

SEEING GOD IN PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: THE LOGOS, THE POWERS, OR THE EXISTENT ONE?

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1. Introduction

For Philo, seeing God represents the greatest experience a human can hope for. It is the “crowning point of happiness” (*Abr.* 58), and the “most precious of all possessions” (*Legat.* 4). Throughout his works, in numerous circumstances and in a variety of contexts, one finds Philo lauding the mystical ascent to the Ideal world, the “noetic realm” (κόσμος νοητός), which more often than not has as its goal the vision of God. The call of Abraham is transformed into a noetic ascent (*Abr.* 70–71), as is Jacob’s encounter with God at Bethel (*Praem.* 36–40). Moses’ receipt of the law is recast in the shape of a mystical noetic ascent, and not surprisingly, study of that same law can engender a similar experience (*Mos.* 1.158–159; *Spec.* 3.6). The true meaning and task of “philosophy” is defined as “nothing other than the earnest desire to see” God and his Logos (*Conf.* 97). And as one might then expect, Philo’s autobiographical accounts of his own philosophical and exegetical study are imbued with noetic visual experiences (*Spec.* 3.1–6; *Migr.* 34–35). Even the name of the historic people of God, “Israel,” is etymologically extended beyond ethnic borders, as Philo identifies “those who see God” as “all respected philosophers, whether Jewish or not.”¹

Despite a wealth of material, determining the content and nature of Philo’s *visio Dei* experience is often extremely difficult. Because he touches on the topic in numerous contexts, while discussing a variety of topics, or in the process of interpreting LXX texts, his thoughts appear to be “filled with contradictions and inconsistencies.”² Most significantly, the identity of the

¹ Ellen Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes* (BJS 290; SPhM 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 116.

² Ellen Birnbaum, “What Does Philo Mean by ‘Seeing God’? Some Methodological Considerations,” *SBLSPS* (1995): 545. A slightly condensed version of this paper appears in her monograph, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*, 77–90.

object of sight in Philo's *visio Dei* accounts is somewhat ambiguous. Though in many contexts God himself is seen, in other places the vision appears to be restricted to divine intermediaries, such as the Powers or the Logos. One even occasionally encounters a blanket statement declaring the *visio Dei* an utter impossibility (*Post.* 167–168), even for Moses (*Mut.* 7–9).

When the most significant *visio Dei* passages are examined, it becomes obvious that Philo's individual discussions are largely conditioned by the goals of his immediate rhetorical context, and thus they resist any easy systematization.³ That he felt no compulsion to perform rote recitals of his "doctrine" of mystical, visual practice is apparent as well. Therefore it is essential to be attentive to the immediate context and be willing to allow ambiguities to stand unresolved; one must also resist the urge to impose synthetic assumptions. Our discussion will demonstrate that a perfectly consistent synthesis is neither possible, nor is it desirable. Nevertheless, as the full range of Philo's views on the identity of the object of sight in his *visio Dei* accounts are presented and allowed to stand on their own, it will become apparent that he is, in broad terms, generally consistent, and certainly coherent.

2. *Transcendence and invisibility*

Some of the apparent inconsistencies and difficulties derive from Philo's strict adherence to the notion of God's utter transcendence.⁴ In fact, the role of divine transcendence in Philo's thought can scarcely be overestimated, as Peter Frick has observed:

In Philo's thought, the idea of transcendence functions as the hermeneutic key that determines the shape of the doctrine of God which in turn determines the

³ See David T. Runia, "The Beginnings of the End: Philo of Alexandria and Hellenistic Theology," in *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, Its Background and Aftermath* (ed. Dorothea Frede and André Laks; *Philosophia Antiqua* 89; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 287: "I believe that Philo has a clear rationale for what he is doing. In his commentaries he takes the scriptural text as his starting-point, to which he as a commentator is subordinate. The exegetical context thus determines the perspective from which he employs philosophical doctrines. If grand attempts are made to make a synthesis of all these passages, the perspective from which they are written soon becomes lost, and the results cannot fail to be unsatisfactory."

⁴ Occasionally one comes across an assertion of immanence, such as in *Somn.* 1.149: "Be zealous, O Soul, to become a house of God, a holy temple, a most beautiful abiding place." The Logos is also occasionally portrayed as indwelling an individual (*Conf.* 134).

idea of immanence and establishes the proper place of other features of his thought.⁵

With regard to the *visio Dei*, one of the most pertinent aspects of Philo's articulation of transcendence is his commonly made claim that God's existence may be ascertained, but his essence (οὐσία), or qualified nature (ποιότης), is unknowable.⁶

Also relevant to our discussion are the unqualified assertions of God's invisibility that one occasionally encounters. If even Moses was incapable of seeing God (*Mut.* 7–9), then only the most arrogant person “will boast of seeing the invisible God” (*QE* 2.37). Moreover, an ontological gulf separates humans from God: “By his very nature he cannot be seen” by created beings (*Mut.* 9; *Post.* 168). Occupants of an entirely different order of existence, humans are ontologically and biologically incapable of perceiving God, “for we have in us no organ by which we can envisage the Existent One, neither in sense . . . nor in mind” (*Mut.* 7; cf. also *Det.* 86–87). In *Opif.* 70–71, the problem is not the lack of an organ of perception, but the shortcomings of that apparatus in the presence of an overwhelmingly radiant God. The philosopher's mind, drawn aloft “on soaring wing,” “reaches out to the noetic realm.” And though “it seems to be on its way to the Great King himself . . . pure and unmixed beams of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that the eyes of the mind are overwhelmed by the brightness and suffer from vertigo” (see also *Abr.* 76; *Spec.* 1.36–50).⁷ Philo also conjectures that “perhaps it is contrary to holiness that the mortal should touch (ψάω) the eternal” with the “eyes of the body” (*Abr.* 76).⁸

⁵ Peter Frick, *Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria* (TSAJ 77; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr; [Paul Siebeck], 1999), 26. On transcendence, cf. David Winston, “Was Philo a Mystic?” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* (ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmadge; Cambridge, Mass: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982), 16–18.

⁶ This assertion is made in a number of *visio Dei* accounts, including: *Praem.* 39; *Post.* 15–16, 167–169; *Fug.* 141, 164–165; *Spec.* 1.40; *Virt.* 215.

⁷ The Platonic theory of vision may inform this failed *visio Dei*. Because of their essential similarity, the eye's fire and the fire of daylight form a “single homogenous body” that extends from the eye to the visible object (*Tim.* 45B–D). A key principle of Plato's theory, “like is known by like,” informs and conditions the act of seeing. The attempted *visio Dei* in *Opif.* 70–71 may then have failed because of the essential differences in God's radiant light and the less powerful light rays emanating from the mind's eyes of the noetic mystic. On Plato's theory of vision, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 3–6.

⁸ The verb “touch” (ψάω) may be used literally here to represent the tactility associated with the extramission theory of vision. To reach out and touch God is an act of irreverent indecency, “contrary to piety/holiness” (ὀσιότης). The verb can be used figuratively in similar contexts, as in Sophocles, *Ant.* 961: “He learned at last it was madness to attack (ψάω) the god with insults.”

