Apophatic and Anthropomorphic Visions of God in Philo of Alexandria

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Abstract: Despite his core theological convictions that God is incorporeal, formless, invisible, and unchangeable, in some of his most carefully crafted *visio Dei* texts Philo portrays God "changing shape" and temporarily adopting a human form. However, these are only "seeming appearances" and actually involve God projecting a human-shaped "impression," or "appearance" (φαντασία) from his shapeless, immaterial being. By accommodating the overwhelming reality of God's being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, these docetic theophanies allow humans to more confidently relate to the deity, while at the same time preserving God's absolute transcendence and apophatic otherness.

Keywords: Philo of Alexandria, apophaticism, negative theology, anthropomorphism, transcendence, ineffability, theophany, visions of God, mysticism, allegorical interpretation

The creativity and sophistication of Philo of Alexandria's philosophically oriented interpretations of sacred scripture are apparent throughout his vast corpus.[1] However, as an inescapable result of his attempted fusion of ancient Jewish religion and Greco-Roman philosophy, Philo's exegeses often are characterized by tensions and disparities, particularly with regard to his portrayals of God and divine-human interactions.[2] Thus, his God is transcendent, yet immanent; abstract, yet personal; free from passions, yet merciful and loving; ineffable, yet susceptible to elaborate description. A noteworthy example of Philo's creativity and sophistication, in which all these tensions and disparities are evident, occurs in a number of texts in which the philosophically oriented concerns of apophaticism (i.e., "negative theology") and anti-anthropomorphism converge and coalesce in interpretations of biblical theophanies. In these texts Philo appeals to the scientific concept of *phantasia* (φαντασία), which denotes an "appearance" or "imagistic representation" of indeterminate

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[1] Cf. Runia, "The Rehabilitation of the Jackdaw," 494: Philo "is primarily an exegete who uses philosophy as 'the language of reason' to expound the wisdom hidden in the sacred books of the Judaic tradition." Thus, he is a "philosophically orientated exegete." It is also important to note that Philo was the beneficiary of a considerable exegetical tradition, of which only traces and fragments survive. On this, see Sterling, "Philosophy as the Handmaid of Wisdom," esp. 72–89.

[2] The inconsistencies also are attributable to his exegetical orientation. Philo's treatises typically do not systematically pursue a philosophical topic; instead his discussion is determined by the scriptural text under consideration.

epistemological status, in an attempt to diminish the perceived intellectual offenses inherent in the anthropomorphic theophanies found in the Mosaic scriptures. In the process he preserves God's incomprehensibility and transcendence, while depicting an attenuated divine revelation in bodily form, one which accommodates the overpowering otherness of God's essence to the limitations and shortcomings of human percipients.

1. Apophaticism and Transcendence

Apophatic conceptions and representations of God, which emphasize the deity's absolute "otherness" and unknowability, are commonly encountered in Philo's *oeuvre*, and are integrally related to his cardinal doctrine of divine transcendence.[3] In fact, the close relationship of apophaticism and transcendence is apparent in three recurring core theological tenets, each of which ultimately point to God's "distance" from all human frameworks of understanding: (1) God alone "truly exists" (*Det.* 160; *Fug.* 101; *Decal.* 59; *Virt.* 40; 64). He is a being incomparable to any other, completely "transcending any genus or species," since they "are divisions of created things, and involve having other things similar to Him, and thus in some sense equal to Him" (cf. *Deus* 55; *Leg.* 2.86; *QG* 2.54).[4] All attempts at analogy therefore will ultimately be frustrated, since God "does not belong to the realm from which our concepts and images are derived."[5] (2) Since God "alone possesses unerringly exact knowledge of his own nature," his existence (ὕπαρξις) may be ascertained, but his essence (οὐσία), or qualified nature (ποιότης) is unknowable (*Leg.* 3.206; cf. *Praem.* 39; *Post.* 15–16, 167–169; *Fug.* 141, 164–165; *Spec.* 1.40; *Virt.* 215).[6] (3) God is ineffable, or "unnameable" (ἄρρητος, *Mut.* 11–15). In these three tenets transcendence and apophatic theology are fused; because God is so very "far away from all creation," he is "unnameable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible" (ἄρρητον καὶ ἀπερινόητον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον,

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3   Hay, "The Psychology of Faith," 921, characterizes divine transcendence as the "cornerstone" of Philo's theology. So also Frick, *Divine Providence*, 26: "In Philo's thought, the idea of transcendence functions as the hermeneutic key that determines the shape of the doctrine of God which in turn determines the idea of immanence and establishes the proper place of other features of his thought." See also Montes-Peral, *Akataleptos Theos.*

4   Dillon, "The Nature of God," 221. Cf. also Termini, "Philo's Thought," 101, who prioritizes God's "otherness" over his transcendence.

5   Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology," 141. However Philo does enlist analogy while proving God's existence, as recently noted by Weisser, "Knowing God by Analogy," esp. 37–41.

6   The distinction between essence and existence may have been derived from Peripatetic traditions. Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 299, defines divine οὐσία as God "as he really is … as he is known to himself." Translations from the Philonic corpus follow the Loeb Classical Library, though occasionally slight modifications are made for the sake of clarity and emphasis.

