Philo's Perception of Women

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CHAPTER THREE

THE STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Sex Distinctions in Philo

On the Philosophical Level

Philo’s writing is replete with distinctions between male and female. They range over a variety of contexts, extending far beyond straightforward comparisons between men and women. Just as in a musical work the familiar notes of a simple theme may repeatedly catch the attention, so in Philo’s writing does the male-female motif. His distinctions between men and women form just one sub-set of the larger body of distinctions based on sex.

Value judgements

Philo expresses value judgments by noting significance in the gender of words, by playing on etymological connections, and by attributing masculine and feminine qualities to his philosophical terms. In all instances, masculinity and maleness signify superiority, and femininity and femaleness inferiority. These value judgements pervade his work in such a way that it is impossible to separate the theoretical statements from their application to the human situation. For this reason I take exception to the view that sexual distinctions can be isolated to certain aspects of his thought. Such a view is
expressed by Jean Laporte in the introduction to a work in which he devotes part of a chapter, entitled "Woman as Symbol," to Philo.¹

... woman as symbol ... is a sign referring to a reality different from the sign itself. For instance, pejoratively, woman could be the symbol of the irrational part of the soul or even of physical and moral weakness. There is no pejorative judgment on women made by the author, who is only making use of a language. The society of the time is responsible for the connection between woman and a negative aspect signified by woman.²

Since Philo extends his male-female differentiation in so many directions, Laporte’s statement is indefensible.³ The following survey will demonstrate the point.

Philo sees significance in the gender of Greek words. I can find no precedent for this particular view. Among the Greeks, gender in language appears to have been accepted without question or comment. At a place in his Rhetoric where an opportunity to discuss the subject arises, Aristotle says only this:

A fourth rule is to observe Pythagoras’ classification of nouns into masculine, feminine and neuter; for these distinctions also must be correctly given (1407b).

In Plato’s Cratylus, which is largely concerned with the aptness of words, Socrates argues that names belong to things by nature, not by custom; although he discusses the nature of names at length, he does not mention the significance of gender. The Stoics, moreover, al-


² Ibid., p.4.

³ I believe Philo’s intertwining of these concepts is a demonstration of the theory of legitimation proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Lückmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Anchor Books, 1967), ch.2, part 2. They posit four steps through which expressions used in everyday speech develop into common knowledge (pp.94-96).
though they continued the discussion of the significance of words, do not appear to have directed their attention to gender. On occasion Philo echoes the Stoic theory that language was originally developed by persons of such insight that there was perfect correlation between words and the things they signified, but that as humankind gradually became corrupted, so too did language, with resulting anomalies (*QG* 1:20; *Op.* 148, 150). But in the following statements, which indicate that the corruption of language extends to gender, he appears to be improvising.

... joy, the name of which is feminine, while its nature is masculine (*QG* 4:18).

... indeed all the virtues have women's titles [i.e. are feminine nouns], but powers and activities of consummate men (*Fug.* 51).

... in the matings within the soul, though virtue seemingly ranks as wife, her natural function is to sow good counsels and excellent words and to inculcate tenets truly profitable to life, while thought (*ho logismos*) though held to take the place of the husband, receives the holy and divine sowings. Perhaps however the statement above is a mistake due to the deceptiveness of the nouns, since in the actual words employed *nous* has the masculine, and *aretē* the feminine form. And if anyone is willing to divest facts of the terms which obscure them and observe them in their nakedness in a clear light he will understand that virtue (*hē aretē*) is male, since it causes movement and affects conditions and suggests noble conceptions, while thought (*ho logismos*) is female, being moved and trained and helped, and in general belonging to

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A nineteenth century work listed in Blank's bibliography, R. L. Schmidt's *Stoicorum Grammatica* (Halle, 1839), has only one minor reference to gender.

Since modern scholars practically omit the topic, I conclude that they found little reference to it in Stoic literature.
the passive category, which passivity is its sole means of preservation (Abr.101f.).

Beneath them all lies the supposition that good things really ought to be signified by masculine nouns.

Another way in which Philo uses language to demonstrate the difference in value between male and female things is to play on the derivation of certain words from the basic terms for "man" and "woman."

