

Philo's Double Paraphrase of the Parting of the Red Sea in *Mos.* 1.175–79 and 2.250–55

Richard A. Zaleski  
 University of Chicago  
 rzaleski@uchicago.edu  
 SBL Annual Meeting 2018

In the parting of the Red Sea in Exod 14, exegetes are faced with several literary issues in the biblical text that complicate readings of the event. This paper will examine one such issue in the text, namely problems encountered due to contradictions between verses. In the case of Exodus 14, we shall analyze contradictions between Exod 14:16 and 21, which contain God's command for Moses to part the sea and Moses's actual carrying out of it, that pose potential interpretive issues for Philo of Alexandria. In these two verses, there are inconsistencies concerning the means by which the sea is parted. Does Moses's staff strike the water to part the sea, as God's command in Exod 14:16 implies, or does a wind blow to drive back the water, as stated in 14:21? Does the parting happen immediately, as in 14:16, or does it take all night long, as in 14:21? These inconsistencies lead to a confusing sequence of events that is potentially difficult for the attentive reader to follow.

Maren Niehoff has demonstrated that Philo perceived of such literary problems as contradictions in the biblical text and attempted to resolve them through various means. In many of his works (e.g., QG, QE, Allegorical Commentary), he did this by drawing on the Problem and Solution genre from antiquity.<sup>1</sup> In his *Mos.*, we also see him respond to problems in the biblical text. Yet, because the work is written in the form of a paraphrase,

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Maren R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); "Questions and Answers in Philo and *Genesis Rabbah*," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2008).

it provides us an occasion to analyze how he responds to perceived problems in the biblical text by rewriting the text itself. At the same time, the Red Sea episode offers us a unique opportunity for analyzing something significant about Philo's exegetical method in *Mos.* due to the fact that it is only one of four episodes (i.e., Red Sea, manna, golden calf, Korah's rebellion) told twice in the entirety of the work. By comparing the two versions of the event, we can arrive at interesting insights about how the second telling interacts with and builds upon the first. Not enough attention has been given to the possible correspondences between these double episodes, likely due to the fact that there are only four of them in the entire work.

For all four of these double episodes contained in *Mos.*, the second telling occurs in the final prophetic section of the treatise in *Mos.* 2.246–87. In this section, Philo returns to events already discussed. In his second telling, he provides further insight on the deeper, prophetic meaning of the same episodes. In the case of the Red Sea episode, his first telling occurs in *Mos.* 1.167–80. There, Philo's literary aim is to paraphrase the biblical text while highlighting Moses as a philosopher-king. In his second telling of the Red Sea episode in *Mos.* 2.247–57, Philo shifts his focus to paraphrasing the event to amplify the prophetic elements of the episode by highlighting Moses as a prophet in that he provides a prophecy that is later fulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I argue that in the double telling of the parting of the Red Sea we see Philo perform a two-step exegetical process. In his initial paraphrase of the parting, he resolves contradictions perceived to exist in the biblical text by providing a new narrative

---

<sup>2</sup> *Mos.* 2.252, 255.

that has more literary cohesion. He does this by adding, omitting, rearranging, or substituting, according to his exegetical purposes. In his second paraphrase, instead of addressing the same literary issues again, he changes his focus to amplify the prophetic potential of the episode. This is a much more abbreviated, concise account. In it, Philo paraphrases his first version of the event as is evidenced by the heavy lexical dependence of specific lexemes that proved significant in resolving the literary problems in his first version. I argue that, by paraphrasing significant lexical elements from his first treatment, Philo creates a kind of rhetorical shorthand where a single word, or short phrase, represents an entire sequence of events. By doing so, he can heavily abbreviate the account while having consistency with the literary solutions arrived at in his first telling. By abbreviating certain parts of the narrative, he allows himself to focus on amplifying the prophetic aspects of the account.

For our analysis, let us first turn to the contradiction in the biblical text itself. In the biblical text, there is a contradiction between Exod 14:16 and 14:21 concerning how the sea is parted. Initially, in 14:16, God commands Moses to lift up his staff, stretch it over the sea, and “break” (ῥῆξον) the sea. In the divine command, the staff serves to physically strike the sea. The aorist imperative ῥῆξον implies that the parting itself occurs immediately once Moses strikes the sea. In Exod 14:21, Moses carries out the divine instructions. The staff has now completely disappeared from the narrative.<sup>3</sup> Moses lifts his hands alone over the sea, a wind blows, and the sea is driven back by its force. Unlike the

