

# Elements of the universe in Philo's *De Vita Mosis*: Cosmological theology or theological cosmology?

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It is the intention of this article to investigate how Philo's understanding of the universe, and particularly its four basic elements as taught by the Greek philosophers, influenced his description of the God of Israel's world in which the Moses narrative unfolds. Given the fact that Philo was a theologian *par excellence*, the question can be asked whether Philo's approach is closer to what one might call 'theological cosmology' or rather closer to 'cosmological theology'? After a brief survey of Philo's inclination to interpret Jewish history in the light of Greek cosmology, the study proceeds with his universe as symbolised in the high priest's vestments. The τετρακτύς with its 10 points of harmony is a key to Philo's symbolism and numerology. The article concludes that Philo is not writing cosmology per se in his *De Vita Mosis*, but he is rather writing a theology that sketches the cosmic superiority and involvement of Israel's God against the backdrop of Greek cosmology as it was influenced by Pythagoras' geometry and numerology as well as by Plato's philosophy. In this sense his account in the *De Vita Mosis* is closer to a *cosmological theology*. He utilises the cosmological picture of the Greco-Hellenistic world in order to introduce and present the powerful nature and qualities of Israel's God.

## Elemente van die universum in Philo se *De Vita Mosis*: Kosmologiese teologie of teologiese kosmologie?

Hierdie artikel het ten doel om ondersoek in te stel na Philo se begrip van die heelal en veral die vier basiese elemente soos dit deur die Griekse filosowe geleer is. Dit het verder ten doel om vas te stel tot watter mate hierdie denke sy beskrywing van die God van Israel se wêreld, waarbinne die Moses-vertelling ontvou, beïnvloed het. Gegewe die feit dat Philo 'n teoloog *par excellence* is, kan die vraag gevra word of Philo se benadering nader is aan wat 'n mens 'n 'teologiese kosmologie' kan noem, of eerder nader aan 'n 'kosmologiese teologie' is? Na 'n kort oorsig oor Philo se neiging om die Joodse geskiedenis in die lig van die Griekse kosmologie te interpreteer, analiseer die artikel Philo se heelal soos dit gesimboliseer word in die hoëpriester se klere. Die τετρακτύς met sy 10 punte van harmonie is 'n sleutel tot Philo se simboliek en numerologie. Die artikel kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat Philo nie kosmologie per se in sy *De Vita Mosis* beskryf nie, maar eerder 'n teologie wat die kosmiese superioriteit en betrokkenheid van Israel se God skets teen die agtergrond van Griekse kosmologie soos dit deur Pythagoras se geometrie en numerologie sowel as deur Plato se filosofie beïnvloed is. In hierdie opsig is sy weergawe in die *De Vita Mosis* nader aan 'n kosmologiese teologie. Hy maak gebruik van die kosmologiese beeld van die Grieks-Hellenistiese wêreld ten einde die kragtige aard en eienskappe van Israel se God voor te stel en aan te bied.

## Introduction

Understanding space as a constructed reality is vital to understanding the societies that inhabited those spaces, as we continue to realize the constructedness of our own images of the past and of our own scholarly practice as well. (Berquist 2002:29)

Philo, the Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria, incorporates aspects of ancient Greek philosophic movements such as Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neoplatonism in his writings. He merges Greek philosophy with Jewish history and theology<sup>1</sup> and produces a corpus of Jewish Hellenistic literature that would provide a window into the world of both Judaism and Hellenism. In his two treatises on the *Life of Moses* (probably written 25–30 CE), Philo retells the Moses narrative by interweaving the Septuagint Exodus account with the oral tradition of the elders in his community and with his own comments and reflections on the unfolding of events (cf. Steyn 2012a). In doing so, the Moses narrative is presented as a hybrid against the backdrop of Greek philosophy and Jewish theological hermeneutics. It becomes embedded within the space of Alexandrian Egypt and the time of the Roman Emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE). The science of ancient Greek cosmology

1.Cf. Winter (1997:241–242): 'It is also important to note that Philo's discussion of the sophistic tradition was but part of a pioneering attempt to bring together the Old Testament (OT) and philosophy, that is, he sought to exegete the OT in the light of those philosophical traditions which he perceived as being most closely allied to it. Thus the key to understanding Philo's discussion of the sophistic tradition in Alexandria is found in Plato's critique of it interpreted through "The Books of Moses".'

merged with Jewish theology which believed that the universe was the creation of the God of Israel.

It is not the intention of this article to analyse and describe Greek cosmology as such, but rather to investigate how Philo's understanding of the universe, and particularly its four basic elements as taught by the Greek philosophers, influenced his description of the God of Israel's world in which the Moses narrative unfolds. It is also not the intention of this article to comprehensively deal with the complete *Corpus Philonicum*, but to focus on Philo's cosmology – only according to his *De Vita Mosis*.

## Interpreting Jewish history in the light of Greek cosmology

True to his allegoric interpretation of events and to his perspective on the symbolism of all that exists and happens, Philo interprets Jewish history in his *De Vita Mosis* within the framework of Greek cosmology. Philo's cosmological connections in his *De Vita Mosis* might be divided into two categories:

1. Divine punishment and destruction by means of the elements of water and fire – the former during the great flood in Noah's time and the latter during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In addition to this, Philo extensively interprets the 10 plagues<sup>2</sup> that preceded the exodus event in Egypt as a display of divine power and control over the universe.
2. Divine revelation through the cultic objects of the tabernacle<sup>3</sup> and the high priest's vestments that serve as symbols of cosmic harmony. This includes, on the one hand, the colour symbolism of the tabernacle curtains with the tabernacle itself understood to be a symbol of the cosmos. On the other hand it also particularly includes the high priest's vestments and the culmination of the zodiac, the *logeum* and the *tetractys* (containing the four elements) which in turn creates cosmic harmony.

Most interestingly, especially two of these are interpreted symbolically against the backdrop of ancient Greek cosmology, namely the 10 plagues and the high priest's attire. Given the parameters of this article, this contribution intends to focus particularly on Philo's understanding of his universe by means of his allegorical representation of the high priest's attire.