Finally, in *Post.* 167–168, Philo employs the “allegorical defense” in what appears to be an attempt to backpedal away from any prior claims he may have made about the possibility of seeing God: “When we say that the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) is visible, we are not using words in their literal sense . . . it is impossible that the God who Is (τὸν κατὰ τὸ εἶναι θεόν) should be perceived at all by created beings.”

These unequivocal denials of the possibility of seeing God are relatively rare, however. Philo more commonly portrays the great goal of the contemplative life as attainable. “For the beginning and end of happiness is to be able to see God” (*QE* 2.51), he exclaims, and such perfect and complete happiness he regularly commends to all who are serious and virtuous lovers of wisdom.⁹ Nevertheless, the presence of the aforementioned denials reveals that Philo is somewhat conflicted about the matter. Perhaps this conflicted, ambivalent testimony about the possibility of seeing God is deliberate, appropriately reflecting the complexity and uncertainty of the enterprise.¹⁰

3. *The object of the vision: God or his intermediaries?*

As mentioned before, the identity of the object of sight in Philo’s *visio Dei* accounts varies, and making a precise determination can sometimes be difficult. Occasionally Philo’s commitment to divine transcendence causes him to represent the Logos and/or Powers as the means by which the transcendent God relates to the world. In many instances, however, God himself appears to be the object of sight.

⁹ The term for happiness here is εὐδαιμονία, which according to almost all schools of Greek philosophy is the ultimate goal of human existence. On its usage in Philo and Hellenistic Judaism see David T. Runia, “Eudaemonism in Hellenistic-Jewish Literature,” in *Shem in the Tents of Japheth: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism*, (ed. James L. Kugel; JSJSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 131–157.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Michaelis comes to the conclusion that Philo, controlled by his allegiance to transcendence, is ultimately convinced of God’s absolute invisibility, even to the “eyes of the soul/mind” (“ὀράω,” *TDNT* 5:336–338). John Dillon, taking into account Philo’s commitment to the traditional Jewish “personal God,” arrives at the opposite conclusion: “When one has established a totally transcendent God, there straightway arises in an acute form the problem of his relations with the universe . . . in this situation, . . . a kind of mystical vision is the only thing that can connect us to any extent with God” (*The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, rev. ed. [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996], 157).

3.1. *The Logos*

The Logos is of inestimable importance to Philo's thought.¹¹ Occupying a crucial intermediary role between the transcendent God and his creation, the Logos, as divine "Reason," or "Intellect," is

that aspect of God that is directed towards creation, whether conceptually (e.g., in the formation of the intelligible cosmos) or in terms of active participation in the ordering of physical reality and its administration (in conjunction with God's powers).¹²

Thus the Logos both provided the *pattern* according to which the universe was ordered, and operated as the *instrument* through which it was created (*Opif.* 20–25; *Leg.* 3.96; *Cher.* 127; *Spec.* 1.81). The Logos continues to uphold the universe (*Somn.* 1.241), and represent that created order to humanity, in the form of rational thought (*Opif.* 146; *Praem.* 163; *Det.* 86–90). Further connecting God and humanity is the Logos' role as the "image of God," as well as humanity's creation in the image of the Logos, "the image of an image" (*Her.* 231; *Conf.* 147). Finally, the Logos functions anagogically, employed by God "to lead up (ἀνάγω) the perfect person from earthly things to himself" (*Sacr.* 8).

3.2. *The Powers*

The Powers occupy a similar mediatorial role in Philo's thought, though they are not nearly as prominent as the Logos.¹³ Philo typically identifies the two Powers as "God," representing the deity's generative capacity, as well as his goodness, and "Lord," which denotes both his sovereignty and right to issue punitive judgment.¹⁴ These Powers stand beside God like the cherubim over the mercy seat (*Her.* 166). An inspired allegorical reading of the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden, in *Cher.* 27–30, also

¹¹ On Philo's Logos, see David Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985), 15–25; David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (*Philosophia Antiqua* 44; Leiden: Brill, 1986), 446–451; idem, "Logos," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden: Brill / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 528; Thomas H. Tobin, "Logos," *ABD* 4:350–351; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, 158–161; Kenneth Schenck, *A Brief Guide to Philo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 58–62.

¹² David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (PACS 1; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 142.

¹³ On the Powers, see Dillon, *The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, 161–163.

¹⁴ Cf. *Fug.* 94–105; *Abr.* 119–132; *QG* 2.16, 51, 75; 3.39; 4.2–8; 30; *QE* 2.62, 68; *Legat.* 6.

identifies the Powers with the cherubim, while the Logos represents the flaming sword that stands in between the two and “unites them, for it is through the Logos that God is both ruler and good.” Philo prioritizes the Logos again in *QE* 2.68, describing the Powers as emanating from the Logos: “like from a spring,” they “divide and break forth.”¹⁵ Though here and in *Cher.* 28 Philo clearly defines the status and roles of the three intermediaries, usually his presentation lacks such careful definition. As Alan Segal has noted:

How the powers relate to the *logos* is ambiguous. Since the *logos* can also signify the sum of all the powers, it logically stands above the two powers in the ascent from concrete to abstract. Yet sometimes Philo uses *kyrios* and *theos* to refer to the two powers of God and at other times to refer to the *logos* and the highest God, being-in-itself. Basically he uses whatever exegesis makes most sense in the allegorical context.¹⁶

It is particularly the title θεός, “God,” that complicates our discussion. Because of its frequent application to the Powers, and occasionally the Logos, it can nowhere be assumed to refer to the most high God, the Existent One (τὸ ὄν). Instead, the individual context is determinative.

3.3. *Recent interpreters*

After expending such effort to systematically distance humanity from God, via the Logos and Powers, we might expect Philo to accordingly restrict the scope of the *visio Dei* to these mediators. And it is perhaps the comprehensive mediatorial presence of the Logos in Philo’s thought that leads David Winston to repeatedly assert that humanity’s “highest union with God, according to Philo, is limited to the Deity’s manifestation as Logos.”¹⁷

¹⁵ On the background of Philo’s equation of the cherubim and the Powers, see Fred Strickert, “On the Cherubim,” *SPhA* 8 (1996): 40–57.

¹⁶ Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism* (SJLA 25; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 175.