Mut. 15; *Somn*. 1.66–67). Humans therefore are incapable of making any "positive assertions concerning his essence, quality, state, or movement" (*Leg*. 3.206),[7] for although the "intellect may play its part in the journey to the divine, the divine is ultimately beyond intellectual comprehension."[8]

While Philo provides the earliest extant example of a developed negative theology, he is by no means the originator.[9] The Jewish scriptures offer unequivocal assertions of God's otherness (Num 23:19) and ineffability (Exod 3:14; Isa 40:18, 25), and equally influential are Plato's aporetic reservations concerning human knowledge of the gods and "the names they call themselves" (*Crat*. 400d).[10] Pythagoreanism also "played a central role in the development of negative theology,"[11] and Philo's use of key Pythagorean terms and concepts, such as "the One," "the Monad," divine transcendence, and negative theology, demonstrates just "how pervasive Pythagorean influence had become in the emerging amalgam that is 'Middle' Platonism."[12]

Theologically, apophaticism reflects an appropriate awareness of God's absolute otherness, as well as his resistance to idolatrous representations. As John Peter Kenney cautions, "we lose sight of the divine whenever we accept as final or complete any conceptual representation of it. The true object of religious devotion and theological attention is not contained in the formulas of its representation … rather it exceeds all finite capacity for conceptual similitude." Negative theology thus "subverts our deep human tendency to settle for idols," and "apophasis saves us from idolatry."[13] Kenney also notes the ongoing importance of apophatic theology for the life of faith, as it "establishes a spiritual disquietude which calls the soul forth into further and unceasing searches for the divine."[14] Accordingly, in *Post*. 21, Philo describes "the lovers of God, who, in their quest of the Existent One, even if they never find him, they rejoice, for the quest of the Good and the Beautiful, even if the goal is missed, is sufficient to give a foretaste of gladness."

There is some ambivalence, however, concerning the actual extent of Philo's apophaticism. In fact, expressions of his negative theology can be charted along a spectrum from weak to strong, with some relatively weaker assertions balancing

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7   Cf. the discussion in Winston, "Philo's Conception," esp. 21–23.
8   Alexander, *The Mystical Texts*, 9.
9   So Dillon, "The Nature of God," 217–219; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 155; Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 303–312; Wyss, "Biblical and Philosophical Influences," esp. 31–32, 38–39, 43.
10   Cf. also Plato, *Tim*. 28c: "Now to discover the Maker and Father of the universe is a hard enough; and if having discovered him, to declare him to humans is impossible"; *Parm*. 142a: the One has "no name, nor is there an account or any knowledge or perception or opinion of it"; *Symp*. 211a: the Form of Beauty is "beyond description or knowledge." Socratic aporia is aptly defined by Ahbel-Rappe, *Socratic Ignorance*, xxxvii: "the vivid experience of somehow, however dimly, knowing, yet failing to define, the virtue, an experience which shines a spotlight on the subject engaged in the inquiry … reorienting him."
11   Bonazzi, "Towards Transcendence," 240.
12   Dillon, "Pythagoreanism in the Academic tradition," 266.
13   Kenney, "The Critical Value of Negative Theology," 441.
14   Kenney, "The Critical Value of Negative Theology," 441.

and tempering the sort of extreme apophaticism espoused in the aforementioned three "core tenets."[15] And perhaps most significantly, the same topic can elicit varying degrees of apophaticism, depending on the context. With regard to incomprehensibility and ineffability, the apophaticism of *Sacr.* 94–96 is almost as humorous as it is extreme. Like "snails stuck in their shells, or hedgehogs rolled into a ball," we are incapable of "rising above" our "human representations" (ἀνθρωπολογέω) of God, "getting outside ourselves in forming our ideas," and "escaping our inborn infirmities." Thus, "we think of the blessed and immortal in terms of our own natures," and "invent for him hands and feet, comings and goings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, anger, and such parts and passions that could never belong to the Cause." Similarly extreme is *Legat.* 6: "reason cannot attain to ascend to God, who nowhere can be touched or handled" (οὐ φθάνει προσαναβαίνειν ὁ λόγος ἐπὶ τὸν ἄψαυστον καὶ ἀναφῆ τάντη θεόν), and so "it sinks and slips away unable to find the proper words" to describe the Existent. And even "if the whole Heaven should become an articulate voice, it would lack the apt and appropriate terms" to describe him.

Somewhat less pessimistic about the possibility of speaking about God are a number of texts which assert that a "license of language" (κατάχρησις) is permitted, and even though this "license" occasionally issues in deliberate misuse of language, it nevertheless affords proximate predications about the deity (cf. *Cher.* 121; *Sacr.* 101; *Somn.* 1.229–230).[16] Philo presumably avails himself of this license throughout his corpus, while directing his formidable theological, philosophical, and literary talents toward explicating the divine nature and being, and his efforts should be considered at least partially successful. To some extent then, we might view his apophatic language as hyperbolic: assertions that God is "incomprehensible" do not amount to claims of utter incomprehensibility, only that he is "not totally comprehensible."[17]

A similar range of apophatic ambivalence attends accounts of the *visio Dei*. At the extreme end of the spectrum is *Opif.* 69–71, in which the philosopher's mind, "possessed by sober drunkenness," "filled with Corybantic frenzy," and overwhelmed by "longing" and "desire," is drawn into the noetic realm and led on the "way to the Great King himself." However, "pure and unmixed beams of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent" from the deity, "so that the eyes of the mind are overwhelmed by the brightness" and entirely "disoriented." This text, which is often

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[15] On the varying levels of apophaticism in the theologies of Middle Platonists like Alcinous and Maximus of Tyre, see Banner, *Philosophic Silence*, 154–157.

