

A Note on the Ahistorical Metaphysics of Philo's *De Vita Mosis*

Daniel Heide

This essay, as Mr Daniel Gillis notes in the introduction to his own deeply considered work, grew out of a debate between the two of us concerning the location of a crucial theophanic moment in Philo's *De Vita Mosis*. At stake was the question as to whether the ground of all four of Moses' offices – that of Prophet, Priest, Law-giver, and King – was his timeless union with the divine *Logos*, or whether these offices were acquired through a temporal sequence of historical unions. In what follows, I argue for the former position; namely, that the ground of all four of Moses' offices is his eternal union with the *Logos* by which he becomes paradigmatic. As such, I regard the temporal sequence of events in Philo's account of Moses' life as subordinate to this eternal reality. Thus, while Mr Gillis champions an historical reading of Philo's *De Vita Mosis*, my own emphasis leans unapologetically towards a more "mystical" interpretation. That is to say, I read the *De Vita Mosis* as a kind of spiritual itinerary, a timeless paradigm pointing to an eternal truth.

Let us turn, now, to the task at hand. Many scholars have commented upon the largely ahistorical character of Philo's writings, in which the historical personalities and events in the Pentateuch serve as allegories for the timeless itinerary of the soul in search of wisdom. As Adam Kamesar puts it, for Philo "the biblical *personae* most often represent 'souls' or more precisely 'minds' or 'dispositions of soul.'"⁵⁸ The three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob symbolize the 'dispositions of soul' that, respectively, acquire virtue by learning, nature, and practice.⁵⁹ Hagar and Sarah, in turn, are not so much historical personalities as 'minds' – the former represents the mind engaged in the study of the liberal arts, the latter the mind in search of virtue.⁶⁰ In *On Abraham*, Philo refers to the patriarchs as 'living laws' who serve as the original archetypes (ἀρχετύπους προτέρους) of

58. Adam Kamesar, *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 85.

59. *De Abrahamo*, 52, in *Philo*, vol. VI, Loeb Classical Library, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

60. *De congressu*, 180; Kamesar, *Companion to Philo*, 86.

particular laws.⁶¹ As such, they serve as enduring exemplars of virtue. Thus, as Kamesar states, Philo regards “history as a set of *exempla*, that is, examples that have a prescriptive moral force.”⁶²

That the importance of Moses’ life lies not in its linear, historical unfolding, but rather in its paradigmatic character is already hinted at in the opening passages in *De Vita Mosis*. Having declared his intention to make known the life of Moses “the greatest and most perfect of men,” Philo criticizes the Greek poets for squandering their gifts on licentious compositions when they ought to have used them to expound, “the lessons taught by good men and their lives.”⁶³ The implication here, of course, is that this is precisely what Philo intends to do with his account of Moses; namely, compose a narrative that will serve as a paradigm of philosophical virtue. This is made explicit when Philo describes Moses entering into the darkness where God was. Here, Moses encounters the “archetypal essence” (παραδειγματικὴν οὐσίαν) of things, and becomes paradigmatic himself.⁶⁴ As such, Moses becomes the archetype for all virtuous souls to imitate. Thus, what we encounter in *De Vita Mosis* is not primarily an historical document concerned with temporal realities, but a philosophical treatise devoted to timeless truths.

Given the strongly ahistorical character of Philo’s writings, it is not surprising that the temporal sequence of events in *De Vita Mosis* is subordinate to the timeless reality of Moses’ union with the *Logos*. The intimate connection between the divine *Logos* and the Mosaic *logos* is well attested. To cite only one example, in *De Mutatione Nominum*, Philo interprets the Shepherd of Ps. 23:1 as the divine *Logos* who delivers souls from the bondage of matter.⁶⁵ This is precisely the role of Moses as king, lawgiver, high priest, and prophet. Indeed, the very same example of shepherding used here is also used in *De Vita Mosis*. Moreover, having been rescued by Moses, the flock of the shepherd maidens goes on “to become art of the holy herd which is led by God’s Word.”⁶⁶ This blurring

61. *Abr.* 4.

62. Kamesar, *Companion to Philo*, 88.

63. *De Vita Mosis*, I. 3, in *Philo*, vol. VI. Cf. *Mos.* II. 47-9, for a further statement alluding to the pedagogical role of historical events and personalities.

64. *Mos.* I. 158.

65. *De Mut.* 116; Ronald Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56.

