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Review of *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* by Maren R. Niehoff

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In *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography*, Maren Niehoff constructs an itinerary for Philo's thought that follows roughly the map of his political career. The central thesis of this study is that Philo's participation in the Jewish embassy to the Emperor Gaius in Rome caused him to abandon his youthful commitment to transcendental Platonism and take up the mantle of the Roman Stoics ("Part One: Philo as Ambassador and Author in Rome"). The Allegorical Commentary, hailed by some scholars as Philo's *magnum opus*, becomes an immature work of the "young Philo," still under the spell of Eudorus ("Part Three: Young Philo among Alexandrian Jews"). Philo's philosophical works and his "most well-designed series" (93), the Exposition of the Law, stem from the mind of the post-embassy Alexandrian and represent his mature thought ("Part Two: Philo's *Exposition* in A Roman Context"). *The Questions and Answers* form something of a bridge, foreshadowing Philo's turn to dogmatic theology in the Exposition. According to Niehoff, Philo's adoption of a Stoic "creation theology" and Roman imperial *mores* represents a "watershed in Western civilization" (104). Whereas the young Philo sets the course for later transcendental "Gnostic" Christianity, the Stoicizing "Roman" Philo stands as the forerunner of rabbinic Judaism and "orthodox Christianity" (105).

Narratives of development in an ancient author's thought that depend upon a hypothetical periodization of his works run the risk of critical acceptance or rejection in relatively equal measure. By making the embassy to

Gaius the intellectual fulcrum for her biography, Niehoff has built on a sure historical foundation. Philo's thought was profoundly impacted by the violence in Alexandria under Flaccus and his subsequent participation in the embassy, which took him away from the pleasures of teaching exegesis and philosophy (*Spec. leg.* 3.1). The relative chronology of Philo's two best-known series, the Allegorical Commentary followed by the Exposition of the Law, makes good sense. Niehoff's assessment of Stoic and Roman themes in Philo's Exposition, as well as in the Allegorical Commentary ("Chapter Twelve: Stoicism: Rejected, Subverted, Advocated"), emphasizes the importance of Stoicism in Philo's thought. Her discussion of Philo's "self-fashioning" and of his veiled critique of Claudius in the *Embassy to Gaius*, as well as her comparison of Philo's and Seneca's anti-imperial rhetoric are particularly well done (41–51). These contributions make Niehoff's biography a touchstone for future attempts to trace the development of Philo's thought.

Despite these strengths, several problems remain with key details of Niehoff's narrative. First, whereas Niehoff plausibly argues for a "Roman turn" in Philo's thought, the idea of a "Stoic turn" in the Exposition is less convincing. As Niehoff herself admits, the young Philo, as a middle Platonizing thinker, was already well acquainted with Stoicism. In an allegorical treatise like *De mutatione nominum*, for example, Philo constructively redeploys the Stoic eight-part soul as a central feature of his psychology (*Mut.* 110; cf. *SVF* 2.836). In this and other passages in the Allegorical Commentary, Philo invokes Stoic anthropology for more than "educational value and emotional appeal" (237). Just as Stoicism animates aspects of Philo's thought in the Allegorical Commentary, so also Philo's Platonist vision is alive and well in the Exposition. As a case in point, consider *De opificio mundi*. According to Niehoff's analysis, the early chapters of *De opificio mundi* provide evidence of Philo's Stoic turn (96–97). However, as Thomas Tobin has argued, in this hodge-podge of a treatise, Philo's primary concerns emerge only toward the end (*Opif.* 151–170), where Philo elaborates his allegory of the soul—the same trademark Platonist project that occupied him in the Allegorical Commentary.

Second, Niehoff's construal of a clean break between the Allegorical Commentary and the Exposition does not directly address alternative periodizations of his *corpus*. For example, in a study from the turn of the twentieth century, Louis Masebieau argued that Philo's experience of Roman politics was already reflected in the Allegorical Commentary itself.¹ While few have followed Masebieau's precise schema, greater attention to his and other alternative chronologies could have strengthened Niehoff's argument. Niehoff's dating of Philo's philosophical treatises and the *Questions and Answers*—both of which do substantial work in the Stoic turn narrative—likewise does not adequately consider alternative relative chronologies. Niehoff asserts the late dating of all of Philo's philosophical treatises, without addressing the alternative *Jugendschrift* hypothesis championed by F. Cumont, W. Bousset, and V. Nikiprowetzsky.² While the Alexander dialogues are probably late, *Probus* and *De aeternitate mundi* may be early. Even if *De aeternitate mundi* is late, *Aet.* 20–149—particularly *Aet.* 76–77, which Niehoff draws upon as evidence for her grand narrative (80)—may, as F. H. Colson suggested, represent the opinion Philo plans to argue against in this fragmentary treatise.³ Locating the *Questions and Answers* after the Allegorical Commentary is likewise a weighty decision that does not wrestle with alternative critical judgments that place it earlier. While not uncomplicated, Niehoff's biography remains a major work with a bold new thesis that reopens many old questions; it deserves a wide readership.

Footnotes

- ¹ See L. Masebieau and É. Bréhier, "Essai sur la chronologie de la vie et des oeuvres de Philon," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 53 (1906): 25–64, 164–185, 267–289; and L. Masebieau, *Le classement des oeuvres de Philon* (Paris: Leroux, 1889).
- ² For an overview of various positions on this philosophical treatise, see D. T. Runia, "Philo's *De aeternitate mundi*: the Problem of Its Interpretation," *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981): 105–151.
- ³ F. H. Colson, *Philo*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929–62), 9.172–178.

