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Philo of Alexandria on divine forgiveness

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Summary and conclusions

6.1 *Aim and focus of the study*

This study investigated the meaning of divine forgiveness in the thought of Philo of Alexandria. In Chapter 1, the Introduction of this study, I began in the present age with Hannah Arendt's view on forgiveness, because she reflected on this fundamental concept like few other modern, non-theological authors. She saw forgiveness as a Jewish invention, unknown in Greco-Roman culture, introduced into that culture by Jesus and further propagated by his followers. This view required some refinement, as was shown by a brief comparison between divine forgiveness in the context of the Bible and early Judaism and that of Greco-Roman culture. Aspects we associate with divine forgiveness, such as praying and sacrificing in order to placate God or the gods when having sinned, were part of the daily-life religiosity of Jews and non-Jews alike in the Hellenistic age. Although known in Greco-Roman culture, seeking pardon from a deity was rejected by intellectuals, who considered it inappropriate when applied to the divine, because the eternal gods cannot change their minds, have no emotions nor can they be troubled by human affairs.

Did Philo, as a Hellenistic intellectual, share in the common intellectual disregard for seeking divine pardon? Could he still encourage his readers to seek God's pardon when they have done evil, while he at the same time explained to them that God cannot be hurt nor angered by human evil or made to change his mind? Or should he call upon his readers to stop sacrificing in Jerusalem because it is nonsense to expect God to change his mind over evildoers and pardon them? How did he resolve the contradictions resulting from the confrontation between daily-life religious practice and truly honouring God in an intellectually sound way? These questions make the investigation of divine forgiveness in his thought such a fascinating topic: what meaning can such a popular but intellectually questionable notion have for a Hellenistic intellectual like Philo?

To be sure, divine forgiveness was not a prominent theme in Philo's thought, nor can he be seen to discuss it as a well-defined concept. However, throughout his works he used terms taken from the semantic domain of divine forgiveness. Not surprisingly, Philo wrote about seeking and receiving divine pardon (συγγνώμη), amnesty (ἀμνηστία) and remission (ἄφεσις) from sins when discussing the Jewish sacrificial cult in *De Specialibus Legibus* I in particular. But even beyond such discourses on rituals and religion, terms like 'pardon' and 'amnesty' do occasionally occur in other treatises as well. Did Philo only use them because he found them in the Bible? Or was he taking them seriously in the sense that they indeed have something meaningful to say about God and his relationship with humans? Insight into Philo's method in developing his thought provides an answer to these questions.

Philo developed his thought in a way shared by other intellectuals of his age. They developed and presented their arguments based on interpretations of ancient texts they considered authoritative, thereby using methods that intellectuals – were they Jewish or not – came to consider standard when discussing the heuristic value of traditional lore. Like interpreters of Homer's epics or Egyptian myths, Philo was convinced that the laws of Moses were meaningful and that they – if correctly understood and interpreted – were even far superior to all other human wisdom. In order to counter objections on the basis of Moses' simple language and – from a philosophical viewpoint – his insufficiently sophisticated concept of God, humans and the world, Philo, like many of his intellectual contemporaries, applied allegorical techniques to reveal what he considered to be the deeper meaning hidden under the surface of Mosaic Law. Philo applied his interpretive strategies to every aspect of Mosaic Law that he discusses. He considered all of it to be meaningful, because he believed that Moses, the divinely inspired law-giver, did not use any words without reason.

To express the deeper meaning of Moses' laws, Philo not only shared commonly accepted methods with his contemporaries, but also a vocabulary in which ideas from various philosophical traditions merged and interacted, sometimes contrasting and sometimes in an attempt to express their convergence. Although it is helpful to retrace these ideas to their original tradition in order to better understand them, it is less fruitful to try and assign Philo to a particular philosophical tradition. Instead, we should recognise that various ideas interact in Philo's thought and explore what they each contribute to the characteristic amalgam of his own special blend of philosophical and religious ideas.

Philo developed his thought in a conscientious, well-conceived way. Therefore, the claim that Philo only mentioned seeking divine pardon because he found it in the Bible without giving it much further thought, is unfounded and does little justice to Philo's seriousness as a thinker. Instead, the question should be asked: what place and meaning does divine pardon have within Philo's overall philosophical outlook? To find an answer, a preliminary reading of *Spec. I*, 235–238 helped us identify a number of problematic implications the notion of 'divine forgiveness' might have in an intellectual context. These were transformed into five questions:

- 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 committing evil for the wrongdoer and how would and could those consequences involve God to remedy them?

