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## COSMOS, LOGOS, AND NOMOS:

THE ALEXANDRIAN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION  
OF THE GENESIS CREATION ACCOUNT**1. Introduction**

The description of the creation of the heavens and the earth and the early history of humankind in the biblical book of Genesis has been the most influential of all the cosmogonic accounts that have come down to us from antiquity. The original version, written in Hebrew, was heavily indebted to Near-eastern cosmogonies. Themes from these earlier accounts were included within a specific framework of Israelite theological ideas and cultic practice. There was, however, no input whatsoever from cosmogonies developed in the Hellenic world, whether mythic or later more literary and philosophical. These were in effect separate traditions that were later destined to interact and to some degree merge in a process that never ceases to fascinate.

Rémi Brague has written learnedly and illuminatingly on this process of interaction and appropriation in his study *La sagesse du monde*.<sup>1</sup> In presenting four cosmological models from antiquity, he first outlines two opposed Greek models, the one initiated by Socrates and developed by Plato in his *Timaeus*, the other put forward as a challenge to it by the atomists Democritus

<sup>1</sup> BRAGUE (1999); I utilise the English translation, BRAGUE (2003).

and Epicurus. The opposition is persuasive. A similar approach, though in more detail and with somewhat different emphases, was adopted by David Sedley in his Sather Classical Lectures entitled *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Sedley, however, Brague goes on to present two more models, the one called 'other than Greece' and derived from the Scriptures in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, the other called 'the other other' and describing the anti-cosmic thought developed in Gnosticism. It was above all the former of these that took its starting-point in the creation account of the book Genesis, although the latter also studied and exploited that account as well.

In his analysis of the scriptural model Brague surveys the major texts of the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran. The main common elements he observes allow him to formulate what he calls an "Abrahamic model" in the following terms:

"The world is created by a good God, who affirms at every stage of creation that what he has just freely brought into being is 'good', indeed in its ordered edifice 'very good' (Genesis 1). But the phenomena that seem most sublime within the physical world are not those of the highest level. They are in fact of lesser value compared with man, whom they serve. Man therefore is not meant to govern himself according to the phenomena of the world but must seek elsewhere for a model of behavior. In the final analysis, that model is God himself. God manifests himself less through his creation than through a more direct intervention: He can either give the world his law, as in Judaism and Islam, or he can indeed enter into that world through incarnation, as in Christianity."<sup>3</sup>

The greater part of this summary is based on the first chapters of Genesis and the tradition that developed from it. Its main ideas seem to me to be persuasive, certainly as far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, and can serve as a background to the present study.

<sup>2</sup> SEDLEY (2007).

<sup>3</sup> BRAGUE (2003) 60-61.

The purpose of my contribution to our discussions is to add an extra dimension to Brague's analysis. Following the conventional schema, he aligns the first two models with 'Athens' and the third with 'Jerusalem' (Gnosticism is not tied down to a symbolic place).<sup>4</sup> It seems to me important to add a third city that in the course of Western thought has also developed a mythic status, albeit not quite as prominently as the other two. I refer of course to the city of Alexandria. I will argue that through the Septuagint translation of the Torah, the Jewish thought of Philo and the Christian thought of Origen this city contributed a crucial new element to ancient cosmogonic and cosmological thinking. Indeed one might even argue that it contributed just as much to subsequent Patristic and medieval articulations as did Athens and Jerusalem before it.

After some brief words on the Septuagint translation, I will first offer an analysis of the main features of Philo's understanding of the creation account, before turning to Origen and the way that he treats the same material. In line with the aims of the *Entretiens* my approach will be broad, undertaking to treat the theme from three viewpoints, the literary, the societal-political and the ideological: what literary form did these authors use to present their interpretation of the biblical creation account, what was the societal and political context of their reading, and what are the most significant ideas that their views bring forward? A comparison between the two authors will allow us to study how biblical and Hellenic ideas interacted and merged under the influence of two related but different religions, resulting in a distinctive and influential tradition of thought.

## 2. The Septuagint translation

Foundational for both Philo and Origen is the text of the Greek translation of the Septuagint. Both write commentaries

<sup>4</sup> See BRAGUE (2003) 44.



on the Genesis account, using comparable but somewhat different methods. Origen is much more of a philologist than Philo, but both pay close attention to the wording and terminology of the text. The features of that text are thus important for our enquiry.

Scholars remain divided as to whether the initiative for the translation was undertaken at the instigation of an official command, as related in the famous accounts of the *Letter of Aristeas*, Aristobulus and Philo, or in response to the needs of the Jewish community in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Certainly it is likely that the translator of the first book was located in the cultural milieu of Alexandria rather than brought in from Palestine, as suggested by the ancient accounts. The syntax stays rather close to the original Hebrew.<sup>6</sup> Our authors accept its oddities as seen from their own viewpoint of normal Atticising Greek and on occasion use them to their advantage.<sup>7</sup> It is above all the lexical and terminological features of the text that are significant, because, although in many regards idiosyncratic from a Greek point of view, they provide a sufficient basis for theological and philosophical interpretation. They include key cosmological and anthropological terms,<sup>8</sup> but also the language of demiurgic creation, of image and likeness, and of moral judgment.<sup>9</sup> Just as would be the case for the New Testament three centuries later, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of these linguistic features. They formed a natural bridge to a Hellenising and philosophical interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> See the judicious account of DORIVAL, in DORIVAL / HARL / MUNNICH (1988) 39-82.

<sup>6</sup> See the close analysis by ALEXANDRE (1988) in her brilliant account of the text and exegesis of the first five chapters of Genesis in the LXX version.

<sup>7</sup> For example by PHILO at *Opif.* 15 on 'day one' in Gen 1, 5. For the *Corpus Philonicum* I use the standard abbreviations of *The Studia Philonica Annual*.

<sup>8</sup> See ἀρχή, οὐρανός, γῆ, θεός (1, 1); πνεῦμα (1, 2); φῶς (1, 3); βοτάνη, σπέρμα (1, 11); σημεῖα (1, 14); ἀστέρες (1, 16, but not ἥλιος and σελήνη); ψυχή (1, 24); ἄνθρωπος (1, 26); ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ (1, 27); πνοή (2, 7); γυνή, σάρξ (2, 21-24).

<sup>9</sup> See (i) ποιέω (1, 1 etc.), πλάζω (2, 7), οἰκοδομέω (2, 22); (ii) εἰκόν, ὁμοίωσις (1, 26-27); (iii) καλός (1, 4 etc.), γινώσκειν καλὸν καὶ πονηρόν (2, 17).

Without it the Philonic and Origenian projects would not have been possible.

Some years ago Martin Rösel subjected this text to a thorough scrutiny and reached the conclusion that it breathed the spirit of an early Hellenistic Judaism which was not afraid to formulate the creation account in terms that drew on and argued with contemporary theories and accounts, including Plato's *Timaeus*.<sup>10</sup> He even went a step further and speculated that it was evidence of an intellectual climate that existed in Alexandria in circles connected with the Museum and the Library and that it was the product of an incipient scholastic climate (*Schulwesen*) within Judaism that would later lead to figures such as Philo.<sup>11</sup> Rösel's observations are not always convincing in their details.<sup>12</sup> But I would not wish to dismiss out of hand his observations that the vocabulary of the *Timaeus* and other Greek philosophical works had infiltrated into the language of the Septuagint Genesis creation account. Such interaction was in significant contrast to the original Hebrew, which as we noted earlier was untouched by contact with the world of Hellenism.

### 3. Philo: cosmos, logos, and nomos amid the threat of disorder

We move forward two centuries and meet with the great representative of Greek-speaking Alexandrian Judaism, Philo. His copious writings leave no doubt that he stood in a rich tradition of biblical exegesis, which mainly took the form of commentaries and was strongly influenced by Alexandrian scholarship.<sup>13</sup> A second-century predecessor had been Aristobulus, whose work

<sup>10</sup> RÖSEL (1994) 25-99.

<sup>11</sup> RÖSEL (1994) 254-257.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the claim (36) that the term στερέωμα is indebted to the notion of solidity conveyed by the adjective στερεός in the *Timaeus* (its use at 31b does not relate specifically to heaven or the heavenly bodies, but to the cosmos as a whole).