The question can now be asked whether Philo's approach is closer to what one might call 'theological cosmology' (i.e. interpreting cosmology by means of his theology), or rather closer to 'cosmological theology' (i.e. interpreting his theology by means of his understanding of cosmology). By pursuing a 'contextual approach'<sup>4</sup> to Philo's theology, this question will,

2.Cf. Aune (2002:865–866) for an appropriate summary of Philo's cosmological interpretation of the 10 plagues. He further writes: 'The Exodus plague tradition, reinterpreted eschatologically in Revelation in the heptads of trumpets (8:7–9:21; 11:15–19) and bowls (16:1–21), for example was already linked to the four elements in Hellenistic Judaism (Philo *Mos.* 96–146).'

3.Koester (1989:59–62) elaborated on Philo and Josephus' interpretation of the tabernacle as a symbol of the cosmos and how they occasionally apply a similar interpretation to the Jerusalem temple.

4.The term has been coined by Runia (1990:71).

as already stated above, only pay attention to his *De Vita Mosis*. As Runia (1990) pointed out:

There is a growing consensus among Philonic scholars that Philo saw himself first and foremost as an exegete of Mosaic scripture, and that a sound way to start understanding him is to begin at the level of his exegetical expositions, i.e. in the context in which his ideas are first developed. (pp. 71–72)

## Philo's universe symbolised in the high priest's vestments

Exodus 28 describes the sacred vestments (στολάς ἁγίας) for the high priesthood. These consisted of the breastpiece (τὸ περιστήθιον), ephod (τὴν ἐπωμίδα), robe (τὸν ποδήρη), checkered tunic (χιτῶνα κοσμηβωτὸν), turban (κίδαριν) and sash (ζώνην, Ex 28:4). In order to produce these items, the biblical text prescribes the use of gold, blue, purple, crimson yarns and fine linen (Ex 28:5). Philo's cosmology can be observed largely in the symbolism ('figurative meanings', *Vit. Mos.* 2.131) of these 'sacred vestments' of the high priest (*Vit. Mos.* 2.117–133). He states that '[i]n its whole it is a copy and representation of the world; and the parts are a representation of the separate parts of the world' (2.117). He concludes (*Vit. Mos.* 2.133):

The high priest, then, being equipped in this way, is properly prepared for the performance of all *sacred ceremonies* (τὰς ἱερουργίας), that, whenever he enters [*the temple*] to offer up the prayers and *sacrifices* (εὐχὰς τε καὶ θυσίας) in use among his nation, all the world (πᾶς ὁ κόσμος) may likewise enter in with him, by means of the imitations (μιμήματα): the long robe [*reaching to his feet*] of the air (ἄερος τὸν ποδήρη), the pomegranate of the water (ὑδατος τὸν ῥοίσκον), the flowery [*hem*] of the earth (γῆς τὸ ἄνθινον), and the scarlet [*dye of his robe*] of fire (πυρός τὸ κόκκινον), the ephod [*priestly mantle over his shoulders*] of heaven (οὐρανοῦ τὴν ἐπωμίδα); the two *hemispheres* (τοῖν δυοῖν ἡμισφαιρίων)<sup>5</sup> being further indicated by the round emeralds on the shoulder-blades, on each of which were engraved six [*characters*] according to the *zodiac* (τοῦ ζωοφόρου).<sup>6</sup> There were twelve stones on the breast arranged in four rows of three stones each, namely the *logeum* (τὸ λογεῖον)<sup>7</sup> which holds together and *regulates* (διοικούντος) the whole *universe* (τὰ σύμπαντα).<sup>8,9</sup>

Philo here perceives the universe to consist of the world (ὁ κόσμος) and the heaven (ὁ οὐρανός). The world is made up of air, water, earth and fire. Heaven itself is represented by two hemispheres – each consisting of six signs of the zodiac – and the *logeum* that holds together and regulates the universe. Philo states that heaven is 'in every respect supreme to and superior over the earth, so also shall the nation which has heaven for its inheritance be superior to their enemies' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.217). Philo also states much later that 'in the world the heaven is the most holy temple, and the further extremity is the earth' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.194).

5.On the use of the term ἡμισφαιρίων by Philo, also see *Cher.* 25, 26; *Mos.* 2.98, 122, 123, 133; *Decal.* 56, 57; *Spec.Leg.* 1.86 (Borgen, Fuglseth & Skarsten 2000:166).

6.The term occurs several times (ca. 40 times) in the Greek literature, of which a quarter of these (nine) are in Philo alone: *Mos.* 2.124, 133; *Spec.Leg.* 2.142, 177, 178; *On Numbers* Frag. 103 col I, col r; 131a (*bis*). Cf. also Aristotle's *De Mundo* 392a.

7.On Philo's use of λογεῖον, refer to *Mos.* 2.112, 113, 125, 127, 128, 130, 133; *Spec.Leg.* 1.88 (*bis*) (Borgen *et al.* 2000:207).

8.Translations of Philo's works in this contribution are largely based on C.D. Yonge (1995).

9.For the Greek text, refer to Borgen, Fuglseth and Skarsten (2005).

It can only be speculated that Philo's arithmetic understanding of the universe probably links with Aristotle's remark on even and odd numbers that 'the One proceeds from both of these (for it is both even and odd) and number from the One, and that the whole heaven is numbers'.<sup>10</sup> Moving back in the chronology, Plato's physical cosmological model is mainly contained in his work of the *Timaeus* dialogue (cf. also *Rep.* 6.510e; 10.614c.). It was based on a dualistic worldview or on a 'two-world ontology' (Runia 1986:95), where there are two spheres in Greek thinking. This model divided all manifestation, that is the universe (κόσμος or φύσις), into two regions, namely the heavenly sphere and the earthly sphere (Gildersleeve 1900). For Philo in his *De Vita Mosis*, God resided in the upper hemisphere, and Moses (*Vit. Mos.* 1.158):

... is said to have entered into the darkness where God was, that is to say, into the invisible, and shapeless, and incorporeal world, the essence, which is the model of all existing things, where he beheld things invisible to mortal nature.