Each of these questions was explored through close reading of sections from Philo's treatises. The first two questions were discussed in Chapter 2, the third question in Chapter 3 and the fourth and fifth questions in Chapter 4. The results from these chapters were then confronted with a detailed analysis of *Spec. I*, 235–238 in Chapter 5, to answer the main question of this study: what is the meaning of divine forgiveness in the thought of Philo of Alexandria? So, where has this approach brought us?

6.2 *Divine forgiveness and Philo's doctrine of God*

In Chapter 2, the study started with the intellectual challenges related to Philo's doctrine of God implied in the notion of 'divine forgiveness'. The sheer idea of evildoers seeking and receiving divine pardon presented Philo with two fundamental intellectual challenges. First, it implies interaction between God as forgiver and human evildoers as the ones wishing to obtain forgiveness. Before focusing on the possible relationship between God and humans, I analysed Philo's discussion of aspects of the creation story of Gn. 1 in *Opif.* 6b–36a to see whether he thought interaction between the transcendent God and creation was possible at all. Second, divine forgiveness implies that God can be offended by human actions, but can also be pacified and moved to grace, a notion which does not seem to fit in with Philo's concept of divine immutability. I explored this matter by analysing *Deus* 51–85, Philo's interpretation of the statement that God became angry in Gn. 6:7.

As a result of analysing these passages, we saw that Philo considered a relationship between the transcendent God and creation not only possible, but even essential. Without God as the source of true and stable existence, the perceptible world could not exist as a beautiful and well-structured whole. In Philo's mind, God provides stable existence to the perceptible world through the intelligible world. The intelligible world is created by God as he conceives of the immaterial concepts that sustain the continued existence of the material world. For Philo, these concepts encompass all aspects of creation that we might call 'abstract' like: time and space, forms and qualities of things, species of living creatures, invisible processes like growth or the turn of the seasons, and more. He used two words in particular to indicate these concepts: 'ideas' (ἰδέαι) and 'powers' (δυνάμεις). Philo saw these ideas and powers as expressions of God's goodness and mercy, because through them God graciously grants meaningful existence to the perishable material world, a world inherently less perfect than himself.

At the same time, we saw in Chapter 2 that Philo considered all human expressions of God as fundamentally flawed and limited. Human statements about God do not express God's reality, but only what humans with their limited abilities perceive of him. Therefore, human statements about God are indicative of the characteristics, especially moral qualities, of the humans expressing them, rather than of the real qualities of God. In particular, Philo explained descriptions of God as 'emotional' or 'changing his mind', as indicating changes not in God himself but in the way how humans perceive God. Such changes in perception are the result of changes in the humans involved: when humans do evil, they perceive God as a wrathful Lord, but when they repent and commit themselves to doing good, they perceive God as a beneficent and forgiving God. The human perception of God can change, but God will never change.

Exploring Philo's use of this shift of perspective from God to humans inevitably brought us to the next major step in the investigation of the place and meaning of divine forgiveness in Philo's thought. After looking at God in Chapter 2, we need to ask: how are humans able to perceive and contemplate God at all? What does Philo have to say about humans and their relationship to God?

6.3 *Divine forgiveness and the relationship between God and humans*

Having discussed how Philo believed God and the whole of creation were related and could interact, Chapter 3 was dedicated to the exploration of Philo's view on the relationship between God and humans in particular. Again, I explored this matter through analysing passages from Philo's works. I focused on *Opif.* 16–25 and 69–88, where Philo examines what it means that humans were created 'after the image of God', as stated in Gn. 1:26–27; and on *Deus* 33–50, where Philo explains the statement that 'God bethought himself' in Gn. 6:6 and its relevance for understanding the nature of humans.

According to Philo, humans as created beings are connected to God in the same, general way as the whole of creation is connected to God. Philo was convinced that God created everything in existence first as concepts existing eternally in God's mind. Among these innumerable concepts, God created the concept of the human species and like all other concepts this concept also exists eternally in God's mind. This is how everything in existence, including human beings, is connected to God in a general way. However, Philo believed humans can become connected to God in a more direct way, because of their ability to reason. This ability allows humans to perceive the concepts underlying physical objects, reaching as it were into God's mind. Humans then perceive how God's spirit pervades the whole of creation to maintain its order, in the form of form-giving force, growth, life-giving force and in intelligent beings such as humans, in its purest form, namely as the ability to reason.

