THE DESPOLIATION: OTHER PATRISTIC TEXTS

In this excursus, we will briefly peruse the patristic texts up to the period of Augustine which are not surveyed in the body of this study.

Clement of Alexandria and Despoliation as ‘Self-Protection’

Clement’s discussion of the despoliation of Egypt is a reprise of what we have encountered in Philo’s Life of Moses. Clement makes no secret of his abundant and authoritative use of Philo; in four cases (all in the Stromateis), he mentions him by name (once in the chapter we will discuss below—1.23). However, Clement’s use of Philo is predominantly anonymous. Philo’s influence on Clement has been carefully studied and delineated.1 Clement is attracted to Philo primarily as a model for biblical interpretation. At times he jumps from one biblical text to the next in Philo in a manner which amounts to a ‘double borrowing.’ Philo provided Clement with pre-selected text combinations which he used in argumentation or interpretation almost as if he considered Philo a personal guide to the important biblical materials.2 Clement did vary from and alter Philo—his concept of God, the position on the law. However, Clement’s attraction to Philo is based on the combination of factors he found linked together there: both brilliance in biblical exegesis and maturity of philosophical reasoning. “Many of the twisting threads of Clement’s theological thinking are taken from Philo but they are woven into a very different tapestry.”3

In the following passage, we find Clement weaving a different tapestry from what he found in Philo. Our text is Stromata 1.23.157.2–4 which Folliet dates ca. 211–16.4

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2 Van den Hoek, Clement 220–221.
3 Ibid., 229–230.
4 Folliet, La Spoliatio, 6.
(2) Subsequently, the Hebrews in their exodus left, carrying a great deal of Egyptian spoil, not out of love of material goods as their detractors suggest (ὡς οἱ κατήγοροι φασίν) (God forbade them even to covet the possessions of others), (3) but, in the first place, taking their proper pay for all the time of service they had given the Egyptians, and secondly, protecting themselves (ἡμύναντο) by a kind of retributive act against the money-changing Egyptians by carrying off spoil, since they had mistreated the Hebrews by en-slaving them. (4) So, as anyone might speak of it as an act of war, they thought they were justified in carrying off their enemy’s property by the law of conquest, stronger over weaker. (This was the cause of the war. The Hebrews came to the Egyptians as suppliants because of the famine. The Egyptians enslaved the foreigners and forced them into service just like prisoners of war, not even paying them wages.) If on the other hand we think of them as at peace, then they simply took the spoil as wages from unwilling hands which had for a long time robbed them by failing to pay them.5

The depth of borrowing is easily evident as one compares the above to Philo’s literal justification in Moses 1.141–2. Clement summarizes the argument a bit. He makes no mention of Philo’s argument that there is no comparison between material goods and freedom so that the Hebrews actually took much less than what had been taken from them. He also rearranges it to form a chiasm; that is, he alters Philo’s peace/war—peace/war to the chiastic peace/war—war/peace.6 Beatrice notes that, for Philo, the detractors of the Jews seem to be Egyptian pagans generally who did not look favorably on the wealth of the Jews, the detractors in Clement have a more specific designation (ὡς οἱ κατήγοροι φασίν) and are likely followers of Marcion for whom the despoliation


6 This occurs in paragraph 4. Van den Hoek argues that, in fact, this passage gives the impression of an untidy and confused argument. According to her, Clement ignores the psychological and theological nuances of Philo and only states baldly that the Hebrews took the spoils as some form of compensation (Clement, 57). Beatrice agrees (“The Treasures of the Egyptians,” 163). I do not share these assessments but believe Clement was in fact shaping Philo’s argument into a chiasm that emphasized self-protection. Immediately upon introducing the fair wage in paragraph 3, Clement introduces the notion of despoliation as self-protection. As in the Ferguson translation above, ἡμύναντο refers to self-defense primarily. This explains why Clement drew this word forward in his presentation (it appears at the end of the Philo passage). Van den Hoek claims it was moved forward for no apparent reason (57). Yet, for Clement, whether the despoliation occurred during war or peace, the final motivation was self-protection. While this may have been a minor theme in Philo, to Clement it becomes a theme he seeks to emphasize by moving it forward and placing it in the center of his thesis.