Angela Standhartinger

Best practice. Religious reformation in Philo’s representation of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides

In De vita contemplativa, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria portrays a group called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, living an ascetic life of study, fasting and religious celebration on the shores of Lake Mareotis outside of the city of Alexandria. His description strikingly resembles a group of Egyptian priests represented by his younger contemporary, the Stoic philosopher Chaeremon. This article focuses not so much on the reconstruction of the priestly group of the historical Therapeutae and Therapeutrides but rather on Philo, their historian and ethnographer, as a religious innovator. The first section places the writing in its literary context. The second presents a close reading of Philo’s representation of Therapeutic eusebeia in comparison to similar representations of Egyptian priestly groups from the first century CE. The third section demonstrates that Philo characterises the group as practitioners of a most eminent and ancient religious practice and thereby as a source of original and untouched truth. According to him, the group, with its methods of allegorical interpretation, also provides the most original philosophical interpretations of wisdom preserved in religious practices and writings. The final question raised is why in this text Philo hides not only the ethnic-religious identity of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides but also his own Jewish identity behind a Greek narrative persona.

In De vita contemplativa the Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria (d. after 40 CE) depicts a community of philosophers, male and female, who live outside Alexandria on Lake Mareotis. Philo calls the group Therapeutae and Therapeutrides.¹ In the first part of the work, he describes their settlement, their ascetic life, their allegorical studies, and their community meeting on the seventh day. The second part presents a detailed description of their festal banquet, during which, among other things, they dramatise the Exodus from Egypt.

¹ Contempl. 1–2.
Most scholars are convinced of the real historical existence of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides,² because on the one hand the location of their settlement, on Lake Mareotis, was so close to Alexandria that readers of Philo’s work would have found it easy to test his statements for themselves.³ In the introductory section of De vita contemplativa, Philo refers to his work on the Essenes.⁴ In contrast to this exclusively male society, the participation of women among the Therapeutae is striking.⁵ Joan Taylor makes use of this observation for her historical reconstruction of the society at Lake Mareotis.⁶

Nevertheless, the evidential basis for historical Therapeutae and Therapeutrides is extremely limited. Philo is our sole witness to their existence. It is also troublesome that he does not explain how he gained his information.⁷ He notes no relationship of his own to the group, despite the fact that elsewhere he speaks approvingly of periods spent in solitude.⁸ It is true that we can observe some differences between the ideals presented in De vita contemplativa and those in Philo’s other writings, such as the praise of unmarried women (Contempl. 68), the ascetic diet of bread and water, and the rejection of slavery, otherwise known only from his writings on the Essenes.⁹ Still, as became clear in the extensive discussion at the end of the nineteenth century over the authenticity of the work, De vita contemplativa is marked from beginning to end by the theology Philo presents throughout his extensive œuvre – including an overwhelming number of repetitive formulae.¹⁰

² The exceptions are Engberg-Pedersen (1999) and Ross S. Kraemer (2011, 57–115).
³ Cf. Daumas and Miquel (1963, 39–46); Taylor and Davies (1998, 10–14); Taylor (2003, 74–104). For an alternative location at the Temple of Serapis in Canopus see Moss (1999, 58–76).
⁴ Contempl. 1; cf. Prob. 75–91; Hypoth. 11.1–18. The Essenes had been also described by Pliny, HN 5.73; Josephus, BJ 2.119–127 and AJ 18.18–22. For a comparison of the Essenes with the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, see Schürer (1979, 591–597); Hayward (2000, 944–945). The identification of the Essenes with the Yahad group in the sectarian writings of Qumran is currently disputed.
⁵ Cf. Hypoth. 11.14. Elsewhere Philo seeks to limit the sphere of Jewish women to the house (Spec. 3.169; Flacc. 89), except on religious festivals (Spec. 3.171). Cf. Sly (1990). For the complexity of Philo’s picture of women cf. also Harrison (1995); Mackie (2014).
⁶ Taylor (2003, 173–347; 2001; 2004).
⁷ Hay (1992, 673; 1998, 167–168).
⁸ Spec. 3.1–2. However, Philo is critical of a life in isolation when he reflects in Leg. 2.85 on his own experience and, in Migr. 89–93, in reference to those who interpret Jewish customs solely in allegorical terms. Taylor (2003, 142–153), seeks to identify the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides with the radical allegorists of Migr. 89–93.
⁹ Cf. the same ideal among the Essenes in Prob. 79. Hay (1992, 673–676; 1998, 168–173).
¹⁰ See the very full demonstrations by Conybeare (1895, 25–153), and Wendland (1896, 720–731). For the debates on the authenticity of Philo’s work in the 19th century, see Al-Suadi (2010).
For this very reason I do not intend to base my reflections here on the assumption of historical Therapeutae and Therapeutrides but rather to focus on Philo the religious individual. What is the most fitting literary context for such an account of a group of worshippers of God? What might have been Philo’s wider aim in describing an ascetic group such as this, together with details of its religious rituals? To that end, I first discuss the issue of genre and then show how Philo inscribes the group on Lake Mareotis in Egypt within contemporary ethnographic discourse. In the third and final section, I return to the old question of the relation between the Therapeutae/Therapeutrides and regular Jewish practice in Philo’s day.

1. The genre of De vita contemplativa

The De vita contemplativa has been ascribed to a variety of different genres. It has carried the title Περὶ βίου θεωρητικοῦ (On the Contemplative Life) at latest from the time of Eusebius of Caesarea. But it is not a description of the exceptional life and moral character of an individual, like Philo’s De vita Mosis, but of a collective way of life. In the light of his analysis of the work’s elaborate rhetorical form, with its pointed contrasts between Therapeutic and pagan lifestyles, Manuel Alexandre has called it a “rhetorical encomium” and an “epideictic discourse”, which seeks to praise the ideal of the “eloquent philosopher”, by contrast to sophistic pagan practice, with the aim of countering the loss of Jewish identity. But Philo has nothing to say about the relationship of the Mareotic group to the Jews of Alexandria, and he never thematises anxiety about Jewish identity. For Troels Engberg-Pedersen, on the other hand, its general form is that of a moral-philosophical treatment that, in the wake of Aristotle, describes a life dedicated to theory and vision as the way that promises the greatest happiness.

The goal of Therapeutic life is eudaimonia. But he believes that it is best viewed

11 Cf. Euseb. Eccl. theol. 2.18.7. The title apparently refers to Contempl. 1 and 58: οἱ τὸν θεωρητικὸν ἡσύχασαν βίον: “(our people) who embrace the contemplative life”.
12 Stadter (2013, 1117), defines biography as an “account of the kind of life led by a historical person that also evaluates the subject’s character, goals, and achievements”.
13 Alexandre (2001, 319, see also 329–330): “It aimed not only to defend Moses against pagan detractors and Jewish infidels, but also to persuade, convince and move into action those Jews who were losing the essence of their faith and being identified with the pagan system of the day in a slow process of domesticating or reconfiguring their own Jewish identity”. For a definition of the genre as that of encomium see also Hay (2003, 333).
14 Engberg-Pedersen (1999, 41), with reference to Arist. Eth. Nic. 1.5 and 10.6–7.
15 Cf. Contempl. 11; 90, and Runia (1997).
as a fictional narrative, an “utopian fantasy done for a serious purpose”, closely related to Plato’s myth of Atlantis and Iambulus’s utopian account of the Island of the Sun. Philo, he thinks, is setting up an ideal Jewish society as a counter to, and negation of, all others, so that the De vita contemplativa should be understood as a generalised cultural critique. Picking up this observation, Mary Ann Beavis has undertaken a detailed comparison of Philo’s sketch and Iambulus’s utopian ‘novel’: both describe the location and the climate, the simplicity of food and clothing, social organisation, marriage and family, symposium culture, and the absence of slavery. But Philo’s description differs from Iambulus in locating his group in a specific place, the neighbourhood of Lake Mareotis in the Nile Delta, and in avoiding any hint of anything marvellous or paradoxical.