Although this case indicates that Philo does not always treat darkness as negative,<sup>11</sup> he does, however, perceive darkness<sup>12</sup> to be contrary to God (Worthington 2011:87; Steyn 2012b:5). The theocentric understanding of Philo's universe is quite different to that which was held by the 'Chaldeans' who, according to Philo, 'concluded that the world itself was God, thus profanely likening the created to the Creator' (*Abr.* 69).

The role of numbers and its symbolic meaning also plays a very important role for Philo in his works. He refers to one of his documents, *περὶ ἀριθμῶν* [On numbers], where he extensively discussed the symbolism of the *tetrad* (*Vit. Mos.* 2.115) – a work that has unfortunately been lost. In his understanding of the creation account of Genesis, he interprets 'number as the basic component of, and the key to, the universe' (Moehring 1995:151). In his exposition of *De opificio mundi*, he devotes more than a quarter of this work 'to arithmological excursus on the tetrad and the hebdomad (*Opif.* 47–52; 89–128)' (Borgen 1997:68). Moehring pointed out that 'Philo's main purpose in his use of numbers as an exegetical tool is to demonstrate that God's creation is orderly and in harmony with certain numbers and numerical relations' (Moehring *ibid*:144).

## The τετρακτύς with its 10 points of harmony in a heliocentric or geocentric universe as a key to Philo's symbolism and numerology

The *tetractys* (τετρακτύς) is a Pythagorean geometrical symbol that is triangular and made up of 10 points in four different rows.<sup>13</sup> This equilateral triangle (an arithmetic and, according

10. Aristotle (*Metaphysics* I, 986a 15–21) quoted in Moehring (1995:150). The latter suspects that Aristotle's remark refers to 'the seven planets which then led to the doctrine of the harmony of the spheres'.

11. Cf. also *Vit. Mos.* 2.70 which refers to the 'smoke' (ὁ καπνός) that covered the mountain in Exodus 19:18 (LXX). Borgen *et al.* (2000:285) confirms: 'Philo pictured Moses' ascent to the "darkness where God was" as his legitimate transformation into being god and king.'

12. That is, darkness as cosmological and pre-creational (e.g. *Spec. Leg.* 4.187), or as anthropological and ethical (e.g., in *Spec. Leg.* 1.54 and *Deus* 3; Worthington 2011:87).

13. Cf. Moehring (1995:149): '[N]umbers were represented by pebbles, and the structure of numbers was made visible through the arrangement of these pebbles in certain patterns, so that the Pythagoreans were able to speak of triangular, square, or pentagonal numbers – and this was meant in a literal sense.'

to some, metaphysical and mystical<sup>14</sup> symbol) played an important role in Pythagoreanism where the foundation of their mathematical work 'was the exploration of the numbers of the decade and their interrelationships' (Moehring 1995:149). The bottom row, understood to be the first square and presenting three dimensions, is a tetrahedron consisting of four points that symbolised the four elements of the cosmos and the principles of the natural world, namely air, water, earth and fire. The second row with its three points presents two dimensions and contained the first odd number. In opposition stood the third row with its two points, presenting one dimension and understood to be the first even number. The top row, consisting of a single point, represented solitary unity and a zero dimension. The structure and position of the points on each consecutive line result in the opposition of evens and odds.<sup>15</sup> The overall composition symbolises unity of a higher order (the *dekad*) and harmony (cf. Fidler 1987).

The Pythagoreans constructed their cosmology largely on this model (Papadogeorgos 2010) and:

... believed that ten heavenly bodies revolve around the central fire. Outside is the heaven of the fixed stars, in the middle is the region of the five planets, the Sun and Moon and below the sublunar region, the realm of becoming and imperfection. (p. 39)

A similar position was held by Aristarchos of Samos (3rd century BCE) who proposed a heliocentric model with the sun in the centre of the universe.

When Philo (*Vit. Mos.* 1.212) remarks about 'the things which are really great and deserving of serious attention', he lists three such cosmological phenomena: (1) the creation of the heaven; (2) the revolutions of the planets and fixed stars; and (3) the position of the earth in the most centre spot of the universe. According to Philo, then the earth, not the sun, is 'in the centre spot of the universe' – thus preferring a geocentric model.

Philo often mentions the *Tetractys* in the *Corpus Philonicum* and also explicitly refers to it three times in his *De Vita Mosis* (*Vit. Mos.* 2.84, 2.115 (*bis*); see Table 1).<sup>16</sup>

Moehring (1995:150) is therefore right in his observation that 'number is the force that ordered the world, both the macrocosmos and the microcosmos'. The implied role of the *tetractys* in Philo's understanding of his universe becomes

14. The term is controversial. Papadogeorgos (2010:39), for instance, supports it: 'Among Pythagoreans the science of numbers became an object of mystical revelation, in the same way that the first astronomers were astrologers and the first chemists alchemists.' Moehring (1995:143), however, opposes it: 'The expression "number mysticism" (*Zahlenmystik*) suffers from the lack of any clear definition of "mysticism" in connection with number.'

15. 'The opposition of evens and odds lies in the base of a series of other, fundamental oppositions such as the unlimited-limited, rest-motion, male-female, odd-even, one-many, right-left, straight-curved, light-darkness, square-oblong, good-evil, et cetera. This series of opposition later generates the harmony which is characteristic of the universe, but which is revealed in particular in musical chords. They even saw the soul as harmony which, within a series of purifications, tended toward the revelation of the harmony of the spheres' (Papadogeorgos 2010:39).

16. Cf. Thom (1996:563): 'Philo had a very positive evaluation of Pythagoreans, referring to them as "the most saintly company" (*Quod omni.* 2). Although there are only a dozen explicit references to Pythagoras or Pythagoreans in his writings (*Quaes. Gen.* 1.17; 1.99; 3.16; 3.49; 4.8; *Leg. all.* 1.15; *Op.* 100; *Quod omni.* 2; *Provid.* 1.22; 2.42; *Anim.* 62; *Aet.* 12), he made extensive use of Pythagorean arithmological doctrines in his exegesis. His lost work, *On Numbers*, was probably dependent on a Pythagorean source text.'