---

<sup>3</sup> The fact that God breaks the sea and that the breaking action does not happen immediately stands in stark contrast to the reader’s potential expectations from the imperative ῥῆξον. Origen actually states that God commanded Moses to strike the sea. See Origen, *Hom. Exod.* 5.5. Of course, it is possible that the reader simply infers the presence of the staff. When Moses raises the staff, the reader may assume that the staff is already in his hand.

instantaneous parting in 14:16, it takes all night long to complete here. These contradictions between the divine command and its fulfillment are represented in the comparison below:

Command (Exod 14:16)	Fulfillment (Exod 14:21)
καὶ σὺ ἔπαρον τῆ ῥάβδῳ σου	
καὶ ἔκτεινον τὴν χεῖρά σου ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν	ἐξέτεινεν δὲ Μωυσῆς τὴν χεῖρα ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν,
	καὶ ὑπήγαγεν κύριος τὴν θάλασσαν ἐν ἀνέμῳ νότῳ βιαίῳ ὅλην τὴν νύκτα καὶ ἐποίησεν τὴν θάλασσαν ξηράν,
καὶ ῥῆξον αὐτήν	καὶ ἐσχίσθη τὸ ὕδωρ.

As the table demonstrates, the main point of difference between the two accounts is the manner of the parting of the sea. The staff is present in 14:16, but the wind is present in 14:21. Unlike in Exod 14:16, where the staff functions to part the sea, the wind serves this role in 14:21.<sup>4</sup> This leaves the perceptive reader potentially wondering whether the staff or the wind ultimately causes the parting the sea or whether they work together in some way. As the biblical account currently stands, the sequence of events lack cohesion and cause potential problems in terms of coherence for the reader.

Because of the textual changes that he makes, Philo seems aware of these contradictions and attempts to resolve them in *Mos.* 1.175–79 by means of paraphrase.

There are four textual changes, in particular, that are worthy of our attention. The

---

<sup>4</sup> If it is still implied that Moses' staff causes the breaking, it is unclear how Moses simply raising his hand—without even mention of the staff—can be described as “breaking” the water or thought to be the fulfillment of Exod 14:16. Moreover, the Greek verb ῥήγνυμι suggests some kind of violent action of breaking or shattering. The action of the wind does not seem to fit this.

comparison between the biblical text and *Mos.* below attempts to demonstrate the most salient aspects of these changes:

Exod 14:16, 21	<i>Mos.</i> 1.177
	<p>καταδύντος δ' ἡλίου, νότος εὐθὺς ἤρξατο κατασκήπτειν βιαϊότατος, ὑφ' οὗ τὸ πέλαγος ἐξανεχώρησεν, εἰωθὸς μὲν ἀμπωτίζειν, τότε δὲ καὶ μᾶλλον ὠθούμενον τὸ πρὸς αἰγιαλοῖς ὑπεσύρη καθάπερ εἰς χαράδραν ἢ χαρύβδιν· [ . . . ]</p> <p>When the sun had set, immediately an exceedingly strong south wind began to rush down, by which the sea withdrew; it was accustomed to ebb and flow, but then instead, pushed against the shore, it was drawn down as into eddies and whirlpools. [ . . . ]</p>
<p>καὶ σὺ ἔπαρον τῇ ῥάβδῳ σου καὶ ἔκτεινον τὴν χεῖρά σου ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ ῥῆξον αὐτήν, καὶ εἰσελθάτωσαν οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ εἰς μέσον τῆς θαλάσσης κατὰ τὸ ξηρόν.<sup>5</sup> [ . . . ]</p> <p>“And as for you, raise your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea, and break it, and let the sons of Israel enter into the midst of the sea on dry land. [ . . . ]</p>	προσταχθεὶς δὲ
ἐξέτεινεν δὲ Μωυσῆς τὴν χεῖρα ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν	Μωυσῆς τῇ βακτηρίᾳ παίει τὴν θάλασσαν <sup>6</sup>
<p>καὶ ὑπήγαγεν κύριος τὴν θάλασσαν ἐν ἀνέμῳ νότῳ βιαίῳ ὅλην τὴν νύκτα καὶ ἐποίησεν τὴν θάλασσαν ξηράν,</p> <p>and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong south wind for the whole night, and made the sea dry land,</p>	
καὶ ἐσχίσθη τὸ ὕδωρ. <sup>7</sup>	ἡ δὲ ῥαγεῖσα δίσταται

<sup>5</sup> Exod 14:16.

<sup>6</sup> The elements that Philo has made paraphrastic changes to here are in bold.

