Chapter Three

The State of Research
General Perspectives

One more introductory task remains before our survey can commence with the first collections of Christian writings. It will be worth our while briefly to look at general and synoptic studies that have been done on the subject of Philo and the beginnings of Christian literature and thought. As was already indicated in the preface, such treatments are rare and far from comprehensive or satisfactory. It is this situation that forms the raison d'être for the present study.

1. Synoptic presentations

The first and still most comprehensive general account of Philo’s influence on the Christian tradition is to be found in the monograph entitled Philo von Alexandria als Ausleger des alten Testaments an sich selbst und nach seinem geschichtlichen Einfluss betrachtet, published by the Gymnasium professor and chaplain C. Siegfried in 1875.1 In his prefatory remarks the author writes:2


Siegfried’s reference to the controversialist atmosphere still surrounding Philo is most interesting. He wishes to read Philo from a historical perspective, and is not interested in disputes between Protestants and Catholics or

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1 Siegfried (1875). He taught at the Gymnasium of Pforta, famous as the institution that educated both Nietzsche and Wilamowitz within a single decade.
2 Siegfried (1875) iv.
between Christians and Jews. There is therefore a slight overlap with the definitive end of the legend of Philo Christianus, which, as I argued above, occurs in the monograph of Conybeare published 20 years after Siegfried's book. This is emphatically not to affirm that religious and 'weltanschauliche' factors no longer play a significant role in the way that Philo is read. The Jewish, Christian or secularized background of modern scholars who write on Philo is generally transparent. The difference is that modern scholarship is not interested in settling scores in the area of religious controversialism.

We also learn in the above quote that Siegfried's specific subject is Philo as expositor of scripture. This is a most fruitful perspective for more than one reason. As we have seen, Philo's thought is founded on his exegesis of the Mosaic writings. By examining the scriptural basis of Philo's doctrines and the hermeneutical rules which underlie his exposition, Siegfried's work penetrates to the roots of Philo's thought. No less important for our subject, however, is that fact that what the Church Fathers appreciate more than anything else is his contribution to the interpretation of scripture. So from this perspective Siegfried was able to cover the more important aspects of the patristic appropriation of Philo.

In the second part of his study, entitled Der geschichtliche Einfluss der philonischen Schriftauslegung, Siegfried first devotes a chapter—inevitably brief—to Philo's influence on later Jewish exegesis, and then turns to the Christian tradition. Beginning with the New Testament, followed by a long chapter on the Greek Patres, and ending with a shorter chapter on the Latin Patres, Siegfried's account covers nearly 100 pages crammed with detailed references to the sources in question. In its comprehensiveness this collection is still unsurpassed more than a century later. Both the method of interpreting scripture and the contents of the interpretation are examined. Siegfried is particularly interested in philological questions, e.g. Philo's (lack of) knowledge of Hebrew and the nature of his Greek vocabulary and style. This interest induces him to pay special attention to the role of etymologies, both in Philo's interpretations and in alleged Patristic borrowings. Clearly, therefore, as a collection of material this study is a valuable contribution.

In terms of method, however, we must have serious reservations about what Siegfried has put before us. It has to be said that the method is essentially compulsory, presenting long lists of parallels (based on a prodigiously detailed reading of the sources), but with little or no critical

3 See above §1.5.
4 Siegfried's own views come to the fore in the final words of the book (399), when he affirms that the comprehensive and spiritually rich system of allegory, when it is in conflict with the truth, nevertheless is destroyed by the power of simple facts. This is the statement of a Protestant theologian.
5 Siegfried (1875) 303–399.