

# The Symposium of Philo's Therapeutae: Displaying Jewish Identity in an Increasingly Roman World

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PHILO'S ENCOMIUM of the Therapeutae, a group of Jewish philosophers living near Alexandria, contains a remarkably long passage on their symposia. This passage clearly extends beyond the framework of a factual report and contains extensive comments by Philo himself, who distinguishes the proper form of a symposium from its deteriorated counterparts.<sup>1</sup> In this context Philo takes a new look at the subject of wine and conversation, offering views which significantly differ from his earlier discussions. I shall argue that the description of the Therapeutic symposia, composed towards the end of Philo's career, is used to locate Jewish identity in a distinctly Roman context. The treatise is an important and highly self-conscious contribution to the discourse of contemporary intellectuals, who negotiated the memory of their Greek past with the exigencies of their present-day identity.<sup>2</sup>

Philo's views on the Therapeutic symposium must be appreciated in the context of a special connection between Alex-

<sup>1</sup> The historical aspects of Philo's *De vita contemplativa* have recently been explored by J. E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria. Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered* (Oxford 2003) 21–53; see my review in *SCI* 23 (2004) 305–309; see also F. Daumas, "Introduction," in *Les Oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie XXIX De Vita Contemplativa* (Paris 1963) 21–23.

<sup>2</sup> The role of sympotic literature as a space for negotiating and displaying identity has been stressed by J. König, "Symptic Dialogue in the First to Fifth Centuries CE," in S. Goldhill (ed.), *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* (Cambridge 2008) 85–114.

andria and Rome.<sup>3</sup> Egypt not only became a Roman province after Augustus' victory over Antony, but had to submit to special restrictions and a rigorous administration. Intellectually, Alexandria entertained close ties to Rome. It was in this city that Antiochus first received two books of philosophy from his teacher Philo in Rome, which prompted him to formulate his own, more integrationist view of the history of philosophy (Cic. *Acad.* 2.11–12). When he left Alexandria, Dion and Aristo and other Alexandrian intellectuals continued the discussion.<sup>4</sup>

Arius Didymus played a special role as an *amicus* of Augustus, coming to Rome under his tutelage, but continued to write in Greek and retained contacts with Alexandria (Plut. *Ant.* 80). His *Epitome* presents Zeno rather than more recent exponents of Stoicism, such as Chrysippus or Posidonius, as *the* representative of the school (ap. Stob. 2.7.1). Significantly, Zeno's stringent monism of the soul is subsequently revived by Seneca, who argued already in the 40s CE that the passions result from mistaken reasoning and must therefore be eradicated rather than tamed.<sup>5</sup> In a letter, which has been identified as reflecting

<sup>3</sup> Connections between Alexandria and Rome have recently been noted again: P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) I 485–494; D. Sedley, "The School from Zeno to Arius," in B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge 2003) 20–32; M. Graver, "Philo of Alexandria and the Origins of the Stoic ΠΡΟΠΑΘΕΙΑ," in F. Alesse (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy* (Leiden 2008) 197–222.

<sup>4</sup> See G. E. Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford 2006) 44–85. J. Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Göttingen 1978) 90–97, rightly warns us not to project a clearly defined school of Antiochus onto the highly fragmentary evidence, but goes too far in his skepticism when suggesting that Antiochus never had any time to speak with Alexandrian intellectuals as he was too busy with politics.

<sup>5</sup> Sen. *Ira* 1.8.2, 3.3, *et passim*; see also *Vit. Beat.* 3.2, where Seneca positions himself within the Stoic school, stressing his own independence vis-à-vis the tradition. Cf. B. Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford 2005) 41–61; T. Reinhardt, "Introduction," in *Seneca. Dialogues and Essays. Translated by J. Davie* (Oxford 2007) XVI–XX; regarding the date and context of *De Ira*, see M. T. Griffin, "Imago Vitae Suae," in J. G. Fitch, *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Seneca* (Oxford 2008) 35.

Arius' work, he moreover warned his readers of the dangers of the symposium.<sup>6</sup> Seneca could easily have become familiar with Arius' approach either in Rome or in Alexandria, where he spent some time before 31 CE with his uncle, the prefect of Egypt. Virtually nothing is known about this early period of Seneca's life, before he became a prolific writer and known political figure.<sup>7</sup> He later remembered his beloved aunt as a "singular example of blamelessness" in Egypt, which is described in distinctly Roman terms as a nest of calumny and licentiousness (*Cons. Helv.* 19.6). Alexandrian elite culture with its strong Roman affinities is thus likely to have had some impact on the young Seneca.

Philo belonged to the same Alexandrian milieu, coming from one of the wealthiest families with close connections to the Roman administration. He himself traveled to Rome as head of the Jewish embassy to Gaius, spending at least two years there (38 to 40 or 41), as the emperor was reluctant to receive them.<sup>8</sup> In his treatise on the embassy Philo professed the Imperial ideology and praised Augustus lavishly, while he had already earlier dismissed Alexander the Great.<sup>9</sup> This highly negative image of Alexander reflects a typically Roman perspective, which stands in marked contrast to the general idealisation of this figure in Alexandria. Since Timagenes in the time of Pompey, Alexander had become a code name for discussing the nature and legitimacy of Roman rule. While Greek writers subversively indicated that he would have subdued Rome, had he only lived longer, Roman writers dismissed him

<sup>6</sup> *Ep.* 89; J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977) 121.

<sup>7</sup> M. T. Griffin, *Seneca. A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford 1976) 43, 287–288.

