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Ryan Hendrickson

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PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE VOCABULARY OF BELIEF

RYAN HENDRICKSON
Boston University

Philo of Alexandria is a thinker who defies taxonomy. The taxonomists in religious studies class him as a "Jewish philosopher," implying that both his Judaism and his philosophy are paramount to his identity, yet his "philosophy" seems almost non-rational, and his Judaism non-traditional at best. I suggest that the best way to understand Philo's writings and motivations is to loosen the modern attempt at classification and try to apprehend him on his own terms. The reader of Philo's writings feels unquestionably that Philo understands *philosophia* in the most simple, straightforward sense–love of wisdom. In this respect, Philo does not so much synthesize Judaism and philosophy from Eastern and Hellenic elements, but rather tries to present Judaism *as* a philosophy, one for whom the conceptual categories of Greek thought are often inadequate. It is true that, as Hans Jonas points out, "In Philo of Alexandria we encounter, besides the Platonic and Stoic elements with which the Jewish core is overlaid, also the language of the mystery-cults and the incipient terminology of a new mysticism."[1] Philo, however, does not hypostatize

[1] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd. ed, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963. 25.

sophia as the Gnostics do; for him, wisdom is not totally spiritualized. *Sophia* is bound together with action and especially with worship, as is evident in Philo's writings on the sect of the Therapeutae from his *On the Contemplative Life*.

Philo, with his fondness for etymology, describes the Therapeutae's name as "a name derived from a verb in the sense of `worship', because nature and the sacred laws have schooled them to worship the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the One and more primordial than the Monad."[2] The reference to "nature and the sacred laws" assumes that they are compatible with and complementary to each other. The latter part of the sentence is full of paradoxes, which are used to simultaneously evade and refer to the identity of God. Michael Sells has suggested that this method of reference/non-reference, which he calls "apophasis," is used in a performative sense.

> Apophasis moves toward the transreferential. It cannot dispense with reference, but through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, it seeks a momentary liberation from such delimitations. In terms of a spatial metaphor, to the linear referential motion apophasis adds a circular turning back (*epistrophe*). The combination yields a semiotic spiral motion ever deeper into the pre-referential ground (or groundlessness) of the discourse.[3]

The point of this digression is to show that *Philo does not do this* (though Plotinus does, very heavily). His sidelong references to God, which occur often, are not of the semantic intensity which Sells describes–which simply shows that he is not as mystical as Jonas's assertion implies, though it's easy to see how his vocabulary might be easily appropriated for mystical purposes.

Philo's mysticism is, unsurprisingly, idiosyncratic. Mystical writers often claim to be inspired, and promise the devoted reader a glimpse of that inspiration, or describe poetically their own experience of the divine.

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[2] Philo, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Hans Lewy, Osford: East and West Library, 1946. 42.

[3] Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. 9.

But Philo, in *Who is the Heir?* writes differently: "The mind is evicted at the arrival of the divine Spirit, but when that departs the mind returns to its tenancy. Mortal and immortal may not share the same home. And therefore the setting of reason and the darkness which surround it produce ecstasy and inspired frenzy."[4] A mystical experience is not something one can *have*, or even apprehend; the experience manifests itself as an absence, rather than a presence. After it is over, it leaves residual effects, as he describes from his own experience in *On the Migration of Abraham*: "I obtained language, ideas, an enjoyment of light, keenest vision, pellucid distinctness of objects, such as might be received through the eyes as the result of clearest showing."[5] We should, however, note Philo's skepticism about the experience itself.

Philo's own "corybantic frenzies" (a very Greek idea) come while meditating on what to write about, a somewhat cerebral context for Divine possession. More often, he speaks of others' mystical experiences using the language of intoxication. In *On Drunkenness*, he describes those who are "God-possessed": " . . . The body is flushed and fiery, warmed by the overflowing joy within which passes on the sensation to the outer man, and thus many of the foolish are deceived and suppose that the sober are drunk. Though, indeed, it is true that these sober ones are drunk in a sense, for all good things are united in the strong wine on which they feast . . ."[6] Also in *On the Creation of the World*, where he writes of people "seized by a sober intoxication, like those filled with Corybantic frenzy, and . . . inspired, possessed by a . . . noble desire."[7] Finally, to return to the Therapeutae:

> Then when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast, having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the strong wine of God's love, they mix and both together become a single choir ... Thus they continue until dawn, drunk with this drunkenness in which there is no shame, and not

[4] Philo 75.