In drawing this conclusion, Beavis was inadvertently reviving an idea of Hans Lewy, who already in the 1920s had appreciated the ethnographic context of the work, though his ideas were subsequently more or less completely forgotten. The first century CE could look back to a long tradition, going back at least to Herodotus, if not his Ionian predecessors, of describing foreign peoples and their religious rituals and customs. Of course, historians and geogra-

16 Engberg-Pedersen (1999, 43–47), with reference to Pl. Ti. 19–26, and Diod. Sic. 255–60.
17 But he locates his ideal state in a familiar place and in the present time so that it may not be discredited as myth or fantasy, cf. Engberg-Pedersen (1999, 46–47).
18 For Beavis, Philo’s account “is a utopian construction of a real (ἀλήθεαν) community” (2004, 41); cf. eadem (2006, 58–68, at 68); Gilchrest (2013, 102–104).
19 Cf. Lewy 1929, 31 n. 4: “Philo […] with his tractate on the ‘theoretical form of life’ enters the discussion among Greek ethnographic popular philosophers, who sought the incarnation of their utopias of state and religious philosophy among the barbarian races. The Greeks found the union of sophisticated spirits and a philosophical bios especially in the priestly castes of the barbarians, among which, since Theophrastus [ap. Porph. Abst. 2.26 = frg. 584 A Fortenbaugh], the Jews were also reckoned. Now Philo contrasts the Jewish sect of the Therapeutae with the Egyptian priests, the Persian magi, the Babylonian Chaldeans, the Indian Brahmins and gymnosophists, the Celtic druids, etc., and combines all the characteristics that were praised in his depiction of the theoretical bios of the Therapeutae (cf. Prob. 72–74). Thus in his competitive work Philo is dependent on the topos of Greek ethnography” (my tr.). Bauer (1924, 408–409 and 416–417) had already made a similar point.
20 See the extremely brief reference (without mention of Lewy) by Sterling (1994, 688). Merrills (2004, 226–229), beginning from a quotation from Hom. Il. 13.5–6 in Contempl. 17, discovers parallels between the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides and Herodotus’s Scythians, the gymnosophists in the Alexander novel, and Tacitus’s peaceful Germanic tribes.
21 See, for example, the first four books of Herodotus, with the commentaries in Asheri et al. (2007); and esp. the extensive description of Egypt in Bk. 2 (based on Lloyd 1975–1988) and of Scythia in Bk. 4 (based on Hartog 1988). The most convenient treatment of his Ionian predecessors, esp. Hecataeus and Hellanicus, is still Pearson (1939). Diodorus provides another, even
phers depended for their ethnographic descriptions not so much on their own observation and research as on earlier writers, whose work they sometimes criticised. They were concerned not with empirical fieldwork in the modern sense but rather with describing foreign peoples living in distant and remote corners of the world in the form of digressions embedded in broader historical narratives. In this discourse, the manners and customs of foreign (“barbarian”) peoples were by no means uniformly condemned but might rather be praised for their supposedly ‘untouched’, or ‘unspoiled’ way of life, and its concomitant religious knowledge.

From the third century BCE onward, indeed, with the expansion of the Greek world thanks to Alexander’s conquests, indigenous authors who knew Greek, such as the Egyptian priest Manetho of Heliopolis (fl. 280 BCE), were able to participate in such discussions. In the following section I show that Philo’s depiction of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides adopts many of the conventions, themes and tropes of a historian writing about foreign people.

2. Philo’s representation of Therapeutic eusebeia

At the beginning of his work Philo presents himself as a scholarly historian. He does not intend to introduce anything of his own, “to improve upon the facts as is constantly done by poets and historians (ποιηταὶ καὶ λογογράφοι) through lack of excellence in the lives and practice which they record”. He thus takes up the approach of Thucydides, who claims that his History of the Peloponnesian War(s) is founded solely on good evidence: “Assuredly they [his proofs] will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet (ποιήτης) displaying the exaggeration of

more comprehensive, description of Egypt (1.10–98). On the history of ancient ethnography see Trüdinger (1918); Müller (1997); Rawson (1985, 250–266); Dench (2007).

22 Parker (2008, 113–116).

23 The term ‘ethnography’ is a modern neo-Greek term and was coined only in 1834 (Dench 2007, 494). Whether digressions on foreign peoples and their habits, gods, lifestyle, etc. in ancient historiographical and geographical writings constitute a literary genre of their own, has been much debated in recent years. See Almagor and Skinner (2013).

24 Cf. Dörrie (1972); Diehle (1994); Gruen (2011).

25 Manetho’s Aegyptiaka (FGrH 609 F1–28) is known only from the extensive quotations by Josephus and Christian authors. See Hornung (2012); Dillery (1999; 2013). It is possible also that Chaeremon offers us such an ‘auto-ethnography’ (see p. 138–142 below), but it is certainly true of Josephus’ Antiquities and Against Apion. Philo, Prob. 72–91 is also part of this tradition. For the influence of foreign peoples on Roman ethnography see Woolf (2011).

26 Contempl. 1. All translations of Contempl. are taken from Colson (1941, 112–169).
his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers (λογογράφοι) that are attractive at truth’s expense” (tr. R. Crawley). In the same vein, Philo desires to hold simply (ἀτεχνῶς) to the truth, for the “magnitude of virtue shown by these men” must not remain untold.

The fundamental purpose (προαιρήσεις) envisioned by ‘the philosophers’ is clear from their very title. They are called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides (θεραπευταί καὶ θεραπευτρίδες) “either because they profess an art of healing [...] which cures not only bodies but souls as well”, as the latter are beset by still worse ills, namely those that produce such things as lust, desire, sorrow, fear, greed, and injustice. Or else they were called Therapeutae and Therapeutrides “because nature and the sacred laws have schooled them to worship the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the One and more primordial than the Monad”. Etymologies of names are part of the standard repertoire in ancient accounts of foreign peoples. Whether the group called itself Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, and whether Philo’s etymologies correspond to their own view of themselves, is a question that must remain open.

Philo uses προαιρήσεις (purpose/purposiveness; Cont. 2; 17; 29; 33; 67; 79) to describe philosophical principles and attitudes toward life. For the concept, note Arist. Eth. Nic. 1114a10–11.

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27 Thuc. 1.21.1. Plutarch also criticises the unsubstantiated myths and errors of poets and historians (De Is. et Os. 20 [358F]).
28 The depiction of τὸ μέγεθος τῆς τῶν ἁνδρῶν ἁρετής is among the foremost duties ancient historians assigned themselves, the locus classicus being Hdt. 1.1, with Asheri (2007, 8–9 and 73). Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for example, thought that “Rome from the very beginning, immediately after its founding, produced infinite examples of virtue in men whose superiors, whether for piety or for justice or for life-long self-control or for warlike valour, no city, either Greek or barbarian, has ever produced” (Ant. Rom. 1.5.3.3, tr. E. Cary).
29 Philo uses προαιρήσεις (purpose/purposiveness; Cont. 2; 17; 29; 33; 67; 79) to describe philosophical principles and attitudes toward life. For the concept, note Arist. Eth. Nic. 1114a10–11.
30 Contempl. 2.
31 Cf. Bauer (1924, 401); Ganter (2014, 229–230); Woolf (2011, 23–24; 54 etc.). Philo derives the name ‘Essenes’ from ὡστότης (sanctity), “because they have shown themselves especially devout in the service of God, not by offering sacrifices of animals, but by resolving to sanctify their minds” (Prob. 75; cf. Hypoth. 11.1).
32 For this view, see Taylor (2003, 54–73).
33 For θεραπευταί as worshippers in Plato, note e.g. Phdr. 252c4–5 (Ares); Leg. 5, 740bc (θεῶν); the word is regularly used for worshippers of Isis und Serapis but also in relation to Asclepius, Mēn and the Syrian Gods. For the term therapeutēs in the epigraphic record, see the contribution of Georgia Petridou in this volume (Chapter 7). Philo can also say of proselytes that they are θεραπευταί τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος, ‘worshippers of the Truly Existing’ (Spec. 1.309), “rendering to Him [...] the supplication and service which are His right”, and that the Levites are θεραπευτικὸν γένος, ‘the ministering race’: Fug. 42; cf. Contempl. 11 and 21. See also Bergmeier
the second we hear of a designation of God that Philo also uses elsewhere. But it is scarcely recognisable as something formed by Judaism. Thus Plutarch can say of Apollo:

