Balaam as the Sophist Par Excellence in Philo of Alexandria

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BALAAM AS THE SOPHIST *PAR EXCELLENCE* IN PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA: PHILO'S PROJECTION OF AN URGENT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ONTO MOSES' PENTATEUCHAL NARRATIVES

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In Philo's commentaries on Moses' Pentateuch, one of the figures dealt with in some detail is Balaam.[1] As we shall see, Philo regards Balaam as quite an important figure. He portrays him as a sophist, for reasons which we shall explore in the first section (§1). From the fifth century BC on, the word 'sophist' was applied, in a technical sense, to the itinerant professors of higher education who travelled widely through the Greek world and gave lectures for which they could charge a large fee. According to a definition by Christopher Taylor,

> They pioneered the systematic study of techniques of persuasion and argument, which embraced various forms of the study of language, including grammar, literary criticism, and semantics. Protagoras was reputedly the first person to write a treatise on techniques of argument, and was notorious for his claim to 'make the weaker argument the stronger'. The sophists aroused strong reactions, both positive and negative. On the positive side, the highly successful careers of the most celebrated testify to a considerable demand for their services, especially in providing rhetorical training for aspiring politicians. On the negative, they were regarded, especially by those of conservative views, as subversive of morality and tradition, in view (...) of their teaching (especially to the young) of techniques of argument. (...) Plato (...) depicts the sophists predominantly as charlatans, in contrast to Socrates, the paradigm of the true philosopher.[2]

The same antithesis between sophistry and true philosophy runs through Philo's writings. By anachronistically attributing the term 'sophist' to past opponents of Israel, Philo rewrites the history of Israel in philosophical terms. Balaam is but one example of the sophists whom Philo

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[1] I wish to thank Dr Maria Sherwood-Smith (Leiden) for her kindness in revising the English in this paper.

[2] C.C.W. Taylor, 'Sophists', in: S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth (eds), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary—Third Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 1422.

mentions. As a sophistic adversary of Israel, who appears during Israel's voyage through the wilderness, Balaam is, chronologically speaking, the last representative of sophistic philosophy in Moses' Pentateuch and takes his place in a long succession of sophists who contend with the ancestors and descendants of the Jewish people. The way in which Philo construes this archetypal conflict between sophistry and Israel will be discussed in the second section (§2).

In his treatment of Balaam and other sophists, Philo shows himself to be anything but detached. As a matter of fact, Philo's grave concerns about the threat posed to true philosophy by sophists in his own day repeatedly emerge from the text in a very vivid manner. The attention Philo pays to sophistry is not the expression of an antiquarian interest in Greek philosophy, but rather reflects his concern about the contemporary movement known as the Second Sophistic, which, in the first three centuries AD, revived the spirit of the classical sophists. The Second Sophistic, which has recently been put on the scholarly agenda by many classicists,[3] flourished in Rome and in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, including Alexandria where Philo worked and lived. It was a public phenomenon:

> Rhetors (ῥήτορες), whether resident teachers of rhetoric or touring eminences, would draw aficionados in large numbers to private or imperial mansions, lecture halls in libraries, *bouleuteria, odeia*, and even theatres.[4]

These rhetoricians were active in public declamation and teaching, but also in the arena of civic and political life:

> Many sophists (...) were influential in their cities and even provinces, intervening to check civic disorder or inter-city rivalry (...), or dispatched as envoys to congratulate emperors on their accession or to win or secure privileges for their cities (and often themselves).[5]

The distinctions they could procure in the public sphere rendered their profession quarrelsome and very competitive. It is against the

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[3] See, e.g., T. Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (New Surveys in the Classics 35), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; B.E. Borg (ed.), *Paideia: The World of the Second Sophistic* (Millennium Studies 2); Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004; G. Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*, London/New York: Routledge, 1993; G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

[4] E.L. Bowie, 'Second Sophistic', in: Hornblower & Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1377–8 at 1377.

[5] Bowie, 'Second Sophistic', 1377.

lure of this rhetorical movement that Philo wishes to warn his readers. It may well be that Philo's treatment of contemporary sophistry offers an important key to his entire oeuvre—commentaries which may otherwise appear to be abstract, monotonous, difficult and unfocused philosophical musings on the books of Moses. As I shall argue, Balaam, along with other adversaries from Israel's past, functions as a chiffre of the (perceived) attack of sophistry on Philo's Platonic philosophy, thus giving a concrete and realistic urgency to Philo's scholarly work. Philo's application of Moses' writings to his own polemical circumstances, and the way he transposes the philosophical controversies of his day back into narratives contained in those writings will be examined in the third section (§3).

The issue of Philo and the sophists of contemporary Alexandria was already taken up by Bruce Winter in his exemplary study *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists* (1997).[6] To my mind, the study constituted a breakthrough in Philonic and Pauline studies by applying the new insights into the movement of the Second Sophistic to contemporary Judaism (Philo) and Christianity (Paul) and contextualizing the opponents in both Philo's writings and Paul's Corinthian correspondence. Prior to Winter's study we lacked a thorough survey of Philo's discussion of the sophists, and his many comments on the sophistic movement seem to have been neglected.[7] Before pointing out a desideratum not fulfilled by Winter's study, I shall briefly outline the structure of his book. In the chapters devoted to Philo, Winter first raises the question 'Who are Philo's Sophists?' Before Winter, views varied considerably in scholarly literature. Winter carefully reviews all existing definitions by modern scholars, deals with the relevant passages from Philo's writings and, on the basis of that, criticizes most modern definitions, to conclude 'that Philo denotes *contemporary*, professional orators and sophists in Alexandria. Other first-century writers such as Plutarch, Epictetus and Dio Chrysostom likewise refer to both groups as a sort of contemporary, identifiable and professional guild'.[8]

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[6] B.W. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement—Second Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997[1]).

[7] Cf. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 59, 59n1, 62.

[8] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, chap. 3, 59–79 at 66. Earlier modern definitions are listed on pp. 60–2 and critically reviewed on pp. 62–78.

In his final conclusion, Winter offers the following assessment, in which he underscores the specialized, technical, literal meaning of the term 'sophist' in Philo and its reference to the actual contemporary movement of the Second Sophistic:

> Orators and sophists comprised an identifiable grouping in Alexandrian society (...). Within the educational system of the first century, the term 'sophist' was not a fluid one: it excluded philosophers, dialecticians, grammarians, musicians, geometricians and any other specialized group. Philo's 'sophists' comprised a specific group within *paideia* (...). Philo does not use the term 'sophist' to stigmatise philosophers (...). The term in Philo's corpus is neither a 'symbol' nor a pejorative label applied to Greek or Jewish teachers or Greek philosophers. (...) the word should be read literally. Philo may well speak of the sophists in a pejorative way, but like Dio, he does not use it pejoratively of non-sophists. A distinct vocabulary of invective, drawn from Plato and well suited to its purpose, was used of the actual sophists in the first century.[9]

On the basis of this terminological clarification, Winter is able to take two further steps in the following chapters. First, Winter studies Philo's critique of the Alexandrian sophistic tradition by offering a systematic analysis of Philo's characterizations and criticism of the sophists, and commenting on their misuse of *paideia* for vice, deception, and personal gain.[10] Whereas Winter's analysis of the comments themselves is systematic, he fails to pay sufficient attention to the original narrative setting of Philo's criticisms within his commentaries on the Mosaic Pentateuch, so that the full import of Philo's criticism is lost.

Secondly, having now established both the definition of 'sophists' and Philo's criticism of these sophists, Winter shows how Philo prepared himself and the ablest among his readers for the arduous debate with and defeat of the sophists.[11]

Despite the ground-breaking qualities of Winter's study, one important aspect of Philo's polemics with the sophists is not sufficiently illuminated: the scope and range of Philo's projection of the contemporary debate with the sophists onto the narratives of the Mosaic Pentateuch, on which his writings offer a running commentary. My own research into the sophists in Philo's corpus of texts throws more light on this

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[9] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 78–9.
[10] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, chap. 4, 80–94.
[11] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, chap. 5, 95–108.

aspect. Apart from yielding some extra passages on the sophists not drawn upon by Winter,[12] my enquiry into the narrative context of Balaam the Sophist and into that of other 'sophists' in Philo's commentaries on the Pentateuch shows that Philo envisaged an uninterrupted threat posed to Israel's history by sophistry. Winter occasionally refers to the narrative settings of Philo's criticism of the sophists and to the way these narratives function,[13] but never highlights them, due to his systematic, non-narrative treatment of the contents of this criticism. By divorcing the polemic from its narrative, biblical context he also fails to point out important narratives and does not mention the anti-sophistic contestants by their biblical names.[14]

Within the Mosaic writings the sophistic threat reached its climax, in Philo's eyes, in the figure of Balaam (§1), as the culmination of sophistic encounters right from the start of creation (§2). By constructing a persistent sophistic threat throughout the narratives of the Mosaic Pentateuch, Philo seems to warn his (Jewish) readers not to yield to the attractions of contemporary sophistry (§3). It shows another side, and therefore a more complicated picture, of Philo of Alexandria. This is the picture, not of a Hellenizing, 'secularizing' Jew, but of a Jew who, by adopting Greek philosophy, draws some demarcation lines against the prevailing forces of the Second Sophistic.

