

Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques?

A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes

Edited by

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Between Rewritten Bible and Allegorical Commentary: Philo's Interpretation of the Burning Bush

Steven D. Fraade

Introduction

Categories are useful for sorting diverse materials, but they reach the limits of their usefulness when they become rigid, which is to say when their boundaries become impermeable, when they do not allow for straddlers (which interest me the most). In the case of the literary category (I resist speaking in terms of “genre”) “rewritten Bible,” it provides a heuristically convenient umbrella under which to include a wide assortment of ancient Jewish writings that make little or no distinction between the scriptural text being “rewritten” and its paraphrastic expansion, reduction, or alteration. However, what gets left out from under the umbrella should not be put “out of sight, out of mind” with respect to what is included under it. In particular, I have in mind the form of scriptural commentary, which I (and others) have often sought to sharply, perhaps too sharply, demarcate from “rewritten Bible” as being fundamentally different with respect to its *explicit* interpretive stance vis-à-vis the scriptural text, and the implicit authority claims thereby made for both the commented-upon text and the text of commentary, as for those of the commentator(s) and the interpretive community.¹ In other words, the value of this distinction, even as it needs to be qualified, is in the performative function of the commentary in relation to its underlying hermeneutical/theological presumptions.

In a previous study of rabbinic midrash as commentary, I sought to deconstruct this demarcation by arguing that even rabbinic scriptural commentary, notwithstanding its atomistic differentiation of scriptural lemma and midrashic comment, implicitly constructs (or may rest upon and hence masks) a continuous rewritten scriptural narrative.² In the present context I wish to look at another transgressive example, this time drawn from the writings of Philo of Alexandria, in which the forms of “rewritten Bible” and “commentary,” in this case allegorical, are combined in interesting ways. Philo is not usually

1 See, in this regard, Alexander (1988), who argues that “rewritten Bible” differs from “commentary” in the former’s “dissolving” of explicit exegesis.

2 Fraade 2006.

included among the exemplars of “rewritten Bible,” in large part because he is thought of more as a “commentator.”³ I hope to show, through one example, that in Philo’s case, this delineation is too sharply drawn. In his introduction to his *Life of Moses* (1.4), Philo is tellingly explicit in saying that his account will be most accurate due to his combining of what he has read (Scripture) with what he has heard (tradition), perhaps an apt characterization of “rewritten Bible” in general:

§4 ἀλλ’ ἔγωγε τὴν τούτων βασκανίαν ὑπερβάς τὰ περι τὸν ἄνδρα μὴνύσω μαθῶν αὐτὰ καὶ βίβλων τῶν ἱερῶν, ὅς θαυμάσια μνημεῖα τῆς αὐτοῦ σοφίας ἀπολέλοιπε, καὶ παρὰ τινων ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔθνους πρεσβυτέρων· τὰ γὰρ λεγόμενα τοῖς ἀναγιγνωσκόμενοις ἀεὶ συνύφαινον καὶ διὰ τοῦτ’ ἔδοξα μάλλον ἐτέρων τὰ περι τὸν βίον ἀκριβῶσαι

But I will . . . tell the story of Moses as I have learned it, both from the sacred books, the wonderful monuments of his wisdom which he has left behind him, and from some of the elders of the nation; for I always interwove what I was told with what I read, and thus believed myself to have a closer knowledge than others of his life history.⁴

The scriptural base (uncited by Philo) of the example we shall consider is the story of the “burning bush” in Exod 3:1–6, the first four verses of which will first occupy our attention. Before turning to Philo’s interpretation of the passage in his *Life of Moses*, we might look at the scriptural text itself, in Hebrew, English, and Greek, to ask what therein might call out for interpretive attention:

Exodus 3:1–6 (MT)

1 וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוּ בְּהַן מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר
וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֲרָבָה:
2 וַיְרֹא מִלְּאֵךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹוֹ כְּלִבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיְרֹא וַהֲנֵה הַסִּנֵּה בַעַר בְּאֵשׁ
וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינֶנּוּ אֶכָּל:
3 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יָבֵעַר הַסִּנֵּה:
4 וַיְרֹא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹוֹ אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:
5 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שְׁלֹנֶעֱלִיךְ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד
עָלָיו אֲדַמְתִּי־קֶדֶשׁ הוּא:

3 On the positive, but qualified, relation of Philo’s Exposition of the Law, which includes his *Life of Moses*, to “rewritten Bible,” see most recently, Sterling 2012, 423–24, cited below at n. 15.

