‘Mostly aged virgins’:
Philo and the presence of the Therapeutrides at Lake Mareotis

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ABSTRACT
Most scholars assume that Philo has a positive view of the female members of
the community at Lake Mareotis which he describes in his De Vita Contem-
plativa. This article questions this from the perspective of Philo’s attitude
to ‘pretty slave boys’ used for sexual purposes, to whom he ascribes the
‘female disease’. Philo was forced to accommodate the Therapeutrides even
though he did not approve of their presence in the community as such. He
describes them as ‘mostly aged virgins’ because his view of γυναῖκες (as opposed
to παρθένοι) does not permit him to ascribe positive values to them.

In his De Vita Contemplativa, Philo of Alexandria describes in glowing terms
the life of an ancient Jewish community at Lake Mareotis near Alexandria
(see Heinemann 1934; Kraemer 1989; Richardson 1993; Taylor & Davies
1998).1 In this description, two particularly interesting issues of gender and
sexuality emerge: Philo’s extreme reaction to the sexual use of slave boys by
the guests at ancient symposia, and his apparently positive description of the
women at Lake Mareotis. Both issues are connected, most obviously perhaps
by the enigmatic ‘female disease’ which Philo ascribes to the ‘pretty slave
boys’ (Contempl 60).2 The concept of the ‘female disease’ attributed to these
boys is based on the Philonic association of disease and ‘being female’ (QG

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2 References to Philonic works follow the system described in the Studia Philonica
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4.15, *Leg* 2.97, *Praem* 159), which is related to the denigration of the passions, which are, in turn, quintessentially female (Szesnat 1998a). The use of these slave boys for sexual purposes is seen as changing their souls and (at least potentially) their bodies into female form (cf *Abr*. 136), which (for Philo, not his Greek or Roman contemporaries) is regarded as extremely degrading to these boys. Philo’s violent opposition to any same-sex sexual intercourse between males (cf *Spec* 3.38), based on a rigid conception of gender stereotypes, the transgression of which is regarded with extreme hostility (cf Szesnat 1998a, 1998b chap 4), even leads him to some uncharacteristically careless and misleading references to Plato and Xenophon (*Contempl* 57–63). In this regard, Philo appears at the extreme end of the Graeco-Roman valorisation of the ‘male’, the denigration of the ‘female’, and the increasing rejection of erotic same-gender relations, not only for women (cf Hallett 1989, Brooten 1996, Szesnat [1999]), but also for men (cf Richlin 1993; Williams 1995).

If Philo was able to use a phrase like ‘female disease’ to describe the sexual use of slave boys, what does this say about women? It is from this angle that I want to approach the question of the presence of women in the community at Lake Mareotis for, as I said, these issues are related. The interpretation of Philo’s attitude to male same-sex intercourse which I summarised above, focussing on Philo’s fear of gender transgression (cf Brooten 1985), tallies with Sly’s study of Philo’s perception of women. Sly argues that Philo’s key concept in respect of women is ‘control’: ‘real’ women (contemporaries of Philo, that is) present no danger to men as long as they are in their ‘proper place’ in the hierarchy god—man—woman—child (cf Sly 1991, 1994). I would argue that even his positive allegorical interpretation of female Biblical figures in the Pentateuch (Sly 1990:91–178), which occurs throughout his work, is forced upon him by the text. Philo’s allegorical use of the notion of ‘virginity’ in this regard is an attempt to deal with the positive presence of female figures in the septuagintal text. In such allegorical interpretation, Philo focuses on the ‘purity’ of virginity (though not in a ritual sense), and on the ‘undefiled’ status of virgins (in contrast to women), so much so that virgins are no longer female but virtually male (Baer 1970:45–64; Sly 1990:131–178; Aspegren 1990:79–98).

