

“I am an Interpreter and not a Teacher” (Alex. 7) – Philo’s Self-Definition in *De Animalibus* in the Context of his Understanding of the “Hermeneut”

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Received: 15 May 2022 ▪ Revised: 20 June 2022 ▪ Accepted: 24 June 2022

Abstract

This article is about defining Philo’s place in the history of philosophy and biblical exegesis. In this connection, his own self-identification as a “hermeneut” in his treatise *De Animalibus* should be important. In this treatise, which is one of the “purely philosophical works” of the author, Philo himself twice explicitly states that he is a hermeneut (Alex. 7; 74). In this case, it is unlikely that he means “interpreter of Scripture”, and the question is to what extent does the translation “interpreter” cover the meaning of hermeneut (ἐρμηνεύς)? An attempt will be made to read this statement of Philo in the context of his understanding of ἐρμηνεύς in other places in his work related to biblical exegesis, as well as in the context of the overall ancient understanding of hermeneutics.

Keywords: Philo of Alexandria, history of philosophy, ancient hermeneutics, interpreter, hermeneut, history of biblical exegesis.

1. I am an interpreter and not a teacher

At the beginning of one of his “purely philosophical works”, the dialogue *De Animalibus* (Alexander), Philo himself explicitly states that he is an “interpreter” and not a “teacher” (Alex.7, p. 74). The question arises, of course, what does Philo mean by “interpreter”? A. Terian’s translation from Armenian of the entire passage (Terian, 1981: 69) is as follows:

(7) PHILO: “I shall begin *to interpret*, but I will not teach (lit. but not teaching), since I am an interpreter and not a teacher. Those who teach impart their own knowledge (or “skills”, “arts”) to others, but those who interpret present through accurate recall the things heard from others. *And they do not do this* just to a few Alexandrians and Romans – the eminent *or* the excellent, the privileged, the elite of the upper *class*, and those distinguished in music and other learning (lit. “philosophy”) – gathered at a given place”.

- The self-definition of Philo as a hermeneut (Alex. 7; 74).
- By contrasting the functions of the teacher and the hermeneut, Philo directs his reader to an understanding of the role of hermeneut.
- A unilateral perception of ἑρμηνεύς as interpreter is an obstacle in understanding the role of hermeneut in antiquity and specifically in the work of Philo.
- The hermeneut as prophet in Philo and the underlying meaning of inspiration.
- Moses is a hermeneut and a prophet: ἑρμηνεία as the highest kind of prophecy.

Evidently, in the context of this treatise, Philo is unlikely to understand the interpreter “interpreter (or commentator) of Scripture”. Terian implies in this case, that Philo points in general to the rest of his work on the interpretation of Scripture, where “his role as interpreter is all too obvious”, that is, he points to his activity as an exegete (*Ibid.*: 116). Fortunately, we have for comparison the Greek fragment №3 to *Alex. 7* (Terian, 1981: 263): “Διδάσκουσι μὲν οἱ τὰς ἰδίας τέχνας μουσῶντες ἑτέρους, ἑρμηνεύουσι δὲ οἱ ἄλλοτρίαν ἀκοὴν εὐτοχία μνήμης ἀπαγγέλλοντες.”

The question is, to what extent does the translation “interpreter” and respectively “to interpret” cover the meaning of hermeneut (ἑρμηνεύς) and ἑρμηνεύω? Because, in this case, the verb ἑρμηνεύω is obviously semantically related to ἀπαγγέλλω, which has the meaning of report, relate and is related to the function of messenger, one who relate. In a rhetorical context, a given verb has the meaning of “power of expressing” (LSL, 1996: 173). Terian himself notes that “it is interesting to note that the question of interpretation in Philo is invariably tied to that of inspiration – as seen in his understanding of the prophets as inspired interpreters of divine pronouncements and in his claim to inspiration with regards to his own interpretation” (Terian, 1981: 17). This observation will be addressed below, as it could shed new light on the question of Philo’s role as ἑρμηνεύς.

