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Rhetorical Argumentation in Philo of Alexandria

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Foreward by Burton L. Mack

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Alexandre declares that his purpose in this book is to show that ancient rhetorical theories of argumentation can help us understand the “structure and basic literary motivation” (p. xiii) of Philo’s discourse. He believes this is the case not only of the speech-like discourses, but also of Philo’s exegetical comments on scripture.

The book commences with a commendatory preface by Burton L. Mack, after which Alexandre offers a general introduction to the current status of Philonic studies. Part one of the book, comprising eighty pages, situates Philo in the context of rhetorical argumentation. In part 2 (one hundred fifty pages) Alexandre sets out his analysis of the formal structure of *De Vita Mosis* and *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* and of five discourses embedded in treatises, for example, *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini 21-44*. In chapter 4 of part 2, he tracks the structure of complete arguments in such documents as *Legum Allegoriae II* and *De Joespho*, as well as the elaborate development of a theme in, e.g., *De Migratione Abrahami*. In chapter five he scrutinized rhymic and periodic structures in such discourses as *Legatio ad Gaium*, 53-56. The work ends with observations on the philosophical character of Philo’s rhetorical argumentation as a technique of argumentation and exposition. The book contains a thirty-three page bibliography as well as indices on passages from Philo, ancient and modern authors, and Greek, Latin and English rhetorical terms.

In the general introduction Alexandre does an excellent job in short order of depicting the present state of Philonic studies. Though he published a book in Portuguese,

Argumentação Retórica em Filon de Alexandria, in 1990, he has brought this 1999 English version up-to-date in comment and bibliography. He mentions the work of the major Philo scholars and the Philonic centers in Chicago, Claremont, Berkeley, Lyon, Italy, and Trondheim. Alexandre himself was involved in the first two centers. He declares that this book "...is the fullest investigation ever attempted of Philo's knowledge and use of rhetoric" (p. 18). I concur and affirm that any future scrutiny of Philonic rhetoric must commence with this book.

In Part one Alexandre situates Philo in the context of ancient rhetorical argument. This is an insightful, thorough and judicious presentation. Alexandre cites not only the appropriate ancient rhetorical works but is abreast of current discussions in Europe and America. He takes up the rhetoricians historically beginning with the Greeks. He noted that the Greeks focused on the differences between philosophical and rhetorical arguments locating the differences, especially after Aristotle, in formal logic and enthymemes. Alexandre, however, is more interested in the formal structures of the manner in which arguments unfold than in those views of the audience that determine the beginning points for arguments, the focus of Aristotle's observations. Alexandre wrote that the success of the arguments depends upon "the listener's cooperative interaction" (p. 43). I suggest that Aristotle gave the audience a more significant role. For him persuasion was based upon the speaker identifying the premises of the audience and employing them as beginning points for arguments. The premises located in the auditors were, for Aristotle, the grist of enthymemes. The later rhetoricians refocused the enthymeme, centering rather upon the form. Alexandre traces developments from Aristotle through the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero, Quintilian, Aelius Theon and Hermogenes and ends with a synoptic chart. While such a chart is of help in locating the varying observations, no ancient prepared a discourse employing such a synopsis.

At first I was skeptical of Alexandre's efforts to establish that Philo was educated in and deeply immersed in ancient rhetoric. While unquestionably rhetorical training existed in Alexandria, Robert Smith has shown that it was not as pervasive as elsewhere, and Alexandria produced no rhetoricians of ancient acclaim. Nevertheless, I came away, convinced by Alexandre that Philo was to some degree influenced by rhetoric because of his comments on rhetoric and the rhetorical vocabulary Alexandre pinpointed. His evidence, however, sometimes, inadequately supported his case, e. g. page 98, and did not give satisfactory attention to the aspects of Philo's discourses that the rhetoricians failed to discuss, for example, the allegorical and analogical.

Given Alexandre's presuppositions and intent, his specific analyses of the argumentative structures in Philo's work are exemplary. He has utilized language and observations from the classical rhetoricians to describe the arguments in the Philonic. For example, in the *Speech on Virtue* (*De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 21-44) he identifies and discusses *narratio*, *propositio*, *ratio*, *confirmatio*, *exornatio*, *exempla*, *complexio*, *res* and

ratio, pronuntiatio and *contrarium, simile* and *exemplum*, and *conclusio*. His approach is useful, however, I am concerned, that Philo's discourse is forced into these categories rather than first undertaking an overall assessment of what informs their flow. Alexandre's basic *modus operandi* is to see how many ancient rhetorical features he may identify while at the same time ignoring the features not discussed by the ancient rhetoricians.

My concerns are two: first, I think it is clear that the ancient rhetoricians set out to be more descriptive than prescriptive. They did not try to force discourse into a mold, rather they attempted to scrutinize the features of discourses so as to determine how those giving speeches or writing documents proceeded. They were more open to differing approaches than synopsis rhetorical analysis admits. Second, they did not examine religious documents, but those having to do with the law courts, the city assemblies, and citizenry praise and blame. Had they examined the exegetical discourses of Philo or the plays of the playwrights, presumably they would have found additional characteristics of written structures. While, of course, it is possible to find features from classical rhetoric in the exegetical discourses of Philo, or in the plays of Aeschylus, I think these insights are quite limited. The rhetoricians did not comment on arrangement that follows the flow of a privileged text and the various rhetorical ploys emerging through so doing. Neither they comment on the rhetorical features of the sorts of narratives found in the texts Philo explicated. Rhetoricians did not comment on argumentative and persuasive powers of the analogical, metaphorical and allegorical features endemic in Philo's discourses. While I tend to side with H. A. Wolfson, that Philo developed his philosophical system with deep Jewish roots, I do think that something happened in the mix with middle Platonism. Philo, with some Jewish predecessors, developed a new creative manner of discourse, which enabled them to embrace middle Platonistic predilections through allegorizing. Rhetorical forms may be identified in such discourses, but I do not see the direct influence of ancient rhetoric a significant factor.

Despite my reservations in regard to the extent to which Alexandre's book helps explain Philo's discourse, granted his purpose and methodology, this book is a monumental accomplishment. It obviously reflects years of exploration and reflection on Philonic studies, the Philo corpus and ancient rhetoric.