

PHILO'S RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT

by YEHOSHUA AMIR

We are used to thinking of Philo of Alexandria within the framework of the historic encounter between Judaism and the world of Hellenistic culture. Nevertheless, he can in fact be considered within the context of yet another development: that of the history of the rebellion against the rationalist culture of the West, led by the effervescent religious forces of the nations of the East. Thus, he participated in the very process that eventually led to the decline of the Ancient Era and to the beginning of the Middle Ages. No one has been able to determine when exactly this process actually began. The Eastern religions were in danger of becoming completely Hellenized when the Hellenistic kingdoms were founded, and they reacted by entrenching themselves behind their defenses. They then ventured very, very slowly out of their strongholds as time went on, making converts among those masses who had lost the *polis* as the basis of their life, thus giving them a new lease of life. This process had begun long before Philo. With him, we find ourselves already at a second stage. This new spirit had already started to slowly penetrate the ranks of the educated classes, too. Naturally the rhetoricians,

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the philologists, the historians, and the heads of the philosophical schools were not going to simply resign from their posts and become hierophants. However, a foreign ring had stealthily begun to find its way into their teachings, and a new element was secretly undermining the very structure of the impressive rationalist culture. The representatives of this literary culture, the glory of which was the *logos*, continued to spice their books with all the refinements of the formal culture which they had inherited, but the value of the coinage of their language was falling significantly, due to the word inflation that the ubiquitous use of synonyms heaped upon every philosophical, moral or political *topos*, had caused. On the other hand, a new and surprising ring could now sometimes be heard, emanating from a very deep yearning for religion, and leading to a world of mysticism. Sometimes, this ring could be heard only in the guise of a well-known, even trite, idea, but seen now from a new angle, in which new, hitherto undreamed-of strata were suddenly discovered. To illustrate this development, I would like to give here one example from Philo's works.

However, before exemplifying a process indicating the mood of that generation by quoting from Philo's writings, we will first have to examine whether Philo ought not to be disqualified as a reliable source in this matter. After all, we could really claim that, as a Jew, those traits that characterized him as such do not necessarily shed any new light on the period in which he lived. It is not surprising that he should give a religious interpretation to a philosophical concept because, as a believing Jew, it was only to be expected that he would have to adapt Greek cultural values — and especially, those of Greek philosophy — to the faith of his own people, a faith handed down to him through the Holy Scriptures! Of course, it was clear to him, even before he had read a single line in the books on philosophy, that God exists and that there is Divine providence; that the world had been created; and that, in fact, there was reward and punishment in this life. Thus, for Philo to give a religious interpretation to a philosophical concept was actually tantamount to giving a Jewish interpretation to a Greek concept, so that we can deduce nothing about the non-Jews of his time from him.

This argument should not be dismissed a priori, but in fact it is insufficient. It may be demonstrated that Philo's religiosity, and especially its finer nuances, did not, in fact, spring from Jewish traditional sources. We see this in the fact that, despite all the words of praise which he lavished, for example, on the social laws of the Torah, he does not really comprehend its deep mainsprings.¹ Notwithstanding his staunch loyalty to the Temple in Zion, his works do not reflect that messianic-

¹ Compare what I wrote about this in my book in German (under my former name): Hermann Neumark, *Die Verwendung griechischer und jüdischer Motive in den Gedanken Philons...* (Würzburg, 1937), p. 17, n. 79.

nationalistic effervescence with which the national spirit in the Land of Israel throbbed, etc. Precisely because our example belongs to moral philosophy, which is not that fixed in Jewish tradition, and because Philo also did not intend to turn it into a philosophical theory of any importance of his own, we can consider Philo as a witness here, as speaking in all innocence.