As to the opposition of the function of “interpreter” and that of “teacher”: “I shall begin to interpret, but I will not teach (lit. but not teaching), since I am an interpreter and not a teacher”, must to pay attention to the previous context. In *Alex. 3* Philo states: “With regard to great assertions, it is agreed¹ that one ought to listen to them carefully, for nothing else seems to be so helpful to good learning as to critically examine what the lecturer is emphasizing. Had he truly wished to continue learning, he would not have allowed himself to become occupied with other concerns” (Terian, 1981: 68). In *Alex. 5* Philo emphasizes Lysimachus’ desire to “hear” new things, as opposed to his willingness to “speak” and his “speech.” In *Alex. 6*, immediately preceding *Alex. 7*, Lysimachus is ready “to seek and to ask for instruction” in his role as Philo’s “student”: “and here you are seated in front of me on a platform... ready to begin to teach your teachings” (Terian, 1981: 68). It is on the above words of Lysimachus that Philo’s assertion in *Alex. 7* comes.

In this case, before moving on to the places in Philo’s work where he makes it clear what he means by hermeneut (ἑρμηνεύς), we will first pay attention to the meaning of “teacher” (διδάσκαλος). The linguistic use of the word διδάσκαλος is standard, as K. Rengsdorf’s review shows. It has a strong technical and rational meaning. Διδάσκαλος is not just a teacher, but also a person, who has specific skills to teach, for example, reading, fencing, music and create the appropriate skills for them. Thus, technical skills such as the art of strategy will be transmitted through διδάσκαλος, but also vices such as the worship of another God (Cf. *Spec. I* 56). That is why, when διδάσκαλος affirms a fact, it can be easily compared to one who clarifies moral or religious positions and testifies to their origin (ThWNT II, 1935: 152).

In Philo’s case, the mentioned above about διδάσκαλος can also be confirmed. To him, the priest is also a διδάσκαλος (*Deus. 134*), for example, when he imparts knowledge νόμος φύσεως (*Agric. 66*) or when νόμος gives the law of himself (*Gen. 80*). Moses is the teacher of the divine things, explaining them to those who have cleansed their ears (*Gig. 54*). Even God is for

σοφοὶ the wise ὑφηγητὴς καὶ διδάσκαλος (*Her.* 19). Compare also: God as διδάσκαλος of ἄρχεται τῆς ὑφηγήσεως (*Her.* 102; *Sacrif.* 65; *Congr.* 114). The educational and pedagogical role of διδάσκαλος is closely related to the role of ὑφηγητὴς – guide, master (LSL, 1996, pp. 1908). Philo uses the two concepts in parallel in many places (Cf. *Her.* 19, 102; *Congr.* 114; *Somn.* 1: 191; *Spec.* 4: 140; *Flacc.* 3, 124).

In the *Post.* 141, Philo offers analogously to *Anim.* 7 distinction:

“For teachers who when they set about giving their lessons keep in view their own great superiority and not the capacity of their pupils, are simpletons, who are not aware how vast is the difference between a lesson (διδασκαλίας) and a display (ἐπίδειξις). For the man who is giving a display (ἐπιδεικνόμενος) uses to the full the rich yield of the mastery which he possesses, and without let or hindrance brings forward into the open the results of hours spent in labor by himself at home. Such are the works of artists and sculptors.”¹

The main meanings of the term ἐπίδειξις – showing forth, making known; exhibition, display, demonstration; set speech, declamation (LSL, 1996: 629) indisputably confirm the idea of expression. The comparison here between διδασκαλία and ἐπίδειξις is similar to the comparison of διδασκαλία with ἐρμηνεία by *Anim.* 7.

