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Philo of Alexandria on divine forgiveness

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Introduction

1.1 *Aim of this study*

1.1.1 *Why divine forgiveness?*

1.1.1.1 *Hannah Arendt on forgiveness*

What is forgiveness? The influential philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt reflected on this fundamental concept like few other non-theological modern authors. She recognised forgiveness as an important tool for regulating human interactions in a peaceful manner.¹ To receive forgiveness, according to Arendt, is to be released from the consequences of an act of evil that someone has committed. The alternative, but not the opposite, to forgiveness is just punishment. Both can end an otherwise endless cycle of revenge.

Revenge is the opposite to both forgiveness and punishment. Revenge is the attempt to inflict the same damage on the evildoers as they have inflicted on the victims. It is a re-enactment of the evil act, but now victim and perpetrator swap places. Revenge in this way leads to an endless cycle of damage and retaliation inflicted back and forth. Forgiveness, in contrast, breaks the endless cycle of revenge. Forgiveness transcends both the perpetrator and the victim above their roles. It establishes a new relationship between them, one that is open for the future.

Arendt described forgiveness in a secular context. She did, however, refer to the religious roots of the concept. According to Arendt, Jesus of Nazareth introduced the power of forgiveness into inter-human affairs. He instructed his followers to be forgiving, and set an example for them in his ministry. Jesus knew of forgiveness as part of his Jewish religious heritage. However, he opposed the claim of his religious peers that only God had the power to forgive. Arendt also claimed that in the non-Jewish context forgiveness played an insignificant role. According to her, the Romans were only rudimentarily aware of the possibility of forgiving, and the Greeks had no knowledge of the concept at all.

Hannah Arendt deserves much credit for highlighting the importance of forgiveness in human interactions, and for her critical reflection on the concept of forgiveness and its background in Jewish and Christian religion. According to her analysis, forgiveness in a secular context is modelled after forgiveness in a religious context. The latter implies divine forgiveness: God forgiving humans. Arendt, however, has not explored the notion of divine forgiveness.

¹ The summary of Hannah Arendt's views on forgiveness is based on ARENDT, *Human Condition*, pp. 236–247 and also on the summary of Arendt's views on forgiveness and promise as helpful tools in human interaction in TIMMERS-HUIGENS, *Geloofscommunicatie*, pp. 53–56, and TATMAN, 'Tikkun Olam'.

She mentioned it as an element of the Jewish religious tradition in which the idea of inter-human forgiveness was fruitfully developed. She then focused on inter-human forgiveness alone.

Arendt presented the development of the concept of forgiveness by applying a sharp contrast between Jewish-Christian culture and Greco-Roman culture, as was usual in her time (her book *The Human Condition* first appeared in 1958). Arendt claimed that because of its antecedents in the biblical concept of divine forgiveness, forgiveness is a Jewish invention, popularised by Christianity. According to her, forgiveness was a novel concept when it came up, previously unknown in the Greco-Roman world. She presented this latter culture as being dominated by the endless cycle of revenge, because it lacked the instrument of forgiveness to break this cycle.²

This element of Arendt's analysis of the antecedents of the notion of forgiveness requires refinement, however. Regarding divine forgiveness, the contrast between Judaism and its Greco-Roman context was not as sharp as Arendt suggested. A brief comparison of divine forgiveness these two will bring this to light. Aspects of divine forgiveness in the Jewish religious context can be brought into view by briefly considering how it appears in the biblical tradition, and how it was further developed in various strands of early Judaism.³ The biblical context of divine forgiveness and its further development in early Judaism will be considered first, followed by an exploration of divine forgiveness in the Greco-Roman context.⁴

² Arendt's claim that forgiveness was a Jewish-Christian invention, unknown or unappreciated in Greco-Roman culture, has often been repeated (see, for example, TIMMERS-HUIGENS, *Geloofscommunicatie*, p. 79). In a volume on forgiveness in antiquity, several authors affirm Arendt's claim that forgiveness was absent from Greco-Roman culture (see KONSTAN, 'Assuaging Rage'; and BRAUND, 'Anger', especially p. 81 note 3). In other contributions in the same volume Arendt's claim is nuanced. Kathryn Gutzwiller and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi both illustrate how the notion of forgiveness is present in Greek and Roman sources (see GUTZWILLER, 'Forgiveness' and VÁRHELYI, 'To Forgive').

³ Divine forgiveness is an important topic in Christianity, as stated, for example, in BEYREUTHER, et al., *Begriffslexikon*, pp. 1739–1740: 'Das Sündersein des Menschen zerstörte dessen Verhältnis zu Gott ... Die Vergebung als Erneuerung dieses Verhältnisses nimmt eine zentrale Stelle in der christl. Verkündigung ein. Sie steht als Gottes Tat gegen das sündige Tun des Menschen und ist begründet in der Gnade Gottes.' Compare also Romans 3:22–25: 'For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.'; and Ephesians 1:7: 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace' (NRSV). However, since the focus of the present study is on Philo of Alexandria, Christian religion and theology are outside of the scope of this study.

⁴ I use the terms 'Jewish' and 'Greco-Roman' to distinguish between interacting sub-cultures that existed and developed within a shared wider cultural context of the time period identified as 'Hellenistic'.

1.1.1.2 ***Divine forgiveness in the biblical context and in early Judaism***

Three words are used in the Hebrew Bible associated with forgiveness: כָּסַח, נָשָׂא and סָלַח; in the Septuagint these are translated into Greek using ἀνίημι, ἀφίημι, ἱλάσκομαι and ἵλεως εἰμί/γίγνομαι. Forgiveness in the biblical context can be predominantly understood as pardon granted by God to humans who have transgressed God's laws.⁵ Such a transgression grieves and angers God, and will consequently be punished. God will punish the sinner, often with life-threatening measures such as illnesses or persecution by enemies. God is prepared, however, to forgive those who confess their sin, ask for forgiveness and repent – that is, commit themselves to follow God's commandments in the future.⁶ Various sacrifices are prescribed to ensure the procurement of divine forgiveness.⁷ Receiving forgiveness means the sinners' illness and persecution will stop and they will be restored to health and safety.⁸ Prayer can be an effective medium to move God to forgiveness, even without sacrifices. Either sinners themselves may ask God for forgiveness or someone else may do this on their behalf.⁹ Confession of sins, sacrifice, (intercessional) prayer and the commitment to just behaviour appear as important elements of divine forgiveness in the biblical context.

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- ⁵ As Michael Morgan puts it: 'The primary 'victim' of wrong, so to speak – the one who is wronged and the one with whom a relationship has been breached by the wrong – is God.' MORGAN, 'Mercy', p. 138; and similarly in his conclusion on p. 142: 'Human sin and divine forgiveness are dominant motifs in the biblical religion. Relatively speaking, there is very little attention paid to interpersonal wrongdoing and forgiveness.' See also KONSTAN, *Before Forgiveness*, p. 105: 'it is for the most part God who forgives' and on pp. 121–122: 'Jesus would seem to be in accord with the conception of sin and forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible, in which repudiation of the Lord is the predominant concern.' Konstan emphasises that he does not wish to imply that the New Testament has nothing to say on the subject of interpersonal forgiveness, yet he does conclude that the primary focus in the New Testament is on God's forgiveness of human faults (see *ibid.*, pp. 122–123 and see also OESTERLEY, *Jews*, pp. 172–174).
- ⁶ Cf., for example, Ps. 86:5 'For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you' (NRSV). See also Num. 14:18; Ps. 130:4; Dn. 9:9; Neh. 9:17. In the Psalms the call on God for forgiveness is regularly accompanied by the commitment to just behaviour (see, for example, Ps. 32:8–11; 85:7–12; 86:11).
- ⁷ For forgiveness in the context of sacrificial cult see: Lv. 4:20–35; 5:10–26; 10:17; Num. 15:25–28.
- ⁸ Ps. 32 offers an excellent illustration of the whole process of the sinner first being ill, then the confession of sin, and the following restoration to health through God's forgiveness. See also Ps. 85:2–4; Ps. 103:2–6; Isa. 33:24, especially for the connection between illness, forgiveness and the restoration to health.
- ⁹ In Psalm 25 and 32 the sinner himself asks God for forgiveness; Job beseeches God, why He will not forgive him (Job 7:21); Abraham pleads with God for forgiveness for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra (Gn. 18:24–26); Moses prays on Pharaoh's behalf, to ask God for forgiveness and to stop the plague (Ex. 10:16–17); and pleads with God for forgiveness on behalf of his people (Ex. 34:9). Also, God can be asked to *not* grant forgiveness (Isa. 2:9; Neh. 3:37).

The biblical notion of God's forgiveness was further developed in various strands of early Judaism.¹⁰ The sacrificial cult in the Jerusalem temple functioned as an important institution to obtain divine forgiveness.¹¹ It seems likely that most Palestinian Jews made a pilgrimage to the temple at least once a year.¹² Jews in the diaspora were considered exempt from the biblical obligation to participate in the annual festivals in the temple. However, those who had the means are thought to have made a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime.¹³ The sacrificial cult helped to make divine forgiveness more tangible for common believers.¹⁴

However, other elements of the biblical concept were developed into mechanisms to realise God's forgiveness as well, reducing the significance of sacrifices. Ben Sirach, for instance, presented as important requirements for God's forgiveness: just behaviour in accordance with God's law, in particular self-examination, repentance and prayer.¹⁵ Repentance and confession of sin also appear as necessary ingredients to obtain God's forgiveness in the writings of Josephus and in various pseudepigrapha.¹⁶ In 4 Maccabees, the biblical elements of just ethical behaviour, intercessional prayer and sacrifice were combined and developed into the notion of God forgiving the transgressions of

¹⁰ More background on forgiveness in the biblical context can be found in FREEDMAN, *AB Dictionary* vol. 2, pp. 831–834; for an analysis of developments regarding divine forgiveness in early Judaism see JOHANSSON, 'Who Can Forgive'; sources for forgiveness in the intertestamental period can also be found in LEE/HUGHES/VILJOEN, 'Forgiveness'.

¹¹ Support of the temple in Jerusalem is one of five elements of what Ed P. Sanders calls 'common Judaism', the other four elements being: performing regular (daily and weekly) rituals in the service of God; Sabbath observance; circumcision; and observing certain purity rules, including dietary regulations such as abstaining from eating pork (see SANDERS, *Judaism*, pp. 236–237). Support that these five elements were seen as normal and often normative for most (however not all) Jews of this period can be found in Greek and Latin literary sources (see COHEN, 'Common Judaism') and also (tentatively) in archaeological data (see MEYERS, 'Material Culture', with additional support and important caveats formulated by Jürgen Zangenberg in ZANGENBERG, 'Multidimensional').

¹² SANDERS, *Judaism*, p. 127.

¹³ Ibid.; Elias Bickerman describes how for Jews in the diaspora fasting became an important ritual for redemption as an alternative to sacrifice (see BICKERMAN, *Jews*, p. 138). In an article discussing the relations between Jerusalem and Jews in Egypt, Johannes Tromp describes how Jews living outside Judea contributed to and visited the Jerusalem temple out of a sense of solidarity with their ancestral city (see TROMP, 'Relations'). Benjamin Gordon describes how the temple of Jerusalem could become an important tourist attraction in the late Second Temple period (200 BCE–70 CE), especially because of Herod's grand reconstruction of the temple and the infrastructural improvements the Roman Empire provided (see GORDON, 'Sightseeing', p. 280).

¹⁴ Sanders provides a lively and informed reconstruction of how an imaginary Palestinian Jewish family may have made such a yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem (see SANDERS, *Judaism*, pp. 112–116). He describes how the acting out of the ritual 'helped create the worshippers' interior response' (p. 116).

¹⁵ Sir. 17:24–25, 18:20.

¹⁶ Josephus, *BJ* V, 415; 1 En. 5:8; Ps. Sal. 9:6–7; 4 Ez. 7:132–140; 2 Bar. 84:10–11; Pr. Man. 11–15.

the nation because of the suffering and death of a single or few righteous ones.¹⁷ Prayer by itself (without sacrifice) was increasingly perceived as sufficient to persuade God to be merciful.¹⁸ In the Damascus Document an eschatological element was added to divine forgiveness. It will be granted by the priestly messiah to the community as a whole.¹⁹

To sum up. Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible and in early Judaism was seen as something granted mainly by God to evildoers who confess their sins and repent – that is, commit themselves to future just behaviour. Forgiveness meant that the divine punishment evildoers receive will stop; instead, they will be restored to health and safety. Prayer and sacrifice often accompanied the plea for divine forgiveness. Righteous people could intercede with God and obtain forgiveness for others, through prayer or even through sacrificing themselves. The complete restoration to health and safety of a community could become part of eschatological hope.

Aspects of divine forgiveness in the Greco-Roman context will be considered next, to refine Arendt's presentation of forgiveness as something rooted in Judaism and Christianity alone.

1.1.1.3 *Divine forgiveness in the Greco-Roman context*

A general inventory of Greek and Latin words related to the semantic field of forgiveness (for example in Greek: συγγνώμη, ἄφεσις, and others; or in Latin: *venia*, *ignotum*, *condonare*, and others), provides us with several examples of forgiveness appearing in both Greek and Roman sources.²⁰ Elements similar to the biblical field of forgiveness can be discerned in daily-life Greco-Roman religions. Confession of sins could be part of healing rituals.²¹ Sacrifice and purification of evil influences could be part of the initiation rituals of certain ancient mystery cults.²²

¹⁷ 4 Macc. 6:27–29; 18:20–22. See also M. DE JONGE, 'Jesus' Death'.

¹⁸ BICKERMAN, *Jews*, pp. 282–283; in 1 En. 13:3–7 Enoch is asked to pray for forgiveness; in 1 QS 2:8–9 a curse is formulated asking God not to forgive and ignore attempts at intercession.

¹⁹ CD 14:18–19.

²⁰ Various examples are provided by Gutzwiller and Várhelyi (see note 2). METZLER, *Verzeihens* provides an extensive overview of the use and development of the concept of forgiveness in Greek literary sources, including in comparison to biblical and early Jewish and Christian sources.

²¹ BURKERT, *Cults*, p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 93–101; although one should heed Walter Burkert's warning against too quickly reading particularly Christian terminology into the rituals and beliefs of mystery cults (see *ibid.*, p. 3). Moreover, some authors argue that awareness of sin, with an emphasis on one's responsibility in doing evil, was hardly present in Greek religion. They claim that doing evil was perceived instead as making a mistake (see NILSSON, *Geschichte* vol. 2, p. 698; PRICE, *Religions*, p. 37; BICKERMAN, *Jews*, pp. 268–269; KONSTAN, *Before Forgiveness*, p. 126).

An example of where the semantic field of forgiveness in the classical context overlaps with that of the biblical context was offered by Zsuzsanna Várhelyi.²³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek historian living and writing in Augustan Rome, presented divine forgiveness as a moral example to his readers. Dionysius argued that humans, just like the gods, should be moved from hatred to pity towards their enemies upon receiving suppliant prayers.²⁴ As in the biblical context, Dionysius allowed for the gods to be moved from anger to forgiveness upon the repentance of the wrongdoer.

Such a presentation of the gods and the rituals of popular religion and cults were often denounced by ancient intellectuals. They considered them charlatanism and as obscuring the truth about the gods.²⁵ The notion of divine or inter-human forgiveness played a marginal part in classical and Hellenistic philosophy. Neither Plato nor Aristotle advocated forgiveness as a virtue.²⁶ As Várhelyi put forward, Dionysius differed significantly from the intellectuals of his time, when he suggested that the gods can become hurt and angry.²⁷

It seems that Arendt projected such an intellectual lack of attention to forgiveness, or denouncement of it, on the whole of Greco-Roman culture. The examples from popular religion and from genres other than intellectual literature show, however, that the idea of divine pardon can be found in the whole Hellenistic culture, and not in Jewish or Christian religion alone.

Seeking and receiving divine pardon appears to have been mainly present in less intellectually considered expressions of ancient religion – that is, in biblical and related sources, as well as in the daily-life rituals of early Judaism and other Hellenistic religions. Here, God or the gods were presented as emotional beings, who could be hurt by evil acts of humans. The divine response to this offence was anger and punishment. Punishment could be replaced with forgiveness if evildoers placated God or the gods through ritual acts. These ritual acts consisted of sacrifices and prayer, accompanied by changes in behaviour (repentance). Such human acts led God or the gods to grant forgiveness, restoring the peaceful and beneficial relationship between God or the gods and human beings.

²³ VÁRHELYI, 'To Forgive', especially pp. 121–130.

²⁴ Karin Metzler (METZLER, *Verzeihens*, p. 66) offers a similar presentation in Homer (*Il.* IX, 496–501) of the gods as a moral example for humans to be forgiving. She also writes (*ibid.*, p. 72) that in the traditional depiction of the gods, with characteristics ascribed to them such as omniscience and magnanimity, it would have been easier for the gods to forgive someone than for humans to do so.

²⁵ See BURKERT, *Cults*, pp. 19–24.

