

CAIN AND ABEL AS CHARACTER TRAITS:
A STUDY IN THE ALLEGORICAL TYPOLOGY
OF PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA¹

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The writings of Philo of Alexandria contain three extensive treatments of the Cain and Abel narrative: *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, *The Worse Attacks the Better*, and *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain*. This paper will argue that Philo's interpretation of Cain and Abel is typological, and that the types in question are both cosmological and psychological. The types of Cain and Abel are presented as two aspects of the human soul, representing the human capacity for good and the human capacity for evil. Consequently, reflection on these two types can be a source of moral teaching.

My argument may sound controversial. For Philo is sometimes said not to practice typological interpretation at all, but rather allegorical interpretation, and the two kinds of interpretation are sometimes thought to be mutually exclusive. Before turning to the details of Philo's interpretation of the Cain and Abel narratives, then, I will first discuss the nature of typology and its relationship to allegory. As I will argue, the idea that they are mutually exclusive arises from particular theological presuppositions and has unfortunate consequences for the study of the history of ancient biblical interpretation. I will also question the claim that Philo does not engage in typological interpretation by considering Philo's interpretations and terminology. Philo's interpretation of the story of Eve's children, I will argue, is at once *both* typological and allegorical, and it provides an important illustration of what is theologically and historiographically at stake.

¹ I have benefited from the incisive comments of John Cavadini, Mary Rose D'Angelo, Paul Franks, Eric Gruen, Graham Hammill, Blake Leyerle, John P. Meier, Judith Newman, David O'Connor, Michael Signer and Gregory E. Sterling.

I

Allegory and typology have often been contrasted as two fundamentally different ways of interpreting Scripture. While allegorical interpretation has been said to focus on the cosmic and the spiritual, typological interpretation has been characterized as more historical and literal.² However, although it is true that allegorical interpretation tends to be cosmological and that typological interpretations tend to be oriented towards history, the distinction between the two is less clear-cut than one might think. Since the reformation, scholars have denigrated allegorical interpretation (e.g., in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and of Origen) because it appeared far removed from the literal sense of Scripture. Instead, typological interpretation (e.g., in the writings of Paul) was celebrated.³ The focus on the literal sense of Scripture—and, since the enlightenment, on historical study of the Bible—produced anti-allegorical polemics that still find their way into current scholarship.

Philo himself uses the term “*typos*” throughout his writings, so one would think that there is good reason to call his interpretations typological.⁴ Still many scholars deny that Philo engages in typological exegesis at all. For example, Goppelt writes:

Philo’s exposition of patriarchal history contains no typological interpretation at all. Whenever the historicity of the patriarchs has not been completely destroyed by allegory, they are presented as ethical “types,” or ideals, and do not fit our definition according to which a type must point to something greater in the future.⁵

In this passage, typological interpretation is restricted to a particular kind of historical typology that can be found in the New Testament. Central use of the term “*typos*” in an interpretation is insufficient, according to Goppelt, for classification of that interpretation as typological. It is also required that the interpretation operate within the

² J. Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, London 1960 and Jon Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, Leiden 2000, esp. 33–45; K.J. Woolcombe, “The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology”, in *Essays on Typology*, Naperville, 1957, 39–75.

³ See Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation*, Chicago, 1995, 34–76.

⁴ E.g., *De Opif. Mundi* 19, 34, 71; *Leg.* 1.61, 1.100, 3.83; *Sacr.* 135, 137; *Det.* 76–78, 83; *Post.* 94, 99; *Deus* 43–44; *Mos.* 2.76; *Decal.* 101.

⁵ L. Goppelt, *TYPOS: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, Grand Rapids 1982, *TYPOS*, 46.

framework of salvation history. It is in this sense of historicity⁶ that typology is said to be historical, whereas allegorical exegesis is said to be symbolic, spiritual and interested only in the cosmic and the eternal, not in the narrative of Scripture.