1. *Balaam in Philo's thought*

In his commentary on Cain's murder of Abel, Philo draws a parallel between the conduct of Cain and that of Balaam. According to Philo, God's question to Cain, 'What have you done?' (Gen 4:10),

> is tantamount to 'You have done nothing, accomplished nothing'. It was so with Balaam also. He was a sophist, an empty conglomeration of

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[12] See, e.g., *De confusione* 39; *Legum allegoriae* 1.74, 3.41, 3.54; *De migratione* 171–172; *De praemiis* 8; *De providentia*, frag. 1.1; *De somniis* 1.102.

[13] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 80, 94, 105, 107.

[14] See, e.g., the narratives about the creation (*De opificio mundi* 45; passage not in Winter), Abraham (*De praemiis* 58; passage in Winter, 89n50 but without name of Abraham), Rebecca (*De posteritate Caini* 150; in Winter, 92 but without reference to section on Rebecca), Joseph (*De Josepho* 104, 125; passages in Winter, 88 and 64 but without reference to Joseph), Moses (*De confusione* 33–35; passage not in Winter) and the Amorites (*Legum allegoriae* 3.232–233; passage in Winter, 91 but without reference to the Amorites).

> incompatible and discordant notions (ὁ σοφιστὴς Βαλαάμ, μάταιος ὢν ὄχλος ἐναντίων καὶ μαχομένων δοξῶν). It was his desire to do harm to the goodly one by laying curses upon him. But he could not, for God turned his curses into a blessing...[15] (*Quod deterius* 70–71)

Apparently, Philo reads the story of Balaam as that of a conflict between Balaam's evil intentions ('his curses') and the outcome (their being turned into blessings by God). In his exegesis of the Balaam narrative in Numbers 22–25, Philo is heavily dependent on its earliest interpretation in Deut 23:4–6 (cf. Noort's contribution, §5b–i). There is an unresolved tension between the positive picture of Balaam in Numbers 22–24 (he refuses to be paid and wishes to speak only as God commands [22:7, 17–18, 37–38; 23:12, 26; 24:11–13]) on the one hand, and the unanticipated reference in Numbers 31 to Balaam's harmful advice (31:16; cf. 31:8) to weaken the Israelites by seducing them and inviting them to idolatry (25:1–3a) on the other. Because of this tension, the author of Deuteronomy assumes that Balaam had in fact been hired and intended to curse Israel for gain, but was prevented by God who turned the curse into a blessing (Deut 23:4–6; cf. Neh 13:2, Jude 11, 2 Pet 2:15). This interpretation turned Balaam into a figure which, in a different context, could be easily understood as a sophist avant la lettre.

This conflict of opposing movements of cursing and blessing in Balaam renders him 'an empty conglomeration of incompatible and discordant notions'—a periphrastic definition of what Philo understands sophists to be. And indeed, as Philo continues:

> Sophists are bound to find the powers within them at strife, words running counter to ideas and wishes to words, in absolute and utter discord (πεφύκασι δὲ οἱ σοφισταὶ πολεμίοις χρῆσθαι ταῖς ἐν αὑτοῖς δυνάμεσι, λόγων ἐνθυμήασι καὶ βουλημάτων λόγοις ἀντιστατούντων καὶ μηδαμῇ μηδαμῶς συναδόντων). (*Quod deterius* 72)

Although the sophists invest much energy in demonstrating both the social character of righteousness and the unsociability of injustice, the advantageous nature of moderation and self-control as well as the loss of health due to a licentious life, the great benefits conferred by piety as well as how irreligion makes one into a pariah, and the power of

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[15] Translations of Philo have been taken from the Loeb Classical Library (F.H. Colson, G.H. Whitaker & R. Marcus) with occasionally minor alterations when needed.

virtue in bringing health and safety as well as the harm occasioned by wickedness, the sophists themselves

> nevertheless (...) all the time entertain sentiments quite at variance with the things they say. At the very moment that they are singing the praises of good sense and moderation and righteousness and piety, they are found more than ever to be practising foolishness, licentiousness, injustice, and impiety, to be confounding and overturning, you may well nigh say, every ordinance of God or man. To these men one might rightly put the question (...) 'What benefit have all these harangues on the subject of virtue conferred on your own souls? (...) Have you not furnished true charges against yourselves, in that, while you have shown yourselves lecturers of the highest order as far as understanding of beautiful things and philosophical discourses are concerned, you are invariably caught cherishing sentiments and indulging in practices that are utterly base?' (*Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 73–75)

This sophistic ambivalence is symbolized in Balaam, who is characterized as 'an empty conglomeration of incompatible and discordant notions'. Balaam is no doubt called 'vain, empty, idle' because of the idle words he intended to speak. Philo is keen to stress Balaam's vanity in a number of passages in other treatises, even when he does not explicitly repeat his charge that Balaam is a sophist in those writings. In *De confusione linguarum*, Philo calls Balaam 'that dealer in auguries and prodigies and in the vanity of unfounded conjectures' (τὸν γοῦν οἰωνόμαντιν καὶ τερατοσκόπον περὶ τὰς ἀβεβαίους εἰκασίας ματαιάζοντα), and relates this to the etymology of his name: 'vain' (καὶ γὰρ μάταιος ἑρμηνεύεται Βαλαάμ; 159). Balaam's vanity is demonstrated by the fact

> that he cursed the Man of Vision [i.e. Moses], though in words he uttered prayers of blessing, for it [i.e. Moses' law-book] considers not what he actually said, words restamped under God's providence, like a true coin substituted for the false, but his heart, in which he cherished thoughts of injury rather than of benefit. There is a natural hostility between conjecture and truth, between vanity and knowledge, and between the divination which has no true inspiration and sound sober wisdom (*De confusione linguarum* 159).

Balaam's vanity is clearly contrasted with true knowledge.

In *De migratione Abrahami*, this vanity is explained by an antithesis between factual truth and rhetorical abilities. Philo argues that the practice of praising someone in encomiums and the opposite act of blaming are often not based on 'the truth of fact', but rest rather on the falsely exercised rhetorical abilities of speakers and authors:

> Do you not see the flatterers who by day and night batter to pieces and wear out the ears of those whom they flatter, not content with just assenting to everything they say, but spinning out long speeches and declaiming and many a time uttering prayers with their voice, but never ceasing to curse with their heart? (*De migratione Abrahami* 111)

This, of course, is a description of what Philo regards as Balaam's hallmark and it is no surprise that he continues by referring to him. In so doing Philo tries to make sense of the positive oracles of Balaam, recorded in Numbers 23–24. Particularly striking, in Philo's eyes, is Balaam's statement: 'God is not as man' (Num 23:19)—a statement Philo could only approve of. Yet, Balaam is to be blamed for his evil intentions and these justify his being called 'empty':

> Accordingly, that empty one, Balaam (ὁ μάταιος Βαλαὰμ), though he sang loftiest hymns to God, among which is that most Divine of canticles 'God is not as man' (Num 23:19), and poured out a thousand eulogies on (...) Israel, has been adjudged impious and accursed even by the wise lawgiver, and held to be an utterer not of blessings but of curses. For Moses says that as the hired confederate of Israel's enemies he became an evil prophet of evil things, nursing in his soul direst curses on the race beloved of God, but forced with mouth and tongue to give prophetic utterance to most amazing benedictory prayers: for the words that were spoken were noble words, whose utterance was prompted by God the Lover of Virtue, but the intentions, in all their vileness, were the offspring of a mind that looked on virtue with loathing. (113–114)

In other treatises Philo repeats his explicit characterization of Balaam as a sophist. In *De mutatione nominum*, Philo highlights Balaam's contradictory performance vis-à-vis Israel. Although Balaam, 'that dealer in augury' (τὸν οἰωνοσκόπον Βαλαὰμ), is described, in the Septuagint, as 'hearing the oracles of God and knowing knowledge from the Most High' (Num 24:16), Philo points out that Balaam himself did not profit from such knowledge but eventually perished in his own madness because with his prophetic, oracular sophistry (σοφιστείᾳ μαντικῇ) he was intent upon 'defacing the stamp of heaven-sent prophecy' (202–203). As such it was no insult for the sophists of Philo's day to be compared with oracular prophets. Philostratus, the second-century AD author of a biographical compendium of sophists and himself a sophist, also drew this comparison at the beginning of his work:

> the sophistic method resembles the prophetic art of soothsayers and oracles. For indeed one may hear the Pythian oracle say: 'I know the number of the sands of the sea and the measure thereof', and 'Far-seeing Zeus gives a wooden wall to the Trito-Born', and 'Nero, Orestes,

> Alcmaeon, matricides', and many other things of this sort, just like a sophist (*Lives of the Sophists* I.481).