²⁶ KONSTAN, 'Assuaging Rage', pp. 19–22. Similarly in JACOBS, 'Forgiveness', p. 226.

²⁷ VÁRHELYI, 'To Forgive', pp. 129–130.

The popular religious presentations of God or the gods conflicted with well-considered intellectual reflections. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, for example, argued that the way the gods were viewed in every-day religious life was widely removed from the truth about the gods. Their philosophising, and that of their intellectual predecessors, contained two trends of critique against the traditional procurement of divine forgiveness. Both stemmed from their view that the divine was identified with perfection.²⁸ Perfection implied immutability. So, their first critique was that the divine could not be subjected to changing emotional states, such as hurt or anger. Their second point was that a perfect being could not be in want of anything. Therefore, they rejected the idea that the gods could be placated or made to change their minds through prayer and sacrifice.²⁹

⋮ **To sum up.** A contrast emerges from the notion of divine amnesty between the
⋮ presentation of God or the gods in daily-life religious expressions and that in
⋮ well-considered intellectual reflections upon the nature of God or the gods.³⁰
⋮ It is precisely this contrast that makes the concept of divine pardon in the works
⋮ of Philo of Alexandria such a fascinating topic. What did divine forgiveness, a
⋮ notion more at home in popular expressions of religion, entail when it appeared
⋮ in the reflections of a Hellenistic intellectual?

1.1.2 **Philo of Alexandria**

Philo of Alexandria was a wealthy Jewish intellectual, a member of a prosperous family, living in Alexandria in Egypt in the first half of the first century CE.³¹

²⁸ Charles Griswold discusses the identification of the divine with perfect being and seeing perfection as the highest virtue in general, as the reason why forgiveness (both divine and inter-human) was little appreciated in ancient philosophy (see GRISWOLD, *Forgiveness*, pp. 2–14, and similarly in GRISWOLD, 'Plato'). Metzler provides an additional form of critique of forgiveness in ancient philosophy: Plato claimed that it sustains injustice instead of correcting it (see METZLER, *Verzeihens*, pp. 139–142).

²⁹ Plato criticises sacrifices as a means for placating the gods in *Rep.* II, 364a–366b. He presents a critique of the traditional anthropomorphic poetic presentation of the gods in *Rep.* II, 377b–383c. Here, he argues that if the gods were truly as emotionally fickle and scheming as the poets presented them, they could not be an example for virtuous human behaviour (see also BORDT, 'Zorn', pp. 147–148). Aristotle argues for the immutability of the divine in *Met.* XII, 1072b, and in *Eth. Eud.*, VIII, 1249b 12 he argues that God needs nothing. For the development of Greek natural theology and how it contrasted with traditional presentations of the divine see JAEGER, *Theology*, pp. 23, 47, 180–181. See further LONG, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 41–49 for an overview of Epicurus' theology and his critique of traditional presentations of the divine.

³⁰ Incidentally, such an identification of God with perfection still appears as an important philosophical objection against ascribing forgiveness to God, as illustrated by examples of MINAS, 'Forgiveness' and VERBIN, 'Trespases'.

³¹ For introductions to Philo see: BRÉHIER, *Les idées*; VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*; WOLFSON, *Philo*; DANÍELOU, *Philon*; GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*; SANDMEL, *Philo*; MORRIS, 'Philo'; WILLIAMSON, *Philo*; BARCLAY, *Jews*; HADAS-LEBEL, *Philo*; KAMESAR, *Philo*; RUNIA, 'Philo'; STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo'; NIEHOFF, *Biography*.

The only anchor we have for dating Philo's life is his participation in an embassy to Emperor Gaius, which Philo described in his treatise *Legatio ad Gaium*. This embassy must have taken place sometime around 38 and 39 CE, shortly after the Jewish community in Alexandria had been in heavy conflict with their Greek neighbours.³² The city of Alexandria in Egypt was a highly developed metropolis, a melting pot for Greek, Egyptian and Near Eastern cultures.³³ Its population was a mix of many peoples, with a long-established and substantial Jewish population.³⁴ Philo and his family were part of the rich and influential stratum of this Jewish population.³⁵ Philo was well educated.³⁶ He also participated in the good life of banquets, attended theatres and sporting events, and was active in politics.³⁷

Philo appears to have been a socially and politically active man. In Philo's own words, however, his dearest occupation was reflecting upon questions that go beyond the mundane matters of politics, beyond the immediate demands that life puts upon a human and even beyond the visible world as such. He recounted with longing the times he enjoyed when he would soar up to the heavens and contemplate ideas, until the turmoil of 'civil cares' would pull him

³² John Barclay dates this embassy somewhere in 38–39 CE (BARCLAY, *Jews*, p. 178); David Runia gives 39 CE (RUNIA, 'Philo', p. 851). For an extensive discussion on the dating of this embassy see COLSON/EARP, *Philo* vol. 10, pp. xxvii–xxxii.

³³ SANDMEL, *Philo*, p. 6; DANIELLOU, *Philon*, p. 12.

³⁴ Philo states that the Jewish population of Alexandria was large (*Mos.* II, 232; *Legat.* 32–45; *Flacc.* 55), and in *Flacc.* 43 he gives a figure of one million Jews living in Alexandria. Josephus (*BJ* II, 497; *BJ* VII, 369) gives a number of 50,000–60,000 Jews being killed in Alexandria in 66 CE. Victor Tcherikover underlines that we have no means to determine the number of Jews in Alexandria precisely and that the figures given by ancient authors should not be considered trustworthy. However, the repeated emphasis that the number of Jews was large, makes it a likely assumption that the number of Jews was substantial and that they could make their influence felt in public life (TCHERIKOVER, *Civilization*, pp. 286–287). Joseph Modrzejewski estimates that the Jewish population in Alexandria in Philo's day amounted to 180,000 people, roughly one-third of the entire population of Alexandria (see MÉLÈZE MODRZEJEWSKI, *Jews*, p. 73).

³⁵ GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, p. 7. Philo's brother Gaius Julius Alexander is attested to have been a very wealthy customs official in Alexandria. Philo's nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander attained the office of Emperor Titus' chief of staff (see RUNIA, *Creation*, p. ix, and STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', p. 253).

³⁶ His erudition is obvious in his works. Also, Josephus states that Philo was well-versed in Greek philosophy (*AJ* XVIII, 259). Philo probably attended a gymnasium for his basic education in grammar, mathematics and music (*Congr.* 74–76). The form that his advanced education took is unclear. It is not certain whether Philo acquired his knowledge on his own and/or had private tutors (see RUNIA, 'Philo', p. 851, and STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', pp. 254–255).

³⁷ For sporting events see *Prob.* 26; *Prov.* II, 58; for visits to the theatre see *Ebr.* 177; *Prob.* 141; for Philo's attendance of banquets see *LA* III, 155–156; see also GOODENOUGH, *Jurisprudence*, p. 2. For Philo's participation in political life see *Spec.* III, 4–5 and *De Legatione ad Gaium*. See also WILLIAMSON, *Philo*, p. 2.

back to earth again.³⁸ Philo listed a few of the fundamental questions that will occupy the mind of a person with good sense.³⁹ These questions are: whether there is one world or more, whether the four elements make up all things, or heaven and its contents have a special nature of their own, whether the visible world is created or uncreated, and if it is created, who the Creator is, his essence and his quality, and what his purpose in making the creation is. Like other Jewish intellectuals before him, Philo found answers to such questions in the law of Moses. Philo made it his purpose to reveal the deeper philosophical truths that lie hidden within Moses' words.⁴⁰

1.1.3 *Divine forgiveness, an intellectual challenge for Philo?*

Philo can be characterised as an excellent example of an intellectual of his period. He has left us with an elaborate library of treatises. He embarked in these treatises on a journey of intellectual reflection about a wide range of topics. Seeking and receiving divine forgiveness is among these topics. All the elements of the supposedly simplistic daily-life religious approach to divine forgiveness appear in Philo's treatises: God who is insulted and enraged by human evil, who reacts with punishment, or with forgiveness if the evildoer repents.⁴¹ His intellectual considerations did not lead Philo to simply reject

³⁸ *Spec.* III, 1–3.

³⁹ *Abr.* 162–163. Half of the questions that Philo raises here could be regarded as theological questions. Ought Philo's thinking to be characterised as theology, rather than philosophy? For example, Mireille Hadas-Lebel claims: 'By placing wisdom at the service of God, and drawing on virtue from the study of the Law, Philo is quite different from the philosophers from whom he borrows' (HADAS-LEBEL, *Philo*, p. 178). Was Philo indeed different from the philosophers from whom he borrows? One should bear in mind that a strict distinction between theology and philosophy is a modern phenomenon. With regard to Philo, as with any ancient author, it is unjustified to distinguish between philosophy and theology: within Philo's intellectual context all philosophy stemmed from a proper understanding of the divine. As Werner Jaeger put it, after Plato 'every system of Greek philosophy (save only the Sceptics) culminated in theology' (JAEGER, *Theology*, p. 4). According to John Dillon, for Philo philosophy and theology were one and the same thing (see DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, p. 141). Rainer Hirsch-Luipold notes, when comparing Philo and Plutarch, that in their writings theology and philosophy were intertwined and that knowledge of theology and philosophy is therefore necessary to understand these ancient authors (see HIRSCH-LUIPOLD, 'Der eine Gott', pp. 162–166). A writer such as Heraclitus, who somewhere around 100 CE presented his philosophical insights in the form of commentaries on Homer's epics, did not distinguish between philosophy and theology. He claimed that 'Homer here has given us a scientific theology in allegorical form' (see Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* 58 [translation by Russell/Konstan]; in RUSSELL/KONSTAN, *Heraclitus*, p. 97; for dating Heraclitus see *ibid.*, p. xi). Whereas Heraclitus found the answers to his fundamental questions in Homer, Philo found his answers in the law of Moses.

⁴⁰ *Spec.* III, 6

⁴¹ Divine pardon appears, for example, in *Fug.* 99; *Spec.* I, 229, 235–238. Scattered throughout Philo's works several words associated with forgiveness occur. The number of occurrences for each word is given in parentheses. These words are: the verbs ἀφιῆμι (63) and συγγινώσκω (9); the nouns ἄφεσις (20), ἀμνηστία (21), παραιτήσις (4) and συγγνώμη (16); and the adjectives συγγνώμων (3) and συγγνωστός (3) (see BÖRGEN/FUGLSETH/SKARSTEN, *Index*). With ἀφιῆμι and ἄφεσις one should note that these words do not always occur with a meaning related to forgiveness.

such representations of God. Instead, he encouraged his readers to enter into self-examination through their conscience, to discover the evil they may have committed unknowingly or knowingly, to repent from that evil and ask God for forgiveness.

The elements of divine forgiveness on which one expects Philo to reflect as an intellectual can be deduced from the contrast between, on the one hand, the presentation of the divine in the Bible and in daily-life religion, and, on the other hand, the reflections on the divine in intellectual discussions. From an uncritical perspective, we find a presentation of an emotional and relational God, who interacts with the world and humans, who can be hurt and angered by human evil deeds, who dispenses punishment in reaction to evil deeds, who can be made to change his mind and be forgiving when the evildoer repents. From a well-considered intellectual perspective, we encounter a presentation of a far more detached God, who is the supreme good and everlasting, who is not an object of emotional afflictions, who does not change, let alone change his mind. This supreme being is almost the complete opposite of what human beings are considered to be. Humans are subject to change and to all kinds of emotions, humans can do either good or evil deeds, humans grow old and die.⁴²

Philo's intention to find deep philosophical truths in the Bible introduces a paradox with regard to the notion of divine forgiveness. This paradox can be phrased as: What intellectually satisfying truth could Philo deduce from a notion either ignored or denounced by intellectuals? The aim of the present study is to find an answer to this question.⁴³ To pave the way, I will consider the

⁴² Várhelyi hints at this contrast when she formulates the following question: 'How does the stripping of the Hebrew God of his passions, including anger, in Philo's allegorical readings, shape his model role in forgiving?' (VÁRHELYI, 'To Forgive', p. 132). Gerhard Sellin discusses how Philo handles the differences between what he calls 'the God of the philosophers' and 'the God of the Old-Testament' in SELLIN, *Allegorie*, pp. 57–72.

⁴³ This study focuses on divine forgiveness in Philo's works. Philo wrote about forgiveness in human affairs as well. The topic of interhuman forgiveness is not extensively discussed in the current study. Generally speaking, Philo maintained that the wise should follow God's example, in being forgiving. In *Mut.* 128–129, Philo describes Moses as representing God towards the Pharaoh, namely in being patient and beneficent, allowing the Pharaoh many chances to repent. Joseph is another illustration of a wise person following God's example in being forgiving. Joseph forgives his brothers, partly out of respect for his natural father, but mostly because of his philanthropy and his respect for God, the eternal and uncreated Father (see *Ios.* 239, 262–265). Moses also follows God's example in being gracious and forgiving. He forgives the rebellious words of his fellow Israelites and their complaining for food, for Moses understands the fickleness of a crowd (see *Mos.* I, 173, 197). In *Mos.* I, 184, Philo writes that God forgives the people for complaining. In *Mos.* II, 189, Philo writes that the merciful and kind nature of God develops similar traits in those that serve him. According to Philo, the ability of the victim to forgive the perpetrator is a sign of wisdom (see *QG* IV, 193). Reversely, according to Philo, a person is foolish and evil when he shows no mercy and is unforgiving. Philo illustrates the evil of the Egyptians chasing the Israelites, by describing them as without *συγγνώμη* in *Mos.* I, 37 (in line with one of the curses that Philo describes in *Praem.* 137, namely to be chased by an enemy who is without *συγγνώμη*). One of the evil traits of Flaccus is that he knows no *ἀμνηστία* (*Flacc.* 84).

current state of affairs in Philonic research regarding Philo of Alexandria's views on divine forgiveness.

1.2 *Survey of previous studies*

This survey of previous studies is divided into two larger sections. The first section offers a chronologically ordered review of studies exploring the contents of Philo's thoughts. Where have Philonic studies brought us regarding Philo's views on divine forgiveness and topics related to it, such as on God's relation to creation, specifically to human beings, and on human ethics, specifically the human ability to do evil? The second section will be dedicated to studies exploring Philo's method in developing his thoughts, to explore the insights we can gain from these studies regarding Philo's relation to his intellectual milieu and his relation to the Bible.

1.2.1 *Divine forgiveness in context of Philo's thought*

In the field of Philonic research, three studies emerged as standard works in the first half of the twentieth century. Émile Bréhier, Erwin R. Goodenough and Harry A. Wolfson all attempted to describe the complete world of ideas and concepts of Philo. Each of these authors did so from a particular perspective: Bréhier held that Philo's ambition was to present Judaism as a universal moral religion; Goodenough maintained that Philo wanted to transform Judaism into a mystery religion; and Wolfson presented Philo as the creator of a new philosophical school with divine revelation and free will as key concepts. Although each of these approaches has its shortcomings, the insights of Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson have greatly influenced the study of Philo.

The contributions of these authors are relevant for the present study, even though none of these authors had much to say on the specific topic of divine forgiveness in Philo's work. They do, however, present us with useful insights into matters connected to divine forgiveness – that is, insights into Philo's view on the relationship between God, creation and humans; and into Philo's ethical outlooks. These insights will be explored first. Next, I will consider contributions that address the specific topic of divine forgiveness in Philo's works. I will then evaluate what insights can be gained from these previous studies, and what remains unclear.

1.2.1.1 *Basic elements of Philo's thought: Bréhier, Goodenough, and Wolfson*

Émile Bréhier (1876–1952), one of the pioneers of modern Philonic studies, explained his view on Philo's thought in *Les idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d'Alexandrie* (first published in 1908). I will limit the evaluation of Bréhier's thorough and comprehensive analysis to subjects related to divine forgiveness – that is, his presentation of Philo's view on the relationship between God, creation and humans; and of Philo's ethical outlooks.

Central to Philo's theology, according to Bréhier, is the view that humans can only know *that* God exists. Knowledge of God's essence, of *who* or *what* he is, is beyond the grasp of human understanding.⁴⁴ The only knowledge humans can have regarding God's characteristics is what God reveals to them. God reveals some aspects of himself to human beings through his interaction with creation. God interacts with creation through his powers (δυνάμεις).⁴⁵ By means of these powers God provides for the world he has created. For, since God is good, he necessarily cares for what he has made.⁴⁶ These powers are all contained within the logos – that is: God's mind or divine reason.⁴⁷

The reason for Philo to introduce the powers as the medium through which God and the world are connected was to avoid pantheism.⁴⁸ Did Philo see God and his powers as separate entities? Philo introduced a subtle shift in perspectives to avoid this conclusion. From the human perspective, divine reason and the powers appear as separate manifestations of God. From God's perspective, however, they are undivided and one. Philo emphasised that in reality God is one, and that the highest form of worship of God is to understand that this is so.⁴⁹

The transcendent God and material humans are connected to each other through conscience. According to Bréhier, Philo saw conscience as a gift from God to humans, bridging the gap between God and humans.⁵⁰ Conscience provides someone with the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.⁵¹ The ideal for human beings is to listen to the wisdom of their conscience.