From *thēlus*, "female," comes the term *ekthēlunein*, "to make into a woman," which Philo uses to denote the crime of the pederast against his partner (Spec.3.39). Although that word may have been chosen for its physical rather than moral aptness, the term *thēludrias*, "a womanish person," in the vice list in Sac.32, definitely conveys a judgement of character.

From the noun designating woman, *gynē*, come two derogatory terms referring to homosexual men: *androgynos* (Spec.1.325), and *gynaikomorphos* (Spec.2.50). As in the case of *ekthēlunein*, it could be argued that the words refer merely to physical matters. With *gynaikeia*, however, Philo intends to convey a moral judgement. *Gynaikeia* is used in the Septuagint as a euphemism for menstruation. Philo extends the meaning of this term to cover the undesirable passions:

But when God begins to consort with the soul, He makes what before was a woman into a virgin again, for He takes away the degenerate and emasculate passions which unmanned it and plants instead the native growth of unpolluted virtues. Thus He will not talk with Sarah till she has ceased from all that is after the manner of women (*ta gynaikeia panta*), and is ranked once more as a pure virgin (Cher.50; cf. Det.28; Spec.2.54f.; Ebr.54-59).
On the other hand, Philo repeatedly plays on the association of *andreia* (courage) with *anēr* (man). Analogous to these terms are the English words "manliness" and "man." *Andreia* is one of the basic virtues for Philo. The most obvious example of his associating the two words is found in this passage from *De Virtutibus*:

So earnestly and carefully does the law desire to train and exercise the soul to manly courage (*andreia*) that . . . it strictly forbids a man to assume woman's garb, in order that no trace, no merest shadow of the female, should attach to him to spoil his masculinity (*Virt.18).*

In these few examples, we see that Philo uses derivatives of the Greek terms for man and woman not casually, but with the purpose of conveying judgements about character.

I stated at the beginning of this section that Philo attributes masculine and feminine qualities to his philosophical terms. The basic presupposition of his allegory is that mind is masculine and sense-perception feminine.

A variation on his theme of male superiority is the declaration that something or someone he admires is motherless and, therefore, devoid of a feminine element. The Sabbath is "motherless, exempt from female parentage, begotten by the Father alone . . . neither born of a mother nor a mother herself, neither bred from

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5 That *anēr* and *andreia* are cognate is understood in the definition of the former in *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, 1831-1856, s.v. "anēr": "5. *Vir, i.e., Virili animo praeditus, Strenuus, Fortis."

6 See, for example, *Sac*.32, 37; *QG* 4.15, 38. Cf. *LA* 2.97.

7 The *LXX*, Deut.22:5, on which this passage is based, does not have this reason; it is Philo's addition.

8 *Op.*165: "... for in us mind corresponds to man, the senses to woman . . .”; *LA* 3.11: "... the weak feminine passion of sense-perception . . . the manly reasoning schooled in fortitude . . .” ; *LA* 3.202: "... free and manly reasonings . . ."
corruption nor doomed to suffer corruption" (*Mos.*2.210). Sarah is "declared, too, to be without a mother, and to have inherited her kinship only on the father’s side and not on the mother’s and thus to have no part in female parentage" (*Ebr.*61; cf. *QG* 4.153, 160).

Activity, completeness, and rationality are masculine, whereas their opposites, passivity, incompleteness and irrationality, are feminine.⁹

... the male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active. So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to the mind and reason is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the feminine (*Spec.*1.200f; cf.LA 2.97).

The soul has female and male offspring; the former are vice and passion, whereas the latter are health of soul and virtues (*Sac.*103).

In borrowing a well-known figure of speech from Plato’s *Phaedrus* (253 d,e), Philo adds a sexual distinction: desire is a horse "mean and slavish, up to sly tricks, [that] keeps her nose in the manger and empties it in no time, for she is a female" (*Agr.*73).

Philo appropriates the Pythagorean distinction that odd numbers are male, and even numbers female. The Sabbath, then, although a feminine noun, ἡ ἰεβδομή, is called andreiotatos arithmos, "the manliest of numbers" (*Spec.*2.56).

