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Birnbaum, Ellen

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

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This book, a lightly revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation (Columbia University, 1992), is a truly thorough, systematic attempt to see how Philo, treatise by treatise, views the tension between the belief in G-d as the Father of the entire universe and the belief in a special, national G-d of the Jewish people. In particular, Birnbaum has an exhaustive analysis of Philo's term for Israel, especially in its etymological sense of "one who sees G-d." She takes into account, as other scholars have generally not done, the relationship between Philo's ideas and the biblical text that he is interpreting, the influence of earlier exegetical traditions, the literary genre of the work, Philo's audience for particular treatises, and the very nature of seeing G-d. The work is largely a reply, exhaustively supported and carefully balanced, to Alan Mendelson's *Philo's Jewish Identity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), which stresses Philo's particularistic view of the Jewish people.

Birnbaum concludes that Philo uses "Jews" or "Hebrews" but not "Israel" to describe the Jewish nation (ἔθνος or λαός or πολιτεία, whereas he uses "Israel" to describe not a particular social group but a race or class (γένος), including non-Jews, which he usually identifies with the mind or soul personified. She finds that Philo speaks of "Israel" and the Jews in different series of works, which are probably intended for different audiences. She concludes that Philo, as seen from his comments about the Persian Magi and other Gentile sages, believes that non-Jews also are capable of seeing G-d in the etymological sense of the name "Israel." On the other hand, he affirms that to belong to "Israel" one must believe in monotheism and that, moreover, Jews do have a special standing with G-

d. Hence, in the last analysis, Philo turns out to be neither a particularist nor a universalist.

Birnbaum is troubled by the fact that the only extant non-exegetical work in which Philo uses the name "Israel" in clear reference to Jews is in the *Legatio ad Gaium* 1.4, where, significantly, he mentions it, along with the etymology. We may, however, explain this by noting that just before this reference Philo (*Legatio* 1.3) speaks of G-d in universal terms, referring to him as "the Father and King of the universe (τῶν ὅλων) and the Source of all things, but adding that this universal G-d has taken Israel, that is, the Jews, as his portion. The reference is clearly to be understood in apologetic terms.

Though Birnbaum is truly exemplary in her thorough and critical coverage of the use of the key terms in Philo, she would have profited greatly if she had compared this usage with the way in which these terms are used in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and other Graeco-Jewish writers (notably Demetrius, Eupolemus, Pseudo-Eupolemus, Pseudo-Hecataeus, Theodotus, Philo the Epic Poet, Ezekiel the Tragedian, Aristobulus, and, above all, Josephus). Their avoidance of the term "Israel" is surely significant, since both particularist and universalist attitudes were subject to attack in antiquity.

Birnbaum (p. 38) notes that Josephus does not use "Israel" to denote the whole people but only the patriarch Jacob, and that while he does use "Israelite" with reference to Jews of the past he does not use it with reference to Jews of his own day. Josephus, we may note, regularly uses "Hebrews" and "Israelites" in referring to Jews. In fact, the only occurrence in Josephus (*Ant.* 9.95) of the term "Israel" is a variant reading in reference to the kingdom of Israel. Birnbaum does not, surprisingly, comment on the significance of this. We may suggest that Josephus, who is so deeply indebted to Vespasian and Titus and who lived in Rome during the last thirty years of his life, is very sensitive to the tremendous gains that Jews had made through conversion of Gentiles to Judaism and to the Romans' negative reaction to this proselytizing activity. While admitting that Judaism is open to those who voluntarily seek to become Jews, he, for apologetic reasons, avoids stressing both the universalistic aspect of Israel and the particularistic aspect of Israel as the chosen people of G-d. On the other hand, Pseudo-Philo, who is generally regarded as a contemporary of Josephus, in his *Biblical Antiquities*, which Birnbaum does not mention at all, does refer to Israel (9.4) and as a *genus* but in the very opposite sense in which Philo employs the term, namely to refer to the Jews as the chosen people. Again, in his version of the Song of Deborah, Pseudo-Philo (32.14) refers to the stars overcoming the enemies of Israel, where Israel clearly refers to the Jewish people. The same particularistic connotation is to be found in the reference in Pseudo-Philo's Song of Deborah to the rib from which Israel was destined to be born as "a testimony to what the L-rd has done for His people."

Birnbaum remarks (p. 37) that pagan writers do not use the term "Israel." In point of fact, there is a reference to the G-d of Israel ascribed to the first century B.C.E. Varro, who is said to equate Jupiter with the G-d of Israel. But this appears in a lost work of Varro which is quoted by Augustine *De Consensu Evangelistarum* 1.27.42), who, of course, is much later and uses "Israel" as Christians did, and who, in citing the passage in three other places, speaks of Varro as referring to the G-d of the Jews.

Birnbaum (p. 25), in apparent frustration, correctly notes that Philo nowhere tells us that Jews and only Jews can see G-d or, conversely, that non-Jews can see G-d, or that "Israel" is a code word for those who can see G-d and may include all Jews or some Jews or even non-Jews. We may suggest that the reason why Philo does not express himself clearly and unequivocally on this matter is that he regards this as a mystery in the etymological sense of a secret about which one must remain close-mouthed. We are reminded that Philo himself, in a rare autobiographical comment, declares that he was initiated under Moses into his greater mysteries, the very phrase having been borrowed from the Eleusinian Mysteries.

In the end Birnbaum concludes that the term "Israel" in the etymological sense does include non-Jews and that proselytes are associated with Jews but not necessarily with "Israel." But if so, she asks, why make efforts, such as Philo clearly favors, to convert them to Judaism? And why should a Jew who is able to see G-d remain a Jew? Birnbaum (p. 185) finds surprising Philo's claim that the G-d worshipped by Jews is acknowledged by all other people; but this, we may note, is also stated by the alleged non-Jewish author of the *Letter of Aristeeas* (16): "G-d, the overseer and creator of all things, whom they [the Jews] worship, is He whom all men worship, and we too, Your Majesty, though we address Him differently, as Zeus and Dis." We find a very similar equation in Philo's predecessor Aristobulus (*ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 13.12.7).

What marks this work and makes it a model of careful scholarship is its honest and carefully balanced approach to Philo's text. She truly believes in Aristarchus' principle, ἡ ἐκ τῆς λέξεως λύσις Birnbaum rightly stresses that Philo's use of the term "literal" is inconsistent and somewhat equivocal and that what he considers "literal" is often a reworking of the text, with additions and subtractions of certain detail. In this she might have noted the remarkable parallel with Josephus, who promises *Ant.* 1.17) that he will present the precise details of the Bible, "neither adding nor omitting anything," only to add and subtract on virtually every page.

Birnbaum's knowledge of the secondary literature is truly exhaustive. The only major omission that this reviewer has noted is Abraham Arazy's "The Appellations of the Jews (Ioudaios, Hebraios, Israel) in the Literature from Alexander to Justinian" (diss., Ph.D., New York University, 1977).