

Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: Means, Methods, and Mysticism

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Abstract

For Philo of Alexandria, seeing God represents the pinnacle of human experience. This essay examines three important aspects of that experience: the effectual means of the vision, the methods employed in evoking it, and the function and influence of Philo's mysticism in the experience. While in some contexts Philo emphasizes the singular role of God in empowering the contemplative ascent and affording the vision, many others highlight the part played by human effort. Philo's accounts of the practices that evoke the ascent and vision of God are also varied. Though Platonic philosophical contemplation and the practice of virtue are occasionally implicated, in most cases exegetical text work is instrumental. Finally, while some have attempted to divorce Philo's mystical praxis from the vision of God, contending that "seeing" is simply a metaphor for "knowing" (i.e., "achieving a rational awareness of God's existence"), a number of factors indicate the importance of Philo's mysticism in the experience and suggest that an actual, mystical visual encounter underlies and informs these textual representations.

Keywords

allegorical interpretation, divine and human agency, heavenly ascent, mysticism, noetic ascent, seeing God

1. Introduction

Seeing God constitutes the pinnacle of Philo of Alexandria's contemplative, spiritual experience. He even considers it the "beginning and end of human happiness" (*QE* 2.51) and the "most precious of all possessions" (*Legat.* 4). In a previous article, analysis of Philo's views about the identity of the object of sight in his *visio Dei* accounts revealed that he is somewhat

conflicted, and perhaps even inconsistent, about who or what is actually seen in this extraordinary experience.¹ In many texts his allegiance to the doctrine of divine transcendence necessitates the inclusion of intermediaries, such as the Logos or the Powers; occasionally they are all the noetic philosopher can see of God (*Mut.* 15-24). At least one remarkable text insists the terminus of the *visio Dei* is arrived at in “contemplating the universe and its contents” (*Spec.* 1.41-50).² Nevertheless, in many passages Philo accords the contemplative a vision of God himself, the Existent One (τὸ ὄν). These variances were attributable to a number of factors, including his use of prior traditions, the goals of his immediate rhetorical context and the LXX text he is exegeting, the nature of the three commentary series and the relative sophistication of their implied audiences, as well as Philo’s own spiritual and philosophic development. When texts were analyzed with these influences in mind, a reasonable degree of coherence emerged.

This present article focuses upon similar complexities that attend three other key aspects of Philo’s *visio Dei* accounts: the effectual means of the vision of God, the methods employed in evoking it, as well as the function and influence of Philo’s mysticism in the *visio Dei*. While in some contexts Philo emphasizes the singular role of God in empowering the noetic ascent and affording the vision, many others highlight the part played by human effort. One even occasionally encounters a depiction of an ascent and/or *visio Dei* that synergistically joins the efforts of the two actors. Ambiguity also attends Philo’s accounts of the various practices that evoke the ascent and/or vision of τὸ ὄν. Though Platonic philosophical contemplation and the practice of virtue are occasionally implicated, in most cases exegetical text work appears to be its underlying basis. The close association of the noetic ascent with the *visio Dei* presents another complication: although not all noetic ascent accounts issue in a vision of God, and not all *visio Dei* texts mention an ascent, nevertheless, the constitutive role of the contemplative ascent in many of the visionary texts warrants the consideration of pertinent ascent accounts, regardless of whether they issue in a vision of God.

¹ Scott D. Mackie, “Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?” *SPhA* 21 (2009): 25-47.

² Philo also occasionally claims God is entirely invisible (*Det.* 86-87; *Post.* 168; *Mut.* 7-9). Note the ironic formulation of *Post.* 15: the “great good” of contemplative inquiry is realized when one “apprehends” that God “is not apprehensible,” and “sees that he is not visible.”

Finally, after having examined a number of ascent and *visio Dei* texts we will be able to adequately assess the function, nature, and influence of Philo's mysticism in his conception of the vision of God. Though some scholars have attempted to divorce Philo's mystical praxis from the *visio Dei*, contending that "seeing" is simply a metaphor for "knowing" (i.e., achieving a rational awareness of God's existence), the emotional and experiential language and imagery that often appears in ascent texts, and occasionally in *visio Dei* accounts, indicates the importance of Philo's mystical praxis, as well as the legitimacy of interpreting at least some of these texts in a fairly literal manner.

2. The effectual means of the vision

The nature and extent of divine involvement in human affairs is certainly a live issue in Philo's time. In both Greco-Roman philosophy as well as the traditions of Second Temple Judaism, the relationship of divine causation and human free will is a recurring topic of inquiry, appearing in a variety of forms and contexts. The first of Plato's trinity of "theological" principles is that "a god" is the cause of good but not of evil (*Resp.* 379A-E), and in *Leg.* 10.902E it is claimed that "a god is both willing and able to care" for its creation.³ Starkly contrasting with the Epicurean belief in the utter transcendence of the deity, which renders "Providence a myth" (Plutarch, *Def. orac.* 420B; cf. Lucretius 2.167-181, 5.156-199), is the Stoic Cleanthes' assertion that "no event occurs on earth... without your permission God, except what bad people do in their own stupidity" (*Hymn to Zeus* 3). Furthermore, the Stoic distinction between "what is up to me," and what is determined by Fate/Zeus, finds its resolution in both a somewhat synergistic and immanent mutuality that exists in the realm of cognition,⁴ and on the level of everyday praxis, as the "autonomous person... voluntarily complies" with "predetermined situations," as they present themselves.⁵

³ See Jaap Mansfield, "Theology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfield, and Malcolm Schofield; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 452-78, esp. 462-69.

⁴ So Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Self-sufficiency and Power: Divine and Human Agency in Epictetus and Paul," in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment* (ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole; LNTS 335; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 117-39 at 125-26.

⁵ A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 222.

And theoretically, at least, the “volition of the perfected Stoic” will “completely coincide with the will of Zeus.”⁶

Perhaps even more relevant are the opinions of Philo’s Jewish near contemporaries, Paul and Josephus. The latter’s discussion of the “three schools of thought among the Jews” in *Ant.* 13.171-173 chiefly characterizes them according to their understanding of agency: “The Pharisees say that certain events are the work of Fate, while other occurrences depend on ourselves.” Occupying opposing extremes are the Essenes, who believe God works without any human cooperation, and the Sadducees, who think “all things lie within our power, so that we ourselves are responsible for our well-being” (cf. *Ant.* 18.12-18). All three positions can be found in the Pauline corpus: (1) divine monergism (Rom 4:4-6; 9:6-16; 11:6; Gal 2:16; 3:5); (2) human effort (Rom 2:6); (3) and synergism (Phil 2:12-13).⁷ Consequently, given its prominence in both Greco-Roman philosophy and Second Temple Judaism, it would be quite surprising if Philo were either ignorant of or uninterested in the issue of divine and human agency. His accounts of contemplative ascent and the vision of God reveal neither to be the case. In fact, there, at the summit of his mystical philosophy, we see the issue of agency standing out in bold relief.

2.1. *Divine agency*

Philo consistently maintains the *visio Dei* is entirely dependent on the self-revelation of the deity: “For it is impossible for anyone by themselves to apprehend the truly Existent, unless he reveals and manifests himself” (*Abr.* 80). Humans are unable to “conjure” God in any way, and an attempted “invasion” of heaven is doomed to futility. In contrast to “Aaron and Nadab and seventy of the Senate of Israel,” who were invited by God to “come up . . . and behold the Existent One” (Exod 24:1), Philo cautions against the exercise of self-initiative, as

the soul has reason to fear ascending in its own strength to the sight of the Existent One, ignorant as it is of the way, lifted up as it is by ignorance and

⁶ Ibid., 230. As Brad Inwood (*Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 66, notes: “the reconciliation of fate and moral responsibility was the dominant and characteristic problem of Stoic moral philosophy.”

⁷ Of course this issue has preoccupied Pauline scholarship since the publication of E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

by daring, for grievous are the falls that have been occasioned by lack of knowledge and excess of boldness. (*Migr.* 169-170)⁸

Furthermore, humans are lacking in both the “perceptual components” and “abilities” necessary to even “cooperate” (συνεργούντος ἢ δυνάμενου συνεργῆσαι) in the *visio Dei*; the “seeker after truth” can only “envisage God through God, as light is seen through light” (*Praem.* 45-46). And it is in the presence of God’s overwhelming radiance that human perceptual shortcomings are particularly evident, as even an ascent to God’s immediate proximity is prone to frustration (*Opif.* 69-71).⁹

Nevertheless, the *visio Dei* is possible, provided God both permits and empowers it. When divine “grace fills the soul,” that soul is “possessed” by God and “inspired,” able to “touch the bounds of the All, and hasten to that most glorious and loveliest of visions: the vision of the Uncreated” (*Ebr.* 145-152). Similar texts, such as *Leg.* 1.34-38 and *Migr.* 34-35, convince John Barclay that “at every stage, and in every dimension” of the noetic ascent, or “soul-journey,” “the soul is dependent on the grace of God in revealing himself.”¹⁰ Barclay further contends that Philo “stresses the causative dynamics of grace to the extent that, in the deepest reality, or at least in its ultimate stages of ascent, the soul is represented as inactive or passive, to avoid any implication of synergism.” Philo’s “ideal man” is

⁸) See also *Somn.* 2.283-286: though the builders of Babel’s tower denied the existence of the noetic realm, they “hoped to soar to heaven in mind and thought,” and were “cast down” by God. See the discussion in Peder Borgen, “Heavenly Ascent in Philo: An Examination of Selected Passages,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans; JSPSup 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 246-68, esp. 259-62; idem, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (NovTSup 86; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 194-97.

⁹) The Platonic theory of vision probably underlies both *Praem.* 45-46 and *Opif.* 69-71. 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. Thus the failed *visio Dei* in *Opif.* 69-71 may be attributed to the essential differences in God’s radiant light and the less powerful light rays emanating from the mind’s eye of the contemplative (see also *Abr.* 76). 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. On Philo’s theory of vision, see Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity* (TSAJ 86; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 198-201.