[5] Philo 73.

[6] Philo 76.

[7] Philo 55.

> with heavy heads or drowsy eyes but more alert and wakeful than when they came to the banquet . . .[8]

This kind of sober intoxication which Philo describes has a direct parallel in Plato. At the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates (who encourages everyone not to drink, but give speeches instead) is wide awake when everyone else is drunk or nodding off, trying to engage Agathon and Aristophanes in a conversation about the nature of comedy and tragedy. Socrates is, in a sense, "drunk" on philosophy. The language of drink would resonate very, very strongly with a Hellenistic audience, who would be accustomed to seeing drink and drunkenness used in a particularly social way at special rituals and ceremonies. Yet the occasion for intoxication among the Therepeutae is an intense allegorical reading of the Torah and a re-enactment of the parting of the Red Sea.

What Philo does with the concept of intoxication is ingenious: he injects a classically Greek image, with all its connotations, into a description of a very pious Jewish sect, maintaining fidelity to both the image's meaning and the sect's activities. This represents a union of universality and particularity, in terms of Philo's Alexandrian cultural context. Greek language and images, because of their mainstream *lingua franca* conventionality,[9] can be seen as universalistic, while Philo's many Jewish references would be particularistic to his audience.[10] In other words, the two separate traditions of Hellas and Israel can talk to each other, inform each other, and even have the same vocabulary, without sacrificing their own identity to the other in the process. On the semantic level, this shows in Philo's many etymologies–part of his attempt to find

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[8] Philo 48, 49.

[9] Martin Hengel: "The bond which held the Hellenistic world together . . . was Attic *koine*. . . . The word [[epsilon]] [[lambda]] [[lambda]] [[epsilon]] [[nu]] [[iota]] [[zeta]] [[epsilon]] [[iot]] [[nu]] primarily meant 'speak Greek correctly,' and only secondarily 'adopt a Greek style of life." *Judaism and Hellenism*, vol. 1, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974. 58.

[10] Ellen Birnbaum suggests, based on the terms that Philo uses to refer to "Jews" and "Israel", that he wrote in two separate genres for two distinct audiences: Jews and proselytes / Gentiles. *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought*, Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press, 1996. 221.

linguistic foundations for a cooperation of traditions. This is different from, say, a merely conceptual syncretism. Philo expands the valences of Greek terms like "drunkenness," "Corybantic frenzy" and even *logos* so that the concepts inherent in those terms can resonate with Jews and Greeks in both a universal and particular way.

In his writings on the Therapeutae's sacred vigil, Philo describes a scene which might be a metaphor for his own vision of a philosophical Judaism.

> They rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory form themselves first into two choirs, one of men and one of women, the leader and precentor chosen for each being the most honoured amongst them and also the most musical. Then they sing hymns to God composed of many measures and set to many melodies, sometimes chanting together, sometimes taking up the harmony antiphonally . . . . Then, when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast, having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the strong wine of God's love, they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honour of the wonders there wrought.[11]

There are many things which bear close analysis in this passage. One of them is the actual style of the choral singing. Music is, again, something that would have strong connotations to a Greek and Judaic audience. Music, of course, is extremely important to both Plato and Aristotle; both of them consider music one of the fundamental subjects of study. Plato was influenced by the Pythagorean school, which analyzed harmony and tunings in terms of mathematics, and Aristotle considered music agreeably cathartic. On the Judaic side, Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin comment:

> Their [The Therapeutae's] psalm singing seems exceptional in its inclusion of women on an equal footing with men, but except for this detail, what Philo describes is typical of the much modified and scaled-down version of the Jewish liturgy that became the framework for the early Christian vigils. . . . One of the foundations of what has been termed the "sacred bridge" between the two religions was the Book of Psalms–

[11] Philo 48.