I refer to the concept of εὐστάθεια (*eustatheia*). Apart from the remarks I made about this concept in my doctoral thesis,² scholars have not, until now, paid much attention to this concept as it is expressed in Philo's thought; it does not even appear in the index to Wolfson's important book.³ The truth is that Philo did not attempt to develop a new teaching concerning *eustatheia*, but that he generally used this concept in the conventional way, and only in a few places does he depart from this usage. It is precisely this slight nuance that enables us to penetrate the author's deepest thoughts.

The substantive *eustatheia* and the adjective *eustathes* can be found both in general literature, as well as in philosophical terminology. In ordinary usage, the word is used to describe a house built very sturdily; a steady breeze favorable to seafarers; calm waters; and, using the well-known parallel between sailing and public life, a peaceful city in which there is no civil strife.⁴

Democritus was the first to use the word in connection with man's soul. Part of his book, *περὶ εὐθυμίας (On Cheerfulness)*⁵ is still extant. In it he states that only through μετρίότης (moderation), and without either ἐλλείποντα (falling short) or ὑπερβάλλοντα (surpassing), can a person attain εὐθυμίη (*euthymiē*). Great fluctuations, κινήσεις (movements), or διαστήματα (intervals) allow people to be οὔτε εὐσταθεές οὔτε εὐθυμοί (neither tranquil nor cheerful). How does a person become worthy of attaining these qualities? By not craving for those things that are out of one's reach, but contenting oneself with the δυνατά (what is in reach), and by training oneself τοῖς παρεούσιν ἄρκεσθαι (to content oneself with what is at hand) and by not envying those who have more than oneself. This wisdom teaches us that, for a person's own good, all situations that arouse strong emotions and that cause any kind of mental agitation are to be avoided. He who succeeds in attaining such an equilibrium is called *eustathes*. This being the case, the word may be translated as "mentally stable." This is the main condition necessary for attaining that joyous state of mind and spirit known as *euthymiē*.⁶

² *Ibid.*, p. 19 ff.

³ H.A. Wolfson, *Philo. Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 2 v. (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

⁴ See Liddell-Scott, s.v.

⁵ *Frg. d. Vorsokr.*, II: 19 = Democritus, B 191.

⁶ This analysis seems to me more correct than that of H. Gomoll, *Der stoische Philosoph*

The views of Democritus and Epicurus are relatively similar. They tend to make similar use of the concept of *euthymiē*, except that Epicurus does not speak of *eustatheia* of the spirit, but rather, precisely of *σαρκὸς εὐστάθεια* (bodily health)⁷ which, in his opinion, constitutes the surest guarantee for the attainment of pleasure. The difference between the two thinkers, however, concerns physiological theory rather than semantics, which is what we are discussing here.

When the Stoics adopted this concept, it was only to be expected that it would undergo certain modifications. The Stoics considered values and virtues as constituting real obligations, and not just advice. If it is man's highest obligation to use his *λόγος* (*logos*) for his heightened self-control, arming himself with it against the onslaught of his affects, then naturally *eustatheia*, i.e. literally, "positive steadfastness," is an appropriate expression for the immunity of that part of the soul which is in control, against the forces threatening to undermine it. Nevertheless, Gomoll⁸ has shown that the concept underwent a slight change of meaning in the Middle Stoic era, as their school of thought considerably mitigated the rigid teachings of the Early Stoics. They differentiated between the *πάθη* (*pathē* — i.e., passions), which a person should carefully guard against, and the *εὐπάθειαι* (*eupatheiai*), which one does not have to resist, and which might even be desirable. The concept under discussion, *eustatheia*, is also included among these *eupatheiai*. As we know that Panaitios' book was called *περὶ εὐθυμίας* (*peri euthymias*),⁹ it seems probable that in this book, too, — just as in Democritus' book of the same name — *eustatheia* occupies an important place, and that it certainly had a more moderate meaning. However, in the Late Stoic period, a much more rigorous tone can once more be discerned in the use of this term from time to time, and it may very well be that Gomoll is right, detecting as he does in this ring a definite influence of the Latin concept of *constantia* which, in his opinion, was translated by the *eustatheia* under discussion. Thereby it also takes on the meaning of "steadfastness," as in the speeches of Epictetus, who devotes an entire diatribe to *eustatheia*,¹⁰ in which he glorifies fearlessness when one is faced with an angry tyrant: ἀγαγέ μοι τὸν Καίσαρα καὶ ὄψει, πῶς εὐσταθῶ (Bring Caesar to me and you shall see how steadfast [*eustao*] I am). For him, Socrates constitutes the prototype of such firm steadfastness, borne for the sake of the precepts of Fate, that is, the precepts of God. He drew his most powerful images from Plato's *ἀπολογία* (*Apology*) of Socrates.