<sup>13</sup> See now the monograph by NIEHOFF (2011).

purported to answer questions on the Pentateuch posed by King Ptolemy. The longest surviving fragment connects the creation of the cosmos with the institution of the Sabbath through God's rest on the seventh day, a theme that Philo will later develop at considerable length.<sup>14</sup> Philo's context is the cultured life of the wealthy city-dweller. His family was situated at the apex of the Jewish community. Recent scholarship has plausibly argued that, like in the case of his predecessors, his literary activity is best seen in a scholastic setting.<sup>15</sup> We can imagine him at the centre of a circle of disciples who would have been in awe of his immense learning. His literary activity cannot, however, have only been directed to an audience internal to the Jewish community. The one fact of his life that is certain is that he travelled to Rome at the head of the delegation of Jews to the Emperor in 38 CE.<sup>16</sup> It may have involved a stay in the capital of two years or more. We have to imagine Philo as not only busy in his study, but also (albeit reluctantly) prominent in the forum of public life.

The importance of the creation account for Philo is well illustrated by the prominence he gives it on two occasions when explaining the contents of the books of Moses. The first of these is in the *Life of Moses*, a work which is best understood as an introduction to the entire series of treatises generally known in modern scholarship as the *Exposition of the Law*, and indeed perhaps to all his commentaries.<sup>17</sup> When discussing the great leader's role as lawgiver, he introduces his 'most sacred books', dividing these into two parts, the historical part and the part dealing with commands and prohibitions, i.e. the laws proper. The former is divided in two again, one section describing the genesis of the cosmos, the other entitled 'genealogy', i.e. the generations of human beings.<sup>18</sup> Philo returns to this scheme towards the end

<sup>14</sup> Fr. 5 cited by Clement and Eusebius; PHILO *Opif.* 89-128.

<sup>15</sup> STERLING (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Reported at length in *Legat.* and confirmed by IOSEPHUS *Ant.* 18, 257-260.

<sup>17</sup> See the analysis in GELJON (2002) 7-46.

<sup>18</sup> *Mos.* 2, 46-47.

of the *Exposition*. He modifies it slightly by now speaking of three parts. The first of these is the creation account, followed by the historical part and the legislative part.<sup>19</sup> For the creation account he uses the word *κοσμοποιία*, a term which is first used in extant Greek literature by Aristotle to describe Presocratic cosmogonies,<sup>20</sup> but after Philo becomes a technical term for the biblical account.<sup>21</sup> He also gives a fuller description of what the creation account contains, stating that 'it begins with the genesis of heaven and ends with the construction of the human being, for the former is the most perfect of what is indestructible, the latter the best of what is mortal.'<sup>22</sup> As I noted in my dissertation, he uses here a formula from Plato's *Timaeus* adapted to the contents of the biblical account.<sup>23</sup>

The unbalanced nature of the tripartition of the Pentateuch that Philo presents in this text is an indication of the importance that he attaches to the Mosaic cosmogony. This part occupies only a few pages at the beginning of the Pentateuch, yet it is seen as foundational for all that follows. As he states in the account in the *Life of Moses*, the lawgiver wanted to demonstrate two essential doctrines, first that the Father and Maker of the cosmos (another Platonic phrase, *Ti.* 28c3) was also its true lawgiver, and second that the person who observes the laws will live in accordance with the ordering of the universe, so that there will be a profound harmony between his words and his deeds.<sup>24</sup> These themes return at the beginning of the treatise *On the creation of the world according to Moses*, which opens his grand commentary on the Pentateuch.<sup>25</sup> In recognition of the

<sup>19</sup> *Praem.* 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Phys.* 2, 3 196a22 (Empedocles); *Met.* A 4, 985a19 (Anaxagoras).

<sup>21</sup> Note its use by the pagan author CELSUS in reference to Moses at ORIG. *Cels.* 6, 27. In the context of the theme of the *Entretiens* it is worth noting that Philo in all his works never uses the term *κοσμογονία*, and that there is no direct ancient equivalent of the modern term 'cosmology.'

<sup>22</sup> *Praem.* 1, reading ὁ δὲ θνητῶν ἄριστος, as suggested at RUNIA (21986) 118.

<sup>23</sup> RUNIA (21986) 86-87 with reference to *Ti.* 27a and 90e.

<sup>24</sup> *Mos.* 2, 48.

<sup>25</sup> In what follows I draw on my commentary on this work, RUNIA (2001).

central place of the Mosaic creation account in Philo's thought, this treatise has always been placed first in all editions and translations of his works. This is a defensible move, but it is completely mistaken to follow it with the *Allegorical Commentary*, as occurs in almost all the editions and translations of Philo's works.<sup>26</sup> The treatise belongs to the series the *Exposition of the Law* and must in the first instance be read in the context of the thought of that larger work.

I already briefly touched on questions of chronology above. If we are to place Philo's works in their Alexandrian context, it is highly desirable that we gain some sense of the circumstances in which they were written. From his own historical writings we know that Philo had a sense of living in times that had moved from peace and order to tumult and disorder.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, there are only two solid facts to work with. His stay in Rome has already been mentioned. It occurs towards the end of his life.<sup>28</sup> At the beginning of the ninth treatise of the *Exposition of the Law* (the seventh extant) he famously complains that he has been swept away into the 'mighty ocean of civil cares' and finds it almost impossible to get his head above water and focus on his studies.<sup>29</sup> Although it is impossible to prove beyond all doubt that the *Exposition* was written towards the end of Philo's life, when the political troubles besetting the Alexandrian Jewish community became severe, it seems to me highly likely.<sup>30</sup>

There are subtle hints at the beginning of Philo's commentary on the Mosaic creation account that point in this direction. The urban setting of Philo's literary activity is hinted at by the

<sup>26</sup> The only exceptions are the German translation initiated by L. Cohn 1909-1964, and the Hebrew translation still in progress. For over a century it has been generally accepted that Philo wrote three separate biblical commentaries; see ROYSE (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Note especially his description of the halcyon days under the emperor Augustus at *Legat.* 147.

<sup>28</sup> As he himself indicates in the opening words of *Legat.*

<sup>29</sup> *Spec.* 3, 1-6.

<sup>30</sup> The strongest advocate for a late date for the *Exposition* is M. Niehoff; see NIEHOFF (2011) 177. ROYSE (2009) 61 is more circumspect.

famous image of the founding and design of a city that is used to illustrate the role of the intelligible cosmos and the Logos in containing the contents of 'day one' of creation (*Opif.* 17-18). To be sure, the comparison between the cosmos and a city may not have been very original, but the details of Philo's image point to the celebrated founding of his own city.<sup>31</sup> Another hint is the emphasis on providential care in the introductory section at *Opif.* 9-11. If the creator does not look after what he has made, a power-vacuum (ἀναρχία) will ensue in the cosmos, just like what happens in a city which does not have a ruler or a magistrate to administer and regulate its affairs in accordance with the law. The theme of order and its opposite disorder pervades the whole of Philo's *œuvre*. It can claim strong antecedents in Greek philosophy, but is certainly no less firmly rooted in his own existential situation in Alexandria.

We turn now to the main body of the commentary on the creation account and examine a selection of its main themes.

(1) The first is the nexus between law (νόμος), cosmos (κόσμος), and logos (λόγος). At the outset, in a key statement, Philo states that there is a harmony between the law and the cosmos, and that the person who observes the law is a citizen of the cosmos (κοσμοπολίτης). As the context reveals, by "law" he primarily means the Law of Moses, but it is plain that he is being deliberately equivocal and also has the law of nature in mind "according to which the entire cosmos is administered".<sup>32</sup> The assumptions he makes here are momentous when seen in the light of the biblical text that he is expounding. The opening words of Genesis that speak of "the heaven and the earth" are read in terms of a cosmology that is taken over from Greek philosophy and in particular the Platonic *Timaeus* and its tradition of interpretation. The further assertion of a law of nature assumes

<sup>31</sup> As demonstrated in RUNIA (1989).