¹⁰) John M. G. Barclay, “‘By the Grace of God I am what I am’: Grace and Agency in Philo and Paul,” in Barclay and Gathercole, ed., *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, 140-57 at 146.

therefore the “resting sage, who approaches the vision of God in pure passivity.”¹¹

Finally, the primacy of divine agency in effecting the *visio Dei* is further implied in Philo’s assertion that the human mind (which is of course the locus of the noetic ascent and *visio Dei*) is intimately connected to the divine, constituting an “inseparable fragment” (ἀπόσπασμα... οὐ διαιρετόν) of the Logos (*Det.* 90). Humanity is therefore “akin to the Divine and has unbroken access to it from within.”¹² It is this “unbroken access,” according to Philo, that affords the active involvement of God: “For we are the instruments, wielded in varying degrees of force, through which particular actions are produced. It is the Craftsman who effects the percussion of both our bodily and psychic powers, the one by whom all things are moved” (*Cher.* 128).

2.2. *Human effort and cooperation*

These unequivocal expressions of divine monergism are not the final word on the subject, as a larger sampling of ascent and *visio Dei* texts, drawn from all three commentary series (the Allegory, Exposition, and *QGE*), demonstrates once more Philo’s propensity to develop a complex and nuanced discussion. Though many passages support Barclay’s thesis that divine agency is solely responsible, in just as many others Philo emphasizes the role of vigorous human striving in the vision of God. Human effort is also apparent in contexts promoting a hierarchy of visionary achievement, as some noetic philosophers, through ability, virtue, status, and sheer determination are able to see more clearly into the noetic realm. Furthermore, in at least two instances, *Mut.* 81-88 and *Praem.* 36-40, Philo documents in fine detail the *visio Dei* occurring as a result of a perfect synergistic balance between human effort and divine grace.

Though Philo insists the *visio Dei* will not admit any human “cooperation” (συνεργέω, *Praem.* 45), he quite often commends a vigorous pursuit of the divine vision. The first person of faith, Abraham, is characterized as possessing a “fire of yearning... resolutely eager to seek the One, not pausing until he received clearer visions... of his existence” (*Virt.* 215-216). So also Moses

¹¹ Ibid., 157.

¹² David Winston, “Philo’s Ethical Theory,” *ANRW* 2.21.1 (1984), 372-416 at 373. Plato also asserts the “kinship” of the rational soul to the Forms (*Phaed.* 79D; *Resp.* 490B, 611E; *Tim.* 47C, 90A-D).

unceasingly yearned to see God and be seen by him... never abating in the intensity of his desire... struggling on with no relaxation of his earnest endeavor, honestly and resolutely enlisting all his faculties to work together (συνγυράομαι) for the attainment of his object. (*Post.* 13)

The noetic ascent is surely an intellectually rigorous enterprise, one with no room for hobbyists. As with Moses, so also Philo himself: in the lengthiest account of his own philosophical-exegetical praxis he emphasizes that the visionary ascent requires the full dedication of one skilled in the contemplation of the universe, philosophy, and biblical interpretation (*Spec.* 3.1-6). And even an adept of Philo's stature will find their "vision dimmed" should they become distracted by the practical affairs of this world (3.3-4). However, when "an ocean of civic duties" threatens to overwhelm him, Philo firmly resists: "I hold my own ground... my yearning for training/education (παιδεία)... lifting me up and relieving my pain... I raise my head with the eyes of the soul... and look as earnestly as is possible, hoping to inhale a breath of life" (3.4).

Human agency is readily apparent in two passages promoting a hierarchy of visionary achievement, *QG* 4.2, 4-5, 8 and *Abr.* 107, 119-132. Both passages draw upon the ambiguous theophany of Gen 18:2-7 to establish quantifiable levels of visionary acumen and accomplishment. The original account's wavering depiction of the theophany, as involving either a single "Lord," or "three men," constitutes Philo's primary focus: the "Lord" allegorically represents the "Existent One" (τὸ ὄν), who, when seen by himself constitutes the highest level of visionary accomplishment, while the "three men" are occasionally interpreted as God accompanied by his two Powers, a vision of less consequence (*QG* 4.2, 4, 8).¹³ Finally, in both passages Philo maintains an allegiance to the original account's theophanic nature (i.e., the deity "appeared" to Abraham), thus the language and imagery of noetic ascent is almost entirely absent.¹⁴

In *QG* 4.2, the "virtuous person," like Abraham, is able to see God himself, because unlike the "ignoble and idle soul" they are ever vigilant, filled with "desire of seeing," "spurring themselves and leaping up to wakefulness."

¹³ The "three men" are also interpreted as humans, but "not the sort of men one may happen to meet by chance, but most perfect of body according to human nature, and of venerable holiness" (*QG* 4.2). In *Deo* 3, the same theophany is deemed "not the appearance of men, but of something like men." It is "the male nature of τὸ ὄν."

¹⁴ Though see *QG* 4.1, which provides a prefatory discussion of various aspects of noetic visuality, including a classic expression of the mechanics of noetic contemplation.

Acumen is joined to effort in 4.4, as Abraham's mind is able to "more clearly form an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, not roaming about nor wandering off with the three... but running towards the one." A synergistic mutuality is then implied, as Philo shifts focus to the divine actor: God "manifested himself without the Powers that belong to him," so that Abraham "saw his oneness directly before him."¹⁵ Human achievement and status are determinative in 4.8, as Philo implies his exegesis of the visionary aspects of the theophany would be incomprehensible to "uninitiated and unworthy" people, since the "knowledge and understanding of the wisdom of the Father and his two highest Powers" is "hidden from many."

The language of effort, ability, and status is less prevalent in *Abr.* 107, 119-132, which also enlists Gen 18:2-7 to discuss the nature of the "visionary mind" (ὁρατικῇ διανοίᾳ, 122), and delineate "three classes of human dispositions" (ἡθους, 124).¹⁶ When the "visionary mind" is "highly purified" it will "pass beyond" the tertiary and secondary visions, and "press on to the ideal Form which is free from mixture and complexity" (122). Of the "three classes of dispositions," the "best class" (ἄριστος) see and worship the "Essentially Existent," and "nothing can make them deviate from this" (124-125).

Human effort, expressed in the acquisition and exercise of virtue, is emphatically stressed in *QE* 2.51, a remarkable text that contains no less than four conditional promises of a vision of God.¹⁷ The promised *visio Dei* is in each instance dependent on the virtue and consecration of the noetic mystic. The first assertion is the most developed: Philo claims God will "graciously grant his appearance" to the "mind" that is "purified with holiness and every kind of purity." This purification involves the "excision" of "desires, pleasures... and related evils." Furthermore, one must "change

¹⁵ Francesca Calabi, *God's Acting, Man's Acting: Tradition and Philosophy in Philo of Alexandria* (Studies in Philo of Alexandria 4; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 88, notes that Philo depicts the theophany as "a process involving both figures." Thus, "the vision arises out of the coming together of two actions: God's appearing and Abraham's seeing."

¹⁶ On this passage, see Jacques Cazeaux, "Le repas de Mambré dans le 'De Abrahamo' de Philon," in *Nourriture et repas dans les milieux juifs et chrétiens de l'antiquité: Mélanges offerts au Professeur Charles Perrot* (ed. Michel Quesnel, Yves-Marie Blanchard, and Claude Tassin; LD 178; Paris: Cerf, 1999), 55-73.

¹⁷ *QE* 2.51 interprets Exod 25:7, "You shall make me a sanctuary and I shall appear among you," and begins with a bare claim of the Powers' visibility in creation: "God always appears in his work... the world. For his beneficent Powers are seen and move around in all the parts of the world: heaven, earth, water, air, and what is in these places."

and adapt oneself to the vision of holiness.” The second and third promises, that “you will see the First Cause,” and the “manifest One (ὁ ἐπιφανής) will appear to you,” are dependent on being “worthily initiated, consecrated to God,” and “an animate/spiritual shrine of the Father.”¹⁸ The fourth assertion, “the beginning and end of happiness is to be able to see God,” is also conditional on consecrating oneself as a “sanctuary and shrine of God.”

Like *QG* 4.2, 4-5, 8 and *Abr.* 107, 119-132, *Mut* 81-88 is characterized by a hierarchical scheme in which human effort and accomplishment are prominent. While discussing the three classes of “learners,” Philo emphasizes the athletic effort required of the “person of practice,” as the *visio Dei* will occur

only when one maintains the contests of wisdom to the end, and drilled in the gymnastics of the soul, wrestles with the thoughts that oppose and hold it fast in its grip. The task of the one who sees God is not to leave the sacred arena uncrowned, but to carry off the prizes of victory. (81)

Divine agency then unexpectedly enters the arena, as Philo reveals that the victory garland for the “athlete-soul” who prevails in their struggles is a divine gifting: “the power which will enable one to behold the Existent (τὸν ὄντα) with clear vision” (82). That enabling power is further defined as “being endowed with eyes” (ἐνομματούω) to see God.¹⁹ Human effort reappears in 84-85: Philo notes the “person of practice” is inclined to relax their efforts periodically, like athletes who “after strenuous exercise, take a breather and relax,” in order to regain their energy. In so doing, however, they are liable to “return back to their original state” (85). C. T. R. Hayward contends this passage “may imply that ‘seeing God’ is a faculty which may be lost, unless the faculties honed by practice retain their sharpness, possibly through continuous training.”²⁰ Thus, seeing God involves a synergistic

¹⁸) The larger context, 2.51-68, provides a detailed allegorical interpretation of the contents of the Most Holy Place in the wilderness tabernacle (e.g., the ark, mercy seat, cherubim, and Decalogue).

¹⁹) On the compound verb ἐνομματούω, which Philo may have coined himself, see Gerhard Dellling, “The ‘One Who Sees God’ in Philo,” in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack; Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 27-41, esp. 33-34. The word is also found in *Ebr.* 82; *Congr.* 145; *Mut.* 56; *Somn.* 1.164; *Virt.* 11.

