

“COSMOLOGY” AS A KEY TO THE THOUGHT-WORLD OF PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA¹

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Much of the charm of the “allegorical method” lies in the fact that under its influence difficult texts that seem to evoke the deepest truths and inconsistencies turn out to point subtly to higher things. In a word, difficulties dissolve. The negative side of this is that not only the difficulties of the text dissolve, but so also does the original meaning. Applied enthusiastically, the allegorical method turns a text into a cryptogram which points directly to the “higher truths” that the interpreter wishes his audience to consider. The text can thereby become a vehicle for the thoughts of the interpreter, rather than those of the original author.

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria was one such enthusiastic practitioner of the allegorical method. The OT became for him a vehicle with which he could present his own ideas—ideas that were congenial to his time and locale. They were, in fact, also congenial to a number of prominent Christian thinkers in the early and medieval church.

However, the modern reader, Christian or otherwise, often finds Philo anything but congenial. Philo’s world of thought appears to be an alien and frustratingly inconsistent universe that moves according to unfamiliar principles. Indeed, one of the main challenges of modern research into Philo is to understand how his thought-world fits together, to perceive the underlying principles behind what he says.

The present essay has grown out of research into this question. In it, I investigate the possibility that Philo’s cosmology may provide the unifying key to unlock the mysteries of his thought-world. “Cosmology” is, of course, a word that can be used to

¹An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at the 1987 regional SBL meetings held in Chicago. I would like to express special thanks to Abraham Terian for his encouragement and advice in the preparation and presentation of this paper.

describe a wide variety of interrelated conceptions. Primarily, it relates to the larger questions of the origins of the "cosmos" (the total universe), its structure, and its present and future history. Within the world of thought in which Philo worked, these questions were intimately tied into the associated questions of God's nature, God's relationship with the "cosmos," and man's relationship to all of the foregoing.

1. *Philo's Cosmological Concepts*

In the following discussion I shall first treat briefly Philo's concepts regarding several basic aspects of his cosmology—the Creation, God's nature, and the physical cosmos. Next I shall relate his cosmological thought to what may be called his "philosophical goal" or objective. Finally, I shall endeavor to ascertain to what extent or in what ways Philo's cosmology serves—and wherein it fails to serve—as a key to Philo's thought.

Creation

Philo's views about Creation (as recorded in Gen 1 and 2) are rather complex.² Of particular interest is his concept that Creation was conducted in two stages—first the realm of ideas (*kosmos noētos*), and then the sensible world (*kosmos aisthētos*). This idea of a double Creation emerges in particular in his interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis (with the accounts in Gen 1 and 2 representing, in fact, two separate stages in creation):

For God, being God, assumed that a beautiful copy would never be produced apart from a beautiful pattern, and that no object of perception would be faultless which was not made in the likeness of an original discerned only by the intellect. So when He willed to create this visible world He first fully formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern wholly God-like and incorporeal in producing the material world, as a later creation, the very image of an earlier, to

²This has been documented by Thomas H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation*, CBQMonSer 14 (Washington, DC, 1983), p. 31. Tobin lists the different strands of interpretation regarding creation that are found in Philo. See also the short, but rather telling, criticisms of Tobin's main theses in Appendix II of David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden, 1986), pp. 556-558.

embrace in itself objects of perception of as many kinds as the other contained objects of intelligence (*Op.* 16).³

Thus, God first fashioned a model of the entire cosmos and everything in it, and only thereafter caused the "sense-perceptible" world to come into existence. An interesting corollary is that man himself is the image of a heavenly man. In commenting on Gen 2:7 Philo suggests that this text reveals "very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier [in Gen 1] after the image of God" (*Op.* 134). He goes on to say that the former ("the man so formed," as recorded in Gen 2:7) is "an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such or such quality, consisting of body and soul, man or woman, by nature mortal," while "he that was after the (Divine) image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought (only), incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible" (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the "formed man" has within him a copy of this archetypal man—namely, the mind:

One is the archetypal reason above us, the other the copy of it which we possess. Moses calls the first the "image of God," the second the cast of that image. For God, he says, made man not "the image of God" but "after the image" (Gen. i.27). And thus the mind in each of us, which in the true and full sense is the "man," is an expression at third hand from the Maker, while between them is the Reason which serves as model for our reason, but itself is the effigy or presentment of God (*Her.* 231).