<sup>32</sup> *Opif.* 3. That Philo invented the concept of the 'law of nature', as argued by KOESTER (1968), cannot be sustained, but the phrase is certainly very prominent in his works.

a rational structure of the cosmos to which the actions of human beings can conform. But famously, when Philo explains what is created on 'day one', the various elements are regarded as constituent parts of an intelligible cosmos (κόσμος νοητός) located in the divine Logos which serves as the model for the creation of the physical cosmos. It is not until the second day that the heaven is created as the firmament. This daring exegesis of Gen 1, 1-5 allows him to postulate the origin of an ordered rational cosmology within the very mind of God the creator.

(2) In his preliminary remarks Philo also makes clear that there can only be a single principle for the whole of existent reality, namely God as activating cause. This cause as universal intellect converts the passive object of his activity into the most perfect cosmos.<sup>33</sup> But Philo does not dwell on the question where this object, which has the function of primal matter in Platonist philosophy, has its origin. His view of the underlying principles of the biblical account can be called "monarchic dualism",<sup>34</sup> and it is emphatically linked to the view that there was a real creative event, not a beginning *in* time (which is philosophically impossible), but a beginning *of* time.<sup>35</sup> God's creative act is directly linked to the doctrine of divine providence. The maker would not exercise forethought for what he did not make.<sup>36</sup>

(3) Not only, as we have seen, are the contents of 'day one' compared to the rational plan of a great city, but also the scheme of the six days is interpreted as expressing the planned structure of the cosmos, though not in an entirely predictable fashion (it would have been expected that the fourth day would precede the third).<sup>37</sup> Into this world the human being is placed as climax

<sup>33</sup> *Opif.* 8.

<sup>34</sup> See RUNIA (2003) 136-141. The question of whether any kind of *creatio ex nihilo* can be attributed to Philo remains highly controversial. He certainly does not make the doctrine explicit in a way that recognises its significant deviation from the doctrines of Greek philosophy.

<sup>35</sup> *Opif.* 7-12, 26-28.

<sup>36</sup> *Opif.* 9-11.

<sup>37</sup> *Opif.* 45-46.



of creation on the sixth day. The cosmos will turn out to be the playing-field on which the struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice will be played out.<sup>38</sup>

(4) In his interpretation of the creation of the heavenly bodies on the fourth day Philo stays quite close to the biblical text. This means he does not entirely avoid the anthropocentrism of the “Abrahamic model” as postulated by Rémi Brague in the passage quoted earlier in this paper.<sup>39</sup> But when wishing to give a philosophical basis for this anthropocentric approach, he finds an ally in Plato. Because he does not take over Plato’s theory of the world-soul, the parallel drawn by Plato between the perfect motions of the heavens and the rational actions to which humans should aspire is not utilised. But he is attracted to another Platonic theme, namely that contemplation of the ordered heavens gives rise to the gift of philosophy.<sup>40</sup> The emphasis is placed on the role of light rather than of sight (as in Plato) because of the different structures of the two accounts.<sup>41</sup> There can be little doubt that Philo, following the majority view in Greek philosophy, regards the heavenly bodies as ontologically superior to human beings. Through their ordered movements established by God they contribute to the preservation of the whole.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis falls, for reasons that we shall discuss further below,<sup>43</sup> on their subordination to the divine command. God has given them powers, but they are not autonomous.<sup>44</sup>

(5) In interpreting the anthropology of the biblical account, Philo does not find it easy to grapple with the double creation of human beings, and some aspects of his views remain difficult

<sup>38</sup> *Opif.* 77-81 anticipates the events in paradise described in *Opif.* 151-170.

<sup>39</sup> Above at n. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Opif.* 53-54.

<sup>41</sup> Plato does not mention light in *Ti.* 47a-c, but does do so earlier in 45b and 46b when discussing the mechanism of sight.

<sup>42</sup> *Opif.* 61.

<sup>43</sup> See below n. 65 and text thereto.

<sup>44</sup> *Opif.* 46.



to interpret.<sup>45</sup> What is beyond doubt is that he interprets the relation between God and human beings — whether the latter are described as created in God's image (Gen 1, 26) or inbreathed by his Spirit (Gen 2, 7) — in terms of the human mind or rational soul, that part of the human make-up that makes possible a life of excellence and reason or a life of vice and passion.

(6) And so the *dénouement* of the cosmogony occurs once the first human being and his partner have been created. Its description takes up the final part of the treatise. Philo emphasises that the first human was perfect in body and soul and was given every opportunity to lead the good life. Indeed, prior to the fashioning of woman he attained the very limit of human well-being (εὐδαιμονία).<sup>46</sup> Fall into misery and death occurs once the woman arrives on the scene. Philo's reading of this crucial episode has often been misunderstood.<sup>47</sup> It is not sexual desire in itself that brings about the fall. It is the inordinate desire for bodily pleasure that led the first man and woman astray, causing them to exchange the life of immortality and well-being for that of mortality and misfortune (κακοδαιμονία).<sup>48</sup> The events in paradise thus culminate in the penalty that occurs when God's commands are transgressed, and were it not that God is a God of mercy, the human race would have been wiped out.<sup>49</sup>

(7) Philo concludes his treatise with a famous epilogue.<sup>50</sup> The Mosaic κοσμοποιία teaches five most beautiful lessons — that God exists and is One, that the cosmos came into being and is one, and that God exercises providence over what he has made. Strictly speaking none of these lessons can be derived

<sup>45</sup> Particular in relation to his exegesis of the second creation of the human being in Gen 2, 7, as expounded in *Opif.* 134; see RUNIA (2001) 322-324, and now LOADER (2011) 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Opif.* 150.

<sup>47</sup> See *Opif.* 151-152 and my commentary (2001) 354-361.

<sup>48</sup> *Opif.* 152.

<sup>49</sup> *Opif.* 169.

<sup>50</sup> *Opif.* 170-172.

directly from the Genesis account. All of them in fact involve some degree of interposition on the part of doctrines from Greek philosophy.<sup>51</sup> Most of all this is seen in the final exhortation with which the work ends. The person who understands these lessons, i.e. the theological and cosmological underpinnings of the Law, will lead a blessed life of well-being, marked by the doctrines of piety and holiness.<sup>52</sup> The motif of religious and moral exhortation is unmistakeable. The disastrous events that occurred in paradise can be undone. We recall the climactic moment of Plato's *Timaeus* when the philosopher is exhorted to lead a life of reason and excellence, and so become εὐδαίμων.<sup>53</sup> It might seem that Philo follows Plato in speaking only of the individual.<sup>54</sup> But in the context of how the *Exposition of the Law* will unfold as a whole, this is surely deceptive. In addition to the individual there is also a community. The reference to God's providential care for the cosmos, compared with that of parents towards their children, recalls the text at the beginning of the treatise, where Philo fears lawlessness in the cosmos just as in a city. In the treatises on the events in Alexandria and Rome in 38-40 CE the salvific action of divine providence is a central theme.<sup>55</sup> As noted above, the *Exposition of the Law* in all likelihood was written before and during those events. The conviction that God cares for the cosmos is ultimately also an expression of hope for the Jews in Alexandria.

Philo wrote two other extensive biblical commentaries, the *Allegorical Commentary* and the *Quaestiones in Genesim et Exodum*.

<sup>51</sup> It is particularly evident in the fourth 'lesson' that the cosmos is unique, a doctrine that is nowhere in evidence in Genesis (which of course does not speak of 'the cosmos') and is also not anticipated in the main body of the treatise at all.

<sup>52</sup> *Opif.* 172.

<sup>53</sup> *Ti.* 90a-d.

<sup>54</sup> But note that, in the context of the trilogy as originally planned, Plato would have also emphasised communal aspects, for example in the struggle between Athens and Atlantis.

<sup>55</sup> See esp. *Flacc.* 191 and *Legat.* 3. It is also an essential background for the philosophical treatises *Prou.* 1-2.