The purely technical and professional function of the teacher (διδάσκαλος) is emphasized by Philo both by the fact that he can be a teacher of vice (Cf. *Her.* 295; *Spec.* 3: 11, 39; *QE* 2: 4) and by the fact that he works for money (*Mos.* 1: 121; *Spec.* 2: 233). The opposition of teacher and hermeneut could have another dimension, based on the belief that “education is not conclusive... education cannot transform a fool into a sage” (Mendelson, 1982: 59-60).

2. The hermeneut as prophet

The basic misunderstanding that arises in trying to understand what for Philo ἐρμηνεύς and, accordingly, ἐρμηνεύω, ἐρμηνεία and their related concepts mean, stems from the long-standing European tradition of one-sided semantic transmission. This tradition seriously narrows the meaning of the word that we have in classical Greece and the Hellenistic period, where ἐρμηνεία denotes in most cases the action of expressions whose externally regulated nature needs to be emphasized (Cf. Pepin, 1988: 97). The Latin translation, through *interpretatio*, can be said to have a negative effect on the concept of ἐρμηνεία. This is due to the fact that the word *interpretatio*, which is almost unchanged in European languages, has an unambiguous prefix, which everywhere gives the specification the basic meaning of “mediation, transmission”. Aristotle does not give any clear definition of his term ἐρμηνεία, but designates it several times: it is a formula that is used in a given definition and which should therefore be as clear as possible (Aristotle, *Topics*, VI 1, 139b 12-14). It can be conveyed as “speech” in the sense of rhetoric (Cf. Pepin, 1988: 98). Philo of Alexandria at the beginning of the Christian era was, one might say, a professional exegete, in whom the use of ἐρμηνεία in the sense of “interpretation” as it was then commonplace should have one important meaning – but in this case, not so. Philo uses the word primarily in an anthropological context, more precisely in the context of an allegorical anthropology – Cf. *Her.* 108; *Cher.* 113; *Mig.* 71-75, 78, 84; *Det.* 40, 68 (*Ibid.*: 98-99). It is worth noting that this meaning also prevails further in cases where, however, the context is determined

¹ All the quoted texts of Philo in English are from the edition of LOEB – *Philo* (1929-1962). In Ten Volumes (and Two Supplementary Volumes) with an English Translation by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker. London-Cambridge: Harvard University press. Translations by other authors are explicitly indicated.

by exegesis. As in *De Vita Contemplativa*, in which Philo describes the community of therapists based on an allegorical reading of the Bible: they believe, he says, that the components of literal (verbal) ἐρμηνεία are symbols of a hidden reality that is revealed only in the covered words. He further notes that the author should not be quick to make oral comments on the Scriptures, as the minds of his listeners will not be able to follow his ἐρμηνεία (*Cont.* 28, 76). Of course, it is possible to translate the term with “exegesis”, but it is more likely that Philo meant the verbal “expression” and “manner of expression” of the commentators. *Hermeneuein*-related concepts in the above-mentioned texts of Philo, as well as in Aristotle, are generally translated as “interpreted”, “interpreter” and “interpretation”. One may wonder how permissible this is if one takes into account that these concepts in the field of music and theater can mark an event through spiritual content that is silent in them, but is brought out by verbal or sound means. It is clear that in the cited texts the term *hermeneuein* and its relatives are always understood in the sense of “expression” and “language”, but never as “interpretation”, identical with exegesis (*Ibid.*, 99-100). It can certainly be said, based on Philo’s own textual testimonies, that for him these concepts are closely related to the idea of prophecy and inspiration. In fact, in many of the places where these terms are used, Philo directly asserts that the hermeneut is a prophet and ἐρμηνεία is equal to prophecy. What’s more, there are passages like *Mos.* II 188, where the author asserts that ἐρμηνεία is not merely prophecy, but the highest kind of prophecy. On the other hand, for Philo, prophecy is “a substitute for Plato’s highest type of knowledge”, which can be read in his statement that “the holy books of the Lord are not monuments of knowledge (*scientiae*) or of vision (*videndi*), but are the divine command and the divine Logos” (*QG* IV 140), from which it can be concluded that “they are not based upon scientific knowledge or sensation but rather upon prophetic revelation” (Wolfson II, 1962: 10). “Prophecy in all its functions is placed by him as the highest grade of knowledge /... / this grade of knowledge is merely said to be independent of sense-perception” (*Ibid.*: 22). In this regard, it is worth paying attention to the assertion of Philo from *Alex.* 7: “those who teach impart their own knowledge to others, but those who interpret present through accurate recall the things heard from others (ἐρμηνεύουσι δὲ οἱ ἀλλοτρίαν ἀκοὴν εὐτοχίᾳ μνήμης ἀπαγγέλλοντες)”.

