The Constitution of Compassion: 
Political Reflections on Philo’s 
De Humanitate

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It is generally agreed that of his three commentary series, Philo’s Exposition of the Law demonstrates the clearest signs of Hellenistic influence and systematic organization. Evidence for this can be found in a major section of the work organized according to a version of the canon of cardinal virtues. The review of legislation begins with the general laws (De decalogo), then the particular ordinances dependent on each of them (De specialibus legibus). At Spec. 4.133–35, however, the direction of the discussion shifts: besides assigning laws to each of the commandments individually, Philo says, it is possible also to show that the Decalogue in its entirety accords with “the virtues of universal value.” These include εὐσέβεια/σεβασμός, φρόνησις, and σωφροσύνη (which he claims to have spoken of earlier), as well as δικαιοσύνη, ἀνδρεία, and φιλανθρωπία (the topics of Spec. 4.136–238; Virt. 1–50, and 51–174 respectively). This recourse to the virtues as a structural and thematic device is consistent with the Exposition’s aim of proving the superiority of Judaism within its Greco-Roman milieu. In particular, Philo endeavors to present the Jewish community not as an ethnic group,
but as a nation guided by the “true” and “most excellent” philosophy,\(^7\) by which he means that it has been established according to laws and customs that constitute “the best politeia,”\(^8\) or constitution, which, as such, accords with the divine, cosmic πολιτεία.\(^9\)

Of the six virtues mentioned in the Exposition, the first five would have been immediately recognizable as proper members of the philosophical (especially Platonic) canon.\(^10\) Philo’s sixth item, however, φιλανθρωπία or “humanity,” would have been, as David Konstan puts it, “a newcomer to the classical list of virtues.”\(^11\) Questions arise, then, as to why (especially given his Platonic proclivities) Philo would devote such a long and rather involved treatise to the subject and what criteria he may have observed in the selection and organization of its contents.

1. Mosaic Humanity and Philonic Apologetics

Contemporary scholarship on the Exposition has generally tended to take Philo’s arguments about φιλανθρωπία as a contribution to the commentary’s broader apologetic agenda.\(^12\) The following comments from Katell Berthelot’s monograph, which includes the fullest and most recent treatment of De humanitate, are typical: “The presentation of the

\(^7\) Opif. 8; Mos. 2.212; Vīrt. 65; Valentin Nikiprowetzky, Le commentaire de l’écriture chez Philon d’Alexandrie (ALGHJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 97–116. As Philo explains in Mos. 2.216, when Jews gather to study “the ancestral philosophy,” what they learn is “prudence and courage and temperance and justice and also piety, holiness and every virtue.”

\(^8\) Spec. 3.167; Vīrt. 175; cf. Decal. 14; Spec. 2.73; 3.24, 181; 4.10, 226; Vīrt. 108, 219; Præm. 4; Harry A. Wolfson, Philo (2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 2:374–95.

\(^9\) See Decal. 97–98, with Borgen, Philo of Alexandria, 73; cf. Opif. 143; Ios. 28–29; Spec. 1.51, 63, 314; 4.55, 159; Vīrt. 127.

