TEXT AND FIGURE IN ANCIENT JEWISH PAIDEIA

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1. Introduction

The following paper focuses on Philo’s relationship to his context, which is both Greek and Jewish at once. This is part of a larger project to understand the relationships in early Judaism between authoritative figures such as Moses and Ezra and authoritative texts such as Jubilees or 4 Ezra.¹ In what follows, I will argue that figure and text are intertwined in Philo’s thought. Indeed, the authority of Scripture, as Philo understands it, depends on its relationship to these exemplary figures. At the same time, authoritative figures and texts are intertwined in Philo’s conception of paideia, a reinterpretation that forms part of his strategy to authorize Judaism in the light of Hellenistic culture, and to legitimize Jewish written law in the light of the unwritten law of nature.

In this paper, I explore these themes of figures, Scriptures, and paideia in Philo’s Jewish-Greek project. Which figures does Philo emphasize, and why? How are they related to Scripture and law? And how does the interplay of figure and text, prevalent in many ancient Jewish texts, structure Philo’s conception of the goal of paideia?

2. Philo of Alexandria: GreekJew, JewGreek

Philo is one of the most striking representatives of a Hellenistic Judaism that can seem worlds apart from the Second Temple Judaisms of

Palestine. For example, we do not find anything like pseudonymous authorship in Philo’s writings. This can make it seem impossible for Philo’s writings to shed any light on, for example, Qumran, or vice-versa. Yet Philo was unquestionably a Second Temple Jew, not only chronologically but also in many aspects of his religious consciousness.\(^2\)

At the same time, Philo certainly faced a challenge quite distinct from the challenge confronting the Qumran community: he had to authorize Judaism itself to both Jews and non-Jews, within the relatively new context of the Hellenistic competition of cultures; this competition was at the same time political, especially in light of the even newer Roman Empire’s quest to authorize itself through the appropriation of the Greek philosophical and literary heritage.

The place of Judaism within this new Roman world was far from clear. On the one hand, the significance of the Greek heritage was now as universal as the empire itself sought to be. Consequently, Near Eastern cultures, which enjoyed the mystique of antiquity and exoticism, could legitimize themselves by identifying their gods with Greek gods and their teachings with Greek teachings. On the other hand, religious syncretism did not cohere easily with the Mosaic law, which seemed primarily to address Jews alone and was therefore in danger of appearing parochial. This rendered it not only potentially insignificant to Hellenic universalism, but also potentially threatening to Rome. It is in this context that Philo’s Greek-Jewish conception of \textit{paideia} is developed.\(^3\)
