

SLEEP

Edited
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LEVANTE EDITORI - BARI

In memory of Thomas Wiedemann
Facunde, docte, lingua et ingenio celer
(Ausonius, *Professors of Bordeaux* 5,1)

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Philo of Alexandria on Sleep

Sofía Torallas Tovar

The structure of the *de somniis* and its missing first book

Philo of Alexandria (1st century BC-1st century AD) was the author of a long series of philosophical and theological works, based on allegorical commentary on the Pentateuch. He belonged to the Jewish community of Alexandria and probably had an important political position. He developed the philosophical ideas of the Platonic and Stoic schools to create an original system applied to the interpretation of the Scriptures. In my analysis of Philo's treatise *De somniis* (*On Dreams*), I came to the following conclusions:¹

1. Philo used a three-fold classification of dreams as a frame for his treatise in three books.² This classification was probably inherited from the Stoic one by Posidonius (ap. Cicero, *Div.* 1.64),³ which divided

¹ Torallas Tovar 1995, 1997, URL1. The abbreviations for Philo's works are the standard ones used in *Les Oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie*, ed. R. Arnaldez, J. Pouilloux, C. Mondésert, Paris.

² The first of the three books which originally comprised *On Dreams* was lost at an early stage. Eusebius informs us of the existence of five books (*Historia ecclesiastica* 2.18), but the analysis of the treatise reveals that there were only three.

³ Fragments in the edition of L. Edelstein & I. G. Kidd (Cambridge, 1972, 1989), vol. I, 104-109. This classification was also inherited by other authors, such as Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3.2; Tertullian, *De anima* 47.1-3; Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* 6.

dreams into three, according to their source: God, angels or intermediate souls, the soul of the sleeper.⁴

2. He used this classification when he commented on texts from *Genesis* that included dreams. These are Jacob's dream of the ladder, of the rams and ewes, Joseph's dreams of the harvest and the stars, the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and baker, and Pharaoh's dreams of the seven ears of corn and the seven oxen.

3. Philo also established a classification of lives and souls, those of the Patriarchs, linked to the dream classification, and developed a theory on communication with God. There are three types of life: the contemplative, the active and the life of pleasure. The first one is the most excellent, in which the soul is free from passions and has reached *apatheia*. The active life is the life of the *asketes*, who struggles against the bodily passions. The third one is the soul of the man drowned in the pleasures of life. The first is represented by Isaac, the second by Jacob and Abraham, and the third by Joseph. Abraham, Jacob and Isaac constitute Philo's mystical triad.⁵ The connection of these three types of life with the structure of our treatise can be explained in Philo's own words:

The lawgiver says that virtue is gained either by nature or by practice or by learning, and has accordingly recorded the Patriarchs of the nation as three in number, all wise men. They had not at the start the same form of character, but they were all bent on reaching the same goal. Abraham, the earliest of them, had teaching as his guide on the way that leads to the good and beautiful, as we shall show to the best of our ability in another treatise. Isaac who comes between him and Jacob had as his guide a

⁴ On dreams in Philo see Petit 1974: 154-6.

⁵ In the introductory lines of the treatise *On Joseph*, Philo refers to three other treatises on the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Only the first one has survived. Philo says: 'The factors which produce consummate excellence are three in number: learning, nature, practice. And these names are represented in three of the wise men to whom Moses gives the senior place. Since I have described the lives of these three, the life which results from teaching, the life of the self-taught and the life in practice, I will carry on the series by describing a fourth life, that of the statesman'. As seen, Joseph is not on the way to excellence, but he is still in the 'material world', since he is a statesman.

nature which listens and learns from itself alone. Jacob, the third of them, relied on exercises and practisings preparatory for the strenuous toil of the arena. There being, then, three methods by which virtue accrues, it is the first and third that are most intimately connected. (*Somn.* 1.167 f.)⁶

4. Throughout his first book, Philo relates the mystical journey toward the contemplation of God, of which the phases are symbolised by Patriarchs. Abraham is the learning step: he emigrated from Chaldaea, symbol of the body, and then from Haran, the material life. Jacob is the next step, the ascetic. His soul knows where truth is, and is on its way towards it. Isaac is the most excellent. He has natural knowledge and needs no practice.