²⁰) C. T. R. Hayward, *Interpretations of the Name Israel in Ancient Judaism and Some Early Christian Writings: From Victorious Athlete to Heavenly Champion* (Oxford: Oxford University

mutuality, as unstinting athletic effort is crowned with a divine “outfitting” of “eyes to see,” though further Olympian training is necessary.

Synergism is also evident in *Praem.* 36-40, though here we see a rare display of divine emotion, as mercy is factored into the equation. Philo discusses again the “person of practice,” i.e., Jacob/Israel, the “wrestler,” who “by means of continuous striving began to slowly open the eyes of his soul . . . and throw off the mist which overshadowed him” (37). “Suddenly” (ἐξαίφνης), the appearance of a “beam purer than ether and incorporeal” revealed to Jacob/Israel the “noetic realm (κόσμος νοητός) ruled by its charioteer.”²¹ However, as he peered into the ideal world and attempted to see its “charioteer,” his “eye was darkened” and overpowered by “dazzling beams” and a “fiery stream” (37-38). He persisted nonetheless, “his sight holding its own in its unutterable longing to behold the vision,” and unlike the contemplative of *Opif.* 69-71, whose efforts were frustrated by a similarly overwhelming divine luminosity, he succeeds when his “epistemological deficiency is met with divine grace.”²² In what nearly amounts to a refutation of divine impassibility, Philo observes: “The Father and Savior saw the sincerity of his yearning and showed mercy” (ἐλεέω) to him, “granting power to the penetration of his eyesight” so as to “permit him the vision of himself, in so far as it is possible” for humans “to behold that sight” (39; see also *Abr.* 79; *QG* 4.1-2, 8).²³ This narrative, and *Mut* 81-88

Press, 2005), 166; idem, “Philo, the Septuagint of Genesis 32:24-32 and the Name ‘Israel’: Fighting the Passions, Inspiration and the Vision of God,” *JJS* 51 (2000): 209-26 at 217. In contrast to the person of practice (ἀσκητικός), typified by Jacob/Israel, the person of philosophical training (διδακτικός), represented by Abraham, holds steadfastly to what they have achieved (*Mut.* 84-88). On these two paradigms, see Michael L. Satlow, “Philo On Human Perfection,” *JTS* 59 (2008): 500-19, esp. 509-11. Satlow suggests Philo’s accounts of the Essenes and the Therapeutae are offered as “concrete examples” of the two paradigms, the former representing practice, and the latter, philosophy (511-15).

²¹ Plato twice characterizes his noetic encounters with the highest Form as occurring “suddenly” (ἐξαίφνης), which in all likelihood denotes the moment divine agency synergistically joined itself to his contemplative effort (*Symp.* 210E; *Seventh Ep.* 341C).

²² 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), 233.

²³ David Winston, “Judaism and Hellenism: Hidden Tensions in Philo’s Thought,” *SPhA* 2 (1990): 1-19 at 9, identifies pity/mercy (ἔλεος) as the sole passion of Philo’s otherwise apathetic God. In this regard “Philo decisively parts company with the Stoics, who had classified pity as a species of distress.” Though he often ascribes the quality of mercy to God (*Leg.* 1.45; *Sacr.* 42; *Deus* 74-76; *Her.* 112; *Fug.* 95, 162; *Somm.* 1.93, 112, 147; 2.149; *Mos.* 1.86; *Praem.* 117), Philo rarely narrates a discrete, personal act of divine mercy like we

as well, both clearly demonstrate the shortcomings of Barclay's repeated claims that "the highest or climactic reaches of this ascent always end in the 'rest' or inactivity of the soul."²⁴ In fact, these two texts vividly illustrate that Philo, despite his occasional objections and qualifications, is capable of conceiving of the noetic ascent, and its goal, the *visio Dei*, as necessarily involving the full and ongoing participation of both actors, human and divine, from beginning to end.²⁵

Finally, though this analysis was arranged thematically, it nevertheless drew upon texts from all three commentary series. Expressions of strict monergism are found in both the Exposition (*Abr.* 80; *Praem.* 45-46) and the Allegory (*Ebr.* 145-146, 152; *Migr.* 34-35; 169-171), while passages mentioning human effort and cooperation appear in all three series: the Exposition (*Abr.* 107, 119-132; *Spec.* 3.1-6; *Virt.* 215-216; *Praem.* 36-40), the Allegory (*Post.* 13; *Mut.* 81-88), and *QGE* (*QG* 4.2, 4-5, 8; *QE* 2.51). Since the Exposition was probably directed to a less sophisticated, and more general audience, we might expect to see in these texts an emphasis on the necessity of vigorous perseverance in the face of frustration and failure.²⁶ Correspondingly, a more nuanced analysis, one de-emphasizing

see in *Praem.* 39. *Legat.* 376 is an exception; there, God is alleged to have shown "compassion" on the Jewish delegation, by "turning" Gaius' "spirit to mercy."

²⁴ Barclay, "By the Grace of God I am what I am," 146. This claim is made some five times (see pp. 146-148, 156). It is worth noting here that Philo's adherence to the Platonic theory of vision, in which the eyes are thought to actively sending forth a "visual fire," also implies an element of human agency. Of course this assumes the same theory of vision also applies to noetic visuality, i.e., the "eyes of the mind/soul."

²⁵ Similar accounts include *Somn.* 2.232-233, in which the High Priest's entry into the Holy of Holies is allegorically compared with noetic ascent, and *Her.* 69-70, wherein the "soul" that "yearns to inherit the good things of God" is described as departing from its body, senses, and speech. Thus, this "divinely inspired (*ἐνθουσιάζω*) mind" is "no longer under its own keeping, but stirred to its depths and maddened by heavenward yearning, drawn to the truly Existent and pulled upward thereto." See also John R. Levison, "Inspiration and the Divine Spirit in the Writings of Philo Judaeus," *JSJ* 26 (1995): 271-323, esp. 291-93, who detects a pattern of mutuality at work in three passages where ascent and noetic visuality are prominent: *Spec.* 3.1-6; *Gig.* 29-31; and *Plant.* 18-26.

²⁶ On the implied audiences of the three series, see Gregory E. Sterling, "The School of Sacred Laws: The Social Setting of Philo's Treatises," *VC* 53 (1999): 148-64. For example, he contends that the audience of the Allegorical Commentary knew the "biblical text exceptionally well" and were "capable of appreciating extended philosophical expositions of it" (159). For an application of these assumptions to *visio Dei* texts, see Ellen Birnbaum, "What Does Philo Mean by 'Seeing God'? Some Methodological Considerations," *SBL Seminar Papers* (1995), 535-52 at 549-550; eadem, *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought:*

human effort and focusing instead on the role of the divine in effecting the ascent and *visio Dei*, might likely be expected for the more sophisticated audiences to which the Allegory and *QGE* were directed. Instead, both views are found fairly dispersed across the three series, indicating, in all likelihood, that this ambivalence about the effectual means of the noetic ascent and vision of God reflects Philo's own viewpoint and experience.

3. The methods Philo employs in the noetic ascent

The preceding discussion has demonstrated the indispensable role of human effort and cooperation in the vision of God. In what follows, an attempt will be made to determine the moral, spiritual, and philosophical disciplines into which that human effort is invested, and which precede, evoke, and accompany the divine vision. And again, the prominence of contemplative ascent in the *visio Dei* accounts necessitates a detailed examination of relevant ascent passages; even though not all these ascent texts contain visual encounters with God, they provide valuable inferential evidence of the circumstances that attend the vision of God.

Philo is somewhat ambiguous about his mystical praxis, particularly the circumstances and methods that evoke or attend the noetic ascent. Both Platonic contemplative philosophy and the allegorical interpretation of the Mosaic scriptures are obviously connected with the contemplative ascent, though a deliberate application of either is never explicitly spelled out. The two practices appear somewhat fused in a few passages discussing the *visio Dei*, further complicating matters. The pursuit and practice of a virtuous life is also associated with the noetic ascent and the vision of God. Despite a lack of specificity and uniformity, the various disciplines that comprise Philo's mystical practice may be pieced together from disparate accounts, from which a provisional, composite picture emerges.

3.1. *Platonic contemplation*

Platonic mystical contemplation is pervasive. Plato's ascent accounts may be the subject of *Spec.* 1.37:

Israel, Jews, and Proselytes (BJS 290; SPhM 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 17-21, 89-90.

We have the testimonies (μάρτυρες) of those who have not taken a mere sip of philosophy but have feasted more abundantly on its reasonings and conclusions. For with them the reason soars away from earth into the heights . . . and finds its power of sight blurred, for so pure and vast is the radiance that pours from there, that the soul's eyes are dizzied by the flashing rays.

In *Leg.* 2.85 Philo discusses his habit of withdrawing from society in order to give his “attention to some subject demanding contemplation” (κατανοέω). On “innumerable occasions,” he has experienced a sudden downpour of unexpected divine inspiration while “writing on philosophical tenets” (φιλοσοφίαν δογμάτων, *Migr.* 34-35). In his most elaborate autobiographical account, *Spec.* 3.1-6, Philo fondly recalls his former years, when he could freely engage in “philosophy and the contemplation (θεωρία) of the universe and its contents.”²⁷ This contemplative study led to ascent and noetic visuality, as Philo describes himself as “a soul possessed with divine inspiration” (ἐπιθειασμός), soaring with “wings” born aloft “by the breezes of knowledge,” while his “soul's eyes” were “irradiated by the light of wisdom.” In *QG* 4.1, he elaborates on the contemplative process that leads to a visual encounter with the “Father and Creator.” God causes the Forms in the noetic realm to shine radiantly around the “whole soul,” filling it with a “heavenly light.” The mind is “guided” by this light, and “brought by it from the Form to the archetype.”²⁸ Philo's contemplative

²⁷) Celia Deutsch, “Visions, Mysteries, and the Interpretive Task: Text Work and Religious Experience in Philo and Clement,” in *Experientia, Volume 1: Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Frances Flannery, Colleen Shantz, and Rodney A. Werline; SBLSymS 40; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 83-103 at 87 notes the close connection between philosophy and contemplation (θεωρία / θεωπέω) in *Spec.* 3.1-2 (so also *Opif.* 77; *Abr.* 162-164; *Mos.* 2.66; *Decal.* 98) and observes that θεωρία and θεωπέω “often signify the gazing, beholding, the vision that represents the mature activity of the sage in the Platonic tradition.”

