

# ETHICS OF PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA (20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.)

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## Introduction

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), a Hellenized Jew, is a figure that spans two cultures, the Greek and the Hebrew. When Hebrew mythical thought met Greek philosophical thought in the first century B.C.E. it was only natural that someone would try to develop speculative and philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy. Thus Philo produced a synthesis of both traditions developing concepts for future Hellenistic interpretation of messianic Hebrew thought, especially by Clement of Alexandria, Christian Apologists like Athenagoras, Theophilus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and by Origen. He may have influenced Paul, his contemporary, and perhaps the authors of the *Gospel of John* (C. H. Dodd) and the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (R. Williamson and H. W. Attridge). In the process, he laid the foundations for the development of Christianity in the West and in the East, as we know it today.

Philo's primary importance is in the development of the philosophical and theological foundations of Christianity. The church preserved the Philonic writings because Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>1</sup> labeled the monastic ascetic group of Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, described in Philo's *The Contemplative Life*, as Christians, which is highly unlikely.<sup>2</sup> Eusebius also promoted the legend that Philo met Peter in Rome. Jerome (345-420 C.E.) even lists him as a church Father.<sup>3</sup> Jewish tradition was uninterested in philosophical speculation and did not preserve Philo's thought. According to H. A. Wolfson, Philo was a founder of religious philosophy, a new habit of practicing philosophy.

Philo was thoroughly educated in Greek philosophy and culture as can be seen from his superb knowledge of classical Greek literature. He had a deep reverence for Plato and referred to him as "the most holy Plato" (*Prob.* 13). Philo's philosophy represented contemporary Platonism which was its revised version incorporating Stoic doctrine and terminology via Antiochus of Ascalon (ca 90 B.C.E.) and Eudorus of Alexandria, as well as elements of Aristotelian logic and ethics and Pythagorean ideas. Clement of Alexandria even called Philo "the Pythagorean."<sup>4</sup> But it seems that Philo also picked up his ancestral tradition, though as an adult, and once having discovered it, he put forward the teachings of the Jewish prophet, Moses, as "the summit of philosophy" (*Op.* 8), and considered Moses the teacher of Pythagoras (b. ca 570 B.C.E.) and of all Greek philosophers and lawgivers (Hesiod, Heraclitus, Lycurgus, to mention a few). For Philo, Greek philosophy was a natural development of the revelatory teachings of Moses. He was no innovator in this matter because already before him Jewish scholars attempted the same. Artapanus in the second century B.C.E identified Moses with Musaeus and with Orpheus. According to Aristobulus of Paneas (first half of the second century B.C.E.), Homer and Hesiod drew from the books of Moses which were translated into Greek long before the Septuagint.<sup>5</sup>

## Life

Very little is known about the life of Philo. He lived in Alexandria, which at that time counted, according to some estimates, about one million people and included largest Jewish community outside of Palestine. He came from a wealthy and the prominent family and appears to be a

leader in his community. Once he visited Jerusalem and the temple, as he himself stated in *Prov.* 2.64.

Philo's brother, Alexander, was a wealthy, prominent Roman government official, a custom agent responsible for collecting dues on all goods imported into Egypt from the East. He donated money to plate the gates of the temple in Jerusalem with gold and silver. He also made a loan to Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great.<sup>6</sup> Alexander's two sons, Marcus and Tiberius Julius Alexander were involved in Roman affairs. Marcus married Bernice,<sup>7</sup> the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who is mentioned in Acts (25:13, 23; 26:30). The other son, Tiberius Julius Alexander, described by Josephus as "not remaining true to his ancestral practices" became procurator of the province of Judea (46-48 C.E.) and prefect of Egypt (66-70 C.E.).

Philo was involved in the affairs of his community which interrupted his contemplative life (*Spec. leg.* 3.1-6), especially during the crisis relating to the pogrom which was initiated in 38 C.E. by the prefect Flaccus, during the reign of emperor Gaius Caligula. He was elected to head the Jewish delegation, which apparently included his brother Alexander and nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander, and was sent to Rome in 39-40 B.C.E. to see the emperor. He reported the events in his writings *Against Flaccus* and *The Embassy to Gaius*.

