

The Vision of God in Philo of Alexandria

by David Bradshaw

To judge from the state of the literature, the reputation of Philo of Alexandria among English-speaking philosophers is not high. Philo has rarely been honored with the same sort of critical reflection as has been lavished on Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics. He has always been regarded as an important figure in the history of Middle Platonism, to be sure, and his writings have frequently been mined for evidence about the teachings of the Hellenistic schools.¹ But it is rare that one hears much on behalf of Philo *qua* philosopher; the general tendency seems to be to dismiss his thought as an unhappy attempt to marry Platonism with Judaism.

Although the received wisdom about Philo is not altogether mistaken, neither is it the whole truth. Philo is not (and would not have claimed to be) an original philosopher of the first rank, but he does reward critical reflection in some interesting and surprising ways. In this essay I will explore one of them. The aspiration to behold directly the highest principle—whether that principle is identified as God, the Good, or the Beautiful—plays a prominent role in both the Bible and Plato. Examining Philo's adaptation of this theme will provide an excellent opportunity to assess how he melds these two traditions. As I will argue, Philo not only interprets Biblical revelation in terms derived from Platonism; he also

¹See John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 138-83 for discussion of Philo as a Middle Platonist. For further references see Roberto Radice and David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography, 1937-1986* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988). Updates to this bibliography are published regularly in the *Studia Philonica Annual*.

redirects the religious impetus of Plato toward a personal God. The result is not mere eclecticism, but a unique form of thought with its own characteristic insights and concerns.

I.

The Purification of the Soul: The texts in which Philo describes the vision of God will be presented below, in Section III. First it will be useful to consider what Philo says about how one who aspires to such a vision (or to any degree of closeness to God) should proceed. Although the initiative in conveying the vision belongs to God alone, there is much an aspirant can do to prepare himself and to make the intensity of his desire known to God.

Philo's term for this process is *katharsis*, purification. The sort of purification he has in mind is not a ritual cleansing or ascetic discipline, but the education of the soul into virtue and wisdom.² Philo holds that the best preparation for the pursuit of divine things is an active life of virtue, "for it is sheer folly to suppose that you will reach the greater while you are incapable of mastering the lesser."³ Virtue in turn requires some degree of academic training. Interpreting the story of how Abraham begat children upon Hagar first and then upon Sarah, Philo identifies Hagar with school learning—grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, and music—and Sarah with virtue. Abraham represents the soul that aspires to know God. In order to bear children by Sarah, such a soul must first be mated to Sarah's handmaiden, the culture available through education.⁴

Many other texts could be cited to illustrate this relatively mundane and pragmatic strand in Philo's understanding of purification.⁵ Yet Philo also holds that in order to approach God one must turn away from the world, and at times he articulates this theme using the language of mysticism. The first question we must address is that of how these two

²Philo does endorse a moderate asceticism as tending to free the soul from the body. See the texts collected in *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, ed. David Winston (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 253-67.

³All citations are based on the Loeb Classical Library, Philo, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, 10 vol. Plus 2 supplements (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1929-1953). My translations generally follow those of the Loeb, but I have sometimes made alterations for the sake of accuracy or style.

⁴*De Congressu*, 9-10.

⁵See *De Cherubim*, 98-105, *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*, 112-17, *De Congressu*, 77-80, *De Mutatione Nominum*, 235-40.

strands in Philo's thinking are related. Does he conceive the active life of virtue as an early stage eventually to be set aside for mystical pursuits, or are the two complementary and simultaneous aspects of a single way of life?

As an example of the mystical strand in Philo's thought, we may take his interpretation of the divine commandment to Abraham to leave behind land, kindred, and father's house.⁶ According to Philo these symbolize, respectively, the body, sense perception, and speech. If Philo wished to urged his readers to separate completely from sensible reality and discursive thought, there could scarcely be a better opportunity. Instead he writes:

The words "Depart out of these" are not equivalent to "Sever yourself from them absolutely," since to issue such a command as that would be to prescribe death. No, the words mean "Make yourself a stranger to them in judgement and purpose; let none of them cling to you, rise superior to them all; they are your subjects, never treat them as sovereign lords; ... at all times be coming to know yourself, as Moses teaches in many places, saying "Give heed to yourself" (Ex. 24:12), for in this way you will perceive those whom it is fitting for you to obey and those whom it is fitting for you to command."⁷

The advice to "make yourself a stranger" to worldly concerns without actually renouncing them is reminiscent of Stoicism; indeed, one feels in reading this passage that it could easily have been written (apart from the citation of Moses) by Seneca or Epictetus. Clearly, for Philo severance from the body, perception, and speech requires only an appropriate mental detachment and is in no way incompatible with the active life of virtue.