²⁸) Perhaps due to the essentially Platonic orientation of his ascent accounts, Philo is more often than not excluded from major discussions of ancient Jewish heavenly ascents: e.g., James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986); Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Paula R. Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 and Heavenly Ascent* (LNTS 313; New York: T&T Clark, 2006). Notable exceptions are Alan F. Segal, “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Their Environments,” *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1980), 1333-94, esp. 1354-58; James Buchanan Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise (2 Cor 12:1-10): Paul's Heavenly Journey in the Context of Early Christian Experience* (BZNW 179; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 144-47. Mary Dean-Otting, *Heavenly Journeys: A Study of*

ascent, like Platonic noetic ascent, would then appear to involve contemplative philosophical inquiry (see Plato, *Symp.* 210C-212A; *Phaedr.* 246E-250D; *Resp.* 517B).²⁹

3.2. *The pursuit and practice of a virtuous life*

In *Her.* 241, Philo appears to attribute the power to evoke noetic ascent to the acquisition and practice of virtue:

Some of our thoughts fly up, others down. To the upward flight falls the better lot, for it has virtue as its fellow traveler, and virtue leads thought to the divine and heavenly realm . . . Virtue is so named not only because we choose it (αἵρεσις), but also for its uplifting (ἄρσις), for it is lifted up and soars on high, because it ever yearns for the celestial.

Furthermore, the practice of virtue is connected to noetic visibility in two contexts: (1) *Mos.* 1.190 describes “the mind of those who have tasted holiness (ὁσιότης).”³⁰ Such a mind “has learned to gaze (βλέπω) and soar upward . . . ever roaming about (φοιτάω) the heights, searching into divine beauties.” (2) *Spec.* 2.44-46 claims “all who practice wisdom, including Greeks and barbarians, who live a blameless life,” and are “armed against the pleasures and lusts . . . using every effort to overthrow . . . the passions,” will “provide their souls with wings so that they may traverse the

the Motif in Hellenistic Jewish Literature (Judentum und Umwelt 8; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 31-33, briefly discusses Philo’s noetic ascent, yet ultimately she excludes him from her study because he fails to describe the heavens or God in a manner comparable to *1 En.* 14 and *T. Levi* 2:5-5:7.

²⁹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mysticism: From Plato to Denys* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1, notes: “A doctrine of contemplation is not simply an element in Plato’s philosophy, but something that penetrates and informs his whole understanding of the world.” See also Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 10.8.7; 1178b.22-24: “The activity of God which is transcendent in blessedness is contemplation (θεωρητικός); therefore among human activities that which is most akin to the divine activity of contemplation will be the greatest source of happiness.” On Philo’s role in the development of noetic ontology, epistemology, and spirituality, see Dragos A. Guile, “The Noetic Turn in Jewish Thought,” *JSJ* 42 (2011): 23-57.

³⁰ “Holiness” is counted among the cardinal virtues in Plato, *Prot.* 324E, 329C, 330B, 349B. For Philo, holiness is comparable to “piety,” the “queen of the virtues,” and as Gregory E. Sterling observes, occasionally the two terms are used “as virtual synonyms to refer to the human response to and perception of God” (“The Queen of the Virtues: Piety in Philo of Alexandria,” *SPhA* 18 [2006]: 103-23 at 113).

upper air and gain full contemplation (περιαθρέω) of the powers which dwell there.”

Platonic influences are especially apparent here. Though the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is the foremost concern in Plato's project, a virtuous life is an expected condition and/or outcome of that pursuit.³¹ In the *Phaedo*, Plato's Socrates encourages an ascetic and “cathartic” purification of the soul from the body (67A, C), as its “passions and desires” (67A) inhibit our ability to “behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul” (66C-D). In the *Phaedrus*, the “wings of the soul” are said to “partake of the nature of the divine.”³² This “partaking” involves the contemplation of divine things, such as “beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all such qualities,” by which “the wings of the soul are nourished and grow” (246E).³³ By contemplating and emulating beauty (252D-253A, 256A-B) the philosopher ascends to the Form of Beauty (254A-B, 256B, D; see also *Symp.* 210A-212A; *Resp.* 500B-C, 517B-C, 518C-519D, 540A-C).³⁴

On at least four occasions Philo surpasses Plato's vision of the Forms when he causally connects the practice of virtue to seeing τὸ ὄν. In addition to *QE* 2.51, which as we have already noted offers four conditional promises

³¹) See the formulation of Seneca: “For philosophy cannot exist without virtue, nor virtue without philosophy. Philosophy is the study of virtue, by means, however, of virtue itself” (*Ep.* 89.8).

³²) Detailed discussions of the ascent passage in the *Phaedrus* are offered by Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 74-156; Graeme Nicholson, *Plato's Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999), 147-212; Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 86-88, 158-68; Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 76-83.

³³) On Plato's noetic ascent and the varying objects of contemplation, see Frederick E. Brenk, “Darkly Beyond the Glass: Middle Platonism and the Vision of the Soul,” in *Platonism in Late Antiquity* (ed. Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengiesser; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 8; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 39-60, esp. 42-46; Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 101-2, 111-13. In *Tim.* 90A-D, Plato appears to indicate that noetic contemplation is the supreme virtuous activity. On this, see David Sedley, “The Ideal of Godlikeness,” in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul* (ed. Gail Fine; Oxford Readings in Philosophy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 309-28, esp. 319-24.

³⁴) In the *Phaedrus*, Plato depicts the gods as gazing on the Forms. He even subordinates them to the Forms, as their contemplative activity is the means whereby they “become divine” (249C).

of a *visio Dei* to the virtuous noetic mystic, Philo twice enlists the account of Jacob's name change to encourage an athletic pursuit of virtue. In *Ebr.* 83 Philo unequivocally attributes the vision of God to a virtuous life: "What among all the blessings that the virtues give can be more perfect than the sight of the Absolutely Existent?" Similarly, in *Mut.* 82 Philo claims those who persevere in the pursuit and practice of virtue will receive the "power to behold the Existent with clear vision." Finally, Philo's depiction of the Therapeutae/Therapeutrides emphasizes their indefatigable pursuit of virtue, the contemplative ascent, and the *visio Dei*. At night they dream of the "divine virtues" (*Contempl.* 26), while by day they "press on to reach the summit of virtue" (72). As a "most fitting reward for their goodness" they have obtained "friendship" with God (90).³⁵ And a loose connection is made between virtue, noetic ascent, and the *visio Dei* in sections 11-12: their relentless pursuit of the vision of God is matched by an unshakable commitment to the community "that carries them on to such a perfect well-being in life" (εὐδαιμονία).³⁶

3.3. *The allegorical interpretation of the Mosaic scriptures*

A. *Allegorical exegesis, contemplative ascent, and mystical visuality*

Allegorical exegesis clearly played a central role in Philo's mystical practice, though it is rarely connected directly with the vision of God. It is, however, closely related to contemplative ascent and mystical visuality. This link is explicit in *Spec.* 3.1-6, a text that begins with a detailed account of noetic ascent and mystical visuality and concludes with a recollection of inspired allegorical interpretation. The fusion of the two practices is evident in that both are similarly described: just as Philo "peers down" (διακύπτων) from the heavens with his "soul's eyes" (τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμμασιν), and sees "earthly things" from a heavenly perspective (3.2, 4), so also in the act of allegorical interpretation he "peers down" (διακύπτειν) with his "soul's eyes" (τῆς

³⁵ David T. Runia, "The Reward for Goodness: Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* 90," *SPhA* 9 (1997): 3-18 at 9, 14.

³⁶ See David T. Runia, "Eudaimonism in Hellenistic-Jewish Literature," in *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism* (ed. James L. Kugel; JSJSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 131-57 at 132: "Together with *arete* (virtue or excellence), *eudaimonia* is the key term in Greek philosophical ethics." Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, 196, characterizes Epictetus' conception of εὐδαιμονία as involving "contentment, freedom, strength, making the best of oneself, fulfilling one's desires, and emotional stability."

ψυχῆς ὀφθαλμούς), “unfolding” (διαπτύσσω) and “revealing” (ἀναφαίνω) the hidden truths in the “sacred messages of Moses” (3.6).³⁷ Consequently, this text convinces Alan Segal that Philo’s “ascent to the divine” is directly attributable to “the activity of the mind, under the guidance of scripture.”³⁸

Allegorical text work may underlie three other elements in *Spec.* 3.1-6: (1) the “divine principles and ordinances” (θεῖοις... λόγοις... καὶ δόγμασιν) that were Philo’s “constant companions” (3.1).³⁹ (2) The παιδεία that was “planted in” his “soul” from his “earliest days,” that he “keeps the yearning for” (3.4). Celia Deutsch believes παιδεία here denotes more than just general “instruction”; rather it signifies “the ongoing use of skills, such as grammar, that Philo would necessarily bring to the task of allegorical interpretation of the biblical text, ‘philosophy.’”⁴⁰ (3) The conflation of “philosophy, the contemplation of the universe and its contents,” and noetic ascent in 3.1. Cosmology, as an aspect of physics, constituted a significant branch of philosophy, and Philo certainly considered Moses a philosopher. He also believed Gen 1-2 offered inspired cosmology/cosmogony (*Opif.* 8; *Fug.* 68). Therefore the “contemplation of the universe and its contents” may have involved the allegorical interpretation of Gen 1-2, and quite possibly a noetic experience evoked by the same text.⁴¹

³⁷ On διακύπτειν, διαπτύσσω, and ἀναφαίνω in 3.6, see Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 149-51. It is also worth noting that Philo begins the description of his allegorical text work with an exhortation to “envision” (ἰδοῦ) him at his task.