For Philo, παρθένοι and γυναίκες belong to two different classes of beings. In Philo’s view, the virgin is transformed into a woman through the

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3 On sexual matters in the Roman period, see for instance Hallett (1988); Brown (1988); Foucault (1986); Richlin (1992, 1993); Williams (1995); Brooten (1996); Taylor (1997).
sexual intercourse that the man has with her \((QE\ 2.3,\ Somn\ 2.185)\).\(^4\) When, in the context of allegorical interpretation, Philo contrasts God’s ‘conversing’ \((δυμαλεῖν)\) exclusively with virginal souls with human reality, he says matter-of-factly: ‘it is the opposite with us. For the union of human beings...turns virgins into women’ \((Cher\ 50)\).\(^5\) As Sly points out, Philo does not encourage contemporary women to imitate the positive Biblical matriarchs he describes—unlike the patriarchs, whose example men are encouraged to follow \((cf\ Mos\ 1.158;\ QG\ 4.138;\ see\ Sly\ 1990:74)\).\(^6\) As Heinemann has already pointed out in his seminal study, originally published in the 1930’s \((1962:232)\):

Die Ausnahme der Sara, die “das Weibliche im Stich ließ und ins Männergemach überging” \((De\ ebr.\ 60)\), gilt nur für das Reich der Allegorie: in Wahrheit sind Mannweiber\(^7\) Philon ebenso unsympathisch wie weibische Männer \((De\ sacr.\ Ab.\ 100)\); und man soll Waisentöchter erziehen, “wie es sich für Mädchen gehört” \((SpL.\ II\ 125)\).

In my view, Philo cannot encourage permanent virginity for women (or men, for that matter) since that would contradict one’s duty to procreate \((cf\ Belkin\ 1940:219–20;\ Heinemann\ 1962:267–268;\ Baer\ 1970:94–95)\), which is one of Philo’s basic principles for legitimate sexual intercourse \((Gaca\ 1996)\).\(^8\) If this is so, how do the Therapeutrides fit into this picture? How is it possible that they are, at least on the face of it, accorded very positive values in \(De\ Vita\ Contemplativa\)? Baer already noted the tension between the positive role ascribed to the Therapeutrides and Philo’s disregard for all things female \((1970:75)\), although, as Sly observes, Baer does not explain the

\(^4\) There may be a remnant of this in contemporary, Western-influenced cultures, where the onset of ‘womanhood’ is associated with the first sexual intercourse a ‘girl’ has with a ‘man’: sex with a male ‘makes’ a female a woman.

\(^5\) In this article, Philonic texts and translations have been taken from the \(Loeb\ Classical\ Library\) edition. However, especially with regard to matters sexual, I have frequently amended that translation.

\(^6\) A participant in the second session of the Philo of Alexandria Group at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, pointed out that Philo does not usually encourage women to do anything. While it is true that men, and not women, are Philo’s implied audience, it is also true that Philo comments on appropriate and inappropriate behaviour of women. Although this is not the same as an exhortation explicitly addressed to women, it can be understood as an indirect exhortation to women via their husbands and fathers. Nevertheless, I agree that one ought not to read too much into this \(argumentum\ e\ silentio\).

\(^7\) I ignore here the rather negative connotations of the German word \(Mannweib\).

\(^8\) More precisely, for Philo it is procreation \(rather\ than\ pleasure\) that legitimises sexual intercourse within wedlock. Gaca’s second principle is ‘sexual apostacy’; I have argued that Philo has a rather more general notion in mind, namely obedience to the Torah \((Szesnat\ 1998a:88–89)\).
rationale behind this tension (Sly 1990:57). The text of *Contempl* generally assumes men as its subject: Philo says that he is compelled to speak of the virtues shown by *men* (ἄνδροι; 1);⁹ it is *men* who leave their property to their families when they take up the contemplative life (13), who leave ‘their brothers, their children, their wives, their parents’ behind (18)—no mention is made of women leaving their families. The members of the community at Lake Mareotis read not only Holy Scriptures (28) but also ‘writings of *men* of old (συγγάμματα παλαιών ἄνδρών), the founders of their way of thinking’ (29). The senior member (πρεσβύτατος) who addresses them seems to be a *man* (31)—and so is their ‘president’ (πρόεδρος; 79–80)—which is underlined by the walled separation of women and men in common meetings on sabbaths, which ‘allows women to hear’, the implication being that the speaker is a *man* standing in the men’s section. Finally, while Philo refers to the community members as ‘people (ἄνθρωποι) of good birth and high character and trained practice in philosophy’ (69), it must be recognised that he generally does not include women when he refers to ἄνθρωποι (cf Sly 1990:59–70), which suggests that, yet again, Philo would have had *men* in mind here.

