

LOUIS H. FELDMAN

Philo's Portrayal
of
Moses
in the
Context
of
Ancient Judaism

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I. General Considerations

1. The Importance of Moses in Classical Antiquity

The one figure in Jewish tradition who was well known to the pagan world was Moses (see Gager 1972). When Quintilian (3.7.21), at the end of the first century, refers to “the founder of the Jewish superstition,” he, like Pseudo-Longinus, does not deem it necessary to name him, because Moses was apparently well known.¹ When Juvenal (14.101–2) wishes to satirize converts to Judaism he speaks of what they learn as “Moses’ arcane book.” Moses’ connection with Egypt, known for its antiquity, its learning, and its wealth, undoubtedly gave him a certain prominence, especially during the Hellenistic period, when Alexandria was the chief center of scholarship. Philo asserts that while the fame of Moses’ laws had spread throughout the world, not many knew him as he really was, since Greek authors had not wanted to accord him honor, in part out of envy² and in part because the ordinances of local lawgivers were often opposed to his (*Mos.* 1.1–2).

In an age and place where grammarians and Homeric scholars were leaders of the intellectual community, one of the important figures of the intellectual scene in Alexandria in the first half of the first century C.E., Apion, known for his glosses on Homer³ and as Philo’s counterpart as a leader of the Alexandrian anti-Jewish delegation to the Emperor Gaius Caligula, was a major advocate of such revisionist views of Moses, as we see in Josephus’ reply (*Ap.* 2.10–27) to these charges. In view of Apion’s intellectual prominence, it was, therefore, all the more important for Philo to refute his charges.

Galen (*De Usu Partium* 11.14), who wrote a century after Philo, adds a further reason why Moses was not accorded honor, namely because he failed to recognize that G-d does not do what is physically impossible but merely chooses the best out of available possibilities. His criticism of Moses as a scientist and philosopher may well go back to an earlier period, and Philo may well have been motivated to challenge such views. Moreover, inasmuch as

mystery religions turned out to be particularly attractive during the Hellenistic period, Philo feels that it is his duty to explain that Jews did not have to go outside of Judaism to find a mystery cult and did not have to seek mystagogues, since they had the greatest of all, Moses, the most ancient of great religious leaders and the founder of the Jewish mystery cult. According to Goodenough (1935, 197) Moses thus bridged the gulf between mortal and immortal.

According to Josephus (*Ap.* 2.145), the first-century Apollonius Molon and Lysimachus maligned Moses as a charlatan and impostor, partly from ignorance, though mainly from ill will. Rather, says Josephus (*Ap.* 2.161), Moses is comparable to the Cretan lawgiver, Minos, and to later legislators, who attributed their laws to a god, whether Zeus or Apollo, either being convinced themselves of this as a fact or hoping thus to facilitate the acceptance of the laws. But as to who was the most successful legislator, this can be answered by comparing the laws themselves with those of others.

The repetition of the charge of superstition⁴ against Moses in Quintilian's younger contemporaries, Tacitus and Juvenal, is evidence that a new image of Moses, prompted by the conflicts between the Jews and the Roman emperors, starting with Tiberius, had established itself in this period. We must, however, reserve judgment, inasmuch as all three of these critics are rhetoricians or satirists and hence tend to exaggerate. That Philo was aware of such charges is evident in the introduction to his *Mos.* (1.2), where he states that he is writing his biography of Moses to refute those men of letters who have refused to treat him as worthy of memory.

In his attempt to raise the stature of Moses in the eyes of his audience Philo was confronted with a dual problem. On the one hand, the Bible seems to offer detractors considerable indications that Moses was really not so great a figure. As Silver 1982, 3–43, summarizes them: “Moses never devised a war plan or sat on a throne, or promulgated laws (he only reported what G-d told him); he had no mausoleum, founded no dynasty, left no important offspring; the Torah does not say Moses freed Israel, that he did miracles, or that he led the people in the desert (G-d is always the subject of those activities); Moses is not depicted as a self-reliant leader but as a man without freedom of judgment and action, a faithful courier who did only what he was told; he was only an agent, not a leader, ambassador, or principal; in *Exod.* 2:14–15 we read that Moses struck down an unsuspecting victim, hid his act, and fled in fright into the night; and Exodus reports no plan of Moses to return and help his people until G-d appeared to him in the bush.”

To these observations, which seem to diminish his stature, we may add that the one virtue of Moses that is singled out by the Bible (Num. 12:3), where he excelled all other people, namely humility, is not one that many or most in his non-Jewish audience would have viewed as a virtue. We need but recall what Aristotle (*EN* 4.3.1125a19–23) says: “The unduly humble man, being worthy of good things, robs himself of what he deserves, and seems to have something bad about him from the fact that he does not think himself worthy of good things, and seems also not to know himself; else he would have desired the things he was worthy of, since these are good.”