What then is the purpose of Philo's mystical imagery? The answer begins to emerge as Philo discusses the second stage of detachment, severance from sense perception. He writes:

At present you have made a loan of yourself to each sense and have become the property of others, a portion of the goods of

⁶Gen. 12:1.

⁷*De Migratione Abrahami*, 7-8.

those who have borrowed you, having thrown away what was your own.... But if you desire to recover the things you have lent and to put on your own property, letting no part of it be alienated or fall into other hands, you will claim instead a happy life, enjoying in perpetuity the benefit and pleasure derived from good things not foreign to you but your own.⁸

"You have made a loan of yourself." Philo sees preoccupation with the life of the senses as a kind of subservience to a foreign master, and hence as a form of self-alienation. One is reminded of the Gospel saying, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?", and perhaps too of the enigmatic remark, "in your patience possess ye your souls." Philo's ideal is a state of freedom from the distractions of the senses, and, for that very reason, a more full and immediate manner of being, a more focused presence in the world.

There is thus already a hint that detachment has for Philo ontological as well as moral significance. Confirmation comes as Philo moves to the third and final stage of detachment, severance from speech. As Philo describes it, what severance from speech actually involves is relatively mundane—a penetrating beyond mere beauties of phrasing to the real beauty lying in the matter expressed. Such insight is valuable and important, of course, but it scarcely warrants description in mystical language. Philo then adds this explanation:

Verbal expression is like a shadow or copy, while the essential bearing of the matters conveyed by words resembles substance and originals; and it behooves the man, whose aim it is to be rather than to seem (*ton ephiemenon tou einai mallon ē tou dokein*) to dissociate himself from the former and hold fast to the latter.⁹

Severance from speech is a key to contact with reality; it is a way of becoming fully real, rather than a mere appearance. Although Philo does not emphasize here the specifically religious dimension of such a transformation, it is axiomatic for him that reality itself is ultimately none

⁸*De Migratione Abrahami*, 10-11.

⁹*De Migratione Abrahami*, 12.

other than *ho ōn*, He Who Is.¹⁰ In light of this fact, the mystical imagery surrounding Philo's ethical injunctions turns out to be fully warranted. By focusing one's being in the world, detachment and the active life of virtue bring one into more intimate contact with reality itself—and so, ultimately, with God.

There are precedents in both Plato and Aristotle for the notion that in the virtuous life one becomes at the same time most truly oneself and most truly divine.¹¹ Philo is undoubtedly drawing on those precedents, but his use of them is governed by his distinctive conception of the virtuous life. Where Plato focuses on harmony within the soul and Aristotle envisions a life devoted to the contemplation of reality, Philo emphasizes concrete acts of obedience. He is confident that the virtuous life is given concrete specification in the Law of Moses. For Philo the Law is, in fact, is nothing other than the divine Logos, the divine Mind or Reason, distilled into ethical form.¹²

A consequence of Philo's view of the Law is that there is an important sense in which one who does the Law enacts the Logos of God. Philo makes this explicit in a passage which is one of the most intriguing and suggestive in all his works.

“He journeyed just as the Lord spake to him” (Gen. 12:4): the meaning of this is that as God speaks—and He speaks with consummate beauty and excellence—so the good man does everything, blamelessly keeping straight the path of life, so that the actions [*erga*] of the wise man are nothing other than the words [*logoi*] of God. So in another place He says, “Abraham did all my law” (Gen. 26:5): “Law” being nothing else than the divine Logos enjoining what we ought to do and forbidding what we should not do, as Moses testifies by saying “he received a law from His words” (Dt. 33:3). If, then, the Law is the divine Logos, and the man of true worth does [*poiei*] the

¹⁰For Philo's interpretation of Exodus 3:14, see *Quod Deterius* 160 (partly quoted below); also *Quod Deus sit Immutabilis*, 55, *De Mutatione Nominum*, 11-12 and *De Vita Mosis*, 1.75 with discussion in David T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), chapters 1 and 11.

¹¹*Republic* ix 588b-590a, *Nicomachean Ethics* x.7 1177b26-1178a8.

¹²See (besides the text quoted immediately below) E.R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935), chapter 3.