<sup>8</sup> The embassy is likely to have stayed in Rome after Gaius' assassination in January 41, Philo leading also the talks with his successor Claudius; regarding the dates of the embassy see A. Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt. The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum* (Cambridge 2008) 10–21.

<sup>9</sup> *Leg.* 143–161, *Cher.* 63, *Lib.* 93–5. Cf. M. R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tübingen 2001) 45–74, 111–136; S. J. K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body* (Tübingen 2007).

as an insignificant and incompetent figure, who naturally gave way to Roman rule.<sup>10</sup>

Philo's treatise on the Therapeutae belongs to the mature period of his career and may even have been written in the context of his embassy to Rome.<sup>11</sup> He envisions also readers outside Alexandria to whom he explains the basics of Egyptian religion, the geography and climate of the Mareotic Lake near Alexandria, and the nomenclature of the Egyptian districts (*Cont.* 8, 23). Philo's special interest in the symposium as a marker of identity, which distinguishes Jewish frugality from Greek excessiveness, reflects his growing Roman orientation. As a result of his personal career, Philo increasingly integrated himself in the contemporary Roman discourse. Three aspects of the Therapeutic symposium, as seen by Philo, are especially remarkable: the construction of the Greek Other, details of food and furniture, and the strictly controlled and private mode of the conversation.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Greek Other at the Symposium*

It is well known that Roman writers felt ambiguous concerning Classical Greek culture. On the one hand they admired it, adopting its literature as their canon, while on the other hand looking at Greek achievements with suspicion, and aiming to

<sup>10</sup> See G. W. Bowersock, *Augustus and the Greek World* (Oxford 1965) 108–110; E. Gruen, "Rome and the Myth of Alexander," in T. W. Hillard et al. (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University* (Michigan/Cambridge 1998) I 178–191; J. R. Fears, "The Stoic View of the Career and Character of Alexander the Great," *Philologus* 118 (1974) 113–130; P. Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines du mythe d'Alexandre* (Nancy 1978) I 131–141; A. Heuss, "Alexander der Grosse und die politische Ideologie des Altertums," *A&A* 4 (1954) 65–104.

<sup>11</sup> For the relatively late date of Philo's *Cont.* see J. R. Royse, "The Works of Philo," in A. Kamesar (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge 2009) 50–55, 59–62.

<sup>12</sup> For a useful overview of the last two aspects in Roman culture, see E. Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl. Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Munich 2005), who focuses on the *realia* rather than the rhetoric of the relevant literature. I wish to thank Friedrich Ave-Marie for drawing my attention to this book.

surpass them.<sup>13</sup> Already Cato the Elder was known for his hostility to Greek philosophy and *paideia*.<sup>14</sup> According to Plutarch, he was especially irritated by Greek “loquaciousness,” warning his fellow Romans of Carneades, whose reputation relied merely on words rather than deeds and military prowess. Cato generally feared that there was something subversive about Greek talk, which he saw as a threat to Roman law and order (*Cat.Mai.* 22.4–5).

Approximately a century later, Cicero admired Greek philosophy and did much to make it known among Roman intellectuals, while at the same time engaging in an antagonistic discourse. Avoiding sympotic settings for his own dialogues, he sought to surpass Greek philosophy by writing a more useful Latin philosophy and replacing the Socratic form of conversation.<sup>15</sup> The atmosphere of the Imperial age was considerably influenced by Augustus’ rhetoric, especially his propaganda against Antony as a renegade to Greek vice as practiced in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> In the period before the flourishing of the Second Sophistic it was still customary in Rome to show disdain for

<sup>13</sup> See N. Petrochilos, *Roman Attitudes to the Greeks* (Athens 1972); G. S. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (New York 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Plut. *Cat.Mai.* 12.4–5, 23.1–2. Cf. A. E. Astin, *Cato the Censor* (Oxford 1978) 157–181; D. Kienast, *Cato der Zensor* (Heidelberg 1972) 39–40.

<sup>15</sup> The absence of sympotic settings in Cicero’s writings has been noted by König, in *The End of Dialogue* 97–98; for a detailed analysis of Cicero’s dialogues see M. Schofield, “Ciceronian Dialogue,” in *The End of Dialogue* 63–84, who stresses, among other things, Cicero’s authorial presence, which conveys the notion of Roman superiority over Greek philosophy (esp. in *Fin.* 1.1–10, 2.1–3); on Cicero’s Roman self-awareness see A. A. Long, “Roman Philosophy,” in D. Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge 2003) 197–203. Regarding Cicero’s participation in contemporary symposia, which he mostly used to develop political connections, see Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl* 220–227.

<sup>16</sup> On Augustan propaganda see esp. R. A. Gurval, *Actium and Augustus. The Politics and Emotions of Civil War* (Ann Arbor 1995) 24–30; K. Scott, “The Political Propaganda of 44–30 B.C.,” *MAAR* 11 (1933) 35–49; J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill 1979) 68–69.

things Greek.<sup>17</sup>

During the mature period of his life Philo engages in this Roman discourse and stresses that he will contrast (*ἀντιτάσσω*) the cheerful conviviality of the Therapeutic symposium to that of “others” (*Cont.* 40, 64). These Others quickly emerge as people getting drunk, assaulting each other in beastly fashion, and ostentatiously presenting their material riches.<sup>18</sup> Philo moreover refers to Homer’s Cyclops, “the comic poet,” and the symposia of Plato and Xenophon.<sup>19</sup> All of these, and especially the latter two, provide examples of a corrupt symposium, which lacks the vital element of contemplation, feasting instead on the lower instincts and unnatural pleasures (58–62). These negative references to Homer and Plato are striking in light of the fact that Philo in earlier treatises spoke respectfully of Homer as *the* poet and of Plato as “the most holy,” using the *Timaeus* extensively for his interpretation of the book of Genesis.<sup>20</sup>

In the context of the Therapeutae Philo explicitly positions himself vis-à-vis the Classical Greek tradition, acknowledging that “in Greece” the two “most famous and notable” symposia are those commemorated by Plato and Xenophon (*Cont.* 57). The readers are directly invited to subvert that tradition by realizing that these banquets are not the models of “happily conducted symposia” which they are generally taken to be. Philo stresses that they will instead stand self-convicted in the

<sup>17</sup> See also Inwood, *Reading Seneca* 7–22, who describes thus the cultural milieu in which Seneca’s works must be appreciated.