And the water was divided.	And it was broken and separated
----------------------------	---------------------------------

First, Philo takes the entirety of God’s command in Exod 14:16 and replaces it with a simple, concise participle *προσταχθείς* (“being commanded”). While this alleviates any potential contradiction between commandment and fulfillment—since it fails to provide any explicit content to the command at all—it also avoids redundancy that Philo’s Greek literary education might prefer to shy away from. If he were to make God’s command in Exod 14:16 and Moses’s carrying out of the command in 14:21 look like mirror events, this would be stylistically monotonous.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Philo substitutes *προσταχθείς* for the content of God’s command in 14:16 and moves elements from there into the equivalent of 14:21 in his account, where Moses carries out those instructions. In this way, the fulfillment of the divine command looks a lot like the biblical command itself. Second, taking his cue from Exod 14:16, he makes explicit that Moses’s staff serves to strike the water in order to part the sea. Third, he preserves the verb *ρήγνυμι* from 14:16 and also moves it to the fulfillment of the event in order to describe the result of the staff striking the water. Fourth, he rearranges the placement of the wind and Moses’s staff. While the sequence of the biblical text is confusing, by rearranging the placement in his account, Philo can preserve both elements yet provide a more logical sequence of events. In his version, he can maintain that the wind blows for a prolonged period of time and that the staff serves to physically strike the sea and immediately part it. He makes clear, however,

---

<sup>7</sup> Exod 14:21.

<sup>8</sup> Philo, *Mos.* 1.177. Although Philo could provide the command and then narrate an explicit, literal fulfillment, this would be stylistically poor Greek due to repetition. To avoid this, he substitutes the entire command with *προσταχθείς*. As a result, it is in the narration of the fulfillment of the command that we learn what God actually commanded be done.

that the staff is ultimately responsible for the parting of the water, while the wind serves an ancillary role, rather than the other way around. By making these moves, he resolves the contradictions in the biblical account primarily by rearranging and substituting elements from both Exod 14:16 and 21, while giving preference to the idea of the staff striking (ῥήγνυμι) the water from 14:16.

Because of these paraphrastic moves Philo performs to address the literary problems concerning the parting of the sea, he feels compelled to make necessary narrative adjustments on the corresponding part of the story where the waters close again. In the biblical text, there is a lack of cohesion between how the sea is parted and how it closes.<sup>9</sup>

This is represented in the chart below:

Exod 14:21	Exod 14:27
ἐξέτεινεν δὲ Μωυσῆς τὴν χεῖρα ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν,	ἐξέτεινεν δὲ Μωυσῆς τὴν χεῖρα ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν
καὶ ὑπήγαγεν κύριος τὴν θάλασσαν ἐν ἀνέμῳ νότῳ βιαίῳ ὅλην τὴν νύκτα καὶ ἐποίησεν τὴν θάλασσαν ξηρὰν,	
καὶ ἐσχίσθη τὸ ὕδωρ.	καὶ ἀπεκατέστη τὸ ὕδωρ πρὸς ἡμέραν ἐπὶ χώρας

In Exod 14:21, Moses raises his hands, a wind blows, and the water is split. In Exod 14:27, Moses raises his hand—there is no mention of the wind—and the water returns to normal. The narrative provides no explanation for why the wind is present in Exod 14:21 but not in Exod 14:27. While these two parts of the narrative are not fully coordinated

<sup>9</sup> See Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, 4 vols., Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993–2002), 269. According to Houtman, “for the flowing back of the water no natural cause is mentioned, whether lying down of the wind (14:21), or the wind coming from the opposite direction (cf. 10:19; see also 15:10).” *Ibid.*, 274.

with one another, this is not a contradiction per se as was the case between Exod 14:16 and 21.

As a result of the narrative changes in the parting of the sea, Philo makes corresponding changes in the closing of the waters. Because in his account Moses does not raise his hands to part the waters, neither can he raise them to close the sea again. The rearrangement that Philo made necessitates a change here. Instead, Philo inserts a northern wind that counters the action of the previous southern wind. By writing an account with two opposing winds, he creates narrative balance and consistency in how the entire process begins and how it ends.<sup>10</sup> These correspondences are displayed in the table below:

<i>Mos.</i> 1.176	<i>Mos.</i> 1.179
καταδύντος δ' ἡλίου	περὶ βαθὺν ὄρθρον [ . . . ]
νότος εὐθὺς ἤρξατο κατασκήπτειν βιαίωτατος	βορείοις πνεύμασι
ὕφ' οὗ τὸ πέλαγος ἐξανεχώρησεν	τῆς παλιρροίας ἀναχθείσης καὶ μετεώροις τρικυμίας ἐπιδραμούσης

He creates several connections between beginning and end: the timing of the event, the wind, and the description of the water moving (with the similar sounding verbs ἐξαναχέω and ἀναχύω). In addition, both sections also include a final statement detailing the results of that action that describes how the Egyptians were directly affected.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of an opposing wind is likely motivated by the fact that Philo had already rearranged the

<sup>10</sup> While the process begins with the wind blowing, it is ultimately the staff that strikes the water causing the sea to split. Although not creating the same narrative balance as Philo, Josephus depicts a storm-like event that closes the sea that includes wind, rain, thunder, and lightning. See Josephus, *A.J.* 2.243-44.