The ability to reason allows humans to think what God thinks, their mind becomes enlightened through the intellectual light of God's wisdom, reflecting it like a mirror for as much as it is able. This ability is limited, however. Humans can never receive God's wisdom in full. Not only is the human ability to reason limited, this ability can be misused as well. Instead of allowing it to be filled with divine wisdom and to think what God thinks, humans are prone to let their ability to reason be hijacked by their irrational and unpredictable impulses. They then think and act irrationally, thereby sinking down to the level of animals instead of fulfilling their purpose by becoming like God. Why, however, would humans choose irrationality over rationality? This question was discussed in Chapter 4, where I focussed on the human ability to do evil.

6.4 *Divine forgiveness and the human ability to do evil*

The next question to explore, then, deals with two aspects of Philo's view on humans. First we need to ask: how could humans, as creatures of a good God, ever turn away from him and commit evil? Then the question arises: what are the consequences of doing evil and how could human evil affect the immutable and impassive God? These matters were explored in Chapter 4 by analysing Philo's discussion of aspects of Gn. 11:1–3 in *Conf.* 14–106.

Philo maintained that the ability to do evil was part of the creation of humans because God wanted to grant them a unique gift, namely freedom of choice. Only when humans have the option to do evil can they consciously decide to do good. Freedom of choice also means that only humans receive praise when they choose to do good and blame when they choose to do evil.

The ability to do evil implies two elements: the irrational part of the human soul and the all-receiving nature of the human mind. Philo did not consider each element in itself to be intrinsically evil. The irrational part of the human soul allows the soul to interact with the body and with its earthly environment. This interaction is not only essential for survival, but it also enables humans to appreciate the beauty and harmony of creation, which is the first step towards perceiving the existence of the Creator. The all-receiving nature of the mind allows it a choice in what to receive and what not. Even though these two elements are not evil in themselves, they were still not created by God directly. Instead, according to Philo, he commanded subordinate powers to create them, so that God is only responsible for the good humans do and never for the evil they might commit.

These two elements make humans amenable to unintentional evil. The irrational part of the soul must be controlled by reason for it to function properly. The all-receiving nature of the human mind means that humans need guidance in choosing which thoughts are beneficial and which are evil. Humans

need God's wisdom to be able to control the irrational part of their soul and also to distinguish between good and evil thoughts and acts. For most humans – except for a lucky few to whom God grants wisdom by nature – achieving control over the soul's irrational part and knowing how to distinguish between good and evil involves a lifelong process of learning and training. However, Philo emphasised that the irrational part of the soul is inherently unpredictable and can lead even the most philosophically trained person to stumble and do evil. Therefore, it is essential that humans acknowledge their vulnerability and never rely on their own abilities alone to become wise and virtuous.

Truly blameworthy evil ensues when humans refuse to stay on this path, choose to neglect their weakness and dependence on God's wisdom and instead act on the input from their body and influences from their earthly environment alone. Their minds are then flooded with evil impulses and thoughts, leading to confusion and all kinds of evil acts. The consequences of such a choice are grave. The human soul becomes increasingly removed from God and true existence, and is more and more defined by what is perishable alone. The ultimate consequence is the 'death of the soul', meaning that the soul is defined only by what is perishable and loses its special connection to God, namely the ability for true and right reason.

Does the human choice for evil affect God? To be sure, Philo did not believe such a choice for evil could ever affect God, hurt him or stir him to anger. The human choice for evil only involves God in an indirect way. When humans choose evil, they diverge from the goal God has intended for humans. God, being good, is benevolent towards the whole of creation including humans. Humans do best when they are defined by rationality, not irrationality, and by true and eternal existence, not destruction. The choice for evil also involves God indirectly, because humans need God's wisdom to return to good sense. This leads to a paradoxical situation: how can humans receive God's wisdom to return to good sense, if through choosing evil they have turned away from God?

With this paradoxical scenario in full view, we arrived at Chapter 5, where I explored the aspects of divine forgiveness as Philo presents them in *De Specialibus Legibus* I, in particular in sections 235–248.

6.5 *Final conclusion: Divine forgiveness in Philo's thought*

What, then, is the place of seeking and receiving divine pardon in Philo's thought? I explored this question in Chapter 5 by analysing *Spec. I*, 235–248, where Philo discusses the obligations in Lv. 5:20–26 for someone who has knowingly committed evil. My analysis provided the following answer: when evildoers obtain divine pardon, this means that the rule of good reason is restored in their mind.

What makes this form of pardon *divine*? How is this restoration of the rule of good reason connected to God? First of all, it is ‘divine’ because it is a manifestation of God’s goodness: according to Philo, divine amnesty is an aspect of the processes and powers that God graciously already installed in creation to sustain it, granting it a share in true being, beauty and goodness. Divine amnesty is essential for the continued existence of the material world, because the fact that God shows mercy towards it means that he allows it to remain in existence despite its inherent imperfection.

