

# PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWISH EXEGETE AND HIS INTERCULTURAL CONDITION

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## Abstract

*Philo of Alexandria, the first century Jewish exegete, is one of the most important non-Christians in the history of Christianity. It is common to find brief reference to his works in theological manuals or introductory books on the New Testament. However, it is very common to find reductionist commentaries on the man and his works. In order to appreciate the real importance of Philo's treatises (and his relevance for our third world postcolonial context) it is necessary to realize the complexity of his cultural context and of his agenda. This is the main aim of this article.*

**Key Words:** Philo of Alexandria; Interculturality; Judaism; Hellenism

## Introduction

*Philo* (Φίλων) was a common name in the first century AD. It is a Greek name, but not used exclusively by the Greeks. After Alexander the Great (323 BC), Greece was not concealed inside its borders any more (Modrzejewski 1993:72-73; Momigliano 1994:10-11). Its language, culture and education were not exclusive to a specific people, neither were its names. Victor Tcherikover rightly observed that “[i]n the Diaspora, as in Palestine, Hellenization found its first external expression in the changing of personal names” (Tcherikover 1999:346). Among numerous persons with the same name, a specific *Philo* is the focus of this study: *Philo of Alexandria*, who is also known as *Philo, the Jew*.<sup>1</sup>

Philo, the Jew. These words together produce a paradox from the beginning. I mean, from the *beginning of the historical person to whom they refer*. *Philo was born at some date between 20 BC and 5 BC. A birth calls for a name. A Greek name is given to the newborn Philo*, a mark that would be with him for years, probably until about the middle of the first century AD, when he died. Nevertheless, the other word, ‘Jew’, also requires a mark, a permanent but non-verbal mark: Philo has been circumcised, and then he received in his own body the testimony of his parents’ faith and belonging to an ethnic group.

Rome, Jerusalem and Athens were very close to each other in the streets of Alexandria, in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> This is doubtlessly a propitious situation for different kinds of collisions and

<sup>1</sup> Before World War Two, Philo was called *Philo Judaeus*. Later, this appellation is replaced by Philo of Alexandria, which has stronger geographical connotation and weaker ethnical reference (Runia 1994:23-24).

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, ‘close to Egypt’, if we want to use the Latin expression ‘Alexandria ad Aegyptum’.

misunderstandings. However, we must remember that cultural *meeting* had been in progress at Alexandria centuries before Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, was born.

The aim of this article is to establish an introductory reflection on Philo's context considering its cultural complexity. Moreover, in the final part I present some intertextual consequences of this intercultural condition, since the work with a text is what characterises the Alexandrian as an exegete. Finally, I conclude the study with an observation about the possible relevance of Philo as an example for contemporary exegetes and theologians.

### The Intercultural Context of Philo's Alexandria

A comparison between Émile Bréhier's (1950) and Wolfson's (1947)<sup>3</sup> studies on Philo is sufficient to render evident how different can be the interpretations about Philo's identity and works. While one author emphasises his Greek background and dependence on Greek philosophical tradition, another tries to display the innovative mind of a man completely engaged in Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid an *exclusive* perspective, Samuel Sandmel refers to Philo's works as "the first major blend of Judaism and Hellenism" (Sandmel 1974:4).<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this dual reference (Greek and Jewish) is what renders possible different views about him. However, it is necessary to think beyond the simple notion of *blend* or *reunion*, terms that do not reflect the potential tension inherent to the meeting.<sup>6</sup>

Philo is *not* a thinker who tried to *conciliate* Greek philosophy and Jewish religion.<sup>7</sup> If we say so, it seems that he brought his culture, met another, and decided to conciliate both in his discourse. It is not the right way to understand his person or his work. He did not decide to conciliate something that was inherent to him with something from the *other*. On the contrary, he had in himself the sometimes uncomfortable companionship of a multiple inscription. That means that his writings are involved in a relationship with different archives mainly because his universe of discourse is as it is. Then, I would prefer to think about a *negotiation*, but I would insist even more that it is not a meeting of the member of an isolated group with an alien culture.