¹⁷ David Winston, *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections* (CWS; New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 21. This statement is repeated in his “Was Philo a Mystic?” 15. Similar statements appear throughout his works on the subject: “For Philo, it is through the Logos and the Logos alone” that humans are “capable of participating in the divine” (*Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria*, 25); “He probably conceived of a mystical contact that was limited only to an aspect of the Deity, namely, his manifestation as Logos” (“Philo’s Mysticism,” *SPhA* 8 [1996], 74); “Since Philo’s mystical theology bars a direct approach to God’s essence, we must seek it out through the oblique traces disclosed by its noetic aspect, the Logos” (*Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria*, 15); “The highest divine level with which mystical experience is associated by Philo is of the Intelligible World, or God qua Logos” (“Philo’s Mysticism,” 82). Winston is joined in this

Thus the noetic ascent “that carries the soul to the uttermost bounds of the universe” issues not in a vision of the Existent One (τὸ ὄν), rather, it enables the mystic “to gaze on the Divine Logos.”¹⁸ In his support, Winston cites just two passages: *Conf.* 95 and *Ebr.* 152.¹⁹

In her detailed consideration of the *visio Dei* theme in Philo, Ellen Birnbaum offers a more comprehensive assessment of the issue: “Although Philo occasionally seems to speak without qualification about the possibility of seeing God, at other times he claims that God can be seen only through apprehension of His various intermediaries.”²⁰ Birnbaum’s discussion primarily focuses on *visio Dei* passages involving intermediaries. And in addition to *Conf.* 95–97, she appeals to *Somn.* 1.64–67 and *QG* 4.2 in support of her claim that the *visio Dei* is occasionally restricted to intermediaries. Furthermore, Birnbaum has demonstrated the necessity of analyzing the various *visio Dei* passages with respect to their location in the three commentary series (the Allegory, Exposition, and *QGE*), since they were written for different audiences who presumably possessed varying levels of biblical knowledge as well as spiritual and philosophical sophistication.²¹

3.4. *Visio Dei* passages in the Allegorical Commentary

The complex and nuanced content of the treatises in the Allegory series indicates they were written for an audience reasonably aware of both biblical traditions and Greco-Roman philosophy.²² David M. Hay has

opinion by others, including: Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935), 22–47; Burton L. Mack, “Moses on the Mountain Top: A Philonic View,” in *The School of Moses: Studies in Philo and Hellenistic Religion in Memory of Horst R. Moehring* (ed. John Peter Kenney; BJS 304; SPhM 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 24. David M. Hay, “The Psychology of Faith in Hellenistic Judaism,” *ANRW* 2.20.2 (1987), 904–905, 921, contends “it is not clear” whether Philo considers God visible.

¹⁸ Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria*, 54.

¹⁹ This same claim and citations are found in his *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections*, 33–34; “Philo and the Contemplative Life,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages* (ed. Arthur Green; New York: Crossroad, 1986), 225; and “Was Philo a Mystic?” 31.

²⁰ Birnbaum, “What Does Philo Mean by ‘Seeing God’? Some Methodological Considerations,” 540; eadem. *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*, 80.

²¹ Birnbaum, “What Does Philo Mean by ‘Seeing God’? Some Methodological Considerations,” 549–550; eadem. *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*, 17–21, 89–90.

²² See the remarks of Gregory E. Sterling, “‘The School of Sacred Laws’: The Social Setting of Philo’s Treatises,” *VC* 53.2 (1999): 159; the implied audience of the Allegorical Commentary knew the “biblical text exceptionally well” and were “capable of appreciating extended philosophical expositions of it.”

characterized the implied audience as “persons committed to the Jewish religion,” and aspiring to a “deeper religious experience.”²³ Therefore the “main theme” of Philo’s “preaching” in the Allegory is “the means of turning to God, the barriers people encounter when they try to grow closer to God, and the stages of spiritual progress.”²⁴

3.4.1. *Conf.* 95 and *Somn.* 1.64–67: God’s transcendence of “place”

In the first passage cited by David Winston, *Conf.* 95–97, Philo interrupts a discussion of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt to briefly touch upon the topic of noetic ascent. Like the Israelites who followed Moses out of Egypt, all “those who serve the Existent One” (τὸ ὄν) will similarly follow Moses into the noetic realm, “ascending in their thoughts to the heavenly height.” It is there, according to Philo, that “they will behold the place which in fact is the Logos, where God stands.” This allusion to the appearance of God at Sinai to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of Israel’s elders (Exod 24:9–11), is developed at length elsewhere (cf. *QE* 2.37, 39). Philo perhaps assumed the familiarity of his readers with this allegory, which is largely dependent on an LXX translation that refocuses the object of sight from God to the “place” where he stood.²⁵ Thus, it is the *place* where God stood that was visible at Sinai, not God himself (as in the MT), and Philo allegorically identifies that “place” as the Logos. Philo concludes this digression with a further qualification: noetic philosophers

desire to see the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) if they may, but, if they cannot, to see his image, the most holy Logos, and after the Logos its most perfect work of all that our senses know, that is the world. For by philosophy nothing else has ever been meant, than the earnest desire to see these things exactly as they are (*Conf.* 97).

Rather than precluding the possibility of seeing τὸ ὄν, this passage merely states that some noetic mystics may be restricted to seeing only the Logos.²⁶ It also infers the existence of a third group, whose experience is limited to

²³ David M. Hay, “Philo of Alexandria,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Siefried; WUNT 2.140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck / Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 365.

²⁴ Ibid. Erwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 13, notes that the Allegory is the most speculative and mystical of the three commentary series.

²⁵ Exod 24:10 (LXX): καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον οὗ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ.

²⁶ A similar sentiment is expressed in *Somn.* 1.117: “To meet a ‘place’ or ‘word’ (λόγος) is an all-sufficient gift to those who are unable to see God who is prior to ‘place’ and ‘word.’”

insights about creation. As we will soon see, such a hierarchy of mystical experience, typically involving three grades of accomplishment, is commonly encountered in Philo's writings.

In *Somn.* 1.64–67, a passage Birnbaum appeals to in support of her claim that Philo occasionally restricts the *visio Dei* to intermediaries, Philo once again plays on the concept of “place” in an attempt to solve a dilemma he finds in Gen 22:3–4: how was Abraham able to “come to a place” and at the same time “see it from afar.” As in *Conf.* 95–97, the “place” Abraham came to, Moriah, is interpreted as the Logos, and the person

who has their place in the divine Logos does not actually reach him who is in very essence God, but sees him from afar; or rather, not even from a distance is one capable of contemplating Him; all one sees is the bare fact that God is far away from all creation, and that the apprehension of him is removed to a very great distance from all human power of thought (1.66).

This passage nowhere states that the Logos is seen instead of God. It instead makes an assertion of divine transcendence: “all one sees is the bare fact that God is far away from all creation” (1.66).

The notion that God cannot be confined to a place, “but rather contains all things within himself,” is a recurring topic in Philo's oeuvre.²⁷ The Yahwist's anthropomorphic Gardener (Gen 2:8) provokes Philo to engage in some “pruning” of his own: “For not even the whole world would be a fit place for God to make his abode, since God is his own place, and he is filled by himself, . . . filling and containing all other things . . . but himself contained by nothing else” (*Leg.* 1.44).²⁸ Philo's focus on “place” in his discussions of Gen 2, 11, 22, 28 and Exod 24, and the careful assignation of the Logos, or Powers, to that place, is typically the result of his larger preoccupation with God's transcendence of place, not his invisibility to eyesight.²⁹ The larger conceptuality, God's transcendence of place, steers the discussion, even when it is not immediately apparent.³⁰ The Logos only

²⁷ Cf. Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ALGHJ 4; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 217; Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundation of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 2nd ed. (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), 1:240–252.

²⁸ Cf. also *Sobr.* 63; *Conf.* 136–139; *Migr.* 182–183; *Somn.* 1.184–185.

²⁹ Cf. *Somn.* 1.62: Space is defined as the Divine Logos, “which God himself has completely filled throughout with incorporeal powers”; and *Opif.* 20: Just as the plans of a city initially exist solely in the mind of the architect, so also the noetic realm has its place in the Logos “who gives the ideas their ordered disposition.” See Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 143.