To answer the charges of those who had sought to disparage Moses, Philo, at the very beginning of his biography of Moses (*Mos.* 1.1–2), boldly asserts that he is seeking in his essay to bring the story of this man, greatest in all respects (τὰ πάντα μεγίστος) and most perfect (τελειότατος)⁵ of men, to the attention of learned (λόγιοι) Greeks.⁶ These superlatives—“greatest in all respects” and “most perfect”—definitely go beyond what we find in the Bible, which limits his superlative qualities to his being the humblest of men (Num. 12:3) and the greatest prophet that has arisen among the Israelites (Deut. 34:10). Philo even goes beyond the encomium that we find in Josephus (*A.J.* 4.328), who limits Moses’ greatness to his having surpassed in understanding (σύνεσις) all men who had ever lived and his having utilized his thoughts (νοηθεῖσιω) in the best (ἄριστα) possible way. Since, as Philo (*Mos.* 2.2) says, following Plato (*R.* 5.473D), the ideal state comes into being only where a king is a philosopher or a philosopher is king, Moses is the ideal ruler, inasmuch as he combines both the kingly and the philosophical in his single person. As the ideal philosopher-king (*Opif.* 2) he is the supreme philosopher in exploring his subject thoroughly, in refraining from stating abruptly what should be practiced or avoided, in preparing his subjects, who are to live under the laws of which he is the agent, and in refraining from devising myths invented by himself or in acquiescing in those composed by others.

Philo (*Mos.* 1.3), as we have noted, felt that he had to refute those Greek writers who had actually shown malice (βασκανία, “slander”) toward him. The fact that immediately after this statement Philo asserts that most of these authors have composed, whether in verse or prose, comedies and pieces of voluptuous license implies, though he does not say so directly or give specific examples, that they have attempted to ridicule Moses through these writings. We may see evidence of this malice in such remarks as that of Diodorus in the first century B.C.E. (*Bibliotheca Historica* 34–35.1.4), who sneers that Moses had ordained for the Jews their misanthropic and lawless customs. Josephus (*Ap.*

2.145) declares that Lysimachus and others, partly from ignorance and partly from ill will, had cast aspersions upon Moses and his code, maligning him as a charlatan (γόης, “juggler,” “cheat,” “sorcerer”) and an impostor (ἀπατεών, “cheat,” “rogue”). In particular, Apollonius Molon, the renowned and extremely influential rhetorician, who included Cicero and Caesar among his pupils,⁷ is reported by Josephus (*Ap.* 2.145) to have maligned Moses as a charlatan. Philo (*Hypoth.* 6.2) similarly refers to some people, though without naming them, who abused Moses as a charlatan (γόης) and a man-monkey (κέρκωψ). Philo sarcastically reduces these charges to absurdity: “Well, that was a fine kind of imposture and knavery which enabled him to bring the whole people in complete safety amid drought and hunger and ignorance of the way and lack of everything as well, as if they had abundance of everything and supplies obtainable from the neighboring nations, and further to keep them free from internal factions and above all obedient to himself.” Such Alexandrian non-Jewish writers as Manetho, Chaeremon, and Lysimachus, in their attack upon the Jews had focused, in particular, on denigrating the greatest Jewish leader, Moses, as a leader of polluted cripples and lepers (*Ap.* 1.260–66, 289–90, 305–11) and as one who had been expelled from Egypt because of his leprosy (*Ap.* 1.279). Even the first-century Pompeius Trogus (*ap. Justin, Hist. Phil.* 36, *Epitoma* 2:11–13), who praises Moses for his knowledge and handsomeness of person, declares that he was expelled, together with those Israelites who were diseased with scabies and leprosy, by the Egyptians, and that it was by stealth that he carried off the sacred vessels of the Egyptians.

As to Alexander Polyhistor’s extraordinary statement (*ap. Suda, s.v. Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μιλήσιος*) that the laws of the Hebrews had been composed by a Hebrew woman named Moso, on the surface this would seem to be an attempt to ridicule the lawgiver of the Jews.⁸ We may here suggest that perhaps Polyhistor or his source saw a similarity of sound between Moses and Musaeus, the teacher or pupil of the revered Orpheus,⁹ and Μῶσα (Doric for Μοῦσα, “muse,” a feminine noun) and hence drew the conclusion that Moses was feminine. Or he may have known the tradition that the great Roman king and lawgiver, Numa Pompilius, had received inspiration from the nymph Egeria. Or he may have been influenced by the tradition of the prophetic Sibyls. Or Polyhistor may have believed that divinely inspired men, like divinities, were bisexual, as we find in the case of such deities as Hermaphroditus and Dionysus.