> In fact the Deity is not Many. [...] But Being must have Unity, even as Unity must have Being. [...] Wherefore the first of the god’s names is excellently adapted to him, and so are the second and third as well. He is Apollo, that is to say, denying the Many and abjuring multiplicity; he is Ieóżos, as being One and One alone; and Phoebus, as is well known, is a name that the men of old used to give to everything pure and undefiled. [...] Unity is simple and pure (tr. F.C. Babbitt).

When Philo calls God ‘the One’ (τὸ ὅν), ‘purer than the One’ (ἔνος εἰλικρινέστερον), and ‘more primordial than the Monad’ (μονάδος ἀρχεγονώτερον), he is thus echoing a Platonic idea that later Platonists, such as Plutarch, could also use for what we ordinarily think of as polytheistic gods, in this case Delphic Apollo.

Philo continues his portrayal of Therapeutic piety (εὐσέβεια) by comparing it favourably to other forms of divine worship, running through the identification of the four elements, fire, water, earth, and air, with gods (which he claims is the favourably too ther forms of divine worship, thus echoing a Platonic idea that later Platonists, such as Plutarch, could also use for what we ordinarily think of as polytheistic gods, in this case Delphic Apollo.

(2002, 47–48). The feminine form θεραπευτρίς seems to be Philo’s own invention; he also uses it in Somn. 1.322 and 2.273 to refer to the soul and in Post. 184 in reference to thought (διάνοια), but no such usage independent of Philo has yet been demonstrated.

34 Cf. Schönböck (1962, 221).

35 By contrast with Exod. 3:14 (ὅ ὅν), Philo translates the Tetragrammaton as τὸ ὅν. According to Prob. 43 “the legislator of the Jews [...] speaks of him who was possessed by love of the divine and worshipped the Self-existent only (τὸ ὅν μόνον θεραπεύοντα), as having passed from a man into a god”. Cf. Praem 40; Spec 4.192. Philo introduces a definition similar to that in Cont. 2: “For this which is better than the good, more venerable than the monad, purer than the unit (ἐκεῖνο μὲν γὰρ, ὁ καὶ ἀγαθὸν κρείττον καὶ μονάδος πρεβύτερον καὶ ἔνος εἰλικρινέστερον) cannot be discerned by anyone else; to God alone is it permitted to apprehend God”.

36 Plut. E Delph. 393b-c: οὐ γὰρ πολλὰ τὸ θειὸν ἐστιν [...] ἀλλ’ ἐν εἶναι δεῖ τὸ ὅν, ὡσπερ ὃν τὸ ἔν. [...] ὀφει εὖ καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἔχει τῷ θεῷ τῶν ὄνομάτων καὶ τὸ δεύτερον καὶ τὸ τρίτον. Ἀπόλλων μὲν γὰρ οἷον ἄρνομενος τὰ πολλὰ καὶ τὸ πλῆθος ἀποφάσκων ἐστίν, ἱηος δ’ ὡς εἰς καὶ μόνος. Φοίβον δὲ δῆτον τὸ καθάριον καὶ ἄγνον [...] τὸ δ’ ἐν εἰλικρίνει καὶ καθαρόν.

37 Contempl. 3–9. On Philo’s use of the technique of σύγκρισις see Martin (2003).

38 Interestingly, Philo praises the same identification in Prov. 2.41 as an interpretation of Homeric poetry.

39 Cf. Decal. 52–81, in the explanation of the first commandment; however, cf. Prov. 2.41.
solely on the tradition of Jewish polemic against false gods,⁴⁰ but also on Platonic and Stoic thought, especially as regards the identification of the elements and heavenly bodies with gods and goddesses.⁴¹ A number of Classical authors, from Diodorus Siculus to Plutarch, claim that the Egyptians likewise identified the heavenly bodies as gods.⁴² As for the end of the list, polemical writing against Egyptian worship of animals was common at least from the time of Herodotus.⁴³ Authors such as Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch, who had at least some regard for the wisdom hidden in Egyptian myths and rituals, make extended attempts at this point to find rationalist, symbolic, and allegorical explanations.⁴⁴ The negative list thus not only emphasises the author’s learning but also elevates the piety of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides as the highest and most superior form.

The false ideas about God on the part of “these (others)” (οὗτοι) – presumably referring both to the last-mentioned ethnos, i.e. the Egyptian temple-tradition, but also to all the practices listed – “infect with their folly not only their own compatriots (ὁμόφυλοι) but the peoples in their neighbourhood (πλησιζοντες)”. As a result, their (spiritual) vision is defective.⁴⁵ The case of the ‘race’ of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides is altogether different, for they are not only schooled in true vision but are “carried away by a heaven-sent passion of love, remain rapt and possessed like bacchanals or corybants until they see the object of their yearning”⁴⁶.

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⁴⁰ Wis 14 speaks of the worship of stars and idols. For further parallels cf. Wendland (1896, 706–708).
⁴¹ It is found also in Plato (Crat. 404b-c) and the Stoics (Zeno ap. Diog. Laert. VP 7.147) and was systematically collected by Cornutus, Theol. graec. [Busch-Zangenberg] 3.1 (Hera, air); 4 and 22.2 (Poseidon, water); 19.2 (Hephaistos, useful fire); 28.2 (Demeter and Hestia, earth), in the first century CE.
⁴² Diod. Sic. 1.12; Plut. De Is. et Os. 32 (363d), cf. also Diog. Laert. VP 1.10. Chaeremon of Alexandria, frg. 5 (van der Horst): “For Chaeremon and the others do not believe in anything prior to the visible worlds, stating that the basic principles are the gods of the Egyptians and that there are no other gods than the so-called planets, and those stars which fill up the zodiac, and all those that rise near them, and the sections relating to the decans, and the horoscopes, and the so-called mighty rulers”, cf. frg.dub. 17 van der Horst (all translations of Chaeremon here are taken from van der Horst 1984). There is a critique of Academic ideas in Cic. Nat. D. 3.61–74.
⁴³ Hdt. 2.65–79; Juv. Sat. 15.1–8, and frequently elsewhere. For the Greek view of animal worship, including some ambivalences in Philo’s own writing (cf. Mos. 1.23), see Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984).
⁴⁴ Diod. Sic. 1.83–90; Plut. De Is. et Os. 70–76, 379d–382a; see esp. Richter (2001).
⁴⁵ “They have lost the use of the most vital of the senses, sight” (Cont. 10).
⁴⁶ Cont. 11. Apart from Plato’s myth of the cave (Rep. 514a–516b), this is probably an allusion to Ion 533e–534a: “For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as in-
Taking leave early from ordinary life on earth, they have no property, children, family, or friends (13). They are thus nobler than the philosophers Anaxagoras and Democritus, so revered by the Greeks, for they allowed their property to fall to pasture in order to be able to devote themselves entirely to study, but as a result they plunged their children into poverty.⁴⁷ Such anecdotes could be turned to use in different ways.⁴⁸ Philo chooses to claim that the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides are acting in accord with the Hippocratic principle, “life is short but art is long”,⁴⁹ and for that reason are akin to Homer’s mythical Mysians, who “drink the milk of mares [...] the most righteous men”.⁵⁰ The identity of this people was the subject of endless speculation in geographical and historical works, for example by Xanthus, Ephorus, Poseidonius, Nicolaus of Damascus and Strabo. Most authors inclined to identify them with Thracians or inhabitants of Asia, particularly nomadic Scythians, who were supposed to “excel all men in justice”⁵¹ inasmuch as they were ignorant of money.⁵² Here Philo adds a pointed general remark to the effect that injustice is caused by the desire for gain whereas justice is the result of equality.⁵³ The Therapeutic indifference to possessions is analogous to that of distant foreign peoples, among whom one may still find an ideal, peaceful way of life free of property and greed.

