

The Symbolic Space in Philo's on the Creation

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Abstract: Space is both a mode of human existence and one of the fundamental questions of philosophy. The construction of cosmic space is a theme and archetype in all major cultures. The *Old Testament · Genesis* describes the creation of cosmic space, the structure of space, and the position and order of various things, including humans, within cosmic space. Philo, a Hellenistic philosopher, employed allegorical interpretation to explicate the composition of space and the symbolism of spatial numbers in *Genesis*. However, Philo's interpretation was not merely a philosophical exposition but rather an expression of his theological thought through spatial metaphors. Through *On the Creation*, one can glimpse the philosophical origins of spatial symbolism and allegory in the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Philo; On the Creation; Symbolic Space

1. The Cosmic Space Divided into Two Parts

For any religion and its cultural representation, the primary question is to address the origin of the world and the existence of humanity, that is, "Where do we come from?" This largely constitutes the concept of the generation of the universe and the position of humans within it, which is a kind of spatial view. However, the question of "Where are we going?"—the spatial destination—is not always elaborated in detail. For example, traditional Chinese Confucianism failed to provide a good solution for the "ultimate concern" of ordinary individuals, and "has a rather obvious non-religious secular characteristic." From a spatial perspective, Philo's interpretation of *Genesis* can be seen as re-establishing a new model of human existence—namely, the close connection between death, sin, and salvation. These themes were abundant in pre-Christian cultures and religions, such as the Orphic mysteries of ancient Greece, the worship of

Isis in ancient Egypt, and even the heroic deeds of Gilgamesh who longed for immortality. However, it was in Christianity that their philosophical legitimacy, the uniqueness of human spatial status, and the uniqueness of faith in obtaining salvation were formally established. This new spatial law of human existence was clearly expressed in Philo's thought.

In ancient Greek religion, humans and gods coexisted in the world or universe; in other words, humans and gods were in the same space. Hesiod said: "Gods and humans have the same origin." [1] Therefore, there is no clear boundary between the two. The spatial concept in ancient Greek myths and religions was opposed by ancient Greek rational philosophy, especially Plato's division of the world of ideas and the phenomenal world, which broke the shared space between humans and gods and became an important source of Philo's dualistic spatial thought. At the same time, the allegorical interpretation of Homeric works that prevailed during the Hellenistic period may have also influenced Philo's allegorical interpretation of the scriptures. Philo believed that the scriptures cannot be understood only literally, but "first of all, one must pay attention to those things that must not be neglected in silence" [2], "I will do my best to give a clear explanation and elucidate the inner obscure philosophical thought. [3]" Just as any great theologian must also be a philosopher, Philo naturally had to explain the cosmogony described in *Genesis*, which is the starting point of all cultures and beliefs, namely, how did space unfold? Or how was it born? Philo divided cosmic space into two parts. He said: "Moses, since he has reached the pinnacle of philosophy and has grasped the greatest and most fundamental part of the knowledge of nature, must admit that the universe must consist of two parts, one is the active cause, and the other is the passive object. The active cause is that most perfect, pure, and immaculate cosmic reason, transcending virtue,

transcending knowledge, transcending goodness itself and beauty itself. The passive object itself cannot have life and motion, but when reason causes it to move, gives it shape, and accelerates it, it becomes the most perfect masterpiece, that is, this world.”[2] Philo also criticized the atheistic idea that the world has no root. He believed that the original source of these two worlds is God, the world of reason is the archetype created by God, that is, the blueprint for creating the material world, and the sensory world is merely a copy of reason. Thus, the model of the world’s creation is: God (Logos) → Intellectual World (Spiritual World) → Sensory World (Material World). The nature, status, and role of the Logos in Philo’s system are quite complex. It differs from the world reason (or Zeus) of Stoicism and from the Son and the Holy Spirit of Christianity. Philo’s Logos seems to be an outpouring of God’s light, but the Logos is simultaneously the dwelling place of both the intellectual and sensory worlds, combining the movable and perishable matter with the archetype of the world, thus allowing one to glimpse the supreme, perfect, and goodness of God. This division of the two spaces strongly injected Greek philosophy—especially Platonic philosophy—while at the same time incorporating it entirely into a monotheistic logical framework. “Philo’s task is to interpret the *Bible*, but in fact, he is striving to synthesize Jewish tradition and Greek philosophy.”[4]

2. The Symbolism of Numbers in Space

Philo’s influence by the Pythagoras school in *On the Creation* is undeniable. This is particularly evident in his interpretation of numbers, some of which are quite interesting, while others seem rather pedantic. However, all of this is done for the purpose of allegorical interpretation of *Genesis*. Philo’s description of numbers is intended to eliminate the temporality of creation. In *Genesis*, God’s creation of the world is a process, which, when interpreted literally, manifests as time and sequence, as expressed in the scripture’s statements like “on the nth day, he did such and such.” Philo has previously divided the universe into two parts. Logically speaking, the intellectual world was created before the sensory world. But why, when it comes to divine creation, does Philo have to erase the

time factor?

