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Philo of Alexandria and the *Placita*

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Ever since in 1888 the young Hans von Arnim, later to become well-known as the editor of the fragments of the Stoa, published his study entitled *Quellenstudien zu Philon von Alexandria*,¹ Philo has been used as quarry for our knowledge of Greek philosophy, particularly of the last two centuries B.C.E. This is not only perfectly legitimate, but also very understandable. After all, Philo's knowledge was so much greater than our own, hampered as we are by the loss of almost all the original writings of that period.² The organisers of our sessions today and tomorrow on 'Philo's sources' have not prescribed any particular methodology. But I think we can safely assume that they will be happy with a different approach from that taken by Von Arnim and the tradition he inaugurated. The emphasis can also be on Philo as reader and user of the source material that he had got to know in the course of his studies of Greek and Jewish literature. I welcome the initiative taken by our organisers and am honoured to make a modest contribution which focuses on one relatively little-known philosophical source that Philo knew and utilised.

Let us start by asking the question: what *kinds* of sources (and I will be concentrating mainly on philosophical works here) did Philo use? I suggest that a simple four-fold typology will be helpful.

(1) There can be no doubt that Philo read and studied carefully the original works of major philosophers in the Greek tradition, whether those of earlier times such as Plato and Aristotle or those of more recent times. Many studies during the past decades have demonstrated this, although we are hampered by the paucity of such works that are still extant from pre-Philonic times. For example the account of the ten sceptical modes in *De ebrietate* may have been

¹ Von Arnim (1888). The study focusses on three texts: *Aet.* (which Von Arnim, following Bernays, regards as non-Philonic); *Ebr.* 170–202 (the tropes of Aenesidemus); and *Plant.* 140–177 (from a treatise on whether the wise man gets drunk).

² See esp. the collection of studies edited by Alesse (2008).

based from direct reading of a treatise by Aenesidemus, but it is also possible that he may also have made use of an intermediate source.³

(2) At the same time there is evidence that Philo made use of literature that commented on and interpreted the works of earlier philosophers, most of which has now been lost. His understanding of Platonic doctrine, for example, shows consistent features of what we now label Middle Platonic interpretation which make it very likely that he made use of secondary works that presented Plato's thought in a particular way, whether treatises similar to the slightly later works of Plutarch and Numenius or commentaries on the text.

(3) A third group of works that Philo will have used focused on particular topics and contrasted the views of differing philosophers and schools. The best near contemporary examples of such works are those of Cicero on the gods (*De natura deorum*), the soul (*Tusculanae disputationes*), ethical goals (*De finibus*) and so on. Philo's *De aeternitate mundi* may have drawn on works of this kind.

(4) Finally Philo certainly knew and made use of what we might call handbook literature. An extensive body of such handbook literature developed during the Hellenistic period. It included manuals on all manner of scientific and technical subjects (including rhetoric).⁴ In the field of philosophy it included accounts of the origin and development of the philosophical schools ('successions literature'), surveys of their doctrines ('sects literature'), and we might also include biographical writings in this category too.⁵ Much of this material has been distilled into the *Lives of eminent philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, the only work of its kind to survive from antiquity. Philo was by no means wholly dependent on this kind of work for his information on philosophy, but he certainly made use of it, as we shall now see.

I wish now to direct our attention to one kind of handbook literature which is of considerable intrinsic interest for the history of ancient philosophy, namely the genre of doxographical literature and in particular the work with the name of Aëtius. This work does not survive in its original form, but large parts of it can be reconstructed with a fair degree of accuracy from later adaptations and exploitation of the original. The reconstruction was first carried out by the

³ Von Arnim (1888) is convinced that Philo used an intermediate source, but Janacek (1981) inclines to the view that Philo uses Aenesidemus' directly. See also Polito (2004) 6.

⁴ The classic study of these works is still Fuhrmann (1960); see also Horster-Reitz (2003).

⁵ On such works in the Hellenistic period see the overview in Mansfeld (1999) 16–26.