## **Emphasis on the Contemplative Life and Philosophy**

The key emphasis in Philo's philosophy is contrasting the spiritual life, understood as intellectual contemplation, with the mundane preoccupation with earthly concerns, either as an active life or as a search for pleasure. Philo disdained the material world and physical body (*Spec. leg.* 3.1-6). The body was for Philo as for Plato,<sup>8</sup> "an evil and a dead thing" (*LA* 3.72-74; *Gig.* 15), wicked by nature and a plotter against the soul (*LA* 3.69). But it was a necessary evil, hence Philo does not advocate a complete abnegation from life. On the contrary he advocates fulfilling first the practical obligations toward men and the use of mundane possessions for the accomplishment of praiseworthy works (*Fug.* 23-28; *Plant.* 167-168). Similarly he considers pleasure indispensable and wealth useful, but for a virtuous man they are not a perfect good (*LA* 3.69-72).

He believed that men should steer themselves away from the physical aspect of things gradually. Some people, like philosophers, may succeed in focusing their minds on the eternal realities. Philo believed that man's final goal and ultimate bliss is in the "knowledge of the true and living God" (*Decal.* 81; *Abr.* 58; *Praem.* 14); "such knowledge is the boundary of happiness and blessedness" (*Det.* 86). To him, mystic vision allows our soul to see the Divine Logos (*Ebr.* 152) and achieve a union with God (*Deut.* 30:19-20; *Post.* 12). In a desire to validate the scripture as an inspired writing, he often compares it to prophetic ecstasy (*Her.* 69-70). His praise of the contemplative life of the monastic Therapeutae in Alexandria attests to his preference of "*bios theoreticos*" over "*bios practicos*." He adheres to the Platonic picture of the souls descending into the material realm and that only the souls of philosophers are able to come to the surface and return to their realm in heaven (*Gig.* 12-15). Philo adopted the Platonic concept of the soul with its tripartite division. The rational part of the soul, however, is breathed into man as a part of God's substance. Philo speaks figuratively "Now, when we are alive, we are so though our soul is dead and buried in our body, as if in a tomb. But if it were to die, then our soul would live according to its proper life being released from the evil and dead body to which it is bound" (*Op.* 67-69; *LA* 1.108).

## Philosophy and Wisdom: a Path to Ethical Life

Philo differentiated between philosophy and wisdom.<sup>9</sup> To him philosophy is “the greatest good thing to men” (*Op.* 53-54), which they acquired because of a gift of reason from God (*Op.* 77). It is a devotion to wisdom, and a way to acquire the highest knowledge, “an attentive study of wisdom.” Wisdom in turn is “the knowledge of all divine and human things, and of the respective causes of them” that is, according to Philo, contained in the Torah (*Congr.* 79). Hence it follows that Moses, as the author of the Torah, “had reached the very summit of philosophy” and “had learnt from the oracles of God the most numerous and important of the principles of nature” (*Op.* 8). Moses was also the interpreter of nature (*Her* 213). By saying this Philo wanted to indicate that human wisdom has two origins: one is divine, the other is natural (*Her.* 182). Moreover, that Mosaic Law is not inconsistent with nature. A single law, the Logos of nature governs the entire world (*Jos.* 28-31) and its law is imprinted on the human mind (*Prob.* 46-47). Because of this we have a conscience that affects even wicked persons (*QG* 4.62).

Wisdom is a consummated philosophy and as such has to be in agreement with the principles of nature (*Mos.* 2.48; *Abr.* 16; *Op.* 143; *Spec. leg.* 2.13; 3.46-47, 112, 137; *Virt.* 18). The study of philosophy has as its end “life in accordance with nature” and following the “path of right reason” (*Mig.* 128). Philosophy prepares us to a moral life, i.e., “to live in conformity with nature” (*Prob.* 160). From this follows that life in accordance with nature hastens us towards virtues (*Mos.* 2. 181; *Abr.* 60, *Spec. leg.* 1.155), and an unjust man is the one “who transgresses the ordinances of nature” (*Spec. leg.* 4.204; Cf. *Decal.* 132; *Virt.* 131-132; *Plant.* 49; *Ebr.* 142; *Agr.* 66).