They were quite likely written earlier than the *Exposition of the Law*, but may have been at least partly written at the same time.<sup>56</sup> It is generally agreed that these works will have had a more limited circulation and reading public. The complexity of the *Allegorical Commentary* meant that it was written for insiders, most likely for a group of disciples in a school setting.<sup>57</sup> The *Quaestiones*, with their detailed and often multiple exegesis, also suggests scholastic use.<sup>58</sup> In both cases there is no commentary on the Hexaemeron itself. The *Allegorical Commentary* commences at Gen 2, 1, the *Quaestiones* at Gen 2, 4. Both commentaries make extensive use of the allegorical method, the former almost exclusively, the latter in a systematic parallel treatment of the literal and the symbolic meaning. Why, then, is the first chapter of Genesis excluded from these works? The question has given rise to much discussion.<sup>59</sup> There are indications which suggest that Philo wrote an opening treatise of the *Allegorical Commentary* that has been lost. The opening words of *Leg.* 1, 1, which cite Gen. 2, 1, baldly state that Moses “having already stated the coming into being of mind (νοῦς) and sense-perception (αἴσθησις), now presents the completion of both”. This appears to assume an identification of mind with heaven and sense-perception with earth that has been introduced earlier, most likely in relation to Gen 1, 1. There is also a hint at *Leg.* 2, 19 of an earlier interpretation of the animals created on the fifth day in terms of the (genera of the) human passions, in conformity with the usual allegorical identification that is pervasive in Philo’s allegories. In this opening treatise, if it was indeed written, Philo would have laid the foundations of his grand allegory of the soul through an allegorical interpretation of the cosmogony in terms of the structural features of the soul and its parts. But it must be said that, apart from the

<sup>56</sup> As argued by NIKPROWETZKY (1977) 194.

<sup>57</sup> See above n. 15.

<sup>58</sup> NIEHOFF (2011) 152 calls it a “manual of instruction”.

<sup>59</sup> See NIKPROWETZKY (1977) 198; MORRIS (1987) 832; TOBIN (2000).

texts cited above, no traces of such an allegory remain and Philo appears to have lost interest in it. For this reason, perhaps, there are virtually no traces of it in the *Quaestiones*.<sup>60</sup>

Without wishing to simplify Philo's notoriously complex allegorical schemes too much (it is not possible to go into much detail), I would argue that the allegory of the soul takes its main point of departure from the double creation of the humanity and its placement in paradise symbolising the garden of virtues. In broad terms it is consistent with the more literal interpretation in the *De opificio mundi*, but with the point of focus on the embodied soul rather than the human being. Philo patiently takes us through the history of that soul, beginning with Adam and Eve (*Leg.* 1-3), their expulsion from paradise (*Cher.*), the story of Cain and Abel (*Sacr.-Det.*) and the birth of Seth (*Post.*). It is mainly a free fall into passion and wickedness, notably when the God-loving soul Abel is murdered by the self-loving Cain. The birth of Seth, however, is the turning point.<sup>61</sup> With Seth the soul begins to make the long journey of progress and improvement, symbolised first by the generations up to Noah, then by the three Patriarchs, one of whom has his name changed to Israel, the "one who sees God", and culminating in the great leader and lawgiver Moses.

A stage on that journey is relevant to our theme. The Patriarch Abraham leaves the land of his birth, Chaldea, and moves first to Haran, out of which God calls him to depart (*Gen* 12, 1). This is the theme of *μετανάστασις*, migration from the cosmos and the world of sense-perceptible nature to the mind and to God, which Valentin Nikiprowetzky declared to be the central theme of Philonic thought.<sup>62</sup> The Chaldeans symbolise those who regard the cosmos as the primal god and the movements of the heavenly bodies, which they study intensely, as determining

<sup>60</sup> There is a partial exception at *QG* 1, 19, but no mention is made of the passions.

<sup>61</sup> See esp. *Post.* 173-174.

<sup>62</sup> NIKIPROWETZKY (1977) 239. See also from a slightly different perspective the remarks by BRAGUE (2003) 79-82 on Philo's "Abrahamic Socratism".

what happens to other beings, whether for good or for evil.<sup>63</sup> Philo trenchantly formulates the view that Moses has on such a doctrine. He agrees that the cosmos has come into being as a unity of parts that are in sympathy with each other. But crucially he differs from them in recognising God as the creator and transcendent cause of the universe. As for the movements of the stars, they are not primary causes, but rather subject to the divine powers which hold the cosmos together.<sup>64</sup> In his discussion of the first commandment of the law, Philo attacks those who worship the heavenly bodies. The cosmos is like a city on the largest scale, with the heavenly bodies as rulers (*ἄρχοντες*) and beings on earth as subjects. But the rulers are not autonomous. They are subordinates of the Father and it is by imitating his rule that they carry out their tasks.<sup>65</sup> The term *ἄρχοντες* is intriguing, because it is precisely the term later used by the Gnostic thinkers to denote the cosmic powers which tyrannise the life of human beings in the cosmos. But it will be plain that Philo is opposed to any form of anti-cosmism as put forward in Brague's fourth model.<sup>66</sup> The cosmos is the greatest and best of created things precisely because it has been created by the good God, Father and Maker of the universe.

Philo's thought remains true to its biblical roots in discerning an element of competition between God and the cosmos. Both claim admiration and worship. But for Israel, if it is to be faithful to its calling, there can be no question of a true contest. The Chaldeans get it wrong by worshipping the cosmos and not looking beyond it to its creator. This theme is also found in the prefatory comments of Philo's main cosmological treatise. There are some, he writes, who have more admiration for the cosmos than for its maker. The former they regard as not having come into being and everlasting, while to the latter they

<sup>63</sup> *Migr.* 179.

<sup>64</sup> *Migr.* 180–181.

<sup>65</sup> *Spec.* 1, 13–15.

<sup>66</sup> See above n. 1 and the text below it.

fail to give due honour, denying him providential activity, for without creation there is no providence.<sup>67</sup> We are now in a position to understand the sub-text of this important remark better. Cosmogony and cosmology not only provide an understanding of the foundations of the cosmos and the place of human beings therein. They also entail divine providence and so have a bearing on the life of the Jews in Alexandria. They allowed Philo to live in hope through grim times and he lived to see that hope at least partly vindicated.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4. Origen: cosmos, logos, and the history of salvation

A full two centuries separate Origen and Philo, and much had occurred in Alexandria in the meantime. Ultimately Philo's hopes for the Jewish community were crushed through the disastrous events of the revolt under Trajan in 115-117 CE.<sup>69</sup> The rich legacy of Alexandrian Jewish literature was lost. The single exception was the corpus of his own writings, rescued from the shipwreck in a process that we cannot reconstruct, but which almost certainly involved the interventions of second-century Alexandrian Christians, including in all likelihood Pantaenus, head of the so-called Catechetical school. As is well known, Origen played a crucial role in this process by eventually taking his copies of the Philonic corpus to Caesarea, where they were preserved in the Episcopal library.<sup>70</sup>

There is evidence of considerable interest in and exegetical activity focused on the Mosaic creation account in the period between Philo and Origen. Clement, the first Alexandrian author to cite Philo, gives various interpretations in his *Stromateis*, some

<sup>67</sup> *Opif.* 7-8. It is disputed whether this text has 'Chaldean' philosophy in mind; see BOS (1998); RUNIA (2001) 122; TRABATTONI (2009).

<sup>68</sup> See above n. 55 and esp. the triumphant undertone of his references to providence, recompense and punishment at *Legat.* 1-7.

<sup>69</sup> For an account of the disaster see now SCHWEMER (2013).

<sup>70</sup> See RUNIA (1993) 16-25.

of which may have been taken over from the lost *Hypotyposeis*.<sup>71</sup> Theophilus of Antioch devotes a long section of his *Ad Autolycum* to exegesis of the Hexaemeron and the early history of humankind. Certain details are reminiscent of Philo's *De opificio mundi* and may have been derived from there.<sup>72</sup>

Eusebius records three other second-century authors who wrote commentaries on the Hexaemeron.<sup>73</sup> Also the heterodox theologians of Alexandria, including Valentinus, made extensive use of themes from the early chapters of Genesis, to judge by material preserved in Irenaeus, Clement, and the Nag Hammadi codices.<sup>74</sup>

This is the tradition in which Origen stood in his interpretations of the first chapters of Genesis. Of all the works in his gigantic *œuvre* that provided exegesis and interpretation of the Mosaic cosmogony, one stands out: the *Commentary on Genesis* in 13 books. Despite its great length we know for certain — because Origen himself tells us — that it treated only the first part of the book from Gen 1, 1 to the words “this is the book of the genesis of human beings” in Gen 5, 1.<sup>75</sup> Most regrettably the work is lost. Only a limited number of excerpts, citations and references have been preserved. These have recently been comprehensively collected and published for the first time by Karin Metzler in the first volume of the new German bilingual edition of Origen's works.<sup>76</sup> Ronald Heine and Charlotte Köckert have also recently done valuable research on the remains of the work and its place in Origen's thought.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> On this work see DUCKWORTH / OSBORN (1985).