Hekaton (Leipzig, 1933), who gives a survey of the evolution of the term *eustatheia* (without discussing Philo's special use of it), and who regards, in the above excerpt from Democritus, the words *eustathees* and *euthymoi* as synonyms.

⁷ C. Bailey, *Epicurus*, frg. 11 (p. 122).

⁸ *Op. cit.* (n. 6).

⁹ Mentioned in Diogenes, Laertius IX, 20.

¹⁰ Epictet, *diss.* I, 29.

Gomoll includes Philo among the Stoic writers who used the concept of *eustatheia* in this sense, and indeed, G. Mayer¹¹ and Leisegang's¹² indices to Philo's works supply us with many examples. At one point, for instance, Philo draws a parallel between *eūexia* (well-being) of the body and *eustatheia* of the intelligence.¹³ Elsewhere, he speaks about a politician who was a crook, τὴν εὐστάθειαν εἰς τυραχὰς καὶ στάσεις μεθαρμοζόμενος (the converter of stability [*eustatheian*] into turmoil and faction).¹⁴ He likes combinations between *eustatheia* and ἡρεμία (tranquility),¹⁵ or εἰρήνη (peace).¹⁶ In all this, no new light has been shed on our discussion so far.

However, at a certain point, he does give the concept a completely original nuance. In his interpretation of “But as for thee, stand thou here by me” (Deuteronomy 5:31) — in Greek, σὺ δὲ αὐτοῦ στῆθι μετ' ἐμοῦ — he says¹⁷ that here God teaches Moses two things:

a) That the Existent Being who moves and turns all else is Himself unmovable and unchangeable — ἀκίνητόν τε καὶ ἄτρεπτον. If God invites Moses to stand “with him,” it follows that God stands on His own, and that Philo's interpretation of this “steadfastness” is, in fact, that there is an absolute absence of movement. For purposes of our discussion, Philo expands on the Aristotelian worldview, which sees the Godhead as “the stationary Driving Force.”

b) That He makes the worthy man share of His own Nature, which is repose. ὅτι τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φύσεως, ἡρεμίας, τῷ σπουδαίῳ μεταδίδωσιν. Philo, however, interprets this verse not as a command to Moses, but, rather, as if He were offering him a superb gift: for this “stationary nature” is conferred on the person himself as well.

Philo returns to this idea in quite a few similar homilies, which always use the term *στῆναι* (*stēnai* — to stand), as in: “But Abraham stood yet before the Lord” (Genesis 18:22) — which teaches us that the *ἔρωσ* (*erōs*) that awakens in the heart of man is capable of bridling the onward course natural to created beings and compels it to stand still. A person to whom this happens “may be sure that he is not far from the divine happiness” Μὴ λανθανέτο θείας εὐδαιμονίας ἐγγύς

¹¹ G. Mayer, *Index Philoneus* (Berlin, 1974).

¹² H. Leisegang, *Indices ad Philonis Alexandrini opera* [Philonis Alexandrini opera. v. 7 (Berolini, 1926–30)].

¹³ Philo, *Virt.* 32.

¹⁴ *Leg Gai* 113.

¹⁵ *Conf. Ling.* 132.

¹⁶ *Flacc.* 135.

¹⁷ *Post. Ca.* 28.