Jewish people had interacted with different cultures in various moments of their history and this frequent conversation with the *other* always left marks in their tradition. One could imagine that this interaction with other cultures would produce a *degenerated* kind of

<sup>3</sup> This is the year of the first printing. I accessed the edition of 1982.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive exposition of the opinion of many scholars on Philo's identification between Greek and Jewish tradition, I suggest a reading of Hilgert 1995. The author himself concludes that "Philo was a Hellenist, but first and always a Jew" (Hilgert 1995:15).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Daniélou attempts to be more complete in his statement: "Philon réunira en lui les divers aspects de ce judaïsme alexandrin: sa culture hellénistique, son loyalisme romain, sa foi juive" (Daniélou 1958:12).

<sup>6</sup> David Winston's article *Judaism and Hellenism: Hidden Tensions in Philo's Thought* is useful to make some of these tensions more explicit. He demonstrates that Philo mobilises Greek philosophical notions in his exposition of the bible, but in different moments, when these notions contradict the understanding originated from the Biblical text, he does not adopt them, and tries to take the emphasis from this fact in order to hide the tension. Nevertheless, Winston still characterises Philo's works as a "remarkable synthesis of Judaism and Hellenism" (Winston 1990:19). I understand that the evidences observed by the researcher himself should make us avoid this kind of conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> Philo's reference to Greek philosophy in Moses' education (*Mos.* 1.23) could be seen as a proof against my statement. However, if one considers the entire treatise, it becomes clear that Philo is not preparing the way for a kind of conciliation, but that he really understands Moses' books as true philosophy. It is not necessary to conciliate philosophy and Scripture. Scripture itself is philosophical, and because of that, it is possible to read it with reason (and Greek philosophy) as a companion.

Judaism, departed from the purest version of it. The fallacy of this idea is revealed when one realises that this *pure* Judaism has never existed at all.

It is impossible for any culture to remain completely isolated. This is undoubtedly the case of first century Alexandrian Jewish experience, and also of Jewish communities in other times and places (Levine 2009:37). Accordingly, Erich Gruen demonstrated that in Antiquity the reaction to the *other* is not essentially of rejection or indifference, but frequently of integration and reception. This phenomenon is observed in many moments of Jewish history as well (Gruen 2011:277-351).

It is clear, therefore, that before Philo's lifetime, a continuous process of cultural meeting had been in course for centuries around the Mediterranean (and especially at Alexandria). Social and cultural changes had taken place and previous influences had been absorbed in every group that had a seat at this negotiating table. New questions appeared at each moment, and new answers were proposed.<sup>8</sup> However, the *dialogue* itself was not a novelty, but a common heritage.

Gregory Sterling states that, from the point of view of the Alexandrian Jews, it was something normal to be a Jew and to share what happened to be called Hellenism.<sup>9</sup> He is emphatic:

While it is a commonplace to point to Jewish observance of Torah requirements as a central component of Jewish identity, I would like to suggest that in Alexandria the right to participate in Hellenism was intellectually just as important and historically of greater consequence. As the community looked northward out across the Mediterranean, it not only looked east to Palestine, but west to Greece. Both horizons played critical roles in the shaping of the community's self-understanding, but from different perspectives. (Sterling 1995:18)

This double looking was part of the Jewish-Alexandrian's self-conception.<sup>10</sup> From their point of view, there is absolutely no antithesis between *Judaism* and *Hellenism*. Therefore, there is no resistance to one of them in benefit to the permanence of the other.

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<sup>8</sup> My point is about a negotiation built into the text. Therefore, the questions the authors faced used to be implicit in their texts. In a few cases, it is even possible to suppose from some passages the existence of previous real dialogues, such as conversations between Philo and other exegetes, someone curious about Jewish history, or a Jew bound to apostatize. The following question proposed by Hadas-Label does not make sense for my reflection: "What if all the works of Philo had been barely a long monologue?" (2003:114). Even if a non-Jewish public had not read them at all, or if his Jewish fellows had not taken them seriously, Philo's works cannot be taken as a monologue, since they are the result of a minded intercultural dialogue and negotiation.

