Does Philo Help Explain Early Christianity?

L. W. Hurtado, University of Edinburgh

To pose such a large question in the limited space provided by this essay will seem unwise, and justifiably so, and may even be mistaken as a trivializing of the issue. Whatever may be the limits of my sagacity, however, I can give the strongest assurance that I regard the question as by no means trivial. Granted, I address the question, not from the standpoint of a Philo specialist, but as someone whose primary concern is to understand Christian origins in historical perspective. But, with the benefit of a considerable body of scholarship provided by specialists in Philo, especially in recent decades, this is an appropriate point at which to consider this question, and to attempt to take stock of what we have learned.

At the outset of this discussion, I wish to signal that in the following discussion my answer to the question posed in my title will be both negative and positive, depending on what one means in asking it. That is, if the question concerns Philo’s usefulness in helping us to see more clearly the New Testament writings and earliest Christianity in the first-century religious and cultural environment, and more specifically in the context of second-temple Jewish traditions, then the answer is an unhesitating “yes”. Indeed, with the greatest appreciation for all the relevant evidence that is now available to us from the period, I regard Philo as probably the single most important first-century Jewish writer for understanding the Jewish religious setting of earliest Christianity, especially in its trans-local expressions outside of Roman Judea. In any case, his writings are also prime material for the sort of work that is represented by the Corpus Judaico-Hellenisticum project.

---

1 This is a pre-publication version of this essay, which is published in Philo and the New Testament--the New Testament and Philo, eds. Roland Deines, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 172; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 73-92. ISBN 3-148396-0.

2 The obvious key starting point for tracking recent Philo scholarship is Roberto Radice and David T. Runia, Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography 1937-1986 (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 8; Leiden: Brill, 1988), which includes interesting statistical analysis of scholarly literature (xxiii-xxix) that shows that since 1960 there has been “a truly explosive growth of Philonic studies, which shows no sign of abating” (xxiv). This work is continued in David T. Runia, Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography 1987-1996 (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 57; Leiden: Brill, 2000). For earlier scholarship, the key resource is the bibliography included in Erwin R. Goodenough, The Politics of Philo Judeus: Practice and Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 125-321. Commencing in 1989, scholarly publication that appeared subsequent to the bibliography by Radice and Runia is tracked in annual bibliographical essays in Studia Philonica. In a study of Philo that was very much ahead of its time, H. A. A. Kennedy, a notable predecessor in my chair in Edinburgh, complained about the neglect of Philo by scholars of early Christianity, a situation that obviously changed remarkably thereafter: Philo’s Contribution to Religion (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), vii. Kennedy’s book was logged in Goodenough’s bibliography, but seems not to have been noticed as much as it deserves. As a work by a Christian scholar of the New Testament, it reflects a commendably sympathetic and rightly-judged focus on “certain integral elements in the fabric of Philo’s religion for their own sake” (23).
If, however, the question has to do with aetiology, that is, whether in Philo’s writings we find the impetus, derivation, or causes for important features of earliest Christianity, then I think the correct judgement must be negative. In other words, if we are asking whether Philo’s writings enable us to account for important features of first-century Christianity that otherwise are anomalous or enigmatic, then I contend that the answer must be an equally clear “no”.

But I wish to add immediately that, whatever the extent of Philo’s relevance for study of the New Testament and Christian origins, he is justifiably a figure of monumental importance in his own right. Indeed, in my view, it is precisely studies of Philo simply for what we can learn from him about second-temple Judaism, especially in its Diaspora manifestations, that in fact also provide those of us who are primarily concerned with the New Testament and the origins of Christianity with the most useful analyses for our work.

1. Philo and New Testament Authors

For well over a century, most scholarly studies of Philo in relation to the New Testament have been concerned with parallels in language, motifs and ideas, and have tended to concentrate on letters of Paul, the Gospel of John (particularly the prologue), and Hebrews. In affirmation of the recent judgements of others, I see the results of a vast amount of publications of this sort as essentially showing numerous interesting points of comparison or contrast, the net effect of which is to indicate that Philo and the NT authors in question independently exhibit features of first-century Jewish tradition. “Philo and the New Testament thus share a common background.” But no direct dependence upon Philo by any NT author seems likely. Moreover, it seems to me that nothing peculiarly Philonic is reflected in any of the NT writings in question.

Philo and Paul

In some interesting respects Paul and Philo make for obvious comparison. Their lifetimes overlapped (though Philo was probably senior by a number of years). They were both Jews from the Roman Diaspora, urbanized and comfortable in Greek, and both of them left us notable writings that convey something of their own personality. Philo seems to me to have been significantly more immersed in Greek philosophy and “high” culture, but Paul’s peripatetic way of life as apostle to the Gentiles likely gave him a

---

3 Radice and Runia show that in the most recent decade surveyed in their bibliography “there has been a marked tendency to concentrate more on Philo as a thinker and personage in his own right,” and that “study of Philo from a Jewish perspective . . . has gone from strength to strength” and appeared to them to be gaining “a position of dominance in Philonic studies” (Philo of Alexandria, xxviii-xxix).

4 In this section of my discussion, I have the benefit of the recent analysis of “Philo and the New Testament” by David T. Runia, Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey (CRINT 3/3; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 63-86.

