



THE
WORLD
OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

CULTURAL,
SOCIAL, AND
HISTORICAL
CONTEXTS

JOEL B. GREEN
LEE MARTIN McDONALD
EDITORS

32

Josephus and the New Testament

MICHAEL F. BIRD

Who Was Josephus?

Flavius Titus Josephus was appointed as the Judean general charged with the defense of Galilee during the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (AD 66–70). He subsequently was captured, changed sides in the conflict, and later wrote significant historical, autobiographical, and apologetic works under imperial patronage in Rome. His significance lies in the fact that he is arguably the single most important witness to the history and religion of the Jewish people in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. The works for which he is known are *Jewish War* (*Bel-lum judaicum*), *Antiquities of the Jews* (*Antiquitates judaicae*), *Life of Josephus* (*Vita*), and *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*).

Josephus was born Yoseph ben Mattiyahu in Jerusalem to a wealthy priestly family in AD 37. His elevated social status is implied by his Greek education, his dispatch to Rome on a diplomatic mission at age twenty-six, his landholdings in Jerusalem, and his appointment as regional commander of Galilee during the war against Rome. In his teenage years Josephus allegedly tried all three major Jewish sects (Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees) and for a time followed a Judean ascetic named Bannus, who lived in the wilderness. Josephus then purportedly returned to Jerusalem and joined the Pharisees. He was selected by a revolutionary council to prepare Galilee for the Roman invasion, during which time he was opposed by John of Gischala. He eventually surrendered to Vespasian's forces

at Jotapata (Josephus, *J.W.* 3.340–92). Josephus was kept alive only because he prophesied Vespasian's accession to the Roman throne (*J.W.* 3.400–408). For two years (ca. AD 68–69) he was kept in Roman custody, but he won favor by acting as a translator, adviser, and negotiator in the siege of Jerusalem. For his cooperation, Josephus was rewarded with Roman citizenship and patronage in the Flavian house, which had acceded to power, with Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian each taking the throne in turn.

While living in Rome, Josephus published *Jewish War*—initially in Aramaic (ca. AD 73), later in Greek (ca. AD 75–81). Its principal purposes were, first, to be an apology for the Romans to the Jews that God had in effect gone over to the side of the Romans because of Judean impiety and, second, to defend Judean character from vitriolic criticism following the disaster of AD 70. Later, around AD 93–94, Josephus composed *Jewish Antiquities*, with his *Life* attached as an appendix. The *Antiquities* fits the genre of “rewritten Bible”; that is, it summarizes and redacts sacred accounts of Israel's history, combined with extensive information about the events leading up to the Jewish war. The *Life* was written to exonerate Josephus from charges of falsehood raised by Justus of Tiberias concerning Josephus's account of the Jewish war and to extol Josephus's character and credentials. Soon afterward, Josephus composed *Against Apion*, a defense of Judaism and the Jewish people against objections posed by the Alexandrian scholar and politician Apion. Josephus probably died sometime around AD 100.

The relevance of Josephus's writings for understanding the NT is manifold. First, he provides a great deal of background information about Judaism and Jewish history. Indeed, we may regret that he never got around to writing his work *Customs and Reasons* about the Jewish people (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.198; 20.268). Second, he writes about events, institutions, groups, customs, places, and people known in the NT, such as Pilate, Herod Agrippa, the census of Quirinius, the Jerusalem temple, and more. Third, independent of the NT accounts, he provides attestation to the careers of John the Baptist, Jesus, and James the brother of Jesus.

Josephus on the Jewish Background to Christianity

The significance of Josephus as a background source and contemporary of the first Christians can be demonstrated with several examples.

First, Josephus provides information about the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, which he describes as the “three forms of philosophy” (*J.W.* 2.119; *Ant.* 13.171; 18.11; *Life* 10). Josephus's account is somewhat jaundiced. He is favorably disposed to the Pharisees (and even claims to be one), probably because they were the Jewish sect that emerged as leaders of the Palestinian Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem. So Josephus disparages the Sadducees as “barbarous”

and presents the Pharisees as “friendly” (*J.W.* 2.166). Josephus also describes the sects in largely Hellenistic terms, likening them to a “philosophy,” with the Essenes believing in the immortality of the soul and Pharisees in reincarnation (*J.W.* 2.154–57, 163). Nonetheless, Josephus remains our best source outside the NT for information about these Jewish sects, including their practices, politics, and beliefs.

