

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Naomi G. Cohen.** *Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourse.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995. xx + 381 pp. \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8204-1650-3.

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This book takes its place among the classic scholarly treatments of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria by Belkin, Wolfson and Goodenough. With this work the author achieves distinction as the leading Jewish Philo scholar of this generation.

Philo has always held a fascination for Jewish scholars. To some, he represents the paradigm of a Hellenized Jew. Philo maintains in his writings a clear commitment to Judaism and a dazzling mastery of the eclectic Hellenistic philosophical traditions of his day and age. Like Philo, Jewish scholars in academic pursuits often must struggle with the tensions created by dual involvement in competing worlds of discourse. So his solutions to the synthesis of “secular” and “religious” philosophies is instructive and worthy of sustained analysis.

Cohen provides a fresh and original approach to many serious concerns of Philonic inquiry. She takes account of previous scholarship and goes well beyond it. Belkin had struggled in his work to show the continuities between Philo and the hypothetical world of rabbinic midrash and halakhah. Cohen admits that this work was limited in its success and admirably extends it further. Her efforts in this area show a deep and extensive knowledge of and sensitivity to the nuances of the Talmud and Midrash.

Goodenough tried to show the coherence of Philo and the hypothetical mystical religions of Hellenistic Jews. According to some assessments, he wanted to justify and explain the emergence of Christianity through the realm of Hellenized Judaism. Cohen notably does not find this task of much concern to her analysis.

Wolfson wanted to cement for Philo a cornerstone position in the development of all of Western philosophy. Cohen appears to have no such grand ambition for defending the significance of this resilient and seminal thinker.

This book achieves a balance often sorely miss-

ing in scholarly monographs. It includes programmatic overviews of issues such as Philo’s relation to the Greek philosophic tradition, his claim to fame as Midrashist, his audience and his influences. Cohen also treats the issues of scholarly credulity afforded to rabbinic sources. Though not all schools of scholarship will agree with her, she makes her complex positions abundantly clear. How refreshing this is, especially compared to less sophisticated work on this topic. Naomi Cohen is also quite respectful of her peers and their efforts. Again this is noteworthy, especially in a field where diatribe against scholarly adversaries is not uncommon.

The programmatic areas, dealt with mainly in chapter one, are not where Naomi Cohen achieves her place as the leading scholar of the discipline. Rather, that comes out of the specific studies she pursues in the rest of the monograph. In successive chapters she treats the parallels of Philo and various midrash texts, his statements on the decalogue, his comparison of Greek virtue and Mosaic law, and his well studied materials on the commandments. Her study of Philo’s Judeo-Greek vocabulary in chapter seven shows Cohen’s tremendous depth of philological mastery.

Assuming that he was a Jew who kept the commandments, Cohen asks in chapter six the obvious questions of the sources. In the course of her sustained inquiry into Philo’s treatment of the paragraphs of the Torah that are called the Shema, she asks, What were Philo’s tefillin like? To this and other issues she assembles the relevant sources and draws her nuanced and reasoned conclusions, epitomized in this citation: “Philo is close in spirit to rabbinic tradition as it has found expression in Talmudic sources, at the same time that he differs from the details of the halakhah as later codified” (p. 177). Bravo for a formulation that allows contemporary scholars of all religious preferences to share in the wealth of

erudition that characterizes this fine book.

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