<sup>72</sup> *Autol.* 2, 12-30. See MARTÍN (1990). The details of his exegesis certainly go back to Hellenistic-Jewish sources. Theophilus is the first author after Philo (*Leg.* 2, 12; *Decal.* 100) to use the term ἐξάχμερος; see *Autol.* 2, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Rhodon, Apion and Candidus; see EUSEB. *Hist. eccl.* 5, 13, 8; 5, 27.

<sup>74</sup> HEINE (2003) 65-66, 70. For Valentinus see fr. 1, 5, 11 in MARKSCHIES (1992).

<sup>75</sup> *Cels.* 6, 49, which also gives an outline of topics treated on Gen 1, 1-8.

<sup>76</sup> METZLER (2010).

<sup>77</sup> HEINE (2003); (2005); KÖCKERT (2009).



In spite of its loss we do know important details about the circumstances of its composition. Eusebius tells us that Origen wrote the first eight books while he still resided in Alexandria and the remainder after his move to Caesarea in 232 CE.<sup>78</sup> An important piece of evidence that the historian cites is Origen's words in the preface to Book 6 of his *Commentary on John*, which was written at the same time as the work on Genesis. This passage is interesting to compare with Philo's lament while writing the *Exposition of the Law*.<sup>79</sup> Origen tells his reader how he overcame the 'storm' directed against him by the enemy in Alexandria which prevented his scriptural labours. Scholars agree that the reference here is not to any persecution by the Roman civil authorities, but to conflict within the Church of Alexandria and in particular with its bishop Demetrius. Ever since he abandoned his literary and philosophical studies when still quite young, Origen had worked as a lay teacher within the Catechetical school of the Alexandrian church. His goal had been, through an intense study of the text and meaning of scripture, to deepen the understanding of its spiritual sense and also protect his charges from the dangers of heterodoxy. The precise nature of the conflict with Demetrius is unclear. It could well have had its origin in differences of opinion on how to instruct the faithful, but there may have also been aspects of church politics involved.<sup>80</sup> We may be certain that the first part of the *Commentary on Genesis* was written in a polemical atmosphere. Origen was defending his own view of how scripture should be interpreted in response to both orthodox opponents who rejected his theological and allegorical approach and heterodox thinkers whose interpretation of the Genesis account differed markedly from his own. But when Origen received the offer to be ordained as a priest of the Church of Caesarea, it was too good to refuse. He took his

<sup>78</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 6, 24, 2 (the number of 12 books here is a mistake on the part of Eusebius).

<sup>79</sup> See above n. 29.

<sup>80</sup> NAUTIN (1977) 422-431; TRIGG (1983) 130-140.



Alexandrian baggage with him, including, as we saw, his copies of the works of Philo.<sup>81</sup>

If the *Commentary* was better preserved, we might have more of an idea of its literary features. Scholars have argued that it followed the method of question and answer directed at the biblical text, as used in the very long extract on Gen 1, 14 preserved in the *Philocalia*.<sup>82</sup> This is a method also frequently used by Philo, which goes back to the heyday of Alexandrian scholarship in the Hellenistic period.<sup>83</sup> It is indicative of a scholastic environment within the Church. To judge by the *Commentary*'s size and the above-mentioned passage, it must have dealt with the questions raised by the biblical text at very considerable length, including exhaustive discussion of the views of predecessors and opponents. It will also have given Origen scope to make detailed philological comments on the text, a practice which is found much less in Philo.

The loss of at least 90 per cent of the work is a considerable handicap when trying to compare Origen's understanding of the Mosaic creation account with that of Philo. Fortunately, however, a number of other works can aid us in this task. Before leaving Alexandria — so at the same time as he wrote the *Commentary on Genesis* —, Origen had also written the systematic work *De principiis* and the first part of the *Commentary on John*. Both works could hardly avoid including interpretations of the creation account (the latter work with reference to the Logos in John 1). The *Homilies on Genesis* were written much later, when Origen was settled in his role as priest of the Church of Caesarea.<sup>84</sup> The first homily treats the first chapter of Genesis. It would appear that on various occasions Origen utilises exegeses

<sup>81</sup> See above at n. 70.

<sup>82</sup> Fr. D 7 METZLER.

<sup>83</sup> NIKIPROWETZKY (1977) 5; NIEHOFF (2011) 136 and *passim*. The general use of the *quaestio* approach should not be confused with the form of *Quaestiones* practised by Philo in the third of his commentaries, which is a particular literary adaptation of the method.

<sup>84</sup> HABERMEHL (2011) 4 dates them to after 245 CE.

from his earlier commentary. Finally in the *Contra Celsum* written late in his life, Origen often refers back to the *Commentary on Genesis* as he undertakes to sharply distinguish Christian doctrine from that of his Platonist opponent.<sup>85</sup>

Let us now outline some of the main themes that emerge from the remains of Origen's *Commentary*, examining them for themselves, but also seeing them against the background of the themes that we earlier discerned in Philo's handling of the same biblical material.

(1) For Origen the very first words of the creation account, "in beginning" (ἐν ἀρχῇ), are not a reference to the aspect of time, as in Philo, but to the Logos, the first principle of all creation. The Logos, equated with the pre-existent divine Wisdom (σοφία) of Prov 8, 22-31, is the instrument through which God created the whole of reality. The ἀρχή is Christ, who in a sense (πῶς) can be regarded as the Demiurge, to whom the Father speaks when he says "let there be light" (Gen 1, 3) and "let the firmament come into being" (Gen 1, 6), but inasmuch as he is wisdom, i.e. the system of the contemplation and conceptuality of the whole.<sup>86</sup> This is Philo's noetic cosmos located in Christ the Logos. Origen makes the comparison with the architectonic models and designs of a house or a ship. Unlike Philo he does not make the comparison with a city, and also does not include the component parts of 'day one' as its contents. On the other hand, like Philo he does distinguish between the heaven created on 'day one' and the physical heaven or 'firmament' created on the second day, but the former is not an intelligible model. It is rather the 'entire spiritual substance'

<sup>85</sup> See *Cels.* 4, 37; 4, 39; 6, 49-52; 6, 60.

<sup>86</sup> I am paraphrasing Origen's actual words here. The text (*Comm. Ioh.* 1, 19, 110-111) reads: δημιουργὸς γὰρ πῶς ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν, ὃ λέγει ὁ πατήρ· "γενεθῆτω φῶς" καὶ "γενεθῆτω στερέωμα". δημιουργὸς δὲ ὁ Χριστὸς ὡς ἀρχή, καθ' ὃ σοφία ἐστί, τῷ σοφία εἶναι καλούμενος ἀρχή. Ἡ γὰρ σοφία παρὰ τῷ Σαλομῶντί φησιν· "ὁ θεὸς ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ", ἵνα "ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦ ὁ λόγος", ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ· κατὰ μὲν τὴν σύστασιν τῆς περὶ τῶν ὅλων θεωρίας καὶ νοημάτων τῆς σοφίας νοουμένης ... Cf. also 19, 22, 147 where the Logos is also κόσμος. On these texts see KÖCKERT (2009) 245.

consisting of all the rational creatures, as opposed to the world of physical bodies represented by the 'earth'.<sup>87</sup> Gen 1, 1 thus lays the foundations for the subsequent creation of human beings as consisting of mind (or rational soul) and body.