5 Runia, Philo in Early Christian Literature, 64.
greater acquaintance with “popular” levels of urban life and in a wider variety of locations.\textsuperscript{6}

In a frequently-cited essay in which he drew upon a body of earlier studies as well, Henry Chadwick posed a sustained comparison of Paul and Philo at many points, contending that they showed “the extent to which both men fished in the same pool.”\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, as Chadwick freely admitted, his list of such points could be increased readily. To illustrate this, note Philo’s hopeful vision in \textit{Vita Moses} 2.43-44 of a time when his people might emerge from the shadows of their colonized status and shine forth in religiousness and prosperity, a development which he believes would lead all other nations to abandon their ancestral customs and turn to observing the Jewish laws alone. This passage makes interesting comparison with Romans 11:11-24. In this famous passage, Paul portrays the collective response of the Jewish people to the Gospel as a “stumbling” (παραπτώματι, v. 11), as a result of which has come salvation for the Gentiles (v. 12), “riches for the world” (v. 12), and “the reconciliation of the world” (v. 15). He then also projects for Israel a future time of “fullness” (πλήρωμα, v. 12) and “acceptance” (πρόσλημψις, v. 15) that will have still more marvellous effects for all, including even “life from the dead” (v. 15).

There is, however, no significant verbal overlap between the Pauline and Philonic passages, and it is obvious that in crucial specifics these two visions of a spiritual and national renewal of the Jewish people and the wider effects for non-Jewish peoples differ very substantially. These two passages proceed from different specific premises, and each involves a very distinguishable religious stance.\textsuperscript{8} Philo chafed at the political and social subjugation of his \textit{ethnos} and was deeply concerned at the uneven fidelity demonstrated by Jews to their ancestral religion.\textsuperscript{9} But Paul’s distress about his people had to do with their failure to perceive God’s decisive revelation in Jesus (Rom. 9:1-2; 10:1-4; 11:1-7; 2 Cor. 3:12-18). And Paul’s hope for the salvation of “all Israel” (Rom. 11:25-26) involved very specifically God’s future overcoming of Jewish “hardening” and unbelief against the Gospel, when God will graft the Jewish “natural branches” back into

\textsuperscript{6} Ironically, Paul, whose extant corpus amounts to a handful of letters, and for whom writing them was a subsidiary feature of his very wide-ranging itinerant mission, wound up being perhaps the most familiar author of the Roman period. Whereas Philo, who seems to have invested enormously more effort and concern to his task as a \textit{writer}, and produced a much more voluminous body of work, is known today largely because of the success of Paul’s mission!

\textsuperscript{7} Chadwick (295) pointed to another interesting Philonic passage to set alongside Romans 11, the more extended projection of a time of Israel’s vindication and supremacy over all those who have oppressed her set forth in \textit{Praem.} 163-72. But the only reasonable judgement to reach remains the same. Philo and Paul develop “a traditional eschatological hope” for Jewish renewal, but each does so in starkly different ways. On this subject, see also Peder Borgen, \textit{Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time} (NovTSup 86; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 261-81.

\textsuperscript{8} Note, e.g., Philo’s echo of Deuteronomistic/prophetic view that the oppressed situation of the Jews was a consequence of, and chastisement for, their sins and straying from God’s laws (\textit{Praem.}163).
the “root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17-24) to share in the richness of the blessings of the Gospel with Gentile believers.\textsuperscript{10}

In short, what connects Philo and Paul in these two passages is essentially an expectation of a future spiritual rejuvenation of their people, a hope whose roots extend well back into (post)exilic-era biblical prophecy and that is expressed in various forms in a wide range of Jewish writings of the second-temple period and thereafter. But by any reasonable judgement of the evidence, in all the crucial specifics of their hopes Philo and Paul differ from each other radically, and there is no plausible way to derive either expression from the other. The real usefulness of studying this sort of “parallel” is that it enables us to see more clearly the distinctiveness and specificity of each text.

In fact, this and all of the other examples of what Chadwick referred to as “close Philonic parallels” in Paul’s letters show that, if Paul and Philo are to be imagined as fishing from a common pool, then, to pursue Chadwick’s analogy, they were clearly using different bait and equipment, were fishing from widely different points on the shore, and were aiming for very different catches! As Runia has noted in his recent review of studies, there are even some interesting terms used in common by Paul and Philo, but when we examine \textit{how} each of them uses the words in question the similarities are superficial and the differences profound.\textsuperscript{11} To reiterate the point, it is in fact difficult to find any “parallel” where Paul is echoing something that is unique to Philo, or that requires Philo’s writings to account for it.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{The Gospel of John}

A number of scholars have probed possible connections or similarities between Philo and the Gospel of John, among whom Dodd and Borgen are particularly well

---


\textsuperscript{12} It seems to me that Chadwick exaggerated connections between Paul and Philo. E.g., Chadwick (298) poses as “perhaps the most provocative instance” of a parallel 1 Cor. 13 and \textit{Det}. 20-21. Both passages counterpoise forms of external religiosity with something more profound, but other than this generalised and somewhat banal comparison, everything else is different. Philo prefers sincerity of purpose and inward commitment above various rituals, whereas Paul urges love (\textit{αγάπη}) as the supreme aim, and he even ranks it above knowledge of divine mysteries, prophecy, miracle-working faith, tongue-speaking, and benevolence. Likewise, the comparison of Philo and Paul in their allegorical treatments of Hagar and Sarah (Gal. 4:21-31; \textit{Congr.} esp. 11-21, 74-82, 139-50) shows only that both writers were acquainted with allegorical exegesis, but the specific exegesis of each is utterly unrelated to the other (cf. Chadwick, 299). The same charge of exaggeration, and even serious misconstrual of Paul in particular, can be levelled with even more force against Samuel Sandmel’s comparison of Philo and Paul: \textit{Philo of Alexandria: An Introduction} (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 149-54. See Runia’s discussion also, \textit{Philo in Early Christian Literature}, 67-70.
known. In spite of occasionally stronger claims, it appears that the overwhelming majority of those who have concerned themselves with possible connections of Philo and the Gospel of John have concluded cautiously nothing more than that the two authors in question share a broadly common background in Roman-era Jewish tradition.