ὄν.¹⁸ In his dream, Jacob sees God “standing above” him at the top of the ladder (Genesis 28:13), in order to let him know that the steadfast God ὁ ἀσφαλῆς θεός (*o asphaltēs theos*) is the support and stay of everyone and that He imparts, as with the impress of a seal, to whom He will the power of remaining unshaken — ἐνσφραγιζόμενος οἷς ἂν ἐθέλι, τὸ ἀσάλευτον.¹⁹ And Pharaoh became insolent towards the Almighty saying, ὄμην ἐστάναι (*ōmēn hestanaī*), (“I thought I stood”), as in the Septuagint (Gen. 41:16), and he does not reflect that to be unswerving and stable — τὸ ἀκλινές καὶ πάγιον — belongs only to God and to such as are the friends of God, καὶ εἴ τις αὐτῷ φίλος.²⁰

I will not elaborate on the subject any further by giving any more examples, but I would rather ask: What has happened here to that ethical virtue called *eustatheia*, by the aid of which the free person can elevate himself, as we have seen until now, to his full stature, conquering those impulses which assail him, and giving the *logos* within him complete mastery over himself?

1) *Eustatheia* no longer depends on mortals, and is completely in God’s hand. According to the law of nature, God alone is steadfast, and all creatures, including man, are in perpetual movement. Spiritual steadfastness is interpreted as physical steadfastness, i.e. immobility, and, according to the Aristotelian worldview, this steadfast nature is the unique quality of the immutable Force. Hence, we would say that human *eustatheia* is something that is impossible.

2) If, nevertheless, it does really exist, this can happen only thanks to a religious paradox or, in other words, only thanks to a miracle. God confers on man a force not in keeping with his φύσις (*physis*). By giving him *eustatheia*, He actually converts him into a creature that is no longer mortal.

3) On whom does God bestow this? In one of the examples we have given, Philo says that *eustatheia* is one of the qualities of God — καὶ εἴ τις αὐτῷ φίλος (and if somebody may be the friend of God). The term used by Philo is the very one Plato used, as when he once described some deep mystery, which only God knows about — καὶ ἀνδρῶν ὃς ἂν ἐκείνῳ φίλος ᾖ (and men such as who may be God’s friend).²¹ However, while Plato, with these words, just leaves room for the age-old idea of God’s favorites, though in fact it does not fit in with his own worldview, Philo was undoubtedly acquainted with such “favorites of God.” In Homer’s world, φίλοισι (*philoī*) were more often than not blood relations and,

¹⁸ *Cher.* 19.

¹⁹ *Som.* I, 158.

²⁰ *Som.* II, 219, and in the next note.

²¹ *Tim.* 53d, and compare in my German book (*op. cit.*, n. 1), p. 6, n. 27.

moreover, these heroes are διογενεῖς (*diogeneis*), i.e., from divine offspring. One can also find an echo of such a mythical association of thoughts in the work of Philo himself, albeit unconsciously expressed.

4) The gift that God bestows on his beloved one fits in structurally in our case, too, with the idea of θεοφιλία (*theophilia* — friendship with the Godhead), which is an idea one often encounters in mythology. Philo, of course, is not implying that there are any blood ties between the godhead and human beings, but, notwithstanding, he does consider that “being God’s favorite” includes God’s giving him a share of his own *physis*; and this is exactly what we have said above. However, instead of bringing a person closer to fulfilling his task as it has been defined for him by tradition, and as a complete human being, this gift in fact estranges him from his human qualities, and partially confers God-like qualities on him. If the teachings of Greek moral behavior have always been directed, from time immemorial, to the attainment of εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia* — happiness),²² here, too, *eudaimonia* has exceeded the bounds of human *eudaimonia* — and explicitly so, because it is said that a person who attains “stability,” becomes θείας εὐδαιμονίας ἐγγύς (close to divine happiness). The *erōs* which elevates a person also checks the onward course which is natural to created being and compels it to stand still, τὴν γενέσεως οἰκειαν φορὰν... ἐβιάγατο στήναι ποιήσας,²³ and brings him closer to divine happiness.

