Philo’s Perception of Women
Sly, Dorothy

Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Sly, Dorothy.
Philo's Perception of Women.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75938

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2630727
CHAPTER TWELVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

In this work I have undertaken to study an area of Philonic thought unexamined heretofore, namely, his perception of women. I have attempted to understand the reasons behind Philo’s propensity to make distinctions on the basis of gender. I approached the work as a Philonic scholar, attempting to enter his world of thought as far as that was possible, by reading his work carefully and consulting the recognized secondary sources. I assiduously avoided the temptation to pluck quotations out of context, or to fault Philo for not thinking like a modern person.

The body of the work has been an examination of the material Philo wrote about both Biblical and contemporary women. I prefaced the main part with a considerable amount of background information, which constitutes the first four chapters of the work. I did this in order to set the subject in context, and to establish certain parameters for the work.

After introducing the subject in the first chapter, I used chapter two to set the topic in the context of the two main traditions which converged in Philo: the Jewish and the Greek. The resulting material provides a backdrop against which elements in Philo’s treatment of woman can be viewed. Chapter two continues with a search for information about the cultural streams which made up the cosmopolitan society of Alexandria that Philo knew. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to determine whether Philo’s perception of women matched reality, I have operated on the belief that we
can better understand the statements he does make when we picture the world out of which he wrote.

From my earlier study of Philo I suspected that, regardless of the particular context or content, Philo’s male-female distinctions were made according to one basic pattern. At the beginning of this study, then, I formulated the hypothesis that one presupposition underlies all Philo’s sexual distinctions, viz., that "male" designates good, strong, and active, and "female" bad, weak, and passive; these are relative, rather than absolute, values. In chapter three I test that hypothesis by surveying the breadth and complexity of Philo’s use of sexual distinctions, and, through examples, demonstrating their interrelatedness. This chapter shows that, because the basic presupposition exists, an investigation of Philo’s perception of women need not be restricted to material where he speaks of woman qua woman. This observation is particularly useful, since it is not characteristic of Philo’s writing that topics are clearly delineated, but rather that threads of ideas become entwined, and indeed entangled, with one another. In chapter three, then, I establish that the material relating to Philo’s perception of women may be broader in scope than one would first suspect.

In chapter four, on the other hand, I demonstrate that certain parts of the text must be rejected in the search for Philo’s perception of women. I examine the language in which Philo couches his observations about the human condition in general. There is no explicit precedent in the scholarly literature for the conclusion that women are not considered in these generalizations. Yet by studying the use of ἄνθρωπος, ἄνήρ, and masculine pronouns and adjectives in Philo and, to a limited extent, in his sources, I demonstrate that the exclusiveness of these terms extends beyond mere grammatical form. When we are seeking to determine Philo’s perception of women, it is necessary to set these generalizations aside. Philo’s perception of woman is of a being other than "man," whether ἄνήρ or ἄνθρωπος.

With chapter five I begin the actual presentation of Philo’s view of women, by examining the context of his two most frequent designations, γυνὴ and παρθένος. I find that womanhood is a state
or condition of life marked by three signs, menstruation, marital relations and childbearing, which symbolize evil, defilement and corruption. Virginity is the absence of these signs of womanhood. It is a state of elevation beyond the physical constraints of womanhood and, as well, beyond the moral states they symbolize.

Much of the material about women emerges from Philo’s commentaries on the female figures of the Bible. Chapters six to ten deal with these figures, the first two chapters with those he calls "women" and the last three with those he calls "virgins."

Philo devotes an extensive amount of material to interpreting the Eden story. For this reason I use all of chapter six to study his presentation of Eve. She is the archetypical woman. Philo presents her both as the less worthy components of Everyman--passion and irrationality--and as Everywoman. In both instances she represents danger, even death, when she is uncontrolled or when she usurps the position of authority. She is helpful, even necessary, when she is under firm masculine control.

In chapter six I introduce Philo’s concept of justice as a cosmic principle which decrees the rule of the superior and the submission of the inferior. Since he accepts without question the natural superiority of the male and the inferiority of the female, it follows that Philo perceives male supremacy as enjoined by cosmic law. Later tradition has named this vision of reality The Great Chain of Being.

