

Philo and Plutarch as Biographers: Parallel Responses to Roman Stoicism

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PLUTARCH'S ACHIEVEMENT as a biographer has often been appreciated as a highly innovative development of ancient Aristotelian models.¹ His famous portrayal of characters is indeed remarkable and clearly superior to the rather more schematic presentation of national heroes by Nepos, who has sometimes been drawn into the discussion as Plutarch's closest predecessor.² In this article I would like to introduce Philo of Alexandria as a significant precursor, who has been largely overlooked thus far, probably because he dealt with Biblical rather than Greco-Roman heroes.³ Despite this difference in their choice of protagonists, Philo and Plutarch re-

¹ See esp. F. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie* (Leipzig 1901); K. Ziegler, *Plutarchos von Chaironeia* (Stuttgart 1964) 272–273; and more nuanced A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*² (Cambridge [Mass.] 1993) 65–100, and U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, “Plutarch as Biographer,” reprinted in B. Scardigli (ed.), *Essays on Plutarch's Lives* (Oxford 1995 [orig. 1922]) 47–74.

Translations here are based on those in the Loeb, with modifications.

² See e.g. J. Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* (Stuttgart 1985) 117–120; T. Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge 2012) 240–242, 277–281.

³ Consider two important yet only partial exceptions: L. H. Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (Notre Dame 2007) 19–27, identifies Philo as a significant biographer before Plutarch, but does not yet provide an overall analysis of the two. A. P. Johnson, “Ancestors as Icons: The Lives of Hebrew Saints in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*,” *GRBS* 44 (2004) 245–264, points to similarities between Plutarch's, Philo's, and Eusebius' use of pictorial language in their respective descriptions of their biographical enterprises.

lied on strikingly similar notions of biography, using anecdotes to illuminate character and stressing the moral lesson to be learnt from each *Life*.

Moreover, Philo's and Plutarch's biographical style must be appreciated in the context of their time, namely with a view to philosophical and cultural discourses in the first century CE. I hope to show that both authors developed their biographical style in response to their first-hand encounter with the culture and form of Stoicism which were prevalent in Rome.⁴ Philo and Plutarch fashioned their particular form of biography as Greek philosophers with strong Roman sympathies.⁵ Reading one author in light of the other, without harmonizing their differences or positing a direct historical connection between them, allows us to understand each of them in the particular circumstances of his time, with only a span of a generation between them.

Studying both biographers from the perspective of their contemporary culture, we appreciate the intellectual impact of Rome on the shaping of memory in the Greek East. Philo plays a key role in this context, because he did not start his literary career in Alexandria as a historian, but turned to the biographical genre only in connection with his visit to Rome. In his case, the impact of Rome is tangible, because it effected dramatic changes in both the style and content of his work. An analysis of Philo's writings furthermore provides us with important hermeneutic tools to appreciate the works of additional writers who came to Rome. Plutarch is particularly meaningful

⁴ On the centrality, political role, and distinct nature of Stoicism in Rome see P. Brunt, "Stoicism and the Principate," *BSR* 43 (1975) 7–35; G. Reydams-Schils, *The Roman Stoics. Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago 2005).

⁵ On Philo's and Plutarch's Roman sympathies see M. R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tübingen 2001) 17–158; C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971); C. B. R. Pelling, *Plutarch. The Life of Antony* (Cambridge 1988) 1–10; R. Preston, "Roman Questions, Greek Answers: Plutarch and the Construction of Identity," in S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome* (Cambridge 2001) 86–119.

in this context, but also others, such as the Jewish historian Josephus.⁶

The beginnings of Philo's and Plutarch's biographies

Philo began his career in the early first century CE as a commentator of the Jewish Scriptures, solving textual problems by Platonic allegories.⁷ In the *Allegorical Commentary*, which belongs to this period, Philo is preoccupied with Platonic categories, such as Ideal archetypes, the body-soul dichotomy, and the division of the soul into three parts, rational, spirited, and appetitive.⁸ Overall, his ethics and theology are highly transcendental, being oriented towards God, who is described in terms of the Ideas.⁹ In the *Allegorical Commentary* there is no space for personal life stories and particular circumstances. Philo's attention focuses rather on the internal conflicts of the soul which are common to all men. He calls his readers to develop and strengthen the rational part of the soul, thus diminishing individual differences and particular "earthly" tendencies.

Philo arrived in Rome in late 38 CE as the head of the

⁶ On the significance of Philo for understanding Josephus see M. R. Niehoff, "Josephus and Philo in Rome," in H. Chapman and Z. Rodgers (eds.), *A Companion to Josephus in his World* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁷ For details see M. R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship* (Cambridge 2011) 133–151.

⁸ See *All.* 1.1, 1.21–23, 1.31–32, 2.1–13, 3.114–117. Regarding Philo's Platonism see esp. D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden 1986) 297–322; G. Sterling, "Platonizing Moses: Philo and Middle Platonism," *StudPhilon* 5 (1993) 96–111; M. Bonazzi, "Towards Transcendence: Philo and the Renewal of Platonism in the Early Imperial Age," in F. Alesse (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy* (Leiden 2008) 233–251.

⁹ See esp. *Det.* 160, *All.* 1.43–44, *Somn.* 1.67; see also F. Calabi, *God's Acting. Man's Acting. Tradition and Philosophy in Philo of Alexandria* (Leiden 2008) 1–38. Compare *Pl. Resp.* 379–382, on which see I. Männlein-Robert, "Umriss des Göttlichen. Zur Typologie des idealen Gottes in Platons *Politeia* II," in D. Koch et al. (eds.), *Platon und das Göttliche* (Tübingen 2010) 112–138.

Jewish embassy to Gaius, aiming to restore the status of the Jewish community in Alexandria after the outburst of violence there.¹⁰ Constantly deferred by the emperor, Philo and his team of ambassadors spent at least two and a half years in Rome, most likely staying there also after Claudius' coronation in early 41 in order to continue the negotiations. While the political atmosphere was generally tense, being further aggravated by Apion's and Chaeremon's polemics against the Jews, Philo rapidly accommodated in Rome. His account of events in the *Legatio* indicates that he had informal access to the court, relied on King Agrippa for contacts as well as diplomatic services, and was generally *au courant* regarding public opinion in Rome.¹¹ As I have shown elsewhere, Philo also became familiar with the Imperial ideology, presenting Augustus and Tiberius in most flattering terms which often conceal known facts to the contrary.¹² Distinctly Roman forms of cult and religion were noted by him.¹³ These contacts with Roman life and culture must have been conducted in the Greek language, spoken by all Roman intellectuals, and may have been facilitated by bilingual assistants, such as were often used by Greek-speaking visitors to the capital.¹⁴

In the context of the embassy Philo wrote his first character sketch, describing the fall of Gaius Caligula. Different views on the nature of Gaius' character are introduced, Tiberius thinking that he is "not naturally made for government (οὐ πε-

¹⁰ For details see A. Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt. The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum* (Cambridge 2008) 10–21; P. van der Horst, *Philo's Flaccus. The First Pogrom* (Leiden 2003).

¹¹ *Leg.* 174, 180, 30–73, 219.

¹² Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity* 111–136.

¹³ For details see M. R. Niehoff, "The Power of Ares' in Philo's *Legatio*," forthcoming in F. Calabi et al. (eds.), *Potere e potenze in Filone di Alessandria* (proceedings of a conference in Milan, 2011).

¹⁴ Unlike Plutarch, Philo never seems to have learnt Latin during his stay in Rome. He mentions only once a rather superficial characteristic of the Latin language (*Opif.* 127).

