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PHILO'S PLACE IN THE CHAIN OF JEWISH TRADITION

Are Philo's writings and the chain of Jewish tradition mutually exclusive? On the one hand, I am convinced that when Philo is read as his contemporaries must have read him, his Jewish dimensions become dominant. On the other hand, he was a member of the contemporary Hellenistic upper class and would hardly have found himself at home in the traditional *bet midrash*.

Philo spent virtually all of his life in one of the largest, most colourful, and most sophisticated cities of the Roman Empire, and his family belonged to the thoroughly Hellenized, upper crust of Hellenistic-Jewish society that was also part of the non-Jewish international Hellenistic-Roman "jet set." He presumably took Hellenistic culture entirely for granted, as something axiomatic, which did not require conscious acceptance or justification. His birthright included the Greek language as a "mother tongue," as well as the contents of a good Greek *Paedeia*, with the resulting thought patterns, frames of intellectual and social reference, and cultural associations. He even alludes to his participation in the cultural life of his day. And finally, in his mature years, after he had penned much of his literary legacy, the Jewish community in Alexandria chose him to be a member of the delegation they sent to Gaius Caligula, whose object was to avert the harsh decrees of the Roman administration.

As for his family, Philo's brother, Alexander the Alabarch, was one of the wealthiest men of his time, at the very least in Egypt, and probably beyond as well. Tiberius Julius Alexander, who chose a career in the Roman administration over loyalty to his faith and people, was Philo's nephew. His brother's second son, Marcus Julius Alexander, was the first husband of Berenice, the daughter of the Hasmonean King Agrippa I. Berenice's fame, or perhaps one should rather say, notoriety, rests upon the fact that after marrying Philo's nephew, who died not long after their wedding, and two more husbands, she had a romantic *liaison* with Titus, the future Roman Emperor.

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At the very same time, it is no less evident from his writings that in contrast to his family, his own Judaism was much more than a biological or even a political fact. For him it was a conscious choice. There are traces in his work that point to a gradual development of an ever-increasing Jewish identity and commitment, which in his adult years became the central axis around which the rest revolved. As well, in terms of the allegorical and quasi-mystical path Philo took, while his interests may have initially been triggered by aspects of the intellectual climate in the Hellenistic Alexandria of his day, the direction his thought took would, in time, become steeped in Jewish tradition.

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It is almost superfluous to state that Philo was a religious thinker. What is not so often realized is that when he spoke about what we today call matters of religion, it was primarily in the frame of reference of the Jewish tradition – particularly its specific idiomatic and idiosyncratic terminology. When Philo the committed Jew wrote about religion, whatever else he brought to the discussion, and he brought a rich world of associations, he expressed himself in the idiosyncratic religious vocabulary that belonged to his Jewish frame of reference. While this idea was revolutionary when I first proposed it over thirty years ago,¹ it has today begun to gain acceptance in principle, even while it remains largely disregarded in practice – a fact that until the present generation has seriously clouded the understanding of the contents of Philo’s work and impeded a correct evaluation of his objectives.

Harry Austryn Wolfson wrote the following:

In the Greek translation of the Bible, when the translators came to translate the various Hebrew terms for God, they did not attempt to coin new Greek terms; they borrowed terms already used in Greek religion. Elohim becomes *Theos*, even though the Greek term had already various connotations in Greek religion. Adonai and Jehovah, the latter of which was also pronounced by the Jews as Adonai, are translated *Kurios*, Lord, even though in Greek literature that term is used as an epithet of various gods. *Shaddai* becomes *Pantokrator*, Almighty, even though, again, in Greek literature that term is used of Hermes... The expression *El Elyon*,

¹ It was first proposed in “The Jewish Dimension of Philo’s Judaism” *JJS* 38/2 (autumn 1987), pp. 165-187. It eventually appeared in a much enlarged form as my book, *Philo Judaicus: His Universe of Discourse*, (in the series: *Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums*), Peter Lang, 1995

the most high God, (Gen. 14:20; Ps. 78:35) is translated by *ho Theos ho hypsistos*, even though in Greek that expression is used of Zeus.²

Similarly, in the translation of Hebrew terms connected with divine worship, such as sanctuary, altar, sacrifice, incense, libation, sprinkling, laver, votive offering, the firstlings or the first-fruits for offering, the Jews did not hesitate to borrow terms from the Greek religious practices...