**TABLE 1:** 'Everything is in fourfold'.

<i>Vit. Mos.</i> 2.115	Translation of <i>Vit. Mos.</i> 2.115
τετραγράμματος δὲ τοῦνομά φησιν ὁ θεολόγος εἶναι, τάχα που σύμβολα τιθεὶς αὐτὰ τῶν πρώτων ἀριθμῶν, μονάδος καὶ δικάδος καὶ τριάδος καὶ τετράδος, ἐπειδὴ πάντα ἐν τετράδι, σημείων καὶ γραμμῇ καὶ ἐπιφάνεια καὶ στερεόν, τὰ μέτρα τῶν συμπάντων	The theologian (Moses) calls the name 'four letters' (tetragrammaton), perhaps presenting them as symbols of the primary numbers: the unit, number two, number three, number four, since everything is in fourfold: a point (sign) and a line and a superficies (appearance) and a solid; the measures of all things.

evident in his allegorical expositions on the 10 plagues, the tabernacle, the high priest's vestments and other places in his *De Vita Mosis*.

An interesting continuation of this idea is to be found in Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism during the middle ages where the *tetragram* is interpreted by means of a disc in the form of a *tetractys*.<sup>17</sup> This motif already occurs in Philo's work (*Vit. Mos.* 2.115).

### The 'bottom line' of the cosmos: Four elements

It comes as no surprise that in a land that consists mainly of desert with patches of oases and a big, fertile and life-giving river with its massive delta, a land with clear skies and a scorching sun, that the four elements of the ancient universe (i.e. earth, water, air and fire) would be prominent and always consciously present in the minds of Hellenistic Jews in Egypt such as Philo. He explicitly mentions in *De Vita Mosis* that 'the elements of the universe of which the world was made, were earth, water, air, and fire' and closely connects these four elements during the creation of the world to be 'by the command of God' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.95). He distances his own Jewish theological viewpoint about God as the Creator of these elements from that of the Greeks amongst whom some deified these elements (στοιχεῖα) (*Decal.* 53), revered them and linked them to Demeter, Poseidon, Hera and Hephaestus (*Vit. Cont.* 3), whilst others deified 'the sun and moon and the other planets and fixed stars; others again the heaven alone; others the whole world' (*Decal.* 53).<sup>18</sup>

Philo considers the elements of earth, water, air and fire to be the building blocks, elements or 'components of nature' (ἄ μέρη τῆς φύσεως ἐστίν, *Vit. Mos.* 1.143). In doing so, he follows the Platonic ordering of the *tetrad* of traditional virtues.<sup>19</sup> The elements were, on the one hand, changeable by nature but, on the other hand, could also appear in combination with other elements (*Vit. Mos.* 1.155–6).<sup>20</sup> It is interesting

17. The equilateral triangle in this pyramid was subsequently used in Jewish mysticism to write the three forms of the divine name, YH, YHW, and YHWH, together in one pattern, which gave rise to later kabbalistic number speculation on the letters of the tetragrammaton יהוה (Christensen 2002:146).

18. Cf. Bruce (1982:193): '[H]e mentions not only the names by which the elements are worshipped but those given to the luminaries and so forth. Cf. Wis. 13:2, where the various elements are mentioned as receiving worship from those who are ignorant of God, but are not called στοιχεῖα but rather πρυτάνεις κόσμου ("rulers of the world").'

19. See Winter (1997:86–87) who refers to Plato's *Republic* (419–445e) and to Philo's *LA* 1.63, *Chr.* 5, *Sacr.* 84, *Det.* 75, *Ebr.* 23, *Mos.* 2.185, *Spec. Leg.* 2.62, *Prob.* 67, 159, and *QG* 4.113.

20. Cf. Lohse (1971:96–97): 'Philo says that just as the seasons of the year periodically follow one another, so too is the case with the "elements of the universe": these elements seem to perish as they change, yet in truth are imperishable as they change: earth is liquified and becomes water, water vaporizes into air, air rarefies into fire (*De aetern. mundi* 109ff.). Air, fire, water, and earth are also the "sensible elements of the sensible world" (στοιχεῖα αἰσθητὰ αἰσθητοῦ κόσμου, *Rer. div. her.* 134), the "four elements of the world" (τέτταρα τοῦ κόσμου στοιχεῖα, *ibid* 140).'

that Philo replaces fire as the fourth element with 'heaven' when he refers to air and heaven as the purest portions of the essences of the universe (*Vit. Mos.* 1.113). According to him, the elements of earth and water 'are composed of more solid parts [...] from which all the corporeal distinctive realities are perfected', whilst the elements of air and fire are considered to be 'the most prolific of life' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.97). Earlier in his *Vita Mosis*, Philo also remarked:

[God, after] having judged [Moses] deserving of being made a partaker with himself in the portion of the elements which he had reserved for himself, gave him the whole world as a possession suitable for his heir – therefore, everyone of the elements obeyed him as its master, changing the power which it had by nature and submitting to his commands. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.155–6)

In his narration on the 10 plagues of Egypt, Aaron is assigned those punishments originating from earth and water ('those elements which are composed of more solid parts'), whilst Moses is assigned those from air and fire ('the elements which are the most prolific of life', *Vit. Mos.* 1.97).

When dealing with the high priest's vestments, Philo makes it clear that materials were chosen:

... equal in number to the elements of which the world was made, and having a direct relation to them; the elements being the earth and the water, and the air and the fire. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.88)

### The long robe representing the element of air

Philo compares the high priest's long robe that reaches down to his feet, with the element of air (*Vit. Mos.* 2.133) which 'reaches down from the highest parts to the feet, being stretched from the parts about the moon, as far as the extremities of the earth, and being diffused everywhere' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.118). The air is, in his opinion, perceived to be 'most sacred' (αἰθὴρ ὁ ἱερώτατος, *Vit. Mos.* 1.217). The colour with which he associates the air is 'the hyacinth colour [...] for, by nature the air is black' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.88; 2.118).