<sup>18</sup> *Cont.* 40–57; these images have often been taken as factual descriptions of the pagan environment, see *pars pro toto* L. Massebieau, “Le traité de la Vie Contemplative et la question des thérapeutes,” *RHR* 16 (1887) 297–302.

<sup>19</sup> *Cont.* 40, 43 (ὁ κωμικός), 57–64.

<sup>20</sup> See K. Berthelot, “Philon d’Alexandrie, lecteur d’Homère: quelques éléments de réflexion,” in A. Balansard, G. Dorival, and M. Loubet (eds.), *Prolongements et renouvellements de la tradition classique* (Aix-en-Provence 2010) 93–100; D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Philo* (Leiden 1986); M. R. Niehoff, “Did the *Timaeus* Create a Textual Community?” *GRBS* 47 (2007) 161–191.

eyes of anyone truly willing to examine “conventional opinion (δόξας) and the widely circulating report (φήμη) about them” (64). “The disciples of Moses,” he asserts, “trained from their earliest years to love the truth,” despise them, especially the foolish story about the androgynous in Plato’s *Symposium* (63).

Another climax of the treatise is reached when Philo introduces a motif deviating so strikingly from any standard Greek symposium that he expects laughter on the part of his audience (γελάσονται τινες ἀκούσαντες): no wine is served at the table of the Therapeutae (73). The paradigmatic Jewish philosophers are thus described as healers of the soul, who abstain from wine and consume only minimal food (2, 34–35, 73–74). At the festive symposium they enjoy only water and bread, spiced by salt and occasionally also by hyssop (73). Philo praises their abstinence by categorically stating that “wine acts like a drug producing folly (ἀφροσύνης φάρμακον) and costly meals stir up that most insatiable of animals, desire” (74).

The ascetic behaviour of the Therapeutae is moreover contrasted to that of Other symposiasts, who lose control, indulging in wine and behaving like wild animals (40):

Whenever they have filled themselves with unmixed wine, they behave as if they had drunk not wine but some ecstatic and maddening potion and anything of a more grievous nature to overthrow their reason. They shriek and rave like wild dogs, attack and bite each other and nibble off noses, ears, fingers, and other parts of the body, so that they show the story about the Cyclops and Odysseus’ comrades to be true, where the poet says that they were eating human “gobbets.”

Completing his overall construction of the beastly Other, who imitates horrendous scenes from the *Odyssey*, Philo asserts that such symposiasts will even kill each other, if they are not hindered from outside (43). Their feasts, he insists, regularly end with the participants “mutilated” or at least fallen into a deep sleep (44). The detrimental effects of such banquets on society are highlighted: indulging excessively in wine, their participants have become “enemies of their nation” (ἐχθροὶ δὲ καὶ τῆς πατρίδος, 47).

In Imperial Rome Seneca presents a strikingly similar dis-

cussion of the symposium.<sup>21</sup> Initially, it is noteworthy that he personally prided himself on having consistently abstained from wine and opulent meals.<sup>22</sup> Already in his early work *De Ira* Seneca combines Zeno's rigorous ethics with images of Greek rulers as decadent symposiasts. Holding that "the enemy must be stopped at the very frontier," Seneca explicitly rejects the more lenient Aristotelian approach to the passions (*Ira* 1.8.2, 3.3). Symptotic excesses are characteristically relegated to Greek and Eastern kings, who figure as examples of madness and barbarian ferocity (see esp. 3.14–16). Seneca paid special attention to Alexander the Great, who became so drunk at a banquet that he stabbed his best friend (3.17). When later recalling this story again, Seneca added that Alexander considered suicide, upon realizing the murder, and expressed his own disgust at the whole incident by asserting that "assuredly he ought to have died" (*Ep.* 83.19).

Further aspects of the symposium are discussed in Seneca's eighty-third Epistle.<sup>23</sup> Seneca opens the letter by reporting Stoic views on wine, defending Zeno's rigorous demand of complete abstention. While admitting that both Zeno's original statement as well as Posidonius' elaboration of it are not quite convincing, Seneca argues that both were right in condemning wine (*Ep.* 83.9–10). Drunkenness is in his view a dangerous vice, because it brings out latent forces that destroy not only the person involved, but also society at large (17, 22–27). The two paradigmatic examples then discussed are either Greek or de-

<sup>21</sup> Interpreting Philo's description of Greek symposia in light of Seneca, I do not deny that both may have used earlier Greek sources, but rather argue that both selected such materials in view of their own ideology, which was significantly shaped by their experience of Rome. For a different approach, see P. Wendland, *Philo und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (Berlin 1895), 18–24, who studied Philo's polemics against other symposiasts without paying attention to the dimension of the Greek Other, conjecturing instead that Philo simply copied from earlier, albeit no longer extant treatises.

