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Philo's Allegorization of Hagar:
Its Fate among Fathers and Feminists

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Remembering Philo

As has often been noted, the works of Philo, a Jewish philosopher and biblical commentator who flourished during the first half of the first century, were preserved not by Jews, but by Christians.¹ Later patristic writers both within and beyond his native city of Alexandria found in Philo a compelling example—and sometimes a suitable foil—for their own attempts to understand and teach various Septuagintal passages. The worth of Philo's writings for ancient Christian thinkers is evidenced by the great quantity of his corpus that survives, including multiple works explicating the Pentateuch, several topical treatises, and numerous fragments preserved in catenae and florilegia.²

¹ David Runia, "Philo and the Early Christian Fathers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210.

² For the transmission history of manuscripts in Greek, Latin, and Armenian, see David Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 16–31. For an overview of the Philonic corpus arranged by genre, see James R. Royse, "The Works of Philo," in *Cambridge Companion*, 32–64. Many of Philo's works are available in English (with facing Greek) in ten volumes and two supplements of the Loeb Classical Library published by Harvard University Press. An accessible but dated one-volume translation by C. D. Yonge (1812–1892) is *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

In recent decades, modern scholars have likewise exhibited substantial interest in Philo's oeuvre, primarily as a resource for understanding diverse aspects of antiquity, from Jewish and Hellenic identity formation to textual criticism and habits of scripture reading in the ancient synagogue.³ Ellen Birnbaum detailed the initial stages of this renewed attention in her 2006 article "Two Millenia Later: General Resources and Particular Perspectives on Philo the Jew," highlighting the increased production of print and electronic resources as well as a growing focus on Philo among those studying Second Temple and Diaspora Judaism.⁴ Since 2006, these trends have only intensified, with the publication of the *Studia Philonica Annual* now reaching its thirtieth year, the ongoing mapping of the field via David Runia's bibliographic work,⁵ and the pending release of several new volumes in Brill's *Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series* constituting just a few notable developments.⁶

³ For instance, the book description for Mireille Hadas-Lebel and Robyn Fréchet's *Philo of Alexandria: A Thinker in the Jewish Diaspora* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2012) locates Philo "at the crossroads of Judaism and Hellenism." Gert J. Steyn examines Philo's biblical quotation in "The Text Form of LXX Genesis 28:12 by Philo of Alexandria and in the Jesus-Logion of John 1:51," *In die Skriflig* 49.2: e1-e7, and Michael Graves adduces evidence from Philo in "The Public Reading of Scripture in Early Judaism," *JETS* 50, no. 3 (2007): 467-87.

⁴ Ellen Birnbaum, "Two Millennia Later: General Resources and Particular Perspectives on Philo the Jew." *Currents in Biblical Research* 4, no. 2 (2006): 241. Birnbaum traces the recent revival of interest in Philo among Jewish scholars to nineteenth-century Germany, where German Jews began looking to Alexandrian Judaism for models of Diaspora living.

⁵ See David Runia's *Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography 1997-2006 with addenda for 1987-1996* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and subsequent editions of the *Studia Philonica Annual*, also published by Brill.

⁶ For an overview of this series, see <https://brill.com/view/serial/PACS>. A list of planned volumes is included on Yale Divinity School's website at

One element of Philo's biblical commentary that has attracted the attention of both ancient and modern readers is his teaching regarding Hagar, whose story is told in Genesis 16 and 21.⁷ The church fathers exhibit interest in Philo's approach to Hagar for two primary reasons. The first is that Philo frequently employs *allegorēsis* when explaining Hagar's significance.⁸ Ancient Christian exegetes held varying opinions about the methodological suitability of allegorical interpretation, with some vociferously supporting it and others avoiding it except in a few cases explicitly legitimized by the New Testament. One focal point of this debate was Paul's discussion of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4, where he describes the details recorded in Genesis as "allegorical" (*ἀλληγορούμενα*), the only time this term is used in the New Testament.⁹ Though Philo and Paul diverge in the details of their allegorization, both are remembered by later exegetes who are wrestling with the biblical narrative itself as well as the suitability of allegory for reading scripture within the church. Additionally, a second reason the fathers perpetuate Philo's interpretations of Hagar concerns the way he defines the allegorical reference of the term "Hagar"; Philo associates

<https://divinity.yale.edu/lifelong-learning/philo-alexandria/related-projects/philo-alexandria-commentary-series>.