φυκότα πρὸς ἀρχήν),” while many others regarded him as a “savior and benefactor” and Macro even saw him as “straight-forward and free from vice” (*Leg.* 12, 22). Philo stresses the change of Gaius’ character following the death of Tiberius, who had a restraining influence on him. Exchanging a healthier way of life for “extravagance,” Gaius lost control over his passions and indulged in excessive eating and sex until he became truly sick (14–17). An anecdote illustrates the height of his embarrassing deterioration (42):

Or if he [Macro] saw him [Gaius] frantic with excitement at the sight of dancers and sometimes joining in the dance, or greeting a mime of scandalous scenes and broad jesting with loud youngster’s guffaw, instead of a subdued or sedate smile ... he would sit or lean back at his side and nudge him.

While Philo does not provide a *Life* of Gaius, focusing instead on the few years of his reign, he shows a new interest in the individual character of a person and observes the particular circumstances of his life. Especially noteworthy are his laments about Tiberius’ premature death, which prompted the negative developments in Gaius’ personality, as well as the unfortunate flattery of the Alexandrians, who ultimately caused his mental derangement and self-deification (24–25, 162–165). Philo’s biographical interests are thus closely connected to politics: drawn out of his scholarly life-style in Alexandria, Philo became actively involved in the events of his time and wrote historiographical treatises with a keen interest in the protagonists’ character. In the *Exposition*, a series of writings which I have interpreted in a Roman context, Philo further develops this approach and offers full biographies of the Biblical forefathers.¹⁵

Plutarch similarly started his career as a Platonic philosopher engaged in traditional genres of writing, ranging from dialogue, table-talk, and *zetemata* to treatises on specific subjects. One of his earliest writings in the *Moralia* deals with a Classical Pla-

¹⁵ M. R. Niehoff, “Philo’s *Exposition* in a Roman Context,” *StudPhilon* 23 (2011) 1–21.

tonic issue, the status of Homer in the philosophical discourse. While Plato denies the philosophical value of the epics, Plutarch reconciles literature with philosophy by making recourse to hermeneutic methods developed at the Museum in Alexandria.¹⁶ His views on Homer reveal him as a Platonist with strong literary tendencies, who creatively engages in more recent discourses.

Plutarch's ethics in the *Moralia* often have a distinctly anti-Stoic orientation, focusing on the early representatives of the school, Zeno and Chrysippus.¹⁷ Plutarch praises Plato for recognizing the division of the soul and the universe into more rational and more bodily parts.¹⁸ Insisting that the passions cannot and should not be eradicated, as the Stoics demanded, Plutarch calls for their control. Like Philo in the *Allegorical Commentary*, he often speaks in transcendental terms of a "mind, pure and uncontaminated by the passions," which seeks divine knowledge and tames the earthlier parts of the soul.¹⁹ He, too, depicts man's moral progress in terms of an inner struggle and

¹⁶ For details see M. R. Niehoff, "Philo and Plutarch on Homer," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters* (Leiden 2012) 127–154, and bibliography there.

¹⁷ Esp. *Mor.* 440D–441D as well as 443A, 450B–C, where Plutarch typically accuses Zeno and Chrysippus of self-contradiction. The two treatises that are explicitly directed against the Stoics, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* and *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*, focus even more exclusively on Chrysippus, while never mentioning more recent representatives of the Stoic school, such as Panaetius.

¹⁸ *Mor.* 441F–442A, 450D–F; see also his criticism of the Stoic notion of a unified soul, which regards the passions as misguided judgements (447A). Cf. T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives. Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford 1999) 72–98, who stresses Plutarch's Platonic orientation in *On the Virtues* and argues for its continuation in the *Lives*. It is the latter point which I wish to nuance in this article, suggesting that there is a significant shift towards Stoic ethics in the biographical writings. Duff is followed by Ch. Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford 2006) 412–421.

¹⁹ E.g. *Mor.* 444B–D; cf. L. van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics. The Social Dynamics of Philosophy* (Oxford 2010) 59–60.

uses the Platonic metaphor of the horses disobeying their charioteer (*Mor.* 445C).

Plutarch entertained intensive contacts with Rome, which spread over his whole career. Coming of age under the Flavians, he frequently travelled to the capital as an ambassador and later probably also simply as a philosopher, making numerous Roman friends who are mentioned in his writings.²⁰ Plutarch moreover made efforts to learn Latin and obviously studied archival materials.²¹ Already at an early stage he discusses *Sayings of the Romans* and *Roman Questions*, both of which testify to intimate knowledge of Roman affairs. He also addresses the politically sensitive question of whether the rise of Rome should be attributed to luck or to virtue. Moreover, would the Romans indeed have risen to power if Alexander the Great had survived and led the Greek commonwealth? These questions were hotly debated among Hellenistic intellectuals. Pro-Roman writers celebrated Rome's virtue and dismissed Alexander, while traditional Greeks praised Alexander as their ideal leader, who would easily have subdued Rome if only he had been given an opportunity. Plutarch takes a moderately 'Greek' view on this issue. While expressing himself far more politely than the fiercely anti-Roman historian Timagenes, he clearly attributes greater virtue to Alexander than to the Romans. While the latter did not lack virtue in his opinion, they in fact built their empire on strokes of good luck. Alexander, by contrast, gave proof of his truly philosophical disposition and implemented Plato's ideal laws throughout the *oikoumene*.²²

Like Philo, Plutarch began his biographical activity in connection with Roman emperors. He did not limit himself to some sketches of character in an otherwise historiographical treatise, but self-consciously offered biographies as distinct from

²⁰ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* 20–47.

²¹ Plut. *Dem.* 2.2–3; cf. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* 29–39, 81–83.

²² *Mor.* 319B–320C, 327E–329A, 332F–333C.

regular history. He introduces his approach in the *Life of Galba* (2.3):

Now, the accurate narration of each of these events belongs to formal history (τῆς πραγματικῆς ἱστορίας), while it is my duty not to omit such incidents as are worthy of mention (ὅσα δὲ ἄξια λόγου ... συμπέπτωκεν) in the deeds and fates of the Caesars.

Plutarch already distinguishes here, as in his later *Parallel Lives*, between a continuous record of history and a biographical narrative focusing on exemplary incidents that are worthy of being recorded. While the concept of biography is already in place, Plutarch's style in the extant *Lives of the Caesars* differs significantly from his later *Parallel Lives*. Most obviously, he does not yet follow the individual life of one hero from beginning to end, but focuses instead on crucial periods in Roman history without clearly distinguishing between the life of Galba and that of Otho. Moreover, the personal traits of each hero are not yet explored in detail. Plutarch's narrative instead focuses on political actions and decisions. It is thus no surprise that the *Lives of Galba* and *Otho* have struck many modern readers as pale in comparison to the later *Lives* of Greco-Roman heroes.

