

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86090-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Philo
Edited by Adam Kamesar
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION BY ADAM KAMESAR

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BCE – 45 CE) stands at the crossroads of three great civilizations of antiquity: the Judaic, the Greek, and the Christian. Philo's primary heritage was that of biblical Judaism, but in the form it had taken on in the Diaspora of the Hellenistic world. His chief literary medium was biblical exegesis, but he sought to interpret the Scriptures by reference to the most advanced and sophisticated systems of thought of the times, which were those of Greek philosophy. In theology and what was called 'physics', the system of primary importance for Philo was that of Platonism, and in ethics that of Stoicism. However, Philo's attempt to assimilate biblical and Greek thought often finds closer parallels in the Christian world than in a Jewish or a pagan environment. Indeed, Philo came to be appreciated more by the later Christian Fathers than by the Rabbis or the Greek philosophers of the Roman imperial age. In view of his background and influence, the writings of Philo are of fundamental importance for the understanding of Judaism, for the history of Greek philosophy, and for the study of early Christianity.

Within the context of the history of Greek literature as well, Philo appears to have lived across the span of the eras in more than simply a chronological sense. For in his writings he assumes many guises and, in a manner of speaking, emerges as a representative of different epochs. At times he is a man of science or a practitioner of the technical disciplines such as grammar and advanced literary study as they had developed in Hellenistic times. At other times, his moralizing diatribes and rhetorical displays have much in common with the popular philosophical literature of the early imperial age. And finally, his Platonistic religiosity and focus on the quest for the transcendent would appear to presage certain forms of spirituality that we encounter in later antiquity, in the Hermetic literature, in the Chaldean Oracles, and in Gnosticism. Of course, Philo's erudition was vast and he drew on an extraordinary array of sources. He knew not only secular Greek literature, but also owed much to a previous tradition of biblical exegesis, no doubt that of Greek-speaking Judaism, which he characterizes only in the most general of terms, without naming names. In fact, Philo's

2 Introduction

dependence on earlier authorities was such that some would study him, as A. D. Nock has put it, 'primarily as a source rather than as a man'.¹ Nevertheless, this circumstance alone cannot account for the great variety in the Philonic corpus. It must also be put down to the breadth of Philo's interests and horizons and to his versatility as a writer. His works represent a most interesting specimen of Greek literature.

Philo's bicultural heritage in Judaism and Hellenism, however, and even his proximity to Christian thought can make him a perplexing author to read. And the sheer bulk and variety of the Philonic corpus make it a difficult sea to navigate. Thus, the role for an up-to-date handbook of this sort. Of course, a handbook of moderate size cannot address all the aspects of Philo's works, nor can it be a substitute for reading those works directly, which, it may be acknowledged, is not always an easy or pleasant experience. But this *Companion* endeavors to supply some essential introductory information in a clear and unassuming format that can turn that experience into less of a struggle. While it is introductory, the *Companion* goes beyond the elementary level. The chapters are intended to provide not only a sense of recent progress in the scholarship on Philo, but also a certain vision of the topics under consideration.

As just indicated, the structure of the volume is meant to be very straightforward: Part I: Life and Writings; Part II: Thought; and Part III: Influence and Significance. With any author, it is necessary to have some appreciation of his or her life and times. In the case of Philo, while we possess few details about him personally, there is a good deal of data concerning his family, social position, and historical setting. He played a key role in the events related to the violence between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria in 38 CE, and wrote about them in two surviving works. All of this material, to be reviewed in chapter 1, allows us to gain concrete insights into some of his positions and attitudes. The corpus of Philo's writings is especially large and complicated, and consequently may appear somewhat intimidating to the novice. Not only did Philo write in a variety of genres and for a variety of audiences, his writings have suffered some modifications and corruptions in the course of their transmission, in manuscript form, through the ages. This circumstance has led to further difficulties in understanding the structure and organization of the corpus, which seems to have been anything but haphazard. The survey in chapter 2 provides an introduction and a reasoned guide to the catalogue of Philo's writings. The majority of those writings, about three-fourths of the corpus, are dedicated to the exegesis of

1 *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA 1972), II, p. 559.

Scripture. That is, for the most part, Philo does not set out his ideas in schematic treatises but proceeds according to the biblical text. His philosophy and religious beliefs emerge in the course of his exposition. Thus, the path to understanding Philo's thought must go through his biblical exegesis, because this is his primary mode of discourse. The objective of chapter 3 is to provide some background on Philo's approach to the Bible and on the basis and orientation of his exegesis, so that the reading of the exegetical works might prove less disconcerting.

