

# Mystical Love in Philo of Alexandria

Stephan Hecht\*

---

**ABSTRACT** • Philo of Alexandria is one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the ancient world rediscovered by scholarship for his role in shaping early Christian and patristic thought in the past 30 years. In this article, I try to elaborate on his concept of mystical love by illuminating three areas where love reveals itself in his allegorical interpretations of the Tora. Starting with natural love and anthropological considerations, I will show how a negative concept of love expressed in yearning of the individual for his archetype can be transformed into the experience of mystical love by right opinion and knowledge of God, motivating authentic ethical conduct and revealing the human soul as a temple for the divine. As I will show at the end, Philo identifies himself as a mystical theorist whose own mystical experiences must be read as the background to his understanding of love.

**KEYWORDS** • Philo of Alexandria, Mysticism, Love

---

## Introduction

Philo of Alexandria is probably one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the ancient world, leading Chadwick to the famous dictum that the history of Christian philosophy did not begin “with a Christian but with a Jew, Philo of Alexandria, elder contemporary of St. Paul”<sup>1</sup>. We know unfortunately little about his life, yet some recent studies such as Niehoff’s *Philo of Alexandria. An intellectual Biography*<sup>2</sup> try to shed light on his

\* Fordham University & Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München.  
E-mail: stephanhecht1@gmx. de

<sup>1</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Philo*, in: Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 137. For the influence of Philo of Alexandria for biblical theology and patristic literature see amongst others: David Runia, *Philo in early Christian Literature. A survey* (Minneapolis: Van Gorcum; Fortress Press, 1993); David Runia, *Philo and the church fathers: a collection of papers* (Brill: Leiden, New York, 1995); For further literature see: David Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: an annotated bibliography 1997–2006 with addenda for 1987–1996* (Brill: Boston/Leiden, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Maren Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria. An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2018). See also my review in: Stephan Hecht, “Philo of Alexan-

Ciceronian and Platonic influences and step into older footsteps walked already by scholars such as Wilamowitz, for whom Philo is a *hellenised* Jew trying to defend his Judaism against the Greeks,<sup>3</sup> or Leisegang, for whom Philo was primarily a Greek Philosopher, who saw Judaism with Greek eyes.<sup>4</sup> What we know is that Philo was approximately born between 13BC and 44AD. As a member of one of the most prestigious families of the ancient metropolis of Alexandria, he led an embassy to Emperor Caligula after struggles between the Jewish and Greek population. Flavius Josephus refers in his *Antiquitates Iudaicae* to this event, calling Philo “a man held in the highest honour”<sup>5</sup>. Today, the Alexandrian scholar is known less for being the brother of Alexander—a stepson of Agrippa I and a high financial officer who sponsored the golden fittings for the Herodian Temple—than for writing several volumes of allegorical commentaries on the Torah, reading the texts as if they contained deeper wisdom about the life of the soul. As I have suggested in my doctoral dissertation about Plato’s “inner man”<sup>6</sup>, I would like to introduce Philo foremost against the backdrop of his Jewish spirituality, following authors such as Daniélou or Wolfson<sup>7</sup>. Such a *spiritual turn*, as I have suggested, aims to take the authors’ spiritual background seriously. It is open to autobiographical hints that might reveal such a background and might have shaped philosophical thought rather than fixing on one philosophical school and trying to force him into categories that are foremost governed by our modern understanding of Philosophy and less