Parallel conceptions of biography

Given Philo's and Plutarch's increasing interest in biography as well as its connection to Roman politics, I shall now turn to a comparison of their fully developed *Lives*. In this section I focus on the underlying conceptions of biography and in the next section point to Roman Stoicism as a background for these. The materials from Plutarch and Philo which I propose to compare are unequal in size. While Plutarch composed twenty-four *Lives* of Greek and Roman heroes, Philo wrote only five biographies of Biblical ancestors, three of which have survived.²³ Moreover, only Plutarch's biographies are conceived

²³ In *Jos.* 1 Philo looks back on the *Lives* of Isaac and Jacob, which are unfortunately lost. Most likely, he began by writing the *Life of Moses* as a way of introducing Jewish culture to a wider audience and subsequently turned

as parallel lives, setting the stories of Greek and Roman heroes side by side. While Philo briefly compares Moses to other law-givers, he generally focuses on the Jewish tradition, offering no systematic comparisons of its heroes.²⁴ While all of Plutarch's *Lives* focus on political leaders, only two of Philo's do so, those of Moses and Joseph. The *Lives* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on the other hand, deal with types of men making progress either by instruction, self-discipline, or practice (*Jos.* 1).

My sense of a significant similarity between Philo and Plutarch as biographers is based on two central assumptions shared by both, namely that biography has a moral purpose and that anecdotes are important as a key to understand the character of each hero. Plutarch is well known for his moral conception of biography.²⁵ In his introduction to the *Life of Pericles*, where he reflects on his work in the ten preceding volumes, he expresses himself with particular clarity. First he stresses in a Platonic mode that art should serve the formation of character, effecting moral improvement in the onlooker, rather than simply provide pleasure. Plutarch then presents his biographies as an extremely useful form of art, which is concerned with virtuous action. Bringing such action from the past to his readers' attention, he hopes to stir them "to imitation (εἰς μίμησιν)."²⁶ Plutarch distinguishes between works of art that evoke pleasure (τέρπει τὸ ἔργον ὡς χαρίεν) and those that encourage virtue (ἄρετή). Being exposed to moral action, he explains, the student of useful art is straightaway disposed to

to the more detailed *Exposition* of Judaism, which includes the other biographies; for details see J. R. Royse, "The Works of Philo," in A. Kamesar (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge 2009) 47–50.

²⁴ *Mos.* 1.1, *Abr.* 1–59.

²⁵ See esp. D. A. Russel, "On Reading Plutarch's *Lives*," in Scardigli, *Essays* 75–81 [orig. 1996].

²⁶ *Per.* 1.4; the Platonic background of this formulation has already been noted by Duff, *Plutarch's Lives* 34–45; F. Frazier, "Contribution à l'étude de la composition des 'Vies' de Plutarque: l'élaboration des grandes scènes," *ANRW* II 33.6 (1992) 4489–4491.

“admire the works and strive to emulate those who performed them” (*Per.* 2.1). The reader of biography in particular is “filled with an active impulse” (πρακτικὴν εὐθὺς ὁρμήν), because “the good ... does not form character by *mimesis*, but through the investigation of its work furnishes the dominant purpose.”²⁷ Biography thus emerges as a historical investigation into virtuous action, which forms the character of present-day readers.²⁸

Plutarch thought of the encounter between the reader and the ancient hero in highly personal terms. Reflecting on the intellectual pleasure he himself has derived from writing biographies, he stresses that history functions like a “mirror,” prompting him “to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted” (*Aem.* 1.1). Indeed, each hero is like a personal guest to him (1.2):

The result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully “how large he was and of what mien” and select from his deeds what is most important and most beautiful to know.

The heroes of the past thus become alive when Plutarch inquires about them and writes down their Lives. He is not interested in the larger affairs of state and more abstract issues such as constitutions, but rather in the protagonists of the events as exemplary personalities. In a sense there is no difference between meeting a contemporary righteous person and encountering one in the ancient documents. It is this lively experience of facing truly great men that Plutarch wishes to convey to his readers. The moral progress of the reader depends on her ability to emulate such personal examples. It is clear from these statements that Plutarch is generally sym-

²⁷ *Per.* 2.3, ἡθοιοιοῦν οὐ τῇ μιμήσει τὸν θεατὴν, ἀλλὰ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ τοῦ ἔργου τὴν προαίρεσιν παρεχόμενον.

²⁸ Despite the introduction to the *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch did not categorically distinguish between biography and history: cf. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives* 18–19; A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London 1974) 2–10; Hägg, *Art of Biography* 268–272.

pathetic to his heroes, even though he also inquires into some of their vices, and he wishes to establish especially the Greek heroes of the past as role models for his readers.²⁹

For Philo, too, writing biography is an intensely personal and moral business. The heroes of the Bible have no antiquarian interest, but are instead meant to prompt moral improvement in the reader (*Abr.* 4):

These are such men as lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most Holy Scriptures, not merely to sound their praises, but to urge on the readers (ὕπὲρ τοῦ τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας προτρέψασθαι) and induce them to aspire to the same (ἐπὶ τὸν ὅμοιον ζῆλον ἀγαγεῖν); for in these men we have laws endowed with life and reason.

Like Plutarch, Philo stresses the moral improvement of the reader as a result of learning about the heroes of the past. His biographies are meant to “urge” and “induce” rather than simply provide information. Philo integrates this approach into the broader context of the Law of Nature which the Biblical heroes are said to have embodied, thus becoming “laws endowed with life and reason (ἔμψυχοι καὶ λογικοὶ νόμοι).”³⁰ For

²⁹ See also Duff, *Plutarch's Lives* 52–72; for examples of Plutarch's study of vice see *Alex.* 51.1–6, *Pyrrh.* 30.1–2, *Dem.* 11.1–12.4, and the *synkrisis* of Nicias and Crassus.

³⁰ Philo fully explains the connection between the Law of Nature and Biblical heroes as well as Mosaic Law in *Abr.* 1–6, *Mos.* 2.13–14. Regarding the Stoic background of these ideas, consider esp. the following: Cicero had already drawn a connection between the law of nature and the particular laws of the Romans. He explained that “law is the highest reason, implanted in nature, which commands what ought to be done and forbids the opposite” (*Leg.* 1.18). In his view, some human legislation conforms to natural law, while the constitution of other nations does not (1.19). Not surprisingly, Roman law is found to reflect nature in a particularly pristine way (1.13). Moreover, Philo's late contemporary Seneca paid special attention to natural law in his ethics, describing man's progress in terms of his increasing accommodation to nature; for details see B. Inwood, *Reading Seneca. Stoicism in Rome* (Oxford 2005) 224–248. Philo's argument about the Biblical heroes and Mosaic Law being “stamped, as it were, with the seals of nature” (*Mos.*

Philo, emulating virtue is identical to following Mosaic Law, both in Biblical times and in his own. The heroes of the Bible function as role models in a double sense: they were virtuous and observed Mosaic Law even before Scripture was written down, precisely because the laws are engraved in Nature and inculcate rational virtue. Abraham was spurred by “unwritten Nature” to follow where “wholesome and untainted impulse led him” (*Abr.* 275). The Jewish past, including its legal heritage, becomes alive in Philo’s biographies for the contemporary reader to admire and endorse.

In the introduction to the *Life of Moses* Philo distinguishes in a Platonic spirit between literature written for “licentiousness” and writings which convey “the lesson (ὁφήγησιν) taught by good men and their lives” (*Mos.* 1.3). For him, too, biography is an especially useful genre of educational literature, and he expresses concern that “nothing of excellence, old or new, should be consigned to oblivion.” Moses and Joseph serve as exemplary statesmen, Moses being an ideal king and combining human virtues with priesthood as well as prophecy (2.3–7). Joseph’s career is said to follow the typical pattern of a politician. He provides an outstanding example of “equable temper,” which proved itself in the dramatically changing circumstances of his life (*Jos.* 3–5, 269). Philo highlights the challenges Joseph faced, especially those posed by Potiphar’s wife. Joseph’s steadfastness is said to derive from self-restraint and rational virtue as well as courage, which are all needed for the welfare of society (40–57).