Part II of the *Companion* is concerned with Philo's thought and its background. Chapter 4 is designed to provide a broad survey of Philo's biblical faith as understood in the setting of Second Temple or 'Middle' Judaism. There are a variety of contemporary sources that help us understand the Jewish context for Philo, and these include the deuterocanonical and pseudepigraphic works, the writings of Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These sources often allow us to better appreciate the specific character of Philo's Jewish thought. In the view of some theorists, Judaism can be well described in terms of the threefold scheme, 'God, Torah, and Israel', and a close variation of this scheme provides the structure of chapter 4. The remaining two chapters in Part II are more in-depth treatments of the two chief spheres of Philo's thought as seen from the perspective of Greek philosophy. From the time of Xenocrates (396–314 BCE), it had been customary to divide philosophy into three branches: logic, physics, and ethics. In his treatise *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, § 80, where he is discussing the Essenes, Philo mentions these three parts of philosophy, and outlines the Essenes' attitude toward them. He indicates that they are completely unconcerned with logic, on the view that it is a kind of verbal sparring unnecessary for the attainment of virtue. With regard to physics, they focus only on the questions of God and creation, and disregard those parts of it that they consider to be beyond the grasp of man. To the ethical branch of philosophy, on the other hand, they devote intense study. This description of the primary interests of the Essenes could apply, with some nuancing, to Philo himself. Indeed, it is not improbable that he imposed his own perspective on them.² Accordingly, chapters 5 and 6 of the *Companion* will cover, respectively, Philo's theology and his views on creation, and his ethics. In both of these chapters, full attention is given to the primary philosophical sources of Philo's thought, namely, Platonism and Stoicism.

Finally, Part III of the *Companion* is dedicated to Philo's influence and significance. As indicated above, while Philo is a figure worthy of study for his own sake, his writings are often read for the light they may

2 This perspective seems to have been derived from a source related to Ariston of Chios, *SVF* I.352.

4 Introduction

shed on other areas of inquiry. In the present volume, those areas are defined by reference to literary *corpora*. Our contributors consider the relationship of the Philonic corpus to three other quite distinct *corpora* of ancient literature: the New Testament, the works of the Church Fathers, and the rabbinic writings. From a chronological perspective, the New Testament is the closest to Philo. While one perhaps cannot speak of a direct influence of Philo's written works on the New Testament authors, it is highly probable that Philo's ideas, possibly spread through the medium of the Hellenistic synagogues, did have some influence on the New Testament. In any case, it is beyond doubt that the Philonic corpus is one of the most important sources parallel to the New Testament and that it can illuminate many of its central ideas. The first chapter of Part III, chapter 7, will provide a convenient and systematic survey of some of the key points of contact between Philo and the New Testament. In the case of the Church Fathers, one may speak of an actual reception of Philo. Especially from the time of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE) onward, the Christian writers adopted Philo almost as one of their own. It is through the Church Fathers, and especially through Origen and the 'Alexandrian' brand of exegesis and theology, that Philo exercised a massive influence on Western religious philosophy. For the Fathers also attempted to combine biblical revelation with Platonic philosophy, and it was therefore almost inevitable that they would take full advantage of the Philonic legacy. If Philo helps us understand patristic literature and thought, the reverse is also true. For the Fathers were Philo's readers in antiquity, and their understanding of his works has much to contribute to our own. Chapter 8 of the *Companion* illustrates in a detailed fashion how Philo's writings came to be a part of the early Christian tradition, and also looks at the question of why this was the case. Paradoxically, the rabbinic corpus stands at a greater distance from Philo. The Rabbis do not mention him at all, and any influence he may have exerted upon them seems to be indirect. Nevertheless, one should not suppose because of this that the works of Philo are not relevant for the understanding of rabbinic literature or vice versa. Quite the contrary. And one should be especially wary of the notion that the rabbinic writings are of too late a date to be of significance for the understanding of the Philonic corpus. While the contemporary critical approaches to the rabbinic writings are certainly in order, the fact remains that these writings preserve earlier traditions and, perhaps more importantly, modes of exegetical thinking. Indeed, the respective exegetical projects of Philo and the Rabbis have enough in common that the Philonic corpus and rabbinic literature may illuminate each other reciprocally. The great difficulties that

one sometimes encounters in attempting to understand either Philo or the Rabbis make that possibility a welcome circumstance. Such reciprocal illumination is based on points of similarity, and also on points of contrast. Chapter 9 of this *Companion* provides a survey of the entire question, both with regard to the general issues and with regard to some specific points of comparability.