4 Here and in what follows, Greek texts and English translations of Philo are from the Loeb Classical Library edition.

6 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתַּר מִשָּׁה
פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מִהַבֵּית אֱלֹהֵי אֲלֵהֶם:

Exodus 3:1–6 (NJPS)

1 Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

2 An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.

3 Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?”

4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.”

5 And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

6 I am,” He said, “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:1–6 (LXX)

1 Καὶ Μωϋσῆς ἦν ποιμαίνων τὰ πρόβατα Ἰσθὸρ τοῦ γαμβροῦ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἱερέως Μαδίαμ καὶ ἤγαγεν τὰ πρόβατα ὑπὸ τὴν ἔρημον καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος Χωρηβ.

2 ὥφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φλογὶ πυρὸς ἐκ τοῦ βάλτου, καὶ ὄρα ὅτι ὁ βάλτος καίεται πυρὶ, ὁ δὲ βάλτος οὐ κατακαίεται.

3 εἶπεν δὲ Μωϋσῆς Παρελθὼν ὄψομαι τὸ ὄραμα τὸ μέγα τοῦτο, τί ὅτι οὐ κατακαίεται ὁ βάλτος.

4 ὡς δὲ εἶδεν κύριος ὅτι προσάγει ἰδεῖν, ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὸν κύριος ἐκ τοῦ βάλτου λέγων Μωϋσῆ, Μωϋσῆ. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν Τί ἐστίν;

5 καὶ εἶπεν Μὴ ἐγγίσῃς ὠδε-λύσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα ἐκ τῶν ποδῶν σου· ὁ γὰρ τόπος, ἐν ᾧ σὺ ἕστηκας, γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν.

6 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς σου, θεὸς Ἀβρααμ καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαακ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακωβ. ἀπέστρεψεν δὲ Μωϋσῆς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ εὐλαβεῖτο γὰρ κατεμβλέψαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

For our purposes, the differences between the MT and LXX are minor (we have one Qumran Hebrew fragment; the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the targumim are unremarkable). Several details (among many) strike me as being of particular interpretive significance:

1. What is the function of the “angel of the Lord” (הַיְהוָה אֲנֹכִי; ἄγγελος κυρίου) that appears to Moses in v. 2, but plays no further explicit role in the continuing narrative, which speaks instead of the Lord/God. Are these the same?
2. What is the relation between the visual experience of Moses, emphasized by the repeated use of verbs for seeing (six times in vv. 2–4, 6, but more pronounced in the MT than in the LXX), but not described, to the explicit revelatory aural content of vv. 4–6 and following?
3. What is the nature of this “bush” (a happax legomenon in both Hebrew and Greek: הַיַּבֵּשׁ; ὁ βᾶτος), appearing only here and in Deut 33:16, in reference to the same narrative?
4. Does the appearance of the burning bush serve any function other than to attract Moses’s attention so as to initiate the dialogue between God and Moses that follows, in which Moses receives his commission, which is all that can be inferred directly from the scriptural account?

However, notwithstanding these calls for interpretation, the scriptural narrative of the burning bush receives surprisingly little attention in Jewish writings prior to or contemporaneous with Philo. There is nothing to speak of inner-scripturally (except for Deut 33:16, already mentioned), nor in the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor in the writings collected by James Charlesworth in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*,⁵ nor in the fragments of Hellenistic Jewish writers.⁶ The narrative retellings of both the book of *Jubilees* and Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* skip over the incident entirely, where we would expect to find it.⁷ Only Josephus includes a relatively unremarkable paraphrase, to which we will return shortly.

Philo’s Rewriting of Exodus 3:1–2

In *Life of Moses* 1.65–66, in the context of recounting Moses’s sojourn in Midian, Philo paraphrases Exod 3:1–2, by at first simply filling in some details in the scriptural narrative:

§65 ἄγων δὲ τὴν ποιμνὴν εἰς τόπον εὐδρόν τε καὶ εὐχορτον, ἔνθα συνέβαινε καὶ πολλὴν πόαν προβατεύσιμον ἀναδίδοσθαι, γενόμενος πρὸς τινὶ νάπει θέαμα

⁵ Charlesworth 1983–1985; Delamarter 2002.