³⁰ Though the discussions appear at times to be occasioned by an anti-anthropomorphic apologetic, they more often than not lead to elaborate defenses of divine transcendence of “place.”

enters this discussion as a secondary consideration, drawn into the conversation at the bidding of the more pertinent agenda. Transcendence, not vision and the object of sight, is the controlling consideration.

3.4.2. *Ebr.* 152: The Uncreated (ἀγένητος): the Logos or God?

The second passage cited by Winston, *Ebr.* 152, is also problematic. Philo discusses the “sober intoxication” of the “God-possessed,” who, like Samuel’s mother Hannah, will “pour out their souls before the Lord” (1 Sam 1:15), and thus soar “to the bounds of the All, hastening to that most glorious and loveliest of visions — the vision of the Uncreated” (ἀγένητος). Winston appears to assume that ἀγένητος, “the Uncreated One,” refers to the Logos, though there is nothing in the surrounding context that can be appealed to in support of that identification.

The word ἀγένητος appears 101 times in the Philonic corpus, and in almost half these occurrences, ἀγένητος would seem to refer to the most high God, τὸ ὄν.³¹ Perhaps even more important are the five passages in which God the Uncreated One is the object of sight (*Sacr.* 60; *Det.* 158; *Post.* 63; *Plant.* 22; *QG* 4.1).³² In only two instances is the Logos possibly called ἀγένητος. The first possible occurrence, *Leg.* 3.100–103, is somewhat convoluted, and must be read within its larger context. Philo compares two

³¹ (1) Contexts that explicitly identify the “Existent One” (τὸ ὄν) as ἀγένητος: *Det.* 158; *Deus* 56, 60; *Plant.* 22; *Ebr.* 84; *Somn.* 1.184; *Spec.* 2.166; *Virt.* 180, 213, 218; *QG* 4.1.

(2) Contexts that identify θεός as ἀγένητος, and which lack the presence of intermediaries: *Leg.* 1.51; *Cher.* 44; *Sacr.* 57, 63, 101; *Post.* 63; *Gig.* 14; *Plant.* 64, 66; *Ebr.* 94; *Migr.* 157; *Her.* 98; *Congr.* 48, 107, 134; *Somn.* 1.249; *Ios.* 265; *Mos.* 2.171; *Decal.* 41, 120; *Praem.* 46, 87.

(3) Contexts where intermediaries are present, but ἀγένητος undoubtedly refers to τὸ ὄν: *Leg.* 3.208; *Sacr.* 60, 66; *Det.* 124; *Plant.* 31; *Conf.* 98; *Migr.* 91, 192; *Her.* 206; *Somn.* 1.94; *Decal.* 60, 64.

(4) Contexts where it may be inferred that ἀγένητος refers to τὸ ὄν: *Her.* 14; *Somn.* 1.77; *Legat.* 5.

(5) Contexts that are inconclusive: *Leg.* 3.31; *Cher.* 52; *Gig.* 42; *Deus* 160.

³² Cf. esp. *Sacr.* 60: While discussing the three divine visitors in Gen 18, Philo remarks, “God who overtops his powers in that He is visible apart from them, yet is revealed in them.” The word ἀγένητος appears with some frequency in three other contexts:

(1) In the debate over whether the earth is eternal, i.e., “uncreated” (*Opif.* 7, 9, 54, 171; *Plant.* 50; *Ebr.* 199; *Her.* 246; *Somn.* 2.283; cf. also *Aet.* 7, 10, 12, 20, 27 [2X]; 52, 69, 75, 93).

(2) When comparing the created and “uncreated” realms/spheres (*Opif.* 12; *Post.* 172; *Fug.* 59; *Her.* 181; *Mut.* 45; *Somn.* 2.231, 234, 253; *Abr.* 162). Though in his treatment of *Opif.* 12, Runia argues against the notion that the noetic realm is being referred to, rather ἀγένητος “more likely refers to God” (*On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 120).

(3) To denote something “false,” that is “without basis,” that “never happened,” or “lacks real existence” (*Abr.* 192; *Ios.* 167; *Spec.* 3.45; 4.48; *Flacc.* 139).

types of minds: the first infers God's existence through the deity's causal relationship to creation, while the second mind is

more perfect and more thoroughly cleansed, having undergone initiation into the great mysteries, and it gains its knowledge of the First Cause not from created things, . . . but in lifting its eyes above and beyond creation it obtains a clear vision of the Uncreated (ἐμφασιν ἐναργῇ τοῦ ἀγενήτου), so as to apprehend both himself and his shadow. To apprehend that, as we saw, was to apprehend both the Logos and this world (ὅπερ ἦν τὸν τε λόγον καὶ τόνδε τὸν κόσμον) (3.100).

It initially seems that the final sentence defines the content of the "clear vision of the Uncreated" as involving both "himself and his shadow," immediately thereafter defined as "the Logos and this world." However, in previous sections—which Philo calls to our attention with his reminder, "as we saw" (ὅπερ ἦν)—Philo first defined God's "shadow" (σκιὰ) as the Logos (3.96), and then his works, his creation (3.99). Therefore, "the Logos and this world" in 3.100 do not correspond in parallel to "himself and his shadow," they refer instead to "his shadow(s)." Thus the "palpable vision of the Uncreated" involves three realities: τὸ ὄν, and his shadow(s): i.e., the Logos and creation. In reiterating the contrast in 3.102, Philo insists the second type of mind, exemplified by Moses, "receives the vision of God (τὴν ἐμφασιν τοῦ θεοῦ) from the First Cause himself." And in contrast to prophets, God speaks to Moses "mouth to mouth in manifest form" (εἶδος, 3.103).

On only one occasion, in *Cher.* 86, does Philo appear to describe the Logos as ἀγέννητος:

For the good and beautiful things in the world could never have been what they are, unless they were made in the image of the archetype, which is truly beautiful and good, the Uncreated (ἀγέννητος), the blessed, the imperishable.

Interestingly, Philo once defines the Logos as "neither uncreated as God, nor created as humans," but occupying a middle point between the two (*Her.* 206).³³ Philo also conceives of the Logos as God's first-born son (πρωτόγονος υἱός, *Agr.* 51; *Conf.* 146; *Somn.* 1.215).³⁴ Finally, there are three occasions in which the Powers might possibly be called ἀγέννητος (*Deus* 78;

³³ Wolfson describes the Logos as having three stages of existence: (1) as the "mind of God," identical with his essence and therefore eternal; (2) as "an incorporeal mind created by God, having existence outside of God's essence"; (3) as immanent in the world (*Philo*, 1:232, 327).

³⁴ In his essay, "Was Philo a Mystic?" Winston defines the Logos as "the first-begotten Son of the Uncreated Father" (20).

Mut. 22; *QG* 2.16). Thus, given the evidence, *Ebr.* 152 is most likely referring to a vision of God himself, τὸ ὄν, not his Logos or Powers.