<sup>9</sup> At least textually the 'Hellenism' (that is, the word ἑλληνισμός, used in this meaning related to a culture), appears for the first time in opposition to the 'Judaism' (Ιουδαϊσμός) and vice-versa, because both words were being used in this way for the first time in the same text, II Maccabees (2 Mc 2:21; 4:12-14; Sterling 2001:263).

<sup>10</sup> The author even suggests that the Roman dominance of Alexandria and the later more radical stratification of the different ethnic groups, with the explicit limitation of access to the Hellenistic civic life imposed on the Jews represented a kind of mutilation of this constitutive element of their identity. Modrzejewski exposes this change in the following words: "Under the Ptolomies, the Jews had been part of the community of 'Hellenes', the dominant group of Greek-speaking conquerors. When the Romans, in their turn, conquered Egypt, the situation was altered from top to bottom. There was no room within the limits of Roman law for the community of Hellenes, a cultural rather than a national concept. It was made up of differentiated elements, each with its own identity, and the sum of these elements could not be recognized as a single 'nation' or 'people'." (Modrzejewski 2001:161). He finds support in Josephus, who informs us that Jews and Greeks

Philo lived and wrote his treatises in this complex context, in this community that saw important references in east and west when looking north. That does not mean that his writing supposes a complete absence of differentiation between Jews and non-Jews. It does mean that there is a continuous and dynamic negotiation in his discourse about what is *own* (specific of Jewish people) and what is *common*, and that this interaction is unavoidable.

Where were the limits of what Philo can consider *common* with himself? At this point, I am touching the question of the *particular* and the *universal*. Ellen Birnbaum approached this theme through a study of the terms *Jew* (*Ιουδαῖος*) and *Israel* (*Ἰσραήλ*) in Philo's works. While from a supposed Hebrew etymology, *Israel* refers to the group of people "who sees God",<sup>11</sup> *Jew* is limited to the nation, the Jewish people, either to the historic people of biblical narrative or to Philo's contemporary people in the Diaspora and in Judaea. These words are not interchangeable. Not every member of the Jewish group is necessarily part of Israel, and, in theory, not everyone considered Israel is necessarily a Jew.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the group of the Jews is not restricted to those who were born as Jews. It was increased by the reception of proselytes. Then, according to Birnbaum, Philo should not be taken as particularistic, even though his universalism was not such to accept other religions of his cultural environment as similarly valid (Birnbaum 1996).<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, denying a total particularism and radical *otherness* is not an affirmation of a complete thoughtlessness about limits. If that were the case, there would be no need for (or possibility of) a negotiation. There were limits indeed, but not all of them were clearly noticed or established once and for all. Philo's discourse does not entail a total and unwise