Philo and Plutarch share another crucial assumption about the genre of biography, namely the conviction that anecdotes are significant. In their view, small details in daily life often tell more about the character of a person than great deeds. Both assume that the private personality of a public figure is of crucial importance for an overall estimation of his achievements in society at large.

^{2.14}) thus engages in an ongoing discussion in Rome and places Judaism among the enlightened cultures with a ‘natural’ constitution.

Plutarch formulates this approach most clearly in his famous introduction to the *Life of Alexander* (1.2):

For it is not histories that I am writing but lives; and in the most illustrious actions there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice. Yet a slight thing (πρᾶγμα βραχύ) like a phrase or a jest often makes the greater revelation of character (ἔμφασιν ἥθους) than battles where thousands fall or the greatest armaments or sieges of cities.

This fundamental self-definition as a biographer has immediate implications for Plutarch: comparing himself to a portraitist, he insists on his right to select relevant material rather than to aim at a comprehensive presentation focusing on highly visible events. Leaving the great contests to others, he is concerned with the “signs of the soul (τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα).”³¹ Anecdotes are a favourite means to that end, because the soul expresses itself most authentically in deeds hidden from the public eye. Plutarch thus shifts the emphasis of his stories from the political scene to the heroes’ private lives. He takes a special interest in their youth, before they become the well-known figures celebrated by everyone.

A generation earlier Philo made strikingly similar statements in his *Life of Moses*. Having introduced his hero by telling significant incidents from his infancy, such as his natural avoidance of fun and laughter (*Mos.* 1.20), Philo self-consciously describes his biographical approach (1.51):

I will describe an action of his at this time which, though it may appear to be a small matter (εἰ καὶ μικρὸν ὅσα γε τῷ δοκεῖν), shows a spirit of no petty kind.

Like Plutarch, Philo favours small incidents over official deeds, because the former reveal the hero’s character. The importance of such insight into the soul stands in direct contrast to

³¹ *Alex.* 1.3; for a careful literary analysis of Plutarch’s focalization on Alexander domesticating the horse, at the expense of his father, picturesque background scenes, and décor, see Frazier, *ANRW* II 33.6 (1992) 4506–4509.

the apparent insignificance of the event. In this passage Philo sounds somewhat apologetic, explaining his biographical style to an audience whom he apparently expects to be familiar with political history. His readers are invited to appreciate the personal and individual characteristics of the hero rather than to look for a macro-narrative about states and international affairs.

How did Philo and Plutarch implement their anecdotal approach to biography? Given the fact that Philo creates his biographies on the basis of the Jewish Scriptures, their method can best be appreciated by comparing them to those *Lives* of Plutarch which are also based on a canonical text. This is the case in the biographies of Nicias and Alcibiades, which self-consciously complement Thucydides' narrative.³² While Scripture was holy to Philo, but Thucydides only exemplary to Plutarch, both stress that they will not compete with their *Vorlage*.³³ Each instead identifies his contribution as complementing the main text by additional, biographical material. Philo says that he has learnt the story of Moses from Scripture and "some of the elders of the nation," and so is more able than others "to deal accurately with his life" (*Mos.* 1.4). Plutarch says that he has found material, unknown to most other writers, which illuminates Nicias' "nature and disposition" (τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν διόθεσιν).³⁴

Philo's well-known reference to "some of the elders of the nation" has prompted a prolonged discussion about his sources.³⁵ In our context we may ask whether he had access to

³² Cf. D. A. Russell, "Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 1–16," in Scardigli, *Essays* 195–197 [orig. 1996]; Ch. Pelling, *Plutarch and History* (London 2002) 117–142, who points to Plutarch's close reading of Thucydides' narrative.

³³ Philo *Mos.* 1.4, *Opif.* 4; Plut. *Nic.* 1.1–2.

³⁴ *Nic.* 1.5. Plutarch in this context stresses once more that he has not collected "useless material of research," but "such as furthers the appreciation of character and temperament."

³⁵ This question is usually raised with a view to Philo's possible knowledge of proto-rabbinic traditions from the Land of Israel. For details see Feld-

similar historical traditions as Plutarch had, enabling him to present Moses “such as he really was” (ὅστις ἦν ἐπ’ ἀληθείας, *Mos.* 1.2). In light of these historical claims on the part of Philo, it is striking that he never mentions a source other than the Bible. Plutarch, by contrast, discusses a variety of sources, often providing a comparative analysis of them. In the *Life of Nicias* (1) he refers to the historical writings of Timaeus and Philistus, which he had used besides Thucydides, while in the *Life of Alcibiades* (1.2) he confesses to having an extraordinary amount of sources at his disposal. Plutarch once quotes Timaeus for an anecdote about Nicias which is not found in Thucydides.³⁶ On another occasion he criticizes Timaeus and points to his self-contradictions, carefully explaining why he finds Thucydides more convincing.³⁷ Regarding Alcibiades, Plutarch dismisses an anecdote by Antiphon, whom he regards as unreliable because of his general hatred of the protagonist.³⁸ Nothing like such a historical analysis appears in Philo’s *Life of Moses* or in any of his other *Lives*. Other sources besides the Bible are never explicitly mentioned, let alone critically evaluated.³⁹

Moreover, a careful reading of Philo’s anecdotes on Moses suggests that he has creatively filled in the gaps of the Biblical text, offering his own conjectures rather than basing himself on previous traditions. Philo occasionally admits that his narrative

man, *Portrayal of Moses* 27–33; for the roots of the discussion in 19th century scholarship and its ideological background see M. R. Niehoff, “Alexandrian Judaism in 19th Century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Between Christianity and Modernity,” in A. Oppenheimer (ed.), *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit. Wege der Forschung: Vom alten zum neuen Schürer* (Munich 1999) 9–28.

³⁶ Compare *Nic.* 28.3 with Thuc. 6.101.

³⁷ *Nic.* 1.1, 19.3–6; cf. R. Flacelière and E. Chambéry, *Plutarque. Vies VII* (Paris 1972) 132–143.

³⁸ *Alc.* 3.2; on Plutarch’s apologetic tendency in his *Life of Alcibiades* see D. Gribbe, *Alcibiades and Athens* (Oxford 1999) 263–270.

³⁹ Note that Josephus a generation later will occasionally adduce other historians regarding Biblical material, such as Berosus and Nicolaus of Damascus on Abraham (*AJ* 1.158–159).

reflects “my opinion” (μοι δοκεῖ, *Mos.* 1.12). After some introductory remarks Philo starts Moses’ *Life* proper with the statement that he “will begin with what is necessarily the right place to begin” (1.5). This expression could be taken to refer to the opening of the Biblical story (Ex 1:1–14), which Philo accepts as the “necessary” (ἀναγκαῖον) beginning of his own story. Yet a comparison of the two openings shows that this is not the case: while the Biblical account focuses on the history of the Israelites in Egypt, Philo immediately draws attention to the person of Moses. He initially mentions the circumstances of his birth—he was a Chaldaean by race and born in Egypt—and then provides an ethnographic sketch of Egypt which has nothing to do with the information provided in the Biblical account. It instead provides topical information and conforms to the literary convention of ‘geographical digressions’ advocated already by Cicero.⁴⁰ In Roman historiography it had become rather acceptable to introduce geographical sketches as a background for the main plot and especially for the individual actors. Philo thus starts his *Life of Moses* at a point which seems necessary to him in terms of the literary genre he is engaging in rather than in terms of the canonical text he is relying on.

