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Moses and Pythagoras: Arithmology as an Exegetical Tool in Philo

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This short communication must restrict itself to a few representative illustrations of an important exegetical method that can be observed in the various writings of Philo of Alexandria, particularly in those treatises which deal with the account of the creation. Philo consistently and systematically uses the neo-Pythagorean understanding of the meaning of numbers in order to demonstrate the scientifically correct and thus intellectually respectable character of Moses' account of the creation. According to his own testimony, Philo even produced a special treatise, *On Numbers*, now lost. Philo's use of numbers as an exegetical device should be called 'arithmology,' and not, as is frequently done, 'number mysticism.' There is nothing mystical and nothing mysterious in the whole matter. The numbers in Genesis are there for a purpose, but they do not veil any esoteric teachings. On the contrary: the numbers demonstrate the universal character of Moses' account which can be understood by anyone who has had a routine education in the encyclical subjects. Numbers are internationally understood, and the meaning Philo imparts to them is that of a Hellenistic philosophy, neo-Pythagoreanism. Significantly, there exists not a single instance of *gematria* in the extant corpus of Philo. Numbers, furthermore, are not dependent upon sense-perception, and thus they possess a degree of permanence which nothing in this sensible world can equal, not even the visible heavens - numbers are prior even to them.

There can be no better way to demonstrate the truth and correctness of Moses' account and of the biblical picture of the universe than by showing the agreement that exists between the numbers given in Genesis and the pattern of the widely accepted Greek cosmology.

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Philo, of course, insists that he is an exegete and not an eisegete. He does not impart any meaning to the text that is not already there. It is not Philo who applies neo-Pythagorean arithmology to the biblical text. That had already been done by Moses himself (*Allegory* 1:4): "Moses' wish . . . is to exhibit alike the things created of mortal kind and those that are incorruptible as having been formed in a way corresponding to their proper numbers."

The most explicit passage in which Philo himself lets us see the successive steps of his exegetical procedure is to be found in *Opificio* 14. The biblical text states that the world was created in six days. Why? -

- a) creation, which is the change from chaos to cosmos, involves order;
- b) order, in turn, involves number;
- c) among all the numbers within the decad, the one most appropriate for creation and productivity is six: six is the first perfect number ($1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$), six combines both the active/male (odd) and the passive/female (even) elements, since it is the product of the first digit in each of these series: $2 \times 3 = 6$.

All of this is by no means coincidental. In the same passage, Philo states: "For it was necessary ($\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota\gamma\alpha\rho$) that the world, being the most perfect of all things that have come into existence, should be constituted in accordance with a perfect number, namely six."

Furthermore: the number six must not be understood to mean a quantity of days. The decisive factor is that six is a perfect number. That means that in Philo numbers possess a force of their own which is entirely independent of their character as quantitative qualifiers.

Similarly, the cosmic significance of the number seven is indicated by the fact that the seventh day is a universal festival, it is the birthday of the cosmos (*Opificio* 89). The glory of the number seven is reflected in the seven zones girdling heaven (*Opificio* 112), the seven spheres of the planets (*Opificio* 113), and the constellations of Ursa Maior and the Pleiades, consisting of seven stars each. In addition, Philo lists almost all the occurrences of the number seven that had been compiled in the pseudo-Hippocratic work on the hebdomad.

For Philo, of course, the universe has its real center in the Jewish temple and its traditional cult. There is a direct relationship between the cosmos and the tabernacle built by Moses. The tabernacle reflects the cosmic order. This basic conception Philo demonstrates through the use of arithmology.

The tabernacle is, and has to be, a copy of the cosmos (*Vit. Mos.* 2:88): "For it was necessary ($\eta\nu\gamma\alpha\rho\ \alpha\nu\alphaγκ\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\nu$), in framing a temple of man's making, dedicated to the Father and Ruler of All, he (Moses) should take substances like those with which that Ruler had made the All." There are, e.g., four pillars at the end of the tabernacle, because "in the tabernacle everything is a symbol of corporeal things, while incorporeal things start above the tetrad" (*QE* 2:93). This is a reflection of the account given in *Opificio* 49: according to the Pythagorean system, four is the lowest number which represents a solid body; the sensible world is composed of a mixture of four elements (fire, air, water, earth), and consequently "four was made the starting point of the creation of heaven and the world" (*Op.* 52). More than that: because the number four is so important in the decad - it is potentially what ten is in reality - God "arranged the heaven on the fourth day" (*Op.* 53).

One of the clearest examples of the liturgical representations of the cosmic order can be seen in the construction of the Menorah: its seven lamps represent the seven planets, with the dominating sun in the center and three each of the lesser planets on either side (*QE* 2:75). The lamp-stand itself is made of "one piece of pure gold" (*Ex.* 25:36). This provides Philo with a welcome opportunity to combine the description of a Hebrew liturgical instrument, the Menorah, with a Greek mythological interpretation of the number seven. The use of a Greek mythological theme - the motherless birth of the ever-virgin Athena - in connection with the description of a Hebrew sacred object is worth noting (*Heres* 216): "the One, alone and absolutely pure, has begotten the Seven, whom no mother bore, begotten her by himself alone and employing no other medium whatsoever."

Associated with the sanctuary and cult are the people of Israel, the people chosen by God. Even this theological position is given by Philo an arithmological explanation: all males in Israel are commanded to be circumcised on the eighth day. It is this "eighth day" which sets Israel apart. Eight is the first cubic number, and since a cube is the same on each of its six sides, it is a symbol of equality; thus eight is a number symbolising equality.

Philo now argues as follows (QE 3:49, commenting on Gen. 17:12): the first hebdomad of creation refers to those who are naturally righteous. But with the number eight a second hebdomad begins, and this refers to those who are righteous by choice. In Philo's own words: "The number eight, which indicates equality, is assigned to the sacred, but not the first, place in the order of rank. Thus he symbolically indicates that he has adapted the first nation naturally to the highest and utmost equality and righteousness. And it is the foremost of the human race, not through creation or in time, but by the prerogative of virtue, the righteous and equal being cognate and unified as if one part."

To summarise: Philo knows basically three realms of the sacred: the cosmos, the people of Israel (not the land!), and, the sanctuary with its ritual and utensils. Each of these realms is arranged according to the same, coherent pattern. This pattern is not esoteric or mysterious. It is accessible to the use of arithmology and, therefore, of universal validity. Pythagoras was a great man, and he is recognised as such by Philo - but Pythagoras merely rediscovered what Moses had already recognised as the key to the understanding of the harmony of the cosmos. By rediscovering Pythagoras, Philo, so he could claim, has rediscovered the key to the universal understanding of Torah.