After the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides had relinquished their property and left their families and homelands (αἱ πατρίδες, 18), they settled in a rural
area outside the city,⁵⁴ and indeed, as Philo says, “not from any acquired habit of misanthropic bitterness but because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character” (20). Anti-Jewish stereotypes echo in the allusion to ‘misanthropy’, but they are transferred from ethical to philosophical discourse.⁵⁵ Indeed Philo goes on explicitly to deny that the group has any specific ethnic identity:

This race (τὸ γένος) exists in many places in the inhabited world, for the perfect goodness must needs be shared both by Greeks and the world outside Greece, but it abounds in Egypt in each of the nomes as they are called, and especially around Alexandria. But the best of these votaries journey from every side to settle in a certain very suitable place which they regard as their fatherland. The place is situated above the Mareotic Lake.⁵⁶

After what has been said about Egyptian animal worship, this privileging of Egypt is striking. But, as will soon become clear, it was by no means unusual in the first century CE.⁵⁷ Beyond that, it is worth noting what Philo has thus far not said, namely, that these could be Jewish women and men. Instead, he speculates about a ‘race’ that dwells among all peoples. The remote place near Alexandria, where the best of this ‘race’ of worshippers live, Philo continues, is located

[...] on a somewhat low-lying hill very happily placed both because of its security and the pleasantly tempered air. The safety is secured by the farm buildings and villages roundabout and the pleasantness of the air by the continuous breezes which arise both from the lake which debouches into the sea and from the open sea hard by. For the sea breezes are light, the lake breezes close and the two combining together produce a most healthy condition of climate.⁵⁸

Ancient geography and ethnography from the time of Herodotus onwards assumed a close connection between geographical situation and a people’s char-

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⁵⁴ Cont. 18–20.
⁵⁵ For misanthropy see Joseph. Ap. 2.291 (14); Tac. Hist. 5.5.1; Ann. 15/44.1. The concept certainly need not refer to Jews; cf. Plin. HN 7.80; Sen. Tranq. 15.1. But the prejudice is ancient. According to an anecdote quoted by both Diodorus Siculus and Josephus, Antiochus III was advised to destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish people, “for they only of all people hated to mix with any other nations, and treated them all as enemies” (μόνος γὰρ ἀπάντων ἐθνῶν ἀκοινωνίτους εἶναι τῆς πρὸς ἄλλο ἐθνὸς ἐπιμίξειας): Diod. Sic. 34/35.1 tr. F. R. Walton; cf. Joseph. AJ 13.245.
⁵⁶ Cont. 21–22.
⁵⁷ Beyond a long tradition of criticising Egyptian religion and culture (cf Richter 2001; Hartog 2002), at least some Romans appear to have been especially impressed by Egyptian culture, cf. Davies (2011), Gruen (2011, 76–114).
⁵⁸ Cont. 22–23.
acter and mores.\textsuperscript{59} An ideal situation and well-tempered climate are found not only in utopias such as Iambulus’s Islands of the Sun or the land of the Hyperboreans,\textsuperscript{60} but are also said to characterise Italy, and especially Rome, which is praised for being neither too hot nor too cold, its pleasant winds and its perfect location between the seas.\textsuperscript{61}

After this, Philo describes the settlement (24), the religious lives of individuals (25–29), the gathering on the seventh day in the common sanctuary (30–33), and finally the group’s abstemious way of life (33–39). The houses are not built too close to one another “since living at close quarters is troublesome and displeasing to people who are seeking to satisfy their desire for solitude”, but not too far apart either, because of the “sense of fellowship which they cherish” (24). Each contains a holy place (οὐκήμα ίερόν) dedicated solely to “the mysteries of a holy life” (τὰ τοῦ σεμνοῦ βίου μυστήρια τελοῦνται). In what follows it appears that this holy room is a place for studying laws, oracles, and psalms, “and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety” (25). Their days are given over to religious practice (ἀσκησις, 28); they pray at sunrise and sunset (27). At night they dream and sometimes even give utterance to “the glorious verities of their holy philosophy” (26), while they spend the day in allegorical studies (29) and in composing songs in different metres and to different melodies (30). Every seventh day they gather for a plain instruction, given by the eldest among them (31), that impresses itself on the soul all the more because of its simplicity. Women are seated within hearing distance behind a wall, so that “the modesty becoming to the female sex is preserved” (33).\textsuperscript{62} “They lay self-control (ἐγκράτεια) to be as it were the foundation of their soul and on it build the other virtues” (34). They eat only in the evening, some of them indeed only every third day, or even less frequently. Only on the seventh day does everyone eat, though “only common bread with salt for a relish flavoured further by the daintier (οἱ ἄβροδιαιτοί) with hyssop” (37). Their houses and clothing are simple (38–

\textsuperscript{59} Hdt. 2.35; more systematically in Hippoc. \textit{Aer.}; Strabo, \textit{Geogr.} 2.3.7 (102C–103C), on the other hand, was critical of the idea, cf. Vasaly (1993, 141–145).

\textsuperscript{60} Iambulus ap. Diod. Sic. 2.56.7: “The climate is most temperate, we are told, considering that they live at the equator, and they suffer neither from heat nor from cold” (εὐκρατότατον δὲ ἐν αὐτοῖς, ὡς δὲ κατὰ τὸν ἱσχυρόν νόοιο τὸν ἀέρα παρ’ αὐτοῖς, ὡς δὲ κατὰ τὸν ἱσχυρόν νόοιο τὸν ἀέρα παρ’ αὐτοῖς).\textsuperscript{35} See Winston (1981, 317 n. 4) and Beavis (2004, 35).

\textsuperscript{61} The lecturer room thus described, similar to a synagogue, is the sole example in antiquity of a segregation of the sexes in a synagogue; differently, e.g., \textit{Luke} 13:10–17. Cf. Brooten (1982, 133–134).
39) and serve merely as protection from “the fiery heat of the sun and the icy cold of the air” (24; cf. 38).

All these are ideals of simplicity (εὐτέλεια) and modesty (ἀτυφία) based on Stoic ideals.⁶³ As has long been recognised, Philo’s account is closely related to the description of Egyptian priests by Chaeremon of Alexandria (ca. 10–80 CE).⁶⁴ The younger contemporary of Philo,⁶⁵ Chaeremon, was known in Rome as a strict ascetic and was probably among Nero’s philosophical tutors.⁶⁶ It is frequently suggested that Chaeremon came from Egypt, in particular Alexandria.⁶⁷ The fragment preserved by Porphyry in De abstinentia 4.6–8 begins with the words:

Chaeremon the Stoic tells in his exposé about the Egyptian priests, who, he says, were considered also as philosophers among the Egyptians, that they chose the temples as the place to philosophise.⁶⁸

Chaeremon’s Egyptian priests are really philosophers who lead a retired, ascetic life devoted to contemplation of the divine, thus representing an example of morality worthy of imitation. They seem, indeed, to be a reflection of Philo’s Egyptian Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, who because of their “ardour for the study of wisdom”⁶⁹ led a retired, ascetic, and pious life⁷⁰ in contemplation of nature and their sacred scriptures.⁷¹ Chaeremon’s description goes on to reveal further commonalities. During the periods of purification the Egyptian priests separate “from their families and fellows”.⁷² Some abstain from wine;⁷³ during these periods of sanctification they eat no bread, and at other times eat it only with...

