



*The Writings of*  
**P**hilo Judaeus

Philosopher in Meditation by Pieter van der Maast, 1652

*English Translation by*  
*C. D. Yonge, et al.*

**Table of Contents**

Preface to Philo.....	4	19. Dreams (Doctrine that Dreams are Sent by God) - Book I.....	1170
A. The Creation of the World.....	10	20. Dreams (Doctrine that Dreams are Sent by God) - Book II.....	1246
B. Allegorical Commentary on Genesis		C. On the Law	
1. Allegorical Interpretation.....	83	1. Life of Abraham .....	1321
2. On the Cherubim – Book I .....	258	2. Life of Joseph .....	1400
3. On the Cherubim – Book II.....	273	3. Life of Moses – Book I.....	1476
4. The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain .....	305	4. Life of Moses – Book II.....	1583
5. The Worse Attacks the Better .....	362	5. Life of Moses – Book III.....	1603
6. The Posterity of Cain.....	427	6. The Decalogue (Ten Commandments) .....	1673
7. The Giants.....	489	7. Special Laws	
8. The Unchangeableness of God.....	508	a. Circumcision .....	1726
9. Husbandry (Tilling of the Earth by Noah).....	559	b. Sovereignty – Book I.....	1730
10. Noah’s Work as a Planter.....	613	c. Sovereignty – Book II.....	1748
11. Drunkenness.....	665	d. The Rewards of Priests .....	1769
12. Sobriety .....	731	e. Animals Fit for Sacrifice.....	1779
13. Confusion of the Languages .....	752	f. Those Who Offer Sacrifice .....	1812
14. The Migration of Abraham.....	813	g. Wages of a Harlot Not Received as Offering.....	1842
15. Who is the Heir of Divine Things? .....	886	h. Commandments 3 & 4 .....	1852
16. Preliminary Studies (Meeting for the Sake of Seeking Instruction).....	977	i. The Ten Festivals .....	1935
17. Flight & Finding (Fugitives) .....	1030		
18. Why Certain Names are Changed.....	1093		

- j. The Festival of the Basket of First-fruits.....1989
- k. Honour Due to Parents .....1992
- l. Commandment 6: Adultery .....2007
- m. Commandment 7: Murder .....2036
- n. Commandments 8, 9, & 10 .....2080
- o. Justice .....2126
- p. Creation of Magistrates .....2132
- q. The Virtues .....2161
- r. Nobility .....2237
- s. Rewards & Punishments.....2253
- t. Curses .....2294

D. Other works

- 1. Every Virtuous Man is Free .....2311
- 2. The Contemplative Life .....2362
- 3. Eternity of the World .....2390
- 4. Against Flaccus .....2448
- 5. Embassy to Gaius .....2504
- 6. Incorruptibility of the World .....2612
- 7. Fragments from Various Sources .....2654
- 8. Genesis: Questions & Solutions – Book I...2713
- 9. Genesis: Questions & Solutions – Book II..2789
- 10. Genesis: Questions & Solutions – Book III.2880
- 11. Hypothetica: A Defense for the Jews .....2957
- 12. Providence .....2973

**Index of Traditional Latin Titles**

- Abrahamo ..... 1321
- Aeternitate Mundi ..... 2390
- Agricultura..... 558
- Cherubim ..... 257
- Circumcisione ..... 1726
- Colendis Parentibus ..... 1992
- Confusione Linguarum..... 752
- Congressu Eduditionis Gratia ..... 977
- Constitutione Principum ..... 2132
- Cophini Festo..... 1989
- Decalogo..... 1673
- Ebrietate ..... 664
- Execratione ..... 2294
- Fuga et Inventione ..... 1030
- Gigantibus..... 488
- Hypothetica..... 2957
- In Flaccum ..... 2448
- Iosepho ..... 1400
- Justitia..... 2126
- Legatione ad Caium ..... 2504
- Legum Allegoriae..... 82
- Migratione Abrahami..... 813
- Monarchia..... 1730

## *The Works of Philo*

## *Contents*

Mutatione Nominum.....	1093
Opificio Mundi .....	10
Plantatione .....	613
Posteritate Caini.....	427
Praemiis et Poenis .....	2253
Providentia .....	2973
Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesis .....	2713
Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres sit.....	886
Quod Deterius Potiori insidiari soleat .....	362
Quod Deus Immutabilis sit .....	508