dria. An Intellectual Biography” (Review), *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 113 (2018), 273–275; answered by Niehoff in: *Journal of Ancient Christianity* 24 (2021), 606–631.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wilamowitz in: Leopold Cohn et. al. (ed.), *Philo von Alexandrien. Die Werke in deutscher Übersetzung*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1962<sup>2</sup>), 219.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hans Leisegang, *Heilige Geist. Das Wesen und Werden der mystisch-intuitiven Erkenntnis in der Philosophie und Religion der Griechen*, Band 1/1: *Die vorchristlichen Anschauungen und Lehren vom Pneuma und der mystisch-intuitiven Erkenntnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, XVIII, 1. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stephan Hecht, *Der “innere Mensch”. Begriff und Ursprung christlich-platonischer Subjektivität* (Freiburg: Alber, 2021), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Philon d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Libr. Arthème Fayard, 1958), 20: “Philon apparaît ainsi comme un bon prédicateur”; For Wolfson see: Leisegang Hans, *Allegorische Erklärung des heiligen Gesetzbuches*, in: Leopold Cohn et. al. (eds.) : *Philo von Alexandrien. Die Werke in deutscher Übersetzung*, Nachdruck der Auflage Breslau 1919, Vol. III (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1962<sup>2</sup>), 3.

by an overall concept of Philosophy as the *love of wisdom*. What can Philo as a “*Mystical Theorist*”<sup>8</sup> then contribute to the concept of love?

## The Concept of Love in Philo of Alexandria

Since Philo provides allegorical interpretations on the Torah that are highly situational, I wish to avoid creating a *philonic system*. It is, therefore, my aim to invite the reader into three areas where in my assessment, love plays a role and reveals itself. The first: The human being as *natural lover*.

### *The human being as natural lover*

Understanding human beings as *natural lovers* requires a closer look at Philo’s anthropology. The reader of *De Opificio Mundi* thus finds the attempt of Philo to harmonize both creational accounts of Genesis. What is central is Philo’s claim of a double creation, which he concludes from his literal understanding of “day one” (ἡμέρα μία) in Gen. 1:3–5:

„Now to each of the days He assigned some of the portions of the whole, not including, however, the first day, which He does not even call ‘first’, lest it should be reckoned with the others, but naming it ‘one’ He designates it by name which precisely hits the mark, for He discerned in it and expressed by the title which He gives it the nature and appellation of the unit, or the ‘one’. [...] For God, being God, assumed that a beautiful copy would never be produced apart from a beautiful pattern, and that no object of perception would be faultless which was not made in the likeness of an original discerned only by the intellect. So when He willed to create this visible world He first fully formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern wholly God-like and incorporeal in producing the material world, as a later creation, the very image of an earlier, to embrace in itself objects of perception of as many kinds as the other contained objects of intelligence.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> David Winston, “Was Philo a Mystic?”, in: *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan/Frank Talmage (Cambridge Mass: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Opif. III,15–IV16.

Like an architect who has all the plans in his mind, so God has drafted an intelligible cosmos at the first day.<sup>10</sup> God is, thereby, radically transcendent.<sup>11</sup> He is incomprehensible. Any attribution is only a periphrasis (κατάχρησις),<sup>12</sup> whereby God's immutability,<sup>13</sup> his goodness<sup>14</sup> and simplicity<sup>15</sup>, his immateriality<sup>16</sup> or eternity<sup>17</sup> can be derived from the Torah. What is important is that Philo does not interpret creation chronologically. This means that with the first moment of creation, the entire reality is already present in an intelligible and perfect state. In contrast to Plato, every individual entity has its perfect archetype.<sup>18</sup> This counts also for mankind. According to both creational accounts, one must differentiate between the creation of an intelli-

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 24–25: “Should a man desire to use words in a more simple and direct way, he would say that the world discerned only by the intellect is nothing else than the Word of God (τοῦ ἀρχιτέκτονος λογισμός), when He was already engaged in the act of creation. For (to revert to our illustration) the city discernible by the intellect alone is nothing else than the reasoning faculty of the architect in the act of planning to found the city.” One must not underestimate the influence of the *Timaios* here. A link between Philo and Plato might have existed via Eudorus and Arius Didymus. Remarkable is their stress on transcendence. “Jewish interpreters must have found such speculation very attractive. The fact that such speculation once again emphasized the transcendence of the supreme deity must have come as welcome alternative to the prevailing Stoic monism” (Thomas Tobin, *The creation of man: Philo and the history of interpretation* [Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, Washington 1983], p18). Philo introduces himself thereby as a “catalyst of Middle Platonic thought” (Roberto Radice, “Observations on the theory of the ideas as the thoughts of God in Philo of Alexandria”, in: *Studia Philonica Annual. Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, Vol. 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta Ga. 1991), 133. More accurate: “Yet this movement seems also partly to develop in a dialectics between the properly Platonic cosmo-theological theory of the three principles (Ideas, Demiurge, matter) and the originally Philonic theory of the two principles (God and matter), in search of a metaphysically satisfying compromise” (Ibid. 133).