Even in creation, God is somewhat distant from the world, entrusting the creation of some of the less salubrious aspects of the cosmos to lesser beings, his "Powers":

"God said, let us make man after our image" (Gen. i.26), "let us make" indicating more than one. So the Father of all things is holding parley with His powers, whom He allowed to fashion the

³Translations of Philo's work are from the LCL editions: *Philo*, 10 vols., trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (London, 1929); *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin*, Supplement 1, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA, 1961) (hereinafter *QG*); and *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Exodum*, Supplement 2, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA, 1961) (hereinafter *QE*). Abbreviations used are found in *Philo*, 1:xxiii-xxiv. In addition, *Prov.* refers to *De Providentia*. In-text citations are given herein for all direct quotations from Philo.

mortal portion of our soul. . . . And He employed the powers that are associated with Him. . . . Therefore God deemed it necessary to assign the creation of evil things to other makers, reserving that of good things to Himself alone (*Fug.* 69-70; cf. *Conf.* 179).

God's Nature

God, for Philo, takes on many characteristics which are generally associated with Greek conceptions. For example, the God of Philo is a God that does not change: "Separate, therefore, my soul, all that is created, mortal, mutable, profane, from thy conception of God the uncreated, the unchangeable, the immortal, the holy and solely blessed" (*Sac.* 101). For this reason, Philo believes that "nothing which tends to destruction should have its origin in Him" (*Conf.* 181). In some comments denying the possibility that God can "repent," he queries:

For what greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchangeable changes? . . . Can you doubt that He, the Imperishable Blessed One, who has taken as His own the sovereignty of the virtues, of perfection itself and beatitude, knows no change of will, but ever holds fast to what He purposed from the first without any alteration? (*Deus* 22, 26).

Here, as elsewhere, Philo is much embarrassed by the anthropomorphisms of the OT.⁴

Indeed, God transcends anything that we can comprehend: "Yet the vision only showed that He is, not what He is. For this which is better than the good, more venerable than the monad, purer than the unit, cannot be discerned by anyone else; to God alone is it permitted to apprehend God" (*Praem.* 40). As a consequence of this, God is so far removed from his created cosmos that he communicates with created beings through a series of intermediaries. The exact details of these intermediary beings can vary, in his separate discussions, but the following is a representative statement:

In the first place (there is) He Who is elder than the one and the monad and the beginning. Then (comes) the Logos of the Existent One, the truly seminal substance of existing things. And from the divine Logos, as from a spring, there divide and break

⁴Cf. *Post.* 3-7; *Deus* 51-65 (this to explain that God has no need of hands, feet, nostrils, etc.); *Plant.* 32-36; *Conf.* 134; *Decal.* 32-35; *QG* 1.93; *QG* 2.54.

forth two powers. One is the creative (power), through which the Artificer placed and ordered all things; this is named "God." And (the other is) the royal (power), since through it the Creator rules over created things; this is called "Lord." And from these two powers have grown the others. For by the side of the creative (power) there grows the propitious, of which the name is "beneficent," while (beside) the royal (power there grows) the legislative, of which the apt name is "punitive." And below these and beside them (is) the ark; and the ark is a symbol of the intelligible world. . . . And the number of the things here enumerated amounts to seven, (namely) the intelligible world and the two related powers, the punitive and beneficent; and the two other ones preceding these, the creative and the royal, have greater kinship to the Artificer than what is created; and the sixth is the Logos, and the seventh is the Speaker. But if you make the beginning from the upper end, (you will find) the Speaker first, and the Logos second, and the creative power third, and the ruling (power) fourth, and then, below the creative, the beneficent (power) fifth, and, below the royal, the punitive (power) sixth, and the world of ideas seventh (*QE* 2.68).⁵