Moreover, divine pardon is particularly essential for the human race to remain in existence. God created humans with the ability for right reason, a gracious gift that creates a special connection between God’s reason and the human soul and allows humans to do good. However, God also graciously gave humans the freedom to choose between good and evil. This choice has fundamental implications: doing good incurs praise and connects humans to true existence, doing evil incurs blame and could ultimately lead to the destruction of the human race. If humans remain committed to evil, they eventually destroy the defining element of human beings, namely the rational part of the soul, thereby severing the special connection between God and humans and consequently between humans and true existence. Humans, however, cannot leave this path of evil on their own, they need God’s wisdom to achieve this. At the same time, the tenets of God’s transcendence and immutability exclude any direct activity from God to intervene and ‘save’ human evildoers. However, according to Philo, God provides evildoers precisely through divine amnesty with the means to reorient themselves to his goodness and wisdom. How does this work?

When humans commit evil, the voice of good reason – the special connection between God’s reason and the human soul – will manifest itself in the form of conscience. Conscience tries to show evildoers the error of their ways. It will do so with increasing intensity, moving from gentle warning to rebuking and even tormenting the soul. Such torment of the soul already constitutes one form of punishment for doing evil, but Philo also warns that evildoers will experience punishment in the form of a variety of curses that befall them. Philo saw such punishment as ‘divine’ in that he considered it the logical consequence for doing evil and as such as an expression of the righteous order God had installed in creation. Such divine punishment is above all intended to lead evildoers to repent and change their ways for the better.

If evildoers recognise the curses that befall them for what they are, begin to listen to their conscience and acknowledge that they have done wrong, the rule of right reason will be restored in their mind. God’s wisdom will purge their minds from wrong ideas, the accusations of their conscience will cease and inner peace will be restored. This purging process can be described as ‘being remitted from sins’: the stains that doing evil has left on the soul are cleansed.

The result is that the human soul can, like a clean mirror, once more reflect the intellectual light flowing from God. In addition, reason and the soul are reconciled. When again put under the rule of reason, the irrational forces in the soul will be kept at bay so that they may perform their useful functions. The senses will once again report truthfully to the mind, so that humans may contemplate God truthfully and in peace and in that way progress on the road towards true wisdom.

When humans think the good thoughts again, they will also speak the right words and do the correct deeds – that is: behave in a wise and virtuous way. One specific way in which Philo thought humans can act virtuously and wisely, is when they bring sacrifices to God. Philo presented bringing a sacrifice, when done with the correct intent, as an act through which evildoers confirm their change for the better. Through it, they acknowledge that they now see that they have committed evil and they express their thankfulness towards and dependence upon God, because he has provided the means to leave evil behind. Material sacrifice itself is not a prerequisite for achieving remission from sins, God has only provided the sacrificial cult as a concession to the human need for concrete acts to confirm that remission from sins has been achieved.

Someone may stumble and fall again. According to Philo, humans, as long as they reside in the body, always run the risk of falling back into wrong thinking and wrong behaviour. All humans should be aware of this risk and put time and effort in philosophical training, to strengthen their ability to distinguish right from wrong, and in the scrutiny of their conscience, to allow right reason to correct them when wrong thoughts have entered their minds. Philo argued that God has provided the process of forgiveness in creation precisely for this reason, to always allow human beings to return to good sense and resume their progress on the way to wisdom. God knows that a human being – while in the body – may be on the road towards perfect knowledge, yet never reaches the end and therefore needs and deserves a second chance. Philo saw divine amnesty as an inherent aspect of creation allowing humans that second chance, and not as a contingent activity depending on direct interaction between God and humans.

Philo did warn that if one remains committed to evil, right reason could permanently withdraw from someone's soul. When right reason leaves the human soul, it loses its connection to true and eternal existence and is defined only by what is perishable. According to Philo, a soul in such a state is no longer living, it has died. Of course, Philo appealed to his readers to not let it come to this.

This brings us to the end of this study. Can divine pardon, seeking and obtaining divine remission of one's sins, have a meaningful place within the well-considered thought of a Hellenistic intellectual? This study shows that

in the case of Philo of Alexandria the answer to this question is affirmative. Yes, divine amnesty has a meaningful place within Philo's thought, while he managed to avoid implications he and other contemporary intellectuals considered inappropriate. He saw divine pardon as a vital manifestation of God's goodness, allowing humans to purge their minds from the evil thoughts that have overwhelmed them and caused them to commit evil, to reestablish the control of good reason and welcome God's wisdom to form their thoughts, words and acts, so that they think, speak and act rationally, as their Creator intended them when he created humans in his own image.

