



Some Remarks on Musical Symbolism of Philo's Hermeneutics in "De Posteritate Caini"

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Abstract

Philo of Alexandria can hardly be called a philosopher, especially given a certain speculative or systematic philosophy. But also, contrary to the prevailing opinion in contemporary research, it could hardly be defined as an exegete, especially given the modern content of the term. At the same time, the impression remains that the most often associated concept with his name – allegory (allegorical interpretation) is usually perceived too narrowly, and not enough attention is paid to the actual literary and hermeneutical skills of the author. Modern translations of his works often do not reflect the symbolism used by Philo at all, as is the case with music imagery in the opening paragraph of *De Posteritate Caini*. The musical theme and symbolism in Philo's work undoubtedly deserve a special and thorough study, which would go far beyond the scope of this article.

Keywords: Philo of Alexandria, allegorical hermeneutics, musical symbolism.

1. Introduction

"It is a thoroughly philosophical proceeding to show how one and the same name has different shades of meaning" (*Post.* 60, Philo II, 1929: 361).

In the approach to Philo's *De Posteritate Caini*, too often, one simple thing seems to be missed and this seemingly elusive observation too many is that Philo not only interprets Scripture allegorically (symbolically), but also that he allows/requires his reader to interpret symbolically his own "exegetical treatises". The modern reader is often perplexed when he encounters Philo the Exegete, as he usually expects Philo to "explain" a sacred text – bearing the relative character of a hidden, obscure, intended for religious people – in some way, which is presumably clear, logical, revealing what is hidden. This principle corresponds to the rationalism of today's reader, but not to the intention of Philo (Cazeaux, 1989: 1). Also, it should be borne in mind that Philo too often not only interprets the biblical text he quotes, but interprets his own text, of course Cazeaux in this case could argue to what extent Philo's text everywhere is "the result of the exegesis that has been made" (Cazeaux, 1983: 27).

- Philo’s modern translation does not take into account Philo’s own language and the musical symbolism used in *Post.* 1 remains invisible.
- The indicated musical imagery on the other hand comes to support the implicit division between seeing and hearing.
- Philo formulated his apophatic theology based on the basic belief that God could not be seen.
- The play with language in Philo is closely related to literary composition and hermeneutics in its own sense.

The musical theme and imagery in Philo’s work undoubtedly deserve a special and thorough study, which would go far beyond the scope of this article. As for the language of music and ancient music theory in Philo’s work, obviously the two chapters (31-32) of *De Posteritate Caini* would be central, as they are explicitly devoted to music. However, the present attempt is not to explore the musical theme itself, but to present how Philo uses the language and symbolism of music in his hermeneutics, relating it to other ideas and images. He does this not only explicitly as in the two chapters mentioned above, but also implicitly, for example, in the opening paragraph of the treatise. This introductory paragraph, which is particularly important for understanding Philo’s allegorical interpretation, in turn has its connections in the tissue of the text and its structure with such key passages as the *Post.* 12-15, 87-88, 103-111 precisely through the symbolic language of music.

In this case, I will be tempted to quote an excerpt from an author, who is far closer to us historically; it would serve on the one hand as a model for a very similar use of musical language and at the same time as an approach to Philo’s hermeneutics:

“The signifying intention is embodied and known by seeking an equivalent in the system of available senses represented by the language I speak and the set of writings and culture of which I am the heir. For this mute vow that is the signifying intention, it is a question of realizing a certain arrangement of the already signifying instruments or of the already speaking significations [...] which arouses in the listener the presentiment of another and new signification and to the reverse to accomplish with him who speaks or who writes the anchoring of the new meaning in the senses already available”¹ (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 84).

It is also very probable that Philo proceeds from a principle of the age in which he wrote, and which states that a sacred text in particular, not only says, but at the same time hides. Undoubtedly, the reader of Philo – even without paying special attention to modern concepts of language, image, expression, must be more attentive to the “play with language” that Philo demonstrates to him (Cazeaux, 1989: 4).