⁶ See Niehoff 2011a, 20 n.8 (Ezekiel the Tragedian), 63–64 (Aristobulus), 145.

⁷ See *Jub.* 48:1–2; *LAB* 10:1.

ἐκπληκτικώτατον ὄρα. βάτος ἦν, ἀκανθώδές τι φυτὸν καὶ ἀσθενέστατον· οὗτος, οὐδενὸς πῦρ προσενεγκόντος ἐξαίφνης ἀνακαίεται καὶ περισχεθεὶς ὄλος ἐκ ῥίζης εἰς ἀκρέμονα πολλῆ φλογὶ καθάπερ ἀπὸ τινος πηγῆς ἀνομβρούσης διέμενε σῶος, οὐ κατακαϊόμενος, οἷα τις ἀπαθῆς οὐσία καὶ οὐχ ὕλη πυρὸς αὐτὸς ὢν, ἀλλὰ τροφῆ χρώμενος τῷ πυρί.

§66 κατὰ δὲ μέσσην τὴν φλόγα μορφή τις ἦν περικαλλεστάτη, τῶν ὀρατῶν ἐμπερῆς οὐδενί, θεοειδέστατον ἄγαλμα, φῶς ἀύγοιδέστερον τοῦ πυρὸς ἀπαστρέπτουσα, ἦν ἂν τις ὑπετόπησεν εἰκόνα τοῦ ὄντος εἶναι· καλείσθω δὲ ἄγγελος, ὅτι σχεδὸν τὰ μέλλοντα γενήσεσθαι διήγγελλε τρανοτέρᾳ φωνῆς ἡσυχία διὰ τῆς μεγαλουργηθείσης ὄψεως.

65 Now, as he was leading the flock to a place where the water and the grass were abundant, and where there happened to be plentiful growth of herbage for the sheep, he found himself at a glen where he saw a most astonishing sight. There was a bramble-bush, a thorny sort of plant, and of the most weakly kind, which, without anyone's setting it alight, suddenly took fire; and, though enveloped from root to twigs in a mass of fire, which looked as though it were spouted up from a fountain, yet remained whole, and, instead of being consumed, seemed to be a substance impervious to attack, and, instead of serving as fuel to the fire, actually fed on it.

66 In the midst of the flame was a form of the fairest beauty, unlike any visible object, an image supremely divine in appearance, refulgent with a light brighter than the light of fire. It might be supposed that this was the image of Him that is; but let us rather call it an angel or herald, since, with a silence that spoke more clearly than speech, it employed as it were the miracle of sight to herald future events.

Moses went where he did in search of good pasturing for his sheep. The bush was a *thorny* and *weakly* kind, perhaps implicit in βάτος, but here made explicit.⁸ To accentuate the miraculous nature of the sight, Philo adds that Moses saw the bush suddenly alight without anyone igniting it, and that the fire appeared as a fountain. Notably, but undramatically, not only was the bush not damaged by the fire, but the bush fed on the fire.

However, Philo's most important contribution here (beginning with §66) is to focus on the nature of the angel within the flames, in part because of the ambiguity of the scriptural narrative as to the angel's function, in part due to

8 See BDB 702; LSJ 311.

Philo's Platonic discomfort with God's appearing to Moses in a visible form. Here he begins his transition from retelling the story to interpreting it. Philo wishes to stress that the divine image in the midst of the bush was *not* a visible object in the normal (physical) sort of visibility, notwithstanding the scriptural verse's repeated emphasis on seeing, nor was this a fire in the usual sense, but rather a refulgent light brighter than normal fire. While one might think, says Philo, of the angelic appearance as constituting an image or visual representation of God, prior to his communication with Moses, ἄγγελος should be understood in its base meaning as messenger or herald.⁹ Since a normal messenger communicates his message through speech rather than through vision, this provides Philo with an opportunity to expand upon the miraculous nature of this event: a *silent* speech that communicates through supernatural *sight*.

