

# 3 JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS

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## *Chapter one*

# God and World

### *The Creation of the World in Accordance with the Law of Nature*

While among other law-givers some have nakedly and without embellishment drawn up a code of the things held to be right among their people, and others, dressing up their ideas in much irrelevant and cumbersome matter, have befogged the masses and hidden the truth under their fictions, Moses, disdainful of either course, the one as devoid of the philosopher's painstaking effort to explore his subject thoroughly, the other as full of falsehood and imposture, introduced his laws with an admirable and most impressive exordium. He refrained, on the one hand, from stating abruptly what should be practised or avoided, and on the other hand, in face of the necessity of preparing the minds of those who were to live under the laws for their reception, he refrained from inventing myths himself or acquiescing in those composed by others. His exordium (Gen. 1), as I have said, is one that excites our admiration in the highest degree. It consists of an account of the creation of the world, implying<sup>1</sup> that

1. The following is a basic doctrine of Stoic philosophy. The identification of Mosaic

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the world is in harmony with the Law, and the Law with the world, and that the man who observes the law is constituted thereby a loyal citizen of the world, regulating his doings by the purpose and will of Nature, in accordance with which the entire world itself also is administered.

*On the Creation of the World*, 1-3 (I, p. 7)

### *God's Ubiquity*

God fills all things; He contains but is not contained. To be everywhere and nowhere is His property and His alone. He is nowhere, because He Himself created space and place coincidentally with material things, and it is against all right principle to say that the Maker is contained in anything that He has made. He is everywhere, because He has made His powers extend through earth and water, air and heaven, and left no part of the universe without His presence, and uniting all with all has bound them fast with invisible bonds, that they should never be loosed...<sup>2</sup>

*The Confusion of Tongues*, 136-7 (IV, pp. 83-4)

### *On Prayer*

When, my mind, thou wishest to give thanks to God for the creation of the universe, give it both for the sum of things and for its principal parts, thinking of them as the limbs of a living creature of the utmost perfection. Such parts are heaven and sun and moon and the planets and fixed stars; then again earth and the living creatures or plants thereon, then the sea, the rivers, whether spring-fed or winter courses, and all they contain; then the air and its phases, for winter and summer, spring and autumn, those seasons which recur annually and are so highly beneficial to our life, are different conditions in the

law with the law of nature implies the philosophical meaning of the Biblical precepts.

2. Remark the adaptation of the philosophical formulas to the idea of a personal God.

air which changes for the preservation of sublunar things. And if thou givest thanks for man, do not do so only for the whole genus but for its species and most essential parts, for men and women, for Greeks and barbarians, for dwellers on the mainland and those whose lot is cast in the islands. And if it is for a single person, divide the thanksgiving as reason directs, not into every tiny part of him down to the very last, but into those of primary importance, first of all into body and soul of which he is composed, then into speech and mind and sense. For thanks for each of these will by itself be not unworthy to obtain audience with God.<sup>3</sup>

*The Special Laws*, I, 210–I (VII, p. 219 ff.)

3. Philo reproduces here the scheme of a Jewish-Hellenistic prayer from which large parts have been preserved.

## *Chapter two*

# God and Man

### *On the Liberty of Men*

The special prerogative which man has received is mind, habituated to apprehend the natures both of all material objects and of things in general. For as sight holds the leading place in the body, and the quality of light holds the leading place in the universe, so too in us the dominant element is the mind. For mind is the sight of the soul, illuminated by rays peculiar to itself, whereby the vast and profound darkness, poured upon it by ignorance of things, is dispersed. This branch of the soul was not formed of the same elements, out of which the other branches were brought to completion, but it was allotted something better and purer, the substance in fact out of which divine natures were wrought.<sup>1</sup> And therefore it is reasonably held that the mind alone, in all that makes us what we are, is indestructible. For it is mind alone, which the Father who begat it judged worthy of freedom, and loosening the fetters of necessity, suffered it to range as it listed, and of that free-will which is His most peculiar possession and most worthy of His majesty gave it such portion as it was capable of receiving. For the other living creatures in whose souls

1. The 'divine natures' are the stars, their substance the ether.



the mind, the element set apart for liberty, has no place, have been committed under yoke and bridle to the service of men, as slaves to a master. But man, possessed of a spontaneous and self-determined will, whose activities for the most part rest on deliberate choice, is with reason blamed for what he does wrong with intent, praised when he acts rightly of his own will. In the others, the plants and animals, no praise is due if they bear well, nor blame if they fare ill: for their movements and changes in either direction come to them from no deliberate choice or volition of their own. But the soul of man alone has received from God the faculty of voluntary movement, and in this way especially is made like to Him, and thus being liberated, as far as might be, from that hard and ruthless mistress, necessity, may justly be charged with guilt, in that it does not honour its Liberator.... For God had made man free and unfettered, to employ his powers of action with voluntary and deliberate choice for this purpose, that, knowing good and ill and receiving the conception of the noble and the base, and setting himself in sincerity to apprehend just and unjust and in general what belongs to virtue and what to vice, he might practise to choose the better and eschew the opposite.<sup>2</sup>

*The Unchangeableness of God*, 45–9 (III, p. 33 ff.)