[16] On this, see Runia, "Naming and Knowing," 83–84, who notes that κατάχρησις can be construed either *positively*, as "extending" a word's meaning beyond its normal range, like a metaphor, or *negatively*, to describe "the deliberate misuse of a word in order to represent a meaning for which no correct word is available."

[17] Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience," 17–18. Smart also contends that apophatic language is "performative," in that it expresses "powerful and existential feelings" for which normal, everyday words are inadequate.

considered the quintessential *visio Dei* account, is in fact fairly anomalous in its extreme apophaticism.[18] Much more common are texts depicting the successful attainment of the *visio Dei* by a contemplative who is free from fears of being blinded or having their brain short-circuited! In some texts the vision even is accompanied by soteriological and revelatory elements. Most notable in this regard are (1) *Somn*. 2.219–233: divine immutability and stability are soteriologically imparted to the "friends of God," who "draw near and enter into affinity" with God, while "seeing and being seen"; (2) *Sacr*. 59–60: the contemplative "receives the impression of God's sovereignty and beneficence"; (3) *QG* 3.42, 55: the *visio Dei* promotes faith in God; (4) *QE* 2.39: seeing God "become clearly visible" is the "true food for the soul," imparting eternal salvation to those who "partake"; (5) *QG* 4.1 and *Abr*. 119: divine illumination accompanies the *visio Dei*; and (6) *Praem*. 36–46: Jacob's earnest striving for the vision elicits an empowering and efficacious expression of divine mercy.

Philo's conceptions and accounts of the *visio Dei*, which attribute to noetic and mystical visionary experiences the potential to transcend God's transcendence, and bridge the chasm separating God's essence from his existence, therefore represent the most significant challenge to strong claims of extreme and absolute apophaticism. As John M. Dillon notes, "When one has established a totally transcendent God, there straightway arises in an acute form the problem of his relations with the universe … in this situation … a kind of mystical vision is the only thing that can connect us to any extent with God."[19] Moreover, noetic vision offers a raw and rich experience whose immediacy precedes and perhaps even precludes normal cognitive activities. In *Praem*. 43 Philo describes the *visio Dei* as involving "the power to apprehend" God "through himself, without the cooperation of any reasoning process leading to the sight." Nicholas Banner places noetic visionary experiences in the highest epistemological category, "direct unknowing," which represents "truly direct modes of approach to the transcendent … whose efficacy is independent of discursive content." He admits that "it is difficult to know what to call these modes of approach," since "they are often presented as being, themselves, ineffable." Nevertheless, these apophatic "modes of approach"

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18   Similarly extreme is Philo, *Post*. 12–16: Moses implored God "to reveal clearly his own nature," a revelation that would allow him "to exchange doubt and uncertainty for a most assured faith" (13). And though he "entered into the thick darkness where God was" (Exod 20:21), "that is, into conceptions regarding the Existent Being" (14), he did not see God, since the deity is completely "out of reach" (13), "above both place and time" (ὑπεράνω καὶ τόπου καὶ χρόνου), "transcending everything" (ἐπιβέβηκε πᾶσιν), and "beyond sight" (ἀόρατος, 14–15), leading the contemplative to an apophatic conclusion, namely, "to apprehend" that God "is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that he is incapable of being seen" (15).

19   Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 157. So also Dillon, "The Transcendence of God in Philo," 6.

will be termed 'direct unknowing' because, while descriptions of them privilege metaphors of contact, unity and ineffability, and tend to deny 'knowing' in any normal sense of the term, they nevertheless occupy structurally the top of the hierarchy of modes of knowing (from discursive to non-discursive and finally transcending knowing itself). While they may be from time to time characterised as forms of knowledge, this is never anything except one of a range of partial metaphors used to attempt to signify an ineffable act conceived of as transcending the written text. The awkwardness and paradoxicality of the term 'direct unknowing' serves to flag the elusive character of the (non)phenomena in question, which tend to evade definition even as they are privileged above the defining mind and even intellect.[20]

Yet despite their apophatic implications, such mystical visionary experiences are for Philo the "most perfect of blessings" (*Ebr.* 83), the "crowning point of happiness" (*Abr.* 58) and the "most precious of all possessions" (*Legat.* 4).

2. Anthropomorphism

Although Philo considers visual encounters with God the preeminent spiritual and philosophic experience, and elaborate accounts of such encounters populate the "pages" of his treatises, these accounts are almost entirely devoid of descriptive detail concerning God's appearance, apart from his radiance and luminosity (cf. *Fug.* 165; *Mut.* 6; *Spec.* 1.37; *Praem.* 36–46; *QE* 2.47). In contrast, ancient Jewish visionary texts, while reluctant to describe God in detail, offer at least some details, many of which imply that God is in some way embodied.[21] Philo's interpretations of these sacred texts often go even further than his *visio Dei* accounts, not just avoiding descriptive detail (cf. *Ebr.* 82–83; *Migr.* 169) but deliberately eliminating the "human-shaped" features found in the sacred text. For example, in his most detailed discussion of Jacob's wrestling match with God at the River Jabbok (Gen 32:24–32), in *Praem.* 36–46, Philo transforms the hand to hand combat into a visual battle. Instead of wrestling with God, Jacob wrestles with the deity's overwhelming radiance!