⁴⁴ BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, pp. 70, 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 75–76. According to Bréhier, Philo was inspired by the Stoic view that the powers manifest themselves as the natural order or natural law that humans can discern in the world. Philo claims that this natural law is none other than the law that Moses wrote down in the Bible (ibid., pp. 80, 95, 147–149, 170–175).

⁴⁶ Bréhier considered Deutero-Isaiah as Philo's source for the view that God, because of his goodness, takes providential care of the world (ibid., p. 77).

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 141

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 302. According to Bréhier, the spirit of man (πνεῦμα) functions as a bridge between God and man, and the spirit can be identified with conscience, ibid. pp. 134 note 7, 135. Also, according to Bréhier, Philo was the first to introduce the concept of conscience into the intellectual discourse (ibid., pp. 31–32, 296, 301, 310). In contrast to Bréhier, Walther Völker identified antecedents for the concept of conscience in Stoic literature (as well as in the Septuagint) (VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, pp. 101–105). Bréhier did not claim that the concept of conscience is Philo's invention. Bréhier referred to Greek tragedies as an inspiration for Philo regarding the role of conscience in ethics (BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, pp. 299–300).

⁵¹ BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, p. 296.

It is essential that humans acknowledge God as the source of true wisdom, in order to be completely guided by right reason on the road to moral perfection.⁵²

Humans are able to be and do good when they acknowledge God as the source of perfect knowledge. Doing wrong and becoming evil is caused by the reverse, namely the denial of God as the source of true wisdom. People who turn away from God will end up in confusion.⁵³ People who do not orient themselves towards God are more susceptible to the influences of the human body, most particularly to 'desire' (ἐπιθυμία).⁵⁴ The human body is a cause of evil, since it is made from imperfect matter.⁵⁵ Either turning towards God, in order to become good, or moving away from God and becoming evil, involves a conscious decision. For Philo, the conscious decision to do evil was what makes something truly sinful. According to Bréhier, Philo's connection of sin to the will was a novelty in the Hellenistic context.⁵⁶

Bréhier mentions divine forgiveness as the final step of what Philo saw as the road towards reaching moral perfection.⁵⁷ Bréhier explained that for Philo

⁵² Ibid., pp. 95, 121, 228. According to Bréhier (ibid., p. 95), Philo insisted, contrary to the Stoics, that humans cannot reach moral perfection on their own: they need God's help. Harry A. A. Kennedy affirmed Bréhier's conclusion that, according to Philo, God gives support to human souls to attain moral perfection, by way of the gift of conscience. As Kennedy put it: 'Conscience involves the impact of God upon the soul' (KENNEDY, *Contribution*, p. 112). Kennedy compared Philo's ideas and concepts with those of Paul and concluded that there are many similarities between the two (ibid., p. 106). According to Kennedy, the identification of conscience with 'the legislative Reason within us, is one of Philo's most remarkable contributions to the content of ancient ethics' (ibid., p. 53). A human needs to realise that this ability to do good, comes from God, and is no achievement of his own. All a human being needs to do is to open up himself towards God, even though first and foremost it is God who reaches out for the human soul. According to Kennedy, this is how Philo believed that God's grace operates (ibid., pp. 149–154). Similarly, Jan N. Sevenster, in his dissertation comparing the concept of salvation of Philo with that of the synoptic gospels (SEVENSTER, *Verlossingsbegrip*), focused on the question of what humans contribute to their salvation, and what God contributes to their salvation. In the first chapter, he collected and analysed passages in Philo's works in support of the claim that Philo held the view that humans, with sufficient training, are able to reach the goal of being able to live a virtuous life through their own effort (ibid., p. 61). In the second chapter this claim is nuanced. Sevenster argued that Philo held that only God is truly active, and that everything created, including humans, is passive (ibid., p. 70). The virtuous life is a gift of God, not something reached by humans through practice. Actually, the greatest sin, and therefore the biggest stumbling block on the road to perfection, is self-love, the megalomania of believing that humans can reach virtue on their own (ibid., p. 79). Humans who want to reach virtue need to acknowledge their own weakness and ask God to help them (ibid., pp. 81–83). This latter part, the longing for salvation through God, is perhaps all humans can contribute to their salvation (ibid., pp. 88, 98).

⁵³ BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, pp. 297–298.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 262–263.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 274.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 299.

⁵⁷ Bréhier described the several steps of the process of turning away from evil and being forgiven in ibid., pp. 296–307. *Spec. I*, 235–238 can be recognised as the backbone of Bréhier's presentation of

the accusation of one's conscience is the first step in this process. Those who listen to their conscience, allow it to show them what they have done wrong. This will lead to a feeling of humility and the awareness of having inflicted damage on one's own soul, resulting in a public confession of sins and a plea for forgiveness. Someone's repentance from evil is true and definite if it is accompanied by an actual change of ways. God will then forgive a thus converted person, and grant him new life. Philo equated true conversion to a blameless life.⁵⁸ Bréhier, however, did not explore the tension between Philo's theological reflections, and the relational and emotional presentation of God that divine forgiveness implies.

To sum up. Bréhier provided several insights regarding the questions related to the concept of divine forgiveness in Philo's works. God can interact with creation through his powers. Through the activity of these powers, humans can know that God exists. Humans can never perceive the true nature of God, however. From a human perspective, God and his powers seem to be separate entities; from the divine perspective, God is one and indivisible. God is connected to humans through conscience. Conscience gives humans a share in God's moral knowledge. This allows them to decide between what is right and what is wrong. Humans do evil when they consciously decide to turn away from God. Doing so makes them susceptible to the influences of the body, specifically desire, leading to confusion and all kinds of evil. Conscience will warn someone when he or she is doing evil. It will help such a person to turn away from evil, and return to God. God will forgive someone who has repented from evil.

Bréhier's ideas provide useful building blocks of the process of divine forgiveness as Philo saw it. His insights into Philo's theology help to better understand how Philo maintained a transcendent God can interact with creation, namely through the divine powers. Philo's distinction between the human ability to know *that* God exists and the human inability to know *what* God is, has remained the undisputed centre of Philo's theology, according to Philonic scholars.⁵⁹ Philo's distinction between human and divine perspectives

Philo's view on the road towards moral perfection.

⁵⁸ According to Bréhier, Philo did this to make Judaism attractive to potential converts (ibid., p. 307). Bréhier claimed that Philo in general downplayed the nationalistic aspects of Moses' laws and highlighted the universal application of these laws as moral laws relevant for all peoples. Bréhier maintained that Philo did this to attract converts to Judaism (see ibid., pp. 9, 31–32). The idea of Jewish proselytism is convincingly disproved in WILL/ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme*.

⁵⁹ See KENNEDY, *Contribution*, p. 162; WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 2, p. 140; DANÉLOU, *Philon*, p. 146; GOODENOUGH, *Light*, p. 382; SANDMEL, *Philo*, pp. 90–91; RUNIA, *Timaeus*, p. 437; MORRIS, 'Philo', p. 881; WILLIAMSON, *Philo*, p. 38; RUNIA, 'Philo', p. 854. Bréhier described how Philo combines God being called *ὁ ὢν* in the Septuagint (Ex. 3:14) with Plato's concept of *τὸ ὄν ὄντως* (*Phdr.* 247E) (BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, p. 70). According to Bréhier, Philo went further than Plato in concluding from this identification of God with true being that God in his essence cannot be known. Bréhier

can be a useful tool in understanding Philo's handling of anthropomorphic presentations of God. Bréhier's work also provides useful insights regarding the connection between God and humans, in particular with regard to the role of conscience. Bréhier, however, did not fully explore Philo's concept of divine forgiveness. It remains to be seen how the building blocks he provided can fit together, to bring to light what Philo believed divine forgiveness to entail.

A whole different perspective on Philo's outlooks is presented by **Erwin R. Goodenough** (1893–1965). As a historian of religion, Goodenough drew attention to influences not only of philosophy in Philo's thought, but also of popular mystery cults that Goodenough supposed to have existed in Alexandria. He claimed that Philo considered his form of Judaism a mystery religion.⁶⁰ Goodenough developed this idea in *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (first published in 1935). According to Goodenough, Philo's thinking can be best understood as aimed at mystical experience, rather than a search for philosophical truth.⁶¹

Goodenough drew attention to how Philo used the metaphor of light to explain how a transcendent God can interact with the material world and with humans. According to Philo, God is a source of light. Similarly to how the sun emits rays of light, God emits the logos as an intellectual light. Creation is the result of the logos falling on formless matter, like rays of light falling on objects and making them visible. When falling on formless matter, the logos imprints it with forms, giving it structure, coherence and stability. This is also how God's providence operates.⁶²

The imprint of the logos is present in humans as well. It forms the reasonable part of the soul – that is, the mind. The mind is meant to rule the soul and the whole human being, enabling someone to lead a virtuous life.⁶³ Goodenough

identified both the biblical views of Deutero-Isaiah as well as Scepticism as sources for Philo's view that God's essence cannot be known, and saw the unknowability of God as an invention of Philo (ibid., pp. 73, 77, 203). Several other authors also claimed the unknowability of God to be an invention of Philo (see WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 2, pp. 111–117 and DANIELOU, *Philon*, p. 147). Wolfson further claimed that Plato used the term ὁ ὄν ὄντως for the ideas only, whereas Philo reserved it for God alone (WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 1, p. 210). Thomas H. Billings did not view the unknowability of God as an invention of Philo. He claimed that Plato had already identified true being with unknowability (see BILLINGS, *Platonism*, pp. 16–17; Billings refers to *Soph.* 249E) and he noted that Plato had already emphasised the limitations of human knowledge (see ibid., p. 68).

⁶⁰ GOODENOUGH, *Light*, pp. 7–9; GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, p. 140.

⁶¹ GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, pp. 16, 140.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 99–109. In contrast to Bréhier who linked Philo's presentation of the logos to Stoic philosophy, Goodenough saw Egyptian influences in Philo's concept of the logos (see GOODENOUGH, *Light*, pp. 42–44).

⁶³ GOODENOUGH, *Light*, pp. 383–384. Here, Goodenough also claims that Philo did not always maintain

held that for Philo ultimate bliss meant to be in full harmony with God. To achieve such harmony, the mind of a person needs to be in full control over the body, and specifically the senses and desires.⁶⁴

Sin occurs when the senses and desires are no longer controlled by the mind. Ignorance is the ultimate cause of sin.⁶⁵ Conscience, an essential faculty of the human mind, shows wrongdoers the sins they have committed and internally accuses them.⁶⁶ They should then repent and convert – that is, turn back to God; for only God can bring full recovery. Repentance and conversion can be compared to the start of a healing process.⁶⁷ Goodenough explained that Philo employed another two metaphors for the process of restoration of control of the mind over the body. The first involves the presentation of God's grace as a purifying stream. This stream removes the bad influences of the bodily senses and desires and restores the control of reason.⁶⁸ The other metaphor is to liken the restoration of reason to the return of light and the removal of darkness. Repentance and conversion allow God's light to shine again into the soul and restore the reasonable part of the soul so that it is able to regain control.⁶⁹

When ignorance is removed and replaced by wisdom, the mind is in control again and the soul is in harmony. Good behaviour then follows automatically.⁷⁰ Goodenough maintained that Philo agreed in this with the ethical views of Greek philosophy. Goodenough did not share Bréhier's view that Philo, in contrast to his Hellenistic context and because of his Jewish heritage, emphasised conscious disobedience as a cause of sin.⁷¹ Goodenough did not

a clear division between the divine mind and the human mind. The human mind is not only 'like' God's, Philo sometimes used descriptions and functions of the divine mind for the human mind.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 316.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 396.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 133–134.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 169–170.

⁷⁰ GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, pp. 152–153.

⁷¹ According to Goodenough, Philo did not mention obedience, understood as a conscious choice to do good, as a virtue (see GOODENOUGH, *Light*, p. 85). Völker, however, disagreed with Goodenough and sided with Bréhier. According to Völker, Philo did see ignorance as a cause of evil, but not ignorance alone. Völker claimed that the element of choice is also very important for Philo's ethical views, and that this stems from Philo's religious background (VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, pp. 59, 65–67, 78–79). Völker further claimed that according to Philo, ignorance and disobedience lead to different kinds of evil acts. Ignorance causes involuntary evil, and disobedience leads to voluntary evil. The task of conscience is to distinguish between these two causes (ibid., p. 100). This distinction is important, because voluntary and involuntary evil have different remedies: voluntary evil requires a religious ritual as a remedy, involuntary evil is remedied through the light of reason (ibid., p. 123). Völker held that Philo's distinction between voluntary and involuntary evil is also part of Philo's Jewish heritage

mention divine forgiveness as part of the process of restoring reason's control over the human soul.

To sum up. Goodenough explored several metaphors used by Philo to explain God's relation to creation and to humans. Philo compared the process of creation to God's logos falling like light on formless matter, imprinting it with forms. God's logos is also imprinted onto the human soul, granting it reason. Reason is meant to rule the human soul. A soul controlled by reason is in harmony with God. Ignorance is the ultimate cause of sin. Through ignorance the human soul is subjected to bodily senses and desires. Ignorance can be washed away through the purifying stream of God's logos. The light of reason, in the form of conscience, then replaces the darkness of ignorance. This process of purification and enlightenment is also a process of healing.

The benefit of Goodenough's suggestion that popular religions may have influenced Philo in developing his thought is that exploring this possible influence could lead to a better understanding of certain ideas of Philo. One of these ideas is the notion of divine pardon. As discussed above, this notion was more at home in popular religion than in an intellectual discourse.⁷² Goodenough did not discuss divine forgiveness, however.

Compared to Bréhier, some more nuanced representations of Philo's ideas and some matters of debate become apparent. Goodenough refined Bréhier's presentation of how God's powers function to establish the relationship between God, creation and humans, by bringing forward the metaphor of light employed by Philo. With regard to Philo's ethics, Goodenough and Bréhier agreed on the importance Philo ascribed to conscience in aiding someone to progress morally. They disagreed, however, about their view on what Philo believed to be the cause of evil. Goodenough, contrary to Bréhier, claimed that for Philo the human body and its senses and desires are not evil in themselves. These only become a cause of sin when no longer controlled by the human mind. Furthermore, Goodenough disagreed with Bréhier regarding the importance of conscious choice in doing evil. According to Goodenough, Philo saw ignorance as the ultimate cause of evil, whereas Bréhier suggested that for Philo doing evil is not just something that befalls someone but rather involves a deliberate choice as well.

The theme of freedom of choice was further explored in **Harry A. Wolfson's** contribution to the study of Philo. Wolfson (1887–1974) attempted, like Bréhier, to give an all-encompassing overview of Philo's ideas and concepts in *Philo*:

(ibid., pp. 89–90).

⁷² See pp. 6–8.

Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (1947).

Wolfson presented Philo as the founder of a philosophical school that greatly influenced Western philosophy up until Spinoza. The main characteristics of this philosophical school were an emphasis on free will and the claim that revelation is the only source of true philosophical knowledge.

According to Wolfson, Philo held that only God can reveal true knowledge. Wolfson pointed out that in Philo's view, human descriptions of God, such as speaking of God's providential care for the world, always fall short of truly describing God's properties. For example, when using relational descriptions of God, the relationship is to be understood as a 'quasi' relationship. The word 'relationship' between God and creation is used because of the limitations of human understanding, not because there is an actual physical link between God and the world.⁷³

The logos has a central role in Philo's attempt to describe the connection between God and the world. According to Wolfson, Philo saw transcendent and immanent aspects to the logos. The logos is transcendent, because it is a synonym for the mind of God. It is the name for the place, also called the 'intelligible world' (κόσμος νοητός), where the patterns God used to create the material world with exist.⁷⁴ Philo called these creative patterns 'God's powers' (δυνάμεις), which are active in the material world defining the shape and qualities of material objects.⁷⁵ This activity brings us to what Philo saw as the immanent aspects of the logos. The logos is immanent, because it envelops the powers active in the material world. The logos furthermore immanently manifests itself in the form of the laws of nature, which maintain the order in the material world. Philo identified the immanent manifestations of the logos with God's providential care for creation, the powers active in the material world together with the laws of nature maintain the order and stability of creation.⁷⁶

⁷³ WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 2, p. 138.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 224. According to Wolfson, this intelligible world was a novel concept, that Philo developed to solve a lacuna in Plato's philosophy, namely the question of where Plato's Ideas can be said to exist.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 218–219. The powers receive their ability to be active in the world from God (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 221), because Philo held God to be the source of all activity (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 134). Wolfson saw antecedents for this presentation of logos and the powers in Aristotelian philosophy.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 331. Similarly to Bréhier, Wolfson explained that Philo held the laws of Moses to be an expression of the logos. The laws of Moses are meant to steer human behaviour, in the way that the laws of nature are meant to control creation. Since Philo held the law of Moses to be an expression of the logos, he also maintained that the law of Moses is eternal, contrary to the philosophical views of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, who maintained that written laws are human products and therefore subject to change (see *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 180–192).