This emphasis on the miraculous interchangeability of the senses of seeing and hearing (seeing what would be normally heard) is familiar from Philo's several interpretations of the theophany at Mt. Sinai, to which, in a sense, the burning bush incident is a prelude. In particular, note his interpretations of Exod 20:15 (18) ("All the people saw the voice") and Exod 20:19 (22) ("You have seen that I have spoken to you out of heaven"), which I have treated at length elsewhere in print.¹⁰ Thus, the function of the burning bush is not simply to get Moses's attention for the communication with God that follows, which would seem to be the plain meaning of the scriptural text, but which leaves the specific function of the angel/messenger unclear. Rather, by Philo's retelling of the story, the "miracle of sight" is employed to "herald" through an articulate silence "future events." In a sense, then, what Moses (and Philo's "readers") "sees" is the *future*. The specifics of this vision as message, that is, the nature and meaning of the future events being foretold, remain to be unpacked in Philo's more explicit allegorical commentary to follow.

The First Level of Symbolic Commentary

Although, as I have suggested, Philo has already (in §66) begun to shift from retelling to explaining, it is in the next paragraph (§67) that he begins his meta-

9 LSJ 7. Cf. BDB 521.

10 See *On the Decalogue* 32–49; *On the Migration of Abraham* 47–49 (including an interesting interpretation of Deut 4:12); *The Life of Moses* 2.213; Fraade, 2008. Compare also Philo's *Questions and Answers on Exodus* 2:47 (to Exod 24:17), wherein Philo similarly discounts fire as a physical representation of God.

phoric unpacking or decoding of the three main characters of the rewritten narrative: the bush, the fire, and the angel:

§67 σύμβολον γὰρ ὁ μὲν καιόμενος βᾶτος τῶν ἀδικουμένων, τὸ δὲ φλέγον πῦρ τῶν ἀδικούντων, τὸ δὲ μὴ κατακαίεσθαι τὸ καιόμενον τοῦ μὴ πρὸς τῶν ἐπιτιθεμένων φθαρῆσεσθαι τοὺς ἀδικουμένους, ἀλλὰ τοῖς μὲν ἄπρακτον καὶ ἀνωφελῆ γενέσθαι τὴν ἐπίθεσιν, τοῖς δὲ τὴν ἐπιβουλὴν ἀζήμιον, ὁ δὲ ἄγγελος προνοίας τῆς ἐκ θεοῦ τὰ λῖαν φοβερὰ παρὰ τὰς ἀπάντων ἐλπίδας κατὰ πολλὴν ἡσυχίαν ἐξευμαρίζοντος.

67 For the burning bramble was a symbol of those who suffered wrong, as the flaming fire of those who did it. Yet that which burned was not burnt up, and this was a sign that the sufferers would not be destroyed by their aggressors, who would find that the aggression was vain and profitless while the victims of malice escaped unharmed. The angel was a symbol of God's providence, which all silently brings relief to the greatest dangers, exceeding every hope.

Whereas several early rabbinic midrashim interpret the lowly, thorny bush as symbolizing Israel in its suffering,¹¹ Philo's unpacking is at first more universal: the bush represents sufferers, while the fire symbolizes their oppressors. Just as the fire fails to consume the bush, the aggressions of the oppressors fail to harm their victims, who "escape unharmed." This reversal of seeming fortunes is ensured by the divine providence, represented in the narrative by the angel/herald, which *silently* fulfils, even exceeds, the hopes of the oppressed for relief. While this symbolic unpacking could have been performed on the scriptural text itself, certain aspects depend on Philo's prior retelling of the narrative, especially the emphasis on the *silence* of the angel. However, the angel as divine providence, perhaps previously implied, is here made explicit. This sets the stage for what appears to be a second, deeper level of allegorical commentary, which is dependent upon both the rewritten narrative (§§65–66) and the first level of symbolic decoding (§67).

11 See in particular *Mekhilta of R. Shim'on bar Yoh. ai* 3:8. (ed. Epstein-Melammed, 1–2). Cf. *Exod. Rab.* 2:1. For ancient interpretations of the burning bush more broadly, see Ginzberg, 1968, 415–416 n. 115.

The Second Level of Allegorical Commentary §§68–70

Next, Philo is explicit that his decoding thus far has only reached the first level, to which there is more to be mined below:

§68 τὴν δὲ εἰκασίαν ἀκριβῶς ἐπισκεπτέον. ὁ βᾶτος, ὡς ἐλέχθη, φυτὸν ἀσθενέστατον ἀλλ' οὐδὲ ἄκεντρον, ὡς εἰ καὶ μόνον ἐπιψαύσειέ τις τιτρώσκειν, οὐτ' ἐξαναλώθη τῷ φύσει δαπανηρῶ πυρί, τοῦναντίον δὲ ἐφυλάχθη πρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ διαμένων ὅποιος ἦν πρὶν ἀνακαίεσθαι μηδὲν ἀποβαλὼν τὸ παράπαν αὐγὴν προσέλαβε

68 But the details of the comparison must be considered. The bramble, as I have said, is a very weakly plant, yet it is prickly and will wound if one do but touch it. Again, though fire is naturally destructive, the bramble was not devoured thereby, but on the contrary was guarded by it, and remained just as it was before it took fire, lost nothing at all but gained an additional brightness.