The source and motivation of this agenda is Philo's anti-anthropomorphic bias, which is closely aligned with his negative theology. In accord with the prevailing

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20   Banner, *Philosophic Silence*, 152.
21   On the anthropomorphic theophanies and visions of God in the Hebrew Bible, see Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism," 31–38; Hamori, "*When Gods Were Men*"; Knafl, *Forming God*. Cf. also Wagner, *God's Body*, 29: "The concept of an anthropomorphic God in human form is not called into question" in the Hebrew Bible, for "the OT does not know of any anti-anthropomorphic tendencies." Nevertheless, as Sommer (*The Bodies of God*, 8) observes, the tendency of much biblical scholarship has been to "minimize, explain away, render metaphorical, or eviscerate, the Bible's anthropomorphism."

philosophical expectations of his time, Philo minimizes, relativizes, and "interprets away" the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God in the Penta-teuch, and as a consequence, Pieter W. van der Horst believes that "Plato's doctrine of the absolute immutability of God prevails over Moses' anthropomorphic conception of a passionate God."[22]

Philo attributes anthropomorphic and anthropopathic conceptions to human weakness and finiteness. Thus, "our own experience" and perspective entirely determine our conception of God (*Conf.* 98). Though the humorous description of this tendency in *Sacr.* 94–96 has already been noted, a fuller quotation reveals Philo's anti-anthropomorphic bias:

> We are not able to cherish continually in our souls the thought which worthily summa-rizes the nature of the Cause: 'God is not as man' (Num 23:19),[23] and thus rise superior to all the human conceptions of him. In us the mortal is the chief ingredient. We cannot get outside ourselves in forming our ideas; we cannot escape our inborn infirmities … and we think of the blessed and immortal in terms of our own natures. We reject in words the monstrosity of saying that God possesses a human form [ἀνθρωπόμορφον], but in actual fact we accept the thought that he is of human passions [ἀνθρωποπαθές]. Therefore we invent for him hands and feet, comings and goings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, anger, and such parts and passions that could never belong to the Cause.[24]

The Pentateuch's many similar anthropomorphic details elicit a range of re-sponses from Philo. As an *apologist* for the law of Moses, he ascribes a pedagogical function to the anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, characterizing them as divine "training" (παιδεία, *Deus* 54) for those who were improperly educated or lack "natural wit" (63).[25] For example, the depictions of God making threats and dis-playing anger, though "untrue," are "beneficial" to those who must be "involuntarily taught by fear" (64).

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22 Van der Horst, "Philo and the Problem of God's Emotions," 177. An important antecedent for Philo's "demythologizing" interpretive techniques can be found in Aristobulus, a 2nd century BCE Jewish Alex-andrian philosopher. In frag. 2, in his effort to "grasp a fitting conception about God," he interprets the an-thropomorphic body parts metaphorically, as representing "the power of God." Nevertheless, Markschies (*God's Body*, 38) identifies Philo as one of "the founding fathers of the movement which would come over the course of centuries ultimately to deprive God of his body."

23 Philo often quotes Num 23:19, "God is not like humans!"; cf. *Sacr.* 101; *Deus* 53, 62, 69; *Conf.* 98; *Somn.* 1.237; *QG* 1.55; 2.54.

24 Cf. however the rare admission found in Philo, *Leg.* 3.206: "Who can assert of the First Cause either that he is without body or that he is with body …? No, he alone shall affirm anything regarding himself since he alone possesses unerringly exact knowledge of his own nature."

25 So van der Horst, "Philo and the Problem of God's Emotions," esp. 175–177; cf. Philo, *Somn.* 1.234: the an-thropomorphisms are intended to "provide instruction and teaching for those who lack wisdom."

As an *interpreter* of the Pentateuch, Philo employs allegory to locate the deeper, spiritual-philosophical meaning of the Pentateuch's anthropomorphisms (cf. *Decal.* 1; *Spec.* 3.178). That allegorical interpretation causes "the mythical" and offensive anthropomorphisms "to vanish from sight" is equally important (*Agr.* 97). Perhaps one of the most extraordinary examples of anti-anthropomorphic allegory involves an improbable extension of logic: since God does not have a mouth or tongue, he cannot speak:

> The ten words … were delivered by the Father of All … Did he do so by his own utterance in the form of a voice? Surely not! May no such thought ever enter our minds, for God is not as a man needing mouth and tongue and wind-pipe. … God wrought on this occasion a miracle … bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments and fitted with perfect harmonies … giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounding forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest. … The new miraculous voice was set in action and kept in flame by the power of God which breathed upon it … creating in the souls of each a unique kind of hearing, one superior to the bodily hearing of the ears. (*Decal.* 32–35; cf. also 46–47; Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 9.178)

The depth of Philo's commitment to this far-fetched conceit is evident in his conception of inspiration: "for though no voice is given forth, prophets hear through a certain power a divine voice sounding what is said to them"; thus God "is heard without speaking" (*QG* 1.42). Similarly, in *Her.* 259 Philo claims that "a prophet has no utterance of his own"; instead, he is "the vocal instrument of God, smitten and played by his invisible hand" (cf. also *Her.* 266; *Spec.* 1.65; 4.49).[26] And perhaps even more surprising, divine speech rarely is heard in Philo's *visio Dei* accounts.[27]

Finally, as a *mystagogue*, Philo offers those making moral and philosophic progress a window into the mindset of an adept contemplative, one whose conception of God is entirely free of anthropomorphic imperfection. These "comrades of the soul" "converse with intelligible incorporeal natures and do not compare the Existent One to any form of created things. They have disassociated him from every category and quality … his being is apprehended as simple being, without other definite characteristic; thus they do not picture him with form, but admit to their minds the conception of existence only" (*Deus* 55).