With regard to Philo's ethics, Wolfson held that Philo strongly adhered to the concept of free will. God is completely free. He can interact with creation and even override the laws of nature if he so desires.⁷⁷ God has given of his free will to humans, too.⁷⁸ Philo did not believe that knowledge of what is good also automatically leads to doing good. In Philo's philosophical outlook, free will enables humans to choose to do wrong even when they have knowledge of what is good. In agreement with Bréhier, Wolfson claimed that Philo was the first to introduce the concept of will into ethics.⁷⁹

Philo held that the free choice to do evil is what makes an evildoer guilty – that is, responsible for the evil that has been committed.⁸⁰ Wolfson identified Philo's emphasis on responsibility in doing evil as the reason why Philo evaluated repentance and conversion more positively than other philosophers. They are expressions of the correct application of free will and essential steps in reaching virtue. Repentance means acknowledging guilt and responsibility, and conversion is the conscious decision to turn away from evil.⁸¹

Wolfson pointed out that the extent of human freedom is limited. Philo held that humans need God's support to reach virtue. Virtuous behaviour becomes possible when someone is able to put sensations under the control of his reason.⁸² However, 'desire' (ἐπιθυμία) is the only sensation where humans truly have a choice as to whether to control it or not. Control over desire is essential for doing good, but it takes struggle and effort, and therefore God's help, to

⁷⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 355, 367, 372 and vol. 2, p. 199. According to Wolfson, this is how Philo left room for miracles, individual providence and divine revelation. However, for the overall stability of the created world it is better that the integrity of those laws is maintained and that God does not act directly upon the world (ibid., vol. 1, p. 373).

⁷⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 446.

⁷⁹ This is not to say that Wolfson was the first to draw attention to the role of free will in Philo's thought. As we have seen, had Bréhier already mentioned that the connection between sin and will is important for Philo (BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, p. 299), and Völker also emphasised that conscious choice is central to Philo's view on ethical behaviour (VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, p. 59).

⁸⁰ WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 1, pp. 435–437, and vol. 2, p. 234. Wolfson held that Philo, in emphasising the importance of conscious choice in doing good or evil, differed from Plato. Plato, in *Tim.* 86E, writes that 'the wicked man becomes wicked by reason of some evil condition of body and unskilled nurture, and these are experiences that are hateful to everyone and involuntary' (translation by R.G. Bury).

⁸¹ WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 2, pp. 245–257. Here, Wolfson also points out that according to Philo sacrifice was to be taken together with prayer as integral parts of the confession of guilt. Sacrifice is not compensation presented to God, for Philo held that in the relationship between God and humans repentance and conversion are enough when having sinned. Only a sin committed against a fellow human requires some form of compensation.

⁸² Ibid., vol. 2, p. 275. According to Wolfson, Philo applied the idea of innocent sensations (εὐπάθεια) in a novel way, as a term describing the state where such sensations are under the control of reason, and as such not necessarily evil.

establish this control. If desire is under control, humans can do good; if not, it causes all kinds of evil.⁸³

To sum up. Wolfson emphasised that Philo saw human descriptions of God and the truth as inherently flawed, because of the limitations of human knowledge. With this caveat in mind, Philo attempted to present as much of the truth about God as he could. One important aspect of God is that he and creation are connected through the logos. The logos is a name for both the mind of God and for the content of God's mind. God thinks the patterns that shape the objects in the material world. They give those objects their defining qualities. Another important aspect of God is that he is completely free. God allows humans a share in that freedom. Humans can choose whether to control the sensation of desire. When this sensation is under control, humans are able to do good. If not, they do all kinds of evil. Wolfson does not discuss divine forgiveness.

The overall benefit of Wolfson's approach is that he reconstructed how Philo developed his ideas while being fully engaged in the intellectual discourse of his time.⁸⁴ Wolfson's presentation of Philo's view on the logos, as a name for both the mind of God and for the contents of that mind, further elucidates and refines how Philo saw the connection between a transcendent God and creation. With regard to Philo's ethics, Wolfson can be seen as uniting Bréhier's and Goodenough's views. Bréhier saw the cause of human evil in the conscious decision of someone to turn away from God and surrender himself instead to the inherently evil sensation of desire. Goodenough saw the cause of evil in the human mind accidentally losing control over the sensations. Wolfson saw the cause of human evil in the conscious decision to give up control over the sensation of desire, which leaves that sensation free rein and causes other sensations to overwhelm the mind, leading to all kinds of evil deeds.

⁸³ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 232–235. Bréhier also identified desire as what Philo saw as the root of all evil (see note 54).

⁸⁴ Wolfson did not resort to a strict and artificial distinction between Greek and Jewish influences. Other Philonic scholars, such as Völker, did make such a strict distinction between Greek and Jewish elements in Philo's thought. He associated Greek influences with intellectualism, and Jewish influences with religiosity and piety. According to Völker, Jewish piety always prevailed for Philo, when these two influences resulted in conflicting ideas. Völker maintained that the Greek intellectual concepts are used by Philo to provide scientific foundations for this piety (see VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, pp. 51, 57). The fact that the development of early Judaism was a complex process of interaction with Hellenistic culture, that cannot be reduced to a strict distinction between either Greek or Jewish influences is discussed in MEYERS, 'Hellenism'. Tessa Rajak (RAJAK, *Dialogue*, p. 4) similarly emphasises the rich interaction between early Judaism and its Hellenistic context. She analyses the presentation of early Judaism of three nineteenth-century scholars, and shows that their distinction between Greek and Jewish influences was shaped primarily by the 'contemporary interests' of those scholars (see *ibid.*, pp. 535–557).

In Wolfson's presentation, however, Philo's appreciation of the extent of human freedom remains somewhat ambivalent: are humans truly free, or ultimately dependent upon God?⁸⁵

What can be gained from the ground-laying works of Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson regarding divine forgiveness in Philo? None of them has focused on this topic in particular. However, they each do provide insights into basic elements of Philo's thought related to the concept of divine forgiveness. Their work sheds light specifically on how Philo saw the relationship between God and creation, and on Philo's views on good and evil. They agreed that God's logos is important in connecting God to creation and to humans. Free will, conscience, repentance and conversion have surfaced as important elements of Philo's ethical outlook. Both Bréhier and Wolfson furthermore pointed out that Philo emphasised the limitations of human language to explain certain seemingly contradictory statements concerning the divine.

We saw that Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson each presented different views on two matters related to divine forgiveness, namely what did Philo see as the ultimate cause of human evil and what did he believe is the extent of human freedom? Do the few studies that focussed on the particular topic of divine forgiveness in Philo provide answers to these questions?

1.2.1.2 **Philo and divine forgiveness: Thyen, Laporte, and Zeller**

The second half of the twentieth century brought a new phase in Philonic study. After the ground-laying works of Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson, specific topics in Philo's works invited further investigation. Three authors explored the topic of divine forgiveness in Philo's works: Hartwig Thyen, Jean Laporte and Dieter Zeller. How do they illuminate Philo's view on the ultimate cause of human evil, and on the extent of human freedom of choice? Their contributions will be discussed in light of these two questions and will be presented in chronological order.

Hartwig Thyen (1927–2015) provided a pervasive study of the concept of forgiveness in the New Testament in his *Studien zur Sündenvergebung im Neuen Testament und seinen alttestamentlichen und jüdischen Voraussetzungen* (1970). He also discussed the concept of forgiveness in the works of Philo as part of his discussion on sin, grace and forgiveness in Hellenistic Judaism.⁸⁶ Thyen claimed that Philo's concept of forgiveness developed from both his Hellenistic context and his Jewish heritage. Thyen argued that some mystery cults,

⁸⁵ WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 1, pp. 446–447. See also note 52, for a summary of how Bréhier, Kennedy and Sevenster explored this ambivalence in Philo's works.

⁸⁶ THYEN, *Sündenvergebung*, pp. 98–130.

especially in Egypt, contained elements related to divine forgiveness. Examples of such elements include the overwhelming power of sin, the need for divine aid in overcoming this power and the need for divine forgiveness. The presence of such themes in mystery cults shows that they were not exclusively Jewish or Christian topics.⁸⁷ Thyen emphasised that even though the notion of forgiveness of sin was alien to Greek philosophy, it was not an unknown concept in Hellenistic culture as a whole.⁸⁸

Thyen presented an analysis of the concept of sin in the works of Philo. Thyen focused on two aspects that he considered as rooted in the Bible. First, he agreed with Bréhier that Philo saw sin as something inherent in the created world. Bréhier, however, identified this inherent evil with imperfection, whereas Thyen saw it as an active power. The power of sin causes man, as a created being, to be inherently inclined towards doing evil. Second, Thyen maintained that Philo saw man as a stranger in the created world, who is commanded by God to battle against the inclination to do evil. The power of sin should be destroyed so that the power of God can come into a person.⁸⁹

The power of sin is broken through knowledge. God sends this knowledge; humans cannot attain it on their own. True knowledge means realising that everything good comes from God.⁹⁰ Converting from ignorance to truth is something good and therefore is also a gift from God.⁹¹ Humans are free to choose evil; but they are ultimately dependent upon God to destroy the power of sin and choose good.

Thyen discussed Philo's view on divine forgiveness very briefly. According to Thyen, Philo only occasionally mentioned forgiveness as part of his religious heritage. Philo's main interest lay with the destruction of the power of sin, rather than with the acquittal of past trespasses.⁹² Divine forgiveness meant for Philo that a new mind is given to the person, which makes it possible for God to come into the now cleansed soul.⁹³

⁸⁷ Thyen followed Goodenough's lead in arguing for possible influences of popular mystery cults in Philo's work (*ibid.*, p. 111).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 116–117.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹² Thyen quotes Larson: 'Pardon of sins appears to be part of his religious heritage, but not at the centre of his own interest' (see LARSON, 'Prayer', p. 198; quoted by THYEN, *Sündenvergebung*, p. 121). Before Thyen, Völker had claimed that sin and the continuous struggle against its power were central to Philo's thinking and that studying these would give the most insight into Philo's personality, piety and teachings (see VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, p. 48).

⁹³ THYEN, *Sündenvergebung*, p. 119.

To sum up. Thyen claimed that Philo, because of the Bible, saw the power of sin as present in everything created. The power of sin is present in humans as an evil inclination. Thyen maintained that Philo held human freedom to choose good or evil to be limited. The ability to do good is ultimately a gift from God, and not so much something someone could choose to do. Divine forgiveness meant for Philo that God gives a new mind to someone, allowing God to enter that mind. Thyen held that Philo only mentioned divine forgiveness because it was part of his religious heritage, and that he did not give it too much thought.

Thyen claimed that the Bible presents evil as something inherently present in creation, and that Philo subscribed to this notion. This view, however, had already been contested by Goodenough and Wolfson. It can be debated whether in the Bible evil is presented as intrinsically present in creation. Moreover, one might debate whether Philo can be seen to simply accept biblical views without further thought. In any case, Philo's view on the cause of human evil requires further exploration.

Furthermore, it appears that the context in which Thyen presented Philo's view on divine forgiveness coloured this presentation. The focus on the destruction of the power of sin and a new mind being given to someone, seems more native to Paul than to Philo. Because Thyen presented the ideas of Philo on forgiveness in the wider context of the concept in the New Testament, he had little room for fully discussing Philo's own theological and anthropological ideas. Thyen's study leaves room for an exploration of Philo's own view on divine forgiveness, less coloured by New Testamental notions. This brings us to the contributions of Laporte and Zeller.

Jean Laporte (1924–2006) intimately connected Philo's view on divine forgiveness to his thoughts on sacrifice. Laporte investigated Philo's view on sacrifice in relation to forgiveness in two complementary articles.⁹⁴ His exploration of the connection between sacrifice and forgiveness sheds light on Philo's view on the extent of human freedom in avoiding evil and doing good.

Laporte concluded in the first article, 'Sacrifice and Forgiveness in Philo of Alexandria' (1989), that, according to Philo, God's initiative is essential for human beings to attain forgiveness. God has given the ritual of sacrifices to humans, in order for them to be forgiven.⁹⁵ What Philo meant when he wrote

⁹⁴ LAPORTE, 'Sacrifice'; LAPORTE, 'High Priest'. And Laporte more elaborately investigated Philo's concept of sacrifice in particular in LAPORTE, *Doctrine*.

⁹⁵ LAPORTE, 'Sacrifice', p. 42: '[P]eople cannot by themselves acquire forgiveness; it belongs to God to grant forgiveness and peace. The ritual of sacrifices has been given for that purpose.' See also *ibid.*, p. 38, where Laporte writes: 'But the ritual of expiation seems to correspond to the gift of forgiveness and peace, which is an act of God.'

that God grants forgiveness, Laporte explored in the second article, ‘The High Priest in Philo of Alexandria’ (1991). Here, Laporte explained that, according to Philo, forgiveness is a form of healing of the soul.⁹⁶ This spiritual healing happens through enlightenment of the mind by the divine logos. This healing and enlightenment help the growth of virtue. God is the one who brings the spiritual healing. Sacrifice is an important element in this process of spiritual healing. Bringing a sacrifice in itself, however, does not heal the soul. Rather, it is a symbol of the spiritual state of the person who offers it.⁹⁷ It means in particular that one acknowledges how one’s soul is God’s true possession, and that one renounces false opinions and the influence of the passions. This is the only thing humans can contribute to the process of spiritual healing. The end result of the spiritual healing is a mystical union with God.⁹⁸

To sum up. Laporte directed us towards a meaningful interpretation of seeking and receiving divine forgiveness in Philo’s works. For Philo, divine forgiveness stood for the purification and healing of the human soul through enlightenment by the divine logos, leading to a union with God. The human contribution to this process is to acknowledge God as the true possessor of one’s soul. Sacrifice is a symbol of that acknowledgement.

Elements of previous authors can be recognised in Laporte’s work, especially Goodenough, who focused on themes such as purification, healing, enlightenment and the union with God.⁹⁹ However, some ambivalence regarding the extent of human choice and freedom remains: how far do humans choose *on their own* to acknowledge God as the source of everything? Does God help in reaching this acknowledgement as well? Laporte presented his interpretation of divine forgiveness in Philo in two relatively short articles. This left him with little room to fully investigate these matters, and also with little room to connect Philo’s view on forgiveness with other elements of his thought, such as his theology and anthropology. Dieter Zeller, the third author who discussed Philo’s view on forgiveness, does attempt to present this view within the framework of Philo’s other ideas and concepts.

⁹⁶ LAPORTE, ‘High Priest’, p. 82, the soul is cured ‘from vice and the passions.’

⁹⁷ Philo interpreted all sacrifices as an expression of εὐχαριστία, of thankfulness to God (see LAPORTE, ‘Sacrifice’, p. 41). By offering a sacrifice one acknowledges how all good things ultimately come from God and how everything is God’s true possession (see LAPORTE, *Doctrine*, pp. 214–215, 238).

⁹⁸ LAPORTE, ‘High Priest’, pp. 75–76. The mystical union ‘ends with a kind of equality of the human worshipper with the divine Logos himself.’

⁹⁹ Laporte also mentioned the role of conscience in the process of forgiveness, in agreement with the views of Bréhier and Völker (see *ibid.*, p. 79).

Dieter Zeller (1939–2014) presented Philo’s concept of forgiveness in *Charis bei Philon und Paulus* (1990), where he compared Paul’s concept of grace with that of Philo. According to Zeller, Philo saw forgiveness as a manifestation of God’s grace. God’s grace again is a manifestation of one of two main powers (δυνάμεις) that Philo discerned in God, namely the creative power. The other main power is the judicial one.¹⁰⁰ Zeller connected Philo’s view on grace to that of the Stoa and Plato’s *Timaeus*. Grace flows from God’s goodness. Goodness is the reason for creation to exist in the first place, and it is also the reason why God sustains creation.¹⁰¹

According to Zeller, Philo held creation to be inherently evil.¹⁰² Philo held this view as an empirical fact, inspired by Platonic and Stoic ideas on God and creation.¹⁰³ If God judged creation by the standards of judicial power alone, his judgement would be to not allow creation to remain. Philo held that God’s grace, however, overrules God’s judgement in three ways. In the first place, grace softens God’s judgement; secondly, it also delays it by giving humans time for repentance; and thirdly, through forgiveness grace makes judgement unnecessary.¹⁰⁴

According to Zeller, Philo saw ungratefulness as the root of human sin. This ungratefulness follows from ignorance, namely not realising that God is the source of everything good, and therefore not acknowledging and thanking God for that which is good.¹⁰⁵ Zeller did not believe that Philo claimed humans to share in God’s free will in the way that Wolfson presented it. According to Zeller, Philo saw human free will as an illusion of the uneducated. Those who understand the truth about God realise that ultimately only God is free, and humans are not.¹⁰⁶

⋮ **To sum up.** Zeller presented divine forgiveness as an expression of God’s grace,
⋮ which again is a manifestation of God’s creative power. God’s creative power, by
⋮ being graceful and forgiving, overrules as it were God’s other main power, the
⋮ judicial one. Grace tempers the strict judgement of the judicial power, allowing

¹⁰⁰ ZELLER, *Charis*, pp. 53–55; cf. Wolfson who pointed out that according to Philo the logos includes the merciful power of God with the name Theos and the judicial power with the name Kurios, which also administers punishment (WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 1, p. 226).