⁷ Hagar is not mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, though the Hagrites appear in 1 Chr 5:19, 21 and Ps 83:6. Gal 4:25, discussed below, contains the only explicit reference to Hagar in the New Testament.

⁸ As detailed below (see note 30), his interpretation of Hagar is often but not *exclusively* allegorical.

⁹ Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 86. For a distinction between Palestinian (Pauline) and Alexandrian (Philonic) allegory, see Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). R. P. C. Hanson, in *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1959), further distinguishes between Palestinian, Alexandrian, and Hellenistic allegory, 63ff.

Hagar with a course of preliminary studies (μέση παιδεία¹⁰ and τα ἐγκύκλια¹¹) and Sarah with wisdom (σοφία),¹² or a life of virtue (ἀρήτη).¹³ This interpretive move situates the Genesis narratives in relation to ancient instruction on the progress of the soul and addresses a question perennially pertinent to Christian teaching: if biblical wisdom is the highest good, then what is the value of other kinds of study (such as basic literacy training or general education¹⁴) that precede it? Miyako Demura identifies this Sarah-Hagar motif “as one of the most important themes in Alexandrian exegetical tradition,”¹⁵ and Albert Henrichs traces the medieval Christian commonplace *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, philosophy is the handmaiden of theology, to Philo’s exposition of Hagar and Sarah.¹⁶ Thus, many church fathers adopt and

¹⁰ *Congr.* 12.

¹¹ *Congr.* 79.

¹² *Congr.* 79.

¹³ *Congr.* 11–12.

¹⁴ The semantic range of the term “*encyklios paideia*” and synonyms in Philo’s usage is a matter of some debate. For a review of relevant literature, see L. M. de Rijk, “‘Enkyklios Paideia’: A Study of Its Original Meaning,” *Vivarium: A Journal for Medieval and Early-Modern Philosophy and Intellectual Life* 3 (1965): 24–93, and Abraham P. Bos, “Hagar and the *Enkyklios Paideia* in Philo of Alexandria,” in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds J. van Ruiten, Hendrik van Beurt, and Martin Goodman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 163–75.

¹⁵ Miyako Demura, “Origen and the Exegetical Tradition of the Sarah-Hagar Motif in Alexandria,” *Studia Patristica* 56 (2013): 73.

¹⁶ Albert Henrichs, “Philosophy, the Handmaiden of Theology,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9, no. 4 (2003): 437–50. This topic is further explored in Hent de Vries, “*Philosophia Ancilla Theologiae*: Allegory and Ascension in Philo’s *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies (De Congressu Quarendae Eruditionis Gratia)*,” trans. Jack Ben-Levi, *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5, no. 3 (2009): 41.1–41.19. Wendy Hellerman, in chapter two of *The Feminine Personification of Wisdom: A Study of Homer’s Penelope, Cappadocian Macrina, Boethius’ Philosophia, and Dante’s Beatrice* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin

adapt Philo's interpretations due to their apparent relevance to the intellectual and theological debates of their day.

More recently, Philo's depictions of Hagar have garnered attention as part of a wider reassessment of the interpretive fate of various female figures in the Bible.¹⁷ Following Phyllis Trible's groundbreaking *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984), which highlighted how Hagar was "victimized by her mistress,"¹⁸ scholars have reread the biblical narratives themselves as well as the history of their interpretation (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in light of the insights of feminist, postcolonial, and critical theory.¹⁹ Those who arrive at Philo via this pathway often note two features of his presentation of Hagar. First, like the fathers, they evaluate the

Mellen Press, 2009), discusses precursors to Philo's exegesis in the writings of Bion (ca. 325–255 BCE), Aristippus (ca. 435–350 BCE), and Ariston (fl. 250 BCE), all of whom compare students who are preoccupied by preliminary studies and do not ascend to the study of philosophy to suitors of Penelope, Odysseus's wife, who never court her because they are consorting with her handmaidens.

¹⁷ For an in-depth summary of twentieth-century feminist scholarship on Hagar, see John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18–24. Anna Fisk provides extensive analysis of recent feminist and womanist scholarship on Hagar in "Sisterhood in the Wilderness: Biblical Paradigms and Feminist Identity Politics in Readings of Hagar and Sarah," in *Looking through a Glass Bible: Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 113–37.