<sup>11</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Philon d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Libr. Arthème Fayard, 1958), 134–135.

<sup>12</sup> Mut. II, 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Plant. XXI, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mut. II, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ibid. I. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ibid. XXIV, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Decal. XIV, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hans Leisegang, *Heilige Geist. Das Wesen und Werden der mystisch-intuitiven Erkenntnis in der Philosophie und Religion der Griechen*, Band 1/1: *Die vorchristlichen Anschauungen und Lehren vom Pneuma und der mystisch-intuitiven Erkenntnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), 77.

gible, true and heavenly man and the creation of an earthly man, that is imperfect and taken from dust.

“After this he says that ‘God formed man by taking clay from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life’ (Gen. II, 7). By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God: for the man so formed is an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such or such quality, consisting of body and soul, man or woman, by nature mortal; while he that was after the (Divine) image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought (only) incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.”<sup>19</sup>

However, it is only in his interpretation of the creational accounts where Philo differentiates so clearly between an earthly and a heavenly man. “In Philo’s understanding the two types of man intersect and overlap, as do the accounts of their creation.”<sup>20</sup> It is therefore no wonder that the heavenly man is in some passages identified as a distanced prototype, in others located in the human being, identified as Adam, as a wise man, as a prophet, as conscience or as human mind. It is important to understand that it is only this prototype, the heavenly man or better: the idea of the individual human being that is created *after* the image of God. The true image of God who is for Philo radically transcendent, is the Logos, the ruler of the universe. Philo derives this from the literal wording of Gen. 1,27 where one reads that man was created “after the image” (κατ’εἰκόνα θεοῦ). Leaving this literal interpretation aside, one can say that Philo follows from these accounts a double perspective on human existence. One that wants to see it under the rubric of its perfection, i. e. the heavenly man, and the other under its fragility, i. e. the earthly man. As our human existence, both intermingle. Therefore, it is no wonder that Philo identifies this heavenly man in most of the passages he interprets as our reason, or better νοῦς, as the Greek term for an intuitive concept that is capable to understand the truth of this world as wisdom.<sup>21</sup> Following this line, one can now try to answer what Philo might have to say

<sup>19</sup> Opif. XLVI, 134.

<sup>20</sup> George van Kooten, *Paul’s anthropology in context: the image of God, assimilation to God, and tripartite man in ancient Judaism, ancient philosophy and early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 64.

<sup>21</sup> For the concept of νοῦς in Plato as paradigm for other usages in Ancient Philosophy, see: Gerhard Jäger, “Nus” in *Platons Dialogen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

on the human being as *natural lover*. I would like to suggest that it is a rather *negative* concept that the reader encounters in these passages on Genesis. Love foremost reveals itself as *an awareness or experience of what is missing*.<sup>22</sup> Interpreting the creation of Eve in Gen. 2,18 as a description of the most natural love relationship, Philo speaks of the “yearning” (Greek: ἐφίεται) or “longing” of the heavenly man, the νοῦς, reason.

