



Philo, On Abraham 209-216

Abraham's exemplary attitude toward Lot: an implicit criticism of Roman conquests?

Name of the author: Philo of Alexandria

Date: 41 CE to 50 CE

Place: Alexandria

Language: Greek

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Biography and Rewritten Bible

Title of work: On Abraham

Reference: 209-216

Source(s) that the text is built upon (explicitly – quotations, references – or implicitly): Genesis 13:1-10

Commentary:

(For a short introduction to Philo, his family and their connections with Rome, see **Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 8-10.**)

The treatise *On Abraham* is part of Philo's *Exposition of the Law*, a series containing "a treatise on the creation, three extant Lives of biblical patriarchs, four books on Mosaic law, and two concluding treatises on virtues and rewards and punishments," which Maren Niehoff considers as having been composed after Philo's embassy to Rome (Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, p. 7-8). As the title indicates, it centers on the figure of Abraham. However, the treatise begins with a preliminary reflection on biblical characters that preceded Abraham, led exemplary lives and embodied certain virtues: Enosh, Enoch and Noah (§§7-47). Then Philo briefly explains what Abraham, Isaac and Jacob stand for: virtue reached either through study, or naturally, or through training (*ask?sis*) (§§48-59). Philo also emphasizes that in contrast to Adam and Noah, from whom flawed humans were born, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the ancestors of the holy people who "sees God" (§§56-57). The section dealing with Abraham alone (§§60-276) is divided into two parts, corresponding to Abraham's relationship with God (§§60-207) and human beings (§§208-261), respectively, followed by a conclusion (§§262-276). In each of the two parts, Philo comments on various episodes of Abraham's life as told in Genesis, at both the literal and allegorical levels. These two parts illustrate the patriarch's exceptional piety (*eusebeia*) and humanity (*philanthr?pia*), two cardinal virtues in Philo's writings (on the importance for Philo of highlighting the humane behavior of the patriarchs and the benevolent nature of the Mosaic Law, especially in view of Apion's attacks against the Jews, see **Philo, On Virtues 106-108**; Berthelot, *Philanthr?pia judaica*, p. 252-300).

The passage under study is located at the very beginning of the section dealing with Abraham's relationships with fellow human beings, which Philo describes in §208 as characterized by *philanthr?pia*. The first example of Abraham's exemplary behavior in dealing with others is based on Genesis 13, the story of the dispute between Abraham's shepherds and those of his nephew, Lot. According to the biblical narrative, Abraham left Egypt extremely wealthy, having received many gifts from Pharaoh (Gen 13:1-2, and 12:16). Both he and his nephew had big herds, and their shepherds had to find pastureland for their cattle. The scarcity of resources led to tensions and a fight between the shepherds (Gen 13:6-7). Therefore Abraham decided to part from Lot, and let him choose the region he wanted to settle in, saying: "Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left" (Gen 13:9, NRSV). Lot chose the Jordan valley, which is described as having been extremely fertile at that time (Gen 13:10).

While commenting on this biblical narrative, Philo adds a few details that have great relevance. He indicates that Abraham had a larger number of men than Lot, and could have imposed his will on his nephew by force (§215). Insofar as Abraham was the stronger partner, it would have been logical for him to seize the best and most fertile lands, rather than giving them up to Lot. Abraham is thus characterized by his reluctance to exert his military power in order to get the best lands. Philo argues that the Hebrew patriarch is free of greediness (*pleonexia*), that is, free of any desire for self-aggrandizement. Elsewhere in his work, Philo describes Israel as sharing this characteristic with Abraham. In *On the Life of Moses* I.307, while retelling the biblical story of Israel's war with the Midianites (Numbers 25), he writes: "The contest before you is not to win dominion (*arch?*), nor to appropriate the possessions of others, which is the sole or principal object of other wars, but to defend piety (*eusebeia*) and holiness (*hosiot?s*), from which our kinsfolk and friends have been perverted by the enemies who have indirectly caused their victims to perish miserably" (translation by F. H. Colson, LCL, p. 437). Philo suggests that wars waged for the sake of



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Thematic keywords in English:

- Abraham
- benevolence
- greediness
- herd
- humility
- local conflict
- Lot
- military power
- military strength
- Pax Romana
- peace
- Roman conquests
- Roman peace
- Roman power
- self-aggrandizement
- shepherds
- virtue
- wealth

Bibliographical references: Barclay, John M. G., *Flavius Josephus. Translation and Commentary. Volume 10. Against Apion* (dir. Steve Mason; translation and commentary John M.G. Barclay; Leiden : Brill, 2007)

Berthelot, Katell, *Philanthrôpia Judaica: le débat autour de la "misanthropie" des lois juives dans l'Antiquité* (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

Cornwell, Hannah, *Pax and the Politics of Peace: Republic to Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

Scott, James C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 8-10

Description of the empire at the time Caligula became emperor

- Read more about Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 8-10

Text

Philo, *On Virtues* 105-108

The humanity of the Mosaic law toward resident aliens

- Read more about Philo, *On Virtues* 105-108

Inscription

Res Gestae Divi Augusti, chapter 13

See Augustus, *Res Gestae divi Augusti* (General Background) for the historical context of the *Res Gestae*.

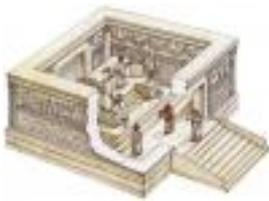


- [Read more about Res Gestae Divi Augusti, chapter 13](#)

Architecture

Ara Pacis (13-9 BCE)_Architecture

Reconstruction of the Ara Pacis



[Ara Pacis: frontal view](#)



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