It seems an odd policy to apply the term “typological interpretation” only to interpretations with particular theological presuppositions. Indeed, others use such presuppositions to distinguish different *species* of typology instead. Thus, for example, Woolcombe writes:

There is no *theological* similarity whatever between the typology of Philo and that of St Paul. The only point of contact between the two writers is their common use of the typological vocabulary. But whereas in St Paul the vocabulary is harnessed to the exposition of God’s redemptive work in history, in Philo it is harnessed to allegorism. It is in fact hardly possible to separate typology from allegorism in Philo, and if the word typology must be used of certain aspects of Philonic exegesis, it should always be qualified by the adjective *symbolic*, in contradistinction to the *historical* typology of the New Testament.⁷

However, the extreme language in this passage—“no *theological* similarity whatever”, nothing more than a *lexical* “point of contact”—suggests that it has the same underlying motivation as the outright denial that Philo practices typological interpretation: to enforce the sense of a radical distinction between Jewish and Christian modes of exegesis. From a scholarly viewpoint, such motivations should be suspect. For they are all but bound to lead to the effacement of the profound exegetical and theological continuities between ancient Judaism and early Christianity.⁸

Nevertheless, Woolcombe is right to say that, it is “hardly possible to separate typology from allegorism in Philo”. Philo’s typological interpretation should be seen as a species of allegorical interpretation. Indeed, as the term “allegorism” suggests, Philo is interested in explaining the cosmic significance of biblical texts. This interest should not, however, be misrepresented as incompatible with respect for the

⁶ See Luxon, 53: “The real reality signified in typology turns out to be every bit as ahistorical, spiritual, eternal, timeless, ever present (and so, historically speaking, ever absent) as God and his majesty, the very things typology was first defined as prohibited from figuring.”

⁷ Woolcombe, “The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology”, 65.

⁸ On the deep connections between Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the start of the Common Era*, Cambridge, 1998, and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: Hybrids, Heretics, and the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia 2004.

literal meaning of the biblical text, whether narrative or legal. As Goppelt writes:

He [Philo] retells and explains biblical history and the very details of patriarchal and Mosaic history. Above all, he insists that the literal sense of the Law must be fulfilled, quite apart from its deeper meaning (Migr. Abr. 89–93; Exsecr. 154).⁹

For Philo, the narrative of Israel is the story of a community that strives for perfection by observing Mosaic Law. But observance of Mosaic Law requires not only attention to the laws in the Torah but also use of biblical narratives within a moral pedagogy rooted within a deep account of the complexity of the human soul. Indeed, as I will argue, Philo's typological analysis of the Cain and Abel narratives should be understood as an exercise not only in cosmology but also in moral psychology and *paideia*.¹⁰

II

It is not difficult to show that the term *tupos* plays an important role in Philo's exegesis. For example, in *De Opificio Mundi* 18, *tupoi* are implemented by the creator from the archetype or paradigm of the overall plan for the cosmos:

Thus after having received in his own soul, as it were in wax, the *figures* of these objects severally, he carries about the image of a city which is the creation of his mind. Then by his innate power of memory, he recalls the images of the various parts of this city, and imprints their types yet more distinctly in it: and like a good craftsman he begins to build the city of stones and timber, keeping his eye upon his *pattem* and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in each case to the incorporeal ideas.

In another example from *De Decalogo* 10–11, Philo describes transgressions upon the soul as *tupoi* and suggests that re-educating the soul is a precondition for receiving the law:

He who is about to receive the holy laws must first cleanse his soul and purge away the deep-set stains which it has contracted through

⁹ Goppelt, *Tupos*, 48.

¹⁰ Cf. John Chrysostom, *On Vainglory*, 39 where the Cain and Abel narrative is taken to be an important text for moral pedagogy. See also L. Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria", *J ECS* 9 (2001), 3–25.

contact with the motley promiscuous horde of men in cities. And to this he cannot attain except by dwelling apart, nor that at once but only long afterwards, and not till the *marks* which his old transgressions have imprinted on him gradually grown faint, melted away and disappeared.