¹⁸ W. Elgersma Helleman, "Augustine and Philo of Alexandria's 'Sarah' as a Wisdom Figure," *Studia Patristica* 70, ed. Markus Vinzent (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 107.

¹⁹ Justin M. Rogers notes the feminist and postcolonial focus on Hagar in "The Philonic and the Pauline: Hagar and Sarah in the Exegesis of Didymus the Blind," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 26 (2014): 57. See also relevant bibliography in Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 62–69.

legitimacy of his allegorizing. As detailed below, some regard allegorical interpretation as *de facto* avoidance of the moral implications of Hagar’s story, while others tacitly accept or actively embrace *allegorēsis* as a productive and ethical method of reading. Second, these researchers often focus on how Philo depicts the relationship between the terms of his allegory, that is, between Hagar and Sarah. Whereas exegetes such as Paul²⁰ or Augustine²¹ set up a firm antithesis between Hagar, who is to be rejected or discarded, and Sarah, who is to be emulated or exalted, Philo usually presents Hagar and Sarah as existing on a continuum, such that one who wants to bear children with Sarah (i.e., attain virtue) must necessarily first bear children with Hagar (i.e., acquire preparatory education).²² Philo’s evaluative stance vis-à-vis Hagar is notable for those who, in the words of Lynn Gottlieb, regard Sarah and Hagar as the “first matriarchs of the Jewish and Muslim peoples,” who may be viewed as “sisters sharing a common bond”²³ and thus regarded as potential models for

²⁰ Letty M. Russell, “Twists and Turns in Paul’s Allegory,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 72: “Paul does not help us move away from the conflict and enmity between the two women, but instead moves straight into it with an allegory that represents the two women as opposing covenants of law and promise.”

²¹ For further discussion, see Helleman, “Augustine and Philo,” 110–11, and the section on “Augustine’s Use of the Hagar, Sarah Story” in Elizabeth A. Clark, “Interpretive Fate amid the Church Fathers,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 136–43.

²² Amir Yehoshua, “Transference of Greek Allegories to Biblical Motifs,” in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, eds. Frederick E. Greenspahn, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984) 15–25: “In Philo, for the first time maiden and mistress do not stand in irreconcilable enmity to each other, but rather the maiden serves the mistress” (18).

²³ Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1995), 88–90.

cooperative, rather than conflictual, interaction between adherents to what are often called the “Abrahamic” faiths.²⁴ Philo’s distinctive treatment of the mutual worth of Hagar and Sarah is useful for those seeking to reimagine the social and spiritual connections between groups historically in opposition.

As the brief survey above indicates, ancient and modern scholars revisit Philo’s discussions of Hagar for varying reasons and with differing expectations. In addition, they often focus on divergent elements of his allegorizing: certain fathers attend to the *reference* of terms in his allegory (such that “Hagar” refers to “preliminary studies,” Sarah to “virtue,” and so on), and several scholars in conversation with feminist theory focus on the *relation* of terms, that is, his depiction of Hagar and Sarah as complementary rather than antithetical. However, despite these significant differences, the groups share an overarching question that shapes their assessments of Philo, namely, what constitutes ethical engagement with the biblical figure of Hagar? Their mutual focus on the pragmatics of biblical interpretation—on the likely *effects* of Philo’s allegorization of Hagar, as distinct from Philo’s *accuracy* in accounting for the meaning, or semantics, of the wording of Genesis²⁵—informs their arguments about the worth and relevance of Philo’s teaching.

²⁴ For instance, in “Unto the Thousandth Generation,” the opening chapter of *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell provide evidence that “most contemporary studies of the three faiths keep the traditional focus on Abraham” and propose that a more promising way forward is to “study...the women Hagar and Sarah” rather than “stressing the putative unity located in Abraham” (1, 26n1).