Second, Josephus refers to the body of “traditions” that the Pharisees preserved and transmitted to others (*Ant.* 13.297–98, 408; 18.15). Evidence for a Pharisaic oral tradition of halakah (i.e., legal interpretation) is attested in the Gospels (Matt. 15:2–6; Mark 7:3–13) and Paul’s Letters (Gal. 1:14). The traditions of the elders may not have been a technical “oral Torah” distinct from the “written Torah” (see *m. ’Abot* 1.1), but Josephus and the NT confirm the existence of such a body of Pharisaic traditions before the codification of the Mishnah (ca. AD 200).

Third, Josephus is also an excellent source of information about banditry, royal pretenders, prophetic movements, and revolutionary leaders in Judea. He writes about how Judea was filled with “imposters and demagogues, [who] under the guise of divine inspiration, provoked revolutionary actions and compelled the masses to act like madmen. They led them out into the wilderness in order that there God would reveal to them signs of imminent liberation” (*J.W.* 2.259 LCL [amended]; cf. *Ant.* 20.160). This is an important factor for considering popular and Roman responses to Jesus’ messianism.

Fourth, Josephus shows that the dilemma of whether converts to Judaism should be circumcised was not limited to the early Christian movement (e.g., Galatians; Acts 15). Josephus recounts how King Izates and Queen Mother Helena of Adiabene (modern-day Armenia) converted to Judaism (*Ant.* 20.17–96). Yet Izates received conflicting advice as to whether he should be circumcised. A Jewish merchant named Ananias told him that he could worship God without circumcision, whereas a Pharisee named Eleazar chastised him for spurning the commandment to be circumcised (*Ant.* 20.41, 44–45).

Fifth, Josephus’s works have a particular parity with Luke-Acts. The prologues to Luke (1:1–4) and Acts (1:1–2) parallel the prologues to both books of *Against Apion* (1.1–5; 2.1–3), and both have patrons in, respectively, “Theophilus” and “Epaphroditus.” Luke and Josephus refer to similar people, places, and events, including the watershed census under Quirinius and political leaders like Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas, as well as such revolutionary leaders as Judas the Galilean, Theudas, and the Egyptian. Both also have written broadly historical works with the purpose of defending a group against calumnious accusations and to demonstrate the inherent virtue of the group’s way of life. Josephus writes about Jews and Romans from the top down in his position as a Flavian client representing Judean interests; Luke writes about Christians and Romans from the bottom up as a gentile Christian in a group regarded as a foreign sect by Roman elites.

Josephus on John the Baptist

In the canonical Gospels, John the Baptist is regarded as the forerunner of Jesus. According to the synoptic evangelists (Mark 6:17–28; Matt. 14:3–11; Luke 3:19–20) the reason for the Baptist’s arrest and execution was that he criticized Herod Antipas for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, contrary to Levitical law (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). Josephus mentions John the Baptist in a parenthetical remark in *Ant.* 18 concerning the defeat of Herod Antipas’s army by the Nabatean King Aretas IV. There Josephus recounts:

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod’s army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they had committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already cleansed by right behavior. When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod’s suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus, the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod’s army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod. (*Ant.* 18.116–19 LCL)

From Josephus we can deduce the following: (1) John was regarded as a Judean holy man, popular with the masses, who attracted large crowds; (2) he was known for and named after his activity as a “baptizer” (*baptistēs*); (3) John exhorted his audience to return to appropriate covenantal behavior, marked by righteous conduct, justice, and reverence for God; (4) a commitment to a righteous life was a prerequisite for baptism and not a license for lawlessness, implying that baptism was for the remission of sins; (5) Josephus links baptism to purification, though he adds a gloss couching this activity in Hellenistic philosophical terms by regarding it as a symbol of the soul that has been cleansed by noble conduct; (6) Herod Antipas imprisoned John because he feared the influence of John over the masses, who might be led to revolt; and (7) it was a commonly held view that the defeat of Antipas’s army by King Aretas of Arabia was a sign of God’s anger with Antipas for executing John the Baptist.¹

1. Michael F. Bird, “John the Baptist,” in *Jesus among Friends and Enemies* (ed. C. Keith and L. Hurtado; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 63.