The anecdotes which Philo reports on Moses’ infancy all pertain to his extraordinary intellectual maturity. Moses is thus said to have been “weaned at an earlier date than they had reckoned,” to be “advanced beyond his age,” “not [to] bear himself like the mere infant that he was, nor delight in fun and laughter and sport” (1.18–20). Later on, he applied himself so seriously to his studies that his was “a case rather of recollection than of learning,” and he “himself devised and propounded problems which they [his teachers] could not easily solve” (1.21). None of these features of Moses are known from pre-Philonic sources. Ezekiel the Tragedian, one of his Jewish predecessors in Alexandria, only mentions briefly his “royal

⁴⁰ See A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (London/New York 1988) 70–116.

upbringing and education.”⁴¹ Philo takes a special interest in Moses’ intellectual development and seems to have imagined the above-mentioned scenes by himself. He must have been inspired by the translation of *לָגַי*, “he grew” (Ex 2:10), which the Septuagint rendered by *ἀδρυνθέντος δὲ τοῦ παιδίου*, “the child grew to maturity.”

Philo’s anecdotes remain somewhat pale, especially in comparison to Plutarch’s, because they reflect philosophical tropes. Philo invokes the Classical Platonic image of the recollection of the soul, most famously discussed in *Phaedo* 72E. Socrates is mentioned there as having established that all human learning is in fact a form of recollection; this in turn shows the immortality of the soul, which had an opportunity to perceive the truth before entering into a specific body. The fact that Philo singles out Moses as a case of recollection rather than learning indicates that he uses the Platonic image in a rather loose sense. It has been transformed from a general human characteristic into a specific complement of the hero. Philo further embellishes this image of Moses as a precocious boy by suggesting that he “presses forward ‘like the horse to a meadow’, as the proverb goes” (1.22). Slightly adapting Plato’s *bon mot* about Socrates (*Tht.* 183D), Philo implies that Moses had similar philosophical strength as Plato’s role model. Moreover, the method of question and answer, which was central in many forms of learning during the Hellenistic period, is applied by Philo to Moses. Moses’ intellectual precocity thus transpires in his early formulation of problems which even his teachers could hardly solve. All these anecdotes are made of philosophical stereotypes, which show Moses’ stern nature and extraordinary intelligence. Already in his youth he emerges as an exceptionally spiritual person, who can easily be recognized as the future philosopher king that he was to become.

Philo’s anecdotes become more alive when he conveys

⁴¹ Ezek. *Exagoge* 37 (ed. Holladay II 355), *τροφαῖσι βασιλικάϊσι καὶ παιδεύμασιν*.

Moses' moral rather than intellectual virtues. After describing the plight of the Israelites in Egypt, who suffered at the hands of their cruel overseers (1.34–39), Philo explores Moses' reactions to this situation (40):

All this continued to dishearten and displease Moses, who was unable either to punish those who did wrong or to help those who suffered it. What he could he did. He assisted with his words, exhorting the overseers to show clemency and relax and alleviate the stringency of their orders, and the workers to bear their present condition bravely, to display a manly spirit and not let their souls share the weariness of their bodies, but to look for good to replace the evil.

Moses emerges in this passage as a person with a strong sense of justice and an equally acute awareness of his limited possibilities. Seeing the overwhelming oppression of the Israelites, he chooses persuasion and encouragement as a means of improving the condition of his people. Moses' moderation turns into violent action precisely at the moment when some overseers go even beyond their usual cruelty and become "wild beasts in human shape." This change of circumstances brings about a change in the hero. Moses reacts by killing the overseer, thus provoking the fatal break with his foster father (1.43–44). Philo concludes this scene by stressing that not only Moses considered his action "righteous," but also he himself does (1.44). This drama of changing circumstances, which prompt changing reactions, has wholly derived from Philo's pen. The Biblical text merely says that Moses saw an Egyptian overseer beating one of the Hebrews and killed him when he believed himself to be unnoticed (Ex 2:11–12). Philo undoubtedly wishes to justify his hero, especially in view of non-Jewish readers who may be critical of his behaviour. It is highly significant that he does so by exploring Moses' character in changing circumstances, stressing that his reaction was appropriate.

Moses' personality similarly comes alive when the reader experiences him upon his arrival in Median, when he sees some girls at the well being pushed aside by breeders of cattle. While the Biblical account (Ex 2:17) simply states that Moses "stood up and helped them," Philo (1.54) explains that:

Moses, who was not far off, seeing what had happened, quickly ran up and standing near by said: "Stop this injustice. You think you can take advantage of the loneliness of the place. Are you not ashamed to let your arms and elbows live an idle life?"

Philo clearly delights in the Biblical image of Moses as the patron of the weak girls and animates the scene by adding a series of quick actions as well as a passionate speech. The reader is encouraged to identify with the enormous effect Moses had on the girls: according to Philo, they were "seized with fear that they were listening to some oracular utterance" (1.57).

Finally, Philo uses the brief Biblical notice that "one day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burden" (Ex 2:11) for a detailed contemplation of his personality. He stresses that "most men, when they feel a breath of prosperity ever so small upon them, make much ado of puffing and blowing," forgetting their original and less fortunate circumstances (*Mos.* 1.30). Moses, by contrast, even though he grew up as a much-acclaimed prince at the Egyptian court, remained "zealous for the discipline and culture of his kinsmen and ancestors" (32). Philo presents him as acutely aware of the fragility of circumstances, not confusing good luck with inherent value. Moses is praised for his most suitable attitude to both his real parents, whom he honoured by profound affection, and his foster parents, to whom he showed gratitude for their kind treatment of him (33).⁴²

⁴² This interest in the correlation between character and circumstances generally animates also Plutarch's *Lives*. Alexander, for example, grew up at court and could have emulated his father in seeking acknowledgement in areas pertaining to sport and pleasure, but he instead chose to be pre-eminent only in matters regarding war and political ambition (*Alex.* 4.4–5.3). Like Philo's Moses, Alexander showed self-restraint in his infancy and avoided the pleasures of the body. He moreover used the opportunity of his father's absence to receive envoys from Persia and interrogated them with an astonishing maturity, which indicated his ambition and competence (5.1). Coriolanus, by contrast, grew up in rather dismal circumstances. Having lost his father at an early stage, he was raised by his mother, a situation

Plutarch's portrayal of Alcibiades' youth follows similar lines of interpretation. He, too, shapes his material with a focus on the person of his protagonist, starting, like Philo, with an emphasis on illustrious family background and exceptional beauty.⁴³ Then he takes a special interest in Alcibiades' intellectual development, initially specifying his school curriculum and then focusing on his relationship with Socrates. While Moses was said to have studied all the encyclical studies, surpassing both his Greek and Egyptian teachers, Alcibiades is portrayed as a diligent student who "usually paid due heed to his teachers," but hated the flute as an ignoble thing (*Alc.* 2.4). His dislike was so intense that he succeeded in having it eliminated from his studies, thus even influencing subsequent curricula.

While Philo portrayed Moses as an embodiment of the Platonic idea of reminiscence, Plutarch highlights Plato's image of Alcibiades as Socrates' special lover.⁴⁴ Instead of criticizing this relationship as a form of pederasty, as Nepos had done (*Alc.* 2), Plutarch uses it for a study of Alcibiades' basically positive character.⁴⁵ Admiring his teacher, Alcibiades becomes under Plutarch's pen "an image of love" (4.1–3):

It was not long before many men of high birth clustered about him and paid him their attentions. Most of them were plainly smitten with his brilliant youthful beauty and fondly courted him. But it was the love which Socrates had for him that bore

which many would regard as fatal to a political career. Plutarch makes a special point of stressing that Coriolanus overcame these initial difficulties, thus proving wrong those who ascribe their failures in political life to neglect in their early childhood (*Cor.* 1.2).