Philo connects the air with the climate and the different seasons of the year that experience various changes and alterations (*Vit. Mos.* 1.212). According to him, the natural function of air is to 'produce water', but as God is in control of the elements of the universe, 'it has seemed good to him [*i.e.* God] that the air should produce food instead of water' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.202) during the provision of manna with the exodus in the desert. Also, because God is in control of the elements, he enabled the two brothers, Moses and Aaron 'to afford the Egyptians this warning in unison'. Moses' 'ministrations were assigned to the afflictions to be caused by the air and by the heaven' so that he 'changed the air for the affliction of the inhabitants of Egypt' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.129). Along these lines then, 'the very great affliction' of the south wind is described, in combination with 'the light of the sun and its fire':

And then a south wind of an uncommon violence set in, which increased in intensity and vehemence the whole of that day and night, being of itself a very great affliction; for it is a drying wind, causing headaches, and terrible to bear, calculated to cause grief, and terror, and perplexity in Egypt above all countries, inasmuch as it lies to the south, in which part of the heaven the revolutions

of the light-giving stars take place, so that whenever that wind is set in motion, the light of the sun and its fire is driven in that direction and scorches up everything. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.120)

### The fringe of pomegranates around the ankles representing the element of water

According to Philo, 'the pomegranates (πόϊσκοί) are a symbol of water, since, indeed, they derive their name from the flowing (τὴν ῥύσιν) of water, being very appropriately named' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.119). The element of water is 'in strict accord with the harmony of the universe' and 'displays its own particular power in definite periods of time and suitable seasons' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.120). Hence, he considers water to be one of the two most powerful elements of the universe, 'so that at appointed times some are destroyed by deluges' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.53). God again controls this and uses it as a form of divine justice (*Vit. Mos.* 2.53). Although being a powerful element, water (and earth) were 'assigned the lowest position in the world'. This is symbolised for Philo by the *placement* of the pomegranates, flowers and bells at the hem of the garment that reaches to the feet (*Vit. Mos.* 2.120).

According to Philo, Egypt is almost the only country (if you exclude those that lie south of the equator) never to be subjected to the winter season (*Vit. Mos.* 1.114). He speculates that one possible reason might be that the country perhaps lacks this season 'because of the river that overflows at the time of the summer solstice, and so consumes all the clouds before they can collect for winter' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.114).

Water is 'produced by air' when it rains (*Vit. Mos.* 1.202) and water is found in many different forms:

[T]he effusion of the sea, and the rapid courses of the ever-flowing rivers and winter mountain torrents, and the streams of everlasting springs, some of which pour forth cold and others hot water. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.212)

The colour of the water is linked to 'purple' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.88) and to the 'pomegranate' colour of the high priest's attire (*Vit. Mos.* 2.133).

### The fringe of flowers round the ankles representing the element of earth

Philo sees the fringe of flowers around the ankles of the high priest's vestment as 'an emblem of the earth; for it is from the earth that all flowers spring and bloom' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.119). The earth produces many things, such as fine flax (*Vit. Mos.* 2.88). Clustered with and related to the element of the earth is 'dust' which 'proceeded from the earth' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.129). Interestingly, Philo understands the flooding of the Nile to be 'a rain which is showered up from below' and hence, the earth also 'brings forth rain' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.202). In fact, apart from his symbolic links between the pomegranates (water) and the flowers (earth) on the fringe, he understands the bells to be:

... the emblem of the concord and harmony that exist between these things; for neither is the earth without the water, nor the water without the earthly substance, sufficient for the production of anything; but that can only be effected by the meeting and combination of both. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.119)

He considers both the elements of earth and water to be 'in strict accord with the harmony of the universe' and considers them 'displaying their own particular power in definite periods of time and suitable seasons' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.120). Philo furthermore contrasts the two 'regions': the 'region of earth' which stands opposite to the 'region of water'.

In his deliberations on the elements of the universe, Philo connects them directly with God and sees God to be more powerful than the earth and the entire universe (ὅτι τῶν μὲν ἐστὶ γῆ καὶ αἱ τοῦ παντὸς ἐσχατιαί). Neither earth nor universe could 'withstand the hand of God'. The supremacy of God and his control on heaven and earth can be seen in the symbolism of Moses' hands during the battle with the Phoenicians. He writes that:

God thus shows by a figure that the earth and all the extremities of it were the appropriate inheritance of the one party [...] the heaven is in every respect supreme to and superior over the earth. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.217)

After having symbolically linked the elements of air, water and earth to the robe and the decorations on its fringes, Philo elaborates that it is from these three elements 'out of which and in which all the different kinds of things which are perceptible by the outward senses and perishable are formed' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.121). He furthermore emphasises the unity and interconnectivity of these three:

[F]or as the tunic is one, and as the aforesaid three elements are all of one species, since they all have all their revolutions and changes beneath the moon, and as to the garment are attached the pomegranates, and the flowers; so also in certain manner the earth and the water may be said to be attached to and suspended from the air, for the air is their chariot. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.121)

### The scarlet dye of the robe representing the element of fire

Fire, as one of the elements, was classified as a natural substance in ancient Greek thinking. Apart from water, fire is the one of the two most *powerful* elements of the universe<sup>21</sup> for Philo: '[S]o that at appointed times some are [...] burnt with fire, and perish in that manner' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.53). God also controls this powerful element and uses it as a form of divine justice, as can be seen at Sodom and Gomorrah when 'God determined to destroy them with fire' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.55). The destructive power of fire can be seen when:

[A]rrows charged with fire have been aimed at vast naval fleets and have burnt them; and fire has destroyed whole cities, which have blazed away till they have been consumed down to their very foundations and reduced to ashes, so that no trace whatever has remained of their former situation. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.157)

Fire is not only one of the most powerful elements – it is also the *purest* of all the elements (*Vit. Mos.* 2.155).<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that 'the ordinary fire' used by men for sacrifices 'might not touch the altar, perhaps by reason of its being defiled by ten thousand impurities' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.155). Philo also makes a clear distinction between the fire 'from God's sacred altar

21. Cf. Lohse (1971:96–97): 'In the Orphic hymns it says: "Eminent fire, the world's best element" (ὀψιφανής Αἰθέρ, κόσμου στοιχείον ἄριστον 5:4).'