¹⁰¹ ZELLER, *Charis*, pp. 42–43.

¹⁰² Zeller argued that for Philo, evil in creation is an empirical fact simply due to its createdness, in contrast to Paul who holds mankind responsible for the state of decay that creation is in (ibid., p. 51).

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 44–45.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 55–59.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 119–126. See also ZELLER, *Studien*, pp. 43–48 where Zeller describes how for Philo this ungratefulness expressed itself mainly in the forms of polytheism and idolatry.

¹⁰⁶ ZELLER, *Charis*, pp. 70–72.

creation to remain. Humans because they are created beings are bound to do evil. Human evil grows from ignorance, namely ignoring God as the source of all things good. This ignorance also results in ungratefulness, because God is not acknowledged as the source of goodness. Humans can also be ignorant regarding the extent of their freedom. Only the truly educated realise that human freedom is nothing more than an illusion.

Zeller agreed with authors such as Bréhier and Thyen, that Philo saw creation as inherently evil. Zeller did not elaborate on why Philo held this view. Zeller's presentation suggests that Philo may have been inspired by Platonic and Stoic ideas. Zeller disagreed with authors who held that Philo saw disobedience as the root of sin. Zeller rather saw ignorance and ungratefulness as the causes of human evil. Zeller in this regard agreed with Goodenough and Laporte. As for Philo's view on the extent of human freedom, Zeller presented us with a view strongly opposed to Wolfson's claims, by presenting human freedom as an illusion. Zeller mentioned divine forgiveness as an expression of one of God's powers. What Zeller did not explore in his study, however, is what Philo believed happens when God forgives.

1.2.1.3 Results from the first part of the survey of previous studies

The survey of Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson provided a possible answer to the question of how Philo saw the connection between a transcendent God and the material world. All three agree that for Philo, the logos establishes this connection. With the term 'logos' Philo named the collective powers or ideas that exist in God's mind and sustain the whole of creation. The logos establishes the connection between God and humans, not only in the form of the human mind but also in the form of conscience, which informs someone that he or she has done wrong.

However, the investigation of the basic elements of Philo's thought as presented by Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson left us with two questions: what did Philo see as the cause of human evil and to what extent did Philo believe humans are free? How far have Thyen, Laporte and Zeller, who have explored the concept of forgiveness in Philo's works, brought us regarding these questions?

One benefit of Thyen's approach is that he, in agreement with Goodenough, pointed out that the idea of forgiveness of sin, was present in Hellenistic culture as a whole. This insight should make us careful when assuming that a particular notion appearing in Philo's works is exclusively rooted in his Jewish heritage. This caveat is further deepened by Zeller's study in which he presented connections between Philo's thinking and philosophical traditions, regarding the concept of grace. Zeller's suggestion that Philo saw forgiveness as a manifestation of God's graceful power can be fruitful. However, Zeller did not explore what Philo believed forgiveness to entail.

Laporte is the only one of the three authors examined in this section who offered some suggestions as to what Philo meant when he wrote that God forgives someone. Divine forgiveness is a healing of the soul brought about by God. Laporte pointed out that forgiveness is connected to sacrifice and explores Philo's view on the meaning of sacrifices. According to Laporte, sacrifice was, for Philo, a symbol of the sacrificer's acknowledgement that God is the true source of everything that exists. This acknowledgement initiates a spiritual healing, resulting in a mystical union with God. Laporte offered some suggestions regarding a meaningful interpretation of Philo's view on divine forgiveness. However, he presented these suggestions without connecting them to other views of Philo, specifically regarding the source of human evil and the extent of human freedom. These latter questions were more extensively explored by Thyen and Zeller.

Zeller agreed with Laporte that the acknowledgement of God as the source of everything that exists and gratefulness to God will lead humans to goodness. Contrary to Wolfson, Zeller did not maintain that Philo saw humans as truly free to choose to either acknowledge God as the creator or not. Zeller suggested that Philo saw human freedom ultimately as an illusion. If this is so, the matter of what Philo meant when he wrote that God forgives someone becomes all the more urgent. Why would God blame and then forgive someone, if the evil they have committed is not done out of free choice?

Thyen and Zeller furthermore presented us with different views as to what Philo saw as the root of human evil. They both claimed that Philo saw evil as an inherent part of creation. According to Thyen, Philo's view of creation as inherently evil is biblical. Zeller, on the other hand, seemed to point to philosophical antecedents for Philo's view on evil. Thyen furthermore held that forgiveness is simply part of Philo's religious heritage and saw this as a reason not to give too much thought to what Philo might have meant when he wrote about divine forgiveness.

Both matters, the possible source of Philo's moral evaluation of creation and whether Philo only mentioned forgiveness because he encountered it in the Bible, raise the question of what Philo's relation to the Bible actually was. Did he find himself compelled by his source to see creation as inherently evil? Did he mention divine forgiveness without giving it too much thought? Philo's relation to the Bible is one of two questions connected to his method in developing his ideas. The survey of Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson brings up the second question related to Philo's method. All of these three authors explored possible philosophical sources that could have inspired Philo. However, each of them pointed in different directions regarding these sources. Bréhier could be seen to point in the direction of Platonic or Stoic philosophy, Goodenough towards Egyptian traditions and Wolfson towards Aristotelian philosophy. How is this

possible, and what does this mean? Should Philo be seen as an indiscriminate eclectic? Did Philo have a method? How did he work?

1.2.2 **Philo's method**

The second section of the survey of previous studies will be dedicated to the advances in Philonic research regarding Philo's method in developing his thought – that is, his intellectual milieu and his treatment of the Bible. I will explore Philo's method by addressing two modern ways of interpretation that ultimately regard the issue of divine forgiveness as irrelevant for Philo's intellectual considerations. The first way is when Philo is considered an inconsistent thinker.¹⁰⁷ The intellectual challenges of divine forgiveness are, then, seen as examples of Philo's habitual inconsistency, which require no further consideration. The second way is when Philo is thought to mention divine forgiveness only because it appears in his source, the Bible, but with little regard for the intellectual challenges the notion implies.¹⁰⁸

In order to evaluate whether these claims do justice to Philo, we need to explore his method. First, to explore whether Philo was indeed an inconsistent thinker, I will describe the intellectual milieu in which Philo was active. John M. Dillon's and David T. Runia's contributions will lead the way into Philo's intellectual milieu. Philo's reception of the Bible will be explored next, to see whether he occasionally mentioned notions mainly because he found them in the Septuagint, while being largely inattentive to the intellectual challenges they implied. Here, Maren R. Niehoff's and Adam Kamesar's contributions will lead the way.

1.2.2.1 **Philo's intellectual milieu: Dillon, Runia**

In the past, scholars have assigned Philo to several philosophical schools, such as the Stoa or Platonism.¹⁰⁹ Ideas and concepts stemming from different philosophical traditions can indeed be identified in Philo's works.¹¹⁰ What has

¹⁰⁷ See HEINEMANN, *Bildung*, pp. 515–523, and also TOBIN, *Creation*, p. 4, note 13 where Thomas H. Tobin refers in agreement to the work of Valentin Nikiprowetzky, who wrote 'C'est lorsque l'on fait d'un thème techniquement philosophique le centre de la recherche que l'on se heurte surtout à un éclectisme décourageant et à d'inextricables contradictions' (see NIKIPROWETZKY, *Commentaire*, p. 237 and also references in RUNIA, *Timaeus*, p. 366, note 2 and p. 512, note 200).

¹⁰⁸ This approach is how a Philonic scholar like Völker solved the problem with the concept of God's transcendence in Philo's works. Völker noted that the concept of God's graceful providence is difficult to combine with Philo's statements on God's transcendence (VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, p. 54). However, according to Völker, the tension should not be stressed too much. He maintained that the concept of God's providence belongs to Philo's Jewish piety, which is always at the forefront of Philo's thought, and the concept of God's transcendence simply takes a secondary position.

¹⁰⁹ See ROSKAM, *Virtue*, p. 148 for an overview of the different stances towards Philo's philosophical position that have been taken throughout the history of Philonic study.

¹¹⁰ The various philosophical ideas and concepts appearing in Philo's works have been catalogued by

frustrated scholars, however, is that it turns out to be rather difficult to assign Philo to any one of these schools exclusively. Philo used different concepts of different philosophical schools next to each other, apparently without noting any conflict between them.¹¹¹ Such eclecticism has led some scholars to present Philo as a thinker who used philosophical concepts as he saw fit without any concern for consistency.¹¹²

As was shown by **John M. Dillon** (*1939), however, Philo's Alexandrian intellectual context provided him with a philosophical vocabulary in which the boundaries between various philosophical schools had already become blurred. Dillon showed how shortly before Philo's time, Alexandrian intellectuals had attempted to harmonise the vocabulary of varying philosophical traditions. As an example, Dillon put forward Eudorus of Alexandria (fl. 60 BCE). Eudorus devised a philosophical-historical framework that provided him with the possibility to incorporate ideas from various philosophical schools into one philosophical framework. Eudorus claimed that Pythagoras was the principal source for all subsequent philosophy. As a result, discrepancies between schools became less pronounced and important. Eudorus characterised those discrepancies as having arisen when schools took divergent historical paths. He presented philosophical concepts as in principle compatible, since he considered them to have grown from the same source.¹¹³

Dillon therefore emphasised that, as a consequence of this harmonising trend, the appearance of a particular word or concept in a given text cannot lead to the conclusion that its author must belong to a certain philosophical school. Even less does the occurrence of a certain concept exclude the usage of another

scholars such as Bréhier, Isaak Heinemann and Wolfson. A recent example of cataloguing various sources of Philo's thought can be found in HADAS-LEBEL, *Philo*, pp. 164–175. See also above (pp. 12–22) for the various positions Bréhier, Goodenough and Wolfson took towards Philo's philosophical sources.

¹¹¹ An almost classical example is Philo's use of μετριοπάθεια and ἀπάθεια alongside each other. Μετριοπάθεια, the ideal of controlling the passions and maintaining a balance between two extremes, is catalogued as an Aristotelian ideal. Ἀπάθεια, the ideal of completely cancelling out the influence of the passions, is catalogued in the history of philosophy as a Stoic ideal. It would appear that the one ideal cannot coexist with the other: either the passions are destroyed, or they are controlled. In *LA* III, 129–132 Philo mentions both as different stages on the road to moral perfection (Aaron practising μετριοπάθεια; Moses ἀπάθεια); in *Abr.* 257 Philo seems to slightly prefer μετριοπάθεια over ἀπάθεια.

¹¹² See note 107.

¹¹³ DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, p. 120. Dillon presents as another example Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 120–68 BCE). He attempted to build a bridge between the philosophy of the Academy and the Stoa. Antiochus advocated the ideal of ἀπάθεια, usually associated with the Stoa. He harmonised this with the concept of μετριοπάθεια, usually associated with the Academy. Antiochus reasoned that controlling the passions (the ideal of μετριοπάθεια) is essentially the same as eliminating the effect of the passions (the ideal of ἀπάθεια). He argued that a πάθος under control is essentially not a πάθος anymore (see *ibid.*, pp. 77–78).

concept, or prove authors inconsistent if they used them alongside each other.¹¹⁴ Dillon claimed that Philo's works are the main evidence of this phenomenon, and presented Plutarch and Numenius as other examples of the same trend.¹¹⁵ Dillon convincingly showed how Philo was part of an Alexandrian intellectual milieu where differences between philosophical traditions had become less pronounced. Dillon also demonstrated that the occurrence, within the works of one author, of what in earlier times might have been conflicting philosophical concepts should not be considered a sign of an incoherent and philosophically opportunistic mind. Philo used an integrated philosophical vocabulary that was no more than common in his Alexandrian context.

Somewhat problematic is Dillon's presentation of this trend to harmonise ideas and concepts of various philosophical traditions in one shared vocabulary as a hallmark of 'Middle Platonism'. Such a label invites to transform a general intellectual milieu into a clearly demarcated philosophical school. **David T. Runia** (*1951) presented what he considered the main principles of the Middle Platonists: they considered themselves followers of Plato and the Platonic school of thought; they had a dogmatic view on Plato and claimed that they presented the authentic Plato; they were loyal to the writings of Plato, albeit to a limited set in particular (*Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Timaeus*); their main method was to explain Plato from Plato and through this method to systematise his ideas; their view on the history of philosophy was that Plato was a student of Pythagoras and that Aristotle and the Stoa had learned from Plato.¹¹⁶ Runia then argued that Philo did not conform to these main principles of 'Middle Platonism': for Philo, Moses was his main teacher, not Plato; the Books of Moses were his main authoritative source; Philo did not aim at systematisation; Philo sometimes even disagreed with Plato. Because of this, Runia called Philo a 'philosophical opportunist', not loyal to one philosophical school alone.¹¹⁷

Did Philo belong to the school of 'Middle Platonism' or not? This question, however, arises from the same mistake as when scholars before Dillon had

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 122. Before Dillon, Marie E. Isaacs had already shown that the usage of terminology usually associated with Stoics in *Wisdom of Solomon* 'is indicative of no more than the fact that such philosophical terms were part of common parlance' (see ISAACS, *Spirit*, p. 24). Geert Roskam describes how for the philosophical milieu of Philo different philosophical ideas could easily be used together, and the problem of consistency is something modern scholars force upon Philo's thinking (see ROSKAM, *Virtue*, p. 150).

¹¹⁵ DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 182–183. Or as Heinrich Dörrie put it: 'Philo vermag seine Gedanken biblisch, stoisch und platonisch auszudrücken; er kultiviert eine solche *πολυφωνία*, um hervorzuhellen, daß alle derartigen < Sprachen > auf die gleiche Wahrheit führen' (see DÖRRIE, 'Platonismus', p. 24, note 3).

¹¹⁶ RUNIA, *Timaeus*, pp. 51–52.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 270, 508.

claimed that Philo was a ‘Platonist’, or a ‘Stoic’. Dillon’s contributions show that it is impossible to delineate strict boundaries between philosophical traditions with regard to Philo’s intellectual context. As a result, it is ill advised to attempt to clearly demarcate the boundaries of ‘Middle Platonism’ and assign Philo to it. Rather, I will avoid using the label ‘Middle Platonism’ altogether. Using the label suggests more than it can actually provide. It indicates a certain time-period and describes a shared method of philosophical authors. However, it provides little indication regarding the contents of an author’s thoughts. Claiming Philo either for ‘Middle Platonism’ or not does not bring much further understanding of the content of his thought.¹¹⁸ What seems true, however, and nowadays hardly any scholar denies this, is that Philo used a method comparable to that of other contemporaneous philosophers like Eudorus or Plutarch.

Eudorus and Plutarch followed the same philosophical-historical framework that Runia presented as the principal basis for ‘Middle Platonism’, namely that Plato was a student of Pythagoras and in turn that Aristotle and the Stoa had learned from Plato. Philo, however, followed his own variant of this framework. When writing about Moses’ education in *Mos.* I, 21–24, he tells us how Moses was taught by teachers from both Egypt and the neighbouring countries, as well as from Greece. As an important difference, however, Philo claims that Moses soon surpassed the capabilities of all his teachers and embarked on his own quest for truth.¹¹⁹ Philo believed that ultimately all philosophy and wisdom grew out from the teachings of Moses. Philo limited this wisdom not to Greek philosophy alone. As stated above, according to Philo, Moses’ teachers were not

¹¹⁸ When revisiting the matter of whether Philo was a Middle Platonist both Runia and Dillon clarified their opinions. The result is that both, in the fifth volume of *The Studia Philonica Annual*, profess their view to be ‘that Philo is a Platonizing expositor of scripture, showing a marked preference for using Middle Platonist doctrines in his exegesis’ (RUNIA, ‘Difficult Question’, p. 126 and DILLON, ‘Response’, p. 151). In the same volume, other scholars, such as Gregory E. Sterling and Tobin, maintain that Philo can be called a Middle Platonist (STERLING, ‘Platonizing Moses’, p. 111 and TOBIN, ‘Suggestions’, p. 150). In his afterword to the revised edition of his study of the Middle Platonists, Dillon emphasises that he does not want to identify Philo as a Middle Platonist; rather, according to him, Philo only ‘constitutes good evidence for prevailing trends in contemporary Platonism’ (DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, p. 439). Moreover, Dillon explains at the beginning of his afterword that his intention is to use ‘Middle Platonism’ as a term to identify a time-period (roughly 88 BCE–250 CE) and ‘a movement held together by certain ideological principles’ (ibid., p. 422). However, attempts to demarcate these ideological principles can quickly become too dogmatic and lead scholars to jump to conclusions. An example is Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who sees Philo’s view on πνεῦμα as irrelevant for illuminating Paul’s thoughts on the spirit, because Engberg-Pedersen identifies Philo as belonging to the Middle Platonist school of thought, and ‘a Middle Platonic, immaterial understanding [of πνεῦμα] does not fit the facts [of Paul’s materialistic view of πνεῦμα]’ (see ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, *Cosmology*, p. 39). Such a rather rash disqualification of Philo’s possible relevance for understanding Paul’s views is regrettable. Philo’s thoughts on πνεῦμα can shed light on aspects of Paul’s thinking, as several contributions to a volume dedicated to the concept of the holy Spirit – including my own – show (see TIMMERS, ‘Πνεῦμα’ and RABENS, ‘Pneuma’).