As in the above two examples, Philo's writings are replete with references to *tupos*. In fact, "*tupos*" is a prominent member of a chain of words that appear in Philo's interpretations. Other members of the chain include "*eikon*" (image or copy), "*character*" (stamp, standard, or figure of letters, but also character type) and "*phantasia*" (impression or appearance). Perhaps it is helpful to think of *tupos* as *character*¹¹ or, more specifically, character trait. The English or Greek word "*character*" like "*type*" has a meaning with two dimensions.

1) A *tupos* or *character* is a legible imprint. It is a mark left by something else, which the mark now resembles as an image resembles an original. I will call this the copying dimension of the meaning of *tupos*. A *tupos* is a copy or *eikon* of some original, which Philo calls an *archetupos* or *paradigma*. For example, according to Philo the archetype of evil is Cain, so every self-lover shares in Cain's sin and in the murder of Abel:

Wherefore let every lover of self, surnamed "Cain," be taught that he has slain that which shares Abel's name, the specimen, the part, the *impression* stamped to resemble him, not the original, not the class, not the pattern, though he fancies that these, which are imperishable, have perished together with the living beings. Let some one say, taunting and ridiculing him: What have you done, poor wretch? Does not the God-loving creed, which you imagine you have annihilated, live with God? You have proved to be your own murderer, having slain by guile that which alone had the power to enable you to live a guiltless life. (*Det.* 78)

Thus according to Philo, types are less perfect than the originals, yet they imitate the originals and resemble them as copies of those originals.

2) A *tupos* or character trait is a disposition to act in a particular way, a virtue or a vice. It is a disposition that a human being may acquire through habit or education. I will call this the psychological dimension of the meaning of *tupos*. Here it is important to note that, as with a piece of wax, a character trait imprinted upon a human

¹¹ See, e.g., *Leg.* 1.61 where *character* is a synonym for *tupos*.

soul may be effaced, and the soul may be restamped with a different, even opposite character trait. Hence the fragility of virtue. For there is no guarantee that a soul will retain the good character with which it has been imprinted. As Philo writes:

The mind, like wax, receives the impress and retains it vividly, until forgetfulness, the opponent of memory levels out the *imprint*, and makes it indistinct, or entirely effaces it. (*Deus* 44)

But the wax analogy also implies the possibility of repentance. For a bad character trait, just like a good one, may be replaced. Here Philo is perhaps reworking Plato's discussion of the waxen imprints upon the soul in *Theaetetus* 191c ff. However, Plato is concerned with the apprehension and retention of knowledge, while Philo focuses on the moral formation of the soul through action.

Philo seems to believe, not only that all human beings have the capacity for virtuous behavior, but also that everyone is actually born in a state of goodness. It is then left to each individual to reinforce this innate goodness through good action, or else it will be compromised through transgression. Notably, not every place is conducive to virtuous behavior. Most famously, Philo insists that the city is a place of corruption. That is why Israel must leave Egypt and receive the law in the desert (*Decal.* 11).

It is helpful to compare Israel's need to leave the city with the philosopher's need to leave the cave in Plato's *Republic*, Book VII. The philosopher returns to the cave to facilitate the enlightenment of his fellows, and to put in order the city and its citizens as well as themselves (*Republic* 539e–540b). Similarly, the Israelites must sojourn in the wilderness so that they may eventually constitute a new more perfect city in accordance with the law received in the wilderness.