²⁵ For an overview of semantics and pragmatics as fields of linguistic study, see chapters 17 and 21, respectively, of David Crystal’s *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For extended discussion of the scope of pragmatics, with examples throughout, see Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). An application of the

The Figure of Hagar

Before proceeding to analyze the ethical concerns of these groups more fully, I will first offer a brief overview of Philo's engagement with the biblical figure of Hagar. My use of the term "figure" here is deliberately multivalent, because in literary studies, a "figure" may be a person (as in, "she is an important figure," where "she" refers to a human being) or a representative of something else (Merriam Webster cites for this usage the King James Version of Romans 5:14: "Adam . . . who is a *figure* of things to come"²⁶). These two senses of the term correspond with Philo's understanding of the word "Hagar" as both referring to a woman and symbolizing various teachings about the progress of the soul.²⁷ He interprets other biblical figures similarly, describing the double signification of the Abraham narratives as follows: "The actual words of the [Genesis] story are an encomium on Abraham as a man; but, according to those who proceed from the literal to the spiritual, characters of soul are indicated also, and therefore it will be well to investigate them too."²⁸ This search for

insights of pragmatics to biblical exegesis is provided by Gene Green in "Lexical Pragmatics and Biblical Interpretation," *JETS* 50, no. 4 (2007): 799–812.

²⁶ "Figure," Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/figure.

²⁷ On these appearances of dual interpretations of Hagar in the works of Philo, see Henrichs, "Philosophy," 440, and Judith Romney Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women—Hebraic or Hellenic?" in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1991), 55.

²⁸ *Abr.* 217.

multiple levels of meaning is characteristic of expert readers trained in the Alexandrian milieu.²⁹

Following this schema, Philo comments on both the historical and the allegorical Hagar in a number of his works. In the *Questions and Answers in Genesis*, for example, he habitually addresses first the literal and then the allegorical sense of the wording of Genesis 16.³⁰ Philo gives Hagar more than a passing consideration: in comparison with other Jewish commentators in antiquity, Philo “pays the most attention to Hagar,”³¹ mentioning her name twenty-seven times across nine works extant in Greek, and also in the *Questions*, preserved in Armenian. In *On Abraham*, as well, Hagar is alluded to, though not named, as part of an extended soliloquy Philo attributes to Sarah as she articulates why she has urged Abraham to seek an heir through her handmaiden (Greek: δούλῃν).³² In several instances, Philo’s references to Hagar are abbreviated, but he also offers sustained commentary in works such as *De Congressu*, in which the narrative in Genesis 16:1-6 provides the organizing frame for the entire work.³³

²⁹ For classic accounts of Alexandrian hermeneutics, see David Dawson’s *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991) or Frances Young’s *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Young revisits the relationship between Alexandrian and Antiochene biblical interpretation in “Traditions of Exegesis,” *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, eds. J. Carleton Paget and J. Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 734–51.

³⁰ *QG* 2.13–38.

³¹ Adele Reinhartz and Miriam Walfish, “Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 104.

³² *Abr.* 247–254.

³³ *The Philo Index: A Complete Greek Word Index to the Writings of Philo of Alexandria* by Peder Borgen, Kåre Fuglseth, and Roald Skarsten (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) cites the following mentions of Hagar in the Greek manuscripts: *Leg.* 3:244; *Cher.* 3, 6,

Though Philo values both the historical and allegorical senses of scripture,³⁴ he often favors the latter when discussing Hagar. For instance, at the end of *De Congressu*, Philo epitomizes his allegorical approach as follows:

When, then, you hear of Hagar as afflicted or evil-entreated by Sarah, do not suppose that you have here one of the usual accompaniments of women's jealousy. It is not women that are spoken of here; it is minds [διάνοια]—on the one hand the mind which exercises itself in the preliminary learning, on the other, the mind which strives to win the palm of virtue and ceases not until it is won.³⁵

Hagar and Sarah are just two of the many biblical figures Philo perceives as part of an overarching allegory of the education of the soul. He expands on this theme at length in works such as *De Congressu*, *On the Creation* (Gen 1), the three books of *Allegorical Interpretation* (Gen 2–3, with excursions into other portions of the Pentateuch), *On Abraham* (Gen 5–26), *On the Migration of Abraham* (Genesis 12:1–3, 6), *On Joseph* (Gen 37–47), and the second book of *On Moses* (selections from

8; *Sacr.* 43, 43; *Post.* 130, 130, 137; *Sobr.* 8; *Congr.* 1, 11, 20, 23, 23, 24, 71, 88, 121, 122, 139, 180; *Fug.* 2, 5, 202; *Mut.* 255; *Somn.* 1:240. See also *QC* 2.13–38 and *Abr.* 247–254.