The opponents of the Jews, according to Josephus, had apparently also reviled Moses as utterly unimportant (φαυλότατος) (*Ap.* 2.290). Braun (1938, 68) has pointed out the significance of the omission of Moses' name from the list of Oriental national heroes cited by Plutarch (*Is.* 24.360P), otherwise a relatively impartial authority (see Feldman 1996a, 529–52). In response to this attempt to belittle Moses, Josephus (*A.J.* 2.216) introduces a scene in which G-d Himself appears to Moses' father, Amram, predicting that a son will be born to him who will be remembered as long as the universe shall endure and not only among Hebrew men but also among foreigners.

And yet, despite attempts to denigrate Moses, we may see the importance of Moses in the writing of the third-century B.C.E. Egyptian priest Manetho. The fact that Manetho (*ap. Ap.* 1.250), himself an Egyptian priest, identifies Osarsiph, whom he refers to as the lawgiver of the Israelites, with Moses as a priest, even though the name seems more reminiscent of Joseph, shows how central Moses was to Manetho.¹⁰ The fact that he identifies Moses as a priest is a great compliment, since the priests in Egypt were said to possess esoteric knowledge; and Herodotus, for example, as he shows throughout the second book of his *Histories*, was very much impressed with this wisdom. We may conjecture that the basis of this tradition is the upbringing of Moses, according to the Bible, at the court of the Pharaoh, who was regarded as a god. Hence, it was readily assumed that Moses must have learned the esoteric lore of the Egyptians. In addition, he had sojourned with Jethro, the priest of Midian, whose daughter Zipporah he had married; and, furthermore, he himself was the brother of Aaron, the progenitor of the high priests among the Israelites. According to Manetho (*ap. Ap.* 1.238) it was the rebellious Israelites (rather than G-d) who appointed Osarsiph (Moses) as their leader.

It was Freudenthal (1874, 1.143–74) who contended that Artapanus, with his emphasis on the importance of Moses, influenced Second Temple Judaism greatly. He was convinced that legendary elements in the amplification of the personality of Moses became the basis for most, perhaps even all, later accounts of Moses both in the Diaspora and even in midrashic accounts in Palestine. Nevertheless, it would seem surprising, if this were the case, that Artapanus is mentioned nowhere by name, let alone quoted or paraphrased by Philo¹¹ or Josephus¹² or for that matter in any other source, whether pagan¹³ or Jewish, until he is quoted by the third-century Clement of Alexandria and the fourth-century Eusebius. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Philo or Josephus would have used as a model for rewriting the Bible a writer who

identifies Moses with the mythical Musaeus and who declared that Moses became the teacher of Orpheus (*ap. Eus. PE* 9.27.3–4), that he assigned cats, dogs, and ibises as gods (*ap. Eus. PE* 9.27.4), and that he was actually deemed worthy of divine honors by the priests and was called Hermes (*ap. Eus. PE* 9.27.6). Hence, it is difficult to adopt the view of Freudenthal and his followers, including, most recently, Lierman (2002, 12–13), that Artapanus enjoyed a wide readership and that it was his view of the centrality and exaltation of Moses in Judaism (and in the Jewish history of the world) that was widely endorsed.

Most scholars have concluded that Artapanus was a Jew,¹⁴ inasmuch as his portraits of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses are embellished, and inasmuch as Moses is exonerated in the slaying of the Egyptian, since it is presented as an act of self-defense; but it is hard to believe that a Jew, however liberal, could have said that Moses consecrated Egyptian deities, especially the worship of animals. It is also hard to believe that Artapanus, if he had been a Jew, would have modeled his Moses, as Tiede 1972, 153–67 (see Niehoff 2001, 72–73) postulates, in conspicuous details, on the most popular Egyptian hero, Sesotris. Holladay 1983, 193, and Barclay 1996, 132, suggest that perhaps his liberal attitude toward the Egyptian religion was more common than we realize and that he represented a popular Egyptianized Judaism; but we have no evidence that such an attitude was popular. Niehoff 2001, 73, contends that only a Jew would have claimed Graeco-Egyptian culture for the Jews; but Artapanus (*ap. Eus. PE* 9.27.3) portrays Moses not so much as a Jew as, in reality, an Egyptian by adoption. Moreover, there is no indication of Moses' Jewish education; and the emphasis is on his popularity among the Egyptians and on the Pharaoh's jealousy toward him. Indeed, we may suggest that the very fact that Artapanus entitled his book *Περὶ Ἰουδαίων* ("Concerning Jews") would seem to indicate that the author was not a Jew but an outsider.

We may see this elevation of the stature of Moses in his representation in the third-century murals of the synagogue at Dura-Europos (see Goodenough 1964, 10:119), where his figure is much larger than those that surround him. Indeed, as Goodenough (121) has suggested, his rod resembles that of a club and indicates that Moses is comparable to Heracles, who was known for his club; and scenes from Moses' life dominate the paintings in the synagogue (see Lierman 2002, 146–47), as they do in Philo's representation.