In one group of passages he tells us, as Wolfson notes, rather vaguely: “For a prophet (being a spokesman) has no utterance of his own, but all his utterance came from elsewhere, the echoes of another’s voice (ἀλλότρια δὲ πάντα ὑπηχοῦντος ἑτέρου)” (*Her.* 259); or that “nothing of what he says will be his own” for “he serves as the channel for the insistent words of another’s promptings” (*Spec.* I 65); or that “he is not pronouncing any command of his own, but is only the interpreter of another” (*QG* III 10). This vagueness, however, is removed in another passage where that “other” who prompts the prophet is identified with God. “For the prophet is the interpreter of God who prompts from within what he should say” (*Praem.* 55). This on the whole reflects the conception of prophecy in Scripture as well as the conception of the various kinds of frenzy in Plato (Wolfson II, 1962: 22-23). A summary of these thoughts can be found in *Spec.* IV 49: “For no pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own; he is an interpreter (ἐρμηνεύς) prompted by Another in all his utterances, when knowing not what he does he is filled with inspiration, as the reason withdraws and surrenders the citadel of the soul to a new visitor and tenant, the Divine Spirit which plays upon the vocal organism and dictates words, which clearly express its prophetic message”.

3. Moses as hermeneut and prophet (*Mos.* II 188, 191)

Mos. II 188:

“Now I am fully aware that all things written in the sacred books are oracles delivered through Moses; but I will confine myself to those which are more especially his, with the following preliminary remarks. Of the divine utterances, some are

spoken by God in His own Person (ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ) with His prophet for interpreter (ἐρμηνέως τοῦ θείου προφήτου), in some the revelation comes through question and answer, and others are spoken by Moses in his own person, when possessed by God and carried away out of himself”.

Mos. II 191:

“Now, the first kind must be left out of the discussion. They are too great to be lauded by human lips; scarcely indeed could heaven and the world and the whole existing universe worthily sing their praises. Besides, they are delivered through an interpreter, and interpretation and prophecy are not the same thing (ἐρμηνεία δὲ καὶ προφητεία διαφέρουσι). The second kind I will at once proceed to describe, interweaving with it the third kind, in which the speaker appears under that divine possession in virtue of which he is chiefly and in the strict sense considered a prophet”.

The importance of this passage from the last part of *De vita Moysis II* can be seen from the opinion of Émile Bréhier, who believes that this is the main source of Philo’s prophecy theory (Bréhier, 1908: 185). Wolfson also uses it as primary evidence in his classification of Philo’s prophecies (Wolfson II, 1962: 36-43). Burkhardt believes that *Mos.* II 188-191 is crucial to the relationship between the hermeneut and the prophet (Burkhardt, 1988: 152). As early as the first half of the 19th century A. Gfrörer also states on the basis of this passage that Philo distinguishes between two types of inspiration, namely ἐρμηνεία and προφητεία (Gfrörer, 1831: 54). Citing the text from *Mos.* II 188-191, he concludes that Philo gives precedence to the former over the latter. This superiority is because the prophet is equated with one living word of God, because he speaks in the name of God (*Ibid.*: 55). On the other hand, he always appears as a hermeneut, because he expresses not his own, but another opinion. Thus, it is not surprising to him that Philo elsewhere (*Spec.* I 65) equates the two concepts, from which Gfrörer again concludes that the superiority of hermeneut is indisputable. According to him, in the quoted places Philo does not clarify the essence of ἐρμηνεία, but suggests it in the deepest connection with the deity, hence his view of the prophecy in many places such as *Spec.* IV 49 (Gfrörer, 1831: 55).