The Physical Cosmos

Philo's view that between God and the tangible cosmos there is a whole series of intermediaries (which is evidenced in the immediately foregoing quotation) has important implications for his conception of the physical cosmos. For Philo, the physical cosmos consists of eight concentric spheres centered on the earth, which is round. Immediately above the earth is the sphere with the moon, and between the earth and the moon is the air, which is inhabited by angels and souls. At the other extremity, the outermost sphere contains the fixed stars. Then come the seven inner spheres, consisting of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Mercury, Venus, and Moon. How the conceptualization is utilized in allegorical Scripture interpretation by Philo will now be illustrated by several examples.

In commenting on the Cherubim and the sword of flame which guarded Eden, Philo states:

I suggest that they are an allegorical figure of the revolution of the whole heaven. For the movements assigned to the heavenly

⁵Cf. the mention of the creative (God) and the kingly (Lord) potencies in *Abr.* 121 and *Fug.* 103-104.

spheres are of two opposite kinds, in the one case an unvarying course, embodying the principle of sameness, to the right, in the other a variable course, embodying the principle of otherness, to the left. The outermost sphere, which contains what are called the fixed stars, is a single one and always makes the same revolution from east to west. But the inner spheres, seven in number, contain the planets and each has two motions of opposite nature, one voluntary, the other under a compelling force (*Cher.* 21-22).

Philo relates the central position of the sun in the midst of the planets to the seven-branched candelabra:

The holy candlestick and the seven candle-bearers on it are a copy of the march of the choir of the seven planets. . . . But the best conjecture, in my opinion, is that of those who assign the middle place to the sun and hold that there are three above him and the same number below him. The three above are Saturn, Jupiter and Mars, and the three below are Mercury, Venus and the Moon, which borders on the lower region of the air (*Her.* 221, 224).

Of the ladder which Jacob saw in his dream, Philo has this to say:

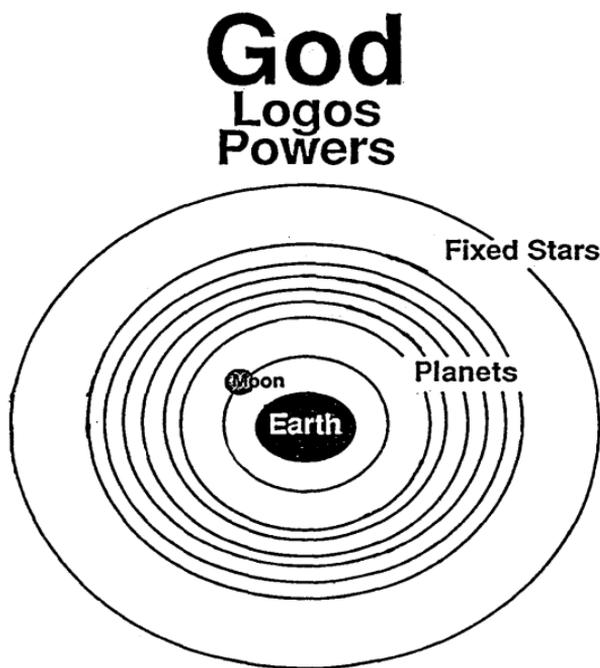
“Stairway” when applied to the universe is a figurative name for the air; whose foot is earth and its head heaven. For the air extends in all directions to the ends of the earth from the sphere of the moon which is described by meteorologists as last of the heavenly zones, and first of those which are related to us. The air is the abode of incorporeal souls, since it seemed good to their Maker to fill all parts of the universe with living beings. He set land-animals on the earth, aquatic creatures in the seas and rivers, and in heaven the stars, each of which is said to be not a living creature only but mind of the purest kind through and through; and therefore in air also, the remaining section of the universe, living creatures exist (*Som.* 1.134-135).