shared the same appellation (τοὺς ἔλληνας) in Alexandria (*B.J.* II 487). It is important to recognize, however, that it is not the case of considering that every Jew was in this same class, but certainly many of them were (Gambetti 2009:49-50). Victor Tcherikover anticipated Modrzejewski's statement, pointing to the fact that when the Jews under Roman domain were submitted to the public tax called *laographia*, they saw themselves on the same social level of the Egyptians (Tcherikover, 1999:311-312).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, Philo uses to interpret *Israel* as ὁρῶν θεόν, "(the one) who sees God". By doing so, he probably reproduces an interpretation of the Hebrew name *Israel*, as a contraction of *ish roê el*, "the man (someone) who sees God" (Birnbaum 1996:70-72). For a different proposal, see Hayward 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Hayward tries to reduce these possibilities with two observations: 1) although someone else could be Israel, every Jew certainly would be Israel (Hayward 2000:226); 2) if a non-Jew could see God it should be understood as an extraordinary inspiration similar to the one experienced by Balaam's donkey (*Numbers* 22:28; cf. *Leg.* 3.210). I do not agree with the first statement, since Philo can be very critical of the Jews that do not live in accordance to their noble origin, and he does that even in a contraposition to proselytes (*Praem.* 152). As for the second point, it does not seem completely wrong, but unnecessary. If Philo does not clearly restrict the meaning of Israel, then neither does he assert that specific non-Jews were part of this group. Birnbaum's examples of non-Jews that are able to see (*Prob.* 74; *Prob.* 140; *Spec.* 2.45 – Birnbaum 1996:94) are not as relevant as she supposes. Firstly, because although *Prob.* is certainly authentic, it is considerably different from the rest of Philo's treatises in respect of the treatment of Greek heritage and non-Jewish elements in general. Moreover, in Birnbaum's references what one finds is a characterization of non-Jewish persons as able to see something important (the truth, the nature and so on), but not God. Birnbaum adds in her lists the *therapeutai*, described in *Cont.*, and remarks that Philo does not say (but merely suggests) that they are Jews. I observe, however, that the Jewish identity of the sect is evident even with a simple reading of the treatise. They are introduced in comparison to the Essenes (*Cont.* 1), they follow Moses' instructions (*Cont.* 64), and their behaviour (*Cont.* 28-31) is close to that of the Jews in the synagogues (*Somm.* 2.126-128). As for the relation between this sectarian group and the Jews in general, cf. Hay 2002:344-345. Therefore, it seems reasonable to affirm that Philo does not close the group called Israel, and does not equal it to that of the Jews, but nothing consistently suggests that this overture was such as to include someone completely ignorant of Mosaic Law as a member of *Israel*.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect, she criticises Mendelson (1988), who, through an analysis of Philo's orthodoxy and orthopraxy, presents the Alexandrian as essentially particularistic.

continuity or identification. It is proved by the fact that there is a way in and a way out. Symmetrically to the possibility of a non-Jew becoming a Jew through conversion, there is the possibility of a Jew becoming an apostate, by neglecting his origins. “Only apostasy entails a break with Jewish identity”, Modrzejewski (1993:83) observes, adding as an example the famous case of Dositheus, recorded in III Maccabees. The Greek text is quite clear about the disconnection of the apostate “who changes the customs and becomes a foreigner to the native beliefs” (3 Mc. 1:3).<sup>14</sup>

For Philo, being part of the Jewish people is one of the most important aspects of a man’s life. Jewish people held a special position in the *cosmos*. He frequently refers to the division of the world into Greeks and Barbarians. He even uses this pair to define the humanity in its totality, as in *Spec.* 1.211, where “Greek and Barbarians” (Ελλήνων, βαρβάρων) follows “men and women” (ἀνδρῶν, γυναικῶν), and is followed by “inhabitants of continents and islands” (τῶν ἐν ἡπείροις, τῶν τὰς νήσους εἰληχότων). Berthelot rightly inquires in which side Philo would locate the Jews. As notable as the problem is the answer the researcher proposes, viz. that Philo does not consider the Jewish people as part of the common world, by a consideration of *Numbers* 23:9 (Berthelot 2011a).

In this quasi-cosmological perspective, then, Philo seems to consider an absolute specificity of Jewish people.<sup>15</sup> However, even marked by this special role, the Jewish people are connected to all of the other nations, since they hold in respect to humanity as a whole the place that the priest holds in a kingdom. The Jewish cult is enacted to the benefit of all humankind, and it is a moment when all the *cosmos* worship its Creator (*Spec.* 1.82-96; *Mos.* 2.133-135; *Somn.* 1.203-215).<sup>16</sup> In this way, Jewish *particular* cult receives a *universal* perspective. Moreover, one should remember Birnbaum’s observation that belonging to this group is not given simply by familial relationship, nor by place of residence. What defines the people is the adherence to a very specific ensemble of laws and practices of monotheism (Ubigli 2003:72-73). Thus any human being is a potential participant of this very singular cult.