While with all other peoples in the Hellenistic world the adoption of the name of a Greek deity for one of their own gods meant a religious syncretism, in the case of the Jews it meant only recourse to the convenience of language...³

In my *Philo Judaeus, his Universe of Discourse*,⁴ I have shown that the same is true with reference to what we would define as the legal aspects of Judaism – the Greek terminology used for what in Hebrew is termed the *Torah she-be'al Peh* (the Oral Law). Had scholars realized this earlier, much of the argumentation respecting Philo's intent when he used the term *agraphos nomos* (literally, 'unwritten law') would probably not have seen the light of day. For side by side with its connotation in the language in general, the Judeo-Greek connotation of Philo's use of the term would have been automatically recognized as such without further ado. And it is obvious that only if Philo's language is comprehended in the same way that he and his contemporaries comprehended it, are we reading him as he meant us to understand him.

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Although Philo of course continued to use the same words/terms in their normal Greek connotations,⁵ when the subject under discussion was specifically Jewish, he and his contemporaries automatically understood them in an idiosyncratic 'Jewish' connotation. This is the master key to an important aspect of the Jewish valence in Philo's writings, and particularly his loyalty to what we today refer to as "the Oral Law." In

² On this last identification see. *CIG*, Index III under *hypsistos*; and E. Schürer, "Die Juden in bosporanischen Reiche etc." *Sitz. der Ber. Akad.*, 1897 p. 209 discusses the application of this expression to Apollo, Attis, and Mandulis.

³ Wolfson, Harry Austryn, *Philo*, (1948) Vol. I, pp.12-13.

⁴ Philo Judaeus, op. cit.

⁵ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961), introduction, vii, has stressed much the same point regarding Greek words in the Patristic literature – that they meant one thing in Christian contexts without losing their normal connotation in non-specific contexts. He writes: 'It must... on no account be supposed that the ordinary senses of such a word are absent... and have been replaced by another... the corresponding entry in Liddel and Scott is, as it were, taken as read ...'

the present context I can do little more than list a few of these words, *exemplia grata*.⁶

1. *Dikaioyne*: This was the *standard* rendering of the Biblical Hebrew word “*tsedaka*,” in the biblical sense: *righteousness*, before it came to mean ‘charity’ (cf. Gen. 15:6 and Deut. 24:13).
2. *Dikaia*: The Torah Statutes.
3. *Dogma, dogmata*: In Philo, this refers to the traditional ordinances, sometimes contrasted with those explicitly found in the Pentateuch, and sometimes encompassing all the ‘commandments.’ It is both a literal translation of the Persian loan word “*dat*,” and also accords with good Greek usage. The Christian ideological connotation comes later.
4. *Dogmata and theoremata*: This idiosyncratic word combination is not attested before Philo. It refers to the traditional ordinances (*dogmata*) and their theoretical underpinnings (*theoremata*).
5. *Logos*: This word, in addition to its other meanings, is often used by both the Septuagint and Philo to refer to the commandments of the Decalogue (Deca+Logoi = Ten *Logoi*). In Sept. Ex. 35:1 it means Torah commandments in general; cf. also. Sept. to Deut. 1:18, 12:28, 31:24, 46 et al. It must be stressed that this is *in addition to*, not instead of the many other connotations that the Greek word *Logos* had.
6. *Logoi kai dogmata*: Like *dogmata and theoremata*, this word combination is also not found as a semantic unit before Philo. Since, as we have just seen, the word *logos, pl. logoi* often means ‘biblical commandments,’ and *dogma, dogmata* = regulations, the semantic unit is apparently akin to the rabbinic combination, *de-oraita* and *de-rabonon*—viz. biblical laws and other regulations. I do not mean that this is a literal rendition, merely that the conceptual frame of reference is similar.
7. *Nomos*: This is a standard rendering for Torah in the Septuagint.
8. *Sophia* (= Torah): In relevant contexts the word translates *hokhma* = ‘Wisdom’ that is equated with the Torah. This is the case in the Septuagint, Ben-Sira as well as in rabbinic midrash.⁷ In all of them it is taken for granted that wisdom is to be equated with Torah.

⁶ For their detailed argumentation, see my *Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourse*, (1995), op. cit., particularly from chapter V on, as well as the footnote below, to the entry *Sophia*.

⁷ See my *Philo Judaeus*, particularly pp. 187-9. A nuanced comparison between the equation of ‘Wisdom’ referred to in Prov. 8:22 with ‘Torah’ in both *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1 (end) and Philo in *Ebr.* 30-31, may be found in my *Philo’s Scriptures: Citations from the Prophets and Writings*, 2007 (*Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*, vol. 123), pp. 219-229, Appendix I. When they are read in tandem, shades of hitherto unsuspected facets of meaning again become visible in the midrash.

The list is far from complete, but it is sufficient to introduce the following passage that illustrates how differently Philo “reads,” when the Judeo-Greek connotation of words is taken into account. It becomes evident that when read in this manner, it metamorphoses from quasi-philosophical verbiage, to a paraphrase of the first paragraph of the *Shema*.