The contrast Philo makes is rather between oracular sophistry and prophecy concerned with real knowledge. It is apparent from Philo's other works that he views true prophecy—such as that uttered by Balaam at God's prompting—as Platonic in nature. In his treatise *De vita Mosis*, for instance, in which he explicitly represents Balaam as a sophist, there is an extensive paraphrase of the Balaam narrative (1.263–293), even if Balaam is not mentioned by name. He is only described as 'a man living in Mesopotamia far-famed as a soothsayer, who had learned the secrets of that art in its every form, but was particularly admired for his high proficiency in augury'.[16] In this retelling, Philo also gives the contents of some of Balaam's oracles, after he has said that Balaam

> became possessed and there fell upon him the truly prophetic Spirit (προφητικοῦ πνεύματος ἐπιφοιτήσαντος) which banished utterly from his soul his art of oracular prophecy (ὃ πᾶσαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἔντεχνον μαντικὴν ὑπερόριον τῆς ψυχῆς ἤλασε). For the inspiration of the Holiest and magical sophistry might not live together (θέμις γὰρ οὐκ ἦν ἱερωτάτῃ κατοκωχῇ συνδιαιτᾶσθαι μαγικὴν σοφιστείαν). (1.277)

Under this influence Balaam speaks:

> From Mesopotamia has Balak called me, a far journey from the East, that he may avenge him on the Hebrews through my cursing. But I, how shall I curse them whom God has not cursed? (...) I shall not be able to harm the people (...). Who has made accurate discovery of how the sowing of their generation was first made? Their bodies have been

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[16] This aspect of Philo's characterization of Balaam is spotlighted in H. Remus, 'Moses and the Thaumaturges: Philo's *De Vita Mosis* as a Rescue Operation', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 52 (1996) 665–80; L.H. Feldman, 'Philo's Version of Balaam', *Henoch* 25 (2003) 301–19; and T. Seland, 'Philo, Magic and Balaam: Neglected Aspects of Philo's Exposition of the Balaam Story', in: J. Fotopoulos (ed.), *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 122), Leiden: Brill, 2006, 333–46. According to Feldman, Philo 'sought to elevate the figure of Moses through contrasting him, the true prophet, with this, the greatest of pagan prophets, who was actually a mere technician' (317); his *De vita Mosis* 'serves to rescue Moses from possible misunderstandings of Moses as a mere thaumaturge or as a magician, a reputation attested in a variety of [pagan] sources' (Remus, 665). Remus (666, 671, 674), Feldman (309) and Seland (345–6) suggest 'that Philo sees contemporary Balaams as practicing their arts in the streets and marketplaces of Alexandria' (Feldman). However, they seem to lose sight of Philo's depiction of Balaam as a sophist (only briefly mentioned by Remus, 668, 672n34 and Feldman, 304, 318).

> moulded from human seeds, but their souls are sprung from divine seeds, and therefore their stock is akin to God (διὸ καὶ γεγόνασιν ἀγχίσποροι θεοῦ). (1.278–279)

As F.H. Colson pointed out, Philo probably derives this appraisal of the Jews in terms of 'divine seeds' and 'being akin to God' from Plato,[17] who, in his *Republic*, quotes the following lines from Aeschylus:

> The near-sown seeds of gods (οἱ θεῶν ἀγχίσποροι), | Close kin to Zeus, for whom on Ida's top | Ancestral altars flame to highest heaven, | Nor in their life-blood fails the fire divine. (Aeschylus, *Niobe*; Plato, *Republic* III 391E)

The passage in Philo about the origin of 'the Hebrews', which the Septuagint lacks, may serve as a nice illustration of how the wording of Balaam's oracles is slightly platonized so as to forge an antithesis between Balaam the sophist and the God-inspired Balaam, who speaks the language of Plato, the great anti-sophistic philosopher.

In his use of the Balaam narrative, Philo is predominantly interested in the character of Balaam, and hardly mentions the episode of the speaking ass. According to F.H. Colson, 'Philo's omission of any mention of the ass speaking [in *De vita Mosis* 1.263–293] may no doubt be due to the feeling that the story might seem ridiculous to the Gentile readers, whom he certainly has in view'.[18] Though this is a possible explanation, there is some evidence to suggest that the episode of the ass speaking to Balaam was already known to a wider Greek public. According to the second-century BC Hermippus of Smyrna, in his *De Pythagora*, Pythagoras remarked that Calliphon, a deceased disciple of Pythagoras, had admonished him 'not to pass a certain spot, on which an ass had collapsed, to abstain from thirst-producing water, and to avoid all calumny.' This, as Hermippus added, was Jewish practice: 'In practising and repeating these precepts he [i.e. Pythagoras] was imitating and appropriating the doctrines of Jews and Thracians. In fact, it is actually said that that great man introduced many points of Jewish law into his philosophy' (Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.162–165).[19]

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[17] F.H. Colson, *Philo*, vol. 6 (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press/London: Heinemann, 1935, 420–1 note *b*.

[18] Colson, *Philo*, vol. 6, 603, Appendix to §263; cf. Feldman, 'Philo's Version of Balaam', 311.

[19] For introduction, text, translation and commentary see also M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1, Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974, 93–6: No. 25.

It is tempting to regard the admonition 'not to pass a certain spot, on which an ass had collapsed' as an allusion to the ass in the Balaam narrative, which collapsed under Balaam in order to escape the threatening Angel of the Lord, who had positioned himself in its path: 'And when the ass saw the angel of God, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was angry, and struck the ass with his staff. And God opened the mouth of the ass (...). And God opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord withstanding him in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand' (Num 22:27–31 LXX). If Hermippus was indeed drawing on the Balaam narrative, the story must have been known to a Greek public. There is no reason, however, to suppose that this public would have ridiculed this passage. The phenomenon of the speaking ass is not entirely unknown in Graeco-Roman literature, as Apuleius and Ps-Lucian testify (see Czachesz's contribution to this volume, §§4–5).

It is more likely that Philo, given his sophistic portrayal of Balaam, is simply less interested in the episode of the speaking ass. All it receives is an allegorical interpretation to the effect that it stands for ordinary pursuits in life, such as farming and trade. Those who 'follow the life of the merchant or the farmer or other business which men pursue for gain' sit on their beast, and blame it when disappointment and misfortune befall them. These ways of life, however, Philo argues, are wholly guiltless objects, because the angel of the Lord, the reason of God, who can intervene along the path of all men, is the source of all good and ill. Only if man uses this divine reason in the right way will he become a truly happy and reasonable being (*De cherubim* 32–33).

The speaking ass is only of minor importance to Philo, since his interest is focused on Balaam, whom he turns in a worse character than the text of Numbers allows for. Contrary to the biblical account in Numbers, Philo asserts that

> not even when the closed eye of his soul received its sight and 'beheld the angel of God standing in his way' (Num 22:31) did he turn aside and refrain from evil-doing, but let the stream of his folly run full course and was overwhelmed by it and swallowed up. (...) [H]e who listens not, who is not turned from his course by the Conviction which stands in his path, will in time receive destruction 'with the wounded' (Num 31:8) whom their passions stabbed and wounded with a fatal stroke. (*Quod deus sit immutabilis* 181–183)

This focus on Balaam the Sophist becomes more understandable if one realizes that Philo's invective against Balaam is part of his comprehensive

programme of refuting the sophists. In many passages Philo gives characteristics of these sophists. In his view, the issues of sophistry date back to the very beginning of creation and have accompanied Israel ever since.

2. *Philo's Anti-Sophistic Programme*

(2.1) *Characteristics of the Sophists*

In his work, Philo characterizes the sophists as mere lovers of words: 'while most people deem the man prudent who can find sophistical arguments, and is clever at expressing his ideas (οἱ μὲν γὰρ πολλοὶ φρόνιμον νομίζουσι τὸν εὑρετὴν λόγων σοφιστικῶν καὶ δεινὸν ἑρμηνεῦσαι τὸ νοηθέν), Moses knows such an one to be a lover of words (Μωυσῆς δὲ λογοφίλην μὲν αὐτὸν οἶδε) indeed, but a prudent man by no means' (*Legum allegoriae* 1.74). Their rhetorical capacities and specious sophistic arguments ([κατα]λόγοι σοφιστικοὶ) belong to the sphere of the body and the sense organs from which the mind must withdraw (*Legum allegoriae* 3.41). We have to abandon excessive, sophistic quibbling about the meaning of words: παυσόμεθα τῆς ἄγαν σοφιστείας (*Legum allegoriae* 3.206) and be led away from 'the sophistries of deceitful word and thought': ἔξω...τῶν κατὰ τὸν ἀπατεῶνα λόγον σοφιστειῶν (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 85). Sometimes the sophists are criticized for their literalism and their failure to apply the rules of allegory (*De somniis* 1.102); on other occasions they, like the poets, are portrayed as obsessed with myths (*De opificio mundi* 157; cf. *De vita contemplativa* 4), the obsession of 'those whose way is to deal in marvels and cultivate sophistry rather than wisdom' (*De praemiis et poenis* 8).