(2) Just like Philo, Origen makes extensive use of the demi-urgic model of the Platonic *Timaeus* to explain God's creative activity. But he points out its limitations in a much clearer manner. God as creator and sole principle is not like a sculptor or a builder who needs already existent material to make his product. Following the lead of Theophilus of Antioch,<sup>88</sup> Origen argues that God's power and will are such that he can summon into being whatever he wishes, i.e. through his foresight he ensures that there is a material basis sufficient for the world he wishes to create. If, however, uncreated matter had preceded creation, there would not be a good Creator or Father who created through his providential activity, but rather some prior providence more ancient than God who caused the pre-existent matter to be available. Another unacceptable alternative would be that God just happened to find the right amount of material for his work.<sup>89</sup> In contrast to Philo and Clement before him, Origen thus makes quite clear that God creates *ex nihilo*, thereby breaking with one of the great assumptions of Greek philosophy that nothing can come to be out of nothing. One of the reasons for this move will certainly be that it is a response to Gnostic thinkers who not only contest the excellence of created reality, but also the goodness of the God responsible for it.<sup>90</sup> It

<sup>87</sup> *Hom. Gen.* 1, 2; CALC. 278 (= *Comm. Gen.* test. C II 1 METZLER). On this interpretation see KÖCKERT (2009) 249-253.

<sup>88</sup> *Autol.* 2, 4.

<sup>89</sup> EUSEB. *Praep. euang.* 7, 20 (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 3 METZLER). Philo entertains the possibility that God calculates the right amount of matter in *Prou.* 2, 50-51, but does not draw out the philosophical implications. KÖCKERT (2009) 285 argues, adducing *Princ.* 2, 1, 4, that Origen has Epicureans in mind, but I suspect his target is broader and includes Platonists and Aristotelians.

<sup>90</sup> As argued by MAY (1994). For remnants of Valentinus' interpretation of Gen 1, 2 which Origen would have had in mind in his exegesis see HEINE (2003) 70.

is also fascinating to see how, like Philo, Origen uses the argument of divine providence, but gives it a different twist.

(3) Origen fully agrees with Philo (and perhaps makes an anonymous reference to him)<sup>91</sup> that creation occurred instantaneously outside time and that the scheme of the six days of the Mosaic cosmogony is used ἐνεκα τάξεως, i.e. to emphasize the ordered nature of the created product.<sup>92</sup> Unlike Philo, however, he again makes explicit the limitations of the demiurgic metaphor: God is not like a builder who needs time for his work.

(4) By far the longest extract that survives from the *Commentary on Genesis* discusses the text of Gen 1, 14 that the heavenly bodies are created to be “for signs”, i.e. to indicate future events.<sup>93</sup> For Origen this verse raises questions about human freedom and human knowledge. It cannot be the case that the role of the stars as signs entails that human beings do not have freedom of choice in their actions, for that would remove human responsibility and even mean that the divine plan of salvation through the law and the sojourn of Christ on earth would be in vain.<sup>94</sup> This would be to fall into the error of the Marcionites, who attribute human wickedness to an evil demiurge.<sup>95</sup> Origen emphasises that the fact that the stars *indicate* future events by no means entails that they *determine* them as in the doctrines of astrology.<sup>96</sup> The excerpt does not tell us much about the status of the heavenly beings. From other texts we know that Origen regards them as rational beings with a higher status and a better life than humans, but they remain creatures nonetheless. Ontologically they are less exalted than in Plato,

<sup>91</sup> See VAN DEN HOEK (2000) 61. Nearly all Origen's references to Philo are anonymous (only three exceptions); see the list at RUNIA (1995) 230-231.

<sup>92</sup> *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 13 METZLER.

<sup>93</sup> *Philoc.* 23, 1-11; 23, 14-21 (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 7 METZLER).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 23, 1.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 23, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Philo too is strongly opposed to astral determinism; see *Prou.* 1, 77-88 and *Migr.* 179; 194 (Chaldeans).

and also less than in Philo, who does not share Origen's speculative doctrine of a divine plan of cosmic salvation that also involves the heavenly beings.<sup>97</sup>

(5) From scattered texts it appears that Origen followed Philo quite closely in his interpretation of the two anthropological texts, Gen 1, 26-27 and 2, 7. We even find the same ambiguity that haunts Philo's interpretation of the texts. The human being "according to the image" can be interpreted as an intelligible model, similar to heaven and earth in Gen 1, 1.<sup>98</sup> But in one of the more extended verbatim excerpts from the *Commentary*, he argues that the "according to the image" character of the human being lies in the rational soul. It should not be seen in relation to the body, since God is incorporeal, but rather to the capacities for knowledge, judgment, practising justice and doing good which the rational soul possesses.<sup>99</sup> In the homily on Gen 1, he first points out that it is only in the case of the heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars and humanity that God is said to "make", whereas all the other creatures are commanded to come into being. This is an indication of the greatness of the human being. But even greater is the honour accorded to him when it is said that he is made "in the image of God". Origen here repeats the Philonic distinction between the two verbs in the texts. God "made" the inner incorporeal human being "according to the image", whereas he "moulded" the corporeal human being.<sup>100</sup> Predictably Origen also identifies the "image" of God, which for Philo was the Logos, with Christ. A reference to Origen's discussion in the *Commentary* that Christ had a soul can be plausibly linked to exegesis of Gen 2, 7, the only text in the creation account which mentions the human soul.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> SCOTT (1991) 132-142. Notoriously in the *De principiis* Origen speculates that the stars are to some degree fallen beings requiring ultimate redemption.

<sup>98</sup> CALC. 278 (= *Comm. Gen.* test. C II 1 METZLER).

<sup>99</sup> *Coll. Coisl.* fr. 73 PETIT (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 11 METZLER).

<sup>100</sup> *Hom. Gen.* 1, 12-13. On the debt to Philo see VAN DEN HOEK (2000) 66.

<sup>101</sup> HEINE (2005) 137 with reference to SOCRATES *Hist. eccl.* 3, 7 (= *Comm. Gen.* test. C II 3 METZLER).

In addition it is likely that there was discussion of Adam and Eve, the first human beings, as types of Christ and the Church, probably with particular reference to Gen 2, 24: just as all human beings stem from the original pair, so all believers are the product of Christ and his church.<sup>102</sup>

(6) Origen agrees with Philo that the story of paradise and the trees that it contains must be allegorised.<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, it is not possible to reconstruct in any detail how in the *Commentary* he interpreted Adam and Eve's life before they fell into sin, their fall and their expulsion. An intriguing Catena fragment records views on the interpretation of Gen 3, 21, where God is said to make "coats of skins" for the first human beings.<sup>104</sup> A literal reading is of course out of the question. A possible explanation is that they represent "bodies". This was Philo's view,<sup>105</sup> and one might expect Origen to be in sympathy with it. But he raises the objection that earlier Adam had spoken of "bones and flesh" (Gen 2, 23). Moreover, if they represent mortality, which now came into the world, how can one explain that God is the cause of this rather than the sin they committed? Another Catena excerpt identifies paradise with the Church and states that "working" there (Gen 2, 15) means carrying out spiritual deeds and obeying the command to love each other. Christians now fall under the "spiritual law" (Rom 7, 14) which gives life, in contrast to the literal law which brings on death.<sup>106</sup> Philo too takes the death mentioned in Gen 2, 17 as referring to death of the soul, much worse than that of the body, but he would of course never agree that the letter of the law has fatal results.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> HEINE (2005) 137-138 based on texts in Jerome and John Philoponus.

<sup>103</sup> EUSTATHIUS OF ANTIOCH *Engast.* 21 (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 14 METZLER).

<sup>104</sup> *Coll. Coisl.* fr. 121 PETIT (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 22 METZLER).

<sup>105</sup> QG 1, 53, expressly identified as the "deeper meaning".

<sup>106</sup> *Coll. Coisl.* fr. 259 PETIT (= *Comm. Gen.* fr. D 18 METZLER). Cf. *Cels.* 7, 20, which shows that the reference is to Rom 7, 14.

<sup>107</sup> *Leg.* 1, 105-108. On the theme of death of the soul see ZELLER (1995).

