

RBL 10/15/1999



Birnbaum, Ellen

The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought: Israel, Jews and Proselytes

Brown Judaica Series 290; Studia Philonica Monographs 2

Providence: Brown University Press, 1996. Pp. xviii +262, Cloth, No Price Available, ISBN 0788501828.

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As stated by the author herself, this book is a lightly revised version of her 1992 doctoral dissertation at Columbia University under the guidance of Professor Alan Segal.

After an extensive introduction the dissertation is organized in six chapters followed by summary and conclusions. The book deals with Philo's use of the term "Israel," the relationship between Israel and God, and finally Philo's views on proselytism as seen in relationship to God, Jews, and Israel. The book closes with bibliography and indices.

According to Birnbaum the etymological interpretation of "Israel" to mean "the one that sees God" opens the way for Philo to redefine the entity "Israel" beyond a specific ethnic group. She shifts the focus from many scholars' discussion of Philo's place in Judaism to the question of Philo's own attitude towards and understanding of being a Jew and whether he believes that all people can participate in seeing God and belonging to Israel. In this way Birnbaum enters a quest of the historical Philo.

Birnbaum rightly stresses that Philo is primarily an exegete. She realizes that scholars have "often focused exclusively upon his [Philo's] ideas without taking note of such other factors as the relationship between these ideas and the Biblical text he is interpreting, the possible influence of earlier exegetical traditions, the literary genre of the work, Philo's audience(s), and finally, the very nature of seeing God" (p. 86). Birnbaum makes several helpful observations in Philonic passages along these lines.

She relates her discussions to Philo's various groups of writings, the allegory, the exposition, the historical writings (*On the Embassy to Gaius* and *Against Flaccus*), etc. This is helpful, but when Birnbaum bases much of her argument on the idea that Philo's various works are directed toward different, though perhaps overlapping audiences, and are composed with different aims, then her study becomes weak. Birnbaum herself admits that at "best one can only attempt to make intelligent guesses about who these various readers are and what Philo's aims might be" (p. 18).

Birnbaum finds it striking that Philo refers to "Israel" only twice in the exposition (*Abraham* 57 and *On Rewards and Punishments* 44), while in the allegory he frequently speaks of "Israel." She also points to the circumstance that in the non-exegetical writings, "Israel" appears only once, in *On the Embassy to Gaius* 1-7. She makes many valuable observations in her discussion of these passages. As for *On the Embassy to Gaius* 1-7, Birnbaum notes that Philo here links "Israel," the one that sees God, with the Jews, and that he combines in this passage philosophical themes with Jewish traditions about God and the nation. God takes special thought for the Jews, who are "the suppliant's race," and are his portion. Philo probably alludes here to Deut 32:9, which is about Israel as God's portion. He counts the vision of God by the Jews as even higher than what can be reached by philosophy. According to Birnbaum, Philo speaks of "Israel" and the Jews together only here. She thinks the reason is his wish to impress a mixed audience of Jews and non-Jews by depicting the Jews as those who embody the ideal of seeing God.

It would have been helpful if Birnbaum more pointedly had pursued her quest for the historical Philo. *On the Embassy to Gaius* 1-7 represents with certainty Philo's own view. The material in the allegory is more problematic, since Philo in that series employs traditions in a more general way, and is also more closely tied to the wordings of biblical texts. A relevant question is: Can Philo's own view, explicitly formulated in *On the Embassy to Gaius* 1-7, positively serve as a hermeneutical key to the material on "Israel" in his other writings? Further research is needed on this question.

As for Birnbaum's discussion of the Jews as a social entity, her treatment of *Migration of Abraham* 89-93 and *Abraham* 98 call for some comments. In the former Philo criticizes persons who in their interpretation of the Sabbath, the feast, and circumcision were in danger of separating the specific and concrete level of observance from the general and universal ideas they express. In her reference to *Migration of Abraham* 89-93, Birnbaum states that Philo in passing refers to individual Jewish contemporaries in a specific social situation. Thus this passage is not of principal importance. Birnbaum's understanding seems inadequate at this point, since Philo in *Migration of Abraham* 93 bases these specific exhortations on a general principle that even involves the Temple in Jerusalem: "Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things, if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shewn by the inner meaning of thing." The outward observances resemble the body, and their inner meanings

resemble the soul. "Just as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode (οἶκος) of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws."

The treatise *On the Migration of Abraham* belongs to the series called the allegory. On this basis the question needs to be discussed further if the principle of the body being the house of the soul is implied in other parts of the same series, for example in *Migration of Abraham* 53-61, where Philo interprets the idea of Abraham becoming a great nation as an allegory of the soul. In this connection the word "Israel" (Exod 1:9) is paraphrased as the race that can see the Existent One, *Migration of Abraham* 54.

In her analysis of *Abraham* 98, Birnbaum rightly notes that the Jewish nation has the role of priest and prophet. According to Birnbaum, in contrast to "Israel," the Jews serve as priesthood of the world. Birnbaum's understanding can be questioned, because in *Abraham* 57 the nation is called both priesthood and Israel, the one who sees God. Thus the idea of priesthood is associated both with Israel and with the Jews.

Moreover, in his interpretation of Abraham in *Abraham* 88, Philo brings the aspect of the "soul"/"mind" and the aspect of literal exposition/the "body" together in a way corresponding to that in *Migration of Abraham* 93.

It is also relevant to bring in *Abraham* 88 in connection with Birnbaum's discussion of Philo's views on membership requirements relative to "Israel" and the Jews respectively. She is right that the membership requirements for these two entities differ. Passages such as *Abraham* 88 suggest, however, that Abraham's concrete journey and his spiritual journey of the soul go together. And to Philo, Abraham is a model proselyte.

In conclusion: Birnbaum's book deals with aspects of the basic idea that God, the creator, is God of all nations and that he at the same time is the God of one nation, the Jews. Thus Birnbaum takes up a central issue in Philo's writings. She is right in approaching Philo primarily as an exegete, and her study contains many valuable observations. She builds too much upon guesswork about Philo's various audiences for his writings, however, and several debatable points in her study call for further research. Thus, Birnbaum has written a stimulating dissertation that challenges scholars to take another look at the sources and to examine further the topics dealt with in her book.