Sophistry is to be censured because 'sophists (σοφισταί), impelled at once by mercenary motives and by a grudging spirit, stunt the natures of their pupils by withholding much that they ought to tell them, carefully reserving for themselves against another day the opportunity of making money' (*De posteritate Caini* 150). They, 'the multitudes of sophists', wrongly imagine 'that wisdom consists in finding specious arguments, and not in appealing to the solid evidence of facts': καθάπερ μυρίοις συνέβη τῶν σοφιστῶν, οἵτινες ᾠήθησαν σοφίαν πιθανὴν εἶναι λόγων εὕρεσιν, ἀλλ' οὐ πραγμάτων ἀληθεστάτην πίστιν (*De migratione Abrahami* 171–172). Whereas Philo leaves 'the invention of ingenious arguments and perverse pretexts to the sophists, the task of wisdom is to investigate all that nature has to show': ἀλλὰ γὰρ σοφιστείας μὲν

ἔργον εὑρεσιλογεῖν, σοφίας δὲ ἕκαστα διερευνᾶν τῶν ἐν τῇ φύσει (*De providentia*, frag. 1.1). The origins of this impious, sophistic way of thinking Philo attributes to 'an ancient sophist named Protagoras', who regarded the human mind as the measure of all things: τίς οὖν ἐστιν ἀσεβοῦς δόξα; μέτρον εἶναι πάντων χρημάτων τὸν ἀνθρώπινον νοῦν· ἢ καὶ τῶν παλαιῶν τινα σοφιστῶν ὄνομα Πρωταγόραν φασὶ χρήσασθαι (*De posteritate Caini* 35).

Sometimes Philo can even attribute the title of sophists to all philosophers insofar as they do not agree in their solutions to particular problems,[20] although among them he singles out the sophistic position proper of 'those who argue at length that man is the measure of all things'. Yet, since the history of philosophy is full of discordance, 'because truth flees from the credulous mind which deals in conjecture' and eludes discovery and pursuit, all scientific quarrellings can be characterized as 'wranglings of the sophists on questions of dogma' (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 246). In certain respects, the sophists resemble the sceptics, who 'spend themselves on petty quibbles and trifling disputes'. Indeed, 'in philosophy there are men who are merely word-mongers and word-hunters' (*De congressu eruditionis gratia* 51–53).

Sophists are also encountered among the audiences of philosophers, who fill the lecture-halls and theatres on a daily basis. Among the audience, there is also a class of people 'who carry away an echo of what has been said, but prove to be sophists rather than philosophers (σοφισταὶ δὲ ἀντὶ φιλοσόφων ἀνευρίσκονται). These people's words deserve praise, but their lives censure, for they are capable of saying the best, but incapable of doing it' (*De congressu eruditionis gratia* 67). Sophists profess an extremely sceptical philosophy and love arguing for argument's sake, thus opposing all other representatives of the sciences (*De fuga et inventione* 209). They are not interested in what is authentic, but rather mimic and debase it by juxtaposing it with spurious matters (*De mutatione nominum* 208), just as Balaam wished to deface the stamp of genuine, heaven-sent prophecy with his oracular sophistry (*De mutatione nominum* 203). At the end of the day, Philo regards the sophists as poorly as he does the uneducated. In this, they contrast sharply with 'the saintly company of the Pythagoreans' and 'all genuine votaries of philosophy', who,

[20] Cf. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 72–3.

> rising above the opinions of the common herd (...) have opened up a new pathway, which the outside world can never tread, for studying and discerning truths, and have brought to light the ideal forms which none of the unclean may touch.

Both, the uneducated and the sophists, are regarded as 'unclean':

> By unclean I mean all those who, without ever tasting education at all, or else having received it in a crooked and distorted form, have changed the stamp of wisdom's beauty into the ugliness of sophistry (κάλλος τὸ σοφίας εἰς τὸ σοφιστείας αἶσχος μεταχαράξαντες). These, unable to discern the conceptual light through the weakness of the soul's eye, which cannot but be beclouded by the flashing rays, as dwellers in perpetual night, disbelieve those who live in the daylight, and think that all their tales of what they have seen around them, shown clearly by the unalloyed radiance of the sunbeams, are wild phantom-like inventions no better than the illusions of the puppet show (*Quod omnis probus liber sit* 1–5).

In this passage, the sophists are clearly identified with the dwellers in Plato's cave (*Republic* VII, 514ff.), Socrates' sophistic opponents and all other uneducated. The inability of the cave-dwellers 'to discern the conceptual light through the weakness of the soul's eye' is also exhibited by Balaam, as we have already seen: 'not even when the closed eye of his soul received its sight and "beheld the angel of God standing in his way" (Num 22:31) did he turn aside and refrain from evil-doing, but let the stream of his folly run full course' (*Quod deus sit immutabilis* 181).[21] Balaam is indeed a sophist *par excellence*.

(2.2) *The 'history' of the Sophists and Israel*

Balaam is not the only sophist which Israel encountered, however. According to Philo, the entire history from creation to the voyage of Israel through the wilderness was full of sophistic attacks on the 'true philosophy'. The main episodes of this unceasing tension are (1) the

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[21] Yet, with regard to *the contents* of his oracles, Balaam is described more favorably by Philo. In his introduction to Balaam's third and (in Philo's representation) final oracle, Balaam is described as 'the one who saw in sleep a clear presentation of God *with the unsleeping eyes of the soul*' (*De vita Mosis* 1.289; italics mine). On this, see C.T.R. Hayward, 'Balaam's Prophecies as Interpreted by Philo and the Aramaic Targums of the Pentateuch', in: P.J. Harland & C.T.R. Hayward (eds), *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium. Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 77), Leiden: Brill, 1999, 19–36 at 20–24, esp. 22. In this way, according to Hayward, 'Something extraordinary has happened. By so speaking of Balaam, Philo has invested him with the character of Israel, (...) "the one who sees God"' (Hayward, 22–24 at 22; cf. 35).

creation and the life of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, (2) the period of the patriarchs and the matriarchs, (3) the period of Israel in Egypt from Joseph to Moses, both of whom were confronted with 'the sophists of Egypt', and (4) the period of Israel in the wilderness, where Moses and the Israelites encountered the Amorites and Balaam. Together, these episodes cover the entire narrative span of Moses' Pentateuch, from the creation to the exodus and the voyage through the wilderness.

(1) *The creation and the life of the first men*

(a) Creation's anti-sophistic order

With an eye to the future attacks by sophists, God already built into the very set-up of the original creation a reminder that it is not wise to trust created phenomena rather than God. This is how Philo tries to explain why God created the earth on the third day, whereas the sun and moon were only created on the fourth day, despite the fact that the plants and fruits on the earth were dependent upon them for their growth:

> being aware beforehand of the ways of thinking that would mark the men of future ages, how they would be intent on what looked probable and plausible, with much in it that could be supported by argument, but would not aim at sheer truth; and how they would trust phenomena rather than God, admiring sophistry more than wisdom (ὅτι πιστεύσουσι μᾶλλον τοῖς φαινομένοις ἢ θεῷ σοφιστείαν πρὸ σοφίας θαυμάσαντες); and how they would observe in times to come the circuits of sun and moon (...) and would suppose that the regular movements of the heavenly bodies are the causes of all things that year by year come forth and are produced out of the earth; that there might be none who (...) would venture to ascribe the first place to any created thing, 'let them', said He, 'go back in thought to the original creation of the universe, when, before sun or moon existed, the earth bore plants of all sorts and fruits of all sorts' (*De opificio mundi* 45–46).

The unexpected order of creation serves, Philo agues, to show the unfoundedness of sophistry which bases itself only on superficial phenomena. The force of sophistry already revealed itself in the lives of the first men, particularly in those of Eve, Cain and Abel.

(b) The Serpent versus Eve

Philo ascribes the first sin to the influence of sophistry, to the serpent, 'emitting a human voice and arguing like a sophist (ἐνσοφιστεύων) to

an utterly guileless character, and cheating a woman with seductive plausibilities' (*De agricultura* 96).