The prologue is the Johannine passage that often has been thought to offer the strongest possibilities for a connection to Philo. But even here, beyond the coincidental (and very different) use of “Logos” by both authors, there is in fact nothing specific for which Philo is essential to understand it. The virtual consensus among scholars is that the Johannine prologue simply shows an independent appropriation and distinctive development of Jewish traditions about Wisdom/Word, and that Philo represents another, and very distinguishable appropriation. For grasping the conceptual background of this Johannine passage, in fact, Jewish “wisdom” writings may serve equally well, or even better. More specifically, it appears to most scholars that the Johannine prologue is intended to set forth christological assertions in the context of pre-Christian Jewish speculation about the relationship of divine wisdom and Torah.

**Philo and Hebrews**

The New Testament writing that most often has been thought to have a possible connection to Philo is the Epistle to the Hebrews. Runia, for example, has referred to Hebrews as unquestionably showing “the most affinity to Philonic thought,” and he points to “a vast body of scholarship on the relation between Hebrews and Philo.” As any survey of the debate will indicate, the large study by Williamson appears to have

---


18 Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 74. For his discussion of the matter (with copious references to scholarly publications), see pp. 74-78.
persuaded most scholars of the subsequent decades that no direct connection of the author of Hebrews to Philo can be sustained. This position was vigorously seconded by Hurst, and recent commentators and other observers of the debate have tended to agree that Hebrews and Philo independently witness to a broadly common milieu, with interesting linguistic and thematic correspondences, but marked differences in their respective thought and religious stance. Above all, the christological concerns of Hebrews not only distinguish it from Philo but govern the thought of the writing.

To sum up things to this point in the discussion, the many investigations of the relationship of Philo to various New Testament writings seem to justify only the modest and careful judgement that no direct relationship is plausible. These studies show that the main usefulness of Philo’s writings is in providing further valuable illustration of the broad Jewish background of the time of the New Testament.

2. Philo and Graeco-Roman Judaism

To conclude that Philo’s major usefulness for New Testament studies is as a major witness and illustration of the Jewish setting of earliest Christianity is by no means a negative, but instead a highly positive judgement. Of course, Philo scholarship need not justify its existence by how direct a connection can be established between Philo and the New Testament or by suggesting direct or indirect dependence upon Philo. As I have urged already, he is a sufficiently remarkable figure in his own right, and the aim of understanding the complexity of Jewish religion and life in the Greco-Roman era is


20 Lincoln D. Hurst, The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 7-42.

21 Among recent commentaries, e.g., Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 28-31; and among recent reports on the debate, Runia, Philo in Early Christian Literature, 78.

22 In the discussion of this essay at the conference where it was first presented, Gregory Sterling suggested that the particular combination of Platonic and Jewish motifs in Philo made his writings especially significant for Hebrews, which reflects a somewhat similar complexity of motifs and conceptual categories. Sterling and I agree, however, that there is insufficient reason to see direct borrowing from Philo in Hebrews, and that the most that might be claimed is that Philo is particularly useful in showing that the conceptual complexity of Hebrews draws upon Jewish tradition, perhaps particularly the Alexandrian Jewish milieu.

23 I use the term “Graeco-Roman Judaism” to refer to Jewish religion of Philo’s time, deliberately avoiding “Hellenistic/Hellenized” Judaism. The latter terms can mean the Judaism of Greek-speaking Jews, or can connote a heavy assimilation to Greek culture, and in some cases “Hellenistic Judaism” is used simply to refer to all Diaspora Judaism, in contrast to a monolithic conception of “Palestinian” Judaism. As Lieberman, Hengel and others have shown, however, Roman Judea/Palestine included Jews whose responses to Hellenism varied just as widely as the Jews of the Diaspora. Moreover, of course, “Hellenistic” can serve to designate either a chronological period or a cultural form, whereas “Palestinian” is a geographical term, so “Hellenistic” and “Palestinian” are hardly contrasting categories. In my use of the phrase, “Graeco-Roman Judaism” includes all forms and expressions of Judaism in the early Roman period, whatever the geographical location.
sufficiently important of itself, whatever Philo’s direct explanatory significance for the New Testament. Moreover, I contend that Philo scholars also in fact best serve the needs of New Testament studies when they focus on Philo for his own sake.

We do have to admit, however, that Philo has often been studied with reference to something else, usually the New Testament or rabbinic Judaism. In my view, that is not in itself problematic, except when apologetic concerns or misguided efforts at historical explanation skew things. It seems to me, for example, that Sandmel’s view of Philo was skewed by his anachronistic privileging of the rabbinic texts as rather directly indicative of “Palestinian” Judaism of the first century, and also by his implicitly apologetic desire to use Philo to help account for the emergence of early Christianity (which he portrayed pejoratively as a “Hellenized” phenomenon). As an instance of misjudged use of Philo to “explain” something in the New Testament, Williamson’s unconvincing attempt to make Philo’s honorific language for Moses explanatory for how Jesus is treated as divine in the New Testament writings fails to do justice either to Philo or the New Testament. The phenomena in question are not fully analogous, and in any case analogy is not explanation.