We have reached the end of the main extant themes of Origen's great *Commentary on Genesis*. The question remains why he stopped it at Gen 5, 1 after the birth of Seth. Ronald Heine has suggested that the reason is connected to the views of the heterodox Christians in Alexandria, who showed a great deal of interest in the creation narrative and in the role of Seth.<sup>108</sup> He notes the text of Theodotus quoted by Clement, in which we read that "three natures are engendered from Adam, the first is irrational, to which Cain belonged, the second rational and righteous, to which Abel belonged, the third spiritual, to which Seth belonged".<sup>109</sup> The rest of the passage demonstrates that this tripartition is based on the Pauline schema of the earthly, psychical, and spiritual.<sup>110</sup> It seems to me valid that the early Christian commentators saw a break at this point in the narrative of Genesis, and not only because of the wording of Gen 5, 1. Theophilus of Antioch points out that after Gen 4, 22 the genealogy of Cain dies out and affirms that "from Seth the rest of the human race is derived up to the present day".<sup>111</sup> But I suspect that the reason that Origen stopped here had a deeper structural reason. As we found in Philo, the birth of Seth means a new starting-point for the human race. The purpose of the creation narrative was to set out the origins of the world and of humanity. With the three sons of Adam the main types of human soul, which can be reduced to two, are in place and the divine plan of salvation can unfold, culminating in the incarnation of the Logos in Christ.<sup>112</sup>

A final word should be devoted to the homily that Origen delivered on the first chapter of Genesis. As we have seen, it very

<sup>108</sup> HEINE (2003) 65-66.

<sup>109</sup> *Exc. ex Theod.* 54, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. IRENAEUS *Adu. haer.* 1, 7, 5 on the Valentinians. It is very odd that at 54, 2 Theodotus says the earthly man is κατ' εἰκόνα. He must mean in the image of the evil demiurge. This is at a great remove from Origen.

<sup>111</sup> *Autol.* 2, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Seth is not mentioned in the *Scholia on Genesis* which Origen compiled on the rest of the Book. See METZLER fr. E 1 ff.



likely contains many themes from the *Commentary* now presented in an attractively compact and straight-forward form. But no less interesting is the manner in which it develops an elaborate allegory of the creations of the six days in terms of the make-up and life of the human being in a manner that was lacking in the extant works of Philo. It starts at the very beginning: the heaven in Gen 1, 1 is the human mind, the first earth his body.<sup>113</sup> The division of the waters (1, 7-8) is an exhortation to the faithful to become heavenly and participate in spiritual matters.<sup>114</sup> The great lights in 1, 14 are Christ and the Church, the former illuminating the latter and enabling it to be the “light of the world”.<sup>115</sup> Climactically the human being is created according to the image, who is the Logos. Here Origen departs from strict allegory and exhorts his listeners to be transformed in the likeness of the Saviour, repenting and making progress just as the Apostles did.<sup>116</sup> This is the cosmogony translated into a spiritual exhortation for the church folk of Caesarea.

But it would be wrong to make too great a contrast between the complexities of the *Commentary* and the simple exhortations of the Homily. In both cases Origen, as Charlotte Köckert has well said, sees the created cosmos as a place of education (“Erziehungsstätte”) for humans to make progress and achieve the spiritual growth that will enable them to be with God.<sup>117</sup> Correspondingly the creation account is more than a description of how the cosmos came into being and what its main components are. If read properly it is also a paedeutic text teaching human beings what they are and how they can be saved. It thus continues the protreptic emphasis of the tradition of Plato’s *Timaeus* just as Philo did,<sup>118</sup> but adds the specific dynamic of

<sup>113</sup> *Hom.Gen.* 1, 1; cf. *PHILO Leg.* 1, 1 discussed above at n. 59.

<sup>114</sup> *Hom.Gen.* 1, 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Hom.Gen.* 1, 5-6.

<sup>116</sup> *Hom.Gen.* 1, 13.

<sup>117</sup> KÖCKERT (2009) 307.

<sup>118</sup> See above n. 53 and text thereto.



the Christian history of salvation. And we may safely assume that for Origen himself the act of commenting and preaching on this sacred text was also a profound spiritual exercise.

## 5. Some conclusions

The two Alexandrian thinkers and theologians we have studied in this paper stand very consciously in an exegetical tradition focused on the Greek text of the Septuagint. Philo's openness to Hellenism enabled him to develop new approaches to the understanding of the biblical creation account, most of which were taken over by Origen in a different context. Starting-point is not the heaven and earth of the first verse, but the cosmos of Greek philosophy, a unified and ordered whole which is good because it comes into being by and through the divine Logos. The anthropocentrism of the biblical account, to which Rémi Brague has rightly drawn attention, is retained to some degree, as can be seen in the treatment of the creations of the fourth and sixth day. But philosophically much is taken over from what Plato had taught in his cosmology. The good life, in conformity with excellence and in accordance with divine instruction, is cosmically situated through the Logos, which enters into the make-up of the human being created κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ. The role of the Logos, philosophically and theologically understood and developed, is what Alexandria added to the Abrahamic model outlined by Brague.<sup>119</sup>

There are divergences between our two authors as well. Philo's context is the Alexandrian Jewish community under threat. Origen found himself wanting to leave his community, the Alexandrian church, behind, because it would not accept the fundamentals of his spiritual theology and exegesis. For Philo the Logos found expression in the *nomos* that Moses wrote down and invited his disciples to observe and study. Origen believed

<sup>119</sup> See above at n. 3.

that the Logos had entered human history and brought salvation. Only the spiritual law remained. But it too invited study in this world, anticipating further contemplation in the next.

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## DISCUSSION

*J. Strauss Clay:* You suggested that the Septuagint in its language and terminology involved a real union of Athens and Jerusalem, so to speak. But to what extent were the translators aware that they were in some cases using Platonic vocabulary? And did they really have a choice?

*D.T. Runia:* In general terms I would say that the Septuagint stays closer to Jerusalem than Athens. But the first chapters of Genesis do stand out in the use of some very striking terms which enabled philosophical speculation to be developed. It is a judgement call, but it seems to me that it was probably no accident.

*S. Maul:* You briefly mention the Chaldeans. Is it not likely that they exercised more influence on thinking in places like Alexandria than is often thought? After all, the distances involved were not so great and there was quite a bit of interaction.

*D.T. Runia:* For my answer I might start off with an analogy. I was looking at Baron Hardt's beautiful library and it struck me that there were virtually no books in English at all. Plenty was known about the Chaldeans from books by authors such as Berosus, but Philo was not very interested. They symbolized particular ways of thinking of which he disapproved and I suspect he did not feel a great need to acquire much knowledge about them.

*K. Volk:* I wonder whether you could say a bit more about Philo's philosophical background. You have mentioned the *Timaeus* a number of times and made reference to Stoicism,

but have elsewhere more loosely invoked 'doctrines from Greek philosophy'. Would it be correct to view Philo as an example of a general Platonist-Stoic syncretism prevalent at the time? And is anything known about his own philosophical training or formation?

*D.T. Runia:* Philo lived in one of the more obscure periods in the long history of ancient philosophy, so that he is more often used to shed light on other philosophers than the other way around. He certainly had a vast knowledge of Greek philosophy and quite often records material that we find nowhere else. John Dillon once suggested that, coming from such a wealthy background, he might have had house tutors. Philo is certainly no syncretist because his aim is to expound the thought of Moses. But his commentaries bear witness to how Platonism was gradually taking over from Stoicism as the dominant philosophy of the Greco-Roman world. It has been plausibly argued by Willy Theiler and others that he may have made use of commentaries on the *Timaeus* or similar kinds of material. It was the beginning of what we now call Middle Platonism.

*K. Schmidt:* Philo seems to have drawn his knowledge especially from authoritative texts, like the Genesis account or Plato's *Timaeus*. Are there any recognizable traces of what we might call empirical observations in his cosmological interpretations?

*D.T. Runia:* My answer would be: very few. Philo was a very learned man, but science was not at the forefront of his interests. His knowledge of astronomy does indeed seem to be rather bookish. There are some fine descriptions of natural phenomena in the fields of botany and zoology, but these too will have been a combination of book learning and very general observation of the natural world.

*J.D. BeDuhn:* I would like to hear about what you think of the use of allegory itself as an interpretive method used by figures such as Philo and Origen. To what degree do you see

allegory as a means by which received cosmogonies and cosmologies are 'rescued' or 'fixed' when they have become no longer palatable to those within a culture? Is allegory used as a way to slip in a new cosmogony or cosmology in place of the traditional one, without admitting to it, pretending instead to find the new one in the old? Your remarks brought to my mind the example of Augustine of Hippo, who famously said in his allegorical commentary on Genesis that nothing would be more ridiculous than to take the creation story literally. In his particular situation, he was dealing with a sharp critique of the literal sense of the Genesis creation story mounted by the Manichaeans, and was able to turn away this critique only by denying that the literal sense was what Genesis was really about. Do we have any reason to think that Philo and Origen had similar concerns about the vulnerability to criticism of the literal sense of the creation narrative?