³⁴ This is noted by Dorothy Sly in *Philo's Perception of Women* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 216, 218. For a related analysis of Philo's literal and allegorical interpretations of the figure of Sarah, see Maren R. Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden, Sister and Spouse: Sarah in Philonic Midrash," *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (2004): 413–44. Niehoff argues that previous studies of Philo that depict him as "writ[ing] women out of the traditions and history of his people" are based on selective reading of his works and expands analysis to *Abr.* as well as the more customarily read *QG* and *Leg.*, 414–415.

³⁵ *Congr.* 180.

Exod–Deut). In every case, he invites his readers to approach the Pentateuch as a book that teaches them about historical figures, but also as one that speaks figurally about how to live in the present: in particular, about how to nurture and discipline their souls so as to attain the heights of virtue. For Philo, allegorical interpretation is what enables readers to understand scripture in this way.

Philo's Allegorical Method

Because *allegorēsis* is featured so prominently in Philo's depictions of Hagar, later readers who cite Philo must wrestle with its suitability as a mode of reading scripture in general as well as its application in this particular instance. In both patristic and feminist contexts, critiques of allegory abound, as do defenses of its viability, and even necessity, for Christian engagement with scripture.³⁶ Those who approve and those who disparage Philo's allegorizing are not merely concerned with whether or not he has interpreted the Hagar narratives correctly according to historical, linguistic, or literary criteria, but also with the potential of his allegorical reading to encourage or hinder moral behavior. Thus, many of their claims about Philo's allegorization of Hagar are also claims about what constitutes ethical engagement with scripture.

This can be seen, first, by considering just two of the many critiques of allegory that emerge from patristic and feminist quarters. On the one hand, ancient teachers such as Eustathius of Antioch, Diodore of Tarsus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia resist allegory because,

³⁶ Jason Byassee provides an incisive overview of recent support for allegorical interpretation in "The Return to Allegory Movement," chapter two in his *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 9–53.

in their view, it enables undisciplined *eisegesis*, or reading meanings *into* the narrative.³⁷ When Theodore comments on Galatians 4:24, for example, he mocks those who “suppose that everything must be tossed into allegory,”³⁸ as though this method of reading encourages arbitrary or ad hoc interpretation. But as Hauna Ondrey has argued, Theodore here is not so much concerned about “any and every” meaning being imported into scripture, as about certain very specific Origenist views, which Theodore regards as heretical, being legitimized. In other words, Theodore is not arguing about “method for method’s sake,”³⁹ but is fencing against a method of reading *and its effects*, which might harm to the reader by enticing him to heresy.

On the other hand, various scholars engaged in feminist-influenced reassessments of Philo’s treatment of Hagar equate his allegorization with a failure to address the moral implications of Genesis. Reinhartz and Walfish set up the contrast this way:

Philo does not attach great importance to Hagar as an individual or as a character in a biblical story, nor does he show much concern for the moral issues raised by Genesis 16 and 21. *Rather*, he

³⁷ Hauna Ondrey identifies this as one of two concerns shared by these teachers. The other is that since allegorical reading was typically applied to fiction, its use implied that scripture was fiction (*The Minor Prophets as Christian Scripture in the Commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 24–25).

³⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Galatians* 83. The Latin reads: *illorum qui uniuersa in allegoriam iactanda esse existimant*. *Theodore of Mopsuestia: The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, trans. and ed. Rowan Greer (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 124–25.

³⁹ Ondrey, *Minor Prophets*, 25.

treats Hagar solely as an element in his thorough allegorical interpretation of Genesis.⁴⁰

Elizabeth Clark characterizes patristic interpretations of Hagar similarly: “When the Fathers do refer to Hagar, it is as a symbol. . . . Nowhere does she seem to be a character for whom sympathy might be shown, a character who all too well recalls the plight of homeless, destitute, abandoned, and mistreated women.”⁴¹ These statements imply that the primary “moral issues” signaled in Genesis are the use and abuse of Hagar at the hands of Abraham and Sarah, and/or the representation of God or the narrator as perpetuators of patriarchy.⁴² Many of those “who approach the text with a concern to emphasize the plight of the oppressed—such as liberation, feminist, African-American, and postcolonial interpreters”⁴³—express concern that the *effects* of cursory engagement with Hagar’s experience as human, woman, slave, Egyptian, and/or mother will necessarily involve “the domination of women and of all groups considered inferior because of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and the like.”⁴⁴ Their resistance to allegorization is linked to their resistance to the perceived effects of allegory on readers’ actions and attitudes.