German scholar Hermann Diels in his celebrated work *Doxographi Graeci*.⁶ It was Diels who first coined the terms ‘doxographer’ and ‘doxography’ and postulated the genre associated with them. The concept of ‘doxography’ is thus a modern, not an ancient concept. But it has proved useful and is still in current use, although it is often used rather imprecisely.⁷

Since 1989 the Dutch scholar Jaap Mansfeld and I have been engaged in preparing a new reconstruction and edition of this work. It is an enormous task on account of the complexity of its defective transmission and the wide scope of its contents. So far we have produced three volumes of preliminary studies.⁸ A first draft of the edition is virtually complete and the final version is scheduled to be completed in 2016. As we shall see, Philo is not a direct witness to the work, but he plays a not insignificant role in understanding its provenance and its purpose. So for me personally there is a nice connection between my research on Philo and this long-term project in the field of doxographical studies.

We know nothing about the author and his place of activity. Even his name, deduced from references in a later author who used the work, is not wholly certain.⁹ The title of his work is likely to have been simply Περὶ ἀρεσκόντων.¹⁰ With the term ἀρέσκοντα we have to understand the words τοῖς φιλοσόφοις, i.e. literally ‘what is pleasing to the philosophers’, their views or doctrines. The Latin equivalent is *placita* and in this paper I will use the term *Placita* to refer to Aëtius’ work and the tradition on which he depends. In its opening words it states that it will hand down the φυσικὸς λόγος, so the subject matter is the domain of physics in the ancient sense. There are five books in all: book 1 on principles; book 2 on cosmology; book 3 on meteorology and the earth; book 4 on psychology; book 5 on physiology. Each book is divided into a series of chapters covering more detailed subjects, 136 in total. The scope is thus huge. The work itself will not have extended much beyond 100 pages of text, yet it

⁶ Diels (1879) 267–444.

⁷ For an introduction to the genre of doxography, including a discussion of modern uses of the term see Runia (1999).

⁸ Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010).

⁹ See Runia (2009), reprinted in Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010) 3.173–180.

¹⁰ On the title see Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010) 1.323–327.

contained close to eight hundred opinions. What was the origin and aim of this remarkable work?

In the most general terms we can say that the aim of the work is to provide a survey of the opinions held by philosophers on natural philosophy. The organisation of the work is topic based. For each subject a number of opinions ranging from the usual minimum of two to about fifteen are recorded. Each opinion commences with the name of a philosopher followed by his view, usually formulated in the most succinct way possible with no argumentation given in support. Some consideration is given to historical aspects. Many chapters commence with early Presocratics such as Thales or Heraclitus, and sometimes details about successions or school allegiance are given. But it is the opinions that are primary. The work pays much attention to how they are organised per chapter. The main method used to do this is through *diaphonia* (opposition) and *diaeresis* (the former opposing opinions to each other, the latter listing, juxtaposing and contrasting them). Diels argued that the origin of the method and much of the content went back to the Peripatetic philosopher Theophrastus. But recent research, particularly by Jaap Mansfeld,¹¹ has shown that it goes back further to Aristotle and underwent further development in the Hellenistic period. You can find three chapters on the handout. I have chosen these because they are relevant to his usage of the *Placita*.

But now I have to introduce an element of disappointment. Although Philo is an important witness to the tradition of Aëtius' work, it is not likely that it was a work that he actually possessed. Various indications point to a date of the second half of the first century C.E., i.e. just a little later than Philo.¹² But, as we shall now see, he certainly utilised an earlier work that was a predecessor to the Aëtian *placita*, so for our purposes it remains an excellent example of the kind of handbook that Philo used. We now turn to the Philonic texts that demonstrate such usage. Because of time constraints I will not be able to go into a lot of textual detail, but I have treated the main texts elsewhere.¹³

¹¹ See Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010), esp. vol. 2.1 and the articles collected in vol. 3.

¹² On the date of the work see Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010) 1.320–323.

¹³ See Runia (2008).