During the period that Philo lived there is every reason to believe that Jews welcomed converts to Judaism (Feldman 1993a, 288–341), as we see in

Philo's account (*Mos.* 2.25–27) of the origin of the LXX. To attract such converts the Jews needed a charismatic national hero, and that hero was Moses.

In sum, Moses is the one biblical figure who does seem to be well known to Greek and Roman intellectuals. His antiquity and his connection with Egypt gave him a definite prominence, though opinions about him differed. In Philo's effort to point out the virtues of Judaism, the personality of Moses was an important means to attract attention, to correct misapprehensions, and to impress potential proselytes.

2. The Antiquity of Moses

To establish the stature of a people, it was first of all necessary to establish its antiquity (Feldman 1993a, 177–200). As Josephus states, every nation attempts to trace its origin back to the remotest antiquity in order not to appear to be mere imitators of other peoples (*Ap.* 2.152). In his apologetic essay *Ap.* (1.7–8), Josephus stresses that the Greeks are relative newcomers to civilization, “dating, so to speak, from yesterday or the day before,” whereas in the foundation of cities, the invention of the arts, and the compilation of a code of laws they were anticipated by the Egyptians, the Chaldeans, the Phoenicians, and, above all, the Jews. One remembers how impressed Herodotus (2.142) was when the Egyptian priests showed him records covering 341 generations. One recalls the remark of the aged Egyptian priest to Solon, “You Greeks are always children; in Greece there is no such thing as an old man” (Plato, *Ti.* 22B). The Egyptian sneers at the genealogies of the Greeks, which, he says, are little better than nursery tales (Plato, *Ti.* 23B).

Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras (*Ap.* 1.162–65), Theophrastus (*Ap.* 1.166–67), and Aristotle (*Ap.* 1.176–82), historians such as Herodotus (*Ap.* 1.168–71), Hecataeus (*Ap.* 1.183–204), and Agatharchides (*Ap.* 1.205–12), poets such as Choerilus (*Ap.* 1.172–74), and many others cited only by name by Josephus (*Ap.* 1.216) establish the antiquity of the Jews and often express admiration for their wisdom and piety. Indeed, in the very first statement in the treatise *Ap.*, Josephus emphasizes that he had, in the *A.J.*, made clear the extreme antiquity of the Jewish people. The very title of the *A.J.*, Ἰουδαϊκὴ ἀρχαιολογία, literally “ancient lore,” underlines this. Furthermore, the title *Ap.* is not Josephus' own; and one of the titles in the manuscript, Περὶ ἀρχαιότητος Ἰουδαίων, *De Iudaeorum Vetustate*, emphasizes this theme.

Josephus himself says (*Ap.* 1.2–3) that his purpose in writing the treatise is to disprove those who discredit the statements in his previous historical work concerning the antiquity of the Jews and who claim that the Jews are relatively modern. It is significant that in the first four sections of the treatise Josephus uses the word ἀρχαιολογία three times (1.1, 2, 4) and the word ἀρχαιότης, likewise meaning “antiquity,” once (1.3).¹⁵

The earliest Greek philosophers to deal with celestial and divine phenomena, such as Pherecydes of Syros, Pythagoras, and Thales, are presented by Josephus as being, by universal agreement, disciples of the Egyptians and Chaldeans (*Ap.* 1.14). In Josephus’ version, the Egyptians turn out to be students of Abraham in mathematics and astronomy (*A.J.* 1.166–68), generally regarded as the most important of the sciences in ancient times (see Marrou 1956, 176–85). When Josephus wishes to emphasize the great wisdom of Solomon, he compares him with the Egyptians and says that even they, “who are said to excel all men in understanding, were not only, when compared with him, a little inferior but proved to fall far short of the king in sagacity” (*A.J.* 8.42). Josephus takes pains to stress that even such critics of the Jews as the Egyptian Manetho, as well as the Tyrian archives, Dios, Menander of Ephesus, and the Chaldean Berosus, bear witness to the antiquity of the Jews (*Ap.* 1.69–160).

The importance that the Romans attached to establishing their antiquity may be seen from the determined attempt of Virgil in his *Aen.* to trace the ancestry of the Romans back to the famed Trojans and specifically to Aeneas, who was said to be the son of Venus, the daughter of Jupiter. We may recall Livy’s famous comment in his preface (7) that if any nation deserves the privilege of claiming a divine ancestry, that nation is Rome.

When Hecataeus (*ap.* Diodorus 40.3.2) cites the leaders of those who were expelled from Egypt he refers to them as notable (ἀξιόλογοι, “worthy of mention,” “remarkable”) men, whereupon he names Moses, together with such famous Greek leaders as Danaus, the mythical king of Argos, after whom the inhabitants were called Danaoi, and Cadmus, the founder of Thebes and the person responsible for the introduction of the alphabet to Greece. To make Moses a contemporary of Danaus and Cadmus gives tremendous antiquity to Moses.