“For the man made after the Image it is not good to be alone, because he yearns after the Image. For the image of God is a pattern of which copies are made, and every copy longs for that of which it is a copy, and its station is at its side.”<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, the earthly man, the mind that is intermingled with the body and fragile, receives Eve as sensation. The passage goes on:

“Far less is it good for the man moulded of the earth to be alone. Nay, it is impossible. For with the mind so formed, linked to it in closest fellowship, are senses, passions, vices, ten thousand other presences.”<sup>24</sup>

It is this idea Philo applies to explain the unfulfillment of this longing. Let us turn therefore to the fall of mankind in Gen 3. With the earthly mind bound to sense perception, the danger for corruption becomes imminent. Consequently, Philo identifies the fall of man through the serpent as the arousal of pleasures that have access to the mind via sense perception, in other words: via Eve. “The movement of pleasure” as Philo says, is “like that of the serpent is tortuous and variable”<sup>25</sup> and “pleasure outwits and misleads the mind, showing objects not as they are, but as they are not”<sup>26</sup> keeping the true human self, the heavenly man, trapped in “longing” and “yearning” of his fulfilment. It is this context in which a tyrannical form of the Eros appears that tortures the soul.

<sup>22</sup> In reference to a famous discussion with Jürgen Habermas. See: Jürgen Habermas/ Michael Reder: *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt: eine Diskussion mit Jürgen Habermas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), English translation: Jürgen Habermas, *An awareness of what is missing: faith and reason in a post-secular age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Leg. II, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Leg. II, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Leg. II, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Leg. III, 64.

„But none of the passions is so troublesome as covetousness or desire of what we have not, things which seem good, though they are not truly good. Such desire breeds fierce and endless yearnings (ἀνηνύτους ἔρωτας); it urges and drives the soul ever so far into the boundless distance while the object of the chase often flies insolently before it, with its face not its back turned to the pursuer.”<sup>27</sup>

This quotation naturally leads to the second dimension of Love in Philo of Alexandria: Love and knowledge.

### Love and knowledge

One needs to keep in mind that Philo is anything but a Manichean or a Gnostic. Speaking of this rather *negative concept of love* as inscribed in human nature is neither the consequence of a punishment nor a negative view of the bodily existence of mankind. The earthly and bodily existence is the overall object of God’s creation, and as he explains at another passage, this condition serves God to reveal himself as the only one upon the whole creation ultimately rests, as Zeller suggests.<sup>28</sup> Speaking about the dependence upon God, one finds the key to turn this *negative concept* into a positive and foremost *mystical concept*. The heavenly man, the νοῦς, thus is able to fulfil this “longing” with the right knowledge about our reality, since “drunkenness, we saw, does not only signify folly, which is the work of this rejection of discipline, but it also signifies complete insensibility. In the body this is produced by wine, but in the soul by ignorance of things of which we should naturally have acquired knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> In *De Ebrietate*, Philo then introduces his readers to the content of this ignorance:

“In the first of these utterances he asserts that there is no God; in the second that even if there is a God he is not known to us, and this conclusion presupposes the assumption that there is no divine providence. For if there were such a thing as providence, God too would be known.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Spec. IV, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Eduard Zeller: *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung: drei Teile, jeder Teil in zwei Abteilungen*. 2. Teil; 1. Abteilung. *Sokrates und die Sokrater: Plato und die alte Akademie* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1963<sup>6</sup>), III, 73. Ann. 2; See also: Her. 315f.

<sup>29</sup> Ebr. XXXVIII, 154.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. VI, 19.

Man needs therefore choose between two general opinions:

„one which ascribes all things to the mind (nous) as our master, whether we are using our reason or our senses, in motion or at rest, the other which follows God, whose handiwork it believes itself to be.”<sup>31</sup>

Philo thinks that “longing for knowledge is ingrained in all people.”<sup>32</sup> It is therefore all about a purification of wrong opinions, that frees the mind which naturally “is all receptive and resembles wax that receives all impressions fair and ugly”<sup>33</sup>. The right disposition of the mind is therefore crucial:

“But they who live in the knowledge of the one are rightly called ‘Sons of God’, as Moses also acknowledges when he says, ‘Ye are sons of the Lord God’ (Deut. xiv. 1), and ‘God who begot thee’ and ‘Is not he himself thy father?’ Indeed with those whose soul is thus disposed it follows that they hold moral beauty to be the only good, and this serves a counterwork engineered by veteran warriors to fight the cause which makes pleasure the end and to subvert an overthrow it.”<sup>34</sup>