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26   This same concern may have influenced Philo's account of creation in *Opif.*, which is almost entirely visually-oriented, and relatively uninterested in the speech-acts that chiefly characterize the creation account of Genesis 1.

27   Exceptions are found in Philo, *Fug.* 165; *Abr.* 71, 112, 127–130; *Jos.* 255; *Mos.* 1.69–84; *QG* 3.42; *QE* 2.82.

3. Apophatic Visions of an Anthropomorphic God

As we have seen, Philo's strong aversion to the anthropomorphisms of sacred scripture will lead him to explain away (*Sacr.* 94–96; *Deus* 63–64; *Decal.* 32–35), ignore (*Ebr.* 82–83; *Migr.* 169), and transform (*Praem.* 36–46) "human shaped" conceptions and depictions of God. Nevertheless, he does on occasion admit some occurrences of anthropomorphism, most notably the anthropomorphic/angelomorphic appearances of God to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18), and Jacob (28:11–17; 31:13). Yet, given his core convictions that God is "incorporeal" (ἀσώματος),[28] "formless" (ἀειδής),[29] and "invisible" (ἀόρατος),[30] while also being "unchangeable" (ἄτρεπτος),[31] these theophanies force him to address a difficult question: namely, does the incorporeal, formless, and invisible God "change shape" and temporarily adopt a material form? In response to this interpretive dilemma, Philo offers a "docetic" solution: God only *seems* to "materialize" and adopt an angelic or human form.

For example, in *Deo* 3 Philo insists that the "three visitors" who appeared to Abraham at Mamre (Gen 18) did not represent "an appearance of men, but of something like men, since the divine does not change and take another aspect," or "undergo a change."[32] Similarly, in *Abr.* 118 Philo contends "it is a marvel that although" Abraham's three visitors "neither ate nor drank they presented/offered the appearance [παρέχειν φαντασίαν] of eating and drinking." He believes, however, that "the first and greatest wonder is that, though incorporeal [ἀσώματος], they assumed the semblance of human form to do kindness" (εἰς ἰδέαν ἀνθρώπων μεμορφῶσθαι χάριτι) to Abraham.[33] Moreover, "the reason for this miracle was to present/offer a perception" (παρασχεῖν αἴσθησιν) of the visitors to Abraham, "by means of fairly clear vision" (διὰ τρανοτέρας ὄψεως).[34] The most elaborate docetic account, in *Somn.* 1.232, 238, which appears to have been inspired by God's reminder to Jacob of the "stairway to heaven" theophany (Gen 31:13),[35] depicts God presenting

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[28] Cf. Philo, *Cher.* 49; *Abr.* 118; *Spec.* 2.176.
[29] Cf. Philo, *Det.* 31, 86–87; *Post.* 15; *Abr.* 75, 79; *Spec.* 1.20.
[30] Cf. Philo, *Leg.* 3.206; *Cher.* 101; *Sacr.* 133; *Det.* 31, 86; *Conf.* 138; *Migr.* 183; *Her.* 259, 266; *Fug.* 46; *Mut.* 14, 139; *Somn.* 1.71–72, 148; *Abr.* 74; *Mos.* 2.65; *Decal.* 120; *Spec.* 1.20, 46; 2.165; 4.31; *Virt.* 47; *Legat.* 310; *QE* 2.37.
[31] Cf. Philo, *Leg.* 1.51; 2.33, 89; *Cher.* 19, 52, 90; *Sacr.* 101; *Post.* 27–28; *Conf.* 96; *Mut.* 28, 54, 87, 175; *Deus* 22; *Somn.* 1.232, 249; 2.221, 228.
[32] Trans. Siegert, "The Philonian Fragment *De Deo*," 5.
[33] Cf. also Philo, *QG* 4.1–8, which characterizes the same theophany as oscillating between incorporeal and embodied manifestations of the deity. Thus, Abraham's "mind's eye" oscillates between an apprehension of the incorporeal God and his Powers, and three "strange men," who possessed "most perfect bodies" (4.2).
[34] Trans. Birnbaum – Dillon, *Philo of Alexandria*, 112. See also *Abr.* 131: the "triple manifestation is in reality an appearance presenting a single subject" (ὅτι δ' ἡ τριττὴ φαντασία δυνάμει ἑνός ἐστιν ὑποκειμένου).
[35] Gen 31:13: "I am the God who appeared to you in the divine place" (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὀφθείς σοι ἐν τόπῳ θεοῦ). Though Gen 31:13 lacks anthropomorphic detail, the "stairway to heaven" theophany

himself in the likeness [εἰκάζω] of angels, not altering his own nature [οὐ μεταβάλλοντα τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν], for he is unchangeable [ἄτρεπτος], but conveying to those which receive the impression of his presence a semblance in a different form [ἀλλὰ δόξαν ἐντιθέντα ταῖς φαντασιουμέναις ἑτερόμορφον] … an image [εἰκών] … to help those in need … he occupied the place of an angel only so far as appeared [ὅσα τῷ δοκεῖν], without changing [οὐ μεταβάλλων], to benefit him who was incapable of seeing the true God … (*Somn.* 1.232, 238)[36]