Mos. II 188-191 begins with a statement by Philo not actually about Moses, but in fact on the Scriptures: “Now I am fully aware that all things written in the sacred books are oracles” and here Philo adds “delivered through Moses”. The second part of the sentence makes it clear that Philo will not speak of Scripture, but of Moses as a prophet and only in another narrow sense, Scripture in all its parts is called a prophecy: “but I will confine myself to those who are more especially his”. Philo begins to speak of Scripture here as he seeks examples of Moses’ prophetic work. In this search, he recalls some assertions that all scripture consists of prophecies as well as prophetic words (*Legat.* 210; *Cher.*124; *Migr.* 14; *Praem.*1). In any case, the whole of Scripture gives us examples of Moses’ prophetic activity, but Scripture gives us very different kinds of prophecy, and not all of Moses’ prophetic ability is emphasized in the same way. From the first kind of prophecy, nothing can be learned about prophetic ability. To what extent, then, can this first kind of prophecy or its product be called prophetic revelation? (Burkhardt, 1988: 153-154). This is probably where the distinction between ἐρμηνεία and προφητεία in *Mos.* II 191 comes from. The expression ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ can be taken as a starting point. A look at the use of the phrase by Philo shows that it is used in cases where God speaks in the first person, or he himself is a spokesman for prophecy, so to speak, is his own prophet (*Decal.* 19, 39, 175) (*Ibid.*: 154-155). This can be seen, for example, in *Decal.* 175: “For it was in accordance with His nature that the pronouncements in which the special laws were summed up should be given by Him in His own person, but the particular laws by the mouth of the most perfect of the prophets whom He selected for his merits and having filled him with the divine spirit, chose him to be the interpreter of His sacred utterances”. In contrast to *Mos.* II 188 Moses as a prophet in this case is an interpreter not when God speaks in “His own person”, i.e., προφήτης and ἐρμηνεύς are synonyms.

Bréhier believes that the triple division of the types of prophecy has a clear parallel with classification of dreams in *Somn. I 1-3* and *Somn. II 1-4* and is related to the Posidonius classification (Bréhier, 1908: 186). In the passage quoted, Philo himself states that he is beyond human ability to consider this first class of prophecy and immediately moves on to the second. The French scholar is of the opinion that the orders of the Decalogue undoubtedly belong to this first class of prophecy. He considers *Decal. 32-36* a remarkable explanation of this kind of prophecy can be found:

“God wrought on this occasion a miracle of a truly holy kind by bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments and fitted with perfect harmonies, not soulless, nor yet composed of body and soul like a living creature, but a rational soul full of clearness and distinctness, which giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounded forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest” (*Decal. 33*).

This description of a miracle, which seems purely material, is followed by the following allegorical explanation: “But the new miraculous voice was set in action and kept in flame by the power of God ... by creating in the souls of each and all another kind of hearing far superior to the hearing of the ears. For that is but a sluggish sense, inactive until aroused by the impact of the air, but the hearing of the mind possessed by God makes the first advance and goes out to meet the spoken words with the keenest rapidity” (*Decal. 34-35*). The author therefore describes the phenomenon of inner listening, in which the spirit is completely passive. The mediator πνεῦμα between God and the soul of whom he speaks corresponds to ἐρμηνεύς of the first class of prophecy. This spiritual “listening” in which God speaks directly occurs quite often (*Abr. 127*).