Philo seems to address a kind of *intellectual arrogance* or *pride* which is for him nothing but the normative consequence of a mind that is *longing* for truth but has forgotten the true cause of the universe and is drunken with the immediate reality that one perceives as truth without any further questioning, following “the instability and waywardness of opinion (...) based on likelihoods and plausibilities”<sup>35</sup>. It is all about recognizing one’s own status as a creature like Adam “that is the Mind, though he names and apprehends other things, gives no name to himself, since he is ignorant of himself and his own nature.”<sup>36</sup> But what is the role of revelation then? Can philosophy alone lead to this *intellectual habit*? In *De Virtute*, Philo writes:

“For what the disciples of the most excellent philosophy gain from its teaching, the Jews gain from their customs and laws, that is to know the highest, the most ancient Cause of all things and reject the delusion of created gods. For no created being is

<sup>31</sup> Sacr. 2; See: Spec. 56; Cher. 9; Sacr. 3; Post. 136; Ebr. 45; Prob. 11; Dec. 67; Art. 76.

<sup>32</sup> Spec. I, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Leg. 61.

<sup>34</sup> Conf. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Praem. V, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Leg. I, 92f.



God in reality, but only in men's fancies, bereft as it is of the essential attribute of eternity."<sup>37</sup>

And some lines before:

"This wealth is bestowed by wisdom through the doctrines and principles of ethic, logic and physic, and from these spring the virtues, which rid the soul of its proneness to extravagance, and engender the love of contentment and frugality".<sup>38</sup>

As the *love of wisdom*, true philosophy for Philo cannot but lead to the *intellectual habit* and right opinion that is revealed by God in the Torah. Therefore, revelation and philosophy are not mutually exclusive, but the one reveals what the other concludes from ethics, physics and logic,<sup>39</sup> thus disposing the individual for the divine. This leads to an interesting aspect of Philo's mysticism. Given its "yearning" and "desire" for the divine, the heavenly man in each individual is in some passages also identified with the statue of a deity (ἄγαλμα):

"A sacred dwelling-place or shrine was being fashioned for the reasonable soul, which man was to carry as a holy image, of all images the most God-like (οἶκος γάρ τις ἢ νεὼς ἱερός ἐτεκταίνετο ψυχῆς λογικῆς, ἣν ἐμελλεν ἀγαλματοφορήσειν ἀγαλμάτων τὸ θεοειδέστατον)".<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Virt. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Virt. 8.

<sup>39</sup> For the relationship of Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism that cannot be discussed further here, see Theo Kobusch, *Christliche Philosophie. Die Entdeckung der Subjektivität* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006). Kobusch discusses amongst other things the role of metaphysics and mystagogy as one and the same way of introspection (*epopteia*) in Origen: "Die Epopie ist aber weit davon entfernt, eine abstrakte Seinslehre zu sein. Vielmehr ist ihr Gegenstand das Liebesdrama zwischen Braut und Bräutigam, d. h. zwischen der menschlichen Seele und Gott" (Ibid. 256). See further: Theo Kobusch: *Selbstwerdung und Personalität: spätantike Philosophie und ihr Einfluß auf die Moderne* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> De Opif 69, quote taken from: George van Kooten, *Paul's anthropology in context: the image of God, assimilation to God, and tripartite man in ancient Judaism, ancient philosophy and early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 201. See also: Mos. I, 28; Legat. 210–211.

Plato shows a similar conviction in the *Symposium* since Alcibiades recognizes statues of deities in the speech of Socrates<sup>41</sup>. Similar passages can also be found in Porphyry<sup>42</sup> or Epictet<sup>43</sup>. Like the statue of a Deity, so man for Philo bears his Archetype in himself.