5. The whole of book II is dedicated to the explanation of life of pleasure. Joseph represents the life of the man attached to his body (he is in Egypt, symbol of the body). The dreams explained are those of Joseph, Pharaoh's butler and baker, and Pharaoh himself. These are the dreams of the irrational part of the soul, which is still attached to the body and blinded by the passions of life, and cannot see the truth at all.

DE SOMNIIS	DREAM	PATRIARCH	LIFE	GENESIS
lost book (I)	God	Isaac	contemplative	
book I (II)	angels	Jacob, Abraham	ascetic	28 and 31
book II (III)	soul	Joseph	passions	37 and 40 f.

All these factors help us to reconstruct the contents of the first book, which is lost. The central figure must be a Patriarch considered perfect by Philo and it must therefore be Isaac.⁷ Moses could also fill this place,⁸ but this is unlikely, as he does not appear until *Exodus* and the aim of Philo is a running commentary on *Genesis*.

⁶ All translations into English are from F.H. Colson & G.H. Whittaker, *Philo*, 10 vols. [Loeb Classical Library], Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1929-1971.

⁷ *Fug.* 166-8, Winston 1996: 75; Decharneux 1990: 129.

⁸ Moses is the link between God and man, while the ascetic hangs between the living and the dead. The souls of men living in passion are the dead (*Somn.* 2.187-9, 2.230).

The next step should be to find a text of *Genesis* between ch. 17 and 27 (since the treatise preceding *On Dreams*, *On the Change of Names*, comments on *Genesis* 17 and the first text commented on in the surviving two books of *On Dreams* is 27). Some scholars have thought of Abimelech's dream in *Genesis* 20,⁹ but his soul lacks the perfection required to receive a vision from God. I suggest that the text or at least one of the texts commented on in the first lost book was *Genesis* 26:

Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the Lord appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you...

This text offers good material for Philo's commentary. The only problem is that it is not a dream seen while sleeping, but an apparition, a waking vision. This means that we need to look more closely at sleep, wakefulness and ecstasy in Philo, as the states of consciousness in which dreams or visions appear.

The nature of sleep and ecstasy

Sleep and Wakefulness

We find three types of sleep, ὕπνος, in Philo:¹⁰

1. Natural sleep: necessary rest (*Spec.* 1.298); relaxation of the bodily senses (*Ebr.* 131, 200; *Spec.* 2.103).
2. The negative view, where it is identified with folly and drunkenness (*Ebr.* 204; *Sobr.* 5; *Migr.* 222).
3. The positive view, where the real senses of the soul are active and the bodily senses are asleep. The soul can depart from the world (*Spec.*

Moses is closest to God. Isaac is perfect, but he is not as close. Jacob and Abraham are struggling with their bodies, and that is why they are between life and death, because death is the body. Joseph lives in the body; thus, he is dead.

⁹ Massebieau & Cohn 1899: 387-436. This opinion appears later, among others, in Goulet 1987: 17 f..

¹⁰ On sleep in Philo see Dowden 1998: 16 f and p. 151 below.

1.298) and find itself. Acquisition of a non-sensory knowledge, access to visions (*Abr.* 70); doctrines of the sacred philosophy (*Contempl.* 26); and visions from God (*Somn.* 1.1).

And three types of wakefulness, ἐγρήγορσις:

1. Natural wakefulness as the state opposite to natural sleep (*Ebr.* 204).
2. The negative view, as the wakefulness of the bodily senses, which means the sleep of the soul's senses (*Heres* 257; *Leg.* 2.26, 30; *Somn.* 1.80).
3. The positive view of wakefulness as the opposite to the sleep of laziness. The wakefulness of the wise man that acquires knowledge (*Ebr.* 159, *Somn.* 2.160, *Jos.* 147).