³⁸ Segal, “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Their Environments,” 1356. In another autobiographical account, *Migr.* 35, Philo recounts “innumerable instances” of divine possession and inspiration that occurred while he was “writing on philosophical tenets.” These particular mystical experiences, even at their profoundest heights, clearly involved text work: “words spoken, lines written... obtaining language, ideas.” *Cher.* 27, 48 and *Somm.* 2.252 also attest to the fact that Philo considered his exegetical work divinely inspired.

³⁹ So Naomi G. Cohen, “Context and Connotations. Greek Words for Jewish Concepts in Philo,” in Kugel, ed., *Shem in the Tents of Japhet*, 31-61, esp. 56-57. Though the phrase is somewhat ambiguous in *Spec.* 3.1, Cohen appeals to *Post.* 89, where λόγοι καὶ θεῖοι undoubtedly refers to the divine commandments.

⁴⁰ Deutsch, “Visions, Mysteries, and the Interpretive Task,” 91.

⁴¹ See Calabi, *God’s Acting, Man’s Acting*, 159: “Given that the cosmos is the work of God, who made it following the order and the law expressed in the *Torah*, any exegesis of the biblical text throws light on the nature of reality, and interpretation of the world of nature is tantamount to the analysis of a text that is symmetrical to and consistent with the biblical text.” See also David M. Hay, “Philo’s View of Himself as an Exegete: Inspired, but not Authoritative,” *SPhA* 3 (1991): 40-52 at 46: *Spec.* 3.1-6 “as a whole suggests that it is through exegesis that Philo lives and works as a philosopher.”

Somn. 1.164-165 appears to document a rare instance in which Philo connects allegorical exegesis with mystical visuality, and possibly the *visio Dei*. He asserts the “sacred oracles” will cause those who are “blind in their understanding to grow keen-sighted,” and receive “the gift of eyesight, enabling them to judge the real nature of things, and not merely the literal sense.” If the “eye of the soul” should ever be closed, Philo beseeches Moses, the “sacred guide,” to

be our prompter and preside over our steps and never tire of anointing our eyes, until conducting us to the hidden light of holy words (ἱερῶν λόγων) you display to us the locked beauty that is invisible to the uninitiated (ἀτελέστοις). All you souls that have tasted divine loves, rising up as it were out of a deep sleep and dispelling the mist, hurry towards the sight to which all eyes are drawn . . . that you may take in all that the Master of the contests has prepared for you to see and hear.

Though John R. Levison contends the purpose of this prayer is that God would “lead people to the allegorical level of interpretation,”⁴² we should not fail to note that Philo also expresses the hope that the allegorical exegete would see the “sight to which all eyes are drawn,” presumably God himself.

B. Moses' receipt of the Pentateuch as noetic ascent and contemplation of the Forms

Also attesting to the apparent fusion of text work, contemplative ascent, and noetic visuality are a number of passages in which Moses' mediation of the tabernacle blueprints is portrayed as a noetic ascent. In these texts, which appear in all three commentary series, Philo typically takes the tiny Platonic seed-plot of Exod 25:9, 40 (LXX) and grows it into a vast plantation of Platonic noetic discourse.⁴³ Moses “saw with the soul's eye the immaterial Forms (ιδέας) of the material objects about to be made, and these Forms had to be reproduced in copies perceived by the senses, taken from the original pattern” (ἀπ' ἀρχετύπου γραφῆς καὶ νοητῶν παραδειγμάτων αἰσθητὰ μιμήματα, *Mos.* 2.74-76). And unlike his assis-

⁴² Levison, “Inspiration and the Divine Spirit in the Writings of Philo Judaeus,” 303.

⁴³ In Exod 25:9, 40 (LXX) Moses is instructed by God to make a sanctuary “in accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern (παράδειγμα) of the tabernacle and the pattern (παράδειγμα) of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” “See that you make them according to the pattern (κατὰ τὸν τύπον) which is being shown you on the mountain.”

tant Bezael, Moses “obtained the office of producing not shadows but the actual archetype of the several objects” (οὐ σκιὰς ἀλλὰ τὰς ἀρχετύπους φύσεις αὐτὰς τῶν πραγμάτων ἔλαχεν ἀνατυποῦν, *Plant.* 27).⁴⁴

In *QE* 2.52, while commenting on Exod 25:9, Philo extends the noetic revelation beyond the tabernacle to the cosmos’s origin, thereby substantiating Gen 1-2. He also attributes to Moses the discovery of the noetic realm (so also *Spec.* 1.47-48). Philo first appeals to Exod 25:9 as proof of the ontological priority of the noetic realm. The same biblical text “excellently” demonstrates that “the teacher of the incorporeal and archetypal things” is “the unbegotten and uncreated God.” Moses was therefore “called and taken above,” and shown “the Forms of the intelligible things and the measures of all things in accordance with which the world was made.” That Moses was engulfed in thick clouds demonstrates that bodily eyesight was not involved in the revelation of the cosmos’s origin. Rather, the “thick symbolism of intelligible things is described . . . by seeing rather figuratively, by attributing certain Forms to certain symbols,” thereby achieving a “correct apprehension of them.” As David Winston observes, “The divine illumination of Moses’ mind is thus mediated through a vision of the eternal Forms”⁴⁵

Even more certainly extending the scope of Moses’ noetic ascent to the receipt of the whole Pentateuch is *Mos.* 1.158-159. 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.⁴⁶ Thus he beheld what was hidden from the sight of mortal nature, and, in himself and his life displayed for all to see, he has set before us, like some well-wrought picture, a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model

⁴⁴) The larger context of this passage, *Plant.* 18-27, is remarkable for its emphasis on contemplative ascent and the *visio Dei*. The “strong yearning” of the “eyes of the soul” to see (κατεῖδον) the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) gives them wings . . . to exceed the very bounds of the entire Universe and speed away towards the Uncreate. That is why those who crave for wisdom and knowledge with insatiable persistence are described in the Sacred Oracles as ‘called upward’ (ἀνακαλέω, Exod 31:2; 35:30; Lev 1:1) . . . The mind is rendered buoyant and raised to the utmost height by the natural force of the Divine Spirit, . . . The mind of the genuine philosopher . . . is borne upward insatiably enamored with all holy happy natures that dwell on high. Accordingly Moses . . . will be one ‘called upward.’

⁴⁵) Winston, “Judaism and Hellenism,” 16-17.

⁴⁶) Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 198, believes this description of Moses’ “entry into darkness” refers “to an ascent by Moses into the presence of God.”

(παράδειγμα) for those who are willing to copy it (μιμέομαι). Happy are those who imprint (ἐναπομάσσω) or strive to imprint, that image (τυπός) upon their souls.⁴⁷ For it were best that the mind should carry the Form (εἶδος) of such virtue in perfection.

Most noteworthy here, however, is Philo's apparent assertion of the paradigmatic nature of Moses' visionary receipt of the Pentateuch. Moses' writings reflect his noetic experience, and those who read them may in turn experience the same heavenly, noetic vision.⁴⁸ As with other ancient Jewish and early Christian accounts of mystical practice, Philo's depiction of Moses' revelatory experience describes and prescribes the means of heavenly ascent for others.⁴⁹ Moses is therefore truly the "sacred guide," the one who will "lead others on the way to the place where God stands" (*Spec.* 1.41; *Conf.* 95-96).

⁴⁷ This sentence appears to reflect Stoic epistemology. The Stoics believed that a "cognitive impression" (καταληπτική φαντασία) "proceeds from a real object, agrees with that object itself, and has been imprinted seal-fashion and stamped (ἐναπομάσσω) upon the mind" (Diogenes Laertius 7.46). See also the intromissionist theory of vision espoused in Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 5.13.4. On this text, see Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (Cambridge Classical Studies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 131-35, 222-23.

⁴⁸ 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), 16-28 at 24, contends that Philo sought to persuade his audience

of the all-encompassing logos Moses saw on the mountain. Such persuasion could only be achieved ultimately by seeing the same vision. For that, words were inadequate. Even Moses' words, though born of that vision and designed to lead to that vision, were no substitute for the vision itself. Knowing this, however, Moses crafted the text with care, leaving clues that pointed to the vision of the logos behind and beyond the text. Philo was able to find these clues in the peculiarities of words, etymologies, numerical codes, phraseology, grammar and syntax.

⁴⁹ See April D. DeConick, "What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April D. DeConick; SBLSymS 11; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 1-24, esp. 5-7; Seth Sanders, "Performative Exegesis," in *Paradise Now*, 57-97, esp. 57-64, 76-77. On the descriptive and prescriptive function of the Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice in the Qumran community, see Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, "The Temple Within," in *Paradise Now*, 145-78, esp. 166-67; Christopher Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (CRINT 3.12; Leiden: Brill: 2009), 325-28. On the Hodayot, see Angela Kim Harkins, "The Performative Reading of the Hodayot: The Arousal of Emotions and the Exegetical Generation of Texts," *JSP* 21 (2011): 55-71.

C. *The Therapeutae and Therapeutrides: allegorical text work and noetic ascent*

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of a causal nexus joining text work, noetic ascent, and the vision of God is found in Philo's account of the Therapeutae. This community of Jewish mystic ascetics personifies Philo's ideal philosopher, and as might be expected, their "philosophy" has its basis in scripture study.⁵⁰ Philo's initial description of the community emphasizes that their pursuit of the *visio Dei* is a full time occupation: the Therapeutae are "beforehand taught always to see (βλέπειν ἀεὶ προδιδασκόμενον) and desire the vision (θέας ἐφιέσθω) of the Existent One, and ascend beyond the sense perceptible sun" (ὑπερβαίνετω, *Contempl.* 11).⁵¹ "Seized by a heavenly ecstatic love," they "remain rapt and possessed like bacchanals or corybants until they see (μέχρις ἧν... ἴδωσιν) the object of their desire" (12).