“For there are, as is evident, two temples of God: one of them this universe, in which there is also as High Priest His First-Born, the divine Word, and the other the rational soul, whose Priest is the real Man; the outward and visible image of whom is he who offers the prayers and sacrifices handed down from our fathers, to whom it has been committed to wear the aforesaid tunic, which is a copy and replica of the whole heaven, the intention of this being that the universe may join with man in the holy rites and man with the universe.”<sup>44</sup>

As the Logos is the High Priest in the cosmos, so the heavenly man is High-Priest in the soul. Therefore, “Philo deals with all the legal requirements for the high priest: the rules concerning his marriage, mourning, integrity, purity, purification.”<sup>45</sup> He thereby intertwines both spheres. “More than once, Philo specifies that the individual worshipper who gives thanks

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 222a: “But when these are opened, and you obtain a fresh view of them by getting inside, first of all you will discover that they are the only speeches which have any sense in them (ἐντὸς αὐτῶν γινόμενος πρῶτον μὲν νοῦν ἔχοντας ἔνδον μόνους εὐρήσει τῶν λόγων); and secondly, that none are so divine, so rich in images of virtue (ἀγάλατ’ ἀρετῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἔχοντας), so largely—nay, so completely—intent on all things proper for the study of such as would attain both grace and worth.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ad Marcellam* 1, quote taken from: George van Kooten, *Paul’s anthropology in context: the image of God, assimilation to God, and tripartite man in ancient Judaism, ancient philosophy and early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 109: “by whom the divine must be honoured through wisdom and by whom, in the organ by which he knows, the temple must, through wisdom, be adorned with a living statue, i. e. with the mind (ἐν τῇ γνώμῃ τὸ ἱερὸν ἐμψύχῳ ἀγάλματι), because God has erected himself in him as his image, and thus has adorned him.”

<sup>43</sup> *Dissertationes* 2. 8. 11–14, quote taken from: George van Kooten, *Paul’s anthropology in context: the image of God, assimilation to God, and tripartite man in ancient Judaism, ancient philosophy and early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 73: “You are bearing God about with you, you poor wretch, and know it not! Do you suppose I am speaking of some external God? It is within yourself that you bear him, and do not perceive that you are defiling him with impure thoughts and filthy actions. Yet in the presence of even an image of God (καὶ ἀγάλματος) you would not dare to do anything of the things you are now doing.”

<sup>44</sup> Somn. I, 215.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Laporte, “The High Priest in Philo of Alexandria”, in: *Studia Philonica Annual. Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, Vol. 3 (Providence: Brown University, 1991), 71.

and praise to God, is a priest, or, more exactly, a high priest.”<sup>46</sup> The individual who wants to resemble his archetype must therefore be as pure as the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies:

“So, we see that they who mean to resort to the temple to take part in sacrifice must needs have their bodies made clean and bright, and before their bodies their souls. For the soul is queen and mistress, superior to the body in every way because a diviner nature has been allotted to it. The mind is cleansed by wisdom and the truths of wisdom’s teaching which guide its steps to the contemplation of the universe and all that is therein, and by the sacred company of the other virtues and by the practice of them shewn in noble and highly praiseworthy actions. He, then, who is adorned with these may come with boldness to the sanctuary as his true home, the best of all mansions, there to present himself as victim. But anyone whose heart is the seat of lurking covetousness and wrongful cravings should remain still and hide his face in confusion and curb the shameless madness which would rashly venture where caution is profitable. For the holy place of the truly Existent is closed ground to the unholy.”<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, he even advises us to sacrifice all our wrong opinions on the “inner Altar”<sup>48</sup>. In the words of Jean Laporte:

“Before sacrificing, or worshipping, a ritual purification is necessary or useful to the faithful, but there must be an internal purification. For this reason, and not because he