Philo's conceptions of sleep and wakefulness are in my opinion in some way parallel. Both have a positive and a negative view, which are complementary. Philo's system is quite consistent. The most interesting point in this case is the paradox, sleep of the body = wakefulness of the soul, an Orphic belief already found in Pindar (fr. 131), which has older roots in the Near East.¹¹

Egyptian belief and Philo

One of Philo's metaphors concerning the sleep of the body and the wakefulness of the senses of the soul seems characteristically Egyptian in its inspiration. The Sun in the material world represents the light, which falls upon physical things and makes the stars disappear. On the other hand the Sun represents the light of our soul, which comes out when the physical Sun sets, that is at night, in the sleep of the body.¹²

In Egyptian we have the word for dream *ršwt*, which stems from the verb *rš*, 'to be awake', and is represented in hieroglyphs by the determinative of an open eye.¹³ This means that they thought of dreams as a kind of awakening in another world. This was the world of Nun, the

¹¹ Oppenheim 1956: 190.

¹² The metaphor of light appears in other authors too, such as Plutarch, *Amatorius* 764F.

¹³ E. Erman & H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* ii.452.1-4, 449.8, 451.12.

primeval ocean, where everything came from and where everybody returned after death.¹⁴ But the Sun too went into Nun every night by its setting and rose every morning in a sort of rebirth.¹⁵ Furthermore the souls of those who sleep went there every night while the body rested. In this way, the souls of men can have contact with the divine.

In Philo we repeatedly find this metaphor of the Sun:

Admirably then does he describe the inspired when he says 'about sunset there fell on him an ecstasy'. 'Sun' is his name under a figure for our mind: For what the reasoning faculty is in us, the sun is in the world, since both of them are light bringers, one sending forth to the whole world the light which our senses perceive, the other shedding mental rays upon ourselves through the medium of apprehension. (*Heres* 263)

Thus, the wakefulness of the senses means the sleep for the mind; and the wakefulness of the mind a time of leisure for the senses. Just as when the Sun has risen the lights of the other heavenly bodies are invisible; when the Sun has set, they show themselves. The mind, like the Sun, when awake throws the senses into the shade, but if it goes to sleep it causes them to shine out. (*Leg.* II 30)

In this creed Abraham had been reared, and for a long time remained a Chaldean. Then opening the soul's eye as though after profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work, assuming the charge and superintendence of that work and all such parts of it as are worthy of the divine care. (*In Abr.* 70)

¹⁴ De Buck 1939: 28-30; McAlpine 1987: 130; Gnuse 1996: 62.

¹⁵ The headrest, *wrs*, was of great importance for the sleeper. It raises the head, which is the seat of life. It was also used to raise the head of the dead King, as an indispensable item for his resurrection. Some headrests have a symbol of the horizon on their foot, as establishing a connection between the rising Sun and the raising of the head in sleep. See Parlebas 1982: 20 f.

Ecstasy

The next step will be to explore the most excellent of the states of mind in Philo: ecstasy.¹⁶ In the treatise *Who is the Heir of Divine Things?* Philo gives us a very complete survey of the four types of ecstasy (*Heres* 249-66):

1. The negative view (249, 250), where it is compared to folly, old age, drunkenness (*Plant.* 147; *Ebr.* 15, 116; *Contempl.* 40; *Cher.* 67) and disease (*Spec.* 3.99). An example is *Deuteronomy* 28.28 f.
2. Ecstasy as astonishment, ἐκπληξίς (249, 251). This is the case in *Genesis* 27.33, 45.26, *Exodus* 19.18; *Leviticus* 9.24.
3. Adam's ecstasy (*Genesis* 2.21), which is tranquillity/inactivity of the intelligence (ἡρεμία διανοίας, 249), sleep of the mind (ὑπνος νοῦ, ἡσυχία καὶ ἡρεμία τοῦ νοῦ, 257). In the creation of woman, who is the irrational element, Adam's reason has to be asleep.¹⁷
4. The true ecstasy, the prophetic ecstasy, divine possession or inspiration (258). It is the state only acquired by true prophets and wise and virtuous men. The Divine Spirit replaces the human mind. It comes from God's initiative and man is his instrument of revelation.

Passive and Active Ecstasy

The first two types of ecstasy are not relevant for Divine Communication, because they are only metaphorical. I therefore only consider the third and fourth types.