⁴³ Plut. *Alc.* 1.1, 1.3; Philo *Mos.* 1.7, 1.9. To be sure, Moses is already described in Ex 2:1 as "good" (טוב), the Greek translators interpreting this epithet as "pretty" or "charming" (ἀστέριος), thus giving emphasis to the aesthetic dimension of his appearance and his physical appeal to people. Philo further enhances the Septuagint image of Moses and raises his beauty far above that of ordinary infants.

⁴⁴ Plut. *Alc.* 4.4, referring to Pl. *Symp.* 213C, cf. 218A4–6, 209B5–7.

⁴⁵ See also Gribbe, *Alcibiades* 271–273.

strong testimony to the boy's native excellence and good parts (τῆς ἀρετῆς καὶ εὐφύιας τοῦ παιδός). These Socrates saw radiantly manifest in his outward person and ... was fain to protect them ... For there is no man whom Fortune so envelops and compasses about with the so-called good things of life that he cannot be reached by the bold and caustic reasonings of philosophy and pierced to the heart. And so it was that Alcibiades, although he was pampered from the very first, and was prevented by the companions who sought only to please him from giving ear to one who would instruct and train him, nevertheless, through the goodness of his parts (ὅπ' εὐφύιας), at last saw all that was in Socrates, and gave to him, putting away his rich and famous lovers. And speedily, from choosing such an associate, and giving ear to the words of a lover who was in the chase for no unmanly pleasures ... but sought to expose the weakness of his soul and rebuke his vain and foolish pride ... And he came to think that the work of Socrates was really a kind of provision of the gods for the care and salvation of youth.

In these scenes Plutarch has enriched both Thucydides' and Plato's image of Alcibiades by his own reflections on the character of a person who is naturally divided, because he is equipped with a good nature, yet also given to the corrupting influence of flatterers. Like Philo, Plutarch wishes to present his protagonist in a favourable light, giving a positive twist to known incidents which had been interpreted negatively. His own moralizing voice is clearly heard in his comments on the inevitable effect of philosophy even on persons pampered by good fortune as well as in his closing remark on Alcibiades' appreciation of Socrates as a savior figure.

Yet Plutarch does not present an idealized picture of Alcibiades. Aware of his strong passions, especially his competitiveness and love of preeminence, he also transmits anonymous "records" (ἀπομνημονεύματα) about his childhood which illustrate his insolence (*Alc.* 2.1). Two examples may suffice: once Alcibiades was hard pressed in wrestling and sank his teeth into his opponent's arm. When the latter cried that Alcibiades bites like women, he answered: "Not I, but as lions do" (2.2). Again, when he was playing in the street, a wagon came along, the

driver bidding him to get out of the way. While the other boys scattered, Alcibiades threw himself flat in front of the vehicle, thus stopping it and arousing much attention on the part of the onlookers (2.2–3).

These anecdotes foreshadow Alcibiades' famous versatility in his political career as well as his dangerous unscrupulousness. Plutarch shows that his character is consistent, his early traits receiving full expression in later years. Moreover, Alcibiades' individual personality becomes visible precisely when he confronts seemingly adverse circumstances. Plutarch does not explore his character in the sterile environment of a private chamber, the hero listening to the different voices of his soul, but rather in complex life situations with a variety of options to choose from. In the two cases above, Alcibiades spontaneously chooses the path others would have avoided. While the average boys vacate the street, Alcibiades confronts the driver. While most would accept their defeat in the wrestling contest, Alcibiades takes recourse to biting and defends his method by outright insolence.

There is much less anecdotal material in the *Life of Nicias*. He is introduced as the son of Niceratus, still relatively young when entering politics as the champion of the rich and notable (*Nic.* 2.1–2). “By nature timid and distrustful of success,” Plutarch furthermore explains, he was concerned to hide his “cowardice” in war under a cloak of good fortune (2.4). As Christopher Pelling has remarked, not much anecdotal material seems to have been available on Nicias' youth, but Plutarch does his best to integrate at least some stories from a slightly later period to portray his character.⁴⁶ He thus refers to “what is said” (*λέγεται*) about Nicias' reaction to a theatre performance where one of his slaves appeared as Dionysus: he rose and gave the youth his freedom, thus foreshadowing his stern commitment to values which would characterize his subsequent career (3.3).

⁴⁶ Pelling, *Plutarch and History* 301–315.

On the whole Plutarch emerges as a biographer with a stronger historiographical self-awareness than Philo. While Plutarch made special efforts to reach all the relevant sources and occasionally discusses them critically, Philo never mentions his. Moreover, when Plutarch had no anecdotes available, he did not make them up, whereas Philo regularly filled in the gaps of the Biblical text, freely imagining picturesque scenes. Philo may thus be identified as a biographer in a *Midrashic* or exegetical mode, who felt the same freedom as other ancient interpreters of Scripture. Josephus, for example, created a charming scene with Moses in Pharaoh's arms, tearing off the diadem which Pharaoh had playfully put on his head. Everyone around them immediately grasped that this child would abase the Egyptian empire (*AJ* 2.233–237). According to the rabbis, Moses himself took the crown, while Pharaoh was hugging and kissing him.⁴⁷ We thus see a similar biographical impetus in these other exegetes, who also pay attention to youthful incidents and take them to reflect the hero's character.

Philo is a more encomiastic biographer than Plutarch. While both Plutarch and the rabbis reflect on their protagonists' vices and weaknesses, Philo regularly presents idealized images of the Biblical forefathers.⁴⁸ This difference probably has to do with their respective audiences: while both Plutarch and the rabbis address sympathetic readers from within their own community, which included in Plutarch's case numerous Roman friends, Philo turns to a wider audience in Rome, which he expects to have been influenced, at least to some extent, by contemporary charges against the Jews. Given this context, he does not want to expose the weak points of the Biblical

⁴⁷ *Exod. Rabbah* 1.26; see also M. R. Niehoff, "Biographical Sketches in *Genesis Rabbah*," forthcoming in the Festschrift for Peter Schäfer (Tübingen 2013).

⁴⁸ See esp. *Mos.* 1.1–2; compare for example Philo's idealizing image of Joseph confronting Potiphar's wife (*Jos.* 40–48) with the scandalous image of him in *Genesis Rabbah* (par. 67). See also Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses* 11–16.

characters, which could easily be interpreted as weaknesses of Judaism.

In conclusion, I would stress that Philo and Plutarch are the first writers in the Imperial period who advance a moralizing and anecdotal approach to biography. Despite differences in style and sources, they share a novel and rather unusual interest in the character of their ancient heroes and indulge in characteristic stories to embellish their portrayals. For both, the heroes of the past are living models for contemporary readers to emulate.

Philo's and Plutarch's biographies in the context of Roman Stoicism

Richard Sorabji has forcefully suggested a significant link between Stoicism and Plutarch's biographies.⁴⁹ He argued that the notion of the Self as emerging over the span of a life is connected to the Stoic notion of progress and daily self-examination. The mental exercises of Marc Aurelius, for example, are directed towards the future so as to ensure the continuity of the moral Self. These initial insights provide a meaningful key for an overall understanding of Philo's and Plutarch's biographies, which I would like to place in a specifically Roman context.