Essential to the mechanics of these "seeing appearances" is God's action of "presenting" (ὑπόκειμαι, *Abr.* 119, 131), "extending" (τείνω, *Somn.* 1.70), "conveying" (ἐντίθημι, *Somn.* 1.232), or "offering" (παρέχω, *Abr.* 118, 122) a *phantasia* (φαντασία) of himself in bodily shape to the human percipient, who visually "receives" (λανβάνω, *Migr.* 5; *Abr.* 79; *Virt.* 215; δέχομαι, *Mut.* 3; *Spec.* 1.45) the *phantasia*.[37] According to philosophical and rhetorical theorizations, a φαντασία is a sense-perceptible "impression," or "appearance," whose ontological and epistemological status is ambiguous, at least initially (cf. *Ebr.* 169–170). Thus, these "seeing appearances" involve God projecting a human-shaped φαντασία from his shapeless, immaterial being,[38] one which accommodates the overwhelming reality of his being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, and which allows humans to more confidently relate to him.[39]

The nature and purpose of these docetic theophanies sharply contrast with Homeric epiphanies, as well as Plato's "theology of epiphany" (*Resp.* 380d–382a). Although the Homeric gods often appear in disguise, in order to deceive and manipulate

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in Gen 28:11–17 (LXX) describes God as anthropomorphically (or "angelomorphically") "leaning on" the ladder/stairway (ἐπιστηρίζω, 29:13).

36 In *Somn.* 1.239 Philo appears to equate the "conveyed" "image" (εἰκών) with "his angel the Logos" (τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ λόγον). The identity of the object of sight in Philo's *visio Dei* accounts often is ambiguous. In some contexts the vision appears to be restricted to divine intermediaries, such as the Powers or the Logos, while in many others God himself is seen. A critique of the prevalent tendency in Philonic scholarship to systematize these texts and unjustifiably restrict the vision to intermediaries is offered in my essay, "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria," 25–47). Cf. Dillon, "Reclaiming the Heritage of Moses," 118: "Philo's God is thoroughly transcendent, and operates in the world only through his Logos."

37 Cf. esp. Philo, *Somn.* 1.70: God "extends appearances that proceed from himself" (τὰς ἀφ᾽ αὑτοῦ τείνων φαντασίας). Additional texts in which φαντασία and φαντασιόω occur in conjunction with a *visio Dei* include Philo, *Cher.* 13; *Det.* 158; *Her.* 301; *Mut.* 7, 17; *Somn.* 1.159; *Abr.* 124, 146; *Mos.* 1.289; *Decal.* 105; *Spec.* 1.40.

38 Cf. Birnbaum – Dillon, *Philo of Alexandria*, 258: the theophany in Philo, *Abr.* 118 involves "immaterial essences taking on human form."

39 On the "principle of accommodation," see Philo, *Opif.* 23: humans are "unable to accommodate benefits to the extent that God is able to confer them, since God's powers are overwhelming, whereas the recipient is too weak to sustain the size of them and would collapse, were it not that God measured them accordingly, dispensing with fine tuning to each thing its allotted portion." Trans. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 51. Runia (*ibidem*, 147) further explains that "creation would suffer an 'overdose of being' unless the overwhelming nature of the divine beneficence is moderated."

unwitting humans (cf. *Il.* 3.383–399; *Od.* 13.312–313; 17.485–486),[40] the *phantasiai* of Philo's deity are entirely devoid of deceptive intent, motivated instead by divine mercy and love. And while Plato's emphasis on the immutability, perfection, and truthfulness of the deity precludes the "extending" (προτείνω) of a potentially deceptive and illusory "appearance" (φάντασμα, *Resp.* 382a), Philo's theophanies instead prioritize God's desire to show "grace" (χάρις, *Abr.* 118), confer "benefits" (ὠφέλεια), and "help those in need" (τῶν δεομένων ἐπικουρίας, *Somn.* 1.238).[41] Perhaps most significantly, God's "love for humanity" (φιλανθρωπία) underlies a remarkable visual encounter with Abraham, in which the deity responded to Abraham's "burning and fiery" (ἐνθέρμοις καὶ διαπύροις) desire for a *visio Dei* with an attenuated revelation of "his own nature" (φύσις, *Abr.* 79). Thus Abraham

> received an appearance [φαντασίαν λαβεῖν] of him who so long lay hidden and formless. In his love for humanity, when the soul came into his presence, God did not turn away his face, but came forward to meet Abraham and revealed his nature [προϋπαντήσας δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν ἔδειξε], so far as the beholder's power of sight allowed. That is why we are told not that the Sage saw God, but that "God appeared to him." For it is impossible that anyone should by themselves apprehend the truly Existent One, if he did not reveal and manifest himself. (*Abr.* 79–80)

This extraordinary text infuses anthropopathic and anthropomorphic details into a theophany that originally lacked both emotional and embodied content (cf. Gen 12:7). Perhaps of greatest consequence, however, is the deity's emotional responsiveness to Abraham's passionate desire for a *visio Dei*.

The key role of φαντασία in Stoic epistemology appears to have influenced Philo's use of φαντασία in his docetic theophanies. In Stoic epistemology a *phantasia* denotes an "impression," derived from the senses or any other faculty of awareness, and this "impression," which addresses and elicits both perceptual and conceptual capacities, possesses varying degrees of reliability.[42] According to Stoic theory,

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40 Cf. Versnel, "What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God?" 46, 53: "What did ancient man see when he saw a god? Sometimes he saw a god, sometimes a human shape, sometimes a phantom, sometimes an animal form." Thus, "ancient man could never be sure whether the person he was talking with was not actually a god in disguise." Cf. also Homer, *Il.* 20.131: "the gods are dangerous when they appear in manifest form" (χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ φαίνεσθαι ἐναργεῖς); Petridou, *Divine Epiphany*, 32–43.