The last quotation above leads us again to an important, but frequently overlooked, element of Philo’s cosmology—namely, that the heavenly bodies form an integral part of a chain of beings that extends from God, as unchangeably perfect, down through the Logos, the powers, the stars, the planets, the sun, the moon, the angels which inhabit the air, and finally to man himself. We have already met this chain of beings in our treatment of Philo’s view of God’s nature. Here it will suffice to notice one further description—a description wherein the heavenly bodies are referred to as “magistrates” and also as “lieutenants of the one Father of all”:

Some have supposed that the sun and moon and the other stars were gods with absolute powers and ascribed to them the causation of all events. But Moses held that the universe was created and is in a sense the greatest of commonwealths, having magistrates and subjects; for magistrates, all the heavenly bodies, fixed or wandering; for subjects, such beings as exist below the moon, in the air or on the earth. The said magistrates, however, in his view have not unconditional powers, but are lieutenants of the one Father of All (*Spec.* 1.13-14).

Thus, while not independent divinities, the heavenly bodies are part of the hierarchy of heavenly beings. Elsewhere Philo calls the stars "souls divine" of "mind in its purest form" (*Gig.* 7), and he refers to the sun and moon as "natural divinities" (*Prov.* 2.50).

The foregoing information can now be combined to form a picture of the cosmos as Philo understood it. (See the accompanying diagram.) At the apex is God, associated with the Logos and the Powers. Below them are the fixed stars, and then the spheres of the planets, including the sun and moon. Below the moon, in the air, are the angels; and below the angels, man. At the bottom of



this ladder of importance are the four elements—water, fire, earth, and air.⁶

This physical cosmos, with the earth at the center and the eight concentric spheres, is, as we have seen, an integral part of Philo's hierarchy of intermediaries between God and man. It therefore holds an essential place within Philo's total cosmology.

2. *The Philosophic Goal*

Not only is the physical cosmos part of the hierarchy of intermediaries between God and man; it is intimately tied to Philo's philosophic goals—goals also linked with his view of man. The human being, for Philo, was composed of two parts, soul and body. Of the two, the former was by far the most important, the body being but a "corpse." "When, then, O soul," he asks, "wilt thou in fullest measure realize thyself to be a corpse-bearer?" (*L.A.* 3.74). Bodily pleasure is called "the beginning of wrongs and violation of law" (*Op.* 152),⁷ and Moses is praised for being "content with nothing but complete absence of passion" (*L.A.* 3.129).

Consequently, man is to control his body, but feed his soul. Moreover, philosophy is the means by which the soul can move to the contemplation of the heavenly realities, to which it belongs, and to which it can return. Its ultimate good occurs when

in all matters turning away from what is base and from all that draws it to things mortal, it soars aloft and spends its time in contemplation of the universe and its different parts; when, mounting yet higher, it explores the Deity and His nature, urged by an ineffable love of knowledge (*L.A.* 3.84).

In another passage where he refers to "the health of the body, the keenness of the senses, the coveted gift of beauty, the strength which defies opponents, and whatever else serves to adorn our soul's house, or tomb" he concludes:

⁶For Philo, the physical cosmos is made up of these four elements, as, of course, was practically universally assumed in the Greek world. This finds very frequent mention in Philo (e.g., *Op.* 146; *Plant.* 3-6, 120; *Her.* 134-135; *Mos.* 1.96; *Mos.* 2.88; *Decal.* 31; *Cont.* 3; *QG* 3.49, 4.8; *QE* 2.73, 85). Philo also seems to subscribe to the view that the heavens were made of a different element (*QE* 2.85). See Ursula Früchtel, *Die kosmologischen Vorstellungen bei Philo von Alexandria* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 57-61, for a more extended discussion of these elements as Philo understands them.

⁷Cf. *L.A.* 3.107; *Deus* 143.

Great ventures such as these betoken a celestial and heavenly soul, which has left the region of the earth, has been drawn upwards, and dwells with divine natures. For when it takes its fill of the vision of good incorruptible and genuine, it bids farewell to the good which is transient and spurious (*Deus* 150-151).