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 74. See also Mos. II,133–137: “Thus the high priest arrayed when he sets forth to his holy duties, in order that when he enters to offer the ancestral prayers and sacrifices there may enter with him the whole universe, as signified in the types of it which he brings upon his person, the long robe a copy of the air, the pomegranate of water, the flower trimming of earth, the scarlet of fire, the ephod of heaven, the circular emeralds on the shoulder-tops with the six engravings in each of the two hemispheres which they resemble in form, the twelve stones on the breast in four rows of threes of the zodiac, the reason-seat of that Reason which holds together and administers all things. For he who must needs have that Fathers’s Son with all His fullness of excellence to plead his cause, that sins may be remembered no more and good gifts showered in rich abundance. Perhaps, too, he is preparing the servant of God to learn the lesson, that, if it be beyond him to be worthy of the world’s Maker, he should try to be throughout worthy of the world. For, as he wears a vesture which represents the world, his first duty is to carry the pattern enshrined in his heart, and so be in a sense transformed from a man into the nature of the world; and, if one may dare to say so—and in speaking of truth one may well dare to state the truth—be himself a little world, a microcosm.”

<sup>47</sup> Spec. 269ff.

<sup>48</sup> Ebr. 87.

would deny their ritual necessity, Philo insists on the moral aspect of all kinds of purifications.”<sup>49</sup>

Achieving this *intellectual habit* then brings us to the third dimension of Love: *The experience of mystical love*.

### The experience of mystical Love

Recognising one’s own limits and existential dependency upon God opens the mind to experience Love in a mystical way. An important category is the *intellectual openness* or *humility* towards God and his creation. The experience of *mystical love* is thereby embedded in a dialectic between the right knowledge about God and the experience of beauty. The former implies recognition of God’s supremacy, the latter “has the power”<sup>50</sup> to lead us to the truth “and truth is marvellously beautiful as falsehood is monstrously ugly.”<sup>51</sup> The individual affected by beauty “has an insatiable desire to be filled with things that are beautiful.”<sup>52</sup> Yet, beauty is more than just an attitude of true opinions. Philo speaks at another place about beauty inflaming the Lover’s soul with a fire that burns all the passions. “For the lover of virtue, set on fire by the brilliant appearance of the beautiful (τοῦ καλοῦ φαντασίας), burns up the pleasures of the body, and then chops and grinds them up”<sup>53</sup>. At another place, Philo even recommends taking refuge in moral beauty as soon as “any of the love-lures of pleasure invite thee.”<sup>54</sup> It needs to be clear, though, that it is God who “alone is beautiful”<sup>55</sup>. Therefore, every experience of creational or moral beauty can only fully be understood in relation to the Logos whom the mind ultimately desires and who provides the highest possible recognition of God for us earthly human beings. The earthly-minded man is thus transformed by this *dialectic* into a hoper:

<sup>49</sup> Jean Laporte, “The High Priest in Philo of Alexandria”, in: *Studia Philonica Annual. Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, Vol. 3 (Providence: Brown University, 1991), 76.

<sup>50</sup> Aet. 76.

<sup>51</sup> Aet. 76.

<sup>52</sup> Post. 174.

<sup>53</sup> Post. 159.

<sup>54</sup> Gig. 44.

<sup>55</sup> Post. 182.

„Since, the first step towards the possession of blessings is hope, and hope like a high road is constructed and opened up by the virtue loving soul in its eagerness to gain true excellence (καλοῦ), Moses called the first lover (ἐραστήν) of hope “Man”, thus bestowing on him as a special favour the name which is common to the race (...), on the grounds that he alone is a true man who expects good things and rests firmly on comfortable hopes.”<sup>56</sup>

Philo describes this hoper also as the “man of Progress” (*Prokopton*) who stands between perfection and imperfection and can be compared to a sailor who still has not reached the harbour.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, it was the experience of *divine love* that had led Abraham to leave his homeland.