¹ “L’intention significative se donne un corps et se connaît elle-même en se cherchant un équivalent dans le système des significations disponibles que représentent la langue que je parle et l’ensemble des écrits et de la culture dont je suis l’héritier. Il s’agit, pour ce vœu muet qu’est l’intention significative, de réaliser un certain arrangement des instruments déjà signifiants ou des significations déjà parlantes [...] qui suscite chez l’auditeur le présentiment d’une signification autre et neuve et inversement accomplisse chez lui qui parle ou qui écrit l’ancrage de la signification inédite dans les significations déjà disponibles” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 84).

2. *Post. 1* and the need of allegorical interpretation

The problem with *De Posteritate Caini*'s opening paragraph is that the modern reader would find it difficult to feel this "play with language" in the translations. For example, musical symbolism here remains completely hidden. In the presented translation and analysis, an attempt is made to convey the ambiguity and imagery of the language used by Philo, which for the contemporaries of the Hellenistic author in Alexandria were probably obvious. It is this initial paragraph that is, on the one hand, crucial for the substantiation of Philo's allegorical interpretation, and on the other hand, it would be a good illustrative example of the characteristic imagery of the author's text itself, which is difficult to convey in modern translations. Heidegger's words can rightly be quoted here: "Dazu ist nötig, dass unser Denken vor dem Übersetzen erst zu dem übersetzt, was griechisch gesagt ist" (For this it is necessary, that our thinking first translated to what is said in Greek before translating) (Heidegger, 1950: 303).

"And Cain went out from the face of God, and dwelt in the land of Nod, over against Eden" (*Gen. 4:16*). Now we wonder whether [these things] in the divinely manifested (*διερμηνευθείσας*) books of Moses, more figuratively (more melodically, in tone) we should hear/listen (*τροπικώτερον ἀκούειν*), [because] the immediate image in the words (*ἐν τοῖς ὀνόμασι προχείρου φαντασίας*) is too out of tune with the real (*πολύ τάληθοῦς ἀπαδούσης*)" (*Post. 1*) (cf. the original text in: Philo, 1929: 328).

For comparison, some of the modern translations could be given, paying attention to the two key expressions used by Philo, containing in the original a certain auditory-musical symbolism:

"Let us here raise the question whether in the books in which Moses acts as God's interpreter *we ought to take his statements figuratively*, since the impression made by the words in their literal sense *is greatly at variance with truth*" (Philo, 1929: 329).

"Now let us raise the question whether in the books in which Moses acts as God's interpreter *we should take what he says figuratively*, since the impressions derived from a literal interpretation *are considerably in conflict with the truth*" (Williamson, 1989: 176).

The starting point for Philo is the biblical expression "from the face of God". The characteristic feature of the words from the biblical quote in *Genesis 4:16*, which prompts the author to refuse to see himself literally, is that they speak of Cain's distance from God's appearance. When this is conveyed as a departure from the face of God, it seems completely anthropomorphic, and therefore the expression could not be literally true. Here is a case of biblical anthropomorphism that forces Philo to interpret it allegorically. Thus, he puts forward the general principle that no anthropomorphic affirmation of God can be taken literally (cf. Williamson, 1989: 178). Naturally, the question here is why the Scriptures contain similar statements to that in *Gen. 4:16*? Philo answers elsewhere (*Deus. 54*), namely that they were "introduced to the teaching of the multitude (*πρὸς τὴν τῶν πολλῶν διδασκαλίαν εἰσάγεται*)".