3.4.3. *Mut.* 15–24: “The Lord (not ‘The Existent One’) was seen by Abraham”

Awareness of the larger context is decisive in *Mut.* 15–24, in which Philo conclusively limits the object of sight to the Powers. The first thirty sections of *Mut.* respond to the two assertions of *Gen* 17:1, that the Lord “appeared to Abraham,” and declared, “I am your God.” Philo severely qualifies these two statements, emphatically asserting God’s invisibility (1–10), “unnamed-ability” (11–15), transcendence (15–17), and non-relational nature (18–30). In fact it is the Powers who are visible, nameable, imminent, and relationally oriented toward creation and humanity. The primary purpose of this extended section, then, is to demonstrate God’s distance from creation and humanity, and establish the role of the Powers as intermediaries.³⁵

In the midst of this larger program, in *Mut.* 15–17, Philo treats the claim of *Gen* 17:1: “The Lord was seen of Abraham.” He conclusively dismisses the idea that “the Cause of all” appeared to him. Rather, Abraham saw only the Power “Lord,” the world’s “charioteer, pilot,” and ruler: “Therefore the words are, ‘The Lord (not “the Existent One”) was seen by him’” (διὸ λέγεται “ὡφθῆ” οὐ τὸ ὄν, ἀλλὰ κύριος, *Mut.* 17).

The discussion then shifts focus in *Mut.* 18–24: when the Power “God” is also revealed to Abraham, Philo calls this “a still higher gift.” The various manifestations of the Powers are then arranged in a hierarchy of mystical experience: (1) the “wicked person” experiences the Power “Lord,” and thus “with awe and groaning feels the fear of the Master hanging over them.” (2) The “person of progress” reaches perfection through their relations with the Power “God.” (3) Like Abraham, the “perfect person” experiences both Powers, “God” and “Lord.” This hierarchy motif is quite common in Philo, and is typically represented as involving three stages of initiatory progress. And as we will see in our discussions of *QG* 4.2, 4–5, 8 and *Abr.* 107, 119–132, it most often accords the highest category the privilege of seeing the Existent One.³⁶

³⁵ See the thorough treatment of this passage in David T. Runia, “Naming and Knowing: Themes in Philonic Theology with Special Reference to the *De mutatione nominum*,” in *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. R. van den Broek, T. Maarda, and J. Mansfield; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 69–91. He notes that the main purpose of *Mut.* is to compare the steadfast and unchanging God, whose “diverse improper names” are not subject to change, and humans, whose names change as their natures change, for better (Abraham and Sarah) or worse (Joseph) (81–82).

³⁶ On *Mut.* 15–18, cf. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 177–178.

3.4.4. *Migr.* 168–175, *Leg.* 3.169–178, *Sacr.* 8: The Logos' role as ἀναγωγός, the means and guide of the noetic ascent

Throughout Philo's writings there is some ambiguity as to whether the Powers and the Logos are autonomous ontological realities (i.e., hypostases), or merely theophanic manifestations (i.e., projections of God's being and/or activity). David T. Runia has aptly summarized the issue:

It cannot be denied that Philo personifies the Logos when talking about him, but it remains difficult to interpret the extent to which he accords him separate existence. In many texts the Logos represents God's presence or activity in the world, so that the distinction between God and Logos is more conceptual than real. There are other texts, however, in which the Logos is presented as an *hypostasis* separate from and ontologically inferior to God himself.³⁷

In at least three passages in the Allegory the Logos appears to operate autonomously in its capacity as the ἀναγωγός, the means and guide of the noetic ascent. This role is unnecessary, and even incoherent, if the Logos is conceptually indistinct from τὸ ὄν. The Logos' autonomy is explicitly indicated in *Migr.* 168–175, where Philo appeals to two scriptural examples, the elders who accompanied Moses to Sinai in Exod 24, and Moses' request for God to accompany the people in the wilderness (Exod 33:12–17), to establish the necessity of the Logos' guidance in the noetic ascent. However, the "divine Logos" is only necessary as long as the contemplative person "falls short of perfection" (τελειόω). Once the state of "full knowledge" (ἄκρος ἐπιστήμη) is reached, the philosopher will ascend at a "pace equal to him who formerly led the way," i.e., the Logos, "and they will both become attendants (ὁπαδοί) of the All-leading God" (τοῦ πανηγεμόνος θεοῦ). That the noetic mystic and the Logos are together identified as both ascending at an equal pace and functioning as "attendants of the All-leading God" further reinforces the distinction between τὸ ὄν and the Logos.

In *Leg.* 3.169–178, Philo describes the Logos as communing with and "summoning the soul to itself," so as to effect a "congealment" (πῆξις) of the "earthly, bodily, and sense-bound" (3.171–172). This work of the Logos is essential if one hopes to attain a vision of τὸ ὄν: "the person who sees God is studying flight from the passions . . . in order that those who see the Existent One (ὁ βλέπων τὸν ὄντα) might pass beyond passion" (3.172). Philo then clearly distinguishes between the Logos and τὸ ὄν: like the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness, so also "the soul of the most perfect is fed by the Logos" (3.176). However Jacob "looks even higher than the

³⁷ Runia, "Logos," 528.

Logos, and says he is fed by God himself. He looks on God as feeding him, not his Logos" (3.177).

Finally, in *Sacr.* 8, Philo discusses those noetic philosophers of the highest order, who, like Moses, "God has advanced even higher, training them to soar above species and genus alike, and stationing them beside himself." Philo then notes that "God prizes" this "wise person as the whole world, for that same Logos, by which he made the cosmos, is used by God to lead up (ἀνάγω) the perfect person from earthly things to himself."

3.4.5. Seeing the Existent One in the Allegory

Though *Mut.* 15–24 unequivocally insists God is visible solely through his intermediaries, the force of this passage is mitigated somewhat when the entire treatise is taken into consideration. Thus, we find Philo asserting in *Mut.* 81–82 that the *visio Dei* is attainable, if pursued with unstinting philosophic athleticism. Those who do so will "be endowed with eyes" and receive the power "to behold the Existent One with sharp vision" (τὸν ὄντα δυνήσεται θεωρεῖν ὁξυδερκῶς).³⁸ And then in *Mut.* 203, Philo contrasts Balaam, "the dealer in augury" and "soothsaying," with Israel, "the soul's best eye that alone has been trained to see God" (θεός).

Finally, a direct visual encounter with τὸ ὄν is documented in two other notable passages in the Allegory. In both, Jacob/Israel, "the one who sees God," is said to have seen τὸ ὄν. Representing the "person of practice," he experienced the "most perfect blessing," the "sight of the Absolutely Existent" (τὸ ὄντως ὄν, *Ebr.* 82–83). And as *Praem.* 37–39 recounts, when his "continuous striving" and "unutterable longing" were met with divine mercy, he saw the "Father and Savior" (see also *Praem.* 27).

3.5. Visio Dei in QG 4.2, 4–5, 8: The wavering vision

Like the implied audience of the Allegory, we can assume those addressed in *QGE* were quite conversant in both scripture and philosophy, though a wider Jewish audience may also be envisioned. The format followed in *QGE* differs from the Allegory, as individual passages in Genesis and

³⁸ Runia, "Naming and Knowing: Themes in Philonic Theology with Special Reference to the *De mutatione nominum*," 80, argues that Philo probably intended to use θεός here in *Mut.* 82, thus with reference to the Power "God." Runia therefore believes the reference to τὸν ὄντα is relatively insignificant, since Philo "finds it quite impossible and quite unnecessary to achieve consistency and correctness in the use and non-use of God's names."