⁴⁰ Reinhartz and Walfish, “Conflict and Coexistence,” 104, emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Clark, “Interpretive Fate,” 143.

⁴² Fisk, “Sisterhood,” 123–24, cites as an exemplar of this view Esther Fuchs, “The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴³ Fisk, “Sisterhood,” 115.

⁴⁴ Letty M. Russell, “Children of Struggle,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 186.

A shared concern about the ethics or effects of interpretation can be seen, second, among proponents of allegory. Philo and many others who employed Alexandrian techniques of literary criticism regarded *allegorēsis* as a way to address perceived moral difficulties in the scriptural text, and thus a way to ensure that readers did not take the *wrong* moral message from biblical narratives.⁴⁵ Problematic features of this passage cited by various fathers include the apparent endorsement of adultery/polygamy by Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar as well as Sarah's jealousy of and harshness toward Hagar.⁴⁶ According to Ambrose of Milan, who relies so heavily on Philo that the nineteenth-century scholar J. B. Aucher referred to him as *Philo Christianus*,⁴⁷ these are not actions that later readers should emulate.⁴⁸ Instead, to Ambrose and others trained in allegorical interpretation, the presence of these details in Genesis suggests that faithful readers should look beyond the historical sense in order to discover the full extent of this passage's

⁴⁵ As Hent de Vries concludes, "Allegory arises from the theological need to conceive of a higher meaning behind whatever may seem offensive," 41.14. Other attributes of scripture that may prompt allegorical interpretation include its status as divine discourse, which some ancients associate with its polysemy, and the presence of any infelicity such that the passage seems "'absurd,' 'impossible,' 'morally noxious,' or 'in contradiction' (with another passage)," as discussed by Adam Kamesar in "Biblical Interpretation in Philo," *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65–91, quote on page 78.

⁴⁶ On the former, see Henrichs, "Philosophy," 439–40, citing *De Congr.* 12. On the latter, see Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 429, citing *Fug.* 1–6, *Cong.* 139–140, 180, and *QG* 3.25. Niehoff observes, "It is striking that the texts . . . Philo reads allegorically are almost exclusively verses that he ignored in his literal exegesis . . . Sarah's jealousy and maltreatment of Hagar are treated only in Philo's allegories, and tactfully omitted from the *Life of Abraham*," (429).

⁴⁷ Runia, *Philo*, 292.

⁴⁸ *On Abraham* 1.28.

divine teaching.⁴⁹ In this construal, allegory is not only a turning away from what is morally objectionable on one level of the narrative, but also a turning toward what the narrative teaches on another level about “the progression and appearance of virtue.”⁵⁰ For instance, Ambrose interprets the fact that Abraham had to bear children with Hagar before doing so with Sarah as indicating that the full acquisition of virtue takes persistent discipline over time. He also notes that, just as Sarah could not bear children according to her own desire or timing, people cannot acquire virtue whenever they please, but must rely on God’s mercy and provision.⁵¹ Another supporter of allegory, Clement of Alexandria, cites Philo’s allegorical interpretation of Hagar in support of the claims that “he . . . who has received previous training is at liberty to approach wisdom” and that “wisdom can be acquired through instruction”⁵² (as opposed to being inherited or natural). In these instances, Ambrose and Clement recommend and use allegory in order to protect readers from interpretations of scripture they regard as potential enticements to sin—and to urge them on in their pursuit of moral excellence.

Finally, among modern researchers engaging with feminist theory, John L. Thompson exhibits an appreciative approach to allegory while still attending to the potential effects of allegorical interpretation on the perspectives of later readers. Thompson

⁴⁹ Ambrose also affirms the historical sense, especially in the first half of *On Abraham*, where he draws conclusions about marriage and adultery. For discussion, see Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose’s Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 51–53.

⁵⁰ *On Abraham* 2.1.

⁵¹ *On Abraham* 2.74–75.