<sup>22</sup> *Ep.* 108.15–16; regarding contrary evidence of his personal extravagance, which was criticized by contemporaries, see Griffin, in *Oxford Readings* 53–55.

<sup>23</sup> Other discussions of the symposium are in *Ep.* 60, 78, 95, 105.



sertion from Rome in favour of the Greek East, namely Alexander the Great and Mark Antony. The national connotations of this choice are immediately conspicuous, because Seneca at the beginning of the Epistle made considerable efforts to show that cases of drunkenness in Rome had no detrimental effect.

Alexander is initially mentioned as a drunken symposiast stabbing his best friend as well as an example of a person, who, despite proven military strength, succumbs to wine and is thus destroyed by “intemperance in drinking” (*intemperantia bibendi*, 23). The national connotations of this negative image of Alexander, to which we have already pointed, become even more evident in Seneca’s subsequent discussion of Mark Antony. Applying Augustan rhetoric, he suggests that wine and the love of Cleopatra “drove him into foreign habits and un-Roman vices” and even turned him into an “enemy of the state.”<sup>24</sup> Antony’s resulting madness finds an outlet in his cruel behaviour at luxurious banquets. “When heavy with wine, he thirsted for blood” (25). A clear dichotomy is thus constructed between Us Romans and the Greek Other, who is characterized by drunkenness at excessive banquets, mental illness, and beastly cruelty (*rabidos*). By implication, the Roman character emerges—parallel to Philo’s Therapeutae—as sober, self-restrained, healthy, and benign. The symposium clearly has become an arena where national identities are constructed and displayed.

The affinity between Seneca and the later Philo is immediately visible when we consider Philo’s portrait of Gaius Caligula as an unrestrained symposiast. The emperor is depicted as regularly getting so drunk that he fell into a deep sleep and, even when awake, misbehaved by becoming ecstatic over the dancers, whom he occasionally joined (*Leg.* 42). This portrait derives from the later period of Philo’s life, after he had already traveled to Rome as the head of the Jewish delegation. As I have shown elsewhere, Philo’s overall image of Gaius as an effeminate and mad tyrant, who succumbed to Egyptian

<sup>24</sup> 25: *et in externos mores ac vitia non Romana traiecit ... hostem rei publicae.*

vice, while undermining true Roman values, is deeply rooted in the contemporary Roman discourse.<sup>25</sup> The detail about Gaius' sympotic excesses fits well into this picture and further indicates the Roman context of Philo's portrait.

At this late stage of his career Philo also wrote his treatise on the Therapeutae, constructing the symposium as a space where values and identity are displayed. Philo's perspective is highly contrastive, the ascetic symposium of the Jewish philosophers being opposed to that of the Greek Other, who loses control and indulges in beastly pleasures. This notion of an unbridgeable dichotomy between Us and Them differs strikingly from Philo's earlier discussions of wine and meals in the *Allegorical Commentary* and encourages us to interpret it in the distinctly more Roman context of his later works.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of his career, when he wrote the *Allegorical Commentary*, Philo adopted a far more positive and distinctly Greek attitude towards the subject of wine and meals.<sup>27</sup> On the

<sup>25</sup> Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity* 85–94, 133–136.

<sup>26</sup> The remarkable centrality of the symposium in the context of the Therapeutae should also to be noted. Twelve of the twenty-seven occurrences of the word appear in this relatively short treatise, while it is used only twice throughout the many treatises of the *Allegorical Commentary*.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the priority of the *Allegorical Commentary* in relation to *On the Contemplative Life*, see L. Massebieau, *Le Classement des oeuvres de Philon* (Paris 1888) 10–33, 59–65; L. Cohn, "Einleitung und Chronologie der Schriften Philos," *Philologus* Suppl. 7 (1899) 387–436; and more recently Royse, in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* 32–64. Massebieau and Cohn both argued for the priority of the *Allegorical Commentary* in comparison to the *Exposition of the Law* and the "apologetic" works, but differed regarding its relationship to the *Quaestiones*, Massebieau placing it after, Cohn before this series. Cohn's reconstruction has generally been accepted by Royse. I consider this series to be Philo's earliest work, which echoes the beginning of his career when he confronted other Jewish exegetes, who had more critical attitudes towards Scripture: M. R. Niehoff, *Jewish Bible Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge forthcoming) ch. 8. See also P. Wendland, "Die Therapeuten und die Philonische Schrift vom Beschaulichen Leben," *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie* Suppl. 22 (1896) 716–719, who discussed significant differences between *On the Contemplative Life* and the *Allegorical Commentary*, while pointing to important affinities between the former and Philo's other "apologetic" treatises. These findings, however, were un-

two occasions, when the word *symposion* is mentioned, Philo refers to it as one of the arts a wise man has to master in order to ensure that it will be a feast with “pleasant feelings and pleasant talk” rather than an occasion for anxiety and physical violence.<sup>28</sup> Philo moreover admits that he has often attended festive dinners, sometimes managing to restrain himself, while on other occasions succumbing to pleasure (*All.* 3.156). His discussion of dinner parties generally revolves around the theme of *enkrateia*, wine being mentioned as the paradigmatic test of the wise man, who should conduct himself with prudent moderation. Like Ben Sira (31:25–30), whose translated work may have been available to him in Alexandria, Philo suggests that wine will either strengthen a man’s tendency towards gladness or prompt loss of self-control.<sup>29</sup> Transcending previous discussions in a Jewish context, Philo even concludes that the wise man will occasionally get drunk as “drunkenness shapes the character” (τῆς μέθης ἡθοποιούσης).<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the *Allegorical Commentary*, Philo writes on the subject of wine and conversation with a sense of belonging to a larger community of philosophers. No dichotomy is yet visible between Jews and Greeks. Philo instead refers on several occasions to other treatises on drunkenness, placing biblical discussions of the subject as well as his own work *περὶ μέθης* into a distinct literary tradition, which has been identified as Stoic.<sup>31</sup> Adopting Cleanthes’ more permissive view, which is harmonized with Peripatetic notions, Philo presents Moses as “admiring” the virtue of innumerable persons who have taken

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fortunately interpreted only in light of the contemporary debate about the authenticity of Philo’s *On The Contemplative Life*, which has since then been overwhelmingly acknowledged.