(c) Cain versus Abel

Moreover, the first murder, of Abel by Cain, was due to Cain's sophistic inclinations, against which Abel, untrained in the arts of rhetoric, could not protect himself. It is noteworthy that in his interpretation of this episode, Philo is not only critical of Cain, but also of Abel for his excessive naivety in meeting up with Cain. The sophists, like Cain,

> when they have covered the dreary length of a long-distance course of talk (...) are held to have defeated men unaccustomed to arguing like sophists (σοφιστεύειν). But their victory lies not in the strength of those who have won, but in their opponents' weakness in this sort of thing. For those who apply themselves to the pursuit of virtue may be placed in two classes. (1) Some, making the soul alone the treasure-house of the good at which they aim, devote themselves to praiseworthy actions, without having so much as dreamt of juggling with words. (2) The others are doubly successful; their mind is secured by wisdom in counsel and good deeds, their speech by the arts of eloquence. Now to encounter the wranglings in which some folk [i.e. the sophists] delight is eminently fitting for these latter, ready and equipped as they are with the means of withstanding their enemies, but for the former class it is not at all safe to do so. (...) Now Abel had never learned arts of speech, and knew the beautiful and noble with the mind only. For this reason he should have declined the meeting on the plain, and have paid no regard to the challenge of the man of ill-will (*Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 35–37).

The hidden message of this passage is, no doubt, that one should be trained in eloquence and speech so as to be able to counter-attack the sophists, lest one suffer the fate of Abel. As we shall see in §3, it is exactly this message that Philo wants to communicate to his own readers. The need to train both mind and speech is emphasized by numerous other examples from Israel's history. Cain is in fact the instructor of all sophists, and the sophist Protagoras is in fact 'an offspring of Cain's madness'. Cain 'proved the strength of his creed by unmistakable deeds in his victory over Abel, the champion of the opposite opinion, and in getting rid of both him and his opinion' (*De posteritate Caini* 35)—so serious is the struggle between sophists and non-sophists. Cain's strategy, according to Philo, consists in building demonstrative arguments, delivering lengthy expositions and perorations, and 'forging plausible inventions contrary to the truth': sophistic devices (αἱ σοφιστικαι τέχναι) which are used by 'the wise in their own conceit, devotees of impiety,

godlessness, self-love, arrogance, false opinion, men ignorant of real wisdom' (*De posteritate Caini* 53).

The other instances in which the strife between sophists and non-sophists comes to the fore cover most key narratives in Moses' Pentateuch, among them the narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs.

(2) *The period of the patriarchs and matriarchs*

(d) Abraham versus the Chaldeans

Abraham, forsaking Chaldean astrology when called by God, 'changes by instruction from sophist to sage': ἀντὶ σοφιστοῦ γενόμενος ἐκ διδασκαλίας σοφός (*De praemiis et poenis* 58).

(e) Hagar and Ishmael versus Sarah and Isaac

The sophistic struggle reiterates itself among his children, Ishmael and Isaac. Whereas Sarah, Isaac's mother, represents virtue, Ishmael's mother, Hagar, symbolizes only preliminary studies.[22] Her child can but be a sophist who has to be banished:

> the most perfect types of being and the secondary acquirements are worlds apart, and wisdom has no kinship with the sophist's culture (σοφία σοφιστείας ἀλλότριον). For the latter has for the fruits of all its labour only those persuasions which tend to establish the false opinion, which destroys the soul; but wisdom studies truth and thus obtains that great source of profit to the mind, knowledge of right reason. (...) the sophist, who is ever sophist, and his mother, instruction in preliminary learning, are expelled and banished by God from the presence of wisdom and the wise, on whom he confers the titles of Sarah and Abraham: ὁπότε καὶ <κατὰ> πάντα σοφιστὴν καὶ μητέρα αὐτοῦ, τὴν τῶν προπαιδευμάτων διδασκαλίαν, ἐλαύνει καὶ φυγαδεύει ἀπὸ σοφίας καὶ σοφοῦ, ὧν ὀνόματα' Αβραάμ τε καὶ Σάρραν καλεῖ (*De cherubim* 9–10).

Hagar's child represents 'the soul just beginning to crave after instruction', because Hagar herself only offers incomplete education so that her child, 'when grown to manhood, becomes a sophist' (*De posteritate Caini* 131). As a sophist he has only covered 'the school subjects', and not the 'sciences which deal with virtues' (*De sobrietate* 9–10). Interpreting the

[22] See A.P. Bos, 'Hagar and the *Enkyklios Paideia* in Philo of Alexandria' in the proceedings of the 2006 TBN Conference on Hagar (forthcoming in the TBN series, Leiden: Brill).

assertion, made by the angel of the Lord, that Ishmael 'will be a wild man; his hand will be against all' (Gen 16:12), Philo argues:

> Now this picture clearly represents the sophist (...). (He is) like those who are now called Academics and Sceptics, who place no foundation under their opinions and doctrines and do not (prefer) one thing to another, for they admit those as philosophers who shoot at (the doctrines) of every school, and these it is customary to call 'opinion-fighters' (*Quaestiones in Genesin* III.33).

(f) Rebecca's non-sophistic attitude

It is Isaac's wife Rebecca who again symbolizes the correct non-sophistic attitude. Commenting on Rebecca's generosity in giving a servant abundant water to drink, Philo remarks:

> When she saw how readily receptive of virtue the servant's nature was, she emptied all the contents of her pitcher into the drinking-trough, that is to say, she poured all the teacher's knowledge into the soul of the learner. For, whereas sophists (σοφισταί), impelled at once by mercenary motives and by a grudging spirit, stunt the natures of their pupils by withholding much that they ought to tell them, carefully reserving for themselves against another day the opportunity of making money, virtue is an ungrudging thing, fond of making gifts, never hesitating to do good (*De posteritate Caini* 150–151).

After the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, Philo also weaves the struggle with the sophists into Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Both Joseph and Moses are confronted with 'the sophists of Egypt'. This, of course, is very relevant to Philo and his public. Being resident in Alexandria in Egypt himself, in a subtle way he equates the contemporary sophists of Alexandria with their Egyptian predecessors from the times of Joseph and Moses.

(3) *Israel in Egypt: Joseph and Moses versus 'the sophists of Egypt'*

(g) Joseph versus the sophists of Egypt

In Philo's representation, the history of Israel and the sophists continues with Joseph. Philo is not entirely positive about Joseph, whose 'coat of varied colours' (Gen 37:3) is interpreted by Philo as:

> the woven robe of statecraft (πολιτεία), a robe richly variegated, containing but a most meagre admixture of truth, but many large portions of false, probable, plausible, conjectural matter, from which sprang up all the sophists of Egypt (οἱ Αἰγύπτου πάντες σοφισταί) (*De somniis* 1.220).

This passage also reveals that Philo is very much aware of the power which rhetorically trained sophists exert in the political arena, a power he may have experienced in the tensions in Alexandria between the Jews and the Greeks, which resulted in each side sending a delegation to the emperor Gaius.[23] Winter, who also draws a parallel between Philo and Plato in this respect, notes:

> The role of the sophists in the political life of the city also drew criticism from Philo, for the deception of the sophistic tradition inevitably spilt over into that arena. 'All the sophists of Egypt' were said to have sprung up in the area of *politeia* from 'a meagre mixture' of truth and 'many large portions of false, probable, plausible, conjectural matter'. They became experts 'in decoying, charming, and bewitching' their hearers, *Somn.* I.220. Plato's view was that among the sophists, those who attempted to direct the *polis* through deliberative oratory were the greatest sorcerers and most practiced in charlatanism. (*The Statesman* 291C, 303C)[24]

Despite his critical note about Joseph's sophistic garment, Philo portrays Joseph as the one who succeeds over the Egyptians sophists in interpreting the dreams of the Egyptian king. As the king anticipates: 'He will reveal the truth, and as light disperses darkness his knowledge will disperse the ignorance of our sophists': διακαλύψει τὴν ἀλήθειαν, οἷα φωτὶ σκότος ἐπιστήμῃ τὴν ἀμαθίαν τῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σοφιστῶν ἀποσκεδάσει (*De Josepho* 104). Joseph distinguishes himself favourably from the 'sophistic praters who shew off their cleverness for hire and use their art of interpreting the visions given in sleep as a pretext of making money' (*De Josepho* 125).

(h) Moses versus the sophists of Egypt

These Egyptian sophists are the same group whom Moses confronts at the court of the Egyptian king (*De vita Mosis* 1.92). It is of course no coincidence that the Egyptian magicians are called 'sophists' by Philo. In this way, Philo places his own struggle with sophistic circles in Alexandria in the wider perspective of the age-long controversy between Israel and the sophists, both within Egypt and beyond. Moses is only

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[23] Cf. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 96: 'The Greeks were well represented by these men [Isidorus, Apion and Lampon] who, needless to say, possessed the rhetorical training needed to present their case'. Cf. Winter, 96–8 about Philo's rhetorical ability as can be discerned from the *captatio benevolentiae* still extant in his *De legatione ad Gaium*.