Thus Philo does not discount human reason, but contrasts only the true doctrine which is trust in God with uncertain, plausible, and unreliable reasoning (*LA* 3.228-229). Philo’s ethical doctrine is Stoic in its essence and includes the active effort to achieve virtue, the model of a sage to be followed, and practical advice concerning the achievement of the proper right reason and a proper emotional state of rational emotions (*eupatheia*).

To Philo man is basically passive and it is God who sows noble qualities in the soul, thus we are instruments of God (*LA* 2.31-32; *Cher.* 127-128). Still man is the only creature endowed with freedom to act though his freedom is limited by the constitution of his mind. As such he is responsible for his action and “very properly receives blame for the offences which he designedly commits.” This is so because he received a faculty of voluntary motion and is free from the dominion of necessity (*Deus* 47-48).

*Philo advocates the practice of virtue in both the divine and the human spheres. Lovers only of God and lovers only of men are both incomplete in virtue. Philo advocates a middle harmonious way (Decal. 106-110; Spec. leg. 4. 102). He differentiates four virtues: wisdom, self-control, courage, and justice (LA 1.63-64).*

Human dispositions Philo divides into three groups – the best is given the vision of God, the next has a vision on the right i.e., the Beneficent or Creative Power whose name is God, and the third has a vision on the left, i.e., the Ruling Power called Lord (*Abr.* 119-130). Felicity is achieved in the culmination of three values: the spiritual, the corporeal, and the external (*QG* 3.16).

Philo adopts the Stoic wise man as a model for human behavior. Such a wise man should imitate God who was impassible (*apathe*s) hence the sage should achieve a state of *apatheia*, i.e., he should be free of irrational emotions (passions), pleasure, desire, sorrow, and fear, and should replace them by rational or well-reasoned emotions (*eupatheia*), joy, will, compunction, and caution. In such a state of *eupatheia*, the sage achieves a serene, stable, and joyful disposition in which he is directed by reason in his decisions (*QG* 2.57; *Abr.* 201-204; *Fug.* 166-167; *Mig.* 67).

But at the same time Philo claims that the needs of the body should not be neglected and rejects the other extreme, i.e., the practice of austerities. Everything should be governed by reason, self-control, and moderation. Joy and pleasure do not have intrinsic values, but are by-products of virtue and characterize the sage (*Fug.* 25-34; *Det.* 124-125; *LA* 80).

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1. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated with introduction by G.A. Williamson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984). 2.17.1.
  2. The view that the Therapeutae were Christians survived until the Middle ages when the Protestants began to consider them to be Jews. Today opinions are divided, but all evidence indicates that they were remnants of the Buddhist tradition (Theravadins) introduced by the missionaries sent by King Asoka in the third century B.C.E. to King Ptolemy II Philadelphos. (Elmar R. Gruber and Holger Kersten, *The Original Jesus. The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*, Shaftesbury: Elements, 1995, 176-186; Z. P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ*, Leiden: E. J. Brill , 1993.) The name Therapeutae is of Buddhist origin. It is the Hellenized form of the Sanskrit/Pali term Theravadins who were members of the Buddhist missionary order Theravada (= Teachings of the Old Ones) founded during the reign of King Asoka (274-232 BCE) with the main center at Gandhara. The members of this order called themselves Theraputta ("Sons of the Old Ones"). They were also, according to Asoka's edict preserved on a rock inscription, to provide medical assistance which was a common occupation of the Buddhist monks (Buddha was also extolled as the King of Medicine). Thus Philo linked the name of the sect with two Greek terms   (therapeuo I cure, I heal; I do service) and   (therapeia = service; medical attendance; worship) as "healers of souls." He also calls them "suppliants" and "beggars" which terms are connected with the Sanskrit name of the monks "bhikshu" (beggars).
  3. Jerome Eusebius Hieronymus Stridensis Presbyter, *De viris illustribus* Ch. 11 in Migne PL Vol. XXIII.
  4. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, I.15.
  7. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 9.27; 13.11.
  6. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.159-160; *Jewish War* 5.205.
  7. Josephus *J. Antiq.* 19.276-277;
  8. Plato, *Rep.* 585 B; *Timaeus* 86 B; *Soph.* 228.
  9. Cicero, *Leg.* I.22; *SVF* II.36; Plutarch, *Epitome*, I.13.