More commendably, especially in more recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies of Philo that concentrate on a sympathetic engagement with him, and take seriously his prominent place in the Alexandrian Jewish community and his bona fide commitment to his religious traditions. I repeat for emphasis my contention that the studies of Philo that are also most useful also for New Testament scholars are in fact those that aim at understanding him in his own cultural and religious setting. Philo’s importance is as our most extensive example of devout Diaspora Jews who sought both to identify themselves with their ancestral religion and engaged their cultural environment seriously in doing so.

As any student of the New Testament will know, first-century Christianity quickly became a vigorously trans-local movement that most characteristically emerged in urban locations where Jews also formed a part of the population. In varying ways it appears that relationships with such local Diaspora groups of Jews were important factors in the

---

24 In their 1988 bibliographical review, Radice and Runia (Philo of Alexandria, xiv) emphasized that “a good proportion of scholarship on Philo is being carried out by scholars for whom Philo himself is only of secondary interest, namely as a source of evidence for other areas of research.”

25 Sandmel’s discussion of “Philo and Palestinian Judaism” is entirely a comparison of features of Philo’s writings and rabbinic texts (Philo of Alexandria, 127-34). Also, Sandmel posited Philo as “in many ways unique” and “representing a marginal viewpoint” (italics his), and he expressed agreement with his teacher Goodenough that “Hellenized Judaism, represented by Philo, made possible the rapid Hellenization of Christianity” (ibid., 147). On the other hand, Sandmel was candid in acknowledging that he had certain personal preferences that affected his conclusions: “Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity. The Question of the Comfortable Theory,” HUCA 50 (1979): 137-48.

26 Ronald Williamson, “Philo and New Testament Christology,” in Studia Biblical 1978: III, ed. E. A. Livingstone (JSNTSup 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 439-45. Williamson mistakenly takes De Somn. 1.164-65 as a “prayer addressed to Moses” (when in fact it is purely a literary device), and he fails to take account of the considerable difference represented by the devotional practice of early Christians. I return to this matter later in this essay.
circumstances of these earliest Christian circles. It is, therefore, especially important to
learn from Philo’s voluminous corpus all that we can about Diaspora Judaism. I take the
 liberty of citing some important results of scholarship on Philo that cast valuable light on
the historical circumstances and struggles of first-century Christianity. In what follows, I
freely acknowledge my near-complete dependence upon the work of Philo specialists.
My own rather modest aim here is simply to underscore and illustrate briefly the values
of their work for New Testament scholars.

The first thing to emphasize (contra, e.g., Bousset) is that Philo is reflective of the
wider Diaspora Jewish experience, and is not the idiosyncratic figure sometimes alleged
in the past. Surely, the fact that Philo was chosen to form part of the embassy sent to
Rome to defend Alexandrian Jewish rights before the Emperor Gaius Caligula shows the
respect that he enjoyed among the wider Jewish community in Alexandria. Had he been
a maverick in his beliefs and practice, it is most unlikely that he would have been chosen
to speak for fellow Jews on this important mission. Moreover, Philo’s complaint about
the demands upon his time that arose from many requests for his leadership and service,
probably on behalf of the Alexandrian Jewish community (Spec. 3.1-5) suggests further
that he enjoyed high regard from fellow Alexandrian Jews.

As a second point (contra Goodenough), the religiosity reflected in Philo is not
indicative of a Diaspora Jewish mystery religion that represents some major assimilation
of pagan religious tendencies and concepts. Philo (along with others such as Paul)
certainly makes use of mystery/mystical language on occasion, but it is clear that the
substance that he affirms in beliefs and practices is readily recognisable as Jewish
religious tradition. To be sure, on the spectrum of cultural sophistication of the day,
Philo seems to represent those Jews who (perhaps on account of their greater financial
resources and leisure) were better placed to take advantage of Greek learning. Philo’s
own articulation and defence of Jewish traditions were likely more skilful and
rhetorically more sophisticated than the abilities of many (perhaps most) of his fellow
Jews. His writings may well have been intended primarily for those Jews (and perhaps
non-Jews too) with the levels of education that would enable them to engage and
appreciate fully the learned and cultured character of these texts. Less learned and

27 E.g., Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, “Identität und Interaktion. Zur Situation paulinischer Gemeinden im
Ausstrahlungsfeld des Diasporajudentums,” in Pluralismus und Identität, ed. Joachim Mehlhausen

28 Cf. Erwin R. Goodenough, By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism (New Haven:
Yale University Press; London: Milford, 1935), id., “Literal Mystery in Hellenistic Judaism,” in
Quantulacumque: Studies Presented to Kirssopp Lake, ed. R. P. Casey, S. Lake, A. K. Lake (London:
Christophers, 1937), 227-41. Goodenough elaborated this position in his thirteen-volume life work, Jewish
Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period. Important critiques include A. D. Nock’s review of By Light, Light
in Gnomon 13(1937): 156-65; Morton Smith, “The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism,
with Especial Reference to Goodenough’s Work on Jewish Symbols,” BJRL 40(1957-58): 473-512; id.,

29 See, e.g., the review of texts and issues by John J. Collins, Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish

30 On Philo’s personal history and circumstances, see Borgen, Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His
Time, 14-29.
culturally sophisticated Jews may well have found his expositions demanding, and may have viewed him as talking somewhat “over their heads.” But it is evident that Philo intended only to affirm and magnify the Jewish traditions that he had inherited. I see little indication that he should be viewed as a religious innovator in any significant sense of the term, or that the Diaspora Judaism that he affirmed and expounded was in any significant sense a distinctive form of Jewish religiosity that could be regarded as especially syncretistic at the expense of its Jewish authenticity.

