When talking about Platonism, one can always talk in two directions: a philosophy and a historical era. The early Platonists, so to say those after Plato himself, put the Theory of Forms in the foreground from which the central meaning of the word ‘idea’ (immaterial pattern, imperfect copies) arises. The word ‘idea’ was already discussed in depth in Part 16 and 21 and will not be defined again. However, the central Platonic meaning of the word was developed in that time. The ‘form of the good’ or ‘idea of the good’ (the words form and idea are synonymous as pointed out in Part 21) is the highest thing that can be perceived by reason, and displays an imperfect copy of ‘the good’. A lot of elements of skepticism were adopted into Platonic thought soon later. However, others rejected skepticism and advocated stoic ideas. In the 1st century BCE, a new era called ‘Middle Platonism’ started. Middle Platonists mostly devoted themselves to Plato’s ‘Timaeus’ in which the world soul concept was introduced (see Part 21). However, Middle Platonists advocated the ‘three principles’: god (the creator), idea and matter, being then put on the tripartite soul. Alcinous (Ἀλκίνους) clarified the three principles as such, that there is a ‘first god’, the ideas (which are the thoughts of the ‘first god’) and matter. Therefore, one could say that the first god had a plan in mind (an idea, a form) how to create and then created after this plan, where the universe is just an imperfect copy of this idea in mind, and the result is matter. In the 3rd century, Plotinus added mysticism into Platonism leading to the third era, Neoplatonism, which as a historical era existed until the 6th century CE, but which as a philosophy exists until now. Anyways, during the historical era it was more than a philosophy. Sometimes it is even called a religion, in particular the most rival religion to Christianity in Roman times. The Neoplatonists emphasized on ‘the good’ which they specified as the ‘one’ (probably as result of Middle Platonism). Despite reasoning, meditation played an important role and the soul was put in the foreground. Seemingly, Neoplatonism advocated the tripartite soul as most important. Phileon of Alexandria (Φίλων ὁ Ἀλεξανδρεύς) lived during the era of Middle Platonism, and was mainly influenced by Platonism and Stoicism (as most Middle Platonists). Philo was a
Jew being born into probably the wealthiest Jewish family in Ancient Greece. He tried to put together the Hellenistic thoughts (especially Platonism) with Judaism. He can be seen as founder and most prominent figure of Hellenistic Judaism and one of the most important philosophers paving the way for Early Christianity. When we try to put Philo on a time scale, we can say he lived around the life time of Jesus, however Philo was born at about 10 years earlier and died at around 10 years later (in the year 40 CE or a bit later).

Philon was “un Juif croyant de la diaspora, qui connaît la Sainte Écriture par la version des Septante, qui avait été publiée dans sa ville Hébreu qui vit culturellement dans le monde hellénique” 1 2. The translation of Septuagint is a Greek version of the Bible, which is stylistically written closely to Hebrew and shows many features of Aramaic due to translation. However, “Ce qui est remarquable, c’est que Philon reste à l’intérieur même de cette culture et de cette langue grecque, dans laquelle ont été exprimés les concepts philosophiques qu’il connaît et dont il se sert, alors pourtant qu’il cherche à exprimer une réalité étrangère à la philosophie : celle de la Revelation” 3 4. Indeed it is very remarkable that he read the Bible in Greek and not in Hebrew (and many scholars doubt that he was fluent in reading Hebrew at all), and at the same time tries to bring the core of his Jewish philosophy presented in Greek, the major language of philosophy, therefore reaching not only Jews, but intellectuals of all kinds, although Hebrew was the most common language for Jewish literature and Jewish intellectuals.

At first, Philon is using the allegorical method in which he believes that all characters in the Bible are only symbols and allegories for behavior. For instance, they present duties, wisdom, perception, desire, knowledge, development, etc. In a Philonian view, Adam represents the ‘nous’, so to say the head (compare Plato’s tripartite soul in Part 16 and Part 21), and Eve represents perception (aisthesis). We can thus assume that they have to be coined to the situation and shouldn’t be understood literally. However, when it goes to perception, Philo advocates that the kosmos noetos (the ‘purely mental world’) and the kosmos aisthetos (the ‘perceptional world’) should be fully distinguished and not brought together. As a result, the mental can just be conceived through the mental and the perceptual just through the perceptual, which makes grasping God totally impossible for human-beings. If we see it in such a strict sense it is evident that if we cannot conceive rationally and perceive at the same time, then we cannot perceive that God is there, while at the same time conceiving God through our mental reasoning. Even the idea that God can appear to human-beings is thus impossible.
However, we have to see the cosmical image very critical as he differentiates anything that can be somehow differentiated. Philon distinguishes between matter and Being. While a matter is always unanimated or dead, the Being is always alive. Concerning matter, something can either be heavy or light. I think that this distinction is too subjective and that we need more categories. Concerning Being, there is ‘phasis’ (unanimated living beings), such as plants, and there is ‘psyche’ (the animated or ensouled beings), such as animals and human-beings. However, within this categories he goes on in differentiating, such as in men and women, and here comes the problem as you know from Part 20, we cannot really make a difference between the genders because they are the same. So the philosophy of Philon is to be regarded that strict, that it differentiates even among things that only have a very small difference. In Philons philosophy, matter and being form the perceptional cosmos or kosmos aisthetos.