Nevertheless, Philo notes the presence of women in the community at Lake Mareotis. Although, significantly, women do not appear in the first, general section on people who live the contemplative life (1–21), Philo specifically mentions them as part of the group at Lake Mareotis (22–90). Their first mention is occasioned by Philo’s description of ‘the common sanctuary’ (τὸ κοινὸν σεμνεῖον) in which the group meets on the Sabbath (32). One part of it is reserved for men, another for women (γυναίκες): ‘for women too regularly make part of the audience with the same ardour and the same sense of their calling’. A wall separates the men and women, allowing the women to hear the speaker in the men’s section, but also ‘to maintain the modesty (αἰδώς) becoming women’s nature’ (33). Female figures are mentioned again at the special feast of the group (68):

The feast is shared by women also, most of them aged virgins (ἀνεστιῶνοι δὲ καὶ γυναίκες, ὅν πλεῖστοι γηραιοὶ παρθένοι), who have kept their chastity (ἀγνεία) not under compulsion, like some of the Greek priestesses, but of their own free will in their ardent yearning for wisdom. Eager to have her [wisdom] for their life mate, they have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to the birth unaided, because the Father has sown in her spiritual rays enabling her to behold the verities of wisdom.

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⁹ In the following, references to *De Vita Contemplativa* are usually placed in simple brackets in the text.
Finally, women appear again in the hymns sung at the feast, at first indirectly: ‘all (males) and all (females)’ (πάντες τε καὶ πάσαι) chant refrains (80). Later, women and men form two choirs (83) who sing until sunrise: separately at first, they later join to form a single choir, imitating the choir at the Red Sea (85) led by Moses and Miriam (87), creating harmonious concord, true music (88).

There seems to be considerable scholarly consensus (with notable exceptions) that Philo had a positive view of the Therapeutrides' philosophical capabilities. For instance, Harrison has recently interpreted the presence of the Therapeutrides in the context of her claim that 'the place of gender in Philo's anthropology is far less monolithic' than Sly (1990) or Aspegren (1990) suggest. According to Harrison, Philo's use of the Platonic image of spiritual childbirth implies (and Contempl 68, cited above, seems to be related to this) that Philo envisages the spiritually mature man as having feminine characteristics along with masculine ones; that is, men are called to become virgins, be impregnated by the divine, and bear spiritual children. Philo also recognizes that some women, such as those belonging to the ascetical Therapeutae, can exercise these positive feminine capacities, but his main focus is on men (Harrison 1995:520–521; emphasis mine).11

Kraemer, although arguing largely the opposite of Harrison, suggests that Philo 'accepted and approved of [the old virgins'] life' in the community (1989:356).12 Similarly, while emphasising the aspect of male domination in Contempl in her first book, Philo's Perception of Women (1990), Sly nevertheless appeared to me to accept that Philo, from his point of view, really intends to portray the Therapeutrides in a positive fashion. Sly notes that in the first-century Jewish community of Alexandria, as depicted by Philo, there would hardly be the space for women to grow old as virgins (1990:209).

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10 That is, their capabilities in Philo's view. What the Therapeutrides' standing in their community was is not my concern here (but see Kraemer 1989).
11 See also her earlier article on Philo (1994). This is not the place to question Harrison's argument as such, which she develops on the basis of Philo's allegorical interpretation. My point is that if one approaches the question of the presence of women at Lake Mareotis from a different angle, a different set of conclusions suggests itself.
12 Although I largely agree with Kraemer's argument, I do not share her view that the Therapeutrides embody the virginal figures of his allegorical interpretations, which make them no longer female, and for which reason Kraemer argues that 'the Therapeutrides were no longer women and therefore no longer subject to his criticism of women' (1989:356). As indicated, I regard Philo's interpretation of the Biblical matriarchs which turn into virgins as a matter which remains purely in the allegorical realm; that is, Philo does not apply this to the contemporary, social realm. However, this is a separate issue which needs further elaboration elsewhere (see also Szesnat 1998b chap 4).
She suggests, therefore, that Philo might have in mind women who are no longer sexually active, and refers to Spec 1.129 in that regard. In that passage, Philo speaks of the virgin-like state of a childless widow who is the daughter of a priest: she ought to return to her father to enjoy her share of the first-fruits that are given to her father, just as she did when she was a virgin (i.e. before her marriage): ‘For in a way, she is still a virgin in capacity (πρόπον γάρ τινα καὶ νῦν ἐστι δυνάμει παρθένος), without husband and children, having nobody else for refuge but her father.’ The point of comparison here lies only in her vulnerable economic and legal status (cf Spec 2.125, 4.178; Virt 114): she is not δυνάμει παρθένος in any other sense.

