

*It Is All in a γάρ; Philo's Introduction to Legatio ad Gaium*  
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Working on a commentary can be a very unappealing task; reading the text, fragmenting it in sections according to criteria of language or content or whatever sounds worthy of particular attention. The risk is very high for the task to become automatic and just merely technical. This does not happen if the author of the text remains front and center to the task; he is always there, behind the language, the content or whatever sounds worthy of particular attention. This is the approach that I am adopting for the commentary to Philo's *Legatio*. The centrality of Philo is the reason why I decided to report to you today on the opening chapters of *Legatio*; because I strongly believe that through his very first words, he put himself at stake.

CHAPTERS 1-2

*Legatio* begins with a rhetorical question, asking to which degree elders (γέροντες) have behaved like children (παῖδες; νήπιοι). The topic of age is not new to Philo's treatises; for example, in *Opificio Mundi* (103-105), on the subject of the allegorical interpretation of the number seven, Philo includes the Classical theory of the seven ages of man (Solon, Hippocrates), whereby the second 7-year period, defined by the words παῖς, παιδίος, νήπιος, is the one of puberty and physical growth, while the last period is the one of the old man, γέρων, who has reached the culmination of wisdom –σοφίη. Here as in many other locations in Philo's *corpus*, Philo deems it to be inappropriate for an elder to behave like a child.

Philo then proceed to a further explanation of the elders' childish behavior by using a syntactical binary pattern very common to all his writings. Instead of following the directions of nature (φύσις), the elders/children have followed the charm of chance (τύχη). They do this in spite of the fact that nature, as Philo tirelessly explains here and overall in his *corpus*, is the very essence of creation and as such is stable, secure and carrier of truth. Chance, on the other hand, whether advantageous or not, is sudden, irrational, unpredictable, erratic, unstable.

The predilection of chance *versus* nature involves alternative intellectual processes. In Philo's schematic construct, people follow unstable chance because they rely on their eyes' perception

to see only what is at hand; while those who follow stable nature rely on reason (λογισμός) to see what is invisible and lay in the future—the elders/children did not rely on reason, did not follow nature and have therefore become blind of what was ahead, ultimately behaving in ignorance.

#### CHAPTERS 8-21

Through their intellectual ineptitude, the elders/children followed false images and became blind to reality. It is Philo's emphasis of seeing and blindness in ch. 1-2 that directly connects to the second rhetorical question that opens ch. 8: Τίς γὰρ ἰδὼν Γάϊον ... οὐκ ἐθάυμασε— for who, seeing Gaius, ... did not marvel, etc. The ἰδὼν conceptually links this chapter to ch. 1-2 where Philo explains the pitfalls of seeing incorrectly.

What did people see, then, at Gaius' accession? Philo says that they saw the entire earth and sea, the entire inhabited world, well governed under the law; they saw wealth and prosperity, harmony among and between rich and poor, creditors and debtors, masters and slaves. They felt enormous empathy when Gaius fell sick and joy and elation when he recovered (ch. 9-19).

But then Philo becomes sarcastic (ch. 20); he describes people's behavior at the news of Gaius' recovery as a path from wilderness to urbanism, from huts to walled cities--πόλις τειχίρης, and from unbridled existence to submission to a guardian--ἀγελάρχης. Philo's vocabulary here is revealing of his uneasiness about this process. In his treatises on Moses, Joseph and the Laws, Philo explains how the development of society described in the scriptures is based on laws defined on the basis of nature, laws that do not need a wall encirclement to be applied. The laws of the scriptures are laws not for the polis, but for the cosmopolis, the entire creation. Indeed, for Philo walled cities are the antithesis of the cosmopolis, and the laws of the walled cities, designed only to satisfy the interest of the limited space of the city, are the antithesis of the nature-based laws of the cosmopolis, applied to the unlimited creation. As for the guardian, ἀγελάρχης is probably a derogatory term for leader of the herd or flock, used in alternative of the usual ποιμένης, which Philo regularly uses in the well-known and positive metaphor of the shepherd of the people (lexical analysis not complete at this time). So, for Philo it is not good to gather into a walled city and being governed by a dubious leader. What Philo is saying here is that all the enthusiasm and the positivity of the first months of Gaius' reign resulted in an unexpected scenario, which sounds totally opposite to the early times of total harmony of the world.