41 Particularly relevant in this regard are the differing assessments of *Od.* 17.485-486 by Plato and Philo. While Plato condemns the idea that the gods would appear "in the guise of strangers … and put on all manner of shapes and visit our cities" (*Resp.* 381d), Philo believes that the legend, though "perhaps not true," is still useful and beneficial (*Somn.* 1.233). On this, see Roskam, "Nutritious Milk," esp. 29–30; Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*, 126–127.

42 Though cf. the admission made by Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.241: "the Stoic theory of φαντασία is hard to define." See also Diogenes Laertius 7.49–51; Long, *Epictetus*, 133, 214; Long, *Stoic Studies*, 265–275; Ioppolo, "Presentation and Assent," 433–449. Forms of the term are employed by Plato in *Theaet.* 152c; *Soph.* 260c–e,

a true impression, one worthy of assent, is characterized as a καταληπτικὴ φαντασία, a "cognitive impression," with which one can "grasp" something real.[43] In addition to being "vivid and striking" (ἐναργεῖς καὶ πληκτικάς, Sextus Empiricus, *Math*. 7.402), a "cognitive impression" is (1) actual, since it derives from an object which really exists; (2) it is in conformity with that object, both imprinted and stamped in accordance with the object, and stamping and imprinting itself, like a seal, on the soul/mind of the percipient; (3) and it could not be the same if it derived from a non-existent object (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.18, 77; Diogenes Laertius 7.46, 50; Sextus Empiricus, *Math*. 7.249–252, 402). The process by which knowledge is acquired is compared to a hand gradually tightening its grip around an object: first an impression presents itself to the senses, assent is then given to it, followed by comprehension, or cognition (κατάληψις), which then leads, finally, to a firm "grasp" of knowledge (cf. Cicero, *Acad.* 2.145).

Since Philo would appear to deliberately avoid describing the reception of a divinely-extended φαντασία as a καταληπτικὴ φαντασία,[44] his docetic theophanies occupy an epistemic grey-zone, and offer a humbling reminder that humans are incapable of using the φαντασία to get a "firm grip" on God; unlike the subject of a scientific experiment, they cannot probe, dissect, or control the "evidence" of a *visio Dei*. A level of manipulation and control of this sort also would violate the viewing conventions that were enforced for elite males in Philo's world, and these conventions would undoubtedly also apply to God.[45] Humans are permitted to see the deity, but not scrutinize; to gaze upon him, but not stare impudently. So while graciously offering an accommodated, yet docetic self-revelation, God maintains his apophatic prerogative and preserves his transcendence.[46]

Counterbalancing these epistemic limitations are the rich metaphysics evident in rhetorical and literary theorizations of φαντασία, and which may have influenced

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264a; *Resp.* 382e. On the history and development of *phantasia*, see Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*; Watson, "The Concept of 'Phantasia,'" 4765–4810; Sheppard, *The Poetics of Phantasia*, 1–13.

[43] Hankinson, "Stoic Epistemology," 60, makes an important distinction: "It is not the impression which we can grasp, but rather the impression *with which* we can grasp."

[44] The Stoic καταληπτικὴ φαντασία plays a prominent role in Philo's epistemology, and is even connected with noetic perception (*Cher*. 60; *Mut*. 56; *Spec*. 1.288), the perception and/or apprehension of God and his wisdom (*Cher*. 97; *Post*. 169; *Ebr*. 108; *Her*. 314; *Spec*. 1.44–47; *Praem*. 45), and the noetic perception of God with the "eyes of the soul" (*Migr*. 39).

[45] Since most theories of vision were extramissive, materialist, and haptic, gazing "full and long" at someone could be construed as indecent, possibly possessing sexually penetrative connotations (cf. Seneca, *Nat*. 1.16.4). Elite Roman males, as "impenetrable penetrators," were protected by Roman law from corporal punishment and this same protection appears to have been extended to the metaphysical realm in which the mechanics of sight were enacted. Cf. Fredrick, "Mapping Penetrability," esp. 258.

[46] In this respect, Philo's docetic theophanies function like the "glory" traditions found in ancient Jewish texts (cf. Exod 24:16–17; 40:34–38; Num 9:15–23; 1 Kgs 8:11). DeConick, "What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" 12, notes that in these texts God's glorious "luminosity" functions "as a mask or screen," a "covering of light" that "simultaneously covers him and reveals him."

Philo's use of φαντασία in his docetic theophanies. In these theorizations, which are roughly contemporary with Philo's *floruit* (ca. 20 BCE – 50 CE), *phantasiai* were reputed to possess and/or convey an ideal quality and identity, akin to the Platonic Forms (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.19; Cicero, *Or.* 8–10; Seneca, *Ep.* 65.7; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.70–71).[47] Thus the orator/author who drew on a *phantasia* in the production of visually oriented rhetoric would expect that their hearers/readers should experience the very same *phantasia* as their text was heard/read.[48]