However, developing a point she made on Brooten’s observations (1982) on the leadership positions of contemporary women in nearby Leontopolis, Sly (1990:211 n 44) later argues that in Contempl, Philo writes an account of the community at Lake Mareotis which allows for certain women to live the life of meditative contemplation and study (traditionally the reserve of men) while remaining in non-threatening positions vis-a-vis men’s leadership functions (1995:146). Indeed, she says: ‘Sometimes Philo gives the impression that he would like to wish them away’ (1995:145). In this regard, I am in agreement with Sly’s work. From the perspective of Philo’s problematisation of contemporary women, boys, sex, and desire, presupposing that Philo’s view of what ‘the female’ constitutes is as negative as my previous comments suggest, Philo would not be welcoming the presence of women at Lake Mareotis, and would not be (indirectly) supporting permanent virginity for contemporary women in his description of the Therapeutrides. In my view, Philo mentions γυναίκες (and not, at first, παρθένοι!) as part of the community simply because they were in fact part of it. Philo apparently had no influence over the practices of the Therapeutæ/Therapeutrides. He does not claim to have been part of their community. Yet he could not deny the women’s presence, for their location was too close to Alexandria. To explain their presence, he is forced to invoke the image of the virgin, contradicting his own use of γυνή in other parts of Contempl (remembering that for Philo, παρθένοι and γυναίκες belong to different orders of beings). The ‘undefiled’, ‘pure’ status of virgins is the only way in which he can imagine female figures positively. Yet the real presence of women at Lake Mareotis seems to have forced Philo to admit that not even all of these women are in fact ‘aged virgins’: they are mostly aged virgins (πλειόσταται γυναικείοι παρθένοι; 68). Philo’s use of πλειόσταται, I would suggest, is not accidental: the ‘real’ Therapeutrides may not have

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13 I am most grateful to Prof Sly for correcting me on my earlier position which I based on her first book. I am all the more satisfied that my suggestions are in agreement with her argument in her latest work.
been virgins after all. Viewed in this light, then, the reference to the age of these women is a matter of the politics of reputation. Philo could hardly write that the Therapeutae lived together with a number of young virgins: this would have invited the kind of ‘knowing laughter’ which accompanied the frequent re-telling of the story of Socrates spending a night alone with the beautiful (and willing) Alkibiades without having sexual intercourse with him (Plato, *Symp* 216c–219e; cf Boswell 1980:47).

Philo’s use of the virgin motif for the women at Lake Mareotis would then be a very reluctant one. It is no accident that there are no contemporary older female figures in Philo’s writings who are called παρθένοι. He has to make use of this motif because for him, these women cannot possibly be γυναικες and be positively valued; hence they have to be παρθένοι. As a result, he stresses the notion of spiritual childbirth, and wisdom as life-mate (68): this is explicitly for those women only, not for the men, as Kraemer points out (1989:355; cf Mattila 1996:126 n 26). For these women, this motif fulfills the duty of procreation at least in name, and that is the reason why Philo uses it only in respect of women: the men in the community have already fulfilled their procreational duty by fathering children (they leave children behind; 13, 18). Nevertheless, Philo does not exploit this image as much as he could have: the obvious link with the allegorical biblical virgins or with the creation story is entirely missing. There is not even a fleeting reference to Sarah, although for ‘aged virgins’, this would be the perfect place: for the allegorical Sarah ‘turned into a virgin’ again (*Cher* 50). As in the rest of his work, Philo leaves this image of Sarah, the post-menopausal woman, the ‘passions now calmed in her’ (*Spec* 2.54), entirely to the realm of allegory (pace Kraemer 1989:353–354). Even within *Contempl*, a writing which uses little explicit allegorical interpretation, such an omission is surprising, considering Philo’s perception of women.