> not just the words, but (to an unknown extent) the melodies as well, for modern research has uncovered a close resemblance between certain psalm melodies preserved to this day among Middle Eastern Jews and certain Gregorian chants sung by the Christians of western Europe in the Middle Ages.[12]

The Therapeutae themselves have embarked on a reinterpretation of traditional Jewish liturgy, much as Philo has undertaken to reinterpret both Judaic and Greek language and thought; thus Philo uses the music of the Therapeutae as yet another example of a term and concept that can be used to bridge the Hellas-Israel gap.

But there is something even more inspiring to Philo than their musical style, and Weiss and Taruskin have only hinted at it in their comment about men and women singing together. The climax of Philo's description of the Therapeutae comes when he describes how the choirs blend together:

> This wonderful sight and experience [the parting of the Red Sea], an act transcending word and thought and hope, so filled with ecstasy both men and women that forming a single choir they sang hymns of thanksgiving to God their Savior, the men led by the prophet Moses and the women by the prophetess Miriam. It is on this model above all that the choir of the Therapeutae of either sex, note in response to note and voice to voice, the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men, create an harmonious concert, music in the truest sense.[13]

This blending of the choirs in harmonious concert is exactly the result Philo himself tries to achieve in his writings and thought. Whether or not he means it, he uses the Therapeutae's music to present a picture of his intentions as a thinker, namely "music in the truest sense."[14] His purpose

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[12] *Music in the Western World*, selected and annotated by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, New York: Schirmer Books, 1984. 20.

[13] Philo 49.

[14] In terms of his own life, Birnbaum (p. 229) writes: "Philo's presentation of Judaism as a kind of philosophy may well deserve to be called the 'crowning achievement' of Hellenistic Jewish efforts. It is clear from his works, however, that for him, being a Jew is not only a matter of believing in a certain philosophy, it also involves a way of life embedded by a very

in creating this unified chorus is, as I tried to show at the beginning of the paper, not mystical. He is motivated by his love of wisdom, and his desire to do as the Therapeutae do, unite "God's friendship" with "true excellence (*arete* of life)."[15]

It is possible to take what I have said about Philo's innovative use of language and try to measure his success or failure. Success would be a transformation of language, where both the Greek and the Jew recognize themselves and each other in a new kind of common tongue; failure would be a corruption of language, where the terms and their concepts become so multi-valenced that they sink into obscurantism (as with some of the Gnostic writings, for example).[16] But judging Philo by these standards puts him to an unrealistic test. His project was instead a process, an unfolding and an uncovering (*aletheia*). Philo's attitude towards language is manifest in another passage from his writings on the Therapeutae:

> The exposition of the sacred scriptures treats the inner meaning conveyed in allegory. For to those people the whole law book seems to resemble a living creature with the literal ordinances for its body and for its soul the invisible mind laid up in its working. It is in this mind especially that the rational soul begins to contemplate the things akin to itself and looking through the words as through a mirror beholds the marvellous beauties of the concepts, unfolds and removes the symbolic coverings and brings forth the thoughts and sets them bare to the light of day for those who need but a little reminding to enable them to discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible.[17]

Language for Philo, like the law book for the Therapeutae, is a living creature which both discloses and conceals its meanings. This, again, shows the twofold universal and particular nature of language as Philo

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particular community. . . . His commitment seems rooted in his existence, in his involvement with the Jewish community and its way of life."

[15] Philo 49.

[16] A useful comparison is the Rabbis, who were concerned with the conservation of language, and certain modes of thought associated with that language. Perhaps this is one reason that Philo's endeavors did not become part of their intellectual orbit.

[17] Philo 47

sees it. It was part of Philo's enduring achievement to pass on this vision of language in his own writings (even if, in my opinion, they were misinterpreted by the Christians who came after him) and to attempt to expand the vocabulary of human belief.

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