<sup>28</sup> *Ebr.* 91, *Somn.* 2.167–168.

<sup>29</sup> *Somn.* 2.164–168, *Plant.* 161–170.

<sup>30</sup> *Plant.* 170, cf. 166, 172. Cf. H. von Arnim, *Quellenforschung zu Philo von Alexandria* (Berlin 1888) 101–140, esp. 105–109; C. Lévy, “Philo’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion* 162–163.

<sup>31</sup> *Plant.* 174, 142; *Ebr.* 2.

wine.<sup>32</sup> Jewish culture thus emerges as an integral part of the larger Hellenistic society.

The Greek flavour of Philo's discussion in the *Allegorical Commentary* is moreover conspicuous in his allusions to Homer and Plato. He looks back to the "real heroes" of former times, who set the standard for a properly frugal meal.<sup>33</sup> This view of the epic heroes as paradigmatic symposiasts echoes the earlier treatise of Dioscorides *Concerning the Customs [preserved by] Homer*. Convinced that Homer advocates prudence and acknowledges the "usefulness of moderate wine-drinking," the author quotes numerous dining scenes from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as examples of proper conduct.<sup>34</sup> Philo thus agrees with this Greek writer that unrestrained drinking of wine and over-indulgence at meals violates ancient Greek customs. One can hardly imagine a more glaring contrast to his discussion of the Therapeutae, where he takes Homer as a negative foil, associating the Cyclops with unrestrained and foolish symposiasts (*Cont.* 40). In a similar vein, Socrates' story about the coexistence of pleasure and pain is used in the *Allegorical Commentary* as a background for understanding the complexity of drinking wine.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, Plato's *Symposium* is not mentioned in this context, let alone criticised as harshly as in *On the Contemplative Life*.

A new approach to the subject of wine and meals is visible in a series of Philo's work known as the *Exposition of the Law*. This series is generally acknowledged to have been written after the *Allegorical Commentary* and before the treatise on the Therapeutae.<sup>36</sup> In our context it is most striking that Jewish customs

<sup>32</sup> *Ebr.* 2: οἱ δὲ προσφερόμενοι τὸν οἶνον μυρίοι τῶν ἐπ' ἀρετῇ μάλιστα καὶ παρ' αὐτῷ τεθουμασμένων.

<sup>33</sup> *Somn.* 2.50, cf. *Il.* 9.211–224.

<sup>34</sup> *FGrHist* 594 F 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ebr.* 8, cf. Pl. *Phaedo* 60.

<sup>36</sup> So Massebieau, Cohn, Royse (n.27 above). The most detailed comparison between the *Exposition* and the *Allegorical Commentary* has been offered by L. Massebieau and E. Bréhier, "Essai sur la chronologie de la vie et des oeuvres de Philon," *RHR* 53 (1906) 25–64, which is, however, highly speculative and requires a thorough re-examination.

are now contrasted with the regular symposium of the surrounding environment. A dichotomy of cultures is constructed without yet labeling the Other as Greek. The festive meal on the evening of Passover, for example, is described as follows (*Spec.* 1.148):

The guests have not come, as to other symposia (οὐχ ὡς εἰς τὰ ἄλλα συμπόσια), to indulge the belly with wine and meats, but to fulfill the ancestral custom (ἀλλὰ πάτριον ἔθος ἐκπληρώσοντες) with prayers and hymns.

On this view, Jewish legislation is opposed to feasts with plenty of wine and food, replacing these pillars of the Greek symposium by pious spirituality. Philo highlights the “solemnity” (σεμνότης) of the Jewish Passover meal, comparing the private houses where it is held to the Temple (148). Philo moreover interprets the features of the Passover meal as indications of its particular proximity to Nature. The date of the holiday coincides with the spring equinox, thus indicating its special place in the cosmic scheme, while the unleavened bread eaten on the occasion is identified as a gift of nature, not yet perverted by the art of cooking (*Spec.* 2.150–160). The Jewish symposium emerges as a frugal feast, recapturing the early stages of humanity “before pleasure took hold” (160). By implication, other symposia belong to the opposite realm of unnatural and undignified banquets.