First, the thorny bush is not just lowly, as appropriate to its representing those who suffer, but can inflict through its thorns harm to those who touch (that is, seek to harm) it. Here Philo picks up on a something previously said, almost in passing, at the end of §65, that the bush was not only unharmed by the fire (which is all that the scriptural text says), but was protected by it, fed on it, even gaining in brightness.

In the next section (§69), Philo makes his one historical allusion:

§69 τοῦθ' ἅπαν ὑπογραφή τις ἐστὶ τῆς ἐθνικῆς ὑποθέσεως, ἢ κατ' ἐκείνον τὸν χρόνον ἐπεῖχε, μόνον οὐ βοῶσα τοῖς ἐν συμφοραῖς. “μὴ ἀναπίπτετε, τὸ ἀσθενὲς ὑμῶν δύναμις ἐστίν, ἢ καὶ κεντεῖ καὶ κατατρώσει μυρίους. ὑπὸ τῶν ἐξαναλώσαι γλιχομένων τὸ γένος ἀκόντων διασωθήσεσθε μᾶλλον ἢ ἀπολείσθε, τοῖς κακοῖς οὐ κακωθήσεσθε, ἀλλ' ὅταν μάλιστα πορθεῖν νομίση τις ὑμᾶς, τότε μάλιστα πρὸς εὐκλειαν ἐκλάμψετε”

69 All this is a description of the nation's condition as it then stood, and we may think of it as a voice to the sufferers: “Do not lose heart; your weakness is your strength, which can prick, and thousands will suffer from its wounds. Those who desire to consume you will be your unwilling saviours instead of your destroyers. Your ills will work you no ill. Nay, just when the enemy is surest of ravaging you, your fame will shine forth most gloriously.”

In saying, “All this is a description of the nation’s condition as it then stood,” Philo presumably refers to the condition of Israel in Egypt at Moses’s time, before returning, it would seem, to a more universal message. In other words, the future events that are heralded by the burning bush are those awaiting Moses upon his return to Egypt. Why this brief, seemingly unnecessary, nod to history? Is Philo thinking that there are those who would apply his allegorical interpretation to the condition of the Jewish community of Egypt (Alexandria) of his own time (early first century CE)? If so, does he seek to discourage such a reading, or indirectly to allow for it (doth he protest too much)? Depending on when we date Philo’s *Life of Moses* in relation to the uprising against the Jews of Alexandria under Flaccus, one could imagine Philo’s allegorical interpretation to speak directly to “the nation’s condition as it then stood” in his *own* time as well.¹²

Interestingly, it is precisely after this historical and national nod, that Philo intensifies his diction by switching to the second-person address, as if the herald of the burning bush is now directly speaking to Philo’s “readers” as sufferers, intensifying even further the message of turned tables first planted inconspicuously at the end of §65: *Your* seeming weakness is *your* strength. Those (*your* tormentors) who seek to destroy *you*, will be *your* unwitting saviours. Just when *your* condition seems as bad as it can get, *you* will shine forth like the fire. What a reversal of roles!

Finally, the fire (which previously symbolized the oppressors) now addresses directly the oppressors, as if speaking for God:

§70 πάλιν τὸ πῦρ φθοροποιὸς οὐσία διελέγχουσα τοὺς ὠμοθύμους·“μὴ ταῖς ἰδίαις ἀλκαῖς ἐπαίρεσθε, τὰς ἀμάχους ῥώμας ἰδόντες καθαιρουμένας σωφρονισθητέ· ἡ μὲν καυστικὴ δύναμις τῆς φλογὸς ὡς ξύλον καίεται, τὸ δὲ φύσει καυστὸν ξύλον οἶα πῦρ ἐμφανῶς καίει.”