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Mos.* I, 21–24 and also *LA* II, 15; *Prob.* 57; *Aet.* 19.

only Greek philosophers, but also wise men of Egypt and other neighbouring countries. It is unclear whether Egyptian traditions did influence Philo's works, although when defending the custom of circumcision Philo referred to the practice of this custom among the Egyptians, and then praised their antiquity and philosophical achievements.¹²⁰

To sum up. Philo should not be considered an inconsistent thinker. He applied a method similar to those of his immediate intellectual context, allowing him to use various concepts not only from Greek sources, but from other sources as well, side by side. This should not necessarily be taken as indication of an inconsistent mind.¹²¹ Philo's approach was based on the view that Moses surpassed all other philosophers in knowledge, which left him with the possibility of concluding that if there was any truth in any philosophical tradition, this truth can be traced back to the ideas of Moses.¹²² Philo's philosophical views might be imagined as an alloy. In chemistry, an alloy is a mixture of different metals. Each component metal can be identified and adds to the properties of the alloy. The alloy, however, is more than the simple sum of its separate elements; it has properties unique to itself. When analysing Philo's

¹²⁰ Goodenough argued for influences of mystical traditions in Philo's thought, which led him to conclude that Philo aimed to create a Jewish mystery cult (see GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, p. 140, and more elaborately in GOODENOUGH, *Light*). Bréhier signalled the mystical character of Philo's allegory and suggested possible precursors in Egyptian mystery-cults for various concepts in Philo's works. He also signalled important differences between Philo and the mystery cults (BRÉHIER, *Les idées*, pp. 40–41, 204, 239–249). Wolfson accepted that Philo may use mystical language, however Wolfson also pointed out that Philo is opposed to the actual mystery cults themselves (WOLFSON, *Philo vol. 1*, pp. 37, 49, 52). Samuel Sandmel held that Goodenough pushes his theory too far, yet he stressed that the aspect of the mystery-cults was an important aspect in Philo's works (SANDMEL, *Philo*, p. 147). Ronald Williamson also signalled that Philo's language evidently has a mystical character (WILLIAMSON, *Philo*, p. 71). See *Spec. I*, 2 for Philo's defence of circumcision.

¹²¹ Niehoff illustrates well how fully Philo participated in the intellectual discourse both in Alexandria and in Rome, and how his interactions within these various contexts shaped the development of his thinking (see NIEHOFF, *Biography*, pp. 199–200, 242). A great benefit of Niehoff's approach for Philonic scholars is to become aware of different stages in the development of Philo's thinking, instead of too quickly concluding that he was an inconsistent thinker (see *ibid.*, p. 226). However, the contrast she presents between Alexandria as a centre for Platonism and Rome as a centre for Stoicism (*ibid.*, pp. 14–15) again suggests a demarcation between philosophical schools sharper than it existed in Philo's time. The example of Eudorus (see note 113 above) shows that this particular philosopher integrated concepts usually associated with Plato and the Stoa. Niehoff extends this contrast between Alexandria and Rome to a contrast between an 'early' more Platonic and a 'later' more Stoic Philo (see *ibid.*, pp. 72–74, 103, 215). If this contrast was truly as strong as Niehoff suggests, it seems strange that Philo prefers the ideal of μετριοπάθεια (usually associated with Aristotelian philosophy) over ἀπάθεια (usually attributed to the Stoics) in a treatise she assigns to the 'later,' allegedly more Stoic Philo (namely in *Abr.* 257; see also note 111). She also seems to overlook (in *ibid.*, pp. 96–102) Philo's critique of Stoic immanence in *Opif.* 6b–12 (as discussed below, see pp. 61–67).

¹²² Philo himself claims that he belongs to the 'school of Moses' (see *Mut.* 223). As will be discussed below (see pp. 34–42), this statement should also not be taken as a sharp demarcation of the contents of Philo's thought.

thinking, we should constantly bear in mind that the whole of Philo's view is a blend, an alloy of different philosophical outlooks, with characteristics of its own.¹²³

With this character of Philo's philosophy in mind, we can investigate a notion such as divine forgiveness as part of a wider coherent philosophical framework.¹²⁴ We are encouraged to carefully look at the relevant passages themselves and analyse their structure, terminology and meaning, expecting these to reflect a coherent pattern of thought, no matter how traditional philosophical schools would have understood the issues under discussion. But before we enter into the discussion of specific passages, a second matter regarding Philo's method needs to be addressed, namely his reception of the Bible. Is it possible that Philo believed it necessary to mention divine pardon because he found it in the Bible, without giving much thought to the complications this notion implied in relation to his overall rationale?

1.2.2.2 **Philo's reception of the Bible: Nikiprowetzky, Niehoff, Kamesar**

Several recent studies focused in particular on how Philo related to the Bible. Philo held the Bible, which he only knew in its Greek translation, in high regard as the culmination and source of all wisdom. Especially important to Philo was the Pentateuch, which he considered to be the 'oracles of Moses'.¹²⁵ This

¹²³ Similarly in TIMMERS, 'Πνεῦμα', p. 268. Incidentally, Philo himself described a medicine as a mixture with properties of its own, exceeding the properties of the elements it consists of (see *Conf.* 187).

¹²⁴ As Runia put it: 'There is clearly a consistent rationale behind his procedure. It resembles the procedure of the Middle Platonists, but is not wholly the same' (RUNIA, *Timaeus*, p. 519). And as Sterling, Runia, Niehoff and Annewies van den Hoek put it, although Philo 'did not work out a systematic presentation' of his philosophical ideas, 'this does not mean that he did not have a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos' (STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', p. 282). Kamesar writes: 'What is striking about [Philo's] allegory is its systematic structure as it emerges in Philo's works, for Philo employs recurring allegorical equivalencies to put together a more or less systematic elucidation of the Pentateuch as a whole, not just individual episodes' (KAMESAR, *Philo*, p. 86).

¹²⁵ Philo speaks of the 'oracles' (χρησμοί or λογοί) of Moses in *Mut.* 196; *Abr.* 166; *Praem.* 1. In *Dec.* 48, he describes God as the source of these revelations. More than once Philo writes how excellently (παγκάλως) Moses put something into words (*Opif.* 148; *LA.* III, 46–47; *Det.* 129; *Post.* 111; *Deus* 85; *Agr.* 54, 84, 144, 179; *Conf.* 99; *Migr.* 14, 135, 152, 206; *Her.* 10, 61, 86, 196, 213, 263; *Dec.* 48, 100; *Spec.* I, 104; II, 239; III, 153; IV, 53, 131; *Virt.* 163, 171, 183, 185; *Praem.* 111; *QG* II, 11, 62; IV, 33; *QE* II, 20), and especially excellent according to Philo is the logical order that Moses recognised (*Opif.* 65; *Spec.* I, 195; IV, 39), or the fact that Moses begins his oracles with the story of the creation of the world (*Opif.* 2; *Praem.* 1). Philo presents Moses as a philosopher (*Opif.* 2; *Abr.* 13) and claims that philosophy sowed excellent ideas into Moses' mind, wherefore the ordinances that Moses gives are excellent and wise (φιλόσοφος) (*Mos.* II, 36, 66). As regards Philo's focus on the Pentateuch, Kamesar writes: 'As far as canon is concerned, Philo's Bible is essentially the Torah, or Pentateuch. He comments on the Pentateuch books only, and even his citations of books from other parts of the conventional canon are proportionately few' (KAMESAR, *Philo*, p. 72). However, Philo had no access to the Hebrew Bible, his 'Bible' was the LXX (see NIEHOFF, *Biography*, p. 4; similarly in DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, p. 141, and WINSTON, *Logos*, p. 13). Therefore, biblical quotes in this study will be from the LXX, unless otherwise specified.

approach of Philo to the Bible was not unique. Already before Philo, Jewish intellectuals in Alexandria had used the Pentateuch as the essential source of wisdom and as the work of a single author, namely Moses.¹²⁶ In the *Letter of Aristeeas* (usually dated to the mid-second century BCE), Moses is presented as a wise man, who ‘drew up his laws with such exceeding care. All these ordinances were made for the sake of righteousness to aid the quest for virtue and the perfecting of character’ (*Ep. Arist.*, 144–145).¹²⁷

Such high regard for an ancient literary source, perceived as the work of one author, presented Philo and his predecessors with an intellectual challenge. Alexandrian Jewish scholars wanted to maintain the authority of the Bible and, at the same time, give serious attention to the scientific insights of their time. The Bible, however, could present them with statements that conflicted with such insights. In Philo’s works we find various examples of different responses to this intellectual dilemma. Philo’s nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander, for example, fully gave up on the authority of the Bible.¹²⁸ Others adhered to a literal reading of the Bible and rejected the scientific insights of their time.¹²⁹ Finally, there were those who dismissed the literal reading of the Bible and attempted to save the Bible’s authority by following an allegorical reading.¹³⁰ Philo positioned himself somewhere in the middle between the latter two extremes. He declined to dismiss the literal reading altogether, while he resorted to allegory to find the ‘deeper meaning’ of a scriptural passage, when its literal reading might lead to absurdities.

On the basis of such an approach, various scholars were inclined to stress Philo’s role as an exegete and expositor of scripture, rather than as philosopher. Some even claimed that Philo occasionally felt the need to mention certain ideas because he found them in the Bible and adhered to them without

¹²⁶ Cf. NIEHOFF, *Exegesis*, p. 39. In *ibid.*, pp. 62–63, Niehoff also provides examples of Jewish authors in Alexandria prior to Philo, such as Pseudo-Aristeeas and Aristobulus (also mid-second century BCE), who used passages from one book of the Pentateuch to explain passages from another book, since they considered Moses to be the author of all five books of the Pentateuch. Pseudo-Aristeeas alludes to Jacob’s dream in Bethel (in Gn. 28) when explaining the meaning of the commandments concerning clean and unclean animals (in Dt. 14) (see *Ep. Arist.*, 160–161). Aristobulus used passages from Deuteronomy (Dt. 4:11; 5:23; 9:15) to clarify multiple statements in Exodus (Ex. 19:16–25; 20:18–21; 24:15–18) of God descending to the mountain (see Aristobulus, fragment 2 in HOLLADAY, *Fragments* vol. 3, p. 142. Cf. also PUCCI BEN ZEEV, ‘Jews’, p. 371).

¹²⁷ Translation by H.T. Andrews (see also *Ep. Arist.*, 139).

¹²⁸ Most assume that Philo’s opponent in the treatise *De Providentia* is his nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander (see COLSON, *Philo* vol. 9, p. 447, and also STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, ‘Philo’, pp. 276–277), who, according to Josephus, gave up on his Jewish religion (*AJ* XX, 100).

¹²⁹ On occasion Philo points out that a solely literal reading of a certain passage would lead to absurdities (see, for instance, *LA* II, 19–21).

¹³⁰ An approach Philo opposes in *Migr.* 89.

considering whether they were consistent with his overall rationale.¹³¹

Valentin Nikiprowetzky (1919–1983), for example, rejected a philosophical systematisation of Philo's thoughts as an inappropriate endeavour, because Philo's philosophical reflections are inspired and limited by the scriptural passage he was trying to explain. He called this limitation Philo's 'exegetical constraint'.¹³² With regard to the idea of divine amnesty, this approach would lead to the conclusion that Philo only mentioned it because he found it in the Bible, without giving it much further thought. Does such an approach do justice to Philo's method of developing his thought?

¹³¹ According to Völker, Philo always remained bound to the scriptural passage and his interpretations were limited by that passage (VÖLKER, *Fortschritt*, p. 9). This explains Philo's eclecticism and excludes any systematisation of Philo's thoughts (ibid., p. 7). However, this did not prevent Völker from developing his own thoroughly systematic view on Philo. Without arguing his case he dismissed certain passages from Philo as not belonging to Philo's main thoughts, where it seems that the only reason for Völker to dismiss these passages was that they did not fit with his view on Philo. See, for example, ibid., pp. 71–77, where he dismissed certain passages in Philo that seem to indicate some form of inherent sinfulness in creation as not belonging to Philo's main thinking. Völker's approach was criticised in GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, p. 15, and THYEN, *Sündenvergebung*, p. 105. Wolfson claimed that Philo always considered the message of the Bible superior to any philosophical beliefs: the Bible provides Philo with the truth to which philosophy needs to adapt (WOLFSON, *Philo* vol. 1, pp. 27 and 164).

¹³² NIKIPROWETZKY, *Études*, pp. 125–127. Runia largely agreed with Nikiprowetzky's view that Philo should be considered foremost an exegete, not a systematic philosopher (RUNIA, *Timaeus*, p. 20). As a consequence, Philo could leave certain questions unanswered and was philosophically opportunistic, not bound to one particular school (ibid., pp. 508–512). Runia later added nuance to the debate as to whether Philo should be considered either an exegete or a philosopher. In defence of Nikiprowetzky, Runia stresses that the latter scholar's position, as much as his own, should not be understood as viewing Philo as an exegete rather than a philosopher, as if the two labels were mutually exclusive. Nikiprowetzky's position can, according to Runia, be defined as follows: 'Philo is an eclectic philosophical expositor of scripture, who appropriates various school doctrines as it suits his exegetical purposes' (RUNIA, 'Difficult Question', p. 126). Runia qualified Philo as a 'philosophically orientated exegete,' thereby giving primacy to the aspect of exegesis over the aspect of philosophy in Philo's work (ibid., p. 123; see also RUNIA, 'Philo', p. 854). When writing that Philo follows a procedure similar to the Middle Platonists, Runia claimed that the difference between Philo and the Middle Platonists is that Philo is not loyal to Plato, but to Moses (RUNIA, 'Difficult Question', pp. 121–123, 131). Roberto Radice called Nikiprowetzky's concept of exegetical constraint a 'felicitous phrase' (see RADICE, 'Freedom', p. 150). In a similar vein, Hadas-Lebel wrote in her introduction to Philo: 'When the scriptural text calls for a philosophical interpretation, Philo borrows elements from the most appropriate doctrine for the occasion' and: 'Philosophy must be subordinate to Scripture, which means for Philo subordinating reason to faith' (HADAS-LEBEL, *Philo*, pp. 175, 178). Similarly, Jaap Mansfeld, when discussing Philo's position concerning the creation of the world, stated that 'Philo, naturally, sides with Moses.' He also writes that 'the demands of scriptural exegesis seem often to be decisive in respect to the [philosophical] option chosen' (MANSFELD, 'Strategies', pp. 79, 84). In her introduction to Philo in the revised edition of Schürer's work, Jenny Morris professed that Philo presented us nowhere with a systematic overview of his philosophical outlook, because he took his lead from the 'the absolute authority of the Mosaic Law.' Referring to Nikiprowetzky, Jenny Morris also stated that 'it might be profitable to regard him [Philo] as an exegete rather than as a philosopher' (MORRIS, 'Philo', pp. 875, 880).

As it is, it remains unclear what a phrase like ‘exegetical constraint’ exactly means. What criteria would Philo have used to decide which philosophical doctrine is most appropriate to interpret a biblical passage and which not? Would authors who suggest that Philo should be seen as primarily an exegete suggest that there is some inner meaning present in a biblical passage that determines Philo’s choices? The question can be posed in general as to how Philo’s interaction with the source he considered authoritative would have been different from other contemporary authors who developed their thinking through exegesis of ancient sources they considered authoritative. Recent developments in Philonic study show that Philo’s exegetical approach to the Bible is not very different from the approach of other ancient authors to their culturally relevant source.

Ancient authors in general valued authors and literary sources from the past.¹³³ They considered them a valuable source for wisdom, seasoned by time. Some of them they even believed to have been written down during humanity’s ‘Golden Age’. This ‘Golden Age’ was thought to be the time of the first humans, who outclassed all humans that came after them, because younger generations were believed to suffer from a process of degeneration.¹³⁴ Ancient authors who held antique sources contained superior knowledge were presented with a challenge, however. They were confronted with internally inconsistent passages in their sources (problems of contradiction) or with statements that conflicted with contemporary understanding of reality (problems of verisimilitude). To solve that dilemma, ancient authors developed the method of allegory to solve such problems and maintain the authority of their source.