Bréhier believes that the key to the distinction between interpretation and prophecy can be found in the relationship between Moses and Aaron (*Det. 39*; cf. *Migr. 181, 169*): “The inspired word (Aaron) is an interpreter not of God but of the divine thoughts contained in the mind, in relation to God it will be a prophet, while the mind will be in its own sense not a prophet but an interpreter of God, but in this sense the mind (not the word) of the prophet is often compared to God’s vocal organ and in the same passage it is called the hermeneut of God”. In this description it seems that the mediator between God and the soul (the divine voice) disappears, but the soul itself, or rather its highest part of the mind, is taken as the mediator between God and the inspired word (Bréhier, 1908: 187-188).

According to Goodenough, “the passage cannot be taken as marking a real refinement in Philo’s theory of inspiration. Philo did not want to discuss Moses’ relation to the direct utterances of God, but did want to discuss the other aspects of Moses’ prophetic character. So, by calling the prophecy ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ by another name than prophecy, he can continue the discussion without reference to this particular type. The distinction, however, is not of real significance for him” (Goodenough, 1969: 192-193). The same author adds that “it seems impossible to understand what Philo could have meant by this distinction, for he does not explain it here, and elsewhere in Philo’s writings προφήτης and ἐρμηνεύς are entirely synonymous” (*Ibid.*: 193, n. 70).

Wolfson notes that the references to prophecy and interpretation in *Mos. II 188-191* “have puzzled students of Philo” (Wolfson II, 1962: 41), pointing to Gfrörer and Goodenough, but it remains questionable to what extent he himself manages to satisfactorily explain the relationship between ἐρμηνεία and προφητεία. For example, he states: “Philo, as is evident from his statement that “interpretation (ἐρμηνεία) and prophecy (προφητεία) are not the same thing” (*Mos. II 191*), uses the term “prophet” in the sense of one who possesses oracular power, in contrast to one who only interprets oracles” (*Ibid.*: 42). Wolfson gives a remarkable translation of ἐρμηνεία and προφητεία in *Mut. 126*: “...Who has received from God a great gift – the power of expressing (ἐρμηνείαν) and of revealing in a prophetic manner (προφητείαν) the sacred laws” (Wolfson II,

1962: 17). However, he finds that he does not take into account his own translation when trying to distinguish between prophecy and interpretation and remains under the influence of the prevailing one-sided perception of *interpretation* and interpretation in Western thought. Consequently, perhaps Sowers is right when he says that Wolfson misunderstands the distinction between prophecy and interpretation in *Mos. II 188* (Cf. Sowers, 1965: 35-36, n. 14).

In the particular case of *Mos. II 188-191*, perhaps an acceptable suggestion would be that in this case Philo after in *Mos. II 188* offers ἐρμηνεία as the first kind of prophesy, then in *Mos. II 191* contrasts ἐρμηνεία and προφητεία in order, first, to substantiate his assertion that “the first kind must be left out of the discussion”. Secondly to emphasize once again that “they are too great to be lauded by human lips; scarcely indeed could heaven and the world and the whole existing universe worthily sing their praises” – that is, in fact they differ (διαφέρουσι) in the superlative sense and ἐρμηνεία is the highest kind of prophecy. Thus, the difference is in terms of superiority (Cf. the opinion of Gfrörer), but not in essence, as this distinction “is not of real significance for him and elsewhere in Philo’s writings προφήτης and ἐρμηνεύς are entirely synonymous” (Goodenough).

With regard to *Mos. II 188-191*, Sowers suggests that “that which is to be interpreted is not oracle already given by God, but God himself... inspiration, in this sense, means the prophet’s acting as a medium for words spoken by God” (*Ibid.*: 36, n. 14). Undoubtedly, this explanation of the function of the hermeneut that Moses has could help us better understand the role of the hermeneut that Philo ascribes to himself. In the context of *De Animalibus*, Philo presents, so to speak, the “secularized” version of the role of the hermeneut “those who interpret present ... the things heard from others”, but in the general context of his work the hermeneut is identical with the prophet who “present the things heard from the Other”.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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