<sup>11</sup> Because there is less direct similarity in this final statement on the Egyptians between the two accounts, it is not reflected in the above table.



placement of the wind and Moses's staff in the parting of the waters. That rearrangement necessitated some kind of alteration be done at the conclusion of the event to attain narrative cohesion and balance for the events.

As we have seen, in the biblical text, there are contradictions between Exod 14:16 and 21. God gives a command that Moses is supposed to break (ῥήγνυμι) the water with his staff. Moses then raises his hands over the sea—with the staff unmentioned—and a wind blows all night. This leaves the water parted, but unclear how the sea is “broken” and how the staff served to break the sea. Philo clears up these contradictions between verses and achieves a more cohesive sequence of events by paraphrasing and adjusting the biblical narrative. According to Philo's account, the wind first blows and pushes the waters up against the shore. Then, the Moses strikes the water with his staff, which causes an immediate parting of the sea. Finally, after the Israelites have passed through the water, an opposing wind blows and the water is pushed back into its original position. Through this rearrangement and clarification of the narrative functions of the wind and staff, Philo can retain both the wind and the staff in his account by resolving the literary problems in the biblical text.

The paraphrastic exegesis done in the initial version of events to resolve literary problems has significant implications when we turn to the second telling of the parting of the Red Sea in *Mos.* 2.252–55. Because he has already largely resolved the literary issues with the episode, Philo does not feel the need to do so a second time. Instead, he focuses on amplifying the prophetic potential of the episode, and he does so by lexically paraphrasing his first version of the episode in *Mos.* 1.175–79. This is perhaps best seen in

a textual comparison by placing the two depictions of the sea's parting from *Mos.* 1.177 and 2.253 side-by-side:

<i>Mos.</i> 1.177	<i>Mos.</i> 2.252–53
ἡ δὲ <b>ῥαγεῖσα</b>	<b>ῥῆξις</b> θαλάττης,
And it was broken	There was a breaking of the sea,
δίισταται καὶ τῶν <b>τμημάτων</b>	ἀναχώρησις ἐκατέρου <b>τμήματος</b> ,
and separated, and some parts	there was a withdrawal of each section,
τὰ μὲν πρὸς τῷ <b>ῥαγέντι μέρει</b> μετέωρα πρὸς ὕψος ἐξαίρεται καὶ <b>παγέντα</b>	<b>πῆξις</b> τῶν κατὰ τὸ <b>ῥαγὲν μέρος</b> διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βάθους κυμάτων,
at the place where it was broken were raised up aloft, and having hardened	there was a fixing of the waves along the broken part through the entire deep,
τρόπον <b>τείχους κραταιῶς</b> ἡρέμει καὶ ἡσύχαζε, τὰ δ' ὀπίσω σταλέντα καὶ χαλινωθέντα τὴν εἰς τὸ πρόσω φoρὰν καθάπερ ἡνίαις ἀφανέσιν ἀνεχαίτιζε, <sup>12</sup>	ἵν' ἀντὶ <b>τειχῶν ἢ κραταιοτάτων</b> ,
like a strong wall, they lied unmoving and quiet; and other parts that were behind were gathered up and bridled, as if someone held back its rushing forward with invisible reins,	so that they might be stronger than walls,
τὸ δὲ μεσαίτατον, καθ' ὃ ἐγένετο ἡ ῥῆξις, ἀναξηρανθὲν <b>ὁδός</b> εὐρεῖα καὶ λεωφόρος γίνεται.	εὐθυτενῆς ἀνατομῆ τῆς μεγαλουργηθείσης <b>ὁδοῦ</b> , ἢ τῶν κρυσταλλωθέντων μεθόριος ἦν, <sup>13</sup>
And the space between, where the break had occurred, was dried up and became a wide road and highway.	a straight cut of a road miraculously made, which was a boundary for the frozen waves,

The elements that he draws directly from his first account have been placed in bold text.

We see that Philo retains strong connections to his first version as seen in the lexemes ῥήγνυμι/ῥῆξις, τμήμα, πήγνυμι/πῆξις, μέρος, τεῖχος κραταιός, ὁδός. Moreover, these

<sup>12</sup> Philo, *Mos.* 1.177.

