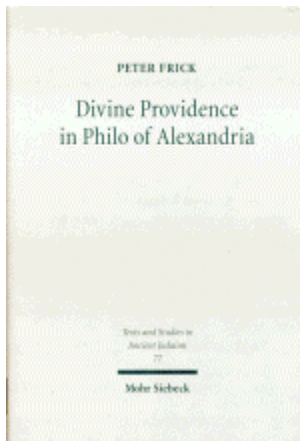


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Frick, Peter

Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria

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In this impressive new study, Peter Frick examines Philo's doctrine of divine providence while drawing attention to its place in the overall theological scheme of Philo's writings. Based (as any such work must be) on a meticulous reading of the entire Philonic corpus, the book attests to Frick's attentive scholarship. He is also conversant in the secondary literature, drawing chiefly on the works of David Runia, John Dillon, and David Winston. The analysis is philological and theological—while Frick also considers Philo's philosophical interests, he understands them as having been informed by the theological exigencies of Philo's reading of scripture. He presents his results in steady, straightforward writing that makes even the more recondite aspects of Philo's thought understandable.

Frick starts with a brief introductory survey devoted to the theme of providence in Greek philosophy (Plato, Middle Platonists, Stoics) and in Hellenistic Judaism (Qoheleth, Ben Sira, LXX, Josephus), to set off what is distinctively Philonic in Philo's account of providence. When he turns to Philo's writings, his point of departure is Philo's treatise *De opificio mundi*. This is appropriate, not only because this treatise contains one of the longest passages in which Philo considers providence as such, but also because it affords Frick the opportunity to situate Philonic providence within the most comprehensive frame of reference possible—namely, the whole of creation. This primary relationship is tremendously important, because it provides the categories Philo used to distinguish between God's transcendence, which is related to the divine essence or nature, and God's immanence, which is related to divine existence or activity (pp. 32-43).

Frick argues that this is the basis for a twofold theological discourse used by Philo. Thus, Philo articulates his doctrine of providence with reference to apophatic (negative) and kataphatic (positive; in Frick's terms, rightly, 'anthropomorphic and anthropopathic') theology. By claiming this distinction, Philo safeguards God's radical epistemological and ontological otherness without sacrificing God's role as creator and sustainer of the universe. The relationship between God's transcendence and immanence that Frick describes is 'indirect': 'In Philonic thought, that relation is brought about through the divine powers.' (p. 52). Philo manages this delicate relationship by ascribing affirmative statements about God to divine activities in the world. Thus, creation does not impinge upon divine transcendence. And because creation is fundamentally providential, providence is in the first instance a cosmological phenomenon. It is further evident in the teleological regularity observable in the cosmos. In keeping with classical esthetics, Philo therefore affirms that the contemplation of cosmic beauty and order reveals the handiwork of God. God's gracious disposal toward creation, in other words, God's providence is evident in the order, stability and beauty of the cosmos.

Next, Frick undertakes an account of precisely how Philo relates God's transcendence and immanence. This relationship, he asserts, Philo grounded in God's creativity. Beyond this, the aporia generated by maintaining God's simultaneous involvement and detachment with respect to creation is something that does not preoccupy Philo, and wisely Frick follows suit. According to Frick, the most important link between God's transcendence and immanence for Philo is God's goodness. God is transcendently good with respect to the divine nature, and immanently good with respect to the divine actions. So far, Philo closely follows Plato—as Frick indicates by putting Philo's *De opificio mundi* 21 in a column alongside Plato's *Timaeus* 29d-e (p. 64). Philo's twinning of Plato's cosmology is enormously important for Frick's interpretation of Philo's cosmology (here, he follows Runia's work), and therefore of Philo's teaching on providence (here, he furthers Runia's work).

But Philo departs from Plato when he introduces grace into the discussion. Frick argues that Philo understood God's will to be the pivotal link between God's goodness, grace and gracious actions—an aspect of Philo's thought he says cannot be 'underestimated' (surely, he meant 'overestimated', p. 68). The fact that God *wants* or *wills* to express his goodness in gracious actions initiates God's creative and sustaining relationship with the world. On the basis of *Timaeus* 30 b-c, providence is drawn into creation, though it is not particularly clear how (pp. 70-73). Frick then moves adroitly through the much-vexed topic of the *logos* and the various divine powers, by not being distracted by the potentially innumerable issues at stake here and adhering to his task of situating the 'providential power' within Philo's overall scheme of the divine powers.