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⁶³ Cf. Xen. Mem. 1.3.5–6; Musonius, Oratio 18 A; 18B; 19; Sen. Ep. 8.5, etc. See Wendland (1895, 8–33).
⁶⁴ Chaeremon, frg. 10 van der Horst. The link was first noted by Wendland (1895, 755). For the dating see Frede (1989, 2079); Schneider (2013, 1424).
⁶⁵ The title is given by Joseph. C. Ap. 1.288, according to whom the work also contains a distorted picture of Israel’s history in Egypt. That the fragments belong together was suggested by Schwyzer (1932, 15); van der Horst (1984, ix); Frede (1989, 2081); Ramelli (2008, 1299–1308).
⁶⁶ Chaeremon’s asceticism is ridiculed by Martial 11.56. The Suda (van der Horst T. 3) calls him a teacher of Nero, and elsewhere (T. 4) the head of a rhetorical school in Alexandria.
⁶⁷ Cf. T. 5 van der Horst; Frede (1989, 2067–68), and elsewhere.
⁶⁸ Chaeremon, frg. 10.6 van der Horst (= FGrH 618 F 6). All translations are taken from van der Horst’s edition.
⁶⁹ See Cont. 16: οἱ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν ὁρμαί; cf. Cont. 2; 27–28; 34; 67; 69; 74; 80; 89.
⁷⁰ Cf. ἐρημία, Cont. 20; ἐγκράτεια, Cont. 34; εὐσέβεια, Cont. 2; 55; 88.
⁷¹ Cont. 1; 29; 58; 64; 57; 78–79; 90.
⁷² Chaeremon, frg. 10.6 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 18; 30.
⁷³ Chaeremon, frg. 10.6 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 40; 73–74, with reference to a law for priests.
They mark the passage of time in cycles of seven, sleep on beds of palm leaves, worship the (divine) sun several times a day, and devote the remaining hours to the study of arithmetic, geometry and philology. At some points the practices are so similar that mutual influence between the two writings has been proposed, for example, when Philo describes the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides as sitting “in order [...] in proper attitude,” with appropriate attire, “with their hands inside the robe”, as the eldest of them lectures “with visage and voice alike quiet”. Compare Chaeremon:

They [the Egyptian priests] were always seen near the gods, or rather their statues, either carrying or preceding them in a procession or setting them up with order and dignity (μετὰ κόσμου καὶ σεμνότητος). And each of these acts was not empty gesture, but an indication of some allegorical truth (ἐνδείξις φυσικοῦ λόγου). Their gravity was also apparent from their behaviour. For their way of walking was disciplined (εὐτάκτος), and they took care to have a quiet look (βλέμμα καθεστηκός) [...] They always kept their hands within their dress.

However, even though it is possible that Philo and Chaeremon were personally acquainted, a literary connection can neither be excluded nor demonstrated.

74 Chaeremon, frg. 10.6 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 37; 73; and see 81, on the table of show bread in the Temple.
75 Chaeremon, frg. 10.7 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 36; 65.
76 Chaeremon, frg. 10.7 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 69.
77 Chaeremon, frg. 10.8 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 89.
78 Chaeremon, frg. 10.8 van der Horst, cf. Cont. 66.
79 Chaeremon, frg. 10.8 van der Horst, cf. the textual studies of the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides, Cont. 28; 75.
80 Cont. 30: καθ ἡλικίαν ἐξῆς καθέζονται μετὰ τοῦ πρόποντος σχήματος, εἰσώ τὰς χεῖρας ἔχοντες; 31: καθεστώτι μὲν τῷ βλέμματι. Cf. also 66: μετὰ τῆς ἀνωτάτου σεμνότητος.
81 Chaeremon, fragm. 10.6 van der Horst: Ἐφαίνοντο δὲ οἱ θεοὶ ἧν ἀγαλμάτων ἑγγύς, ἤτοι φέροντες ἢ προηγούμενοι καὶ τάσσοντες μετὰ κόσμου τε καὶ σεμνότητος ὃν ἔκαστον ὁὐ τύφος ἤν, ἀλλὰ τινὸς ἐνδείξεως φυσικοῦ λόγου. Τὸ δὲ σεμνὸν κάκ τοῦ καταστήματος ἑώρατο. Πορεία τε γὰρ ἦν εὐτάκτος καὶ βλέμμα καθεστηκός ἐπετηθευστό, ὡς ὅτε βουλήθηκεν μὴ σκαρδαμύττειν· γέλως δὲ σπάνιος, εἰ δὲ που γένοιτο, μέχρι μειδιάσεως· ἢ οἱ δὲ ἐντός τοῦ σχήματος χεῖρες.
82 A Chaeremon, son of Leonidas, is referred to in a rescript of the emperor Claudius as an emissary from Alexandria (T. 5 van der Horst). Philo was the leader of the Jewish delegation (Legat.). Early twentieth-century scholars discussed the question of a literary dependence, yet did not agree on who was inspired by whom, cf. Wendland (1896, 755 – 756); Schwyzer (1932, 81). Van der Horst suggests “a literary genre well-known in the Hellenistic period: the idealised description of priestly castes or religious fraternities of barbarian peoples” (1984, 56). While the idea of a direct acquaintance between the older Philo and the younger Chaeremon must remain speculative, we should note that the latter’s account of Jewish history (frg. 1 van der Horst) is highly critical of the Jewish people. Cf. Frede (1989, 2027).
The relationship between Philo’s and Chaeremon’s praise of Egyptian worshipers of God lies at a deeper level. What links them is an increasing interest, from the first century BCE onward, on the part of authors shaped by Stoicism and Platonism, in the customs, myths, and rituals of the ‘wise (barbarian) nations’, Egypt among them. Plato’s association of the Atlantis myth with Solon began the trend. If Chaeremon really came from Egypt his writing may represent an “autoethnography”; in any case it is “an attempt to integrate genuinely Egyptian ideas, concepts of Stoic philosophy, and astrological interest, and to identify astrology, ethics, and asceticism as basic elements of the pristine ‘philosophy’ of the Egyptians”.

At any rate, Chaeremon was not alone in his interest in Egyptian priests and their rituals. Diodorus Siculus begins his Greek history of the world with Egyptian teachings about the gods because the Egyptians “were the first to introduce the worship of the gods”. His first book concludes with a statement that all the great figures of antiquity, from Orpheus and Homer to Solon and Plato, had been influenced by Egyptian wisdom. Plutarch, in De Iside et Osiride, portrays his platonising interpretation of the myths and rituals of the Isis religion as a search for truth. He also notes the fasting of the priests, for example their abstention

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83 Boys-Stones (2001, 44–60) shows that Chaeremon stands in a long Stoic tradition of isolating ‘original’ philosophical material from the traditions – here the Egyptian religious practices that have preserved it. Van Nuffelen shows that Post-Hellenistic philosophy on the whole sees “religion as created by wise ancients and is thus supposed to contain philosophical knowledge” (2011, 4).

84 Tim. 21e-25d; cf. Critias 113d.

85 Dench defines autoethnography as “the process whereby African and South American people [today] constructed accounts of themselves through engagement with European ethnographical traditions that depicted them as ‘other peoples’” (2007, 493–494).