In order to bring together the cosmological and psychological dimensions of Philo's typology, it is helpful to note that the laws themselves are described as *tupoi*, images or impressions which the Israelites are told to stamp upon their hearts. Cosmologically speaking, the law of Moses is a copy of the law of nature.¹² To live in accordance with the law of Moses is to live in accordance with the cos-

¹² See my article "A Written Copy of the Law of Nature: an Unthinkable Paradox?" *StPhA* 15 (2003) forthcoming.

mic order created by God. Psychologically speaking, to observe Mosaic law is to efface the evil that results from transgression and foolishness, and to restamp one's soul with the character of goodness and virtue. Consider Philo's discussion of how ceasing from work on the seventh day enables a soul to live in accordance with the great archetype:

Let us not then neglect this great archetype of the two best lives, the practical and the contemplative, but with that pattern ever before our eyes engrave in our hearts the *clear image and stamp* of them both, so making mortal nature, as far as may be, like the immortal by saying and doing what we ought. (*Decal.* 101)

According to Philo, Cain exemplifies the *type* of wickedness, while Abel exemplifies that of holiness. In a sense, these biblical characters *are* types. For every detail related about them in the biblical narrative—their names, their chosen professions, their conceptions of God and their actions—every single detail contains a moral lesson about the impression of vice or virtue upon the human soul. I suggest that the reason for this is that Cain and Abel exemplify character traits, and their conflict exemplifies the conflict between these traits in every human soul. The conflict between Cain and Abel becomes an allegory of psychic conflict within the soul of every human being. Moreover they are to be understood as two aspects of a single soul.

According to Philo, Cain's deepest problem is his flawed conception of God, which is reflected in his very name. For Cain believes himself to possess all things. In contrast, Abel's "name means one who refers (all things) to God." (*Sacr.* 2).

The brothers' chosen professions reflect and reinforce their fundamental differences. Philo emphasizes that Cain's chosen profession involves him with earthly and inanimate objects. So he does not choose to prepare for a future life and to pay attention to living things. Similarly, Philo points out that Cain is called a tiller of the soil because he refers all things to himself and to his own mind (*Sacr.* 51). In fact, it is Cain's lack of understanding that the land is really foreign and belongs only to God that misleads him in the direction of a self-loving character trait and ultimately causes the destruction of his soul. In contrast, Abel chooses to tend living beings. Thus:

Abel's choice of work as a shepherd is understood as preparatory to rulership and kingship (*QG* 1.59)

The praiseworthiness of shepherding and its connection to leadership is developed further in *Life of Moses* and again in the essay on the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain:

With good reason then is Abel who refers all that is best to God called a shepherd. (*Sacr.* 51)

Unlike Cain, Abel is prepared for a future life:

So then when God added the good conviction Abel to the soul, he took away the foolish opinion, Cain. So too, when Abraham left this mortal life, “he is added to the people of God,” (Gen 25:8), in that he inherited incorruption and became equal to the angels, for angels—those unbodied and blessed souls—are the host and people of God. (*Sacr.* 5)

The birth of Abel only worsens Cain’s negative disposition. For Abel’s disposition is preferable to Cain’s, and so Cain’s soul abandons him when Abel is born.

It is a fact that there are two opposite and contending views of life, one which ascribes all things to the mind as our master, whether we are using our reason or our senses, in motion or at rest, the other which follows God, whose handiwork it believes itself to be . . . Now both these views or conceptions lie in the womb of the single soul. But when they are brought to the birth they must be separated, for enemies cannot live together forever. Thus, so long as the soul had not brought forth the God-loving principle in Abel, the self-loving principle in Cain made her his dwelling. But when she bore the principle which acknowledges the Cause, she abandoned that which looks to the mind with its fancied wisdom. (*Sacr.* 2-4)

As Philo goes on to say, the two opposite views of life represented by Cain and Abel cannot coexist in peace. Like Jacob and Esau, Cain and Abel must be separated:

She had conceived the two contending natures of good and evil and considered earnestly, as wisdom bade her, received a vivid impression of each, when she perceived them leaping and as in a skirmish pre-luding the war that should be between them. And therefore she besought God to show her what had befallen her, and how it might be remedied. He answered her question thus: “two nations are in the womb.” That was what had befallen her—to bear both good and evil. But again “two peoples shall be separated from thy womb.” This is the remedy, that good and evil be separated and set apart from each other and no longer have the same habitation. (*Sacr.* 4)

Note that, by the time of Jacob and Esau, the *philautos* (the self-lover) has become a type of a whole character and not just a character trait or type. However, according to Philo, Cain and Abel may represent character traits, but not complete characters.