Some scholars (Winston 1989: 46-67; 1990: 12-19; Levison 1994: 83-9) have recently suggested that there were two kinds of ecstasy for Philo: one of them ecstatic inspiration and the other hermeneutic inspiration. The first one implies that the mind of the inspired becomes passive and he himself becomes an instrument or a medium for the divine message. This is the definition that Philo gives for the first kind of ecstasy (*Heres* 264-6):

¹⁶ On *sobria ebrietas* and ecstasy in Philo, Winston 1996: 74 f., Decharneux 1990: 123-133, and more below.

¹⁷ This is also discussed at *Leg.* 2.31; *Quaest. Gen.* 1.24.

... a trance which proceeds from inspiration, takes violently hold of us, and madness seizes upon us, for when the divine light sets this other rises and shines... The mind that is in us is removed from its place at the arrival of the Divine Spirit, but is again restored to its previous habitation when that Spirit departs, for it is contrary to holy law for what is mortal to dwell with what is immortal.

This kind of inspiration is found repeatedly in Plato.¹⁸

The second type of ecstasy is more restrained.¹⁹ The soul is inherently prophetic, and by relaxing the rational element, it can receive inspiration without displacement of the mind. But the mind must be active and awake to receive the vision.

Adam's ecstasy, or sleep of reason, is the passive kind of ecstasy, while the ecstasy of wise and holy men like Noah, Abraham, Isaac is the prophetic one. Although Philo says that their mind must be displaced, there is a prerequisite for their having these visions, namely that their souls must be perfect. In this way they are capable of receiving and understanding messages from God. This double conception of this type of ecstasy may be due to Philo's dependence both on Jewish belief, which understands the human being as a whole, and on Greek beliefs about the soul detached from the body.

Sleep and Ecstasy

We see a parallel approach to sleep and ecstasy in Philo's works. This is how the classification of the types of ecstasy can be related to the types of sleep (obviously setting aside sleep as a natural phenomenon):

1. Sleep as folly and drunkenness is the first type of ecstasy.
2. The second type of ecstasy, astonishment, does not have a parallel type of sleep.
3. Adam's ecstasy is a trance in sleep.
4. Prophetic ecstasy can be compared to the positive view of sleep: the awakening of the soul.

¹⁸ *Phaedr.* 244a-245c, *Tim.* 71e, *Apol.* 22c, *Meno* 99c, *Ion* 543c.

¹⁹ Winston 1990: 26 finds it in Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum* 413b-438.

Sources of, and parallels to, Philo's system

The Old Testament

In the Old Testament we find a clear distinction between sleep and ecstasy, as well as a distinction between false and true prophets. Samuel, Balaam, and Nathan are true prophets. Miller (1990: 401-4) thinks the distinction that is made is between dream and vision: true prophets have visions in the night, false prophets have dreams. But in *Jeremiah* 23.25-32, true prophets have true dreams and false prophets have false dreams. In *Numbers* 12.6, God says that he appears to the prophets in visions and he talks to them in dreams.²⁰

There is a double conception of dreams as illusions and as divine messages, and sleep as a positive and a negative phenomenon. This is an idea which continues in Rabbinic literature. Although Philo's system depends mainly on Greek thought, it is difficult to think that an author so connected to the Jewish world, whose work is a commentary on Biblical texts, has not been influenced by them. And in fact we find clear reflections of Biblical belief in his theory of ecstasy.

*Plato*²¹

In Plato we find a number of different texts illustrating his concept of sleep: (1) as a natural phenomenon in *Prot.* 310d; (2) as a state of confusion in *Theaet.* 190b; and (3) as a state of inspired divination in *Tim.* 71e:

No man achieves true and inspired divination when in his rational mind, but only when the power of his intelligence is fettered in sleep or when it is distraught by disease or divine inspiration.

Here we have the sleep of reason, of disease, and of divine inspiration. Plato does not consider active ecstasy, which is important for Philo. This can be explained by the importance that Philo gives to asceticism and to the improvement of the soul.

²⁰ See also *Job* 20.8 and 33.5.

²¹ Gil 1966: 38-74; Vicaire 1970: 333-50.

