INSPIRATION AND THE DIVINE SPIRIT IN THE WRITINGS OF PHILO JUDAEUS

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I. Introduction

Many of Philo’s references to πνεῦμα are ordered with remarkable consistency. Gen 1:2, for example, is the anchor for Philo’s description of the cosmic πνεῦμα.1 The divine inbreathing of Gen 2:7 provides the basis for Philo’s anthropology of the human spirit.2 Philo’s references to the inspiration of the divine spirit, on the other hand, are attached more tenuously to the Bible. Attempts to order these references have led scholars to widely divergent opinions which attest to the confusing nature of Philo’s view of the spirit’s role in inspiration. During the first third of the twentieth century,


3 Der heilige Geist, 53-69. Leisegang (62-64) carefully argues that, according to Philo, the purpose of hellenistic philosophies is to lead to mystical intuitive knowledge. When that knowledge is obtained, the secondary worth of these philosophies becomes evident.
H. Leisegang, H. Lewy, and E. R. Goodenough sought the genesis of Philo’s view of inspiration primarily in hellenistic mystery religions. In their view, the spirit mediates mystical vision—a sobre intoxication—which surpasses rational knowledge.

This viewpoint elicited a negative response from G. Verbeke and H. A. Wolfson. Verbeke emphatically traced inspiration to the LXX alone, and not to “croyances populaires de la période hellénistique...” while Wolfson discerned a combination of “…the ‘divine spirit,’ which according to Scripture is the cause of prophecy, with the process of ‘divine inspiration’ or ‘possession’ which, according to Plato, is the cause of his various kinds of frenzy…”

Attempts to explain Philo’s view of inspiration during the post-Wolfson era have been even more diverse. A. Laurentin and M. Weaver connected the spirit to the spiritual life. Laurentin discerned three stages of the spiritual life in which the spirit participates: faith; spiritual progress; and vision of God. Weaver contended that Philo’s “concern with the spiritual life gives the doctrine of πνεῦμα some internal cohesion…” The doctrine of the spirit belongs to a “theology of grace,” that is, the spirit, and no human capacity, enables people to attain to mystical vision and to lead a life of virtue. In contrast to Laurentin and Weaver, M. Isaacs proffered another explanation of Philo’s view of inspiration by tracing it to an apologetic motive. Philo recounts contemporary instances of inspiration, such as dream interpretation and prediction, but he limits possession by the spirit to the biblical prophets in order to assert implicitly “that the inspiration of the authors of scripture was qualitatively different from any subsequent insight.”

This lack of consensus is evident furthermore in two of the most recent studies of inspiration in the writings of Philo. R. Berchman

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4 *Sobria Ebrietas. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der antiken Mystik* (BZNW 9; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1929) 64-66.
5 *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1935).
6 *L’évolution*, 254.
8 “Le pneuma,” 424.
9 πνεῦμα in *Philo of Alexandria*, 162; 142-63.
10 *Concept of Spirit*, 49.