66. *Mut. Nom.*, 114, in *Philo*, vol. V, Loeb Classical Library, trans. F. H. Colson (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1929).

of distinctions between *logos* and *Logos* points to the inextricable unity of Moses with the divine mind, a unity that does not occur at some point in time, but rather expresses a pre-existent reality.⁶⁷

Recognizing this timeless unity helps to make sense of the way in which the narrative of *De Vita Mosis* unfolds. That is to say, while Philo portrays Moses' life as unfolding in historical sequence, this sequence itself rests upon the eternal reality of Moses' union with the *Logos*. Thus, while Philo only explicitly describes the union by which Moses becomes paradigmatic at *Mos.* I. 158, this union is presupposed from the very beginning. Evidence for this emerges already with Moses' infancy and education. Even as a small child, says Philo, Moses eschewed frivolity, applying himself "with a modest and strict bearing" to "what was sure to profit the soul."⁶⁸ Unlike other children, Moses instinctively orders his soul in accordance with divine reason. In addition, teachers arrive unbidden to instruct the young prodigy, as though summoned by an invisible *logos*. Moreover, on account of his gifted nature, Moses soon surpasses his teachers "so that his seemed a case rather of recollection than of learning."⁶⁹ So effortless is this acquisition of knowledge that it is really a case of Moses educating himself: "The gifted soul," says Philo, "takes the lead in meeting the lessons given by itself rather than the teacher."⁷⁰ This exalted description of Moses' education has an almost docetic character. As the paradigm of human perfection, Moses gives the outward appearance of acquiring that which he already innately possesses, while the human teacher is merely the external reflection of Moses' inherent wisdom. Not only does this account strongly suggest a pre-existent union between Moses and the *Logos*, it is only on the basis of this supposition that this account actually becomes intelligible.

Another way of glimpsing the eternal perspective that lies beneath the temporal is in Philo's treatment of the four offices. Philo states that, while Book I of *De Vita Mosis* is dedicated to Moses' education as philosopher-king, Book II is concerned with the offices of lawgiver, priest, and prophet.⁷¹ While Philo does follow this scheme, his approach is not strictly linear. For example, the episode

67. Similar identifications occur in other guises within the Philonic corpus (i.e. both Moses and the *Logos* are called high priest and act as mediators)

68. *Mos.* I. 20.

69. *ibid.*, 21.

70. *ibid.*, 22.

71. *Mos.* II. 1-3.

where Moses comes to the rescue of the shepherd girls already portrays Moses as both prophet and lawgiver. Philo tells us that, in confronting the troublemakers Moses “grew inspired and was transfigured into a prophet.”⁷² Moreover, acting upon his innate sense of justice, Moses persuades the shepherds to act virtuously. In this way, he actualizes his office as lawgiver. All of this occurs *prior* to Moses perfecting his training for kingship by tending his own flock of sheep. More importantly, with the possible exception of the priesthood,⁷³ all the offices are enacted *before* the theophany of light at the burning bush, and the theophany of darkness atop Sinai.

Of the numerous theophanies in *De Vita Mosis*, this latter theophany is the most important for our argument. Here, Moses enters into the darkness, where he encounters “the unseen, invisible, incorporeal, and archetypal (παράδειγματικήν) essence of existing things.”⁷⁴ As such, we are told, Moses himself becomes paradigmatic, a “well-wrought picture, a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model (παράδειγμα) for those willing to copy it.”⁷⁵ Following this theophany, Moses goes on “with the sanction and assent of God” to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land.⁷⁶ While this linear progression makes sense insofar as Moses’ becoming paradigmatic empowers him to take up his subsequent leadership role as king, lawgiver, high priest, and prophet, this temporal sequence is not absolute. As we noted above, Moses is arguably *already* paradigmatic from the very beginning. His exceptional childhood and education, as well as the fact that he manifests his offices before even the theophany at the burning bush, is unintelligible apart from his pre-existent union with the *Logos*. Moreover, early on in the narrative Moses is deemed beautiful (ἀστειός), as well as “iconic” and godlike.⁷⁷

We noted at the outset that Philo’s portrayal of history is not overly concerned with “facts.” This is uniquely expressed in *De Vita Mosis*, where Philo’s fluid sense of history means that time and eternity become inextricably interwoven. Thus,

72. *Mos.* I, 57.

73. It could be argued that even the priestly office is implied in Moses’ meditative role as “allied to a mighty arm which the rapacious may not see” (*ibid.*, 56), though this may be pushing the argument too far.

74. *ibid.*, 158.

75. *ibid.*

76. *ibid.*, 163.

77. *ibid.*, I, 9, 27.

while the temporal sequence of events remains symbolically significant, this is nonetheless subordinated to the perspective of eternity, namely, Moses' timeless union with the *Logos*.