In fact, Philo's reasoning in the passage in question begins with the fact that "Moses acts as a hermeneut of God (*ἐν ταῖς διερμηνευθείσας βίβλοις ὑπὸ Μωυσέως*)". In this case, a serious misunderstanding could be caused by modern translations in connection with the concept of *hermeneuein*. Thus, for example, Colson and Whitaker convey in English the corresponding expression as "in the books in which Moses acts as God's interpreter" (Philo II, 1929: 329), in the same way Williamson (Williamson, 1989: 176). Philo hardly refers to Moses as the "interpreter" or "interpreter" of Scripture. From the original, here and elsewhere it is seen that it is unlikely that the concept of *hermeneuein* and its relatives will be understood in the sense of "interpretation", identical with exegesis, but rather of "expression" (cf. Pepin, 1988: 98-99). Philo praises Moses as "king and lawgiver and high priest and prophet" and "hermeneut of the sacred laws" (*Vit. Mos.*

II.3; I.1). He also calls him “the hermeneut of natural (of reality) things (ὁ τῶν τῆς φύσεως ἐρμηνεύς πραγμάτων)” (*Her.* 213).

Therefore, Philo after quoting the words of Gen. 4:16, then asks whether this statement by Moses should be taken literally or figuratively (τροπικώτερον). The word is often used in passages where the Hellenistic author describes his method of interpreting the biblical text and draws attention to the deeper meaning beneath the literal surface. He finds reason to regard the language of Scripture, in this case, as figurative on the basis that its literal meaning gives the impression that it is very different from the real one (cf. Williamson, 1989: 179). It is necessary to pay attention to the own literal surface of Philo’s text, as it contains a certain musical imagery. The first expression mentioned above is conveyed as: “we ought to take his statements figuratively”, “we should take what he says figuratively”. As can be seen, the phrase τροπικώτερον ἀκούειν is identically conveyed as “perceived figuratively”, but nowhere does it hint at the literal meaning of the verb ἀκούειν. It should not be forgotten that he conveys the musical-technical connotations of the expression, as well as of the term τροπικώτερον. The term τροπικώτερον mentioned here is used together with a specific verb ἀκούειν, whose main meaning and its derivatives is “listen, hear” with the corresponding audio-musical connotations transmitted in English with the verbs “hear” and “listen” (LSL: 52-53, 493). Of course, it can be understood as “I know” and even “understand” and “perceive” - as conveyed in modern translations, but still it seems that Philo uses in this case the literal expression “more figurative to hear”. The adjective τροπικῶς, in patristic post-Philonian Greek (apparently influenced by Philo), is now commonly used in the sense of “figurative, allegorical, symbolic” (cf. Lampe, 1961: 1413). On the other hand, τροπός in addition to the usual meanings “manner, custom”, as is known, is used in the field of oral and written language to denote “manner of expression, form, style, figure, method”, but in the field of music there are meaning of “melody, mood, tonality” (LSL, 1996: 1827). It is hardly possible to assume that the author does not play linguistically with the polysemantic content of this term, given this musical meaning. Then the corresponding expression could be conveyed as “more melodic to hear”. In support of this assumption is the meaning of the last word of the sentence ἀπαδόσης, derived from the verb ἀπαδω, which in practice is also a musical term meaning “I do not sing in tone, I am not in tune, I sing falsely” and which is used figuratively in the sense of “I introduce disharmony, deviate, differ; I am inappropriate” (LSL, 1996: 174). Thus, if one wants to “literally” convey the text to Philo, one could safely suggest the following as an example: “we should hear/listen more melodically [because] τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὀνόμασι προχείρου φαντασίας is too out of tune with the real one (τάληθοῦς)”. The last term τάληθοῦς is not accidentally found here and obviously originates from ἀλήθεια. The Greek word does not just mean truth, but also reality (LSL, 1996: 63-64). In philosophy it is understood as true being in distinction from the worldly phenomena which in the first instance appear as being and takes on more and more the sense of “true and genuine reality” (ThDNT I: 239). The notion of ἀλήθεια can also mean “genuineness”, “divine reality”, “revelation” (ThDNT I: 254). In the Greek world the question of truth implies that of the reality underlying all appearances as true reality. The understanding of knowledge as that which comprises this ἀλήθεια is shaped accordingly (ThDNT I: 692).