Josephus on Jesus

The most famous passage from Josephus is the *Testimonium Flavianum*, which contains the first of two mentions of Jesus in *Antiquities of the Jews*. The received form of the text reads:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. *He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him*. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared. (*Ant.* 18.63–64 LCL, italics added)

The authenticity of the passage is disputed because it sounds far too positively disposed toward Jesus to have been penned by someone who was not a follower of Christ. (See the italicized portions of the quotation, above.) Origen, writing in the third century, states that Josephus “did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah” (*Comm. Matt.* 1.15; *Cels.* 1.47), perhaps indicating that no “Jesus passage” was in the version of Josephus available to Origen. Others argue that the *Testimonium* interrupts the context that deals with upheavals and the folly of Roman governors, while no such upheaval occurs here. We could say regarding context, however, that Josephus is prone to rather obtrusive digressions in his works. In any case, the *Testimonium* is not really a digression, since it continues to recount the events occurring under Pilate’s procuratorship. Origen’s remark about Jesus only indicates that Josephus did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah, not that Josephus did not mention Jesus at all. Finally, the glowing account of Jesus is explainable by the fact that the text has been touched up by a Christian scribe (i.e., the italicized portions above).²

In summary, the evidence favors the authenticity of the *Testimonium*, though not in its present form. (1) The language in the *Testimonium* is consistent with

2. For example, on the phrase “He was the Messiah,” Alice Whealey (“The Testimonium Flavianum in Syriac and Arabic,” *NTS* 54 [2008]: 573–90) draws attention to the *Testimonia* preserved by Michael the Syrian (twelfth century) and Jerome (fourth century), which independently attest to the reading “he was thought to be the Messiah.” This corresponds to Origen’s claim that Josephus did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. A variant is also found in the Arabic chronicles of Agapius of Hierapolis (tenth century): “he was perhaps the Messiah.” In light of this, there probably was a reference to Jesus as Messiah in the *Testimonium* but probably in a way that held that the messianic status of Jesus was dubious. Christian scribes who transmitted the text of Josephus removed this dubiety from the *Testimonium* and instead inserted “He was the Messiah.” Alternatively, Jerome’s version may be an assimilation from *Ant.* 20.200. Overall, I think there was a reference to the Messiah in *Ant.* 20.200 and probably in *Ant.* 18.63, but it was expanded (rather than interpolated) by a Christian scribe.

Josephus's style elsewhere.³ (2) There is no emphasis on the role of the Judean leadership in Jesus' death. (3) The brief mention of Jesus again in *Ant.* 20.200 presupposes the mention of Jesus in *Ant.* 18.63–64. If a Christian scribe interpolated the Jesus passages in Josephus, it is likely that he would have put them into one location rather than spread them over books 18 and 20. (4) Arabic and Syriac versions of the *Testimonium* differ slightly from the received Greek textual form and either omit or alter the seemingly positive descriptions of Jesus.⁴

Stripped of the obviously Christian glosses and embellishments, the original form of the text probably was something like this:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out.⁵

Josephus on the Martyrdom of James

Josephus narrates how, during an interregnum between Roman governors in Judea, the high priest Ananus had a man “named James the brother of Jesus called the Messiah” and his companions summarily executed about AD 62.

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was set upon the road. He [Ananus] convened the council of judges and brought before it the brother of Jesus—who was called “Christ”—whose name was James, and certain others. Accusing them of transgressing the law he delivered them up for stoning. But those of the city considered to be fair-minded and strict concerning the laws were offended at this and sent to the king secretly urging him to order Ananus to take such actions no longer. (*Ant.* 20.200 LCL)

James was venerated as a martyr in Christian tradition and was even called “James the Just” (see *Gos. Thom.* 12). The precise reason for James's death is not given in any of the sources, including Josephus. The charge of being “breakers of the law” is a form of sociological deviant labeling where the beliefs and praxis of someone are regarded as a threat to a shared identity and common way of life. Most likely, James was a victim of intra-Jewish sectarianism, where Christians

3. H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus, the Man and the Historian* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1929), 137; see, however, Ken Olson, “Eusebius and the *Testimonium Flavianum*,” *CBQ* 61 (1999): 305–22.

4. For discussion, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (4 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:56–69; Alice Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

5. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:61.

in general and James in particular were regarded as a dangerous threat to the integrity of the Judean laws on account of their messianic faith and so warranted violent censure.

Conclusion

Josephus is the single most important source for understanding first-century Judaism. He provides crucial background information about the politics, sects, culture, laws, and religion of Judea. Josephus also provides independent historical attestation for many events recounted in the NT, not the least of which is the existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth in the *Testimonium Flavianum*.