To this, Philo says: “... ‘In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.’ Here, the word ‘beginning’ does not have a temporal meaning, as some people think, because there would be no time before there was a world. Time arises simultaneously with the world or after the world. For time is a measurable space determined by the movement of the world, and since movement cannot precede the moving object, but must arise after or simultaneously with the moving object, time must necessarily arise simultaneously with the world or after the world has arisen.”[2] Philo denies the temporality of the stages of creation, so what he cannot ignore is the spatiality of creation, which is manifested in what he calls “simultaneity,” that is, “the world was created in six days not because its creator needed time to do the work, for we must assume that God did ‘all’ things simultaneously, remembering that the word ‘all’ also includes the thoughts that God issued behind the scenes.”[2] For Philo’s “simultaneity,” we can call it synchronicity or universalism. “As far as Philo is concerned, both (Greek philosophy and Hebrew faith) are precisely indeterminate and alive in interpretation. The reason for this basic view, which sees different traditions as parts to be transcended and integrated, is precisely his universalism.”[5]

Philo’s description and interpretation of numbers thus arise because numbers and sequences indicating time appear in the scriptures, but divine creation cannot be described using the movement of the so-called second part of the universe, the sensory part. Therefore, space can only be expressed as order, and it is expressed through the abstract and mysterious meaning of numbers. Its mysterious and sublime characteristics correspond to the essence and goodness of God. Philo’s purpose is to “claim the original freedom and the ‘supreme good’ of God contained in this freedom, and to mystically liberate man from the bondage of knowledge”[6].

Since God completes all creation simultaneously, what is the role of numbers? Philo says: “... because those things that are generated need order, and order is related to numbers...”[2] This inevitably reminds one of Pythagoras. Pythagoras took refuge in Samos and founded his own school there. He was the

first to call the universe “kosmos”, which Aristotle believed meant “an ordered whole”[7]. An individual can be seen as a concentrated microcosm—this is somewhat similar to the Chinese Daoist view, where an important way for an individual to maintain harmony within oneself is to obtain the order of the macrocosm, and mathematics is the means to achieve this goal. Therefore, Pythagoras regarded numbers as the essence of the universe. According to legend, Pythagoras held a hecatomb to celebrate the discovery of the Pythagoras theorem. And his student Hippasus discovered the irrational number $\sqrt{2}$, which caused a shock to the Pythagoras school and the entire ancient Greek philosophy.

Pythagoras also discovered the golden ratio, the connection between numbers and music, etc. In terms of specific numbers, the Pythagorass had a more mystical understanding, such as believing that “1” is the first principle of numbers, the mother of all things, and also wisdom; “2” is the principle of opposition and negation, and is opinion; “3” is the form and shape of all things; “4” is justice and the symbol of the creator of the universe; “6” is the life of God and the soul; “7” is chance; “9” is reason and power; “10” encompasses all numbers and is perfection and beauty. These mystical ideas, however, fit perfectly with Philo’s urgent need for an allegorical interpretation of *Genesis*. Philo’s purpose is “to reconcile, through such a roundabout way, certain statements that are particularly difficult to understand or accept literally with people’s beliefs, and to successfully complete the transformation towards understanding the hidden intentions of God.”[8]

Philo explained “6” and “7” in more detail. He believed that “6” is the most fertile number because it contains both yin and yang in itself, and is also a combination of odd and even. For “1,” it seems to be similar to Pythagoras’ view, and can be considered the first archetype of space, or the intellectual world. “2” and “3” represent the separation and connection of space, respectively. Regarding “4,” it can be related to “10,” because “1+2+3+4=10,” and “4” is the foundation and source of the perfect number “10,” and “10” is the potential “4.” “4” contains the proportion of harmony in music, and is also the necessary basis for the formation of space, because it requires adding

depth to the surface formed by “1, 2, and 3.” From this, a pyramid can also be formed, and because “4” is the first natural number to contain a square within itself, it can be regarded as a symbol of justice and equality.

God created the world in six days, so the seventh day has incomparable dignity. It is sacred, not only a festival for cities and countries, but also a holiday for the universe. Therefore, Philo elaborates on the meaning and nature of the number “7” in great detail, such as: “7=1+2+4,” “2, 4” have a special relationship with harmony, and “7” can obtain double harmony; “7” contains “3, 4,” and in the Pythagoras theorem, “3, 4” can form a right angle, so “7” should be reasonably regarded as the root of all figures and all specific forms”; “7” is also related to the cycle of human physiological growth and change. Philo’s lengthy and tedious emphasis is clearly to illustrate the perfection, eternity, and stillness of God as the creator.