The next expression that deserves attention is τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὀνόμασι προχείρου φαντασίας, which is accordingly translated as: “since the impression made by the words in their literal sense”, “since the impressions derived from a literal interpretation”. As can be seen here in the original text, there is an ancient Greek word φαντασία (*phantasia* (Latin), fantasy, etc.), which has been widely used in modern languages. The literal meaning of the verbal noun is “appearing, appearance”, or “appearance, presentation to consciousness, whether immediate or in memory, whether true or illusory” (LSL, 1996: 1915). It “means that faculty by which these impressions, more than just being inside us, get stamped upon the soul” (Goodenough, 1969: 373). In this case, it is very likely that “presentation” is a better term than “perception” or “impression” for this notion (*Ibid.*). It can also mean the ability to imagine, the creative imagination (the re-

presentation of appearances or images, primarily derived from sensation), as well as the use of figurative language in literature (LSL, 1996: 1915-1916). Naturally, the last expression here is in a certain respect and comparison with the expression from the previous sentence ἐν ταῖς διερμηνευθείσαις βίβλοις, which, whether we translate with “God-expressed” or “God-interpreted” books, could lead us to think. Something that Ricoeur pointed out at a time closer to us: “Imagination is that dimension of subjectivity which, as a poem, gives its answer to the text. If the distance that the “thing” of the text digs into reality corresponds to the distance of the imagination, then the poetics of discourse corresponds to a poetics of existence” (Ricoeur, 1983: 99). Philo expresses this “distance” entirely through the symbolism of music: “we should listen more in tune because the handy presentation in the words is too out of tune with the real one”. The need for allegorical hermeneutics (meaning not only interpretation and understanding but also expression) is so clearly justified by Philo, but at the same time it is implied that it also depends on the ability to “hear in tune” and from the imagination. In connection with a hermeneutics that starts from the text and from the “thing” of the text, Ricoeur further asserts that “the text speaks above all to my imagination, to which it offers” images “of my liberation” (*Ibid.*: 100). It could turn out that the language of Philo through the use of musical symbolism and the two terms mentioned above (φαντασία and ἀλήθεια) is much more demanding to the reader than the language of one of the prominent representatives of modern philosophical hermeneutics.

Even a cursory comparison of the translations with the language used by Philo can reveal two dimensions of the author’s text that the translations do not take into account at all. The first, concerning the origin and form of Philo’s work: the verb “listen, hear”, used by the author immediately after the quoted biblical text, could obviously refer to a specific school or synagogue environment where a text of Scripture is read and then commented. Whether in practice Philo’s specific text originated in such an environment, or whether it is merely a literary imitation of such a form, is irrelevant in this case. What the author tells us here is that the biblical text is “listened to” and not “read”. The second dimension of the author’s text, not shown by the translations, one might be tempted to call simply fiction, but in fact it is here that a valid approach to Philo’s understanding of language, and hence to its hermeneutics, could be sought. The ambiguity of the phrase τροπικώτερον ἀκούειν “to be perceived symbolically” and “to be heard in tone” is maintained and developed by the author further through the “handy image (representation) in the words too with the real is not in tune”. This artful literary work with language in this case is also a sophisticated, so to speak, “distilled” Hellenistic hermeneutic manipulation of Plato’s language, where the connection between the verb “see” and the terms “eidos” and “idea” is well known. Here we “hear, perceive” the handy “image, representation” (φαντασία) in the words, which “is not in tune with the real thing”. There is no doubt about the connection of this term with the specific biblical verse (Gen. 4:16), which is quoted, but naturally refers to the overall biblical affirmation of God, who appears to Israel indirectly - in the cloud, smoke, etc., and hence to the theology of God’s presence and the Covenant. In this context, the non-accidental use of “listening” can be emphasized once again, for example, as Winston notes – David Cohen characterizes Judaism in general as “auditory”: “Unlike Greek philosophy, which is conceptual and contemplative ... In Judaism, man is called by the cosmic voice not to see God, which is impossible, but to understand and listen to it” (Winston, 1990: 2).