Eventually, Philo exposes clear differences between Jews and Greeks, even though he is so radically involved in both traditions. Theological differences are presented throughout the Philonic *corpus*, but an especially interesting opposition that embraces different themes,

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<sup>14</sup> About apostasy according to Philo, see Barclay 1998:84-85, and also Sandelin 2006 and 2012. (There is an isolated problem in this last article that has to be observed: Sandelin seems to be worried about Philo’s presence in civic events that would comport some religious connotation. His worries are based on Feldman’s understanding that the mere presence of a Jew in these events would compromise his orthodoxy [Sandelin 2012:44]. There is flagrant anachronism or at least imprecision in Feldman’s categorical statement of a supposed orthodoxy in Philo’s context.)

<sup>15</sup> Different passages from Philo’s works can make one think that he includes the Jews with one of the sides. Ellen Birnbaum mentions the expression ‘our language’ used by the Alexandrian in reference to Greeks as an example of his self-insertion among Greek speakers (Birnbaum 2001:47). However, the fact that a writer who is writing in Greek states that this is the language of himself and his readers is not the same as stating that all in the group of Jews are on the same side as the Greeks. Birnbaum also mentions *Mos.* 2.27 as a possible insertion of Jews among Barbarians (Birnbaum 2001:47; cf. Goudriaan 1992:84-85). Nevertheless, as Berthelot rightly observes, in this passage Philo reproduces the opinion of non-Jews (Berthelot 2011a:48).

<sup>16</sup> This understanding attributes to the Jewish cult a meaning related to all humanity. Nevertheless, this very notion is also the point of divergence, since it is in complete opposition to Hellenistic religiosity, for while in it the human being worships elements of the (created) cosmos, the Jewish Alexandrian proposes that (together with the human being) the created cosmos worships The One Who Is (uncreated). (Harl 2011:173 and Bréhier 1950:170).

appears in *De Vita Contemplativa*. A series of passages of the treatise (*Cont.* 14, 42, 57, 68) astound the reader with how closely the Alexandrian is to Hellenic culture (Birnbaum 2001:46). Maren Niehoff explains this characteristic of *Cont.* by affirming that it was written in a late period of Philo's life, when he would have adhered to Roman ideology and, then, adopted Roman stereotypes of the Greeks, in order to have the Jews together with Roman elites (Niehoff 2001:137-158). I observe that by comparing his own ideal with that of the Greeks, Philo reveals once more the importance of this tradition to his reflection. Greek traditional texts could be appreciated, but, at the same time, considered as less important than the *ideal* text of the Jews (the *Torah*). Similarly, specific Greek behaviour, although to some extent praiseworthy, are revealed as less important or imperfect when compared to that of a possible Jewish *ideal* of life (that is to say, the life of the *therapeutai*, which gravitates towards the *Torah*). The most important point, however, is that one should recognise that in a time of tense intercultural negotiation, it ought to be expected that an author would use different emphases in his construction of relations, limits and communications, according to his strategies.

Philo's context is not an empty space where different cultures circulate without any thought about differences. There were lines in his map indeed. However, these lines were not given beforehand in order to be merely preserved.

### **Some Observations on the Main Encounters – not only the Greeks**

While Jewish people interacted with many different cultures for centuries, there was something especially tense (in a cultural-religious sense) in their relation with the Greeks. Albert Baumgarten asserts:

(T)he problem with Greek overlords was not the same as with other imperial masters: it was not only economic, political or military, but had important religious and cultural components. Jews therefore felt the need to mark the boundary between themselves and the Greeks much more than they felt that need with other imperial powers (Baumgarten 2002:8).

At Alexandria there was a "Greece deposited in a library" and "a point of view about Greece as culture" (Hartog 2004:119). There were also the living Greeks, who in specific situations could interpose obstacles to the keeping of fundamental rights indispensable for the existence of Diaspora Jewry, similar to the exemption from the imperial cult, as it is reported in *Legatio ad Gaium* and *In Flaccum*. Then, of course, the interaction between the Hellenised Jews, Greek culture and the Greeks was definitely relevant.