Next, Frick shows how Philo defies the claim that if the universe is generated, it must be perishable (Aristotle, *De caelo* 282a30 ff.). Philo asserts that God willed to generate the universe, which is a benevolent and providential action in keeping with the nature of

God (*Decal.* 58, *Mig.* 181; *Aet.* 47-51). So Philo invokes providence in answer to Aristotle's claims: God is providentially disposed toward creation, therefore creation will not suffer destruction. Here, Philo's account is in keeping with Middle Platonist exegesis of *Timaeus* 41a-b (following Dillon, Frick cites ps.-Plutarch 572 and Calcidius, *Tim.* 176). Frick identifies Philo's theory as a form of *creatio continua*, 'temporal beginning but continuous existence' (p. 117), which is further evidence for the importance of providence in Philo's thought. This caps off Frick's assessment of divine immanence and transcendence as Philo coordinates them with his account of providence.

Having considered this system, Frick then turns to other problems that Philo addressed with reference to divine providence. Thus, Frick considers the problem of 'horoscopic astrology' that Philo addresses in connection with Abraham, the Chaldean 'whose father was an astrologer' (*Virt.* 212). 'Chaldean' in Philo often means simply 'astrologer', so Philo makes an important claim when he asserts that Abraham 'left the impious ways of astral religion and came to believe in God as the creator and providential administrator of the cosmos' (p. 129). This sharp dichotomy, according to Frick, reflects Philo's keen awareness of the threat to divine transcendence and therefore to divine providence posed by an astrological system that depicts the universe as self-sufficient and/or God as the 'world-soul'. Thus, as Frick notes, Philo is eager at *Providence* 2.52 to subordinate the heavenly bodies to providence. Frick also notes Philo's objection to astrology on the basis that it undermines or confuses questions of moral responsibility. This leads Frick to consider the interaction of providence and moral responsibility, under the classic rubric of theodicy.

Frick shows that Philo observes the classic division of theodicy according to physical and moral evil. On the question of physical evil, Philo's treatment as a whole resembles nothing so much as a rehearsal of Stoic conventions, though the particulars of Philo's application are sometimes interesting in their own right. But his account of moral evil is quite fascinating. Here, he exculpates God by laying the responsibility squarely on the human soul as the moral agent, which causes moral evil by virtue of its irrational element (pp. 153-156). According to Philo, God is blameless for this chaos because it was not God alone who made man. Here Philo has recourse to the plural in Genesis 1.26 ('Let us make man...'), in his exegesis of which he identifies God's conversation partners as those who created the mortal, irrational component of human beings (*Conf.* 168-83, *Opif.* 72-75, *Fuga* 68-72, *Mut.* 30-31). This harkens back to Plato's *Timaeus*, where the creation of the irrational element is attributed to lesser divinities, thus safeguarding the transcendence of the Demiurge (for Philo, God).

This completes Frick's examination of the moral and philosophical aspects that emerge in Philo's writings. He then turns briefly to the historical manifestations of providence. This section bolsters Frick's thesis that Philo regards philosophy as the adjunct to theology by providing concrete examples of God's providential care for the Jewish race (the raw data, so to speak, that Philo's eclectic philosophy is assembled to

explain). By concluding with reference to how Philo deploys his understanding of providence in historical interpretation, Frick emphasizes once more Philo's identification of providence and grace. The work culminates with a regrettably brief reading of Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium* and *In Flaccum*, where Frick finds evidence for Philo's belief in the continuity of God's providential care for the Jews in his own time.

The book is excellent. Still, it is a shame that Frick did not extend his analysis from the Middle Platonists to the Neoplatonists, though certainly the decision is understandable. (The flowering of Neoplatonism was, after all, nearly four centuries after Philo's time.) Perhaps, though, the relative wealth of information available about Neoplatonic thought could mitigate that problem. After all, Frick compares Philo to Calcidius readily enough, who wrote about two hundred years after Philo. Given the fragmentary survival of Middle Platonist writings, it might be illuminating to consider later figures whose numerous writings survive *in toto*, such as Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, commentary on the *Timaeus* and three treatises on providence, which would have made an interesting addition to the discussion. To judge from the work as it stands, Frick could have put this material to remarkably good use.