

On Providence: Fragment I

Philo of Alexandria



ON PROVIDENCE (FRAGMENT I)

From Eusebius P. E. 7.21.336b-337a

But that you may not think that I am here arguing in a sophistical manner, I will produce a man who is a Hebrew as the interpreter for you of the meaning of the scripture; a man who inherited from his father a most accurate knowledge of his national customs and laws, and who had learnt the doctrines contained in them from learned teachers; for such a man was Philo. Listen then, to him, and hear how he interprets the words of God.

Why, then, does he use the expression, "In the image of God I made Man," as if he were speaking of that of some other God, and not of having made him in the likeness of himself? This expression is used with great beauty and wisdom. For it was impossible that anything mortal should be made in the likeness of the most high God the Father of the universe; but it could only be made in the likeness of the second God, who is the Word of the other; for it was fitting that the rational type in the soul of man should receive the impression of the Word of God, since the God below the Word is superior to all and every rational nature; and it is not lawful for any created thing to be made like the God who is above reason, and who is endowed with a most excellent and special form appropriated to himself alone.

This is what I wish to quote from the first book of the questions and answers of Philo.

And the Hebrew Philo, in his treatise on Providence, speaks in this way concerning matter.

But concerning the quantity of the essence, if indeed it really has any existence, we must also speak. God took care at the creation of the world that there should be an ample and most sufficient supply of matter, so exact that nothing might be wanting and nothing superfluous. For it would have been absurd in the case of particular artisans, for them, when they are occupied in making anything, and especially anything of much value, to calculate the exact quantity of materials which they require; but for that being who is the original inventor of numbers and measures, and the qualities which exist and are found in them, to omit to take care to have just what was proper. I will speak now with all freedom, and say that the world had need for its fabrication of some precise quantity of materials, neither more nor less; since otherwise it

would not have been perfect, nor complete in all its parts, being thoroughly well made, nor would it have been made perfect of a perfect essence.

For it is an indispensable part of a workman who is thoroughly well skilled in his art, before he begins making any thing, to see that his materials are exactly sufficient; therefore a man, even if he were most eminently skilled in the knowledge of other things, still if he were not able altogether to avoid error, which is so natural to mortals, would be very likely to be deceived in respect of the quantity of materials which he required when he was about to proceed to the exercise of art; sometimes adding to it as too little, and sometimes taking away from it as too much. But that Being who is, as it were, a kind of fountain of all knowledge, was not likely to supply anything in deficient or in superfluous quantities, inasmuch as he employs measures elaborated in a most wonderful manner, so as to display perfect accuracy, and all of the most praiseworthy character. But he who is inclined to talk nonsense, at random, will easily do it, looking upon the different works of all artisans as causes, and as having been made in a more excellent manner, either by the addition or by the subtraction of some material or other. But it is the peculiar occupation of sophistry to quibble and cavil; while it is the task of wisdom to investigate accurately everything that exists in nature.