Chapter seven examines Philo’s treatment of the other Biblical characters Philo calls "women." In this part of the study, I find that Philo sees these women as two types. In this chapter I discuss Philo’s use of the terms astai and pornai to designate acceptable and unacceptable women. In the presence of the former, man exercises control, even though sometimes that control is imperceptible. In other words, astai are women who work within the social framework established by men, and their actions contribute to the welfare of men. Pornai represent danger, and in their presence man must choose between fight or flight, depending on his own powers of resistance.
I use chapter eight to introduce Philo's allegorical concept that the great women of Scripture were not really women, but virgins. I present the theory that Philo employed this as part of his adaptation of the larger concept of the sacred marriage. For this he used a literary precedent provided by Plato, maintaining the central concept of reproduction in the soul, but substituting the virgin wives for the boy lovers, and naming God as the true source of creation. In this allegory, the wives lose their identities by becoming the virtues of their husbands.

Because Sarah and Rebecca receive lengthier treatment in Philo than any other women besides Eve, I devote a full chapter, the ninth, to them. There is a second reason. Perhaps because they were so well-known in the tradition as folk-heroines, Philo did not entirely eliminate the literal element from his treatment of these two figures. Thus, as well as studying the allegorical treatment of these women, which elaborates the basic pattern outlined in chapter eight, I also examine Philo's interpretation of the literal stories. I discover that when Philo retells the story of the relations of these women to their husbands, he alters the Biblical account so as to make Sarah and Rebecca dependent, subservient, and totally cooperative.

In chapter ten, Leah is the main character. Like Sarah and Rebecca, she appears in a dual role, as the allegorical virgin and as the good wife. In the latter role she is contrasted with Rachel. In Philo's discussion of these two sisters the terms astē and pornē reappear. Even more than Rebecca and Sarah, Leah represents Philo's ideal wife. The character of a good woman is expressed in the meaning of her name, "Rejected." A good wife is, like Leah, harsh and unattractive. She is completely devoid of the allure which is invariably condemned in Philo.

In chapter eleven, my study of Philo's perception of contemporary women, I find a repetition of the themes already discovered in his treatment of Biblical women. Philo recognizes only two types of women, the ladies, astai, and the harlots, pornai. The former live a life of virtual seclusion, devoted to home, husband and children. The latter are those who do not meet this standard. Whether they
display themselves in public, practise magic, join other religious
groups, or actually engage in sexual misconduct, Philo condemns
them all as *pornai*, enemies of the people, deserving extinction.

**Conclusions**

This study has been an attempt to search Philo’s writing for
answers to questions that I am convinced he never asked. For this
reason I have refrained from presenting his thoughts on women as
though they emerged from a clearly-defined pattern in his mind.
Attempts to systematize Philo’s thought on any subject run the risk
of imposing structure from without. The danger is all the greater
when one is treating a subject that was incidental to his main con-
cerns.

Nevertheless, I have concluded that a basic conception of the
proper relationship of the sexes forms the substratum to all Philo’s
remarks pertaining to male-female distinctions. The key term is
"control." On this point I diverge in my conclusions from Richard
Baer, whose book, *Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female*,
provided much of the foundation on which I built. Baer explored the
meaning of Philo’s sex distinctions on the philosophical level. He
established three principles that proved useful for the present work:
1) that Philo designates the lower, carnal part of the individual as
female, and the higher, spiritual part as male;
2) that virgin and male are, on the soteriological level, equivalent;
3) that Philo uses sexual language on the cosmic level to depict
interactions between certain forces which are strong, superior and
active, and others which are weak, inferior and passive.

Baer concluded that Philo advocated escape of the soul from
the concerns of the body. In Philo’s philosophical language, this
entailed abandonment of the female in favour of the male or the
virgin. Baer admitted an apparent conflict between this point of view
and the traditional Jewish perception of the physical creation as
good.
I disagree with Baer's literal acceptance of Philo's statements about abandoning the body or the female elements. Drawing on Mig.7-8 as a key text, I conclude that Philo's calls for quitting the body are rhetorical, and that the theme of his work is control of the lower elements rather than separation or elimination.\(^1\) In this passage Philo says that to command the latter "would be to prescribe death." Clearly, then, he does not mean literally that one should sever oneself from the body or from the female elements of life. Here is a shortened version of that text:

The words "Depart out of these" are not equivalent to "Sever thyself from them absolutely," since to issue such a command as that would be to prescribe death. No, the words import "Make thyself a stranger to them in judgement and purpose; let none of them cling to thee; rise superior to them all; they are thy subjects, never treat them as sovereign lords; thou art a king; school thyself once and for all to rule, not to be ruled; evermore be coming to know thyself, as Moses teaches thee in many places, saying "Give heed to thyself," for in this way shalt thou perceive those to whom it befits thee to shew obedience and those to whom it befits thee to give commands" (Mig.7f.).