Exodus are treated atomistically, with both literal and allegorical interpretations occasionally appearing side by side.³⁹ Birnbaum has therefore characterized *QGE* as a “collocation or digest of interpretations reflecting the opinions of a broader community of Alexandrian Jews.”⁴⁰ According to Hay, in *QGE*, Philo “conceives of exegesis as a kind of dialogical enterprise that involves many debate partners and opponents.”⁴¹

What is perhaps one of Philo’s most important, and complicated discussions of *visio Dei* is found in *QG* 4.2, 4–5, 8.⁴² This lengthy treatment of the theophany of Gen 18:2–7 is primarily focused on an apparent discrepancy found in both the MT and LXX. Abraham and the narrator waver back and forth concerning the number of visitors: a single visitor is assumed in Gen 18:3, 10, 13–15, and “three men” are spoken of and addressed in 18:2, 4–5, 8–9, 16. This ambivalence is especially pronounced in the varying pronouns used in 18:2–5. Philo clearly notes these changes in *QG* 4.2, quoting all the pertinent passages and dividing them into two respective groupings. He concludes the first group, which assumes a single visitor, with the observation, “all these passages point to his appearance as God.” The second grouping he prefaces by saying: “The following indicate an appearance as of strange men.”

This same awareness is evident in other comments made in *QG* 4.2. Philo initially indicates that God “cannot be seen in his oneness without something (else), the chief Powers that exist immediately with him, the creative, which is called God, and the kingly, which is called Lord.” Near the end of the passage, Philo deviates from this stance: “Seeing the vision before his eyes, which was not constant, being at one time God, at another time that of the strangers, . . .” Thus the vision does not always include three divine beings, rather it oscillates back and forth from one to three. Abraham, and presumably Philo himself, are experiencing at the height of their mystic vision of God an oscillating vision, one where God is seen through his creation, and in his creative capacity, as well as his lordship

³⁹ In *QGE* Philo’s responses to these assorted exegetical interpretations varies: at times he approves of the literalist interpretations, while other interpretations he critiques, particularly those of the “critics,” literalist exegetes who demean the scriptures. And in some instances, Philo fails to respond to a literalist interpretation (*QG* 1.32, 81; 3.52; 4.64, 121, 123, 145, 196). See David M. Hay, “References to Other Exegetes,” in *Both Literal and Allegorical Studies in Philo of Alexandria’s Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus* (ed. David M. Hay; BJS 232; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 81–97.

⁴⁰ Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*, 19.

⁴¹ Hay, “References to Other Exegetes,” 97.

⁴² Given the Armenian text, the exact names of the divine characters are sometimes uncertain. However, as we will see, the flow and logic of the argument allow for a fairly precise delineation of the characters involved.

over creation, and then occasionally, but only momentarily, are they able to soar above these aspects of God's actions and gain a fleeting glimpse of the truly Existent One.

In QG 4.4 Philo again makes this oscillating pattern explicit while commenting on Gen 18:3, wherein Abraham addresses a single "Lord." Philo says that this change was predicated on a transformation of Abraham's "mind"; it "now more clearly forms an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, and not roaming about nor wandering off with the triad." Thus Abraham's mind "runs towards the one," since God has "manifested himself without the Powers that belong to him." In the next passage, QG 4.5, Philo notes the change back to plural address that occurs in Gen 18:4, and most remarkably, he identifies God as "him who had made himself directly visible."

Finally, towards the end of QG 4.8, Philo attributes the triadic vision to the weakness of human sight: "He in his oneness is likened to a triad because of the weakness of the beholders." Just as the eyes of the body will sometimes see two lights glaring from a single light source, so also is the case with the "eyes of the soul." They cannot see God in his singular "Oneness"; instead they "receive an impression of the triad." Philo then places the whole discussion under the rubric of a mystery initiation. The three measures of flour used by Sarah to make "ash-cakes" for the visitor(s) cryptically triggers the claim that the "knowledge and understanding of the wisdom of the Father and his two highest Powers are hidden from many."⁴³ This is appropriate, for "revealing mysteries to uninitiated and unworthy people is the act of one who destroys, sacks, and undermines the laws of the mysteries of divine perfection."

Ellen Birnbaum attributes Philo's vacillation in QG 4.2, 4 to his careful exegetical technique. Philo handles each verse of Gen 18 separately, and in what amounts to a charge of near-sightedness, she alleges he is "so verse-focused that he may contradict himself from one moment to the next, without acknowledging the inconsistency either in the Bible or in his own discussion."⁴⁴ However, although Philo's discussion in QG 4.2, 4–5, 8 is lengthy and not easy to follow, if one pays careful attention it becomes clear that Philo's discussion is, in fact, predicated on the "inconsistency" of the biblical narrative as it progresses. As mentioned above, his awareness of,

⁴³ As Ralph Marcus points out in a footnote to his translation, this unexpected exegetical turn may have been inspired by wordplay between ἐγκρυφίας, "ash-cakes," and κρυπτός, "hidden" (PLCL, 282).

⁴⁴ Birnbaum, "What Does Philo Mean by 'Seeing God'? Some Methodological Considerations," 547; eadem. *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought*, 87.

and attention towards, the nuances of the entire biblical narrative is explicit in 4.2, when he lists both the single and plural subject addresses and phrases, and in 4.5, where he notes the unexpected return back to plural address in Gen 18:4. Moreover, it is implicit throughout the discussion, as Philo attempts to explain why the text vacillates back and forth between the singular and plural.

Decisive to understanding the whole discussion, in fact, are Philo's repeated claims that the change is attributable to the state of the viewing subject. In contrast to the "ignoble and idle soul," whose sight is "in a deep sleep" and "always blocked," Abraham is the "virtuous person," whose "spiritual eyes" "are awake and see" (4.2). Abraham, the model philosopher, also overcomes the weakness of sight that typically causes the "lucid and bright" eyes of the soul to become "dimmed" in the presence of the deity (4.8). His "mind" is able to "clearly form an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, and not roaming about nor wandering off with the triad." His "fully opened" mind then "runs towards the one," and he sees God as one, clearly manifest, "directly visible" (4.4). Philo's concluding remarks in 4.8, on the necessity of initiation, functions as a cautionary: only an adept would fully fathom this subtle and nuanced conversation. Abraham Terian considers QG 4.8 to be "one of Philo's most profound explanations of the mystical apprehension of God," and most likely reflecting his "personal experience."⁴⁵ Thus, QG 4.2, 4-5, 8, with its claim that Abraham is apparently able to achieve a depth of vision attainable by few others, hints once again at Philo's propensity towards establishing quantifiable levels of philosophic achievement, or "spiritual consciousness."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Abraham Terian, "Inspiration and Originality: Philo's Distinctive Exclamations," *SPhA* 7 (1995): 79. Recognition of both the meticulous care with which the passage is exegeted, and the well charted flow of logic, also precludes the possibility that QG 4.2, 4-5, 8 contains unassimilated and unreconciled earlier traditions. Though the work of his exegetical predecessors is probably present in QG 4.2, 4-5, 8, Philo has apparently shaped and conformed the entire passage to reflect his own views and *visio Dei* experiences.