Nevertheless, Philo also refers frequently to the Egyptians. He spouts stern criticism towards Egyptian religiosity and accuses contemporary Egyptians of blameworthy behaviour. This particular encounter with the Egyptians is interesting not only because the Alexandrian was surrounded by them, but also because it entails not only social contemporary problems, as Goudriaan demonstrated (1992), but also biblical hermeneutics. Different researchers attempt to identify *the* source of Philo's repudiation of this very people. Some of them state that the social context is crucial, while others emphasise Philo's readings of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> I think that there is frequently a double orientation in his criticism

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Niehoff 2001 and Pearce 2007.

towards Egyptians, a Biblical one, and another social-contemporary one, and that a scholarly approach should take account of both perspectives simultaneously.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that when Philo was born, the Roman Empire already held power over Alexandria. Philo's relationship to Roman culture and power is disputed. Maren Niehoff, who investigated the question over more than a decade, is convinced that Philo knew and reproduced certain elements of Roman thought. She has received stern criticism from many other Philonists, including some important reservations indeed, and invited to conduct further research. Sarah Pearce observes, for example, that Roman thought itself is very complex and, consequently, what Niehoff takes as an element of Roman ideology is not necessarily a wide-spread thought or general characteristic (Pearce 2007:XXV-XXVI). On the other hand, some of these attacks on Niehoff's proposal are quite misleading. Denying the possibility of Roman influence upon Philo because he did not read Latin (*idem*) is an example of this. Anyone dedicated to the study of culture and discursive relations, whether in Antiquity or in later times, recognises that the reading of a text is not the only possible via to cultural and literary interchange (cf. Lévy 2004:297). Philo went to Rome at least once. He had to think under and about Roman power. He demonstrates knowledge on recent Roman history in his *Legatio ad Gaium* or *In Flaccum*. Therefore, the question that can motivate some debate is not whether he was influenced by the Romans. It is a fact. The real problem is the identification of the precise source of this influence, the extent of it in Philo's writing and thought, and his position concerning Roman power and thought.

### **The Complex Negotiation about what is One's Own and what is Common (with the Other)**

A textual resonance of this complex intercultural context can be found in Philo's use of the words ἰδιος (one's own) and κοινός (common) in the narrative of an important and tense moment of his career. In his *Legatio ad Gaium* the Alexandrian relates his own enterprise as a member of the embassy, sent by Alexandrian Jews, in order to negotiate their residence rights and security in the presence of Caligula. While the five ambassadors were waiting for an opportunity to talk directly to the emperor, an unidentified Jew arrived with devastating news: a statue of Caligula-Zeus was going to be located inside the Temple in Jerusalem. Philo reports that once they heard about it, all of them "gathered together in seclusion and bewailed simultaneously (ὁμοῦ) the disaster personal to each and common to all"<sup>18</sup> (*Legat.* 190). The adverb ὁμοῦ can express both a simultaneity (that is, a coincidence in time) and a place coincidence. The translator should opt for "at the same time" or "at the same place". Whatever, the most important point is to observe that in this case the *one's own* and the *common* are co-cried. There is a distinction, but only one crying. What would be *one's own* and *common* in this case? The *common* refers to what is suffered by the Jews as a people, in general. The *one's own*, in turn, can be related to the individual (each one bewails the fact according to his own experience) or to the geographical dimension, since there were Alexandrian Jews and non-Alexandrian Jews on that occasion. Another passage can bring some light to this question. The narrator reflects on the change of priority from the defense

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<sup>18</sup> This translation, such as the others in this article, is from the Loeb edition (with small changes in the present case).

of rights in the ambit of what is the Alexandrian's *own* problem and the fight in a wider context:

For small things must need give way to big and particular to general interests, the loss of which means the perdition of the body politic. For what religion or righteousness is to be found in vainly striving to show that we are Alexandrians, when we are menaced by the danger which threatens a more universal interest, the corporate body of the Jews? (*Legat.* 193-194).

By not considering these texts cautiously, one could imagine that for Philo the *own* would always have been what was related to Jewish culture, while the *common* would have been the heritage he shared with the Greek cultural environment. Nevertheless, the situation is far more complex. The *common* can be Judaism as a whole and the *own* the Alexandrian Jewish community.