Consequently, we can understand why Josephus placed such stress, in his apologetics, on his claim that Moses was the most ancient legislator who ever lived (*Ap.* 2.154),¹⁶ next to whom such famous lawgivers as Lycurgus of

Sparta, Solon of Athens, and Zaleucus of Locris “appear to have been born yesterday,” whereas an infinity of time has passed since Moses (*Ap.* 2.279). It is significant that in a fiercely apologetic treatise, *Ap.*, Josephus sees no need to reply to a charge that Moses never lived. Indeed, his existence is never questioned by any ancient writer, Jewish or non-Jewish.

Moses’ reputation was further enhanced by Manetho’s dating of the Exodus (*ap. Ap.* 2.16) as occurring in the reign of Tethmosis, 393 years before the flight of Danaus to Argos. Inasmuch as Danaus was the son of Belus, who was said to be the son of Poseidon, this lent the great prestige of antiquity to him.

In view of the fact that the ancients placed such a premium upon antiquity, the statement of the first-century Ptolemy of Mendes (*ap. Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos* 38, and Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.21.101.5), an Egyptian priest who was the author of a chronicle of the Egyptian kings, is of importance. He states that the Exodus of the Israelites occurred under the leadership of Moses in the time of King Amosis, who lived in the time of King Inachus, the first king of Argos, who was said to have been the son of Oceanus (the son of Ge and Ouranos, the very first divinities) and Tethys (likewise the daughter of Ge and Ouranos). Thus Moses’ ancestry is traced back to the very beginning of creation. The statement that Moses lived at the time of Inachus is also found in Apion (*ap. Africanus, ap. Eus. PE* 10.10.16) and Tertullian, *Apol.* 19.3. According to Polemo of Ilium, who lived in the second century B.C.E., the Exodus occurred during the reign of Apis, the king of Argos, who was the son of Phoroneus, who was the son of Inachus. The fourth-century Porphyry (*Adversus Christianos, ap. Eus., Chronica, ap. Jerome, Chronica*, 7–8) assigns an even greater antiquity to Moses, since he says that Semiramis, who reigned 150 years before Inachus, lived after Moses; and it thus follows that Moses preceded the Trojan War by almost 850 years.

Lysimachus, who lived apparently in the second or first century B.C.E. (see Stern 1974, 1:382), has an account of the rise of the Israelites that seems to be independent of Manetho or Chaeremon or their sources.¹⁷ It is more anti-Jewish than any account that has come down to us, with the exception of that of Apion. Indeed, Josephus (*Ap.* 1.304) says that he surpasses Manetho and Chaeremon in the “incredibility of his fictions.” By placing the Exodus in the reign of the Pharaoh Bocchoris (*ap. Ap.* 1.305), a king of the twenty-fourth dynasty, that is, in the eighth century B.C.E.,¹⁸ Lysimachus no longer accords Moses the compliment of antiquity;¹⁹ but his is clearly a minority opinion.

Unlike Manetho, Apion (*ap. Josephus, Ap. 2.17*) dates the Exodus in the year 752 B.C.E., the first year of the seventh Olympiad and the year in which the Phoenicians founded Carthage, a much later date than that assigned by Manetho. Apion's date for the Exodus is thus in approximate accord with that assigned by Lysimachus.²⁰ This clearly contradicts the statement of Apion (*ap. Africanus, ap. Eus. PE 10.10.16*) that Moses lived at the time of Inachus. Apion is apparently getting his information here from different sources.

Like Eupolemus and Artapanus, the identity of Thallus, whether pagan, Hellenistic Jewish, or Samaritan, has been much debated (see Holladay 1983, 1:343–44). His date is probably somewhere between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. In view of the great regard that the ancients had for antiquity, the fact that Thallus (*ap. Theophilus, Ad Autohycum 3.29*) states that Moses is the most ancient of all writers, since he says that Moses antedates the capture of Troy (the traditional date for which is 1193 B.C.E.) by 900 to 1000 years, is a tremendous compliment, inasmuch as a much later date of approximately 1270 B.C.E. for the Exodus seems more likely (see Oded 1971, 6:1042–48). Elsewhere Thallus (*ap. Pseudo-Justin, Cobortatio ad Gentiles 9*) asserts that of all the Greek teachers, “whether sages, poets, historians, philosophers, or lawgivers, by far the oldest, as the Greek histories show us, was Moses.”