Quod Omnis Probus Liber.....	2311
Sacerdotum Honoribus .....	1769
Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini.....	305
Septenario .....	1965
Somniis .....	1170
Specialibus Legibus .....	1726
Victimis.....	1779
Virtutibus.....	2161
Vita Contemplativa .....	2362
Vita Mosis .....	1476

## **Preface to Philo**

by C. D. Yonge (vol. 1, pp. iii-vi)

[p. iii] The author of the following Treatises was, as the title by which he is generally known imports, of Jewish extraction, and a descendant of the sacerdotal tribe of Levi. He is spoken of by Josephus as one of the most eminent of his contemporary countrymen, and as the principal of the embassy which was sent to Caligula to solicit him to recall the command which he had issued for the erection of his statue in the temple at Jerusalem. The embassy was unsuccessful, though the death of the emperor saved the sacred edifice from the meditated profanation; but we see that Philo suffered no diminution of his credit from its unsuccessful result, since, at a subsequent period, his son, Tiberius Alexander,

married Berenice, the daughter of King Agrippa. The date of his birth and that of his death are alike uncertain; he speaks of himself as an old man when the embassy to Rome took place; and the treatise in which he gives an account of it was apparently written in the reign of Claudius, who succeeded Caligula A.D. 41, and reigned nearly fourteen years. His chief residence was at Alexandria, which at that period was, next to Athens, the most celebrated seat of philosophy in the world, and which had long been a favourite abode of the learned Jews. On one occasion he mentions having visited Jerusalem; and this is all we know of his personal history.

In his religious opinions he appears to have been a Pharisee, to the principles of which sect some portion of his fondness for allegorical interpretation may perhaps be owing.

It was, however, rather to his philosophical labours that his celebrity among his contemporaries and his notoriety at the present day are mainly owing. He was so devoted a follower of the great founder of the Academic school, that it appears to have been a saying among the ancients that, "either Plato Philonises, or philo platonises." And there are many doctrines asserted in the following treatises which can be clearly traced to the principles and even to the extant works of the son of Ariston; and it is in consequence of this tendency that he is spoken of as the first of [p. iv] the Iseo-Platonists, that is to say, of that school which attempted to reconcile the doctrines of the Greek, and more especially of the Academic, philosophy with the revelations contained in the sacred scriptures, while, at the same time, he transferred into the Platonic system many of the opinions which lie borrowed

from the East.

According to the manner of the Eclectics, however, he mingled with his Platonism many doctrines derived from other schools, and those of Pythagoras in particular, to such an extent, that Clemens, of Alexandria, calls him a Pythagorean, not recollecting that Aristotle tells us, that the Academy harmonized in very many points with the philosophy of Cortona. In many points, again, especially in the supremacy which he assigns to virtue, he betrays an inclination to the principles of the Stoics.

The attempt to reconcile the heathen philosophy with the Bible was not altogether new. As early as the time of Ptolemy Lagus, many Jews had been settled in Alexandria; and, at the period when Philo flourished, they are supposed to have formed half the population of that city the

splendid library of which opened to the learned men of their nation those stores of Greek wisdom and eloquence with which they were previously unacquainted; and as they could not fail to be struck with the truth of many of the principles which they found laid down in those works, it was not unnatural that, being also formerly convinced of the divine origin of their own scriptures, they should endeavour to reconcile two systems, both of which appeared in so great a degree to rest on the same foundation. The truth of their own books they knew to proceed from divine revelation; that of the Greek philosophers they looked upon as an efflux more or less remote from that revelation, and the pride of human intellect led them to endeavour to display their superior penetration by discerning a hidden sense in their own scriptures, which should contain the germ of the Greek philosophy.