⁴⁶ See also the detailed consideration of Philo's various three-tiered schema in David M. Hay, "The Psychology of Faith in Hellenistic Judaism," 902-907. Two accounts pertinent to our present discussion are *Gig.* 60-61 and QG 3.34. In *Gig.* 60-61, Philo identifies the three classes as (1) the "earth-born" who indulge in the pleasures of the flesh; (2) the "heaven-born" who love to learn; (3) and the "people of God" who refuse citizenship in the world, and "who have risen wholly above the sphere of sense-perception and have been translated into the noetic realm and who dwell there as registered citizens of the commonwealth of Ideas, which are imperishable and incorporeal." On this passage, see David Winston and John Dillon's "Commentary on *De Gigantibus*," in *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria: A Commentary on De Gigantibus and Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* (ed. David Winston and John Dillon; BJS 25; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 269-270. In QG 3.34, Philo's interpretation of Hagar's visionary encounter with God (Gen 16:13) also

And this hierarchical, gradational thinking is crucial to Philo's conception of the vision of God.⁴⁷

3.6. *Visio Dei passages in the Exposition*

The Exposition of the Law is the "most systematic and thematically unified" of the three commentary series, and in its ten individual treatises⁴⁸ Philo most commonly operates at the literal level of the biblical tradition, though symbolic and allegorical interpretations occasionally surface.⁴⁹ This "rewritten Bible" would then appear to be directed to a general audience of Jews, and possibly some non-Jews, possessed of minimal acquaintance with either scripture or philosophy.⁵⁰

3.6.1. *Abr.* 107, 119–132: The three stages of initiatory progress

A hierarchical ordering of visionary accomplishment reappears in *Abr.* 107, 119–132, while treating the same passage as *QG* 4.2, 4–5, 8: Gen 18:2–7. This time, however, Philo explicitly divides noetic philosophers into three stages of initiatory progress, or spiritual development. Though the "mind that is highly purified," the "visionary mind" (τῇ ὁρατικῇ διανοίᾳ), will sometimes see God as three, it will occasionally be able to see him as one, the Existent One (τὸ ὄν). Those who are "not yet initiated into the higher mysteries," however, are "unable to see the Existent One alone by himself." This lower class of philosopher will instead only see God as Three. They will see God not as he exists, but as he acts, through his Powers (*Abr.* 122). In *Abr.* 124–125, Philo further delineates the object of vision experienced by each level

promotes a hierarchy of visionary experience, this time based on the social status of the visionary. Though Hagar believed she saw God directly, she was mistaken. As a servant, she was capable only of seeing God's servant, his Logos (referred to in Genesis as the "angel of Yahweh"). Philo further denigrates Hagar, comparing her experience to that of an ignorant and inexperienced rural person mistaking a small village for a metropolis. She mistook a "satrap" for the "Great King." Throughout the same passage Philo implies that Sarah, here referred to as "Wisdom," actually did see God himself.

⁴⁷ See also *QE* 2.51: The "worthily initiated" are promised their "closed eyes" will be opened, and they will see "the First (Cause)." They will be roused from "deep sleep" and in "wakefulness" there will "appear to them that manifest One, who causes incorporeal rays to shine."

⁴⁸ Or twelve if you include the two books of *Mos.*; cf. the discussion of this issue below, in footnote 52.

⁴⁹ Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 6.

⁵⁰ The sole exception being *Opif.*, which assumes on the part of its readership a fair level of philosophical knowledge. On the place of *Opif.* within the Exposition, see Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 1–4.

of noetic philosopher: (1) the “best class” sees the “essentially Existing One” (τὸ ὄντως ὄν). (2) The second class sees the beneficent Power “God.” (3) The third sees the governing Power “Lord.”⁵¹

Furthermore, we can assume on the basis of his careful delineation of the various levels of attainment, and the divine characters encountered therein, that Philo has not, at least in *Abr.* 107, 119–132 and *QG* 4.2, 4–5, 8, collapsed his various intermediaries into manifestations of a single deity. Like the passages in the Allegory that present the Logos functioning as the ἀναγωγός of the noetic ascent, in these two passages the intermediaries also appear to operate as autonomous realities.

3.6.2. *Spec.* 1.41–50: Existence and essence

Despite its presumably less sophisticated audience, the Exposition contains one of the most complicated *visio Dei* accounts in the Philonic corpus: *Spec.* 1.41–50. In the middle of this passage Philo seems to imply that the Powers are all one can see of the deity. His discussion of Exod 33:12–23 begins with Moses’ “inspired cry” to God: “Reveal yourself to me!” There then follows the record of a lengthy conversation between Moses and God. Moses admits only God can reveal himself, to which God replies that created beings are incapable of apprehending (κατάληψις) him. Moses humbly acknowledges the wisdom of God’s response, admitting,

I never could have received the vision of you clearly manifested, but I beg that you would show me the glory that surrounds you, and by that I mean the Powers that guard you, of whom I would love to gain apprehension (κατάληψις) . . . the thought of which creates in me a mighty longing to have knowledge of them (1.45).

God responds that the Powers are “not discerned by sight but by the mind even as I, whose they are, am discerned by mind and not by sight” (1.46). These Powers, “while in their essence they are beyond your apprehension, they present to your sight (παρὰφάινω) a sort of impress and copy of their active working” (1.47). Further qualifications are then made:

Do not hope to ever be able to apprehend me or any of my Powers in our essence. But I will readily allow you a share of what is attainable. That means I welcome you to come and contemplate the universe and its contents, a spectacle apprehended not by the eyes of the body but by the unsleeping eyes of the mind (1.49).

⁵¹ While discussing this passage in his essay, “Was Philo a Mystic?” Winston accurately reproduces the argument of *Abr.* 119–123, yet fails to allow it to influence his conviction that only the Logos is seen (21).

Though 1.49 initially appears to be making the common distinction between God's existence and essence, it immediately and severely qualifies the grasp of even divine existence, ultimately allowing only an inferential relationship: it is solely in "contemplating the universe and its contents" that one can see the creator God. Thus *Spec.* 1.41–50 charts a course that moves in the opposite direction of many other *visio Dei* passages. Though mid-passage it appears to propose that at least the Powers are seen, it quickly moves to disallow even that, and ultimately argues for the utter invisibility of both God and his Powers. *Spec.* 1.41–50 demonstrates again the necessity of following a unit from its beginning to its end.

3.6.3. *Abr.* 79–80, *Opif.* 69–71, *Mos.* 1.158: "Intermediary-free" *visio Dei* passages

The Exposition also contains a number of passages where Philo portrays the vision of God as occurring without the intervention or presence of intermediaries. Of Abraham it is said that he

received a vision of him who so long lay hidden and invisible. . . . God did not turn away his face, but came forward to meet Abraham, and revealed his nature, so far as the beholder's power of sight allowed. That is why we are told not that the Sage saw God, but that God was seen by him. For it is impossible that anyone should by themselves apprehend the truly Existent One (τὸ ἀλήθειαν ὄν), if he did not reveal and manifest himself (*Abr.* 79–80).