Moreover, as Borgen in particular has shown, Philo was first and foremost an exegete of Jewish scriptures.31 In some cases he employs an allegorical approach, showing his appropriation of an interpretative method that originated in Greek philosophical traditions. In other places he engages in more straightforward exposition of the biblical text. But, whatever Philo’s method or tactic, the constant characteristic is his devotion to and affirmation of the Jewish scriptures as uniquely important texts. The Greek translation of the Torah in the third century BCE (and other Old Testament writings subsequently), a major investment of effort and resources, certainly shows a concern to facilitate and promote engagement with the scriptures by Greek-speaking Jews considerably prior to Philo.32 For his part, Philo illustrates eloquently that Greek-speaking Jews of the first century CE eagerly continued to devote themselves to pondering and promoting their scriptures. Whatever his own intellectual and/or rhetorical skills, Philo is to be seen as our most extensive extant witness to an exegetical tradition that was a major feature of the religious life of the Alexandrian Jewish community in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.33

Philo also demonstrates a firm loyalty to the special significance of his ancestral people, and he affirms strong hopes for their collective future. His use of Greek learning certainly does not represent a diminution of appreciation for his own heritage. Instead, Philo illustrates the ready appropriation and adaptation of whatever in a given cultural

31 Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, esp. 1-13. Borgen refers to the emphasis on Philo as an exegete of the Torah as “a growing trend in Philonic scholarship” (9). See also Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria: A Critical and Synthetical Survey of Research Since World War II,” *ANRW*, 2.21/1:99-154, who advocates that the starting point for study of Philo must be “the fact that Philo was an exegete” (118), and insists that “Philo was not a unique individual philosopher … but an exegete among fellow-exegetes, and a representative of a trend in Alexandrian Jewry” (142). Note also Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Michael E. Stone (CRINT; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 233-82; and Yehoshua Amir, “Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Writings of Philo,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Jan Mulder (CRINT; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 421-53. Amir (422) pointed out that the index to scripture quotations in Philo has 65 pages of references to the Pentateuch, compared to five pages of references to the other Old Testament writings, and no quotations at all from the writings that we refer to as Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

32 An interesting discussion little noticed today is Adolf Deissmann, “Die Hellenisierung des semitischen Monotheismus,” *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum Geschichte und deutsche Literatur* 1 (1903): 161-77. More recent comments on the significance of the LXX for Diaspora Judaism include Amir, “Authority and Interpretation,” 440-44. So far as I know, there remains considerable room for consideration of the many aspects of the LXX as evidence of Greek-speaking Judaism of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

setting is useful to their own purposes that characterize those in a religious group devoted to their own traditions and confident of their validity. As Borgen observed,

Philo’s intention is to conquer the surrounding culture ideologically by claiming that whatever good there is has its source in Scripture and thus belongs to the Jewish nation and its heritage. In this way, Philo represents the dynamic and offensive movement of the Jews who infiltrated the environment of Alexandrian citizens around the gymnasium...”

It is very important for New Testament scholars to take this seriously. To judge from Philo (and other corroborative evidence), there were plenty of Roman-era Jews who combined a readiness to negotiate their lives in various Diaspora settings with a firm commitment to their ethnic and religious particularity as Jews, and they were prepared to advocate and defend their traditions vigorously.

We should not imagine that Diaspora Jews of the Roman era collectively represent some weakened and alloyed form of Judaism that sought to escape or transcend its ethnic identity, and (contra Boyarin) that prefigured the trans-ethnic direction of early Christianity.

In fact, based on the evidence compiled by Tcherikover, Fuks and Stern, it appears that Egyptian Jews made a stronger effort to express their ethnic and traditional particularity across the late Seleucid and Roman periods, in comparison with the Hellenistic period, as reflected in such phenomena as greater use of biblical names and use of Hebrew in documents and inscriptions. That is, there appears to have been a growing cultural “Judaization” of Egyptian Jewry across the time-frame of the Graeco-Roman period. This evidence is often not reckoned with in scholarly discussions of Alexandrian Judaism. But it suggests that we should see Diaspora Judaism, not as a static entity, but a dynamic social and religious expression that by the first-century CE was showing increasingly a strong move toward re-assertion of Judaic particularism.

Granted, Philo also confirms that Jews were not unanimous in their choices about negotiating their existence in the Diaspora. Philo rebukes some Jews who focused on the allegorical/spiritual meanings of the commandments of Torah, and who felt free to treat literal observance of the commandments as optional (Migr. 86-93). He also condemns other Jews, such as his nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, who went so far as to assimilate wholly to the non-Jewish political and religious setting, effectively committing religious apostasy. Philo’s comments confirm what we should expect to have been the case, that Jews took various and quite distinguishable courses of action in dealing with the question of how to conduct themselves in the Diaspora. In his very valuable study of

34 Borgen, “Philo of Alexandria,” ANRW 2.21/1: 151.
35 The anonymous text, Wisdom of Solomon, is another important example.
Diaspora Jews, John Barclay gives specific examples of Jews who exhibited various levels/kinds of assimilation.38