The following is Colson’s translation of Spec. 4:141 in the *Loeb Classical Library*, and then my own translation of the same passage, which takes the Judeo-Greek connotation of the words into account. To facilitate the comparison I have remained as close as possible to Colson’s translation and also italicized the relevant words.

Colson *Spec.* 4:141-2 (italics mine):

(141) Indeed he must be forward to teach the *principles of justice (ta dikaia)* to kinsfolk and friends and all the young people at home and in the street, both when they go to their beds and when they arise..., they may be gladdened by visions of the *just (twn dikaiwn)*. For there is no sweeter delight than that the soul should be charged through and through with *justice (dikaiosyne)*, exercising itself in her eternal *principles and doctrines (dogmasi kai theorhmasi)*...

My translation:

(141) Indeed he must be forward to teach the *commandments (ta dikaia)* to kinsfolk and friends and all the young people at home and in the street, both when they go to their beds and when they arise...they may be gladdened by visions of the *commandments (twn dikaiwn)*. For there is no sweeter delight than that the soul should be charged through and through with *righteousness (dikaiosyne)*, exercising itself in the traditional ‘ordinances’ and their theoretical underpinnings (*dogmasi kai theorhmasi*)...

This short excerpt demonstrates the Jewish substrate in Philo’s writings and at the same time illustrates his manifest loyalty to what we today call “the Oral Law.”

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This is so despite the hundreds of years that elapsed between Philo’s writings and the appearance of the earliest rabbinic midrashic compendia, not to mention their completely different cultural frames of reference. It is tempting to speculate about the relationship between the two, so far removed as they are from each other, but while I touched upon this in the book, this is clearly well beyond the parameters of the present essay.

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Which brings us to the final point: If what we have shown is in fact so, why has this for so long remained virtually unrecognized? The short answer is that axiomatic premises, like mist on one's spectacles, tend to obscure the clear view of facts. The previous blindness to this phenomenon on the part of most scholars is a direct function of the "world" to which most Philonic scholarship used to belong. This determined how scholars comprehended what they read and also which matters they considered worth investigating.

Until recently, the study of Philo's works at universities was not associated with Jewish studies. It belonged to the faculties of Classics or Theology, and hence the Greek philosophic component of Philo's work was considered its most relevant facet. This also reflected their commitment to what they considered to be of great value in the Christian tradition – the possession of a "truly Greek spirit" that was looked upon as the epitome of a cultured person.⁸ Scholars who turned to the study of Philo, whether they were classicists or theologians, naturally turned to those aspects of Philo's writings that were firmly rooted in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition.

In illustration of the fact that the superiority of the Greek spirit was most essential to Philonic scholars, here is one single, striking, but not isolated example: At the beginning of his monumental work, *Judaism and Hellenism*, Martin Hengel wrote:

[T]he Greek spirit first revealed *its superiority*⁹ to the people of the East in an inexorable, highly secular way: in a perfected, superior technique of war and... in a no less perfect and inexorable state administration, whose aim was the optimal exploitation of its subject territories.¹⁰

...[I]n the first period after the expedition of Alexander, the encounter of Judaism with Hellenistic civilization did not take place in those terms usually associated with the term 'Hellenism': Greek literature, art, philosophy or a syncretistic religious context.

There is an *axiomatic assumption* of the superiority of the Greek spirit *vis-a-vis* the spirit of the orient. For Hengel, and not only for him, the achievement of excellence would be the transmutation of the Jewish

⁸ It is not for naught that Greek and Latin were considered to be vital subjects in the curriculum of a liberal education in Europe well into the twentieth century – at least as important as Bible, English and Math are today in Israel.

⁹ Italics mine.

¹⁰ Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus* (second rev. and enlarged ed. 1973); transl. as *Judaism and Hellenism*; first Engl.edition 1974), I, p. 12.

heritage into something Hellenistic. A mind set such as this made serious consideration of Philo's writings from a Jewish frame of reference out of the question. In any event, the vast majority of scholars lacked the requisite Jewish knowledge for such an endeavour.

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In opposition to the above, the frame of reference with which I came to the study of Philo was that of one raised in the dual traditions of 20th century American liberalism and the Jewish ethical imperative. It is hardly surprising that when I first read it, I found Hengel's statement extremely bizarre. I don't mean that I did not recognize and accept the very important insights he provided in his writings. But even today, many years later, it is difficult to understand how a "superior technique of war" and an "inexorable state administration, whose aim was the optimal exploitation of its subject territories" can be considered evidence of a *superior* spirit, whether Greek or anything else. However, this does indicate that the Jewish aspect of Philo was irrelevant to the enterprise of academic philonic scholarship.