Law, he assuredly “does” the Logos: so that, as I said, God’s words are the wise man’s doings [*praxeis*].¹³

As this passage indicates, obedience has for Philo more than a voluntaristic dimension. The good man’s actions do not merely follow a pattern set down by God; they become that pattern. Hence the puzzling statement, “God’s *logoi* are the wise man’s *praxeis*.” I would suggest that this statement be understood in light of the creation story in the *De Opificio Mundi*. The theme of that work is that in creating the world God brings the divine Logos out of its existence as an archetypal ideal into concrete, sensible reality. The good man does precisely the same in obeying the Law. His actions become like the cosmos itself: a sensible Logos, God’s “younger son” as opposed to the elder son, the intelligible world.¹⁴ By thus imitating on a small scale God’s act of creation, the good man also brings himself more fully into being. In his life, as in the cosmos as a whole, God speaks and it is so.

II.

Assimilation and Deification: Even prior to the vision of God, then, the good man comes to mirror the divine Logos. That process is intensified in the vision itself. The Platonic tradition regularly identified the goal of human existence as *homoiōsis theōi*, achieving a likeness to God.¹⁵ This formula originates in *Theaetetus* 176a-b, where it is used to explain and justify the admonition that “we ought to flee from earth to heaven as quickly as we can.” Such talk of fleeing suggests a withdrawal from the world into contemplation, and Plato does sometimes identify the means by which man can become like the gods as *theoria*. More often, however—including in the *Theaetetus* passage—his emphasis is on the exercise of virtues such as justice, piety, and temperance.¹⁶

¹³*De Migratione Abrahami*, 129-30.

¹⁴For the cosmos and the intelligible world as God’s younger and elder son, see *Quod Deus sit Immutabilis*, 31.

¹⁵See the references to Eudorus, Strabo, and others collected in Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*, 379 n.546. For a comprehensive treatment see Hubert Merki, *Homoiosis Theoi* (Freiburg: Paulusverlag, 1952).

¹⁶See, besides the *Theaetetus* passage, *Phaedrus* 252d, *Republic* 613a-b, *Timaeus* 90a-d, and *Laws* 716c-d, 792d

Philo adopts the *Theaetetus* formula, on one occasion quoting it explicitly in order to make a point similar to Plato's about fleeing from earth to heaven.¹⁷ Like Plato—and indeed with much more prominence than in Plato—he also uses the *homoiōsis* motif to drive home the lesson that men ought to act as God does. This is in keeping with his general emphasis on the active life of virtue as the means of approaching God. For example, Philo writes that “a man should imitate [*mimesthai*] God as much as may be and leave nothing undone that may promote such assimilation [*exhomoiōsin*] as possible.”¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Philo uses the term *mimesthai* alongside the more traditional *exhomoiōsis*. *Exhomoiōsis*, “assimilation to” or “becoming like,” indicates only the goal of the process; *mimesthai* indicates not only the goal but also the means of attaining it.¹⁹ No doubt part of the reason for Philo's emphasis on imitation is that he believes there is a concrete specification of that in God which is to be imitated. As we saw in the previous section, for Philo any obedience to the Law is a way of putting into action the contents of the divine mind, and so ultimately a kind of *imitatio Dei*.

Thus, besides the vision of God, there is another way in which Philo characterizes the *telos* of human existence: assimilation to God. It is not surprising that the two are closely related. On the one hand, becoming like God through virtuous action is a means of preparing for the vision; on the other, the vision results in yet greater assimilation to God because of the overwhelming power and intensity of the divine presence. The latter point emerges most clearly in Philo's description of how Abraham and Moses, when they had come to stand in the presence of God, took on the divine attribute of fixity or repose.

See what is said of wise Abraham, how he was “standing in front of God” (Gen. 18:22), for when should we expect a mind to stand and no longer sway as on the balance save when it is

¹⁷*De Fuga et Inventionem*, 63.

¹⁸*De Virtutibus*, 168; cf. *De Specialibus Legibus*, iv.73 and 186-88, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesim*, 188.