Bibliography

Major translations of Josephus's works include Henry St. John Thackeray et al., trans. and eds., *Josephus* (9 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929–53); and Steve Mason, ed., *Brill Josephus Project*. The translation by William Whiston (*The Complete Works of Josephus* [1737; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997]) is dated and unreliable.

Barclay, John M. G. *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996. Though not written exclusively on Josephus, this is a useful overview of Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora that makes constant use of Josephus (and others, like Philo) for mapping the life, religion, politics, and society of Jews outside Palestine.

Böttrich, Christfried, et al., eds. *Josephus und das Neue Testament*. WUNT 1/209. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006. A collection of essays that presents the current scholarly views of Josephus and NT studies; several essays are in English.

Mason, Steve, ed. *Brill Josephus Project*. 9 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2000–. The gold standard for Josephus studies. It includes new translations and commentary on Josephus's works. Not all the volumes are available yet, but the early ones on *Against Apion* and *Life of Josephus*, and the early chapters of *Judean Wars* and *Antiquities of the Judeans*, are well worth consulting.

———. *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009. A helpful collection of essays on the significance of Josephus for study of the NT and early Christianity. Although some of Mason's positions are debated, overall this is a good introduction to the importance of Josephus.

Meier, John P. "Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal." *CBQ* 52 (1990): 76–103. A sober and lucid approach to the *Testimonium Flavianum* and a slightly more expanded account than found in Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (4 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:56–88.

33

Philo and the New Testament

TORREY SELAND

Life and Accomplishments

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) was a Jewish scholar, philosopher, author, and politician who lived in Alexandria all his life and who has had significant influence through his many books. He wrote about seventy treatises, of which about fifty are still extant in whole or in part. His works are of tremendous value for students of the Judaism of his time, of the NT, and of the early churches in the Diaspora.

Until the seventeenth century, many scholars believed that Philo had had some relation to Christianity; some thought he referred to early Egyptian Christian groups in his writings, or that he had met Christians during a stay in Rome. Some ancient sources even consider him to have been a Christian. As far as we know, however, Philo never met any Christians, nor does he tell anything about any Christians, nor did any of the NT writers know him. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that during the many centuries after his death, Jews did not preserve his works, but Christians did, and they came to cherish them and to adopt many of the ideas inherent in his works. Today we can see that his literary remains contain evidence of various relevant traditions about Jewish life and theology and various ways of interpreting the Jewish Scriptures, as well as information about the life of the Jews as a minority group in the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD.

Philo's Works

Most of Philo's writings are expositions of the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. These expositions are grouped in two main parts: the exposition of the law and his exegetical commentaries. The first group comprises ten volumes that are still preserved: *On the Creation of the World*; *On the Life of Abraham*; *On the Life of Joseph*; *On the Decalogue*; *On the Special Laws 1–4*; *On the Virtues*; *On Rewards and Punishments*; and probably *On the Life of Moses 1–2*.

The exegetical commentaries are of two kinds: two volumes on *Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus* and the allegorical commentaries, consisting of twenty-one books dealing with Gen. 2–41: *Allegorical Interpretation 1–3*; *On the Cherubim*; *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*; *That the Worse Attacks the Better*; *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain*; *On the Giants*; *On the Unchangeableness of God*; *On Agriculture*; *On Noah's Work as a Planter*; *On Drunkenness*; *On Sobriety*; *On the Confusion of Tongues*; *On the Migration of Abraham*; *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things*; *On the Preliminary Studies*; *On Flight and Finding*; *On the Change of Names*; and *On Dreams 1–2*.

In addition, Philo wrote some philosophical works (*That Every Good Person Is Free*; *On the Eternity of the World*; *On Providence 1–2*; and *On Animals*) and some historical and apologetic works (*Against Flaccus*; *On the Embassy to Gaius*; *On the Contemplative Life*; and the *Hypothetica*). (For more information on the various volumes, see Kamesar, *Philo*; and Schenk, *Philo*.)

