CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MAN AND GOD’S PEOPLE WITHIN
A COSMIC CONTEXT

Animals and nature

In the preceding chapters aspects of the complex relationships and movements on the borderline between Jews and non-Jews have been examined, with focus upon influence, proselytism and apostasy, tension and conflict. The task now is to develop further Philo’s interpretation of the role of God’s people seen within its context. This time the context is not just other peoples, but animals, nature and the cosmos.

The main sources for examining the relationship of humans to animals and nature are in Philo’s Exposition of the Laws of Moses. The starting point for our study is found in Opif. 77–88. This passage has the form of question and answer. In the chapter about this question and answer form much attention was paid to Opif. 77–88. The observation was made that the problem of an unexpected order and rank in the Pentateuchal story is raised, and that close parallels exist in rabbinic writings. In the present chapter the focus will be on ideas expressed in the passage.

Gen 1:28 deals in a direct way with human beings’ rule over the animals and over nature in general. In the index of the Loeb-edition, volume 10, only two references are given to this biblical verse, namely Opif. 84 and 88. One might then think that the topic is peripheral to Philo. This is David Runia’s understanding when he writes: “Man has a special place in the cosmos not because of his dominance over the creation, nor because of his cleverness in practical matters, but because he contemplates the worlds of thought and sense and so can reflect on his own nature and situation.” In a footnote Runia adds: “Note how Philo plays down this central theme of Gen 1:26–30 in his interpretation in Opif”.

The present analysis will provide support

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1 Runia (1986) 472, and note 372. It should be added that Runia elsewhere states that his comprehensive study on Philo and the Timaeus of Plato is necessarily
for the understanding that the topic has a firm place in Philo's exegesis.²

*Opif.* 77–88:

Question:

(*Opif.* 77): One should inquire the reason why man comes last in the world's creation; for, as the sacred writings show, he was the last whom the Father and Maker fashioned. Four answers are given, and a further comment is attached. The outline goes as follows:

1 *Opif.* 77–78: God provided first for man's means of living, so that man would find a banquet ready for him when he came.

2 *Opif.* 79–81: Just as man found all provisions needed for life, those who strive for righteousness will experience peace, order and all good things in readiness. Man gave himself to pleasure, however, and so now must work.

3 *Opif.* 82: Man as miniature heaven ties the end of creation to the beginning, heaven.

4 *Opif.* 83–86: Man came after all created things, as king and master.

5 *Opif.* 87–88: Added comment: Man is not inferior because he was created last.

For our analysis it is natural to start with point 4, *Opif.* 83–84, because Philo here paraphrases parts of Gen 1:26/28. The first sentence in paragraph 84 ties the paragraphs 83 and 84 together:

> for which reason too the Father, having brought him [man] into existence as a living being by nature capable of sovereignty, appointed him, not only in fact but also by verbal election, king of all living beings under the moon . . . (trans. mine).

In *Opif.* 83 man's actual sovereignty over the other living beings is demonstrated: "for they were sure, as soon as they saw him, to be amazed and do homage to him as to one who by nature is ruler and despot" (trans. mine). Then in paragraph 84a God's explicit and verbal appointment of man as king is referred to, by means of a paraphrase of parts of Gen 1:26/28. In the paragraphs 84b–86 Philo provides proofs of man's rule from experience, that is, from "what is to be seen" (τὰ φανόμενα).

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² For the following, see Borgen (1995) 371–81.