Philo’s argumentation reaches a climax in the description of Yom Kippur, the famous holiday celebrated by a day-long fast. For Philo, this is a welcome opportunity to stress the dichotomy between Jews and Others, who are now described as “perversely minded people” (τῶν ἐτεροδόξων), who cannot imagine a feast without unmixed wine and opulent meals as well as frivolous entertainment (*Spec.* 2.193). These vulgar pleasures are contrasted to “real merriment” of which Moses was acutely aware when calling “a fast a feast” (195). Yom Kippur with its total abstinence from food and drink is thus identified as a quintessential expression of Jewish ethics, which informs all of

Mosaic legislation.<sup>37</sup>

Philo's description of the Therapeutae, written at the last stage of his career, when he came into closest contact with Rome, continues this line of thought, adding many details of the Other symposia and invoking "Greek" excesses. As we have seen, these new aspects together with stringent Stoic ethics remarkably resonate with contemporary Roman notions. Philo thus went particularly far in inscribing Jewish identity into a prominent Roman discourse, using the symposium to suggest that the paradigmatic Jewish philosophers are located on the same side of a substantial dichotomy as Roman intellectuals like Seneca. It is moreover interesting that Chaeremon, the Egyptian priest who described a similar group of non-Jewish philosophers in his country, did not, as far as the extant fragments can tell, offer a similarly Roman interpretation, but instead retained a far more local perspective.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Food and Furniture*

Another feature of the Therapeutic symposium, as seen by Philo, which reflects a particular affinity with Roman culture is his emphasis on their frugality, which is contrasted with the delicacies and extravagant furniture of Others. It is not clear whether Philo describes actual customs which have become acceptable in Alexandria, or whether he speaks polemically, repeating literary *topoi*. As he complains about the "Italian expensiveness," which is "now" prevalent everywhere, he may

<sup>37</sup> *Spec.* 2.196; similar formulations can be found in Philo's discussion of the two loaves of bread which were exposed on the Sabbath in the Temple. These too were of the simplest nature, lacking the daintiness of the confectioners (1.173–174). In this context too, Philo does not fail to highlight the contrast between the Jews and their environment: only laughter and mockery can be expected from Others, who indulge in regular banquets and are oblivious to God (1.176).

<sup>38</sup> See the fragments of Chaeremon's work, collected by P. W. v. d. Horst, *Chaeremon. Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (Leiden 1984), esp. fr.11, where Chaeremon praises the frugality of the Egyptian priests, stressing that they abstain from meat and wine as well as eggs, but without contrasting these habits to a Greek Other.

be describing *realia* of his environment imported from Rome (*Cont.* 48). At all events a clear development of Philo's thought, from a more integrationist to a more oppositional perspective, is conspicuous. His discussion of Therapeutic food and furniture thus again expresses an attitude strikingly similar to that of Seneca and other Roman writers.

At the beginning of his career, in the *Allegorical Commentary*, Philo generally distinguishes between men who require only the bare necessities and others, who indulge in luxury. While the former lead a healthy life and do not become slaves of pleasure, the latter employ cooks and butlers to satisfy their appetites (*Ebr.* 214–219). However, Philo does not yet distinguish between Jews and Others, restricting his remarks about excessive behaviour to a few sentences. We thus hear of milk-cakes and “numberless other kinds of pastries in the greatest variety” as well as different types of wine and dressings (217–219). Philo does not yet betray specialist knowledge about the preparation of the particular dishes and instead speaks rather generally about “professional cooks ready for the task” (219). The issue of the furniture is not yet discussed.

In the treatise on the Therapeutae, by contrast, the subject of food and furniture has become a central aspect of constructing identity. The Jewish philosophers are praised for their frugality, their houses being described as “exceedingly simple” and merely providing basic protection against heat and cold (*Cont.* 24). At the symposium they recline in the order of their admission on simple couches (67). The simplicity of their furniture is highlighted and, by implication, distinguished from the reader's expectations about the customs of Others (69):

Does someone perhaps suppose that couches, if not costly ones, but at least those of a softer kind are prepared for them as people of good birth and high character and trained in philosophy? Actually they are rather random couches of wood, covered with cheap strewings of native papyrus, slightly raised at the arms to give something to lean on.

By contrast, those who indulge in luxury are said to use a seemingly endless list of equipment (49):

sets of three or more couches made of tortoise shell or ivory or even more valuable material, most of them inlaid with precious stones, coverlets purple-dyed with gold interwoven, others brocaded with flower-patterns of all sorts of colours to lure the eye; a host of drinking-cups set out in their several kinds, beakers, stoops...

Philo continues to enumerate the extravagant utensils of Others with such fervour that the stern posture of his own text is undermined. While the idealized Therapeutae are satisfied with the simplest furniture, Philo indulges in lavish details of decor. Departing from his factual discussion of meals in the *Allegorical Commentary*, he provides astonishingly vivid pictures, which no doubt reflect his own experience—as well as his barely restrained appetites.

A similarly complex picture of the Other emerges in the context of food (53–54):<sup>39</sup>

(The assembled guests) turn their necks round and round, indulging their greedy eyes and noses in the richness and abundance of the meat as well as the steamy odour arising from it. Whenever they have become satisfied with both seeing and smelling, they decide to eat, after having lavishly praised the layout as well as the munificence of the entertainer. Seven tables and even more are brought in, covered with the flesh of every creature that land, sea, as well as rivers and air produce—beast, fish or bird—all choice pieces and in fine condition, each table differing in the dishes served and the method of preparation. And, that nothing to be found in nature should be unrepresented, the last tables brought in are loaded with fruits, not including those for the drinking-bouts and the so-called after-dinners.

Philo permits the reader here a stealthy glance on the forbidden pleasures of Others. As a member of the upper class, he obviously had personal experience of lavish banquets, while at the same time idealizing stern frugality. A part of him at least

<sup>39</sup> The text follows Cohn's critical edition, including a transposition of a line, which is not accepted by the French editor and translator of the treatise P. Michel.



seems to have crossed the boundaries and identified with the customs attributed here to the Other, thus creating a particularly complex text. Two motifs are especially remarkable in the description: the greedy looks of the symposiasts, devouring the food even before it reaches their mouth, and their aspiration to attain the most extravagant delicacies from all over the world. No space, Philo stresses, goes unnoticed without hunting for culinary specialties.