Thallus cites the evidence of Polemon, who lived in the second century B.C.E., in the first book of his *Hellenica*, and of Apion in his book against the Jews and in the fourth book of his history, where he says that during the reign of Inachus in Argos the Jews revolted from Amosis, the king of Egypt, and that Moses led them. Ptolemy of Mendes (*ap. Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos 38* and *ap. Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 1.21.101.5*), who lived before Apion, who cites him, likewise asserts that the Exodus occurred, under the leadership of Moses, in the time of King Amosis, who in turn lived in the time of King Inachus. Pseudo-Justin, *Cobortatio ad Gentiles 9*, whose date is thought to be the third century C.E., likewise attests to the antiquity of Moses in his statement that the historians Hellanicus, who lived in the fifth century B.C.E., Philochorus, who dates from the fourth to the third centuries B.C.E., Castor of Rhodes and Alexander Polyhistor, who lived in the first century B.C.E., “and, moreover, the very wise (σοφώτατοι) Philo and Josephus, the historians of the Jews, have mentioned Moses as a very ancient (σφόδρα ἀρχαῖος) and old (παλαιός) leader of the Jews.”²¹

Thus, the fact that Philo (*Mos. 1.5*) begins his biography of Moses with the statement that he was a Chaldean and that he was born and raised in

Egypt is his way of calling attention to the fact that Moses was thus associated with the two most ancient and most respected civilizations, those of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

In sum, Josephus establishes that many Greek philosophers and historians attest to the antiquity of the Jews. In particular, a number of writers attribute tremendous antiquity to Moses, some dating the Exodus back to long before the Trojan War. Consequently, Philo and Josephus can claim that Moses was the most ancient legislator who ever lived.

3. Philo's Audience in *De Vita Mosis*

In order to determine Philo's attitude toward Moses we must first address the important question as to whom he is addressing his comments in the most important essay dealing with Moses, *Mos*. Furthermore, if we could, we would want to distinguish between his intended audience and his actual audience. Quite clearly, as we can see from the contradictory views that he expresses in other essays about such figures as Joseph and Jethro, not all the treatises were addressed to the same audience. Some of Philo's works, however, are more intelligible when it is recognized that they were directed also or even primarily toward Gentiles, though admittedly it is usually impossible to determine whether Philo is interested in converting Gentiles or in merely explaining the Bible.²² Such treatises as *Contempl.* and *Prob.* are definitely addressed to Gentiles, as Nock 1933, 79, admits (the latter essay being, in substance, a popular Hellenistic diatribe), and as we can see from the approving reference in the latter treatise both to companions of "the Olympian gods" (42) and to "the legislator of the Jews" (43)—phrases one would hardly use in addressing Jews. We may add that the *Hypoth.* is apparently addressed to Gentiles, as it is probably meant to meet the hostile criticism of the Gentiles by giving a rationalistic version of Jewish history. Indeed, the opening sentence (6.1) in the first fragment that has come down to us states that "*Their* original ancestor belonged to the Chaldeans," where *their* must have been written by a Jew addressing a non-Jewish audience, since a Jew would have written *our*. The apologetic works *Flacc.* and *Legat.* likewise seem to have been addressed to Gentiles.

Probably intended for a non-Jewish audience are Philo's statements that Moses attained the summit of philosophy (*Opif.* 8), that the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus stole his theory of opposites from Moses (*QG* 4.152),

that Moses excelled the Greek philosophers in assigning the task of giving names not to some of the men of old but to the first man created (*Leg.* 2.15), and that Moses (like Socrates) was opposed to sophistry (*Det.* 38–39), though admittedly such statements would also have delighted Hellenized Jews.

Still, the theory that such treatises and statements were intended primarily for Jews who were on the threshold of apostasy seems less likely in view of the infrequency with which the issue of apostasy is mentioned explicitly by Philo (see Feldman 1993a, 79–83; Barclay 1996, 104–6). Indeed, Philo (*Virt.* 217) praises the example par excellence of the missionary, Abraham, as one whose voice was invested with persuasiveness and whose hearers were endowed with understanding by the Divine spirit. Sandmel 1979, 47, moreover, has suggested that if we conceive of the presence in Alexandria of Jews nearly on the verge of leaving the Jewish community, as did Philo's nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, with whom he has a dialogue in his *Prou.*, he may have had an obliquely related purpose to counter this threat.

There are some scholars, such as Tiede 1972, 107, who contend that Moses may be praised by Philo as much to encourage the cultured Jew who tends to be embarrassed by his tradition as to win respect from the non-Jew who has preconceived notions about Judaism. However, it would seem that *Mos.* is an apologetic treatise addressed primarily to non-Jews (Goodenough 1933, 109–25; 1940, 37–38),²³ or that it was addressed to wayward Jews who had imbibed Greek culture and who had raised questions about the Bible. If, indeed, it is addressed to non-Jews it seems to differ from Philo's other apologetic works—*Hypoth.*, *Flacc.*, and *Legat.*—in that, unlike them, *Mos.*, though it begins with a refutation of the misrepresentation of the Jews by non-Jewish writers, is not primarily concerned with refuting the charges of these writers. Rather, it appears to be an introduction to the ideals of Judaism as exemplified by Moses (Goodenough 1933, 109).

