

Albert C. Geljon, *Philonic exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa's De vita Moysis*. Brown Judaic Studies n. 333, Studia Philonica monographs 5, Providence RI 2002, XX, 220 pp.; 15x24 cm., ISBN 1-930675-12-7.

The work is a revision of the author's doctoral thesis, presented at the University of Leiden in December 2000: it is a serious and detailed analysis of Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* from the perspective of Philo's homonymous work. Its purpose is to determine the influence of philonic exegesis on Gregory of Nyssa's work.

According to the author, Philo's *De vita Moysis* represents a typical example of a philosophical life, a literary composition that often introduced the edition of the writings of an author of antiquity, in order to make more accessible its thought to the reader. In the case of Moses, the purpose would have been the introduction of the heathen to mosaic philosophy. The case of Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* is clearly different, but in both works the life of Moses is proposed to the reader as a model.

The book is divided in three main parts: the first part analyzes the meaning of Philo's *De vita Moysis* in the context of the work of the great Alexandrine. In the second part, the attention of the author is centered on the homonymous Nyssen work and on Philo's influence on Gregory. Finally, the last part, which is the longest and constitutes the most original and valuable contribution of the work, offers a detailed analysis of Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* with its possible relations to Philo's thought.

Paradoxically, both great exegetes are very near and very distant at the same time. Gregory depends on Philo when he affirms God's essential incomprehensibility, as in the example of the darkness in *Ex* 20-21. But, at the same time, the Nyssen rejects completely the philonic doctrine of the *Logos*, that from Gregory's point of view is considered subordinationist and read as a source of inspiration for the same Eunomius. The author follows methodically two different steps: first of all he analyzes the phraseologic parallelisms and, only later, does he study the exegetic level.

J. Daniélou had already noticed many literal parallels between Nyssen and Philonic writings. Geljon finds up to 25 verbal parallelisms, that appear in the commentary of the same passages of Moses' life which are not present in other possible sources of Gregory's thought. Most of them occur in the first part of the Nyssen *De vita Moysis*. Much less relevant are the common points at the exegetical level: Gregory never uses exactly the same Philonic interpretation and most of the time, when a similarity occurs, it can be attributed to different sources or mediations.

The clearest common point between the two exegetes is the interpretation of Biblical Egypt as the "world of passions". Gregory takes all this complex allegory from the Philonic

work: verbal parallelisms suggest that the influence is due to a direct readout. Nevertheless the theological thought of the Nyssen prevents him from following its source in those interpretations that identify the “world of passions” with the body of man.

In synthesis, Gregory uses his source with great freedom, presenting Moses’ life as an example of the virtuous man, who knows how to fight against passions. The difference with respect to Philo’s *De vita Moysis* is very clear: while the latter presents the saintly man as philosopher, king and wise person par excellence, Gregory proposes him as an example of a mystic, who struggles constantly along the infinite path towards the perfect communion with God.

The book is written with order, clarity and conciseness. The section dedicated to the indices is good. It would have acquired even more value for the reader, if it had included an index of the main ideas and of the main Greek words. With respect to the relation between the two ancient authors, it would have been interesting to analyze how far rhetorical education influenced the exegesis of both Gregory and Philo. But these considerations do not reduce absolutely the value of this very serious, useful and interesting study.

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