Thus, the goal of existence for Philo is to reunite the soul with God, to restore it to its proper place in the heavens.⁸ This is achieved by subduing the body, eliminating the passions, and by an educational program that culminates with philosophy (cf. *Cong.* 9-18). A program of this sort leads to ecstatic experiences of the kind that at times happened to Philo himself. He declares that "I have approached my work empty [on certain occasions] and suddenly become full, the ideas falling in a shower from above and being sown invisibly, so that under the influence of the Divine possession I have been filled with corybantic frenzy and been unconscious of anything, place, persons present, myself, words spoken, lines written" (*Mig.* 35). It is interesting to compare this with what he says about the experience of the OT prophets: In them the divine mind excluded the human mind (*Spec.* 1.65).

3. *Cosmology and the Key to Philo's Thought World*

Now that some aspects of Philo's cosmology have been explored, it should be possible to give some assessment of the value which that cosmology may have as a key to unlocking Philo's thought-world. On the positive side, cosmology does seem to encompass a whole range of Philo's thought—his conceptions of

⁸There is yet another delightful expression of this found in "On the Special Laws," and cited by Erwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 5-6:

There was once a time when by devoting myself to philosophy and to contemplation of the world and its parts I achieved the enjoyment of that Mind which is truly beautiful, desirable, and blessed; for I lived in constant communion with sacred utterances and teachings, in which I greedily and insatiably rejoiced. No base or worldly thoughts occurred to me, nor did I grovel for glory, wealth, or bodily comfort, but I seemed ever to be borne aloft in the heights in a rapture of soul, and to accompany sun, moon, and all heaven and the universe in their revolutions.

For Philo to accompany the "sun, moon, and all heaven and the universe in their revolutions" was not just an expression of poetic excess. He considered these to be higher beings with which he was communing.

Creation, God, how God relates to both mankind and the cosmos in general through a succession of intermediaries, what man's true goal in life should be, and how Philo understands his own religious experiences. That cosmology also fits well his understanding of anthropology and his fundamental distinction between material things and mind. Perhaps with a little effort it would be possible even to graft his ethics into this system. There is indeed a remarkable consistency in Philo's cosmological viewpoint throughout all his writings.

On the other hand, an honest reading of the entire corpus of Philo's writings must leave a lurking suspicion that although cosmology is an important element in the total structure of Philo's thought, it is not the sole key to his thought-world. Indeed, Philo gives a great deal more attention to ethics and anthropology than he does to cosmology, and it is precisely in these areas that he is so seemingly inconsistent.⁹ Cosmology cannot be the only center of Philo's thought, inasmuch as it does not encompass these two important areas, nor does it explain the principle upon which Philo operates to produce such apparently inconsistent statements about things which are very important to him and to which he has devoted a great deal of thought.

Another suspicion aroused by a reading of the total Philonic corpus is that even Philo's consistency in the area of cosmology may be due to his expressing himself less on this subject than he does in other areas. In fact, on occasion he can give a somewhat different view of how he understands the hierarchy of beings between God and man. Another passage in his writings which is often set forth to understand how Philo organizes the hierarchy of beings is as follows:

With their company let the whole choir of philosophers chime in, harping on their wonted themes, how that of existences some are bodies, some incorporeal; and of bodies, some lifeless,

⁹In the realm of anthropology, e.g., as Goodenough points out:

The Stoic eightfold division of the soul into the ruling reason, the five senses, and the two powers of speech and generation; the Platonic division into reason, spirit or emotion, and desire; the Aristotelian division into the parts which are nourished, those which have sense perception, and those which reason; all these Philo can use interchangeably, guided largely by the numbers or details involved in a scriptural passage he may at the time be allegorizing (p. 151).

some having life; some rational, some irrational, some mortal, some divine; and of mortal beings, some male, some female; a distinction which applies to man; and of things incorporeal again, some complete, some incomplete; and of those that are complete, some questions and inquiries, imprecations and adjurations (*Agr.* 139-140).¹⁰

Philo goes on to say that these are the things that are "set forth in the elementary handbooks" (*ibid.*). Thus, he appears to be giving an outline taken directly from another source. Consequently, this description may well represent a view which is not so central to his understanding as the one involving the eight concentric spheres. Nevertheless, it provides a different, and somewhat contradictory, outline of the hierarchy of beings.