Of all the writers of this school the most eminent was Philo, and his works are highly interesting as showing us the manner in which the Sophists of his age and nation sought to appropriate the Greek philosophy by an allegorical interpretation of the works of Moses, which they thus represented as containing all the principles which the Greeks [p. v] subsequently expanded into the precise doctrines of their several sects. Accordingly, he represents Jehovah as a single uncompounded Being; unchangeable, eternal, incomprehensible, the knowledge of whom is to be looked upon as the ultimate object of all human efforts. He teaches that visible phenomena are to lead men over to the invisible world, and that the contemplation of the world so wonder fully and beautifully made proves a wise and intelligent Cause and Creator of it. Having adopted, however, the Epicurean doctrine, that

nothing can be produced out of nothing, he also assumed the existence of a mass of lifeless matter, passive and primeval, destitute of quality and form, but containing within itself the four primary elements; and of this mass, he looked upon the Spirit of God as the divider and fashioner into distinct shape.

Matter again he conceived as something subordinate to, and at the same time resisting, the divine arrangement, and in this latter character as the source of all imperfection and evil. Moreover, not having arrived at any just notion of the Deity as the immediate cause of the existence of the work, he assumed the existence of an intermediate cause which he called the Logos; and he also imagined an invisible world, appreciable only by the intellect, as the pattern of the visible world in which we live; carrying out his

theory so as to give an outline of that doctrine of emanations, which at a later period was elaborated and fully developed by the Gnostics.

The treatises contained in the present volume refer to the books of Moses. At the beginning of the first, that on the Creation of the World, he intimates that his object is to show how the law and the world accord with one another, and how the man who lives according to the law is as such a citizen of the world. For Moses, as he remarks in his treatise on the life of that prophet, demonstrates in his history that the same Being is the Father and Creator of the universe, and the true lawgiver of the world; and accordingly, that whoever follows his laws is adapting himself to the course of nature and living in harmony with the general laws of the universe; while again, the man who transgresses those laws is punished by

the operations of nature, such as floods, fire from heaven, and such means. [p. vi] In his treatise on the Laws, he divides them into what he looks upon as unwritten laws, that is to say, the living patterns of a blameless life which the scripture sets before us in Enoch, Noah, Abraham, &c., and particular laws in the narrower technical common acceptance of the word.

In the other treatises, he deduces an allegorical meaning from the plain historical account of Moses, which serves him as the foundation for his philosophical system.

In all these works he exhibits profound and varied learning, showing himself deeply versed in Greek literature of every age and description, and of considerable skill in the sciences of music, geometry, and astronomy. His style is clear, and even though he may at times be open to the

charge of an over-refined subtilty, it is impossible to deny him the praise of acuteness and ingenuity, set off to their best advantage by neatness of language and felicity of expression. For the Christian reader these treatises have a peculiar interest from the ample materials which many of them furnish for the illustration of St. Paul's Epistles; materials so copious and so valuable that an eminent divine of the present day has pronounced an opinion (referring probably more especially to the treatises on the Sacrifices of Abel and of Cain—on the Different Incidents in the Life of Noah—on Abraham—on the Life of Moses—on the Ten Commandments—and on Providence) that all the other ancient commentators on the Scriptures put together have not left works of greater value for that most important object. It is even asserted by Eusebius that he formed an acquaintance with St. Peter

while at Rome, but that statement is generally looked upon as wanting confirmation. From his treatise against Flaccus, and in that which refers to his embassy to Rome, we likewise derive information with respect to the condition of the Jews in the time of our Saviour, and to the manner in which they were treated by the Roman governors, which supplies much incidental corroboration of some of the historical allusions contained in different parts of the New Testament.

The text which has been used in this translation has been generally that of Mangey.

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## **The Creation of the World**

*(De Opificio Mundi)*  
by Philo Judaeus  
translated by C. D. Yonge  
(vol. 1, pp. 1-52)

I. (1) Of other lawgivers, some have set forth what they considered to be just and reasonable, in a naked and unadorned manner, while others, investing their ideas with an abundance of amplification, have sought to bewilder the people, by burying the truth under a heap of fabulous inventions. (2) But Moses, rejecting both of these methods, the one as inconsiderate, careless, and unphilosophical, and the other as mendacious and full of trickery, made the beginning of his laws entirely beautiful, and in all respects admirable, neither at once declaring

what ought to be done or the contrary, nor (since it was necessary to mould beforehand the dispositions of those who were to use his laws) inventing fables himself or adopting those which had been invented by others.