After using these words to convey the real intention behind his rhetoric, Philo goes on to make the kind of statement upon which, taken alone, one might accept Baer's conclusion: "... escape, man, from the foul prison-house, thy body, with all thy might and main ..." (Mig.9). The meaning of the passage taken as a whole is quite different from that of this part seen in isolation: although Philo speaks of escape, he intends control.

It follows that the conflict Baer observed is more apparent than real. Philo perceives the lower elements as dangerous and potentially evil. The fact that they are so, however, calls for their control rather than their excision. On the individual, social or even

\(^1\) I have quoted this entire passage in ch.11, above.
cosmic level, the feminine, when it is harnessed, loses its danger, and enhances the masculine.

Philo presupposed that in the correct order of things (that is, according to the principle of *dikaiosyne*), male must relate to female as superior to inferior, strong to weak, and active to passive. The female must be controlled by the male. This principle applies on the human as well as on the philosophical plane.

The one area of reality to which Philo failed to extend his sexual distinctions was the internal make-up of woman herself. He did not raise the question whether it was possible for woman functioning in traditional society to control her own lower, feminine impulses by her higher masculine self. Instead, he postulated external control.

Even when he had the opportunity to praise the great women of the past Philo handled the Biblical text in such a way as to avoid lauding women's independent action. When he discussed the Biblical matriarchs as women, he subordinated them to their husbands, and when he treated them allegorically he transformed them into virgins (the equivalent of males).

Philo envisioned reality as a hierarchy in which the interaction of the successively higher elements could be expressed in sexual terms. Such a world view was not unnatural for a man steeped in patriarchy. In the case of Philo, it was particularly apt, since he admired not one, but two such systems.

In a patriarchal system the subordination of women is accepted as natural. Although they expressed it differently, both the Jewish and the Greek traditions converged on this point.

Nearly all the sexual distinctions Philo combined in formulating his thought were foreshadowed in one tradition or the other. Throughout my presentation of the topic I have been able to supply precedents for almost every point that Philo raises. This indicates that in the matter of sexual distinctions Philo was not an innovator. Any originality on his part lay in his combination of ingredients already at hand.
I have presented a number of factors which may have influenced the particular configuration of Philo’s perception of women.

One of them is that Philo believed that the hope for present society was to return to the standards of a better age derived from his reading and enhanced by his imagination. This was the Golden Age of Greece combined with the period of the patriarchs.

An important factor influencing Philo’s perception of women was the admiration he felt for the folk-hero, Phineas. Philo mentioned him several times, always with praise. Phineas had rescued the nation from the threat posed by women. The young Hebrew men were succumbing to the Moabite women and committing idolatry and apostasy, when Phineas turned the tide. Philo saw in Phineas a model champion of the faith against seductive pleasure. Moreover, the story illustrated the deadly power of uncontrolled female sexuality.

Philo’s aversion to the functioning of the female body could have developed from factors in each tradition. In the Greek tradition there was the Platonic doctrine that the process of generation and birth, that is, of becoming, entails corruption. In the Jewish tradition I have disclosed a menstrual taboo, and have suggested that this taboo is associated with Philo’s expressed aversion to blood, which symbolizes the life of the body.

Philo also could have developed his demands for strict controls on sexual intercourse from both traditions. Even towards forms of intercourse sanctioned by law the Jews had expressed vacillation. From early times they had not clearly distinguished between moral transgression and ritual impurity. Philo associated the taint of adultery with intercourse in marriage, postulating a form of purification not required by Scripture. Whatever revulsion he felt because of his Jewish background could have been intensified by the Platonic denigration of the body and Plato’s requirement that intercourse be for procreation only.

For women in particular Philo associated intercourse with defilement. On the allegorical level he showed this by elevating the great women of Scripture to virginity. On the human level it can be
seen in his praise of the female Therapeutae. This valuing of virginity over womanhood was to play a major role in the history of Christianity and may have received its impetus from Philo.

Philo’s insistence on the sexual purity of his people and the restraint of its women may have had the apologetic aim of presenting Judaism to outsiders in the most moral light possible. It may also have been a reaction to anti-Semitic charges of lasciviousness.

All these factors may have played roles in causing Philo to write about women as he did. Whatever the mixture of factors may have been, their combined influence resulted in Philo’s conviction that woman’s need is to be controlled by man and her function is to serve his ends.

Philo’s restricted view of woman’s purpose in life stands out starkly against the new spiritual freedom he offered man, the opportunity to undertake an Odyssey of the spirit. That achievement ought never to be belittled. Yet it underscores the limitations he would place upon woman. He simply did not raise the question of her spiritual growth. Hers was to be a derivative salvation. The spiritual accountability he urged upon men had no counterpart in the women’s quarters.