Furthermore, the exact dividing line in Philo's hierarchical cosmology between the realm of ideas and the sense-perceptible world is not clear. The distinction between the two is very important in Philo, but it does not surface in any prominent way in his comments about the cosmological hierarchy.¹¹ In short, although it is itself reasonably stable, Philo's conception of the physical cosmos is not adequately or clearly integrated into other areas which he considers important. Consequently, while cosmology is very important to Philo, and while it provides some help in understanding him, we must conclude that it is not the single key to unlock his thought-world.

4. Conclusion

There are reasons, aside from understanding Philo himself, that make Philo's cosmology important. It is important, for instance, for the light it throws upon the intellectual world into

¹⁰It is so used, e.g., in Früchtel, pp. 44-45, cf. p. 42; and Georgios D. Farandos, *Kosmos und Logos nach Philon von Alexandria* (Amsterdam, 1976), pp. 259-263, esp. p. 262; Abraham Terian, *Philonis Alexandrini de Animalibus: The Armenian Text with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Chico, CA, 1981), p. 35.

¹¹My thanks to David Aune for bringing this to my attention. From *QE* 2.68 (cited above), it might appear that the line is drawn underneath the seven powers (the intelligible world lies below the arc), but Philo is not consistent in his enumeration of the powers. Moreover, he calls the stars "souls divine" or "mind in its purest form" (*Gig.* 7), and this may indicate that his realm of the *kosmos noētos* began among the spheres. The difficulty of knowing exactly where Philo would draw the line between the realm of ideas (*kosmos noētos*) and the sensible world (*kosmos aisthētos*) is highlighted dramatically by the diagram in Farandos, p. 306, which shows the relationship between the two realms.

which Christianity emerged. In particular, it may assist in furthering the investigation into some of the varieties of Christian expression that were deemed inappropriate by the writers of the NT, and which have often been considered as the specter of some form of gnosticism. Also notable about Philo's cosmology are many features which appear to lie behind ideas opposed in the NT itself, such as a concentration of mystical ideas about the heavens, heavenly powers, and angels, linked together with Jewish practices such as circumcision. Philo's cosmology is in all probability not the original source of these ideas, but it does illustrate the sort of fertile soil in which they could grow.

The particular value of Philo's cosmology for this question lies in the fact that Philo is representative of a larger group of thinkers. Several lines of evidence point in this direction. For example, on occasion Josephus allegorizes the OT in a way that is similar to, though also different in detail from, Philo. There are strong similarities between the physical cosmologies of both writers.¹² Another line of evidence is the relatively frequent mention that Philo makes of other allegorists. While it is not always easy to distinguish the viewpoints of these other allegorists from those of Philo,¹³ the references to them make it clear that Philo was in dialogue with a much larger group—a group which, if it did not

¹²E.g., in his description of the temple of Jerusalem, Josephus gives a very interesting allegorical interpretation of the temple which closely resembles that of Philo:

Before these hung a veil. . . . Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe. For the scarlet seemed emblematical of fire, the fine linen of the earth, the blue of the air, and the purple of the sea. . . . The seven lamps (such being the number of the branches from the lampstand) represented the planets; the loaves on the table, twelve in number, the circle of the Zodiac and the year; while the altar of incense, by the thirteen fragrant spices from sea and from land, both desert and inhabited, with which it was replenished, signified that all things are of God and for God (*Jewish War* 5.4-5; in LCL 5.212-213, 217-218).

¹³These references are listed and their difficulties are discussed by David M. Hay, "Philo's References to Other Allegorists," *Studia Philonica* 6 (1979-80): 41-75. Hay concludes "that Philo's works are in good measure the product of a school of allegorical exegetes, perhaps in some fashion the precipitate of actual classroom instruction" (p. 61).

hold exactly the same ideas as Philo, at the very least had a conceptual framework that was close enough to his for him to be able to argue with them. Indeed, some of the inconsistencies in Philo may well grow out of the way he drew upon and presented the results of these other allegorists.