22. Cf. Lohse (1971:96–97): 'In the Orphic hymns it says: "...[Vulcan], workman, destiny of the world, pure element" ([Ἡφαίστη] ἐργαστήρ, κόσμιοιο μέρος, στοιχείον ἀμειμφέες 66:4).'

which is applied to common uses' and 'celestial flames from heaven'. The former 'belongs to man' and is 'holy', but corruptible; the latter 'belongs to God' and is 'profane' and 'incorruptible': '[F]or it was fitting that a more incorruptible essence of fire than that which served the common purposes of life should be set apart for sacrifices' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.158). Philo believes that:

... not only handicraft trades, but also nearly all other acts and businesses, and especially all such as have reference to any providing of or seeking for the means of life, are either carried on by means of fire themselves, or, at all events, not without those instruments which are made by fire [*which is why*] Moses in many places, forbids any one to handle a fire on the Sabbath day, inasmuch as that is the most primary and efficient source of things and the most ancient and important work. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.119)

He considers wood to be 'the material of fire and the beginning of all arts' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.220).

Philo's thinking on the origin of fire is that 'the *essence of fire flows from* the quarter of the torrid zone in an invisible manner' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.56). According to him, this fact might be another reason why Egypt lacks a winter season – it may not only be linked to the possible role of the element of water, but might also be due to the possible role of the element of fire (*Vit. Mos.* 1.114). He states that, 'some say' that the lack of a winter season might be:

... from the fact of [*Egypt*] not being at any great distance from the torrid zone, since the essence of fire flows from that quarter in an invisible manner, and scorches everything all around ... (*Vit. Mos.* 1.114)

For Philo the *colour* associated with fire is 'scarlet', 'because it is red in colour' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.88), as can also be seen in the symbolism with the high priest's attire (*Vit. Mos.* 2.133).

### The mantle (ephod) as symbol of heaven with its two zodiac (ζωοφόρος) shoulder plates representing two hemispheres with six signs each

Exodus 28 prescribes that the ephod shall consist of two shoulder pieces (δύο ἐπωμίδες) that are attached at its edges, so that it may be joined together (v. 7), and that the two stones (δύο λίθους) should be set on the shoulder pieces of the ephod 'as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance' (v. 12).

Philo understands the two stones of Exodus 28 to be 'two emeralds on the shoulderblades, which are two round stones'. He postulates two possibilities for their symbolic understanding. The first is an opinion held by 'some persons who have studied the subject' and who see them as 'emblems of those stars which are the rulers of night and day, namely, the sun and moon'. The second possibility is to see them as emblems of the two hemispheres in Philo's opinion. This option is for him more correct and closer to the truth:

[F]or, like those two stones, the portion below the earth and that over the earth are both equal, and neither of them is by nature

adapted to be either increased or diminished like the moon. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.122)

He lists as additional evidence the colour of the stars:

[F]or to the glance of the eye the appearance of the heaven does resemble an emerald; and it follows necessarily that six names are engraved on each of the stones, because each of the hemispheres cuts the zodiac in two parts, and in this way comprehends within itself six signs of the zodiac. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.123)

The *zodiac* is an arithmetic symbol that was most likely developed by Babylonian (Chaldean) astronomers.<sup>23</sup> Some scholars are of the opinion 'that the zodiac did not appear in developed form until the Persian period' (Heck 1990:23–24). It consisted of a disc that was divided into 12 equal zones of 30 degrees each and contained 12 astrological signs<sup>24</sup> such as the Capricorn, Taurus (bull) and Libra (scales). Greek astronomy adopted it during the 4th century BCE and it became well established during the Hellenistic period where it resulted more in astrology than in astronomy. By the 2nd century BCE, astrology was already deeply rooted in Palestine and has reached Rome, where the Senate first banned it in 139 BCE, but the zodiac or its signs later appeared on Roman coins of many provinces (Negev 1990). The oldest known relief of the zodiac to be found, dates from approximately 50 BCE due to the identified position of the planets and stars at that time. This bas-relief was discovered in the Hathor Temple at Dendera in Egypt, within the ceiling of the *pronaos* of a chapel that was dedicated to Osiris.

A distinction ought to be made between at least two kinds of zodiacs:

1. The astrological or '*astronomical*' map of the stars as inherited from the Babylonians (or Chaldeans) by the Greeks, as discussed above.
2. The discs that contained the 12 names of the sons of Israel as described in Exodus 28:9–10: 'You shall take two onyx stones (δύο λίθους σμαράγδου), and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel (τὰ ὀνόματα τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ), six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth.'

There seems to be little doubt then that for Philo the two discs represent the two hemispheres ('because each of the hemispheres cuts the zodiac in two parts'), and that the six 'names' engraved (ἕξ ὀνόματα ἐγγλύφεται) on these are most likely not those of the sons of Israel as in Exodus 28, but rather the six astrological 'signs of the zodiac' (ζῳδια) on each disc (*Vit. Mos.* 2.123; cf. also 2.133). Philo thus seems to create a hybrid version between the Chaldean-Greek astrological tradition and that of the Jewish biblical tradition from the Torah.

### The λογεῖον: An emblem that holds together and regulates the universe

In his extensive discussion of the breastplate with its 12 stones that differ in colour and which are set in four rows of

23. Cf. Moehring (1995:147): 'We do not know exactly what Pythagoras adopted from Babylonia, what he himself discovered and what was attributed to him by his immediate and later disciples.'