The tensions in Diaspora Jewish communities over whether and how to maintain Jewish particularity, most specifically over what to do about observance of Torah, were very serious, and are completely understandable to anyone who considers the situations of Diaspora Jews sympathetically. Awareness of such tensions within Diaspora Jewish communities may also help New Testament scholars to sense better a factor that likely contributed to the intensity of the controversies aroused in some Christian circles over what to require of Gentile converts.39 Those Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile converts had to undergo full proselyte conversion (including circumcision of males) may well have feared that to treat Torah-observance as anything less than mandatory for all could be seen as supporting the view that Torah-observance was not necessary for anyone. That is, Diaspora Jews (including Jewish Christians) who were concerned to maintain solidarity in Torah-observance over against other tendencies in Diaspora Jewish communities may have seen the Pauline position on the admission of Gentiles into Christian circles as implicitly supporting the sort of allegorizing Torah-observance that Philo criticised. In other words, Paul’s Gentile converts may be thought of as having walked into a family quarrel within Diaspora Jewish communities, unintentionally exacerbating it. If this line of inference is correct, what was at stake in the controversies over the admission of Gentiles to full Christian fellowship was not simply the terms of Gentile conversion, but was also the question of how far Diaspora Jews could allow themselves to go in negotiating their lives in non-Jewish environments.

We could continue much farther in sketching how Philo helps us to see more accurately and fully Judaism in the Diaspora. For me to do so here, however, would only extend the basic point that has been made very fully by experts in Philo and Diaspora Judaism already. But I permit myself a further brief observation. In the light of Philo, New Testament scholars are often better enabled to see the features of that other notable Jew from the Diaspora, Paul.

As stated already, a comparison of Paul and Philo shows that, as well as interesting similarities between them, there are notable differences. Indeed, comparison of Paul with Philo makes it all the easier to see Paul’s identifying features.40 I agree with a number of scholars in recent decades who have shown that Paul’s Jewishness was deep, thorough, and authentic, and that even in his religious re-orientation as Apostle to the Gentiles he retained an outlook that was recognizably Jewish.41 Given Paul’s concern to


39 For further treatment of this matter, see Peder Borgen, Philo, John and Paul: New Perspectives on Judaism and Early Christianity (BJS 131; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), esp. 61-71, 233-54, 255-72.

40 I draw here upon Barclay’s excellent analysis in Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora, 381-95.

41 This line of scholarship can be traced at least as far back as W. D. Davies’ historic study, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), and includes subsequent influential studies such as E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, Heidenapostel aus Israel: Die jüdische Identität des Paulus nach ihrer Darstellung in seinen Briefen
enfranchise Gentiles without requiring them to undergo proselyte conversion to Torah-observance, one might expect him to have developed a more flexible attitude toward the wider non-Jewish culture. But instead, as Barclay has observed, “we find in Paul a strongly antagonistic cultural stance combined with a radical redefinition of traditional Jewish categories,” this comprising “the anomaly” that is Paul.42

In fact, in comparison with Josephus, Philo, or the anonymous authors of several other Greek-language Jewish works of the period, such as 3 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, Paul comes across as less open to cultural engagement with Hellenism. To cite Barclay again,

To turn to Paul after reading most other Diaspora literature is to be struck by his minimal use of Hellenistic theology, anthropology or ethics. . . . comparison of Paul with other Diaspora authors only shows how little his theology is influenced by Hellenism.43

3. Two Key Distinguishing Features of Early Christianity

The considerable difference between Paul and other major Diaspora texts in their appropriation of Hellenism puts us on notice that we should not lump all Diaspora Jews into the same category, and that we should be prepared to grant the possibility of significant differences, even innovations occasionally, among them. In the final section of this essay I focus on two key features of first-century Christianity that I contend represent significant distinctives in comparison with the Roman-era Jewish setting: the programmatic conversion of Gentiles without requiring Torah-observance, and devotion to Jesus as divine.

My aim here is to show further that comparison of the New Testament with the Diaspora Jewish background assists us as much in the identification of distinguishing features of early Christianity as it does in detecting how the young religious movement reflected the Jewish religious matrix in, and out of which, it emerged. The thrust of the following comments will be that for neither feature is Philo, for example, much help in providing an aetiological explanation. I emphasise again that it is not my purpose here to downgrade the significance of Philo for New Testament studies. Instead, I want to underscore the need to face squarely the explanatory limits of the “background” of the New Testament.44 Or, to express the matter better, I want to emphasize that study of Philo (and other important witnesses to the religious context of first-century Christianity) makes a positive contribution, even when the result is to show that something more than alleging the appropriation of putatively analogous features of the historical background is required to account for the certain Christian phenomena.

(WUNT 62; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1992); and still more recently Terence L. Donaldson, Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

42 Barclay, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora, 388.

43 Barclay, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora, 390.

44 In conference discussions, the term “context” was proposed cogently as a more useful term than “background”. I add my support to this suggestion.
The Gentile Mission

The first major feature of first-century Christianity that I want to highlight is the Pauline mission to secure “the obedience of the Gentiles” without requiring them to undergo full proselyte conversion (i.e., to Torah-observance). At the risk of oversimplifying an important debate, I am persuaded that it is incorrect to attribute a Gentile “mission” to second-temple Judaism. 45 Certainly, Diaspora Jews such as Philo often seem to have been eager to defend, and even commend, their religion to Gentiles, and they likely were often ready to welcome any level of positive interest from Gentiles in their religion. 46 But I can find nothing in Philo or other Diaspora Jewish writings that would account for Paul’s powerful conviction that God’s eschatological will, as now revealed, called for a programmatic enfranchising of Gentiles as full co-religionists with Jewish Christians. Whatever one’s evaluation of the validity of Paul’s claim that he had been called by God uniquely and specifically to secure “the offering of the Gentiles” (Rom. 15:15-16), it is at least a novel conviction!