[24] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 90.

able to confront the sophists because he has first been thoroughly trained after admitting his inexperience in speech. Unlike Abel, Moses is not naive about the tricks of the sophists and avails himself of the help of Aaron, who acts as his spokesman:

> Do you not see that Moses declines the invitation of the sophists (σοφισταί) in Egypt (...)? He calls them magicians, because good morals are spoiled by the tricks and deceptions of sophistry (σοφισμάτων...τέχναις καὶ ἀπάταις) which act on them like the enchantments of magic. Moses' plea is that he is not 'eloquent' (Exod 4:10), which is equivalent to saying that he has no gift for oratory, which is but specious guesswork about what seems probable. Afterwards he follows this up by emphatically stating that he is not merely not eloquent but absolutely 'speechless' (Exod 6:12). He calls himself 'speechless', not in the sense in which we use the word of animals without reason, but of him who fails to find a fitting instrument in the language uttered by the organs of speech, and prints and impresses on his understanding the lessons of true wisdom, the direct opposite of false sophistry (ἀντίθετός...ψευδεῖ σοφιστείᾳ). And he will not go to Egypt nor engage in conflict with its sophists (σοφισταί), until he has been fully trained in the word of utterance, God having shown and perfected all the qualities which are essential to the expression of thought by the election of Aaron who is Moses' brother (*Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 38–39).

Thus trained, Moses is able to meet the Egyptian king at the edge or mouth of the river (Exod 7:15), Philo says. This place of encounter is taken, in an allegorical sense, to point to the lips through which the stream of speech passes:

> Now speech is an ally employed by those who hate virtue [i.e. by the sophists] (...), and also by men of worth for the destruction of such doctrines (...). When, indeed, after they have shaken out every reef of fallacious opinions, the opposing onset of the sage's speech [i.e. the speech of Moses] has overturned their bark and sent them to perdition, he [Moses] will (...) set in order his holy choir to sing the anthem of victory (*De confusione linguarum* 33–35).

This triumph of Moses over the sophists at the 'lip of the river', reminds Philo of the even greater triumph of Israel over the Egyptians who attempted to pursue them through the Red Sea, but drowned and were seen dead at the edge of the sea (Exod 14:30). Their death symbolizes 'the destruction of unholy doctrines and of the words which their mouth and tongue and the other vocal organs gave them to use' (*De confusione* 35). As Philo puts is elsewhere: 'the scene of their death is none other than the lips of that fountain bitter and briny as the sea,

those very lips through which poured forth the sophist-talk which wars against virtue (δι' ὧν ὁ πολέμιος ἀρετῆς σοφιστὴς λόγος ἐξεκέχυτο)' (*De somniis* 2.281–282).

As we have seen before, Philo warns his readers that there are many who 'have not the capacity to demolish by sheer force the plausible inventions of the sophists (τὰς πιθανὰς τῶν σοφιστῶν), because their occupation has lain continuously in active life, so they are not trained in any high degree to deal with words' (*De confusione* 39). Such rhetorical training is crucial if one is to succeed in defeating the sophists, as Moses' life shows.

This counter-attack against the sophists naturally also colours the Mosaic laws. According to Philo, Moses' anti-sophistic intentions can be noted in his decrees concerning the holy seventh day on which one should abstain 'from work and profit-making crafts and professions and business pursued to get a livelihood'. The leisure of this day

> should be occupied (...) by the pursuits of wisdom only. And the wisdom must not be that of the systems hatched by the word-catchers and sophists (οἱ λογοθῆραι καὶ σοφισταὶ) who sell their tenets and arguments like any bit of merchandise in the market, men who for ever pit philosophy against philosophy (οἳ φιλοσφίᾳ κατὰ φιλοσοφίας...χρώμενοι) without a blush (...), but the true philosophy which is woven from three strands—thoughts, words and deeds (*De vita Mosis* 2.211–212).[25]

(4) *Israel in the wilderness: Moses and the Israelites versus the Amorites and Balaam*

(i) Israel versus the Amorites

The attacks suffered from the sophists do not stop once Israel leaves Egypt. Even during the voyage through the wilderness, the sophists continue to plague them. Philo mentions them by name: the Amorites and Balaam.

The name 'Amorites', Philo argues, should be etymologically understood as 'men fond of talking', who 'symbolize the uttered word' (τοῦ

[25] A further instance of Moses' anti-sophistic codifications is found in *De specialibus legibus* 3.54 where accusers who appear before the judges are warned that they should draw up their formal challenges 'not in the spirit of a false accuser or malicious schemer, set on winning at any cost, but of one who would strictly test the truth without sophistry (ἄνευ σοφιστείας)'. Although closely following Num 5:12–31 the phrase ἄνευ σοφιστείας is lacking from the Septuagint.

γεγωνότος λόγου σύμβολον ὄντες). Philo draws here on the Stoic distinction between *logos prophorikos* ('speech') and *logos endiathetos* ('thought').[26] The Amorites represent only the former, the uttered word, without it being the vehicle of the internal word. The problem here, in the Amorites' case, is that their uttered word does not function in harmonious cooperation with the internal word (a harmony which, as we shall see, is advocated by Philo), but is in fact devoid of internal reason. As Adam Kamesar has convincingly shown, in Philo's view the training of the *logos prophorikos* should be assigned to the discipline of rhetoric, and that of the *logos endiathetos* to philosophy. This view is also upheld in Greek writers such as Plutarch, Hermias of Alexandria and Sopater. The setting of this assignment of the two *logoi* to these two disciplines, Kamesar shows, is that of the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy. These two *logoi* are meant to function harmoniously: 'A *paideia* that is concerned with both τὸ φρονεῖν and τὸ εὖ λέγειν, the educational ideal that goes back to Isocrates, would entail the cooperative synergy of the *logos endiathetos* and the *logos prophorikos*, if Stoic terminology is employed'.[27] By portraying the Amorites as only in command of the *logos prophorikos* without the backing of the *logos endiathetos*, Philo characterizes them as sophists. Their king, according to Philo,

> is the sophist clever at searching after verbal artifices (ὁ σοφιστής ἐστι καὶ δεινὸς λόγων ἀνερευνᾶν τέχνας); and those who transgress the boundary of truth place themselves at the mercy of his quibbling (*Legum allegoriae* 3.232).

He is concerned with sophistic riddles (τὰ αἰνίγματα τὰ σοφιστικὰ), probabilities and plausible arguments which involve no knowledge of the truth (233).

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[26] See G. Verbeke, 'Logos I. Der Logosbegriff in der antiken Philosophy', *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 5 (1980), 495–6n4 with reference to Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 8.275 (= *Adversus Dogmaticos* 2.275): 'Man does not differ in respect of uttered reason from the irrational animals (...), but in respect of internal reason' (trans. R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library); = *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 2.135.

[27] A. Kamesar, 'The *Logos Endiathetos* and the *Logos Prophorikos* in Allegorical Interpretation: Philo and the D-Scholia to the *Iliad*', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 44 (2004) 163–81, esp. 170–3 at 173, with an extensive bibliography on the *logos endiathetos* and the *logos prophorikos* in 163–4n1.

(j) Balaam

The threat which the Amorites pose to Israel in the wilderness is another instance of sophists' onslaught against knowledge and truth. Philo found this episode narrated in Numbers 21, just before Balaam takes centre-stage in Numbers 22–24. In this sense, the appearance of Balaam the sophist, already discussed in §1 above, constitutes the climax of Israel's manifold encounters with the sophists.

3. *Philo's application to the philosophical discussion of his day*

An intriguing question which arises when one takes in the multitude of Philo's comments on sophists is why he devoted so much attention to them. There are clear indications in his writings that Philo views the sophists of his day as a clear threat which he wishes to tackle head-on. I take my starting-point in another passage on the Amorites, whose name, as we have just seen, Philo explains as 'men fond of talking', and whose king he referred to as a sophist. In *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, Philo, having introduced the Amorites and identified them as 'talkers', remarks that the gift of speech 'has been marred by thousands of the recipients (...). These are impostors, flatterers, and inventors of cunning plausibilities'. Their practice is contrasted with 'the man of worth' whose speech 'should be transparent and true. But the speech which most strive for is obscure and false' (302–303). Philo clearly experiences this as a problem of his own day:

> So long then as 'the sins of the Amorites', that is of sophistical arguments, 'are not fulfilled' (Gen. 15:16) because of the fact that they are difficult to disprove and criticize (οὖν οὐκ ἀναπεπλήρωται τὰ ἁμαρτήματα τῶν Ἀμορραίων, τουτέστι τῶν σοφιστικῶν λόγων διὰ τὸ ἀνεξέλεγκτον), but still in virtue of their powers of attraction seduce us (ἡμᾶς ἐπάγεται) with their plausibilities, while their enticements make us powerless to turn from and leave them, we remain powerless. But if ever all the plausible fallacies are refuted by true beliefs (...), we shall (...) slip our cable and sail clean away from the land of falsehood and sophistry (ἀράμενοι τῆς τῶν ψευσμάτων καὶ σοφισμάτων χώρας) (...) Such is the lesson expressed in the problem here presented. For it is impossible to turn back from, to hate, to leave the plausible falsehood, unless the sin involved in it be revealed complete and consummated. And this revelation will be made when, confronted by the firm evidence of truth, it receives the much-needed refutation (κατὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀντίταξιν καὶ βεβαίωσιν) (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 304–306).