5) Nevertheless, Philo has certain reservations about the relations between man and God. God imparts “a share” μεταλίωσιν (*metadidosin*)²⁴ of His own divine Nature. Such a person is “close to” ἐγγύς,²⁵ the divine happiness. For Philo, the High Priest symbolized the most exalted of men. On the verse, “And there shall be no man in the tabernacle of the congregation when he goeth in to make an atonement in the holy place, until he come out” (Lev. 16:17), Philo explained that when the High Priest entered the Holy Place, he was elevated in holiness, until he was no longer in the mortal realm; he would, however, become “a nature, midway between man and God — μεθόριός τις θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπου φύσις — less than God, yet superior to man.”²⁶ From a metaphysical point of view, it is difficult to turn these reservations into reality. Against a background of Aristotelian metaphysics, that quality which is reserved for the Godhead alone, i.e. that of being unswerving, is unfathomable. It is difficult to find a role, or even a possibility, for a being “whose nature is midway between man and God” in this worldview. However, it is self-evident that this reservation stems from a religious

²² What Aristotle formulates in *Eth Nic* 1095a 18 is true, in principle, for all of classical Greek ethics.

²³ *Cher.* 19.

²⁴ *Post. Ca.* 28.

²⁵ *Cher.* 19.

²⁶ *Som.* II, 188.

inhibition against an extreme idea, which does not even come into consideration. We can certainly attribute this reservation to Philo's Jewishness. But this modification in no way changes the basic idea: namely, that God bestows on man a share of His divine nature. This is not a Jewish idea. For in the Jewish world, whether in the Bible or in Rabbinic thought, everything that God bestows on his beloved ones allows for a dialogic relationship between God and man, who stands "before Him".

6) It is true that at one point in his works, Philo does fit into this Jewish structure. We may just read on, and shall find that the faculty of reason is at a standstill when it is facing God ἐνώπιον θεοῦ.²⁷ Here, in fact, a person is not wholly absorbed into the godhead — neither completely, nor partially — but stands "in front of Him," in exactly that steadfastness and dialogue that characterize the Jewish structure. However, the decisive phrase, "in front of," is not Philo's. It is taken from the verse, already quoted: "And Abraham was still standing before the Lord"; only, Philo substituted for the word, ἐνώπιον (*enōpion* — facing) found in the Septuagint its synonym, ἀντικρὺς (*antikrŷs* — opposite). This closely following his text cannot teach us anything about the opinions of Philo himself.

So, basically, regarding his fundamental principles, Philo remains all that we have elucidated above: his religious feelings were formulated in terms of a philosophical concept defined within an ethical system, whose meaning was transposed to the level of the relationship of the soul with its God. The various hesitations which we found that Philo had, cannot reverse the general direction of his thought, which is clearly expressed in his writings. The pre-eminence of values becomes a divine gift, giving a person a share of the divine *physis*. In Philo's works, this transition does not only apply to *eustatheia*. One can, for instance, see the same nuance concerning the concepts of χαρά (*chara* — delight)²⁸ and πίστις (*pistis* — belief).²⁹ These concepts, and all that they represent, are transposed to the religious sphere, and fulfill the role of bringing Man into the divine sphere, blotting out all boundaries. This religious reality ultimately leads to the deification of man. And this is the most poignant definition for any mystic religiosity. Without allowing for the doubtful attempts that have been made³⁰ to prove that Philo actively belonged to an organized Jewish mystery cult, we can say that, in terms of its fundamental tendency, Philo's religiosity may undoubtedly be defined as a mystical one.

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²⁷ *Som.* II, 226.

²⁸ On this, see my book (*op. cit.*, n. 1), p. 28 f.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22 f.

³⁰ See in particular: E.R. Goodenough, *By Light, By Light! The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (Amsterdam, 1969).