24. Cf. 2 Enoch 21:6 ('And I saw the eighth heaven [...] and the twelve zodiacs, which are above the seventh heaven. And I saw the ninth heaven [...] where the heavenly houses of the twelve zodiacs are') and also 2 Enoch 30:3–6.



three each (*Vit. Mos.* 2.124–130), Philo understands them to be emblems of the circle of the zodiac:

For that also is divided into four parts, each consisting of three zodiac signs (ἐκ τριῶν ζῳδίων), by which divisions it makes up the seasons of the year, spring, summer, autumn, and winter, distinguishing the four changes, the two solstices, and the two equinoxes, each of which has its limit of three signs of this zodiac (τρία ζῳδία), by the revolutions of the sun, according to that unchangeable, and most lasting, and really divine ratio which exists in numbers; on which account they attached it to that which is with great propriety called the *logeum* (τῷ προσαγορευθέντι δεόντως λογεῖω). For all the changes of the year and the seasons are arranged by well-defined, and stated, and firm reason; and, though this seems a most extraordinary and incredible thing, by their seasonable changes they display their undeviating and everlasting permanence and durability. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.124–5)

Philo further elaborates on the *difference in colour* of each of the 12 stones with the symbolism of the zodiac (τῷ ζωοφόρῳ) where:

... each sign produces that colour which is akin to and belongs to itself, both in the air, and in the earth, and in the water; and it produces it likewise in all the affections which move them, and in all kinds of animals and of plants. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.126)

The fact that the *logeum* (τὸ λογεῖον)<sup>25</sup> is described as ‘double’, is quite appropriate for Philo as he understands reason (ὁ λόγος) to be of a double-sided nature: ‘both in the universe (ἐν τε τῷ παντί) and also in the nature of humankind (ἐν ἀνθρώπου φύσει)’. Firstly, in universe is reason that is conversant about incorporeal species (τῶν ἀσωμάτων). These incorporeal species are like patterns (παραδειγματικῶν) of which a world consists that is perceptible only by the intellect (ὁ νοητὸς ἐπάγη κόσμος). Then also there is reason that is concerned with the visible objects of sight (καὶ ὁ περὶ τῶν ὀρατῶν). These objects are imitations and copies (μιμήματα καὶ ἀπεικονίσματα) of those species coming from the world perceptible by the outward senses. Secondly, in humanity (ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ) there is, on the one hand, reason that is kept back and that is like a spring situated in the mind. On the other hand, however, is reason that finds vent in utterance and all that flows from it. This reason is situated in the tongue, the mouth and the rest of the organs of the voice (*Vit. Mos.* 2.127).

When it comes to the *quadrangular form* of the *logeum*, he sees the intention of it to be ‘that both the reason of nature (τὸν τῆς φύσεως λόγον), and also that of man, ought to penetrate everywhere, and ought never to waver in any case’ (*Vit. Mos.* 2.128). He links this to the two virtues (δύο ἀρετάς) of manifestation (δηλώσιν) and truth (ἀλήθειαν):

[T]he reason of nature is true, and calculated to make manifest, and to explain everything; and the reason of the wise man, imitating that other reason, ought naturally, and appropriately to be completely sincere, honouring truth (τιμῶν ἀλήθειαν), and not obscuring (συσκιάζειν) anything through envy (φθόνῳ), the knowledge/information (ἡ μῆνσις) of which can benefit those to whom it would be explained. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.128)

25. The raised platform, or high stage, that was used for the actors in the Hellenistic theatre – and which currently corresponds with the modern stage – was also known as the *logeion*, that is the ‘speaking place’ (Norwood 1942:53; Davis & Jokiniemi 2012:223).

Philo’s position on these virtues (λόγους) is:

[I]t is suitable to the mind that it should admit of no error or falsehood, and to explanation that it should not hinder anything that can conduce to the most accurate manifestation. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.129)

The position of the *logeum*, being fixed to the robe which is worn over the shoulder so that it may never get loose, is an indication for Philo that:

[T]here is no advantage in reason which expends itself in dignified and pompous language, about things which are good and desirable, unless it is followed by consistent practice of suitable actions [...] as he does not approve of the language being separated from the actions; for he puts forth the shoulder as the emblem of energy and action. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.130)

It can thus be concluded that for Philo ‘the *logeum* is an emblem of that reason which holds together and regulates the universe’ (τοῦ συνέχοντος καὶ διοικοῦντος τὰ σύμπαντα τὸ λογεῖον, *Vit. Mos.* 2.133).<sup>26</sup> Truth and manifestation, as noticed in actions and language, forms the binding ring that holds together Philo’s symbolic universe.

## Observations with regard to Philo’s theology

Philo’s theology is in line with that of the mainstream thinking on the nature of God as it had been described in the Jewish Scriptures.

### The Creator

Philo sees God as ‘the uncreated and everlasting God’ (*Vit. Mos.* 2.171), ‘the first being who had any existence, and the Father of the universe’ (*Vit. Mos.* 2.205). He is the *Creator* (*Vit. Mos.* 2.209)<sup>27</sup> who ‘possesses everything and is in need of nothing’ (*Vit. Mos.* 1.157). It is not only one portion of the universe, but ‘the whole world that belongs to God, and all its parts obey their master, supplying everything which he desires that they should supply’ (*Vit. Mos.* 1.201). He is ‘the Creator of the world; since he brought things which had no existence into being’ (*Vit. Mos.* 2.100).<sup>28</sup>

For the elements of the universe, earth, water, air, and fire, of which the world was made, were all by the command of God, brought into a state of hostility against them, so that the country of those impious men was destroyed, in order to exhibit the height of the authority which God wielded, who had also fashioned those same elements at the creation of the universe, so as to secure its safety, and who could change them all whenever he pleased, to effect the destruction of impious men. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.96)

Philo’s God states:

26. ‘Those who wished to live in harmony with the universe should adopt Mosaic practices (*Mos.* 2.25–44, 108)’ (Koester 1989:180).

27. ‘Since God is the creator of the cosmos, the context of the Jewish people and other peoples were seen within the broader cosmic context’ (Borgen 1997:286).

28. ‘In the ancient world, creation of “non-being into being” typically did not assume an ultimate or absolute “nothing” (*nihil*): see 2 Mac. 7:28a (cf. v. 28b and v. 23 with v. 28a [i.e. 1 Cor 11, *GJSJ*]); Plato, *Soph.* 265c; Philo: *Spec.* 4.187; *Migr.* 183; *Mos.* 2.100 (though these references in Philo should be compared with his use of an ultimate “nothing” in *Plant.* 7; *Somn.* 1.63–64; *Mos.* 2.267)’ (Worthington 2011:5; cf. also Steyn 2012a).