*‘The Lord Shepherds Me...’*

‘The Lord shepherds me and nothing shall be lacking to me’ (Ps. 23.1). It well befits every lover of God to rehearse this Psalm. But for the Universe it is a still more fitting theme. For land and water and air and fire, and all plants and animals which are in these, whether mortal or divine, yea and the sky, and the circuits of sun and moon, and the revolutions and rhythmic movements of the other heavenly bodies, are like some flock under the hand of God its King and Shepherd. This hallowed flock He leads in accordance with right and law, set-

2. The whole argument is a characteristic mixture of Platonic and Biblical (*cf.* Gen. iii. 22) teaching.

ting over it His true Word and Firstborn Son<sup>3</sup> Who shall take upon Him its government like some viceroy of a great king; for it is said in a certain place: 'Behold I am, I send My Angel before thy face to guard thee in the way' (Ex. 23.20). Let, therefore, even the whole universe, that greatest and most perfect flock of the God who is, say, 'The Lord shepherds me, and nothing shall fail me'. Let each individual person too utter this same cry, not with the voice that glides forth over tongue and lips, not reaching beyond a short space of air, but with the voice of the understanding that has wide scope and lays hold on the ends of the universe. For it cannot be that there should be any lack of a fitting portion, when God rules, whose wont it is to bestow good in fullness and perfection on all that is. Magnificent is the call to holiness sounded by the psalm just quoted; for the man is poor and incomplete in very deed, who, while seeming to have all things else, chafes at the sovereignty of One; whereas the soul that is shepherded of God, having the one and only thing on which all depend, is naturally exempt from want of other things for it worships no blind wealth, but a wealth that sees and that with vision surpassingly keen.

*On Husbandry*, 51-4 (III, p. 135 ff.)

### *God is Near Us*

God, since His fullness is everywhere, is near us, and since His eye beholds us, since He is close beside us, let us refrain from evil-doing. It were best that our motive should be reverence, but if not, let us at least tremble to think of the power of His sovereignty, how invincible it is, how terrible and inexorable in vengeance, when He is minded to use His power of chastisement. Thus may the divine spirit of wisdom not lightly shift His dwelling and be gone, but long, long abide with us, since He did thus abide with Moses the wise.... For we read 'stand thou here with Me' (Deut. 5.31). Here we have an oracle vouchsafed to Moses; true stability and immutable tranquillity

3. Wisdom, or the Logos.

is that which we experience at the side of God, who Himself stands always immutable.

*On the Giants*, 47 ff. (II, p. 469)

*God, the Possessor of All, Man its Usurer*

God claimed the sovereignty of all for Himself; to His subjects He assigned the use and enjoyment of themselves and each other.... For I am formed of soul and body, I seem to have mind, reason, sense, yet I find that none of them is really mine. Where was my body before birth, and whither will it go when I have departed? What has become of the changes produced by life's various stages in the seemingly permanent self? Where is the babe that once I was, the boy and the other gradations between boy and full-grown man? Whence came the soul, whither will it go, how long will it be our mate and comrade? Can we tell its essential nature? When did we get it? Before birth? But then there was no 'ourselves'. What of it after death? But then we who are here joined to the body, creatures of composition and quality, shall be no more.... Even now in this life, we are the ruled rather than the rulers, known rather than knowing. The soul knows us, though we know it not; it lays on us commands, which we must fain obey, as a servant obeys his mistress. And when it will, it will claim its divorce in court and depart, leaving our home desolate of life. Press it as we may to stay, it will escape from our hands. So subtle is it of nature, that it affords no grip or handle to the body. Is my mind my own possession? That parent of false conjectures, that purveyor of delusion, the delirious, the fatuous, and in frenzy or melancholy or senility proved to be the very negation of mind. Is my utterance my own possession, or my organs of speech? A little sickness is a cause sufficient to cripple the tongue and sew up the lips of the most eloquent, and the expectation of disaster paralyses multitudes into speechlessness. Not even of my sense-perception do I find myself master, rather, it may well be, its slave, who follows it where it leads, to colours, shapes, sounds, scents, flavours, and the other material things.

All this surely makes it plain that what we use are the posses-

sions of another, that neither glory, nor wealth, nor honours, nor offices, nor all that makes up body or soul are our own, not even life itself. And if we recognize that we have but their use, we shall tend them with care as God's possessions, remembering from the first, that it is the Master's custom, when He will, to take back His own. The thought will lighten our sorrow when they are taken from us. But as it is, with the mass of men, the belief that all things are their own makes their loss or absence at once a source of grief and trouble.

*On the Cherubim*, 113–8 (II, p. 75 ff.)