70 Again fire, the element which works destruction, convicts the cruel-hearted. “Exult not in your own strength” it says. “Behold your invincible might brought low, and learn wisdom. The property of flame is to

12 See Niehoff (201b, 11–16) who argues for Philo’s having written the Exposition of the Law toward the end of his life while in Rome, in which political and intellectual context the Exposition, especially the *Life of Moses*, needs to be understood. For a similar argument, see most recently Bloch (2012, 71–77). Note in particular (76): “Philo’s allegorical reading of the burning bush episode—the burning bush is a ‘symbol of those who suffered wrong’—may not only refer to the biblical suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, but also to the suppression in Philo’s Alexandria.”

consume, yet it is consumed, like wood. The nature of wood is to be consumed yet it is manifested as the consumer, as though it were the fire.”

Just as the sufferers were told by a voice (of the herald?) not to despair in their seeming weakness (§69), the oppressors are now directly admonished not to exalt in their seeming (physical) strength, but to learn wisdom.¹³ Returning to the scriptural terms of the message, the flame and bush (wood) have exchanged roles as consumer and consumed. Once again, not only is the bush (whether Israel or sufferers more universally) not consumed (as per the plain scriptural sense), but it will vanquish its oppressors.

From “Rewritten Bible” to Allegorical Commentary

Thus far, I have sought to demonstrate that Philo’s allegorical interpretation of the scriptural narrative of the burning bush is based not on the scriptural text itself, but on its initial retelling (§65 and the beginning of §66). Philo’s explicit commentary begins with his comment that “It might be supposed that this was the image of Him that is; but let us rather call it an angel or herald . . .” From there on, Philo’s allegorical understanding of bush and fire as signifying sufferers and their oppressors grows steadily more explicit and pronounced, with some surprising twists (the fire changes from the oppressors to the voice that condemns the oppressor and back again). However, notwithstanding this apparent division of labour, it would be difficult to draw a sharp line of demarcation between “rewritten Bible” and “commentary” here.

Can we presume that the initial rewritten scripture (§§65–66) upon which Philo comments was one that he himself created (perhaps for the very purposes of providing a base for his commentary), rather than a version of the scriptural narrative that he inherited from his predecessors or that circulated in his time among Alexandrian Jews? We may ask more broadly, can we presume that extant texts of rewritten scripture are the exegetical products of their authors alone in direct response to Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*, as it were), and not the creative incorporation of Scripture and tradition (as Philo himself avers¹⁴)? In this case we are at a disadvantage since we have, as previously noted, so little evidence of interpretations of the burning bush either prior to or contemporaneous with Philo.

13 I would move the closing quotes to the end of the previous sentence ending with “learn wisdom.”

14 See above at n. 4.

Our only other example of a rewritten version of the story from around Philo's time is that found in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2.264–268, which I shall not cite here. In that passage we find several elements of Josephus's retelling that are common to Philo's: 1. Moses chooses to pasture his father-in-law's sheep by Mt. H. oreb because of the abundant herbage there (§§264–65). Josephus also notes that the “fire found a tongue” (§267), but without going on at length, as does Philo, about the “miracle of sight.” Most significant perhaps is Josephus's portrayal of the voice from the fire as predicting (heralding) the future (§268). However, for Josephus that future is the “glory and honour that [Moses] would win from men under God's auspices.” Thus, while the two retellings share several important elements, they are of a rather mundane sort. Josephus's retelling, while lengthier than Philo's does not provide the basis for a similarly soaring commentary. Nevertheless, the comparison enables us to see how particularly “Philonic” is Philo's retelling of the burning bush narrative, being not the end of his process of interpretation, but only the first step of several, in a sense the staging area for his allegorical commentary.

From this (admittedly brief) example, of which there are others, especially in Philo's *Life of Moses*, we might ask whether “rewritten Bible,” in its other shapes and contexts is the end of an exegetical process, its beginning, or something in between. As Gregory Sterling says of Philo's Exposition of the Law, of which the passage that we examined may be considered an acute example, “His standard handling of the text is to summarize the account and to comment on his summary . . . Philo appropriated the tradition of rewriting the text in the Exposition but used it as a technique within the commentary tradition.”¹⁵ Thus, as important and useful as the distinction between “rewritten Bible” and “(allegorical) commentary” is, we should not allow that distinction to conceal the ways in which they are intersecting partners in the multifaceted dynamics of ancient scriptural interpretation.

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15 See above, n. 3.

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