In this passage, Philo shows his concern that the sophistic powers of attraction may 'seduce us' (ἡμᾶς ἐπάγεται), that is him and his contemporary readers. It demonstrates that even in a passage about the Amorites of long ago, who tried to seduce Israel in the wilderness, Philo recognizes the sophists of his own day. He also acknowledges that the sophistic arguments are difficult to disprove and criticize, yet emphasizes that their refutation is much-needed. We encounter here a vivid interest is the philosophical discussion of his own day.

That Philo regards the sophists as a present-day phenomenon and not only as a literary motif derived from Plato's anti-sophistic dialogues is shown by the fact that he talks explicitly about 'the orators or sophists *of today*': οἱ ῥήτορες ἢ οἱ *νῦν* σοφισταὶ (*De vita contemplativa* 31). They are contrasted with the senior leader of the Jewish sect of the Therapeutae who, every seventh day,

> gives a well-reasoned and wise discourse. He does not make an exhibition of clever rhetoric like the orators or sophists of today but follows careful examination by careful expression of the exact meaning of his thoughts, and this does not lodge just outside the ears of the audience but passes through the hearing into the soul and there stays securely.

Elsewhere, too, Philo explicitly makes the link with contemporary sophists, the sophistic throng of people of the present day: ὁ νῦν ἀνθρώπων σοφιστικὸς ὅμιλος. The road which leads to God, Philo argues, one must take

> to be philosophy, not the philosophy which is pursued by the sophistic throng of people of the present day (ὁ νῦν ἀνθρώπων σοφιστικὸς ὅμιλος), who, having practised arts of speech to use against the truth, have given the name of wisdom to their rascality, conferring on a sorry work a divine title (*De posteritate Caini* 101).

A further indication that Philo, in his discussion of the sophists is thinking primarily of the sophists of his own day, is the lively portrait of everyday life of which the throng of sophists is part:

> Day after day the throng of sophists, which is to be found everywhere (ὁ πανταχοῦ τῶν σοφιστῶν ὅμιλος), talks the ears off any audience they happen to have with disquisitions on minutiae, unravelling phrases that are ambiguous and can bear two meanings and distinguishing among circumstances such as it is well to bear in mind—and they are set on bearing in mind a vast number (*De agricultura* 136).

They are the ones who, though professing to be philosophers, fill the lecture-halls and theatres almost every day, 'discoursing at length,

stringing together their disquisitions on virtue without stopping to draw breath. Yet what profit is there in their talk?' (*De congressu* 64).[28]

In a passage in which Philo criticizes the hectic and indulgent, passionate lifestyle of the sophists, the sheer size of the sophist movement is also highlighted:

> And so multitudes of those who are called sophists (μυρίοι . . . τῶν λεγομένων σοφιστῶν), after winning the admiration of city after city (θαυμασθέντες κατὰ πόλεις), and after drawing well-nigh the whole world to honour them (καὶ τὴν οἰκουμένην σχεδὸν ἅπασαν ἐπὶ τιμὴν ἐπιστρέψαντες) for their hair-splitting and their clever inventiveness, have with all their might worn their life out, and brought it to premature old age, by the indulgence of their passions (*De agricultura* 143).

This movement spreads through the cities like wildfire and, Philo fears, is influencing the young: 'Vanity (. . .) with its sophisms (σόφισματα) and trickery beguiles every city and loses no time in capturing the souls of the young' (*De praemiis* 25).

It is in this world that Philo wants to shoulder his philosophical responsibilities and there are several passages in his writings which express his personal commitment to refuting sophistry. Philo does not regard himself as Abel, who had never learned the arts of speech and for whom it was not safe to encounter the wranglings of the sophists (*Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 35), but likens himself to Moses, who only engaged in conflict with the sophists once he had been fully trained in rhetoric (*Quod deterius* 38–39). As he makes plain:

> It will be well for us to counter in this manner those who are pugnacious over the tenets which they maintain; for when we have been exercised in the forms which words take, we shall no more sink to the ground through inexperience of the tricks of the sophistic wrestling (οὐκέτ' ἀπειρίᾳ σοφιστικῶν παλαισμάτων ὀκλάσομεν), but we shall spring up and carry on the struggle and disentangle ourselves with ease from the grips which their art has taught them. (. . .) But if a man, though equipped in soul with all the virtues, has had no practice in rhetoric, (. . .) when like Abel he

[28] I agree with Winter that this passage is about sophists. See Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 74: 'Philo comments that hardly a day goes by but lecture-halls and theatres fill with οἱ φιλοσοφοῦντες. Various classes of people listen with different but inadequate responses. But to whom does Philo refer? While οἱ φιλοσοφοῦντες can be translated as "philosophers", it often means sophists in the Philo corpus. In *Post.* 34 Philo mentions that many who have "professed" philosophy arrive at conclusions belonging to the ancient sophist, Protagoras.'

> steps out for a sophistic contest (εἰς σοφιστικὸν ἀγῶνα), he will fall before he has obtained a firm footing (*Quod deterius* 41–42).

Philo clearly regards himself as fully up to the job. This is no task for those who are just beginning their studies, those making progress, and those who have reached perfection without having established firm roots. All these should refuse 'to engage in the war waged by the sophists' (καὶ μὴ τῷ τῶν σοφιστῶν ἐπαποδύεσθαι πολέμῳ); if they, mere amateurs, engage 'trained and seasoned fighters, they will undoubtedly get the worst of it' (*De agricultura* 159; 162). Therefore,

> It will, then, be the business of him who fully apprehends and understands the subject, and thoroughly knows his own powers, to go to war with the strife-loving band of sophists (πολεμῆσαι τῷ φιλέριδι καὶ σοφιστικῷ στίφει) (*De agricultura* 162).

Philo's strong advice not to engage lightly in the strife with sophists probably reflects his experience of the ongoing clash between sophistry and philosophy in his own days. His own ideal is to integrate rhetoric, intentions and virtuous deeds in one coherent whole. In support of this ideal he quotes Moses:

> In a thoroughly philosophical way he [Moses] makes a threefold division of it, saying: 'It is in thy mouth and in thy heart and in thine hand' (Deut 30:11–14), that is, in words, in plans, in actions. For these are the parts of the good thing, and of these it is compacted, and the lack of but one not only renders it imperfect but absolutely destroys it. For what good is it to say the best things but to plan and carry out the most shameful things? This is the way of the sophists (σοφιστῶν οὗτος ὁ τρόπος), for as they spin out their discourses on sound sense and endurance they grate on the ears of those most thirsting to listen, but in the choices that they make and the actions of their lives we find them going very far wrong.

It is equally wrong, however, to have good intentions but fail in deeds and words, or to practice the right things 'without understanding and explicit speech'.

> But if a man succeeded, as if handling a lyre, in bringing all the notes of the thing that is good into tune, bringing speech into harmony with intent, and intent with deed, such an one would be considered perfect and of a truly harmonious character (*De posteritate Caini* 85–88).[29]

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[29] This threefold enterprise is also discussed in *De agricultura* 144; *De congressu eruditionis gratia* 67–68; and *De vita Mosis* 2.212.

In order to achieve this synthesis, and avoid one-sidedness of whatever kind, Philo also reflects on the Stoic distinction between *logos prophorikos* ('speech') and *logos endiathetos* ('thought'), as we saw in the case of the sophistic Amorites who only possessed the former *logos* (see at the end of §2). Philo stresses that one should master both *logoi*:

> 'Logos' has two aspects, one resembling a spring, the other its outflow; 'logos' in the understanding resembles a spring, and is called 'reason', while utterance by mouth and tongue is like its outflow, and is called 'speech'. That each species of logos should be improved is vast wealth, understanding having good reasoning at its command for all things great and small, and utterance being under the guidance of correct training. For many reason excellently, but find speech a bad interpreter of thought and are by it betrayed through not having had a thorough grounding in the ordinary subjects of culture. Others, again, have shown great ability in expounding themes, and yet been most evil thinkers, such as the so-called sophists (οἱ λεγόμενοι σοφισταὶ).

Abel is adduced as an example of the first category, those who 'reason excellently' but lack 'a thorough grounding in the ordinary subjects of culture', and is contrasted with the sophists. Moses, however, once he has been trained in knowledge and wisdom, is a perfect example of those who command both *logoi*. This is in accordance with God's intentions:

> God bestows on those who obey Him no imperfect boon. All His gifts are full and complete. And so, in this case also, He does not send the blessing or 'logos-excellence' in one division of logos, but in both its parts, for He holds it just that the recipient of His bounty should both conceive the noblest conceptions and give masterly expression to his ideas. For perfection depends, as we know, on both divisions of logos, the reason which suggests the ideas with clearness, and the speech which gives unfailing expression to them.