¹⁹Among the relevant Platonic texts, *mimesthai* occurs only at *Phaedrus* 252d, where each follower of a god on the heavenly circuit “lives after the pattern of the god in whose chorus he was, imitating (*mimoumenos*) him as far as he can.” This is not a true parallel, for it presents imitation of the divine as an aspect of the soul's pre-existent state rather than as a guide to present life.

opposite God, seeing and being seen? For it gets its equipoise from these two sources: from seeing, because when it sees the Incomparable it does not yield to the counter-pull of things like itself; from being seen, because the mind which the Ruler judges worthy to come within His sight He allots to the solely best, that is to Himself. To Moses, too, this divine command was given: "Stand thou here with me" (Dt. 5:31), and this brings out both the points suggested above, namely the fixity of the man of worth, and the absolute stability of being [or He Who Is, *tou ontos*). For that which draws near to God enters into affinity with being [or He Who Is, *tōi onti*] and through that immutability becomes self-standing.²⁰

The notion that the vision of ultimate reality has a transforming, even deifying, effect upon the beholder is prominent in Plato's *Symposium* (212a) and *Phaedrus* (248d-249d, 253a). What is most striking in this passage from Philo is that the effect is attributed to two causes: beholding God, on the one hand, and being beheld by Him, on the other. There is a mutuality of regard that is absent in the Platonic tradition. Furthermore, God's beholding of Abraham issues in His call to Abraham, for "the mind which the Ruler judges worthy to come within His sight He allots to the solely best, that is to Himself." Philo's emphasis on the will and election of the deity is another feature of his thought foreign to Platonism.

From speaking of imitation of God or assimilation to God, it is a short step to speaking of outright deification (*theōsis*). The Pentateuch affords an opening in this direction through the declaration of God to Moses at Exodus 7:1, "I give thee as a god to Pharaoh." It is noteworthy that Philo declines the invitation. He interprets Exodus 7:1 in light of God's earlier pronouncement at Exodus 3:14, "I am He Who Is." According to Philo, the latter implies that "others lesser than He have not being, as being indeed is, but exist in semblance only and are conventionally said to exist.... It follows as a consequence that, when Moses was appointed 'a god unto Pharaoh,' he did not become such in reality, but only by a convention is supposed to be such ... [for] that which is given is passive not active, but He that really is must be active."²¹

²⁰*De Somniis*, ii.226-228.

²¹*Quod Deterius*, 160-62.

The reasoning of this passage turns on the Platonic contrast between being and becoming. In dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, that which "truly is" is precisely that which remains the same at all times and in all respects. Philo reasons that, since to be communicated implies passivity, and passivity implies susceptibility to change, that which truly is cannot be communicated. But of course God is He who truly is, so it follows that true deity cannot be communicated; a man can become divine only in a loose and derivative sense, as evidenced by freedom from the body and participation in such divine attributes as beneficence and immortality. Thus Philo, in opposition to some of the religious tendencies of his day, maintains that there is an impassable chasm between the human and divine modes of existence.²²

It is interesting to compare Philo's teaching on this point to that of the Greek Fathers. For the Greek Fathers, too, the vision of God is the central goal of human existence. Unlike Philo, however, they see the vision as both the cause and culmination of a process of deification.²³ In effect they deny the premise that to be communicated implies passivity, for they identify that which is participated in God as the divine operations or "energies" (*energeiai*), which are intrinsically active. Although the term *energeia* is not unknown to Philo, it does not have for him the characteristic sense that it acquired in patristic Greek. Whether Philo's position would have been different had this concept been available to him is hard to say; what is certain is that, despite the many affinities between his thinking about the vision of God and that of the Church Fathers, there remains at least this one highly significant difference.

²²See further *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*, 9, *De Mutatione Nominum*, 128-29, *De Vita Mosis*, i.158, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber sit*, 43-44, and *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Exodum*, ii.29 and 40, with full discussion in Carl Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), chap. 3, and Wendy Helleman, "Philo of Alexandria on Deification and Assimilation to God," *Studia Philonica Annual* 2 (1990): 51-71.

²³See Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), esp. 39, 69-70, 84-88, 131-132, 145-148; Lossky, "The Theology of Light in the Thought of St. Gregory Palamas" in his *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 45-69.

III.

The Vision of God: We are now ready to consider Philo's descriptions of the vision itself. The question on which I will focus is that of how the knowledge granted through such a vision differs from that available through other means. Philo frequently draws a distinction between knowledge of the divine essence (*ousia*) and knowledge of the divine existence (*huparxis*).²⁴ The essence is unknowable because to apprehend it would require a strength equal to that of God Himself—something that Philo, having denied the possibility of deification, holds is certainly beyond reach.²⁵ The divine existence, on the other hand, can be apprehended through a reasoned consideration of creation. Philo develops this theme in greater or lesser detail in various works, sometimes elaborating it into a full statement of the teleological argument.²⁶ The question I wish to ask is this: since neither the vision nor inference reveals the essence of God, and both reveal His existence, how do they differ?