If any one does not think anything whatever that is made by hands, or anything that is created, a god, but believes that there is one ruler of the universe only, let him come to me. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.168)

Philo's cosmological theology is extensively summarised in *Vit. Mos.* 1.212–3:

... if anyone disbelieves these facts, he neither knows God nor has he ever sought to know him [...] looking at the things which are really great and deserving of serious attention, namely, the creation of the heaven, and the revolutions of the planets and fixed stars, and the shining of light – of the light of the sun by day and that of the moon by night – and the position of the earth in the most centre spot of the universe, and the vast dominions of the different continents and islands, and the innumerable varieties of animals and plants, and the effusion of the sea, and the rapid courses of the ever-flowing rivers and winter mountain torrents, and the streams of everlasting springs, some of which pour forth cold and others hot water, and the various changes and alterations of the air and climate, and the different seasons of the year, and an infinite number of other beautiful objects. And the whole of a man's life would be too short if he wished to enumerate all the separate instances of such things, or even to detail fully all that is to be seen in one complete portion of the world. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.212–3)

## Transcendent

Philo's God is *transcendent* and to be found 'in the darkness (ἐἷς τε τὸν γνόφον); that is to say, in the invisible, and shapeless, and incorporeal world, the essence (τῶν ὄντων), which is the model of all existing things, where he beheld things invisible to mortal nature' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.158).

## True and living

Philo pictures God as the *true* (*Vit. Mos.* 2.171) and *living* God (*Vit. Mos.* 2.67) and speaks of 'the holiness of the living God' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.161). As a God of truth, 'God is not able to speak falsely as if he were a man, nor does he change his purpose like the son of man' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.283). He loves virtue, and piety, and excellence (*Vit. Mos.* 1.148). At the burning bush:

... in the middle of the flame there was seen a certain very beautiful form, not resembling any visible thing, a most Godlike image, emitting a light more brilliant than fire, which any one might have imagined to be the image of the living God. (*Vit. Mos.* 1.66)

God calls himself 'I am that I am' and says that 'there is a difference between him that is and him that is not' and 'that there is no name whatever that can properly be assigned to him, who is the only being to whom existence belongs' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.75). It is by the letters of his name that 'the living God is indicated since it is not possible that anything that is in existence should exist without God being invoked' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.132). God's name 'is always most deserving to obtain the victory, and is especially worthy of love' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.205).

## Providence

Philo talks of the (sacred) *will* of God (*Vit. Mos.* 1.95, 287; 2.3, 71, 176) and understands events to take place in accordance with the *providence* of God (*Vit. Mos.* 1.12, 162; 2.6, 32, 58, 154). The 'angel' of the burning bush is an emblem of the

providence of God (*Vit. Mos.* 1.67) and God declares his will 'by demonstrations clearer than any verbal commands, namely, by signs and wonders' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.95). It is therefore 'not at all safe or free from danger to oppose the commands of God' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.85).

## Justice

Philo presents God as a *just* God (*Vit. Mos.* 1.260) with justice as God's constant assessor (*Vit. Mos.* 2.53). God can bring punishments to proceed out of the water and others out of the land (*Vit. Mos.* 1.107). He is 'also a king by nature, because no one can rule over beings that have been created more justly than he who created them' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.100).

## Power

Philo describes God as *powerful* (*Vit. Mos.* 1.19, 47, 95, 96) and as the supreme and mightiest of all powers (*Vit. Mos.* 1.111). He 'presides over the rights of free men, and of strangers' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.36). A mortal is inferior to God (*Vit. Mos.* 2.194) and he is the great ruler of all (*Vit. Mos.* 1.318). He can determine to destroy by fire (*Vit. Mos.* 2.55) and can give a share of his prescient power (*Vit. Mos.* 2.190), such as when 'Moses, at the command of God, smote the sea with his staff and it divides in two parts' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.177). 'For all the earth put together, from one end to the other, could not withstand the hand of God, no nor all the universe' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.112). 'God does not deliver in the same way that man does' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.173). Philo interprets the two cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant as:

... the two most ancient and supreme powers of the divine God, namely, his creative and his kingly power; and his creative power is called God; according to which he arranged, and created, and adorned this universe, and his kingly power is called Lord, by which he rules over the beings whom he has created, and governs them with justice and firmness. (*Vit. Mos.* 2.99)

The power of God is nonetheless 'merciful power' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.96).

## Mercy

Philo's God is thus also *merciful* (*Vit. Mos.* 1.101; 2.61) and desirous rather to admonish the Egyptians than to destroy them (*Vit. Mos.* 1.110). He 'listens favourably to prayers' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.5), has a natural love and compassion for humanity, and shows 'his great piety and holiness in all matters whether visible or invisible, pitied them and relieved their distress' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.198). He has shown 'mercies and benefits in matters beyond all hope' (*Vit. Mos.* 2.259) and can grant 'peace, the greatest of all good things, which no man is able to bestow' (*Vit. Mos.* 1.304).

## Conclusion

### Cosmological theology or theological cosmology in *De Vita Mosis*?

Given the fact that Philo is a theologian *par excellence* (Runia 1990:69), the question can be asked if we have here



a *cosmological theology*, that is the cosmology used to better explain the nature of God? In other words, does Philo talk about God in cosmic terms? Is he thus interpreting his theology by means of his understanding of cosmology? Or do we rather have here a *theological cosmology* that is Philo's theology used to interpret and explain the cosmos? In other words, is he interpreting cosmology by means of his theology?

Philo is not addressing cosmology per se in his *De Vita Mosis*, but he is rather writing a theology that sketches the cosmic superiority and involvement of Israel's God against the backdrop of Greek cosmology as it was influenced by Pythagoras' geometry and numerology as well as by Plato's philosophy. In this sense, his account in *De Vita Mosis* is closer to a *cosmological theology*. He utilises the cosmological picture of the Greco-Hellenistic world in order to introduce and present the powerful nature and qualities of Israel's God.

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