3. The relation of *Post.* 1 to *Post.* 12-15

Apparently, Philo has a “*style déroutant*” (puzzling style), and one that unfolds *De Posteritate* (as well as any of his allegorical treatises) usually recognizes at first glance some general moral formulas close to the cliché, “but drowned themselves in the middle of chaotic images, bizarre features, intellectual tools or reasoning more surprising than enlightening” (Cazeaux, 1988: 70). In this case, the aim is to show in a completely schematic way how Philo continues to use the musical symbolism indicated in the “microtext” of the opening verse, as if by

chance, but at the same time emphasizing “rhythmically” certain musical terms and imagery in the *Post.* 12-15. The musical motif used in the composition of the treatise in this passage, on the other hand, is related to such theological themes as the opposition of “hearing” and “seeing” God and hence his unknowability. In the *Post.* 12 Philo reintroduces a verb derived from ἀκούειν and at the same time introduces the most popular musical term not only in ancient music theory but also in ancient philosophy:

“Cain, then, has left the face of God to fall into the hands of Justice who takes vengeance on the impious. But Moses will lay down for his pupils (τοῖς γνωρίμοις αὐτοῦ) a charge most noble “to love God and hearken to (εἰσακούειν) and cleave to Him” (*Deut.* 30: 20); assuring them that this is the life that brings true prosperity and length of days. And his way of inviting them to honour Him Who is the worthy object of strong yearning and devoted love is vivid and expressive. He bids them “cleave to Him”, bringing out by the use of this word how concord and union (οἰκειῶσιν ἁρμονίας) comes through making God our own” (*Post.* 12: 335).

In this paragraph, Philo introduces the theologically important quote from *Deut.* 30:20. Here is the verb εἰσακούειν, but perhaps for anthropomorphic reasons Philo omits τῆς φωνῆς (his voice). The verb has the meaning of “to hear something or someone”, “to consent to” or “to gratify”, “to obey” (ThDNT I: 222). The hearing of man represents correspondence to the revelation of the Word, and in biblical religion it is thus the essential form in which this divine revelation is appropriated. Unlike Greek mysteries and oriental Gnosticism where great stress is laid on the fact that man apprehends God by seeing. This prevalence of hearing points to an essential feature of biblical religion. It is a religion of the Word, because it is a religion of action, of obedience to the Word (ThDNT I: 216-218).

The expression οἰκειῶσιν ἁρμονίας undoubtedly has musical connotations: “harmonics”, in ancient terminology, is the science dealing with the ordered arrangement of notes in scales and the relationships between scales, and it is the structures underlying melody that are the concern of harmonics. It was not concerned like modern harmonic theory with chords and chord-successions. “Harmony” and “harmonic progression”, as we understand such things, had no place in Greek musical practice (Barker, 2007: 7; West, 1992: 5, not. 7). The Greek term is better conveyed in English not with “harmony”, but “attunement” (Goodenough, 1969: 404; West, 1992: 198; Levin, 2009: 14). It is harmonics, “that lives the most vigorous life outside its own specialized sphere, and interacts most intimately with patterns of thought characteristic of other intellectual domains” (Barker, 2007: 7). “The notion that music owes its life to mathematics, and that the universe, by the same agency, owes its soul to *harmonia* – the attunement of opposites– took hold of human imagination from its first utterance and has transfixed it for the millennia” (Levin, 2009: 6). The word οἰκειῶσιν in addition to the possible reference to Stoic philosophy (Pembroke, 1971: 116-121; Long, 1974: 185-189) also has a specific musical meaning (Levin, 2009: 289, 297).

The translation of the τοῖς γνωρίμοις αὐτοῦ with “his pupils” does not seem entirely adequate, Goodenough offers his “mystical followers” (Goodenough, 1969: 212). The term is closely related to the meaning of “acquaintance” and “knowledge” and suggests rather “close persons” and “capable of apprehending”, “capable of knowing” (LSL, 1996: 355; ThDNT I: 718). In Philo, it is used of the knowledge of God (*Gen.* 167; *Mut.* 17).