Nevertheless, Tcherikover 1956, 169–93, questions whether widespread Jewish literary propaganda among the pagans was technically possible, and he challenges the widespread views that the distribution of books in the ancient world was similar to that in modern times, that books were produced in large numbers of copies and were sold in thousands of shops and sent to distant countries, and that famous authors had their own “publishers” who profited from these sales. I have challenged Tcherikover on almost every basic point (Feldman 1987–88, 187–251). The fact is that by the middle of the first century not only public but also private libraries had become numerous (Kenyon

1951, 80–81). The fact that Pseudo-Longinus (*On the Sublime* 9.9) not only paraphrases Gen. 1:3 and 1:9–10 but cites it as an example of the most sublime style makes it unlikely, as we have noted, that the quotation would be utterly unknown to his readers. In addition, from the way that he refers to Moses without bothering to identify him by name, presumably because his readers knew who the “lawgiver of the Jews” was, we may gather that he was acquainted with much more from the Bible than this passage alone.

That *Mos.* was apparently directed primarily to non-Jews seems likely from the fact that at the very beginning of the treatise (1.1) Philo declares, as we have noted, that he hopes to bring the story of Moses to the attention of such as deserve not to remain in ignorance of it. Again, at the very beginning of the treatise (1.2) he complains that Greek authors have refused to treat Moses as worthy of memory, the implication being that Philo in this treatise is seeking to correct this; and he can do this only by directing his comments to the non-Jewish readers who have a distorted picture of Moses. In the second book of this treatise Philo (2.25–44) tells the story of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek even though this is, strictly speaking, not directly relevant to the account of the life of Moses. He does this in order to show that King Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt conceived an affection for the Jewish laws to the point that he sought to have a copy in the library that he was building. The implication is that other non-Jews would likewise find it of interest. Just as, according to Philo, the Arist. (9–11), and Josephus (*A.J.* 12.12–16), the Pentateuch was translated into Greek upon the order of a non-Jew, Ptolemy Philadelphus, so the *Mos.*, which tells the story of the translation, may have been intended for a non-Jewish audience; and just as the translation of the Pentateuch received recognition throughout the civilized world (*Mos.* 1.2), so Philo writes his essay in order that the hero of that work, Moses, who had hitherto been neglected, might receive due recognition (*ibid.*). The fact that this treatise presents a rewritten version of the Pentateuch, in this respect similar to Josephus’ *A.J.*, will explain the relatively straightforward narrative style, with few philosophical and allegorical interpretations, such as we find in most of Philo’s other works. It would seem, therefore, that *Mos.* is presented as a kind of official biography of by far the most important figure in Judaism, Moses, intended for the non-Jewish world in the hope, if not of actually winning it to convert to Judaism, at least of explaining to an intelligent and scientifically sophisticated audience, in a rational and credible fashion, the key events reported in the central book in Judaism, namely the Pentateuch.

Goodenough 1933, 109–25, has contended that *Mos.* served as the first presentation of the Jewish point of view to be given to Gentiles who showed genuine interest in the Jews but as yet knew little about them. This would seem to be borne out, as we have noted, by the extraordinary digression in *Mos.* 2.25–44 concerning the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, which, significantly enough, starts with the statement “That the sanctity of our legislation has been a source of wonder not only to the Jews but also to *all other nations* [my emphasis], is clear both from the facts already mentioned and those which I proceed to state.” The key point of this passage is the statement (*Mos.* 2.41) that every year a feast and general assembly are held on the island of Pharos, “whither not only Jews but *multitudes of others* [my emphasis] cross the water, both to do honor to the place in which the light of that version first shone out, and also to thank G-d for the good gift so old, yet ever young.” The pericope ends with a call to the Gentiles for conversion to Judaism (*Mos.* 2.44): “But if a fresh start should be made to brighter prospects, how great a change for the better might we expect to see! I believe that each nation would abandon its peculiar ways, and bidding farewell to their ancestral customs, turn to honoring our laws alone. For when the brightness of their shining is accompanied by national prosperity, *it will darken the light of the others* [my emphasis] as the risen sun darkens the stars.” This can refer only to the hope of mass conversion to Judaism, even if there is no indication of actual missionary activities. Fischer 1978, 186, says that Philo is here speaking of a spiritual and universal eschatology rather than a national Jewish eschatology, but, as Borgen 1992, 346, n. 7, concludes, the passage indicates that all nations will become proselytes. We would call attention to Philo’s language, namely, that all nations will bid farewell to their ancestral customs and adopt Jewish laws alone. This indicates a metamorphosis, a mass conversion to Judaism.