As we cannot grasp God, according to Philon, and as the cosmos is strictly differentiated in subgroups (cosmos → Being → psyche → mortal/immortal), there is a need for the solution of how God and the world can interact anyways. He therefore proposes the ‘dynameis’ (forces), so we cannot perceive God, but his force. Philon goes deeper in defining his forces which are either ‘benevolence’ or ‘authority’ but are held together through the ‘logos of god’. Sometimes, there is even talk of a ‘deuteros theos’ (δεύτερος θεός), a second god. It remembers me a lot of Plato’s good and his idea of the good. While god is the good (or the ‘first god’ in Middle Platonian), the idea of the good is the manifestation of god, in this case the forces of god (which can be called ‘second god’). The parallel is evident as while in Platonian, the Good has a plan in mind, and the idea of the good is the imperfect copy of the plan that was in the mind of the god (see Part 21) and who cannot be felt or grasped directly as there are two realms (the visible and the intelligible), the concept of Philon also knows two realms (the mental and the perceivable) in which God can be manifested through his force, which is either benevolent or authoritative (which is useful to explain natural forces, as his authority are natural catastrophies and his benevolence is receiving a good harvest), and in which the many can be subgrouped in a higher one (mortal as part of the psyche which is part of matter which is part of the perceivable cosmos).

The important role of Logos gets clear if we imagine it as a trustee of God, so the logos as second god is not an independent god, but doing his work on behalf of the first God, thus god itself, although Philo does not characterize the nature of God itself, and leaves the question open, whether he is ‘to on’ (the philosophical principle in which there is a monotheist highest principle, simply refered to as ‘god’) or ‘ho on’ (a personal God, which is determined by the
scripture and thus to a specially defined God is referred). God can intervene between the two realms or substances through mediators. Such as the Dao in Daoism which makes the highest one out of the many (here to be meant as plural of many as one many – so to say the many parts of the many as shown through subgroups above), the Logos is the universal substance and nothing is independent to it, or in other words everything is dependent to it. In a Philonian discourse, human-beings are a copy of the logos (λόγος), which represents the nous (νοῦς), and therefore human-beings are sometimes referred to as earthly men, while logos is the ‘heavenly man’ (remember the category mortal vs. immortal). We can thus say, that human-beings are the idea of the logos to put it in a Platonian sense.

Just like Plato, Philo rather sees the body as a cage of the soul (desmoterion), and thus the soul is to be liberated. A unification has to take place between the rational or mental realm and the visible or perceivable realm. However, as god lives in a transcendental dimension which is totally ungraspable for human-beings, the idea of seeing god cannot be seen in a mystical tradition, but rather in a purification of the soul, maybe – I just assume – through the cognition of sin, as the sin plays an important role for Philo as even the noblest man is not without sin (remember Plato’s ‘just man’ and ‘unjust man’ and the relation to each other).

Philo was a very active writer with over 50 works that survived until now, although some of them just in their Latin translation. It is usual to quote Philon’s book titles in Latin although they were written in Greek. Unfortunately, we know today that at about 20 works of Philo got lost, including three books of his five volumes of “Legatio ad Caium”.

Major works are “Apologia pro Judaeis” (Apology for the Jews), “De aeternitate mundi” (On the Eternity of the World), “De opificio mundi” (On the Creation of the World), “De somniis” (On Dreams), “De virtutibus” (On the virtues), “Quo Deus sit immutabilis” (On the Unchangableness of God), and “Quod omnis probus liber sit” (Every Good Man is free) – just to mention some of them.