⁵² *Stromateis* 1.5.

accomplishes this by distinguishing Philo's use of the allegorical method from the nature of his opinions about Hagar as a person, thus calling into question the equation of the allegorical method with morally suspect exegesis.⁵³ Thompson says:

[O]ne may also argue that Philo's own intention and usage did not necessarily determine the later reception of his words. That is to say, Philo himself may well have had a low opinion of the "real" Hagar (thought, perhaps significantly, he does not comment). *Yet the equanimity with which he often treated the allegorical Hagar may still have had an ameliorating effect on how the literal Hagar was later perceived.* In any case, on the allegorical level, Philo clearly had no problem reading and even redirecting the biblical narrative so as to portray Hagar in a relatively flattering light.⁵⁴

This statement entails at least two relevant claims: first, that Philo's use of allegory has no necessary relationship with his view of the "real" Hagar, and second, that Philo's use of allegory is just as likely to have encouraged "sympathetic" or appreciative approaches to the historical Hagar as it is to have discouraged them.⁵⁵ Maren Niehoff offers a similar appraisal of Philo's allegorization of the figure of Sarah, asserting that although "Philo certainly was a conservative who did

⁵³ Here, Thompson is in dialogue with the position stated above that, if Philo does not demonstrate sympathy for the historical Hagar's plight, then his interpretations are potentially harmful.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 27, emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ The language of "sympathy" for Hagar and the association of sympathy with ethical interpretation is common in feminist-influenced scholarship. For instance, it appears in the quote from Clark cited above (n41); Thompson argues that Philo "is clearly capable of portraying Hagar sympathetically" despite his acceptance of "patriarchal values" (*Writing the Wrongs*, 26–27).

not challenge prevalent patriarchal structures,” his allegorical interpretations reveal that “he is willing to idealize Sarah as the personification of masculinity who enjoys the closest ties to God.”⁵⁶ Niehoff and Thompson express reservations about allegorization but also acknowledge its potential for effecting morally acceptable attitudes and actions; they reject the claim that all use of allegory necessarily has negative moral consequences.

Thus, ancient and modern adjudicators of Philo’s allegorization advance numerous arguments about the hazards and benefits of the allegorical method. They disagree over the potential of the method to evoke or deter moral action. What these groups share, however, is a tendency to assess the value of allegory in general or its use in a particular instance in light of the effect it has on later readers: in other words, they focus on what speech act theorists call the “perlocutionary force” of the allegorization.⁵⁷ Insofar as Philo’s use of allegory provides what they regard as a helpful way forward (i.e., if it helps them read scripture as an instruction manual for virtue or to appreciate the moral complexities of Hagar’s experience), they approve it. Insofar as Philo’s allegorization is perceived as giving license to heretics or perpetuating immoral behavior, they criticize it. This ostensible debate about the allegorical method is also a debate about what constitutes moral action and ethical interpretation.

⁵⁶ Niehoff, “Mother and Maiden,” 444.

⁵⁷ See chs. 8–9 of J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, 1975) for further description of the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary elements of speech acts.

A Conversation among Fathers and Feminists

In sum, Philo's allegorization of Hagar has been a focal point of analysis for many readers across the ages, including those conversant with ancient Alexandrian study culture and contemporary feminist biblical criticism. These readers demonstrate a range of responses to Philo's teaching on Hagar: some reject, modify, or qualify his exegesis, while others embrace, extend, or merely record it. In their evaluation of Philo's contribution to the exegetical tradition, they are far from univocal.

At the same time, one characteristic these diverse readers hold in common is their focus on the ethics of biblical interpretation. When they evaluate the worth and relevance of Philo's *allegorēsis*, they do so not only on semantic or philological grounds (could "Hagar" mean "preliminary studies"? does this reading accord with authorial intent?) but also in light of its pragmatics (how will interpreting "Hagar" in this way encourage or inhibit moral action?). For these readers, the fate of Philo's allegorization of Hagar is a function not only of what Philo says about Hagar, but also of what he *does* in the act of expositing the Bible—and of what his interpretations may inspire others to do.

This unity of focus situates fathers and feminists as cross-cultural dialogue partners who are mutually concerned with the definition and limits of ethical interpretation. As such, they illustrate how different study cultures can provide unique yet complementary vantage points on a common method of textual evaluation. Contemporary assessments of Philo's allegory would do well not only to consider the pragmatic approach highlighted by these two groups, but also to examine how other interpreters separated by time, space, and culture might combine to illuminate new avenues for exploration.