3. The Symbolic Attributes of Space

Philo’s symbolic space provides a logical explanation of the relationship between the creation of the universe in the Old Testament *Genesis* and God. By introducing ancient Greek rational philosophy and the mystical symbolism of numbers, he opened up a new spatial model, which is the supreme spatial authority that Christianity has firmly controlled ever since. Philo believed that time is merely a marker indicating the eventual disappearance of the sensory world (including rational beings). As the creator of the universe, God transcends time. How does God reveal himself? How does he shine the light of his revelation into the human eye? From *On the Creation*, we can glimpse Philo’s description of the symbolic attributes of the religious space he believed in.

Philo’s space has a strict concept of separation, and he sets boundaries for the separation of space. Plato’s philosophy established a distinction between two worlds, the world of ideas and the phenomenal world, “Our earthly poets have never sung nor are worthy to sing of that heavenly dwelling place, it is the dwelling place of true being, colorless, shapeless, and nameless, which only reason, the pilot of the soul, can gaze upon. All true knowledge comes from there.”[9] Philo, with the help of Platonism, draws a boundary

between God and man. Philo wrote: “Moses also says that ‘the face of the deep was without form and void.’ For in a sense, the air is above the void, and the light of reason was kindled before the sun was created, and then its opponent, darkness, retreated. ... However, in order to prevent them from causing chaos by constant collisions, and to prevent war from occurring in places where peace prevails, and disorder in an orderly universe, he not only separated light from darkness, but also set up boundary markers at the places of contention, thereby restraining the endpoints of each side” ... “Then the formless world was completed and located within the divine Logos. And the sensory world was born according to the formless archetype.”[2]

The generation of cosmic space is the result of a separation, indicating the difference between God and man. *Genesis* says: “And God called the firmament Heaven.” (Genesis 1:8) Philo explains, “He called the day on which the heaven was created ‘the second day,’ thus giving the whole day its space and interval. He did this because he considered the dignity that heaven has among sensory objects.”[2] It is not enough for space to have only separation, it also needs connection. Otherwise, how can God and man be connected? Philo explains that the law of spatial connection is a reciprocal movement, but this reciprocal movement is limited to the sensory world, and its law of motion is set by God.

Therefore, by observing the laws of motion, we can recognize the intellectual world and thus approach God. Philo said: “With the cycle of the seasons, these principles expand and manifest. Because God wants nature to operate according to processes that can return to their starting point, God endows species with eternity, making them eternal partakers.” These laws of motion manifest as order, that is, the space in which humans exist, and God created all of this. This is also why humans were created last, that is, God wanted humans to see the orderliness of space as soon as they appeared, so as to guide reason to pursue the archetype and continue to yearn for the world of God. But Philo also believes that this pursuit is always on the way and cannot be reached, just as John Keats wrote in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” that

“...thou shalt never kiss,
Though closely pressed to thee;

She will not feel the wound; nor thou the kiss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”[10]

Philo depicts a spatial image of God that is eternal and motionless, while the long life of a human being is but a moment, which is simultaneous for God. This makes people lament the shortness and pain of the present world and long for eternal peace and true happiness. So, how is the order of this space established? Philo clearly pointed out the relationship between the numerical symbolism of space and the body, as well as the central position occupied by the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. “6” is a perfect number because it represents the completion of God’s creation, and the final completion is precisely man, a rational being whose body is completely different from other species. Philo said: “The number 6 is related to the animal movements provided by the instrumental limbs, because the body equipped with such instruments is naturally suitable for moving in six directions: forward, backward, upward, downward, left, and right.”[2]

Therefore, God’s space is eternal and unchanging, while human space is in motion, because the natural structure of the human body gives space its human characteristics. Or in other words, in the sensory world, it is precisely because of the existence of humans that there is a symbolic meaning of space, and the universe has symbols and meanings. Therefore, the construction of the Garden of Eden is necessary. Eden means abundance, and God placed the created man there to pursue the virtues and happiness of God. Philo placed the Tree of Life in the center of the Garden of Eden because it is virtue or goodness in a comprehensive sense, and specific virtues are derived from it. The Garden of Eden, as the core of the universe, has the meaning of a holy place. It symbolizes the navel of the earth and the difficult journey of human beings’ fall and return.

4. Conclusion

Throughout Philo’s allegorical interpretation of the scriptures, this symbolic method is consistent. For example, he also likens Eve to sensation and Adam to reason. Space, for Philo, is naturally symbolic and metaphorical. Its meaning is hidden in the truth conveyed by the Logos and manifested in the process of human existence. The sensory world in which humans

live must converge towards the intellectual world. Therefore, from the perspective of the source of truth, goodness, and beauty, time is insignificant, and space must be controlled. In medieval Christianity, this was like a tight net, firmly imprisoning the world.

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