To clarify: I am a Jew, Hengel was a German. While I too have a definite and clear bias – it differs from his. Indeed, I still recall an experience from well over a half a century ago when I studied Caesar's Gallic Wars in Latin class. The teacher and the class were of course on the side of Julius Caesar, but I, who had already become acquainted with Jewish History, and particularly with the conquest of Judea by the Roman general Pompey and all that followed in its wake, found myself strongly empathizing with the Gauls. I could not help but root for them, even while I knew that theirs was a lost cause. Hence it is hardly surprising that when, years later, I had occasion to turn to Philo's works, the prism through which I read them automatically highlighted the Jewish facet of his writings.

There is one more significant factor that has triggered the awareness that in Hellenistic Judaism Greek words sometimes carried a Jewish connotation. The existence today of an extensive library of Jewish texts in English translation that often uses English words in idiosyncratically "Jewish" connotations when the context is Jewish gives us the precedence to read Philo as he was meant to be read.

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So what is the "bottom line"? How "Jewish" should we consider Philo to be? When addressing this question one must bear in mind that the same

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phenomena have different meanings when approached from different frames of reference. Thus, if one first poses the question: ‘How Hellenized was Philo?’ the answer is clearly that he was thoroughly Hellenized. Indeed, from the frame of reference of intellectual creativity, Philo’s *oeuvre* has become part and parcel of Hellenistic, rather than Jewish, culture. His writings have been preserved only due to their having become an integral part of the library of the Church Fathers.

But when the question posed is the converse: ‘How Jewish are his writings?’ one discovers an astonishingly pervasive hard core of Judaism which has succeeded in transforming the Hellenistic frames of reference into ‘handmaids’ — to use Wolfson’s metaphor — that serve a Jewish core to which Philo pledges an unswerving allegiance.

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There are distinct vogues in scholarship. As a student, we used to discuss “syncretism” and Judaism — ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘how much?’ Today, the politically correct catchword is “Judaisms” – in the plural. But this term largely begs the question, because there must be an element common to all, ‘a something’ of which there are varieties, for the term to be meaningful. We must not lose sight of the concept described by Sanders, of a recognizable common denominator.¹¹ This will be the benchmark of Philo’s Judaism.

Philo, however Hellenized he may have been, has not compromised the core of his Judaism. We know from his writings that he was an unequivocally committed Jew, loyal to the Jewish tradition including the observance of its *minutiae*. At the same time, he was completely acculturated, i.e. steeped in the contemporary Hellenistic-Roman cultural milieu. But we cannot consider him to have been what we today call ‘assimilated,’ in any pejorative sense.

One of the most striking facets of Philo’s *magnum opus* is that it is so firmly rooted in the *ipsissima verba* – the very words of the Bible – the Jewish Holy Scripture. So much so, that although his writings can be understood on a meaningful level without the reader’s ever having opened a book of Greek philosophy, much of what he has written appears to be no more than verbose quasi-philosophic ramblings unless the reader has a good grounding in the Pentateuch.

Lester Grabbe has endeavoured to bridge this gap by stating that Hellenism was a culture, whereas Judaism was a religion. While I fail to

¹¹ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism, Practice and Belief 66 BCE - 66 CE*, 1992, 48, 450-451, 465 and *passim*.

find myself in unequivocal agreement, I do agree that Judaism was Philo's religion, while Hellenism was his cultural matrix.

But I wish to take the matter one step further, and pose a somewhat different and thought provoking question. Like Greek in the West, Aramaic was the alternate *lingua franca*, in the non-Greek speaking parts of the ancient Near and Middle East. Must Philo be considered to have been less Jewish because his mother tongue was Greek rather than Aramaic?

I do not think that one can answer this question by a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The fact remains that Aramaic, not Greek, was the language of post-biblical Judaism. Parts of Ezra-Nehemia and Daniel were composed in Aramaic, and this is also the language of both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds. This language difference goes a long way to explaining the peripheral nature of Philo's contribution to Judaism. However, it still does not answer the question: How Jewish was Philo?

James Kugel, in a short book addressed to the American Jewish college student, has expressed a vital insight that also applies to Philo's Judaism. Kugel writes, "It is the same, it seems to me, with different Jewish communities around the world. We all have the same Torah... basically even the same codifications of Jewish law, interpretations and decrees of later authorities; and of course we keep the same Sabbaths, festivals, and holy days. Yet in each place Jews come to these things with a slightly different spirit, a different way of seeing things...this can make for very large differences in what comes out."¹² Can one get much closer to the 'Philonic experience'?

Philo's contribution to Judaism and to the world grew and developed upon the foundation of rich Hellenistic philosophic soil. It embraced a commitment to Judaism, including the ongoing obligation both to the study and to the practice of the Torah commandments — argued from the vantage point of a thoroughly Hellenized Jew and addressed to a thoroughly Hellenized audience.

¹² *On Being a Jew*, 1998, p. 83.

