “toil” (πόνος), in *Sacr.* 35–42, reinstates the primacy of human agency within the overarching narrative. In this text, Lady Virtue “strips bare” (30) Lady *Hedone*’s promise to provide “freedom from . . . the stress of business and the discipline of labor” (23), and demonstrates instead that “toil” is the “greatest of blessings” and the “source of all goodness” (35). However, severe sacrifices and great rewards are equally emphasized in her frank and forthright exhortation to toil:

In my store there is one thing which seems especially to involve hardship and discomfort, and this I will tell you frankly without concealment; for though at the first encounter it seems on the surface painful to the imagination, practice makes it sweet and reflection shows it to be profitable. This thing is toil, the first and greatest of blessings, the enemy of ease, waging war to the death against pleasure. For in very truth, God has appointed

---

<sup>33</sup> André-Jean Festugière (*Personal Religion among the Greeks* [Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954], 44) describes this text as “the expression of personal experience.” Though opinions are divided about the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*, this passage clearly coheres with the sentiments expressed in *Symp.* 210–212 (cf. also *Phaedr.* 246–256; *Phaed.* 66–67). That this passage appears within a somewhat hyperbolic polemic against Dionysius’ unauthorized publication of discussions he had with Plato also does not limit its applicability here.

<sup>34</sup> As Andrea Wilson Nightingale (*Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 111) notes, though “arduous philosophic effort” is presupposed, Plato’s vision of the Forms is “granted . . . as a gift.” Cf. also Andrew Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mysticism: From Plato to Denys* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13: “The final vision of the Beautiful is not attained, or discovered: it comes upon the soul, it is revealed to the soul. It is outside the soul’s capacity; it is something given and received. One might speak here of rapture or ecstasy.”

toil as the beginning of all goodness and true worth to humans,<sup>35</sup> and without it you shall find that nothing excellent takes shape amongst mortal men . . . so the eye of the soul cannot grasp the practices of virtue, unless it take toil, like light, to cooperate with it. Toil stands midway between the mind and the excellence which the mind desires . . . it creates that perfection of goodness, friendship and harmony between the two. Choose any good thing whatsoever, and you will find that it results from and is established through toil. Piety and holiness are good, but we cannot attain to them save through the service of God, and service calls for earnest toil as its yoke-fellow. Prudence, courage, justice . . . we cannot acquire them by self-indulgent ease . . . by constant care and practice there arise a kindliness between us and them. Service pleasing to God and to virtue is like an intense and severe/violent harmony [ἔντονον καὶ σφοδρὰν ἀρμονίαν], and in no soul is there an instrument capable of sustaining it . . . (36–37)

In her “ode to toil,” Lady Virtue establishes that it is divinely ordained that everything good and worthwhile can only be attained through sacrificial hardship and disciplined labor. In fact, all the virtues, including piety, holiness, prudence, courage, and justice, are acquired and solidified solely through the instrumentality of “toil.” And though toil “cooperates” with and actualizes the mind’s “desire” for “excellence,” it appears that the inner person, which kinetically conveys the mind’s wishes to the body, suffers from an unsustainably “violent tension” [ἔντονον καὶ σφοδρὰν] while engaged in virtue-directed toil. The Stoic psychological imagery of “tension” (τόνος) is once again enlisted, as Philo traces the material origins of toil’s bodily “hardships and discomfort” to a sympathetic psychological state in the virtuous person.

### **Conclusion**

Disciplined avoidance of Platonic non-rational psychology, or deliberate adherence to Stoic monistic psychology? The avoidance of ecstatic experience is certainly a related issue.

---

<sup>35</sup> The assertion that “God has appointed toil as the beginning of all goodness and true worth to men” would seem to reflect an overly optimistic reading of Gen 3:17: “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree . . . cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”