Moreover, the terms of Paul’s Gentile mission are unique. 47 By contrast, the sort of Diaspora Jews who are represented by Philo saw full Gentile conversion to the God of Israel as involving an abandonment of non-Jewish religion, family, friends, and social-political identity. That is, for Jews such as Philo, proper Gentile conversion meant joining the Jewish community, and taking on a commitment to full Torah-observance. Borgen has proposed that, although Philo did not hold circumcision to be a prerequisite for Gentile male proselytes who wished to enter the Jewish community, he did regard the rite as “one of the commandments which they had to obey upon receiving the status as a


46 On Philo’s attitude toward proselytes, Borgen, Philo, John and Paul, esp. 61-71; and also now Ellen Birnbaum, The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes (BJS 290; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), esp. 193-219. I am not persuaded, however, by Birnbaum’s contention (e.g., 209-19) that for Philo the category “Israel” connoted an ambiguous entity to which one does not “convert” and that includes anyone (in principle, Jews and/or non-Jews) with the “spiritual ability” signified by Philo’s emphasis on “seeing God”. I understand Philo as using “Israel” to represent the spiritual/religious identity and status assigned particularly to the social entity represented by the nation of the “Jews”. I do not see in the passages that Birnbaum considers any clear indication that Philo included unconverted Gentiles among “Israel”.

47 Terence Donaldson has proposed (Paul and the Gentiles [n. 40 above]) that, prior to his apostolic mission to Gentiles, Paul the Pharisee may have shared second-temple Jewish tradition concerns about the salvation of the nations. In any case, Donaldson grants that Paul’s Gentile mission represents a novel and remarkable “remapping” of any such concern, with conversion to Christ occupying the place that conversion to Torah-observance held in Jewish proselyte requirements. I grant that some second-temple Jewish texts reflect hopes for the conversion of the nations (e.g., Philo, Mos. 2.43-44). In my view, however, Donaldson fails to account for Paul’s understanding of his Gentile mission as a prophet-like special calling (e.g., Gal. 1:15-16), and Paul’s conviction that the success of his mission was itself an urgent duty laid upon him personally and with eschatological consequences (Rom. 11:11-36).
Jew." \(^\text{48}\) Even if this be so, such a view of the necessity of circumcision clearly represents a very different position from the one promoted by Paul. In Paul’s conviction, it was absolutely inappropriate to require circumcision and full Torah-observance of Gentiles, either as an entrance requirement or as a subsequent duty as members of the elect. In Paul’s view, faith in Christ and obedience to the ethical demands of the Gospel were fully sufficient as the basis on which to treat Gentile converts as full partners in God’s eschatological salvation and fully sons of Abraham with Jewish Christians.

Furthermore, in spite of frequent claims to the contrary by some of his contemporary Jewish opponents (e.g., Acts 21:20-21) and by some scholars subsequently, Paul’s conviction that Gentiles were excused from Torah-observance did not mean discouraging Jewish Christians from observing Torah. \(^\text{49}\) So long as Jewish-Christians’ Torah-observance did not prevent them from accepting Gentile Christians as full co-religionists in the Christian assembly, there was in Paul’s view no problem at all in Jewish believers continuing to affirm their ancestral identity as those to whom the Torah was given (Rom. 9:4). \(^\text{50}\) Otherwise, we would have to call Paul a liar in such passages as 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. \(^\text{51}\) Certainly, Paul claimed for his Gentile converts freedom from the sort of commitments that Diaspora Jewish communities required of proselytes for them to be accepted as full members. But this should not be thought of as arising from Paul renouncing the Torah as a false revelation, or from his seeing all Torah-observance as totally obsolete. He did not hold either of these views. His position on Gentile salvation did not represent a radical Hellenization by Paul and did not involve a flight from his Jewish identity.

Space does not permit me to elaborate the matter further. My main contention here is that Philo does not help us to account for Paul’s views. Nothing that I can see in Philo provides us a missing explanatory link or key that unlocks the remarkable conviction that drove Paul to traverse a good part of the Roman Empire.

**Devotion to Jesus**

The other major phenomenon that I want to mention here is, in my view, the most distinctive feature of earliest Christianity: devotion to Jesus. \(^\text{52}\) Moreover, in this case as

---


\(^\text{50}\) See the thoughtful weighing of matters by E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 171-206. I find much to commend in Sanders’ discussion, and I am broadly supportive of the view that Paul sought to maintain his identity as a Jew, and that he did not actively discourage Jewish Christians from observing Torah. But I also find a several points of disagreement that I cannot elaborate here.


\(^\text{52}\) I base the following comments on more extensive discussions that I have provided in other publications, esp. *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), esp. 51-69; and *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
well, we are dealing with a major phenomenon that represents a significant innovation that cannot be accounted for as deriving from analogies in the Diaspora Jewish traditions of the first century. Here too, Philo, for example, does not “explain” early Christianity. Yet Philo certainly helps us to see better the context in which devotion to Jesus emerged; so thereby our ability is enhanced to grasp the historical significance of this remarkable religious development.