Previous attempts to deal with this question do not seem to me to have been satisfactory. H.A. Wolfson describes the vision of God in Philo as "a direct perception of the evidence in nature for the existence of God"; he holds that it differs from the teleological argument, not in the type of knowledge it conveys, but only in that the relevant evidence is acquired directly through prophecy and revelation rather than through sense perception.²⁷ David Winston agrees with Wolfson that the outcome of the vision is no more than a knowledge of the fact of God's existence, but he sees the difference as more akin to that between the teleological and ontological arguments: the vision of God is an "inner intuitive illumination" resulting from a process of rational reflection on the concept

²⁴For example: "all that follows within the wake of God is within the good man's apprehension, while He Himself is alone beyond it—beyond, that is, in the line of straight and direct approach ... but brought within ken by the Powers that guard and attend Him; for these make evident not His essence [*ousia*] but His existence [*huparxis*] from the things He accomplishes" (*De Posteritate Caini*, 169). See also *Quod Deterius*, 89, *Quod Deus sit Immutabilis*, 62, *De Fuga et Inventione*, 164-65, *De Mutatione Nominum*, 7-9, *De Specialibus Legibus*: i.32-50, *De Praemiis et Poenis*, 39-40.

²⁵See *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Exodum*, frag. 1 (Loeb vol. 12, p. 258).

²⁶See *Legum Allegoriarum*, iii. 97-99 and *De Specialibus Legibus*, i.33-35.

²⁷H.A. Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968),

of God.²⁸ Neither of these proposals explains why Philo assigns the vision a value categorically superior to that of the knowledge of God available through creation. For Philo the vision is not simply one among several possible means of apprehending God, but in a sense the only real means; it is the “pearl of great price” for which one should be willing to cast all else aside. Surely the knowledge it conveys must differ from that available through creation, not only in immediacy and assurance, but also in its fundamental character.

With this question in mind, let us turn to the texts. First is a passage immediately following one of the statements of the teleological argument. After describing the sort of reasoning there involved as an apprehension of God by means of His “shadow,” the created world, Philo continues:

There is a mind more perfect and more thoroughly cleansed, which has undergone initiation into the great mysteries—a mind which gains its knowledge of the First Cause not from created things, as one may learn the substance from the shadow, but lifting its eyes above and beyond creation obtains a clear vision of the Uncreated One, so as from Him to apprehend both Himself and His shadow. To apprehend that [i.e., God and His shadow] was, as we saw [in the discussion of the teleological argument], to apprehend the Logos and this world. The mind of which I speak is Moses who says, “Manifest yourself to me, let me see you that I may know you” (Ex. 33:13); “for I would not that you should be manifested to me by means of heaven or earth or water or air or any created thing at all, nor would I find the reflection of your being in aught else than in you who are God, for the reflections in created things are dissolved, but those in the Uncreated will continue abiding and sure and eternal.” This is why God has expressly called Moses and why He spoke to him. Bezalel also He has expressly called, but not in the same manner. One receives the clear vision of God directly from the First Cause Himself; the other discerns the

²⁸Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*, 28; see also Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985), 43-47.

artificer of created things as it were from a shadow, by virtue of a process of reasoning.²⁹

This passage shows as plainly as any the supreme value that Philo ascribes to the vision of God. The vision is the "great mystery" available only to a mind sufficiently cleansed and perfected, a "clear vision" as opposed to a vision of shadows. In attaining it one does not give up one's knowledge of creation; rather one comes to see creation in its true nature, apprehending it "from" God, much as a shadow is seen in its true nature only in relation to the thing that casts it.

The object of the vision is not quite God Himself, however, but the divine Logos.³⁰ Why does Philo introduce at this point the concept of the Logos? Part of the answer may be found in the passage itself. Philo paraphrases Moses' request to see God in a rather odd way, as a request to see the reflections of God in Himself. Apparently Philo assumes (and has Moses assume) that God, simply as God, is beyond the vision of even the most highly purified mind. Yet the passage also asserts that to apprehend the Logos *is* to apprehend God. This apparent contradiction can be resolved if we take the Logos to be a sort of reflection of God, for in apprehending a reflection one also apprehends its original. That fits with the way Philo paraphrases Moses' request: the Logos is the reflection of God present "in" Himself, rather than in the created world.