The types of Cain and Abel do not live in sufficient separation, and they come into conflict as a result of their different conceptions of worship. Reinforcing through his daily actions his misconceived sense of his own importance, Cain's type is that of self-lover: the *philautos* (*Sacr.* 3). Consequently, he is in no hurry to thank God for what he takes to be the fruits of his own labor. And, when he gets around to it, he selfishly fails to offer the first of his crops to God. Instead, he keeps the first and the best for himself. Again, Cain understands the land to be his, while in fact it belongs to God. For Cain, humanity comes first and his sustenance is more important than the acknowledgment of God:

There are two charges against the self-lover (i.e., Cain): one that he made his thank-offering to God "after some days"¹³ instead of at once; the other that he offered of the fruits and not of the earliest fruits, or in a single word the first fruits. (*Sacr.* 52)

Those who assert that everything that is involved in thought or perception or speech is a free gift of their own soul, seeing that they introduce an impious and atheistic opinion, must be assigned to the race of Cain, who, while incapable even of ruling himself, made bold to say that he had full possession of all other things as well. (*Post.* 42)

These charges are not directed only at Cain. They are directed at every self-lover—that is at anyone who allows the type of Cain to become the dominant character trait in one's soul. Abel's sacrifice, however, illustrates further his God-loving nature:

But Abel brought other offerings and in other manner. His offering was living, Cain's was lifeless. His was first in age and value, Cain's but second. His had strength and superior fatness, Cain's had but weakness. For we are told that Abel offered of the firstlings of the sheep and of their fat (Gen 4:4). (*Sacr.* 88)

¹³ Philo is referring to Gen. 4:3.

Again, of Abel's sacrifice Philo writes:

Abel offers the firstlings not only from the first-born, but from the fat, showing that the gladness and richness of the soul, all that protects and gives joy, should be set apart for God. (*Sacr.* 136)

Again, Philo is not writing only about Abel, that is, the character in the Genesis narrative. For Philo, the narrative is about the character trait in the soul. The character trait of virtue is imprinted upon the soul in the form of grateful, joyous acknowledgement of God. Of course, God prefers Abel's sacrifice. And it is in jealous response to God's preferential treatment that Cain kills Abel. But this evil act does not solve Cain's problem. It only exacerbates his problem by removing the possibility that Cain will come under Abel's virtuous influence:

It would have been to the advantage of Cain, the lover of self, to have guarded Abel; for had he carefully preserved him, he would have been able to lay claim only to a mixed "half and half" life indeed, but would not have drained the cup of sheer unmitigated wickedness. (*Det.* 68)

Thus vice is self-destructive. Indeed, Philo argues that it is preferable to die like Abel than to live like Cain, in a state of eternal death:

But in my judgement and in that of my friends, preferable to life with impious men would be death with pious men; for awaiting those who die in this way there will be undying life, but awaiting those who live in that way there will be eternal death. (*Post.* 39)

Immediately after Cain's fratricide, God asks him, "Where is your brother?" According to Philo, the point of God's question is to offer Cain an opportunity to confess his sin and to repent:

Why does he who knows all ask the fratricide, 'Where is Abel, your brother?' He wishes that man himself of his own will shall confess, in order that he may not pretend that all things seem to come about through necessity. For he who killed through necessity would confess that he acted unwillingly; for that which is not in our power is not to be blamed. But he who sins of his own free will denies it, for sinners are obliged to repent. Accordingly he [Moses] inserts in all parts of his legislation that the Deity is not the cause of evil. (*QG* 1.68)

Cain rejects the offer to repent. Still, God's question, as interpreted by Philo, is of great significance. For it shows that repentance is always possible, even for someone whose vicious character is inscribed

in his very name. Consequently, although God created everything, including the archetype of evil, only man is responsible for the evil impressed upon his soul and realized in the world.

