

NOTES

A NEW APPRECIATION OF PHILO

As this notice is written, the galleys of a two-volume work on Philo are slowly issuing from the Harvard University Press, and perhaps the early spring of 1946 will see the work itself on the market. Several features of this new study—its central thesis, its method, its contents, and its author's plan to build a whole series of related works around it—call, it seems, for something in the nature of a preview of *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Harry Austryn Wolfson. To historians of dogma or philosophy, and perhaps more urgently still to the increasing number of those interested in the problems of the relation of faith and reason, Professor Wolfson's *Philo* will address itself.

The *Philo* is to form the second in a series of works, the last of which, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass., 1934), has already been published. When the entire project has been published, the first work of the series will give an historical interpretation of Greek philosophy as the source of future problems. After the *Philo* there will be several volumes dealing with the subsequent development, in Christianity, Islam, and later Judaism, of the same philosophical problems raised in the *Philo*. In his treatment of Christian philosophy, the author will devote considerable space to the Fathers of the Church and to medieval Latin philosophy, with a special reference to St. Thomas and his influence. The concluding work of the series, the already extant *Spinoza*, will then appear in a revised edition, extended to three volumes.

Building his whole structure upon the thesis that Philo was not, as is too commonly thought, an eclectic who pieced together in syncretism the *dissecta membra* of Greek and Hellenistic thinkers, but a very original mind and a critic of the Greeks, the author attempts to show that Philo laid down those fundamental principles of the relation of philosophy to religion which were never challenged until Spinoza. Not only must philosophy, as Philo was the first to maintain, bow to Scripture as handmaid to queen, but in the light of this radical relationship, Greek philosophy must also undergo a complete revision, patiently submitting all its findings to be recast by the higher authority of religion. Philo himself undertook such a revision.

Spinoza¹ broke with this seventeen-century old tradition, established by

¹ Not Descartes: Bruno and Descartes revolted, it is true, but their revolt was rather against medieval science than against this revision of philosophy by Philo. The author maintains, in fact, that the central purpose of the Cartesian philosophy was to show that the Philonic position in philosophy was still compatible with a new science.

Philo and maintained in substance by all medieval religious thinkers thereafter, whether Jewish, Christian, or Moslem. Though this tradition or attitude, namely, that there are certain irreducible tenets of revealed religion to which human philosophies must necessarily accommodate themselves, was defined with characteristic differences by Christians, Jews, and Moslems, says Professor Wolfson, it nevertheless transcended the frontiers of creed and language in the form of a common conviction that revelation was now mistress of the sciences and must have the obeisance of unaided human reason.

It is, therefore, from the central trunk of this idea, rooted in the *Philo*, that the distinct but related branches of Professor Wolfson's series will grow in organic unity. It is an ambitious and original program of synthesis which (since the writing has all been completed) we may hope to see published within the next five years.

While the thesis of the *Philo* will commend itself to those who are interested in a Christian philosophy, the method employed by the author will be of even more general interest to all who work with philosophical texts of any age, especially those more remote. To this method Professor Wolfson has given the name: "hypothetico-deductive method of text-study." It is doubtless already familiar to those acquainted with his *Philosophy of Spinoza* and his earlier work, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929). In the *Spinoza* the method is given the following general formulation:

The first step, the basic step, in the understanding of any philosopher, upon which any subjective form of interpretation or any literary form of presentation must rest, is the determination by the method of historical criticism of what the philosopher meant by what he said, how he came to say what he said, and why he said it in the manner in which he happened to say it.²

A more detailed analysis is the following:

We must assume that the *Ethics* is a carefully written book, in which there is order and sequence and continuity, and in which every term and expression is chosen with care and used with precision. We must try to find out not only what is within it, but also what is behind it. We must try to understand not only what the author says, but also what he omits to say, and why he omits it. We must constantly ask ourselves, with regard to every statement he makes, what is the reason? What does he intend to let us hear? What is his authority? Does he reproduce his authority correctly or not? What are the differences between certain statements, and can such differences be reduced to other differences so as to

² *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, I, vii.

discover in them a common underlying principle? In order to understand Spinoza in full and to understand him well, we must familiarize ourselves with his entire literary background. We must place ourselves in the position of students, who, having done the reading assigned in advance, come to sit at his feet and listen to his comments thereon. Every nod and wink and allusion of his will then become intelligible. Words previously quite unimportant will become charged with meaning. Abrupt transitions will receive an adequate explanation; repetitions will be accounted for. We shall know more of Spinoza's thought than what is merely expressed in his utterances. We shall know what he wished to say and what he would have said had we been able to question him and elicit further information.³

With the *Philo* this method comes into its own. Philo's intellectual and spiritual environment as determinants of his thought, his unexpressed presuppositions, his unformulated reactions to earlier thinkers and to the entire pagan milieu of the first decades after the birth of Christ are all painstakingly explored or deduced and then brought to bear on the actual words of the text.

A glance at the contents of the *Philo* will reveal the breadth of its subject matter and the range within which this hypothetico-deductive method is made operative. Professor Wolfson's first chapter, dealing with Hellenistic Judaism, is an analysis of the Hellenistic Jewish reaction to the religious and philosophical elements of Greek culture. Against the historians who claim that a Judaeo-pagan syncretism took shape in Alexandria during the three hundred years between the second Ptolemy and Philo, the author contends that this syncretism was merely apparent and accidental, a syncretism into which the Diaspora was betrayed only by the limitations of human language, while the inner orthodoxy of Judaism remained inviolate. In substance, the Judaism of this period stood fixed intransigently over against a dominant paganism, and yielded its autonomy and purity in no essential either to pagan mysteries and cult, or to any other than to an aesthetic use of pagan language and literature. This outspoken refusal to be bent or broken by paganism was reiterated and summarized by Philo, both in his insistence on the complete autonomy of the Scriptures *vis-à-vis* philosophy and in his translation of this insistence into a total revision of the results of pagan thought—an attitude which, the author claims, anticipates and parallels a similar reaction of the Fathers of the Church in later centuries. The second and third chapters of the *Philo* explore this subordination of the text of Aristotle to the revealed accents of the text of Scripture

³ *Ibid.*, I, 24-5.

by a study of Philo's technique of interpreting Scripture by philosophy and philosophy by Scripture.

In the remainder of the work, Philo is made to present systematically his own view of the outstanding problems of Greek philosophy, insofar as these problems have a bearing on religion. There is a long, monographic treatment of Philo's Logos; there is a chapter dealing with creation; to the laws of nature and miracles, to souls, immortality, and angels, to free will, and to the question of knowledge and prophecy, separate chapters are devoted. Another chapter deals with the proofs for the existence of God. This is followed by a study of the unknowability of God's essence and the meaning of the predicates by which He is described. Finally, there are two long, monographic chapters on Philo's ethical and political theory. In this wealth of material each topic is connected with every other and with the whole of medieval philosophy by a section ("Conclusion, Inference, Anticipation") which terminates each chapter, providing a summary, an organic, textual bond with future treatments of the same subject, and a glance down the ages to Spinoza and his attempt to overturn the tradition of religious philosophy.

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