But this answer only raises the further question of what it means to speak of a reflection of God in Himself. For further insight we must turn to the *De Opificio Mundi*. There Philo develops an analogy between the creation of the world by God and that of a city by an architect. Just as the architect first conceives a plan of the city in his mind, so God conceived the plan of creation. This plan is the intelligible world, *ho noētos kosmos*. Philo first describes the intelligible world as "the Logos of God when He [i.e., God] was already engaged in the act of creating"; he then adds that it is

²⁹*Legum Allegoriarum*: Vol. I, iii.100-02.

³⁰Wolfson takes the second occurrence of the term "shadow" in this passage to refer to the Logos as well as the created world, with the consequence that the clear vision is not of the Logos but of God's existence (vol. 2, 83). But the other two occurrences of the term refer solely to the created world; furthermore, the relative pronoun connecting the phrase "the Logos and this world" to the preceding clause is neuter rather than feminine, indicating that it glosses the entire clause and not only "shadow." The Loeb translation is similar to that given here.

“the reasoning faculty [*logismos*] of the architect in the act of planning to found the city.”³¹ From these descriptions it is evident that the Logos is the reasoning faculty of God *as it is informed by a particular content*—namely, the archetypal Ideas. As John Dillon writes, the Logos is “the active element of God’s creative thought,” “the sum-total of the Ideas in activity.”³² Hence Philo describes it as the “Idea of Ideas,” meaning that it is the single Idea embracing all others.³³

Since the Logos is the divine reasoning faculty, it clearly is “in” God. As for its being a reflection of God, we also find in the *De Opificio* that the Logos is the image of God. Philo interprets Genesis 1:26 to mean that man is an image of an image of God, and infers on this basis that the whole of creation must likewise be such a secondary image.³⁴ The original image—the archetype of creation—is, of course, the divine Logos. Unfortunately, Philo never explains precisely *how* the Logos is God’s image. The question is not really how it can be sufficiently like God to be an image, for as the reasoning faculty of a simple being it is certainly “like” that being. The question is how it can fail to be simply identical to God. Presumably the answer lies in the fact that the Logos is the divine intellect *only as that intellect is occupied with created reality*. Since for Philo it is axiomatic that the act of creation does not exhaust the plenitude of God’s being, the Logos can be no more than a partial and limited expression of what God is. Philo expresses this limitation of its content by calling the Logos an “image.”³⁵

Let us return now to the texts describing the vision of God. The two others of greatest importance occur in the course of Philo’s exposition of the allegorical significance of Jacob. Philo takes Jacob to represent the highest stage of the ascent to the divine mysteries, that of one who sees

³¹*De Opificio Mundi*, 24.

³²Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 159

³³*De Opificio Mundi*, 25, *De Migratione Abrahami*, 102-03.

³⁴*De Opificio Mundi*, 25.

³⁵Contrast this interpretation of the Logos with that of Wolfson (*Philo*, vol. 1, 217-40). Wolfson attempts to harmonize Philo’s various statements about the Logos by distinguishing between an uncreated Logos (that is, the divine mind) and a created Logos. Unfortunately, this distinction is nowhere to be found in Philo’s text, and it runs afoul of Philo’s explicit statement that the Logos is neither created nor uncreated (*Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, 206). For further criticism see E.R. Goodenough, “Wolfson’s *Philo*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67 (1948): 87-109, especially 105-06.

God.³⁶ In the first passage Jacob earnestly seeks God but finds the corporeal universe dark and indeterminate. Suddenly he is illuminated:

A beam purer than aether and incorporeal suddenly shone upon him and revealed the conceptual world ruled by its charioteer. That charioteer, ringed as he was with beams of undiluted light, was beyond his sight or conjecture, for the eye was darkened by the dazzling beams. Yet in spite of the fiery beam which flooded it, his sight held its own in its unutterable longing to behold the vision. The Father and Saviour, perceiving the sincerity of his yearning in pity, gave power to the penetration of his eyesight and did not grudge to grant him the vision of Himself insofar as it was possible for mortal and created nature to contain it. Yet the vision only showed that He is, not what He is. For that which is better than the Good, more venerable than the Monad, purer than the One, cannot be discerned by anyone else; to God alone is it permitted to apprehend God.³⁷

Philo takes up the same topic a few pages later. After contrasting the access to God granted to Jacob with that available through creation, he explains:

This knowledge he has gained not from any other source, not from things on earth or things in Heaven, not from the elements or combinations of elements mortal or immortal, but at the summons of Him alone who has willed to reveal His proper existence (*tēn idian huparxin*) to the suppliant. How this access has been obtained may be well seen through an illustration. Do we behold the sun which sense perceives by any other thing than the sun, or the stars by any others than the stars, and in general is not light seen by light? In the same way God too is His own brightness and is discerned through Himself alone, without anything cooperating or being able to cooperate in giving a perfect apprehension of His existence.... The seekers

³⁶See the copious references in Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*, 351 n.240

³⁷*De Praemiis et Poenis*, 37-40.

for truth are those who envisage God through God, light through light.³⁸

The first of these two passages identifies the object of Jacob's vision as the conceptual world, *ho noētos kosmos*. This is apparently just the radiance surrounding the charioteer. The radiance is so dazzling that it prevents Jacob from beholding the charioteer, yet it does not *hide* the charioteer. On the contrary, it reveals Him; the vision is one of God "insofar as it was possible for mortal and created nature to contain it." The analogy with the sun in the second passage helps clarify what this means. One sees the sun through the field of radiant light surrounding it. The field is spatially extended, and in that sense diverse; yet precisely in virtue of its spatial structure—its converging to a focus—the field of light points beyond itself to the unity which is its source. One cannot see the light without also "seeing" the sun behind it; in fact, that is the only way in which the sun can be seen by (unaided) human vision. So it is that God can be apprehended only through Himself, "light through light."³⁹

These passages provide further evidence of the inadequacy of the interpretations by Wolfson and Winston mentioned earlier. Jacob does not behold God by receiving a direct revelation of the facets of creation that reveal God's existence. Nor does he seem to be engaged in a process of rational reflection on the concept of God; indeed, both in these passages and elsewhere, it is abundantly clear that the vision comes in an ecstatic state transcending normal human experience.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Wolfson and Winston are correct in asserting that even the vision of God reveals only "that He is, not what He is." Somehow this restriction does not prevent the knowledge available through the vision from surpassing that available through creation—not only in immediacy and assurance, but in its most

³⁸*De Praemiis et Poenis*, 44-46.

³⁹Philo's use of this phrase may also deliberately echo Psalm 36:9 (35:9, LXX), "in thy light shall we see light."

⁴⁰Winston at first denies this but then seems to affirm it (*Philo of Alexandria*, 27, 30, 34-35). It is true that, as Winston observes, Philo sometimes uses language about divine ecstasy hyperbolically, but this by no means implies that all his uses of it are hyperbolic. For Philo's most explicit statements on the ecstatic character of the vision, see *De Opificio Mundi*, 71, *De Vita Contemplativa*, 11-12, and *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin*, iv.29. For his understanding of the contrast between ecstasy and reason, see *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, 263-65.

fundamental character. Precisely how it does so will be the subject of our final section.

IV.

Essence and Existence: The explanation I propose rests on the fact that the vision is a personal encounter. That the vision is above all an encounter with the *person* of God should be abundantly clear from the evidence already assembled. We have noted that the means of preparing for the vision is not a dialectical ascent, but conformity to the divine will as revealed in the Law; that it is granted only by the election of God; and that Abraham and Moses not only see God, but are seen by Him. This personalistic tendency in Philo's thought is further confirmed by the three passages just quoted. In the first, Moses is "expressly called"; in the second, God perceives the sincerity of Jacob's yearning and grants the vision to him "in pity"; in the third, Jacob responds to the divine summons. It is surely reasonable to surmise that the special significance of the vision somehow involves the personal character of the encounter between God and man.

What is needed is a way of interpreting the divine *ousia* and *huparxis* that leaves room for differentiating the vision of God from the apprehension of God through creation. Scholars have generally assumed that by *ousia* Philo means Aristotelian essence, that is, genus and difference.⁴¹ No doubt this is often what he does mean, but there are also passages in which the divine *ousia* must be more than a definable essence. The most important occur in *De Specialibus Legibus*. Following an explanation of how observation of the cosmos makes it possible to learn the existence of God, Philo writes: "As for the divine essence (*ousia*), though in fact it is hard to track and hard to apprehend, it still calls for all the inquiry possible. For nothing is better than to search for the true God, even if the discovery of Him eludes human capacity, since the very wish to learn, if earnestly entertained, produces untold joys and pleasures."⁴² Here the inquiry into the divine *ousia* is equated with the search for the true God, and the search itself, though never-ending, is said to be a source of joy. In light of Philo's strong conviction of the personal reality of God, there can

⁴¹E.g., Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 2, pp. 110-11; Winston, *Philo of Alexandria*, 22-23.