(1) Towards the end of the Allegorical Commentary Philo devotes a lengthy passage to exegesis of Jacob's dream at Bethel (*Somn.* 1.2–188). He first notes that it took place when Jacob went out from the well of the Oath (Gen 28:10). In allegorical terms the well is a symbol of knowledge. But why is this well the fourth that was dug by Abraham and Isaac (Gen 21:25)? The solution Philo proposes is that both the cosmos and human beings have four prime constituents, of which three are knowable but the fourth is beyond our knowledge (§15). For the cosmos there are earth, water, air and heaven; for the human being there are body, sense-perception, speech and mind. In order to demonstrate his thesis Philo poses a number of questions on both heaven and the mind followed by various speculative answers that enable him to demonstrate that we really do not know the answers. I give two brief examples from the beginning of each treatment to illustrate how he does this. On heaven he writes:

All of these we perceive, but heaven has a nature (φύσις) that is incomprehensible and it sends us no sure indication of itself. For what could we say? That it is a solid mass of crystal, as some have maintained? Or that it is the purest fire? Or that it is a fifth body that moves in a circle, having no share of any of the four elements? (§21)

The implicit question here is 'what is the nature of the heaven'. It is exactly the same topic as the title of one of Aëtius' chapters (2.11 On heaven, what is its substance). In addition each of the three opinions that Philo gives as examples is found in Aëtius' list of doxai. Compare the text from his handbook on the handout. But we note that Philo does not record the name-labels of the philosophers holding the views (Empedocles, Parmenides etc., Aristotle). He is only interested in the divergence of opinions, which illustrate that we cannot really know the answer. This usage correlates well with our observation above that in the *Placita* the opinions are more important than the identity of those who hold them.

When he turns to the subject of the mind he commences his account as follows:

Is, then, the fourth element in our own make-up, the ruling intellect (ὁ ἡγέμων νοῦς), able to be comprehended? Certainly not. For what do we think it is in its essence (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν)? Is it spirit or blood or body in general? It is not body, but must be declared incorporeal. Is it then limit or

form or number or continuity or harmony, or whatever else among things that exist? (§30)

This passage corresponds to two later chapters in Aëtius Book 4 (4.2 On soul, what it is, and 4.3 Whether soul is body and what is its substance). Once again all the opinions (with the small exception of 'limit') can be found in Aëtius' list spread out over the two chapters. It is striking that Philo divides the views into those that see the mind as corporeal and those that regard it as incorporeal. This is precisely the main diaeresis that Aëtius uses to organise his collection of views. But in three interesting respects Philo deviates from what we find in the *Placita*. Firstly he speaks about the mind rather than the soul, no doubt in order to accentuate the aspect of inscrutability and also to link the question more closely to human beings (since they alone of earthly beings have mind, whereas all living beings have soul). Secondly, he reverses the order, first giving corporealist views, then those affirming incorporeality.¹⁴ Thirdly, he does appear to repudiate the view that the mind is corporeal. So he must think that we know at least that much.¹⁵

Given the extent of the parallels, which I cannot now pursue in further detail, there can be no doubt that Philo used a doxographical handbook closely related to Aëtius' work, though not identical with it.¹⁶ There are further important parallels in authors such as Cicero and Lucretius which indicate that Aëtius belonged to an older tradition of *Placita* that goes back to the Peripatetic school and underwent various transformations during the Hellenistic period.

It should be noted, finally, that there are four other texts in *De somniis I* and the previous treatise *De mutatione nominum* which refer more briefly to similar material from the *Placita* (*Mut.* 10, 67, *Somn.* 1.145, 184). The speculation would seem warranted that Philo made a special study of doxographical texts when writing these treatises. A work similar to that of Aëtius must have been on his desk, as it were.

¹⁴ Of course we cannot be certain that the order of treatment in his source was the same as in 4.2–3. But given the extensive parallels, it is at least likely.

¹⁵ Another difference is that the view that the mind is blood deviates from the view of Critias in Aëtius (4.3.13 in our reconstruction) that it consists of blood and moisture. This may be no more than a simplification, but it may possibly be influenced by the biblical view that the animal soul is blood, which elsewhere Philo bases on Lev 17:11; see *Det.* 80, *Her.* 55, *QG* 2.59.