To be sure, ‘problem-solving’ does not fully reflect the sophisticated assumptions underpinning the allegorical method. On the one hand, allegorists assumed that the divine truth can never be completely and adequately expressed in language, regardless of form or genre, be it a philosophical treatise

¹³³ James Kugel discusses the background of the phenomenon where ancient texts become valued as significant sources of wisdom, in: KUGEL, ‘Early Jewish Biblical Interpretation’, especially pp. 152–153 and 165–166. He describes how this phenomenon is not unique to Judaism and names the examples of the Vedas in Hinduism, Confucius’ writings in Chinese culture and others. He presents four assumptions that ancient interpreters of the Bible shared: 1) they assumed that the texts were cryptic, often meaning something different to what the plain text says; 2) they assumed that the texts, although written centuries ago, were relevant to their present day; 3) they assumed that the diverse writings of the Bible contained one unitary message; and 4) they assumed that every word of the Bible came from God.

¹³⁴ See LOVEJOY/BOAS/ALBRIGHT, *Primitivism*, pp. 1–22; HOLLEMAN/HOLLANDER, ‘Death, Sin, and Law’, pp. 284–286. A somewhat comparable example of the degeneration of humanity through the generations can be recognised in Gn. 11:10–26 where the age humans reach is presented as declining through the generations, from 500 years for Shem to 119 years for Nahor. Aristotle accepts in *Met.* XII, 1074b 1–14 that myths can contain remnants of ancient knowledge, which have become distorted in later generations (cf. MOST, ‘Hellenistic Allegory’, p. 26).

or a poetic myth.¹³⁵ On the other hand, they assumed that the divine truth permeated everything, including ancient texts.¹³⁶ With these two assumptions together they supported the main premise of the allegorical method, which was that transcendent truth lies hidden beneath the surface of words. Allegorists developed various methods to disclose this hidden truth.¹³⁷

Recently, **Maren R. Niehoff** (*1963) drew attention to how Philo's approach to the Bible fits in well with a longstanding tradition of Jewish exegesis in Alexandria. That tradition was developed in intensive interaction with Homeric scholarship, for which Alexandria had become (in the third and second centuries BCE) an important centre in the Hellenistic world.¹³⁸ The goal of this Homeric scholarship was to maintain the authority of Homer's epics as a source for philosophical wisdom, defending them against the criticism of being inconsistent and unreliable.¹³⁹ Niehoff presents examples of how Aristotle and other commentators on Homer's epics countered this criticism and, using allegory, tried to solve problems of internal contradictions and verisimilitude.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ See STRUCK, *Symbol*, pp. 170–175. Peter T. Struck's book has as an epigraph a quote from Plato (*Crat.* 425D) expressing amazement at the limitations of written texts. Struck (while presenting an overview of Plotinus' main tenets in STRUCK, 'Allegory and Ascent', p. 59) points out that allegorists claim to 'render the transcendent in the concrete, and use language to express what is beyond language.'

¹³⁶ See STRUCK, *Symbol*, pp. 188–191; similarly in MOST, 'Hellenistic Allegory', p. 28. Glenn W. Most (ibid.) adds that this approach also made it possible to provide a more universal meaning to originally local texts and practices.

¹³⁷ For an overview of the development of the method of allegory see SELLIN, *Allegorie*, pp. 9–56, which contains an exploration of Philo's allegorical method and its background in both Jewish and Greco-Roman antecedents, see ibid., pp. 29–56; see also SANDMEL, *Philo*, pp. 17–28. Sellin explains that the hidden nature of what is perceived to be the actual meaning is what sets allegory apart from metaphors and symbols (SELLIN, *Allegorie*, p. 17). Rita Copeland and Struck describe allegory as 'a hermeneutic aimed at the transcendent truths concealed in language' (COPELAND/STRUCK, *Allegory*, p. 3). Philo describes allegory as a method that reveals the hidden meaning of a literal text (*Cont.* 28); he compares this hidden truth to the invisible soul of a text, where the literal words form the visible body (*Cont.* 78). Philo describes in *Cont.* 29 how hymns and psalms can be composed as the vice-versa movement of this process of interpretation: new words are sought and found to express the transcending truth. Most describes this as a wider trend of allegorists in MOST, 'Hellenistic Allegory', pp. 33–38.

¹³⁸ Most describes the development of allegorical interpretation of Homer's (and also other Greek poets') works, beginning with Zeno, then moving to his successors Cleanthes and Chrysippus and being consolidated in Alexandria by 'a group of philologists' under the first Ptolemies (third and second centuries BCE) (see MOST, 'Hellenistic Allegory', pp. 29–30).

¹³⁹ These Homeric scholars respond to 'widely known criticism of the epics, especially Plato's dismissal of Homer as an unphilosophical and thus misleading writer' (NIEHOFF, *Exegesis*, p. 9).

¹⁴⁰ See ibid., pp. 38–57. She gives as an example from Homer's epics of internal contradiction, the difference between *Il.* XXI, 17 where Achilles is said to lay aside his spear and *Il.* XXI, 67 where Achilles uses his spear to attack his foes. Nowhere in the intermediate lines, however, is it mentioned how Achilles retrieves his spear. Underlying the perceived contradiction was the assumption that all of Homer's epics were indeed the accomplishment of one author, and therefore should be more or less homogeneous. The problem of verisimilitude is where a statement in Homer's epics conflicts

These examples allow Niehoff to highlight the similarity between this type of Homeric scholarship and the way that Philo, and other Alexandrian Jewish intellectuals before him, attempted to solve stumbling blocks of contradiction and verisimilitude in the Pentateuch.¹⁴¹

The anonymous author of the Letter to Aristeas can, for example, be seen to address a problem of verisimilitude in *Ep. Arist.*, 128–171. He attempted to provide an answer to the question of why in Mosaic Law some animals are considered unclean, and others clean. Some critics considered the distinction between clean and unclean animals rather arbitrary and unscientific, lacking a clear basis in the properties of the animals involved. Pseudo-Aristeas, however, held that ‘nothing has been enacted in the Scripture thoughtlessly or without due reason.’¹⁴² Pseudo-Aristeas then argues how unclean birds are of a ferocious nature and therefore should be avoided lest our character becomes contaminated with their ferociousness.

Philo’s exegesis, however, is not aimed at solving problems of contradiction or verisimilitude alone. **Adam Kamesar** (*1956) who has recently also addressed Philo’s allegorical method identified a distinctive difference between Philo’s exegesis of the Pentateuch and that of Homeric scholars. It is Philo’s conviction that there are no superfluous passages in the Pentateuch, whereas Homeric scholars held that some passages of Homer’s epics were included for aesthetic purposes alone, without deeper meaning. To Philo, every bit of the Pentateuch is meaningful.¹⁴³

with the contemporary scientific insights of the interpreter. Niehoff gives an example of this type of problem in *Il. XXI*, 538–9, where Apollo is described as flinging wide the gates of Troy, thereby illuminating the whole city. This appears to be an absurd statement, as if the gates of Troy would be the only place where light could fall into the city.

¹⁴¹ Another example is Demetrius, also an Alexandrian predecessor of Philo, who at the end of the second century BCE wrote a commentary on the Bible in the form of questions and answers (for a plausible dating of Demetrius, see *ibid.*, p. 55). One of the questions that Demetrius attempted to answer is a problem of contradiction in Exodus. Demetrius asks how the Israelites armed themselves for the battle with Amalek in Ex. 17:8–9, since in Ex. 5:3 it is stated that they left Egypt unarmed. His solution is to assume that the Israelites armed themselves with the weapons of the Egyptians who drowned in the Red Sea (see Demetrius, fragment 5 in HOLLADAY, *Fragments vol. 1*, p. 76). The examples of Pseudo-Aristeas and Demetrius are presented and discussed in NIEHOFF, *Exegesis*, pp. 39–40; the example of Demetrius is also discussed in NIEHOFF, *Biography*, pp. 174–175.

¹⁴² *Ep. Arist.*, 168 (translation by H.T. Andrews).

¹⁴³ As Kamesar put it: ‘What is important to emphasize in the present context is that even the “didacticists”, that is, those who believed that instruction was the primary aim of literature, for the most part allowed for the fact that even in Homer, the “educator of Greece”, there were “psychagogic” elements. In other words, they were not all-inclusivists in their didacticism and, allowing for “psychagogic” intentions on the part of Homer, they did not feel compelled to find a didactic purpose in every line of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. In contrast, Philo explicitly denies that Moses aimed at *psychagōgia* “without benefit” (Mos. 2.48)’ (KAMESAR, *Philo*, p. 81). Niehoff describes how this insistence on meaningfulness of every element of the Pentateuch creates a creative springboard for

He made it his purpose to reveal the deeper truths that he believed lie hidden behind Moses' 'oracles'.

Philo's favourite method of developing his insights is by means of commenting on various biblical passages. The main bulk of Philo's extant work consists of commentaries on passages from biblical books, mostly from Genesis and Exodus.¹⁴⁴ This is not to say that Philo only wrote exegetical works. There are also several treatises transmitted to us where Philo investigates one specific topic, such as the meaning of freedom for the wise, or whether the world exists eternally, whether animals can be rational, and if providence exists.¹⁴⁵ We do, however, lack a work in which Philo systematically presents us with his philosophical outlook and method.

Philo's approach is not unique. For example, it resembles that of some Stoic philosophers who chose to expound their tenets by allegorically explaining the works of Homer.¹⁴⁶ Another example is Chaeremon of Alexandria who presented his philosophical ideas in the form of commentaries on Egyptian myths. Furthermore, some of the philosophical ideas of Plutarch are transmitted to us in the form of commentaries on the myth of Isis and Osiris. Yet another example is Numenius of Apamea, who presented his philosophical outlook by commenting on oriental traditions.¹⁴⁷ None of the aforementioned philosophers, however, is considered primarily an exegete of Homer or the myths to which he connected his philosophical outlooks. No one suggests that the myths or poems they expounded were forcing ideas or 'exegetical constraints' upon them, so why should we treat Philo differently?

Philo can be considered, like the Stoics, Chaeremon, Plutarch or Numenius, to be interested in the truth, truth that according to these authors reveals itself through careful scrutiny of an authoritative ancient source.¹⁴⁸ Philo's main *aim*

Philo to embark on elaborate allegoric explorations, which she sees as a novelty of Philo compared to both his Jewish and Stoic predecessors (see NIEHOFF, *Biography*, pp. 178–181).

¹⁴⁴ For an overview of Philo's works see STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', pp. 256–257.

¹⁴⁵ *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit*, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, *De Animalibus* and *De Providentia*. Niehoff connects Philo's explicitly philosophical treatises to his stay in Rome. The treatises where he presents his readers with a close reading and interpretation of biblical passages she associates with Alexandria (see NIEHOFF, *Biography*, pp. 245–246).

¹⁴⁶ DILLON, *Middle Platonists*, p. 142. See also SANDMEL, *Philo*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', p. 282.

¹⁴⁸ David Winston (in an article exploring Philo's concept of free will) concluded that Philo belongs to 'the ranks of those whose philosophical convictions run considerably deeper than their adhesion to religious dogma' (WINSTON, 'Free Will', p. 186; see also references in note 16 of that article). Throughout the present study several instances are indicated where ideas of Philo are characterised as biblical, when rather they should be considered as stemming from Philo's philosophical convictions (see note 180, 280, 422).

was to find and share what he considered truth.¹⁴⁹ His main *method* of finding and presenting this truth is by means of exegetical expositions of the source he considered most valuable, namely the Pentateuch, written by the only truly wise man, Moses. For Philo, there was no real difference between exegetical and philosophical exposition.¹⁵⁰ He considered the study and exposition of Mosaic Law the highest form of philosophy.¹⁵¹ The suggestion that Philo would only mention something because he found it in the Bible, without giving it much further consideration, does neither do justice to Philo's intention nor his method. He cared deeply for the truth contained in every bit of Moses' writings. We can ask, therefore, what deeper truth Philo claimed was hidden in the biblical statement that God forgives an evildoer.

To sum up. Like Chaeremon of Alexandria, Plutarch or Numenius of Apamea, Philo was in search for truth. Like those non-Jewish thinkers Philo used the method of scrutinising ancient authoritative sources to extract the truth hidden in them. All these authors held such sources in high regard, because they believed them to contain original and non-diluted wisdom. Furthermore, they were convinced that transcendent truth lay hidden beneath the surface of the literal words of these texts. As modern, critical readers we see these authors sometimes struggle to reconcile their contemporary intellectual insights with statements or passages they encounter in their sources. From our modern-day perspective they might even be guilty of reading novel ideas into their ancient texts, committing *eis*-egesis instead of *ex*-egesis. From their own perspective, however, these authors were convinced that through their exegetical methods of allegory they were able to bring the truth to light from their sources, originally contained in them.

¹⁴⁹ As discussed in note 39 for Philo, similarly to other ancient authors, theology and philosophy were one and the same.

¹⁵⁰ As is stated in STERLING/NIEHOFF/VAN DEN HOEK, 'Philo', p. 273, the matter of whether the philosophical or the exegetical aspects were more dominant in Philo's writing has been debated at length by Philonic scholars, and to stress a contrast between philosophy and exegesis in Philo's works is to oversimplify the matter. They conclude: 'Both aspects are important to Philo, but most of his treatises are allegorical commentaries on the Pentateuch, which may be considered the basis of his interests.' I, however, ask *why* this allegorical commentary on the Pentateuch is considered so interesting by Philo. My answer to this question is that it is because of the philosophical truths that Philo finds in his analysis of the Pentateuch. This approach prevents us from considering Philo's treatises on specific philosophical topics to be strangers or stepchildren in the Philonic corpus. This approach also means that instead of considering only Philo's purely philosophical treatises to be able 'to provide valuable insight into the contemporary culture and the study of ancient philosophy in the first century' (as is stated in *ibid.*, p. 274), the whole of Philo's work can be considered to provide such valuable insights.

¹⁵¹ RUNIA, *Timaeus*, p. 540. In *Spec.* III, 6 Philo clearly states that the objective of his examination of the books of Moses is to lay bare their deeper philosophical truths.

Philo can be considered to apply the same methods as other ancient intellectuals. The only difference is which ancient text each of these thinkers referred to as source for wisdom and truth, be it Homer's epics, Egyptian myths or Moses' Pentateuch. So, if Philo wrote about divine forgiveness in his treatises, we cannot simply discard that by claiming he did so merely because he found forgiveness in his biblical source, without giving much further attention to it. Instead, we can and should ask what he meant when writing about divine forgiveness.

1.2.2.3 ***Results from the second part of the survey of previous studies***

It was shown that both the depiction of Philo as an inconsistent thinker and the claim that he mentioned certain biblical topics without much further thought, do little justice to the way in which Philo developed his thinking. In Philo's conviction, he presented his readers with the wisdom that was once revealed to Moses and was then written down in the Bible, especially in the Pentateuch. Philo presented what he considered the philosophical truths of Moses mostly – but not exclusively – as expositions of passages from the Pentateuch. Long before Philo, this allegorical method had been adapted by Jewish intellectuals from other Alexandrine intellectuals who, instead of the Hebrew Bible, regarded Homer's epics or Egyptian myths as their authoritative source of wisdom.

With regard to the development of Philo's thought, it was discussed how the Alexandrian intellectual milieu presented Philo with the opportunity to integrate insights from various philosophical traditions into what he believed were originally Moses' philosophical truths. I have used the metaphor of an alloy to characterise Philo's thought. His ideas consist of elements that can be traced back to various philosophical traditions. Comparing them to other sources of these philosophical traditions can shed light on how Philo understood them. At the same time, Philo's blend of philosophical outlooks has characteristics of its own, like an alloy, rising above the sum of its constituent elements. Assigning Philo to one particular philosophical tradition does not do justice to the richness of his ideas, nor to the rich intellectual interactions of his time.

This chapter began with Hannah Arendt, a twentieth-century intellectual who gave forgiveness a well-considered place in her philosophical thinking. She did this under the assumption, common in her time, that the concept of forgiveness was little known or appreciated in the Greco-Roman subculture of the Hellenistic period. We have refined that statement in the sense that forgiveness, and specifically divine forgiveness, is attested to in not only the Jewish subculture of the Hellenistic period but also in other sub-cultures of the same period, particularly in everyday religious life. However, divine forgiveness was little appreciated in intellectual circles in the Hellenistic period, but it does appear in the works of a typical Hellenistic intellectual, Philo of Alexandria. What does this mean?

The survey of previous studies has provided us with insights into basic elements of Philo's thought and into his method of developing his ideas. The discussion of Philo's method allows us to ask what deeper truth Philo thought seeking divine pardon contained. The discussion of elements of Philo's thought has presented us with possibilities, but also unresolved difficulties, in obtaining a clear view of how the element of divine forgiveness fits in the whole alloy of Philo's philosophical outlook.

On the basis of previous research, we now turn to the texts themselves, because only they can give us access to Philo's complex way of thinking. A preliminary reading of *Spec. I*, 235–238 will help us identify the questions that need to be addressed, in order to give us an idea of the various implications of what Philo meant when he wrote that God forgives someone. With these questions in view, I will then describe the method used in this study to answer them.