In Imperial Rome Seneca speaks from a strikingly similar perspective as Philo. He, too, was a man of the upper class, used to opulent banquets, while preaching frugality.<sup>40</sup> Some reacted to this contrast, accusing him of hypocrisy.<sup>41</sup> Seneca indeed took pride in his ascetic life-style, stressing that he had always eaten little, used a hard pillow and a simple couch not made for display.<sup>42</sup> At the same time he was intimately familiar with contemporary excesses at meals. The aspiration of the rich to hunt for delicacies “over land and sea” was all too familiar to him and he did not tire of criticizing it, especially the yearning for flamingo tongues.<sup>43</sup> Like Philo, moreover, Seneca contrasted the moderate behaviour of the wise man to silly symposiasts. Nomentanus and Apicius, for example, are described in terms which recall the Other symposiasts in Philo’s description of the *Therapeutae* (Sen. *Vit. Beat.* 11.4):

[They are] digesting, as they say, the blessings of land and sea, and reviewing the creations of every nation arrayed upon their board! See them, too, upon a heap of roses, gloating over their rich cookery, while their ears are delighted by the sound of music, their eyes by spectacles, their palates by savours; soft and soothing stuffs caress with their warmth the length of their bodies, and, that the nostrils may not meanwhile be idle, the

<sup>40</sup> See esp. *Tranq.* 1.5: “I am possessed by the very greatest love of frugality, I must confess.”

<sup>41</sup> *Vit. Beat.* 17.3–18.3; cf. Griffin, in *Oxford Readings* 54–58.

<sup>42</sup> *Tranq.* 1.5; *Ep.* 108.15–16, 23.

<sup>43</sup> See esp. *Ep.* 110.11–12, 95.19, 60.2; cf. Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl* 211–219.

room itself, where sacrifice is being made to Luxury, reeks with varied perfumes. You will recognize that these are living in the midst of pleasures, and yet it will not be well with them, because what they delight in is not a good. (transl. Basore)

Seneca's description is more controlled than Philo's, conveying a clear message and providing direct advice to his readers, which is meant to heal their envy. At the same time it is clear that Philo uses the very same images and experiences to construct a dichotomy between the Jewish wise men and foolish slaves of pleasure.

*Strictly Controlled Conversations away from the Tumult of Politics*

Scholars today debate whether Plato's and Cicero's dialogues truly involved true conversation and to what extent there was real dispute. Whatever position is taken on these issues, there can be no doubt that Philo's notion of Therapeutic conversation radically differs from the extremely lively settings of Plato's *Symposion* and other dialogues, where the dispute with other parties is seen as an essential tool of clarifying the truth.<sup>44</sup> Following his own move from engaged dialogue with Jewish opponents in the *Allegorical Commentary* to a merely didactic use of the question-and-answer format, Philo praises the Therapeutae for their stern discipline in their table-talk.<sup>45</sup>

At the symposium of the Therapeutae Scripture is the subject of conversation.<sup>46</sup> Both at their weekly gatherings and on

<sup>44</sup> M. Finkelberg, "Introduction," in *The Symposion of Plato. Translation into Greek, Introduction and Notes* (Tel Aviv 2001 [Hebrew]) 7–13; A. Long, "Plato's Dialogues and a Common Rationale for Dialogue Form," in *The End of Dialogue* 48–53, stresses the dialogical nature of certain works, such as the *Protagoras*, while arguing that they are not representative of Plato's overall *oeuvre*, thus not allowing us to speculate about a general, underlying agenda.

<sup>45</sup> Regarding Philo's move, see Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis* chs. 8 and 9.

<sup>46</sup> This is remarkable in contrast to the *Letter of Aristeas*, where philosophical questions about kingship are discussed (180–294), and Ben Sira, who does not specify the subject of the conversation, the importance of which is marginal in comparison with the entertainment (32:3–4). Regarding Aristeas see O. Murray, "Philosophy and Monarchy in the Hellenistic World," in T. Rajak et al. (eds.), *Jewish Perspectives on Hellenistic Rulers* (Berkeley 2007)

special occasions a senior member of the group or the president himself provides a festive exposition and “inquires into some question (*ζητεῖ*) in the Holy Scriptures or solves (*ἐπιλύεται*) one previously raised by someone else” (*Cont.* 75). This exposition is significantly identified as a form of leisurely instruction (*διδασκαλία*), which involves some repetition, shunning clever rhetoric and superficial effect (75–76). The symposium is thus an occasion for teaching rather than a free debate, where equals challenge each other.

Strictly hierarchical structures characterize Therapeutic table-talk. The president of the group speaks only when absolute silence prevails. His exposition is not addressed to equals, but rather to an audience “not similarly clear-sighted” (75). The members of the group are not expected to argue with him, but rather to try and follow the course of his exposition (77):

They listen with ears pricked up and eyes fixed on him always in exactly the same posture, signifying comprehension and acceptance by nods and glances, their praise of the speaker by cheerfulness and slightly turning their faces, their perplexity by a gentler movement of the head as well as the finger-tip of their right hand.