The *own* and the *common* change in a game of variable perspectives. In a certain moment, as has been seen, Philo can assume a Greek division of the world between Greeks and Barbarians, presenting Caesar as the one “who healed the pestilences common (κοινά) to Greeks and Barbarians” (*Legat.* 145). Even though a scholarly study can bring us to the conclusion that he put the Jewish people out of this division, as I observed, this is not explicit in a simple reading of his texts. In passages such as the one I have just quoted, there is nothing textually indicating that any group is excluded from this division. What is explicit, on the other hand, is an appraisal of a Roman emperor responsible for the expansion of the goods of Hellenism for all over the world. In a negotiation, the writer can avoid some themes and hide some of his conditions at specific moments.

Thinking about what is *one's own* and what is the *common* entails a reflection on limits. I understand that in the constitution of a group definition, generally what counts more is the limit that separates this group from the others, rather than the cultural content inside these limits (Barth 1998:15). On the other hand, it is not right to restrict the thought to a scheme in which *one's own* is at one side and the *other* at the other side of a border. This can be the main thought in the definition of a group. However, in the *negotiation* the notion of the *common* (with different possible perspectives) is what is most remarkable.

In his intercultural context Philo does not have an identity based on an absolute sameness, but one that is constructed in a complex process of identification. This is remarkable in his case, but is not exclusive to him. Shaye Cohen rightly observed that the identity of the Jews in Antiquity was elusive and uncertain (Cohen 1999:3). Moreover, Joseph Geiger demonstrated clearly that even in this respect “the Jews had much in common with the rest of the inhabitants of the empire” (Geiger 2009:145-146).

Therefore, while Ellen Birnbaum looked for *the place of Judaism in Philo's thought*, I suspect that there is an unavoidable instability in the *places* occupied by each element in Philo's writing. The *places* themselves are movable.

### **Resonance of the Intercultural Condition in Philo's Intertextual Relations**

The intercultural condition of the exegete is a crucial aspect that influenced his work with texts, including Jewish people's *own* texts (the Torah especially) and those texts *common* to the entire Hellenistic world.

The book the Alexandrian quoted most was the *Torah*. It makes us consider that he is obviously related to Jewish discursive traditions (not only in Diaspora but also) in Judea<sup>19</sup>, but he reads this *Book* in its translation in the Greek language, and uses a vocabulary and method of interpretation close to the one used by Greek interpreters. Although there is no consensus on the origins of Philo's allegorical interpretation, the most pertinent proposals to its constitution consider seriously the importance of similar methods developed among the Greeks. Frequently, the interpretation of the Stoics is evoked as a possible source. Even though this notion has been criticized by Long (1996 and 1997), I still think it is possible to observe a remarkable parallel. There are, however, other possible comparisons. Émile Bréhier (1950:39-44) compared Philonic allegories to the Pythagorean interpretation registered in *The Tabula of Cebes*. Recently, Motusova (2010) made a more precise approximation with Neo-Pythagorean hermeneutic tradition, and Berthelot (2012) pointed to a similarity with the hermeneutical work of the Neo-Platonists. The identification of the best Greek school or document to establish a comparison is an open question, but it is certainly the relation of Philo's method with the Greek world. Moreover, he mobilizes philosophical, medical and astronomic Greek knowledge in the exposition of his reading. That is to say, the very work with the sacred text is not closed inside a universe exclusively Jewish (which does not exist at all).

Philo also quotes verses from Homeric poems, lyrical poems, tragedies and comedies from the Greek literary corpus. He does so even in the course of an exegetical exposition of the *Torah*. However, he tries to preserve *a limit between Greek and Jewish literature*. Better said: a limit between Greek literature and the most sacred core of Jewish literature: the *Torah*. His preoccupation about this question, which seems to originate from the conflict with some 'accusers' of the Biblical text,<sup>20</sup> is manifest in oppositions such as the following:

Indeed an old saying is still current that the deity goes the round of the cities, in likeness now of this man now of that man, taking note of wrongs and transgressions. The current story may not be a true one, but it is at all events good and profitable for us that it should be current. And the sacred word ever entertaining holier and more august conceptions of Him that is, yet at the same time longing to provide instruction and teaching for the life of those who lack wisdom, likened God to man, not, however, to any particular man (*Somn.* 1.233-234).