86 Schneider (2013, 1424). See also Frede (1989, 2069): “With this reference to Egyptian wisdom, which seems at least, in Chaeremon’s eyes, to have better preserved ancient truths than did the Greek tradition, the Stoic Chaeremon shows himself to be, both formally and in many respects as to content, a precursor of certain tendencies we usually associate or even identify with later Platonism, for example Numerius or Celsus, Porphyry or Iamblichus”.

87 Cf. Frede (1989, 2103 and passim).

88 Diod. Sic. 1.6, prefacing his extensive descriptions of myths and rituals (1.11–26; 83–90). Seneca seems also to have shown an interest in Egypt, as the fragment De situ et sacris Aegyptiorum shows; cf. Frede (1989, 2076).

89 Diod. Sic. 1.96–98.

90 Plut. De Is. et Os. 2 (351e).
from salt\(^9\) and wine,\(^2\) as well as other dietary rules, and praises their efforts at “studying, learning, and teaching religious matters”.\(^3\) Plutarch also grounds the ascetic practices of the female and male priests by saying that abstinence from food as well as preservation of virtue is necessary in order to attain to knowledge of the divine and to abide with it, or with her (Isis).\(^4\)

Chaeremon’s view that in Egypt “[t]he true philosophising was found among the prophets, and priests who had charge of the sacred vestments, the sacred scribes, and also the astrologers”\(^5\) was, as is now familiar, due to the idea that certain peoples, even among the barbarians, had access to truth in its original purity, a truth that had been lost in the course of history because of the general decline in virtue. Seneca traced this thesis to Poseidonius.\(^6\) Chaeremon and Plutarch agree that this truth can be regained through a ‘symbolic’ (i.e. allegorical) interpretation of the myths of the gods and priestly rituals.\(^7\) Chaeremon in particular claims that such methods were invented by the Egyptian priests.\(^8\)

Chaeremon’s praise of the model and ascetic way of life of the Egyptian priests also served to hold up a mirror to the (supposed) current decline in virtue.\(^9\) Philo takes up this feature especially in his third extended comparison, in which he caricatures Greek symposium culture. Drinking wine leads at best to ‘slavish taste’ (45), and at worst to enmity and wild fist-fights.\(^10\) Men “attack and bite each other and gnaw off noses, ears, fingers and some other parts of the body, so that they make good the story of the comrades of Odysseus and

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\(^{91}\) Ibid. 5 (352f); 32 (363e), cf. Quaest. conviv. 5.10.1–2 (684 f-685a); on the importance of salt in ordinary circumstances, see e.g. ibid. 4.4.3 (668e). Philo emphasises that the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides by contrast eat bread with salt: Cont. 37; 73; 81.

\(^{92}\) Plutarch, De Is. et Os. 6 (353b).

\(^{93}\) Ibid.: φιλοσοφοῦντες καὶ μανθάνοντες καὶ διδάσκοντες τὰ θεία διατελοῦσιν.

\(^{94}\) Ibid. 2 (351e).

\(^{95}\) Chaeremon, frg. 10.8 van der Horst.

\(^{96}\) Sen. Ep. 90.3–6, with Frede (1989, 2088–2092). Cf. Plut. frag. 157.1 Sandbach; Cornutus, Theol. graec. 17.1 p. 96 Busch-Zangenberg; Aelian, Var. hist. 2.31.

\(^{97}\) Frede (1989, 2086–2092). Cf. Ramelli (2008, 1301–4); Plut. De Is. et Os. 76 (382c–d).

\(^{98}\) Cf. Chaeremon, T. 9 van der Horst; also T. 12 van der Horst: “Chaeremon says the Egyptians were the first to teach – since they wanted to teach the great and lofty things to the uninitiated by means of allegories and myths – Athena is, mythically spoken, a goddess”. Frag. 2 van der Horst: “Egyptian wisdom is to say all things symbolically”. Plutarch makes a sharper distinction between the ‘obscure and clearer symbols’ (De Is. et Os. 67–68 [377e–378b]).

\(^{99}\) This, too, was one of the standards of ancient ethnography. Thus the Spartans know that discord ceases when greed and luxury (πλεονεξία καὶ τρυφή) are eliminated (Strab. Geogr. 10.4.16 [480C]); the Indians are happy “because of their simplicity and moderation” (διὰ τὴν ἁπλότητα καὶ τὴν εὐτέλεια; Strabo, Geogr. 15.1.53 [709C]).

\(^{100}\) Cont. 40 – 47.
the Cyclops by eating ‘gobbets’ of men, as the poet says”. The revellers show themselves enemies to their families and homeland, and even to themselves. The reflection here of Stoic moral discourse, comedy, and satire is unmistakable. Consequently, such things as the luxurious decorations of the dining rooms, well-upholstered ivory couches, purple coverlets, expensive dishes and drinkware, erotically-dressed slaves, artistic confections, and exotic foods are branded as ‘Italian luxuries’ beloved of Greeks and barbarians.

Finally, Philo also criticises literary depictions of symposia. It is true that Xenophon and Plato described the two symposia in which Socrates participated, “surmising that they would serve posterity as models of the happily conducted banquet. Yet even these if compared with those of our people who embrace the contemplative life will appear as matters for derision” (57–58). It is true that there were pleasures at both, but only human ones. In Xenophon’s account musicians, dancers, and actors appear, and the subject of discussion at the Platonic banquet is love, heterosexual and homoerotic. “But [...] the story of these well-known banquets is full of such follies and they stand self-convicted in the eyes of any who do not regard conventional opinions” (64), despite the common notion that they are successful undertakings.

The Therapeutic symposium naturally presents an entirely different picture. The people gather for prayer on the fiftieth day, clothed in white, with the utmost dignity (μετὰ τῆς ἀνωτάτω σεμνόστητος), lifting their hands and eyes to heaven, because “they have been trained to fix their gaze on things worthy of contemplation” (66). Men and women recline together, yet the female members keep their chastity voluntarily and in that respect are superior to those Greek priestesses who are compelled to virginity (68). Hostile to the pleas-

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101 Cont. 40. Biting off noses, ears, etc. is regarded by Plutarch as a dreadful barbarism; cf. Plut. Cons. Apoll. 113b. For the Cyclops as cannibalistic barbarians see, e.g., Ov. Met. 14.174–196, cf. Tietz (2013, 245).
102 Cf. Wendland (1885, 8–33); Bernhardt (2003, 203–206); Niehoff (2010, 98–112); Tietz (2013, 323–353). There is, of course, a consensus between Greek and Roman moral discourses. Philo himself makes reference to comedy (Cont. 43). For tussles at symposia see e.g. Lucian, Symp. 43–47.
103 Cont. 48–56. The same topics are encountered frequently elsewhere: cf. Muson. 18a–b; 19a–b Hense. For slaves as marks of luxury see Sen. Ep. 95.24. There is also a critique of male homoeroticism in Muson. 12. Cf. also Bernhardt (2003, 199–203; 214–217).
104 Cont. 57–64. There are other indications of criticism of these two literary symposia, for example the extended praise of Homer’s banquet scenes in contrast to those of Plato, Xenophon, und Epicurus in Athen. Deipn. 5.1–20 (85a–193c), esp. 5.8 (180a–b); 5.13 (187f-188d); cf. too Plut. De Pyth. or. 15, 401c.
105 See the description in Wendland (1896, 704–705).
ures of the body, the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* recline on hard benches “served by free younger members in modest clothing”. The meal again consists only of bread, salt, and “as a luxury”, hyssop.