The murder of Abel certainly does not succeed in exterminating virtue from biblical history. For Seth, who is born after Abel's death, continues to exemplify the type of goodness and holiness exemplified by his dead brother.¹⁴ Later, all those who are deemed righteous are considered to be from the "seed of Seth," while all those who are deemed evil are said to be from the "seed of Cain."¹⁵

Those who assert that everything that is involved in thought or perception or speech is a free gift of their own soul, seeing that they introduce an impious and atheistic opinion, must be assigned to the race of Cain, who, while incapable even of ruling himself, made bold to say that he had full possession of all other things as well. But those who do not claim as their own all that is fair in creation, but acknowledge all as due to the gift of God, being men of real nobility, sprung not from a long line of rich ancestors but from lovers of virtue, must remain enrolled under Seth as the head of their race. (*Post.* 42)

This passage brings out two points to which I want to give special emphasis. First, in Philo's view, theology is the root of all good and of all evil. For it is first and foremost one's conception of God, and of one's own relation to the cosmos created by God, that impresses either the type of virtue or the type of vice upon one's soul. It is from one's theology that choices and actions flow, actions that tend to reinforce the initial impression of good or evil. And it is one's theology that determines whether one belongs to the race of Cain or to the race of Seth—although, as I have said, Philo thinks that repentance is always possible. Second, the story of Cain and Abel is important because they exemplify the ways in which the archetypes of virtue and vice—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil—may come to leave their copies upon the human soul. In Philo's view, our situation is fundamentally that of Cain and Abel. We inhabit the same cosmos, and the formation of our souls is no less dependent on our theological convictions, on the choices we make, on the actions we perform, and on the influences to which

¹⁴ Although the biblical text implies that Seth is a replacement for Abel, Philo explicitly rejects the idea that one person can replace another.

¹⁵ For further discussion about the descendents of Cain and Seth see the contributions of J. Tubach and G.P. Luttikhuisen to this volume, below, pp. 187–201 and 203–17.

we expose ourselves. So we have much to learn from Cain and Abel. For they pioneered the kind of life that each of us must live. And their tragic story exemplifies the pitfalls we must all seek to avoid.

Since Cain and Abel exemplify types—at once cosmological and psychological—it is not surprising that they are echoed by their successors in the biblical narratives. Thus Philo compares Abraham, Jacob, Isaac and Moses with Abel. And he compares Esau and Laban to Cain. In this way, Philo's typological interpretation of the Cain and Abel story enables him to use that story as a lens through which to read other biblical narratives.

At the same time, however, Philo also reads the Cain and Abel narrative through a lens provided by other biblical passages. In particular, Philo repeatedly connects Cain and Abel with *laws* that are given only later in the biblical story. This is because, I suggest, Cain and Abel represent the problem for which the law of Moses is the solution. As the story of Cain and Abel shows, we are all highly impressionable and therefore capable of great good or great evil, and each of us is responsible for the effects upon our soul of every choice or action. However, as I said earlier, the laws of Moses are images or impressions, which the Israelites are told to stamp upon their hearts. The laws provide, as it were, solutions to the problems exemplified by Cain. They are designed to implant healthy theological convictions, to efface evil impressions and to reinforce good ones. Thus, for example, the tiller of soil is commanded to bring the first fruits as an offering to God, and to profess God's dominion over a land to which the farmer is ultimately foreign. Philo's analysis of Cain brings out the wisdom of this law, which manifests a deep understanding of the human soul.

I have argued, then, that Philo's interpretation of the Cain and Abel narrative in Genesis 4 may justly be called typological, and that his typology has both cosmological and psychological dimensions. Indeed, the children of Eve have a special importance within Philo's biblical exegesis as a whole. For their story illustrates—in an exemplary fashion—some of the central presuppositions of Philo's exegetical endeavor: the impressionability of the human soul, which can be horrifying or sublime; the responsibility of each individual for himself or herself, which is endless; and the intimate relationship between cosmic structures and Mosaic laws, which both stem from a single creator and from a perfect paradigm.