Two passages in the *Contemplative Life* attest to the fusion of philosophical contemplation and allegorical text work, and provide detailed descriptions of their praxis: 28-30 and 78. Moreover, the first passage emphatically insists the community's practice of allegorical interpretation is a full time pursuit; therefore we may safely surmise it is specifically allegorical text work that is instrumental in evoking the ascent to the *visio Dei*, since, as we have seen, sections 11-12 describe it as an unceasing occupation. In the first text, Philo describes the daily routine of the Therapeutae: "from the early morning until evening they are entirely engaged in spiritual exercise" (ἐξ ἑωθिनὸς μέκρις ἑσπέρας διάστημα σύμπαν... ἄσκησις). This "spiritual exercise" is defined as "philosophizing" (φιλοσοφῶ), which is expressed in "reading the sacred scriptures and interpreting allegorically their ancestral philosophy" (φιλοσοφία). Allegorical interpretation is based

⁵⁰) On the likelihood that Philo's account of the Therapeutae reflects some degree of reality, see Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8-19. Skeptical appraisals have been offered by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa* as a Philosopher's Dream," *JSJ* 30 (1999): 40-64; and Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57-116, who contends that "Philo has either entirely invented the Therapeutae, or has so radically shaped his presentation of some actual ancient persons as to make them virtually inaccessible to us" (66).

⁵¹) Celia Deutsch, "The Therapeutae, Text Work, Ritual, and Mystical Experience," in DeConick, ed., *Paradise Now*, 287-311 at 289, believes the two unusual uses of the imperative here, ἐφιέσθω and ὑπερβαίνετω, may "suggest that Philo is in relation to the community, either directly or through his spiritual or intellectual identification with them."

on the conviction that “the words of the literal text are symbols of something whose hidden nature is revealed by studying the underlying meaning” (28). Towards this end, the community uses interpretive guidebooks, written by the “founders of their school of thought” (αἵρεσις),⁵² who “left many memorials of the Form (ιδεά) used in allegorical interpretation and these they take as a kind of archetype (ἀρχετύπος) and imitate” them (29). Philo further notes that “six days of the week” are entirely spent in this “philosophizing,” and their unswerving dedication is evident in the fact they “never leave their monastic dwellings” (30).

In *Contempl.* 78, Philo compares allegorical interpretation to “looking through the words as through a mirror”; in so doing, “the rational soul contemplates” “the transcendent beauty of concepts, unfolding and removing the symbolic coverings and bringing forth the thoughts into the light of day.” They thereby “see the invisible through the visible” (τὰ ἀφάνη διὰ τῶν φανερῶν θεωρεῖν).⁵³ As Joan E. Taylor has noted, for the Therapeutae, “the contemplative life is essentially the allegorically interpreting life.”⁵⁴ And as *Contempl.* 11-12 attests, the unceasing goal of this “allegorically interpreting life” is an ascent to the “vision of the Existent One.”⁵⁵

⁵² According to David T. Runia, “Philo of Alexandria and the Greek *Hairesis*-model,” *VC* 53 (1999): 117-47 at 140, in this context, αἵρεσις, “school of thought,” can be “interpreted either as referring to their contemplative way of life, or the use of the allegorical method in their scriptural exposition. The two alternatives . . . differ only in their point of reference, for it is via the study of scripture that the members of the community practice the contemplative life.”

⁵³ We should not assume that the Platonic noetic imagery used here exactly reflects the community’s understanding of the nature of allegory. So Sterling, “The School of Sacred Laws,” 157; David M. Hay, “Things Philo Said and Did Not Say About the Therapeutae,” *SBLSPS* (1992), 673-83, esp. 679, 681-82. Though Sterling believes Philo’s description in *Contempl.* 75-78 is generally reliable: “It remains probable that the Therapeutae did in fact practice exegesis along the line Philo indicated” (“Philo’s *Quaestiones*: Prolegomena or Afterthought?” 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], 99-123 at 106).

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria*, 131. So also 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. Seifrid; WUNT 2.140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 357-79 at 357: Philo “stresses that scriptural interpretation is at the heart of their spirituality.”

⁵⁵ Levison, “Inspiration and the Divine Spirit in the Writings of Philo Judaeus,” 298, contends Philo is the originator of the combined practice of allegorical interpretation and noetic ascent. This is improbable given the prominence of these practices in Philo’s account

D. *An attempted reconstruction of Philo's textual mysticism*

On the basis of this evidence, which has been drawn from across the full spectrum of Philo's writings, we can attempt to loosely reconstruct Philo's mystical textual practice. He would presumably begin by contemplating the "thick symbolism of intelligible things" (*QE* 2.52) in the "philosophy" of Moses, the "sacred guide" (*Somn.* 1.164). In a manner reminiscent of noetic contemplation, Philo would begin to perceive "hidden truths" (*Spec.* 3.6), as he "attributed certain Forms to certain symbols" (*QE* 2.52). As divinely inspired allegorical insights illuminated Philo's consciousness (*Spec.* 3.6; *QG* 4.1), he would find himself rapturously "caught up" and "borne aloft" into the heavens, possibly even within sight of the radiant τὸ ὄν. Though many aspects of the mystical ascent are portrayed with imagery derived from Platonic tradition and the mysteries, *QE* 2.52; *Mos.* 1.158; and *Contempl.* 28-30, 78 demonstrate that sacred Jewish texts provide the tangible guidebook for the ascent.⁵⁶ It is the inspired writings of Moses that provide Philo with the "symbols" that he allegorically connects to the "Forms," the spiritual truths that set his spirit aloft.⁵⁷

This reconstruction represents only an aspect of Philo's mystical practice. Of course not all his mystical experiences were connected with allegorical interpretation. As we have seen, Platonic contemplation and the practice of virtue are also attributed the power to evoke an ascent to the vision of God. Furthermore, Philo's allegorical methodology is complex; this reconstruction has attempted to describe only a particular cognitive and spiritual moment of inspiration, occurring in the task of exegesis.⁵⁸

of the Therapeutae, and the likelihood that the *Contemplative Life* is generally reliable.

⁵⁶ *Contra* Sze-Kar Wan, "Charismatic Exegesis: Philo and Paul Compared," *SPhA* 6 (1994): 54-82, whose analysis of four texts, *Migr.* 34-35; *Spec.* 3.1-6; *Somn.* 2.250-254; and *Cher.* 27-28, leads him to conclude that scriptural exegesis, though a part of Philo's mystical praxis, cannot be conclusively identified as either evoking or emanating from spiritual experiences. Wan's argument, however, is seemingly predicated on Philo's failure to provide an orderly account of procedure and experience. Despite this failure, our analysis of a slightly larger body of texts charts a recurring coincidence of mystical experience and text work, such that we can safely posit the existence of a causal nexus connecting allegorical interpretation, divine inspiration, and mystical experience, particularly noetic ascent, and occasionally the vision of God.

⁵⁷ See Irmgard Christiansen, *Die Technik der allegorischen Auslegungswissenschaft bei Philon von Alexandria* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Hermeneutik 7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 134.

⁵⁸ On Philo's methodology, see David T. Runia, "The Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatises: A Review of Two Recent Studies and Some Additional Comments," *VC* 38 (1984):

4. Philo's mysticism and the *visio Dei*

Having examined a number of ascent and *visio Dei* texts, we are now in a good position to evaluate some key issues pertaining to the function, nature, and influence of Philo's mysticism in the vision of God.⁵⁹ These include the role of human reason in the *visio Dei*, its affective and experiential dimensions, and the extent to which an actual visual encounter with God is possibly indicated.

4.1. *The role of human reason in the vision of God*

Certainly the human mind is the locus of the noetic ascent and *visio Dei*, and the texts we have examined so far clearly show the crucial part played by cognitive and contemplative activities in evoking the ascent and vision. However, this cognitive orientation, along with Philo's repeated insistence that the vision reveals only God's existence, and not his essence (*Praem.* 39; *Post.* 15-16, 167-169; *Fug.* 141, 164-165; *Spec.* 1.40; *Virt.* 215), has led some to equate the *visio Dei* with "achieving a rational awareness of God's existence." Consequently, nature and reason are highlighted, while supernatural and suprarational elements are minimized.

209-56; idem, "Further Observations on the Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatises," *VC* 41 (1987): 105-38; Burton L. Mack, "Philo Judaeus and Exegetical Traditions in Alexandria," *ANRW* 2.21.1 (1984), 227-71, esp. 257-62. This attempted reconstruction of Philo's mystical praxis also helps explain why one encounters, in the midst of a massive project of scriptural interpretation, spiritual experiences that are so often Platonic in texture. It also helps connect two disparate roles of Philo's Logos: as the repository of the Forms in the noetic realm (*Opif.* 20; *Somn.* 1.62), and the mediator of revelation (*Leg.* 1.19; *QG* 4.140).

⁵⁹⁾ Attempts at defining "mysticism," even when restricted to a single religious tradition, have often been frustrated and deemed problematic. The definitions that are offered seldom agree with one another—for as Gershom G. Scholem observed over a half century ago, "there are almost as many definitions" of mysticism "as there are writers on the subject" (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [3d ed.; New York: Schocken, 1954], 3-4). For recent and concise reviews of the issues, see Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mysticism*, 200-214; Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 1-20. Noticeably absent from Philo's mysticism are concepts and motifs central to other ancient Jewish and early Christian mystical traditions, such as mystical union with God, the ontological transformation of the mystic, and elaborate descriptions of the heavenly realm and its occupants. We may briefly define Philo's contemplative mysticism as visually oriented, and transcending ontology and cosmology in its effort to come within visual proximity of God. And though it originates in cognitive activity, this visual encounter will on occasion be prefaced by or generate a profound emotional, and even ecstatic, reaction; nevertheless, it does not issue in an ontological transformation.

For example, Harry A. Wolfson contends seeing God represents the “direct perception of the evidence in nature for the existence of God.”⁶⁰ Though this “direct perception” may be acquired “with the help of God by means of prophecy and revelation,” the object of the vision is nevertheless restricted to “nature.”⁶¹ In fact, Wolfson’s interpretation of *Opif.* 69-71 seems to imply that it is the sun’s overwhelming radiance that repels the contemplative.⁶² The *visio Dei* is thus limited to an ontological connection being drawn between the created order and its Creator.⁶³ And though divine revelation may be involved, the possibility of an actual mystical visual encounter with God is never entertained.