Now the giants were on the earth in those days" (Gen. VI:4). Some may think that the Lawgiver is alluding to the myths of the poets about the giants, but indeed myth-making is a thing most alien to him, and his mind is set on following the steps of truth and nothing but truth (*Gig.* 58).

In the first passage, where we find a reference to the *Odyssey* (XVII:485-487), a certain honour is conceded to the Greek poem introduced as an 'ancient word' (παλαιός λόγος). However, Moses' book surpasses it in solemnity and holiness. In the second, Philo's aim is

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<sup>19</sup> At this point I must observe that I am not considering the existence of a complete rupture between Palestinian Judaism and Judaism of the Diaspora, also because Judaism was Hellenized also in Judea (Hengel 1974). The rejection of specific aspects of Greek culture does not necessarily entail a complete opposition to Hellenism in general (Goldstein 1981). Nevertheless, I agree with Gregory Sterling, who observes that even though there was not a total rupture, the existence of differences in the responses of each Jewish community in its relationship with the Hellenism (Sterling 2001:278) is obvious.

<sup>20</sup> Philo reproduces one of these blames in *Conf.* 2.

to observe an even clearer limit by stating that what is read in the sacred book has nothing to do with the composition of myths (μυθοπλαστειν).

There is a real negotiation. Philo reads and uses Greek literature throughout in his works (Koskenniemi 2010; Berthelot 2011b). However, it is not a submissive appropriation. He is engaged in a real negotiation. He has conditions and reservations. He certainly knew and understood the methods developed at the Museum for the study of traditional texts, including the comparative mythology,<sup>21</sup> but he decided to avoid them because of his appreciation of the Scriptures as inspired by God himself (Paul 2000:207-213). Instead, he opts for another Greek kind of reading, the allegorical method, as I have just mentioned. This option is the one he thought was the more suitable for his religious needs, and it results are propitious to his intercultural production. Similarly, in his works with Greek poetry, he is meticulous to select and introduce the verses without compromising on religious ideas opposite to those of Jewish monotheism. In this sense, every use of Greek poetry or Greek knowledge in his interpretation and exposition of the Bible reveals a continuous and thoughtful negotiation.

This is one of the ways the intercultural condition enriches the writing of the Jewish-Alexandrian exegete and renders it more and more intriguing.

## Conclusion

This presentation of Philo's context as an intense intercultural environment makes evident that he is unavoidably an intercultural subject and exegete. It also shows that he is not a Jew trying to conciliate his thought with an exotic tradition. Moreover, it briefly suggests how rich the monumental works of this Alexandrian-Jew can be considered when the reader takes into consideration all the complexity of his cultural and discursive context. The main aim of this introductory article was to remark that this consideration is strictly necessary in any approach of Philo's works. As a secondary objective, it should offer to non-Philonists one more reason to consider reading this impressive *corpus*: the cultural complexity and tension present in it.

I suggest, moreover, that in addition to all the relevance of Philo of Alexandria to different fields of knowledge,<sup>22</sup> he and his works can be taken as a point of departure for a reflection on the practice of our contemporary theologians and exegetes, in a world which is more and more intercultural. This type of exercise seems to be useful (including perhaps especially) for biblical scholars working in ex-colonies countries – including African and South-American nations – where, as in Philo's Alexandria, interaction (sometimes *tense* interaction) of different cultures and different powers is a dynamic, strong and daily reality.

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- <sup>22</sup> David Runia affirms that Philo of Alexandria's works are important for five fields of knowledge: Jewish-Hellenistic Literature, Second Temple Judaism, New Testament, Patristic and Gnosticism (Runia 1990:185-186).

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