Ps.-Longinus's discussion of rhetorical φαντασία succinctly captures this dynamic of inspiration and mediation: "under the effects of inspiration [ἐνθουσιασμός] and emotions [πάθος], you seem to see what you are describing, and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience" ([*Subl.*] 15.1). Euripides's description of the Furies, in *Orestes*, provides a flagship example of poetic *phantasia* functioning in this manner. Ps.-Longinus remarkably claims that Euripides was inspired by an actual vision of the Furies, and his text effectively mediates this same fantastic visual experience, "almost compelling the audience to see what he imagined" (ἐφαντάσθη, 15.2; cf. 15.4, 8). Quintilian offers what is perhaps the fullest account of the psychological and metaphysical mechanics attending the evocation of a *phantasia*. Like Ps.-Longinus's "fantastic" interpretation of Euripides's Furies, Quintilian characterizes *phantasiai* as "haunting visions" which possess the power to make us feel as though we really are "travelling or sailing, fighting a battle, addressing the people, or spending money that we do not have" (*Inst.* 6.2.29–30). In spite of their numinous power, these sorts of "hallucinations" can be routinely cultivated and exploited. According to Quintilian, an orator must visually immerse himself in the imagined scenario, "bringing before" his "eyes all the relevant circumstances," and then allow that elaborately cultivated vision to become "indelibly impressed upon" his mind (6.2.31). The orator who has mastered this process and "who is really sensitive to these impressions will have the greatest power over the emotions." Moreover, the "possessor of this power"

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47 Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.19 is the *locus classicus*, with its assertion that *phantasiai* grant the artist access to the noetic realm: unlike "mimesis," which is "dependent upon what it sees, *phantasia* will represent that which cannot be seen, since it proceeds with existent reality as its basis" (μίμησις μὲν γὰρ δημιουργήσει, ὃ εἶδεν, φαντασία δὲ καὶ ὃ μὴ εἶδεν, ὑποθήσεται γὰρ αὐτὸ πρὸς τὴν ἀναφορὰν τοῦ ὄντος). On this text, see Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, 62–93; Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 320–329.

48 On the reciprocal role of a *phantasia* in the production and reception of an ekphrasis, see Vasaly, *Representations*, 96–99, 102; Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 26–28, 37; Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 93–97, 110–114. As Elsner (*Roman Eyes*, 187) notes: "What the listener 'sees' in ekphrasis is the vision which the orator himself 'sees' ... Despite the fact that this vision was subjective (it appeared only in the *mind* of speaker, listener, and artist), it was nevertheless objective in that it bore the stamp of truth: it was (in each case) the same vision." With regard to the metaphysics underlying Quintilian's important discussion of *enargeia* in *Inst.* 8.3.61–70, Webb (*Ekphrasis*, 93) observes: "he seems to assume that the orator's imagination (the scene that appears to him ...), its verbal expression and the image which 'appears' in the audience's mind as a result of these words are both simultaneous and identical, and that this image can be equivalent to the direct perception of a thing."

is characterized by Quintilian as an εὐφαντασίωτος, someone "most skilled in summoning up *phantasiai*" (6.2.30).

Although Philo's docetic theophanies appear to be occurring in the earthly realm, in three texts Philo locates the "presentation" of divine *phantasiai* in the noetic realm. In *Mut.* 3 he insists that a divine φαντασία cannot be "applied/presented" (προσβολή) to the "eyes of the body,"[49] instead "it is the eye of the soul that receives the appearance of the divine vision" (ἀλλὰ τὸ δεχόμενον τὴν θείαν φαντασίαν τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐστιν ὄμμα). And while commenting on Gen 18, in *Sacr.* 59, Philo describes God "producing in [ἐνεργάζομαι] the seeing soul" (τῇ ὀρατικῇ ψυχῇ) a φαντασία of himself. Finally, a moral dimension attends *Post.* 8, which warns that deliberate wickedness can result in the "mutilation" (πηρόω) of the "eye of the soul," which would then preclude the reception of a divine φαντασία.

When considered in light of the rhetorical and literary conceptualizations of *phantasiai*, as possessing and/or conveying an ideal quality, like the Forms, these three Philonic texts lend a noetic quality to the docetic theophanies, infusing them with the highest level of veracity in their representation of God's unfathomable being. And if we are permitted a certain "license of language," we might enlist Quintilian to help us more clearly envision Philo's portrayal of God in these theophanies, now casting the deity as a master εὐφαντασίωτος, one "most skilled in summoning up" and "projecting" noetically-reliable *phantasiai* of his very being to his beloved human friends, affording them familiarity and confidence in their relationship.

Conclusion

Despite his core theological convictions, that God is incorporeal, formless, invisible, and unchangeable, in some of his most carefully crafted *visio Dei* texts Philo portrays God "changing shape" and temporarily adopting a human form. These theophanies are only "seeming appearances," however, and actually involve God projecting a human-shaped "impression," or "appearance" (φαντασία) from his shapeless, immaterial being. By accommodating the overwhelming reality of God's being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, these "docetic" theophanies allow humans to more confidently relate to the deity, while at the same time preserving God's absolute transcendence and apophatic otherness. Philo's essential pedagogical orientation also is evident in these "seeming appearances," for he knows that the intellectual and spiritual development of students occurs in stages, and the developing stages require accommodating measures, sometimes even those

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49   Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.35, which contains a similar phrase: the "application of the impression" (ἡ προσβολὴ τῆς φαντασίας).

that provisionally violate important theological tenets. Although adept contemplatives are not reliant on human-shaped *phantasiai*, since they "apprehend God's being as simple being, without definite characteristic, and do not picture it with form, but open their mind to an appearance of his existence only" (τὴν κατὰ εἶναι φαντασίαν μόνην ἐνεδέξαντο μὴ μορφώσαντες αὐτό, *Deus* 55), students who are progressing toward perfection are greatly assisted by anthropomorphisms, as they afford both familiarity and confidence in their understanding and relationship with the God of Israel's sacred scriptures.

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