The role of reason is even more strongly emphasized by David Winston. In contrast to Wolfson, he considers it “very unlikely” that divine revelation is involved in these representations of the *visio Dei*, and claims instead that these texts employ “figurative language” to describe what is essentially an “inner intuitive illumination, constituting a rational process of an analytical type.”⁶⁴ In his interpretation of the representative passage *Praem.* 44-46, he appeals to Plato, *Resp.* 511B-C and 532A-B, two texts which describe the role of dialectical reasoning in leading the philosopher to a “sudden intuition of the First Principle.” From these Platonic texts he infers that Philo also attributed “the direct vision of God . . . to the workings of intuitive reason,” which “in no way serves as a bypass of man’s rational faculties.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundation of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2d ed.; 2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), 2:90. He further contends that it “is in this sense . . . that the expression ‘to see God’ or ‘the vision of God’ is used by him in other passages” (2.91).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.90.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.92.

⁶³ Wolfson’s discussion of the *visio Dei* appropriately occurs in a chapter entitled “Proofs of the Existence of God.”

⁶⁴ David Winston, “Was Philo a Mystic?” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* (ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmadge; Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982), 15-39 at 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-26. Winston discusses the same topics in his *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections* (CWS; New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 26-30. In his essay, “Philo’s Mysticism,” *SPhA* 8 (1996): 74-82, he appeals to *Praem.* 27, which lauds “the perpetual vision of the Existent One,” and on the basis of this one text, he contends that since there is “no indication in Philo’s writings of the possibility of reaching such a permanent unitive state” (i.e., mystical oneness with God), “Israel’s permanent vision of God must be viewed as an intellectual vision of God’s existence” (82).

To Winston's credit, *Praem.* 43 does indeed mention some "truly admirable persons . . . superior to the other classes" who have "advanced from down to up by a sort of heavenly ladder and by reason and reflection happily inferred the Creator from his works."⁶⁶ However, in the same section Philo identifies an even superior order of contemplatives, who "have the power to apprehend him through himself without the cooperation of any reasoning process (μηδενὶ χρησάμενοι λογισμῷ συνεργέω) to lead them to the sight."⁶⁷ Philo construes this superior mode of "apprehension" as occurring solely at the behest of God (44), through his own luminosity, and not through the reasoning process: "Is not light seen by light? In the same way God is also his own brightness and is discerned through himself alone, . . . The seekers after truth are those who envision (φαντασιώω) God through God, light through light" (45-46).

Andrea Wilson Nightingale's analysis of Plato's contemplative ascent texts, though not diminishing the role of reason, highlights their revelatory, visual, and religious dimensions. Plato's vision of the Forms is a sort of "sacralized visuality," comparable to "religious revelation," since it is ultimately "the divine gift of light—the metaphysical light of the Good—that confers on the human soul the ability to know and 'see' being."⁶⁸ Like Winston, she also appeals to *Resp.* 532E; however she claims this text distinguishes dialectic from the contemplative vision, the latter beginning where the former ends. Though the vision of the Forms is initiated by the "effortful, methodical, and technical" activity of dialectic, the contemplative ultimately arrives at a state of "rest or repose."⁶⁹ They are thus "gazing

⁶⁶ Similar ontological/cosmological arguments appear in *Leg.* 3.97-99 and *Spec.* 1.32-35. See the discussion in David Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985), 45-47.

⁶⁷ See *Conf.* 97, which places the "direct perception of the evidence in nature for the existence of God" on the third rung of a ladder of visual apprehension. Noetic philosophers "desire to see 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." See also *Leg.* 3.100-103.

⁶⁸ Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 110, 112-13. On the mystical and ecstatic qualities of Plato's noetic ascent to the vision of Forms see also André-Jean Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 43-44; Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 86-99; Nicholson, *Plato's Phaedrus*, 80, 135-46, 152-55, 177-78, 187, 193, 197.

⁶⁹ Of *Phaedr.* 247A-250C, Griswold (*Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, 97, 104) observes, "The divine banquet consists of contemplation of the Beings, not of an effort to analyze

upon—rather than battling for—the truth.”⁷⁰ So also in *Praem.* 43-46, where surely we encounter Barclay’s “resting sage,” who receives the radiant *visio Dei* in “pure passivity.”⁷¹ It would therefore appear that this passage reveals both the function and limitations of human reason—and possibly even intuition—as well as the presence of mystical experience in Philo’s vision of God. The realm of cognition seems to have been somewhat transcended, as Philo portrays the revelatory encounter as almost entirely visual in nature (see also *Opif.* 69-71). Though surely the intellect is receiving and processing this revelatory visual information, Philo’s cryptic “light by light” formulation perhaps signals his own conviction of the experience’s ultimate ineffability, as well as its possible transcendence of the limitations of human cognitive activity.⁷²

them discursively.” He further notes: “Theorizing requires leisure and, in a sense, passivity; the gods do not do anything when they feast except look.”

⁷⁰ Ibid., 114. Nightingale further notes:

Plato repeatedly isolates the act of ‘seeing’ the Forms in his descriptions of the journey of philosophic *theoria* and treats it as a unique kind of activity. Though the notion of ‘seeing Being’ is of course a metaphor (and must be interpreted as such), I believe that the descriptions of the philosophic soul gazing on the Forms capture something essential about the experience and nature of knowledge as Plato conceived it.” (110)

⁷¹ Barclay, “‘By the Grace of God I am what I am,’” 157. Philo espouses a similar sentiment in *QG* 4.4, a text which offers one of his most detailed treatments of the *visio Dei*: “the limit of happiness is the arrival/manifestation (*παρουσία*) of God, which completely fills the whole soul with his incorporeal and eternal light.”

⁷² So also David Bradshaw, “The Vision of God in Philo of Alexandria,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 483-500, esp. 497. Though see Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (ed. Steven T. Katz; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22-74 at 26: “There are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences... all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.” Sterling, “‘The Queen of the Virtues,’” 118, believes the “light though/by light” revelatory formulation in *Praem.* 46 denotes a “mystical experience” that

transcends the limits of rational thought. It *may be* that Philo understood light by light to mean the ascent of the soul above the multiplicity of the sense-perceptible and discursive world to the unity of the Logos where God could be perceived intuitively. This was the highest religious experience a human being could hope to enjoy. While most would never achieve it, it was an ideal that a few had actually experienced.

We should also note that an ecstatic overwhelming and bypass of cognitive facilities is apparent in some of Philo’s portrayals of divine inspiration (*Mos.* 1.273-284; *Her.* 264-266;

4.2. Mystical experience and the vision of God

Further proof that at least some of Philo's *visio Dei* accounts attempt to represent a mystical vision of God may be evident in the affective and experiential elements that appear in those accounts. Though in some earlier works Winston acknowledged the presence of these elements, in a more recent essay he claims that

in all the passages in which Philo speaks of the vision of God, all references to experiential mystical language, such as sober intoxication, Bacchic frenzy, a body flushed and fiery, agitation by heavenly passion, being mastered by divine love, forgetting of self, and the mind that is no longer in itself, are entirely absent.⁷³

Though many of the *visio Dei* accounts are fairly dispassionate and cognitive in orientation, a number of texts, found throughout the Philonic corpus, contain emotional, experiential, and ecstatic language and imagery, including *Opif.* 69-71; *Plant.* 18-27; *Praem.* 38-39; *Contempl.* 11-12; *Ebr.* 145-152. The latter two texts in particular most conclusively refute Winston's absolute assertion. According to Philo, in their pursuit and practice of the *visio Dei*, the Therapeutae are "seized by a heavenly ecstatic love (ἔρως) . . . rapt and possessed like bacchanals or corybants until they see the object of their desire" (*Contempl.* 11-12).⁷⁴ Even more emotional,

Spec. 1.65; 4.49; *QG* 3.9), as well as his own experiences of such inspiration (*Migr.* 34-35; *Cher.* 27). For recent discussions, see David Winston, "Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon on Creation, Revelation, and Providence: The High-Water Mark of Jewish Hellenistic Fusion," in Kugel, ed., *Shem in the Tents of Japhet*, 109-30; John R. Levison, "Philo's Personal Experience and the Persistence of Prophecy," in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (ed. Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 427; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 194-209.

⁷³ Winston, "Philo's Mysticism," 79-80. See also idem, "Was Philo a Mystic?" 23: "there is no mention of ecstasy or the eviction of the mind . . . in the passages dealing with the direct vision of God." Though in the same essay, from 1982, he claims the *visio Dei* "may at times culminate in an experience of mystical union accompanied by Bacchic frenzy, an ecstatic condition which shakes the soul to its very foundations" (p. 26; so also *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections*, 30).

⁷⁴ On the mystical praxis of the Therapeutae, see the excellent discussion of Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria*, 311-40. With regard to their communal worship celebrations, she remarks: "In terms of a contemporary phenomenological appraisal, the Mareotic group work themselves into an altered state of consciousness. . . . This state is usually referred to as a trance" (339). See also Hindy Najman, "Philosophical

embodied, and even disembodied experiential detail attends *Ebr.* 145-152, where Philo discusses the “sober intoxication” of the “God-possessed.” When “grace fills the soul” of such a person, they “rejoice, smile, and dance,” for they are “possessed and inspired,” appearing to be “drunken, crazy, and beside themselves” (146). Their “soul is stirred and goaded as it were into ecstasy,” while their “body also is flushed and fiery, warmed by an overflowing joy from within that passes on the passion to the outer person” (147). Like Samuel’s mother Hannah, they will “pour out their souls before the Lord” (1 Sam 1:15), and thus “send it outside, reaching out for and diffusing it, so that it may touch the bounds of the All, and urged on towards that most beautiful and illustrious of visions—the vision of the Uncreated” (152).⁷⁵

These indications of a comprehensive mystical experience, involving and affecting the entire person, may help to support our earlier assertion of the possible transcendence of cognition. Furthermore, we have limited this inquiry to *visio Dei* texts; however, as we have seen, the contemplative ascent plays a constitutive role in the vision of God, and our analysis has shown that ascent accounts commonly contain experiential mystical features. Therefore, all ascent accounts, even those failing to explicitly issue in a *visio Dei*, should be allowed a voice in this discussion. To exclude them is methodologically unsound, as it imposes unnecessary, overly precise restrictions on the inquiry.

