

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

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This short essay grew out of a debate between Mr. Daniel Heide and I in Dr. Wayne Hankey's seminar on Philo's *De Vita Mosis* in the winter semester of 2014. I think Mr. Heide to be a very fine and profound thinker, and it is for this reason that I choose to use his position as a foil for my own. As Plato knew, the truth is reached only through dialectic. The question that sparked this 'debate-of-the-Daniels' was whether or not the first 'mystical moment,' at I. 155 of *De Vita Mosis* can be said to have taken place on Mount Sinai. I shall quote the passage in question at length.

For he was named God and king of the whole nation, and entered, we are told into the darkness where God was (*eis te ton gnofon, entha ēn ho theos*), that is into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things (*tēn aeidē kai aoraton kai asōmaton tōn ontōn paradeigmatikēn ousian*). Thus he beheld what is 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 god-like, a model (*paradeigma*) for those who are willing to copy it.¹

The undeniable biblical allusion, as Colson notes in his edition, is to *Exodus* XX. 21, where it is said that, "Moses went into the darkness where God was". The Septuagint reads "*Mōusēs de eisēlthen eis ton gnofon hou hēn ho theos.*" In the biblical narrative, Moses goes into the darkness upon Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments, on the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt.² Yet Philo's elaboration at *De Vita Mosis* I. 155 occurs instead while the Israelites are leaving Egypt, just *before* the parting of the red sea. I take Mr. Heide's position to be that the union described is in fact the one that takes place on Mount Sinai,

1. *De Vita Mosis*, I. 155, in *Philo*, vol. VI, Loeb Classical Library, trans. by F.H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

2. *Ex.* XIX.1.

because Philo's account of the life of Moses allows for a fluidity of historical sequence. His argument has a metaphysical ground, namely that Moses' union with the *Logos*, which 'historically' takes place upon Mount Sinai, in fact transcends history because that union is unseen, invisible, and incorporeal, and by extension, out of time as we experience it. At the very least, I take the force of Mr. Heide's claim to be that even if the event at I. 115 is not a leap-into-the-future, it does not particularly matter to insist upon the location and time of such an originary event, which is subordinate to the eternal reality of Moses' union with the *Logos*.

I argue instead that *De Vita Mosis* must be understood not simply as a mystical Moseological work, but as a defense of the historical state and people of Israel, a defense by way of a creation story. This story of the creation of the state requires a specific kind of temporal succession, a logical sequence which is deeply rooted in the fundamental structures of Philo's philosophy as a whole, especially his doctrine of creation in a broader sense. The establishment of the nation of Israel as the one which sees God and is aligned with the *logos* and nature by the law, the law of which Moses is the ensouled paradigm (*nomos empsychos*), requires a very specific sequence of psychic 'creations.'

This consideration arose after Mr. Justin Singer helpfully noted that for Philo, working in a Biblical context, if a sensible world is to be created after an intelligible model, as it is in Plato's *Timaeus*, for example, then the need for the sensible representation ought to be contained within the model itself. That is to say the model must itself be understood as a model for a sensible representation.³ This logic is best teased out of Philo's work on the creation of the world *De Opificio Mundi*, which owes much to the *Timaeus* especially in the following passage:⁴

When He willed to create this visible world he first fully

3. My interpretation owes much to Mr. Singer's insight, and I thank him. I have since found that the notion of the world as an 'image of an image' has been discussed in the literature, though at my view with far too little emphasis on the importance of the third term which Mr. Singer points out, namely the second representation as a representation of the first representation. Cf. J.C.M. Van Winden, "The world of ideas in Philo of Alexandria," *VChr* 37 (1983) 209-217; T.H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation* (Washington, 1983).