It is significant that in an essay on the life of Moses, Philo (*Mos.* 2.12–14) digresses to compare the laws promulgated by Moses with *all* the other laws that have ever arisen among the Greeks and barbarians in *all* other countries. He makes a special point of noting that the laws of the Jews alone are “firm, unshaken, immovable, stamped, as it were, with the seals of nature itself.” This is an indication that he is addressing a non-Jewish audience, who are, in effect, invited to compare their laws with those of the Jews. As if to answer those who would disparage the Pentateuch, he admits (*Mos.* 2.15) that the Jewish people have undergone many changes, both increased prosperity and the reverse, yet “nothing—not even the smallest part of the ordinances—has

been disturbed, because *all* have clearly paid high honor to their venerable and godlike character.”

That Philo is directing his remarks to non-Jews seems evident from his statement (*Mos.* 2.43) that “the laws of the Jews are shown to be desirable and precious in the eyes of *all*, ordinary citizens and rulers alike, and this despite the fact that our nation has not prospered for many years.” The fact that he says that rulers praise the laws must refer to non-Jewish rulers, and consequently the reference to ordinary citizens must be to non-Jews as well.

It is striking that in a biography of Moses Philo sees fit to include at some length an account of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, which, strictly speaking, as we have noted, is really only tangential. This is still another indication that he is directing his essay to non-Jews, since it includes his statement (*Mos.* 2.27) that some people—a clear reference to Ptolemy Philadelphus—thought that it was a shame that the laws should be found in only one-half of the human race, the barbarians—that is, the Jews—and denied to the other half, that is, the Greeks, and consequently arranged to have it translated into Greek. Although Philo’s account of the translation is clearly dependent upon that in the *Arist.*, his addition about the annual celebration of the translation on the island of Pharos surely underlines the fact that non-Jews regularly participate in this celebration. Indeed, in his account of the translation, Philo (*Mos.* 2.36) makes a point of adding that the translators prayed that G-d assist their aim, namely that the greater part, or even the whole, of the human race—another indication that Philo has non-Jews in mind—might be led to a better life through adopting the laws in the Pentateuch. It is significant that *to Philo* the reason for the translation was not, as many modern scholars postulate, that the Jews of Alexandria lacked the knowledge to understand the Pentateuch in the original Hebrew, but rather that it should be made known to all nations so that they might be converted to Judaism, although, in point of fact it might have served both purposes (see Borgen 1997, 140–44).

Furthermore, though this is an *argumentum ex silentio*, we may suggest that if the *Mos.* had been written for wayward Jews, Philo would have inserted a comment, such as his unusual interpretation (*Spec.* 4.149) of the biblical prohibition (Deut. 19:14) against removing one’s neighbor’s landmark that one’s forefathers have erected, namely that this applies not only to boundaries of land but also to the safeguarding of ancient customs. Or we would have expected him to criticize such wayward Jews as he does extreme literalists

(*Somm.* 2.301, *Cher.* 42, *Conf.* 2, 9–10, *Deus* 21, 52, *Virt.* 10, *Mut.* 61) and extreme allegorists (*Migr.* 89, 91; *Post.* 42, *Migr.* 90, 93). Or we should have expected him to criticize such wayward Jews as he does those who rebel from the holy laws (*Virt.* 182, *Praem.* 152) or who intermarry (*Spec.* 3.29). Moreover, if *Mos.* were directed toward Jews we would expect it to comment on contemporary issues and events, particularly anti-Semitism and the relationship with the non-Jewish community.

In sum, *Mos.* is best seen as an official biography of Moses, primarily addressed to non-Jews, as we see from the very beginning of the treatise, where Philo says that he hopes to bring the story of Moses to the attention of those who deserve not to remain in ignorance of it. The fact that it includes an extraordinary digression concerning the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, with the striking call to Gentiles to give up their ancestral customs and to turn to the laws of the Jews, is an important clue to one of the purposes of the treatise.

4. Philo's Life of Moses as an Aretalogy and as an Encomium

Moses Hadas and Morton Smith (1965) have discussed the genre of ancient biographical writing called aretalogy,²⁴ which praises a hero's virtues and excellence. Hadas 1965, 3, who is the author of the first part of this volume, defines "aretalogy" as "a formal account of the remarkable career of an impressive teacher that was used as a basis for moral instruction." Examples may be found in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Najman 2003, 90–91, calls attention to three notable characteristics of aretalogies: the hero's education is depicted as including travel and initiation into mysteries, notably those of Egypt; he is outstanding for his treatment of others and his formulation of a code of behavior; and he is portrayed as so superior to ordinary humans that he is practically divine. All of these are found in the case of Philo's *Mos.* To be sure, Moses does not actually travel abroad, but he has teachers who come from other lands to instruct him. We would add a fourth characteristic, namely, that the sole focus of the biography is on the hero; and a fifth characteristic, namely, that the perfect copy of the Law of Nature is to be found in the life of the sage. Indeed, the focus in Philo's *Mos.* is solely on Moses; his father and mother are referred to merely as "father" and "mother" and never identified