Occasionally, scholars have proposed that Philo does explain the divine status accorded to Jesus in the New Testament. I mentioned earlier such a suggestion from Ronald Williamson. Essentially, Williamson focused on Philo’s exalted treatment of Moses, as ideal figure, even as “divine” in some sense of the term. For example, in De Vita Mosis, Philo portrays Moses as appointed to be God’s “partner of His own possessions,” God giving into Moses’ hands “the whole world as a portion well fitted for His heir” (1.155). In the same context, Philo goes on to make one of his numerous allusions to Exodus 7:1, describing Moses as “named god and king of the whole nation” and as the model “beautiful and godlike” (pā/gkalon kai qeoeidej) set before others to copy in their spiritual efforts (1.158).

But it is clear that Moses remains in Philo’s understanding completely a human being, although the most admirable person who ever lived or ever shall live. For Philo, Moses is no “divine man,” no really divinized being. The most important indicator, in the religious environment of the time, is that Moses receives no cultic worship in the devotional practice advocated and observed by Philo. As I concluded about Philo’s treatment of Moses fifteen years ago, “Moses never really becomes anything more than the divinely endowed supreme example of the religious life commended by Philo.” And, as Scott concluded in a very recent examination of the evidence, Philo’s honorific language for Moses cannot provide a bridge to the treatment of Jesus reflected in the New Testament.

The “binitarian” devotional pattern reflected in the New Testament, indeed already treated as traditional in Paul’s letters written scarcely more than twenty years after the death of Jesus, represents a major and unparalleled innovation in the practice and beliefs of second-temple Jewish tradition. In this pattern, Jesus is not only accorded uniquely exalted status, he is also incorporated into a constellation of devotional practices as recipient of worship along with God (“the Father”). We cannot explain Jesus’ status in earliest Christianity, especially the pattern of devotional practice, aetiology as imitation of, or derivation from, Jewish tradition as reflected in Philo or other contemporary texts. Nor, I submit, can we explain Jesus-devotion adequately on the

53 Williamson, “Philo and New Testament Christology.” For other similar discussions of Moses traditions reflected in Philo and other second-temple Jewish material, see the references that I cite in One God, One Lord, 152 n. 41

54 See the recent discussion by Ian W. Scott, “Is Philo’s Moses a Divine Man?” SPhil 14(2002): 87-111.

55 Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 61.

56 Scott, 110-11.
basis of religious practices and conceptions in the wider Roman-era religious environment.\(^{57}\)

Yet Philo does at least help us to perceive more precisely what was innovative and unusual about early devotion to Jesus, and in the light of Philo and other second-temple Jewish sources we are better able to appreciate the remarkable nature of the early Christian phenomenon. Although we have no indication that Philo ever had direct contact with Jewish Christians or ever considered their claims about Jesus and their religious practices, I suspect strongly that he would have found it all astonishing and even seriously incompatible with right Jewish belief and practice. Runia cites a fascinating statement by the sixth-century Armenian translator of Philo, which refers to the Diaspora Jews who disputed with Stephen (Acts 6:8-9), among whom were Jews from Alexandria, and the translator then says that “Philo is believed to have belonged to their number.”\(^{58}\) Although he grants that the statement of Philo’s involvement is “pure fantasy,” Runia proposes “Taken symbolically, however, the intuition is not all that unsound. . . . Chronologically Philo could have been among this group.”\(^{59}\)

Whatever one makes of the account of the Acts account of the mortal controversy between Stephen and Jews from the Diaspora, I also propose that Philo’s religious views would likely have made him aligned with the position attributed in Acts to Stephen’s opponents. In spite of later Christian tradition, I see nothing in Philo that would make him a likely candidate to be baptized in the name of Jesus, and a member of any circle(s) of Jewish Christians that there might have been in Alexandria in Philo’s lifetime. Indeed, Torrey Seland has pointed to Philo as expressing approval of the view that devout Jews are entitled to take direct punitive action against other Jews whom they witness committing public outrage against God’s honour.\(^{60}\) So, perhaps it is not impossible to imagine Philo as ready to stand alongside the zealous Pharisee from Tarsus in condemning as outrageous the christological claims and devotional practices of Jewish Christians such as attributed to the Stephen figure of Acts.

**Conclusion**

I suspect that my basic point in this essay has been stated sufficiently often already, and is also perhaps sufficiently unremarkable to many scholars, that it would be tedious to do more at this point than to reiterate it briefly. For New Testament scholars, Philo is a resource of unsurpassed value, especially for developing a sense of what Diaspora Judaism represented. In Philo’s voluminous body of extant works, we have a major reservoir of material that is probably not yet studied adequately. Those of us whose

---

\(^{57}\) For defence of this judgement, see, e.g., Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 1-15.

\(^{58}\) I depend here upon a paraphrase of the statement of the Armenian translator given by Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 5.


primary concern is to understand early Christianity receive gratefully all that Philo specialists can furnish.

Yet, with all sincere appreciation for the importance of Philo and for the labours of those who devote themselves to study of him, neither Philo nor other second-temple Jewish texts “explains” key features of earliest Christianity witnessed in the New Testament, in the sense of accounting for their appearance. In my experience, Philo specialists have only rarely ever suggested otherwise. So, if my discussion of matters in this essay serves any good purpose, it will likely be as exhortation to fellow New Testament scholars to avoid simplistic use of “parallels,” and, instead, with the aid of experts in Philo, to acquire as deep an acquaintance as we can with this remarkable Jewish leader of Alexandria so that we may grasp better what first-century Christianity represented in the context of Roman-era Judaism.