Philo's sarcasm turns into pessimism in ch. 21: he says that people enjoyed that process, but he adds that they were in complete ignorance (ἄγνοια) of the truth, because, he continues, the human mind, since it has the power to use images and conjectures rather than knowledge, is blind (τυφλώττω) to the perception of what is really advantageous. This closing statement on ignorance and blindness takes us back to ch. 2. There, ignorance is the result of trusting a false sense of vision, of following chance instead of nature; by the same token, here Philo says that people fell into the trap of chance, which, by means of its erratic characteristics, had driven people into believing that Gaius had brought heaven on earth, only later to reveal that people had delivered themselves in the care of a dubious leader and trapping themselves into the limited space of a walled city. Back in ch. 2 Philo rebukes the elders—whom is he rebuking here?

### CH 3-7

After explaining the mistaken behavior of the elders/children in ch. 1-2, Philo embarks on a very personal digression; he says that the many decisions taken at his present times have convince people not to trust the providential God and his care for humans, and especially for the suppliant people. The suppliant people are Israel, which in Greek means “seeing God--ὄρων θεόν. Philo builds this sentence with a very specific rhetorical construction, which interrupts the basic linearity of speech logic in order to communicate his strong feelings about this matter. Philo's narrative indeed become here quite dramatic here.

The process of seeing God is a privilege, because it educates the soul to look beyond the tangible, to gaze upwards to the intangible and to see the divine, the most astounding thing to see. However, and Philo seems to become apologetic here, what the soul sees is very high, but reason (λόγος), working at a lower level, cannot reach that high. Reason, which has the function to translate that vision into words, cannot really accomplish that, because those words do not exist. What reason can do with the existing words is to barely describe the complementary parts of the divine, rewards and punishment.

How can the people who see God describe that view? Philo seems to see the inability to describe the vision of God as a handicap of reason. What people can talk about is just one aspect, maybe a marginal one, of the divine, the aspect they could all easily experience in their lives: reward and punishment. Philo seems to say that the reason's inability to describe the soul's sight of God contributed to distrust the existence of that very God and his care of humans, including the suppliant people of Israel.

It is at this point that Philo introduces ch. 8, with the rhetorical question of Τίς γὰρ ἰδὼν Γάιον. Indeed, Philo's description of the Roman Empire at Gaius' accession sound very much like the cosmopolis: an Empire encompassing the entire world with laws governing it, harmony among all its people, wealth, peace and prosperity and a ruler who received his position legally and not through factional fight. This is what people, **saw** with their eyes and **touched** with their hands. This kind of experience, Philo seems to apologetically say, could not compete with the mere description of reward and punishment to which the description of the providential God was limited by words. The "people who see God" could not adequately describe what the vision of God looked like. People saw in Gaius' early reign the best possible representation of what divine providence could produce, and, Philo says, they liked it; but, he implies, they were following unstable chance.

Of course, Philo writes in retrospect, and is able to see the terrible mistakes. According to *Legatio's* internal evidence, Philo writes after Gaius' death and when Claudius is already emperor, and we know that Claudius in his *Letter* upheld Gaius' decrees against the Alexandrian Jews. So, Philo's mention of the present times and the many questions decided about it (ch. 3) must refer to the events of 38 and 39. These events contributed to cement the general mistrust in the benevolence of the providential God for the suppliant people of Israel.

What about the suppliant people of Israel, then? To which extent does Philo's painful narrative of ch. 1-21 relate to the people of Israel? Were they distressed by the words' inability to describe the sight of God? Were they dissatisfied with the reduction of the concept of the divine to a combination of reward and punishment, the only available and understandable explanation that words could produce? Did they participate in the enthusiasm for the early reign of Gaius? Philo is not necessarily explicit on this, but in ch. 1-2 he refers to the elders/children, to their impossibility to see the truth and the future through the active vision of the soul, to their reliance on chance and overall blindness and ignorance in term of 'we' and 'us.' I think that indicates that the skepticism towards the God of Israel, which Philo describes in ch. 3-7 can be extended to the Alexandrian people of Israel. Indeed Philo uses the γάρ at the beginning of ch. 8 to connects the description of the impossibility to describe in words the divine vision of the intangible providential God with the clear tangible experience of Gaius' "heaven-on-earth;" the people of Israel, who could not experience the divine vision of God because of lack of words, could see and touch the world of Gaius; they liked it, Philo says, but they were following erratic chance, and they were wrong. And by saying that, Philo admits the blindness and ignorance of himself and his people.