As we have seen, both authors offered their first biographical sketches in connection with Roman emperors. Philo moreover engaged in the biographical genre only at a late stage in his life, namely when visiting Rome as the head of the Jewish embassy. His sympathetic turn towards Roman culture in his later writings can perhaps best be seen in his lavish praise of Augustus and Tiberius (*Leg.* 143–161). Reflecting contemporary Roman discourses, Philo also made sniping remarks about Greek talkativeness and dismissed Alexander as a foolish ruler.⁵⁰ Plutarch

⁴⁹ R. Sorabji, *The Self. Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago 2006) 172–180; see also W. Uxkull-Gyllenband, *Plutarch und die griechische Biographie* (Stuttgart 1927) 110–112, who briefly points to the Roman-Stoic background of Nepos' and Plutarch's biographies.

⁵⁰ *Lib.* 93–96; for details see Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity* 111–158.

frequently came to Rome and was proud of the process of Hellenization the city had gone through, praising Cicero for his command of Greek as well as his extended visits to Athens and other centres of Greek philosophy, while criticizing Cato the Elder for too vehemently opposing Greek influence in Rome.⁵¹ His *Life of Cato the Younger*, moreover, indicates that he was highly sympathetic to a man whom he identified both as a conspicuous Roman and as a Stoic philosopher (*Cat.Min.* 27.7). He mentions not only his training with the Stoic Antipater, but also his enthusiastic devotion to ethics (4.1). Plutarch even defends Cato against Cicero's ridicule of him as a Stoic typically given to paradoxes.⁵² The extent to which Plutarch has acculturated in Rome can be grasped by considering his portrayal of Alexander in the *Parallel Lives*. In comparison with his earlier treatise *The Fortune of Alexander*, which we discussed above, Plutarch now adopts a more distinctly Roman approach. He has become far more critical of the Greek king, dwelling on his weaknesses, such as the impulsive murder of his friend Cleitus, which was well advertised in Rome.⁵³

Moreover, basic features of both Philo's and Plutarch's biographies resonate particularly well with Roman Stoicism and seem to have emerged in that cultural context. Foremost among them is the use of ancient heroes as contemporary role models. We saw above that Philo and Plutarch revive the past by presenting its heroes as personal examples of virtue to their readers. Plutarch even describes this approach as hosting great personalities, painting their features as a portraitist does. Both Philo and Plutarch invite their readers to emulate the ancient heroes, implementing their virtues in their own lives, rather than relate to the knowledge of the past in a merely theoretical

⁵¹ Plut. *Cic.* 2.1–4, 3.1, 4.1–3, 40.1–41.1; *Cat.Mai.* 2.4, 12.4–5, 22.1–23.2, 24.1.

⁵² *Cat.Min.* 21.5; contra S. Swain, "Plutarch's *Lives* of Cicero, Cato, and Brutus," *Hermes* 118 (1990) 192–203, who suggests that Plutarch in these *Lives* was animated by an overriding hostility to the Stoics.

⁵³ Compare Plut. *Alex.* 50.1–52.5 with Seneca *Ira* 3.17, 17.1–4, *Ep.* 83.19.

or antiquarian fashion.

This philosophical use of ancient figures is rooted in Stoic notions of moral authority. Gretchen Reydam-Schils has recently shown that the Stoics differed from other Hellenistic schools by rejecting commentary culture and personality cult.⁵⁴ Unlike contemporary Platonists, for example, Roman Stoics did not define affiliation with their school by joining a group of commentators who interpret the texts of their founder, assuming that he was divine and so left behind texts of unsurpassed authority. Instead, the Stoics acknowledged an impressive variety of exemplary figures, including philosophers from other schools, politicians, and heroes mentioned in ancient texts.⁵⁵ Moral authority was not based on a canonical text or a particular school allegiance, but rather followed from the usefulness of the model.⁵⁶ Any person, provided she behaved in an exemplary fashion, could become authoritative and prompt others to improve themselves by emulating her virtues. Such role models were depicted in real-life situations, which could easily be identified by the readers, rather than in an idealized and aloof state.⁵⁷

Philo and Plutarch echo this approach of Roman Stoicism when presenting to their readers heroes of the past, who have under their pen become alive in a highly personal sense. The

⁵⁴ G. Reydam-Schils, "Authority and Agency in Stoicism," *GRBS* 51 (2011) 296–322.

⁵⁵ See esp. Sen. *De otio* 1.4–3.5; *Constant.* 1.1–2.3, 7.1; *Ep.* 64. The Stoic willingness to accept exemplary figures from outside of their own school tradition must also be appreciated in the context of their notion of ancient wisdom to be found in texts not generally considered as philosophical; for details see G. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford 2001); P. van Nuffelen, "Varro's *Divine Antiquities*: Roman Religion as an Image of Truth," *CP* 105 (2010) 162–188.

⁵⁶ See esp. Sen. *Brev. Vit.* 14.1–2, 14.5, and 13.1–9, where Seneca distinguishes his own moral inquiry into the past from merely antiquarian studies, which he associates with Greek scholarship on Homer; see similarly Epict. *Disc.* 1.4.

⁵⁷ See esp. Sen. *Ep.* 22–24.

reader is not treated to a detailed commentary on the respective canonical text, but experiences the protagonists in their daily lives, when they confront difficult situations and make good use of opportunities that offer themselves. Like their Stoic counterparts, Philo's and Plutarch's heroes are 'socially embedded'.⁵⁸ Their virtue consists in their proper mediation of social roles, political responsibilities, and moral convictions. It is this philosophical background which has prompted Philo and Plutarch to indulge in anecdotes as a key to understanding the moral character of their heroes.

The Stoic philosopher Panaetius, who spent much of his time in Rome, played a key role in this discourse. He had powerfully argued for the Self as a particular individual rather than a universal type. This approach has rightly been distinguished from that of Plato, who divided everyone's soul into the impersonal categories of rational and physical without considering the particular circumstances of each person's life.⁵⁹ Cicero heavily relied on Panaetius' ideas and gave them a highly influential hearing in Latin.⁶⁰ His writings continued to be available in Greek to such authors as Philo and Plutarch.⁶¹ The discussion in Rome thus shifted from notions of universal rationality to a concern for "our own nature," "individual particularity," and "proper" characteristics.⁶² Greek intellectuals, especially those

⁵⁸ Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics* 15–52.

⁵⁹ Sorabji, *Self* 115–136, 157–171; Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics* 20–25; see also Brunt, *BSR* 43 (1975) 13–15; *contra* Ch. Gill, "Personhood and Personality: The Four-*Personae* Theory in Cicero, *De officiis* I," *OSAPh* 6 (1988) 169–199, who questioned the degree of individual personality envisaged by Panaetius by stressing that there was no real conflict between the individual and society. Such tension, however, is anticipated.

⁶⁰ Cicero speaks of Panaetius' treatise *On Moral Duties* as "unquestionably the most thorough discussion of moral duties that we have, and I have followed him in the main—but with slight modifications" (*Off.* 3.7).

⁶¹ Philo mentions Panaetius once in *Aet.* 76, while Plutarch refers to him on numerous occasions (e.g. *Mor.* 453D, 463D).

⁶² Cic. *Off.* 1.107, 110–117.

attuned to Roman culture, became increasingly aware of these new perspectives. Already at birth, Cicero insisted with Panaetius, men differ with regard to their particular physical qualities as well as their dominant traits, which subsequently determine their career. Men also vary from one another as a result of their specific family background and luck of circumstances (*Off.* 1.107–109). These differences are so important for the evaluation of an individual man that the same deed, for example suicide, can be a duty in the case of Cato but a crime in the case of another person (112).