Moses was led to look into knowledge and wisdom 'with a view to getting the better of the sophists in Egypt (οἱ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ σοφισταί)'. It was Aaron who acted as Moses' logos in utterance (ὁ προφορικὸς λόγος).[30] To be versed in both *logoi* is extremely important:

> It is a vital matter, then, for one about to face a contest with sophists (πρὸς ἀγῶνα σοφιστικὸν) to have paid attention to words with such thoroughness as not only to elude the grips of his adversary but to take the

[30] Cf. also *De gigantibus* 52.

> offensive in his turn and prove himself superior both in skill and strength (*De migratione Abrahami* 71–82).

In *De ebrietate*, Philo emphasizes what happens if one is dominated by the uttered word only. The uttered word (ὁ κατὰ προφοράν... λόγος) implants in us

> through the specious, the probable and the persuasive (...) false opinions for the destruction of our noblest possession, truth. Why, then, should we not at once take vengeance on him too, sophist (σοφιστής) and miscreant that he is, by sentencing him to the death that befits him—that is to silence, for silence is the death of speech? Thus will he no longer ply his sophistries within the mind (ἵνα μηκέτ' ἐνσοφιστεύοντος ὁ νοῦς μεθέλκηται), nor will that mind be led astray, but having been absolutely released from (...) the sophistries of speech (τῶν κατὰ τὸν... λόγον σοφιστειῶν ἐλεύθερος) (...), the mind will be able to devote his unhampered liberty to the world of mental things (*De ebrietate* 70–71).

Only if one is versed in both *logoi*, as Philo makes clear in *De migratione*, can one defeat those who 'bring their sophistic trickery into play against the divine *logos* (ἀντισοφιστεύοντες τῷ θείῳ λόγῳ)'. Philo is optimistic, however, that this contest with the sophists will be successful: 'All the arguments of sophists (πάντες οἱ σοφιστικοὶ λόγοι) are devoured and done away with by Nature's many-sided skill (...). sophistry is ever defeated by wisdom (ἀεὶ σοφιστείαν ὑπὸ σοφίας ἡττᾶσθαι)' (*De migratione Abrahami* 72–85).

It is to underpin this view, that sophistry has indeed always been defeated by wisdom, that Philo retells the story of the sophist Balaam who planned in vain to attack Israel with his sophistic oracles.

Epilogue: The function of the Old Testament narratives in Philo

Philo not only takes action against contemporary sophistry in general but seems particularly concerned that the Jewish youth, receiving a Greek education at Alexandria, may be prone to non-philosophical, sophistic influences. Speaking about the Jewish race, 'our race', Philo observes that many have used their education not for the better ('for day and light') but for the worse ('for night and darkness'), and have effectively extinguished the enlightenment of their souls by striving after a life of luxury and high offices:

> Many (...) have acquired the lights in the soul for night and darkness, not for day and light; all elementary lessons for example, and what is

> called school-learning and philosophy itself when pursued with no motive higher than a life of luxury, or from desire of an office under our rulers (*Legum allegoriae* 3.166–167).

This concern is recognized already very clearly by Alan Mendelson in his study 'Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria' (1982):

> Neither political activities nor practical applications of the arts and sciences were condemned as inherently evil, although both were fraught with danger. But Philo drew the line when secular education compromised the integrity of the individual or the solidarity of the Jewish community. It is not coincidental that in *LA* [*Legum allegoriae*] iii.167–68 the most explicit instances of miseducation are students who use the encyclia to serve pretentious ends or to curry favor with the Roman rulers.[31]

This observation is further spelled out in Mendelson's final conclusion, in which he underscores 'the social and political lures of total assimilation' and 'the real dangers' exerted by the sophistic movement (although, writing prior to Winter, he does not sufficiently address the issue of the sophists in the Philonic reflection on secular education):

> Taking it for granted that the elite Jewish youth of Alexandria would be enrolled in Greek institutions, he [Philo] appears to have asked himself in what way their secular education could be turned to account. Jews, he insisted, should utilize the encyclia in their strivings toward divine knowledge instead of exploiting the acquisition of Greek culture simply to further their social and political ambitions. (...) In this environment, the social and political lures of total assimilation must have loomed large. Philo was particularly sensitive to this issue, perhaps because his nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, had already shown signs of disloyalty to Judaism. (...) Philo continued to draw clear lines between what was acceptable and what was not acceptable for his coreligionists. (...) Philo encourages a certain devotion to the encyclia, but he places them within a Jewish framework, and he repeatedly warns against their seductive charms. On the latter point, I cannot emphasize too strongly the real dangers which Philo saw in the disciplines, dangers which ranged from sophistry to heresy.[32]

If Philo is indeed gravely concerned about the dangers the sophistic movement poses to the Greek-educated Jewish youth at Alexandria, I believe this apprehensiveness accounts for the anti-sophistic slant of his

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[31] A. Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria* (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 7), Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982, 46. Cf. also Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 93 with 93n72.

[32] Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, 82.

commentaries on Moses' Pentateuch. Philo's anti-sophistic stance and his concern about the possible misuse of secular education puzzled F.H. Colson in an important article 'Philo on Education' (1917). Since all in all 'very little systematic or formal writing on the subject' of education survives from pagan Graeco-Roman sources, despite the importance which Antiquity attached to it, Colson deems it 'strange to find one of the most vexed questions of classical antiquity most fully discussed in the work of this semi-hellenized Jew [i.e. Philo]—to find the old issue between the sophist and the philosopher stated to us in terms of the Old Testament.'[33]

However, it is not strange at all if Philo is determined to guard the Jewish youth against the influence of the sophist movement. Indeed, as Winter writes in reply to Colson's statement: 'If it is strange (as F.H. Colson maintains), it is also highly informative that Philo evaluated the Alexandrian sophistic tradition by means of OT incidents imported into the structure of Plato's critique.'[34] Winter's emphasis, however, is on the final part of the sentence, 'OT incidents *imported into the structure of Plato's critique*', and it seems he takes Philo's evaluation of the sophistic tradition '*by means of OT incidents*' almost for granted. What Winter sets out to demonstrate and clarify in response to Colson is Philo's Platonizing tendency, not his use of narratives from the Mosaic Pentateuch. After quoting Colson, Winter continues: 'Although Philo conducts his discussion of the sophistic tradition within a framework of OT characters and texts, we will see that his critique of it depends heavily on Plato's evaluation of the sophists'.[35] However, it may also be informative that Philo criticizes the sophistic tradition 'by means of OT incidents' if he is indeed trying to warn the Greek-educated Jewish youth. If that is the case, warning them through anti-sophistic commentaries on the Mosaic Pentateuch is far more effective than through general treatises.

Occasionally Winter seems to be aware of this anti-sophistic function of the Old Testament narratives. Commenting on *De migratione Abrahami* 76–85, where Philo states that 'all the arguments of the sophists are devoured and done away with' by the rhetorically gifted Aaron, the *logos prophorikos*, the 'Finger of God', Winter states: 'This narrative functions as a divine rescript which declares that "sophistry is ever defeated by

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[33] F.H. Colson, 'Philo on Education', *Journal of Theological Studies* 18 (1917) 151–62, esp. 151, 153, 162, with quotation from 162.

[34] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 94.

[35] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 80.

wisdom"'.[36] Here, Winter explicitly reflects on the function which Philo attributes to a particular Old Testament narrative. Similarly, later on Winter argues that 'Philo's war against contemporary sophistic activity was an outworking of' his high esteem for Moses as '"*the* wise man" (πάνσοφος), exceeding in age and wisdom even the Seven Wise Men of the Greeks', in congruence with the rhetorical question posed by the Greek philosopher Numenius: 'What else is Plato, but Moses speaking Attic Greek?'[37] Consequently, according to Winter, Philo 'believed that conflicts in which noted OT characters engaged provided the paradigm for his evaluation of the sophists'.[38]

I agree with this and believe that the narrative emphasis of the present paper, which focuses on the Old Testament narrative contexts of the polemic concerning the sophists in Philo's oeuvre, shows abundantly that there is an uninterrupted anti-sophistic reading of these narratives in Philo's commentaries, spanning the entire line from the creation to Moses. The scale and scope of this undertaking suggests that Philo deliberately chose the Mosaic Pentateuch as the vehicle to convey his warning to the Greek-educated Jewish youth concerning the dangers of the anti-philosophical, social and political lures of the sophist movement.

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[36] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 105.

[37] On Numenius' view on Moses, see now M.F. Burnyeat, 'Platonism in the Bible: Numenius of Apamea on *Exodus* and Eternity', in: G.H. van Kooten (ed.), *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity* (Themes in Biblical Narrative 9), Leiden: Brill, 2006, 139–68. On Graeco-Roman views on Moses in general, see G.H. van Kooten, 'Moses/Musaeus/Mochos and his God Yahweh, Iao, and Sabaoth, Seen from a Graeco-Roman Perspective', in: Van Kooten, *The Revelation of the Name*, 107–38.

[38] Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, 107.

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