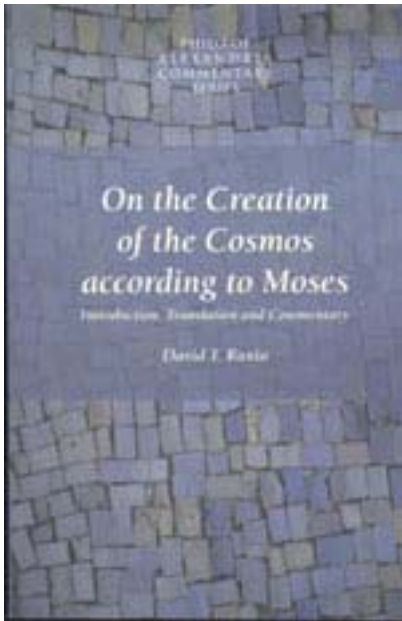


RBL 04/2006



**Runia, David T.**

***On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses:  
Introduction, Translation and Commentary***

Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series 1

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. Pp. xviii + 443. Paper. \$34.95. ISBN 1589831608.

Mark Weedman  
Crossroads College  
Rochester, MN 55902

It is difficult to imagine a negative review of this work, and I certainly will not attempt one here. This is a masterwork of historical scholarship that, in scope and execution, demonstrates the kind of contribution a commentary of this type can make. The work is the first volume in the Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series, which includes a second volume by Pieter W. van der Horst on Philo's *Flaccus: The First Pogrom*. The series was originally published by Brill, but through a joint arrangement with the Society of Biblical Literature it has now been reissued in paperback. This is an especially welcome development, as the hardback Brill editions, although well done, are prohibitively expensive for all but Philo specialists. The appearance of a comparatively affordable paperback version makes the work available to a much wider range of readers, including student of early Christianity in general and the New Testament in particular. Ideally this arrangement between the SBL and Brill will lead to broader discussion about the role of Philo and philonic exegesis among the variety of scholars who are part of the SBL.

Runia's commentary is divided into three parts, which I will here discuss in their order of appearance. The first is an introduction to *On the Creation of the Cosmos*. This section covers the standard introductory issues, including date, genre, and provenance. Runia places *Creation* as the opening treatise in the series of writings known as the "Exposition

of the Law,” which places its writing sometime between 30 and 40 C.E. The introduction as a whole is generally quite helpful and includes a number of features that distinguish it from the standard commentary introduction. I will just highlight two here. First, Runia’s discussion of Philo’s use of the Bible and exegetical method is an interesting use of statistical analysis (including graphs!) to shed light on the variety of exegetical practices Philo employs in the treatise. Runia’s treatment of Philo’s exegetical method is nuanced, and I think it opens the door for scholars to do even more work in this area. Second, the introduction includes a very helpful section that Runia calls “nachleben,” in which he treats the reception of *Creation* among Jewish and, especially, Christian writers. The reception of Philo is, of course, one of Runia’s great contributions to philonic scholarship, so the presence of this section is not surprising, and it helps make the commentary more relevant for a greater number of scholars.

The second section contains the translation, and it is a gem. It reads very smoothly, even though it appears to be a fairly literal rendering of the Greek. Runia has renumbered the text into chapters to reflect better the various themes contained in the text, though he also includes the traditional numbering so that readers can easily refer back to the older translations or the Greek itself. Another nice feature of the translation is the decision to highlight the words or phrases that Philo lifts directly from Genesis in bold (allusions to the Bible are highlighted in bold italic). This is a small thing, but it helps to illustrate some of Runia’s findings about Philo’s exegetical method from the introduction, and it helps the reader to track the flow of Philo’s exegesis throughout the course of the treatise.

By far the most extensive section of the book is the commentary itself, running for over three hundred pages. It is divided into twenty-five chapters that correspond to the chapter divisions Runia applied to the text itself in his translation. Each chapter in the commentary contains four subdivisions: a general analysis of the entire chapter, detailed comments in which Runia goes almost line by line through the chapter, a brief discussion of other passages where Philo interprets the same Genesis passage, and a “nachleben” section that considers specific instances where Philo’s thought in the chapter appears in later Jewish or Christian writings. Each chapter of the commentary section then concludes with suggestions for further reading, and occasionally a chapter will include an excursus on some theme or particularly important scholarly debate. It is difficult to know what the best format for a translation and commentary is. This one works well, although it might have been nice to have the translated chapter also situated at the beginning of the commentary for more convenient reference.

The comments themselves are exceptionally thorough and are generally very enlightening. They do reveal Runia’s scholarly priorities when it comes to interpreting Philo. First, he is especially interested in using cross-references from within Philo’s corpus to explain the

passage at hand, and in some ways a close reading of the commentary provides a nice introduction to Philo as a whole. Second, Runia draws heavily on Philo's philosophical background, regarding it as the primary external source for explicating Philo's thought. Runia's conclusions here are almost always compelling, but there were moments when I wished for more specificity. It would be helpful to know precisely what Philo was reading. When Philo paraphrases the *Timaeus*, what version of the text is he paraphrasing? Is it Plato himself, or perhaps some Middle Platonic commentary on it? I realize that in most cases these questions are unanswerable, and this is more a quibble than substantive critique. Third, several reviewers have noted the ease with which Runia navigates the range of secondary scholarship on both the passage at hand and the work as a whole. I would certainly second this and suggest that this feature of the commentary makes it a good starting place for both beginning students of Philo and more experienced scholars alike.

The strengths of this work hardly need further explanation. If subsequent volumes in this series can match the quality of this one, the series will become the standard for Philonic scholarship. As for weaknesses, despite the thoroughness of Runia's comments, it is still not entirely clear to me how Jewish Philo's thought and exegesis is. Runia points out that one problem with identifying Philo's Jewish sources is a lack of material, especially since it is extraordinarily difficult reliably to date the rabbinic material from this era. However, the ten since years since the writing of the Brill edition of this commentary have seen a number of scholarly works that help to identify more accurately what sources we can use to account for Hellenistic Judaism. This includes James R. Davila's recently published *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* We now have the possibility of a clearer picture of the Judaism of Philo's time, which may help us recognize that Philo was not necessarily as exceptional as commonly supposed. This is the next phase of Philo scholarship. One problem with commentaries as a genre is that the most important of them tend to establish the questions taken up by subsequent commentaries. One hopes that in this case Runia has so cleared the ground that we can move forward to new questions.