"AND HAVE DOMINION..."
THE INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 1, 28 IN PHILO JUDAeus
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This study began as part of a larger essay on the history of the interpretation of the Old Testament texts referring to human rule over the creation 1). In their extent, variety, and influence, Philo of Alexandria’s references to Gen. 1, 28 proved to be the most important of all those studied. In presenting the following analysis of them we have two general aims; to provide insight into Philo’s exegetical and hermeneutical approach, particularly his relating of scripture to Hellenistic thought; and to explore what we may call the hermeneutical potential of one scriptural text, for it commended itself to Philo’s use in a surprisingly rich variety of theological and philosophical contexts. After identifying the primary references to our text in Philo, and making some introductory remarks about them, we shall divide the study into four major sections, I. Philosophical anthropology, II. Ethics, III. Historical speculation, IV. Philosophical assessment of culture. This arrangement corresponds to what seem to be the implicit questions with which Philo approaches Gen. 1, 28. First, does the text describe a present reality—do human beings in present experience possess the dominion of which the text speaks? Empirical observation provides a mixed answer; they do possess far-reaching power over nature, yet nothing like the total rule the text suggests. Part I presents Philo’s positive and constructive treatment of the dominion theme, but parts II and III cover different approaches to the negative side of experience, understanding it respectively as due to human imperfection and to historical processes. Second, to what kinds of human activity does the text refer—what human activities in the natural world have biblical sanction and divine approval? Part IV deals with this by exploring Philo’s attitude to human culture. A

third implicit question is everywhere apparent—how does dominion
over nature, however understood, fit into the pattern of the total
human relationship with God? Philo’s interest is at all times
theological, and rule over nature is never treated as a topic in-
dependent of this larger questioning.

Basic to the investigation will be Op 77-88 2), Philo’s only com-
mentary on our text, but numerous other passages are of direct
relevance. Quaes Gen II 56 is a commentary on the closely related
Gen. 9, 1.2, and actually contains a quotation of Gen. 1, 28. In
addition to Op 84, the following have apparent paraphrases of the
biblical words about dominion: Op 148, Agr 8, Vita Mos II 65,
Spec Leg III 111, Praem 9, and there are other allusions, not all
entirely certain, in Op 142, Quod Dens 47, Mut 63, Vita Mos II 22,
Praem 86.89, Aet 65, Quod Omn 20, Quaes Gen I 18-21, I 94, II 60,
Quaes Ex II 25 (and cf. the allusion to Gen. 9, 1.2 in Praem 22).
In what follows we will draw upon all these passages, but will
relate the discussion as closely as possible to the major commentary
in Op 77-88.

On the basis of these passages, read in their contexts, we make
some preliminary remarks. Whereas Gen. 1, 28 refers to dominion
by verbs in the imperative, Philo’s paraphrases are always in the
past indicative and express dominion in nouns (the office of ruler,
the function of rule). A dynamic expression has been replaced by
a static one; dominion is not something to be attained, but some-
thing that belongs to the permanent structure of the world 3).
Further, and in common with most of the early exegesis of our
text, Philo pays surprisingly little attention to the Gen. 1 context.
Aside from one probable allusion, he does not connect dominion
with the vegetarian implications of Gen. 1, 29 4). Nor does he
link it with the command to “be fruitful and multiply”, though
Gen. 1 does so in the closest possible way. Most importantly and
surprisingly, though the Imago Dei and human dominion are both

2) For Philo’s treatises, we here adopt the system of abbreviations given in
Studia Philonica 1 (1972) 92.

3) Ps. 8, 6, which speaks of a once for all appointment to rule, may have con-
tributed to this development. The LXX vocabulary in this verse (κυριεῖται,
ὑποτάσσεται) is common in exegesis of Gen. 1, 28 (e.g. Theophilus, Ad Autol. II
18, Ps.-Clement, Hom. X 3), and even appears in Philo himself (πάντα ὑπέταττεν
ὑπότετον, Op 84, which deserves notice as one of his relatively rare citations of non-
pentateuchal texts).

4) Cf. below, note 138.