⁴²*De Specialibus Legibus*, i.36.

be little doubt that in describing inquiry into the divine *ousia* as a source of joy Philo has in mind more than a quest for an Aristotelian definition.

To illustrate how the divine essence cannot be known and yet must be sought, Philo next paraphrases the exchange between God and Moses in Exodus 33. First Moses asks to understand God in His essence. God replies that to do so is impossible. Next Moses asks to behold the glory about God—meaning, according to Philo, the divine Powers. God replies that even they are unknowable. Finally God declares that He will grant to Moses all that can be granted, namely, to contemplate the cosmos and behold in it the working of the Powers. Moses is disappointed, but cherishes the hope of something greater: “When Moses heard this, he did not cease from his desire but kept the yearning for the invisible aflame in his heart.”⁴³

Throughout this story God’s personal character, His ability to converse with Moses and respond to his supplications, is very much at the fore. The words in which Moses frames his first request are particularly instructive: “what you are in your essence [*ousia*] I desire to understand.... Therefore I pray and beseech you to accept the supplication of a suppliant, a lover of God, one whose mind is set to serve you alone; for as knowledge of the light does not come by any other source but what itself supplies, so too you alone can tell me of yourself.”⁴⁴ This is not the language of one seeking to discover an Aristotelian essence. It is the language of a lover. Clearly, the *ousia* which is the object of Moses’ quest is not a definition of the kind of being God is, but something more akin to that which a lover seeks to apprehend in the object of his love.

In order to understand Philo’s notion of the divine *ousia*, we must ask what it is that a lover seeks to apprehend in the beloved. Although this is a question admitting of virtually endless reflection, for our purposes a simple answer will suffice. What a lover seeks in the beloved is nothing less than the innermost wellsprings of the beloved’s thought and action, that which makes him or her uniquely the person he or she is. Let us call this the “personal essence” of the beloved. I submit that it is this sort of *ousia* that Moses seeks to apprehend in God.

Indeed, I would suggest that there are two distinctions implicitly at work in the exchange between God and Moses, and throughout Philo’s

⁴³*De Specialibus Legibus*, i.50.

⁴⁴*De Specialibus Legibus*, i.41-42.

descriptions of the vision of God. The first is that between the Aristotelian essence and what I have called the "personal essence." In the case of God neither essence can be known, but the latter possesses, as the former does not, the power to draw the heart forward in an unending quest to know God as He is. The other distinction is between knowledge of the fact of God's existence, where what is known is a proposition, and a felt awareness of God's existence as a living, personal presence. Both of the latter are ways of knowing the divine *huparxis*, but whereas a study of creation is sufficient for the first, only the vision of God can convey the second.

These distinctions enable us to see both why the vision of God is superior to the inferential knowledge available through creation and why even the vision does not reveal the divine *ousia*. The difference between inference and vision is like that between learning of Friday from his footsteps in the sand and meeting him face to face. The footsteps can make one aware of Friday's existence. They can also make one yearn to meet him directly, as they did in the case of Crusoe. But only a direct meeting can convey an awareness of his existence as a living presence. Such a meeting reveals the person one has been desiring to know, while at the same time oddly concealing him; for now one comes to know all the nuances of character that seem to spring from an inner source, the personal essence, yet one never apprehends the essence itself. One's desire is transformed from a distant yearning into a more heartfelt and personal love, even while the unattainability of its object becomes ever clearer.

In closing, let me point out how this reading resolves what would otherwise be a contradiction between Philo's discussion of Exodus 33 in *De Specialibus Legibus* and that in *Legum Allegoriae* (quoted in Section III). In the former Moses is described as frustrated in his quest for the vision of God, whereas in the latter he is said to enjoy "a clear vision of the Uncreated One." Both descriptions are appropriate, provided we understand the vision as I have interpreted it here: as a dynamic state in which an acute awareness of God's presence provokes the beholder to move beyond inferential knowledge to an insatiable desire to know God as a person. Moses on Mount Sinai is the paradigm of one in such a state. His encounter with God makes it plain that the vision is not simply a resting point, but also a beginning.

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