*D.T. Runia:* Philo, and to a lesser extent, Origen fought a running battle with the so-called literalists who interpreted the Genesis account as 'plain history' because they felt this gave rise to too many inconsistencies and implausibilities. But at the same time they were also concerned about readings that presented the biblical account of the early history of human beings as mythical in a manner parallel to Greek mythology. Allegorical interpretation in their view was able to solve both these problems. To this extent they would certainly regard it as serving to 'rescue the text'. It cannot be denied that they were led to this position at least in part because they viewed the biblical text in the light of Greek philosophy and its emphasis on rationality and plausibility.

*S. Maul:* Wie Sie uns überzeugend aufgezeigt haben, reduzierte Origenes in gewisser Weise die in den Jahrhunderten zuvor in den Mittelmeerkulturen lebhaft und in Vielfalt geführten Diskurse über den Ursprung der Welt auf eine ausschließlich heilsgeschichtlich zu verstehende Aussage. Ist dies von

Zeitgenossen des Origenes als Engführung verstanden worden und gab es andere Strömungen innerhalb und außerhalb des Christentums, die nach wie vor Interesse daran hatten, darüber nachzudenken, wie in einem materialistischeren Sinne Kosmos und Umwelt entstanden sind?

*D.T. Runia:* I doubt that many contemporaries of Origen would have felt that his reading of the biblical cosmogony was too narrowly non-scientific and too focused on aspects of providence and salvation. Most thinkers would have agreed that the primary function of cosmogony was paedeutical rather than scientific, especially since most philosophers, by the third century, agreed that the world had not had a beginning in time, but was a 'steady-state' universe.

*M. Erler:* Thank you very much for your excellent paper which I very much liked. To return to the question of the meditative function of Philo's and Origen's commentaries on the Genesis account, could I give you the chance to expand a little bit on this most interesting aspect of the cosmogonic tradition?

*T. Fuhrer:* Die von Michael Erler aufgeworfene Frage nach der Funktion, die die Interpretation(en) des biblischen Schöpfungsberichts für das Lesepublikum — und in der Origenes-Homilie — hat bzw. haben kann und soll, möchte ich aufnehmen und fragen, ob nicht letztlich jede Auseinandersetzung mit der ‚Genese‘ der Welt, in der wir leben, einem letztlich anthropologischen Interesse entspricht — weil die Frage nach dem, was ‚am Anfang‘ war, immer fasziniert. Stefan Maul sagte mir, dass er als Übersetzer des *Gilgamesch-Epos* immer wieder Anfragen von nicht-wissenschaftlich, sondern religiös, esoterisch, ethnologisch Interessierten erhält und sich mit deren Interpretationsangeboten auseinandersetzen darf. Kann man sagen, dass auf ein ähnliches Wissensbedürfnis und einen vergleichbaren Fragenbestand sowohl die Genesis-Auslegungen Philons und Origenes' als auch die populärwissenschaftlichen Zeitschriften oder auch Fernsehsendungen zum ‚Urknall‘ und fernen Galaxien reagieren?



*D.T. Runia:* I will give a combined answer to the two related questions posed by our distinguished hosts. It is generally recognised that stories or accounts of beginnings *in illo tempore*, as Mircea Eliade used to say, are fundamental to the human experience. When these accounts are presented or interpreted in a philosophical context, the emphasis can fall on explanation or on edification. The earliest Greek cosmogonies (most of which are lost) focused on the former, whereas Plato in the *Timaeus* clearly aimed to combine the two. In the case of Philo and Origen, there is a clear recognition that the biblical account speaks about the foundational history of humanity. Nevertheless the edificatory or paedeutical aspect is very strong, and as I emphasised in my analysis, it no doubt is related to the context in which these interpretations were developed, in Philo's case the Jewish community, in Origen's case the church in Alexandria and Caesarea. Preaching in the church of Caesarea meant that Origen would have had a primarily lay audience and it is no wonder that he would have focused on 'meditative aspects', to use Michael's terminology. In our time church-going has strongly receded and perhaps we are so caught up with all the possibilities of the new media that the need for stories of origins is also less felt. But I agree that the television programs and magazines of popular science and ancient history still fulfil the same function. The same happens in relation to myth. Since Tolkien and C.S. Lewis there has been a huge explosion of literary activity in this field and the possibilities for film and television have been fully exploited.

*R. Durrer:* Genesis (as I see it) clearly tells a story about how the world came into being. Modern cosmology tries to generate connections, to relate phenomena via physical laws and logic. Has there been a break between the one attempt and the other, or was there a continuous evolution?

*D.T. Runia:* There was a sharp break, made all the sharper because for quite a long period in science cosmogony receded

in favour of cosmology. This can be seen very clearly in the remarkable work of Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, which is a summation of pre-Darwinian science. But ever since Darwin launched his evolutionary view of life on earth and all the more after the development of the Big Bang hypothesis, a narrational aspect has returned to science. It is very different from earlier and, as we would say, the accounts are more naïve. But it gives an explanation of where we find ourselves today. We saw a fine example at the exhibition at the CERN, which we visited, namely a time chart going from the Big Bang to the 21<sup>st</sup> century of our era. But it is much more difficult for us moderns to draw edificatory lessons from this 'history', except a general sense of wonder.

*R. Brague:* First of all I must thank David Runia for taking the trouble to read my book and to quote from it. I am delighted to be found useful. In particular I thank him for making a suggestion which I regret that I did not discover myself, namely the name of the third paradigmatic city in our western tradition, Alexandria. I then could have dispensed with the rather inelegant term 'Abrahamic', which has the disadvantage of suggesting an affinity between the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam which is more apparent than real. Of the many questions to which his paper gives rise let me select the following three.

(1) Did Philo pose the question why in the creation account the text speaks of the "second day", "third day" and so on, but does not say "first day"? This anomaly was well known to commentators and Rashi saw in it an allusion to the fact that the Creator was one.

(2) Philo leaves open the question of whether God had formed pre-existent matter such as what the Demiurge finds before him in the *Timaeus*. The idea of a creation *ex nihilo* was at least prepared in the Greek Bible by the expression οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων in 2 Maccabees 7, 28. Did Philo have any knowledge of this passage or parallel traditions?

(3) Is it not remarkable that the tradition in which Philo and Origen stand should subordinate the heavenly beings to human beings in the anthropocentric way that you have described? Is there any tradition in the ancient world in which the heavenly beings were stripped of their divine status?

*D.T. Runia:* Thank you for your questions. I will answer them one by one.

(1) Philo refers to the expression 'day one' and sees in it a subtle hint that this day of creation is exceptional, because it contains the constituents of the intelligible world, whereas on the remaining days beginning with the second it is the world of sense-perceptible and physical reality that comes into being (*Opif.* 15). As noted in my paper he regards the unicity of God as one of the lessons that the creation account teaches (*Opif.* 171), but does not provide a textual basis for this doctrine.

(2) Philo never refers to the history of the Maccabees and we cannot be sure whether he knew of the four treatises under that name (he reveals some affinities with the ethical doctrines of 4 Maccabees). The difficulty is, as Hans Friedrich Weiss showed nearly fifty years ago, that the phrase "out of what does not exist" is ambiguous, since existence can be taken either absolutely or relatively (i.e. not existing in a formed state as now). What is certain is that later authors such as Origen did take this text (and a similar statement in Hebrews 11, 3) as evidence for their conviction that the world was created out of nothing in the radical sense contrary to the doctrines of Greek philosophy.

(3) In earlier Greek thought there was a tradition particularly associated with the philosopher Anaxagoras, but also with the atomistic tradition, that the heavenly bodies were "no more than red-hot lumps of earth" without any divine status. This position remained very much a minority view throughout antiquity and its proponents were labelled as "impious" (e.g., Philo at *Aet.* 47). From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards most educated people regarded the heavenly bodies as beings that were

ontologically superior to humans. But this did not preclude them from in many cases in being above all interested in the influence that the heavenly bodies exerted on life on earth. The anthropocentrism shown by Philo and Origen may have been encouraged by the biblical tradition, but would certainly not have been seen as being out of step with educated opinion in their times.