Philo's classification of the four kinds of ecstasy has been compared to Plato's classification of *μανία* in *Phaedrus* 265a-b:

There are two kinds of madness, the one caused by sicknesses of a human sort, the other coming about from a divinely caused reversal of our customary ways of behaving. ... And of the divine kind we distinguished four parts, belonging to four Gods, taking the madness of the seer as Apollo's inspiration, that of mystic rites as Dionysus', poetic madness, for its part, as the Muses', and the fourth as that belonging to Aphrodite and Love; the madness of love, we said was best ...

This classification does not coincide with Philo's. Puech (1933: 311-33) and Belletti (1983: 72-89) have studied this question, and they consider that the highest kinds of ecstasy in the two classifications have nothing to do with each other. It is true that these classifications cannot be compared, but if we think of Plato's madness of love, with its highest achievement, which is the contemplation of Beauty, this is not far from Philo's contemplation of God.²²

Plato (*Rep.* 9.571c-e) says that there are both divine dreams and dreams of the lower parts of the soul. Divine dreams are sent to wise men who can control this lower part of the soul, whose reasoning faculty is working properly and who are able to grasp the message they receive. This can be found in Philo's dreams of the third type, when he says that the soul living in the passions of the body is blind, and can only see passions in its dreams, while the soul of the ascetic is improving and achieves visions of the divine.

Plato's and Philo's systems are not analogous, but they are not far from each other. We can plainly see the influence of Plato.²³

Bereshit Rabbah

Another parallel is provided by *Bereshit Rabbah*, a rabbinic commentary on *Genesis* from the fifth century AD. In chapter 17, Rab, the first Talmudic doctor of Babylon, who belongs to the first generation of

²² See *Somn.* 2.232; Winston 1996: 76.

²³ See further Runia 1986: 312-14.

Amoraites, gives his interpretation of the four kinds of *tardemah* (*trdmh*), 'sleep'.

1. *shenah*, *Genesis* 2.21: Adam's sleep.
2. *nebuah*, prophetic sleep, *Genesis* 15.12: Abraham's dream about the Promised Land.
3. *marmota*, astonishment or bewilderment (*I Samuel* 26.12: Saul, Abner and the soldiers fell into a deep sleep to allow David take the spear and the jug from Saul).
4. *shetuth*, the sleep of madness (*Isaiah* 29.10)

Puech (1933: 331) connects Rab with Philo (*Heres* 249-66) in the following way:

Philo	Rab
psycho-pathological ecstasy <i>Deut.</i> 28.28 f.	<i>shetuth</i> <i>Isa.</i> 29.10
ecstasy as astonishment <i>Ex.</i> 19.18	<i>marmota</i> <i>I Sam.</i> 26.12
sleep of intelligence <i>Gen.</i> 2.21	<i>shenah</i> <i>Gen.</i> 2.21
prophetic ecstasy <i>Gen.</i> 15.12	<i>nebuah</i> <i>Gen.</i> 15.12

Puech and Belletti wish to find a Hellenistic-Jewish antecedent for Philo's system, although there are clear Platonic elements in Philo.²⁴ Puech does not think it possible that Rab took his ideas from Philo.

I think that this classification does not fit into Philo's philosophy, because parts of it do not appear elsewhere in Philo's works, and are not

²⁴ Leisegang 1919: 167, Pascher 1911: 165, Brehier 1902: 167, and Wolfson 1947: ii.282 f. suggest a Hellenic origin for Philo's doctrine of ecstasy, while Puech, Belletti and Pohlenz prefer a Hellenistic-Jewish one.

likely to be his own creation: ecstasy as astonishment never appears anywhere else in Philo. We cannot say if there was a common source or direct dependence on Philo in the case of the *Bereshit Rabbah*. We must reserve judgement on this point.

Conclusion

As in his theory of dreams, Philo seems to show no Jewish influence and draws all his ideas from Greek philosophy and Egyptian belief (Petit 1974: 158; Bréhier 1902: 185). But his concept of ecstasy is close to his concept of sleep as a prophetic state of mind, and this can be due to the fact that these conceptions are very close together in the Old Testament. All this gives us a basis to reconstruct the lost first book of the treatise *On Dreams* with the help of *Genesis 26*, a vision seen in wakefulness by Isaac, the most perfect of the Patriarchs.