4. See D.T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), *passim*.

formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern (*archetypon*) wholly God-like and incorporeal in producing the material world, as a later creation, the very image of an earlier, to embrace in itself objects of perception of as many kinds as the other contained objects of intelligence.⁵

Regarding this first creation, Philo claims "the world discerned only by the Intellect is nothing else than the Word of God (*theou logon*) when He was already engaged in the act of creation."⁶ The crucial point upon which we must insist is that if the sensible representation of the intelligible model is in fact to be understood as an image, then there must be two sensible representations. In *De Vita Mosis* the clearest example of this logic comes in the discussion of the wise man in book II. Philo claims that the *logos* is twofold (*dittos gar ho logos*), and that with man

in one form it resides within, in the other it passes out from him in utterance. The former is like a spring, and is the source from which the latter, the spoken, flows. The inward is located in the dominant mind, the outward in the tongue and mouth and the rest of the vocal organism.... the *logos* in the wise man, being a copy of the other (*mimoumenos ekeinon*), has as its bounden duty to honour truth with absolute freedom from falsehood."⁷

The crucial words here are *mimoumenos ekeinon*, which show that the *logos* in the wise man is already but an image of its model the eternal *logos*, to which *ekeinon* refers. The duty of the first representation, here the wise man's mind, is to represent it once more, here in speech. I will term this the doctrine of 'double image.'

There are three distinct moments in his life, all of which have a certain mystical character, and which are necessarily in sequence: 1) the episode at the Burning Bush, 2) the Deification before leaving Egypt (the one with which we began this

5. *De Opificio Mundi*, 16, in *Philo*, vol. I, Loeb Classical Library, trans. F.H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

6. *Opf.* VI. 24.

7. *Mos.* II. 127.

essay), and 3) the union at Sinai in Book II. It is true that in all cases, Moses is in some way in contact with or united to the *logos*, but what changes is the way that relates to what is below Moses, that for which he comes to be a paradigm.

From the opening pages of *De Vita Mosis* it is clear that already in his childhood Moses is in some way in touch with the eternal *logos*, being able to self-move and educate, to remember rather than to learn. However, his irrational soul still has to undergo a certain purification. This purification occurs during his sojourn in Midian, the culminating moment of which is the Burning Bush episode. In Midian he "set before himself as a goal the right reason of nature (*prokeitsthai skopon hena ton orthon ths phuseōs logon*)."⁸ In Midian, Moses is purified so that he as an individual soul becomes fully noetic, in the desert, away from the bodily realm represented by Egypt. He is thus prepared to return to Egypt and take up the leadership of Israel. But notice that for now, it is the *logos* of nature to which he has conformed.

The next episode I will treat is the moment at which Moses becomes the leader of Israel, immediately following the ten plagues. Moses, having spurned all luxury and become wholly noetic, is *given* command over the whole of nature, named God, enters into the darkness and the incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things.⁹ This is the passage with which we began. Moses now becomes *paradigmatic*, a model for others to copy. Let us recall the double creations noted in reference to creation: there is always a model before its material creation. The leader of that state at this point becomes fully *logikon*. It seems to me that we might say that Moses' own irrational soul is subsumed into the noetic realm, subsumed by the rational, and in its stead comes the people of Israel, an irrational bunch who need their own purification. Just as Moses *qua* irrational soul had contact with the *orthos phuseos logos* to guide him, the people of Israel now have an embodied *logos* to imprint in their souls. Moses must first become the model before later issuing the law: "Perhaps, too, since he was destined to be a legislator, the providence of God which afterwards appointed him to that work, caused him long before that day to be the reasonable and living impersonation of the law (*nomos empsuxos*)."¹⁰

8. *Mos.* I. 48.

9. *ibid.*, 158.

10. *ibid.*, 162.

The second creation in this case is the establishment of the kingdom of Israel (ultimately in Canaan) living by the law. Recall that the law is nothing different than the law of nature, the incarnation of the *logos* of God. Furthermore, recall the distinction regarding the *logos* in man, namely that “in one form it resides within, in the other it passes out from him in utterance.” In *De Vita Mosis*, the nation of Israel is considered a soul itself, a soul of which Moses is the rational, higher part. Moses has become united with the *logos* in God, above the sensible world, and we have seen that the law has thus been imprinted in his mind, as a paradigm to follow. This is the first-creation of the *logos* in Israel, and it ‘occurred’ when Moses became the King as they fled Israel and he was *given* dominion over nature. The second-creation of the *logos* is its utterance: the time spent on Mount Sinai after wandering in the desert. The desert sojourn had to occur, as it did earlier for Moses himself, so as to purify the irrational soul of the *vulgus*, and to prepare the people for the reception of the immanent *logos*, the law. He becomes conformed to that *Logos*, the original model, in the mystical moment at *Mos* I.155. This is why it cannot have taken place at Sinai. Moses descends from Sinai uttering the law, as second representation only after the first conformity with the *logos*.