Not much is known about Philo's private life. He most probably belonged to a rich and influential family in Alexandria. He had both a brother and a nephew who were involved in politics, the latter ending up as the prefect of Egypt (AD 66–70)—the highest Roman official in Egypt. Philo himself became engaged in some political duties, even serving as the leader of a delegation to the emperor in Rome in AD 38–40. The work of most interest to us in the present context is his exposition of the Holy Scriptures of the Jews, the Scriptures we call the OT. Philo himself does not explicitly reveal to us the social context of his writings, but Gregory Sterling has strongly argued that Philo “had a private school in his home or personally owned structure for advanced students which was similar to schools of higher education run by individuals throughout the Greco-Roman world” (Sterling, “School,” 150). At the time of Philo, Alexandria was one of the three largest cities in the Roman Empire, probably containing a half million people. The city was famous for its great library—though Philo never mentions it—and as being a learning center for its region. Later it was to become a great Christian center, and Philo's works and thoughts had a great impact on the theology of the church fathers living there.

As a philosopher and expositor of the Scriptures, Philo was heavily influenced by Platonism but also by Stoicism and Pythagoreanism. His philosophy, especially his Platonism, is the ideological background of many of his interpretations of the

Scriptures, and he can hardly be understood without taking that conceptual and ideological background into consideration.

Philo and Social Life in the Diaspora

Due to his family context, Philo belonged to the elite segment of the Jewish communities, but he was also an embedded member of the Jewish community in Alexandria. The Jewish community at that time was large. Philo says that they lived primarily in two of the five sections of the city (*Flacc.* 55). They probably had their own institutions of a social, judicial, and religious nature; these were often housed in one and the same building (i.e., the synagogue), and the Jewish Torah was the fundamental and comprehensive law. The Jews were nevertheless living in a minority situation, competing with other minority groups in the same city, all subject to and ruled by the Roman authorities.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, the apostle Paul took the Jewish synagogues as his point of departure for his evangelistic work in the various cities, starting with his fellow Jews (see Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–2; 18:4; etc.). It took ten Jewish men to establish a synagogue; hence, there were synagogues in most major cities. However, as the Christians were soon separated from local Jewish synagogal communities, they had to establish their own social settings and congregations. And thus they were a minority group, subject to conditions comparable to those of the Jews. Reading Philo can help us to see the social processes at work and thus to understand the social conditions of such minority groups in the Roman world.

Let us focus on one important issue. One particular aspect singled the Christians out from the Jews: they were a missionary movement, trying to recruit others as members of their Jesus Messiah-believing congregations. It has been hotly debated whether the Jews were engaged in missionary activities to gain proselytes; probably they were not, but they welcomed those who wanted to be accepted as proselytes. Michael Bird summarizes the present research situation: “Although proselytes to Judaism were made in significant numbers, there is no evidence for concerted, organized, or regular efforts to recruit Gentiles to Judaism via the process of proselytizing. Conversion to Judaism was a difficult affair, and was usually done at the initiative of the Gentile” (Bird, *Crossing*, 13). Philo can illuminate some of the social costs of becoming a Jewish proselyte, or per analogy, of becoming a Christian. He describes, for example, the disruptive functions such conversions might have and the converts’ need for being included in their new settings: The proselyte is a person who has “turned his kinsfolk . . . into mortal enemies, by coming as a pilgrim to truth and the honouring of the One who alone is worthy of honour” (*Spec.* 4.178); they have “joined the new and godly commonwealth . . . ; they have left their country, their kinsfolk and their friends for the sake of virtue and religion. Let them not be denied another citizenship or other ties of family and friendship, and let them find places of shelter ready for

refugees to the camp of piety” (*Spec.* 1.51–52; see also *Virt.* 102, 181, 219–22).¹ We have similar sayings in Paul: “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9); and exhortations in several of his letters prove the various problems Christians might have in family relations (see 1 Thess. 2:13–17; Eph. 4:17–6:9). Moreover, the author of 1 Peter admonishes his readers to take care not to invite harassment in their neighborhoods, but “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (3:15; cf. 2:11–17; 4:1–4). They are to consider themselves as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). Philo has also several statements about apostasy (*Spec.* 1.54–56, 313–18); these too illustrate possible problems created by conversions. Thus, in reading Philo, we can illuminate the social context and even some of the experiences of the early Christians from a contemporary source.