¹⁶ This emerges more clearly from a full analysis of the passages first undertaken by Wendland (1897). Diels believed that Aëtius adapted a previous fuller work which he called the *Vetusta Placita*. This hypothesis has been called into question by Mansfeld, who thinks it is better to think of a broader tradition with various representatives; see Mansfeld-Runia (1997–2010), 2.27–41, 3.152–157.

(2) A second work where Philo reveals knowledge of the *Placita* is *De Providentia* II. In the debate on the existence and workings of providence the dialogue touches upon many topics in the domain of physics which also occur as chapters in Aëtius' compendium. At §48 Philo cites 'the doctrine of highly regarded philosophers, as maintained by Parmenides, Empedocles, Zeno, Cleanthes and other divine men', that the universe is ungenerated and everlasting. The combination of presocratics and Stoics is somewhat surprising. A glance at Aëtius' chapter on 'whether the cosmos is destructible' (2.4) shows that Philo has combined two views, (a) that the universe is truly uncreated and indestructible (Parmenides), and (b) that it is everlasting through a cyclical process of birth and destruction (Empedocles and the Stoa). Later in the discussion Alexander argues that heavenly phenomena have no purpose as directed by providence. An example is the Milky way (§89). He cites 'experts in meteorology who oppose each other so that they have quite dissimilar views on the subject'. He then gives six explanations. Only two of these occur in the corresponding chapter of Aëtius (3.1). But all but one are found in other sources related to the *Placita*. Once again Philo hardly gives any names (only the scientist Eratosthenes is mentioned). The list of views is meant to prove that it is quite impossible to ascribe the phenomenon to the workings of providence. It is simply the result of natural processes.¹⁷

(3) I now turn to a different kind of usage of the *Placita*. In various exegetical contexts Philo has occasion to dwell on the nature of philosophy and how it can and should be used. I give three examples. In *Abr.* 162–163 Philo asks why one of the five cities was not destroyed in Gen 19:15–29. It symbolises the sense of sight, which is superior to the other senses and gives rise to philosophy. As part of his explanation Philo illustrates how sight allows the mind to investigate the various phenomena of nature. Philo lists the main questions and then illustrates them by asking further questions about the cosmos. The various subjects in the area of first principles and cosmology show a net if inexact correspondence to the way that Aëtius organises his subjects in Books I and II of his compendium. In *Her.* 243–248 Philo gives exegesis of Gen 15:11, where we read that Abraham was sitting among the birds who 'descended upon the bodies that were

¹⁷ I would wish to revise my interpretation of this passage given at Runia (2008) 42.

divided' (i.e. of animals prepared for sacrifice). Philo sees here an allegory of sophists who hold opinions that are divided against each other. He then gives five examples, three which can be found in Aëtius, but also two others which refer to epistemological questions. It seems that the biblical term διχοτομήματα recalls to Philo's mind the opposition (i.e. diaeresis) of philosophical views that is so prominent in doxography. In response Abraham the wise man acts as judge and adjudicates between the various doctrines (§247). A third example is found at the end of *De opificio mundi* in the famous list of five 'lessons' that Moses teaches through his creation account. All five refer to questions that are prominent in the Aëtian *placita*:

Lesson 1, on the nature of God, whether he exists or not—cf. Aëtius 1.7;

Lesson 2, on the nature of God, whether he is one or many—cf. Aëtius 1.7;

Lesson 3, on the cosmos, whether it is created or not—cf. Aëtius 2.4;

Lesson 4, on the cosmos, whether it is single or multiple or infinite in number—cf. Aëtius 2.1;

Lesson 5, on providence, whether it exists or not—cf. Aëtius 2.3.

Philo again speaks in very general terms—no philosophers are named. For each topic the opposition of views is indicated, but there is no doubt that Moses chooses one of the options. Like Abraham, he exercises judgment and resolves questions that the philosophers cannot settle.