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⁹ Observe the way Plotinus, who also accepts a Platonic psychology, speaks of sense-perception and mind. He rejects the passivity of sense-perception, i.e., the Stoic theory that it consists of impressions (*typoi*) being made upon a passive recipient: "... what is seen and what is heard, ... are not by nature impressions or affections, but activities concerned with that which approaches [the soul]" (*The Enneads*, translated by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, 1966-1984, vol.4, 4.6.2.). The imagery which he employs to show the relation of sense (*aisthesis*) to mind (*nous*) shows difference of rank, but not of sex: "Sense perception is our messenger, but Intellect is our king" (ibid., 5.3.3).
Throughout Philo’s work, the reader finds such distinctions given as self-evident. They all must be understood with the presupposition that male is superior to female.

Creation and production

For production in both the physical and the spiritual spheres Philo frequently posits the interaction of male and female on the model of human mating. God is always the father. Occasionally Philo suggests that earth is the corresponding mother. Philo says that in the time of creation sweet water was left on the earth to prevent it from being entirely dried up, and so becoming unproductive and barren, and enable it like a mother to provide, as for offspring, not one only of the two kinds of nourishment, namely solid food, but both kinds, food and drink. Wherefore the earth had abounding veins like breasts (Op.38; cf.43).

Wisdom and Nature are also named as our mother (Det.54, 115; LA 2.49; Sac.98). The Logos is the first-born of God, whose mother is sometimes posited as Wisdom (Conf.63).

In one instance, when Philo reveals his most sacred teaching, it is to the effect that God mates with the virtues in the souls of men to produce the offspring happiness (Cher.42-48).

Man must choose between his two wives, Pleasure and Toil, out of consideration of the kind of children they will bear him (Sac.20).

A mind (dianoia) must bear children to God, or be widowed and cast out (Det.147). In an autobiographical passage (Mig.33-35),

10 "... it seems true to say that in Philo’s thought there is present the recognition of a female life-principle assisting the supreme God in his work of creation and administration, but also somehow fulfilling the role of mother to all creation. If this concept reveals contradictions that is perhaps because Philo himself was not quite sure what to do with it” (John Dillon, The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 20, London: Duckworth, 1977, p.164).
Philo speaks of the need for divine impregnation before his mind can produce thoughts:

For the offspring of the soul's own travail are for the most part poor abortions, things untimely born; but those which God waters with the snow of heaven come to the birth perfect, complete and peerless (Mig.33).

Sexual reproduction thus can be seen as a model on which Philo bases creativity in all spheres.

Proper functioning of an organism

Philo expresses the proper functioning of an organic whole as the right relationship between its male and female components, that is, the rule of the masculine over the feminine: "For pre-eminence always pertains to the masculine, and the feminine always comes short of and is lesser than it" (Fug.51). The pattern that exists in the family is also suited to the individual and the cosmos:

... by observing the conditions prevailing in your own individual household, the element that is master in it, and that which is in subjection ... you will gain forthwith a sure knowledge of God and of His works. Your reason will shew you that, as there is mind in you, so is there in the universe, and that as your mind has taken upon itself sovereign control of all that is in you, and brought every part into subjection to itself, so too He, that is endued with lordship over all, guides and controls the universe by the law and right of an absolute sway ... (Mig.185f.).

For an imbalance of the male and female components in the individual, Philo draws a lesson from Adam's heeding Eve's advice:

Reason is forthwith ensnared and becomes a subject instead of a ruler, a slave instead of a master, an alien instead of a citizen, and a mortal instead of an immortal (Op.165).
Proper balance in the individual should follow that of the family:

There is in the soul a male and female element just as there is in families, the male corresponding to the men, the female to the women. The male soul assigns itself to God alone as the Father and Maker of the Universe and the Cause of all things. The female clings to all that is born and perishes . . . [T]here is no greater impiety than to ascribe to the passive element the power of the active principle (Spec. 3.178-180).

On the cosmic scale, Wisdom relates to God as woman to man:

For that which comes after God . . . occupies a second place, and therefore was termed feminine to express its contrast to the Maker of the Universe who is masculine . . . (Fug. 51).

