

Characterization of a Sage: The Many Moses' of Philo of Alexandria

The Greco-Roman biographical tradition is represented by numerous authors from distinct cultural and religious backgrounds. These distinctions have resulted in biographical works with distinctly non-Greco Roman subjects, with one of the most notable examples being *The Life of Moses* from Philo of Alexandria. In this paper, I will analyze Philo's characterization of Moses, which reflects Philo's dependence on the form of Greek biography, his expression of a Platonic hero, and his commitment to maintaining the exalted position of his Jewish faith, and a deep love of his Hellenistic education.

In the first part of this paper, I compare the early accounts in the *Life of Moses* to the biblical account in the *Book of Exodus* (Nyström 2024; Feldman 2002). Through this comparison, it becomes clear that Philo is re-ordering and re-interpreting events to legitimize Moses as a worthy subject of praise in his biography. Philo's focus on both the antiquity of Judaism and the addition of certain details from the Exodus account concerning his early life, birth narrative, upbringing, education, and physical appearance is reflective of Philo's agenda; namely to portray Moses as a kind of Platonic superhuman, while conforming neatly to the biographical form found in other biographical texts, such as the *Evagoras*, *Cyropaedia*, and *Lives* of Plutarch and Suetonius (Feldman 2002).

In the second part of this paper, I draw some potential comparisons between the figure of Moses found in Philo, and other depictions of "wise-men" in biography; the richest of these comparisons being found in the characters of Pythagoras, in the *Life of Pythagoras* by Diogenes Laertius, and Appollonius of Tyana, in the eponymous *Life* by Philostratus. I analyze the shared characteristics of these figures as non-Greek, semi-legendary sages, who all share and model a

distinct pattern of “wise-men” characterization in their pedigree, universal education, access to divine influences, and the expression of miraculous power (Scott 2002). I argue that these characterizations of foreign-born “wise-men” are standard to Greco-Roman biographical form as a part of a “function of legitimization”, where authorial figures like Philo attempt to build the reputation and respectability of both the sage, and the community from an external perspective.

Finally, I evaluate the merit of the comparisons drawn between Moses and other legendary sages, and argue that Moses is distinct from other sages in his characterization. This is a direct result of Moses’ lack of agency in his performance of miracles and feats because Moses is an agent for God, and not a self-contained semi-divine being acting in accordance with his own will (Scott 2002). In this sense, Moses becomes a closer analog to the characterization of Jesus found in the Gospels, but still retains a unique character composition because of Philo’s background and significant reliance on Platonic ideals. In conclusion, I argue that Moses is representative of Philo’s lived experience and ideals as a Jewish man with significant Hellenistic education living in Alexandria, which is reflected in Moses as a Platonic ideal for a human being, an agent of God, and a divinely inspired “wise man”.

Works Cited

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