CHAPTER EIGHT

PROCLAMATIO GRAECA – HERMENEUTICAL KEY

Having analysed and characterized examples of expository forms, structures and terminology we shall examine aspects of the ideas expressed and applications made by Philo in his exegesis. The question to be asked is: How far is it possible to identify some of the hermeneutical principles which guide Philo in his expository enterprise? Some clues may be found in Mos. 2:1–65.

God’s Laws proclaimed to the Greek-speaking world

In the Diaspora setting of the Alexandrian Jews the translation of the Laws of Moses into Greek was a major revelatory event. Philo testifies to such an understanding in his interpretation of this event in Mos. 2:25–44. The context of this story is as follows:

Moses was the paradigmatic person of king, lawgiver, high priest and prophet (Mos. 2:1–11). In Mos. 2:12–65 Philo praises Moses as lawgiver. Surprisingly enough he does not here tell about the giving of the Laws on Mt Sinai but extols Moses on the basis of the Laws’ qualities as made evident in their history after they were received. The glory of Moses as lawgiver is seen in the permanence of the Laws (Mos. 2:12–16), in the respect paid to them by other nations (Mos. 2:17–44), especially by Ptolemy Philadelphus when he arranged for the Septuagint translation (Mos. 2:25–44), and in the content of the Laws themselves (Mos. 2:45–65).

Philo develops here a perspective of national and universal revelatory history. In contrast to the laws of other nations the Laws of the Jewish nation were

firm, unshaken, immovable, stamped, as it were, with the seals of nature herself, [they] remain secure from the day when they were first enacted to now, and we may hope they will remain for all future ages as though immortal, so long as the sun and moon and the whole heaven and universe exist (Mos. 2:14).

On this basis Philo interprets the history of the Jewish people: “Thus, though the nation has undergone so many changes, both to increased
prosperity and the reverse, nothing – not even the smallest part of the ordinances – has been disturbed” (Mos. 2:15).

Philo expresses here a common view held by Jews in the Diaspora as well as in Palestine.¹ Even his formulation in Mos. 2:14 seems to be based on widespread phraseology, as can be seen from similar statements like the one in Matth 5:18: “... till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished”.

This revelatory history has its goal in the time when the Laws of Moses, being also the divine Laws of nature, will be acknowledged by all nations:

Thus the laws are shewn to be desirable and precious in the eyes of all, ordinary citizens and rulers alike, and that too though our nation has not prospered for many years. It is but natural that when people are not flourishing their belongings to some degree are under a cloud. But if a fresh start should be made to brighter prospects, how great a change for the better might we expect to see! I believe that each nation would abandon its peculiar ways, and, throwing overboard their ancestral customs, turn to honouring our laws alone. For, when the brightness of their shining is accompanied by national prosperity, it will darken the light of the others as the risen sun darkens the stars (Mos. 2:43–44).

From this it is seen that Philo looked forward to the time when all nations will become Jewish proselytes.

Philo interprets this revelatory history of the Laws of Moses within the Greek distinction which divided the world’s population into two parts, the Greeks and the barbarians.² Within this context two events have basic significance: 1. the giving of the Laws at Mt Sinai in the Hebrew language for the barbarian half of the human race, and 2. the translation of these Laws into Greek on the island Pharos at Alexandria to make them known to the Greek half of the world:

In ancient times the laws were written in the Chaldean tongue, and remained in that form for many years, ... so long as they had not yet revealed their beauty to the rest of mankind. ... Then it was that some people, thinking it a shame that the laws should be found in one half

² See Immut. 136; Mos. 2:18, 20; Jos. 134; Praem. 165; Legat. 141; Quod Omn. 73, 94, 98, 198; Prov. 2:15. This distinction is also applied to the classification of languages: Greek is the language of the Greek half of the world, while Hebrew serves as the main language of the barbarian world, Mos. 2:27ff.; cf. Conf. 68. – Cf. Paul’s use of the distinction Greek and barbarians in Rom 1:14.