It is clear enough that focusing on the expression “face of God” from the quoted biblical text of *Gen.* 4:16 at the beginning of the treatise, Philo considers it anthropomorphism and a reason for allegorical interpretation. However, the “language play” he begins in this first paragraph is less prominent, emphasizing “hearing” as opposed to implicitly implying “seeing the face of God”. In *Post.* 12, Philo returns to the biblical expression given at the beginning, but this time he connects it quite arbitrarily with the theologically important biblical quote from *Deut.* 30:20. In both paragraphs, we have an emphasis on “hearing”, but while in Genesis 1 it is in Philo’s text, in *Genesis* 12 it is in the biblical quotation itself. It is further emphasized by the conscious use of

musical symbolism through specific musical terms and concepts. In *Post.* 1 through ἀπαδούσης, and in *Post.* 12 through οικείωσιν ἁρμονίας. The latter, perhaps not only the most significant musical term in ancient music theory, but also the most important musical symbol in ancient philosophy, was repeated at the end of *Post.* 14 through ἁρμονίας λόγους. In the very next *Post.* 15 Philo marks the beginning of an apophatic theology that will have a long history of patristics and the Middle Ages, explicitly emphasizing the impossibility of “seeing” God: “When therefore the God-loving soul probes the question of the essence of the Existent Being, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boom, namely to apprehend that the God of real Being is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that He is incapable of being seen” (Philo II: 337).

The musical symbolism used and the emphasis on “listening”, Philo uses in the composition of his text as a “counterpoint” to “seeing” to reach in *Post.* 15 to expose the theme of the unknowability of God, i.e., that he cannot be “seen”. And not only that “He is incapable of being seen”, but also that “His essential Nature [...] we cannot touch it even with the pure spiritual contact of understanding” (*Post.* 20, Philo II: 339). Philo’s hermeneutics consists not only in the rationalizing philosophical discourse (allegorical exegesis) of a certain literal, it also means “literary” biblical text, but also in the literary work both on his own text and in connecting and moving to particular biblical texts. Of course, he does this not without the use of certain symbolism, “language play” and the effort of the imagination.

4. Conclusion

Based on this initial paragraph of *De Posteritate Caini*, perhaps before proceeding with any further analysis, it is necessary for the modern reader of Philo to pay more attention to the peculiarities of the text and the language used by the author. The language of modern translations differs significantly from the language of Philo – it differs not only philologically (as the ancient Greek language), which is self-evident, but also differs purely literary and as a philosophical discourse. Philo says differently what modern translations convey. He uses language in a different way. It would be too frivolous to attribute this simply to whim or coincidence, or even more to the inability of the ancient Greek or the author to say a certain thing in the way modern languages and translators say it, respectively. It is this “other way of saying” by Philo that could lead the thought not only to the obvious artistic use of language by the author and the corresponding openness he provides (to being, reality), but also to its hermeneutic dimension. The introductory paragraph of *De Posteritate Caini*, which is particularly important for understanding Philo’s allegorical interpretation, in turn has its connections in the tissue of the text and its structure with such key passages as the *Post.* 12-15, 87-88, 103-111 precisely through the symbolic language of music.

In the considered passages from Philo’s treatise there are certain biblical quotations such as *Gen.* 4:16, *Deut.* 30:20 and *Exod.* 33:13, but the serious question is: to what extent does he is doing exegesis of these quotations from Scripture that are in some way related to the general logic of the biblical text, rather than quoting them “arbitrarily” to interpret and to express his own text? If it could be proved that in this case Philo does not approach “exegetically” at all by looking for some internal logic and relationship between the quotations from the Scriptures, but on the contrary, he looks for a certain image, word, name from the text of Scripture to use for the development of his own discourse. This would mean that Philo did not simply perform an allegorical exegesis of the text of Scripture, but that he used it to express and interpret his own text.

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