On the Human Level

The examples given above show that Philo's sex distinctions range far beyond statements of differences between men and women. But, as we might expect, they apply here as well. He quotes the following truism from an anonymous poet:

"Not even a woman so far lacks good sense
As when the better's there to choose the worse" (Aet. 41).

In doing so, he is indirectly expressing an opinion generally held by men in the ancient world, viz., that women are inferior beings. But as he moves on from description of women to prescription for their proper behaviour, Philo is speaking as a person particularly concerned with the survival of the Jewish community and its values. Since man is naturally superior to woman (Spec. 1.201), a man should rule over his wife (Hyp. 7.3). Man is active and woman passive, as their appropriate behaviour shows (LA 2.385; Spec. 200). Woman's sexuality is a constant threat to the mind and morals of man, even within marriage. Philo says on one occasion that "a wife
is a selfish creature, excessively jealous and an adept at beguiling the morals of her husband and seducing him by her continued impositions," and that "she cajoles the sovereign mind" (Hyp.11.14). In another place he warns that a man's mind is "trussed and pinioned" by a woman (Mos.1.299). The threat that woman poses necessitates strict regulation of her activities:

A woman, then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion. She should not show herself off like a vagrant in the streets before the eyes of other men . . . (Spec.3.171)\textsuperscript{11}

Only in motherhood does woman take on fulfillment and honour, and command respect equal to that of her husband.\textsuperscript{12} But even on that score Philo is subdued.\textsuperscript{13}

Although most of his sexual distinctions can be traced to the rich variety of sources on which he drew, Philo is unusual in the extent to which such distinctions are integral to both his philosophy and his practical understanding of life.

\textsuperscript{11} Goodenough, in \textit{Jurisprudence}, pp.130f., notes a remarkable similarity between these injunctions and statements of the Pythagorean female philosopher Phintys, preserved by Stobaeus.

Heinemann, in \textit{Bildung}, pp.234f., cites this passage from Goodenough, and adds that this type of restriction on women's movements derives from neither Alexandrian practice nor Biblical example, but from Stoic and Pythagorean philosophy.

\textsuperscript{12} Deus 13: Hannah's nature "is that of a goodly and happy motherhood." \textit{Decal}.51: Philo speaks of "the duty of honouring parents, each separately and both in common." Cf. \textit{Decal}.107, 119.

\textsuperscript{13} Philosophically, he denigrates motherhood (see above, "Value judgements."). One example that can be cited is QG 4.160, which says in part: "For the wise and cultivated man comes into being as the portion of the Cause, whereas the wicked man . . . is related to passive matter, which gives birth like a mother."
Mixing of the Philosophical and the Human

The manner in which Philo moves from theoretical to practical matters and from philosophical to human distinctions works against a clear differentiation between the two. The reader is helped by the fact that the treatises generally called Allegorical tend to have a preponderance of the first use of sexual terminology, i.e. the philosophical, whereas the Exposition and the Miscellaneous Writings have more direct statements about women's behaviour. Moreover, in Questiones in Genesin and Questiones in Exodum, Philo frequently begins with the literal, human story and moves on to the allegorical explanation, thus making the distinction explicit. But these are only general rules. Within a single treatise Philo frequently handles Biblical material on the two levels adjacently, without a transitional statement. In the following example he interprets the temptation of Eve first in terms of mind and sense within the individual, but then as the cause of woman's situation in life:

... in us mind corresponds to man, the senses to woman; and pleasure encounters and holds parlay with the senses first, and through them cheats with her quackeries the sovereign mind itself . . . . Those who were the first to become slaves to a passion grievous and hard to heal at once had the experience of the wages paid by Pleasure. The woman incurred the violent woes of travail-pangs, and the griefs

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14 I am following the custom of dividing the treatises into four groups, as described by Sandmel, Philo, chapter 3, "Philo's Writings" (See also Winston, Philo, p.6. This division originated in the work of Massebieau and Cohn. See Bréhier, Les Idées, p.iii).