1.3 *The problem of divine forgiveness in Philo's thinking*

Philo uses three words we usually associate with forgiveness (συγγνώμη, ἀμνηστία and ἄφεσις) in *Spec. I*, 235–238.¹⁵² Here, Philo describes the various steps leading toward divine pardon being granted to someone. For this reason, this section is particularly suited to bringing into view the aspects that, at first glance, appear to conflict with other fundamental elements of his thinking. We shall take that first glance at what Philo writes about forgiveness in these sections and preliminarily compare this to aspects of his doctrine of God, his views on human beings and his ethical outlooks.

In *Spec. I*, 235–238, Philo elaborates on the prescriptions that are given in Mosaic Law on what is required from someone who intentionally sinned against someone else.¹⁵³ Philo takes the example of theft. If people steal something, several actions are required from the perpetrators for their sin to be forgiven. First, they have to acknowledge the accusation and conviction by their conscience, even when they have escaped human accusers. There is no escape from these internal accusations, however, other than to openly confess the wrongful actions. The culprits must then ask for pardon (συγγνώμη). Philo notes how Moses prescribes that amnesty (ἀμνηστία) will be extended to the wrongdoers if several conditions are met. A confession alone will not be enough, the offenders need to manifest their repentance with actions. First, the wrongdoers need to compensate the injured party by repaying what they have stolen, plus a fifth of the value added as a penalty for the offence. Secondly, they have to go to the temple and ask for remission (ἄφεσις) of sins, bringing with

¹⁵² See note 41 for further references to places where forgiveness appears in Philo's treatises.

¹⁵³ The context of this passage will be fully discussed in Chapter 5 (see pp. 193–226).

them a ram as sacrifice. When these conditions are met, they will be forgiven, and the guilt of the sin will no longer weigh upon them.

How does what Philo writes about forgiveness compare to other elements of his thought? To begin with, in light of several statements Philo makes about God throughout his treatises, it is puzzling why evildoers should go to the temple and bring a sacrifice, involving God as it were in the process of achieving remission of sins. First of all, the idea that God could either be insulted by the offence or appeased by the sacrifice is at odds with Philo's view that God is immutable and cannot change from one state to another. Secondly, God is not to be considered as subjected to any emotions, which rules out the possibility that he could either feel pain or anger. Thirdly, the role of sacrifice itself is complicated. It cannot be regarded as a compensation to God, comparable to the compensation given to the human victim, because the idea that God would need anything from his creatures is blasphemous to Philo.¹⁵⁴ Finally, the possibility of interaction between God and his creatures is complicated by the transcendence of God which Philo continuously emphasises.¹⁵⁵

The aforementioned issues relating to Philo's doctrine of God outline the theological problems involved in understanding what divine forgiveness means in the works of Philo. However, the apparent ability of humans to commit evil in the first place is puzzling as well. Philo maintained that humans were created by the good God.¹⁵⁶ Can this good God then be the source of evil in human beings?

¹⁵⁴ In *Opif.* 170–172, Philo lists the philosophical truths that he believes Moses' account of the creation of the world teaches. Philo brings to the fore the following principles concerning God: first, that God exists; second, that he is one, not many; and lastly, that God takes providential care of the world. In addition to these statements in *Opif.* 170–172, Philo maintains that the Deity is the active cause (*Opif.* 7–8), that he does not change and has no such fickleness as humans (*Deus* 22, 28; *Spec.* I, 300), that God knows no repentance (*Deus* 33, 72), that he does not move nor can he be moved (*Opif.* 100), that he is self-sufficient and needs nothing from his creation (*Dec.* 8; *Spec.* I, 271, 277), that he is free from emotions (*QG* I, 95; *Abr.* 202) and consequently knows no anger (*Deus* 71) and that he does not punish. God leaves punishment to other powers, because it is somehow associated with evil (*Conf.* 182) and in God there is no evil (*Fug.* 79).

¹⁵⁵ In regard to creation, Philo presents the following views in *Opif.* 170–172: that the world is indeed created and has a beginning; that there is only one world, not many. To these statements in *Opif.* 170–172 can be added that Philo holds that the creation is formed in two parts: the invisible world of ideas, and the visible world of matter that is created based on the higher ideas (*Opif.* 19); that in created matter the force of change is ever present, which implies the risk of ill (*Opif.* 151; *Congr.* 84); and that there is a gap, a distance between the heavenly world of eternal ideas and the visible world of changing and perishable matter (*Fug.* 103–104).

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, *Opif.* 65–66.

This is impossible according to Philo, and again a very blasphemous thought.¹⁵⁷ How, then, does the possibility of doing evil become a part of human life according to Philo? And even more: how is it possible that humans commit evil not only by mistake but intentionally? Philo presented humans as capable of rationality, and purposely doing evil is not only the complete opposite of rationality, it means applying reason to an evil intent by devising an evil deed and then doing it. So, what is going on in Philo's opinion when a human being commits evil, and in what way does that relate to forgiveness?¹⁵⁸

With these aspects in view, I can propose several sub-questions that need to be addressed in order to establish the meaning of divine forgiveness in Philo's thinking.¹⁵⁹

- Forgiveness implies a relationship, but how can the transcendent God relate to and interact with creation at all?
- Does divine pardon imply that human actions can hurt and anger God and that God can be made to change his mind?
- How can humans interact with and relate to the transcendent God?
- Why would and could humans, as creatures of the supreme good God, intentionally do evil?
- What are the consequences of doing evil for the wrongdoer and how would and could those consequences involve God to remedy them?

If we get a better view on Philo's reflections on these matters, we can understand what he meant when he writes that someone receives divine amnesty and is remitted from sins. Several possible answers to these questions were found in the survey of previous studies. We learnt about the important role that Philo assigned to the logos as an intermediary between God, creation and human beings. God's logos manifests itself as powers interacting with creation. Divine forgiveness could be understood as a manifestation of one of these powers. Furthermore, we also saw that the phrase 'God forgives' could be understood as indicating a change not on God's part but on the part of the human that received forgiveness. Finally, we have seen that the human ability to do evil is in some way connected to human freedom.

¹⁵⁷ *Fug.* 84.

¹⁵⁸ God must have left the creation of the earthly man to lower powers, since in humans there exists the potential for both good and evil (*Opif.* 73–75); the Deity therefore can never be claimed to be the cause of evil (*Fug.* 80; see also *Opif.* 75, 149).

¹⁵⁹ These questions are an extension of the question Várhelyi poses in the conclusions of her contribution to a volume on forgiveness in antiquity (see note 42); there she also claims that Philo 'without parallel in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition ... [introduces] the notion of human sinfulness and adds the virtue of repentance to those already in the Stoic canon' (VÁRHELYI, 'To Forgive', p. 133). One of the ambitions of the present study is to investigate whether these notions of Philo are indeed without parallel in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition.

Nevertheless, this survey also left us with several unanswered questions, specifically regarding Philo's view on the source of evil in creation and on the extent of human freedom. Also, there has not yet been a study that connects the several elements of Philo's thought to the notion of divine forgiveness, with a view to understanding what Philo meant when he wrote that God forgives someone.

The five above-mentioned sub-questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters of this study. In the final chapter, the results of these chapters will be applied to *Spec. I*, 235–236 for a detailed, concluding analysis of Philo's statements. My overall approach in the following chapters will be to remain as close as possible to Philo's own words. I present the method I believe aids us best in this approach in the next section.

1.4 *Method and structure*

The aim of this study is to explore what Philo meant when he wrote that God forgives someone. How did he reflect intellectually on the possibility of divine pardon? What philosophical truth did he associate with it? This is a fascinating question, because Philo introduced a concept from daily-life religion into an intellectual environment. However, he has not reflected explicitly upon divine forgiveness. Also, he has not presented a concise overview of the framework of his ideas. Nevertheless, the conclusion from the survey of Philo's method was that we may assume a coherent rationale in the way Philo developed his thinking. So, the question can be asked as to how seeking and receiving divine pardon fits into Philo's overall intellectual outlook. How can we find an answer to this question?

1.4.1 *Integral approach*

I will follow Goodenough's proposal for an integral approach to explore Philo's thoughts. Goodenough already criticised approaching Philo by quoting passages from his treatises almost at random to illustrate a point someone wishes to make. Instead of using Philo as quarry, Goodenough emphasised that it is important to have a grasp of the place a certain passage has within a treatise, and what place that treatise has in the whole of Philo's oeuvre, to understand what Philo writes about.¹⁶⁰ Goodenough further presented Philo as

¹⁶⁰ GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, p. 20. This approach is comparable to what Runia describes as 'the contextual approach' in RUNIA, 'Naming and Knowing', pp. 69–72. Runia distinguishes roughly three approaches towards the description of Philo's theology. These are: first, the systematic approach, where scholars 'attempt to put together, on Philo's behalf, the systematic presentation of his doctrine of God, which he never managed (or dared) to publish'; second, the historical approach, where Philo's theology is mainly described and explained by linking and comparing his ideas and concepts to those of other authors, such as Posidonius and Plotinus; and third, the contextual approach, where Philo is considered first and foremost an exegete, and where the starting point is taken with the analysis of

someone fully integrated and interacting with his cultural surroundings, both on an intellectual and on a more popular level. Goodenough did not consider Philo's Jewishness as something separated from this cultural background.¹⁶¹ Goodenough therefore avoided classifying Philo's ideas as either belonging to his Jewish or his Hellenistic background and education.

It took quite some time for these views to take hold in Philonic research.¹⁶² Although picking through Philo's works to illustrate a certain point still occurs occasionally, strictly differentiating between Greek or Jewish elements in Philo's thinking is hardly done anymore.¹⁶³ However, one could consider attributing a special character to Philo's interaction with the Bible, setting him apart from contemporary intellectuals who explored other authoritative ancient sources, a rudimentary trace of this approach. Still, the current state of affairs in Philonic research in general is that Philo is considered a Jewish thinker fully engaged and interacting with his intellectual, cultural and political environment, and that it is necessary to consider the full context of a passage to interpret what he is writing about.

1.4.2 *Close reading*

A close reading of Philo's texts will achieve such an integral approach to how Philo developed his ideas. The preliminary reading of *Spec. I*, 235–238 has produced five sub-questions that need to be answered to understand the meaning of divine forgiveness in Philo's works. These questions all involve themes on which Philo reflects explicitly in his extant works. The approach of the present study will be to analyse sections from Philo's treatises in which he engages these sub-questions, to ensure we remain as close as possible to

Philo's treatises themselves. Runia advocates the third approach. Although I find the label 'exegete' not very informative, I will follow an approach like Runia's. A somewhat similar approach is followed by Williamson in his introduction to Philo (see WILLIAMSON, *Philo*).

¹⁶¹ GOODENOUGH, *Introduction*, pp. 9, 122.

¹⁶² See note 84.

¹⁶³ Morris proposed two views that can be taken on the issue of the relation between 'Greek' and 'Jewish' elements in Philo's thought. The first view is that Philo has consciously made an effort to synthesise Judaism with Greek intellectualism. This approach assumes a bipolar view regarding the relation between Judaism and Greek philosophy. The second view takes the 'sharp differentiation between Judaism and Hellenism as a construct of modern historians rather than as part of Philo's own outlook.' Morris made it clear that she belongs to the second class of Philonic scholars (see MORRIS, 'Philo', pp. 813 and 879, nt. 25). Runia took a similar position: '[Philo's] Ergebnis ist eine Gedankenwelt, die wie eine Synthese aus griechischem und biblischem Gedankengut anmutet, obwohl dies von Philo sicherlich nicht beabsichtigt war' (RUNIA, 'Philo', pp. 853–854). Barclay went as far as suggesting that there is 'no hint of tension between 'Greek' and 'Jewish' values,' (BARCLAY, *Jews*, p. 161). I agree with Morris' position, and would not go as far as Barclay. Contrary to his view that there is no hint of tension between values in Philo, for example, Philo finds it necessary to defend the custom of circumcision against ridicule (see *Spec. I*, 2), and he denounces the frivolity of banquets, as celebrated by Xenophon and Plato, in *Cont.* 57–63 (see also WINSTON, 'Hidden Tensions').

the way Philo himself develops his thoughts. Crucial to this analysis will be to recognise the place the relevant passages have within the context of the whole treatise.

To identify the place of a passage within the whole of a treatise, each treatise will be subjected to a structural analysis. The structural analysis makes use of the way Philo himself, by using textual signals, structured the argumentation of the treatise. Similarly to the rhetorical style of other ancient authors, Philo used Greek keywords to, for example, highlight a conclusion or to signal that he will engage a new topic. The reconstruction of Philo's argumentation based upon these keywords is supported by developments in Philonic research regarding Philo's rhetorical abilities. These developments help to identify and appreciate how Philo structured his argument.¹⁶⁴ The approach of close reading, identifying when Philo signalled conclusions or statements he thought important for his readers, differs from analysing the structure of a treatise on the basis of the perceived content of the treatise alone. The latter approach bears the risk of modern readers setting the agenda according to their own preferences, possibly overlooking what Philo himself saw and marked as the key points of his discourse.

A structural analysis of Philo's introduction to *De Opificio Mundi* (*Opif.* 1–12) serves as example to illustrate the benefits of this method.¹⁶⁵ At first glance, these sections may look like a collection of somewhat disconnected statements.¹⁶⁶ A structural analysis, however, reveals Philo's artful composition and identifies the main points Philo wanted to bring forward. The first of these appears in *Opif.* 4, where the combination of μέν and οὖν occurs. Here, Philo writes that he can only present the highlights of Moses' account of creation, because the ideas contained in that account are too numerous to be expressed in full. The second occurrence of οὖν, in *Opif.* 12, signals the conclusion of Philo's introduction to the treatise, with another main point he wants to highlight: the great Moses has correctly apprehended that the world perceived by the senses must be created.

¹⁶⁴ See CONLEY, 'Philo'. Thomas M. Conley writes (*ibid.*, p. 695): 'While [Philo] is, to be sure, not the simplest of writers, Philo is usually more in control of what he is doing than he is given credit for, and in fact does what he does very well' (see also ALEXANDRE, 'Argumentation'). For an example of reconstructing the structure of one of Philo's treatises based on the rhetorical techniques Philo employed, see ALEXANDRE, 'Texture'.

¹⁶⁵ A full structural analysis of *De Opificio Mundi* is presented in Chapter 2 (see pp. 54–56).

¹⁶⁶ In the analytical introduction to the translation of *De Opificio Mundi*, George H. Whitaker claims that in *Opif.* 1–20, Philo wants to bring to the fore 'two salient points' that he attributes to Moses, namely that the Creator of the world has no origin and that he cares for his creation (COLSON/WHITAKER, *Philo* vol. 1, p. 2). Whitaker then continues his summary of Philo's discourse with a list of somewhat disconnected statements.

Before reaching that conclusion, Philo has put forward two arguments why that world must indeed be created. He has placed one (in *Opif.* 6–9) before and one (in *Opif.* 12) after his main objection against the world was not created. This main objection, introduced in *Opif.* 10–11 with the combination of μέν and γάρ, is that if the world was not created, there would be no divine providence and therefore no sustained order in creation. Obviously *Opif.* 1–12 contain more than just these highlights. However, these brief structural observations show that the additional elements of this passage should be considered subsidiary arguments, put forward by Philo in support of the conclusions most important to him.

These structural observations allow us to discover the flow of Philo's discourse, and to distinguish between main points and side issues. This again aids us in reconstructing key elements of the overall rationale implicitly present in the way Philo develops his thinking.

1.4.3 **Chapters**

The aim of this study is to answer this question: what meaning did divine forgiveness have in the thought of Philo of Alexandria? To answer this question, the five sub-questions formulated above based on the preliminary exploration of *Spec.* I, 235–238 (see pp. 43–46) will have to be answered. These sub-questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters of this study by means of analysis of one or more relevant passages from Philo's works. The sub-questions will be presented in relation to Philo's doctrine of God, his view on humans and his ethical outlooks, shaping the focus of each following chapter:

Chapter 2 is devoted to the questions that arise from Philo's presentation of divine forgiveness in relation to his doctrine of God, namely:

- Forgiveness implies a relationship, but how can the transcendent God relate to and interact with creation at all?
- Does divine pardon imply that human actions can hurt and anger God and that God can be made to change his mind?

Chapter 3 is devoted to the question that arises from Philo's presentation of divine forgiveness in relation to his view on human beings, namely:

- How can humans interact with and relate to the transcendent God?

Chapter 4 is devoted to the questions that arise from Philo's presentation of divine forgiveness in relation to his ethical outlooks, namely:

- Why would and could humans, as creatures of the supreme good God, intentionally do evil?
- What are the consequences of committing evil for the wrongdoer and how would and could those consequences involve God to remedy them?

Finally, in Chapter 5 I will return to *Spec. I*, 235–238 to integrate the results of Chapters 2–4 and answer my main question: what was Philo’s view on divine forgiveness?

In each chapter, the approach will be to provide a close reading and analysis of one or more relevant passages from Philo’s treatises. Philo did not discuss divine forgiveness in a systematic way. Nevertheless, analysing key passages and illuminating interconnections enable us to grasp what he meant when he wrote about it.