CHAPTER 2

Descent and Adaptability: The Pedagogy of the Logos in Philo and the Fourth Gospel

How could the soul have conceived of God, had He not breathed into it and mightily laid hold of it? For the human mind would never have ventured to soar so high as to grasp the nature of God, had not God Himself drawn it up to Himself, so far as it was possible that the mind of man should be drawn up, and stamped it with the impress of the powers that are within the scope of its understanding.

PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, Legum Allegoriae 1.38

Philo and John: Two Portraits of an Adaptable Logos

In her essay, “Pauline Accommodation and ‘Condescension’ (συγκατάβασις),” Margaret Mitchell demonstrates, in part, that Philo characterized the descent (κατάβασις) of various heavenly intermediaries, notably ὁ Λόγος, as an act of divine adaptability. Moreover, she shows how this aspect of Philo’s thought helped pave the way for early Christian conceptions of the incarnation.1 Specifically, Mitchell argues that Philo’s God frequently engages with humankind in ways that resemble the very techniques of adaptability as those outlined in the previous chapter, and that early Christians—such as the Alexandrians Clement and Origen—in turn applied the concept of adaptability to the descent of the divine Λόγος in Jesus Christ.2 In short, the Λόγος in both Philo

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and early Christian writers is closely tied to God’s adaptable psychagogy. Yet between Philo and writers like Clement or Origen stands the Fourth Gospel, which contains both a figure called ὁ Λόγος, as well as references to the Word’s κατάβασις (“descent”; e.g., John 3:13). Might the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of the Word similarly reflect an expression of divine pedagogy?³

To answer this question, this chapter will focus on several parallels and similarities between the Logos of Philo and the Word of the Fourth Gospel. The exact relationship between Philo and the Gospel remains a subject of debate, although a consensus has emerged that John’s Logos seems to emerge from the same sorts of ideas that Philo’s Logos does.⁴ This consensus points toward an important recognition for the present study, i.e., that the divine Word of

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