AN UNKNOWN LIGHT ENLIGHTENED
On an Enigmatic Passage
in Philo of Alexandria (QG 3,18)

In his treatment of the question why Sarah did not bear children to Abraham (QG 3,18), Philo makes three allegorical comments. First of all, begetting is an activity that is typical of the male, virtuous soul. Secondly, one may admit that even the bad begets, but contrary to the virtuous man, who begets good things, the bad man begets dirty, shameful and useless things. The third point should be quoted in full:

> And the third (point) is that he who has progressed even to the very end is near to what is called by some the forgotten and unknown light. This progressive man does not beget vices nor virtues either, since he is not yet complete, but he is the same as one who is not ill and (yet) not altogether well in body, but is now coming back from a long illness to health. (translation R. Marcus)

The second part of this section, which contains the point Philo really wants to make, does not raise any problem: the προκόπτων does not beget vices, nor virtues. This is the situation of Abraham's personal virtue at that moment (Sarai not yet having become the generic Sarah[1]).

The first part of the quotation, however, remains rather unclear: what should be understood by this so-called forgotten and unknown light? In a note, Marcus points out that the text is obscure, and refers to an explanation of the Armenian glossator: "he who is alienated from sin has made a beginning of virtue; of this some say that such a man is near the unknown light, which he formerly knew, but strayed from through sin, and now has come back to"[2]. I think this explanation of the glos-

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1) For Philo's understanding of the names Sarai and Sarah, see, e. g., Cher. II,5–7; Congr. I–2 and II–6; Mut. XI,77–80; QG 3,53; cf. 4,122.

2) Philo. Supplement I: Questions and Answers on Genesis. Translated from the ancient Armenian Version of the original Greek by R. Marcus, London/Cambridge, Mass. 1953 (LCL), 203, note j. No explanation is given in the recent French translation of Mercier (Philon d'Alexandrie. Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesim III–IV–V–VI e versione armeniaca. Traduction et notes par Ch. Mercier, Paris 1984 [Les œuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie, 34^B]).

sator is rather misleading. It is in any case defective, as it does not identify the τινες who formulated the enigmatic doctrine and fails to explain the real meaning of the unknown light.

Perhaps, the solution can be found in the Stoic doctrine of the σοφὸς διαλεληθώς. Indeed, Philo's third allegorical comment is about the situation of a man who has progressed to the very end. This can be connected with the condition of the so-called ἐπ' ἄκρον προκόπτων in Stoicism (Stobaeus, Flor. 4,39,22 = SVF III 510). Now in Stoic doctrine, the next phase, to which the ἐπ' ἄκρον προκόπτων is indeed very close, is that of the σοφὸς διαλεληθώς: at a certain moment, the προκόπτων instantaneously changes from utter wickedness to perfect virtue[3], even though he for a while remains unconscious of this radical change[4].

The "forgotten and unknown light" in this passage might refer to the condition of the σοφὸς διαλεληθώς. The connection between light and wisdom does not cause many problems, as it returns often in Philo's works[5]. Somewhat more problematic, however, is the relation between διαλεληθώς, on the one hand, and "unknown" and "forgotten", on the other. Now one should note that in the Armenian translation, one Greek term is very often rendered by two Armenian words[6]. In this case too, the Armenian translator may have split up the term διαλεληθώς into two separate terms that together approximatively denote the Greek original[7].

Finally, one should note that Philo is familiar with this Stoic doctrine of the σοφὸς διαλεληθώς. In Agr. XXXVI,157–XXXVIII,165, he makes use of it in order to explain the Jewish law (Deut. 20,5–7) about conditions of exemption from military service, and even explicitly refers to the traditional argument "of the philoso-

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3) Cf. Plutarch, De comm. not. 1062D: ἐκ τῆς ἄκρας προκοπῆς μεταβάλλουσιν εἰς εὐδαιμονίαν καὶ ἀρετήν.

4) On this Stoic doctrine, see, e. g., Plutarch, De prof. in virt. 75D–F (= SVF III 539); De Stoic. rep. 1042F–1043A; De comm. not. 1062E; Stobaeus, Ecl. 2,7,11[n] (= SVF III 540); cf. also Seneca, Epist. 71,4 and 75,9.

5) See, e. g., Opif. XVII–53; Leg. all. III, LVIII–167; Migr. VIII,39–40; Congr. IX,47–48; Jos. XX–106; Spec. I, LII–288 (διανοίας δὲ φῶς ἐστι σοφία); III, I–6.

6) See J. Dillon/A. Terian, Philo and the Stoic doctrine of εὐπάθειαι: a note on Quaes. Gen. 2.57, StPhilon 4, 1976–1977, 18; A. Terian, Philonis Alexandrini De animalibus: The Armenian Text with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary, Chico 1981 (Studies in Hellenistic Judaism 1), 10–13.

7) Of those two Armenian terms, one still contains a reference to the Greek verb λανθάνω ("forgotten" = ἐπιλελησμένον), the other ("unknown" = ἄγνωστον or καινόν) is closer to the meaning which is required in the context. One should note that this illustrates very well the general technique of the Armenian translation; see F. Petit, L'ancienne version latine des Questions sur la Genèse de Philon d'Alexandrie, I: Edition critique, Berlin 1973 (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 113), 16: "Pour le vocabulaire, en particulier, il [sc. the Armenian translator] a adopté le procédé du doublet, voire du triplet: juxtaposition de synonymes pour rendre un seul mot grec. Le plus souvent, un des termes du doublet traduit le sens étymologique, l'autre le sens que demande le contexte; parfois aussi le traducteur accumule les diverses nuances possibles du terme original."

phers" that the arrival at the goal and the apprehension of this arrival cannot come about at the same time (Agr. XXXVII–161 = SVF III 541)[8].

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