(3) And his exordium, as I have already said, is most admirable; embracing the creation of the world, under the idea that the law corresponds to the world and the world to the law, and that a man who is obedient to the law, being, by so doing, a citizen of the world, arranges his actions with reference to the intention of nature, in harmony with which the whole universal world is regulated. (4) Accordingly no one, whether poet or historian, could ever give expression in an adequate manner to the beauty of his ideas respecting the creation of the world; for they surpass all the power of language, and amaze our

hearing, being too great and venerable to be adapted to the sense of any created being. (5) That, however, is not a reason for our yielding to indolence on the subject, but rather from our affection for the Deity we ought to endeavour to exert ourselves even beyond our powers in describing them: not as having much, or indeed anything to say of our own, but instead of much, just a little, such as it may be probable that human intellect may attain to, when wholly occupied with a love of and desire for wisdom.

(6) For as the smallest seal receives imitations of things of colossal magnitude when engraved upon it, so perchance in some instances the exceeding beauty of the description of the creation of the world as recorded in the Law, overshadowing with its brilliancy the souls of those who happen to meet with it, will be

delivered to a more concise record after these facts have been first premised which it would be improper to pass over in silence.

II. (7) For some men, admiring the world itself rather than the Creator of the world, have represented it as existing without any maker, and eternal; and as impiously as falsely have represented God as existing in a state of complete inactivity, while it would have been right on the other hand to marvel at the might of God as the creator and father of all, and to admire the world in a degree not exceeding the bounds of moderation.

(8) But Moses, who had early reached the very summits of philosophy,<sup>[1]</sup> and who had learnt from the oracles of God the most numerous and important of the principles of nature, was well aware that it is indispensable

that in all existing things there must be an active cause, and a passive subject; and that the active cause is the intellect of the universe, thoroughly unadulterated and thoroughly unmixed, superior to virtue and superior to science, superior even to abstract good or abstract beauty; (9) while the passive subject is something inanimate and incapable of motion by any intrinsic power of its own, but having been set in motion, and fashioned, and endowed with life by the intellect, became transformed into that most perfect work, this world. And those who describe it as being uncreated, do, without being aware of it, cut off the most useful and necessary of all the qualities which tend to produce piety, namely, providence: (10) for reason proves that the father and creator has a care for that which has been created; for a father is anxious for the life of his children, and a workman aims at the duration of his works, and

employs every device imaginable to ward off everything that is pernicious or injurious, and is desirous by every means in his power to provide everything which is useful or profitable for them. But with regard to that which has not been created, there is no feeling of interest as if it were his own in the breast of him who has not created it.

(11) It is then a pernicious doctrine, and one for which no one should contend, to establish a system in this world, such as anarchy is in a city, so that it should have no superintendant, or regulator, or judge, by whom everything must be managed and governed.

(12) But the great Moses, thinking that a thing which has not been uncreated is as alien as possible from that which is visible before our eyes (for everything which is the subject of our

senses exists in birth and in changes, and is not always in the same condition), has attributed eternity to that which is invisible and discerned only by our intellect as a kinsman and a brother, while of that which is the object of our external senses he had predicated generation as an appropriate description. Since, then, this world is visible and the object of our external senses, it follows of necessity that it must have been created; on which account it was not without a wise purpose that he recorded its creation, giving a very venerable account of God.

III. (13) And he says that the world was made in six days, not because the Creator stood in need of a length of time (for it is natural that God should do everything at once, not merely by uttering a command, but by even thinking of it); but because the things created required

arrangement; and number is akin to arrangement; and, of all numbers, six is, by the laws of nature, the most productive: for of all the numbers, from the unit upwards, it is the first perfect one, being made equal to its parts, and being made complete by them; the number three being half of it, and the number two a third of it, and the unit a sixth of it, and, so to say, it is formed so as to be both male and female, and is made up of the power of both natures; for in existing things the odd number is the male, and the even number is the female; accordingly, of odd numbers the first is the number three, and of even numbers the first is two, and the two numbers multiplied together make six. (14) It was fitting therefore, that the world, being the most perfect of created things, should be made according to the perfect number, namely, six: and, as it was to have in it the causes of both,