„Mastered by his love (ἔρωτι) for God, he mightily overcame all the fascination expressed in the fond terms of family affection, and told the divine call to none of his household, but taking out of his numerous following two only, the oldest and most loyal, he went forth with his son, four in all, as though to perform one of the ordinary rites.”<sup>58</sup>

But it needs to be clear that God is the source of these experiences:

„It is necessary that the soul should not ascribe to itself its toil for virtue, but that it should take it away from itself and refer it to God, confessing that not its own strength or power acquire nobility (τὸ καλὸν), but He who freely bestowed also the love (τὸν ἔρωτα) of it.”<sup>59</sup>

Reading these experiences of mystical love into the text of the Torah, one needs to ask if this reflects experiences that Philo might have had himself. Are there hints in the works of Philo that reveal the experience of *mystical love* as a personal experience he processes in his allegorical interpretations? Dealing with a similar question, Hay identifies his exegetical work as *Inspired, but not Authoritative*<sup>60</sup>. “Perhaps the most interesting question regarding Philo’s view of himself as exegete concerns his sense of divine guidance.”<sup>61</sup> Philo seems to be quite modest when it comes to *mystical ex-*

<sup>56</sup> Abr. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Abr. 47.

<sup>58</sup> Abr. 170; see also: Cher. 20; Ebr. 146.

<sup>59</sup> rob. 136.

<sup>60</sup> David Hay, “Philo’s View of Himself as an Exegete: Inspired, but not Authoritative”, in: *Studia Philonica Annual. Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, Vol. 3 (Providence: Brown University, 1991), 40–52.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 44.

*periences* that are autobiographical, yet at some passages, he reveals himself:

„But there is a higher thought than these. It comes from a voice in my soul, which often times is god-possessed and divines where it does not know. This thought I will record in words if I can. The voice told me that while God is indeed one, His highest and chiefest powers are two, even goodness and sovereignty.”<sup>62</sup>

Similar in Somn. II,252:

„I hear once more the voice of the invisible spirit, the familiar secret tenant, saying ‘Friend, it would seem that there is a matter great and precious of which thou knowest nothing, and this I will ungrudgingly shew thee, for many other well-timed lessons have I given thee. Know then, good friend, that God alone is the real veritable peace...’”

And in another autobiographical note taken from Leg. III, 1:

„There was a time when I had leisure for philosophy and its contents, when I made its spirit any own in all its beauty and loveliness and true blessedness, when my constant companions were divine themes and verities, wherein I rejoiced with a joy that never cloyed or sated.”

## Conclusion

In this article, three dimensions of love in Philo of Alexandria are introduced. Starting with his allegorical interpretations of the creational account, Philo confronts us with an ideal of human existence, the heavenly man, and its realistic fragile condition that presents us with a *negative and even tyrannical* concept of love expressed in “yearning” and “desire” of this true human “self” for the divine. Confused with many pleasures, *mystical love* can only take rest in the human soul, when the human mind frees itself from the arbitrariness of wrong opinions and adopts a right understanding about the transcendence of God and his providence. Showing *intellectual humility* and *openness* to the true reality of our existence, the Man of Progress experiences a dialectic of right knowledge and beauty transforming this negative love into hope that ultimately leads to the experience of *mystical love* that

<sup>62</sup> Cher. 27.

transcends the capacities of our thinking and is authored by God alone. Even though one must always remember that his allegorical interpretations are deeply situational and it would probably mislead to create a *philonic systematic*, it is striking that Philo himself applies the Temple in Jerusalem in several passages to the human soul. He thus reveals himself as a Jewish mystical master who had deep mystical experiences himself and whose dialectic of mystical love reminds us in some places of classical spiritual authors in the West, such as Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and their evocation of sudden consolation and the experience of God's grace.<sup>63</sup> All in all, it is only this love that can truly fulfil the soul, and lead us to an ethical authentic life and the realization of our true self. In Philo's words:

“For he has given myself to me and everything that is to itself, since I will establish my covenant with thee is the same as ‘I will give thyself to thee.’ And it is the earnest desire of all the God-beloved (οἱ θεοφιλεῖς) to fly from the stormy waters of engrossing business with its perpetual turmoils surge and billow, an anchor in the calm safe shelter of virtue roadsteads.”<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Elder Mullan S. J. (New York: J. Kenedy&Sons, 1914).

<sup>64</sup> Somn. II, 224–225.