Most strikingly, the banqueters also abstain from shared sympotic conversation. Instead, the president gives a lecture, discussing questions from sacred scripture and using the allegorical method (75). The others listen silently, and only at the end of the president’s discourse are they allowed to applaud (77–79). Finally, the president sings an original hymn to God or “an old one by the poets of an earlier day” (80). From the context, one supposes that the hymn must be a biblical psalm, yet the detailed list of genres and modes that follows points to Greek cult and drama (80).

The banquet of the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides*, which up to this point has little in common with the wine-fuelled joy and excitement of ancients ymposium culture, nevertheless culminates, like other symposia, in ‘honourable drunkenness” and Bacchic enthusiasm – and indeed, given the mention of a ‘sacred vigil’ (παννυχίς), may even have lubricious features.

Here Israel’s

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106 Cont. 72. Cf. the high-girdled transparent garments of the luxury slaves at other banquets (Cont. 51).
107 Cont. 73; cf. 37.
108 Niehoff (2010, 112–116) attributes the hierarchical and monological character of the meals of the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* to Roman tastes. But Roman authors of the imperial period also speak of the convivial character of the meal, something not suited to monologues. Cf. Egelhaaf-Gaiser (2012, 97).
109 His lecture style follows the rhetorical ideal of the unadorned character of an instruction that “proceeds in a leisurely manner; he lingers over it and spins it out with repetitions, thus permanently imprinting the thoughts in the souls of the hearers” (Cont. 76).
110 Jeffery (2003, 167): “Philo’s five genres seem to have been listed hierarchically, from the relatively mundane iambic trimeter, through the grand processional prosodion and even more dignified paraspondeion, finally arriving, as it were, ‘next to the altar’ with a parabomion. The whole then culminated in the stanzas of choric song and dance. If they were actually performed in this sequence, the effect would have been one of growing solemnity, with a graduated increase in complexity”. Philo is well known for his reflections on musical theory. Feldman (1996, 504–528); Ferguson (2003, 391–426); Oertelt (2007, 51–62).
111 But cf. Cont. 40, where Philo promises to write about “the cheerfulness of their convivial meals”.
112 Cont. 89: μεθυσθέντες [...] τὴν καλὴν ταύτην μέθην. For this notion, which picks up Philo’s concept of ‘sober drunkenness’ and its relationship to the Platonic idea of ‘divine drunkenness’, see Lewy (1929, 1–8).
113 Philo explicitly compares the experience with that of *bacchantes* when he says that, “having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the unmixed wine of God’s love” (85), both women and men are equally possessed by God (ἐνθουσιῶντες τε ἄνδρες ὁμοῦ καὶ γυναῖκες, 87).
114 Cf. Eur. *Bacch. 882; Athen. Deipn. 6.55 (250a); 14.6 (647c); 15.7 (668d).*
Exodus from Egypt is acted out dramatically. Men and women, each conducted by a choral leader, sing stationary songs (*stasimon*), strophes and antistrophes, and ultimately form a mixed choir. In this manner, they celebrate the Crossing of the Red Sea:

(They become) a copy (μίμημα) of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honour of the wonders there wrought. For at the command of God the sea became a source of salvation to one party and of perdition to the other. As it broke in twain and withdrew under the violence of the forces which swept it back there rose on either side, opposite to each other, the semblance of solid walls, while the space thus opened between them broadened into a highway smooth and dry throughout on which the people marched under guidance right on until they reached the higher ground on the opposite mainland. But when the sea came rushing in with the returning tide, and from either side passed over the ground where dry land had appeared, the pursuing enemy were submerged and perished.¹¹

Thus, as Philo goes on to say, the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* represent (ἀπεικονίζειν) the choir with Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea.¹¹ It is thus cultic theatre, part of the cultic mythos – the decisive moment in Israel’s history with God, staged, and thus imitated, through drama.¹¹ By implication, Philo’s readers constitute the audience.

Philo describes the choirs at the Red Sea and the leadership of Miriam and Moses in similar terms elsewhere.¹¹ The mixing of the two choirs seems to reflect an exegetical tradition attested in *Wisdom* 10:20.¹¹ In the whole we have an actual re-poeticising of the Exodus event as classical drama, with fragments of an apocryphal song of Miriam.¹² This is thus a narrative of a religious celebration rendered plausible for some Jewish communities in antiquity. The Exodus event is presented as the highest form of religious experience.¹²¹

At the same time, however, the terms in which Philo invokes Israel’s Exodus from Egypt are strikingly detached. The miracle at the Red Sea is either a “source of salvation” or a “[source] of perdition”. The Egyptians are not mentioned. The people depart from an unnamed land and are led safely, in very general terms, on “a highway smooth and dry” to higher ground, while their enemies

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¹¹ Cont. 85–86.
¹¹ Cont. 88.
¹¹ See Nielsen (2002); Gasparini (2013).
¹¹ Mos. 1.180; 2.256; Agr. 80–82 (citing Exod. 15.20–21).
¹¹ Cf. Enns (1995).
¹² Ezekiel the Tragedian, quoted in Euseb. *Praep. Evang.* 9, 28–29 and Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.23. From 4Q365 6a ii + 6c 1–7 (reworked Pentateuch C) we learn of a song of Miriam with an invitation to the women to join in: see Crawford (2003, 36–37).
¹²¹ For Philo’s interpretation of the Exodus story elsewhere in his writings, see Bloch 2015.
are destroyed. The event could scarcely be described in more neutral terms. Moreover, the gesture that concludes the feast, the adoration of the rising sun, can be shown to be part of many other religions.\(^\text{122}\) Finally, Philo praises those who so completely devote themselves to contemplation of nature (θεωρία φύσεως) as “citizens of Heaven and the world” (οὐρανοῦ μέν καὶ κόσμου πολιταί). They are set beside the “Father and Maker of all” (πατρι καὶ ποιητῇ τῶν ἀλων γνησίως συσταθέντες) because they have sought the highest degree of virtue (καλοκἀγαθία) and happiness (εὐδαιμονία).\(^\text{123}\) This combination of Stoic and Platonic ideals raises the question of who the Therapeutae and Therapeutrides actually were for Philo.

3. Therapeutic allegoresis and the religious and political identity of Philo’s Therapeutae and Therapeutrides

Given the author, the reader inclines at once to infer that the group of Therapeutae and Therapeutrides must be Jews. That Jewish ritual surpasses other forms of worship of God is part of the tradition of Jewish polemic against idols.\(^\text{124}\) Worship of “the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the one and more primordial than the Monad” (Cont. 2) is the sole form appropriate to the tradition of Jewish monotheism. The people gather on the seventh day, that is, on the Sabbath (Cont. 30). The identification of the feast on the day after seven times seven (Cont. 75), on the other hand, is disputed, though it does recall the preference for the number seven in the book of Jubilees. The instruction at the festal gatherings recalls Philo’s description of synagogue worship in De specialibus legibus and De vita Mosis.\(^\text{125}\) On the other hand, Philo seems determined to keep his description...
of the ‘Therapeutic sect’ as general as possible. The words *Hebraioi* or *Ioudaioi* do not appear in *De vita contemplativa*.¹²⁶ Nor is there any reference at all to male circumcision and the other *halakah*, even though the meal of water, bread, salt, and hyssop certainly is kosher. Philo presents us with a group of people who live in temple-like houses by a lakeside just south of Alexandria in Egypt, abstain from wine like sacrificing priests (84), share food in reverence to a holy table enshrined in the vestibule of an unnamed temple (81), and have ecstatic experiences like bacchanals or corybants (12; 85). Only in the last third of the text does Philo mention that the members of the group “have dedicated their own life and themselves to knowledge and the contemplation of the verities of nature, following the truly sacred instructions of the prophet Moses” (64). The only other undoubted reference to Jewish identity is the identification of the choral leaders at the performance of the Exodus as Moses and Miriam (87).