"Those treatises on biblical matters that begin with a series of biblical verses, and the content of which is shaped by these verses, are known as the Allegory of the Law. Those treatises on biblical matters which lack an opening series of verses and the content of which flows from the title of the particular essay are known as the Exposition of the Law" (p.30). The Miscellaneous Writings are non-biblical. Questiones in Genesin and Questiones in Exodum form a fourth category. They overlap the Allegory somewhat in being biblical commentary. Sandmel suggests that they may have been written as preliminary notes for treatises.
which come one after another all through the remainder of life *(Op.165-167)*.

In the next example he reverses the procedure: from a generalization about women, he draws conclusions about masculine and feminine souls:

That the rule of custom is followed by women more than men is, I think, quite clearly shown by the words of Rachel, who looks with admiration only on that which is perceived by the senses. For she says to her father, "Be not wroth, sir; I cannot rise before thee, because the custom of women is upon me" *(Gen.31:35)*. So we see that obedience to custom is the special property of women. Indeed, custom is the rule of the weaker and more effeminate soul. For nature is of men, and to follow nature is the mark of a strong and truly masculine reason *(Ebr.54)*.

It is evident from these illustrations that Philo does not clearly separate his more theoretical, philosophical, or (to use Laporte's term) symbolic use of sexual terminology from his opinions about sexual differences in humans.

Indeed sometimes Philo seems completely unaware of the shift from one level to another. The following quotation is a commentary on *Gen.3:9*, "But the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where art thou?'" In the final words it is difficult to tell whether it is sense-perception, or Eve, or woman in general that is irrational.

Included then in the call of Adam, the mind, is that of sense-perception, the woman; but God does not call her with a special call; why? because, being irrational, she has no capacity derived from herself to receive reproof *(LA.3.49f.)*.

Since Philo's sexual distinctions on the philosophical level are so intertwined with those on the human level, a study of Philo's perception of women will necessarily encompass them both.
Only recently has the question of Philo’s sexual distinctions become a subject for extended reflection. Serious discussion began in 1970 with the publication of Richard Baer’s monograph, Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female. The book is largely successful in establishing three points.

**Anthropology**

First it deals with the place of sexuality in Philo’s anthropology. Here Baer concentrates on the treatise De Opificio Mundi, for in it Philo interprets the two Genesis accounts of creation. Baer carefully examines Philo’s interpretation of Gen.1:26 and 2:7, which he considers the basic texts of Philo’s anthropology. He concludes that, in Philo’s understanding, the two key verses from Genesis essentially lead to the same view of man, namely that he is a composite creature. In respect of his higher self he is asexual, but in his lower self he is either male or female.

**Soteriology**

The second point Baer establishes is the place of sexuality in Philo’s soteriology. Sex inhibits salvation. Therefore one must rise above it. Baer coins three expressions for this. The first is to "b-

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15 Leiden: E.J.Brill. On pp. 3f. Baer discusses the state of the question up to the time his book was written.

16 My use of "man", "he", and "his" in this sentence is deliberate. It demonstrates the ambiguity of Baer’s wording. As I continue to summarize Baer’s position, I shall use these words in the sense that he does. Elsewhere I use the terms only in their exclusive, masculine sense.
ecome one", to rise from multiplicity to oneness. Femaleness, in this instance, represents multiplicity, and maleness unity. Unity is also characteristic of God. This leads to the second expression for salvation, to "become male". Maleness here is not meant in the lower sense of being a counterpart to femaleness, but rather in a supra-sexual sense, the sense in which God is male. The third expression is to "become virgin". This is close in meaning to the other two expressions, for it implies controlled, or relinquished, sexuality. It, too, transcends the bodily realm. In salvation one escapes the sexual self which resides in the body.

Sex function

For his third point Baer suggests a pattern in Philo’s thought which will clear up the existing confusion about the sex roles attributed to (a) God, (b) his powers (Sophia [Wisdom], Arete [Virtue], and the Logos), and (c) man, in creative activity. In each union, which Philo describes in sexual terms, the superior partner plays the active, male role and the inferior the passive, female role. Thus, in spite of their respective genders, Sophia can play the male role in relation to Anthrôpos (man), and together they can produce offspring. Baer demonstrates that the sexuality of God’s powers, as of the human soul, is functional rather than ontological. This pattern serves to clarify Philo’s thought and, at the same time, to cast doubt on the recurrent theory that Sophia and Arete are shadows of Mediterranean goddesses, and that Philo deliberately allows the Logos to upstage them.  