The study of Philo is vibrant in many countries, as the list of contributors to the present volume attests, and is carried out in many languages. While there has been an effort to direct attention to bibliographical resources in English, there has also been reference, of necessity, to contributions in other languages.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86090-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Philo

Edited by Adam Kamesar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86090-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Philo
Edited by Adam Kamesar
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I. Philo's Life and Writings

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86090-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Philo

Edited by Adam Kamesar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

DANIEL R. SCHWARTZ

1 Philo, His Family, and His Times

As might be thought appropriate for a philosopher who frequently expressed disdain for life in this world and its fleeting events, relatively little is known of Philo's life. Philo tells us little about himself,¹ and unfortunately, there is not much else in the dossier of ancient sources about him. Josephus gives him a few lines in his *Jewish Antiquities* (18.259–60), but beyond stating that he was highly respected, a philosopher, and led an Alexandrian Jewish delegation to the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula, they hardly tell us anything we could not learn or infer from Philo's own writings. The bits of information about Philo offered sporadically in early patristic literature beginning with Eusebius and Jerome (the latter of whom devoted, in his biographical compendium *De viris illustribus*, a brief entry to Philo [ch. 11]), add little, apart from Christian myth, to what we can learn – as they did – from Philo and Josephus.²

However, if we move out from the inner circle, that is, about Philo himself, which we shall address in section I, we find a good bit of information about the next two circles: his family and the historical context within which he lived. Both are relatively well-documented and of import for any proper understanding of Philo. Above we enumerated the data Josephus supplies and underlined how little they actually are; now we may add that Josephus gives one more datum, unparalleled elsewhere, that is a treasure: Josephus gives us the name of Philo's brother. As we shall see in section II, this datum allows us to locate Philo in the context of a family that was very affluent and among the most prominent in Alexandria, and that enjoyed special relationships with the Roman

- 1 For collections of his statements about himself, see D. Winston's edition of Philo of Alexandria, *The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections* (New York 1981), pp. 75–8, and D.M. Hay, 'Philo's View of Himself as an Exegete: Inspired but not Authoritative', *StPhAnn* 3 (1991), pp. 40–52.
- 2 On 'Philo Christianus', see D. T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen 1993), pp. 3–7. The relevant passages from Eusebius and Jerome are conveniently accessible (along with others) in PCW I, pp. LXXXV–CXIII.

imperial family and also with the Herodian dynasty of Judea. Members of the family appear several times in Josephus' writings, there are some ostraca that document the family's import-export business, and one member of Philo's family, his nephew, had quite a successful – and well-documented – career in service of Rome. As for Philo's broader historical context – whether we look at the Roman Empire in general (the days of the Julio–Claudian emperors) or the Jews in particular (the days of the Herodian epigones, anti-Roman agitation, incipient rabbinic Judaism and nascent Christianity) – here too we have rather full dossiers, on the basis of which we will concentrate in section III on one central issue.

I. PHILO

Given the fact that Philo terms himself 'old' at the time of his participation in a Jewish delegation to Gaius Caligula in 38/39 CE (*Legat.* 1), his birth is usually placed around 20–10 BCE. This fits well with his dialogue *De animalibus*, in which he represents himself as a mature adult in an argument with a much younger Tiberius Julius Alexander.³ The latter, Philo's nephew, to be discussed in section II, who was old enough to be an *epistratēgos* (sub-governor) of the Thebaid in Upper Egypt in 42 CE but still young enough to be on Titus' staff at the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, was probably born around 15 CE. As for Philo's death, the only plain *terminus post quem* is given by his allusion to an event under Claudius (*Legat.* 206), which means that he did not die before Gaius' death and Claudius' accession to the throne in January of 41 CE. This may also be extrapolated from Philo's promise, in the same work (*Legat.* 373), to tell the 'palinode' of the Gaius story. This promise seems clearly to imply that Philo, in the lost ending of the *Legatio ad Gaium*, narrated how the story worked its way back to a happy ending, which certainly entailed the death of Gaius.⁴ We have no way to determine precisely how long Philo lived after that, although several of his writings appear to have been written after that date,⁵ implying that he lived at least a few more years.

- 3 See A. Terian in his edition of Philo Alexandrinus, *De animalibus* (Chico, CA 1981), p. 31.
- 4 On that episode in general, see P. Bilde, 'The Roman Emperor Gaius (Caligula)'s Attempt to Erect His Statue in the Temple of Jerusalem', *Studia Theologica* 32 (1978), pp. 67–93. For the possibility that Josephus used the lost ending of the *Legatio*, as also extant parts of the book, see D. R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea* (Tübingen 1990), pp. 18–23, 180–2.
- 5 See Terian in his edition of *De animalibus*, pp. 33–4; also D. R. Schwartz, 'Philonic Anonyms of the Roman and Nazi Periods: Two Suggestions', *StPhAnn* 1 (1989), pp. 64–5.