



[Philo, On Planting 66-68](#)

The instability of wealth and power

Name of the author: Philo of Alexandria

Date: 20 CE to 50 CE

Place: Alexandria

Language: Greek

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Commentary

Title of work: On Planting

Reference: 66-68

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 Plantation* belongs to a series composed of four books, together with *On Agriculture*, *On Drunkenness*, and *On Sobriety*. These volumes are part of the *Allegorical Commentary* (of Genesis), which Maren Niehoff dates to the period prior to Philo's embassy to Rome (Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, p. 7-8). *On Plantation* is part of Philo's allegorical interpretation of Genesis 9:20-21, "Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent" (trans. NRSV). Philo's main idea in this treatise is that God the Creator is the supreme Planter, whereas human beings merely received God's creation from Him.

In the passage under consideration here, Philo is in fact commenting on Deuteronomy 10:9, "Therefore Levi has no allotment or inheritance with his kindred; the Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God promised him". In the Bible, the Levites have no share in the Land of Israel, and must live from the tithes and offerings that the Israelites give to God. Instead of land, they thus have God as their "inheritance" or "portion" (*naʿalah* in Hebrew, *kl̥ros* in Greek). The Levites become for Philo the embodiment of the sage, who disregards the earthly goods in order to seek wisdom exclusively (§§64-65). Then comes the conclusion in §66 that only those "who are not eager to be rich in created things, but who despise all created things in comparison of the intimate relationship with the Uncreated (God)" can be deemed wise. True wealth lies in a person's intimate relationship or kinship (*oikeiot?s*) with God.

Philo then formulates a general criticism against those who boast over their earthly power, be it established over a single city, territory or people, or over the whole world, "to its furthest borders," on land as well as on sea (§67). The reference to Greek and barbarian peoples is a way to refer to humankind as a whole. Philo has in mind a universal hegemony. Although his statement is general and can be interpreted as referring to different empires that had existed in the past, such as the dominion of Alexander the Great, it seems more likely that he is alluding to Rome's *imperium*.

Philo knew very well that the Romans' dominion was not truly universal, being limited in the north by the German peoples, and in the east by the Parthian kingdom (see his remarks in [Legat. 8-10](#)). Yet he was also aware of the Romans' claims to have achieved universal rule like no other previous empire. At the very beginning of the *Res Gestae*, Augustus declared that he had submitted the world (*orbis terrarum*) to the *imperium* of the Roman people (Cooley, *Res gestae divi Augusti*, p. 58). Ovid significantly wrote: "The land of other nations has a fixed boundary, [whereas] the territory of Rome is identically that of the City and that of the world (*Romanae spatium est Urbis et orbis idem*)" (*Fasti* 2.684, my translation). Dionysius of Halicarnassus compared the empires of the past to the Roman one and claimed that the latter's geographical extent had far surpassed the achievements of its predecessors (*Roman Antiquities* 1.2.1). He concluded that "Rome rules every country that is not inaccessible or uninhabited, and she is mistress of every sea, not only of that which lies inside the Pillars of Hercules but also of the Ocean, except that part of it which is not navigable; she is the first and the only State recorded in all time that ever made the risings and the settings of the sun the boundaries of her dominion" (*Roman Antiquities* 1.3.3-4; translation by Earnest Cary, LCL, p. 11). The image of an empire extending from the rising to the setting of the sun is in fact an ancient motif, going back to the Achaemenid empire and even to Neo-Assyrian propaganda (Pairman Brown, *Israel and Hellas. Vol. III*, p. 75). The exceptional character of the Romans' claim to universal rule lay not so much in the claim itself as in the wide recognition by provincials that it was in fact more accurate in the case of the Romans than in those of previous empires.



Philo was aware of these Roman or pro-Roman discourses, and the use of the notion of victory and rule “over land and sea” to refer to Rome’s hegemony (see the commentary on [Legat. 8-10](#)). It is with this notion of dominion over land and sea in mind that he argues that even if a worldly power could claim to have conquered the heavenly realm (thereby mastering three realms instead of two: earth, sea, and air), they would nevertheless be inferior to the people who have God as their inheritance (§68). By the latter he means not merely the Levites, but Israel, defined as the people who sees God (on “Israel” and “the Jews” in Philo’s work, see Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought*). Israel’s kingship, Philo claims, is infinitely superior to the *imperium* of the Romans, which is limited to earthly realities and does not give access to the divine realm.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [barbarian](#)
- [city](#)
- [dominion](#)
- [God](#)
- [Greek](#)
- [happiness](#)
- [kingship](#)
- [kinship](#)
- [land](#)
- [oikoumenè](#)
- [people](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [sea](#)
- [universalism](#)
- [wealth](#)
- [wisdom](#)

Bibliographical references: Birnbaum, Ellen, [The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes](#) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996)

Cooley, Alison E., [Res gestae divi Augusti: Text, Translation and Commentary](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)



Niehoff, Maren, [*Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press)

Pairman Brown, John, [*Israel and Hellas. Vol. III, The Legacy of Iranian Imperialism and the Individual*](#) (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2001)

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[Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 8-10](#)

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Text

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Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42c \(part two\)](#)

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