<sup>13</sup> Philo, *Mos.* 2.253.

elements occur in the same general chronological sequence in each account, but sometimes have been slightly rearranged. In addition, further elements have been added, some things omitted, and some things substituted throughout. Both of these accounts demonstrate much more in common with one another than the simple biblical statement, “and the water was divided. [ . . . ] and the water became for them a wall on their right side and a wall on their left side.”<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, in this version of events, neither the staff nor the wind makes an appearance. Instead, we are told only about the result of the parting of the sea. This occurs primarily in the lexeme ῥήγνυμι, which Philo used in *Mos.* 1.177 to describe the breaking of the sea, as well as other terms that described the after effects of that parting. By giving simple predicate nominatives for the sequence of events for the parting of the sea, Philo can refer to a whole series of events with a single word that clarified things in his first version: “there was a breaking of the sea.” Yet, Philo does not provide further details concerning the mechanism by which the sea was broken. The entire sequence of events that is narrated in detail in *Mos.* 1.175–77 is simply implied in the short phrase ῥῆξις θαλάττης.

The same is true in regard to the closing of the sea in *Mos.* 1.179 and 2.254. This, again, may be observed in the textual comparison below:

<i>Mos.</i> 1.179	<i>Mos.</i> 2.254
τοὺς δὲ τὰ <b>τμήματα</b> τοῦ <b>πελάγους</b>	<b>πελαγῶν</b> ἃ τέως <b>ἀνακοπέντα</b> διειστήκει
But the portions of the sea	[There was a reflux] of water, which until then was driven back and separated,

<sup>14</sup> Exod 14:21–22. καὶ ἐσχίσθη τὸ ὕδωρ. [ . . . ]. καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ αὐτοῖς τεῖχος ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ τεῖχος ἐξ εὐωνύμων.

<p>ἐκατέρωθεν ἐπικυλισθέντα καὶ ἐνωθέντα αὐτοῖς ἄρμασι καὶ ἵπποις καταποντοῖ, βορείοις πνεύμασι</p> <p>rolled up and gathered on either side drown the Egyptians with their chariots and horses, with a north wind</p>	
<p>τῆς παλίρροιας ἀναχυθείσης</p> <p>the reflux was poured out</p>	<p><b>παλίρροια</b>, τοῦ διακοπέντος καὶ ἀναξηρανθέντος μέρους αἰφνίδιος θαλάττωσις,</p> <p>there was a reflux [of water, which until then was driven back and separated,] and a sudden submergence of the part that had been cut off and dried up,</p>

In the coming back together of the sea, Philo draws on the lexemes of cutting (τμήμα/-κόπτω), πέλαγος, παλίρροια. Similar as with the parting of the water, Philo does not mention the wind in this second version of events. Instead, the entire series of events within which the action of the wind takes place is again implied by the use of predicate nominatives: “there was a reflux of water, which until then was driven back and separated.” There are no further details given about how exactly the water was restored to normal. This is not Philo’s purpose in this telling.

But what is the significance of all of this for our understanding of Philo’s exegetical method? First, Philo employs paraphrase in *Mos.* as a strategy to resolve literary problems, such as contradictions, that he perceives in the biblical text. Although there is nothing terribly new and remarkable about this, what is more significant is how his response to problems in the biblical text via paraphrase has implications for his second treatment of the episode. Second, although both of his versions of the full Red Sea event

take up much space,<sup>15</sup> we see a dramatic amount of literary dependence—by way of Philo paraphrasing himself—in the very spots where we also saw him dealing with literary problems in his first account in the biblical text. This was seen in the textual comparisons above. Third, in his second account, it is highly significant not just for what we see but also for what we do not see. We fail to see any mention of Moses’s staff or the wind, the very problems in the biblical text that Philo strove to resolve in his first account. Why might this be? It seems likely that Philo is only concerned with dealing with literary problems in his first version of events. In his second version, he turns to deal solely with the prophetic elements of the text, namely that Moses gives a prophecy that is later fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> While the focus is on the prophecy and its fulfillment, Philo must still narrate the basic contours of the Red Sea events, even if he does so in a highly abbreviated manner. Because he has already dealt with the literary problems in the text, and because it provides consistency for his reader, his first account provides the best textual basis for him to abbreviate via paraphrase. In this method, single words or short phrases stand in for a whole series of events.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Mos.* 1.167–80 and *Mos.* 2.247–57.

<sup>16</sup> Compare *Mos.* 2.252 and 2.255. See also his words in 2.253.