In recent times, there has been a lot of confusion over the ‘Apologia pro Judaeis’ which is also simply known as ‘Hypothetica’, as ‘Emil Schürer writes: ‘Υποθετικα.—Our knowledge of this work rests solely on the fragments in Euseb. Praep. evang. viii. 6-7, which are introduced by Eusebius with the words (viii. 5, fin.): Φιλωνος . . . απο του πρωτου συγγραμματος ον επεγραψεν Υποθετικων, ενθα τον υπερ Ιουδαιων οις προς κατηγορους αυτων δοσολομενος λογον ταυτα φησιν. The title does not signify “suppositions concerning the Jews,” but, as Bernays has pointed out, “counsels, recommendations.” For Υποθετικου λογοι are such dissertations as contain moral counsels or recommendations, in contradistinction to theoretical invesigations of ethic questions. Philo, as the preserved fragments already show,
has devoted the main point of his work to the discussion of such Jewish precepts as he could recommend to the obedience of a non-Jewish circle of readers, to whom the work is unmistakeably directed. As the work pursues apologetic aims, we might be inclined to regard it as identical with the Apologia pro Judaeis to be forthwith mentioned, but that Eusebius distinguishes the two by different titles.’ (The Literature of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus, pp. 355-356)" \(^6\), however, “F. H. Colson writes (Philo, vol. 9, pp. 407-411): We have no information about the two extracts which are here reproduced beyond what Eusebius tells us, namely that the first is taken from the second book of a work entitled by Philo ‘Hypothetica,’ in which the author is writing a defence of the Jews, and that the second comes from the ‘apology for the Jews,’ while in his history (ii. 18) when giving a list of the works of Philo he mentions one Περι Ἰουδαϊων. The general assumption is that these three are one and the same’” \(^7\). So as the original work is lost, there are many discussions about the fragments that we have transmitted through Eusebius and there is a lot of discussion about the purpose of the work. As long as the version remains lost, we probably cannot solve all questions that are connected to this work. Another scholarly debate turns around “De aeternitate mundi” as Colson states: “Among the works of Philo this is certainly the one whose genuineness can be most reasonably doubted” \(^8\). Furthermore, Colson writes: “The belief that the work is non-Philonic rests chiefly I think on the authority of Bernays. My confidence in his judgement is not increased by observing that he says the same of the Quod Omnis Probus and the De Providentia. He does not anywhere formulate his reasons for rejection and one or two of those casually mentioned are trivial. But on p. 45 he notes the phrase ορατος θεος as one which no orthodox Jew could have used of the Cosmos. Cumont perhaps makes somewhat too light of this objection” \(^9\). I think this makes it clear even further that there is still a lot of discussion on the authorship of what was really written by Philon. It is very important to mention this since it was always pointed out that Philo’s philosophy is sometimes inconsistent. However, if we do not really know for sure, which books can be Philonic, it should be no surprise to find a lot of inconsistency, especially as many works are lost or only known fragmentary. Thus, we do not know for sure whether Philo tried to solve several contradictions or problems that arouse. Although, we have certain transmissions through secondary sources, we have to be aware that they cannot give a fully perfect image, and thus questions that want and/ or should be scholarly solved cannot be solved through a lack of philosophical profoundness in Philo’s writing, but rather through the traces of time and the early interpretations and transmissions which are giving us the nowadays image of this important philosopher.
There is also the widespread belief that Philo thought that every word in the Bible was to be seen literally and every Hebrew word and accent was set in a divine manner, which I partly oppose because Philo preferred the allegoric method, thus the mentioning that every word is to be seen literally is directly opposing, however it is correctly that he saw the words as holy and set as the revelation was done through a medium on behalf of the divine will (so to say God). Second, it is somehow strange that someone who is believed to be unable to really read Hebrew emphasizes that much on accents. Therefore, I think once again it has a rather valuable importance for him, which means that for him every word was set as ultimately true as witnessed by the medium, but the meaning behind is to be found by the philosopher himself, which doesn’t make the sentences itself the ‘ultimate truth’, but rather the language style in which it was delivered. Even further, Philo saw the meaning behind the allegories as such as an ultimate truth as well, as one can assume.

Therefore, Philo was caught between the Greek tradition and the Jewish belief, but mastered to put both together in a philosophical manner. Philo’s ideas influenced a lot of Early Christians, but also were of importance through the different schools of thought, as Philo incorporated Platonian, Stoic and Neo-Pythagorean ideas. He played an important role for both, metaphysics and ethics as well as epistemology for his contemporaries and was translated in several languages in Ancient times.

Annotation:

The word ‘apology’ is very interesting in this sense. It derives from Greek ἀπολογία and was transferred as ‘apologia’ in Latin. The word literally means ‘speech in defense’. For instance, the Apologia Sokratis is the defense speech of Socrates. Therefore, it can be assumed that Philo’s Apologia pro Judaeis is a speech in defense for the Jews. Therefore, the English translation ‘Apology for the Jews’ could lead to false assumptions, when the word meaning is regarded in popular speech.

Notes:

2. passage translated by the author: “a religious Jew from the diaspora [i.e. Egypt], who knew the Holy Scripture in the version of Septuagint, which was published in his Hebrew village which lived culturally in the Hellenistic world”.


4. passage translated by the author: “That which is remarkable is that Philon stays within that same Greek culture and language, in which the philosophical concepts that he knew where expressed and in which he served, so that he anyways searches to express a foreign reality in philosophy: that of the revelation.”

5. This allegory is just an example to make the idea of Philo clear.


7. ibid.


9. ibid.

Recommandation:

Soulier, Henri: La Doctrine du Logos, Turin: Vincent Bona, 1876

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