(4) For my last text I wish to return to the tropes of Aenesidemus that Philo summarises in *De ebrietate*. The final trope which is discussed at great length in §§193–202 focuses on the divergences in lifestyles, customs, laws and thought in human societies. This is meant to show that it is impossible for the human mind to attain certainty and truth. It is no wonder, he argues, that the confused crowd of ordinary people follow tradition and make affirmations and negations without serious investigation. But in fact the philosophers who do engage in such study are no better. They too are divided into groups which disagree on virtually everything (§198). Philo then proceeds to give examples, three from physics (which are all paralleled in Aëtius) and also this time two from ethics (which fall outside the scope of his work). I list them on the handout. It is possible, though we cannot be certain, that Philo's source, Aenesidemus, made use of the *Placita* in drawing up this part of his argument. What this passage demonstrates very clearly is that Philo was aware that one of the main uses of

the *Placita* was to illustrate the disagreements of the philosophers. The original purpose of doxography in Aristotle and Theophrastus had been to record the various views of their predecessors on a systematically arranged list of topics. At various stages during the Hellenistic period this body of information was exploited by academic and sceptical philosophers in an attempt to demonstrate that it is impossible to reach doctrinal certainty on any particular topic. This was not a position that Philo could espouse. His heroes are Abraham (cf. *Her.* 246) and Moses, who with the aid of divine inspiration could sit in judgment and teach their disciples the truth. But the topos of the *dissensio philosophorum* was one that he could exploit for his own purposes. Like the church fathers after him,¹⁸ he uses it to show that unaided human reason has fatal limitations in its quest to attain certainty on all the fundamental questions treated by philosophy.

We have seen, therefore, that Philo makes considerable, if in most cases not very precise use, of the tradition of the *Placita*. It is one of the sources on which he drew for his knowledge of the views of the philosophers. Our final task is to draw some conclusions on *why* the *Placita* were a valuable source for him, one that he had studied carefully and on more than one occasion had within arm's reach. I think at least four reasons can be given.

(1) The *Placita* fulfilled the same function that many handbooks still have today. They allowed Philo to *organise his thought* on the various subjects that philosophy treated in the domain of physics. Time and time again, when he speaks about the subject matter of philosophy, he outlines it by making use of the schemata, both in terms of topics and opinions, that were standard in the doxographical tradition of the *Placita* represented by Aëtius.

(2) The *Placita* provide Philo with *specific information* on the views that philosophers had held on a wide range of topics in the earlier history of philosophy. Much of this information, though I suspect not all, would have been known to him from his wide reading of primary sources. But a compendium such as Aëtius' work was a handy tool for gaining access to that

¹⁸ Especially Eusebius and Theodoret, who make extensive use of the tradition of the *Placita* and are important witnesses to Aëtius' compendium; see Mansfeld–Runia (1997–2010), 1.130–141, 272–290.

information. It is a role that handbooks still play today. However, the role that the *Placita* played in this respect would seem to have been fairly limited. Except in his philosophical treatises, Philo does not make many detailed references to the views of the philosophers and the names of the particular philosophers who held these views. Most of his references are rather general. For his purposes there was no need to be more specific.

(3) We have also seen very clearly that the method of the *Placita*, which emphasised the plurality of opinions held by philosophers on a multitude of subjects, invited Philo to reflect on the epistemological status of the doctrines of the philosophers. Not only can their views be divided into various camps. They also often stand in opposition and indeed in blatant contradiction to each other. Philo is thus sympathetic to the conclusion reached by sceptical philosophers who conclude that it is futile to attempt to reach the truth by studying the doctrines of the dogmatic philosophers. In the end, however, he does not find himself in agreement with their radical conclusion on the unattainability of certain knowledge. For this one has to go elsewhere, namely in the study of divinely inspired scripture.

(4) The study and exposition of scripture is the main activity that Philo himself is engaged in. We have seen that the *Placita* were exploited by Philo on a number of occasions when he gives exegesis of scriptural texts. Works such as that of Aëtius were part of that vast library of knowledge that he was able to use in order to attain a deeper understanding of scripture, often in quite surprising and creative ways. The use of the *Placita* illustrates what Jaap Mansfeld in the title of an important article called 'philosophy in the service of scripture'.¹⁹ And since exegesis and exposition lie at the very heart of the Philonic enterprise, this use of the *Placita* would have to be regarded as the most important of all.

¹⁹ Mansfeld (1988), reprinted in Mansfeld (1989), article X.

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