Seneca continues this discussion about the Self, adding a dimension which is of particular importance for our present inquiry into Philo's and Plutarch's biographies. All of Seneca's writings assume a highly individuated Self, which he addresses in specific situations of life. A great deal in his *Epistles* indicates his alertness to the variety of human circumstances, which demand reflection and individual appreciation.⁶³ In his essay *On the Shortness of Life* Seneca proposes to extend the limitations of one's own experience by associating with figures from the past (*Brev. Vit.* 15.4–5). In this context he develops precisely the kind of moral approach to ancient figures that we have encountered in Philo's and Plutarch's programmatic statements about biography. Seneca recommends that his readers take great thinkers from the past, such as Zeno and Aristotle, as "their most intimate friend (*familiarissimos*) every day" (14.5). One should become their "client" and adopt them as teachers and friends, "from whom we may seek counsel on matters great and small" (15.2). Most importantly, the reader should "fashion himself in the likeness" (*se similitudinem effingat*) of such great personalities of the past (15.2). Historical figures such as Scipio and Cincinnatus were among the exemplars which serve the contemporary reader as a guide to a good life (17.6). Moreover, in one of his *Epistles*, addressing Lucilius' anxiety in the face of a law suit, Seneca recalls the examples of Socrates and Cato

⁶³ See also his more programmatic statements in *Vit. Beat.* 1.3 about finding happiness off the trodden path.

(*Ep.* 24). These men are shown to have overcome their fear of death and bad fortune, calmly accepting the end of their life. Seneca himself was highly aware of the transformative effect of reading good literature. He recommends Q. Sextius as someone who inspires him to new confidence and rouses him to noble action in his own life.⁶⁴

It took two philosophers from the Greek East who had increasingly come into contact with Rome to make full use of these Stoic ideas in the realm of historiography. It is perhaps no coincidence that both Philo and Plutarch came to Rome as outsiders and never permanently settled there. Moreover, both engaged in a profound mediation of cultures. They addressed a variety of intellectuals, presenting the Romans to their original constituencies and, vice versa, the tradition of their own community to Roman audiences. This mediating role may well have prompted them both to present the past in continuous narratives and to look for a common moral denominator of heroes from different traditions. Philo could thus suggest that Moses, Abraham, and Joseph were impressive heroes in contemporary Roman terms, while Plutarch showed that Greece and Rome have produced heroes of a similar kind.

The Stoic background of Philo's and Plutarch's biographies may illuminate another feature which has often been discussed in modern scholarship, namely the sense that the heroes remain somewhat one-dimensional or uniform, lacking such individuating features as the experience of agonizing inner conflicts or profound changes of personality.⁶⁵ Seneca describes the Stoic hero in a similarly uniform fashion: "we Stoics have declared that these were wise men, because they were uncon-

⁶⁴ Sen. *Ep.* 64, see also *Tranq.* 1.12.

⁶⁵ See also Russel, in Scardigli, *Essays* 81–86; Pelling, *Plutarch and History* 283–330, who stresses the straightforward or integrated character of Plutarch's heroes, which does not allow for profound contradictions. He also points to the fact that Plutarch's approach cannot be explained by reference to Aristotle, even though there are some resemblances, but does not suggest an alternative philosophical background for these features.

quered by struggles, were despisers of pleasure and victors over all terrors" (*Constant.* 2.1). It is the Stoic notion of a uniform Self that has given its particular flavour to Philo's and Plutarch's *Lives*. Like Seneca, these two writers focused on their heroes' responses to the circumstances of their life and investigated whether they were appropriate. They, too, assumed that a man develops throughout life, following the pattern of the kind of person he or she is, rather than making abrupt changes as a result of inner conflicts. Development of original characteristics and gradual progress along fairly uniform lines are thus the focus of their attention.

Summary and conclusion

The results of our inquiries throw new light on the Romanization of the Greek East and especially on the triumph of Roman Stoicism. Both Philo and Plutarch emerge as thinkers who have increasingly accommodated Roman discourses, changing both their genres of writing and their philosophical focus. Both left behind more traditional forms of Platonism and adopted a literary style more congenial to Roman Stoicism. To be sure, I am not suggesting a kind of conversion from Platonism to Stoicism. On the contrary, throughout this study I have pointed to Platonic motifs and sensitivities in Philo's and Plutarch's *Lives*. Their continued allegiance to the Platonic heritage was harmoniously incorporated in their new biographical project. At the same time, however, a shift of emphasis is discernable in both, prompting them to experiment with the new genre of biography. For Philo, the change was rather more abrupt, following his unexpected visit to Rome towards the end of his career. For Plutarch, on the other hand, the change was more gradual and in line with his prolonged as well as relaxed relations with Rome.

The novelty of Philo's biographical style emerges with particular clarity against the background of the *Allegorical Commentary*. Throughout its many treatises he suggested that man has to escape from the material and multifarious world in order to approach God and achieve the ultimate moral goal. Philo pays special attention to Plato's *Theaetetus*, a key dialogue for Alex-

andrian Platonists,⁶⁶ and recommends that:

we ought to fly away from earth to heaven as quickly as we can;
and to fly away is to become like god, in so far as this is possible;
and to become like him is to become just, holy, and wise. (*Thl.*
176A–B, quoted by Philo in *Fuga* 63)

Philo follows Plato in assuming that the created earth stands in stark contrast to God Himself. Only the one who escapes the material realm can become a true moral agent and emulate the Divine. Not surprisingly, Philo mentions in this context neither personal lives nor anecdotes of famous persons of the past. Such subjects only begin to interest him during his stay in Rome, when he came into contact with the school most inclined in this direction.

Plutarch, on the other hand, presents already in the *Moralia* many examples of historical figures, inviting his readers to “imitate” their deeds or avoid their pitfalls.⁶⁷ He programmatically states that he uses not only philosophers for his moral instruction, but also collects the sayings and deeds of kings and despots, because their examples are more appealing to a wider audience (457D). Figures of the past have a moral meaning for contemporary readers, who learn through their examples how to tame their own passions. In his treatises *On the Control of Anger* and *On Tranquility of Mind* Plutarch not only addresses the same topics that had already been discussed by Seneca, but also uses some of the same examples as his Roman counterpart.⁶⁸ While insisting on the Platonic notion of “conquering” the passions, Plutarch parallels Seneca in recommending that we ought “to accept in a suitable manner whatever accrues from Fortune and to assign to each a place” (467B, cf. 454C).

⁶⁶ For details see M. R. Niehoff, “Philo’s Role as a Platonist in Alexandria,” *Etudes Platoniciennes* 7 (2010) 40–45.

⁶⁷ *Mor.* 467D (μυμείσθαι); see also Duff, *Plutarch’s Lives* 49–51; van Hoof, *Plutarch’s Practical Ethics* 41–65; T. Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge 2007) 122–159.

⁶⁸ Compare e.g. *Mor.* 458B with *Sen. Ira* 3.17.1, *Mor.* 458F with *Ira* 3.22.4–5.

Living a generation after Philo and arriving in Rome at a comparatively earlier stage in his career, Plutarch has more deeply acculturated to the philosophical discourse in the capital. His move to political biography in a moralizing fashion is less dramatic and flows more consistently from his other work than is the case with Philo, whose development as a writer is truly surprising.⁶⁹

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