The creaturely limitations of the "beholder's power of sight" are decisive also in *Opif.* 69–71, which describes a noetic philosopher soaring into the heavens, only to be repelled by the blinding radiance of the "Great King himself."

One of the more remarkable instances of an "intermediary-free" *visio Dei* is found in *Mos.* 1.158,⁵² which elaborates on Moses' receipt of the torah on Sinai. Philo reports that Moses, the "god and king of the whole nation, entered into the darkness where God was, that is into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things." That Moses "beheld what was hidden from the sight of mortal nature" indicates, with all probability, the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) was the object of Moses' sight.

⁵² Scholars are divided on whether *Mos.* is an integral part of the Exposition of the Law or related to it as a general introductory treatise. See Jenny Morris, "Philo the Jewish Philosopher," in *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, (ed. E. Schürer, G. Vermes et al., vol. 3 part 2; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 854; Albert C. Geljon, *Philonian Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa's De vita Moysis*, (BJS 333: SPhM 5; Providence R. I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2002), 7–30.

4. Conclusion

Our survey of selected *visio Dei* passages has demonstrated the presence of four recurring elements in all three of the commentary series. (1) The identity of the object of sight varies, not only from passage to passage in a treatise, but even within the same passage. Nevertheless, in all three commentary series there are clear statements of the visibility of τὸ ὄν. (2) A hierarchy of visionary accomplishment, based on the spiritual advancement of the noetic philosopher, often determines who is seen, and quite often it is τὸ ὄν who is seen by the highest category of mystic philosopher. (3) The intermediaries operate as autonomous agents, conceptually distinct from τὸ ὄν, both in passages promoting a hierarchy of visionary accomplishment, as well as those depicting the Logos as the ἀναγωγός, the means and guide of the noetic ascent. (4) Philo occasionally allows his allegiance to divine transcendence to direct the discussion, and τὸ ὄν is then said to be absolutely “non-visible.” It is also apparent that “intermediary-free” *visio Dei* passages are not as commonly encountered as those populated by intermediaries, and are most prevalent in the Exposition.

Ellen Birnbaum has provided a convincing explanation for some of these phenomena that is based on a treatise’s intended audience. Since the Exposition is directed towards a less sophisticated audience, who would be both unaware of the intermediaries and somewhat unprepared to discuss seeing God, the *visio Dei* is therefore rarely mentioned in these treatises, and when it is, a simple, unmediated visual encounter with God is described. In the much larger Allegorical Commentary, with its more mature audience, Philo not only speaks more often of seeing God, but it is a much more nuanced conversation, frequently involving intermediaries.⁵³ There are some complications, however. As our survey has shown, the question of audiences, and their relative sophistication, is not an entirely reliable predictor of the manner in which Philo presents his *visio Dei* accounts. *Spec.* 1.41–50, in the Exposition, offers one of the most detailed defenses for God’s invisibility, one involving not only mediators, but also the subtle distinction between essence and existence. And perhaps Philo’s most advanced discussion of the *visio Dei* appears in QG 4.2, 4–5, 8, whose audience would also have undoubtedly included novices.⁵⁴ Even more

⁵³ Birnbaum, “What Does Philo Mean by ‘Seeing God’? Some Methodological Considerations,” 549–550; eadem. *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*, 89–90.

⁵⁴ Gregory E. Sterling considers the “pedagogical character of the format and the listing of multiple interpretations” in QGE proof they “were written for beginning students in his school” (“General Introduction,” in Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, xi. See also idem. “‘The School of Sacred Laws’: The Social Setting of Philo’s Treatises,” 159–160).

confounding is the presence of a similarly complex treatment of Gen 18:2–7 in the Exposition, in *Abr.* 107, 119–132. In the case of this particular piece of recurring exegesis, we may perhaps assume that all Philo's students were aware of his various three-stage hierarchies of spiritual development, and the novices in particular would want to know the nature and contents of the hierarchical order. Or perhaps Philo simply lost himself, and like so many of us, temporarily allowed his exegetical interests to overrun his pedagogical program!

Although the issue of a treatise's implied audience is generally instructive, it is incapable of accounting for all the variances in Philo's *visio Dei* accounts. At least some of the ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies may be attributed to three other factors. (1) Perhaps the foremost of these factors are the exegetical traditions that Philo occasionally draws upon in commentaries, particularly the Allegory and *QGE*. These "conversation partners" are quoted for the sake of completeness but not completely assimilated into, or coherently harmonized, with Philo's own views. As Sterling notes:

The inconcinnities and tensions which annoy modern readers are marks of a school tradition. Philo offers various interpretations as a matter of preserving the traditions. Since he is working within a tradition there is no need to impose his own views on all of his predecessors; he is content to allow them a voice as well as to make his own heard in matters of importance. Philo presents multiple views as a means of illustrating the range of meanings of a text to the students.⁵⁵

(2) The varying views may also reflect Philo's own spiritual growth and philosophical development over the course of his lifetime. A trace of such development might be evident in the admission made in *Post.* 167: "When we say that the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) is visible, we are not using words in their literal sense." This severe qualification of prior claims of God's visibility does not square with the vivid and emotional texture of the *visio Dei* accounts we find throughout Philo's writings, which would most naturally lead one to take them quite literally. (3) Finally, as we have earlier suggested, Philo may well have been conflicted about the whole matter. His ambivalence about the possibility of seeing God would then be a deliberate effort to appropriately represent both the complexity and uncertainty of a

⁵⁵ Sterling, "'The School of Sacred Laws': The Social Setting of Philo's Treatises," 160.

mystical experience that is ultimately inscrutable.⁵⁶ Furthermore, this mystical experience, perhaps more so than any other aspect of Philo's thought and experience, created an irreconcilable tension between his philosophical commitment to transcendence and his religious commitment to the often-imminent God of Israel, as revealed in the writings of Moses. In addition to the issue of audience, these three factors, when taken into account, help to mitigate the effect of the ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies.

As we have seen, Philo's views about the object of the *visio Dei* are varied and often highly nuanced. More often than not his commitment to divine transcendence seems to necessitate the inclusion of intermediaries in the discussion. Nevertheless, in his semi-ubiquitous schema of stages of initiatory progress, perhaps evidence of an essential pedagogical orientation, he more often than not accords those in the highest class a glimpse of the transcendent Existent One. In both these passages and those where the Logos functions anagogically, as well as those remarkable instances which are "intermediary-free," the noetic mystic is portrayed as soaring into the κόσμος νοητός and enjoying the "beginning and end of human happiness" (QE 2.51), the "most precious of all possessions" (Legat. 4), a vision of the Existent One.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The issue of agency is similarly characterized by ambivalence, and will be discussed in a forthcoming paper, tentatively entitled: "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: Methods and Means." I intend to demonstrate that in some passages divine initiative is solely responsible for the vision of God, while in many others Philo emphasizes the role of vigorous human striving. And in at least two passages, *Mut.* 81–82 and *Praem.* 37–39, Philo achieves a perfect synergistic balance between human effort and divine grace.

⁵⁷ This article is dedicated to the memory of David M. Scholer (1938–2008). Ten years ago in a graduate seminar on Second Temple Literature, David's contagious passion for Philo opened my eyes to the joys of studying the "Alexandrian Exegete."