Applause and acceptance rather than open discussion inform this sympotic setting. Obviously not in a position to argue with the speaker, the members of the group may only aspire to imbibe his words. This is not only true of the special occasions, when the president himself addresses them, but also of the weekly Shabbath meals, when a senior member expounds the Torah. Then too, Philo stresses, the Therapeutae are exposed to a didactic discourse, which they accept silently, indicating their “praise by looks or nods” (31). The Therapeutic symposium was a very stern affair indeed—no trace of frivolity or jokes. Plutarch, who appreciated an atmosphere of humorous playfulness at the symposium, would hardly have identified this

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<sup>13–28</sup>; regarding Ben Sira see S. Schwartz, “No dialogue at the symposion? Conviviality in Ben Sira and the Palestinian Talmud,” in *The End of Dialogue* 193–216.

as such.<sup>47</sup>

Can such *gravitas* be identified at contemporary Roman tables? The transformation of the Republic into an Empire appears to have brought about a profound change in the culture of dialogue.<sup>48</sup> Cicero still uses the genre to present radically different approaches, inviting his readers to decide for themselves.<sup>49</sup> Regarding table-talk, he recommends in a traditional Greek manner that it should be “easy and not in the least dogmatic, it should have the spice of wit” (*lenis minimeque pertinax, insit in eo lepos*). The host is explicitly warned “not to debar others from participating in it, as if he were entering on a private monologue” (*Off.* 1.134).

Seneca, however, became acutely aware of the dangers of talking too freely. As a court philosopher he learnt to plan his steps carefully and guard his tongue. His essay *De Clementia* vividly illustrates the kind of caution and adulation that were called for.<sup>50</sup> Philosophy became more detached from politics, Seneca indulging in nostalgia for tranquility away from the tumult of public life. He no longer wrote proper dialogues, but began to use the letter format as a way of disseminating his views on moral philosophy.<sup>51</sup> This literary genre is inherently

<sup>47</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 1.1 (614A); cf. A. Kovelman, *Between Alexandria and Jerusalem* (Leiden 2005) 67–100, who distinguished between serious Alexandrian Jews and their more frivolous brethren in the Land of Israel. This difference, however, seems to be less consistent and may, ironically, also have to do with the respective reaction of these two groups to Roman authority and *gravitas*.

<sup>48</sup> See also Goldhill, “Introduction,” in *The End of Dialogue* 2–4, who suggests a connection between dialogue and political regime, without particularly considering developments in Rome.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Schofield, in *The End of Dialogue* 63–84.

<sup>50</sup> On the fragility of Seneca’s position, see Griffin, in *Oxford Readings* 3–5, 55–56.

<sup>51</sup> R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog. Ein Literaturhistorischer Versuch* (Leipzig 1895) II 25–29; the novelty of Seneca’s epistolary style has been stressed by Ch. Gill, “The School in the Roman Imperial Period,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* 43. It is interesting to speculate on the significance of Paul’s Letter to the Romans in this context.

more authoritative than the dialogue, leaving hardly any space for other voices. Moreover, the questions which are occasionally raised in Seneca's *Essays* have a clear didactic function. Rather than expressing serious objections, they allow the writer to preach further aspects of his message. The symposium was preeminently discussed in terms of proper ascetic behaviour, having lost its role as a preferred space of conversation.

Valerius Maximus, in the Tiberian age, is interesting in this context. While he speaks about a family meal rather than a symposium of philosophers, the similarities between him and the late Philo are remarkable. Both assume a private setting with a clearly defined group of participants, who enjoy ties of community life beyond the meal. Both included women.<sup>52</sup> Valerius Maximus moreover outlined the proper kind of conversation by presenting an idealized picture of the traditional Roman *convivium* (2.1.8). The Roman meal is characterized by the same solemnity as the Therapeutic symposium. In both contexts concord and proper decorum are preserved. The atmosphere at the Roman table is furthermore strictly hierarchical. Youth renders respect to the elders, Valerius Maximus stresses, waiting to recline after them and speaking only "sparingly and modestly" in their presence.<sup>53</sup> The focus of the conversation, like that of the Therapeutae, is ancestral literature properly expounded (2.1.10):

At dinner the elders used to recite poems to the flute on the noble deeds of their forebears to make the young more eager to imitate them. What more splendid and more useful too than this contest? Youth gave appropriate honour to grey hairs, age that had traveled the course of manhood attended those entering on active life with fostering encouragement. What Athens, what school of philosophy, what alien-born studies should I prefer to this domestic discipline? (transl. Shackleton Bailey)

In this passage the private and strictly controlled conversation

<sup>52</sup> Regarding the women see Val. Max. 2.1.2; Philo *Cont.* 32–33 and 68, who contrasts their voluntary virginity to that of Greek priestesses.

<sup>53</sup> 1.9: *parco et quam modesto sermone.*

at the family table is introduced as the Roman alternative to Greek philosophy at the *symposion*. Its advantages are practical efficiency and the preservation of proper social structures. This distinctly Roman ideal of solemn table-talk was shared not only by Juvenal and Quintilian, but also by Philo's Therapeutae.<sup>54</sup>

In conclusion, for Philo the symposium has increasingly become an arena where national identity is displayed and ancestral values are transmitted. In the case of the Therapeutae it exemplifies the stern demands of Jewish ethics, which are diametrically opposed to the hedonistic and reckless ways of the Greek Other. This antagonistic construction of Jewish identity emerged in the more mature stages of Philo's career and significantly differs from his earlier positions. This change of perspective can be explained by reference to Philo's increasing integration into distinctly Roman forms of discourse, which rendered him close to intellectuals like Seneca. The Therapeutic symposium, as seen by Philo, moreover provides a crucial background for understanding subsequent Christian writers, like Clement, who shared his familiarity with Greek literature as well as his ascetic tendency and Roman affinities.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Juv. 14.189, Quint. 1.2.7–8; cf. Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl* 86–91; J. D'Arms, "The Roman *Convivium* and the Idea of Equality," in O. Murray (ed.), *Symptica. A Symposium on the Symposion* (Oxford 1990) 308–320.

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