Thus the ethnic identity of the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* remains deliberately vague. This community of philosophers and priests, with its studies of the “laws and oracles delivered through the mouth of prophets, and psalms and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety”,¹²⁷ proves itself the equal of the Egyptian priests and their religious knowledge and practice, so highly acclaimed by Diodorus, Cornutus, Chaeremon, and Plutarch.¹²⁸ As we have seen, Chaeremon claimed that the allegorical method used to discover the deeper truth behind these myths and rituals was developed by the Egyptian priests themselves.¹²⁹ That of the *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides* is likewise very ancient. It comes from the books of the ancients and “founders of their way of thinking (οἱ τῆς αἱρέσεως ἀρχηγέται), who left many memorials of the form used (καθάπερ τοιν ἀρχετύπως) in allegorical interpretation and these they take as a kind of archetype and imitate the method in which this principle is carried out” (29). Moreover the content of their scriptures goes beyond the etymological methods used by Cornutus and Chaeremon and points to the highest idea of reality:

The exposition of the sacred scriptures treats the inner meaning conveyed in allegory (δι’ ὑπονοιῶν ἐν ἀλληγορίαις). For to these people, the whole law book seems to resemble a living creature with the literal ordinance for its body and for its soul the invisible mind

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¹²⁶ Cf. Birnbaum (1996, 119–120).
¹²⁷ Cont. 25.
¹²⁸ See p. 140–141 above. Matusova (2010, 1–51) suggests that the account is based on (Egyptian and) Orphic methods of interpretation of sacred texts, such as the Derveni Papyrus.
¹²⁹ See n. 98 above.
It is in this mind especially that the rational soul (ἡ λογικὴ ψυχή) begins to contemplate the things akin to itself (τὰ οίκεια θεώρειν) and looking through the words as through a mirror (ὅπερ διὰ κατόπτρου) beholds the marvelous beauties of the concepts, unfolds and removes the symbolic coverings and brings forth the thoughts and sets them bare to the light of day for those who need but a little reminding (ὑπόμνησις) to enable them to discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible.¹³¹

Therapeutic allegoresis is thus the (by this time perfectly conventional) path to the Platonic ideas.¹³² It helps one rise above the visible world, remember original Being, and so behold original Beauty. Plutarch, in very similar fashion, regards the garments of Isis and Osiris as the culmination of his platonising interpretation of the cult of Isis. He interprets the white garment of Osiris, donned only once, as a symbol for the thought of the pure and holy Intelligibility, for “the apprehension of the conceptual, the pure, and the simple, shining through the soul like a flash of lightning, affords an opportunity to touch and see it but once” (tr. Babbitt).¹³³

For this reason Plato and Aristotle call this part of philosophy the epoptic (ἐποπτικόν) or mystic part, inasmuch as those who have passed beyond these conjectural and confused matters of all sorts by means of Reason proceed by leaps and bounds to the primary, simple, and immaterial principle; and when they have somehow attained contact with the pure truth abiding about it, they think that they have the whole of philosophy completely, as it were within their grasp (tr. Babbitt).¹³⁴

Therefore when the Egyptian priests “conceal the truth and call Osiris the leader and king of the dead”, it is clear to the Platonist that this can mean nothing other than that the immaculate and non-substantial Godhead is the leader and king of souls released from their bodies, who adhere to him and behold the “unutterable and indescribable beauty”.¹³⁵

Philo’s Therapeutae and Therapeutrides and Plutarch share the fundamental Platonic conviction that the goal of human understanding is to behold the highest Idea and Beauty. Both make use of allegorical interpretations of religious tra-
ditions to identify a path to that goal. Yet while for Plutarch philosophy is the prerequisite for truthful worship and the avoidance of superstition as well as the true interpretation of religious symbols and rites, Philo declares his Egyptian God-worshippers to be the originators of allegory as a path to philosophical understanding. Philo’s Egyptian priests are both at once: practitioners of a most eminent and ancient religious practice and thereby a source of original and untouched truth and its best and most experienced interpreters.

4. Conclusion

In *De vita contemplativa* Philo presents the ethnography of an ideal group of people who are philosophers. The ‘Therapeutic race’ exists among all the peoples of the world, but the best of them are to be found in Egypt, more precisely at Lake Mareotis south of Alexandria. Their name refers to their abilities in the most important arts of healing. The temperate climate in which they live; their pious, simple and ascetic lifestyle; and their religious festivals surpass the ideals of the time. Therefore, the group resembles the ‘mare-milk drinking Mysians’, the ‘most righteous of men’ and thus the ideal barbarians on the fringes of the inhabited world. Their allegorical interpretations of scripture and hymns show them to be true philosophers. Through their piety, they surpass others’ ideas about God.

Philo’s account contains nearly all the heads that belong to the genre of ethnographic description. As often, the focus is on religious and cultural usages. But what is lacking in Philo, apart from a few hints such as the mention of books by the founders of the school (29), is any information about the origins and history of the ‘race’. Hence he obscures the link between Therapeutic *eusebeia* and their religious tradition, namely Judaism.

As in many other ethnographies, an essential impetus is the criticism of social conditions in the writer’s own reference-group. In Philo’s case, it involves a critique of Greek and Egyptian ideas about God, the way Greek philosophers dealt with the issue of property, and the symposium as practised in Philo’s own time and even as represented in the paradigmatic Classical versions. However, Philo keeps not only his own Jewish identity but also that of the Egyptian

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136 Nuffelen (2011, 60).

137 On closer inspection, however, “the founders of their way of thinking” (29) turn out as biblical figures and authors while the allegorical method was used by others Jewish philosophers as well, not at least Philo himself. See Niehoff (2011, 165–168) has shown.

138 Müller (1972, 113–14); Parker (2008).
‘sect’ entirely in the background. It is true that he employs the first person singular pronoun eleven times – remarkable in such a short text¹³⁹ – but this narrative I is primarily a communicative device: it gives internal indicators, introduces clarifications, and anticipates possible ridicule and lack of understanding of a wine-free symposium.¹⁴⁰ But nearly half of these self-referential statements locate the narrator within Graeco-Roman culture.¹⁴¹ In other words, the narrative I here is not Jewish but Greek. The emic ethnographic gaze of a Jewish author upon a Jewish group thereby turns into an etic description.

But why does Philo hide his Jewish identity and present his authorial voice as a Greek one? There are no doubt many possible answers to this question. One is that the fictitious authorial voice helps initially to hide and only gradually reveal the true religious identity of the group and to construct Judaism as a religious practice comparable to that of Egyptian priests. Moreover, with Philo’s etic description of Therapeutic eusebeia, he is able to represent the religious life led by the Therapeutae as the universal ideal for all of humankind and especially for Greek culture. Hence he also underscores the use of ancient ethnography to criticise an indigenous – here Greek – decline in morals. However, his ascetic religious group on Lake Mareotis, itself just the most exemplary of many analogous forms, remains an exceptional phenomenon, separated from the world and incorporating the highest philosophical ideals. Here is a group that exists beyond the world, in the vicinity of the Father and Creator. And ‘beyond the world’ means that membership can be gained only through personal imitation of its goal of happiness through perfect virtue.

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¹³⁹ Cf. Hay (2003, 345–346).
¹⁴⁰ Cont. 73. Philo shows his intentions clearly, supporting what has just been said, in Cont. 10; for internal indicators see Cont. 40; 64; 75, and for reference to a text on the Essenes see Cont. 1.
¹⁴¹ Like the Greeks, he admires Anaximander and Democritus (14); he knows Homer’s Mysians who drink mare’s milk (17); he agrees with Plato’s statement that cicadas live on air (35); he invokes his bad experiences at contemporary Greek banquets (46); and he maintains a polite reserve in his description of mythological poeticising in Plato’s Symposium (63).
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