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Borgen, Peder.
Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time

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As Peder Borgen's introductory chapter shows, there have been various assessments of Philo's work. Some have seen him as a mystic, attracted to the Hellenistic mystery religions (although he invariably speaks of them with contempt; Judaism is the true "philosophy"). Wolfson called him "no mere dabbler in philosophy, but a philosopher in the grand manner"; indeed, he regards Philo's writings as the most significant influence in philosophy for the next fifteen centuries. The more recent trend, however, has been to regard him as primarily an exegete, and this is the line that Borgen follows, with a significant qualification: not just an exegete, but an exegete *for his time*. These last three words are quite important.

Two of Philo's works, the *Legatio* and the *In Flaccum*, are neither philosophical nor exegetical but historical, and consequently appear as something of an anomaly. In *Spec. Leg.* iii 1-6 Philo speaks of being distracted from the study that was his primary interest, and plunged into a sea of political concerns and anxieties, and scholars often see here an allusion to the conflicts that occasioned these two treatises; but they remain to some extent apart, of subsidiary interest. The real Philo is the exegete who with his allegorical method contrived to read Greek philosophy between the lines of the Jewish scriptures, and so prepared the way for Christian Fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Borgen's approach, however, makes it possible to understand these two treatises not in isolation but closely together with his exegetical writings. They demonstrate that "a central context for Philo, as also for the Alexandrian Jews in earlier times, was the relationship and interaction between the Jewish community and its non-Jewish surroundings," a context "in various ways reflected in his expository writings."

Borgen begins by setting out that context with chapters on "Philo and his World" and "The Historical Perspective," outlining the tensions and conflicts that developed between the Jews and their pagan neighbors, particularly after the Roman conquest of Egypt; he then devotes several chapters to discussion of Philo's exegetical method, with ample illustration through analysis of various treatises. The crucial point for his argument comes in chapters 9 and 10 ("Tension and Influence" and "The Conflict"), where he argues that

Alexandrian Jews "experienced an attack on their Laws, their synagogues, their Temple and their ancestral customs" not only in the pogrom of 38 CE but even earlier, and that the two "historical" treatises show points of contact with Philo's exegetical *Exposition of the Laws of Moses*. Philo's concern throughout his work is the defense of his people's ancestral heritage, in the face of a largely hostile world.

This is not a book to be read at a sitting. It makes demands upon the reader, but those who are prepared to work through it carefully will find the effort well worthwhile. It is written in clear and lucid English, with occasional lapses (e.g., a plural verb with a singular subject, or vice versa, "greivous" (p. 76) for "grievous," "contended" (p. 163) for "contented"), but these are seldom likely to cause difficulty for the reader. At p. 6 one wonders if Borgen has quite appreciated how neatly Sandmel countered Jonas: the quotation (from p. xxiv of Sandmel's book, not p. xvi) picks up words from the peroration of a paper by Jonas not listed in Borgen's bibliography (*The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt [Nashville, 1965], p. 293) and uses them against him; but that is something for a specialist in Gnosticism, not for a Philonist. The passage is quoted by Sandmel some ten pages earlier (p. xv), but with no cross-reference one might easily miss the connection.

It would be wrong to end on a note of criticism. Peder Borgen has enriched the literature on Philo and on the New Testament over many years, and this latest volume is a valuable contribution toward the better understanding of Philo's work. The numerous detailed footnotes and the ten-page bibliography testify to Borgen's familiarity with the literature, ancient and modern, and the volume is completed by some thirty pages of indexes.