Philo and the Study of the New Testament

An important starting point for evaluating the significance of Philo for understanding the NT is the fact that both are representing and presenting expositions of the so-called OT. Philo, on his part, probably did not know much Hebrew. His “Bible” consisted of the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, what later came to be called the Septuagint (LXX). Philo, in fact, provides us with his version of how the Greek translation came into being (see *Mos.* 2.25–44; cf. *Letter of Aristeas*). The “Bible” of the Christians who wrote the NT books was also the LXX. Although some of these authors probably did know Hebrew, they all wrote in Greek, and their quotations from the Scriptures reveal a deep knowledge of the Greek translations in vogue at that time. Sometimes their quotations conform to the Hebrew text, sometimes to the LXX, and sometimes they may come from versions no longer available to us.

The Acts of the Apostles provides two important cases of possible influence from Alexandria. In Acts 6:9 we read that people from Alexandria were among the persons from the synagogue of the Freedmen opposing Stephen, and in 18:24 we find that Apollos, the young man whom Priscilla and Aquila met in Ephesus, was born in Alexandria. Some scholars consider the influence of this Apollos, as reflected in 1 Corinthians, as due partly to his ideological background in Alexandria. Hence, it is at least possible that some early Christians would have met people who had heard Philo, or might have been influenced by him in other ways.

Philo knew about various interpreters and various ways of interpreting the Scriptures. It is clear that he had predecessors, and he points to contemporary exegetes with whom he both agrees and disagrees. It is particularly interesting that he points to expositors who interpret the Scriptures in a more literal way,

1. All quotations from Philo in this chapter are taken from the LCL translation.

nowadays often labeled the “literalists,” and to some who allegorize, the “allegorists.” Philo himself uses both methods according to his audiences or topics, or both, and he criticizes those who reject the one in preference for the other.

In addition to the scriptural texts, Philo also knows traditions that were carried on from “the fathers,” and he utilizes both in his own works. For example: “For I will . . . tell the story of Moses as I have learned it, both from the sacred books, the wonderful monuments of his wisdom he has left behind him, and from some of the leaders of the nation; for I always interwove what I was told with what I read, and thus believed myself to have a closer knowledge than others of his life’s history” (*Mos.* 1.4). Thus Philo knows many Jewish interpreters and traditions, but most regrettable for us, he never names any such persons or provides further characterizations of his traditions. Yet, in his love for the Scriptures as well of oral and written traditions, he sides with his contemporary Jews and with the early Christians.

In the NT we find that when Paul describes his pre-Christian past, he characterizes himself as one who “advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for *the traditions of my ancestors*” (*Gal.* 1:14); later, as a Christian, he emphasizes the role of tradition-awareness among early Christians (*1 Cor.* 11:23; 15:1–3). In a society where only two out of ten could read and write, the role of oral tradition was pivotal. And the NT confirms the importance of promoting the oral traditions about Jesus and his gospel. Furthermore, we see various interpretations in use. For example, Paul had to deal with other interpreters and preachers of the gospel; among the more obvious are those to whom he refers as other interpreters from Jerusalem (*Gal.* 2:11–15; cf. *Acts* 15; 21:21–25), but several of his other letters reflect additional theological debates and interpretations with which he had to cope (cf. *Gal.* 3–4; *Rom.* 4; *Col.* 2:16–23; *Titus* 3:9).

The NT authors do not, however, share the delight of Philo in allegorical interpretations, and the most prominent NT hermeneutical procedure, involving typological interpretation, is not found in Philo. In fact, there is only one clearly allegorical interpretation comparable to those of Philo in the NT. That is the

Philo on the “Literalists” and the “Allegorists”

“There are some who, regarding the laws in their literal sense in the light of symbols of matters belonging to the intellect, are overpunctilious about the latter, while treating the former with easy-going neglect. . . . They ought to have given careful attention to both aims. . . . Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things, if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shewn us by the inner meaning of things. Nay, we should look on all these outward observances as resembling the body, and their inner meaning as resembling the soul. It follows that exactly as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws.” (*Migr.* 89–93)

Paul's Allegory in Galatians 4:21–31

“Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous
than the children of the one who is married.’