Philo, then, does not encourage the kind of arrangement which allows the Therapeutrides to exist, apparently side by side, almost on an equal basis, with the (male) Therapeutae. In a recent essay, Hay noted several ‘value conflicts’ between the views of Philo and the Therapeutae/Therapeutrides,

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14 Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Philo, in *Cher* 48, using the language of mystery cults, calls for restraint in imparting ‘these things’ to the uninitiated. Sly cites an apt comment of Nikiprowetzky: ‘when Philo is going to present an argument that some people would ridicule, he hedges it in mystery language, and explains that it is intended only for the “initiates”’ (Sly 1990:134). In the context of *Cher* 48, Philo would have been worried about the possible misunderstanding of his image of divine intercourse with a human female (ἐρώς γάμος!), but also, I would suggest, the possibility that, if taken literally, post-menopausal women would ‘turn into virgins’ and become potentially powerful figures, usurping the role of men.
including the status of women; my views tend to corroborate his argument (Hay 1992:674–675). It is important to stress that Philo never advocates virginity for ‘real’ women, even if they are exceptional: the Therapeutides are forced on him like the biblical figures, which the pentateuchal text presents, and like the grammatical gender of certain key terms in Philo’s writings (e.g. η φύσις or η σοφία).15 The same applies to Julia Augusta (i.e. Livia), the only contemporary woman to whom Philo ascribes a fully positive value.16 She is praised for ‘excelling her sex’ as her training gave manliness to her reasoning power (ἐκατέρωθεΐσα τον λογισμόν; Legat 320): Philo virtually turns her into a man. But, not surprisingly in the context of Legat, Philo did this for rhetorical and political purposes.17 Julia Augusta is not a model but a grudgingly granted exception.

Perhaps, then, in this instance the male, celibate Essenes are far more of an ideal community for Philo than the community at Lake Mareotis. Regardless of Philo’s distinction between the ‘active’ and the ‘contemplative’ life, Philo would prefer the Essenes to the Therapeutae/Therapeutides in respect of their exclusively male community status (Hypoth 11.14). Like Josephus, he must have heard that the Essenes were a celibate, male community (whether true or not, and for what reasons, is another matter), and he exploits this fully in Prob and Hypoth: the Essenes fit into his attitude to women, the Therapeutides do not.

In this article, I have posed the question whether the Therapeutides are positively valued by Philo. Contrary to what is usually assumed, I suggest that the reality of the presence of women at the Mareotic Lake forced Philo to find a positive role for them in the form of ascribing the status of permanent virgins to them: they are a concession, not the ideal. As a result, permanent female virginity is not actually an option which Philo would advocate for contemporary women: marriage is the ethically acceptable and, I would suggest, implicitly preferable norm for Philo. This is in spite of the fact

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15 On the gender aspects of Philo’s concepts of σοφία and φύσις, see Mattila (1996).
16 Perhaps I also ought to mention the case of the ‘Dardanian women taken prisoners by the Macedonians’ (Prob 115) who were so ‘manly’ that they preferred killing their children rather than letting them grow up in slavery, in spite of the ‘fact’ that women, in Philo’s view, are ‘endowed by nature with little sense’ (τὸ φύσει ὀλγόφρονα; Prob 117). One should note that citing certain historical cases of exemplary and necessarily unusual behaviour is not uncommon in classical literature (e.g. Thucydides on Korkyrian wives helping their husbands’ class-struggle by throwing tiles from the rooftops onto the heads of the oligarchs: ‘their endurance of the din of battle is “unnatural”, para phusin’; Winkler 1990:20).
17 Placed on the writing tablet of Agrippa (Legat 276–329), the purpose of this section is to placate Caligula for contradicting his ancestors’ attitude to the Jewish people. On Legat, see Smallwood (1970).
that his apparently positive description of the virginal Therapeutrides, and his allegorical interpretation in particular, opens this possibility for the early church, in parts of which female virginity could later be regarded as preferable to the control of desire in marriage. Of course, Philo was not the only source for such notions in the early church: Paul could be read in this way, and so could some ‘pagan’ philosophers. But that is another issue.18

WORKS CONSULTED


Heinemann, I 1934. Therapeutai. PW s v


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