17 For a recent discussion of this theory see Joan Chambers Engelsman, The Feminine Dimension of the Divine (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979). She uses Baer as a source but misinterprets his explanation of the role of Sophia. "It is difficult to say why Sophia was replaced by Logos/Christ. Philo’s work indicated the presence of a symbolic misogyny which might have come from a psychocultural need to replace Mother with Father." (p.120). Engelsman's concern is to find evidence of the worship of the divine feminine. The same concern is found in R. Melnick's paper "On the Philonic Conception of the Whole Man," in Journal for the Study of Judaism 11 (July, 1980), pp.1-32.
Baer’s Limitations

Baer’s title indicates that he intended to limit his work to the concepts of male and female in Philo’s philosophy. Because of the intertwining of allegorical and non-allegorical strands in Philo’s writing, however, he found it necessary to give some attention to Philo’s perception of women. Nevertheless he acknowledges that he has not resolved the apparent tension between Philo’s expressed abhorrence of things female and his acceptance of a role for women in God’s order:

In *Vit. Cont.*, in his description of the Therapeutae, Philo shows considerable admiration for the ideal of sexual abstinence and perpetual virginity. But this ideal always more or less remains for him something to be admired from a distance. He was far too much a Jew not to take seriously the divine command to be fruitful and multiply.

Baer makes no attempt to explain the tension or to suggest an overarching principle which would cover both positions.

Further Scholarship

Nothing substantial has been added to the subject since the publication of Baer’s book. An article by Judith Romney Wegner deals directly with Philo’s perception of women, but her work is

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18 "... his [Philo’s] depreciation of actual women and of female sense-perception are frequently so closely intertwined that no clear separation between the two can be made" (*Categories*, p.40).

Baer’s discussion of women is virtually limited to pages 40 to 44.

19 Ibid., p.75.
marred by inappropriately emotive language and faulty reasoning. Melnick makes a justifiable criticism of the world-denying aspect of Baer's interpretation, but his attempt to challenge Baer's third conclusion with the conjecture that "there was a long-standing tradition within Judaism of a Female in nature through whom salvation could be sought" is unconvincing. Leonard Swidler and Evelyn and Frank Stagg miss the subtleties of Philo's thought in their search for misogyny. For her book on the concept of woman in philosophy, Sister Prudence Allen has done some independent research on Philo, but largely from one treatise, *Questiones in Genesin*, and her conclusions are limited to a few pages. Unfortunately, she also accepts the dubious findings of Engelsman.

These few short works constitute the recent scholarly work on the topic. There has been no fullscale examination of sexuality, specifically female sexuality, in Philo since Baer opened the subject in 1970. Thus his book remains the foundation for further study.

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20 "The Image of Women in Philo", *SBL Seminar Papers* 1982 (California: Scholars Press), pp.551-563. She charges Philo with displaying "a pronounced male chauvinist bias" (p.555) and bases her argument for the irrationality of woman's soul on an uncritical acceptance of Baer's interpretation of *Heres* 138f. (p.552, using Baer, *Categories*, p.19, which is questionable).

21 I refer to this article in note 17, above. The quotation is from p.7.

22 Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1976); Swidler's references to Philo are incidental to his main interest, which is women in Palestine and Babylonia.

Evelyn and Frank Stagg, in *Women in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), discuss Philo on pages 41 to 45. Although they make some insightful comments, they are careless in making the overall judgement that, "Philo's misogyny is so pronounced that his judgment is suspect" (p.38). Philo would not have understood the charge. He uses the word *misogynaioi* only once, and in that instance it signifies men who tire of their wives and try to get rid of them by making false accusations of infidelity (*Spec.3.79ff.*).

23 *Concept*, pp.189-193.

24 See note 17, above.