

## Philo of Alexandria Builds a Better Atheist

J. Albert Harrill

1. Now just as the creature with many feet and that without feet, opposite species in the genus of creeping things, are proclaimed unclean, so also atheism and polytheism (ἡ ἄθεος καὶ πολύθεος), mutually antagonistic doctrines in the soul, are alike profane. Here is the indication of this: the Law has expelled both of these doctrines from the sacred assembly, atheism (ἡ ἄθεος), by debarring a eunuch from membership of it; polytheism, by likewise forbidding the son of a harlot to be a listener or speaker in it [Deut. 23:1–2]. For the sterile man is godless (ἄθεος); and the son of a whore is a polytheist (πολύθεος), being in the dark about his real father, and for this reason ascribing his begetting to many, instead of to one. (Philo, *The Migration of Abraham* 69; trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL).

2. I marvel too when I read of that sacred Word, which ran in impetuous breathless haste “to stand between the living and the dead (μέσος τῶν τεθνηκότων καὶ τῶν ζώντων).” For at once, says Moses, “the breaking was abated” [Num. 16:47–48]. And indeed how could all that shatters and crushes and ruptures our soul fail to be abated and lightened, when the God-beloved separates and walls off the consecrated thoughts, which veritably live, from the unholy (οἱ ἄνοστοι) which are truly dead (οἱ τεθνήκασιν πρὸς ἀλήθειαν)? For often proximity to the sick brings to the very healthiest the infection of their sickness and sure death in its train. But this fate was no longer possible to the consecrated, hedged in by the mightiest of pales, fixed in the midst to repel from the better sort the onslaught and inroads of the worse. Still more am I lost in admiration, when I listen to the oracles and learn how the cloud entered in the midst between the hosts of Egypt and Israel [Ex. 14:20]. For the further pursuit of the sober (ἐγκρατές) and God-beloved race (θεοφιλὲς γένος) by the passion-loving and godless (φιλοπαθὲς καὶ ἄθεος) was forbidden by that cloud, which was a weapon of shelter and salvation to its friends, and of offence and chastisement to its enemies (ἐχθροί). (Philo, *Who Is the Heir* 201–204; trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL)

3. Now according to nature these are the native-lands of the two ages: Egypt, that is passion (τὸ πάθος), of the age of childhood; Canaan, that is vice (κακία), of the age of adolescence. But the holy word, though it knows full well what are the native-lands of our mortal race, sets before us what we should do and what will be for our good, by bidding us hate the habits and the customs and the practices (τὰ ἔθη καὶ τὰ νόμιμα καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα) of those lands. ... So then the true life (ἡ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ζωὴ) is the life of him who walks (περιπατοῦντος) in the judgements and ordinances of God (ἐν ταῖς τοῦ θεοῦ κρίσεσι καὶ προστάξεσιν), so that the practices of the godless (τὰ τῶν ἀθέων ἐπιτηδεύματα) must be death (θάνατος). And what the practices of the godless (τὰ ἀθέων) are we have been told. They are the practices of passion and vices (τὰ πάθος καὶ κακιῶν), from which spring the many multitudes of the impious (ἄσεβεῖς) and the workers of unholiness (ἀνοσιουργοί). (Philo, *The Preliminary Studies* 85–87; trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL)

4. Let us, then, have recourse to the scientific mode of interpretation which looks for the hidden meaning of the literal words, and we shall escape from the difficulty and be able to give a reasonable account of the matter. We say, then, that the High Priest is not a man, but a Divine Word and immune from all unrighteousness whether intentional or unintentional. ...

The High Priest, so Moses says, “shall not go in to any dead soul” [Lev. 21:11]. Death of soul is a life in the company of vice, so that what is meant is that he is never to come in contact with any polluting object, and of these folly always stinks. To him there is betrothed moreover a maiden (παρθένης) of the hallowed people (ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ γένους), pure and undefiled and of ever inviolate intention (καθαρὰ καὶ ἀμίαντος καὶ ἀδιάφθορος εἰς αἰὶ γνώμη); for never is he wedded to a widow or one divorced or to a profane woman or to a harlot [Lev. 21:13–14], but against them he ever wages a truceless and unrelenting warfare. For hateful (ἐχθρός) to him is widowhood from virtue, and the plight of one cast out and driven from her doors, and any (marriage) conviction (πεῖσμα; rope, marriage-tie) that is profane (βέβηλος) and unholy (ἀνίερος). But the promiscuous, polyandrous cause of polytheism, or rather of evil atheism (τὸ δὲ πολυμιγὲς καὶ πολυάνδρον καὶ πολύθεον, ἄθεον μὲν οὖν κακόν), the harlot, he deigns not even to look at, having learned to love her who had adopted, as her one Husband and Father, God the All-sovereign. (Philo, *On Flight and Finding* 108, 113–15; trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL, alt.)