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.”

famous statement of Paul in Gal. 4:21–31. Another comparable saying of Paul is 1 Cor. 10:1–12, concerning the Israelites in the desert and the accompanying rock, which is interpreted as Christ. In this case, though, the role of the event was to provide examples, or “types,” for coming generations. Hence this is hardly to be read as an allegory, but rather as a typology. In typology, the OT contains issues, characters, and events that function as models, or rather types, finding their fulfillment in the time of the new covenant. Hebrews abounds in such typologies; see also Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Pet. 3:20–21. This heuristic way of using issues, characters, and events from the OT is not found in the same manner in Philo. The reason for this absence in Philo is to be found in the Christian conception of fulfillment in the messianic times that have been inaugurated with the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

Several studies have also demonstrated that exegetical debates reflected in Philo might be useful when trying to understand discussions and arguments present in the NT. When Paul, for instance, discusses the role of circumcision (Col. 2:8–13), comparable issues in Philo have proved illuminating (e.g., *Spec.* 1.1–11), and Paul’s discussion of Deut. 30:12–14 in Rom. 10:4–17 should be read in light of Philo’s *Virt.* 183–84 and *Praem.* 79–84. The use of the manna traditions in John 6 has also been illuminated by a comparison with Philo and rabbinic traditions.

For a long time Hebrews has been considered the letter most influenced by the works of Philo and his Platonism (see esp. Heb. 7–9). In the middle of the

twentieth century several scholars suggested that the otherwise unknown author of this letter might even have been a former student of Philo who had converted to Christianity. Nowadays this view is held by only a few; most scholars suggest that we should rather reckon with a kind of influence from comparable traditions and interpretive milieus. But Hebrews is still most often considered to be the NT book closest to many views known from Alexandria.

Furthermore, the roles of the Word (the Logos) in the prologue of the Gospel of John have been investigated for a possible Philonic background. There is in fact a lot about the Logos in the works of Philo, a concept he uses more than fourteen hundred times. Several aspects are also comparable to issues inherent in John 1; we might mention only the role of the Logos as an intermediary between God and the world, as well as its presence at and participation in creation. But again, direct influence from Philo is not necessary. Such OT traditions as Jewish Wisdom theology might be a possible background for both John and Philo.

In a similar way we might consider various issues in the Letters of Paul. Several aspects of the problems of the communities in Corinth have been suggested as due to influences from Alexandrian ideologies, and the terminology of the hymn in Col. 1 has been studied against the background of Philo's works. The list could be considerably prolonged.

Summary

In the study of the NT, the works of Philo should surely be included when investigating exegetical techniques, specific concepts and ideas, their social and ideological background, and theological debates. However, some important precautions should also be taken into consideration.

1. It is improbable that there was any direct contact between Philo and any NT writers.
2. It is possible, however, that there might have been some contact between some persons mentioned in the NT and Philo, or students of Philo.
3. Furthermore, one must not forget that both the NT writers and Philo of Alexandria had the same Scriptures—what we call the OT—as their theological background.
4. Hence, as interpreters of the same Scriptures, they might have drawn on various common techniques, or they might both have been influenced by comparable theological traditions and interpretive milieus.
5. In some cases, it seems that the similarities between Philo and Paul, for example, relate more to what Paul was arguing against; that is, the similarity is less between Philo and Paul and more between Philo and those whom Paul sought to counter. Such cases nevertheless demonstrate the relevance of including Philo in one's reading.

6. When looking for similarities between the NT and Philo, one should not forget the differences that still remain. The Platonist Philo did not know Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. Hence, he did not share the developed Christology of the early Christians or the eschatology found in the NT.

Even with these caveats, Philo's works remain extremely important for students of the NT, of the Judaism of his time, and of the early churches of the Diaspora.

Bibliography

The most used translation and text edition of Philo's works is F. H. Colson et al. *Philo with an English Translation*. 10 vols. LCL. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929–62.

Bird, Michael F. *Crossing over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010. The most recent study of the question of possible Jewish missionary activity in the first century AD.

Deines, Roland, and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, eds. *Philo und das Neue Testament*. WUNT 172. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004. A collection of scholarly articles on Philo and the NT, in English and German.

Kamesar, Adam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. A collection of informative introductory articles concerning Philo and his life, works, thoughts, and influence.

Runia, David T. *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey*. CRINT 3.3. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. A comprehensive presentation of the influence of Philo in the NT and in the church fathers.

Schenk, Kenneth. *A Brief Guide to Philo*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. A general introduction to Philo, also containing an informative section on Philo and the NT.

Seland, Torrey. *Strangers in the Light: Philonic Perspectives on Christian Identity in 1 Peter*. BIS 76. Leiden: Brill, 2005. Five studies reading issues in 1 Peter in light of perspectives from Philo.

Sterling, Gregory E. "The School of Sacred Laws: The Social Setting of Philo's Treatises." VC 53 (1999): 148–64. An important study discussing the social setting of Philo's teaching.