### *On God's Grace*

'Noah ("the righteous man") found grace in the sight of the Lord' (Gen. 6.8). 'Finding grace' is not as some suppose equivalent only to being well-pleasing, but something of this kind besides. The righteous man exploring the nature of existence, makes a surprising find, in this one discovery, that all things are a *grace* of God, and that creation has no gift of grace to bestow, for neither has it any possession, since all things are God's possession, and for this reason grace too belongs to Him alone as a thing that is His very own. Thus to those who ask what the origin of creation is the right answer would be: that it is the goodness and grace of God, which He bestowed on the race that stands next after Him. For all things in the world and the world itself is a free gift and act of kindness and grace on God's part.

*Allegorical Interpretation III*, 77–8 (I, pp. 351–3)

### *Man Offers what God has Given Him*

The most sacred ordinance of Moses runs, 'My gifts, My offerings, My fruits ye shall observe to bring to Me' (Num. 28.2).<sup>4</sup> For to whom should we make thank-offering save to God, and wherewithal save by what He has given us? For there is nothing else whereof we can have sufficiency. God needs nothing, yet in the exceeding greatness

4. It may be remembered that the Greek translation of the Bible used by Philo often differs from the Hebrew original.

of His beneficence to our race He bids us bring what is His own. For if we cultivate the spirit of rendering thanks and honour to Him, we shall be pure from wrong-doing and wash away the filthiness which defiles our lives in thought and word and deed. For it is absurd that a man should be forbidden to enter the temples save after bathing and cleansing his body, and yet should attempt to pray and sacrifice with a heart still soiled and spotted. The temples are made of stones and timber, that is of soulless matter, and soulless too is the body in itself. And can it be that while it is forbidden to this soulless body to touch the soulless stones, except it have first been subjected to lustral and purificatory consecration, a man will not shrink from approaching with his soul impure the absolute purity of God and that too when there is no thought of repentance in his heart? He who is resolved not only to commit no further sin, but also to wash away the past, may approach with gladness: let him who lacks this resolve keep far away, since hardly shall he be purified. For He shall never escape the eye of Him who sees into the recesses of the mind and treads its inmost shrine.

*On the Unchangeableness of God, 6–9 (III, p. 15)*

### *On Giving Thanks to God*

The gifts which God can give are not such as man in his turn can receive, since for Him it is easy to bestow gifts, ever so many, ever so great, but for us it is no light matter to receive the proffered boons. For it is enough for us to obtain the good fruits of toil and effort, those more familiar gifts which grow up with us, but such as spring up independently without art of any form of human devising, which come ready-made to the recipient, we cannot even hope to attain. These are gifts of God, and therefore to discover them is the inevitable destiny of natures closer to God and undefiled and released from the mortal body. Yet Moses taught us to make our acknowledgements of thanks according to the power of our hands (Num. vi. 21), the man of sagacity dedicating his good sense and prudence, the master of words consecrating all the excellences of speech in praises to the Existent in poem or prose, and from other offerings after their kind, natural

philosophy, ethical philosophy, the lore of the arts and sciences from the several students of the same. In this way the sailor will dedicate success of voyage, the husbandman fruitfulness of crops, the herdsman the teeming increase of his livestock, the physician the health of his patients, or again the general his victory in war, the statesman or crowned head his lawful pre-eminence, or sovereignty, and in short he who is not self-centred will vow as the cause of all goods of the soul or body or outside the body Him who in very truth is the one sole Cause of aught. Let none then of the lowly or obscure in repute shrink through despair of the higher hope from thankful supplication to God, but even if he no longer expects any greater boon, give thanks according to his power for the gifts which he has already received. Vast is the number of such gifts, birth, life, nurture, soul, sense-perception, mental picturing, impulse, reasoning. Now 'reasoning' as a name is but a little word, but as a fact it is something most perfect and most divine, a piece torn off from the soul of the universe,<sup>5</sup> or, as it might be put more reverently following the philosophy of Moses, a faithful impress of the divine image.

*On the Change of Names*, 218–23 (v, p. 255 ff.)

### *World and Soul: An Offering to God*

The whole heaven and the whole world is an offering dedicated to God, and He it is who has created the offering; and all God-beloved souls, citizens of the world, consecrate themselves, allowing no mortal attraction to draw them in the opposite direction, and they never grow weary of devoting and sanctifying their own imperishable life.

*On Dreams*, I, 243 (v, p. 425)

### *The Levite*

'I am thy portion and inheritance' (Num. 18.20): for in reality the mind, which has been perfectly cleansed and purified, and which renounces all things pertaining to creation, is acquainted with One

5. This is a Platonic tenet.

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alone, and knows but One, even the Uncreate, to Whom it has drawn nigh, by Whom also it has been taken to Himself. For who is at liberty to say 'God Himself is alone [and all] to me', save one who has no welcome for aught that comes after Him? And this is the Levite attitude of mind, for the name means 'He [is precious] to me', <sup>6</sup> the thought conveyed being that while different things have been held precious by different people, he is alone in holding precious the highest and worthiest Cause of all things.

*On Noah's Work as a Planter*, 64-5 (III, pp. 245-7)

6. The explanation of the name "Levite" is one of the artificial etymologies which Philo borrowed from his predecessors.