4.3. *The visio Dei as a visual event and an attempted reconciliation of Philo’s philosophical and religious commitments*

Though Philo himself, in the context of a discussion of the *visio Dei*, warns of the limitations of language and subjectivity: “each one of us knows what they have themselves experienced as no other can know it” (*Plant.* 21), we

Contemplation and Revelatory Inspiration in Ancient Judean Traditions,” *SPhA* 19 (2007): 101-11 at 107: through their prayers, in which they “actualize their own potential divinity, the Therapeutae come to *see* God, just as Israel did at the Red Sea after the Exodus from Egypt.” On the likelihood that Philo’s depiction of the community reflects his own experiences, practices, and beliefs, see Deutsch, “The Therapeutae, Text Work, Ritual, and Mystical Experience,” 287, 292, 310.

⁷⁵ In my article “Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?” 34-36, I demonstrated that the “Uncreated” (ἀγένητος) in *Ebr.* 152 most likely refers to τὸ ὄν. The remarkable mysticism espoused in this text is the subject of my forthcoming essay, “The Passion of Eve and the Ecstasy of Hannah: Sense Perception, Passion, and Mysticism in Philo of Alexandria, *Ebr.* 143 -152.”

may reasonably conjecture that the emotional content, experiential orientation, and vivid visual imagery found in some of his *visio Dei* accounts indicates that an actual visual event, of some sort, underlies and informs its textual articulation.⁷⁶ These emotional, experiential, and especially visual elements are readily apparent in *Opif.* 69-71: the “mind” which ascends on “soaring wing” to the noetic realm “sees (ὁράω) all things,” “investigating” (διερευνάω)⁷⁷ the elements of “land and sea,” and “viewing closely” (κατασκοπέω) the “atmosphere and all its phases.” It then “peers beyond (ὑπερκύπτω)⁷⁸ the confines” of the sense-perceptible realm, and “reaching out after the noetic realm,” it “sees” (ὁράω) the Forms, “sights of surpassing beauty that it gazes upon” (θεάομαι). The contemplative is then “seized by a sober intoxication” and filled with a “longing to see” (ὁράω) the “Great King himself.” However, the deity’s luminosity is overwhelming, as “pure and unmixed rays of concentrated light pour forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled.”⁷⁹ Such emotional, experiential, and visually oriented evidence reinforces the textual evidence set forth in my earlier essay, and together they attest to the likelihood

⁷⁶ Similar, though more developed, arguments have been made for the authenticity of apocalyptic visionary accounts. See Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 61-70, 214-47; Michael E. Stone, “Apocalyptic, Vision, or Hallucination?” *Milla Wa Milla* 14 (1974): 47-56; reprinted in *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* (SVTP 9; Leiden: Brill 1991), 419-28; idem, “A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions,” *HTR* 96 (2003): 167-80. Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 18, points to Philo’s accounts of the “mind’s inspired ascent” (*Spec.* 3.1-6), the voice heard in his soul (*Cher.* 27-29), and the “ecstatic experiences with loss of consciousness and with an experience of light” (*Migr.* 34-35), and concludes: “The variety of forms of these ecstatic experiences support the understanding that they refer to real experiences and are not only literary compositions made up by Philo as an author.”

⁷⁷ That διερευνάω also occurs in a well-known Platonic contemplative ascent text, *Theat.* 174B, convinces Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, 228-29, that Philo is deliberately recalling the Platonic passage.

⁷⁸ This verb appears frequently in ascent texts (*Leg.* 3.100; *Gig.* 61; *Ebr.* 62; *Migr.* 184; *Congr.* 105, 134; *Fug.* 164; *Praem.* 30; *Prob.* 3; *Legat.* 5). A related verb, ἀνακύνω, occurs in Plato, *Phaedr.* 249C, which is perhaps the most influential Platonic ascent account.

⁷⁹ A wealth of visual language and imagery is also found in *Spec.* 3.1-6. On the visual emphasis in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, see Nicholson, *Plato’s Phaedrus*, 199-201, 206. As Nightingale notes, Plato “positively revels” in visual language and imagery (*Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 79).

that these texts attempt to represent a direct visual encounter with the Existent One.⁸⁰

As with the other aspects of the *visio Dei* we have analyzed, the ambivalence attending this topic results, in part, from Philo's attempt to reconcile his philosophical commitment to transcendence and his religious commitment to the often-immanent God of Israel, as revealed in the writings of Moses. Philo is both a philosopher of the Transcendent and an exegete of Jewish biblical traditions.⁸¹ His efforts to reconcile these two disparate occupations and outlooks are not always successful. This is especially the case with regard to his preeminent philosophical and spiritual experience, the vision of God. Recognition of the inherent tensions caused by these two concerns and influences, philosophy and religious traditions, allows us to give each their due, not favoring one to the exclusion of the other.⁸²

5. Conclusion

Philo's assertions about seeing God, that this "most glorious and loveliest of visions" (*Ebr.* 152) constitutes the "crowning point of happiness" (*Abr.* 58) and is the "most precious of all possessions" (*Legat.* 4), are well substantiated in his writings, particularly the accounts of his own mystical

⁸⁰) Examples of "direct textual evidence" may be found in texts promoting a hierarchy of visionary achievement (*Abr.* 107, 119-132; *QG* 4.2, 4-5, 8), in contexts where the Logos functions anagogically, leading the noetic mystic to the vision of God (*Leg.* 3.169-178; *Sacr.* 8; *Migr.* 168-175), and in few remarkable *visio Dei* accounts that are completely "intermediary-free" (*Opif.* 69-71; *Abr.* 79-80; *Mos.* 1.158). See Mackie, "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?" 37-44.

⁸¹) On this issue, see Winston, "Judaism and Hellenism," 1-19; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (rev. ed.; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 139-44, 182-83; idem, "Reclaiming the Heritage of Moses: Philo's Confrontation with Greek Philosophy," *SPhA* 7 (1995): 108-23; and the essays in *SPhA* 5 (1993): Gregory E. Sterling, "Platonizing Moses: Philo and Middle Platonism," 96-111; David T. Runia, "Was Philo a Middle Platonist? A difficult question revisited," 112-40; David Winston, "Response to Runia and Sterling," 141-46; Thomas H. Tobin, "Was Philo a Middle Platonist? Some suggestions," 147-50; and John Dillon, "A Response to Runia and Sterling," 151-55.

⁸²) An almost exclusive emphasis on Philo's doctrines of God's transcendence and essential unknowability, as well as an equally strong cognitive orientation, lead Calabi to repeatedly offer assertions of God's complete invisibility, even to the eyes of the mind/soul (*God's Acting, Man's Acting*, 40-41, 44, 59, 64-69, 82-83, 89, 101-4, 155, 203-5). Near the end of her study, however, she admits Philo considered Moses uniquely capable of seeing God (204-5, 214).

experiences. It is perhaps a testimony to the extraordinary nature and sheer emotional force of this experience that it leads Philo to set aside and/or modify some of his core theological/philosophical convictions. As shown in my previous article, the *visio Dei* leads Philo to temporarily betray his otherwise thoroughgoing allegiance to divine transcendence, affording humans a direct visual encounter with τὸ ὄν. This present work has demonstrated that Philo's usual commitment to a monergistic basis for divine-human relations is incapable of adequately representing the full scope and scale of the noetic ascent and *visio Dei*. Vigorous human striving, a refined level of acumen, a virtuous life, and an advanced philosophical/spiritual status are often required of the few fortunate humans allowed to ascend and see God. Even Philo's exegeses of the Pentateuch's theophanies emphasize the effort, skill, virtue, and superior status of the human recipients of these divine self-manifestations. Thus, the *visio Dei* quite often requires the full involvement of the human actor, as energetically striving and/or obediently cooperating with the divine will and empowerment.

Though a thorough investigation of the methods Philo employs to evoke the noetic ascent and divine vision has yet to be attempted, this present study has demonstrated the importance of philosophical contemplation, the practice of virtue, and allegorical interpretation. Allegory in particular has been shown to be the "method dear to those whose eyes are opened" (*Plant.* 36). Inquiry into this facet of Philo's mystical praxis has further demonstrated its exceptional nature. Those who would see God must be versed in both philosophy as well as the sacred writings of Moses.⁸³ And they must be almost entirely occupied in these pursuits, as are the two "real-life" practitioners in Philo's accounts, both himself and the Therapeutae.

Finally, Philo's mystical spirituality has been evident in many of the texts we have examined. And while cognitive activity is prominent in the *visio Dei*, a number of factors support our contention that it cannot merely represent a metaphor for attaining a "rational awareness of God's existence." Among these factors are: (1) the numerous passages that delineate a hierarchy of visionary achievement (2) and/or detail the many hardships and hazards encountered by the contemplative in their quest; (3) the effusive emotional, experiential, and ecstatic language and imagery evoked by

⁸³) Note the pessimism of *Spec.* 3.47: "Whether you will find God when you seek him is not certain; for to many he has not manifested (φανερώω) himself, but their zeal has been without success all along."

the sight; (4) the occasional indications of ineffability (e.g., the “light by light” formulation); (5) the preponderant visual orientation of texts like *Opif.* 69-71; (6) and finally, the many superlative-laden assertions that the vision is the *non plus ultra* of human existence (e.g., “the crowning point” and “beginning and end” of human happiness, the “most glorious and loveliest of visions”). Indeed, these factors strongly suggest that Philo’s *visio Dei* accounts represent an attempt to “express the inexpressible,” the experience of an actual, mystical visual encounter with God. And despite its exacting demands and apparent exclusivity, Philo’s mystical spirituality is attractive and engaging, evincing an indefatigable joy for scriptural exegesis that emanates from a “mind mastered by the love of the divine.” That mind is still able to speak down through the millennia, inspiring readers to wrestle and strive for the greatest prize: to “be endowed with eyes,” receiving the power “to behold the Existent One with sharp vision” (*Mut.* 82).

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